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Introducing Economic Women



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In Karl Marx's critique of capitalism, Robinson Crusoe is the prototype of "Homo Economicus."¹ King of his island, living (with the help of some scavenged English tools and materials) off of his own labor and that of Friday, Daniel Defoe's shipwrecked hero exemplifies the traits of prudence, production, and power that made him the model of economic individualism. Despite Marx's recognition that such extreme isolationism is a fantasy of fiction,² nineteenth- and even twentieth-century economic philosophers looked, like Defoe, for the new spaces of production and trade that would characterize Economic Man. But where, in this fiction, is Economic Woman? Marx, who considered the family's division of labor to be a "spontaneously developed system,"³ didn't bother to look for her, and, for the most part, neither did his contemporaries. Although recent discussions of Economic Man by economists and cultural historians of the period have richly complicated his isolated productive stance, his analogue, Economic Woman, remains at best a liminal figure.

¹ "Capital," in *The Marx–Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (1978), 324–25.

² Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 2 (2011), 26.

³ "Capital," 326.

By telling Economic Woman's story, this volume builds on the wealth of interdisciplinary economic criticism published in the last twenty years and also intervenes in its larger narratives of economic subjectivity and the prevailing behaviors that attend it. Crusoe's economic tale—from his rejection of a middling rank to his claims to sovereignty over a Caribbean island—ignores women almost entirely, and no corresponding female character has personified economic individualism within the popular imagination. Indeed, for much of the nineteenth century, "individualism" itself was a concept at odds with dominant notions of women's place within domestic ideology. Consigned to the "private" sphere by such conduct-book writers as Sarah Stickney Ellis and fiction writers as Charles Dickens, considered a "relative" creature whose aims were to serve her family rather than herself, she was an unlikely character to showcase the self-interest so crucial to political economy.⁴ Even such economically significant efforts as her household management and reproduction were most frequently detached from the market and characterized as modes of service that privileged the needs of others over the individual economic agent. Writing the history of nineteenth-century Economic Woman requires new modes of conceptualization that take into account her carefully circumscribed socioeconomic position and the behavior it elicited; she cannot simply be modeled on Economic Man.

Whereas the familiar fiction of Economic Man posits "a conscious, knowing, unified, and rational subject,"⁵ this volume argues that more wide-ranging popular representations of Economic Women throw both characters into question. Instead of seeking one solitary, self-serving figure to mirror Economic Man, we do better to recognize the complex and exciting set of economic options that were available to a diverse range of nineteenth-century mothers, daughters, wives, and "surplus" women during a period when many women were fighting for economic opportunities. The nineteenth century saw significant changes in economic thought and practice: production and then consumption replaced household management as the focus of economics, various forms of labor were increasingly professionalized and regulated, and consumer markets drastically expanded at home

⁴ Of course, in practice women were entering the public sphere and, according to some scholars, even "feminizing" it through their participation. See, for example, Anne K. Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation* (2000).

⁵ Susan Feiner, "A Portrait of *Homo Economicus*" (1999), 193. For more on women's relationship to Economic Man, see Anne Laurence, Josephine Maltby, and Janette Rutterford, eds., *Women and Their Money* (2009), 1–2; Edith Kniper and Jolande Sap, eds., *Out of the Margin* (1995); Marianne Ferber and Julie A. Nelson, eds., *Beyond Economic Man* (1983); and Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic* (2008), chapters 5 and 6.

and abroad. The real and fictional women discussed in this volume were part of this well-known economic trajectory, but they also challenged it and in some cases embodied the anxieties it produced. Our emphasis on gender suggests how, and with what social costs, the familiar story of Economic Man was written. It also allows us to recover and explore the lesser-known stories of Economic Women. These women were not simply marginalized by Economic Man. Nor did they achieve uniform liberation in the markets of Victorian Britain. In their various roles as domestic employees, middle-class women contemplating the costs of marriage, and upper-class ladies pursued for their wealth, the women discussed in the following essays were givers and takers, producers and consumers. Some staked out a share in colonial markets, while others negotiated investments and business back home. And, as we will see, some succeeded in their economic efforts, while others revealed the steep opportunity costs of their attempts.

Many of these Economic Women were also fictions, characters produced and consumed by an avid reading public. Literature allowed both men and women to consider the economic dilemmas they faced, to spell out their real or imagined consequences, and to envision solutions.⁶ And although writing was sometimes a private affair, publication offered financial security for many of the women discussed here, allowing their work to have economic significance in both practical and theoretical ways. In order to demonstrate how facts and fantasies about Economic Women coexisted with and informed one another, this volume places essays on novels and short stories alongside essays on historical actors, and emphasizes private as well as public records: our contributors have consulted archives of diaries, letters, and ledgers in addition to more widely circulated fiction, periodicals, travel writing, and essays.

Within these wide-ranging texts, Economic Women enact many roles. Some of their stories have received more critical attention than others, typically as specific subsets of economic activity.⁷ Rather than rehearse the most obvious examples of women's labor (prostitution, factory work), this collection focuses on other, less easily classified practices. Our aim is not to catalogue every economic role that women might have had during the long

⁶ See Susan Zlotnick, *Women, Writing, and the Industrial Revolution* (1998); for a discussion of the generic relationship between literature and economics in the nineteenth century see Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy* (2008).

⁷ For instance, Nancy Henry and Cannon Schmitt, eds., *Victorian Investments* (2008); Linda H. Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters* (2009); Patricia Johnson, *Hidden Hands* (2001); Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (1980); and Elsie B. Michie, *The Vulgar Question of Money* (2011).

nineteenth century. Instead, we propose a broad understanding of what this topic might include and, to that end, showcase a wide sampling of current critical approaches to the subject by many of the best-known and emerging scholars in the field. Since traditional categories do not fully account for Economic Women, the four sections of this volume offer exciting ways of conceptualizing how nineteenth-century women not only mediated existing economic theories and practices but also negotiated new ones. Yet the "economic" aspects of each section overlap and refuse single categorization. For instance, Janette Rutterford's exploration of marital property is also a story about investment, while Leslee Thorne-Murphy's history of a charitable bazaar is also a narrative about free trade. Similarly, Nancy Henry's account of women's business practices, when read in the context of domestic finance and political economy, helps us to see "business" itself as one of many arenas for female economic activity, rather than privileging it as the sole acceptable—or even most desirable—model. We encourage students and scholars of the period to read across sections, forge their own connections between essays, and engage in the fuller, richer picture our contributors paint of Economic Women in nineteenth-century British culture.

I. THE ETHICS OF EXCHANGE

When Marx positioned himself against the individualist ethos of Economic Man, he gave less thought to already extant forms of economic behavior that depended on more communal ideals: the feelings of obligation and mutuality implicit in traditional notions of an elite, paternalistic economy; the charitable efforts of a rising middle class; the increasing interest in philosophies of altruism and sacrifice.⁸ Marx was not alone in leaving such practices—and the Economic Women engaged in them—at the margins of economic thought. In histories of the Victorian turn away from *o*conomy and toward political economy, the gift practices associated with community care typically give way to less interpersonal notions of independent contract and self-help.⁹ The infamous New Poor Law of 1834, which rejected

⁸ See Susan F. Feiner, "Reading Neoclassical Economics" (1995); Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women* (1985); F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy* (1980); Dorice Williams Elliott, *The Angel Out of the House* (2002); Seth Koven, *Slumming* (2006); Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Superintending the Poor* (1993); Jill Rappoport, *Giving Women* (2012); and Ilana Blumberg, *Victorian Sacrifice* (2013).

⁹ For example, Feiner, "A Portrait," 193; Nancy Folbre and Heidi Hartman, "The Rheto-

traditional ideas of a parish's responsibility for its able-bodied destitute, is perhaps the best-known example of this shift in economic attitudes. Yet the rupture between old and new was never as clearly cut in practice as it was in theory.

The nineteenth-century women featured in this section highlight the varied and contested economies that persisted alongside the more familiar activities of Economic Man. Essays by Kathryn Gleadle, Leslee Thorne-Murphy, and Ilana Blumberg reveal the complexity of economic activity that not only deviated from prevailing legal efforts and social trends but also depended on particular configurations of gender, class, religion, and politics. The stories they detail are not always triumphant. Women's alternative economic practices were often ridiculed as ladies' work, they frequently emerged out of suffering, and they occasionally even destroyed the women who practiced them. At the same time, however, the Economic Women who emerge in these studies push beyond the limits set out for them by social expectations or legal restrictions. In personal correspondence, works of fiction, and widely publicized social action, they insist on their right and ability to take wide-ranging economic action on behalf of others, and, by doing so, they effect important changes in their local and larger communities. The essays in this section chart women's rich and sometimes troubling efforts to both articulate and enact forms of mutually beneficial, ethical exchange.

Drastic food shortages and the consequent economic crises of the 1790s blurred the lines between political and moral economies by emphasizing how the fiscal management of a household mirrored and also shaped the economics of the nation.¹⁰ At a time when political economy was presumably replacing earlier models for economic action, traditional moral economy rooted in paternalist ideas of mutual obligation continued to undergird the outlook of female elites, according to Kathryn Gleadle's essay in this volume. Drawing on extensive private manuscripts to demonstrate how Katherine Plymley, an extremely well-connected member of the Shropshire gentry, adhered to the class-based system of paternalism rather than exclusively gendered patterns of behavior or benevolence, Gleadle challenges straightforward narratives of both radical reform and feminine philanthropy. She argues that women's charitable action should be seen as an informed response to contemporary economic issues as much

ric of Self-Interest: Ideology and Gender in Economic Theory" (1988), 187, 196. In contrast, Margot Finn stresses the coexistence of gift and market practices; see *The Character of Credit* (2003).

¹⁰ See, for example, Edward Copeland, *Women Writing about Money* (1995).

as an outgrowth of developing social consciousness or religious conviction. Attempting to balance her radical political sympathies with her commitment to the hierarchical relationships of the elite, Plymley exemplifies how women's economic stances were shaped by identity markers beyond gender—in her case, those of social class and religion in particular.

The Plymley archive testifies to women's awareness of and engagement in contemporary economic thought at the turn of the century not only through Katherine Plymley's careful documentation and private criticism of current affairs but also through her tragic account of her niece, Jane. As the family responded to local shortages through projects of dietary economy, gendered patterns emerged. Plymley's brother the Archdeacon experimented with recipes to conserve grain and provide the poor with the means to prepare cheap food. This practice, with its emphasis on self-help, exemplifies a more general movement away from paternalism and destabilizes gendered associations of who should be in the kitchen. At the same time, the women of the family took to extreme and eventually deadly degrees the household's effort to restrict its own consumption in order to make basic food available to the poor. Fourteen-year-old Jane Plymley, whose severe dietary abstinence proved fatal, emerges in Katherine Plymley's diaries not as a fading flower of femininity but as an ethical (if misguided) economic agent. Understanding Jane's private, bodily actions as part of the gentry's wider emphasis on restricted consumption and moral economy, Plymley associates her starvation with Jane's thwarted desire for the larger sphere of public economic action available to her father but not to her.

If Jane, in 1801, ultimately found it impossible to reconcile private economic efforts with her larger public ambitions, other women would assume increasingly visible roles in political debates about economic affairs. For instance, by the hungry forties, women's charitable labor had begun to serve the economic and political function of endorsing free trade. Women took center stage as the organizers, producers, and staff of the 1845 Anti-Corn Law League fund-raising bazaar that would make a stunning financial contribution to the campaign for free trade. Ironically, as Leslee Thorne-Murphy's essay indicates, it did so through methods that appeared to contradict the League's avowed economic aim, because the bazaar itself relied on the creation of an artificially inflated market. In an attempt to resolve these disparate economic practices, the League aligned women's charitable contributions to the bazaar with the contemporary shift away from outdoor relief for the poor, claiming that the women's efforts, by working toward free trade, would replace handouts with

political reform and fair prices. Again, as in Gleadle's essay, charity emerged out of and on behalf of economic concerns at least as much as out of sentimental consciousness. Yet, as Thorne-Murphy reveals through her exploration of League publications and other press coverage, the two market systems of the bazaar came into conflict, and that conflict was emphatically gendered. Women's needlework productions were associated with the higher prices and superficial fancywork of a "ladies' fair," while items of masculine manufacture also on display were advertised at wholesale rates in promotion of industry. These disparities prompted debate about the relative value of these items and demonstrated the extent to which valuation itself depended on extramarket forces.

One contribution to the bazaar explicitly took up this question of gendered labor and attempted to show how a reevaluation of women's work might support both the moral imperatives of charitable economics and the political purposes of free trade. Harriet Martineau—best known for her popular tales of political economy—also supported ladies' fund-raising fairs and wrote a fable of colonial free trade for the League bazaar. In *Dawn Island* (1845), the expansion of free trade improves native women's marginal status, thanks to its new valuation of their productive and reproductive labor as integral to the marketplace. By making women central to commerce, the tale also suggests that "feminine" morality, domesticity, and religion—along with women's previously undervalued labor—are inseparable from the successful operations of free trade.

While Martineau worked to merge "feminine" and "masculine" economies on behalf of free trade, George Eliot in the 1860s struggled instead to construct a realm of ethical economic activity for women, independent of the cash nexus and hoarding she associated with men's marketplace exchange. In her novel *Romola* (1862–63), according to Ilana Blumberg's essay in this volume, female self-sacrifice is a trenchant commentary on Victorian gender politics, ethics, and economics. Understanding sacrifice not as the "self-lacerating and inhibiting forms of repression we have been used to associate with Victorian female experience" but as a transaction that exchanges painful loss for even greater profit, Blumberg argues that *Romola's* emphasis on sacrificial value refuses a basic principle of fungible currency. Eliot, according to this essay, insists that not all forms of value are equal despite their seeming equivalence in transactions.

For Eliot, masculine economies pose gendered threats to women, who are often exchanged as objects or hoarded as prized possessions. Whereas Martineau finds a healthy balance in *Dawn Island's* merger of male and female economies, Eliot points to the inherent dangers of the former,

which fails to differentiate between objects and people as both circulate to men's advantage and women's detriment. In its place, she establishes a mode of ethical exchange for her heroine that uses female self-sacrifice to look beyond the narrow, egotistical values of male market dealings in favor of a wider sense of sympathy and shared debt. When Romola redeems her husband Tito's treacherously earned money by using it to feed the bodies of his extralegal wife and illegitimate child, she chooses physical absorption by others over the more personal or permanent glory of procuring material memorials. Romola's sacrifice dissolves the lines between self and other that have previously divided ethical from economic practice. Unlike Jane Plymley's tragic efforts to offer up her own body for the greater good, though, George Eliot's fictional portrayal allows her to imagine ways in which ethical economics might effectively inform everyday exchange.

In their shared interest in alternatives to traditional market practices, Gleadle, Thorne-Murphy, and Blumberg find particular value in women's bodies and bodily acts. Whether through their own restricted diet or their nourishment of others, their manual labor or reproduction, their exchanges are largely material, concrete, embodied. The significance of food itself in these three essays further suggests that women's economic activity began most readily with private economies and concerns appropriate to the traditional dictates of Victorian domestic femininity. Yet food takes on political and even national significance here, and bodies—fed or unfed, busy at fancywork or in childbirth—exist alongside women's more abstract reflections on moral, political, or sympathetic economies. Together, these essays not only demonstrate the variety of extracommercial exchanges that Economic Women were pursuing during the nineteenth century but, in their intersections, also challenge contemporary associations of women with extravagant consumption¹¹ by suggesting just how economical their regulation of bodies—their own as well as those of others—could be.

II. POLITICAL ECONOMY

Moral economy presented a seemingly logical space for women to occupy, even though, as we have seen, their participation in it was never straightforward. In contrast, scholars typically encounter real problems trying to place women within and relative to the rise of nineteenth-century political

¹¹ See Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure* (2000), 52; and Krista Lysack, *Come Buy, Come Buy* (2008).

economy, primarily because of women's near invisibility within the theory itself.¹² From its late eighteenth-century emergence through its dissociation from household management (*oeconomy*) and then moral economy, to its establishment as a full-fledged mathematical science, political economy failed to address Economic Woman.¹³ Not until John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) were women treated in discussions of work, division of labor, and fair wages, and even here the references are still few and far between. Complicating the matter further is that few women were writing economic treatises and even fewer were considered to be economists. When women such as Jane Marcet, Harriet Martineau, and Millicent Garrett Fawcett did write explicitly about economic theory in the nineteenth century, they were viewed as "popularizers" of the science rather than as "economists."¹⁴ Yet by featuring women as economic actors and domestic practices as critical to the operation of larger-scale economics, their popular didactic tales attempted to redress the uneven picture offered by economists, even as the commercial success of such writing allowed these women to enact some of the theoretical principles they espoused.¹⁵

As the essays in this section show, women also contributed to the discourse of political economy in other important and highly visible ways: they formulated new models for understanding economic data; they weighed in on debates about value; they were deeply implicated in economists' configurations of consumption and desire. In this section, Mary Poovey, Gordon Bigelow, and Deanna Kreisel reveal the extent to which women were instrumental to the formation of nineteenth-century economic thought. Although political economists may not have conceptualized women as economic actors, women affected and were affected by the value of objects and labor, the supply and demand of commodities, the economics of reproduction, and the fiscal principles of household management. Whether as statisticians proposing new ways to present and understand data, as novelists complicating the economic understanding of value, or as embodiments of

¹² See Peter Groenewegen, ed., *Feminism and Political Economy in Victorian England* (1994), chapters 1 and 2; Michelle Pujol, *Feminism and Anti-Feminism in Early Economic Thought* (1992), 1–23; and Jane Rendall, "Virtue and Commerce: Women in the Making of Adam Smith's Political Economy" (1987).

¹³ For a useful overview of the transition from classical political economy to neo-classical economics, and the history of Economic Man, see Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants* (2000), 1–5 and chapter 1.

¹⁴ See Lana L. Dalley, "Domesticating Political Economy: Language, Gender, and Economics in *Illustrations of Political Economy*" (2010); and Elaine Freedgood, *Victorian Writing About Risk* (2000), chapter 1.

¹⁵ See Ella Dzelzainis, "Feminism, Speculation, and Agency in Harriet Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy*" (2010); and Claudia Klaver *A/Moral Economics* (2003), 118–37.

cultural anxieties about unrestricted consumption, women claimed a stake in nineteenth-century political economy.

Although critics have generally assumed that women were most concerned with the moral aspects of midcentury political economy, Mary Poovey's essay in this volume suggests that Florence Nightingale helped advance the mathematical "science" of late-century economics. Nightingale is, of course, best known for her efforts to reform nursing during the Crimean War, but, according to Poovey, she also deserves to be known for her innovations in descriptive statistics. Her early attempts to present complex information graphically helped render authoritative such simplifying, selective modes of presentation. Facing criticism of the mortality rates she documented, Nightingale turned to statistics in *Notes on Matters Affecting the Health of the British Army* (1858), where she used a combination of polar-area diagrams, fictional accounts, and editorial commentary to argue for sanitary reform. For Nightingale, statistics widened the scope of sympathetic response by "link[ing] individuals to the collective." More concerned with saving lives than saving money, Nightingale was, nonetheless, also arguing for greater fiscal responsibility in hospitals. As Poovey demonstrates, the economic dimensions of Nightingale's work are brought into sharp focus in Harriet Martineau's *England and Her Soldiers* (1859), a work that—like Martineau's earlier *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832–34)—aimed to clarify and popularize Nightingale's theories.

Acknowledging Nightingale's important contributions to economics draws attention to the ways in which women were instrumental to the formation of the discipline, and the ways in which their efforts may be obscured in the historical record. Poovey's essay also reminds us that discourses we now perceive as separate—religion and mathematics, morality and economics—were often not so distinct in their practitioners' minds. Nightingale put forth her statistical models in the heyday of classical political economy, yet these models provided the foundation for what would become the primary representational system for rendering economic factors in the early twentieth century. As the premises of classical political economy were swept aside by the subjectivist method advocated in England by W. S. Jevons, the religious grounding of Nightingale's work (she referred to statistics as "a religious service") was increasingly eclipsed by the utility of her statistical models.

George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* (1871–72) appeared just at this pivot point of nineteenth-century economic thought. Despite recent critical efforts to link Eliot to the emerging neoclassical economic model that

privileged consumption and demand over labor and production, Gordon Bigelow argues that Eliot develops a view of economic behavior that is radically at odds with this subjectivist model, in its understanding both of subjective perception and of moral consumer choice. Just as Nightingale made sense of sanitation by highlighting the collective, Eliot's ruminations on cost and consumer desire challenge the individualist premises of existing economic models by shifting focus to the complex social construction of value. In *Middlemarch*, Bigelow argues, desire for valuable things is not shaped by private wants and needs, as it appears to be, but rather by social contexts;¹⁶ for Jevons, market prices are a response to human desire, but according to Eliot, "desire follows price." Even the pursuit of pleasure is not clearly distinguishable from pain in *Middlemarch*, as characters' patterns of consumption frequently bring them suffering rather than the satisfaction of fulfilled personal desire. The psychological texture of Eliot's late fiction and its continuing emphasis on the radical distinctiveness of individual experience ultimately insist not on subjectivity but on intersubjectivity; the evident thrust of her work is toward sympathetic connection, even as she offers detailed analyses of what warps and obstructs it.

In the early 1870s the new marginal revolution was highly contested, but by the 1890s it held firmer cultural footing, and so did the new theory of value that emphasized the necessity of unceasing and ever-expanding consumption. In her essay on Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Deanna Kreisel further explores women's vexed relationship to Jevons at the fin-de-siècle by arguing that the women of the novel embody the unconscious cultural anxieties attendant upon this model of consumption. Examining the figure of the female vampire, Kreisel argues that bodily fluids such as blood and breast milk are particularly cogent emblems of economic operations: they are the only "products" that are "manufactured" solely in response to demand. The women of *Dracula* thus literally embody the spectacular fears attendant upon the neoclassical theory of value that emphasized the necessity of unceasing and ever-expanding consumption—a consumption that comes to be seen as the special purview of the bourgeois woman over the course of the nineteenth century. The ultimate irony of *Dracula*, Kreisel argues, is that the model of vampirism, in which consumption actually brings new products into being, is the perfect resolution to the anxiety generated by a demand theory of value, but one that—like female

¹⁶ For the larger significance of things themselves in Victorian culture, see Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things* (2006).

vampires—is inadmissible to middle-class Victorian values because of its improper, gendered consumption.

III. FINANCING THE FAMILY

Whether women were represented as preying upon blood or consuming extravagantly in general, their presumed failure to manage their households with restraint was seen as threatening the stability of the bourgeois family. The familiar story of nineteenth-century economics echoes this sense of women as domestic liabilities: since women were disadvantaged from birth by the common-law doctrine of primogeniture, reliant on fathers and brothers while unmarried, and frequently compelled to marry for financial stability, their role was one of dependence and obligation.¹⁷ This section, however, challenges these longstanding assumptions about gendered contributions to the Victorian household and demonstrates women's important contributions to family finances.

Our contributors don't minimize the suffering that many women experienced as a result of imbalanced economic laws and unfair social perceptions of women's financial roles, but they don't limit themselves to those tales of victimhood, either. By giving *Economic Women* a fuller place in the story, chapters by Janette Rutterford, Esther Godfrey, and Erika Rappaport offer much more nuanced accounts of real and imagined Victorian families. Acknowledging the precarious situation of women at a time when they had little control over the material conditions of marriage, these scholars nevertheless reveal how women mediated existing legal frameworks,¹⁸ claimed agency in their economic lives, contributed to the financial well-being of their households, and even established independent livelihoods through their own efforts and through networks outside of their families. Furthermore, their essays undermine the privileged place that men have held in the familiar narrative, showing how—whether single, married,

¹⁷ Even as a wife, she could not claim property in her own name until the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882. See Ruth Perry, *Novel Relations* (2004); Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England* (1989); Susan Staves, *Married Women's Separate Property in England, 1660–1833* (1990); and Lee Holcombe, *Wives And Property* (1983). For exceptions to this uniformly bleak portrait, see Amanda Vickery, "Golden Age to Separate Spheres?" (1993), 405; and Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (1993), 26, 78, 224.

¹⁸ See also Margot Finn, "Women, Consumption and Coverture" (1996), 706, 707; and Joanne Bailey, "Favoured or Oppressed? Married Women, Property, and 'Coverture' in England, 1660–1800" (2002).

or separated—men frequently found themselves nearly as dependent on women for their economic stability as women were on men. Whether marrying for money, driven to desperation by their wealthier wives' economic autonomy, or compelled to pay alimony to their estranged wives, the men described by Rutterford, Godfrey, and Rappaport do not appear to benefit from the imbalance of economic laws as much as existing scholarship suggests they do.

Real, imagined, or self-imposed, the strains on men's finances emerge to a remarkable extent in midcentury print culture. For Esther Godfrey, this increasing focus on men's precarious relation to wealth is in part an anxious response to new efforts to secure married women's property. Godfrey's discussion of *The Woman in White* (1859–60) argues that the sensationalism of Wilkie Collins's novel derives less from recounting the familiar narrative of a woman's economic disadvantage than from destabilizing that narrative. The heroine's wealth makes her both a coveted wife and an heiress beyond reach for the two men vying for her, and she weighs the advantages of her approaching marriage with open eyes before choosing to marry without love. In place of a wife's dependence on her new husband, Collins depicts men whose own economic agency is threatened by that of a woman whose wealth has been secured to her as her own "separate estate" and who is consequently able to make her own legal decisions even after her marriage. When, ultimately, his heroine does become the victim of her husband's plotting, her plight highlights the desperate ends to which men might be driven by women's increasing economic autonomy instead of identifying a woman's legal situation as necessarily one of disadvantage or dispossession. The heightened anxiety produced by women's increasing economic agency coupled with the ideological loss of men's financial foothold threatened the very genre that described these relationships, as the sensational techniques they require ultimately upend the conventional marriage plot of Victorian fiction. Showcasing the dramatic stakes of male disempowerment in the nineteenth-century novel, Godfrey suggests that only the imprisonment and infantilization of Economic Woman, the (temporary) loss of her wealth, and its restoration in the hands of a male heir can restore the fragile state of family affairs introduced by the imagined consequences of women's economic autonomy.

The cost of family itself becomes grounds for debate in the three hundred letters published by the *Daily Telegraph* during the summer of 1868, as Erika Rappaport's chapter in this volume discusses. Whereas male correspondents relied on familiar tropes of women's rampant consumerism and extravagant consumption to bemoan the expensive tastes of middle-class

women and to frame marriage as a luxury beyond their financial means, the female correspondents Rappaport discusses refused to accept these charges. Rather than allowing themselves to be seen as liabilities in marriage, they uniquely rendered visible their domestic labor in order to show the significance of their housekeeping to family budgets. By their accounts, wives' mending, cooking, cleaning, and child care offered important economic counterpoints to husbands' financial earnings, though such domestic work typically went unseen in the bourgeois home. Moreover, they argued, men were as much to blame as women for the excessive spending that kept marriage increasingly out of reach for many. If marriage sometimes granted women greater access to consumerism than was available to single women, that was only part of the story. Men's own expensive tastes also shaped the marriage market. If they continued to court only the most fashionable women, one correspondent wondered, how could they expect to gain anything but expensive wives? Yet men remained bachelors as much to indulge their own desire for luxury items as out of any concern about a future wife's spending. Bachelors, according to these letters, were choosing cigars, theater-going, gambling, prostitution, and fine clothing instead of investing in family life.

The extent of this debate suggests that the economics of middle-class family life at midcentury were more complicated and highly contested than typical accounts of parasitic women allow. Women's responses to men's accusations in the *Daily Telegraph* series reveal both the strength of their own economic contributions and the fallacy of associating shopping only or even primarily with women. Indeed, within couples of the lower or middle classes hoping to establish or maintain the appearance of a respectable bourgeois identity, men and women were at least equally driven to match the social expectations that attended their (would-be) status. So, for instance, as Gordon Bigelow remarks in his contribution to Part II of this volume, *Middlemarch's* Rosamond Vincy—educated at an expensive boarding school and well attuned to the details of dress—initially admires the town's new doctor, Lydgate, for his ease at wearing the "right clothes" (267). Yet if her own class aspirations are depicted as both shallow and gendered—in a financial pinch, she is hardly a helpmeet—they also match Lydgate's own, as he lunges into debt "without any notion of being extravagant" (348). The essays in this volume call into question Victorian depictions of consuming wives as a financial burden for budget-conscious husbands and of hardworking husbands as the sole providers for the family. In the case that Bigelow describes, as in the wide-ranging testimonies documented by Erika Rappaport's essay, men (both single and married)

were as likely to live beyond their means as women, and women were as likely as men to contribute in diverse ways to the household economy.

Whether they could afford marriage was less problematic for some men than whether they could afford its dissolution. Janette Rutterford's essay on Lady Emily Westmeath's marriage and divorce proceedings—which spanned the period 1812–37—not only undermines the premise that marriage offered women financial stability but also demonstrates the innovative ways in which women could secure independent wealth. Rutterford further shows how, despite the common-law doctrine that gave husbands rights to their wives' wealth when it was unprotected by settlements, husbands could still be held legally responsible for taking advantage of their wives' property and compelled to support them after a separation.

Drawing on an extensive archive of personal correspondence, legal documents, and financial transactions for her case study, Rutterford explores the difficulties of a wife's position in marriage. Notwithstanding her high class standing, Lady Westmeath was subjected to financial threats, denied her pin money, stripped of gifts and inheritances received after her marriage, and denied the jointure that had presumably been settled on her. These circumstances, along with her husband's custody of their children and the steep cost of obtaining a divorce before the 1857 Act, made her situation precarious. Yet Lady Westmeath was no victim. Separating herself physically from her husband before she was granted a legal separation, she documented his adultery, his cruelty, and his financial abuses and used them against him in their ongoing legal battle. Even more striking were the bold, creative approaches that this Economic Woman took toward achieving an independent lifestyle. From running up debts that her husband would be forced to pay to exploiting a vast network of wealthy connections outside of marriage, Lady Westmeath procured an extensive income through unconventional means. The most notable of these was her investment in high-risk stocks and bonds; her investment portfolio not only challenges the well-established notion that women's investments, rare in and of themselves, were generally conservative, but also undermines the idea that a woman's economic life necessarily depended on her male kin. Lady Westmeath's investment strategies benefited from the advice and connections of a single female friend.

Together, Rutterford, Rappaport, and Godfrey show how women did more (and men sometimes less) toward financing their families than previous studies have acknowledged. Just as significantly, their essays suggest how even the forms a family could take depended on women's economic status and self-positioning during the nineteenth century.

IV. WOMEN'S BUSINESS

Despite these signs of women's financial contributions, during the nineteenth century professions increasingly operated in spaces outside of the home and in gendered spheres that domestic ideology labeled masculine.¹⁹ As the 1851 census made clear, women's options were limited not only by gender but also by class; very few women could pursue the kind of economic opportunities that Emily Westmeath enjoyed through speculation and investment. Yet Economic Women were innovative, playing with market options rather than conforming to their constraints, exploring alternative economies as well as conventional ones. Accruing both financial benefit and professional status, women cultivated profitable relationships through creative business practices that capitalized on their access to and circulation of information.

In the final section of this volume, our contributors show how creative forms of exchange redefined the business of Victorian women so that it comprised much more than the nursing, teaching, or retail positions frequently thought of as "women's work" during the period. Without downplaying the significance of those earlier and ongoing efforts or presenting these newer forms of exchange as the culmination of economic activity for women, Narin Hassan, Nancy Henry, and Tara MacDonald explore how women adopted lucrative roles as "doctresses," businesswomen, and even purveyors of gossip. As nineteenth-century women wrote about their experiences in these roles, they crafted economic identities by carefully mediating between their public and domestic selves and, in so doing, challenged popular notions of what constituted women's business. These essays show how the expansion of women's commercial reach was contingent upon the careful dissemination of information; as new markets opened in the nineteenth century, women increasingly depended on print culture to legitimate their participation in them. The expansion of print culture in the nineteenth century created a rewarding—though sometimes volatile—knowledge economy, in which women acted as both producers and consumers.²⁰

Reading against dominant paradigms of patriarchal inheritance and women's marginalized financial status in Ellen Wood's *St. Martin's Eve* (1866), Tara MacDonald's essay demonstrates how gossip in the novel constitutes its own economy, wherein private information functions as treasured currency for certain female characters and even the novelist herself.

¹⁹ See Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments* (1988).

²⁰ See Linda H. Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (2009); and Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914* (1993).

Arguing that for many nineteenth-century readers the circulation of novels was akin to the circulation of gossip, MacDonald shows how Wood adopted the role of "gossipy, feminine amateur" in order to reconcile her public role as a writer with her domestic role as a wife and, as a consequence, to achieve financial success. While gossip had long been considered the purview of women, Wood reimagines it as an economic practice. Within *St. Martin's Eve*, MacDonald argues, women are both objects and agents in the gossip economy; bad gossip can "drive one's 'price' down"—a fact that is especially pertinent to the marriage market—while good gossip can garner money, respect, and connections. In the novel, the everyday exchange of information is an economic act with far-reaching and, at times, devastating implications. As MacDonald shows, it is an economy that both feeds upon and is especially driven by women. It is also one that appears to privilege servants, offering them unusual financial opportunities at a time when working-class women were generally unable to eke out more than subsistence in domestic service or factory work.²¹

Whereas the gossip economy identified by MacDonald is dominated by women, Nancy Henry takes up women's participation in an economy long considered the province of Economic Man. Henry's essay explores the writing of Mrs. J. H. (Charlotte) Riddell, who defended everyday business practices and business people as valid literary subjects. Riddell believed that representing everyday aspects of business, trade, and finance offered a more complete and inclusive picture of Victorian attitudes toward business life than novels focusing on dramatic financial events such as bubbles, swindles, and bankruptcies. The sympathetic and capable businesswoman in Riddell's financial fiction refutes the popular conception that women were unfit for the financial sphere, and Riddell's own command of business knowledge within her fiction challenged the scope of what was deemed appropriate material for women writers. Like Wood, Riddell regarded writing as a lucrative business and one that she used to support her family after her husband declared bankruptcy. By writing novels that engage with the mundane technicalities of "the City" and insisting that business matters require a new form of storytelling, Riddell also argues that the economics of "the City" are women's business.

Away from the financial center of London, the expansion of Western medicine was a successful entrepreneurial enterprise for English women in the colonies. According to Narin Hassan's essay in this volume, access

²¹ For two seminal accounts of Victorian working women, see Wanda Neff, *Victorian Working Women* (1929); and Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850* (1930).

to portable medical kits and new discourses of family medicine allowed British women in India and the Middle East to carve out roles as female doctors to natives. Travel narratives by Lucie Duff Gordon and Isabel Burton detail the ways in which their interactions with native populations allowed them to build informal medical practices that were both profitable and professionally rewarding. Like both Riddell and Wood, these women travelers carefully negotiated their public and private identities, in this case by characterizing their doctoring as simultaneously scientific, charitable, and remunerative. Hesitant to define their work solely as economic ventures, they nonetheless make it clear that they are running businesses. Although they sometimes received monetary returns, they were also compensated through barter and gift exchanges. Hassan shows how such travel narratives offered compelling evidence of successful female entrepreneurs, as well as authoritative advice to readers who might want to join their ranks. Here, as in many of this volume's essays, *Economic Women* found that self-interested gain and mutual cooperation could be compatible; even as they pursued their own livelihoods, they also provided models for other women to emulate their methods.

As the range of activity featured in this volume suggests, locating *Economic Women* requires us to broaden our understanding of what constitutes economics itself. These chapters thus enrich our comprehension of both nineteenth-century economics and nineteenth-century women. Our contributors tell multiple stories that reveal ambivalence as well as achievement, setbacks as well as forward motion. The lines drawn by class, race, religion, and education in these essays also remind us of the divisions we face whenever attempting to speak of such a diverse group as women, for whom economics has always constituted various forms of management and discipline, labor and consumption, desire and dispossession.

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