The Madwoman Outside the Attic: Eavesdropping and Narrative Agency in *The Woman in White*

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> The hiding of a crime, or the detection of a crime, what is it? A trial of skill between the police on one side, and the individual on the other. When the criminal is a brutal, ignorant fool, the police in nine cases out of ten win. When the criminal is a resolute, educated, highly intelligent man, the police in nine cases out of ten lose. If the police win, you generally hear all about it. If the police lose, you generally hear nothing. And on this tottering foundation you build up your comfortable moral maxim that Crime causes its own detection! Yes—all the crime you know of. And what of the rest?
>
> (*The Woman in White*)

Frederick Walker's poster for the Olympic Theatre's 1871 dramatic adaptation of *The Woman in White* portrays a woman clothed in white who looks fearfully about her as she passes through a doorway or large, shuttered window.[1] The background's dark, starlit sky and the woman's frightened glance evoke a nighttime setting of mystery and suspense. The poster could represent any of several women in Wilkie Collins's 1860 novel *The Woman in White:* the first woman in white whom Walter Hartright and the reader encounter, later identified as Anne Catherick; Laura Fairlie, who, dressed in white as she walks on the terrace on the first evening of Walter's stay at Limmeridge House, possesses a striking resemblance to Anne; or as the black-and-white illustration suggests, a reversed image of Marian Halcombe as she embarks on her dangerous mission of aural surveillance in the middle of the narrative. The fact that the evocative woman of the title can refer to many of the text's female characters indicates the tenuousness of women's identities in the narrative. The ambiguity of the woman depicted and the fear she exhibits as she leaves a protected space reflect the novel's preoccupation with individual identity and with

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Figure 1. Frederick Walker, "The Woman in White," courtesy of the Tate Gallery, London/Art Resource, New York.

the danger that women incur in leaving the spaces and activities deemed proper to them.[2] Eavesdropping—an *improper* activity on the border between inside and outside, private and public—figures transgression in the novel. An eavesdropper steals the secrets of private life and controls their dissemination in the public realm; by withholding or revealing people's secrets, the eavesdropper determines their social identity. In *The Woman in White* illicit overhearing reveals anxieties about the vexed relations between gender, identity, and narrative and social agency.

Numerous critics have examined these complex issues in Collins's novel, although none has considered specifically how eavesdropping represents the intersection of such concerns and the transgression of conventional attitudes toward them in the novel—that is to say, how this particular narrative device aids in the telling of the story and subtly

comments on the story being told and its ideological implications.[3] Peter Thoms is one of the few critics to examine in detail Collins's "use of structure for thematic purposes."[4] However, in reading the characters' development as a "movement from a false story or a 'plot' to the possession of a true story," he considers all three protagonists' stories (Walter's, Marian's, and Laura's) as forming a single, collective tale which stands in opposition to the conspirators' intrigue (55). Consequently, Thoms does not consider how the repeated emphasis of composite construction calls attention to the problematic relations in the novel between narrative agency, identity, and *gender*. Women have very different narrative opportunities than men do in the novel. Although it seems Marian and Walter contribute equally to solving the mystery, Walter ultimately controls what is told to whom. Tamar Heller convincingly argues that Walter, representing the "professional man who, by the novel's end, reasserts the division between male professionalism and domesticity," replicates Collins's own need to distinguish himself from the realm of domesticity and women in order to establish himself as a professional male writer.[5] Moreover, this intratextual competition between male and female writers for authorial control parallels Collins's anxious rivalry with specific female authors such as the deceased Charlotte Brontë, the creator of the original "madwoman in the attic," as well as George Eliot, the "masculine" and socially unconventional woman writer whose recent *Adam Bede* (1859) had established her as a major English novelist.

In the complicated narrative and social environment of *The Woman in White,* eavesdropping spatially represents the interaction of social, institutional, and narrative forces operating in the novel.[6] Eavesdropping, the usurpation of other people's private information for one's own ends, suggests the unsanctioned transfer and use of narrative information from speaking subject to listener, and from writer to reader within a text. Ideologically, given its liminal position in the space between the private conversation and the realm of public knowledge, eavesdropping dramatizes the struggle for the control of a story and its dissemination. The recurrent acts of illicit overhearing in Collins's text suggest that this novel in particular, and perhaps novels in general, are composed of deviant activities and the attempts to suppress them. The novel itself represents a space of female narrative activity and mobility which eventually is contained and enclosed in reassuring, conventional, patriarchal structures, structures that confirm the normative gender ideology of the novel's conventional readers.[7] Moreover, because the very distinction between private and public spheres is bound up with middle-class Victorian assumptions about gender, eavesdropping in *The Woman in White* foregrounds the relationship between narrative agency and the determination of sexual and social identity.

The foremost transgression in *The Woman in White* is, in fact, against conventions of gender: those Victorian assumptions about women's passivity and men's activity.[8] Beginning with the declaration that "This is the story of what a Woman's patience can endure, and what a Man's resolution can achieve,"[9] the authoritative narrator of the preamble asserts that gender roles are fixed and absolute. Initially unidentified, this narrator delegates to Walter Hartright the power to "be heard first" and establishes him as the prime organizer of the narrative (33).[10] Thus the pen begins firmly in the male hand, and the power to write or tell represents the ability to act or do. The juxtaposition of woman's passive endurance and man's active will, however, quickly breaks down. Although the conclusion will confirm and legitimate the fixed gender categories of the beginning, the narrative itself thrives on, indeed owes its existence to, instances of transgression to all kinds of social and narrative codes: gender, law, privacy. In such an environment, eavesdropping serves as both narrative strategy and metaphoric representation of this subversive activity.

The narrative space of *The Woman in White* presents a struggle for authority that ultimately reaffirms the social and institutional status quo. Those individuals who threaten and transgress conventional boundaries of law, narrative, and gender are punished.[11] Sir Percival and Count Fosco's attempt to rewrite Laura's identity and hence usurp her fortune ostensibly stands as the central crime in *The Woman in White*. Yet in this story of complicated plots and plotting, eavesdropping reveals not just the collusion between men to steal a particular woman's social identity and the wealth that accompanies it, but more radically, a collaboration between narrative representation and female confinement. Far from demonstrating simply that good characters, whether male or female, triumph over evil ones, *The Woman in White* reveals a collusion of male narrative forces to limit female narrators and characters. The narrative is further complicated in its presentation of multiple patriarchal figures competing among themselves for control of stories and identities. The final confrontation between male antagonists Walter and Fosco can occur precisely because Marian, like Anne Catherick, "a dangerous woman to be at large" (177), has been finally enclosed within the "asylum" that Walter has provided for her and her narrative voice has been silenced.[12]

Indeed, this narrative world presents women's institutional fate in a system of the male-dominated social establishment. As Count Fosco tells Marian, "English Society, Miss Halcombe, is as often the accomplice as it is the enemy of crime" (258). *The Woman in White* tells the story of this secret crime. Sir Percival appears as the villain of the piece, and only later do characters and the reader realize that Fosco is the more deadly criminal. A third, even more insidious enemy of female narrative agency lurks within the pages of the novel; in retrospect, he is actually more treacherous through

his seeming alliance with the female characters. This most hidden menace is none other than our central narrator, Walter Hartright; his crime goes undetected by the novel's characters and its more conventional readers.[13]

The opening of *The Woman in White* suggests why this central crime and hidden danger pass unremarked, proposing as it does an absolute division between public and private spheres, sanctioned and unsanctioned eavesdropping, authorized and unauthorized narratives. This section is entitled the "preamble," a term usually referring to the preliminary statement of a formal, legal document. As such, the novel's beginning asserts that the narrative itself imitates the proceedings of a court of law and deliberately models the presentation of a legal case, with individual narratives representing the accounts of different "witness[es]" (33).[14] The narrative makes explicit that the reader, as well as the characters, becomes invested with the powers of judgment and must be convinced of an individual's social and moral legitimacy; social institutions determine personal identity.[15] The courtroom presents a public, sanctioned overhearing which is always accompanied by a written account of the proceedings; it is an oral and written act which always purports to "set the record straight" by first establishing the "truth" and next writing it down, thus lending the act a legitimacy and a permanency. Such writing is always in the public domain. In fact, the judgment or verdict in turn becomes part of a larger legal narrative of case history and precedent, so that a ruling in one case establishes the authority of an argument in succeeding ones.

In contrast, both private conversations and diaries operate under the assumption of confidentiality. However, in *The Woman in White,* all writing falls in the public domain; private notes, letters, and diaries are subject to constant interception and circulation among a larger audience than the one for which they were intended. The lawyer Mr. Gilmore notes the danger of being "obliged to commit to writing questions which ought always to be discussed on both sides by word of mouth" (163). Yet even such discreet conversations, in this novel, are subject to illicit overhearing; private and secure conversations or writing seem impossible. Eavesdropping and unsanctioned reading of private documents stand as the criminal correlatives of the public, sanctioned overhearing which the court of law requires to regulate all forms of transgression.

The preamble, by invoking "the Law" as the ultimate authority, and by investing the reader with the same kinds of power of judgment as legal justice ("As the Judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now"), establishes the novel as a substitute tribunal where transgressions to social order will be punished, since "the machinery of the Law [cannot] be depended upon to fathom every case of suspicion, and to conduct every process of inquiry" (33).[16] In a novel where written narrative stands in for oral testimony, the acquisition and eventual transcription of oral

information into written document becomes an activity which must be guarded and controlled, for it confers legitimacy upon both the story and its teller.[17] The struggle for narrative authority thus involves both the power to control an individual's identity as well as the public account of it.

In *The Woman in White,* crime often centers on acts of eavesdropping or forgery: aural or written trespassing, intruding on or appropriating the property of other individuals. The information an individual gathers aurally (or through secret reading of private writing) provides the material for his or her writing of another person's story, the usurpation of that individual's identity, and the titles to rank and property that accompany it. In addition to the attempted theft of Laura's identity and fortune, the two other crimes which Sir Percival and Count Fosco are found to have perpetrated at the conclusion of the novel are, respectively, forgery (the creation of a false legitimacy and title by adding a line to a marriage register) and counterrevolutionary spying (illicitly acquiring information about others to prevent them from challenging the political establishment). In such a narrative milieu, eavesdropping spatially locates and figures acts of narrative, whether they aim to uphold or subvert the narrative or social order.

Yet just as individual characters eavesdrop upon each other and determine what pieces of information are relevant to them, here the reader is specifically positioned, even enjoined by the preamble, to overhear other people's stories and make judgments about them. Does this imply that the reader, as a metanarrative eavesdropper, also is to be punished for his or her listening in on stories about other people? Hardly. Because readers' listening is, as the preamble indicates, a sanctioned overhearing, one which the narrative itself sets up, indeed requires, it affords us the luxurious position of committing seemingly illicit activity, with all the seduction of forbidden fruit, yet without fear of punishment. Our eavesdropping provokes judgment in us, the judgment which the narrative itself requires in order to accomplish its stated purpose of proving the guilt of certain characters, re-establishing the identity of Laura Fairlie Hartright, and in doing so, asserting the right of other characters to positions of rank, title, and authority. But the "truth" which the novel presumes to tell "always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect" is actually a narrative of devious and manipulative strategies which enacts its own textual usurpations and incarcerations (33).[18]

* * *

Collins described the "central idea" of his work as

> a conspiracy in private life, in which circumstances are so handled as to rob a woman of her identity . . . The destruction of her identity

> represents a first division of the story; the recovery of her identity marks a second division.[19]

The woman he refers to is the novel's heroine, Laura Fairlie, whose husband Sir Percival Glyde conspires with his friend Count Fosco to replace her with the mentally and physically frail Anne Catherick and imprison Laura in Anne's place. Once the false Lady Glyde had died, Laura's fortune would pass to her husband and his partner in crime. Part of the "conspiracy in private life" is precisely the fact that this novel is not "private," but consists of a plot against privacy and private information; Laura recovers her identity only through the dissemination of private information to a larger public audience, and through public recognition of her by the male villagers and farm laborers on her estate, who collectively vote her into existence at the end of the novel, and who, like the reader, are told only part of the story upon which they render a verdict. However, *The Woman in White* is not just about the usurpation of Laura's identity but also about the confiscation of the identity of the other female protagonist in the novel, and one of the novel's central eavesdroppers and narrators: Marian Halcombe. Besides the overt subjects of crime and punishment, *The Woman in White* also presents Marian's transgression of the unwritten laws of proper female behavior, and the ensuing discipline and incarceration to which she is subjected. The three other women in the novel—Madame Fosco, Anne Catherick, and her mother, Mrs. Catherick—offer similar examples of transgressive female energies and the retributive, male efforts to curtail this activity.

In an age where "'moral insanity' redefined madness not as a loss of reason, but as deviance from socially accepted behavior," any woman could be called "insane" who exhibited behavior considered "abnormal or disruptive by community standards."[20] Anne Catherick represents mental disorder; *The Woman in White* simultaneously presents and criticizes the Victorian system of benevolent, paternal "moral management" to care for her mental and physical illness. Yet the novel more subtly enacts the same kind of "management of women's minds" on other female characters who in different ways stand as figures of deviance and transgression; and in doing so, it offers to Collins's more conventional readers a reassuring reestablishment of the social order and woman's place within it.[21] In a text which foregrounds the importance of writing and narrative control in determining an individual's social power, this institutionalization of "mad" women and other deviants takes place on a narrative level: they are eventually written into limited roles or written out of the story altogether.

* * *

The first number of *The Woman in White,* published in *All the Year Round* (1859), concludes with the following exchange, overheard by Walter Hartright, between a policeman and two men in a carriage:

> "Policeman!" cried the first speaker. "Have you seen a woman pass this way?"
> "What sort of woman, sir?"
> "A woman in a lavender-coloured gown—"
> "No, no," interposed the second man. "The clothes we gave her were found on her bed. She must have gone away in the clothes she wore when she came to us. In white, policeman. A woman in white."
> "I haven't seen her, sir."
> "If you or any of your men meet with the woman, stop her, and send her in careful keeping to that address. I'll pay all expenses, and a fair reward into the bargain."
> The policeman looked at the card that was handed down to him.
> "Why are we to stop her, sir? What has she done?"
> "Done! She has escaped from my Asylum . . ." (55)

Walter's secret acquisition of the information that the woman whom he just helped has escaped from an insane asylum causes him to reexamine his actions. He wonders whether his promise "to leave her free to act as she pleased" was "ill-considered," despite the fact that in his encounter with her, "the idea of absolute insanity which we all associate with the very name of an Asylum, had . . . never occurred to me, in connection with her"; "nothing, in her language or her actions," appears "to justify" her incarceration (55). Indeed, when asked by the policeman what this person has "done," the only crime of which she can be accused is having escaped the place where she was being held against her will. Yet Walter ponders whether he has "assisted the victim of the most horrible of all false imprisonments to escape; or cast loose on the wide world of London an unfortunate creature, whose actions it was [his] duty, and every man's duty, mercifully to control" (55). In this state of uncertainty, Walter not only reveals his own desire to judge, categorize, and sentence women, but recalls the novel's initial self-presentation as a space of judgment. Significantly, the preamble of the novel confers upon Walter a privileged status within the larger narrative: it gives him the right to "be heard first" and establishes him as the prime organizer of the narrative, who determines what (or who) fits where (33). Just as Mr. Fairlie hires him to "arrang[e] and moun[t]" his masterpieces, the unidentified narrator, in essence, engages Walter to arrange all the pieces of this master's story (*Riverside,* 9). Walter's need to decide whether this as of yet unidentified woman should be permitted to remain at liberty parallels the larger

narrative's demand to determine where women in general belong, when they should be allowed freedom, and when is it "every man's duty, mercifully to control" them.

What remains hidden until the lawyer, Mr. Gilmore, begins his section of the narration is the fact that Walter himself has devised the plan of "presenting the story to others, in the most truthful and most vivid manner" by having it told "at each successive stage in the march of events, by the persons who were directly concerned in those events at the time of their occurrence" (150). Walter introduces himself as merely a narrating and organizing character and obfuscates his other role as author of the preamble. By associating the preamble with the authority of the Law, the distanced, anonymous, impartial institution, Walter hides the fact that such institutions, like the preamble itself, are *man*-made, and that they, too, often assert the rights, privileges, and authority of some individuals (and their stories) over others.[22]

The end of the first installment raises the question of the need to contain a potentially dangerous woman, the mysterious "woman in white" whom Hartright has met on a deserted road in the middle of the night. Just as Walter ponders whether he has behaved properly in permitting this woman to remain free to act, the novel itself operates between these two poles of freedom and containment of female power. D. A. Miller perceptively registers the confusion of distinct, rigid gender categories in this novel. In his seminal argument about readerly feeling in Collins's sensation novel, Miller stresses homosocial relations and the repression of homosexuality in the construction of gender.[23] He inverts the traditional formulation of male homosexuality as a woman's spirit imprisoned in a male body, and suggests that Marian Halcombe, the most compelling female character and narrator in the novel, represents "*anima virilis in corpore muliebri inclusa*": a man's spirit imprisoned in a female body.[24]

Yet *The Woman in White* is not primarily the story of, "on the one side, a passive, paranoid homosexual feminization; on the other, an active, corroborative, heterosexual masculine protest." Miller's argument rests on the initial erroneous assumption that the reader is male,[25] whereas Collins indicates a presumed audience of men and women, in the preface to the second edition of novel, and fluctuates in addressing a male or a female reader (or both) in the body of the novel itself (32, 76, 79, 88). Miller subsumes "the sequestration of the woman" into a larger argument about how normative heterosexuality represses homosexuality.[26] In doing so, he does not explore the implications of Marian as a woman writer, and by extension, the relation between women's narrative agency and social power in the novel. Thus, by focusing on only one aspect of her character, his reading replicates the novel's incarceration of the female narrative subject, for he puts Marian's story to his own (gay) male ends.[27] In addition,

Miller's argument relies on a vocabulary of visual surveillance, instead of eavesdropping, which specifically involves the control of language, and thus offers greater resonances for a discussion of narrative and narrating subjects.

The narrative space that constitutes the body of *The Woman in White* is less a region of either/or, and more a representation of liminality. It manifests a resistance to dichotomies of black or white, masculine or feminine.[28] The narratable defies such ordering activities; not surprisingly, narrative closure involves the reestablishment of fixed social positions and absolute gendered identities. Mr. Fairlie, whose "effeminately small" feet are shod in "little womanish bronze leather slippers" and who has "a frail, languidly-fretful, over-refined look," presents an appearance that is "unpleasantly delicate in its association with a man, and, *at the same time,* something which could by no possibility have looked natural and appropriate if it had been transferred to the personal appearance of a woman" (66 e.m.). But Mr. Fairlie's pale delicacy appears to be a *Fairlie* trait, a characteristic passed down on the *father's* side that both Laura and her half-sister Anne inherit, and which Marian, who resembles her mother, does not.[29] Thus Collins renders suspect the contemporary belief that women were primarily responsible for the hereditary transmission of madness or degeneracy, as characterized by weakness, nervousness, and languor.[30] The mesh of contradictory doublings among characters indicates how Collins complicates the seemingly straightforward dichotomies established in the novel.[31] The effeminate Fosco offers a very different image of the criminal from brutal, macho Sir Percival, just as his massive presence offers a striking foil to his compatriot, the diminutive Pesca. It is "unfeminine" Marian, however, who offers Fosco his closest narrative double, and his equal in intelligence and plotting; indeed, their similarities and attraction to each other provide a distinct counter-example to the traditional couple represented by Laura and Walter.[32] For this reason, eavesdropping, an act which takes place on the boundary between inside and outside, private conversation and public knowledge, and one which foregrounds its liminal, transgressive status, serves as a particularly resonant trope for the narrators themselves and the kinds of narrative activity occurring within this novel.

The first eavesdropping scene also distinctly contradicts the opening sentence of the novel announcing the fixed gender roles that the story presumably will demonstrate, and opens up a narrative space in which the primary narrators present exceptions to orthodox generic characteristics rather than the rule. Walter, instead of exhibiting manly "resolution" here, is characterized by indecision. He presents himself, at the beginning of the novel, as possessing few of the masculine attributes which could be associated with decisive activity, and has, in fact, so bungled his control

over his own finances that his only recourse is a return to a female space, his mother's cottage. This self-portrait acknowledges his position of economic dependence, limited mobility, and marginal status, a situation very similar to that of a Victorian woman (34). In order to be hired by Mr. Fairlie, Walter must "produce testimonials—letters that speak to his character," letters that speak for him, and authorize or confirm his identity (41).[33] Miller also emphasizes Walter's lack of "manliness" in the first half of the novel, but he mistakenly locates the origin of Walter's "feminization" in Anne's touch, her contamination of him on the road to London (152). Walter's "immaturity" obtains even before his encounter with Anne, as his economic inadequacy suggests. Walter must embark on an imperial adventure to Central America in order to return a virile, empowered "changed man," determined and able to wrest back not only Laura's identity and inheritance from Fosco and Sir Percival but control of the narrative from his presumed female ally, Marian Halcombe (427).

In contrast, Marian presents a female character who, even before her defiant act of eavesdropping on Count Fosco and Sir Percival's conversation in the library, violates established Victorian assumptions about gender even as she continually utters them. For instance, she declares, "I am as inaccurate as women usually are" (60). This incongruity, rather than supporting such accepted behavioral norms, suggests their invalidity.[34] In his first encounter with her, Walter describes Marian first in terms of the grace of her figure, which is

> 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. (58)

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 accoutrements of fashion: the stays that normally confine a woman's body. Even her body resists enclosure.[35] Her head rests with "pliant firmness" upon her shoulders, and combines (com)pliancy with a suggestion of will, a characteristic usually attributed in the dichotomy of Victorian gender to men. In fact, this indication of "masculine" traits mingled with "feminine" ones is succeeded, in Walter's close-up inspection of Marian, by the discovery that she is not merely the passive object to be considered and evaluated by "the eyes of men." Instead, approaching her, Walter, "in a flutter of expectation to see her face clearly," gasps to discover the strong, unconventional, and thereby "ugly" features of his new pupil. He describes how

> the lady's complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. She had a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, *resolute* brown eyes . . . Her expression—bright, frank, and intelligent—appeared, while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete. To see such a face as this set on shoulders that a sculptor would have longed to model—to be charmed by the modest grace of action through which the symmetrical limbs betrayed their beauty when they moved, and then to be almost repelled by the masculine form and masculine look of the features in which the perfectly shaped figure ended—was to feel a sensation oddly akin to the helpless discomfort familiar to us all in sleep, when we recognise yet cannot reconcile the anomalies and contradictions of a dream. (58–59, e.m.)

In this passage, Walter reveals the discomfort that a "resolute" woman provokes in him, an uneasiness particularly acute since he has demonstrated thus far a tendency to be less than resolute in his own actions and thoughts. Here, rather than being merely passive subject to the calm evaluation of men's eyes, Marian appears determined, with "resolution" of her own.[36] Walter's first narrative emphasizes her assurance and her "will" which continually bolster his own lack of "manhood" (96, 63). In response to Marian's "fearless sympathy which me[ets him] on such mercifully equal terms," Walter evinces a general "loss of self-control" and "weakness" (95, 97). His position is that of emotionally overwhelmed, speechless, and submissive femininity; hers, that of "fearless," self-possessed, determined masculinity. When he leaves Limmeridge, she presses his hands "with the strong, steady grasp of a man" while "[his] voice falter[s], [his] eyes moiste[n] in spite of [himself]" (148).

In a novel that asserts that it will tell the story of what "man's resolution" can achieve and "woman's patience" can endure, such characterization initially seems incongruous. Marian hardly seems the epitome of ladylike submission or forbearance, but instead embodies a mixture of traits usually considered both masculine and feminine, as does Walter, although his narrative seems less conscious of this fact. Marian appears more fully aware of such gender oppositions, and at the same time, more dubious of their validity. In describing herself and Laura, Marian declares, "she is an angel; and I am—Try some of that marmalade, Mr. Hartright, and finish the sentence, in the name of female propriety, for yourself" (61). In refusing to identify herself as a devil, Marian resists classification in terms of such pure binaries, even though she uses the excuse of "female propriety" to escape such taxonomy. Her ability to manipulate language,

whether oral or written, appears early on. Aware of her situation as a Victorian woman, she puts ironic self-consciousness into words. Nina Auerbach points out how the old maid's "overt supremacy . . . in ordinary life must cover itself with self-effacing rhetoric."[37] Indeed, for Marian irony becomes the rhetorical signature of doubleness. Like her male counterpart Count Fosco, she combines "masculine" and "feminine" attributes in a manner that complicates Victorian assumptions about gender. Marian's description of the Count as "strikingly original and perplexingly contradictory" could be equally applied to herself (242). Just as Anne Catherick does not completely fit into easy categorization according to class (she has "not exactly the manner of a lady, and, at the same time, not the manner of a woman in the humblest rank of life" [48]), Marian refuses classification as essentially "feminine." To Walter, her lack of "gentleness and pliability" and all too "masculine form and a masculine look" make him "almost repelled," and feel "helpless discomfort" (59), because such attributes remove from him the assurance of control and empowerment. 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.[38] Neither completely masculine nor feminine, Marian's indeterminate status places her in an intermediary position between the men and women in the novel, communicating first with Laura, then with Walter, with Madame Fosco as with Fosco himself.[39]

It is precisely this defiance of gender stereotypes that makes Marian so attractive, not only to Count Fosco, but to us as readers.[40] Marian embodies what Barthes calls an erotic space of "intermittence" or betweenness, the space of textual pleasure, for she represents liminality.[41] She constantly refigures conceptions of masculine/feminine, public/private, outside/inside as character-narrator in the novel. Her boundary crossing takes literal form and becomes narrative and narratable event when she eavesdrops upon Count Fosco and Sir Percival's conversation in the library. Her eavesdropping provides a doubly layered, spatial representation of such liminality, since the act of deliberately overhearing is, itself, a transgression of boundaries. Because of its illicit nature and the threat of discovery, eavesdropping involves this Barthesian fascination for the reader (the metanarrative eavesdropper), the continual possibility that the flow of information will be cut off and the eavesdropper caught and punished. Moreover, in preparing to listen to the conspirators' conversation, Marian further represents narrative titillation, for she divests herself of her "white and cumbersome" undergarments, those clothes which offer an obstacle to her unrestricted movement on the ledge of the roof; Marian consciously notes how, in her "present dress . . . no man could

have passed through the narrowest spaces more easily than I" (342). Just as she spies on the two men, gathering information about and from them, the reader can observe her as she performs her utterly clandestine activity in a semi-clad state. We are privileged with doubly private information, for we acquire information about her and about the secret conversation between Fosco and Percival.[42]

To eavesdrop on the conspirators, Marian literally and figuratively assumes a position of power similar to the invulnerable place of the reader or an omniscient narrator: she installs herself on top of the veranda roof, above the two men in the library. In this post, she believes herself to be more protected than downstairs, where she would otherwise be "within reach of Sir Percival and the Count" (342). In listening to and then writing down Fosco's private conversation with Sir Percival, Marian transforms private knowledge into a form which can be easily circulated, reproduced, and transmitted to others who can frustrate the criminals' plots. By transcribing the secret conversation she overhears into her diary, Marian possesses the information necessary to forestall their devious plans, or so she thinks.

Marian's two previous significant actions have been scriptural as well, in the form of letters. Her first letter to Laura's lawyer informing him of Percival and Fosco's activities accomplishes its goal: it temporarily obstructs their plans to force Laura to sign a document which would provide Percival with greater access to her money and diminish her children's inheritance. When Marian writes a second letter to the lawyer informing him of Sir Percival's physical abuse of and threats to his wife, she considers her writing as a surrogate male power. Echoing yet denying the novel's opening sentence, she declares, "our *endurance* must end, and our resistance must begin" (321, e.m.). Marian refuses the role of feminine passivity in favor of linguistic, legal, and later, physical action. Marian's writing enlists the larger institutional power of the law to frustrate Percival and Fosco's plan, and turns the bruise or "mark" on Laura's arm into a "weapon to strike [Percival] with" (321). The mark on the body is translated into a mark on the page, as the battlefield becomes an explicitly textual one. Hence, Marian determines to record the information she obtains in the central eavesdropping scene of the novel, for "the words those two men [would say] to each other would furnish us, not only with our justification for leaving the house, but with our weapons of defence against them as well" (357). Later, Walter will hope to rely again on writing (the duplicate marriage registry) to expose Percival's original crime.[43] In both instances, control of someone else's private story—the threat or the act of putting it into circulation, and specifically, its inscription and dissemination in the public sphere—represents the greatest power over him, for it establishes him as virtuous citizen or monstrous criminal.

In her rooftop eavesdropping on the men in the library (the room which embodies male narrative power and the written evidence of its authority) and in the transcript of her listening, Marian even more fully arrogates to herself the male privileges of mobility, writing, and agency. Unlike the reader's or an omniscient narrator's sheltered listening, Marian's daring act of aural transgression involves no small risk. Her emphasis on the specifically aural aspect of her spying (she declares that "Laura's life itself . . . might depend on my quick ears and my faithful memory" [340]) recognizes the particular danger inherent in this kind of transgressive behavior: the reciprocal threat of being caught, by being overheard in turn. Michel Foucault notes that Bentham had initially envisioned a form of "acoustic surveillance" in his *Panopticon,* but that he abandoned the idea "perhaps because he could not introduce into it the principle of dissymmetry and prevent the prisoners from hearing the inspector as well as the inspector hearing them."[44] Eavesdropping rarely involves a unidirectional flow of information, as Marian learns all too painfully. An unsanctioned listener, she is punished by the person whose informational space she has trespassed upon: Count Fosco retaliates with an extreme violation of her own private textual space.

In an escalation of crime and the response it provokes, Marian's rebellious eavesdropping incurs punishment of both her physical and textual bodies, for in divesting herself of her womanly garments and leaving the domestic space, she has allowed herself to be exposed to the elements and exposed as a woman transgressing boundaries of "appropriate" behavior. Consequently, she catches a fever from having crouched in the rain, outside the protective domestic walls, and Count Fosco not only reads her private journal, in which she has transcribed his conversation with Percival (thus exposing her private thoughts to his gaze), but in an act of even greater violation, he writes his comments about his unsanctioned reading in it as well. The language of "exposure" suffuses this part of the narrative and reinforces the bi-directional danger of Marian's eavesdropping, for just as she hopes to "expose" Percival and Fosco's plot (323), she also exposes herself to the elements and to the men's retributive actions. Fosco's report relates how "Miss Halcombe unhappily exposed herself to be wetted through by a heavy rain" (373). His very language here seems eroticized, invasive, and indicative of the textual violation that follows such physical exposure.

By reading Marian's diary, Fosco reappropriates narrative agency—the ability to direct and shape the course of events—she had temporarily stolen from him. 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. Doubly violated, her textual body becomes his;[45] he possesses her narrative, and

controls its ending. Miller considers this act a textual "rape," but in doing so, he only regards Marian as the passive object of male narrative and desire; he fails to consider what happens to her as writing *subject*.[46] Fosco's appropriation of her most private space of narrative authority—his writing in and on her textual body—redefines its shape, giving it narrative stays that limit its expansion and power. Fosco's act of literary eavesdropping and his punishment of her narrative theft ensure that Marian becomes a much more docile tool in the hands of Walter Hartright, just as Countess Fosco, the woman who once read Mary Wollstonecraft, has been "tamed" to become her husband's "willing instrument," silently listening to "the scraping of [Marian's] pen" (329, 330). 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." Like Madame Fosco, her identifiable sound becomes not the scraping of her pen but the "rustling of her dress" (330). Just as Fosco's writing in and on her textual body punishes her liminal act, it also removes from her the status of a liminally gendered subject. In doing so, Fosco reestablishes the gender binary that her writing and eavesdropping would defy.

With "large, bold, and firmly regular" strokes of his pen, Fosco writes in Marian's diary (358); he strikes her out of the position of "virile," desiring, narrating subject, and into that of the passive, desired, narratable object. Thus, Fosco speaks of his reading the journal in terms of narrative and sexual satisfaction: "I can lay my hand on my heart, and declare that every page has charmed, refreshed, and delighted me" (358). In his self-designated "paternal lines" (359), Fosco patronizingly admires Marian's "tact," "discretion," "easy grace of style," and "charming outbursts of womanly feeling" (358). Although he commends her "wonderful power of memory" and "accurate observation of character" (358), Fosco's critique echoes Victorian literary reviewers who, though often complimentary, established both condescending and constraining standards for evaluating female writers.[47] 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," albeit one who has forfeited further consideration in the sexual economy of the novel.

Marian's reinsertion into traditional sexual stereotypes occurs spatially as well. The eavesdropping madwoman who ventured outside the attic and defied male narratives is domesticated, enclosed within Blackwater Park. Now, instead of being narrating subject who had earlier described the domestic space as "suffocated," "stifled," Marian herself is shut in, restrained within the house whose power to confine rather than

shelter she had noted earlier (220, 227). Marian's claustration removes from her those threatening, monstrous energies that challenge male hegemony. Fosco's inscription excises her from the role of active narrator, so that she becomes "nothing but a woman, condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats for life" (221). She is indeed given a life sentence, "condemned" to wear again the narrative petticoats that she had earlier removed to eavesdrop, and which now hamper her movement. Like Bertha Mason, imprisoned in the attic of Thornfield, Marian is confined within the abandoned, Elizabethan wing of the mansion, where, sick, drugged, and powerless, she poses no threat to Fosco and Sir Percival's plot.[48]

When she eventually recovers from her illness and incarceration, Marian in turn helps her sister escape. But the two women's attempt to prove Laura's identity fails when confronted with the male legal narratives which assert the death of Lady Glyde and the incarceration of the supposed Anne Catherick: the doctor's death certificate (425–26), the "Narrative of the Tombstone" (426), the asylum director's testimony, even the labels on the linen Laura wears which identify her "in good marking ink" as "Anne Catherick, as plain as print!" (448). Marian can no longer contest such male narratives herself, and her hands, once "as awkward as a man's" and used to wield the pen, can now only perform housework, the task which she herself defines as "what a woman's hands *are* fit for" (253, 453). Fosco's inscription on her textual body insures not only that she will not actively interfere in his schemes to usurp Laura's identity (and by extension her property and wealth), but also that his primary narrative opponent becomes Walter Hartright, the male artist-hero. The story becomes one of male pens competing to write women's stories, as well as their own.

Fosco's inscription in Marian's diary serves another function in the narrative. His unauthorized reading is a form of textual eavesdropping and becomes a satisfaction of narrative desire, for he possesses the textual body of the woman who so fascinates him. By presenting his inscription in her diary without previously signaling to the reader that such transgressive narrative activity is occurring, Collins not only surprises the reader and heightens the suspense of his larger narrative. He also suggests the parallel between Fosco's illicit activity and our own. By shocking the reader with the information that we are not the only readers of this presumably private document, Collins draws a further analogy between Fosco's transgressive behavior and our sanctioned eavesdropping on Marian's private words and thoughts; he makes us recognize the potentially transgressive nature of all reading. We are in the same position as Fosco, yet because our reading is acknowledged, even solicited, by Walter with Marian's approval, we are absolved of Fosco's crime, even as we are enabled to experience his titillation. As readers, we are in a privileged

position of legitimate eavesdroppers, and as such, are safe from punishment. Fosco, however, has read Marian's complete diary; we have read, as we later learn, only those portions of her diary which she selects to read to Walter, who then decides what to transcribe for us (456–57). Fosco's narrative trespass is thus more complete and invasive than ours, but his, like Marian's, will not go unpunished.

The second half of the novel stresses Marian's diminished position in the narrative primarily as passive character rather active, narrating subject. Collins presents her now as the male hero's confidante, rather than as his advisor or the chief plotter. Accordingly, Marian's eyes, once so resolute, continually fill with tears, not "like men's tears, with sobs that . . . frighten every one around [her]," as they once did (187); rather, her tears "fall slowly over her cheeks" (453). Indeed, in his first encounter with her upon his return from America, Walter describes her "eyes large and wild, and looking at me with a strange terror in them. . . . Pain and fear and grief written on her as with a brand" (430–31). Walter's impression of Marian could be equally applied to Laura, for both appear to have experienced a great trauma. Both have been incarcerated in different kinds of madhouses and stamped with the same mark of "sorrow and suffering" (120), the mark that was once missing from the blank page of Laura Fairlie. Fosco's "large, bold, and firmly regular" handwriting in Marian's diary parallels the "hard, clear, cruel black letters" on Laura's tombstone. Both women have been "branded" deviant; both written out of the narrative in different ways and denied their respective identities as living, sane Lady Glyde (Laura), and as active, resolute narrator (Marian). One of these acts of identification appears as the story's most serious crime; the other passes undetected.

Walter aids and abets the male criminals' narrative and physical incarceration of Marian. Once in control of the story, Walter refuses to allow Marian to act outside of the house, and even holds her back when she wants to help him confront Fosco (603). He thus treats Marian in the same manner as the criminals in the novel treated her half-sister Laura, and Anne Catherick as well: restraining her in a different asylum, ostensibly to offer her "care and protection," but effectively to curtail her physical activity and silence her story (211). Thus, in Walter's second narrative, Marian appears completely femininized. Her first words to Walter, simultaneously invoke patriarchy and designate him as prime actor: "Father! strengthen him. Father! help him in his hour of need" (430). Instead of telling him what to do, Marian continually seeks and follows his advice. Walter's control of the narrative de-emphasizes Marian's successful rescue of Laura and foregrounds his own exploits (569, 570). Fosco rightly refers to the home Marian, Laura, and Walter establish in London as a "new asylum" (468), for in it, woman's opinion and woman's narrative

are incarcerated and silenced.[49] In fact, Walter's representation of Marian's deferential attitude appears forced, exaggerated, and suggests that his narrative here overcompensates for her earlier, obvious superiority over him. Particularly since Fosco, not Walter, removed Marian from the position of narrative agency, Walter's appropriation of Fosco's achievement reminds us that, in the battle over control of stories and identities, one person's victory may paradoxically abet an enemy's plot.

The ending of *The Woman in White* emphasizes Marian's status as reformed "good angel" of the house, an angel given leave to speak by the newly established patriarch Walter, who, by the conclusion of the novel, has written himself and his wife into legitimacy, and produced male issue (646). Although at the end of the novel Marian presents Walter's son to him, we cannot conclude from this gesture that she represents a form of narrative and sexual potency. Instead, her position is one that Walter grants to her by suggesting "let Marian end our story." Moreover, the final lines of the novel are his; the narrator-scribe writes down for us Marian's last words and then encloses them in his own conclusion, a narrative gesture which repeats earlier incarcerations. Just as Fosco calls his once "tigerish," now fully tamed wife "my angel" (328), Walter's dubbing Marian "the good angel of our lives" signifies the male curtailment of her agency.[50] Her holding "the Heir of Limmeridge" may imply Marian's ability to direct his education and acculturation, but her authority is indirect, oblique; she represents the conventionally feminine power behind the throne.

Consequently, the second half of the novel foregrounds *Walter's* narrative activity, for storytelling constitutes his primary means to regain Laura's identity and patrimony. After stating his "position" and his "motives," he declares that "the story of Marian and the story of Laura must come next" (435). Now it is not just Laura but Marian, too, who seems unable to tell her own story. Instead Walter asserts,

> 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 adviser. So the tangled web will be most speedily and most intelligibly unrolled. (435)

Walter boldly claims for himself the right and the power to tell other people's stories better than they can. He even assumes the position of "guid[ing]" his own "adviser." He admits that "Laura Fairlie" is a "feigned name" for the woman whose identity the narrative has set out to establish; he has, in fact, changed all the names of the characters (563). In

substituting fictitious names for people's real ones, and specifically, for the name of the woman whose identity has been stolen, Walter reenacts her dispossession, ostensibly to protect her; in arrogating to himself the Adamic act of naming, he reserves for himself the power to confer her identity upon her. By this deed, Walter takes from her the very identity which the narrative supposedly returns to her, and in essence, reestablishes the male control of a female textual space, a space to be written on and taken over.

Once we learn this secret, the narrative turns to the incarceration of the final deviant still at large: Count Fosco. Percival has been, through his own rash behavior, incarcerated and punished in the very place where he first forged the history of his legitimacy. Because the narrative of his created identity (his "confession") dies with "Percival," Walter does not have the story in writing, the "proof" the lawyer considers necessary for the assertion of "Laura's" identity (463). Hence Walter vows "to wrest from Count Fosco the confession [he] failed to obtain from his accomplice" (579). By possessing the narrative, Walter will have control over the person.

Walter accomplishes this feat through another series of sanctioned and illicit transmissions of information, notably involving eavesdropping and the transcription of the spoken word onto the page. When Walter points the Count out to his friend Pesca in the hope that the Italian can identify his compatriot, a man with a scar overhears their conversation. Although Pesca cannot identify Fosco, the Count recognizes *him* and flees, followed by the man with the scar. We learn through Pesca's voluntary confession that he is the secretary of a "Brotherhood," the name of which he whispers to Walter, and thus places his life in Walter's hands. By uttering the name of this clandestine group, Pesca gives Walter the power to tell his secret story; he shows Walter the "secret mark" "identified with the Brotherhood," an indelible emblem which all members bear (596). Walter becomes the depository of all secrets, the man who has the power of life and death in his speech and written stories. Pesca's position as secretary, the keeper and recorder of secrets in this group, means that he has a similar power over other members. We also learn of Fosco's "evidently . . . false" name (599) and of the fact that he has repudiated the Brotherhood whose objective is "the assertion of the rights of the people" (595). A character who seems the representation of lawlessness and transgression, Fosco is in fact a counterrevolutionary who wishes, as his wife's obsequious biography declares, to assert "the rights of the aristocracy and the sacred principles of Order" (644).

The final battle between Fosco and Walter is one of words, a contest to see who has the greatest "faculty of arranging his ideas" and controlling their dissemination (613).[51] Walter has sworn to get a confession out of Fosco; he does this through a blackmail of letters—a threat of public

exposure—for his note to Pesca brands Fosco as a traitor to the Brotherhood. To avoid being identified as such, Fosco writes the confession of how he "took [Laura's] identity instead" of her life (632). In return for freedom and control over his own destiny, Fosco gives Walter the narrative which enables him to reassert "Laura's" identity. Essentially, the two men conduct a transaction involving the transfer of ownership of a woman's story and the assertion of male power. In this process, Walter becomes the possessor of the right to tell; he has heard the story prepared for his own "private ear," and can do with it what he pleases (614). Later, his careful editing of the "narrative of the conspiracy" for the Limmeridge tenants is a testament to his complete control over the story (638). Walter ensures that Fosco will only have "the *fact*" of Walter's communication with Pesca, not the letter itself, the "written evidence" which would give Fosco power over the secretary (612).

Yet even when forced to produce a written statement of his guilt, Fosco signs it, like his earlier letter to Marian, with a "flourish" (469, 614). Although a confession, whether forced or voluntary, offers an acknowledgment of crime (and here represents a deposition which provides the *written* proof of criminal activity), Fosco turns a situation which is usually one of contrition into a further assertion of his greatness. The gesture intimates the tenuous nature of Walter's triumph over him. The flourish with which he ends his "confession" suggests an ostentatious display. Indeed, Fosco's confession presents more *braggadocio* than the repentance Walter would have him express. Moreover, in the Count's other two languages, Italian and French, the word for "flourish" suggests other significances pertinent here. The French word *paraphe* (or *parafe*) and the Italian *paraffo* have an equivalent in the English *paraph,* a word which means "a flourish made after a signature, originally as a kind of precaution against forgery."[52] A paraph makes forgery difficult, so that Fosco's concluding narrative gesture offers a mark of authenticity. Fosco's "flourish" represents both the brandishing of his weapon in front of Walter—a gesture of defiance—and a guarantee of the authenticity of his writing and his identity as writer.[53] However, Fosco's identity is as dubious as his other activities. Just as his narrative offers an example of extreme deviousness in counterfeiting other people's identities, the story of his identity proves similarly intricate and difficult to decipher. If, as we have learned, Fosco's name and face are as self-authored as his narrative about Laura, how genuine can this mark of authenticity be? What is the value of a genuine mark of a false name? Even Fosco's confession, the place presumably where mysteries are solved, hints at further secrets and concealment. At the end of his verbal sparring with Walter, Fosco has had the last word.

But even though Walter has agreed not to "put the finger on" Fosco, he has no control over the man who had eavesdropped upon his conversation

with Pesca about Fosco and who had learnt of his identity as a lapsed member of the secret fraternity. This spy's long pursuit of Fosco ends when he cuts on Fosco's physical body the same kind of decisive inscription Fosco has cut on Marian's textual one: the killer carves a "t" (for *traditore*) over the identifying mark of the Brotherhood on the Count's arm. This action identifies him as both a former member and a traitor to the cause. The stories Fosco has tried to write about himself are removed from him; his body, bared and barred from any of the flourishes and embellishments he used to conceal and recreate its contours, is uncovered, just as his imposture is revealed in the narrative (643).[54] Fosco's transgression of social laws is greater than Marian's and incurs a graver punishment. His physical rather than textual body is fatally violated; his secret story is made more public than hers, "exposed to the flippant curiosity of a French mob" (643). The public that views his private body is more universal and impersonal. In Victorian England, the only way to silence a man is to kill him; women can simply be shut up.

Although Fosco's body remains completely displayed and "identified" (644), supposedly "the hand that str[ikes] him [is] never traced" (643). However, Walter identifies the marked man, the man with the visible scar, as Fosco's assassin. He is able to do this work of detection because he inadvertently overhears two conversations: one between Pesca and the assassin, in which the secretary says he will forward a report (641), and the other among people who have just visited the Morgue and seen Fosco's corpse (642). Walter becomes the true "master" storyteller (599), the one who can identify all individuals and place his mark upon them. Although Walter never learns Fosco's real name and "the secret history of his life" (644), he does not need to, for Fosco's ability to act—associated with ability to eavesdrop and appropriate stories, to manipulate his own and other people's tales—ends in the most absolute manner possible; his impersonations and his narrative transformations are terminated, and even his physical body is now unmistakably marked and accounted for, the object of other people's stories. Establishing a new patriarchal law and order—significantly one of bourgeois rather than aristocratic origins—Walter's narrative reassures the more conventional readers of Collins's fiction. However, the narrative overkill required to produce such a restoration of order subtly contests its permanence. Walter's own radical transformation appears suspect, and, in its artificiality, reminds readers of the consummate puppet-master behind the marionettes: Collins himself. And although Walter may know Fosco's entire plot relating to Laura Fairlie, he never learns the full story of the secret society. Once he realizes his own goal of establishing professional and social legitimacy and fending off competitors, he leaves other transgressive conspiracies to proceed unchecked. Walter refrains from any narrative or legal interventions that

might impede the secret machinations of the *Brother*hood; his concerns, like Collins's own, center on establishing his own narrative legitimacy and creating a professional identity marked by separation between himself and the world of domesticity and women.

* * *

The vehement recurrence of *The Woman in White*'s narrative incarcerations suggests an excessiveness with significant implications about Collins's ambivalent, sympathetic yet defensive, attitude toward women's narrative and social agency. His fiction, like his life, demonstrates an anxiety about offering women complete social and economic equality. Although Collins offers abundant portrayals of intelligent, resourceful, and active women, his novels usually retreat toward a more conventional stance regarding women's narrative and social power in their conclusions. Such narrative conservatism represents both his need to satisfy a wide array of readers—from those who accept normative assumptions about gender to those who, like Collins himself, displayed a marked degree of unconventionality in their private social relations—and his rivalry with successful women authors.

The endings to most of his novels intimate that Collins's rebellion against conventional social mores was accompanied by a discomfort with granting women complete social and economic equality. In each of the major novels with an active, transgressive female character, narrative resolution requires the woman to be chastened and purified before she can be accepted into the community. In some cases, such as that of *Armadale*'s Lydia Gwilt (1866), her crimes are so heinous that their expiation requires her death. Others, like *No Name*'s Magdalen Vanstone (1862), must be punished and suitably contrite before they are allowed to marry and reenter the fold of respectability, as Magdalen does when she weds the aptly named Captain Kirk. Valeria Macallan in *The Law and the Lady* (1875) goes further in establishing the legitimacy of women who actively investigate and solve crimes; she proves that her husband did not murder his first wife. But, when forced to choose between publicly declaring his innocence or becoming his ministering angel and the mother of his child, she elects the conventional alternative, and allows her male cohorts to piece together and interpret the narrative that explains the mysterious death of the first Mrs. Macallan. Here, however, although the two men have the last word in solving the puzzle, Valeria is the novel's primary narrator. Like Walter Hartright, who permits Marian to conclude the narrative, Valeria grants the men the semblance of control, while she actually finishes the novel and continues to protect, by word and deed, her morally and physically enfeebled husband. Although Valeria wields narrative

power, by allowing male figures to appear to be in control and by offering an acceptable justification for her actions (conjugal devotion), Collins creates a narrative that offers subversive figures an opportunity to critique normative gender ideology and, at the same time, courts the more conventional readership he needed for popular success.

Collins's own life reflects the same kind of tension between an identification with transgressive figures who challenge social conventions and a distinct uneasiness about the full economic and legal empowerment of those resolute women who so attracted him. Collins's unconventional lifestyle offers an unabashed rejection of normative social relations. He lived with one mistress, Caroline Graves, and her daughter from a previous marriage. At the same time, he established another woman, Martha Rudd, in a separate household; Martha bore him three children whom he acknowledged in his will. Yet Collins demonstrated a relatively traditional stance regarding women's entitlement to economic equality. Whereas he acknowledged his illegitimate children by Martha Rudd in his will, he distinguished between male and female heirs. Although he granted life interests to Caroline and her daughter, and to Martha and his two daughters by her, only his son, Charles William Collins Dawson, received his share as a capital sum.[55] In addition, despite his defiance of conventional attitudes toward marriage, Collins constructed the fictional identity of one William Dawson, solicitor, as a cover for his visits to Martha Rudd Dawson. By posing as her husband, Collins provided the semblance of propriety for their relations and protected his children from public stigma. Although *The Woman in White* was written several years before he began his relationship with Martha, its ending with two domesticated angels seems to anticipate his own disinclination to unite himself with a single woman and indicates his contradictory attitudes toward traditional gender roles within the institutions of marriage and family.

Collins entered the literary marketplace at a time when his most obvious rivals in both sensation and realist fiction were women. Heller's persuasive analysis of Collins's relation to the female Gothic and its nineteenth-century heirs demonstrates how such plots are simultaneously "the source of inspiration and ambivalence."[56] Mrs. Henry Wood's and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensation fiction vied directly with Collins's own. At the same time, as Gaye Tuchman and Julia Swindells point out, the professionalization of literature that was taking place in mid-century emphasized a division between male labor and female domesticity.[57] Collins's handling of a "resolute" female narrator thus has implications for his own situation in the literary marketplace, both within the genre of sensation fiction, and more generally, within the larger category of the novel. George Eliot, the highly intelligent, if not conventionally attractive, acclaimed writer, can be seen as the original Mary Ann who inspired his

Marian Halcombe; the character's domestication and silencing by would-be male authorities and authors within the text suggests Collins's own desire imaginatively to control and contain powerful female competitors.[58] In her representation of marginalized and imprisoned madwomen, Charlotte Brontë offered a compelling precursor to Collins; Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights,* with its series of framed narratives and multiple narrators, presented a impressive model for Collins's own complicated narrative structure in *The Woman in White*. Elizabeth Gaskell, a regular contributor to Dickens's *Household Words* and *All the Year Round,* represented a powerful rival as well. In fact, Dickens solicited serial novels from both Eliot and Gaskell immediately to follow *The Woman in White* in *All the Year Round*. Although both women declined, Gaskell produced "The Grey Woman," a Gothic tale which ran in three parts in the magazine in January, 1861.[59] She also wrote "A Dark Night's Work," a novella that immediately followed Collins's *No Name* as the front-page serial in *All the Year Round* in 1863. Hence, although Collins's novels offer representations of powerful, subversive women, their endings suggest a critical but not radical attitude toward gender ideology. More specifically, they intimate Collins's anxieties about asserting and maintaining his position in the competitive professional market of mid-century Victorian novelists, particularly female rivals.

The Woman in White reveals Collins's ambivalent, sometimes contradictory attitudes toward the complex relations among gender, identity, and narrative agency. It suggests his sympathy for seductive, socially transgressive figures. But the novel also displays his need to court more conventional readers for financial and critical success. It parallels Collins's attraction to resolute, marginalized women, yet his hesitation about granting such women in his own life complete economic and social equality. Finally, it traces his identification and nervous competition with powerful, contemporary women writers. The result is a novel that, in its repeated and increasingly violent acts of narrative incarceration and suppression of subversive energies, paradoxically suggests the inability of such measures fully to contain subversive agents, identities, and narratives. Although Walter may control our access to the narrative, it is the earlier, defiant Marian and Fosco who linger in our minds, long after we close the book. Like the secret Brotherhood, which survives in the margins of Walter's narrative, *The Woman in White*'s subversive narrators, the illicit means by which they acquire information, and their transgressive stories continue to seduce and produce readerly pleasure even as they are relegated to the attic—or the eaves—of the house of Victorian fiction.

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NOTES

1. See Figure 1.

2. Jonathan Loesberg, among others, notes "the concern with identity and its loss" as a recurrent preoccupation of sensation fiction ("The Ideology of Form in Sensation Fiction," *Representations* 13 [1986]: 117). Ronald R. Thomas reads identity as being socially constructed through "some conspiracy of law and medicine" ("Wilkie Collins and the Sensation Novel," *The Columbia History of the British Novel,* ed. John Richetti [New York: Columbia University Press, 1994], 492). See also Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 21; Tamar Heller, *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 139; and Andrew Gasson, *Wilkie Collins: An Illustrated Guide,* consultant editor Catherine Peters (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 83–84.

3. For a summary of the critical interpretations of sensation fiction's stance toward issues of gender not mentioned here, see Loesberg, 136. Critics tend to fall into two camps: those who believe Collins's representation of women offers an unqualified subversion of dominant ideology, and those who believe his narratives offer a sympathetic, if ambivalent attitude toward the situation of women and the need for their greater empowerment. For the former reading, see Sally Shuttleworth, "Demonic Motherhood: Ideologies of Bourgeois Motherhood in the Mid-Victorian Era," *Rewriting the Victorians: Theory, History and the Politics of Gender,* ed. Linda Shires (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 31–51; Susan Balée, "Wilkie Collins and Surplus Women: The Case of Marian Halcombe" *Victorian Literature and Culture* 20 (1992): 197–215. For the latter, see Richard Barickman, Susan MacDonald, and Myra Stark, *Corrupt Relations: Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins and the Victorian Sexual System* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), who argue that "contradictions in Victorian values . . . agitate the narrative voice itself" (18); Sue Lonoff, *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers* (New York: AMS, 1982); Ann Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), who demonstrates that the "figure of the middle-class woman in the sensation novel is . . . alternately privileged and oppressed, in ways that challenge the binary oppositions between those categories" (203); and Heller. My reading falls in this second category of analyses. Collins's novels play with contemporary anxieties about woman's nature; traditional conclusions to these novels suggest an ambivalent if critical attitude about the position of women in Victorian society. Elaine Showalter maintains that Collins's novels of the 1860s "are relatively conventional in terms of their social and sexual attitudes" (*A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977], 162).

4. Peter Thoms, *The Windings of the Labyrinth: Quest and Structure in the Major Novels of Wilkie Collins* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1992), 4–5.

5. Heller, 11; also 110–41.

6. Contemporary reviewers were aware of and censured Collins's use of eavesdropping. Andrew Lang writes of *Armadale,* "We are vexed by the number

of persons who spy, listen, and overhear what was not meant for them" ("Mr. Wilkie Collins's Novels," *Contemporary Review,* January 1890, in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage,* ed. Norman Page [London and Boston: Routledge, 1974], 270–71). Describing *No Name,* Alexander Smith deplores the "monstrosities" of a novel dependent on such activities for its plot (Unsigned review, *North British Review,* February 1863, in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage,* ed. Norman Page [London and Boston: Routledge, 1974], 141). Both essays indicate a concern for the transgressions of seemly behavior, and both suggest the immorality of literature that stoops to present such activities.

7. D. A. Miller discusses how Collins's novel "is profoundly about enclosing and secluding the woman in male 'bodies,' among them institutions like marriage and madhouses," but his argument diverges from mine in the fact that it subsumes the "sequestration of the woman" into an investigation of the disciplining of nonnormative sexual inclinations. He thus turns his discussion away from examining female narrative agency in the novel. See *The Novel and Police* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1988), 155–56.

8. Heller argues that woman's transgression is the "dead secret" of Collins's novels (2).

9. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White,* introduction and ed. Julian Symons (London and New York: Penguin, 1974), 33. All subsequent references cite this edition parenthetically. *The Woman in White* was first published serially in 1859–60 in Dickens's *All the Year Round*. The Penguin text, based on the 1861 edition of the novel, contains minor changes that Collins made when it was first published in book form in 1860, and again in 1861. The Riverside edition (eds. Kathleen Tillotson and Anthea Trodd [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969]) is based upon the serial text as it appeared in *AYR,* but adopts the chronology corrections of 1860 and 1861; henceforth it will be cited as *Riverside,* with references incorporated within the text.

10. Walter Kendrick points out that the preamble was subsumed under the heading of Walter Hartright's first narrative after serial publication ("The Sensationalism of *The Woman in White,*" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 32, no. 1 [1977]: 24). However, the manner in which the preamble refers to Walter in the third person continues to suggest an initial difference between this narrator and Walter. Most current twentieth-century editions (Penguin, Oxford, and Riverside, for example) continue to treat the preamble as separate from Walter's first narrative.

11. U. C. Knoepflmacher notes the "artificiality of this return to convention" in "The Counterworld of Victorian Fiction and *The Woman in White,*" *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction,* ed. Jerome H. Buckley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 365.

12. Many critics examine the double valence of the word "asylum" in *The Woman in White*. See, for example, Jenny Bourne Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 112, and Miller, 171–72.

13. For another reading of how Walter "manipulat[es] . . . the narrative for his own ends" see Pamela Perkins and Mary Donaghy "A Man's Resolution: Narrative Strategies in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White,*" *Studies in the Novel* 22,

no.2 (1990): 392. They consider Collins's criticism of Victorian gender norms as unambiguous. See also Kendrick, 34.

14. John Sutherland notes how Collins stresses "the analogy of *The Woman in White*'s narrative to the process of *law,* as it is ritually played out in the English criminal court" ("Wilkie Collins and the Origins of the Sensation Novel," *Dickens Studies Annual* 20 [1991]: 248). Sutherland discusses the legal cases that may inform Collins's novel.

15. Miller notes the association Collins makes between reader and judge (158). Knoepflmacher notes the "participatory quality" of Victorian fiction in general *(Laughter and Despair: Readings in Ten Novels of the Victorian Era* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971], ix).

16. See Franco Moretti's discussion of the relation between literature and the law in *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), 212. Leila Silvana May asserts that "not only [*The Woman in White*'s] form, but also its content, places it in a self-consciously ambivalent relation to the law," but she examines primarily the law's role in disciplining illicit, often homosexual loves. See "Sensational Sisters: Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*" *Pacific Coast Philology* 30, no.1 (1995): 97.

17. For a discussion of how statements, once written down, acquire the weight and conviction of evidence, see Philip O'Neill, *Wilkie Collins: Women, Property, and Propriety* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 121.

18. Miller suggests that this operates more generally in all narrative (25). Collins's frame narrative denies responsibility for controlling "the facts" even as it shapes them.

19. Wilkie Collins, "How I Write My Books: Related in a Letter to a Friend," *The Globe* (26 Nov., 1887), in *The Woman in White,* ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 596.

20. Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 29. Showalter explains how "the domestication of insanity and its assimilation by the Victorian institution coincide with its feminization" (52). She summarizes how the madwoman must be "purged from the plot" in order for Victorian novel to reach its happy ending (68).

21. Showalter, *Female Malady,* 78.

22. Taylor also notes how Walter hides his position of "general editor" (110). Taylor's reading of the novel stresses the usurpation of individuals' cognitive "perceptions" rather than the aural acquisition and linguistic presentation of such "perceptions" (109).

23. Miller, 146ff., 160. For a discussion of the origins and characteristics of the sensation novel, see Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Walter C. Phillips, *Dickens, Reade, and Collins: Sensation Novelists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1919); and Cvetkovich. Cvetkovich discusses nineteenth-century sensationalism as it relates to the politics and discourse of affect.

24. Miller, 180, 176. See his larger discussion of Karl Ulrich's formulation of male homosexuality and its relevance to the incarceration of the sexually "deviant" (154ff.).

25. Miller, 165, 153, 163.

26. Miller, 156.

27. For a similar criticism of Miller's argument, see Laurie Langbauer, "Women in White, Men in Feminism," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 2, no. 2 (1989): 219–43. She asserts that his essay "shares the attitudes it may also be critiquing," including "a debate between men that ultimately silences [a feminist voice]" (232, 234).

28. O'Neill notes how "The semes which traditionally allow us to identify certain traits as either masculine or feminine exist in a state of flux in *The Woman in White*" (115). See also Loesberg, 131.

29. Taylor discusses the different familial oppositions in the novel and their implications (107–8). Balée analyzes female subversion of traditional gender binaries in the novel (201–4).

30. In *The Physiology and Pathology of the Mind* (1867), Henry Maudsley asserts "Insanity descends more often from the mother than the father, and from the mother to the daughters more often than to the sons" (Henry Maudsley, as quoted in Shuttleworth, 36–37).

31. Many critics note the obvious doublings in the novel. See, for example, Julian Symons, introduction to *The Woman in White* (London and New York: Penguin, 1974), 13. Hughes identifies doubling of both character and incident as integral to the sensation novel (20–21). Some readers indicate the complex and contradictory nature of these juxtapositions. See, for example, Mark Hennelly Jr., "Reading Detection in *The Woman in White,*" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 22, no. 4 (1980): 461.

32. Knoepflmacher points out this attraction between the novel's most engaging yet socially deviant characters ("Counterworld," 366). Marian, however, is simultaneously attracted and repelled by Fosco only when she is an active, writing subject (*Woman in White,* 240, 310). Once he reads and writes in her diary, she feels nothing but her "old loathing" for him; she no longer stands as a desiring subject, but only as desired object (566). In contrast, she has lost none of her attraction for him, because he still holds the position of active, desiring subject (568).

33. Balée describes Walter as "safely emasculated" (203).

34. As Barickman, MacDonald, and Stark observe, "it is often the very blatancy of sexual stereotypes in these novels that alerts us to the complex, psychologically and socially accurate material that the novel is trying both to suppress and to explore" (19).

35. Nina Auerbach also notes "Marian's abandonment of stays" and indicates how this "defiant assertion of new space and scope for herself" threatens Walter and provokes his statement of her "ugliness" (*Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982], 136).

36. The word "resolute" usually signals the amount of power a particular character wields at a given moment. Count Fosco and Walter alternate in claiming for themselves the greatest amount of determination or resolution. Perkins and Donaghy note the "collapse" of gender stereotypes in the novel's use of the word (394–95).

37. Auerbach, 135.

38. For a presentation of the Victorian construction of the ideal "angel of the house" and the dangerous "strong-minded woman," see Elizabeth Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, and William Veeder, *The Woman Question: Society and*

Literature in Britain and America, 1837–1888, vol. 3, *Literary Issues* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 79–110.

39. Moreover, as narrator, she mediates between the reader and the story; her narrative occurs between those of the "irresolute" and "resolute" Walter. See also Miller, 174.

40. Indeed, Edmund Yates relates Collins's account of having received, immediately after the publication of *The Woman in White,* "a number of letters from single gentlemen, stating . . . their wish to marry the original of Marian Halcombe at once." One wonders whether their attraction, however, is to the initial empowered Marian, or the one who, domesticated at the end of the novel, remains within the house and presents Walter with his heir (Collins as quoted by Yates, *Celebrities at Home,* 1879; reprinted in Sucksmith, 592).

41. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text,* trans. Richard Miller (London: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 9–10.

42. See Miller's analogous discussion of the act of reading a novel as the "definitive fantasy of the liberal subject, who imagines himself free from the surveillance that he nonetheless sees operating everywhere around him" (162). I would take issue, however, with the Miller's Foucauldian conclusion about the novel's coercion of its readers, and emphasize instead its ability to engender identification with the most transgressive characters of the novel.

43. There is a distinction between the two acts of writing, however. Sir Percival's illicit writing authorizes his own identity as gentleman of title. To prove "Sir Percival" is guilty of forgery, Walter must produce the authentic document that records precisely the *absence* of writing: the space between entries that proclaims Percival's parents' marriage to be a later illegitimate addition to the registry in the vestry.

44. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 317 n. 3.

45. Kendrick notes the double violation to Marian's text, but he presents it simply as a two-step process of reading and writing (29).

46. Miller, 160. Balée similarly considers this incident a "psychic rape" (203).

47. See Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder, 26–78.

48. My discussion here owes an obvious debt to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's ground-breaking study of female authorship, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979). For a discussion of Collins's transformation of Gothic elements and ideology, see Stephen Bernstein, "Reading Blackwater Park: Gothicism, Narrative, and Ideology in *The Woman in White*" *Studies in the Novel* 25, no. 3 (1993): 291–305. See also Heller *passim*.

49. Kendrick points out that two moral codes operate in the novel, so that the rhetorical deceptions Fosco commits are considered crimes, while those of Walter are "forgivable" because they are necessary for the narrative's "sensational" aspects (34).

50. Although Walter's control is not complete over Marian or her diary (she reads him selections from her journal), Walter then decides what, from the entries read to him, should be included in the larger narrative (456). By the end of the novel, women's power resides solely in their ability to withhold information.

51. As Taylor notes, "Fosco's power is derived precisely from his command of the language and the codes of 'English common sense'" (123). However, the comical, diminutive Pesca has the last *written* word.

52. *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 2:2075. English definitions of *flourish* offer various meanings, including: "to thrive, display vigor in"; "to be at the height of fame or excellence"; "to adorn, decorate, embellish, ornament"; "to display ostentatiously"; "to wave [a weapon] about by way of show or triumph"; "to boast" (*Compact O.E.D.,* 1:1031–32).

53. In agreeing to the exchange of information for freedom, Fosco stresses that the duel between them is both physical and verbal; he demands that Walter give him "the satisfaction of a gentleman for [his] intrusion into [Fosco's] private affairs" and declares, "the time and place, abroad, to be fixed in a letter from my hand . . . contain[ing] a strip of paper measuring accurately the length of my sword" (611).

54. Kendrick notes the "reinscription" that takes place on Fosco's body (29).

55. William M. Clarke, *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins* (London: W. H. Allen, 1988), 7.

56. Heller, 8.

57. Gaye Tuchman with Nina E. Fortin, *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Julia Swindells, *Victorian Writing and Working Women: The Other Side of Silence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

58. I am indebted to U. C. Knoepflmacher for pointing out the uncanny similarity of names and the possible parallels it suggests between fictional and real world competition among male and female writers. Catherine Peters points out the physical resemblance between Collins's description of Marian Halcombe and George Eliot, but she does not develop the implications of this similarity (Catherine Peters, *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins* [London: Secker and Warburg, 1991], 217).

59. See Dickens's letters to George Henry Lewes, dated 14 November, 1859 and to Gaskell dated 20 December, 1859 in *The Letters of Charles Dickens,* ed. Walter Dexter (Bloomsbury: Nonesuch Press, 1938), 3:136, 139.