

**The Voices of Ellen Courtenay- The Life and Work of Ellen Courtenay as Helen Steinberg- Poet**

**Actress, Appeal Memoirist and Lecturer**

**by**

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This thesis addresses the life and work of Ellen Courtenay (c.1803-1864) and argues - based on documentary evidence - that she did not die in 1837 as has been previously thought but is one and the same person as the itinerant lecturer and poet Madame Helene Steinberg. By connecting the career of Courtenay with that of Steinberg, the project offers a unique and unprecedented investigation of the ways in which a nineteenth-century woman writer and performer negotiated issues of identity, voice and public reputation.

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## Introduction

The story of Ellen Courtenay (born c.1803-1864) reads like something out of a Braddon novel. Ellen Courtenay was an Irish actress who gained notoriety in 1832 when she published a pamphlet which made shocking allegations against the M.P. for Kerry, Daniel O'Connell. She accused O'Connell of raping her when she was fifteen years old which resulted in the birth of a son. O'Connell never claimed he was the father of the boy and refused them any financial support. In the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Patrick Geoghegan's entry for Ellen Courtenay suggests that she disappeared in 1836 and died a year later, however, this thesis will present evidence that shows she did not die. Like Lady Audley, she reinvented herself and became Madame Helene Steinberg (c.1803-1864), a poet and lecturer who negotiated the restrictions imposed on women in the public sphere to express her radical political views. The trope of false identity was popular in sensation novels of the 1860s. In Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), Isabel Vane becomes the governess Madame Vine and in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), Helen Tallboys fakes her death, reinvents herself as Lucy Graham and marries Sir Michael Audley. The reward for both women is minimal. Vane gains access to her children but the effort in sustaining her false identity hastens her death, whilst Lucy Graham's acquisition of the title of Lady Audley allows her to climb the social ladder and rescue herself from poverty, but her desire to maintain this status and cover up her past secrets leads to attempted murder and insanity. These improbable stories suggest the ease with which these women could challenge masculine power through deception and destabilise the safety of the domestic sphere.

Like her heroine, Braddon understood how to manipulate her public position. She used multiple genres to attain a foothold in the literary marketplace. However, in order to maintain her artistic integrity, she adopted the pseudonyms of Babington White and Lady Caroline Lascelles for the "disreputable thrillers" *The Black Band* (1862) and *Circe* (1867), which were produced for the

penny market. *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* (1863) were published under her own name as she endeavoured to secure a foothold with middle-class readers in the literary marketplace (Grass, 108). These strategies were not unusual to women in the nineteenth century who sought to carve out a career in this male-dominated literary world. Indeed, the subject of this thesis, Ellen Courtenay goes much further than these well remembered authors in her adoption of a new identity and her adaptability in embracing a variety of genres in pursuit of her literary goals. Her experiences may bear more in common with the subjects of the sensation novels than the women who wrote them.

Ellen Courtenay was an Irish actress whose life and work has been misunderstood by previous academic studies. In 1832 she published a pamphlet whilst incarcerated in the Fleet Prison for debt. Its full title was *A Narrative by Miss Ellen Courtenay, of Most Extraordinary Cruelty, Perfidy and Depravity, perpetrated against her by Daniel O'Connell, Esq. (M.P. for Kerry:) and also A Faithful History of many of the circumstances of her eventful life*, referred to hereafter as *Narrative*. She claimed that O'Connell seduced her when she was fifteen years old which led to the birth of their son on 4<sup>th</sup> November 1818. Since then, she has been remembered as a failed actress, the blackmailer of Daniel O'Connell and the mother of his illegitimate child. However, this study will provide documentary evidence to show that she did not die and she was the author of the *Narrative*. Additionally, by an evolving process of transformation, not unlike Helen Tallboys who had to adopt the identity of Lucy Graham in order to become Lady Audley and save herself from poverty, Courtenay adapted her identity to become Mrs. Courtenay and finally Madame Helene Steinberg, a performer, lecturer, teacher and poet.

After the failure of the *Narrative* to save her from poverty, Courtenay returned to Ireland and was reunited with Henry who was now about fifteen years of age. They went to London and continued to attack O'Connell from the stage and at public meetings he attended. An assault against Henry by Daniel O'Connell's legitimate son, John resulted in a highly publicised court case and Courtenay decided to distance herself from a scandalous past. Between 1836 and 1847, Courtenay

lectured on aspects of poetry and drama. In France she lectured as Madame Anglaise. In 1847, after the death of Daniel O’Connell, Courtenay became Madame Steinberg. Madame Steinberg was recognised in her lifetime as an itinerant lecturer and poet who was active between 1847 and 1862. Her volume of poetry, *Oswald, the enthusiast, a poem, Caiaphas in London; and other fugitive pieces*, (hereafter referred as *Oswald*), was published in 1852. *Oswald* contains a number of satirical and politically critical pieces such as “The Apotheosis,” which is a strident attack against Daniel O’Connell following his death. This poem had originally appeared in the *Northern Star* in 1847 under the pseudonym “An Irishman”. Another political piece “The Silent Lyre” was published in the *Northern Star* under the pseudonym “Henry Gracchus.” This poem is renamed “Hail, Land of Song” in Steinberg’s *Oswald*.

Before going further, it is necessary to provide the evidence to confirm Courtenay’s identity as Madame Steinberg. Madame Steinberg was recognised in her lifetime as an itinerant lecturer and poet who was active between 1847 and 1862. Her volume of poetry, *Oswald, the enthusiast, a poem, Caiaphas in London; and other fugitive pieces*, (hereafter referred as *Oswald*), was published in 1852. *Oswald* contains a number of satirical and politically critical pieces such as “Apotheosis,” which was written in 1847 in response to the death of Daniel O’Connell, as well as a number of “fugitive pieces” which are concerned with traditionally feminine themes such as love and loss. Steinberg lectured on many subjects but was primarily recognised as a lecturer on female education which was published in Paris in 1855. The evidence provided below which links the lives of Courtenay to Steinberg has been uncovered in public records and is supported by letters sent by Steinberg to Edward and Rosina Bulwer Lytton in 1858. The style and handwriting in these letters, which have not been previously studied, reveal striking similarities with letters that Courtenay sent to Henry Hunt M.P. in 1831 when she appealed for his assistance in pursuing O’Connell.

In the 1851 census for Brightlingsea, Helen Steinberg (mistakenly transcribed as “Helen Steenberg”) a teacher of forty-nine years of age is found at 8 Norfolk Rd with her sister, Theresa Simpson aged sixty and Helen’s nephew Henry, a teacher of astronomy aged thirty. Helen’s marital

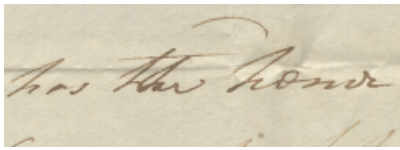
status is documented as “widow.” Theresa and Henry are “unmarried.” They all state London as being their place of birth, though an account of Steinberg’s lecture in Dover in 1858 suggests that she was Irish. (‘Steenburg, Helen. (1851). *Census Return for Brightlingsea. Norfolk Rd, Sussex, Palace*. The National Archives. Piece 1646, Folio 415, p22). In the 1861 census, the family are living at 22 Oxford Street in London and all state their place of birth as Ireland. Steinberg (mistakenly transcribed as “Helen Stemly”) is described as a teacher of languages, Henry Simpson (now documented as Steinberg’s son) is a lecturer in science. It is the surname given by Helen’s sister that provides a clue to the identity of Helen Steinberg. Theresa gives her surname as “Courtney (‘Stemly Helen’. (1861). *Census Return for Chelsea. Chelsea North East* .The National Archives. Piece 39, Folio 6, p.10.)

1861 Census”). The variations in the spelling of the surname, the anglicisation of Helene to Ellen and the connection to Henry Simpson are highly suggestive that Helene Steinberg was Ellen Courtenay.

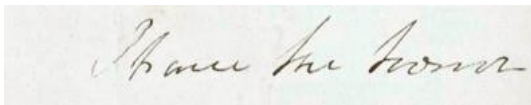
Whilst this might be a coincidental connection, the assertion is strengthened by details on the marriage certificate of Henry Simpson to Amelia Daw Lane at Trinity Church, Marylebone dated 13<sup>th</sup> June 1853, at which Helene Steinberg was a witness (“London, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns 1754-1932”). Henry, in this document, is “Henry Courtenay.” His profession is given as teacher and his father as Daniel Courtenay, barrister, deceased. By this time Daniel O’Connell had died, but he had been a barrister prior to his career in politics. From 1840, after all attempts to gain support from O’Connell had failed, Henry styled himself as a lecturer of astronomy and began to tour the lecture circuit of Britain. Notwithstanding the reliability of familial details provided by the family to registrars and census enumerators, the connection between the identities of Ellen Courtenay and Helene Steinberg is strong.

Finally, further evidence is supplied by examining the handwriting of Ellen Courtenay and Helene Steinberg. There are many similarities that can be detected between the formation of words

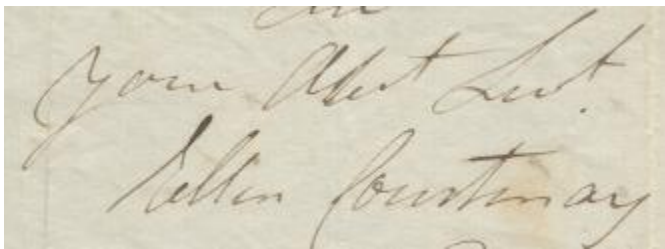
in the letters that Courtenay sent to Henry Hunt in 1831 and letters sent by Steinberg to Edward and Rosina Bulwer Lytton in 1858. Some examples are illustrated below .



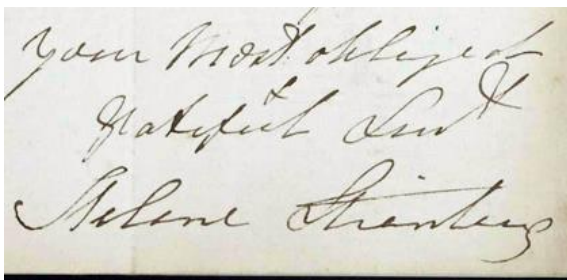
"has the honor" ; Letter from Ellen Courtenay to Henry Hunt 16<sup>th</sup> December 1831 (Henry Hunt Papers, correspondence 1831, box 1, folder 15, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library).



"I have the honor" ; Letter from Helene Steinberg to Edward Bulwer Lytton 28<sup>th</sup> September. No year is provided but the address that Steinberg gives, suggests 1858 (DE.C25.99.6).



"Your obed. (obedient) Servt. (servant) ; Letter to from Ellen Courtenay to Henry Hunt 7<sup>th</sup> December 1831 (Henry Hunt Papers, correspondence 1831, box 1, folder 15, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library).



"Your most obliged and grateful Servt.;" Letter from Helene Steinberg to Edward Bulwer Lytton 28<sup>th</sup> September. No year is provided but the address that Steinberg gives, suggests 1858 (DE.C25.99.6). Notice in particular the formation of the word "your" but also the form of the "S" and idiosyncratic crossing of the "t" in the abbreviated "Servt" (servant).



The establishment of Steinberg's identity as Ellen Courtenay presents her as a unique case study of a woman who demonstrates a chameleon-like ability to modify her identity and voice and embrace multiple genres of self-expression in order to conduct an independent career in the public arena.

The *Narrative* first brought Courtenay into the public eye but the inclusion of political comment in the endnotes have cast doubt on her authorship of it and resulted in claims that she was a political pawn who was manipulated by O'Connell's enemies and Barnard Gregory, the editor of *The Satirist* newspaper (Bishop 64-65). This conclusion has persisted and Lynda M. Thompson's statement that the scandalous memoirists have been raided for information about the accused men at the core of their work is particularly pertinent to Courtenay's *Narrative*. However, this study will provide documentary evidence to show that she was the author of the *Narrative* which establishes it as an example of women's life writing and the first stage of a literary career. In *The Autobiographical Subject Gender and ideology in Eighteenth Century England* (1989), Felicity Nussbaum recognised that autobiography offered women the opportunity to assert themselves in print. However, those who related their stories in the genre of the scandalous memoir were required to position themselves both as defendants and prosecutor in their own cases which drew attention to the societal expectations of feminine decorum that confined them (180-181). The mere textualization of their experiences implied wrong-doing or weakness, cementing their reputations as "Fallen Women." Courtenay's experience corroborates this observation. It instigated a change in her self-representation in order to secure a place for herself in the male-dominated literary marketplace where women were subject to social censure evolving from societal separate spheres (Easley 13) .

The *Narrative* failed to save Courtenay from poverty but she had acquired fame. Earlier writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson (1757-1800) and Mary Hays, had attempted to craft their reputations in the public arena through pseudonym and changes in voice and genre and Courtenay followed their example. However, she had to balance her desire to continue her condemnation of O'Connell, against the desire to retrieve her damaged reputation and manage her newfound fame. Tom Moles's edited collection *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture 1750-1850*

addresses the negotiation of “celebrity” during this period. A chapter in this book by Heather Macpherson describes how Sarah Siddons (1775-1831) took an active role in her self-fashioning which enabled her to overcome hostile audiences personal attacks throughout her career (121). Judith Pascoe offers a contrast with Siddons’s relative, Ann Hatton (1768-1838), a “minor literary figure and major fame seeker[...] who found a variety of means for thrusting herself into the public spotlight” (245). Courtenay’s misjudgement in the shaping of her public persona between 1835 and 1837 placed her firmly in the latter category as she struggled to curtail her fury against O’Connell in public.

By this stage in her career Courtenay had already alienated herself from the acting profession as she had criticised the working practices of theatres in the *Narrative*. Therefore, this necessitated a change in strategy. The actress Elizabeth Wright Macauley had also been ostracised for her criticism of theatre management and devised a one-women entertainment which allowed her control of her career. It seems that Courtenay adopted a similar model of self-expression that evolved into her career as a lecturer. Indeed, Cheryl Wanko’s research on the working conditions of actresses in the 1820s corroborates Courtenay and Macauley’s grievances with the management of London theatres which led to this change in strategy. From 1836 onwards, using a combination of entertainment and instruction, Courtenay joined a growing number of female lecturers. These female lecturers provided instruction on a variety of subjects (both political and non-political) and their profession as a whole, has been largely neglected by critics. However, studies of the works of successful lecturers such as Clara Balfour offer an insight into this mode of expression. Challenges that faced the women lecturers are addressed in Janice Schroeder’s article “Speaking volumes: Victorian feminism and the appeal of public discussion” (2003) in which she describes the conflict experienced by politically active women in the mid-Victorian period who “wished to be heard and not seen” (97). She highlights the tonal quality of women’s vocal expression as a marker of social status and “a significant political tool in the articulation of a middle-class feminine identity” (98). For Courtenay this presented further problems as she wanted to be heard and seen as she sought to

change the public's perception of her from the Irish actress associated with the O'Connell scandal to a respectable middle-class lecturer.

Most of the information regarding female lecturers has been taken from contemporary newspaper reports. These reports which, subject to the political leanings of individual publications, are inherently variable but reveal a number of women who lectured on diverse subjects and reveal strong prejudices against radical and socialist women who expressed their opinions in public. In *A Victorian Woman's Place, Public Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (2007), Simon Morgan provides evidence of a greater tolerance for the participation of women in political and social discourse as lecturers within the Mechanic's Institutes between 1838 and 1849, when Courtenay was developing her public persona as a lecturer. The Mechanic's Institutes also provided spaces for expression of radical ideas like Chartism. The Chartist newspaper, the *Northern Star* provided a space for the poetry of the working classes to be expressed in print and Mike Sanders's book *The Poetry of Chartism; Aesthetics, Politics, History* (2009) focuses on the role of the newspaper in its support of amateur poets. This is particularly relevant to Courtenay's experience and has been invaluable in locating the works of "Henry Gracchus," a pseudonym under which Courtenay/Steinberg wrote.

"The Apotheosis", which was written in 1847 in response to the death of Daniel O'Connell, as well as a number of "fugitive pieces" which are concerned with traditionally feminine themes such as love and loss. Steinberg lectured on many subjects but was primarily recognised as a lecturer on female education which was published in Paris in 1855.

The discovery that Courtenay and Steinberg are the same person provides a different dimension from which to view Courtenay's life, motives and experiences. As previously noted, the radical self-fashioning of Courtenay is taken to a degree only seen in fiction and the implication of her decision is highly significant to the study of women's self-representation in this period. Her decision to adopt a false identity was a strategic move as while she was lecturing as Madame Steinberg, she was using the pseudonyms of "Irishman" and "Henry Gracchus" in the production of

her radical and political poetry in the *Northern Star*. Under these pseudonyms her work was well received and accepted. This validation encouraged Courtenay to fashion an identity that suggested nobility and gravitas to integrate with the emerging Chartist poets such as J. W. King in whose social circles she inhabited and in doing so, gain literary recognition.

It is not known the extent to which her original identity was known but, she admits in her introduction to *Oswald* that she had survived fame which suggests that her history was known (iii). This raises questions about how successful Steinberg would have been had she manipulated her self-image in the way in which Mary Robinson had, some fifty years earlier. Robinson did not disown her past and became known as a poet and literary celebrity, but she had the advantage of being a married woman. This status enabled her to successfully manage the boundaries between respectability and fame. Robinson's canny selection of *The World* as a suitable repository for her poetry, and her alignment with the Della Cruscan poets of the 1770s with her adoption of female pseudonyms allowed her to capitalize on the curiosity that the identities of these poets inspired (Wilson, 156-165). However, Steinberg's retrieval of the *Northern Star* poems for publication in *Oswald* proves to be problematic as she is revealed as woman with political views. Steinberg asserts that she was persuaded to include the "fugitive pieces" in *Oswald* by the publishers. These pieces, written in the Romantic/Della Cruscan style are deemed suitable subjects for a poetess. Steinberg would not have achieved recognition had she continued to hide behind her masculine pseudonyms and her ownership of *Oswald* allowed her to apply for assistance from the Royal Literary Fund. However, her exposure as a woman with political opinions damaged her literary reputation. Thus far, there is no indication that she published any poetry after *Oswald*, after which point she concentrated on her reputation as a lecturer. However, Courtenay's extraordinary and unique formation of her public image allowed her to conduct an independent career in the public eye until her death in 1864. Steinberg was a survivor who refused to be silenced by society and took her desire to be heard to an unprecedented level. Her ability to circumnavigate the challenges she faced resulting from her scandalous beginning are covered in the following chapters.

Chapter one examines Courtenay's *Narrative* (1832). It argues that the conclusions formed by previous critical assessments of the *Narrative* by historians such as Denis Gwynn, Erin Bishop, Patrick Geoghegan and others are flawed. Analysis of Courtenay's *Narrative* confirms that her decision to publish was motivated by not only financial considerations, but also by her desire to embark on a literary career. This is an important factor in establishing the *Narrative* as a credible literary work and connecting this work to Steinberg's, thus proving the connection of these identities. These current scholars conclude that a woman like Courtenay could not have written the political endnotes in the *Narrative*. However, a closer examination of the letters that Courtenay sent to Sir Henry Hunt, the radical M.P. for Preston in November and December 1831, suggests that she had more control over the contents of the *Narrative* and its promotion than has been previously acknowledged. Furthermore, Courtenay's literary ambition is revealed when the *Narrative* is examined as an example of the appeal memoir, a sub-genre of the scandalous memoir as described in Caroline Breashear's article, "The Female Appeal Memoir: Genre and Female Literary Tradition in Eighteenth Century England" (2010). As such it represents Courtenay's initial presentation as an author and reflects her intention to adopt a popular literary style that would connect with her readers and gain her a foothold in the literary marketplace.

Chapter two analyses Courtenay's transition from actress to lecturer. Here it is argued that Courtenay did not die in 1837 but began to manage her public image by changing her identity. This was necessary as she was conflicted by her desire to pursue O'Connell for justice and her need to retrieve her reputation and distance herself from the scandal. However, she realised the need to modify her radical views in her public expression. Courtenay's reinvention of her image as a performer and educator is compared to the experiences of the actress Elizabeth Wright Macauley (1785-1837) who had also been ostracised for her public criticism of the power handed to theatre managers and leading actors (Bratton, 63). This transition also involved Courtenay's experimentation with her identity as she adopted the name of "Mrs. Courtenay" in acknowledgement that the

security of a masculine figure behind her added legitimacy to her right to claim a public voice. The link between Ellen Courtenay and Mrs. Courtenay in 1847, which is crucial in maintaining continuation of Courtenay's career, is confirmed in a report in *The Era* of 24<sup>th</sup> January 1840. It stated that a Miss Courtenay, otherwise Mrs. Courtenay, had been acting at the Adelphi in Glasgow and also lecturing upon drama and poetic composition in the hall of the city. This identity is, in turn, confirmed in establishing the importance of the year 1847 in the process of Courtenay's self-fashioning. Daniel O'Connell died on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1847 and from this point, all lectures by Mrs. Courtenay cease but lectures on exactly the same themes as Courtenay's are delivered by Madame Steinberg across the North of England, thus establishing a connection between her identities. However, recognising that the maintenance of her career as a lecturer would be compromised by her radical and unfeminine political views led her to modify the tone and subjects of her lectures. The modification of her public persona was vital in the continuation of her profession as a lecturer and teacher. However, to publish her political opinions, she was using masculine pseudonyms.

In chapter three it is argued that Courtenay's transformation to Madame Steinberg took place in 1847 after O'Connell's death but she expressed her radical political views on O'Connell, Irish politics and Chartist ideas in the *Northern Star* newspaper under the pseudonyms of "Irishman" and "Henry Gracchus". *Oswald* was published in 1852 but some poems which appear in this volume first appeared in the *Northern Star* in 1847. Steinberg took advantage of the Chartist sympathies and anti-O'Connell rhetoric promoted by the *Northern Star* and its encouragement of amateur poets to make a final attack on Daniel O'Connell in her poem "Apotheosis." This poem, in which she mimics the style of Byron's "Avatar" of 1826, appears under her own name in *Oswald*, although references to O'Connell have been removed. Gracchus's "The Broken Harp" becomes "Hail, Land of Song" in Steinberg's *Oswald*. Steinberg's poem "Wreck of a Nation" is also included in this study as she made a public recitation of this poem in Sheffield in 1849 and suggests sentiments that relate to the experiences of Ellen Courtenay. Steinberg's decision to publish her political pieces under masculine pseudonyms is supported by critical analyses of her work at the time of publication. Whilst the work

of Gracchus is praised, Steinberg's political poetry was dismissed by *The Quarterly Literary Review* of 1852 as "effusions over the wrongs of Ireland" that should not intrude into "the chaste regions of poetry" whilst her "fugitive pieces" were praised as they included "love passages and touches of pathos which speak the woman" ("Oswald The Enthusiast").

The concluding chapter offers some insight into Courtenay/ Steinberg's private voice, that is to say, Courtenay's appeals to the press between 1832 and 1840 and as Steinberg in her correspondence with Rosina Edward and Bulwer Lytton in 1858. It is argued that Courtenay/Steinberg needed affirmation and aid from influential public figures throughout her career to be accepted as a respected author and lecturer. Her lack of constraint and breaches of protocol created a tension between Courtenay/Steinberg and these public figures which meant she was often unsuccessful in her appeals. Courtenay's strategy is contrasted with the experience of Caroline Norton (1808-1877), who was also forced to defend her reputation in the aftermath of her divorce from the M.P. George Norton. The conflict between self-promotion and restraint is also demonstrated in Steinberg's letters to the Bulwer-Lyttons. Steinberg is caught between the noble cause of supporting Rosina Bulwer Lytton during her incarceration in a lunatic asylum by Lytton's estranged husband and the realisation that Edward Bulwer Lytton was better placed to aid her in her literary and creative ambition. This chapter also includes discussion of Steinberg's application to The Royal Literary Fund in 1852, after the publication of *Oswald*. Details in her application highlight the immense hardship that she endured in pursuit of her career and reveal further links between Steinberg and Courtenay.

In the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Geoghegan states that Courtenay never wavered from her allegation that O'Connell was the seducer of her innocence and it will never be proved whether she was "the victim of a rape, the victim of a seduction by an older man, a cynical blackmailer, or the author of an elaborate fantasy (Geoghegan, Patrick, M. "Courtenay, Ellen"). This thesis does not try to answer this question but provides evidence to show that she was not destroyed by O'Connell but skilfully navigated the difficulties that resulted from the scandal to continue to express her voice in

the public arena. Her adaptability, ingenuity and skill allowed her to conduct an independent career as a lecturer until her death in London on 28<sup>th</sup> May 1864.

Courtenay may have been all the things that historians have suggested but she was also an educator, lecturer and poet, and the recognition of Ellen Courtenay as Madame Helene Steinberg offers opportunities for further study for historians and literary scholars alike. This discovery allows a complete re-assessment of the life of a woman whose accusations, motives and identity have been questioned for nearly two hundred years. Gwynn's early criticism of Courtenay's *Narrative* implied not only that a man such as Daniel O'Connell would never have acted in the way Courtenay claimed but also that Courtenay could never have written the *Narrative*. This has projected an identity onto Courtenay that subsequent studies have failed to remove. The re-instatement of Courtenay as an educated woman with an "unfeminine" interest in radical political matters alters the perception of her as O'Connell's victim as through her skilful manipulation of genre, identity and voice, she continued to be heard. Furthermore, the acknowledgement of Courtenay's *Narrative* as an example of the appeal memoir places the work in a chronologically significant position as the popularity of the genre had passed some thirty years previously. However, the ownership of her work and her brazen promotion of it denote a rejection of the stringent societal barriers that restricted the lives and voices of women in the nineteenth century that society sought to confine to the domestic sphere. The extent to which Courtenay manipulated her voice and identity is unique and unprecedented amongst nineteenth women authors. The transformation of Ellen Courtenay shows how an opinionated woman in the nineteenth century fought and succeeded in being heard.



## Chapter One: Ellen Courtenay's Narrative (1832)

When Ellen Courtenay published a pamphlet from The Fleet Prison in 1832, she intended it would be received not just as a document that would persuade Daniel O'Connell to rescue herself and their son from poverty but also as the story of her life thus far and of interest and entertainment to a growing readership in the literary marketplace. Her intention is clear in the *Narrative's* lengthy title. *A Narrative by Miss Ellen Courtenay of most extraordinary cruelty, perfidy and depravity, perpetrated against her by Daniel O'Connell Esq. (M.P. for Kerry) and also a faithful history of many of the circumstances of her eventful life which such outrage immediately, collaterally or remotely influenced.* The allegations contained in *The Narrative* were made against the Member of Parliament Daniel O'Connell and pertained to an event that had occurred fifteen years previously.

She claimed that, at the age of fifteen, she was raped by O'Connell and gave birth to his son. The child was named Henry Simpson at O'Connell's request. She described how O'Connell had sworn to support both Courtenay and their son but failed to keep his promise. Furthermore, she claimed that O'Connell's agent, a Father L'Estrange, tricked her into swearing that she would cease pursuing O'Connell on promise of payment. This payment was insufficient to ease Courtenay's distress and after an attempt to forge a career in the theatres of London and Paris, she was imprisoned in The Fleet Prison for debt. Courtenay insisted the debt belonged to O'Connell as it was due to the medical bills that had accrued in the care of his son. These allegations were published when Daniel O'Connell's career was at its peak. He had just been elected as the first Roman Catholic Member of Parliament in Westminster and Courtenay's inclusion of political comment in the endnotes of the *Narrative* and the timing of its publication invoked speculation and gossip in the national newspapers about her identity and motives. It is a principal element of this chapter to prove the authorship of Ellen Courtenay's work in order to establish a literary connection to her later identity as Madame Steinberg. This chapter therefore demonstrates that Courtenay was indeed the author

of the *Narrative* and had much greater control of her work than previous studies have allowed. This evidence is provided by letters that Courtenay sent to the M.P Sir Henry Hunt in 1831 and numerous newspaper reports that signify her manipulation of the press in promotion of her work. Moreover, this chapter will also use analysis of the *Narrative* to argue that Courtenay had authorial ambition and wrote the *Narrative* in the form of the scandalous memoir that had been popular in the eighteenth century to appeal to a wide audience.

Courtenay wanted to connect to a wide audience to further her literary ambition. Therefore, the structure she chose was the appeal memoir, a subgenre of the scandalous memoir, a literary form which was popularised by women writers such as Laetitia Pilkington (1709-1750), who published her memoirs in 1748 and Theresia Constantia Phillips (1709-1765) whose *Apology for the Life of T. C. Phillips* was also published in 1748. Felicity Nussbaum describes the scandalous memoir as “the point at which women widely produce as well as consume discourses about themselves” (180). However, in doing so, “women’s representation escapes its policing to threaten patriarchal relations as the scandalous memoirs negotiate the culture’s clashes over character, class and gender in published texts” (180). Thus, women who expressed themselves in this way were subject to reputational damage and condemnation. It was a risk that Courtenay was prepared to take as the form and language of the scandalous memoirs allowed her to express her grievances in a way that connected author and reader. Courtenay’s *Narrative* becomes the starting point of a literary career which leads to later invention as Steinberg but to firmly establish Courtenay as a writer, the doubts surrounding the *Narrative*’s authorship must be addressed.

The Irish historian Denys Gwynn makes an early critical challenge to Courtenay’s *Narrative* in his book *Daniel O’Connell and Ellen Courtenay* (1930). Gwynn dismisses Courtenay as a delusional woman who saw the opportunity to blackmail O’Connell and chose to pursue it (341). To support this argument, he produces a letter written by Courtenay which she sent to Gorman O’ Mahon, M.P for Clare. It was dated 28<sup>th</sup> February 1831, a year before the publication of the *Narrative*, but informs O’ Mahon of her intention to publish her allegations against O’Connell. This letter is the

earliest evidence of Courtenay's intention to publish and the admission that she had been urged to publish her *Narrative* by "many persons" who would "make her fortune" is used by Gwynn to assert that Courtenay was being manipulated by O'Connell's opponents for criminal intent (340). Gwynn suggests that Courtenay was even obliged to undergo imprisonment as an arrangement with these presumed enemies of O'Connell to focus attention on her *Narrative* (341). The conclusion that Courtenay was not the author of the *Narrative* is reiterated in later studies. In her paper "Was O'Connell Faithful? Ellen Courtenay Revisited" (1996), Erin Bishop acknowledges that Courtenay's version of events was plausible but also agrees with Gwynn that Courtenay was unlikely to be the author of the political endnotes in the *Narrative* and these were most likely to be the work of O'Connell's political enemies (65). Bishop's evidence is based on the political nature of the endnotes and the notorious reputation of its publisher as a blackmailer (74). This is plausible, particularly as the editor of the *Satirist*, Barnard Gregory, was indeed a notorious blackmailer but letters sent by Courtenay to the radical M.P. for Preston, Henry Hunt (1773-1835), indicate that she was much more in control of her manuscript than these earlier studies have allowed.

When Courtenay wrote to Hunt in November 1831 it was not merely because of his reputation as "well known friend to the oppressed, the destitute and the unfortunate", it is indicative of her personal political sympathies. Hunt's desire for political reform, support of the working classes and advocacy of Chartism is reflected in Courtenay/Steinberg's poetry published under the pseudonym of Henry Gracchus in the *Northern Star* in 1847. This later expression of Courtenay's political opinion (as Steinberg) challenges Gwynn's inference that the style of the political endnotes in the *Narrative* was written in the "familiar style of all his political critics at the time" and were therefore not her own (391). Additionally, in her approach to Hunt, Courtenay uses the candid and graphic language of her *Narrative* to evoke sympathy from him. She tells him how she is "literally starving" and describes O'Connell as "that monster of inhumanity and iniquity." This was a successful strategy as Hunt donated to her cause and passed the manuscript of the *Narrative* to O'Connell. Hunt was not an ally of O'Connell's but believed that O'Connell would wish to prevent

its publication. Hunt remarked to O'Connell that he would not have believed Courtenay had he not been aware of O'Connell's character and stated he expected no gratitude from him for supplying him with the information. O'Connell accused Hunt of blackmail and doubted that Courtenay even wrote the allegations.

Courtenay's ownership and control of her work is further indicated in a letter dated 12<sup>th</sup> December 1831. She refers Hunt to an article that *The Satirist* had published on her case "tho' scarcely strong enough on the matter." She also apologises to Hunt in a letter dated 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1831 and expresses regret that Mr. Hunt had been mixed up in her unhappy case and said that she had spoken to the editor of *The Satirist* who assured her that it would not happen again. This may refer to an item in *The Satirist* dated 18<sup>th</sup> December 1831 in which Henry Hunt's name was not only used in association with Courtenay's case but, in a manner typical of the newspaper, used its inclusion to cast a slur on Hunt's character. Referring to O'Connell, it stated:

the learned gentleman has made up his mind to brazen it out, instead of availing himself of a *locus penitentiae* which was afforded him by his friend and fellow patriot, Mr. Hunt. The latter worthy, it seems, though, if we are to credit common report, he allows his own wife to be inmate of a workhouse, thought this affair too black for the reputation of Mr. O'Connell, and advised him, by a little tardy generosity, to endeavour to avoid its publication. ("The Patriot O'Connell").

It is notable that *The Satirist* claimed that they had no axe to grind with O'Connell. In the edition of 11<sup>th</sup> December 1831, when it first publicised Courtenay's case, it stated "We have felt very favourably towards Mr. O'Connell in consequence of his recent conduct; and it was with some degree of reluctance that we gave way to the conviction of his moral worthlessness." This reluctance to besmirch O'Connell's character may have been a smokescreen to deflect the accusations of blackmail but the letters between Courtenay and Henry Hunt suggest that the relationship between Courtenay and *The Satirist* provided Courtenay with a platform for the *Narrative* whilst allowing *The Satirist* access to the kind of salacious story for which it was renowned.

The motive of extortion as a reason for publication is probable. Courtenay mentions the "ten or twelve wretched females, whom he had seduced, hanging upon him for support" (*Narrative* 32),

and was more than likely aware that some of these women had been “paid off” for their discretion. In his book *King Dan: The Rise of Daniel O’Connell 1775-1829* (2008), Patrick Geoghegan brings attention to a letter that O’Connell’s brother James wrote to him. James O’Connell complained about the £600 a year, debts, which he suggests refers to payments O’Connell sent to former mistresses. Irrespective of O’Connell’s reputation as a womaniser, the publication of the *Narrative* exposed Courtenay to intense public scrutiny which inflicted damage to her reputation and there was much speculation about her identity.

The criticism was personal and damaging. A letter was published in *The Constitution* dated 25<sup>th</sup> December 1831 signed by “G.F.E.”. The author claimed that Courtenay was a “consummate black-leg” and they could “provide the testimony of several witnesses who have been so unfortunate as to have had some connexion with her” (“Mr. O’Connell v. The Satirist”). It warned that the Catholic families of London “will see exposed one of the strongest examples of ingratitude and deception, and the frequenters of private theatres will perhaps be rather surprised to find in their MADAME ST. JULIAN- in the antiquated representative of Belvidera- the *young* and unprotected orphan now in the Fleet on account of debts contracted to support the offspring of a profligate patriot.” The writer then offered to supply “a relation of the full career of MADAME ST. JULIAN, both in Cork, London and Paris.” (“Mr. O’Connell v. The Satirist”). The juxtaposition of the antiquated actress with the “*young*” orphan, the trope of the violated innocent, is also cast into question and Courtenay is presented as an unreliable and artful narrator.

Courtenay’s response to these allegations was to take control of her public image by adopting a bold strategy to promote it. This was to publicly swear an affidavit verifying the truth of allegations in the *Narrative*. Her attendance at The Bow Street Court on 15<sup>th</sup> March 1832 was calculated to raise the profile of her work and provide an image of Courtenay that the public had, so far been denied. The *Morning Post* reported that she was a “pretty-looking woman of genteel appearance and good address” (“Police Intelligence”). Hence, the public was reassured that she had the qualities to be respected as a writer and a woman. The magistrate was unable to help

Courtenay, but some newspapers chose to print the affidavit in full. The affidavit, whilst rejected by the magistrate, resented the synopsis of her *Narrative* to the public and additionally, with the mention of other “particulars equally atrocious,” hinted at further revelations to come. The *Morning Post* published the affidavit in its edition dated 16<sup>th</sup> March 1832:

Ellen Courtenay, of 2, Clements Inn in the county of Middlesex, spinster, came before me, George Rowland Minshull, Esq., this 15<sup>th</sup> March 1832 and made oath that the various averments contained in a “Narrative,” just published, are all of them strictly true, viz:- As to the forcible violation of her person by Daniel O’Connell herein mentioned; as to the said Daniel O’Connell’s subsequent ill-usage and neglect of herself and his child thus begotten on her body; as to the extraordinary conduct of a certain father L’Estrang in administering an oath to her unlawfully, and in finally depriving her child; and as to her arrest and imprisonment in the Fleet Prison, on account of a debt contracted for the said child’s maintenance. Deponent made oath that the facts set forth in the said narrative, are so far from being exaggerated, that she has refrained, at the request of certain of her friends, from giving them as high a colouring as a truth would warrant, by not accompanying them with the addition of particulars equally atrocious (“Police Intelligence: extraordinary applicarion”).

This attempt to rescue her reputation from speculation and gossip was not without precedent amongst scandalous memoirists. Teresa Constantia Phillips had also taken charge of the promotion of her autobiographical narrative, distributing her pamphlet from her own home and challenging her opponents in print. This strategy was successful for Phillips. She proudly acknowledged the material benefits that her notoriety and self-promotion had allowed (Nussbaum, 190-191). Courtenay’s adoption of this strategy was less successful. By brazenly promoting the *Narrative* and exposing the pretty, genteel, well-addressed woman behind the text, Courtenay’s public image became distanced from that of the helpless victim of Daniel O’Connell in the *Narrative* with whom the public might have sympathy. They might even question how this capable woman had failed to legitimately pursue O’Connell through the legal system. The *Narrative* was printed when “cultural, political and economic anxieties coalesced around the figure of the author” (Batchelor 150), and Courtenay’s promotion and commodification of her work as a single woman, without masculine familial support, did little to persuade the public of her authenticity. In a letter dated 28<sup>th</sup> February 1831, Courtenay informed Gorman O’ Mahon that she would make her fortune from her work (Gwynn, 339) which seems to confirm her ambition but evidence can be sourced in the *Narrative* itself. Courtenay’s

commodification of her experience is at odds with her duty to “expose vice and to encourage virtue (*Narrative* iv) which she states as a legitimate reason for publication. The inclusion of the names of agents through which donations could be made in the *Narrative* serves to emphasise her reliance on the saleability of her work (27). Furthermore, Courtenay’s uses coercive language to persuade the wealthy to practice what they preach, expressing her desire to “excite the kind sympathy of the feeling and the affluent, should there be in this land of benevolence and worth, hearts which can *practise* the humanity they wish to feel” (27). This statement challenges her readers to turn sympathy into the practical act of contributing to her financial restoration which re-iterates the commercial aim of the *Narrative*, casting doubt on the author’s intent.

This evidence supporting Courtenay’s involvement in the production and promotion of the *Narrative* challenges previous assumptions about her degree of involvement. Her initial approach to Hunt with her case, her displeasure that *The Satirist’s* article was not forceful enough and her influence with its editors do not suggest a woman who was being entirely manipulated by the press: rather, she was using it to promote her work to its best advantage. However, the *Narrative* failed to provide Courtenay with the living she desired and she was declared bankrupt (“Insolvent Debtor’s Court”). The commodification of her work and the doubts expressed over her motives, reputation and identity contributed to this outcome. The style and language of Courtenay’s *Narrative* elevates it from an account of historical events into a work of literary significance affirming her authorial ambition. However, Courtenay’s decision to adopt the style of the scandalous memoir also reveals her misjudgement of the societal shift that had occurred between the publication of the memoirs of the eighteenth century and her *Narrative*.

Courtenay was aware that the literary style of the scandalous memoir would allow her to connect with readers most effectively. Felicity Nussbaum and Lynda M. Thompson reveal these texts to be credible examples of life writing, placing them firmly in the chronology of the development of women’s writing experience. Caroline Breashears states that this form evolved into the appeal memoir. The appeal memoir is described by Breashears as a first-person memoir about a woman

whose particularly female situation has led to loss, displacement and distress (611). It is a form in which the author becomes the defendant and plaintiff in representing her case in an appeal to a public tribunal in which print becomes the courtroom and the reader the jury. Courtenay's *Narrative* fulfils Breashears criteria of loss, reputation, social status and financial stability but the exposure of her situation is countered by her assertion of her moral virtue. Her aim is to "expose vice and encourage virtue" as "one of the duties we owe to society" (*Narrative* vi). Having assured her readers of this moral stance, she builds a bond of trust, familiarity and empathy with her reader through adopting the informal and conversational style that is typical of the appeal memoir. This is established in the very first paragraph when Courtenay confesses her bitterness at being forced to reveal her grievances in print. Her bitterness is explained by suggesting that her feelings "can only be conceived by those unfortunates, whose early blossoms of opening happiness, like mine, have been nipped and destroyed by the chilling blast of adversity" (*Narrative* 7). Here, she creates a bond between author and reader by inviting them to imagine how they would feel if they were in her position. The informal style is continued with the inclusion of dramatic phrasing, intended to elicit the strongest reaction of horror in her reader. Using the melodramatic language of a gothic novel to describe a scene that depicts O'Connell at his most cruel, she manages to produce a mental image that lingers. Courtenay describes how she waits outside O'Connell's door for him to return from the four courts in Dublin and how O'Connell hurls her from his door and slams it against her face,

with all the fury and gesticulation of an incensed drayman. The sound fell upon my ear like the thunderbolt of heaven! A total suspension of life's faculties took place and I fell upon the stony steps of the wretch's door like the stricken victim of an assassin's dagger (*Narrative* 17).

The linguistic style of the *Narrative* fulfils the criteria of transcending the social barrier between authors and reputable readers (Breashears 610). Having broken this barrier, Courtenay repeatedly challenges her readers to imagine what it would be like to be in her position and to question how they would react to her experiences:



Was I not innocent till he polluted me? Was I not happy till he undermined the virtuous principles diligently inculcated by fond and anxious parents- was I not the idol of my friends, and am I not now the object of their scorn [...] Should I be delicately scrupulous- should I be fastidious in my expression and denunciation- should I throw any longer the veil of concealment over the black atrocities of such a cold-hearted ruffian? Would such be my duty? Or ought I not rather to expose the scorn and execration of mankind, the unhallowed and brutal enormities of such a monster of depravity and vice? ( *Narrative* 25).

These words offer a contrast between the Ellen Courtenay before and after the assault but are also a vindication of her decision to publish. The text of the *Narrative* is replete with words that evoke images of torture and death. She writes of “agonies,” horrors” and despair. She describes how she “implored him to destroy me” (9) whilst her occupation was not merely taken from her, it was “annihilated”. She suggests that O’Connell wished for her to die and suggested that this was a reason he denied her financial support.

It was done I verily believe to weary my heart and drive me to desperation: it was in the hope, on my conscience and honour, I solemnly aver, that the wildness of despair would at length hurry me to self-immolation!” ( *Narrative* 19).

The tone and mood of the *Narrative* then shift drastically as she describes how the popular Shakespearean actor, Charles Young encouraged her to become an actress. Courtenay may have hoped that the inclusion of this famous witness would confer authenticity. However, it also serves to remind the reader that Courtenay is a performer and capable of deception.

Courtenay’s execution of the appeal memoir may have contributed to its failure, even as she attempted to emulate the popular scandalous memoirs of the eighteenth century. Lynda M. Thompson acknowledges that a more rigid adherence to the concept of separate spheres in the nineteenth century diminished the opportunities proffered to women writers (8). Courtenay may well have acknowledged this in her expression of her memoir as a *Narrative* rather than an appeal or an apology. Uncertainty and instability in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars provoked a backlash against some of the more progressive ideals of the late eighteenth century and emerging sensibilities were challenged by the aggressive tone and very unfeminine content of the *Narrative*. Some comparisons may be observed in the self-fashioning of the actress and erstwhile mistress of The Prince Regent (later George IV), Mary Robinson. In the *Memoirs of Mrs. Robinson Written by*

*Herself* (1801). In *Romantic Women's Life Writing Reputation and Afterlife* (2019), Susan Civale presents the argument that Robinson straddled the "contradictory identities of the victimised heroine of sensibility and the titillating actress" (141) by using a strategy of rhetorical gaps, and that it is these omissions and the exhibition of restraint which ensured its endurance. This strategy was successful for Robinson as her *Memoirs* was reprinted ten times throughout the nineteenth century (141). In contrast, Courtenay claims to retain information in the *Narrative* but despite her alleged omissions, she does not hold back in describing the moments of emotional intensity in the bluntest language. In the preface to the *Narrative* Courtenay insists that "I have *omitted* many HORRIBLE ATROCITIES and softened many ODIIOUS VICIES of which I have been the unfortunate victim (*Narrative* vi). The emphasis placed on "horrible atrocities" and "odious voices" signals to the reader the salacious content of Courtenay's story. Likewise, Courtenay states, "I regret having been persuaded to *omit* circumstances and facts, at which humanity would turn pale". She tempers this with, "sometime or other, perhaps, I may supply this deficiency-in the intervening period enough has surely been said" (*Narrative* 26). The "intervening period" indicates that Courtenay does not view her *Narrative* as the end of her story. She will reveal everything if a willing publisher cares to listen but this damages her attempts to present herself as a woman of virtue, sullied and corrupted by O'Connell's actions. Courtenay is rightly indignant at the failure of O'Connell to provide for her but her strident haranguing of O'Connell demonstrates unrestrained (despite her insistence) rage and fury whilst failing to demonstrate that most uniquely feminine of qualities: maternal love.

References to young Henry and Courtenay's bond with him are scarce. When she refers to Henry's birth she writes of "the dreaded hour" when "a male infant was born into the world" (12). She adds, "I must slur over this hideous season of grief, agony, and danger," but continues to explain how she had to sell every article she owned to obtain money for food. No mention of love or hope signposts Courtenay as the doting mother. Thereafter, Henry is barely mentioned except to remark on his weak constitution, which led to the unpaid medical bills that resulted in her imprisonment. A cursory mention is made of Henry in the endnotes, in which she acknowledges that she was "fondly

attached to this infant” and “anticipated the pleasure of rearing and educating him and providing for his future wants with all the delighted sensations of a doting and anxious parent” (30). The emotion or sensory detail that would allow Courtenay to build intimacy and trust with her reader (Civale 146) is also lacking in the account of her parting with Henry. She states unemotionally, “The time at length arrived when a separation from my child became indispensable [...] I at last consented to yield my unfortunate child to the care of Mr. O’Connell’s agent (30). Relinquishing care of her child to her sworn enemy raises questions about Courtenay’s judgement and her attachment to the child. Her admission that “Often have I endeavoured to ascertain the state of his health and welfare with an earnestness which might move the flinty heart of fiends” (23) is hollow. The use of “earnestness” seems inadequate to describe these circumstances. All of Courtenay’s energies, all her emotion is reserved for her vitriolic attack against O’Connell and L’Estrange, and it is this aspect of the Narrative that her readers may have found the least palatable.

If Courtenay’s *Narrative* ended on her plea for validation, it might have afforded her more sympathy but The *Narrative* concludes with various endnotes, in which she includes the names of reputable witnesses to support her case, and other appendices to the text. The inclusion of endnotes, whilst a typical feature of the appeal memoir (Breashears 616), is a critical indicator of Courtenay’s control of it. She writes,

On referring to the subsequent notes, there will be found much further information which had been recommended me to suppress; but as I did not altogether agree to this mode of cutting out facts and recollections, I have used a woman’s privilege and inserted in the notes what has been omitted in the context (*Narrative* 27).

Courtenay’s exertion of “a woman’s privilege” might be a further indication of Courtenay’s control of her *Narrative* and infers that she was requested to limit the content. This is significant as an important inclusion is a political attack against Daniel O’Connell. This is an inclusion that causes Courtenay some anxiety and she acknowledges the limitations afforded to her sex for expressing it preferring to frame her opinions as common sense and ordinary foresight:

In political science I profess not to be an adept. It is not exactly the province of a female, nor is it at all in consonance with my taste and inclination- but of common sense and ordinary

foresight, I lay claim to such share as is usually allowed to women. These qualifications enable me to see clearly through the motives which actuate this braggadocio of Ireland, this Cromwell of his day" (*Narrative*,35).

It is notable that Courtenay reveals her family history in the endnotes of the *Narrative* which differs from the four-phase narrative structure of the appeal memoir (Breashears 618). By placing this information here, before the political commentary, she signifies her entitlement to pass comment. She reveals that her father was a man of high respectability and character, whose "own house was the receptacle for literary characters of all grades -the man of genius, the scientific, the clergy and professional men of all branches, found there a hospitable home" (*Narrative* 29). Courtenay's exposure to this broad range of intellectual diversity might have led to the formation of her own radical views but this information also serves to contradict that later criticism by Gwynn that he found it "impossible to believe that a woman who claimed she was seduced and left to starve was such an astute writer and observer of politics and sentiments" (Bishop 64).

This chapter has argued that Bishop's assumption is flawed. Courtenay's writing style, control and promotion of her narrative are revealed in her exchanges with Henry Hunt and her recognition of the publicity that would be generated by her application of the affidavit. However, the genre she chose in order to connect with her readers was outdated and offensive to the sensitivities of the public and Courtenay's public representation did not fit the victim of her work. She failed to convince the public that she was anything other than an opportunist, an actress, with power to deceive. Courtenay had written the *Narrative* out of financial need but also to gain a foothold in the literary market and these dual motivations drove her career. Therefore, Courtenay had few options at this point but to return to the stage. Letters that she sent to the Lord Lieutenant, Dean Vignolles indicate that she was in Dublin between 1833 and 1835 (Gwynn, 396) where she was reunited with Henry. They both went to London where they continued harassment of O'Connell in the London Theatres.

The London stage was not an environment that was likely to alter public perceptions of Courtenay and her cause. William Archer claims that the first third of the nineteenth-century was

the winter solstice of the British Stage in which the theatre was “a wilderness of vulgarity, bad writing, and self-indulgent acting that pandered to the lowest common denominator of public taste” (Bratton 59). Bratton argues that this was a concept promoted by the male middle class who wished to reclaim the stage for the exclusive transmission of their own voice. By “the assertion of a superior public morality, they aimed to cleanse the stage of its immoral associations, and to cleanse it of its association with independent women” (59). Bratton explores this concept in relation to the life of Elizabeth Wright Macauley. This independent woman, who angered the theatre managers with her public criticism of them, devised a way of escaping their control by devising a form of a one-woman entertainment. In the next stage of her transformation, Courtenay draws on Macauley’s experience to salvage her reputation as a public lecturer. Chapter two will look at the next stage of Courtenay’s transformation between 1836 and 1847 when she draws on Macauley’s experience and becomes a public lecturer in a bid to salvage her reputation and continue her career.

Ellen Courtenay the Actress Becomes Madame Steinberg the Lecturer (1835-47) 1847)

After Courtenay's *Narrative* (1832) failed to gain her public sympathy and financial support, she sought to recover her reputation. Courtenay was an actress but, as noted in the previous chapter, she criticised the individuals associated with the theatre so any progression in this arena was unlikely. Whilst the managers of the London theatres might have been tempted by Ellen Courtenay's fame, her comments in the *Narrative* suggest that she was not an easy woman to "manage" (22). This necessitated a change of strategy and she decided to reinvent herself as a performer and lecturer. Just as the scandalous memoirists may have provided an example for Courtenay's *Narrative*, the example set by actresses such as Sarah Siddons, Elizabeth Wright Macauley and Anne Hatton who had negotiated the transition from actress to public speaker may also have been useful to her in this next stage of her career. However, Courtenay's continuing attacks against O'Connell hindered her early progress.

A comparison of the strategies employed by these women to manage their reputations exposes Courtenay's misstep in formulating the early stage of her career as she attempted to insert political discourse to her lectures. Additionally, accounts of Courtenay's experimentation with solo performance were widely reported from 1834 onwards and the publication of a letter sent to the *John Bull* newspaper in 1840 and her eventual transformation into Madame Steinberg in 1847 will show that, rather than dying 1837, Courtenay continued to develop her public image to adapt her identity. She became Madame Steinberg after O'Connell's death in 1847, when she was gaining recognition as an itinerant public lecturer. Female itinerant lecturers travelled the country speaking on a large number of subjects such as bloomerism, temperance and education. These women faced enormous challenges to be taken seriously because their expression of opinions in public were at odd with the prevailing norms for female behaviour. This is evident in their treatment by some reports in the press which reflected prevailing norms for female behaviour and criticised women

who expressed their opinions in public. A discussion of the attitudes and problems that the lady lecturers faced is therefore included in this chapter. Courtenay had one advantage over some of these women lecturers, which is that she was used to performing before an audience.

Courtenay's confidence in her acting ability was encouraged by the popular Shakesporean actor Charles Young. Charles Young had acted opposite Siddons and had at his own admission been rendered almost speechless by her (Siddons's) skill (Buchanan 426). Young's encouragement led Courtenay to believe that she could inhabit the strong female roles that Siddons had made her own (*Narrative* 20). However, evidence suggests that she was a minor player. Her first appearance as Lady Macbeth at The English Opera House was reported in *The Morning Herald* of 9<sup>th</sup> June 1824. Siddons had retired from the stage in 1812 and the reporter acknowledged that in the absence of the great tragedians, they suspected that "somewhere among us-neglected perhaps, and unknown (are) the germs, capabilities of better *tragic* acting than it is our good fortune at this day to witness at our theatres." Courtenay does not seem to have fulfilled that role:

Miss Courtney, though very superior to the group with which she was associated, has neither the physical nor the intellectual endowments requisite to sustain the lofty and almost superhuman character she aspired to personify. She conceived, however, the character with tolerable accuracy, and delivered the text of her author in general with as much propriety as limited powers and a partial lisping would permit ("English Opera House").

Courtenay would have been around twenty-one years of age at this time. The commentator tries extremely hard to display the polite discourse that his report required but the criticism is harsh.

Courtenay was frequently accused of overestimating her talent. In 1836, the Cork correspondent to the *St. James Chronicle* of 29<sup>th</sup> March 1836 re-affirmed Courtenay's status as the daughter of a baker in Cork, and wrote:

Possessing some mental capabilities, and imagining that they were of a high order, she, as most enthusiasts in self-love do, bethought herself of making a dramatic "hit" in London[...] But nothing less than an appearance in Lady Macbeth would suit her taste or powers or both; and accordingly she did inflict the said character on some two or three dozen who witnessed the ill-advised young woman's performance [...] She is just now the remains of a well looking woman- artful, talkative, and mightily well established in her own opinions, she soon steals on the credulity of those who will listen to her grievances, but very shortly

forfeits any good impression she makes by her masculine flippancy, and a high air which she mistakes for great mental display and fine dignity (“The O’Connell Assault”).

The inference here is that it is not Courtenay’s lack of talent that is offensive, but her adoption of masculine traits – artfulness, flippancy and the formation of her own opinions- that is unacceptable.

Sarah Siddons’s success as an actress was due to her ostensible adherence to notions of female propriety. Patricia Howell Michaelson explains how Siddons demonstrated restraint in roles such as Lady Macbeth and how she was able to combine majesty and femininity (99). Siddons also managed to convey this in her acting roles such as her portrayal of Lady Macbeth in which she demonstrated the balance between the fiendish side of Lady Macbeth and her domesticity. Michaelson remarks how scholars have “looked to Siddons as a test case for how the public (male)/private (female) boundary might be negotiated. Additionally, Siddons’s private demeanour was remarked upon by those who knew her. Frances Burney said, “She behaved with great propriety; very calm, modest, quiet and unaffected” (100). The reference here to domesticity is also a factor in Courtenay’s failure to connect with the public. Sarah Siddons’s carefully cultivated private persona as a dignified wife and mother countered the association of actresses with prostitution (Pascoe, 246). Siddons’s famous act in presenting her children on stage as the “Three Reasons” she left Bath to act in the theatres of London, provided a means to distance herself from greed and fame that was associated with theatrical celebrity. It is possible that Courtenay believed that she could create the perception that she was a caring mother which might enhance her standing with the public but her decision to take her son Henry to the London stage seems to have had the opposite effect.

Courtenay’s status as an unmarried woman with an illegitimate child was a significant factor in determining how she was perceived publicly and this was only emphasised by Henry’s appearance. In Dublin, she was reunited with Henry, who in 1835 was about fifteen years old (Gwynn 396-397). Later, in a letter dated 26<sup>th</sup> January 1836 which was sent to the *John Bull* newspaper she explained how she had had found him at Clondalkin Monastery, sleeping "on a



dunghill” and denied any education (“To John Bull”). In London, Courtenay and Henry staged a benefit performance of the play *Douglas* at the Victoria Theatre on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1835 which she claimed O’Connell had attempted to sabotage by asking Lord Melbourne to withdraw the theatre’s licence. However, the performance went ahead with Courtenay in the role of Lady Randolph and Henry O’Connell as Young Norval. Courtenay changed the text of the play to name O’Connell as the absent father rather than Douglas and the fate of Young Norval, the starving child abandoned on a hillside to die, could not have been lost on the audience. (“Victoria Theatre”).

If Courtenay had thought that producing Henry on the stage would act as a justified reason” for her exposure to the public, she was mistaken. Mrs. Sarah Siddons’s presentation of her three young children as her validation for her chosen career contrasted starkly with the youth that Courtenay introduced to the theatre going public. It merely reminded them of Courtenay’s scandalous past and provoked discussions in the press about the degree to which Courtenay’s “little boy” resembled his purported father. The critic in the *Evening Mail* of 24<sup>th</sup> July 1835 reported, “ It cannot be said that the young man bears a very close resemblance to the personage to whom the lady has attributed his existence. He is a slim puny youth and possesses little of the burly bulk and breadth of beam which characterise his putative progenitor.” This is a harsh criticism, considering that the boy was about fifteen years old and had allegedly been rescued from starvation.

Alternatively, some commentators in the newspapers saw a very striking resemblance to O’Connell but his presence shows how the scandal was remembered and detracts from Courtenay’s performance. Indeed, the *Evening Mail*’ critic’s introduction to the piece describes, “a lady who calls herself Ellen Courtenay” suggesting that suspicion about her identity persisted. The critic drew attention to the physical, stating, “the lady is not deficient in those charms which depend on embonpoint and has some pretensions to histrionic skill” (“Victoria Theatre”). The subtext here is that Courtenay is a loud, big-bosomed woman, a vulgar trollop capable of charming the audience in the way she had charmed O’Connell.

Aside from her boldness at bringing her grievances to the public stage, Courtenay continued to harass O'Connell and conduct correspondence with the press which further raised her public profile, reviving the scandal and damaging her reputation. For example, Henry interrupted a meeting of The Law Reform and Anti-Oppression Society on 18<sup>th</sup> January 1836. A report in *The Morning Post* described how Henry accused Daniel O'Connell of insatiable ambition. He warned the attendees that O'Connell was the most errant oppressor of them all and that he would play them like a pack of cards. Courtenay was unhappy with the report and sent a letter to the *Morning Post* which was printed in the edition dated 21<sup>st</sup> January 1836. She protested the "unhandsome manner in which my little boy's able and well-delivered speech was delivered in your paper" and argued that the assembly was very sympathetic to the boy ("Mr. O'Connell and Miss Courtenay"). It is quite likely that Courtenay was responsible for all of Henry's public speeches as she claimed Henry had no access to learning at Clondalkin. The harassment of O'Connell reached a climax in March 1836 when Courtenay and Henry followed Daniel O'Connell and his legitimate son, John O'Connell, to church. John O'Connell became angry with the continued haranguing of his father and attacked Henry with his umbrella. This led to a court case at which Henry was awarded ten pounds and the incident was widely reported in the press. This coverage of the case led Courtenay to write to *The Times*, condemning O'Connell for being absent from the hearing. She also said that she was aware of a conversation that had taken place between two friends of O'Connell, a Mr. Carmichael Smythe and Major MacNamara, in which MacNamara had admitted that O'Connell had made no attempt to deny that Henry was his son and that he (MacNamara) felt satisfied that the boy was O'Connell's. Carmichael Smythe and MacNamara were compelled to refute these claims, keeping the matter in the public eye.

Courtenay's decision to pursue a career away from the theatres followed a disastrous benefit performance during which Courtenay and Henry were bombarded with fruit and a fight broke out in the orchestra pit. From this point Courtenay adopted a form of solo performance that led her away from her acting aspirations and towards a career as a lecturer. She instigated this

change by experimenting with a form of solo entertainment that had been tried by other actors. The Irish comedian Charles Mathews (1776-1835) gained popularity by means of his solo entertainment called an "at home" which he first performed in 1808. It consisted of representations of his comic characters and songs and became extremely popular with the public. However, this entertainment did not deviate from the form of entertainment that he had conducted within the company, it allowed him to represent himself as a solo performer who was in control of the format of his show. This strategy offered some advantages to performers such as Ellen Courtenay. That previously referenced letter to the *Cork Chronicle* stated "but nothing less than an appearance in Lady Macbeth would suit her taste or powers or both" ("The O'Connell Assault") seeks to portray Courtenay as an arrogant young woman whose notions of grandeur were not matched by her talents but there may have been very practical reasons for this.

Cheryl Wanko's work on the contracts awarded to Drury Lane actresses working in 1822 confirms the extent to which star actresses received better treatment than minor actresses, and in particular, the huge financial rewards available to leading actresses in contrast with the meagre remuneration awarded to minor players (53). Furthermore, the contracts stipulate a variety of stringent rules and regulations, the breaking of which led to deductions from the performer's salary. These included the failure to turn up on time to rehearsals, being present on the stage when not required for the scene being rehearsed and being "not perfect" in the words and music of a part (59). Unscrupulous theatre managers could use these rules to their advantage. Perfection in a part is surely open to interpretation and the insistence that the times of the rehearsals were regulated by only the Green-Room clock must have led to infringements that reduced the income of already poorly paid supporting actresses.

There were also rules and regulations regarding the production of benefit performances. Each performer would have three weeks' notice to advertise a benefit play but the play could only be advertised by the hand of the prompter or one week's salary would be lost. There was no guarantee that any extra remuneration generated by a benefit performance would cover the cost of

its production. Wanko's analysis of the minor actress Elizabeth Edward's contract reveals that in 1822, Edwards was required to deposit two hundred guineas with the Theatre Treasurer as security that her benefit would cover costs and suggests this would have been difficult to recompense as being a minor player, she was less likely to fill the house. Courtenay remarked on this in the

*Narrative:*

In the first place, cash, or unexceptionable security, must be given to the proprietor of the for the rent, and the charge is usually exorbitant; then the machinist, the underlings of all descriptions, the lighting etc. etc; and whatever may be the actual receipts of the House, supposing it to be well patronized and filled, the person for whose Benefit it was intended, must consider it a fortunate circumstance if there be no actual loss attending it. [.....]. That person must have strong nerves and an adamant heart, who can be proof against the extortions, knavery and insolence of the harpies connected with a Theatre! (21)

Courtenay recognised that in order to continue her criticism of O'Connell, publicise her wider political opinions and earn an independent living her future lay in solo performance and she may have looked to the example of the actress Elizabeth Wright Macauley (1785-1837) in the formulation of her entertainment. Macauley had conducted a successful career in the Dublin Theatre but in 1808, published a pamphlet which criticised the power afforded to theatre managers. In 1809 she published a book *Macauley's Literary Amusements* and found some success acting opposite the highly popular and respected actor Edmund Kean at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. However, she published another pamphlet that criticised Kean and the theatrical hierarchy, denouncing "the power and behaviour that we recognize as being typical of the spoiled superstar" (Bratton 67).

Macauley devised a solo performance, a one-woman show that she called a "Literary and Musical Regalio" whilst in Ireland. This three-part entertainment demonstrated her performance skills and provided a medium through which she could promote her opinions and earn an independent living. Like Courtenay, Macauley was at a disadvantage, operating "without a father, brother, husband to protect her" (Bratton 63). Macauley was also imprisoned for debt and wrote her life story to effect her release. However, Macauley is brazen in her expression of her desire for fame, stating that it was not *An Apology*, but "I write my life, because I wish it should be written; I send it into the world because I wish it should be read" (63). This contrasts with Courtenay's assertion that

“The statement contained in the subsequent pages, has long been withheld, and would perhaps never met [sic] the public eye, but that publication has been at length forced upon me by cruel circumstances” (Narrative 6). Notwithstanding these differences in opinion regarding their reasons for exposing their lives to public scrutiny, Courtenay wished to challenge the manipulations of the theatre managers and refused to submit to the treatment that the men in power inflicted on them (Bratton, 63). As we shall see as the progression of Courtenay’s career unfolds, where Macauley remained defiant and unapologetic in her expression of her political opinions, Courtenay tempered the content and presentation of her soirees and lectures to counteract criticism.

Courtenay may have recognised that it was Macauley’s display of defiance and refusal to conform to expectations of restraint and propriety that her critics found distasteful. Macauley died in 1837 and an account of her life in the *Gentleman Magazine* entitled “Mad Actors” criticised everything she had achieved, from the publication of her plays and poetry, to her acting style and her effrontery at daring to present herself before the public “in any possible way” (“Play-House People”). Her acting style was ridiculed. The critics said the “Dramatic Illustrations of the Passions [...]served as food for immoderate laughter.” Her dramatic execution of Belvidera’s “mad scene” saw her “dash herself down upon the six feet square stage erected at one end of the room and with frantic yells, tear at the border with her distended fingers.” Here we see that it was the presentation that mattered, for, like Courtenay, Macauley lacked the buffer of respectability provided by husband and family to counteract the transgressive nature of their abandoned display of female emotion in public. It was acknowledged that the liberty afforded to Sarah Siddons in her portrayal of roles such as Lady Macbeth and Belvidera was because of her reputation as a devoted wife and mother) and her status permitted an interpretation of her portrayal of ruined and immoral women as acting feats rather than her own character (Buchanan 429).

In this context, as a ruined and immoral woman, Courtenay’s execution of the solo entertainment genre involved some reputational risk but she began to use this mode of entertainment in 1833 as *The Warder and Dublin Weekly Mail* of 25<sup>th</sup> June 1833 advertised Miss E.

Courtenay's intention to provide a "Soiree Musicale et Dramatique" at the Rotundo in Dublin ("Rotundo: Under Distinguished Patronage"). However, Courtenay realised that the establishment of her respectability was a key factor to the acceptance and appreciation of her work, so when she took her one-woman show on the provincial circuit, she advertised herself as "Mrs. Courtenay."

This tweak in her public persona was not enough to endear Courtenay to public opinion as she still wished to find an outlet for her political views. Evidence from early critical reviews suggests that she did not learn immediately from Macauley's experience that whilst "instruction" might be permitted by lady lecturers, "opinion" was not. Macauley courted controversy when she took out a licence to preach on "The Morality of The Christian Religion" at Lisle Street Chapel in Leicester square in 1827. These lectures promoted her religious and political views, which reflected the ideas of the philanthropist and social reformer, Robert Owen. Courtenay tried to hide her radical views within socially acceptable subjects to avoid public criticism. An advertisement appeared in the *Ipswich Gazette* of 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1839 regarding her "Lecture on the Drama" at The Mechanics Institute. It stated, "Mrs. C. will show forth the great Antiquity of the Drama-Its Progress-Its Depression-The Cause-and the Evils resulting to Society from its depressed state." It also promised a lecture on "The Political, Religious and Moral State of the Country" ("Mechanic's Institute, Ipswich"). When she delivered the lecture in Norfolk, the *Norwich Mercury* of 1<sup>st</sup> February 1840 stated that a Mrs. Courtenay had applied to The Mayor of Norwich to use St. Andrews's Hall for a Musical Soiree and lecture on Drama. He had since learned that instead of being a lecture on drama, it was "a political and religious lecture of a very bad tendency." ("Town Council"). He had withdrawn permission for further use of the venue and was determined to inform the press and public as to the nature and tendency of her exhibition.

As Courtenay was navigating these barriers to her success, her desire to protect and promote Henry and hold O'Connell to account served to hinder her progress. She continued to vent her rage against him in public and in print. In 1840 she was forcibly removed from meeting of the British India Project in Manchester at which O'Connell was present. In response to an account that

appeared in the *Manchester Courier*, in which she felt misrepresented, she sent the editor a letter dated 28<sup>th</sup> August 1840. She claimed that O'Connell had only himself to blame for the spectacle,

My feelings became uncontrollable when I heard THIS man TALK of HUMANITY and JUSTICE!! Oh! He has GOADED me, GOADED me to act; thus, twenty years of sufferings (almost unparalleled) have not subdued my feelings. Oh! He has TORN ALL from me that I held dear, left me nothing but despair and vengeance, and MUST take the consequences of his own creation !! ("To The Editor of the Manchester Courier").

This impassioned missive, written in the unrestrained manner of the *Narrative*, along with the newspaper reports of her development from actress to lecturer between 1837 and 1839 bear testament to her survival as a public figure beyond the point at which it is alleged that she died. The continuity in the career of Ellen Courtenay is further established in a newspaper report in *The Era* of 24<sup>th</sup> January 1847, when Courtenay returned to the public eye after a break of six years. This particularly important report connects the identity of Miss Courtenay the actress and Mrs. Courtenay the lecturer. It stated that Miss Courtenay, otherwise Mrs. Courtenay, had been acting at The Adelphi in Glasgow. It also noted that she had been lecturing upon drama and poetic composition at one of the halls in the city ("Provincial Theatricals").

However, it is the events of May 1847 that have a profound impact on Courtenay's career, effecting a complete change in her identity. An advertisement appeared in the *Newcastle Journal* of 29<sup>th</sup> May 1847 stating that Mrs. Courtenay was lecturing on "Oriental Literature" and "Elocution" in the following week. ("Victoria Rooms"). Daniel O'Connell died in Genoa on 15<sup>th</sup> May. From this point onwards, all lectures by Mrs. Courtenay ceased but Madame Steinberg began lecturing across the North of England on Oriental Literature. It is also significant that the last advertisement that appeared in the press under the name of Mrs. Courtenay on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1847 states her intention to recite the entire play of Hamlet. A handbill that advertises Madame Steinberg's lectures at Chelmsford in 1858 quotes the *Gagliani*,

When we heard of the "Admirable Crichton" reciting a Play from memory, we thought it a - a thing impossible, but these feelings were completely removed on Wednesday Evening, at the "Salle Herz", when Madame Helene Steinberg, to our astonishment and surprise, recited in the spirit of Truth, with all the varieties in tone and gestures that

each character required, (identifying herself with each one) the entire of the Play of Hamlet from memory! We did not miss the artificial aids which dress and scenery afford but were carried on by the strength and beauty of her exquisite delineations of the inspired Bard ("Madame Steinberg's' Lecture on India").

Meanwhile, Henry acquired an orrery, a magic lantern, laughing gas and other scientific paraphernalia and travelled the lecture circuit delivering lectures on astronomy. From this point on, Ellen Courtenay lectured as Madame Helene Steinberg. She was one of a number of women who travelled the length and breadth of Britain instructing the public on a variety of subjects. Steinberg's new persona may have been adopted to put distance between herself and the now deceased O'Connell but it may also have been to confer an aura of respectability to counter the criticisms that so many of the lady lecturers encountered.

As late as 1845 (ten years after Courtenay embarked on her new career), an anonymous correspondent wrote to *The Coventry Herald and Observer* to express outrage that the committee of the Mechanics Institute in Coventry had engaged a lady lecturer. It was acknowledged that this decision had given rise to "considerable controversy upon the fitness and qualifications of the fair sex for such occupations," and the correspondent quoted at length the observations of the materialist philosopher Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis:

In general, learned women know nothing thoroughly; they ruin and confound all objects and all ideas. Their lively conception has seized some point and they imagine they know the whole. Difficulties disgust them and their impatience overleaps them. Incapable of fixing the lively and profound enjoyment of deep meditation, they pass rapidly from one subject to another and nothing remains to them but some partial incomplete notions which usually form in their heads the most grotesques combinations. ("Correspondence").

During her career, Steinberg was also a victim to this kind of critical attack. After an appearance in Edinburgh in 1852, an anonymous correspondent wrote to the *Greenock Advertiser*, complaining that:

A Madame Steinberg is at present lecturing at the Edinburgh Queen Street Hall on education and the genius of Shakespeare. I have not heard Madame and am ungallant enough to say that although I believe she is a talented and respectable person, I shall avoid her prelections. I cannot tolerate females appearing in public to expound any theory whatever, bloomerism, education, or morals or science or the rights of women. The



proper sphere of the sex is the narrow but sacred one of the household (“Female Lecturers”).

These opinions emphasise the sentiments held by many that women were unsuited to public roles. Even educated, it was thought were so imbued with perceived feminine characteristics of impatience and irrationality that they could only understand important subjects at a superficial level.

Despite these critical assessments, some women were making a living from public lecturing. Clara Lucas Balfour (1808-1878) delivered lectures on subjects such as temperance and moral worth which led to publication of her work. The *Reading Mercury* of 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1845 acknowledged the “alleged impropriety of females lecturing in public” but assured its readers that,

No one who heard Mrs. Balfour’s eloquent address on Tuesday evening and remarked the strict propriety and decorum with which every part of the proceedings was conducted, would for a moment hesitate to countenance and support the talented speaker in her praiseworthy endeavours to promote the intellectual improvement of her fellow creatures (“Literary, Scientific and Mechanic’s Institute”).

This assessment emphasises propriety and demeanour but subject matter was also open to criticism. For example, a Miss Georgiana Bennett delivered a lecture on Poetry at The Philosophical Institution in Birmingham in December 1846. A report in the *Hereford Journal* of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1846, indicates that the audience was highly respectable and the lady finished her lecture to hearty and deserved applause. In contrast, a Mrs. Martin lectured in Worcester in May of 1839. The reporter in the *Hereford Journal* of 8<sup>th</sup> May is incredulous at the choice of her subject matter, “Woman”, and outraged that she spoke about the shocking barbarity and unfairness in the dealings of men toward women and she advocated the claims of women to a better share of independence (“Female Lecturer: Mrs. Martin”). Harsher still was a report about Mrs. Chappel-Smith, “The Female Socialist.” A measure of the intolerance of women who wished to engage in political discourse is demonstrated in the opening paragraph:

is we know, a very ungracious, disagreeable task, to be obliged to speak of any one of the fair sex in a newspaper; and if we could, we certainly should never trespass upon their privilege of privacy; and least of all, if it could be avoided, should we bring one of them before the world as “a political character.” But what is to be done, if a lady mounts the rostrum, and specifies by the hour? She does so, we conclude to be noticed. By the very act she unsexes herself and exposes herself to be commented upon as if she were made of

“sterner stuff” than those whom nature has destined to be the mother children. (“Political Gallery, no.IV, (“Female Socialist”).

The author of this piece considered Mrs. Chappell Smith to be fair game as by encroaching on masculine platforms, she should be held to the same criticisms as men. These attitudes that had persisted from the end of the eighteenth century viewed women such as Chappell Smith as threatening to the stability of the home.

These attitudes were problematic for Courtenay/Steinberg who harboured radical views but wished to be accepted by the literary establishment. In order to gain public approbation, her choice of subjects for her lectures should be conservative. She capitalised on her performative skills and introduced the subject of elocution into her repertoire: an acceptably “feminine” subject, which had been endorsed by writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) and Anna Letitia Barbauld (1743-1825) since the eighteenth century. Wollstonecraft and Barbauld, recognized that confinement of the female speaker in the private sphere was not inevitable but the prevailing attitude at the time of Steinberg’s emergence is reflected in work produced by the elocutionist Sarah Stickney Ellis, whose promotion of female reading and elocution placed it very firmly in the domestic sphere(Abbott, 4). However, the inclusion of elocution provided Courtenay with the opportunity to generate income by teaching it between lectures and give validation to her artistic expression of the Shakespeare plays that she admired so much.

This combination of entertainment with instruction met Steinberg’s desire to perform and her private instruction as a teacher elevated her from the negative connotations associated with the acting profession. By establishing herself in the lecture halls of Newcastle, Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool and Hull, she found a greater acceptance of her talents in the more liberal environment of The Mechanics Institutions. Additionally, the Chartist movement was highly active in the industrial areas of the north, which, as will be shown in the next chapter, was instrumental in influencing Steinberg’s poetry. The Mechanics Institutions also provided public spaces for women to be heard. Recitations by actresses were also common and provided a lucrative opportunity for talented

performers (Morgan 56), and the acceptance of middle-class girls by the Institute Schools provided Steinberg with a pool of students who could attend her elocution classes (58). However, the growing number of female lecturers presented Steinberg with competition. For example, Clara Balfour dominated the January 1847 lecture programme at the Leeds Mechanics Institute. She was fully established as a lecturer and her subjects, "Influence of Women," "The Female Characters of Shakespeare" and "The Female Characters of Sir Walter Scott" indicate how the intellectual needs of women were being addressed (56). Steinberg recognised the necessity of broadening her repertoire so she offered "British and Hindoo Drama," "Temperance," "The Heroic Disinterestedness of Maternal Love," "Moral Worth," "Oriental Literature," "The Condition of Woman and Her Claims to Social Freedom and Popular Delusions of the Day," "The Genius of Shakespeare," "The Genius of Poetry" and "The Physical, Moral and Intellectual Improvement of the Industrial Classes", all of which she spoke on between 1836 and 1862.

The emphasis that the women lecturers placed on the roles of women in society were bound up with an awareness that the education of girls was a desirable thing and of benefit to society. However, a debate centred around the extent to which this education would allow women to function in their domestic roles. There was a growing argument offered by writers such as J. D. Milne and Harriet Martineau who stated that there was a case for the education of women to participate in the economy in their own right. This argument generated uncertainty about the future safety of the domestic sphere. In her Lecture on "Female Education" (1855), Steinberg adopted the educational ideas of Hannah More (1745-1833) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1797-1759) which challenged the views that families would be neglected if girls received a formal education (Morgan, 38). Hence Steinberg's stance was that girls could be educated in the home to become better wives and mothers and raise, "A superior race of men, a land of heroes, philosophers, men of literature and science in all departments [...] Men in whom the love of Truth would be more potent than the love of Gain" (Steinberg, 6). This echoes More's views in *Strictures of Modern Education* (1799). More emphasised the importance of providing an example to their sons and she writes: that

women, should be therefore trained with the view to their several conditions, and be furnished with a stock of ideas, and principles, and qualifications, and habits, ready to be applied and appropriated, as occasion may demand, to each of their respective situations” (More 107).

Or, as Steinberg writes, “to lay a foundation of his future career, [...] who has to form that infant mind, which is like wax in her hands, and will take any impression she chooses to give it” (“Lecture on Female Education 5). The benefit for women was that such an education would, “fit her for life (be the circumstances which surround her what they may) with juster feelings, with more cheerful acquiescence” (8).

Steinberg was also influenced by the work of Lydia Hunter Sigourney (1791-1865) who also brought More’s educational philosophy before the nineteenth-century audience. Steinberg’s lecture contains sections of text lifted directly or paraphrased from Sigourney’s “On the Policy of Elevating the Standard of Female Education” (1834). Sigourney’s work had been delivered at the American Lyceum in May 1834 and was published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* and reproduced in the January 1846 edition of *The Female’s Friend*. Steinberg finishes her lecture with a passage lifted directly from Sigourney:

Let the age which has so fully imparted to woman the treasures of knowledge, and justly expects from her the highest moral excellence [...] enforce those virtues which sustain the moral worth, and promote the permanence of a great nation make her answerable to the character of the next generation; give her this solemn charge in the presence of men and angels; gird her to its fulfilment with the whole armour of *home* and *heart* education, and see if she be not faithful to her offspring, to her country and her God (“Lecture on Female Education” 4-15).

This rousing conclusion centres Steinberg’s commitment to the support of female education in the home to be used in the nurturing of honourable citizens, thus removing the threat of the disintegration of the family unit and thus denoting Steinberg’s manipulation of her public image.

Thus, over the course of fifteen years Courtenay managed to fashion a persona that met the standards of decorum and propriety that society expected from lady lecturers. This profession allowed her to indulge her love of performance but also let her achieve what few women could, voice her private opinions in the public sphere. Charles Young had convinced the young Ellen

Courtenay that she “had the power of creating sympathy in the bosoms of others” (*Narrative*, 20). Her relentless pursuit of publicity had a deleterious effect on her success but she adapted to devise a means of gaining control over her livelihood and rehabilitating her reputation. The adoption of the Steinberg identity placed a huge distance between Courtenay and O’Connell but raises certain questions regarding her marital status that must be acknowledged. In her application to The Royal Literary Fund in 1852, she stated that she was the widow of Adolphus Steinberg and she always described herself as a widow in the censuses. This information is at odds with information provided on her death certificate which states she is the widow of Henry Steinberg. Thus far, no evidence has emerged to confirm that she was ever married and the European sounding surname and use of “Madame” is perhaps used to authenticate her much advertised claim to be a lectrice to the courts of France and Belgium. A surviving handbill of Steinberg’s lecture in Chelmsford in 1858 refers to her identity as “Madame Anglaise” the name by which she was known as in Paris. It also states that she had spent three years in Madras, all of which conveyed respectability and her entitlement to public’s attention. Her new status as a lecturer allowed her a foothold in the literary circles of the north of England which provided opportunities for her to develop her career as a poet. Chapter three will examine her poetic output between 1847 and 1852 as a further aspect of her public career.

### Chapter Three : The Poetry of Madame Steinberg (1847-1852)

By 1846, “Mrs. Courtenay’s” reputation as a competent lecturer and entertainer was becoming established but the self-censorship that she imposed on herself belied her radical political sympathies. Between 1847 and 1850 she lectured in the major industrial towns of the north of England but she realised that whilst female lecturers were becoming more accepted in the public arena, those with radical views were not. This chapter shows that while she was presenting this respectable façade in public, Steinberg took advantage of the anti-O’Connell stance adopted by the *Northern Star and Leeds General Advertiser* (hereafter *Northern Star*) and turned to the work of Byron in the construction of her long anti O’Connell poem, “The Apotheosis,” to appeal to the artistic preferences of the editor of the *Northern Star*. “The Apotheosis” was published in the 17<sup>th</sup> July 1847 edition of the *Northern Star* as the work of “An Irishman” (“Poetry: The Apotheosis”). “The Broken Harp” by “Henry Gracchus” appeared in the edition of 31<sup>st</sup> July 1847 (“Poetry: The Broken Harp”). On the 13<sup>th</sup> November 1847, the *Northern Star* featured a review of a new book, *The Chieftain and Other Poems*, by “Henry Gracchus, gentleman”. It mentions that both “The Apotheosis” and “The Broken Harp” are included in the publication, thus cementing the identity of “an Irishman” and “Henry Gracchus” (“Review: The Chieftain and Other Poems”). The success of these poems led to the publication of Steinberg’s *Oswald the Enthusiast, a poem, Caiaphas in London and other Fugitive Pieces* (1852), (hereafter referred to as *Oswald*). Both “The Apotheosis” and “The Broken Harp” are included as her compositions, although “The Broken Harp” is re-named “Hail Land of Song.” Many of Steinberg’s poems are worthy of further study, but this thesis will concentrate on “The Apotheosis” and “Hail Land of Song” (Gracchus’s “The Broken Harp”) as they both appear in *Oswald* and can be clearly identified as Steinberg’s work. “Wreck of a Nation” will also be included as it is the only poem of her own that Steinberg recited publicly.

Many of the poems signed as being the work of Gracchus are of a highly political nature and concern Chartist ideology and Steinberg recognised the necessity of adopting pseudonyms for her

work that reflected radical views. Supporters of The People's Charter called for Parliamentary reform, listing six principles that would enable the participation of working-class men in political procedures. These were: a vote for every sane man over the age of twenty-one, elections conducted under secret ballot, no property qualification for Members of Parliament, payment of Members of Parliament, equal constituencies and annual elections (Geoghegan 113-114). Steinberg's views are expected if we consider that, as Ellen Courtenay, her first plea for assistance when imprisoned in The Fleet Prison, was to the M.P. Henry Hunt. Hunt had actively devised a strategy of constitutional agitation and had been imprisoned after the Peterloo Massacre on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1819. This event, at which Hunt was present as the main speaker, resulted in the deaths of seventeen people and injuries in 650 others at the hands of yeomanry hired to disperse the meeting. The leader of The Chartists in England, Fergus O'Connor, acknowledged the legacy of Hunt, proclaiming in 1842 that "he would fill up the vacancy caused by the death of Henry Hunt" (Chase 12-13).

However, whilst the pro-chartist *Northern Star* offered poets such as Steinberg the opportunity for artistic expression, its seemingly liberal acceptance of women writers belies an intolerance of their overtly political expression, an attitude that was reflected in the Chartist movement at large. The *Northern Star* permitted contributions from authors regardless of rank and gender but Steinberg's decision to mask her gender proved to be justified. The preponderance of poems authored by "Anon," pseudonyms or initial letters hides the identities of many poets, some of whom may have been women. A few women were published with their own names. The most famous of the female Chartist Poets, Eliza Cook, was frequently published in the *Northern Star* using her own name. Cook's ability to overcome the challenges presented by her gender and political views lay in her strategy of centring her poetry in the home. The *Northern Star* stated, "This poetess gives every rural scene, and everything connected with home, a double charm in which she conveys her thoughts of things associated with our early years [...] 'Summer is Nigh' forcibly reminds us of the evils that need remedial measures to alleviate the sufferings of the aged, the infirm and the poor, but unwilling idler" ("Fraser Family: Musical Evening"). This is in contrast to another poet, Caroline

Maria Williams, who published under her own name in the *Northern Star*. In her poem "Self-Conceit" which was published in the 4<sup>th</sup> June 1842 edition of the *Northern Star*, Williams challenges the social order,

Women's influence is powerful, says man;  
Their real effects wonders; if true,  
I vow I'll do all that I can,  
And provoke men to act as I do.

I'll use no exciseables; no,  
Though dear as a right eye they be;  
Those of course, then, the men must forego,  
Or own themselves weaker than me (Williams, lines 21-28).

The exposure of Williams's views proved to be damaging. Her poetry and letters addressing her "Chartist Sisters" were detrimental to her livelihood. She complained to the *Northern Star* in April 1842 that she had established a school for infants in Bristol which had been thriving until a local clergyman informed the neighbourhood that she was a Chartist. The revelation of her political sympathies adversely affected her business. The *Northern Star's* response that their opinion is that the parson was a "busy, dirty, meddling fellow" lacks the force of feeling that such an act justifies from a newspaper that promotes Chartist ideology but belies an underlying intolerance to feminine discourse within the movement, especially towards those that expressed highly radical viewpoints.

This was the background against which Steinberg navigated the limitations put upon women in the public arena. Some male Chartists expressed support for female suffrage and the active political participation of women whilst others such as the leader, Feargus O'Connor, expressed concern that this would lead to disagreements that would divide families (David Jones 1-2). It is important to note that these concerns were not confined to male reformers. The writer and social reformer Harriet Martineau (1802-1874) disapproved of women who drew attention to their personal lives in their work. Martineau perceived that by drawing attention to themselves, attention was diverted from the issues that would free them from the societal roles to which they were confined (Easley 80).



In spite of these challenges, Steinberg exploited the anti-O'Connell stance adopted by the *Northern Star* to launch a final attack against Daniel O'Connell in her poem "The Apotheosis." O'Connell had been associated with the Chartist Movement from its inception in 1838, contributing his own ideas on the People's Charter. However, he objected to certain elements of the Charter and felt that strong radical social movements channelled the anger and resentment of the people which destabilised society (Geoghegan 115-117). A rivalry between Daniel O'Connell and the leader of the Chartists in Britain, Feargus O'Connor, ensued and attacks against O'Connell's character in correspondence, editorials and poetry appeared in the *Northern Star*. In his essay "No Laughing Matter: Chartism and the Limits of Satire" (2016), Mike Sanders states that it was estimated that a third of satirical poems published in the *Northern Star* were directed at O'Connell (23). It was acknowledged that Chartist poetry played a cathartic role as it allowed the expression of violent emotion that could not be expressed in any other medium ( Sanders, 6), but Steinberg recognised that, as a woman, she could not express her anger without censure and her adoption of male pseudonyms was crucial to the preservation of her reputation.

The *Northern Star* observation that "The Apotheosis" echoed Byron's "Avatar" was justified as Steinberg intelligently adapted her work to meet the editorial standards of the *Northern Star*. The editor, George Julian Harney (1817-1897), ran a weekly feature on "The Beauties of Byron" which ran from 12<sup>th</sup> July 1845 to 11<sup>th</sup> November 1846. His desire was to raise the literary standard of the copious amounts of verse penned by amateur poets that were submitted to the paper (Sanders, 75-76). A statement was placed in the Readers and Correspondents column in the 11th May 1844 edition stating:

We have registered a vow never (knowingly and wilfully) to give publicity to any more trash, feeling assured that we shall best gratify our readers in general, and instruct our poetic friends in particular, by calling from the deathless pages of Byron, Shelley, Burns, Nichol, &tc. &tc., rather than by giving insertion to outpourings which can lay no claim to the title of 'immortal verse'" ("Readers and Correspondents").

Harney's preferences provide a link between the Chartist Movement and the radical poets of the Romantic Era, establishing the role of poetry in the movement, which acted to consolidate ideas of

social reform and call out for the mobilisation of a disenfranchised population. These earlier works were accessible to the working classes. Frederick Engels recorded his experiences in Manchester in 1845, remarking on the familiarity of the workers with the unexpurgated poetry of Shelley and Byron. Noting Shelley's prophetic genius and Byron's "sensuous fire" and virulent satire (St. Clair, 338), Harney held the amateur poets to these standards held the amateur poets and Harney's comments improved the professionalism of Chartist and Non-Chartist poetry in the *Northern Star* (Sanders 77).

The similarity between "Apotheosis" and Byron's "Irish Avatar" is supported by closer inspection. "Irish Avatar" was printed in pamphlet form in 1821. It was written in the style of Thomas Moore's "Lines on the Entry of the Austrians into Naples" and as Moore berated the capitulation of the Italians to Austrian forces, Byron condemned the sycophancy of the Irish and their worship of George IV on his visit to Dublin. In "The Apotheosis," Steinberg castigates the Irish for their worship of O'Connell and adopts the meter of the anapaestic quatrain used in "Irish Avatar" to drive the poem forward with force. Like Byron, Steinberg doesn't refrain from naming the oppressors. For Steinberg it is O'Connell and his hired political bishops Cantwell and Higgins (although Steinberg removes the names in *Oswald*), for Byron it is O'Connell, "George the despised" and James Plunkett, Earl of Fingal.

The opening stanza of "The Apotheosis" places the work directly in its time as it references the death of Daniel O'Connell in Genoa and the repatriation of his remains to Ireland. The poem is dated 12th July 1847, which places it between the death of O'Connell on 15th May, the return of his remains on 2nd August and his funeral on 12th August. Steinberg, writing as "Irishman" describes the removal of O'Connell's heart and its journey in a silver casket to Rome where O'Connell had been travelling in Pilgrimage:

O! my country, awake from thy long sleep of years,  
For thy torpor degrades thee far more than thy chains:  
See thy half-famished children, like spectres in tears,  
Sing the requiem dirge to O'Connell's remains.

To remains, now as vile as the commonest earth,  
While his heart, as a jewel, is sent off to Rome;  
But to cheer hapless Erin, the land of his birth,  
His worthless old carcase is coming back home ( Steinberg/“Irishman,” lines1-8).

Byron’s “Irish Avatar” also places his poem in time in the first stanza, referring to the indecent haste exhibited by George IV in his journey to Ireland following the death of his wife, Caroline of Brunswick:

Ere the daughter of Brunswick is cold in her grave,  
And her ashes still float to their home o’er the tide,  
Lo! George the triumphant speeds over the wave,  
To the long-cherished Isle which he loved like his bride (Byron, lines 1-4).

Here, Byron likens George IV’s regard for Ireland and its people with the love he had for his newly deceased wife. It was public knowledge that George’s marriage was a sham and devoid of love or respect. George IV had married Maria Fitzherbert in 1785 in an unlawful ceremony. He was forced to marry Caroline of Brunswick in 1795 and to extricate himself from this marriage he had abandoned Caroline and publicly humiliated her in the courts. Caroline’s position as an abandoned and persecuted wife led radicals to exploit the public sympathy shown to Caroline and expose it as evidence of a repression by the government (Macalman 162-175). Eminent Chartists such as Thomas Murphy had been drawn into radical discourse by their support of Caroline (Chase 6) and the strong public support for Caroline had led to fears of revolution. Thus, the importance of the poem as an early expression of radical ideology to the Chartist cause is clear.

There is a significant aspect of “The Apotheosis” which sets it apart from “Avatar” and other poems written by Chartist poets who reflected on the Irish Issue and this also provides a link to the *Narrative* of Ellen Courtenay. Steinberg’s contempt that O’Connell abandoned the Irish in pursuit of fame and riches is emphatically surpassed by the disdain and disgust with which she treats the gullibility and inertia of the Irish people. Byron berates the people for their pandering to the whims of the rich and powerful in their preparations to receive King George, Irishman/Steinberg goes much further. She condemns as slaves who worship O’Connell as they embrace the chains with which he

binds. The contempt with which the poet holds the Irish people is equal to, if not greater than, her contempt for O'Connell:

O! degraded, O! abject. O! sycophant fools,  
In disgust must I turn from your meanness [sic] away,  
When the National Beggar who made you his tools  
Is ador'd as a god, though but carrion clay. ( Steinberg/"Irishman," lines 33-35).

Byron's final stanza softens his attack by finding solace and hope in the works of Irish men of genius.

Or, if aught in my bosom can quench for an hour  
My contempt for a nation so servile though sore,  
Which though trod like the worm will not turn upon power,  
Tis the glory of Grattan and genius of Moore! (Byron, lines 125-129).

In contrast, "Irishman"/Steinberg's final stanza condemns O'Connell to hell :

Let Cantwell and Higgins then swear he's forgiven  
For political Bishops the saints little care;  
If this old venal sinner has got into Heaven,  
Why the Devil may hope still one day to go there.  
(Steinberg/"Irishman",lines 52-54).

Steinberg's return to religious imagery here reflects the adherence to the Roman Catholic doctrines that as Courtenay she claimed to hold close. It also reveals unease at her adoption of the Byronesque style in "Avatar" in which Byron, famed for the expression of anti-Christian sentiment in his verse, ends his poem in the present.

Steinberg's attitude towards religion, poetry and the work of Byron is revealed in a report in the *Windsor and Eton Express* of 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1860. In her lecture entitled "Poetry Co-Extant with The Universe", at High Wycombe, she declared that the characteristics of true poetry were to be found in the Bible. Furthermore, its cultivation was the means of bringing into play "all the qualities of the mind which the Almighty has given us for our happiness." ("Uxbridge: Lecture on Poetry"). The lecture was repeated at Marlow the following month and Steinberg proclaimed the Bible as the most sublime specimen (of poetry) and placed the works of Shakespeare as next on the list. She referenced "the ignoble use of the genius as illustrated in the writings of Byron, and the noble and grand aim of Milton and Shakespeare" ("High Wycombe: Lecture on the Genius of Poetry"). This

rejection of Byron reveals the tensions between Steinberg's personal views and her *modus operandi*. Byron may have made ignoble use of poetry, but it was highly effective in conveying political rhetoric. It provided her with the model to express her anti-O'Connell emotion and the *Northern Star* provided the platform to publicise it.

Steinberg's angry denunciation of the oppressed Irish in "Apotheosis" is repeated in "Hail Land of Song" (Henry Gracchus's "The Broken Lyre"). The poet's anger at the impotence of the people is expressed at the end of the fifth stanza:

Away, away, degraded race,  
I cannot bear your foul disgrace (Steinberg, lines 29-30)

Throughout the poem her fellow Irishmen are denigrated in the harshest language, portrayed as tamely crouching before the shrine, coward slaves, whose decline is mourned by the verdant hills and mossy stones of its land. The dismay hits a crescendo in the lines:

Go, go and bend the servile knee,  
Before these traitors humbly bow-  
I hop'd a brighter destiny,  
But never thought you vile till now.  
Rise from your thralldom, bondsmen, rise,  
Who falls for freedom never dies. (Steinberg, lines 59-60)

The poem ends on a rallying cry to rise up and fight, reminiscent of Shelley's "The Mask of Anarchy" :

Rise like Lions after slumber  
In unvanquishable number—  
Shake your chains to earth like dew  
Which in sleep had fallen on you—  
Ye are many—they are few. (Shelley, lines 144-148)

Steinberg recalls the freedom fighters of former times and desires to restore the broken harp and inspire the "ignoble slaves" to fight for freedom. This is in contrast to the trope of the Irish as a passive entity awaiting freedom at the hands of some external force which is expressed in many pro-Irish poems printed by the *Northern Star*. For instance, "Erin" by an anonymous contributor was included in the edition of 6th February 1847 and suggests that the Irish are merely waiting for a hero to release them from oppression,

Then Erin take courage, the day is at hand

When Saxon oppression shall tremble and fall,  
When Erin's own sons shall possess their own land,  
And make their own laws, still better than all.

Yes, Erin's dark night of oppression shall flee  
Like a vapour dispell'd by the sun's genial ray,  
And then, sweetest Isle of the ocean, thall't be  
First flower of the earth and first gem of the sea. ("Poetry: Erin")

The condemnation of the people in allowing themselves to be enslaved in both "Apotheosis" and "The Broken Harp" links directly to Courtenay's warning in the *Narrative*. In the political notes at the end of the *Narrative* she states, "The credulous Hibernians believed the tale and his popularity was of course, extreme. Surely, they will at last awake from their delusion and in the next election substitute sterling coin with the base metal they have stamped with their approbation" (36). Later she states, "Awake, my countrymen, from this delusive dream- be robbed no longer- for it is as bare-faced and shameless a robbery as ever was committed on a confiding people" (37). Courtenay had warned the people in 1832 but they had not listened. The theme of awakening returns us to the opening lines of "The Apotheosis":

O! my country, awake from thy long sleep of years,  
For thy torpor degrades thee far more than thy chains:  
(Steinberg/"Irishman," Lines 1-4).

The O'Connell scandal ruined Ellen Courtenay but she found that by masking her identity she was able to continue to challenge him. She had found a way to be heard and she despised her countrymen for refusing to take the stance that she had in challenging his power. Steinberg's fury is a personal expression of her own anger and frustration because O'Connell was dead and still the people were treating him like a saint. However potentially futile, it was a call to rally the reader to action even though they had decided to worship him as a hero.

Whilst Steinberg's use of pseudonyms allowed her to express her political sentiments in print, a note of caution must be made regarding the sole authorship of her work and the extent of her involvement with the Chartist Movement. The name "Gracchus" is a reference to the Roman politician Tiberius Gracchus (c.163 BC–133 BC). Gracchus was known for his radical policies for

reform which called for the redistribution of land from the wealthy Roman landowners to the poor. These ideas reflected the principles of the Chartist movement and the National Land Company, a cooperative society set up by the Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor to assist working men buy land and property. Therefore, "Gracchus" was a pseudonym frequently used by Chartists in public forums. Throughout the spring and summer of 1847, when the poems of "Irishman" and "Henry Gracchus" were published, a correspondent named "Gracchus" sent numerous letters to the *Northern Star* relating to the administration and election of leaders, treasurers and auditors of the Land Company. There is no firm evidence that suggests this was Steinberg, but it cannot be ruled out. The forename "Henry" might reference Courtenay's son, Henry O'Connell/Simpson. It is a reminder that, as Henry had played a part in Courtenay's dramatic ambitions, his contribution to her poetic output cannot be entirely ruled out even if this seems unlikely.

In the introduction it was shown how Courtenay (living as Helene Steinberg) retained close contact with Henry and both are traceable in census returns. They are documented as living at the same residence in Brighton in 1851 and in London in 1861. Steinberg's sister Theresa was also in the household. Again, the collaborative element of these individuals in contributing to *Oswald* cannot be totally discounted although throughout 1846-1847 Henry O'Connell/ Simpson was conducting an extensive tour of the lecture circuit, lecturing and teaching astronomy. Theresa Courtenay is infrequently mentioned except as a reason for Steinberg rescheduling some lectures in Hull in 1850 when she was detained in the town following a "melancholy accident to her sister" ("Madame Steinberg: Accomplished Lady"). Steinberg also mentioned Theresa in her application to the Royal Literary Fund in 1858 as being a dependent relative. Whilst this would not preclude her from contribution, Steinberg's "The Apotheosis" reveals strength of language that echoes Courtenay's *Narrative*.

The success of "The Apotheosis" allowed Steinberg to successfully publish further poems under pseudonyms in the *Northern Star* but the reception of her poetry demonstrates the double standards that were applied to women's writing.

The double standards surrounding women's expression are evident in reviews of "The Apotheosis". The editor claimed: "We have read nothing equal to the above fiery outburst since Byron's 'Irish Avatar,' to which it bears a strong resemblance" ("Poetry: The Apotheosis"), and whilst noting that the poet was not perfect, his "otherwise excellent effusions[...] are directed to a right object, the advancement of the good cause of human freedom and human happiness ("Review: Chieftain and other poems"). However, a review of *Oswald* in 1852 which was published as the work of Madame Steinberg in the *Quarterly Literary Review* of 1852 stated that the effusions over the "wrongs of Ireland" should be confined to the "Rotunda, and such-like resorts of spouters, without intruding themselves into the chaste regions of poetry." Steinberg, it stated, "calls profusely and indiscriminately the not very odiferous flowers of agitation rhetoric and tosses them recklessly into rhyme." It notes too how she denounces "tyrants and oppressors (commonly known as landlords, magistrates etc.) but also those who submit to live under them." It was much more impressed by the "fugitive pieces," remarking, "There occur here and there, love passages and touches of pathos which speak the woman, and to such we earnestly recommend her to devote her pen for the future." Notwithstanding the political allegiances of the publications that critiqued her poetry, "pathos which speak the woman" sends a clear message to Steinberg. Her voice was aggressive and her message unladylike ("Oswald The Enthusiast and Other Fugitive Pieces").

This is in contrast to the review of Steinberg/Gracchus's *The Chieftains and Other Poems*, which offers no criticisms of the inclusions of "feminine" expression of poetry. As well as many political pieces such as: "The Land and Charter", "An Epistolary Eclogue, Addressed to Feargus O'Connor Esq.", "The Battle", "The Victory", "Lowbands", "Thomas Muir, the Scottish Martyr", "The Chieftain" and "A Sketch of the Past and the Present", the review noted the inclusion of several non-political pieces "which possess not the least of the pure elements of poetry, simplicity and sweetness" ("Review: Chieftain and other poems"). The poems named are "The Poet's Souvenirs," "The Interview," "The Parting Tear" and the "Dirge of Anna." Apart from "The Apotheosis" and "The Broken Harp" which are positively identified as Gracchus poems in Steinberg's *Oswald*, Steinberg's



“Essay on Capital Punishment” (written in rhyme) is possibly Gracchus’s “An Essay on the Abrogation of the Punishment of Death.” It is also likely that Gracchus’s “Dirge to Anna” is Steinberg’s “The Departed Beauty,” which includes the lines:

Yes, Anna now sleepeth  
Amidst fairy slumbers  
Where kind heaven keepeth  
Its watch o’er her slumbers. (Steinberg, lines 1-4).

The conclusion to be drawn from the attitudes to Steinberg’s/Gracchus’s works confirms the undesirability of the expression of women’s political opinion in public.

Just as the pseudonym “Henry Gracchus” allowed Steinberg to get her poems into print, “Madame Steinberg” allowed Courtenay to develop her public image as a lecturer. Therefore, while she expounded her radical political voice as “Henry Gracchus,” she moderated her more extreme radical views in her public lectures. Thus, as Eliza Cook diluted her message through images of countryside and home, Steinberg embedded her ideas within poetical, ethical and moral content, rooting them as much in a religious and literary context as a political one. For instance, in 1849, she delivered lectures in Sheffield and Hull on “Temperance and Moral Worth” (“Local Intelligence: Madame Steinberg’s Lectures”). Temperance was at the heart of an anonymously written story, “The Charter and the Land” (1847) that had been used to promote propaganda for The Land Company (Breton 139), but the subject itself could not be allied with societal concerns for the individual as much as with the Chartist movement. Similarly, a lecture was delivered to the employees of Ullathorne and Davis, a Hull Draper’s establishment, on 14<sup>th</sup> January 1850. The subject was “The Advantages and Moral Results of Early Closing- The Physical, Moral and Intellectual Improvement of The Industrious Classes (“Madame Steinberg: Moral Worth”). Once again, the emphasis was on the improvement of the individual and presented no threat to societal order.

Steinberg’s cultivation of this restrained, intellectual voice was necessary to forge fruitful connections with members of the literary world she now inhabited. In keeping with Chartist ideology, which encouraged participation in the arts by all members of society, her lectures on

poetry frequently featured the works of working-class poets. In Sheffield, on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1849, Steinberg recited some works of Robert Burns and Kirke White (*Buxton Herald* 7<sup>th</sup> July 1849). She remarked on “how much they were indebted to good and noble-minded mothers for that tuition which laid the foundation of their future fame” (“Madame Steinberg’s Lecture : Sheffield”). This shrewd reference signals the principles enshrined in her lecture on female education, a subject which was bringing her fame and respect. She also spoke in highest praise of J. W. King, proclaimed as a “young aspirant for poetic fame.” At a lecture about “Temperance and Moral Worth” on 6<sup>th</sup> August 1849, she recited J. W. King’s poem, “Ode to Peace” (“Mechanic’s Institution”: Madame Steinberg”).

Steinberg’s admiration of King led her to subscribe to his volume of poetry *Lays of a Struggling Heart* (1850) which was an enlarged edition of King’s *The Emigrant and Other Poems* (1849). Steinberg’s connection to King shows that at some level she was financially able to contribute to the publication of King’s work and suggests that by making contacts with other subscribers, she could bring attention to her body of work which became *Oswald*. Whilst his work is not as widely known as other eminent poets of the Chartist movement, King’s poem “A Tribute of Respect to the Memory of the Late Mr. Councillor Briggs of Sheffield, an Uncompromising Advocate of The People’s Rights,” was published in the *Northern Star* on 25<sup>th</sup> November 1848. Additionally, the poetry feature of the *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser* of 6<sup>th</sup> October 1849 published an excerpt of Steinberg’s *The Enthusiast* in conjunction with J. W. King’s Lines on “Debuff’s Picture, ‘The Temptation’”.

When Steinberg recited King’s “Ode to Peace” at Sheffield 6<sup>th</sup> August 1849, she also recited her own composition “The Wreck of a Nation”. Her tone in this poem is more sympathetic than her voice in “Apotheosis.” She does not blame the people for their plight but reverts to the trope of appealing to the heroes of antiquity to free them.

Will none dispel this night of gloom  
That hangs around each martyr’s hero’s tomb?  
Alas! Not one of all her gen’rous race  
Can soothe her woes, her servitude efface:  
None left to blot from her pure, hallow’d brow,

The stamp of slav'ry which degrades her now. (Steinberg, lines 64-68)

In this poem the people cannot help themselves but must await a saviour. The feminisation of "Erin" in literature is, of course, not unusual and was noted in Byron's "Irish Avatar" as representing Caroline of Brunswick, but considering Steinberg's personal history, another interpretation of "Wreck of a Nation" can be seen. The poem is about the ruination of Erin but the ghost of Courtenay can be read between its lines:

She stands a victim, bleeding at each pore,  
The tide of life now scarcely ebbs and flows,  
So great her wants, so numerous her woes.  
The bloom of health has vanish'd from her cheeks,  
And ev'ry pang her agony bespeaks:  
With garments rent, her visage wan and pale,  
She looks around – but none her wrongs bewail.  
They who behold, but turn away their eyes  
From each starv'd pauper who before them dies. (Steinberg, lines 73-81)

The final lines recall the opening lines where, rather than commanding the people to wake up from their torpor, she implores :

Sleep, sleep for ever, hapless Erin, sleep,  
O! wake no more to see thy children weep- (Steinberg, lines 1-2)

She ends with:

All silent! all! Few, few are left to weep  
To break her slumbers or disturb her sleep!  
Far in the West, a wreck is to be seen,  
Girt by the sea, to tell *she once had been*. (Steinberg, 90-94)

Steinberg's deliberate italicisation in the final phrase is placed for emphasis but a valid interpretation is that as Erin was ruined by O'Connell by and his hirelings, so too was Ellen Courtenay.

Steinberg's decision to publish the Gracchus poems in her own name in *Oswald* raises questions, not least because it included other highly political pieces such as "Caiaphas in London" and "Ode to Caiaphas." There are several reasons why Steinberg wanted to openly publish this work. A significant factor was her financial situation. The life of an itinerant lecturer was not an easy one, particularly for an aging single woman. Newspaper reports of attendances at her lectures show that audience numbers were highly inconsistent and her application to the Royal Literary Fund in October

1852 mentions bouts of ill-health that prevented her from earning. She may have recognised that a published body of work would affirm her status as an author and improve her chances of charitable relief. What is certain is that by 1850, the Chartist movement was on the wane. Steinberg moved from the north of England to Brighton in 1850. Here, it might have been the encouragement of Lady Hotham, to whom *Oswald* was dedicated, that encouraged her to include the poems of *The Chieftain* in *Oswald*. However, Steinberg's willingness to put her name to the overtly political poems in *Oswald* may indicate a change in her own mindset. An introductory poem on the title page reads,

SAY not, 'tis strange, in this degenerate age,  
When Railways, gold, mechanics are the rage,  
To see *me* write, ambitious of renown,  
That fools may laugh, and critics run me down.  
Read, ere you censure Beauty's modest muse,  
I ask no more-sure none can this refuse.

The italicisation of “me” anticipates incredulity at the notion that she has the audacity to write. The phrase “Ambitious of renown” adds another layer of ambiguity. It can mean “Historically I was ambitious” or “I am still ambitious for fame” and she notes the disdain and criticisms that these ideals invoke. Her only wish is that her work should be read before she is judged. This suggests that Steinberg's identity and past may have been known to a public audience as she acknowledges how she has been ridiculed and criticised.

The acceptance of her past is compounded in Steinberg's introduction. Her reasons for coming before the public are expressed thus: “It is not the advice of friends, as most young authors affirm, and as many old ones perty repeat: neither is it ambition, nor a love of fame; I have survived both.” This refers to the retrieval of her reputation over the course of the preceding two decades. The only reticence Steinberg demonstrates is in her censorship of “The Apotheosis” in *Oswald* in the substitution of O'Connell's name with the ambiguous “Martella” and the substitution of Cantwell and Higgins with “Knaves and Retainers” (*Oswald* 103).

Steinberg is disdainful of the fugitive pieces writing, “The other minor Pieces, added only as an Appendix, require all the reader's indulgence, and he must blame the Publisher, not me, for giving

them to the world. Mediocrity, always painful, in Poetry becomes intolerable." This apology, whilst a common feature of women's written work, is unwarranted as these pieces cut through the venom of the political pieces and reveal the person. "These Walls" relates the misery of incarceration:

These walls have witness'd hours of pain,  
I would not live for worlds again.  
Oft have I wish'd that death was near.  
As life had left but little dear. (Steinberg, lines 1-4)

Considering Steinberg's history, one can relate this to time spent in the Fleet prison and pieces such as "The Tear," "From Sorrow's Dream Awakening," "The Farewell" and "I Never Can be Thine" refer to loss, longing and separation. The inspiration for these poems may have come by lifetime spent travelling between Ireland, England, France, Belgium and India and the disruption that this lifestyle caused to her personal relationships.

However, another reason that marks Steinberg's decision to claim ownership of her political voice is an acceptance, that after O'Connell's death she had no reason to hold on to the past.

This is expressed in the poem "I Have Broken the Spell":

I have broken the spell—  
Come, away with all sorrow,  
For no mortal can tell  
What may happen to-morrow.  
Why repine at our woes,  
As man's life cannot last?  
Then a fig for our foes,  
And a sigh to the past.

What the future may bring,  
It were vain to enquire.  
If our life were all spring,  
Then, as time flies away.  
Let us fortune defy  
If we live but a day,  
Let us live till we die. (Steinberg, lines 1-15)

She was finally free to express pride in her satirical and political poetry and she is proclaiming that despite her identity and history, she is unashamedly stepping before the public to express her feelings. *Oswald* was reviewed in *The Era* of 11<sup>th</sup> July 1852. The critic wrote:

Steinberg is an Irishwoman who feels strongly and writes warmly. If she is not the “raie” Sappho of the sunken isle of the west, she is entitled to much commendation for a variety of spirited, graceful versification, on topics, too, which will be found magnets for the Million (“Literature: Oswald the Enthusiast”).

*The Era* mentions Steinberg’s assertion that “she is careless, she declares, about the opinion of the public.” Steinberg expresses in the introduction of *Oswald* that “however severe the Critic’s sentence may be, I will cheerfully accept it, when sanctioned by the suffrage of half a century.” The implication here is that it is the freedom to publicly express her artistic talent that is the overriding impetus for her writing but it is evident from *Oswald* that Steinberg’s love of her country and hatred of O’Connell and his “hired knaves” also drove a major part of her work.

1847 was a momentous year for Courtenay in the formation of her public image. Daniel O’Connell’s death allowed Courtenay to break from her past and she took the opportunity to develop her career and enhance her reputation in the identity of Madame Steinberg. She recognised the opportunities that the *Northern Star* provided which would allow her an outlet for her political opinions, especially in her condemnation of O’Connell. It is possible that Steinberg submitted other poems in the *Northern Star* that might be hidden behind other pseudonyms but she was clever enough to recognise the damage that could ensue if she published in her own identity. The identities of “Irishman” and “Henry Gracchus” allowed her to express controversial opinions, both in her anti-O’Connell rhetoric and in her support of the Chartist Movement. Despite her personal opinion of Byron’s “ignoble use” of poetry, the tropes, style and sentiments of his example were effectual in appealing to the editor of the *Northern Star* and offered a way of using language and ideas not often accepted in women writers. Following the reception of the “Henry Gracchus” poetry, she opted to claim authorship of these poems in *Oswald*. This was a work that proved her accomplishment to the Royal Literary Fund and indicated an acceptance of her past and her defiance of public opinion.

#### Chapter Four: The Private Voice of Ellen Courtenay (1831-1858)

Thus far we have seen how Courtenay/Steinberg concealed her masculine voice and opinions behind pseudonyms whilst she modified the subject and tone of her public lectures under the identity of Madame Helene Steinberg. However, examination of Courtenay/Steinberg's private voice as expressed in her correspondence reveals the challenge to outspoken women such as Courtenay in negotiating the conventions of social interaction. Courtenay was driven by the dual needs of the public self-promotion that she required to attain a literary career and of maintaining the dignified and feminine demeanour. Her miscalculation in managing these conflicts led to setbacks in the development of her literary career and the retrieval of her reputation. Courtenay misread the redefinition of male and female roles in society. She used the passionate and uncensored voice of the *Narrative* in her letters to the press to keep her case in the public eye and frequently named respected public figures to validate her claims. As Madame Steinberg, she was a moderately well-known lecturer in her day, but it was an unpredictable living which required self-promotion and the support of influential patrons to fill the lecture halls which would protect her from poverty. After the publication of *Oswald* and her "Lecture on Female Education," Steinberg considered herself entitled to approach very eminent literary figures for assistance, however her miscalculation in her interactions with these figures reveals a boldness in her conduct that recalls the character of Ellen Courtenay.

This miscalculation will be shown in her correspondence with Edward Bulwer Lytton (1803-1873) and his estranged wife, Rosina (1802-1882), in July 1858 at a time when Rosina was incarcerated in a lunatic asylum by her estranged husband. These letters, which have not been previously studied, form part of the Bulwer Lytton Collection held by Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies. Steinberg's application and letters of testimony sent to the Royal Literary Fund in 1852, following the publication of *Oswald*, are also covered in this chapter. These records form part of the record collection of the Royal Literary Fund held by the British Library. They reveal details that

connect Madame Steinberg to Ellen Courtenay, name individuals with whom she was reliant on for support and confirm the degree of poverty that Steinberg experienced.

The letters that she wrote to the press between 1831 and 1847 fly in the face of contemporary instructional conduct manuals on the art of letter writing as she writes them in the unrestrained and melodramatic language of the *Narrative*. This may have been a very conscious decision by Courtenay to hint to her readers at what they might expect from her writing, but to write to the press at all seems to have been a bold move. *The Epistolary Guide and Elegant Correspondent* by J.H. Brady (1835) provided sample letters for a multitude of occasions, including those that advise on very specific situations, for example, “From a young man just out of apprenticeship to his intended wife’s maid-servant” (Brady 121). Instructions are provided for correspondence between persons of different rank and gender but there is no advice for those wishing to write to the editor of a newspaper or a correspondent’s column. This suggests that these were not respectable spaces in which one could express one’s opinions and grievances. However, Brady gives general advice as follows:

it should be remembered that oral discourse is usually extempore, while a written communication is advised. It should not be forgotten, too, that ‘litera scripta manet’ – that sentiments recorded in writing may at some time be quoted and *proved*, against their writer, under his own hand. In general, then, though some deliberation and prudent forethought be not only allowable, but necessary, in all letters (except those of the most unreserved friendship), and every care ought undoubtedly to be taken to avoid the use of language low or mean (X)

In her letters to the newspapers Courtenay often names prominent public figures as witnesses to her allegations and is not afraid that her opinions might be quoted and challenged. An example of this is shown in a letter sent to the *Manchester Courier* dated 28<sup>th</sup> August 1840. It referred to Henry Simpson’s disruption of a meeting at which O’Connell was present and it is important to note that this letter was written some three years after the year in which Courtenay was thought to have died.

Sir-As the friend of the oppressed and injured, I beg you to bear in mind in your report of the unhappy business of Wednesday, that Mr. D. O’Connell has his own



persevering malice to blame; he resisted the appeals on our behalf of Colonel Sir Y.S. Lillie, Major Macnamara, Mr. Thomas Wakley and many others to settle this wretched business. What, sir, is the poor youth to do? Is he to hang, drown, or perish for want, to please Mr. O'Connell's avarice and diabolical malice? My feelings became uncontrollable when I heard this man speak of humanity and Justice. Oh! He has goaded me to act thus; 20 years of sufferings (almost unparalleled) have not subdued my feeling. Oh! He has TORN ALL from me that I held dear, let me nothing but despair and vengeance, and MUST take the consequences of his own creation !! All, with the exception of his panders, toadies and hired ruffians, condemn his conduct in this business, his best friends, even in this town and among the rest, Sir Thomas Potter who took several tickets for his son's benefit.- I remain, sir, your obedient servant, ELLEN COURTENAY ("To The Editor of the Manchester Courier").

The over-use of exclamation marks, capitalisation of words for added emphasis and candid language echo the tone and style of the *Narrative* so that the letter reads more like an excerpt from an epistolary novel. However, this letter was not intended to be private. It was inevitable that this would be published by the editor of the *Manchester Courier* and read by its considerable readership. As was seen in Chapter 1, Courtenay's careful use of language is made to forge a bond with a sympathetic reader by the depiction of highly graphic images. The image of the poor boy left to drown, hang or perish and the suggestion of hired toadies and ruffians convey the horror of a gothic novel in which the vulnerable Courtenay and her child are at the mercy of powerful and merciless villains. Additionally, the inclusion of the names of influential witnesses in her letter is reminiscent of the named witnesses in the *Narrative* but has added impact in the pages of the newspaper as often these "witnesses" were compelled to refute her claims in the next issue which kept the story in the public eye for longer. The letter above reveals that Courtenay had not learnt from the failure of the *Narrative* eight years earlier and instead illustrates the extent to which Courtenay was prepared to keep her story in the public eye to entice audiences to her entertainments, even if these were comprised of people curious to see the infamous Ellen Courtenay.

Courtenay's contemporary, Caroline Norton (1808-1877), also pursued private and political grievances in the newspapers but the strategy she adopted in her letter writing to the press was successful. She had to manage the public interest generated by the breakdown of her marriage to George Chappel Norton, M.P. for Guildford (1800-1875), in 1838 and the accusations of adultery

that were levelled against her. Norton was denied a divorce and access to her children but used her position to make changes in the law that led to the Custody of Infants Act of 1839, the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 and the Married Women's Property Act of 1870. Like Courtenay, Norton's reputation was damaged and her situation relied on public sympathy but Norton's strategy in exposing injustice is in stark contrast to Courtenay who unashamedly took her grievances directly to the press. In the letter reproduced above, Courtenay's plea is for justice for herself and her starving son but Norton's plea went beyond her personal circumstances.

In 1854, in her introduction to *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century*, Norton writes:

In consequence of the imperfect state of law, I have suffered bitterly, and for a number of years: I have lately been insulted, defrauded and libelled: and as the law is constituted, I find redress impossible. To publish comments on my own case for the sake of obtaining sympathy; to prove merely that my husband has been unjust, and my fate a hard one, would be a very poor and barren ambition. I aspire to a different object. I desire to prove, not my suffering to his injustice, but that the present law of England cannot prevent any such suffering or control any such suffering or control any such injustice.

Norton begins her statement by acknowledging the personal harm that she has endured but she chooses to use her experience for the benefit of others by stating her intention to expose the defects in the law that enabled her distress. She is careful not to name names and avoids melodrama, merely stating that "my husband has been unjust." By blaming the flaws in the law that enables this injustice, she does not expose herself to criticism that she displays masculine characteristics like revenge. The tone of her letter is calm and measured and there are no exclamation marks or capitalisation of words to highlight a point or suggest a lack of self-control. Her letter communicates her overriding desire to change the law, not for her personal gain but for the benefit of society. This is in contrast to Courtenay's admission in her letter to the *Manchester Courier* in 1840. She states, "my feelings became uncontrollable" and her actions were the result of "despair and vengeance," confirming that she is driven by the masculine traits of her character but is prepared to do damage her reputation to further her personal and political cause.

Norton rejects a strategy of direct and active engagement with the press. She challenged misrepresentations of her character in the *British and Foreign Review* (1838), but her attitude to actively courting publicity is clear:

You have said that I have “courted publicity.” It is attacks of the nature you have made upon me which force that publicity. It would, no doubt, suit the author of that article, and other known or unknown foes, that I should always preserve silence, let what would be said of me. “Do not court publicity!” that is, “let the publicity be all on one side; let us assert what we choose; let us invite what we can ; let us pour out what venom and scurrility we please on your name; and do not you venture to deny the falsehood, or reply to the attack; it is not fit the truth should be known, and if we can bully you into silence, we will. (“ Mrs. Norton and the British and Foreign Review”)

Courtenay dramatically accuses O’Connell of goading her into taking an overtly public stance which serves to emphasise the origin of her grievances (and thus the scandalous nature of her case).

Norton’s defence diverts her predicament away from “the author of that article, and other known or unknown foes,” - even though she may know who they are. Her defence is her right to express the truth and her determination that the truth is documented.

Norton treats each untrue statement with a clear denial and she takes the opportunity to expand on her views within her response, thus attracting a greater understanding of her case. In response to a statement that she was the authoress of a pamphlet entitled *A Statement on the Wrongs of Woman*, a “renowned agitricer” [sic] who promoted a work on the subject of sexual equality, Norton states:

I did not write it; I have never even read it, nor knew of its existence till I saw it named in your review [...]. Nothing I have ever written, nothing I have ever said, will bear out the assertion that such are my sentiments; on the contrary, in my novel of *The Wife* you will find precisely the contrary argument [...]. I believe the beauty and devotion of a woman’s character to depend on the consciousness of her inferiority to man, and that the greatest suffering a right-minded and pure hearted woman can feel is to be able to be unable to respect and look up to her husband. (“ Mrs. Norton and the British and Foreign Review”)

Norton counters misinformation skilfully by distancing herself from controversial or radical views like sexual equality and this works in her favour in preserving her reputation. However, Norton also has the benefit of class, marital status and the respect of the literary establishment to affirm her

credibility whilst Courtenay is writing as a single actress with radical views who is fighting for justice for her illegitimate son.

Courtenay shows a desire to associate with respected public figures throughout her life. She does this to add to her credibility, to name the witnesses to her claims and to aid her in her career. In the *Narrative* she refers to the actor Charles Young, who assisted her in her bleakest moments (*Narrative* 20), and as Helene Steinberg, her bills and advertisements are heavy with the names of local dignitaries who had attended her lectures. In her identity as Madame Steinberg, these validations were important for the presentation of herself as a respectable literary woman and in allowing her access to beneficial professional networks, such as that with the poet J. W. King described in chapter three. Steinberg's desperation to form these relationships leads her to overstep accepted standards of propriety. Her mismanagement of this feature of her self-fashioning is shown in the letters that Steinberg wrote to Lord Edward Bulwer Lytton and Lady Rosina Bulwer Lytton in 1858. Steinberg's involvement with this high-profile couple occurs at a time when they are going through their own very public scandal after Edward Bulwer Lytton arranged for his wife to be incarcerated in a lunatic asylum. By supporting the "victim" of the case, Lady Lytton, Steinberg distances herself from Lord Lytton who was more likely to assist her in her ambitions.

In *A Blighted Life, a True Story* (1880), Rosina Bulwer Lytton relates the breakdown of her unhappy marriage, leading to separation from her husband in 1836. Lord Lytton denied her access to her children and her response to the injustice was to portray her cruel husband in the pages of her novel, *Cheveley; or The Man of Honour* (1839) in the character of Lord de Clifford. Her grievances against Lord Lytton became public in 1858 when she found herself in financial distress. Here Courtenay and Lytton's approach to injustice shares some similarities. In January 1858, a pamphlet printed by "Isaac Ironside" reported that Rosina was in extreme distress and whilst awaiting the opportunity to pursue Lord Lytton in court, a request was made to the public to send donations of money to assist her. ("Lady Lytton"). Matters came to a head in June 1858 when Lord Lytton attended a public meeting to secure his nomination as the Tory member of parliament for Hertford.

Just as Courtenay had harassed O'Connell at public meetings to confront him with her allegations, Rosina stormed the hustings and listed her grievances to the crowd. In Rosina's words, "Here, Sir Liar, with his hands before his face, made a rush from the hustings" (Cobbold David Lytton, 9). Lord Lytton's response was to arrange Rosina's incarceration in a lunatic asylum. The public outcry that ensued resulted in her release after twenty-four days with an agreement by Lord Lytton to settle her debts and a raise in her allowance to £500 a year. Whilst we have only Steinberg's letters to examine, the contents reveal a tense relationship with Steinberg and Lady Lytton as the letters include a note inscribed "flattery letter from Madame Steinberg who afterwards proved such a she blackguard" Steinberg, Helene. Flattery letter to Rosina Bulwer Lytton, 1858 DE.K.C25.99.7, The Bulwer Lytton Papers, Archives and Local Hertfordshire Studies.

This tension is echoed in the beginning of a letter dated 6<sup>th</sup> July 1858 which was sent from 31 Grafton Street, Fitzroy square, London. Steinberg begins, "Notwithstanding your Ladyship's most unkind and insulting letter some years past, I never ceased finding the deepest sympathy from mighty wrongs!" ( Steinberg, Helene. Letter to Rosina Bulwer Lytton, 6<sup>th</sup> July 1858, DE.K.C30.36, The Bulwer Lytton Papers, Archives and Local Hertfordshire Studies).

The reference to Rosina's earlier letter, rather than letter, denotes that this relationship is not close and suggests Steinberg is insinuating herself into Rosina's current predicament. She continues to impress upon Rosina how she had argued her plight in both London and Paris and persuaded her friend, a Mrs. Casse to support her cause. She states that she had been in Paris for three years where she had met Rosina's son, "your very image but his father's ugly, bad mouth." Steinberg informs Rosina of her opinion that she believes he is not a good son as he emulates his father's feelings and contrasts his character to "young Norton who idolises his mother though the world is aware that in honour and virtue not comparable with yourself." Here Steinberg is asserting her power in the narrative. Her compliment of Rosina's honour and virtue is dulled by the knife twist inflicted by the declaration that Lytton had not only deprived her of status and income but also her son's love.

In chapter one it was shown how Courtenay's *Narrative* shifts dramatically in tone. In this letter she changes the subject to concentrate on her self-promotion. She writes "I have some fame as a lecturer and will deliver on The Rights of Women if you would give me the heart of what you would like me to say. I shall be happy to give your grievous case all the force of energy I can keeping within the bounds of truth, reason and the feelings and conduct of a gentlewoman." Steinberg is suggesting that she would not compromise her conservative public views in conveying Rosina's cause but she was, after all, an actress and could deliver ideas with force and conviction, "creating sympathy in the bosom of others" (*Narrative* 20). It seems Steinberg was indeed looking to acquire a more settled lifestyle as her letter to Lord Lytton dated 9<sup>th</sup> June 1858 (shortly before the asylum scandal) is a request to Lord Lytton to become a subscriber to a school she was hoping to open. She claims she had received a payment of £3 from the Bishop of London, £1 from the Marchioness of Stafford and £1 from Sir Fitzroy Kelly. She also enclosed a copy of a newspaper's critique

as evidence of my indefatigable efforts on behalf of my afflicted family an only son. an idiot. and an aged relative) wholly depending on me. The honor of your name, Sir Edward would wholly aid my widowed efforts and add another obligation to those which I am already indebted. (Steinberg, Helen. Letter to Rosina Bulwer Lytton, 9<sup>th</sup> June 1858, Hertfordshire Archives, DE.K.026.307.3, , The Bulwer Lytton Papers, Archives and Local Hertfordshire Studies).

Caution must be exerted in the interpretation of this letter. Steinberg's punctuation is erratic and although there appears to be a full stop between "son" and "idiot," it could equally be a comma, which alter the meaning. It is not clear whether she was describing Henry as an idiot or whether she was responsible for another individual in her household who was unable to contribute. Henry was certainly not "an idiot" but earning a living as a lecturer and teacher of astronomy. If this is the case then Steinberg was prepared to lie in order to establish her school and end her itinerant lifestyle. It also highlights the predicament that she found herself in when Rosina was imprisoned late that month.

Because Lord Lytton's financial backing was important to this project, Steinberg impresses on Rosina the personal sacrifice she was giving in her support, stating, in the 6<sup>th</sup> July letter that she

would have been a cherished guest at Knebworth were it not “for my foolish (as some would say) advocacy of your ladyship. I am not his clinging crawling thing you did me the honour to state in your letter.” She is insinuating that Rosina should acknowledge and be grateful for the professional risk that Steinberg has taken, in spite of their fractious relationship. We do not know if Steinberg and Rosina Bulwer Lytton had met. They had a mutual acquaintance in Lady Hotham to whom *Oswald* was dedicated and who is mentioned by Rosina in *Blighted Life*. However, the tone and candour of this letter surpasses the rules of etiquette expected between women of differing rank. As Brady stated,

In general, then, though some deliberation and prudent forethought be not only allowable but necessary, in all letters (except those of the most unreserved friendship), and every care ought undoubtedly to avoid the use of language low and mean (X).

It is an important letter for Steinberg which demonstrates how far she will go to exploit the relationship between Edward and Rosina Bulwer Lytton for her own gain. A further breach of etiquette is revealed in a letter that Steinberg sent to Edward Bulwer Lytton on 12<sup>th</sup> July 1858 in which she accuses Lytton of conspiring to murder his wife (Steinberg, Helene. Letter to Edward Bulwer Lytton, 12<sup>th</sup> July 1858 DE.K.C25.99.1, The Bulwer Lytton Papers, Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies).

Steinberg offers no polite introduction to her letter but expresses that she felt great anxiety on Lady Lytton’s account and warns Lord Lytton that all his wealth, genius, talents and high position would not shield him from suspicion should his wife come to any harm, adding that she is aware that Lytton desired the removal of his wife so that he could marry a “Lady of rank”. By stating her knowledge of these “facts,” Steinberg seeks to assume power in a relationship that transgresses the rules of class and gender. She boosts her argument with a further revelation. She explains that she was aware that his son, Edward Bulwer Lytton, had taken a journey from Paris to London to assure a “certain Lady of Rank that Lady Bulwer Lytton could not survive three months, being eaten up with cancer, dropsy and disease of the heart. Why was this?”

Steinberg hints at extortion in the next passage which is reminiscent of Courtenay's threat to publish her manuscript in her pursuit of O'Connell in the letter written from the Fleet Prison to Gorman O' Mahon in 1832 which was discussed in chapter 1. Here Steinberg writes "I never mentioned the matter to Lady Lytton, Miss Ryves or any of her friends, poor as I am I would not take £100 to do so because I know that Lady Lytton would make them public and with the deep respect and esteem, I have for this Lady of Rank, I would not do so." An alternative reading of this phrase is "I would take £100" (for my silence). Despite Steinberg's insinuation that Edward Bulwer Lytton was being advised by "that bad man Loaden and Sir Henry Bulwer who are active agents for evil, (know all they have done)," her underlying message is that she could be silenced by payment. She is poised with a foot in both courts, protecting the reputation of Edward Bulwer Lytton's mysterious Lady of Rank whilst simultaneously pledging her support to the wronged Rosina. However, Steinberg had mentioned the matter to Rosina in the July 6<sup>th</sup> letter. She writes, "pray, has Doctor Jones had any interviews with those dreadful enemies of yours, the Lytton Bulwer family? Are you eaten up with cancer? Have you a dropsy? A physical disease of the heart?" She mentions her suspicions about Lord Lytton's intentions, "but a lady of rank assures me that I need not be uneasy for Sir Edward was a marked man." Steinberg's interference in the Lytton's affair indicates that she wishes to profit from the information she has acquired and aspires to be on a social par with the Lyttons as she expresses no shame or apology in the breaches of protocol revealed in these letters.

In order to obtain Rosina's gratitude (and the benefits it might bring to Steinberg), she wrote to her again on 15<sup>th</sup> July, two days before Lady Lytton was released from the asylum (Steinberg, Helene, Letter to Rosina Bulwer Lytton, 15<sup>th</sup> July, DE.K.C25.99.3, The Bulwer Lytton Papers, Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies). Steinberg suggested that it was her intervention that had encouraged Lord Lytton to meet Rosina's demands and affect her release. She tells Rosina how her enforced imprisonment had induced her to write to Lord Lytton and how she had told him that a matter that had come to her knowledge on a visit to Knebworth. Steinberg claimed that she told Lytton that what she would make public what discovered on her visit unless he released Rosina from



the asylum. She acknowledged that Lord Lytton wielded great power but she did not care if she could help Rosina.

Rosina Bulwer Lytton was, however, sceptical and treated the matter with remorse. In *A Blighted Life* (1880), Rosina wrote:

My doctor gave me antidotes; and said some attempt had been made to poison me. This seemed to be confirmed by my (in about three weeks) from old P----- (which letter I have got), with another from another old adventuress calling herself Mme. S-----, who being at K.....overheard a whole plot to incarcerate me in a mad-house, and so have me *gradually* made away with. She also sent me a copy of a letter, which she says (?) she sent to Sir....., after I *was* incarcerated, saying if a hair of mine was injured, she would denounce him publicly as the dark villain he was. (6)

It is impossible to know to what extent Steinberg really intervened in this matter or whether she had sent the letters of accusation to Lord Lytton, but Rosina's insertion of the question mark after the mention of Steinberg's copy of the letter suggests she doubted it had been sent. What is clear is that Steinberg was actively courting Lord Lytton's assistance a fortnight before Rosina's incarceration and it is highly unlikely that she would have jeopardised her appeal by sending the accusatory letter.

The final letter to Lord Lytton might be classified as a "fan" letter but it reveals Steinberg's attitude to her craft and the details of a close associate. It also demonstrates the extent to which Steinberg was prepared to compromise for the purpose of sustaining her reputation. She informs Lord Lytton that a lady called Mrs. Casse was enraptured with his works and was desirous of an interview with him. Steinberg adds, "I know not if it be on the subject of literature for, she is intelligent, clever and deeply read and might have acquired literary fame only, (happily for her) she is too rich to trouble herself with such matters" (Steinberg, Helene. Letter to Edward Bulwer Lytton, 25<sup>th</sup> July, DE/K/026/306, The Bulwer Lytton Papers, Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies).

She suggests that Mrs. Casse might leave an enormous sum of money to Lytton on her death, should the interview be arranged. The tone of the letter and her association with Mrs. Casse reveals how the supposedly respectable Madame Steinberg could not fully suppress her true identity Ellen Courtenay, the alleged blackmailer of Daniel O'Connell.

It seems that Steinberg sought to gain the influence of Charles Dickens prior to her application. Charles Dickens had been on the Committee of The Royal Literary Fund in 1839 and it is possible that Steinberg wished to gain his support. We only have Dickens's response to that letter which features in *The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens 1850-1852, Vol VI*. It is sent to "My Dear Wills" from his residence in Camden Place Dover, and the message is blunt. He writes "Madame Steinberg is an impudent bitch. If you should not have written her yet- though I dare say you should have done so- return her book and say I will take care of her letter. (738). One can only imagine the tone of Steinberg's letter but as we have seen the breaching of protocol and candid language Steinberg exhibits in the Bulwer Lytton correspondence, it is possible to imagine Dickens's harsh reaction.

The footnote which refers to this letter in *The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens 1850-1852* correctly identifies Steinberg as the author of *Oswald* but identifies her as the wife of a London solicitor, Nicholas Steinberg. The only source provided for this is the family's entry in the London's Post Office Directory for 1852-1853. Steinberg is acknowledged as the author of an essay on capital punishment in the footnotes and it is suggested that, as a woman who expounded her own views on society's ills, she was offended by Dickens's characterisation of *Bleak House's* Mrs. Jellaby and Mrs. Pardiggle as hypocritical philanthropists. By depicting Jellaby as a woman whose devotion to missions in Africa was at the expense of her own family's needs, and Pardiggle's neglect of the material needs of the poor in preference to their spiritual needs, the inference was that Steinberg viewed these depictions as a criticism to public women. However, as Steinberg's casual approach to celebrity has been shown, and the date of the response indicates, Dickens's annoyance may be because Steinberg approached him for a personal endorsement to her application to the Royal Literary Fund which she expressed in a highly personal or manipulative manner.

Steinberg's application to the Royal Literary Fund in September 1852 allows no room for flattery as she negotiates the criteria set by the Fund to present her case. The Fund was established in 1790 by David Williams to support men of genius in distress and in spite of objections regarding

the wisdom of handing out charitable gifts for unproductive labour, the Fund received Royal status in 1803 following endorsement by George IV. Studies by Jennie Batchelor and S. D. Mumm have examined women's applications to the Literary Fund between 1750-1830 and 1840-1860, respectively, to show the challenges that women faced in being rewarded for their craft. By the time of Steinberg's application in 1852, the dilemma, which had been faced by female applicants to the fund since its inception, persisted: how to promote one's genius within the confines of accepted interpretations of feminine propriety (Batchelor, 509). Therefore, in comparison to Courtenay's impassioned pleas in the *Narrative* and the press, Steinberg's letter of appeal to The Lords and Gentlemen of The Literary Guild is restrained.

The reason given for her application was her failure to conquer losses resulting from illness, the failure of schools and "circumstances beyond her control." This reason is purposefully vague as any admittance of errors or lack of propriety would be harmful to her case, so instead she focuses on the desperate nature of her situation. She was in debt to a Mr. Arnold of 22, Sackville Street, Piccadilly, who she owed £25, and the rest of her debts amounted to £60 in all. She had been compelled to sell her furniture for a fourth of its value. In a move calculated to persuade the Committee of her moral worth she claims that she had paid poor rates, church rates and Queen's Taxes when she was able to do so.

Enclosed with her application was a copy of a note signed by Edward Bulwer Lytton who had given her £5 to aid her application. The copy of the note from Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton was written in her own hand. It was dated 27<sup>th</sup> August 1852 and was sent from his residence at Knebworth. In the letter, he thanked her for her note and the volume of poems she had sent to him. He said the poems were "stamped with poetic force of feeling conveyed in versification elegant, easy and vigorous" (RLF 1/1308/3) This endorsement by such an influential figure within the Royal Literary Fund might be deemed inappropriate to her appeal, but as we have seen, an important part of Steinberg's self-fashioning involved her association with people of rank to validate her talent and she was prepared to take this risk. However, the "copy" of Lord Lytton's letter rather than the

original might have aroused suspicion of its authenticity. Her application was rejected as “Authorship not sufficient.”

The standard application form of Royal Literary Fund which accompanies her letter of appeal contains Steinberg’s personal details but her responses show how she constantly adapted her public face to meet her immediate needs. In the face of such extreme poverty her responses seem calculated to make the best impression she could in portraying herself as a respectable woman, worthy of assistance. It is therefore unsurprising that, on her application form, dated 16<sup>th</sup> September 1852, she states that she was Helene Steinberg, widow of Adolph Steinberg. No marriage has been located thus far between an Adolph Steinberg and Ellen Courtenay, although there is a possibility that this could have occurred abroad, but her status as a widow would elicit greater sympathy from the committee. She describes herself as a lecturer and teacher of elocution and was 47 years old, having been born on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1805, at Baggot Street, Dublin. She resided at 4, Norfolk Terrace, Westbourne Grove, Bayswater. She claims she had an only son, who through reason of health was unable to assist her and he was at present in America. Steinberg’s representation of Henry in her application is at odds with the portrayal of her son as “an idiot” in the Bulwer Lytton letter of 1858 and indeed, in November 1852, Henry Simpson is mentioned in a newspaper report as having delivered a lecture on astronomy in Lancaster (“Lancaster: Astronomy”). *Preston Chronicle* 20<sup>th</sup> November 1852).

Steinberg’s dishonesty sheds doubt on the validity of other details in her application and further suspicion is evoked in the letters of testimony that she enclosed with her application. Two are of particular note as they provide details about Steinberg’s life and social circle that link back to Courtenay. A letter from Amelia Dawe Lane confirmed that she had known Madame Steinberg for six years and knew her to be “highly respectable and of a highly moral character and deserving every kindness,” and in an almost exact copy of Miss Lane’s testimony, a James Courtney said he had been acquainted with Madame Steinberg for some years and knew her to be “highly respectable and of a highly moral character and deserving every kindness (Dawe Lane, Amelia. Letter to Committee of

The Royal Literary Fund, 11th October 1852, British Library Manuscript Collection- Records of the Royal Literary Fund, RLF 1/1308/). As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, the marriage certificate of Henry to Amelia Dawe Lane on 13<sup>th</sup> June 1853 provided details that linked Steinberg to the identity of Ellen Courtenay. Amelia died in Camberwell Lunatic Asylum on 19<sup>th</sup> December 1867 of “exhaustion from mania”. In 1861, Henry was described as “widower”, whilst Amelia was incarcerated. Whilst no criminal activity can be definitively proved, the circumstances suggest the “gold digger” tactics employed by Mrs. Casse and her circle.

Another letter supporting Steinberg’s Application was from James Courtney, a wine merchant from Lambeth. He was possibly a relative of Courtenay/Steinberg. Additionally, there is evidence that Henry Simpson was not Courtenay’s only child and it is possible that other children borne by Ellen were taken in by James Courtney and his wife Mary. James and Mary married in 1834. The 1851 census shows that there were a number of children in the household born prior to this date and who do not appear in baptismal records, whilst the baptismal records for James and Mary’s children who were born after 1834 are to be found in the Roman Catholic Records in Southwark Cathedral.

The presence of these children, which include one named Ellen, born in 1831, and one named Theresa, born in 1829, is suspicious. The theory that Ellen Courtenay had other children is also suggested in a newspaper report in the *Morning Herald* of 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1835 which states: “There is a report of a woman of about 30 years of age, and stated to be an actress of some celebrity, named Ellen Courtney [sic] to have been seen attempting to drown herself and an infant at the foot of Westminster Bridge.” It was reported that a warrant had been issued against the putative father but he had not been found. Courtenay was admitted into the workhouse but immediately discharged herself. A report in the *Evening Mail* of 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1835 adds more to this account in describing how the police constable Holmes had “observed the unhappy creature walking about the bridge for some time,” before he pulled her back from the water before she could do any harm. It is perhaps cynical to imagine the actress Ellen Courtenay revealing her distress in full view before the constable before

he inevitably prevents her from self-harm. However, just as she had gambled with her reputation in the publicization of the affidavit she seems to be willing to do the same again, although whether this was out of desperation or to court publicity is difficult to ascertain. This incident, occurring three years after Courtenay's case was first publicised, recalls the *Narrative* when Courtenay, in despair, indicates that she had considered this course of action before:

That I often did harbour the thought of burying my cares and my sorrows in the greedy deep, is, most true, and of this premeditated sin "I do repent me." To the kindness, consolation, and advice of a Lady, who alone was privy to my secret, on whose bosom I reposed my griefs, and whose assistance and sympathy upheld me in the darkest season of my adversity, I may say I owe my preservation from this fearful crime (Courtenay 19).

The timing of this incident fits with the timeline of Courtenay's life. After her highly public attack against O'Connell in 1832, Courtenay's name is absent from the press until July 1835, allowing for the timing of another pregnancy. Her highly publicised benefit performances began in July 1835. In this light, the promotion of the name of Ellen Courtenay as an "actress of some celebrity" is timely and suggests this was a calculated move. These revelations also highlight the gaps in Courtenay/Steinberg's life that may be uncovered by further research and suggests that in the act of forming her public image, in private she was contending with failed relationships and pregnancies which added to her distress and financial difficulties. Unlike the poet Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802-1838), who strove to keep her liaisons and illegitimate children out of the public eye, Courtenay appears to have exploited her situation to court publicity.

Courtenay/Steinberg was constantly struggling to balance her need for active self-promotion and confident self-representation against the feminine restraint that was expected of a respectable woman operating in the public sphere. The young Courtenay's impassioned voice that sought to keep her name before the public was necessarily muted in her new identity as Madame Steinberg but her new persona did not protect her from poverty. Women such as Steinberg, who found themselves in middle-age, single and unprotected by masculine or domestic ties had few options apart from the workhouse. Therefore, in this situation, her social network was crucial to her independence and survival. This involved a delicate strategic balance between appeal and flattery.

The Bulwer Lytton letters show Steinberg's miscalculation of this balance and Steinberg's allusions to extortion suggest the desperation of her situation. Courtenay/Steinberg is found to be unreliable in the information she feeds to those who she wishes to influence but this characteristic is due to her financial difficulties. Many facts that emerge in Steinberg's appeal to the Royal Literary Fund lead to theories about Steinberg's life that are presently supported by circumstantial evidence. However, what is certain is that Steinberg continued to actively lecture up to December 1860 and at the time of her death in 1864 she was living at a private residence in London. This represents Courtenay/Steinberg's success in maintaining an independent career in the public sphere.

## Conclusion

This study is important in retrieving Ellen Courtenay's voice and completing the story of a woman whose experiences have been the subject of doubt and speculation for almost two hundred years. The letters, public records and analysis of Courtenay/Steinberg's work covered in this research establishes that Ellen Courtenay did not die in 1837, as previous studies have suggested, but reinvented herself as the lecturer and poet Madame Helene Steinberg. Courtenay exhibits a chameleon like ability to fashion her public persona to adapt to the changing attitudes of society to women in the public sphere by constantly changing her literary expression and identity to voice her opinions. Madame Helene Steinberg died in 1864 and there are no obituaries to be found celebrating her literary achievements. However, she had survived the notoriety of being Ellen Courtenay and conducted an independent career in the public arena.

This discovery opens up new ways of understanding not just Courtenay/Steinberg, but other nineteenth-century literary and artistic women and their lives. These challenges that these women faced have been acknowledged in the lives of high-profile figures such as Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë and Mary Anne Evans (George Eliot 1819-1880) who adopted masculine pen names to shield them from the disadvantages afforded to women in the male-dominated literary marketplace. Lucasta Miller has added lesser-known literary figures such as the poet Letitia Elizabeth Landon ("L.E.L" 1802-1838) in this group. Landon shares many similarities with Courtenay. Landon was "a shape-shifter" who "did in truth resemble the disputed colour of the chameleon, changing its hues with the changeful lights around" (Miller, xii). However, from the start of her career Courtenay adopted a unique approach, rejecting anonymity, she openly promoted her radical views which damaged her reputation. Her *Narrative* exposed her to ridicule and mistrust which necessitated a change in strategy. This study is unique because, unlike other "scandalous women" such as Caroline Norton and Mary Robinson who reinvented themselves in the public gaze, Courtenay adopted a whole new identity.



This was a gradual process but Courtenay was undeterred in her ambitions to succeed as a performer and educator but she realised that a compromise to her public presence was necessary to gain the confidence of the public. Her use of “Mrs. Courtenay” to describe her status in her early lectures between 1836 and 1847 denotes an understanding that the suggestion of domestic ties afforded her greater credibility. Periods of time spent in France between 1837 and 1846 provided her with the opportunity to experiment further with her identity by adopting the title “Madame Anglaise”. On returning to Britain, Courtenay continued to lecture, but realising her radical views would not be tolerated by society, published political poems under the pseudonyms “Irishman” and “Henry Gracchus” in the *Northern Star*. The analysis of her lectures show how, after the death of Daniel O’Connell in 1847, “Mrs. Courtenay” became Madame Helene Steinberg. This was the identity she used to publish her poems in *Oswald* and the name by which she was known until her death.

As Courtenay’s identity evolved, so too did her choice of literary expression. Previous women writers had changed their profession to keep in the public sphere but Courtenay was unique in conducting a career that embraced the genres of the acting, memoir writing, poetry and public lecturing. She used the examples of other creative women in the development of her career. This has been shown in her mimicry of the scandalous memoirists in the construction of her *Narrative* and the career of Elizabeth Wright Macauley in her transition from actress to lecturer. Additionally, she used Byron’s “Avatar” as a framework for “The Apotheosis”. Her success depended on her delivery of socially acceptable instruction, without breaching the standards of propriety and decorum that the public expected from women. Consequently, she ensured that her subject matter and performance appealed to a public audience but adopted male pseudonyms to express her acerbic and radical political views in the pages of the *Northern Star*.

Courtenay faced many setbacks in her career. She frequently needed aid from high profile political and literary figures but breaches of protocol meant she was unsuccessful in her appeals. In

order to appeal to the popular mood, her experimentation with diverse subjects such as “Mesmerism and Human Magnetism” proved to be a mistake which saw her withdraw from the public stage in Britain for five years. This interval, during which she claimed she lectured at the courts of France and Belgium allowed her to hone her performance and establish herself as a Lecturer in Female Education. The identity of Madame Steinberg allowed her to break with the past and place distance between herself and O’Connell. However, the defiance that is detected in her introduction to *Oswald* and the inclusion of the “Irishman” and “Gracchus” poems suggests that she was, at last, unapologetic for the creative expression of her political opinions in her poetry and prepared to face the consequences of their publication. It is important to note the physically and financially insecure nature of this Courtenay’s career choices. Steinberg’s application to the Royal Literary Fund is testimony to the level of poverty she endured and her determination to overcome hardship in pursuit of her career.

The work of Courtenay/Steinberg has escaped scrutiny. The identification of Steinberg as Ellen Courtenay may rectify this and elevate her to the ranks of the Lady Poets such as Felicity Hemans (1793-1835), Letitia Landon (1802-1838), Caroline Norton (1808-1877). Steinberg did not attain riches or fame in her lifetime and towards the end of her career she returned to her theatrical beginnings and lectured primarily on Shakespeare and the British Poets, giving her the freedom to perform extracts from the roles she coveted as an actress. It is testament to her success that her last known lecture was delivered in the Queen Charlotte Rooms, Hanover Square, London on 21<sup>st</sup> May 1862, two years before she died. An account in the *Era* of 25<sup>th</sup> May 1862 praised her pleasing and graceful remarks which “doubly pleasing from coming from a well-informed and sensible female point of view”. They asserted that “to our lady readers we more especially recommend Madame Steinberg’s Lectures as she not only reads with taste and judgement, but gives a cultivated *woman’s* views of Shakespeare, based on moral and intellectual considerations.” This review acknowledges the unique perspective that Steinberg could offer and the desirability of educating women in society. For Steinberg, it indicates that at this stage in her life she had achieved her ambition of promoting

the education of women, albeit from a position that allowed women to better educate their sons in moral and ethical conduct.

Courtenay's transition from actress to lecturer and poet opens up new questions about women's self-fashioning during the nineteenth century. Courtenay was not a maiden lady genteely writing poems or novels supported by her family. Her views were radical, strident and threatening to the domestic sphere but her status as a single mother, failed actress and "wronged woman" did not deter her from her desire to conduct an independent career in the public eye. This ambition, for Courtenay, could only be achieved with a new identity. Her adaptability, willingness to modify her voice and identity, and her success in multiple genres places her in a unique position amongst her contemporaries. Courtenay's experiences encourage further examination not only of the lives of the women who worked as itinerant lecturers at this time but also to look at the links between available public identities for women in the nineteenth century and how compatible they were.

Many aspects of Ellen Courtenay's life will remain a mystery, most notably the truth of her allegations against Daniel O'Connell. Indeed, further study of the work of Ellen Courtenay as Madame Steinberg may reveal more about Daniel O'Connell, who remained resolutely silent about his relationship to Ellen Courtenay and Henry Simpson throughout his life. There is much more to be discovered about Ellen Courtenay. Courtenay/Steinberg's claim that she performed in Paris and Brussels and Steinberg's declaration that she had spent three years in Madras ("Lecture on India") presents further avenues for exploration that may contribute to a greater understanding of this complex woman.

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