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A Woman's Song: The Power of Women's Voices in Victorian Era Stories

Madeline Bellman '18



Women in Victorian stories exist in environments of power and helplessness. Within the domestic sphere, a woman has control over the house, the servants, and the organization of things, but it's her husband or guardian who makes the final decisions. Outside of the home, where does a woman experience power? What type of power does she have? Any woman, regardless of her social standing, has the power of her voice and can use the sound to achieve a number of agendas. For example, a siren's alluring song brings unsuspecting men to their deaths while the rose of Sharon in the Bible's Song of Solomon features a woman exalting the love she has for her husband. A woman's songs can be used lure and deceive as well as to exalt and plead, and both man and beast are stunned when they hear it. Women's voices in Harriet Spofford's "Circumstance" and Louisa May Alcott's "Behind a Mask: or, A Woman's Power" are given righteous and seductive tones to accomplish holy and unholy tasks, those of salvation and manipulation.

I argue that a woman's most formidable power comes from her voice, and this power can be used by both good and evil women to manipulate an environment to their will. Of course, this categorization traps women into a confining binary of identity by labeling them either an angel or a siren, but it was prevalent for women in

Victorian sensational fiction to be depicted as one extreme or the other. Women were subjected to this dichotomy based on their actions and what they said, and it was commonly the judgment of men and religion that determined a woman's identity. In the context of Victorian literature, Jean Muir, from Alcott's "Behind a Mask," has a voice that represents the wickedness and temptation often depicted in sensation fiction whereas the unnamed narrator in "Circumstance" represents the good, the holy, and the religious Victorian ideal woman. While both types of women have equal power to assuage man and beast, Jean Muir uses her voice to submit others to her will while the narrator in "Circumstance" uses hers to save her own life. I will draw from the aforementioned texts as well as incorporate contextual elements of religion from the King James Bible about Jesus' experience of Temptation from the Devil in the wilderness. Through this story in the Bible, I will elaborate on Jean Muir's image of the devilish temptress and the Jesus-like image of the narrator in "Circumstance" to demonstrate the rift between Victorian portrayals of women.

The greatest power a fictional woman of the Victorian era possessed was the sound of her voice. Though a woman could not use her voice to buy land, argue with her husband, or speak from a political office, she was able to control those around her through captivating conversation and song. This type of control was not limited to the evildoings of an explicitly evil woman. In fact, "as angels and sirens mirror each other's repertoire and skill ... bewitchment is as much the angel's effect as the siren's tool" (Weliver). Manipulation is not solely an accomplishment of the siren as the power to control others through sound transcends the good-evil binary under which women were viewed.

Even the angel's voice is utilized to control. This was an important element of Victorian literature as "any woman in sensation fiction may be angel or siren, and the thrill comes from the difficulty of distinguishing between them" (Weliver). Lady Audley from *Lady Audley's Secret* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon is an excellent example of the gray areas in a woman's identity, that even a siren may have an angelic appearance. At the beginning of the novel, Lady Audley is portrayed as an angelic figure who is exceptionally pleasant, but the reader comes to see she's nothing more than a gilded figure. She covers her calculating personality with excellent piano skills and charming conversation, and no one suspects anything until she attempts to murder her former husband and his best friend. The thrill of the story comes from Robert Audley's investigation of Lady Audley and from looking beyond appearances to see the truth of her character. In the case of Jean Muir, the reader knows of her cruel intentions but must wait for the story's characters to figure her out. The narrator in "Circumstance," is a woman described as being strictly loyal to her family and to her God, and she exists in a stark juxtaposition to a character like Lady Audley. Yet regardless of a woman's distinction of siren or angel, once she recognizes the amazing ability her voice has to influence those around her, she finds a power available to women in Victorian literature that has no equivalent.

Control and power aren't reserved to being negative actions, as demonstrated by the unnamed narrator in Harriet Prescott Spofford's short story, "Circumstance."

"Circumstance" tells the story of a wife alone in the winter woods where she's held within the claws of a blood-thirsty beast described as the Indian Devil. In fear, she calls out to her husband but he doesn't come to save her. What stops the beast from devouring her are the woman's songs. She begins with melancholy tunes and Irish jigs but spends the

majority of the story singing Psalms and other religious songs. This woman doesn't have a weapon to bludgeon the Indian Devil nor does her husband quickly come to save her, so the woman turns to her own voice for comfort and protection. The beast, "the most savage and serpentine and subtle and fearless of our latitudes," remarkably, is unable to move when she is singing, as if he is held under a spell or other supernatural power (Spofford 85). During her serenade, the calmed beast moves its body to a more comfortable position "with heavy satisfaction" (Spofford 88). The most important takeaway of this section is that the woman didn't fully understand the capabilities of her own voice until this supernatural being threatened her life. As she continues to sing, the narrator notes that this woman "had learned the secret of sound at last" (Spofford 88). From her choices of songs, the reader can conclude that the woman lives a deeply religious life and often sings to her child because of the hymns and lullabies she sings during the night. One cannot help but note the biblical imagery of a dangerous beast preying upon a woman in the woods, but unlike Eve, the woman in "Circumstance" survives this encounter with Temptation without being banished from God's kingdom. United with her own power and with her God's, she uses her voice to ward off death and reunite with her family.

The wholesome values of family and religion aren't always the goals of a singing woman in Victorian literature. In the case of Jean Muir from "Behind a Mask," she costumes her body and personality into that of a young, shy, pious governess, as a means to secure her position as the new wife of Uncle John, the rich relation of the Coventry family. Jean Muir frequently uses her voice as a weapon to accomplish ulterior motives. She sings and makes riveting conversation with the Coventrys, and her voice serves as a pleasant, desired presence in the

household that is alluring to man and beast alike. Like the mother in “Circumstance,” she uses her voice to calm a wild beast, but for Jean Muir, it’s a domesticated but unruly horse rather than an Indian Devil. Jean Muir “offered the clover, uttering caressing words and making soothing sounds, till by degrees and with much coquetting, the horse permitted her to stroke his glossy neck and smooth his mane” (*Louisa May Alcott* 369). With her soothing words and songs, the horse forgets its energetic, wild nature and becomes considerably more docile after hearing them, and Edward Coventry, in pure admiration, remarks that Miss Muir tamed a beast that injured a number of good men in the past. Yet Jean Muir never feared the animal would hurt her. She was already aware of the power her voice has, and she uses that power to manipulate others into submitting to her will. The mother from “Circumstance” sings religious tunes and is saving her life by doing so, but she holds the same power as Jean Muir and uses it with drastically different intentions. Both women seek to control the environment they’re in, and this control brings both women power, safety, and the ability to survive. While the mother in “Circumstance” wants to survive a dreadful night and reunite with her family, Jean Muir wants a marriage that will provide her with every means of survival for the rest of her life, and her definition of survival includes money, capital, and other luxuries. Looking beyond their motives, both women are fighting for a secure, safe future, and they use the same power to get there.

It is important to distinguish the tones each woman has to her power and the environment she is attempting to control. This distinction recognizes both the angel and the siren within Victorian era literature. For example, the premise of “Circumstance” is notably commensurable to the narrative of Jesus in the Wilderness in the book of Matthew in terms of temptation, environment, and religious

salvation. Christ was fasting in the wilderness for forty days, and the Devil came to Christ and tempted him three times: to create food for himself from the stones near him and satisfy his hunger, to cast his body down from a pinnacle and be saved by angels, and to relinquish his relationship with God in order to receive the possession of and glory of all the kingdoms in the world (Matthew 4:2-9). Christ refutes the Devil's efforts to tempt him to create bread by saying "it is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). All of these Temptations pertain to earthly comforts and would betray Christ's loyalty to Heaven, to the immaterial, to the reward of eternal life and peace after serving a life dedicated to serving God and his followers.

Similar to Jesus in the book of Matthew, the mother in "Circumstance" is placed in an uncomfortable wilderness environment where she is vulnerable to Temptation and the influences of the Devil. The mother looks to religion for strength and guidance from Scripture and the adversities Christ faced. Her body is tired, her voice is sore, and nothing on earth is providing her with comfort any longer, so she turns to a hope beyond this earth for guidance. This concept is described well by Elder Howard W. Hunter from the Church of the Latter-Day Saints, "'There are times in our struggle with the adversities of mortality when we become weary, weakened, and susceptible to the temptations that seem to be placed in our pathways. A lesson for us lies in the account of the life of the Savior'" (Hunter). After the secular songs she sings no longer have an effect on the beast, she sings Bible verses throughout the night and soon turns to the words of Job, speaking of her Lord, "'Though He slay me, yet I will trust in him'" (Spofford 91). This woman does not blame God for her circumstance. Instead, she accepts this is the reality she

faces, and she turns even closer to God for as her body continues to weaken.

Toward the end of her night of singing, the mother begins to see Heaven awaiting her, “her vision climbed to that higher picture where the angel shows the dazzling thing, the holy Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God” (Spofford 93). Spofford depicts the woman as a holy, angelic figure who has a true heart dedicated to God, and the similarities of her situation with that of Christ in the wilderness are uncanny. Spofford is clearly linking the morality with this mother to her faithfulness in religion, and her voice cries out not in anger toward God but for salvation and peace. A woman who thinks of her family, their happiness, and God is clearly a woman worthy of salvation. She refuses to give up on her faith in God, and her heart remains true to her Lord despite the physical and mental strife she endures. This is the exact same message of Christ’s refusal to fall to the Devil’s Temptations. Christ and the mother endure physical weariness and pangs of hunger, but they do not act against their covenant with God by willingly submitting to the earthly comforts of rest or food. In fact, Christ and the mother turn their eyes toward God for their strength. As Jesus said, “Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve” (Matthew 4:10).

The true importance of the religious environment of “Circumstance” is how the mother is characterized, and the message Spofford is trying to convey is conveyed in the sermon by Elder Howard Hunter. Though we may have the strength to sing and to ward off evils that challenge us, the word of God comprises the power with which we sing, and the mother in this story acknowledges the hand God has within her life: “He is the Lord our God; his judgments are in all the earth” (Spofford 91). Without Psalms or Bible verses, the mother wouldn’t have anything powerful

enough to sing that would protect her from the Indian Devil's jaws. In this story, singing alone cannot save someone's life. Only an angel who exalts the power of God will survive after a night of battle against the Devil's forces, but they must give themselves wholly to God. As she is written, the mother in "Circumstance" is nothing less than an angel.

Yet angelic appearances do not always signify angelic intentions, and not every singer needs the words of God to survive. Jean Muir, a quiet and interesting young woman, is an enigma. She displays kindness and warmth while conversing with those in the Coventry house, but the reader knows that she is hiding ulterior motives. Jean Muir uses her voice to seduce others, but for Coventry, a handsome inheritor of a large fortune, it's when he is deprived of hearing her voice that he wants to see her more. She actively becomes a pure Madonna, a divine woman, to Coventry as he acknowledges, "the more she eluded him, the more he desired to see her," and she repeatedly refuses to sing or play music for Coventry in order to interest him in her mysteries (*Louisa May Alcott* 388). This governess acts as a temptation to Coventry, piquing his interest enough to dangle him from a hook but never letting him see past the smoke and mirrors. Her power over him is often referred to in a mystical sense, and like the power the mother in "Circumstance" had over the Indian Devil, this effect upon Coventry is described as: "the spell which so strongly attracted him in spite of himself" (*Louisa May Alcott* 407). There is a helplessness of those subjected to the power of a woman's voice, that they're unable to shake the attraction they feel to a woman's sound, and unless the woman is silent, those around her will always be at the risk of her control. Jean Muir, as a character, reflected other cultural elements of the Victorian Era as well. According to author Phyllis Weliver:

The coexistence of seraph and demon within a woman reflected contemporary fears. During the last half of the century, gender ideals and traditional female roles were questioned, and sensation fiction suggests that a woman's use of music reveals how she positions herself. (Weliver)

Characters like Jean Muir and Lady Audley demonstrate the capability for women to use their power of song to manipulate those around them, but those being manipulated, like Coventry, have no idea what power is reigning over them. It's disorienting because these women pose two contradicting versions of themselves. Women like them "are presented in sensation fiction as both the female ideal and its opposite. The danger these women pose lies in their ability to deceive" (Weliver). Referring to this idea, Jean Muir's actions speak volumes to her character as she's willing to deceive members of the Coventry House without feeling ashamed for her actions, and she's determined to win her spot next to Uncle John as his wife by any possible means. As it turns out, music is one of her strongest skills of manipulation. The question that remains is: Where and how does Jean Muir position herself when she uses music?

Jean Muir has a manipulative strategy similar to that of a boat being drawn in and taken out by the tide, and she incorporates her music as an integral element to this type of seduction. Jean Muir devises a plan to allow members of the Coventry House glances into her life but pushes them away so they'll be more curious about who she is. With Coventry, she draws him in with her personal history and her music, and once he becomes invested, interested, and somewhat suspicious, she pushes him away and refuses to say anything more. He is attempting to figure out whether she is an angel or a siren, but during his investigation of her, he becomes bewitched by the

sound of her voice. As Coventry lays in bed recovering from the injury his brother gave him, he asks Jean Muir to sing him a song, and she “sang on as easily as a bird, a dreamy, low-toned lullaby, which soothed the listener like a spell” (*Louisa May Alcott* 386). Her songs are often associated with the words “soothe” and “spell,” and that calming, enchanting language is an important part to her control of others. She does not come off abrasively, and when she tries to distance herself from members of the Coventry Estate, most of them become concerned and try to make amends. In one instance, Jean Muir wants to leave Coventry’s embrace while he’s trying to make her stay, “She spoke imperiously, flung off the cloak, and put him from her. He rose at once, saying, like one waking suddenly from a pleasant dream, ‘I do indeed forget myself’” (*Louisa May Alcott* 401). In this passage, the reader is able to see the power Jean Muir has over Coventry, that she has reduced him to a dream-like state, only to snap back into reality when she leaves him.

Jean Muir’s expertise in music is an important element to her seduction and manipulation of the Coventry family. She’s extraordinarily gifted at the piano and captivates Coventry’s musical appreciation with her playing:

Stepping out of the French window, Coventry strolled along the sunny terrace, enjoying
the song with the relish of a connoisseur. Others followed, and still he walked and
listened, forgetful of weariness or tune. As one exquisite air ended, he involuntarily
applauded. (Spofford 372)

Coventry innocently stops to listen to the music wafting through the air, and he completely loses himself in the music of Jean Muir’s spell. In order to control her

environment, Jean Muir appeals to the interests and desires of those in the Coventry House and fulfills them in ways no one else is able to, and music is one avenue she takes to captivate the entire household. Soon after listening to Jean Muir's private lullaby, "Coventry waited eagerly for her reply, for the spell was still upon him" (*Louisa May Alcott* 398). This type of control exemplifies the dangerous power of a woman's voice, that her spell continues to affect a man's mind even after she's stopped singing. Seemingly innocent songs and conversations become weapons once a woman realizes the potential powers of her voice.

Jean Muir and the unnamed woman from "Circumstance" both exhibit the use of song and voice to control the environments around them. What they seek to control are the threats to their safety and survival, and only for the unnamed woman does this include the dangerous circumstances of life or death. Jean Muir manipulates those of the Coventry House into becoming her friends and lovers because it is imperative to her survival that she have wealth. She even marries the richer, much older uncle of Coventry because she would be able to obtain the money sooner when Uncle John dies compared to the eldest Coventry brother. Jean Muir very clearly represents the siren—a beautiful woman who lures others in with her voice, and she does so to take over their lives and see to their destruction. Though Jean Muir is no mermaid sitting upon a rock preying on lost sailors, she does pose an imminent threat for those in the Coventry House. By marrying Uncle John, she successfully reroutes the money Coventry was going to inherit into her own bank account, and Uncle John refuses to believe she would have such dastardly motives for marrying him such as that. She is the siren, the leech for power, the unsentimental woman who manipulates others with her alluring voice in order to get what she wants. Yet even the pure angel uses her voice to

manipulate those around her. As stated by Weliver, “proficient musicality marks the allure of both seraphs and fiends” (Weliver). The narrator in “Circumstance” uses music to maintain control over the beast before her, singing cultural and religious songs to paralyze the animal and save her life. This weapon of a woman’s voice is incredibly powerful because it can affect man or beast, and she has total control over its physical body as long as she continues to sing. Men often have no idea they’re affected by a woman’s song until they awaken from their dream or the spell has been broken.

A woman’s motives for using her power of song determine whether or not she’s a moral person. For instance, as the singer in “Circumstance” demonstrates, she seeks to protect herself from the claws of the Indian Devil, so she sings the words of God throughout the night as a spell of protection. Jean Muir’s spell was an abundance of lies. Her voice never relayed anything close to the truth while she stayed with the Coventry family, and her whole act was manufactured so that she could deceive an old man and inherit his fortune. Both look to survive in their own ways, but Jean Muir had devilish, deceitful intentions. In the end, there isn’t moral ambiguity in either story. One woman uses her musical gift to obtain earthly pleasures while the other uses her gift to ask for eternal salvation, so it’s explicitly clear what story Victorian women were supposed to model themselves after.

The most important conclusion to arrive to after analyzing these stories is that both narratives demonstrate women as active agents in deciding their futures. Disregarding the morals of each woman, whether she’s a siren or a seraph, these stories gave Victorian readers female characters that had a hand in their own survival, that their lives are better off once the women achieved their goals by their own means. They way they achieved their

goals was due to their own musical abilities, not assistance from men or other characters. The narrator in “Circumstance” had enough strength and courage to fight through a cold, winter night in order to survive and see her family again. Jean Muir knew exactly what she was after and was cunning enough to utilize her voice and accomplish her goal. Though society categorizes these women within the binary of angel and siren, both women utilize the same power of their voice and ensure a secure future. The narrator in “Circumstance” expresses her love for God all through the night when other words fail her and escapes a dangerous beast, and Jean Muir plays her part so well that she deceives a vulnerable family and inherits a massive fortune.

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