

# NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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## **#MeToo and Victorian Literature: Reading Against Rape Culture in the Undergraduate Classroom**

By Ellen Stockstill, Penn State Harrisburg  
and Jessica Mele, Penn State Harrisburg

<1>We write this essay from our positions as professor and student to offer readers of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* a broad, informed perspective on #MeToo in the Victorian literature classroom. We bring to this topic different experience levels, generational lenses, and authority positions, and in collaborating on this piece, we aim to augment scholarship on teaching and learning that ignores or minimizes the perspectives of students. In particular, we want to avoid overlooking the active role students play in creating a transformative learning environment—something crucial in an essay that tackles issues of power imbalance, misconduct, and abuse—and we want to recognize and give voice to the impact our classes can have on undergraduate students at a crucial point in their lives. As the field of Victorian studies grapples with the ideas and repercussions of #MeToo, this kind of student-faculty collaboration can be incredibly important as we re-evaluate our systems of education and as we advocate for gender equity in the college and university communities where we learn, work, and live.

<2>Although Victorian literature and our culture’s current wrestling with the concerns, tactics, and targets of #MeToo might initially seem unrelated to the general public, sexual misconduct scandals, fictional and real, are quite familiar to those of us who have studied the history and culture of the nineteenth century. LeeAnne Richardson, for example, recently wrote in *The Conversation* about the similarities between Jeffrey Epstein’s “sordid sex ring” and the sale of underage girls described in W.T. Stead’s “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” published in 1885 in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Many cornerstone works of literary criticism, history, and philosophy in Victorian studies have highlighted the persistence and importance of sex scandals in nineteenth-century Britain including Steven Marcus’s *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (1964), Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1976), and William A. Cohen’s *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* (1996) (among many, many others). Cohen writes that “Victorian Britain is mainly remembered for two things: sexual prudishness and long novels,” but he points to how sex scandals often drive the plot of Victorian realist fiction, and he emphasizes how these novels’ reticence about sex does not indicate a lack of engagement with it as a subject (1). We argue here that studying the “private parts” of Victorian literature—in particular, interrogating the moments of gender-based violence and discrimination depicted or referenced therein—can help us dismantle a cornerstone of contemporary rape culture: the culture of silence. When we transform moments of literary silence into opportunities for discussion of difficult topics, we positively impact the lives of women on our campuses and demonstrate how Victorian studies can be a site of empowerment and advocacy, as well as one of academically rigorous and historically faithful

coursework. Here we outline the contours of contemporary rape culture, its reliance on the silence of survivors, and we demonstrate how critically engaging with Victorian novels helps challenge those norms.

### **Rape Culture and Silence**

<3>We use the term “rape culture” to communicate the extent to which sexual violence saturates our society and contributes to a pervading sense of danger in women’s daily lives. According to the Women’s Center at Marshall University, “Rape Culture is an environment in which rape is prevalent and in which sexual violence against women is normalized and excused in the media and popular culture.” It persists “through the use of misogynistic language, the objectification of women’s bodies, and the glamorization of sexual violence, thereby creating a society that disregards women’s rights and safety” (“Rape Culture”). At its core, this culture instills a fear, as Roxane Gay describes it, of *when* a woman will be raped, not *if* a woman will be raped (xi). As women, our fear of sexual violence and harassment burdens us with the weight of never being fully at ease in our professional and personal lives. This creates what is essentially a psychological and behavioral tax on women and girls as most of us “limit [our] behavior because of the existence of rape” while “[m]en, in general, do not” (“Rape Culture”). Studies in the social sciences “have shown that women fear crime more than men, which is due in large part to [their] fear of sexual assault” (Runyan et al. 270). It is not just that many women and girls experience sexual violence themselves; it is also that so many of us experience “vicarious, or indirect, violence” because of the frightening experiences of our “family members, friends, and acquaintances” (Runyan et al. 270). Vicarious violence reaches us from beyond our social circle, too, as narratives about violence against women freely, widely, and repeatedly circulate. In other words, while one in three women in the United States experiences “sexual violence involving physical contact during their lifetimes,” all women modify their behavior or register increased risk (Centers for Disease Control). Rape culture, then, refers to the environment of sexist discourse in which women and girls are conditioned to these risks as they “perceive a continuum of threatened violence” and see them as normal and, indeed, expected (Buchwald et al. xi).

<4>The persistence of this threat encourages a culture of silence around sexual violence and misconduct. Women are dissuaded from coming forward with allegations of assault or harassment because of several factors, including the language our society commonly uses to describe survivors. In popular culture and news media, those who experience rape and sexual assault are regularly referred to as “the accuser” and not “the victim.” In other criminal cases, the victim is robbed or murdered, but in cases of sexual violence, the victim “accuses” the perpetrator of the crime. While this term attempts to protect the right to be “innocent until proven guilty,” the “accuser” label from the start embeds skepticism toward the victim and subtly encourages disbelief in the woman’s traumatizing experience.

<5>What follows is a dynamic that has become all too familiar and that also discourages women from coming forward in good faith: a woman’s believability is aggressively combated by a man’s established reputation. In many cases, the woman must be willing to accept professional and personal retaliation for daring to tarnish the reputation of a respected man. As Susan B. Anthony wrote at the end of the nineteenth century, “From time immemorial the rule has been not to punish the male offender, but to get the victim out of his way” (qtd. in Harding v). We do not mean to suggest that women’s accusations are never taken seriously, but we do wish to

underscore how our culture defaults to a setting in which the woman's story is viewed with skepticism in the service of protecting a man's "hard-earned" reputation. Just as many women modify their behavior knowing about the experiences of sexual violence their friends, family, and co-workers have faced, many women register the substantial risks of coming forward with an allegation when they see other women face embarrassment, resistance, and retaliation. This means that although women today do not face the same kinds of legal and social barriers that they did in the Victorian period, they frequently remain informally dissuaded from making allegations of sexual violence against the men in their lives.

<6>Women are also discouraged from breaking silence by a lack of confidence in our judicial system to adequately address their traumatizing experiences. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), "only 5 out of every 1,000 rapists will end up in prison" ("About Sexual Assault"). This illustrates, in part, how hard these cases are to prosecute in our system. It also places victims of sexual violence in a difficult position. Why would a woman put herself through a painful legal process if there is a slim chance she will prevail? And prevail at what cost? To have her sexual history exposed, discussed, and evaluated? To have her motivations interrogated for flaws? Chanel Miller's "Victim Impact Statement" from the sentencing hearing of Brock Turner, published by *BuzzFeed News* in 2016, powerfully captures this dynamic and the psychological toll it takes on a woman to come forward and pursue legal action after an assault. Miller poignantly narrates a long stream of questions she was asked without interruption that underscore the psychological strain of a sexual assault trial. The questions point to an attempt to both undermine the credibility of her allegation and sow distrust in the victim about her own experiences. She reports being asked, "*How old are you? How much do you weigh? What did you eat that day? Well what did you have for dinner? Who made dinner? Did you drink with dinner? No, not even water? When did you drink? How much did you drink? What container did you drink out of? Who gave you the drink? How much do you usually drink? Who dropped you off at this party? At what time? But where exactly?*" Miller describes this experience as being "pummeled," "dissected," and "assaulted with questions designed to attack" her and shift focus to the supposedly difficult time Turner, with "a lot at stake," was having.<1> Miller's lengthy enumeration of the questions illuminates the difficulty of proving one's credibility enough to challenge or damage the reputation and future of a man. We see the deterioration of care for the victim as she endures intrusive questions about what she did wrong—not Turner—pinning her as the cause of her assault. Miller's experiences have been memorable not only because of her rhetorically impactful statement but also because her case reveals the psychological toll of working through the legal system even with the advantages of DNA evidence and eyewitness testimony—assets that many victims of sexual violence do not have when considering legal action. Turner was found guilty on three counts, but Miller's pain and frustration have endured in the public's consciousness in the years since. More recently, in a 2018 case, an Irish teen's thong underwear was used as evidence of her consent (Safronova). The defense lawyer drew attention to her underwear in his closing argument saying, "Does the evidence out-rule the possibility that she was attracted to the defendant and was open to meeting someone and being with someone? You have to look at the way she was dressed. She was wearing a thong with a lace front" (O'Halloran). The attorney's comments sparked outrage and inspired multiple protests aimed at combating this kind of victim-blaming in the courts and in the broader culture.

<7>Despite the publicity and outrage surrounding these two cases, they show quite clearly the consequences women face when they break their silence through the official channel of our legal system. The significant burden women face for seeking legal redress as victims of sexual violence explains, in part, why the social media hashtag #MeToo took off as it did. For many women it was easier to write a Tweet about an experience of sexual violence and to enjoy a moment of solidarity with people all over the globe than to file a complaint through an official channel in which they would face an uphill battle that would involve a re-endurance of past trauma and would invite aggressive questioning into all aspects of their lives.

<8>A victim's silence is also encouraged by her understandable fear of harming a person she knows, likes, loves, admires, or relies upon for employment or future opportunities. More often than not, women are harassed or assaulted by someone they know. According to RAINN, "8 out of 10 rapes are committed by someone known to the victim," and this fact contributes significantly to the underreporting of assault ("Perpetrators of Sexual Violence"). When the perpetrator is someone a woman trusts (like a friend, acquaintance, co-worker, or intimate partner), "it can take years for victims even to identify what happened to them as a violation" (Dewan). Even if the victim immediately recognizes the behavior as wrong, she may fear the emotional toll of tarnishing a "good" man's reputation, retaliation in her personal or professional life, or a sense of shame at having been in a relationship with a man who would harm her. A quick read of #WhyIDidntReport Tweets, which people started posting in solidarity with Christine Blasey Ford after President Trump questioned her delay in accusing Brett Kavanaugh of assault, reveals a host of reasons why victims keep silent, including that they are "afraid of repercussions," "made to feel it's their fault," "told to dismiss it," "afraid they would be asked for more evidence," and "afraid no one will believe them" (Willingham and Maxouris). Some "victims feel it's easier to keep it to themselves" and some quite simply "want to forget"—to come up with a rationalization for what happened and then move on (Fortin; Willingham and Maxouris). These barriers to reporting are incredibly effective at silencing victims, and they cut across gender, class, and race lines. They are a kind of awful equalizer, a shared set of fears that victims of sexual violence experience which inhibit reporting and which serial abusers rely upon to enable their behavior. Part of what was so disturbing and inspiring about the Harvey Weinstein case was that big-name movie stars could be intimidated and silenced by their perpetrator just like "regular" people. The clout of an actress like Gwyneth Paltrow not only helped enhance the credibility of the case against Weinstein but her story also underscored that even women at the top of their craft, with a loving public, and money at their disposal found coming forward with an allegation incredibly difficult. These challenges were recognized publicly by *TIME* when in 2017 the magazine named its Person of the Year "The Silence Breakers" (Zacharek et al.). And in fact, multiple key publications of this movement have emphasized this issue of silence and the barriers to breaking it including Ronan Farrow's *Catch and Kill: Lies, Spies, and a Conspiracy to Protect Predators* (2019) and Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey's *She Said: Breaking the Sexual Harassment Story That Helped Ignite a Movement* (2019).

### **Breaking Silence in Victorian Studies**

<9>Studying Victorian literature can help address our culture's endemic silence about sexual violence in a couple of ways. First, courses focused on nineteenth-century literature and culture provide a comforting distance for students that allows them to engage critically with

contemporary gender politics. In Jessica's experience, many students come into undergraduate courses thinking that the Victorians lived in a manner wholly alien to their own; they frequently view nineteenth-century people as far-off figures and their literary achievements as vintage at best and obsolete at worst. Certainly, Ellen's job as a faculty member is to shake up these preconceived notions, but professors do not have to simply combat these ideas in the classroom. Instead, we recognize what this dynamic affords us in shaping and experiencing meaningful learning opportunities. The historical distance of over 150 years offers students a useful cushion from the people, events, and books of the Victorian age, and, in our experience, this makes having discussions about sexual violence and gender inequality easier and less fraught than in classrooms where gender and violence is the primary subject of study. In addition to this historical distance, literature courses provide students the opportunity to analyze fictional narratives, another layer of removal, that enables students to objectively analyze the power dynamics of an abusive relationship, the social stigma of a sexual indiscretion, and the barriers to women seeking legal intervention. The ability to study these topics—to learn terminology, read legal texts, discuss important scenes, interrogate public discourse—allows students to immerse themselves in a variety of relevant debates about gender, sexuality, and power with the protective cover of an intellectual exercise about people who lived generations before them. In our experience as student and professor, the combination of studying Victorian fiction, history, and culture encourages students to make profound connections between the past and the present, and students' perceived distance from the nineteenth century helps generate these epiphanies.

<10>Second, close readings of Victorian literature via in-class writing and discussion activities give students the opportunity to productively interrogate moments of textual silence regarding sexual and domestic violence. Victorian literature rarely contains explicit descriptions of sex or intimate touching, consensual or forced, and yet because so many fictional narratives of this period employ marriage plots, the issues of sexual purity, anticipation, indiscretion, and shame are frequently central concerns. When students learn to recognize what is not written outright on the page, they further refine their skills to potentially read their own moments of silence—that is, the moments of their lives when they have experienced or witnessed something that was not explicitly named as indecent, harmful, abusive, or criminal, but which nonetheless was. This has empowering possibilities for survivors who may find comfort in recognizing the language perpetrators and enablers use to elide, diminish, or disguise abusive behavior. Survivors can be reminded that they are not alone, and that, in fact, women who lived generations before them also experienced the confusing, isolating, and psychologically damaging effects of assault. It also has educative potential for bystanders who may not have previously recognized the warning signals of sexual and domestic violence.

<11>We encourage faculty to find a balanced approach to creating learning experiences in which these kinds of discoveries are possible but not required for participation. When teaching Victorian novels with this goal in mind, for example, it is crucial that faculty present nineteenth-century fiction in its historical and cultural context regarding women's rights, marriage and divorce laws and norms, and issues of gender and sexuality across different classes. This approach not only helps students understand the nuances of what they read, but it also demonstrates for them the ways literature engages with the "real world." Excerpts from Lydia Murdoch's book *Daily Life of Victorian Women* (2014) are particularly useful in an undergraduate course for this purpose, especially her chapters on "Women and the State,"

“Health and Sexuality,” “Childrearing, Youth, and Education,” and “Wage Labor and Professional Work.” Additionally, many articles featured in the “Gender and Sex” Topic Cluster on *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History* are useful as peer-reviewed, open-access resources. Helping students discover various linkages between nineteenth-century fiction, history, and culture helps them hone their ability to draw connections between literary texts and various spheres of life, including their own.

<12>In order for this to happen effectively and safely, faculty must create an environment of trust and support in the classroom that allows for students to take intellectual and emotional risks in their thinking, discovering vital links between the course material and their own lives. If students do not feel encouraged to think critically and expansively and supported when they attempt to do so, they are significantly less likely to have a transformative learning experience. This kind of encouragement begins by fostering an environment of respect in each class meeting by patiently listening as students work out burgeoning ideas and by appreciating students who take informed risks in discussions and writing assignments. The goal is to create a space in which students can make these kinds of discoveries *on their own* so that the work is most empowering and impactful. We believe that faculty should allow students to make connections through thoughtful course design and lesson planning; they should not force associations that students may not be emotionally prepared to consider. As L. Dee Fink recognizes in his “Taxonomy of Significant Learning,”

When students are able to see and understand the connections between different things, an important kind of learning has occurred. Sometimes they make connections between specific ideas, between various learning experiences (say, between courses or whole disciplines), or between different realms of life (say, between school and work or between school and leisure life). . . . The act of making new connections gives learners a new form of power, especially intellectual power. (36)

We believe it is incredibly important to offer all students—but especially survivors of sexual violence and harassment—opportunities to experience this form of power. For those of us who have had our sense of agency diminished or questioned through acts of violence or harassment, it can be tremendously valuable to regain some confidence in the intellectually stimulating environment of a college classroom.

<13>Each of the Brontë sisters has a novel that would work well in this context of reading violence—alluded to, threatened, and acted upon—and exploring the relationship between fiction, English marriage laws, and women’s rights. In *Jane Eyre*, when Rochester tries to get Jane to stay with him and become his mistress he tells her, “Jane! will you hear reason?” (he stooped and approached his lips to my ear) ‘because, if you won’t, I’ll try violence’” (302). He does not act upon this threat, but a discussion of the power dynamic between them as employer and employee and as wealthy man and kept woman helps illuminate the difficulty of this situation for Jane and her social and legal vulnerability at this point in the novel. In *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff essentially brags about his abusive treatment of Isabella saying to Nelly, “I’ve sometimes relented, from pure lack of invention, in my experiments on what she could endure, and still creep shamefully cringing back! But tell him [Edgar], also, to set his fraternal and magisterial heart at ease: that I keep strictly within the limits of the law” (133). Heathcliff’s horrifying claim that he has stayed “within the limits of the law” while testing the limits of what

his wife can endure naturally invites a classroom dive into marriage laws in the nineteenth century and what did and did not constitute abuse in the eyes of the law.

<14>Perhaps the Brontë novel with the greatest pedagogical potential in this arena is Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). In it, Helen writes in her diary about her husband Arthur early in their marriage: "He likes to have me near him; and, though he is peevish and testy with his servants and his dogs, he is gentle and kind to me. What he would be, if I did not so watchfully anticipate his wants, and so carefully avoid, or immediately desist from doing anything that has a tendency to irritate or disturb him, with however little reason, I cannot tell" (225). Helen's confession to her diary is an early hint at Arthur's desire to control her. Helen recognizes her husband's capacity for anger in his testiness with servants and animals as well as the fact that his sweetness towards her depends on her not "doing anything that has a tendency to irritate or disturb him." Perhaps most importantly, she notes the capriciousness of his judgements ("with however little reason, I cannot tell") and the psychological toll they take on her as she must "watchfully anticipate" in order to be treated gently and kindly. Her "I cannot tell" is particularly heartbreaking as it points to her inability, try as she might, to comprehend and predict Arthur's moods and desires.

<15>A close reading of this scene asks students to interrogate how Arthur has established control over his wife and its psychological impact on her, implicitly training the reader to recognize patterns of abuse. While this moment in Helen's diary does not depict an act of direct physical violence, her entry poignantly conveys her fear of Arthur even though she does not explicitly write, "I am afraid of what my husband will do to me." She lives in fear of "doing anything" that would offend him. Furthermore, as students continue to read the novel carefully, they discover that this moment Helen records is but one event in a series that all point to Arthur's abusive nature as an intimate partner. He leaves her for long periods of time, purposely stokes jealousy in her, tries to manipulate their son into distrusting her, drinks heavily, limits her access to money and means of independence, and has an affair with another woman.

<16>The study of this novel can be particularly eye-opening in terms of #MeToo when students discover through lectures, readings, and discussions how this couple's social system contributed to and perpetuated Helen's abuse. When students read and discuss *Tenant* while also studying the legal doctrine of coverture, the double standard enshrined in English divorce law that required women prove "aggravated adultery" to obtain a divorce while men need only prove adultery, a married woman's limited property and custody rights, and the social stigma of separation and divorce, they come to understand the ways that English society hindered women, including mothers of young children like Helen, from gaining the legal and social footing needed to ensure their physical and psychological wellbeing and financial security (Hager). While some of these restrictions on women's property and custody rights may seem arcane to students, the presence of a social and legal structure that disincentivizes justice for domestic and sexual violence will strike them as quite familiar.

<17>In addition to this kind of historical and cultural study that helps students understand more deeply that gender-based violence does not happen in a vacuum, faculty can introduce contemporary terminology and frameworks for understanding this kind of violence. For instance, when studying a novel such as Anne Brontë's *Tenant* or Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*,

an instructor can share the “Power and Control Wheel” (see Fig. 1), first developed in the 1980s by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project to make “the pattern, intent and impact of [physical and sexual] violence visible” (“FAQs”). This wheel emphasizes how an abuser utilizes “an array” of tactics that may be “less easily identified” than the bruises or cuts of a physical attack but that collectively and “firmly establish a pattern of intimidation and control in the relationship” (National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence). This activity helpfully supplements in-depth historical and cultural study by encouraging students to closely read the dialogue, body movements, and narration of a particular scene. The wheel’s spectrum of behaviors, the majority of which are not physical, enables students to reconceive intimate partner violence and helps them interpret the silences of Victorian texts.



Fig. 1 “Power and Control Wheel” developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project and distributed by the National Domestic Violence Hotline, [www.thehotline.org/is-this-abuse/abuse-defined/](http://www.thehotline.org/is-this-abuse/abuse-defined/).

<18>A class on *The Woman in White*, for example, might examine the scene in which Laura Fairlie attempts to end her engagement to Sir Percival Glyde. The moment has nearly everything



one could want in a dramatic narrative: nervous characters to heighten the drama (Sir Percival's foot taps "incessantly" on the floor); a speech by a central, sympathetic character; the hallmark polite language and deference of Victorian marriage plots; and great expectation on the part of the reader who believes this will be Laura's great opportunity to break free and possibly marry her true love, Walter Hartright. What happens, though, is that Laura cedes her power to withdraw from the engagement and instead admits to loving someone else. She asks that Sir Percival will break off the engagement, but he refuses to do so saying, "You have said more than enough ... to make it the dearest object of my life to KEEP the engagement"—a response that causes Laura to "[start] violently" with a "faint cry of surprise" (Collins 173). Sir Percival, according to Marian, acts "with perfect delicacy and discretion" in this scene and yet his words devastate Laura. Asking students to analyze Sir Percival's delicacy and discretion in concert with his physical movements and Laura's submissive speech encourages them to see the ways he strategically manipulates Laura's social and psychological vulnerability at this moment. When students recognize how Sir Percival exploits Laura's submissive personality and her emotionally-loaded devotion to her deceased father, they practice the kind of critical thinking crucial to understanding their own experiences of manipulation and gaslighting. This scene does not contain a direct act of physical or sexual violence, but it sets up a psychological power dynamic that Sir Percival will continue to abuse after the two are married.

<19>Furthermore, readers are to assume, based on his behavior here and in future scenes, that despite Laura's admitted lack of affection for him, Sir Percival will take advantage of the conjugal rights legally granted him by marriage. As Laura later tells Marian, "It is very hard for a woman to confess that the man to whom she has given her whole life is the man of all others who cares least for the gift. If you were married yourself, Marian—and especially if you were happily married—you would feel for me as no single woman CAN feel, however kind and true she may be" (261-62). The way Laura distinguishes between married and single women here suggests that she speaks about sex and a wife's "duty" to her husband. She also tells Marian about the honeymoon when Sir Percival learned Walter's name:

He helped me out, and followed me upstairs as usual. But the moment we were in the drawing-room, he locked the door, pushed me down into a chair, and stood over me with his hands on my shoulders. "Ever since that morning when you made your audacious confession to me at Limmeridge," he said, "I have wanted to find out the man, and I found him in your face to-night. Your drawing-master was the man, and his name is Hartright. You shall repent it, and he shall repent it, to the last hour of your lives. Now go to bed and dream of him if you like, with the marks of my horsewhip on his shoulders." (265)

Laura's description of this violent moment clearly depicts what readers and Marian have feared. As in the Power and Control Wheel described earlier, Percival dominates over Laura with both physical force and threats to harm a loved one. Later in the novel, he will seek further control of her financial assets and he will arrange for her imprisonment and loss of legal identity.

<20>We have found that students feel empowered to use this kind of contemporary language about physical and sexual violence in analyzing Victorian literature and that our historical distance from the nineteenth century, as discussed earlier, helps students approach this subject matter objectively. While we have mentioned Brontë and Collins's novels, many Victorian texts could work this way in an undergraduate classroom including Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the*

*D'Urbervilles*, George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, among many others. In seeing the violence amidst the silences of Victorian literature, students come to a better understanding of how sexual violence depends upon and thrives in an atmosphere of silence, both then and now. And quite powerfully, the brainwork students employ in analyzing these moments allows them to practice silence-breaking in the shelter of an intellectual exercise.

<21>While many novels from various periods and traditions could arguably generate useful discussions in relation to #MeToo, we think Victorian novels are particularly well-suited to this kind of anti-rape-culture work because of their consistent engagement with the status and lives of women. In their big-data article “The Transformation of Gender in English-Language Fiction,” Ted Underwood, David Bamman, and Sabrina Lee discuss their examination of 104,000 books and their discovery that “gender divisions between characters have become less sharply marked over the last 170 years. In the middle of the nineteenth century, very different language is used to describe fictional men and women. But that difference weakens steadily as we move forward to the present; the actions and attributes of characters are less clearly sorted into gender categories” (Underwood et al. 1). This maps neatly onto what most people perceive to be the normative gender dynamics of Victorian literature and culture: men and women operating in separate spheres. As George Levine writes, “the gender boundaries in Victorian novels ... are almost always sharply drawn” (26). The research team’s more striking conclusion, however, is their observation of “an eye-opening, under-discussed decline in the proportion of fiction actually written by women, which drops by half (from roughly 50% of titles to roughly 25%) as we move from 1850 to 1950. The number of characters who are women or girls also drops” (Underwood et al. 2). As they note, “women invent female characters much more often than men do, so any decline in the number of women writers will create a corresponding decline in description of women” (Underwood et al. 5). Across the 200 years they study, this gender gap remains “depressingly stable” as “[i]n books written by men, women occupy on average only [a] quarter to a third of the character-space. In books written by women, the division is much closer to equal” (Underwood et al. 10).

<22>What this means for us is that nineteenth-century novels provide greater access to women writers and women characters than those of the twentieth century. Because of their greater representation of women, Victorian novels offer us a unique opportunity to study women’s lives in fiction and in everyday life—including their sexual lives. Additionally, the prevalence of the marriage plot in Victorian literature forces us to consider what women’s lives were like in the nineteenth century in terms of love, courtship, marriage, sex, and family life. These aspects of women’s lives, then and now, come with serious risks. Women’s legal rights in terms of marriage, divorce, property, and child custody have certainly expanded dramatically, but students will nonetheless be able to see the fresh ways in which Victorian literature speaks to our contemporary #MeToo moment and the persistence of identifiable elements of rape culture.

## **Conclusion**

<23>Some instructors may be hesitant to connect contemporary debates about #MeToo with their Victorian literature courses out of concern that doing so would be anachronistic. Thinking about the ways Victorian novels intersect with today’s patriarchal culture, however, does not

cheaply capitalize on a temporary moment of social activism and feminist fervor. Rather, it quite simply responds to the reality of the lives of students in our classrooms. Far too many students are survivors of assault, trauma, abuse, harassment, and life within a culture that conditions them to expect violence, and we, as a faculty member and a student, recognize the potential that close readings, respectful intellectual discussions, and careful written analyses have in combating the silence that builds around these experiences. Instructors have the opportunity to highlight the relevance of Victorian literature in our contemporary moment with students whose age puts them at greater risk for sexual victimization; and, consequentially, our modeling for students how to connect the dots of women's lived experiences, and the gender norms and legal frameworks that shape their lives, has the potential to help survivors break out of a cycle of self-blame and to help all students recognize and resist rape culture ("Victims of Sexual Violence"). If students can analyze what contributed to or led up to a moment of gender-based violence in a work of literature, perhaps they will be able to better understand what happened to them, and in doing so to gain some agency over it.

<24>Because Victorian literature is permeated with the concerns of women and their sexual and marital challenges, we do not need to drastically re-work courses for them to speak to our current #MeToo moment. Rather, we should craft our courses knowing of the realities of our students' lives and with the goal of building a supportive, intellectually-rigorous learning environment in which students trust that they can discuss violence against women in the Victorian era while also implicitly or explicitly connecting what they read with their own experiences of discrimination, harassment, or assault. Creating a community of trust in the classroom space and cultivating respect for the narrative expressions of women's lives can do a range of good for students in our colleges and universities, and in their lives beyond the classroom.

### Notes

(1)Because of the way Miller's whole statement works to emphasize the collective force of her experiences, the writers highly recommend reading her victim impact statement in its entirety.

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