Party Politics: Domestic Entertaining and the Reaches of Sociability in Nineteenth-Century Literature

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PARTY POLITICS:
DOMESTIC ENTERTAINING AND THE REACHES OF SOCIABILITY
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE

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PARTY POLITICS:
DOMESTIC ENTERTAINING AND THE REACHES OF SOCIABILITY
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE

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Literature in the nineteenth century often featured highly structured scenes of domestic entertaining. *Party Politics* makes a case for these parties as both literary devices and cultural touchstones, at once practices indicative of the period’s commitment to strict standards of etiquette and capacious arenas in which to test the already blurred boundary between the public and private spheres. Ultimately, this project contends that parties are staples of Victorian sociability and its depiction in literature; they therefore allow authors and their characters to register social, moral, economic, political, and even international developments of the period in the lives of middle- and upper-class individuals.
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To Megan
PARTY POLITICS: AN INTRODUCTION

In 1836, with the Reform Act then four-years-old, the *Examiner* published the following critique of Tory sybaritism:

The Tory party indeed is now emphatically the dinner party. It is a most gifted eater . . . thrice happy, is the cause which depends on the pleasing exertions of the knife and fork. How willing is the service! Who will refuse to eat for his King and Country. [*sic*] How perfect the satisfaction of conjoining the performance of public duty and the satisfaction of the private tooth. [*sic*] Where is the man so stomachless as to shrink from the battlefield of a dinner table? And how agreeable to make minced meat of enemies while cutting up grouse and black cocks. Horace says that it is sweet and honourable to die for one’s country, but it is surely far sweeter to dine for it, and sweetest of all to dine *upon* it, to devour the green fat of the land, to which perfection the Tories would come at last. The crowning feast of Conservatism is to consume the substance of the people; but to arrive at this blessed end they must set the spits turning, and there must be much basting, infinite roasting, broiling, and stewing, and the manual and platoon exercise of the knife and fork must be sedulously and zealously practised.¹

In an iteration of this project’s central pun, the *Examiner* here compares the political party to the dinner party, stretching the metaphor in as many ways as he can: Tory politicians, he claims, eat like gluttons, make political decisions over dinner (hidden from their constituents’ view), and, most disdainfully, feed even on their own countrymen, on the “green fat of the land” and “the substance of the people.” For Albany Fonblanque, the *Examiner*’s political commentator, a Whig, and presumably this article’s author, striking a dinner-table bargain is within the capabilities of even the most “stomachless” politicians: after all, every man eats, and those who are too cowardly for the battlefield are certainly not too cowardly for a meal and a bit of

conversation.² These meals allow Tory MPs to assert that they are serving “King and Country” without acknowledging the parasitic nature of their relationship to their constituents.

Furthermore, the Examiner links the animal drive of hunger—literal, food-related hunger—with the putatively insidious ambition of Tory ministers, who dine on “grouse and black cocks” in the same way they feed, as members of the aristocracy, on the produce of tenant farmers and the products of England’s working classes.

The article goes on to criticize other publications, the John Bull and the Times, for recording the details of these kinds of dinners in the tabloid fashion with which today’s reality television viewers would feel at home: an exercise in voyeurism, delineating who attended, what they ate, and what bellicose debates were had. A cursory glance through periodical articles of the nineteenth century in which the word “dinner” appears will reveal a surplus of similar accounts. Most begin “Dinner to . . .” and are followed by the name of an eminent Victorian and a description of the gathering’s guests as well as any notable things that were said. In fact, despite its mockery of the John Bull and the Times for their “rapturous admiration” of Tory dinners (706), the Examiner itself published at least 50 “Dinner to” reports in its 78-year history, from

² The phrase “dinner-table bargain” is borrowed form Lauren F. Klein, who writes that Thomas Jefferson either misremembered or exaggerated a now famous and likely apocryphal dinner he had with James Madison, in which the two decided to move America’s capital form New York to Washington, D.C. as long as the South agreed to back “the federal assumption of states’ debts” (403). Klein argues that Jefferson’s misrepresentation of the dinner—whether intentional or not—reveals his tendency to link republican ideals with matters of taste, both figurative and literal. The discernment that led to an appreciation of American values, the most explicit of which is that of liberty, was thought to be comparable to the discernment that led to an appreciation of good food. But for Klein, this twinned emphasis on taste is complicated by the means of production that undergird the physical food itself: namely, slave labor, which is, of course, in direct opposition to notions of liberty and equality, “Dinner-Table Bargains Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and the Senses of Taste” in Early American Literature, 49.2 (2014): 403-433.
1808 to 1886. The publication’s overt condemnation is that these dinners are just another example of Tory frivolity and decadence; but the subtext in the *Examiner*’s critique, particularly when they themselves were perpetuating the chronicling of lavish dinner parties in print, is that these dinners were exclusive, powerful, and therefore threatening. When a group of influential men (and, as I will demonstrate, women) unite over a meal or under the auspices of other forms of domestic entertaining, a certain kind of governance happens—but not the standard, visible governance of a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system. Rather, it is something socially powerful and empowering, cultural manipulable, and wide-reaching.

It is with this form of governance that this project is concerned: not politics proper, but the socio-political aims of the nineteenth-century dinners and parties in literature. Where parliamentary politics are actually in question, the party functions as a space of micropolitical movement with broader political systems; in “political economy”—the Victorians’ favored phrase for modern-day economics—the party provides a space where personal economy, collective systems of morality, and larger social attitudes towards trends of sociability can be destabilized and re-signified; and in geopolitical contexts, entertainments that take place in domestic spaces—meaning both interior, home spaces and non-foreign homelands—are foregrounded as a means of navigating other cultures and reifying one’s own national identity.

*Party Politics: Domestic Entertaining and the Reaches of Sociability in Victorian Literature* takes up the highly structured and socially significant practice of the nineteenth-century dinners and parties. *Party Politics* makes a case for the Victorian party as both a literary device and a cultural touchstone, at once a practice indicative of the period’s commitment to strict standards of etiquette and a capacious arena in which to test the already blurred boundary

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3 This figure is based on search results from *British Periodicals* via ProQuest.
between the public and private spheres. For Victorians, party were the rare event in which the mixing of genders was sanctioned and deliberate, and I argue that nineteenth-century writers often used scenes of sociability like these to negotiate the shifting terms of domesticity, femininity, professionalism, and even national identity. *Party Politics* analyzes British works by George Eliot, George Meredith, Amy Levy, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, Margaret Oliphant, and Wilkie Collins, as well as texts by Americans Leonora Sansay and Louisa May Alcott. It also explores etiquette literature, such as *Mrs Beeton’s Book of Household Management*, and nineteenth-century periodicals. In these texts, social gatherings serve as occasions to explore, sometimes begrudgingly, the interplay between the feminized social performances and masculine, public conditions, often allowing men and women to partner together to advance political, commercial, and national objectives—or to impede them. Women gain political power by performing the duties attendant on any hostess, or rewrite the rules of party etiquette, thereby redefining notions of propriety (and sometimes morality) to suit their circumstances. And when “masculine” interests of global trade and imperialism threaten the insularity of these occasions, men and women unite together to master rituals of etiquette and sociability in order to preserve nationalistic ideals and perpetuate their own sense of identity in what is, eventually, a failing system of specifically British sociability. Ultimately, I contend that parties in nineteenth century literature offer the most explicit space in which men and women could work out the ongoing collapse of private and public divisions in the period. They are staples of Victorian social interaction and the literature in which it is depicted, whose very quotidian nature enables their ample utility in social, moral, economic, political, and even international points of interest.
“Politics” and “Parties”

The phrase “party politics” generally means one of two things, referring first to political systems divided into parties and, second, to the politics which are (usually negatively) affecting or complicating a specific political party from the inside out. I also want to think about “party politics” as the social politics of giving and attending parties and the political and apolitical ends to which parties are employed. The *Examiner* article illustrates that this pun is not a new one, and that similar linguistic machinations have long been used to criticize political parties themselves, while revealing what might be considered an opposing claim: that “party” can act as an adjectival form to describe a particular kind of politics – politics, in the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s words, as the “Management or control of private affairs and interests, especially as regards status or position.” Whereas the *Examiner* is specifically talking about the party’s impact on parliamentary politics, this dissertation thinks about the politics of giving and attending parties, and how the mastery of those politics (and their depiction in literature) can be deployed to accomplish any number of broader social and literary objectives.

The word “party” has a complex etymology. In its earliest definitions from the fourteenth century, the word is used indicate either a “part” of a whole or “a group or company of people,” and this dual usage suggests that the earliest “parties” of people (in English) were thought of as groups that constituted a portion of the population and that had been temporarily set apart. Thus, even 700 years ago, parties were exclusive. It was not until the 1680s that the word began to be used in a political context, as “A formally constituted political group, usually organized on a national basis, which contests elections and aims to form or take part in a government,” and not until the mid-1700s that it took on the sense at issue in this dissertation: “A social gathering, especially of invited guests at a person’s house, typically involving eating, drinking, and
entertainment.”

Thus, the party as a group of people united together for sociable reasons is essentially a recent concept—more recent, at least, than either political parties or parties of people in a more general quantitative sense. Fonblanque, in his piece for the *Examiner*, seems at least unconsciously aware of this complicated history of “parties,” and uses the abstract possibilities of the word to produce anxiety about the potential for definitions to crash into one another with negative results.

*Party Politics*, however, looks at parties in very specific terms. The social occasions analyzed in this dissertation are first primarily fictional, appearing either in novels or poems or imagined in the minds of etiquette writers. Second, they are primarily domestic—a party in the mid-eighteenth-century sense of the word: “A social gathering, especially of invited guests at a person’s house.” Finally, their existence requires that their participants have enough economic capital to engage in acts of hosting, entertaining, and attending such events, which often required providing guests with meals of multiple courses or, at the very least, being able to dress for such occasions and afford transportation to them. There were, of course, other forms of sociable parties in the nineteenth century and its literature, including those among working-class people. But they lie beyond the scope of this project, which specifically concerns itself with the highly formalized forms of sociability available to people capable of operating according to the standards and restrictions of etiquette manuals, which offered a formalized system by which to entertain and be entertained. As such, this dissertation is primarily about the Victorian middle

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classes and the landed gentry, with occasional appearances by the nobility. That the party, and most often the dinner party, is a shared practice between the bourgeoisie and their “betters,” and that it largely maintains its shape regardless of class (though its accoutrements may vary) is indicative of its status as both a translatable form and a concept with far-reaching cultural significance.

Outline of Chapters

As my first chapter explores in more detail, there is something specifically “Victorian” about the party in Victorian fiction. This is to say that the Victorian period saw the formalization of a previously unstandardized body of information, with authors like Isabella Beeton and others shifting from the eighteenth century’s emphasis on conduct literature to focus instead on etiquette literature. No longer concerned only with how a woman should behave herself in public, Beeton and her peers responded to the gradually evolving (and gradually reforming) social, political, and economic standards of the century by solidifying, in print, what they believed to be standard and proper for the most common forms of entertaining. In fact, the conduct manual seems to have evolved directly into the etiquette manual, in that these authors usually emphasized the woman’s (or “mistress’s”) role in domestic entertaining while inflecting that role with moral weight. “Dine we must,” Beeton writes, “and we may as well dine elegantly as well as wholesomely.”5 This imperative to make the biological impulses of humankind into something “elegant” is explored in Claud Lévi-Strauss’s “The Raw and the Cooked” (1964), in

which basic, binary oppositions are used to think about sociocultural systems of thought. But where Lévi-Strauss focuses on this opposition (cooked vs. raw food) to think about the distinctions between the civilized and the uncivilized, Beeton and her peers inject the concept of “wholesomeness” into their notions of civility. In Victorian etiquette literature, to entertain “elegantly” is both an indication of cultural superiority and a moral good.

In Victorian fiction and poetry, however, scenes of domestic entertaining are not always sites of incorruptibility. My first chapter, “The Party’s Politics: The Victorian Dinner Party as Cultural Practice and Literary Convention,” establishes the Victorian dinner party within its historical context as both a literary convention of the period and a cultural icon of middle- and upper-class sociability. My most directly historical chapter, this section situates the literary representation of dinner parties alongside the idealized expectations of etiquette manuals (the most prominent of which is Mrs Beeton’s Book of Household Management [1861]). I argue that the Victorian dinner party adhered to a strict schedule with stringent rules for behavior and a somewhat cryptic set of performative symbols through which hostesses and hosts could communicate to their guests any number of messages (regarding, for instance, financial standing, social capital, or intrinsic personal values). These rules and symbols owe their power to larger structures of power, including Pierre Bourdieu’s fields and Caroline Levine’s forms; as smaller instantiations of more universal organizing principles, dinner parties in literature retain a

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7 Other conduct manuals of interest are E. L. Blanchard’s A Handy Book on Dinners: Dinners and Diners at Home and Abroad (1860), Cassell’s Household Guide (1869), Lady Maria Clutterbuck’s What Shall We Have for Dinner? Satisfactorily Answered by Numerous Bills of Fare (1852), William Kitchiner’s The Housekeeper’s Oracle; or, Art of Domestic Management (1829), Charles Selby’s The Dinner Question; or, How to Dine Well and Economically (1860), and J. H. Walsh, A Manual of Domestic Economy (1857).
consistent shape and order of events, which makes them ripe for reimagining in any number of contexts, according to the requirements of plot and theme. The literary components for this chapter are George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871-2), George Meredith’s *Modern Love* (1862), and Amy Levy’s poem, “At a Dinner-Party” (1889), each of which allows authors to illustrate that even seemingly standard dinner parties are underpinned by a complex system of rules and expectations. These texts depict the Victorian dinner party as not just a source of pleasure, but a way of producing, testing, and reifying cultural norms.

This first chapter lays the groundwork for the following three, in which I explore the reaches of sociability, in the context of literary dinners and more general scenes of domestic entertaining, extrapolating the uses to which these occasions were put by partygoers, party-givers, and their authors. My second chapter, “Reforming Sociability and Its Signifiers: Manners, Morality, and Money in *Cranford* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,*** takes up the role of women in the Victorian party, but here in a context largely divorced from masculine influence—a kind of limit case for the Victorian woman’s domesticized power. In Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1851), the party acts as the locus of social life in a town in which men are almost entirely absent, either due to natural, professional, or otherwise contrived events. Here, women preside over both domestic and public life—though in point of fact, men inhabit the boundaries of the narrative, flitting in and out of both Cranford the town and *Cranford* the novel, and lingering just off the page, in India, at sea, in death, or, presumably, at home. Without the overt influence of professional, political, or military spheres, the domestic setting takes primacy as the arbiter of all aspects of polite society and becomes a space in which the ripples of more obviously “public” concerns inhere in feminized and domesticated ways. For my purposes, *Cranford* acts as a meditation on the intersection of the party with certain kinds of “economy,” and the ways that
financial realities require women to negotiate social ideals and morals through the use of language and a kind of ad hoc set of fluid social standards. The express femininity of Cranford allows Gaskell to locate these economic concerns within the purview of women and to establish the domestic space as an acutely influential component of complex social and public concerns. The second section of this chapter looks at Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), and presents an opposing case: a domestic world *too* full of men, too indifferent to financial concerns, and therefore morally tenuous. For the novel’s heroine, Helen, the systems of economy and morality that work so precisely in Cranford must be once again renegotiated and re-signified. Brontë’s story is often thought of in terms of “the one vs. the many,” and a look at the novel’s social engagements (the many) allows us to set prescribed expectations of sociability against Helen’s personal moral system (the one), in order to think about the way that women’s domestic roles allowed them to restructure social assessments of moral, economic, and sociable expectations.

If my first chapter provides a foundation for the Victorian party as a repeatable form and flexible literary device, and my second chapter looks at the party’s place in the limited space of domestic and feminine circle, my third chapter broadens its scope to consider parties and their influence on a national scale. “Politics Parties: Domestic Entertaining and Parliamentary Power in the Mid-Nineteenth Century” takes up dinners and parties in Charles Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), Anthony Trollope’s *Can You Forgive Her?* (1865), and Margaret Oliphant’s *Miss Marjoribanks* (1865-1866). I argue that these novel’s portrayals of dinners and parties are emblematic of an ongoing process in nineteenth-century literature, wherein women, by properly giving and attending parties, had the power to shape the parliamentary futures of men specifically and political movements in general. At the Victorian party, husbands and wives
could partner together to participate in a ritual of constantly shifting protocols that allowed hostesses, hosts, and guests alike to interpret not just a person’s social status or marriageability, but (invariably) his fitness for political office. Reassessing these apparently apolitical occasions continues what Nancy Armstrong, Elizabeth Langland, and others have begun, investing both nineteenth-century women and the domestic spheres they occupied with political power and exploring the relationship between men and women in these spaces. The three texts offer a spectrum of both the imagined possibilities of women’s politico-domestic involvement in Parliamentary affairs and their authors’ level of ambivalence to the notion of a politically-minded party hostess.

My fourth chapter broadens the scope of the Victorian party’s influence one more, moving from the national to the international. “Domestic Virtues, National Importance’: Parties in the Age of Globalism” turns its focus from interiors—of the home, of Great Britain—toward the effects of globalism on Anglicized sociability. This international move illustrates the farthest-reaching aspects of “private” sociability by exploring the geopolitical repercussions of parties (and the repercussions of geopolitics on parties) in the rapidly globalizing world of the nineteenth century. This chapter begins with a look back to the beginning of the century to literature informed by international conflicts in and around the island of Hispaniola, considering, on the west side of the Atlantic, Leonora Sansay’s Secret History (1808), and on the east, Jane Austen’s Persuasion (1808). Both Sansay’s and Austen’s works are ostensibly novels of manners (a famously strict set of manners) and yet both deploy the apparently domestic world of dinners and parties to international ends, demonstrating how private instances of sociability—the

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micropolitics of these occasions—respond to and even in some instances shape macropolitics on an international scale. A second section analyzes the degree to which nineteenth-century authors imagined the party as a space protected from the threats of international incursion, both on domestic soil in Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1859) and, in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868), in foreign lands. In Amy March’s trip to the continent, Alcott constructs a multinational social gathering that, rather than leading to a new awareness of cosmopolitanism in one of her co-heroes, instead reifies Amy’s national identity and sense of American superiority. Collins’s central party, on the other hand, is a domestic birthday party that is essentially invaded by Indian priests. *The Moonstone* features what I imagine as a revolt of the colonized in miniature, which anticipates the impending collapse of the British Empire and indicates the unsustainability of British sociability as a “pure,” unchanging stronghold against the porous political and cultural boundaries of a globalized world. By including four texts from four distinct authors, I show that writers on both sides of the Atlantic deployed literary representations of dinners and parties to similar ends, at once engaging with a transatlantic body of values, manners, and ideas, and tailoring their depictions to specific (and usually nationalistic) objectives.

Finally, the coda, “*Downton Abbey* and *Gosford Park*: The Costume Drama and the Remnants of Victorian Sociability in Contemporary Culture,” engages with modern manifestations of Victorian party sensibilities to argue that, both artistically and in actuality, Victorian notions, expectations, and applications of sociability stretch even into the twenty-first century. This coda simultaneously attempts to determine the reasons for the recent vogue of nineteenth-century ideals and fantasies of sociability and to articulate what exactly it is that we, as modern-day social beings, owe to the Victorians. This brief chapter takes as its primary
subject the tremendously popular British television series, *Downton Abbey* (2010-15), which, though set before and after World War I, represents in many ways a perennial nostalgia for the Victorian Era, both in the United Kingdom and the United States. A culmination of the cultural narrative this dissertation traces out, beginning with Chapter One on the literary and social work of parties and ending in an explication of their transnational capabilities, this analysis of modern Victorian dinners and parties makes a case for the enduring influence of nineteenth-century notions of sociability and the uses to which they continue to be put today: as fantasies of comfort, sources of aspiration, and as capacious spaces used for the working out of complex and mutable notions of what is good, what is expected, and what is possible in polite society.

Taken as a whole, this dissertation is an exploration of a particular iteration of sociability in nineteenth-century literature: the scene of domestic entertaining. I define “domestic entertaining” broadly as any occasion in which an individual acts as host or hostess to a body of invited guests. These scenes usually take place in the home, although, occasionally, the novels in question depict parties set in *ad hoc* domestic spaces, such as a military base or a European hotel. *Party Politics* is about the capacity that nineteenth-century authors imagined such domestic entertainments had: to invite the outside world in, and in turn, shape the world from the inside out. This dissertation is one in a series of scholarly works seeking to reconsider the power of domestic space and domestic actors in Victorian literature and culture. Its central conceit is that the party afforded nineteenth-century authors of realist literature with a kind of flexibility, giving their slice-of-life characters a larger-than-life space in which to metaphorically roam. Victorian hosts, hostesses, and their guests could, at least in literature, maneuver within prescribed systems of sociability to effect moral, economic, political, and even international change, while also
using scenes of domestic entertaining to register the transformations of a continually modernizing, globalizing, democratizing world.
CHAPTER ONE

THE PARTY’S POLITICS: THE VICTORIAN DINNER PARTY AS CULTURAL PRACTICE AND LITERARY CONVENTION

Man has emphatically been called a cooking animal—one who alone purifies his food by fire; but with equal truth and sagacity it may be observed that man is the only animal that chats over his dinner, or takes wine over it—or makes the dinner the nucleus of a social solar system, around which the sparkling universe of bright stars may pleasantly revolve.

—E. L. Blanchard, A Handy Book on Dinners (1860)

Man, it has been said, is a dining animal. Creatures of the inferior races eat and drink; man only dines. It has also been said that he is a cooking animal; but some races eat food without cooking it. It is not a dinner at which sits the aboriginal Australian, who gnaws his bone half bare and then flings it behind to his squaw. And the native of Terra-del-Fuego does not dine when he eats his morsel of red clay. Dining is the privilege of civilization.

—Isabella Beeton, Mrs Beeton’s Book of Household Management (1861)

In these epigraphs, two Victorian etiquette writers hold up the dinner and the act of dining as icons of middle- and upper-class sociability and civility. For E. L. Blanchard, a journalist and theater critic for the Daily Telegraph, the dinner is anthropocentric. Man, though still an animal, is an animal that “chats” and “takes wine”; but more generally, he—and it is inevitably a “he”—is a social animal whose “universe,” in Blanchard’s hyperbole, “pleasantly revolves” around the dinner table. Isabella Beeton, the Victorian cookery-and-etiquette writer


par excellence, narrows her taxonomy even further. Not only anthropocentric, dining is an essentially Eurocentric, and later Anglocentric, practice. Beeton limits this “privilege” to “civilization,” by which she means white, Western civilization, as far removed as possible, both socially and geographically, from antipodean aborigines and Patagonian natives. These statements, apart from vexing any cultural relativist worth her salt, serve the dual purpose of exalting both specific cultures and a specific custom of these cultures: the daily practice of gathering around the table, eating cooked food, and socializing in a particular way. These two authors, who are clearly in conversation with one another, were part of an upsurge of nineteenth-century writers, including other prominent names like Charles Selby and Catherine Dickens, who wrote about general etiquette but placed special emphasis on dinners and dinner parties.

Searching out emblems of British exceptionalism was, of course, not unique to the Victorians, and yet, between the 1810s and 1870s, the dinner party grew into a key signifier, and perhaps the key signifier, of British civility.

Beeton in particular uses the dinner-party as an ideal to advance exceptionalist ideologies at both the national and individual level. In her paean to dining, she seems to contradict herself, first saying that “man . . . is a dining animal,” but also that “some races eat food without cooking it,” and that such “races” cannot be said to dine. She stops short of fully articulating her nascent syllogistic claim (i.e. all men dine, not all races dine, therefore, not all races are men), but goes so far as to use “Creatures of the inferior races” as a not-so-implicit umbrella phrase for non-whites and animals alike. In case her readers miss this message by virtue of its subtlety, she continues:

The rank which a people occupy in the grand scale may be measured by their way of taking their meals, as well as their way of treating their women. The nation which knows how to dine has learnt the leading lesson of progress. It implies both the will and the skill to reduce to order, and surround with idealisms and graces, the more material conditions
of human existence; and wherever that will and that skill exist, life cannot be wholly ignoble.\textsuperscript{11}

Beeton essentially equates the valuing of dining practices and the valuing of basic human rights, as if using the proper knife to carve one’s leg of mutton and condemning violence towards women are somehow comparable virtues. Moreover, she situates such knowledges—a set of best practices for dining in the correct English way—as markers of rank, progress, and nobility that are founded in one’s ability to obscure the natural, the material, the physical “with idealisms and graces.” The idea, of course, is that, though the Selk’nam hunter in Tierra del Fuego relies on food as much as a British nobleman does, he represents a too-close-for-comfort union between the natural world and human society. England and the English, by contrast, have taken “the more material conditions of human existence” and imbued them with grace, excellence, and etiquette, ignoring their own biological materiality in the process.\textsuperscript{12}

That Beeton would make such extreme claims, and in a book ostensibly about table settings, menu items, and party invitation protocol, is perhaps not surprising. After all, her livelihood depended, at least in part, on her ability to stake a claim for the supreme importance of 1112 pages of what appear to be essentially arbitrary formalities.\textsuperscript{13} In a turn similar to that of a

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 363.

\textsuperscript{12} According to Catherine Bell, this process is central to a society’s development of rituals. For Bell, “Table manners are . . . [an] obvious area of activity formalized according to cultural conventions that bear only indirect links to the utilitarian purpose of getting nourishment into one’s stomach,” \textit{Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions, Revised Edition} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 142. This chapter, and indeed, this project, is less interested in the “material conditions” of dinners and dining, and more interested in the effects of British dining and socializing rituals. I would hesitate to consider this a food studies project; it is, rather, a cultural and literary history of the Victorian dinner party as a cultural ritual.

\textsuperscript{13} Margaret Beetham, “Of Recipe Books and Reading in the Nineteenth Century: Mrs Beeton and her Cultural Consequences” in \textit{The Recipe Reader: Narratives, Contexts, Traditions}, ed. by Janet Floyd and Laurel Forster (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 17. It
demagogue stoking popular fears to increase the impact of his message, Beeton seeks to convince her readers that etiquette, specifically dinner etiquette, is one of the flagship attributes that differentiate the English from the “inferior races”—a message that would have particular resonance in a time when the British Empire was increasingly bringing residents of the metropole in contact with foreign individuals and exotic ways of life. E. L. Blanchard, who, in addition to writing for the Daily Telegraph had a prolific 37-year career writing the Drury Lane pantomimes, is less beholden to the national “cause” of etiquette and its profits and therefore less extreme, but he is still likewise comfortable making grandiose claims about dinners and dining:

There is no operation [than dinner] in which the individual humanity can take greater interest. It is the goal of his daily ambition, the crowning reward of his daily toils and struggles. The lever that moves the world, which Archimedes so ardently desiderated, is simply—a dinner. The impulse of the poet, the statesman, and the philosopher may be traced to that diurnal attrition of the coats of the stomach which, according to the learned physiology, produces the singular sensation we denominate “hunger.”

According to Blanchard, dining has ties to both abstract pursuits like poetry, politics, and philosophy and material concerns of biology and biological theory, with dinner acting as the “goal” of everyday striving and the hunger that precedes it, providing the source that energizes such striving in the first place. His phrasing here is illustrative, in that it is not simply food that acts as an overdetermined signifier of hard work and higher thought, but “the dinner” in particular—an idealized emblem of desires fulfilled—which encapsulates both the act of eating and a capacious concept of proper Victorian sociability.

should also be mentioned that Beeton also worked as a journalist and that her husband Samuel was a partner at the publishing house Clarke, Beeton & Co., as Nicola Humble reminds us in her introduction to Oxford edition of Mrs Beeton’s. It was through this particular publication, however, that she and her husband both made their fortunes (vii-x).

14 Blanchard, 1.
For Beeton and Blancard’s fellow members of the Victorian bourgeoisie (and above), dinners were occasions that literally dominated the day. The historical practice of taking a light midday luncheon followed by dinner in the afternoon, supper in the early evening, and then tea in the late evening was completely upended by the increasing popularity and social importance of large extra-familial dinners, so much so that eating supper had almost completely fallen out of fashion by the 1870s. This project takes such shifts in fashion and practice as quotidian manifestations of a broader cultural narrative, wherein the dinner party began to play a significant role in British society at large. The etiquette manuals of writers such as Beeton, Blanchard, Catherine Dickens, and Charles Selby indicate, at the very least, a burgeoning market for written guides that enabled their readers to navigate the turbulent waters of dining at others’ homes and giving dinners in their own. The aim of this chapter is to examine the complicated politics of the dinner party as an ideal, and to widen our understanding of what the nineteenth-century dinner party, as both a historical practice and a representational convention of Victorian literature, could do. In the remaining chapters, I will explore the larger social implications of literary dinners and other forms of domestic entertaining—their work as complicated economic signifiers, their ramifications in British politics, and their capacity to influence even transatlantic

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15 Tea was likewise affected, and the then relatively new practice of taking it in the mid-afternoon still persists today. Nicola Humble, in her notes to Mrs Beeton’s, observes the dinner’s new importance for the Victorians, evidenced by the fact that “Beeton devotes 109 pages to dinners, and half a page each to breakfasts, and lunches and suppers together,” 390n. Historian Judith Flanders states that taking one’s dinner late in the evening became popular as a way of signaling one’s rank: “those who did not have to get up for work the next morning pushed dinner even later, as a sign of leisure. The upper middle classes copied them, in order to indicate their own gentility, and the middle classes, in turn, followed their lead, in order to separate themselves from those beneath them.” Flanders also notes a practical impetus behind the later dinner as, with the advent of cheaper, more efficient lighting mechanisms, it became less expensive to dine after dark, Inside the Victorian Home: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 267.
geopolitical affairs. In this chapter, after a word on the theory of separate spheres, I first locate the party’s unique situation within a Habermasian system of the public, the private, and the domestic. I then sketch out the parameters of the party as a microcosm of a Bourdieusian field—a social text from which successes and failures, as well as codified messages about one’s social capital, can be read and quantified, and simultaneously a skeleton upon which private and public, domestic and professional, interior and exterior objectives can be imposed. This field, I argue, is itself a product of Caroline Levine’s overlapping organizational forms. Lastly, I describe the cultural practice of the dinner party and examine its specific Victorian-ness, turning to works by Beeton, George Eliot, George Meredith, and Amy Levy. These works at once illustrate the historical assumptions attendant on the dinner party, the dinner party’s status as a staple in literature of the period (whether advice literature, fiction, or poetry), and its manipulability as a fluid ritual with multiple uses and potential abuses, which are both personal and, of course, social. In taking up the literary device of the dinner party, authors responded to shared ideas regarding the party’s utility—in the real world and in literature—and reinforced those ideas by portraying the party’s shape as something consistent and repeatable, and therefore legible. By laying the groundwork for this dissertation’s remaining chapters, this chapter opens door for a widened understanding of the reaches of sociability in the nineteenth-century, both in literature and culture, and examines the track of a cultural narrative that persists in the West even today.

1.1 Some Theoretical Frameworks for Assessing the Victorian Party

Georg Simmel influentially defined “sociability” as “the art or play form of association, related to the content and purposes of association in the same way as art is related to reality,” or,
more simply, “association for its own sake.” For Simmel, this means that true sociability is a departure from the ulterior motives that structure everyday pressures, which can only be felt “as from a distance.” As a specific aspect of what sociologists call association, “sociability” is the fun part of society, removed, in its purest form, even from codifying influences like class and gender; but Simmel cautions that “If sociability cuts off completely the threads which bind it to real life and out of which it spins its admittedly stylized web, it turns from play to empty farce, to a lifeless schematization proud of its woodenness.” This project takes up the tail-end of Simmel’s definitions, looking closely at the connecting “threads” which sociability, to function properly, ostensibly ignores. In her study of ritual in social and religious practice, Catherine Bell calls the dinner table “a distinct ceremonial arena,” noting that “table etiquette conveys symbolic messages—about social class, the mannered person’s place in and attitudes toward the hierarchy of social classes, and his or her understanding of the specific social situation.” Of course, there were other ways of signaling British virtue and imagined cultural preeminence. But the dinner party in Victorian England allowed for a kind of self-perpetuating, self-congratulating machine by which guests and hosts could simultaneously assert their exceptional status as individuals, as British subjects, and as a nation, thus communicating that Britain was a dining nation and that

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17 Ibid., 261.

18 Ibid. Despite being initially articulated in the 1910s, Simmel’s definition of sociability continues to be the standard today. Janet Lyon suggests that Simmel’s continued preeminence is due to his efforts at “counterbalancing” a negative, Weberian assessment of “modern disenchantment.” For Lyon, Simmel’s “formulations of sociability . . . redirect us towards creative practices of re-enchantment,” “Sociability in the Metropole: Modernism’s Bohemian Salons” in *ELH* 76.3 (Fall 2009), 687.

19 Bell, 143.
certain British diners were, therefore, arbiters the very idea of Britishness. The dinner party is Victorian literature’s arch-example of sociability, and by closely examining its ties to those aspects of reality which impinge on the insularity of Simmel’s version of sociability, we can complicate and reconfigure his somewhat idealistic insistence on sociability as a remedy for a world “overburdened with objective content and material demands.” The very nature of the dinner party, with the standardized rules and systematic exclusion of outsiders that this chapter unpacks, reveals that no such escape from classist, financial, or gendered constraints existed for the Victorians, while its status as an icon of British exceptionalism served as a constant reminder both of those markers of Britishness—like manners—and those aspects of the non-British world against which the Victorians differentiated themselves. And yet, as later chapters in this dissertation show, party-givers and party guests of the nineteenth century manipulated the dinner and its constraints to their own ends, pushing against rigid definitions of how Victorian sociability and its remotely formative “threads”—class, gender, economic status, political affiliation, national identity—functioned.

As an idea, the dinner party in Victorian England was, of course, shaped by normative, one-dimensional conceptions of gender roles. This dissertation aims, in part, to complicate our understanding of the way those roles inhered in the dinner party as a practice. Still, it is difficult to talk about any practice which placed the onus of its success on a woman’s shoulders without thinking about the doctrine of separate spheres, so prevalent in the nineteenth century and so contentious for present-day scholars. Along with, perhaps, Coventry Patmore’s The Angel in the

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20 Simmel, 257. Simmel’s conception of sociability, and its relation to the art object, is noticeably influenced by modernist ideas of the detachment of art from history and lived experience, and is thus obviously post-Victorian. It does, however, mirror Ruskinian notions of the home as a refuge from stressors of “real” life in that it too imagines spaces or interactions that are somehow “safe” from public concerns.
House, John Ruskin’s Sesame and Lilies is the seminal text for assessing Victorian notions of the separate spheres and their distinctions. But even if one were to take at face value Ruskin’s conceit that the home, as a sanctuary from the outside world, was therefore “the woman’s true place and power,” then the dinner party appears as an anomaly in a system intent on differentiating the public from the domestic. 21 If the home is the seat of power for women, then inviting the outside world in (in the form of friends, family members, and men’s professional associates) first disrupts the supposedly hermetic nature of her domain and second invests her with a complex kind of power, wherein, by performing the wifely duties that Ruskin and Patmore prized so highly, she disrupts the structure of male hierarchical power that such thinkers likewise insisted on maintaining. 22

This awkward, liminal strength only exists if we acknowledge the power and general stability, at least conceptually, of the two spheres of Victorian social life: the masculine, professional public and the feminine, domestic private. Critics of American literature and culture have been more adamant in their rejection of “separate spheres” as a lens that is either truthful or useful when considering life before the 1900s. American Literature’s famous (or infamous) special issue, No More Separate Spheres! (1998), emphatically calls for a reassessment of simple, normative notions of privacy and public life and, ultimately, expects its writers and


22 Michael McKeon cautions against always equating domestic practices with isolation: “in lived experience the norms and values of domesticity and privacy were found to be capable of obstructing one another.” But McKeon does not take up the specific practice of hosting dinners or parties, and in fact asserts that domesticity and privacy are more often complementary than not, The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), xxi.
readers to dismiss Ruskinian notions of men’s and women’s spheres entirely. Among its central complaints is the idea that such gendered binaries of existence act more as “reductionist” strawmen, against which to validate feminist recoveries and recuperations of female agency and significance, than they do as actual categories of lived experience. There are two problems with such treatment of separate spheres theory. Caroline Levine has noted the first, which is the obvious gender inequality of the period and, relatedly, Victorian culture’s understanding of masculinity and femininity as fundamentally distinct concepts. The second is the doctrine’s persistence: in pushing against the separateness of the private and the public, we paradoxically emphasize their interconnectedness and their distinctiveness, thereby fortifying “separate spheres” as an ordering principle of analysis. In Rebecca Stern’s words, “to argue that the separate spheres were not so separate is not to deny the historical division of knowledge, but rather to reinforce it: the very capacity to recognize the public in the private is to depend on definitions of public and private ‘as such.’”

This chapter and this dissertation as a whole take Stern’s view of the doctrine of separate spheres. It is, in Tricia Lootens’s words, “an insistently archaic, yet ongoing dream poetics” that

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24 “But unless we wanted to argue that men and women were absolutely equal in the period, or that the cultural distinction between masculinity and femininity was non-existent or irrelevant—which, to my knowledge, no scholar has been inclined to do—it is difficult to argue that we have no need for an analytic approach to separate spheres at all. . . .” Caroline Levine, “Strategic Formalism: Toward a New Method in Cultural Studies” in Victorian Studies, 48.4 (Summer 2006), 628.

organizes both ours and the Victorians’ thinking. I take the permeability of the boundaries between the two spheres as a given, without rejecting the existence of the boundaries themselves, and I locate the most obvious indicators of their porousness in the dinner party. The archetypal dinner party as a practice and an ideal (or “dream”) of proper sociability at once reified definitions of publicness and privateness while providing a space for the two to overlap. To invite a set of guests, who were social, professional, or political equals, into one’s home was to self-consciously bring the public sphere into the private sphere, and to assert the dinner party’s status as both a mirror of the outside world (with the same classes of people included and excluded from representation in both) and its foil. At once a practice indicative of the period’s commitment to strict standards of etiquette and a capacious arena in which to test this already blurred boundary between public and private, the dinner party was the most socially acceptable event in which the mixing of genders was sanctioned, deliberate, and expected. This unique position necessarily allowed nineteenth-century writers to use scenes of sociability like these to negotiate the shifting terms of domesticity, femininity, professionalism, and even national identity. It also invested the party with a distinctive power that, while feminized, could be used to either “feminine” or “masculine” ends. The responsibility for managing the household in a way that made entertaining possible fell solely on the shoulders of women (whether wives, daughters, or single women who found themselves at the helm of household duties). Put

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27 This is to say, members of the lower classes could not expect to be invited to dinner at middle- or upper-class homes, just as members of the lower classes could not expect to associate, either professionally or politically, with members of the middle or upper classes.

28 The major exception to this rule was the bachelor—and the “confirmed bachelor.” Helena Michie and Robyn Warhol take up one Victorian bachelor in particular, Sir George
another way, the provision and professional management of resources was a man’s responsibility, while their domestic management was up to women and women only. It is my contention that women could then join with men in using these resources to public ends. Rather than allowing the home to act as a refuge from work, the dinner party uses the home and its proper management to accomplish public aims, whether they are social, professional, or political. In Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair’s words, home and work “interpenetrate,” and the dinner party reveals this symbiotic relationship in its most explicit form.29

Such a claim, like so many others, explicitly rejects Jürgen Habermas’s general structure of societal boundaries, which limit the public sphere to the field which comprises the bourgeois voice of “rational-critical discourse,” the private sphere to individualistic pursuits (including

Scharf, in their meta-archival project, Love Among the Archives. Their work explores Scharf’s unique position in society as a single, likely queer man, and notes his love of food, dining, and entertaining. A frequent party guest himself, Scharf eventually began hosting dinner parties of his own, which were similar to the parties discussed here in their formal construction, but different in that their guest lists were entirely male. Michie and Warhol delineate other unique qualities of Scharf’s life such as these and interrogate their implications with regard to Scharf’s sexuality, social position, and profession, while also exploring the unique difficulties and insights such attributes offer the archival researcher, Love Amon the Archives: Writing the Lives of Sir George Scharf, Victorian Bachelor, New York: Edinburgh UP, 2015.

29 Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair, Public Lives: Women, Family, and Society in Victorian Britain, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 109. Historian John Tosh resists this notion of interpenetration: “The Victorian middle-class domestic unit represented the final and most decisive stage in the long process whereby the rationale of the Western family shifted from being primarily economic to become sentimental and emotional. More specifically, it reflected a steadily increasing separation of work from home,” A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 13. However, Tosh is contextualizing Victorian England specifically as it differs from the England of the eighteenth century, in which it was not uncommon for the home to double as a place of work. Taken together, Gordon and Nair and Tosh indicate the constant making and unmaking of private/public boundaries, both historically and by historians themselves.
work and the exchange of goods), and the domestic or “intimate” sphere to the home. Gender theorists in particular have been critical of what they see as shortcomings of Habermas’s, who, however unintentionally, echoes Ruskin’s views on domesticity and the private sphere when he writes that “The intimate sphere, once the very center of the private sphere, moved to its periphery to the extent that the private sphere itself became deprivatized.” Scholars like Nancy Fraser, Seyla Benhabib, Joan B. Landes, Mary P. Ryan, and Leonore Davidoff have all written about Habermas and his limitations—and, in fact, I am here interested in Habermas in light of these limitations and insofar as his definitions of the spheres of human social experience collapse in on one another. Caroline Levine invokes Habermas when she writes about “how different social hierarchies overlap, sometimes powerfully reinforcing one another”; we can think about Habermas’s three spheres in terms of what Levine calls “forms”: recognizable shapes, patterns, and systems of organization which, rather than constituting a “master hierarchy of values,” allow for the possibility that a bourgeois public sphere, an individualist “private” sphere, and the domestic sphere of the home “are just as likely to unsettle one another, their collisions as liable to produce gains in odd places as to reinforce given structures of power.” Levine’s ideas allow

30 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991): 19-20. Unless specifically noted, I use “private” to mean domestic or home-related, and “public” to mean ostensibly non-domestic, which is in keeping with the practices of most scholars of domesticity and gender theory since Habermas.

31 Ibid., 152.


us to reimagine Ruskin’s claim about the home as the place from which women reign by leaning into his almost antithetical suggestion, about idealized domestic women, that “wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her.” The home was indeed a “seat of power” for women in the Victorian period, but the limits of that power extended far beyond her supposed sanctuary. If Habermas’s version of the private sphere has been “deprivatized,” Levine and her fellow critics enable us to think about the deprivatization of that other, even more private sphere: the “intimate” sphere of the home.

Monica Cohen writes about the deprivatized home in her work, *Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel*. Cohen is interested in how women’s domestic roles prepared them for quietly subversive new forms of public life, such as philanthropy and voting rights activism, whereas I am arguing that the party also enabled non-subversive engagement in the world beyond the home and therefore allows us to continue reassessing the ways that Victorian society operated. Cohen does note, however, that attempts to extend “the domestic sphere into public life actually entailed its reverse: extending the public sphere into the home.” She is specifically writing about how women with outward-facing objectives limited their actual, physical work to the home, where they “assembled food baskets, sewed blankets, [and] held meetings.” Thus, “Their homes continued to be where they worked even if they worked in a more public capacity.” Yet the notions of “extending the public sphere into the home” and “extending the domestic sphere into public life” are useful when considering the dinner party, and one way to

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34 Ruskin, 68.

make sense of the interplay and overlap between these two categories of lived experience can be found in Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus, and capital.

Bourdieu’s fields are spaces that function according to their own rules, ostensibly outside the more material public systems whose power we are more prone to acknowledge: economics, state power, particular systems of governance, along with others. Fields are structured by individuals within the field who vie for the ability to manage and direct the resources germane to that particular field, and, except in the case of actual political fields, the forces structuring a field are explicitly apolitical. They are also putatively detached from economic systems. Simmel’s aforementioned version of sociability is thus one iteration of the Bourdieusian field, detached, in theory, as the art object is from reality. We can think of Victorian middle- and upper-class sociability as a field generally, and dinners and parties as a particular iteration of that field’s shape and structure. Outwardly, these occasions appeared to be acts removed from the grim and grimy world of labor, of high political intrigue, and so on. But of course, they were only possible thanks to labor of all kinds: masculine professional work created income, which was usually predicated, somewhere down the line, on actual physical labor; more immediately, servants labored to prepare and serve food, to clean spaces such as dining and drawing rooms, to set the table, to dress their employers in appropriate attire, and so on. And political forces, as a later chapter will show, influenced the party’s subjects of conversation and its guest lists, while the confluence of the London social season with the sitting of Parliament and the presentation of debutantes at court suggests an almost utilitarian approach to the requirements of proper sociability.

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Bourdieu reconciles the contradictory notion that the field is separate from economic and political forces while necessarily being beholden to those forces for its very existence, with the concept of “relational thinking,” which emphasizes the fact that “no cultural product exists by itself, i.e. outside the relations of interdependence which link it to other products.” Again, Levine’s overlapping forms come to mind: in the same way that, for Levine, hierarchies, binaries, rhythms, and networks layer on top of one another, sometimes constructively, sometimes disruptively, economic fields, political fields, cultural fields, and “fields of power” are interdependent—or, to go back to Gordon and Nair’s ideas of home and work, interpenetrative. Bourdieu’s own methodology further emphasizes the fluidity of the field’s boundaries, in that success in a given field depends on the mastery of different kinds of “capital,” which in turn produces what he calls *habitus*. When discussing Gustave Flaubert’s novel, *L’Éducation sentimentale* (1869) and its “meetings or gatherings or dinners,” he defines *habitus* for such social occasions as “the acquirements, the embodied, assimilated properties, such as elegance, ease of manner, beauty and so forth, and capital as such, that is, the inherited assets which define the possibilities inherent in the field.” Of course, by capital, he means not just economic capital, but social capital that comes from one’s social networks and the cultural capital one develops as result of one’s surroundings and manifests in particular knowledges and skills. Economic capital is necessarily an aspect of social capital and a determinant of how one’s cultural capital develops, and the very word “capital” suggests a kind of fungibility of systems between fields.

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37 Ibid., 32-33.

38 Ibid., 148, 105.
This is all to say that the Victorian dinner party is one iteration of a Bourdieusian field—
the field of middle- and upper-class sociability—and that it is therefore interdependent on other
fields for both its existence and our understanding of its internal shape and external influence.39
We as theorists of the dinner party’s power must necessarily understand the binary “form” of
separate spheres and its limitations, particularly if we think about the way that Bourdieusian
capital moves across the spheres’ imaginary boundaries. One could not give or attend a dinner
party without first developing social capital, and the ability to do so depended on both a
woman’s performance in her social circles and a man’s professional or political clout. The party
itself displayed a hostess’s mastery of Habermas’s intimate sphere and her adherence to and
achievement of Ruskinian social and domestic expectations—which were the products of her
cultural capital and played a vital role in producing more social capital. These more abstract
forms of capital could themselves generate more economic or political capital, which then
necessitated the production and manipulation, again, of more social capital. As a nexus point for
each of these sources and expenders of capital in this self-perpetuating cycle, the party allows us
to make sense of the entanglement of public/private, professional/domestic, masculine/feminine
relationships that structured daily life for the Victorian middle- and upper-class and informed the
literature of the period.

39 I focus on the middle and upper classes for two reasons. The first is practical, in that, as
is always the case with the nineteenth century, historical records of the middle and upper class
are more often preserved, just as members of the middle and upper classes are more often
represented in literature. Second, the dinner party as a standardized practice required a middle- or
upper-class income for its existence, and while there are of course instances of working-class
parties both in history and literature, the dinner party as a reproducible icon of Victorian
sociability was a middle- and upper-class phenomenon.
1.2 Cultural Practice and Cultural Narrative: The Dinner Party as an Icon of Middle- and Upper-Class Victorian Sociability

The eighteenth century in Britain has been called an era of public sociability: the coffee-house, the tavern, the club are all archetypes of a particularly eighteenth-century version of social life located within Habermas’s version of the private sphere, wherein specific spaces acted as out-of-the-home gathering points which facilitated the exchange of ideas and emphasized a communally edifying version of sociability. These public spaces were physical manifestations of ideals such as Habermas’s “rational-critical discourse” and the democratic thinking it promoted, and they provided a space in which men of all classes could interact and exchange ideas, in opposition to the idea of “the court as a center of elite sociability,” and to the limitations of the public sphere, which was made up of places with more barriers to entry, such as Parliament, universities, and institutional buildings like courts of justice. But by the early nineteenth century, the pendulum had reversed course, and coffee-house culture had all but disappeared, muscled out by the reemergence of exclusivity, exemplified by the proliferation of men’s clubs and women’s societies. The dinner party offered a mixed-gender alternative to these isolating forums of interaction. In the face of newly destabilized sources of status and power, such as financial mobility and even actual, geographical mobility, the home emerged as a confined site of sociability that made it easier to regulate networks of political, financial, and


class strength. With parliamentary reform and the permeability of class divisions putting once concrete systems of classification in flux, “the confining of social life to private homes,” in sociologist Leonore Davidoff’s words, “also made possible the evaluation and placing of [people] in the social landscape.”

Though Davidoff does not explicitly say so, that this regulation was “in-home” meant that women now possessed a particular version of regulative power. Helen Day has suggested that the proliferation of clubs in the nineteenth century somewhat paradoxically resulted in an increased emphasis on the home as a Ruskinian refuge and the dinner as the family-centered meal we think of today. Indeed, one of the *raisons d’être* for books like *Mrs Beeton’s* was the fear that the attractions of men’s clubs would prove too great when compared to an unfit housewife whose home was uncomfortable and whose meals were lackluster.

Relocating the site of sociability to the home effectively meant that men could continue the kinds of public discourse of the eighteenth century in a leisurely context that now included and empowered women, making them, if not equals in the more general hierarchy, partners in sociability and cultural production. And it was not just wives and husbands who benefited: as a more restrictive alternative to the coffee houses and salons of the eighteenth century, and a smaller, less expensive, and therefore more repeatable iteration of the balls so common in Jane Austen’s novels, the Victorian dinner party allowed single women to meet single men, under the aegis of watchful hosts and family members, providing a new freedom of interaction on a more intimate scale than had been possible before.

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43 With regard to geographical mobility, Davidoff notes that new technologies of travel increased movement and therefore “disrupted notions of social placing,” so that one’s geographical provenance no longer held the weight it once did, *The Best Circles: Society Etiquette and the Season* (New York: The Cresset Library, 1986), 17.

By the 1790s, notions of sociability had become so linked to the domestic party that capable homeowners began to designate specific rooms solely for entertaining guests: the parlor for the middle classes, with the addition of the drawing room for the upper classes. The spaces were, in historian Judith Flanders’s words, “the private face of public life and the public face of private life . . . not private rooms in the strict sense, but perhaps privately public rooms.” According to John Tosh, the bourgeois home of the eighteenth century still functioned as a space for professional endeavors where needed, with a wife often acting as “her husband’s junior partner in his business,” whether that meant working the counter of a ground-floor shop or acting as an ad hoc secretary for more labor-intensive occupations. In the Victorian period, the public and the private collided within the home in more nuanced ways—in a kind of middle threshold that was neither wholly private nor wholly public. We can read in this a transition for the home’s intentionally outward-facing spaces, where the focus of those spaces moves from the professional to the sociable. But the uses for these kinds of spaces are similar: to invite the outside in, to position oneself and one’s family favorably within a larger network and reap the rewards, and to develop capital (whether economic or social).

The dinner party’s spatially singular position was mirrored by its uniqueness as a cultural concept. The glut of cookery and etiquette manuals of the period indicates the social pressures and expectations attendant on the party as an ideal to be achieved. Apart from Mrs Beeton’s *Book of Household Management*, some of the more famous cookery and etiquette manuals

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46 Flanders, 292.

47 Tosh, 15.
include Blanchard’s *Handy Book*, Alexis Soyer’s *The Gastronomic Regenerator* (1846), Catherine Dickens’s *What Shall We Have for Dinner?* (1852) (written as Lady Maria Clutterbuck), Charles Selby’s *The Dinner Question* (1860) (written at Tabitha Tickletooth), and an earlier text, William Kitchiner’s *The Housekeeper’s Oracle; or, Art of Domestic Management* (1829). *Mrs Beeton’s* outsold them all, and would continue on as, according to Margaret Beetham, “a brand,” with her works published, republished, added to, and illegally reproduced on into the 1890s.\(^4^8\) Beetham writes that the “cook-book” began to take its modern in shape in 1875 and “owed much” to Beeton’s milestone work and her brand. Beeton’s husband “specialised in general knowledge miscellanies, encyclopaedies, and what we would now call ‘how-to’ books, almost all of which were explicitly linked with the name of the firm,” such as *Beeton’s Guide to Investing Money* (1870).\(^4^9\) As a result, the Beetons were well-equipped to build on the immediate success of the first *Mrs Beetons* volume by imitating the publication practices of serialized authors. Even after her death in 1865, Beeton’s husband continued to publish books that used her name as a selling point, including *Mrs Beeton’s Dictionary of Everyday Cookery*, *Mrs Beeton’s Cookery Book*, *Mrs Beeton’s Shilling Cookery Book*, and *Mrs Beeton’s Penny Cookery Book*, giving Isabella Beeton an afterlife that extended on into the early twentieth century.\(^5^0\)

*Mrs Beeton’s Book of Household Management* was thus the most popular manual of the time, and it begins its chapter on “Dinners and Dining” with the aforementioned ode to western

\(^{4^8}\) Beetham, 17.

\(^{4^9}\) Ibid., 17-18.

\(^{5^0}\) Ibid., 19.
dining practices: “Dining is the privilege of civilization.” For Beeton—her generation’s real-life version of Betty Crocker—and for dozens of her peers, Victorian dinners and dining were emblematic of Britishness itself. She goes on to argue that they are an “index of human ingenuity,” meaning that meals, their presentation, and the ways in which they are consumed act as tangible indicators of British exceptionalism and Western innovation. In support of these ideas, Beeton offers a kind of “who’s who” list of historical British diners and literary depictions of dining. The list is lengthy and includes: Lord Byron’s description of a dinner party in Don Juan; a scene from William Makepeace Thackeray’s Book of Snobs; Raphael’s visit to Adam in Milton’s Paradise Lost; a “dainty supper, given by Keats” in “The Eve of Saint Agnes”; the picnic of Tennyson’s “Audley Court”; and an allusion to celebrated French chef and British resident Alexis Soyers and the Reform Club. In a text which dedicates most of its space to the minutiae of daily living—the “household management” of its title—this literary turn is telling in that it positions literature as the arbiter and exemplar of good tastes, strong values, and proper social praxis, and marks out dining conventions as the physical evidence of these qualities. Equally significant is the effect these literary examples are supposed to have on Beeton’s readers:

We gladly quote passages like these, to show how eating and drinking may be surrounded with poetical applications, and how man, using his privilege to turn any and every repast into a ‘feast of reason,’ with a warm and plentiful ‘flow of soul,’ may really count it as not the least of his legitimate prides, that he is ‘a dining animal’ . . . Leaving great men of all kinds, however, to get their own dinners, let us, who are not great, look after ours. Dine we must, and we may as well dine elegantly as well as wholesomely. 

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51 Beeton, 363.

52 Ibid., 365-66. Here Beeton quotes from Alexander Pope’s Imitations of Horace (1733–1738), implicitly suggesting that Victorian diners can imitate both their British forebears and the Romans of antiquity, linking British dining to classical concepts of wisdom and edification. Her reference to “a dining animal,” however, appears to be a self-quotation from a few pages before.
Beeton’s goal, then, is to “show” the connections between dinners, dining, and “poetical applications,” and to create in her readers a shared value system and a shared sense of British pride. The mistresses and housekeepers and other domestic servants after whom chapters are named are expected to put down the book and implement the lessons gleaned both from Beeton’s practical lessons and from literary feasts, embodying and perpetuating certain behaviors and values as particularly British and particularly feminine.

Or are they? Isabella Beeton was selling not just a manual, but a lifestyle. Guidebooks such as hers are always at least partly aspirational, and it is therefore difficult to assess the degree to which readers took Beeton’s recommendations seriously, and to what degree books like hers were read as someone today might read actress Gwyneth Paltrow’s famously pilloried website or any number of self-help books, style guides, and lifestyle magazines: for entertainment, and to feed daydream-like hopes for certain fantasies they do not actually expect to be met. The difference, though, between Beeton and her modern successors, is that Beeton was making an intervention into a previously unstructured system of cultural signifiers and providing detailed tips to help readers make sense of that system. In Margaret Beetham’s words, she “codified a previously chaotic body of knowledge” and “produce[d] a science of domestic management, one that could be systematically taught” in a time when “traditional practices were being redefined and attached to formal methods of learning.” Its idealistic, foundation-laying preface


54 Beetham, 22.
notwithstanding, most of Beeton’s work marks a turn away from the moralizing of conduct manuals of the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century, and focuses instead on the practicalities of actual household management. Her section on dinners provides a step-by-step guide, offering practical solutions to the middle-class woman who, often for the first time, found herself responsible for managing a family budget, directing servants, and maintaining the connections in her family’s social circle, all while adhering to often unarticulated expectations of behavior.\textsuperscript{55}

And with the burden of modeling and mirroring distinct aspects of British cultural superiority, the task at hand was a heavy one.

Beeton’s mingling of idealistic and practical advice can be seen in her instructions to the mistress of the house who decides to host a party:

\textit{The half-hour before dinner} has always been considered as the great ordeal through which the mistress, in giving a dinner-party, will either pass with flying colours, or lose many of her laurels. . . . The mistress, however, must display no kind of agitation, but show her tact in suggesting light and cheerful subjects of conversation, which will be much aided by the introduction of any particular new book, curiosity of art, or article of vertu, which may pleasantly engage the attention of the company. In giving an entertainment of this kind, the mistress should remember that it is her duty to make her guests feel happy, comfortable, and quite at their ease; and the guests should also consider that they have come to the house of their hostess to be happy. Thus an opportunity is given to all for innocent enjoyment and intellectual improvement, when also acquaintances may be formed that may prove invaluable through life, and information gained that will enlarge the mind.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{55} As Beetham phrases it, Beeton’s book “simultaneously addressed and sought to bring into being the middle-class domestic woman,” 20.

\textsuperscript{56} Beeton, 21-22. Also included in this section are a short poem about the troubles of the half-hour before dinner and the phrase “\textit{nous avons change tout cela}” as a dismissal of old ideas about arriving fashionably late. Both fulfill aspirational aspects of the guidebook by offering the reader a kind of winking inclusion into the world of the intelligentsia, as if Beeton is saying “Here are some practical suggestions, but of course, you, who know French and appreciate poetry, already know all of this.” Such a move would allow women to read without feeling as though that had been condescended to.
It’s a tall order, placing a lot of productive weight on the party and stretching its limits as a forum for entertainment, but Beeton renders it as a list of practical instructions. In doing so, she suggests that the ideal is in fact achievable, if overwhelming. She treats the small slot of time before food is served as “the ordeal” through which a hostess can prove her mettle – but one which comes with the risk of losing “many of her laurels.” Beeton then lays out the stakes of the dinner party (as a do-or-die trial of domestic acumen) and its hoped-for outcomes (happy, comfortable, easy-going guests; an equally happy hostess; “innocent enjoyment and intellectual improvement,” valuable life-long acquaintances, and the acquirement of edifying knowledge). But rather than only scaremongering or grandstanding, she gives her readers specifics to help them weather the trial successfully: read current books and be up-to-date on the art world, with any interesting stories about antiques, rarities, and other curiosities at the ready.

This thirty-minute space of time is a miniature iteration of what Helena Michie has called the “cultural narrative”: “a master-narrative, a culturally powerful story with a predictable shape against which individuals are encouraged to evaluate the course of their lives.”57 The hostess—who might be a new housewife, or like Lucilla Marjoribanks or Alice Vavasour, a daughter responsible for her family’s social lives—could approach the task, prepared for certain events and expectations, and predict the likely “outcomes”; as a result, she and her guests could “evaluate the course of their lives,” making judgments about their own fitness for entertaining

57 Helena Michie, *Victorian Honeymoons: Journeys to the Conjugal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 54. Michie is describing a slightly grander cultural narrative – that of the honeymoon journey. But as an occasion with a “predictable shape,” a consistent schedule of events, and expected outcomes that, according to Beeton, could mean general edification for those involved, the framework of the Victorian dinner party resembles that of the Victorian honeymoon, which was meant to result in greater intimacy and new identification as husband and wife, with the couple returning as “one flesh.”
and assess their social circles, their individual intelligence, their knowledge of current events, and so on. Indeed, the entire schedule of events that made the party possible, from invitations to the occasion’s final hours of drawing-room entertainments, was so structured, so clearly outlined in the etiquette literature of the day, that success or failure would be completely obvious to everyone involved. The cultural narrative went as follows: Invitations were sent out by the hostess, in her and her husband’s names, three weeks ahead of time, with a response expected within twenty-four hours.\textsuperscript{58} The gathering itself would take place between six and nine in the evening.\textsuperscript{59} Guests were allowed a fifteen-minute “grace period” following the party’s start time, during which they could arrive without concerns of rudeness. People would first assemble in the parlor, but no introductions would be made to the group as whole; instead, the host or hostess brought each male guest to the woman he was expected to escort to dinner and introduced them. (He would bow; there would be no handshake, no kissing the back of the palm, etc.) The two would then make small talk until dinner was announced, and then the highest-ranking woman would be led into the dining room by her escort, followed by a procession of couples in order of precedence, highest to lowest, with the hostess and the man of the highest rank bringing up the rear. They were sometimes followed by men with no partner: poor men, single men, young men.\textsuperscript{60} At dinner, there was a complicated but standardized seating arrangement, according to rank, along with name cards, which made ranks more legible.\textsuperscript{61} Women removed their gloves

\textsuperscript{58} Flanders, 285.

\textsuperscript{59} By the second half of the nineteenth century, this became the standard for dinners. In the first half of the century, dinner could be served anytime between noon and midnight, Nicola Humble’s notes for Beeton, 390n.

\textsuperscript{60} Flanders, 286-287.

\textsuperscript{61} Beeton, 22.
upon sitting, though the men would not. Then a meal of at least three courses would follow (first soup and fish, after which wine could be served, then entrées, then the remaining relevés, roasts, entremets, and fruit), including breaks for using “finger glasses” and scheduled times for refilling wine glasses. Young ladies, as a rule, were not to eat small game birds (at least not full birds), nor should they eat cheese or gargle water when finger-glasses appeared, lest they appear too French; all guests were to refuse a second helping of fish and soup, which would require their fellow guests to wait before beginning the next course, but second helpings would be offered regardless. At the meal’s close, the hostess rose, signaling to the ladies that it was time to leave and allowing the men to smoke, recover from their alcoholic consumption, and discuss “masculine” subjects. The ladies waited in the drawing room, where the men would eventually join them for the remainder of the party for tea, small refreshments, and entertainment such as cards, music, and sometimes dancing. Here, more general introductions between men and women could be made. Parties ended by ten or eleven in the evening and, within a week following, guests were expected to call or send a card expressing their thanks and assuring their hosts that they enjoyed themselves.

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62 Flanders, 287.
63 Beeton, 23.
64 Flanders, 288.
65 Beeton, 22.
66 Ibid., 25-26. When these introductions were made for the purpose of dancing, they lasted, according to Beeton, only the duration of the party, so that a woman was “consequently, free next morning, to pass her partner . . . of the previous evening without the slightest recognition,” 25.
67 Ibid., 26.
This detailed delineation of events seems arduous, even ridiculous to a modern reader, and yet, according to Judith Flanders, “This was all much less complicated than it appears now . . . [and] the idea that society ran smoothly only through adherence to an accepted set of rules was rarely challenged.” As a result, guests knew what to expect, down to when fish would be offered for a second time and the fact that fellow guests would politely decline. Of course, the nineteenth century was a time of continuously shifting standards, with industrialization, financial speculation, and political reform among the many factors which were constantly reshaping British society. The dinner party was not immune to these fluctuations, and thus manuals for proper etiquette and household management took on particular importance. Even members of the \textit{nouveau riche}, only recently accepted into the upper echelons of polite society, could learn and replicate these rules, thanks to Beeton and her peers. Ostensibly, etiquette manuals such as hers were first and foremost descriptive rather than prescriptive, articulating a set of preexisting knowledges and describing, more plainly, the kinds of practical scaffolding upon which the rhythms and rigors of social propriety in the home depended. In actuality, however, they allowed those who existed outside the pre-established spheres of the middle and upper classes to gain access to those spheres. According to Flanders, “The rules were important, therefore, not as a barrier to restrict movement, but to indicate current status as people moved though the different levels of society.” In this way, the dinner provided a reciprocal system of what Bourdieu calls “consecration,” wherein one’s accepted presence and correct performance at a dinner party

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68 Flanders, 290.

69 Ibid., 291.
assured one’s legitimacy and one’s inclusion in a set, while the collective group of guests who had agreed to attend a party simultaneously legitimized its hosts.\textsuperscript{70}

Rather than making standards of behavior obsolete amid so many fluctuations, the saturation of books like \textit{Mrs Beeton's}, and \textit{Mrs Beeton’s} transformation into a “brand,” persistently insisted that there \textit{were} standards – they only needed to be sought out. The shift from service \textit{à la française} to service \textit{à la russe} exemplifies the way that such standards mutated without completely undoing themselves. In the first half of the century, dinners were placed on the table in their entirety, served in an early iteration of what we now call “family style,” with dishes passed around by the guests themselves. By mid-century, service \textit{à la russe} became the norm in households where it was financially plausible, with servants serving individuals from dishes.\textsuperscript{71} Where the former necessitated more food (as the table needed to look pleasingly covered), the latter required other table decorations (thus the now standard practice of placing flowers on the table) and, more significantly, more servants. In both cases, the desired result was the same: service \textit{à la française} allowed for the conspicuous display of grand porcelain serving dishes and promoted ideas of surplus, while the later practice created an opportunity for hosts to impress by the sheer number of servants in attendance. Furthermore, the basic form of the party was unchanged: the schedule of events before, during, and after dinner remained the same, as did the rules for polite conversation, polite eating, and so forth; meanwhile, the shift in serving practice allowed another chance to signal one’s social \textit{savoir faire} by keeping up with new

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{71} Elizabeth Langland, \textit{Nobody’s Angels: Middle Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 40. As noted above, this shift in service also meant a shift in dinner times, with service \textit{à la russe} including a later dining hour.
\end{itemize}
trends. Beeton herself was ambivalent to these changes, lamenting the fact that gentlemen no longer needed to learn to carve meat—“the art which was in auld lang syne one of the necessary accomplishments of the youthful squire”—and yet she provides several bills of fare for people wishing to try their hand at the newer form of dinner service.\textsuperscript{72} Such evolutions of sociability do not preclude the structured nature of the Victorian dinner party, but rather emphasize that structure’s flexibility and durability.

As a mutable, translatable event which nevertheless retains its most basic shape over time, the cultural narrative of the Victorian party exemplifies several of Caroline Levine’s structuring \textit{forms}: the binary and the hierarchy (in the division of roles according to gender; in the division of ranks and the order of precedence; and in the less acknowledged—at least in literature—division between servants and the people they serve);\textsuperscript{73} the rhythm (the aforementioned strict schedule of events);\textsuperscript{74} the network (upon which the guest list depends); and the bounded whole (with the home itself acting as a “containing shape” which encapsulates the people and events that make up the party itself).\textsuperscript{75} In accordance with Levine’s guiding principle, these forms necessarily interact and overlap so that the party can exist in a shape that is

\textsuperscript{72} Beeton, 238. There are, however, only two bills of fare for service \textit{à la russe}, as compared to the 111 bills of fare for service \textit{à la française}, Humble, 611n368.

\textsuperscript{73} Servants are rarely acknowledged in Victorian literature, but when they are, it is often before or after a dinner, while dressing or undressing their employer. In Patricia Rozema’s film adaptation of Jane Austen’s \textit{Mansfield Park}, known for its critique of Sir Thomas’s Antiguan plantation, she makes the directorial decision to include liveried servants in the film’s many dining scenes, again forcing viewers to acknowledge labor that is often elided in more escapist, nostalgic renditions of Austen’s works and those of her literary successors, \textit{Mansfield Park}, directed by Patricia Rozema (1999; Buffalo: Miramax, 2000), DVD.

\textsuperscript{74} Flanders, 285.

\textsuperscript{75} Levine, 44.
recognizable and classifiable as such. The bounded whole of the domestic space imposes one kind of order: having the party in a specific home marks it as a dinner party, rather than a banquet or a ball, which more often took place in public forums or large houses of the very rich. The dinner party schedule imposes another kind of order: a particular rhythm, with particular expectations, as I have just articulated. The hierarchies of men over women and employers over servants have their own affordances, determining who serves whom, who sits where, and where one goes when the meal is up. But as Levine says, a hierarchy might be “simple in itself, organizing many realms of experience according to its straightforwardly oppositional logic,” and still “the formal story grows knotty and strange” when it intersects with other forms. We see this “knottiness” when the space of the party and its the rhythm—the move from the parlor to the dining hall and then into the drawing room—overlap with the gender hierarchy and reverse it: each of these moves is signaled, not by the host, but by the hostess, announcing dinner or rising from the table. The “whole” of the domestic space and the schedule of events butt up against one another, flipping the standard hierarchical binary and empowering the hostess in the process, if only symbolically and only momentarily. The realities of nineteenth-century Britain collide in such a way to make the Victorian dinner party’s unique shape conceivable, and therefore make the party a useful lens or “index” for studying Victorian literature and culture. At the nexus formed by the hierarchical forms of British class, gender, culture, and society, the narrative of the dinner party emerges both as a space and an occasion structured by those forms, and capable of pushing against their attendant hierarchies.

76 “Affordances” is Levine’s term, which she borrows from design theory: “a term used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs,” 18.

77 Levine, 93.
1.3 The Cultural Narrative at Work: The Party and the Multi-plot Novel in *Middlemarch*

We have literature to thank for the dinner party’s status as an established cultural narrative. Etiquette manuals such as *Mrs Beeton’s, A Handy Book on Dinners*, and others provided a kind of bare-bones framework around which to build real-life parties. Creative literature (most often the novels of the period but sometimes its poetry) took that basic framework and filled it in with characters and consequences, illustrating in explicit detail what the party was expected to accomplish and, sometimes, how that party could fail. In George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), for instance, Mrs. Stelling gives dinners that make her appear wealthier than she truly is; William Thackeray’s *The Book of Snobs* (1848) features a dinner so successful that it lifts its host from poverty and lands him in a job in Bombay. And on the other end of the spectrum, Charles Dickens provides several examples of parties gone wrong, from Mrs. Havisham’s never-begun wedding feast, to the Lammles’ manipulation of Georgiana Podsnap at her birthday party in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), to Martin Chuzzlewhit’s ghastly experiences with Americans and their animalistic table manners in his eponymous novel (1842-44). Rachel Verinder’s birthday party in Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868) is interrupted by the appearance of three Indian Brahmins with apparently devious motives and ends dramatically with a lost diamond and several embarrassed suspects. In Eliot’s *Silas Marner* (1861), the arrival of an illegitimate daughter casts a shadow over Squire Cass’s Christmas party, and Oscar Wilde’s Algernon Moncrieff from *The Importance of Being Ernest* (1895) avoids undesirable parties altogether, thanks to his Bunburyism. Readers could pick up a book and see a dinner party played out before them: either ones that resembled their own experiences, or the escapist, aspirational fests of Anthony Trollope’s Palliser series and Benjamin Disraeli’s silver fork novels. But more than that, such literature cemented the role of the dinner party as an
indicator of one’s place in a given social circle; furthermore, the depiction of dinners and parties in literature reflected the function of such gatherings as sociologically significant events that reestablished connections between individuals and groups, whether they were separated by the rhythms of city life, as is often the case in Dickens’s novels, or by the geographical distances of country living, as we see in the works Eliot.

This second application is particularly apparent in a novel where literary form intentionally mirrors the circumstances of reality. Eliot’s Middlemarch is famously broad-ranging in its subject matter and its sheer number of characters and plots. Peter K. Garrett’s now archetypal “multiplot novel,” Middlemarch exemplifies the significance of dinners and parties as occasions around which a recognizable society can cohere.\(^78\) In literature, we see how dinners and parties act as nodal points, cinching together various narratives and providing a space for individuals to be depicted relationally, allowing us to visualize networks in a collapsed space. In a novel like Middlemarch, one of Henry James’s “large, loose, baggy monsters,”\(^79\) with its sometimes interconnected, sometimes disparate multi-plot structure, social occasions like dinners, parties, and teas provide signposts at which both readers and characters themselves make connections between such distanced individuals as Dorothea, Mr. Hawley, and John Raffles, while also updating readers and characters alike on the status of the community.\(^80\) If, as


\(^{80}\) This is not to say that Dorothea and Raffles interact at a party (which is regrettable, as such a scene would be especially diverting for the reader), but rather that social gatherings such as these allow us to connect the dots, as it were, between two such disparate characters, with the same third parties to discuss them at different times. Mark S. Granovetter’s “weak ties” are at
Beeton says, the party was a space where “acquaintances may be formed that may prove invaluable through life, and information gained that will enlarge the mind,” fiction literalizes theses outcomes, highlighting the way that acquaintanceships are developed within communities and depicting the exchange of information that is often so key to the fictional party’s narrative weight.

One significant character arc in Eliot’s novel is Lydgate’s progress, or rather decline, both professionally and socially, from outsider to insider to outsider again. Characters of all stripes and classes gather with friends, sometimes even for the express purpose of discussing his professional and financial catastrophes. The first such occasion is the engagement party for Dorothea and Casaubon, where Lady Chettam requests that her son James “bring Mr Lydgate and introduce him” to her, saying that she “want[s] to test him.”81 Lady Chettam’s “testing” involves running Lydgate through a series of questions and assertions and gauging his responses. Significantly, this testing comes after Mrs. Cadwallader and Lady Chettam have failed to establish a joint opinion on the man, agreeing only that he is “a gentleman” and that he looks “wonderfully clever . . . [with] a fine brow indeed” (91). That these judgments must be put to the test through actual acquaintance, and the fact that hearing of Lady Chettam’s introduction to

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Lydgate later solidifies Mr. Brooke’s own opinion of the man, is indicative of the unique role of the dinner party as a sanctioned space in which to meet others and capitalize on one’s new connections. In Lydgate’s case, Lady Chettam melds the man of science with science itself, for Lady Chettam, and by proxy, Mr. Brooke, are not only testing Lydgate on a social level: she explores his standing on “treating fever on a new plan,” seeks confirmation on “her view of her own constitution as being peculiar,” and brings out his position on “a too lowering system,” “reckless cupping,” and “incessant port-wine and bark” (91). The result is that Lady Chettam seeks out Mr. Brooke to assert that she is “quite pleased with [his] protégé” and then that she believes him to “understand his profession admirably” (91). Whether or not Lady Chettam is the best judge of Lydgate’s scientific acumen—and of course, she is not—Lydgate’s success in the region is dependent on the opinions of laypeople like Lady Chettam.

Indeed, Lydgate’s early medical triumphs with Fred Vincy and Mrs. Larcher’s charwoman, Nancy, are marred first by uninformed opinions about his refusal to dispense medicines, as is the popular practice, and then by society’s assumptions that he is in league with the unpopular Bulstrode. The effects of these so-called shortcomings are perpetuated by a series of dinners which, again, in the multi-plot novel, bring together far-flung characters and allow them to establish public opinion. At the first of these parties, Lydgate’s new medical practices come up in conversation, and Mr. Toller, Mr. Hackbutt, Mr. Hawley, and Mr. Wrench all agree that he is nothing more than “one of your damned new versions of old humbug” (448). Later, at Mr. Toller’s Christmas dinner party, the host, accompanied by Mr. Standish, Mr. Chichely, Dr. Sprague, Dr. Minchin, and Mr. Harry Toller, pokes fun at the “scientific phoenix” and his experimental “theories of treatment,” despite Mr. Farebrother’s objections (639). Then, after John Raffles’s conspicuous death, Mr. Hawley hosts a party “expressly to hold a close discussion
as to the probabilities of Raffles’s illness, reciting to them all the particulars which had been
gathered from Mrs. Abel in connection with Lydgate’s certificate . . .” (720). This party, in
particular, shows the interplay between Lydgate’s medical prowess and the public opinion which
surrounds him.82 Among those Hawley gathers, the medical men “see nothing in these particulars
which could be transformed into a positive ground of suspicion.” “But,” the narrator goes on,
“the moral grounds of suspicion remained.” (720). The reader knows of Lydgate’s innocence, but
his nonstandard medical practices, debts, and close relationship with the now disgraced
Bulstrode have been bandied about, party after party, so that his innocence is called into question
along with his scientific prowess.

Significantly, it is most often men in Middlemarch who turn to sociability to assess local
developments. This is so much the case that, when Mrs. Hackbutt gives a tea party to discuss
Harriet Bulstrode’s fall from grace (itself tangentially connected to Lydgate’s own fall), the list
of those present reads like a feminized version of Mr. Toller’s parties: Mrs. Tom Toller, Mrs.
Sprague, Mrs. Plymdale (742). In the novel, the practice of giving a party and using that space to
arrive at a communal consensus is therefore multi-gendered, despite the emphasis on feminized
domesticity and the roles of the hostess found in books like Mrs Beeton’s. But that men are
gathering and, essentially, “gabbing” in a way that eventually disrupts Lydgate’s advancement
and exacerbates his growing list of professional and personal concerns is significant. It gestures
openly to domestic entertainment’s outward-facing functions and the larger concerns at stake for
all involved in the dinner party’s cultural work. Not only must the hostess endure the “ordeal,” in

82 Public opinion is, of course, both a shaped by and shaping of one’s cultural and social
capital.
Beeton’s words, of successfully providing for and entertaining her guests, but the guests themselves must perform well, if they are to pass their fellow guests’ “tests.”

It is, thus, no surprise that Rosamond, in an attempt to reconcile herself, her husband, and her husband’s failing medical practice to the public, chooses “to send out notes of invitation for a small evening party, feeling convinced that this was a judicious step, since people seemed to have been keeping aloof from them, and wanted restoring to the old habit of intercourse” (754).

Having grown up in the Vincy household, and therefore having been persuaded of the cultural power of the dinner party, Rosamond has faith in the restorative capacity of inviting others into one’s home, playing Mrs. Beeton’s perfect mistress, and thereby, if successful, reestablishing one’s standing—and the standing of one’s professional reputation—in the community.83 She executes her scheme secretly, her plan being that, “When the invitations had been accepted, she would tell Lydgate, and give him a wise admonition as to how a medical man should behave to his neighbors” (754). But of course, every single invitation is declined, and Lydgate, receiving the final rejection from Mr. Chichely, is furious at her lack of social awareness. By now, Lydgate is well aware that polite society has turned its back on him, and Rosamond’s futile attempt at using her social graces to recuperate professional and social losses only adds insult to injury. In a novel where parties have indicated interconnectedness, even in the expansive space of the English countryside and the extensively complex web of interrelationships so central to Eliot’s literary praxis, the failed party, or non-party, signals the Lydgates’ now complete exclusion from society at large. In Bourdieusian terms, the Lydgates now lack the capital (of all kinds) to influence the structure of the field and its resources. They are, in fact, excluded from the field of sociability altogether. They can no longer be “tested” by the likes of Lady Chettam, and

83 “An alderman about to be mayor must by-and-by enlarge his dinner-parties,” Eliot, 97.
therefore no longer able to demonstrate their command of social, cultural, and economic capital, and so the Lydges can no longer manipulate sociability and the invisible “threads that bind it to real life” as accessories to accomplish their professional and personal goals.

The Casaubons’ engagement party, Mr. Toller’s Christmas party and the one he gives to discuss Raffles’s death, Mrs. Hackbutt’s tea, and Rosamond’s fruitless invitations—each of these follows, or at least attempts to follow, the cultural narrative of the party evinced in books like Beeton’s guide. Even if the events themselves differ in purpose, they mirror one another as nexuses for Levine’s forms: they follow a rhythm particular to Victorian entertaining, operate according to the fluctuations of the region’s social networks, take place in the imagined whole of the household, and both respond to and enact a hierarchical system of inclusion and exclusion. Likewise, they are Bourdieusian fields in miniature: legible texts indicating the social capital or lack of social capital available to guests, hosts, and those who are neither. Lastly, they are meaningful conventions of the Victorian novel, during which the reader is not the only person involved in the work of interpretation – nodal points which draw together disparate plot points and characters and play them against one another, allowing the characters themselves to assess their own connections to each other, and to the community at large. In Middlemarch, we see a basic iteration of what the party and its consistent framework can do. When a community is apprised of how such things typically “go,” such systems take on a social significance that makes the party a convenient and easily intelligible stand-by for the work of maintaining social order. Any aberration in that system is necessarily cause for scrutiny, and one’s inability to fulfill narrative expectations—from sending invitations at the start to enduring “tests” in the drawing room at the party’s end—indicates a failure of social powers and potential isolation from collective systems of understanding and functioning in daily communal life.
1.4 “Hiding the Skeleton”: Beneath the Cultural Narrative of the Dinner Party

Beeton expects that parties will be in some way illuminating, offering their guests revelatory moments about current events and curiosities of art. But as we see in *Middlemarch*, the party is also a useful device for the Victorian novelist, in that it can offer revelatory moments of a different kind, by opening a window into someone’s character. In the case of poor Lydgate, the window is a foggy one, and the image arrived at thanks to parties all over *Middlemarch* is incomplete, holding up Lydgate’s debt and his interest in scientific advancement as evidence that his practices, both as a medical man and a newcomer to the town, are predatory and ill-advised. Eliot, then, presents her novel’s parties with more nuance than the stuffy *Mrs Beeton’s* or the aspirational, extravagant Silver Fork novels of the era, with the long and interwoven form of fiction allowing the novelist time and space to toy with the high-mannered, well-documented narrative of the dinner party and its place as an icon of proper Victorian sociability.

Furthermore, in this capacity as a literary device, novelists like Eliot and those that follow in this dissertation use the party to imagine the possibilities open to this ever-present aspect of Victorian sociability and those engaged with them. In the remainder of this dissertation, I explore those possibilities more fully. Authors seem to be conscious of the party’s capaciousness for such endeavors, and they treat its imagined cultural power in the realms of morality, economics, politics, and conceptions of international relations optimistically, ambivalently, and pessimistically. Like Beeton, these authors treat the party as if it were something revelatory or productive, but they do not always acknowledge its capacity for distortion or disingenuousness. Poetry of the period, by contrast, seems more interested in the immediate interiority of the speaker than it is with those speakers’ surroundings or their imagined possibilities. In the heyday of the dramatic monologue, two Victorian poets, George Meredith and Amy Levy, both saw the
party as a culturally shared and therefore accessible lens through which explore their interest in
duplicity and false, performed morality. In their eyes, the party provides the perfect cover for
untruths. Just as manners are about artifice, about, in Lévi-Strauss’s terms, cultural agents
working to separate nature (the symbolic “raw”) from culture (the symbolic “cooked”) through
arbitrary customs, dinner parties are about appearances, taking the unrefined processes of eating
and elevating them to something emblematic of one’s status and social graces.84 For Victorian
hosts, hostesses, guests, and even servants, the party was a kind of implicit masquerade,
portraying the home and its inhabitants exactly according to one’s desires, while guests played
along or willfully deceived themselves, playing their roles within a miniature theater of propriety
and savoir faire.

This is exactly the point of Meredith’s short poem, number XVII in Modern Love, his
sonnet series about the deterioration of his and his wife’s marriage. Meredith assumes the
reader’s familiarity with novelistic dinner parties, and can thus exaggerate the potential for the
dinner party, as a literary and social convention, to be used for subterfuge that enables the status
quo to be maintained:

At dinner, she is hostess, I am host.
Went the feast ever cheerfuller? She keeps
The Topic over intellectual deeps
In buoyancy afloat. They see no ghost.
With sparkling surface-eyes we ply the ball:
It is in truth a most contagious game;
HIDING THE SKELETON, shall be its name.
Such play as this the devils might appal!
But here’s the greater wonder; in that we,

84 The same can be said of tea parties and even parties and balls more generally, which
make sociable interactions into something structured and orderly, as compared to the supposedly
cruder dealings of the lower classes and, indeed, of social animals. Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The
Raw and the Cooked,” Mythologiques, vol. 1, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Chicago:
Enamour’d of an acting and our wits,
Admire each other like true hypocrites;
Warm-lighted glances, Love’s Ephemerae,
Shoot gaily o’er the dishes and the wine.
We waken envy of our happy lot.
Fast, sweet, and golden, shows the marriage-knot.
Dear guests, you now have seen Love’s corpse-light shine!85

Modern Love frequently uses metaphors of rot, decay, and disease, and here, Meredith stretches the metaphor to its extreme, suggesting that the couple’s love is both a skeleton and a nearly-dead body, whose demise is portended by the “corpse-light” of superstition: a will-o’-the-wisp portending death. Meredith’s speaker, a poeticized version of Meredith himself, casts the couple, and particularly the wife, as deceivers who perfectly execute their roles as hostess and host. In an echo of Beeton’s emphasis on “light and cheerful subjects of conversation” and her insistence that “the mistress should remember that it is her duty to make her guests feel happy, comfortable, and quite at their ease,” the wife “keeps / The Topic over intellectual deeps / In buoyancy afloat,” agilely preventing the conversation from growing too dreary or complex (lines 2-4). She is a “ghostly” “devil” in an Angel in the House’s clothing and a partner in her husband’s “hypocrisy.” The image is insidious and almost farcical, as if the husband and wife are hiding literal skeletons in their closet—though here, the figurative skeletons of infidelity and eventual separation (and suicide) is just as scandalous.

The poem’s focus on deceptive appearances is amplified, ironically, by its form, which plays with the sonnet’s traditional themes of courtly love and admiration from afar and

nineteenth-century critics’ belief in its “wholesome” influences. Kenneth Crowell sees in *Modern Love* an echo of the sonnet series’ “formal heritage,” which he locates with the Renaissance’s *sonetto caudato*, which “undermin[es] through analysis” and ends in a “tail” that “amplif[ies] the poem’s sentiment in a surprisingly abrupt manner.” For Crowell, Meredith subverts the expectations attendant upon the sonnet form, as Michelangelo and John Milton did before him, though those two precursors turned the *sonetto caudato*’s ironizing powers on their own popular and often misguided public personas. In *Modern Love*, it is “modern love” itself that is “undermined through analysis,” and in Sonnet XVII, it is specifically the weight that Victorian society placed on the dinner party as a revelatory window into one’s private life and moral character.

This poem follows close behind Sonnet XV, where the speaker reads over a love letter from happier times and finds “another letter lately sent. / The words are very like: the name is new.” It precedes Sonnet XVIII, which describes four young lovers at a country fair, with a final formal “tail” that traces back the “source” of their “country merry-making on the green”: “’tis beer” (lines 3, 16). The former poem is staged in the middle of the night, from within the husband and wife’s bedroom while the wife sleeps deeply, one arm hanging off the bed. The

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87 Kenneth Crowell, “*Modern Love* and the *Sonetto Caudato*: Comedic Intervention through the Satiric Sonnet Form” in *Victorian Poetry* 48.4 (Winter 2010), 545, 546. This assertion, Crowell notes, is contrary to Meredith’s own claims, in an 1885 letter to William Sharp, that “The Italians allow of 16 lines, under the title of ‘Sonnets with a tail.’ But the lines of *Modern Love* were not designed for that form,” 539. According to Crowell, “Nothing Meredith told Sharp about form was actually true; ‘Sonnets with a tail,’ or *sonetti caudati* vary in line length and are often not sixteen-line poems,” 546.

88 Meredith, 37, lines 15-16.
husband thus encounters his wife’s duplicity and attempts to come to terms with her infidelity first in one of the most private spaces of the private sphere: the marriage bed. The country fair of Sonnet XVIII pulls the husband from his quiet bedchamber into a scene of public festivity. What has been made visible in the intimacy of the home now colors the husband’s view of the outside world, so that every “Jack,” “Tom,” “Moll,” and “Meg” is a potential snake in the grass, with only a “nut-brown stream” of ale keeping them happy and naïve and “signal shakings of the leg” masking the grittier underside of romantic relationships (lines 1, 6, 4).

Sonnet XVII forms a bridge between these two poems. The couple’s dinner party, as I have said, acts a liminal space, less intimate than the bedroom but still more private than the country fair. In this space, Meredith interrogates the falseness inherent in occasions that are built around artifice and performance, bolstered by what he has seen privately, which in turn allows him to cast a more scrutinizing eye on the coarser, less fundamentally artificial gambols of a public fair. Here, the trappings of proper sociability (“the dishes and the wine” [line 13]) act like the Biblical “white-washed tombs” of the Pharisees, projecting the appearance goodness and purity on the outside but hiding sin and death within. The focus, for Meredith, is not the party itself, but what the party conceals, and what the party guests refuse to see: two “true hypocrites” playing a “contagious game.” Alan P. Barr points to this poem’s emphasis on the “socially and psychologically scripted deceptions” of “marital relations.” In taking up the common practice

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89 Sonnet XVI, which comes between the bedroom scene and Sonnet XVII’s dinner party, is a kind of flashback, with the speaker remembering another intimate scene when the “library-bower . . . was left to [them],” 4-5. In the moment, the husband—then perhaps only a lover—takes the dying fire as an indication that love which burns hot must someday die as well, and the wife “yearn[s for him] that sentence to unsay,” 12.

90 Alan P. Barr, “How All Occasions Do Inform: ‘Household Matters’ and Domestic Vignettes in George Meredith’s Modern Love” in Victorian Poetry 42.3 (Fall 2004), 287.
of hosting one’s friends over a meal, the poet highlights these deceptions as essential aspects of entertaining, itself a duty of all middle- and upper-class married couples, where “marital relations” expand to include a couple’s relations to its social circle.

Of course, such “relations” are not only ever marital; indeed, the deceptive game-playing that dinner parties allow—even require—grows more complicated when the romantic pairing itself, rather than just its relative happiness or unhappiness, must be concealed. Amy Levy’s short poem, “At a Dinner-Party,” illustrates just this:

With fruit and flowers the board is deckt,
The wine and water flow;
I’ll not complain—could one expect
So dull a world to know?

You look across the fruit and flowers,
My glance your glances find.—
It is our secret, only ours,
Since all the world is blind.91

Levy’s poem, and its two subjects, rely on the same tropes of false appearances and playacted propriety as Meredith’s, but to opposite ends. The couple in question are not a secretly miserable husband and wife, but illicit, clandestine lovers—and, in light of Levy’s rumored sexual fluidity, possibly same-sex lovers.92 Regardless, Levy’s poem is an explicit indictment of the falseness of


92 Critics are divided on Levy’s sexuality, though most now agree on her status as a queer artist. Many of the poems in A London Plane-Tree are addressed to women, but Deborah Epstein Nord argues that Levy employs a “male persona” to camouflage the confessional nature of some of her poetry and her use of personal experience for inspiration, 748. Linda Hunt Beckman, by contrast, recognizes Levy’s likely “pre-lesbian world” desire for her friend Vernon Lee, while Alex Goody explicitly calls her a “a Jewish, feminist, lesbian writer at the fin de siècle,” Linda Hunt Beckman, Amy Levy: Her Life and Letters (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000), 148; Alex Goody, “Murder in Mile End: Amy Levy, Jewishness, and the City” in Victorian Literature and Culture 34.2 (2006), 461.
etiquette, which it classes as dullness and a kind of willful blindness. Addressed at once to a secret lover and to “you,” the poem draws the reader into the speaker’s game and places her, as the title suggests, at the dinner party. Like Beeton’s reading of Keats, who, in her words, “gives” readers a “dainty supper” in “The Eve of Saint Agnes,” Levy’s speaker implicates her reader in her deception by relying on that reader’s assumed familiarity with dinner parties and their expected rhythms and norms which make the romance taboo and gives subterfuge its erotic energy.

Here, “the dishes and the wine” over which Meredith’s couple glances furtively, morph into “fruit and flowers” which frame Levy’s couple’s flirtatious and coy looks. Both couples are playing a game, both aping normalcy, though the one hides the breakdown of romance and the other its secret blossoming. Levy’s choice of fruit is significant as, so late in the period, dinner was likely served à la russe. This meant that it was unusual to use fruit and other desserts as table decoration, when servants would typically serve desserts individually. The very use of flowers as decoration would normally preclude a similar staging of fruit. But here, Levy’s staging echoes both the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden—so many “fruits” for the taking, but only one that is both prohibited and irresistible—and the homoerotics of Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market,” where Laura sucks “fruit globes fair or red” (line 128). The two lovers share, in full view of their fellow party guests, their own forbidden fruit, hidden in plain sight by the overcomplicated trappings and performances of dinner-table etiquette.

A similarly short poem earlier in the same collection uses the imagery of fruit and flowers to similar ends. “To Vernon Lee” describes a walk between the speaker and her close

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female friend, with whom she seems to be in love: “A snowy blackthorn flowered beyond my reach; / You broke a branch and gave it to me there; / I found for you a scarlet blossom rare” (lines 9-11). This exchange of flowers certainly reads as romantic, but the image grows more sexualized when one takes into account the reference to thorns (which pierce the flesh), the usual associations with flowers and feminine chastity, and the fact that, when their petals fall away, blackthorns yield a stone fruit called a sloe, harvested in England. For the reader who has made her way through the volume, poem by poem, the fruits and flowers seem to have migrated from the couple’s walk in the woods to the dinner table, first exchanged in flower form as a pledge of love, and now, fully ripe, undergirding their matured affections and calling back to former, freer times, away from the watchful but unknowing eyes of their fellow guests.

Both Meredith and Levy present us with characters caught in the crosshairs of Victorian propriety and human desire, with the dinner party acting as a muted lens which paradoxically magnifies the energies behind those desires. Whereas the dinner for Meredith’s couple is a trial to be endured, with a skeleton to be kept hidden, the dinner invoked in Levy’s poem likewise requires careful concealment while also allowing for the suspension of time, emphasizing the heightened pleasure of the moment without regard for the future that it nevertheless invokes. Meredith’s couple longs to separate from one another; Levy’s speaker and her partner long to come together; and the dinner party illustrates just how unlikely either of these outcomes is, under the usual terms of propriety, etiquette, and sociability. If we think again of Levine’s forms and Bourdieu’s kinds of capital, we can parse out why exactly this is. The subjects of these poems have their lived experiences structured by the wholes, rhythms, networks, and hierarchies

of Victorian daily life, while their ability to move within those forms, or to be included in their spaces in the first place, is dependent on their mastery of different kinds of capital. That the subjects of these poems are present at their particular parties, in their particular moments, is due to their position in a specific social network, their place in a class hierarchy, the rhythms of the social season, and so on. But these forms are themselves structured by others: the expected rhythms of Victorian romance and the hierarchies they produce. The progression from bachelor to husband was imagined as a certainty, and the third term—divorcee, did not figure into most equations of respectability. Likewise, the social hierarchy of Victorian England placed husbands above bachelors, and bachelors above divorcees and adulterers. Levy’s secret lovers, if we imagine them both as women, did not even figure in either articulated hierarchies or understood rhythms of life stages. Put in these terms, the forms of Victorian era seem to hold Meredith and Levy’s couples in place, keeping them from obtaining their hearts’ desires.

But these poems allow for another reading. Rather than articulating the constraints the dinner party could impose on an individual, these two poems uncover the false power of structuring forms and the subversion possible within the systems they produce. That the couple in *Modern Love* can play the host and hostess and ensure a “cheerful” evening for their guests, artfully and “buoyantly” directing the conversation, all while playing a “devilish” game, “Hiding the Skeleton” of their dying or already-dead marriage; that, in doing so, they can even convince themselves, however briefly: this is proof of the failure of the rules of etiquette and the forms and fields of polite life to persist as obstacles which mask the truth, and proof that they can themselves be manipulated and overcome by capable individuals. Beeton describes the iconic mistress of the home by turning to the Biblical book of Proverbs for her epigraph: “Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come. She openeth her mouth with
wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness . . .”†⁹⁵ She follows this with an even more burdensome first paragraph, which declares of the mistress that “Her spirit will be seen through the whole establishment” and ends in a quote from The Vicar of Wakefield: “She who makes her husband and her children happy, who reclaims the one from vice and trains up the other to virtue, is a much greater character than ladies described in romances . . .”†⁹⁶ In Meredith’s host and hostess, we see both the utter idealism of these pronouncements, and the irony Meredith expects his readers (especially those who know Beeton and her ilk) to register. His sonnets record the couple’s blatant unkindnesses, the dishonor they both show to their marriage vows and each other, and so on. Rather than “reclaiming” her husband from vice, the wife is an adulteress who, in the speaker’s eyes, leads her husband into adultery himself. But the “spirit” of the whole establishment is untouched: “We waken envy of our happy lot. / Fast, sweet, and golden, shows the marriage-knot” (lines 14-15). Instead of revealing some essential truth about the couple or their relationship, the well-executed dinner and the forms on which it depends can restrict not transgression itself, but the outside world’s awareness of it.⁹⁷

Levy’s lovers, like the couple from Modern Love, possess all the social and cultural capital needed to allow their presence at their dinner party, and so of course they are also in full command of its attendant habitus. Of course they possess Bourdieu’s “embodied, assimilated

†⁹⁵ Prov. 31:25-28, qtd. in Beeton, 7.

†⁹⁶ Oliver Goldsmith, qtd. in Beeton, 7.

⁹⁷ Of course, there are exceptions to the rule, as will be seen in Chapter Three, with Lady Glencora’s party faux pas in Anthony Trollope’s Can You Forgive Her? Trollope emphasizes instead the potential for parties, as moments of display and mixed-gender interaction, to lay an individual’s faults bare—though even Glencora transforms, as Trollope’s Palliser series progresses, into a more dutiful wife whose method handling sociable engagements becomes more standard and predictable.
properties, such as elegance, ease of manner, beauty and so forth . . . which define the possibilities inherent in the field,” and as such know what the dinner party can and cannot accommodate. In fact, it would seem Levy’s speaker is hyperaware of “the possibilities inherent in the field” of sociability, here instantiated in the party, and therefore of the party’s limitations and the limitations it imposes on its guests. “The world is blind”—blinded by the strictures of Victorian social expectations, blinded by structuring power of hierarchies and rhythms, and therefore unable to see or comprehend the unwieldy, unstructured power of desire. Judith Halberstam has written about “queer time,” and how the bodies and desires of queer individuals disrupt “the conventional emphasis on longevity and futurity,” and instead offer the potential “of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing.”

But here, Levy’s speaker and her secret paramour allow themselves to be guided by one rhythm (the rhythm of the party, marked by the “flowing” of water and wine, which, as I have mentioned, would be refilled at scheduled intervals) while resisting another (the expected rhythm of a woman’s progression from girl to wife to mother). Levy sees a kind of power in this: the power of passing and of secret-keeping, which makes her lovers superior to “So dull a world” outside themselves. The lovers, like Meredith’s couple, exhibit mastery over the field of Victorian sociability, perfectly performing propriety, but they refuse to allow their inner lives to be structured by anything but their own desires.

1.5 Conclusion: Desire and Domestic Entertaining

Nancy Armstrong’s famous work, Desire and Domestic Fiction, argued for domestic fiction’s vital role in fashioning the Victorian domestic woman as the agent of history, with her

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retreat to the intimate sphere allowing her to shape the similarly intimate history of sexuality and enabling the literary dominance of the bourgeoisie, with the domestic woman at its helm. For Armstrong, the “desire” of her title is explicitly related to ideas of gender and marriage; she claims that the nineteenth-century novel emphasized differences in genders and their assumed heteronormative impulses to such a degree that such differences became the defining determinants of ideology and its impact on day-to-day life. The result, for Armstrong, was that the concept of subjectivity was then understood on the basis of sex, rather than that of political affiliation, religion, or class. Women, therefore, became more powerful in their status as representatives of middle-class ideology and in their ability to shape culture in ostensibly (but not actually) apolitical ways.\(^99\)

Rather than focusing on the confluence of domestic ideology and the cultural dominance of the middle-class woman, this project thinks about desire inasmuch as it reveals Victorian sociability’s oft-ignored connection to the public sphere. Like Armstrong, I too look at domestic fiction, but I do so alongside realist novels that offer a panoramic view of nineteenth-century society, including forays into the domestic—and in doing so, I mirror the way that represented parties of the period breach the divide between private and public. Just as the bourgeois Victorian woman’s mastery the supposedly anti-public domesticity gave her and members of her class peculiar public power (if only conceptually), the mastery of domestic sociability, too, generated power in the world from which it was supposedly separate. Victorian realist literature, in modeling and responding to social expectations of what the party could and could not do, thus perpetuated those expectations by giving the party a recognizable shape. That shape, however,

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was flexible, and responded to the less predictable movements of the individuals who made up
the parties themselves: their temperaments, their lived experiences, their desires. The tension
between personal desire and social expectation, seen most explicitly in the poems by Meredith
and Levy, is one of the motivating forces for the readings in the remaining chapters of this
dissertation, and desire expresses itself in a multitude of ways in the texts that follow: as a
yearning for social inclusion; as a resolute commitment to a personal system of morality; as
political ambition. The final substantive chapter takes up desire as self-preservation amid
encounters with foreignness, and the coda that follows considers what happens when the force of
new and progressive desires in the Edwardian period begins to outstrip the strength of dated
Victorian standards, while also considering the continued appeal of such standards in our society
today. The dinner party presents, to repeat Beeton’s words once more, “a striking index of
human ingenuity and resource,” and this dissertation makes the argument that the same is true of
Victorian domestic entertainments of various kinds. However, represented dinner parties remain
the focal point of analysis for most of the texts which appear in the pages that follow. As what I
have called the “icon of Victorian middle- and upper-class sociability,” the dinner party was the
most rigorously structured and the most easily repeated of the frequent forms of Victorian
mixed-gender entertainment for members of those classes. Because they were a feature of so
many literary texts (whether in a “how-to” sense, or as an aspect of realist representation),
individual dinner parties were also easily evaluated against what was seen as a standard practice.
But where this dissertation diverges from the dinner party as a focal point, it does so
purposefully: the tea party, for instance, offers a poor man’s—or, rather, genteel and
downwardly mobile woman’s—version of the dinner in the novel Cranford, where women parrot
a higher version of sociability than is actually available to them. The extended country retreats of
The Tenant of Wildfell Hall are really depicted as a string of dinner parties, linked together by daytime excursions and late-night dalliances, and are themselves versions of Victorian sociability gone wrong, where the dinner party as a containing, constricting structure ceases to function. Chapter Four, which takes up the party as a site of nationalist encounters with the foreign, necessarily includes two kinds occasions that take place in more public spaces than the domestic dinner party: first, the large expatriate balls of Leonora Sansay’s Secret History and second, Amy Marsh’s European hotel dinner party and ball in Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women. In both cases, the participants are travelers in foreign lands, removed from their actual domestic spaces (“domestic” in both senses of the word), so that these more public forums act as quasi-private spaces for individuals who would otherwise be denied them.

I mention this here because the cultural narrative I have been articulating, Levine’s forms that afford it, and the Bourdieusian capital that makes it navigable are not limited to one version of sociability, just as the value of Armstrong’s understanding of the history of gender and the Victorian middle class is not limited to a particular kind of Victorian literature. But the dinner party as an ideal, like domestic fiction as a paradigm, is a useful framework for how Victorian sociability functioned because it, like most aspects of Victorian society, was highly structured, highly regulated, idealized, and fretted over. Because Victorian as an adjective so often means “stodgy,” “stuffy,” and “strict,” the party as an ideal is the consummate example of Victorian-ness and the contradictions inherent in that term and our use of it. Parties were stodgy, stuffy,
and strict, and yet, they were also capacious in their potential for manipulation, exploitation, and
subversion. Just as Foucault’s undoing of the repressive hypothesis has allowed us to peer
beneath reductive versions of Victorian sexual norms, an acute analysis of the dinner party
allows us to open up limited understandings of Victorian sociability and the reaches to which it
can be deployed.101

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101 Michel Foucault, “We ‘Other’ Victorians,” *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*
CHAPTER TWO

REFORMING SOCIABILITY AND ITS SIGNIFIERS: MANNERS, MORALITY, AND MONEY IN CRANFORD AND THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL

The relationship between virtue and money, or the lack of money, motivates and informs the plots and themes of early novels such as Moll Flanders (1722) and Pamela (1748); even the gothic fiction of the late 1700s, which seems to place sexual and xenophobic anxieties at the forefront, highlights an enduring interest in finances and their effects on women of various classes. In fact, Edward Copeland notes that one of the undergirding “horrors” of gothic fiction was “an unforgiving economy,” which threatened to leave women impoverished and in debt, the implicit suggestion being that poor heroines of the last quarter of the century were only a few calamities away from becoming Moll Flandersons themselves.\(^\text{102}\) The turn of the century, Copeland also argues, brought with it “an aggressive new image for woman’s economic role, this one employing the tropes of the domestic budget” (9). Central to both of these economic

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undercurrents, the first involving financial insolvency and the second emphasizing personal budgeting practices, is, of course, the position of women in societies that did not acknowledge their potential for financial output or allow, in polite circles, female employment more generally.103 Whereas the women of early realist novels, gothic novels, and Copeland’s “budgetary” fiction are often figured as victims or passive participants in an unforgiving economy, the mid-Victorian period saw a rise in texts in which, I am arguing, women began to manipulate social structures in order to take control of their own financial and moral destinies. Though the novels of the Victorian period are not always as detailed in their treatment of the minutiae of monetary practices and their social and moral significance (there are few if any Defoe-like facsimiles of bills in the mid-nineteenth-century novel), writers, and especially women writers, continued to emphasize the financial pressures placed upon the nineteenth-century woman. This chapter argues that dinners and parties in literature were a primary space in which Victorian characters could do one of two things: first, in Cranford, characters can work at attaining social capital regardless of the status of their material capital, and do so by destabilizing the sign systems by which propriety and morality are signified at various parties. Second, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall’s protagonist can resist the significatory power of the party altogether, dedicating herself to systems of morality that are independent of systems of propriety and removing herself from systems of sociability entirely in the process. In both instances, the

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103 Jane Austen’s entire catalogue is predicated on women’s perceived financial impotence, and her concomitant interest in both economy and sociability has been well explored. See, for instance, Copeland’s chapter, “Shopping for Signs: Jane Austen and the Pseudo-Gentry,” 89-116; Elsie Michie’s “Social Distinction in Jane Austen” in The Vulgar Question of Money: Heiresses, Materialism, and the Novel of Manners from Jane Austen to Henry James (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 26-64; and Lynda A. Hall’s Women and ‘Value’ in Jane Austen’s Novels: Settling, Speculating, and Superfluity (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
authors in this chapter emphasize the inadequacy of the Victorian party and its accoutrements as indicators of moral purity or classist superiority, and thus its potential for manipulation and exploitation by the women at their helms.

As I have made clear in my previous chapter, dinners and parties of various kinds were the spaces in which the public entered into the private and the ordinary enterprises of private life could be deployed to accomplish public work. That fiction of the mid-nineteenth century should depict this merging of public and private spheres with an emphasis on economic concerns is unsurprising for two reasons: first, because domestic management necessarily entailed both social and financial management, with women of all classes responsible for maintaining a way of life that fit within budgetary constraints; and second, because of the inescapable economic tenor of social discourse in the 1840s and 1850s.104 Writing to a friend 1843, Walter Bagehot asserted that “There has never, perhaps, been another time in the history of the world when excited masses of men and women hung on the words of one talking political economy.”105 Anthony

104 This project, as indicated by the previous chapter, takes the view that Caroline Levine and Tricia Lootens share with regard to the doctrine of separate spheres: namely, that the division between the feminine, private, domestic sphere and the masculine, public, professional sphere is arbitrary and permeable, yet no less powerful as a structuring form for nineteenth-century literature and culture. For Lootens, the concept of “separate spheres” is “an insistent archaic, yet ongoing dream poetics” which is itself the product of “structures of feeling,” The Political Poetess: Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of Separate Spheres (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 2, 13. And in Levine’s words, though Victorian gender ideology is “too simple, too orderly,” the binary it produces is at once “crude but also sometimes operative” and powerful. In an early iteration of the claims she later puts forth more comprehensively in Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network (2015), Levine states that the binary of separate spheres is particularly significant as one of “multiple crude categories” that “collide, overlap, and decenter” in an attempt to “impose order” on a society, “Strategic Formalism: Toward a New Method in Cultural Studies” in Victorian Studies, 48.4 (Summer 2006), 630.

Howe traces this economic “excitement” to the ongoing debates surrounding the Corn Laws, coming to a head with their repeal in 1846, and, by most accounts, initiating Britain’s adoption of free trade several decades before many Western nations.¹⁰⁶

Though women were necessarily excluded from official parliamentary debates about the Corn Laws and their effects, they nevertheless let their voices be heard elsewhere. In Walsall in 1841, for instance, women formed the all-female Anti-Corn Law Association in response to the Anti-Corn Law League President J. B. Smith’s loss in a parliamentary by-election.¹⁰⁷ That women such as these even had an opinion regarding the nation’s economic operations is due in part to Harriet Martineau’s *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-34), which offered fictional vignettes modeling Adam Smith’s free market ideals in a then-modern context. In her review of that text, Christian Isobel Johnstone, notable in her status as female editor-in-chief of Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine, explicitly links women’s daily practices of domestic economy with what she calls “the economy of empires”:

. . . we believe that there is something in the female mind which peculiarly fits it for elucidating, in a familiar manner, the intricacies of political economy. The economy of empires is only the economy of families and neighbourhoods on a larger scale. Now woman is eminently the best family manager. . . . [W]e give it as our deliberate conviction that there never yet was a well-regulated house in which the lady was not the master. Woman alone can exert the strictest economy, unblemished by the harsh heartlessness of avarice—she alone can enforce a martinet discipline in household affairs, without communicating a sense of oppression. There is a delicate tact about woman which enables her to see at once on what side a recusant is to be attacked, and an ever ready observation which nothing escapes, and a gentleness which nothing can resist. She lacks the strength to take an active share in the concerns of an empire, but her experience

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

in the business details of her own miniature state enable her to read lessons worthy of serious attention from all who take an interest in public affairs.108

Defending Martineau against critics who might take issue with her status as a female economist, Johnstone mirrors Isabella Beeton’s military-domestic language which the latter would deploy almost thirty years later in her descriptions of dinner-giving and its complexities.109 Johnstone and Beeton use such masculinized language to legitimize their work and themselves, raising their supposedly anti-masculine domestic concerns to the level of military tactical maneuvers and Imperialist conquest. Johnstone’s rhetorical moves here suggest a cycle of understanding that rotates along gendered lines and subverts typical expectations regarding feminine access to complicated systems of thought: women can understand male concerns of the economy of empire, because women’s concerns are already infused with masculine elements; but “women alone” can make sense of domestic economy, and therefore “women alone” can understand the complexity of Britain’s grand, international economic network by reducing its scale, as Martineau’s Illustrations of Political Economy explicitly does.110 Thus, Martineau, and in fact all


109 “As with the COMMANDER OF AN ARMY, or the leader of any enterprise, so is it with the mistress of a house. Her spirit will be seen through the whole establishment; and just in proportion as she performs her duties intelligently and thoroughly, so will her domestics follow in her path,” Isabella Beeton, Mrs Beeton’s Book of Household Management (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

110 This emphasis on feminized powers of comprehension and their source in domesticity is in direct opposition to the philosophy of domestic management articulated by Sarah Stickney Ellis. Like Beeton, Ellis was considered an authority on Victorian womanhood and domesticity and authored many books on the subject. In one of her most famous works, The Wives of England, Ellis insists on the unique and complementary, but ever discrete knowledges of men and women: “... it would be wise to begin early in married life to act upon the principle, which allows to every wife a little sphere of domestic arrangements, with which the husband shall not feel that he has any business to interfere ... and into which a reasonable man would not wish to obtrude his authority, simply because the operations necessary to be carried on in that
women, Johnstone argues, are particularly suited for the “martinet” concerns of household economy and can use their supposedly essentially feminine attributes to “attack” “recusants” and prohibit “escapes” without possible “resistance,” precisely and ironically because they are women. “Of course Martineau is capable of explaining economics,” Johnstone seems to say; “she is a woman.” In another world, she suggests, women might be able to speak to concerns of political economy on the national, even imperial level.

So much of the Victorian woman’s day-to-day was wrapped up in financial concerns of what Johnstone calls “her own miniature state,” among them, of course, how to afford the dinners and parties that social expectation required. In J. H. Walsh’s *Manual of Domestic Economy* (1857), explicitly written for “families spending from £100 to £1000 a year,” he addresses these concerns, writing that “In the present day it is too often the case that dinner parties . . . are carried to such an extravagant extent, that a serious outlay is involved, which may not always be agreeable to those invited, some of whom are neither able, nor, if able, willing to return such a display.” He takes for granted that “a larger stock of glass, china, and plate is required than is possessed by the lady of the house,” and suggests renting everything from silverware to chairs and tables, while also seeking to alleviate fears about the outsized cost of hosting several guests by insisting that “the remains will feed the household for the week” (624-)

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department of his household are alike foreign to his understanding and his tastes. . . . [I]t is from an ambitious desire to extend the limits of this sphere, that many have brought trouble upon themselves, by having their authority called in question, more than it ever would have been, had they remained satisfied with a narrower field for its exercise,” *The Wives of England, Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, & Social Obligations* (London: Fisher, Son, & Co., 1843), Hathi Trust Digital Library, 121-22.

Walsh’s manual thus represents the conflicting narratives of excess and frugality inherent in Victorian sociability: hosts are expected to provide far more food than could ever be consumed in one evening, but also to dedicate themselves to utility by consuming that food in lieu of other meals and nearly nullifying the cost of entertaining as a result. Implicit in these bits of advice, and indeed, in the manual’s very title, is the effect of the regulating force of free market ideals.

By 1857, what Martineau could only hope for seemed, to Walsh, to be a reality, with the lower prices of the post-Corn Laws world allowing £100 families to give the same parties, for the same price, as £1000 families. And yet, Walsh’s “Table of Expenditure,” which provides sample budgets for four categories of income, allots only £5 annually for “Illness and amusements” for those on the low end of the financial spectrum, compared to the £125 available to wealthier families (606). By his own accounting, a family with an annual income of £100 has resources enough to host only one party a year, which suggests that higher class and more frequent party-giving go hand-in-hand.

It is no surprise, then, that fiction of the era would feature characters for whom social and economic anxieties are linked, and that these characters, chiefly women, would work to fit within proscribed boundaries while also attempting to reshape these boundaries to match their own

112 The need for excessive quantities of food would diminish by the 1880s, when service à la russe became the norm, in which servants carried dishes from person to person. In the 1840s and 1850s, however, service à la française was still in full force. Judith Flanders notes that dishes in service à la française remained on the table for the whole meal, taking the place of decorative flowers, and therefore they “had to be completely filled to make them look attractive, even if they then contained too much food for the number of people at the table; half-filled dishes made the host look shabby and mean,” Inside the Victorian Home: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 274. By Flanders’s calculations, service à la russe required a third as much food as service à la française, though the former also presupposes the existence of multiple servants. Parties in the novels that form the focus of this chapter would be served in the French style, though Cranford’s women avoid the financial burden of large quantities of food by giving teas, rather than even modest dinners, for the majority of their social gatherings.
financial circumstances. According to advice writers like Walsh, among others, women as financial entities were, in Krista Lysack’s words, “an extension of their husbands’ resources.”¹¹³

Of course, such a claim presupposes the existence of both husbands and resources. This chapter explores the ways in which characters in novels by Elizabeth Gaskell and Anne Brontë must renegotiate normative systems of sociability when “the business details of [their] own miniature state” are partly determined by the nonexistence, absence, or dissoluteness of husbands and the lack of ready income. Whereas Harriet Martineau saw the domestic sphere as a kind of object lesson for larger economic shifts, the women in these novels work in reverse. If, as Bagehot suggested, the shifts in political economy were on every mid-Victorian’s lips—whether men or women—one can imagine Gaskell’s and Brontë’s characters responding to the news of their nation’s newly freed trade in their own ways.¹¹⁴ The repeal of the Corn Laws, with farmers and their consumers calling for and then achieving a new economic system to their benefit, led to a set of sea changes that suggested attitudes toward domestic economy might also be reworked to better suit one’s own resources and needs.

Despite its comic edge and tongue-in-cheek references to “elegant economy,” Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford (1851-53) allows her to imagine a world in which a particular kind of feminized economic system can exist. Her economy is maintained by women who are themselves removed from the public sphere and who lack access to any means of production that


¹¹⁴ This is not to say that repealing the Corn Laws birthed an immediate, fully formed free market economy. Their overturning did, however, by most accounts, initiate an era of free trade that would last until 1931, when tariff reform and intra-Imperial dealing became the norm. See, for instance, Anthony Howe’s chapter, “Free Trade and the Early Victorians: The Corn Laws Repealed, 1846,” 1-37.
has not been mediated by the influence of men. Absent the kinds of offices, boardrooms, and exchange floors that make up the male economic experience, teas and parties provide the space in which Gaskell’s women can execute their economic objectives and shape the economic ethos that informs everyday Cranford life, thereby continually constructing a localized definition of gentility that allows them to live within their means without losing social prominence. Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) presents an opposing case: a domestic world too full of men and too indifferent to financial concerns. In her capacity as hostess to several multi-day country house parties instituted by her dissolute husband, Helen Huntingdon attempts to maneuver between forces pulling at her from two opposing directions, with the social expectations of society pitted against her own desires for moral purity. Though she is not as successful as the Cranford ladies in her attempts to navigate the conflicts inherent in the juxtaposition of sociability and morality, her circumstances, and the potential financial consequences of leaving those circumstances, lead Helen to formulate her own systems of etiquette, virtue, and economy. These systems explicitly reject those put forth by feminine communities like the one we see in *Cranford*. While the Cranfordians work within the system, restructuring it to meet their needs, Helen turns her back on established norms, escaping from the overcrowded, overly social world of her husband into isolation and initial poverty, but of her own volition. The parties in these novels, like real parties of the mid-Victorian period and those imagined by commentators like J. H. Walsh, highlight the symbiotic but tenuous relationship that exists between social life, financial security, and morality, and the way that women played a key role in organizing the systems by which each was assessed and maintained.
2.1 Seed-cakes and Savoy Biscuits: Signaling Inclusion in Cranford’s Elegant Economy

Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford presents readers with a world ostensibly divested of men and all their usual associations: work, marriage, sex, economic productivity, political and geopolitical action, and so on. The specters of these things linger at the boundaries of the articulated narrative—men have gone off to war, died with the East India Company, or gone to work in town, but instances of actual men participating in the social order of both Cranford the village and Cranford the novel are limited. Instead, the text focuses on poor, primarily aging women, who fill their days with needlework and social and philanthropic visits and their evenings with subdued parties. These parties are necessarily influenced by the particular way in which Cranford society is gendered and by its inhabitants’ impoverished version of gentility. Whereas, generally in Victorian literature and culture, members of the middle and upper classes use dinner parties to display their wealth and accumulate acquaintances (with potential secondary effects), parties in Cranford are microcosms of more general gentile poverty and its attendant economy; they are the marker of a hostess’s proper humility and homely sensibilities, particularly in a society dominated by old women and widows. Without the overt influence of professional, political, or military spheres, the domestic setting takes primacy as the arbiter of all aspects of polite society and becomes a space in which the ripples of more obviously “public” concerns inhere in feminized and domesticated ways. Cranford, then, highlights the intersection

115 Notable exceptions are Captain Brown, who dies early in the text, and Miss Matty’s former paramour Thomas Holbrook, who also dies.

116 Borislav Knezevic has written in detail about the precise nature of the Cranfordians’ gentility and its relation to their poverty. He argues that “The community’s self-understanding of ‘aristocracy’ is not constituted merely by economic status, but primarily by an active maintenance of a group solidarity,” Figures of Finance Capitalism: Writing, Class, and Capital in the Age of Dickens (New York: Routledge, 2004), 93.
of the social party with certain kinds of “economy,” and the ways that financial realities (rooted in professional, geopolitical, and heritable concerns) cause individuals (here women) to negotiate social ideals. The pronounced femininity of Cranford allows Gaskell to locate these economic concerns within the purview of women to an exaggerated degree and to establish the domestic, feminized party as an acutely influential component of complex social and public concerns.

It would seem at first that Cranford is removed from the public sphere entirely; in fact, it offers its own version of the public, with its own concerns at play. Some early critics of the novel have suggested that the village exists in direct opposition to its geographical foil, the manufacturing town of Drumble to its north: Cranford is to Drumble as women are to men, and as domesticity is to commerciality. And it is true that both Cranford the village and Cranford the novel provide a unique space, feminized in a particular way: domestically, economically, and according to the standards, whims, and needs of women of a certain age. But rather than propose that Cranford and its inhabitants insulate themselves from the commercial world, or conversely, that their financial situations drive them to become merchants and financiers themselves, Gaskell suggests that the private sphere is always already feminine and masculine, domestic and commercial. The lack of men means that these women preside over the full

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117 One theorizer of this feminized economy is Jill Rappoport, who has argued that the Cranford women practice a version of a gift economy. She suggests that they “reconcile themselves to limited commodities, operating on a horizontal plane of equivalences that substitutes conservation for accumulation and circularity of action for forward motion,” *Giving Women: Alliance and Exchange in Victorian Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 78.

118 Andrew H. Miller makes some strides in reading the novel seriously, rather than as a charming exercise in provinciality. He suggests that we as readers should not risk “condescending to these characters” or “seeing them as ‘so inane and so frivolous,’” (quoting an early review in *The Athenaeum*), but continues the convention of reading Cranford as a space that resists the influence of the commercial world, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity, Culture, and Victorian Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 117. In opposition to
spectrum of intimate and public life. In particular, the social gatherings of Cranford highlight the intersection of personal economy and more general economics, and the ways in which financial realities cause women to negotiate their engagement with stalwart, culturally shared ideals that are in opposition to their community’s more mutable economic state. Without men to deal with, these women and their social engagements re-signify what is proper, or what can be glossed as proper, while also establishing a new kind of localized propriety based, as Elizabeth Langland points out, on the tension between “vulgarity” and “elegance.”¹¹⁹ In practice, the women of Cranford establish a shared epistemology through the humorous fictions they tell themselves: “If we walked to or from a party,” the narrator insists, “it was because the night was so fine, or the air so refreshing; not because sedan-chairs were expensive.”¹²⁰ Other fictions are more elaborate:

When Mrs. Forrester, for instance, gave a party in her baby-house of a dwelling, and the little maiden disturbed the ladies on the sofa by a request that she might get the tea-tray out from underneath, everyone took this novel proceeding as the most natural thing in the world; and talked on about household forms and ceremonies, as if we all believed that our hostess had a regular servants’ hall, second table, with housekeeper and steward; instead of the one little charity-school maiden, whose short ruddy arms could never have been strong enough to carry the tray upstairs, if she had not been assisted in private by her mistress, who now sat in state, pretending not to know what cakes were sent up; though she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew, she had been busy all the morning making tea-bread and sponge cakes. (7)


These performances of propriety are insufficient as acts of mutual deception (‘we knew that she knew that we knew’), but that is not their function. They are instead iterations of a shared belief in the value of economy and a shared disgust for ‘vulgarity.’ Actions such as assisting one’s maid with a heavy load and storing the tea-tray beneath the sofa would be considered the height of vulgarity elsewhere. But here, in Cranford, they are markers of economy, while vulgarity itself comes to be shorthand for all the things these women do not have access to: too much food at a party is vulgar, overt maleness is vulgar, dressing with too much attention to current fashions is vulgar. In reality, these women cannot afford multiple servants or elegant displays of food or fashionable clothing, and their husbands, fathers, and brothers have mostly died off, eliminating the possibility of future moneymaking.

Their detachment from excess, shifts in fashion, and the hyper-masculine world of the market is ironic, in that they are choosing what has, in effect, already been chosen for them. It is humorous, of course, but significant, too, in that they are working within the constraints that have been imposed upon them, turning their limitations into a kind of intra-communal strength. The ironic re-signification—this is how things work in Cranford, this is our decision—falls in line with so much of what recuperative feminist criticism has aimed to do in the last forty years: it is a particularly feminized thing to maneuver within constraints imposed by outside forces, and to manipulate those one’s mastery of those constraints into something powerful. That power necessarily remains enclosed within a specific system: here, within the community of mostly old, genteelly poor women in Cranford, evinced in the parties they give and the few decisions they can make about those parties. But Gaskell is no recuperative feminist critic of the twentieth or twenty-first century. Writing for Dickens’s Household Words, Gaskell’s contributions were famously edited by Dickens himself, who, as her patron and her publisher, made changes to the
manuscripts without her permission and, in Thomas Recchio’s words, “injected details and even a tone of voice that does some violence to the subtle indirectness of Gaskell’s text.”\footnote{121}{Thomas Recchio, \textit{Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford: A Publishing History} (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 47.} The contentious relationship between Gaskell the writer and Dickens the editor has been well-documented, as has Gaskell’s own resistance to turning what was initially conceived as a single short story into a longer serialized novel.\footnote{122}{See Margaret Case Croskery’s “Mothers Without Children, Unity Without Plot: Cranford’s Radical Charm” in \textit{Nineteenth-Century Literature} 52.2 (1997): 198-220; Elsie Michie’s “‘Those That Will Not Work’: Prostitutes, Property, Gaskell, and Dickens” in \textit{Outside the Pale: Cultural Exclusion, Gender Difference, and the Victorian Woman Writer} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993): 113-141; Talia Schaffer’s “Craft, Authorial Anxiety, and ‘The Cranford Papers’” in \textit{Victorian Periodicals Review} 38.2 (Summer 2005): 221-239; Hilary M. Schor’s “Affairs of the Alphabet: Reading, Writing and Narrating in Cranford” in \textit{NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction} 22.3 (Spring 1989): 288-304.}

Under Dickens’s watchful eye, and in response to his insistence that she stretch the story out—even after killing Captain Brown “very much against [her] will,” as she expected she would have no need of him again—Gaskell capitalized on the strength of Dickens’s name while resisting his absolute power.\footnote{123}{Gaskell, letter to John Ruskin, February 1865, in \textit{The Letters of Mrs Gaskell}, ed. J.A.N Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 748.} Hilary Schor classes Dickens as “the male writer reading over Gaskell’s shoulder as she writes Cranford, and his most famous emendation, the removal of references to “Boz” and the \textit{Pickwick Papers}, led Gaskell to implicate and even impugn Dickens in more subtle ways.\footnote{124}{Schor, 293.} According to Schor, Gaskell “battles” Dickens by integrating “Dickensian references and patterns” throughout the text, “his every appearance . . . charged with significance.”\footnote{125}{Ibid.}
Schor, in fact, reads *Cranford* as a “Dickensian experiment” which feminized and sometimes satirized Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers*, and thus allowed her to develop her authorial voice by at once imitating and resisting Dickens himself, and doing so under the aegis of his very own publication. Gaskell, she says, emulates Dickens’s authoritative voice and narrative trajectory, but resists Dickens’s own authority by several key reversals: where Pickwick goes on ambulatory adventures, the Cranfordians’ femininity keeps them resolutely “at home”; where Dickens’s narrator is almost godlike, Gaskell’s Mary Smith is increasingly imbricated into the fabric of Cranford life. If we agree with Schor, it becomes clear that irony is central to Gaskell’s project. Her very work is itself a resistance to strictures imposed by outside forces, just as the women of Cranford’s project of verbal re-signification (mirroring Gaskell’s written re-signification) is a resistance other masculine impositions and restrictions. To say one thing and mean another, to allow her characters to be laughed at, is not the same as undermining her characters or their social power, particularly when the characters themselves are in on the joke: “we knew that she knew that we knew.” Gaskell’s ironic depiction of characters who purport to make choices when choice is so often denied them is prescient, in light of the feminist criticism that would follow in the next century, and it is precise: this performative decision-making is intentionally limited to the domestic sphere, and even more so, to the world of teas and parties – female-dominated spaces and activities where power is regulated exclusively by women in the absence of men.

However, this ironized detachment from things that are actually unattainable need not be treated as purely ironic, or purely feminine. Despite Gaskell’s parodic voice, and her jokes at the expense of women like Deborah Jenkyns and Mrs. Jamieson, the women of Cranford, who

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126 Ibid., 302.
survive on annuities provided by absent fathers and husbands and who deplore the vulgarity of the cotton trade and the railway, in fact exhibit a modified version of P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins’s “gentlemanly capitalism,” whereby they make money from a distance, rather than “working directly” for it. In a world where unmitigated capitalism was now leaving women like the Cranfordians helpless in its wake, Gaskell’s women represent the feminine counterpart to Cain and Hopkins’s “gentlemanly” system—a dying system, which these women doggedly to conserve, without the benefits reserved for their male coequals. Borislav Knezevic has made a similar claim in arguing that the novel’s focus on women who let “houses above a certain rent” provides the “female equivalent of the standard used nationwide to determine which men could vote,” articulating a political version of the social and economic argument I am making here.

The women of Cranford certainly see themselves this way, with the narrator Mary Smith asserting, tongue-in-cheekily but no less truthfully, that they “were all aristocratic” (7). She and her peers mirror the fates of impoverished bachelors of the aristocracy, like those Edith Wharton would later depict The Buccaneers (1938), who turn to American heiresses to finance their insolvent estates, writ especially small. Despite the difference in scale, both the women in Cranford and the men in The Buccaneers are in need of money, but prohibited by society from working, Wharton’s men and their Victorian antecedents by their rank, and the Cranfordian women doubly so, by their class and their gender. Dinners and teas, which stand in for the grand

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128 Knezevic, 92, emphasis original. Likewise, Knezevic notes that “the basis of the Cranford way of life” is “capital previously accumulated and converted into stock” – not exactly an aristocratic source of income, but more genteel, in its removal from production, than money explicitly from manufacturing, 93.
balls and parties of the actual aristocracy, are then moments of both display and concealment in Cranford. Inviting the village’s version of “the public sphere” into the private realm, requires the negotiation of what Jill Rappoport calls “shared knowledge and shared concealment,” where the women’s financial straits are at once in full view and resolutely ignored.  

Indeed, to be a woman who is financially pressed is a foregone conclusion in Cranford, which, to be endured, requires the cognitive dissonance to assert, at once, “We are poor” and “We are genteel,” in the midst of a capitalistic shift that facilitated the rising of the lower classes and necessitated a new class system not organized by wealth or poverty. The party in *Cranford* thus becomes the primary space for working out these incompatible notions, which the novel’s women accomplish precisely by refusing to make the two ideas cohere. As Erika Rappaport has noted, a financial inability to give or attend parties in the midcentury would result in “social ostracism”; and while Mary Smith and her companions are disposed to rewrite the incidental details of what counts as “elegant” and “vulgar,” they are not willing to overturn or reject the primary spaces and methods through which the former is displayed and the latter suppressed. What happens at the party may change, but the party itself is a mainstay, and to abolish it is to relinquish control of the signifiers it yields and their meanings.

One example of this feminized engagement with the town’s complex socio-economic system can be seen in Mrs. Jamieson’s careful performance of genteel rank (in order to mask her apparent impoverishment) and in the ladies of Cranford’s universal complicity in this charade.

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129 Rappoport, 79.

As the “sister-in-law to the late Earl of Glenmire,” Mrs. Jamieson is the most obviously genteel member of Cranford society, though her connection to the nobility is thoroughly tangential (8). The narrator’s mocking use of her honorific (“the Honourable Mrs. Jamieson”), coupled with the elder Miss Jenkyns’s obsequious way of “always yield[ing] her the post of honour” allows Gaskell to examine what she later calls the “small economies” of her cast of characters (79, 49). The women of the novel unite in assigning a negative value to “anything expensive,” calling it “vulgar,” and thereby accounting for their parties’ lack of ostentatious display or conspicuous consumption without acknowledging their own unstable financial situations. “Wafer bread-and-butter and sponge-biscuits were all that the Honourable Mrs Jamieson gave” at her parties, the narrator remarks, calling this practice an act of “elegant economy,” and then self-consciously acknowledging that such a descriptor is a piece of the particular “phraseology of Cranford,” where “economy was always ‘elegant’” (8). “We had tacitly agreed,” she continues, “to ignore that any with whom we associated on terms of visiting equality could ever be prevented by poverty from doing anything that they wished” (8). In choosing to collectively overlook what would be considered deficiencies in wealth and propriety by other, more moneyed members of society, the women of Cranford use dinners and parties to manipulate basic social power structures and, in so doing, reinvest their particular domestic sphere with determinant power.

Doing so also allows these women to self-reflexively redefine their own status. It is not admitting Mrs. Jamieson’s economic constraints that the women abjure. Rather, they refuse to acknowledge that anyone with whom they themselves have chosen to associate could be in any way encumbered by the realities of feminine middle-class life. It is significant that this tacit social contract turns on one specific qualification: “anyone with whom [they] associated on terms of visiting equality” – that is, anyone for whom they would leave a carte de visite or
include on a guest list for the teas and dinners that make up Cranfordian social life. For Mary Smith and her community, “visits” of various kinds are markers of familiarity and social acceptance that serve to implicate the visitors themselves in a mutually constituted, mutually approved circle of intimacy.\footnote{One thinks of Granovetter’s “cliques” which comprise only “strong ties,” and thus necessarily fragment a social group’s place in a larger community, Mark S. Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties” in American Journal of Sociology, 78.6 (May 1973): 1373-74.} Agreeing to visit someone’s home, to physically enter into their private space, or to invite someone into one’s own home, is an act that registers, both internally and externally, psychologically and socially, as a sign of equal status, wealth, and prestige. Thus, the fact that Mrs. Forrester cannot hire more than one maid to serve her guests and must cook her tea-party desserts herself, or that Mrs. Jamieson can only afford the blandest and cheapest of party fare, cannot be acknowledged without also forcing Mary Smith, the Jenkynses, and Mrs. Pole to acknowledge their own meager resources.

In \textit{Distinction}, Bourdieu argues that the kind of food offered to guests at a social gathering is “a very good indicator of the image they wish to give or avoid giving to others and, as such, it is the systematic expression of a system of factors including, in addition to the indicators of the position occupied in the economic and cultural hierarchies, economic trajectory, social trajectory and cultural trajectory.”\footnote{Pierre Bourdieu, “The Aristocracy of Culture” in Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 79.} Yet the residents of Cranford resist Bourdieu’s assessment at nearly every turn: their refreshments are \textit{not} indicative of the image they wish to give but the image of economy they \textit{purport} to wish to give. (The joke is that economic strategies are hardly ever elegant and almost never \textit{de rigueur}.) While Mrs. Jamieson and Mrs. Forrester’s sad fare does serve to position them in realistic economic hierarchies, it does not
accurately represent their place in *Cranford*’s social hierarchy; nor do their tea-cakes, bread-and-butter wafers, and sponge-biscuits indicate economic, social, and cultural trajectory, but rather the absence of movement and the restrictions of social and economic stasis. Whereas, for Bourdieu, the “trajectory effect . . . manifests itself . . . whenever individuals occupying similar positions at a given time are separated by differences associated with the evolution over time of the volume and structure of their capital,” the economic and cultural states of the majority of Cranford’s population are precluded from evolution by virtue of their status as unemployed and unemployable women. As a result, giving and attending parties can be a transgressive act. The women of Cranford refuse to allow the natural rhythms of Bourdieu’s “social space” to interfere with their own self-imposed “image” and their management of economic and cultural hierarchies. They insist that party accoutrements, such as food and the servants who (should) serve it, will not signify as they are expected to; instead, the women rework the entire process of cultural signification to match their preferences and maintain their structure of power. And while Gaskell presents such scenes with a wink, inviting her readers in on jokes at her characters’ expense, the very fact that the humor of their situation escapes most members of Cranford society (excluding perhaps Mary Smith) indicates that society’s resolute adherence to this system of re-signification and to the systematic rejection of the natural structure of economic, social, and cultural capital that Bourdieu observes, which are for them no laughing matter.

One apparent exception to this rejection of standard significatory values and to Cranford’s resistance to economic, social, and cultural trajectory, is the story of Betty Barker,

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133 Bourdieu, “The Social Space and Its Transformations” in *Distinction*, 111.
who seems, at least at first, to upend the social structure I have just been suggesting is fixed.\textsuperscript{134} Though talk of money must be derided and its absence ignored in order to maintain the fiction of elegance and aristocracy, Betty’s narrative tacitly acknowledges the accumulation of money and depicts a kind of social mobility particular to Cranford that must once again be negotiated by the ladies themselves, and which manifests itself most clearly in the context of another party, this time given by Betty herself. She and her older sister, formerly ladies’ maids, have first saved enough money to open a milliner’s shop, and then made enough money at that shop so that, at her sister’s death, the younger Barker is able to retire into relative comfort (75). When Betty decides to give a tea, some “five or six years” after closing the shop, invitations are made to “a choice and select few,” to the exclusion of Mrs. Fitz-Adam, the daughter of the village doctor who has recently returned to town a widow (75). When asked by Matty if she will be included among the party’s guests, Betty replies, “No, Madam. I must draw a line somewhere. . . . I have the greatest respect for Mrs Fitz-Adam – but I cannot think her fit society for such ladies as Mrs Jamieson and Miss Matilda Jenkyns” (76-77). It is a strange and comical exchange—one of many instances of Gaskell provoking readers to laugh at the Cranford ladies, whose rules of social engagement are old fashioned and very often opaque. No one objects to Mrs. Jamieson being entertained by her own former lady’s maid, whose new money comes from not only owning but personally running a hat shop; and yet inviting Mrs. Fitz-Adam, whose offenses include being a farmer’s daughter and wearing silk mourning dresses instead of something more subdued, to a party where Mrs. Jamieson will be present is a bridge too far. Despite its comic tenor, the exchange subtly acknowledges the power these women have, in their ability to control

\textsuperscript{134} Betty, of course, represents the economic, social, and cultural trajectory of the working class, rather than that of the pseudo-genteel bourgeois space occupied by most of the novel’s characters.
who is and isn’t included in polite society, as well as the complicated shape such power structures take.

Of course, one of the novel’s central themes is that this power is dying. These opaque, outdated rules of social life are now untenable. The reality of Betty Barker’s giving the party fails to cohere with the bygone system of engagement to which the Cranfordians still cling—the system which excludes the likes of Mrs. Fitz-Adams. Here, Gaskell’s characteristic ironic voice uncovers what the women of Cranford continue to model throughout the novel: that the rules of sociability and party-giving are arbitrary and therefore adaptable. I argue in the previous chapter that the standards of dinner-party praxis were ever-changing, but that Victorians remained committed to the idea that there were standards, hence the proliferation of so much etiquette literature and so many cookery books. These books articulated a theory of what the dinner party should accomplish—namely, the edification of guests and hosts alike and the maintenance and dissemination of the hosts’ good name—though the procedures of entertaining, and therefore the specific aspects of the more generally agreed-upon culturally narrative, necessarily evolved. I this scene of crisis, with Betty Barker and Mrs. Jamieson striving to make sense of a system in flux, with no easy answers, Gaskell, however humorously, looks at the incremental changes that resulting from larger national and international social and economic shifts, thus revealing that the changes in what was proper were never smooth, and were even cause for panic.

The truth of the matter is that trade has made Betty Barker wealthier than any of the ladies whom she entertains, and that such a change in the social order is understandably alarming. Though, following her own sister’s death, Miss Matty is the most respected member of Cranford society, and Mrs. Jamieson the most connected, it is Betty alone who can afford to feed her guests with the kinds of foods typical of a tea party. The result is a party that does and does
not meet the waning standards of Cranford’s version of gentility, and so causes guests to navigate their counterintuitive predicament with extra dexterity:

The tea-tray was abundantly loaded. I was pleased to see it, I was so hungry; but I was afraid the ladies present might think it vulgarly heaped up. I know they would have done at their own houses; but somehow the heaps disappeared here. I saw Mrs Jamieson eating seed-cake, slowly and considerately, as she did everything; and I was rather surprised, for I knew she had told us, on the occasion of her last party, that she never had it in her house, it reminded her so much of scented soap. She always gave us Savoy biscuits. However, Mrs Jamieson was kindly indulgent to Miss Barker’s want of knowledge of the customs of high life; and, to spare her feelings, ate three large pieces of seed-cake, with a placid, ruminating expression of countenance, not unlike a cow’s. (81)

Betty’s tea is in keeping with the sociability of the age, which, as cookery books of the time make clear, equated food-related excess with gentility. As Knezevic notes, if impoverished Cranfordians wish to maintain their sense of dignity, they must instead “interpret the limits on their expenditure as requirements of gentility.”135 And while that may usually be the case, Mrs. Jamieson’s obvious enjoyment of Betty’s lavish fare, with her cow-like rumination and willingness to indulge herself, communicates a tacit approval of Betty’s hosting choices and even an involuntary, semi-erotic attempt to sate an appetite that has long been suppressed by her straitened circumstances. At the very least, she excuses excess that she might elsewhere consider “vulgar.” Despite its status in Cranford as a watchword for impropriety, “vulgarity” is then a capacious term with a mutable definition: what is vulgar for Mrs. Jamieson, by virtue of her own never spoken-of poverty, is good and proper for Betty Barker, by virtue of her similarly unacknowledged financial stability.

Betty’s seed-cakes and their consumption work according to Bourdieu’s understanding of social engagement, while the rest of Cranford does not. For Betty, food is indicative of the “image” she hopes to “give or avoid giving to others.” She hopes to present herself, according to

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135 Knezevic, 97.
the Cranford system of inclusion, “on terms of visiting equality” with her new peers. She is a new member of one of Bourdieu’s factions of the lower middle class who choose to “serve their friends ‘plentiful and good’, ‘simple but well-presented’ meals,” rather than something flashier, in accordance with her economic, social, and cultural trajectory from lower class worker to, in Bourdieu’s words, “new petite bourgeois of middle or working-class origin.” Bourdieu finds that, within the parameters of the petite bourgeoisie, individuals “who are upwardly mobile and originate from the working classes” are likely to provide guests with similar kinds of foods as “those in decline” (79). And yet, in Cranford, “those in decline,” who make up the majority of the visible populace, are unable to afford the same refreshments as Betty. As a new member of the petite bourgeoisie, Betty paradoxically signals her inclusion in that group by giving a party that established members of that group cannot themselves match. Betty’s “vulgar” heaps of food serve to differentiate her, economically, from her new peers, at the same time that they unite her with them socially. The “peculiar phraseology of Cranford,” where “economy is always elegant,” does not have a category for the upwardly mobile Barkers, and necessarily ceases to function once Betty’s inclusion in the set has been allowed. In keeping with Gaskell’s playful topsyturviness, material capital functions for Betty in the way social and cultural capital operate for Mrs. Jamieson et al., precisely because she cannot access the latter forms of capital, just as her superiors cannot access the former.

The question remains as to why Mrs. Fitz-Adam remains excluded from Mrs. Jamieson’s society, until near the novel’s close, while Betty is welcomed in. The short answer is that Mrs. Fitz-Adam is both wealthy and newly bourgeois, which makes that wealth excessive and therefore “vulgar.” When Miss Matty must auction off her belongings for ready money, it becomes apparent that Mrs. Fitz-Adam is affluent enough to buy many of those possessions and then give them back, outfitting Miss Matty’s sitting room and “cram[ming] all sorts of things” into the space, with attention to “what articles were particularly regarded by Miss Matty on account of their associations with her early days” (169). The source of her money, as the narrator humorously tells us, is her marriage:

[Mrs. Forrester] had always understood that Fitz meant something aristocratic; there was Fitz-Roy—she thought that some of the King’s children had been called Fitz-Roy; and there was Fitz-Clarence, now—they were the children of dear good King William the Fourth. Fitz-Adam!—it was a pretty name, and she thought it very probably meant “Child of Adam.” No one, who had not some good blood in their veins, would dare to be called Fitz; there was a deal in a name . . . (78)

Mrs. Fitz-Adam, daughter of a local farmer and a kind of everywoman (as “Child of Adam” implies), leaves home and returns a widow, mysteriously moneyed and potentially aristocratic. Upon her arrival, she lets “a large rambling house, which had been usually considered to confer a patent of gentility upon its tenant” (78). It is this notion of “gentility conferred” that Mrs. Jamieson finds so abhorrent. She literally refuses to see Mrs. Fitz-Adam “when they [meet] at the Cranford parties,” looking instead “at the wall above her” to “show how honourable she was” (79). Whereas Mrs. Jamieson’s “honourable” status has been conferred by her family connection to Lady Glenmire, Mrs. Fitz-Adam has married into wealth and then been made doubly genteel by the lodgings her wealth affords her.¹³⁷ Unlike Betty Barker, whose own surname brings to

¹³⁷ It should be noted that “wealthy,” “aristocratic,” and “gentility” are all words of relative value in Cranford, like “vulgar” and “elegant.” Mrs. Fitz-Adam’s name sounds, to “the
mind notions of auctioneers and loudmouthed shop advertisers, Mrs. Fitz-Adam is a threat to Mrs. Jamieson, having at least as great a claim to aristocracy as the sister-in-law of Lady Glenmire—who herself marries Mrs. Fitz-Adam’s brother, Mr. Hoggins, lowering herself and severing Mrs. Jamieson’s ties to the peerage. Mrs. Fitz-Adam has obtained her cultural capital from similarly obscured channels as those which empower both Mrs. Jamieson and Lady Glenmire, making her dangerously socially mobile. In a reversal of the usual Victorian systems of gentility and inclusion, which mirrors Cranford society’s destabilization of normative understandings of “elegance” and “economy,” Betty’s trade-based ascendance is paradoxically innocuous, while Mrs. Fitz-Adam, whose connections are the result of marriage and therefore proper, is dangerous. Trade is somehow emptied of its malign character for Betty, who becomes a kind of gatekeeper, with her party acting as a mark of inclusion and acceptance, where she herself performs the role of social arbiter: Mrs. Jamieson is “in,” Mrs. Fitz-Adam is “out.”

old blue-blooded inhabitants of Cranford,” like something aristocratic, but readers have by this moment learned to treat such opinions skeptically, 78. Likewise, to be wealthier than one’s neighbors is, in Cranford, no great feat.

Later, Mrs. Jamieson takes Betty’s invitation to Mrs. Gordon’s welcome-back party as a compliment to herself, as Betty was “formerly her maid” and has now been put “on a level with ‘those Hogginses,’” indicating that Mrs. Jamieson has acknowledged society’s inclusion of Mrs. Fitz-Adam and her brother without approving of it herself, but also suggesting that Betty’s position as a new petite bourgeois has not improved, 184.

One of the many ironies surrounding Mrs. Jamieson’s aversion for Mrs. Fitz-Adam is that the latter’s money is potentially just as entrenched in the world of trade as Betty’s is: Mrs. Fitz-Adam’s late husband dies off-page, without “any of [them] car[ing] to know what Mr Fitz-Adam was,” and is “gathered to his fathers without [their] ever having thought about him at all” (77). For all anyone knows, he may have been a shopkeeper himself, making Mrs. Fitz-Adam less of a social threat to Mrs. Jamieson’s social dominance, but the source of his income is obscured in another iteration of Cain and Hopkins’s “gentlemanly capitalism,” where money is made at a distance, at least from the perspective of the Cranford women.
Thus, trade, money, and abundance are only vulgar inasmuch as they can be said to vie with the elegance of genteel economy—in the same way that masculinity is only vulgar when it is unattainable. For example, the women are resistant to Captain Brown, who is initially treated as unwanted intruder; but once he becomes a staple of Cranford society, his death is mourned as a great loss. However, in the absence of other men like him, and a man’s attendant connections to the public world of trade and commerce, the ladies of Cranford are able to construct, define, and control what Schor calls “an exclusively female language.”¹⁴⁰ They are, in Gaskell’s own words, “Amazons”: women who have created a society where men’s absence is not a loss but a neutral quality, and, furthermore, where the women themselves act as the banishers, excluding men in order to retain their power to unhinge and redefine signifiers and statuses as they will.¹⁴¹ Rather than perpetuate the tension between public and private, domestic and professional—rather than allowing for competition between masculinized, more industrial “work” and feminized “gentility,” the women of Cranford weight the two options equally and make them interchangeable. Either has the potential to add one’s name to a guest list, granting access to proper social circles; but for one individual have both wealth and class together belies the


¹⁴¹ Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund make a similar argument: “What appears as humor that gently mocks the ridiculousness (even horror) of an all-female society also presents itself as an aggressive threat (the Amazon reference) or as a marginalizing of the male within a deliberately female-centered fictive world,” Victorian Publishing and Mrs. Gaskell’s Work (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 6. Additionally, Peter Jenkyns does play the hero of the novel’s conclusion, returning home from India to save Matty from the shame and stress of shop-keeping and pay off her debts, which might at first suggest that their society needs male interference to sustain it. Jill Rappoport, however, has demonstrated how the women of Cranford use a gift economy of kindness to mitigate Matty’s difficulties, even without his arrival. Rappoport also notes that Peter himself, with his “history of cross-dressing,” is “an easy addition to the feminized circuit of sympathy when he returns home,” Giving Women: Alliance and Exchange in Victorian Culture, 74.
autonomy of women and the preeminence of standards of sociability as determinant methods for marking out class and inclusion. In this way, the women of Cranford use the parties they give and the choices they make therein to sustain an otherwise moribund social order, rather than allowing it to bow to a new world of capitalistic enterprise and its potential for class leveling. Concerns of economy and class mobility, or class paralysis, manifest in the “solemn festivities” that these women are duty-bound to participate in, despite being financially precluded from meeting social standards that proliferate beyond the boundaries of Cranford (11). To give a party in Cranford is thus to manipulate the symbols of sociability—party refreshments, servants, guest lists—and to reassign their value and meaning in accordance with a uniquely feminized, fluid system of signification.

This new language does not translate outside of Cranford, but rather absorbs the outside world into it. Largely, the women are genteelly distanced from manufacturing, shop-keeping, and the inner workings of the county’s new railways; but not so distant that they cannot enjoy their benefits, and more importantly, capitalize on their opportunities. To return to Betty Barker, in becoming milliners in a town where Indian fashions are growing belatedly popular, she and her sister not only link Cranford to the faraway worlds of capitalistic imperialism, but they bring such far-flung economies home. Rather than separating the Barkers from Cranford’s genteel society, their supposedly masculine and threateningly un-aristocratic engagements in commerce are instead run through the Cranfordian system of signification, where bourgeois elegance has been transposed with hard-earned wealth, to allow for their initial and continued inclusion in the upper echelons of the Cranford social circle. Put another way, these women’s participation in local and, by extension, international trade finds both a cause and an effect in the private, domestic sphere: to include Betty as a member of Mrs. Jamieson’s social circle, to include her in
her parties and those of Mrs. Gordon and others, Mrs. Jamieson and the rest must reconcile Betty’s history with that standards articulated by Cranford society and society at large—they must acknowledge financial realities while denying those realities’ significance, both with regard to their own straits and Betty’s newfound wealth. Whereas the true aristocracy would view Betty’s working past, Mrs. Forrester’s innovative tea-tray storage, and Mrs. Jamieson’s Savoy biscuits as standard examples of “vulgarity,” the wholly feminine language of Cranford allows for a radical reassessing of these facts in a way that benefits and maintains their particular version of society. It is an empowering, nuanced, and mutable method of defining what counts as proper, and when, and for whom, all worked out in dining rooms and drawing rooms under the auspices of parties given by the “nice old ladies” of Cranford (131).

2.2 Against “Ultra Civilized Life”: Redefining Sociability Itself in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

Mrs. Fitz-Adam appears in the pages of Household Words about four years after The Tenant of Wildfell Hall’s Helen Huntingdon, and her introduction to the narrative of Cranford reads like a reworking of Helen’s defining characteristics: “She had taken a large rambling house, which had been usually considered to confer a patent of gentility upon its tenant, because, once upon a time, seventy or eighty years before, the spinster daughter of an earl had resided in it. . . . Still, it was not at all a settled thing that Mrs Fitz-Adam was to be visited” (78). Helen, however, appears in a novel in which she is the central character. While Mrs. Fitz-Adam is one of many Cranfordians who together reassess and redefine standards of sociability and its attendant connections to money, manners, and morality, Helen’s story features isolation and iconoclasm that mirror those of Anne Brontë and her family. For Helen, as I will illustrate, morality, or more specifically, virtue, begins as an amorphous, manipulable idea and becomes
more fixed as the narrative progresses—and this difference from *Cranford*, where what counts as “true” virtue is as slippery as what counts as true elegance, is indicative of the two works’ formal differences. Despite the frame narrative and temporal back-and-forth of Brontë’s novel, the story it presents has a clear-cut beginning and end, with one heroine knitting each of its aspects together. *Cranford*, by contrast, began as a series of vignettes, which, as I have mentioned, Gaskell only belatedly transformed into a novel, at Dickens’s request. Whereas Brontë’s story is, from the beginning, about Helen’s journey from coquette to virtuous iconoclast (with her own ideas about sociability and morality), Mrs. Fitz-Adam and the rest are the subjects of stories, plural, about a village and its inhabitants, which necessarily requires a multiplicity of views that, as part of their sociable project, are translated into a kind of collective system that suits them as a group.

In further contradistinction to the genteelly impoverished women of Cranford, Helen Hntingdon is the daughter of a squire, returning to her ancestral home—Wildfell Hall—not some upstart farmer’s daughter moving up in her station. And in contrast to the former Miss Hoggins, who comes home in “the hope of being admitted into the society of the place,” Helen returns to Linden-Car intent on isolation and anonymity (79). She has left her husband; in fact, she has left society all together, in order to soothe her conscience and protect her son Arthur from pursuing the example of his father, a roisterous alcoholic who delights in tormenting Helen’s sense of dignity and subverting her expectations of spousal duty. The decision is a painful one, and a long time coming, and though Helen herself, in her diary entries, emphasizes the social, moral, and legal obstacles initially keeping her from taking steps toward independence, perhaps the largest
unspoken hindrance is the threat of poverty.\textsuperscript{142} Indeed, beyond the fear that Arthur Huntingdon, Sr. will learn of her whereabouts, her first concerns upon obtaining her freedom are almost all financial:

Frederick has supplied me with all requisite furniture and painting materials: Rachel has sold most of my clothes for me, in a distant town, and procured me a wardrobe more suitable to my present position: I have a second-hand piano, and a tolerably well-stocked bookcase in my parlour; and my other room has assumed quite a professional, business-like appearance already. I am working hard to repay my brother for all his expenses on my account; not that there is the slightest necessity for anything of the kind, but it pleases me to do so: I shall have so much more pleasure in my labour, my earnings, my frugal fare, and household economy, when I know that I am paying my way honestly, and that what little I possess is legitimately all my own; and that no one suffers for my folly—in a pecuniary way at least. I shall make him take the last penny I owe him, if I can possibly effect it without offending him too deeply.\textsuperscript{143}

Helen takes up her favorite pastime, painting, though now for money, in hopes of repaying her brother, keeping her and her son afloat, and, most significantly, ensuring that her few possessions are “legitimately all [her] own.” Having been trapped by her legal and moral commitment to her husband, and forced to preside over raucous parties that make a spectacle of her husband’s alcoholism and infidelity, Helen signals her recent independence to herself and her family by achieving a semblance of economic self-sufficiency, which coincides with the social isolation of single motherhood. The target of Brontë’s critique here, as Alexandra K. Wettlaufer has argued, is “both the injustice of the laws oppressing married women and the social structures that uphold

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\textsuperscript{142} Ian Ward has written about Helen’s “precarious . . . financial situation” as it relates to her legal status, sixty years before the 1882 Married Women’s Property Act. He notes that, as Helen is unable to even obtain a separation agreement, she must work and thereby “add to the peculiarity of her position, at least in the eyes of her already suspicious neighbors,” “The Case of Helen Huntingdon” in Criticism, 49.2 (Spring 2002): 166.

\textsuperscript{143} Anne Brontë, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 333.
\end{flushright}
them by obscuring the reality of this oppression with constructed, romanticized fantasies of gender and domesticity.”

Thus, the financial independence achieved by painting allows Helen to remove herself from her domestic fantasies gone wrong and to explicitly reject the society that set those fantasies in motion. Her ability to paint for money is crucial, as what remains of Helen’s fortune is initially tied up in her marriage, flowing indiscriminately through Huntingdon’s hands and into the coffers of his lenders, liquor merchants, and others who make his intemperance possible. Prior to her escape, the most overt depictions of Huntingdon’s profligacy and his disregard for either Helen’s feelings or her finances, are his weeks-long parties, featuring disproportionately male guests at Grassdale, the Huntingdon country home. Unlike Walsh’s chimerical £5 dinners, these parties require the provision of up to two months of room and board for large groups of people, some of them titled, while also requiring Helen to engage in “forced cheerfulness and wearisome discourse” and “to talk, and smile and listen, and play the attentive hostess, or even the cheerful friend” (288). Furthermore, such parties put a strain on the Huntingdons’ already overextended resources and put an undue burden on Helen’s financial offerings to the marriage: “nearly the whole of the income of my fortune,” she bemoans early into her diary entries about her life as a wife, “is devoted, for years to come, to the paying off of his debts, and the money he contrives to squander away . . . is incomprehensible” (208-9).

Rather than paying off his debts himself, Huntingdon uses Helen’s money to pay for financial requisites so that his own

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145 Before the marriage, too, Helen’s uncle warns that “a great part of his father’s fine property has been squandered away” and tells her “we must persuade your father to give you a decent fortune,” 152.

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dwindling fortune can go toward pet extravagances of upper-class sociability. As a result, we have a heroine who is painfully aware of the association between morality, propriety, and economy, but who is isolated from communities of women who might assist her in a Cranfordian revaluation of seemingly concrete behavioral expectations. No one in her community at Grassdale shares or sympathizes with her marital and financial hardships, and so Helen must simultaneously meet and reject the expectations of entertaining on her own, outwardly performing social convention while inwardly revolting against the social constraints that Wettlaufer notes. Moreover, her plan to free herself from those conventions is explicitly motivated by the vice made possible by the standards of giving and attending parties.  

Laura C. Berry observes that Huntingdon’s desire to keep Helen with him stems from “concerns . . . either financial or vengeful” and that custody law at the time “defined a child’s relationship to his family as financial,” with “the mother’s role . . . made secondary, if not altogether ignored.” It is for the young Arthur’s sake that Helen plays the hostess: the child is, for Huntingdon, a potential resource, just as Helen’s once-large fortune is a resource, and so the three of them are tied together, in a complicated knot of financial realities and social and moral expectations.

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146 It is, of course, at one of the Grassdale parties that Helen discovers Huntingdon in the shrubbery with Lady Lowborough, just as it is from his father’s guests that Arthur begins to learn “all the embryo vices a little child can show,” 296.


148 Diane Reay notes that, though “emotional capital” is not included in Bourdieu’s forms of capital, his notion that the family provides the most essential space for cultural reproduction implies its existence, “Gendering Bourdieu’s Concept of Capitals? Emotional Capital, Women and Social Class” in Sociological Review, 52 (2005): 57-74. We can think, then, about the ways in which Helen manipulates social capital in service of emotional capital—those cultural skills and resources which a mother transmits to a child through care—in order to stay near to Arthur, and how she eventually forgoes social capital in favor of emotional capital and its requirements.
In her youth, though, Helen is a woman who pushes against social norms, with little concern for financial or familial obligations. She signals her disregard for the latter two by marrying a poor man to whom her family objects, while her antipathy for social norms can be seen in her attitude toward dining customs. Parties, of course, are one of the sanctioned spaces in which men and women can be introduced and begin, under the watchful eyes of hosts, hostesses, and other guests, the early stages of courtship. The safety of such occasions is at least partly due to their highly structured rhythms: women mingle with women, men with men, until the dinner is announced; then, the escorting begins. “What a tiresome custom that is,” Helen writes in her diary, discussing the practice of men leading women from the parlor to the table in order of rank; “—one among the many sources of factitious annoyance of this ultra civilized life. If the gentlemen must lead the ladies into the dining-room, why cannot they take those they like best?” (121). Helen reads this custom as both “tiresome” and a mark of “ultra civilized life” that seems unassailable. She considers herself “fated” to be escorted by the dull, insincere Mr. Grimsby, while Mr. Huntingdon’s rank affords him an audience with a “capacious” old lady (121). This is an early (at least chronologically, if not narratively) iteration of Helen’s railing, politely and internally, against the strictures and conventions of civilized life. Here, her objections are out of boredom with required customs; later, they are moral.

Her marriage to Huntingdon is her last act of rebellion for a long time. Despite her aunt’s cautioning against such a union, Helen accepts Huntingdon as a suitor because she finds him exciting and attractive. Her air of defiance proves to be the product of youth and singleness: once married, Helen quickly assimilates to the duties of a wife and woman in society, adhering to the strictures of “ultra civilized life” that she once derided. Helen is “continually straining to satisfy his sanguine expectations and do honour by his choice,” and she fears that she will “disappoint
him by some awkward misdemeanour, or some trait of inexperienced ignorance about the
customs of society, especially when I acted the part of hostess, which I was not unfrequently
called upon to do” (184). Huntingdon here acts the arbiter of good taste. His spousal
requirements extend beyond the covenental and the conjugal into the social. Himself a gentleman
and an aristocrat, he enforces his own set of expectations, coterminous with those expectations
set forth by Isabella Beeton, J. H. Walsh, and other Victorian commentators on domestic
management – expectations which Helen is required to follow for fear of disappointment,
awkwardness, or embarrassing ignorance. She must play the hostess, but more importantly, she
must play his version of the hostess:

He seemed bent upon displaying me to his friends and acquaintances in particular, and
the public in general, on every possible occasion, and to the greatest possible advantage.
It was something to feel that he considered me a worthy object of pride; but I paid dear
for the gratification: for, in the first place, to please him I had to violate my cherished
predilections, my almost rooted principles in favour of a plain, dark, sober style of
dress—I must sparkle in costly jewels and deck myself out like a painted butterfly, just as
I had, long since, determined I would never do—and this was no trifling sacrifice . . .
(183-84)

Here, Helen speaks of Huntingdon’s movements in London, where he takes pains to parade his
wife before his social circle, positioning her at social gatherings (both at home and at the homes
of friends) as favorably as possible, showing her off as a new and prized possession.
Significantly, he dresses Helen in the style that is consistent with upper-class views of “public”
extpectation, but his preferences are, of course, contrary to Helen’s own “predilections” of
modesty and unpretentiousness. They offer a precursor to his later nominal adherence to social
standards (giving a party, for instance) which only thinly veils his more unscrupulous tendencies
(using such parties as avenues for drunkenness and infidelity) and the violence they do to
Helen’s sense of decency. When he and Helen retreat to Grassdale, Huntingdon is free to set a
new standard for sociable behavior and performance on his own terms (and his own turf),
offering an implicit critique of Beeton and Walsh’s connection of propriety to morality and even piety. Brontë invites us not just to think about dinners and parties as stuffy, conventional practices with arbitrarily binding rules, like those aspects of “ultra civilized life” that restrict Helen’s early movements, but to think about the obverse side of any convention: its potential to be violated and transgressed.\footnote{Though the novel is not typically considered as such, we can think of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a novel of manners, in that it highlights the disconnect that can prevail between manners and morality, which Nancy Bentley argues is the central subject of the nineteenth-century novel of manners, *The Ethnography of Manners: Hawthorne, James, Wharton* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).}

The Grassdale parties are the source of two clear forms of transgression: first, the wild dissipation of Huntingdon and his guests, and second, Helen’s eventual separation from her husband. Huntingdon’s transgressions are necessarily the source of Helen’s, and buried within the more obvious drives for sexual fulfillment and alcoholism that provoke Huntingdon’s behavior and Helen’s response is an imperiled economic system that makes such profligacy possible (while simultaneously making Helen’s departure more difficult). As Richard Godden notes, “The foundation of all manners is economic . . . An elaborate place setting, involving careful discrimination as to the position of the fish knives, bears witness to an accumulation of knowledge made manifest.” For Godden, the successful dinner party signifies economic privilege, as the knowledge of the detailed social particularities that make such success possible requires “leisure time, which in turn derives from a secure property base.”\footnote{Richard Godden, “Some Slight Shifts in the Manner of the Novel of Manners” in *Henry James: Fiction as History*, ed. Ian F. A. Bell (Totoway, NJ: Vision Press, 1985), 156.} As Huntingdon himself performs dining conventions with standard competence, he at once signals wealth and savoir faire, which in turn masks his less savory exploits. Even when her servant Rachel warns
Helen of Huntingdon’s dalliances with Lady Lowborough, her surveillance of them both at dinner reveals “nothing extraordinary in the conduct of either, nothing calculated to excite suspicion” (253). But well-mannered dinners like these act as precursors to other, more illicit after-dinner activities that are in keeping with standard party practices, such as Huntingdon’s excessive postprandial drinking with his male guests (179) and Lady Lowborough’s “moonlight rambles,” supposedly taken with her husband but actually shared with Huntingdon himself (230).

Huntingdon, then, flips Godden’s assessment of manners and wealth on its head. Grassdale is indeed a secure property base, and Helen’s inheritance provides the financial support needed to keep her husband’s debtors at bay—and this economic solvency is the practical and social antecedent for the Grassdale parties. As Gwen Hyman notes, Huntingdon is both a “Regency rake, who produces nothing” and an archetype for the “mid-century upper-crust gentleman” who “reinforce[es] his class position through his refusal to limit his appetites,” and is therefore “a figure more and more removed from the useful world by the advance of the business-minded striver.”

He, like the ladies of Cranford, if a bygone figure whose way of life is ill-suited to the forward movement of society; but whereas Cranford features women striving nobly, if comically, to maintain a middle-class level of gentility, Brontë’s novel encourages the universalization of the “middle-class imperative to productivity and abstemious behavior” that

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151 Gwen Hyman, “‘An Infernal Fire in My Veins’: Gentlemanly Drinking in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall” in Victorian Literature and Culture 36.2 (2008), 454-6. As Hyman notes, the novel was written in 1848, but takes place in the late 1820s—the tail-end of the Regency period, and the period after George IV’s actual status as Prince Regent. As such, Huntingdon is a liminal figure, both the “Regency rake” and a prototype for the later dissolute Victorian gentleman, giving Brontë the opportunity to explore contemporary problems in the upper class through the lens of well-known and legibly “old-fashioned” characters and implicitly comment, as Gaskell does, on the difficulties of maintaining and advocating for class distinctions in the face of industrialization and growing class mobility, 453.
both the upper-class Helen and the bourgeois Gilbert exhibit. It is only through the financial and social stability achieved by Huntingdon’s marriage to Helen, whose own tea-totaling isolates her in an upper class “preoccupied” with drinking, that the expectations of propriety at these parties can be dismissed, in turn dangerously destabilizing his and Helen’s financial security by virtue of their excess.152 In Bourdieusian terms, one who exhibits the “conspicuous freedom” of “deliberate transgression” is capable or breaking rules by virtue of his or her self-positioning “as a maker of higher rules, i.e., a taste-maker” or a “dominant” who imposes “a definition of excellence which, being nothing other than their own way of existing, is bound to appear simultaneously as . . . absolute and natural.”153 This is not to suggest that Huntingdon is by any definition a paragon of “excellence”; rather, he is a member of a class whose economic dominance confers upon its members a sense of their own excellence (signaled in part by his performance at dinner) and can therefore break with the social conventions incumbent upon those incapable of hiding behind money and status, in a way that is at once defiant and “natural.”

As such, he invites his friends to stay for “social retirements” of an indefinite duration, at which wine is supposed to be “an accessory to social enjoyment” but becomes more of a prerequisite (417, 220). These spaces are polar opposites of the drawing rooms in which readers of Cranford spend their time: they are moneyed, hyper-masculine, and intemperate where the latter are moneyless, feminine, and, in Gaskell’s words, “solemn.” Ladies are invited to Grassdale “for the sake of appearances” and to prevent Helen from confronting her husband, while a party of men and Lady Lowborough, Huntingdon’s partner in infidelity, attend “for the pleasure and convenience of the host” (287). Such occasions are meant to be indicative of

152 Ibid., 454.

153 Bourdieu, “The Dynamics of Fields” in Distinction, 255.
Huntingdon’s previously unrevealed rakish character and, of course, come as a shock to Helen, particularly as she has already criticized an early suitor, Walter Hargrave, for similar indiscretions:

This same son [Walter] is a man of expensive habits, no reckless spendthrift and no abandoned sensualist, but one who likes to have ‘everything handsome about him,’ and to go to a certain length in youthful indulgences, not so much to gratify his own tastes as to maintain his reputation as a man of fashion in the world, and a respectable fellow among his own lawless companions; while he is too selfish to consider how many comforts might be obtained for his fond mother and sisters with the money he thus wastes upon himself: as long as they can contrive to make a respectable appearance once a year, when they come to town, he gives himself little concern about their private stintings and struggles at home. (195)

Central to Helen’s frustration with Mrs. Hargrave’s coddling of her grown son are this son’s twin vices of financial irresponsibility and bad company. In surrounding himself with “lawless companions,” Walter indulges in “expensive habits,” seeking “comforts” of his own which in turn lead to “stintings and struggles” on the part of his female family members. In a frying-pan-to-fire move, Helen rejects Walter’s affections in favor of Huntingdon, who himself proves to be a “reckless spendthrift” and nearly “abandoned sensualist.” Walter and his faults ironically foreshadow the drama to come, but they also emphasize the economic tenor of Huntingdon’s misdeeds. To drink and party to the point where immoral behavior becomes permissible is treated synonymously with spending “recklessly,” with “abandon.” For Helen, both have the same outcome: her money is spent and her morality called into question, but whereas Huntingdon’s hardships are consequent of his own actions, Helen’s livelihood and integrity are treated as collateral for her husband’s misdeeds.

Parties, then, in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, allow for a crisis of morality that is both indicative of and perpetuated by financial irresponsibility. Helen breaks from this system of financially foregrounded sociability when she makes the decision to leave Huntingdon. Her
departure is a separation from both her husband and his society, and it is motivated by moral and
economic worries, in turn leading to moral and economic uncertainty. To remove herself from
her husband’s society, and save her son from the society of his friends, Helen turns to a life of
isolation and straitened circumstances. Even in Linden-car, a village with its own systems of
sociability in place, and its own sociable women in the forms of Eliza Millward, Jane Wilson,
and Gilbert Markham’s mother and sister, Helen is detached from potential companions. In fact,
when Mrs. Markham invites her to “a small party on Monday, the fifth of November,” Helen
says flatly, “Thank you, I never go to parties” (206). Sundays at church, then, act as a kind of
ecclesiastical stand-in for the purely entertaining parties of Grassdale, serving a social function
similar to that of the everyday dinner party. After a much remarked-upon absence, Helen appears
at church soon after her arrival in the village, and it is here that Gilbert catches his first glimpse
of the “fair unknown” (15). The discussion surrounding Helen is reminiscent of assessments and
assumptions made about Dorothea, Celia, and Rosamond at the Casaubon engagement party in
George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, where Chichely and Standish guess at the women’s tempers and
describe their various physical charms. Here, in church, Helen’s dress, hair, face, complexion,
and comportment are all remarked upon, and her temper is guessed at: “here was a slight
hollowness about the cheeks and eyes, and the lips . . . that betokened . . . no very soft or amiable
temper” (16). Having removed herself from the usual opportunities for display and mixed-gender
introductions, Helen unwittingly pushes denizens of Linden-car to exploit a supposedly sacred

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154 Helen’s money troubles do not quite compare to those of the Cranford ladies. There is
no fear of having to work, with a brother nearby to provide for her and an ancestral home at
which to live. And of course, her inheritance from a wealthy uncle at the end of the novel undoes
any suggestion of actual penury. Still, her insistence on earning her own money, rather than
relying on the aid of others, and living simply as a result, put her in a similarly precarious
position, at least temporarily.
place of meeting for social purposes.\textsuperscript{155} In a novel where typical events associated with sociability are interchangeable with moral compromise, Brontë depicts Linden-car as a space with its own set of social expectations that are at least ostensibly removed from standard opportunities for sexual and alcoholic perversion. While Linden-car is certainly less proper than Grassdale, and while masculine energies can still flare up there in unsavory ways (as Gilbert’s horsewhipping of Mr. Lawrence illustrates), Helen, who, under the pseudonym Mrs. Graham, “never goes to parties,” can remove herself from the kinds of sociability mandated for a Mrs. Huntingdon. Put another way: if the social work of parties is accomplished at church, then that work can take place under the protective auspices of an even more rigidly structured system of propriety, without the threats present in unchecked sociable enjoyment. Helen runs from the debauchery that domestic and social standards allow into a kind of antisocial sanctuary, where she has no marital-domestic requirements and no social functions at which her presence is required, except for obligatory yet ostensibly benign church attendance.

Of course, her hopes for total self-seclusion are dashed by Gilbert’s dogged persistence and by the gossip that proliferates around a woman whose living practices are so at odds with local expectations. Yet, at least until the novel’s close, Helen seems to avoid the kinds of

occasions (raucous or not) that have characterized her early life, marriage, and her son Arthur’s first few years—seems to avoid, because, of course, Helen’s voice disappears from the third act of the novel, where her diary ends and Gilbert takes up the story from his perspective. Feminist critics of the last thirty years have sought to justify Brontë’s technical choice, pushing against the suggestion that the novel’s two semi-disparate narratives merely reiterate, in Rachel K. Carnell’s terms, “the intractable cultural rift between public and private spheres.”156 The insertion of Helen’s diary into a masculinized frame narrative has been read variously as a formal convention, a radically feminist interruption that destabilizes Gilbert’s narrative authority, and, for Carnell, a technique that insists on the inclusion of Helen’s voice alongside “the discourses and debate of the bourgeois public sphere” (11).157 But readings of the novel that treat Helen’s diary and its frame as conflicting public and private or masculine and feminine narratives fail to note that Helen’s account, where she is at her most “wifely” and domestic, also seems to be too-full of men and masculine perversity, while her presence in Gilbert’s epistle highlights her isolation from feminine society. If, as this project as a whole argues, parties are hybridized public/private events, then Grassdale (that is, the setting of much of Helen’s diary) is a kind of quasi-public space, while Linden-car (the setting of the events Gilbert writes of) offers Helen an

156 Rachel K. Carnell, “Feminism and the Public Sphere in Anne Brontë’s The Tenant of Wildfell Hall” in Nineteenth-Century Literature, 53.1 (June 1998), 1.

157 N. M. Jacobs sees the novel as a companion to Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights, relying, as that earlier novel does, on “layered narratives” to set apart potentially unsavory or irregular subjects, “Gender and Layered Narrative in Wuthering Heights and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall” in The Journal of Narrative Technique, 16.3 (1986): 204-219. Elizabeth Langland argues that it is Helen’s diary that overtakes and minimizes Gilbert’s epistolary narrative, rather than the other way around, and that the frame narrative and diary are parts of “a transgressive economy” that equally juxtaposes “feminine desire” alongside more typically articulated masculine drives, “The Voicing of Feminine Desire in Anne Brontë’s The Tenant of Wildfell Hall” in Gender and Discourse in Victorian Literature and Art, ed. Antony H. Harrison and Beverly Taylor (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992): 112.
escape into a hyper-private space, where she can cloister herself away rather than “talk, and smile and listen, and play the attentive hostess, or even the cheerful friend” (288).

In fact, Helen’s eventual marriage to Gilbert seems to be a continuation of her antisocial project.¹⁵⁸ “I need not tell you,” he writes, “how happily my Helen and I have lived together, and how blessed we are in each other’s society, and in the promising young scions that are growing up around us” (417). This may seem like a passing remark, but when the letter and the diary it includes have spent so much time detailing the interplay between outside society and marital woes, the fact that Gilbert and Helen seem to have passed twenty years unperturbed by the likes of Lady Lowborough or even Eliza Millward is significant. It is “each other’s society” that is emphasized, not society more generally, and its partners in blessing, “the promising young scions” who surround them, suggest that the Markhams have been remaking society in their own image. In the final paragraph of the novel, Gilbert mentions only family members when tying up narrative loose ends for his reader (his brother-in-law Jack Halford) and Brontë’s actual readers. The family, then, becomes a kind of enclosing boundary, protecting Helen from dangerous, non-familial companions and the occasions at which they most often get into trouble.

Things do not seem likely to change for the Markhams in the future. The novel ends with a final sentence gesturing to an unseen, impending gathering that, like other parties in the novel, will presumably last for several weeks. Gilbert writes that he and Helen are “now looking forward to the advent of you [Jack] and Rose, for the time of your annual visit draws nigh, when you must leave your dusty, smoky, noisy, toiling, striving city for a season of invigorating

¹⁵⁸ Antonia Losano goes so far as to suggest that, having left Huntingdon already, Helen might potentially recede further into seclusion by one day leaving Gilbert as well. At the very least, she continues to remove herself from expected social settings, “The Professionalization of the Woman Artist in Anne Brontë’s The Tenant of Wildfell Hall” in Nineteenth-Century Literature, 58.1 (June 2003), 21n53.
relaxation and social retirement with us” (417). Apart from being an indictment on the hustle and bustle of city life, this concluding sentence purports to be a reassurance that Helen and Gilbert live happily ever after in the wake of so many hardships. It leaves the reader to imagine a pastoral retreat into blissful rest for the novel’s hero and heroine, surrounded by their children and siblings. And yet, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, a wholesome, relaxing retirement into the country is a contradiction in terms. It is at such occasions that Helen has experienced her greatest trials, and through the conventions of party-giving, which require Helen’s diligent management and occupy her attention, that Huntingdon has been able to drink without judgment and liaise with his mistress.

Brontë safeguards against potential associations between the Markhams’ “social retirement” and the country retreats of the Huntingdons in three ways: first, in the method I have been suggesting, by limiting the guest list to members of the family. Just as church is an ecclesiastical occasion put to social use but nominally precluded from potential transgressions by its supposed sacredness, the Markhams’ “social retirement” is a *familial* occasion put to “social” use, and therefore set apart from actual society. Second, Gilbert writes his letter from Staningley Hall, the estate which Helen has inherited at the death of her uncle. The arrangement is an unusual one that Gilbert himself calls “strange” and which we might even call unbelievable, as her relation to her uncle is by marriage only, and the man himself has been described as

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159 It is impossible to read of such family-only country retreats in a Brontë novel and not think of what Lucasta Miller calls “the Brontë myth” that grew up around the three sisters, and which Elizabeth Gaskell perpetuated in her often apocryphal biography, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë, The Brontë Myth* (New York: Knopf, 2005). 35. Much work has been done by Miller and others to dispel fantasies of the Brontë family’s supposedly reclusive lives. To suggest that the conclusion to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is either autobiographical or some kind of antisocial wish-fulfilment for Anne Brontë herself is to reduce the author to her mythologized identity unnecessarily.
“worthless”—not a term that inspires visions of familial loyalty (403, 386). Furthermore, Helen’s brother, Frederick, is the expected heir to the estate, though a “quarrel” has precluded his possible inheritance (403). This contrivance, however, ensures that the Markhams have more than enough money; and with no parties to give, no crowds of dissolute friends to house and feed and entertain, there is no threat of squandering money in the spirit of debauched enjoyment, under the cover of social propriety. Whereas money at Grassdale was fuel for wrongdoing, money in Staningley is a defense against the uncertainty that characterized Helen’s stint as a single mother.160 Thirdly, the reunion between the Markhams and the Halfords remains unrepresented, or perhaps unrepresentable. It is a potentiality, set for some undisclosed date in the future. As parties have proven themselves ripe for exploitation, it is nearly impossible for Brontë to represent normative sociability in a favorable way, without undertones of potentially ominous revelations waiting somewhere in the distance. In Cranford, parties are a quotidian sign of one’s inclusion in polite society, and therefore an endorsement of one’s gentility. But in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, parties become another in a long list of things that society and standard systems of morality accept, even require, but which actually promote immoral behavior—while practices of seclusion and, in the case of a wronged woman and endangered son, spousal separation, are social anomalies motivated by virtue and righteousness.

However, the Markhams’ idyllic existence at the novel’s close is less certain than it might at first appear. Antonia Losano notes that Helen has left home with the children for long enough that Gilbert can write “a three-hundred-page letter,” and thus might possibly one day leave

160 Of course, this money and the land from which it comes have both become Gilbert’s property upon marrying, and, as Losano notes, there is a peculiar parallelism between Huntingdon’s and Gilbert’s acquirement of Helen’s landed property and her apparent desire to spend time away from those properties.
Gilbert for good. After all, “We have only Gilbert’s word” that the marriage is blissful, and “Gilbert has not proven himself to be an entirely trustworthy narrator.” Such suggestions, though possible, minimize the anguish inherent in Helen’s decision to leave Huntingdon, and her absence at the novel’s conclusion rather seems to be a byproduct of the novel’s somewhat unwieldy framing system. At the very least, however, Brontë ends her narrative with a sentiment that begs to be read ironically: the city may in fact be “dusty, smoky, noisy, toiling, striving,” but the implication that social retirements in the country are somehow necessarily purer, cleaner, has been proven demonstrably false by all that has come before. The idea of “invigorating relaxation” away from the bustling city life, of course, means one thing to the supposedly pious Markhams and Halfords, and something altogether different to the likes of Arthur Huntingdon, Sr. and Lady Lowborough—indeed, by this point, it means something different to Helen herself. In the same way that seed-cakes and Savoy-biscuits operate at multiple valences of signification in Cranford, for Brontë, sociability itself means, at once, propriety and wealth, dissipation and debt, and finally, financially secured familial seclusion that exists outside the normal channels of polite interaction.

Helen’s separation from Huntingdon, then, results in even larger-scale redefinitions of conventional signs of both morality and social life, though the frame of reference for such redefinitions is her own, rather than that of society at large. She does not aim to convince the Lady Lowboroughs and Walter Hargraves of the world that one version of sociability or propriety should proliferate over another, but then she has no partners in her project. Apart from her servant Rachel, no one understands her position, no one truly shares in her plight, and so hers is an individualized enterprise that results in further removal from a system that emphasizes class

161 Ibid., 21
position and its norms over ethics. Where women like Matty Jenkyns have others like Mrs. Forrester and Mrs. Jamieson to act as collaborators, working together to gloss deviations in expected etiquette as genteel, such collectivist systems have failed Helen, and so she works against them. A system of communally assigned social norms, which can be so mutually beneficial in the feminized world of Cranford, is instead disenfranchising for the married woman, vulnerable to exploitative marriage laws in early nineteenth-century England, and so Helen works in reverse, undoing the system of value that Huntingdon’s companions have worked to create, and calling out the immorality inherent in their shared version of acceptable sociability.

2.3 Conclusion: Parties in the Era of Free Trade

It is difficult to say with certainty that these authors are responding consciously, or even unconsciously, to the repeal of the Corn Laws and its repercussive effects in the worlds of international and domestic trade. Gaskell certainly had questions of trade, industrialization, and the working poor in mind in when writing her more blatantly “social” novels like North and South and Mary Barton. Ayşe Çelikkol notes that “free trade ideology presented a vision in which commerce and empathy were not antithetical,” but argues that, in Gaskell’s “social problem novels,” women generate “emotional intensity” while men, who represent “capitalist activity,” specifically lack any subjectivity of feeling. In Çelikkol’s view, the two drives do not interact without conspicuous effort.¹⁶² But Cranford is explicitly not a social problem novel like Mary Barton or North and South, which critics have tied more precisely to early questions of

¹⁶² For Çelikkol, who invokes both Nancy Armstrong and Mary Poovey, women are capable of “recuperat[ing] economic man” by imbuing “him” with some of this “emotional intensity,” Romances of Free Trade: British Literature, Laissez-Faire, and the Global Nineteenth Century (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 103-104.
protectionism and free trade. As I have noted, the village of Cranford stands, at least superficially, in opposition to the world of Drumble, a stand-in for Manchester—and Manchester was itself a kind of industrial bastion that memorialized the nation’s progress toward free trade. Yet, as I have demonstrated, Cranford-as-anti-Drumble is too simplistic a classification. Gaskell’s depiction of women in Cranford resists readings that would isolate them from the commercial world, most obviously in the cases of Betty Barker and Matty Jenkyns, who actually hold jobs, but more universally in the construction of Cranford’s “peculiar phraseology”: a deliberately unstable semiotic lexicon of party foods, sociable procedures, and opaque hierarchies of rank, where meaning is variable but powerful. If, as scholars like Çelikkol and Angus Easson suggest, Gaskell had free trade in mind when writing her social novels, Cranford’s unique genre does not automatically exclude it from such economically inflected social questions.

Anne Brontë’s views on protectionism and free trade are, perhaps unsurprisingly, more difficult to pin down. Patrick Brontë was a well-known Tory who supported landed rights and opposed reform, and Charlotte wrote ambivalently about free trade advocates from Birmingham and Manchester in The Professor. Anne herself insists, in the preface to the second edition of

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163 See Angus Easson’s chapter, “Mary Barton and North and South: Industry and Individual,” in which he argues that debates about free trade form “the background to her primary purpose” in these novels, Elizabeth Gaskell (New York: Routledge, 2016), 54.

164 I mean this literally. Manchester’s Free Trade Hall began construction in 1853, when Cranford ended its serial run. Its tympana depict images of free trade that are meant to be representative of the city’s culture, Clare Hartwell, Manchester (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 92.

165 Easson, 54.

166 On Patrick’s political views, see Simon Avery’s “Politics” in The Brontës in Context, ed. Marian Thormählen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 261. Charlotte Brontë writes in The Professor that Hunsden Yorke Hunsden’s few English houseguests “are all either
The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, that she is ill equipped to “reform the errors and abuses of society,” ostensibly removing herself from political discourse, though her story’s subject matter seems to draw her back in.\(^{167}\) As Simon Avery writes, the novel, like Agnes Grey before it, celebrates “the individual standing firm against the establishment, rejecting the ‘naturalized’ associations of power with privilege . . . and effectively re-aligning dignity, morality and social responsibility with the political underdog,” crafting, in the end, “nothing less than a reconfiguring of the socio-political order around her.”\(^{168}\) Helen’s one-against-the-many stance aligns her with Anti-Corn Law Leaguers, in sentiment if not in articulated politics.

Regardless of Gaskell’s stated views on progress or Brontë’s more implicit spirit of progressivism, it is certain that free trade and the repeal of the Corn Laws emphasize the unfixed value of goods and the arbitrary nature of standards enforced unilaterally on the populace, without regard to local circumstances. In the parties of Cranford, we find a localized body of women who refuse to abide normative definitions of propriety, who unite together in the name of exclusive gentility and paradoxically inclusive sociability. Cranford society operates on a complex system of who and what are “in” and “out,” signaled by one’s inclusion in teas and dinners and the exclusion, at those teas and dinners, of certain kinds of so-called vulgarity. Just as the price of crops in a post-Corn Laws world was determined by individual farmers, who responded to collective demand, the values of bread-and-butter wafers, Savoy biscuits, and tea cakes in Cranford shifts according to who serves them. Though Helen Huntingdon has no men of Birmingham or Manchester, hard men seemingly knit up in one thought—whose talk is of free trade,” The Professor (New York: Oxford University Press 2008), 216.

\(^{167}\) Anne Brontë, 3.

\(^{168}\) Avery, 265-66.
community of likeminded women to join her in filtering social expectations through the lens of moral convictions, she executes a maneuver that mirrors those of the Cranford ladies, but in reverse. Helen plays the hostess in exact accordance with the standards of the many, “talking,” “smiling,” and “listening” as an “attentive hostess” should. Internally, however, she can distinguish between societal norms and ethical behavior, which in turn allows her to remove herself from social systems altogether, redefining, not what counts as proper or elegant or vulgar, but what counts as sociability more generally. Whether performing propriety, despite lacking the trappings of normative sociability, or performing sociability in the face of absent propriety, the women in these novels find the standard form of the Victorian party to be adaptable enough to accommodate itself to a range of economic identities, and a capacious enough space to resist, even upend, standards themselves. Victorian society seems always to expect parties, teas, and social retirements, but Gaskell and Brontë suggest that the expectations attendant on those occasions are variable and susceptible to the rhythms of reform: what the party requires and accomplishes can and does change, according to the finances, familial circumstances, and systems of morality of the women at its helm.

Of course “reform,” when used in the context of nineteenth century England, is a loaded term – one that I take up again in the following chapter. But while the repeal of Corn Laws provides a more immediate political antecedent to the composition and publication of the two novels under consideration in this chapter, the first Reform Act of 1832 necessarily reverberates through Gaskell’s and Brontë’s novels as well. Though Cranford, as I have noted, is not a social problem novel like Mary Barton and North and South, Gaskell’s interest in the more overtly political questions at stake in those works is also obvious here. For all their talk of their aristocratic status, Cranford’s women put forth a system that is essentially democratic, both in its
inclusion of Betty Barker and in its system of reciprocal, communal caring. Gaskell seems to be working toward a method for easing the transition from a dying order of rigorous class structures into the industrialized, variable social world so pronounced in those later novels, and she turns, in part, to party-giving as one practice which makes such progress more bearable. *Cranford*’s mutuality stands in stark contrast to the obviously anti-democratic impulses of Helen and later Gilbert, who together resist both the shared system of sociability visible in Huntingdon’s parties at Grassdale and the middle-class society of Linden-car, seeking instead a solitary and more typically aristocratic existence in Staningley (typical in its removal from the lower classes, if not in its antisocial isolation). Brontë, a lifelong Tory like her father, is hostile to processes of democratization like the one we see in *Cranford*, emphasizing instead a kind of individuality that, in the end, is only tenable with the benefit of upper-class connections, seen in Helen’s unlikely inheritance of the Staningley estate. Despite these extreme differences, both Helen Huntingdon Markham and the women of Cranford manipulate the social world and its signifiers in particularly feminine ways, evidenced in their handling of sociable duties, either as an individual, as is Helen’s case, or as a community, as with the Cranfordians. This command of sociability and its signifiers, however, need not be limited in its reaches to the circumstances of women, and as the next chapter shows, can even extend into the public sphere, influencing the parliamentary prospects of men and enhancing the political leverage of women.
CHAPTER THREE

POLITICS PARTIES: DOMESTIC ENTERTAINING AND PARLIAMENTARY POWER IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

In January of 1865, the Saturday Review took Conservatives to task for what it deemed an unnecessary and inscrutable tendency to dine together:

People who have a fancy for hunting out the subtler and more remote properties of objects would find a suitable employment in trying to discover the exact connexion between Conservatism and conviviality. Why is it that, once or twice a week during the recess, the Conservative newspapers have to report a triumphant banquet, while their Liberal rivals never seem to get anything more exhilarating than a meeting of a member and his constituents? . . . If we take into account also the preliminary rehearsals of the great event which the executive committees on such occasions always feel it their bounden duty to perform, the total amount of Conservative eating and drinking must be stupendous. Yet one never hears of a Financial Reform Association, or a Ballot Society, or a National Reform Union rising to the height of one of those sublime demonstrational banquets which the Standard looks upon as among the most significant and gratifying political facts of the time. We may be rather at a loss to see what a large and rough dinner-party signifies . . . 169

Their's was not a new complaint. Albany Fonblanque’s piece in the Examiner, noted in the introduction, lob's similar critiques at what was then the Tory party—nearly thirty years earlier. Here, the Review juxtaposes the “triumphant banquet[s]” of Conservatives with the more muted, more professional meetings of “their Liberal rivals,” the implicit critique being that Liberals keep their heads down and work, while Conservatives, like their Tory forebears, couch their proceedings in ceremonies of display and excess. The author qualifies the former as

169 “Political Convivialties” in the Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art no. 482 (Jan. 21, 1865): 75-76.

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“demonstrational,” meaning that they are given and attended in hopes of being talked about or written up in periodicals like the Standard; he then suggests that readers will struggle to ascertain what these occasions “signify.” At a semiotic level, the dinner party signifies one thing for the Review—frivolity and mere “conviviality”—and another for the Conservative party-members themselves – what, exactly, remains unclear, at least in the lines of the Review column.

That same year, Charles Dickens’s Our Mutual Friend and Anthony Trollope’s Can You Forgive Her? were both about midway through their serial publications. Miss Marjoribanks by Margaret Oliphant would begin publication the next month.¹⁷⁰ Each of these authors turned to the contemporary political climate to drive their narratives, each looking at parliamentary elections and appointments, and, most significantly, doing so at least in part by looking at those elections’ connections to sociability and entertaining. In a time when questions of suffrage and enfranchisement carried the day—the Second Reform Act would eventually double the franchise in 1867—writing about political life meant writing about social life as well, and, it seems, necessarily meant writing about dinners and parties. The writer for the Review, as is clear, resists this connection, and later calls it “a great comfort” that the parliamentary recess will soon come to a close, meaning that “people will have something better to think and write about than insignificant country banquets” (76). The idea is that the end of recess means the beginning of “real” politics—the politics of Westminster, rather than the politics of the dining or drawing room.

¹⁷⁰ Trollope’s novel ran from January 1864 to August 1865. Dickens’s ran from May 1864 to November 1865. Both were published in monthly shilling parts by Chapman & Hall. Oliphant’s novel, printed in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, began serial publication in February of 1865 and came to a close in 1866.
Implicit in this critique is a dismissal of meetings and conversations that take place under the auspices of domesticity. Without explicitly saying so, the Review decries what it sees as a specifically feminine form of social engagement. The two spheres of governance and domestic entertaining—the one masculine, the other feminine—are perceived to be incompatible. It is with the meeting of these two spheres, however, that this chapter is concerned: with the political aims of nineteenth-century scenes of domestic entertaining, or, put another way, the micropolitics of politics. If the overarching aim of this project is to contend that “private” parties in the nineteenth century were necessarily public, and therefore culturally, economically, and politically significant, then the specific objective of this chapter is to illustrate that parliamentary endeavors were unmistakably influenced by dinners and parties, and therefore influenced by the women at the helm of these occasions. Edmund Burke famously defined the political party as “a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed.” In fact, in nineteenth-century literature and culture, social parties can be described in similar terms, give or take a few specifics: bodies of men and women united for promoting by their joint endeavors their own political interests and the national interest upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed.

Perhaps in and of itself, the claim that social engagements could shape parliamentary careers and political movements is unsurprising. In our current age, where “gaffes” and social missteps on the part of British royals, American presidents, and other politicians are often headline news, it is understood that political acumen alone is not enough to be successful in government. But our contemporary context, in which women vote, hold public office, and

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171 Edmund Burke, Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents (London: J. Dodsley in the Pall-Mall, 1770), 110.
leverage their influence in a variety of other ways, is far from comparable to the nineteenth-century political landscape. For domestic entertaining—the purview of women and, according to domestic advice writer Isabella Beeton, one of their essential “duties”—to play such a vital role in directing parliamentary outcomes means that these women can be reinvested with a kind of political agency heretofore denied them.\(^{172}\) I contend that it was not only those women who pushed for the right to vote, or who agitated for changes like the Married Women’s Property Act and the universalizing reform of the Representation of the People Act (1918), who left their mark on the political histories of nineteenth-century Britain. Rather, the hostesses—the housewives, the mistresses—who gave parties, who invited men and women into their homes in ostensibly domestic acts for ostensibly social reasons—these women too had a hand in parliamentary affairs.\(^{173}\) If the Reform Acts resulted in more widespread enfranchisement and fewer obstacles to voting for men, the party culture of the nineteenth century provided a space in which women, simply by performing their so-called “feminine duties,” could further blur the boundaries


\(^{173}\) Susan K. Harris, writing about Annie Adams Fields and Mary Gladstone Drew, claims that the very title of “hostess” conjures up images of a woman “about whom ‘everybody’ knew but who was always projected in relation to other people rather than for herself . . . a facilitator of other people’s interactions, rather than as a principal actor on her social stage,” *The Cultural Work of the Late Nineteenth-Century Hostess: Annie Adams Fields and Mary Gladstone Drew* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 2. One of Harris’s central arguments is that these women (unknowingly) used the home as a training ground for eventual movement into “the new professional marketplace,” in which women were eventually more welcome (3). Such a reading seems, inadvertently, to minimize domestic work as a mere precursor to later, more important public work. Indeed, the argument that hostesses are self-abnegating intermediaries for “great men” flies in the face of the seminal works of Nancy Armstrong, Elizabeth Langland, Monica F. Cohen, and others, all of whom seek to recuperate and recover domestic work as something warranting equal consideration and consequence as more obvious avenues of professional work. This chapter looks at such in-home work not as secondary but as integral to political success, as the less visible but equally significant half of a full parliamentary career.
between the private and public spheres and partner with men in future professional and political ambitions.

The party might therefore be classed as one iteration of what Monica F. Cohen calls “professional domesticity,” a concept which imagines the domestic sphere as a kind of woman’s workplace.174 Victorian women, Cohen claims, considered their homes to be “vocational outlets,” which allowed “Victorian feminism [to overlap with] nineteenth-century professionalism.”175 Dinners and parties were, according to Cohen’s thinking, literally women’s work, in that these women used the language of professionalism to make sense of their social roles and to emphasize the cultural significance of such domestic practices. This concept, however, only accounts for one half of the equation. While Victorian women may indeed have treated dinners and parties as vocational endeavors—moments which called upon these women to perform characteristically feminine skills to the best of their abilities and with some sort of “profit” in mind—these same occasions were, for men, moments of what could be called “domesticated professionalism”: social events with professional aims that could either advance or impede both individual political careers and greater public objectives. By inviting men and women into the ostensibly feminized space of the home, husbands and wives brought the public sphere into the private, essentially domesticating the social aspects of political life.


175 Cohen notes overlap only “in so far as both movements are concerned with the social role and value of communal principles,” but I find that classification too limiting for the kind of political work women helped accomplish by entertaining. I argue that, rather than being limited by “communal principles,” women could exploit their positions as community organizers, as it were, deploying the “roles” and “values” inherent in that position in order to advance political goals, 7.
While the Review seems to characterize this relationship between dinners and political events as an exclusively Conservative phenomenon, Liberals engaged in the same process, by which parliamentary positions and decisions were partially predicated on social performances within the context of domestic entertainments. Dickens and Trollope dramatize this interplay between the public sphere and the private dinner, with the latter associating the practice explicitly with Liberals and Radicals. Both Oliphant and her heroine’s favored political candidate are deliberately vague in their party leanings, and, in the novel, the success of Mr. Ashburton’s run for Parliament suggests that voters likewise see politics as necessarily linked to dining and entertaining, regardless of party affiliation. Dickens is critical of the process in general, using Mr. Veneering in Our Mutual Friend as an example of the kinds of unqualified men who find their way into Parliament by virtue of their popularity and sociability; Trollope’s criticisms are more implicit in that he appears to recognize this process as somewhat of a given. Of course politics are personal, he seems to say, and of course women have a vital role to play. In fact, in his novel, Can You Forgive Her?, it is Trollope’s women who are most outspokenly political, with Alice Vavasor and Lady Glencora Palliser actually espousing political views while their romantic partners are merely described as a Radical and a Liberal respectively. Oliphant’s Miss Marjoribanks takes this connection, between publically running for office and what might be called “privately” campaigning over the dinner table, as the central conflict and climax of the novel, pushing romantic endeavors to the sidelines and literally exiling the heroine’s primary (and eventually successful) suitor to India, so that the former may focus on her political ambitions. The three authors illustrate the spectrum along which politically-minded Victorian women found themselves: in Oliphant, we have a woman of exaggerated political power, who singlehandedly chooses the “best man” to represent her town; in Dickens, we find a woman on
the opposite end of the spectrum, whose visibility is diminished, and whose political function can only be uncovered by close-reading; and in Trollope, we find middle ground, where women are as likely as any man to pose threats and offer potential benefits to political careers.

3.1 “Bringing Him In”: Dinner Party Electioneering in *Our Mutual Friend*

In the postscript to *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens acknowledges the complexity of his novel’s winding and revolving plot: “... it would be very unreasonable to expect that many readers, pursuing a story in portions from month to month through nineteen months, will, until they have it before them complete, perceive the relations for its finer threads to the whole pattern which is always before the eyes of the story-weaver at his loom.”

Examples of these “finer threads” include the detours into the high society lives of the novel’s socialite families. The Veneerings, Lammles, and Podsnaps are both “fine,” or superior, in their social elevation, and “fine” in that their roles are minimal when compared to those of John Harmon, Lizzie Hexam, and others. Critics of Dickens’s apparent meanderings have variously classed these characters and their attendant chapters as “seemingly unrelated” interruptions that “truncate” the work’s more prominent plotlines, and as carriers of the central metaphor for the novel, with the Veneerings embodying actual and symbolic “veneer” in order to eliminate “the distinction

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177 Gregg A. Hecimovich, “The Cup and the Lip and the Riddle of *Our Mutual Friend,*” in *ELH*, 62.4 (Winter 1995): 967. Hecimovich’s general argument is that the novel is a collection of riddles with a key—not a *roman à clef*, as might be expected, but a set of gaps and slippages occurring in the novel at the levels of plot, syntax, and perspective, the key to which is the reader’s careful application of “poetry, imagination, and re-evaluation” (972). For Hecimovich, the Veneerings and their companions obfuscate an already over-complicated story.
between human and material, reducing both to the high varnish of social furniture.”¹⁷⁸ These readings tend to relegate the Veneerings, their friends, and the parties they give to either insignificant authorial missteps or satirical lampoons lacking any real social power. Their way of life, according to Owen Knowles, is too superficial to be anything more than a “manufactured illusion.”¹⁷⁹

Indeed, that Dickens and his narrator mock the Veneerings’ “bran-new” world, Mr. Podsnap’s myopic Anglocentricism, and the Lammles’ attempts to masquerade as a happy couple in spite of their financial disappointments, is undeniable. But of course, mocking a particular institution or individual does not automatically divest that institution or individual of its power. The very fact that these socialites are held up to be pilloried suggests their significance in Dickens’s understanding of society and the (to his mind) negative forces by which it is ordered. The most egregious, most farcical abuse of the Veneerings’ social influence terminates on the election of Mr. Veneering to Parliament—a result not of any sort of political acumen but of his “vast vague reputation,” established at his own dinner parties and proliferated by his fellow “hard workers”: his male and female dinner guests (250).

I would like to re-empower the Veneerings and their friends, with particular evidence in their abilities to install whom they choose in parliamentary positions. Dickens already gives this high society crowd a kind of controlling ability over the novel’s structure, in that their dinner parties punctuate the novel at significant moments, bookend the work as a whole, and often

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.
round out entire volumes of the novel with a kind of mock social commentary. In fact, Books II, III, and IV all end with chapters set at parties in the Veneerings’ home. It is true that, though the Veneerings, Podsnaps, and Lammles make frequent appearances in the first half of the novel, by the second half they become mere observers of the novel’s events, limited to one chapter per book. However, the titles of these two seemingly peripheral chapters grant them greater significance than might first be expected: Book III ends with “A Social Chorus” and Book IV with “The Voice of Society.” If the Veneerings and their friends serve as “the social voice” of the novel’s world (regardless of whether that voice is an unconsciously ironic one), then the gatherings in their home act as mile markers along the novel’s track, telling the reader how to respond to certain events—even if they do so by expecting readers to see through the novel’s satire and understand these events as humorous counterexamples aimed at revealing shallowness.

But what is this social voice saying? I argue that it is the partygoers’ interest in the affairs of John Harmon, and by extension the Boffins, Wilfers, and Hexams, that establishes these affairs’ significance, at least in the eyes of the disembodied entity of “Society.” In using the Veneerings, Lammles, and Podsnaps, as well as Lady Tippins and Mr. Twemlow, to examine the social implications of occurrences like the elder Mr. Harmon’s death, the Lammles’ decline in society, and the marriage of Lizzie Hexam and Eugene Wrayburn, Dickens implicitly raises these events from the level personal experience to that of the gossip-worthy subject. Patricia Meyer Spacks would call this “bad gossip”—gossip that “exists to be circulated . . . uses private material to public ends . . . [and] confirms Heidegger’s point about how ‘groundlessness’

\[180\] Bookending” is technically an incorrect term. While the novel ends with a chapter on the Veneerings and their peers, the very first chapter is, of course, focused on the Gaffer and Lizzie Hexam’s discovery of the body presumed to belong to John Harmon. This chapter, though, is immediately followed by a lengthier chapter at the Veneerings’ dinner party explaining the discovery’s importance.
provides no obstacle but rather an encouragement to promulgation.” I do not wish to make a value judgment on the badness or goodness of certain kinds of hearsay. Rather, Dickens’s novel provides us with a process by which pieces of information are transmitted to a group of people, reified by that group’s engagement with the information (regardless of substance), and then re-transmitted to the world at large. This kind of information then has social power, and Dickens’s inclusion of it in his novel mirrors a real-world narrative wherein social gatherings (the dinner party in particular) and their conversations are used consistently to accomplish a particular set of classist or political goals and to perpetuate normative social expectations. In Our Mutual Friend, social gatherings, even highly satirized, superficial ones, prove to be both reactionary and constructive, establishing a sanctioned social response to normative and non-normative events and performing a kind of self-perpetuating feedback loop, in which information is both processed and produced.

Dickens refers often to this kind of known-but-not-quite-articulated knowledge and its power. In Bleak House, he replaces “the Voice of Society” with the “fashionable intelligence,” a kind of Bourdieusian specter demarcated by ill-defined categories of taste and class. In that novel, “the fashionable intelligence” is an abstract force cataloguing the movements, missteps, and fluid statuses of the social elite. In Our Mutual Friend, the Voice of Society is a voice of gossip and ongoing public discourse—what is being said, thought, and believed by members of a

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181 Patricia Meyer Spacks, Gossip, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 26. Spacks takes as one of her case studies Jane Austen’s Northanger Abbey, arguing that, for Catherine Moreland, gossip allows for both subversion, seen in the way that rumors of General Tilney’s cruelty lead to Catherine’s mental resistance of his expectations, and intimacy, expressed negatively in Catherine’s relationship with Isabella Thorpe and more positively in her friendship with the Tilneys (24). Northanger Abbey is, of course, another novel deeply invested in the power of social gatherings, as much of the novel takes place in the seasonal retreat of Bath, which acts as a sanctioned space for engagement between individuals of different genders and classes.
particular social class. With Veneering’s stand for Parliament, information about his desire to be an MP is disseminated by dinner-party guests who go about London, effectively turning the cogs of the rumor mill to ensure widespread knowledge of his candidacy. Kristen A. Pond claims that this kind of talk is an epistemological endeavor that “resists categorization as it dissolves the boundaries used to distinguish types of knowledge, such as private/public, domestic/political, objective/subjective, and empirical/intuitive” and that it “favors speculative, biased, and subjective knowledge.”

But whereas Pond interprets this dissemination of dubious information as a method by which individuals question and challenge supposedly objective truths, gossip, hearsay, and public opinion in Our Mutual Friend effectively assume the weight of objectivity. Speculations (in both senses of the word) are treated as certainty, and biases, though people like Wrayburn, Lightwood, and eventually Twemlow resist them, are generally reified by mutual agreement. In fact, the dinner parties in which these moments of hearsay originate are organized precisely as a means of reestablishing public opinion and actualizing mutually beneficial ideas. Here, the central idea-made-real is the possibility of Mr. Veneering’s winning a parliamentary seat:

Britannia, sitting meditating one fine day (perhaps in the attitude in which she is presented on the copper coinage), discovers all of a sudden that she wants Veneering in Parliament. It occurs to her that Veneering is “a representative man”—which cannot in these times be doubted—and that Her Majesty's faithful Commons are incomplete without him. So, Britannia mentions to a legal gentleman of her acquaintance that if Veneering will ‘put down’ five thousand pounds, he may write a couple of initial letters after his name at the extremely cheap rate of two thousand five hundred per letter. (244)

In this scene, Britannia is abstracted. Who exactly mentions Veneering, and to which “legal man,” is purposefully elided. One reading of this passage might suggest that Britannia, who sits

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“perhaps in the attitude in which she is presented on the copper coinage,” is an economic force, a personification of the market and of a kind of unacknowledged spoils system (244). Another (and the two are not mutually exclusive) suggests that Britannia, in this instance, is a collection of opinions, ideas, and rumors: the fashionable-intelligence-like voice of the people—or at least of one particular group of people. The idea that Mr. Veneering could and should stand for Parliament is abstractly introduced to society at large, and when that information is presented to Mr. Veneering, he chooses to ruminate on the idea while he determines “‘whether his friends will rally round him.’ Above all things, he says, it behoves him to be clear, at a crisis of this importance, ‘whether his friends will rally round him’” (244). Mr. Veneering enlists the aid of these friends, comprised of his wife, Lady Tippins, Twemlow, the Podsnaps, and a few more minor acquaintances, to “go to work” and “bring him in”—work which involves, essentially, riding about town and sitting stationary at clubs (250).

The joke, of course, is that this kind of business is hardly work at all. It seems aimless. But the “work” is peculiarly effective:

Now, the point of view . . . that this same working and rallying round is to keep up appearances, may have something in it, but not all the truth. More is done, or considered to be done—which does as well—by taking cabs, and “going about,” than the fair Tippins knew of. Many vast vague reputations have been made, solely by taking cabs and going about. This particularly obtains in all Parliamentary affairs. (250)

We are given a direct contradiction: the “work” is about more than appearances, but the appearance of productivity (“More is done, or considered to be done—*which does as well*”) is just as effectual as any actual work. What is actually productive, it turns out, is the Veneerings’ “vast vague reputation”: power derived from social capital rather than political astuteness. The source of that social capital is of course their famous dinners, and the initiating, ordering force by which those parties are arranged and sustained is implicitly Mrs. Veneering—“implicitly,”
because Mrs. Veneering is nearly invisible in the text, usually mentioned in tandem with her husband or ignored altogether. She has, by my count, five spoken lines of dialogue: three about babies (116, 254, 626), one in which she employs baby talk (12), and one exclamation to which “nobody attends” (817). More often than not, Mrs. Veneering’s words are represented in indirect speech, as the following exchange from an impromptu campaign party conspicuously demonstrates:

Mrs Veneering faintly remarks, as dinner opens, that many such days would be too much for her.

“Many such days would be too much for all of us,” says Podsnap; “but we’ll bring him in!”

“We’ll bring him in,” says Lady Tippins, sportively waving her green fan.

“Veneering for ever!”

“We’ll bring him in!” says Twemlow.

“We’ll bring him in!” say Boots and Brewer. (250)

In a scene where nearly everyone present seems to have something to say (albeit unoriginal repetitions of a vague campaign slogan), Mrs. Veneering is only said to “remark” on her own frailty, and even then she does so “faintly.”

In spite of Dickens’s apparent desire to virtually silence women like Mrs. Veneering and erase their influence from the political sphere, she and women like her are, in Cohen’s words, “homekeepers,” who, in their domestic work, stand “on common ground with the intellectual and the artist: amateurs who used the language of professionalism to represent their work as the fulfillment of a higher calling.”183 As the wife of a new giant in the world of speculation, she is responsible for the “private” side of her husband’s professional (and eventually political) ambitions, and for creating a domestic space that both befits and advances his public persona. Despite her apparent lack of agency in the text, the home, which provides physical evidence for

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183 Cohen, 9.
the Veneerings’ coming up in the world, falls within Anastatia Veneering’s purview, as do the dinners through which Hamilton Veneering generates and sustains his social power. As my earlier chapters have made clear, the Victorian hostess was responsible for decorating the home, establishing the guest list, sending out invitations, and planning the party’s menu. It is because Mrs. Veneering is such an adept hostess—or at least a woman capable of passing for an adept hostess in the Veneerings’ “bran new” mockery of contemporary upper-middle-class domesticity—that these dinners are so conducive to her husband’s public success.

The most explicit of these productive dinners is the aforementioned impromptu campaign party that follows the group’s “going about.” Again and again the dinner guests declare, “We’ll bring him in!” stating and restating their purpose, until this speech act of assent takes the place of the work itself. After fortifying themselves with the Veneerings’ best wines for the work ahead, no measurable work occurs except for repeated agreement that they will all continue “rearing round their dear Veneering . . . roaring round him . . . reeling round him . . . rarullarulling round him” (251). “Rarullarulling,” used only here, acts as a proto-Joycean neologism. A near portmanteau of the proceeding verbs (rearing, roaring, reeling), its individual morphemes bring to mind the cheering “rahs” of a crowd, as well as the taxing complexity of a “rigmarole,” gesturing to the procedurally complicated but ultimately incomprehensible nature of their work.

“Rarullarulling” defines whatever it is that these guests do at Mr. Veneering’s parties—whatever it is to rear and roar and reel around someone—and it is at once acutely effective and vacant of

184 Mrs. Beeton uses the terms “hostess” and “mistress” interchangeably, though the latter occurs about seven times as often. Though “mistress” appropriately carries with it a sense of authority, skill, and mastery, it also connotes a kind of ownership that proves less appropriate when examining Miss Marjoribanks later in this chapter. The same can be said of discussing Emma or any other text in which the primary hostess occupies the liminal space of daughters—not quite on par socially or familiarly with wives and mothers, but still capable hostesses and party-givers.
real political, social, or practical content. We might define it as “attending a party and agreeing with one’s peers in a way that is politically consequential,” or, the practice of the theories put forth by “aristologists.” The consensus achieved by the host, hostess, and their guests supersedes the canvassing of a typical political campaign because the gathering itself acts like another abstraction of the British people. Saying that Veneering’s guests have rallied and rarullarulled around him is effectively tantamount to saying that Britannia wants Veneering in Parliament. The one stands as a metonym for the other. This, of course, is exactly the kind of thing Fonblanque and his *Examiner* colleagues are criticizing when they refer to the Tory party as “the dinner party”: “Nothing can be clearer now,” they say, “than that the root of Aristocracy is the Greek *ariston*, dinner, and that, literally rendered, it signifies the dinner-rule.”¹⁸⁵ (In fact, the roots of “aristocracy” are “aristos,” meaning “best,” and “kratia,” meaning “power”—that is, government by the “best” rulers, the nobility. “Ariston” is, however, the root for “aristology,” the “art or ‘science’ of dining.”)¹⁸⁶ Though Dickens carefully refrains from explicitly linking Mr. Veneering to any particular party, the fact he and his wife are mocked for cultivating a relationship with Twemlow in hopes of leveraging his “being first cousin to Lord Snigsworth” might suggest his being a Conservative of the kind that the *Review* attacked (6).¹⁸⁷ Were the Veneerings of a different class, their gathering and agreeing would not have the same kind of actualizing power. But in a novel so concerned with the actual actions of the lower classes

¹⁸⁵ “THE DINNER PARTY,” 706.

¹⁸⁶ “ariˈstələdʒi, n.” OED Online, March 2016, Oxford University Press.

¹⁸⁷ Eric J. Evans notes that even William Gladstone, the hero of nineteenth-century liberalism, was elected as a Tory due to the influence of the Duke of Newcastle and Lord Winchilsea, that latter of whom had his agent “correct” “any erroneous notions” regarding the vote, *Parliamentary Reform, c. 1770-1918* (New York: Longman, 2000), 27.
(people like Lizzie Hexam, the Riderhoods, and, in his assumed identity, John Harmon), the vague and empty “actions” of the upper class offer a kind of counterpoint—a veneer, as Knowles would say, that has taken the place of the thing it covers, but done so in a way that has measurable consequences.

Though the specific mechanics that have actuated these consequences are vague, their roots are undoubtedly found in the Veneerings’ particular brand of sociability, as well as their status as a nouveau riche novelty:

Mr and Mrs Veneering were bran-new people in a bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London. Everything about the Veneerings was spick and span new. All their furniture was new, all their friends were new, all their servants were new, their plate was new, their carriage was new, their harness was new, their horses were new, their pictures were new, they themselves were new, they were as newly married as was lawfully compatible with their having a bran-new baby, and if they had set up a great-grandfather, he would have come home in matting from the Pantechnicon, without a scratch upon him, French polished to the crown of his head.

For, in the Veneering establishment, from the hall-chairs with the new coat of arms, to the grand pianoforte with the new action, and upstairs again to the new fire-escape, all things were in a state of high varnish and polish. And what was observable in the furniture, was observable in the Veneerings—the surface smelt a little too much of the workshop and was a trifle sticky. (6)

Dickens mocks the Veneerings and their belongings, describing them as one might describe a contemporary McMansion in a historic neighborhood: too obviously new and therefore too noticeable, too lacking in architectural (that is, socially prescribed) integrity, and unruly in its disruption of more established standards. Dickens is not so much critiquing wealth, himself by now a member of the nouveau riche, as he is criticizing Mr. Veneering’s practice of financial speculation, the principle of which, James M. Brown observes, “is not confined to the stock-exchange but infiltrates all areas of society as a social frame of reference,” meaning that the Veneerings also invest in social speculation, making as many “dearest and oldest friends” as
possible in hopes of generating social capital and the prestige and power it provides.\textsuperscript{188} The Veneerings are all stuff and no significance, just as Mr. Veneering’s eventually failed political career is predicated on pomp and circumstance without real substance. Still, it is from this “stuff” that their status is established, and by their “bran new” wealth that they are able to engage in the particular kind and level of social interaction that leads to a political career. Yes, the Veneerings’ belongings act as evidence of superficiality, but they are also indicators of their suitability for upper-middle-class socializing. And of course, the things themselves, and the interiors in which they sit, would have been Mrs. Veneering’s responsibility: it would be her role to maintain their “bran-new house,” and to keep their “furniture,” “plate,” “pictures,” “hall-chairs,” and “grand pianoforte with the new action” in respectable order by giving direction to “all their servants.” In Thad Logan’s words “such women were, by mid-century at least, responsible for turning houses into homes . . . guided by the canons of taste and style generated by cultural authorities.”\textsuperscript{189}

Domestic property acted as a signifier of wealth and, in the minds of many Victorians, moral fiber. Logan has written that the interior of Victorian homes, and specifically the Victorian parlor, was “identified . . . as a strongly marked space, full of material objects” that communicated specific messages to visitors (94). “If a family’s prosperity increased,” for instance, “corresponding changes in domestic décor were expected to occur” (91). Thus, Anastatia Veneering, in selecting which “bran new” objects will be used to decorate the home, is engaging in a cultural dialogue, deploying “decorative grammar” in order to convey, in the visual and economic language of the time, that she and her family have arrived at a new level of

\textsuperscript{188} James M. Brown, \textit{Dickens: Novelist in the Market-Place}, (New York: MacMillan, 1982), 149.

\textsuperscript{189} Thad Logan, \textit{The Victorian Parlour: A Cultural Study}, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 36.
prosperity and consequently entered a new quasi-class.\textsuperscript{190} Though that message is met with
disapprobation on the part of the narrator, it is heard loud and clear by the Veneerings’ plentiful
dinner guests. It is an indication that the Veneerings are acceptable partners in sociability and
that Mr. Veneering is a potential parliamentary surrogate for a specific kind of person: the new-
money upper-middle-class Conservative. Dickens explicitly acknowledges (and implicitly
criticizes) this political collaboration between Mrs. Veneering and her husband. Later, he tongue-
in-cheekily refers to “Hamilton Veneering, Esquire, M.P. for Pocket-Breaches,” and his
counterpart “Mrs. Veneering, W.M.P. [wife of Member of Parliament] for Pocket-Breaches,”
who “like a faithful wife, shares her husband’s discovery and inexpressible astonishment” at the
Lammles’ eventual social faux pas (618).\textsuperscript{191} They are co-representatives, working together to
construct a self-serving public identity. Dickens is perhaps less derisive of Mrs. Veneering’s
political machinations by proxy than he is of the media through which she enacts them: her
successful execution of dinners and parties. He is, of course, equally critical of the vanity of the
Veneerings’ political ambitions and of their partisan biases. The “Pocket-Breaches” bring to
mind “pocket boroughs” controlled by (or in the pocket of) a particular set of wealthy
individuals—here the Veneerings’ particular set of “dearest and oldest friends” (117). It is
exactly the kind of micropolitical engineering of macropolitics that is lampooned in both the
\textit{Examiner} and the \textit{Saturday Review}.

\textsuperscript{190} Logan, 80.

\textsuperscript{191} Dickens defines W.M.P. as “wife of Member of Parliament” the first time he uses it,
411. Another possible referent for the acronym is Woman Member of Parliament, a moniker with
particular resonance in both Trollope’s novels, where Alice Vavasor and Lady Glencora are both
expressly political, and in \textit{Miss Marjoribanks}, where Lucilla speaks often of her “career” and
jokingly calls her cook, Nancy, her “Prime Minister.”
John Tosh has argued that “The most critical precondition of middle-class domesticity was the withdrawal of the wife from direct involvement in the productive work of the household.”\textsuperscript{192} He is careful in his wording, and for good reason. He notes that, before the end of the eighteenth century, women would frequently partner with their husbands in the particular work of their trade, and that the home itself generally functioned as the locus for certain kinds of work. Shopkeepers, for example, used the bottom floors of the house as show rooms, while the family lived upstairs. As distances grew, both between sites of production and living spaces and between production itself and financial payoff (one thinks of the abstract speculation Mr. Veneerings engages in), women became more and more isolated in the work of the domestic sphere.\textsuperscript{193} At least, to borrow Tosh’s words, their “involvement” in their husband’s professional worlds became less “direct” and their contributions to the “work of the household” less \textit{visibly} “productive.” Yet, to argue that the “marital working partnership was virtually at an end among the Victorian bourgeoisie,” as Tosh does, ignores the implicit power of figures like Mrs. Veneering and, as I will later argue, Trollope’s Lady Glencora Palliser, who use their wifely duties, if not exactly subversively, then more “productively” than Tosh suggests was the norm \textsuperscript{(18)}. These women create spaces and perform roles acceptable for their husbands’ political ambitions (to varying degrees of success), in order to convey messages to their peers regarding their husbands’ and their own suitability as public figures.

It could, of course, be argued that it is, most importantly, Mr. Veneering’s £5000 that ensure his position in Parliament. Such an argument, however, is not necessarily contradictory to

\textsuperscript{192} John Tosh, \textit{A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 17.

\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., 14.
the claims I am advancing here. Mr. Veneering’s money certainly establishes his right to stand for a seat—but that money, like the “work” of going about town in a hired cab and the unacknowledged work of Mrs. Veneering, is somehow abstracted: “It is clearly understood . . . that nobody is to take up the five thousand pounds, but that being put down they will disappear by magical conjuration and enchantment.” Of course everyone (the reader, Mr. Veneering, his political confrères) knows that someone, somewhere will benefit from Mr. Veneering’s money. But rather than explaining where this money goes and how it effects Veneering’s victory, Dickens’s narrator substitutes the power of money with the power of society. Out it goes, into undisclosed coffers, and the dinner-party-turned-campaign-party essentially reifies Veneering’s financial power by transforming it into something social, where money is acknowledged but obscured. Molly Anne Rothenberg has suggested that the Veneerings accomplish this transformation by “align[ing] themselves with available social institutions to increase their own power and prestige.” Though their continual and comical insistence that everyone they meet is one of their “dearest and oldest friends” certainly seems to corroborate her claim, Rothenberg’s argument classes the Veneerings as passive recipients of borrowed glory, focusing too much on the reactionary aspects of the their social world and ignoring the ways in which they galvanize individuals like the Podsnaps and Lady Tippins into aiding and abetting them in their active pursuit of social power. That process is underwritten by the work Mrs. Veneering has, beyond the pages of the novel, already accomplished.

194 Dickens, 244.

The power of the novel’s social gatherings to establish public opinion can be seen again when the Veneerings and Podsnaps come together to discuss, interpret, and arrive at a verdict on the nature and significance of the Lammles’ eventual social decline (618). Whereas the Veneerings have used their parties to explicitly political ends with a concrete, measurable outcome (Hamilton indeed gains a seat in Parliament), their discussion of the Lammles contributes to public opinion more vaguely. We read elsewhere that the Podsnaps’ silver “was made to look as heavy as it could, and to take up as much room as possible” in order to ensure that guests knew their constitutive elements: “so many ounces of precious metal worth so much an ounce” (84). The display of silverware acts as a metonym for the Podsnaps themselves: they use it to signal their status, their worth, and their adherence to social protocols. The result is that the Veneerings and Podsnaps choose to approve of one another. They have read the signs indicated by each other’s home interiors and by, presumably, the correct performance of dinner-party etiquette. Responding accordingly, they admit one another into polite society and allow their private gatherings to become meetings that determine future guest lists and the boundaries of their specific social circle. The power exerted here in the Podsnaps’ home is more limited in scope—resulting only in the future exclusion of the Lammles from polite society, rather than a successful parliamentary campaign—but the process is the same. An opinion is taken up to be debated or explored, within the context of a specific dinner or party, and due to the articulation of visual and social “grammars” therein, that opinion solidifies into something momentarily concrete.

This power, whether political, social, or some mixture of the two, is tenuous. As often as social gatherings seem to establish public opinion, they are also subject to its vicissitudes. When Mr. and Mrs. Lammle find that neither is as rich as they had first believed, their domestic
unhappiness and serious financial straits result in their exclusion from their “circle of acquaintance,” leading the Veneerings to give “a wondering dinner party” (618). In the same way their friends have rallied around Hamilton’s political campaign, riding about town to drum up votes, two other guests then “go about in cabs, with no other intelligible business on earth than to beat up people to come and dine with the Veneerings” while Veneering himself “pervades the legislative lobbies, intent upon entrapping his fellow-legislators to dinner”—all with the sole purpose of discussing the matter of the Lammles’ social and financial ruin (618).

Likewise, Hamilton and Anastatia Veneering fall from grace when their social liabilities outweigh their social capital: Mr. Veneering’s parliamentary membership and social status—the result of the aforementioned social speculation, wherein he throws the net of his acquaintance far and wide—go south with his market speculations (815). His and wife’s decline is an ironic one, as they have become victims of their own game, but it is not a surprise. When his investments turn sour, the Voice of Society outstrips them and bites them in the backs: “It shall likewise come to pass,” the narrator explains proleptically in the novel’s final chapter, as if transcribing the prophetic voice of God, “that Society will discover that it always did despise Veneering, and distrust Veneering, and that when it went to Veneering’s dinner it always had misgivings—though very secretly at the time, it would seem, and in a perfectly private and confidential manner” (815). Society has heretofore spoken through the collective gathering of individuals in the homes of people like the Veneerings and the Podsnaps, but here, some unnamed group of people at some other unnamed dinner party has chosen to oust the first couple from their ranks. After all, a dinner “must” be given (618). The Veneerings, then, cease to represent of “The Voice of Society,” and in fact they never did to begin with. That voice must exist outside individuals,
preceding and exceeding them as a kind of amorphous mass that is necessarily always comprised of other people, regardless of one’s own prestige or power.

Social power is then, for Dickens, subject to the more mutable aspects of public opinion, and therefore necessarily unsuited to influence Parliamentary affairs. Yet Dickens is himself a kind of Voice of Society—not a politician or socialite, but a novelist and cultural critic, dependent on his own “vast reputation” for continued success. Perhaps there is a gender-political explanation for this apparent double standard. The whole of Our Mutual Friend can be said to perpetuate an “Angel in the House” vision for Victorian society. Lizzie Hexam, arguably the novel’s heroine, is rescued from a life of squalor and supposedly masculine work by the noble Eugene Wrayburn, and then transformed: no longer Lizzie “the female waterman,” living adjacent to the Thames and sustaining herself on its refuse, she becomes Mrs. Wrayburn, helpmeet and literal support to her husband, who, “wan and worn” must now walk “resting on his wife’s arm” (811). Similarly, John Rokesmith, arguably the novel’s hero and grand puppet-master, reveals himself to be John Harmon, thus fulfilling the conditions of his inheritance and marrying Bella Wilfer, likewise rescuing her, through a series of circuitous incidents, from lower-middle-class impoverishment and an “unwomanly” preoccupation with money. Though these women are complex and, in their own way, empowered to express and accomplish their desires, Dickens eventually renders them innocuous housewives, with no obvious public or political sway, who fit neatly within prescribed boundaries of nineteenth-century domesticity.

The novel’s other domestic partnerships tell similar stories. The Veneerings’ fellow members of the political class consist of the virtually silent Mrs. Podsnap and the conniving, vengeful Mrs. Lammle, the former acting as a mirror to Mrs. Veneering and the latter as a cautionary tale against premarital dishonesty and post-marital cupidity. Though Mrs. Lammle is far from successful in her domestic endeavors, Mrs. Podsnap implicitly manages to the setting for her husband’s social dominance—and yet she is even less visible than Mrs. Veneering.
This reading of Dickens and his angelic women has been the standard. In her foundational polemic on women’s subjugation in literature, Kate Millett cites moments like these as some of the “most disheartening flaws in the master’s work,” in that “nearly all ‘serious’ women” in his novels “are insipid goodies carved from the same soap as Ruskin’s Queens.” Even in a book like *Dombey and Sons*, she says, which “achieved a nearly perfect indictment of both patriarchy and capitalism,” this dichotomy persists (90). In responding to Millett, Juliet John has tried to grant Dickens a more capacious awareness of available femininities, arguing that women “like Edith Dombey, Lady Dedlock, Miss Havisham, and so forth” are far from marginalized in their own texts (233). Still, in defending her claim that his novels do in fact feature “performative female characters” who render problematic “the transparent, one-dimensional construction of femininity which was the cornerstone of Victorian gender ideology,” even she must admit that these women are still anomalous and, more importantly, “deviant” (233-234). If, however, Dickens’s two possible female archetypes are serious goodies and performative deviants, Mrs. Veneering is almost a nonentity, essentially off-the-map: she is certainly not serious, if by “serious” we mean thoughtful or three-dimensional; and while Dickens does not treat either her or her husband favorably, they are not villains in the way of Fascination Fledgeby, Silas Wegg, or Bradley Headstone. Nevertheless, Dickens’s non-serious

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197 Speaking of Kate Millett’s derisive critique of Dickens as an anti-feminist figure, Juliet John says, “This approach is perhaps understandable in one of the pioneers of feminist criticism, but it has been an ironically persistent feature of criticism of Dickens’s women that, until recently, it has adopted essentially the same perspective on Dickens’s texts as he would have done himself,” *Dickens’s Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 233.


199 These claims, after all, appear in her work, *Dickens’s Villains.*
treatment of Mrs. Veneering—the oft ignored, baby-talking W.M.P.—does not presuppose her unimportance. That Dickens himself seems at best oblivious and at worst hostile to her significance as a partner in Mr. Veneering’s political career indicates his antipathy for the blending of the public and private spheres. Despite a few social idiosyncrasies, it is never made explicitly clear why Mr. Veneering makes for such a bad M.P., except that his campaign and its success are predicated on the success of dinners, parties, and rarullarulling—namely, that they are specifically predicated on domesticity. Mrs. Veneering occupies an uncomfortable position, somewhere between domestic angels like Rose Maylie and Florence Dombey and the caricatured Mrs. Jellyby, who neglects her “domestic mission,” believing that “the idea of woman’s mission lying chiefly in the narrow sphere of Home was an outrageous slander on the part of her Tyrant, Man.” But whereas Mrs. Jellyby elicits Dickens’s ironic censure, Mrs. Veneering, who can accomplish her and her husband’s social and political missions because she succeeds in her “domestic mission,” earns his minimizing disregard and brings reproach upon her family’s aspirations.

3.2 Breaking the Mould: Partying Women and Political Campaigns in Can You Forgive Her?

Anthony Trollope takes a more sympathetic view of the role women and sociability play in parliamentary affairs, while likewise locating a significant degree of power within the bounds of social occasions. If Veneering’s political future is determined at a party specifically designed for the “work” of “bringing him in,” Plantagenet Palliser in Can You Forgive Her? benefits from his attendance at dinners and parties more generally (250). His eventual post as Chancellor of the

Exchequer, for example, is all but assured by his decision to join kingmaker Sir Cosmo Monk and various other members of the nobility for dinner parties and retreats; by contrast, his wife Lady Glencora initially poses numerous threats to his eventual parliamentary success in her refusal to adhere to party protocol. Whereas, for Dickens, this mutual responsibility is a mark of the larger, more insidious problem of power that is not indicative of merit but rather social and domestic success, for Trollope, it—this potential partnering between husband and wife—is a foregone conclusion that can be either instrumental or injurious to political aims. Furthermore, Lady Glencora’s growth into an informed individual with politics of her own leads to a more overt partnership between husband and wife (albeit, in Trollope’s words, an “imperfect” one), in which she states outright both her husband’s and her own political principles and works to accomplish their realization.²⁰¹

Despite John Speare’s famously misguided claim that he “never took his politics more seriously than as a means . . . for telling a good story,” Trollope’s Palliser novels are deeply enmeshed in the political world, and far more explicitly so than those of Dickens.²⁰² In the Palliser novels that follow Can You Forgive Her? (particularly Phineas Finn [1867-68], Phineas Redux [1873], and The Prime Minister [1876]), Trollope juxtaposes marriage plots and family dramas with the inner workings of Parliament, with conflicts between Whigs and Tories getting

²⁰¹ In his autobiography, Trollope himself calls Plantagenet and Lady Glencora the two “safety-valves by which to deliver [his] soul,” saying that he “used them for the expression of [his] political or social convictions” in lieu of being able to “speak from the benches of the House of Commons, or to thunder from platforms,” An Autobiography and Other Writings (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 114. He goes on to say that Lady Glencora “becomes ambitious, first of social, and then of political ascendancy,” and that Plantagenet “is thoroughly true to her . . . and she, after her less perfect nature, is imperfectly true to him,” 116.

the lion’s share of his interest. Can You Forgive Her? is more like Our Mutual Friend than its fellow Palliser novels in that it deals less with standard parliamentary policy and more with elections and appointments. The novel’s heroine, Alice Vavasor, is torn between two suitors, the rakish George Vavasor and John Grey, her less exciting but more stable option (and ultimate husband) who, at Alice’s urging, stands for Parliament at the novel’s close (and wins). The two men are necessarily contrasted, and their parliamentary ambitions reveal essential differences in character: George campaigns for Parliament on the grounds that it will be both socially empowering and financially lucrative, à la Hamilton Veneering; John, by contrast, enters the political sphere in dutiful answer to a call and consequentially weighs personal concerns in light of public interests.

Whereas John’s eventual place in Parliament is largely incidental (he essentially inherits his position when Plantagenet Palliser becomes the representative for another county), the implications of sociability on George’s political ambitions could furnish a chapter of their own. He is pugnacious, unsophisticated, and ignoble. He routinely inveigles Alice into lending him money from her inheritance to fund his political campaigns, and he entrusts the management of his campaigns to the unscrupulous Mr. Scruby, who “[does] not care a straw from what source the necessary funds might be drawn.”203 In addition to this lack of ethical or relational decency, George also wants the social graces of John Grey:

. . . he never gave breakfasts, dinners, or suppers under his own roof. During a short period of his wine-selling career, at which time he had occupied handsome rooms over his place of business in New Burlington Street, he had presided at certain feasts given to customers or expectant customers by the firm; but he had not found this employment to his taste, and had soon relinquished it to one of the other partners. . . . Eating or drinking there was never any to be found here [at his new, smaller quarters] by the most intimate of his allies. His lodgings were his private retreat, and they were so private that but few

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of his friends knew where he lived. . . . And had it been possible he would have wished that no one should have known his whereabouts. (100)

Unlike his rival, John, George actively avoids opportunities for sociability, even going so far as to prohibit having the location of his living quarters from being known. He is never depicted attending a dinner or party, apart from those with his family members, and he seems to see dinners and dining only beneficial when there are unambiguously associated with business. Even then, he finds the “employment” unpalatable. Whereas Hamilton Veneering gains his position in part as a result of his prominent reputation, Vavasor gains his in the absence of one. Significantly, the latter seems to substitute money and actual campaigning for social clout, but it as an exchange that leads to a failed political career and, in the process, bankrupts him, causing him to rely on Alice’s generosity to fund both his parliamentary campaign and his own livelihood (296).

Plantagenet Palliser, on the other hand, is a paragon in the practice of deploying social capital to political ends.204 D.A. Miller notes that political animals in Trollope usually “are not repressed characters sternly denying themselves in the interest of social good that in return guarantees their own well-being, but rather characters who uninhibitedly desire what Trollope calls . . . ‘the good things of the world.’”205 Trollope himself believed that Plantagenet was “a very noble gentleman,—such a one as justifies to the nation the seeming anomaly of an hereditary peerage and of primogeniture.”206 These descriptions of Trollope’s eventual Prime

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204 At least, initially. In The Prime Minister, his political failures are attributed to his ineptitude at “attracting personal friends” and inability to “be all things to all men,” Anthony Trollope, The Prime Minister (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 314-15.


206 Anthony Trollope, An Autobiography and Other Writings, 115.
Minister suggest that his social aptitude actually reveals true nobility of character—a far cry from the superficiality and duplicity Dickens attributes to consummate party hosts like the Veneerings and the Podsnaps.

There is, for Trollope a class distinction implicit in the valorization of Plantagenet. What Dickens found so deplorable about the Veneerings and what Trollope himself disparages in George Vavasor is their mercenary manipulations of professional and social relationships, but this would be unimaginable in Plantagenet Palliser. As his first name suggests, he is a member of the highest ranks of British Society. In *Can You Forgive Her?*, Plantagenet is the heir apparent to and eventual inheritor of the Dukedom of Omnium. As such, he and his wife Lady Glencora are less concerned with visually telegraphing their social status than the Veneerings are, as Trollope is here dealing with men and women whose place in the upper echelons of polite society is set in stone. They have no need to host parties where they display the newly acquired accoutrements of wealth, in part because none of their domestic accoutrements are newly acquired. As a result, the Pallisers are great *attenders* of parties rather than givers of parties, choosing to adorn other people’s homes with their presence instead of inviting others in to pay witness to their own success.

The seminal social event of the text is Lady Monk’s eminent dinner party and ball, and it is at this event that Trollope begins to clearly delineate his version of “woman’s work.” Trollope foregrounds the role of Lady Glencora in her husband’s political career and the significance of domestic and social propriety for public success. The details of the dinner and ball spread out over three full chapters: “Preparations for Lady Monk’s Party,” “How Lady Glencora went to Lady Monk’s Party,” and “How Lady Glencora came back from Lady Monk’s Party.” Each of these descriptive chapters has prescriptive analogues in the etiquette literature of the day, in
which much paper and ink are spent detailing the processes of preparing for parties, arriving at them, and leaving them, with writings on the latter two especially concerned with being seen in particular attitudes, as well as times and methods of coming and going. Lady Monk herself is potentially a better parallel to the Veneerings than either of the Pallisers, who are more often party guests: she is the premiere party-giver of her day. “This giving of parties,” Trollope says, “was her business, and she had learned it thoroughly. She worked at it harder than most men work at their trades, and let us hope that the profits were consolatory” (404). These parties are “known to be very great affairs” and are deliberately scheduled so that they do not coincide with parliamentary votes or parties given by other important socialites (404). As a result of her careful machinations, thorough execution of etiquette-specific protocols, and methodically curated guest lists, Lady Monk and her parties are granted the highest level of prestige: “It was generally acknowledged to be the proper thing to go to Lady Monk’s parties” (404). Trollope taxonomizes her guests in different classes: those whom must be invited simply because of who they are; actual friends and family members; and finally, “all those who made strong interest to obtain admittance within her ladyship’s house,—who struggled and fought almost with tooth and nail to get invitations” and with whom Lady Monk “carried on an internecine war” (405). One such guest is Mr. Bott, a lowborn political operative with poor social skills, whom Plantagenet insists on bringing along. In order to have Plantagenet and Lady Glencora, Lady Monk must have Mr. Bott, and so, like a military strategist, she takes on collateral damages in her “internecine war” in order to secure the company of the Palliser family. Each of her social moves is calculated, weighing credits and debits, gains and losses in order to accomplish “the business” of entertaining with a kind of professional, military precision.
If Lady Monk is part party-giving general, she is also part party-giving politician. The Duchess of St. Bungay is a fixture at her evenings, even though she “hates” and “abuses” her hostess; “but a card was sent to the Duchess in the same way the Lord Mayor invites a Cabinet Minister to dinner, even though one man might believe the other to be a thief” (405). Here the political undertones of a dinner party are made clear, with Lady Monk upholding her “professional” duty and inviting a sworn enemy into her home, in the same way warring municipal and national authorities must often socialize for the sake of political expediency. It is good for Lady Monk to have the Duchess at her parties, and it is good for the Duchess to be seen there. Lady Monk likewise wants Lady Glencora to make an appearance, though her motives here are more complicated. One the one hand, Lady Glencora is young, beautiful, and popular—a jewel in the crown of any social gathering. On the other, she is the former love interest of Lady Monk’s nephew, Burgo Fitzgerald, and it is believed that her presence at the party will give Burgo the opportunity to woo her away from her new husband. Lady Monk knows that even the grandest of parties, conducted according to the most stringent dictates of etiquette, provides the potential opportunity for violations of sexual mores by permitting men and women to interact in a socially appropriate, socially sanctioned space. Though Lady Glencora’s interactions with Burgo at this party are far from well-mannered or well-meaning, their meeting and communicating under the auspices of Lady Monk is far less suspect than their meeting elsewhere would be.

At least, such is initially the case. Lady Glencora dances with Burgo without transgressing any essential boundaries or actually breaking rules of etiquette, but the spirit of those rules falls by the wayside. She has hopes of escaping, either physically with Burgo or into a mental reprieve from the strictures of society, but they are dashed by the watchful eyes of Mrs.
Marsham, her ad hoc duenna, left in charge upon Plantagenet’s early departure from the party, and Mr. Bott (423). Even at a ball, where the regulations placed upon male and female interactions are somewhat softened, Burgo and Lady Glencora are still subjects under surveillance:

Mrs Marsham had never believed that Mr Palliser’s wife would really be false to her vows. It was not in fear of any such catastrophe as a positive elopement that she had taken upon herself the duty of duenna. Lady Glencora would, no doubt, require to be pressed down into that decent mould which it would become the wife of a Mr Palliser to assume as her form; and this pressing down, and this moulding, Mrs Marsham thought she could accomplish. It had not hitherto occurred to her that she might be required to guard Mr Palliser from positive dishonor; but now—now she hardly knew what to think about it. (422)

Their every move is watched and adjudicated by Mr. Bott and his feminine partner. Mrs. Marsham is troubled by the scene of Lady Glencora and Burgo waltzing, in a style akin to Scarlett O’Hara in her widow’s weeds, and not just for obvious reasons—not only because of the clear impropriety of a married woman dancing with her former lover, particularly when her husband has left the party early—but because it runs contrary to her plans of “pressing” Lady Glencora into the “mould” that befits a Mrs. Palliser. She has taken it upon herself to “act as Argus,” a watchful surrogate for the husband and, at Lady Monk’s party, as a mouthpiece for the potential opinions and judgements of the guests themselves (363).207 Plantagenet enlists her aid in the first place because he wishes Lady Glencora “should be discreet and matronly” and because “he feared that she might . . . not know how to live a life becoming the wife of a Chancellor of the Exchequer” (364).208 Now, it is through Mrs. Marsham’s eyes that we

207 Plantagenet later says that she visits him mid-party because “she saw that every one in the room was regarding [Lady Glencora and Burgo] with wonder” (490).

208 It should be noted that Plantagenet only hopes Mrs. Marsham will be a good influence on his wife. She, like Mr. Bott, takes it upon herself to offer a watchful eye, and Plantagenet eventually objects to any reference to her or Mr. Bott as his “spies” (491).
experience Lady Glencora’s dance-floor dalliances at the social event of the season, and according to her assessments that we understand her fellow guests’ experiences. She watches Lady Glencora’s actions and measures the degree to which they fit her imagined mold for the wife of the man in charge of Her Majesty’s Treasury, seeing as the party guests see and evaluating what information she gathers in a bid to literally re-form her subject as she sees fit. The party then, for Lady Glencora, is a kind of proving ground, in which she can display (or, more accurately, fail to display) her aptitude for her future role in the world of professional and political domesticity.

If Mr. Bott seeks to help Plantagenet traverse the obstacles that might stand between him and the chancellorship, Mrs. Marsham is his female counterpart, whose role is to aid the husband by monitoring the wife. She is capable of navigating the specifically feminine spaces from which the men are excluded, and she is unencumbered by any actual professional requirements, such as Bott’s frequent evening meetings with Plantagenet. As a result, to Lady Glencora’s mind, she is “worse than Mr. Bott” (357). Trollope describes her as a woman who is “ambitious of power, and not very scrupulous as to the manner in which [she] obtain[s] it” (362). We see in Mrs. Marsham, then, a matronly foil to Lady Glencora: the latter, by virtue of her husband’s position, is granted a certain degree of politico-domestic power—power deployed from the domestic sphere upon the political sphere—but wields it inexpertly and endangers his prospects; the former desires that same kind of power but cannot quite attain it, and as a result she must attach herself to powerful figures if she wishes to achieve any form of political or social influence. Whereas Lady Glencora is a political force at one remove, a partner in her husband’s parliamentary aspirations, Mrs. Marsham exists at two removes from the source of authority, working through Lady Glencora to support Plantagenet.
The power struggle between these two women comes to a head at Lady Monk’s party. Having made an appearance, Plantagenet leaves, anxious to attend to the more tangible, measurable side of political self-advancement, effectively placing the burden of sociability entirely on Lady Glencora’s shoulders. In his commitment to macropolitics, he entrusts Mrs. Marsham with the management of Lady Glencora’s micropolitical work. It becomes apparent, though, that Lady Glencora is the only member of the Palliser coterie who does not see her performance and her enjoyment of the party’s opportunities as “work,” or at least not work derived from a specific duty. Whereas Mr. Bott expends himself in laboring toward “the reward for which he was working, private secretaryship or what else” (426), Lady Glencora dances with Burgo, according to the report her husband receives, “Recklessly . . . Reckless of what people might say; reckless of what [he] might feel about it; reckless of [her] own position” (490). She causes a scene and, in thinking only of her own love problems, endangers “her own position” and her husband’s political ambitions, so much so that he eventually determines that they should go to the Continent for the summer while he “give[s] up politics for this season” (493).

Lady Glencora reads this as a decision that distills his virtues into one distinct act: “He was killing her by his goodness” (493). And indeed, Trollope himself spoke of Plantagenet as the arch-member of the nobility – a kind of shining example of highborn righteousness who, again, “justifies . . . the seeming anomaly of an hereditary peerage.”209 His decision to leave England before the end of the current parliamentary session, to take Lady Glencora away from the temptations of parties like Lady Monk’s and from wayward guests like Burgo, all for the sake of their marriage, is an act of self-sacrifice that could potentially thwart his hopes at a future Chancellorship. Of course, a more critical reading might class Plantagenet’s decision to

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physically remove his wife from that which he perceives as endangering his vision for the future as anti-feminist. Indeed, he seems to make the decision without her input and without her explicit verbal consent. Such critiques neglect that, when Plantagenet declares he will “give up politics for this season” and invite their cousin Alice to accompany them, Lady Glencora is both awed and touched. Incapable of audibly agreeing to her husband’s suggestion, she “gently put up her hand and rested it on the back of his,” reciprocating his placing a hand on her waist earlier in the scene (493). Though certainly not the most progressive decision, or even the most realistic one, the Pallisers leave England as partners with a shared ambition: to make their marriage work. Additionally, Plantagenet is being practical. Though he seems to be sabotaging his own political goals, he is in fact salvaging his relationship with the woman who will act as arbiter of the micropolitical component of his future successes. Just as Anastatia Veneering has implicitly laid the domestic groundwork for the achievement of Hamilton’s professional and political ventures, Plantagenet needs Lady Glencora if he is to continue along the tack he has taken since first dining with Sir Cosmo earlier in the novel. While his political accomplishments allow him to remain an M.P., it is his social accomplishments that make certain his procurement of ever-higher positions within Parliament, and eventually ensure his status as Prime Minister.

Lest these social and political machinations seem too vague in their processes and results, Trollope charts the continued development of this balancing of social and political aptitude as his series goes on. The second of the Palliser novels, *Phineas Finn*, features several cameo appearances on the part of Lady Glencora and Plantagenet, the first of which affirms the power of social occasions in shaping political futures while also revealing Lady Glencora’s development from dancing coquette to full political partner. On his way to one party at Saulsby Wood, Phineas, “the Irish member” of Parliament, reveals to his friend Laurence that he has also
been invited to a later party at Loughlinter, where Plantagenet Palliser—still Chancellor of the Exchequer—will be gathering with his cabinet.  

“I wish he had invited me,” Laurence says, adding “I should have thought it as good as a promise of an under-secretaryship.” He tells Phineas that he is “the luckiest fellow” in his acquaintance because, as a first-year M.P., he has been “asked to the two most difficult houses in England” (94). Elaine Hadley describes these parties as follows:

In contrast to the cabinet meeting’s sense of belatedness, as this novel portrays it, where men convene to acknowledge what has already happened elsewhere, the gatherings at the Plantagenet [sic] estate of Matching are the elsewhere. The rituals of sleeping, eating, playing, and politicking—in the interstices of a leisured life on the estate—are so deeply entangled with their location and the ownership of that location that Phineas knows he must go into debt to get the furnishings he needs to join “the hunt.”

In keeping with Hadley’s reading of *Phineas Finn* alongside the Irish Land Act of 1870, she locates the power of these gatherings in their physical setting rather than in the act of gathering. According to Hadley, land in general (England and Ireland, as she is fond of stylizing them) and Matching Priory specifically are the sources of political influence, though Plantagenet, as a Liberal, will spend the rest of the Palliser novels passing legislation that threatens his own aristocratic, locationally-derived power. But looking at the other side of Hadley’s equation, we see that the work of politicking is entrenched in and shaped by the pleasures of sleeping, eating,

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210 Neither of these parties are dinner parties in the narrowest sense. They are rather what Anne Brontë’s Gilbert Markham refers to as “social retirements”: extended visits to country houses for the purposes of relaxation and, in the case of Phineas Finn, hunting expeditions, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 498. Social retirements such as these can be broken into a series of events, of which dinners are preeminent in importance with regard to plot and character development, and as part of the narrative structure of such retreats in the “real” world.


and playing. In a cycle that mirrors the Veneerings work of “bringing him in” by attending dinner parties, what is acknowledged at eventual cabinet meetings is accomplished at and by the parties at Matching Priory, Loughlinter, and Saulsby Wood. The political work is abstracted, removed from the public sphere and relocated in the private, where men and women both are present.

Lady Glencora is once again the belle of these events, and the party at Loughlinter allows her to throw her socio-political weight around. Violet, a potential love interest of Phineas’s, says she would “give one of [her] little fingers to go” to Loughlinter, specifically because “there will be four Cabinet Ministers in the house, and four un-Cabinet Ministers, and half a dozen other members of Parliament, and there will be Lady Glencora Palliser, who is the best fun in the world; and, in point of fact, it’s the thing of the year” (95). Still “fun,” Lady Glencora has likewise “taken lately very strongly to politics, which she discussed among men and women of both parties with something more than ordinary audacity” (96). She is no longer the unruly party guest whom Plantagenet hesitates to leave alone for fear that she might make reckless faux pas, and she can now hold her own in political discourse, even taking certain ministers to task for their inactivity: “‘What a nice, happy, lazy time you’ve had of it since you’ve been in,’ she said to the Earl. . . . ‘But you’ve done nothing. Mr Palliser has twenty schemes of reform, all mature; but among you you’ve not let him bring one of them’” (96). Later at the same party at Saulsby Wood, she makes an argument in support of the central tenet of what she calls “my politics,”

It is likely that Violet’s “un-Cabinet Ministers” are merely junior ministers without cabinet positions, but it is tempting to juxtapose them with Mrs. Veneering, Dickens’s W.M.P. – female counterparts of and partners in politicking to their M.P. husbands.

Here we have another pun on “party politics.” Lady Glencora discusses politics with people at both the Saulsby Wood party and the Loughlinter party; she likewise discusses politics with both Liberals and Conservatives.
claiming that equality between men and women is at the “heart” of liberalism (105). These views and their development are in keeping with what Christopher Harvie calls Trollope’s progressive structure. “Conservatives,” he says, “as elitists, make their literary-political pattern a sort of dance – the characters perform a sequence of movements and end up where they started.”

Lady Glencora, though, like her husband, is a Liberal who literally progresses, personally and politically, with the plot of the novels. She has become a famous figure in the parties of Matching Priory (and presumably of other M.P.-heavy parties elsewhere), both as a hostess and attendee, who ensures the “fun” of these gatherings—Hadley’s “sleeping, eating, playing”—and as a fellow political operative with her own ideas, who joins her husband in “politicking” by manipulating guests and asserting her personal opinions. Whereas Lady Monk and Mrs. Marsham’s actions remain micropolitical, keeping up domestic appearances and managing the performance of others’ propriety respectively, Lady Glencora overtly engages politics proper alongside her domestic work, not only providing a space for the convening of extra-parliamentary meetings, but also using that space and her presiding power to advance her husband’s and her own political ambitions. They are both politicians, if not in name, then in deed, and they are both committed to the ideals of Liberalism.

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216 Like any politician, Lady Glencora’s machinations are not always successful. By Trollope’s fifth Palliser novel, *The Prime Minister*, Plantagenet has filled the eponymous role, and, as a result, Lady Glencora (now a Duchess) appears to overestimate her own political sway. She implies that her husband will endorse the possibly Jewish Spaniard, Ferdinand Lopez, if he stands for Parliament, which proves to be a foolhardy mistake. When Plantagenet does not follow through and Ferdinand is forced to withdraw his name from the ballot, the latter sues for the reimbursement of his campaigning expenses and causes a momentary political scandal. Pamela K. Gilbert suggests that Trollope here “insists . . . that the days of social influences are over,” *The Citizen’s Body: Desire, Health, and the Social in Victorian England*, (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007), 123n. I counter, however, by the simple suggestion that one
3.3 Evenings and (Social) Politics in *Miss Marjoribanks*

Margaret Oliphant’s Lucilla Marjoribanks occupies the furthest extreme of the spectrum delimited by this chapter’s three authors, acting as the limit case for female politico-domestic power and indicating some of the potential problems in the depiction and reception of this kind of feminine agency. Lucilla’s blatantly political ambitions have resulted in complicated and contradictory readings of *Miss Marjoribanks* and its author: are they feminist, antifeminist, or somewhere in between? Do they offer successful and redemptive depictions of female political agency or ironic censures of a too-brazen, vacuous antiheroine? Any discussion of *Miss Marjoribanks* must grapple with its complicated position on the feminist/antifeminist spectrum, and with uneasy (and unanswerable) questions about its author’s intentions. Melissa Schaub notes that one’s reading of Oliphant and her views is largely dependent on which aspect of her writing is being scrutinized: her fiction scans as feminist, her nonfiction as antifeminist; the events of *Miss Marjoribanks*’s narrative seem to support the universal equality of men and women, but her tone in describing them does not. Critics who focus on the plot of her novel see Oliphant’s heroine as an empowered icon of feminist equality; by contrast, those who consider Oliphant’s ironic tone often read the novel as heavy-handedly critical, where Lucilla and her machinations are satirized and her achievements mocked. Schaub notes that the “narrator, however, never openly endorses a critical reading of the irony, instead professing great

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socio-political misstep need not be a metonym for all socio-political endeavors, particularly as *The Prime Minister* is preceded by texts like *Can You Forgive Her?* and *Phineas Finn*, which suggest an exactly contradictory narrative.

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regard and affection for Lucilla,” and that, even if this affection is itself ironic, “it creates an
ambivalence that makes the narrative tone complicated at best” (200). Furthermore, regardless of
Oliphant’s or even Lucilla’s feminist or antifeminist convictions, Schaub insists that “the power
that Lucilla achieves is presented by the novel as real” (224).

I do not aim to answer such contested questions, but rather to analyze what is
unquestionably present in the text: this power—indubitably real in its accomplishments—that
places Miss Marjoribanks in a unique position among her contemporary fictional analogues.
Lucilla takes things a step beyond Mrs. Veneering and Lady Glencora, both as a hostess and a
political operative. Though a daughter rather than a wife, Lucilla acts as a kind of mistress of her
father’s domestic affairs, playing the consummate hostess and doing so in a fashion far more
visible and far more articulated than either of the other aforementioned women.218 Her two major
objectives upon returning to Carlingford, following the completion of her education, are to “be a
comfort to dear papa” and “to revolutionise society” there, and the steps she takes toward this
latter goal form the subject matter of most of the novel’s first half.219 Her social revolution is at
first confined to the world of dining and entertaining: she is “pleased with the success of [her
father] the Doctor’s dinners,” but also “a little piqued to think that they owed nothing to herself”
(36), and she eventually commits herself to dragging Carlingford society out of “the prehistoric
period” and into a new age under her rule (41). Upon filling a power vacuum that exists in the
village’s social world, Lucilla can then set about deploying her domestic preeminence in more

218 In fact, as I discuss in more detail later, her liminal status as an unmarried daughter
rather than a wife—a kind of housedaughter, as it were, with a similar familial status but fewer
behavioral restrictions—enables Lucilla to fill a more capacious role as both domestic hostess
and political operative, acting as the private arm of the political machine.

219 Margaret Oliphant, Miss Marjoribanks (New York: Penguin, 2006), 39. Subsequent
references cited parenthetically.
specific, broad-reaching ways, with her sights set on backroom political machinations that will
determine who is best suited to represent Carlingford in parliamentary affairs and simultaneously
elevate her status from hostess to political insider.

Many critics have engaged with Lucilla’s status as a hostess-cum-political influencer, the
most famous being Elizabeth Langland, who argues that she “seizes control of local society
through a dexterous manipulation of domestic discursive practices and a clever staging of class
and femininity.”220 In a more specified iteration of Langland’s argument, Andrea Kaston Tange
has claimed that, beyond ideas, Lucilla also manipulates a specific location, “her elegant drawing
room,” and that that manipulation “is the most important ingredient of her success” in that it
becomes a properly middle-class-coded “container for her original and often remarkably
‘unfeminine’ projects.”221 These critics are each too narrow in their evaluation of Lucilla and her
power, with Langland acknowledging only her control of “local society” and Tange privileging
the space of the drawing room over the use to which that space is put.222 By the end of the novel,
as I later discuss, Lucilla’s ambitions expand from influencing Carlingford’s elections to, in a
partnership with her new husband Tom, affecting those at the county level (not to mention,
implicitly, national politics), just as her control of the drawing room eventually extends to


221 Andrea Kaston Tange, Architectural Identities: Domesticity, Literature, and the Victorian Middle Classes (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 82.

222 Tange’s argument is necessarily architecturally focused, in keeping with her book’s
larger claim that the Victorian home as a space was the cultural sign of one’s middle-class status;
and it is true that Lucilla goes to great lengths to ensure that her drawing room is in keeping with
“the prejudices of society,” Oliphant, 55. But to limit the source of her power to the space that
she occupies is remarkably reminiscent of the Angel in the House ideologies articulated by
Coventry Patmore, John Ruskin, and, more recently, Susan K. Harris, from whom she claims to
diverge on this exact point, Tange, 64.
control of Marchbank, a large landed estate and the Marjoribankses’ ancestral home. I therefore look at events that are not limited to one space or locality, but that bridge the gap between drawing room and estate, village and county: Miss Marjoribanks’s “Evenings.”

Though Lucilla Marjoribanks engages in a move from private to political (via the social gathering) that is almost identical to those seen in Our Mutual Friend and Can You Forgive Her?, a number of differences distinguish her methodologies from those of her literary peers. For one thing, her “Evenings” are not dinner parties at all, but deliberately informal postprandial get-togethers, with a standing invitation open to any of her friends. They purport to deviate from the strict regimen of dinner party protocols, though in fact, inviting guests to less formal after-dinner gatherings was not a unique social practice. More importantly, it is the tenor of these evenings, rather than their specific protocols, that distinguishes them from the dinners of the Veneerings or the more typical parties and balls attended and hosted by the Pallisers:

“Dear papa,” said Lucilla sweetly, “it is so dreadful to hear you say parties. Everybody knows that the only thing I care for in life is to be a comfort to you; and as for dancing, I saw at once that was out of the question. Dancing is all very well,” said Miss Marjoribanks thoughtfully; “but it implies quantities of young people—and young people can never make what I call society. It is Evenings I mean to have, papa.” (70)

In an ironic articulation of the central argument which this project as a whole rejects, Lucilla states that true society is incompatible with the supposed frivolity of parties. From her choice in dress (a “white frock, high” rather than the articles of “a grand toilette”) to her choice in entertainment (the local and lower-class Barbara Lake rather than “professional singers”), Lucilla

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223 Beeton has the following to say on the matter: “AFTER-DINNER INVITATIONS MAY BE GIVEN; by which we wish to be understood, invitations for the evening. The time of the arrival of these visitors will vary according to their engagements, or sometimes will be varied in obedience to the caprices of fashion,” 24. One can imagine Lucilla referring to Mrs Beeton’s Book of Household Management in her effort to “be a comfort to dear papa,” and then taking up her suggestion of “invitations for the evening” as a guiding principle of her Thursday gatherings.
is careful to distinguish her evenings from the more formal and paradoxically less serious dinner parties of her peers, always striving to instill her evenings with a sense of gravity that prohibits the opportunity for humor (111). This laser-like focus on a solemn, sober-minded version of society reveals Lucilla’s overt sense that social gatherings should accomplish something. Unlike the parties of the Veneerings and Pallisers, whose extra-social, extra-domestic effects are, at least on their faces, byproducts of the “main event” of entertainment and enjoyment, Lucilla’s evenings have the stated purpose of reforming society and, eventually, effecting political change. When Barbara’s superior singing seems to momentarily threaten Lucilla’s social dominance, Lucilla goes so far as to compare herself to “an accomplished statesman, who sees a rash and untrained hand meddling with his most delicate machinery,” suggesting that her evenings are a kind of “machinery” akin to a fellow statesman’s political machinations (120). Her evenings, she asserts, are a means, and not an end.

Furthermore, Lucilla is a hostess without a host, whose social movements are in part an attempt to make up for what her widowed father has lost in his wife’s death (though in fact, the late Mrs. Marjoribanks was an invalid and near recluse). She does not initially partner with a husband or mate either socially or romantically but instead selects Mr. Ashburton, a lawyer, as her favored political representative, determining that he shall represent her borough’s interests in Parliament. Rather than taking a supporting (but nonetheless essential) role in a husband’s parliamentary campaign, Lucilla acts as campaign manager, repurposing her social energies into more overt political engagement than might otherwise be possible for one of Dickens’s W.M.P.s. Mr. Cavendish’s sister Mrs. Woodburn believes as much, admitting to herself “that it would be

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224 In a typical example of Oliphant’s irony, the joke is that, though Lucilla herself lacks a sense of humor, her exaggerated sense of self-importance and refinement are the object of numerous narratorial jokes at her expense.
very foolish of Miss Marjoribanks to marry, and forfeit all her advantages, and take somebody
else’s anxieties upon her shoulders, and never have any money except what she asked from her
husband” (375). She goes on, regretting the fact that she herself has “as may be said, two men to
carry on her shoulders”:

She had her husband to keep in good humour, and her brother to keep up and keep to the
mark, and to do what she could to remedy in public the effects of his indolent Continental
habits, and carry, if was possible, the election for him—all with the horrid sense upon her
mind that if at any time the dinner should be a little less cared for than usual, or the
children more noisy, Woodburn would go on like a savage. (375)

This is the great feminist moment of the novel—or at least the articulation of novel’s great
feminist complaint. When determining what it is that is keeping Mrs. Woodburn from being as
politically-minded as Lucilla, she can only arrive at one conclusion: men. Her time is devoted to
husbands and brothers, people whom she needs to manage and whose approval she must
maintain, who keep her from managing more exciting political affairs. Lucilla, however, is
unfettered by any concerns but her own, and rather than choosing to come alongside in support
of a man’s professional and political plans, she is the initiating force behind Mr. Ashburton’s
parliamentary aspirations, using him as an appropriate proxy that enables her to leverage social
prestige for political success.

Lucilla is, as a result, this chapter’s most explicit case of domestically derived political
power, with Oliphant straightforwardly progressing her heroine from a paragon of entertaining to
an undisputed political force. In a move that resembles Mrs. Veneering’s implicit duties in Our
Mutual Friend, but which is ultimately far more self-conscious, Lucilla begins her political
career by taking control of her home, “harmonis[ing] the rooms” by rearranging the furniture and
converting the drawing room from “an abstract English drawing-room of the old school into Miss
Marjoribanks’s drawing room, an individual spot of ground revealing something of the character
of its mistress” (50 emphasis added). Once these preparations are completed, tailored to suit Lucilla’s unique identity (and her physical appearance), she initiates what she calls “her campaign . . . just before Christmas, at the time above all others when society has need of a ruling spirit” (99). She is ostensibly ruminating on her goal to revolutionize Carlingford society, though of course Oliphant’s choice of the word “campaign” is deliberate, bringing to mind both military incursions and sustained parliamentary electioneering. It is in the midst of her social campaign that Lucilla’s political ambitions begin to materialize as a result of a conversation with Mr. Cavendish, a potential love interest with a mind to stand for Parliament himself:

“As for your conception of social politics, it is masterly,” the future M.P. added, in a tone which struck Lucilla as very significant; not that she cared particularly about Mr Cavendish’s meaning, but still, when a young man who intends to go into Parliament congratulates a young lady upon her statesmanlike views, and her conception of politics, it must be confessed that it looks a little particular. (111)

Despite the narrator’s suggestion that Lucilla does not care about her interlocutor’s “meaning,” an important slippage occurs that suggests rather a willful disregard for his stated message: though Cavendish refers to her “social politics,” Lucilla receives his compliment as if it were a comment on her conception of politics proper, valorizing her “statesmanliness.” Here again, Oliphant’s ironic tone is significant, as she is quietly mocking Lucilla’s tendency to hear what she wants to hear, and to find earnestness where there is in fact only polite banter. Mr. Cavendish does not treat the “Evening” with the same gravity Lucilla does, nor does he share her interest in potentially progressing their relationship, preferring instead to pursue greater intimacy with Barbara Lake. Still, Lucilla’s narrow views of herself, her evenings, and their purposes prove to be far less misguided than they at first appear, as she is in fact a masterful stateswoman with a unique degree of influence on eventual parliamentary elections.
Thinking further on this exchange with Cavendish, it occurs to Lucilla that “there was something in the very idea of being M.P. for Carlingford which moved the mind” and that “It was a perfectly ideal position for a woman of her views, and seemed to offer the very field that was necessary for her ambition” (114). In context, she seems to believe that the “perfectly ideal position for a woman of her views” is not as an M.P., but as the wife of an M.P. Due to Oliphant’s intentionally vague phrasing, however, it reads as though the perfect occupation for a woman with Lucilla’s beliefs, abilities, and determination is as a Member of Parliament herself. Whereas Trollope’s Alice Vavasor is “not so far advanced as to think that women should be lawyers and doctors, or to wish that she might have the privilege of the franchise for herself” but only has “a hankering after some second-hand political manœuvering,” Lucilla pushes against this secondary position. To be “only” a wife, a W.M.P., when she could be an unofficial politician in her own right, is not enough: she has, after all, taken a course in “political economy,” a detail which we might expect to figure only in matters of economics, but which Lucilla continually deploys as evidence of her fitness for all kinds of sensible decision-making. Indeed, Lucilla seems to do a kind of accidental close reading of the phrase, pulling it apart into its two halves. She tells her teacher, Miss Martha, early on, “you will let me learn all about political economy and things, to help me manage everything,” and the question arises as to how capaciously readers should interpret the word “everything” (33). Initially, Lucilla seems only to refer to matters of her recently widowed father’s household, and yet, the more she deploys this phrase, the greater scope it seems to have, referring at once to the management of money, to general reasoning, and to the managing of politics and politicians as economically as possible, using the few resources available to her. Put another way, Lucilla repurposes her knowledge of

225 Trollope, Can You Forgive Her?, 87.
personal economy for the management of politics as well. Indeed, when Cavendish first praises her “conception of social politics” in their aforementioned exchange, she replies, “Oh, you know, I went through a course of political economy at Mount Pleasant,” to which he in turn responds, “I think you ought to be Prime Minister” (111). She, however, has her sights set on a position initially more local, symbolic, and, significantly, ceremonial: “To marry a man in his [Cavendish’s] position . . . would constitute Lucilla a kind of queen in Carlingford” (102). Any Victorian reference to queenship must bring to mind Victoria herself, and, in the context of Miss Marjoribanks, readers cannot help but think of her status as queen regnant. Lucilla does not desire a king, but the power and autonomy of queenliness, garnered as much from her knowledge of political economy as it is from her own sense of a joint “manful” and “womanful” capability.

This view of herself does not extend to womankind in general, and it is certainly not women’s equality that motivates Lucilla. She is no Victorian suffragette, no Josephine Butler, whose progressive views included female enfranchisement, the end of coverture, and better education for women, and who sought women’s involvement in government so that women could, in her words, “raise our voices to claim what we claim now—freedom and power to reach

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226 Schaub has written about the ways in which this notion of queenliness is complicated for Lucilla, noting that “Queenship . . . is a fully hypostatized role, one that women are rather than do,” and that “Oliphant rewrites queenliness to emphasize this gap between being and doing,” 203-204. For the purposes of this chapter, however, Lucilla’s (misguided) conception of her own queenliness is what is significant.

227 Oliphant only refers explicitly to Lucilla’s dual “manfulness” and “womanfulness” in reference to Ashburton’s eventual proposal, wherein she fights “manfully, womanfully against the weakness which hitherto must have been lying hidden in some out-of-the-way corner in her heart,” 468.
and deal with great social evils.”228 In fact, Lucilla does not appear to hold any concrete political views in need of voicing, nor does she articulate any evils in need of policing: “Lucilla was not of very marked political opinions, and perhaps was not quite aware what Mr Ashburton’s views were on the Irish Church question, or upon parliamentary reform; but she said after, that it came into her mind in a moment, like a flash of lightning, that he was the man” (344).229 The rudimentary concerns of the day hold no sway over Lucilla’s decision-making process in selecting Ashburton as her political proxy.230 He is simply “the man” for Carlingford, not because of any inherent qualities or foundational views, but because he is someone about whom Lucilla has vaguely defined convictions. Because she sees political views as mutable ideas that can be changed simply as a result of one’s influence, Ashburton’s actual opinions and eventual, potential voting pattern play no role in his selection. “If they are not of the same way of thinking” she says of possible supporters of his political opponents, “we must make them . . . besides, what does it matter about opinions? I am sure I have heard you all saying over and over that the thing was to have a good man” (346 emphasis original). In this way, Lucilla resembles not Mrs. Veneering, in her unacknowledged auxiliary role, but Mr. Veneering. While he desires the popularity and prominence that comes with being a Member of Parliament, Lucilla’s


229 In an additional instance of Lucilla’s potential “manfulness,” Lucilla further describes this “flash of lightning” in another way, telling Ashburton that he “came into her mind like—like Minerva,” thus figuring herself as a new Jupiter, fathering a figure supposedly emblematic of her own wisdom, 344. She is the creator of Ashburton as a political figure, and he merely her feminized brainchild.

230 In fact, she even purports not to “see any difference” between “Tories and Whigs, or anything of the sort,” though it remains unclear whether we should take this assertion seriously or not, 346.
parliamentary ambitions are founded not on any altruistic belief in the power of political assembly but on the desire to find a receptacle for her excess ambition:

To have the control of society in her hands was a great thing; but still the mere means, without any end, was not worth Lucilla’s while—and her Thursdays were almost a bore to her in her present stage of development. It was this that made Mr Ashburton so interesting to her, and his election a matter into which she entered so warmly, for she had come to an age at which she might have gone into Parliament herself had there been no disqualification of sex, and when it was almost a necessity for her to make some use of her social influence. (394)

Where her evenings were once a means to “have the control of society in her hands,” now that control has become a means itself, the natural end of which is a political career. But because her gender precludes her from obtaining that career in her own right, she exercises her influence over Ashburton and, what’s more, stokes the sentiments of other similarly disenfranchised women to procure for him the social equivalent of the “woman vote”:

. . . naturally, she threw all the younger portion of Grange Lane . . . into a flutter of excitement. Among these rash young people there were even a few individuals who took Lucilla’s word for it, and knew that Mr Ashburton was very nice, and did not see that anything more was necessary. To be sure, these enthusiasts were chiefly women, and in no cases had the vote, but Miss Marjoribanks, with instinctive correctness of judgment, decided that there were more things to be thought of than electors. (350)

As a woman with an overabundance of ambition, she can tap into the latent energies of her unambitious peers to stimulate interest in her preferred candidate—and Oliphant is clear that she does so by deploying the power generated by her social preeminence, which is itself a result of her masterful management of her weekly Evenings. In fact, “these enthusiasts,” otherwise called “rash young people,” who are “chiefly women” are most excited by “the idea of wearing a violet-and-green cockade” in support of Ashburton (350). Of course, it is Lucilla who chooses these signature colors, asserting their preeminent importance over all other campaign choices (despite Ashburton’s mocking laughter at the notion)—and it is these colors that adorn the walls of Dr. Marjoribanks’s redecorated drawing room, at Lucilla’s urging. She has effectively used
the drawing room as an incubator for, if not true political passion, “rash enthusiasm,” allowing her domestic influence to proliferate and her ostensibly apolitical followers to carry her cause for her, marked with visual indicators of their allegiance to Miss Marjoribanks’s drawing room and its attendant social politics, and thereby accomplishing political ends without real political power.

One of the byproducts of Oliphant’s sometimes opaque treatment of Lucilla is an unclear final appraisal of this marriage of the social with the political. Whereas Dickens, with the author of the Review’s “POLITICAL CONVIVIALITIES,” seems to locate in the connection a miscarriage of democratic principles, and Trollope takes the union of politics and domestic sociability as an imperfect matter of course, Oliphant treats Lucilla and her machinations in a manner that resembles Jane Austen’s portrayal of Emma Woodhouse: the two heroines are humorously misguided, with a bloated sense of self-importance, and yet they are sympathetic, capable of moments of striking insight and essentially unselfish in their attempts to benefit society. When Mrs. Woodburn decries the burden of the “two men . . . on her shoulders,” Lucilla’s relative freedom and socio-political power read as significant and worthy of commemoration; when the foundation for Lucilla’s allegiance to Ashburton is scrutinized (a “lightning strike” of intuition; a committed avoidance of actual political issues), their success in the election appears to be at best amusing and at worst regrettable. Then again, to look for a moral imperative in Oliphant’s persistently ambiguous narrative is a foolhardy endeavor. Like Lucilla, Oliphant is not so much concerned with right and wrong as she is with the fact of power—for Lucilla, the fact of her own power, for Oliphant, the power of Lucillas more generally.

231 “Lucilla had become conscious that her capabilities were greater than her work. She was a Power in Carlingford, and she knew it,” Oliphant, 394.
In a move resembling Gaskell’s conclusion to *Cranford*, Oliphant closes Lucilla’s story with a relative named Tom returning from India. Like Miss Matty’s brother, Lucilla’s cousin spends the majority of the novel out of sight, working with the EIC. In the tradition of Gaskell’s Tom Jenkyns, Wilkie Collins’s Walter Hartright, and Dickens’s Magwitch, Tom Marjoribanks returns from abroad changed and rehabilitated—though he was less in need of such a process than either Jenkyns or Magwitch—and the prospect of Lucilla’s marrying him becomes incrementally more appealing. While a lazy reading of the text might class their nuptials as a failure of feminine independence—one more tally mark in the long list of marriage plot novels that end in the usual way—Langland, Schaub, and Talia Schaffer all read the marriage as empowering for Lucilla, with Schaffer calling the marriage a “vocational” one, wherein Lucilla uses her new husband to improve cottagers’ lives (again a result of ambition rather than altruism) and to “get Tom into Parliament.” I agree, but with the caveat that these critics treat the marriage as something loveless and mercenary, despite Lucilla’s own realization that it will provide a space for “honest love” (474) and her assertion that, while she could “assume the sovereign authority in her own house . . . to marry anybody that would be merely an appendage to her was a thing not to be thought of” (481). After becoming *Mrs.* Marjoribanks, Lucilla sets to work, thinking about what Tom can do, and, while reading the *Carlingford Gazette* one morning, she experiences another lightning-like flash. She shakes hands with herself, as if she embodies both parties of a business deal, and leaves the paper folded in such a way that Tom will see it—

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232 Talia Schaffer, *Romance’s Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 221. Langland argues that the marriage “spells not a diminishment of her social power but its increase and new direction,” 171. Schaub claims that, instead of “dwind[ing] into a wife,” Lucilla “is translated into another and better realm, with her identity in tact,” but also notes that Oliphant’s contradictory tone in describing her eventual move to Marchbank “is meant to make us feel sorry for the residents [there] rather than glad for Lucilla,” 200.
and see that the Marchbank estate, once owned by their shared great-great-grandfather, is for sale.

Tom takes the bait (because everyone takes Lucilla’s bait), but before he makes his decision, she offers a partial plan for what will come next: “you could improve the land, you know, and do all that sort of thing, and the people you could leave to me” (485). Tom objects that land “doesn’t pay,” but his new wife’s refutation is simple and assured: “We could make it pay” (486 emphasis original). Whereas Mrs. Veneering and Lady Glencora have their abilities and duties co-opted in service of their husbands’ parliamentary ambitions, Lucilla, for all her flighty failings, meets Tom head on, and capitalizes on her husband’s abilities and assets as it suits her own desires. “We could make it pay,” she insists; not “You,” but “You and I,” partners in investment and improvement. Furthermore, her machinations move from the background to the foreground: even if she first suggests Marchbank to Tom by way of passive aggressive newspaper placement, Tom’s failure to read the paper on his own leads her to eventually engage him in a discussion that, though it is “confused by some slightly unintelligible conditions about doing good to one’s fellow-creatures,” is “not a trifling or romantic suggestion” (486). She insists on the move, on her terms, assuring Tom of eventual financial profit for the both of them. But of course, Lucilla Marjoribanks is not to be satisfied with economic success alone. “The people” whom she has told Tom to “leave to me” are in need of a social leader—a queen, as it were:

“And there are members for counties as well,” Lucilla, in the depths of her soul, said to herself. Then there rose up before her a vision of a parish saved, a village reformed, a county reorganised, and a triumphant election at the end, the recompense and crown of all, which should put the government of the country itself, to a certain extent, into competent hands. (497)
As Mrs. Marjoribanks, Lucilla’s ambitions—and her potential for fulfilling them—have grown, stretching beyond a mere borough seat to the county seat of the landed gentry, a socially (if no longer politically) superior position representing a larger geographic region of the country’s richest, most privileged citizens. Exactly whose “competent hands” are now governing the country is ambiguous. Tom, like Ashburton, is presumably “the right man” for the job, which would suggest that Lucilla views him as the capable politician for the county. But, of course, another set of competent hands are guiding Tom’s, reforming his constituents and managing his supporters and opponents, not in the supporting role of “Angel in the House,” but as an equal—a “We.”

It should be acknowledged that, though Lucilla’s, Ashburton’s, and Tom’s political views remain opaque, both Dickens’s and Trollope’s politics are more in line with the Pallisers’ than the Veneerings’. It is therefore unsurprising if the latter are the most obvious subjects of critique. To argue, however, that Dickens derides the Veneerings simply because he does not agree with their implied Toryism is inadequate. The Veneerings are mocked for attempting to pass off their “bran new” world as something authentic, and, furthermore, for trying to deploy these empty possessions as fuel for political power. For Hamilton and Anastatia, outside trappings mask interior moral bankruptcy while purporting to be representative of social, professional, and political value. Social performances at parties and the physical accoutrements of those events—accoutrements achieved by unproductive speculation—stand in for actual, interior worth and productive investment in society. For the Pallisers, by contrast, social aptitude is evidence of inherent noble virtue; or if that virtue is not inherent, their joint political efficacy is an apology for society’s tendency to treat it as such. Plantagenet acts as Trollope’s enduring “justification” for the continued existence of the nobility in the face of liberal progress; Lady Glencora, despite
her immutably high rank, represents progress itself, in the form of a kind of learned interior nobility. Born into a title, she grows into the noble attributes that that title supposedly produces, while likewise growing noble in ambition.

In both novels, the party lays bare the presence or absence of actual virtues. The objectives of instituting or attending social occasions may be primarily social, professional, and political, but the outcomes are equally personal, private, and individual. *Miss Marjoribanks* is the exception, acting as Oliphant’s alternative to the more black-and-white social systems of Trollope and Dickens. Her dual motives of expelling ambition and finding “the right man” with “competent hands” to assist in governing the country seem at first contradictory to one another. But when read in the context of Dickens’s and Trollope’s novels, Lucilla essentially gives voice to the silent Mrs. Veneering, while enjoying freedoms and opportunities from which Lady Glencora finds herself excluded. And rather than letting the novel stand as a kind of opprobrium on the institution of marriage, Oliphant allows Lucilla to remain “a power,” despite her removal from Carlingford and her eventual transition into *Mrs.* Marjoribanks. “And yet it is odd to think that, after all, I shall never be anything but Lucilla Marjoribanks,” Lucilla says in the novel’s final paragraph. The narrator continues: “If there could be any name that would have suited her better, or is surrounded by more touching associations, we leave it to her other friends to find out; for at the moment of taking leave of her, there is something consoling to our own mind in the thought that Lucilla can now suffer no change of name” (498). Her marriage, then, results in a change of location, of wealth, and perhaps status, as she is now a county estate holder rather than a woman dependent on her middle-class father’s annuities; but it does not result in a change of identity. She is forever Lucilla Marjoribanks, and the marriage, it would seem, is essentially an egalitarian one, where two Marjoribankses become *the* Marjoribankses, each with their own
roles: for him, management of the land; for her, management of the people—or perhaps more aptly, the populace.

3.4 Conclusion: Convivial Politicality

When the writers at the *Saturday Review* lob critiques at so-called “political convivialities,” their points are valid insofar as M.P.s nominally representing their constituents behind closed doors causes alarm bells to ring. But implicit in their uneasiness is the idea that politics should be somehow impersonal—that individual subjectivities, personal values, and social competencies should be set aside with regard to elections and government policy. Writers at the *Saturday Review* and their predecessors at the *Examiner* fall into the trap of assuming that politicized dinners and parties are frivolous occasions, hardly more serious than other “demonstrational banquets,” that have been stretched to the limit of their efficacy. The practice of using the party as a proxy for proper political assembly is, for these critics, detestable precisely because they fail to recognize the potential of these parties to reveal as often as they conceal. The Veneerings can only mask their shallowness and incompetence for so long before the Voice of Society expels them from both polite society and political office, despite their performance of wealth and propriety; likewise, Lady Glencora’s party dalliances are glimpses into her own interior independence and necessarily threaten her husband’s political futures. The parties of *Phineas Finn* are then representative of her personal rehabilitation. She has grown, *progressing*, in Harvie’s sense of the word, and gatherings at Matching Priory and Loughlinter allow her to prove that, reinforcing Plantagenet’s fitness for his position in the process. Lucilla Marjoribanks, as has been said, is unique. Pamela K. Gilbert somewhat paradoxically calls her apolitical methods of supporting man over party “a tribute to liberalism” that “works to convince voters who are diametrically opposed to him politically . . . to judge him [Ashburton] as a
citizen, a neighbor and consumer, rather than evaluating his politics.” While I hesitate to ascribe such deliberate reformist motivations to her epiphonic decision to back Ashburton, that idealized liberalism is a side effect of Lucilla’s machinations is an indication, in an otherwise morally opaque narrative, of the party and the party hostess’s real and redeemable power.

Political dinner parties thus expose the already vulnerable myth of a purely public political sphere. They reinforce contemporary discourses arguing that a distinction between the private and public spheres is not only arbitrary but also flawed. They likewise allow for a reassessment of the gendered, implicitly sexist perspective according to which Victorian political practices have generally been appraised. Even an author like Dickens, whose ambivalence toward domestically-manipulated politics is clear, cannot ignore the tangible power of women who have mastered the complex protocols of party-giving. To see this particular iteration of domesticated professionalism, the private political work of the home, as superficial or less equitable than the more conspicuously public work of Westminster is to refuse to acknowledge the influence of women specifically and domesticity in general in the political sphere. Though some proponents of gender equality often rail against the limitations of just wifedom—and particularly Victorian wifedom—the figures of Anastasia Veneering, Lady Glencora Palliser, and Lucilla Marjoribanks remind us that such women were political operatives in their own right, whose management of home affairs could threaten or advance both the careers of politically-minded men and their own pet policies, simply by performing their “feminine duties” of furnishing the home and overseeing “sleeping, eating, and playing.” Which, of course, was not a simple thing after all.

233 Gilbert, 128.
CHAPTER FOUR

“DOMESTIC VIRTUES, NATIONAL IMPORTANCE”: PARTIES IN THE AGE OF GLOBALISM

As the previous chapters show, the party in Victorian literature is at once imagined to be strictly controlled—hermetic, even, with regard to who was in and who was out—and open to the reverberations of outside forces that can inhere in surprising, sometimes subversive ways. This chapter takes up that largest of outside forces in the nineteenth century: globalism, a kind of elephant on the page, whose presence is felt even in the most explicitly domestic novels of the period. Lauren Goodlad has argued that the nineteenth-century realist novel was particularly adroit in its ability to adapt itself in order to “craft aesthetic forms receptive to the dynamism of a fast-globalizing world.”234 The realist novel’s myriad of portrayals of sociability demonstrates Goodlad’s claim in action and indicates the significance of domestic entertaining as an archetype of Englishness or Britishness (or sometimes, more generally, Westernness) in an increasingly interconnected, diversified global network. The party in Victorian literature, in its various manifestations, is almost explicitly anti-global, made up as it is of a small collection of British subjects, usually taking place in the home or in some nearby location reserved for sociable events—a far cry from the distant regions within the boundaries of Britain’s ever-expanding rule. But, of course, the repercussions of imperialism were inescapable—imperialism was “crucial,” in

fact, in Gayatri Spivak’s words, in “the cultural representation of England to the English.” The British Empire, past and then-present, shows its reach in the oranges eaten by the Cranford ladies, in the camels which decorate the Veneerings’ table in Our Mutual Friend, and in Jeffrey Palliser’s vaguely abolitionist tableside overtures to Alice Vavasor in Can You Forgive Her?; it is in the turbans and shawls women wore to dinner parties, the porcelain dishes from which food and drink were served, the tobacco smoked by men once the women had retired, and the textiles used to furnish drawing rooms where guests would spend their after-dinner hours.

In this chapter, I look at unambiguous encounters with foreignness, made possible by colonial and imperial conquests, in nineteenth-century novels where sociability plays a significant role in either characterization or the advancement of plot. Thanks to the work of scholars such as Elaine Freedgood, that the global infiltrates the local, daily, and domestic in nineteenth-century life and fiction is now obvious. More relevant for the purposes of this project is the consistent and overt resistance put forth by both characters and authors in the face of conspicuous indications of globalism, rather than those that pervaded their lived experiences without being remarked upon. Much of postcolonial and post-postcolonial theory and criticism of the last twenty years has looked at the ways that colonized subjects resist and reject the authority of their colonizers. This chapter, with one exception, considers life in the metropole,

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236 Freedgood’s work on the day-to-day materials present in Victorian fiction, from Jane Eyre’s mahogany furniture to cotton curtains in Mary Barton and Negro Head Tobacco in Great Expectations, encourages readers to look “beyond the covers of the text” and to think about the stories such objects tell in the context of a globalized and globalizing world, The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 5.
and looks at the party’s role in both acknowledging the globalizing world at a distance and refusing to acknowledge its immediate (and, of course, often negative) repercussions.

Thinking about British sociability in a globalized world necessarily means that this chapter includes the dissertation’s only non-British-authored texts: Leonora Sansay’s Secret History, or The Horrors of St. Domingo (1808) and Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women (1868-69). Reading the former together with Jane Austen’s Persuasion (1818) provides two roughly contemporaneous accounts of Anglicized social life in a world disrupted by global interconnectivity. Little Women offers an American perspective on the globalized Europe, where encounters with cosmopolitanism are strictly limited to sociable engagements, but where those encounters only result in the further stratification by nationality; likewise, the novel gestures vaguely to European and American histories of colonization, though in a typically bowdlerized, distancing fashion. This chapter concludes with Wilkie Collins’s The Moonstone (1868), a novel impelled by foreign incursions into what should be a purely domestic sociable occasion: Rachel Verinder’s birthday party. The Moonstone offers an account, contemporaneous to Little Women, of the British metropole, again centered around a particular social engagement, but is explicit in its portrayal of the consequences of British imperialism, depicting resistance by both Britons, who believe themselves entitled to the spoils of empire, and their colonized subjects.

In literature that is at least aware of and informed by globalism (if not necessarily “world literature” itself), the party, then, acts as a litmus test for the degree to which Western authors and their characters are comfortable with or interested in acknowledging the imbrication of daily life in their nation with the now-interconnected world around it.\(^{237}\) The Anglicized party, which

\(^{237}\) The scope of this project regrettably prohibits the exploration of literary depictions of non-Western parties, particularly those depicted by non-English or “subaltern” writers. A
previous chapters have shown to be structured but flexible in what is allowable and what can be accomplished, here shows itself to be imperfectly insular with regard to its protocols of what is and is not spoken of or recognized. This chapter tracks a trajectory, from the early nineteenth century and the very beginnings of Imperial Britain, to the 1860s, when the Victorian Empire was in full swing (if not quite at its peak). In *Secret History* and its parties, we see an almost reckless refusal to acknowledge the collapse of colonial society and an insistence on the perpetuation a now-outdated version of sociability; in *Persuasion*, sociability that is informed by fantasies of empire and a perfect indifference to the realities of Britain’s naval power (which Sansay makes so obvious in her contemporaneous text) is indicative of the explicit nationalism of Austen’s literary project. In *Little Women*, European polite society and its sociable engagements are diverse, but only within strict limitations, and only so far as divisions between diverse groups remain intact. And finally, in *The Moonstone*, which takes place 100 years after Britain’s first incursions into India, Rachel Verinder’s party is a crumbling monument to a way of life that is always already tainted by Britain’s infiltration of inhabited lands, without regard for existing cultures and the systems by which existing societies are defined and perpetuated. By focusing our attention on sociability in a global-yet-Western setting, each of these novels allows us to examine the way that parties in nineteenth-century fiction functioned as domestic sites of

broader study of sociability would think about *globalized* sociability, rather than Anglicized and Westernized sociability that comes into contact with the non-English and non-Western.

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238 I use “Anglicized party” to refer to any party whose structure and rhythms are in keeping with British expectations of etiquette and order. The parties in *Little Women*, for instance, are explicitly linked to British ideals of sociability, while those in *Secret History* are mirror images of parties alluded to in *Persuasion*, despite their overt cosmopolitanism.

239 Though the British Raj officially began in 1858, the East India Company, by most accounts, first initiated Company Rule in the 1750s.
nationalism and self-preservational desire, with the cultural narrative and strictures of etiquette made much of in the previous chapters acting as (failing) systems for signaling social savoir faire, as barriers to subaltern entry, and as evidence of supposed Western superiority.

4.1 Chatting about “St. Domingo”: White Sociability as Resistance to Transculturation in *Persuasion* and *Secret History*

Austen’s novel is at least partially about the reintegration of naval sailors into British society during peacetime, after those sailors have spent years aboard ship, primarily in the company of men, often encountering European, American, Caribbean, Indian, African, and Middle Eastern cultures obviously distinct from their own.240 As is so often the case with Austen, scenes of sociability in *Persuasion* act as crucibles which prove one’s good manners, proper morality, right to social inclusion, and potential for romantic involvement, and much space is spent discussing how now-worldly sailors in particular fit into the hyper-domestic world of Regency dinners and parties. Sansay, an American who married a Frenchman and spent time in Haiti, interacting there with Haitian natives, freed slaves, French Creoles, British sailors, and American servicemen, fictionalized her own experiences and dedicated ample space to the weirdness of wartime sociability, where the expectations of social engagements persist even in the face of local violence and nationalistic militarism. Both novels hinge on events in or off the coast of the island of Hispaniola: for Sansay, the Haitian uprisings of 1803 and 1804 provide exterior conflict for the novel’s heroine, Clara, amid her more central attempts to climb the rungs

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240 As Mary A. Favret notes, between the years of 1770 and 1815, Great Britain was in a near constant state of war, “sending men to kill and be killed across the globe . . . in continental Europe, North Africa, North America, the Mid East, India, the Mediterranean, and the Caribbean,” *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 145.

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of a failing colonial society; and for Austen, Captain Wentworth’s role in the 1806 Battle of St. Domingo leads to his promotion and accrual of prize money—both prerequisites for his new status, not as an equal of Anne Elliot and her family, but at least as one worthy of being invited to sociable occasions.

Austen is, of course, characteristically mum about the more unseemly realities of Britain’s naval might; Sansay, by contrast, writes a novel which takes place concomitantly with the composition of and events in Austen’s oeuvre, but which is shot through with globalism, colonialism, and cosmopolitanism. She depicts a protagonist who is almost oblivious to the world beyond her own romantic and sexual conquests, which are usually instantiated in dinners, balls, and other parties, and yet uses this character’s history (itself a heavily fictionalized account of her own) to trace and analyze, in Michael J. Drexler’s words, “not ideologically rigid distinctions of caste, but . . . multiple fluid categories,” including unstable hierarchies of gender, geography, and politics. Whereas Sansay is “in the thick of it,” as it were, Austen is necessarily writing at a distance. While Persuasion is one of her more ambulatory novels, ranging from the fictional Kellynch Hall to Lyme and then to Bath, its connections to places like St. Domingo, as well as the East Indies, Lisbon, Gibraltar, Bermuda, and the Bahamas, are mentioned only in passing, despite their significance to the history of characters such as Admiral

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241 That Sansay’s work is a novel is in fact a point of contention. Michael J. Drexler points out that is has been variously classed as a work of autobiographical fiction, a hybrid of autobiography and romance, and a roman à clef with a too-obvious key, Messy Beginnings: Postcoloniality and Early American Studies, ed. Malini Johar Schueller and Edward Watts (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 184. For the sake of simplicity, I will consider Secret History, as Drexler does, to be a work of fiction with autobiographical and historical elements.

242 Michael J. Drexler, introduction to Leonora Sansay’s Secret History; or, the Horrors of St. Domingo and Laura (Buffalo: Broadview, 2007), 26.
and Mrs. Croft, Mrs. Smith, and Captains Wentworth, Benwick, and Harville, as well as, by
association, Anne Elliot and the Musgroves. More specifically, these locations are mentioned
only under the aegis of the British Navy and its operations in the Atlantic, the Caribbean, the
Mediterranean, and, to a lesser degree, the Indian Ocean. Taking these texts in tandem, then,
allows us to see sociability, and essentially, white sociability, at two registers: with Austen, at the
metropole of a budding global empire; and with Sansay, at an imperial outpost—albeit a
contested French imperial outpost—in the midst of its demise.

First, a word on Secret History and its place in a dissertation which primarily focuses on
works by British authors of the nineteenth century. Historian Jeremy Popkin writes that authors
like Sansay, whose eye-witness accounts of colonial life enhanced their credibility as cataloguers
of culture, were participating in a Rousseauian tradition that necessarily operated by transmitting
information from one side of the Atlantic to the other.243 Despite the fact that Sansay, an
American, married to a Frenchman, wrote a novel about a formerly French-controlled colony,
and even formatted that novel as a set of letters to Aaron Burr, Popkin and others read the
literary work of Sansay and her fellow St. Domingan chroniclers (whether black, white, or
creole) as something that is in communication with contemporary British and Anglophone
writers, and therefore part of the same literary discourse, if not the same literary tradition, as the
works of Austen.244 Drexler, too, notes that Sansay’s speculations about political upheavals span

243 Jeremy D. Popkin, Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian

244 Tessie P. Liu situates the novel within “the circum-Atlantic discussions on race and
colonial insurgency during the Napoleonic period” and describes the salacious news stories of
“feminine peril” resulting from Hispaniolan unrest which were “translated into English and
circulated among a transatlantic reading public,” “The Secret beyond White Patriarchal Power:
Race, Gender, and Freedom in the Last Days of Colonial Saint-Domingue” in French Historical
Studies 33.3 (Summer 2010), 387, 389. Marlene L. Daut likewise notes that Sansay’s work was
the entire Western Hemisphere, incorporating various British territories in their breadth.\textsuperscript{245} Sansay’s story is replete with Frenchmen, Haitians, Creoles, and British sailors, and is itself predicated on St. Domingo’s peculiar version of cosmopolitanism: a wartime cosmopolitanism that emphasizes both the instability of a colony on the brink of nationhood and the fixed nature of the micropolitics of daily life and the rhythms of sociability.\textsuperscript{246} A focus on such a variety of nationalities, in a place whose sense of its own geographic, political, and national identity is continuously being destabilized, renders the questions of a work’s place in a specific nation’s canon, if not moot, then mutable.

In fact, despite Sansay’s keen interest in the complex power struggles of her day and her personal history spent traveling between present-day Haiti and the United States, her depiction of Hispaniola is in some ways as vague and featureless as Austen’s. The “St. Domingo” of Sansay is more properly referred to as Saint-Domingue, the French colony which is now Haiti. Austen’s “St. Domingo” technically refers to the east side of the island, the Spanish colony Santo Domingo or San Domingo, which is now the Dominican Republic, where the 1806 Battle of San

\textsuperscript{245} Drexler, \textit{Messy Beginnings}, 186.

\textsuperscript{246} Throughout this chapter, I use the term “cosmopolitanism” with Tanya Agathocleous’s \textit{Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination in the Nineteenth Century} in mind. Agathocleous notes that other terms that “transcend a focus on the nation and nationalism, such as transnational, geopolitical, global, and postcolonial are modern inventions,” whereas “cosmopolitanism and its variants were used frequently by the Victorians [themselves],” (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2. Agathocleous also notes the word’s two valences: in the first case, it is synonymous with our usage of the word “globalization”; in the second, it is a “neo-Kantian” word emphasizing “‘perpetual peace’ and ‘universal brotherhood,’’” 2. All of the authors in this chapter, I argue, think in terms of Agathocleous’s first definition, and are more interested in overlap than metaphysical interconnection.
Domingo took place. However, from 1795 to 1809, both parts of the island were under French control, Saint-Domingue as a French colony, and Santo Domingo as the French-occupied Captaincy General of Santo Domingo. Austen and Sansay’s use of the catch-all phrase “St. Domingo” allows them to elide the cultural differences and complicated political and national histories of the two regions and illuminates the way the “St. Domingo” functions in both texts: it is a symbol of exoticism, invoked most often as something that stands in contradistinction to quotidian whiteness or Europeanness and their supposedly inherent practices.

When Persuasion’s Captain Wentworth casually mentions being “at sea in the year six” while at a dinner party with Anne Elliot, the Crofts, and both Musgrove families, he refers to the time immediately following his separation from Anne: “Anne felt the utter impossibility, from her knowledge of his mind, that he could be unvisited by remembrance any more than herself. There must be the same immediate association of thought, though she was very far from conceiving it to be of equal pain.” For Anne, such parties have become private trials, in which she is forced to endure the proximity of a former paramour, unbeknownst to her fellow guests and without the release of articulating her feelings of regret to either Captain Wentworth himself or a sympathetic companion. “The year six” is a phrase that conjures up images of distance and separation for Anne and Wentworth, while at the same time referring to the geographically distant “action off St. Domingo,” or the Battle of San Domingo (26). Brian Southam notes that this battle was the first great victory for the British navy since Trafalgar and the last such victory at the time of Austen’s writing. It is also the battle to which Wentworth owes his captaincy.

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248 Brian Southam, Jane Austen and the Navy (London: National Maritime Museum, 2005), 271. He also notes that Austen’s own brother, Francis, was present at the battle, 53.
Mentioned as it is in passing, it brings to mind Sir Thomas’s Antiguan plantation in *Mansfield Park* and General Tilney’s pineapples in *Northanger Abbey*, both of which are relatively minor details in the greater narratives of those novels, but both of which were potentially threatened by Napoleon’s Atlantic campaigns. The pineapples and the Antiguan plantation are indications of the characters’ investment in Britain’s Caribbean colonies, the sustained control of which was of course a great source of anxiety during the Napoleonic Wars. The victory at San Domingo ensured the continued strength of Britain in the region and established Britain’s naval dominance in the Atlantic until Napoleon’s first surrender in 1815.249

For Austen’s characters (and perhaps for Austen herself), the existence of the Caribbean islands and of Britain’s imperial designs there, are at once essential and secondary to the trajectory of the narrative. The novel’s encounters with foreignness are always peripheral and always mitigated by the navy—an emblem of both Little England and Greater Britain’s global strength. British sociability, then, for Austen, remains—and insists that it is—isolated from the outside world, and isolated from the threat of transculturation, even as the effects and the trappings of imperialism infiltrate every occasion of the novel.250 Louisa and Henrietta Musgrove, for instance, buy a navy list for the ostensible purpose of learning about naval ships and their positions in the West Indies, but in fact want to hear from Captain Wentworth himself about “the ships which [he] had commanded” (56). The distant reality of naval maneuvers in the

249 Ibid., 271.

250 I take the term “transculturation” from Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2007). Pratt notes that the word is often used by ethnographers “to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from cultures transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture”; she herself uses the term to support her argument that “the fruits of empire . . . were pervasive in shaping European domestic society, culture, and history,” 6.

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Caribbean is acknowledged but made immaterial by the immediate reality of Wentworth’s presence in the drawing room after dinner, and the man himself is treated as a kind of synecdoche for the entire naval fleet and the British colonies which it protects.\footnote{For Monica F. Cohen, \textit{Persuasion} is at once “the story of how the navy is domesticated in the post-Napoleonic years” and “the story of how domesticity is professionalized,” exemplified in the way that “two lines of potential narrative development, the naval adventure and the domestic plot, merge,” \textit{Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel: Women, Work, and Home} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 14. Unlike Cohen, I argue that the naval narrative, with its unmentionable unpredictability, is sublimated into the domestic narrative. The realities of Britain’s global maritime maneuvers are always secondary to Cohen’s domestic narrative and, in fact, are continually distanced from the central storyline, mediated as subjects of dinner party discussion, but never seen “in action” themselves.}

Likewise, at this same dinner, during which Anne becomes aware of Louisa and Henrietta’s attentions to Wentworth and learns of the latter’s former interest in her cousin Charles Hayter, Anne observes Mrs. Croft, whose manners and appearance are evidently influenced by her years at sea with her husband, the Admiral:

She had bright dark eyes, good teeth, and altogether an agreeable face, though her reddened and weather-beaten complexion, the consequence of her having been almost as much at sea as her husband, made her seem to have lived some years longer in the world than her real eight and thirty. Her manners were open, easy, and decided, like one who had no distrust in herself, and no doubts of what to do; without any approach to coarseness, however, nor want of good humour. (44)

At this particular gathering, the worldly and weather-worn Mrs. Croft joins a disagreement between her husband, Wentworth, and Mrs. Musgrove about a woman’s place at sea, telling the latter that she has “crossed the Atlantic four times, and [has] been once to the East Indies, and back again; and only once besides being in different places about home—Cork, and Lisbon, and Gibraltar.” Though she has not gone “beyond the Streights,” she has visited the West Indies and Bermuda (61). Thus, in the same drawing room, Louisa and Henrietta muse over the British
Empire in the abstract, while Mrs. Croft, her husband, and Wentworth recall from memory what it is like to be at sea.

Here, “at sea” is the operative phrase. The colonies themselves are never actually described, and even Mrs. Musgrove’s assertion that Mrs. Croft “must have been . . . a great traveller” is met only with the latter’s description of the traveling itself—the moving back and forth across the seas, between locations whose names are mere placeholders, standing in for nothing more than vague ideas of worldliness and distance (both relational and geographic). The party acts as a particular space in which the whole of the British Empire can be distilled down the experiences of the men and women present and encountered within the safe confines of British domestic entertaining. For Anne, the Battle of San Domingo marks a turning point in her relationship with Wentworth, regardless of what it marks in the grand scheme of Britain’s imperial enterprise: namely the sustained control of resource-rich colonies and continued dominance over the French and non-European British subjects alike. Likewise, the social requirements of giving and attending parties allow Mrs. Musgrove and her daughters to encounter ideas of foreignness, though that foreignness is mediated by the very British (yet just exotic enough to be fascinating) figures of Mrs. Croft and Captain Wentworth.

Such an understanding of the globalizing world and its import is, of course, explicitly Anglocentric. Anne Frey argues that one of Austen’s overarching novelistic projects is to explore the way that the English—distinct even from the Welsh and the Scottish—cohere as a nation made up of smaller communities. In Austen’s earlier novels, Frey says, “communities rise organically from the English people and landscape” as a result of the centrality of landed inheritance; but in Persuasion, this sense of community is unhinged from the land itself when power is “transfer[red] from the gentry to the navy,” thus critiquing Burkean understandings of
national coherence.\textsuperscript{252} That Austen is interested specifically in \textit{Englishness}, rather than \textit{Britishness}, is clear. And yet, in the age of British naval might and the British Empire that it enabled, even the most limited sense of national identity would necessarily be influenced by newly developing definitions of “Britishness” as an expansive concept. As Bernard Porter notes, the tendency for English Victorians to be ignorant of, or, in his words “absent-minded” about, the breadth of the British Empire was not indicative of the Empire’s actual significance in daily life and society.\textsuperscript{253} For Anne, the navy provides a matrix of relationships that serve to unyoke her from her family’s control while providing an outlet for her extensive knowledge of both British naval practice and the ever-expanding geographical regions in which they move. Sitting in the drawing room at the Great House of the elder Mr. and Mrs. Musgrove, at the same party where the Miss Musgroves have fawned over the navy list, Anne first remembers her own grasp of \textit{where} exactly Wentworth has been located over the years (she knows the geography far better than her cousins); she then silently judges her in-laws’ ignorance “as to the manner of living on board, daily regulations, food, hours, &c.; and their surprise at [Wentworth’s] accounts, at learning the degree of accommodation and arrangement which was practicable,” including the existence of servants, cooks, and sophisticated dining utensils (56). These qualities of naval life essentially cover what domesticity, or its rough imitation, look like on ship, wherever that ship may be stationed. Anne’s erudition in this matter enables the reader to make connections between quotidian rhythms of experience, both at sea and at home in England. Austen seems to be taking pains here to mirror what has just occurred (a dinner between a set of English subjects)


with what takes place every day for the English and British more generally—even the English who have been removed from the comforts of home by the demands of wartime. (“Sailors,” she seems to say, “they’re just like us.”)

This investment in the lives of sailors overseas is in some ways contrary to Edward Said’s now-canonical reading of Mansfield Park, which marks Austen’s sparse descriptions of the Caribbean as “the avowedly complete subordination of the colony to the metropolis”: “Sir Thomas, absent from Mansfield Park, is never see as present in Antigua, which elicits at most a half dozen references in the novel.”254 Wentworth and Croft, by contrast, are at least imagined “at sea,” with their cutlery and their cooks, their on-deck balls, their servants waiting on their needs. Still, Austen’s project here is similar, in that the effects of the British Empire are felt but not articulated, while Englishness is preserved. This project of reifying Englishness and establishing a particularized sense of shared nationhood, even across the seas, culminates in the novel’s final sentence, which describes Anne’s life as a naval wife, a position in which she “glories” but for which “she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance” (203). The language of this closing line reflects the nationalistic thrust communicated in the novel’s earlier party scene: just as Wentworth and the Crofts act as domesticated proxies of sanitized foreignness, in a scene of domestic entertaining, Anne’s connection to the naval “profession” requires a “tax,” and that profession has both “domestic virtues” and “national importance.” Austen suggests a one-to-one analogy: daily life is to life on ship as British naval sailor is to everyday Englishman. Her project is then necessarily isolationist in both its intent and execution. The cultured, worldly, well-traveled Wentworth, just like his sister and brother-in-

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law, is somehow at once better for his international travels and yet still an archetype for
Englishness, just as, as I have argued, the dinner party is an archetype for a particularly English
version of sociability. That the vast majority of conversations touching on the breadth of English
interconnectivity with other nations, territories, and colonies take place under the auspices of the
thoroughly domestic dinner party is indicative of such parties’ significance in the collective
conception of what it meant to be English, which was thus indelibly tempered by what it meant
to be a British imperial subject.

It is easy to find fault with this limited perception of globalism, in which attempts to
understand the ever-shrinking world were turned inward in service of understanding Englishness
and Britishness and ascribing those concepts with a sense of superiority in keeping with the
imperial project. However, such critiques, leveled at Austen and her characters, lose some of
their sharpness when juxtaposed with Sansay’s novel. Despite the fact that Sansay’s protagonist,
Clara, is living in one of the most diverse locations of her day, with regard to race and
nationality, her day-to-day routines, and particularly her interest in sociable occasions and their
significance, remain remarkably unmodified by either the local intermingling of cultures or the
political upheavals that perpetuate the armed conflicts and form the drama of her story. Whereas
most of Austen’s women experience foreignness in the only way available to them—by using the
space of the party to talk, in limited terms, to those who have actually experienced it firsthand—
Clara uses sociable occasions, such as balls, breakfasts, picnics, and dinners, to resist
acknowledging the very cultures, practices, and political enterprises of the non-Western, non-
white people that make up the majority of the population of which she is a part. Namely, she too
resists transculturation, despite her daily, immediate encounters with other cultures. While this
may not seem unusual at first glance—it is, after all, an extremely heteronormative assumption
that women would be necessarily unconscious of grand military actions or political shifts of power, and more concerned with the assumed trivialities of hosting and attending parties—Sansay in fact spotlights this apparent disconnect in her emphasis on the odd and convoluted ways in which domestic sociability and geopolitics intermingle.

In Sansay’s Saint-Domingue, geopolitical maneuvers are the foundation for proper—meaning “dignified” and Westernized—parties. The novel takes place seven years after Napoleon’s failed attempt to reconquer the island. Sansay’s narrator Mary and her heroine, Mary’s sister Clara, are both Americans who, following the latter’s marriage to a Frenchman, return to the island from America to take back the property Clara’s husband lost in the first uprisings. The French have been told that the revolution is quelled, and that their former lands are theirs for the taking. In reality, Saint-Domingue is still in turmoil: fleets of French and British soldiers continue to wage war with Haitian rebels and each other, while French, American, and British colonists weather the unrest as best they can. Slave uprisings and other acts of anti-colonial sentiment occur on a near daily basis—and yet, into her tales of fires, gunfights, ambushes, and cruel homicides, Sansay intermingles moments of European-style sociability. Early in the novel, Mary writes to Aaron Burr and describes her arrival in Saint-Domingue. Sandwiched between stories of Bonaparte’s sister and her husband General Charles Le Clerc (famous for capturing and deporting Toussaint L’Ouverture) and descriptions of restless “natives,” Mary writes, that “There are a thousand pretty things to be had, new fashions and elegant trinkets from Paris; but we have no balls, no plays, and of what use is finery if it cannot be shewn?”

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255 Drexler, introduction, 11.

256 Leonora Sansay, Secret History; or, the Horrors of St. Domingo and Laura (Buffalo: Broadview, 2007), 65. Subsequent references cited parenthetically.
page later, she repeats her complaint: “We have neither public nor private balls, nor any amusement except now and then a little scandal” (66). The arrival of officers, however, whose ostensible purpose is to suppress revolution and protect French holdings against possible British incursions, signals the arrival of social events at which the women are finally able to interact more formally with both their peers and French, Creole, and Spanish women that make up Saint-Domingue’s unique society. Like the London social season, which is implicitly political in that it coincides with the sitting of Parliament, the social season of Saint-Domingue correlates with the geopolitical movements of soldiers, upon whose arrival “Nothing is heard of but balls and parties” (76). That “nothing” is of course hyperbolic; and yet, in just a few words, Mary dismisses the “negro uprising” described just a few letters earlier and its aftermath: the “dreadful spectacle” of “the groans of the wounded, who were carried through the streets to their homes, and the cries of the women for their friends who were slain” (69).

What Mary really means is that, with the arrival of French soldiers and their heralded leader, General Rochambeau, nothing is heard of pertaining to white society but “balls and parties”—an indication of the party’s significance as an emblem of Western, white culture, which is described with the same weight as General Rochambeau’s movements in the theater of war. As Matthew Pratt Guterl notes in his study of the Gulf of Mexico as “the American Mediterranean,” sociability in creole contexts serve to unite and empower a certain type of individual: Westerner, white, often male, and affluent, “An American Mediterranean: Haiti, Cuba, and the American South” in American Hemispheric Studies, ed. Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 97.

In a particularly pointed instance of this fusion of social and geopolitical concerns, Mary and Clara attend an Admiral’s ball on the deck of warship. Such balls were not uncommon. During Wentworth’s disagreement with Admiral Croft and Mrs. Musgrove, he asserts that he “would never willingly admit any ladies on board a ship of his excepting for a ball, or a visit, which a few hours might comprehend,” Austen, 59.
small boats “covered with carpets” which will take guests to the ship, which has itself been turned into “a fairy palace”: “decks were floored in; a roof of canvas was suspended over the whole length of the vessel, which reached the floor on each side, and formed a beautiful apartment” (74). The walls and ceilings are decorated with wreaths, while actual orange and rose trees are spread throughout the room and a raised platform is added for dining. Here, the warship becomes the site of (white) sociability, blending military events with social ones and uniting “elite” individuals—that is, people who, in spite of their national differences, have a vested interest in maintaining their superiority and continuing to subdue the uprisings of non-white revolutionaries.

It would appear that parties and gatherings are the result of military matters allowing for their convenience, meaning that military parties are the result of larger-scale military actions, but the reverse is also true. The Admiral’s on-ship party provides the first opportunity for Clara to meet General Rochambeau, and their meeting quickly develops into an illicit courtship, Clara being already married.259 At first, the romance is kept secret, but when the two begin to be less cautious, Mary reports that Clara’s husband St. Louis “has declared that she shall go to no more balls; and she has declared as peremptorily, that she will go where she pleases. So on the first public occasion there will be a contest for supremacy, which will decide forever the empire of the party that conquers” (81). Sansay’s language in this passage is self-consciously militant, not-so-subtly connecting the romantic campaigns of Rochambeau and St. Louis to the geopolitical campaigns of the Haitian natives and the French and British navies. But this connection is not

259 Incidentally, Sansay’s General Rochambeau is not to be confused with Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau who aided Americans during the American Revolution. Rather, Sansay refers to Jean-Baptiste’s son, Donatien-Marie-Joseph de Vimeur, vicomte de Rochambeau.
only a symbolic one. Clara’s struggle with St. Louis over which parties she can and cannot attend is not only like war, with its “declarations,” “contests,” “empires,” and “conquering parties.” It is, in fact, a determining factor in the way the war is fought. When Rochambeau, despondent from complications of his tryst with Clara, moves his fleet from Cape François to Port-au-Prince, he loses “the confidence of the people” because “He gives splendid balls, and elegant parties; but he neglects the army, and oppresses the inhabitants” (91). Later, he seems to return from Port-au-Prince for the express purpose of giving a ball, at the same moment that “war has been declared between England and France” (98). The party itself is a lavish affair, given without regard to larger geopolitical consequences, and given explicitly to woo Clara, who, at this point, has seen the error and indelicacy of her ways, and now only wishes to remain faithful to her husband. The St. Louises and Mary, in fact, only attend out of fear, citing “the danger of irritating the general” as their motivating impulse (98). Rather than an on-ship ball like the Admiral’s, which could be given in an official capacity, it is paradoxically this private ball, hosted at Rochambeau’s residence (a military residence, but a residence nonetheless), that most clearly delineates the imbrication of nationalistic values, sociable obligations, and romantic desires.

In their defense of domestic space as culturally constructive and socially powerful, Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd argue that, particularly as regarded white women in non-white colonies, “the domestic is accorded a much more active role in the enforcement of the authority of the dominant powers” than might generally be expected: “When colonized space is constructed as

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260 This declaration of war marks the official beginning of the Napoleonic Wars, in which Austen’s Captain Wentworth and Admiral Croft, as well as two of her real-world brothers, would eventually fight.
marginal, domestic space can be accorded a position at the center.” Whether the parties and balls of *Secret History* take place aboard ships, in public spaces, or in a domestic space, these spaces, with their roses and orange trees and wreaths of fresh flowers, are already undoubtedly feminized and domesticized. Thus, when Rochambeau moves his fleets from one side of the island to in other specifically to give the ball at his residence, knowing Clara and her family will be obligated to attend, the concerns of domesticity—the supposedly private world of sociability, love, and marriage—begin to shape the geopolitical movements of an authoritarian force, and thereby the livelihoods of those whom they are oppressing. In a reversal of the events in *Persuasion*, where the international reflects and reifies the national and the individual, Rochambeau’s personal concerns, interests, and desires all influence, to some extent, the experiences of Haitians, Americans, the British, and the French. Though Clara’s attendance at this ball and her intrigues with Rochambeau are far from self-conscious machinations, Sansay’s novel gives us an indication of the effect that parties and other sociable occasions have even on a geopolitical scale in literature of the nineteenth century.

The party then, for Sansay, is a kind of battle in itself: one of many wartime conquests that can be won or lost, and whose reverberations can be felt even from the other side of the Atlantic. Tessie P. Liu notes that, while balls in transatlantic Regency-era literature were usually sites in which the tropes of romance could easily play out, Sansay portrays them in “militarized language,” using words like “triumph,” “vanquished,” and “conquest” and alluding to imagined

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261 Bryden and Floyd go on to argue that “the periphery . . . determines the center,” suggesting that, through a kind of negation, the colonized “other” is what allows the colonizer to establish the boundaries of their superiority, Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd, eds., *Domestic Space: Reading the Nineteenth-Century Interior* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), 5.
victory wreaths to be lavished on returning war heroes and lovers alike.\textsuperscript{262} Compare this treatment of sociability to \textit{Persuasion}, in which even the suggestion of either foreignness or military actualities is mediated by ignorance and inexperience on the part of the Musgrove sisters and treated only as evidence of a null in her life story for Anne. Sansay’s handling of sociability and transcultural military action in \textit{Secret History} offers a pronounced contrast. Where the party for Austen can be a sanctioned window into far off lands that allows spectators (as it were) to retain their Englishness, Sansay’s parties are shaped by the realities of a globalist world in flux: first, by their location in a geographically, racially, and politically unstable space; and second, by their characterization as precarious sites open to conquest and reclamation. They are overdetermined spaces, expected to carry such a large load and accomplish work that is at once domestic, social, and political, and therefore they also play a role in shaping these unstable spaces themselves, as Rochambeau’s private ball demonstrates.

For both Austen and Sansay, then, “St. Domingo” functions at the conceptual level, communicating information, feeling, and experience that need not necessarily take into account the actual lived experiences of St. Domingans. Together, the two authors treat the island as a symbol of foreignness and, more significantly, a site whose fate exclusively influences the colonizer without much regard for the colonized. Even Sansay, who gives ample space to stories of slaves and freed Haitians, is more interested in Saint-Domingue as a kind of testing ground—for the white aristocracy, for marital fidelity, for Western notions of sociability and propriety—than as a site of deep-seated conflict indicative of a hemispheric shift in the relationship between black slaves and white oppressors. In fact, the stories themselves are, unsurprisingly, mediated by the white men and women who tell them, often as bits of casual conversation at the parties.
that are so significant in the structure of daily life for the Americans and Europeans. Mary hears one such story, about a woman who orders the beheading of her husband’s presumed mistress, a black slave, at a party given by Creole ladies, at which “the pleasures of the table were carried to the last degree of refinement” (70). That Sansay imagines the party as an archetypical practice of Western propriety is illustrated in her second novel, *Laura* (1809), which includes locales in Ireland and Portugal, as well as the United States. In that novel, the eponymous character’s fiancé, Belfield, begrudgingly attends a series of dinners and parties given in his honor to celebrate his engagement, “more in compliance with what was proper, than to seek amusement,” despite viewing these departures from Laura as “privations” that he would sooner avoid.\textsuperscript{263} Parties, for Sansay, are a ritual—a required part of social life at certain class, and that ritual is transnational, even inclusive of other nations, but never multiracial. In the same way that Austen’s parties strive to domesticate foreignness or sanitize the realities of the British Empire and its navy, Sansay’s parties distance the tensely interracial aspects of colonial cosmopolitan life, even as those aspects form the substance of their conversations. St. Domingo is imagined as a Western outpost, despite the upheavals which Sansay herself experienced and its eventual transformation into a Haitian state, and the party thus acts as a kind of bastion of whiteness, Europeanness, and imagined propriety which instantiates these notions through the perpetuation of standard practices of sociability.

4.2 Nationalism and Transatlantic Sociability in *Little Women*

Austen and Sansay’s treatment of the party as a literary device that works in service of maintaining particular nationalist ideas differs from the party’s utilization later in the nineteenth

\textsuperscript{263} Sansay, *Laura*, 212.
century. As Chapter One makes clear, there is something specifically Victorian about the particular shape that the party takes, and the narrative that it works in service of. The rise of etiquette literature formalized an amorphous body of ideas, opinions, and rituals into what we now think of as the Victorian dinner party, and even though Austen offers us some early iterations of what we see in Eliot, Meredith, Levy, Gaskell, the Brontës, Dickens, Trollope, and Oliphant, the cultural work that her parties accomplish is more limited in scope. By the mid-to-late nineteenth century, however, the aforementioned authors had used the Victorian party to engage with questions of gender and sexuality, social norms, economy, government regulation, and electoral politics—as well as treating the party as a plot device and a feature key to character development. These authors treat the party as a capacious arena which provides space for the working out of multiple ideas at once. None of this is to say that Austen and Sansay are too narrow in their treatment or depiction of sociability and its consequences. But for them, the party is explicitly a place of insulation, even isolationism. I turn now to another American author, Louisa May Alcott, whose Little Women (1868) flips this notion on its head. In her novel, the party is both an open, often cosmopolitan space, and as I explore later, an iteration of Caroline Levine’s forms, in that it is manipulable and capable of being translated from a British context to an American one, and then again to still more international conditions.

Despite Little Women’s enormous popularity in England at the time of its publication, it is not typically thought of in conversation with novels like those of Austen and, in this chapter’s next section, The Moonstone. It is only recently, in fact, that scholars have begun to treat Little Women and Alcott’s other novels with the critical attention granted to her authorial
contemporaries. And yet the novel is immensely concerned with American women and their place in the world, particularly as that world grows more and more interconnected. Alcott situates her heroines in the middle of the American Civil War, but surrounds them with European visitors and even takes Amy March on a tour of the European Continent. Any suggestion that *Little Women* is in some way provincial, or that its perception of the world is limited, fails to take these elements into account. The novel is self-consciously about what it means to be a woman of a certain class in the late 1860s, in a transatlantic context; and being a middle- or upper-class woman usually involved attending, giving, and presiding over dinners and parties of various sorts, whether in America or Great Britain. What is appealing about Alcott, particularly for this chapter, is that her parties at least purport to lack the insularity of those in *Persuasion* and, to a lesser degree, *Secret History*. Her American parties include, as guests, the Vaughns, an English family who visit the Marches’ neighbors, and Jo’s eventual husband, a German immigrant, Friedrich Bhaer; and Amy’s European tour is replete with parties more cosmopolitan than anything seen in Austen or even Sansay. Yet Alcott’s novel is resolutely American, and, as this section argues, her depiction of parties at once allows access to non-American ways of life, without affecting (or infecting) her protagonists’ Americanness, which is here figured as a kind of moral system.

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264 Mary Lamb Shelden locates “Alcott’s emergence, suddenly and at long last, into the canon of American literature deemed worthy of serious critical attention” in 2004 and 2005, during which time, four monographs about Alcott and her novels were published, “A Coming-of-Age for *Little Women* and Alcott Scholarship” in *Children’s Literature* 34 (2006), 209. A cursory search through databases like JSTOR and ProjectMUSE reveals scholarly articles considering Alcott’s literary merits from as far back as the 1940s. If we treat a wealth of monographs as a mark of one’s place in the literary canon, however, then Shelden is correct in her assessment of Alcott’s recent emergence.
*Little Women*’s party scenes depict a particularly American experience of Europeanness, first with the Vaughns and then in the parties of Europe proper. Even in these diverse forums, the party’s rhythm, articulated in Chapter One, remains the same, if at a very basic level. We can continue to think of Levine as we consider Alcott’s parties as participants in a matrix of *forms*: they are insulated systems or networks that clash with foreign analogues in interesting but usually unproductive ways. To talk about *Little Women* in conversation with these other works, then, is to recognize the modular nature of the forms of sociability present in Alcott’s novel and in nineteenth-century transatlantic fiction more generally. The party in literature maintains a consistent shape and reads as a translatable form, legible on both sides of the Atlantic, but with the potential of offering different affordances according to its context.

One early indication of the crossover between American and British cultural and social norms can be found in the pretend dinner party that Laurie and the March girls construct for the Vaughns. The make-believe occasion begins, as real dinner parties began, with a (mock) formal invitation, written “in a big, dashing hand,” from Laurie to Jo March and her sisters Beth and Meg. (The youngest, Amy, tags along.) “Some English girls and boys,” he writes, “are coming to see me tomorrow, and I want to have a jolly time. If it’s fine, I’m going to pitch my tent in Longmeadow, and row up the whole crew to lunch and croquet;—have a fire, make messes, gypsy fashion, and all sorts of larks. They are nice people, and like such things.”265 Meg, the letter goes on, will “see to lunch,” acting as hostess, while Kate Vaughn, eldest of the “English girls,” “will play propriety for the girls” (101). The sisters go on to worry about “decent” dress

for “the fête,” while Beth expresses anxieties about having to “play, or sing, or anything” at the “pleasure party” (102). The next day, the party begins when the Vaughns arrive by carriage:

Laurie ran to meet, and present them [the Marches] to his friends, in the most cordial manner. The lawn was the reception room, and for several minutes a lively scene was enacted there. Meg was grateful to see that Miss Kate, though twenty, was dressed with a simplicity which American girls would do well to imitate; and she was much flattered by Mr. Ned’s assurances that he came especially to see her. (103)

Each of these actions stands like an Americanized, juvenile version of the cultural narrative articulated in Chapter One: invitations arrive from a host and preparations are made; the party begins when the guests arrive, and those guests are received and formally introduced in an imagined “reception room.” Eventually, the party, which takes place outdoors and involves a smorgasbord of small snacks, requires the “making [of] little braided rushes, to serve as plates” and a table “spread . . . with an inviting array of eatables and drinkables, prettily decorated with green leaves.”

The guests then playact a dinner party, imitating their conversation and imagining their meager offerings as a full-on dinner spread: “There is salt, here, if you prefer it,” Laurie says to Jo, indicating “a saucer of berries.” “Thank you,” Jo answers, “I prefer spiders. . . . How dare you remind me of that horrid dinner-party, when yours is so nice in every way?” (Laurie is here mocking Jo for an earlier attempt at dinner-party-giving, which involved her accidentally salting strawberries.) Finally, the “dinner” concluded, the group turns to games. In the same way that Laurie treated his lawn as a reception room, the group now leaves the dinner

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266 Alcott here unknowingly replicates the language of Sansay and, as noted in Chapter Three, Margaret Oliphant, when she describes the setting of the table in militarized, politicized terms: “The commander-in-chief and his aids soon spread the table-cloth . . .”, 105. Whether it takes place amid the uprisings of Saint-Domingue, as a component of a British parliamentary campaign, or in the minds of British and American children, the party’s complexities and specific narrative shape make comparisons to grander, even more complicated operations and maneuvers easy and immediate.
table to approach a patch of grass, which Alcott refers to as “adjourn[ing] to the drawing-room”
to play card games, such as “Authors” and “Rigmarole” (106).

This performance of sociability, as Laurie indicates in his invitation, is specifically for
the Vaughns, whom he has characterized as “nice people [who] like such things,” by which he
appears to mean British people of a certain class who are used to certain standards of sociability.
That the party is so easily (and comically) distilled into a play-time activity for young children,
and that Americans can here caricature British methods of entertainment for their benefit, allows
us to think about British systems of sociability as something available for satirizing, which thus
acknowledges its status as a touchstone of Western propriety in the minds of nineteenth-century
readers on both sides of the Atlantic.267 Elisa Tamarkin, writing about “Anglophilia” in
antebellum America, argues that fascination with Britishness was a necessary part of constituting
American identity amid the tumultuous years in and before the 1860s: “We might say that
Anglophilia makes an art out of colonial vicariousness: the fantasy that England still functions as
an imperial metropolis for Americans patterns a devotion to a mythology of British sovereign
power that sees it grow in strength the more that it recedes.”268 She goes on to note that while
“America’s preoccupation with the grandest symbols and tiniest gestures of British culture may
appear to constitute some sideshow, some space removed from the pressing concerns of the

267 Alcott was widely read in Britain, to a much greater degree than Sansay. The first
volume sold out in the U.S., and overseas interest from the British reading public was one of the
factors which encouraged Alcott, at the behest of her publisher, Thomas Niles, to continue
writing the second volume, Susan Cheever, *Louisa May Alcott: A Personal Biography* (New
York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 204. Alcott would later go on Grand Tour of her own, like that
of her character Amy, though she would go “as a distinguished literary lion,” whose books were
“being published in London to great sales and acclaim,” 215.

268 Elisa Tamarkin, *Angolphilia: Deference, Devotion, and Antebellum America*
(Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), xxv.
national scene . . . some of the period’s urgent questions were addressed by confusing America with what it manifestly was not.”269 Tamarkin does not specifically treat the Anglicized party, though here, this “tiny gesture of British culture” both links Laurie and the Marches with the Vaughns (who find the party and its guests “odd, but rather clever” [103]) and links Alcott’s novelistic project of depicting daily life for young American women with a grander, international literary project of representing daily life more generally, whether in Massachusetts or overseas in England. The Victorian party stands in the gap, to be translated into different contexts to different ends, all while retaining its basic shape.

This hybrid project—both domestic and transatlantic—is reinforced more fully when Amy goes with her aunt and uncle on a European tour, eventually to be joined by Laurie and his grandfather. Their experiences there further illustrate the party’s status as both a narrative convention and a broader cultural signifier. In the multi-plot novel, the party functions as a literary device that links otherwise divergent narratives and characters together: for instance in Middlemarch, as I have argued, parties illustrate for the reader which families, friends, and storylines are connected, and how, and why. In Little Women, Amy’s European parties serve a similar function, in that they link Amy, and, by proxy, America, to a cosmopolitan world that is fast globalizing, and that will keep globalizing, without regard for the complex but often insular concerns of Civil War-era America or the almost claustrophobic community of the March family (who, apart from husbands and close neighbors, appear to have little time for acquaintances beyond the family circle). By simply placing Amy overseas, Alcott can parade before her a catalogue of non-American individuals, who, like Amy herself, stand in as synecdoches for their nations as wholes.

269 Ibid., 3.
And parade them she does, almost literally. When walking on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, France, Amy and Laurie encounter other tourists like themselves, enjoying the pleasures of the greenery-bordered path and the seaside beyond it: “Many nations are represented, many languages spoken, many costumes worn; and, on a sunny day, the spectacle is as gay and brilliant as a carnival” (296). This “carnival” serves as a precursor to the dinner party that follows it, by allowing Alcott to define various nationalities by distilling their identities into a single characteristic, and then uses the dinner party to set those characteristics against each other. On the promenade, she depicts “Haughty English, lively French, sober Germans, handsome Spaniards, ugly Russians, meek Jews, [and] free-and-easy Americans,” all of whom “drive, sit, or saunter here, chatting over the news, and criticizing the latest celebrity who has arrived” (296). Here, in an outdoor scene, Amy and Laurie first reunite from time apart, to mourn the loss of Beth back home, and to celebrate Christmas together. These stereotypical descriptions are voiced without a hint of irony, and Alcott places the two Americans in relief, modeling their “free-and-easiness” by having them grasp both hands “to the great scandalization of a French mamma” and her daughter (297).

The reader takes these descriptions, assumed to be true (at least within the world of the novel) into a Christmas dinner party that evening, where guests are described in similar terms:

The company assembled in the long salle a manger, that evening, was such as one sees nowhere but on the continent. The hospitable Americans had invited every acquaintance they had in Nice, and, having no prejudice against titles, secured a few to add lustre to their Christmas ball. . . . Of course, there were many light-footed, shrill-voiced American girls, handsome, lifeless-looking English ditto, and a few plain but piquante French demoiselles . . . (301)

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270 Interestingly, though, this French mamma confuses Laurie and Amy for “mad English” in another example of the slippages that occur between British and American culture, at least from the point of view of outsiders, 297.
The “free-and-easy Americans” of the Promenade are here “light-footed” and “shrill-voiced,” the “haughty English” are “handsome, lifeless looking . . . ditto,” and the “lively French” are “plain but piquante.” Assembled at the long hotel dining room—an ad hoc domestic space for those abroad—citizens of different nations have maintained their signature, apparently immutable qualities, and what is more, their intermingling does not denote any sort of multiculturalism. Rather, Alcott depicts a specific version of cosmopolitanism that signifies more an overlapping of people from different cultures than an intermingling or amalgamation of those cultures themselves. It stands in contradistinction to Amanda Anderson’s definition of modern-day cosmopolitanism, which involves “reflective distance from one’s original or primary cultural affiliations, a broad understanding of other cultures and customs, and a belief in universal humanity.”

Parties for Alcott are contact zones, not in Mary Louise Pratt’s original sense of the phrase, where colonizers from the metropole interact with the colonized, but in the sense of this specific kind of cosmopolitanism, in that they provide a space in which individuals from various metropoles interact, on the same footing, where the distribution of power is less clear. Without a top-down structure of oppression and resistance between colonizer and colonized, the Christmas dinner party’s guests—Russians, Poles, Germans, Frenchwomen, Englishwomen, and Americans—can coexist as equals, Europeans and Americans, without disrupting the imagined

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271 Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 12. Anderson agrees, however, that the Victorians themselves were unsophisticated and reactionary in their own approach to geopolitics and the “internationalism” of the era, 90. Alcott’s cosmopolitanism is more in keeping with Tanya Agathocleous’s aforementioned definition of the term, as well as Lauren Goodlad’s version of Victorian cosmopolitanism, which she describes as something that “evoke[s] the impersonal structures of capitalism and imperialism [rather] than an ethos of tolerance, world citizenship, or multiculturalism,” 63.
unity of nationalities and national characteristics. This is so much the case that Amy seems to bring America itself with her to the party, particularly when those gathered turn to dancing: “She knew she looked well, she loved to dance, she felt that her foot was on her native heath in a ballroom, and enjoyed the delightful sense of power which comes when young girls first discover the new and lovely kingdom they are born to rule by virtue of beauty, youth, and womanhood” (301-302). The implication here is that Amy is a denizen of the ballroom – her true habitat. But of course, amid so varied a collection of international guests, “her native heath” brings to mind her home in the United States, especially when Alcott has implied that one’s country of birth determines one’s most socially legible characteristics. Furthermore, Amy is here depicted as an American colonizer, returning to the land of her nation’s own former colonizers to rule in this space, as, it seems, is her natural right. Amy is equally as at home dancing in America as she is in a hotel ballroom in Nice, in a set “composed of English [dancers]” (302). Though she would like to dance the tarantella, she instead “walk[s] decorously through a cotillion,” in accordance with the “haughtiness” and “lifelessness” supposedly inherent in all Englishwomen. In effect, she socially and culturally codeswitches, suppressing her “free-and-easiness” to match the tenor of the room, while still retaining her motivating impulses. She is an American, who retains her Americanness, but who is also capable of engaging in sociable practices that share a specifically Western shape. Where the imagined dinner party with the Vaughns depicts a shared understanding of the components of proper sociability, this cosmopolitan occasion reiterates the resilience of the party (here iterated as a dinner and ball) as a form that crosses boundaries, while allowing for a multiplicity of experiences and interiorities within the limits of that form.

Amy’s adeptness in the ballroom, and her understanding of sociability and its requirements as translatable forms, give her power, even dominion, in this space. Before the
party even begins, Laurie buttons Amy’s gloves and asks if his tie is straight, “just as he used to do when they went to parties together, at home” (301). Whereas she is able to treat this party like any other, Laurie does not share her social graces or her sociable amphibiousness: he is overwhelmed by the number of guests and surprised when she responds affirmatively to his question, “Do you care to dance?” (“One usually does at a ball!” she jibes). Once their first dance ends, he leaves Amy to attend to her cousin “without securing Amy for the joys to come, which reprehensible want of forethought was properly punished” (302). Amy expects Laurie to navigate the rhythms and expectations of the ball like he would at home, as smoothly as she does; when he cannot, she weaponizes her own sense of social literacy by securing dancing partners according to her liking, filling her dance card and thus leaving him to sit on sidelines (a punishment to which he does not in fact object). Unlike Sansay’s Clara, who is figured as a militarized opponent to the always-victorious Rochambeau, Amy is a newly minted conqueror and queen, bolstered by her social aptitude: “she . . . felt an irresistible desire to trample on [Laurie], as girls have a delightful way of doing when lords of creation show any signs of subjection” (304).

“Where did you learn all this sort of thing?” Laurie asks, referring at once to her dress, comportment, and her knowledge of what is good and proper at such an occasion (or, as he puts it, “the general air, the style, the self-possession”). Amy’s answer is deceptively simple: “Foreign life polishes one in spite of one’s self; I study as well as play” (304). Her studiousness of propriety and its iterations in other cultures, of British and European modes of dining and dancing, has been demonstrated, first with the Vaughns, and now, by her preeminence at a party made up of people from so many different places. However, this studiousness is not imagined as augmentation or reinvention of her social graces, but rather as a kind of self-discovery: she has
been “polished” by her time overseas, both made shinier, and revealed for what she truly was already. Her sense of her own Americanness remains, as does her playfulness, her free-and-easiness. In fact, it is insisted upon, and indicative of the American way of life, in which, “as everyone knows, girls early sign a declaration of independence, and enjoy their freedom with republican zest” (304). Amy is dexterous in her manipulation of sociable occasions and influenced by European ways of life, and yet she, like the other guests with whom she interacts with their stalwart sense of national character, retains what Alcott imagines to be the essential traits of American women.

*Little Women*, then, offers a midpoint for the nineteenth-century party in the globalizing world, between the forced insularity of *Persuasion* and *Secret History* and the culturally interpenetrated imbroglio we will see in *The Moonstone*. The party is a cultural touchstone, shared across both sides of the Atlantic, with Englishmen, Englishwomen, and Americans capable of imagining a shared space of sociability; but it is also a kind of menagerie that unites without unifying. Those who are particularly socially accomplished can maneuver freely across parties and continents, thanks to a shared set of expectations and practices. But where these forms of sociability overlap, they also reveal what is distinct within them: namely, the people themselves, and *Little Women’s* project of depicting American women in a transatlantic context stays true to that central adjective: Amy and her sisters are American, and so is their story.

4.3 “The Devil Possessed that Dinner Party”: British Sociability and Foreign Interruptions in *The Moonstone*

If *Little Women*’s parties offer an American, slightly more international version of the kinds of parties in Austen and Sansay, the most significant party in Wilkie Collin’s *The Moonstone* (also published in 1868) reveals the ways in which culturally isolationist impulses are
no longer sustainable for British subjects living in the metropole. Collins’s most famous novel marks an early, literary end to a Victorian version of the party and its ability to signify a particular kind of old-world Britishness. Though novels like *Middl* *emarch* and *Miss Marjoribanks*, covered in other chapters in this dissertation, were written later, *The Moonstone* is in many ways a harbinger of the British Empire’s collapse and of anti-imperial sentiments then stewing in colonies and territories the world over. As Ian Duncan writes, in one of the first extensive postcolonial readings of the novel, it is “the sole mid-Victorian novel of the first rank that makes England’s relation with India the center of its business.” As such, it is the sole mid-Victorian novel to reckon with the realities of India’s central place in the British Empire. Of course, Collins’s work is also an extended exercise in Orientalism and scaremongering, suggesting that, at any moment, the colonized may appear at one’s home to repossess what has been stolen from them; but, as critics like Niketa G. Narayan, Mary Elizabeth Leighton, and Lisa Surridge have argued, the novel’s more unseemly themes are tempered by the eventual victory of the Brahmin priests, who retrieve the stolen Moonstone, exact revenge on its thieves, and return it to its rightful place in the temple in Seringapatam. Whichever adjectives might have been used to describe the parties of Austen and her contemporaries—“safe,” “pure,” “monolithic”—none of these is any longer accurate in *The Moonstone*. For Collins, the party ceases to stand as

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272 Ian Duncan, “The Moonstone, the Victorian Novel, and Imperialist Panic” in *Modern Language Quarterly* 55.3 (September 1994), 297.

an impenetrable symbol of Britishness, and in fact becomes just one of many sites of imperial overlap and even invasion.  

The party in question is Rachel Verinder’s birthday party. Given that the narrator of this particular section of the novel is Gabriel Betteredge, the Verinders’ house steward, readers are privy to a more detailed account of the party as an exercise of domestic entertaining than is usual in similar fiction of the period. Betteredge is particularly preoccupied with the success of the party and its potential to represent the dignity of the house, in which he has spent his life serving. After describing the basics (who arrives first, and how, and how many guests there are total [twenty-four]), Betteredge moves to assert his sense of the party’s grandeur: “It was a noble sight to see, when they were settled in their places round the dinner table, and the Rector of Frizinghall (with beautiful elocution) rose and said grace.”  

The party is large, stately, and picturesque. More than that, as the Rector’s presence suggests, it blends etiquette, moral propriety, and elegance, all in the service of a sense of order: grace is said (beautifully), and the “noble” party at the dinner table can begin the night’s proceedings. And things begin without a hitch. Rachel is “queen of the day” and “naturally the great attraction of the party” (88). She sits in state, surrounded by adoring guests and pillars of the community: the rector; the vicar; Mr. Candy, the  

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274 Another possible text to read in conjunction with The Moonstone, if space allowed, is Collins’s Armadale, in which a mixed race character, Ozias Midwinter, is the son of an English colonist and a Caribbean woman who returns to England to reclaim his position as the heir to the Armadale fortune. Alternatively, Vanity Fair features Miss Swartz the “rich woolly-haired mulatto from St. Kitt’s” (10), for whom George Osborne becomes “as fond . . . in the course of a single evening as the most romantic advocate of friendship at first sight could desire” (232). These texts include what would be considered more “civilized” specimens of the colonies—both of whom, notably, are only partially non-white—than the Indian jugglers-cum-priests of The Moonstone, which is itself an indication of what is required, racially, in order to be included in the polite society of the dinner party.

doctor; Godfrey Ablewhite, a philanthropist, and his respected father and mother; “worthy Mrs. Threadgall, widow of the late Professor of that name” (90); Mr. Murthwaite, a “celebrated Indian traveler” and “an eminent public character” (89); Mr. Franklin Blake, her cousin; and her own mother, Julia, Lady Verinder. Rachel amplifies her status as the belle of the party by wearing the novel’s eponymous Moonstone as a brooch, with all who are gathered there “wonder[ing] at the prodigious size and beauty” of it (88).

This dinnertime tableau indicates the almost casual way in which Victorian social and domestic life in the mid-century was informed by the realities of the British Empire. Rachel and the others engage in this characteristically English party, so much so that Mrs. Threadgall seems to think the table representative of “every able-bodied adult in England” when she speaks of her dead husband, who was so well-known in life, that she assumes his death is equally well-understood (90). And, at least initially, the concerns and problems which arise, disrupting the order and dignity which Betteredge so prizes, are equally domestic and “English.” “As the dinner got on,” Betteredge laments, “I became aware, little by little, that this festival was not prospering like other festivals had prospered before it. . . . There were gaps of silence in the talk, as the dinner got on, that made me feel personally uncomfortable. When they did use their tongues again, they used them innocently, in the most unfortunate manner, and to the worst possible purpose” (89). Betteredge goes on to discuss “sulky” and “bashful” guests, and conversations gone wrong, with taboo subjects accidentally or intentionally raised: Mrs. Threadgall must explain, to her great distress, that her husband is dead, and that “His present address . . . is the grave” (91); the vicar is drawn, against his will, into discussing the concept of adultery, and when exactly extramarital attraction becomes illicit; “the lord of the manor” has his extensive knowledge of cattle insulted, while the doctor must abide derisions of the effectuality of
medicine; and the Whiggish Franklin Blake provokes a Tory council member into an outburst: “If we lose our ancient safeguards, Mr. Blake, I beg to ask you, what have we got left?” (92).

In another novel, this scene might read simply as a party gone wrong. One thinks of the early social faux pas of Becky Sharpe in *Vanity Fair* or Pip’s bumbling through his encounters with the Havisham family in *Great Expectations*. But Collins here takes pains to situate the party within the context of the British Empire, and specifically its territories in India. The Moonstone, of course, stands as a gleaming beacon of Britain’s might. As John Plotz puts it, the diamond is “a portable metonym for India itself,” the possession of which is made explicit by Rachel’s wearing the gem, silently communicating an almost absentminded sense of British superiority that will soon be shown to be misplaced. To Plotz’s point, the story of the stone is largely elided in its relegation to a piece of jewelry, much as the realities of Indian life, culture, and politics were ignored in Britain’s extended conquest of that region. But for the reader, the stone is an overdetermined object: the novel begins with a rambling account of its history, beginning with its place “in the forehead of the four-handed Indian god who typifies the moon,” then moving on into the eleventh century and the actions of the Muslim conqueror Mahmoud of Ghizni, which the three Indian priests charged with guarding the god and the stone resist by secreting “the inviolate deity” away. Here, Vishnu appears to the priests and curses the stone, “predict[ing] certain disaster to the presumptuous mortal who laid hands on the sacred gem, and to all of his house and name who received it after him”; next, “Aurungzebe, Emperor of the Moguls” seizes the stone, which will fall, centuries later, “into the possession of Tippoo, Sultan of Seringapatam” (26). All of this, of course, culminates in the ransacking of Seringapatam on

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May 4, 1799 and John Herncastle’s theft of the stone; and now, nearly 70 years later, the family has maintained its grip on the stone, just as Britain has maintained its grip on India. Yet, that grip appears to be slipping. “Looking back at the birthday now,” Betteredge writes, “by the light of what happened afterwards, I am half inclined to think that the cursed Diamond must have cast a blight on the whole company” (89). “The Devil,” he says, after describing the party’s early mishaps, “(or the Diamond) possessed that dinner party; and it was a relief to everybody when my mistress rose, and gave the ladies the signal to leave the gentlemen over their wine” (93). Betteredge thinks of the stone as something foreign, mystical, and unwelcome, and when Mr. Murthwaite quizzes Franklin on his dealings with the diamond, praising his good fortune in not being murdered while it was in his possessions, Betteredge reprimands Mr. Murthwaite for his sensationalist claims because, he says, “this sort of thing didn’t at all square with my English ideas” (96). The diamond is so obviously foreign that even its status as a trophy of British imperialism is dimmed by the more threatening effects of such globalizing moves: if Britain sticks its nose into non-British spaces, Betteredge seems to think, then it is no wonder when curses, murders, daring burglaries—all of them resolutely foreign in their fantasticalness—come back to bite the nation and its people.

The diamond, too, offers a convenient excuse for the failings of Betteredge himself. Despite describing himself as “a privileged character” who can convince even the most hesitant guests to try “unpopular dishes,” Betteredge’s efforts at plying diners with wine and suggesting appropriate subjects of conversation fall flat (89). With the Moonstone, he can blame a bad party on a centuries-old curse, rather than acknowledge any faults in the company or the household in which they are assembled. Such conveniences are given more credence when an “Indian drum” in the distance marks the arrival of “jugglers,” who are in fact successors of the Brahmin guards
charged with guarding the diamond. They arrive as performers, appearing to maintain their subservient position as colonized subjects coming in contact with residents of the metropole, and yet Mr. Murthwaite sees through their disguise, accuses them of duplicity, and sends them away “bowing and salaaming to him in their most polite and snaky way,” before revealing their true nature to Betteredge and Franklin (93).

But this interruption is treated, initially, only as such: when the Indian “jugglers” have left, the ladies withdraw to the dining room, while the men return to smoking and drinking in the dining room—all as if nothing has changed. When the two parties once again merge, they play whist, sing duets, and look at photographs; according to the steward, “Upon the whole, things were prospering better than the experience of the dinner gave us any right to expect” (98). When the Moonstone eventually disappears, the priests are, of course, blamed—but not to blame. That distinction falls to Franklin, who steals the diamond in an opium-induced fugue state, apparently motivated by his desire to protect Rachel from the potential horrors described by Mr. Murthwaite, in the event that she wears the diamond in the presence of Indians again. Godfrey then steals the diamond, which finally leads the priests to murder him and abscond back to India with the diamond in their possession.

I relate these events in detail because Collins so carefully frames them within the parameters of the dinner party, and the dinner party itself is consciously treated as something understood and familiar. It becomes the controlled variable in an experiment that Franklin undergoes, in an attempt to recreate the events of the night that the Moonstone disappeared. One year later, Franklin and his ally, the solicitor Matthew Bruff, arrange for the same guests to attend a second birthday dinner (thanks to a guest list preserved by Gabriel Betteredge), where Franklin is once again drugged, hoping that something will be revealed about his and other
guests actions that night. In going back through the rigors and rhythms of the dinner party, Franklin can tap into the memory of something specific (Rachel Verinder’s birthday party) and into something general (the shared cultural memory of the dinnertime ritual). That repetition, so normal in the everyday goings-on of casual social parties, can here be used to reawaken a set of long-sublimated memories, inside of which is hiding the truth about, not just the Moonstone itself, but Rachel Verinder’s honor and Franklin Blake’s dignity. Both having been accused of stealing the diamond themselves, their actions at this second party, which is so easily recreated, have the potential to vindicate them.

The venture is successful. At dinner, Mr. Candy, who had been mocked by Franklin at the party the year before and taken his revenge, once again has laudanum placed in Frank’s drink; afterwards, when the drug takes its full effect, Franklin begins to ramble, observed by Mr. Candy’s assistant Ezra Jennings. “How do I know?” he repeats to himself. “The Indians may be hidden in the house?” (433). Eventually, he begins digging around Rachel’s cabinet, indicating that he had done the same thing the year before, when he stole the diamond unwittingly. Franklin owes his accidental thievery to two goods imported from within the Empire, both of which are featured in the space of the party: first, the Moonstone itself, on full display for Franklin, Mr. Murthwaite, and the Indian priests, thanks to Rachel’s preeminence in the group; and second, opium, which Franklin only ingests as because it is added to his drink at the dinner table.

The history of opium’s place in the British Empire is complicated, but what is additionally interesting here is opium’s status as a kind of currency or bartering chip in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and China. Britain’s dominance in South Asia afforded them textiles and opium, which could then be sold in Southeast Asia in exchanged for silver and pepper, which
were in turn sold in China in order to obtain Chinese tea.\textsuperscript{277} The juxtaposition of opium, with its practical uses (medicinal, recreational, and financial) with the Moonstone, which has been removed of its sacred religious associations and appropriated for use as jewelry, makes Rachel Verinder’s dinner party into a microcosm of the imbricated nature of life in the nineteenth-century British Empire. But the priests embody resistance to this attempt at Anglocentric cosmopolitanism, in which goods and culturally significant artifacts are evacuated of their meaning, in service of British ideas of sociability, fashion, or imperial power. The archetypal English dinner party is disrupted by the arrival of the Brahmin men, by the opium in Franklin’s drink, and potentially by the diamond itself, whose insidious curse, to Betteredge’s mind, upheaves the normal equanimity and dignity of the Verinders’ domestic entertainments.\textsuperscript{278} In Ashish Roy’s words, “the sanctity of an English home,” and I would argue, the sanctity of the English dinner party, is “usurped.”\textsuperscript{279}


\textsuperscript{278} Narayan reads the priests as “the necessary attachment to the Moonstone,” whose persistence, in the face of the passivity which characterizes Betteredge and the others, allows them to be figured as joint-detectives with Franklin, Betteredge, and the police officer, Sergeant Cuff, charged with finding the diamond, 787. I differ from Narayan, in that she views the Brahmin priests as instruments that enable the “knowability” of the English community, whereas I read their presence in the narrative as obvious disruptions that indicate the \textit{unknowability}—and unsustainability—of the \textit{British} Empire, 794. Likewise, she treats the English colonizer as an emblem of modernity and the Indian priests as figures of traditionalism, 796. In fact, \textit{The Moonstone} suggests that the particular version of modernity embodied by the English colonizer is coming to an end, ushered in by the resistance of the supposedly anti-modern priests and their countrymen.

\textsuperscript{279} Ashish Roy, “The Fabulous Imperialist Semiotic of Wilkie Collins’s \textit{The Moonstone}” in \textit{New Literary History} 24.3 (Summer 1993), 663.
Collins is vague about this curse and whether, in the world of the novel, this ancient Hindu power is actually real. Thematically, though, the diamond is an object of disruption by virtue of the fact that it has been stolen from its rightful place in India and woven into the fabric of everyday British life, where it can be put on display as one of many items adorning the evening wear of the party’s assembled guests. This later version of British culture, which attempts to consume other cultures without fundamentally reshaping itself, is clearly unsustainable, and Collins understandably uses the dinner party—this cultural signifier of order, propriety, and expectations met—to measure the degree to which Old-World systems are breaking down. Sociability, once so capacious in what it could accomplish, is for Collins a kind of sideshow. This is partially due to his interest in genre: *The Moonstone*, like his other novels, is sensational, giving more space to feats of intrigue than to the orderly domestic world than do works like *Middlemarch* or *Cranford*. But Collins’s worldly consciousness indicates, too, the way that attempts by British subjects to go on living, to go on socializing, to go on dining in the

280 According to Ilana Blumberg, “the novel’s naturalized—that is to say, economic—expression of this curse is debt,” “Collins’s *Moonstone*: The Victorian Novel as Sacrifice, Theft, Gift and Debt” in *Studies in the Novel* 37.2 (Summer 2005), 169. For Blumberg, the Moonstone is a kind of currency that can be read transactionally, with its movements throughout the text being emblematic of problems facing Victorian novelists who tried to make sense of a socioeconomic world in flux. I take issue with this reading, as it participates in the same desacredizing actions of the Herncastles and Verinders in the novel itself, by removing the Moonstone from its religious context. I would argue that the Brahmin priests force us to read the Moonstone as something separate from normal economic systems of value, and that this is part of why their disruption of the dinner party is so significant: the English system of social and cultural assessment is no longer satisfactory in an international world.

281 Roy makes a similar argument: “Rachel’s diamond localizes the unstable incursion of a fabulous wealth from the colonial enterprise in India and elsewhere, while its presentation under the sign of artifice, its site [on her white dress], continues to modernize the gem’s archaic, synecdochic-organic unity,” 663. For Roy, the Moonstone is a signifier that works both linguistically and culturally to register the difficulties inherent in the merging of disparate cultures.
old and well-worn ways, are in fact attempts to ignore the globalizing world around them—

attempts which must be unsuccessful.

4.4 Conclusion: Global Sociability as White Sociability, or, the End of the Victorian Party

The party, as either an activity or a literary convention, is not something that immediately
brings to mind notions of globalism or imperialism. It is, by definition, a small, intimate
gathering of individuals who are usually well-acquainted with one another, or at least well-
connected within one another’s society. But to be a Briton, or a British author, in the nineteenth
century was to exist in an interconnected world—a world in flux, where national boundaries
were permeable and the limits of colonial holdings fluid. A British subject in the nineteenth
century might be a woman at home on holiday in Bath, or a man on-ship in the Caribbean—or,
of course, a native of any of Britain’s numerous colonies and territories. The parties of Little
England, represented in works such as Persuasion and The Moonstone, were inextricably
informed by the imperialism of Greater Britain, as were all other aspects of life and, as Spivak,
Freedgood, Goodlad, and others remind us, fiction. Reading these works in conjunction with
works by non-British writers allows us to understand the party as an expansive concept—a
shared experience by members of a certain class on both sides of the Atlantic, which was used to
shore up boundaries of identity just as it transgressed geographic boundaries in its transferability
and repeatability.

No earlier chapter in this dissertation has dealt with race, and indeed, this chapter hardly
does. But Sansay’s and Collins’s works force the issue, reminding us of the ways in which
“British sociability” is often a stand-in for “Western sociability,” which in turn stands in for
“white sociability.” When I write that Persuasion’s parties are insulated from ideas of
internationalism, globalism, or imperialism, I also mean that those parties are hermetically white,
even as Sansay’s novel reminds us that such distinctions are arbitrary and must be enforced. For Sansay, the party as an iteration of sociability stands as a monument to whiteness, to imperial possession, to privilege and power—and that monument must fall. At the novel’s close, Mary and Clara are driven from the island, fleeing to Cuba and then home to the United States. They are expunged from Haiti, in the same way that the British would later be flushed out of India. Even as a work of autobiographical, historical fiction, recounting true or near-true events from a decade earlier, *Secret History* is prescient, in that it underlines the structured, Western versions of sociability that exist as a consequence of certain systems of privilege and oppression. Austen’s characters are happy to benefit from such systems, and even to remain ignorant of them. But such ignorance cannot last.

For her part, Alcott is less concerned with power structures than Sansay, but her work is also more urbane than Austen’s. *Little Women* is often thought of in relation to the American Civil War, with the financial consequences of Mr. March’s deployment in the Union Army generating much of the conflict for the novel’s first half. But Amy March’s trip overseas, and the earlier visit of the Vaughns from England, pull the novel into the international arena, explicitly pointing to the potential translatability of systems of sociability (namely dinner parties and balls) when a person is moving from one metropole to another. The Marches, the Vaughns, and the tourists of Amy’s grand tour, though on different footing financially, are on equal footing culturally, capable of meeting together, dining together, dancing together, by relying on a shared system of engagement and a shared lexicon of party objectives.

*The Moonstone* reveals the foundation on which these shared systems rests, which, again, is rooted in structures of power and race. For Collins, the party continues to stand as something familiar, conventional, and repeatable. As it is in *Middlemarch*, *Can You Forgive Her?*, and *Our
*Mutual Friend*, the party scene is a literary device that draws together Collins’s characters, locating them all in one place – a particularly important move, where a mystery novel, full of suspects, is concerned. But in *The Moonstone*, instead of treating the party as something with an international significance—a translatable *form*—a determinedly domestic party is invaded. Foreignness comes home to England, with the imperial subject interrupting “normal” rhythms of life and sociability. Like Spivak and the rest, Collins seems to believe that the global informs the local and the domestic—but Collins figures it as an incursion. One thinks of *Dracula* (1899), in which the real horror is not a vampire’s exploits in far-off Transylvania, but the potential for that vampire to arrive on English shores and pass as an Englishman himself. The Indian priests, like the Moonstone they pursue, cannot be integrated into the world of the Verinders, Blakes, and Ablewhites, because they have no shared system of sociability. They arrive unannounced, as subservient performers, but in doing so set off a chain of events that defies notions of British propriety and that makes the party itself a source of misconduct and deceit.

In short, the birthday dinner party in *The Moonstone* allows us to read the parties in *Persuasion*, *Secret History*, and *Little Women* differently. The globalism—and the global sociability—of Austen, Sansay, and Alcott is in fact a white globalism and a white sociability, which is an obvious but not essential truth. Their parties are features of racially isolated societies, in which middle-and-upper-class-ness prerequires whiteness. Collins, however, reminds us that the actual globalism of the nineteenth century was multiracial and truly global, stretching from the East to the West. None of this is to suggest that structures of white hegemony were breaking down as early as the 1860s, particularly in England. But race in Collins—a subject which could occupy an entire chapter of its own—is significant in that it provides an unavoidably visible component to the cultural shifts I have been addressing with the other novelists at issue here.
Collins takes great pains to depict the Indian priests as *others*, people who could not possibly integrate into the existing systems of sociability by virtue of their explicit foreignness. They are an interruption and, more importantly, a disruption, after which things can never be the same. To our contemporary cosmopolitan sensibilities, Collins’s outlook seems bleak: the Indian priests and the white British party guests cannot interact according to the standard terms of sociability, because they share no standard terms. They are inherently at odds, as colonizer and colonized, oppressors and resisters. At the same time, *The Moonstone* reveals that the party can no longer be used as an instrument of cultural protectionism. The insularity of the parties in *Persuasion*, seen there as a matter of course, necessary to the perpetuation of a certain version of Englishness, is no longer feasible, just as Englishness—and now Britishness—must now be redefined according to the realities of Greater Britain, itself an unsustainable Empire that will soon come to an end.

Ten years after the Sepoy Uprising of 1857 and sixty years after the West Indian uprisings that inform *Secret History*, the cracks in colonial power have begun to show.²⁸² And as abroad, so at home. Victorian systems of sociability, with their attendant notions of morality and propriety, begin to show their age. And in its inability to adapt to newly global structures of existence, the specifically Victorian party, as a cultural touchstone and as a literary convention, begins to grow obsolete.

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²⁸² I am indebted again to John Plotz, who points out the novel’s connection to the Sepoy Uprising, and notes that, a decade later, “the terror associated with the mysterious followers of the jewel is redoubled by all the fiscal and military unease associated with imperial rule over India,” 40.
When I first conceived of this subject as the focus of my dissertation, I was watching Robert Altman’s *Gosford Park* (2001), which, as Roger Ebert wrote, is an exploration of “the distinct behavior produced by the British class system” that feels “like a party with no boring guests.” It does indeed feel like a party, both because the movie is funny and enjoyable, populated by mostly well-mannered characters, and because the story is actually set during an extended party or “social retirement” like those in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The movie takes place in England between the First and Second World War, at the country estate of Sir William McCordle and his wife, Lady Sylvia McCordle. The two have invited friends and family for a shooting party, which includes lavish dinners, outdoor luncheons (with a full serving staff), and, inadvertently, murder. The film is clearly influenced by works like *The Moonstone* and those of Collins’s successors, Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, and specifically uses the dinner party, with its emphasis on propriety and order, to expose that which is improper and disorderly: it is at dinner that Sir William’s affair with a housemaid is exposed, and during the postprandial

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283 *Gosford Park*, directed by Robert Altman (2001; Universal City, CA: Focus Features 2001), DVD.

separation of sexes that Sir William is murdered by the housekeeper, just before he can be murdered by an illegitimate son posing as the valet for one of his guests.\footnote{285}{The housekeeper, Mrs. Wilson, is the valet’s mother, one of many servants whom Sir William has impregnated and then coerced into relinquishing their children to orphanages. Mrs. Wilson herself uses the party as a kind of cover, in that she, as housekeeper, has no formal role in the dinnertime proceedings, and is able to slip away, unnoticed by servants or guests. She can then brew Sir William a cup of tea, poison it, and deliver it to him in the library while the other guests are otherwise entertained.}

It turns out that such class-related, etiquette-based scenes of intrigue are staples for \textit{Gosford Park}’s writer, Julian Fellowes: he is also the creator of the wildly popular ITV series \textit{Downton Abbey} (2010-15), which takes place between the Victorian and interwar periods; the author of \textit{Snobs} (2004), about a contemporary middle-class woman who marries into the aristocracy and must navigate its complexities; and, most recently, the author of \textit{Belgravia} (2016), a neo-Regency period mystery, set in the upper-class alcove of its title, which was released in serial installments via mobile app.\footnote{286}{In an interview for NPR’s \textit{Morning Edition}, Fellowes explicitly sites Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, and George Eliot as inspirations for his novel and for its unique form of distribution, Renee Montagne, “‘Downton’ Creator Brings Drama on the Installment Plan in ‘Belgravia,’” NPR.com, last modified on April 14, 2016, https://www.npr.org/2016/04/14/474082409/downton-creator-brings-drama-on-the-installment-plan-in-belgravia.}

If it weren’t for Fellowes’s enormous popularity, this string of works might be written off as the pet fascinations of a single man, himself a titled member of the peerage.\footnote{287}{“Lord Fellowes of West Stafford,” \textit{Parliament.uk}, http://www.parliament.uk/biographies/lords/lord-fellowes-of-west-stafford/4208. Fellowes is conservative member of the House of Lords.}

But \textit{Downton Abbey}, which aired on PBS in the United States, is that channel’s most watched, highest rated television show of all time.\footnote{288}{Jace Lacob, “‘Downton Abbey’ Becomes Highest Rated PBS Drama of All Time,” \textit{The Daily Beast}, last modified on March 19, 2013, https://www.thedailybeast.com/downton-abbey-becomes-highest-ratedpbs-drama-of-all-time.}
fact, carved out such a wide space in the cultural consciousness of contemporary Britons and Americans that, once it aired its final episode in the UK in December 2015, several things happened: Fellowes’s niece, Jessica Fellowes, began work on a novel of her own, *The Mitford Murders* (2018), an upstairs-downstairs mystery set in 1920, marketed as “the perfect new obsession for fans” of the show; Fellowes himself began writing a new series, *The Gilded Age*, which takes place in New York City in the 1880s and acts as a prequel to *Downton*; and ITV and PBS announced that they would fill the show’s timeslot with a new drama, *Victoria*, focusing on the early years of Queen Victoria’s reign, hoping to capitalize on the former show’s popularity and to attract the same viewers. *The Gilded Age, Belgravia,* and, of course, *Victoria* all take place in the nineteenth century; and despite their later temporal settings, *Gosford Park, The Mitford Murders,* and *Downton Abbey* are really nineteenth-century holdovers, featuring

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289 “The Mitford Murders,” *Macmillan Publishers*, https://us.macmillan.com/themitfordmurders/jessicafellowes/9781250170781/. The “Mitford” of the title gestures at once to Victorian writer Mary Russell Mitford, the notorious Mitford Sisters of the early twentieth century, and Jan Karon’s cozy contemporary Mitford novels. Jessica Fellowes also wrote several tie-in books that serve as companions to the television series, such as *Downton Abbey: A Celebration* (2015), *The Wit and Wisdom of Downton Abbey* (2015), and *A Year in the Life of Downton Abbey* (2014). *Downton Abbey: A Celebration* treats the family home as if it were a real space, with sections such as “At Home with the Family,” “Behind the Green Baize Door,” and “The Estate and Village.” “At Home with the Family” offers images and detailed accounts of specific rooms in the Abbey, with the section entitled “The Dining Room” beginning: “Eating is the cornerstone in a great house like Downton Abbey,” *Downton Abbey: A Celebration* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015), 38.

290 It is a prequel in that *Downton* is about the lives of a British earl, married to an American heiress from New York, and *The Gilded Age* is said to deal with the heiress’s family. Fellowes has said in multiple interviews that *Downton* was inspired by Edith Wharton’s unfinished novel, *The Buccaneers* (1938), which is about American girls marrying land-poor members of the English gentry.

wealthy and titled Britons desperate to drag Victorian systems of morality and class into the twentieth century. Each of these post-*Gosford* and then post-*Downton* developments indicates the way that modern readers, writers, and television producers and their viewers seem to associate a particular kind of story about a certain class, dealing with a distinct set of manners and social expectations, with the Victorians.

The recent vogue for nineteenth-century ideals and fantasies (whether or not they are actually regarded as such by the public at large) articulates what exactly it is that we, as modern-day social beings, owe to the Victorians and their systems of sociability. *Gosford Park, Downton Abbey, Belgravia, Victoria, The Gilded Age, The Mitford Murders*—all represent a perennial nostalgia for the Victorian Era, both in the United Kingdom and the United States, and Fellowes’s work in particular, with its frequent depictions of grand dinners, balls, and other parties, grapples with the kind of social, cultural work that domestic entertainments could accomplish in the mid-, late, and post-Victorian period. These modern-day instantiations of what are essentially neo-Victorian or Victorianized silver-fork stories makes a case for the enduring influence of nineteenth-century notions of middle- and upper-class sociability and the uses to which they continue to be put today.

There is more to be said about *Downton Abbey*’s transatlantic viewership and the appeal of what is arguably a very British show here in America. *The New York Times, New York Magazine, Time Magazine, CNN.com, BBC.com, The Wall Street Journal, and The Guardian* have all published pieces attempting to make sense of this phenomenon. The consensus across

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292 Elisa Tamarkin’s *Anglophilia* (2009) also tries to work out the reasons for the ongoing American interest in Englishness more generally, though her focus is on Revolutionary America. It lays the groundwork, however, for the way that “Anglophilia” is woven into the culture of the United States and, in fact, always has been.
publications is that *Downton*’s modern appeal, whether for Americans or Britons, has to do with class. Writers differ, however, on whether viewers were yearning, with a toxic sense class nostalgia, for a more socially striated society,\(^{293}\) or imagining a world where different classes live symbiotically under the same roof,\(^{294}\) or watching the show aspirationally, dreaming of sharing the wealth of Downton Abbey’s residents, the Crawley family.\(^{295}\) Obviously, the reasons behind cultural phenomena such as this one are difficult to pin down, but I would like to point to my own personal reasons for watching and enjoying the show, and then make a case for the relevance of those reasons more generally: I watched the show for the parties.\(^{296}\)

I should start by saying that I began watching *Downton Abbey* because I liked *Gosford Park*. And I liked *Gosford Park* because of Robert Altman’s singular filmmaking style, and because of Fellowes’ intelligent dialogue, and because, as a Victorianist, I love a good costume

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\(^{296}\) Or, I watched the show *mostly* for the parties. I also watched it because I like to be part of broader cultural conversations, and because the show sits deliciously on the border of highbrow and lowbrow art, at turns a sophisticated contemplation of things like class and sexuality, and a soap opera. In one early episode, for instance, a Turkish diplomat, Kemal Pamuk, joins the Crawleys for a dinner party, and the conversation at the table turns on discussions of race, imperialism, and cultural relativism. After the party, however, Pamuk stays the night and dies mid-coitus with Lady Mary, the Crawleys’ eldest daughter. He must then be carried, by Mary, her mother, and the housemaid, Anna, from Mary’s bedroom back to the guestroom, to avoid the scandal of being discovered out of bed in the morning. But I suppose even that soapy moment owes its existence to the party itself, which provides the reason for Pamuk’s presence at Downton Abbey in the first place.
drama. But one scene in *Gosford Park* always stands out to me: an aerial shot, moving down the length of the dinner table from above, with the audio flitting in and out of conversations between the guests on either side of the table, while the screen is filled with images of lavishes dishes, flowers, candelabra, and utensils, and punctuated with the moving hands and heads of servants and diners alike. In a single shot, written by Fellowes, Altman highlights the decadence of the peerage, the treatment of servants as ancillary or invisible, the range of possible topics at such dinner parties (politics, inheritance, business, the Hollywood film industry), and more. Fellowes continues to look at these same subjects in *Downton Abbey*, and to do so by depicting dinners and parties, which feature prominently in nearly every episode of the series.²⁹⁷

The show’s parties (which also include garden parties, cricket parties, hunting parties, Christmas parties, and, late in the series, a party at an automobile racetrack) accomplish much of the same work as the party in Victorian literature. As in *Middlemarch*, *Downton’s* parties are plot devices that connect disparate storylines and allow the show’s nineteen main (and countless recurring) characters to interact with one another on a regular basis. As in the poems of George Meredith and Amy Levy, parties at Downton Abbey provide cover for illicit behavior, as when, in the first episode of the series, a Duke visits for dinner and slips away to continue a longtime sexual tryst with a male footman. The economic problems at issue in the parties of *Cranford* are again in play here, with the Crawleys’ lavish parties belying their oft-discussed financial woes (as members of the landed gentry in the early twentieth century); and similarly, slippages between class, which the novel can never quite endorse, are often in focus in *Downton*, with entire episodes dedicated to the learning curve faced by Matthew Crawley, a middle-class

²⁹⁷ Julian Fellowes, *Downton Abbey*, KERA Public Media for North Texas (Dallas: KERA). Fellowes also wrote every episode of the series and only worked with a co-writer on two episodes.
solicitor turned unexpected heir, and Tom Branson, a chauffeur who marries the Earl’s daughter. Predictably, these episodes include lavish dinners and other social occasions at which Matthew and Tom’s fish-out-of-water status can be thrown into relief. The links between morality and propriety featured in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall’s long social engagements also materialize, here in the Crawleys’ commitment to remaining on socializing terms with people with otherwise deplorable notions on class, race, and religion for the sake of propriety. As in Our Mutual Friend, Can You Forgive Her?, and Miss Marjoribanks, politics, too, figure in Downton’s stories often (Tom is an aspiring Labor politician), and no less than Neville Chamberlain attends one dinner party. Lastly, as the show takes place in between the two World Wars, issues related to globalism, the British Empire, and its impending collapse are often taken up over dinner or at other social occasions, just as they are in Persuasion, Secret History, Little Women, and The Moonstone. Party guests throughout the series include an Ottoman attaché, a Russian refugee prince and princess, Lady Grantham’s American family members, and the newly appointed Governor of Bombay and his wife on the eve of their departure to India.

These parties, so capacious in what they can accomplish and whom they can include, are smaller iterations of what I take to be one of the central pleasures of Downton Abbey: the simultaneous comfort and thrill of something that is both cozy and unusual. The parties in Downton are familiar enough to be accessible, but foreign enough to be exciting. Most modern viewers have not had to sit through a five-course meal with foreign dignitaries and heads of state, but all understand what it is to feel out of place at a dinner, or to commit a social faux pas, or to

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298 This is the same party at which Lord Grantham’s undiagnosed ulcer bursts, causing him to vomit blood across the table, providing a nice juxtaposition of the intimate concerns of the Crawley household with Neville Chamberlain’s international legacy as, among other things, a proponent of appeasement with Adolf Hitler, for the informed viewer.
struggle to find conversation topics with unfamiliar party guests. Likewise, the simultaneous
familiarity and foreignness of show’s parties allow viewers the aspirational experience of
imagining themselves into something that is at once recognizable and inordinately lavish. But
there is also something uncommonly orderly about these parties, with servants and guests
conforming (usually) unquestioningly to their socially prescribed roles, within a socially
prescribed system. While the show often emphasizes the changing dynamics of the 1910s, 1920s,
and 1930s, with servants moving on to become secretaries and estate managers and one of the
Earl’s daughters becoming the editor of a ladies’ magazine, *Downton Abbey*’s very existence as
an upstairs-downstairs drama rests of the perpetuation of Victorian systems of servant-employer
relationships. In fact, the show ends when it becomes clear that these relationships are no longer
sustainable, with several servants leaving to become owners of their own homes. Through the
lens of often un-interrogated nostalgia, the show depicts a bygone era, awash in the trappings of
luxury and a now-defunct, formerly unquestioned system of subservience and superiority. We
sympathize with the servants; we aspire to be the masters. In short, the show is a fantasy that
suspending the progression of time for viewers and characters alike, allowing for a bowdlerized
look back at what is imagined as both a simpler and more glamorous time.

What *Downton Abbey* does for viewers, the party—and usually the dinner party—does
for the Crawleys. The order of events at Crawley dinner party is exactly the same as that
described by Isabella Beeton and depicted in the works of Anne Brontë, Charles Dickens,
Anthony Trollope, and the rest. Over and over again, guests arrive, go to dinner in pairs, are

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It also ends with a note of something like magical thinking, with one disgraced
footman returning in triumph, now in the elevated role of butler, suggesting that, maybe, this old
world can continue on in perpetuity. Viewers are of course aware, however, that World War II
sits on the horizon, and that it will again unsettle British notions of class and order, this time in
such a way that old systems of servant-based life will be almost entirely destroyed.
attended to by servants, separate by gender, and then reunite for games, singing, and conversation in the drawing room. By the early twentieth century, this now-outdated iteration of sociability was only feasible for the very rich and only necessary for figures like Lord Grantham, Earl of an ancient estate now on its last legs. This patriarch is often depicted as someone with a Victorian sense of propriety, and much of the show revolves his need to modernize his and his family’s way of life. Lord Grantham is the central obstacle to the chauffeur Tom’s inclusion in the family circle, and to Lady Edith’s ascension to magazine editor, among other things. He is seen as old-fashioned and sometimes curmudgeonly for clinging to the ideals of the past, while the rest of the family and their servants embrace the developments of the modern era.\textsuperscript{300} And yet the dinner party, in all its grandeur, is never questioned as a fixture of daily life, never discussed as something outmoded or obsolete. It allows the Crawleys to assert their continued place in the social order, but accomplishes that work without being remarked upon. It is a symbol of an old order that has been rendered, for viewers and characters alike, as a staple for this new-yet-somehow-temporally-arrested world.

That, I argue, is the real appeal of \textit{Downton Abbey}. A period drama, which exists at the nexus of old-fashioned, orderly ways of life and a new world in flux, the show paradoxically provides viewers with a sense of stability, order, and predictability: the imagined comfort of a space in which people exist in their prescribed roles and the rhythms of daily life, exemplified in the rhythms of the dinner party, are sure and steady, even amid the tumult of a rapidly modernizing, globalizing, democratizing world. While most people would not admit to longing for a world in which class was (at least imagined to be) static, shows like \textit{Downton Abbey} and

\textsuperscript{300} One exception is Mr. Carson, the butler, who often functions as a downstairs analogue to Lord Grantham, regarding the house and family as his own and mirroring the Earl in his resistance to change.
films like Gosford Park allow us to temporarily exist in a space in which the predictable luxury of Victorian notions of sociability can be pulled into the present, but without prohibiting progressive change. Servants and members of the family are just as likely to be proponents of modernization as they are to bemoan the collapse of aging ways of life, and so we as viewers can, somewhat irresponsibly, excuse ourselves from having to take a stand with either camp. We can, at once, cheer on the housemaid as she pursues dreams of being an independent “career woman,” and revel in the structured, glamorous scenes of sociability that inhere in the Crawleys’ dinner parties, Christmas dances, and so on.

Integral to this cognitively dissonant pleasure are different ideologies of class for the characters of Downton and its modern viewers. As I have already mentioned, the extension of Victorian ideals of sociability into the twentieth century was only feasible for the rich and titled. While the middle-class Victorian mistress might have had several servants under her command, by the late nineteenth century, such arrangements were growing increasingly unsustainable. Thus, the Crawleys’ Victorianized form of sociability necessarily conflates, for the modern viewer, the nineteenth-century-style dinner party with notions of upper-class wealth, in a way that was not necessarily true for the Victorians themselves or the characters in their books. This misapprehension is important, however, for the show’s fan base, largely made up of white,

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301 Edward Higgs synthesizes the various reasons for the decline of Victorian servanthood nicely. It has been seen variously as “a function of the declining middle-class demand during the Great Depression”; a result of “increasing middle-class emphasis on domesticity which encouraged closer ties between parents and children, and thus reduced the possible role of servants”; and a byproduct of “the availability of other, more attractive, employment for women in the late nineteenth century,” “Domestic Servants and Households in Victorian England,” in Social History, 8.2 (May 1983), 204.
middle-class women (and some men). Viewers can watch from a comfortably detached position, knowing that it is very unlikely that they will become either a British earl (or countess) or an in-house domestic servant, living according to the whims of all-powerful employers. The lives of the Crawleys and their servants seem exceptional and unobtainable for the modern *Downton* fan, and so their dinners and parties—both because of their luxuriousness and because of the domestic labor they require—are exceptional and unobtainable as well.

The lavish Victorian-style dinner party was almost as unfeasible then, in the early twentieth century, as it is now, and yet it continues to function, for Fellowes’s characters and for the show’s viewers, as an icon of Victorian sociability. It is a time-honored staple for them, an aspiration for us; it is inordinately, excitingly elegant and familiarly ritualized; it is a method by which Fellowes can connect his numerous characters, and in which we, the viewers, can make those connections ourselves. It is both a bygone practice to which the Crawleys and their guests cling, and an ever-relevant method of communicating information to contemporary audiences and guests alike. The truth is that we don’t need the party to be feasible, for us or for the Crawleys. We are drawn to its simultaneous commonness and impossibility, and in fact we rely on these traits to perpetuate both our identification with the Crawleys and their servants and to entertain us in their opulent, costume-drama style.

In some ways, the dinners and parties in *Downton Abbey*, and those in *Gosford Park*, are responsible for the existence of this dissertation. As I have already said, I began thinking about writing on this topic while watching the latter; but more importantly, the role that the party plays

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302 *Downton* doubled PBS’s usual viewership “in all the important demographics, but among women 35 to 49, it was up 370%. For men in the same age group, the was roughly doubled,” “PBS reveals who’s really watching *Downton Abbey*,” *Los Angeles Times*, last modified on March 28, 2012, http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2012/03/pbs-reveals-whos-really-watching-downton-abbey-.html.
in *Downton Abbey* and in Fellowes’s earlier film reiterates the role that the party plays in Victorian literature and reveals its continued significance today. The highly structured party provides a screen against which to project the expectations of characters, readers, and viewers. Meeting those expectations brings a sense of order, and perhaps comfort; subverting them brings drama and leads to revelatory moments. Furthermore, within the safe strictures and expected rhythm of the party, the unfamiliar can be encountered, the uncertain weighed, and the unexpected accomplished. The Victorian party, then and now, is a at once a litmus test for the achievement of old-order expectations, a haven against the discomforts of the modern and the unknown, and a mutable space which can accommodate the vicissitudes of an ever-changing world. One need only attend (to) it.


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