UNEVEN DEVELOPMENTS
The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England

MARY POOVEY

The University of Chicago Press
CHAPTER ONE

The Ideological Work of Gender

In 1862, in an essay entitled "Why Are Women Redundant?" the liberal manufacturer W. R. Greg addressed what he saw as one of the most pressing issues of his age. For Greg, the problem resolves itself into this: that there is an enormous and increasing number of single women in the nation, a number quite disproportionate and quite abnormal. . . . There are hundreds of thousands of women—not to speak more largely still—scattered through all ranks, but proportionally most numerous in the middle and upper classes—who have to earn their own living, instead of spending and husbanding the earnings of men; who, not having the natural duties and labours of wives and mothers, have to carve out artificial and painfully sought occupations for themselves; who, in place of completing, sweetening, and embellishing the existence of others, are compelled to lead an independent and incomplete existence of their own.1

Greg identified unmarried working women as a "problem" because he assumed that women normally "complet[e], sweeten[e], and embellish[e] the existence of others" as wives and mothers. To Greg, women's natural role was indisputable—or, more precisely, if it were disputed, an arbiter was close at hand. "Now what does Nature say in reference to the case before us?" he asks, by way of definitively silencing skeptics.

By dividing and proportioning the sexes, by the instincts which lie deepest, strongest, and most unanimously in the heart of humanity at large in all times and amid all people, by the sentiments which belong to all healthy and unsophisticated organisations even in our own complicated civilization, marriage, the union of one man with one woman, is unmistakably indicated as the despotic law of life. This is the rule. . . . [Those]
Chapter One

who remain unmarried constitute the problem to be solved, the evil
and anomaly to be cured.2

The central project of this book is to challenge Greg’s assertion
that certain instincts, however they are defined, “lie . . . unanimously
in the hearts of humanity . . . in all times and amid all people.”
Instead of accepting the notion that “instincts” and a “natural” dif-
fERENCE between the sexes delineate social roles, my project is to
mark the historical specificity of this concept of nature, to point out
the place it occupied in the assumptions by which the Victorian
middle classes governed their lives, and to describe some of the
material effects that this conceptualization of sexual difference fa-
cilitated in mid-Victorian England. In contrast to Greg, I assume
that the representation of biological sexuality, the definition of sexual
difference, and the social organization of sexual relations are social,
not natural, phenomena.3 In this book I argue that the construction
and deployment of these images performed critical ideological work
at midcentury, that they were intimately involved in the development
of England’s characteristic social institutions, the organization of its
most basic economic and legal relations, and in the rationalization
of its imperial ambitions. When Greg argues that unmarried women
constitute “the problem to be solved,” he not only mobilizes assump-
tions about women; he also alludes to an entire social organization
that depends upon naturalizing monogamous marriage, a sexual
division of labor, and a specific economic relation between the sexes,
in which men earn and women “spend” and “husband” the earnings
of men.

The title of my book is intended to underscore the active role
played by this complex interaction of images and social institutions
in mid-Victorian society. I give the phrase ideological work two dif-
ferent emphases. In one sense, it means “the work of ideology”: rep-
resentations of gender in midcentury were part of the system of
interdependent images in which various ideologies became accessible
to individual men and women. In another sense, however, the phrase
means “the work of making ideology”: representations of gender
constituted one of the sites on which ideological systems were si-
multaneously constructed and contested; as such, the representations
of gender I discuss were themselves contested images, the sites at
which struggles for authority occurred, as well as the locus of as-
sumptions used to underwrite the very authority that authorized
these struggles.

Both emphases are critical to the project of this book, for only
when taken together do they convey the two guises of what I am
calling ideology—its apparent coherence and authenticity, on the
one hand, and its internal instability and artificiality, on the other.
As I am using the term, an ideology is a set of beliefs—the “imaginary
relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence,” as
Althusser phrases it.4 Ideologies exist not only as ideas, however.
Instead, they are given concrete form in the practices and social
institutions that govern people’s social relations and that, in so doing,
constitute both the experience of social relations and the nature of
subjectivity.5

To describe an ideology as a “set” of beliefs or a “system” of
institutions and practices conveys the impression of something that
is internally organized, coherent, and complete, and in this intro-
ductive chapter I initially emphasize this guise of mid-Victorian
ideology for the purpose of clarity. Yet it is one of the tasks of the
rest of this book to reveal the other face of this ideology—the extent
to which what may look coherent and complete in retrospect was
actually fissured by competing emphases and interests. One of my
central conclusions from this study is that the middle-class ideology
we most often associate with the Victorian period was both con-
tested and always under construction; because it was always in the
making, it was always open to revision, dispute, and the emergence
of oppositional formulations.

The system of ideas and institutions I examine here, in other
words, was uneven, and it developed unevenly. This is the sense I
want to convey by the main title of this book. This ideological
formulation was uneven both in the sense of being experienced
differently by individuals who were positioned differently within
the social formation (by sex, class, or race, for example) and in the
sense of being articulated differently by the different institutions,
discourses, and practices that it both constituted and was constituted
by. For some groups of people some of the time, an ideological
formulation of, for example, maternal nature might have seemed so
accurate as to be true; for others, it probably felt less like a description
than a goal or even a judgment—a description, that is, of what the
individual should and has failed to be. For some institutions or, for
that matter, for some individuals or groups within institutions, an
ideological formulation received one emphasis or was put to one
use; while for other institutions, individuals, or groups, the same
ideological formulation received a different emphasis and was used
for another—even competing—goal. For these reasons, this ideology was also uneven in the degree to which it could manage or symbolically resolve the contradictions it necessarily contained.

Another way to formulate the subject of this book, then, is to say that it is about the unevenness within the construction and deployment of mid-Victorian representations of gender, and representations of women in particular. This unevenness not only characterizes the conservative ideological work of these representations, but it also allowed for the emergence in the 1850s of a genuinely—although incompletely articulated—oppositional voice. Each of the five chapters that follow focuses on a controversy that developed during the 1840s and 1850s; these controversies provide glimpses of the specific ways in which gender was simultaneously constructed, deployed, and contested—and the extent to which it was, as an effect and a cause of this ideological work, uneven. Despite concentrating primarily on only two decades, one country, one class, and one race, then, this book is about the conditions that facilitated change. It is about the specific instabilities of one ideological formulation and the sites at which that formulation was contested and its instabilities revealed.

I

Despite Greg’s confident appeal to nature’s “golden rule,” the very fact that there were so many unmarried women at midcentury caused contemporaries to worry that all women could not—or would not—perform those tasks nature and their instincts assigned them. The scope of the “problem” had been widely publicized by the 1851 Census, which calculated that 42 percent of the women between the ages of twenty and forty were unmarried and that two million out of Britain’s six million women were self-supporting. Some contemporaries, like Barbara Bodichon and Harriet Martineau, addressed this problem by arguing for better educational and occupational opportunities for women. For Greg, such solutions only compounded the “evil” society faced. “To endeavour to make women independent of men,” he asserted, “to multiply and facilitate their employments; to enable them to earn a separate and ample subsistence by competing with the harder sex. . . . Few more radical or more fatal errors, we are satisfied, philanthropy has ever made.”

If Greg viewed competing for work with men as the “evil” that “redundant women” inflicted on England’s economy, then the “evil” with which they threatened the moral order posed just as serious a problem. This evil, which Greg only alludes to here, was epitomized in prostitution, a subject Greg had explored in an essay published in 1850. In his essay on redundant women, he merely reiterates the point he drove home in that earlier essay: if the disproportionate number of women could be diminished and their “value thereby increased, men [would] not be able to obtain women’s companionship and women’s care so cheaply on illicit terms. . . . If men were necessitated either to marry or be chaste . . . so far from there being too many women for the work that must be done, . . . there would be too few.”

Greg’s plan to “remov[e] five hundred thousand women from the mother country . . . to the colonies” is therefore related to his scheme to criminalize “the propagation of syphilis” (although not prostitution); both would solve the problems attendant upon expressions of sexuality that exceeded monogamous marriage. Greg consistently assigns responsibility for the moral laxity that perpetuates such sexual license to men, but the solutions he devises always address the supply side of the economic balance, not the sexual demand; that is, Greg always imagines removing or sequestering the women, not regulating male sexual appetite. The reason he imagines controlling women and not men is that, according to Greg, women are not dominated by the irrepressible drive that governs the sexual lives of men. Women’s sexual desire is not a problem, in other words; men’s sexual desire is, and it lies behind the problem redundant women have become. To underscore his point, Greg argues that even prostitutes do not fall because of sexual desire. “Women’s desires scarcely ever lead to their fall,” he asserts, for . . . the desire scarcely exists in a definite and conscious form, till they have fallen. In this point there is a radical and essential difference between the sexes . . . In men, in general, the sexual desire is inherent and spontaneous, and belongs to the condition of puberty. In the other sex, the desire is dormant, if not non-existent, till excited; always till excited by undue familiarities; almost always till excited by actual intercourse.

While Greg laments the sexual double standard, he accepts it (and prostitution) as inevitable. “We do not argue for the application to [men],” he concedes, “of a sterner code than, in the present state of human progress, could be borne.” The solution to the problem redundant women pose, then, is to get them out of harm’s way, to send them to the colonies, where there are so few women that men will be forced “to marry or be chaste.”
Chapter One

Greg’s conceptualization of sexual desire in terms of sexual difference, not similarity, was accepted by most of his middle-class contemporaries. This is only one formulation of what I take to be the characteristic feature of the mid-Victorian symbolic economy: the articulation of difference upon sex and in the form of a binary opposition rather than a hierarchically ordered range of similarities. The message that the natural difference between “manly” men and “womanly” women dictated social roles permeated mid-Victorian culture in sermons, conduct manuals, and popular literature with such power and in such a way as to produce the norm that Greg invokes and to define whatever did not conform to that paradigm as an “anomaly” and therefore a “problem.”

The mid-Victorian phase of state formation and social organization was characterized by skirmishes among various secular and religious institutions for the authority to legislate social behavior. In chapters 2 and 3 I discuss two of the contests by which the medical and legal institutions began to wrest authority away from religious jurisdiction. But while I devote some attention to these contests, in the book as a whole I am more interested in the shared assumptions that underwrote these struggles than in the investments that divided contestants. Whatever their differences, I suggest, almost all of the participants in the mid-nineteenth-century battles for social authority assumed and reinforced this binary model of difference articulated upon sex.

The conceptualization of difference as a binary organization of sex had as an increasingly persuasive basis during these decades a new scientific representation of the body. According to Thomas Laqueur, ancient and Renaissance accounts of the body retained the Galenic model of an exact physiological homology between male and female reproductive organs that positioned men and women hierarchically on a spectrum of “heat.” By contrast, late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century medical men began to represent the differences between male and female bodies and functions as a series of binary oppositions. Emphasizing the incommensurability of male and female bodies entailed foregrounding the role of the reproductive system, so that this difference was seen as more important than any similarities between men and women; it also entailed effacing other kinds of differences among members of the same sex, so that the similarity of women’s childbearing capacity became more important than whatever other features distinguished them.

In 1843, when Theodor Bischoff observed spontaneous ovulation in a mammal for the first time, he was merely providing a scientific explanation for the principle most nineteenth-century medical men had already come to accept: the female of the species, woman included, was dominated by the involuntary periodicity of the reproductive system. The principles contemporary medical men linked to Bischoff’s observation were far-reaching: not only could sexual difference apparently be proved incontestably by scientific means, but female pleasure was obviously irrelevant to reproduction. If this model of periodic and involuntary ovulation marginalized the importance of women’s affective participation in sexual intercourse, however, it increased the importance of another womanly feeling—maternal love. In fact, the model of spontaneous ovulation, along with other somewhat less well-documented biological “facts,” was enlisted to provide a scientific explanation for what rapidly came to be considered woman’s definitive characteristic—maternal instinct. In this, women even excelled over the females of other species. “The generative organs,” W. Tyler Smith asserted, “reach their greatest state of development in the human species, and consist of parts adapted to coitus, ovulation, menstruation, impregnation, utero-gestation, parturition, and lactation—functions which are placed in relation to the highest affection and parental love.”

That maternal “instinct” was increasingly invoked by contemporaries to define woman’s nature suggests that by the 1830s naturalistic explanations of difference were posing a serious challenge to scriptural explanations of the same thing. This instinct, theoretically, accounted for the remarkable fact that women were not self-interested and aggressive like men, but self-sacrificing and tender. Here, for example, is Peter Gaskell, writing in 1833.

Love of helpless infancy—attention to its wants, its sufferings, and its unintelligible happiness, seem to form the very wellspring of a woman’s heart—fertilizing, softening, and enriching all her grosser passions and appetites. It is truly an instinct in the strictest acceptance of the word. A woman, if removed from all intercourse, all knowledge of her sex and its attributes, from the very hour of her birth, would, should she herself become a mother in the wilderness, lavish as much tenderness upon her babe, cherish it as fondly . . . sacrifice her personal comfort, with as much ardour, as much devotedness, as the most refined, fastidious, and intellectual mother, placed in the very centre of civilized society.

Maternal instinct was credited not only with making women nurture their children, but also with conferring upon them extraordinary
Chapter One

power over men. Women may have been considered physically unfit to vote or compete for work, but, according to this representation, the power of their moral influence amply compensated them for whatever disadvantages they suffered. Here is Gaskell again, explaining the power of women's moral influence:

The moral influence of woman upon man's character and domestic happiness, is mainly attributable to her natural and instinctive habits. Her love, her tenderness, her affectionate solicitude for his comfort and enjoyment, her devotedness, her unwearying care, her maternal fondness, her conjugal attractions, exercise a most ennobling impression upon his nature, and do more towards making him a good husband, a good father, and a useful citizen, than all the dogmas of political economy.19

The image of woman that Gaskell sketches here was further idealized by Coventry Patmore in the mid-1830s in the character of Honoria, the “Angel in the House.” “Naturally” self-sacrificing and self-regulating, this domestic deity radiated morality because her “substance” was love, not self-interest or ambition. Claiming that love is woman's “special crown,” Patmore draws her as the opposite and necessary counterpart to man, whose crown he calls “truth,” a virtue that he characterizes as restless and self-conscious.

For love is substance, truth the form;  
Truth without love were less than nought;  
But blindest love is sweet and warm,  
And full of truth not shaped by thought;  
And therefore in herself she stands  
Adorn'd with undecifent grace,  
Her happy virtues taking hands,  
Each smiling in another's face.  
So dancing round the Tree of Life,  
They make an Eden in her breast,  
While his, disjointed and at strife,  
Proud-thoughted, do not bring him rest.20

The model of a binary opposition between the sexes, which was socially realized in separate but supposedly equal “spheres,” underwrote an entire system of institutional practices and conventions at midcentury, ranging from a sexual division of labor to a sexual di-

vision of economic and political rights. In the chapters that follow, I describe some of the discourses in which this model was constructed at midcentury and the way the model was deployed to authorize these practices. In chapters 2 and 4, I discuss the different ways the idealized image of domestic woman was mobilized in arguments supporting the professionalization of medicine and writing. In chapters 3 and 4, I suggest that this representation of woman constituted the basis both for the oppositional economy that seemed to (but did not) rest on a binary opposition and for the fundamental model of male identity in capitalist society. On the one hand, this man was structurally suited to the alienated labor of the capitalist economy; on the other hand, his internal alienation (what Patmore calls his “strife”) was translated into a narrative of personal development, which one woman inaugurated and another rewarded. Throughout the book, I argue that this image of woman was also critical to the image of the English national character, which helped legitimize both England's sense of moral superiority and the imperial ambitions this superiority underwrote. Finally, I demonstrate throughout how these deployments of the domestic ideal helped depoliticize class relations at midcentury, partly by translating class difference into psychological or moral difference, partly by setting limits to competition, and partly by helping subsume individuals of different classes into a representative Englishman, with whom everyone could identify, even if one's interests were thereby obliterated and not served.

Despite repeated invocations of the domestic ideal, despite the extensive ideological work this image performed, and despite the epistemological centrality of woman's self-consistency to the oppositional structure of Victorian ideas, the representation of woman was also a site of cultural contestation during the middle of the nineteenth century. These contests reveal, on the one hand, the extent to which any image that is important to a culture constitutes an arena of ideological construction rather than simple consolidation. On the other hand, however, the specific nature of the contests that mid-nineteenth-century texts disclose reflects the persistence in the domestic ideal of a historically specific and apparently antithetical image of woman. This is the representation of woman as Eve, “Mother of our Miseries.” As late as the 1740s, woman was consistently represented as the site of willful sexuality and bodily appetite: whether figured as that part of man responsible for the Fall, as was characteristic of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts, or represented as man's foil, as in eighteenth-century texts like Swift's and Pope's poems, women were associated with flesh, desire, and unsocialized,
Chapter One

hence susceptible, impulses and passions. For reasons that lie beyond the scope of this study, the eighteenth century witnessed the gradual transformation of this sexualized image of woman as willful flesh into the domestic ideal I have been describing. In the process, woman became not some errant part of man, but his opposite, his moral hope and spiritual guide. This transformation proceeded alongside—and was an integral part of—the consolidation of bourgeois power and the redefinition and relocation of the idea of virtue. Instead of being articulated upon inherited class position in the form of noblesse oblige, virtue was increasingly articulated upon gender in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As the liberal discourse of rights and contracts began to dominate representations of social, economic, and political relations, in other words, virtue was depoliticized, moralized, and associated with the domestic sphere, which was being abstracted at the same time—both rhetorically and, to a certain extent, materially—from the so-called public sphere of competition, self-interest, and economic aggression. As superintendents of the domestic sphere, (middle-class) women were represented as protecting and, increasingly, incarnating virtue. Despite the fact that women contributed materially to the consolidation of bourgeois wealth and political power, their economic support tended to be translated into a language of morality and affection; their most important work was increasingly represented as the emotional labor motivated (and guaranteed) by maternal instinct. The domestic ideal I have described, then, was a crucial component in a series of representations that supported both the middle class’s economic power and its legitimation of this position.

The rhetorical separation of spheres and the image of domesticated, feminized morality were crucial to the consolidation of bourgeois power partly because linking morality to a figure (rhetorically) immune to the self-interest and competition integral to economic success preserved virtue without inhibiting productivity. In producing a distinction between kinds of labor (paid versus unpaid, mandatory versus voluntary, productive versus reproductive, alienated versus self-fulfilling), the segregation of the domestic ideal created the illusion of an alternative to competition; this alternative, moreover, was the prize that inspired hard work, for a prosperous family was the goal represented as desirable and available to every man. Locating difference between men and women also helped set limits to the groups that actually had access to liberalism’s promise of universal economic opportunities. If Samuel Smiles’ cheerful for-
mulation of the effectiveness of “self-help” had been true in practice, after all, there would have been no limit to competition and no insurance that the power so recently consolidated by middle-class men would remain proof against the claims of other groups—not only women, but, more problematically, working-class men. Women helped set those structural limits, not only because they were represented as the group in opposition to which legal and economic subjects defined themselves, but also because of the more complex interplay I discuss in chapters 3 and 4. This process included generalizing the morality attributed to middle-class women to all women, translating the discrepancy between what one now has and what one could acquire into a psychological narrative of personal development, and subsuming the economic rewards capitalism seemed to promise into the emotional rewards that seemed available to every man in the castle of his home.

The place women occupied in liberal, bourgeois ideology also helps account for the persistence in the domestic ideal of the earlier image of woman as sexualized, susceptible, and fallen. The representation of woman not only as dependent but as needing the control that was the other face of protection was integral to the separation of spheres and everything that followed from it, because this image provided a defensible explanation for inequality. If women were governed not by reason (like men), but by something else, then they could hardly be expected (or allowed) to participate in the economic and political fray. Increasingly, from the late eighteenth century, the medical model of reproductive difference was invoked to define this something: when it was given one emphasis, woman’s reproductive capacity equaled her maternal instinct; when given another, it equaled her sexuality.

The contradiction between a sexless, moralized angel and an aggressive, carnal magdalen was therefore written into the domestic ideal as one of its constitutive characteristics. Even though this contradiction was sometimes symbolically resolved by being articulated upon class or moral “type,” it never completely disappeared from the mid-Victorian representation of woman. In the chapters that follow, I identify some of the cultural debates that exposed the persistence—and effects—of this constitutive contradiction. In chapter 2, I turn to a medical discussion about childbirth—the controversy over whether to administer chloroform to women in labor—to show how conceptualizing women’s reproductive capacity as the basis of femininity inevitably (if inadvertently) foregrounded women’s sexuality alongside their moralized maternal nature. In chapter
I turn to a legal case, Caroline Norton’s complaint that separated women could not keep their own earnings, to show how legal provisions to “protect” women also functioned to protect men against the aggression they feared women harbored. Chapter 4 highlights the symbolic work necessary to manage such anxieties about women’s aggressiveness; through a series of substitutions, Charles Dickens neutralizes the sexuality he associates with some women, only to betray its imaginative persistence by the very labor with which he writes it out. In Chapter 5, I suggest that representations of governesses also alluded to women’s sexual aggression, but I also show how feminists could rewrite this aggression as women’s “capability” in order to argue for expanding the employment opportunities open to women. And in chapter 6, I show how women could use the contradictory nature of the domestic ideal to authorize ambitions that, in the case of Florence Nightingale at least, took them not only out of the domestic sphere, but away from mother England as well.

I call the issues I focus on here “border cases” because each of them had the potential to expose the artificiality of the binary logic that governed the Victorian symbolic economy. While it is arguable that all issues are potentially problematic for oppositional thinking because every case lies on the border between two defining alternatives, I suggest that those issues that are constituted as “problems” at any given moment are particularly important because they mark the limits of ideological certainty. These issues were the site of such intensive debates, in other words, because they threatened to challenge the opposition upon which all the other oppositions claimed to be based—the opposition between men and women. Each of the issues I examine threatened to relocate difference—either to move it from the sexual to some other, cultural division (such as class) or to uncover it in woman, the very subject upon whose self-consistency the ideology rested. Either of these moves had the potential to challenge the social arrangement of separate spheres and everything that went with it: the sexual division of labor, the model of moral influence, the notion that there was some boundary to the alienation of market relations.

The discovery of the anesthesiological properties of chloroform constituted childbirth as a border case because, in making childbirth pain medically treatable, the anodyne opened the possibility that this most “natural” of all activities might be defined as “unnatural” in order to authorize medical treatment. That this occurred at a particularly critical moment in the professionalization of medicine also meant that the contradiction inherent in representations of the female body was exposed, as competing groups of medical men emphasized either woman’s innate morality or her sexuality in order to authorize their own particular practice.

Divorce was constituted as a border case partly by the strain that the factory system, urban overcrowding, and the ostensible breakup of the family economic unit placed on the working-class family; partly, divorce acquired this position as a result of legal reformers’ desire to rationalize the inefficient and often overlapping branches of the legal system. But divorce was not a problem in the same sense that childbearing pain became; whereas the latter was pushed from the category of the norm (health) into the category of the abnormal (illness), the former was pushed out of the category of the legal impossibility (except under very special conditions) into the category of the legally permissible (under certain carefully delimited conditions). In this sense, divorce became a solution rather than a problem; the problem it symbolically “solved” was presented by the Married Women’s Property Bill, for that legislation would have constituted married women as identical to (not different from) men in relation to property, and that, as I argue in chapter 3, would have imprinted the symbolic economy that depended on and institutionalized binary oppositions.

The literary man (and I use that noun advisedly) came to occupy the position of a border case as a result of two sets of antithetical factors. On the one hand, technological developments in printing and papermaking made it possible for the publishing industry to feed and keep up with accelerating consumer demand; along with changes in publication practices that dramatically lowered the price even of new fiction, this increase in supply and demand positioned the literary man and literary labor at the heart of the mushrooming capitalist economy. But on the other hand, because of received (and recently elaborated) associations between writing and the expression of wisdom or even “genius,” the literary man seemed immune to market relations; telling universal truths, he was—or should have been—superior to fluctuations in taste or price. The literary man—and the representation of writing, in particular—therefore became the site at which the alienation endemic to all kinds of labor under capitalism simultaneously surfaced and was erased. As I argue in chapter 4, the construction of literary labor as the exception that mitigated the rule of alienated labor had as one
of its critical components the reinforcement and appropriation of another representation of nonalienated labor—the image of women's domestic labor as a nonalienated expression of a selfless self.

The 1891 Census was instrumental in the two dialectically related processes by which the unmarried woman was constituted as a social problem. On the one hand, in designating an “entire house” as the desire of “every Englishman,” the Census simultaneously represented the middle-class domestic living arrangement as the norm and defined that norm as entailing both a particular (noncommercial) relation among the inmates of a house and a particular kind of house (one that was a “shrine” because it focused on “family and hearth”). On the other hand, however, in revealing that the proportion of women to men within the marriageable age-group of fifteen to forty-nine years was 107 percent, the Census demonstrated that this ideal was not even available to every woman. In chapter 5 I argue that the governess was the prime example of what Greg called the “redundant woman” and that, as a consequence, she constituted the border between the normative (working) man and the normative (nonworking) woman. Not a mother, the governess nevertheless performed the mother’s tasks; not a prostitute, she was nevertheless suspiciously close to other sexualized women; not a lunatic, she was nevertheless deviant simply because she was a middle-class woman who had to work and because she was always in danger of losing her middle-class status and her “natural” morality.

As Florence Nightingale represented and defined her, the nurse also occupied the border between the “normal” (domestic) and the “abnormal” (working) woman. But because of the particular ideological and professional contests I discuss in chapter 6, the Nightingale nurse represented a compromise between a series of normative oppositions rather than a destabilizing problem. Not a member of a religious sect, she was able to take up her “calling” without arousing religious controversy. Not a “strong-minded woman” like the would-be lady doctor, she was able to engage in health-care work without antagonizing medical men. Neither a mother nor a professional, she was able to nurture her wards and to supervise sanitary conditions; she was, in short, able to make the hospital a home and, in so doing, to enhance the reputation of an activity that had been degraded because it was traditionally women’s work.

In these chapters, I discuss both the reason these cases were potentially destabilizing and some of the rhetorical and practical strategies advanced to manage the anxieties they generated or even to resolve their destabilizing potential. My argument here is that these border cases obey no inherent logic, nor do they accommodate or accomplish only one kind of symbolic work. The “problem” of female aggression, for example, could be conceptualized as female sexuality; in this form it submitted (rhetorically, at least) to medical definition, treatment, and (more or less effective) “cure.” By contrast, however, it could also be represented as female “capability”; in this incarnation, it could be mobilized to “explain” women’s success in such “feminine” activities as teaching or domestic nursing, but it could also be used to authorize expanding women’s employment beyond the sphere that was supposedly home to women’s nature. By the same token, the “problem” of female aggression was addressed and “resolved” by a variety of practical and rhetorical strategies, ranging from Greg’s suggestion that “redundant women” be removed to the colonies (lest they become prostitutes in England) to Henry Mayhew’s “explanation” that some (lower-class) women did experience sexual desire; for Mayhew, this sexuality was also a problem that had to be contained, for he saw it as the driving force behind all crime, poverty, and social disorder.

Because the domestic ideal of female nature that I have been describing was both internally contradictory and unevenly deployed, it was open to a variety of readings that could be mobilized in contradictory practices. In the chapters that follow, this unevenness and these contradictory practices enable us to see both why this representation proved so resilient and how its artificiality began to become visible at last.

II

This may seem an odd book for a literary critic to have written. Very few of the primary texts I treat here are canonical literary texts, and I do not respect the boundaries of the texts I do examine, as formalist critics of all persuasions do. My strategy derives, in the first instance, from the fact that I have taken up a different object of study from the one literary critics usually analyze. The object of my study is neither the individual text (of whatever kind) nor literary history, but something extrapolated from texts and reconstructed as the conditions of possibility for those texts—what I have called the symbolic economy or, more generally, the internal structure of ideology. To identify this set of assumptions so as to delimit its internal organizing structure and its principles of operation, I have assimilated various texts, ranging from the official records of parliamentary debates to privately printed personal vindications, from David Cop-
perfield to medical lectures on female reproduction, from feminist analyses of work to defenses of domesticity culled from the pages of the *Saturday Review*. But while the primary documents I have analyzed vary widely in terms of their modes of publication and address, their position on the spectrum from entertainment to instruction, their audience and their politics, they have in common a middle-class authorship and, largely, a middle-class readership. In fact, in the sense that these texts articulate bourgeois values and, equally importantly, the structure of middle-class assumptions, they can be said to position their readers as middle-class individuals, even when a reader's actual class affiliation might not have been bourgeois.

My training as a literary critic shows up most explicitly in the methodology I use to interpret these texts. This methodology draws on the techniques and vocabularies of three contemporary interpretive paradigms, but the assumptions with which I approach texts significantly affect how and how much I take from each. The three paradigms that inform my work are post-structuralist versions of formalism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis. What links these three methods is their shared assumption that signification is not a singular process; signifying practices always produce meanings in excess of what seems to be the text's explicit design. This assumption underwrites my readings of the texts' implicit participation in the production and interrogation of the mid-Victorian symbolic order. It also helps explain why I discuss the multiple effects that texts produce rather than attributing to each of them some single, ahistorical meaning.

I share with formalists of all persuasions my reliance on close textual analysis. In the first instance at least, I focus on the local features and structural paradigms by which texts are semantically articulated and syntactically organized: these include both specific images and such organizational features as the patterns of repetition and the variations or transformations that derive from and alter these patterns. 39 In chapter 4, I argue that these patterns determine the reading of a text—not in the sense that they dictate a particular interpretation but in the sense that they construct the reader as a certain kind of reader and position this reader in a particular relation to the system of connotations to which a text gives specific form and in which it therefore participates. I am arguing, in other words, that the language and organization of any text make reading constitutive of the reader as well as of meaning. This constitutive process consists of a number of operations: establishing identification (which is governed by such formal features as point of view, mode of ad-

dress, range of allusion and vocabulary); reproducing values and the symbolic economy that underwrites them (which is regulated by both connotation and the repetition of the structural principle by which the symbolic economy is governed); and providing various narrative paradigms that make the reading experience repeat, so as to affirm, the structure of the reading subject's identity (through such features as thematic closure, the consistency of characters, and both psychological and circumstantial realism). 40

To discuss the ways in which a text constitutes its reader, however, is already to have transgressed the textual boundaries most formalists (including post-structuralists) set for themselves. In the chapters that follow, I deconstruct texts to reveal their internal contradictions and the artificiality of the "truths" they purport to tell. Nevertheless, unlike most deconstructive literary critics, I do not argue that there is nothing outside the text or that analyzing discrete texts is sufficient. Like critics such as Michel Foucault, Etienne Balibar, Pierre Macherey, and Fredric Jameson, I maintain that every text works; as an ensemble of specific discursive practices and as the outgrowth of a determinate mode of production, every text participates in a complex social activity. 41 Part of the work that texts perform is the reproduction of ideology; texts give the values and structures of values that constitute ideology body—that is, they embody them for and in the subjects who read. In this sense, reading—or more precisely, interpretation—is a historically and culturally specific activity; it is part of a public institution. As Gerald Bruns has pointed out in relation to the law, one does not have to read a set of specific texts to be bound by the conditions by which they were produced and given authority. Because texts "belong to traditions of understanding," which are effects of the social and cultural relationships that obtain at the moment of production, the conditions that govern the production of texts are reproduced in the texts themselves as the condition of possibility for meaning. 42

This paradigm of interdependent and mutually constructive relation is crucial to both my conceptualization of causation and my organizational strategy in the chapters that follow. Despite my assumption that the conditions that produce both texts and (partly through them) individual subjects are material in the ever elusive last instance, I also maintain that this famous last instance is ever elusive—precisely because the material and economic relations of production can only make themselves known through representations. 43 The interdependence of material conditions and representations (as well as the interdependence of representations) means
that causation is never unidirectional; as a consequence, the kind of linear narrative that many literary critics and historians employ necessarily obscures the critical complexity of social relations. Despite the fact that I recognize this, I sometimes provide such narratives in the chapters that follow. I do so partly because it has seemed to me necessary to remind readers of the sequences of events in which the individual texts I interpret were written and of the context in which they worked. Partly, such histories answer my own desire for narrative coherence. But I want to make it clear that I am aware of the artificiality of these histories and of the ideological work they perform in my own narrative. Ideally, an analysis of the social construction of meanings and the texts that participate in this process would contain no such unconscious, linear narratives, for the conventions that make these narratives meaningful are also socially constructed; they too are determined in the last instance by the material conditions I have been discussing here. Such an ideal is not attainable, however, partly because one of the effects of any ideology is to obscure the conditions of its own production, and partly because my readers and I can only communicate through the conventions of significations we share. I return in a moment to the compromise I have tried to strike in my organization of each chapter, but the effect of the self-consciousness I voice here will have to carry over into the rest of the book, where I occasionally represent the "real" as if it were a linear development that could shed both textualization and the quotation marks that signify that it is always a social construction.

My emphasis on interdependence also signals my primary departure from post-structuralist Marxists—my attitude toward class. I agree that class position is a crucial determinant of one's experience and consciousness and that class is one of the fundamental categories by which individuals are positioned within social relations and discursive practices. But I do not think that class position is always or at all times more important than other constitutive categories, such as gender, race, or national identity. In the chapters that follow I argue that in the late 1840s and early 1850s in particular, gender issues often displaced the more politically volatile issue of class so as to address and manage it symbolically, but I also point out that by the mid and late 1850s, the issue of national identity had assumed greater prominence in relation to both gender and class. My object here has been to examine the relationships among such categories. It seems to me that plotting the changing interaction of these determinants within a culture and within individual texts is more important than relentlessly subordinating any combination of these factors to an ahistorical master category.

The third methodology from which I both borrow and depart is psychoanalysis. My debt to psychoanalysis is clear in the language of the following chapters, for I use a vocabulary derived from Freud's conceptualization of the dreamwork to discuss the signifying operations of individual texts and the assimilated social text. The tropes of displacement, condensation, working through, repression, and symbolic action seem appropriate to the transmigrations and transvaluations of the images and themes I identify in these texts, and the idea of association (which is anything but free) is crucial both to the features I interpret and to my own interpretive practice. When I read a text or group of texts, my first move is to identify clusters of associated themes and images—whether the associations among these images are based on likeness (metaphor) or contiguity (metonymy). The clusters of associated images that reappear or occupy strategic positions in the text constitute my basic units of interpretation; I describe the text's operations in terms of how these units are broken up and redistributed in the text, the ways in which they combine or exchange terms with other associated clusters of images, and the extent to which they provide the vehicle in which thematic issues can be worked through by means of the symbolic resolution of contradictions or the management of destabilizing tensions. This is a structural psychoanalytic methodology in the sense that I interpret the organizational principles governing the production of meaning and not individual characters or writers. Unlike some psychoanalytic critics, moreover, I do not respect the boundaries of characters or texts. Just as a character is only one semantic unit in a text—the effect generated by associating a set of characteristics with a proper name—so too is the individual text only one semantic unit in a cultural field, the effect of certain conventions of authorship and closure.

The primary sense in which I differ from most psychoanalytic critics, in other words, is that I do not attribute signifying acts exclusively to individuals (whether individual characters, real historical individuals, or individual texts). Indeed, in general, I am less interested in the origin of discrete signifying acts than in their internal dynamics and interrelations with other signifying acts. If texts are parts of complex cultural economies, as I am arguing they are, then no individual can originate meaning nor can he or she contain or foresee the effects the text will produce. If even the unconscious and language (by which I mean conventions of signification) are
Chapter One

cultural constructs, as I am arguing they are, then it is more important to examine the production and effects of meaning than its origin; it is more important to look at the structure and deployment of signifying practices than their “originality.” Because I look at texts as participants in a cultural economy, my two extended analyses of literary texts in chapters 4 and 5 do not aspire to be “comprehensive” readings; instead, one of these readings intersects, and the other is intersected by, analyses of the cultural debates in which they participated.

This brings me to one of the most problematic aspects of my study: the problem of the individual. The concept of the individual is problematic for me in ways that it was not for the nineteenth-century writers I examine. In fact, for most of the writers whose works I analyze, individualism was a solution, not a problem. But one of my underlying points here is that the ego-centered subject is a historical construct, and I devote considerable attention in the following chapters to the ways in which this ideological image was produced, maintained, and deployed as a symbolic solution to problems it could not actually solve.

In chapters 4 and 6, I discuss the importance that the idea of the individualized subject held for midcentury Victorians, and in chapters 3 and 4 I discuss the contradictory structure of the individual in class society. But even though one of the projects of this book is to historicize the idea of the individual, I remain at least partly within the narrative paradigms underwritten by individualism. In conceptualizing the issues I address, I have found myself torn between focusing on individuals as if they were the agents of change and dispensing altogether with individual life stories in order to create the impression that individuals are merely points at which competing cultural forces intersect. The compromise I have reached may well be unsatisfying at both extremes: for some readers, no doubt, I rely too heavily on the biography of Caroline Norton, for example, to organize my discussion of the law; other readers will be frustrated when my discussion of the Married Women’s Property Bill interrupts the narrative of Norton’s life so as to question her status as agent. What I have tried to provide in each of the following chapters and in the book as a whole is closer to a fabric than a line of narration. I have tried to tell enough of each story to give the reader something to follow at the same time that I have woven several stories together in defiance of the integrity of individual stories, lives, and texts. The result, I hope, is an organization that reproduces the interrelation and process of mutual construction that I describe; in the book as a whole I have tried to describe the structural conditions in which certain changes occurred, without invoking a teleology, attributing causation to any single individual, or representing “history” as completely random or impervious to human intentions.

Thus, for example, one of the subjects I treat in this book is the emergence of an organized movement to improve women’s social and economic position, and one of my aims has been to describe the ideological (and, to a lesser extent, material) conditions in which such a movement developed. Yet this book is not simply the story of that development; nor, having introduced that story, can I trace its origin directly or exclusively to the individuals who self-consciously affiliated themselves with it. As just one example of the complexity of causation, consider the role Caroline Norton played in this development. Norton was reviled by self-proclaimed advocates of women’s rights like Harriet Martineau, and Norton herself explicitly denounced the “wild and stupid theories” that women should have rights equal to men’s. Yet, as I show in chapter 3, Norton’s support for the Matrimonial Causes Bill indirectly provoked Barbara Bodichon and Bessie Parkes to organize the “ladies of Langham Place” because the passage of this bill forestalled legislative consideration of the more radical Married Women’s Property Bill. One might even argue that Norton’s pamphlets in favor of the divorce law did more for the development of feminist consciousness (although not for women’s economic independence) than did the more explicit polemical works of Mary Wollstonecraft or even John Stuart Mill. If changing women’s position in society has entailed both making women of all classes conscious of their situation and winning concrete economic and political rights, then Norton has been as important a figure in the complex history of feminism as have more obvious protagonists like Barbara Bodichon or Elizabeth Blackwell.”

III

This example not only illuminates the complexity of causation; it also suggests how difficult it is to access women’s participation in the developments I discuss in the following chapters. One of the most important debates among contemporary feminists has involved the ways in which women contributed to the construction and application of the domestic ideal, or, conversely, the extent to which we have participated in our own oppression. One reading of this history stresses women’s ability to capitalize on and enhance the kinds of power that the nineteenth-century moralization of women
Chapter One

and the feminization of virtue generated; another emphasizes the restrictions women suffered as a consequence of being idealized. Both of these emphases perform important political work for late twentieth-century readers. The first can alert us to contributions women have made to state formation and economic development, because it urges us to reconceptualize power and to question the separation of the public from the private sphere. The second can combat complacency because it refuses to accept as straightforward triumphs women’s participation in reproducing the dominant culture. Each position also has its political limitations, of course. The first can lead either to the idealization of women’s separatism that a critique of separate spheres should undermine or else to the elimination of the possibility for any genuinely oppositional stance. The second can generate a sense of victimization among women readers that also defeats our desire to inaugurate change.

This is a vexed and complex debate, to which this book will inevitably make a contribution. In the chapters that follow, I do not focus exclusively on the advantages men have obtained by idealizing women, because I do not subscribe to the reading of history that casts women as helpless victims; but neither do I devote exclusive attention to the ways that women have used these representations for their own advantage, because I do not believe that “advantages” can be measured any more absolutely than causation can be traced. I have tried to highlight various forms of institutional and ideological work that these representations performed at midcentury without always analyzing exactly who benefited from this work. When I have highlighted the benefits women enjoyed—as, for example, in the opening of nursing as a respectable occupation for women—I have also suggested the other side of this gain—the extent to which benefits for middle-class women often translated into liabilities for working-class women and hence as a barrier to women’s recognition of either the similarities of their gendered position or the extent to which class remained a factor dividing women into competing groups.

My argument is that both men and women were subject at midcentury to the constraints imposed by the binary organization of difference and the foregrounding of sexual nature. Sometimes, in fact, as in the professionalization of medicine, some men profited at the expense of other men as much as at the expense of women. In this, as in the other examples I explore, men were too thoroughly ensnared in the contradictions that characterized this ideology to be charged with being simple oppressors. Despite my assertion that all individuals are subject to ideological constraints, however, I do not want to lose sight of the fact that, as long as difference was articulated on gender, men and women were subject to different kinds of ideological constraint. Because they were positioned as nonexistent, women at midcentury did not have institutionally recognized power, no matter how much moral influence they could wield. When I emphasize early feminists’ ability to reconceptualize the contradiction written into the domestic ideal or Florence Nightingale’s ability to deploy this reconceptualization in the service of ennobling (some) women’s work, I therefore do so in the context of reminding my readers that women’s control over the terms of representation remained limited by the way in which the female sex was defined and positioned.

To argue that knowledge is socially constructed, as I do in this book, is necessarily to admit that one’s own interpretations are part of larger social constructs and, as a necessary corollary, that they are ideological. To the extent that one can self-consciously excavate one’s own assumptions and narrative paradigms, ideology may be dignified with the name of politics, but there is no escaping the fact of investment; to adopt the position I have adopted is to renounce even the pretense of objectivity. This is not, however, to slide over into complete relativism; at any given moment, every conceivable interpretation and choice of materials is neither equal nor available, because one’s own position within determinant institutional, cultural, and historical conditions dictates criteria of sufficiency, coherence, and validity that delimit (but do not exclude) personal taste. More concretely, this means that my choice of gender, instead of one of the other determinants I have discussed as a focus for analysis, is a function of the absolute and ahistorical importance of gender, but of the coincidence between the importance this opposition held for mid-Victorian Britains and my own position as a white feminist within the Anglo-American academic establishment.

My self-consciously feminist argument here is that analyzing the history of gender is significant political work because it challenges the kind of truisms that W. R. Greg formulated in the 1860s and that other social critics reformulate now. While I acknowledge that my desire to question such commonplaces may have unforeseen effects that, in the long run of history, will be seen as reinforcing the status quo, I maintain that any challenge is important because it is an intervention—an intervention that may well disrupt processes already underway and that certainly will become part of the cultural contest by which new meanings are produced.