"Whose Injury Is Like Mine?"
Emily Brontë, George Eliot, and the Sincere Postures of Suffering Men

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Of the many repeated terms in George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss, a few are particularly striking: pain, suffering, injury. Critics have long argued that the “oppressive narrowness,” as Eliot describes it, of life in St. Ogg’s generates emotional and cognitive limitations for its central character, Maggie Tulliver; it circumscribes her aspirations, imagination, ideas, and desires (363). After several hundred pages in which Maggie suffers, culminating in the loss of her reputation when she and her suitor Stephen Guest briefly elope, it seems only natural that she would exclaim, “[W]hose pain can have been like mine? Whose injury is like mine?” (647). Indeed, given her thwarted and at times ill-conceived attempts to attain agency, such an expression seems decidedly appropriate. Only Maggie does not utter these words; Stephen does.

The incongruity of Stephen’s self-pitying rhetoric at the very moment when Maggie becomes a social pariah encapsulates several vexing social questions. These questions frequently recur in both The Mill on the Floss and Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights, a novel written thirteen years earlier that also evinces an interest in male suffering. Why do men repeatedly assert their own powerlessness despite the legal, familial, and social authority they enjoy? What is the source for the anguish of which they speak? Does the seemingly misogynistic convention of transforming the subjugated woman into an imagined agent of oppression—as the men in these novels, attempting to identify the cause of their distress, often do—originate in something other than an entrenched cultural hostility? Focusing on the transition from a traditional yeoman economy to a system of capitalist property ownership, and with it the changing definitions of dependency affecting able-bodied and disabled men alike, these novels track the emergence of a wounded masculinist liberal subject.¹

I would like to thank Nancy Armstrong and the Novel editorial board, as well as its outside reader, for their encouragement. I am also grateful to Elaine Hadley, Rosemary Hennessy, and Helena Michie for their generous comments on earlier versions of this essay.

¹ Derived from the Latin liber, or “free,” the word liberal is generally associated with the belief that individuals have a right to pursue their own self-interest. This subject originates with Locke’s famous formulation of metaphysical freedom: “[T]he Equality which all Men are in, in respect of Jurisdiction or Dominion . . . [arises from] that equal Right every Man hath, to his Natural Freedom, without being subjected to the Will or Authority of any other Man” (2.54, 304). Locke conceives of the self as both bounded and autonomous: “[E]very Man has a Property in his own Person” and therefore “no Body has any Right to [it] but himself” (2.27, 287–88). One might, of course, argue that Locke conceives of a rights-bearing individual rather than a rights-bearing male. In refuting one of Robert Filmer’s arguments, Locke contends in Two Treatises of Govern-
I derive my understanding of wounded subjectivity from Wendy Brown's argument that male dominance resides in the very terms of liberal discourse. Brown contends that liberalism, which develops coevally with capitalism, is founded on a set of concepts (including autonomy, liberty, the individual, and the public sphere) that both rely on and require the disavowal of obverse notions coded as feminine (including dependence, encumbrance, the family, and the private sphere). These constitutive gendered dualisms perpetuate the sexual divisions of labor and the partitioning of "the sensibilities and activities of subjects" that liberalism presumes to transcend (States 152). Subjective sovereignty, therefore, is facilitated by the ideological if not actual separation of the public and private spheres: the putatively autonomous liberal subject is produced and reproduced through and sustained by the nonautonomous dependents whose "natural" domain is the familial. The gendered ontology of liberalism, in Brown's account, is fundamentally incoherent because the autonomous male, who has shed reliance and encumbrance, depends on the nonautonomous subjects of the household to sustain him. Although Brown's principal concern is with minoritized populations who build collective struggles around shared pain, she offers a tantalizing suggestion about how we might understand the distress that hegemonic men experience. The tension between autonomy and dependency that liberal male subjects experience, she argues, marks them as always already wounded, incapable of achieving sovereignty "in the context of a discourse in which its self-making is assumed" (States 67). Because liberal subjectivity is precarious, dependent on the very concepts it disavows and the individuals onto whom those concepts are displaced, psychic pain is always a potential component of what it means to be a liberal male subject.

Yet while these novels call attention to the genuine ontological crises that men experience in ways that ratify Brown's claims, they also provide reasons for thinking that male suffering is not simply a structural effect of liberalism but is also intrinsic to it. In departing from Brown, I would suggest that it is precisely in the moments when the terms of liberal discourse begin to falter, when men are most under duress, that they access significant power and authority. These novels that "Man" does not refer to the male gender; rather, it refers to the "Species" (1.30, 161). Thus, in defining the free individual—"every Man has a Property in his own Person"—Locke may very well be using gender-specific language to describe a gender-neutral individual. But intentionality is ultimately beside the point, since it is the juridical or codified subject with which critics of liberalism have long been concerned. As Luce Irigaray asserts, "[A]ny theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the 'masculine'" (133). See also C. B. MacPherson, who provides the essential account of how a supposedly universal Enlightenment subject is in fact grounded in property.

My thinking has also been stimulated by Lauren Berlant's account of how dominant social groups in twentieth-century U.S. culture respond to challenges to their influence and authority through an idiom of victimization (see Queen). Also see David Savran, whose focus is explicitly on the phenomenon of the white male as victim in contemporary U.S. culture.

John Kucich has also recently sought to reappraise the function of suffering in the Victorian novel. He considers suffering in the context of masochistic fantasies reveling in the glorification of voluntary pain, sacrifice, and surrender. In his view, masochism is "a fantasy structure designed to create or protect fantasies of omnipotence" (26). "Through masochistic fantasy,"

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els frame male suffering as a nonvolitional style—one might even say the style of liberal masculinity itself—expressed through a bodily and linguistic idiom of self-pity, which attempts to manage perceived threats to the self. The interpersonal and social power that men derive from their distress is facilitated by the insatiable demands for sympathy that their self-pitying performances compel from others and the resentment and self-righteousness that psychic pain fuels within them, facilitating their virulent reassertions of sovereignty.

I employ the term sincere postures to describe Brontë’s and Eliot’s efforts to figure the gestural and rhetorical modes of male suffering as suffering while also recognizing them as calculated strategies. Representing male suffering as both authentic and histrionic, indicative of both powerlessness and power, enables these novelists to acknowledge the emotional violence that men inflict on women but then to assign a specific cause for it largely outside men’s individual control. This is less an effort to excuse such behavior than it is, I think, an attempt to authorize Brontë’s and Eliot’s own respective projects of establishing sympathy as the foundational virtue of the new bourgeois owning class whose hegemony they help to bring about. If men’s behavior toward women can be seen as emanating from genuine distress rather than inherent misogyny, women can play an active role in offering the kind of succor that might heal the wound and stop the violence that male suffering produces. However, this paradox, in which suffering is at once

Kucich argues, “the pain of impotence and abandonment is transformed into fantasies of total control, the fear of annihilation into fantasies of absolute destructive power, the agony of helplessness into fantasies of benign dependence, and the pain of solitude into fantasies of splendid isolation” (26–27). While I too am interested in how subjects obtain individual and social authority in moments of distress, the role of suffering in the consolidation of middle-class culture, and the ways in which characters are represented as both victims and oppressors, my study offers a more explicitly materialist understanding of male psychic pain.

Unlike recent scholarship that considers masculinity as a form of self-stylization, this essay emphasizes masculinity’s coercive rather than volitional aspects. The critical preoccupation with Victorian masculinity as a conscious project of rhetorical construction unduly emphasizes individual preference and choice. On masculinity as an adjustable style, see James Adams; Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffin; and Herbert L. Sussman.

In formulating my argument, I have benefited from Nancy Armstrong’s differently focused study in which she contends that mid-Victorian fiction evokes readerly pity for men in part by converting male hostility into female aggression. The novel thus defends “masculinity against its own violence” by featuring “precocious women” whose behavior could enable readers to see male aggression as a form of self-defense (83, 84). By disturbing the gendered equilibrium that sustains liberal individualism, the women in Victorian fiction draw readers’ attention away from the contradictions of male subjectivity. Novels persuade readers “to forgive” the very behaviors in men that they pathologize women for possessing (80).

So important is sympathy to Eliot’s fiction that critics have granted it foundational status, referring to her “doctrine of sympathy” (Noble 55–56) and “religion of humanity” (Paris, “George Eliot’s” 13). Also see Ellen Argyros. (For more skeptical views on Eliot’s sympathy, see Christopher Lane; and see Bernard Paris’s Rereading, a qualification and partial repudiation of his earlier views.) On sympathy and Wuthering Heights, see John Hagan and Ivan Kreilkamp. Nineteenth-century readers, of course, found the novel’s moral and meaning elusive, although the end gave them hope for sympathetic identification between the younger Cathy and her cousin, Hareton Earnshaw (Allott 221, 228, 232).
both a symptom of masculine precariousness and incoherency and an asset for a man’s preservation and reassertion of authority, allows Brontë and Eliot to resolve one problem only to introduce another. If suffering is constitutive of masculine dominance, then the concept of reparative compassion is incoherent because male authority relies on appeals to female sympathy to keep it intact. In my reading, these novels are poised between conservation and critique, producing an ambivalence that can be reconciled only through “imaginary or formal ‘solutions’” (Jameson 79) to the disquieting paradox of liberal masculinity.

Sincere Postures

In *Wuthering Heights* Emily Brontë depicts the historical transition from the interdependence characteristic of farming families such as the Earnshaws, whose labor and social relations are intertwined, to the independence characteristic of the genteel Lintons, whose lifestyle is severed from the material conditions that generate and sustain it. In comparison to the capitalist economy that supplants it, the agrarian system fosters less gender-specific economic dependency because of the necessarily interdependent nature of labor for collective survival (see Fraser and Gordon). Reliance on others, therefore, is not stigmatized, and the conditions of subordination that the daughter, Catherine, the servant Joseph, or the nanny, Nelly Dean, occupy are different in degree rather than kind.

When Mr. Earnshaw brings young Heathcliff home following a visit to Liverpool, however, the boy’s suspect racial origins and lack of generational ties lead the patriarch and his son and heir, Hindley, to differentiate between the general subordination of Catherine and the farm laborers and the specific racial inferiority they ascribe to Heathcliff: “[T]ake it as a gift of God, though it’s as dark almost as if it came from the devil,” Mr. Earnshaw says in handing the child over to his wife’s care (34). Refusing to use a gendered pronoun, Mr. Earnshaw casts Heathcliff as so “unlocatable” within the English social body as to “have no person-

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7 I am conscious of what may appear to be my lack of attention to the different historical and geographical contexts in which Brontë and Eliot wrote and set their novels. *Wuthering Heights* was written in 1847 but set in the Yorkshire moors of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. *The Mill on the Floss* was written in 1860 but set in a Midlands provincial town in the late 1820s and early 1830s. However, these novels are focused on slightly different phases of the same historical transition in which the new bourgeois property-owning class is still in the process of securing its hegemony. Despite their differences, these novels are so similar, as I will develop, in ways that seem to suggest that liberal masculinity is something of an ongoing social crisis. Indeed, while holding firm to a notion of historical incommensurability, I would also argue that male suffering in these novels is genealogically linked to the kinds of twentieth- and twenty-first-century expressions of anguish by various elites (most often male) who feel that they, and not those they have historically subordinated, are the true victims of injustice. This trend is ably analyzed by Berlant (*Queen*) and Savran.

8 As Berlant points out, while ambivalence is commonly understood as “uncertainty, obscurity or relentlessly assertive self doubt,” it is, “in its strongest versions, a pulling-apart or antithetical attraction that cannot be overcome by synthesis, will or better reason” (“Compulsion” 228)—hence fantasies of resolution that have become so naturalized that they are no longer recognized as fantasies (228). On the role of the novel in managing ambivalence, see Armstrong.
hood” (Helsinger, Rural 205). Indeed, he is, Nelly Dean remarks, not “a creature of my own species” and thus occupies a peculiar position of dependency within the Earnshaw household (160). A term that had once referred to a social relation, as Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon point out in their historical genealogy, dependency is redefined in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as “an individual character trait” (315). Thus Heathcliff, dependent because he is coded as racially inferior, is excluded from the familial network and idiom—otherwise capacious enough to encompass Joseph, Nelly Dean, and other nonblood relations—that would render his work part of the collective labor of the Heights.9

Heathcliff’s subsequent mastery, during a period of absence from Yorkshire, of the capitalist system of accumulation and possession reflects a new historical reality. Fitting into neither of the two classes represented in the novel, the traditional yeomanry and the landed gentry, Heathcliff returns as a self-made man, having gained an education and amassed enough cultural capital to purchase “the expensive commodity of gentility” (Eagleton 54). He now appears as “tall, athletic, well-formed,” with an “upright carriage,” a manner “dignified, quite divested of roughness,” and a countenance that “looked intelligent, and retained no marks of former degradation” (94). Once dismissed as “unfit for a decent house,” Heathcliff—“Mr. Heathcliff I should say,” Nelly Dean notes in correcting her narrative—has now obtained the attributes of the proprietary subject that make him “worthy of anyone’s regard” (49, 100, 98).

With this transformation in bodily demeanor and comportment comes a rapacious desire for property—“Avarice is growing with him a besetting sin” (102)—and revenge that reflects a kind of horrific masculinism. Heathcliff’s accumulation of cultural capital, he believes, will elevate him and his offspring from the condition of intrinsic dependency to which he had been cast by Mr. Earnshaw and Hindley, thereby rendering their descendents as reliant on his family. “I want the triumph of seeing my descendent fairly lord [of the Earnshaw and Linton] estates; my child hiring their children, to till their fathers’ lands for wages,” he declares (208). Possession of landed property reflects a man’s possession of property in himself (to use John Locke’s phrase) (227, 287–88). It signifies boundedness, autonomy, and security; control over one’s dominion; the capacity to engage in a system of exchange with other proprietors; and the ability to maintain one’s own lifestyle through the wage labor of others. Yet the logic of ownership that Heathcliff now shares with Catherine’s husband, Edgar Linton, is shown to have a corrupting influence on the only affective relationship he has known. Having refashioned himself within the bourgeois discourse of gentility in order to ask Catherine for her hand in marriage, Heathcliff, finding her already married, can no longer offer her either the “asexual” relationship of their childhood, when their “equality” was predicated on relative androgyny (Helsinger 209; Eagleton 53), or an alternative to her genteel union with Edgar. For the autonomy that Edgar and Heathcliff both

9 Mr. Earnshaw does demonstrate favoritism toward Heathcliff in ways that make Catherine and Hindley jealous, yet he always insists on the former’s difference from his two children: Heathcliff is “the poor, fatherless child” (36).
prize must necessarily be sustained through the sexual divisions of the household, in which the wife occupies the dependent position, the “natural” condition of subordination.

Edgar, whose gentility is enabled by the productivity of others, conceives of his relationship with Catherine in proprietary terms. He sees her “intimacy” with his rival, Heathcliff, as a frontal assault on the notions of propriety that he cherishes (117). Whenever she mentions Heathcliff’s name with fondness, Edgar “contrives to be sick . . . either [experiencing] a head-ache or a pang of envy” or tears (97). When his “utter[ly] pettish, silly speeches,” designed to remonstrate with Catherine for being “cruel and selfish for wishing to talk [about Heathcliff],” fail to force her into a choice between the two men, he makes his position explicit. “Will you give up Heathcliff hereafter, or will you give up me?” he demands. “It is impossible for you to be my friend and his at the same time; and I absolutely require to know which you choose” (118). Edgar cannot imagine a scenario in which Catherine can maintain relationships with both himself and Heathcliff—the two men who are, in their different ways, dear to her.

Similarly, Heathcliff insists that Catherine’s marriage to Edgar is an expression of cruelty directed solely against him, and he proclaims that love is measurable, with the one who experiences it most fervently having the greater claim on her: “Can you compare my feelings respecting Catherine, to his?” he asks Nelly Dean (148). Heathcliff cannot grasp the possibility that Catherine can be both “over fond” of Edgar and yet so attached to Heathcliff that she sees him as a part of herself (91). Perceiving that Catherine has treated him “infernally,” Heathcliff suffers a deep psychic wound for which his marriage to Isabella Linton, Edgar’s sister, serves as revenge. “I’m not your husband, you needn’t be jealous of me,” Heathcliff says to Catherine, using proprietary language in reverse to establish his claim on her (112). Because Catherine refuses to renounce her marriage and does not demonstrate the jealousy he demands—“If you like Isabella, you shall marry her,” she notes matter-of-factly (112)—Heathcliff becomes increasingly confused and apoplectic. He begins by pleading: “Oh, Cathy! Oh, my life! How can I bear it” (158). Then he protests: “Don’t torture me till I am mad as yourself” (159). And finally he denounces her: “You teach me now how cruel you’ve been—cruel and false. Why did you despise me? Why did you betray your own heart, Cathy?” (161).

Calliing attention to the conflict between masculinity’s putatively autarkic nature and the bonds that Heathcliff requires for emotional nourishment and sustenance, Brontë figures his behavior, like Edgar’s, as both sincere and posed for effect, leaving emotional and physical devastation in its wake. Having labored to become independent only to find Catherine married to someone else, Heathcliff experi-

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10 Patsy Stoneman provides an important corrective to the view that Catherine must choose either Edgar or Heathcliff (xxxvi–xxxvii). This view is explicit, for example, in Hagan’s study of the novel, in which he argues that Catherine has a “wholly unreasonable expectation” that Edgar and Heathcliff should both be a part of her life and is “wholly unable” to recognize the “natural” logic of either/or (307). On the link between monogamy and the concentration of wealth and property, including the wife herself, in the hands of one man, see Friedrich Engels.
ences the collapse of the gendered dualisms on which his new identity relies.\(^\text{11}\) His obstructed agency, marking the point where the liberty to pursue his desired goal becomes the encumbrance of a love that cannot be fulfilled, engenders all-consuming feelings of suffering. “I have no pity! I have no pity!” he exclaims, when the revenge he attempts to exact on Catherine renders Isabella, disavowed by her brother as well as abused by Heathcliff, collateral damage. “The worms writh,” he exclaims, “the more I yearn to crush out their entrails” (152)—echoing, as Florence Swinton Dry points out, Walter Scott’s *Black Dwarf*: “And why . . . should other worms complain to me when they are trodden on, since I am myself lying crushed and writhing under the chariot-wheel?” (qtd. in Dry 19–20). Heathcliff experiences the agony that comes from having been vulnerable to another and the feeling of dispossession that flows from grief, which he seeks to vanquish through his rage. Having once been branded as intrinsically dependent on others, Heathcliff sought to overcome this stigma by eradicating any emotional trace of his reliance on others. Yet his feelings of vulnerability, which Nelly Dean notices he disavows at the very moment when they are most intense, register the profound lack he feels when Catherine rejects him: “He held a silent combat with his inward agony, defying . . . my sympathy with an unflinching, ferocious stare,” Nelly observes. “Poor wretch! I thought; ‘you have a heart and nerves the same as your brother men! Why should you be so anxious to conceal them?’” (166). No matter how untrustworthy Nelly may be as a narrator, Brontë uses Heathcliff’s rejection of Nelly’s sympathy to emphasize the psychic pain that comes from attempting to embody the myth of masculinity through the disavowal of emotional dependence.

This suggests to me an underlying motivation to represent male violence as originating in a genuine wound—the cultural expectation of male sovereignty and the actuality of dependency and vulnerability—so that sympathy can be posited as the resource for its amelioration. Heal the wound and male cruelty, too, will cease; hence Brontë’s repeated framing of Heathcliff’s distress as sincere. The problem, however, is that the novel has already shown how appeals to womanly sympathy are one of the very mechanisms that keep male dominance intact. Catherine recognizes an attempt in each man’s histrionic but sincere agony—Heathcliff’s violent rages and Edgar’s whimperings—to appeal to her sympathies, without regard for her own distress, in the hope that she will offer both amelioration and resolution by renouncing one man for the other. “You and Edgar have broken my heart,” she tells Heathcliff in a moment of defeat. “And you both come to bewail the deed to me, as if you were the people to be pitied” (158). Demanding compassion for themselves, the men in Catherine’s life figure her as responsible for both the amelioration of

\(^{11}\) While a number of critics have sought to understand the violence Heathcliff inflicts in the second half of the novel as originating in his childhood deprivation (Fike; Paris, “Hush”; Schapiro), Rachel Ablow has recently argued that “however much Heathcliff may claim that his complaints are legitimate, it remains the case that as a foundling he has no obvious rights at Wuthering Heights” (63). “Whatever assistance or employment he receives from the family is therefore,” she continues, “necessarily a species of generosity” (63). For Ablow, Heathcliff is motivated instead by a will to power, “a way to correct the wrong that has been committed against every man in not being given absolute power” (64). By contrast, I am stressing a more historically specific understanding of Heathcliff’s motivations.
their suffering and their ongoing emotional sustenance, thereby endeavoring to stabilize the gendered dualisms on which their identities are predicated.

Yet what would appear to be an incisive critique of the mechanisms by which male rule is maintained, in which Edgar’s and Heathcliff’s suffering in effect preempts Catherine’s, is transmuted into an account of an individual woman’s deficiency: “I shall not pity you, not I,” Catherine exclaims (158). With this statement, the novel redirects attention away from the constitutive tensions of liberal masculinity and toward Catherine’s willful refusal to achieve the kind of self-transcendence that such a moment is imagined to offer women. “I care nothing for your sufferings,” she continues. “Why shouldn’t you suffer? I do!” (158). While Brontë is hardly an advocate for the ethereal angel of the house, I read this moment as implicitly assuming that a woman, precisely because she has suffered, should be able to recognize the legitimacy of a man’s distress as well. By stigmatizing Catherine for withholding her sympathy from Edgar and Heathcliff, Brontë is able to deflect attention away from this seemingly irresolvable social problem and to suggest that healing can in fact take place if only the right woman comes along—as she will in the person of Catherine’s daughter and namesake during the second half of the novel. Literary criticism often posits a direct connection between Catherine’s rebelliousness and Brontë’s own. But the formal and diegetical confusion effected by the duplication of Catherine as the mother’s and daughter’s first name reads more like a rebuke of the former’s behavior than an unambiguous identification with it. Serving as a corrective to her mother, the younger Catherine facilitates the transition into modernity that the elder Catherine had sought to thwart.

George Eliot similarly foregrounds the insecurities and fears of proprietary men, focusing on how, by drawing out sympathy or guilt from others, perceived threats to the self become occasions for inflicting pain or opportunities to forestall challenges to one’s authority. Like Brontë, Eliot is interested in the moments of violence or manipulation that originate in the tensions among a discourse of sovereignty, the actualities of dependency, and the historically specific anxieties about a form of identity not yet fully consolidated. In her representation of Tom Tulliver’s coming of age, Eliot tracks the effects on men of the transformation from yeomanry to bourgeois capitalism. While Eliot is not blind to the gender inequalities of agrarian community life, she suggests that its ideology is premised on paternalistic rather than proprietary assumptions. This shift from paternal to proprietary relations, the novel suggests, is coeval with the movement from an agrarian to a capitalist economy.

Industrialization and the concomitant expansion of mercantile capitalism, represented by the increasing prominence of Guest & Co. over the course of the novel, generate economic pressures on agrarian communities to adapt or be swept aside. Mr. Tulliver certainly recognizes the rapidity of economic and social change; by educating his son, Mr. Tulliver expects that Tom will be able to follow the “tricks o’ these fellows as talk fine and write wi’ a flourish” and thus ensure victory in

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12 As one contemporary reviewer puts it, in the story of “Catherine the younger . . . we [the readers] have some hope . . . at the last” (Allott 232).
a complicated legal entanglement over water rights (56). Tom’s education lays the groundwork for the management and protection of the farm as well as his attainment of a higher-class status. Mr. Tulliver is unable to grasp, however, that the entire agrarian culture is undergoing fundamental change. As an entrepreneurial spirit begins to take hold among the citizens of St. Ogg’s, the Tulliver way of life becomes increasingly obsolete.13 Once lawyer Wakem gains the mill, in order to win it back “Tom submits himself completely and at great emotional cost to the commercial system which defeated his father” (Carroll 123). In other words, Tom must reject the relatively nurturing, intimate, and connected (though by no means egalitarian) ideology of agrarianism to embrace, instead, the principles of laissez-faire capitalism with its emphasis on the responsibility of individuals to make their own way in the world. Part of what Tom must renounce in order to become an autonomous male is any hint of femininity. Speaking to his Uncle Deane, and attempting to stamp out the traces of what the narrator describes as his “girl’s susceptibility” to tears, Tom “bit his lips hard; he felt as if the tears were rising, and he would rather die than let them” (210, 315). Because the emerging market economy transforms dependence into a stigmatized character trait, able-bodied men, as Eliot demonstrates, must eradicate, through regimes of self-discipline, any indication of dependency, a condition constitutive of earlier social relations but subsequently coded as feminine, if not female, and personified by women and disabled men.

The capitalist system to which Tom submits is shown to be a reconstituting force for the family as well. As it did in the agrarian society of Wuthering Heights, dependency, rather than being an individual character trait, signifies a social relation based on economic conditions described in the early portions of the novel. While still hierarchical, therefore, the fictional world that Eliot presents in the first half of the novel is one in which women, children, and workers all contribute to the family’s economy. St. Ogg’s is hardly “a feminist utopia,” as Joshua Esty points out, yet Eliot’s novel shows that women held “distinct powers” and positions of responsibility within an economy based on agriculture (149–50). Thus, after the collapse of her family’s finances and the loss of the mill, Maggie expresses a desire to help pay her father’s debts through sewing, thereby contributing her labor in an effort to resolve what she sees as a collective problem. Tom refuses to allow it: “‘I don’t like my sister to do such things,’ said Tom, ‘I’ll take care that the debts are paid, without your lowering yourself in that way’” (386). The possessive pronouns italicized by Eliot underscore Tom’s assertion of autonomy and emphasize his paying off his father’s debt rather than protecting Maggie, who is figured here as an owned object (“my sister”). Indeed, his insistence that Maggie remain in the home with no tangible responsibilities reflects the sexual division of labor in the emerg-

13 Uncle Deane makes this point to Tom in explaining why Mr. Tulliver’s refusal to modernize represents a backward form of economic thinking: “It’s this steam, you see, that has made the difference,” Deane says in advocating the mill’s potential. “[I]t drives on every wheel double pace and the wheel of Fortune along with ‘em” (507).
ing economy. In a consolidating market culture, public and private spheres become ideologically divided as separate and gendered spaces.14

The family is therefore redefined: no longer a zone of interdependence, it is the ballast of a masculinist liberal subject whose “natural” domain is the public (economic) arena. Insisting that his sister not work, Tom wants Maggie to exemplify the abstract virtues that undergird a logic of private domesticity in which she is sequestered from the sphere of capitalist production. The gendered ontology of liberalism, as Brown points out, requires the distinction between autonomy and dependents/dependency, since “a world of unrelieved autonomous individuals is an unlivable world: it offers no bases for association and connection other than utilitarian or instrumental ones” (States 157). Put another way, Eliot represents the home as the anchor for the self-interested male, who relies on the selflessness of its occupants to sustain him.

When an occupant of the selfless realm of domestic dependency manifests an orientation toward the self, Eliot suggests, the male subject, who has been laboring to achieve a state of sovereignty, experiences an ontological crisis because the basis of his identity appears to be collapsing. Recognizing the danger in seeing Philip Wakem without Tom’s approval, Maggie nervously tells Philip: “[Y]ou had better not take more notice of my brother than just bowing to him. He once told me not to speak to you again, and he doesn’t change his mind” (403). Tom’s control of Maggie’s relationship with Philip, and later with Stephen, reflects the general social trend of reconceiving female members of a household as privately possessed objects. According to the narrator, Tom’s “strong, self-asserting nature” insists on being “dominant” at precisely the moments when he perceives his own inferiority (319). Thus Tom experiences Maggie’s relationships with Philip and Stephen as challenging his authority and threatening his dominion. When Maggie returns to the mill after eloping with Stephen, she faces an angry Tom and endures his remonstrance:

“What will keep you?” said Tom, with cruel bitterness. “Not religion—not your natural feelings of gratitude and honour. And he—he would deserve to be shot, if it were not—But you are ten times worse than he is. I loathe your character and your conduct. You struggled with your feelings, you say. Yes! I have had feelings to struggle with—but I conquered them. I have had a harder life than you have had; but I have found my comfort in doing my duty.” (613)

The chiasmatic reversal of Tom’s affective rhetoric—moving away from Maggie’s feelings toward his own, from “you struggled with your feelings” to “I have had feelings to struggle with”—occurs at precisely the moment that Maggie has made an implicit assertion of self-ownership, with disastrous results for herself,

14 Men “who sought to be ‘someone’” in this new economy, “to count as individuals because of their wealth, their command or their capacity to influence people . . . embedded [themselves] in networks of familial and female support which underpinned their rise to public prominence” (Davidoff and Hall 18). The family was therefore the “crown of the [male capitalist] enterprise” and was valued by society primarily in terms of its public character (18).
that undermines not merely Tom’s authority but also his right to dispose of his own property as he wishes. The rhetoric of Tom’s suffering trumps Maggie’s even though, as a result of her elopement, popular opinion in St. Ogg’s casts her as a fallen woman. If Maggie and Stephen have in fact engaged in sexual relations, then the value of Maggie as the possessor of internalized, spiritual essences that are the private property of the male head of the family is substantially diminished.

Tom therefore expresses himself as the aggrieved party and identifies Maggie as the source of his suffering. Although Tom insists that he has mastered his feelings, the syntax of the sentence in which he compares Maggie with Stephen, with its hesitations and interrupted train of thought—“And he—he would deserve to be shot, if it were not—But you are ten times worse than he is”—suggests a lack of control for which blame serves a compensatory function. To claim that Maggie is ten times worse than Stephen is to ascribe to her a greater complicity, thus figuring her in some undefined sense as being more responsible than Stephen. But it flows freely from this kind of logic that Tom sees Stephen as a victim and thus as more absolvable than Maggie. The consensus of St. Ogg’s is summed up in similar fashion: “As for poor Mr. Stephen Guest, he was rather pitiable than otherwise: a young man of five and twenty is not to be too severely judged in these cases—he is really very much at the mercy of a designing bold girl. And it was clear that he had given way in spite of himself” (621). As a final act of punishment for Maggie, Tom expels her from the family home, claiming that the very sight of her is “hateful to me” (614). In their childhood, Tom imagined that he would supply Maggie’s needs (he “meant always to take care of her” [92]) and regulate her conduct (“punish her when she did wrong” [92]) according to a form of discipline that protected the integrity of the family: “[T]he right thing was to correct them [errant family members] severely, if they were other than a credit to the family, but still not to alienate from them the smallest rightful share in the family shoe-buckles and other property” (365). Now, however, Tom announces his decisive break with the values of the agrarian culture, the kinship system in which he was raised, and the forms of paternalistic punishment that, while severe, did not cast individuals out of the family.

Despite the consensus of St. Ogg’s, Stephen seems to be the last person in the novel who could legitimately describe himself in pitying terms. His freedom has been secured by his family’s liquid property, the “largest oil-mill and the most extensive wharf in St Ogg’s” (469). Indeed, property confers on him both social and political power; he intends to serve as the town’s representative in Parliament. With his “diamond ring, attar of roses, and air of nonchalant leisure at twelve o’clock in the day” (469), Stephen appears to transcend the discursive contexts of work (his sole responsibility is to “sign cheques”) and masculinity in which male subjects are formed (314). Yet, as the passage with which I opened this essay demonstrates, he repeatedly relies on the idiom of suffering in his own self-presentations.

Stephen’s agony, the novel suggests, stems from the tension between the emotional bonds that sustain human life, for which he longs but which he must (casually and nonchalantly) disavow, and the transcendent nature that he is compelled to embody. Thus, at the very moment when Maggie wants to end their romantic relationship because she realizes that the consequences of their elopement will
include the loss of her reputation and possibly her expulsion from her family (an “irrevocable wrong that must blot her life” [596]), Stephen frames himself as the one truly aggrieved. His statement “Of course it is of no consequence what a man has to suffer—it is only your woman’s dignity that you care about” exemplifies the heightened emotional demands on women under capitalism (566).

Writing to Maggie two months after their elopement and subsequent separation, Stephen presents himself as psychically and emotionally tethered to the moment of their parting, interpellating Maggie as a figure wielding vast ameliorative power: “[C]all me back to life and goodness! I am banished from both now” (647). Stephen’s pain, which he describes as incommensurable, has both a temporal and a spatial dimension: “Perhaps they tell you I have been ‘travelling.’ My body has been dragged about somewhere; but I have never travelled from the hideous place where you left me” (647). By laying stress on Stephen’s use of the first-person nominative in his insistence on never having “travelled from the hideous place” where Maggie left him, the novel signals the kind of power one can obtain from a socially privileged position of suffering. His exorbitant expressions of self-pity, conveyed in a letter that Maggie “did not read . . . [but rather] heard him uttering,” are inflected by a self-righteous authority that has a distinct effect on her: Stephen’s “voice shook her with its old strange power,” and his “tone of misery . . . made the balance [that is, her resolve to leave him for the sake of others] tremble” (647–48). Through his suffering, and in his figuration of Maggie as the one who can soothe his pain, Stephen exerts control while ascribing power to her. When Maggie rebuffs Stephen’s further advances, he exclaims:

*Good God! . . . what a miserable thing a woman’s love is to a man’s. I could commit crimes for you. . . . But you don’t love me—if you had a tithe of the feeling for me that I have for you,—it would be impossible to you to think for a moment of sacrificing me. But it weighs nothing with you that you are robbing me of my life’s happiness.* (603–4)

Equating love to a compulsory tax that Maggie does not feel compelled to pay, Stephen argues that she renders him a victim through a kind of double theft: first she has stolen his heart, then she has robbed him of his “life’s happiness” by refusing to be with him. He figures himself as passive in relation to Maggie: *she* stole his heart, *she* robbed him of happiness. Stephen thus proclaims himself to be the object of Maggie’s “torture” and appeals to what he thinks should be her innate self-effacing qualities, which would put his feelings before hers (606).

Whereas Brontë suggests that Catherine is not selfless enough, Eliot points out that even apparently genuine acts of self-transcendence can be seen as an obstacle to male agency. Ironically, Stephen interprets Maggie’s selflessness—placing social and familial expectations as well as promises and prior commitments over her own sexual desires, no matter how misguided such an effort might be—as a form of self-interestedness. By insisting on her right to put other feelings, though not his, before her own, Maggie upsets the gender equilibrium that requires her to be selfless in fulfilling *his* self-interested aspirations. For Stephen, the world briefly
becomes unlivable because she has disrupted the gendered dualism of autonomy and dependence.

Just as Heathcliff and Edgar subject Catherine to their proprietary logic, both Tom and Stephen perceive Maggie as that ethereal nonautonomous entity who embodies and sustains the emotional bonds and relations that a liberal capitalist order, with its emphasis on sovereignty and self-reliance, disavows. When Maggie resists or thwarts their expectations, they experience the uncertainties of self for which histrionic suffering—at once sincere, because it is intrinsic to the discursive context of liberal capitalism from which they emerge, and posed for effect, because it is a way of coping with perceived threats to the self—serves a compensatory function. Their rhetorical and gestural expressions of distress draw out Maggie’s guilt by framing her actions as selfish, insisting that she has put her own feelings ahead of others, and therefore identifying her as the source of their suffering. In so doing, they also attempt to elicit her sympathy and demand redress.

By demonstrating that male suffering is genuine, Eliot places the behavior in a wider context that can serve as the basis for compassionate understanding and the possibility for healing. But in emphasizing this authenticity, she also reveals how suffering is a kind of default position for men, placing women in an impossible situation. In ways that resonate with Catherine Earnshaw’s observation that the men in her life “bewail” their suffering as if they “were the people to be pitied” on the occasions when she is most aggrieved (158), Maggie exclaims to Stephen at the end of The Mill on the Floss, “I have suffered and had no one to pity me” (605). Unlike Brontë, who assigns blame to Catherine for withholding her sympathy, Eliot has Maggie offer an immediate qualification: “and now I have made others suffer” (605). Yet Maggie’s resolve to be sympathetic to those who have shown little compassion toward her amounts to much the same effect. The choice that the novel has represented until now as repressive—Maggie can either give in to Stephen when, having taken advantage of her wandering mind to row off into the sunset, he forces them to spend the night together, or she can return home to face both the rebuke of her brother and social stigmatization—is transmuted into a vague fantasy of female empowerment in which Maggie evacuates her sorrow, with which no one has empathized, to take responsibility for the distress of her suitors Philip and Stephen and her brother Tom.

“Ordinary Resources”

So invested are these novels in tracing the changing nature of dependency—from a form of economic social relation to a stigmatized individual condition—that both works prominently feature disabled men. Indeed, the links among male property ownership, psychic distress, and suffering as a mode of authority are equally vis-

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15 When Eliot lauds “woman’s peculiar constitution for a special moral influence” (Letters 4:468), she is, as Bernadette Waterman Ward points out in her gloss of this statement, “invoking the notion that someone who refrains from vengeance is especially virtuous and can transform others with her virtue” (109)—exactly what Maggie attempts to do here. See also Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder, especially 3–20.
ible in Brontë’s and Eliot’s representations of male debility. Within the emerging market economy these novels depict, dependency is feminized and disabled men are seen as sharing “the ultimate stigma, the weakness imprinted by nature” that is frequently ascribed to women, who are themselves metonymically linked to animals (Horkheimer and Adorno 206). Morally and physiologically, as Brown points out, women have long “appeared to be in a natural and permanent state of entrapment” (Manhood 55). Following the Enlightenment, women became the “embodiment of biological function, an image of nature” (Horkheimer and Adorno 206). Infantilized, feminized, or animalized at different historical moments, disabled men were seen as having more in common with women than with able-bodied men. During the period of transition from an agrarian to a market economy that both novels track, the historically specific form of difference ascribed to women and disabled men is their seeming personification of dependency. Yet these two novels, rather than continually foregrounding similarities between women and disabled men, actually emphasize the differences between them in ways that complicate the functions of difference and displacement—or the functions imagined by these novelists—within the emerging liberal capitalist social order. Both novels focus on how disabled men, figured within Victorian culture as biologically determined and therefore dependent, attempt to transform physiological debility from a sign of weakness, and therefore an indication of the disabled male’s cultural alignment with females, into a mechanism for self-assertion in a system of male rule.16

Born into a world of privilege, Linton Heathcliff—a “faint-hearted creature” with a body that is “extremely slight” and whose “looks and movements” are “very languid” (211, 216)—is raised to be a “gentleman’s son” (195). When his mother, Isabella, dies, he comes to Thrushcross Grange, “wrapped in a warm, fur-lined cloak, as if it had been winter,” to continue his gentlemanly education under the care of his Uncle Edgar (200). Heathcliff, Linton’s father, sees his son’s dependent condition as a marker of effeminacy: he is “more a lass than a lad” (221). Nelly Dean describes him as a “pale, delicate, and effeminate boy” (200). She places great emphasis on Linton’s peculiar somatic traits, coded as female, and his need for warmth in the summer, when the healthy agrarian male body would be at its most active outdoors. “He must have a fire in the middle of summer,” Nelly explains to the visiting Mr. Lockwood, “he must always have sweets and dainties, and always milk, milk for ever—heeding naught how the rest of us are pinched in winter—and there he’ll sit, wrapped in his furred cloak in his chair by the fire” (211). Linton’s desire for milk, like that of a child still nursing at his mother’s breast, suggests

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16 The disabled are largely absent from classical liberal theory. In accounting for this absence, Carol A. Breckenridge and Candace Vogler argue that “the ‘person’ at the center of . . . traditional liberal theory is not simply an individual locus of subjectivity (however psychologically fragmented, incoherent, or troubled). He is an able-bodied locus of subjectivity . . . one who can imagine himself largely self-sufficient because almost everything conspires to help him take his enabling body for granted (even when he is scrambling for the means of subsistence)” (350). Because critiques of liberalism tend either to replicate the erasure of the disabled male body or to posit that body as a site of subversion, these novels are particularly interesting in the way that they stress commonality among men—legally and emotionally.
a state of arrested development in which his progression into manhood remains incomplete. Indeed, Cathy, often "stroking his curls, and kissing his cheek," regularly offers "him tea in her saucer like a baby." This pleases him, Nelly observes, "for he was not much better" than an infant (201). Linton further instructs Cathy in one of her many visits to the Heights to "[s]it on the settle and let me lean on your knee—That's as mama used to do, whole afternoons together" (242).

Linton's "delicate constitution" casts him into a condition of dependency, figured as akin to a domestic animal or a suckling child, that confirms both Heathcliff's rugged yeoman manliness and Edgar's refined sensibility and gentility. For Heathcliff, understanding manliness to connote energy, virility, and strength, Linton's demeanor and his physically weak body represent all that is wrong with genteel masculinity, in which bourgeois ideology has elevated women to the role of civilizing power. As Heathcliff contemptuously declares when meeting Linton for the first time, "Thou art thy mother's child, entirely!" (207). Similarly, Edgar, whom Heathcliff describes as a "slavering, shivering thing" (115), is figured as the embodiment of gentrified values, occasionally giving in to "nervous trembling" and "anguish and humiliation" and unable to defend himself physically (115). Yet Linton's very excessiveness establishes Edgar's values and mannerisms as the ideological norm within the fictional society of the novel. As a marker of excess, beyond which bourgeois masculinity becomes more like femininity and femininity becomes more like asexuality (the dependent animal or child), Linton functions for Edgar as the exception that normalizes and codifies his own social position. Indeed, Linton demonstrates how certain bodies and specific behaviors come to signify as manly or unmanly. The novel thus shows how the abject other is necessary for Heathcliff's as well as Edgar's sense of self.

Linton's social positionality, the novel shows, generates a wounded masculinity that would seem at first to foreclose the possibility of identifying with able-bodied men. However, recognizing an opportunity to become subjectively whole—bounded and autonomous—by becoming the head of a household, which is to say a property owner with nonautonomous dependents subordinate to him, Linton draws on his debility for specific ends. Increasingly expressing himself through an idiom of suffering, Linton foregrounds his weak constitution as a means of both avoiding the rugged activities that occupy the residents of the Heights and securing and maintaining Cathy's constant attention. Lamenting his condition, he tells Cathy that "to walk four miles would kill me" (217); he complains that writing letters to her "tired me greatly" (237); and, as Nelly notes, he occasionally "wail[s] aloud for the very pity of himself" (240). Linton's understanding of himself as the embodiment of agony, the novel suggests, performs a very specific type of work: he uses his mental anguish and his physical suffering to elicit sympathy from his cousin. "Papa talks enough of my defects, and shows enough scorn of me, to make it natural I should doubt myself," he tells Cathy. "I am worthless, and bad in temper, and bad in spirit" (254). Linton's rhetoric of suffering is expressed in non-linguistic forms as well. "He sighed and moaned like one under great suffering," Nelly recalls, "and kept it up for a quarter of an hour on purpose to distress his cousin, apparently, for whenever he caught a stifled sob from her, he put renewed pain and pathos into the inflexions of his voice" (240). Nelly recognizes that Lin-
ton’s “ordinary resource[s]” are “moaning and weeping” (273). Through his histrionic self-displays, he manipulates the sympathetic responses of his cousin, who repeatedly runs to his aid. “You must come, to cure me,” he tells her. “You ought to come because you have hurt me—You know you have, extremely! I was not as ill when you entered, as I am at present—was I?” (241).

In addition to his exaggerated performances of physical difference, Linton also manipulates cultural encodings of gender, thereby turning the feelings of masculine inadequacy that he experiences into a resource for dominating his cousin. While arguing over their respective parents’ emotional entanglement, Cathy causes Linton to fall against one arm, and he begins to wail in pain. Distressed by the spectacle, Cathy attempts to bring about a resolution: “I’m sorry I hurt you, Linton!” she said at length, racked beyond endurance. ‘But I couldn’t have been hurt by that little push; and I had no idea that you could, either—you’re not much are you, Linton? Don’t let me go home thinking I’ve done you harm!’” (240). Linton’s slight physical strength, which, as Cathy notes, is not even comparable to a woman’s, becomes one of his greatest rhetorical assets: “You’ve hurt me so, that I shall lie awake all night, choking with this cough! If you had it you’d know what it was—but you’ll be comfortably asleep, while I am in agony” (240).

Linton’s genuine suffering thus has a tactical value or instrumental use. He is able to appeal repeatedly to womanly feeling, which in the nineteenth century was perceived to be more developed than a man’s compassion; through their supposedly greater capacity for sympathy, women like Maggie and Cathy are seen as being able to evacuate their own desires in order to ensure fulfillment on the part of others. When Cathy attempts to leave the Heights after fighting with Linton one afternoon, Nelly Dean notes: “We were recalled by a scream—Linton had slid from his seat on to the hearthstone, and lay writhing in the mere perverseness of an indulged plague of a child, determined to be as grievous and harassing as it can” (240). The scream immediately triggers Cathy’s womanly sympathy, as Nelly perceptively discerns: “[S]he ran back in terror, knelt down, and cried, and soothed, and entreated, till he grew quiet from lack of breath, by no means from compunction at distressing her” (241).

Linton’s “ordinary resources”—his series of self-pitying and compulsory theatrical performances—enable Heathcliff’s plot to kidnap Cathy long enough to force her into marriage with his son. For it is Linton’s lapse into “another paroxysm of helpless fear,” as Nelly calls it, that convinces Cathy to enter the Heights, where she is then imprisoned by Heathcliff (268). After Cathy has been locked up, Nelly confronts Linton, who “lay on the settle . . . sucking a stick of sugar-candy” as if to celebrate his victory (279). Nelly demands that he tell her where Cathy is, to which he replies, “[S]he’s upstairs—she’s not to go; we won’t let her” (279). Linton’s shift here from his predominant use of the first-person nominative (I) to the first-person plural (we) indicates the extent to which his wounded masculinity serves as an enabling mechanism for him to become like other men in the eyes of the law. Linton’s spasmodic episode is a ruse performed for his and his father’s benefit, and Heathcliff responds approvingly: “By chance, you’ve managed tolerably” (273). As Linton later explains to Nelly, his marriage to Cathy ensures that he will be master of the Grange after Edgar dies. “Catherine always spoke of it as her house,” Linton
explains. “It isn’t hers! It’s mine” (280). He understands that the domain of the law is the one place where distinctions between competing definitions of masculinity make no difference. The law of coverture establishes Linton’s legal right over both Cathy and her property. Through the marriage that occurs as a result of his alliance with Heathcliff, Linton assumes his place in the juridically defined system of male rule. In its representation of Linton’s “paroxysm of helpless fear”—a performance that enables him to seize legal control of Cathy and to overcome temporarily the social stigmatization of his disability—the novel suggests that his status as a sufferer, although initially serving as a marker of his departure from agrarian and bourgeois normative conceptions of masculinity, becomes, paradoxically, the means by which he is inscribed into the law as a male head of household.

Like Edgar and Heathcliff, who define themselves against Linton, Tom Tulliver repeatedly agonizes over the threat of biological limitation that Philip Wakem poses. Indeed, Philip—a “pale, puny fellow” suffering from a spinal deformity (234), whose “melancholy” appearance (234), “small, delicate hand[s]” (258), and nerves are “as sensitive as a woman’s”—represents a model against which Tom defines and continually reaffirms his manliness (543). Philip is described by the narrator as “half feminine in sensitiveness,” possessing some of “woman’s intolerant repulsion towards worldliness and the deliberate pursuit of sensual enjoyment” (431). Mr. Tulliver repeatedly refers to Philip as the personification of dependence, claiming that he was brought up “like a girl” (537). One aspect of his being brought up “like a girl” is his having been given an education with no particular purpose; his training in Latin declensions and conjugations, the Greek Euclid, and sketching does not ground him in any practical knowledge. Philip is painfully aware of the extent to which his education has opened up some horizons while foreclosing on others, telling Maggie that “I flutter all ways, and fly in none” (426). Philip understands himself to be pitiable in another way as well: “I have been brought up to no profession. I can’t offer her poverty as well as deformity” (542). His lack of professional training also indicates the extent to which he is dependent on his father and thus in a sense dependent on “whom he belongs to”—a variation on the phrase his father uses to describe female subjugation in marriage (543).

As does Brontë, Eliot shows how the self-pity of disabled men can be a source for male authority. Telling his father that Maggie would never have him for a husband, Philip insists that there is not a “single person in St. Ogg’s who will not tell you that a beautiful creature like her would be throwing herself away on a pitiable object like me” (543). Deploying a rhetoric of suffering, Philip increasingly figures himself as downtrodden: “My life will have nothing great or beautiful in it; I would rather not have lived” (398). In describing his sense of deprivation, Philip confesses to Maggie, “there are many . . . things I long for” (398). He frames his desire by drawing on the language of proprietorship, noting that these are “things that other men have, and that will always be denied me” (398). One such “thing” denied to him is, of course, a spouse. Having acknowledged that Maggie is unlikely to fall in love with him on her own, Philip attempts to appeal to what he perceives to be her essential moral worth by strategically wondering aloud, when they are together, whether she “wouldn’t really be more likely to love a man that other women were not likely to love” (434).
In addition to interpellating Maggie as a moral exception, “more likely to love a man that other women were not likely to love,” Philip also repeatedly calls attention to his difference from other men in order to activate and, as we will see, at times coerce Maggie into sympathetic identification. When Maggie comes to the conclusion that Philip’s nurturing of her passion for education may divide her from her family, she tells him, “I have made up my mind—it is right that we should give each other up, in everything but memory” (425). He responds by appealing to her emotions, urging that they “forget” her resolution for “one half hour—let us talk together a little while—for the last time” (425). As they sit among the Scotch firs, Philip begins another lament about his dilettantish education. When Maggie argues that it might in fact be “a happiness to have so many tastes,” Philip responds “bitterly”:

> It might be a happiness to have many tastes if I were like other men. . . . I might get some power and distinction by mere mediocrity, as they do—at least I should get those middling satisfactions which make men contented to do without great ones. I might think society at St Ogg’s agreeable then. But nothing could make life worth the purchase-money of pain to me but some faculty that would lift me above the dead level of provincial existence. Yes—there is one thing: a passion answers as well as a faculty. (426)

His difference from other men, as Philip articulates it here, is in neither the physical debility with which he lives nor the education that serves as another form of impairment. Instead he argues that he is unlike other men because he will not settle for “power and distinction by mere mediocrity.” Expressing a desire to rise above provincial existence and its “middling” satisfactions through a passion that would burn within him, he activates Maggie’s “own discontent” (426).

Philip, in other words, uses the analogies that structure difference in order to exert authority over Maggie. Conceding and then revalencing his difference from other men, Philip insists that he is a kind of soul mate to Maggie, not someone that she should easily give up. When she persists in arguing that it might be “right to resign ourselves entirely” to the lack of channels by means of which to feed their passions, Philip attempts to reason with her: “‘Yes, Maggie,’ said Philip, vehemently, ‘and you are shutting yourself up in a narrow self-delusive fanaticism which is only a way of escaping pain by starving into dullness all the highest powers of your nature’” (427). The narrator’s differing characterizations of Philip’s speech in these two passages—“bitterly,” “vehemently”—highlight the changes in rhetorical strategy that Philip deploys as he shifts from an idiom of affect (self-pity) to intellect (rational argument).

While this shift may reflect Philip’s heartfelt desire to see Maggie flourish intellectually, it also evinces his own self-interest. Explicitly calling attention to the relationship between sincerity and posturing, the narrator explains: “Philip seriously believed what he said, but he said it with vehemence because it made an argument against the resolution that opposed his wishes” (427). When Maggie remains unconvinced by either his self-pity or his rational argument, Philip turns
to remonstrance. “Don’t persist in this wilful [sic] senseless privation,” he tells her. “It makes me wretched to see you benumbing and cramping your nature in this way” (428). And then he continues in a wistful tone of disappointment: “You were so full of life when you were a child—I thought you would be a brilliant woman—all wit and bright imagination” (428). When the rhetorical resources of self-pity, vehemence, and remonstrance fail him, he resorts to pleading: “Listen to me—let me supply you with books” (429). Philip’s suffering, therefore, potentially yields dividends. He emphasizes his difference from other men in ways that appeal to Maggie’s emotions. When emotional appeals do not work, he attempts to reason with her, then remonstrates with her, and finally tempts her by offering to continue bringing books to her under the guise of facilitating her education.

Linton and Philip, therefore, draw on their suffering as a resource to lure Cathy and Maggie into relationships that will annihilate their dependency. The rhetoric of suffering that defines Linton’s and Philip’s respective self-presentations originates in the tensions between the ideal of masculine self-sufficiency and the particular conditions of dependence in which they find themselves. While physical disability is clearly different from psychic pain, Brontë and Eliot suggest that both able-bodied and disabled men are united in their efforts to realize the liberal formulation of liberty by displacing the categories of dependency, vulnerability, and encumbrance onto women.

(Ir)resolutions

The opposing tendencies I have been tracing suggest that Brontë’s and Eliot’s critiques of liberal masculinity are contained within the sanctified discourse of the woman’s mission. Indeed, both authors remain faithful to the notion of woman’s special moral powers and perpetuate the fantasy of marital reciprocity while leaving the terms of liberalism intact. It is the younger Cathy’s more generous sympathy that Brontë celebrates at the end of the novel: recognizing her downtrodden cousin, Hareton Earnshaw, as a fellow sufferer, Cathy offers him both emotional nourishment and tutorials in literacy. Cathy and Hareton come to recognize the conditions in which they are constituted as individuals. She acknowledges that his attachment to Heathcliff is “stronger than reason could break—chains, forged by habit, which it would be cruel to attempt to loosen” (321); Hareton understands that despite these ties, his and Cathy’s subjective possibilities at the Heights have been limited. Through sympathetic identification and reciprocity as the basis of bourgeois domesticity, males like Hareton appear to break the cycles of violence, thereby ushering in an era of purported domestic tranquility that Brontë was helping to fashion. Thus, in contrast to Heathcliff’s rapacious desire for property as a means of domination, Hareton, the only male character who survives, represents a new model of proprietary subjectivity. Unlike Heathcliff, he embraces his respon-

17 As Armstrong points out, Wuthering Heights attempts to mold “the available examples of masculinity into a ruling-class male who can compete with other men and still be good to women” (84).
sibilities as a landowner while accepting the essential relationality of human life. In *Wuthering Heights*, bourgeois domesticity is posited as the antidote to capitalist self-interest.

Eliot ends her novel on a less celebratory note by suggesting that modern conjugality is founded on psychic pain. In the most literal expression of Eliot’s belief in love as “the mutual subjection of soul between a man and a woman” (*Letters* 468), Stephen and Lucy Guest, who are left standing over Maggie’s grave, have been drawn into “a common current of suffering” (*Mill* 258), their relationship apparently capacious enough for both of them to work through their agony by ritually visiting the site of their friend’s death. While she had earlier linked the domestic ideal with the problem of possessive individualism in Tom’s changing attitudes toward Maggie, Eliot ends *The Mill on the Floss* with an image of marital reciprocity as a balm for interpersonal wounds. Rather than being the possessor of spiritual essences that are the private property of the male head of the family, Lucy has become Stephen’s companion in grief who has apparently set aside her own distress—over Stephen and Maggie’s betrayal—to offer succor to her new husband. It may be marital reciprocity founded on shared grief, but it is a fantasy of marital reciprocity nonetheless.

Brontë’s and Eliot’s proffered solutions emanate from their dissatisfaction with, rather than their rejection of, the liberal ideologies of masculinity and femininity and of the marital institution that enshrines them. Even as they cling to such disaffirming yet naturalized ideologies, these novels provide significant insight into a seemingly intractable social problem by suggesting that male dominance resides not simply in the obfuscated gendered dualisms that authorize male autonomy and female dependency but also in the very moments when these subjective supports fail. Brontë’s and Eliot’s ambivalence, therefore, is an effect of liberalism itself precisely because it has naturalized these ideologies to such an extent that no other alternative is conceivable. Thus male suffering and self-pity are not simply indicative of the constitutive tensions within liberalism’s conception of masculinity. They are in fact the very mechanisms that keep liberalism’s gendered ontology intact by generating both ambivalence and the fantasies that “resolve” it.

Works Cited


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18 Both novels seek to resolve their ambivalence, torn as they are between the antithetical tendencies of conservation and critique, through a mode of temporalization. By setting their novels in a time that precedes their own, Brontë and Eliot can posit marital reciprocity as the resolution to the problem of liberal masculinity. On the temporalization of ambivalence as a strategy of resolution, see Berlant, “Compulsion” 228–29.


