MERLE TÖNNIES

(En-)Gendering a Popular Theatrical Genre

The Roles of Women in Nineteenth-Century British Melodrama

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1 Women and melodrama. Representation and response

The two abstractions underlying this study – 'gender' and 'genre' – to some extent serve comparable purposes of categorisation, assigning an individual phenomenon to a more general class and thereby making it possible for the observer to deal with it according to the models of response s/he has internalised. Quite apart from any more detailed definitions, which will be approached in the subsequent chapters (2. and 3.) with regard to the nineteenth-century situation under consideration here, both concepts are thus equally governed by rules, which can be analysed both diachronically and synchronically. These conventions influence and sometimes subvert each other when 'gender' and 'genre' come to interact. In critical literature, interest in these processes has engendered a veritable 'genre' of enquiry, in which 'gender' is restricted almost exclusively to its feminine side and women's relationship with particular groups of texts is examined from different points of view. Most obviously, critics have analysed how female authors use established genres, focusing on the transformation of the given norms from their special feminine perspective, so that gender becomes "the split in the [systemic] totality" constituted by genre (Curti 1988, 152). Concretely, this approach often means establishing correlations between a woman's representation of female characters and the genre conventions governing her work, which are both undermined by the gender play in the text and serve to limit its subversive scope.[1]

At the same time, certain genres have also been identified as inherently 'female'/ 'feminine'. Such labels are mostly not restricted to indicating the large number of women engaging in a particular field of creative activity, but they also convey the opinion that the genre in question is especially well suited to expressing female concerns.[2] As Mary Gerhart points out with regard to the rapport often constructed between women and the novel, gender-genre links may thereby mask value judgements which see 'femaleness' as a deviation from the 'male' norm and thus use the label either deliberately or subconsciously to classify the form concerned as "substandard" (1992, 30). In more recent analyses, the perspective on such 'special relationships' between gender and genre tends to shift from the author to the audience (see Curti 1998, 31). This is especially true of studies dealing with popular culture, since in contrast to established genre definitions in literary studies, which regularly exclude the addressee (Curti 1988, 155), 'popular' cultural artefacts are understood to be constructed explicitly with the audience's wishes in mind. Once again, the 'femaleness' of a particular category refers not only to its factual recipients – as in Gerhart's observations on the romance novel (1992, 5) –, but also signals the special affinity of the texts in question with female respondents. Genres like the soap opera are thus seen to be

[1] See e.g. Warhol (1996) on gender and genre doubling in female-authored Victorian novels and Puschmann-Nalenz (2013) on the female approach to a whole range of genres.
[2] Tayler and Luria, for instance, treat female authors' genre choices in British Romantic literature from this point of view (1977).

targeted specifically at women viewers, both catering for their particular needs and drawing on those viewing and interpreting skills that are fostered by the female experience.[3]

In its filmic manifestations, the form under consideration here, melodrama, has frequently been treated as a classic case of such a genre-gender link, with critics emphasising "its construction of narratives motivated by female desire and processes of spectator identification governed by female point-of-view" (Kuhn 1984, 18). Works of this kind are considered to put female characters and their problems centre-'stage' (Mulvey 1981, 14-15) and thereby "demand a female reading competence" (Williams 1984, 8). It is important to point out, however, that film critics hardly ever see these affinities as politically enabling for women. Ann E. Kaplan is especially harsh on melodrama in this respect, pointedly defining the term to signal that a film is "*complicit* with dominant, patriarchal ideology" (1993, 13, her emphasis; see also 1983, 47). From this point of view, the genre ultimately perpetuates the very power structure in which its female audiences are caught, showing its heroines to be passive victims who cannot defend themselves against the forces confronting them (Docker 1994, 249-251). The plot development is considered to invite unreflected sympathy with these characters. At most, it allows female spectators an escapist respite from their real-life oppression in a "wish-fulfilment" dream which "act[s] out the narrative resolution of conflicts" (Williams 1984, 4), without ever questioning the distribution of power underlying these problems. Implicitly, such mechanisms are understood to absorb subversive energies which might otherwise have been channelled into challenging patriarchal domination in 'real' life. Some film critics are slightly more sympathetic to melodrama. Notably, Laura Mulvey credits it with expressing "ideological contradictions centred on sex and the family" (1976, 53), thus focusing on the representation of conflict itself rather than on the solutions. In this view, then, film melodrama at least uses its rapport with female audiences to give a voice to their grievances, even though it is still a far cry from genuine feminist protest and from presenting counter-models of female behaviour.

Although the cultural artefacts under consideration in the present study fall in the same category of 'melodrama', they use a different medium and were on average produced a century earlier than the twentieth-century film examples. It is thus very doubtful indeed whether one can simply transfer results obtained with regard to one kind of 'melodrama' to another, even though Kaplan does not seem to recognise such generic and temporal shifts as a problem: she repeatedly mixes film analysis with the treatment of late-nineteenth-century 'melodramatic' novels (see 1992, *passim*). In contrast to the 'female' genre of the novel, however, theatre – as the medium realising dramatic art – has often been considered to be rather ambiguous in its relationship with women.[4] While it "provided a place for at least some women to overstep normal social restraints on vocation and identity" "[l]ong before women had access to most other professions" (Postlewait 1988, 309), this by no means demonstrates a gender bias. For a

[3] For such an approach see Gledhill (1997) and Curti (1988, 154-155).

[4] It should be stressed here that despite the following consideration of women's general relations to the theatre, drama is not as such understood as a 'genre' in the present work. It is rather seen as a literary form comprising a number of different 'genres', including melodrama.

long time, 'theatrical' women remained exceptional, both as playwrights and (even more) as actresses, as they differed both from the male norm in these professions and from the 'normal' female role in society. In this realm, feminist critics have thus tended to "critique[…] the male exclusion of women" and to try and establish theatre's "own female tradition" in the face of male domination (Aston 1995, 16; see also Austin 1990). This has especially meant 'recovering' those women who nevertheless made a name for themselves as playwrights or actresses in the cause of theatre history (see e.g. the collection of essays edited by Gale / Gardner 2000 and Howe 1992 respectively). Some works (like Dudden's [1994] on the American context) also bring in the audience, where women once more tended to be exceptions rather than the 'natural' recipients even up to the twentieth century. In the study of individual plays, this problematic gender background has often made the dramatist's sex the paramount consideration.[5] Instead of treating genre-genre relations, feminist criticism on drama has tended to work on the assumption that female playwrights have special abilities in portraying female characters irrespective of dramatic conventions (see the papers in Schofield / Macheski 1991, especially Steeves 1991, 220-221). Male authors, on the other hand, are expected to create disabling and/or less realistic representations of women simply because of their sex (see e.g. Finney 1989, 21). In these cases, actresses and performance conditions may to some extent work as an antidote (Cima 1993, 1-2), especially, one can imagine, when women play a prominent role in the theatre audience.

It may be a consequence of theatre's lack of pronounced female affinities that in research on the nineteenth century, where gender is an obvious topic for analysis because of its prominence in social discourse, there is almost a convention of examining literary portraits of women and questions of female authorship with regard to the 'female' form of the novel.[6] If earlier studies of this kind treat drama at all, they mostly focus on the last decades and the turn to the twentieth century, when the social visibility of the movement for female emancipation makes it more or less imperative to look for possible reflections on the stage and feminist activists even expressly appropriated drama for propagating their views.[7] Towards the beginning of the 1990s, the above-described approaches to women's general relationship with the theatre then came to be transferred to the nineteenth century and generated a more comprehensive interest in the drama of this period. Tracy C. Davis and Ellen Donkin's 1999 collection, for instance,

[5] Ferris's 1990 study of – as a chapter heading puts it – 'archetypal images of women in theatre' is clearly an exception, as it almost exclusively deals with works from the established canon of male-authored drama without paying any attention to the playwrights' sex.

[6] Analyses of this kind became very popular with the rise of feminism in the 1970s, but the wave of critical interest has by no means abated. For an almost random overview of examples see Calder 1976, Agress 1978, Reynolds / Humble 1993, Thompson 1996, Ingham 1996, Weisser 1997, Palmer 2011 and Schenke 2013.

[7] See e.g. the research of Lorrichs 1973, Adams 1974, Kolb 1975, Gottlieb 1975 and Weintraub 1977. The topic has remained popular in more recent times, as is proved by the collections edited by Friedl 1987, Fitzsimmons / Gardner 1991, Gardner / Rutherford 1992 and Chothia 1998, as well as by the work of Wiley 1989, Klein 1990, Gainor 1991 and Osmasreiter-Blaicher 1994, 390-398.

concentrates on female playwrights and their heroines, with female actors and theatre managers coming in as additional influences, while Davis's own research centres on the role of the actress (see especially 1988, 1989a and 1991). Kerry Powell (1997), on the other hand, chooses a comprehensive perspective, devoting equal attention to female stage writing and production. Although Powell also examines the 'backlash' produced when male adaptors interfered with 'female' texts, the study clearly gives more scope to the 'progressive' women writers than to deconstructing patriarchal domination in male-authored works. This focus is representative of the 1990s feminist projects on Victorian theatre. They were motivated much more consistently by the desire to 'recover' 'lost' women than by the critical impulse with regard to the male establishment that plays such a prominent role in more general works on drama and in film criticism.

It is possible to use the prominence of this approach to explain why despite the continuing and even increasing popularity of nineteenth-century melodrama from 1837 onwards, it appears relatively rarely as a dramatic form in its own right in studies on women in the Victorian theatre. Although – as pointed out above – the theatrical variety cannot necessarily be expected to show the same (disabling) affinities with the female spectators' desires as the 'women's genre' of film melodrama, the relative scarcity of female melodramatists in the nineteenth century and the clichéd view of intense patriarchal domination in this period may well have created assumptions along those lines, especially with critics used to highlighting the author's role. The titles of many plays moreover foreground the heroine's name and thus suggest a 'female' focus similar to that of film melodrama. The attribute 'escapist' is indeed often linked with stage melodrama in more general works (see e.g. Schmidt 1986, 233; Booth 1965, 187), and critics who deal with the genre's treatment of social class tend to reach conclusions very similar to the 'wish-fulfilment' model established in film criticism with regard to gender (for instance Lenz 1986, Krahé 1992, Estill 1971; cf. also Wadsworth 1998, 213, 216-217). Heather Jones (1989) even explicitly describes (in this case Canadian) stage melodrama of the nineteenth century as a 'feminine' genre that has a special rapport with female spectators but ultimately uses it for supporting dominant ideologies of gender and nationhood. She thereby spells out a view that may well have influenced analysts mainly interested in subversive representations not to deal with this genre.[8]

Nineteenth-century stage melodrama moreover already held a relatively marginal position in secondary literature long before the gender analyses of the 1990s. As a popular dramatic form, it was from the very beginning despised by the literary establishment for its lack of artistic merit (cf. Landy 1991, 16) – an opinion that is captured in the derogatory use of the adjective 'melodramatic' even today. Critics from the traditional field of literary studies were thus likely not to consider the genre a valid research topic. In the British context, the development of nineteenth-century drama was generally construed as "[b]reaking through the darkness" (as Jenkins still entitled his first chapter in 1991), with plays staged before T.W. Robertson's *oeuvre* of the 1860s receiving only the most cursory attention. This author was singled out as a precursor of

[8] Ralph J. Poole and Ilka Saal criticise in more general terms that critical liteature has often equated melodrama with "the affirmation rather than the questioning of a given set of moral imperatives" (2008, 3).

Arthur Wing Pinero, Henry Arthur Jones, Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw, whose work in the last two decades of the nineteenth century was taken to have initiated a 'renaissance' of British drama after the long period of 'stagnation' (see also Hudson 1951, Rowell 1978a). It is obvious that this 'grand narrative' could not survive the deconstructionist impulses of more recent criticism, particularly when the influence of cultural studies already by itself drew attention to popular artefacts. Literary histories of the 1990s which profess an interdisciplinary interest along the lines of Tucker's *Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture* of 1999 and Shepherd and Womack's 1996 'cultural history' of English drama tellingly devote adequate space to melodrama (see Fischler 1999, Shepherd 1996). Drawing on isolated forerunners like Michael R. Booth's seminal *English Melodrama* of 1965, Maurice Willson Disher's two surveys of British melodrama motifs (1949 and 1954) and the more general works by Rahill (1967) and Smith (1973), analysts of the 1980s and 1990s begin to study nineteenth-century British melodrama from a variety of perspectives. Author-oriented approaches (see e.g. Doyle 1980, Clifton 1993) mix with genre-focused ones (for instance Schmidt 1986, Ranger 1991 and Harcourt 1994), which are occasionally broadened – following the model of a melodramatic 'mode' developed by Brooks with regard to the French context (1976) – to explain nineteenth-century British culture as a whole in 'melodramatic' terms (see Hadley 1995). Another prominent feature of the 1980s and 1990s is collections of essays that deal with melodrama on a cross-cultural basis, usually analysing the French and the American situation together with the British one (see e.g. Redmond 1992, Hays / Nikolopoulou 1996). Quite often, such volumes include twentieth-century film melodrama as well (as did Bradby / James / Sharratt 1980, Gledhill 1990 [1987] and Bratton / Cook / Gledhill 1994), although it has to be noted that comparative approaches within individual articles remain rare. Despite the pointedly wide range from which topics are drawn, women (as authors, spectators or characters) are as notably absent from these melodrama studies as the genre of melodrama is in the general research on women in nineteenth-century theatre. Frequently influenced by cultural studies approaches, the new generation of melodrama scholars are after all as likely as the feminist theatre historians to be interested in subversive rather than conformist representations and apparently did not expect much from melodrama in this respect. The tendency to equate stage melodrama with the filmic manifestations of the genre is potentially even stronger in these studies, as the medium only rarely becomes a topic of analysis in its own right. Indeed, as Matthew Buckley has stressed (2012, 430), it is typical of more recent works to understand 'melodrama' "in [an] expanded, modal sense" which transcends media boundaries. In the twenty-first century, the genre is even often taken to escape the researcher's grasp "continually" "in its adaptive dynamism, its transformational variation, and inter-media movement" (*ibid.*). Thus, the interest in the detailed study of concrete nineteenth-century melodramas has on the whole abated again after 2000.

Research on women's roles in nineteenth-century melodrama thus lies as much outside the critical mainstream in the 1980s, 1990s and in the twenty-first century as it did in earlier decades, both with regard to British theatre and to a larger context. If such projects are carried out at all, they very often take the form of (unpublished) doctoral dissertations. These works usually examine portraits of female characters in the melodrama of a selected period, with the beginning (see e.g. Bird 1975, Mendelson

1977), the middle (Mellick 1976, Métayer 1981, Duffy 1998) and the end (Pam 1980, Hill 1982) of the century achieving roughly equal shares of critical interest. Studies that refer to the whole of the nineteenth century (like Rebeck's [1989] and Spaise's [1991]) are considerably less frequent. Whatever the chosen period of time, however, the results are very similar. In the majority of cases, the authors seem to take over the most widespread opinion on film melodrama without any modifications, painting the picture of an intensely conservative dramatic form. The book-length studies thereby chime in with the clichés which are propagated almost whenever the heroines of nineteenth-century stage melodrama receive any mention at all in more general publications and which also appear in most of the (rare) articles broaching the topic. The female characters are regarded as proverbial victims who "do not so much act as permit themselves to be acted upon" (Davies 1975, 242; see also Schmidt 1986, 183), without any resources of their own and completely unable to stand up for their rights without (male) assistance. It is tempting to see the ultimate origins of this opinion in the contempt with which nineteenth-century 'literary' circles treated the genre and which often manifested itself in complaints about stereotypical heroines who are "always in trouble" and "always *victims* of some sort" (Jerome 1912 [1889], 20; anon. 1845, 319, emphasis in the text). Critics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries reproduce this belief not only independently of the exact period of time on which they focus but also irrespective of whether they deal with British, American or French melodrama.[9] In some cases, secondary literature opens up the typical victim role a little and allows the heroine some degree of strength, which, however, is then shown to manifest itself mainly in her endurance and her ability to run quickly in order to escape persecution (see Vicinus 1981, 133 and 1989, 178; Booth 1965, 26, 28; Newey 2001, 157-160). Fundamentally, the heroine thus still remains without any traits that would allow her to manage her life effectively on her own.

A second, much smaller group of critical analyses finds exactly those qualities realised in the specific variety of stage melodrama they analysed. They all present their findings as evident and unequivocal, but completely fail to establish any relationship with the dominant opinion, which after all claims to be equally 'obvious' and to apply to the dramatic genre as a whole. According to the second group of critics, melodrama heroines were able to act resourcefully and successfully in female-authored East-End plays of the second half of the nineteenth century (J. Davis 1999, 138 and 1991, 385-386; Powell, 1997, 128),[10] in Colin Hazlewood's drama staged in the same neighbourhood and period (Williams / Watt 1996, 252), in late nineteenth-century

[9] See e.g. Rebeck (1989, 19), Ilsemann (1996, 200-201), Donohue (1992, 118), Mendelson (1977, 226, 428), Mayer (2004, 149-150) and C. Williams (2012, 203-204) on the British context, Hill (1982, 111-112), Grimsted (1968, 174) and Singer (1990, 120) on American melodrama and Métayer (1981, 401, 936), Przybos (1987, 88), Ubersfeld (1976, 197) and Ginisty (1982 [1910], 14) on the French.

[10] There is a blatant contradiction here to Sheppard's opinion on East-End performances: "There, the people who make things happen in a typical 'blood-and-thunder' melodrama tend to be men." (1996, 210) Representatively, however, none of the texts makes any attempt to analyse the relationship of its findings with the opposite view.

American melodrama (Bank 1987, 241; Pam 1980, 112, 151; McConachie 1992, 221; Hill 1982, 163[11]) and colonial or imperialist plays (Holder 2000, 170) as well as in British and French melodrama of the early nineteenth century (Nikolopoulou 1996, 133; Bird 1975, 85, 90). Activity on the heroine's part is moreover said to depend on the setting, with colonial locations having a favourable influence (Radford 1997, 2), and on her social class: "As we travel down the social scale, the violence offered to these characters and their passivity with regard to it appears to increase disproportionately" (Spaise 1991, 94). In some of these instances, it may indeed be possible to explain why the specific kind of melodrama considered in a particular text will have been especially interested in active heroines. One could even find the above-cited view that female playwrights have gender-specific abilities in representing women reflected in the special position accorded to the female writers of the East End – which, however, creates an obvious contradiction to the apparently comparable skills of a male playwright like Hazlewood. The randomness of the collected 'exceptions' alone indeed suggests that critics find female activity in melodrama almost whenever they turn away from generalisations and concentrate on the actual texts. It is after all noticeable that the second group of authors is much more likely to have looked at concrete playscripts in their entirety. Many of the texts propagating the clichéd view of melodrama women, on the other hand, still seem to have relied on plot summaries along the line of Disher (1949 and 1954) and Booth (1965), even if they are book-length studies of a much later date (see especially Mendelson 1977[12] and Rebeck 1989).

What this overview first of all makes imperative for a study like the present one is thus more or less a truism, namely that one can only hope to transcend the existing contradictory views on nineteenth-century melodrama heroines and obtain generally applicable results if one analyses the original plays. As Rohan McWilliam concludes on a more general level: "Future work in this area will require far more attention to the specificities of melodrama." (2000, 74) A second point is of equal importance. What is manifestly missing from the secondary literature referred to above is a clearly defined standard according to which given female characters can be evaluated as either passive victims or active managers of their own fates. In the absence of a pre-established scale, it is the researcher's own models of behaviour which automatically come to serve as a yardstick, even though they, of course, bear hardly any relationship at all to the dramatic portraits assessed.[13] In extreme cases, twentieth-century feminist theory is used as a basis, so that – in an especially graphic example from outside the realm of melodrama – Marjean D. Puriton sets out to examine the sexual politics of Joanna

[11] This reference is an exception to some extent, as active heroines are treated in the same text that postulates the rule of the heroine as a suffering victim. Even here, however, the relationship between the two observations remains very superficial; Hill simply concludes that "[p]assivity was by no means a requirement for heroines of this period [the late nineteenth century]" (1982, 163).

[12] This author even explicitly refers to Booth's plot descriptions rather than to the actual dramas (see 414, fn. 1; 416, fn. 3; 417, fnn. 1 and 3 *et passim*).

[13] See Carlson's realisation that "the lens of [her] own feminism has often threatened to distort [her] evaluation" of 1890s comedy (1999, 273).

Baillie's *The Election* "within the theoretical paradigm of French feminism" (1998, 126). From the studies discussed above, Spaise's is most conspicuous in this respect, as it transfers the ideas of Luce Irigaray to the nineteenth century without further thought (1991, 78 *et passim*). By contrast, the only scale which is relevant to the plays themselves and would allow comparisons both between dramas from different cultural contexts and between the results reached by different researchers is the social femininity concept at the time of writing and/or the first production.

An exceptional study in both respects is Margo J. Mellick's 1976 thesis. Firstly, its selection of plays with 'divergent melodramatic heroines' is much broader than the extremely restricted samples used by the second group of critical works discussed above. Mellick's results thus substantiate the suspicion that non-conformist melodrama heroines may have been more widespread at least in the nineteenth-century British context treated in the dissertation than is generally assumed, even though the author herself unfortunately fails to relate her findings to the established critical view that would allow them only the status of exceptions. Secondly, in this work already the use of the term 'divergent' in the title indicates the recognition of a predefined standard. The second chapter indeed briefly sums up the existing feminine ideal and the situation of women in society. However, these points are rarely taken up again in the subsequent analysis of individual plays. 'Divergence' is thus unfortunately understood as the counterpoint to conformity in a binary opposition, without any consideration of how the various components of the melodrama representations interact with established preconceptions and with each other. In this way, Mellick's study is typical of what has been termed the 'images of women' approach of the 1970s, when feminist studies began to examine portraits of women in popular culture (and the media in particular), usually condemning the results as providing disabling role models for actual women. As later theorists have repeatedly criticised (see e.g. Pollock 1992 [1977] and 1991 [1990]; Hollows 2000, 21-24), this not only meant seeing the 'images' as monolithic entities[14] that could (and should) be measured against 'real' life, but also presupposed that "what it means to be [...] a woman is straightforward, self-evident [and], unchanging" (*ibid*., 22).

In order to avoid these pitfalls, one has to understand the female characters presented in melodrama as 'representations' or 'constructions' (see *ibid*.) which are put together against the background of the existing social models and may partly support and partly subvert them. In addition (and especially from a Cultural Studies perspective), the standards themselves of course have to be seen as constructions as well (see Pollock 1991 [1990], 208-209). They shape individual processes of identity construction in the period as positive or negative role models, and therefore both

[14] Some works on theatrical portraits of women that are not confined to melodrama show the effects of such an approach still more graphically than Mellick's dissertation even though they were published much later. Aston's 'study in images of women in English and French theatre 1848-1914' (1987) and Ferris's monograph on 'images of women in theatre' (1990) start off with self-contained 'images' that they seek to trace in a variety of dramatic texts from different contexts, without paying any attention to how these clichés are adapted to different cultural and theatrical contexts and if their use in a particular play masks (or creates) internal contradictions.

influence, and are influenced by, these individuals' 'real' behaviour. It is the internalised gender concepts (rather than the 'real' conditions themselves) which come to bear most directly on the reception of female characters shown in popular and literary cultural artefacts and which should thereby form the basis for studying women in nineteenth-century stage melodrama. It is obvious that – just as with the dramatic texts – actual source material has to be analysed in order to avoid simply taking over the clichéd view on the subject, which may well be no more than a retrospective construction of twentieth-century origins. In the nineteenth-century British context under consideration here, this means isolating the 'dominant' view of womanhood from the numerous conduct books and periodical articles which were published on the topic in this period and demonstrate the process of establishing such a standard and keeping it in place by naturalising it as 'evident' and 'immutable'. Mellick indeed already draws on some texts of this kind but mixes them rather indiscriminately both with information about women's actual lives and with twentieth-century representations of 'the' Victorian woman in secondary literature.

Although Mellick's dissertation goes relatively far for the 1970s, its impulses were only taken up again – and some of its shortcomings addressed – in 1998, in Daniel James Duffy's thesis on women in domestic melodrama from 1820 to 1874, which constitutes the most recent large-scale study of this topic so far. The author not only refers directly to a comparatively wide range of dramatic examples (despite the 'domestic' focus announced in the title) as well as contemporary constructions of femininity, but he also consciously rejects the 'images of women' approach used by Mellick (see Duffy 1998, 38). Paradoxically, however, this new study only reinforces the need for further research, as its view of the melodrama heroine remains as contradictory as that of critical literature in general. While starting off with the complaint that major works on melodrama do not perceive the energy in the heroine's character (*ibid*., 37), the author nevertheless continues to talk about the "melodramatic role as helpless heroine" (*ibid*., 158). In the end, he concludes that representations of self-reliant women were clearly less "favour[ed]" by the genre than conventional portraits, while the actress speaking to the audience through the persona of the character added a fair share of female assertiveness to all the stage portraits (*ibid*., 255, 258). The reasons for this disappointing overall result – despite many well-balanced, textually-grounded analyses of individual plays – become clearer when one looks at the perspective Duffy adopts on representations of female activity. Despite his rejection of the 'images of women' approach and the comparison of the 'images' with 'real' women implied in it, he sees such instances exclusively as reflections of real-life events rather than as potentially characteristic of melodrama itself (see especially *ibid*., 158, 196).[15] He thus fails to establish any relationship with the standard opinion on female melodrama characters partly reproduced by himself. This shows that in order to evaluate melodrama's representations consistently, a second scale is needed apart from the dominant femininity concept, and that is the theatrical genre system of the time. By

[15] Duffy goes a step further here in a more recent article where he distinguishes between different spectator positions with regard to theatrical portraits of women in the nineteenth century, stressing that all of these could be and were taken up by both men and women (2001, 128-129).

seeing given female portraits as processed by the genre rules that make melodrama what it is in the particular period,[16] one avoids the simplistic view of direct social influences on the plays and is also able to assess the radicality or conformity of such representations from a theatrical point of view, as well as from an ideological one: While being influenced by the same dominant gender concept, internalised by both authors and audiences, other dramatic genres may well have constructed completely different heroines, due to the genre laws which constituted them and which were similarly known to all parties in the process of theatrical production.

In order to give the necessary equal weight to gender and genre, one can concentrate on the author's or the audience's point of view, since the two notions interact directly at both points in the dramatic process of communication. As shown above, the orientation towards the playwright has so far tended to yield rather simplistic results close to a gender-based 'intentional fallacy' and has precluded rather than fostered in-depth research with regard to melodrama. It thus seems much more productive to transfer the new interest in the audience that can be observed in gender-genre studies more generally to the realm of drama and to focus more closely on the receiving end. Although drama has generally been neglected in reader-oriented criticism (see Chaudhuri 1984, 282), it is indeed particularly apt for treating the audience's perception as the place where the dominant genre and gender conventions of the time interact both with each other and with the text. Following Fredric Jameson, 'genre' in the most general terms can be seen not simply as an abstract system of rules but as a "contract[…] between a writer and his readers", as a "literary *institution*[…]" "based on tacit agreements or contracts" (1975, 135, his emphasis). The readers' or spectators' assumptions about a particular genre thus affect their initial response to a cultural artefact with that 'label' (Holland / Sherman 1986, 229; Gerhart 1992, 7), including the decision whether they take up the position of the audience at all or maybe reject the text outright. Even prior to that, the way in which the work is written is influenced by these expectations, since the author of course knows about them and tries to fulfil or frustrate them (see Howard 1980, 188-189; Palmer 1992, 4) in the desire to 'interpellate' a particular target group (Althusser 1971 [1969], 160). Mutual influences do not stop here, however, but continue in both directions throughout the reception process; as Una Chaudhuri has put it, "[t]he text processes the reader and the reader processes the text, the two operations occurring not successively but simultaneously" (1984, 284; see also

[16] As works on women's relationship with the theatre generally tend to focus on the author's point of view and link the portraits shown in the plays with his/her gender, they rarely recognise the influence of the rules of the chosen dramatic genre – which may after all affect the representations and their reception far beyond the playwright's conscious gender-based decisions. Susan Carlson is exceptional for realising that her research on 'women and comedy' needs to show "how the genre has shaped both male and female writers", although she, too, originally took up her project in order to demonstrate "that comedy written by women is different because women are different" (1991, 7). In his 2001 article Duffy sets out to include genre rules as well, but very quickly arrives at the general conclusion that in contrast to farce, "[m]elodrama and comedy were not able to portray such visions [of dominant women]" (129). This then seems to form the basis for rather than the result of his analysis of concrete plays.

McConachie 1992, xi-xii). The audience's ongoing experience of the work is fed back into the "first, total relation between text and self" (Holland / Sherman 1986, 231) that was based on pre-existing genre notions, and it thereby shapes both subsequent responses and the overall understanding of the artefact, as well as reflecting back on the general genre concept. In the realm of drama, these processes become especially evident through the theatrical realisation.[17] Performances expose a play very directly to the audience's reactions, which are in their turn fortified by the group experience and tend to assert themselves far more openly than in other forms of literary reception. In this way, a "'reception loop' of performer to audience back to performer again" can develop (as Donkin [1992, 279] describes it with regard to eighteenth-century British theatre), in which theatrical responses immediately influence not only the audience's but also the playwright's genre concepts: Changes to the author-reader contract of genre introduced from the 'producer's' side are either "ratified" or rejected "instantaneously" (*ibid.*), while evolving notions of literary form on the recipients' part reveal themselves to the writer relatively early on through the spectators' dissatisfaction with his/her work.

Such an understanding of reception as 'negotiation' can equally be applied to the perception of gender representations; the concept of 'negotiation' was indeed developed by Christine Gledhill with a particular focus on the response of female audience members to portraits of women in film and television (1988, 70-77). Again, the interaction between the audience's preconceptions and the literary works is most pronounced in drama. As Ellen Donkin notes, "the actress publicly reinforce[s] a notion of Woman" by "performing [theatrical] roles", and "[t]hat notion of Woman ha[s] a positioning effect on real women, on the way they live[…] their lives, on what men expect[…] from them, and on what they expect[…] from themselves" (1992, 278). In sociology, "specific ascribed and prescribed behaviours" (like those laid down by the established version of 'femininity' in a particular period) are after all often conceived of as 'roles' which are known to all participants as appertaining to a particular interactional situation and by which individuals "reality test[…] self-hypotheses" and adapt "to the social demands placed upon" them (Horrocks / Jackson 1972, 109, 93).[18] It has already been pointed out that the analogy with theatrical role-playing tacitly assumed in such approaches[19] is more problematic than it might seem at first sight. Although actions conform to "conventions" both "inside and outside the theatre" (Burns 1972, 3), the usefulness of the equation remains rather limited as far as the transfer of theoretical concepts from drama to social life is concerned: As Bruce Wilshire explains

[17] As Pistonik has pointed out, theatre presupposes "an agreement of exchange" between producer(s) and recipient(s) (1985, 681), i.e. the theatrical process can be taken to visualise the basic author-audience 'contract' constituting all genres.

[18] See also Jervis 1998, 27, 33 (who even directly refers to melodrama); Shaw / Costanzo 1970, 326; Styker / Statham 1985, 331. The most well-known theory based on such a view of social interaction is probably Goffman's (1959). A general overview of the different trends subsumed under 'role theory' is provided by Burns (1972, 125-129) and Styker / Statham (1985, 332-340).

[19] See e.g. Stryker / Statham 1985, 330; Shaw / Costanzo 1970, 326. The analogy comes to the foreground in the concept of "role performance", especially in the subcategory of "role playing" (Horrocks / Jackson 1972, 94, 115-116).

in detail, one thereby collapses different levels of awareness, as the theatre audience not simply observes a role, but is usually conscious of a character being played by an actor, and the actor's perception of his/her own work is structured in the same way (1982, 275). Everyone in the theatre moreover has an acute sense that the theatrical role – in contrast to a social one – is "causally inefficacious in [its] thematic import *vis-à-vis* the immediately surrounding offstage world" (*ibid*., 280). With regard to the theatrical reception process under consideration here, on the other hand, the role analogy makes more sense: The "artificial construction of roles" in drama can both "sharpen the individual's consciousness" of the roles s/he plays in 'real' life (Goodlad 1971, 39; see also Wilshire 1982, 104) and "provide[…] usable paradigms for conduct", because the "causes and consequences of action" can be shown much more clearly here than in social life (Burns 1972, 34). The identification with a dramatic character can thus lead to the adoption of a certain role model. Although analysts have tended to focus on such rational, didactic effects, it can be assumed that especially in genres aiming at audience entertainment, spectators far more readily avail themselves of imaginative chances to 'try out' roles that they can never (or never even want to) adopt in reality. As Judith Butler has pointed out, it is exactly the fundamental difference between 'theatre' and 'life' (which has proved so problematic in sociological role theory) that facilitates such a response, providing a 'safe' space for pleasurable play with representations that would appear threateningly subversive outside the theatre (1988, 527). In this way, the women embodied by the actress on stage can go beyond 'reinforcing' established gender concepts and undermine the standards internalised by the individual spectator at least for the duration of the performance.

It is significant that – as the reference to Butler shows – such enabling implications of the relationship between theatrical and social roles have been noticed specifically by more recent gender theory. If one adopts this approach, the interaction between the two kinds of roles can indeed be considered to take place especially naturally in the sphere of gender. While Teresa de Lauretis still grants gender a factual foundation, seeing 'femininity' as a social construction based on 'female' sex and representing the individual's position with regard to society's 'sex-gender system' (1987, 3-5), other feminist theorists have given far more scope to the realm of representation. Still transcending Luce Irigaray's concept of the 'masquerade of femininity' into which every female human being has to enter in order to become a 'normal woman' (1977, 132), Judith Butler conceives of all "[g]ender reality" as "performative", i.e. "it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (1988, 527). It is obvious that this view gives the same ontological status of 'representations' to both theatrical portraits and social gender roles and thus makes imaginary crossovers between them especially easy when they come together in the spectator's mind. It has to be stressed that before assuming the occurrence of such uninhibited gender (inter-)play with regard to nineteenth-century British melodrama, one has to clarify in how far the dominant gender ideology of that time fostered or impeded the understanding of femininity as a construction – an issue that will be addressed in the following chapter. For the present context, it is sufficient to note that the spectators' notions of both gender and genre will have shaped their response to the melodrama characters and will in their turn have been affected by the theatrical images. Preconceptions and perceptions of gender will moreover have affected those of genre and vice versa, so that the overall process will have resembled

Mary Gerhart's "hermeneutical spiral, in which successive readings of the text, under the influence of genre choices and gender questions, lead to successively more refined understandings" (1992, 43). In the intensity of direct reciprocal influences made possible by the theatrical performance, however, the audience's 'negotiations' with and between gender and genre will hardly have taken the well-structured form suggested by Gerhart's diagram of the 'spiral', but will have allowed for spontaneous shifts, overlaps and the coexistence of contrary reactions. Much more than the stability of an "irreducible interpretation" that stands at the end of the reception process in Gerhart's model (*ibid*.), spectators of the popular form of melodrama can indeed be expected to have relished the entertainment that imaginary experiences provided in their own right. Such benefits should moreover have been obtainable already in one performance, rather than through the successive readings traced by Gerhart, since the theatrical 'reception loop' would otherwise have favoured different forms of gender-genre interaction that could capture the spectators' imagination more easily.

Apart from combining gender and genre issues, the notion of reciprocal influences between the audience and the text also proves helpful with regard to the general quandary of reception studies, namely which audience one is to examine: a specific, empirically observable one or that of the 'implied reader/spectator'[20] projected by the text? With drama, this dilemma is still complicated by the decision on whether one wants to focus on the written dramatic text as a basis for both private study and the performers' readings prior to the staging or on the 'performance text' created by an individual production or performance (see e.g. Chaudhuri 1984, 286-287; Pistonik 1985, 677-679). With plays from a different historical era, a further distinction has, of course, to be made between reception processes occurring at the time of the first publication/production and in later periods, including the analyst's own age. As Una Chaudhuri has charted graphically, this considerably multiplies the options available for the audience response criticism of drama (1984, 283). These problems explain why this literary form has so far played a rather marginal role in reader-oriented analyses. Since the conditions of a theatrical production (and even more of one particular performance) are very hard to reconstruct retrospectively, most of the existing research in this field has concentrated on the text, arguing that "the theatrical art form allows the dramatist to exercise" a high degree of control "over the audience", especially because "the playscript controls many of the audience's basic responses by determining the sequence in which the audience perceives stage events" (Howard 1980, 188; see also Chaudhuri 1984, 286). As Vesna Pistonik has outlined, this text-centred view is criticised by theatre semioticians, who maintain that "a dramatic text is 'incomplete' unless it reaches the stage" (1985, 678), i.e. if the playscript is used as a basis at all, one always has to treat it from the point of view of its theatrical realisation and recognise the fluidity that this gives to the 'text'. A second key objection that especially 1990s authors have raised against the orientation of audience response criticism towards the written text consists in the neglect of "the larger context – social, cultural, political,

[20] This concept was developed by Wolfgang Iser with regard to narrative works (1972, 7, 10 *et passim*). It is applied to drama in Manfred Pfister's model of dramatic communication (1988, 21-22).

material, ideological – in which a given theatrical work unfolds" (Roach 1993, 42; see also Pistonik 1985, 680). Based on Tony Bennett's concept of the 'reading formations' that "regulate the encounters between texts and readers" (1983, 218), such theatre criticism has concentrated on specific sections of the play's contemporary audience and analysed how these spectators will have responded to it against the background of socio-economic conditions, political outlook and personal experience. This method has produced some interesting research in the realm of nineteenth-century British melodrama (see especially Mayer 1987 and Storey 1992), but – for reasons of sheer feasibility – it can only deal with a very limited range of primary texts and performance locations. In addition, there is always the latent danger of constructing a one-to-one relationship between the audience's conditions and the plays, which leaves out all potential influences from within the theatrical system. Thereby, such an approach can come close to reproducing the simplistic view of drama as a reflection of the social situation that was already criticised above with regard to Daniel James Duffy's doctoral dissertation.

The best approach thus seems to be one that lies between script- and performance-orientation and at the same time gives equal weight to the theatrical and the social point of view.[21] On the basis of the 'reception loop' concept, the dramatic text can thus – according to the model that Norman Holland and Leona Sherman have developed with regard to Gothic fiction (1986, 225, see also 226-227) – be seen as "creat[ing] certain possibilities" of response. The members of the audience take up these offers according to their own experience, situation and wishes (Gledhill 1988, 73; Brunsdon 1981, 32) and reflect their interaction with the play back to the performers, theatre managers and playwrights. It is clear that the need to use nineteenth-century gender rules and genre conventions as a scale for evaluating melodrama's female roles makes it imperative in the present work to study these processes with regard to the audiences for whom the plays were written, excluding any later recipients of the same texts. In that period, the public encountered a popular genre like melodrama more or less exclusively in the form of theatrical performances rather than through private reading.[22] The analysis thus has to see the plays "as theater pieces, not simply as literary texts" (Howard 1980, 186) and also constantly has to take account of the theatrical context and its potential effects on the realisation of a given drama on stage. This context will be introduced here together with the genre system against which melodrama defined itself as a dramatic form and which was itself profoundly influenced by the material conditions governing the process of theatrical communication in the period (see 3.). At the same time, the spectators' realisation of the dramatic 'possibilities' will have depended on the extra-theatrical

[21] There is a certain parallel here with 'third-generation' studies of media audiences, which – according to Pertti Alasuutari – tend to adopt a "constructionist" rather than an 'ethnographic' perspective on the spectators (1999, 6).

[22] Those melodrama playscripts that were printed in the nineteenth century appeared in 'acting editions', i.e. as texts inviting the readings of subsequent directors and performers rather than of the general public. See e.g. the playtexts published in T.H. Lacy's Acting Edition (1848-1873), a selection of which has now been digitalised by the Victorian Plays Project (http://victorian.worc.ac.uk/modx/).

conditions highlighted by 1990s audience response criticism on drama. Giving adequate weight to these circumstances thus helps one to avoid tacitly substituting one's own response for that of the nineteenth-century spectators. While starting from the text as performed on stage, the analysis therefore always has to ask which spectators will have been especially likely to take up specific 'possibilities' – which could after all only establish themselves in melodrama because significant sections of the theatre audience enjoyed doing exactly that and thereby 'ratified' the dramatic offers. In addressing these issues, it will be of central importance to consider which kinds of plays appeared at which theatres and were therefore considered likely to succeed with (and/or actually succeeded with) the social class(es) frequenting the particular establishment.

Apart from the class question, research on gender representations obviously has to differentiate between elements targeted at male and female audience members respectively and also has to examine how the same 'possibilities' may have been realised differently according to the spectator's sex. As Jacky Bratton has noted (1996a, 63), the pioneering research on gender-specific effects of women (and men) performing publicly has been carried out in film criticism, most prominently by Laura Mulvey (e.g. 1975, 1981) and Mary Ann Doane (e.g. 1982; see also the essays by a number of other analysts collected in Pribram 1988). The present work will draw on these results, but it will always have to be stressed that film and drama can only be compared up to a point and that both men and women had internalised different gender models in the nineteenth century. These reservations are all the more important because – due to the view of melodrama as a 'women's genre' – much of the work on gender-based responses to film has been undertaken with respect to this genre. The available research on female responses to the theatre can at the same time be used as a reminder that – especially with respect to a time dominated by one established concept of femininity – one has to distinguish between more conservative and more critical women in the audience as well: As Jill Dolan's study (1988) shows representatively, theatre critics have tended to privilege the 'resistant' readings created by feminist spectators, while the popular genre of nineteenth-century melodrama had to offer 'negotiating' space for audience members with a range of attitudes to the dominant ideology in order to interact with its spectators as successfully as it did.

After a few remarks on the overall structure of the analysis and the dramatic texts used, the present study will now proceed to reconstruct the gender rules and genre conventions internalised by melodrama spectators in the period up to (roughly) 1860 – a year in which significant changes began to take place in both realms. 'Genre' will be treated with regard to the theatrical genre system as a whole, melodrama's role within it as a 'popular' form and the material conditions of production and performance (chapter 3.). Chapter 4. will then deal with the specific laws that established themselves at the turn towards the nineteenth century as constitutive of melodrama. Since the primary literature examined in the present work will be unfamiliar to many readers, this chapter will aim at giving some sense of how the plays worked and how they affected audiences when put on stage. It will also chart a repertoire of genre characteristics that can be used in the subsequent analysis to explain the functioning of the female representations in the theatrical process. The study of the actual texts is based on a sample of over five hundred melodramas from the whole of the nineteenth century. This corpus of primary material was selected to be as representative as possible of the genre according to a

number of criteria: Plays come from all decades and performance locations[23] and include theatrical hits as well as absolute failures and works that remained unperformed for either theatrical reasons or censorship problems. Acting editions by major theatrical publishers of the period stand side by side with privately printed texts and manuscripts submitted to the Lord Chamberlain for a performance licence. Against the background of critical literature's tendency to stress the author's sex in the analysis of gender representations, special care has also been taken to analyse texts by female playwrights together with those by the vast male majority of melodramatists. Through this combination of different selection criteria and the overall size of the sample, it will be possible to avoid the 'case studies' approach that limits the validity of the results reached in the existing works on the topic, including Duffy's dissertation. As he seems to realise about his own study, one cannot avoid feeling that so far critics who treated the primary material in any detail tended to pick out the "playtexts that display [the representations in which they are interested] best" (1998, 258) instead of providing an accurate picture of melodrama's female portraits.

On the basis of its representative dramatic corpus, the present work isolates four essential female 'roles', understanding the concept in a broad sense that allows for influences between the theatrical representations and the social 'roles' internalised by the audience. These melodrama roles invited the spectator's identification in diverse ways and had very different relationships with the dominant femininity stereotype of the time. Chapters 5. to 8. will analyse them with regard to the pre-1860 period, when notions of gender and genre were still more or less ruled by the same conventions as at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This process will not only involve reconsidering critical literature's clichéd opinions on melodrama, but will also provide an opportunity to reflect upon the limitations of established theoretical concepts (like the 'popular' or the functioning of gender-genre interaction and affinities) and upon the actual control that the dominant gender ideology had over nineteenth-century society. Other dramatic genres will continuously be present as a comparative background in evaluating the melodrama representations. As will become clear in the survey of the theatrical genre system in the following chapter, tragedy – as the other 'serious' dramatic genre of the time – is of special importance here, but comparisons with the use of related motifs in comic genres will also regularly play a role. This is particularly true of the parodies presented by the genre of 'burlesque',[24] which demonstrate which

[23] The venue and the date of the first performance will be indicated in brackets at the first mention of a play and in the bibliography. For printed works, such data are taken from the edition used. To avoid errors, they are checked against the information provided by Nicoll (1960 and 1962) and – for drama after 1837 – by Mullin (1987). These hand-lists become the exclusive source in the case of unpublished works. For the sake of consistency, theatres will be referred to by their most well-known name, even if they had briefly adopted a different designation when the play in question came out.

[24] Such parodies were named 'burlesques' or 'extravaganzas', and some of them even appeared in the shape of 'pantomimes'. While in other contexts it can be useful, though difficult – especially in the case of burlesque and extravaganza (see Booth 1976a, 26) –, to distinguish between these three forms as separate genres, for the purposes of the present work it suffices to subsume them

specific traits of individual plots and the genre of melodrama as a whole nineteenth-century theatre practitioners found especially characteristic.

After a summary of the interaction between the basic roles and an overall assessment of their relationship with the established femininity concept, with the genre system and with their audiences in chapter 9., chapter 10. will provide brief outlines of how the ideological and the theatrical context developed after 1860. Subsequently, this diachronic perspective will be transferred to the plays themselves, and chapter 11. will present the key changes that, from the 1860s onwards, occurred in the four main female roles, in their distribution and correlation in the plays and in the way they addressed the melodrama audience. It has to be noted that by choosing 1860 as a dividing line, the present work sets itself apart from the relatively few works that have so far assumed any development at all in nineteenth-century melodrama. They tend to favour 1850, presumably because it creates a 'natural' division between the first and the second half of the century, but generally fail to make clear which specific shifts warrant their choice.[25] This again demonstrates the need for research that combines the in-depth study of the primary material with an adequate treatment of the ideological and theatrical background. The concluding section of the present work will then sum up the overall development of the female melodrama roles up to the first decade of the twentieth century, paying particular attention to the specific kind of 'popular' subversion produced by the genre. This perspective invites a final comparative look at the 'melodramatic' potential of other 'popular' forms after 1900 and the implications that this orientation has for the portrayal of women.

under the term 'burlesque', which expresses their shared impulse to parody ('burlesque') a theatrical original.

[25] See the unexplained distinction between pre- and post-1850 plays in volumes one and two of Booth's *English Plays of the Nineteenth Century* (1969a and 1969b), in which melodrama plays a prominent role, and the demarcation of chapters in Kalikoff 1986. In his standard survey of melodrama, Booth even denies explicitly that any major changes took place in the genre "in the second half of the nineteenth century" (1965, 145).

2 The dominant femininity concept up to 1860

After 'womanhood' had first been recognised as a potentially problematic concept in the eighteenth century, the 'woman question' was very high on the agenda throughout the nineteenth century. Two main catch-phrases have come to sum up the established thinking of this period from a twentieth-century point of view: Coventry Patmore's concept of 'the angel in the house', most comprehensively represented in his poetry volume of that title (1854/1856) and 'separate spheres', the theory put forward in John Ruskin's classic lecture "Of Queens' Gardens" of 1864. As becomes clear from the flood of conduct books, tracts and magazine articles which ceaselessly offered ever-new versions of basically the same image of femininity, the familiar 'Victorian woman' associated with these texts is not simply a twentieth-century construction: Even before Victoria's ascension to the throne, the social and philosophical discussion had drawn attention to the most salient traits of the stereotype we recognise today. Conversely, when reformers from many different backgrounds tried to alter woman's role in society especially from the 1860s onwards, they were surprisingly unanimous in the kind of 'femininity' they attacked – if not always in the changes they wanted to see introduced. Thus, although the two most famous descriptions of femininity were formulated fairly late and potentially with the aim of fending off new developments, it is possible to talk of a 'dominant' image of womanhood that established itself at the end of the eighteenth century and continued to rule social opinion at least until the 1860s.

It is important to note that the predominance of this concept is asserted here exclusively for the realm of social mythology. As has been variously noted in critical literature, the lives of actual nineteenth-century women may have differed considerably from the ideal.[1] Such real-life 'divergences', however, did not affect the sales value of the conventional image, which could apparently rely on a readership conscious of its central importance. As Mary Poovey concludes: "Because gender roles are part of familial, political, social, and economic relationships, the terms in which femininity is publicly formulated dictates [*sic*], in large measure, the way femaleness is subjectively experienced." (1984, x) Women may have fashioned their own self-representations in accordance with the preferred image, irrespective of their personal views, and even individuals transgressing against the standard will have been aware of it. Indeed, the dominant concept itself was inherently prescriptive rather than descriptive in nature,[2] positing the traits a woman 'should' have instead of starting with the roles women actually played in nineteenth-century society. This characteristic approach was acknowledged openly when the *Westminster Review* talked about "woman, properly so called" ('Is. Is.' 1849, 354), and it becomes especially obvious by comparison with dissenting texts like Mary Wollstonecraft's, which generally went from the deficiencies

[1] See e.g. the research of Purvis 1989; Hall 1990; Davidoff / Hall 1987 and Lown 1990.

[2] As for instance noticed by Poovey (1984, 15), Vickery (1993, 383-384) and Zedner (1991, 2, 12).

observed in actual female behaviour to the level of the beliefs considered to cause them (see e.g. 1995 [1792], 39-40, 69-70, 205). On the whole, the established femininity stereotype thus had a deliberately 'constructed' side. Against the background of the previous chapter, it is obvious that this facilitated the interaction between social and theatrical gender roles when they came together in the melodrama spectator's mind. Just as the portraits of women created in the theatre, the dominant social concept operated fundamentally on the level of the collective subconscious, although obviously aiming at prescribing 'real' behaviour in the final result. As already pointed out in chapter 1. with regard to social roles in general, this 'reality aspect' clearly distinguished the femininity stereotype from the theatrical roles. At the same time, however, the difference will have made spectators relish the 'safe' framework provided by the theatre's distance from 'reality'. Especially female audience members could find emotional relief here from the psychological pressure built up by the prescriptive thrust of standard 'femininity'.

On the conceptual level itself, the 'abstract' construction of 'woman' in the established nineteenth-century view had a number of far-reaching implications. In the first place, it meant that the notion had to be (at least implicitly) defined 'against' an opposite that could serve as a point of reference.[3] At first sight, this was clearly the masculine 'norm'; 'woman' was understood as the "Other" – to bring in Jacques Lacan's term (1977 [1966], 263-264) – which man desired and needed in order to delimit his own identity. 'Women' thereby became the "relative creatures" of Sarah Stickney Ellis's conduct book classic *The Women of England*: "Women, considered in their distinct and abstract nature, as isolated beings, must lose more than half their worth", being able to attain full value only in their relationship with men (n.d. [1839], 149-150). Many of the characteristics ascribed to 'woman' in the dominant concept were therefore the exact opposite of traits considered particularly masculine. Moreover, she was fashioned in such a way that she had the "faculty of instrumentality" (*ibid.*, 150), i.e. the ability to serve man as he wished: "It is not to shine, but to please, that a woman should desire." (Sandford 1853, 7)[4]

This binary opposition, however, was not the only one influencing the definition of 'woman'. She was not only man's 'Other' but had her own 'Other' as well, namely all those characteristics that were not necessarily seen as 'masculine' but were specifically considered undesirable in the dominant concept of 'woman'. As *The Athenaeum* concluded: "*Woman* is a term of high honour" (ESS. 1847, 1128, emphasis in the text). Despite the enormous number of studies devoted to gender in nineteenth-century Britain, critical literature has remained surprisingly silent on the two different oppositions at the basis of the dominant femininity concept, their possible interactions and the contradictions they give rise to. Cora Kaplan is exceptionally perceptive in noticing the distinction between 'women' and females excluded from the gender concept by bourgeois society (1985, 166-167), but she unfortunately does not link this opposition with the 'male'-'female' one. Building on Kaplan, Anita Levy goes to the

[3] For the notion of constructing identity from difference see Woodward 1997, 29 and Williamson 1986, 21.

[4] See June Purvis's conclusion that "[f]emininity was defined in relation to masculinity and above all else, this meant serving men" (1981a, 228). Cf. also Poovey 1984, x.

opposite extreme by viewing woman's 'Other' (in her terms, the African female and the prostitute) in explicitly masculine terms and thus equating the two oppositions despite their different status (1991, 69). Although she does not consider the basic binary oppositions explicitly, Amanda Vickery's approach is less simplistic. Focusing on one particular point, the potential for female activity, she concludes that the exclusion of this trait from the dominant concept of femininity may have been a sign of concern that 'real-life' women were becoming increasingly 'transgressive' in this respect (1993, 400). While it might be difficult to argue along those lines for the whole of the stereotype, Vickery is certainly right in stressing that the prescriptive approach hid deep-lying fears. Adapting Michel Foucault's argument on sexuality, one can understand the proliferation of discourses on the woman question as indicating society's desire to regulate it and to contain the widespread anxiety about women in this way (1990 [1976], 18, 25). In contrast to the distinction between 'woman' and 'man', where – although 'man' was the primary point of reference – both concepts were equally valid, the juxtaposition of 'woman' and 'anti-woman' could thus not be made explicit. Representations of femininity constantly had to try and make invisible what kept the dominant concept in place, namely that it might be possible – in terms of de Lauretis' "sex-gender system" (1987, 9) – for a female human being to adopt 'non-feminine' characteristics. The result is – as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have described in the abstract – "a psychological dependence upon precisely those Others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level" (1993 [1986], 5).[5] In a perfect illustration of Foucault's concept of the 'limit' (1977, 34-35), the excluded characteristics could be glimpsed only when a transgression against the rules of femininity occurred. This means that the 'anti-image' of womanhood will mostly not have taken concrete forms such as those envisaged by Levy, but will have remained rather diffuse, hardly imaginable because of the element of fear involved in it. This will of course also have led to a certain degree of fascination with the forbidden and (literally) 'unrepresentable', which could be exploited in representations that gave a shape to this nightmare figure.

In addition, the anxiety about woman's 'Other' occasioned a special representational strategy that can be found in virtually all texts propagating the dominant femininity concept. They tried to show that the characteristics ascribed to woman and the roles prescribed for her were hers by "law of nature" (anon. 1840a, I, 4)[6] or by the unfailing decree of Providence (Gisborne 1996 [1797], 230; More 1974 [1799], II, 21, 23; Ellis n.d. [1843], 18). The constructed 'feminine' traits were thus 'naturalised' along the lines of 'myth': In Roland Barthes' terms, femaleness became the signifier of femininity in a second-order semiological system, and the "equivalence" between the two sides of the equation was presented as "a kind of causal process" (1993 [1957], 142) that could be used as an 'irrefutable' argument when 'describing' the female character. At the same

[5] The interdependence of the 'normal' and the 'abnormal' was, of course, already pointed out by Durkheim (1908 [1895], 66).

[6] For an almost random overview of other instances see e.g. Y.Z. 1802, 241; 'Omega' 1824, 389; Sandford 1833, 14; Ellis n.d. [1839], 149; anon. 1844, 3; [Patmore] 1851, 530; [Craik] 1860 [1858], 5.

time, the equation functioned as 'ideology' according to Louis Althusser's model: A female individual should have internalised the dominant concept of womanhood as an integral part of her own subjectivity and should therefore not be aware of its constructedness: "It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are 'obviousnesses') obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot *fail to recognize*" (1971 [1969], 161, his emphasis). However, whereas in both theoretical approaches the arbitrariness of the imposed concept is masked more or less completely by a 'natural' appearance, the prescriptive aspect of the nineteenth-century femininity stereotype was retained at the same time, which is obvious from the great number of overtly didactic texts on the subject. The naturalisation strategy was primarily used to assuage anxieties about the female 'Other'.

The combination of contrary tendencies gave rise to logical contradictions inherent in the concept, which have so far not been analysed in critical literature with any degree of comprehensiveness.[7] Most importantly, 'feminine' behaviour was both biologically conditioned and had to be cultivated constantly;[8] a woman was born to fulfil her 'natural' role and at the same time could only do so to her full potential when she was assisted by society and especially by the men in her social environment – another proof of her 'relative' nature. Coventry Patmore's famous poem for instance 'demonstrated' how the newly-wed wife becomes truly feminine through her husband: "his praiseful words / The virtues they impute confer. Her heart is thrice as rich in bliss, She's three times gentler than before; / [...] Now she through him is so much more" (n.d. [1854/1856], 106). In a similar way, 'daughter' and 'mother' were considered social roles that allowed the complete development of femininity in caring for the father or for (male) offspring.[9] This means that the figure of the 'spinster', which was viewed with increasing concern during the Victorian era,[10] not simply gave rise to the practical problem of how she was to earn a living without compromising her femininity. Far more fundamentally, the absence of a concrete male point of reference that would accord one of the established feminine roles to her prevented the older unmarried woman from being completely feminine. Indeed, she may even have been considered to be lapsing from the femininity she had cultivated as a daughter: The prescriptive side of

[7] Poovey is unique in treating both the prescriptive character of the concept and its naturalisation on a theoretical level (1984, x, 14). Implicitly, however, she seems to consider the masking of prescription to be all-encompassing and thus does not go into the contradictions. Other works have focused on specific contradictions, which will be dealt with below, but have not examined the reasons for them in the abstract femininity concept itself. See e.g. Hartnell (1996, 472) on such logical breaks in Patmore's *Angel*.

[8] Poovey (1984, 15) notices this paradox but does not examine the deeper reasons for it.

[9] See Gorham (1982, 5-6) on the importance of 'daughters' for the feminine ideal. Woman is defined through her effect on her sons for instance by [Phillimore] 1843, 397; 'Is. Is.' 1849, 356, 366 and [Patmore] 1851, 530-531. The fulfilment of all three basic roles was routinely charted in conduct books. Cf. e.g. the titles of Gregory 1996 [1774]; Ellis n.d. [1842]; Ellis n.d. [1843] and Taylor 1818.

[10] See [Craik] 1860 [1858], 19; [Kaye] 1859, 558 and the debate on the 'redundant' woman, which reached its high point shortly after the period under consideration here ([Greg] 1862; [Greenwell] 1862; Cobbe 1862).

the feminine ideal meant that womanhood could not only be perfected but also ‘lost’. At the same time, the naturalisation of this concept left the female who stood outside the bounds of conventional femininity without any status at all, unable to define herself and ‘unrecognisable’ for society.[11] Such an ‘unnatural’ person of the female sex came dangerously close to embodying the ‘Other’ excluded from the ideal of womanhood and could therefore only be viewed with alarm. This explains why women who could not live one of the established feminine roles were regarded as social problems even if they did not fall short of the dominant concept in any material particular.

In order to gauge the respective importance of the various traits demanded by this concept and to examine their interrelations, the present analysis will deal with them individually, always setting the characteristics included in the two most famous constructions of ‘femininity’ (the angel in the house and separate spheres) in the context of the wider discussion. Before we can turn to the details, however, the femininity stereotype as a whole still has to be categorised in terms of social class. It is obvious from the standard texts propagating the ideal that it was in the first place associated with the upper strata of society, with “women placed in the higher or in the middle classes of society”, as Gisborne’s classic defines its target group (1996 [1797], 1-2). At the same time, however, these groups were not considered to be isolated from society as a whole. As Mrs. Taylor observed, their conduct was highly important to the other classes through its influence on the general morality of British society (1818, iv), and it could also serve as a model, especially with regard to the lower ranks (see Ellis n.d. [1843], 57). In Edward Lytton Bulwer’s words, “*social* habits descend from the upper to the lowest class” (1971 [1833], I, 181, his emphasis), and while he in the first place related this observation to the aristocracy, it was the nineteenth-century middle classes who actively promoted such a process. Many philanthropic activities had a didactic side, and – as Jane Purvis has analysed with regard to educational classes for working-class women (1981a, 230-231) – this implicitly included imparting middle-class ideological tenets. Through its inherently prescriptive character the dominant gender concept was an obvious candidate here.[12] The texts indeed increasingly presented it as the norm for the lower classes as well as for the intended readers, with Ellis for instance reminding her addressees that the male-female relations prescribed in her text applied to all couples, “rich or poor”, and also remained valid in cases where social status was lost (n.d. [1843], 78; see also [Patmore] 1851, 522, 524). William Cobbett’s *Cottage Economy* even explicitly introduced the domestic angel into the ideal working-class household he propagated (1821, 63). These expansive tendencies seem to have met with a comparable endeavour on the part of the working-classes to integrate the dominant femininity concept into their own identity constructions. As Catherine Hall has examined in detail (1990, 92, 94), such effects for instance played an important role within the culture of working-class radicalism. It is obvious that the division between the ‘real-life’ activities of working-class women, who often had to contribute their share

[11] Poovey (1984, 23) makes the same point in a more restricted context; however, again without going into the ideological reasons for the attitude described.

[12] These activities are overlooked in Cora Kaplan’s understanding of the femininity stereotype as deliberately restricted to the “ruling class” (1985, 167).

to their husbands' wages, and the ideological ideal will have been much sharper than in middle-class circles (see Zedner 1991, 17). As has been noticed in critical literature (C. Hall 1981, 165; Digby 1992, 205-206), however, the growing validity of the dominant femininity concept for the working-classes was supported by its value as an aim to which one could aspire in terms of social respectability. It became the ambition of working-class men to earn enough to allow the female members of the household to lead the life of the 'ideal' woman, while the imposition of this role could at the same time help to assuage male fears of both female competition in the workplace and female predominance in the family (see Purvis 1981b, 101; B. Taylor 1993 [1983], 111). Consequently, defining themselves according to the desired image will have been an important issue for the women in question, quite apart from their actual occupation and their own preferences. The deliberately constructed side of the established concept supported this process. In analysing theatrical representations of women addressed to working-class audiences, it will thus be interesting to examine in how far the sharper division between the prescriptive ideal and 'reality' affected these images and perhaps caused them to differ from those targeted at middle-class spectators.

In addition to the working classes, the opposite end of the social scale also deserves separate notice. In the course of the century, classic conduct books increasingly tried to distinguish the concept of 'womanhood' they presented from the upper-class 'lady' (see e.g. Ellis n.d. [1839], 2; 'Is. Is.' 1849, 357), whereas their early-nineteenth-century colleagues had approached the topic far more comprehensively. This development shows the special importance of the femininity stereotype in the formation of middle-class identities (see C. Hall 1981, 165). It is possible to argue, however, that the distinction was predominantly a prescriptive one. In order to consolidate a middle-class group identity, the texts over-emphasised a difference that in the actual role models proposed related mainly to outward accomplishments. The later, deliberately middle-class authors stressed details of household management that will have been more interesting to their target group than to an upper-class 'lady', but the central traits ascribed to femininity did not differ from the tracts with a less class-specific approach. Conversely, while life in aristocratic circles will have been less restrained in practice than the existence of the typical bourgeois woman, the basic values of middle-class femininity ensured the smooth functioning of family relations here as well.[13] After all, Queen Victoria herself took care to present herself in the standard roles of wife and mother for public appearances and in her letters and journals,[14] irrespective of the fact that the actual duties of her position took her beyond this conventional image. The influence of the stereotype in the upper class was moreover deepened by inter-class marriages, which not only brought middle-class wealth to the landed aristocracy but also women educated in the ideology of the middle classes (Poovey 1984, 11). In the

[13] See also the reference to "highly-accomplished ladies" as an example of ideal femininity in [Cornwallis] 1857, 55.

[14] Christopher Hibbert tellingly names a chapter of excerpts from these sources "Family Life, 1841-1861" (Victoria 1985 [1984], 92; see e.g. also 64-65, 93-95). See also Homans (1995) on visual representations of the Queen, some of which she commissioned herself. This text explicitly calls Victoria "first and foremost [...] a middle-class wife" (170).

final result, the femininity stereotype as a prescriptive ideal thus had a wider social applicability than real-life differences in the lives of individual women would lead one to expect, thereby validating Gisborne's factually untenable claim about "the general similarity in the situation of women [...] placed in separate classes of society" on an ideological level (1996 [1797], 4; see also Poovey 1984, 14).

When now turning to the individual traits ascribed to womanhood in the dominant concept, one first of all notices that most texts endowed women with a basic set of abilities that were expressly defined against those associated with men. The two genders were thus constructed to fit each other as perfectly as possible – a strategy that found its most polished expression in Ruskin's famous theory: "Each has what the other has not: each completes the other, and is completed by the other: they are in nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give." (1905 [1864], 121) As a result, they could "effect a greater amount of good by their joint efforts, than either could effect alone" (Ellis n.d. [1843], 71; see also Y.Z. 1802, 240; 'Omega' 1824, 389). It is clear that an approach which explained woman's gender characteristics by comparison with her biological counterpart will have tended to naturalise these qualities more completely than the femininity stereotype generally did. Presented as immediately obvious instead of constructed and prescribed, feminine abilities were meant to come across as a consistent whole in which each point validated the next and which could only be questioned by doubting the wisdom of nature or Providence. By introducing such inherently 'natural' elements into predominantly prescriptive tenets, authors could then transfer this strong sanction also to clusters of characteristics which were implicitly defined against woman's 'Other' rather than against man.

In order to advertise 'naturalness', most definitions of feminine abilities started from an empirically observable fact: woman's relative "want of physical strength" compared with man ('Is. Is.' 1849, 375). Further traits could then 'logically' be associated with this basic difference, so that women were for instance proclaimed to be as "unlike [men] in their minds" as "in their bodies": "all the education in the world will never produce a woman as *strong* as the strongest man, either in mind *or* body" ('Omega' 1824, 389, emphasis in the text; see also Fordyce 1996 [1766], I, 271-272; anon. 1840a, I, 173, 211). Other texts tried to naturalise the intellectual difference by applying the 'empirical' approach directly to this realm: "If, then, nature had bestowed intellectual gifts in equal abundance on the two sexes, we might reasonably expect that the number of women of remarkable genius [...] would have been as considerable as that of men. But how stands the case?" (anon. 1841, 196) The question is obviously almost a rhetorical one, and the conviction that women 'observably' lacked intellectual faculties remained unchanged even when an author proposed to be more objective by taking into consideration that "the position of women in society has never yet been – perhaps never can be – such as to give fair play to their capabilities": "Nevertheless", George Henry Lewes concluded without further evidence, "we must confess our doubts whether women will ever rival men in *some* departments of intellectual exertion" (1850, 154, his emphasis). The basically prescriptive rather than descriptive approach of the dominant social opinion thus still shines through even in the strongly naturalised realm of feminine abilities. It occasionally came to the foreground to such a degree that "mental strength" was not simply denied to woman but was expressly forbidden as "unnatural"

as well (anon. 1835, I, 47, 74; Walker 1840, 43) – a distortion of logic intended to make doubly sure that the aberration of an intellectual woman could never occur. It is clear that in such cases fears about woman's 'Other' were intermingled with the definition of woman against man. Coventry Patmore was especially outspoken in this respect, stating that "in France, as in the East, the culture of the female intellect is, and long has been, consciously and avowedly, no more than one of the means of increasing sensual debasement" (1851, 517). He thus linked female intellectual prominence with Otherness not only in terms of immorality, but also by associating it with inherently 'foreign' regions.

Texts that kept the appearance of complete naturalisation intact, on the other hand, tended to focus on the exact ways in which feminine mental 'weakness' manifested itself, often connecting such characteristics explicitly with woman's lack of physical strength. Thus, she was said to have "feebler volition", a "feebler capacity of attention", "less power of combination and of generalization", less perseverance and less judgement than man and to "lack decision" compared with him (Walker 1840, ix; anon. 1841, 193; Sandford 1833, 134; , I, 50). These traits obviously had severely disabling implications as far as the potential for female action was concerned. Women were neither able to plan ahead, nor to take independent decisions, nor could they stick with any course of action for a longer period. This effect was compounded by another manifestation of woman's weaker physique, her 'natural' "timidity" and "greater excitability of nerve" (anon. 1841, 194; see also Fordyce 1996 [1766], II, 222; anon. 1844, 3), implicitly contrasted with the courage characteristic of man. As with the issue of intellectual eminence more generally, the female anti-image can be found lurking behind many of these representations, thus almost turning 'timidity' into a requirement providing against the eventuality of "an intrepid female [who] seems to renounce [man's] aid, and in some respect to invade [his] province" (Fordyce 1996 [1766], II, 224). Most of the authors who painted the picture of woman as consisting of nothing but absences, however, seem to have felt the need to introduce some qualities that were positively hers. After all, the whole idea of the two genders complementing each other presupposed that both sides were able to make some genuine contribution towards their common welfare. Thus, quite a few writers were nervous about explicitly labelling the list of absences intellectual 'inferiority', stressing "organic *difference*" instead ([Lewes] 1850, 154; see also 'Omega' 1824, 388) and re-formulating some of the points in positive terms. The most famous phrase is probably Ruskin's proposition that woman's "intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement" and "beautiful adornment" (1905 [1864], 122, 136). Other texts, too, emphasised that woman's inability to cope with large-scale planning was compensated for by her particular aptitude for the "perception of minute circumstances" (anon. 1841, 193; see also Sandford 1833, 136; anon. 1835, 49), while the lack of abstract thinking and generalisation was counterbalanced by the power of imagination, in which she outperformed man ('Omega' 1824, 394). Similarly, many authors posited a quality of "passive courage", which described the ability to endure in the most adverse circumstances. Women here equalled or surpassed men (anon. 1841, 193; Reid 1988 [1843], 50; Gisborne 1996 [1797], 25) and thus to some degree made up for their 'natural' timidity.

Writers who explicitly insisted on calling the capacities of the female mind ‘inferior’ also seem to have felt some need for compensation. They tended to construct a separate realm of faculties where woman could rule without any challenge from man: the “empire [...] of the affections” ([Lewis] 1840, 37; see also Fordyce 1996 [1766], I, 282; Ellis n.d. [1842], 11). Their superior “sensibility” (Walker 1840, vii) allowed female human beings not only to sympathise with other people particularly intensely (Gisborne 1996 [1797], 23) but also to penetrate into realms inaccessible to the intellect and make intuitive judgements about the human character and moral issues (More 1974 [1799], II, 26). It is this perspective on gender differences that most obviously shows man and woman ‘completing’ each other, with each excelling in his/her particular province. It is equally clear, however, that the high standards of feminine feelings could not change the disabling implications for activity contained in woman’s ‘characteristic’ intellectual make-up. This is especially true if one reminds oneself that indispensable presuppositions for successful action like some degree of abstract thinking, perseverance and fearlessness were latently linked with the ‘unnatural’ female ‘Other’ and thus forbidden to woman under the penalty of losing her social identity. Indeed, the concept of ‘separate spheres’ and the corresponding gender-specific abilities in most texts explicitly included the trait of ‘passivity’ for woman. In contrast to man’s “active, progressive, defensive” “power”, she was “not [fit] for battle” (Ruskin 1905 [1864], 121-122) but for a “quiescent” life (‘Oxoniensis’ 1865, 546; see also [Craik] 1860 [1858], 11). Some authors deemed woman capable of action in cases of utmost emergency, but even then the descriptions tried to preserve passivity to some extent: Women “brave dangers and death, [...] endure sufferings and privations, or [...] sacrifice their own interests and fortunes” (, I, 284) but are not shown to fight against opposing forces and vanquish them. This would after all have meant encroaching upon the masculine variety of courage. In the overall result, the set of feminine abilities propagated by the key didactic texts thus both reproduced and reinforced the premise of woman’s ‘relativeness’. Defined against man and designed to please him, she was also inherently unable to “be ‘without the man’”, needing him as the “freer agent[...]” to put any project into practice – phrases that were tellingly coined by a woman herself engaged in charitable work (taken from a correspondent’s letter quoted by Dora Greenwell 1862, 69).

Apart from ‘natural’ abilities, the most important cluster of feminine traits was ‘modesty’ – “the one charm of charms” “without [which] female nature would be a very poor piece of business indeed” (anon. 1835, II, 209). Not only was this quality expected to show in everything a woman said or did (Lambert 1995 [1790], 143; Sandford 1833, 209), but it was often considered the essence of what distinguished femininity from the female ‘Other’. Its loss thus “degrade[d] [the woman concerned] below even the most depraved of [the male] sex” (Thomson 1836, 418; see also Lambert 1995 [1790], 140; Y.Z. 1802, 242). Interestingly, this characteristic, which was most likely to deprive a woman of her social identity when developed insufficiently, was also the most diffuse trait ascribed to femininity. Most often, ‘modesty’ was implicitly equated with a retiring nature that did not strive to attract notice; women “should seek the shade, and not appear in the glare of public view” (*ibid*., 241; see also Lambert 1995 [1790], 141). In this understanding, the quality related both to a woman’s behaviour towards the men

around her, especially towards the male authority figures in her life, and to her relationship with the public sphere.

In the first respect, the rules laid down by the dominant femininity concept were explicit: Woman was the "weaker vessel" and should be "conscious of inferiority" (Sandford 1833, 14; see also [Craik] 1860 [1858], 18). A wife for instance always had to be aware of "the superiority of [her] husband, simply as a man" (Ellis n.d. [1843], 17). Independence became an inherently unfeminine quality (Sandford 1833, 14; anon. 1835, 37), and 'proper' male-female relations were visualised by the image of "the oak and the vine, – the tenderness of the one supported by the other's strength" (*ibid*., 283; see also Poovey 1984, 10). Texts focusing on this side of the 'modesty' requirement indeed sometimes likened woman to a child (Walker 1840, 137) and saw "weakness" in her as "an absolute attraction, and by no means a defect" (anon. 1835, 37). More frequently, the "appropriate expression of dependence" was seen in 'gentleness' (Sandford 1833, 15; see also anon. 1840a, I, 283; [Kaye] 1855, 561), with Coventry Patmore representing this manifestation of 'modesty' as the defining quality of feminine gender: "The woman's gentle mood o'erstept / Withers my love, that lightly scans / The rest, and does in her accept / All her own faults, but none of man's." (n.d. [1854/1856], 96) Closely connected with gentleness as an expression of modesty was submissiveness in relation to (male) authority figures. Patmore idealised "woman's excellent privilege of subordination" (1851, 515), and a number of other texts required her to obey and serve in her different social roles as an inherent part of her gender identity (see e.g. Gisborne 1996 [1797] 12, 229; anon. 1835, II, 277; anon. 1839b, 196). It is important to note that this characteristic generally stayed in place even in cases where authors theoretically defined gender relations on the basis of equality rather than superiority and inferiority. "The submission which is naturally and properly due from woman to man, is quite consistent with equal rights", claimed Marion Reid (1988 [1843], 51), while John Ruskin declared his theory of 'equal but different' roles for men and women to be compatible with "true wifely subjection" (1905 [1864], 121). Caroline Norton, whose personal experience of the injustice inherent in the divorce law of the time made her adopt a critical attitude to the established gender concept, is therefore certainly correct in her ironic summary of its fundamental tenet: "Women must submit, those who don't, are bad women" (1855, 105) – except that such offenders came dangerously close to losing their womanhood completely and turning into the 'Other' against which femininity itself was implicitly defined.

Modesty as expressing itself in woman's relationship with the public sphere is closely linked with the requirement of submissiveness. As she was to avoid all that might attract undue attention, the dominant gender concept constantly cautioned her to stay in the domestic realm, which was simultaneously regarded as particularly suitable for characteristic feminine traits (such as sensitivity and the concentration on minute detail). Many writers mixed the prescriptive and the naturalising perspective rather indiscriminately here, with Patmore's famous title phrase, for instance, positing woman's inherent connection with the domestic, while he emphasised in another text that in this respect, too, she needed (male) supervision to live up to her true nature and discharge her duties to perfection (1851, 537; see also Gisborne 1996 [1797], 2; Sandford 1833, 2; anon. 1840a, I, 214-215). Ruskin's theory of 'separate spheres', on the other hand, clearly accorded the primary position to woman's 'natural' affinity with