

**The Disconcerting Double Bind:  
Anonymity and Writing as a Woman in the Nineteenth Century**

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<1> Literary women in the nineteenth century faced degrading options when defining their public presence in the world. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have noted, they could either suppress their work entirely, publish it pseudonymously or anonymously, or modestly confess their female ‘limitations’ and concentrate on the so-called lesser subjects reserved for ladies: “Thus, as Virginia Woolf observed, the woman writer seemed locked into a disconcerting double bind: she had to choose between admitting she was ‘only a woman’ or protesting that she was ‘as good as a man’” (64).

<2> A more rebellious strategy was for literary women to present themselves as men, although this, too, proved problematic: “For a woman artist is, after all, a woman – that is her ‘problem’ – and if she denies her own gender she inevitably confronts an identity crisis as severe as the anxiety of authorship she is trying to surmount” (66).

<3> In the context of identifying the nineteenth century as one of the golden ages of the pseudonym, Calisher has argued that, while a pseudonym could strike a note of intimacy, a *nom de plume* may simply have been adopted because that was the custom of the time. Alexis Easley, on the other hand, has argued that for women to be authors in Victorian society, they had to be “first person anonymous”, “that is, to both construct and subvert notions of individual authorial identity, manipulating the publishing conventions associated with various print media for personal and professional advantage” (2). Easley argues that this anonymity served as a liberating rhetorical mechanism for women writers as it enabled them to discuss issues traditionally considered masculine in a way that avoided the restrictions that accompanied the female authorial voice.

<4> Another liberating rhetorical mechanism that allowed literary women in the nineteenth century to deal with their socially prescribed subordination was to write under an instrumental pseudonym that simultaneously embraced their identities as women while challenging the socially constructed and prescribed nature of what it meant to be a woman. In other words, there were women who chose to highlight their femaleness through their choice of a *nom de plume* while employing that *nom de plume* to enter into debates around the essential nature and role of women and to put pen to their views on contemporary prescriptions associated with the female gender and the relations between the sexes. As a contribution to the literature on women writer’s

use of pseudonyms, this article discusses the writings of three women who wrote under pen names in the mid to late nineteenth century in New Zealand: Mary Müller, Ellen Ellis and Mary Ann Colclough. Each of these women emigrated from England, arriving in New Zealand in the 1850s. All three experienced troubled marriages, their husbands being either abusive or incompetent providers. They each used writing as a means to engage in public debates on the nature, role, and social and legal position of women. Under her pen name 'Fémmina', Mary Müller published an influential pamphlet in 1869 arguing for women's right to the vote; under her pen name 'A Woman', Ellen Ellis wrote letters to her local Auckland newspapers during the early 1870s on the relationship between the sexes; and under her pen name 'Polly Plum', Mary Ann Colclough wrote newspaper articles and letters from the late 1860s to the mid 1870s on a range of issues related to women's rights.

<5> Two of these women, Mary Müller and Ellen Ellis, chose pen names that highlighted their gender (Fémmina and A Woman). In contrast, Mary Ann Colclough chose a pen name that sounded more like a children's storybook character (Polly Plum). On first impressions, these pen names could be interpreted as what Gilbert and Gubar identified as strategies that minimized their writings as women in an apologetic frame. As I intend to demonstrate, however, these three women employed their *nom de plumes* in ways that opened up possibilities to subvert and challenge dominant understandings of the time regarding what it meant to be a woman. After providing a brief biographical profile of each of these women and a discussion of the reasons they employed *nom de plumes*, attention then shifts to a discussion of the content of their writing to consider how they made use of the possibilities that these instrumental pseudonyms offered them as writers.

### ***Mary Müller ('Fémmina')***

<6> In 1850, after seven and a half years of marriage, Mary Ann Griffith (nee Wilson) left London with her two children and without her husband, and immigrated to New Zealand. The ship's passenger list recorded her as a widow but records indicate that her husband was most likely still alive and that she had left him because of his cruelty. Within two years she remarried Doctor Stephen Lunn Müller, a surgeon, who entered politics and later became a Resident Magistrate in the province of Nelson.

<7> Hailed as the pioneer of the suffrage movement in New Zealand, Mary Müller had been aware of the extent of legal discrimination against women prior to leaving England. When she remarried in New Zealand she used every opportunity to discuss issues relating to women's rights with a number of the high-ranking political men in her husband's circles who often visited and stayed at their home. Some of these men were sympathetic to her views and her lobbying is credited with being influential in significant changes in the Married Women's Property Acts of 1860 and 1870.

<8> Mary Müller's husband was not a supporter of women's rights, and it was for this reason that she wrote under the anonymity of a pseudonym to advocate for the cause of women. She had an ally in her stepdaughter's father-in-law, Charles Elliott, who was also a Member of Parliament as well as being the editor of the *Nelson Examiner*, one of the most influential newspapers in the colony at that time. Elliot used his contacts to ensure that Mary Müller's correspondence was

received and forwarded in anonymity and arranged for the publication of her articles in various newspapers throughout New Zealand. It was not until a number of years after her husband's death that Mary Müller's identity as *Fémmina* was made public.

<9> In 1864, aged in her mid forties, Mary Müller met Maria Rye, the founder of the Female Middle Class Emigration Society, who was touring New Zealand on behalf of the Society. After this meeting, Mary Müller began to closely follow the progress of the women's rights movements in Britain and the United States. In 1869, under her *nom de plume*, she published a pamphlet titled 'An Appeal to the Men of New Zealand' in which she outlined why women should be granted the vote. Her pamphlet generated a great deal of discussion throughout the country and also received favorable comment from John Stuart Mill along with a complimentary copy of his recently published *The Subjection of Women*.

### ***Ellen Ellis ('A Woman')***

<10> Ellen Ellis (nee Colebrook) emigrated from Surrey, England in July 1859 with her husband and two sons. During the 1860s and 1870s she was active in temperance work and in fostering links between the European settlers and the indigenous Māori population in New Zealand. By the early 1880s her energies were devoted to organizing opposition to the Contagious Diseases Act in Auckland. In 1882, aged in her early fifties, she published a novel under her own name titled *Everything Is Possible To Will*. In the Preface she explained that the novel was written especially for "working women" with the intention of "wakening thought" and marking an "epoch" in the lives of women readers (vii).

<11> Having been dismissed from school at the age of thirteen with the label 'incorrigible dunce', Ellen Ellis's identity as a writer operated in resistance to her teachers' and her family's estimations of her intellectual abilities. As an adult, Ellen Ellis engaged in a number of projects for her own self-education. Prior to her immigration to New Zealand, she had been occupied in her own research regarding the legal status of women in England with the intention of writing pamphlets. Soon after settling in Auckland, she entered into self-education to ascertain the causes of the misunderstandings between the European settlers and the indigenous Māori population. She found these projects very satisfying but domestic responsibilities and the disapproval she received from her husband and their circle of acquaintances brought these intellectual pursuits to a halt. In mid-1865, she taught herself bookkeeping skills in order to balance her husband's neglected business accounts and soon became a proficient debt-collector. Several years later, with the encouragement of the Non-Conformist minister Reverend Samuel Edger, she began training herself with writing exercises with the intention of writing a novel, having decided to use that form of writing to present her arguments for the need for legal and educational rights for women.

<12> As she developed her skills of rhetoric, Ellen Ellis made use of the letters to the editor columns of her local newspapers to express her views on topical social issues of the day and to articulate her ideas on women's rights. These letters, dating from mid-1870, were written under her *nom de plume*. The timing of her correspondence to the Auckland newspapers suggests that these letters were Ellen Ellis's earliest written didactic attempts to challenge public opinion with regard to women's situation.

### ***Mary Ann Colclough ('Polly Plum')***

<13> Mary Ann Barnes immigrated to New Zealand from London in 1859 at the age of 23. Within a few years she married Thomas Colclough, a 45 year old 'gentleman settler' and they had two children. Her husband proved to be an incompetent provider and she experienced first hand the injustices of being the breadwinner but not having any of the social and legal powers and privileges that usually accompanied that role. When she was 31 years old her husband died and she was left a widow with two children under the age of five to support.

<14> By the age of 33, Mary Ann Colclough could rightly claim herself a well-established writer of fiction, journalistic articles, light prose and newspaper correspondence. Despite her regret of the "very limited sphere" (Polly Plum's Last 6) for writers in New Zealand, she published widely and had articles accepted and paid for in England and America as well as in New Zealand. Her first novel, titled *The Half Caste Wife*,<sup>(1)</sup> was published in the early 1860s in a serialized form in a Melbourne newspaper. Her second novel, *Alone in the World: A Tale of New Zealand* was published in New Zealand in 1866. Mary Ann Colclough's name did not appear on this novel; under the title of the novel it simply stated "Author of 'The Half Cast Wife'".<sup>(2)</sup> The only known review of *Alone in the World* appeared some twenty years later in *The Penny Journal* on 19 May 1886, more than 18 months after Mary Ann Colclough had died. The reviewer concludes that the novel presents a "very pleasing and well written story" and notes that: "The interest throughout is well sustained, the dialogue is fairly managed, and natural, the characters are drawn from the author's point of view with skill, and the story throughout indicates the hand of an observant, fluent, rather cynical, but conscientious writer" (Review of *Alone in the World* 21).

<15> This review also revealed that a shorter version of this work had previously been published in serialized form in the Melbourne newspaper the *Weekly Argus*. Its popularity with readers had encouraged the author to expand the work and publish it in novel form. A third major fictional work, *Effie's Inheritance*, was published under the name Polly Plum in serialized form in 1870 in the *Christian Times*, a monthly religious journal published in Auckland.<sup>(3)</sup>

<16> Like many English immigrants to New Zealand, Mary Ann Colclough regularly read English periodicals such as the London *Times* and subscribed to the *Leisure Hour* even though it took several months for mail to arrive from England. She often wrote to the local Auckland newspapers with comments on what she had been reading and to voice her opinions on topical issues. In September 1868, she sent an article clipped from the May 1868 issue of the *Ladies Own Journal and Miscellany* to the editor of the Auckland newspaper the *Weekly News*. The article was subsequently published in the *Daily Southern Cross* with a short leader under the name Polly Plum. This marked the beginning of a lengthy and prodigious writing association with the local Auckland press. From the late 1860s to the mid-1870s, Mary Ann Colclough's work regularly featured in a number of New Zealand newspapers.

<17> Mary Ann Colclough was the most notable of these three women writers, both in terms of the volume of her work and what is known about her subjectivity and identity as a writer. She made a clear distinction between her status as a writer and that of anonymous letter-writers to the newspapers. In some respects this was a curious distinction for her to make given that most journalism at this period in New Zealand's history was anonymous and most of Colclough's writing in the New Zealand press was under her pen name. Although not a newspaper columnist

in the accepted sense of having her own regular column, Mary Ann Colclough was far more than simply another correspondent, albeit a prodigious one, to the Auckland newspapers. What marked her from the majority of writers who contributed to the newspapers of the period was that she consistently signed her pen name to her work, be it commissioned articles, letters to the Editor or shorter pieces of work. Between September 1868 and June 1871, she contributed about forty articles to the *Daily Southern Cross* and the *Weekly News*. During this period she also wrote about forty short opinion pieces, lighter in tone and following the accepted format of the paragraphist, on a wide range of issues such as appearances and fashion, novels, music, social customs and etiquette.

<18> In identifying herself as a writer in contrast with the many letter writers who wrote to the periodical press on topical issues, Mary Ann Colclough also made a distinction between her more serious work on social issues, in particular issues relating to the social and legal position of women, and minor articles to the colonial press on matters of etiquette and the like that were simply sources of income. In response to a critic she explained in a letter to the editor:

I merely write down my thoughts on things as you write your leading articles – because it pays me to do so. My mission is to provide for my little fatherless children, and if I confined my attention solely to washing my dishes they would not often want washing, as there would seldom be food to put on them... Were I to act as I do from mere vanity, and neglect my duty, there would be wisdom in what you say; but not only I, but many women are perforce in a position in which it is our bounden duty to use such talents as we have to the best advantage. We have to buy our dishes as well as wash them (2 June 1870 3).

<19> This could suggest, borrowing Elisabeth Jay's idea, that journalism was the price Mary Ann Colclough paid for being a minor artist.<sup>(4)</sup> However this conclusion would appear inappropriate in Mary Ann Colclough's case for two reasons. Firstly, her journalism was never a major source of income. Her full time occupation was as a schoolteacher and she often supplemented this with offering piano lessons, extra tuition in the weekends to private paying pupils, and series of public lectures in the evenings. She was never well off financially and, in early 1874, appeared before the court on two occasions for unpaid debts and was declared bankrupt. Secondly, her identity as a writer was passionate and strong. By the age of thirty-three she referred to herself as a well-established writer and spoke of the national and international standing of her work with pride. Although she made distinctions between her major and minor works, her correspondence and journalism for the newspapers was an important avenue for her to express her views and challenge public opinion on the position of women. In effect, as a writer, she successfully managed to combine writing for an income with fulfilling what she described as her God-given mission to advocate for the cause of women.

### **What's in a name?**

<20> In considering the possibilities that presented for each of these women through their use of instrumental pseudonyms, attention now shifts to how they made use of the anonymity their *nom de plumes* afforded to challenge dominant gender assumptions. As noted previously, Mary Müller and Ellen Ellis each chose pen names that identified them first and foremost as women. In refusing to deny their sex, their instrumental pseudonyms were used to claim authorship *as*

women. Although Mary Müller had little option but to write under a *nom de plume* given her husband's opposition to the cause of women's rights and his high public profile, Ellen Ellis's motivations for choosing a *nom de plume* are most likely related, at least in part, to her lack of confidence as a writer. However, the issue of concealment also played a part. During her early writing period she wrote frequently from first-hand experience about the abuses women suffered when they were married to drunkards. The use of a pen name would therefore have been a strategy to protect herself and, likely, her husband's public reputation.(5)

<21> Both her relative inexperience as a writer, and the influence of her own experiences on the content of her writing, were commented upon by others and Ellen Ellis's responses to these comments offer some insights into her motivations for writing. In September 1870, she submitted her first critical piece of writing on the issue of the respective natures and social roles of women and men to the major Auckland daily newspaper the *New Zealand Herald*. Written as a letter to the editor under the title 'On Woman', it triggered criticism from a correspondent who signed his letter 'A Man'. His complaint was that the piece did not follow the rules generally adopted by those who engage in literary undertakings and that the piece presented a "rather unsparring and indiscriminate attack" (3) on the masculine gender. Ellen Ellis's response was to point out that had the correspondent in question been aware of the many years she had owned the title 'incorrigible dunce' he would be most surprised that she had managed to put pen to paper in the first place. This response, however, should not be read as either an admission that she was 'only a woman' or as a confession of, or concession to, female 'limitations'. To the contrary, Ellen Ellis was making the point that despite having received messages throughout her life attesting to her lack of ability of written expression, she was defining and claiming a presence in the public world as a woman and as a writer.

<22> A Man's concern at the tone of the piece she had written was shared by Ellis's contemporary Mary Ann Colclough who observed that there was a "root of bitterness" in the writings of A Woman that manifested itself in a "wholesale censure" of men. Under her *nom de plume*, Mary Ann Colclough wrote in a forgiving tone:

No doubt it is simply the bitterness of experience, not of heart. She has often written before, I fancy; and I think she is one who has suffered through the pregnant source of evil, drink, or has some one near and dear suffer by it (Letter to Editor 5 October 1870 2).

<23> A Woman's response to this commentary on her writing was passionate:

I never write for writing's sake, still less for idle discussion. My purpose is, to change the tone of public opinion, as to the right of women tamely to submit in silence to indignities heaped upon them by bad men. ...I write in desperate despair, with a sort of last wild hope that by such untoward means, I may touch a chord in the heart of one who is worth saving, tho' alas every legitimate effort has proved of no avail. Deeply should I deplore it, if the acrimony of 'bitter personal experience' mars the work (Letter to Editor 27 October 1870 3).

These exchanges suggest that, like Mary Müller, Ellen Ellis's choice of her *nom de plume* operated as a strategy of survival as well as a strategy of resistance. Not only did each seek a safe space where they could write *as women*, they each sought a public presence *as women writers*.

<24> Anonymity also appears to have been a factor in Mary Ann Colclough's decision to use a *nom de plume* because soon after she was publicly identified as Polly Plum she stopped using this pen name.(6) She first used the name on a series of articles she had contributed to an American journal(7) and by late 1868 was using the name in her writing in the New Zealand press. The name may have been suggested to her by Julius Vogel, then owner of the less conservative of the two major daily newspapers in Auckland, the *Daily Southern Cross*. Vogel, who was later elected Premier of New Zealand, was known for his support of the cause of women.(8)

<25> The pen name itself became a subject of interest amongst readers of the Auckland newspapers and there were occasions when correspondents identified themselves in relation to Polly Plum, as in the case of 'Janie Plum', 'Maggie Plum' and 'Peggy Plum' – although on reading their correspondence the basis of their kinship was somewhat dubious. Janie Plum certainly did not agree with most of the views expressed by Polly Plum and considered it "unseemly" and "altogether unwomanly" for women to even wish to infringe upon "man's sphere" in any way (3). The motivation for Maggie Plum's sense of kinship appears to have been a desire for the approval of her namesake. She considered Polly Plum to be a person of more than average intellect who, rather than wishing to be a martyr as had been asserted by one of her critics, simply wanted to be known and admired as a clever woman who "does not like her light to be hidden under a bushel" (3). Maggie Plum claimed a special insight into Polly Plum's character because she felt she was in a similar situation to that of Polly Plum before the latter began publishing her views in the newspapers. As a self-proclaimed poetess, Maggie Plum had often wished she could publish her effusions rather than "'blush unseen and waste my perfume on the desert air' or have my fine temperament destroyed by minding a cross baby all the day long" (3).

<26> One significant way in which Mary Ann Colclough's use of a pseudonym differs from Mary Müller's and Ellen Ellis's is that Mary Ann Colclough consciously crafted and protected her persona as Polly Plum. On one occasion, for example, a member of the public used the name of Polly Plum to respond to public advertisements. This brought the following strong retort from Mary Ann Colclough:

It has come to my knowledge that some mean or malicious persons have taken the unwarrantable liberty of using the name of 'Polly Plum,' in answering silly advertisements, and that it has been done more than once. Of course I feel annoyed; and, though no one who knows me would believe me capable of such a thing, those who do not may be deceived. I wish I could discover the names of these reprehensible practical jokers, and I would publicly expose them, as they justly deserve. I have not had occasion to answer an advertisement for years, and in every case I have always signed my full and proper name, as the advertisements concerned me *professionally*, and required testimonials, &c. *No other* advertisements have *ever* been answered by the one and only lady who has really the right to sign herself, POLLY PLUM (emphasis original, Letter to Editor 13 November 1869 4).

<27> Alongside this serious protection of her persona as Polly Plum, Mary Ann Colclough did engage in a degree of playful banter around her choice of pseudonym. On one occasion, she

wrote that the Plums could trace their ancestry back to the biblical flood and hence, were established in their respectability. On another occasion in response to a writer who stated he found it difficult to clip or prune her writings, she replied that “‘Plums’ grow all the better for the use of the pruning-knife” (To Jemmy Jenkins 4).

<28> Another highly significant aspect of Mary Ann Colclough's identity as Polly Plum was that she was definitely not Mrs Plum. In February 1871, she had published an article entitled ‘The Law and the Bible’ in which she censured men who adapted the Scriptures to their own purposes. Amid the debate that ensued, a correspondent referred to her as Mrs. Plum. In her response, Mary Ann Colclough signed her letter “Polly Plum, not Mrs Plum” (‘Amicus’ on Law and Scripture 3). Given that the title Mrs defines a woman in terms of her relationship to her husband, Mary Ann Colclough’s rejection of this title for Polly Plum could signify that Polly Plum’s identity was that of an independent woman and, as such, *should not* be defined in terms of any relationship to a man.

<29> Mary Ann Colclough’s persona as Polly Plum was a self-consciously crafted identity that enabled her to assume a public persona that was separate from, although influenced by, both her private and professional life. Given this, it is significant that the name Polly Plum provokes a playfulness that contrasts sharply with the critical content of her writings. As a diminutive form, Polly suggests something that is trivial and inconsequential and has a nursery-rhyme feel about it. It is also suggestive of succinctness and of the innocence of childhood. As a common nickname for Mary, Polly could simply have been a name from Mary Ann Colclough’s own childhood. Plum, on the other hand, evokes the English expression common in New Zealand at the time of ‘having a plum in one’s mouth’ which denoted having a noticeable upper class accent, which, given that she taught elocution, seems rather appropriate. One writer commented favorably on its “rich flavour of Bloomerism”, delighting in its suggestiveness of “a sprightly and vivacious spirit which ripeness of years has no power to abate” (Lodge 6).

<30> It was also common for women to chose pen names based on alliteration, as in the well-known case of American journalist Fanny Fern (Sarah Willis Parton, 1811-1872) to whom Polly Plum was likened. Fanny Fern’s choice of pen name had been quite deliberate; the name had evoked childhood memories of walking in the countryside with her mother who would always pick a fern leaf and enjoy its sweet smell. In her first book, Fanny Fern satirically cautioned her imitators “in choosing your signatures, bear in mind that nothing goes down, now-a-days, but *alliteration*” (*emphasis original* 334). Mary Ann Colclough was familiar with Fanny Fern’s work which appeared from time to time in the New Zealand press from the late-1850s until well after her death, and may possibly have been influenced by this advice from a kindred spirit. But while Fanny Fern may have written on serious issues relating to women’s rights, such alliterative names were usually associated with a particular type of female writing; they tended to be indicative of a shallow sentimental genre that was common in the mid to late nineteenth century. Some of Polly Plum’s writings, particularly the short paragraph opinion pieces she wrote for payment, fitted with this style of writing. The main body of her work, however, was didactic and more commonly polemic in style. In this respect, her innocent *nom de plume* initially masked the potentially subversive content of her writings.

#### **The subversive possibilities of writing as a woman**

<31> Mary Müller, Ellen Ellis and Mary Ann Colclough were significant early voices in

advocating for the cause of women in New Zealand. All asserted themselves as women and engaged in public debates about the position and role of women in their writing. In doing so, each utilized positions that opened up possibilities to challenge and subvert dominant ideas about what it meant to be a woman. In turning to the content of what each wrote, attention shifts to a consideration of how these three writers challenged gendered constructions of woman and man in their writings and what effects these politicized understandings may have had on their readership, particularly their female readership.

### ***Appealing to the Men***

<32> Mary Müller's most significant piece of work written under her *nom de plume* was 'An Appeal to the Men of New Zealand' (1869), published initially in the *Nelson Examiner* and later in pamphlet form. Principally focused on arguments for why women should be granted the franchise, the Appeal also canvassed issues of equal pay, educational reform, old-age pensions, prison reform, peace and international arbitration, and natural healing.

<33> What is perhaps the most significant aspect of this Appeal is that it was published more than fifteen years prior to the establishment of an organized women's movement in New Zealand. Accepted histories of the first wave of feminism in New Zealand date its emergence with the formation of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (W.C.T.U.) in 1885. This view is supported by feminist historian Charlotte Macdonald who maintains that earlier advocates of women's rights, notably Mary Taylor,<sup>(9)</sup> Mary Müller and Mary Ann Colclough, were "isolated voices" whose ideas, although read and discussed, "did not prompt widespread agitation, sudden changes in law or even a sustained debate on the position of women" (17).

<34> The suffrage campaign in New Zealand also began in 1885, spearheaded by the establishment of the Franchise Department of the W.C.T.U.. Prior to the mid-1880s, information on the activities of women's rights advocates and suffrage campaigns within the international women's movement did appear in the major New Zealand newspapers on a sporadic basis. With respect to the suffrage question, for Mary Müller the issue was simple:

*Why has a woman no power to vote, no right to vote, when she happens to possess all the requisites which legally qualify a man for that right? She may be a householder, have large possessions, may pay her share of taxes towards the public revenue, but sex disqualifies her* (4).

<35> In her systematic petition of arguments for why women should be granted the right to vote, *Fémmina's* first point was that there were many precedents, notably in England and America, of women showing that they were intelligent, responsible citizens, capable of assuming a wide range of occupations and roles; Queen Victoria after all, ruled England. In America women were employed as doctors, lawyers, managers of factories and schools; they worked as government clerks and there was even one known female judge. *Fémmina* asked "When we consider what great wheels are turned by women, can we fail to wonder at their being so rigidly, so jealously excluded from the touch of this one of voting?" (5) Custom was no excuse for maintaining the legal status quo; the laws needed to "be fitted to the people and the times" (8). Women, she argued, were now educated, thinking beings and New Zealand could lead the world and no

longer be shackled with old world prejudices in the ways of Government. Change was imminent so why should it not happen now:

Our women are brave and strong, with an amount of self-reliance, courage, and freedom from conventionalities eminently calculated to form a great nation. Give them scope. At present their grasp and power of mind is 'cribbed, cabined, and confined' to one narrow groove. It is weakened and famished by disuse, and only a close observer can detect the latent force, the unspent energy lying dormant in many seemingly ordinary characters (10).

<36> Although she is most well known for her Appeal, Mary Müller's main feminist activism was campaigning for married women's property rights. Because of her husband's position she mixed with many politicians and she used these occasions to discuss issues around the legal rights of married women with these influential men. Seven and a half years after her husband's death Fémmina's true identity was made public in a short article in *The White Ribbon*, the official magazine of the W.C.T.U.. Mary Müller died the following year in 1901, at the age of 80. She had witnessed the passing of the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1884, as well as the gaining of women's suffrage in 1893. In a letter to Kate Sheppard, the figurehead of the suffrage movement in New Zealand, written in March 1898 she wrote:

Old and failing, it is cheering to watch the efforts of the younger and abler women striving bravely to succeed in obtaining rights, so long unjustly withheld. It was a triumph to obtain the Suffrage; The Married Woman Property Act was to me even greater, for I had suffered greatly. The effort will give us a freedom that thousands yearn for (qtd. in Harper 163-164).

### **A "true" woman**

<37> As A Woman, Ellen Ellis also wrote on a diverse range of local topical issues including the need for public parks and recreational spaces, the need for a self-supporting home for the poor, the moral training of children, her support for the teachings of the Reverend Samuel Edger, and the Permissive Bill and suppression of liquor sales. Although none of these issues were overtly feminist, her views were clearly informed by the need for more state provision for, and protection of, women's and children lives.

<38> Ellen Ellis also wrote under her *nom de plume* to directly address issues relating to the relationships between women and men. These writings reflect a philosophical stance, focusing on articulating the essential natures of Man and Woman and on the nature of truth and dignity. Her key distinction was between the 'true' as opposed to the 'ideal'. The 'true' woman, she argued, could never deny her nature, no matter what her circumstances may be. The problem was that Woman's essential femaleness had been obscured by ignorance and social constraints. Women's attempts to conform to dominant social expectations were impediments to the expression of women's 'real' selves and 'true' natures.

<39> As was common at the time, Ellen Ellis accepted fully the assumption that woman's God-given work was to bless mankind and that God had endowed woman with superior moral qualities to facilitate this. She wrote about how God had accorded woman a key role in the divine plan for the moral universe and how woman's influence would always be good wherever it was

brought to bear. Women, like men, also had their own souls to form and this mutual moral development was necessary as the moral training of young minds was intended as a shared parental responsibility.

<40> It was of great concern to her that younger generations of women appeared to be accepting of lower standards of manly excellence and that these women were not always good and pure in their own standards. Her response was: “if they did but know the power of unconscious influence arising from innate superiority, they would never make themselves so cheap - never, never” (Women’s Rights 3).

<41> Even though Ellen Ellis strongly advocated that women’s primary function was to facilitate moral development, she maintained that this should not limit their involvement in the wider public sphere. Women’s primary path may be toward marriage and motherhood, but women’s natures were varied and, she argued, if Nature had not qualified women to fill the offices they sought, their ambitions would have been speedily checked.

### ***Learning to be a ‘lady’***

<42> Like Mary Müller and Ellen Ellis, Mary Ann Colclough also wrote on a wide range of issues encompassing educational concerns (such as religious education in schools, the curriculum for girls, systems of teaching and examination, and pay and conditions for female teachers), the abuses of alcohol, prison reform, as well as many aspects of the social and legal position of women. She presented as somewhat of an enigma to the Auckland public who, at different times, extolled her womanly traits while also condemning her so-called “masculine proclivities” (Coleman *Unsettled Women* 18). Her particular combination of investments in the outward manifestations of femininity and her ‘unfeminine’ behavior of entering public spaces to express critical views of accepted notions of women’s place and role in society mark her subjectivity as simultaneously inside and outside dominant constructions of femininity.

<43> Her views on the issue of women attending to their manners and appearances typify the way in which she drew on multiple and conflicting subject positions in constructing her own understandings of femininity. On the basis that God had provided a model by making all His works beautiful, Mary Ann Colclough maintained that it was fitting for women to attend to their appearances on the proviso that it did not exceed their means and remained subservient to their higher duties and pursuits. In a series of articles on courtship and marriage, she wrote “do I despise beauty and elegance and grace? No, indeed I do not. I admire all the beautiful works of God, and a lovely woman is one of the most beautiful, and it is fair and pleasant to look on and admire her” (Early Married Days 4).

<44> She also made recourse to Nature and economics to support this view:

Nature teaches us the lesson: she throws a sweet mantle of green over the unsightly stump and the ragged and broken thatch. Even the grass of the fields and the insects have each their own beauties of form and colour, apart from their use. So long then as we make these things subservient to our higher duties and pursuits, I think we do well to devote some thought to them, and I think, also, that the education of the eye and taste is a very desirable, if not

absolutely requisite, branch of a young lady's training. She will find the knowledge of how to dress not only serviceable in improving her appearance, but also an absolute saving of money (Coming Out 7).

<45> While critical of the social patterning of gender relations and the present “favourite type of womanhood” (Pattern Women 4), Mary Ann Colclough exhibited many of the manners and behaviors that were associated with dominant definitions of femininity. In introducing her at a public lecture in Auckland in 1871, the Reverend John Macky said that had she not been present at the time he could have spoken more of her gentle and womanly traits of character that could not appear in the writer and lecturer but which adorned her public life. An extremely well spoken woman recognized as excelling as a teacher of elocution, she was well known for her “calm, dignified, and impressive” manner of public speaking (Mrs Colclough’s Lecture at Otahuhu 3). These attributes, along with her exhibiting the manners and appearances befitting a lady, would undoubtedly have encouraged more conservative members of the Auckland public to attend to her arguments.

<46> While she distanced herself from the “affected make-believe sort of lady”, Mary Ann Colclough accepted the view that “we have a right to look for grace, courtesy, and refinement in her mind and manners” (A Lady 4). Rather than viewing such behaviors as the outward manifestation of woman's innate qualities, she stressed that these were *learned* behaviors. Moreover, while simultaneously maintaining that it was a right to expect such grace and refinement in a woman, she also considered it to be a deficiency in women to not exhibit such behaviors. In articulating this position, Mary Ann Colclough drew attention to the relationship between such outward conventions of behavior and women's social standing:

To hold herself nicely, and to move with ease and grace is a regular part of a lady’s education; to fail in these things would be to lose caste, unless she had great wealth or position to excuse the deficiency, and even then it would only be excused, not hidden (The Rising Generation 7).

<47> In maintaining such an investment in these outward expectations of femininity, Mary Ann Colclough was simultaneously positioned both within and in resistance to dominant understandings of what it meant to be a woman. An *effect* of her particular investments in socially sanctioned aspects of femininity would have been increased attention to, although not necessarily acceptance of, her views. In this respect, her outward conformity to the manners and appearances of a lady and her consistent advocacy of the necessity and desirability of such conduct and deportment effectively increased the subversiveness of her arguments regarding the constructed nature of social modes of being a lady and the political interests that these constructions served. Hence, it is in the tensions between the multiple positions that Mary Ann Colclough articulated within discourses on femininity, in terms of her simultaneous contesting and reproducing of dominant positions, that she destabilized the hegemony of dominant discourses on femininity.

### ***Writing as a woman***

<48> In the introduction to her anthology of nineteenth century writing by women on women,

Susan Hamilton notes that in the very act of writing on the Woman Question, the woman writer helps to establish the legitimacy and authority of women's participation and perspective on public issues and, simultaneously, helps to produce a public professional identity for women as social and political critics. In claiming this space through writing *as women*, Mary Müller, Ellen Ellis and Mary Ann Colclough each refused to define themselves as Other and yet were writing about how women were defined as Other. In this respect, they were simultaneously women and not women, Other and not Other. Just as the act of asserting themselves as women writers was contradictory and ambiguous, so too were their respective claims to authorship which were simultaneously acts of concealment. Mary Müller was acutely aware of this as she wrote the final paragraphs of her Appeal:

In the face of these thoughts, how small a matter seems this simple concession here pleaded. And for that cause how frail a hope seems these few pages – penned in jealous secrecy from every human eye, for such is the ban we live under that a woman naturally learns to shrink from drawing down upon her devoted head the avalanche of man's condemnation, and travels on with 'bated breath,' hiding her noblest, highest aspirations (12-13).

<49> As women writers, Mary Müller, Ellen Ellis and Mary Ann Colclough epitomize the unstable, shifting and contradictory feminist female subject, simultaneously constituted through dominant discourses and in resistance to those discursive limits. In foregrounding their identities as women through their choice of instrumental pseudonyms, they entered into public discourse as gendered beings. Mary Müller and Ellen Ellis identified themselves solely as women, but to different effects. Mary Müller's use of the Latin form *Fémmina* signaled a more educated and authoritative voice mirrored in the content and style of her writing. In contrast, Ellen Ellis' unpretentious identification simply as *A Woman* drew attention to her standpoint simply on the basis of her sex and her ascribed moral superiority. Mary Ann Colclough, on the other hand, employed a more ambiguous *nom de plume* that effectively embodied her simultaneous contesting and reproducing of dominant forms of femininity. Each of these women claimed and defined a public presence in the world through their use of instrumental pseudonyms that both challenged and re-inscribed aspects of their socially prescribed subordination. They did not refuse or deny their gender; rather, they deliberately made recourse to their sex to expose their gender and, in doing so, opened up alternative positions from which their female (and male) readership could be exposed to politicized understandings of the contingent nature of social relations and social organization.

#### Endnotes

(1)To date, no extant copies of this work have been located.(^)

(2)For a detailed discussion of how this book was traced and the author identified as Mary Ann Colclough, see Coleman (2004).(^)

(3) To date, no extant copies of this work have been located. (^)

(4) For a discussion of the opportunities available to women journalists from the 1860s to the 1940s in New Zealand see Coleman (2007). (^)

(5) On publication of her loosely autobiographical novel, Ellen's son and nephew bought as many copies as they could and burned them to protect the reputation of Ellen's husband Oliver Sydney Ellis. (^)

(6) Although she stopped using this pen name, the print media continued to identify Mary Ann Colclough by the name Polly Plum for several years, particularly in late 1874 and early 1875 when she engaged in a series of public lectures on women's rights in Melbourne. (^)

(7) See review of her public lecture, "Mrs Colclough at the Athenaeum," *Argus*, 28 October 1874: 5. (^)

(8) Sir Julius Vogel was the author of *Anno Domini 2000; or Woman's Destiny* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1889). (^)

(9) Mary Taylor, childhood friend of Charlotte Brontë, lived in New Zealand for fifteen years, returning to England in 1860. Her correspondence during this period has been collected and edited by Joan Stevens, *Mary Taylor, Friend of Charlotte Brontë: Letters from New Zealand and Elsewhere* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1972). (^)

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