

PRIVATELY DEVIANT, PUBLICLY DISCIPLINED: THE VIOLENT SEIZURE  
OF FEMALE NARRATIVES IN TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL, THE  
WOMAN IN WHITE, AND LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET

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## ABSTRACT

In Victorian England, women were subjects within their patriarchal society. What Anne Brontë, Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon emphasize and “sensationalize” is the subjugated marriage relationship, violently portraying men forcing their wives into submission. Brontë’s *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Collin’s *The Woman in White*, and Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* provide examples of men attempting to control the women in their lives. These novels deploy moments of violent seizure to dramatize and critique the inequalities inherent in the strict Victorian marriage laws. However, despite this usurpation of the female narrative, the insurgent testimony of the female voice persists in the mind of the reader. This thesis will examine the Sensation genre, focusing on the female narratives within the three novels. It will argue that the female narrative cannot be shut out or stifled. Once it has been released into the world, it must evoke power and create a culture of change.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

In a late chapter from Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861-62 serialized) entitled "My Lady Tells the Truth," Helen Talboys confesses to the attempted murder of her first husband. In baring the "truth," she also sums up the plight of Victorian women, "I had learnt that which in some indefinite manner or other every schoolgirl learns sooner or later—I learned that my ultimate fate in life depended upon my marriage..." (298). After speaking these words, Helen Talboys is diagnosed as mad and shut away—effectively silenced—in a Belgian mental institution. Helen's words and situation were not by any means as extreme or singular as they might appear to a modern audience. In Victorian England, women were subjects within a patriarchal society, and their only hope of economic and social security hinged on a successful marriage. Through Helen's testimony, Braddon articulates the "business" of marriage and how the feminine voice is silenced by the patriarchal marriage paradigm.

Although Victorian society believed marriage provided women with financial security and social position, marriage also brought legal anonymity and complete dependency upon male sovereignty. In a Victorian marriage, husbands had legal ownership of their wife's body, her income, her property, and all progeny. According to English law, husband and wife were one flesh with the man as the lawful figurehead of the family. In return for protection and financial comfort, she forfeited legal control over her person, her income, and her children. Legally, the married woman was invisible: "Man and wife are one person men in law; the wife loses all her

rights as a single woman, and her existence is entirely absorbed in that of her husband . . . A woman's body belongs to her husband; she is in his custody, and he can enforce his right by a writ of habeas corpus” (Bodichon 6). If a wife were to withhold her body or diverge from her husband’s beliefs, she would suffer social and legal consequences, including incarceration.

Not only was a woman’s body not her own, but the 1832 Reform Act dictated that only male property owners earning a minimum of £10 per annum could vote (Wilson 39). This act made it illegal for a woman to vote, silencing her political opinions. The reasoning behind barring women from voting was “the concept that a woman was ‘covered’ by her husband” (Bodichon 6). In essence, she need not express her own political voice because, as a dutiful wife, her thoughts were to parallel her husband’s. To deviate from her husband’s values would violate the Victorian standard for femininity, which expected women to be docile, obedient, and self-sacrificing. These standards promoted her social and legal anonymity because women enacted little influence over their homes or their country. Therefore, everything a married woman owned, produced, and, theoretically, thought was subject to her husband.

Despite an attempt to rectify the invisibility of women with the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, the act provided very little protection for them and simply maintained the double standards between men and women. For example, according to the act, men could simply request a divorce on the grounds of adultery; proof was unnecessary. On the other hand, a woman who filed for divorce could only do so on the grounds of aggravated adultery, meaning adultery in conjunction with “desertion, cruelty [that endangers life or limb], rape, ‘buggery,’ or bestiality” (Yalom 188). Moreover, a woman had to provide sufficient proof of multiple instances of her husband’s crimes before a divorce would be considered. Rather than extending asylum to ill-treated wives, receiving a divorce further complicated women’s circumstances.

According to the act, a divorced woman could not reclaim property formally owned by her prior to the marriage. She could also be barred from seeing her own children, even if her husband was known to be abusive. Although she was given legal rights to her own income after the divorce, the 1857 Marriage Act provided little relief to the divorce issue. It was not until 1882 with the Married Women's Property Bill that married women were seen as separate and legal citizens, not mere phantoms of their husbands, able to keep and maintain their own property and income.

At the heart of these unjust divorce laws was the preservation of the Victorian family paradigm. For centuries, women were perceived by men as evil temptresses, daughters of Eve, and incapable of controlling their own sexuality. Accompanying the female temptress myth was the belief that women needed to be restrained by men, lest the women lead the men into sin. These negative ideologies changed during the Victorian era. Instead of being considered a demonic and evil being, Victorians created the "angel" mythology, regarding women as innately good and bringers of peace and harmony to the home. Coventry Patmore's *Angel of the House* (1854), a collection of poems dedicated to his wife, inspired the angel rhetoric. For Patmore a woman's "disposition is devout, / Her countenance angelical" (10-1). To strengthen the angel myth, Victorian society was divided into "separate spheres," where men worked outside the home and wives managed household affairs, servants, and instructed the children. Victorian society took great pains to keep the public and private spheres separate, as it was feared that women would become corrupted by constant exposure to public world. As John Ruskin summarizes in his 1865 lecture, "Of Queen's Gardens," the wife's special prerogative was to exercise a "true Queenly power" for the greater good of the family: "within his house, as ruled by her . . . need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence. This is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror,

doubt, and division” (59). In essence, the Victorian wife served as a guide for her family. If the wife became polluted, Victorians believed she would lead her entire family to ruin. Therefore, any deviation from the Victorian ideal of femininity and family was strictly punished. For example, mental illness in women was synonymous with a lack of moral virtue. A woman was deemed mentally unstable simply because she was incapable of making decisions founded on Victorian standards of morality, “Though they might show no other signs of mental illness or defect, the ‘morally insane’ were identifiable by the very fact of their persistently anti-social behavior . . . [moral insanity] was widely used to denote perceived moral incapacity” (Zedner 270). Not only was a “mad” woman considered morally corrupted, but also she was cast out of society and imprisoned because of her moral deviation.

Sensation novelists like Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and others expose and “sensationalize” the subjugated marriage relationship of such Angels and Queens. These novels portray husbands violently forcing their wives into submission, manipulating them into Victorian ideals of femininity. Women who refuse to embody the “angelic” ideal, such as Braddon’s strong-willed and self-determined Helen Talboys, are denounced as mad and sentenced to a mental institution. Anne Brontë’s *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1859-60, serialized), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1861-62, serialized) provide examples of men attempting to control the women in their lives. In these instances, male characters—typically antagonistic husbands or their auxiliaries—seize private letters and diaries from the female characters and wield the narrative against them. The novelists’ demonstrations of male seizure and control mirror the loss of legal identity and power within the Victorian marriage relationship.

During the Victorian era, diaries were private spaces, opportunities for the author to articulate their value system in juxtaposition to societal realities. Anne-Marie Millim argues, “the diary can be seen as the verbal materialization of its author’s state of mind . . . The diary accentuates the intersection of stimulating or oppressive societal conventions and the diarist’s personal reactions to and interventions in cultural reality” (978). Furthermore, Millim incorporates the diary critic Philippe Lejeune, who argues that by writing something down in a diary connotes a sense of ownership and power, “the diaristic gesture to the practice of account-keeping, which . . . indicates that the administrator ‘can write and [owns] something’ and that, as a consequence, the diary is always ‘a way of exercising a modicum of power, however limited’” (979). In other words, instead of social conventions blindly ruling the diary’s author, the diary enables the writer to formulate his/her own ideas in a secure space and then compare these ideas to societal expectations. By doing so, Lejeune asserts that the author exerts power or authority over his/her own ideas and values because these values are separated from societal norms.

Within these novels, diaries and letters serve not only as an autobiographical account of daily events but also capture the inherent thoughts and ideas of the woman. Thus, journals, diaries, letters, and other private forms of written discourse become metaphorically identified with the woman’s mind and self. As the fictional works of Anne Brontë, Willkie Collins, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon demonstrate with dramatic force, the issue arises when the private writings of these women reveal a deviation from the Victorian feminine standard. Instead of promoting the self-sacrificing and obedient “angel,” the female characters in *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *The Woman in White*, and *Lady Audley’s Secret* voice their dissatisfaction within the home and within their marriages by means of diaristic narratives. Following Lejeune’s argument, the written verbalization of the female characters’ distrust of and abhorrence for their husbands calls

into question the Victorian family structure. By questioning social norms, the women characters in these three works deviate from the Victorian ideal and develop their own values and voice by means of their diary writing. This new feminine voice bestows power over their ideas, which overthrows the previously silencing Victorian standards for femininity and family.

When the male characters in these novels discover the secret diaries and uncover the hidden contemplations of these women, they seize the texts from them. As Anne Brontë, Wilkie Collins, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon demonstrate, this seizure or violation of a text implies a kind of violation of the personhood of the woman. These men attempt to silence the divergent writings in order to protect and uphold the Victorian family ideal, attempting to place Victorian gender binaries back into a position of power. Brontë, Collins, and Braddon therefore deploy such moments of violent seizure in their novels in order to dramatize and critique the inequalities inherent in the strict Victorian marital scheme. Nevertheless, the insurgent testimony of the female voice condemning unjust female subjugation persists in the mind of the reader. Brontë and Braddon critique the social and legal treatment of Victorian women through their characters, Helen Huntington and Helen Talboys. Both women commit crimes in order to resist the men in their lives. However, their personal narratives stimulate empathy from the Victorian reader, calling to question the legal and social standing of women. The reader does not see these women as criminals or “fallen angels,” but understands they are victims of a failed legal system that offers no form of sanctuary from abusive men.

Although Anne Brontë’s Helen Huntingdon, Wilkie Collin’s Marian Halcombe, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Helen Talboys face overwhelming hardship at the hands of men, the narratives they leave behind spark the discourse of resistance. Bahktin’s dialogism speaks to interrelations of narrative, “Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the

speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships” (Bakhtin 263). For Bakhtin, each idea interacts with another in a community of dialogue, creating a “multiplicity of social voices.” As one voice emerges, it adds to the heteroglossia, demanding a response from other voices within the dialogical relationship. With this in mind, the female narratives that expose the harsh realities of the Victorian marriage demand a response from the reader. Once the narratives have engaged the literary dialogue, they cannot simply be dismissed. In fact, for Bakhtin, any attempt to close or suppress the dialogue is met with resistance. The men in the novels attempt to suppress or silence the female narrative. Nevertheless, their voices are still heard and create outrage among the Victorian readership. The incarcerated Bertha Mason of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* has no voice—no narrative to enact change. Although she makes a gesture towards expressing her anger by burning down Thornfield Hall and committing suicide, her actions are so horrific to Victorian sensibilities that she is dismissed as a lunatic and forgotten. However, in the stories of Brontë, Collins, and Braddon, Helen Huntingdon, Marian Halcombe, and Helen Talboys all have their opportunity to speak out. The diaries and letters shift the identities of these women from inarticulate deviant criminals to articulate and persuasively sympathetic sufferers. In the same light, Michael Foucault compares resistance with power in terms that strikingly recall M. M. Bakhtin’s dialogic theories, “to resist is not simply a negation but a creative process; to recreate and recreate, to change the situation, actually to be an active member of that process” (Foucault, Rabinow and Faubion 168). Through their narratives, these female characters in the novels by Anne Brontë, Willkie Collins, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon vocalize the tyranny placed over them by their husbands and the legal system. Their diaries and letters allow the women to

formulate their own ideologies separate from society's expectations, which create compassion and understanding for the reader. Their voices resonate with the reader long after their male antagonists have silenced them.

In the following pages, I will examine the Sensation genre, focusing on the female narratives within *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *The Woman in White*, and *Lady Audley's Secret*. Specifically, I will argue that *Tenant*, although not usually classified as part of the genre, acts as a precursor to the Sensation novel, and many of the themes and traits of sensationalism emerge through this work. Furthermore, I will examine the relationship of the female narrative in respect to the novels as a whole. My thesis will question the male narrator's authority in crafting the text, specifically in the crafting of the feminine text. It is necessary to understand how the female voices are suppressed in order to appreciate how these voices resist and rise above the power attempting to control them. In order to accomplish this, I intend to divide my paper into three subsections. The first section will show how Anne Brontë's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is a natural precursor to the Sensation genre because of multiple usurpations of female narrative, specifically the violent seizure of Helen Huntingdon's diary by her husband and the framing of the female narrative by her second husband, Gilbert Markham. The same usurpations of female narrative emerge in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret*. I will spend two sections detailing how the male characters within each novel violate the female narrative. To conclude, I will argue that the female narrative cannot be shut out or stifled. Once it has been released into the world, it must evoke power and create a culture of change. I will argue that Brontë, Collins, and Braddon have outlined specific revelations they wish to persuade their female and male readership to embrace.

## CHAPTER II

### “WRESTING” THE NARRATIVE IN TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL

While writing about Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,<sup>1</sup> Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar summarize the novel as “a story of woman’s liberation” (80). To a degree, this synopsis is true. Brontë establishes the necessity of female liberation by displaying the imprisonment of women within the Victorian marriage paradigm. Brontë’s “liberation” story begins, as the title implies, with a new tenant at Wildfell Hall. Under the assumed name of Helen Graham, Helen Huntingdon arrives in the neighborhood to take up residence at Wildfell Hall, introducing herself as a working artist and widow with a young son. In reality, Helen is fleeing her abusive husband, Arthur Huntingdon. Her mysterious entrance excites intrigue and gossip amongst the townsfolk, drawing the attention of the eligible bachelor and gentleman farmer, Gilbert Markham. Initially, Markham endeavors to befriend Helen; however, he soon falls in love with her and her son, Arthur. Unable to hold off Markham’s advances, Helen offers her diary as a confessional, disclosing her actual identity as Helen Huntingdon. In the diary, Gilbert learns that Helen is a victim of domestic abuse, and she has fled with her son to Wildfell Hall to protect them from Arthur Huntingdon’s immoral and violent behavior. Before Gilbert can discuss with Helen the contents within the diary, Helen learns that her husband is deathly ill. She returns to nurse the sick, dying, and bitter Arthur. Within a few months, Arthur dies. The

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter abbreviated to *Tenant*.

couple eventually reunites, and Helen proposes marriage to Gilbert. He accepts, and the two live “happily,” “blessed,” and surrounded by “promising young scions” (417).

As explained in the Introduction, Victorian women lost their personal and legal rights when they married. Instead of speaking and thinking for themselves, wives were “covered” under the belief systems of their husbands and expected to take on those beliefs, while simultaneously taking their husband’s last name. In contrast, unmarried women were allowed more legal freedoms. Often heralded a “problem” (Poovey 1) amongst Victorian men, unmarried women, commonly referred to as “redundant women,” were viewed as deviants because they failed to fulfill their “destiny” (Poovey 52) of becoming a wife and mother.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, single women were entitled to legal rights that married women were obliged to forfeit, namely the right to a personal income, right to hold and maintain property, and a right to independent thought. Because unmarried women did not have a husband to whom they were mandated to adhere to, she could develop and preserve her own system of beliefs.

In *Tenant*, Brontë brings to light the contrast between the legal rights of married and unmarried women through Helen Huntingdon. As a single person, Helen is able to thwart the male usurpation of her personal narrative. However, when she marries, Helen loses all autonomy over her own textual self and personal identity. Her freedom of self-expression and autonomy over her private thoughts hinges on her single state. Once she is married, she loses her legal rights to her private and textual selves. Brontë depicts this loss of identity through the usurpation of her personal narratives by her husbands. In Helen’s first marriage, Arthur “forcibly wrest[s]” (309) Helen’s personal diary from her, whereas Gilbert subtly edits “a few passages

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<sup>2</sup> In Collin’s *The Woman in White*, we see the consequences of deviant singleness in the textual rape of Marian Halcombe. Because Marian is unwilling to submit to a man and lose her identity in a marriage relationship, she is forcibly silenced when her journal is stolen and annotated by Count Fosco.

here and there of merely temporal interest to the writer” (110). Nevertheless, both husbands attempt to usurp Helen’s narrative story in order to confine, dominate, and control her. This chapter will examine Helen’s personal narratives, specifically pointing to moments of violation by her two husbands. Her relationship with Arthur Huntingdon will be examined first because his usurpation of her diary is so extreme. From there, we will explore how Gilbert Markham assumes authorial rights and thus, like Arthur Huntingdon, usurps her narrative, albeit to a lesser degree.

Before her first marriage, Helen lived as a typical middle-class Victorian woman, spending her time as an amateur artist as well as a writer. Although it appears that Helen’s landscape paintings are simple artistic reproductions to assuage the boredom of a middle class Victorian woman, closer observation reveals that her artwork is a form of artistic self-expression. Helen used her artwork as a “public mask to hide her private dreams” (Gilbert and Gubar 81). She uses her landscape paintings as “public mask” to display to her friends, while expressing her “private dreams” of love on the backs of her art. During his courtship of Helen, Arthur Huntingdon uncovers her private aspirations that she had sketched on the backs of her artwork. Brontë writes, “‘THIS is better than all!’—I looked up, curious to see which it was, and, to my horror, beheld him complacently gazing at the *back* of the picture—it was his own face that I had sketched there and forgotten to rub out!” (131-2). To a modern audience, Arthur’s discovery seems an insignificant embarrassment; however, a Victorian audience understood the egregious error Helen made in failing to “rub out” her secret sketches. By unknowingly displaying her secret desires and thoughts, Helen has revealed her true affections for Arthur. Although she attempts to keep her personal feelings private, the revelation of her “private dreams” violates Victorian courtship protocol. According to Marilyn Yalom, Victorian courting etiquette was

exceedingly precise: “a young man would write the first [love] letter and the young woman could then reply, if her parents approved. Caution was the order of the day, especially for the woman, who was not supposed to indicate her true feelings until the man had declared his” (177). Helen has secret passions for love, specifically the love of Arthur, that she is unwilling to verbalize. Through the imagery and narrative of her artwork, Helen is able to articulate these private desires.

Arthur capitalizes on Helen’s blunder, using her vulnerability as an opportunity for humiliation and manipulation. Arthur discovers the sketches and publically announces with “peculiar emphasis” (131) Helen’s private feelings to the surrounding friends in the room. He then takes the picture for himself as Helen vainly attempts “to snatch it from his hand” (132): ‘No—by George, I’ll keep it!’ placed it against his waistcoat and buttoned his coat upon it with a delighted chuckle” (131-2). He believes the discovery of her true feelings places him in a position of power over her. He has seen what Gilbert and Gubar call her “secret desires” (81) and then uses this revelation to manipulate and control Helen. He knows she desires his requited love and affection. Nevertheless, he cruelly uses this moment of weakness and vulnerability to exert control over her, prepping her for her submissive role in their future marriage relationship.

As a single woman with an comfortable income under her uncle and legal rights to her own person, Helen will not succumb to Arthur’s manipulation. She exclaims, “something must be done to check his presumption—I would not submit to be tyrannized over by those bright, laughing eyes” (134). Helen recognizes that Arthur is trying to control her and “tyrannize” her into “submitting” to his will. A few pages later, Helen is able to assert her authority over her artwork and private self. While again invading her privacy and riffling through her “unfinished

sketches,” Arthur finds another portrait of himself. This time, however, she successfully “wrests” the work from Arthur, proving she is in control. She writes:

But my portfolio was on the table; he [Huntingdon] took it up, and coolly sat down to examine its contents . . .

‘Bless my stars, there’s another!’ and slipped the small oval of ivory paper into his waistcoat pocket—a complete miniature portrait . . . But I was determined he should not keep it.

‘Mr. Huntingdon,’ cried I, ‘I *insist* upon having that back! It is mine, and you have no *right* to take it. Give it me, directly— . . . At length however, he restored it to me, saying—

‘Well, well, since you value it so much, I’ll not deprive you of it.’

To show him how I valued it, I tore it in two, and threw it into the fire. He was not prepared for this. His merriment suddenly ceasing, he stared in mute amazement at the consuming treasure . . . [and] I was glad, at the moment, that I had vexed him. (136-7)

Helen’s unfinished sketches are her secret works, her hidden self-expressions. As a single woman, she has the right and social obligation to withhold her personal feelings from men who are not her father or guardian. When Arthur usurps her secrets, he attempts to assume control over them and her. He sits down and “coolly examines [the] contents,” acting as though he owns them. Nevertheless, Helen, as a single woman, still has legal rights to privacy and her art. She attempts to “wrest” the work from his hand. This same term will be used later when Arthur “forcibly wrests” Helen’s diary from her hands. Here, however, Helen is able to reassert authority over herself and her “secret desire” because she is quick to point out that Arthur has no legal “right” to her work. This is true. He cannot assume control over her because, by law, she is not his property. As soon as she calls attention to her rights, he “restores” the stolen picture to her. To further “vex” Arthur and assert her control over her own narrative, Helen rips the sketch and throws it into the fire. Arthur believes she wants the picture back because she “value[s] it so much.” He patronizes her for what he sees as girlish frivolity. However, the reality is that the picture’s value is of little consequence to Helen. She is more concerned about placing herself at

the head of the relationship power struggle. By destroying the image, Helen proves that she is in control of her mental and creative faculties and will not submit to domination. She is still a single woman and is still legally completely in control of her body and self-expression, releasing herself from Huntingdon's "tyranny."

After marrying Arthur, however, Helen loses all legal control over her own self-expression and discourse. Because she has a husband to provide for her, she puts away her paints and picks up her pen, where she recounts her declining love and Arthur's increasing abuse. Finally, Helen realizes that it is no longer safe for herself or her son to continue residing under Arthur's roof. She writes, "But this [abuse] should not continue; my child must not be abandoned to this corruption: better far that he should live in poverty and obscurity with a fugitive mother, than in luxury and affluence with such a father" (298). To escape her husband, Helen must become a working woman, transitioning from an amateur artist to a professional one: "The palette and the easel, my darling playmates once, must be my sober toil-fellows now" (298). By entering the workforce, Helen blurs the lines of Victorian "separate spheres" and deferring her role as wife and mother to assume the masculine role of financial provider. Paradoxically, according to Victorian gender ideology, Helen is potentially exposing herself to the evils of the world by entering the economic fray. As a woman, she is supposed to remain in the domestic setting to protect herself from worldly evil. Instead, evil resides within her home. To maintain her virtue, Helen must flee the domestic space to prevent the immoral corruption of herself and her son.

Because of strict Victorian gender expectations, Helen must work out her escape in secret. She cannot even disclose her abuse and planned flight to her family: "What should I do then? Apply to my brother, and explain my circumstances and my resolves to him? No, no; even

if I told him *all* my grievances . . . he would be certain to disapprove of the step: it would seem like madness to him, as it would to my uncle and aunt, or to Milicent. No; I must have patience and gather a hoard of my own” (298). According to English Law, Helen is committing larceny, stealing her body and progeny that are lawfully Arthur’s property. Despite her ill treatment, she cannot legally remove herself from Arthur’s grasp. Moreover, she risks being seen as “mad” by her own family for daring to separate herself from her husband’s abuse. She has become a societal deviant, daring to go against her responsibilities as a dutiful wife and mother. Ironically, Helen is acting out true motherhood by shielding her son from harm. Nevertheless, witnessing her “extreme” behavior would have been shocking to a Victorian reader.

As noted earlier in the Introduction, diaries acted as a method of exerting the self, a way to “represent the diarists’ negotiation of their personal value within the discourses and ideologies of their culture” (Millim 977). Moreover, we have seen that Helen expresses her socially deviant behavior within her diary. She contradicts her husband’s will and conspires to steal his rightful “property.” Mirroring Lejeune’s argument, Helen is able to articulate her own thoughts separate from social conventions through the writing process, and in doing so she becomes empowered to enact change. After solidifying her own thoughts on paper, she is willing to defy social conventions to be rid of Arthur’s influence. Therefore, when Arthur uncovers her plans, he takes great pains to put Helen back in her place of servitude and submission. Arthur reasserts his legal authority over Helen by “forcibly” removing Helen’s diary from her grasp. She reports:

He [Arthur] had risen however, unknown to me, and, actuated by some base spirit of curiosity, been looked over my shoulder for I know not how long; for when I had laid aside my pen, and was about to close the book, he suddenly placed his hand upon it, and saying—‘With your leave, my dear, I’ll have a look at this,’ *forcibly wrested it from me*, and, drawing a chair to the table, composedly sat down to examine it. (309) (*emphasis mine*)

The female narrative here is violently removed from the author and is placed under her husband's authority. Because of this, Helen's secret plans are revealed, and she seemingly loses the resistive power she had gained through writing. When he removes the diary from her, "Arthur physically and emotionally disarms his wife" (Signorotti 23). It is clear that Arthur's violence is a dramatization of domestic assault and rape. Corporeal punishment was completely legal in Victorian England in order to provide "moderate correction" for deviant female behavior (Yalom 185). In reading her diary against her will, he has violated Helen's inmost person, penetrated her "secret desires" again. Arthur's action mirrors his attempted usurpation of her portfolio of unfinished sketches during the time when he courted Helen's hand for marriage: he sits down to "composedly . . . examine" the diary in the same way that he sat to "coolly . . . examine [the] contents" of her art. Thus, his later acts of abuse are clearly foreshadowed by Anne Brontë's presentation.

Although he was unable to control her actions while unmarried, Arthur now has full legal backing to exact control over his deviant wife. Furthermore, in order to maintain his stronghold over his "property," he must silence his wife. To do this, he strips her of all resources. He demands the information to retrieve the money she has earned selling her paintings and her jewelry. He remarks, "we must have a confiscation of property" (310). He takes her earned income (which is lawfully his) then destroys her art supplies and depriving her of all methods of self-expression and income. Helen writes, "My painting materials were laid together on the corner table . . . He soon spied them out, and putting down the candle, deliberately proceeded to cast them into the fire—palette, paints, bladders, pencils, brushes, varnish—I saw them all consumed" (310). The violence and injustice of this scene are exacerbated by the Victorian reader's knowledge that under English law he is entitled to exact this revenge. The law sanctions

his right to take away from her or destroy anything she owns or uses. Ironically, Helen is acting in accordance of Victorian gender standards. She is the moral guide of her home, but the evil nature of Arthur prevents her goodness from being effective. Nevertheless, when she attempts to leave her house and protect the moral integrity of her son, she is deemed a social deviant, whereas her husband's abuse of her and his son is legally sanctioned (Lee par. 8).

When Helen finally flees Arthur's violence and domination, she emerges as the tenant of Wildfell Hall, feigning her identity as a widow. Although she is poor, she is able to survive by selling her paintings, which she signs under a false name.<sup>3</sup> From what little he knows of Helen Graham, Markham, as a gentlemen farmer, believes he has the upper hand in their relationship. He is more financially secure, and under Victorian premises, he can offer her a substantial increase from her current living conditions. Nevertheless, under the guise of a widow, Helen is basking in the freedom that comes with being a single woman. She can earn her own income as an artist and has the right to her own private opinions. She will not allow her poverty to limit her new freedom and she will not allow men to control her. For example, when Gilbert begins to peruse her artwork without her permission, she quickly reprimands him and asserts her control over her art. Neither Gilbert nor the reader know what it means to "take up" one of Helen's paintings. But reading her diary, which she willingly gives, educates the reader and Gilbert in such a way that even such a small is now clearly an issue of personal space and autonomy.

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<sup>3</sup> In many ways, Helen's story is a reflection of Anne Brontë's narrative as a female writer in a patriarchal society. In the same way that Helen had to sign her artwork under a false name, Brontë, too, had to hide her true identity in order to write. As Gilbert and Gubar note, for these women, art is a form of expression but also "camouflage" (81). Not only did female artists have to hide their true identities, but they also were marginalized by their Victorian society because of their "radical" beliefs. Because they did not follow the social conventions of their day, they were viewed as deviants. This gendered prejudice filtered into their working careers. Both Helen and Bronte had to fight the manipulation of Victorian men, who sought "to commodify [the heroine] by stripping her identity, voice, and power" (81).

When Gilbert asks if it is impertinent that he look upon her artwork without her permission, Helen replies, “‘It is an act of very great impertinence, sir; and therefore, I beg you will ask nothing about it, for your curiosity will not be gratified’” (43). Gilbert continues, “for without a grain of ceremony, she took [the painting] from me; and quickly restoring it to the dark corner, with its face to the wall” (43). Although at the time neither Gilbert nor the reader understands the significance of Gilbert’s “impertinence,” we have a reflection of the painting scene with Arthur. He, too, was attempting to observe her “hidden sketches” without the artist’s permission. Helen asserted her rights over Arthur, and, as an unmarried widow, she asserts those rights again. She unceremoniously takes the picture from him and places it “with its face to the wall,” inhibiting the art from unauthorized viewers. For years, Helen was haunted by her vile husband. In her freedom, she turns his visage away, suggesting he no longer has dominion over her.

After he confesses to love her, Helen willingly offers her diary to Gilbert in order to “teach” him about how to respect her person. In her own voice, Helen wants Gilbert to understand the domestic abuse she has experienced under the authority of Arthur so that Gilbert will not fall into similar patterns of abuse and ultimately silence her as Arthur attempted to do. In offering her diary to him, Helen controls who will view her art; she also determines what portions of her diary he will read. She tears out the back section of her diary that speaks of Gilbert and the people surrounding Wildfell Hall. When he realizes she has prohibited him from reading about himself, Gilbert disappointedly responds, “Here it ended. The rest was torn away. How cruel—just when she was going to mention me!” (335). Now that she is single, she can decide which parts of her narrative she wishes to share. Despite her feeble attempts, Helen, as a wife, could not keep her diary out of the hands of her husband. Arthur owned her and her

identity. However, Helen, as a widower, has now reclaimed control over her narrative and identity. She belongs to no one and only exposes herself to whomever she pleases.

Unfortunately, Gilbert does not fully learn Helen's lesson. After they are married, Gilbert assumes the traditional role of the Victorian husband by "covering" his wife's story and identity as his own. He frames her narrative around his own in the same way that a husband frames or "covers" his wife in the marriage relationship, "encourage[ing] the reader to . . . see the way that nineteenth-century notions of marriage consigned women to silence" (Senf 450). Moreover, he openly confesses to editing pieces of her story: "you shall have the whole (diary), save, perhaps, a few passages here and there of merely temporal interest to the writer, or such as would serve to encumber the story rather than elucidate it" (110). According to Markham, the diary is not complete without his input. Alisa Clapp argues that Brontë feels that those things of "temporal interest" are essential to the text and are essential to what makes up female authorship: "she considers even the mundane occurrences in a woman's life to be worthy of language. Brontë thus redefines 'art' to include the ordinary daily expressions of life" (117). In fact, it was quite common for female diaries to include everyday life events: "Many feminists scholars. . . have contended that the structure of diaristic texts reflects the inherently chaotic nature of women's lives, claiming the diary as an essentially feminine form and thereby opposing its formlessness to be the assumed goal-orientedness of men's writing" (Millim 979). Because Gilbert assumes authority over Helen's narrative, he emphasizes his own agenda, silencing the importance of the everyday. Although he seems to have Helen's interests at heart, Markham covertly (maybe even unconsciously) assumes authority over the text. Elizabeth Signorotti observes, "Markham's appropriation and editing of Helen's history reflects an attempt to contain and control her. In a society where possession of knowledge equals power, Markham's revealing

epistle to Halford further reflects the means by which Victorian men maintained power over women” (21). Thus, even among well-meaning men, the female voice cannot rest on her own power and conviction but, instead, is controlled by men.

Interestingly, Gilbert waits until the house is empty to reveal the contents of the diary: “It is a soaking, rainy day, the family are absent on a visit, I am alone in my library, and have been looking over certain musty old letters and papers . . . so that I am now in a very proper frame of mind for amusing you with an old world story” (9). It would appear that Gilbert must wait for the family to leave because he knows Helen would not approve of him divulging her past. When she first hands him her diary, Helen warns, “Bring it back when you have read it; and don’t breathe a word of what it tells you to any living being—I trust your honour” (109). Gilbert violates her trust by disclosing the privacy of her diary. She asks him to bring the diary back when he finishes reading it, implying she still wants control over her narrative. Moreover, she “trusts his honour” that he will keep the diary’s contents confidential. Despite his good nature, he seems to believe that, as her husband, he has a right to her personal narrative and, therefore, usurps it for his own. Gilbert is evidence that even good natured men are not free from Victorian gender dichotomies.

### CHAPTER III

#### “TAMING” THE NARRATIVE IN THE WOMAN IN WHITE

Wilkie Collin’s creation of Count Fosco is a characterization of paradoxes. Physically, he is a tall, obese man and capable of carrying out the most villainous of deceptions. Despite his larger-than-life physique, he is also dainty, soft-footed and spends his free time doting on his pet birds and mice. Count Fosco’s paradoxical personality corresponds to his contradictory accounts of the rights of women. Towards the end of Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*, Count Fosco is called upon to give his account of the cruel abduction of Laura Fairlie. After confessing to the crime, Fosco ironically criticizes the English patriarchal system for impeding Victorian women from having their own “private opinions:” “I remember that I was married in England—and I ask, if a woman’s marriage obligations, in [England], provide for her private opinion of her husband’s principles? No! They charge her unreservedly to love, honour, and obey him” (628). Fosco’s seemingly sympathetic statements regarding the adversity of English women is paradoxical because he conspired to strip Laura Fairlie of her voice and title as well as forced his own wife into submissive silence. Before Fosco’s marriage to his wife, Marian recounts, “As Eleanor Fairlie (aged seven-and-thirty), she was always talking pretentious nonsense, and always worrying the unfortunate men with every small exaction which a vain and foolish woman can impose on long-suffering male humanity. As Madame Fosco (aged three-and-forty), she sits for hours together without saying a word, frozen up in the strangest manner in herself” (218). In a mere six years, Fosco has “tamed” Madame Fosco to be docile, obedient, and silent.

Interestingly, he fails to see himself in the same light as Victorian Englishmen; he believes himself to be innocent of forceful female submission, instead touting Madame Fosco's "unhesitating devotion of herself to the fulfillment of my [Fosco's] boldest wishes" (628) was of her own desire. Collins exposes Fosco's hypocrisy in order to demonstrate the wide severity of female submission within the Victorian period. Fosco rebukes English men for silencing their women by not permitting "her private opinion," but he is no different from the men he chastises.

*The Woman in White* opens with the imagery of a legal procession "as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness" (5). The novel is made up of a collection of narratives, edited and retold by Walter Hartright. Walter begins the set of narratives with an encounter with a "woman in white," Anne Catherick, who escapes a mental institution. Although Anne's sudden appearance begins the narrative, the initial legal premise of the novel is to restore the name and identity of Laura Fairlie, who was wrongfully abused by her husband, Sir Percival Glyde, and his crony, Count Fosco. Sir Percival married Laura for her financial assets in order to use her money to reimburse his multiple debtors. When Laura refuses to submit to her husband's wishes and hand over her money, Sir Percival and Fosco concoct a plan to incarcerate the deviant Laura in the mental asylum from which Anne had originally emerged and to do away with Anne. Coincidentally, Laura and Anne are half-sisters, sharing an almost identical resemblance to each other. (Both Laura and Anne share the same father, whereas Laura and Marian share the same mother.) Because of their uncanny similarity, the plot succeeds; Anne accidentally dies during the kidnapping and Laura replaces her in the mental asylum. With the help of Laura's other half-sister, Marian Halcombe and Walter, Sir Percival and Fosco's plot is discovered and Laura is freed from the mental institution and her title reestablished. To make amends for their deceit, Collins provides Sir Percival and Fosco with

horrific and painful deaths. Finally, the story ends with Walter and Laura married and living peaceably at Limmeridge House (Laura's childhood home) with Marian and children in the background.

Marian's perpetual singleness and Laura's two marriages create an interesting contrast in how they are perceived and ultimately silenced by men. In this chapter, I will examine Marian first, noting how she is first violated by Count Fosco when he steals her journal and later silenced by Walter Hartright himself, as he writes her out of the narrative completely. Next, I will show how Sir Percival attempts to silence his deviant wife in a mental asylum, while Walter, either consciously or unconsciously, rewrites Laura's personal narrative and takes it as his own heroic testimony.

As a single woman, Marian Halcombe is allowed freedoms of self-expression and independence of which no Victorian woman would have been capable. Because she has cast off all ideas of marriage, Marian upsets the traditional expectations of Victorian femininity. These strict gender binaries of masculine and feminine attempt to confine and constrict Marian. Victorians believed woman's sole purpose was to be a wife and mother. Marian chooses to deviate from the societal expectations for women. Therefore, she embodies and ironically critiques gendered aspects of socially dictated masculine and feminine roles. In fact, her lack of confinement is made evident when Walter and the reader first meet her. Walter describes her facial features as "swarthy" with "almost a moustache" and "large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw" (32). Nevertheless, Walter notes that her body is quite feminine: "Her figure was tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat; her head set on her shoulders with an easy, pliant firmness; her waist, perfection in the eyes of a man, for it occupied its natural place, it filled out its natural circle, it was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays" (31). In one

person, Marian embodies both masculine and feminine characteristics. She is a kind of hermaphrodite, resisting all social conventions that endeavor to place her within a specific gender norm. Although she is dressed like a woman, she is “undeformed by stays,” refusing to constrict her body to the social expectations of femininity, foreshadowing her night adventure out on the roof-ledge. Ann Elizabeth Gaylin asserts, “In this catalogue of appearance, traditional notions of feminine beauty combine with hints of the woman yet to be encountered. She is shapely, yet that shape is visible because she does not restrict her body with the usual accouterments of fashion: the stays that normally confine a woman’s body. Even her body resists enclosure” (313). According to Victorian standards, Marian is a deviant and problematic woman. Yet Wilkie Collin’s novel celebrates her for overturning Victorian standards. In the same way that she refuses to submit to the uncomfortable “stays” for the sake of Victorian fashion, she is also unwilling to marry and submit to the authority of a man. Her resistance and independence proves threatening to the Sir Percival and Count Fosco that take pains to silence her and force her back into socially sanctioned feminine role.

Not only does Marian physically portray a masculine and feminine form, but she also participates in both masculine and feminine roles. Where her sister paints and plays music beautifully, Marian only draws and paints for the sake of her sister. Instead, Marian’s talents lie in masculine games. She challenges Walter, “I can match you at chess, backgammon, écarté, and (with the inevitable female drawbacks) even at billiards as well” (35). Instead of limiting herself to socially accepted female hobbies, Marian entertains herself with more masculine enjoyments. She even challenges Walter to play with her as his mental and physical equal. For Marian, there are no “separate spheres” or feminine docility. Rather, she views herself an equal

with men. Additionally, Marian is a writer, a predominately masculine activity.<sup>4</sup> Not only is she responsible for the correspondence of the Limmeridge estate, but she also writes extensively in her journal. It is in her journal that the reader is able to discern Marian's intimate thoughts. As the heroine, she also exposes the intimate conspiracies of Sir Percival and Fosco. She is the female-detective, willing to risk her life to undermine the ruthless schemes of her antagonists. She even risks her life, "determined to go on at all hazards" (327), by climbing onto the roof of the Blackwater terrace. Although Marian's hybrid masculine-feminine identity is accepted at Limmeridge, when she moves to Blackwater Park, her willful noncompliance to Victorian standards is threatening to Sir Percival and Fosco. Both men wish to silence Marian and conform her to the stereotypical woman who "loves, honors, and obeys" (628). To do this, Marian must be tamed, and Fosco accepts the challenge. By usurping her narrative, Fosco commits an act of mental rape, which is able to suppress and silence Marian.

When Marian first meets Fosco, she describes him as "a man who could tame anything" (219). As illustrated earlier in this chapter, his ability to "tame" is made evident through Madame Fosco. Marian acknowledges, "If he had married *me*, I should have made his cigarettes as his wife does—I should have held my tongue when he looked at me, as she holds hers" (219). The horrifying notion that she could be silenced, causes the 'strong,' 'masculine' Marian to experience fear: "Sir Percival is nevertheless afraid . . . of giving any serious offence to the Count. I wonder whether I am afraid, too? I certainly never saw a man . . . whom I should be sorry to have for an enemy" (226). Marian's fears are realized, when Fosco steals her journal in an act of intellectual rape. D. A. Miller asserts, "what Fosco finally accomplishes when he reads

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<sup>4</sup> Gaylin parallels Marian to women writers (like Brontë and Braddon) who also contradict feminine behavior: "In her passion and her resolution, Marian embodies the 'strong-minded' woman writers and heroines castigated for being 'denatured' or 'unwomanly' because they thought and acted in a manner which contradicted normative 'feminine' behavior" (Jackson 63).

Marian's *journal intime*—is virtual rape. We might consider what is implied or at stake in the fact that the head game of suspicion is always implicitly transcoded by the novel into the body game of rape" (116). For the Count, Marian needs to be muzzled. Since she will not accept a traditional role as submissive wife, she must be silenced by force.

In the same way that Helen Huntingdon's diary is forcibly removed from her, Marian Halcombe's diary in is also commandeered and edited without her approval. While Marion lies unconscious from typhus, Fosco enters her room and steals her diary. After reading it, he writes in the diary, "The illness of our excellent Miss Halcombe has afforded me the opportunity of enjoying an unexpected intellectual pleasure. I refer to the perusal (which I have just completed) of this interesting Diary" (343). At a position of vulnerability, Marion's thoughts are usurped and used against her to foil "every plan that she has formed for her sister's benefit" (344). Collins uses sexually charged language to describe the event. His phallic penmanship is described as "large, bold, and firmly regular" (343). Fosco describes reading the journal as "pleasure[able]," "gratifying", and "awakening the finest sensibilities in my nature" (343-4). Later, when he shares his testimony, Fosco asks the reader to "Pass me the intoxicating familiarity of mentioning this sublime creature [Marian] by her Christian name" (615). The phrase "intoxicating familiarity" suggests an intimacy of a physical nature. Fosco believes he "knows" her on such a "familiar" level that he can forgo his proprieties and refer to her on a first-name basis. He even hints that Marian could have made a suitable wife for him: "Under happier circumstances how worthy I should have been of Miss Halcombe—how worthy Miss Halcombe would have been of ME" (343). Fosco's suggestion of marriage is interesting because of the way he treats his current wife. He has tamed Madame Fosco into a silent, submissive, 'angel.' Essentially, by raping Marian, he has done the same thing to her—she no longer speaks.

Gaylin writes: "If Marian as female writer had exemplified, according to orthodox Victorian conceptions of gender, an 'unwomanly woman,' Fosco's narrative usurpation removes from her the 'masculine' possibility of desiring, writing subject and thus, redefines her as 'feminine'" (318). Like Madame Fosco, Marian would have still been caged and tamed to suit the whims of her master.

By writing in her journal, Fosco has "marked" his territory and reclaims Marian's narrative for himself: "Writing in her journal and inscribing his own name at the bottom of his entry, Fosco not only reclaims his own plot from her, but he claims her most private narrative space for himself as well" (Gaylin 317-8). In "claiming" Marian's narrative, he uses it to punish and demean her. Fosco lauds the journal as "amazing. The tact which I find here, the discretion, the rare courage, the wonderful power of memory, the accurate observations of character, the easy grace of style, the charming outbursts of womanly feeling, have all inexpressibly increased my admiration of this sublime creature" (343). Gaylin likens Fosco's praise and admiration of Marian's journal to Victorian literary critics, who "though often complimentary, established both condescending and constraining standards for evaluating female writers. His admiration, instead of according her narrative authority, further disempowers her. Rather than a loss of maidenhead, the textual violation of Marian's diary deprives her of her 'head' and leaves her incarcerated as a mere 'maiden'" (318). By constructing these gender binaries and confining Marian into a socialized "female," Marian's rape and ultimate silence by Fosco leaves Walter as his only literary competitor.

In the same way that Gilbert Markham frames Helen Huntingdon's diary, the male narrator of *The Woman in White*, Walter Hartright, frames Marian's narration. As his name suggests, Walter is "right hearted," and his actions demonstrate that he is an untiring ally of

Marian and Laura. Nevertheless, even as a proven ally, friend, and eventual brother-in-law, it is Hartright's voice that noticeably dominates in the presentation of Marian's journal and her remaining "speeches" afterwards. Despite working together to solve Laura's mystery, Marian becomes a silent wallflower, hidden in the background as Walter assumes control over all narration, deciding what narratives are worth telling. Walter begins to tell the story of Marian and Laura, but refuses to express their story "in the words of the speakers themselves." Walter explains:

The story of Marian and the story of Laura must come next.

I shall relate both narratives, not in the words (often interrupted, often inevitably confused) of the speakers themselves, but in the words of the brief, plain, studiously simple abstract which I committed to writing for my own guidance, and for the guidance of my legal advisor. So the tangled web will be most speedily and most intelligibly unrolled. (422)

Although Walter may not be consciously patronizing Marian and Laura's narrative, he feels that their narratives are long, elaborate, and unintelligible—a "tangled web" that requires a "studious" man to decipher. In the same way that Gilbert Markham edits "extraneous" everyday detail from his wife's narrative, Walter also feels compelled to usurp the women's stories and replace it with his own "edited" and "intelligible" version.

Although Marian frees Laura from jail, eavesdrops over the roof to hear Sir Percival and Fosco's conspiracy, and saves the family from being caught by thugs, Walter still distances her from any of the action once the reading of her journal is finished. Pamela Perkins and Mary Donaghy argue that Walter shoves Marian into the background out of jealousy (399). This may be true; however, a more reasonable excuse for Walter's behavior is his desire to rewrite the narrative of the novel. In the beginning of this chapter, it was established that the legal purposes for this novel were for Laura to regain her name, identity, and birthright as the Lady of Limmeridge Estates. Although this is accomplished in the end, Walter skews the narration to

depict himself as the “hero” of the story—not Laura or Marian. Walter needs to establish himself as an authority if he is to emerge from this narrative as the resident owner of Limmeridge Estates. Therefore, caught up in creating his own narrative, he absentmindedly dismisses Marian, and reduces her to a mere helpmeet to his feeble wife.

As the story ends, this complication is all the more noteworthy because of Walter’s claim at the close of his narrative, where he insists that “Marian was the good angel of our lives—let Marian end our Story” (643). Walter’s tribute is clearly well meant, but it comes with an irony deep-felt by readers who have grown loyal to Marian. Marian does not achieve direct, unmediated testimony at any point after her illness, and any “last words” she might offer are framed and filtered by Walter, who quotes her. Furthermore, by speaking on behalf of Marian and inscribing her as “the good angel,” Walter inadvertently transforms the challenging and outspoken Marian into terms that echo the dominant Victorian stereotype of a pure, tractable, and angelic womanhood—changing Marian into something like Coventry Patmore’s “Angel in the House” (1854).

The silencing of Laura is more subtle but nonetheless severe. Like Marian, Laura’s identity and overall narrative is distorted as it is retold through the lens of Walter. Walter begins Laura’s narrative, declaring “This is the story of what a Woman’s patience can endure, and what a Man’s resolution can achieve” (5). The “resolution” that Walter is supposed to be after is the justice for the wrongs committed against Laura. He is supposed to restore her narrative—her identity—back to her: “The ‘plain narrative’ is Laura’s story. Its purpose is to re-establish her legal identity and restore her to her social position. Hartright’s omissions, concealments and editing have the effect of making ‘the Story’ his story” (Pykett 43). In other words, the purpose

of the novel was to give Laura social standing—a voice in society. Instead, Walter usurps that role and begins to craft his own narrative, polluting Laura’s testimony and voice.

Additionally, he is supposed to be giving identity back to Laura. However, when he first meets Laura at the beginning of the novel, he is unable to describe her. He instead “paints” her as an undefined watercolor: “How can I describe her? How can I separate her from my own sensations . . . The water-colour drawing that I made of Laura Fairlie . . . lies on my desk while I write. I look at it, and there dawns upon me brightly . . . a light, youthful figure” (48). For the next two pages, Walter fails to depict what Laura looks like. She is a non-descript figure in a watercolor painting. Finally in desperation, Walter says, “Think of her as you thought of the first woman who quickened the pulses within you that the rest of her sex had no art to stir . . . Take her as the visionary nursling of your own fancy; and she will grow upon you, all the more clearly as the living woman who dwells in mine” (50). Although to many Walter’s failure to grasp Laura’s image could be seen as romantic, the reality is that his inability to describe her hinders the creation of her identity. As the giver of justice, Walter must prove that Laura is who she says she is. Giving a vague “watercolor” description of her appearance and inviting the reader to merely “take her as the visionary nursling of your own fancy” does not create an identity for Laura. Instead, Laura could be anyone’s fantasy.

Finally, Walter usurps Laura’s narrative and identity by playing the part of a traditional Victorian husband. English law declares that once he has married Laura, her narrative, property, and identity become his. Therefore, he exercises his rights and manipulates the narrative to turn the focus and glory on himself. As a previously poor art teacher, he must prove to the surrounding community that he is not Sir Percival Glyde—that he is worthy of his new

ownership of Limmeridge Estates. To do so, he alters the purpose of the novel, giving himself an identity and a narrative, instead of providing those for his wife.

## CHAPTER IV

### “GOADING” THE NARRATIVE IN LADY AUDLEY’S SECRET

In 1854, Coventry Patmore published his collection of poems entitled *The Angel in the House*. The collection was intended to be a work of praise for his recently deceased wife, Emily. He lauded her for her dedication in household affairs, for providing an atmosphere of comfort and peace within the home, and for her willful submission to Patmore's authority as head of the house. Essentially, Patmore commends her utmost desire to please him. He writes, "Man must be pleased; but him to please / is woman's pleasure" (Patmore). Despite its originally innocent (albeit biased and limiting) intentions, this poetic accolade became a method of Victorian female bondage. The Angel in the House narrative transposed itself into the Victorian ideal of femininity. This restrictive feminine ideal inhibited women from truly expressing their own thoughts and emotions. For instance, in order for there to be perpetual harmony within the home, there could never be conflict. The wife could not express her own opposing concerns because that would break the peace. Therefore, as Virginia Woolf would later argue, this ideal left a woman without "a mind or a wish of her own" (237). The final section will examine how the angel narrative is orchestrated throughout Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and how Helen Talboy's deviation from the angel ideal causes her to be shut away and silenced. Through Lady Audley's private letter, we see her "weariness" (213) of the Victorian female condition as a lesser being and a longing to change.

Braddon begins her novel with the marriage of the poor governess, Helen Talboys (under the assumed name of Lucy Graham) and Sir Michael Audley. Later in the story, we learn that Helen is forced to work as a governess because her first husband, George Talboys, leaves her for Australia in order to gain enough wealth to financially sustain his family. Helen decides to leave her child with her alcoholic father and make a new name for herself as Lucy Graham. Because of her stunning good looks and “angelic” demeanor, she is able to captivate Sir Michael’s attentions. Despite Sir Michael’s old age, he proposes marriage, and Helen accepts his proposal to flee from poverty, confessing to him, “I *cannot* be disinterested; I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance. I cannot, I cannot!” (15). Taking “advantage[] of such an alliance,” the couple is married, and Lucy Graham becomes Lady Audley. Shortly after their marriage, however, George Talboys, Helen’s first husband, returns to England with a newfound fortune in tow. He expects to find his wife waiting for him and is shocked to find that she has assumed a new persona and is married to someone else. Talboys confronts Helen, and she attempts to murder him to keep her real identity secret. Coincidentally, Helen’s nephew, Robert Audley, is a close friend of George. After George’s mysterious disappearance, Robert begins searching for the killer. As he uncovers clues, Robert is led straight to Helen. After confronting her several times and accumulating evidence, Helen finally confesses to the crime and is diagnosed as mad for her deviant behavior. She is then shut away in a Belgian maison santé. All the while, George survived the attack on his life and had travelled to America. When Robert discovers that George is in fact alive, he summons him back to England to live with Robert and his new wife (and George’s sister), Clara.

Throughout *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Braddon paints the assumed identity of Helen Talboys, Lucy Graham, as Patmore’s perfect angel. Her physical features resemble an angelic nature with

her pale skin, golden blonde hair, and pale blue eyes. Braddon writes, “They were the most wonderful curls in the world—soft and feathery, always floating away from her face, and making a pale halo round her head when the sunlight shone through them” (13). When the sunlight strikes, Lady Audley’s hair makes a “pale halo round her head,” signifying that she physically embodies the stereotypical image of an angel. Lady Audley also plays the part of the Victorian domestic angel, making her surroundings and person as amiable as possible: “For you see Miss Lucy Graham was blessed with that magic power of fascination by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile. Every one loved, admired, and praised her” (11). She is docile and childlike. She keeps herself amused with insignificant things like clothes, gossip, and jewels. Braddon writes:

All her amusements were childish. She hated reading, or study of any kind, and loved society; rather than be alone she would admit Phoebe Marks into her confidence, and loll on one of the sofas in her luxurious dressing-room, discussing a new costume for some coming dinner party, or sit chattering to the girl, with her jewel box beside her, upon the satin cushions, and Sir Michael’s presents spread out in her lap . . . Pleased with her high position and her handsome house; with every caprice gratified, every whim indulged; admired and caressed wherever she went; fond of her generous husband; rich in a noble allowance of pin-money . . . it would have been hard to find in the county of Essex a more fortunate creature than Lucy, Lady Audley. (50)

Braddon’s description of Lady Audley parodies Patmore’s angelic ideal. She is jovial, “childish,” “fond of her generous husband,” and does not trouble her mind with “reading or studying of any kind,” rather she “love[s] society.” Lucy fully embodies the Victorian feminine ideal, causing men to swoon after her. In fact, she is so lovely that Robert Audley, Lady Audley’s antagonist, confesses, “I am falling in love with my aunt” (53).

Despite appearing to be the perfect angel, Gilbert and Gubar note that her behavior is a form of protective camouflage: “Denied the freedom to act openly out in the world, [Lady Audley] exploit[s] [her] intuitive understanding of the needs to the male ego in order to provide

comfortable places for [herself]” (473). Although outwardly it seems Lady Audley has embraced the misogynistic feminine ideal that Marian Halcombe and Helen Huntington have shirked, in her private spaces—her closet, jewelry case, and dressing area—Helen uncovers her true self. Lucy is simply an acted role to protect and provide financial and societal “comforts.” Her private spaces give glimpses into her former life as a mother and her deviant, “fiendish” beliefs. Lynn M. Voskuil argues that “the figure of Lady Audley . . . captivated Victorian readers precisely because she “looked the part” of Victorian woman and wife but refused to “be” it inside” (613). By “look[ing] the part” of the Victorian male fantasy, Lady Audley hopes she will be immune from harm. Unfortunately, her disguise is found out, and she is punished for her deceit. Her private spaces are not safe from Robert Audley, who is led to a secret entrance and gains access to Helen’s private areas. While Lucy Graham conforms to the Victorian gendered ideals, Robert Audley assaults the private areas of Lady Audley and uncovers the deviant life of Helen Talboys.

Like Helen Huntington was compelled to deviant behavior because of her husband’s abusive and corrosive behavior, Helen Talboys an unwilling participant in deviant behavior. After marrying George Talboys and giving birth to his son, she is unexpectedly abandoned by her husband and left penniless with an infant and an alcoholic father to care for. Because of the strict Victorian conventions against married women in the workplace, Helen was left few options to financially provide for her family. Braddon tells us that Helen taught piano lessons for a while; nevertheless, her father drank what money she brought in: ““She tried to support herself after her husband’s desertion by giving music lessons . . . But I suppose her father took her money from her, and spent it in the public-houses”” (212). Moreover, while her husband is away, he fails to ever contact her to let her know he is alive. Frustrated with her apparent

abandonment, Helen changes her identity to Lucy Graham, assumes the role of a single woman where she can maintain control of her own income, and becomes a governess to support herself.

Interestingly, George Talboys has a vacillating opinions as to whether he abandoned his wife. When he is on the ship back to England, he confesses, ““My pretty little wife! My gentle, innocent, loving, little wife! Do you know . . . that I left my little girl asleep, with her baby in her arms, and with nothing but a few blotted lines to tell her why her faithful husband had deserted her?”” (21). While sailing on international waters, George admits to “deserting” his wife in her sleep, leaving her nothing “but a few blotted lines” to explain his departure.

Nevertheless, the moment he reaches British soil, he changes his tune. Robert Audley’s landlady is shocked to learn of George’s desertion, ““What! . . . him as deserted her so cruel, and left her with her pretty boy upon her poor father’s hands”” (40). Interestingly, George responds, “crying out,” ““I did not desert her!”” (41). Here, he vehemently denies deserting his wife. However, it seems everyone else is able to see the desertion. Even the physician who comes to diagnose Helen as insane can find no fault in Helen’s distress, admitting George placed her in a “desperate” situation (321). When Helen admits to the attempted murder of George, she sights his desertion as the reason for her “hating the man” so exceptionally: “I looked upon this as a desertion, and I resented it bitterly—I resented it by hating the man who had left me with no protector but a weak, tipsy father, and with a child to support . . . I recognized a separate wrong done me by George Talboys” (300). Although everyone, including George, admits that Helen was unjustly deserted by him and left in a dire situation, George is never prosecuted for his actions. He is not legally the deviant party. He is entitled to withdraw physically and financially from his wife. Instead, Helen is arrested and sentenced for attempting to survive the deplorable

circumstances George places her in. She is punished for the cruelties inflicted on her by her husband, while Robert Audley understands George to be the victim of Helen's immorality.

Convinced Helen murdered his friend, Robert scours the English countryside, looking for evidence of her guilt. In Helen's former residence at Wildernsea in Yorkshire, her secret letter is uncovered and stolen by Robert. Audley finds circumstantial evidence in a letter Helen wrote to her father. Her letter reads:

I am weary of my life here, and wish, if I can, to find a new one. I go out into the world, dissevered from every link which binds me to the hateful past, to seek another home and another fortune. Forgive me if I have been fretful, capricious, changeable. You should forgive me, for you know *why* I have been so. You know the *secret* which is the key to my life.  
'Helen Talboys' (213).

Helen confesses to being "weary of [her] life" as a destitute wife, abandoned to poverty by her husband. She instead longs "to go out into the world," embrace the freedoms of a single woman, and "seek another home" for herself. She wants the comfort of protection and reliability she was denied with George. Helen Talboys, like Brontë's Helen Huntingdon, must assume a new identity and flee the home to find peace and security. Although not physically and psychologically abused like Helen Huntingdon, Helen Talboys was financially neglected by her husband. Had she not sought work for herself, George Talboy's abandonment would have led to poverty, homelessness, and starvation for Helen and her son. George's economic abandonment is a form of domestic abuse because of the limited power that Helen Talboys possessed as a married Victorian woman. Helen's suffering causes her to reject the Victorian feminine standards. Instead, she attempts to overthrow the bondage of marriage and seek a "new" life for herself.

However, Robert finds deviant and dangerous behavior in Helen's desire to seek a new life. He knows she married Sir Audley to gain her new life and tried to murder George to keep

her secret. He approaches her with the evidence, declaring “When Helen Talboys left her father’s house at Wildernsea, she left a letter behind her—a letter in which she declares that she was weary of her old life, and that she wished to seek a new home and a new fortune. That letter is in my possession” (230). Robert Audley takes Helen’s narrative and uses it to prosecute her for murder and lock her away as a madwoman. Since Helen choose to find freedom outside of the home and the bonds of marriage, she is considered by Robert Audley to be a moral deviant, unable to make ethical decisions for herself. In fact, Robert no longer views her as a woman—a human being. Instead, in his eyes her sins transform her into a “demoniac incarnation:”

“Henceforth you must seem to me no longer a woman; a guilty woman with a heart which in its worst wickedness has yet some latent power to suffer and feel; I look upon you henceforth as the demoniac incarnation of some evil principle” (294). Audley associates Helen’s lack of morality to the corruptive influence of Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth: ““Do you remember what Macbeth tells his physician, my lady?’ asked Robert gravely. ‘Mr Dawson may be very much more clever than the Scottish leech; but I doubt if even *he* can minister to the mind that is diseased’” (226). For Audley, her deviant behavior has “diseased” her mind, causing her to be a danger to society.

Because she is deemed immoral and incapable of making decisions that follow the Victorian ethical standards, she is diagnosed as mad. When the physician comes to diagnose Helen, he asks Robert, ““You would wish to prove that this lady is mad, and therefore irresponsible for her actions” (320). Robert responds, ““Yes, I would rather, if possible, think her mad. I should be glad to find that excuse for her’” (320). In this moment, Robert gives himself away. Helen is not really insane; rather, she is morally corrupt, making madness, or feeble-mindedness, a valid “excuse” for her deviant behavior. As Zedner explains:

‘feeble-mindedness’ came to be seen as a major social problem, a source of social dangerousness, and the causal link in a wide range of deviant behavior . . .

[Feeble-mindedness] rediagnosed [women] as blighted by a mental incapacity for making correct moral judgements and, therefore, as incurable inadequacies. In turn, this diagnosis removed those thus labelled from the sphere of criminality by redefining them as irresponsible. (264-5)

It is not that Helen is mentally unstable. Instead, she is unwilling to submit to the abuse of her first marriage. She will not maintain her place as the subordinate wife. Therefore, she is “irresponsible” and a danger to society.

Initially, the physician does not want to diagnose Helen as mad. He asserts: “I do not believe that she is mad . . . because there is no evidence of madness in anything that she has done” (321). Nevertheless, in a few lines, he completely changes his mind:

‘There is latent insanity! Insanity which might never appear; or which might appear only once or twice in a life-time . . . acute mania; but its duration would be very brief, and it would only arise under extreme mental pressure. That lady is not mad; but she has the hereditary taint in her blood. She has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence. I will tell you what she is, Mr. Audley. She is dangerous!’ (323)

Ihsen Hachaichi notes, “Dr. Mosgrave’s comment suggests that Robert Audley has ascribed the label of madness to Lucy because she has deviated from the average norms of institutionalized female behavior” (92). Her “prudence of intelligence” and her unwillingness to subjugate herself to abuse makes her a “danger” to society’s standards, “she has failed to complement hegemonic masculinity in a relationship of subordination” (Hachaichi 93). Her dangerous behavior compels the men to incarcerate her away in order to keep her moral “disease” from infecting the rest of society. The physician articulates the fear her deviant behavior manifests: “From the moment in which Lady Audley enters that house . . . her life. . . will be finished. Whatever secrets she has will be secrets for ever! . . . But as a physiologist and as an honest man I believe you could do no better service to society than by doing this; for physiology is a lie if the woman I saw ten minutes again is a woman trusted to be at large” (324). Helen’s morality is incongruent to the Victorian

societal standards and cannot be “trusted to be at large.” By sentencing her to a mental institution, Robert Audley is doing a “service to society.”

Yet Helen Talboys’ ardent testimony cannot help but raise questions in the minds of her readers. Legally, she has committed bigamy and attempted murder. However, on closer inspection, Lady Audley is merely attempting to survive her hostile Victorian world after being abandoned by her first husband. Helen Talboys flees for safety in the wealth and security of her second husband in the same manner that Helen Huntingdon flees the evils of Arthur Huntingdon for the sanctuary of Gilbert Markham. Helen Talboys knows she has no legal rights or protection as a married woman. Once she is abandoned, she is helpless and financially destitute. Helen’s marriage into the Audley family is an act of survival. Thus, her “trial,” conviction, and punishment sparks outrage among the readership

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

In his lecture entitled “Of King’s Treasuries,” John Ruskin argues that books permit an author to simultaneously “speak” to thousands of readers at once. For Ruskin, books allow the author to “preserve” his or her voice and the truths they wish to convey: “But a book is written, not to multiply the [author’s] voice merely, but to preserve it. The author has something to say which he perceives to be true and useful, or helpfully beautiful” (8). In light of Ruskin’s revelation, we must examine what truths the writers Anne Brontë, Wilkie Collins, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon wished to “preserve” in the minds of their readers. All three novels depict moments where the male characters silence the female voices of Helen Huntingdon, Marian Halcombe, Laura Farlie, and Helen Talboys. However, the silence inflicted upon these female characters serves a significant purpose. These women are not mere victims of a faulty Victorian system, but instead empower their Victorian readership to question the plight of women in order to alter Victorian divorce laws, women’s legal standing, and debilitating Victorian gender ideals. Although the men in their lives strived hard to wipe the voices of these women from the novels, the echoes of the female character’s testimonies still remain in the minds of the reader. These women do not remain casualties of a Victorian patriarchy, but instead create sympathy in their readership, which invokes a need for change. In this final concluding section, I want to examine how the female narratives we have discussed are “preserved.” How they impacted their audience

to insight a change of mind. Essentially, I want to ask what is at stake for both the female and male readership.

In the Preface to the second edition of *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë confesses that her novel was meant to warn “thoughtless girl[s]” from falling for dangerous men like Arthur Huntingdon: “I would not be understood to suppose that the proceedings of the unhappy scapegrace . . . are a specimen of the common practices of society: the case is an extreme one . . . but I know such characters do exist, and if I have . . . prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain” (4). *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *The Woman in White*, and *Lady Audley’s Secret* act as warnings to Victorian women readers, using extreme, “sensationalized” male characters to demonstrate the cruel reality of domestic abuse. Brontë, Collins, and Braddon use the narratives of their female characters as spokespersons, vocalizing the harsh treatment of women. Also, these novels warn women against dangerous men, such as Arthur Huntingdon, Count Fosco, and Sir Percival that attempt to steal away the female voice. Within these novels, the dangerous men are easily spotted, and these men’s actions evoke a sense of horror among the Victorian readership. Their actions are vile and unforgiveable. The novels attempt to warn women of the cruelty, manipulation, and suppression that these kinds of men will undertake in order to prevent Victorian women from being duped by their charms, like Helen Huntingdon and Laura Fairlie. The poor choices made by Helen Huntingdon and Laura Fairlie almost silenced their voices forever. Brontë, Collins, and Braddon do not want their female audience to suffer the same fate of silenced. Brontë desires for all her female audience to be able to declare without fear of legal or social retribution: “when I feel it my duty to speak an unpalatable truth, with the help of God, I *will* speak it,

though it be to the prejudice of my name and to the detriment of my reader's immediate pleasure as well as my own" (4)

That noted, Brontë, Collins, and Braddon also wish to warn women against allowing their voice to be silenced by good-natured Victorian men. Either consciously or unconsciously, Gilbert Markham and Walter Hartright usurp the female narrative for themselves. Although they attempt to bring the female plight to life, they do so in a manner that discredits the female voice. They edit their narratives, stripping away what is essentially "feminine" and removing the woman's authority over her own voice. In many ways, this unconscious usurpation of narrative by Markham and Hartright serve to demonstrate how engrossed the Victorian gender roles have infiltrated the male psyche. Even after trying to help the women within their stories, Gilbert and Walter cannot help but assume control over the female narrative for themselves. According to John Stuart Mill, Victorian gender entitlement was a disease that begins at birth and slowly consumes the male psyche, writing:

Think what it is to a boy, to grow up to manhood in the belief that without any merit or any exertion of his own . . . by the mere fact of being born a male he is by right the superior of all and every one of an entire half of the human race . . . What must be the effect on his character, of this lesson? And men of the cultivated classes are often not aware how deeply it sinks into the immense majority of male minds. For, among right-feeling and well-bred people, the inequality is kept as much as possible out of sight . . . (80-1)

From birth, Victorian boys were raised to see themselves as superior to women and Victorian girls were seen as inferior. This gendered division infiltrates how the respective genders view themselves and their counterparts. Brontë, Collins, and Braddon want women to understand how "deeply" this psychological manipulation "sinks into the immense majority of [Victorian] male minds" and to urge their female readers to guard their narratives against male usurpation. The

novelists do not want their Victorian female readers to experience the narrative silence that their characters endured.

Moreover, Brontë, Collins, and Braddon want to break the social stereotypes that hinge women into a specific (and impossible) feminine ideal. For example, Helen Huntingdon becomes a professional artist, while Marian Halcombe becomes a detective, spy, and saves her sister from the horrors of an insane asylum. In a different manner, Braddon creates a parody of Helen Talboy's alter ego, Lucy Graham. In all respects, Lucy is the epitome of the Victorian "angel." However, Lucy is not Helen's true nature. It is a mask that she must wear to protect herself against Victorian society. When the mask finally comes off and "My Lady Tells the Truth," she is found to be "cunning" and "intelligent," aspects that deem her "dangerous" to society and require permanent separation from the world. Women need to be aware that their intelligence is a value and not a hindrance to society. Women should be permitted to think and write for themselves and not be silenced as "mad" by a male audience for such rudimentary ambitions.

Not only do Brontë, Collins, and Braddon wish to warn the Victorian female readership against narrative usurpation and silence, the authors also wish to speak to the male readers who resemble Gilbert Markham and Walter Hartright—the decent Victorian men who hold the legal power to enact change. The novelists wish to expose their male readership to the realities of the Victorian wife's condition. The authors chose to expose their male readers to the horrors of Arthur Huntingdon, Count Fosco, and Sir Percival in order to portray the helplessness that Victorian women have to flee these brutal conditions. Because they have no access to their own income, these women must flee, like Helen Huntingdon, Marian Halcombe, and Helen Talboys, penniless and destitute. In the words of Helen Huntingdon, fleeing her husband is "madness"

(298). By speaking to their male audience about these atrocities, these authors believe they will be able to legally change the plight of women. They want their male readers to sympathize with the poor circumstances that these women are in and then feel compelled to offer legal sanctuary for women who are in abusive relationships.

Moreover, Brontë, Collins, and Braddon ask that their male audience not only change the legal circumstances surrounding Victorian divorce, but also interrogate themselves, cause themselves to question how they treat women. Do they inadvertently silence the women in their lives? Are they like Gilbert and Walter and feel that feminine sympathies are unnecessary and, thus, drown out the feminine voice with their own? As John Stuart Mill asserts, have Victorian men become immune to recognizing their own dominance: “people are little aware, when a boy is differently brought up, how early the notion of his inherent superiority to a girl arises in his mind . . . how it is inoculated by one schoolboy upon another . . . and how sublime and sultan-like a sense of superiority he feels, above all, over the woman whom [he marries]” (81).

Through their novels, Brontë, Collins, and Braddon wish to break the cycle of “inherent [male] superiority” and allow women the freedom to make their voices heard, not only legally but socially as well. They want to stop the gendered biases placed on women as the “angel” and “moral guide,” and instead simply allow women to be women—without any unnecessary obligations. Most importantly, men must be aware and supportive of this movement. As the social and legal leaders of Victorian society, men have to become aware of and take a stand against the silencing of women. They need to undermine the Victorian social constructs and allow women to voice their opinions and not be considered “feeble-minded” for doing so.

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## VITA

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