In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft defined the term “Masculine woman” as “the imitation of manly virtues, or (more accurately) the achieving of the talents and virtues that ennoble the human character and raise females in the scale of animal being when they are brought under the comprehensive label ‘mankind’” (33). 102 years later, in 1894, Sarah Grand coined the term “New Woman” as the term for a woman liberated from oppressive Victorian standards, who “does not in the least intend to sacrifice the privileges she enjoys…especially of the kind which man seems to think she must aspire to as so much more desirable” (273). In that century between those two terms, there is a history of women fighting for the necessary reforms that would allow them equal freedoms to their male counterparts. In this paper, I will examine three novels — *Wuthering Heights, Daniel Deronda*, and *Jude the Obscure*— in the context of Victorian society and women’s issues at the time, highlighting how the struggles faced by the heroines in each novel are congruent with the silent struggles of women at the time. Each of these novels features a heroine who could be referred to as a “masculine woman” in that she has the desire to act, a trait which was considered masculine by Victorian society. In each novel, this desire to act is blocked by forced inequality to man through conforming to societal standards, as shown through the institution of marriage. These masculine heroines are then required to find sources of power outside of marriage in order to achieve an equitable relationship with their spouse and place in society. Thus, the masculine natures of women in Victorian novels represent the actual struggles of women pushing for reform, paving the way for the birth of the New Woman.

In *Wuthering Heights*, there are two female characters who embody this masculine desire to act—Catherine Earnshaw, who has a wild childhood among the moors, and her daughter Cathy Linton, who is kept sheltered by her father for most of her life. Catherine is the more
masculine of the two, requiring others to bend to her will as “honeysuckles embracing the thorn” (92) and desires to remain in her wild ways, “half savage and hardy, and free…among the heather on those hills” (Brontë, 125-126), meaning the hills of Wuthering Heights, all the while still possessing Thrushcross Grange. Cathy comes across initially as the more feminine, but still is depicted as “eager to be active” (218), and also shows a desire to be mistress of the two homes. Despite their differences in circumstances, both these women follow a similar pattern of living—their idyllic and active childhood is brought to a rude end by a foreign male, to whom they are rushed into marriage as a form of control. In Catherine’s case, her marriage to Edgar Linton fails her as it takes her away from Wuthering Heights and the things she loves, feeding her self-destructive behavior until it kills her. Cathy, on the other hand, is able to overcome the destructive patterns of her progenitors, and restores balance between Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange.

It is not because of her marriage that Cathy is able to unite the two—marriage is where Catherine the first failed to unite the two houses—but because of how she uses her education. Both women were educated, although the first Catherine’s was neglected after the death of her mother. The major difference between the two, however, was that Cathy the second used her education to make her marriage equitable, leading to the prosperous union of the two houses, whereas Catherine did not. Banu Akcesme identifies Cathy’s inheriting both contested properties in the end as a kind of victory, stating “Cathy has a chance to establish more egalitarian and feminine society with her newly gained economic power and social rank after Heathcliff’s death as the new owner of the Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange” (35). In other words, Cathy in the end sets things right again not by returning to traditional female roles and lowering herself below her husband, but by rising against them through her education. Thus, the contrast
between Catherine and her daughter Cathy, who both have this desire to act, shows that education helps better the circumstances of a woman in a way that just traditional marriage cannot. And soon after *Wuthering Heights* was published, Queen’s College, the first institution in the world to give academic awards to women, and the first one to receive a royal charter, opened, legitimizing the education of women (“Schools: Queen's College, Harley Street.”). This school played a key role in championing education for women, and indicates a movement towards greater opportunities of learning for women during the time period Brontë was writing in. Thus, Brontë’s masculine women overcoming the limits of marriage through education mirrors the steps taken to liberate women of the time period through education, marking in the pages of *Wuthering Heights* this first crucial step towards the New Woman.

The next step towards the birth of the New Woman is recorded in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, where the masculine desire of Gwendolen to act serves to show economic inequality forces women into subservience to their husband. As a general theme, inheritance law and its system of primogeniture was major fodder for Victorian novels. However, *Daniel Deronda* differs from many of those novels in that, rather than dealing with whose right it is to inherit—like in *Wuthering Heights*, for example—it deals with showing how women suffer under those inheritance laws as a general rule. As stated by Marion Heffer Wajngot in her essay on inheritance law in Victorian novels, “*Daniel Deronda* is one of many nineteenth-century novels characterized by an ethical engagement with traditional wrongs…creating an emotional background for a rational reconsideration of social judgments and legal practices” (30-31). Thus, the legal system of inheritance in *Daniel Deronda* functions exactly as it should—which is the problem.
This is where Gwendolyn, Eliot’s heroine, comes in. In all things, Gwendolyn appears to be the perfect Victorian ideal—she is well-versed in the myriad accomplishments a young lady is supposed to have in order to gain a husband, and is portrayed as being very lovely. However, her ambitious desire to be independent as a man is, asking “why should not a woman have a like supremacy?” (1.8), sets her apart as having that masculine desire to act. She does not intend to marry, as she believes her family has means enough for her desires, but when financial ruin comes upon her family, partially as a result of the inheritance laws of the time, Gwendolyn finally accepts a proposal of marriage. She then regards marriage as a sort of “social promotion,” stating that “a peerage will not quite do instead of leadership to the man who meant to lead; and this delicate-limbed sylph of twenty meant to lead” (4.2), with her marriage to Grandcourt seeming to promise to her “the dignities, the luxuries, the power of doing a great deal of what she liked to do” (13.53). However, her marriage is shown to be just the opposite—rather than liberating her, it restricts her more than her impoverished state before her marriage did.

Here, education is not the cause for the inequality in their marriage, as both Gwendolyn and Grandcourt are shown to be educated. Rather, it is Gwendolyn’s economic dependability on Grandcourt that makes their marriage inequitable and forces her to submit to his whims. This all should have been set right upon Grandcourt’s death, but Grandcourt’s skimping on her inheritance as made possible by inheritance laws at the time is a subtle reminder of the control a man still has on his wife, and her dependency on him, even after he is dead. Gwendolyn’s inability to gain economic stability through either marriage or inheritance highlights the necessity of economic independence for marriage to be equitable to women. Daniel Deronda, through Gwendolyn’s desire to act being thwarted by her economic dependency on her husband even after his death, shows that the system of primogeniture in Victorian Inheritance laws
needed to be changed before equality could be achieved. As the Married Women’s Act of 1882 gave women the right to own property in their own name about six years after its publication, Daniel Deronda and its masculine woman marks that next step towards the liberation of women, giving women greater autonomy and control over their lives.

Throughout these novels, there has been a pervading subtext of marriage at the root of every problem and behind every need for reform. In Wuthering Heights, marriage was shown to be insufficient as a means of equalizing men and women. Daniel Deronda took that a step farther, beginning the discussion of whether marriage is actually beneficial to a woman. In order to take that final step in freeing women from the bonds of society and making her equal to men in regards of ability to act, restrictive marriage laws must be overcome. This is where Thomas Hardy’s Jude the Obscure comes in, taking this issue of marriage and pushing it further to the point that the problems posed by marriage cannot be overcome through any means other than a rejection of the institution itself.

This idea is manifest through the treatment of the character Sue Bridehead. Sue is described as one with a “curious unconsciousness of gender” (Hardy, 143), able to interact with men “almost as one of their own sex” (141) and desiring to act and “Be more independent” (97), thus identifying her as one of these masculine women of Victorian novels. As such, Sue does not want to marry, saying that “I think I should begin to be afraid of you, Jude, the moment you had contracted to cherish me under a Government stamp and I was licensed to be loved on the premises by you—ugh, how horrible and sordid” (249). In other words, Sue’s desire to remain unmarried comes from the fact that Sue feels marriage would be restrictive and prevent her and Jude from existing as equals. Society, however, intervenes and does not allow her to live as she pleases outside of marriage without consequences. Sue is pressured into a marriage with
Phillotson, which Sue agrees to “because the awkwardness of [her] situation” (162) in spending time with Jude as an unmarried woman. Their marriage by all accounts should be an equitable one, as they are equals both educationally and economically. However, Sue struggles to adjust to her marriage because marriage as an institution requires her to be subordinate to her husband, and not an equal. She runs away to live with Jude unwed to him, “do[ing] that which was right in (their) eyes” (297) and not society’s. In the end, however, society rears its ugly head, and destroys the happiness and the children Jude and Sue had in their union. This causes Sue to run back to Phillotson in an attempt to set things right, stating “we must conform” (331), an act which leaves her trapped in her loveless marriage to a man who physically disgusts her, destined to “never [find] peace” (397), until she is dead, as Jude is by the end of the book. Hardy’s portrayal of Sue as a masculine woman shows that, even though a man and woman may be both educationally and economically equal, as Phillotson and Sue were, the institution itself forces them into an unequal relationship. Her struggles against marriage therefore mark the final step towards liberation and the emergence of Sarah Grand’s New Woman, born from the labor of those masculine women of the Victorian era.

The term “New Woman” was coined by Sarah Grand the same year that Jude the Obscure began serialization in magazines, with Sue Bridehead heralded by some as “the first delineation in fiction of the woman who was coming into notice…the intellectualized, emancipated bundle of nerves that modern conditions were producing” (Hardy, xlvi). In other words, the New Woman. The “New Woman” was marked by her refusal to follow societal norms, especially when pertaining to marriage and traditional gender roles. According to Serf, “[the New Woman] felt free to initiate sexual relationships, to explore alternatives to marriage and motherhood, and to discuss sexual matters such as contraception and venereal disease” (Serf,
In other words, the New Woman acted like a man in regards to initiating relationships with who she pleased, or in choosing not to and remain independent, a sentiment which is echoed in Sue’s choice to live with Jude. Sue therefore represents a very special figure of the masculine woman, as she is both a response to and representative of this new women’s movement, but also the culmination of the pattern that Wollstonecraft influenced when she first delineated the term. Hardy’s treatment of Sue Bridehead, therefore, is not meant, as William A. Davis assumed, to be a critique of the New Women and to “show us why women like Sue will fail” (58), but is more to show that she cannot exist as she desires under the current system, and that the New Woman movement was destined for failure unless marriage reform happened. This puts Hardy’s sentiments more in line with Grand, who argued that marriage reform was not to allow greater licentiousness among women, as men feared, but to put a stop to the double standard of chastity between the sexes, saying “True womanliness is not in danger, and the sacred duties of wife and mother will be all the more honorably performed” (Grand, 274) when she is free from the system that oppresses her. As this idea is manifest in how she was happier living free to act outside of a restrictive marriage, Sue Bridehead thus marks the arrival of the New Woman in literature, her journey having been recorded throughout Victorian novels through the struggles of women embodying that supposed-masculine desire to act.

*Wuthering Heights, Daniel Deronda,* and *Jude the Obscure* are examples taken from early, middle, and late Victorian periods, respectively, and represent a broad scope of themes and issues. However, connecting them all is that figure of the masculine woman, who embodied the masculine desire to act. This desire to act comes in conflict with Victorian societal norms that required women to be passive and submissive to their husbands, as reinforced through the construct of marriage. In response to these repressive systems, the heroines of these novels are
shown to use sources outside of marriage to achieve their desires, making the novels themselves a way of prompting the reform of those repressive systems by showing how women could be elevated as a result. Thus, Victorian literature encapsulates through its various masculine women—and the problems they go through—the birth of the New Woman. In their pages is preserved the journey made by countless women struggling against societal norms and pressures to gain the right to act for themselves that had long been denied them. Thus, the struggles, triumphs, and failures of these masculine women of Victorian novels echoes the actual journey of women throughout the Victorian period fighting for the liberation of their gender that would culminate in the birth of the New Woman near the end of the period.
Works Cited


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