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# From a distance “You might mistake her for a man”: A closer reading of gender and character action in *Jane Eyre*, *The Law and the Lady*, and *A Brilliant Woman*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This research examines and contributes to recent work by Matthew Jockers and Gabi Kirilloff on the relationship between gender and action in the nineteenth-century novel. Jockers and Kirilloff use dependency parsing to extract verb and gendered pronoun pairs (“he said,” “she walked,” etc.). They then build a classification model to predict the gender of a pronoun based on the verb being performed. This present study examines the novels that were categorized as outliers by the classification model to gain a better understanding of the way the observed trends function at the level of individual narratives. We argue that while the classifier successfully categorized and identified novels in which characters behave

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1. The quotation in the title is taken from Wilkie Collins’ *The Law and the Lady* (p. 190).

unconventionally—that is, in ways not typical to the corpus as a whole—the rhetorical effects of these unconventional novels (and the extent to which their authors openly question nineteenth-century gender norms) vary based on other factors of characterization and narration. We propose that the combination of machine and human reading that this essay utilizes provides a productive model for allowing distant reading to guide and provoke traditional humanities scholarship.

## 1 Background

In “Understanding Gender and Character Agency in the 19th Century Novel,” Matthew L. Jockers and Gabi Kirilloff examine the relationship between a character’s gender, as evidenced by pronouns, and the actions associated with that character. To perform this analysis, Jockers and Kirilloff used a dependency parser and regular expressions<sup>2</sup> to extract gendered pronouns and the verbs associated with them from 3,329 nineteenth-century novels.<sup>3</sup> Jockers and Kirilloff then use these extracted pronoun and verb pairings to train a classification model that predicts the gender of a pronoun in their corpus based on the verb that pronoun performs. 81% of the time verbs served as reliable indicators of pronoun gender, a finding that points to a strong correlation between character gender and verbs in the nineteenth-century novel.<sup>4</sup> Within their corpus, certain verbs are more often performed by either male or female characters. In many ways, this result corroborates previous scholarship on gender attribution<sup>5</sup>; the fact that male and female characters behave differently in these novels seems to be a clear reflection of nineteenth-century notions of gender propriety. In particular, the types of verbs found to be associated with male and female characters support the idea that these novels reflect the codification

2. Details regarding the dependency parser and regular expressions are found in the Methodology section of Jockers and Kirilloff (2016).

3. A bibliography of the works in the corpus is available online at: [doi:10.7910/DVN/3UXBOJ](https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/3UXBOJ), and a description of the corpus is provided in Jockers and Kirilloff (2016). 41% of the novels in the corpus were female authored, 52% were male authored, and 7% were of unknown authorship.

4. Jockers and Kirilloff (2016) provide (in the section titled ‘Classification’) extensive detail of how the model was built and tested using both 10-fold cross-validation and hold one out validation. The original paper reports precision and recall for both training data and held out test data as well as extensive details of nature and type of errors observed. What is remarkable about the three novels discussed here is that they completely confounded the model.

5. See, for example, Sarawgi *et al.* (2011), Mukherjee and Liu (2010), and Koppel *et al.* (2002).

of behavior into “masculine” and “feminine” actions in accordance with the “gendered spheres” that Victorians saw emerging from “the Woman Question.”<sup>6</sup> For example, many verbs connoting physical motion, such as “walked,” are strongly associated with male pronouns, while many verbs connoting emotion, such as “felt,” are strongly associated with female pronouns, a result which brings to mind the nineteenth-century separation of public and domestic spheres.

Though these results suggest an overall trend in the novelistic depiction of male and female behavior, Jockers and Kirilloff found 408 of 3,329 (12%) novels where male characters were performing verbs more typically associated with female characters and 647 of 3,329 (19%) where female characters were performing verbs more typically associated with male characters. The presence of such outliers creates a more complex picture of the ways authors chose to represent male and female characters during the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Surprisingly however, among these outliers, only 6 of 3,329 (0.01%) novels featured both male and female characters behaving in ways that defy the overall trends seen in the corpus. These six novels were Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth The Wanderer A Tale* (1820), Allan Cunningham’s *Sir Michael Scott A Romance* (1828), Thomas de Quincey’s *Klosterheim Or The Masque* (1832), Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), *The Times Digital Archive* (1875) *The Law and The Lady*, and Julie Chetwynd’s (1892) *A Brilliant Woman*.<sup>8</sup> This essay examines three of these novels at a closer scale to assess their status as outliers and explore the ways each partakes in broader

6. For a further historical exploration of the emergence of the “separate spheres” ideology, please see Peter Capuano’s (2015) “Luddism, Needlework, and the Seams of Domesticity in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*,” in *Changing Hands: Industry, Evolution, and the Reconfiguration of the Victorian Body* (69–88).

7. A reviewer of this manuscript noted that the presence of few outliers might also suggest something about the acquisition preferences of publishers. It is entirely possible that books selected for publication might be those that more closely adhered to conventions. To test this idea would be difficult in part because it requires having novels that were not published, and also because it requires having metadata pertaining to the publishers of the first editions. Nevertheless, it is a point well taken that there may be factors beyond individual authorial choice influencing the patterns of pronoun and verb use we observe in this research.

8. Despite the unconventionality of the characters in these six novels, it may still seem surprising that the model classified so few novels as outliers; many novels come to mind whose characters also act in seemingly unconventional ways. Keep in mind that this study represents the aggregate of all female, and the aggregate of all male, pronouns within each novel. Many novels, such as William Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, feature unconventional characters whose actions may be ‘balanced’ by the actions of their conventionally behaving fictional doubles. For example, *Vanity Fair*’s infamous social climber Becky Sharp appears alongside the passive and feminine Amelia Sedley.

nineteenth-century conversations about gender and behavior.<sup>9</sup> While in Jockers and Kirilloff's macroscale study, the machine classified these novels as deviating from corpus norms, at a closer scale we might ask if, and to what extent, these patterns in gendered behavior shape the narrative impact of each novel for human readers.

Examining these three "outlier" novels through the close reading perspective of traditional literary studies offers the opportunity to explore the benefits and limitations of using computational tools to study the relationship between gender and action in fiction. As Jockers and Kirilloff note, there are several aspects of gendered characterization that their study does not capture; the categorization of a novel as an outlier does not, for example, explain why the characters in that work are behaving in non-typical ways nor does it indicate the literary effect produced. While one benefit of distant reading is that it allows for a broader sociohistorical picture to emerge across a large corpus, a potential downside is the flattening of complexity. Thus, this essay seeks to critically examine the three novels categorized as outliers and the variety of ways that these nineteenth-century authors constructed characters who behave in unconventional ways. Though united in their status as outliers, the three novels exhibiting both misclassified male and female pronouns are quite distinct: they include different themes and settings, their dates of publication range across the nineteenth century, they participate in different genres, and they feature different narrative styles. Consequently, we also consider what these works have in common and whether these works employ non-"gender-typical" behavior in similar or different ways.

Ultimately, we argue that while these texts do not employ character behavior to make a single "argument" about gender, their portrayal of character behavior engages with nineteenth-century conversations about the role of individual human agency. This is an important distinction. Given the results from Jockers and Kirilloff's study, it is tempting to assume that the novels participating in the corpus wide trend include "stereotypical" depictions of gendered behavior, while the outlier novels offer a more subversive depiction of gender. However, as we will show, this assumption is problematic in several ways. Among other things, such a supposition artificially imposes

9. For several reasons, we have opted to exclude Maturin, Cunningham, and de Quincy from the present analysis. The most obvious rationale for doing so is lack of space; providing depth and discussion of three novels in a short paper is already complicated. Additionally, though, we found that each of the excluded works was in some way formally complex or unusual in comparison to the more standard narratives of Brontë, Chetwynd's, and Collins. *Melmoth*, for example, involves many interwoven narratives, whereas *Klosterheim* largely involves what might be called 'off stage' action. The three novels we selected for discussion here are unified in several ways. Most obviously, each of these books revolves around a central female character.

ideology on the novels and assumes a static binary between support and rejection of cultural practices. What these novels do have in common is that they each explore the limitations of specific instantiations of institutionalized authority. The institutions of authority include, for example, the legal system in *The Law and the Lady*, patriarchal marriage in *A Brilliant Woman*, and even Christian morality and sexual propriety in *Jane Eyre*. Often these institutions are inseparably connected to questions of gender; thus, these texts engage in a broader nineteenth-century conversation about the tension between individual and collective agency. This is not to say that these novels actively subvert nineteenth-century social norms; rather, the unusual (i.e. non-typical) use of verbs corresponds with characters who struggle against different forms of social authority, giving voice to cultural anxieties about the changing role of the individual in society.

## 2 Jane Eyre

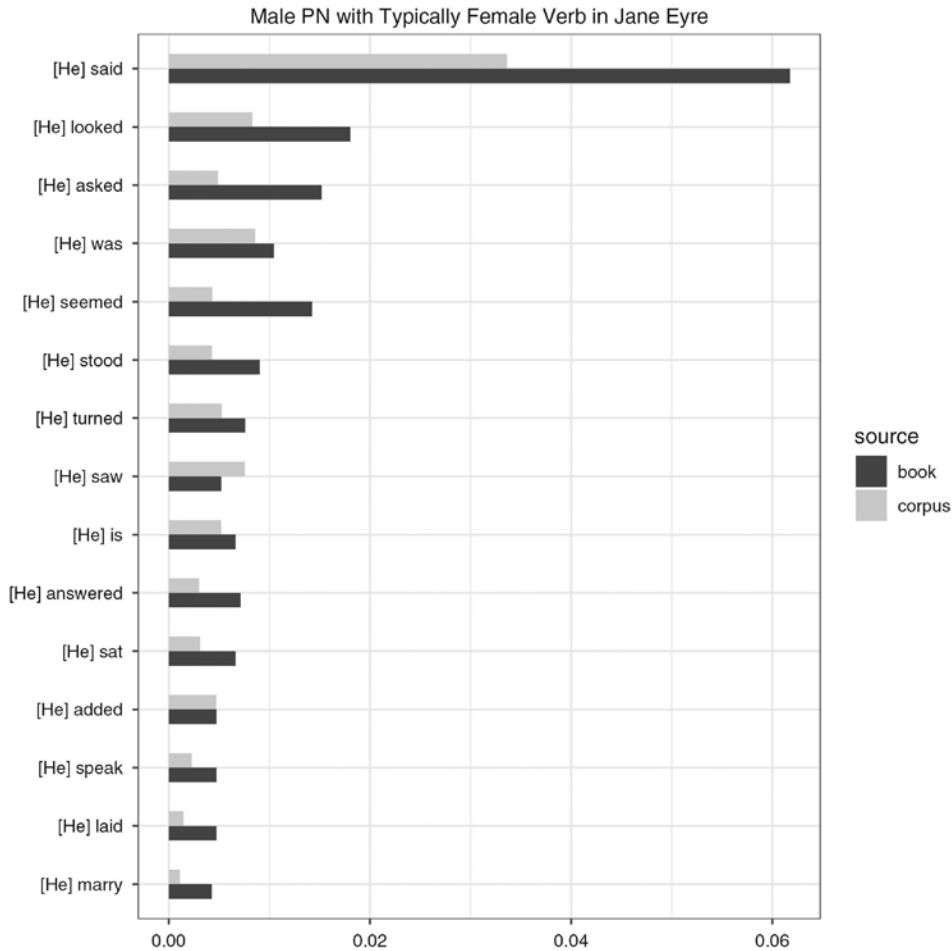
The contemporary reactions to *Jane Eyre's* publication under an androgynous pseudonym (Currer Bell) in 1847 reveal much about this novel's participation in the complicated and evolving debates about gender and agency in the middle of the nineteenth century. *The Examiner*, *The Weekly Chronicle*, and several other important reviewing outlets considered the fact that the novel was so well written to be direct evidence of a male author. In their estimation, "the power of the style ruled out female authorship" (Davies xiii). Others were appalled by the novel's "fierce unwomanly tone and incendiary message" (Davies xii). One famous review by the conservative Elizabeth Rigby asserted that, if the novel had not been composed by a man, "it must be the work of a sexual delinquent" (Davies xiii). Along these lines, many thought that a novel containing such a dangerous and sexually arousing female manifesto could only have been written by a woman. Still others, like the influential novelist and critic George Henry Lewes (George Eliot's future partner), viewed the question of authorship quite differently. Lewes believed that the novel's searching portrayal of the depths of female struggling, suffering, and enduring spirit indicated a position that only a woman could fathom. More apprehensive and even fearful reviewers, like the writer for *Blackwood's Magazine*, conceded to the novel's female authorship but believed it would become a rabble-rousing document which would whip up a new generation of women writers "to grossness and violence" (Davies xv).

These heated and contradicting assessments of a single novel reflect the larger social, political, and cultural context of debates surrounding what became known as "The Woman Question" in the 1840s. With the steady rise of a sizable middle class in England came new questions about what a woman's

“essential” role should be. Many men (and women) believed that a woman who tried to cultivate her intellect and individuality beyond prescribed drawing-room accomplishments (sewing, singing, piano-playing) was violating the order of Nature and, consequently, of religious tradition. Instead, women were to be valued for other qualities considered “natural” and essential to their sex: tenderness of understanding, unworldliness and innocence, domestic affection, and submissiveness. One of the primary and most popular proponents of this “separate sphere” ideology was Sarah Stickney Ellis, who in 1839 published *The Women of England*—a “guidebook” on woman’s naturally submissive role in domestic affairs that went through sixteen editions before 1841. In it, she endorses a life of near total selfless submissiveness: “What can I do to make my parents, my brothers, or my sisters, more happy? I am a feeble instrument in the hands of Providence, but as He will give me strength, I hope to pursue the plan to which I have become accustomed, of seeking my own happiness only in the happiness of others” (p. 59). Chase and Levenson (2000) put it this way in *The Spectacle of Intimacy*: “the clearest aim in [Ellis’s (1843)] writing project is to persuade women that they ought to embrace what they cannot in any case escape: an inferiority, a dependence, a suffering” (p. 80). Such ideology, especially since it came from a woman, had a powerful influence over the question of gender roles in the middle of the century.

There were those who chafed at such gendered limitation, of course. The most eloquent and notable response to Ellis before the publication of *Jane Eyre* came from a married woman named Marion (Kirkland) Reid, who published *A Plea for Women* in 1843. Like Ellis, Reid’s (1845) work was widely read and reprinted several times. She offers a deliberate and damning analysis of the way her contemporaries—and she admits, they were often other women—talk so confidently about an essential “woman’s sphere” that equates womanliness with the renunciation of the self. Reid discusses how “womanly” behavior usually means attention to her husband, keeping her children neat and clean, and attending only to domestic arrangements. But Reid insists that this seemingly “natural,” noble, and virtuous self-renunciation usually involves a kind of criminal self-extinction. Hewing very closely to the tradition of Mary Wollstonecraft, Reid traces the root of this problem back to a system of education that merely cramps and confines young women: “any symptom of independent thought is quickly repressed. . . and the majority of girls are subdued into mere automatons” (pp. 135–6). Her argument ultimately asserts that there is no natural or religious reason why women should be limited to domesticity.

Understanding this context and the lively debates about “The Woman Question” is imperative to any understanding of how gendered character agency operates in *Jane Eyre*. The data on gendered pronoun use, for



**Fig. 1.** Male pronouns and typically female verbs in *Jane Eyre*

example, demonstrate why this novel is one of the “outlier” texts in the nineteenth century. As shown in Fig. 1, males participate in typically female pronoun/verb constructions at nearly double the rate that they do so in the larger corpus.<sup>10</sup>

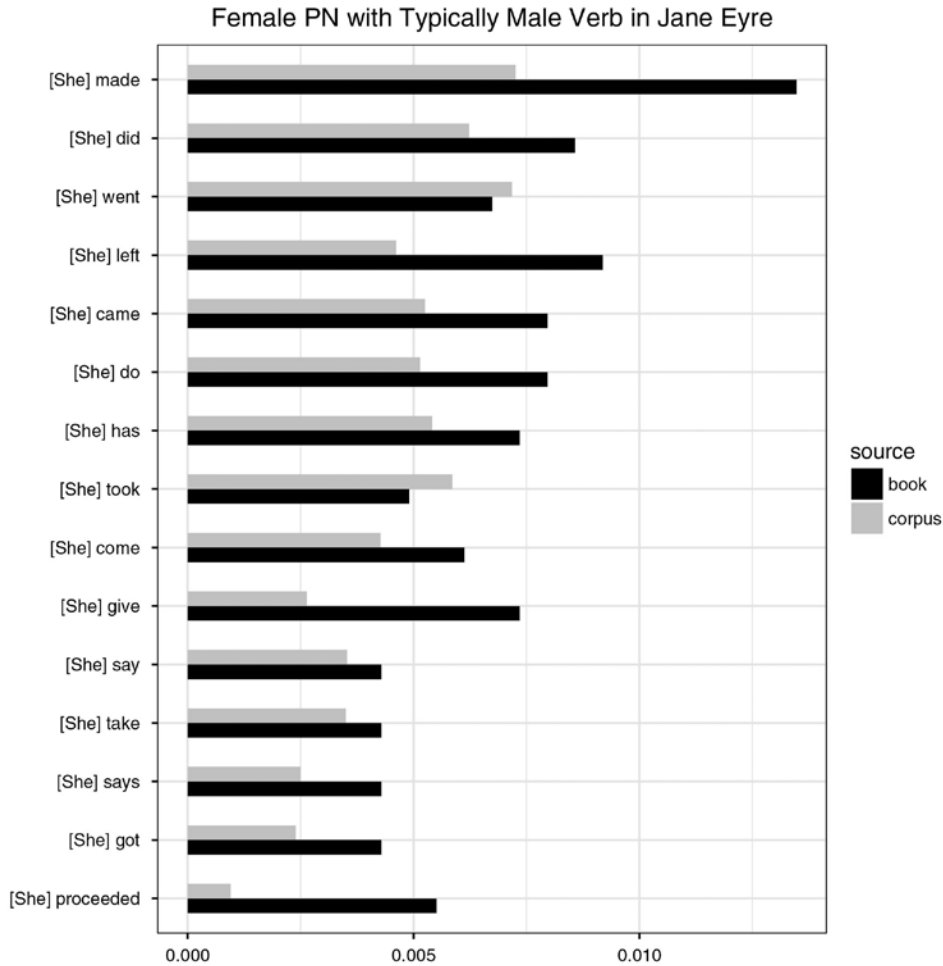
What this means is that the males consistently perform more typically female actions in *Jane Eyre*. This trend is sustained when the genders and pronouns are inverted as well.

Figure 2 reveals that females perform typically male actions far more often in *Jane Eyre* than in the larger corpus of nineteenth-century novels— and at a considerably higher rate.

A closer examination of some of the verbs associated with female pronouns (beyond *Jane Eyre*) can tell us much about how and why *Jane Eyre*

10. This graph, and similar ones that follow, highlight the fifteen verbs in the novel that most deviate from the corpus norms as a whole.





**Fig. 2.** Female pronouns and typically male verbs in *Jane Eyre*

is one of the few “outlier” texts where gender pronouns appear inverted. Put simply, the formal plot structure of this novel is one in which large sections of the text center around all, or nearly all, female characters. Chapters V through X, for example, chronicle Jane’s life while she lives at Lowood School for 8 years. Since this is an all-girls school staffed with a female superintendent, female teachers, monitresses, and nurses, these female characters assume organizational and agentic behaviors usually reserved for male characters. Mrs Temple, Mrs Miller, Miss Scatcherd, and Madame Pierrot all variously “inquire,” “explain,” “communicate,” “supply,” “summon,” “dismiss,” “make,” “know,” “call,” “touch,” and “proceed” during this long stretch of narration. Even the verbs associated with Mr Brocklehurst’s periodic visits to Lowood are surprisingly passive: he “pauses” twice in a single conversation— an action, we will see, that also often characterizes Rochester and St John Rivers—and also “hems” (pp. 74, 75, 78).

The lengthy section in the middle of the novel which takes place at Thornfield Hall is similarly “female centric” and thus subject to feminine directive. Just as Mrs Temple runs the day-to-day operations at Lowood, Mrs Fairfax organizes life at Thornfield—so much so, in fact, that Jane at first believes her to be the lady of the estate. In such a role, Mrs Fairfax performs many typically male actions; she “conducts,” “addresses,” “points,” “takes,” “wants,” and “went.” Others also contribute to this anomalous behavior: Adele “jumps” and “resists,” while Blanche Ingram “looks,” “glances,” and even “seizes” Rochester’s arm (p. 239). We also consider the verbs associated with Rochester in his guise as a female gypsy. This character “wishes,” “says,” “takes,” “approaches,” and “continues” in the process of telling the fortunes of Thornfield Hall’s visitors. Furthermore, when Rochester recounts his interactions with Bertha Mason, he describes her actions as aggressively masculine: she “flattered,” “allured,” and, of course, she eventually “bites” and “stabs.” Rochester himself provides the best register of “unexpected” behavior when we read his actions closely. For such a gruff, Byronic, and generally misanthropic character, Brontë (through Jane) describes his actions in typically feminine ways. He “sat,” “sat down,” “went” (on several occasions), “left,” “disclosed,” “stopped,” “bit his lip,” “checked himself,” “staggered,” “endured,” “forebore,” “sighed,” and “felt.” Like Brocklehurst, he is also oddly passive in his rhetorical speech; he “murmurs” and “pauses” seven times in his discussions with Jane. Brontë evidently patterns male rhetorical dialogue similarly throughout *Jane Eyre*. For example, St John Rivers “pauses” four times in a single conversation with Jane (pp. 406–9) and also joins the company of Rochester by “murmuring” twice (pp. 429, 433). He also “waits” for Jane, “supplicates” towards her, and “obeys” her (pp. 466, 481, 484).

Because *Jane Eyre* is recounted in a first-person narrative voice, however, the analysis of gendered agency in the text becomes much more complicated and even contradictory. Homans (2015) has recently analyzed how Brontë’s first-person narration acts as “a beacon to some, [and an] outrage to others” (p. 28). Such a complicated narrative strategy establishes the validity of the older Jane’s voice and yet keeps the story focused on the younger Jane’s self-affirmations. One of the first elements to note is how often and how much Jane herself participates in typically female actions.

As Fig. 3 indicates, with the single exception of the “I said” construction, Jane’s narration uses verbs typically associated with females at a startlingly high rate compared with the rest of the corpus.<sup>11</sup>

11. In the corpus as a whole, the verb ‘said’ is more often associated with female pronouns than with males. The use of ‘said’ with the first-person female ‘I’ in *Jane Eyre* appears to run contrary to the corpus norms for females, but this behavior likely says more about the first-person perspective and Jane’s character than about the norms for pronoun gender.

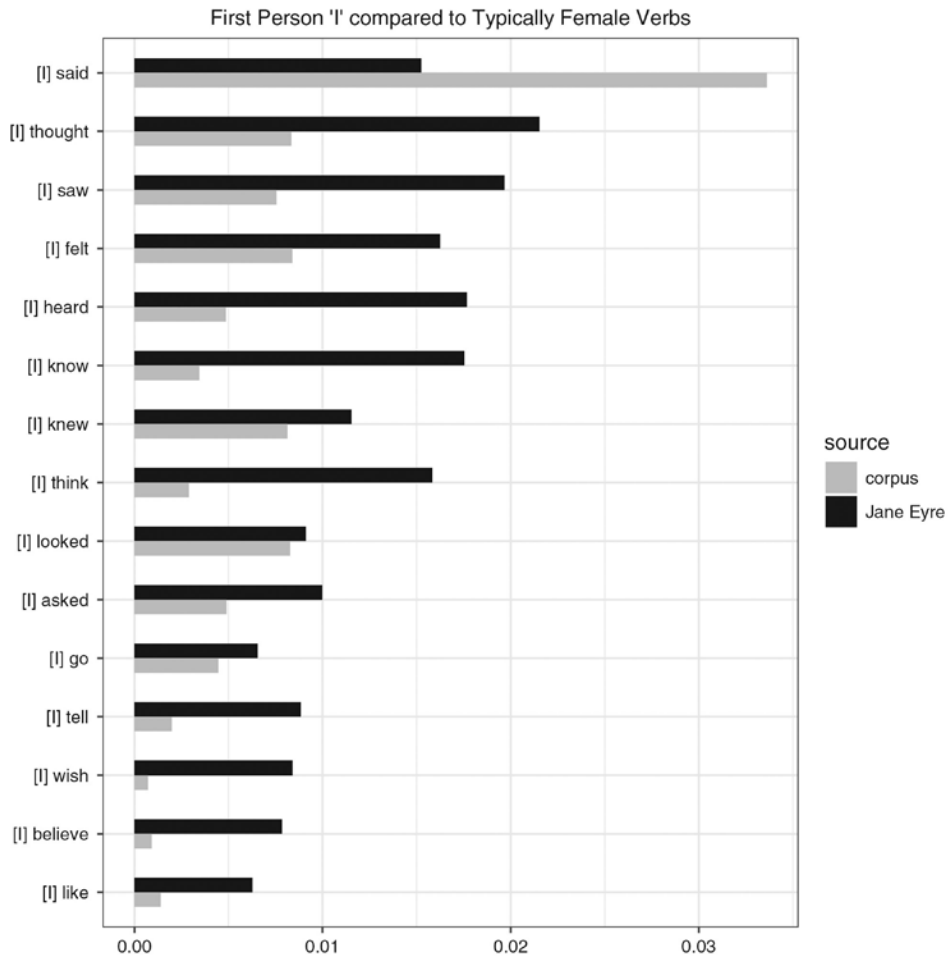
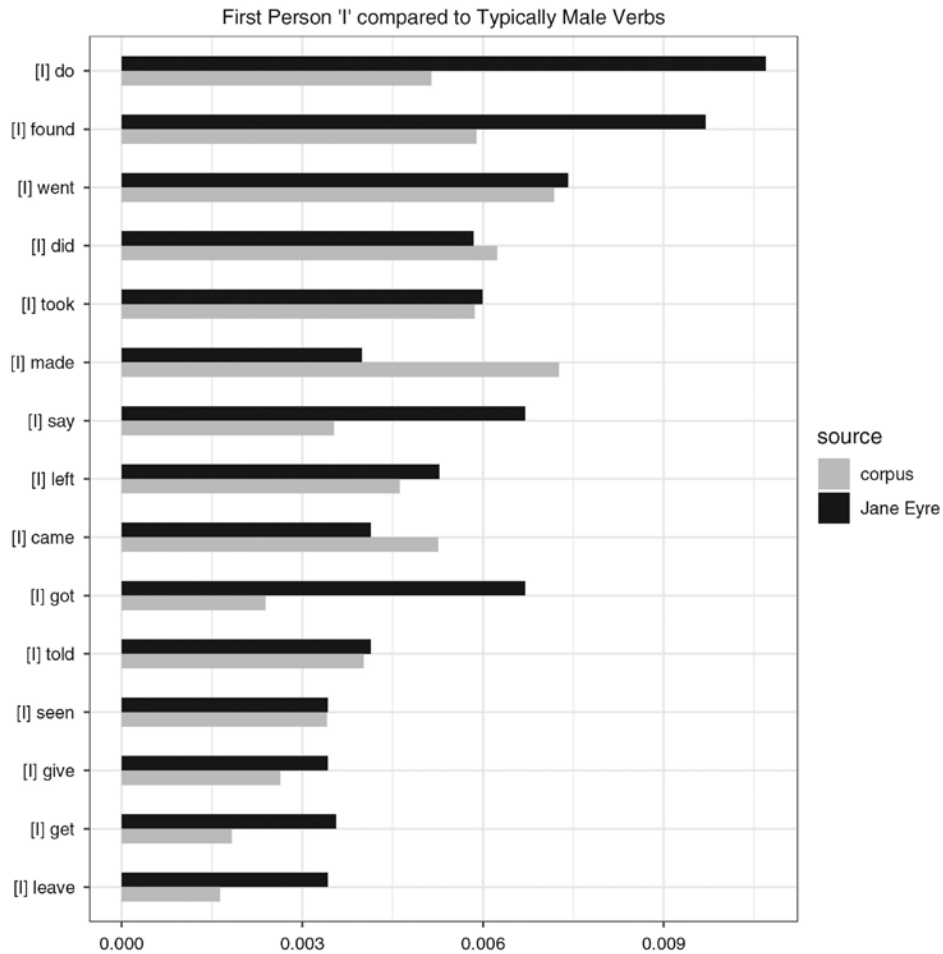


Fig. 3. First-person pronouns and typically female verbs in *Jane Eyre*

The situation is further complicated when considering Jane's use of typically male verb constructions.

Figure 4 shows that Jane, as "I," performs typically male actions (at a significantly higher rate than in the corpus as a whole). She "does," "found," "got," "gets," and "leaves" at a rate that almost doubles what we would expect based on a corpus of males "doing," "finding," "getting," and "leaving." But how do we make sense of the other half of the instances where males perform typically male actions at a similar rate or higher than Jane does?

The answer, we think, lies in the contradictions that exist both in the context and the text of this novel that are difficult to identify on the scale of distant reading. *Jane Eyre* is famously a novel of a passionate and determined young woman's path from precarious orphanhood to secure marriage, and eventually to motherhood. She distinguishes herself in a very difficult educational setting, so that she can achieve one of the very few "respectable"



**Fig. 4.** First-person pronouns and typically male verbs in *Jane Eyre*

occupations open to unmarried women in the nineteenth century: govern-essing. In this process, Jane has to adopt, starkly unlike the “womanly” positions endorsed by Sarah Stickney Ellis and others, characteristics of self-reliance, resourcefulness, and independence. And there is ample evidence of her traditionally “unfeminine” behavior in the text. In the second chapter, when Jane is forcefully removed to the “red room,” she tells us: “I resisted all the way” (p. 15). Moreover, in “the desperate revolt,” she punches her cousin John in the face and a maid upbraids her for such passionate and “unfeminine” behavior: “For shame, for shame!. . .What shocking conduct to strike a young gentleman, your benefactress’s son! Your young *master*” (p. 15, emphasis added).<sup>12</sup>

12. For a seminal article on how ‘passion’ becomes ‘unwomanly’ in the nineteenth-century, see Nancy Cott’s “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790–1850.”

Diedrick (1993) has noted the extent to which Jane Eyre's story "fulfills [Mary] Wollstonecraft's wish that women 'may every day grow more masculine'" (p. 24). By "masculine" both Wollstonecraft and Brontë emphasize rationality which had long been the province of men only. Of course Jane is noteworthy for thinking and acting in exceptionally rational, characteristically "unwomanly" ways. In one of the novel's most famous passages, she reflects on the essential equality of feeling between men and women:

It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. . . Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded. . . to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (pp. 129–30)

This rhetoric, and the sentiment behind it, might have been borrowed directly from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) or Marion Reid's 1843 *A Plea for Women*. Moreover, Jane follows these ideas of gender equality into practice with Rochester—even employing Reid's critique of the female "automaton":

Do you think I am an automaton?—a machine without feelings? ... Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong!—I have as much soul as you—and as much heart! ... I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even mortal flesh;—it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet *equal*—as we are! (p. 292, emphasis added)

Here, the sense of "feeling" might be characteristically feminine, but the bold assertion of equality between the genders is most certainly not. Jane maintains her feelings for Rochester even when his previous marriage prevents their union. It is worth emphasizing that marriage, in the prevailing nineteenth-century public opinion, was the highest, most orthodoxly desired, and most coveted achievement of woman. With St. John

Rivers, Jane refuses to enter into a marriage without equality of feeling—even if such a resolute decision places her future existence in immediate peril. Fittingly, the words Rivers uses to describe his shock upon learning of the finality of Jane’s decision to “adhere to [her] resolution” register the incompatibility of her position in regards to traditional gender norms. In a spasm of disappointment and disbelief, Rivers calls her “violent, unfeminine, and untrue” (p. 475).

Yet despite all of Jane’s passionate self-assertion that contradicts contemporary gender norms, we must acknowledge that, in the trajectory of the text’s most expansive plot, *Jane Eyre* is ultimately a fairly conservative novel—and, as we will discuss, the same can be said about *The Law and the Lady* and *A Brilliant Woman*. In this sense, then, the novel is contradictory in the worlds both inside and outside its textual boundaries. As Dierdre D’Albertis has pointed out, Jane’s service as a teacher at Lowood and as a governess at Thornfield connotes a “matter-of-fact” “self-reliance and determination”—but in such a way that is not to be confused with “liberty, excitement, [or] enjoyment” (p. 268). For D’Albertis (2014), as well as for many feminist critics, Jane is a contradictory mix of “autonomous self-creation” and “self-abnegating domesticity” (p. 270). On the verge of yielding to Rochester’s plea to run away with him, Jane sternly and rationally asks herself: “who in the world cares for you? . . . I care for myself. The more solitary I am, the more I will respect myself.” This cold rationality presents a serious challenge to the Victorian ideal of woman’s selflessness. But what Margaret Homans calls “the novel’s socially conformist goal, the happy marriage with which it concludes” also in turn typifies the contradictory feminist formations in the text (p. 32). Jane eventually marries a much older, disabled man, for whom she becomes a kind of nurse and to whom she often calls her “master.” Indeed, many believe that the novel’s “happy ending” exchanges the revolutionary fervor of her youth for the settled comfort of the Victorian wife. This adherence to conventional gender norms is further complicated by the fact that Charlotte Brontë was not a necessarily revolutionary person; she was a Tory and Anglican who held both traditional and progressive views about women. In this sense, the somewhat inconsistent data on character agency provide an index to some of the novel’s internal (and external) contradictions that can only be measured by closer readings.

### 3 The Law and the Lady

Collins’s 1875 sensation–mystery *The Law and the Lady* opens with the following cautionary address to the reader:

In offering this book to you, I have no Preface to write. I have only to request that you will bear in mind certain established truths, which occasionally escape your memory when you are reading a work of fiction. Be pleased, then, to remember (First): That the actions of human beings are not invariably governed by the laws of pure reason. (Secondly): That we are by no means always in the habit of bestowing our love on the objects which are the most deserving of it, in the opinions of our friends. (Thirdly and Lastly): That Characters which may not have appeared, and Events which may not have taken place, within the limits of our own individual experience, may nevertheless be perfectly natural Characters and perfectly probable Events, for all that. Having said these few words, I have said all that seems to be necessary at the present time, in presenting my new Story to your notice. (p. 6)

Eschewing all pretense of subtlety, Collins informs readers that this novel, and the characters that inhabit its pages, will not only challenge convention but will do so by conscious design. 132 years after the novel's publication, the data collected from Jockers's and Kirilloff's gender-verb classification model suggests that Collins' novel engages with, and at times directly challenges, gender conventions. The events of the novel take place within the first-person limited perspective of Valeria Winston (or Woodville, or Macallan, depending on where we are in the narrative of her life). The novel follows the complex marital situation that unfolds when Valeria discovers that her new husband, Eustace Macallan, not only married her under a false name (i.e. Woodville) but did so because he is a man stigmatized by the dreaded "Scotch Verdict," a legal ruling, which in this case, neither fully vindicates nor condemns him for the murder of his first wife, Sara.

Ashamed by what Valeria has discovered, Eustace leaves a farewell letter and flees to Spain to join the war effort. Despite suffering indignation and abandonment, Valeria vows to win her estranged husband back and to make of him "a man vindicated before the world, without a stain on his character or his name—thanks to his wife" (p. 109). This promise, deemed absurd by virtually all secondary characters, provides the primary impetus behind Valeria's trajectory for the remainder of the narrative. Despite facing recurrent opposition—much grounded in the perceived incompatibility between the female sex and the intricacies of the common law system—Valeria is ultimately successful, spearheading the discovery that the late Sara Macallan was not poisoned by her husband's hand but had in fact committed suicide. By the novel's conclusion, Valeria and Eustace are again joined in marital bliss; though the proof of Eustace's innocence—Sara's suicide letter—remains sealed, it contains a mystery to all but Valeria and the small

team who aided in its recovery. Eustace, resigned to loving Valeria regardless of his reputation, leaves the fate of the letter to the next generation—to the couple's newborn son.

Contemporaneous reviews of Collins's *The Law and the Lady* are predominantly negative, with a frequent point of contention arising from Collins's attempts to "make an alliance between the sensation novel and the propaganda novel" (Johnson, p. 14)—a goal that came to define the author's final decades of literary activity. A particularly scathing review published in the conservative London newspaper *The Morning Post* (31 March 1875) exemplifies this:

In these go-ahead days a man to be popular must be progressive, and this is the secret of Mr. Collins success. His books were eagerly welcomed by a certain section of the public—a section which possibly may be regarded as representing (if the hyperbole be permissible) the *invertebrata* in the scale of mental and moral development—when they were only positively sensational, and one can readily understand to what extent this interest would be augmented when they advanced in swift succession to comparative and so on to superlative sensationalism. And now, to do adequate justice to "The Law and the Lady," we are compelled to add a term to that portion of etymology known as the comparison of adjectives, and to express a conviction that in his last production Mr. Wilkie Collins has in one bound leaped from the superlative to the exaggerated. (p. 3)

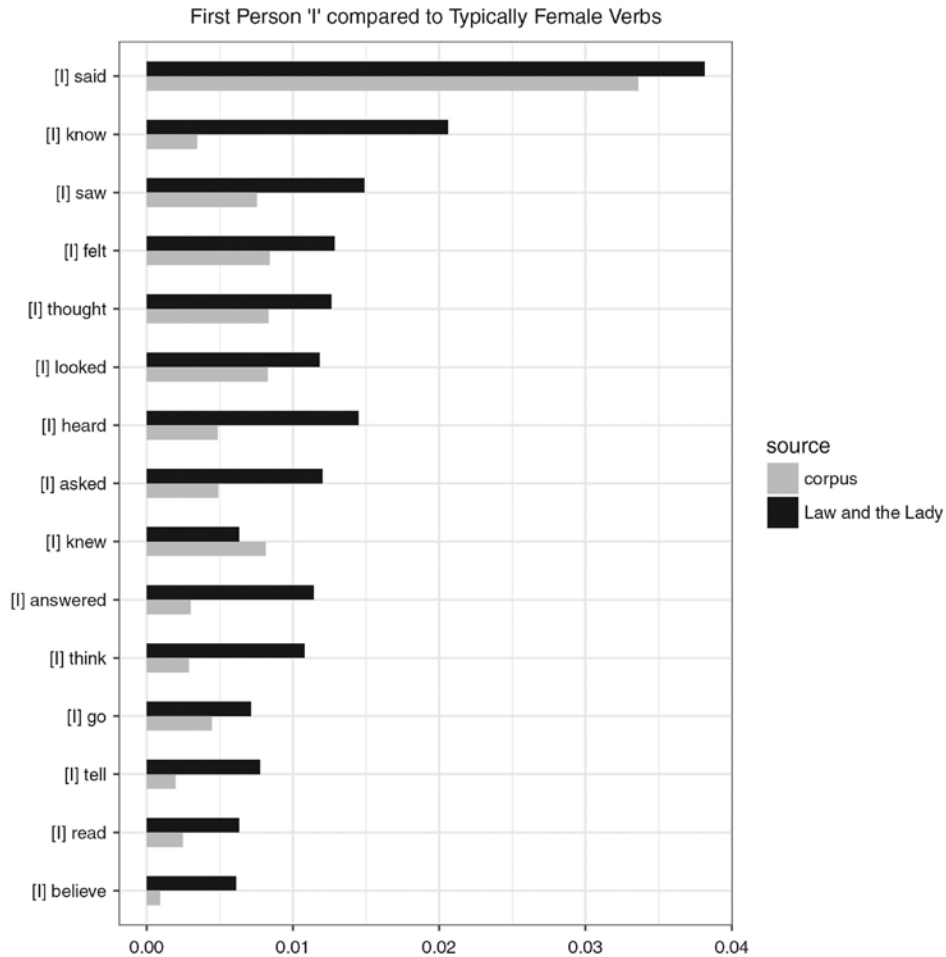
Integral to this "leap," argues the anonymous critic, is the "ubiquitous" and "incomprehensible female [Valeria] who controls their [minor characters] several destinies [and] perpetually asserts herself, apparently with no better object than the increased complexity of the dispensation over which she presides" (p. 3). In a less caustic review published by *The Times* (14 December 1875), Valeria's characterization receives less attention; her description as acting "the unheroic part of a detective," however, is noteworthy in underlying her character's unusual status as a female sleuth within the then nascent genre of detective fiction—preceding Edward Stratemeyer's *Nancy Drew* series by nearly a half century. It is worth mentioning that previous fictional "detective roles" were filled by professionally trained men: Inspector Bucket in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852–53) and the barrister Robert Audley in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), for example. Beyond noting that Valeria "suffers, as was scarcely to be wondered at, humiliation in the pursuit of her vocation," *The Times* critique appears far less concerned with propriety and social moralizing than its conservative



counterpart (p. 3). Yet, estimations of gender and agency appear here as well, not through derision but rather, praise: “The most lovable being in the book is Ariel, the idiot cousin and servant of Dexter, whom he tortures and starves, and who dies upon his grave like a faithful dog” (p. 3). That one review lambasts *The Law and the Lady*’s titular protagonist for “vindicating her right to be called a strong-minded woman,” while the other pays compliment to a grotesque caricature of female submission that is telling of nineteenth-century gender politics—and Collins’s aptitude for upsetting the status quo (p. 3).

Throughout the narrative, Collins both subtly and sometimes boldly subverts conventional gender roles, especially those associated with women. In her section titled “Breaking the Laws about Ladies: Wilkie Collins’ Questioning of Gender Roles,” O’Fallon (1995) delineates Collins’s experimentation with gender dynamics, observing that “the progress of the Collins heroine from novel to novel suggests that Collins became increasingly intrigued by the possibilities of his female characters” (p. 229). This proposed progression reaches its zenith in “the less well known *The Law and the Lady* [. . .] Collins’ most interesting novel in terms of the reworking of gender roles” (p. 231). O’Fallon’s assertions “[that] if one wants to claim that Collins is a feminist writer, a large part of that claim must rest on this novel” and that “in Valeria Brinton (Woodville) Macallan, Collins has finally given readers a heroine who acts effectively without the supervision of a man” (p. 232). This appraisal effectively highlights *The Law and The Lady* as a noteworthy outcrop against the tabular, deeply stratified pediment of Victorian Era gender propriety. Skilton (2004) corroborates these findings, noting “that among male novelists of the period, Collins took an unsurpassed interest in women characters, and particularly in their intellects and ambitions” (p. viii). Skilton contrasts Collins’s interest in women with Dickens who “presented female characters as dolls, termagants, good sisters, or stereotypical fallen women” (p. viii). Less evident from Skilton’s introduction is the concomitant interest that Collins appears to have in subverting masculine stereotypes. While we might imagine it to be the case that the subversion of female stereotypes demands a less masculine foil, this is not necessarily so. It is conceivable that Collins could subvert the conventions of the female stereotype while also adhering to convention with his male characters. What we, and the model employed by Jockers and Kirilloff, observe in *The Law and the Lady* is both.

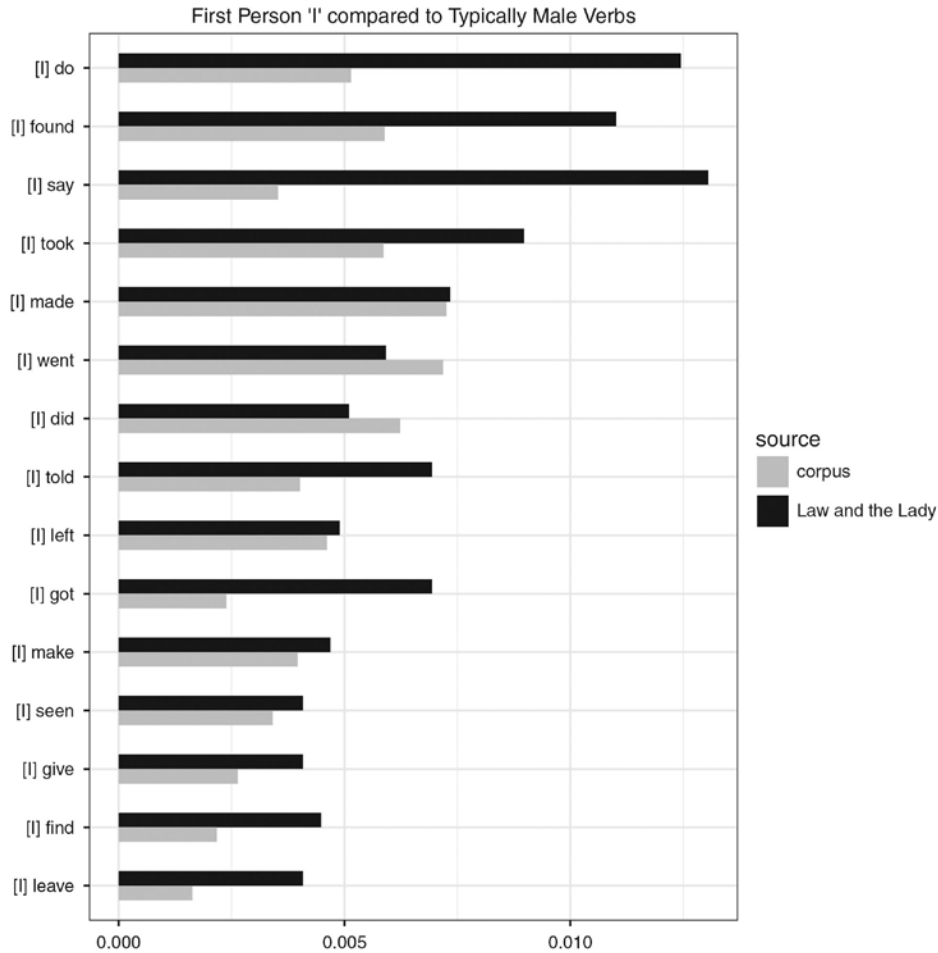
As Fig. 5 indicates, like *Jane Eyre*, Valeria’s first-person narration uses verbs typically associated with females at a high rate compared with the rest of the corpus. However, as Fig. 6 demonstrates, Valeria’s narration employs verbs typically associated with males at a slightly higher rate than *Jane Eyre*’s. Valeria “does,” “finds,” “says,” “takes,” “tells,” “gets,” “gives,” “finds,” and



**Fig. 5.** First-person pronouns and typically female verbs in *The Law and the Lady*

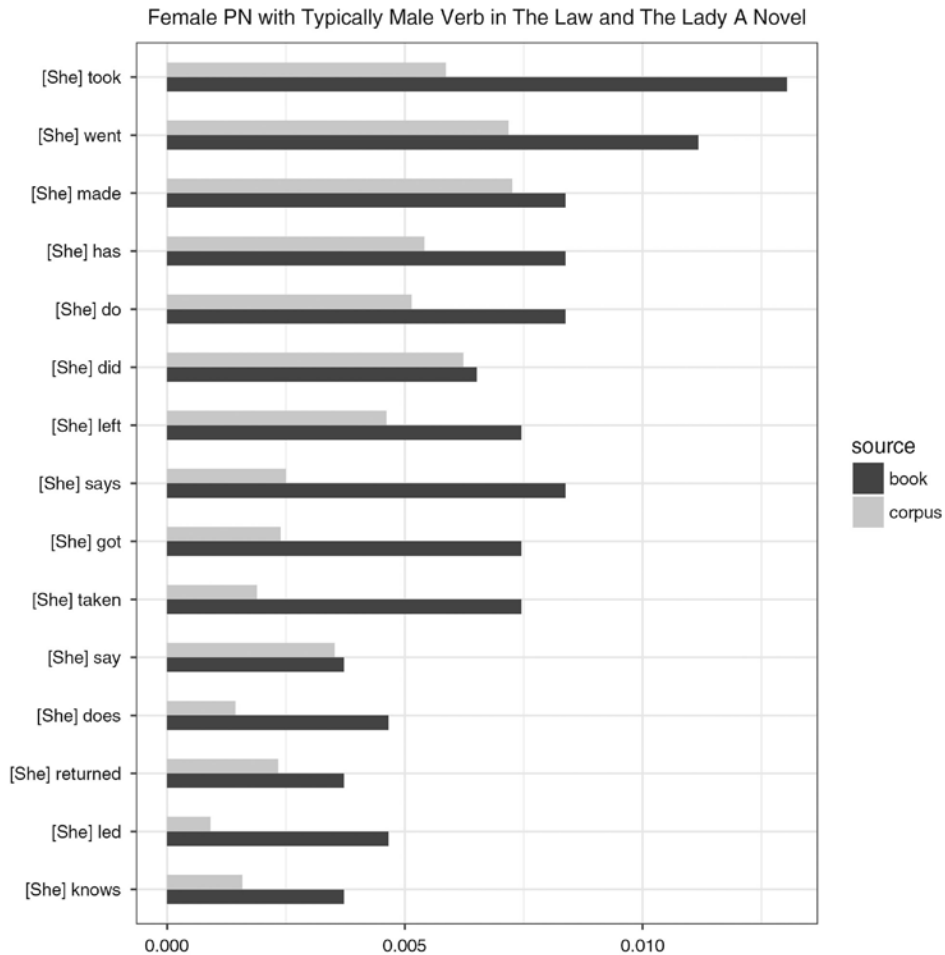
“leaves” at a higher rate than that of the rest of the corpus. Reed (2008) has commented on how Valeria’s actions and her narrative point of view combine to present an anomalous picture of female agency: “Only someone outside the regulations of the law can informally prosecute the case [after the Scotch Verdict]; remarkably for a Victorian novel that person is a determined young woman” (p. 222).

This verb usage corresponds with Valeria’s role as an active protagonist. In seeking to vindicate her husband, Valeria becomes a sleuth in a mystery that, at least in the eyes of Victorian readers, might, as Skilton suggested, have been more appropriately “left to the men” (p. xiii). Not however, in the eyes of Valeria who proclaims to her husband: “What the Law has failed to do for you, your Wife must do for you . . . Are you surprised at the knowledge of the law which this way of writing betrays in an ignorant woman? I have been learning, my dear: *The Law and the Lady* have begun by understanding one



**Fig. 6.** First-person pronouns and typically male verbs in *The Law and the Lady*

another” (p. 108). Valeria is, therefore, no stereotypical Victorian woman, a fact that she and Collins (following Wollstonecraft’s example) are at pains to make clear. Valeria was neither “one of those women who shed tears on the smallest provocation” (p. 35) nor was she inclined to accept the notion that “Ladies are not generally in the habit of troubling their heads about dry questions of law” (p. 222). Quite the contrary, she is determined to pursue her goals rationally even while admitting that she is not always well prepared: she acknowledges that “a man in my place might have known what to do” (p. 280). The irony here is that she is precisely well prepared, especially so in contrast to the various males in the novel who tend to be passive and even submissive: Valeria’s husband describes himself as “one of the weakest of living mortals” (p. 183).

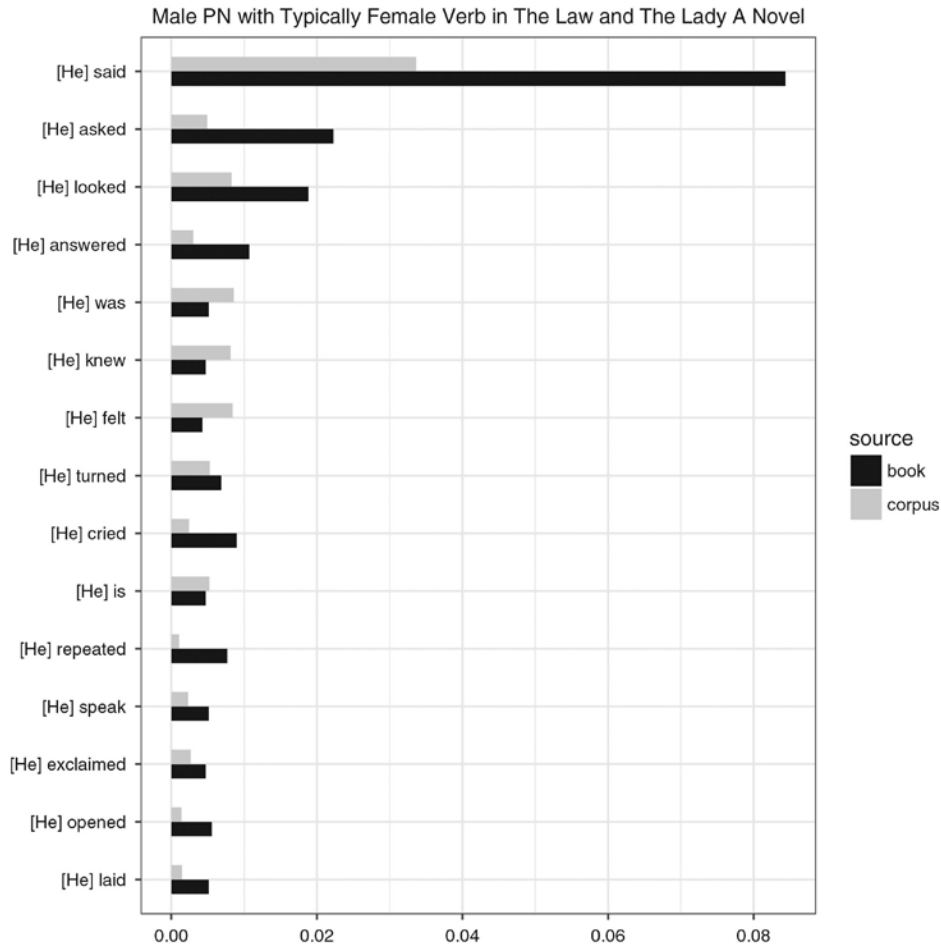


**Fig. 7.** Female pronouns and typically male verbs in *The Law and the Lady*

In the *Law and the Lady*, females participate in typically male pronoun/verb constructions at more than double the rate that they do so in the larger corpus. Female agency, as detected by the model and seen in Fig. 7, has strong male inflections.

As Fig. 8 demonstrates, the inverse is seen with the males in the novel who are far more likely to be associated with verbs that are typically correlated with female characters.

Readers of the novel may not be surprised by these data: this is, after all, a novel that includes two—somewhat despicable, or at least deranged—cross-dressing characters (Dexter and Ariel). Dexter, we are told, has “large clear blue eyes, and . . . long delicate white hands, [which] were like the eyes and hands of a beautiful woman . . . his whole conduct [was] (I say again) the conduct of an essentially weak man” (p. 163). Complicating matters,



**Fig. 8.** Male pronouns and typically female verbs in *The Law and the Lady*

as Briefel (2009) has noted, Dexter’s employment of cosmetics and ornate clothing make him a kind of “mannish woman” (p. 473). Ariel, conversely, is a sort of beast: “A creature half alive; an imperfectly developed animal in shapeless form, clad in a man’s pilot jacket, and treading in a man’s heavy laced boots: with nothing but an old red flannel petticoat, and a broken comb in her frowsy flaxen hair, to tell us that she was a woman” (p. 196). While not nearly so sensational, the two main characters, Valeria and Eustace, present a more subtle sort of flipped agency. Valeria, as protagonist, has all the physical and forward-moving agency and energy in the novel, and she frequently compares her actions to those of “some women” or “those women” in both cases meaning “typical women.” Valeria is so different from other women, that she cannot even “pretend to guess how other women might have acted in [her] place” (p. 53), and she is quite clear that if “another woman” behaved as she has, she would herself “be quite at a loss to account for her conduct” (p. 107).

Eustace, meanwhile, is passive—consciously avoiding action—and nervous. Passivity is certainly not a quality consistently encoded as feminine, even by the measures of the computer model, but inaction in the physical sense certainly is. Eustace is largely incapable of taking action or control. Even his tone of voice is reserved: Eustace whispers (pp. 16, 156, 346) or speaks in similarly subdued or reluctant tones (pp. 27, 96, 290, 346, 367, 368, 369, 371) consistently throughout the text.<sup>13</sup> And when Eustace looks at Valeria it is with the “tenderest and gentlest eyes that [she] *ever saw in the countenance of a man*” (p. 15, emphasis added). In an early scene, newlywed Valeria and Eustace are on a train heading off on their honeymoon. Valeria describes how her “husband *winds* his arm round [her] . . . and presses [her] to him gently.” Meanwhile her own “arm *steals* round his neck” (p. 16, emphasis added). The larger context is even more telling, but notice here, if nothing else, the contrast between the two arms: the male arm winds; the female arm steals, and steals around the neck no less.

Readers familiar with the conventions of the sensation novel will recognize *The Law and the Lady* as a case study in the genre: plot driven with intense emotions, scandal, murder (suspected, at least), madness, and sexual deviance. All of this takes place in the context of standard domestic settings and morally upstanding individuals, who are either outwardly anxious about their identity or inwardly conflicted about their place in society. In many ways, these characters push against institutions of authority, whether these are the institutions of moral authority, or the more defined conventions of jurisprudence. However, though Collins may characterize Valeria in surprisingly unconventional terms, it does seem, in the end, that her agency is not so much inspired by a move toward the “masculine” but rather as a manifestation or byproduct of an innately “feminine” power of intuition. Complicating and even contradicting matters, Collins’s narrator makes several comments throughout the novel that seem to infantilize this brand of “feminine intuition,” linking female behavior with the behavior of children and animals— a linkage that we have seen was emphatically denounced by Wollstonecraft and other early proponents of feminism: “Women, children, and dogs proverbially *know by instinct* who the people are who really like them” (p. 58, emphasis added). Collins’s novel may read as a celebration of female agency, and in many ways it is important to note that Valeria’s agency is still at times couched in an essentializing portrayal of “feminine” behavior.

13. For example, Eustace ‘hesitated in asking’ (p. 27), spoke in ‘cold, measured tones’ (p. 96), was ‘weak and wayward’ (p. 291), ‘said nothing’ and ‘stood looking gravely’ (p. 368), and had ‘shown symptoms of weakness’ (p. 371).

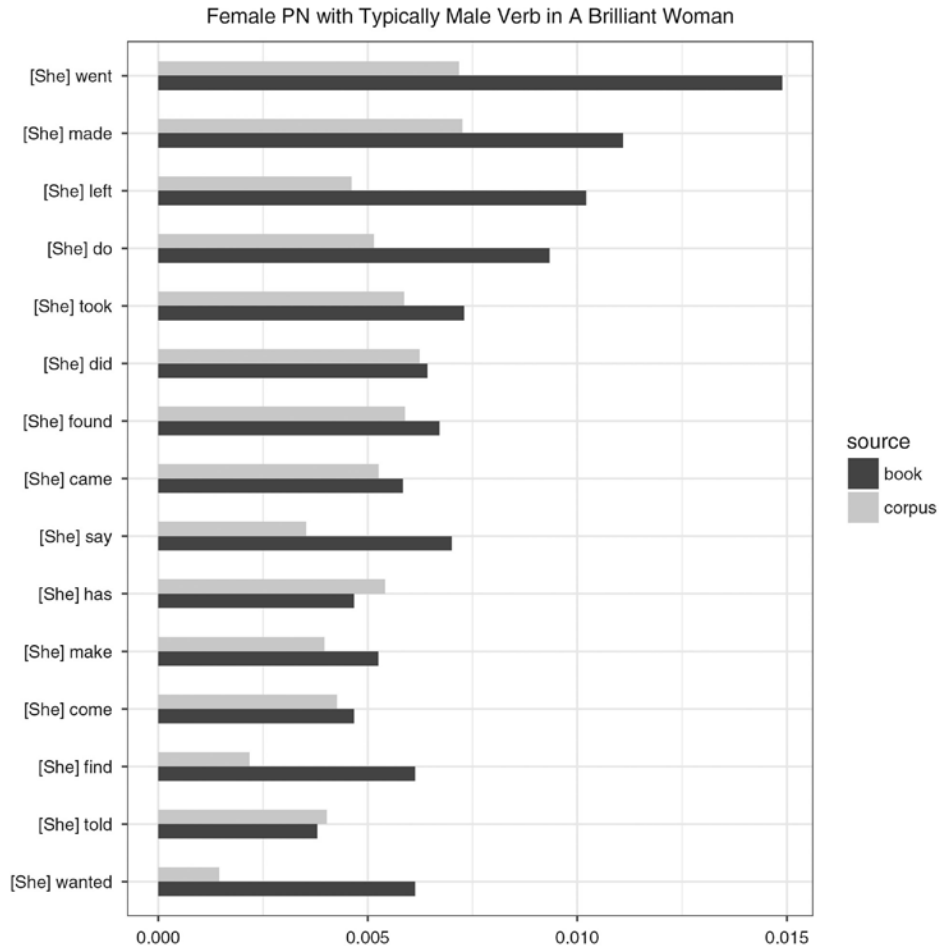
#### 4 A Brilliant Woman

*A Brilliant Woman*, written in 1892 by Julie Bosville Chetwynd, follows the brief courtship and early married life of Cyril Burlington and his wife Maria Kingson, the eponymous brilliant woman. At the beginning of the novel, Maria's Aunt, Mrs Kingson, tricks Cyril and Maria into marrying by convincing Cyril that Maria is madly in love with him, and vice versa. Cyril, whom Chetwynd depicts as quiet and plain, is flattered by Maria's beauty and social graces. The couple is married under false pretenses and soon come to realize that they are incompatible. The marriage is initially unsuccessful and the majority of the novel focuses on a series of misunderstandings that drive Cyril and Maria apart. One of these misunderstandings arises from Cyril's decision to keep secret his knowledge that Maria's mother was a dancer rumored to have left her husband. Eventually, Maria discovers this and goes on a quest to find her long lost mother, after which the couple is happily reconciled.

Though Chetwynd is relatively unknown today, the contemporaneous reviews of *A Brilliant Woman* treat the novel as a popular success. In 1893, *The Publishers' Circular* observed that the novel's success is "evidenced by the appearance of a second edition. The story is an excellent one, and its popularity is well deserved" (p. 384). The critical reception of *A Brilliant Woman* was not as polarized as the critical response to *Jane Eyre*. However, reviews of *A Brilliant Woman* vary in their interpretation of Maria's character. *The Speaker* characterizes Maria as "a singularly ill-bred" and "very vulgar woman" (p. 52). Similarly, *The Saturday Review* describes the novel as "the story of Maria's vanity and ambition, her ludicrous failures, the gradual dawn on her egoism *that her husband is in every light her superior and her better*" (p. 538, emphasis added). However, *The Standard* takes a more sympathetic view, "for some of the mishaps [Maria's] foolishness brought upon him her husband had partly himself to thank. . . She is really a fine character. . . and she justly complains when he [her husband] keeps [things] from her" (p. 6). These reviews highlight a fundamental tension within the narrative; Chetwynd's novel lends itself to both a critique of "unwomanly" female behavior and a critique of the societal imposition of this standard.

Given the centrality of Maria's character and Chetwynd's third-person narration, the vast majority of female pronouns within the text refer to Maria. At first glance, Maria appears to behave similarly to the female characters in *The Law and the Lady* and *Jane Eyre*. As Fig. 9 demonstrates, verbs of motion and physical action, such as "went," "left," and "came" which are typically associated with male pronouns, are here associated with female pronouns.

However, unlike *Jane Eyre* and *Valeria Winston*, Maria's association with physical action and motion is openly linked to "negative" aspects of her



**Fig. 9.** Female pronouns and typically male verbs in *A Brilliant Woman*

character, including ambition and willfulness, which Chetwynd portrays as contributing to the difficulties in Maria's marriage. In this sense, Chetwynd's depiction of Maria corresponds with nineteenth-century notions of gender propriety. Chetwynd characterizes Maria's headstrong conduct as threatening the stability of her marriage because it usurps her husband's authority. In a conversation between Maria and her cousin, Chetwynd links Maria's ambition with her desire to control Cyril:

It jarred not a little upon her [Maria's cousin] to hear the open way in which Maria expressed her intention of "managing" Mr. Burlington—of whom she herself had a very high opinion. "I do not think you quite understand Mr. Burlington, my dear. He is not a character that will brook management." "My dear cousin! He will know nothing about it. I mean to make him do always and at

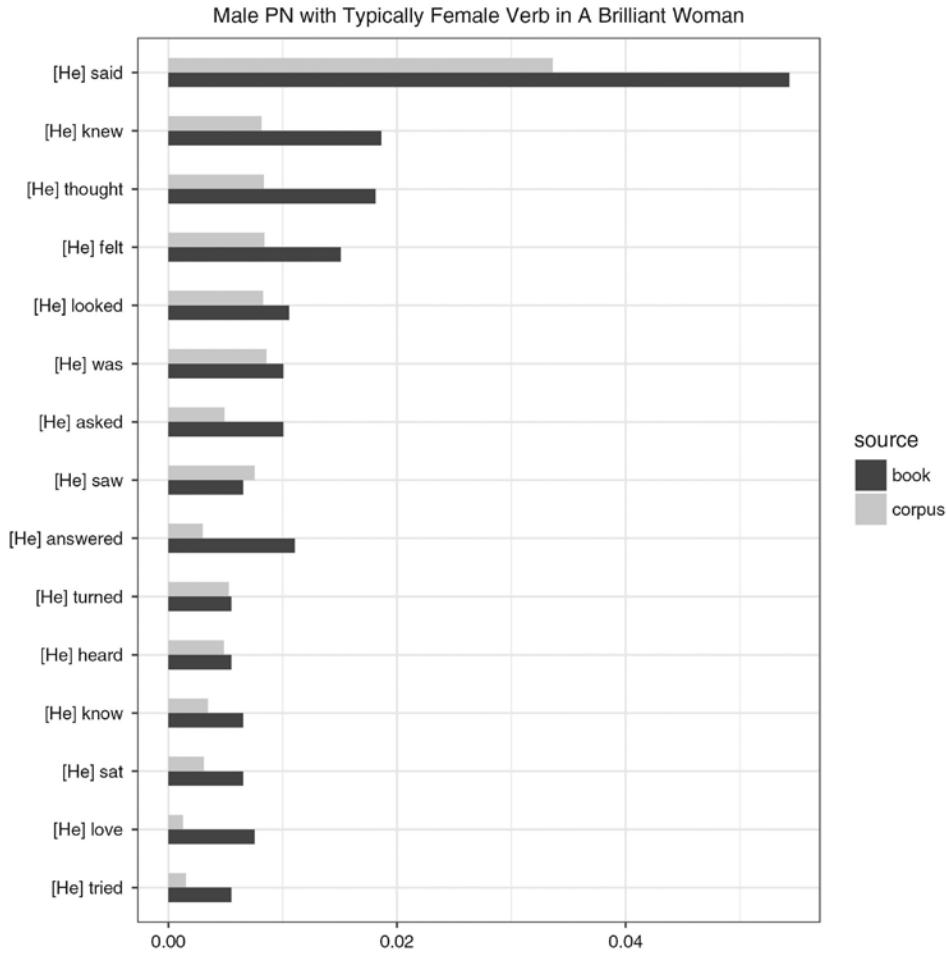


all times exactly what I wish without his being aware of it. It is one of the attractions. I intend pushing him into action—rousing his ambition—you will see. Of course, to succeed in anything one must know and understand everything. But I am not afraid; I do not think the task quite beyond me.” (1: 32)

Though social convention dictates that Maria operates behind the scenes, Chetwynd’s description couches Maria’s ambition in particularly forceful language. Maria intends to “make” her husband do what she desires. Similarly she will “push,” rather than guide or encourage, him into action. The parallels between Maria’s intended action and her husband’s powerlessness subvert the paradigm in which men are active doers and women are passive responders. Though Cyril is still “doing” and “acting,” his position is imagined as lacking agency. Chetwynd criticizes Maria’s attitude through the use of plot devices that depict Maria’s desires as misguided; Maria’s attempts to control her husband often end in comedic failure, such as when she assumes that her husband has no knowledge of foreign languages and offers to “help” him, only to learn that his knowledge far exceeds hers. Given Maria’s inability to fully understand her husband, her claim to “know and understand everything” appears humorously conceited. This narrative device serves a double function—not only does it censure Maria’s behavior by highlighting her failures but also Chetwynd’s use of humor patronizingly infantilizes Maria by portraying her ambition as ridiculous.

Maria’s desire for public and political engagement reflects the dramatic changes that were occurring during the late nineteenth-century; the first debate in Parliament on women’s suffrage took place in 1867, along with the publication of John Stuart Mill’s *The Rights of Women*. In this sense, Chetwynd’s depiction of Maria reflects concerns regarding the development of the “New Woman.” Maria reverses traditional nineteenth-century expectations by imagining herself wielding political power outside of the domestic sphere. Maria vows to “make a man” (1: 38) of Cyril, and imagines herself as “the center, the motive power, the wire-puller” of her husband’s political career (1: 110). Cyril, on the other hand, seeks domestic happiness in his marriage above all else, and, at the beginning of the novel, has neither social nor political ambition. Chetwynd describes Cyril as not only domestic but also as emotional. The verbs associated with male pronouns in the novel (shown in Fig. 10), such as “love” and “felt,” reflect this.

Returning to his estate after his honeymoon, Cyril is touched by the tenants coming to greet him and is annoyed by Maria’s lack of emotion. “He himself felt a huskiness in his throat, and was much impressed by the cordiality and evidence of kindly feeling which went quite beyond his expectations, but Maria was radiant with satisfaction, smiling and bowing right



**Fig. 10.** Male pronouns and typically female verbs in *A Brilliant Woman*

and left, and as far from being emotional as she could well be. . ." (1: 66). The Victorian woman was expected to be emotional, a duty which Mary Poovey argues was "increasingly represented as the emotional labor motivated by. . .maternal instinct" (p. 10). Chetwynd reverses this common association by drawing our attention to Cyril's emotional state and Maria's apparent lack of emotion.

Given the way Chetwynd aligns Cyril with domesticity and Maria with political ambition and then situates the pair in an unhappy and failing marriage, it is tempting to read *A Brilliant Woman* as a straightforward, didactic warning against the dangers of deviating from conventional Victorian gender roles. Yet, there are several elements of Chetwynd's narrative that complicate this reading, the most significant of which is the way Chetwynd uses Maria to discuss questions about individuality and desire. In *Feminine Subject in Masculine Fiction*, Miller (2013) argues that female characters in

the nineteenth century reflect broader shifts in cultural attitudes about human identity. During the later nineteenth century, ideas about women began to shift from viewing them as passive objects to viewing them as active subjects. Consequently, many writers used this changing and dichotomous conception of female identity to explore the meaning of human subjectivity. Miller sees “desire” as playing a key role in the way writers represented female characters in this changing environment. With the acceleration of industrial production and consumer culture in the West, “desire gains primacy,” and takes on various gendered connotations (p. 13).

The exercise of will and the presence of desire, the one a socially enacted “power” and the other a psychic state of defining incompleteness, are what delineate women as subjects in late nineteenth-century European fiction. The interplay between the two seems also to constitute the fascination of these characters for their authors. As women, they locate and perform the problematic tension between these two things, as they define individual subjectivity. They are able to act upon the material world and do so in the most unsettling ways, they appropriate and divert patriarchal wealth, or refuse it in favor of their own economic agency. Equally they experience a continual sense of interiority through the presence of perpetually unsatisfied and inexpressible desire (p. 15).

The newly created female consumer stands in opposition to the Victorian concept of woman as a desireless and selfless being. As emerging subjects, women became emblematic of the way humans function, as both subjective individuals filled with desire, and socially functioning actors. Consequently, it seems particularly significant that the verb “wanted,” typically associated with male pronouns, is associated with female pronouns in *A Brilliant Woman*. However, Maria’s desire is depicted as negative, since what she “wants” is a type of power that hinges on her husband’s lack of agency.

Like Brontë’s (2006) depiction of *Jane Eyre*, Chetwynd’s depiction of Maria engages debates about desire, individuality, and social responsibility. This is particularly clear in passages that link Maria’s positive and negative behavior with her individuality, “She might be provoking, willful, different in many ways perhaps from *the ideal he had had*, but the individual charm of her manner, her brightness, and her absolute truthfulness, made her more lovable. . .” (2: 222, emphasis added). What is particularly striking about this and similar passages is that Chetwynd draws our attention to the way in which the social idealization of a single type of womanhood can be dangerous because it threatens the reality of human individuality. Maria’s status as an individual, one who despite her “faults” is repeatedly associated with “positive” characteristics, is in direct opposition to the socially sanctioned understanding of what a woman should be. When Cyril observes that in marrying Maria “he had brought an inexplicable and delightful brilliancy” into his life, he then laments that he “tried to neutralize it as being too unlike his

ideas of a quiet home life” (2: 222). The depiction of Cyril using social standards to “neutralize” Maria’s individuality recalls Reid’s argument that the imposition of rigid gender roles “subdues” young women into “automatons.” This passage directly portrays the *domestic* ideal as an unrealistic and damaging societal expectation. By repeatedly linking Maria’s positive and negative traits with a sense of truthfulness, Chetwynd associates Maria’s character with honesty rather than artifice which further contradicts the idea that the only “natural” female is a domestic goddess.

Though Maria’s desire to wield power is portrayed as a threat to her marriage, Chetwynd criticizes Cyril’s repeated attempts to “neutralize” Maria’s individuality. Chetwynd both voices the anxieties surrounding the changing status of women and questions the Victorian valorization of female domesticity. Moments in which Chetwynd explicitly invokes late nineteenth-century debates about female suffrage and female equality embody this tension. In a conversation between Cyril’s kindly Aunt Ann and Maria, Chetwynd directly invokes debates about the changing role of women: “‘I think it such a great blessing we women are not called upon to put our ideas before the world,’ said Anne, quietly. ‘Women are apt to infuse bitterness and narrowness into these things’. . . ‘Ah, my dear Aunt Anne, you are, I am afraid, one of those people who keep womankind back,’ exclaimed Mrs. Burlington” (1: 90). Aunt Ann’s comments register as particularly prescient, since all of Maria’s attempts to “put her ideas before the world” end in disaster. Yet, even Aunt Ann, who throughout the novel stands as the vanguard of conventional Victorian femininity, criticizes Cyril’s decision to keep the story of Maria’s parentage a secret: “‘I have studied your wife. I have grown to like her; and I think she is being very unfairly used. . . You expect her to shut her eyes to what goes on. . . She is in a false position, and it is unfair” (1: 280). The way in which Aunt Ann criticizes Cyril’s decision as “unfair,” brings to mind the critique of the Victorian husband’s ability to exercise complete authority over his wife.

Despite Aunt Ann’s repeated praise of female domesticity and wifely obedience, her comments reflect Maria’s more direct and politically charged critique of Cyril’s behavior: “‘You expect me to make my acquaintances, to form my friendships, altogether on your lines; to see with your eyes, to be guided by your wishes, to act by your advice blindly, in a way no woman can do. You never give a reason. You expect a slavish submission. Yes, Cyril! you put me—or, rather, you try to put me—in the position of a slave, not in that of a wife!” (2: 3). While Chetwynd dismisses Maria’s early comments about a woman’s right to political agency, by later aligning Aunt Ann with Maria, Chetwynd makes it harder for the reader to dismiss Maria’s charges against Cyril. Interestingly, Chetwynd’s language here closely mirrors the language used in political debates about economic gender equality. In a speech to the National Liberal Club in 1890, Florence Miller notes that “Under exclusively

man-made laws women have been reduced to the most abject condition of legal slavery. . . under the arbitrary domination of another's will, and dependent for decent treatment exclusively on the goodness of heart of the individual master." The invocation of "slavery" in both of these quotes again brings to mind Miller's argument that the issues surrounding female agency often spoke to broader questions of human subjectivity, since Maria's critique focuses on the negation of her individual will.<sup>14</sup>

While the majority of *A Brilliant Woman* reflects the tensions between conventional and emerging attitudes about the role of women, the end of the novel attempts to resolve these tensions by reinstituting the domestic ideal. Though Cyril must learn to appreciate his wife, Maria must learn to abandon her political and social ambitions. At the end of the novel, Maria proclaims, "let us leave politics to men who understand them. . . and let me show you my new flower-beds" (3: 257). Yet, Chetwynd cannot so easily do away with the problems of individual will and desire that she raised earlier; as a sympathetic character, Maria must still retain the individuality that makes her "brilliant"

That she [Maria] was one of those whose *individuality sets a mark* on all she touches is true; but when this power—and it is a power—is used to enhance the happiness of her children, of her husband, and her home, who can take exception to it? Mrs. Burlington would always be a center of attraction. She had the knack of investing everyday things with a charm that made them far removed from common-place; and, though she never would allow him to say it to her, her husband was convinced that the extraordinary success that followed his career was entirely due to his brilliant wife (3: 263, emphasis added).

The desirous female subject has retreated into a domestic angel. Chetwynd directly calls our attention to the tension between individuality and societal duty in this passage. The way in which Maria's "individuality" invests "everyday *things* with a charm" offers a clue as to why individuality is important in this context, and why it cannot be totally eradicated, despite its ability to disrupt social values. As Bill Brown (2003) observes in *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter in American Literature*, "the democratization of objects" brought about by the increasing accessibility of goods during the turn of the century problematized the way that objects confer and reify identity. If everyone has the right, if not always the opportunity, to possess the same objects, then the ability of objects to confer identity is disrupted.

14. The invocation of "slavery" also stems from the way in which the rhetoric surrounding African slavery in the USA was increasingly influencing the women's suffrage movement.

As objects, and people, became commodified in an increasingly competitive, urban, and commercial world, setting oneself, and one's things, apart from the crowd became increasingly important.<sup>15</sup>

Maria's "brilliance," her uniqueness, while at odds with Victorian gender propriety, functions as a type of social currency that ensures that she will "always be a center of attraction." Chetwynd attempts to resolve this dichotomy by suggesting that female individuality and domestic responsibility can be negotiated, but only when the individual will is in the service of the family. This serves to reify the notion that women must be selfless; Maria's individual, subjective desire for power is replaced by a limited power that must be mediated through her wifely duty to her husband. Her selfhood is negated even while Chetwynd affirms her individuality.

## 5 Conclusions

Our examination of *Jane Eyre*, *The Law and the Lady*, and *A Brilliant Woman* both corroborates and complicates, Jockers and Kirilloff's initial study of behavior in nineteenth-century fiction. In each work, characters act in ways that push the boundaries of what was considered gender appropriate behavior in the nineteenth century. The computer model was successful in detecting this deviance from the norms of the larger corpus but weaker in helping us to understand the how and the why. The tool used by Jockers and Kirilloff does not take into account the emotional valence of a character's actions—a valence which is often created by description, elements of plot, and narrative interjection. As readers we can distinguish Jane Eyre's proclamation that "an honest and happy pride I *took* in it [students' progress]" (p. 422) from Chetwynd's remark that "[Maria] evaded every argument skillfully, and always with a charming smile; but she invariably *took* her own way afterwards. . ." (1: 18). Within Brontë's narrative, the fact that Jane takes personal pride in her students' success may serve to rebuke the idealization of female identity as devoid of personal need; yet, this act of "taking pride" is conditioned by Brontë's other methods of characterization, which position Jane as a strong, intelligent, and kind female character. Though Chetwynd uses the same verb, "took," to describe Maria's action, the reader has already been made to understand that Maria's behavior is a manifestation of "negative" traits. In this case, what is missing from the computer model's results is not only a sense of what is being taken but the emotional valence of the act itself.

15. This is a concept familiar to archaeologists who conceive of "ideotechnic" artifacts as objects that symbolize the ideological conceptions and rationalizations of a sociocultural system.

These complications suggest several avenues for future study. For example, one could use dependency parsing and a machine classification model to examine the adjectives used to describe characters, asking questions such as: Are different adjectives associated with male and female characters? Are certain categories of adjectives, such as those pertaining to physical appearance, more often used to describe male or female characters? In addition, sentiment analysis, a computational method used to determine the positive or negative emotional valence of a sentence, could be used in conjunction with dependency parsing. Using sentiment analysis, scholars might ask questions such as: What types of actions are performed in sentences with a positive emotional valence? When female pronouns perform male actions, is the emotional valence of the sentence negative? Using a combination of these tools may produce a more thorough understanding of literary characterization and point toward additional outliers.

Though the model that Jockers and Kirilloff employ does not fully capture the nuance of fictional characterization, it does illuminate several similarities between three seemingly disparate novels. The machine trained model detected outliers that existed across periods, genres, movements, and additional categories of difference. One of the benefits of utilizing the machine trained model is that it allowed us to put canonical and non-canonical texts in dialogue with one another. While numerous scholars have discussed the portrayal of gender in *Jane Eyre*, little scholarship exists on *A Brilliant Woman*. Both Brontë and Collins are canonical authors; however, Chetwynd, despite her popularity in the nineteenth-century, has been largely forgotten. The machine-trained model guided and informed our close reading, pointing us toward comparisons that we would otherwise not have been able to make. In turn, this allowed us to closely examine the nuances that the machine overlooked through the lens of traditional literary scholarship.

Close reading these novels alongside one another highlights the extent to which each author engages, rather than rebukes, nineteenth-century cultural shifts in the understanding of human, and gendered, identity. Though the characters in these novels behave in “unconventional” ways, all three narratives struggle to mitigate traditional and emerging social values. Despite Jane’s unwillingness to submit to authority, Brontë depicts her married role as similar to the traditional configuration of woman as helpmate: “I will be your companion—to read to you, to walk with you, to sit with you, to wait on you. . . I served both for his prop and guide” (p. 516). The seemingly dichotomous nature of “prop and guide” underscores the fundamental tensions at play in each of these three novels. As a “prop,” Jane functions as a selfless support, yet, doing so gives her a type of power that is predicated on her crippled husband’s lack of physical agency. Similarly, Valeria’s role

as an intelligent female sleuth grants her a unique form of authority; yet, her agency is intertwined with her desire to protect and serve her husband. Like Chetwynd's penitent Maria, whose "ambitious aims were for him [her husband] now. Any plans she made were for his benefit, and not her own," Valeria is lauded for operating outside of the domestic sphere, but only when her family's welfare is dependent on her success (3: 192).

Despite their differences, *Jane Eyre*, *The Law and the Lady*, and *A Brilliant Woman* end in remarkably similar ways; in each case, a marriage that has been threatened by a dangerous falsehood<sup>16</sup> is salvaged, domestic bliss ensues, and the heroine becomes a devoted mother and loving spouse. It is possible to read these endings as unsatisfying acts of containment in which seemingly unconventional characters are reimprisoned by Victorian domestic ideals. Yet, as Miller observes in her discussion of *Jane Eyre*'s ending, "we cannot know how readers are specifically affected by any texts, but we can surmise that the disruptive and unstable middles of these stories also have profound cultural resonance. If they did not, they wouldn't create the tensions they do" (p. 31). The conventional aspects of each novel point toward an attempt to understand what marriage and love might look like in a world of rapidly shifting gender roles. As our analysis demonstrates, these "tensions" are reflected not only at the level of plot but at the level of the sentence, and in fact, at the level of individual words; the way verbs are used in these novels speaks to the characters' struggles with and against dominant social norms. The fact that a machine-trained model using only verb/pronoun pairings identified the nonconforming nature of these novels reaffirms the importance of word choice and character action in shaping our impressions of narrative.

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16. In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester lies about his previous marriage, in *The Law and the Lady* Eustace hides the details of his previous wife's mysterious death and in *A Brilliant Woman*, Maria's Aunt tricks the couple into marrying, while Cyril hides aspects of Maria's parentage. This commonality points to an interesting avenue for future study—the repeated focus on female characters being "duped" into marriage by their future spouses can perhaps be read as a reflection of social anxieties about female dependence within Victorian marriage. Tellingly, in these three novels, resolution is only achieved once the male protagonist's secrets are revealed and are dealt with jointly by the male and female protagonists.



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