

# Dutiful Daughters and Colonial Discourse in Jane West's *A Gossip's Story*

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In *A Gossip's Story and a Legendary Tale* (1796), Jane West engages with both the contemporary ideology and the political reality of the British empire by explicitly supporting British overseas trade while acknowledging the precarious nature of a transatlantic empire. For West, the female body is a potent site through which to explore colonialist ideologies. The fates of various female characters reinforce ideas about feminine virtue and sexual regulation shaped by British contact with the Atlantic world, thus promoting a moral code that would come to define the empire. If young women do represent the British subject in didactic fiction of this period, with the father figure representing state authority, West's portrayal of these characters in *A Gossip's Story* against the backdrop of British Caribbean colonies alters our understanding of the national culture she promotes. *A Gossip's Story's* overt message—the importance of filial duty—urges its female readers not just to be good daughters, but to be good daughters of the British empire.

abstract

THOUGH BORN in London, where she lived for her first eleven years, Jane West (1758–1852) spent the majority of her life in the English countryside. Married to Thomas West, a farmer and tradesman, she raised her children and cultivated a prolific career as a writer while residing in the rural village of Little Bowden. West often referred to herself as a “simple country girl” and a “village maid.”<sup>1</sup> One of her better known poems, “To the Hon. Mrs. C———e” (1791), reflects this self-conscious bucolic image: “You said the author was a charmer, / Self-taught, and

<sup>1</sup> Marilyn Wood, *Studios to Please: A Profile of Jane West, An Eighteenth-Century Author* (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2003), 1, 9. Wood's profile of Jane West is the source of most current biographical knowledge of her, along with Pamela Lloyd's excellent *Jane West: A Critical Biography* (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 1997). See also the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 60 vols., ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 58:226–28. *The Orlando Project* is an excellent resource for information on West and other contemporary British women writers: <http://orlando.cambridge.org>.

married to a farmer. / Who wrote all kinds of verse with ease, / Made pies and puddings, frocks and cheese. / ... Her conversation spoke a mind / Studious to please, but unrefined.”<sup>2</sup> This image of the simple farmer’s wife, minding her duties at home while also answering the call of her pen, was an important part of West’s authorial persona. A letter published in *Gentleman’s Magazine* in 1802, for example, describes West in these terms: “As a wife, mother, daughter, and a farmer’s wife, she is an example to be held up to every female.”<sup>3</sup> This writer goes on to praise West for the butter and cheese she makes in her dairy and for her devoted attention to the minutiae of life on a farm. West was anxious that her career as a writer not seem to take precedence over her domestic life, once writing, “My needle always claims the pre-eminence of my pen.”<sup>4</sup>

Scholars of West’s fiction tend to take the author at her word, ascribing primarily domestic motivations to West’s politically interested novels, such as *The Advantages of Education* (1793), *A Gossip’s Story and a Legendary Tale* (1796), and *A Tale of the Times* (1799). Like other women writers of the 1790s, West turned to writing novels in order to add her voice to public debates over individual rights and governance of the body politic in the wake of the French Revolution.<sup>5</sup> What did it mean to West to write on behalf of her nation in this tumultuous political climate? The critical consensus is that West wrote for and about women: wives, daughters, grandmothers, and spinsters all occupy central roles in her novels. Critics contend that West and other so-called “conservative” writers—such as Hannah More and Elizabeth Hamilton—reinforced British patriarchy as a necessary social institution and upheld the father as a kind of divine monarch requiring female allegiance. West outlined the proper education of daughters, warned her readers about the dangers of sentimental fiction, and argued for the importance of filial duty to maintaining the domestic sphere. Women such

<sup>2</sup> The poem “To the Hon. Mrs. C———e” first appeared in Jane West, *Miscellaneous Poems, and a Tragedy* (York, 1791), 115–21.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Marilyn Wood, *Studious to Please*, 61.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Marilyn Wood, *Studious to Please*, 57.

<sup>5</sup> In her *Jane West: A Critical Biography*, Lloyd argues that West thought of herself as a poet first and turned to writing novels specifically in response to contemporary social issues: “Almost everything that has been written about Jane West has focused on her novels ... But Jane West’s early ambition was to be a serious poet” (iv–v).

as More and West are often set up in contrast to so-called "radical" women writers from Mary Wollstonecraft to Mary Hays, though this kind of polarizing discussion oversimplifies the concerns each woman addressed.<sup>6</sup>

Without question, Jane West and others like her cared deeply about the home and about the women who occupied and maintained it, and they saw the home as crucially linked to national stability. However, "home" meant something more to West: to her, the concept of "home" collapsed and incorporated a wide range of ideas about race, gender, sexuality, and national identity formed in and around colonial "contact zones," to use Mary Louise Pratt's term.<sup>7</sup> My aim in this article is to deepen the discussion of West's fiction by examining her second novel, *A Gossip's Story and a Legendary Tale* (1796), through the lens of late eighteenth-century colonial discourse. The empire serves as an important backdrop in this novel, yet West's engagement with both the contemporary ideology and the political reality of the British empire has often been overlooked in scholarship. Given the prominent position of women in West's fiction, gender dominates existing studies of her novels;<sup>8</sup> however, as

<sup>6</sup> See Harriet Guest, "Hannah More and Conservative Feminism," in *British Women's Writing in the Long Eighteenth Century: Authorship, Politics and History*, ed. Jennie Batchelor and Cora Kaplan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 158–70. Guest surveys critical reappraisals of Hannah More that debate the degrees of radicalism and conservatism in her work, such as Anne Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England, 1780–1830* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); and Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Mary Louise Pratt coins the term "contact zones" in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), and defines contact zones as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today" (4).

<sup>8</sup> West scholarship largely focuses on West's anti-Jacobinism following the French Revolution and on her apparently rigid and conservative constructions of gender. M.O. Grenby includes *A Gossip's Story* among a list of novels that displayed "zealous anti-Jacobinism." Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel: British Conservatism and the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 197. See also Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution, 1790–1827* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Claudia L. Johnson's reading of West's fiction in many ways typifies early critical responses to West and other so called "conservative" women writing in the 1790s; Johnson asserts that "the novels and conduct books by Hannah More and Jane West advance the strictest programs for female subordination and the most repressive standards of female propriety to counteract the influence

Felicity Nussbaum, Kathleen Wilson, and others have convincingly argued, a discussion of what it meant to be an English citizen in the eighteenth century must attend to the ways in which discursive categories such as gender, race, and nation were produced by England's expanding awareness of the New World.<sup>9</sup> To assess the qualities assigned to "proper" Englishwomen in the late eighteenth century in a novel such as *A Gossip's Story* leads us to examine the way Englishwomen were imagined alongside women in colonial territories. Such a reading compels us to think about the nation in a transatlantic context, which is necessary not only in eighteenth-century fiction featuring colonial settings but also in so-called domestic fiction.

of progressive ideas about women." Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 16. More recent scholarship, however, accords West a greater degree of nuance, especially in her portrayal of patriarchal figures. Caroline Gonda suggests that "many novels in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries [including *A Gossip's Story*] ... present fathers who have failed to make proper material provision for their daughters ... their impotence given bodily form by sickness and death." Gonda, *Reading Daughters' Fictions 1709–1834: Novels and Society from Manley to Edgeworth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 175. Lloyd similarly sees West questioning patriarchal power, emphasizing the number of patriarchal figures who die in West's novels (including Mr Dudley in *A Gossip's Story*) (5–8). West's narrative techniques have also received critical attention. Patricia Meyer Spacks examines the position of Prudentia Homespun, West's narrator in *A Gossip's Story* and four other novels, claiming that "the gossip ... typifies the novelist" because the gossip "functions explicitly as the originator of compelling fictions." Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 181. Similarly, Anna Uddén deconstructs the narrator's position in *A Gossip's Story* and argues that "Jane West's construction of a narrative voice ... is not only to be seen as a struggle for discursive authority; she also questions the premises of such authority and redefines them by her practice." Uddén, *Veils of Irony: The Development of Narrative Technique in Women's Novels of the 1790s* (Uppsala: S. Academiae Ubsaliensis, 1998), 71. For a discussion of West and the romance genre, see Mary Anne Schofield, *Masking and Unmasking the Female Mind: Disguising Romances in Feminine Fiction, 1713–1799* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Felicity Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). In *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), Kathleen Wilson analyzes what she refers to as the "circuitry of empire" (17)—the interconnectedness of colonial and metropolitan territories in forging ideas about Englishness in the eighteenth century. Wilson argues that "women's bodies and minds functioned symbolically and literally as the bearers of national values and ideals, just as their alleged 'characters' were taken to encapsulate the best and worst features of national manners" (93). Such national ideals and constructions of femininity, Wilson contends, were inextricably linked to eighteenth-century British imperialism.

Set entirely in England and featuring occasional glances to the West Indies, *A Gossip's Story* highlights implicit connections between domestic and colonial in the late eighteenth century. West presents a nuanced and complicated picture of what the empire meant at this time, explicitly supporting British overseas trade while also acknowledging the precarious nature of a transatlantic empire. In the novel, the female body is a potent site through which West explores colonialist ideologies. Through the fates of various female characters, *A Gossip's Story* reinforces ideas about feminine virtue and sexual regulation shaped by British contact with the Atlantic World, and, in so doing, promotes a moral code that would come to define the empire. The novel upholds "CONSISTENCY, FORTITUDE, and the DOMESTICK VIRTUES," and presents its narrative to "afford instruction, as well as amusement to the younger part of the female world."<sup>10</sup> Among the domestic virtues displayed in *A Gossip's Story* are a young woman's loyalty to a patriarch who represents an idealized version of British mercantilism and the supposed benevolence of imperial expansion. As critics have noted, the patriarchal figure stood as a symbol of state authority in the fiction of this period, and "the family and the state were analogous bodies."<sup>11</sup> Lisa Wood claims that in the 1790s femininity "was intimately tied to the preservation of the state, the family, and the national church."<sup>12</sup> Harriet Guest suggests that women writers such as West "more or less explicitly represent the condition of women as the key to the moral and political condition of the national culture."<sup>13</sup> If young women represent the English subject in the didactic fiction of this period, with the father figure representing state authority, West's portrayal of these characters in *A Gossip's Story* against the backdrop of Britain's Caribbean colonies alters the ways in which we understand the national culture she promotes. *A Gossip's Story's* overt message—the importance of filial duty—

<sup>10</sup> *A Gossip's Story and a Legendary Tale*, 2 vols. (London: T.N. Longman, 1796), 1:iv, 4. References are to this edition.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Allen Ford, "Tales of the Times: Family and Nation in Charlotte Smith and Jane West," in *Family Matters in the British and American Novel*, ed. Andrea O'Reilly Herrera, Elizabeth Mahn Nollen, and Sheila Reitzel Foor (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1997), 16.

<sup>12</sup> Lisa Wood, *Modes of Discipline: Women, Conservatism, and the Novel after the French Revolution* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003), 36.

<sup>13</sup> Guest, 159.

urges the female reader not just to be a good daughter, but to be a good daughter of the British empire.

These concerns have also been overlooked in the larger body of scholarship on late eighteenth-century didactic texts by women. Pursuing such analysis in this and other contemporary texts allows us to expand what we think of as the compass of eighteenth-century women's "domestic" concerns. How did the British empire influence the domestic Englishwoman's ability to imagine the nation and her place within it? What did eighteenth-century women writers think about Great Britain's increasing national wealth and territorial expansion? How did growing awareness of the empire and its "others" impinge upon the middle-class morality promoted by women such as Hannah More? To ignore such questions, or to presuppose that women like More, West, and others, did not think or write about such issues is to affirm the limiting assumption that the domestic scene (narrowly defined) is the woman writer's primary terrain during this period.

*A Gossip's Story* chronicles the lives of the Dudley family who reside in the English market town of Danbury. As the novel opens, Mr Dudley, a widower with two daughters named Louisa and Marianne, returns to Danbury after attending to his plantations in the British West Indies. The colonial backdrop to the novel's domestic setting is immediately apparent: one of the first descriptions of Mr Dudley reveals that he "united the character of the true Gentleman to the no less respectable name of the generous conscientious merchant" and that he possessed "a considerable estate" (1:14) in Barbados. Louisa, the novel's example of filial piety, accompanied him to Barbados where she was educated among the "luxuriant bounty of nature, and the fierce contention of the elements" (1:16), an environment that contributed to forming her superior intelligence and character. By contrast, Marianne stayed in England with her grandmother, where she experienced "all the fond indulgence of doating love" (1:16). Despite her father's wishes to the contrary, Marianne rejects her first suitor Mr Pelham because he does not suit the romantic sensibilities she has cultivated through prolific novel reading. She eventually marries Mr Clermont, a man who shares her romantic sensibility, and their marriage is disastrous. Louisa likewise rejects her first suitor, the wealthy Sir William Milton,

and marries Mr Pelham. She ends the novel a happy woman, rewarded for abiding by her father's wisdom and choosing a husband of whom he approves. Scholarship on *A Gossip's Story* generally focuses on the didacticism of these courtship plots, debating what they reveal about West's stance towards patriarchal authority.<sup>14</sup> Critics have also located Louisa and Marianne as source material for Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), since the sisters seem to embody these qualities in a generic way: Louisa as sense, Marianne as sensibility.<sup>15</sup>

We cannot fully understand the novel's insistence that women adhere to patriarchal norms without examining the mercantilist layer of Mr Dudley's character, nor can we understand West's broader construction of national identity without considering its colonial context. Underwriting the courtship plots in *A Gossip's Story* is the eighteenth-century plantation culture of the British West Indies as well as England's maritime conflict with other European empires, specifically the Spanish and French. Damage to his Barbados plantations necessitates Mr Dudley's initial return to England, as "the terrible devastations of a hurricane" force him to abandon "the schemes of improvement he had projected upon his estates" (1:20). Although the novel never explicitly addresses this aspect of Mr Dudley's profession, as a West Indian plantation owner Mr Dudley is likely a slave owner as well. *A Gossip's Story* is set before the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 (though the 1790s witnessed fierce debate over the issue of slavery)<sup>16</sup> and West Indian plantations at this time

<sup>14</sup> For examples, see Eleanor Ty, *Empowering the Feminine: The Narratives of Mary Robinson, Jane West, and Amelia Opie, 1796–1812* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), esp. chap. 5, "Abjection and the Necessity of the Other: West's Feminine Ideals in *A Gossip's Story*," and Lisa Wood, *Modes of Discipline*. Wood claims that *A Gossip's Story* "is typical in its use of the courtship plot for didactic purposes" (70). See also n8.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the intersections between Austen and West, see Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Sisters," in *Fetter'd or Free?: British Women Novelists, 1670–1815*, ed. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986), 136–51. See also J.M.S. Tompkins, *The Popular Novel in England, 1770–1800* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961). Tompkins refers to *A Gossip's Story* as an "embryo" of *Sense and Sensibility* (99).

<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of women's participation in this debate, see Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670–1834* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), esp. chaps. 7–11. For a history of slave uprisings in the 1790s, see Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

depended on slave labour to supply their workforce: as Catherine Hall outlines, “Plantations could vary hugely in size, from 80 to 2,000 or more acres, the latter requiring the labour of 500 or more slaves.”<sup>17</sup> His likely participation in the slave trade is invisible in the description of Mr Dudley’s “considerable” West Indian estates, though an eighteenth-century reader could fill in this gap. West clearly does not see this participation in slave culture as a blemish on his character. Mr Dudley’s position as the novel’s moral compass effectively merges patriarchal and slave-owning colonial authority.

At times the novel reads as explicit colonial propaganda, advancing a connection between patriarchy, empire, and national identity. For example, in a dispute between Mr Dudley and Louisa’s first suitor Sir William Milton, Sir William suggests that Mr Dudley’s masculine virtue emerged only after he “retired from mercantile pursuits” (1:182). Mr Dudley’s rebuttal reads like a pamphlet circulated to promote trade and colonization: “If, by reminding me of the profession I once followed, you mean to throw any reflection on the general character of a British merchant, you rather expose your own want of information respecting the resources and wealth of this empire, than discredit me. I glory in having stimulated the industry of thousands; increased the natural strength of my country; and enlarged her revenue and reputation, as far as a private individual could” (1:182). This speech relies on common tropes of representing the empire to the English public: beginning in the seventeenth century, “the literature advocating voyages of discovery, new trades or colonies often gives the impression that the promoters were concerned with nothing more nor less than the public good: in contemporary terms, the common weal.”<sup>18</sup> The “public good” included employment for the so-called “idle poor,” English independence from foreign goods, and increased national revenue. These representations elided the merchant’s mercenary desires as well as the public desire for luxury goods. Such propaganda continued into the eighteenth century, during which debates over the consumption of luxury goods increased as a result of growing trading relations

<sup>17</sup> Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 71.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Andrews, *Trade, Plunder, and Settlement: Maritime Enterprise and the Genesis of the British Empire, 1480–1630* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 33.

and expanding colonial territory.<sup>19</sup> Through Mr Dudley, West characterizes the English colonial as a benevolent figure working in service to his nation.

Despite its celebration of Mr Dudley's identity as a plantation owner and a "generous conscientious merchant," *A Gossip's Story* is not simplistically pro-empire. West differentiates between the virtuous prosperity sought by English merchants like Mr Dudley and the rapacity of those merchants of other European nations—in particular Spain, with whom Great Britain long maintained a rivalry over trading privileges and colonial territories.<sup>20</sup> For example, in a letter to Louisa written while in London managing debts accrued via trade, Mr Dudley proclaims, "Integrity is no less a character of an English merchant than enterprise" (1:173). Later in the novel, West sets up this sense of integrity in stark contrast to "the suspicious spirit with which the Spaniards conduct their colonial affairs, and their jealousy of the commercial importance of England" (2:141). Mr Dudley's difference from avaricious Spanish merchants contributes to his peculiarly English character. According to West, then, being English means both commercial and moral superiority, and the two are intimately intertwined in this text. The reader ascertains Mr Dudley's patriarchal virtue through the honesty of his commercial dealings.

Notably, in the context of West's overall conception of the empire, Mr Dudley's mercantile pursuits are his ultimate undoing. We understand his superior character in the transatlantic theatre of empire, yet West subsequently shows that the empire has the power to undercut (even destroy) domestic stability. Following the initially dismal portrait of his hurricane-damaged estates, Mr Dudley's loss of financial prospects looms large throughout the novel as the Dudley family's financial security gradually unravels. Mr Dudley attempts to recoup some of his plantation losses through further investment in trading enterprises, yet continually receives letters from his "London correspondent" relaying "unpleasant" intelligence (1:167), such as the loss of ships and goods to French pirates. He is forced to leave his estate in Danbury in order to deal with these crises, first moving to the country in Seatondell with Louisa,

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of the so-called "luxury debates," see *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires, and Delectable Goods*, ed. Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> See Andrews, esp. chaps. 1 and 6.

then travelling to London, and proposing a trip to Spain. In an oblique way, financial peril kills Mr Dudley. As his fortune fails (none of his financial ventures prosper) so does his health: his physician tells Louisa that “his uneasiness of mind has increased his disease” (2:178). Mr Dudley dies in London, but not before expressing final distaste for the “haughty indolent inhabitants” of Spain (2:184). His deterioration, both financial and physical, illuminates the precariousness of overseas empire in the late eighteenth century, during which scenarios such as those facing Mr Dudley—for example, a report he receives outlining that “the French had detached a squadron to lay wait for the West-India fleet; which was destitute of adequate means of defence against an unexpected attack” (1:167)—were a reality for merchants and investors.

Further illustrating the intimate connections between colonial and domestic at this time, the West Indies play a significant role in *A Gossip's Story's* courtship plots in both subtle and explicit ways. A less central (though no less significant) female character who at one time resides in the Indies, Miss Morton, challenges the way we read femininity and courtship in this novel and allows us to look at Louisa and Marianne's various narrative ends in more complicated ways. Specifically, Miss Morton's characterization reveals the connection between eighteenth-century perceptions of colonial territory and constructions of female sexuality. Following Louisa's return to England at the beginning of the novel, as Sir William begins to pursue her, she receives a letter from a “poor widow woman” claiming that Sir William seduced, impregnated, and abandoned her daughter Miss Morton while in the Indies. Presumably, he “promised to marry her, and so at last ruined her” (1:169). The arrival of this letter effectively aborts one of the novel's first significant courtship plots: Louisa and Mr Dudley had been debating the merits of this match between Louisa and Sir William. Louisa initially expresses trepidation about marrying Sir William, whose character is cast in doubt upon their introduction: “To judge by his countenance, a gloomy suspicious soul seemed to lour from under his dark bent eye-brows” (1:56). Despite this unfavourable impression, she is willing to consider the match at her father's urging because of the financial security it offers, a security necessitated by Mr Dudley's plantation losses. The

revelation of Miss Morton's past experience with Sir William ruptures the possibility of this marriage and ushers into the novel the sexual corruption associated with the Caribbean colonies—crucially, it is a corruption primarily associated with women rather than men.

The narrative of Sir William's affair with Miss Morton points to the ways in which female sexuality in this novel is couched in anxiety about empire. West portrays Miss Morton as a powerful seductress and Sir William as the seduced victim. Upon learning the "true" version of the affair, Mr Dudley absolves Sir William of culpability: "The Mortons, my love, are artful women," he asserts. Despite her mother's claims to the contrary—she insists that her daughter is "a very handsome, well-behaved young woman"—Mr Dudley relays that the young Miss Morton "was educated for the infamous purpose of attracting the notice of some man of fortune" (1:168). While in the Indies, she "laid such snares" as were "impossible" for the unfortunate Sir William to resist (1:219). This scenario reflects eighteenth-century "anxieties about female sexuality ... [and] male degeneracy" as well as growing concern over "women's agency, sexuality and their control."<sup>21</sup> As West portrays her, Miss Morton's apparent sexual power threatens social order in its ability to so completely undermine masculine authority. Sir William is rendered weak and effeminate by Miss Morton, who exercises sexual power in a British colonial outpost known for its supposed sexual degeneracy. In this novel—and more broadly in the eighteenth-century English imagination—the Caribbean colonies appear as untamed spaces in which European men are seduced by sexually lascivious women. Nussbaum outlines the eighteenth-century conviction that "warmer climates naturally intensify the amount of sexual activity and consequently produce a larger population that freely indulges its libidinous energy."<sup>22</sup>

*A Gossip's Story* depicts the Caribbean according to the contemporary conventions Nussbaum outlines: when Mr Dudley learns of Sir William's unfortunate West Indian affair, he grants that "the influence of dissipated society" and the "unrestrained freedom of manners in which Europeans indulge themselves" can be accounted for (even excused) by the "luxurious climate of the east" (1:180). The "glowing fertility of the tropical islands"

<sup>21</sup> Wilson, 141.

<sup>22</sup> Nussbaum, 8.

(2:48) lingers in Mr Dudley's memory long after he leaves the islands behind. Note the feminized language in this description: West portrays the Caribbean as a site for reproduction and sensuality, a common trope in contemporary accounts of the "torrid zones." Eighteenth-century West Indian plantation culture had particular associations with supplying goods to satisfy English desire—chiefly, sugar.<sup>23</sup> Men like Sir William could satisfy other kinds of desires as well and were known for keeping mistresses among the local population. As Hall puts it, "England was for families, Jamaica was for sex."<sup>24</sup> In *A Gossip's Story*, West portrays the "luxurious climate" in the West Indies as the ideal location for the artful Miss Morton to lay her snares for the unsuspecting Sir William. Not least through her association with sexually lascivious territory, Miss Morton represents everything a good daughter (and a virtuous Englishwoman) like Louisa cannot be if she wants to secure a husband and end the novel happily.

I do not wish to draw a simple binary between Louisa and Miss Morton, however. Rather, I mean to suggest the fundamental connections between them despite their very different characterizations and narrative ends. In the eighteenth-century imagination, these women were conceived in tandem with one another, just as the colony and the metropole, according to Hall, were "mutually constitutive."<sup>25</sup> The Englishwoman embodied by Louisa and Marianne was "invented" alongside "the 'other' woman of empire," the "exotic, or 'savage' non-European woman" in the colonial space.<sup>26</sup> Each figure's legibility relied on the existence of the other, and neither could exist in isolation. Though Miss Morton is not a non-European woman, but an Englishwoman residing in the Caribbean, following Nussbaum I argue that she nonetheless occupies the position of the "other" woman in this novel: a woman of unchecked libidinous energy, removed from the English countryside and outside the novel's immediate action.<sup>27</sup> Miss Morton is a powerful figure who "made [Sir

<sup>23</sup> See Keith Sandiford, *The Cultural Politics of Sugar: Caribbean Slavery and Narratives of Colonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Hall, 72.

<sup>25</sup> Hall, 8.

<sup>26</sup> Nussbaum, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Nussbaum suggests that in the eighteenth century "sexuality in all women was associated with the Other" (26).

William's] lofty spirit submit to what she pleased to propose" (1:219), and she casts a persistent shadow over the narrative, still surfacing several times after Louisa formally rejects Sir William's marriage proposal. Though she is never an embodied character—spoken of but never physically present—Miss Morton highlights the sexual ideologies that West relies on, as well as illustrating the negative consequences available to women who, simply put, have non-marital sex.

Miss Morton represents what Charlotte Sussman deems "characters the novel self-consciously pushes to the margins"<sup>28</sup> because they violate the ideological conventions the novel upholds. Determining those elements that the novel is most at pains to suppress allows us to identify its most salient categories of meaning—in this instance, the female body. We are given two very different versions of Miss Morton's tale: that related by her mother Mary Morton and a supposedly absolving explanation offered by Mr Dudley. The mother's version contains an unmistakable suggestion of Miss Morton's physical deprivation. After describing the history of her daughter's involvement with Sir William, Mary Morton laments, "Poor creature, the worse for her now. For at last he quarrelled with her, and left her behind him when he came to England, and would do nothing for her, and she is come home in great distress indeed. She has two children, Madam, and I have hard work to maintain myself these bad times" (1:169). The real threat of poverty and starvation underlies this narration, as Mr Dudley acknowledges, but this threat is soon neutralized. Writing to Louisa from London, Mr Dudley outlines, "[Miss Morton] was at length left without any provision, but this was not wholly her paramour's fault, as at their quarrelling she stubbornly refused to accept any. Nothing was done for the children" (1:219). In this explanation West effectively dismisses Sir William's objectionable sexual behaviour and again blames Miss Morton for her own dire circumstances, since she is the one who will not "accept" assistance. Eventually Sir William is persuaded to settle "one hundred a-year upon each of them [her children]" (1:219), and Miss Morton ends up forming another, apparently miserable, "connection" with Sir William at the novel's end.

<sup>28</sup> Charlotte Sussman, "I Wonder Whether Poor Miss Sally Godfrey Be Living or Dead": The Married Woman and the Rise of the Novel," *Diacritics* 20, no. 1 (1990): 101.

Miss Morton's association with reproduction (she is the only woman in the novel who produces children) and sexual power (in her eventual settlement with Sir William she yet "makes his haughty spirit bend to her controul" [2:222]) points to West's broader concern with governing the female body, which extends to all its central female characters. In its anxiety about the body, *A Gossip's Story* participates in the regulation of sexuality outlined by Michel Foucault. This regulation (as Foucault notes) was connected to eighteenth-century discourse about climate—a discourse that connected geographic location and sexuality.<sup>29</sup> *A Gossip's Story* bears out Caroline Gonda's claim that "the sentimental family depends for its success on the construction of a particular kind of female heterosexuality"—a sexuality anchored by "self-policing" and "self-regulating" daughters.<sup>30</sup> The sentimental daughter is the opposite of the sexual "other" woman of empire: Louisa's success in *A Gossip's Story* hinges on her self-policing and her ability "to find pleasure and comfort in the resources of her own mind" (1:190)—that is, Louisa derives pleasure from her mind rather than her body. It is the "loveliness of intellectual beauty" (2:193) that attracts Mr Pelham to seek her hand in marriage. Marianne, lacking these intellectual properties, ends the novel in a physically deteriorated state, "faded by sickness and distress" (2:208). Echoes of Miss Morton's "great distress" resonate in Marianne's withered form. The narrative destinations of Louisa, Marianne, and Miss Morton imply that women who are too bodily—too prone to physical excitement and, presumably, sexual arousal—are dangerous to themselves as well as to others.

The female body in *A Gossip's Story* is both a site for discipline—for punishing women who fail to perform their filial duties—and a visible register for the moral virtue that women are expected to uphold. West compares Louisa and Marianne's varying degrees of control over physical excitement and associates this control with their respective happiness or misery. The

<sup>29</sup> In "The Incitement to Discourse" in *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), Foucault suggests that, beginning in the eighteenth century, "one had to speak of [sex] as of a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all ... Sex became a 'police' matter" (24).

<sup>30</sup> Gonda, 30, 32.

first extended descriptions of these characters display West's interest in policing the female body and emphasize Louisa's crucial control of it. Louisa "was tall and elegant" and "her eyes expressed intelligence and ingenuous modesty" (1:18): we read her superiority via her physical person. Her manner is "placidly reserved" rather than "obtrusive or sparkling," and "[even in] gayer moments her mirth indicated an informed well-regulated mind" (1:18). Outwardly contained, any excitement Louisa might experience (bodily or otherwise) is mediated by her mind. Or, Louisa is not overly susceptible to pleasure, her "mirth" never superseding her moral duty. In a trenchant analysis of the link between moral virtue and imperialism in Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), Saree Makdisi contends that Sir Thomas Bertram's return from his plantations in Antigua to find his household engaged in a production of the play *Lover's Vows* offends him because it is a pursuit of idle pleasure. Pleasure, Makdisi points out, was associated with Oriental despotism and was therefore threatening to moral order.<sup>31</sup> West subtly reassures the reader that Louisa's pleasure—her "mirth"—is never beyond the reach of the moral order she is expected to uphold, allowing her to perform both her domestic and social duties.

The metaphors with which West invokes Louisa's regulated body are also subtly infused with the material culture of empire: "Science in her might be compared to a light placed behind a veil of gauze, which without being itself apparent, sheds a softened radiance over each surrounding object" (1:18). Here Louisa's intelligence appears as diffused light: it does not shine directly, but is filtered through cloth portrayed as a "veil"—a feminine article that obliquely evokes the act of covering the body. As Laura Brown notes,<sup>32</sup> women such as Louisa represented commodity culture and overseas trade in eighteenth-century literature through their association with material goods such as cloth and through the frequently depicted act of dressing their bodies in colonial commodities, an association exemplified by Belinda's dressing table in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1714).

<sup>31</sup> Saree Makdisi, "Austen, Empire and Moral Virtue," in *Recognizing the Romantic Novel: New Histories of British Fiction, 1780–1830*, ed. Jillian Heydt-Stevenson and Charlotte Sussman (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 192–207.

<sup>32</sup> Laura Brown, *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

Both of these discourses—of bodily discipline and commodity culture—are fused in West’s description of Louisa and her intellectual veil. Though a much less literal rendering of a woman dressing than that presented by Pope, who portrays the “nymph” Belinda “robed in white” and gazing on the spoils of empire glittering on her dressing table,<sup>33</sup> West nonetheless uses a feminine commodity as a mediating element. Louisa achieves a happy marriage to “a polite, tender husband,” becoming his “unassuming wife” who “often surprises him by the discovery of some new virtue, or graceful accomplishment; which unobtrusive delicacy had hitherto concealed from his observation” (2:217). Her deftness at concealment and control are the keys to her success.

In stark contrast, Marianne enters the text as an ungovernable body, and she lacks the self-regulation for which Louisa is celebrated. Her narrative end is decidedly different from her sister’s—a difference initially signalled by Marianne’s failure to control her physical person: “Her features were formed with delicate symmetry, her blue eyes swam in sensibility, and the beautiful transparency of her complexion seemed designed to convey to the admiring beholder every varying sentiment of her mind” (1:18–19). Marianne’s “transparency” is dangerous and in direct opposition to the “veil of gauze” that metaphorically covers Louisa. Importantly, it is Marianne’s body that signifies her lack of discipline: “her looks expressed what indeed she was, tremblingly alive to all the softer passions” (1:19). Marianne enters this text as a body—a body that trembles and weeps and refuses to contain itself. Marianne’s failure to govern herself leads to her selecting an improper marriage partner in Mr Clermont, against her father’s advice. The disastrous turn Marianne’s life takes—she ends the novel in misery, childless and estranged from her husband—enacts the punishment due her for failing to self-regulate. Early in the novel, the suggestion that “[Marianne’s] natural good health had hitherto preserved her from bodily sufferings” (1:19) subtly introduces the punishment she will ultimately experience, expressed in physical terms. At the beginning of the novel, Marianne’s sensibility is described as “agonizing” (1:17); at the novel’s conclusion, “Her time passes very uncomfortably,” with her beauty “withering under the worm of discontent, her features

<sup>33</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, canto 1, line 123, in *Alexander Pope: Selected Poetry*, ed. Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 32–53.

contracted by peevish melancholy" (2:220, 212). The perceived danger of women's bodies, a fear emerging from anxiety about empire, infuses characterizations of the novel's women.

West also connects female sexuality to the debate over women's education taking place in the 1790s, part of the larger French Revolution-era debate over the rights of man. As Miriam L. Wallace outlines, a crucial component of these debates was whether or not the political subject is constituted by inherent "natural" properties (a Cartesian model of subjectivity) or through social relations and ideology (including education—a Lockean model of subjectivity), and to what degree these models overlap and inform one another.<sup>34</sup> If examined with Wallace's discussion in mind, Louisa, Marianne, and even Miss Morton ("educated" to entrap men) emphasize the social and relational nature of identity formation, as their educations determine their fates. Lloyd deems Louisa's West Indian education "masculine,"<sup>35</sup> a claim that seems to emerge from the subtly gendered terms in which West describes it—and, more generally, from Louisa's natural propensity for this education: "from her earliest years" Louisa "discovered a disposition to improve both in moral and mental excellence ... Instructions thus enforced by example, sunk with double weight into her retentive mind" (1:15). Louisa possesses what educators stereotypically considered a masculine capacity for mental improvement, as she is capable of more than the feminized physical sensuousness lambasted by Mary Wollstonecraft in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Moreover, the West Indies offers a traditionally masculine context in which Louisa might exercise her capable mind: its climate exhibits fierceness and demands fortitude. At the most literal level, Louisa's education is masculine because she is educated by a man, though West is careful to point out

<sup>34</sup> Miriam L. Wallace, *Revolutionary Subjects in the English "Jacobin" Novel, 1790–1805* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2009). Wallace suggests that Jacobin writers—those novelists generally deemed "radical" in contrast to West's supposed conservatism—questioned the proposition that only land-owning men should be considered political subjects and drew attention to the social forces that govern identity formation. Wallace argues that "women were particularly attuned to the ways in which embodiment impinged upon idealized independent subjects" (22)—that is, conceptions of sexual and gender difference, rooted in the body, created the idea that women were biologically determined for specific social roles and impeded their quest for political subjectivity.

<sup>35</sup> Lloyd, 171.

that “she commenced her education under a female eye [her mother’s]” (1:16)—a necessary early arbiter in a novel supporting patriarchal authority.

Though its implications are quite different, Louisa’s West Indian education is framed in terms similar to Miss Morton’s seduction of Sir William: both are kept geographically separate from the domestic terrain of the novel and absorbed by a colonial elsewhere. West reassures her readers: “Though her [Louisa’s] education had extended to particulars not usually attended to by females, there was nothing in her conversation to excite the apprehension which gentlemen are apt to entertain of learned ladies” (1:18). This description reinforces the connection between the West Indies and potentially disruptive women, in that the “particulars” of Louisa’s education include its unusual colonial setting, and there is certainly a sexual connotation in the fear that Louisa might “excite” the gentlemen. As elsewhere in the novel, the colonies operate as a foil to the English domestic scene: in this instance, as a place where it is possible to educate daughters as one would educate sons. West removes such an education from England, diffusing its potentially radical implications and allowing the West Indies to absorb yet another version of threatening femininity.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> First published the same year as *A Gossip’s Story*, with a revised second edition appearing in 1797, Elizabeth Inchbald’s *Nature and Art* also employs a colonial context in entering the debate over education. Originally subtitled “A Satire upon the Times,” *Nature and Art* engages Revolution-era debates over “natural” rights, social class, relations between classes, and a social system based on hierarchy. The novel primarily explores the sharp contrast between cousins Henry and William. Raised on “Zocotora Island,” a fictitious island off the coast of West Africa to which his father emigrated, young Henry returns to England as an adolescent. Having received no formal education, he is innately intelligent, perceptive, and lacks awareness of any social conventions; he is “nature.” By contrast, William has been raised in England and has received an extensive formal education: he “passed *his* time, from morning to night” with a variety of tutors, knows all the rules of polite society, and is adept at memorizing and regurgitating his lessons, like “a parrot or magpie”; he is “art” (Inchbald, *Nature and Art*, ed. Shawn Lisa Maurer [Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2005], 53). Contemporary perception of Africa as more innocent because less developed along a continuum of civilization (see Wilson) enables Inchbald to define what she deems “natural” qualities, such as compassion for the poor and sympathy for those in distress—qualities embodied by Henry. Africa allows her to critique the moral failings of English society. Both West and Inchbald link the success of their morally superior characters with a colonial education. Though Inchbald’s purposes are different than West’s, both writers’ use of the same colonial plot device deserves further critical scrutiny.

West's incorporation of a colonial backdrop and its association with transgressive female sexuality is not unique in eighteenth-century fiction: the appearance of this setting in both earlier and later British novels indicates its salience to studies of female sexuality and places *A Gossip's Story* in conversation with a larger body of texts. Perhaps the most notable (or, at least, the most noted) fusing of sexual impropriety and colonial territory earlier in the eighteenth century appears in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; Or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740–41), in which the servant girl turned gentlewoman Pamela Andrews anxiously speculates, “*I wonder whether poor Miss Sally Godfrey be living or dead!*”<sup>37</sup> Following her marriage to a man of elevated social status, Pamela learns of her new husband's former mistress, with whom he fathered a child and whose end is initially unknown to Pamela. She learns that this “Poor Lady” (483) resides in Jamaica where she passes for a widow and manages to land an unsuspecting husband. Richardson asks us to read the penitent Sally Godfrey alongside the virtuous Pamela Andrews; some critics contend that we are enabled to read Pamela because of Sally Godfrey.<sup>38</sup> West's novel presents its female characters with the same set of possibilities and narrative ends: virtue is rewarded; self-regulation and sexual restraint are essential to the happiness—even the survival—of women.

The body as a site for discipline and regulation is notably absent in West's portrayal of masculine authority: there is no male counterpart to Miss Morton's “great distress” or Marianne's “agonizing” sensibility. Thus the body (and its policing) becomes a strictly female property in this novel; uncomfortable narrative ends are feminine terrain. As we have seen, bodies—female bodies in particular—are dangerous in their susceptibility to desire and in their ability to lead masculine virtue astray. Mr Dudley remains physically absent throughout much of the novel despite the fact that his authority underpins its moral messages—or perhaps his body is absent because he is the novel's moral centre. His precepts are frequently conveyed via letters

<sup>37</sup> Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; Or, Virtue Rewarded*, ed. Thomas Keymer and Alice Wakely (1740; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 448. References are to this edition.

<sup>38</sup> See Albert J. Rivero, “The Place of Sally Godfrey in Richardson's *Pamela*,” in *Passion and Virtue: Essays on the Novels of Samuel Richardson*, ed. David Blewett (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 52–72. Rivero suggests that, despite Pamela's assertions to the contrary, “There is nothing agreeable about Sally Godfrey's fate” (72). See also Sussman.

sent while he is away from Danbury attending to his crumbling finances. Following her marriage to Mr Clermont, for example, Mr Dudley commands Marianne via letter to “respect your husband’s virtues, and divert your attention from his failings” (2:135)—one instance of the novel’s emphasis on obedient wives and daughters. Mr Dudley delivers this letter as a presumably enduring form of communication: “I had much to say to you, my dear child ... and it is of too important a nature to be intrusted to the vague impression conversation imprints upon the mind” (2:129). In essence, Mr Dudley suggests that his letters are the preferred vehicle for transmitting his wisdom; hence West portrays authority as textual and transmittable across space, a concept that is implicit to the maintenance of empire.

A scene near the conclusion of *A Gossip’s Story* neatly brings together the various strands I have been tracing in this essay—specifically, West’s emphasis on patriarchal authority, dutiful daughters, and (though more subtly) colonial discourse. Immediately following their nuptials and Mr Dudley’s death, Louisa and Mr Pelham retire to his country estate. As she wanders through the grounds, admiring the property, “her attention was suddenly arrested by one object *superlatively* interesting; a fine bust of her father in white marble, was placed at the upper end of the building” (2:213). Louisa weeps upon encountering this bust, and Mr Pelham lovingly tells her, “Here, my Louisa, we will often retire to hold communications with our own hearts, and to form a just estimate of life ... We will recollect your father’s precepts, and consider it as a chequered scene, from which the virtuous well-regulated mind may derive many advantages” (2:214). This speech expresses a number of the novel’s interwoven domestic and colonial ideologies.<sup>39</sup> Louisa is married, and she apparently occupies the appropriate position in her marriage, effectively subsumed by the “we” of Mr Pelham’s instructive speech. Following this scene, Louisa’s voice is missing from the novel’s concluding pages; her husband has the last word on her behalf. Crucially, we are made to understand that Mr Dudley’s precepts will remain present despite his

<sup>39</sup> Ty examines this scene, arguing that “this phallic image of the father’s statue watching over his descendants and his patrimony is an apt and literal rendition of the type of society and familial structure Jane West was promoting. Patriarchal teachings and the father’s law abides even without a real father” (99).

physical absence. Given my observations about the importance of his role as an English merchant and plantation owner (and likely slave owner), we can add a significant layer of meaning to this marble bust: Mr Dudley signifies the British empire's most idealized version of itself, and it is to this image of colonial authority that Louisa bows.

Examining *A Gossip's Story's* colonial discourse is one way of beginning to understand the place of the empire in late eighteenth-century didactic fiction. Such concerns are worth exploring on several fronts. The popularity of the genre in this period made it an ideal tool for promoting political agendas, and, in turn, for disseminating colonial ideology. Lisa Wood claims that "the novel, more than any other literary genre, was used to promote the ideas of radicals and moderates as well as anti-revolutionaries."<sup>40</sup> She suggests that despite "deep ambivalence" about the novel as a genre due to its association with sentimentality and romance, women writers like West "chose the novel in large part because it was expedient. It gave them potential access to a large reading audience" and "provided a form and a readership for writers hoping to reach young women in particular."<sup>41</sup> *A Gossip's Story* raises provocative questions that deserve more scholarly attention: to what degree did didactic literature promote the cultural hegemony associated with British imperialism? How might the didactic novel have naturalized—even sanctioned—the sexual proclivities of Englishmen in colonial territories, or reinforced racialized notions of sexuality? In what ways did such texts educate the public about what the empire was and what it signified?

In its concern, moreover, for (feminine) moral virtue, *A Gossip's Story* is constituted by what Makdisi identifies as an emerging imperialist ideology, taking hold in the nineteenth century, that was contingent on the moral virtue of the self-regulating subject. This ideology is more difficult to recognize as imperialist because more covert, or more deeply embedded, than plot details such as plantations in Barbados. In his discussion of *Mansfield Park*, Makdisi suggests that we must look past the more direct ways Austen represents colonial relations—such as Sir Thomas Bertram's plantations in Antigua—to the moral

<sup>40</sup> Lisa Wood, *Modes of Discipline*, 13.

<sup>41</sup> Lisa Wood, *Modes of Discipline*, 14, 15.

codes embedded in the subjectivity of the novel's characters, and to the way such codes produce support for the colonial mission. *Mansfield Park*, Makdisi contends, celebrates "the discourse of self-regulating moral virtue," which became a cornerstone of colonial administration in the nineteenth century, as "the proclaimed mission of European imperialism was precisely to teach non-Europeans how to regulate themselves."<sup>42</sup> In Makdisi's terms, West's emphasis on regulated pleasure is not politically disinterested, nor is it restricted to making daughters suitable for marriage: it extends to forming subjects suitable for colonial administration. This argument has powerful implications for the way we read *A Gossip's Story* and other contemporary novels written specifically for the education of daughters. That such connections to empire are harder to see in this fiction makes their exposition more crucial, and calls for revising the lenses through which we look at texts such as *A Gossip's Story* that have often fallen under the radar of postcolonial criticism. In the nineteenth century, as a result of its "civilizing" mission, Great Britain would come to control twenty-five per cent of the globe. Such civilizing began at home.



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<sup>42</sup> Makdisi, 205, 203.