"A Storm in Her Mind"

Representations of Female Melancholy in *Ruth* and *The Mill on the Floss*

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This thesis is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Research at Macquarie University. I certify that this thesis is entirely my own work and that I have given fully documented reference to the work of others. The thesis has not previously, in part or in whole, been submitted for assessment in any formal course of study.

Signed: Monica Sharpe

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Abstract

There is a long history of criticism concerning certain trends in the characterisation of female characters within Victorian novels. This thesis aims to explore a trend that has been largely ignored within literary criticism, the melancholic woman. This thesis will explore the representation of female melancholy in two Victorian realist novels, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* and George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. It aims to demonstrate the ways in which representations of female melancholy functioned politically in these novels, in either reflecting or undermining Victorian gender ideologies. In approaching this question the intersections between Victorian medical and social understandings of female melancholy and the literary representations of melancholy will be examined. Through this exploration it will be argued that these novels were a space in which the assumptions underpinning the Victorian psychological discourse, and wider normative ideologies of womanhood could be challenged and complicated.

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Ultimately, I dedicate this work to God, who is the source of all my hope, the One who calms the storm in my own mind.

Introduction

The madwoman, the prostitute, the spinster and the angel; the women who inhabit the pages of Victorian literature are iconic. A long history of criticism has focused upon the political implications of these female character types and the way that they have been used by Victorian writers to reflect or undermine normative ideologies of womanhood. However, there are other trends in the characterisation of women in Victorian literature that have been largely ignored in academic work. One such trend is the melancholic woman; the woman who contended with a "storm in her mind" (Gaskell 84), restless and disappointed, withdrawn and dissatisfied with the world which she saw and understood. Through a focus on the mostly ignored melancholic woman, this thesis will demonstrate another way Victorian novelists were engaging with discourses in their society, for example psychological discourse[1], in order to intervene in contemporary debates surrounding domestic and gender ideologies which were so powerful in determining the experience of being female in the Victorian era.

This thesis will explore the representation of female melancholy in *Ruth* written by Elizabeth Gaskell in 1853, and *The Mill on the Floss* written by George Eliot in 1860. It aims to demonstrate the way in which representations of female melancholy functioned politically in these novels, in either reflecting or undermining Victorian gender ideologies. In approaching this question, I have

[1] I have chosen to refer to the psychological discourse, rather than the medical or psychiatric discourse, to reference a wider societal discussion found not only in medical texts but also other texts, for example treatises by clergy who were also involved in the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders in the Victorian era.

first returned to the medical and social understandings of female melancholy within the Victorian era. I have then examined the ways Gaskell and Eliot employed aspects of these constructions of melancholy in their own literary representations. Through this comparison, I will argue that these novels were a space in which normative ideologies of womanhood could be challenged and complicated.

While the melancholic female is a recurrent character in a range of Victorian genres, including poetry and sensational fiction, I have chosen to confine my scope of inquiry to realist novels for a number of reasons. It has been widely argued that Victorian realism is inherently ethical in nature, intrinsically involved in the production and reproduction of Victorian gender and domestic ideologies[2]. In *How To Read Victorian Novels,* Levine argues that in its representation of the detailed interactions between individuals and society, the realist mode asks its reader to actively engage and act out of the knowledge they acquire from reading (28). As this thesis is focused upon the way literary representations of female melancholy interact with wider discussions within medical and social discourses in order to reproduce or disrupt Victorian gender ideologies, the realist genre is an appropriate avenue by which to explore this interaction. This is because, as Levine has argued, the mode is inherently and explicitly involved in the construction, reproduction and interruption of gender ideologies.

[2] See works by Miller (1988), Langland (1995), and Armstrong (1987)

Within the realist genre the number of female melancholic characters is vast. Although I could have chosen to focus upon numerous novels, I chose *Ruth* and *The Mill on the Floss* because they have several comparable features, and have been under-examined compared to other works by Gaskell and Eliot in recent academic debate. The protagonists of both novels, Ruth Hilton and Maggie Tulliver, experience extended periods of melancholy that are catalyzed by social and economic factors beyond their control, and after a period of time are seemingly 'cured'. Yet, both characters eventually descend back into melancholy and die at the conclusion of their narratives. The endings of both novels have also been widely criticized. These factors make a comparable study of the texts productive. While there has been some academic work published on both *Ruth* and *The Mill on the Floss* recently, it has focused upon other concerns, and is yet to investigate representations of melancholy in either work. Current work which focuses on the characterisation of Ruth and Maggie continues to examine Ruth as a fallen woman[3], while work on *The Mill on the Floss* tends to examine Maggie Tulliver as the daughter of the bankrupt father, fallen woman or religious martyr[4]. This has meant that the status of Ruth and Maggie as melancholic women has been mostly ignored[5].

[3] See works by Freeland (2002), Webster (2012), Malton (2005) and Jaffe (2007) and Fenton-Hathaway (2014)
[4] See works by Allen (2010), Hunter (2011), Yeoh (2009)
[5] The exception is Marshall's exploration of Maggie's performative melancholy in *Romanticism, Gender and Violence* (2013)

I have used a number of sources, both primary sources from the Victorian era and contemporary secondary sources, to frame my argument. There is a vast amount of medical and psychological writing available from the Victorian era. The definitions and descriptions of melancholy that I have used in my analysis are gained primarily from two Victorian medical manuals; Bucknill and Tuke's *The Manual of Psychological Medicine* published in 1858 and Griesinger's *Mental Pathology and Therapeutics* published in 1845. I have chosen these two sources because they offer concise and coherent descriptions of the symptoms of melancholy that I have been able to compare to the symptoms displayed by Ruth and Maggie. To understand wider medical conceptions of mental disorder in the Victorian period, especially ideas about its cause and appropriate treatments, I have used other non-medical writing, with a particular focus on John Barlow's description of moral management in *On Man's Power Over Himself to Prevent and Control Insanity.*

Within Victorian literary studies there exists a long history of feminist literary criticism that examines the connections between literary representations of women and normative gender ideologies. Seminal works in the field such as Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* were published in the 1970s as feminist literary criticism was emerging from second wave feminism. More recently, there has been a range of studies published within this field that adopt a historicist approach, using as their method a comparison between literary representations of women and representations in other social and medical discourses. These include Deborah Anna Logan's *Fallenness in Victorian Women's*

Writing in 1998, Jill Matus' *Unstable Bodies* in 1995 and Anna Krugovoy Silver's *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* in 2008. I have modeled the construction of my argument on the historicist theoretical frame of these studies. However, in all of these studies, representations of female melancholy have been ignored in favor of representations of fallenness, motherhood and anorexia. This thesis attempts to fill this gap, using the same analytical tools to examine intersections between literary representations of women and representations in other societal discourses, but with the focus of melancholy. This new focus opens up new areas of discussion regarding the ways in which Victorian writers intervened in debates regarding gender and domesticity.

The Victorian era saw the rise of psychiatry as a subset of the medical sciences. As a new field of inquiry there was a struggle over terms and definitions and conflicting ideas concerning causes and treatments (Oppenheim 11). Medical psychiatric texts were often used to give authority to ideological constructions of gender. The medical sciences were, for the most part, gendered, with the female most often cast as the patient, and the male cast as the physician (Showalter 54). It was generally thought that madness was a physical disease of the body, located in the brain and its connected nerves and caused by instability in the body's elements (Shuttleworth 42). The female body was considered particularly susceptible to madness because of the instability of the female reproductive processes of menstruation, pregnancy and lactation (Oppenheim 193). These inherent instabilities were thought to render the female body fundamentally pathological, in an almost constant state of collapse. The woman was, therefore,

thought to be powerless, completely subject to the forces of her body that interfered with emotional, rational and sexual control.

However, alongside the idea of female powerlessness ran a contradictory rhetoric of self-help, with women being urged to monitor and work on controlling their bodies and behaviours. Within this thread of the psychological discourse, bodily instabilities manifested themselves as the symptoms of mental disorder. These symptoms tended to be any antisocial behaviours, or for women, behaviours that did not fit within the paradigm of normative femininity (Shuttleworth 54). The dominant treatment for mental disorder in the Victorian era was moral management, a theory that suggested that the cure for mental disorder was a patient's reintroduction into appropriate social behaviours. The ideas of moral management and the rhetoric of self-help demonstrate the intersections between the Victorian psychological discourse and other wider social discourses concerning gender. The psychological discourse was then another discourse of control, warning women that deviations from normative femininity would result in mental instability and distress, and giving seemingly irrefutable authority to normative constructions of womanhood.

Within my thesis I have chosen to focus my analysis on one Victorian mental disorder, known as melancholy. This disorder, also sometimes referred to as "broken health" or "shattered nerves" has symptoms similar to contemporary major depressive disorder (Oppenheim 1). Griesinger in *Mental Pathologies and Therapeutics* defines it as primarily consisting in "the morbid influence of a painful negative affection, a vague feeling of oppression, anxiety, dejection and

gloom… without external motives (false ideas)" (209). In *The Manual of Psychological Medicine* Bucknill and Tuke describe a sufferer of melancholy as losing relish for experience, having an overall sense of gloom and dread, and "unceasingly revolving his own desperate condition which he considers worse than all others" (153). Sufferers of melancholy were also secretive, and withdrawn, often keeping their pain and suffering extremely private. In general terms, melancholy was thought to be an insidious state of restlessness and dissatisfaction with life.

As an abstract concept, covering a vast range of symptoms and experiences, melancholy is an ideal Victorian phenomenon upon which to focus my analysis. Moreover, the melancholic female seems to embody core Victorian anxieties regarding women, an affront to Victorian conceptions of ideal femininity[6]. The melancholic woman cannot perform her function as angel in the house, and gatekeeper of the moral domestic space because she is dissatisfied and restless with the world. She is hard to identify because she performs her sadness and distress secretly and without hysterics. She could therefore be anywhere, and any woman, an unseen threat to the stability of the home. These attributes render the melancholic woman a perfect tool for Victorian writers, like Gaskell and Eliot, to challenge and complicate gender and domestic ideologies.

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[6] Attempting to construct an exhaustive picture of the gender ideologies at play within the Victorian era is an impossible task. It would require the over-simplification of a network of complex culture narratives which interacted, interrogated and recreated a gender discourse which was in constant flux. It is possible, however, to identity certain trends within the discourse which make the analysis necessary for my argument possible. When I refer to Victorian "ideal femininity", I refer to a trend within Victorian gender discourse that described an ideal woman as sexually passive, spiritual and unassuming. She was to rule over and protect the home, which was the moral centre of society in which her husband and sons could be morally refreshed after spending time in the morally corrupt world of economics. For further discussion of this trend see Hall (1992), Helsinger et al. (1983) and Langland (1995).

My thesis will examine the interactions between the literary texts, *Ruth* and *The Mill on the Floss*, and non-literary texts within the Victorian era. I will argue that Gaskell and Eliot were able to intervene in and challenge the construction and reproduction of Victorian gender ideologies through their novels. In dealing with this phenomenon I am methodologically indebted to the foundational work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. Underlying my argument is the assumption that a study of literary and non-literary representations of melancholy can be used to draw conclusions concerning gender ideologies of the Victorian period. This draws upon the argument made by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* that it is in the interaction of all discursive practices that a culture represents itself. Foucault argues that it is within discourse that a culture constructs, transmits, reproduces and challenges ideologies, naturalizing particular beliefs. Within *Gender Trouble* Butler similarly argues that there is nothing natural or inherent about gender, but rather in culture both femininity and masculinity are ideologically constructed and then performed. She writes "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 186). Therefore, the body and in my argument, its illnesses, are culturally constituted, as a reflection of the culture's values and beliefs.

While this thesis will argue that within their fiction Gaskell and Eliot challenged assumptions and ideas found in medical and social texts about melancholy and moral management, I make no assumption that they would have read such texts or directly allude to them. Rather, I argue that the ideas, especially concerning

gender, which underpinned medical understandings within the Victorian era, were part of a broader network of ideas that permeated Victorian understandings of the world. It is this vast and interconnected system of which Gaskell and Eliot, as well as the Victorian psychological discourse, are a part. In *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Fiction*, Gillian Beer argues that "who reads what does not fix limits" (3), when it comes to analysis and in fact within society, "ideas pass more rapidly into the state of assumptions when they are unread" (4). Just as Beer argues that the ideas of Darwin became naturalized and assumed, I argue that the Victorian gender ideologies that underpin the Victorian psychological discourse were assumptions widely distributed and pervasive in Victorian thought and society. The ideas found within medical texts became part of wider discussions within society, with which Gaskell and Eliot were engaged. For this reason, Gaskell and Eliot's direct knowledge of the actual medical theories is not assumed in my analysis.

In Chapter One and Chapter Two I will argue that within *Ruth* and *The Mill on the Floss*, Gaskell and Eliot challenged medical understandings about the cause of melancholy. I will argue that the Victorian psychological discourse located mental disease within the instability of the female body, thereby excluding economic and social pressures. Within the narratives of *Ruth* and *The Mill on the Floss*, Gaskell and Eliot reintroduce social and economic pressures into the narratives of Ruth and Maggie, and locate the cause of their melancholy in these external pressures. In *Ruth* I will argue that Gaskell locates the cause of Ruth's melancholy in her economic helplessness as an orphan and seamstresses'

apprentice, and her inability to protect herself from a predatory male because of her lack of sexual understanding and knowledge. In *The Mill on the Floss*, the cause of Maggie's melancholy, I will suggest, is the foolishness of the father's economic decisions, her position as the daughter of a bankrupt father and the moral failings of her family and the wider society. In introducing these external factors as the cause of both Ruth and Maggie's melancholy I will argue that Gaskell and Eliot remove the cause of melancholy and mental distress from the body of the female, and place it on the external injustices of Victorian society and its expectations of women. I conclude these chapters by arguing that although the Victorian psychological discourse positioned melancholy as an irrational response by an unstable female body, both Gaskell and Eliot reposition melancholy as a rational response to understanding or perceiving the injustices of society. For Ruth, melancholy is a rational response to understanding the injustices of the fallenness myth and its effect upon her life and the life of her son, and for Maggie melancholy is a rational response to understanding the hypocrisy of her society, and her inability to perform the kind of femininity required of her.

In Chapter Three and Chapter Four I will consider the way Gaskell and Eliot challenge the discourse of moral management. I will argue that while moral management advocated the performance of socially acceptable feminine behaviours as the cure for melancholy, Gaskell and Eliot, while echoing this discourse, ultimately expose it as inadequate, by demonstrating that the kind of feminine performance required was ultimately unsustainable, and ignored the social and economic factors which caused the experience of melancholy in the

first place. For *Ruth* I will argue that although her brief reprieve from melancholy echoes ideas of moral management because it includes her adoption into a domestic space and her experience of motherhood, ultimately this cure breaks down as the domestic space is unconventional and her status as fallen woman supplants her status as mother. Likewise, although Maggie goes through a period of self-renunciation and the attempt to conform to normative femininity, this is ultimately unsuccessful as she is brought into contact with male figures that desire relationships with her. The breakdown of the cure in both *Ruth* and *The Mill on the Floss*, catalyze the final descent back into melancholy for both Ruth and Maggie. I will argue that through this Gaskell and Eliot suggest that moral management is inadequate because it ignores the actual material injustices perpetuated upon women through economic and ideological oppression within the Victorian period.

In the Afterword I will address the controversial endings of *Ruth* and *The Mill on the Floss.* Rather than flaws, I will argue that these endings are the inevitable culmination of Gaskell and Eliot's powerful critiques of the Victorian psychological discourse and wider gender ideologies. I will argue that the realist mode that Gaskell and Eliot were writing within did not allow for the continuation of Ruth or Maggie because they were women whose narratives embodied challenges to the gender ideologies of the societies in which they lived. Gaskell and Eliot respond by moving beyond the realist paradigm with conclusions that unsatisfactorily include elements of the supernatural and spiritual. These endings deliberately frustrate the reader in order to reveal the

inconsistency of Victorian psychological discourse and gender ideologies that eventually destroy the women that they entrap.

I will conclude that Gaskell and Eliot use the idea of melancholy within the Victorian psychological discourse to illuminate economic and social injustices, and the oppressive gender ideologies that affected the lives of Victorian women. They achieve this by reframing melancholy not as a psychological or moral issue, to be addressed through behaviour modification, but as a social and economic issue located within systems of power within Victorian society.

Chapter One

"Surely life was a horrible dream": *Ruth* and the Onset of Melancholy

Recent scholarship has tended to characterize *Ruth* as a social problem novel in which Gaskell explores the problems surrounding the treatment of, and discourse surrounding, fallen women in Victorian society[7]. The focus of these discussions has tended to be the way in which Gaskell's characterisation of Ruth interacted with social discussions that were taking place regarding fallen women, and more broadly, so called 'redundant' or 'surplus' women[8] who did not fit Victorian conceptions of womanhood. It has been argued that Gaskell offers a critique of the treatment of fallen women, and the gender discourse that surrounded this debate. Although there have been brief references to the medical discourse surrounding female sexuality within these discussions[9], for the most part, the Victorian medical and psychological discourse has been ignored. Focusing on Ruth as not only a fallen woman, but also a melancholic woman offers a new way of exploring Gaskell's critique of Victorian gender ideologies. This focus allows not only Gaskell's interaction with social discourses, but also medical and psychological discourses to be explored, opening up a new

[7] See works by Freeland (2002), Webster (2012), Malton (2005) and Jaffe (2007) and Fenton-Hathaway (2014)
[8] The idea of the 'surplus' woman comes from the 1851 census that found an increase in the number of single women and sparked debate about the decline of the family. For more see work by Levitan (2008).
[9] See for example Fenton-Hathaway's discussion of Victorian medical understandings of female sexuality (2014)

avenue for discussion regarding Gaskell's interaction with Victoria gender and domestic ideologies.

In this chapter I will focus on the way in which the onset of Ruth's melancholy challenged Victorian conceptions of the cause of female mental disorder. The conceptualization of mental disorder as a psychological and moral issue within the medical discourse, I will argue, is rewritten within *Ruth* as a social and economic issue. I will begin by briefly exploring the way in which the Victorian medical and psychological discourse understood female mental disorder, as being catalyzed by instabilities within the female body, especially the female reproductive functions. I will then demonstrate how this medical understanding reinforced a social anxiety to control and repress female sexuality, through a suppression of knowledge. I will argue that Gaskell's initial characterisation of Ruth, as an 'angel in the house'[10] type who conformed to Victorian expectations of femininity, challenged this conception of female mental disorder. Although Ruth conforms to Victorian femininity, she descends into melancholy because of her economic and social status as an orphan and seamstress apprentice and the advances of a predatory male. While the medical discourse suggested that the cause of mental disorder was located in the natural defects of the female body and an unrestrained sexuality, Gaskell locates the cause of melancholy outside of the woman and in society and its values. Moreover, I will argue that Gaskell in fact suggests that it is Ruth's ideal Victorian femininity, especially in regard to

[10] The 'angel in the house' is a reference to Coventry Patmore's infamous poem of the same title published in 1862. The term 'angel in the house' is used to reference women who embodied the Victorian feminine ideal.

her lack of sexual knowledge, which leaves her susceptible to a descent into melancholy.

I will conclude this chapter by arguing that within *Ruth*, Gaskell repositions melancholy as an inevitable and natural response to Ruth's understanding of her place within the fallenness myth. By repositioning melancholy as an act of understanding, rather than an act based in irrationality, Gaskell exposes the unjust nature of the Victorian treatment of women like Ruth and the artificiality of both the medical discourse and the wider social discourse surrounding gender. Although it is established throughout the narrative that Ruth and her son Leonard are innocent of vice and guilt, the power of the myth of fallenness over their lives leaves them as outcasts, destitute if it were not for the kindness of the Bensons. As Ruth becomes aware of this injustice she descends into melancholy. Melancholy is thereby repositioned by Gaskell as a logical response by Ruth to her place as a woman in Victorian society. Gaskell highlights the dangers of an ideal womanhood built upon a lack of sexual knowledge, the dangers of ignoring the effect of economics of the lives of women, and the dangers of the myth of fallenness. It is these aspects of Victorian gender ideologies, rather than Ruth's own body or moral failings, which result in her experience of melancholy.

Victorian medical discourse located the cause of mental disorder primarily in the body of the woman. In 1848 Dr. J. G. Millingen wrote that:

> woman, with her exalted spiritualism, is more forcibly under the control of matter; her sensations are more vivid and acute, her sympathies more irresistible. She is less under the influence of the brain than the uterine

> system… in her, a hysteric predisposition is incessantly predominating from the dawn of puberty. (157)

Similarly, in 1828 in *Commentaries on Insanity*, George Man Burrows commented upon the impact of menstruation on sanity: "everybody on the least experience must be sensible of the influence of menstruation on the operations of the mind. In truth, it is the moral and physical barometer of the female constitution" (146). These comments reflect a wider discourse that saw the female physical body as being the cause of all mental distress and disorder (Shuttleworth 76). Such a discourse naturalized mental disorder, allowing economic and social factors that had real impact upon women's lives to be ignored.

The location of mental disorder in the instabilities of the female body interacted with a wider social anxiety regarding female sexuality. If female reproductive processes caused disorders like melancholy, then there was a need to control these processes and their expression in female sexuality. Although by no means supported within all of the Victorian medical discourse, the view that gained currency and was seen influencing Victorian literature on womanhood and the home, was the idea that normal women had little to no sexual desire (Oppenheim 203). The idea was popular within conventional domestic discourse because it seemed to ensure passive compliance with domestic life. A restless, active female sexuality was seen as a threat to the home that was meant to serve as a spiritual haven for the male (Oppenheim 203). Therefore, within discourses on Victorian domesticity and womanhood it was promoted that a proper woman should have no knowledge or education regarding sexuality. It was thought that

lack of knowledge would curb any deviant sexuality that was present because of instability within the female body. Martha Vicinus has termed this phenomenon the "conspiracy of silence" in which Victorian girls were raised, arguing that the lack of sexual education received by Victorian girls meant they were unable to act as responsible sexual agents (161). Within Victorian gender ideologies it was thought therefore that women who exercised control and were sexually chaste and naïve, like Ruth, were protecting themselves from the inherent instabilities of their own bodies.

The initial characterisation of Ruth establishes her as an example of ideal Victorian femininity; she is innocent, lacking sexual knowledge, modest and unassuming. This characterisation of Ruth, as the archetypal Victorian woman, renders her descent into melancholy a challenge to Victorian medical understandings of melancholy because it disrupts the idea that the cause of melancholy is located within an unstable female constitution. Although it is immediately established that Ruth is beautiful and knows her own beauty, "Yes, I know I am pretty… I could not help knowing… for many people have told me" (Gaskell 14) she is free of pride and seemingly unconscious of the power of her beauty. In her first interaction with Mr. Bellingham she is modest, unassuming and most importantly silent; "she did not look up to thank him, for she felt ashamed" and she "received the flower silently, but with a grave, modest motion of her head" (Gaskell 17). In her modesty and innocence, Ruth displays characteristics of ideal Victorian womanhood that valued submissiveness and a lack of worldly knowledge. She is trapped within Vicinus' "conspiracy of silence" in that she cannot understand the reason her interaction with Bellingham feels

important to her. When considering the flower he had given her, "she had no idea that any association (with Bellingham) made her camellia precious to her. She believed it was solely on account of its exquisite beauty that she tended it so carefully" (Gaskell 18). Ruth's lack of understanding of herself as a sexual being, both in being perceived by others as such, or having desire herself, establishes her as a properly innocent and unworldly Victorian woman.

As the archetypal Victorian female, Ruth's subsequent seduction, fall and period of melancholy does not fit within the paradigm established by Victorian psychological discourse. Rather than locating the cause of Ruth's fall and melancholy within the instability of her body or a restless sexuality, Gaskell introduces a predatory male who takes advantage of her innocence, and social and economic factors as the causal factors. Bellingham is immediately attracted to Ruth because of her extreme innocence; for him "there was a spell in her shyness… it would be an exquisite delight to attract and tame her wildness, just as he had often allured and tamed the timid fawns in his mother's park" (Gaskell 31). Although ideally Victorian women were expected to be both desirable to men and yet resist morally questionable behaviours, Ruth's ignorance of sexuality leaves her without the resources to identify such behaviour (Shuttleworth 72). This is emphasized as she instinctively refuses a private walk with Bellingham and yet was "questioning herself why she refused a thing which was, as far as reason and knowledge (*her* knowledge) went, so innocent" (Gaskell 36). On the same walk, after being entranced by the "beauty of an early spring day" Ruth, "almost forgot the presence of Mr. Bellingham" (Gaskell 36), highlighting Ruth's child-like nature and inability to comprehend Bellingham's

intentions, because she neither sees herself, nor him, as sexual beings (Webster 19). Gaskell concurrently emphasizes Ruth's innocence and the intentionality of Bellingham's actions, exposing the dangers of the "conspiracy of silence" in which Victorian women were raised.

Gaskell not only emphasizes Ruth's victimization by Bellingham but also her victimization by the wider economic system that leaves her almost entirely destitute and alone after the death of her parents. From the outset Ruth is wounded by other people's financial exploits. Upon his death her father is found to be deeply in debt and Ruth is entrusted to an unreliable guardian who immediately apprentices her to the dressmaker, Mrs. Mason. During her time at Mrs. Mason's she is commodified for her beauty as a girl "likely to do credit to the establishment" (Gaskell 10). It is Mrs. Mason's exploitation of Ruth's beauty in selecting her to work at the ball that first brings her into contact with Bellingham. Mrs. Mason's lack of care for the girls that are apprenticed to her is evident from her lack of interest in their wellbeing, for example in not setting out supper for Ruth the only orphan who has no where to go on Sundays.

The detail Gaskell provides of Ruth's past and her time at the dressmakers is essential because it removes the blame for Ruth's subsequent fall and period of melancholy from her as a woman, and on to the social and economic system which failed to support her as a uneducated and abandoned child. The significance of Ruth's vulnerable position is emphasized by the didactic voice of the narrator in "it would have been a better and more Christian thing, if she (Mrs Mason) had kept up the character of her girls by tender vigilance and maternal

care" (Gaskell 48). This insertion of a moralizing narrative voice within Gaskell's narrative, a technique more common within Eliot's style in *The Mill on the Floss*, highlights the significance of Ruth's helplessness in her situation. It is Ruth's loneliness, her lack of connection in the world which makes her vulnerable to Bellingham as "sorrow had filled up her days… the interval of blank, after the loss of her mother and during her father's life-in-death, had made her all the more ready to value and cling to sympathy-first from Jenny, and now from Bellingham" (Gaskell 40). The details surrounding the beginning of Ruth's melancholy implicitly interrogate the Victorian psychological discourse, exposing the danger of the 'conspiracy of silence' that it encouraged, and the way it ignored an unjust social and economic system.

Gaskell interrogates the Victorian psychological discourse that linked melancholy with the irrational nature of women by linking moments of melancholy with moments of understanding within *Ruth*. Initially, Ruth's melancholy is connected with her moving from a state of naivety regarding her relationship with Mr. Bellingham, to one of understanding. As Ruth lives with Bellingham as his lover it is made clear that she is completely innocent of the way in which people are viewing her, as a fallen woman. She "was quite unconscious of being the object of remark; and in her light rapid passings to and fro, had never looked at the doors and windows, where many watchers stood observing her, and commenting on her situation" (Gaskell 61). Although Ruth's innocence is seemingly implausible, Gaskell emphasizes this innocence to critique Victorian gender expectations. It is evident that Ruth truly believes

Bellingham to love her and her actions to be the right thing for her to do in her situation.

As Bellingham abandons her, Ruth is made to understand her situation as a forsaken mistress, an understanding that is the catalyst to her first melancholic experience. Gaskell thereby repositions melancholy as an act of understanding, rather than a result of the irrational forces of the female body. As Ruth receives the note that tells her that Mr. Bellingham has left, she immediately begins to exhibit melancholic symptoms. There are multiple descriptions of Ruth's sleepless nights for example, "Ruth, sleepless, weary, restless with the oppression of a sorrow which she dared not face… kept awake all the early part of the night" (117). Ruth is struck with despair about the world in which she lives. Gaskell describes Ruth's mental state in "her only hope was to die, and she believed she was dying. She could not think; she could not believe anything. Surely life was a horrible dream" (Gaskell 80). The imagery Gaskell uses of being in a nightmare state in which one experiences intense pain connects Ruth to the melancholic patients described by Griesinger who are afflicted with a "painful, negative affection" (209). Gaskell continues this type of imagery in "the storm was in her mind, and rent and tore her purposes into forms as wild and irregular as the heavenly shapes she was looking at" (Gaskell 84). Although Ruth's melancholic symptoms are similar to those described within the Victorian medical texts, rather than being irrational, Gaskell represents them as the logical outcome to Ruth's understanding of her situation. Gaskell interrogates the Victorian psychological discourse by positioning melancholy as a logical, rather than irrational, response to society.

Following this initial experience, Ruth's melancholy returns at moments when she understands her place in society as a fallen woman. The fallen woman was a powerful cultural icon within the Victorian era that embodied an anxiety regarding female sexuality and proper womanhood. As there was a widespread belief that female sexuality was either weak or nonexistent, for a woman to engage in sexual activity was considered a deliberate, conscious choice to sin (Mitchell xi). This kind of activity was a direct affront to Victorian conceptions of womanhood that viewed the woman as the gatekeeper of morality and the domestic space (Webster 13). Lynda Nead has commented that this gives the fallen woman particular cultural power because she "threatened not only stable class relations but also national and imperial security" (91). In *Ruth* Mr. Bradshaw embodies the Victorian view of the fallen woman as irredeemable and completely corrupt in his speech about Ruth;

> she has come amongst us with her innocent seeming, and spread her nets well and skillfully. She has turned right into wrong and wrong into right, and taught you all to be uncertain whether there by any such thing as Vice in the world, or whether it ought not be looked upon as Virtue. She had led you to the brink of the deep pit, waiting for the first chance circumstance to push you in (Gaskell 279).

Bradshaw's use of religious imagery is characteristic of Victorian discussions of fallen women. Rachel Webster has analyzed the use of religious imagery within the fallenness myth, writing that within Victorian understandings the fallen woman has become "Original Sin incarnate, the corruptible, dangerous figure, who, it can be assumed, was not predestined, and thus is beyond societal and

redemptive help. Therefore, to prevent contamination, she must be isolated from her virtuous counterpart" (14).

Gaskell challenges this myth of fallenness through Ruth's character and her interactions with other characters. Although other characters, most importantly Faith Benson and Jemimah Bradshaw, hold similar views to Mr. Bradshaw when they first learn of Ruth's fallenness, Faith thinks it "would be better for her to die at once" (Gaskell 95) and Jemimah "shuddered up from her and from her sin" (Gaskell 278), upon interaction with Ruth both change their opinion. When giving their explanations for this change of opinion both characters reference Ruth's character and appearance. Jemimah testifies before her father that, "I watched her… if I had seen one paltering of duty- if I had witnessed one flickering shadow of untruth in word or action… my old hate would have flamed out with the flame of hell… instead of… the stirrings of new awakened love" (Gaskell 278) and Faith explains "it is almost impossible to help being kind to her; there is something so meek and gentle about her, so patient, and so grateful!" (Gaskell 104). The characteristics that Faith and Jemimah attribute to Ruth are those of the ideal Victorian woman. Gaskell uses her status as both 'angel in the house' and fallen woman to challenge the myth of fallenness that existed within the Victorian era.

Even as this myth is being problematized during the narrative, Ruth is coming to understand it, an understanding that always catalyzes a melancholic experience. Although Gaskell exposes the artificiality of the fallenness myth through the plot of *Ruth*, its power in determining Ruth's life remains. An understanding of this

injustice renders Ruth's melancholy rational, as opposed to irrational. As the Bensons decide that Ruth must pose as a widow in order for her to take part in society, Ruth increasingly becomes aware of herself as a fallen woman and the effect that will have on the way she will be treated. After Faith gives her her fake wedding ring, she "hung down her head… her eyes smarted with the hot tears that filled them… Ruth went up to her room, and threw herself down on her knees… and cried as if her heart would break" (Gaskell 120). Although Gaskell is exposing the artificiality of the Victorian fallenness myth, Ruth is concurrently slowly being made aware of it as a social injustice, and its impact upon her life. The injustice with which she will be treated causes her melancholic experience. This is especially evident after her secret has been exposed to the community and she is consequently unable to work, an experience which sends Ruth once more into melancholy. Being shunned and unable to seek employment, being destitute was it not for the assistance of the Bensons, "she was so willing to serve and work, and everyone despised her services" (Gaskell 301).

Gaskell exposes the incoherence, and yet power, of the fallenness myth even further as Ruth becomes aware of the way society will view Leonard as an illegitimate child. Ruth's understanding of the injustice of the treatment of Leonard, like the injustice of the treatment of herself as a fallen woman, is positioned by Gaskell as a moment of melancholy. Gaskell positions it, however, as a logical response, rather than the irrational response described by the Victorian medical discourse. At the baptism of Leonard Mr. Benson expresses the Victorian view of illegitimate children, "this child, rebuked by the world and bidden to stand apart" (Gaskell 152). Upon hearing this "tears fell fast down the

cheeks of the silent Ruth as she bent over her child" (Gaskell 153). The effect on Leonard as he becomes aware of his illegitimacy and how he is to be viewed by others, causes him intense pain and a change in his character. He refuses to go outside for fear of the rejection he will experience from his community, and "his temper became fitful and variable. At times he would be most sullen against his mother; and then give way to a passionate remorse" (Gaskell 300). This causes Ruth's "lips to quiver and her colour went and came with eager anxiety" (Gaskell 300). Throughout *Ruth*, Ruth's melancholic experiences are catalyzed by moments of understanding the injustice of society and her own oppression.

Through linking melancholic experiences with moments of understanding for Ruth, Gaskell repositions melancholy as a rational response to the treatment of women within Victorian society. This is very different from the melancholy found in Victorian psychological discourse. The Victorian psychological discourse located the cause of melancholy within the instability of the female body and a deviant or uncontrolled female sexuality. These medical understandings were re-creating and being re-created by a broader discourse of womanhood which was underwritten by an anxiety concerning women's place in the public domain and the dangers of female sexual expression. Through the use of melancholy within *Ruth* Gaskell interrogates first the medical understanding of melancholy and then the wider Victorian gender discourse. Ruth's initial characterisation as an ideal Victorian girl, innocent and lacking sexual knowledge, raised in the "conspiracy of silence" makes her unlike the women who were thought to be susceptible to mental instabilities like melancholy. Through the plotting and characterisation of Ruth, however, Gaskell

demonstrates the way in which it is these characteristics that make her susceptible to manipulation and seduction by a worldly man. Gaskell then introduces details of Ruth's economic and social position as an orphan and seamstress' apprentice that causes her to be even more vulnerable. It is these factors that cause Ruth's seduction, fall and subsequent melancholy rather than a cause found in her own body as a woman. This is a challenge to the Victorian psychological discourse that naturalized mental disorder, ignoring social and economic factors. Gaskell links Ruth's melancholy to her understanding of the injustice of her treatment within the Victorian gender structures. She recognizes her entrapment within an unjust myth of fallenness and illegitimacy and responds, logically, with melancholy.

Chapter 2

"I wish I could make a world outside of it, as men do": *The Mill on the Floss* and the Onset of Melancholy

Like Gaskell, Eliot, within *The Mill on the Floss*, challenges Victorian gender ideologies by repositioning female melancholy as a rational response to an understanding of the injustice of Victorian society. While Gaskell uses Ruth as an ideal Victorian female to construct this critique, Eliot employs Maggie as a transgressive female. From the opening of the narrative, Maggie is described as demonic, a "small Medusa" (Eliot 87) who rejects normative femininity and craves masculine forms of knowledge. In this chapter I will explore how these traits render Maggie characteristic of the females within Victorian psychological discourse who are susceptible to mental distress. Within the Victorian psychological paradigm, it would have been these traits located in Maggie's female body and her rejection of femininity, which would have caused her experience of melancholy. However, I will argue that Eliot challenges this discourse by introducing factors external to Maggie's body as the causes of her mental distress. As Gaskell introduced economic and social factors as the cause of Ruth's melancholy, Eliot locates Maggie's melancholy in the dysfunctional, patriarchal family structure in which she lives. It is the foolishness of Mr. Tulliver's actions that cause Maggie's family to become bankrupt and descend into poverty. It is this event in the novel, not Maggie's body or lack of acceptable femininity that catalyzes Maggie's experience of melancholy.

I will conclude this chapter by arguing that as within *Ruth*, within *The Mill on the Floss*, melancholy is repositioned as a rational response because it is linked to Maggie's understanding of her society. As the moments of Ruth's melancholy are the moments of her understanding the injustice of the fallenness myth in which she was trapped, Maggie's moments of melancholy are the moments of understanding the moral failings that lay at the heart of her family. Maggie's experience of the disjunction between the morality espoused by her family and the society of St Oggs, and the lack of actual decency and dignity within the economic structures which controlled her family's experience of bankruptcy, and her family's actions, is her moment of melancholy. I will argue that as Eliot repositions melancholy as a rational response to an understanding of injustice, rather than an irrational response of the female body, she exposes the actual material injustices present within Victorian society that repressed and damaged women, and which were ignored when they were naturalized by the Victorian psychological discourse.

Many of Maggie's traits render her characteristic of the type of woman the Victorian psychological discourse suggested was particularly susceptible to mental disorder. Maggie is intensely physical, violent and often seemingly out of control of her actions and emotions. Within Victorian medical discourse these kinds of erratic and emotional behaviours were attributed to disruptions or "irregularities" in the female body (Shuttleworth 81). Medical advertisements during the period, for example an 1850 advertisement for 'Dr. Locock's Female Pill' emphasized the significance of the physical processes of the female body in determining mental health, quoting six medical doctors with the opinion that

"most of the diseases of women are caused by irregularities" in menstruation (Shuttleworth 81). It was believed that this manifested in an unwillingness to conform to acceptable feminine behaviour. As such, women were to take great care to control their bodies, treat them gently and not exert themselves, either emotionally or physically (Shuttleworth 79).

Maggie conforms to the descriptions of mentally unstable women in the Victorian medical discourse, as she is prone to uncontrollable emotional outbursts, which are linked within the narrative to her rejection of normative femininity, especially in her outward appearance. From the outset Maggie is described as direct, confident and forthright, the very reverse of the unassuming and quiet woman she was expected to be by her traditional family. Her abrupt and outspoken tone in "'Oh mother', said Maggie, in a vehemently cross tone, 'I don't *want* to do my patchwork'" (Eliot 10) establishes her unconventional female character. This is outwardly represented in her physical appearance; especially her hair, which Mrs. Tulliver continuously laments "won't curl" (Eliot 11). Gitter argues that within the Victorian literary imagination a woman's hair was symbolically very significant as it was "the outward sign of the woman's self" (941). Within *The Mill on the Floss* Maggie's rejection of long, curly hair, is therefore symbolic of her rejection of the normative femininity her mother wants her to perform. When she is angry at her mother, she "suddenly rushed from under her hands and dipped her head in a basin of water standing near- in the vindictive determination that there should be no chance of curls today" (Eliot 23). Later in a more violent act, "Maggie answered by seizing her front locks and cutting them straight across the middle of her forehead" (Eliot 55). The active

verbs used in these descriptions of Maggie, “seizing” and “suddenly rushed”, convey that Maggie deliberately and knowingly rejects the models of femininity her family expects her to fulfil. Within the Victorian medical discourse, Maggie’s behaviour was dangerous, because the lack of control and care she takes with her emotions and behaviours would have left her susceptible to prolonged mental disorder.

Maggie takes no care in controlling her violent and intensely physical impulses, and is prone to outbursts of violence. According to the Victorian psychological discourse, Maggie would have been susceptible to mental disorder as she constantly succumbed in her impulses, indicating a lack of control. This is most evident in the description of the attic in which Maggie enjoys spending time as a child. The doll in the attic, traditionally a symbol of innocence and girlhood, is transformed into a symbol of Maggie’s violence;

> a large wooden doll… now entirely defaced by a long career of vicious suffering. Three nails driven into the head commemorated as many crises in Maggie’s nine years of earthly struggle… the last nail had been driven in with a fiercer stroke than usual, for the Fetish on that occasion represented aunt Glegg (Eliot 24).

This disturbing violence is combined with extravagant and irrational emotional outbursts within the attic, “sobbing with a passion that expelled every other form of consciousness- even the memory of the grievance that had caused it” (Eliot 24). Maggie’s unstable mental state is further emphasized by her propensity for acts of masochism, once more usually performed within the attic, for example her insistence that she will go so far as to “starve herself” (Eliot 32)

to punish her brother for his ill treatment of her (Marshall 86). Within the domestic space, the attic is a place far away from the hearth, a rejected and almost hidden space. Maggie's emotional instability and violence, performed within the attic space, positions her as a prime candidate for female mental disorder according to the Victorian medical discourse.

The Victorian medical discourse also particularly condemned females seeking after academic pursuits designed for men, as such pursuits were considered dangerous to the female mind. As the doctor Clouston wrote, the general attitude was that education would spoil the female mind and, "why should we spoil a good mother by making an ordinary grammarian?" (20). There was a widespread belief amongst Victorian medical practioners that there were distinct differences between the makeup of the male and female nervous system (Oppenheim 193,194). Medical doctor George John Romanes wrote that "the whole organization of woman is formed on a plan of greater delicacy, and her mental structure is correspondingly more refined" (656). This belief in the inherent and specific fragility of the female body and its systems was used to reinforce the separate spheres ideology and resist pressures to engage women in forms of education that were traditionally exclusively male. Victorian medical doctors suggested that if a woman engaged in masculine forms of education she risked both mental insanity, because her cerebral cortex was not developed enough to handle such intellectual strain, and damage to her reproductive function. It was advocated by doctors that intellectual pursuits would redirect blood flow to the brain at the expense of the reproductive organs. This could lead to irreparable damage and an arrest in reproductive function (Oppenheim 193).

In this, the medical discourse underpinned the separate spheres ideology because it located its logic in the biology of the woman, rendering it seemingly unquestionable.

Victorian medical journals are filled with case studies of women with similar characteristics to those of Maggie Tulliver. The records of their symptoms and treatments reflect the medical beliefs in the fragility of the female body and its unsuitability to masculine intellectual pursuits. In his *Clinical Lectures of Mental Diseases*, Thomas S. Clouston describes the case of a young woman who displayed many of the symptoms of melancholy. She was tormented by her revolving thoughts, was plagued by a constant "watching of herself", was unable to sleep or find peace. She also could barely endure any physical exercise, was often mentally confused and suffered pains in her head. Clouston's interpretation of her symptoms was that she had "no surplus stock of nerve energy, having "used up in schoolwork the energy that ought to have gone to build up her body." His treatment plan included confiscating all books and reading materials, and sending her to domestic space with open air. Here she was engaged in "feminine pursuits" including painting, drawing, gardening and the keeping of chickens. Her engagements in such pursuits, was proof to Clouston of her recovery (Oppenheim 195).

Within the Victorian medical discourse, Maggie's rejection of normative femininity and her pursuit of masculine forms of knowledge would have left her vulnerable to the same mental torment as Clouston's patient. The cause of her melancholy would have been located in her rejection of domestic pursuits and

her interest in education. From the opening of the narrative, Maggie is described as being able to "read almost as well as the parson" (Eliot 10). Rather than the "pretty books" (Eliot 15) that male characters such as her father wish she enjoyed she is drawn towards more masculine books, for example "The History of the Devil" which is "not quite the right book for a little girl" (Eliot 15). Her partiality towards masculine styles of learning and knowledge continues. For example, "Maggie becoming fascinated, as usual, by a print of Ulysses and Nausicaa… she presently let fall her cake, and in an unlucky movement crushed it beneath her foot- a source of much agitation to her aunt" (Eliot 81). Here, Maggie's desire for knowledge causes her to act in an unfeminine way, an occurrence that Eliot repeats throughout the text, emphasizing the barrier which traditionally masculine knowledge is to Maggie performance of an acceptable femininity (Marshall 84). While Maggie visits Tom at school with Philip and is once more exposed to masculine education, Philip wonders, "What was it… that made Maggie's dark eyes remind him of the stories about princesses being turned into animals?... I think it was that her eyes were full of unsatisfied intelligence, and unsatisfied, beseeching affection" (Eliot 159). Maggie's continuous pursuit of masculine education, her emotional outburst and lack of self-control, all render her susceptible to mental disorder according to the Victorian medical discourse. She makes no attempt to treat her body or mind gently or with care as was advocated by Victorian doctors, which according to Victorian medical discourse would leave her powerless to the forces of her body.

Although Maggie appears to conform to descriptions of women susceptible to mental disorder within the Victorian medical discourse, Eliot challenges this

discourse by locating the cause of Maggie's melancholy not within her own body or actions, but in the actions of her father, and her status as the daughter of a bankrupt father. While the Victorian medical discourse would have attributed Maggie's melancholy in her lack of care and control over her own body and emotions, and her rejection of feminine pursuits in favour of masculine education, within *The Mill on the Floss* these are not the causal factors in her melancholy and distress. Rather, the catalysts for Maggie's melancholy are the foolish actions of her father, Mr. Tulliver, in bankrupting the family, and then the poverty and humiliation of herself and her family caused by Victorian social conceptions of bankruptcy. Through this disruption in the Victorian narrative of mental distress, Eliot criticizes both the medical discourse which ignored social and economic factors in female experience, and exposes the moral failings of Victorian society.

Eliot locates the cause of Maggie's melancholy as partly resulting from the foolish actions of her father, Mr. Tulliver. Rather than being the cause of her own melancholy, Maggie is positioned as a victim of the actions of her father. Although continually advised against it, Mr. Tulliver unwisely "goes to law" and in the process is declared bankrupt, losing his property and possessions to his rival Mr. Wakem, and plunging his family into debt and poverty. Kristie M. Allen argues in"Habit in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*" that Mr. Tulliver's foolish lawsuit is represented by Eliot as the cumulative and material effect of "all the obstinacy and defiance of his nature" (836). Allen argues that Eliot uses Victorian understandings of moral habit to offer a critique of the empty tradition that dictated much of Victorian society. Within the Victorian understanding of the

mind it was believed that there were "channels of association… thought to be formed in the individuals brain by bodily, sensory and emotional experiences" (Allen 836). Morally right, reflexive behaviours were thought to be developed through the cultivation of these channels.

Within *The Mill on the Floss* Eliot represents the Dodson and Tulliver family, in their habits and morality, as symbolic of the wider society of St. Ogg's. Their idiosyncratic morality and lack of compassion, Eliot represents as characteristic of a problem with the wider Victorian society. It is this moral decay that Maggie is a victim of and which causes her melancholy, rather than her own personal deficiencies as a Victorian female. Mr. Tulliver's foolish actions in "going to law", rooted in his own pride and stubbornness, are characteristic of the behaviours of the other members of the Dodson and Tulliver clans. Within the society of St. Ogg Eliot continuously emphasizes the importance of habit and tradition, often comically, for example in Mrs. Tulliver's habits of dealing with her husband in ways that consistently achieve the opposite of her intentions. In these actions Eliot describes her "as a patriarchal gold-fish (who) apparently retains to the last its youthful illusions that it can swim in a straight line beyond the encircling glass." But if habit and tradition lie at the heart of the society at St Ogg's it is habit revealed by Eliot to be established in an adherence to idiosyncratic morality, at the expense of compassion and benevolence. In perhaps her most scathing assessment of St Ogg's ,Eliot describes;

> It is a sordid life…irradiated by no sublime principles, no romantic visions, no active, self-renouncing faith… Here, one has conventional worldly notions and habits without instruction and without polish.

> Observing these people narrowly… one sees little trace of religion, little less the Christian creed… The religion of the Dodson's consisted in revering whatever was customary and respectable (Eliot 244,245).

Representing the society of St Ogg's as a microcosm of British society as a whole, Eliot is critical of the religious and moral failings that lay at the heart of the Protestant population. Eliot represents this failing as being what leads to the kind of character Mr. Tulliver is and which results in bankruptcy. It is this, rather than the female body, which results in Maggie's mental distress and experience of melancholy.

As Ruth understands the injustice of her fallenness status and responds with melancholy, so Maggie responds with melancholy to her understanding the moral failings of her family and society. Melancholy is thereby repositioned as not an irrational response to the female body and constitution, but a rational response to the experience of being female in Victorian society. Maggie begins to understand the lack of compassion of her family and the lack of morality that governs society, questioning her family, ""Why do you come then... talking and interfering with us... if you don't mean to do anything to help my poor mother- your own sister- if you've no feeling for her when she's in trouble, and won't part with anything, though you would never miss it, to save her from pain?" (Eliot 194). This understanding results in an emotional and mental state analogous to those suffering melancholy as described in Victorian medical discourse. The descriptions of Maggie's meditations on life are similar to Bucknill and Tuke's description of the melancholic patient who "unceasingly revolves his own desperate condition, which he regards as worse than any other person" (153) ;

> "Every affection, every delight the poor child had had, was like an aching nerve to her. There was no music for her…. there was no flavor in them- no strength… She wanted some explanation of this hard, real life; the unhappy looking father, seated at the dull breakfast table; the childish, bewildered mother; the little sordid tasks that filled the hours, or the more oppressive emptiness of weary, joyless leisure… a heavy weight had fallen on her young heart." (Eliot 256, 257).

It is Maggie's enlightenment about society, "everybody in the world seemed so hard and unkind… the world outside books was not a happy one… it seemed to be a world where people behaved best to those they did not pretend to love and that did not belong to them" (Eliot 210), that directly result in her despair; "Maggie rushed away, that her burst of tears… might not happen till she was safe upstairs" (Eliot 210).

Not only is Maggie's experience of melancholy linked to the moral failing of the family, it is also linked to her situation as the daughter of a bankrupt father. In Victorian England when a man was financially ruined it impacted upon the entire family. One could either be imprisoned or declared bankrupt (Hunter 140). Once this occurred the creditors had legal rights to seize the property of the bankrupt and liquidate all his assets to pay for the debt. The bankrupt party would remain indebted to the creditor until the time when the entirety of the debt had been repaid (Pool 98). However, economic ruin was not the only effect of bankruptcy upon the bankrupt and his family. Bankruptcy was perceived by the public as a disgrace, with bankrupts seen as being reckless and immoral, a very affront to

the Victorian masculinity which valued self-reliance and restraint (Hunter 140). In 1840 individuals declared bankrupt were described in *The Times* as "excessive", engaging in "absurd speculations in commodities" and "selfish recklessness not easily to be accounted for" (Hunter 140). It is the pain of the economic situation and the disgrace and humiliation leveled at her family, most often by other members of her extended family, that coincides with Maggie's decline into melancholy.

Maggie experiences this descent into poverty as a helpless victim, a position that she responds to with a typical melancholy as described in the Victorian medical discourse. The Victorian doctor Greisinger's description of the melancholic patient is one who is afflicted with a "painful, negative affection" (209), which is experienced privately as an intense sadness. Like Ruth, Maggie begins to turn inward, withdrawing from the people around her, and privately indulging in moments of intense sadness and pain. Eliot uses powerful imagery to describe this "painful, negative, affection" as in "Maggie's sense of loneliness, and utter privation of joy, had deepened with the brightness of the advancing spring" (Eliot 256). Maggie also experienced her melancholy as a rejection of her domestic duties and tasks, it was when "her mother was not in the room" that Maggie's tasks "would all end in sobbing. She rebelled against her lot, she fainted under its loneliness, and had fits even of anger and hatred towards her father and her mother" (Eliot 258). While Maggie is able, to a certain extent, to perform normality to her family, in private she is filled with distress and rage, which she focuses on her situation within the domestic space.

Maggie's melancholy is positioned within *The Mill on the Floss* as the rational response to understanding the injustice of her situation, rather than as a result of her own body or personality. Eliot repeatedly uses the image of a 'struggle' to characterize Maggie's melancholy; "to the usual precocity of the girl, she added that early experience of struggle, of conflict between the inward and outward fact" (Eliot 247) and "no wonder, when there is this contrast between the outward and the inward, that painful collisions come of it" (Eliot 211). Maggie struggles with her expectations of life, her family and society, and an unjust reality. Melancholy is repositioned as the result of this clash between expectations and reality; she "was again sitting in her lonely room *battling* with the old shadowy enemies that were forever slain and rising again" (Eliot 458)(italics added). Maggie's consciousness that her experience of injustice within Victorian society is inextricably linked to her gender is evident in her lament to Philip; "I wish I could make myself a world outside of it, as men do" (Eliot 365). Although the world is unjust, Maggie recognizes that men were able to exercise a level of independence and freedom in spite of injustice, which was not afforded to women. Melancholy within *The Mill on the Floss* is therefore positioned as a understandable and inevitable response to Maggie's understanding of the hypocrisy and injustice of her society, and her entrapment within such a system, because of her gender.

Although Maggie displays traits and behaviours that are characteristic of Victorian descriptions of women susceptible to mental disorder, in *The Mill on the Floss* it is economic and social factors, rather than these traits and behaviours, which catalyze Maggie's melancholy. While the Victorian medical

discourse located mental disorder in a lack of control over the instabilities of the female body and a rejection of feminine pursuits in favour of masculine education, Eliot locates Maggie's melancholy in systems and situations in which she is a helpless victim. Her father's foolishness, the moral failing and dysfunction of her family and the social consequences of her family's bankruptcy catalyze Maggie's melancholy and are structures and situations in which she is denied agency and control. Maggie's moments of melancholy are moments of insight and understanding into her lack of agency within these situations, specifically because of her gender. The rational response to such an understanding is deep sadness, discontent and introspection, the symptoms of Victorian understandings of melancholy. In repositioning melancholy as a logical response to society, Eliot challenges the ideological natural of the Victorian medical discourse. She challenges a set of discourses, medical and then wider social and gender ideologies, which ignored material injustices enacted upon women and which denied them agency.

Chapter Three

"Her whole heart was in her boy": A Cure in Motherhood and the Domestic Space

Within *Ruth,* the moments when Ruth appears to be cured from her experience of melancholy are when she is adopted into a domestic space and when she becomes a mother. In this chapter I will explore the way in which Ruth's 'cure' echoes the ideas of moral management, a treatment strategy that dominated the Victorian psychological discourse and advocated treating female mental disorders by reeducating patients into socially acceptable, feminine behaviours. I will explore the ways in which this medical practice reflected wider cultural ideas about morality and control, born out of Evangelical thought. Within *Ruth*, Gaskell engages with these medical and cultural values as Ruth begins to adopt more traditional female roles, within a domestic space, rather than the work space of the seamstress, and as a mother, rather than a mistress to Mr. Bellingham. It is when Ruth adopts these traditionally feminine roles that she is seemingly cured from her melancholy.

However, I will argue that Gaskell subtly destabilizes this moral management narrative that appears to be present within *Ruth* through several narrative mechanisms. The domestic space into which Ruth is adopted is an untraditional domestic space, populated by unmarried women and a feminized and crippled man. It is far from a domestic space that reinforced traditional ideas of femininity and masculinity. Moreover, Ruth is prevented from fully experiencing

normal motherhood because of her status as a fallen woman, an identity which continuously supplants her identity as a mother. I will argue that Gaskell uses the motif of forgery, which runs throughout the narrative, to establish that according to Victorian domestic and gender ideologies, both the Benson's home and Ruth as a mother are ultimately forgeries. Moral management as a discourse is therefore shown within *Ruth* to be ineffective because it is based entirely upon performance, Ruth's performance of normative domesticity and femininity. However, even as Ruth performs such actions, much like the women in the case studies of the medical discourse, they cannot free her from her characterisation in the Victorian society as fallen. Although her performance appears to for a time cure her, Ruth finally returns to a melancholic state. This is because moral management as a discourse ignores the social and economic factors that caused her melancholy in the first place, by focusing on merely the control of anti-social behaviours. Ultimately, Gaskell demonstrates that a domesticated performance of sexual purity cannot be a cure for a social problem like female melancholy as melancholy is itself rooted in the unworkability of Victorian gender and social ideologies.

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In *On Man's Power Over Himself to Prevent and Control Insanity* John Barlow describes the treatment of a young girl who "was sixteen years of age but in a state of complete brutishness; her look stupid… She was as incapable of understanding as of acting." Barlow recounts how she was admitted into an asylum where "a nurse succeeding in teaching her first how to hold a knitting needle, and then how to knit, then to articulate a few words and phrases… and then to reply rationally to the questions that were asked her" (26). Barlow's case

study describes moral management, a method for the treatment of mental disorders that was dominant in the Victorian era. Advocates of moral management, like John Barlow, suggested that mental disorders could be cured if the patient was re-educated into appropriate social behaviours and moral action. Underlying such treatments was the belief that mental disorder was the result of a deviance from or rejection of socially acceptable roles. For women, this meant a rejection of proper forms of womanhood, and a deviation from the 'angel in the house' paradigm.

The discourse surrounding moral management as a treatment for melancholy and other forms of mental disorder demonstrates the interaction between psychological discourse and ideas of the domesticity and femininity. The idea of moral management was born out of Evangelical thought which sought to re-imagine the world as "an arena of constant moral struggle, resisting temptation, and mastering desire" (Adams 6). These values underlie moral management which conceived of mental disorder as a lack of desirable moral qualities; control, decorum and order. In his *An Inquiry Concerning the Indications of the Insane* John Conolly wrote that mental disturbances "arise rather from this species of want of moral control over themselves". He continues by advocating "to educate a man, in the full and proper sense of the word, is to supply him with the power of controlling his feelings" (191). This form of rehabilitation focused entirely on controlling anti-social behaviours, indicating the connection that was formed between psychology and ideas of the domestic.

For women, moral management discourse contributed to the characterisation of mental disorders like melancholy as a lack of proper female attributes and a rejection of socially appropriate behaviours. Barlow includes in *On Man's Power Over Himself to Prevent and Control Insanity* the case of a woman who "feeling that the brain was escaping her control, gave her hands to be held by the attendants… and then maintained an obstinate silence that no irrational words might pass her lips. None could doubt that this patient was sane" (16). Sanity is therefore linked within this discourse to the ability to perform traditionally feminine behaviours. Showalter argues that the treatments performed on female patients under moral management in Victorian asylums aimed to impose "the ladylike virtues of silence, decorum, taste, service, piety, and gratitude" (79). Under this theory, the female patient was encouraged to submit entirely to her male doctor who took on a priest-like quality. This encouraged mentally disturbed females to practice submission to male authority (Showalter 81). Moral management discourse contributed to the naturalization of certain gender assumptions as it gave a scientific and therefore seemingly unarguable underpinning to the idea of the 'angel of the house' female as being the sane state for women.

Ideas of moral management are evident within *Ruth* as Ruth begins to recover from her melancholy when she is adopted into the domestic space of the Bensons' home. The home occupied by Mr. Benson and his sister Miss. Benson is described as an idyllic Victorian domestic space:

> the curtains were drawn in the parlour; there was a bright fire and clean hearth; indeed exquisite cleanliness seemed the very spirit of the

> household, for the door which was open to the kitchen showed a delicately-white and spotless floor, and bright glittering tins, on which the ruddy firelight danced (Gaskell 114).

The cleanliness of the Benson's home and the warm and comforting hearth all echo Victorian ideas of the domestic ideal in which the family finds solace, comfort and moral strength after engaging in the world.

Within this space Ruth is educated by Mr. Benson, Miss Benson, and the servant Sally in her proper moral duties, and begins a general education. Gaskell's description of Ruth's recovery echoes the language of moral management:

> her mind was uncultivated, her reading scant… she set to work… read every morning the books that he (Mr. Benson) marked out; she trained with strict perseverance to do all thoroughly… Those summer mornings were happy because she was learning neither to look forward or backwards, but to live faithfully and earnestly in the present (Gaskell 148).

As Mr. Benson, who significantly is a minister, guides Ruth to gently cultivate her mind, and set herself with perseverance upon appropriate tasks within the domestic space, she begins to recover from her melancholy. During this time a marked change comes over Ruth and she is once more able to engage with the world without sadness and melancholy. She herself is conscious of this change, "she was conscious of it though she could not define it, and did not dwell upon it. Life had become significant and full of duty for her. She delighted in the exercise of her intellectual powers… she strove to forget what had gone before" (Gaskell 159). Ruth is increasingly able to demonstrate a sense of control over her own

mind, she is able to choose what she dwells upon, rather than "constantly revolving" her own "desperate condition" (Bucknill & Tuke 153). The development of these moral and mental skills, appropriate to the ideal female, takes place as she is adopted in a secure and ideal domestic space.

Ruth is likewise seemingly 'cured' from her melancholy as she becomes a mother. As a result of the importance of motherhood in Victorian conceptions of womanhood, Ruth's adoption of the position of mother similarly echoes the discourse of moral management. While she was previously in a state of severe melancholy, close to death, after Mr. Bellingham deserts her, it is only the news that she will soon be a mother that allows her to move out of such a diseased state; "And she whispered, quite eagerly, 'Did he say I should have a baby'?... "Oh, my God, I thank Thee! Oh, I will be so good!'" (Gaskell 99). It is characteristic within the narrative for Ruth's good health and returned emotional stability to be attributed to her role as Leonard's mother;

> "a clear ivory skin, as smooth as satin, told of complete and perfect health and was as lovely… her eyes, even if you could have guessed that they had shed bitter tears in their day, had a thoughtful, spiritual look about them… I do not know if she had grown taller since the birth of her child, but she looked as if she had… Her whole heart was in her boy" (Gaskell 173).

Not only is Ruth healthy in her role as a mother, she also has regained a spiritual purity and depth that is uncharacteristic of her fallen state. The language of regaining the spirituality that was so essential to the Victorian conception of the ideal woman is repeated in Mr. Benson's seemingly improper excitement at Ruth's pregnancy. Although Miss Benson is outraged at her brother's response to

Ruth's pregnancy he offers her a convincing religious explanation that "I can imagine that if the present occasion be taken rightly, and used well, all that is good in her may be raised to a height unmeasured but by God; while all that is evil and dark may, by His blessing, fade and disappear in the pure light of her child's presence" (Gaskell 102).

Ruth's role as a mother is significant within the moral management framework because being a mother was the ideal state for a woman within normative Victorian gender ideologies. As anxieties about the moral degradation of society grew within the Victorian era an increasing emphasis was laid upon the domestic space as the space for moral healing and development, with the woman, as wife and mother, the overseer of that space. As such, the woman was represented as being responsible for the moral regeneration of mankind. This was especially thought to occur through her role as a good mother. The idea was that "good mothers make good men" (Lewis 22), and the woman was responsible for raising her sons with an upright moral framework so that they would eventually be able to move into the public sphere without the threat of being corrupted (Lewis 22). Within this framework the blame for social problems that were characterized as stemming from a denigration of conventional morality, was on a failure of mothers. This idea that the mother is an essential and important role for a woman echoes throughout *Ruth* as she is cured from melancholy as she adopts the role of mother and moral guide to Leonard.

However, although Gaskell engages with the ideas of moral management through the processes by which Ruth is seemingly cured from her melancholy, she

ultimately critiques it through a number of narrative mechanisms. Moral management is revealed as ultimately a kind of forgery, as Ruth's idyllic domestic space is unconventional, and Ruth's role as mother is once more supplanted by her position as a fallen woman. Through this metaphor of the forgery, which runs throughout *Ruth*, most notably in the discovery of Richard Bradshaw's economic forgery, Gaskell exposes moral management as a discourse underwritten by conventional Victorian gender and domestic ideologies that ultimately is damaging and entrapping for women.

Although Ruth is rescued into a domestic space, by Victorian standards it is far from the domestic space idealized within Victorian domestic ideology. While the ideal Victorian domestic space was populated by a family; father and mother, with their children and possibly servants, the Benson household includes Mr. Benson, a disfigured Dissenting minister, his spinster sister Miss Benson and their trusted servant and companion, the elderly and unmarried Sally. Audrey Jaffe has argued that the domestic space of the Benson's is ultimately an entirely feminine community. Mr. Benson, the only male allowed within the household, Jaffe argues has a "gentleness of manner and physical deformity which exempt him from the demands of conventional masculinity" (54). Gaskell emphasizes the swap in the gender roles of the Benson siblings in the household; Miss Benson's "excellent, practical sense, perhaps, made her a more masculine character than her brother. He was often so much perplexed by the problems of life, that he let the time for action go by" (Gaskell 170). While Miss Benson possesses the masculine traits of action and practicality, Mr. Benson is more feminine in his placid and thoughtful nature. While Ruth may have been cured by a domestic

space, it is a problematic space in which, rather than being upheld, gender ideals are subtly challenged.

Not only is the domestic space female-centric, it also centres upon women that in Victorian social discourse would have been considered redundant women. The now infamous census of 1851 reported that there were over half a million, 'surplus', 'excess' or 'redundant' women in Britain. These were women who were unmarried, of which Miss Benson and Sally are prime examples. Anna Fenton-Hathaway has argued that Gaskell deliberately hands her narratives over to the voices of 'redundant' women as a social protest against the idea of the redundant woman and the Victorian assumptions regarding utilitarianism; that every female must adopt conventional roles in order for society to progress. The Victorian anxiety over redundant women was that these women would cause society to become stagnant and unprogressive because they were not contributing to traditional family units, which were the building blocks of a functioning society (Fenton-Hathaway 236). While Sally and Miss Benson are technically 'redundant' women, throughout the text, they perform, along with Mr. Benson and Ruth, a conventional domestic unit. Reflecting on Sally's agreement to attend Leonard's funeral, the Benson's were "glad she wished to go; they liked the feeling that all were of one household, and that the interests of one were the interests of all" (Gaskell 149). The Benson's household adopting traits of conventional domestic ideologies through a focus on totality and utility is an attack upon such ideologies because they are an unconventional domestic unit. Redundant women and an unconventional man co-opting the domestic ideology is a direct threat to Victorian ideas about domesticity and gender. For

Ruth to be 'cured' upon the framework of moral management, by such a domestic space, Gaskell challenges Victorian gender and domestic ideologies.

Not only is the domestic space of the Benson's unconventional, Ruth as a mother is also ultimately a forgery, a role she illegitimately inhabits and finally is unable to occupy because of her more important position as a fallen woman. The motif of the forgery is central to the narrative of *Ruth* with a key plot event being the discovery of Richard Bradshaw's crime of forgery against Mr. Benson. Forgery was an extremely serious crime within Victorian culture, a capital offense until the Forgery Acts of 1832 and 1837 (Phillips 233). Sara Malton argues that this was partly because the crime of forgery threatened an economic system that was based upon visibility, surveillance and classification. The act of forgery was a direct assault upon the stability of such a system because it was by nature, invisible and based on a misclassification (188). As such, Malton argues that in Victorian society there was an intersection between the 'crime' of illegitimacy and fallenness and that of economic forgery. Ruth concealing her fallenness through adopting the legitimate status of father, concealing Leonard's bastardy through his performance of legitimacy, was likewise an attack upon social and gender ideologies that were based upon the classification of moral and immoral, legitimate and illegitimate, fallen and pure. Within *Ruth*, Gaskell exposes the vulnerability of such a system. Moreover, she demonstrates that within the Victorian moral management narrative, Ruth's 'cure' is unsuccessful because it is based upon a forgery and is therefore illegitimate.

Once it is finally discovered that Ruth is in fact not a widow, but rather a fallen woman, she is unable to occupy the role of mother in the Victorian society. Ruth is aware of this as when she is discovered, her first thought is that she must cease to act as Leonard's mother; "Oh! Mr Benson, don't you know that my shame is discovered?... And I must leave you, and leave Leonard… It would break my heart to go, but I think I ought, for Leonard's sake. I know I ought" (Gaskell 190). Once it is discovered that Ruth is fallen she is unable to occupy the position of mother in Victorian conceptions of the woman. As Malton argues, Ruth is the dramatization of the destructive function of the fallenness classification that permanently inscribes the fallen woman as degenerate, leaving it impossible for her to move beyond such a classification to occupy other subject positions (189). Within *Ruth* Gaskell challenges the Victorian gender and medical discourses that equated female fallenness and mental disorder with moral deficiency. This equation framed these issues as moral and psychological issues, which could be therefore 'cured' through some form of 'moral management'. However, Gaskell demonstrates that these issues were not in fact moral, but rather based within the unjust economic and social structures which had material effect upon the lives of women. Within *Ruth*, her moral performance is inadequate in addressing her social status as fallen and therefore her 'cure' breaks down and is ultimately both ineffective, and inappropriate. Although Gaskell alludes to moral management as a cure for melancholy within the narrative, it is finally proved unsuccessful, as both the domestic space and Ruth's role as a mother are ultimately illegitimate within Victorian domestic and gender ideologies.

Through *Ruth* Gaskell critiques the moral management discourse as one that frames mental disorder as a moral and psychological issue, while ignoring the effect of unjust social and economic factors and repressive gender ideologies upon the lives of women within the Victorian era. For Ruth, her attempt at moral management to 'cure' her melancholy is ultimately ineffective because it is based upon the performance of normative domesticity and femininity. Although she attempts to, and is seemingly successful, in adopting appropriate feminine behaviours and morality, her performance is ultimately illegitimate because of the kind of domestic space she is in, and her status as a fallen woman that continuously supersedes her identity as a mother. Through the breakdown of Ruth's 'cure' Gaskell demonstrates the ineffectiveness of a treatment that casts melancholy as a moral issue, able to be cured by the performance of normative femininity because female mental distress is rooted in the problematic nature of Victorian gender and social ideologies.

Chapter 4

"I've been a great deal happier since I have given up": A Cure in Religious Self-Renunciation

As Ruth is seemingly cured of her melancholy as she is adopted into a domestic space and becomes a mother, Maggie is seemingly cured of her melancholy through a period of religious self-renunciation. In the period of the text following Maggie's reading of *Thomas à Kempis* Maggie decides that the way to cure "all the miseries of her young life" (Eliot 260) is to repress and deny her physical and emotional desires. This religious self-renunciation is a version of moral management and engages with ideas popular during the Victorian period, as well as wider discourses around femininity that focused on control and repression as central to ideal womanhood. In this chapter, I will explore the interactions between Maggie's period of self-renunciation and the importance of self-control within the theory of moral management. I will also explore the way this period of self-renunciation interacted with wider discourses of femininity which were interrelated with the ideas of moral management, and emphasized the need for the repression of female physical desires in order that women may act as the gatekeepers of morality in Victorian society.

However I will argue that like Gaskell, Eliot also ultimately critiques the discourse of moral management and the wider interrelated gender discourses. Just as Ruth's 'cure' ultimately breaks down as a result of the fallenness myth, so Maggie's 'cure' in her commitment to self-renunciation proves unsustainable

when she is bought into contact with male characters, in the form of Philip Wakem and Stephen Guest. While Philip will not allow Maggie to remain unconnected to her desires for knowledge and worldly experience, Stephen will not allow her to remain disconnected from her sexuality. In both cases, Maggie's performance of the repression required by Victorian normative femininity proves a barrier to the male's desire for relationship with Maggie and is therefore designated by Philip as a form of madness, "monomania" (Eliot 301) and by Stephen as "unnatural" (Eliot 401). As Maggie is unable to sustain her self-renunciation in relationship with both Philip and Stephen, her 'cure' breaks down and she descends back into melancholy, "having impatient thoughts again" (Eliot 301) and she "moved about with a quiescence and even topor of manner" (Eliot 409). Through Maggie's brief 'cure' and then descent back into melancholy, Eliot exposes the unsupportable nature of the kind of self-control that was required of women by advocators of moral management and wider gender discourses. Once again, melancholy is positioned not as a result of anti-social behaviours, but rather the restrictive and impossible Victorian ideologies of femininity. Melancholy is, therefore outside the female body, and unable to be addressed by modifications of female behaviour.

John Barlow begins his *On Man's Power over Himself to Prevent or Control Insanity* with an overview of the Victorian understanding of the mind and its functions. He states that there are two forces at work in man's bodies; the 'vital force' that controls unconscious processes of the body, and the 'intelligent force' that raises man above the position of animals. This 'intelligent force' is the "source of the higher phenomena of mental existence, which is of a perfectly

distinct, and so far a superior nature, that it is able sometimes to exercise a dominion over the vital force which nullifies its actions, and at all time controls and modifies it" (5). In an era of immense transformation and change in almost every element of society, anxieties about the loss of traditional values and ways of life were countered with this almost obsessive belief in the ability of man to exercise self-control, even control over seemingly uncontrollable bodily processes. Both the discourse of moral management and gender ideologies are similar in their emphasis on this idea of self-control as the ultimate indicator of morality and normality.

The discourse of moral management valued the ability to control one's desires and emotions as the ultimate indicator of sanity. This is particularly evident in John Barlow's treatise when he describes cases of women who had seemingly disturbed desires and thoughts and yet, because they were able to control them, were considered completely sane and without need of medical assistance. One example he gives is that of a servant who begs her mistress to allow her to leave her service because whenever "the unhappy woman undressed the little child which she nursed, she was struck with the whiteness of its skin, and experienced an almost irresistible desire to tear it to pieces." For Barlow, this demonstrated that "delusions of sense may co-exist with perfect sanity" (18,19). These kinds of examples in which a control that stems from an understanding of morality is equated with sanity, even in the presence of what would seemingly be considered disordered thinking, demonstrates the core values of moral management. Within moral management, it was entirely the ability to make moral judgments and control one's action in a way that was considered moral

that indicated sanity. Similarly, an indicator of one's morality was one's ability to behave in socially acceptable ways.

This focus on self-control within moral management discourse is characteristic of wider domestic and gender discourses within the Victorian era. Victorian gender ideologies were saturated by language suggesting that to fulfill one's position as an acceptable woman one must reject one's desires and focus on self-control and an adherence to morality. In the popular conduct manual, *Woman's Mission,* Sarah Lewis puts forward the argument that it is the particular task of women to be the moral gatekeepers of the world. They were to achieve this by the development of personal moral character, rejecting worldly desires and focusing on cultivating a perfect, moral domestic space. Into this domestic space they were to invite their husbands who would experience moral regeneration and raise their children as moral citizens. All of this required the development of a woman's self-renunciation that Lewis described as "the one quality on which woman's value and influence depend" (50). This self-renunciation stemmed from a religious morality, which was "the only scheme which has annexed happiness to self-renunciation, and thus made the revelation of our true and real nature" (135). This appeal to the "true and real nature" of the woman demonstrates the way in which gender ideologies were naturalized within Victorian discourse, so that deviations from 'appropriate' behaviours were considered inherently unnatural and pathological.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie appears to be briefly cured from the acute melancholy she experienced following her father's bankruptcy, through her

commitment to religious self-renunciation and the repression of her desires. Maggie's 'cure' therefore echoes the emphasis that was placed on female self-control and the repression of physical desires within the moral management discourse. During this brief period within the text, Maggie makes a concerted effort to control her own desires, renounce her body and become a spiritual, sacrificial and unassuming female. This period for Maggie is the dramatization of the argument put forward by Sarah Lewis in the *Woman's Mission* that was outlined above. Maggie becomes aware that

> all the miseries of her young life had come from fixing her heart on her own pleasure, as if that were the central necessity of the universe; and for the first time she saw the possibility of shifting the position from which she looked at the gratification of her own desires- of taking her stand out of herself, and looking at her own life as an insignificant part of a divinely-guided whole (Eliot 260).

The language used by Eliot invokes the language of conduct manuals like Sarah Lewis'. Following this realization, Maggie attempts to transform herself and adopt the characteristics of acceptable Victorian femininity. She takes up feminine pursuits, "hanging diligently over her sewing" (Eliot 263) rather than pursuing a masculine education, and becomes gentle and dutiful: "it was amazing that this once 'contrairy' child was become so submissive, so backward to assert her own will"(Eliot 263). This transformation seemingly cures her melancholy as she is rewarded with a peaceful mind and a new physical beauty: "her new inward life… shone out in her face with a tender soft light that mingled itself as added loveliness with the gradually enriched colour and outline of her blossoming youth" (Eliot 263). For a brief time within *The Mill on the Floss*,

Maggie's attempt to perform normative femininity seems almost possible as a cure for her melancholy.

While the melancholic Maggie trembled with desire and was in an almost constant state of chaos, the cured Maggie recognizes her weakness and her need to withdraw into a state of calm. Catherine Hall argues that within the Victorian era, the Evangelical movement had a large role in shaping this idea about femininity. Hall suggests that within this movement "women were naturally more delicate, more fragile, morally weaker, and all of this demanded a greater degree of caution, retirement and reserve" (86). During her period of transformation, Maggie articulates this idea to those around her, especially during her interactions with Philip. When Maggie explains to Philip:

> I've been a great deal happier…since I have given up… being discontented because I couldn't have my own will… Our life is determined for us- and it makes the mind very free when we give up wishing, and only think of bearing what it laid upon us (Eliot 272)

she engages with Evangelical thinking about the role of women. She demonstrates that she is determined to sacrifice desire in order to adopt what Hall suggested was the Evangelical definition of a woman, "a greater degree of caution, retirement and reserve" (86). Maggie's cure from melancholy echoes the ideas of moral management because it sees her adoption of an acceptable form of Victorian femininity being rewarded with a brief period of normality. This reference to moral management discourse emphasizes the importance of control and sacrifice, and the inherent vulnerability of women that was central to Victorian gender ideologies.

However, the cure found in an adoption of traditional Victorian female pursuits and characteristics becomes unsustainable for Maggie when she is brought into interaction with masculine characters; first Philip Wakem and then Stephen Guest. While Maggie begins her interaction with Philip strongly committed to conforming to Victorian conceptions of femininity, her dedication slowly crumbles as Philip reintroduces her to knowledge and aesthetic pursuits. The initial interaction between Philip and Maggie is significant because Maggie defends normative femininity and Philip, the masculine character, urges her to reject it. As Philip offers Maggie a book she rejects it because of its worldly nature, which begins the argument, with Philip arguing;

> 'But you will not always be shut up in your present lot: why should you starve your mind in that way? It is narrow asceticism- I don't like to see you persisting in it, Maggie. Poetry and art and knowledge are sacred and pure.'
>
> 'But not for me-not for me', said Maggie, walking more hurriedly. 'Because I should want too much' (Eliot 275)

During this interaction Maggie's desperate assertion, "not for me- not for me", demonstrates the Victorian understanding that there was something particular and inherent within Maggie as a woman, which meant certain pursuits were inappropriate and also dangerous. Yet, Philip is unhappy with her in her performance of acceptable femininity and uses guilt and an appeal to Maggie's loving nature, to ultimately force her into behaviours and a secret relationship that she knows is 'improper' and 'wrong' for her as a woman, and because it has been banned by the patriarchal authority of her brother.

Philip rejects Maggie's adherence to Victorian femininity because it is an obstacle to his pursuit of a secret relationship with her. Within their interactions, Maggie attempts to be both submissive and obedient as she has been practising, and yet also firm in her rejection of what she deems as an inappropriate relationship. Yet, these two characteristics of Victorian femininity cannot coexist in this situation, as Philip continues to pursue her. As Philip pursues her, he, significantly, diagnoses Maggie's very performance of docility and control as a form of madness, monomania: " "what you call self-conquest-blinding and deafening yourself to all but one train of impression- is only the culture of monomania in a nature like yours" (Eliot 301). Monomania was another form of mental disorder within the Victorian period characterized as a single pathological preoccupation in an otherwise sound mind. Eliot's use of this language demonstrates the 'double-bind' that Maggie experiences, which is inherent in Victorian conceptions of femininity. When she follows her heart and emotions in an unrestrained way she is described as demonic and a "small Medusa" (Eliot 87), when she controls herself and renounces her desires, Philip deems it "monomania" (Eliot 301). As Philip selfishly manipulates Maggie into a continuing relationship, he catalyzes her descent back into melancholy, as she begins again to be "restless" and "think a great deal of the world and…have impatient thoughts again" which "cut me (Maggie) to the heart afterwards" (Eliot 301). Maggie is once more like Bucknill and Tuke's melancholic patient who "unceasingly revolves his own desperate condition" (153), plagued by restless and dissatisfied thoughts. Eliot demonstrates Maggie's helpless position, symbolizing the helpless position of women more generally, in attempting to

conform to a gender ideology that was so constructed and based upon performance, that it was ultimately unsustainable.

As Maggie attempts to perform a renunciation of her desire for knowledge in her interactions with Philip, she attempts to renounce her sexuality in her relationship with Stephen. Just as Philip rejects Maggie's attempts as a form of "monomania", Stephen rejects her performance of Victorian femininity as "unnatural". Again, Eliot demonstrates the position of helplessness that Maggie is in as she is bought into interaction with male figures that desire relationship with her. The spirituality and lack of physicality that is required within Victorian gender ideologies becomes unsustainable. The interactions between Maggie and Stephen are filled with physicality and sexuality, as they walk arm in arm, "the change of movement brought a new consciousness to Maggie; she blushed deeply, turned away her head" (Eliot 395). Eliot uses powerful imagery to describe their physical connection in "something strangely powerful there was in the light of Stephen's long gaze, for it made Maggie's face turn towards it and look upwards at it- slowly, like a flower at the ascending brightness" (Eliot 394). Although Maggie attempts to suppress her sexual desire and act in a moral way because Stephen is engaged to her cousin, Stephen labels her actions as "unnatural". His argument that they should be married rests upon the fact that their desire for each us is 'natural' and that to suppress it for the sake of morality would be unnatural; "it is unnatural- it is horrible. Maggie, if you loved me as I love you, we should throw everything else to the winds for the sake of belonging to each other" and "the pledge can't be fulfilled… it is unnatural: we can only pretend to give ourselves to anyone else" (Eliot 401, 402). Through Stephen's

accusation that Maggie is "unnatural" (Eliot 401), Eliot reveals the helpless position that Maggie is in; she is a "demon" (Eliot 82) and a "small Medusa" (Eliot 87) when she is ruled by her emotions and yet she is also "unnatural" when she attempts to suppress her emotions and conform to traditional morality and ideas of womanhood.

Like Philip, who does not allow Maggie to remain disconnected from her desire for knowledge, Stephen consistently places Maggie in situations where she is increasingly unable to renounce her sexuality. The culmination of this battle is the boat ride that will finally cast Maggie as a fallen woman. Although Maggie protests to the inappropriate boat ride several times, "Oh, we can't go" and "We must not go", Stephen physically leads her into the situation, "'Let us go, Stephen murmured, entreatingly, rising, and taking her hand to raise her too… she was being led down… all by this stronger presence that seemed to bear her along without any act of her own will" (Eliot 413,414). Although Maggie had attempted to suppress her sexual attraction to Stephen, as part of her religious self-renunciation, ultimately his persistence and her sexual desire result in her resignation from her struggle and to the boat ride. Whilst in the boat she "obeyed, there was an unspeakable charm in being told what to do, and having everything decided for her" and "she was silent" (Eliot 418). While Maggie gives into her desire and abandons her moral self-renunciation, ironically, she also performs a submissive and compliant femininity, surrendering her will to that of Stephen. Eliot exposes the "double bind" which Victorian gender ideologies placed upon women in the impossibility of Maggie being both a woman who is desirable to a man, and yet also a woman who denies her physicality and sexual

desires. When Maggie's performance proves unsustainable, and her self-renunciation fails, she descends back into a period of melancholy. Following the boat ride she "was again sitting in her lonely room, battling with the old shadowy enemies that were forever slain and rising again" (Eliot 458) and "all the next day she sat in her lovely room, with a window darkened by the cloud and the driving rain, thinking of that future, and wrestling with patience (Eliot 460). Maggie's final descent back into melancholy critiques the moral management discourse's treatment of mental disorders as moral issues that could be treated through moral education and the performance of Victorian normative femininity. Maggie's melancholy is revealed as not stemming from her own moral deficiencies, but rather from a struggle to conform to a set of gender expectations that proves impossible and oppressive.

The discourse of moral management suggested that the psychological was inextricably linked to morality and the control of antisocial behaviours. For woman this meant that mental disorders could be cured by a return to appropriate female behaviours and characteristics; control, submission, the denial of the physical body and its desires, and a development of moral character. Maggie Tulliver cures herself of melancholy following these guidelines, by practising self-renunciation, and adopting a quiet, submissive and calm persona. However, her cure breaks down when this transformation of her character becomes unsustainable. This occurs when she is bought into contact with masculine characters that seek relationships with her. In these situations, Maggie's performance of Victorian femininity is designated as a form of madness, "monomania" by Philip and "unnatural" by Stephen. In her continuing

interactions with Philip and Stephen, Maggie is unable to be both submissive and calm, and also moral and spiritual in denying her desires. Victorian conceptions of femininity are revealed as unworkable and impossible for Maggie. Through this Eliot reveals the impossibility of moral management because it is based upon a flawed and repressive social construction of womanhood.

Afterward

"Why Must She Die?"

The endings of *Ruth* and *The Mill on the Floss* are both controversial, having been widely criticized since their publication. While Charlotte Bronte criticized the ending of *Ruth* saying "Why must she die? Why must we close the book weeping?" (qtd. Swenson 30), Henry James wrote of *The Mill on the Floss* that "the denouement shocks the reader most painfully. Nothing has prepared him for it; the story does not move towards it; it casts no shadow before it" (qtd. Sodre 4). However, I will argue that these endings are not only appropriate, but inevitable, the powerful culmination of the critiques launched by both Gaskell and Eliot throughout their texts. Neither Ruth nor Maggie's narrative proves able to be sustained or continue in the realist paradigm in which they began. Ruth and Maggie, as female characters, challenge and exist outside of that which could be contained within Victorian psychological discourse and gender ideologies. The response of both Gaskell and Eliot is to conclude the texts by unsatisfactorily moving beyond the realist paradigm in which they were writing. Gaskell transforms *Ruth* into a moral tale, in which Ruth becomes a mythologized, spiritual, Christ-like martyr, while Eliot concludes with the 'deux ex machina' flood. Rather than being blundering or rushed, these endings deliberately frustrate the reader, to reveal the incongruity and impossibility of Victorian psychological discourse and gender ideologies, which repress and eventually destroy the women which they entrap.

Gaskell is essentially forced to conclude Ruth's narrative because Ruth becomes a static character, her melancholy having challenged and exposed the flaws of the fallenness myth and yet being unable to move beyond the constrains of the myth because of the limits of the Victorian setting. As we have seen, the society of the Victorian setting draws an unbreakable link between Ruth's sexual past and her present character and morality. In describing Ruth, Mr. Bradshaw uses a list of synonyms, she is "stained", "contaminated", filling his house with "defilement" and "impurity", which equate her past sexual sin with permanent physical filth. In this paradigm fallenness will *always* issue from a flaw in the moral integrity of the fallen woman. Yet, the actual plot of *Ruth* and her characterisation prove this attitude towards fallenness essentially inadequate and unjust. As Natalka Freeland writes, "long before Ruth's fall *resulted in* her social problems it *resulted from* them, since she succumbed to her seducer only because she was already jobless, friendless, and broke" (809). The realization of the injustice of her position, and the injustice towards her illegitimate son, results in an incurable condition of melancholy for Ruth. For Gaskell, writing a realist novel in the setting of a Victorian society, there is nowhere for Ruth's narrative to go, she cannot move beyond her position as the melancholic, fallen woman. Moral management is inadequate and so she remains diseased and trapped.

Within the Victorian realist paradigm, Ruth's full restoration, redemption and re-integration into society is impossible, resulting in Gaskell's transformation of Ruth from real fallen woman, to spiritual symbol. As Ruth takes up her position as a nurse she is increasingly described in almost supernatural ways:

> her ways were very quiet… it had more the effect of a hush of all loud or disturbing emotions, and out of the deep calm the words that came forth had a beautiful power. She did not talk much about religion; but those who noticed her knew that it was the unseen banner which she was following. The low-breathed sentences which she spoke into the ear of the sufferer and the dying carried them upwards to God. (Gaskell 321)

Like Christ who sacrificed himself to bring restoration to his enemies, Ruth sacrifices herself for the physical restoration of Mr. Bellingham, and the townsfolk who condemned her. In this act of sacrifice she takes on a saint-like character to the people in the town,

> she will be the light of God's countenance when you and I will be standing afar off. I tell you, man, when my poor wench died, as no one would come near her, her head lay at that hour on this woman's sweet breast… the blessing of them who were ready to perish is upon her. (Gaskell 251)

In a reference to the "wife of noble character" from Proverbs 31, Ruth is the woman that "many arose and called her blessed" (Gaskell 352).

The conclusion of *Ruth* sees the text move from the gritty realism of the seamstresses' workshop where it began, to the unrealistic conclusion of an entire community weeping over the martyred, saint-like Ruth. In so doing it moves beyond the paradigm of the realist, social problem novel and becomes a moral, fable-like, religious tale, as if the realist genre, and therefore the Victorian society it attempted to reflect, could not house a woman like Ruth. Rachel Webster has argued that Gaskell, being unable to comprehend the full restoration of a fallen

woman within the Victorian reality, hands Ruth over to become a spiritual symbol that reflects the Unitarian security of redemption only within death (25). This is evident in Mr. Benson's description of Ruth's haunting of his chapel, as he gives his sermon, "he looked, and as he gazed, a mist came before him, and he could not see his sermon, nor his hearers, but only Ruth… stricken low and crouching from sight… like a woeful, hunted creature. And now her life was over! Her struggle ended!" (373). The frustrating and unsatisfactory transformation of Ruth from real woman to the dead, saint-like spiritual presence demonstrates the inadequacy of Victorian gender ideologies and psychological discourse. Her expulsion from her narrative, demonstrates that the gender ideologies were unable to contain or accommodate women who challenged and problematized the conceptions of and myths about womanhood that existed within the period.

Similarly to the supernatural conclusion of *Ruth,* the frustrating deux ex machina ending of *The Mill on the Floss* is effective because it demonstrates that there was no realistic way to progress Maggie's narrative in the Victorian setting. Although the narration makes it clear that Maggie is innocent of the crimes that the St Ogg's society accuses her of, they have cast her as a fallen woman who is unable to function in society. Maggie's position, her struggle between her sexual desire for Stephen and her religious beliefs, cannot be resolved, leaving her in a position of melancholy. In the aptly named final chapter 'The Final Conflict' Maggie's position is described as,

> all the next day she sat in her lonely room, with a window darkened by the cloud and the driving rain, thinking of that future, and wrestling for patience- for what repose could poor Maggie ever win except by

wrestling? (460)

The debilitating "wrestling" thoughts of melancholy are all that Maggie has left at this point in the narrative, as she cannot progress in society at all; "there was no home, no help for the erring, even those who pitied were constrained to hardness" (Eliot 460). Maggie's devout religion, and her commitment to morality, both of which echo the ideas of moral management, have proved inadequate in addressing the social and economic factors that were the real cause of her melancholy, and she is therefore left in it. Like Ruth, Maggie is a female character who has exposed the unworkability of Victorian gender ideologies and yet is still paralyzed by them, because she cannot escape her Victorian setting.

The contemporary criticism for the ending of *The Mill on the Floss* focused upon its failure to conform to the reader's sense of novelistic conventions and its ambiguity as to Maggie's redemption. In 1870 Dinah Mulock Craik wrote that the ending of *The Mill on the Floss* was an affront to Christian morality, writing that the lack of any "radical change" in Maggie, was dangerous because it meant, "we fall back into the same dreary creed of overpowering circumstances" (204). Craik argued that the flood robbed Maggie of moral agency, leaving her the victim of nature. More recently Kristie Allen argues that although Eliot introduces several possible narrative types by which *The Mill on the Floss* could be read, the ending ultimately frustrates all of them. Allen writes that "Maggie was supposed to be uncontrovertibly converted in the conventions of conversion narratives, or she was supposed to be married to live happily in the conventions of romance"(846). Although frameworks of Victorian disciplinary narratives that end in death for the fallen woman are also evoked in *The Mill on the Floss*,

Maggie's innocence renders these frameworks also unsatisfactory. Rather, *The Mill on the Floss* ends with the abrupt death of Maggie and the unrealistic, spiritual reunion with Tom in death; "the boat re appeared- but brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted: living through again in one supreme moment, the days when they had clasped their little hands in love and roamed the daisied fields together" (Eliot 467). With such an ending Eliot frustrates all the reader's expectations and desires for Maggie's actual material redemption.

Rather than being a blundering case of poor plotting on the part of Eliot, the ending of *The Mill on the Floss* is the culmination of a powerful critique of the Victorian psychological discourse, and wider gender ideologies. Like Ruth, Maggie as a female character who exposes the inadequacy and impossibility of fulfilling the requirements of Victorian femininity, cannot exist within the Victorian realist setting. The impossibility of Maggie's progress or actual redemption in the realist setting means she must be destroyed. The frustration felt by the reader by Eliot's inclusion of the deux ex machina flood, is a mirror of Maggie's frustration at being unable to exist within Victorian society.

Conclusion

Within Victorian thought, the melancholic woman embodied an affront to femininity. Restless and discontent, insular and brooding, she was dissatisfied with the life offered her by Victorian society. Her intense sadness and despondency rendered her unable to fulfil her role as moral gatekeeper of the sacred domestic space. Within Victorian psychological discourse the cause of this mental disorder was located within the very processes of the female body, which were thought to disrupt female control over emotional and sexual impulses. The treatment was most aptly named, moral management. At the centre of moral management was the belief that female mental disorder stemmed from a lack of morality and an unwillingness to conform to feminine behaviours. The solution, therefore, was behaviour modification and the reeducation of female patients into appropriately feminine practices. Within this framework melancholy became a physical and moral issue, located within the body and nature of the female patient. It also became part of a wider discourse surrounding gender and domestic ideologies that focused on the control of female behaviour.

Within this thesis, I have argued that through their representations of female melancholy, Elizabeth Gaskell in *Ruth*, and George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss* challenged this conception. I have argued that Gaskell and Eliot repositioned melancholy, not as a psychological or moral issue, but rather a social and economic issue, located in the unjust Victorian economic system and the unrealistic pressures of Victorian ideologies of femininity. Within the novels, melancholy is not an irrational response of the unstable female body, but rather

a logical response by females who understand the reality of their place within the Victorian system and feel entrapped and dissatisfied with this reality.

In Chapter 1 and 2 I examined the intersection between Victorian understandings of the causes of melancholy and the presentation of the cause of Ruth Hilton and Maggie Tulliver's melancholy. I suggested that both Gaskell and Eliot introduced external factors, both economic and social, into their protagonist's narratives as the cause of their melancholy. In both texts, the moments of melancholy for Ruth and Maggie are linked to moments of understanding the injustice of their place and prospects as women within Victorian society. While the Victorian psychological discourse located the cause of melancholy within the body and behaviours of female patients, Gaskell and Eliot challenge this by locating the cause of melancholy on external pressures within Victorian society. Within *Ruth*, I have argued that Gaskell uses this representation of melancholy to launch a critique of the fallenness myth and demonstrate its unjust and material impacts on the lives of women. Within *The Mill on the Floss*, I have argued that similarly, Eliot uses melancholy as a mechanism to appraise Victorian moral failings and the impossible pressures of Victorian ideologies of femininity.

In Chapter 3 and 4 I explored the relationship between the representations of melancholy in *Ruth* and *The Mill on the Floss* and Victorian ideas relating to moral management. I argued that within both texts the brief times where Ruth and Maggie are seemingly cured from their melancholy echoed ideas of moral management. This is because for both women, their cures were based upon their

adoption of appropriate female behaviours and performance of acceptable Victorian femininity. For Ruth, this involved her adoption into a domestic space and her role as a mother. For Maggie, this involved her renunciation of herself, particularly her desires for 'masculine' forms of knowledge and experience, and her sexual desires. I have argued, however, that ultimately both Gaskell and Eliot critique moral management discourse by demonstrating the inadequacy of female behaviour modification as a cure for an inherently social and economic problem. Both texts demonstrate that moral management discourse was a part of a wider gender ideology which ignored the actual, material and ideological oppression of women within the Victorian period.

I have concluded with an Afterward that addresses the controversial endings of *Ruth* and *The Mill on the Floss*. While many have called these endings weak and poorly plotted, I have argued that they are in fact the culmination of powerful critiques of the Victorian psychological discourse, and wider discourses of gender and domesticity. I have argued that through transforming their texts from realist novels into seemingly trite moral supernatural tales, Gaskell and Eliot demonstrate the inadequacy of Victorian societal structures to contain women like Ruth and Maggie, who understand and are discontent with their place within Victorian society, and yet have no means of escape. I conclude that our frustration as we close both *Ruth* and *The Mill on the Floss* echoes the frustration of Victorian women, oppressed by unjust economic and social structures, and trapped within conceptions of femininity to which it was impossible to conform.

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