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Jane Eyre and Becky Sharp's Progeny: Mapping the Governess in Victorian Literature

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JANE EYRE AND BECKY SHARP'S PROGENY:
MAPPING THE GOVERNESS IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Criticism on the role of the Victorian governess is not new, but much of the critical coverage has been confined to the historical and cultural context of the figure and her presence in fiction. And critical studies that *have* examined the role of the governess have been restricted only to well-known novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey*. However, there has not been a discussion about how the fictional governess has evolved or a discussion of the deviations between governess novels. This dissertation will bring together those discussions to trace the evolution of the governess in Victorian fiction.

I will argue that 1847-1848 was a paramount time for the fictional governess due to the publication of three notable texts featuring a governess that deviated significantly from her literary antecedents: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), and J. Sheridan Le Fanu's "Some Account of the Latter Days of the Honorable Richard Marston of Dunoran" (1848). Of these texts, two would go on to create new and lasting models that would be used well into the twentieth century: Jane Eyre of *Jane Eyre* and Becky Sharp of *Vanity Fair*. This study will examine the progression of future governesses by locating both well-known and forgotten governess novels along the Jane Eyre and Becky Sharp trajectories.

I will also examine the presence of the governess in these texts in relation to how anxieties over her gender and social class are manifested in these novels. If we look at the

progression of the governess figure, it becomes clear that she has become the embodiment of her employer's fears about their own precarious social status and the threat she poses to the roles of the women who already reside in the house.

These twin anxieties of class and gender will be theorized by utilizing a materialist-feminist critical position as outlined by Judith Newton and applying this approach in the vein of Nancy Armstrong and Mary Poovey, both of whom examine the influence of gender relations upon the discourse used by middle-class, British men and women to determine class relations.