Crime in Verse

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“Household Law” and the Domestication of Murder

IN ROBERT BROWNING’S The Ring and the Book (1868–69), Guido Franceschini’s defense lawyer, Arcangeli, imagines the aggravations that the Fisc, Bottini, will heap upon the charges against his client for the brutal murders of his wife and her parents. Among these projected aggravations, which constitute a “[p]arasite-growth upon mere murder’s back” (VIII.1109), lies the fact that the murders were committed in the victims’ home:

Third aggravation: that our crime was done—
Not in the public street, where safety lies,
Not in the bye-place, caution may avoid,
Wood, cavern, desert, spots contrived for crime,—
But in the very house, home, nook and nest,
O’ the victims, murdered in their dwelling-place,
In domo ac habitatione propria,
Where all presumably is peace and joy. (VIII.1243–50)

Guido’s “hurly-burly case” (VIII.106), therefore, confronts the problem of domestic ideology. As Arcangeli meanders through his legal analysis, Guido's offenses against domesticity contrast his own domestic obsessions, evident here in the idyllic connotations and confident stresses of “house, home, nook
and nest.” Betraying his preoccupation with the domestic idyll, his monologue consistently returns to the pleasures of dinner, the prideful satisfactions of fatherhood, and his preference for “home-sanctitudes” (VIII.1765), which he succinctly catalogues as “my fry, and family and friends” (VIII.1746). As these domestic desires overpower his professional and public ambition and offset Guido’s violent affronts to domestic pieties, they also expose the mercenary posture of Arcangeli’s legal strategies and thereby burnish his legal integrity. In building such a character, as Alexander Welsh has noted, Browning develops a “playfully absurd defense” (Welsh 209) that satirizes this particular defense lawyer while questioning the mechanisms of legal inquiry.¹

Particularly relevant to a discussion of the poem’s domestication of murder, are the ways in which Arcangeli’s investments in domestic “peace and joy” complement the home’s more violent tendencies. The intersection of Guido’s domestic villainy and Arcangeli’s homespun languor allows Browning to acknowledge the violent permissions and intimate consequences of state and symbolic laws governing marriage and family in Victorian England. With these complementary characters, Browning’s epic poem isolates the same variables that underlie Mill’s critique of legal permissions and domestic customs in On the Subjection of Women. Written in 1861 but published in 1869, Mill’s text defines the home as a site of “domestic slavery” and husbands as “despots” and “tormentors”: “I have no desire to exaggerate, nor does the case stand in any need of exaggeration. I have described the wife’s legal position, not her actual treatment. . . . If married life were all that it might be expected to be, looking to the laws alone, society would be hell upon earth” (286). Explaining that not all despots exercise the extent of their powers and that husbandly despotism is frequently precluded or mitigated by genuine “feelings and interests,” Mill writes, “The despotism of Louis XVI was not the despotism of Philippe le Bel, or of Nadir Shah, or of Caligula; but it was bad enough to justify the French Revolution, and to palliate even its horrors” (286). According to Mill, however, in order to ensure wives’ rights the law should grant protections—not permissions—simply because of the ubiquity of abuse: “laws and institutions require to be adapted, not to good men, but to bad” (287).

In a perfect inversion of Mill’s reformist proposition, the ease with which Arcangeli abandons “home-joys” for murder rights demonstrates exactly how laws and institutions are “adapted” to “bad” men. Tellingly, as permissions accrue, Arcangeli’s “home sanctitudes” are configured as excessive and expedient fantasies, which serve to muddle rational and moral judgments and to obscure the legal definitions and patriarchal ideologies governing spousal relations and family life. In characterizing Arcangeli as a mercenary lawyer, a prideful patriarch, and a self-proclaimed homebody, Browning ridicules his sentimentalizing and mystifying ethos. Aware of his own compromised ethical and legal rigor,
Arcangeli seeks to obscure, or mitigate, it with rhetorical special effects. Having scoured “Law, Gospel and the Church” (VIII.729) for support and having “ecclesiasticized” (VIII.1742) his brief, he will “[r]egularize,” “emphasize,” “latinize,” and “lastly Cicero-ize” (VIII.1743–44) it in order to mimic a proper defense. In his capacity as defense lawyer, Arcangeli quite adeptly exchanges the “home-joys” model for an “[h]onoris causa” (VIII.424) model, which establishes the “natural ground” (VIII.479) of “complete revenge” (VIII.478) for an uncompromising “household law” (VIII.483). In this way, a strategy of “[e]xplaining matters, not denying them!” (VIII.315), reveals wife-murder to be perfectly congruous with matrimonial law.

In 1851, eighteen years before the publication of The Ring and the Book and On the Subjection of Women, the sinister ethos of such “household law”—and the galling impunity of wife-murderers—inspired Mil and Harriet Taylor to submit an editorial missive to the Morning Chronicle. After several wife-murderers had recently enjoyed the benefits of judicial leniency, Mill and Taylor angrily deconstructed the legal and cultural logic of husbanding, which simultaneously charged husbands with protecting and excused their abusing. They explain that in cases of wife-murder or child-murder, “[t]he crime is greater; for it is a violation of more solemn obligations—it is doing the worst injury where there is the most binding duty to cherish and protect” (28 August 1851, 4). It is also “baser” because “the culprit” targets the trusting and the weak (4). Assessing the chronic cultural problem of “domestic ruffianism,” they intimate that the domestic sphere is, in fact, an ideal criminal locale where “[t]he domestic tyrant can perpetrate his tyrannies with the utmost facility, and need never wait for an opportunity; a stronger motive therefore is required, when the brutality exists, to deter from its indulgence” (4). As they assert the language of criminal intent—the issue at stake in the acquittals and reduced charges that so appalled them—they argue that an abiding cultural faith in domestic privacy accommodates criminal opportunity and motive. Because criminal intent is frequently dismissed or explained away by lenient judges, they quip, “[t]he vow to protect thus confers a license to kill” (4).

Attesting to the long history and lingering problem of such domestic license, Browning’s Arcangeli and Guido, the gourmand and the murderer, constitute a particularized version of Mill’s and Taylor’s legal critique. Both enjoying varying degrees of “license,” and both beneficiaries of patriarchal permissions and practitioners of patriarchal excess, they represent the contradictions of domestic ideologies. In partnering Arcangeli, as defense counsel, and Guido, as defendant, Browning asks readers to recognize the interdependencies of their ostensibly opposing versions of domestic nostalgia and to revisit the longstanding and as yet unresolved dilemma of domestic authority. Arcangeli longs for “home-joy” with its attendant entitlements—paternalism, comfort, and indulgence—while
Guido longs for domestic tyranny with its attendant entitlements—control, dominance, and impunity. Both claim domestic ideology as the foundation for their personal identities, both secure for themselves the position of the patriarch, and both assert husbands’ murderous rights with reiterations of “household law.” With them, Browning exposes the seductive powers and practical misuses of domestic ideologies while giving material force to the abstractions of family law. In interrogating the domestic politics of this “hurly-burly case,” he forces the intersection of another pair of ostensibly antithetical conceptual categories—criminality and domesticity. And establishing congruities between these two concepts, he encourages further reflection on legal discourses and social institutions as forces that determine and domesticate violence.

Examining dialectical relationships between poetic forms, generic codes, and cultural discourses and tracing the gendered structures of “household law,” this chapter explicates Browning’s inquiry into the precariousness of domestic protections, affections, and permissions and applies these analytical and contextual insights to the explication of two “minor” dramatic poems that imagine the murderous prerogatives of wives. Juxtaposing Browning’s massive, canonical verse-novel with two lesser-known verse dramas about Greek houses in ruin, Clytemnestra (1855) by Edward Robert Bulwer Lytton (Owen Meredith) and Medea, A Fragment in Dramatic Form, After Euripides (1884) by Amy Levy, allows us to explore the poetics of domestic conflict and consider the gendered aspects of murderous rage. On the most fundamental level, these three texts are linked by their pointedly counterintuitive and unsentimental rendering of domestic spaces as “spots contrived for crime,” and in domesticating crime, they also share a reliance on historical transposition to generate political meanings. Browning, of course, distills The Ring and the Book from the historical resources of the now infamous “yellow notebook,” while Lytton and Levy modernize two classical murderous women, Clytemnestra and Medea, who have long embodied the traumatic threat of domestic breakdown.

As they exploit the opportunities of historical displacement for the purposes of contemporary gender debate, Browning, Lytton, and Levy all similarly scrutinize domesticity and rescript its patriarchal customs as criminal tendencies. Built upon the private and public foundations of matrimonial law, they suggest, the “house, home, nook and nest” is hostile to romance and amenable to violence. And, because the theme of murder entangles social prohibitions and individual agency, it allows these poets to simultaneously imagine the institutional and ideological mechanisms of oppression (and resistance) and scrutinize the discursive modes, generic forms, and interpretive practices of sensation and scandal. Challenging the legal melodramas of the courts and the press with epic and tragic reconfigurations of marital breakdown, these poets historicize and contextualize both acts of murder and representations of transgression as
products of legal, sexual, and gender codes. Enacting and analyzing murderous scenarios, in which marriage contracts and domestic bargains are violently dissolved and broken, husbands, wives, and children detail the failures of marital commitments and the pressures of domestic confinements. With such ongoing commentaries and metacommentaries, Browning, Lytton, and Levy fully exploit the generic citation and differentiation integral to the hybrid forms of the verse novel and the verse drama in ways that highlight the semiotic shifting and semantic maneuvering that informed the vexed gender politics of marriage, domesticity, and criminality.

“Bad Bargain[s],” “Decent Couple[s],” and Adversarial Domesticity

In order to fully understand the domestication of murder in these three poems, a glimpse at the discursive arena in which they circulated is in order. Although a full rendering of the dense history of marriage and divorce in the nineteenth century lies well beyond the scope of this chapter, consideration of the political arguments, cultural anxieties, and textual practices that shaped Victorian marriage reform and domestic ideologies allows us to appreciate the incisive arguments of Browning’s, Lytton’s, and Levy’s poetic critiques. Several recent literary and historical studies have explored the marriage reforms of nineteenth-century England, which dealt with issues of divorce, abuse, custody, and property, and examined the modes of representation—from matrimonial legislation to press coverage to feminist polemic to prose fiction—with which Victorians documented and interpreted these changes.\(^2\) In particular, scholars have isolated the middle-class cult of domesticity as the dominant ideological model of homelife, and they have delineated its sentimentalized and pacified concepts of gender difference and its vision of a home-sanctuary illuminated by the hearth and protecting its inhabitants from public corruption.\(^3\) In his recent study of domestic masculinities, John Tosh explains that within the paradigm of the separate spheres romance, the home was a place where “masculine and feminine were brought together in a proper relation of complementarity” (7). In this scenario, private households self-regulate through the organization of virtues and pleasures—Arcangeli’s “home-sanctitudes.” As it evolved into “a privileged site of subjectivity and fantasy” (4) and was increasingly “identified with childhood, innocence and roots,” Tosh explains, the home, contrasting the corrupt public sphere, came to be identified “with authenticity itself” (3).

Most often, the public-private balancing act of this middle-class idyll constitutes our primary departure point for understanding Victorian domesticity, and a sense of the “authenticity,” pervasiveness, and influence of this model almost
always orients our studies of nineteenth-century domestic culture. In their exacting study, *The Spectacle of Intimacy* (2000), for example, Chase and Levenson navigate their “discontinuous history” (6) by counterposing privatized idylls and publicized spectacles: “broad norms and conspicuous exceptions” (12), “love and trouble” (12), “pursuit[s] of home peace” and “flights from disaster” (16). Demonstrating that “the norm needed and cultivated the disturbance” (12), the “home peace” version of domesticity centers their arguments. Yet, while this idyll—and its grim antithesis—was indisputably central to nineteenth-century cultural representation, another version of marriage and homelife also preoccupied Victorians, one that became crucial to negotiating marital breakdown and domestic violence in the courts and in the press.

This second model, codified in marriage and family law, rather explicitly denied the home its claims to authenticity and privacy and exposed these apparent privileges as mere romantic fictions that belied the fundamentally pragmatic and public functions of marriage. Marriage law mandated the systematic interference in intimate life, and, thus, virtuous and pleasant self-regulation succumbed to the coercive yokes and obstructive forces of public interests and legal contracts. As this disciplinary model prioritized state interests but privileged husbandly authority, coercion displaced cooperation and complementarity. Viewed through the lens of law, then, marriage—neither private nor authentic—was quite simply a repeat and command performance at the behest of the state.

The contest between sentimental reverence and state paternalism became most strikingly apparent during the mid-century renegotiation of marriage laws. In 1857 England’s revised matrimonial and divorce laws reiterated this performative and disciplinary model of family life in several important ways. With the establishment of England’s first divorce court, these laws ensured the dissemination of that model in public trials and newspaper reports when the court refused time and again to grant separations or divorces to petitioning spouses. The revised laws also enforced what we might call an adversarial model of spousal relations, which gained ideological force as the structures of both criminal law and family law, undergoing significant revisions in the second half of the nineteenth century, increasingly intersected uncomfortably (and publicly) in the home. Such interventions further challenged the collective fantasy of domestic autonomy by underscoring the fragility of domestic peace, emphasizing the persistence of bad behavior, and regulating formerly private transgressions. While the “home-joys” idyll normalized, and made appealing, a paternalistic and cooperative model of private life, the adversarial model insinuated a more inhospitable and combative model of domestic relations—one that was always subordinate to the power and the interests of the state.

The debates leading up to and the passage of the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 highlighted the difficulties of revering marriage, facilitate-
ing divorce, and upholding state interests through the classed and gendered mechanisms of marriage law. To liberalize and economize divorce procedures was to invite uncertain social consequences. Well before the passage of the act, these legal and ideological quandaries informed the first report generated by the Royal Commissioners on Divorce, who in 1850 were appointed by Queen Victoria to study divorce, specifically divorce à vinculo matrimonii (from the bonds of marriage). In 1853 the commissioners articulated the conflicting issues at stake in the process of divorce reform. Marriage, they explain, was “strictly speaking” indissoluble by law, and, therefore, divorce required an expensive and laborious act of parliament “to provide one specially by passing a particular law in favour of those who can make out a case which will warrant its interference” (First Report 3). Quoting from William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, the authors acknowledge unsettling tensions between reverence and regulation, contractual obligation and lawful renunciation:

[T]he common law of England, which follows in this case the canon law of the Church, ‘deems so highly, and with such mysterious reverence, of the nuptial tie,’ that the causes of Divorce are purposely limited to a few extreme and specific provocations; and the preservation of that union, so long as it can be secured, is so manifestly essential to the best interests of society, that before it can be dissolved it must clearly be established by the strictest proof that the offence has been committed; that there is no contrivance by which the parties are endeavouring to escape from their solemn obligations to themselves and their children; that they cannot discharge their mutual duties by continuing any longer to cohabit with each other, and that the party complaining is free from guilt. (First Report 1)

In proper service to the “nuptial tie,” the report goes on to explain, England’s ecclesiastical courts aptly established stringent divorce requirements: “Divorce will only be granted for the extreme provocations adverted to above; secondly, that the law will not suffer it to be obtained on the sole confession of the parties themselves; and thirdly, that it will be refused, even though an offense has been committed which would otherwise justify it, if collusion, connivance, condonation, or recrimination can be pleaded and proved” (1). While by the mid-nineteenth century these rules based on “soundest wisdom” require “some little modification,” the commissioners assert, “we conceive that in substance they ought to be maintained” (1). As the details of the report’s historical review and subsequent recommendations make clear, in order to maintain the substance of “mysterious reverence” and disciplinary authority, the law must skillfully and prudently adjudicate guilt and innocence, contrivance and evidence, provocation and protection, duty and default.

The commissioners also established a more secular foundation for uphold-
ing deference to the nuptial yoke so that the conservative approach outlined in the report is further justified by citations from one of England’s highly regarded ecclesiastical court judges, Lord Stowell, who in a 1790 ruling summarized the collective interests of marriage, the disciplinary power of indissolubility, and the unlikely roots of marital happiness:

For though, in particular cases, the repugnance of the law to dissolve the obligations of matrimonial cohabitation may operate with great severity upon individuals; yet, it must be carefully remembered, that the general happiness of married life is secured by its indissolubility. When people understand that they must live together, except for a very few reasons known to law, they learn to soften by mutual accommodation that yoke which they know they cannot shake off; they become good husbands and good wives, from the necessity of remaining husbands and wives; for necessity is a powerful master in teaching the duties which it imposes. If it were once understood, that upon mutual disgust married persons might legally be separated, many couples, who now pass through the world with mutual comfort, with attention to their common offspring, and to the moral order of civil society, might at this moment have been living in a state of mutual unkindness, in a state of estrangement from their common offspring, and in a state of most licentious and unreserved immorality. In this case, as in many others, the happiness of some individuals must be sacrificed to the greater and more general good. (13)

Yet, while Stowell and the commissioners express confidence in the softening effects of “mutual accommodation” and dismiss the inevitable “severity upon individuals” as sacrifices for the “greater and more general good,” the case for legal indissolubility necessarily falters in cases of adultery, which constitutes justifiable grounds “so consonant to reason and religion” (3) for divorce. As Barbara Leckie has argued, in such a context, adultery emerges as a “uniquely domestic crime” (62). The primary affront to the sanctity of marriage, an “extreme and specific” provocation, adultery forms the central issue in the reconsideration of divorce law, in the establishment of the divorce court, and in the increased availability of divorces à vinculo matrimonii. The various features of the report’s arguments—the investment in disciplinary yokes, the punishment of adulterous transgressors, the suspicion of colluding partners—contribute to an adversarial model of domestic unhappiness, which, foregrounding matters of sexual discipline, informs the divorce court’s proceedings and its scandalous publicity.

As Parliament sought to enact appropriate legislation, its members weighed the advantages and disadvantages of modernizing divorce law, and they continued to address the problems alluded to in the commissioners’ report. They considered ways to ensure that divorcing couples would not be rewarded by
the state and that a freshly liberalized divorce law would not threaten the social order. As both legal and ideological controls were considered, conventional models of spousal relations, including sexual double standards and separate spheres ideologies, set the priorities of legislators and organized the details of marital breakdown. After significant debate over the problem of equal grounds and equal access for husbands and wives, parliamentarians crafted a restrictive divorce act that privileged husbands’ interests and that created only a single, centralized civil divorce court in London. By restricting access, they sought to maintain male and class privilege, and they hoped to deter petitioners, reduce divorces, and enforce marriages. As Gail Savage explains, these restrictive measures “served both to limit and disguise the real demand for divorce” in Victorian England (“Intended” 36).

In the end, the 1857 Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act, the “cautious outcome of a long public brooding” (Chase and Levenson 191), established separate and unequal grounds for male and female divorce petitioners. Demonstration of a wife’s adultery constituted sufficient legal ground for husbands to seek the dissolution of a marriage, but because only aggravated adultery legitimated a wife’s claim, the burden of proof increased for petitioning wives, who were required to demonstrate adultery and additional offenses, such as cruelty, desertion, sodomy, incest, or bigamy. This discrepancy, of course, upheld conventional male sexual freedoms and enforced female sexual constraints, and it privileged male prerogatives in sexual, property, and custodial matters. Petitioners who could not demonstrate adultery or aggravated adultery to the court’s satisfaction were condemned to remain married or restricted to judicial separations—divorce à mensa et thoro (from bed and board)—which failed to nullify the legal bond of marriage and disallowed remarriage.

The gender inequalities written into the act further underscored, and indeed emerged from, an allegiance to an adversarial model of spousal relations. Documenting a discussion in the House of Lords in 1857, in which members considered the social risks of equalizing the grounds for divorce, Savage explains that their language “evoke[d] a vision of sexual relations fraught with conflict, each side giving as good as the other”:

Men asserted a natural superiority but not a moral one. The weakness of husbands, who might commit ‘occasional and fugitive’ acts of adultery with domestic servants or even collude to commit adultery so that wives could sue for divorce if the law made that possible, did not invalidate masculine authority over the family. The argument mounted by the defenders of unequal grounds portrayed women as active and dangerous combatants, ready and willing to commit adultery themselves or to revenge themselves upon adulterous husbands. (“Intended” 15)
With two opposing views of femininity—one which sees women as patient, long-suffering marriage preservers and one which sees them as potentially uncontrollable, vengeful, divorce-seeking producers of “spurious offspring” (Savage 18)—parliamentarians ultimately placed their faith in the socially stabilizing features of gender inequality. “In so doing,” Savage observes, “they framed legislation which in turn provided an institutional apparatus that constrained and directed the ways in which private conflicts between husbands and wives could be publicly recognized, acted out, and resolved” (18). In this model of domesticity, the state penetrates the private sphere by establishing a husbandly proxy, and, through the mechanisms of sexual inequality, the state leverages the privileges of one spouse against the subjugation of the other. “Household law,” then, founded upon readings of sexual transgression, affirms the preferences of the state and privileges the status of the husband while demanding a melodramatic legal script with a perpetrator and a victim. As such anxieties about private conflicts and public interests conspire to necessitate an adversarial model, that combative trope, in turn, provides a convenient basis for rationalizing sexual inequality and legal restrictions.

As this combative notion of marriage circulated within the discourse of divorce reform, domesticity accumulated criminal associations. Not surprisingly, given the recurrent themes of marital yokes and spousal conflicts, the newly established divorce court, requiring a practical schema for deciphering broken marriages, adopted an adversarial model similar to that operating in the criminal courts. Divorce cases, staged in the court and in the press like criminal cases in which an innocent party confronted a guilty party, demanded the conventional roles of perpetrator and victim. Tried by oral evidence, divorce cases required and recorded the testimony of opposing parties, and, thus, Victorians witnessed the voices of husbands and wives publicly cataloging intimate conflicts and abuses as well as the trivialities and minutiae of domestic life. As the testimony of witnesses, including that of household servants and observant neighbors, was introduced into evidence, the domestic imperatives of privacy, loyalty, and discretion eroded, and the dissolution of privacy aided the disciplin ary functions envisioned by the state.

As Martin Wiener argues in *Reconstructing the Criminal*, when husbands and wives brought each other to court and charged one another with adulterous transgressions, divorce proceedings mimicked their criminal counterparts both in terms of format and procedure and in terms of punishment and deterrence: “[t]hough a civil institution, the divorce court was (like bankruptcy court) in tone not unlike a criminal court, punishing the guilty party not through imprisonment but through public denunciation” (73). Moreover, divorce courts, like criminal courts, had “the secondary aim of deterring, through its stigma, others from falling into guilt” and of “educating the public, through its proceedings
and decisions published in the newspapers, in the rules of respectable conjugal behavior” (73). Courts of law and courts of public opinion focused on culpability, and, “if a marriage failed, someone was responsible and that person must be called to the bar of justice” (73). This paradigm secured a doctrine of marital discipline and a deference to—if not a reverence for—nuptial yokes. Within the adversarial framework, at least, marital failures appear to emanate from the actions of particular, identifiable, and legally accountable transgressing individuals, not from more systematic or diffuse institutional pressures, constraints, and inequalities.

As the divorce court and an observant public scrutinized married and family life in ways that paralleled and sometimes initiated criminal trials and legal procedures, an authentic and private idea of homelife was clearly imperiled, and, while the unhappiness of one spouse was legally sanctioned, the unhappiness of both spouses was explicitly denounced. Acknowledging that marital unhappiness was a tricky affair, the commissioners explained in their report that acts of “recrimination, connivance, and condonation” (the divorce court term for forgiving—or appearing to forgive—an adulterous offense) must be “deemed and treated as bars to the suit” (22), for they significantly undermined, even mocked, the social foundations and disciplinary functions of marriage. Flouting the binary logic of the adversarial model, mutual unhappiness, mutual disgust, mutual adultery, mutual guilt, or mutual victimization threatened the semiotics of guilt and innocence and, in the process, hinted at the possibility of broader institutional failures or social dysfunction. Therefore, the law forbade collusion, in which, for example, a husband “would ‘accept’ a charge of adultery in order to escape a marriage” or in which spouses “would suppress evidence of mutual guilt” (Horstman 101). Similarly, even specious evidence of condonation could erase the legal significance of otherwise culpable behaviors.

The potential judicial and social menace of colluding spouses also inspired a range of deterrent procedural measures. In the parliamentary debates preceding the 1857 Divorce Act, a fear that rampant collusion would lead to high divorce rates and social chaos was cited as a reason for restricting access to a central court in London (Savage, “Intended” 13). At the beginning of the reform process, the commissioners suggested that the court be given “large discretion” in “adjusting the rights” (First Report 22) of husbands and wives with respect to property and children. In procedural matters, their report recommended that a judge be charged with “examining the parties” and “ordering any witnesses” (22) and that oral testimonies, rather than the written testimonies used by the ecclesiastical courts, be used in order to prevent collusion. It also proposed the use of written depositions and signed narrative records to secure the accuracy and authenticity of divorce proceedings. A structural resistance to collusion might also be improved, the commissioners suggested, by endowing the judge with the
right to call witnesses and by submitting controvertible facts to the collective common sense of a jury (22). By 1860, spousal collusion was thought to be so common that an amendment to the Divorce Act granted discretionary powers to the Attorney General, who, acting through an agent, the Queen's Proctor, could charge suspected petitioning spouses with collusion. Charged, like criminals, with collusion, petitioners’ cases were suspended until they could adequately disprove the charges; likewise, if guilty, petitioning couples were subject to punitive fines.5

In addition to tainting the domestic idyll with such disciplinary interventions, Chase and Levenson contend, divorce reform also signified, for some opponents of reform, the “long-dreaded fall into degraded modernity” (188). Acknowledging this blighted descent, Lord Redesdale penned an urgent critique of the commissioners’ initial proposal of “common legal remedy” in marriage matters. Embedded in his lament is a disdain for democratization and decentralization:

> These divorces will thus be opened to another and numerous class, but a still more numerous class will be equally excluded as at present. Once create an appetite for such license by the proposed change, and the demand to be permitted to satisfy it will become irresistible. The cry for cheap law has of late been universally attended to, and the result will too probably be that these delicate and important questions will be brought before inferior tribunals, where the number of the judges (each acting separately) will render anything like uniformity of decision upon the circumstances which are to rule in refusing applications, impossible, and must ultimately lead to extreme facility in obtaining such Divorces. (“Lord Redesdale’s Opinion” 26)

Subjected to “cheap law” and “inferior tribunals,” the marital yoke loses its force, and divorce becomes “irresistible.” Such anxieties about compromised authority and legal remedy, of course, reveal the many classed and gendered investments in the marital yoke.

While Redesdale and his counterparts wrestled with the implications of this “license” to divorce, another significant mid-century intervention in domestic relationships, the 1853 Act for the Better Prevention and Punishment of Aggravated Assaults upon Women and Children, forced Victorians to grapple with what Mill and Taylor labeled the “license to kill.” Simultaneously challenging domestic pieties and increasing state intervention in the home, this act, the first decisive criminalization of domestic abuse, allowed magistrates to inflict six-month sentences for aggravated assaults. The discussion and passage of the bill inspired public reflections on the appropriate punitive measures for these new-found offenders, and an amendment to the bill, which was eventually
defeated, even introduced the possibility of corporal punishment for offending husbands (127). This act also contributed to adversarial and criminal inflections of domesticity. Although the language and intent of the act challenged conventional notions of patriarchal authority and household law, wives’ continued reluctance to testify against husbands and their economic dependence on husbands diminished its application and enforcement. Twenty-five years later, the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878 provided maintenance and separation allowances for abused wives and thereby acknowledged the necessity of legal and financial protection for victims of assault. Notably, in both instances, the state preferred to grant legal protections rather than legal personhood to wives. The application of the criminal code to sort out domestic tyranny and economic inequality only deepened the associations between criminality and domesticity. Extending “the criminalization of harmful behavior” into the hitherto private domestic sphere (Wiener, Reconstructing 82), they reconfigured ideas about the commission of crime within Victorian homes.

As these various examples of procedural and legal changes indicate, over and over again, the politics of domesticity required that the public sphere subject the private sphere to the rigors of adversarial law. While Victorian citizens negotiated a concept of marriage that contradictorily celebrated and sanctified marriage, enforced resigned capitulation to the nuptial yoke, and privileged a model of domestic combat (whether in cases of abuse or divorce—or both), the law always preferred acquiescence to the marital yoke. In Cruelty and Companion-ship (1992), A. James Hammerton documents the law’s continued privileging of institutional integrity over individual safety or autonomy, and he documents the paternalistic (and pragmatic) investments in marital preservation following the 1878 Matrimonial Causes Act:

[L]ocal magistrates’ courts increasingly took on a more paternalistic role, eager to intervene in an attempt to make the wife forgive, the husband reform and the family reunite, and thus avoid the fragile division of slender economic resources. Magistrates, together with a growing army of police court missionaries, probation officers and clerks of the court came to see themselves as marriage menders. (39)

In a more direct disciplinary mode, Judge Cresswell Cresswell, the Judge-Ordinary of the divorce court, repeatedly explained to petitioners, witnesses, and juries that a willingness to separate simply did not constitute an entitlement to separate because, as he summed up in one case, “the adjudication of quarrels between man and wife was of great social importance, and involved consequences much more enduring than were involved in the pecuniary questions generally submitted to juries” (Times, 18 February 1859, 9). Furthermore, the
law required that only one party could be deserving of a divorce—the clearly wronged, victimized party. Similar advisories appeared in more informal and unofficial newspaper commentaries. The *Times*, reporting on the first jury trial in the newly established civil court and dutifully covering the entire “mass of circumstances” involved in the case, editorialized on the implications of granting a separation and adjudicating squabbles:

They had made a bad bargain and they must abide by it. If man and wife knew that by getting into squabbles and making themselves unhappy they might obtain a judicial separation, that knowledge might be an encouragement to them not to attempt to curb their tempers; whereas, if they knew that if they did not curb their tempers they must continue to be miserable, they might set about it and become a decent couple. (1 December 1858, 11)

Located far below the elevated heights of the domestic romance, this pragmatic corollary necessitates abiding by a “bad bargain” and espouses a strikingly modest proposal. Recommending a double-edged course of civility and mediocrity, the inflexible law advises its unhappy subjects to “become a decent couple.”

Advocating a reformist, feminist agenda, Francis Power Cobbe in “A Lesson in Matrimony,” which appeared in *The Echo* in 1869, documents divorce cases not to “lament divorce itself,” as Susan Hamilton argues, but to argue that “our marriages turn out so badly because they are not well made” (234); surveying the public record of marriages and divorces, Cobbe concludes, “there is something radically wrong with our present matrimonial system” (qtd. in Hamilton 232). Of course, feminist critique was not the dominant Victorian mode of analysis, but the juxtaposition of these differing critical responses reminds us that as domestic ideology and marriage law situated themselves awkwardly with respect to one another, the prerogatives of state control became more glaringly apparent. As a result, the domestic idyll was not always the predominant cultural shorthand for articulating family relations in Victorian England. While the separate spheres model and the companionate model imagined spouses enjoying and sharing their respective gender-appropriate domestic comforts, which sanctify their union and fortify the social order, the law—and it various proponents—insisted upon a bleaker picture of control, capitulation, and coercion. The default model of marital relations, it would seem, imagined disciplinary and adversarial scenes of domesticity with occupants perpetually tensed by the pressures of rectitude and restraint.

And with this bleaker picture, the newspaper press—from the *Times* to the *Divorce News and Police Reporter*—found a thoroughly marketable commodity. As divorce proceedings were transferred from the legislature to the newly established Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Court in London, the press capitalized
on the publicization of the private sphere. Transformed by a more sensational agenda, Stowell’s softening yoke became a “galling yoke” (Times, 12 March 1859, 9) under which unhappy spouses might be heard “groaning” (15 July 1859, 5). Newspapers documented the divorce court’s practices, proceedings, and case-loads, thereby contributing to and profiting from what Chase and Levenson have called the “political theater of private life” (14). “Scandal was a perpetual resource,” they argue, because “the Victorian investment in family life unfolds in the awareness that at any moment it can turn into the antifamily of popular sensation” (7). In the popular imagination, they explain, “the naming of private histories became one of the avocations of the age,” and generates “the spectacle of intimacy” (12).

As a glance through the thorough divorce court reportage in the Times reveals, this spectacular intimacy included catalogues of pecuniary embarrassments, drinking habits, sexual infidelities, ill-treatment, verbal taunts, physical assaults, and obscene language (often indicated with blank spaces and dashes). In trial transcripts, however, readers also glimpsed (legally irrelevant) testimony on the minute tensions, myriad belittlements, and daily squabbles of married life. Petitioners quarreled about such things as a Newfoundland dog endangering the furniture (Times, 1 December 1858, 11) or the inequalities of butter distribution: “he complained that she eat fresh butter herself, and only allowed to him salt butter” (25 November 1858, 8). Documenting the cumulative slights of her domestic life, Mrs. Emily Cherry, a widow who married a man with eleven children, complained of “having no room made for her in the family circle near the lamp of an evening” and of having didactic portions of the thirteenth chapter of the first of Corinthians “pointedly read at her” (16 December 1858, 8). Yet, even more striking than the courtroom litanies of the immense cruelties and intense banalities of domestic life, is the court’s repeated insistence, time and time again, that long-term exposure to chronic bad behavior fails to merit legal separation or divorce.

In examining the opportunistic and innovative methods for representing the tumult of mid-century family law and family life, recent textual scholarship has favored journalistic scandal, political melodrama, and sensational fiction. With notable exceptions, these genres upheld clear boundaries between innocence and guilt, boundaries which accommodated polemicist tactics, such as those used by Caroline Norton, and facilitated novel plots such as those popularized by Elizabeth Braddon and Wilkie Collins. Yet, such binaries, as we have seen, were also mandated by predominant legal fictions, and the law’s sensationalizing bent, as Anne Humpherys explains, contributed significantly to textual representations of marital breakdown:

[B]ecause the only ground for divorce was adultery, and for women adultery
aggravated by cruelty or worse, the details in the press reports were by necessity sensational and scandalous. Indeed, while novels that dealt with sexual infidelity and marital brutality were denounced as shocking and indecent and circulating libraries refused to handle them, the reports of divorce court proceedings were uncensored and available to every person who could read. (“Coming Apart” 224–25)

While divorce court coverage inspired “the first governmental restriction of newspaper reporting of judicial proceedings” (220), the allure of such uncensored representations, as Savage contends, created the “aura of scandal attaching to divorce, which made the subject endlessly fascinating to newspaper readers” but “in fact misrepresented the mundane reality of marital breakdown in Victorian society” (“Intended” 19). The primacy of adultery in divorce cases, Leckie explains, inspired a journalistic “epistemology of adultery” that “wr[ote] adultery as a domestic detective story” in which “the goal for the judge, jury, and reader alike is to read the signs by which adultery betrays itself, to determine the truth of this uniquely domestic crime” (62). Divorce reports, “part record, part entertainment” (Humpherys, “Coming Apart” 221), and their “distortions and misrepresentation of the social realities of marital conflict,” ultimately deterred petitioners and thereby “functioned to mitigate the potential threat that divorce posed to the gender and social orders” (Savage, “Intended” 37). Domestic scandal, as Hammerton argues, privileged “the darker side of conjugal life,” and it inspired condemnations of “behaviour, from both sexes and in all social classes, which was inconsistent with the middle-class domestic idyll and with heightened emotional expectations of marriage” (2). Falling short of the domestic romance central to Hammerton’s study of marital conflict, however, the “darker side” and the scandal-seeking public gaze increased scrutiny of domestic violence. In doing so, they also corroborated the ominous adversarial notions inscribed in the legal model, and, thus, as “a locus of conflict” (14) or a site of crime, the home even threatened to reclaim some authenticity—albeit in a profoundly sinister way.

In charting divorce’s contributions to “the spectacle of intimacy,” Chase and Levenson argue that, although the divorce act was “far from radical in its legal and material consequences” (185), the “specter of divorce” (185) haunted Victorians because it placed divorce “intractably within the repertoire of possibilities” (186). Furthermore, they note, “because the difficult political struggle had made family breakdown so conspicuous in the cultural reverie—in Parliament, in the press, in prose fiction—no legal act could relieve the turbulent fantasy” (186). In tracing the representational influences of the divorce court, studies in the novel have been particularly interested in the ways in which historical cases of and debates about marital violence are filtered through the generic formats and influenced by the aesthetic affiliations of narrative fiction. In The Private Rod,
Marlene Tromp explores how the marginal status of the sensation novel allowed it to generate radical challenges to both high literary forms and conservative legal traditions. In *Bleak Houses*, Lisa Surridge, juxtaposing newspaper stories and novel plots and highlighting “moments in which generic, legal, and social discourses were particularly and visibly unstable” (7), examines how realist fiction developed the theme of domestic violence and explored the cultural functions of the “public scrutiny of private conduct” (10) not to reject marriage but to challenge male violence and regulate marital conduct.

Reading poetry, with a similar attention to the dialectal relationships between genre and discourse as well as their counterdiscursive frictions, this chapter proposes a different reading of the moral panics and textual mediations surrounding the publicity of marriage and divorce. This reading highlights the ways in which the inaccessibility and unavailability of divorce was equally unsettling, and, along these lines, the poems under discussion here—also purveyors of “cultural reverie”—can be said to invert the “turbulent fantasy.” Rather than defending an institution and critiquing conduct, these texts indict marriage. Playing with the contentious politics of marital yokes and domestic discipline, they conjure a combative and criminalized vision of spousal relations and present the home as a source of murderous motive and a site of violent opportunity. Extending the theme of misbehavior to the theme of murder, Browning, Lytton, and Levy interrogate the adversarial model of spousal relations and implicate its destructive absurdities. Accordingly, with the domestication of murder, they challenge the horrors of divorce by imagining more brutal and lethal alternatives.

In the context of marriage, murder has specific political meanings. Riveting instances of murder, unlike lesser forms of domestic violence or more salacious forms of transgression, check what Francis Power Cobbe, writing on “wife-torture” in 1878, criticized as “a certain halo of jocosity which inclines people to smile whenever they hear of a case of [an assault on a wife by her husband] (terminating anywhere short of actual murder)” (133). Murder also exaggerates—often to the point of absurdity—the contractual demands of the law when, for example, it very succinctly confronts the problem of contractual extrication and marital dissolution and challenges the fictions of marital unity and female coverture. Examining divorce novels, Humpherys has argued that divorce reform broke the stranglehold of the marriage plot in the Victorian novel and developed narrative analyses of the difficulties of extrication. The most commonly used “Caroline Norton plot,” she argues, focuses on the long-suffering wife in which “a brutal and/or egregiously adulterous husband is repeatedly excused, forgiven, and often nursed by the heroic wife until finally he or she dies”; less often, the oppressed flees, and even less often, the husband reforms (“Breaking Apart” 44). Meanwhile, in the “Jane Eyre plot,” a husband is “tricked into a bad marriage or his wife turns bad quickly, and then he falls in love with a good woman who
should be his wife” (44). Both tropes present problems of how “to extricate the heroine or hero from the mistaken marriage” and “whether to allow her or him to make a second more fulfilling one” (44), and these novels often demonstrate an “intent to expose legal injustice” and the “denial of any remedy” (46). In the poems under discussion here, murder, with great ironic and traumatic force, offers the longed-for “remedy.”

In writing marriage plots as murder plots, Browning, Lytton, and Levy, despite significant textual and historical differences, demonstrate striking consistency in their characterization of the home’s murderous orientation as overdetermined. Husbands and wives, thwarted by the intrinsic features of the marriage contract or the disciplinary functions of patriarchal authority, resort to murder because the strictures of domestic arrangements preclude less drastic solutions to marital conflict. Accordingly, readers witness the civilizing edifice of a disciplined domestic economy collapse under the weight of murderous violence. This collapse exposes the folly of domestic pieties, the structure of gender oppression, and the absence of adequate legal remedy, and because these murderers offer rationally, legally, and politically informed reasons for their actions, their crimes serve a variety of specific critical purposes. The synthesis of murderous action, domestic locale, and dramatic voice allows these poets to present a somewhat unusual vision of homicidal criminality: decisive, murderous action arises from the paradoxical convergence of frustrated agency, overdetermined subjectivity, and domestic confinement. The remainder of this chapter explores the specific textual and contextual details of such criminal representations.

**Divorce Rights and Wife-Murder in Robert Browning’s The Ring and the Book**

In the often-quoted final line of *The Ring and the Book*, Browning proclaims the poetic value of “Linking our England to his [Lyric Love’s] Italy!” (XII.870) and thus concludes the Roman murder case with a firm nod to Victorian times. Notably, this announcement occurs just after the poet-narrator claims, “Art may tell a truth / Obliquely” (XII.855–56), and Browning’s not-so-oblique linking of a Roman murder trial and “our” Victorian England accesses the disarray of Victorian domestic politics. As Browning places “this old woe . . . on the stage again” to “[a]ct itself o’er anew for men to judge” (I.824–25), he explicitly and emphatically commands his audience, “Examine it yourselves!” (I.38). Addressed to “the British Public,” who, by 1868, over ten years after the establishment of the divorce court, constituted an audience learned in the political rhetoric of public scandal and marital breakdown, the poem’s first book apprises readers
of the legal questions defining this case of marriage and murder. Though often described as a murder poem, as Simon Petch has noted, “[m]arriage, as the locus of the competing demands of nature, trust, and contract, is the most charged legal site in Browning’s poem” (“Equity and Natural Law” 110), and for this reason, marriage also focalizes the poem’s questions about institutional force and violent agency.

An interpretation of the doomed marriage quite simply determines the murderers’ status as criminal or non-criminal while their domestic locale, as Arcangeli reminds us, aggravates—or perhaps mitigates—their meaning. The “Roman murder-case” (I.121), as the notebook records, focused on the determination of criminal responsibility through a central question: “Wherein it is disputed if, and, when, / Husbands may kill adulterous wives, yet ’scape / The customary forfeit” (I.130–31). Starkly emphasizing the criteria of license and right, Browning asks readers to consider whether adultery or murder more forcefully affronts the marriage bond. Two interpretations of the killings—affront or necessity—yield two possible verdicts: “murder, or else / Legitimate punishment of the other crime [adultery], / Accounted murder by mistake” (I.133–35).

In analyzing Browning’s epic crime poem, literary scholars have often focused on the noisy polyphony that follows this introduction. As the poem’s eleven speakers, “voices we call evidence” (I.833), select and highlight divergent details of the marriage in order to interpret and reinterpret the murders, they secure the deconstruction of truth itself. The poem’s stake in domestic politics, however, is most strikingly revealed in unexpected but recognizable symmetries between the monologues of Guido and Pompilia. As the monologues of husband and wife—killer and victim—rebut and corroborate one another, Browning problematizes the conventions of adversarial discourse so integral to marriage reforms, divorce petitions, and scandalous spectacles.

In doing so, Browning selects an outrageously unsympathetic figure, Guido, who easily courts characterization as a monstrous aberration, obsessed with power, pathetic in his aristocratic ravings, and representative of old Roman corruption. He then uses him to embed a much more topically resonant, and perhaps unexpected, critique of marriage. In their respective testimony and debate, statements and accusations, rebuttals and refutations, Guido and Pompilia reconstruct the traumatic dynamic of their marriage and homelife. As Melissa Valiska Gregory has argued, Browning “persistently portrays the dynamics of the home as deeply painful for both men and women, and focuses especially on the various forms of masculine violence occurring in the struggle for sexual dominance between husbands and wives” (494). In The Ring and the Book, when both Guido’s and Pompilia’s accounts of marriage and murder coalesce on crucial points of causality and consequence, they reveal the roots of such struggle in the violent permissions of household law and the oppressive strictures of
domestic ideology. The yoke of marriage, rather than inspiring “mutual accommodation,” cruelly forces violent resistance. Regardless of how skewed, unreliable, or ambiguous the facts of this murder case, the only two speakers with firsthand knowledge of the marriage and the murders cite the domestic roots of their destruction and trace their actions, transgressions, and victimization to marriage’s “galling yoke.”

Attentive to the advantages of explaining, not denying, Guido’s first monologue elaborates a patriarchal structure of marriage. Fortifying his claims with an impenetrably circular logic, Guido’s case relies heavily upon the reiteration of legal tautologies: “the law’s the law: / With a wife I look to find all wifeliness, / As when I buy, timber and twig, a tree— / I buy the song ’o the nightingale inside” (V.603–6). And the law, he maintains, obliges his mastery: “The obligation I incurred was just / To practice mastery, prove my mastership:— / Pompilia’s duty was—submit herself” (V.716–18). Jettisoning the embellishments of the “dusty crumblings of romance” (V.696), he discourses unapologetically on the economy of marriage. “We talk of just a marriage,” he argues, “The every-day conditions and no more; / Where do these bind me to bestow one drop / Of blood shall dye my wife’s true-love-knot pink?” (V.697–700). When Guido poses the rhetorical question, “Purchase and sale being thus so plain a point, / . . . . / From the bride’s soul what is it you expect?” (V.574–77), he responds by expressing marriage as a contract in which a husband’s will subsumes all: “Why, loyalty and obedience” (V.578).

To temper, yet support, these claims, Guido disingenuously qualifies his dogmatic approach to husbanding by noting that symbolic dictates forced him to choose his particular domestic “path.” He recalls that as “eldest son and heir and prop o’ the house” (V.212), he was commanded to marry and forced to domesticate himself. Occupying a somewhat feminized state, he is told, “Here’s your post, / By the hearth and altar” (V.213–14). When he returns from Rome to be “content at home” (V.366), Guido is led by Paulo, his priest-brother, to marry Pompilia. His marriage, therefore, complies with a triply mandated familial, class, and religious decree. Even after his condemnation, he presents himself as a hapless victim of an erring domestic ideology, noting, “I am one huge and sheer mistake,—whose fault? / Not mine at least, who did not make myself” (XI.938–39). In this sense, then, he identifies himself as an initially reluctant but nonetheless zealous enforcer of patriarchal codes. In making these arguments, Guido paradoxically invokes a powerlessness to avoid husbandly power in order to write a narrative of his domestic oppression. His murderous violence thus becomes a righteous attempt to maintain the dignity of a flagging institution.

Despite logical inconsistencies, or perhaps because of them, Guido manages to implicate a dishonored and fickle Roman society as the accomplice to his violent tyranny while noting its responsibility for his initial presence at “the
“Household Law” and the Domestication of Murder

hearth and altar.” In this way, he traces his crimes to a restoration of an honor lost to state authority as much as to an adulteress wife. He shifts his crime, then, from a premeditated murderous frenzy to a loyal enforcement of matrimonial law. While clearly drawing upon a defensive legal rhetoric, which, as Arcangelì insists, must explain not deny, Guido exposes the ideological structures of marital tyranny. Set as they are amongst other corroborating and misogynist voices in the poem, which implicate sexual double standards and advocate legal latitude, his claims that society formed him—his brutal self—retain some credibility. Furthermore, when he articulates his violence as a physical embodiment of domestic ideology, he is able to question the condemnation of his judges:

Father and mother shall the woman leave,  
Cleave to the husband, be it for weal or woe:  
There is the law: what sets this law aside  
In my particular case? (V.581–84)

Lacking more attractive ideological veneers, Guido’s “purchase and sale” version of marriage and his proclamation of guilt seem starkly uncivilized. Yet his testimony about previous legal and church support for such uncivilized tactics, later confirmed in Pompilia’s testimony, and his bewilderment at its present withdrawal, tie his brutality to a history of legal permissions. For this reason, Guido, as wife-murderer, claims his superior integrity. Citing his ideologically consistent brutality, he can claim to have always been “[m]arching in mere marital rectitude!” (V.859) while the law has lapsed. Guido can defend “the irregular deed” (V.99) because the very irregularities of the law’s application and enforcement, the law’s transgressions, have framed and, in fact, demanded violence.

For Guido, the failures of legal discipline in marriage matters create domestic breakdowns that can be overcome only through more unambiguous forms of control. The court’s refusal to share Guido’s strict interpretations of the law lead him to practice murder. His “desecrated hearth” (V.1034) results from Pompilia’s alleged affair with Caponsacchi and marks murder as “the natural vengeance” (V.1070) against a “thief, poisoner and adulteress” (V.1975). His singular folly, Guido argues, was his restraint—his initial failure to give material force to the violation of the law—and he frankly surmises that if he had severed Pompilia’s finger to instruct her in wifely submission, he would have received “reproaches,—but reflections too!” (V.966). Guido’s particular model of a Blackstonian application of “moderate correction” appears excessive and thus grimly parodies the familiar legal precedent lurking behind the notion.13 Yet, Guido explains, applications of verbal abuse failed because they simply continued to abstract his power in language. That he “[c]alled her a terrible nickname, and the like” (V.984), stands as the “gentle course” (V.986) which he
now deems “the fool’s” (V.980). Similarly, when, upon their apprehension in Castelnuovo, he forgoes the legally justifiable murders of Pompilia and Caponsacchi and instead turns the “criminals” over to legal authorities, Guido’s ends are frustrated by their nonviolent approach to punishment. To Guido’s dismay, for flight and apparent adultery, Pompilia is sent to a convent and Caponsacchi to Civita Vecchia.

Guido’s repeated insistence on the hypocritical restraint of legal authorities allows him to indict the judges—and the state—as institutions that establish the motives and the conditions for murder. Because they tacitly acknowledge “the crime” (V.1228) of adultery but only punish it lightly, he argues, “the cure grew worse disease” (V.1947). As Guido’s murderous motive and multifaceted defense becomes entangled in the politics of divorce, Browning introduces the idea of divorce as a pressure-valve required to prevent more violent ends. The ecclesiastical court refuses the divorce that could end the domestic struggle that began in a secret marriage and continued through the revelation of Pompilia’s illegitimate birth, her overt resistance, her flight with Caponsacchi, her assault upon Guido with his sword, and her exile to the convent for adultery. Only at this point of refusal does Guido admit defeat: “I am irremediably beaten here” (V.1393).

However repulsive Guido’s actions and explanations, the fact that the murders occur after the Church rejects his divorce petition underscores Guido’s violent dissolution of the marriage as a decision that he understands as “the will / To do right” (V.1622–23). The Church’s response to his petition, “‘Annul a marriage? ’Tis impossible!” (V.1813), forms Guido’s defense: “Well, let me have the benefit, just so far, / Of the fact announced,—my wife then is my wife, / I have allowance for a husband’s right” (V.1816–18). Amidst this muddle of state rights and husband rights, it is by the claim to “husband’s right” that Guido finally forces legal abstraction to confront its sanctioning of corporeal violence. Without divorce rights, in other words, he claims murder rights.

Guido, of course, asserts Pompilia’s adultery in order to legalize, under seventeenth-century Roman law, his murders as a restoration of his honor. But Guido’s accusations also resonate in nineteenth-century England, where adultery informed divorce law and criminal law and thus offered another example of their gendered interdependencies. While a wife’s adultery did not legalize her murder outright, it permitted a reduction in the charge from murder to manslaughter. Providing leniency not available to women who killed adulterous husbands, this permission—if not for intentional lethal force at least for extreme violent rage—tacitly approved the husband rights so vehemently articulated by Guido two hundred years earlier (Doggett 50). As Wiener has documented in his recent study of masculinity and criminality, “In the course of the Victorian era wife killing appeared to be particularly resistant to the ‘civilizing offensive’ affecting masculine identity and male behavior:
In an increasingly “civilized” society, the home seemed to have become the “last retreat” of men’s violence. In recorded homicide a new, more “modern” social pattern developed of fewer total cases overall, but with a substantially higher proportion of them taking place within the family, or within intimate relations, and thus with women rather than men as typical victims. Yet the rise in the domestic proportion of homicide prosecutions was not only the result of diminution elsewhere; it also reflected the increasing readiness of the law to “invade” the home. . . . (Men 146)

These historical details suggestively contextualize Guido’s predicament, for he finds himself caught precisely between a long history of consent and a recent willingness to monitor, convict, and condemn wife-killing. Such changes inspire Guido’s challenge to the ruling of Innocent XII in which Guido sees a newfangled intolerance for wife-murder. He asks, “Why do things change? Wherefore is Rome un-Romed?” (XI.265), and replies, “Ah, but times change, there’s quite another Pope” (XI.276). As cultural models of respectable masculinity increasingly hinged on exhibitions of personal restraint, Guido exemplifies the limitations of that project.

With such historical links, Browning confirms that Guido is ideologically adrift, and, perhaps for this reason, Guido constructs working-class men as character witnesses. In fact, he credits the influence of his “own serving-people” (V.1551) with his final violent resolve. “Not one of us,” they explain to Guido, “[b]ut would have brained the man debauched our wife, / And staked the wife whose lust allured the man, / And paunched the Duke, had it been possible, / Who ruled the land, yet barred us such revenge!” (V.1557–60). This account of the murders conjures stereotypical Victorian attitudes about working-class masculinity and criminality, but because Guido’s speech is unreliable and his character is unethical, his invocation of working-class support only amplifies his aristocratic arrogance while exposing his attempt to further implicate the motivations of his paid accomplices. A less desperate aristocrat might purport to lead the people, not admit to eagerly following the murderous advice of “[r]esolute youngsters” (V.1562). When Guido scapegoats his servants, he attempts to displace the origins of male violence onto an othered class. At the same time, by virtue of his eager participation, he implies the widespread appeal of husbands’ violent prerogatives. The male collusion addressed in Guido’s claims—and actions—recognizes the presumed marriage rights of husbands and the violent desire to preserve honor and control as a masculine, rather than an aristocratic, birthright.

As the monologue progresses, Browning broadens the historical horizon of such violent entitlements. While traveling to Rome to commit the crimes, Guido attempts to call to mind the ideological origins of the violence he is about to inflict—an intertextual approach Arcangeli enacts in his rehearsal of a defense.
He searches his mind for “some snatch / Of a legend, relic of religion, stray / Fragment of record very strong and old / Of the first conscience, the anterior right, / The God’s-gift to mankind, . . . the one law, right is right” (V.1571–78). His pastiche of textual documentation and legal precedent lays the foundation for his later self-assurance: “I did / God’s bidding and man’s duty, so, breathe free” (V.1702–3). As “law’s mere executant” (V.2003) and “defender” (V.2004), Guido tells the court that he has “Blackened again, made legible once more / Your own decree, not permanently writ, / Rightly conceived but all too faintly traced” (V.1997–99). Insofar as his role in the poem is to embody the logic of patriarchy *in extremis* and to trace its violent legal history, he speaks accurately: he writes the law of marital and domestic authority clearly, permanently, and darkly in the blood of his victims. As Guido alternately abstracts this process in the legal language of his defense and renders it concrete through his metaphors and his murders, his maneuvering helps to position the critical value of the case, for it is the scrutiny of this very process that seems to particularly interest Browning.

Speaking well after his crimes and after his trial, the condemned Guido, “the same man, another voice” (I.1285), continues to insist on the inevitable intersections of marriage and murder. He imagines Rome as a community of property and “manly” men who understand, condone, and claim their murderous rights:

. . . All honest Rome approved my part;
    Whoever owned wife, sister, daughter,—nay,
    Mistress,—had any shadow of any right
That looks like right, and, all the more resolved,
    Held it with tooth and nail,—these manly men
   Approved! (XI.39–44)

Despite his condemnation and imminent execution, Guido contends that, although the Pope condemns spousal murder, everyday men and honorable institutions continue to excuse it: “there be nods and winks / Instruct a wise man to assist himself / In certain matters nor seek aid at all” (XI.1530–32). Contemplating his death sentence, he confidently explains, “Frown law its fiercest, there’s a wink somewhere” (XI.2001). In fact, Pompilia also describes her futile appeal to the Governor in exactly these terms; she arrives at his palace just in time to witness Guido and the Governor “[e]xchanging nod and wink for shrug and smile” (VII.1279). This lexicon of nods and shrugs—the nod of complicity and the shrug of consent—is fundamental to Browning’s depiction of patriarchal domesticity, and with reference to it, these two monologues document the ominous everyday structure of legal permissions. Demonstrating a link between
smiles and shrugs, winks and nods, and marriage and murder, Browning sketches an unsettling social portrait, and moments such as this in which murderer and victim corroborate one another’s claims, suggest the institutional, rather than purely individual, origins of domestic violence.

Compromising his claims to “[m]arital rectitude,” Guido’s second monologue delivers disorganized affronts and blasphemies. Yet, it nonetheless complements the arguments for domestic discipline applied in his first monologue. Guido has been defeated by the Pope’s belief in Pompilia’s sexual innocence and his denial of Guido’s murderous right. Pompilia’s restoration to an ideally chaste, victimized, pacified, silenced wife and woman frustrates Guido’s stance as a lawful hero who “judged, sentenced, and punished” a disobedient and adulterous wife, whom he has earlier sought to dismiss as a “hysteric querulous rebel” (V.1828). The long project of devaluing and discrediting Pompilia included his sexual assaults, which, as Pompilia recalls, Guido described as an opportunity to damn her: “Give me the fleshly vesture I can reach / And rend and leave just fit for hell to burn!” (VII.783–84). Accordingly, as he approaches his own death, calling attention to the abject decomposition of the dead Pompilia, he seeks a similar defilement: “What you call my wife / I call a nullity in female shape, / Vapid disgust, soon to be pungent plague . . .” (XI.1110–12). And, in a vengeful apostrophe to his dead wife, he warns, “Beware me in what other world may be!— / Pompilia, who have brought me to this pass!” (XI.2101). Presented as ravings, these claims also reveal a defensive logic. In refuting the justice of his condemnation, Guido must subvert Pompilia’s authority, which relies upon a notion of her innocence and her victimization and, amongst these “voices we call evidence,” becomes the interpretive crux of the case.

Before the Pope’s ruling, most of the other voices in the poem presume the greater authority of the husband. Pompilia’s newfound authority, Guido argues, results from the fact that “The mob’s in love, I’ll wager, to a man, / With my poor young good beauteous murdered wife” (XI.1823–24). Guido, anxious as ever about class hierarchies, blames the representational powers of song sheets in which Pompilia’s violated, dying self outweighs his emboldened masculine authority:

And eyes, on warrant of the story, wax
Wanton at portraiture in white and black
Of dead Pompilia gracing ballad-sheet,
Which, had she died unmurdered and unsung,
Would never turn though she paced street as bare
As the mad penitent ladies do in France. (XI.1826–31)

Here again is the iconic imagery of victimized wife and brutalizing husband,
and in this passage, Browning suggests both the representational power of the crime ballad and the imperatives of melodramatic binaries in order to chart Guido’s fall. When Guido credits the ballad with gaining a public sympathy for her plight, a political pressure to which he believes the Pope is susceptible, he cites the inversion of class and honor that continually plague him. In the public forum of working-class literature, the nobleman loses his credibility to the illegitimate daughter of a prostitute. At the same time, Browning’s ballad references highlight the fact that only Pompilia’s violent death authorizes her voice. The crime and her wounds speak for her in ways that she could not and compel an audience of listeners that, while living, she could not.

Because Guido’s condemnation renders his campaign against her public honor and her otherworldly salvation futile, he redirects his ravings towards dismantling the abstract value of purity and sullying the revered sacrament of marriage. After deconstructing Pompilia’s popular authority, Guido attacks the wifely ideal itself, which has been instrumental in his ruin:

Why, when a man has gone and hanged himself
Because of what he calls a wicked wife,—
See, if the turpitude, he makes his moan,
Be not mere excellence the fool ignores! (XI.2205–8)

His proposed union with Lucrezia Borgia, a reference which inspires his priest-interlocutors to hold up their crucifixes, extols the evils of a sinning woman, whose evil he can and will surpass:

Oh thou Lucrezia, is it long to wait
Yonder where all the gloom is in a glow
With thy suspected presence?—virgin yet,
Virtuous again in face of what’s to teach—
Sin unimagined, unimaginable,—
I come to claim my bride,—thy Borgia’s self
Not half the burning bridegroom I shall be! (XI.2212–18)

He thus deconstructs “[m]arital rectitude” and mocks the companionate ideal that so annoys him. In proposing a marriage in hell with a mythic poisoner and sexual predator, Guido attempts to undo all of the gendered codes that he ruthlessly enforced in his marriage and then opportunistically invoked in his defense.

His relentless attempts to apply patriarchal law with rhetorical and material force culminate in this shocking scene where husband and wife vie for transgressive dominance. Espousing this model of adversarial excess before a collection of upheld crucifixes, Guido even claims “impenitence” (XI.2229) as an
act of resistance and a legal loophole. Just as he manages to attain this level of performative power, however, Guido’s final words mark his surrender, and they underscore the desperate dialogue with Pompilia that his monologues have consistently implied: “Abate,—Cardinal,—Christ,—Maria,—God, . . . / Pompilia, will you let them murder me?” (XI.2424–25). With Guido’s wild rhetorical energy reduced to pathetic verbal exhaustion, this apostrophe to his murder victim encapsulates the poem’s commentary on the state’s interests, investments, and interference in domestic matters. But, in a perversion of the eternal bond of marriage (the much touted yoke), Guido’s desperate inquiry also neatly condenses the intricate and unending dialogue between husband and wife—murderer and murder victim—upon which the poem builds its scrutiny of adversarial domesticity.

Toward the same end, Pompilia’s monologue both contrasts and corroborates Guido’s assertions. Pompilia is a murder victim whose voice is only heard and recorded because she dies over the course of days. As she hovers between a tragic life and a certain death, her remarkable status grants her an uncustomary wifely authority, which, as Guido laments, allows this “pale frail wife” (XI.1675) to “shimmer through the gloom o’ the grave, / Come and confront me” (XI.1680–81) and “turn / My plausibility to nothingness!” (XI.1686–87). Pompilia herself bitterly critiques the horrific origins of her death-bed authority, noting that it lies only in the “twenty-two dagger wounds, / Five deadly” (VII.38–39) with which Guido has violently asserted his husband rights. She is “to die tonight” (VII.40), she explains, and “[f]our days ago, when I was sound and well / And like to live, no one would understand” (VII.908–9).

Fittingly, then, Pompilia tells the story of silenced womanhood. Violante, Guido, the Archbishop, the Governor, the Friar, and the Court, which exiled her to the convent, prohibit her speech at various crucial points in her life. She describes her childhood wedding as an induction into silence. Violante, acting without Pietro’s knowledge, instructs her that she “must hold [her] tongue, / Such being the correct way with girl-brides” (VII.382–83). And Pompilia reminds her audience: “Remember I was barely twelve years old— / A child at marriage” (VII.734–35). Significantly, like Guido, Pompilia regards her acquiescence to the marriage as an economic exchange. She, however, bargains herself: “hardly knowing what a husband meant, / I supposed this or any man would serve” (VII.410–11) to “purchase” the “praise of those I loved” (VII.408). She recalls a secret ceremony of uncertain vow-making in which Paolo required her to “[r]ead here and there, made me say that and this” (VII.446) and:

... told me I was now a wife,
Honoured indeed, since Christ thus weds the Church,
And therefore turned he water into wine,
To show I should obey my spouse like Christ. (VII.446–50)
Pompilia, again equating wifehood with silence, “was quiet, being a bride” (VII.471). Only as a murdered wife can Pompilia speak with frankness and anger about the violent correlations between marriage and murder: “I was the chattel that had caused a crime” (VII.520).

Throughout her monologue, Pompilia disclaims any desire to catalogue Guido’s actions: “. . . no, I leave my husband out! / It is not to do him more hurt I speak” (VII.1134–35). Commenting on the intentions and omissions of her speech, Pompilia signals (and perhaps feminizes) the difficulties of expression, but she also highlights the purpose of her monologue—to defend her sexual self and thereby indict her murderous husband. As Gregory has argued, “Browning fills her monologue with metaphors and ellipses, blank spaces, and oblique references where the reader must imagine violence rather than (as in so much of Browning’s early work) experience its painfully intimate details” (503). Marriage is a “blank” (VII.574) and rape a silence marked by ellipses:

Remember I was barely twelve years old—
A child at marriage: I was let alone
For weeks, I told you, lived my child-life still
Even at Arezzo, when I woke and found
First . . . but I need not think of that again—
Over and ended! (VII.734–39)

Gregory considers these elliptical omissions as part of Browning’s “investigation into modes of achieving lyric self-expression without forcing violence upon his audience” (504), but while Pompilia sidesteps “the traditional role of courtroom plaintiff” (504) by refusing to completely narrate the crimes against her, she also asks the reader to acknowledge the violent possibilities and permissions of marriage. In this way, her monologue indicts marriage itself as a violent and false covenant rather than detailing or isolating Guido’s individual perversions and transgressions. Both Guido and Pompilia sketch narratives that forge an uneasy agreement about cause and effect by pointing to the institutional powers and ideological pressures that determine their violent ends.

While Guido idealizes household law, Pompilia idealizes romantic love. Pompilia, like Guido, erects an ideal vision of marriage against which to measure the disorder of her own experience: “Marriage on earth seems such a counterfeit” (VII.1824). Aware that her authentic ideal cannot be realized on earth, Pompilia seeks to expose the “home-joys” version of domesticity, based upon husbandly love, religious devotion, and paternal protection, as a façade masking deeper structures of patriarchal violence and state control:

Everyone says that husbands love their wives,
Guard them and guide them, give them happiness;
‘Tis duty, law, pleasure, religion: well,
You see how much of this comes true in mine! (VII.152–55)

Marital rape, which Pompilia only reluctantly documents in her monologue, leads her to connect her own experience to that of her biological mother, the prostitute from whom Violante purchased her:

My own real mother, whom I never knew,
Who did wrong (if she needs must have done wrong)
Through being all her life, not my four years,
At the mercy of the hateful,—every beast
O’ the field was wont to break that fountain-fence,
Trample the silver into mud so murk
Heaven could not find itself reflected there,—(VII.864–70)

Her angry comparison between abused wife and dehumanized prostitute, of course, echoes the arguments of nineteenth-century feminists who read the sexual economies of marriage and the legal liabilities of wifehood through metaphors of prostitution. Comparing her mother’s trampled and profaned life “[a]t the mercy of the hateful” with the sexual, physical, and psychological debasement of her marriage, Pompilia cynically undercuts angelic and sacred formulations of wifehood and domesticity.14

As Ann Brady has argued, when Pompilia rejects wifely submission, publicizes her oppression, and flees with Caponsacchi, she violates parental, secular, and ecclesiastical authorities. Demonstrating “self-possession,” “self-direction,” and a “sense of sole responsibility for the preservation of self,” she resists patriarchy in ways that constitute “radical behavior” and “radical judgment” (14). Yet, Pompilia’s attempt to murder Guido, it is worth noting, signifies a much more significant challenge to patriarchal control. Not only does Pompilia assault Guido with his own sword at Castelnuovo, but, overcoming her habitual and enforced silence, she shouts, “Die, . . . devil, in God’s name!” (VI.1546). Oddly, critics often neglect this passage, but it is here that the notion of marriage’s violent core—its adversarial mandate—is most solidly confirmed. Though Pompilia later qualifies the intentions informing her actions, she nonetheless enacts and articulates an open revolt against marriage law, Guido, and the cast of collaborators that ensure her domestic imprisonment. In terms of scale, of course, her momentary act of resistance hardly compares to the systematic violence of Guido, but its symbolic functions are crucial to the poem’s vision of domestic combat and its commentary on bad bargains.

In narrating her rebellion, Pompilia charts her resistance with details that reveal her intent and that powerfully implicate the ways in which the marriage engenders violence. Pressed by Guido’s presence as “master” and by the guards
who are taking custody of “her angel” (Caponsacchi), Pompilia recalls, “I did for once see right, do right, give tongue / The adequate protest” (VII.1591–92). Referring to her attempt to kill Guido as her single “adequate protest” and her “first / And last resistance” (VII.1622–23), she effectively argues that violence offered the only possible end to the marriage. The assertion that violence offers the only available recourse, of course, is precisely Guido’s argument, and, significantly, both husband and wife describe their murderous violence as an effort to “do right.” At such points where their monologues converge, Browning forges an unsettling connection between the yoke of marriage and the outbreak of violence. The Ring and the Book, then, becomes more than a demonstration and critique of male violence, for it offers collective testimony about the inescapable and escalating tensions of bad marriage. The flight and apprehension—and Pompilia’s and Guido’s accounts of the impossibility of divorce—create an unhappy vision of marriage as a prison closely guarded by legal, social, and religious codes.

Although in the aforementioned lines Pompilia boldly claims her own murder rights, in subsequent passages she exhibits a desire to situate the details of her rebellion in more acceptable terms. She authorizes her actions in a religious language of duty rather than secular language of protest, and with such discursive maneuvering, Browning exposes the contradictory ideological demands inflecting her character and her speech. All at once, this murdered child-wife must negotiate proper testimony, proper womanhood, and proper victimhood. When Pompilia confesses her actions, she also casts her violence as a service to God and positions it as the rescue of God’s angel, Caponsacchi:

I did spring up, attempt to thrust aside
That ice-block ’twixt the sun and me, lay low
The neutralizer of all good and truth.
If I sinned so,—never obey voice more
O’ the Just and Terrible, who bids us—“Bear!”
Not—“Stand by, bear to see my angels bear!”
I am clear it was on impulse to serve God
Not save myself,—no—nor my child unborn! (VII.1594–1601)

The strands of this explanation are complex. Pompilia displaces responsibility for her violence and denies her interests in defending herself. She differentiates between acceptance of the violence against her, which she had been instructed to “bear,” and a rejection of the violence against Caponsacchi, which, she argues, marital codes do not require her to bear. She forces this distinction even further when she notes that she did not attack Guido for the sake of her unborn child, who would presumably also fall under Guido’s tyrannical authority. Her
violence against her husband, she attempts to argue, functions as a response to a higher authority (“serve god”), which necessarily overrides corrupt earthly systems of marital authority. The reference to an unborn child at this point also supports her claims to Guido’s paternity and, thus, implicitly denies the charge of adultery with Caponsacchi. While admitting to the attack, then, Pompilia refuses to acknowledge any shirking of womanly forbearance, and, at the same time, she undermines Guido’s claim to *honoris causa*. Her use of discursive pastiche and rhetorical confusion once again reflects the labyrinth of gendered and classed codes that she must negotiate—even as she dies.

As Pompilia continues, these strategies resurface when the explanations for her violence shift slightly:

> But when at last, all by myself I stood
> Obeying the clear voice which bade me rise,
> Not for my own sake but my babe unborn,
> And take the angel's hand was sent to help—
> And found the old adversary athwart the path—
> Not my hand simply struck from the angel's, but
> The very angel's self made foul i' the face
> By the fiend who struck there,—that I would not bear,
> That only I resisted! (VII.1614–22)

Differing only slightly, both explanations serve to replace self-interest with self-effacement. In this instance, she acts, “[n]ot for [her] own sake,” but for the sake of the “babe unborn.” This minor adjustment allows Browning to suggest the care with which Pompilia attempts to master and adhere to the codes of womanhood while she simultaneously indicts and rejects them as factors in her demise. Even as a murdered woman, she remains wary of the perils of submitting the private circumstances of her marriage to the public record. Because criminalizing and condemning Guido, her “old adversary,” requires the maintenance of her wifely purity, she confronts these impossible contradictions with a doublespeak, one that mirrors and inverts Guido’s own self-interested language. Accordingly, Pompilia masks her intent and denies her own interests, in order to tame the transgression that she enacted against her “master.” Her reference to an angel’s support helps to secure the role of innocence and right, which can absolve her and condemn Guido.

In spite of her rhetorical maneuvers, however, her attack on Guido reinforces the often unacknowledged agreement between these two adversaries about how the institution of marriage overdetermines their violent ends. Though it is tempting to scan their monologues in an effort to ascertain the veracity of one testimony or the other, as criminal and divorce courts mandated, the striking
resemblances between Guido’s and Pompilia’s narratives work against this interpretive approach. Browning, explicitly interested in the difficulties and contingencies of interpretation, constructs correlations that underscore causal relations between the marriage bond and its violent dissolution. As the narratives of crime mutate into tales of marriage—and back again—Browning suggests that marriage and murder form essential parts, beginning and end, of the same coercive contract.

This argument about the nature of a “bad bargain” is echoed in other monologues as well and establishes a kind of critical refrain. The voice of Half-Rome, for example, asserts that marriage is the “knot / Which nothing cuts except this kind of knife” (II.66–67). A similar connection between marriage and murder appears when Pompilia recollects Pietro’s words upon discovering her secret marriage to Guido. When Guido comes to claim his bride, an astonished Pietro cries to Violante, “You have murdered us, / Me and yourself and this our child beside!” (VII.492–93). Pietro’s certain application of the word “murder” suggestively encapsulates the troubling slippage between marriage and murder that Browning sustains throughout the poem. Of course, Browning does not suggest that all marriages end in murder, but the poem uses this slippage to elaborate the lingering disillusionment with marriage law and marriage reform in Victorian England. He uses extreme violence to reinscribe patriarchal permissions, and to exaggerate the adversarial model, and thereby critique the notion that marital yokes and husbandly discipline produce decent couples.

Accordingly, the problem of marital yokes, spousal antagonism, and inadequate remedy appears when Pompilia traces murder to the legal difficulties of divorce, citing Rome’s rejection of Guido’s divorce petition: “People indeed would fain have somehow proved / He was no husband: but he did not hear, / Or would not wait, and so has killed us all” (VII.156–58). And though here she critiques Guido’s impatience and expresses confidence in an eventual legal divorce, she explicitly depicts the murder as a divorce. After asking, “I—pardon him?” (VII.1709), she explains:

Let him make God amends,—none, none to me
Who thank him rather that, whereas strange fate
Mockingly styled him husband and me wife,
Himself this way at least pronounced divorce,
Blotted the marriage-bond: this blood of mine
Flies forth exultingly at any door,
Washes the parchment white, and thanks the blow. (VII.1712–18)

Pompilia’s thanks for “the blow,” her acceptance of Guido’s irrevocable “divorce,” her appreciation of the now publicly visible blot on the “marriage-bond” (which had hitherto been privatized and concealed), and her exultation in the
purification of her violent death combine to register a deeply bitter and ironic anger. At the same time, they focus the poem’s grim conclusions about marriage and divorce. The narrative and rhetorical logic of both accounts affirms that the radical annulment, the murders with which Guido finally “pronounced divorce,” constitutes the only solution possible within the confines of Roman society. Emphasizing this cultural oppression, Pompilia’s monologue ends with a full rejection of earthly marriage law and a vision of companionate marriage undertaken by angels—removed from a social context valuing “birth, power, repute so much, / Or beauty, youth so much, in lack of these!” (VII.1831–32).

If we consider the symmetries of these two monologues, we can see how the poem challenges the codes of legal melodrama and public scandal circulating in Browning’s murder poem and in Victorian England. With the voices of Half-Rome, The Other Half-Rome, and Tertium Quid—and with the Pope’s contemplation of the historical significance of his ruling—Browning represents the “public anxiety” (I.1141), “the vibrations in the general mind” (I.844), produced by marital violence. Placed between the “world’s outcry” (I.839) and the “world’s guess” (I.842), the murder case, initially introduced as a problem of “if, and, when, / Husbands may kill adulterous wives,” raises more questions about institutional force and individual frailty than a narrative condemning the monstrous outrage of a violent devil, fated for execution, and lamenting the passive victimization of a virtuous saint, fated for martyrdom, can address. While responding to the noisy debates that accompany shocking crimes and failing marriages, the stories of Pompilia and Guido function as political critiques of the melodramatic mandates and legal discourses that threaten to misrepresent and misinterpret their marriage and her murder. While the voices of the public and of the law wish to uphold the binaries of martyrdom and monstrosity, or adultery and honor, Guido and Pompilia, although drawing heavily upon these polarities (because they are consistently subjected to them), develop a critique of marriage law and its entire apparatus of customs and permissions. Because Guido’s murder of Pompilia and the state’s execution of Guido both interrogate the power dynamics of marital yokes and bad bargains, the poem ultimately exceeds the limits of the central question posed by the “the old yellow book.” The question of “if, and when” requires an analysis of the violence supporting the mechanisms of marriage, which, Pompilia argues, “has killed us all.”

As the converging monologues of Pompilia and Guido serve to expose the inadequacies of popular exegesis, Browning uses the verse novel’s polyphony and the epic’s massive scale to interrogate the reductive processes and ideological blindspots determining its generic and discursive methodologies. As Felluga has argued, the development of the verse novel correlates to the marginalization of poetry in the Victorian literary marketplace. In developing verse analogues to the novel, he argues, “poetry could attempt to play to that market as best it could by exploring the characteristics that made the novel such a popular
success (narrative sequentiality, realistic description, historical referentiality, believable characters, dramatic situations, fully realized dialogism and, above all, the domestic marriage plot)” (“Verse Novel” 171). Suggesting an interest in the literary marketplace, Browning’s poetic maneuvering also suggests a stake in the cultural and political marketplace surrounding marriage and divorce, one that includes the sensation novel but also the newspaper press. Responding to the poem’s unusual approach to content and context, a review in The British Quarterly Review, lamenting Browning’s interest in “mere vulgar murders” rather than “really noble” actions, characterized the text as both a “story which would suit a contemporary sensation novelist” (“Browning’s Poetry” 456) and “the newspaper in blank verse” (457). Such observations return us to the performative and intertextual experiments of poetry—and the dialectical interplay of genre and discourse—in the marketplace of Victorian verse.

Considering the development of genre with respect to historical and cultural instability, Felluga considers that genres may be “perceived as belonging to a particular regimen but also as regimented against other genres” (“Novel Poetry” 495). As The Ring and the Book exemplifies a poetic response to the representational practices of the novel, the newspaper, and the court in cases of marital violence and domestic cruelty, its most striking argument “against other genres” emanates from its performance of and differentiation from their codes. While demonstrating an interest in scandal, the disgressive witnesses to and participants in this domestic murder plot undermine their own interpretive authority with their idiosyncratic and self-interested asides and their allegiances to prefabricated and outmoded narrative frameworks. To understand the laws of marriage and the laws of murder in representational terms, the poem suggests, the laws of genre must be revised and reimagined. The Ring and the Book has a great deal to say about textual production and legal fictions, but it is worth noting that in alluding to but not reproducing the framework of novels and newspapers, Browning generates the most startling feature of the text: the likenesses of Guido’s and Pompilia’s dramatic monologues. With their words, set amidst the crumbling integrity of matrimonial laws and the unstable resources of public gossip, readers glean some semblance of authenticity. With this unlikely symmetry—establishing the twinned testimonies of mutual disgust—Browning centers his critique.

“High Justice” and Husband-Murder in 
Edward Robert Bulwer Lytton’s Clytemnestra

Of course, when it comes to interrogating marriage law and domestic ideology, murderous wives and mothers signify much differently than murderous
husbands and fathers. Guido’s crimes, as well as his rhetoric of impunity, for instance, crystallize the immense cultural machinery upholding wifely subjugation. As Guido explains in his defense, he merely embodies the abstracted ideologies and legal permissions of patriarchal hegemony. At the same time, his household crimes resonate with the developing Victorian discourses condemning abusive fathers and husbands, criminalizing domestic assault, and mandating protections for legally compromised wives. Murderous wives and mothers, in marked contrast, subvert this gendered system of permissions and protections. Neither respecting masculine authority nor requiring male rescue, domestic murderesses explode ideologies of feminine passivity, wifely patience, male protection, and husbandly dominance. And, while murderous wives and mothers countered representations of domesticated femininity, companionate marriage, and romantic love, they also threatened disciplinary models of marriage that aligned state and husbandly power.

Until 1828, English law had formally recognized the dense cultural symbolism of such wifely transgressions. Wives who killed their husbands, like servants who killed their masters or mistresses and ecclesiastics who killed their superiors, were guilty of “petit treason.” Quoting Blackstone’s legal interpretation of such acts, Maeve Doggett explains that these social relationships “embodied ‘obligations of duty, subjection and allegiance’ similar to those characterizing the relation between citizen and sovereign” (50). Lytton’s Clytemnestra and Levy’s Medea play upon this relationship between domestic and political ordering by refashioning scenarios of domestic violence in Greek drama and positing causal links between marriage and murder. These texts allowed both authors to ignore the popular Christian rhetoric underlying justifications for the naturalness of domestic patriarchy and the compensatory enjoyments of angels in the house. Expressing themselves as sexual and psychological subjects, Lytton’s and Levy’s wives and mothers forego the domestic comforts of everyday “trifles” (2), the daily refinement of “minor morals” (7), and the measured exercise of “moral power” (49) advocated by Sarah Stickney Ellis in The Women of England (1838).

As both poets secularize the dynamics of household law, they reconfigure these tragic murderesses as particularly modern women who express the dissatisfactions and injustices of gender inequality in terms immediately connected to marriage and divorce laws of the Victorian period.

Modern readers are not particularly familiar with Lytton’s poetry, but among Victorian readers his poems, published under the pseudonym Owen Meredith, alternately inspired admiration and elicited contempt. A protégé of the Brownings, Lytton influenced a coterie of Oxford students with his debut poetry collection, Clytemnestra, the Earl’s Return, the Artist, and Other Poems, which Chapman and Hall published in 1855, and, as Florence Boos has documented, his early work likely influenced William Morris’s approach to medievalism. At the same
time, many critics challenged his work as derivative amateurism or outright plagiarism. Swinburne labeled him a “pseudonymous poeticule” and parodied his work in “Last Words of a Seventh-Rate Poet” (1880) (qtd. in Mitchell 83). Despite his poetic pursuits, however modest or contested, Lytton ultimately fulfilled the demands of his novelist-father, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and established his national reputation, not as a writer, but as a career diplomat.17 In 1876, he became Viceroy to India, just as Queen Victoria was preparing to assume the title of Empress of India. While his biographers have acclaimed his literary work and attempted to revitalize his poetic reputation, his diplomatic stature invariably outshines his artistic achievements. Yet, although Lytton’s work remains significantly marginalized in our contemporary studies of Victorian poetics, Clytemnestra merits attention here because it deploys an ancient and familiar spousal murder in order to represent Victorian England’s anxious domestic politics and because it does so with attention to the imbrications of genre and discourse.

Signifying its own importance, Clytemnestra headlined Lytton’s first poetry collection and thereby assumed particular responsibility in launching his poetic career. Lytton composed and published the verse drama during the especially tense arena of marriage debates between the establishment of the Royal Commission on Divorce in 1850 and the passage of the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act in 1857, and he appropriated details from the national conversation on marriage reform in order to establish the homicidal motives and critical perspectives of Clytemnestra. Working in tandem, the dramatic voices and the narrative logic of Lytton’s Clytemnestra suggest that murder offers a form of recourse for legally, politically, and socially compromised wives. Poised in this symbolic position, murder affords, in Clytemnestra’s terms, a “high justice” that, with the sharp reprisals of the knife, condemns the sexual double standard that privileges and ensures husbandly dominance and patriarchal power. In murdering Agamemnon—husband and king—Clytemnestra gains both the household and the state. In adapting Clytemnestra’s story to Victorian times, Lytton retrieves and reorganizes portions of the Orestian saga of family breakdown in order to consider the legal and psychological dilemmas of marital unhappiness. Because Clytemnestra balances extensive commentary on the dejected experience of wifely oppression with the terrific outcome of a murderous rebellion, Lytton forces the abstraction of unhappiness to be read through its tangible results.

Though writing the verse drama in his early twenties, the young, unmarried Lytton undoubtedly possessed insights into such matters, for he existed in especial proximity to the political, legal, and scandalous implications of marital disintegration and discord. His parents, the novelist and MP, Edward Bulwer-Lytton and his wife, Rosina (née Wheeler), were the notorious adversaries of one of the most publicly vitriolic and endlessly scandalous society marriages
of mid-nineteenth-century England. Though his parents obtained a judicial separation in 1836, after nine years of marriage, they were ineligible for divorce, both before and after the Divorce Act, because they both had committed adultery. Yet, as Marilyn J. Kurata has argued, “[a]lthough English law made divorce impossible in this case because both partners possessed grounds for divorce, other laws offered means of controlling a recalcitrant wife” (45). Accordingly, on various occasions, Bulwer-Lytton used the arsenal of marital weapons available to the mid-Victorian husband: financial control, child custody, secret surveillance, forced asyluming, and physical assault. Skillfully wielding publicity as her instrument of redress, Rosina retaliated with newspaper letters, allegorical novels, and public appearances in which she vilified her husband’s character and disrupted his dignified political image. According to most biographers, Lytton almost unwaveringly aligned himself with his father in his parents’ matrimonial feuds—and even ushered his outraged mother off the stage of British scandal and onto the continent in order to salvage his father’s reputation. However, complicates this standard biographical view of his domestic allegiances and gendered sympathies. Fixing its gaze on Clytemnestra, the poem registers an attempt to depict, to understand, and to analyze the feminine subject position in the context of marital breakdown.

In a few striking ways, the Bulwer-Lytton family saga resembled the Orestian nightmare portrayed in Clytemnestra. It includes an outraged wife and mother, who explicitly lamented the strictures of womanhood and sought compensation with increasingly radical methods, and a pompous, controlling patriarch, whose official state duties and political self-fashioning took precedence over his private, family duties. Their family story also includes the tragically early death of the daughter and sister, Emily, whom Lytton once referred to as a “murdered girl” and whose early death inspired mutual accusations of neglect in the parents’ ongoing battles (qtd. in Raymond 75). In the ongoing recriminations, Emily appeared an innocent martyr to the neglect, incompetence, and selfishness of her warring parents. Furthermore, as Marie Mulvey-Roberts contends, the “Bulwers feared the murderous inclinations of one against the other” (124), and many of the family’s struggles were broadcast to and witnessed by an observant and fascinated public. While Clytemnestra is certainly not a fully autobiographical domestic allegory, the struggles of the Bulwer-Lytton family signal the poem’s historical context and Lytton’s interest in the destructive forces lurking within the disharmonies and injustices of married life. Equally important are his poem’s commentaries on publicity. With his representations of the chorus—alternately accusatory and placated—Lytton encompasses the broader cultural theater of marriage and divorce on the implied stage of the closet drama and thereby addresses the generic patterning of domestic romances and marital scandals.
With a text that is both safely literary and suggestively political, Lytton authorizes his work—and launches his career—with a classical crime. The literary alchemy of the ancient and the modern, especially in the context of crime, also attends to questions of authorial legitimacy and textual vulgarity that surrounded crime writing in the Victorian period. In fact, just before Lytton began to exploit the violent and criminal resources of Greek tragedy for his début volume, his father had attempted to defend his crime novels—*Paul Clifford* (1830), *Eugene Aram* (1832), and *Lucretia; Or, The Children of the Night* (1846)—against charges of glorifying criminals and wallowing in vulgarities. In his defensive essay, “A Word to the Public” (1847), Bulwer-Lytton defends his work by plotting the literary relationship between the ancient and the modern. The “delineation of crime,” he explains, “in every age” has been the “the more especial and chosen thesis of the greatest masters of art quoted to us as authorities and held up to us as models” (14), and his catalogue of evidence includes the infamous murderers of several canonical favorites: Clytemnestra, Medea, Orestes, Oedipus, Phaedra, Richard, Hamlet, Othello, and Macbeth.

These dramatic texts and characters do not celebrate crime, he argues, but rather exhibit and embody tragic necessity: “Crime, in fact, is the essential material of the Tragic Drama. Take crime from tragedy, and you annihilate tragedy itself” (16). Literary crimes generate “moral terror” because they induce speculation about and confrontations with “some destroying or dangerous agency” (20). “Look a little deeper,” Bulwer-Lytton confides, “and you will find that there are only two kinds of this agency—the first, supernatural, such as Fate” and “the second agency is human crime” (20). Arguing that modern novelists must be permitted to depict modern crimes rather than crimes “clad in the pomp of history” (24), he asserts, “the past cannot monopolise the sorrows and crimes of ages” (25). For, with the Greeks, fate “was the main instrument of woe and crime. . . . [b]ut, with us, guilt or woe has its source in ourselves. Our conscience is our oracle, our deeds shape our fate” (54). In Bulwer-Lytton’s argument about the necessity of a modern crime literature, one might glean a corollary argument about the merits of revising ancient crimes. While Bulwer-Lytton defends the literary merits of modernity’s “vulgar” crimes, his son’s *Clytemnestra*, “clad in the pomp of history” and dwelling in the realms of poetry, exploits the aesthetic and moral comforts of classical crime in order to confront the modern discourses of domestic scandal and household law. Combining the ancient crime with the modern motive, Lytton invokes the “moral terror” of wifely rebellion. Moreover, the ancient Greek context also affords Lytton an opportunity to jettison Christian dogma from his analysis of spousal relations. Effectively secularizing the text, it allows Lytton to interrogate the symbolic laws of the home without having to honor—or address—Christian-based domestic pieties. A poetic comparison reveals the latitude gained by this secular bent. Penning
their verses of mid-Victorian homelife at precisely the same time, Coventry Patmore enshrines an “Angel in the House” (1854) while Lytton domesticates a high tragic murderess.

In critiquing the poem, Victorian commentators—both private and public—frequently relied on the dramatic template of Aeschylus and the genre codes of Greek tragedy as their evaluative tools. Elizabeth Barrett Browning described Clytemnestra as “too ambitious because after Aeschylus, but full of promise indeed” (Harlan and Harlan, Letters 27). Accusations of plagiarism also surfaced as several reviewers scrutinized his Greek and Shakespearean imitations and documented his contemporary literary borrowings. More interesting than the problems of generic authenticity and authorial originality, which Lytton himself addressed, is the poem’s discursive collage of literary precedents and contemporary gender debates surrounding the subject of domestic conflict.

While Victorian critics eagerly scrutinized the text’s derivative style, its possible plagiarisms, and the impossibly lofty agenda of transposing Greek tragedy into Victorian culture (and imitating the notoriously obscure Aeschylus), their critical language also frequently revealed their preoccupation with the poem’s representation of marriage. As the reviewer for Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine noted, Lytton’s Clytemnestra had a “curious involution of the modern and the antique about it” (“Owen Meredith’s Poems” 682). In slipping between ancient and modern paradigms, Lytton demonstrates his conceptual showmanship by enlarging the scope of Clytemnestra’s character and by redefining the causalities of tragedy. These alterations combine to interrogate the semiotics of fate and crime. The involutions of past and present allow readers to consider psychological and ideological explanations for crime. A curse on the house of Atreus, therefore, resembles a bad nineteenth-century marriage while crime and fate emerge paradoxically as socially determined and individually motivated entities.

Clytemnestra consists of twenty separate scenes that range from the lone soliloquies of Clytemnestra to discussions between the chorus and other main characters. In revising the story, Lytton makes significant structural changes; most important, of course, is the centering of Clytemnestra. The drama pivots around Clytemnestra’s thoughts and deeds—and the always vexed relationship between these two components of crime. Accordingly, Lytton’s Clytemnestra, unlike Aeschylus’s Agamemnon, opens onto Clytemnestra’s soliloquy rather than a watchman’s exposition. Inducted into the drama via Clytemnestra’s sentiments and thoughts, readers immediately encounter the murderously unhappy wife, after a night of troubled and troubling sleep, explicating the psychological perils of domesticity, articulating her adulterous desire for Aegisthus, and contemplating the immanent return of Agamemnon from war. As Clytemnestra lays out her adulterous anxieties, her murderous motive and intent present themselves for inspection when she suggests, as she apostrophizes the morning
sun, that she suffers the punishment of sleepless guilt without having committed the crime:

Wherefore to me—to me, of all mankind,
This retribution for a deed undone?
For many men outlive their sum of crimes,
And eat, and drink, and lift up thankful hands,
And take their rest securely in the dark.
Am I not innocent—or more than these?
There is no blot of murder on my brow,
Nor any taint of blood upon my robe. (I.4)

Clytemnestra proclaims, however, that the darker crime exists in her thoughts: “It is the thought! It is the thought! . . . and men / Judge us by acts!” (I.4). While commenting on the origins of her adulterous transgression, “one wild hour of unacquainted joy” (I.4), Clytemnestra reveals that she has just awakened from a dream in which Helen ruefully reminds Clytemnestra that her similar inconstancy started a war. “Allured by love,” Helen explains, she “[f]ell off from duty”; and a “baleful” procession of slaughtered Trojan warriors passes through Clytemnestra’s mind, affirming the extensive social consequences of one woman’s sexual impropriety (I.4). Here, then, Lytton introduces the troubling equations of thought and action, motive and deed, which are then interrupted by “the tread of nimble feet” (I.5) as the town awakes and gathers for Agamemnon’s return.

As the first scene suggests, imagining modern social foundations for traditionally fated criminality required a fully developed psychological portrait of Clytemnestra. Writing to his father in 1853, Lytton explicitly claimed an interest in ascribing psychological complexity to this long-generalized icon. He highlights the poetic innovations and thematic limitations that underlie his interest in generating modernized circumstantial contingencies for this icon of “strong-natured passionate” womanhood, and he characterizes the text as an “experiment” and a “failure” (qtd. in Harlan 71):

The character of Clytemnestra always seemed to me one of the great creations of fiction, and yet it is one of wh. we really know very little—for in Aesch: she is more a goddess than a human being, and stalks out & in, like the old executioners with a mask, does her deed and disappears, while in Euripides she is a mere virago—a common sort of Madam Lafarge. About a year or two ago, I began a sketch of the character in blank verse; in wh. I endeavoured to suppose wht. might be the feelings of a strong-natured passionate woman under the circumstances wh. form the plot of the drama of Aesch: But not
liking wt. I had done, threw it by & forgot all about it. Some time back, in looking over old papers I found the sketch, & set to work upon it again. It almost unconsciously, however, grew into dramatic form, and I then changed the plan, & added choruses after the manner of a Greek drama. (qtd. in Harlan 71–72)

Dwelling on the verse drama’s nature as a “poetical exercise” (71), Lytton confesses something “impertinent” (71) in the work since it “brings one flat against the great Greek masters & Shakespeare too, both of whom crush one, of course” (71), and he argues that “poetry shd now be in front, & not behind, the age; the times are so quick” (71). Yet, because Lytton rewrites Clytemnestra during a national conversation about family law, amidst the renewed idealization of the separate spheres, and against the sentimentalization of the family, he imbues this verse drama with a modernizing stance. In refining Clytemnestra’s voice and complicating her motivations, he dismisses the conventional portrait of this disgruntled adulteress and high-tragic murderess. As Harlan has argued, Lytton “sought to penetrate the austere silences of the Greek drama by analyzing and psychologizing” and “mak[ing] explicit and rational what in Aeschylus is symbolical and passionate” (72). In spite of his disclaimers, then, Clytemnestra attempts to develop a modern content.

The replacement of symbol and passion with analysis and psychology also informs the important semiotic triangle connecting Clytemnestra, the Chorus, and Agamemnon, which Lytton establishes early in the second scene and continues throughout the entirety of the poem. The chorus, exhibiting deference and bearing offerings, inquires after Clytemnestra: “But tell us wherefore, O godlike woman, / Having a lofty trouble in your eye, / You walk alone with loosened tresses?” (II.6). The observant chorus then engages Clytemnestra in conversation on the well-being of Agamemnon. The Chorus states, “But more than all I reckon that man blest, / Who, having sought Death nobly, finds it not” (II.9), and Clytemnestra replies: “Except he find it where he does not seek” (II.9). When the Chorus counters, “You speak in riddles” (II.9), Clytemnestra merely redirects, “with garlands wreathe the altars, / While I, within, the House Prepare” (II.9). In this oblique yet ominous exchange, Clytemnestra both publicizes her dissent and invokes her duty. Yet, what in public appears the overseeing of domestic preparations is, in fact, the crafting of a murderous snare.

Because Lytton yokes the exercise of household duty with the plot of murderous retribution, he forces a point about the private traumas and the public mandates of separate spheres ideology. While anticipating a reunion of brothers and a restoration of a noble household, the chorus also articulates the possibility that Agamemnon’s public deeds, primarily the sacrifice of Iphigenia for the benefits of war, may have private repercussions: “My heart is fill’d with vague
forebodings, / And opprest by unknown terrors / Lest, in the light of so much gladness, / Rise the shadow of ancient wrong” (II.11). Breaking down the convenient dichotomy of private and public, this vague apprehension then takes more specific form: “For the unhappy sacrifice of a daughter; working evil / In the dark heart of a woman; / Or some household treachery; / And a curse from kindred hands!” (II.12). The chorus, the vocal proponents of fate’s powers and the record-keepers of family wrongs, effectively comes to represent the ever curious and scandalized public, which enforces social propriety as it attempts to cast its gaze into the home and bear witness to its intimate transgressions. As we shall see, Lytton complicates the role of the chorus throughout the drama, configuring it as an unreliable and unstable force of public opinion creating and consuming the “spectacle of intimacy.”

The public’s instability and appetite for spectacle, Clytemnestra explains to Aegisthus, allows her to manipulate “the arts / That guide the doubtful purpose of discourse / Thro many windings to the appointed goal” (VIII.49) in order to “draw [the citizenry] on to such a frame of mind / As best befits our purpose” (VIII.49). While Clytemnestra uses Iphigenia’s sacrifice to position herself ethically, Lytton uses it to particularize Clytemnestra’s crime as the revenge of an unloved housewife whose false consciousness slips away when her daughter’s sacrifice materializes the absolute powers of the family patriarch and when her “heart” responds to the affection of Aegisthus. Priming the chorus to accept her murderous project, she questions their belief in “terrible necessity” (IX.54). Asking, “Was it a murder or a sacrifice?” (IX.55), she interrogates the “foul infanticidal lie” (IX.55). Similarly, as the chorus proffers an ethical equation that accepts “this single, individual loss” for the “universal good” (IX.55), Clytemnestra counters with a criminal accusation: “Can all men’s good be helped by one man’s crime?” (IX.55). As the chorus begins to acquiesce, calling the sacrifice “an evil thing” (IX.56), Clytemnestra exploits maternal politics. Agamemnon, she explains, simply “did not bring [Iphigenia] forth” (IX.57), and while he enjoyed war, “his blythe pastime on the windy plain” (IX.57), Clytemnestra “sat apart, / Silent, within the solitary house: / Rocking the little child upon [her] breast” (IX.57). Having been swayed by the arts of discourse, the chorus begins to expect retributive justice, and Clytemnestra notes with satisfaction that her “mischief works apace!” (IX.60).

The entirety of the next scene, the mid-point of the play, is given over to the chorus’s narration, in great lyrical detail, of Iphigenia’s sacrifice, which leads the chorus to doubt Agamemnon: “Oh, what falling off is this, / When some grand soul, that else had been sublime, / Falls unawares amiss, / And stoops its crested strength to sudden crime!” (X.63). A clear indication of Clytemnestra’s political savvy and the public’s impressionability, this scene also implicates Agamemnon’s own bloody choices and thereby deepens—and genders—the psychological complexity of Clytemnestra’s murderous rage. As Boos has argued, “Lytton’s
‘Clytemnestra’ is not exactly a feminist rewriting of Aeschylus, but it recalibrates the scales of judgment to balance the guilt of an arrogant child-murderer against that of his vengeful wife” (37). In the end, Boos notes, Clytemnestra’s actions are “understandable but not attractive” (40), an apt expression that also describes Victorian England’s simultaneously queasy and riveted response to the public politics of marital breakdown.

Although we witness Clytemnestra confidently manipulating public opinion, we also see her struggling with her own internal judgments. While she maintains her performative sensibilities and strategically masks her internal revolution with outward subordination “as best befits a wife / And woman” (IV.21), she privately strengthens her resolve with countless and contradictory reflections on necessity, justice, and fate. With a nod to destiny, for example, she refuses to “shrink” from the “forecast event” which “hurls” her into the “abyss of crime” (IV.21–22):

...What need
Of argument to justify an act
Necessity compels, and must absolve?
I have been at play with scruples—like a girl.
Now they are all flung by. I have talk’d with Crime
Too long to play the prude. . .
Crime’s easier than we dream. (IV.22)

Yet, significantly, this event has been “forecast” by none other than Clytemnestra in her opening soliloquy. In such passages, then, Lytton highlights the struggle between her self-motivated intentions and what she considers girlish scruples. Throughout the play, Clytemnestra undergoes a clear psychological struggle between the imperatives of feminine identity and her unwomanly willfulness. This gender dilemma appears as Clytemnestra laments her womanhood as inadequate to her character.

O fate! to be a woman! You great Gods
Why did you fashion me in this soft mould?
Give me these lengths of silky hair? these hands
Too delicately dimpled! and these arms
Too white! too weak! Yet leave the man’s heart in me,
To mar your master-piece—that I should perish,
Who else had won renown among my peers,
A man, with men—perchance a god with you,
Had you but better sex’d me, you blind Gods! (IX.51)

In fact, fate, as in this passage, is often construed as a gendering of, rather than
a preordination of, her crimes, which are necessitated by the mismatching, or misgendering, of body and will.

Though her references to gods clearly suit Lytton’s Greek context, her references to fate more frequently designate a patriarchal hegemony rather than an interventionist cosmology. For example, Clytemnestra, reflecting on men as warriors and women as war slaves—“long hair’d virgin wailing at the shrines” (IX.51)—again denounces fate’s gendering properties:

O fate, to be a woman! To be led
Dumb, like a poor mule, at a master’s will,
And be a slave, tho’ bred in palaces,
And be a fool, tho’ seated with the wise—
A poor and pitiful fool, as I am now,
Loving and hating my vain life away! (IX.51)

Done in by limited options, Clytemnestra curses both her hatred for her husband and her love for Aegisthus because both signify subordination and futility—a “vain life.”

Furthermore, her tragic oversight, which she bemoans, has been her failure to perceive marital injustices, a kind of gendered hamartia that led her to believe that her own homelife would rise above that of other women. Speaking to Aegisthus, she confesses that she was “foolish” not to read other wives’—indeed, all women’s—unhappiness as a warning:

. . . And tho’ I saw
All women sad—not only those I knew,
As Helen . . .
Not only her—but all whose lives I learn’d,
Medea, Deianeira, Ariadne,
And many others—all weak, wrong’d, opprest,
Or sick and sorrowful, as I am now—
Yet in their fate I would not see my own
Nor grant allegiance to that general law
From which a few, I knew a very few,
With whom it seem’d I also might be number’d,
Had yet escaped securely:—so exempting
From this world’s desolation everywhere
One fate—my own! (VII.36–37)

In describing “all women” as “weak, wrong’d, opprest” and “sick and sorrowful” and proclaiming the “world’s desolation everywhere,” Clytemnestra reveals
her sense of the scale of women’s oppression and the magnitude of her own folly. Her poignant regret highlights the collective oppression of women, for the home, she claims, is inevitably—fatefully—the space of solitude and alienation: “I moved about, a shadow in the house, / And felt unwedded though I was a wife” (VII.47). But she has also expressed a sense of compromise, though not “so exacting” at present, she explains to Aegisthus, she still hopes for a reformed domestic future with him.

With her explanatory and analytical soliloquies in place, Lytton uses Agamemnon’s return from war to confirm the details of Clytemnestra’s critique. Agamemnon appears as the incarnation of heroic masculinity, and the chorus proclaims this stature as he marches amongst the urns being carried home from war. References to his “sublime head” (XI.70) and “eminent authority” (XI.70) join admiring shouts, such as, “what an arm,” “what shoulders,” “what a throat,” and “Look at that sword” (XI.71), to underscore his royal masculinity and “stateliness” (XI.71). Clytemnestra’s majesty appears to match his: “With what grand eyes she looks up, full in his!” (XI.72). As the chorus revels in the palpable return of paternalism, patriarchy, and royalty, the public face of a noble marriage appears to them just, secure, and right.

To underscore the falseness of this collective delusion, Lytton embellishes Aeschylus’s version of Agamemnon’s response to Clytemnestra’s welcome and thereby renders it an aggressive dismissal of her speech and an explicit degradation of the feminine. As Clytemnestra expresses the required honorifics, Agamemnon exclaims, “Enough! Enough!” (XII.74), and he then discourses on the virtues of women’s silence in fully nineteenth-century formulations of domestic propriety:

But women ever err by over-talk.
Silence to women, as the beard to men,
Brings honour; and plain truth is hurt, not help’d
By many words. To each his separate sphere
The Gods allot. To me the sounding camp,
Steed, and the oaken spear; to you the hearth,
Children, and household duties of the loom.
’Tis man’s to win an honourable name;
Woman’s to keep it honourable still. (XII.74–75)

Clytemnestra’s “over-talk,” of course, is not an error but a posture, and as Agamemnon confines Clytemnestra to the custodial role of keeping his honor, his strict adherence to the doctrine of separate spheres, which casts the home as a place of silence and peace and the public sphere as a place of violence and war, profoundly undermines his strength and status. Given Clytemnestra’s fully
expressed murderous intent, Agamemnon’s reference to “plain truth” charges the scene with a dramatic irony, for readers know that Clytemnestra’s formal rhetoric of welcome, her “over-talk,” belies an intimate contempt and a malicious plan, which she has plainly spoken in “many words” throughout the drama. Agamemnon’s words thus appear both blindly complacent and arrogantly provocative.

Although Clytemnestra summons the perfunctory apology, she prefaces it with an aside that mocks the domestic entitlements of presumed impunity of husbands:

(O beast! O weakness of this womanhood!
To let these pompous male things strut in our eyes,
And in their lordship lap themselves secure,
Because the lots in life are fallen to them.
Am I less heart and head, less blood and brain,
Less force and feeling, pulse and passion—I—
Than this self-worshipper—a lie all thro’?) (XII.75)

Now relegated to parenthetical aside, in contrast to the bold declaiming that opens the play, Clytemnestra’s speech nonetheless reclaims for woman the organs of agency and force. As Agamemnon takes leave of the reception in order to bathe, he inquires, “Is our house order’d?” (XII.76), and thus, Lytton furthers the dramatic irony of domestic breakdown. Clytemnestra responds that the palace is “order’d fair / Befitting state” (XII.77), including the “purple-paven, silver-sided bath, / Deep, flashing, pure” (XII.77). While the ideologies of domesticity, presumptions of womanly submission, and the privileges of husband rights define Agamemnon’s perspective, the audience observes in this scene a seething confrontation between a rebel and a tyrant in which the tyrannical “self-worshipper” remains completely oblivious to his imminent and complete overthrow. Basking in his heroic return from war, he adheres to a gendered code of dominance that has shifted unbeknownst to him during his long absence.

Satisfied that his house is ordered, Agamemnon instructs Clytemnestra to attend to Cassandra, thus confirming Clytemnestra’s earlier judgments about women, slaves, and war. Notably, Lytton preserves Cassandra’s life so that Clytemnestra may express sympathy for their common experience as women: “Our fortunes are not so dissimilar, / Slaves both—and of one master” (XV.88). Cassandra, therefore, stands as a fellow subjugated woman rather than a competitor in a patriarchal sexual economy, and this distinction enables Lytton to clarify for his audience that Clytemnestra’s crime constitutes a wholesale rejection of patriarchal authority and not a momentary (but momentous) flare-up of sexual jealousy.
In Agamemnon’s attempt to assert his authority via the reiteration of separate spheres, Lytton also establishes the interpretive schema for the murder. Occurring behind the closed, locked doors of the home, the murder is overheard in the streets by the agitated public. Choric voices avow that “[s]ome hideous deed is being done within” and call to “[b]urst in the doors” (XVI.96). This scene overthrows the binary comforts espoused so forcefully by the returning war hero, and the inversion is striking. As “[t]he house is fill’d with shrieks” (XVI.95), the noises of dishonorable violence astonish the public, which, assembled to celebrate a homecoming, listens helplessly to the demise of the patriarch, the household, and the state. The sounds of outrageous crime that emerge from the palace include Agamemnon’s cries, which serve to detail the crime. He identifies, in gendered terms, the killer, “Murderess! oh, oh!” (XVI.95), and the method, “Stabb’d, oh!” (XVI.97), while maintaining his characteristic boldness, “I will not die” (XVI.95). The conspirators are also overheard: Aegisthus instructs Clytemnenstra, “Thrust there again!” and Clytemnestra affirms, “One blow has done it all” (XVI.98). As the astonished public grapples with the meaning of these verbal fragments, a choric voice exclaims and questions, “My heart stands still with awe! / Where will this murder end?” (XVI.98). The relationship between the chorus outside and the crime within is emphasized by the locale of the murder scene—a spatial representation of domesticity and publicity. The scandal of adultery, therefore, gives way to the monumental horror of murder, constituting the final, ironic reply to Agamemnon’s arrogantly naïve question about whether or not the house is “order’d.”

In the next scene, Electra, the crime’s sole eyewitness, rushes from the house with Orestes in order to secure his escape and thus ensure his capacity to enact a future “high vengeance” (XVII.99). Responding to the citizenry’s inquiries, she presents an account of the crime. She calls attention to Aegisthus’s passivity as he “halted, half irresolute” (XVII.99), and she highlights Clytemnestra’s vigorous agency:

But Clytemnestra on him flung herself,
And caught the steel, and smit him through the ribs.
He slipp’d, and reel’d. She drove the weapon thro’;
Piercing the heart!” (XVII.99)

Contemplating the meanings of this crime, the chorus further articulates the ironic reversal of the private/public opposition: “But Death, that fear’d to front him in full field, / Lurk’d by the hearth and smote him from behind” (XVII.100). Electra then exhorts the crowd to assist in protecting Orestes and assuring a future restoration of proper order, and she represents the chaos of the present, curiously, in terms of the virtual nonparticipant, Aegisthus, rather than the
“devilish woman, lying long in lurk” (XVII.99) who orchestrated and executed the crime: “The house runs blood. Aegisthus, like a fiend, / Is raging loose, his weapon dripping gore” (XVII.101). As Electra and the chorus lament the fall of the state and the death of a patriarch, the transformed Aegisthus, now thirsting for power, demands Orestes and threatens Electra, who, boldly dismissing him, calls him “half a man” (XVIII.110) and, with rather comical alliteration, a “[b]lundering bloodshedder” (XVIII.111). She then threatens him with the future avenging powers of Orestes.

The shocking spectacle of the crime scene, however, disrupts Aegisthus’s and Electra’s mutual posturing when, the palace doors are “thrown open” (XIX.112) and reveal Clytemnestra standing over the body of her victim and shouting: “Argives! behold the man who was your King!” (XIX.112). This positioning of murderer and victim visually underscores Clytemnestra’s murderous agency even as she verbally ascribes the deathblow to “Fate” (XIX.112). In marked contrast, her subsequent explanation uncovers a deeply personal agency:

He who set light by woman, with blind scorn,
And held her with the beasts we sacrifice,
Lies, by a woman sacrificed himself.
This is high justice which appeals to you. (XIX.113)

Clytemnestra thus expresses some satisfaction in this tit-for-tat gender equity, acquired by leveraging the effects of paternalist misogyny and domestic violence for the destruction of patriarchal ideology and its embodied authority. As the plotted crime and the expressed rage of the opening soliloquy are enacted, Clytemnestra asserts the purpose of her spectacular revolution. Implicating long-standing analogies between state power and husbandly power, she combines high treason and petit treason.

At this point, Clytemnestra’s insistence on “high justice” also confronts Victorian anxieties about women’s anger, the frightening antithesis of a feminine ideal of long-suffering patience, passivity, and, of course, silence. In her murderous euphoria, she unequivocally represents the possibility that the resources of patience, whether naturally formed or culturally constructed, are, in fact, finite and, in this instance, completely depleted. The representation of Clytemnestra’s crime, and her public interpretation of it, appropriates the discursive trick of pitching arguments in extremis in order to generate an ideological and institutional critique. Nowhere is this more apparent than when, contemplating Agamemnon’s military strength, Clytemnestra proclaims the superior power of her private disdain:

O triple brass,
Iron, and oak! the blows of blundering men
Clang idly on you: what fool’s strength is yours!
For, surely, not the adamantine tunic
Of Ares, nor whole shells of blazing plates,
Nor ashen spear, nor all the cumbrous coil
Of seven bull’s hides guard the strongest king
From one defenceless woman’s quiet hate. (III.16–17)

The armor and weaponry of war, long-celebrated emblems of male strength and public purpose, thus prove useless when set against the quiet and long-growing hate of the domesticated woman.

Because Clytemnestra consistently interprets her actions in terms of the separate spheres dichotomy, she signals Lytton’s ongoing attention to Victorian domestic ideology. Sacrificed to war, Iphigenia embodies the subordination of the private to the public and the feminine to the masculine.Aligning herself with her daughter, then, Clytemnestra again proclaims an affiliation of womanhood, and her use of the term “sacrificed” to characterize her murder of Agamemnon reconnects his husbandly oppression to his strategic killing of Iphigenia. This completion of the sacrificial cycle, Clytemnestra explains, ushers in a new political order because it answers and overthrows the laws of patriarchal dominance. Manipulating the public’s desires for justice, she highlights the immediate problem of masculine authority and thereby sidelines the language of fated retribution and ancient wrongs that have defined choric speculation throughout the play.

Accordingly, christened in the blood of a fallen monarch, she imbues her ascension to power with modern and secular revolutionary sentiments. Proclaiming, in the aftermath of a murder, “Now it is time to laugh!” (XIX.115), Clytemnestra attempts to replace gravity with levity, and she seeks to dispel both the public’s skepticism and its bloody memories by promising a moderate and peaceful rule:

A milder sway, if mildly you submit
To our free service and supremacy.
Nor tax, nor toll, to carry dim results
Of distant war beyond the perilous seas
But gateless justice in our halls of state,
And peace in all the borders of our land! (XIX.115–16)

As Clytemnestra articulates this bargain, a utopian state without wars or prisons in exchange for their immediate and collective submission, her efforts to insert emotional levity and political optimism into these murderous events, which the chorus has been reading as a tragic plot, is abruptly interrupted by Electra’s flinging herself onto the blood-soaked body of her dead father and asserting the
tragic necessity of retribution. Yet, in spite of Electra’s performative invocations of tragic imperatives, Clytemnestra’s rhetorical powers continue to persuade as she offers her traumatized daughter a “mother’s heart” and “[s]afe silence. And permission to forget” (XIX.116)—and Electra appears to relent.

This scene reveals Lytton’s interest in exposing the scaffolding of the two fundamental discourses of Clytemnestra: ancient Greek tragedy and contemporary marriage debates. With Clytemnestra advocating a gendered political revolution and Electra insisting on tragic determinism, Lytton stages the two discourses in a competition for interpretive power. As Clytemnestra verbally subdues her angry daughter, Lytton privileges the modern content. Electra desires the familiar comforts of patriarchy, including its obsession with adultery, which she upholds early in the play when she expresses confidence that her returning father will “destroy the base adulterer, / And efface the shameful past” (VI.26). Explaining the contrasting figures to his father, Lytton stated that Clytemnestra represents the “active” principle and Electra represents the “suffering” principle (Harlan 72). With their oppositional rhetoric, Lytton suggests that the tragic, ancient mode insistently perpetuates and obsessively redresses past suffering while the revolutionary, modern view seeks to invest in futurity—and femininity.

Questioning the causalities of individual agency and divine fate, the final scene of Clytemnestra continues to entertain modern and ancient explanations for the crime and its relationship to the past and the future. The chorus concludes the play with a chant that repeats the phrase, “Destiny is over all” (XX.122). But, even though Lytton includes this discourse of fate, his changes to the drama challenge its explanatory power. In the end, despite her earlier references to the dejected state of all married women, Lytton’s Clytemnestra imagines a reformed union with Aegisthus. Because their partnership is quite literally built upon the violent dissolution of a combative model of marriage, the play hints at the possibility of and a desire for a companionate and equitable alternative to the more conventional model of the husband-centered family and the male-dominated state. Clytemnestra’s final words express the promise of a reformed domestic contract: “Thou lovest me! O love, we have not fail’d. / Give me thy hand. So . . . Lead me to the House. / Let me lean on thee. I am very weak” (XX.121). Exhausted by crime, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus enter their “House” to continue a partnership sealed in crime. Momentarily displaced are the portended revenge of Orestes and the sulky judgments of Electra.

Yet, crucial textual details thwart this happy ending. The emphatically different perspectives and behaviors of the two transgressing lovers trouble Clytemnestra’s companionate model of domesticity and monarchy. Most significantly, the contingencies of the illicit romance, which have inflected Clytemnestra’s crimes and motivations throughout the play, continue to resonate here. For example, Clytemnestra must prompt Aegisthus to declare his love. Just before the
ending, we see Clytemnestra fretting, “But, if he cease to love me, what is gain’d?” (XX.120), and, after she queries, “Aegisthus, dost thou love me?” (XX.121), Aegisthus claims, “As my life!” (XX.121). His response inspires her final confidence in their relationship and her feminized physical weakness, which requires her to “lean” on him as they enter the palace. Clytemnestra, however, has clearly not parsed Aegisthus’s line, for his language encodes a telling subtext. He has witnessed the life-taking powers of this particular wife, as she drove a knife through the ribs and into the heart of her husband, and his future safety, citizenship, and life are now hers to control. Given this context, “As my life!” signifies the nature of his compromised condition, and it also quite pointedly alludes to her earlier threat that without committing to her and her crime, Aegisthus, a “poor baffled crownless schemer,” would be ruined—if not dead. Her romantic prompting and prodding at the end of the play, then, reminds readers of the private anxieties underlying her public pronouncement, which Clytemnestra, in fact, laments throughout the play. At the end of the play, with just a few words and gestures, we see the culmination of Lytton’s skepticism. Doomed and overdetermined, men and women cannot overcome the pressures and limitations of an adversarial and hierarchical domesticity.

Several particular impediments become most relevant to Lytton’s analysis. For instance, Lytton fully demonstrates that Clytemnestra exceeds her two male counterparts in willful purpose and psychological grit. As we have seen, Agamemnon’s self-satisfied dismissal of Clytemnestra and his presumption of uncontested power leave him vulnerable in the bathtub, and Aegisthus’s terrified hesitation mobilizes her murderous resources and places her in the role of supreme and singular agent. In terms of narrative logic, then, both Agamemnon and Aegisthus contribute to the making of Clytemnestra the murderer. Agamemnon’s public interests establish Clytemnestra’s private hurts and provoke her murderous outrage. Similarly, she frightens Aegisthus with her tenacious criminal plotting, which he had long entertained in theory but dislikes in practice. As Electra contemptuously explains, he blunders his conspiratorial duties and renders Clytemnestra solely responsible for Agamemnon’s death.

Demonstrating how entrenched gender inequalities might yield disastrous results, such details also undermine crucial ideologies of masculinity. Clytemnestra out-strategizes and overpowers Agamemnon. As they live out the adversarial model of spousal relations, he relies on traditional forms of control while she opts for new methods. Likewise, Aegisthus’s failed collusion undercuts notions of male agency and male rescue. Earlier in the play, examining Agamemnon’s shield, Clytemnestra reads its nicks and scratches as signs of his physical prowess. Then noting, “Aegisthus’ hands are smaller” (III.16), she acknowledges his conspiratorial impotence and signals her ferocious power. Even more importantly, however, both Agamemnon’s and Aegisthus’s actions and inactions
suggest that Clytemnestra has no adequate match in marriage, love, or governance. Far from modeling a partnership of equals or investing in a companionate ideal, Lytton’s verse drama marks the absence—and perhaps implies the impossibility—of spousal cooperation or domestic comfort. This conspicuous absence establishes the play’s relentlessly pessimistic critique of marriage.

Details throughout the play set readers up to appreciate the spectacle of the doomed lovers at the end of the play and to read it as an exacting critique. The companionate marriage, the longed-for alternative to authoritarian models, is introduced early in the play when Clytemnestra uses it to justify her adulterous transgressing and her criminal plotting. She deploys the language of love to contest the definition of adultery as treason: “If I had loved him once—if for one hour—/Then were there treason in this falling off. / But never did I feel this wretched heart / Until it leap’d beneath Aegisthus’ eyes” (III.14). For Clytemnestra, romance continues to function as both an interpretive framework and an intended goal, but she observes that Aegisthus is “wavering in nature” and “trembling ever on extremes” (XV.85) and is passive even in love: “his was never yet the loving soul / But rather that which lets itself be loved” (XV.86). She wonders if he will misinterpret her actions and intentions and “[r]emembering the crime, remember not / It was for him that [she is] criminal” (XV.87). Similarly, she adjusts her rhetoric and seeks to feminize her agency: “‘Tis not for him, but for myself in him, / For that which is my softer self in him—I have done this, and this—and shall do more” (XV.86). Her anxieties about exercising her will and feminizing her self, stemming directly from the romantic idyll, complicate her project of self-liberation.

Meanwhile, Aegisthus, concerned about public opinion, portends, “all the Greeks will hate us” (VII.33), and warns, “we shall be dishonour’d” (VII.34). Failing to comprehend that Clytemnestra is motivated by her revolutionary contempt for female subjugation and her ambitious desire to reconstruct the state, he recommends that they “part now” and offers “[f]light” (VII.38) as a more prudent solution to their adulterous dilemma. Clytemnestra, however, seeks to confront and overthrow, and operating in a Macbethian mode, she mocks his lack of strength and cites her fatal error in entrusting her future to him: “This was the Atlas of the world I built!” (VII.39). Even suggesting that his lack of support constitutes “retribution” for her adultery, she proclaims, “a universe [her love] lies ruin’d here” (VII.39). Ever invested in his participation, however, she both rallies and bullies him, admonishing him to “be a man for once” (VII.39) as she explains to him that assuming power of the house is the only viable option. The public, she explains, valuing strength and hating weakness, will embrace their cause. She questions his integrity, asking, “lives there nothing of the ambitious will?” (VII.40). She recalls the “proud plots” and “dextrous policy” that characterized years of pillowtalk (VII.40), and explains that to abandon their
murderous plot would be shameful: “For to conceive ill deeds yet dare not do them / This is not virtue, but a two-fold shame” (VII.41–42). As Clytemnestra’s rhetoric escalates, as she seeks to recover “[her] King! [her] chosen! [her] glad careless helpmate” (VII.43), the idea of companionship and partnership begins to recede.

Increasingly exasperated as Aegisthus wavers and shrinks, she finally announces that she will commit the crime herself: “What! Shrinking still? / I’ll do the deed. Do not stand off from me” (VII.44). Yet, Aegisthus’s “stand[ing] off” then forms a central anxiety. When in response to Clytemnestra’s assertion that he fears her, Aegisthus claims to “worship” (VII.44) her, he betrays the absence of love, romance, or equality. As a rhetorical last resort, when the language of romance has failed, she warns this “poor baffled crownless schemer” that his fate rests in her power:

Without my love
What rests for you but universal hate,
And Agamemnon’s sword? Ah, no—you love me,
Must love me, better than you ever loved—
Love me, I think, as you love life itself! (VII.45–46)

Here, then, is the antecedent to the final scene in which he claims, as instructed, to love Clytemnestra “[a]s my life!”; and therein lies the adversarial core of their domestic partnership.

At the end of the play, if not throughout, readers see Clytemnestra’s anxieties legitimized. Boos notes that Clytemnestra intimates a “rhetoric of female self-defense” (37) and revises Aeschylus’s more masculine Clytemnestra by ascribing to her “acceptable ‘womanly’ desires for love” (38). Given that Lytton sought to imagine a markedly feminine psychology, we might assume that he resorted to or relied upon conventional tropes of feminine subjectivity. However, it is also worth noting that companionate aspirations and romantic discourse in Clytemnestra always succumb to or are thwarted by uncooperative gender identities and inhospitable domestic ideologies. Conventional femininity, for example, rendered Clytemnestra a “weak, passionate, unhappy woman” (VII.44), but that weakened self attracted Aegisthus, who envisions her now as a “Terrible Spirit.” In seeking a masculine political power, therefore, Clytemnestra unwittingly sacrifices opportunities for love and companionship, which require a feminized identity. Clytemnestra’s particular tragedy, then, stems from an ideological miscalculation about the unwanted presence of female agency in any romance plot.

Noting their frustrations with the text, Victorian reviewers somewhat obliquely acknowledged Lytton’s critique of domestic romance. Describing
Clytemnestra, a critic for the *Dublin University Magazine* explains: “She is, in [Owen Meredith’s] hands, neither the bold virago, indifferent to consequences, of Aeschylus, nor the depraved woman, by turns violent, sophistical and weak, that Sophocles represents her. She is a woman, haughty, proud, self-willed, yet possessed by one sentiment, her love for Aegisthus, which exhibits a woman in her heart, and is the mainspring of all her errors and sins” (“Clytemnestra” 487). The reviewer goes on to complain that her love “but little elevates her” and that Aegisthus is a “poltroon, who loves her a little, and fears her more” (488). But the fact “that the woman who has this deep love in her heart should repine at the fate that made her woman—should despise her sex, and long after manhood—is revolting, because it is utterly outside the bounds of nature—”(488). Such observations might be reinterpreted in terms of the gender tragedy that Lytton develops in the play.

Clytemnestra’s gender bending is less a “revolting” perversion of nature than a daring attack on a particular set of gender norms. Another reviewer, diagnosing the “general unhealthiness of the poems relating to love” (“Meredith’s Clytemnestra” 302) and presenting them as characteristic of “the Byronic or Bulwerian kind” (302), maintains: “They never sparkle with health, or kindle with hope. . . . To us, these pieces wear the look of one who knows more than he ought to know; it may be a wrong impression, but it is none the less painful. Or else there is some fatality in the author’s choice of subjects relating to woman” (302). It is difficult to believe that this reviewer did not know the true identity of “Owen Meredith.” Regardless, the identification of Byronic and Bulwerian romantic pathologies and feminine fatalities—and certainly the claim that “he knows more than he ought to know”—correctly assert Lytton’s interest in disturbing the domestic, gender, and sexual politics of Victorian England. His is indeed a “painful” view, and the profound failures of the romantic idyll that mark Lytton’s version of this ancient tragedy establish the principal dramatic and political ironies of the text.

The dramatic irony that underpins this domestic failure thus fully engages the mixture of Greek paradigms and modern politics that characterizes the entire drama. As Clytemnestra insists upon performing a scene of domestic happiness, the psychological tensions of the domesticated subject, as “conflictual complexes,” emerge even as the chorus sings the powers of fate: “Who shall say ‘I stand!’ not fall? / Destiny is over all! (XX.122). The chorus has relied on fate throughout the play as a device for explaining outrageous violence. Yet, Clytemnestra has consistently demystified fate, applying the term variously—to persuade the public, to delineate her will, and to denote gender hegemony. At the end of the play, the audience, privy to Clytemnestra’s public suasions and inner reflections, senses the ironic inadequacy of the chorus’s continued fate-based sensibilities. Just as the notion of fate cannot impinge upon the explanatory power of the intimate rage that Clytemnestra expresses and enacts, it also cannot
resolve the unsatisfying implications of Clytemnestra’s domestic bargain with Aegisthus.

In Lytton’s *Clytemnestra*, then, the epistemology of gender trumps the epistemology of fate, and, because Lytton effectively accesses the Victorian contest of gendered prerogatives, individual rights, and domestic duties, the ending portrays neither triumphant love nor tragic destiny—but just another “bad bargain.” Clytemnestra and Aegisthus might just become a “decent couple,” but under the heavy yoke of domesticity—articulated throughout this verse drama as a psychological yoke of entrenched and internalized sexual inequalities—their partnership will never match the high drama of its origins in adulterous romance and revolutionary crime. In positing such tragic mediocrity, Lytton exploits the formal freedoms of closet drama. Dispersing high tragedy into twenty clipped scenes, Lytton elaborates the psychological traumas of marriage, the systematic processes of marital breakdown, and the risky investments of unexacting lovers. Bending gender and genre in this way, he domesticates Clytemnestra’s ancient crimes for his particularly modern commentary on the ominous nature of household law.

**Domestic “Compact[s]” and Child-Murder in Amy Levy’s *Medea* **

Composed in 1882 and published in *A Minor Poet and Other Verse* in 1884, Amy Levy’s *Medea. A Fragment in Drama Form, After Euripides*, similarly scrutinizes the psychological perils of domestic bargains. Compressed into two scenes, Levy’s modernized *Medea* accommodates the adversarial model of domesticity by eliminating many of the voices of Euripides’ original drama and leaving only Medea and Jason, and Aegeus and Nikias (as “Citizens of Corinth”), to convey a tragic plot of spousal bitterness. Levy presents Jason and Medea as hostile adversaries whose household arrangements, initially negotiated under the influence of sexual desire, romantic love, and heroic adventure, succumb to the divisive public mandates and patriarchal agendas of domestic arrangements. Highlighting the self-interested benefits of husbandly authority and the solitary suffering of wifely subordination, Levy obscures Jason’s obligations to gods, fates, and Kreon and omits Medea’s sympathetic audiences with nurse, tutor, and chorus. Stripping away these influences, Levy enumerates the emotional, psychological, and sexual intimacies of spousal antagonism. With pointed representations of Jason’s politicized marriage-making and Medea’s psychologized home-making, Levy, like Lytton and Browning, imagines the home’s emotional charge, which the disciplinary mechanisms of domesticity—from placating domestic ideologies to authoritative patriarchal decrees—can never fully neutralize or contain.
In particular, beginning with Medea’s dehumanizing, domestic alienation and culminating in Medea’s shameful, criminal isolation, the narrative logic of Levy’s verse drama provocatively aligns the psychological consequences of marriage and murder—for women. Deemed a fragment, Levy’s Medea concludes with a fully incriminating portrait of marriage and domesticity, and, offering neither consolation nor remedy, she abandons a fugitive Medea, exhausted by “fruitless striving” and propped against a rock, “outside the city” (55).28 “This is the end,” she proclaims, “Thus go I forth / Into the deep, dense heart of the night—alone” (56). Imbued with a sense of domestic fatalism, Levy’s Medea also dramatizes the relationship between private discord and public voyeurism as the gossipy commentators, Aegeus and Nikias, who are seen engaging in “idle talk” (38) and “conferring in whispers” (47) throughout the drama, perceive and interpret events according to facile notions of femininity, domesticity, and criminality. With their inaccurate commentaries, Levy acknowledges the troubled communications between the private actors and the public spectators of domestic upheaval while probing the gendered logic of such private-public distinctions.

When she invokes Euripides in the title of her poem, Levy signals a political and poetic interest in outrageous femininity, and she situates her text within a broader context of Victorian Medeas. As Edith Hall points out, Euripides’ Medea enacts the only premeditated maternal child-killing, unmitigated by madness, in Greek tragedy. The infanticidal radicalism of the Euripidean Medea so affronted Britain’s maternal codes that “[o]n the British stage it was not until 1907 that Euripides’ Medea was performed, without alternation, in English translation” (Hall “Legislation” 42). Exacerbating her violent offenses, Euripides’ Medea renounces feminine duty, invests in masculine-coded honor, and enjoys the impunity of a charioted escape. With her multivalent transgressions—from public speaking to murderous revenge—she fully unsettles distinctions between “private and public, friend and foe, and especially between man and woman” (Hall, “Introduction” xvii). In mid-century London, the disruptive domestic politics of the Medea plot enjoyed particularly topical resonance. As Hall explains, during the divorce controversy of 1856 and 1857, the national obsession with marital matters created a “British epidemic of Medea plays,” and Medea was “one of the most ubiquitous heroines on the London stage” (56).

In particular, Medea frequented Victorian burlesque theatre, where, as Fiona Macintosh has recently reminded us, she was “transposed” into a travesty comic figure but nonetheless encoded “relatively radical” gender critiques (“Medea Transposed” 77). In Medea; Or, The Best of Mothers, with a Brute of a Husband (1856), for example, Robert Brough characterizes Medea as “a conjugal lesson, surpassing in intensity anything of similar description attempted even at this establishment, an awful warning to every single individual” while describing
Jason as “a hero of antiquity, of fabulous courage, about to marry the second time without the slightest hesitation.” In the productive disjunction between satirical levity and tragic weight—with Jason embodying the remarrying kind and Medea portending marital doom—Brough invites a timely and comical lessoning on the serious politics of divorce and matrimonial law.

Writing almost thirty years after Brough, Levy complicates the “conjugal lesson” of male lassitude and female fury in order to assess the conflict of spousal interests and the precariousness of domestic bargains. Born in 1861, Levy missed the mid-century marriage debates that inspired Brough’s (and Lytton’s) Greek revival, but her Medea’s murderous exasperation suggestively alludes to the persistence of women’s inequality. Although women’s legal status continued to improve over the latter half of the nineteenth century, as Atkins and Hoggett have argued, the legal gains of the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 coincided with the “entrenchment of housewife marriage” (106). The colliding interests of marriage contracts and domestic pressures, emerging from what Mary Poovey terms the “uneven developments” of law and ideology, inform Levy’s historicized understanding of late-Victorian gender politics.29 As Linda Hunt Beckman notes in her recent biography, at thirteen, Levy reviewed *Aurora Leigh* for *Kind Words* and published “The Ballad of Ida Grey” in the feminist journal, the *Pelican*, thereby demonstrating a “precocious attraction to women’s rights” and, I would add, her historical awareness of women’s struggles and feminist discourse (Beckman 18).

A poet with an equally historicized sense of literary genre, Levy enfolds this tension into her Medea plot, but, instead of developing a fully structured feminist political allegory, she sketches the psychological momentum, rather than the political motivation, of Medea’s violence. In this way, the bleakness of Medea’s domestic experiences and the extremity of her psychological suffering inform the outrageousness of her crimes. For example, Levy excises Euripides’ “Women of Corinth” speech, in which Medea catalogues the systematic social wrongs of woman—from arranged marriage and shameful divorce to painful birth and domestic boredom. But she extracts from that famous speech a pithy summary argument and installs it as an epigraph: “Of all ensouled and minded things, women are the natural beings who struggle most.”30 With these lines, Levy prioritizes female subjectivity as the primary site of gender oppression and the most pressing issue of marriage politics. Accordingly, she traces Medea’s murderous violence to the affective extremes of domestic oppression, thus avoiding more conventional formulations of Medea’s crimes as vengeful defiance or political argument.

Reconstructing the domesticated subject-position of the notorious, filicidal Medea, Levy gathers the resources of dramatic poetics to indict decades of piecemeal legislation and ideological lethargy, and, in this way, Levy’s psycho-
logical poetics constitutes a particularly feminist stance, one that recalls Philippa Levine’s comments on “anachronistically” applying “feminism” to explicate Victorian women’s discourse. Levine argues that feminism “signif[ies] a perspective far more concrete and thoughtful (if still contested and admirably plural) than an attachment to any vague notion of ‘rights’ or ‘equality’ might suggest. Its commitment to a thorough and holistic understanding of the pervasiveness and connectedness of a host of gendered subordination lends it consistency and vision” (1). Moreover, in the context of family politics, Levine explains:

The family in Victorian England was the site of confined domestication whose grip on women was firm and frequently total. It constituted one element of the polarized ordering of the social fabric which critically defined role and standing for both women and men. The binary opposition of home and work, of private and public translated into and percolated through to a bewildering range of thought, action and material circumstance. Feminists seized upon the cruelties, the injustices and the dangers that attached to that polarization, appropriating and subverting it to their design. (10)

While sidestepping focused “rights” arguments, Levy fashions her Medea to highlight the polarizing effects of family politics. For example, she forcefully highlights Jason’s self-interested exchange of a passionate illegitimacy for a conventional respectability, which begins in his domestication of Medea and culminates in his marital bargain with Kreon. Jason, of course, trades on Medea’s expendability, and insofar as Levy articulates the kind of feminist critique that Levine traces in Victorian discourse, Medea’s destruction of Jason’s proposed family underscores a “holistic understanding” of women’s domestic oppression in Victorian England. Striking at scions and royals, Medea bluntly exposes the methods of procuring, protecting, and publicizing family assets. With the legal and ideological features of domesticity—maternity, paternity, patrilineality, respectability, legitimacy—under scrutiny, Levy constructs a dramatic “assessment of gendered wrongs” (Levine 1) and offers a wholesale rejection of domesticity as an unregenerate form of social contracting.

Demonstrating the political ingenuity of poetic design, Levy initiates her verse drama with a soliloquy. Speaking to herself in front of her home, Medea proclaims herself “lone and weary and sad” (33). Acknowledging her status as a foreigner, but emphasizing her alienation as a wife, she catalogues the sources of her dejection. A Colchian among Corinthians, she identifies herself as “[a]lien” (34) and describes herself as “[h]ungry” (35) for love. Detailing the features of Corinth, where “marble-cold” (34) and “fair” people (34) greet her with “hatred” (35) and “hostile eyes” (35), she laments, “I, an alien here, / That well can speak the language of their lips, / The language of their souls may never learn” (34). Lacking opportunities for companionship and communication, she is misread:
I am very meek. / They think me proud, but I am very meek, / Ready to do their bidding” (35). Occupying this emotional slum, suffering from hunger, cold, and loneliness—the very antitheses of domestic comforts—Medea observes a contrast between her present self and her former self. Now “a creature reft of life and soul” (35), she was formerly “a creature in whose veins ran blood / Redder, more rapid, than flows round most hearts” (34). Levy intertwines notions of ensoulment and embodiment by offering bodily metaphors—the hunger for love or the flow of blood—to describe Medea’s domesticated state. In this way, Levy alludes to the predicaments of wifely personhood. Housebound and hated, Medea endures a kind of physical and psychological coverture, and suffers her own negation.

Throughout the poem, the critical observations of Aegeus and Nikias, who pronounce judgments upon Medea as wife, mother, and woman, confirm her marginalization. While Aegeus judges Medea “fair enough” (36) but “strange” (37), Nikias detests such “swart skins and purple hair” and “black, fierce eyes where the brows meet across” (37). Meanwhile, Nikias admires Jason’s “gracious presence” (37), his “strange and subtle strength,” his “gold-curled head,” and his “smooth tones” (44). Racializing gender in this way, the stinging prejudices of Nikias and Aegeus, which pit Jason, civilized and “fair,” against Medea, “strange” and “swart,” affirm the social layers of Medea’s subordination. Their smug, objectifying voyeurism also contextualizes Medea’s definition of herself as monstrous: “. . . I have poured the sap / Of all my being, my life’s very life, / Before a thankless godhead; and am grown / No woman, but a monster” (41). Alluding to her bad bargain with Jason, a “thankless godhead,” Medea again defines her bartered self with bodily metaphors. The deadening, almost vampiric, effects of Jason’s household law, render her a bloodless or sapless thing. Playing with the civilizing pretenses of domesticity and the political meanings of Medea’s ethnic otherness, Levy pits a vital barbarity against a banal civility and twists the conventions of domestic rhetoric.

Although Medea precisely detects the circumstantial origins of her alterity, she nonetheless remains subdued by persistent memories and nostalgic desires. Overhearing Jason’s name spoken by Aegeus and Nikias, Medea acknowledges, “I wax white and do tremble; sudden seized / With shadowy apprehension” (36), but yields to passionate loyalties, for “woman’s chiefest curse” (36), she explains, is:

That still her constant heart clings to its love
Through all time and all chances; while the man
Is caught with newness; coldly calculates,
And measures pain and pleasure, loss and gain;
And ever grows to look with the world’s eye
Upon a woman, tho’ his, body and soul. (36)
Similarly, when Medea overhears the citizens’ “idle talk” describing Jason’s “wise” (36) marriage alliance with Kreon (for Glaukê), she exclaims, “’Tis false, ’tis false. O Jason, they speak false!” (38). Surveying Levy’s poetic oeuvre and personal life, Beckman has asserted that Levy was “obsessed by” the “theme of woman’s constancy” but not necessarily “convinced of the truth of this tenet of nineteenth-century gender ideology” (95). Here, with Medea’s expression of women’s cursed fidelities and her disbelief at “strange rumours” (39) of Jason’s betrayal, Levy establishes the sexual and material interests of heterosexual romance. When Jason, having “coldly calculate[d]” his political “loss and gain” with “the world’s eye,” later defines the “shadowy apprehension” with a specific decree, his callous bargains obviate romantic fidelities and domestic sentiments. In establishing her compromised status, Levy uses Medea’s cloying regret to underscore the radicalism of her murderous transformation.

While Medea dramatizes the pathetic qualities of a domesticated femininity, Jason signifies the unsavory ethos of a domesticating masculinity. Neither contractually legitimate nor politically advantageous, Jason and Medea’s conjugal cohabitation—a sexually but not legally consummated “marriage”—nonetheless inspires Jason to perform conventional household rituals. Jason’s first words to Medea introduce his disciplinary strategies: “Your looks are wild Medea; you bring shame / Upon this house, that stand with hair unbound / Beyond the threshold. Get you in the house” (38). Preoccupied with rumors of his marriage negotiations, however, Medea remains on the threshold and struggles to activate Jason’s loyalties. In addition to citing “[t]he long years passed in this Corinthian home” (39) and “[t]he great love I have borne you through the years” (39), she reminds Jason of his profound indebtedness to her:

O strong you were; but not of such a strength
To have escaped the doom of horrid death,
Had not I, counting neither loss not gain,
Shown you the way to triumph and renown. (39)

Medea’s recollections incite Jason to regret and repress his former dependency. Dismissing any obligatory gratitude, he responds:

And better had I then, a thousand times,
Have fought with my good sword and fall’n or stood
As the high Fates directed; than been caught
In the close meshes of the magic web
Wrought by your hand, dark-thoughted sorceress. (39–40)

The clash between Medea’s historical memory and Jason’s dismissal of her “magic
web” revisits the problem of Medea’s compromised subjectivity. Marking her disempowerment, Levy conspicuously downplays her magical powers in order to underscore the debilitating effects of domestication, which saps Medea of magical, psychological, and sexual force and, therefore, fortifies Jason’s control.

Medea declaims her weakened state, “Lo, I who strove for strength have grown more weak / Than is the weakest” (41), and she laments the fact that her magical powers prove ineffectual—and irrelevant—in the loveless economy of the patriarchal household: “What avail / Charms, spells and potions, all my hard-won arts, / My mystic workings, seeing they cannot win / One little common spark of human love?” (41). Linking the concurrent loss of her “mystic workings” and “human love” (41), Medea registers sexual and emotional deprivation and conjures the circumstances of her careless domestic bargain (“counting neither loss nor gain”) with Jason. Her now obsolete “hard-won arts” indicate an unrewarded and unacknowledged sacrifice of self, and her domestication consists of social and sexual annihilation:

Behold me now, your work, a thing of fear—
From natural human fellowship cut off,
And yet a woman—sick and sore with pain;
Hungry for love and music of men’s praise,
But walled about as with a mighty wall,
Far from men’s reach and sight, alone, alone. (41)

“[W]alled about” and “cut off” (41) from “human fellowship,” “men’s praise,” and “love,” Medea, “thing” and “woman,” attributes her degraded homelife to Jason’s “work.” His “work,” her alienation, then, does not arise as the byproduct of domestic duties but functions—quite intentionally—as the central mechanism of Jason’s domestic rule. For this reason, Medea’s continued speech on the home’s threshold irritates Jason because it threatens the privatizing effects of his home rule. Monitored by Jason and transgressed by Medea, the threshold forms the boundary between the private and public spheres upon which Jason expects to stage his respectability and authority. Seeking to prevent an inexpedient spectacle of troubled intimacy, Jason ushers her into the home, and offsetting his self-possessed masculine poise with a reference to her compromised feminine dishevelment, he condemns her “wide-eyed, unveiled, unfilleted” (42) appearance. In this verbal skirmish, Medea’s unrestrained (and notably sexualized) feminine pathos offsets Jason’s disciplinary male reserve. Yet, as Nikias observes, Jason “speaks low and smooth,” but “there is that within his level tones, / And in the icy drooping of his lids / (More than his words, tho’ they are harsh enough) / Tells me he hates her” (40). Summing up, Nikias reads “wrath and hate and scorn” in Jason’s “white cheeks” and “knitted brows” (42).
His hatred on display, Jason nonetheless attempts to defend his actions and defuse Medea’s affective arguments by blurring distinctions between romantic loyalties and political advantages. He questions the sincerity of her professed love and cites her failure to embrace his public interests: “Can I deem it so, / When what does most advantage me and mine / You shrink to hear of?” (42). Seeking to temper Medea’s skepticism with appeals to maternal and familial interests, he contends that his proprietary union with Glaukê constitutes an investment in Medea’s and their sons’ political future. Because his seemingly “hard” proposal signifies “a blessing, wrapped and cloaked about / In harsh disguisements” (43), he advises, her present submission may yield her future rule:

And in those days Medea’s sons and mine
Shall stand at my right hand, grown great in power.
Medea, too, if she do but control
Her fiery spirit, may yet reign a queen
Above this land of Corinth. I have said. (43)

Concluding his previous comments with a despotic “I have said,” he likewise punctuates the announcement of his new marriage contract and the banishment of Medea and their sons:

That I have sworn to take as wedded wife
Glaukê, the daughter of our mighty king,
In this, in nowise hurting you and yours.
For you all fair provision I have made,
So but you get beyond the city walls
Before the night comes on. Our little ones—
They too shall journey with you. I have said. (43)

Ironically upholding household laws at the very moment he intends to abandon them, Jason expects Medea to adhere to the private ethos of wifely sacrifice and obedience while he brokers a political marriage to secure his public influence and power. At the same time, he expects his political promises to his illegitimate and neglected family to silence opposition because framed in “I have said.”

After Jason maliciously pronounces this divorce, an admiring Nikias comments, “Well said” (43), and Aegeus contends, “But none the better that ’twas false” (4). When Nikias in turn replies, “I’d sooner speak, for my part, fair than true” (44), Levy prompts readers to recognize that Jason builds his domestic autocracy upon style rather than substance. Though Nikias and Aegeus are clearly prejudicial commentators, their observations alert readers to important character details. Having emptied his words of intent, Jason appears to believe that
domesticity is a fundamentally dictatorial and rhetorical endeavor. Signaling his exit and his orders with an “I have said,” he simultaneously nullifies and exercises his husbandly authority. His redistribution of affections and allegiances underscores the extent to which Jason opportunistically invests in domestic authority but neglectfully shirks domestic obligations. With his insistence on disciplinary authority, his symbolically freighted decree of divorce, and his banishment of Medea and their “little ones,” he unconditionally negates their conjugal union and waives away the custodial prerogatives of paternal guardianship. Divesting himself from these particular familial roles, he renders domestic sentiments and parental affections irrelevant—committing household violations most often attributed exclusively to Medea. In marked and stunning contrast, having gone from homebound to homeless, from femme covert to femme sole, in a single decree, Medea signals her own exit not with rhetorical flourishes but with murderous actions. In a clever set of discursive inversions, Levy demonstrates that while Jason claims license to divorce, Medea claims license to kill, and, while Jason exchanges one domestic scenario for another more advantageous one, Medea rejects domesticity entirely.

In the monologue that follows Jason’s bold decree, Medea metamorphoses from the downtrodden and degraded Medea to the troubling and tragic Medea of theatrical infamy. Responding to Jason’s authoritative “I have said,” Medea states, “As you have said, O Jason, let it be” (45) and claims not to protest a “compact never in fair justice framed” (45). But she only momentarily assumes this posture of compliance, and she immediately launches into an analysis of their sexual domestic “compact” and his political marriage plot and reveals the mocking intent of her initial “[a]s you have said”:

    For you, you thought: This maid has served me well
    And yet may serve me. When I touch her palm
    The blood is set a-tingle in my veins;
    For these things I will make her body mine. (45)

While he rakishly devised a system of sexual service, Medea tells Jason, “I stood before you, clean and straight, / And looked into your eyes with eyes that spake: / Lo, utterly, for ever, I am yours” (45). Reflecting on her trampled status, Medea must retrieve her “gift”—her self—by “gather[ing] it up”:

    And since that you, this gift I lavish laid
    Low at your feet, have lightly held and spurned—
    I in my two arms, thus, shall gather it up
    So that your feet may not encounter it
    Which is not worthy of your feet to tread! (45)
Liberated by Jason’s rejection, a self-possessed Medea claims a moral integrity that dwarfs Jason’s. While she elevates her love to a magnanimous gesture, a lavishly bestowed “gift,” she reduces Jason to its mere unworthy recipient. Medea’s earlier moments of pronounced self-abasement increase the rhetorical weight of this speech, which, beginning with a well-mannered and humble assent, concludes in exclamatory and insulting defiance.

As her monologue progresses, Medea’s analytical rebuttals evolve into ominous threats, which stage the psychological transition from demoralized subordinate to murderous agent. Taking on a patronizing tone, Medea reviews Jason’s domestic logic and instructs, “Yet pause a moment, Jason” and then, with even more condescension, repeats, “Ah, Jason, pause” (46). That he considered her “meek enough” and “[c]ontent with what [he] gave” (46), she explains, constitutes a gross miscalculation:

You never knew Medea. You forget,
because so long she bends the knee to you,
She was not born to servitude.

I have knelt
Too long before you. I have stood too long
Suppliant before this people. You forget
A redder stream flows in my Colchian veins. (46)

With the retrieval of her past self—signified here, as in the opening soliloquy, by the “redder stream” in her “veins”—she finds the resources for overthrowing Jason’s authority: “Now behold me free, / Ungyved by any chains of this man wrought / Nothing desiring at your hands nor his” (46). Having “[u]ngyved” herself, she transcends romantic conceits and sexual desires and enters “an awful realm / Where is nor love, nor pity, nor remorse, / Not dread, but only purpose” (47). Undistracted by domestic obligations or ethical attachments, Medea embodies only destructive “purpose.” She has exchanged her sentimental haze for an angry lucidity, and she replaces a cultural fantasy of feminine compliance with a feminist fantasy of female rebellion. In contrast to Lytton’s Clytemnestra, Levy’s Medea threatens Jason—and the entire local system of patriarchal operations—plainly, directly, and publicly:

There shall be
A horror and a horror in this land;
Woe upon woe, red blood and biting flame;
Most horrid death and anguish worse than death;
Deeds that shall make the shores of Hades sound
With murmured terror; with an awful dread
Shall move generations yet unborn:
A horror and a horror in the land. (47)

While Medea foretells the violent consequences of Jason’s familial negligence, the metrics of her warning forcefully underscore the psychological momentum of her crimes. In the syncopations of “Woe upon woe, red blood and biting flame,” Levy measures Medea’s terrible intent. The metaphorical bloodletting of her domestication will be retributively turned back onto the wholly complicit “land.”

This upsurge of verbal energy, in turn, highlights the extremes of Jason’s emphasis on rhetoric over action in matters of spousal antagonism, for he categorizes her speech as a mere public raving, and, practicing his usual disciplinary methods, simply ushers Medea, once again, into the house with angry epithets and a vague warning: “Shrew, triple-linked with Hell, get you within. / Shame not my house! ’Tis your own harm you work” (47). Concluding the first scene, Jason’s lines generate a pronounced incongruity. Blinded by his bargain-based understanding of domestic life and his rhetorical practice of spousal antagonism, Jason fails to acknowledge the emotional charge of domestic life and the psychological authenticity of Medea’s “purpose.” In response to her promise of “[a] horror and a horror in the land”—resonating in hell and across generations—Jason merely issues his habitual directive, “get you within,” and a wholly inadequate retort, “Shame not my house!” In the contrast between Medea’s exclamation of social destruction (“the land”) and Jason’s obsession with domestic propriety (“my house”), Levy creates a dramatic irony that attests to Jason’s patriarchal folly. Attempting to enforce his husbandly authority, which, of course, he has just negated, Jason ignores the birth of murderous “purpose.”

Such ironies inform the signifying power of Medea’s subsequent crimes. Throughout the poem, Levy locates Medea’s speeches and crimes on the threshold of the home, and, merging dramatic space and speech, she comments on the disciplinary function of separate spheres ideology. When Medea transforms the threshold of the home into a bloody scene of filicide, she literalizes both the logic and the failure of Jason’s household laws. As the first scene culminates in Jason’s attempts to redomesticate Medea, the second scene opens with a frenzied spectacle of their public exposure. With a “crowd of people running to and fro” (48), Nikias and Aegeus unravel a “bloody rumour” of “awful purport” (48) and mediate the details of the crime spree that bisects the text. The social aftereffects of the murder help to configure Levy’s radicalized Medea plot.

In filtering the crimes through the astonished witnesses, Levy depicts the interpretive preferences and unreliable perspectives of public opinion. Nikias, who presides over the telling, ascertains that Medea has deployed her sons to
murder Glaukê and Kreon and then, having used these “tender boys” as “her crime’s instruments” (49), murdered them when, bewildered by events, they returned to her for solace and protection. Her crimes completed, Nikias explains, Medea deposited the bodies of these “[i]nnocent doers of most deadly deed” (50) to be discovered by Jason on “his own home’s threshold” (55). Nikias, less inspired by regicide, virtually ignores the demise of Kreon and Glaukê and develops his crime narrative around the sensational scene of child-murder. Proclaiming, “I saw the deed, I, Nikias, with these eyes!” (51), he foregrounds Medea’s particularly maternal violations:

Half apprehending what thing had befallen,
Fled forth unmarked, and all affrighted reached
The house of Jason, where Medea stood
Erect upon the threshold. (51)

As her sons stand “[h]iding their faces” (51) in her robe, Medea responds, “I will not have ye, for I love ye not!” (52). Nikias’s credibility withstanding, his account—the only account—of the infanticide sharpens the edge of Levy’s critique. Notably absent are the Euripidean antecedents: Medea’s expressions of motherly hesitation and the fretful death cries of her protesting children. With these absences—and Medea’s “I love ye not!”—Levy enforces the notion of dreadful “purpose.” With her subsequent actions, also narrated by Nikias, Medea actualizes her stark rejection of maternal affection with a double murder:

Forth from her gathered garment swiftly drew
A thing that gleamed and glinted; in the air
she held it poised an instant; then—O gods!
How shall I speak it?—on the marble floor
Was blood that streamed and spurted; blood that flow’d
From two slain, innocent babes! (52)

As the scandal-mongering Nikias revels in the narrative and verbal tropes of crime reporting and as his interlocutor, Aegeus, seeks to absorb and assess the spectacular details of a knife “that gleamed and glinted” and of “blood that streamed and spurted,” Levy addresses the semiotic processes of publicity. Nikias can fully—and enthusiastically—articulate the status of Medea’s bloody victims but not the details of the murder (“How shall I speak it?”). Significantly, however, Nikias subsequently records the strange sounds of Medea’s murderous fury. Above the crowd’s “wail / Of lamentation” (53), he recalls, “[a] fierce long shriek, that froze the blood i’ the veins, / Rang out and rose, cleaving the topmost cloud”
As the transcendent shriek of the killer obscures the mournful wail of the crowd, Levy once again implicates Medea's murderous “purpose.” Emanating from the adversarial endgame of domestic strife, her “purpose” disentangles her from social sympathies and domestic pieties. Paradoxically, the inarticulate shriek manages to articulate the profound alienation of the wife-turned-criminal in a way that conventional crime narratives, such as that put forth by Nikias, cannot.

In fact, throughout the public’s crime reporting, Levy insists that amongst the characters of the play, the symbolic power of Medea’s crimes remain obscured. Aegeus, expressing “woe” for “the state,” “Kreon slain,” “hapless Glaukê,” and “our Jason,” assigns “three times woe for her that did the deed— / Her womanhood sham’d; her children basely wrong’d” (48). Scripting her motives according to the conventions of romantic tragedies, he situates the murders within the context of spurned love: “[t]was her love / That wrought the deed—evil, yet wrought for love” (49). Favoring melodrama, a dismissive Nikias replies, “Spare me such love” (49), and proceeds to document Medea’s maternal villainy. He recalls a “summer’s morn” on which she “looked into [her son’s] eyes, / Not gladly, as a mother with her child, / But stirred by some strange passion; then the boy / Cried out with terror, and Medea wept” (50). As a result, Nikias “never yet could deem, / Ev’n ere the horror, that Medea held / The love of human mothers in her breast” (49). In the end, Nikias’s persuasive reading prevails, and Aegeus concedes, “You judged this thing aright; / This woman was dark and evil in her soul; / Black to her fiend-heart’s root; a festering plague / In our fair city’s midst” (54). Espousing a “fiend-heart” theory of her crimes, Nikias and Aegeus categorize her criminality as innate rather than circumstantial, and their shared misjudgments force readers to consider and question the epistemological barriers of gender politics.

The public’s errant logics and mistaken conclusions, in fact, cast into relief the symbolic power of Medea’s crimes. The threshold theatrics of the poem’s domestic cruelties and crimes resonate fully with Victorian conceptions of the architecture of the home. While the home’s interior gathered “nook and nest” associations, the home’s threshold possessed signifying powers of its own. In *Family Fortunes* (1987), Davidoff and Hall reflect on the threshold indicators of private and public space in Victorian England: “Clean steps, doors, and window ledges, gleaming brass knockers, and starched white curtains dramatically demonstrated the break between private rectitude and public squalor” (382). Reversing this semiotic equation, Levy offers a picture of private squalor and public rectitude—stunningly embodied in the corpses of Jason’s banished boys sprawled on “his own home’s threshold.” Their corpses embody the negating powers of his banishment. Thus counterposing the inauthenticity of Jason’s
public rectitude and the sincerity of Medea’s domestic dejection, Levy indicts the material consequences of Jason’s household law more than she denounces or sensationalizes Medea’s crimes. In pairing Medea’s violent extremism with Jason’s domestic despotism, Levy complicates the equations of provocation and culpability and introduces mitigations such as those entertained by Mill, who argued, “The despotism of Louis XVI was not the despotism of Philippe le Bel, or of Nadir Shah, or of Caligula; but it was bad enough to justify the French Revolution, and to palliate even its horrors” (286). Because the children’s bloody bodies saturate the home’s threshold, the staging ground for Jason’s despotic husbanding throughout the drama, Medea’s infanticides symbolize a brutal and revolutionary comeuppance.

As Armstrong has suggested, Levy’s Medea appears “to rationalise and justify feminine violence,” to represent the “destructive impulse of the rejected,” and to dramatize “the fury and anguish of the woman who is dispossessed and denied” (Victorian Poetry 375). One of her most interesting accomplishments in this regard is Levy’s savvy ability to objectify and thus critique the maternal politics that invariably come to bear on representations of child-murder and of Medea. With her intricate alignments of domesticity and spectacle, she manages to foreground paternal politics and patriarchal policies. She accomplishes this in part because she courts readerly sympathies and skepticism when she mediates Medea’s crimes through the perspective of the always crude and presumptuous Nikias. But she also insists that while Medea’s crimes grotesquely renounce all ordering principles of familial sentiment and domestic rectitude, Jason’s autocratic neglect and his arrogant decrees precede Medea’s violent crimes in rendering such ideals illusory and defunct. Presenting domestic ideals as expedient methods for organizing and hierarchizing gendered relations, Levy links the politics of infanticide to the politics of marriage in order to launch her thoroughly feminist critique of domesticity.32

As Thaïs Morgan has commented, “As with divorce, so infanticide raises the question of the distribution of the power between the sexes. The child holds a special position at the intersection of the capitalist economy and the gender economy that structured Victorian society. Who produces, owns, and manages a child, and through the child, the future of society: the man or the woman?” (294). Levy emphasizes these predicaments of household management with a simple plot: Jason banishes his children, and Medea murders them. Only when Medea thus forcefully redistributes domestic power does Jason relinquish his claims to discipline and punish Medea. Nikias narrates Jason’s public decree at the crime scene when it becomes apparent that Medea has escaped:

“Let no man seek this woman; blood enough
Has stained our city. Let the furies rend
Her guilty soul; nor we pollute our hands
With her accursèd body . . .” (54)

With his matrimonial and political aspirations wholly thwarted, a humbled and humiliated Jason transfers authority to the furies, and, attempts, once again, to leverage some public power via rhetorical force. Contrasting their pure citizenship with Medea’s defiled criminality, he invokes stock formulae of public outrage and personal insult.

At the end of the second scene, Levy shifts locales, and we see Medea speaking from “outside the city.” No well-connected sorceress escaping in a god-sanctioned chariot, this Medea lurks alone in the dark “beyond men’s eyes, beyond / The city’s hissing hate” (55). Defamiliarizing the classical Medea in this way, Levy substitutes somber defeat for tragic vengeance. Medea speaks of her time in Corinth as the dream of a woman who “strove and wept and yearned for love / In a fair city” and who “was blind indeed” (55). “I have fought with the Fates / And I am vanquished utterly” (55), she proclaims, and, as in Clytemnestra, this fated universe bespeaks the hegemony of domestic imperatives, which nurture despots and expel dissidents:

This is the end:
I have dash’d my heart against a rock; the blood
Is drain’d and flows no more; and all my breast
Is emptied of its tears.
Thus go I forth
Into the deep, dense heart of the night—alone. (56)

Medea is, once again, engaged in lonely soliloquy, and the social and psychological status of Levy’s fugitive Medea, drained of blood and tears, precisely parallels that of the housebound Medea, who, “lone and weary and sad” (33), lamented her dejection at the opening of the play. In rendering the domesticated wife and the escaped murderer in like terms, Levy provocatively parallels the social annihilation of wives and murderers. In her evolution from housewife to killer to fugitive, Medea’s status does not change.

This grim conclusion forcefully reveals the extent of Levy’s feminist critique. For Levy, a renegotiation of domestic arrangements, such as that attempted by Lytton’s Clytemnestra, offers no solution to the injustices of household law, which casts women as the loveless and unloved objects in a series of unequal exchanges. With the outlaw Medea lurking on the margins of the city in painful solitude, Levy continues to engage the poetics and politics of affect that inform her rereading of Euripides’ Medea. While Medea’s murderous rage allows Levy to render the psychological devastation of her domestication and banishment
in the terrible images of terrible crimes, Medea’s quiet fugitive despair repre-
sents the complete negation of the feminine. Casting Medea in such stark terms,
Levy’s *Medea* enacts a wholesale dismissal of Victorian domesticity and rigor-
ously disavows any possibility for reformed alternatives.33

**The Politics of Genre:**

**The Murderous Scandal and the “Cool Queer Tale”**

In scrutinizing marriage and murder, Browning, Lytton, and Levy each orga-
nize their poetic resources differently. While *The Ring and the Book*, versifying
the found curiosity of a bookstall, deploys narrative polyphony and symmetry,
*Clytemnestra* and *Medea* condense and compress the grand stage tragedies of
ancient Greece. Yet, collectively their texts exhibit striking consistencies. They
share a common thematic interest in dramatizing the bad bargains of married
couples, the psychological effects of marital yokes, and the immense pressures
of household law. Such commonalities alert us to central anxieties of marriage
law and domestic ideology in Victorian England. Aligning these three different
representations of domestic murder from three different decades allows us to
see particularly poetic approaches to exploring the problem of marriage reform
and divorce law, to plot some ideological consistencies across time and texts,
and to observe how the same legal and cultural problems lingered unresolved
for several decades.

On the most fundamental level, murder offers a way of interrogating the
disciplinary functions of marriage law and domestic ideology—of imagining
homes, to use Stallybrass and White’s phrasing, as “discursive sites where social
classification and psychological processes are generated as conflictual com-
plexes” (25). In murderous scenarios, the fictions of homelife—from the legal
notions of *couverte* and marital unity to the sentimental notions of separate
spheres and paternal protection—lose their force. In their murder plots, Brown-
ing, Lytton, and Levy imagine spousal combat in the context of public pressures
and personal frustrations. As they insist on the emotional extremes and psycho-
logical problems of the home, they contest the two most popular social models
of domesticity; for, in these poems, the soothing effects of “home-sanctitudes”
and the “softening effects” of disciplinary yokes are entirely absent. Instead,
domesticity functions as a kind of house arrest, and, similarly, marriage, with its
“galling” yokes and hierarchical imperatives, always appears, on some level, to be
the primary culprit and the determining force in cases of outrageous violence:
it is the “knot / Which nothing cuts except this kind of knife.”

The breeding of violent offenders in the home, of course, clearly challenges
stock formulations of criminality, which frequently expressed crime as a con-
dition of modern decay and imagined criminals emerging from urban squalor. And, as each of these poems depicts the home as a symbolically resonant locale that operates as both a cause and a site of murder, their bloodied interiors and thresholds overturn the binaries of domestic purity and public corruption. While the domestic sites and scenes of crime clearly jettison ideological constructions of a domestic idyll, they even more pointedly exploit and critique the discourse of adversarial marriage and the reverence for “mutual accommodation.” As murderers forcefully and authoritatively explicate their motivations and expectations, they claim their crimes as the distinct features of domestic arrangements. At the same time, however, operating within a prisonhouse of legal barriers and ideological controls, these killers depict their crimes as symbolically appropriate modes of redress or singularly available acts of resistance to an uncompromising law.

In depicting ominous links between marital unhappiness and murderous agency, these poets draw upon the performative features of poetic voice and the discursive significance of poetic genre. With respect to murder, their poems, unlike the poems discussed in previous chapters, have little interest in obscuring the origins of murderous subjectivity, in introducing the possibilities of criminal lunacy, or in diminishing the processes of premeditation. Instead, the home provides a contextualized understanding of intimate struggles between individuals and institutions, which, in turn, inflect intimate struggles between murderers and their victims. Murderers’ soliloquies and murder-victim dialogues analyze murderous motive and opportunity as the particular effects of domestic ideology, matrimonial law, and gender inequality.

The focused and frank expressions of murderers and their crimes are then set against the wayward and contrived commentaries of the public. Interrogating the modes and manners of public opinion, Browning, Lytton, and Levy carefully enfold the voices of witnesses and voyeurs, who, representing the ill-informed and widely disseminated speculations of their Victorian counterparts, articulate muddled social investments in marital yokes and domestic rectitude. These poets therefore scrutinize rather than affirm the codes of legal melodrama and sensational scandal. Recalling Browning’s emphatic directive, “Examine it yourselves!” (I.38), the integration of formal techniques and political content forces readers to consider the play of gender and genre in representations and misrepresentations of marriages and murders.

The particular generic characteristics, instructive agendas, and critical postures of these texts become even clearer when placed within a wider historical network of domestic murder poems. Just as these poets looked back to glimpse literary and legal precedents, we might look forward to speculate about the interconnections of literary development and cultural change. Offering a coda to this study of nineteenth-century representations of domestic crime, a speculative but
suggestive discussion of Thomas Hardy’s short lyric poem, “Her Second Husband Hears Her Story” (1928), casts into relief the distinct generic and political priorities of its fully public and extremely bloody Victorian counterparts. Published in the 1920s, when cultural reconsiderations of marriage, divorce, and remarriage had shifted away from the noisy outcries and anxious tones of the nineteenth century, “Her Second Husband Hears Her Story” images marriage and murder in private and lyrical tones. Hardy’s claim that the poem represents “a true story” situates his text, perhaps disingenuously, as a social record rather than a social argument.34

The poem presents a bedtime conversation between a wife and her second husband in which the wife explains how she killed her first husband by stitching him too tightly to their bed, the very one upon which the newlyweds now sit in conversation. The second husband, incredulous and puzzled, exclaims, “I do not see how / How you could do it, seeing what might betide” (4–5). The wife replies that her crime originated in her fear of his habitual drunken abuse after “he came home one midnight, liquored deep— / Worse than I’d known— / And lay down heavily, and soundly slept” (6–8). Fearful that he might “wake up, and attempt embracing” (24), she practically employs her domestic skills to protect herself:

Then, desperate driven, I thought of it, to keep Him from me when he woke. Being an adept
With needle and thimble, as he snored, click-click An hour I’d sewn,
Till, had he roused, he couldn’t have moved from bed, So tightly laced in sheet and quilt and tick He lay. And in the morning he was dead. (9–15)

She covers up her crime by simply removing the stitches “[e]re people came” (16), and his death “thus ’twas shown to be a stroke” (18).

The crime brings about no public upheaval, only the husband’s comment that “it sounds strange—told here and now to me” (20). Her second husband does, however, attempt to interpret her actions through legal definitions of homicidal intent. He asks, “Did you intend his death by your tight lacing?” (21). The wife replies with an ambiguous “O, that I cannot own” (22). The husband’s conclusion, and the last line of the poem, is simply: “Well, it’s a cool queer tale!” (25). While criminal intent remains unstated, in linking domestic labor and crafty resistance, the poem wryly reimagines the exercise of household duty as a form of murderous agency. As the housewife constitutes a potential threat in an intimate disguise, the subdued conversation and lyrical inflections of the poem
leave open the question of whether the wife seeks to confess a bad memory or issue a subtle warning. With this ambiguity, Hardy’s “Her Second Husband Hears Her Story” illustrates an alternate take on wife-abuse and husband-murder; in this case, murder, like marriage, is very practical and very private.\textsuperscript{35}

The quiet and private act of murder committed by an abused wife, now enjoying her second marriage, also suggests the evolution of marriage discourse and the shifting importance of publicity. Hardy’s decision to write an often sensationalized crime as an unplanned sewing project highlights by contrast the aggressively public voices and political interventions of Victorian poems—in which speakers voiced extended monologues about murderous motive and denounced the domestic bargains necessitating their crimes. Attentive to such cultural changes, Hardy, no stranger to Victorian representations of violent marriages and sexual outrages, enacts an ironic inversion of domestic ideology: no longer requiring the fully legible expressions of the knife, murder becomes the silent work of “needle and thimble.” And no longer demanding a public reckoning or confronting an astonished community, the murderer refuses to unequivocally “own” or refute any malicious intentions behind the “click click” that brings her snoring husband to his end. In its privatization of domestic tragedy, “Her Second Husband Hears Her Story” allows us to trace the generic contours of domestic discord from the old traditions of \textit{honoris causa} to the revolutionary aspirations of “high justice” to the pragmatic remedy of the “cool queer tale.” With this comparison in mind, we might speculate about how the dialectical relations between genre and discourse in turn signal the historical relationships between poetic form and cultural content, and how the heights of domestic romance and the depths of domestic conflict allowed poets to examine the epistemological and legal contingencies of murder and the subjectivities and identities of murderers.