As an undergraduate double-majoring in English and Theology, I spent my years in school investigating the under-explored niches of Georgetown’s library. While working on two senior Honors theses, it was not unusual for me to spend half the day in the basement poring over a nineteenth-century record of Victorian Spiritualist writing, and the other half on the top floor locating holograph copies of Faulkner’s Requiem for a Nun. In the process of exploring the library’s niches, I found my own: the interdisciplinary intersection of religion and literature.

As my two theses neared completion, this interest in library organization soon manifested itself in my fascination with the virtual “library” of epigraphs contained in George Eliot’s Middlemarch. This epigraph collection reads like an eclectic English literature survey course. Eliot quotes thirty-three authors, including Milton, Donne, Wordsworth, Chaucer, and—most compellingly—herself, the only woman included. She cites herself thirty-two times. What could it mean, I wondered, for this miniature library of male-authored literature to be contained within the novel’s expansive form? After conducting an exhaustive study—of Eliot’s letters, essays, and commentary on the “Woman Question;” her use of epigraphs in other novels; and her theories of aesthetics as articulated in “Notes on Form in Art.”—I concluded that Middlemarch’s epigraphs reconfigure the concrete historical debates concerning the place of women in Victorian society at the level of epigraphical form. Specifically, the epigraphs perform a two-fold process of “concentration” and “miniaturization” of canonical male authors, and in doing so present a subtle feminist argument on behalf of the ‘epic’ nature of the female life. My realization that Eliot’s novel was constructed in response to an artistic paradigm informed by her knowledge of both the scientific and social structures of her world brought forth many more questions than it answered, as I began to wonder what other sorts of social commentary might inhere in the epigraphs of Felix Holt and Daniel Deronda, and, more broadly, within the epigraphs of novels by other Victorian authors. If cultural contexts, such as gender and religion, helped shape a novel’s content, then did its epigraphs, help shape an author’s commentary upon these issues?

It is my hope that Cornell University’s English Ph.D. program will provide a fertile intellectual environment in which I can continue revising these questions and developing new ways to answer them. I am particularly interested in bringing my religious-studies training to bear on an analysis of Eliot’s epigraph use in Middlemarch’s structural sibling, Daniel Deronda, in order to discern whether or not an argument pertaining to a Jewish life inhere in the epigraphs analogous to the way in which an argument pertaining to a woman’s life inhere in the epigraphs of Middlemarch. The vast archival resources available through Cornell’s Goldwin Smith Papers, which contain this nineteenth-century British historian’s discussions of “the Jewish Question,” and Kroch Library’s first editions of Eliot’s novels, would provide abundant primary source material with which to begin creating and contextualizing such a project.

As this potential project indicates, my research occurs at interdisciplinary intersections, most often those of religion and literature. My writing of two Honors theses in English and Theology allowed me to further refine those discipline-spanning inquiries which will direct my scholarship as a Victorianist. My English thesis investigated the cultural cross-section of humor, religion, and gender in three southern novels, while my theology thesis employed comparative historical analysis to investigate the ‘religiosity’ inherent in a contemporary practice—when teenage girls write the name of their “crush” repeatedly. I argued that this act serves the same purpose as religious writing rituals of the nineteenth-century Spiritualist and twentieth-century
Voudou communities. My projects evolved in tandem, with my discoveries in one informing and enriching my analysis of the other. Moreover, working on each thesis allowed me to hone those research and analytical skills needed for success as a literary scholar. My English thesis necessitated I conduct historically contextualized close readings of texts, while my theology thesis necessitated I perform a macro-analysis of many texts at once, using digital tools to locate descriptions of Spiritualist writing practices in nineteenth-century British newspapers. Having cultivated my talents as a close and macro-level reader of texts, I intend to use both approaches as a Victorianist. For example, I am already envisioning a second new project which would investigate the role Christianity played in Victorian feminism through examining how the woman preacher figures into the Victorian novelist’s religious imagination and exploring how figures such as George Eliot’s “Dinah Morris” and Elizabeth Gaskell’s “Ruth” can be understood when analyzed alongside the sermons, theological tracts, and devotional manuals from women authors which appeared in nineteenth-century Britain’s periodical presses.

The inherent interdisciplinarity of my work, combined with my evolving research concerning the epigraphy in Victorian literature, will allow me to contribute to the critical conversations taking place in Cornell’s English department. The faculty’s expertise in nineteenth-century British literature, in conjunction with the library’s holdings, allow me to envision my research developing in several directions. Were to I continue examining “the Woman Question” or “the Jewish Question” as addressed in Eliot’s epigraphs, I would benefit from coursework with professors working at the theoretical intersection of nineteenth-century literature and narratology, such as Professor Shaw, and from studying with scholars specializing in the history and theory of the novel, such as Professor Cohn. If I further investigate the figure of the woman preacher in Victorian literature, I would benefit from additional study with experts in gender and sexuality in Victorian literature, such as Professor Hanson. I hope to use my interdisciplinary research to contribute to organizations both within Cornell’s English Department, such as the graduate Roundtable and the British 18th and 19th Century Reading Group, and to those activities encompassing Cornell’s wider intellectual community, such as the Victorian literature symposium recently co-sponsored by the Society for the Humanities. The Society for the Humanities, in particular, would provide me with valuable opportunities for conversation and collaboration with scholars outside my home department, which would help me better discern how my interdisciplinary research figures into a broader humanities framework.

Having spent three years as a writing tutor and Teaching Assistant, I have already experienced to some extent what the life of a professional scholar-teacher entails, and am ready to take the next step towards this goal as a graduate student at Cornell. If admitted to your program, I will contribute a well-defined interdisciplinary perspective, teaching experience, and a mind that is both focused and flexible, open to developing in unanticipated directions as my education progresses. While working on my undergraduate theses and considering the direction of my scholarly career, I was advised: “Imagine what floor of the library you want to be on—and if possible, what shelf.” My research on Eliot’s epigraph use, in combination with my knowledge of the relationships between religion and literature, has confirmed for me that that shelf will be an interdisciplinary one, focused upon questions of narrative form and social commentary in the Victorian novel. The resources and faculty at Cornell will give my scholarship ample room to evolve, as I pinpoint more precisely which section of the Victorianist shelf will be mine.