

Issue No.1

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THE WOMAN QUESTION

a feminist periodical



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Acrylic on canvas

Edited by Jessica O'Toole

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Contributors



Jessica O'Toole identifies as a 40-year-old white cis hetero woman. She is a chronically ill breast cancer survivor and non-traditional college student majoring in English literature at NC State University. She loves Ben and Jerry's chocolate fudge ice cream and dachshunds.

Courtney Wiborn is a 34-year-old first generation college graduate with a Bachelor's in Linguistics working towards her Masters in English Literature. She lives in the suburbs with her husband, two dogs, and a pet duck, and enjoys riding horses competitively and playing video games.

Rhoda Oladosu is a young African graduate student majoring in English Literature at NC State University. She loves telling stories through content creation and is passionate about advocating for the education of African women. She thinks best at night.

Elizabeth Swann is a writer and teacher pursuing her MFA in fiction at NC State. She's a North Carolina native interested in exploring the complexity of the south, family, and marriage through her writing. She loves coffee and lives with her husband and three other roommates (including a baby named Wade!) in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Diego Berrocal is a 24-year-old Hispanic writer currently attending NC State University and pursuing a M.A. in English with a concentration in literature—who lives in Holly Springs, NC, with his family and Yorkie, Mimi (she's very talkative, especially outside!).

Ashley Peltack is an almost-thirty-year-old white cisgender hetero female. She is a product of public schooling and returned to the same environment for a career. She recently left that concrete jungle for another and is pursuing a graduate degree in English literature.

Gabby LaPlante is a junior at NC State University, studying English Literature and Women and Gender Studies. She identifies as a white straight cis woman and enjoys reading, hanging with her cat Romeo, and going out for sushi!

Mada Brown (she/her) is a 36-year-old graduate student in the English MA at NC State University with a Literature concentration. She gets weirdly passionate about history, books, and lore, has five cats, and has worked in customer service way too long.

Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

On this day in the year 1759, Mary Wollstonecraft was born in London. As an activist and author, she argued that women were capable of reason and should be equal participants in society alongside men. Her treatise, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) called for radical reform of England's educational system and is one of the texts that fueled the women's rights movement. She died at the age of 38 from complications days after giving birth to Mary Shelley. Fast forward to today, April 27, 2024, and it's easy to feel discouraged in the aftermath of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* as women's rights are being revoked. Like many of you, I often feel frustrated and helpless. What can I do to make a real difference in the world?

During the Victorian period, women's roles were understood through an ideology of "separate spheres" where women's roles were confined to the domestic sphere of the home. Women's activism at this time was concerned with entering the public sphere and working for societal change. Women wanted opportunities to receive education, work, vote, and be full participants in society alongside men. "The Woman Question" referred to the debate about a woman's role and behavior in society. I chose this title for our periodical because "The Woman Question" is still relevant for women today. The New Woman was a term first used by Sarah Grand in an essay titled, "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" (1894), referencing the popularity of novels featuring a "modern" woman who moved outside of the domestic sphere and pushed the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

This periodical was conceived as a Victorian literature graduate class project at North Carolina State University. We wanted to understand how Victorian women used the periodical press to expand the woman's sphere. How did they practice resistance? How did they build community? How did they shape societal discourse and bring the New Woman into existence?

Victorian scholar Fionnuala Dillane calls the work of feminist scholarship to recover women activists and authors a "type of socio-cultural memory activism" which frames narratives about women as producers of culture. Through this periodical, we aim to perform this work alongside our effort to shape feminist discourse in 2024.

We also seek to embrace the Undisciplining Victorian Studies movement called for by Ronjaurnee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong in 2020. We have done this from the beginning of the project by practicing care with each other and with you, dear reader, in the pages of this magazine. We have prioritized building community, breaking from traditional modes of scholarship, and starting conversations in public, outside of our classroom. By engaging in reflexive practice that examines our positionality throughout this issue, we make an imperfect effort to decolonize academia.

Victorian periodicals were just as varied as magazines today. This issue is modeled after the *Women's Penny Paper*, a general feminist journal printed from 1888-1890. They included many different genres of writing that focused on shaping views of women's roles, advocating for women's rights, and valuing the important work of women. In this issue you will find genres from the Victorian period such as the interview, short story, Ask Us column, essays, profiles, and original artwork. The physical printing press influenced the form of the periodical, and we embraced this effect. This meant mixing many seemingly random genres and topics that fill every available space and (hopefully) come together to tell a story that makes sense—not unlike the TikTok or Instagram Feed of today! I hope the content here gets you talking to friends and family about issues that are important to you. Maybe, like the women of the Victorian period, we can make real change today by speaking it into existence?

Your voice matters,

Jessica O'Toole, Editor

Victoria's Egg Freezing Experience

Interview
By Courtney Wiborn

My first conversation about egg freezing with Victoria occurred roughly a year ago while on a trip to visit her in New York City. Her boyfriend (now fiancé) and my husband were deployed to a combat zone; the first for her, the fourth for myself. The time alone was perfect for her to start the egg freezing process, one she had first thought about at the age of 18, without having to worry about the chance of getting pregnant. She was hopeful at the time, yet we hadn't had much time to discuss the nuances of the procedure, nor any greater feelings she may have had at the time.

Now, as I sit on the plush sofa in the living room of the house owned by her fiancé, Josh, I'm reminded of the phone call we had shortly after Vic's egg retrieval, and the candid way in which she spoke about the unexpected difficulties she endured throughout the process. Today, she is even more candid, yet before I have a chance to ask her about her experience, Josh offers me a cup of coffee in a mug he brought back from his most recent deployment. Despite having bought the house before meeting Vic, the home very much feels as much hers as it is his. The shelves are crammed with Josh's books about foreign politics beside Vic's med school study guides while the digital picture frame that sits atop one of the lower lying shelves scrolls through photos that reflect their lives together.

Josh and Vic have been together since the summer of 2021, yet her desire to undergo egg freezing had persisted long before she met the man to whom she will be married come August. Growing up in New York, the daughter of a spinal surgeon and an EMT, Vic tells me that her parents never pressured her to marry or have children until she felt ready to do so and found the right person to start a family with. It wasn't until she attended Purdue university in Indiana that she felt the pressure, watching her university friends get married and start their families while still in college.

"I knew it was something that I wanted," she tells me, admitting that she put a lot of pressure on herself to have a child before the age of 35, when women are medically considered geriatric in terms of their fertility. "I was not in the mindset nor was I in the place to find a significant other like that."

She had first heard about women freezing their eggs before college, and by the age of 28, she found herself single during the pandemic, with no real hopes of finding a long term relationship.



At this point, she began contemplating her future as a single woman in her late twenties with no responsibilities outside herself.

"I didn't want to look back in 10, 15 years and say 'I had an opportunity to try to go to medical school' and not take that opportunity." Working as a dietician for the last five years, the choice to further her career coupled with the increasing visibility of prolonging fertility through egg freezing made Vic think more heavily about her own reproductive choices. "I wanted a backup plan between going to school and potentially not meeting anyone."

So, during the summer of 2022, she began planning for the procedure, knowing that between her post-bac classes and EMT training, she would have to wait until the following year to

undergo the extensive process of retrieving her eggs. Despite meeting her now fiancé shortly after solidifying her decision, she still felt insistent on having the peace of mind that she still had fertility choices, and the summer of 2023 proved to be the perfect time to do so. Despite moving to North Carolina only six months prior, Vic returned to her family in New York at the start of her fiancé's deployment, knowing that it was a safe state for women's reproductive rights, such as having legal access to abortions and birth control. And, she would have the support of her family while undergoing the egg retrieval process.

Vic was referred to a fertility clinic by her primary care physician, who told her that it was necessary to continue using her birth control in order to suppress her ovaries until it was time to start the process of stimulating the follicles to encourage egg growth. A month or two before she was to start the necessary injections, Vic took a blood test intended to represent her egg reserve and the projected success of undergoing the egg retrieval. The doctor was hopeful, stating that they expected her to grow anywhere between ten to twenty eggs.

The entire process took roughly two and a half weeks, from the time she quit her birth control to the time her eggs were then harvested, and consisted of two injections administered daily for the first week, either to the thighs or stomach, to encourage the ovaries to develop multiple follicles in a short period of time. Because both her parents worked in the medical field, they were able to help guide her through this process, one that Vic admits most people would have to navigate on their own due to the lack

of explanation from the doctor. Every other day, she underwent bloodwork, weight checks, and transvaginal ultrasounds to check her ovaries and the growth of her eggs. By the second week, Vic had added a third injection intended to stop the eggs from being released until they had grown to the proper size. At this point, the doctor's visits became daily. One of the most difficult things during this initial process, she tells me, was the weight gained from taking the hormone stimulants.

"I do not want to see the number on the scale," she tells me, admitting that the weigh-ins were most stressful due to a history of eating disorders and body dysmorphia. "Associating that number with a value, I told them I wanted to do blind weights, and they were respectful of that," she says, noting the importance of monitoring for excessive fluid retention, an indication of a more serious underlying health issue. To exacerbate this sensitive mental health issue, she wasn't allowed to engage in any serious physical activity at the risk of ovarian torsion due to their increased size. "Not being able to do weight training or spin class, feeling so uncomfortable in my body and the changes going on... it was a big change, mentally."

Despite knowing multiple people who have undergone in vitro fertilization (IVF), Vic also began experiencing back pain, a symptom that was never disclosed by either her physician or her friends. While the doctor claimed it was unusual, a coworker who had undergone IVF four separate times reassures her that it is a normal part of the process.

"Essentially, you're having growth pains." Yet when asked if she had spoken to friends about side effects, without hesitation she tells me that they all said the same thing. "Weight gain. But I didn't know about the back pain, the extreme bloating." And when asked if she had done her own research about the procedure, she admits that was so adamant about it that she didn't look into the side effects until she was already in the midst of the process. Furthermore, the outcome of her egg retrieval began looking more and more bleak with each ultrasound.

"Throughout the whole process as we were watching them grow, it looked like I had three growing on one side, and five growing on the other. I was told we would get somewhere between ten and twenty, and here, this entire time, I'm really only counting eight," Vic tells me with a tone of disappointment. "It's also a mental game," she says. "I was told I have a great egg reserve, that my likelihood of fertility was great, and that I'd have a lot of eggs going into this. So when I'm only seeing eight on the screen, I'm thinking, where are they?" The frustration is clear in her voice as she speaks, again referring to the mental game of expectation versus reality. "We're pushing through with this process," she says. "It's an expensive process." \$15,000, to be exact, and all out of pocket due to her lack of infertility. Thankfully, she tells me, being able to live with her parents while working during the pandemic enabled her to save the funds necessary for the procedure. Still, the stakes were high.

Just three short days after beginning the third injection, her eggs were ready for retrieval, and a fourth and final injection was to be administered that would signal the ovaries to finally release the eggs. "The trigger shot," she tells me with a hint of humor. Within two days, Vic was back in the doctor's office, ready for the final step in the egg retrieval process.

"I was nervous going into this," she says, mentioning that her worries stemmed from a recent news story of a nurse at a Yale fertility clinic who was found guilty of siphoning from the clinic's fentanyl supply. Once sedated, a needle, connected to a suction, was guided by an ultrasound wand and punctured through the vaginal wall and into each individual follicle, eight in total. "I was completely knocked out, which I was more than happy about." In the end, they were able to retrieve five eggs, four of which were mature enough to be frozen.

"What is the success rate for these four eggs?" I ask.

"Well, that's the frustrating part. I don't fully know, because you can't test an egg to see its quality." The physician gave Vic about a 25% chance that she could have a viable embryo, noting that they first had to survive the freezing, followed by the thawing, and fertilization process. "The chance of getting two children from the four eggs is less than 2%," she tells me, noting that the physician recommended another course of the egg retrieval process. A process Vic reminds me is all out of pocket. Between the physical side effects, the emotional toil, and the disappointment of retrieving only a fraction of her expected eggs, was it worth it?

"I think there is a part of me that still has that piece of mind, knowing that there is something there. I always saw it as an insurance policy," she reiterates. "Part of me wishes I had done it earlier. Maybe I would have had a better result? If I do have an issue getting pregnant and those four eggs turn into nothing, I will do it again," she states with certainty. "I've always wanted to be a mom, I've always seen that in my future. I definitely would do it again. Would I have maybe prepared myself differently? Yeah."

"How so?"

"Knowing what I know now, the mental health side of things, I think I would want to see a therapist the entire time."

Within our ongoing discussion of women's fertility and the current climate of women's reproductive health in the United States, I can't help but to ask what Vic's thoughts are on the recent ruling from the Alabama Supreme court declaring that IVF embryos are legally considered children.

"Don't even get me started on that. Have you seen the Tik-toks? They're absolutely fucking hilarious," she says before detailing the satirical video short of a woman putting a test tube in a swing with the caption "We are Alabama moms. Of course take our kids to the park."

Despite the hilarity of the video, and others like it that have emerged in light of the ruling, Vic emphasizes that the issue is serious.

"That ruling in that ultra conservative state is going to screw over families. If it [the embryo] can't survive on its own, it's not a kid."

“I've always wanted to be a mom, I've always seen that in my future. I definitely would do it again. Would I have maybe prepared myself differently? Yeah.”

Yet she also admits that the ruling should spark a broader conversation about the ways in which IVF storage labs ensure the safety and responsibility of their patient's eggs and embryos. Having gone through the painstaking process herself, Vic tells me that she pays a yearly storage fee of \$1000 to keep her eggs frozen.

"What if the power goes out? Now I lose my eggs," she says. With women's reproductive rights more fragile than ever, and the emotional and financial costs high, the ruling deals a blow for people seeking to expand their fertility choices. Yes, there should be consequences for labs that mishandle patient's eggs and embryos. However, the ruling raises more questions than answers for the future of IVF and unused embryos, one that Vic admits makes her more cautious about her own fertility journey.

Profile: Women Entrepreneurs of the 19th Century

ANGELA BURDETT-COUTTS



In 1822 at the age of 23 she became one of the wealthiest women in England due to an inheritance. Known as “Queen of the Poor,” she paid for social housing, invested in clean water for the poorest neighborhoods, co-founded with Charles Dickens a refuge to help “fallen” women turn their lives around, invested in education for children in poverty. She financed hospitals and the work of Florence Nightingale. The organization she founded, today known as National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, is still doing this work today.

MADAM C. J. WALKER



Born Sarah Breedlove on a plantation in Louisiana to formerly enslaved parents who were sharecroppers after the Civil War. After struggling with hair loss, she launched her own line of hair products for African American women “Madame Walker's Wonderful Hair Grower.” After her divorce in 1910, she built a factory and sold her products nationally through licensed sales agents, ultimately employing 40,000 African Americans. Her total worth was over \$1 million. She was an active philanthropist, supporting the YMCA, educational tuition for African American students at Tuskegee Institute, and involved in the NAACP anti-lynching movement.

Challenges of Black Women leaders in Corporate America; A cross-platform Representation

By: Rhoda Oladosu



Background

Throughout the Victorian era, women were subjected to severe restrictions both in class and at employment and they were never in control of their fate because they were women (Barret 5). The novel, *North and South* vividly depicted the reality of women in that era. The women were mostly at home, controlling household affairs while the men were fully involved with the industry. It was not until the rise of the New Woman,—a word coined by Sarah Grand—that women (black and white) began to situate themselves within the social, economic and literary space (“The New Woman”).

In 2024, “The New Woman” or is it the “The Aggressive Woman” or “The loud Woman”?—is still navigating challenges such as segregation, and gender inequality at the workplace. Specifically black women who are constrained by their race and skin color face even larger issues in corporate spaces. Black women have been leading the way in instigating change, disrupting barriers, and challenging conventional norms (“Trailblazers and Torchbearers”). However, Farmer as quoted by Ellis relates that, whenever she sees

“Black women around the world are using social media platforms to voice their challenges, hoping to build solidarity and understanding among fellow Black women.”

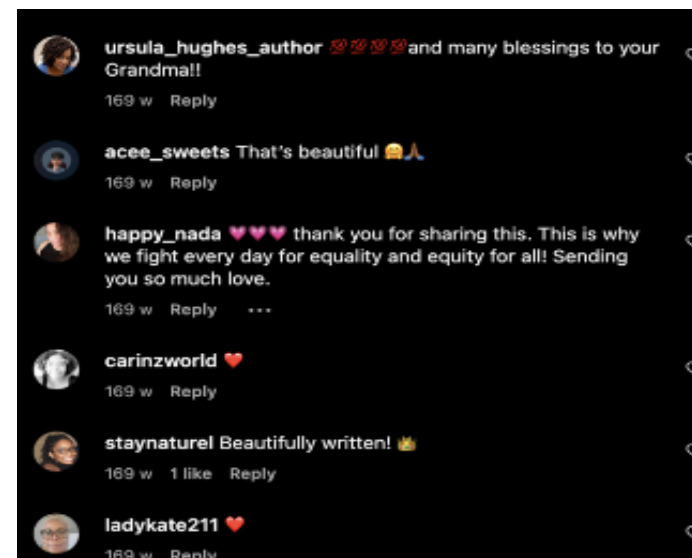
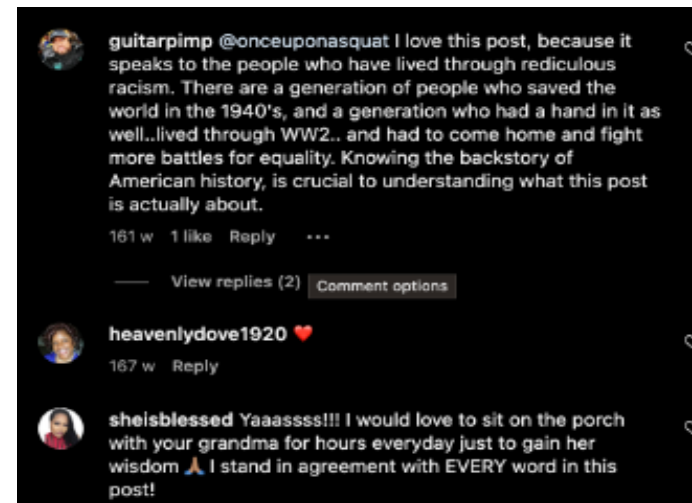
Black women who have broken barriers, there is always a story, she is either navigating or negotiating something. As of 2022, Corbett reported that “only 4.4% of Black women are in management positions and only 1.4% hold C-suite positions, despite being 7.4% of the U.S. population. It is not enough that they are women, they are also black and being a double minority (Dawuni & Frazier 1), navigating spheres in the society can be quite challenging. Black women around the world are using social media platforms to voice their challenges, hoping to build solidarity and understanding among fellow Black women. While each platform offers a unique perspective on social issues, this article focuses on the discussion centered on leadership challenges Black women experience in American corporate spaces as of 2024. Using data from the top 20 Instagram, X, and TikTok search results, the analysis offers insights into these ongoing discussions.

Method

This analysis will make use of the top 20 posts from the keywords searches including “Black Women in leadership”, #Blackwomeninleadership, “Black Women Leaders in Corporate America” and #blackwomenleadersincorporateamerica on Instagram, X, and TikTok to offer insights into how social media platforms are shaping conversations about Black women's leadership in America. It will explore how Black women use these platforms to demonstrate their agency. Additionally, posts with the

highest number of comments on each platform will be highlighted to capture a range of perspectives. While each platform will be examined individually, patterns will be identified to demonstrate how all three platforms influence discussions on Black women's leadership in American corporate spaces.

Instagram

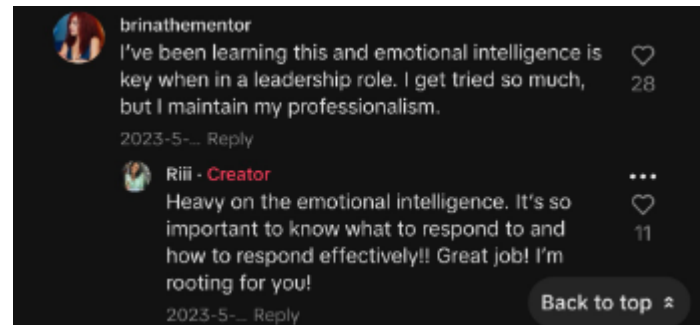
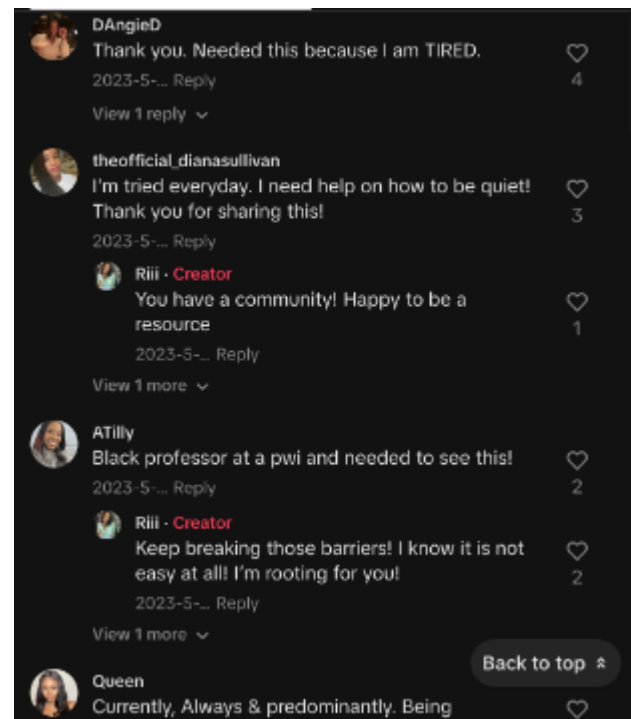


Out of the top 20 posts spanning from 2020 to 2024, there was no post under the hashtag #BlackWomenLeadersInCorporateAmerica. However, the hashtag #BlackWomenInLeadership had a more significant presence. Fifty percent of the posts aimed to celebrate Black women or highlight Black women leaders. Ten percent called for justice for Black women in leadership roles, while another ten percent encouraged women to support their fellow Black women leaders. Twenty percent of the posts focused on recognizing these women's achievements, while the remaining ten percent used the hashtag for unrelated content.

X



On X, there were a significant number of posts under the keyword searches "Black Women Leaders in Corporate America" and "Black Women Leaders." Many users talked about Black women in leadership roles without specifically addressing Black women leaders in corporate America. Forty percent of these users criticized Black women for being mean, while twenty percent defended Black Women leaders. Ten percent made calls to action for other Black women, twenty percent focused on celebrating women, and the remaining ten percent consisted of breaking news posts or dissertation topics centered on women.



On TikTok, I observed a similar exploration of the challenges Black women face as on X. Half of the posts focused on inspiring and advocating for Black women leaders, while the other half addressed self-affirmation, issues of self-isolation, and the facade of 'performance' by Black women leaders in corporate America. The expectations placed on them can be overwhelming, as they may feel pressured to conform to certain roles to maintain their leadership positions in the corporate space.

Patterns and Differences

Instagram mainly celebrated and recognized Black women leaders, while also calling for justice and support whereas X had a more controversial tone, with a considerable number of posts criticizing Black women, alongside defense and calls to action. TikTok provided a balanced perspective, with half the posts focusing on advocacy and inspiration, and the other half addressing internal issues and societal pressures experienced by Black women leaders. Overall, each platform emphasized the challenges and constraints faced by Black women in the corporate space, particularly in America. While the approaches to these issues differed across platforms, there was an evident pattern: Black women were more expressive about their experiences on X and TikTok than on Instagram.

These issues reflect how the New Woman, who faces challenges head-on, surpasses expectations, breaks limits, or even resigns due to overwhelming pressure from undue expectations, handles them across these different platforms. Are things different for Black women leaders now, and what is being done about these prevalent biases? In the end, we are forced to ask questions that may not have the desired answers at the moment, but we recognize that there is a system that needs restructuring from top to bottom.

Hateship

Short Story
By Elizabeth Swann

It is hot, as usual. My nightgown clings to my legs and lower back, which are damp with sweat. I shift under the covers. My husband lays beside me, mouth slackened in sleep, hand resting on his thin stomach. The slave woman, Mary, is singing underneath the window while she hangs the laundry. I wish she would be quiet. Soon the children will be up, and there will not be peace again until they go to sleep.

I rise from the bed, careful not to wake my husband. I dress quickly and walk downstairs. Mary stands in the side courtyard, bent over a tub of clean, wet clothes. I watch her work from the doorway. She takes each piece of clothing out of the tub and inspects it before twisting it tightly to remove the excess water. Then she drapes it carefully over the line and bends down to grab the next piece of laundry, grunting occasionally with the effort of straightening up again.

I know that she sees me in the doorway, yet she does not acknowledge me, does not stop her singing or her working. She often ignores me in this manner, and it infuriates me to no end.

"Mary, stop singing immediately. You'll wake the children."

She stops singing, shutting her mouth like a trap. Then she turns and continues with the laundry, twisting, lifting, hanging, bending, straightening.

"I expect a response when I speak to you."

She pauses, bent over the laundry tub. Then she straightens slowly and faces me.

"Yes ma'am."

I turn on my heel and walk back into the house. The sun has barely risen and already I am sweating, little droplets of perspiration gathering on my forehead and the back of my neck. This climate does not suit me, a fact no one seems to care about, least of all my husband. I hear the patter of footsteps upstairs. The children are awake, and he will be angry with me all day if they wake him. His impatience towards our children angers me to no end, as it is he who has kept me in a state of almost constant pregnancy from the very beginning of our marriage.

I was eighteen on our wedding day. I knew nothing of men or marriage or motherhood. I certainly had no idea that babies were the result of the heaving, breathless activities he insisted on night after night, couplings which left me sore and sweaty and ashamed. Edward was twenty-seven when we married, already established as a merchant in St. Johns. We were introduced while he was in London for the summer on business. My father was a cruel and angry man, flying into violent rages at the smallest of things, dominating my mother and siblings. So it did not concern me much to marry a man I barely knew. In my mind, he could not be worse than the man I did know. We set sail for Antigua after a week-long honeymoon in Hertfordshire. I have not left this island since.

At first I was relatively content. Edward owned a house in town, with two stone courtyards and a separate kitchen building. We hired out a slave woman from the neighbors to help with the washing and cooking. I was pregnant only a month after our arrival, sick as a dog and languishing in the heat. It was then that my husband began to show his quiet cruelty, so different from my father's loud and blustering rage. He would sigh softly when I complained that I was too weak, too hot, too sick to attend church or a dinner party. He'd walk me upstairs, tell me to lie down on the bed, and then leave, locking the door from the outside so I was trapped in the bedroom until he returned. I once bought a swath of green fabric for a new dress that he did not like. He asked to see it in a low voice, then went to the kitchen and sliced the fabric to pieces with a carving knife.

He was very pleased, though, when our first child was a boy. After the midwife left and I had changed into a clean nightgown, he sat on the side of our bed to meet his son. He held him very gently and smiled at me.

"Good, Caroline. Very good."

He named the child Edward, after himself.

That was the best day of our marriage. In the past six years things have only grown worse between us. I have borne him three daughters, the last of whom almost killed me. I have submitted to every want, every grasping need when he comes to my bed each night. I have toiled without rest in this horrid heat, running our household, raising our children, managing the household help, who are often sullen or insolent or lazy. I have tried to make a good life for us in this blistering hellhole of an island. And I have never received a word of thanks, never a moment of true affection. Only erratic punishments for slight offenses. I live my life on tiptoes, in whispers, always uncertain, always on-edge.

Mary is complaining of rheumatism again. It is the third time this week, and I am quickly growing tired of it. Must everything in this cursed place be difficult? When she first came to us she was a good worker - keeping the children clean and fed, washing all the clothes and household linens in the pond, a job I loathed. She was so efficient that after a few weeks I urged my husband to buy her. I was pregnant and very sick, hardly able to eat anything or rise from the bed. To my surprise, he agreed. We purchased her for three-hundred dollars from her owner in Bermuda, who told us in a letter that he wished Mary would "not be sold to anyone who would treat her ill." I found this to be a strange statement, and wondered what this man must think of us. We assured him that we treat all slaves and hired help firmly and fairly, and he agreed to the sale.

But Mary has lately been troubled with a variety of illnesses and complaints that make me regret ever purchasing her. She is

asking to be relieved of duties and tasks, needing supplies from the kitchen to make salves and ointments for her rheumatism, wanting to travel across town to see a doctor, leaving me alone with the children. At this point she is more trouble than she is worth, and my husband is irritated that we bought her in the first place.

It's time for the children to be brought inside for supper. They've been playing by the pond all afternoon. My husband and I are in the parlor, enjoying the quiet. I call for Mary, who is sitting in the courtyard, mending a shirt. She stares at me for a moment through the window. I hate when she does this. I find it impertinent. Then she reaches for her cane and hobbles inside, clunking against the tiled floor with each slow step.

My husband looks up from his newspaper, irritated.

“Whatever is wrong with that woman?”

“She says she has rheumatism.”

“Well tell her to be quiet.”

He folds his newspaper with a snap and leaves the room. I hear his footsteps on the stairs. Mary stands in the doorway, leaning on her cane, face impassive.

I rub at my temple. My head aches, as it always does this time of day.

“Mary, go get the children from the pond and bring them inside immediately.”

“I can't. It's too far. My knees.” She gestures at them, as if I don't know what they are.

I can feel the rage bubbling up inside me, filling my stomach, rising like bile through my chest, making me lightheaded.

“You *will*. You will go immediately.”

She stands there, not moving a muscle.

“Did you hear me, you stupid woman? Go right now and get the children.” I am shouting now.

“I already told you. I can't. I can barely walk across this room. I need a doctor.” She is so calm it makes me want to hit her.

“You need nothing of the sort,” I shriek. “Go get the children or I will get my husband to beat you until you really can't walk.”

“I can't. I'm sick. I won't make it that far.”

I cannot believe she is disobeying me in this manner, so blatantly and calmly. I try one last time, speaking in a low voice.

“Mary, this is your last chance to obey me. Go down to the pond and get the children.”

“I can't.”

I'm seeing black spots in the corners of my vision. My whole body is pulsing with rage.

“You will! You will! You will!” I'm screaming, hitting Mary over and over again with the backs of my palms. She is holding up her arms, blocking my blows, moving backwards to get away from me. She begins to scream too, yelling “No! No! No!” over and over again. We're both on the ground now. She turns in the direction of the doorway and crawls toward it. I grab her foot and begin to pull her backwards, back into the room. She kicks at me and I let go, falling on my back.

And now she is gone. She has crawled through the front door, not even bothering to close it behind her, and left me here in the parlor. I am sobbing, crying in a heap on the floor.

I hear my husband's boots on the stairs. He walks across the parlor and stops in front of me. I look up. He is staring at me,

thoughtful. Then he walks to the dining room, where dinner is already laid out on the table. He takes each dish, slowly, carefully, and dumps it onto the ground. The roast chicken bounces and slides on the tiles. The biscuits crumble as they hit the floor.

He comes back into the parlor and leans against the doorframe.

“Go get the children.”

I stand up and walk to the pond, tears still fresh on my cheeks.

Author's Note

This excerpt is meant to be read as a fictional companion piece to *The History of Mary Prince*. I was inspired to write this narrative after reading the novel *Property*, by Valerie Martin, along with an article by scholar Stephanie Li entitled *Valerie Martin's Property: a Neo-Enslaver Narrative*.

Property tells the story of an enslaved woman, Sarah, through the eyes of her enslaver's wife, Manon Gaudet. Manon is an unlikeable figure, warped by her own unhappy circumstances, her racism, and her power. Yet she is also the narrator of the novel, so we see everything through her eyes and from her perspective, including the ways in which she herself feels like the property of her husband.

The author of *Property* is white, as am I. And she's trying to write ethical fiction about the institution of slavery (as am I!). So how do we do this? How do white authors write about slavery in a way that is helpful and not harmful? I believe that Martin provides a possible answer to this by choosing a white enslaver as her narrator, providing “another way to conceptualize white-authored depictions of blackness. Rather than focus on the interior life of a black character, Martin imagines the thoughts and emotions of Manon Gaudet, the white wife of a Louisiana slaveholder. This unique perspective presents readers with what might be called a neo-enslaver narrative. While the neo-slave narrative reimagines a journey from bondage to freedom, the neo-enslaver narrative considers the contours of bondage and the consequences of power” (Li 238).

I chose to write a “neo-enslaver” story because I think it's an ethical way for me as a white author to engage with the topic of slavery. I also chose it because I believe it's important to consider “the contours of bondage and the consequences of power” in conversation with each other. Understanding the condition of both the oppressed and the oppressor is valuable work for a writer.

Caroline Wood, the narrator of my story, is most certainly an oppressor. Much like Manon, she is a miserable and unlikeable character, filled with hate. Yet as a woman in the 1830s, she is also a victim of oppression at the hands of both her husband and her father. I was inspired to explore this dynamic by Stephanie Li, who wrote this about *Property*:

“Martin is especially concerned with the nature of interracial alliances and the ways in which white patriarchy entraps both blacks and whites, especially women. While the novel does not make easy correlations between the bondage of chattel slavery and the bondage of marriage, it highlights freedom not as an absolute condition but as a spectrum of limitations and unlikely choices” (237)

I chose to include scenes of Caroline Wood's domestic abuse to explore the idea of freedom not as a binary, but “as a spectrum

of limitations and unlikely choices”. Edward Wood has more freedom than Caroline, and he uses that freedom and power to exert his will upon her, emotionally, sexually, and financially. But Caroline (as a free woman and a British citizen) has significantly more freedom and power than Mary Prince does. And instead of using that power to advocate for or relate to Mary as a fellow woman, Caroline uses her power in the same way that her husband does - to dominate, entrap, and abuse Mary. While I don't know that Mrs. Wood was actually abused by Mr. Wood in the ways I imagined, I do know that British women in the 1830's were still under the coverture, which “made a husband and wife one under the law and gave husbands financial and legal control over their wives. Under coverture, women lost all control of their property once married, unable to buy, sell, own, or inherit anything they possessed before” (Loudermelk). So while Caroline Wood considers Mary Prince her property, she is also aware of and living through the reality that she herself is the legal property of her husband. This reality rots her from the inside. She is not able to rise above it or to stop the cycle of abuse. Instead, she participates in it as Mary's prime abuser. As scholar Stephanie Li observes, “power poisons” any alliance the two women might have had. Caroline Wood sees Mary Prince as “a repulsive other, not a woman constrained by a violent social order” (254).

I chose to include Caroline's descriptions of her endless housework and labor to highlight the fact that while she feels burdened by the demands of her role as wife and mother, she is not able to extend any empathy or understanding towards Mary, who is forced not only to care for a home, but to care for a home that is not her own - a place where she has no agency or power. Caroline sees her own complaints and grievances as legitimate, yet cannot extend any compassion or understanding to Mary's. She sees Mary, a black woman and a slave, as fundamentally “other”, and subject to different rules and standards. For example, beating Mary for disobedience would be (in Mrs. Wood's mind) a perfectly “fair and firm” way of relating to her.

This is not a finished piece. It is a prototype, or sample, of a larger work I believe could be done imagining how Mrs. Wood might have felt and acted in Mary Prince's story. The story of the Woods' relationship to Mary Prince spans almost two decades. I chose to focus on the beginning of the story, when Mary is new to their household and begins to fall ill. But there is so much rich material later on in their relationship that could be really interesting to explore. I wanted to end this short prototype with a scene of resistance from Mary. She refuses to get the children from the pond, which leads to a savage attack from Mrs. Wood. Mary attempts to protect and defend herself and ultimately leaves the house altogether. This is what I've imagined as the impetus for Mary, who is gravely ill at this point, to go and stay in the “little old out-house” (14) she mentions in *History of Mary Prince*, where she lives in squalor at the worst part of her illness. In the fictional scene I created, I wanted to contrast Mary's resistance to Caroline with Caroline's lack of resistance to her husband. While Caroline is not legally enslaved, she has submitted herself to a “violent social order”. Mary has not submitted herself to this social order in the same way, and tries to escape it.

Profile: Women Entrepreneurs of the 19th Century

ELIZA TINSLEY



Took over her deceased husband's business and was a successful entrepreneur. In 1871 employed 4,000 people producing wrought iron nails, rivets, chains, and anchors in the UK. The company is still in business today.

On the Passing of a Beautiful Soul: The Life and Death of Amy Levy

By Diego Berrocal

Sweet sounds to-night rose up, wave upon wave;

Sweet dreams were afloat in the balmy air.

This is the boon of the gods that I crave—

To be glad, as the music and night were fair.

For once, for one fleeting hour, to hold

The fair shape the music that rose and fell

Revealed and concealed like a veiling fold;

To catch for an instant the sweet June spell.

—A June-Tide Echo, by Amy Levy



When a beautiful soul departs from this earth, it is always a heartbreaking tragedy echoing throughout the ages. But when a beautiful soul takes itself away from this earth willingly, of its own volition, the tragedy is almost unbearable—to the point of having no sufficient words to define it. This is the challenging and painful experience I have set to chronicle, yet it is necessary to undergo—if only to understand the beautiful woman's life and what she accomplished throughout it.

Amy Levy was a British-Jewish poetess who passed away at the young age of 27 and unfortunately took her own life—yet, to reduce Levy to his mere sentence and express this as “her life” is a grave injustice. Levy wrote novels, poetry, articles, and short stories, acquired many friends and traveled widely, and, at the same time, led a calm, quiet, and respectful life—the type of respectful and humble life that always belongs to individuals of genius. In fact, perhaps the only other poet that one may cite in having lived such a gentle and humble life like Levy's is Alice de Chambrier, a Swiss poetess who passed away at the age of 21, but was known for her kindness and hospitality toward those she met.

To return to Levy's life now, it is best to begin with her academic experience while she attended Brighton High School for Girls. Here, Levy grew to admire Brighton's headmistress, Edith Creak, who admirably represented the “New Woman,” as she was renowned for being a highly-educated woman with noble academic ambitions—indeed, Creak later went on to study at Cambridge and graduate from London University. To Levy, this might well have

been the fire that ignited her own ambitions to go far in her own academic life and leave a lasting legacy.

Like Creak, Amy Levy also attended Cambridge and went on to study at Newnham College. However, she left this latter school before finishing her term, as she faced unfortunate antisemitism and prejudice against her ancestry. Levy then decided to travel: she went to Switzerland and Germany, but she also returned to London as well. Indeed, in London, Levy achieved some of her greatest success; she spent much of her time in Britain's Reading Room, associating with fellow female writers while also publishing her own written work, like essays and poems, in London magazines.

At this point, I would like to mention Levy's relationship to her own ancestry—that of her Jewish background. She was not raised religious in connection with Judaism, per se, but she retained a most religious character about herself and maintained a humble sincerity in everything she wrote.

While Levy stayed in Florence in 1886, she met (and developed a romantic relationship with) Vernon Lee, one of the leading New Woman writers of her time. Levy's relationship with Lee is evidenced in one of her most beautiful poems, “To Vernon Lee,” which reminds one, in its concluding stanzas, of some of the finest lyrics in English Romantic poetry:

It is notable to notice how, though Levy's poetry is beautiful, the last two lines point to a melancholic temperament and sense of

A snowy blackthorn flowered beyond my reach;

You broke a branch and gave it to me there;

I found for you a scarlet blossom rare.

Thereby ran on of Art and Life our speech;

And of the gifts the gods have given to each—

Hope unto you, and unto me Despair.

painful despair. This was years before Levy took her own life, and yet it is painful to note that Levy dealt with depression and mental illness all her life, particularly in her twenties. We can only hope that her relationship with Lee, though brief, gave her as much joy as possible and showed her the brighter and more fortunate things in life.

Let us turn then to the next several years of Levy's life, for they give us a more uplifting time in her existence. During this time, Levy wrote more poetry and more essays—essays like one on “The Poetry of Christina Rossetti”—which allowed her to expand her thoughts on contemporary writers and problems of her time. She also wrote two novels by 1888, and gained her footing as a talented writer who expressed her thoughts eloquently in different mediums.

Unfortunately, however, this period of success would be interrupted by the reception garnered when Levy published one of her novels, *Reuben Sachs*, in 1889. Some of the reading public mistakenly identified Levy as perpetuating Jewish stereotypes through her novel, which did not account for the unreliable narrative voices Levy employed in her fiction.

Nonetheless, Levy went on to write a third novel, *Miss Meredith*, the following year of 1889, but subsequent reviews of *Reuben Sachs* disheartened Levy. Arguably, this negative reception to her work may have inspired Levy to write one of her most autobiographical tales, *Cohen of Trinity*, that same year, which centralizes on a Jewish writer who composes a novel which is misinterpreted by literary critics as furthering anti semitic stereotypes. The narrator succumbs to despair after realizing their work will not be understood by the reading community.

With the unfortunate negative developments that surrounded Levy's controversial novel, the British-Jewish poetess returned to her parents' home not long after her *Reuben Sachs* was criticized by *The Jewish Chronicle*. At this point in time, Levy grew deaf, but she still took the time to revise one of her latest poetry collections, *A London-Plane tree and other Verse*.

By the end of that same year, on September 10, Levy took her life, leaving this earth at the age of 27. As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, it is always heartbreaking to know that someone with so much genius and potential is forever lost from the world—that we will never know what Ms. Levy may have left us throughout the rest of her lifetime had she lived.

The world, indeed, grows a great deal darker and downcast whenever a soul determines to end its life, and perhaps we shall never fully recover from the terrible and woeful tragedy

that any case of suicide is. The loss of any life, indeed, is always cause for mourning, and in the case of Amy Levy's passing, the tragic blow is a heart wrenching and painful one.

But, if there is to be a bright spot taken from Ms. Levy's life, it is that she led her life as she understood it. Through her verse, we have a piece of Levy's gentle soul to hold onto and understand and cherish forever—as is the case with artists of immortal genius. Indeed, genius never truly dies till the artist's books, the very lifeblood of their spirit, no longer exist and cease to touch any human soul on earth.

But to return to the young woman for one final time, perhaps the best gesture of respect that we can pay her is by picking up a collection of her work, whether it be prose or poetry, and nurture it as we would a tender heart—seek to understand it as we would a dear friend or family member whom one has not seen for many years and wishes to know again. Let us open our arms to her as we would for those closest to us. Ms. Levy's heart still beats in her work: it awaits us to care for it even now.

**Profile: Women Entrepreneurs of
the 19th Century**

BARBE-NICOLE PONSARDIN



Madame Clicquot took over the company founded by her father-in-law after her husband's death. Her creativity and lust for innovation led to many firsts in Champagne: the first known vintage champagne; the invention of the riddling table; the first known blended rosé champagne. Three inventions that revolutionized champagne making and were widely adopted by producers, becoming the basis of modern champagne production.

Ask Ally

By Gabby LaPlante

Ally is like the older sister you never had. She's like the best friend you wish you could ask all the awkward questions to without her thinking twice. Graduating with a degree in psychology and a minor in women, gender, and sexuality studies, as well as being a woman who experiences plenty of the difficulties that come along with that herself, Ally has all the qualifications to give you advice for whatever's on your mind. Not to mention she is extraordinarily up to date on all the new trends and media, making her feedback particularly helpful to a wide audience, both young and old. If it's a problem out there that a woman has had, Ally has probably heard about it. Nothing is too taboo. She's here to myth bust those skincare hacks you saw on TikTok, help you decide what to wear to your first job interview, and even recommend you resources for access to mental health care or contraceptives from the comfort of your own home! And so much more! If you have a question or an issue you need advice about, email Ally for it to be featured in our next issue!



Reminder! Not all emails are included in full. Due to space, most issues will include 1-2 opening letters with responses from Ally, followed by a series of Ally's answers only as a response to other emailed questions, which can be understood by all readers in context of her responses. Also note that all names are kept confidential and are marked only by the pen name you give or your initials if you do decide to share your name with us! We can't wait to hear from you!

This issue's featured Ask Ally in full:

Dear Ally,

I've recently started college and I've tried really hard at making friends. I have found a group of girls that I have a lot of fun with, but I find at times that the relationships are very surface level. While I do like the occasional gossip and watching reality TV, in the midst of everything going on right now, I sometimes need someone to talk to about bigger issues. The election is coming up this year and I don't even know if these girls vote. When Roe v. Wade was overturned, I had no one to talk to. These issues are important to me and it's hard to see how they're not to other women around me. It's not that I don't enjoy spending time with these girls, but I sometimes wish there was something more. When I try to hang out with other people though, my friends get jealous and ask if I like the new friends better than them. I don't know what to do. I don't want to stop being friends with them but at the same time I need more. Please tell me what you would do in this situation.

A big big fan,
GL

Ally's Answer:

GL, you seem to hold very strong to your morals and recognize that you need more out of your friendships. That's a great start! It's important to remember that there are all kinds of friendships, some are fun and more surface level, some are more meaningful and long lasting. And that is okay! Everyone that comes into your life serves a purpose; to teach you something. To be frank, these girls seem highly insecure if they are feeling threatened by you hanging out with other people. Your maturity level is probably higher than theirs since you realize and are bothered by this. Whether you want to stay friends with them or not is up to you, but I would encourage you to continue meeting new people and exploring new relationships. You will find the people you need by doing this, even if it takes time, but not if you stay in your comfort zone of the surface level. Try setting boundaries with your current friends, hanging out with them on your own terms, and hanging out with other people when you need it. Getting involved in organizations that focus on issues you're passionate about is a great way to meet like-minded friends. The Women's Center and the LGBTQ Pride center here at NC State are wonderful places that each hold weekly events focused on inclusivity and equity.

There are also over 800 clubs on campus for just about any niche interest you may be interested in! You may be interested in the Progressive Students Task Force for example, which is a club focused on taking action for progressive causes such as reproductive services, voter turnout, anti-racist activism, and so much more. Always remember you can only control yourself; not what others think. And remember, as the cliché goes, some friends are for a reason, some are for a season, and some are for life. (and it tends to take a while to find those lifelong ones so don't rush it)

Ally's Answers to other reader's questions:

It seems **harrystyleslover123** has fallen into the trap many of us have with the overbuying and using of skincare products. While yes TikTok may recommend you double cleanse, tone, exfoliate, use four different serums and masks, and moisturize your face twice a day with red light therapy and skin patches in between, a lot of these things are myths. While a lot of these products can have a time and a place, our skin can easily be overwhelmed by large amounts of new products, especially when they don't mesh well together. Capitalism makes it so that we women feel we need to buy ALL the things to never age. A lot of beauty companies are in the hot seat right now for using AI to create fake images of women to market their beauty products. Many influencers are also being called out for using the "beauty filter" on apps like TikTok and Instagram that alter the look of their natural skin and features. Be careful not to get caught up in these unrealistic and even artificial standards. As cliché as it is, beauty comes from within, and aging is a natural part of life. Use skincare products that make you feel good and that protect you from the sun. Take your makeup off before bed, wash your face with a good cleanser, moisturize and put on SPF, and you should be just fine!

I'd like to first commend **CH** for your bravery in bringing this topic to our attention. Talking about abortions is scary, especially in the state of our country right now. However, abortions are health care and you should have the right to make choices about your own body. ACLU North Carolina has a lot of resources that are very useful to aiding in reproductive care. North Carolina has 14 abortion providers. Use this Abortion Finder at abortionfinder.org to locate the one closest to you. It is important to note that if a clinic you are considering is not on this site, it is possible that it is a Crisis Pregnancy Center, meant to dissuade you from having an abortion. The ACLU website also delves into the different types of abortions and what information you would need to provide the clinic of your choosing. If you have further questions, the National Abortion Hotline at prochoice.org is a multilingual hotline for abortion provider information and financial assistance. If you are concerned about paying for your abortion the Carolina Abortion Fund may be able to assist you. Furthermore, if you are experiencing a need for contraceptives whether that be condoms or the birth control pill or even emergency contraception, the Raleigh Health center at Planned Parenthood is a great resource. The Gynecology Services clinic at the Campus Health Center also offers a lot of resources in a confidential setting. Things like Plan B can be purchased over the counter at the pharmacy there and they also have free condoms!

Everyone, let's welcome **mommyof2** to the best part of the patriarchy: the part where we get to play mom to our partners, because we're not exhausted enough after working from home all day while taking care of our kids because we can't afford childcare. Even if you're a stay-at-home mom, that work is work. You still have the right to be a little upset when your husband comes home annoyed and says he needs time to himself from his hard day at work or complains about being hungry. Marriage, and relationships, and raising kids in those environments is about compromise and balance. Even though you stay at home, your grocery shopping, cooking, chores, and caretaking are still labor. Unpaid labor at that. And you still need time to yourself, just like your husband. He is grown, so I recommend having a conversation with him about taking time for each of you at whatever schedule you choose where the work of running the household and caring for the kids is more equally divided between you. Even if this means you just take a shower, go for a 20-minute walk, or call a friend uninterrupted. Vocalizing your frustration and wanting to fix it is always the first step. Too many of us women think we have to take care of everyone else and ignore our own needs. If we want things to change, then we've got to speak up!

If you, like our reader **SP**, are worried about your partner and feel like they need to see someone about their mental health, here are some things I would recommend. First start by choosing the right time and place to have a conversation about how they (and you) are feeling. This is ideally somewhere private, where you both are comfortable. Let them know how much you care about them. Ask how they are doing. Discuss with them the particular behaviors that are causing you to think they need extra support - try to avoid making the person themselves feel like the issue, focus on their actions. Be open, clear, and vulnerable with them. Give them an opportunity to talk about how they are feeling without judging them. You can even suggest that you would go to therapy as well, it's good for everyone! Don't push too hard. Discuss with them the symptoms that THEY are having and how it's affecting them, which with the right listening skills, should probably also make them realize they want the help too.

If you or someone you know is struggling, call or text 988 for free, confidential help connecting to services for mental health or substance abuse through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. NCSU also has a counseling center with many mental health services to support BIPOC, LBGTQ, disability, veterans, and more at counseling.dasa.ncsu.edu

The Curious Life of Mathilde Blind

By: Diego Berrocal

Mathilde Blind, a German-British poetess writing at the end of the nineteenth century, experienced good fortune from her childhood in the form of intellectuals igniting her imagination. At her family's home in England, she associated with bright literary luminaries like Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and the British painter Ford Madox Ford. Perhaps the most notable aspect of her life is precisely this early association with Pre-Raphaelite figures and their corresponding school of thought—which consisted of an emphasis on Nature, along with the implementation of sincerity and genuineness in their art.

From this period onwards, Blind would align herself with the burgeoning Pre-Raphaelite movement and use their revolutionary stance on what art could express in her own work. In her late teens, Blind studied the lives of independent, intellectual women who made a name for themselves in the past; these women included figures like George Eliot and Marie Bashkirtseff. Blind went on to publish biographies on each of them, and her work was well-received, and she also produced a great translation of Marie Bashkirtseff's diary in 1890.

Another notable influence in Mathilde Blind's life was the English writer Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her respective writings, particularly in regards to her verse novel *Aurora Leigh*. Browning's feminist leanings influenced Blind's further work, and *Aurora Leigh* gave her a template from which she could derive inspiration for her own radical poetry.

To preach a little further on Blind's poetical life, her most notable poem—and in Blind's own view, her magnum opus—is *The Ascent of Man*, a feminist response to Charles Darwin's *On The Origins of Species*. The impact of this poem and the effect it had on the reading public is perhaps best evidenced by a reviewer writing in the *Athenaeum*: "We have known her book to be read on the Underground Railway, and the reader to be so absorbed... as to be carried unawares several stations past his destination."

In terms of Blind's romantic life, she entertained a close friendship with Ford Madox Ford, but, though their friendship lasted several years, they did not get married. Instead, Blind continued to associate herself with women, developing a friendship with the British New Woman novelist Mona Caird, who may well have had an influence on the ideas presented in Blind's only novel, *Tarantella*, in 1885. Blind extended her literary influence and voice by contributing writings in leading periodicals of the British Victorian period—namely, *The Dark Blue* and the *Athenaeum*.

Later on in the 1890s, Mathilde Blind experimented with same-sex desire (and sexual desires in general) in some of her later collections of poetry, like *Birds of Passage* and *Dramas* in



Miniature. If anything, this pointed to Blind as a forward-thinking artist who sought to push the boundaries of what literature could say and do. Blind's oriental collections of poetry were inspired from her travels to Egypt in the 1890s.

Toward the end of her life, Blind was tragically afflicted with cancer of the uterus and passed away at the age of 55, but she left a series of writings that explored such diverse topics as nature, the charms of love, same-sex desire, and the beauty of the orient and the occident. Few other female writers can claim these areas of focus as their own—and count themselves as cultured and widely traveled as Blind was—and perhaps that is why we should take the time to sit down and read Blind's work—for its ingenuity, its creativity, and its boldness.

Duty

By: Mada Brown

"No, no doctor!"

Agnes looked up from her embroidery and towards her sister, Mary, in confusion. Their mother had never shouted like that before, and they could not begin to understand why she would be so upset about a visit from Dr. Moore. Agnes shoved her needle into the fabric that she had been working on and set it aside, there were too many mistakes to fix now. She stood from her chair and moved towards the drawing room's open door. Mary was close behind her, hovering, as Agnes peeked round the door frame to the parlor door down the hall.

"Girls, come back," Ms. Baker said, sounding particularly exasperated. This was her hour of rest when the two youngest had been sent upstairs to nap. "It is unladylike to sneak and spy, especially on one's own mother."

"It is hardly spying when she is shouting for the whole house to hear," Beatrice stated from the corner of the room, never looking up from her book.

Agnes ignored both and strained to hear what was being said. She could vaguely hear Alice, her mother's lady's maid, speaking in a low voice, while her mother's was still fairly high: "---will not--- shut away!"

A few moments passed and the door to the small drawing room opened. Agnes quickly moved back, to keep from being seen, and held her breath while listening to steady footsteps head out and down the hall to the servants' stairs.

"I will go and check on Mama," she quietly said to Mary. "Wait here."

Venturing down the hall, she listened for the sounds of servants moving about. Jane, the upstairs maid, was going about her duties in all the children's bedrooms. Alice, who had just left the room, was surely headed downstairs to the basement where Mrs. Foster, the housekeeper might be. If Agnes stood very still on the landing by the stairs, she could just barely hear the sound of doors opening and closing, but no more. Sometimes she found it odd to think a house so full could be this quiet. The family house in the country seemed much busier at times, but that was due to her father and two older brothers being home instead of working outside the house every day. Unlike the bright, bustling countryside home Agnes and her siblings loved, No. 80 Chester Square had dark corners, and hidden side rooms that one could easily slip into for isolation.

The smaller drawing room was the favorite isolated spot of Agnes' mother, Mrs. Cora Edwards. The room was surrounded by dark wallpaper, intricate and ornate frames holding pictures of family and paintings of seascapes. To one side was a small writing table next to a large, white marble fireplace. Opposite that desk

was a set chairs with a couch in deep velvety red lined with gold. Mrs. Edwards sewing sat in a basket beside the couch, ready to be picked up at any moment, while on a low table was a serving of tea and biscuits. Agnes' mother was sprawled across the couch, her head on her arms and her legs flung up onto the cushions. She was breathing hard, as if she'd been yelling more than what the children had actually heard and had tears in her eyes.

"Mama, are you alright?"

Mrs. Edwards startled and righted herself immediately, wiping her cheeks and moving to straighten her hair.

"Of course, Agnes," she said, turning her head to face me. The melancholy that had been on her face disappeared and was replaced by the graceful smile Mrs. Edwards always wore.

"May I ask what happened, Mama?"

"Never mind," Mrs. Edwards replied. "I'm sure Mrs. Foster will be along any moment now."

As she said this, Mrs. Foster appeared in the door, clearing her throat.

"Ah, Mrs. Foster, I knew you'd be coming," Mrs. Edwards voice had a strain in it, as though she wanted to laugh.

"I heard there was an issue with Alice, ma'am," Mrs. Foster replied.

"Yes," Mrs. Edwards stood from the couch and moved towards one of the large windows overlooking the downstairs terrace. "She thought something was wrong, poor dear, and it caused quite the overreaction."

"But Mama, we all heard--"

"I believe Ms. Baker is looking for you, Miss Agnes," Mrs. Foster said, moving out of the doorway and gesturing down the hall. "You wouldn't want to leave her waiting."

Agnes looked towards her mother but was met with only the image of her back, a common sight to her. "Thank you, Mrs. Foster," she whispered, moving quietly out of the room.

Mrs. Foster closed the door immediately behind her back and Agnes heard the lock click. She paused and waited a moment before pressing her ear against the dark wood of the door, desperate to hear something.

"Ma'am, how far along are you? Do you have any idea?" Mrs. Foster's voice asked, still quite close to the door. "When was the quickening?"

"Two months ago."

"And she's been using the same lacings the whole time?"

"I insisted."

"Ma'am, we must call Dr. Moore to check on you," Mrs. Foster pleaded.

“Maria,” Mrs. Edwards had an urgency in her voice that Agnes hadn’t heard before. “If you call Dr. Moore he will insist I go on bedrest and then immediately into confinement just as he did during the last one. I cannot endure it again!”

“But ma’am, it cannot be good for the ba-“

“I do not care what is good for it, I don’t want it! I never wanted it!

Agnes startled back, shocked at the anger in her mother’s voice. Mrs. Edwards had never shouted at her children, had never shown anger or frustration. That graceful smile was just about the only thing any of them knew of her.

“I begged William to ask Dr. Moore about ways to prevent this,” Mrs. Edwards continued. She was so close to the door now. “I almost died last time and I know that if he and Dr. Moore have their way I will die with this one.”

“Ma’am, please.”

“Maria, I’ve known you for twenty years,” Mrs. Edwards voice had softened. “You will help me in this, won’t you? You can have Alice pick up one of those remedies.”

“I cannot do that, ma’am.”

“Please, Maria, do not leave me to this.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but the disruption will more than likely be reported to Mr. Edwards. If he asks, I cannot lie to him. We must call the doctor.”

Agnes moved back from the door as silently as possible. She moved down the hall and back to the large drawing room where Mary was waiting, peeking from the doorframe.

“What happened? What happened?” she whispered frantically.

“Mama is fine,” Agnes announced to the room, before pulling Mary over to the corner couch. She sat her down and leaned in close.

“Mama is in danger from something.”

“What?” Mary’s eyes went wide. “How?”

“She said something is going to kill her,” Agnes whispered. “And that it tried to kill her before.”

Dr. Moore had been brought in the next morning. It was announced to the family that Mrs. Edwards was expecting again and must immediately go on bedrest. Agnes and Mary had heard another argument involving Mrs. Edwards, but this time it also involved Mr. Edwards and Dr. Moore. The girls had crept to the stair landing, listening as their mother shouted at the two men. This led to Mrs. Foster coming up and assisting Alice in putting Mrs. Edwards to rest by force as she continued to struggle.

“Mr. Edwards, if she continues to act this way in the coming days, I’m afraid it would lead me to suspect your wife is suffering from a kind of mania, possibly brought on by the pregnancy.”

“What should be done, Dr. Moore?”

Mr. Edwards looked stern and unaltered by his wife’s actions. Instead there was an air of irritation to him, a man who’s peace had been infringed on.

“She must not move from the bed, and I would recommend that she do very little until the child is born. Perhaps some sewing is acceptable, conversation with her other children, but absolutely nothing strenuous.”

“Right,” Mr. Edwards nodded. “That will be no problem, I will alert the housekeeper to her restrictions.”

Mrs. Edwards eventually quieted down, on the third day of her forcible bedrest, after Mr. Edwards ventured into her room and

had a stern discussion with her. After that she had not made a single shout, but she also had not smiled once. Alice arranged her bed everyday so that she may lean against a bundle of pillows while working on her embroidery or conversing.

Something about this situation felt off to Agnes. Mary and Beatrice ignored the goings on, hearing mother was expecting and feeling it rather ordinary. Mary was focused on her upcoming social activities, having been invited to a few different houses for visits, while Beatrice was devouring books from father’s office downstairs at a voracious rate. She was the only girl in the family brave enough to venture into that room by herself, Agnes had only gone in once for a punishment.

Henry, Arthur, and Charles were away at school and wouldn’t be home again till break. Clara and Clarence were the youngest and enjoying the company of Ms. Baker every day. Agnes was left to wonder what had happened and why their mother was so upset day after day, until she finally ventured to ask.

Mrs. Edwards had a bedroom on the backside of the house, facing the terrace. The room was quite large with a soft couch set of its own to one side, however the dominating feature of the room was the large bed covered in that same velvety red, so dark it was almost purple. This was the same color Mrs. Edwards used at the family’s country house. In the middle of that bed was a small figure, with her hair splayed out around her in a pool of light brown.

“Agnes?” her voice sounded dull and worn. “What brings you here?”

Agnes moved to the bed and sat down on it, beside her mother. There were dark circles starting to form under Mrs. Edwards eyes. She was dressed only in her nightgown and Agnes had to wonder if she had ever seen her mother in so little. No jewelry, no lace, no frills, just a woman of forty-two in a bed she seemed to be growing to hate.

“I wanted to see if you were alright, Mama.”

“The baby’s fine, Agnes,” Mrs. Edwards sighed, looking towards the window. “I will make sure to do as Dr. Moore says, so do not worry.”

“No, Mama,” Agnes replied, taking her mother’s hand in hers. “I wanted to know if you were alright. Not the baby.”

Mrs. Edwards turned her head back to Agnes and looked at her daughter as if it was the first time she had ever seen her.

“Mama, what can I do to help you?”

There was a pause as Mrs. Edwards thought about what help she wanted in the moment but then she squeezed her daughter’s hand and leaned forward, “Would you walk with me around the room?”

Agnes did not even think about the request, she simply stood and pulled back the covers on her mother’s bed to give Mrs. Edwards room to move. She helped her mother stand up and then waited for her mother to take the first step.

The days of Mrs. Edwards pregnancy passed in relative ease. She grew larger with child and Agnes spent more and more time within the confines of Mrs. Edwards bedroom. There was a change between the two, as they spoke and ate together, at times Agnes even reclined on the bed next to her mother. When this happened, Mrs. Edwards seemed to open up to Agnes in a way her daughter never could have imagined.

“My grandmother died early, the year before she bled almost every day.”

“Bled?”

“She ran a boarding house and had to keep working, so my mother and her sisters would collect the soaked rags beneath her and replace them with new ones to soak up the blood.”

“Why was she bleeding?” Agnes questioned.

“No one knew,” Mrs. Edwards said, her voice taking on an odd quality as she stared at the window. “She wasn’t in pain, however it just would not stop.”

There was a silence between them for a time, Mrs. Edwards unnoticing as she continued to stare while Agnes shifted closer towards her mother. A month had passed since Mrs. Edwards was confined and not once since beginning this new regime had Agnes seen her father. Did he care about her mother? Was he simply busy with work? Could work be more important than his wife’s health?

Agnes could not understand the distance between her mother and father but assumed it was the way a marriage worked.

“Will what happened to your grandmother happen to you?” she quietly asked.

Mrs. Edwards took Agnes’ hand, “Not if you help me, Agnes.”

“Of course, Mama.”

“When my waters break, I must have a midwife. Dr. Moore may be in attendance as well, but I require a midwife, only a woman would know what to do.”

“But Papa said Dr. Moore-“

“You father does not understand!” Mrs. Edwards spit out. “All he wants is another child and Dr. Moore is ready to deliver one to him.”

“Mother,” Agnes was shocked by the anger that had appeared on her mother’s face, it was bordering on hatred.

“Do you know that I never wanted to have eleven children?” Mrs. Edwards continued. “I only ever imagined three. After your sister Edith I tried to speak to your father about the things out there to stop it from happening again, at least those I knew.”

“Things?”

Mrs. Edwards moved herself towards the edge of the bed and stood, stretching her body out before beginning to pace.

“Things to prevent this from happening. But no, your father said it was our duty to have more and I should feel blessed for it. I tried Agnes, I truly did try to feel blessed by you and your brothers and sisters, but I just couldn’t. I felt like a heifer giving milk half the time, breeding the next. It was a blessing whenever your father allowed us to stay in the country while he came to London since it assured me a respite from his needs and my condition.”

“Mother,” Agnes could feel tears starting to well up in her eyes. However, she couldn’t tell if they were for the feeling of rejection from her mother or out of sadness for the woman before her.

Mrs. Edwards stopped her pacing upon noticing the tears in Agnes’ eyes and sighed. She sat back down on the bed and took Agnes’ face in her hands.

“I have not been a good mother to you in the past because of my resentment,” she grazed her fingers over the hair curling at the side of her daughters face. “But I can be one now and tell you that you are not meant to breed. You are meant to simply be.”

Agnes sniffed and held onto her mother’s wrists. “What does that mean?”

A smile slowly formed on Mrs. Edwards face, not the graceful one she had presented to her husband for years but a small, soft smile. She pulled Agnes close, wrapping her arms around the girl. “I mean that I want you to never think your only duty is to have a child, Agnes. I am telling you now that your duty is to live the long, happy life I could not.”

“I promise I will, Mother. I promise!”

The day it happened was not expected.

Mrs. Edwards was expected to be pregnant at least one more month by Dr. Moore. However, during a late breakfast in her room with Agnes, Mrs. Edwards’ waters broke. There had been chaos immediately after as Alice had been in the room and scurried out to alert Mrs. Foster.

Agnes helped her mother back to her bed and before she could move the covers back over her mother, Mrs. Edwards had grabbed her wrist.

“Agnes, tell them I want a midwife,” she had urged, leaning forward.

“Yes mother, I will.”

When Mrs. Foster had returned both Agnes and Mrs. Edwards altered her to the wish for a midwife, then stated it again when Mr. Edwards appeared to confirm the news. He had stepped into the room, checked with Mrs. Foster for her account and then left to wait for Dr. Moore.

When the doctor had arrived, Agnes had met him and her father at the door and reiterated the need for a midwife. Both men had ignored her, telling her to go wait with her governess. Frustrated, Agnes had refused and stood outside the door to her mother’s room and shouted again for a midwife. She kept shouting as Ms. Baker and the upstairs maid, Jane, took her arms and forcibly pulled her from the door. She was taken to the downstairs drawing room with Mary and Beatrice where Ms. Baker had a footman stand outside with the door locked.

“You must not disturb your mother now,” she had said. “It is a precarious time for her.”

Hours and hours passed as Agnes sat at the window going back and forth between watching people walk outside and staring at the door that she could not open. It had been dark for a couple hours by the time the footman had unlocked the door and said everything was over.

Agnes now stood before that door to her mother’s room once again and wondered what she might find behind it. As she reached for the door, it opened, and Mrs. Foster walked out carrying a tiny bundle of cloth.

“Miss Agnes,” she seemed startled. Her hair was untidy, and she looked a little tired, but it was darting of her eyes to the bundle that gave Agnes pause. “I do not think you should go in, it wouldn’t be right for you to see-“

Behind Mrs. Foster, Dr. Moore had tried to bustle through but just jostled the older woman instead. As she stumbled forward, the bundle opened just enough that Agnes caught a glimpse of what was inside. It was pale, wrinkled, and covered in red. The eyes weren’t open, and it did not cry.

Mrs. Foster seemed to quickly notice the change and adjusted to cover up what she had hidden. “Miss Agnes,” she started.

“I will see my mother now” Agnes stated, moving past her and Dr. Moore into the room.

Inside the room almost everything looked the same. It was a bedroom on the backside of the house, facing the terrace. The room was quite large with a soft couch set of its own to one side, however the dominating feature of the room was the large bed covered in a sickening dark red that stained the sheet and covers strewn all around it. There in the center of the bed was a small figure with light brown hair splayed all around its head, and an ugly red stain between its legs.

Author’s Note

I was inspired to write this piece after reading the novel *The Story of an African Farm* by Olive Schreiner, specifically the story of Lyndall and her unwanted pregnancy that ultimately ends in her death.

In *Story*, Lyndall expresses her desire to live a free life with no constraints set by men, and that includes children. When Lyndall gives birth and the baby dies, there is no spontaneous love or bond formed between mother and child. Lyndall did not want the child, however she does regret that it doesn’t survive. I think this kind of narrative is subversive for both the Victorian era and for us still today: that women want to control their own reproduction and limit the number of children they have.

My second source of inspiration would be my own family. My great-great grandmother, Esther Mada, was a believer of birth control and followed the work of Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood. Her own mother was the inspiration for the bloody towel story of Mrs. Edwards grandmother. I can only imagine how that experience must have affected her and influenced her to give birth to a smaller number of children.

I chose to focus on an upper middle-class family as that would allow me to use a main character, Agnes, who was almost completely sheltered from any knowledge of biology and her own body to a certain extent. I also chose the middle-class because they had the most issue with pregnant women and their ability to handle their bodies own natural functions. Working-class women would be dealing with jobs in order to feed themselves or a family right up until birth while nobility were not as constrained by morals as the middle-class.

I did not want this short story to turn into a dump of information about birth, abortion, miscarriage, etc. However, I tried to include as much reference to the issues of the time as possible: corsets, abortifacients, male doctors vs. midwives, and more. There are so many issues that center around the issue of women choosing to not give birth that this is a story I could easily develop into something bigger.

I hope that in the future I will be able to expand this so that I can touch on issues regarding women of the working-class as well. I had originally started with the idea of three main characters in Agnes, Mrs. Edwards, and Jane the maid, but realized I could only focus on one pregnancy in order to give the best short narrative.

Profile: Women Entrepreneurs of the 19th Century

KATHARINE WRIGHT HASKELL



American teacher, suffragist, and younger sister of aviation pioneers Wilbur and Orville Wright. Graduated from Oberlin college in 1898 and became a high school teacher of Latin and English. Actively assisted the Wright brothers; her support was essential to their historic first flight. In 1903, newspapers declared there might have been “no Kitty Hawk without Kitty Wright.”

MADAM LOUISE POMMERY



Took over the Pommery & Greno winery after the death of her husband in 1858. Her mission was to make the highest quality wine and over the years she built a collection of the finest vineyards in all of Champagne. In matters of taste, she was ahead of her time. She created the first brut champagne to meet with commercial success, thereby breaking with the tradition of very sweet wine. A woman in a man’s world, she imprinted her personality on her champagnes. The purity and the finesse of Pommery wines perpetuate this legacy today.

Sources

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Female Entrepreneur Names:

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