Nobody’s Angels: Domestic Ideology and Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Novel
Author(s): Elizabeth Langland
Reviewed work(s):
Published by: Modern Language Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/462641
Accessed: 15/06/2012 11:22

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Modern Language Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to PMLA.
Nobody’s Angels: Domestic Ideology and Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Novel

ONE PLOT that shaped the rise of the novel in eighteenth-century England—a virtuous serving girl winning the love of a master vastly her social superior—disappeared in the nineteenth century. Pamela Andrews’s conquest of Mr. B, anticipated by Moll Flanders’s first marriage to the gentleman brother, establishes a significant pattern in the eighteenth-century novel, a pattern that Ian Watt’s influential study The Rise of the Novel hails as a prototype for the courtship plot that dominates novels in the succeeding century (148–49).1 But, in fact, although men and women still marry, the classes do not intermarry. In the novel, nineteenth-century servants do not marry their respectable middle- and upper-class masters.

Lizzie Hexam and Eugene Wrayburn in Dickens’s Our Mutual Friend may seem a notable exception, but their relationship is skewed by Eugene’s dissoluteness, the savage attempt on his life, and his rebirth at Lizzie’s hands. Moreover, the marriage leads to social seclusion instead of social accommodation. A few governesses, like Jane Eyre and Becky Sharp, snare their masters’ hands in marriage, or at least secure proposals, but these are not “working girls”; they are educated and impoverished gentlewomen forced to the expedient of working. The absolute class barrier makes its dramatic presence felt in the doomed romances of couples such as Little Em’ly and Steerforth, Hetty Sorrel and Arthur Donnithorne, Ruth Hilton and Henry Bellingham, Tess Durbeyfield and Angel Clare, where the pretty little innocent who aspires to be a lady ends up transported, dead, or dying. Marriage between a working-class woman and a higher-class man has become nonnarratable.2 Why?

I can focus here on only one strand of a complex process, but it is a central one: the intersection of class and gender ideologies in a Victorian icon—the “Angel in the House.” It shows that the wife, the presiding hearth angel of Victorian social myth, actually performed a more significant and extensive economic and political

---

ELIZABETH LANGLAND, professor of English at the University of Florida, is the author of Society in the Novel (U of North Carolina P, 1984) and Anne Brontë: The Other One (Macmillan, 1989). She has coedited three collections of essays on feminist criticism and theory, as well as publishing numerous articles. She is working on a book about Victorian domestic ideology, of which this article is a part.
function than is usually perceived. The prevailing ideology regarded the house as a haven, a private domain opposed to the public sphere of commerce, but the house and its mistress in fact served as a significant adjunct to a man's business endeavors. Whereas husbands earned the money, wives had the important task of administering the funds to acquire or maintain social and political status.

Running the middle-class household, which by definition included at least one servant, was an exercise in class management, a process both inscribed and revealed in the Victorian novel. Novelists and novels, I argue, do not simply reflect the contemporary ideology. Rather, by depicting a material reality filled with and interpreted through ideology, they also expose ideology. Although the nineteenth-century novel presents the household as a secure and moral shelter from economic and political storms, another process is at work alongside this figuration: the active deployment of class power. The novel, in sum, stages the ideological conflict between the domestic angel in the house and her other (the worker or servant), exposing through the female characters the mechanisms of middle-class control, including those mechanisms that were themselves fictions, stratagems of desire.

Thus, the story of the working-class wife for the middle-class man became nonnarratable (although, as I later show, not unlivable) because the mid-Victorian husband depended on his wife to perform the ideological work of managing the class question and displaying the signs of the family's status—duties to which he contributed a disposable income. In 1839 Sarah Ellis put the matter succinctly: "Society is to the daughters of a family, what business is to the son" (Daughters 255). A lower-class wife, a working girl, would not be sufficiently conversant with the signifiers of middle-class life to guarantee her husband's place in society. The domestic sanctuary overseen by its attending angel can be decoded as a theater for the staging of a family's social position, a staging that depends on prescribed practices.3

These discursive practices range widely from increasingly complex rules of etiquette and dress to the growing formalization of "Society" and "the Season," to the proliferation of household-help manuals, to the institution of household prayer and the custom of house-to-house visiting; they even encompass major changes in domestic architecture. In regulating what is sayable and how it can be articulated, who can speak and in what circumstances, discursive practices constitute knowledge. To say, then, that beginning in the 1830s and 1840s middle-class women controlled significant discursive practices is to argue that they controlled the dissemination of certain kinds of knowledge and thus helped to ensure a middle-class hegemony in mid-Victorian England.

It is also to argue that middle-class women were produced by these discourses even as they reproduced them to consolidate middle-class control. This understanding of the construction of subjectivity complicates notions of gender and agency, calling into question more traditional analyses of women's roles in Victorian society. Such a reinterpretation counters the view of women as victims passively suffering under patriarchal social structures; it equally subverts the idea that they were heroines supporting unproblematic values in dealing with issues of gender and class. By stressing that experience is constructed and that politics governs its construction, the new perspective provides a better account of the complexities of social change and human agency. While drawing on previous approaches to the ideology of Victorian novels, it also challenges them, presenting a more comprehensive view of household angels and lingering on a drama generally overlooked even in such well-known texts as David Copperfield.

The pioneering work of social historians like Leonore Davidoff, Carol Dyhouse, Catherine Hall, and Anne Summers has already begun to challenge the historical portrait of Victorian women as the passive, dependent, and idle creatures of prevailing ideology. Further, recent revisionary interpretations from such critics as Mary Poovey and Nancy Armstrong explore the "ideological work" of gender and the political dimensions of domestic life. By investigating the ways that this work was constantly fissured by competing analyses and practices, Poovey paves the way for my argument here. Whereas she powerfully illuminates the ideology of gender
Domestic Ideology in the Victorian Novel


operative in public institutions such as medicine and law, I analyze the ways that Victorian concepts of class and gender differences were embedded in day-to-day social practices, in prosaic household arrangements.

Nancy Armstrong broke ground in contending that conduct books produced a new female ideal, which she associates with the rise of the novel and the rise of the middle class in England, and concluding, therefore, that the "modern individual was first and foremost a woman" (8). Armstrong focuses on political movements like factory reform and working-class dissent to demonstrate how political conflict was reinterpreted as private struggle through representations of the feminine. In contrast, I focus on domestic discursive practices to illuminate how the private realm was increasingly implicated in such political agendas as class management. Armstrong's concentration on conduct books, moreover, yields a fairly seamless portrait of emerging subjectivity from the early eighteenth to the twentieth century. My approach identifies a more subtle genealogy and notes a shift that Armstrong's study elides—the gradual disappearance of conduct books in the 1820s (their heyday was 1760–1820) and the dramatic and sudden emergence in the 1830s and 1840s of the set of discursive practices that I identify above: rituals of Society and the Season, norms of etiquette, family prayer, house-to-house visiting, and architectural changes.

This essay first elaborates the discursive practices that gave middle-class women unprecedented political power, a power we see masked in two major tracts of the period: Sarah Ellis's *Women of England* and John Ruskin's "Of Queen's Gardens." The second part examines representations of Victorian domestic angels in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters*, novels that both inscribe and expose ideology. The final section, turning from Victorian fiction to Victorian lives, considers the biographies of Arthur Munby and Hannah Cullwick, a gentleman and his servant, who wed and struggled to live out the nonnarratable plot of interclass marriage.

I

As the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth, Society and the Season became more formalized. Leonore Davidoff has commented that "in the 1830s and 1840s there was a reinterpretation of the idea of Society and the expectation for individual behaviour to gain access to that society," an expectation that historically stems in part from the presence in England of the untitled gentry (22). The untitled gentry, "tie[d] to the nobility by marriage and similar life-styles" and to the farmers and middle classes "by family ties and farming interests," played a crucial role in the English social hierarchy. Because "formalised Society took the place of mobility controlled through legal classifications" (21), individuals sought stability in detailed decorums.4
Generally, with the rapid increase of wealth generated by the industrial revolution, status was fluid and increasingly dependent on the manipulation of social signs. For example, after explicitly acknowledging that in a “mercantile country like England, people are continually rising in the world” ([Day] 10), two early etiquette manuals, *Hints on Etiquette* ([Day]; 1836) and *The Spirit of Etiquette* (1837), set out to teach individuals the signifiers that can confer the status that money alone cannot guarantee.

Prescribed social practices were widely published in the manuals of etiquette that proliferated “from the 1830s onwards” (Davidoff 18, 41; Crow 47-48). Although none of these books appeared between 1804 and 1828, suddenly thereafter numerous volumes found print in rapid succession. In 1837, the *Quarterly* reviewed eleven that had come out within the previous two years, some in several editions (Curtin 34, 40). These manuals, which highlight the way “social status [can] be indicated through a minute control of conventional behavior,” contrast sharply with the earlier courtesy or conduct books, which focus on individual standards of moral and civil conduct. While the conduct books cover topics like “fortitude,” “honesty,” and “fidelity,” the etiquette manuals discuss “balls,” “introductions and cuts,” “calls,” and so on (Curtin 31-32, 130). Another distinction is that the manuals specifically target a middle-class audience; not until the end of the century does a guide—*Cassell’s Book of the Household* (1897)—address a “mass readership covering all sections of the population” (Briggs, *Things* 218). Thus the manuals apparently served more to consolidate a public image within the middle classes than to facilitate a rise in status for other ranks; they helped construct an identity for a group that might otherwise seem bound together only by Carlyle’s “cash nexus.”

The etiquette manuals were precise and detailed, giving exact information, particularly on that “sensitive area ruled by etiquette . . . the introduction of new individuals and families into group membership and activities. The introduction, calls, various levels of ‘commensality’ and their obverse—the ‘cut’—became vastly elaborated” (Davidoff 41). A system so highly elaborated—specifying the way cards were to be left, the official timetable for visiting, the duration and content of calls—obviously played a significant role in establishing and solidifying the Victorian hierarchy. *A Manual of Etiquette for Ladies* (1856) set an appropriately lofty tone in stating that etiquette establishes the “rule of conduct which is recognized by polite society . . . that law to which obedience must be rendered; the sovereign to which authority and allegiance are due” (3). Even if we are skeptical about the possibility of anyone’s observing such rules in daily life, the very popularity of the etiquette manuals reveals a pervasive awareness of and commitment to the class distinctions they reinforce.

Isabella Beeton’s popular *Book of Household Management* (1861), which sold 60,000 copies in its first year, was typically detailed, stipulating, for example, the duration and decorum of a call: “fifteen to twenty minutes being quite sufficient. A lady paying a visit may remove her boa or neckerchief; but neither her shawl nor bonnet” (10). Elizabeth Gaskell makes such strict guidelines the subject of wry humor in *Cranford*. When a young lady is instructed “never to stay longer than a quarter of an hour,” the narrator remarks, “As everybody has this rule in their minds . . . of course no absorbing subject was ever spoken about. We kept ourselves to short sentences of small talk, and were punctual to our time” (41).

Davidoff notes an additional guarantor of middle-class hegemony: “Although the system of etiquette was highly formalised, its details were constantly changing . . . to mark the knowledgeable insider from the outsider” (45). For example, details of dress, always associated with status, became increasingly subtle indicators of class rank. Davidoff explains:

The strict demarcation by age as well as status of women and girls in the nineteenth century is indicated by the variety and complexity of their clothes as opposed to the almost uniform drab “workman-like or business-like” look of men’s clothing after the 1840s. Every cap, bow, streamer, ruffle, fringe, bustle, glove or other elaboration symbolised some status category for the female wearer. (93)
who regard “frippery as the ambition of a huckster’s daughter” (5). Margaret Oliphant, in Phoebe, Jr., expands on these class implications of dress. When the eponymous character, whose parents have successfully climbed the social ladder, returns to visit her shopkeeper grandparents, she finds herself negotiating a difficult social breach, concretized by her dress. One observer thinks, “How strange it was to see her . . . putting her daintily-gloved hand upon old Tozer’s greasy sleeve, walking home with the shuffling old man, about whose social position no one could make the least mistake” (118). When Phoebe’s grandmother wants to dress her granddaughter up and show her off to the community, she asks Phoebe to put on silk and bright colors, a lace collar, a pad, and an ostentatious brooch—requests to which Phoebe politely demurs, privately horrified at the implicit class transformation. “So that Phoebe’s toilette, which would have been mightily admired in a London drawing-room, could not be said to be a success [with her grandparents]” (121). Such manuals as Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen (1876) and Routledge’s Manual of Etiquette (1875?) focus on these challenges of dressing for the nouveau riche: simple elegance versus vulgar display. Isabella Beeton summarizes, “[It is better to be under-dressed than over-dressed]” (10).

These rituals of dress were further elaborated in the paraphernalia of mourning—“in dress and its accessories, in stationery, seals, floral decorations and other insignia”—that might allow persons emerging from mourning “to reshuffle their social hand by the skilful play of cards and calls” (Davidoff 55, 56). We can now appreciate the disdain of the ladies of Gaskell’s Cranford when a widow appears in public “dressed in rustling black silk, so soon after her husband’s death,” for “bombazine would have shown a deeper sense of her loss” (108).

In a gendered politics of power, middle-class Victorian women were subservient to men; but in a class politics of power, they cooperated and participated with men in achieving middle-class control through the management of the lower classes. Ironically, the very signifiers of powerlessness in the gendered frame of reference became eloquent signifiers of power in a class frame. As Florence Nightingale’s testimony in Cassandra makes clear, although women sometimes suffered from the rituals of etiquette—social corsets as rigid as the physical corsets confining their bodies—nonetheless women did control these indicators of class status. The clothes, like the customs, were constructed to distinguish the middle-class woman from her social inferiors. Her apparel, physically inhibiting as it may have been, was also a sign of her class power because it precluded physical labor and displayed her managerial status. Of course, many middle-class women did work; one maid of all work could not accomplish everything that needed to be done in a home. But ladies pretended they did no useful chores (Besant 91).

Middle-class women were pursuing a “career of sociability” (Curtin 302), the necessary complement to a man’s career of monetarily remunerated work. The two were not separate but integrated and integral. Indeed, the celebrated domesticity of nineteenth-century women tends to conceal the increasing domesticity of men, the expectation that a master would socialize at home in the evenings so that a couple could develop and cultivate mutual acquaintances within their class. John Stuart Mill describes this phenomenon in The Subjection of Women: “The improved tone of modern feeling as to the reciprocity of duty which binds the husband towards his wife—has thrown the man very much more upon home and its inmates, for his personal and social pleasures” (qtd. in Briggs, Things 220). What I have described as a social career to match a monetary career is here translated into the phrase “reciprocity of duty.”

Social status was marked not only on the woman’s person and in her behavior but in her sanctum and sanctuary, the Victorian home. This haven became a setting for displaying social status, and nineteenth-century architecture changed in response. F. M. L. Thompson observes that the layout of houses “encouraged their occupants to conform to a stereotype of respectability”—a measure of respectability, here, as in female clothing, being that the “wife did not work or could not be seen to be working apart from running the household” (176). Similarly, Mark Girouard notes the increasing demand for the
Elizabeth Langland

segregation and privacy of sexes and classes in Victorian houses. Spaces were coded as masculine or feminine. Drawing rooms, for example, were regarded as feminine and usually decorated with "spindly gilt or rosewood, and silk or chintz," while the dining rooms, considered masculine, required "massive oak or mahogany and Turkey carpets" (Life 292). The male domain expanded into smoking rooms, billiard rooms, and bachelor suites, a result of a "remember-there-are-ladies-present-sir" attitude (Victorian 34). Feminine spaces extended from the drawing room to sitting rooms and boudoirs. The masters' establishment was separated from the servants' quarters, where the arrangement of rooms also segregated the sexes. To enforce a strict division by class, the clean lines and open spaces of the eighteenth-century house were often cut up to provide passageways and partitions. "In an age when government was organized into departments, the middle classes into professions, science into different disciplines and convicts into separate cells, country house life was neatly divided up into separate parcels" (Victorian 28). Thus Girouard pinpoints the institutionalism of the Victorian home, which a Foucauldian analysis reveals to be deeply implicated in the power arrangements of its day through its highly regulatory and normative function in class and gender systems. In describing the country house as a "machine," Girouard stresses its hierarchical structure, the need for clockwork precision, and the productive operations performed. The person who managed this complex organization was the wife, both in the larger country estates, where the man looked after the outdoor concerns, and in the modest one-servant establishments, from which the husband departed punctually for work each morning. The wife was, in Isabella Beeton's words, like "the commander of an army" in overseeing the smooth functioning of this demanding establishment (1); she was a specialist in "Household Management" (always capitalized). Beeton speaks forcefully of "proper management" and "daily regulation," admitting that "the performance of the duties of a mistress may, to some minds, perhaps seem to be incompatible with the enjoyment of life" (1–2). The mistress is cautioned to remember that she is "the Alpha and the Omega in the government of her establishment; and that it is by her conduct that its whole internal policy is regulated" (18).

Such discursive practices as those governing etiquette, dress, and architecture reveal how Victorians categorized male and female, but their bifurcation of human beings into servant and master classes was more insidious because it was more mystified. The angel in the house is a middle-class ideal built explicitly on a class system in which political and economic differences were rewritten as differences of nature. Social ideology inscribed the lower classes as inherently less moral, less delicate, more physical, and more capable of strenuous labor. This refiguration of sex and class was necessary because "the main distinguishing mark between the middle-class woman and those who were considered socially inferior was the attitude of mind which demanded that she should have at least one servant to wait on her" (Crow 49; see also Hall 28).

Hence, the central task of the Victorian angel was management of her servant(s) (Crow 49). Therein lay her success or failure. Her regulatory presence is symbolized in Victorian novels by housekeeping keys. Esther Summerson in Dickens's Bleak House perpetually jingles hers; David Copperfield's mother signals her weakness by relinquishing her housekeeping keys to Miss Murdstone, and Dora Copperfield announces her failure by conceiving of the keys as a toy. Trollope's Susan Grantly, in The Warden, uses her keys as a sign of her authority, which is absolute within the household even though she bows to domestic ideology in appearing to defer to her husband. The narrator laughs at Archdeacon Grantly—"vain man!"—for his presumption in attempting to secure certain documents from his wife's knowledge: "It is probable to us that the contents of no drawer in that house were unknown to its mistress, and we think, moreover, that she was entitled to all such knowledge" (77–78).

The middle-class Victorian woman, much more than the man, found herself interacting with the servants and regulating their behavior in the interest of maintaining middle-class control. Indeed, in the same period that proliferating etiquette books, household manuals, and archi-
tectural changes spelled out for women the decorum of social interaction from top to bottom, men were growing more removed from their workers. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, most middle-class men separated their family residences from their workplaces. This residential withdrawal was accompanied by the “increasing size and scale of the mechanised work place,” so that the distance between the classes also increased. It devolved on upper- and middle-class women to bridge the widening gap (Summers 37–38).

Two strategies emerged to mediate class differences and to manage lower-class dissent. One, as we have seen, was the regulation of the classes in the middle-class home, a strategy that I argue was mystified by the rhetoric of the angel in the house. The institutional practice that most masked the gross inequities was family prayer, a custom that became increasingly popular during the 1830s. As Davidoff points out, “This custom united all the elements of control . . . into one of the most significant rituals of Victorian life.” The entire household was summoned every day for an activity—prayer—that “reinforced the idea of community, an organic whole” (35). George Eliot’s earliest fiction, “The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton,” presents a stunning madonna in the figure of Milly Barton, who enlists undying loyalty from her maid of all work, Nanny. Milly and Nanny are represented as striving together for the commonweal, an ideology cemented at the end of the day when “Nanny could now join in the short evening prayer, and all could go to bed” (Scenes 54, 58). The institution of family prayer cooperated with the other discursive practices centered in the home to become “one of the most effective instruments for social control ever devised” (Davidoff 36). Isabella Beeton’s Book of Household Management links servants with children in its end-of-the-day advice: “The younger members of a family should go early and at regular hours to their beds, and the domestics as soon as possible after a reasonably appointed hour. . . . [N]o servants should, on any account, be allowed to remain up after the heads of the house have retired” (17). Such policies also guaranteed that all the servants were in and accounted for at day’s end. Regulatory strategies and prayer join in Cranford when a servant, “forbidden by the articles of her engagement to have ‘followers,’” denies any violation, despite the male shadows that seem to haunt the kitchen: “I don’t see a creature from six o’clock tea, till Missus rings the bell for prayers at ten” (65).

The second strategy to mediate class differences fell to women as a logical extension of their “angelic” mission—philanthropy, particularly in the form of house-to-house visiting. Although such visiting may seem, in Anne Summers’s words, “dateless and commonplace . . . this is not so” (35). Like the other practices we have been examining, extensive house-to-house visiting was born in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Prochaska 100–01). Summers succinctly spells out its implications: “the iron fist of coercion could be supplemented or even replaced by the velvet glove of friendship. Visiting the poor in their own homes . . . help[ed] to isolate the poor from each other” (37). Middle-class women approached the poor “not merely as spiritual missionaries . . . but as managers and employers of labour in their own right. . . . Women were developing a pattern of personal relationships across class barriers at a time when men were losing the social element in relationships at work” (39). Not surprisingly, the model women developed to govern relations between masters and servants was applied outside the home to rich and poor: “a model of the working class, as economically and socially dependent, obedient, disciplined, clean and broken in to the daily methods and routines of the middle-class family unit.” In fact, “knowledge of domestic management” was “one of the secrets to successful visiting” (Prochaska 110). Beeton’s guide confirms this regulatory function: “Great advantages may result from visits paid to the poor. . . . there will be opportunities for advising and instructing them, in a pleasant and unobtrusive manner, in cleanliness, industry, cookery, and good management” (6).

Through house-to-house visiting, women became responsible for establishing “a model of class relations which suggested a remedy for present and future ills” (Summers 41), and husbands began to depend on their wives to manage the class question, although men could not ac-
knowledge this dependence. “The male writers [on philanthropy] . . . did not think too deeply about the political dimension of women’s visiting. . . . It was not admitted that women, in dispensing material assistance and using influence on behalf of the poor, could not but exercise considerable leverage upon them.” Further, taking this assistance into the home “made it possible to continue to focus on the family unit rather than the work place, and subordinate the issue of wages to questions of personal conduct and domestic behaviour” (Summers 45, 56).

The practice of visiting figures prominently in the Victorian novel. One of its most memorable manifestations occurs in Bleak House when Mrs. Pardiggle descends on the brickmakers. Obviously, Dickens is parodying such philanthropists and positing personal benevolence against such abstract humanitarianism, Esther Summerson against Mrs. Pardiggle. But, ironically, the brickmakers can resist Mrs. Pardiggle’s high-handed attempts to take them into moral custody, whereas they are seduced by the same values when proffered with the soft voice and gentle touch of Esther. The family model that Esther holds out transports the workers into the realm of middle-class domestic virtue and veils the economic exploitation that characterizes their situation. Likewise, in Gaskell’s North and South, Margaret Hale’s visits to the working-class Higgin family culminate in her persuading the father to accompany her home and join the Hale household in prayer. It is hard not to read as ironic the narrator’s assurance that this ritual “did . . . no harm” (41).

Two popular tracts of the Victorian period, Sarah Ellis’s Women of England and John Ruskin’s “Of Queen’s Gardens,” show a complex understanding of the discursive practices constituting Victorian women’s lives and reveal the ways in which domestic ideology masked the political aspects of domestic life. Ellis devotes several pages to an account of the arrival and accommodation of a visitor. The narrative interest turns on the lack of preparation, a failure of management that culminates in “disappointments experienced by our guest,” “chagrin” for the mistress, and a harassed and forlorn appearance in an “overworked domestic.” These consequences of poor planning, the narrative implies, could be entirely avoided with proper organization and foresight. But the rhetoric does not make the point that this miniature society must be “managed” by the mistress to prevent antagonisms and insurrectionary impulses in the servant. Rather, at the summarizing moment, it shifts its focus to woman’s essential nature:

[T]he individual here described fails to exhibit the character of the true English woman, whose peculiar charm is that of diffusing happiness. . . . [S]he enters, with a perception as delicate as might be supposed to belong to a ministering angel, into the peculiar feelings and tones of character influencing those around her. (202-03)

By attributing the problems to the failure of English feminine nature, this passage obscures the material and political realities of domestic life, which the narrative tends to clarify. The mystifying rhetoric at once justifies the status quo and disguises the class issues as a matter of gender. Ruskin’s “Of Queen’s Gardens” sets out a comparable argument that women (read middle-class women) are peculiarly suited to moral “gardening,” to cultivating human plants not only at home but also abroad to remedy social ills. At the heart of his conception is the angel in the house, to whom Ruskin devotes the essay’s first section. Feminist critics have been quick to point out the tensions in his position: he advocates a more active role for women only to protect a traditional way of life. I suggest another tack to the conflicts. First, it seems unlikely that Ruskin would speak with such assurance of women’s potential as social arbiters unless women were already effective in such roles, as I have argued they were. Indeed, Ruskin implicitly acknowledges women’s social career, chiding the woman who “abdicate[s] this majesty” of regulation to “play at precedence with her next-door neighbor” (93). Second, from the perspective of my argument, it seems clear that Ruskin translates women’s social and political powers into symptoms of their domestic virtues and innate womanly strength. The oxymoron of “sweeter ordering” is one signal of this ideological shift: “But the woman’s power is for rule, not for bat-
tle,—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision” (81). Management strategies, “ordering, arrangement, and decision,” are reinterpreted as attributes of woman’s inborn “sweetness.” Ultimately the essay serves less to promote women’s social activism than to identify their social effectiveness as a symptom of domestic rather than managerial talents, of intrinsic feminine charm rather than practical, applied intelligence. Ruskin engages in the same kind of reformulation that Ellis does.

II

The ideology informing tracts such as Ellis’s and Ruskin’s also shapes Dickens’s David Copperfield and Gaskell’s Cranford and Wives and Daughters, novels that represent the construction of subjects through discursive practices and thus depict conflicts inherent in the ideology of domestic life. The history of Charles Dickens’s autobiographical hero, David Copperfield, is memorable in part for the domestic chaos that ensues when he marries his angel, Dora Spenlow. David is, as it were, unwarned. Having secured a Victorian angel, he expects domestic bliss to follow. Indeed, Victorian myth suggested that a woman by nature diffuses a charm and order that turn the home into a refuge from the capitalist competition of the marketplace. But David’s tale both illuminates the way domestic discursive practices constitute and regulate a field of individual possibilities and reveals that household management depends less on the character of an English woman than on a precise set of organizational skills that would not be inappropriate in a factory. One way to assess what the “hero” of the story achieves is to measure his success at acquiring the content (or fortune) and form (status display) that will inscribe him firmly within the middle class.

Indeed, David’s is a story of status jeopardy. David (“a gentleman’s son”) is spared entanglement with his first infatuation, Emily (“a fisherman’s daughter”), by the intervention of Steerforth. David then appropriately directs his attention to securing a middle-class wife capable of establishing him on social terra firma. Of course, as we know, the mystifying aspects of Victorian ideology mislead David, and he selects poorly. Dickens is one of the few authors to depict the household angel amid domestic chaos—theft, unruly servants, “skirmishing plates” and “wandering vegetable dishes and mugs”—and in that tension we see the way novels both reproduce the ideology and represent the material conditions that expose its inherent fault lines. Dora’s default allows us to glimpse the functions performed by women in furthering middle-class control through class containment and status display.

Dickens refuses one common refiguration of women’s managerial work in the novel, that is, the interposition of the anonymous, all-competent housekeeper between a wife and her work. For example, Trollope’s narrator in The Warden comments on an excellent housewife in this vein: “Mrs. Grantly, I presume, inspected her kitchen, though

she had a first-rate housekeeper, with sixty pounds a year” (74). In context, we are asked to judge Mrs. Grantly as bossy and interfering. It is impossible to imagine a nineteenth-century novelist commenting about a male character, say the master of an estate or of a factory, that he “inspected his tenants’ rents, though he had an excellent agent,” or that he “attended to his factory’s productivity, though he had an excellent foreman.” In depicting women, the novelist is foregrounding an ideology of passivity, dependence, and idleness. Ironically, the novelists must create the image of a working-class woman with managerial skills—the housekeeper—to conceal the real work performed by middle-class women as wives.

David refers to his unfortunate choice of a wife as the “first mistaken impulse of an undis-     ciplined heart” (644), his language inviting a Foucauldian analysis that aligns domestic discipline with other regulating and normalizing practices. David has already admitted that he can subject himself to a steely discipline in his professional life. He needs to find an agent similarly constituted to bring his household into line with his professional accomplishments.

That agent is Agnes Wickfield, her father’s housekeeper since her childhood. Although the text elaborates Dora’s domestic failures, implicitly challenging the ideology of the angel in the house, it refuses to name the source of Agnes’s success. It remystifies the domestic hearth angel: Agnes, David says, is “my guide, and best support,” “the source of every worthy aspiration I ever had; the centre of myself, the circle of my life,” and “my soul” (799, 802, 814). The happiness Agnes instills is written as an aspect of her nature rather than as a product of her skillful organization and control. But we have seen enough of household chaos with Dora to know that far more important than grace and sympathy are the household keys Agnes carries at her side: the symbol of her authority, the tool of her management, and the sign of her regulatory power and control.

What Dickens represents fully, Elizabeth Gaskell knew about firsthand: the demands of housekeeping and the ideological construction of middle-class womanhood. Cranford articulates the relation between signifying practices and knowledge. The women depicted, though all of moderate economic means, are so adept at manipulating the cultural codes and controlling the discursive practices that signal class—dress, lodging, and the rules of etiquette encompassing calls and cuts—that they dispense with the ostentatious displays of a capitalist society tainted by the vulgarity of “money-spending.” The women’s economy is always “elegant” (42). Indeed, Gaskell ironically implies that middle-class aspirants can more afford to do without money than without mastery of society’s discursive practices. A humorous recognition of the power of these practices, albeit a tacit one, occurs when Miss Matty relates the story of her brother, Peter, and his pranks, which involve dressing up as a woman and gulling his father. Miss Matty relates the confusion: “Peter said, he was awfully frightened himself when he saw how my father took it all in, and even offered to copy out all his Napoleon Buonaparte sermons for her—him, I mean—no, her, for Peter was a lady then” (94). In Miss Matty’s system, if Peter signifies “woman,” then he is a woman.

By deploying these signifying systems and understanding the realms they constitute, women ultimately gain remarkable latitude in arriving at social meanings. Notably, when Miss Matty loses her funds in a shaky investment scheme, the ladies of Cranford do not allow her bankruptcy to debase her “caste,” even when she must go into business selling tea. Instead of letting themselves become pawns to society’s signifying practices, women manipulate these tools to achieve their own wishes.

As it ironically turns out, even naive Miss Matty has learned from her household experiences how to manage a business, and she establishes an edge over her competitor by telling him that she will not compete. Miss Matty “had trotted down to [Mr. Johnson’s] shop . . . to tell him of the project that was entertained, and to inquire if it was likely to injure his business.” Mary Smith’s father, the women’s financial adviser, terms this idea “great nonsense” and asks “how tradespeople were to get on if there was to be a continual consulting of each other’s interests, which would put a stop to all competition di-
rectly.” But the strategy works very well, for Mr. Johnson sends all his customers to Miss Matty for their choice teas, “saying that the teas he kept were of a common kind” (200–01). Miss Matty simply supersedes the competitive ethic with a domestic ethic that has proved effective at managing social interaction among individuals and classes. Her success calls into question conventional ideas of the home and women’s role within it and thus helps subvert a domestic ideology that bespeaks women’s naivété, innocence, and ignorance. Mary Smith, the narrator, has the last word. In response to her father’s comment that “such simplicity might be very well in Cranford, but would never do in the world,” Mary notes, “And I fancy the world must be very bad, for with all my father’s suspicion of every one with whom he has dealings, and in spite of all his many precautions, he lost upwards of a thousand pounds by roguery only last year” (201).

Unlike Cranford, which focuses from the beginning on a society controlled by women, Gaskell’s last novel, Wives and Daughters, suggests that we must see women in their relationships with men. But Gaskell undermines the titular emphasis by stressing the ways men rely on women and concentrating on the discursive practices of middle-class domestic life. At the center of the novel is Dr. Gibson, a socially “ambiguous” figure; as Hollingford’s town doctor, he is not bound by society’s rules, nor can he use them as others might for social advantage. Leonore Davidoff notes that “functionaries” (clerics, doctors, governesses, etc.) could “not introduce or cut” (42). She adds, “The ambiguous doctor . . . could be allowed the semi-privacy of lawns and tennis courts while still being denied the inner sanctum of the drawing room” (67). Thus, we can readily intuit that the fate of the doctor’s daughter—whether she improves her social lot or not—falls to the management of her mother, the doctor’s wife. Here we discover the inherent drama of Gaskell’s final novel, which presents two charming and marriageable girls—the doctor’s daughter, Molly, and his stepdaughter, Cynthia. The doctor acquires his stepdaughter in the course of the novel by marrying a widow, Mrs. Kirkpatrick. Dr. Gibson’s new wife—vain, foolish, and ambitious for her daughters—is reminiscent of Jane Austen’s Mrs. Bennet (Lerner 7–11; Stoneman 13). But there is an enormous difference: unlike Mrs. Bennet, the second Mrs. Gibson furthers the girls’ interests, thus demonstrating the social importance of the mother-wife, the semiotician of the middle class, in the fluid and shifting society of Victorian England.

Critics who “read” Mrs. Gibson often dismiss her, so Patsy Stoneman notes, as a “neat satire” of “human deficiency” (173); even feminist critics have found only a negative value in the character: that is, she reveals the deficiencies of female education and women’s dependency on men (176). But Gaskell’s exposure of domestic ideology depends on making Mrs. Gibson perfectly awful as a person and completely successful in her roles. The wife’s masterful negotiation of the rules of etiquette and fashion makes her a key player in arranging Molly’s and Cynthia’s socially prestigious marriages—marriages that install the young women permanently within the upper middle class and remove them from the ambiguous status of doctor’s daughters and potential governesses.

When the novel opens, Dr. Gibson seems almost proud of Molly’s social backwardness, admitting that “she is a little ignoramus, and has had no . . . training in etiquette” (88). Her taste in clothes is atrocious, and Mrs. Hamley, the local squire’s wife, is persuaded that Molly will not prove a dangerous distraction for the Hamleys’ sons because, as their mother tells the squire, “she’s not at all the sort of girl young men of their age would take to. . . . [L]ads of one and two and twenty want all the accessories of a young woman. . . . Such things as becoming dress, style of manner” (112). Mrs. Gibson rapidly assesses Molly’s deficiencies and, shortly after becoming her stepmother, “fidget[s] Molly into a new amount of care about the manner in which she put on her clothes, arranged her hair, and was gloved and shod.” In consequence, the squire’s fastidious older son, who has previously ignored Molly, immediately notes that “her appearance [is] extremely improved” (216). That Molly ultimately marries the squire’s younger son testifies to Mrs. Gibson’s success in putting her stepdaughter into social circulation. Although Molly has many virtuous qualities, an eligible man’s appreciation of them depends on her first attract-
Readers tend to laugh at Mrs. Gibson, whose folly the narrator seems to pinpoint with comments like “Cynthia and Molly looked their best, which was all the duty Mrs. Gibson absolutely required of them” (306). But while the text appears to collude to some extent in an ideology that devalues women’s interest in fashion as frivolous, it is subversive in showing how preoccupation with dress leads to social advancement.

As a manager with limited resources, Mrs. Gibson is brilliant. Although the narrator describes the widow Kirkpatrick as longing for a second husband “who would work while she sate at her elegant ease in a prettily-furnished drawing-room” (138), in fact she does not simply sit when her longing is fulfilled. Rather, she exchanges the exhausting, poorly remunerated work of school-mistress for the more rewarding labors of a household manager. By regulating the servants and properly displaying status, she establishes order and elegance in Dr. Gibson’s long-neglected household.

Mrs. Gibson is an executive who knows her business, and she begins immediately. When the servants grumble about the work their new mistress demands of them, she summarily dismisses them, even Betty, Molly’s nurse and surrogate mother, who has been with the family for sixteen years. Despite Molly’s distress over the dismissal and our sympathy with her point of view, the organization of the house improves as the hierarchy reasserts itself, banishing the insolence and carelessness that David Copperfield attributes to poor management. The middle-class ideal, however unattractive in some of its manifestations, is clearly reaffirmed here to the ultimate benefit of the Gibson family. Such is Gaskell’s unblinking realism. Wives must manage the class issue even if doing so involves unpleasantness.

Ironically, Mrs. Gibson’s reforms extend even to overturning long-established pleasures and customs in her husband’s life, thus seeming to counter the Victorian “expectation that a wife should be solicitous for her husband’s needs. . . . Even in the lower-middle-class home meals would tend to be taken at times which fitted around the routine of the man’s work” (Dyhouse, “Mothers” 33). In contradiction to this domestic mythology, Mrs. Gibson’s changes encompass her husband’s schedule when it interferes with her manipulation of the discursive practices that will win the family social standing. In short, her social business “rather diminished [his] domestic comfort,” a truth rarely admitted so directly in Victorian fiction, where the angel is ostensibly feathering a nest with only the master’s comfort in mind. Mrs. Gibson entirely rearranges her husband’s routine, forcing him to give up a noon dinner for a “six o’clock dinner” to prevent the aromas of “hot, savoury-smelling dishes from the kitchen . . . when high-born ladies, with noses of aristocratic refinement, might be calling” (213). She also forbids her husband his favorite diet of bread and cheese because, as she says, “really I cannot allow cheese to come beyond the kitchen” (214). Of course, all these changes are accompanied by her fulsome professions that she has only her husband’s wishes at heart.

Such episodes are amusing, but underneath we recognize the pressure of a complex system of signifiers, the social codes that Mrs. Gibson reads so well, and our recognition must temper our response to her. She remains a formidable figure in the novel, a master of the signs of status, fully constituted by the discursive practices of her society, unaccompanied by any mystifying rhetoric of sensitivity, sympathy, and sainthood. And she does make the doctor and the daughters figures to be reckoned with socially, and that, as Gaskell forces us to recognize, is the real goal, one varnished over by the Victorian mystification of middle-class women. The character is a signal achievement on Gaskell’s part. If we regret, with Mr. Gibson, that his wife is not more saintly and selfless, less shallow and selfish, are we not, perhaps, reflecting our own ideological indoctrination?

III

We may now ask why the plot of a worthy working girl marrying her master disappeared from the novel. In fact, of course, masters did still marry servants in Victorian England, but a brief examination of perhaps the most famous instance—the marriage of Arthur Munby and
Hannah Cullwick—suggests, from another angle, why such stories were no longer narratable and offers a further insight into the material reality behind the myth of the angel in the house.

The Arthur Munby affair became public knowledge only in the twentieth century. Although a few close friends shared the secret during his life, his family was unaware of his marriage to the working woman Hannah Cullwick. The extreme secrecy that surrounded the relationship marks it as a site of some of the most intransigent problems of Victorian England. Munby, born in 1828, and Hannah Cullwick, born in 1832, inhabited an England dominated, as we have seen, by a mythology that constructed the image of the middle-class woman and bifurcated her as signifier. The discursive formations of Victorian England dematerialized middle-class women as bodies and essentialized working and lower-class women as mere bodies, sexual and physical machines.

The story has many bizarre twists. Munby met Cullwick in May 1854. According to his biographer and the editor of his journals, Derek Hudson, the attraction was mutual: Munby found in her a “helpmate fit to labour,” and she had always wanted “to love someone above her own class” (15, 18). Hannah always referred to Munby as “Massa,” suggesting the intersection of race as well as of class and gender. He celebrates her work so that she learns to relish her own debasement, reveling in her dirty appearance. He writes in his diary of 1860 that she was “dirty and unkempt, as she had been all day, she said; and the poor child evidently thought I liked to see her so” (51). Hannah would throw herself into cleaning frenzies of the most awful drudgery and filth entirely for Munby’s viewing pleasure (Stanley 284–85). But dirt was obviously a major signifier of difference, that which distinguished Hannah from a middle-class lady, and she no doubt sensed Munby’s ambivalence. Munby essentializes Hannah as a “true peasant girl, servant girl . . . too low and too genuine to be vulgar” (79).

Although Munby’s story surely reveals his individual psychology, it also suggests the ways his subjectivity was constituted through the discursive practices of his age. Hudson points to the “latent homosexual trend” evident in Munby’s “interest in trousered, grimy, even disfigured women” (71). Obviously, Hannah attracted him in part because she was not a “woman” within his culture’s signifying practices. Munby loved to contrast women of her class with ladies, depicting them both in the same drawing; inevitably, the signifiers of femininity are entirely absent in his representations of working women—bulky figures with blackened faces, distorted features, and shorn or covered hair. At one point Munby cuts Hannah’s hair and remarks, “[T]hough I should never have proposed the sacrifice—which she made of her own accord—it adds one more to the outward contrasts between her and fine-ladyhood. & so I like it” (148).

The relationship between Munby and Hannah was fraught with tensions. His Victorian sense of duty made him increasingly aware of an obligation to marry her, and he finally did so after eighteen years. Munby alternated between attempting to raise her station through education and celebrating her as a kind of deity of dirt. Highly intelligent, Hannah had a distinction of manner that separated her from most women of her station. Yet neither she nor Munby could accept her transformation into a lady. Once married, Hannah initially played at being a lady by night and Munby’s servant by day, enjoying the humorous contrast in roles. Yet gradually the game became wearing; in an effort to maintain her own identity, Hannah worked herself into a collapse, but she became embittered when Munby wanted to hire a housekeeper to spare her labor. Munby writes in his diary: “This is her standing grievance, her one accusation against her husband: that he cannot & will not allow his wife to be his only servant” (424). Finally, Hannah simply refused to act the lady, and the debacle of their relationship led to increasing estrangement and Munby’s decision to live apart from her.

Hannah’s obsession with drudgery and dirt as signifiers of her value obviously reflects the ideology of her culture. She defined labor as menial, physically exhausting work, and she defined herself as a servant, a maid of all work. Those are the terms in which her subjectivity was socially constituted. She was completely alienated from the signifying practices of the middle class; to be a lady was, for her, to be without identity. She
Elizabeth Langland

helped to produce a certain kind of subject to ensure the domination of middle-class interests.  

Notes

1 On the question of a heroine’s social elevation, Watt also claims that “Pamela initiated a fairly constant feature in the novel . . . a rise in the social and economic status of the bride . . . . Hypergamy, though not a convention of modern society, is a fairly constant convention of the novel” (154).

2 Although in life, unlike novels, Victorian gentlemen did occasionally marry working-class women, the phenomenon was rare. F. M. L. Thompson notes that “although fiction, not implausibly, records attraction and romance across these [social] divides, it is most unlikely that real-life affairs of this ilk made any appreciable impression on the class and group defences which the middle class had erected round their daughters and sons” (105).

3 Asa Briggs quotes an unnamed observer at the Great Exhibition in 1851, who speaks pointedly of the importance of cultural signifying practices: “[Suppose that] a modern drawing room, with its sumptuous furniture . . . were to be hermetically sealed up and consigned to the inspection of our descendants. . . . The material substances upon which they employed themselves, or by which they signified their wishes, wants or desires would, in process of time, have become so completely new and foreign that we could not understand them, nor they us” (Things 51).

4 According to Michael McKeon, this breakdown in traditional forms originated in the eighteenth century; indeed, he suggests that the emergence of the novel parallels conditions of “status inconsistency” in early modern England. But these tensions, even if they date back to the eighteenth century, intensified in the early nineteenth century as strategies developed to manage them.

5 F. M. L. Thompson notes that “working class girls . . . could and did marry upwards in the social scale . . . chiefly into the lower middle class, many of them no doubt making the transition via a spell in domestic service” (95). Thompson implicitly suggests that practice in middle-class homes was more important than preaching by middle-class manuals.

6 “The wife’s duties as family emissary in the matter of calls and cards seem to have expanded through the century. The fact that it became increasingly the normal pattern for husbands and wives to spend their evenings together . . . meant that the acquaintances of each of the spouses tended also to become family acquaintances” (Curtin 223).

7 Michael E. Rose argues that the middle classes saw the lower classes as qualitatively different from themselves. Distinguishing between poverty, which they regarded as a stimulus to hard work, and pauperism, “a contagious disease but also a hereditary one,” they credited hereditary causes over environmental ones (63).
Domestic Ideology in the Victorian Novel

8 Summers 36. See also Briggs, who points out that nineteenth-century cities saw an increasing de facto segregation of the classes by residential area. In earlier times the housing for the two groups had been jumbled together, workers and middle class all living in the same neighborhood (Cities, esp. 27–28, 61–62, 142–43).

9 I wish to thank the readers whose responses and criticisms improved this essay: Daniel Cottom, Alistair Duckworth, David Leverenz, and participants in the University of Florida Women’s Studies Colloquium.

Works Cited


Rose, Michael E. “The Disappearing Pauper: Victorian Attitudes to the Relief of the Poor.” Sigsworth 56–72.


