

ROBINSON, STEPHANIE RENEE, M.A. *At the Altar of Lares: Domesticity and Housekeeping in Caroline Howard Gilman's Recollections of a Housekeeper.* (2007) Directed by Dr. Karen Weyler. 37 pp.

Caroline Howard Gilman's novel is an early example of domestic fiction which sought to promote the authority of the middle-class woman. This paper explores the ways in which housekeeping was used as a tool of domesticity and as a measurement of value in a domestic-oriented society. Domesticity created a space for middle-class, married, white women that allowed them greater autonomy and privilege within the home, as well as in the public world as literary figures and as moral leaders. However, domesticity was also limiting: lower-class women, particularly servants, were exploited in order to keep middle-class values intact. Gilman's text explores domesticity as both a catalyst for positive change as well as a limitation to class mutability.

ROBINSON, STEPHANIE RENEE, M.A. Plainly Written: Openness, Politeness, and Indirect Discourse in Jane Austen's *Emma*. (2007)  
Directed by Dr. Karen Weyler. 29 pp.

In using indirect discourse in her novel, *Emma*, Jane Austen exposes and critiques aspects of manners relating to gender and class. Although recognizing the necessity of politeness in society, the novel implies a dislike of societal convention that rendered proper ladies reserved and courtship misleading. Despite valuing openness over empty politeness, Austen balances exposure and betrayal in her novel: although Emma's faults are made clear, the narrative does not betray her or make her unlikable. Likewise, Austen exposes a critique of conventional social behavior without marking herself out as a radical. The intricate nature of indirect discourse allows the narrative to be both straightforward and reserved, to interrogate without openly rebelling.

AT THE ALTAR OF LARES: DOMESTICITY AND HOUSEKEEPING IN  
CAROLINE HOWARD GILMAN'S *RECOLLECTIONS*  
*OF A HOUSEKEEPER*

AND

PLAINLY WRITTEN: OPENNESS, POLITENESS,  
AND INDIRECT DISCOURSE IN  
JANE AUSTEN'S *EMMA*

by  
Stephanie Renee Robinson

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Approved by

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## INTRODUCTION

Although written more than twenty years apart and on two different continents, Jane Austen's *Emma* and Caroline Howard Gilman's *Recollections of a Housekeeper* have some intriguing similarities. Austen's well-recognized novel explores the use of manners in a polite society and Gilman's more obscure work explores the importance of housekeeping in domestic society. Both texts are largely concerned with the use of various tools – whether manners or housekeeping – to attain and maintain power. Austen's novel implies a critique of a society in which politeness is used to promote duplicity and reserve. Ultimately, her protagonist embraces a more open mode of discourse, although one tempered with considerate moderation. Gilman's novel indicates the benefits middle-class women could achieve through domesticity and housekeeping, but also exposes the ways in which domesticity was complicit in limiting lower-class women from gaining more authority. Both papers explore the ways in which these authors expose and complicate issues of class and gender in the early nineteenth century.

AT THE ALTAR OF LARES: DOMESTICITY AND HOUSEKEEPING IN  
CAROLINE HOWARD GILMAN'S *RECOLLECTIONS*  
*OF A HOUSEKEEPER*

After a century or more of fiction that trivialized or disdained women, nineteenth-century domestic fiction made headway in promoting the authority of an unlikely heroine: the middle-class housewife.<sup>1</sup> This fictional promotion, however, was in fact a reflection of cultural trends. As Glenna Matthews indicates, “Wherever a middle-class housewife turned – whether to her minister’s words from the pulpit or to her favorite reading matter – she could see and hear her value and the value of her home for which she was responsible being affirmed” (34). Middle-class white women used domestic ideology to carve out a space of authority and identity for themselves in the nineteenth century, an authority that was based on skill, status, and moral influence. Caroline Howard Gilman’s *Recollections of a Housekeeper* is one of the first examples of such domestic fiction and clearly demonstrates the means by which middle-class females gained authority in society. Gilman’s narrator Clarissa Packard stands as a model for domestic women of the early nineteenth century, and she was a prototype for the respect middle-class white women could gain by adhering to domestic ideology. Gilman was a forerunner in a movement that would change the public discourse on both women and the role of the private home.

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<sup>1</sup> Nina Baym identifies Samuel Richardson and other authors of sentimental fiction as largely responsible for promoting degrading female characters (29).



Gilman contributed significantly to the cultural phenomenon of domesticity in the early nineteenth century. While domesticity shifted the criteria of female worth away from wealth and title and toward inner character and ability, Gilman also delineated a new system of measuring female worth: housekeeping. What is most significant, however, is that Gilman did not acknowledge a division between domesticity and intellect, between the woman of the home and the woman of the pen. In both her own career and in her heroine, she demonstrated that housekeeper and writer are not mutually exclusive terms and that if women may rise in social esteem by practicing domesticity, they may also rise to new literary heights through the same medium.

Gilman's influence on domestic fiction and domestic ideology has been largely unexplored by critics. However, her work provides an interesting dimension to scholarship on domestic fiction. As a forerunner in fiction of this type, she served as both a catalyst for new thoughts and ideas, as well as a type of Janus posed between the lingering Republican ideals of female virtue from the eighteenth century and the new-found interest in the domestic sphere and woman's role in the nineteenth century. Because of her unique historical placement, Gilman was able to reflect on past cultural ideas about women and the home, as well as to foresee how those ideas might change through the early nineteenth century. As a result, her writing is innovative; she developed new genres and character types, and broadened the current conception of woman's work and value, and promoted the female ability to comment on political and social issues.

Gilman reflects these ideals in her own life, as well as in her writing. A New Englander by birth and education, Gilman moved to Charleston, South Carolina as the bride of Unitarian minister Samuel Gilman.<sup>2</sup> Providing an example of female strength and accomplishment, Gilman raised six children while working as editor of *The Rosebud*, a children's publication aimed at education and moral instruction. This periodical would later be renamed *The Southern Rose* and expand its audience to adults. Gilman began her career as a novelist with *Recollections of a Housekeeper* (1835) and later wrote *Recollections of a Southern Matron* (1836), as well as *Love's Progress; or Ruth Raymond* (1840) (Prennat). Gilman's interest in the home and the middle-class woman's role as domestic manager and moral leader is evident throughout her work. She attributed her success to maintaining an original vision, explaining it was "the first attempt, in that particular mode, to enter the recesses of American homes and hearths" (qtd. in Kelley 27). This primacy and her innovation are also the sources of Gilman's importance to modern critics. She provides insight into early nineteenth-century society and reflects the changes that were being instantiated through her efforts and those of other domestic writers.<sup>3</sup>

Nineteenth-century society's interest with the private realm is surprising, given the historical construction of a male-dominated, public-centered world. However, domestic ideology represented more than a culture's concern with the workings of the

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<sup>2</sup> At the outbreak of the Civil War, Gilman, by then a widow, declared her allegiance to the South, moving inland after her home was shelled. Returning after the war, she found most of her possessions destroyed or stolen, including her books and papers. Undaunted, she declared the beginning of a "new era" in her life and, at almost seventy, went on to publish three more collections of stories and poems (Prennat).

<sup>3</sup> For more on Gilman's career, see Mary Kelley, *Public Woman, Private Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America*.

home. Despite the rhetoric of separate spheres, the domestic and ostensibly private home commingled with the world, including the political and social realms.<sup>4</sup> Because domesticity placed the home as the center of the world, the division between the two is not as rigid as the term “separate spheres” might suggest. The far reaching aims of domestic ideology, according to scholars such as Nancy Armstrong, Lora Romero, and Nina Baym, was to redefine the feminine ideal and to restructure the system by which women were valued in society.<sup>5</sup>

Lora Romero indicates that domesticity is an ideology designed to repudiate the patriarchal system that so limited the scope of female value and education. Crediting Hannah Moore with founding domestic ideology, Romero explains that

using the home as a metaphor for interiority (in the sense of ‘selfhood’), Moore was attempting to redefine woman’s value in terms of internal qualities: sound judgment, knowledge of how to run a household, moral tendencies – qualifications that suited a woman to be a good wife and mother rather than merely making her satisfying to the male gaze. (21)

In this way, Romero, drawing on Moore, describes domesticity as a system by which women are valued in terms of internal worth and ability.

While Romero focuses on domesticity as a means of creating interior self-worth for its practitioners, Nancy Armstrong elucidates the more widespread cultural implications of domestic ideology. Armstrong also discusses domesticity as an ideology

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<sup>4</sup> While critics have long discussed the concept of separate spheres, which dictated that women were restricted to the private world of the home and a life of passivity and men were a part of the public, some critics have suggested that separate spheres may have been a nineteenth-century rhetorical stance, rather than an active reality. See for example, Tonkovich xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* Chapters 1-2; Nina Baym, *Woman’s Fiction* Chapters 1-3; Lora Romero, *Home Fronts: Domesticity and the Critics in the Antebellum United States* Chapter 1.

that valued women for internal character, but she looks at the cultural trends and class issues that brought domestic ideology into the social rhetoric. Her scholarship reveals that in previous eras women were valued for such elements as birth and money, circumstances over which they had no control. The most eligible bride was the one who could bring the most wealth or most prestigious family connections to a marriage. A shift occurred in both Britain and America in the late eighteenth century, spurred on by the Enlightenment, among other things, and men began to look for wives not primarily among the peerage or the old money families, but among the women who had achieved recognition for their inner character and abilities. As a result of this change, a woman had to possess more than wealth or elite status; she had also to be a worthy housekeeper, an excellent household manager, and to possess those practical and artful skills that lent themselves to the creation of domestic bliss (Armstrong 4).

In her text *Woman's Fiction*, Nina Baym broadens this understanding of domesticity by arguing that domesticity not only restructured the criteria by which women were valued, it also changed the culture's perspective on what was valuable in life. While for some modern critics "domesticity is equated with entrapment," the writers of domestic fiction in the early nineteenth century saw it as something else (Baym 26). Their work "imagines a happy home as the acme of human bliss. It assumes that men as well as women find greatest happiness and fulfillment in domestic relations" (27). Thus, Baym suggests, domesticity is not only a means of redefining a woman's value, it is also a system by which both men and women benefit by the reordering of the home as the center of human happiness.

Most significantly, because woman was responsible for creating this blissful home life, her position was altered. As Baym explains, “to the extent that woman dominated the home, the ideology implied an unprecedented historical expansion of her influence, and a tremendous advance over her lot in a world dominated by money and market considerations, where she was defined as chattel or sexual toy” (Baym 27). Like Romero and Armstrong, Baym defines domesticity as a revolution that overturned the former patriarchal tendencies that valued women only as possessions or as tools for climbing social ladders. However, it is clear that in appropriating the power given by domesticity, women faced limitations. While the home, as the center of the world, gives them the power of influence, it also restricts them from more direct involvement in the world outside the home.

The work done by these critics may be further expanded: domestic fiction not only altered categories of female value and cultural goals, it also granted some women further agency as literary authors and characters. As the ways in which women were valued in society changed and expanded, women themselves were allowed to enter the fray as both writers and heroines, and the concerns of the female world became topics of literary and cultural debate. In this way, the experiences of the average woman were given prestige and honor, which reflected the change taking place in society. The appearance of the average middle-class homemaker in print helped to further the conversation about female value.

Consequently, the concerns of that middle-class homemaker were also made important and the distinctions of her experience became crucial. Domesticity cannot be

conflated with housekeeping; keeping house is not the sum total of domesticity. Instead, domesticity involves a more complex ideology that addresses gender and the woman's place in the home and in society. However, to expand on Baym's definition of domesticity, the act of housekeeping may be seen as a method for determining ability and standards within domesticity. In keeping and running a house, a woman is showcasing the ideology behind domesticity and her own talents. In keeping the house, she is demonstrating to the public her maintenance of the house, a symbol of middle-class consumerism; in running it, she is proving her ability to oversee the private tasks that made the middle-class home function. As nineteenth-century American society moved toward new categories of ideal femininity, a new system of measurement was needed. As Nancy Armstrong points out with regard to nineteenth-century Britain, this was a class issue.<sup>6</sup> In Britain, female value would no longer be based solely on the European aristocratic concerns of pounds per annum or distance in relation from duke, earl, or baronet. While the aristocracy was not a concern in America, class consciousness was still at the center of this shift, and social rank and wealth were no longer as important in marital prospects.

Although the tendency to sequester women into categories of marriageability continued in the new system, middle-class women enjoyed far greater agency, mobility, self efficacy, and satisfaction. In domestic ideology, women have authority over the home, the personal, the family and kinship relationships, and the increasingly important element of romantic relationships (Armstrong 3). Letters by American women of the

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of class, domesticity, and cultural ideals of femininity, see Armstrong Chapter 2.

time provide evidence for this authority. As a prolific letter writer, Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis provides an example of a domestic woman using her influence and authority to discuss the ordering of the home and relationships.<sup>7</sup> In a letter to her friend Elizabeth Bordley dated January 11, 1821, Lewis writes about the marriage prospects of her daughter: “you need not fear that *I, or mine*, will ever be governed by interested motives, or that any man will be consider'd as a match for my daughter, who has not mind, manners, and every recommendation most desirable in a matrimonial connexion” (Lewis 287). Although Lewis had the advantage of status (she was the granddaughter of George and Martha Washington), her sentiments reflect the power women had gained in arranging the relationships of their family and friends and in organizing kinship relationships. In attaining this authority, women also grasped the responsibility of developing domestic standards and judging their own levels of ability. The yard stick for measuring these domestic labels, as Gilman shows in her text, is housekeeping. The well-run home and the resulting happy family served as indicators of middle-class female value in the new domestic-driven culture.

Housekeeping was a complex process, as Gilman’s work indicates. Clarissa Packard, the middle-class urban housewife of Gilman’s novel, has experiences that were likely similar to those of middle-class women in early nineteenth-century America. With the appearance of new technology, such as the tin oven, and the continued lack of some other technologies, such as modern refrigeration, clean-burning heat sources, and laundry devices that did not involve washboards, such women had the difficult task of keeping a

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<sup>7</sup> The *North American Women’s Letters and Diaries* database houses 119 letters by Lewis to her friend Elizabeth Bordley, spanning well over half a century and a range of topics.

large house running smoothly and seamlessly.<sup>8</sup> This process, which in America's founding years might have been taken for granted as mere survival rather than an art, came to enjoy a newly distinguished importance in the eyes of the nineteenth-century American public. As men began to look for wives with the ability to create comfortable homes and the social strata shifted, the ability of women to change their social standing became comparatively easier. Certainly if a more advantageous marriage could be attained by learning domestic traits, then women would surely be interested in learning them. With this new interest, domestic manuals appeared designed to instruct established housekeepers in the many ways of keeping house and also to illuminate hopeful young women in the many tasks that could be required of them as a new bride (Armstrong 83-84).

One such manual was Catharine Beecher's *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, a popular handbook that went through three editions between 1842 and 1846.<sup>9</sup> This tome of domestic instruction provides advice for "the use of young ladies at home and at school" and includes chapters on washing, the care of yards and gardens, and the care of kitchen, cellar, and storeroom. In addition to these more typical excerpts, Beecher also provides instruction on the care of children, the management of domestics, construction of houses, and the care of the human body complete with anatomical diagrams. If such a manual is to be considered as representative of the tasks carried out by women such as Clarissa Packard, the work of a middle-class woman was indeed complex and exhausting.

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<sup>8</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe bemoans a servant's inexperience with the tin oven in her article "Trials of a Housekeeper," *Godey's Lady's Book* (January 1839).

<sup>9</sup> In 1845, Beecher's text was taken over by Harper and Brothers and was reprinted every year between then and the early 1870s (Railton).



Beecher does little to ease the mind of the overtaxed housewife, however; rather, she ups the ante by explaining that the woman's work in the home is not only a necessary element in providing a comfortable life, it is also a nationalistic goal. Such a decree was designed to indict Europeans who, for Beecher, epitomized laziness, dissipation, and a grand degree of excess and to put them into contrast with the American ideals of efficiency and frugality. "No women on earth," Beecher writes, "have a higher sense of their moral and religious responsibilities, or better understand, not only what is demanded of them, as housekeepers, but all the claims that rest upon them as wives, mothers, and members of a social community" (44). By becoming diligent and careful housekeepers, as well as moral-minded wives and mothers, middle-class women were defining an American ideal that rejected foreign notions. Thus, domesticity proves to be not merely a private matter of the individual home, but a political and national concern, one with far-reaching consequences; at the forefront of this concern was the middle-class woman.

Caroline Howard Gilman's novel is an example of this concern with domestic ideology and the world of the middle-class woman. Its title, *Recollections of a Housekeeper*, suggests that it is the act of keeping the house that is definitive of the domestic ideology behind it. In the novel, Clarissa Packard's experiences in housekeeping illustrate her place in the home and her influence on the world in everyday activities such as managing her domestic staff or replenishing (or not) her liquor cabinet. It is as a housekeeper that Clarissa sees herself. Her actions and duties in the home supply her sense of identity and her sense of self worth. As Gilman demonstrates in the

novel, these are potential markers of quality in society, and they are standards created and upheld by women themselves.

To mark out the position of the middle-class woman in nineteenth-century America, vocabulary was developed around her world and works. Ann Romines indicates that the domestic abilities practiced by such women would have been called “faculty” in the nineteenth century. She who has such faculty is “a housekeeper of exemplary competence” (4). Romines quotes Harriet Beecher Stowe’s description of such a woman:

To her who has faculty nothing shall be impossible. She shall scrub floors, wash, wring, bake, brew, and yet her hands shall be small and white; she shall have no perceptible income, yet always be handsomely dressed.... She who hath faculty is never in a hurry, never behind-hand. (qtd. in Romines 5)

This description is certainly epic in proportion; however, it serves to indicate the promotion that domestic women underwent at this time. Their merits were begun to be appreciated and the skill with which they did their duties to be admired. However, this passage also demonstrates the narrow boundaries of domesticity. The woman of this passage is clearly white, with her small, white hands; married, as she has no income, implying that she depends on her husband; and middle-class, as she is handsomely dressed. While domesticity certainly promoted some women, it did not immediately extend to all women.

In her abilities as a housekeeper, Clarissa Packard proves to be in possession of great faculty. In this way, her skill at housekeeping reflects the domestic ideology that gave middle-class women greater value and a sense of identity. They were contributors

and artists. In performing these tasks, Clarissa is displaying the use of a knowledge that she has carefully acquired. Her work is appreciated by her husband, and both take comfort in a home that seems to define Baym's concept of the "acme of human bliss" (27).

At the heart of this domestic and nationalistic business of housekeeping is the kitchen. In the kitchen, the middle-class housewife is the mistress, and from this station she executes her tasks. In this inner sanctum, behind-the-scenes activities take place to which outsiders, guests, and even other family members are not privy. The managing of a middle-class home in the early nineteenth century, even one located in the urban setting of Boston, would have required a daunting amount of work. Laetitia Montague's 1785 book *The Housewife*, subtitled "a most useful assistant in all domestic concerns," provides a context for the tasks facing a housewife in this era. Although written several decades before Gilman's novel, this text is useful for illustrating the basic concerns of housekeeping, and it contains a variety of recipes, both for cooking and for curing everything from gout to gonorrhoea. In addition, it also has instructions on "pickling, collaring, potting, and preserving, [and] instructions for making butter and cheese" (Montague 2). While by the 1830s many of these items could be purchased, a great many more were still made at home. In addition to creating such products, housewives also had to contend with keeping fires going, for both heat and cooking, and keeping fabrics clean and stain-free from soot, lamp oil, and dirt. Pride was taken in keeping a spotless home. Children, also, were to be tended and trained up. Altogether, the work of a housewife was complex and exhausting.

To gain the faculty needed to perform such consuming tasks, a woman would necessarily be subjected to an intensive education. Clarissa begins her narration with an account of her childhood instruction. Her scholarly efforts were typical: “I read ‘No man may’ in Webster’s Spelling-book, then advanced to the more elaborate ‘Art of Speaking,’ and committed, page by page, Morse’s Geography, without maps, of course in glorious uncertainty with regard to the position even of my own country” (Gilman 5). She sums up her accomplishments by recounting her opening an exhibition ball with a minuet and a red-cheeked dancing partner of thirteen. She learned music on the spinet and managed a sampler of “unrivalled beauty” at the age of 10 (10). Thus ends Clarissa’s accounts of formal education, and neither her academics nor her accomplishments are alluded to again in the work. However, it is important that Gilman has established her protagonist as an educated woman, and only the wealthier classes could provide such an education. In being in possession of both an academic and a domestic education, Clarissa has the advantage of conferring guidance upon others, particularly that of moral instruction.

Beecher, like Gilman, felt that domestic tasks were an important part of female education. She saw her *Treatise on Domestic Economy* as a tool to be used in a formal educational setting in which young women at home or at school were taught the fundamental practices of housekeeping. Beecher recommends that mothers “secure a strong and healthful constitution for their daughters, by active domestic employments” and that society “raise the science and practice of Domestic Economy to its appropriate place, as a regular study in female seminaries” (50). Beecher envisions “all the sweeping, dusting, care of furniture and beds, the clear starching and nice cooking should

be done by the daughters of a family” (50) and schools where “each young lady is required to spend a certain portion of time in domestic employments, either in sweeping, dusting, setting and clearing tables, washing and ironing, or other household concerns” (54). Clarissa’s education seems to fall in line with that recommended by Beecher, steeped in domestic concerns and designed to provide her with skills that will aid her through her adult life. However, she did not acquire her housekeeping abilities in the traditional classroom setting, as Beecher imagined, but instead received them from another, more significant, source.

The lasting education Clarissa received was taught by her mother and consists of her housekeeping skills. The transmission of housekeeping skills from mother to daughter is important in domestic ideology because this process allows female knowledge to become legacy. For this reason, Ann Romines considers domesticity in terms of ritual. This ritual, necessary for the preservation of order and civilization, is passed down intact from mother to daughter. Romines illustrates this concept with a case study in which a mother’s use of imperatives “to describe her young daughter’s obligation to domestic ritual (and by implication her own obligation to prevent the ‘tragedy’ of its disappearance) indicates the weight and pressure that the very subject of domestic ritual has exerted for many women” (15). Obviously, domestic practice was understood as more than mere practical application or a series of “how-tos.” It was an integral facet of middle-class female existence, shared between mother and daughter. Clarissa’s mother gladly enumerates the talents her daughter has acquired through this domestic ritual for Edward Packard, a potential husband for Clarissa. Clarissa recounts,

“she made him understand that I could skewer a goose, roll puff paste, complete a shirt, and make a list carpet, as well as I played on the spinet and worked tent-stitch. She was on the point of telling him that I could spin a little, but I protested against anything so old-fashioned” (Gilman 16). Clarissa’s mother illustrates the value society had come to place on domestic arts, and thus on the middle-class female experience. Keeping house is elevated from rote drudgery to the loftier heights of ritual and inheritance.

It is necessary, however, to distinguish between domestic arts and “accomplishment,” another nineteenth-century concept that encompassed a variety of skills that were designed to demonstrate a different type of female performance.<sup>10</sup> While domestic skills may initially be compared to these accomplishments, the art of keeping house is far from the netting of purses and painting of screens that seemed to devalue their practitioners by their lack of practical value. Such accomplishments are linked inextricably with the aristocratic norms disliked by American domestic writers. Instead, the skills that Clarissa learns are practical in the extreme. All were designed to create a comfortable living environment and promote family and household happiness. However, Beecher and others show that the two sets of skills are not mutually exclusive:

It is asked, how can young ladies paint, play the piano, and study, when their hands and dresses must be unfitted by such drudgery? The woman who asks this question, has yet to learn that a pure and delicate skin is better secured by

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<sup>10</sup> Conduct manuals instructed accomplished young women to: Study your own language thoroughly.... French, you ought to be as well acquainted with as English; and Italian might, without much difficulty, be added. Acquire a good knowledge of History.... Learn so much of Geography, as to form a just idea of the situation of places.... it is necessary for you to be perfect in the first four rules of Arithmetic.... Music and drawing are accomplishments well worth the trouble of attaining.... the study of natural philosophy you will find pleasing and instructive. (qtd. in Fritzer 10)

healthful exercise, than by any other method; and that a young lady, who will spend two hours a day at the wash-tub, or with a broom, is far more likely to have rosy cheeks, a finely-moulded form, and a delicate skin, than one who lolls all day in her parlor or chamber, or only leaves it, girt in tight dresses, to make fashionable calls. (Beecher 55)

While Beecher wishes to make it clear that domestic work will not prevent a young woman from tending to her accomplishments, she also indicates that not only is the one morally superior to the other, but that domestic exercise leads to a healthier, more attractive appearance. Clarissa's excellence in the domestic realm would indicate, according to Beecher, far more than would be initially apparent. She has not only gained a valuable set of skills, but also a more pleasing demeanor and experience. While the reader may be certain that these are not the only reasons that Mr. Packard marries her, they are certainly no small considerations. A woman who did not possess these skills was not only a poor candidate for marriage; she was also in for an uncomfortable time herself.

The middle-class woman who did possess these skills could take pride in her status and enjoy an inner sense of self-worth and efficacy. Clarissa exults in her abilities. Her early training is a source of complacent pride for herself and her mother, and later in the narrative Clarissa is able to feel a sense of contentment in having overcome many of the difficulties that afflict a newly initiated housewife. She is able to recount:

My 'help' was 'the perfectest pattern of excelling' housekeepers and my affairs went on like clockwork. Our meals 'came like spirits.' No half-cooked potatoes betrayed a cold and hard heart beneath a soft surface – no half-picked poultry came to the table as if reluctant to resign the feathery insignia.... My windows were clear as a good conscience, my brasses bright as ready wit, and like

Narcissus in the stream, I half fell in love with myself in the polished mahogany.  
(Gilman 52-53)

Although the reference to Narcissus might be ironic, given the middle-class self-satisfaction Clarissa exudes in this passage, the fact remains that this character has achieved a pervading sense of complacency and self-value that is the direct result of her housekeeping skills. These skills reflect the tenet of domestic ideology in which women are not only lauded by society, but gain a sense of their own worth and ability.

On the other hand, the epistolary account of Clarissa's wealthy friend Emily Lawrence indicates the intense unease that can be experienced by the woman who has not achieved the level of skill necessary to run a seamless household. In her letter, Emily chronicles the embarrassment she felt when guests discovered the poorly cooked meals and the dirtiness of her kitchen. Her uncle gives her sound advice that is even more significant as it comes from a man. Far from being above noticing such trivial domestic matters, Emily's uncle earnestly informs her, "My dear child, you had materials enough on your table for twenty persons, but your cookery is deplorably deficient. Your mother neglected a very important part of your education. You will spend your fortune to very little purpose if, amid the abundance with which you are surrounded, you cannot procure a well-cooked dinner" (Gilman 114-15). Such well-cooked dinners are the more apparent results of efficient domesticity, a trait Emily does not yet possess. This passage is intriguing because it clues the reader to why Emily is so deficient: her wealth. The short description in the novel indicates that Emily is of an upper-class family, higher than the Packards, and so before her marriage, "she breathed the very atmosphere of



indulgence, the acquisition of various accomplishments being the only discipline she was called to endure” (Gilman 105). It is clear that Gilman is championing the middle-class woman and her identity as housekeeper and creator of comfort when Emily pleads with Clarissa to “come, and counsel and teach me;” Emily claims, “I find that wealth cannot produce order and comfort, and I long for your example and advice in the absence of my mother” (117). Emily’s humble plea indicates the aspirational quality of domesticity: even the upper classes, indulged and wealthy as they were, desired the comfort and authority owned by the middle-class housekeepers.

While upper-class women may acquire the faculty and power of the middle-class housekeeper, it was not so easy for the lower classes, particularly those who served in middle-class homes. The presence of servants in the middle-class home of the nineteenth century made middle-class domesticity possible, and in order to maintain their own authority, middle-class housekeepers sought to keep their servants “in their place.” Although middle-class women used domesticity to mark out an identity appreciated by society, they also depended largely on “domestics” to keep their homes in order and to preserve their own sense of status. Much of the middle-class housewife’s authority comes from her position as manager, a role that scholar Faye Dudden compares to a business manager (155). Just as men were responsible for the well-ordered running of business and commercial affairs, so women were responsible for the same within the home. In homes like the Packards’, a cook would have been employed to do the everyday cooking, another woman, or more usually a girl, was hired for cleaning and waiting the table, and a man might have been employed for more labor-intensive tasks such as chopping wood.

The housewife would be responsible for hiring these people, training them, and making them a part of her personal domestic ritual.

Glenna Matthews indicates that the middle-class woman was able to hire servants in a manner that previous generations of housekeepers had not, which led to the elevation of the status of the housewife. An influx of immigrants, particularly the Irish in the urban areas of New York and Boston, created an available group of people who would work for lower wages and were often exploited as a result. In her seminal text *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America*, Faye Dudden expands on the changing relationship between servants and mistresses that allowed middle-class women to give more time to “the elaboration of domestic space and rituals” (44). Matthews adds, “Moreover, supervising a servant – as opposed to working with help – gave housewives a more elevated status” (12). Thus, Dudden and Matthews argue that the change from the term “help” to describe people hired to work along with the mistress of the house to the term “domestic servant” or just “domestic” also describes a change in the distinction between the laboring housewife of the colonial era and the supervising mistress of the early nineteenth century. Matthews also indicates that this change afforded middle-class women more time to devote to the specialization of their skills. For example, women could leave the everyday cooking to the hired cook but save the more difficult baking for themselves (Matthews 14).

This delicate tension between mistress and servant shapes the underlying premise of Gilman’s novel. While many of the anecdotes Clarissa details in her narrative are amusing, they demonstrate both how arduous the tasks of housekeeping were and how

important it was to organize help to perform them. It would have been grueling for one woman to manage all the household duties herself, as narratives of lower-class families in which domestic servants were a luxury attest. Certainly, the Packards have a substantial advantage in being able to afford such hired help, and Clarissa has the capacity to blush at her smudged fingers only because there is money to hire others to smudge their fingers. Clarissa's first experience as a housewife is that of dealing with an intractable servant, Nancy. Despite Nancy's declarations that "*I am not at all petiklar. I never had no differences with nobody*" (Gilman 18), she almost immediately takes affront at Clarissa's method of making a pudding. Again reaffirming the importance of the handed down domestic ritual, Clarissa asserts, "My mother had taught me culinary arts with great care, and I felt on strong ground, while I defended *my* quantity of milk" (20). Nancy tests her mistress, declaring "Well, *Miss Packard*, if you will spile the pudding, you must bake it yourself" (21). Clarissa firmly asserts her position as mistress in this dispute, and the argument itself suggests the complexities of maintaining authority within the domestic structure.

Writings by Harriet Beecher Stowe indicate that Clarissa's experiences in working with domestic servants were not uncommon. In an article with the resonant title of "Trials of a Housekeeper," Stowe provides humorous accounts of servants who are incompetent and untrained. When she does manage to hire a helpful servant, a "tidy, efficient-trained English girl; pretty, and genteel, and neat, and knowing how to do everything, and with the sweetest temper in the world" (Stowe 482), the girl promptly leaves to be married. A similar story is told in *Recollections of a Housekeeper*: Clarissa's

own Sally is quickly taken off by a Sam, leaving Clarissa with yet another position to fill. Whether housekeeping is viewed as a “recollection” or a “trial,” it is clear that a large portion of this work is taken up with dealing with servants. Clarissa’s foray into housekeeping demonstrates the authoritative position that domestic ideology gave to middle-class women, placing them in control of their own kitchens and consequently their own homes. However, it becomes clear that domesticity is made practical largely by the urbanization of the middle class and the availability of immigrant workers to serve in increasingly complex households.

Middle-class women maintained their authority not only by managing their housekeeping duties and their servants, but by acting as moral leaders. This concept of women as moral guides began in the Revolution era with the symbolism of the Republican mother.<sup>11</sup> While society had previously denied women status as teachers of virtue for children in favor of the father, new ideas emerged that placed the woman at the forefront of moral instruction. Among the causes for this change were new economic patterns that drew men to work away from the home, leaving children to the care of their mothers, and the decreasing use of wet-nurses, which enabled mothers to bond more closely with their own children and to be seen as the nurturing, caring figure in the child’s life (Bloch 59-61). As this ideology continued into the nineteenth century, women were given status not only as Republican mothers, who would train children to be civic-minded and patriotic, but also as moral mothers. As Matthews puts it, “Women in

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<sup>11</sup> For more on Republican motherhood, see Linda Kerber’s *Women of the Republic*.

their homes were the locus of moral authority in the society,” an authority the middle-class housewife could exercise most easily on her servants (6).

Clarissa most clearly uses her position as moral example for her maid Polly. Polly is an orphan the Packards removed from the asylum to work for them until she became eighteen. Clarissa feels responsible for Polly’s moral as well as her physical upbringing and comments that “she was so docile and innocent, that could I always have sheltered her under my own wing, she would have been pure as a bird” (81).

Unfortunately, Polly comes under the influences of the unscrupulous Mrs. Phillips, another servant in the Packards’ home, who eventually leads her away into a life of vice. A penitent Polly is soon welcomed back into the Packard household, however, and Clarissa has the satisfaction of seeing the girl grow, under her instruction, into a “tried and faithful friend” (91). Clarissa’s managerial skills are put to the test in her domestic position in the home. Through this housekeeping task, her qualities of diplomacy, forgiveness, and perception are revealed, and her value within domestic ideology is clearly shown.

Clarissa is also tested in her moral guidance of her servants in another seemingly superficial arena that actually has far-reaching implications for class relations: dress.<sup>12</sup>

Taste in dress was supervised between social groups, and, despite American pride in its

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<sup>12</sup> During the period in which both Gilman and Beecher were writing, dress became an increasingly fraught issue for women. While improved print technology led to an increase in the number of periodicals for women, these journals often had to be subsidized by fashion ads. Magazine’s such as *Godey’s Ladies Book*, a work that defined and instructed women for decades and united both the established East Coast and the burgeoning frontier, ran ads for continental fashion that editors and proponents for women’s health found disturbing (Tonkovich 72). The issue became further vexed as some rebelled against the stereotype that attention to dress indicated vanity or frivolity in a woman. This was especially complicated since a woman’s appearance was often a reigning factor in how she was judged. A dowdy woman might be virtuous, but the extent of her influence would be limited.

classless, democratic society, tacit sumptuary laws were rigidly upheld. Economics seemed to play a ruling role in this issue. While the tightly laced whale-bone corsets were restrictive and even reproductively damaging (the main bone of contention with contemporary dress reformists), they were expensive and therefore limited to the middle and upper classes. Even their restrictive nature reinforced their exclusivity, as working women would have been unable to perform their labors in such a garment (Tonkovich 76-77). In this way, dress was a concern, not merely of projected appearance, but also in matters of social standing and class structure.

Lower-class working women, particularly servants, were restricted in their choice of outer garments as well. In Gilman's novel, a work that is obsessed with the relationships between domestic servants and their employers, the issue of sumptuary restrictions surfaces more than once. The servant Cinda is made an object of ridicule when she is caught trying on the delicate and decidedly fashionable head gear of a female visitor of the Packards. She is described as having "placed on her carrotty locks Mam'selle Ligne's beautiful evening cap, and thrown a slight scarf over her shoulders; and there she stood, with an air of the most complacent satisfaction, gazing at her own charms" (Gilman 39). Her embarrassment at being discovered leads her to rush back to her chores still sporting the hat, resulting in the redoubled amusement of her employers and their guests. The jarring juxtaposition of the crude, rough, and probably Irish Cinda and the delicate, flimsy hat is an object of gentle, non-malicious mirth. However, the underlying principle is upheld. The gentle mockery made by the Packards, and indeed by the novel itself, serves to indicate the inappropriateness of such dress transgressions and

to uphold the structure of the class system, as well as the authority of the middle-class woman.

As Gilman's novel illustrates, dress remained an important indicator of class and a check on the social mobility of servants. The issue reoccurs in a direr situation when the malleable Polly, under the pernicious influence of the cook, begins to don increasingly extravagant clothing for church. The implications of such an act are partially explained in Clarissa's reaction. The public response to Polly's finery would go beyond mere amusement. Class sensibility would be offended; Polly would be seen as a usurper, as someone trying to "rise above her station." Additionally, some might question how she obtained such items. As most middle-class women both employed servants and bought extravagant hats, the comparison between wages paid and the cost of such millinery would leave the ladies to conclude that dishonest means had been employed. While Polly reasonably insists, "I don't see why I can't dress as well as other folks" (82), Clarissa's injunction to Polly to remove the finery goes beyond a desire to keep her in her place (though there is certainly a consideration for her "age and situation" as domesticity seems to be complicit in the maintenance of class boundaries), but also out of a concern for her reputation and sense of modesty.

Gilman's novel, however, contains an interesting passage on moral leadership that makes for a complex message. While Clarissa is clearly the moral guide throughout the novel, she herself receives moral instruction from a servant, Lucy Cooledge. This young woman, who serves a short time before a rather sentimental death, is the catalyst who inspires the Packards towards a more comprehensive understanding of their moral

capacity and responsibility. She instructs them: “Do not love each other too well. Pray with and for each other. Forget not that Christ lived and died for you” (Gilman 50). Lucy’s resolute faith prompts Clarissa to be mindful of her position as a conveyer of morality. Clarissa asserts that Lucy had a task: “It was, to direct my thoughts to a feeling of the value and necessity of Christianity; to teach me to subdue the idolatry of my affections, and give them a *spiritual* bias...” (49). While most of the novel seems intent on promoting the moral authority of the middle-class woman, Gilman complicates this position by having her heroine receive instruction from a young servant. However, the rest of the novel makes it clear that such instruction would only be permissible from a death bed, and Lucy’s mortality gives her an authority that supersedes class.

In nineteenth-century domesticity, women used their authority in the areas of housekeeping and moral leadership to promote an issue of public importance: temperance. Over the course of the nineteenth century, women became increasingly vocal about the issue of alcohol, a movement that culminated in the formation of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union after the Civil War. Even earlier than that, Catharine Beecher espoused the beliefs of this movement in 1842, stating, “Intemperance in drink has produced more guilt, misery, and crime, than any other one cause. And the responsibilities of a woman, in this particular, are very great; for the habits and liabilities of those under her care will very much depend on her opinions and practice” (Beecher 106).<sup>13</sup> Her text demonstrates that the roots of the temperance movement began early in

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<sup>13</sup> The term “intemperance” was widely used in this time, as “alcoholism” would not be introduced until the 1860s and “alcoholic” not until 1891 (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Such terminology would imply that the over-consumption of alcohol indicated a character flaw, a lack of self-control that could be corrected with influence and discipline.



the century and originated in the home. Middle-class women with enough time to devote to public concerns became aware of the problem of drinking and through domestic ideology, which gave them moral authority, began to feel responsible for supporting abstinence from alcohol. In fact, Frances Willard, a leader in the WCTU, is quoted as saying, "Were I to define in a sentence the thought and purpose of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, I would reply: It is to make the whole world Homelike" (qtd. in Matthews 86). Thus, Baym's assertion that the home was the center of world in domestic ideology and that those home values radiate outwards into the world is demonstrated; Willard is clearly showing one means of infiltrating the world with the home. Working from within domestic ideology, women used their sense of efficacy and responsibility to bring their moral and ordered perspective into a fraught issue.

Clarissa finds a way to promote the cause of temperance in her own house through housekeeping. In the course of the novel, she is saddened to discover that her cousin William Ingols, who is staying with them for a time, has become overly fond of his drink and is even displaying signs of addiction. William hides, even from himself, how much he is consuming. Clarissa addresses her husband, Edward, on this subject, but he quickly defers the responsibility back to her, saying, "You are a woman, and can manage these things better than I. Talk with Ingols on the subject" (Gilman 141). As Edward points out, according to cultural values, as a woman, Clarissa is better suited for this delicate matter than a man could be. As women gained status in the early nineteenth century as the keepers and exhibitors of moral excellence and cultural ideals, it became their lot to enforce these matters. However, as Lora Romero points out, theirs was not

the power of force or brutality but that of persuasion and influence (15). Clarissa approaches her cousin with the gentle grace that is distinctive in all she does. Her kind lecture, however, is not enough. Although intending to reform, William cannot conquer himself and can only make a half-hearted promise. Soon William returns to the liquor cabinet, only to find every decanter emptied. He returns a note to Clarissa, declaring “you have conquered, cousin. I thank you, and I thank God” (Gilman 147). Her success is complete; her cousin is ashamed of his vice when contrasted with the moral earnestness his cousin exhibits.

Clarissa explains at the beginning of the chapter the influence a woman may have on such a matter through mere housekeeping, demanding,

Let every housekeeper seriously look back through her past experience, and ask herself how many individuals (unintentionally, of course) she has led into temptation with these polished seducers.... I know not how others may have felt, but my soul has been wrung with anguish at the utter hopelessness of preventing any individual, who has betrayed a tendency to intemperance, from plunging daily further and further into sin, while the means were spread before him, leaving unchecked his vitiated taste. (Gilman 139-40)

Clarissa sees the domestic environment as capable of executing definitive and pragmatic moral change within the home. William, likewise, has experienced the power of this ideology and accounts his cousin as strong in an area where he is weak. It is not merely by removing the temptation that Clarissa has saved William: it is her example and perseverance that inspires repentance. Her housekeeping intervention is the means of his

deliverance.<sup>14</sup>

While the temperance movement was one example of a public movement by women, female influence also extended into the world beyond the home through literary means. Domestic ideology emphasized women's education, as well as their value to society and to themselves. As domesticity is an ideology that promotes female accomplishment, it makes sense that it would also promote female literary accomplishment and provide women with an entrance into the literary market. Housekeeping again provides a reflection of this domestic ideology. Just as the transmission of domestic ritual is passed from mother to daughter, in the literary world it is capable of being passed from one woman to another. Domestic fiction was written by women, for women, about women. As Nina Baym indicates, much domestic fiction includes details about the domestic rites of the women of the novels. There are accounts of cooking and sewing and managing a house. These rites are imparted through literature, and often the main goal seems to be to introduce and induct the reader into this world of domesticity and female authority.

Gilman herself demonstrated this emphasis on female authority by reinforcing the idea that women could be worthy writers and that a woman's experiences could be worthy topics of literature. In this vein, perhaps her greatest contribution to the arena of domestic rhetoric in the early nineteenth century was her experience in the field. Unlike the writers of domestic manuals such as Catharine Beecher, Caroline Howard Gilman

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<sup>14</sup> Gilman was among the first, along with Sarah J. Hale, to incorporate issues of temperance into fiction. For more on temperance fiction, see Carol Mattingly, *Water Drops from Women Writers: A Temperance Reader*.

married, raised children, and managed a household. The plights, pitfalls, and triumphs of her heroine Clarissa are not unlike the ones she likely experienced. While Beecher's authority was tenuous due to her lack of personal experience, a fact which forced her to rely on tone and on the legitimacy of print, Gilman's work appeals to the heart of the domestic woman rather than her work ethic or sense of patriotism. As Catharine Beecher's cousin Elizabeth Foote expressed, many women were likely wondering with a bit of sarcasm "if it were not for these maiden ladies instructing the married ones how to keep house and take care of children I dont know what would become of us?" (qtd. in Tonkovich 91). Gilman at least escaped the censure of her fellow married women.

Gilman not only created a charming heroine with whom readers could identify, but covertly outlined a political agenda that might not have been well-received had it been the expressed intent of the author. She insured this partly by avoiding the error of pedantic instruction. Her work is not a manual or guide book, but a novel. Her heroine writes from an autobiographical standpoint to an audience that she expects to be both sympathetic and entertained. In this way, Gilman was able to promote the professionalization of domestic concerns, temperance, and the cultural approbation of middle-class women through domesticity, concerns also put forth by nonfiction writers, without risking condemnation by an audience that might be suspicious of female political activism. Instead, Gilman remained a mild, though effective, proponent of middle-class female privilege without raising alarm or introducing scrutiny into her life. Because Gilman shielded them in domestic fiction, her aims remained protected and her message was effectively received.

According to Nancy Armstrong, British domestic fiction worked by inoculating readers with a political agenda that is imperceptible at the surface. In a world that was often divided along the male and female binary and between the political, public world and the domestic, private one, women were thought to be essentially apolitical. Therefore, a novel about a domestic woman would not have been seen as threatening to the status quo (Armstrong 29). The female, according to this model that Armstrong calls the sexual exchange, trades any political power that she may have had to her husband in return for domestic authority and an exalted position in the home. These exchanges, however, are largely superficial, and women could retain rights to public discourse and political activism through a medium such as the novel.

Gilman goes beyond matters of political power, however. Through her work in *Recollections of a Housekeeper*, she introduces a character who inhabits two apparently mutually exclusive spaces: wife and writer. Clarissa represents a fictional version of the female wives and writers of the time, as well as the women who might be so inclined in the future. In discussing the lives of famous domestic writers, however, Nicole Tonkovich illustrates that these women did not lead conventional domestic lives. They tended to be either unmarried or long widowed and childless; they tended to leave much of their housekeeping to an army of servants in order to allow them more time to write (Tonkovich xiv). Catharine Beecher, for example, described a domestic ideal in which women were able to perform a great number of household duties that exemplify the modern concept of multitasking. In fact, Beecher felt a good deal of exasperation for her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe, who balanced a burgeoning family with a writing career. In

an anecdote, she describes her attempt to get a promised article from her sister, who was weighed down with the demands of domesticity. Catharine organizes the servants and then takes dictation from Harriet. Catharine concludes, “Thus we went on, cooking, writing, nursing, and laughing, till I finally accomplished my object. The piece was finished and copied, and the next day sent to the editor” (qtd. in Tonkovich 146).

Catharine Beecher, neither a wife, mother, nor household manager herself, had a certain amount of frustration for her sister. This story illustrates the tension between the ideals of domestic practice and that of domestic authorship.

Beecher cedes that the mere encyclopedic compilation of domestic lore could have a demoralizing effect on women. The burden of living up to such instruction could crush the spirit of women who might not seem to be able to measure up, especially since domestic ability was sometimes conflated with moral character. Such stress could lead to those stereotypical nineteenth-century complaints: nervousness and bouts of hysteria. In such an example, domestic inability is linked to a mental instability. Thus, domesticity as an empowering ideology is complicated as this link between substandard domesticity and mental instability would condemn women who either could not or chose not to participate in domesticity. Paradoxically, Beecher saw the solution to stresses of domestic detail in compiling more detail, specifically through writing. In her opinion, a housekeeper who wrote her lists and catalogued her tasks was warding off the hysteria that threatened to creep upon her: “At this time, let her take a pen, and let her make a list of all the things which she considers as duties. Then, let a calculation be made, whether there be time enough, in the day or the week, for all these duties. If there be not, let the least important

be stricken from the list, as not being duties, and which must be omitted” (Beecher 166). Taking this model even further, a better domestic manager is one who wrote on a more literary level. If the simple everyday type of writing typified by lists and organizational strategies can ward off mental instability and the sense of bewilderment that women facing domestic life might feel, then writing more complex novels and personal reflections would, by this model, provide an exponentially greater feeling of control and self-efficacy. This is an interesting conclusion: the novel becomes a source of greater authority than science, and the personal narrative provides more control, and perhaps a more disciplining power, than other types of writing. Writing moves a woman from being controlled by circumstances to being in control of them. These circumstances may be expanded from the daily duties of a housekeeper to the political and social position of women. A woman who writes has agency and not only intellectual control, but domestic control as well.

Keeping Beecher’s structures in mind, then, *Clarissa Packard* is a powerful character. Here is a woman who not only has her domestic world in strict order, but is ostensibly a writer. It is Clarissa’s name that is printed on the title page of the novel as author, and the story is told as though it were her personal memoir. Going beyond listing or cataloguing, Clarissa chronicles the affairs of an ordinary domestic woman. Thus, the experiences of such a woman achieve a new level of importance. The tasks, anecdotes, and stories of a middle-class woman have become literature. In a genre that was previously dominated by sentimental tales of aristocratic lords and ladies in Britain and by nubile, victimized young maidens in America, the adventures of a matronly New

England housekeeper take on a new precedence.

Gilman was a revolutionary in a cultural phenomenon that changed female ideals and society's goals for a happy existence. Gilman led the way in a variety of new arenas. She represents a new category of writers: not the male writers who had dominated the literary circles of previous centuries. She was married, not single, as Beecher indicates is an almost necessary component for a successful writer. Indeed, her example suggests that a woman can have both marriage and career and that the two are complementary. In fact, it is striking that Gilman introduced a married female character when young marriageable women had predominated in novels previously. Gilman had an advantage in the realm of domestic literature that the single woman lacked: that of experience. While Beecher's texts provoke women to mental distraction and then coax them back again with strategies for managing these tasks through writing, Gilman's personal experience likely suggested to her the value of helpful and appealing heroines. In fact, she introduces a new breed of heroine, not an elite woman, but an ordinary, middle-class, married woman who meets her obstacles with a good deal of common sense, efficacy, and humor. Gilman thus provides a new model, a literary structure in line with the cultural one that shifted away from elite ideals of wealth and status and toward those of inner character and ability, although the promotion of middle-class ideals is often at the expense of the lower classes. Her work underscores important changes in the cultural fabric, bringing new ideas into the realm of the public consciousness, and through the genre of the novel, unobtrusively inserting a new political agenda into the minds of readers across the country.



*Recollections of a Housekeeper* is one of the first examples of an ordinary middle-class married woman as heroine, and apparently there was a demand for such works. Caroline Howard Gilman found herself widely celebrated as the first author to discuss matters of keeping the home. She recounts, “On the publication of *Recollections of a New England Housekeeper*, I received thanks and congratulations from every quarter and I attribute its popularity to the fact that it was the first attempt, in that particular mode, to enter into the recesses of American homes and hearths, the first unveiling of what I may call the altar of Lares in our cuisine” (qtd. in Saint-Armand 3).<sup>15</sup> The home and housekeeping enable this type of literature and also create an arena in which women may prove their literary merit, as well as their worth within the private realm. Housekeeping is a reflection of the domestic ideology that values the middle-class woman and her role as domestic manager, moral leader, and literary figure.

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<sup>15</sup> *Recollections of a Housekeeper* was published as *Recollections of a New England Housekeeper* in 1839.

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PLAINLY WRITTEN: OPENNESS, POLITENESS,  
AND INDIRECT DISCOURSE IN  
JANE AUSTEN'S *EMMA*

*Emma*, like most other love stories, proves the Shakespearean rule to be correct: “The course of true love never did run smooth.” The narrator even states that a Hartfield edition of the Bard would have a particularly long note on that line (67). Misdirection, diversions, and mistaken intentions make for engaging fiction, but in *Emma*, they also demonstrate the author’s use of these narrative conventions to confront cultural conventions of class and gender. The rules of these conventions are clearly demonstrated in the climactic scene in which Mr. Knightley makes his feelings known to Emma. As is typical with a love story, the scene is full of mistaken motives and misdirected feelings. Knightley is at first assured of Emma’s regard for Frank Churchill; Emma is convinced that Knightley loves Harriet. His attempts to confess to her are silenced; her response to his revelations is delayed. The rules of politeness intersect with the mistaken intentions of both parties to create obstacles to their relationship. Courtship and romance are portrayed, indeed as they were seen in the Regency era, as matters of polite interaction. However, Austen seems to indicate that far more serious issues are at stake. Once the lovers have made themselves clear, Austen adds the commentary:

Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken; but where, as in this case, though the conduct is mistaken, the feelings are not, it may not be very material. Mr. Knightley could not impute to Emma a more relenting heart than she possessed, or a heart more disposed to accept of his. (391)

Here Austen is arguing that in love, as in most other human matters, openness is an ideal seldom achieved. A binary is set up between conduct and feeling, the first often designed to disguise the second. In this case, Austen seems to be championing feeling over conduct, leading to a “relenting” and accepting heart and the climax of the narrative. However, it is only at this point, at the end of the novel, characters remove mistakes and disguises from conduct and display true feelings. The previous course of the novel seems to build to this moment, as characters blunder through mistaken disclosures and disguised truths.

This reading leads to a somewhat puzzling picture of Jane Austen’s authorial intention. Her novels are obviously concerned with the workings of polite society and the nuances of conduct. What, then, does she mean by allowing feeling and emotion to triumph over the niceties of proper behavior? Austen’s position as the proper spinster aunt has had some critical opposition. While some critics, such as Jonathan Grossman, would posit Austen as wholly conservative, there seems ample indication that she harbored far more subversive sentiments as well. For example, critics such as Claudia Johnson envisage a more radical Emma and a more rebellious Austen, a feminist author who produces powerful female characters (124-25).<sup>16</sup> Pursuing this dichotomy in imagining Austen’s stance is reductive, however. It is possible to imagine Austen as both concerned with proper conduct and with true feeling. As Nancy Armstrong proposes, Austen is neither reifying rank and status in *Emma*, nor is she a proto-feminist rebel

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<sup>16</sup> Devoney Looser delineates the critical stances about Jane Austen and feminism in *Jane Austen and Discourses of Feminism*.

against convention (156). While Austen is clearly conscious of the culture of politeness built by eighteenth-century moralists and conduct book writers, she is not merely reproducing that culture. Rather, her bits of ivory contain some pointed questions about proper female behavior and about the role of manners between classes, which often served to make even more distinct the barriers between upper and lower class.

Throughout her work, Austen clearly exposes the intricate manners of Regency society, particularly those dealing with gender relations and class issues. Her desire is to expose the misleading elements of courtship and other social interactions, which would indicate a desire on her part to bring them into open discourse instead of allowing them to remain in an unexamined corner of tacit cultural understanding. This is certainly true in *Emma*. In this text, Austen creates a comparison between openness and politeness through the nature of her characters, and she portrays Emma as a character growing in openness. Ultimately, Austen uses indirect discourse in the narrative to underscore her preference for openness while still maintaining a polite reserve. This type of discourse is reflected in her political intentions for the novel; Austen exposes the fraught issues surrounding women's choices (or lack of choice) in the intersection of marriage and class. While this exposure may not seem radical initially, there are far-reaching implications to making such subjects open. By calling attention to these issues, Austen is interrogating the issues of marriage for women of all social groups and the ways in which manners and politeness may be manipulated and misused.

In order to understand Austen's understanding of and departure from the standards of polite interaction, it is necessary to understand the historical framework with

which she was working. By having Mr. Knightley at first unsure of Emma's true feelings, Austen was demonstrating one result of the work of eighteenth-century moralists. According to Jenny Davidson's short history of morals and manners, women had been instructed "to cultivate an unreadable quality in their relations with men and with society at large" (11). By Austen's time, manners and reserve were almost inseparable, at least for women. Certainly, politeness was a gendered subject, with the expectations of proper behavior varying distinctly between men and women. The early nineteenth-century understanding of polite female behavior was grounded in a history of suspicion about women. Joseph Swetnam, a seventeenth-century writer, painted a particularly chilling image of woman as ravenous, inconstant, and cruel (Poovey 4). Contemporary opinion held that women were naturally weak and given to inappropriate and insatiable desires, so social structures such as the church sought to train women to be modest and chaste, to be proper. However, as the eighteenth century progressed, the definition of a proper lady changed from one who does not act on her desires to one who does not desire. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, a proper lady was supposed to be cold and passive, and she expressed this propriety through polite reserve. With a radically different stance (although one with the same objective as their seventeenth-century predecessors), nineteenth-century moralists considered women to be naturally modest and reserved (Poovey 15). There remained, however, the insistence that women need to be trained in modesty and manners, a function carried out largely by conduct literature.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For more on this paradox, see Mary Poovey's introduction to *The Proper Lady*.



In addition to increasingly strict codes concerning gender ideals, changes in the understanding of manners also affected the social classes. Historian Lawrence Klein illuminates the role of eighteenth-century moralist and political writer the Earl of Shaftesbury in re-imagining the rules and norms of politeness. Shaftesbury aligned manners and politeness with the upper class, making it an exclusive ideology that served to reveal distinctions among the elite. The contemporary definition of politeness was “the art of pleasing in company,” a notion that emphasized both the studied aspect of politeness as well as its public setting (Klein 3-4). Klein indicates that in polite exchanges words were most important, and so conversation became the main arena for demonstrating politeness. By the early nineteenth century, politeness was the concern of the elite, although there was a trickle-down effect into the lower ranks of society. This process is illustrated by Jonathan Grossman in his article “The Labor of the Leisured in *Emma*: Class, Manners, and Austen. Grossman identifies creating and enforcing manners as the work of the gentry. The minutia of these manners and the elements of polite conversation were expounded, along with the requirements of a proper lady, in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century conduct books.

However, by Austen’s time, these books did not merely illuminate the social skills necessary to represent the upper class or to enact the part of the proper woman; rather, manners had taken on a moral bent, and conduct writers conflated correct behavior with good character. As scholar Marjorie Morgan has pointed out, manners were “regarded and valued as the outward manifestation of religious and moral principles” (Morgan 13). In describing the content of these works, Morgan indicates, “Advice on such practical

matters as dressing, visiting or inviting guests to a meal mingled with more solemn discussions on religion, morality and qualities of character such as benevolence, vanity, modesty, virtue and integrity” (16). Scholar Penelope Joan Fritzer extends this study of conduct literature to Austen’s work when she contends in *Jane Austen and Eighteenth-Century Courtesy Books* that Austen’s novels were largely in line with the spirit of the conduct manuals. However, despite such easy identification between Austen’s novels and the conduct literature of the day, it is clear that Austen’s comedies of manners probe the social norms surrounding manners rather than to merely reify them. It is important to make this distinction, given the polarized state of Austen scholarship.

Just as a dichotomy between proponents of Austen’s radicalism and defenders of her conservatism arises, critical debates also bring to light a dichotomy between those who believe Austen to be supporting socially-structured politeness and those who read her examination of manners as a critique. For example, critics such as Jonathan Grossman see Austen in a rather conservative light. His article “The Labor of the Leisured Class in *Emma*” argues that the upper-middle-class gentry about whom Austen wrote were largely concerned with the creation and deployment of a system of manners, a view that seems to take into consideration the historical background of manners and the class-conscious way in which manners developed. Grossman argues that *Emma*, as a *bildungsroman*, is a novel about an individual in tension with social norms; in order for that character to grow, she must come to adopt those norms (162). This argument implies that Austen wants Emma to conform to the societal standard of manners. In other words, a polite Emma is a conservative Emma who does not challenge views on class or gender.

Although Grossman's assessment of the novel seems historically sound – he grounds his work in Norbert Elias's seminal text *The Civilizing Process* – he seems to indicate that Austen is merely reproducing her culture rather than interrogating it.<sup>18</sup> For example, he condemns Emma's insult of Miss Bates on the grounds that Emma is “standing in both mind and body dangerously apart from the labor of etiquette that is her everyday work as a member of Highbury's leisure class” (Grossman 155). For Grossman, Emma has erred, not as a human, but as a representative of the upper class, and he implies that Austen is concerned primarily with reinforcing the leisured work of the gentry. Such an argument fails to take into consideration the layers of meaning in the text. While Austen ostensibly promotes politeness in the Box Hill encounter, it is not because she wishes to promote class hierarchy. Rather, Austen seems to be challenging that hierarchical system and calling into question the legitimacy of high-class snobbery.

This view is taken up by critic Jenny Davidson. Like Grossman, historically-centered scholar Davidson also faults Emma for her snub toward Miss Bates. However, Davidson considers Emma's mistake to be one toward Miss Bates herself, rather than toward Emma's own class. She contends that politeness existed in part to protect the lower classes from the caprice of their social superiors (166). Davidson presents a complex reading of politeness in Austen. She indicates that Austen valued openness, but the requirements of female behavior created complications. Davidson points to an example of this in “Hypocrisy and the Novel II: A Modest Question about *Mansfield Park*,” where she reads Fanny Price's reserve and timidity as a necessary defense; her

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<sup>18</sup> Elias's work is a detailed examination of the history of manners and the development of civilization in the West from the Middle Ages.

subservient position in the Bertram household requires a polite hypocrisy, and the opacity of her character, Davidson contends, is what allows her triumph in the end. Her argument is logical, given the historical formation of the concept of politeness.

However, when Davidson extends this logic to Jane Fairfax of *Emma*, she has a more difficult task in defending Jane's reserve and hypocrisy. While both Fanny and Jane are dependent, lower-middle-class women – a double condemnation – there certainly seems to be a distinction between reader regard for the two characters; Jane is hardly a well-liked character. Davidson briefly attributes this distinction to the narration: Fanny's thoughts, although reserved to the other characters, are completely open to the reader; Jane's remain completely opaque, as Austen has allotted the use of indirect discourse for the protagonists (168). However, Jane is purposefully secretive, a trait that cannot be explained away by mere diffidence, as Fanny's reserve may be. Although Davidson's assessment of Fanny Price seems to be accurate, Jane Fairfax is an entirely other creature. Austen is using her to demonstrate another, more negative facet of politeness: coldness and reserve may be used to hide one's true nature. It is necessary to expand Davidson's argument: Austen's work in *Emma* not only critiques the class structure that forced women to become dependent on others, but also politeness itself as a tool of that class structure.

While it is clear that critics take quite disparate stances on Austen's intentions in *Emma*, it is obvious that her meaning does not lie on the surface of the text. It is therefore necessary to explore the narrative layers, an exploration that will reveal Austen's critique of politeness rather than her support of it. For this reason, indirect

discourse seems to have significant relevance to Austen's exploration of manners in her novels. According to Frances Ferguson in "Jane Austen, *Emma*, and the Impact of Form," Austen uses indirect discourse as a novelistic technique. Through this style, the characters' thoughts are made clear to the reader and are commented on by the narrator without any direct authorial intrusion. This form and the genre of novel are tied together. In "Indirect Discourses and Irony," J. Hillis Miller claims that "becoming a novelist means inventing a narrative voice" (171). He goes on to state that the author cannot be separated from the text in indirect discourse because it is a self-affirming act: "the author goes outside himself or herself, doubles himself or herself, in order to affirm the self through a language that will be mirrored in the eyes of others, recognized by them, mirrored or married there where it may see itself" (172). In other words, meaning may be found in indirect discourse because that is where the author's self-revelation takes place. Austen's use of this narrative form creates a complex treatment of politeness and openness in relation to gender and class. In an article titled "'The Tittle-Tattle of Highbury': Gossip and Free Indirect Style in *Emma*," Casey Finch and Peter Bowen indicate that Austen achieves Flaubert's goal in which the author is "everywhere felt, but never seen" (Finch 3); Miller's doubling, although self-affirming and mirrored, reflected, and married in the reader, remains discreet. While Austen seems to value openness and frankness, the narrative voice fluctuates between reticence and candidness in a way that draws attention to the use of manners in Highbury society.

Austen uses indirect discourse in her novel in a way that tests both the cultural and formal extent of her limitations as a female member of a polite society. Her sense of

female propriety does not lead to opacity, yet her critique of societal norms is so carefully controlled as to be barely perceptible to a casual reader. Likewise, her “never seen,” in Flaubert’s terms, is hardly so obscure, and her “everywhere felt” is not stifling. *Emma*, then, seems to be a balance on the author’s part, an effective equilibrium that allows her to both represent her culture and critique it, to maintain the appearance of a proper lady while impolitely asking questions about class and gender.

In *Emma*, Austen’s examination of the proper lady figure culminates in Jane Fairfax. In defense of *Mansfield Park*’s Fanny Price, Davidson argues that polite hypocrisy is a necessary trait in dependent females like Fanny. This seems to be a justifiable position as she points out many examples from the novel in which Fanny’s actions are maliciously misinterpreted by the Bertrams.<sup>19</sup> Davidson’s reading brings to light the correlation among politeness, power, and gender, demonstrating that for dependent females, politeness was used as a type of defense that could make up for their lack of power in some ways. Like Fanny, Jane Fairfax is lacking in relative power. The narrative lays out Jane’s history as a matter of so many facts; her tragic parentage, reduced financial status, and dependence on the Campbells leave her few options and mark her similarity to Fanny Price. However, while Fanny is merely diffident and meek, Jane is cold.

In describing Jane, Austen uses indirect discourse, superimposing the narrator’s voice on Emma’s. Thus, Emma “could never get acquainted with her: she did not know

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<sup>19</sup> Davidson points out that the greatest defense of Fanny’s reserve is her final success. She is able to marry Edmund and remove to the parsonage largely because she has concealed her true motives from the family (159).

how it was, but there was such coldness and reserve – such apparent indifference whether she pleased or not” (150). The voices are doubled again to mark Jane as “worst of all, so cold, so cautious! There was no getting at her real opinion. Wrapt up in a cloak of politeness, she seemed determined to hazard nothing. She was disgustingly, was suspiciously reserved” (152). Although Davidson marks this language as “unreasonably hyperbolic,” the appearance of the sentiment in indirect discourse indicates that even if Emma’s resentment is passionate, it is grounded in an authoritative truth (165). As critic Kathy Mezei points out in “Who is Speaking Here? Free Indirect Discourse, Gender, and Authority in *Emma*, *Howards End*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*,” through the novel, “the ironic distance between the narrator and Emma lessens, and the narrator looks over Emma’s shoulder, nodding as it were” (74). Rather than the narrator creating a sense of irony by allowing her to make outrageous and hyperbolic claims, in this passage the narrator imbues Emma’s thoughts with a sense of truth because it appears that Emma and the narrator agree about Jane. In fact, Emma, the narrator, and Austen herself all seem to indicate that such intense reserve is distasteful, and openness is preferable to such closed politeness.

Nevertheless, Davidson’s belief that Emma is purposely exaggerating Jane’s faults is logical, given the sense of competition between the two. The narrative’s indirect discourse indicates Emma’s attempts to reason out her resentment toward Jane: “Mr. Knightley had once told her it was because she saw in her the really accomplished young woman, which she wanted to be thought herself; and though the accusation had been eagerly refuted at the time, there were moments of self-examination in which her

conscience could not quite acquit her” (150). The “accomplished young woman” of this passage has everything in common with the “proper lady” described by eighteenth-century conduct books. Jane excels in the requirements of propriety; the coldness described in the previous passages alludes to a pervasive sense of modesty and reserve that Mary Poovey indicates is the hallmark of correct female behavior (15). Additionally, women were instructed in a variety of accomplishments that underscored their enactment of a cultural ideal.<sup>20</sup> The narrator relates Emma’s feelings about this sense of achievement between Jane Fairfax and herself: “She did unfeignedly and unequivocally regret the inferiority of her own playing and singing. She did most heartily grieve over the idleness of her childhood; and sat down and practiced vigorously an hour and a half” (208). Here, the indirect discourse is ironically mocking Emma’s sincerity, rather than authorizing her regret of a misspent youth. Obviously, indirect discourse can be ironic, as Davidson argues, or it can indicate truth, as Mezei points out; the difficulty is in determining which is being used.

In this particular case, however, it appears to be irrelevant. Emma may play second fiddle to Jane in the realm of propriety and accomplishment, the tenets of female achievement, but Emma has the clear advantage in class. While Jane may be “proper,” it

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<sup>20</sup> Conduct manuals prescribed a comprehensive curriculum for privileged young women. One such manual instructed women to:

Study your own language thoroughly... French, you ought to be as well acquainted with as English; and Italian might, without much difficulty, be added. Acquire a good knowledge of History... Learn so much of Geography, as to form a just idea of the situation of places... it is necessary for you to be perfect in the first four rules of Arithmetic... Music and drawing are accomplishments well worth the trouble of attaining... the study of natural Philosophy you will find pleasing and instructive. (qtd. in Fritzer 10)

Such an education was available largely to those with money, although those like Emma would have little need for it, while those who would be governesses, like Jane, were quite desperate for it.



is Emma who comes closer to being a “lady,” merely by virtue of birth; as Claudia Johnson points out, “class can actually supersede sex” (127). In the tacit competition between Emma and Jane, although Emma may feel contrite about her lack of accomplishment, it is not important enough to warrant any true worry. Her class position is high enough that she does not need to achieve artistic skills in order to make an advantageous marriage or to market herself as governess. In fact, her status is high enough that she may even consider not marrying at all.<sup>21</sup>

Jane Fairfax, on the other hand, must either marry or sell herself in the governess trade, as she rather dramatically terms it. She proves to be a complex character to deal with. Readers may sympathize with her lowered position and lack of options. She seems to have grasped at the only means of promoting herself: politeness. However, in having achieved this ideal, she has not made herself any more agreeable to other Highbury residents or to the reader. Indeed, her reserve is repugnant, perhaps mostly because the reader, like Emma herself, is duped. The narrative does not even hint about the engagement between Jane and Frank, and some of this discomfort at being fooled is placed on Jane. If *Emma* is the answer to *Mansfield Park* on issues of manners, then Jane is the remaining question (Davidson 164). While Austen on the whole seems to value openness and forthrightness, she does acknowledge that even the most annoying and

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<sup>21</sup> Emma clearly indicates that status and wealth are important considerations in marriage:

I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry... Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want; I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's. (Austen 76)

Such a statement makes it clear that Austen is not merely reifying the social structure, but is instead critiquing the marriage system.

hypocritically polite character may have inducements based on sex and class that can hardly be overcome. Also, the fact remains that while Jane conceals her engagement from Highbury, it is truly the narrator who keeps this news from the reader. Thus, while the narrative portrays Jane as priggish and reserved, Austen has implicated the narrator in Jane's desire to conceal.

While Jane's position illustrates the complications cultural expectations forced on women of lower class, Austen further demonstrates how problematic relations between the sexes could become in a polite society. Norbert Elias explains the medieval roots of polite interactions between men and women in which women were flattered with song and poetry in a courtly society. However, such flattery was marked by some particular goal: patronage or protection for the troubadour (246). Such goal-oriented manners are particularly apparent in Mr. Elton, a man who has studiously acquired the skills of polite insincerity. Unfortunately, Emma is initially taken in by his manners:

I think a young man might be very safely recommended to take Mr. Elton for a model. Mr. Elton is good humored, cheerful, obliging, and gentle. He seems to me to be grown particularly gentle of late. I do not know whether he had any design of ingratiating himself with either of us, Harriet, by additional softness, but it strikes me that his manners are softer than they used to be. (29)

Emma has a particular knack for revealing truth, although not the one she intends. Her choice of words for describing Mr. Elton is significant. She wonders if he had any "design," a term that juxtaposes substantially with the naturalness of other characters, such as Mr. Knightley and Robert Martin. Emma is unwittingly suggesting that Mr. Elton is not a straightforward, open man, but rather one who works through schemes and

designs. Her term “ingratiating” is further indicative of his character; Mr. Elton is ingratiating, certainly. In short, he is a flatterer.

Mr. Elton’s character opens up a realm of Regency social code that is difficult to miss in Austen’s narrative. Flattery was considered a polite mode of discourse without necessarily being a sincere one. Shaftesbury himself considered flattery to be an unfortunate element of politeness; as Klein indicates, “Shaftesbury thought [flattery was] a distorted and morally debilitating form of speech” (151). Politeness seems to be inherently closed – it involves not revealing a variety of things, including one’s true feelings or intentions. For example, Elton praises both Harriet and Emma, and indeed probably every other woman, so that Emma is in doubt whether he intends to “ingratiate himself with either of us” (29). Such doubt, coupled with her own thoughtlessness, is bound to lead to substantial error. A large part of Emma’s difficulties with Mr. Elton arise from the fact that she engages him in a coded play. By attempting to use the games of courtship, Emma becomes enmeshed in polite and misleading interactions. Although Elton’s flatteries are clearly guilty of distortion, they also fall under Shaftesbury’s other objection: inanity (Klein 100). Emma admits: “This man is almost too gallant to be in love... I should say so, but that I suppose there may be a hundred different ways of being in love... but he does sigh and languish, and study for compliments rather more than I could endure as a principal” (42). Elton’s manipulation of politeness does him little credit. Although he is at first marked out as a model of polite manners, even his champion, Emma, soon tires of his gallantry. Austen’s use of this character demonstrates serious objections to conventional politeness. His gallantry is so overdone that it signals

his insincerity, and the very fact that his compliments seem studied further indicates an overblown politeness.<sup>22</sup>

Knightsley draws attention to Elton's hidden motives when he attempts to persuade Emma away from her schemes with the injunction that "Elton will not do. Elton is a good sort of man, and a very respectable vicar of Highbury, but not at all likely to make an imprudent match. He knows the value of a good income as well as any body. Elton may talk sentimentally but he will act rationally" (58). Mr. Knightsley bases this characterization on Mr. Elton's own speeches in "unreserved moments, when there are only men present" (58). Such a statement indicates the challenges presented to open courtship. Elton demonstrates the societal rule that dictated that men be mysterious toward women and women still more toward men. Knightsley, however, does not usually carry out this rule. Rather than flatter, he is nothing if not straightforward, particularly with Emma. The narrative asserts that "Mr. Knightsley, in fact, was one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them" (8). If the narrative is set up as a means of valuing openness, it is clear from the beginning that part of Emma's problem is that too few people have been open with her. Mr. Knightsley is the only one to do the office of plain correction, a position that should have also been filled by her father and her governess, Miss Taylor.<sup>23</sup> A polite nineteenth-

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<sup>22</sup> An interesting comparison may be drawn between Elton and Mr. Collins, the clergyman of *Pride and Prejudice* who ingratiates himself with his patroness with "delicate little compliments." When asked about his methods, he candidly reveals that "They arise chiefly from what is passing at the time, and though I sometimes amuse myself with suggesting and arranging such little elegant compliments as may be adapted to ordinary occasions, I always wish to give them as unstudied an air as possible" (91).

<sup>23</sup> For a further discussion of Emma's education (and her lack thereof) see R.E. Hughes, "The Education of Emma Woodhouse," and Barbara Horwitz, "Women's Education During the Regency: Jane Austen's Quiet Rebellion."

century society was one in which the faults of the charming and high-born were overlooked and flattery was an art form; Knightley, then, is rebellious. He rejects societal convention and forms a more Austenian ideal of manners.

Mr. Knightley perhaps best represents the understanding that good character depends on openness and forthrightness. The first introduction of Mr. Knightley to the narrative begins by presenting him as an open, plain-spoken man whose opinion is valued. In fact, it is the narrative voice that pronounces that Knightley “had a cheerful manner,” a sentiment that is echoed by a variety of characters throughout the novel (7). It is Emma herself, however, who gives the most telling characterization of Mr. Knightley. In tutoring Harriet in the manners of men, Emma announces, “You might not see one in a hundred, with *gentleman* so plainly written as in Mr. Knightley” (28). The term “gentleman” certainly refers to his status in Highbury society; Knightley seems to embody a Shaftesburian ideal – a “member of the landed elite, whose life combined the personalities of rentier, agriculturalist, businessman, politician, officeholder, member of local society, and leader in local religion” (Klein 143). However, he comes close to an Austenian ideal, as well; it is the descriptive “plainly written” that does the most justice to Mr. Knightley. He is an open book in a book that values openness, and his plainness is of high value.

If Austen equivocates on holding Jane responsible for her frigid manners, she has no such qualms concerning the male characters of the novel. With the naïveté that is typical of her in the early episodes of the novel, Emma delineates the masculine ideal with much truth and a number of contraries:

There is an openness, a quickness, almost a bluntness in Mr. Weston, which everybody likes in him, because there is so much good humour with it – but that would not do to be copied. Neither would Mr. Knightley’s downright, decided, commanding sort of manner – though it suits *him* very well: his figure, and look, and situation in life seem to allow it: but if any young man were to set about copying him, he would not be sufferable (29).

Emma’s admission that openness is liked in Mr. Weston and that Knightley’s directness suits *him* indicates that Emma sees these as admirable qualities. Despite attempting to persuade Harriet to the contrary, Emma is laying out a vocabulary of masculine ideals based on their interactions with other characters. Emma has drawn upon them to display a contrast with Robert Martin and with Mr. Elton. However, the narrative clearly indicates that Martin has far more in common with Knightley and Weston and that Elton is lacking.

Martin’s directness is shown in a letter that the reader does not read. Emma provides the critique, and it is assumed that it is a truthful one, as it is both grudging and positive. Although she does not like to admit it, Emma finds the letter to be a good letter, “strong and concise,” and must therefore conclude, “No doubt he is a sensible man, and I suppose may have a natural talent for – thinks strongly and clearly – and when he takes a pen in hand, his thoughts naturally find proper words. It is so with some men. Yes, I understand the sort of mind. Vigorous, decided, with sentiments to a certain point, not coarse” (44). This is very much a stylistic matter, as Marilyn Butler points out: “the style [of discourse] is morally unambiguous: one style is very much preferred to all the others. Emma’s dialogues with Mr. Knightley stand in the same relation to her own interior monologues as Robert Martin’s prose does to Mr. Elton’s poetry. One is manly

and direct, the other over-elaborate, devious, and unreliable” (265). Butler points out that the stylistic differences between Martin and Elton indicate differences in their character; a direct style of writing indicates a direct character, while the flowery language of Mr. Elton is misleading.

Similarly, Knightley’s open style of discourse has much in common with the narrative, as Kathy Mezei points out (72). His words often seem to represent the voice in the narration, as his voice and the voice of the narrator are often parallel, if not conflated. Both he and the narrative voice enact a kind of open dialogue that indicates a value of plainness in the story, and so Mr. Knightley proves that Austen values openness. Additionally, the connection must be made between Knightley’s openness and his quick perception. Although lacking the omniscience of the narrator, Knightly is quick to pierce the reserve and duplicity of other characters. By aligning the narrator with an open and direct character, Austen is clearly promoting openness and directness as an ideal; this ideal is further valorized in comparison with other characters such as Mr. Elton and, most clearly of all, with Frank Churchill.

However clearly the narrative values openness and suspects flattery, most of Highbury initially perceives Frank Churchill as a pattern of male aristocratic politeness. As an outsider in Highbury, his arrival is much anticipated as a source of entertainment and novelty in an otherwise humdrum existence; he was “one of the boasts of Highbury, and a lively curiosity to see him prevailed” (14). Like Robert Martin, he is initially judged by his style of writing; and this judgment is performed by the other characters. This letter, which comes in place of the author, is pronounced a “handsome letter... a

highly prized letter,” which says very little of its originator other than that he himself is likely to be handsome and highly prized (14). Thus, it is not the contents of his letter that first indicate his character, but rather that a letter came at all, as it serves as substitute for the writer, who was surely expected to visit his newly-acquired step-mother.

Mr. Woodhouse, who is deemed by Grossman to be the voice of politeness in the novel (147), pronounces the letter “an exceeding good, pretty letter” and feels that it meets all the criteria of formality, as it begins “My dear Madam” and (he forgets how it goes on) is finished “F.C. Weston Churchill” (86). However, the very idea that Mr. Woodhouse is an authority on such matters needs to be called into question. Throughout much of the novel, he is pointed out as an unreliable judge, as his hypochondria and his fears about drafts and the safety of the roads are usually overblown and unfounded. He himself is outwardly polite. His insistences that others take a little gruel or only a little pie are ostensibly hospitable, but mostly dictatorial. However, the most glaring fault in his abilities to judge character is found in his interpretation of this very letter. Mr. Woodhouse seems to feel that it is the mere form, rather than the content (which is so easily forgotten) that proves Frank’s merit. He meets the bar of formality with his “dear Madam” and creates a sense of his own importance in his ostentatious name. Here, perhaps, where Robert Martin’s lower status would lead Emma to assume that his letter would necessarily be inferior, Mr. Woodhouse and others may have assumed that Frank’s higher rank would indicate a superior letter-writing ability.

Unlike Robert Martin, however, Frank Churchill does eventually materialize on the scene, and his manners are a source of conversation for Highbury and Hartfield in



particular. When quizzed about the newcomer, the reticent Jane will concede only that “she believed every body found his manners pleasing” (153). Unlike the ingratiating Elton or the reserved Jane, Frank Churchill takes the issue of politeness in an entirely other direction. Frank seems to exploit politeness. As Jonathan Grossman points out, Frank “has not so much presented the possibility of discarding manners as of using them” (154). He uses gallantry and favors as a means of amusing himself through others. Although he is more than willing to talk and seems quite frank, as his name would suggest, he does so without truly disclosing any element of his character. His politeness seems to be summed up in his ability to “make himself agreeable” (Austen 173).

This ability echoes the definition of politeness outlined in Shaftesbury’s day: “the art of pleasing in company” (Klein 3). Frank does pursue this as a social art, with all the artifice and affectation such a definition implies. In indirect discourse, his words and compliments are translated into the narrative voice, and so all his flattering enthusiasms about Randalls and the walk and “Highbury itself, and Hartfield still more” and above all his great interest and curiosity in it all gives the impression of an agreeable nature (Austen 173). However, in this case, the narrative voice superimposed upon Frank does not give his voice the ring of truth as it did for Emma on other occasions. Instead, this doubling seems only to amplify the emptiness of his compliments. In this way, the narrative voice can be seen as acting as a type of magnifier, bolstering the true voice, but mocking the insincere. Frank’s grandiose discourse leads Emma to certain suspicions, although they are ones she barely entertains: “That he should never have been able to indulge so amiable a feeling before passed suspiciously through Emma’s brain; but still if

it were a falsehood, it was a pleasant one, and pleasantly handled. His manner had no air of study or exaggeration. He did really look and speak as if in a state of no common enjoyment” (173). Emma does have a fine sense of perception, although she hardly pays attention to her own intuition. The narrative, in this case, seems to be merely recording Emma’s passing thought and leaves it to the reader to make assumptions as to Frank’s true nature, which may consist mainly of pleasant falsehoods. His polite dishonesties will eventually amount to betrayals of both the other characters and the reader; they are merely “a system of hypocrisy and deceit – espionage and treachery” (362) as Emma terms it.

This system is made most apparent in the Box Hill episode, where politeness is encoded as a verbal game.<sup>24</sup> Frank begins the game by announcing, in courtly style, “Ladies and gentlemen, I am ordered by Miss Woodhouse (who, wherever she is, presides,) to say, that she desires to know what you are all thinking of” (335). Critic Jonathan Grossman indicates that this injunction by Frank ruptures the elements of manners and the self, while calling attention to the work of etiquette (154). Certainly Frank’s demand illustrates his own double nature, as his courtliness toward Emma is the zenith of polite flirtation, while his demand of the others is manipulative and designed to assuage his own boredom and perhaps to pique Jane Fairfax. The rudeness covered by politeness that Frank demonstrates is further compounded by the class conflict implied. His demand is ostensibly authorized by his own sense of entitlement, and it is Emma’s

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<sup>24</sup> Critic Joseph Litvak sees the novel as a series of games and word-plays that reveal Emma’s and Knightley’s different understandings of subjectivity and the self. For more, see “Reading Characters: Self, Society, and Text in *Emma*.”

similar sense of entitlement to which he appeals.

This game, more than any of the others in the book, plays most explicitly with the problems of openness versus politeness. Ostensibly, Frank's command is one that demands openness and honesty. To know what every person present is thinking would indeed be a revelation. It is only Emma, however, who complies, although that is not her intention. When Miss Bates self-deprecatingly admits that she will easily supply the three very dull things, Emma, riding high on a cloud of boredom and self-satisfaction, "could not resist" (336). The resulting insult ("only three at once") reveals Emma's misunderstanding of politeness and openness. Emma's mistake is in miscalculating how far the limits of openness go, and as a result, she crosses a class line. As Mr. Knightley later points out, Miss Bates's lower social position requires that Emma be particularly considerate of her. Although critic D. W. Harding indicts Emma for failing to make a "civil falsehood," this is not a mere reification of the social class (177). Rather, Knightley's injunction goes beyond mere politeness: he is reprimanding Emma for a lack of kindness, rather than her lack of social politeness. He remonstrates to her, "Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done indeed!" (340). While the novel values openness and plainness, often above empty polity, Austen is clearly illustrating that openness, like most other things, requires moderation and sense. Emma attempts, perhaps, to mimic the openness of Mr. Knightley, and instead she is merely carried away with the recklessness of Frank Churchill and, as Marilyn Butler terms it, "is led to the moral trap she falls into on Box Hill" (255). In this case, rather than promoting politeness, Austen is promoting moderation and consideration.

It is significant that the narrative voice, which had a corrective quality in Emma's other mishaps, and even her own interior monologue, which generally reveals a keener perception, are both silent at this point. No conscience indicates to Emma that she has done wrong, and no narrator points out the true kindness of Miss Bates. Instead, the narrative quickly moves on with the dialogue of the game. Thus, it is solely up to Mr. Knightley to instruct Emma, and it is to be supposed that his voice echoes that of the narrative as he confronts Emma with her most grievous mistake. Interestingly, Emma realizes, once Knightley has confronted her, that her mistake was one of openness, and so she hopes that her excess of plainness might have been erased by a closedness on Miss Bates's part: Emma hopes that she misunderstood. Knightley must reject this supposition and goes on to praise the openness of Miss Bates: "She felt your full meaning. She has talked of it since. I wish you could have heard how she talked of it – with what candour and generosity" (340). Miss Bates, the ridiculous and loquacious, has provided an example of the balance that Emma must attempt to achieve. While she openly acknowledges that she has been hurt by Emma's words and even plainly admits their truth, she politely treats Emma with compassion, refusing to censure her or blame her too harshly. Her qualities of "candour and generosity" represent the balance that Austen is promoting between openness and politeness, between exposure and betrayal.

Austen navigates the balance between exposure and betrayal most significantly with her heroine. Despite Austen's assertions that she was going to create a character only she would like (Austen-Leigh 119), Emma has remained not only a much discussed character, but a well-liked one judging by the amount of popular acclaim she has

received. The indirect style Austen uses allows the reader to experience Emma's thoughts along with the implied commentary of the narrator. Thus, Emma's mind is transparent, a vulnerable state in which to be, and Austen uses the narrative to expose Emma's flaws in a conscious way. This is a novel with a flawed, yet amusing character, which stands in contrast with the legacy of sentimental heroines of the previous century. The reader is very much aware, not only of Emma's thoughts, but also of what the narrator thinks of those thoughts. Her snobberies, her prejudices, her misguided assumptions are all laid out whether she realizes their existence or not.

However, while exposing her thoughts and her flaws throughout the novel, the narrative does not betray its heroine. This is achieved by the very means that expose her. Because Emma's thoughts are open to the reader, sympathy is created for her that might not have been possible had her thoughts been closed and her actions the only available means of judging her character. Rather than acting the socially expected part of the proper lady, she exhibits features that many early nineteenth-century writers would be reluctant to credit to a woman: rationality, openness, and sense. Through Emma, Austen is rejecting cultural ideals without directly rebelling against that culture.

Austen uses a similar approach with the form of her work. Her method of writing political intention into a novel is in line with Nancy Armstrong's assessment of the domestic novel of the nineteenth century in which women writers safely addressed political issues because their work was disguised in issues of gender relations rather than social change. Because of the disguise, detractors could not detect any political ambition, although the message was received by readers. Armstrong indicates, "The novel was

identified with fiction that authorized a particular form of domestic relations. But if Austen could not vary the form and still write a respectable novel, she could modify the content and thus the nature of the social conflict that marriage appeared to resolve” (50). Indeed, Austen does not modify the form: her novel still ends with marriage and class, important institutions in Regency culture, being upheld. The characters pair off in mostly class-conscious marriages. However, as Armstrong indicates, she does change the content.

The problems posed for dependent females, the monetary and class inducements to marry, the duplicity and manipulation involved in courtship, and the inconsistencies in upper-class figures that corrupt the manners they are supposed to be enforcing are not resolved by novel’s end. However, they are exposed and a critique is implied. Austen has achieved a method of making vexed situations a part of the public consciousness without directly rebelling against that public. Thus, within Austen’s work, the political is turned into the psychological, and form echoes intent. Just as she writes openly about issues affecting social conflict while politely disguising them as issues of character interaction, Austen uses indirect style to show the balance between exposing one’s character or agenda and betraying that character or agenda. Thus, while Austen is not reifying the social structure and the limiting gender roles of the era, neither is she rebelling against the status quo. Austen seeks to expose the biased standards surrounding class and gender, but she does not overturn them. Her characters are still married off, but not according to the mercenary values of her time. Marriage, while it resolves the action

of the novel, is not seen as the solution for the social issues women faced. Rather, matches are made based on love, respect, and affection: ideals in any time period.

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