

ISSUE 13.2 (SUMMER 2017)

Special Issue:
Age and Gender: Aging in the Nineteenth Century

Guest Edited by Alice Crossley

**“A distortion of nature’s harmony”:
Aging Women and the Exotic in *Dombey and Son* and *Villette***

By [Leah Grisham](#), George Washington University

<1>Within Victorian culture, aging – and, in particular, aging among women – was often associated with the loss of physical and mental capacities, social isolation, and dependence on others. As Lisa Niles explains, “described in terms of adversity, melancholia, insanity, disease, and hysteria, the woman who had passed into menopause had relinquished her possession of power: power over her desires, her body, even possibly her mind” (295). According to Looser, “old age was more like to be experienced as a period of loss [as compared to men’s aging experiences] – both in terms of property and law and in terms of the perceptions of physical decay. The culture’s fixation on a youthful physical ideas was especially directed towards women” (2). Or, as W. R. Greg wrote in *Why are Women Redundant* (1869), the lives of elderly women are: “wretched and deteriorating, their minds narrowing and their hearts withering, because they have nothing to do and none to love, cherish, and obey” (6). As all of the above-quoted material suggests, often in the nineteenth century aging and elderly women were associated with helplessness, senility, and redundancy.

<2>As Perkin explains, in addition to the stereotypes associated with aging, elderly women often faced severe economic hardships.⁽¹⁾ Any who were not fortunate enough to inherit money or have family members willing to support them had to rely on charity from the community. Davidoff and Hall note that while some women were indeed able to support themselves, there were social stigmas that made such a lifestyle even more challenging. They note that in these cases, women “were often expected to fend for themselves, but were not supposed to earn more than enough for a modestly comfortable lifestyle. Accumulation was stigmatized” (287). While it may have been acceptable for men to accumulate wealth, single women were not afforded the same rights – at least not without risking social opprobrium.

<3>This essay will take two specific examples of elderly women in nineteenth-century novels as its focus: Charles Dickens’ Mrs. Skewton, from *Dombey and Son* (1846-8) and Madame Walravens from Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853). Both Mrs. Skewton and Madame Walravens are direct refutations of the helplessness that was associated with old age in women. That is,

rather than enacting a secluded and uneventful old age, as was the expectation for women their age, these two characters are mercenary in their search for economic and social power, which marks them as unnatural within the worlds of their respective novels. Their unnaturalness is highlighted through comparisons with Cleopatra, who within the nineteenth century was analogous to deviant social, sexual, economic, and political power in a way that was threatening to English gender ideologies. In *Dombey and Son* and *Villette*, Dickens and Brontë compound unnatural enactments of old age with exoticized, Cleopatra-like images to send the message that such behavior is un-ladylike, immoral, and thoroughly un-English.

<4>It is not groundbreaking scholarship to say that, according to nineteenth-century social norms, women had a special place at the center of the domestic sphere. Davidoff and Hall call this the “heavenly home” in their work *Family Fortunes: Men and Woman of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (21) That is, the masculine sphere was the outside world – economy and commerce – while the feminine sphere was the domestic space; it was, of course, a woman’s role to make the domestic sphere comfortable and cheerful while remaining largely aloof from that outside world. Dickens and Brontë are writers who often challenged these expectations. For Dickens, one only has to look as far as Edith Dombey, whose refusal to submit to her cruel husband is celebrated within the novel. As Louise Yelin argues, “Edith questions the necessity of masculine authority and dominance and feminine submissiveness within the family and laments the fact that her ‘education’ consisted entirely of preparation for the marriage market ” (298). Furthermore, according to Yelin, Dickens uses Edith as a mouthpiece for critiquing social expectations toward women. “Her aborted challenge to Dombey's authority – and to her mother's Regency values – echoes the critique of women's roles in the family and society which characterized English feminist writing of the early and mid-nineteenth century” (298). A similar paradigm exists within the world of *Villette*, as well. Brontë goes to great lengths to highlight the difficulties that a young, single woman like Lucy Snowe faces in the harsh economy of the nineteenth century, in which it could be difficult for women to find opportunities to support themselves. Judith Mitchell explains that Brontë, however, uses Lucy Snowe to navigate “a way for the female character to negotiate a realistic pathway to both love and independence” (69). Alone and poor for much of the novel, she ends the novel still alone but economically stable and independent. Lucy and Edith are tried by the patriarchal institutions under which they live, yet rise to and overcome such hardships. Their triumphs are celebrated within their respective novels, which show that there are rewards to be reaped from challenging the patriarchy.

<5>This essay, however, is more concerned with two other female characters in *Dombey and Son* and *Villette* who are also able to carve out some economic stability for themselves. Notably, however, these particular characters, Mrs. Skewton and Madame Walravens, are vilified for their actions. Dickens and Brontë lived in a period when the conversation about a woman’s place in the world was evolving, though many – especially those already in power – were deeply concerned about what it could mean to have a society in which women had more freedoms.⁽²⁾ While to some, such as Dickens and Brontë, it was feasible to create strong-willed and independent young heroines; elderly characters and their real-world counterparts were still expected to fit into narrow social roles.

<6>As I will argue, the female characters at the center of this study break free from their prescribed social roles and are maligned because of it. Mrs. Skewton and Madame Walravens

have close connections to and power within the economic world. This economic and social power that they are able to obtain is not portrayed as a glorious rebellion against the norm or as a model of positive agency. Rather, their economic and social power is shown to be a dangerous threat to the social order, especially as connects to the domestic role of younger women within the novels. This is heightened by their extreme age and by the comparisons to Cleopatra and exotic, non-Western forces of power that are at the forefront of their characterizations. As previously mentioned, old age was often associated with a removal from public life and dependence on those who were more able-bodied and able-minded. Mrs. Skewton and Madame Walravens, however, defy such stereotypes and in fact prey on those who are younger. In *Dombey and Son* and *Villette*, this behavior is coded as threatening and unnatural through associations with an exotic, Eastern source of power. As H. L. Malchow explains, individuals with elements of both the familiar and the exotic were even more frightening to the nineteenth-century imagination, since they represent “hidden threats – disguised presences bringing pollution of the blood” (168). These are not just dangers that are lurking in the peripheries, but threats that are born and reside within the metropole. While Malchow discusses such threats that come in the shape of vampires and other non-human gothic creatures, Brontë and Dickens use the exotic appearances and grotesque manifestations of age to show that such behavior as Mrs. Skewton’s and Madame Walravens’ is an unnatural and threatening distortion of the English domestic order.

The Cleopatra Connection

<7>Cleopatra becomes an important metaphor within *Dombey and Son* and *Villette*. These novels include direct references between their elderly villains and Cleopatra-like figures. In the case of Mrs. Skewton, these are overt and come explicitly from the narrator, while in *Villette*, Brontë uses more subtle references to link Madame Walravens to Eastern images of female power in order to condemn Walravens’ dealings in the Caribbean. Cleopatra was in fact a popular figure in nineteenth-century art, history, and literature, and was often associated with certain negative attributes that would have been recognizable to many of Dickens’ and Brontë’s readers. As Piya Pal-Lipinski has noted, “Exoticism, luxury, political authority, erotic power ... all ... converged in the body of Cleopatra” (44). Cleopatra was often portrayed as existing outside conventional femininity – she was wealthy, independent, politically ambitious, and dangerous to men in power – and was therefore a threat.

<8>In *British Women Writers and the Reception of Ancient Egypt, 1840-1910: Imperialist Representations of Egyptian Women*, Molly Youngkin explores how British women writers treated Egyptian women in their novels and non-fiction. She explains that many of the most popular British women writers of the nineteenth century had a great deal of knowledge about Egyptian women, but, ultimately, they tended to perpetuate negative stereotypes, noting that “despite their knowledge of ancient Egyptian women, British women writers did not incorporate representatives of ancient Egypt into their literary works or revise negative stereotypes about Egyptian women” (xvi). She explains that there were many discourses about ancient and contemporary Egypt in Victorian society, and many women writers in particular were familiar with accounts that “characterized ancient Egyptian women as holding more privileges, including control over their husbands, than women from other ancient cultures,” and that, importantly, “ancient Egyptian women were also threatening, since they adopted transgressive sexual

practices that had to be controlled” (xvi-xvii). Youngkin argues that positive analogies made between Egyptian women and British women are so rare because “to draw on representations of ancient Egyptian women would have challenged the boundaries for ideal English womanhood” (xvii). Youngkin provides a useful framework to think about Mrs. Skewton and Madame Walravens, since they evoke comparisons with Cleopatra and other negative examples of eastern, exoticized women. Highlighting such eastern references helps to tease out the ways in which Mrs. Skewton and Madame Walravens are coded as villains of their respective novels due to the threats they pose to British domestic ideologies.

Mrs. Skewton/Cleopatra: “The painted object”

<9> Many examinations of gender roles in *Dombey and Son* focus on Mr. Dombey and the way that he treats the women in his life – the first Mrs. Dombey (who passes out of the novel quickly), Edith, and his daughter Florence. I, however, take Mrs. Skewton, the skeleton-like mother of Edith, as my focus. When we first meet Mrs. Skewton, the narrator highlights the discrepancy between her real age and her appearance. “Although the lady was not young,” readers are told, “she was very blooming in the face – quite rosy – and her dress and attitude were perfectly juvenile” (316). Her somewhat desperate façade of youthfulness is constantly highlighted by the narrator, who explains that Mrs. Skewton has “false curls and false eyebrows... false teeth, set off by her false complexion” (317). The emphasis on Mrs. Skewton’s falseness is important. On one level, Dickens’ readers would have understood Mrs. Skewton’s artificiality and her usages of cosmetics to help appear younger as inappropriate and vain. There were many advice columnists and conduct-book authors in this period who lamented any use of cosmetics, to be sure, but especially among aging women. As Marie Dolores Eliza Rosanna Gilbert, Countess of Landsfeld, who was better known by her stage name, Lola Montez, points out in her 1858 book *The Arts of Beauty, Or, Secrets of a Lady’s Toilet: With Hints to Gentlemen on the Art of Fascinating*, old women were not to partake in any artificial means in order to attempt to recreate youthful appearances. In her chapter on “Paints and Powders,” Montez gives advice to young women on how to enhance their looks with precise and scant use of makeup, but notes that “the ancient ladies seem to have outdone even the modern belles in this painting business...in no case, can even *rouge* be used by ladies who have passed the age of life when roses are natural to the cheek. A rouged old woman is a horrible sight – a distortion of nature’s harmony!” (47-9). In Montez’s account, aging women are set apart from younger women and given different standards by which they are judged. Young women may benefit from cosmetics, but older women who wish to use makeup are shaped as unnatural and unwomanly – they up-end accepted ideologies of appropriate womanhood, just as we see with Mrs. Skewton. Dickens clearly draws on such derision in his descriptions of Mrs. Skewton’s appearance: from our first encounters with Mrs. Skewton, she is mocked as false, vain, and unnatural.

<10>In fact, the narrator goes to great lengths to describe the horrifying ritual that happens every night as Skewton’s maid removes her youthful façade, explaining:

At night, she should have been a skeleton... The painted object shriveled underneath her hand; the form collapsed, the hair dropped off, the arched dark eye-brows changed to scanty tufts of grey; the pale lips shrunk, the skin became cadaverous and loose; an old,

worn, yellow nodding woman, with red eyes, alone remained in Cleopatra's place, huddled up, like a slovenly bundle, in a greasy flannel ground (431).

In this passage, it becomes clearer that Mrs. Skewton, or, Cleopatra, as the narrator notably calls her, is not just a silly, vain woman. Underneath her façade of youth Mrs. Skewton is monstrous and animal-like, hinting back to the above-quoted argument from Malchow that associates monstrous, mixed-race characters with the threats from inside England's own borders. Passages such as this suggest that surface appearances can hide threats within. That is, Mrs. Skewton is not a silly old woman, but a woman who has spent her life unfairly using her daughter's relationships with men such as Dombey for her own financial gain.

<11>Elizabeth Barry explains that such depictions of aging were not at all uncommon in nineteenth-century literature. "As far as the body is concerned, however, aging is usually understood as an inexorable decline, involving shrinking, atrophy and a loss of mental capacity. And it would be disingenuous to suggest that this is not, broadly, the tale told of the body in literary representation" (132). She also explains that in nineteenth-century depictions of age, there is "both vilification and a certain compensatory ascription of power. The old and bedridden in Victorian literature, and in the works of Charles Dickens in particular, can often be tyrants, the fear that they will demand too much of, and somehow transfer their incapacity to those who encounter them, perhaps being displaced onto fears of other kinds of malign power" (138). As we shall see, such a malign power is most definitely present in the characterization of Mrs. Skewton, who relies on the stereotypes of elderly women as mentally and physically incompetent to allow her to hide her dark plans for her daughter and Florence Dombey.

<12>Mrs. Skewton also performs old age by demanding to be pushed around in a wheel chair. The narrator makes it clear, however, that this is just an act – Mrs. Skewton is perfectly able to walk on her own, and in fact does so with much energy at times. The narrator takes note of moments when Mrs. Skewton goes "skipping off her couch with tolerable briskness" – she's by no means physically an invalid (467). This raises a paradox. On the one hand, Mrs. Skewton constantly – desperately – tries to make herself appear younger; she works as hard as she can to try and avoid a physical appearance of old age. On the other hand, though, Mrs. Skewton wants to be pushed around in a wheel chair by her servant. Why does a woman so desperate to look young also want to be pushed around like an invalid? I suggest the way to understand this paradox is by examining the specific reason that Skewton wants to be pushed around in the wheel-chair: the Cleopatra connection. As the narrator reveals,

Her attitude in the wheeled chair (which she never varied) was one in which she had been taken in a barouche, some fifty years before, by a then fashionable artist who had appended to his sketch the name of Cleopatra: in consequence of a discovery made by the critics of the time, that it bore an exact resemblance to that Princess as she reclined on board her galley. Mrs Skewton was a beauty then, and bucks threw wine-glasses over their heads by dozens in her honour. The beauty and the barouche had both passed away, but she still preserved the attitude, and for this reason expressly, maintained the wheeled chair and the butting page: there was nothing whatever, except attitude, to prevent her from walking (319).

In other words, the wheel chair has nothing to do with age, but is about harkening to the image of Cleopatra. This can, of course, be read as homage to the vanity of an aging woman. However, I argue that the physical reference to Cleopatra, in addition to the fact that the narrator calls Mrs. Skewton “Cleopatra” more than a hundred times over the course of the novel, is meant to gesture to other connotations, as well – connotations of danger and power that are manifested in Mrs. Skewton. That is, Mrs. Skewton is by no means a harmless old lady. The novel makes it explicitly clear that she is a threatening, dangerous influence in the life of her daughter, and to the English domestic space at large. Skewton’s Orientalized demeanor and performative façade are not just ridiculous, but are used to signal the duplicity that exists within her.

<13>Through this link between Mrs. Skewton and Cleopatra, Dickens draws on specific, established associations that nineteenth-century readers would have made to Cleopatra and Eastern women more generally. Youngkin points out that, often, representations of Cleopatra “[drew] heavily on the stereotypical view of Cleopatra as Eastern seductress, who can only bring trouble to England” (10). Jane Rendal speaks more generally of associations between white European women and the Eastern “savage,” explaining, “These representations [of savagery] were part of the construction of white British middle-class femininity in the early nineteenth-century. From the mid-1770s onward, representations of savage and ‘Eastern’ women were used to signal the superiority of white British femininity by differentiating it from its ‘others’ in the prescriptive literature addressed to young women” (103). Mrs. Skewton and Madame Walravens are not simply threats from the East, but are white, Western women who call on images of Cleopatra to invoke a sense of power over others – especially other women. Because of this, Mrs. Skewton presents a complex threat to the British social order due to the fact that she is not an Eastern “savage,” to borrow Rendal’s phrase, but a metropolitan British subject who uses metaphors of Eastern power to cause destruction from within. This is compounded further by her age, due the fact that by the time a woman reached a mature age, she was expected to recede quietly into a state of polite submission to authority, which Mrs. Skewton refuses to do.

<14>While Mrs. Skewton, with her decrepit, aging body, is not exactly a sexual threat herself, she most certainly is associated with sexual and moral deviance in connection to some of the other characters of the novel, most particularly in terms of her daughter, Edith, and Florence Dombey. Mrs. Skewton’s desire for wealth has led her to force her daughter into a life that is often related to prostitution – Skewton has paraded her daughter around society to entice the highest bidder, so to speak, in order to obtain a life of comfort and luxury for herself. This selfishness and love of luxuries is in line with common Victorian stereotypes of Egyptians. As Edward Lane wrote in his 1836 *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, “An overreaching and deceitful disposition in commerical [sic] transactions, which is too common among all nations, is one of the most notorious faults of the Egyptian” (311). This is an important point; it is not out of a general goodwill or love for her daughter that inspires Mrs. Skewton to treat Edith as such, but out of a desire for material comforts for herself. Mrs. Skewton is like one of the deceitful Egyptians in Lane’s account – her outward and inner motivations are very different, and she is mercenary in the commercial transactions in which she involves Edith. In one particularly charged outburst to her mother, Edith relates her mother’s treatment of her to slavery: “There is no slave in the market,” Edith exclaims, “there is no horse in a fair: so shown and offered and examined and paraded, Mother, as I have been, for ten

shameful years” (432). In this analogy, Edith is a slave whose life is at the mercy of the slave driver, her mother.

<15>Edith finally takes a stand against her mother when she perceives that Skewton is trying to drag Mr. Dombey's daughter, the innocent and beautiful Florence Dombey, down the same path of merciless wealth hunting. ““ It is enough,” said Edith, steadily, ‘that we are what we are. I will have no youth and truth dragged down to my level. I will have no guileless nature undermined, corrupted, and perverted, to amuse the leisure of a world of mothers” (473). What Edith is hinting at here is bigger than just Florence Dombey. Given the extent to which the private home was used to represent a microcosm of the larger British social structure, it is possible to read Mrs. Skewton as an example of a *type* of mother who perpetuates a specific *type* of marriage. Her attempt to induct innocent Florence into this type of wealth-driven marriage is a continuation of the cycle Edith wants to disrupt. Mrs. Skewton's Orientalized associations and mercenary greed, which stand in stark contrast to the socially acceptable life of an elderly widow, mark her as a threat to the larger social order: a threat that needs to be eradicated.

Madame Walravens: “a barbarian queen”

<16> Finally, I'd like to turn to Madame Walravens, an elderly Cleopatra-like character who is the cause of many problems for Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. Lucy relates her to “Cunegonde, the sorceress!” and “Malevola, the evil fairy” and describes her appearance in great detail (432).⁽³⁾ In a long passage worth quoting in its entirety, readers behold Madame Walravens:

She might be three feet high, but she had no shape; her skinny hands rested upon each other and pressed the gold knob of a wand-like ivory staff. Her face was large, set, not upon her shoulders, but before her breast; she seemed to have no neck; I should have should have said there were a hundred years in her features, and more perhaps in her eyes – her malign, unfriendly eyes, with thick gray brows above, and livid lids all round. How severely they viewed me, with a sort of dull displeasure! (431).

Physically, she bears a striking resemblance to Mrs. Skewton – her extreme age is emphasized and used to set her apart from other, more acceptable and docile iterations of old age. As Bridget Hill points out, from the seventeenth-century on, “witch” was a common term for elderly single women, used both as an insult and to scapegoat single women for various social evils. Here, her extreme age is emphasized as is Mrs. Skewton's – it is unnatural and therefore evil and threatening. Brontë gives her readers specific descriptions of the excessive way in which Madame Walravens dresses herself. The narrator continues:

This being wore a gown of brocade, dyed bright blue, full-tinted as the gentianella flower, and covered with satin foliage in a large pattern; over the gown a costly shawl, gorgeously bordered, and so large for her, that its many-coloured fringe swept the floor. But her chief points were her jewels: she had long, clear ear-rings, blazing with a lustre which could not be borrowed or false; she had rings on her skeleton hands, with thick gold hoops, and stones – purple, green, and blood-red. Hunchbacked, dwarfish, and doting, she was adorned like a barbarian queen” (431-2).

The narration, as filtered through Lucy's consciousness, refers to Madame Walravens as a *being*, which instantly dehumanizes her even more than Lucy has done already through the comparisons with evil sorceresses. She is so far removed from Lucy's very English sense of femininity that she may be human-like, but is not fully human. Also important in this passage is the focus placed on her extreme wealth and luxury. She is dripping with sumptuous fabrics and jewels, which Lucy associates with wealth and power; these are physical representations of the money and influence Madame Walravens hopes to regain through sending M. Paul to her Caribbean plantation. She's not just a barbarian, but a barbarian *queen*, denoting power and influence within her sinister nature.

<17>This power is not just imagined, but real. Her power, however, comes not from any kind of dark magic, but from the economic power she holds as the owner of plantations in the West Indies. Though Madame Walravens is not English, it is important to keep in mind that she was written by and for English readers, who would have read her from within their own English matrices of gender ideology. As Sudan argues of the continental-European settings of *Villette* (and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*): "yet while they entertain the idea of expatriation, the domesticity their characters choose to inhabit is determined by the cultural laws of Englishness," suggesting that Walravens and the land of Villette are coded as English (135). Additionally, it is relevant to note that Madame Walravens is, like Mrs. Skewton, a white, Western-European woman who takes on the qualities of the exotic. She is not a transplant from the East – a threat from outside the Western world – but a threat that emerges from within Europe's own borders.

<18>The English gender discourses that readers would have read Madame Walravens within were not just social, but legal, as well. Madame Walravens falls under the legal category *feme sole*. That is, as an unmarried woman, she has legal rights that make her more independent than a married woman (*feme covert*) whose life and finances were easier to control under coverture. Hill explains that elderly single women who held extreme financial power were coded as threatening to the patriarchal social order. Hill argues that "just because they were outside marriage and so outside the control of husbands, single women were seen as an anomalous minority and resented by the men whose control they escaped...[there was] a deep hostility so often displayed to unmarried women (2). This is to say that it was rare for single women (especially elderly women, thought to be infirm in mind and body) to be able to possess and manage property independently of men. Therefore, those who did – like Madame Walravens – were seen as threatening to the masculine-minded world of business and property.

<19>Nina Auerbach raises a salient point on women like Madame Walravens and Mrs. Skewton, who in her words invoke "the threat of women who were mobile, self-defined, free to establish their own boundaries" (ix). She explains that "beneath the social straightjacketing, the spinster was regarded, even by respectable Victorians, as a disturbingly commanding figure precisely because she evaded family definition" (ix). There were many negative discourses surrounding aging single women; their disassociation from heteronormative family values made them, like other types of single women, threatening. Auerbach explains that, in fact, elderly single women were seen as so threatening that the term "old maid" is actually an attempt to discursively remove some of the power that a *feme sole* could generate for her self :

[In] revenge against her power, the appellation ‘old maid’ forced on her the most horrible attributes of youth and age: ‘maid’ turns her into a perpetual virgin and humble servant, while ‘old’ mocks the grotesquerie of her preadult status. An old maid is not merely servile creature out of nature; the long middle of life, the phase in which most of us *make* our lives, is amputated so that there is only a beginning yoked to an end” (x).

The Victorian rhetoric in Auerbach’s example – and in the novels of Dickens and Brontë – works to try and strip power from single women who did not operate within accepted Victorian value and domestic systems. Women such as Mrs. Skewton and Madame Walravens are not simply unusual, but they are unnatural. In the case of *Dombey and Son* and *Villette*, though, the aged women are able to garner power for themselves despite the social stigma against them. Also in these novels, the identity of such female characters is associated with a dark sources of Eastern female power to compound their unnaturalness and help mark them as the villains of the novel for contemporary readers. In *Villette*, Madame Walraven’s Orientalized body is collapsed with her strong ties to the Caribbean and the influence she derives from this, and for which she becomes the villain of the novel. That is, she sends Lucy’s love interest, M. Paul, to her plantation in order to oversee it for a few years and to break up the budding romance between M. Paul and Lucy. It is on his voyage home that M. Paul dies, leaving Lucy alone. The novel ends on a sad note with Lucy’s hope for future love dashed by the selfish and commercial prowess of Madame Walravens.

<20>One can hardly, of course, discuss Cleopatra in connection to *Villette* without mentioning the painting of Cleopatra that Lucy and John Bretton view at the art museum. According to Lucy, the painting “represented a woman, considerably larger, I thought than life... She was, indeed, extremely well fed: very much butcher’s meat – to say nothing of bread, vegetables, and liquids – must she have consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh” (223). Lucy’s narration of this painting belies a sense of derision and judgment that she feels toward it while employing almost every possible stereotype of Eastern women. Here, her large size is attributable to her large appetite, harkening to her possible sexual appetite as well as her culinary one. Lucy’s description of this Cleopatra also capitalizes on other common stereotypes of Eastern women; Cleopatra “appeared in hearty health... she could not plead a weak spine; she ought to have been standing, or at least sitting bolt upright. She had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa” (223). Her languid attitude, reminiscent of that which Mrs. Skewton utilizes in *Dombey and Son*, makes Lucy assume a sense of laziness in Cleopatra – laziness that far removes her from the Protestant work ethic into which Lucy buys. Cleopatra’s sexuality is also represented through her clothes: or perhaps more accurately, her lack of them. Lucy continues: “she ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case: out of abundance of material – seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery – she managed to make inefficient raiment,” and Lucy is also dismayed by “the wretched untidiness surrounding her” (223). Again, sexuality and excess are palpable within this representation of Cleopatra, which is not attributed to a particular artist in the novel, but is described as quite similar to other nineteenth century European representations of the Queen of the Nile. The excess and luxury are also, of course, some of the same signifiers that Lucy uses in connection to Madame Walravens, who drips with jewels and luxurious fabrics. Madame Walravens (like Mrs. Skewton) is most certainly not a sex symbol in the same way that other Orientalist images of Cleopatra were given her extreme age and grotesque appearance. This, I

argue, is a significant departure within the worlds of *Villette* and *Dombey and Son*. That is, removing the sexuality from Mrs. Skewton and Madame Walravens takes away some of the allure and intrigue that made Cleopatra such a captivating character for nineteenth-century imaginations. Brontë and Dickens strip the sexiness from their Cleopatra-like characters while leaving the more sinister connections – her wealth, political power, and influence over the lives of British subjects – behind. While Brontë does not explicitly name Madame Walravens as Cleopatra in the same way that Dickens does, the similarities between this repugnant (in Lucy’s eyes, that is) Eastern “queen” and her descriptions of Madame Walravens, a “barbarian queen,” allow readers to make the connection implicitly (223, 432).

<21>The scene in which Lucy encounters the Cleopatra painting is a contentious point for *Villette* scholars. Many have read this scene as one in which Lucy, to varying degrees, identifies or empathizes with the image of Cleopatra. Aimillia Mohd Ramli rightfully notes that “unlike in *Jane Eyre*, the character of Lucy Snowe and nineteenth-century British society are shown to become permanently destabilized by their encounter with the Orient” (119). Ramli goes on to argue that:

Thus, what the Cleopatra episode offers is an opportunity for Lucy not only to become desirable to the male gaze but also to assert a kind of control over the men in the narrative, a power which eludes a ‘shadowy’ Lucy in real life. While the narrative implies Lucy’s self-identification with the sexually empowering image of Cleopatra, it also suggests that this identification is riddled with anxiety connected to racial differences (123).

While she points out the fraught racial differences at work in the analogy, Ramli is also arguing that the Cleopatra scene is used to create a link between Lucy and the ancient Egyptian queen. Similarly, Sian Griffiths explains that “in Lucy’s critique of Cleopatra, Brontë uses words laced with irony, and we are meant to laugh at Lucy rather than to sympathize with her as she tries to domesticate this Egyptian queen by suggesting that Cleopatra cook, clean, and sew rather than rest on her royal couch” (54). Both Ramli and Griffiths make fair points, but I pose another way of reading this scene that aligns with Youngkin’s analysis of Cleopatra in the nineteenth-century imagination. It is important to note that Lucy is calling on stereotypes that were common to Eastern women in general (and Cleopatra in particular); this Cleopatra reference does not occur in a vacuum. There were numerous print and artistic renderings of Cleopatra in the nineteenth century that, as Youngkin has pointed out, tended to call on negative associations with Cleopatra. Many of these echo Shakespeare’s portrayal of Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* to one degree or another, in which Cleopatra is “especially manipulative” (Youngkin xxi). Additionally, Youngkin also goes to great lengths to show that, in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, it wasn’t uncommon for British discourses to call on contemporary Egyptian women as examples of women who faced unfair oppression, but that historical (or perhaps more accurately, quasi-historical) accounts of Cleopatra and other ancient Egyptian women from the long nineteenth century are not depicted in the same manner. They, on the other hand, are portrayed as already having power – and usually too much of it for English comfort (Youngkin xvi).

<22>*Villette* is a novel in which Brontë calls on Cleopatra-inspired references in order to help code Madame Walravens as a threat to Lucy's domestic happiness. More broadly, Brontë compounds Madame Walravens' markers of racial otherness with her extreme age, creating a character who is so far outside the accepted social norms that she is described as a threat because of her deviant existence. The same can be said about Dickens' Mrs. Skewton. That is, there are certain expectations for how Mrs. Skewton should act as an elderly woman. As outlined by Davidoff and Hall, elderly women in particular were expected to recede into the background of their social spheres and were certainly not supposed to work to accumulate wealth or social influence – both of which are desired by Mrs. Skewton and Madame Walravens. Mrs. Skewton takes advantage of her power over her daughter and forces her into undesirable marriages to achieve her own ends, while Madame Walravens ruins Lucy's chances at beginning her own domestic family unit in order to rebuild her own wealth. Madame Walravens and Mrs. Skewton show what can happen when English citizens themselves, and notably a class of English citizens who were supposed to be some of the least active in the British economic world, make the decision to become active agents. Dickens and Brontë link the economic ambition of Mrs. Skewton and Madame Walravens to an exotic otherness in a way that creates a messy entanglement and conflation between the two identities, leaving readers with the notion that to be so ambitious as a woman is morally and socially un-English.

Endnotes

(1) For more, see *Victorian Women*.^(^)

(2) John Stuart Mill captures this very sentiment in his 1869 essay *The Subjection of Women*, in which he explains that women have been purposefully oppressed by men in power since, from the perspective of parliament members and other men in power: “to be equal is to be an enemy” (449).^(^)

(3) Cunegonde is, of course, a reference to the character of the same name in Voltaire's *Candide*, whose sexuality is at the forefront of her characterization, and Malevola references a “child-devouring mother.” For more, see Sarah Wakefield's *Folklore in British Literature: Naming and Narration in Women's Fiction 1750-1880*.^(^)

Works Cited

Auerbach, Nina. Introduction. *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel*, ed. Laura Doan. University of Illinois Press, 1991.

Barry, Elizabeth. “The Aging Body.” *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, eds. Hillman and Maude. Cambridge UP, 2015, pp. 132-148.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Villette*. Ed. by Helen Cooper, Penguin Classics, 2004.

Davidoff, Leonore, and Catherine Hall. *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*. University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Dickens, Charles. *Dombey and Son*. Ed. by Andrew Sanders, Penguin Classics, 2002.

Greg, W. R. *Why are Women Redundant*. London: N. Trubner and Co., 1869. google

Griffiths, Sian. "Dissolving Pearls: Charlotte Brontë's Textual Hieroglyphics," *Women's Writing*, 14.1, 2007, pp. 49-69, jstor.com.

Haefele-Thomas, Ardel. "'One Does Things Abroad That One Would Not Dream of Doing in England': Miscegenation and Queer Female Vampirism in J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Florence Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire*." *Queer Others in Victorian Gothic: Transgressing Monstrosity*, 1st ed., University of Wales Press, 2012, pp. 96-119, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qhdw4.8.

Hill, Bridget. *Women Alone: Spinsters in England 1660-1850*. Yale UP, 2001.

Lane, Edward. *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. 1836. J. M. Dent and Sons, 1908 reprint, archive.org.

Looser, Devony. *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain, 1750 – 1850*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2008.

Niles, Lisa. "Malthusian Menopause: Aging and Sexuality in Elizabeth Gaskell's 'Cranford,'" *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2005, pp. 293-310, www.jstor.org/stable/25058708.

Malchow, H. L. *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996. Google Books. Web.

Meyer, Susan. *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction*. Cornell UP, 1996.

Mitchell, Judith. *The Stone and the Scorpion: The Female Subject of Desire in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy*. Praeger, 1994.

Montez, Lola. *The Arts of Beauty, Or, Secrets of a Lady's Toilet: With Hints to Gentlemen on the Art of Fascinating*. Dick and Fitzgerald, 1858, archive.org.

Perkin, Joan. *Victorian Woman*. NYU Press, 1995.

Ramli, Aimillia Mohd. "From Pasha to Cleopatra and Vashti: The Oriental Other in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," *Brontë Studies*, 35:2, 2010, pp.118-127, JSTOR.com. DOI: 10.1179/147489310X12687567278851

Rendall, Jane. "The condition of women, women's writing and the Empire in nineteenth-century Britain." *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, eds. Hall and Rose. U Michigan Press, 2006, 101-121.

Romo, Christine. "Meryl Streep Explains Why She Took the Witch Role in 'Into the Woods'." *ABC News*. 3 Dec. 2014. Web. 05 Apr. 2017.

Sudan, Rajani. "Fair Exotics: Two Case Histories in *Frankenstein* and *Villette*." *Fair Exotics: Xenophobic Subjects in English Literature, 1720-1850*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002, pp. 117-147, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fj36r.7

Wakefield, Sarah R. *Folklore in British Literature: Naming and Narrating in Women's Fiction, 1750-1880*. Peter Lang Publishers, 2006.

Yelin, Louise. "Strategies for Survival: Florence and Edith in *Dombey and Son*." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1979, pp. 297-319, JSTOR.com.

Youngkin, Molly. *British Women Writers and the Reception of Ancient Egypt, 1840-1910: Imperialist Representations of Egyptian Women*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.