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The Family Artist: Women's Narratives of Self-Help and Self-Sacrifice in Victorian England

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When we contemplate the failure of pecuniary means, as it is regarded by the world, and attempt to calculate the immense variety of channels through which the suffering it produces is made to flow, in consequence of the customs and habits of society, I believe they will be found to extend through every variety of human life, to the utmost range of human feeling.

—Sarah Stickney Ellis (1839), *The Women of England*

Every one's experience may furnish dozens of cases of poor women suddenly thrown adrift—widows with families, orphan girls, reduced gentlewomen—clinging helplessly to every male relative or friend they have, year after year, sinking deeper in poverty or debt, eating the bitter bread of charity, or compelled to bow an honest pride to the cruellest humiliations, every one of which might have been spared them by the early practice of self-dependence.

—Dinah Mulock Craik (1858), *A Woman's Thoughts About Women*

<1>Bankruptcy in the Victorian period damaged more than just the pocketbooks of creditors and debtors: for men, it signified failure in the profession that defined their identity in the world; for their wives and daughters, it signified total economic and social uncertainty. As Sarah Stickney Ellis notes in the epigraph, the consequences of bankruptcy can be found to “extend through every variety of human life, to the utmost range of human feeling” (318). Money is deeply rooted in questions of social value and self-worth. The affective impact of bankruptcy appears at its most powerful in the fiction of the nineteenth century. In novels of bankruptcy spanning

from the 1840s to 1880s, authors frequently depict patriarchs that respond to financial ruin with violent escapes, ranging from suicides (Melmotte and Merdle) and deaths (Rothsay and Tulliver) to decampments (the Vernons).⁽¹⁾ In contrast to the men, daughters of ruined fathers, for example Olive Rothsay, Gertrude Lorimer, Amy Dorrit, Marian Erle, and Florence Dombey, typically respond with surprising strength and heroism, ranging from professional and economic pursuits to family-building and community-building.⁽²⁾ Volatile market conditions and rapidly evolving bankruptcy legislation made financial ruin a part of everyday life, and women were forced to become more involved in family financial affairs. Victorian middle-class daughters—whose education prepared them for marriage and society, not professional careers—were particularly vulnerable to the economic turmoil that hit England in the 1840s. Nevertheless, fictional and nonfictional accounts of their lives show that they leverage their fathers’ failures to gain social and political agency, and this agency appears in surprising expressions of professional identity, from moral strength and steady devotion to practices in humility and solidarity.

<2>When daughters lost their gentility due to their fathers’ financial ruin, their education best prepared them for professions such as writer, artist, and governess, with some notable historical examples including Harriet Martineau, Dinah Craik, and Fanny Corboux. Governess was the most common profession for daughters of bankruptcy.⁽³⁾ The bestselling author Dinah Craik, who was a daughter of financial ruin herself, considers the profession of artist within the larger context of women’s self-help and self-dependence in her essays *A Woman’s Thoughts About Women*, the short story “The Story of Elisabetta Sirani,” and the novel *Olive*. Inspired by Craik’s novel *Olive*, this essay focuses on narratives of women who become artists in response to their family’s financial ruin. Antonia Losano observes that many critics of Anne Brontë’s novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which also features a painter-heroine, typically focus on fictional artists as surrogates for the author—Losano offers a critique of this approach, suggesting that the professional qualities of women artists are just as important as the biographical details. Losano suggests that “we must see the scenes of painting in *Tenant* as barometers for the novel’s radical view of women’s role as creative producers during a particularly complex moment in art history” (7). This essay examines Dinah Craik’s use of the profession of women artists as a barometer for larger questions about women’s education and preparation for professional work, with emphasis on the delicate intersection between women’s domestic economic affairs and their entry into the very public profession of the visual arts. Choosing art for a profession offered higher risk than other professions, such as writing, which allowed women to work independently in privacy of their home. Work as an artist required that women circulate in public spaces to engage in instruction, practice, selling, and displaying their art. Such public exposure appears

at the heart of Craik's efforts to draw attention to the challenges women faced as they navigated uncertain economic conditions and cautiously entered professional life.

<3>This essay is organized into three sections that explore the following questions: (1) How did the social and economic landscape contribute to women's complicated entry into the professions in the nineteenth century, amid the rhetoric of economic failure and need to support their families? (2) How do narratives of professional labor as a woman artist reveal some of the overarching institutional and cultural barriers to women's entry in the professions in the nineteenth century? (3) What values are privileged in narratives featuring women artists, and how does the novel *Olive* depict these values in terms of the relational components of work and family? I frame these sections in terms of self-dependence, self-doubt, and self-sacrifice to narrate the unique challenges women face when they enter a profession in the visual arts. These categories consider the measure of confidence and its fluctuations, which provides insight into the social, psychological, and institutional systems that define women's lives in the Victorian period.

Self-Help Narratives and Self-Dependence

<4>Samuel Smiles defines self-help, in part, as the willingness of the individual "to rely upon their own efforts in life, rather than depend upon the help or patronage of others" (Preface iv). Such a definition, however, largely excludes women from the genre, because they were raised to be dependent, first on their fathers, then on their husbands. The degree to which women were already departing from such an ideology and relying upon their own resources became evident in the United Kingdom's 1851 census, which revealed information about women's actual economic lives. Tracy Seeley observes that the census "provided the 'hard facts' for asserting that women already *had* a place in the national economy, and that their roles in the public sphere should be reconceived" (94). Among these hard facts was the statistic that "forty-three per cent of the female population over twenty was either unmarried or widowed, and that half the female population worked for pay" (Seeley 94). The 1851 census began to transform the public's perception of professional women, and it influenced two decades of proto-feminist rhetoric.

<5>Among the most marked responses to the data of the 1851 census appears in the life and works of Dinah Craik. Craik herself numbered among the unmarried women working for pay when the census data was collected in 1851. Craik's father Thomas Mulock was a clergyman who "was repeatedly consigned to the Stafford County Lunatic Asylum, and whose correspondence records his abusive relationship with

his wife and children” (Bourrier 203). His absence and lack of financial support spurred Craik to write for a living. Despite her difficult upbringing and the necessity foisted upon her that she earn her own living as a writer, Craik rarely publicized these circumstances in framing her own profession as a writer. In her public writing on women and economics, however, Dinah Craik draws upon these types of circumstances in the lives of other women. In direct response to the census data, Craik opens her collection of essays *A Woman’s Thoughts about Women* (1858) with an essay for single women on “Something to Do,” where she states: “It is the single women, belonging to those supernumerary ranks, which political economists tell us, are yearly increasing, who need most thinking about” (9). Every essay in the collection begins with such references to the larger social and political forces at work, with Craik presenting her ideas within the context of what simply cannot be avoided, because it is supported by facts, noting that “in the present day, whether voluntarily or not, one-half of our women are *obliged* to take care of themselves—obliged to look solely to themselves for maintenance, position, occupation, amusement, reputation, life” (“Self-Dependence” 29). Dinah Craik builds the case for women’s increased training in professional and economic matters in her essays and fiction, by framing the need in terms of the lack in number and quality of male providers.

<6>The need for women to work was not merely caused by the excess number of unmarried women in the British population; it was also attributed to the shifting economic landscape in which bankruptcy and profligacy were not uncommon. Smiles describes the consequences of this shift as appearing in “the rank frauds committed by men who dare to be dishonest, but do not dare to seem poor; and in the desperate dashes at fortune, in which the pity is not so much for those who fail, as for the hundreds of innocent families who are so often involved in their ruin” (301). An 1855 editorial in *The London Times* responds to the economic danger posed by unlimited liability laws and fraudulent speculators, referring specifically to the highly publicized damage caused by the firm of Strahan, Paul, and Bates: “Go where you will, you hear of some fresh case of misery caused by their unprincipled dealings with property not their own,” and the editors refer to various types of lost savings, such as “the widow’s portion—the orphan’s pittance—the sea-officer’s prize-money” (*The London Times* 1855). Dinah Craik adopts a similar line of rhetoric when referring only to women:

Every one’s experience may furnish dozens of cases of poor women suddenly thrown adrift—widows with families, orphan girls, reduced gentlewomen—clinging helplessly to every male relative or friend they have, year after year, sinking deeper in poverty or debt, eating the bitter bread of charity, or

compelled to bow an honest pride to the cruellest humiliations, every one of which might have been spared them by the early practice of self-dependence. (“Self-Dependence” 31)

In this excerpt, Craik draws broad strokes over the issue of sudden financial ruin for middle-class women, identifying three specific cases in which women are “thrown adrift”: widows, orphans, and “reduced gentlewomen.” To be thrown adrift almost always signifies that the male providers have suddenly departed or experienced great financial loss or failure. She ends her statement with a call for women to be supported as independent wage-earners.

<7>Despite the negativity and failure associated with men’s bankruptcies and women being “thrown adrift,” Craik and other women writers have written essays about the benefits that work confers on young women in consequence of financial ruin. In “Something to Do” (1858), Craik writes: “this chapter must be understood especially to refer, not to those whom ill or good fortune—*query*, is it not often the latter?—has forced to earn their bread; but ‘to young ladies,’ who have never been brought up to do anything” (11). Her interjection subtly expresses that it is the “good fortune” of financial ruin that propels middle-class women into professional work. In “A Paris Atelier” (1886), Craik notes that women’s work “in our generation it has become, not only necessary, but essential; nay *even desirable*” (emphasis added 183). Craik refers to such changes in women’s economic situation as the product of “good fortune” and as a “desirable” outcome. Similarly, Marianne Farningham writes in *Girlhood* (1869): “It has been considered a sort of hardship for girls to be obliged to work. My dear young friends, do not you believe that. Very probably it is the *greatest good* that could happen to you” (emphasis added 30). Farningham’s chapter on “Work” shares many of the same features of Craik’s chapter on “Something to Do”: both authors emphasize the benefits of labor, particularly charitable labor. Most famously, Harriet Martineau heralds her newfound freedom to write professionally in response to her family’s financial ruin in her *Autobiography*: “I, who had been obliged to write before breakfast, or in some private way, had henceforth liberty to do my own work in my own way; for we had lost our gentility” (141-42).

<8>All of these exclamations about the benefits of labor are typically framed, on the one hand, in terms of promoting women of leisure to be active in engaging in charitable good works, and on the other hand, in terms of preparing them as they move from a position of dependence on their husbands and fathers to self-dependence, when those husbands and fathers cease to provide financially, due to death, illness, or ruin. By constructing economic necessity as an opportunity, rather

than as a misfortune, women writers created narratives of self-help for women that could respond to the institutional challenges single middle-class women faced in the nineteenth century, while also constructing a public image of the professional woman. In the past, scholars have observed that women in the nineteenth century could not “become active economic agents” unless “forced by necessity,” such as when a woman was “without either an income of her own or a man to support her” (Davidoff and Hall 272). More recent work from Jill Rappoport, Deanna Kreisel, Ilana Blumberg, and Nancy Henry suggests that women found other means of accessing economic agency, such as through gift exchange, conservation, self-sacrifice, and investment.⁽⁴⁾ In *Material Ambitions: Self-Help and Victorian Literature*, Rebecca Richardson offers an excellent reading of Harriet Martineau’s experience with her family’s economic challenges and how they spurred her to hard work. Nancy Henry writes about women novelists and their participation in cultures of investment in *Women, Literature and Finance in Victorian England: Cultures of Investment*. Talia Schaffer, in *Communities of Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction*, provides an important reading of communities and relationships in the Victorian novel that privilege caregiving activities beyond financial obligations.

<9> Craik argues that a woman who can “take care of herself can always take care of other people” and that her “working-value therein is doubled and trebled, and society respects her accordingly” (“Self-Dependence” 34). This statement echoes one made by Samuel Johnson, as quoted by Samuel Smiles: “No man can help others that wants help himself; we must have enough before we have to spare” (qtd in Smiles 299). In comparison to Smiles, Johnson, and others, Dinah Craik’s tone expresses more urgency, calling her readers to action, challenging her readers to see their choice and pursuit of a profession as “entail[ing] more, much more, than flighty young genius or easily-satisfied mediocrity ever dreams of; labour incessant, courage inexhaustible, sustained under difficulties, misfortunes, rebuffs of every conceivable kind” (“Female Professions” 54). Self-help for women in the nineteenth century often means relying on one’s own resources in the face of institutional barriers against working middle-class women, while surmounting the debts their husbands and fathers leave behind to provide for the families and restore trust and connection in their communities. As the next section will illustrate, self-help for women also means surmounting socially internalized feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, not only to build a professional identity, but also, to build or maintain families, while also widening the sphere of their influence.

Women Artists and Self-Doubt

<10>Emily Mary Osborn's painting *Nameless and Friendless* (1857) depicts a young unmarried woman standing in a shop with her younger brother, attempting to sell her art. Critics offer myriad visual cues to suggest that she and her brother have been recently orphaned, left destitute, and obliged to sell artwork out of necessity, including "the woman's bent head, troubled expression, and fidgety hands" (Denisoff 154-55) and her "downcast glance as well as an air of youthful fragility and vulnerability" (Cherry 37). Middle-class women who were forced to rely on their own resources, often in the aftermath of a father's or husband's financial ruin, had a limited set of professions they could occupy while still maintaining respectability, which included art.⁽⁵⁾ The woman in Osborn's painting is not a trained professional artist, but rather, an orphaned middle-class woman who has turned her drawing room leisure activity into a means of earning an income. Nameless and friendless, she has no experience in the field and she has no mentors.

<11>The young woman appears as the object of male gazes rather than as a subject who sees, who creates, and who speaks. Her raised eyebrows, slightly crinkled forehead, and vacant eyes staring off toward the ground, indicate a kind of knowledge and patient expectation that she is being judged. The composition of the painting shows a pattern of male gazes that draw attention to the "sexualised encounters and economies of the modern city, its spaces of pleasure, exchange and consumption" (Cherry 28), and that simultaneously depicts "women as individuals worthy of respect and as objects inviting sexualized derision" (Denisoff 155). Women are seen primarily as objects, not as creators, painters, and visionaries. The woman in Osborn's painting timidly presents her work for scrutiny, and Osborn the artist, does the same.

<12>Denis Denisoff describes the second pair of woman and child exiting the shop as a "visual echo that implies that the heroine's situation is not unique." Stepping outside the painting to potential viewers of this work, we might imagine another echo in the form of living women artists seeing their own struggle reflected and their own self-doubt affirmed. In "Art, Ambition, and Sisterhood in the 1850s," Jan Marsh writes at length about the institutional barriers to confidence in artistic work. Marsh points to theories that frame men as creative artists, while women are depicted as mere "imitators": "Such theories surely discouraged many girls who were gifted with greater dexterity than their brothers yet led to believe they lacked the same potential; for to learn early on that 'no woman can paint' is something of a self-fulfilling statement" (35). The literature on women artists reflects a pattern of self-doubt that can be linked to larger institutional concerns.

<13>While the story inside the painting emphasizes economic need, difficulty, and self-doubt for the woman artist, the story of the artist who painted it points to the broader reach of women's professional identities. Emily Mary Osborn exhibited *Nameless and Friendless* at the Royal Academy in London in 1857, the same year that the *Society for Female Artists* was formed to address the professional needs of female artists. The painting makes the political statement that women artists face the additional challenge of systematic discrimination based on gender. Emily Mary Osborn paints not only to earn a living, but to make a social difference, to make political statements, and to make an impact on people's lives.⁽⁶⁾ The Royal Academy of Art, for example did not admit female students until 1860. Patricia Zakreski notes that the "first female student, Anna Laura Hereford, was eventually only grudgingly granted entrance, her admittance was allowed after much debate and resistance when it was discovered that the 'L. Hereford' who had applied and been accepted was a woman" (88). Bourrier notes that Craik was friends with Hereford and wrote to her brother that "I wouldn't like to be Laura the first day she goes in & takes her place in the Antiques School" (68). Craik was aware of the unique challenges artists faced navigating the public sphere.

<14>On the subject of self-help, difficulty, and the impact of women artists, Elizabeth Ellet (1859) published *Women Artists in All Ages*—the same year Smiles's *Self-Help* was released—and she prefaces the book with the objective that it "show what woman has done" through a "faithful record of her personal experiences" in order to inspire her readers to do the same, thus keeping it in league with the developing genre of self-help. While most collective biographies of the nineteenth century share this same objective,⁽⁷⁾ Ellet also foregrounds the kinds of difficulties that comprise the historical record of women's professional lives, noting that the "general conditions" have been sometimes "favourable or unfavourable to her efforts," and that the biographies present a "view of the early struggles and trials, the persevering industry, and the well-earned triumphs" of women who have been successful in their pursuits as artists. Not only does she hope that her readers will go and do likewise, but also, that they will be "inspire[d] with courage and resolution ... to overcome difficulties" (v). Ellet suggests that many obstacles have been overcome to lead to the increased production of art by women artists in the nineteenth century. She points ahead to the much bigger question about women in art, that it's not just about women earning a living, but about having an impact on the art world, and on Art as a craft and discipline.

<15>One of the Victorian women artists featured in Ellet's work is Marie Françoise Catherine Doetter Corboux (1812–1883), popularly known as Fanny Corboux. Her biography was often used to inspire others to achieve success in the face of difficulty,

and every major account of Fanny Corbaux's professional career begins with the story of her father's ruin during the banking crisis of the 1820s.⁽⁸⁾ The financial setback caused by her father forced Fanny to become an artist working for wages. In *Clever Girls of Our Time: Who Became Famous Women*, Joseph Johnson observes that her professional career was "necessitated by her father . . . [who] found himself, in his advanced age, with debility of mind and body, utterly unable to retrieve his position," and that Fanny "must now endeavour to use the talents for maintenance, which had previously been used for amusement" (144). Laboring for any other reason than out of necessity would have otherwise been prohibited to women of her class.

<16>Corbaux's biographers draw attention to her lack of formal training and the efforts she took to persevere despite this lack of education. Corbaux "had received only superficial instruction in drawing" (Ellet 218), limited to the "crude lessons denominated in schools as 'learning to draw,' but which would render her very little aid in perfecting herself in her profession" (Johnson 144). In addition to her lack of instruction, she had lack of means to gain instruction and lack of acquaintances in art to advise her in how best to proceed. Elizabeth Ellet describes Fanny as possessing "the ardent spirit of youth" and as "sparing herself no severe labor," such that, through her own valiant efforts she not only was able to support her father and herself, but also receive medals from the Society of Arts (Ellet 218). Joseph Johnson writes at greater length about Fanny's virtues of fortitude, noting the additional obstacles she faced as a woman: "[women] must, if they are determined to make art the study of their life, follow that object with difficulty, at all times surrounded with lets and hindrances" (Johnson, *Clever Girls* 147). Johnson observes that Corbaux won her position in the art world by practicing "continuous and untiring labour" (149). Likewise, in the encyclopedic compendium *Men of the Time* (1856), Corbaux is depicted as fearless when it comes to undertaking studies to improve her knowledge and talents, despite restrictions placed upon her due to her sex: "To Miss Corbaux belongs the merit of having removed in one instance the barrier which separated her sister-students from art knowledge. Finding that there was no regulation more stringent than that of custom to prevent their attendance at the Academy lectures, she obtained the co-operation of some other ladies, and endeavoured by example to smooth the path for less dauntless spirits" (*Men of the Time* 826). Corbaux's narrative is not so much about her contribution to Art, as it is about how she paved the way for other women to become artists.

<17>Like so many other narratives of women artists, Fanny Corbaux's journey to become an artist is fractured by messages of self-doubt. Johnson and her other biographers frequently quote Fanny's most self-effacing statements about her

growth as an artist, such as that she had “little idea” of painting, and in her early trials, she frequently “sponged out the face, weeping over [her] disappointment” (145). While Johnson emphasizes Fanny’s persistence in surmounting the difficulty of learning to paint well, the second message Fanny is sending to us is that the real difficulty was overcoming socially constructed messages of self-doubt and lack of self-worth as a woman artist.

<18>To give context to this culture of self-doubt and women artists, I point to Craik’s short story “The Story of Elisabetta Sirani” (1859), where Craik re-imagines the circumstances surrounding the Italian Baroque artist’s rise to fame. In the story, when the father falls ill, the daughter Elisabetta proposes that she attempt to earn money by her art:

Elisabetta’s cheek flushed, her eyes sparkled, words rose to her lips; but she stopped, thinking of the pain they would give to her helpless father. At last she said timidly, ‘Father, you know I have been your pupil these four years; in that time, I think—I hope—I have learned enough to gain something by my paintings. Will you let me try?’ (Craik 386).

Craik describes her voice as timid, hesitating in her appeal to her father, saying “I think,” qualifying her statement with the demure statement, “I hope.” Finally, she simply asks for permission to try. In her narrative commentary, Craik applauds Elisabetta Sirani for her “woman’s tact” in appealing to her father’s prejudices against women artists, despite the training he had given her. Later, when Elisabetta brings home her first earnings, she emphasizes that she did not earn the money on her own, but that “we”—she and her father, made it happen. She says “all I have learned in painting I owe to thee. I am only thy hand to work in thy stead, until it shall please the blessed Madonna to restore thee. Therefore this shall be devoted, like all thy other earnings, good and kind father, to the general benefit of the family” (387). Craik emphasizes collaboration, community, and spiritual devotion in women’s success.

<19>While today we might critique Elisabetta Sirani’s rhetoric as lacking self-confidence, in this story, Craik appears to be strategizing how women might make waves in arenas previously closed to them. At the same time, she establishes equivalency between the earnings of the daughter and those of her father, stipulating that they both benefit the family in the family fund. Craik attributes her father’s acceptance of the money and this equivalency to “Elisabetta’s loving deceit, aided by the natural vanity of mankind, made him actually believe that his daughter’s unselfish gifts were but a due requital for his instruction in art” (387). Craik suggests

that humility and spiritual devotion were acts of survival that led to progress for women professionals.

Dinah Craik's *Olive* and Self-Sacrifice

<20>In the novel *Olive* (1850), the father Captain Rothesay behaves like so many other men in bankruptcy narratives, which is to collapse under the sudden impact of his financial failure: his “proud nature could not withstand the shock [of impending ruin]; shame smote him, and he died” (103). His failure is undignified, but it opens the door for his daughter Olive Rothesay to act. In the aftermath of her father’s ruin and death, Olive Rothesay “awoke to consciousness and strength. . . She became a woman—one of those of whom the world contains few—at once gentle and strong, meek and fearless, patient to endure, heroic to act” (100). Her demeanor takes a sudden turn to courageousness and dignity that causes others to view her with “a respect not unmingled with awe” (101). Olive’s story reflects the historical pattern outlined in the previous sections, and her confidence comes not from an idea of herself as a professional, but as someone who can sacrifice anything to support her family.

<21>Although the Rothesays are wealthy during much of Olive’s girlhood, Olive is excluded from society and education in the female arts (dancing, singing, piano-playing), because of her disfigurement. Bourrier notes that Olive—due to her physical deformity and her lack of investment in forming a society marriage—was able to engage in the more public work of art, because men do not typically notice her or take an interest in her. Olive’s decision to sell her own paintings to redeem her father’s debt to Harold Gwynne reflects her identity as an atypical lady. She chose art because her “desultory education” made her unfit to be a governess (118), and the “oddity” of her portfolio of works, the narrator suggests, “showed the spirit of Art that dictated them. There were no pretty, well-finished, young-ladyish sketches of tumbledown cottages. . . . Olive’s productions were all as rough as rough could be” (121). When Olive arrives at the decision to become an artist, “it was from no yearning after fame, no genius-led ambition, but from the mere desire of earning money” (119). She transforms what would be considered a feminine art into an economic venture. Jess Donohoe observes that “Olive’s professional female character does not, then, entirely rewrite the existing female ideal, as she retains her commitment to sacrificial devotion to others. She does, however, claim for women the right to work, and the right to escape some aspects of the traditional female ideal” (37).

<22>In Olive's journey as an artist, Craik shows the institutional obstacles and psychological barriers to success that a woman must overcome before she can be successful. Olive's interactions with the male artist Michael Vanbrugh showcases some of these difficulties on an interpersonal level. His instinctual response to her desire to become an artist is: "Pshaw—a woman make an artist! Ridiculous!...Ha! take the rubbish away—don't come near my picture" (121). He further supports his position with a statement that echoes the theories about women artists that were circulating at the time, saying that "it is an acknowledged fact that no woman ever was a great painter, poet, or musician" (123). Furthermore, "custom and education would certainly stunt its growth" (123). The impact that custom and education has on Olive's personal confidence and belief in her capabilities is evident in Craik's expressions of her doubt: "labouring secretly and without encouragement, Olive found her progress in drawing—she did not venture to call these humble efforts *Art*" (119), and Olive declares that "I have sometimes thought my drawings were not so very, very bad" (120). Like Fanny Corboux and the artist depicted in *Nameless and Friendless*, Olive too experiences self-doubt and underestimates her abilities before she can even be rejected. This celebration of humility is largely a rhetorical choice: to depict a woman as confident and ambitious in the professions would be highly distasteful. To depict her as capable of ascending to the higher service of Christian duty and service to her family and community is considered heroic.

<23>Self-help narratives directed at women—such as Joseph Johnson's *Heroines of Our Time* (1860) and Sarah Stickney Ellis's *Daughters of England* (1842)—emphasize that greatness comes from helping others, not the self. In Johnson's collections, the biographies are designed to be inspirational, and they include a range of English and American women, from Florence Nightingale and Charlotte Brontë to Margaret Fuller. However, the difference in content and tone from that of Smiles is substantial. Johnson's chapter on "Ministering Women" describes women's love as knowing "no bounds":

it overcomes the strongest repugnances; it prompts her to fly through scenes of death, to relieve the wounded sufferer; to face disgust and misery, so that the wretched may be consoled; to tear off the trappings of luxury, to clothe the naked; and causes her not to hesitate to bare her bosom to the winds, if, haply, the afflicted may be preserved from the blast. (2-3)

Johnson's advice to women is rooted in self-sacrifice rather than self-help. As Ilana Blumberg observes in *Victorian Sacrifice*, self-sacrifice does not necessarily signify "painful, solitary self-sacrifice in service of another's good," but rather, as Blumberg argues, mid-century novelists challenged this view by producing "an ethical realism

suggesting that virtuous action could serve the collective benefit of all parties involved” (2). Rather than overcoming difficulty to lift themselves out of poverty, as the men are advised in their self-help guides, women are advised to sacrifice themselves on behalf of others and for the good of the community.

<24>In addition to promoting the communal benefits of self-sacrifice, other writers also disparaged any views of self-help or ambition on the part of women. Sarah Stickney Ellis (1842) articulates this gender disparity in self-help most bluntly in what she describes as a “love of distinction”; she writes, “In man, this passion is ambition. In woman, it is a selfish desire to stand apart from the many. . . . to be the idol of society; which is synonymous with being the butt of ridicule, and the mock of envy, to all who witness her pretensions” (*Daughters* 238-39). Victorian women were actively discouraged from pursuing a path of self-help, self-improvement, or any kind of professional ambition that reflects self-promotion or success. Women were discouraged from ambitious thoughts and feelings, and thus it is only under the guise of survival that they are empowered; for this reason, the daughter-of-bankruptcy narrative is valuable to the study of women’s developing professional identity in history. The consequence of such advice in these self-help narratives has been to promote long-term weakness in women’s professional identity, including lack of confidence in one’s abilities and professional accomplishments.

<25>At first, Olive Rothesay does not believe herself to be capable of adopting a professional identity to support herself, but, when called upon—in the words of Sarah Ellis—to throw “every consideration of self into the balance as nothing, when weighed against the interest or happiness of those she loves,” she demonstrates an emotional power capable of overcoming any obstacle. For men in the Victorian period, difficulty is a test of character. Men who raise themselves up out of poverty are described, in the words of Samuel Smiles, as “right-minded and true-hearted” and as exhibiting “strength, confidence, and triumph.” When men work toward success, it evidences itself in the form of prosperity and virtue. Women, on the other hand, exhibit excellence in the form of self-sacrifice and, in the words of Sarah Stickney Ellis, a “spirit of devotedness.” As a moral novelist, Craik models strong Christian values that supersede the self and personal ambition. Richardson makes a similar observation in her analysis of Craik’s bestselling novel *John Halifax, Gentleman*, where John’s ambition is not to be influential for the sake of fame, but to be able to make a difference in the lives of impoverished populations, serving community, nation, and empire, with the ultimate goal of entering the kingdom of heaven: “John’s last words interpret his own self-help story as part of God’s change, linking his earthly ambition for influence in the valley with his aspirations toward

heaven—a link Craik worked to forge by redefining ambition as a drive that serves Christian love and duty” (Richardson 115).

<26>Throughout the novel, Olive experiences variable degrees of confidence, ranging from unbounded fearlessness and strength when she is called on to support her mother to helplessness and self-doubt when she first evaluates herself as an artist. While Olive suffers lack of confidence in her artistic pursuits, she is full of energy and strength in her higher pursuits, which Craik classifies as family, honesty, and community. Olive chooses to become an artist, not to effect great change on the world of art, but as a financial means to a much greater end, that of defending and protecting her immediate family members. Craik places family obligation before professional obligation, but this hierarchy doesn't mean that Craik doesn't value work. In *Communities of Care*, Talia Schaffer remarks that caregiving “militates against the ideas of autonomy, liberty, independence, and self-reliance that are so enshrined in post-Enlightenment thought—and care thus challenges profound ideas about what it means to be a subject and what a successful life might look like” (Schaffer 32). When Craik introduces Olive's physical impairment, she describes Olive as either a specter or an angel. According to Schaffer, disability is not necessarily an indicator of individual need, but rather an indicator of a weakness in the social framework where social needs are not being supported.^[9] Olive's disability reveals that her family places too much emphasis on material values. Her parents experience a shift in attitude toward their daughter when they are confronted with financial catastrophe. By the novel's end, it is clear that Olive is both specter and angel: she serves as a harbinger for tragedy to come, as well as the redeemer of all the family's financial and moral failings. Her work as an artist is a temporary service to earn a living, whereas her calling is the much higher pursuit of love and spiritual devotion. The noble, loving, and merciful heroism of Olive on behalf of her family results in a character that readers will want to emulate.

<27>One of the narratives that I have been tracing throughout this study is the idea that bankruptcy liberates women from social constraints, enabling them to work in the public sphere without major social repercussions. While being forced to work by necessity serves as a useful rhetorical device for narrating the developing working lives of Victorian women, it is only the beginning of the story. Craik illustrates the institutional challenges and psychological barriers to success for women artists in the nineteenth century. Through *Olive*, we begin to see how deep these institutionalized difficulties and feelings of self-doubt can become for the professional woman, while also considering how women's work expands beyond the definition of self-dependence to being about making an impact on current and future generations of families and communities.

Notes

(1)Augustus Melmotte in *The Way We Live Now* (1875), Mr. Merdle in *Little Dorrit* (1857), Captain Rothesay in *Olive*, Mr. Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), and John and Edward Vernon in *Hester* (1883).(^)

(2)Olive Rothesay in Dinah Craik's *Olive* (1850), Gertrude Lorimer in Amy Levy's *Romance of a Shop* (1888), Amy Dorrit in Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1857), Marian Erle in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), and Florence Dombey in *Dombey and Son* (1848). I trace this pattern of daughters of bankruptcy in my dissertation: *Bankruptcy's Daughters: The Economics of the New Daughter in Victorian Literature*. For a discussion of Florence Dombey's and Amy Dorrit's interventions in community building, see my article "Communities Built from Ruins: Social Economics in Victorian Novels of Bankruptcy."(^)

(3)Ruth Brandon writes that if "a middle-class woman had neither a husband to support her nor money of her own, this was almost the only way in which society allowed her to earn a living. In the 1851 English census, 25,000 women—that is, 2 per cent of all unmarried women between twenty and forty—described themselves as governesses" (1).(^)

(4)See Jill Rappoport's *Giving Women*, Ilana Blumberg's *Victorian Sacrifice*, and Deanna Kreisel's *Economic Woman*. See also Lana Dalley and Jill Rappoport's edited collection on *Economic Women*.(^)

(5)For book-length studies on the lives, institutional challenges, and work of women artists, see especially Deborah Cherry's *Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain 1850 -1900*, Patricia Zakreski's *Representing Female Artistic Labour, 1848-1890: Refining Work for the Middle-Class Woman*, and Hilary Fraser's *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century: Looking Like a Woman*.(^)

(6)The Tate describes *Nameless and Friendless* as a political statement: "*Nameless and Friendless* was almost certainly conceived as a political statement, Osborn being closely associated with the feminist and artist Barbara Bodichon's Langham Place circle and their campaign for women's rights. She was also a member of the Society of Female Artists established in 1857 (the year the picture was first exhibited) to help overcome the difficulties experienced by female artists in exhibiting and selling their work."(^)

(7)On the subject of women’s collective biographies, Alison Booth has provided exhaustive research, both in her monograph *How to Make It as a Woman* and in her evolving digital repository of *Collective Biographies of Women*. Booth notes that these narratives are often implicitly or explicitly prefaced by the invective that the readers may “go and do likewise.” Joseph Johnson, in one of his collective biographies of women, presents his material as “sketches [that] are not creatures of the imagination merely; they are facts drawn from actual life—showing on the one hand what woman has done, and on the other what woman may do” (Preface vii).(△)

(8)These accounts include *Men of the Time* (1856), by unknown, *Women Artists in All Ages and Countries* (1859), by Elizabeth Ellet, and *Clever Girls*(1862), by Joseph Johnson.(△)

(9)Schaffer performs a disability reading of Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol*, asking: “What if disability in ‘A Christmas Carol’ is about malnutrition and exposure rather than a single saintly character?... In this ‘ordinary bodies’ reading, the elements of hunger, cold, deprivation, and isolation are not merely a scenic background but in fact the whole point of this story, and Tiny Tim merely functions as a local embodiment of those larger forces” (82-83).(△)

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