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A Servitude of One's Own: Isolation, Authorship, and the Nineteenth-Century British Governess

NORA GILBERT

PERHAPS the darkest moment of Jane Austen's *Emma* (1816) is that in which Jane Fairfax compares the trafficking of "human flesh" (the slave trade) to the trafficking of "human intellect" (the governess trade)—two commercial enterprises that, she concedes, are "widely different certainly as to the guilt of those who carry [them] on; but as to the greater misery of the victims, I do not know where it lies."¹ As hyperbolic and problematic as such an analogy might sound to us today, Jane Fairfax was by no means alone in her abysmal impression of the governing profession; throughout the nineteenth century, the figure of the lonely, exploited, pitiable governess haunted England's cultural

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¹ Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. R. W. Chapman, vol. 4 of *The Novels of Jane Austen*, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1923, 1988), pp. 300–301. I would like to thank Gabriel Cervantes, David Namie, Dahlia Porter, Kelly Wisecup, and Erika Wright for reading and commenting upon earlier drafts of this essay.

imagination. In the late 1840s the governess reached her artistic heyday, featuring prominently in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* (1847), and William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847–48). In each of these narratives, along with the majority of other constituents of the “governess novel” genre to which they belong, the heroine is saved from the drudgery and intellectual stagnation of her work life via the conduit of marriage.² But I am more interested in an alternate form of intellectual rescue, one that was ironically afforded by the very alienation that lay at the heart of the governess's perceived plight. Because she found herself in a social standing abyss, “inferior” to the family she worked for but “superior” to her employer's housemaids, cooks, footmen, et al., the governess's free time was not uncommonly spent on her own—even, more specifically, in a room of her own. And, just as Virginia Woolf would envision in her landmark feminist treatise, the activity that this isolated, educated woman habitually and productively turned to was the activity of writing.

In this essay I consider the various kinds of writing that took place in the deserted schoolrooms and dusty attic quarters to which the nineteenth-century British governess was so often consigned.³ Almost all resident governesses relied on letter writing as their primary source of connection to the outside world, but many also expressed their thoughts and opinions in the form of journals, diaries, memoirs, advice manuals, essays, poems, and works of fiction. As the public fascination with the governess figure grew throughout the first half of the century, more and more of these written efforts found their way into print, adding a new dynamic to the governess's perception and reception within the Victorian world. This period witnessed, too, a steadily expanding market for publications *about*

² For more comprehensive explorations of the “governess novel” as its own subgenre, see Cecilia Wadsö Lecaros, *The Victorian Governess Novel* (Lund, Sweden: Lund Univ. Press, 2001); and Katharine West, *Chapter of Governesses: A Study of the Governess in English Fiction 1800–1949* (London: Cohen & West, 1949).

³ It should be noted that, in the Victorian era, the term “governess” referred to women who taught in schools, women who tutored children privately during the day but returned to their own homes at night, and women who lived with the families they worked for. In this essay, I limit my discussion to the last, since the resident governess was really the figure who captured the interest and the pity of the Victorian public.

governesses: from the mid-1830s onward, readers were inundated with stories centered on governess heroines, articles reporting on the fraught state of the governing profession, and conduct books aimed at prospective governesses and the families who would be employing them. The coinciding upsurge of writings by governesses and about governesses was, of course, no coincidence; rather, as this essay shows, the pivotal role that writing played in the life of the governess became a key component of the governessorial mystique. Bringing together a diverse sampling of fictional and nonfictional accounts of the governess's relationship to authorship (and paying particular attention to the novels and letters of Charlotte and Anne Brontë, our best-known and most culturally resonant governesses-turned-authoresses), I outline the ways in which the governess, both as an iconic figure and as a real, writing woman, influenced the formal, stylistic, and thematic development of nineteenth-century women's literature.



The specter of the ill-fated, ill-treated governess loomed large for the Victorians—larger, really, than it statistically should have. As Kathryn Hughes explains in her comprehensive history of the profession,

During the 1840s and 50s one of the favourite subjects for a whole range of middle-brow periodicals was the governess' 'plight', which was described as a mixture of low pay, poor working conditions and patchy preparation. Yet the overwhelming majority of readers neither worked as governesses, nor employed one to teach its children. Nonetheless, what these articles do illuminate is the way in which the tensions which the governess seemed to embody... touched a raw nerve with a whole swathe of middle-class Britain. The figure of the governess took on a significance to her contemporaries out of all proportion to her actual numbers.⁴

The reason that the *Governess Question* reached its height of public interest in the middle of the nineteenth century has been attributed to a conflation of several disparate historical

⁴ Kathryn Hughes, *The Victorian Governess* (London: Hambledon Press, 1993), p. xiii.

factors: the rise of a newly monied middle class that wanted to prove its “leisured” status by exempting the ladies of its households from all domestic labor, including the education of its children; a sudden surplus of unmarried women resulting from an increase in imperial and import ventures that took eligible bachelors out to sea; the emergence of ever more periodicals—and, in particular, women’s periodicals—that had a vested interest in sensationalizing the social issues of the day. As much, then, as this periodical discourse purported to sympathize with the governess’s arduous and unfair lot in life, it also repeatedly raised concerns about the social, sexual, and financial threats posed by the resident governess.

These threats have been described and discussed by a number of recent critics, most of whom use M. Jeanne Peterson’s foundational concept of “status incongruence” to synopsize the anxieties at play: the governess was threatening because her station in life was complicated, malleable, and unclear.⁵ On one hand, she represented that which was anathema to the British middle classes—the possibility of downward social mobility. She had to be a woman of a high enough caste to qualify as a well-bred role model for the children in her charge, but she had to be poor enough to need to work for a living. More often than not, she was put in this paradoxical position as a result of her father’s death or economic downfall, and so she intrinsically reminded those around her of the precariousness of their own financial speculations. At the same time, however, she also represented the threat of *too much* upward social mobility, which might occur in one of two ways. The first way is explicitly decried in Elizabeth Rigby’s famous *Quarterly Review* essay from 1848, an essay that starts off as a book review of *Vanity Fair* and *Jane Eyre* but slips into a polemical indictment

⁵ See M. Jeanne Peterson, “The Victorian Governess: Status Incongruence in Family and Society,” *Victorian Studies*, 14 (1970), 7. Examples of other studies that employ a discourse of “status incongruence” include Marion Amies, “The Victorian Governess and Colonial Ideals of Womanhood,” *Victorian Studies*, 31 (1998), 537–65; *The Governess: An Anthology*, ed. Trev Broughton and Ruth Symes (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997); Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988); and Dara Rossman Regaignon, “Instructive Sufficiency: Re-Reading the Governess through *Agnes Grey*,” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 29 (2001), 85–108.

of the treatment of real-life governesses by its end. One of the problems facing “proper” governesses, according to Rigby, is that “farmers and tradespeople are now educating their daughters for governesses as a mode of advancing them a step in life, and thus a number of underbred young women have crept into the profession who have brought down the value of salaries and interfered with the rights of those whose birth and misfortunes leave them no other refuge.”⁶ The second way in which a governess might attempt to raise her social status, meanwhile, is represented in both of the novels that Rigby is reviewing—the “Reader, I married him” scenario,⁷ most notoriously depicted in the crafty sexual advances of Thackeray’s social-climbing anti-heroine, Becky Sharp. As Mary Poovey has argued, such fictionalized portrayals exacerbated “the mid-Victorian fear that the governess could not protect middle-class values because she could not be trusted to regulate her own sexuality” (*Uneven Developments*, p. 131). But the reality, we know, was that this marriage plot was far more common in literature than in life; as a general rule, the governess was looked upon as a subordinate rather than as a prospective partner by the eligible bachelors of the family by whom she was employed, and found herself indefinitely banished to the liminal space of spinsterhood.

While a heteronormative reading of such banishment would necessarily view it in a tragic light (as, indeed, the majority of nineteenth-century periodicals bemoaning the plight of the governess implicitly did), that is certainly not the only way to read the experience of spinsterhood, particularly during the early Victorian era.⁸ Until the passing of the Married Woman’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, England’s common law doctrine of coverture meant that women forfeited legal ownership of all their property and financial holdings the moment that they said “I do.” In this way, the supposedly pitiable spinster

⁶ Elizabeth Rigby, “Vanity Fair—and *Jane Eyre*,” *Quarterly Review*, 84 (1848), 180.

⁷ See Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, 3d ed., ed. Richard J. Dunn (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2001), p. 382. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

⁸ For a detailed analysis of the experience of spinsterhood for early Victorian women, see Bridget Hill, *Women Alone: Spinsters in England, 1660–1850* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2001).

had a considerable leg up on her successfully betrothed female counterparts, and constituted a noxious threat to the gendered status quo. The governess, as a spinster who left her patriarchal household and actually worked for a living, served, therefore, as an even more menacing symbol of unencumbered femininity. According to popular perception, of course, this action of moving away from home in search of gainful employment was only ever pursued as a final resort; governessing was something one *had* to do, never something one *wanted* to do. It is my contention, however, that necessity and desire were not quite such mutually exclusive categories. When we look at the language of the way real women talked about their entry into the profession in their letters, journals, and memoirs, we find, in fact, a knotty combination of anxiety and excitement, of trepidation and anticipation, of acquiescence and moxie.

Nelly Weeton, for example, an early-nineteenth-century middle-class woman who opted to leave a life of relative leisure in order to earn some extra income as a governess, outlines the state of her spirits in a journal just before venturing forth: "I set out in hope; Heaven grant I may not be disappointed! As it is very probable I may, I shall inform no one of my real motive for leaving such a comfortable home. When they know what kind of a situation I am engaged in, the world will perhaps stare and wonder—Let them."⁹ Similarly, in an 1892 autobiography penned by Mary Smith, "Schoolmistress and Nonconformist," we are given Smith's incentive for applying to become a governess; having been "blamed unjustly" for some small misdeed by the family friends with whom she was staying, Smith explains: "This event had roused me to action; for I was proud, and though poor, of a very independent spirit. So I cried and prayed all the night through, but rose in the morning . . . with a full determination on action. . . . I wrote out an advertisement for a preparatory governess' situation."¹⁰ For some governesses, the beginning of employment also meant the beginning

⁹ [Nelly Weeton], *Miss Weeton's Journal of a Governess, Volume I, 1807–1811*, ed. J. J. Bagley (New York: August M. Kelley Publishers, 1969), p. 204.

¹⁰ Mary Smith, *The Autobiography of Mary Smith, Schoolmistress and Nonconformist, A Fragment of a Life* (London: Bemrose & Sons, 1892), pp. 123–24.

of new, uncharted adventures abroad, with all the additional attendant emotions that such a change was prone to induce. The most well-known transnational governess is Anna Leonowens (of *The King and I* fame), who writes in the preface to her memoirs of the surprising eagerness with which she finds herself anticipating governessorial life: "At first it was with much reluctance that I consented to entertain the project; but strange as it may seem, the more I reflected upon it the more feasible it appeared, until at length I began to look forward, even with a glow of enthusiasm, toward the new and untried field I was about to enter."¹¹

But the two women whose governing experiences have played the most conspicuous and influential part in England's literary history are, without question, the Brontë sisters, Charlotte and Anne. (Emily, who worked as a schoolteacher when she was twenty, suffered so much in her post that she quit after just six months and was never employed outside the home again.) Both Charlotte and Anne began their resident governing careers in the spring of 1839, though Anne persevered in the occupation for much longer—six years compared to Charlotte's scattershot two. Neither one can be said to have remotely "liked" the work, however. In one of Anne's only surviving diary entries, written the month after she resigned from her final position as a governess in 1845, she reflects on a journal entry she had written four years prior: "Yet I was then at Thorp Green and now I am only just escaped from it—I was wishing to leave it then and if I had known that I had four years longer to stay how wretched I should have been."¹² Charlotte was far blunter and more vocal about her distaste for the vocation; in a series of letters written to her best friend, Ellen Nussey, throughout her period of service, we hear Charlotte complaining about "how hard a governess's work is to [her]," "how utterly averse [her] whole mind and nature are to the employment," how "miserable" she is when "dwell[ing] on the

¹¹ Anna Harriette Leonowens, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), p. 8.

¹² Anne Brontë, diary entry for 31 July 1845; quoted in Juliet Barker, *The Brontës: A Life in Letters* (New York: Overlook Press, 1998), p. 132.

necessity of spending [her] life as a Governess,” and so forth.¹³ Anne confesses to her diary at the conclusion of her career that being a governess has exposed her to “some very unpleasant and undreamt of experience[s] of human nature” (quoted in Barker, *The Brontës*, p. 132); Charlotte carps to Emily just a month into hers: “I used to think I should like to be in the stir of grand folks’ society but I have had enough of it—it is dreary work to look on and listen” (*Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, I, 191). And yet, nestled within and alongside the Brontës’ written complaints and lamentations lie some subtle hints about the unexpected connection between the work that they detested doing and the work that they fervently wished to do.

In the first place, we know that both sisters used the “unpleasant and undreamt of experience[s] of human nature” that they were forced to “look on and listen” to as direct fodder for their literary enterprises. *Agnes Grey* is considered to be the most overtly autobiographical of any of the Brontës’ novels, particularly when it comes to detailing Agnes’s relationship to her unruly and unsympathetic charges; indeed, James R. Simmons, Jr., has gone so far as to aver that if Anne had had “more pleasant” experiences working as a governess, “she might never have been a novelist at all.”¹⁴ And while Jane Eyre undoubtedly finds herself in a more agreeable (because more exciting) governing situation than Charlotte Brontë ever did, it is not difficult to connect the dots between Charlotte’s description of the first family for whom she worked and the monstrous step-family that she would come to assign young Jane; in a letter to Emily written during her stay with the Sidgwick of Stonegappe, Charlotte grouches: “The children are constantly with me, and more riotous, perverse, unmanageable cubs never grew. As for correcting them, I soon quickly found that was entirely out of the question: they are to do as they like. A

¹³ Charlotte Brontë, letter to Ellen Nussey, 3 March 1841, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë with a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends*, ed. Margaret Smith, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995–2004), I, 246; Charlotte Brontë, letter to Ellen Nussey, 24 January 1840, in *Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, I, 210.

¹⁴ James R. Simmons, Jr., “Class, Matriarchy, and Power: Contextualizing the Governess in *Agnes Grey*,” in *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë*, ed. Julie Nash and Barbara A. Suess (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 26–27.

complaint to Mrs. Sidgwick brings only black looks upon oneself, and unjust, partial excuses to screen the children" (*Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, I, 190–91). The fact that the Sidgwick household sounds so much more like the Reed household than the Rochester household contributes to our sense that Jane Eyre is a full-fledged "governess novel" even though Jane only spends about a third of the narrative employed in that role. As Susan Fraiman points out, Jane's problematic social standing at Gateshead foreshadows the "status incongruence" that she will come to experience while working at Thornfield Hall: "At Gateshead and Thornfield both, she is neither family nor servant, but floating uncomfortably between."¹⁵ Jane is, in other words, treated like a governess from the moment we meet her.

There is, of course, nothing too remarkable about basing one's fictional creations on one's personal experiences. Yet I would argue that women working as governesses were placed in a particularly optimal position to pursue this kind of life writing. Many Victorian articles and advice manuals described the model governess in terms of her willingness to stay on the periphery; to serve as an impartial observer rather than an active participant; to accept the fact that she would only ever be an outsider looking in. In one such manual from 1847, for instance, the governess is forewarned that, should she be permitted "to be present at an evening party, or to occupy the place of tea-maker," she must not expect to be introduced to the guests or to join in the festivities; at most, she might be "noticed by a formal bow," but that is all.¹⁶ Even more to the point is a manual from 1882 in which the author pronounces the ideal governess to be one who "recognizes her exact place in the home circle, and keeps it. . . . If she is much with the family her ready tact enables her to perceive in a moment when the presence of one not exactly *of it* may be intrusive and disagreeable, and she glides away with some smiling excuse."¹⁷ Living her life on the outskirts of the action in this way meant that the governess was forced into what might be called, in

¹⁵ Susan Fraiman, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and The Novel of Development* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993), p. 97.

¹⁶ [Mary Maurice], *Mothers and Governesses* (London: John W. Parker, 1847), p. 56.

¹⁷ Laura Valentine, *The Amenities of Home* (London: F. Warne & Co., 1882), p. 134.

narratological terms, an “observer narrator” (as opposed to a “narrator agent”) type of existence¹⁸—not a particularly gratifying existence, perhaps, but one that was inherently conducive to storytelling.

From an employer’s perspective, meanwhile, this status meant that the governess possessed a uniquely threatening observational power; as one anonymous contributor to *Fraser’s Magazine* ominously described in 1844, “If she is indiscreet, she writes to her family about her pupils, and is taught hereafter by bitter experience the fruits of incaution; some, perhaps, go on all their lives betraying a holy trust.”¹⁹ The most dangerous word in this sentence, it should be noted, is the word “writes,” gesturing as it does to the additional risks involved in being monitored by a patently *literate* outsider. For even though all domestic servants were able to see and hear the intimate details of their employers’ lives, it was the governess, with her more substantive educational background, who was better equipped and more socially habituated to writing down her thoughts, observations, and opinions of those around her. “Let her relax her self-restraint for one moment,” the writer of the *Fraser’s Magazine* article continues, “and who shall say what mischief and misery might ensue to all from one heedless expression of hers?” (“Hints,” p. 574).

Two notable pre-Brontëan examples of governesses who “relaxed” their “self-restraint” in this way and used their employers’ lives as literary source material are Mary Wollstonecraft and Anna Jameson. Wollstonecraft began her first novel, *Mary, a Fiction* (1788), while working for the wealthy Kingsborough family in Ireland and clearly modeled the character of Mary’s mother on the “haughty and disagreeable” mistress of the Kingsborough household (“Spite of my vexations,” she announced in a letter to a friend just after leaving her governess position in 1787, “I have lately written, a fiction which I intend to give to the world”—a fiction which, she acknowledged, was largely “drawn

¹⁸ I draw these terms from James Phelan, *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2005).

¹⁹ [Anon.], “Hints on the Modern Governess System,” *Fraser’s Magazine*, 30 (1844), 574.

from Nature”).²⁰ Jameson, meanwhile, traveled to Italy with the Rowles family in 1822 in the role of governess and described to her loved ones back home the extent and ultimate objective of her daily writing practices:

I think I shall be able to amuse you all, dear girls and Mamma and Papa, with some of my *scribbles*. I have always a notebook and a journal; in the first I merely put down dates and occupations of the day; the other, which is secured by lock and key contains all my remarks on the characters, scenes and incidents I meet with and this I never trust out of my hands to any human being—no one has ever looked into it. I have filled one note book and half another and have quite filled two thick journals, securely locked up, and have just bought a third, so I am not idle. I have collected material which, if I live and Heaven grants me health and that peace to which I have long been a stranger, I will turn to good account.²¹

Several years later, Jameson did turn this material to good account, loosely basing her first foray into fiction, *The Diary of an Ennuyée* (1826), on the “characters, scenes, and incidents” that she had detailed in her journals. (The book caused something of a controversy, not because it was too honest for the public’s taste but rather because it was too dishonest: the publisher promoted it as a “real,” posthumous diary of a young woman who had died of a broken heart, and so audiences were a bit put off when they discovered its author to be alive and well and living in London.) Though neither Wollstonecraft’s nor Jameson’s fictionalized avatars of themselves are employed as governesses, we can see in both of their stories the attention to the details of daily living and the sense of alienation from the world around them that would come to be hallmarks of the governess novel genre that was about to catapult onto the literary scene. Indeed, as Janet Todd remarks in her introduction to *Mary*, the principal draw of the text today is that it shows us

²⁰ Mary Wollstonecraft, letter to Reverend Henry Dyson Gabell, 13 September 1787, in *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2003), p. 136.

²¹ Anna Jameson, letter to Camilla Murphy, Easter 1822, in *Anna Jameson: Letters and Friendships (1812–1860)*, ed. Mrs. Steuart Erskine (London: T. Fisher Unwin, Ltd., 1915), p. 65.

“an early effort at the creation of an alienated intellectual woman, the beginning of a line that would include the more substantial heroines of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, women who tried to make their own way in the world and who expressed a complex misery at their situation and at the feminine images available to them.”²²

It was about a decade after the release of Jameson’s *Diary* that the governess novel came into its own as a distinct (and exceedingly popular) genre, ushered in by such titles as Mary Martha Sherwood’s *Caroline Mordaunt, or, The Governess* (1835), Julia Buckley’s *Emily, the Governess* (1836), Miss Ross’s *The Governess; or, Politics in Private Life* (1836), and Marguerite Blessington’s *The Governess* (1839). What distinguished this crop of novels from its predecessors, thematically, was a heightened focus on the hostile working conditions and uncomfortable social position of its female protagonists; the trend in early nineteenth-century governess storytelling had been, as Cecilia Wadsö Lecaros describes it, to “have a clearly didactic purpose and present highly appreciated teachers” (*Victorian Governess Novel*, p. 32). But along with this new thematic focus came several important developments in terms of form and style. Though not all of the women who wrote governess novels had actually worked as resident governesses,²³ most of them were sensitive enough to the realities of governessorial life to know to highlight the emotionally fraught “observer narrator” nature of their protagonist’s existence, and to make that a key aspect of their narratorial schema. In works like Sherwood’s *Caroline Mordaunt*, Dinah Mulock Craik’s *Bread Upon the Waters: A Governess’s Life* (1852), E. W.’s *Ellen Manners* (1875), and the Brontës’ *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre*, marginalized governesses serve as first-person narrators who relate (and also cast judgment on) the strange

²² Janet Todd, “Introduction” to Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary, Maria and Mary Shelley, Matilda*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. x.

²³ Examples of authors who appear to have worked as resident governesses in real life include Rachel M’Crindell, who wrote *The English Governess: A Tale of Real Life* (1844), and the unidentified writer of *Ellen Manners; or, the Recollections of a Governess* (1875) who went by the initials E. W. There were also several governess novel authors who had worked as schoolteachers, private tutors, or ran their own boarding schools, including Barbara Hofland, Elizabeth Sewell, and Mary Martha Sherwood (see Wadsö Lecaros, *Victorian Governess Novel*, pp. 41–42).

and/or supercilious behaviors of the families they work for, while in works like Buckley's *Emily, the Governess*, Blessington's *The Governess*, Rachel M'Crindell's *The English Governess: A Tale of Real Life* (1844), and Harriet Martineau's "The Old Governess" (1850), the story is technically told by an omniscient narrator but is filtered almost entirely through the mind of its marginalized governess protagonist. Fortified with such generic qualities as piousness, perspicacity, and sobriety, and positioned in a more all-seeing (because more detached) space within the narrative, the heroines of governess novels are able to provide us with a particularly nuanced delineation of the dress, deportment, and daily habits of the characters surrounding them. They provide us, that is, with the very material that would come to characterize the Victorian realist novel.

This is not to say that governess heroines are only, or even primarily, looking outward. Along with the governess novel's keener interest in the detailed minutiae of daily life, the genre also places a greater emphasis on the interior lives of the outsiders who are doing the observing. Certainly if we take *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre* as our foremost examples, we can see how Agnes and Jane are simultaneously the most peripheral and the most focal characters of their respective stories. They are the kinds of characters we are used to ignoring, or at least misunderstanding; to return to the reference with which I began this essay, they are the Jane Fairfaxes, rather than the Emma Woodhouses, of the world. But within the new value system of the governess novel (and of the many other Victorian novels that follow in the governess novel's thematic and aesthetic footsteps), it is the quieter, steadier, more internalized style of a Jane or an Agnes that registers as more appealing, sympathetic, and profound. As much, then, as the work of governessing may have been creatively inspiring to its practitioners because of the access it gave them to the outside world (or, more accurately, to the inside world of families that were not their own), it also inspired them to turn inward and cultivate a stronger sense of self-reflectivity. And the primary way that they were able to do this, not surprisingly, was through the activity of writing.

Writing had, of course, been an indispensable tool for all "genteel" women from roughly the seventeenth century onward;

as Ruth Perry has noted, such women were “excluded from [public] centers of social exchange” and, as a result, “generally stayed at home writing letters which were at once a way of being involved with the world while keeping it at a respectable arm’s length.”²⁴ But I would argue that the structure and tenor of the governess’s work life imbued her writing efforts with a distinctive brand of urgency. Because she was excluded from both public *and* private forms of social exchange—because, in Charlotte Brontë’s words, she was “not considered as a living and rational being except as connected with the wearisome duties she has to fulfil” (*Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, I, 191)—writing became all the more vital to her emotional and cerebral survival. We can catch glimpses of this urgency throughout Charlotte’s governessorial correspondence, as she repeatedly intimates to her friends and family the critical importance of eking out some private writing time in the midst of her grossly overworked existence: e.g., “You must excuse a very short answer to your last most welcome letter—for my time is entirely occupied”; “It is 12 o’clock at night but I must just write you a word before I go to-bed”; and, most brazenly of all, “I am about to employ part of a Sunday evening in answering your last letter—You will perhaps think this hardly right and yet I do not feel that I am doing wrong—Sunday evening is almost my only time of leisure, no one would blame me if I were to spend this spare hour in a pleasant chat with a friend, is it worse to spend it in writing a friendly letter?”²⁵ In these lines and others like them, Charlotte counterposes the work of being a governess to the activity of writing; if only she did not have to teach so much, she would not have to forego such valuable undertakings as a good night’s sleep and her observation of the Sabbath to do the writing that “must” be done. But the lines also imply an intrinsic link between governessing and writing—because she has no nearby friends with whom to spend an hour having “a pleasant chat,” she is forced to sublimate her social and discursive inclinations through her use of pen and paper.

²⁴ Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel* (New York: AMS Press, 1980), p. 69.

²⁵ Charlotte Brontë, letter to Ellen Nussey, 21 March 1841, in *Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, I, 248; letter to Ellen Nussey, 1 April 1841, in *Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, I, 249; letter to Henry Nussey, 9 May 1841, in *Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, I, 255.

As much as we hear about Charlotte's obsession with letter writing during these governess years, what is glaringly absent is any mention of her desire to write fiction. The reason for this absence, we gather, is that Charlotte only felt comfortable discussing her literary aspirations with her most radical and intellectual school-friend, Mary Taylor, who unfortunately did not share Ellen Nussey's careful letter-preservation habits. We do, however, hear Charlotte complaining strongly and bitterly about her teaching duties getting in the way of her imaginative life in what is commonly referred to as her "Roe Head Journal," a collection of six fragments of personal writing that she scribbled down on scraps of paper while working as an instructor at Roe Head School in 1836 and 1837. In one particularly visceral enunciation of this conflict of interests, for instance, she describes what went through her mind one summer morning during a lull in her tutoring:

I felt as if I could have written gloriously. I longed to write. The spirit of all Verdopolis, of all the mountainous North, of all the woodland West, of all the river-watered East came crowding into my mind. If I had time to indulge it, I felt that the vague sensations of that moment would have settled down into some narrative better at least than anything I ever produced before. But just then a dolt came up with a lesson. I thought I should have vomited.²⁶

Here, once again, we witness the paradox of Charlotte blaming teaching for impeding her writing *in written form*: when she is finally freed from the "wretched bondage" of her workday and is able to sit down to write, what she chooses to write first is a personal account of her life struggles (and, in particular, her struggles with an overactive imagination) rather than a sensational account of the fictitious Verdopolis. The pain of reality is, in other words, becoming more interesting to her, as a writer, than the whimsy of pure fantasy.

This move away from the genre of fantasy and into the genre of realism would, in time, play a major role in Charlotte's

²⁶ Charlotte Brontë, journal entry for 14 October 1836, in "Charlotte Brontë at Roe Head," quoted in *Jane Eyre*, p. 404.

ability to become a successful, professional author. (When she first began to write fiction that she hoped to get published, as she explained to G. H. Lewes in a letter of 6 November 1847, she intentionally “restrained imagination, eschewed romance, repressed excitement, . . . and sought to produce something which should be soft, grave and true” [*Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, I, 559].) But if, as I am arguing, the unhappiness that Charlotte experienced while working as a governess helped to bring about this essential shift in her writing style, it also served to foster and bolster the deeper, darker form of imaginative power that characterized her published works as well. She describes how this occurs in both her Roe Head Journal and in her fictionalized rendition of governess life. For *Jane Eyre*, relief from the “restlessness” that governessing effects in her soul is achieved by pacing back and forth along the third floor of Thornfield Hall: “safe in the silence and solitude of the spot, and allow[ing] my mind’s eye to dwell on whatever bright visions rose before it . . . to open my inward ear to a tale that was never ended—a tale my imagination created, and narrated continuously; quickened with all of incident, life, fire, feeling, that I desired and had not in my actual existence” (*Jane Eyre*, p. 93). For Charlotte, the same kind of relief is achieved by lying down on a spare bed at Roe Head, where she can experience “the luxury of twilight and solitude” and allow her creative mind to wander: “The toil of the day, succeeded by this moment of divine leisure, had acted on me like opium and was coiling about me a disturbed but fascinating spell, such as I never felt before. What I imagined grew morbidly vivid. I remember I quite seemed to see, with my bodily eyes, a lady standing in the hall of a gentleman’s house, as if waiting for someone” (“Charlotte Brontë at Roe Head,” 14 October 1836, quoted in *Jane Eyre*, p. 405). According to both of these accounts, the laborious tedium of the educator’s work life paradoxically functions as a hypnotic, hallucinatory gateway to the imaginative world. Loneliness begets inventiveness; boredom begets creativity.

Another important point to be gleaned from these passages is that Charlotte Brontë’s sense of isolation while inhabiting her employers’ households was, in fact, something that she

actively cultivated herself. Contrary to the perceived notion that all governesses must suffer bitterly from being ostracized and left to their own devices, Charlotte made it abundantly clear that she preferred spending her leisure time on her own to spending it in the supposedly desirable company of the people she worked for. This preference is most explicitly evinced in a letter that Charlotte wrote to her publisher W. S. Williams on 31 July 1848; responding hesitantly to his invitation to come spend some time in “London Society” now that she was a celebrated author, Charlotte explained: “The only glimpses of society I have ever had, were obtained in my vocation of governess—and some of the most miserable moments I can recall, were passed in drawing-rooms full of strange faces. . . . when I could endure the sense of exhaustion and solitude no longer, I used to steal off, too glad to find any corner where I could really be alone” (*Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, II, 95). For a woman of Charlotte Brontë’s fiercely reserved temperament, then, seclusion served as a privilege rather than a punishment, a source of refuge rather than a source of pain. And writing, as a fundamentally hermitic act, contributed all the more to the pleasure she took in fugitivism: “I am writing a letter to you with pencil,” she confessed to Ellen in a 30 June 1839 letter, “because I cannot just now procure ink without going into the [Sidgwick’s] drawing-room—where I do not wish to go” (*Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, I, 193).

Similar descriptions of pleasure being derived from solitary, writerly pursuits can be found in the letters and diaries of many lesser-known governesses as well. Regency-era governess Agnes Porter, for example, relates in her journal: “When [my charges] went out a-walking with their maids, I . . . wrote to amuse my self; I felt the pleasure of existence in a peculiar manner, and seemed to derive amusement from resources of my own with extreme satisfaction.”²⁷ Along much the same lines, Nelly Weeton describes the reason that she writes so much—“it has been a great amusement during many a solitary hour when I had no other employ” (*Miss Weeton’s Journal*, p. xix)—and Mary Smith tells the story of how she first began

²⁷ Agnes Porter, *A Governess in the Age of Jane Austen: The Journals and Letters of Agnes Porter*, ed. Joanna Martin (London: Hambledon Press, 1998), p. 228.

to write poetry in her head while alone and straightening up the nursery: "Busy with my hands, I found . . . that by concentrating the mind on some single subject, I could throw my thoughts into verse as an exercise. And by doing this, I could relieve myself of the feeling that, do what I could, I was living a sad, monotonous, profitless life, so far as anything I specially desired or wished for was concerned" (*Autobiography of Mary Smith*, pp. 139–40). It is significant to note, too, that in each of these cases the governess went on to make her personal writing at least somewhat public: Agnes Porter sent her verses to her poetry-writing friend Mr. Upcher to prove to him that she "had a sufficient touch of the muse to enjoy his verses with a better relish" (*A Governess in the Age of Jane Austen*, p. 229); Nelly Weeton transcribed and kept copies of all her letters and writings in the hopes that they might someday be rescued from "a musty shelf" and be published (as indeed, in 1936, they were); and Mary Smith was bold enough to send her poems directly to Whitridge's *Miscellany*, where they found their way quite promptly into print. The pleasure of private writing was, for these women, always subtly connected to a desire for more public authorship.

An interesting counterexample to all of this solitary writing can be found in the memoirs of Elizabeth Ham, a governess who was actively encouraged and assisted in her writing efforts by her employer, the published poet and translator Sir Charles Elton. As honored as she was, at first, to have aroused a professional writer's interest in her poetry, Ham soon began to find his input (and his society) a bit irksome:

I had been working hard all the time we had been in Bath at my MS from tea time till far into the night. I was still at it, and if I gave Mr. E. a sheet to look at, he would come to the Dining room, where I sat after tea, to criticise and talk it over. I now see that this was not good in any way. In the first place, though the plan of the poem might have been improved by the new cast, the execution could neither be so free or original, not so much my own; and in the next, Mr. E. often sat so long as to bring Mrs. E. down to see what was become of him.²⁸

²⁸ Elizabeth Ham, *Elizabeth Ham, by herself, 1783–1820*, ed. Eric Gillett (London: Faber & Faber, 1945), p. 230.

Here, again, the governess expresses sentiments that seem to gainsay her contemporaries' assessment of her situation. When she spends her evenings alone, she is able to work hard and be creatively productive. But when the "gift" of social contact is charitably bestowed upon her, she finds that her writing can no longer be free, original, or truly her own. In the end, much as Elizabeth Ham may have tried to reflect on this gift with a tone of humble gratitude, her regret and even bitterness cannot help but seep occasionally through: "I had had, hitherto, very little literary intercourse with anyone, and it cannot be much wondered at that I submitted implicitly to the successful translator of *Hesiod* and *Specimens of the Classic Poets*, and thus lost what little originality my poor 'Elgiva' had" (*Elizabeth Ham, by herself*, p. 225).

Although we do not have any of Anne Brontë's letters from the years in which she was employed as a governess (sadly, indeed, only five of Anne's letters have survived in total), the two diary entries of hers that we do have both hint at the valued role that writing played in her governessorial life as well. In the first entry, composed in July 1841 while working for the Robinson family, she writes: "My pupils are gone to bed and I am hastening to finish this before I follow them"; a little later, she also mentions: "I am now engaged in writing the fourth volume of Solala Vernon's Life" (quoted in Barker, *The Brontës*, p. 97). In the second entry, composed in July 1845 when she had "only just escaped" her stint with the Robinsons, she discusses the fact that she has recently "begun the third volume of passages in the life of an Individual," a work that she "wish[es]" she "had finished" before returning home (Anne Brontë, quoted in Barker, *The Brontës*, p. 133). We also have further evidence of Anne's on-the-job literary efforts in the form of the original manuscripts of the verses she would come to publish in the 1846 collection, *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell*. On several of these manuscripts, including "Lines Written at Thorp Green" (whose title was changed to "Appeal" in the collection, presumably for anonymity purposes), "A Fragment" (which was reworked and given the title "Self-Congratulation" for the collection), and "Lines Composed in a Wood on a Windy Day," Anne made note of the specific dates that the poems were

written—dates that clearly fall within the range of her residency as a governess.

And then, of course, we have the “evidence” of *Agnes Grey*, a novel in which the eponymous heroine explicitly lays out for us the correlation between the emotional turmoil of governessing and the emotional release of imaginative writing. About three-quarters of the way through the narrative, Agnes confesses to us that whenever her work life has been too much for her, she has been able to tap into a “secret source of consolation” by writing poetry:

When we are harassed by sorrows or anxieties, or long oppressed by any powerful feelings which we must keep to ourselves, for which we can obtain and seek no sympathy from any living creature, and which yet we cannot, or will not wholly crush, we often naturally seek relief in poetry—and often find it too—whether in the effusions of others, which seem to harmonize with our existing case, or in our own attempts to give utterance to those thoughts and feelings in strains less musical, perchance, but more appropriate, and therefore more penetrating and sympathetic, and, for the time, more soothing, or more powerful to rouse and to unburden the oppressed and swollen heart.²⁹

Though this passage may appear at first glance to support the predominant Victorian (and present-day) view of the governess as a pitifully “harassed” and “oppressed” figure, what it more effectively articulates, to my mind, are the subtle ways in which a governess might assert herself in the face of such oppression. Significantly, the idea of power comes up twice in the course of this articulation: once as Agnes describes the brute force of her own emotions, once as she describes the “rousing” and “unburdening” potency of putting her words to paper. In the move from “cannot” to “will not,” from “seeking” to “finding,” from a passive appreciation of the “effusions of others” to an active rendering of her own “thoughts and feelings,” Agnes takes charge of her affective life and transforms her angst into authorial autonomy.

²⁹ Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey*, ed. Hilda Marsden and Robert Inglesfield (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 153–54. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

Agnes does not only write poems, however. In the final paragraphs of the novel, it is revealed to us that she is also a meticulous journal-keeper, and that the “true history” we have been reading all along has largely been drawn from those journals: “Here I pause. My diary, from which I compiled these pages, goes but little farther” (*Agnes Grey*, p. 207). It is telling that this abrupt conclusion of the story occurs just after her romantic relationship with Mr. Weston has been verbally, if underwhelmingly, consummated (“You love me then?” he asks; “Yes,” without elaboration, she returns [p. 207]). While it is certainly commonplace for narratives to come to an end once the conflict of a courtship plot has been resolved, what Agnes’s comment highlights for us is that the story stops here because *her writing* stops here; as soon as she leaves the “sorrows” and “anxieties” of her teaching life behind her—its lovelessness, its peripherality, its daily monotony—she no longer feels the need to “seek relief in poetry” or journaling or anything else. The implication, yet again, is that working as a governess stimulates and facilitates acts of personal and creative writing. But there is also another, subtler implication of this statement as well: the implication that Agnes is taking the time, in the midst of her wifely and maternal duties, to “compile” the “pages” of her diary for us. Agnes Grey (or, more accurately, Agnes Weston) wants to be—and succeeds in becoming—a published author.

The fact of Agnes’s authorship has, in fact, been emphasized for us since the very outset of the novel, opening as it does with her rationale for publishing the story of her life:

All true histories contain instruction; though, in some, the treasure may be hard to find, and when found, so trivial in quantity that the dry, shrivelled kernel scarcely compensates for the trouble of cracking the nut. Whether this be the case with my history or not, I am hardly competent to judge; I sometimes think it might prove useful to some, and entertaining to others, but the world may judge for itself: shielded by my own obscurity, and by the lapse of years, and a few fictitious names, I do not fear to venture, and will candidly lay before the public what I would not disclose to the most intimate friend. (*Agnes Grey*, p. 3)

In her recent essay on the deployment of shame in *Agnes Grey*, Katherine Hallemeier notes the paradoxical confluence of “self-effacement” and “self-interest” that characterize this opening paragraph (as well as Agnes’s persona as a whole), and credits Anne Brontë with developing a uniquely subversive, “dissembling” style of storytelling.³⁰ While I agree that *Agnes Grey* negotiates the space between candor and artfulness in particularly nuanced ways, I also think it is important to acknowledge that the opening of the novel is clearly playing off of what was, by 1847, an established narrative convention, utilized by governesses both real and imagined to assure the audience that they were the good, faithful, humble women society demanded them to be while also drawing attention to the fact that *they* were the writers of the thoughts and ideas to follow.³¹ Indeed, the simultaneously self-deprecating and self-promoting air with which Agnes lays her story down before her reader’s eyes bears a significant resemblance to the quiet but assertive air with which Anne Brontë first presented her writing for external perusal, at least according to Charlotte’s well-known account of it in her *Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell* (1850). After discovering Emily’s private hoard of “wild, melancholy, and elevating” verses and working hard to “persuade her that such poems merited publication,” Charlotte tells us, a secondary artistic discovery was swiftly but unassumingly thrust upon her: “Meantime, my younger sister quietly produced some of her own compositions, intimating that since Emily’s had given me pleasure, I might like to look at hers.”³²

³⁰ See Katherine Hallemeier, “Anne Brontë’s Shameful *Agnes Grey*,” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 41 (2013), 258–59.

³¹ A representative example of this kind of introductory apologia can, for instance, be found in Jane Smith’s preface to her volume of “Admonitory Epistles”: “It is with feelings of the deepest anxiety, the Author presumes to present this little Work to the Public. It was originally intended only for her own private pupils; but at the request of numerous friends, she has ventured to send it forth into the world. . . . The Author, having stated her motive for appearing before the public, has now only to solicit from the candid reader, (with trembling diffidence), *that* indulgence, which she humbly hopes will not be denied” (Smith, *Admonitory Epistles from a Governess to her Late Pupils* [Birmingham: Richard Peart, 1824], p. v).

³² Charlotte Brontë, *Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell*, in Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights: The 1847 Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism*, 4th ed., ed. Richard J. Dunn (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2003), p. 308.

But if Agnes Grey and Anne Brontë both showed a certain amount of mettle in their efforts to get their writing seen and read by others, Jane Eyre and Charlotte Brontë pushed the boundaries of Victorian acceptability in their struggles to express the innermost feelings of their souls. Charlotte, on one hand, was audacious enough at the age of twenty (in the midst of the “wretched bondage” of her instructorship at Roe Head School) to send samples of her writing to poet laureate Robert Southey, asking him if he thought they were good enough to be published. His answer, famously, was that it did not really matter if they were good enough or not, since “Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life: & it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment & a recreation.”³³ Charlotte’s response two weeks later to Southey’s discouragement was to thank him profusely for his “kind & wise advice” (*Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, I, 168)—and then to live her life in complete opposition to that advice by actively pursuing a professional writing career for both herself and her sisters. One could, in fact, almost say that her true reply to Southey’s letter is found in one of the most impassioned and overtly feminist passages of *Jane Eyre*. Having just confessed that she allows her “mind’s eye” to indulge in silent storytelling on the third floor of Thornfield Hall whenever the tranquil dullness of her life as a governess gets to be too much for her, Jane explains to the “many” readers who, she assumes, will “blame” her for indulging in such a habit:

It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too

³³ Robert Southey, letter to Charlotte Brontë, 12 March 1837, quoted in *Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, I, 166–67.

absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (*Jane Eyre*, p. 93)

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf points to precisely this passage to describe what is “wrong” with Charlotte Brontë’s writing: it is too angry, too personal, too blatantly bellicose.³⁴ Ironically, however, this is the passage that bears the most in common with Woolf’s own rhetorical argument, especially if we read it as Jane’s (or, really, Charlotte’s) avowal of her desire to break out of the confines of tedious domesticity and become a working, thinking *writer*.

For even though *Jane Eyre* does not speak as explicitly about her urge to write as does *Agnes Grey*, Sharon Marcus has mapped out the ways in which the few times that we do see Jane writing (when she composes her advertisement to become a governess, when she doodles “*Jane Eyre*” on a piece of scrap paper while posing as Jane Elliott, etc.) play an integral part in the development of her character. This development culminates with Jane’s proud declaration that she is “still [Mr. Rochester’s] right hand” even after he has partially regained his sight in the final chapter of the novel (*Jane Eyre*, p. 384)—a declaration that, as Marcus puts it, serves to “highlight the place of writing in Jane’s progress. By using writing to abstract her body into a mechanized body part, Jane accedes to sovereignty through service and becomes the scribe of both her own and her husband’s stories.”³⁵ Marcus is here referring to the “service” that Jane performs in her role as wife to a blind and crippled man, but I would argue that “sovereignty through service” is a good way to describe what Jane achieves in her role as governess as well. For as much as we may see Charlotte’s distaste for the governess life reflected in Jane’s fictionalized account of it, we are also made

³⁴ See Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1929), pp. 120–21.

³⁵ Sharon Marcus, “The Profession of the Author: Abstraction, Advertising, and *Jane Eyre*,” *PMLA*, 110 (1995), 213.

privity to Jane's mental process as she comes to the decision that she *wants* to be a governess—a decision that is born, more than anything, out of her yearning for emotional and intellectual freedom: “I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer; it seemed scattered on the wind then faintly blowing. I abandoned it and framed a humbler supplication; for change, stimulus: that petition, too, seemed swept off into vague space: ‘Then,’ I cried, half desperate, ‘grant me at least a new servitude!’” (*Jane Eyre*, p. 72) The fact that Jane uses what “should” be a position of subservience to gain the liberty and stimulus that she so indecorously desires is, for readers like Elizabeth Rigby, the most unsettling aspect of the book; the problem, complains Rigby, is that “It is by [Jane’s] own talents, virtues, and courage that she is made to attain the summit of human happiness, and, *as far as Jane Eyre’s own statement is concerned*, no one would think that she owed anything either to God above or to man below” (“*Vanity Fair—and Jane Eyre*,” p. 173; emphasis added). What Rigby is sensing—and finding to be so disturbing to the Victorian status quo—is that, in the course of Jane’s self-told story, the governess’s journey bleeds somehow into the woman writer’s journey, with all the indignities of self-empowerment that such a comingling implies.

If we return, then, to the question of what was so threatening about the mythologized figure of the governess in nineteenth-century Britain, we must surely include in our answer this writerly aspect of the governess’s life. It was felt to be threatening on a local level, by the families that sensed they were being observed by an educated outsider who spent the majority of her free time cordoned off with a pen and paper, inscribing their experiences into her letters, journals, or creative writing endeavors that might potentially be published and made visible to the world at large. But it was also felt to be threatening on a more diffuse, cultural level. For as small as the percentage of women who were able to transition successfully from private instructor to professional writer may actually have been, the image of the solitary, literary governess became so much a part of the Victorian zeitgeist that it forced new questions about female autonomy and female authorship to the surface. In the end, the “new servitude” of the governing profession may be seen as an

important stepping stone on the pathway to the “New Woman” movement and beyond, blurring as it does the lines between work and domesticity, between isolation and privacy, between subjugation and liberation.

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ABSTRACT

Nora Gilbert, “A Servitude of One’s Own: Isolation, Authorship, and the Nineteenth-Century British Governess” (pp. 455–480)

Much has been written, both during the Victorian era and in recent literary and cultural-historical criticism, about the plight of the nineteenth-century British governess, a plight that is largely attributed to her uncomfortable position of “status incongruence,” as M. Jeanne Peterson has usefully labeled it. Because the governess was deemed inferior to the family she worked for but superior to the family’s domestic servants, her free time was not uncommonly spent on her own—even, more specifically, in a room of her own. And, just as Virginia Woolf would envision in her landmark feminist treatise, the activity that this isolated, educated woman habitually and productively turned to was the activity of writing. Almost all resident governesses relied on letter writing as their primary source of connection to the outside world, but many also expressed their thoughts and opinions in the form of journals, diaries, memoirs, advice manuals, essays, poems, and works of fiction. Bringing together a diverse sampling of fictional and nonfictional accounts of the governess’s relationship to authorship (and paying particular attention to the novels and letters of Charlotte and Anne Brontë, our best-known and most culturally resonant governesses-turned-authoresses), this essay outlines the ways in which the governess, both as an iconic figure and as a real, writing woman, influenced the formal, stylistic, and thematic development of nineteenth-century women’s literature.

Keywords: Governess; Charlotte Brontë; Anne Brontë; *Jane Eyre*; *Agnes Grey*