

Little Rebellions: Wilkie Collins' Exploration of Ideal Femininity

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Abstract

My thesis explores Wilkie Collins' novels construction of ideal femininity in several of his novels. I argue that, contrary to popular critical sentiment, Collins creates ideal or passive female characters who subtly test the boundaries of propriety, rebelling in their own way while remembering issues of decorum and propriety. In my first chapter I examine the conventions of the sensation genre within which Collins is working, while also detailing popular ideas about gender from contemporary critics. I explore the works of a few of Collins' contemporaries such as Dickens, Braddon, and Le Fanu in order to emphasize the ways in which Collins understanding of rebellion and ideal femininity differ from his fellow writers.

In my second chapter I begin my exploration of the primary novels I will use in my thesis: *The Woman in White*, *Man and Wife*, *No Name*, and *The Law and the Lady*. By examining some of the types of secondary female characters he uses in his novels, I indicate the ways in which Collins creates a spectrum of femininity. His exaggeration of desirable feminine traits, as indicated by popular sentiment and conduct manuals, illustrates the ridiculous nature of the requirements women are expected to fulfill.

In my third chapter I detail Collins' use of doubling and the ways in which his passive female characters rebel against conventions and expectations, making it clear that he is attempting to expand the reader's understanding of Victorian femininity. While in his early novels he must rely on doubling to illustrate women's multi-faceted nature, in *The Law and the Lady*, Collins finally achieves a balance. I explore Collins' lesser known novel last, and demonstrate the culmination of Collins' stretch toward uniting rebellious and passive traits in Valeria Woodville Macallan.

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Introduction

An Overview

In Wilkie Collins' *No Name*, Norah Vanstone finds that "the way to happiness is often very hard to find; harder, I almost think, for women than for men. But, if we only try patiently, and try long enough, we reach it at last" (311). Collins' subtle heroine demonstrates an accepting and mild approach to life. Such models of femininity would appear familiar to readers of Victorian fiction who came to expect identifiably "good" female characters in their novels. Without ignoring such expectations, Collins nonetheless reveals his complex vision of femininity and gender in novels such as *The Woman in White*, *Man and Wife*, *No Name*, and *The Law and the Lady*, demonstrating bold flexibility with regard to categories of right and wrong. His meek figures, such as Laura Fairlie and Blanche Lundie, contrast with other female characters in his novels who oftentimes outrageously break social conventions or, at the very least, challenge them aggressively. Collins' passive females often escape notice and have been disregarded as embodiments of patriarchal ideals, much like Dickens' Amy Dorrit. Although critics have examined the importance and impact of Collins' active female characters, they usually fail to analyze characters like Norah Vanstone. In Patricia Frick's article "The Fallen Angels of Wilkie Collins", for instance, she mentions Norah once, writing only that she quietly submits to her fate (348). I contend that many of Collins' idealized women contribute to destabilizing notions of femininity when they resist quiet submission. By examining the various female types in Collins' novels and other novels of the time, it is evident that he creates multi-faceted women who are able to navigate between rebellion and acceptance with subtlety. Collins' dexterous manipulation of gender conventions cannot be underestimated, and while many of his female characters have received critical attention

worthy of their innovative behaviour, some of his more subtle creations have not; each of Collins' characters play a role in his re-imagining of a woman's proper behaviour.

To fully appreciate and understand Collins' work, this thesis will situate him within a context, particularly, within the conventions of sensation fiction. Deborah Wynne writes that sensation fiction was "an important response to the issues of the day, particularly anxieties surrounding shifting class identities, financial insecurity, the precarious social position of single women, sexuality, failed and illegal marriages, insanity and mental debilitation, [and] fears of criminality" (2-3). Collins exemplifies these anxieties in his novels, as he alternates between entertainment and didacticism in his work, illustrating the changing role of women as seen through the lens of a genre known for "articulating the problems of modernity" (Wynne 2). His manipulation of the genre differs in interesting and significant ways from novels by other popular sensation authors, like Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Sheridan Le Fanu.. Examining the fiction of Charles Dickens, Collins' friend and better known contemporary, also helps the reader to understand the divergence which occurs between the women of Collins' sensation fiction and the less evolved creations in Dickens' realist novels. While genre conventions play an important role, gender conventions do as well, making it important to examine contemporary work on gender issues, including writings by John Ruskin, John Stuart Mill, and Frances Power Cobbe, among others.

After setting the stage for Collins' emergence as a popular author, my second chapter explores Collins' secondary female figures who illustrate the dangers for women in society. Closely concerned with legal rights, Collins accentuates the ways in which the legal system can victimize women. While Collins focuses on the main characters, he nevertheless populates his novels with secondary figures who paint a darker portrait. Rather than simply

reproducing docile victims who echo the problems faced by the heroine, Collins also creates female characters who foil the primary players, most often falling upon the defence of duty to justify their actions. Outwardly, these characters are perfect illustrations of feminine virtue, yet they are also short sighted and cruel. Madame Fosco in *The Woman in White*, Lady Lundie in *Man and Wife*, and Mrs. Lecount in *No Name* exemplify feminine duty taken to a negative extreme. These secondary characters, whether they are rigidly patriarchal or alarmingly submissive, illustrate a spectrum of femininity and highlight the negative aspects of conduct-manual behaviour, thereby creating room for Collins' reformation of feminine deportment.

In my third chapter, I explore the issue of doubling in *The Woman in White*, *Man and Wife*, and *No Name*. The passive characters in these three novels both play with and work toward reshaping the feminine ideal. *Man and Wife* and *No Name* have similar structures, whereby two women are paired up briefly before one breaks away from convention and propriety. Collins, however, refuses to demarcate either double as irredeemable. These novels focus on female characters who are rebellious and appealing. Anne Silvester's determination and independence propel her forward; the strength of her character makes it easy to overlook her best friend and almost-sister, Blanche Lundie. Similarly, in *No Name*, Norah Vanstone's acceptance of her new social position is not as compelling as her sister Magdalene's refusal to bow down to the British inheritance laws. Nevertheless, both Blanche and Norah navigate between stagnation and rebellion. In contrast to Norah or Blanche, Laura's passivity only hints at a stronger kind of rebellion, but her character does not push the boundaries of conventional femininity in the same ways that the characters who follow her do. Her

character demonstrates the ways in which Collins' construction of female figures evolves as he grows more experienced as an author.

The Woman in White is also the novel that marks Collins's transition into the detective genre, a style that thrives on mistaken impressions, unlikely villains, and unexpected heroes. In his earlier attempts, Collins uses male detectives to work through the mystery, as seen in *The Woman in White* or in *The Moonstone*. In one of his later novels and less well-known novels, *The Law and the Lady*, Collins uses the first person narrative to enter the mind of his ultimate feminine ideal: Valeria Woodville. Valeria is driven by her desire to be the perfect wife: she begins an investigation into his first wife's murder in an attempt to clear his name. Valeria embodies the contradictions that Collins has previously split between two women: ideal and action.

While Collins' central female figures are due respect and are undeniably groundbreaking and important, not enough critical attention has been paid to the ways in which Collins interacts with the idea of ideal femininity. The characters who most closely resemble ideal women are often disregarded by critics as imitation Dickens, plain conduct-book heroines with no innovative characteristics to make them attention worthy. Such a reading of Collins' tamer women would be doing an injustice to his clever character creations; he writes daring and unabashed heroines, placing them alongside more traditional women, but both types act and react against rigid gender stereotypes and roles, making Collins' gentle heroines anything but boring.

Chapter 1

Circling the Question

Wilkie Collins wrote between 1848 and 1888, a time when women's capacities, women's roles, and women's rights were hotly under debate. It is fitting, therefore, that he would choose sensation fiction as the genre in which he would play with expectations surrounding "the woman question". Readers of the salacious genre expected nothing less than topics which tested the boundaries of decency and which, inevitably, raised eyebrows. The mid-1800s witnessed legal changes surrounding divorce, remarriage, and property issues. In turn, Victorians were reconfiguring ideas of female identity after marriage. In Patricia Hollis' survey of the Victorian women's movement, she explores the legal identity women had and the changes initiated by people like John Stuart Mill, who argues for increased rights for women in *The Subjection of Women*. According to Hollis, once married a woman lost control over more than simply her property, as the husband "controlled her body too; until 1891 he could imprison her in her own home. As the wife had no independent legal existence, she could obtain no legal redress from him" (167). The Divorce Act of 1857 allowed for divorce, but the grounds were notably more difficult for a woman to obtain than for her male counterpart. While women had to prove adultery combined with another offense – incest, desertion, cruelty, or unnatural offences – men needed only prove adultery had occurred (Hollis 168). The Married Woman's Property Act of 1870 altered the situation, allowing women "to retain their property or earnings acquired after marriage" (169). With these important and radical changes occurring in the social and political arena, it is only natural that sensation novelists, like Wilkie Collins, would give special attention to women's changing roles.

The Debate

Familiar with the legal system because of his background in law, Collins manipulates and re-imagines legal debates of the 1860s in his fiction, exposing injustices and highlighting deficiencies in the system. John Stuart Mill writes that “the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement” (57). By outlining the consummate imbalance and injustice pertaining to the woman’s role, Mill hopes to enlighten and alter his reader’s perspectives. He argues that the “law of servitude in marriage is a monstrous contradiction to all the principles of the modern world, and to all the experience through which those principles have been slowly and painfully worked out” (135). In particular, Mill is concerned with the absolute rights men hold and the lack of legal recourse women have for protecting themselves from various kinds of spousal abuse. Declaring that many men in Britain are little higher than brutes, Mill wonders at man’s ability to “obtain a victim” legally by marrying her (91). He goes on to point out that a seemingly civil man might still be abusive to his wife simply because she has no legal recourse and he knows he cannot be punished. Respectability, Mill writes, does not guarantee civility in the “unrestraint of home” (92). He implores his reader to apply liberal principles to the woman question, using his rhetoric to point out the gross injustices that are often overlooked.

Mill is not alone in worrying over the imbalance of rights between husband and wife. In her aptly titled essay “Wife-Torture in England,” Frances Power Cobbe attempts to illuminate the problems facing many British women. Cobbe, although admitting to what we would now call spousal abuse in the middle and upper classes, focuses on the lower classes and treatment that goes beyond “an occasional blow or two of a not dangerous kind” (295).

According to Cobbe, the middle and upper classes are more vulnerable to public censure and keep that in mind when they contemplate visibly bruising or harming their wives. In the lower classes, however, no such restrictions are in play, and Wife-torture occurs often. Declaring that small beatings escalate as the husband becomes “satiated” with that kind of treatment and often result in “Wife-torture and the Wife-torture usually ends in Wife-maiming, Wife-blinding, or Wife-murder” (310). Instances of such abuse can be found in many sensation novels of the time, including those of Wilkie Collins.

Collins took a strong stance against wife abuse, creating characters who are both pathetic and sympathetic in many of his novels, including Sarah Leeson in his first major book, *The Dead Secret*, and also Hester Dethridge in *Man and Wife* and Mrs. Wragge in *No Name*. Cobbe and Mill both describe the situation in an attempt to instigate or accelerate legal changes, but not every voice in the public debate was of the same mind. Eliza Lynn Linton argued for a return to a time when the “fair young English girl” (356) was “once the most beautiful, the most modest, the most essentially womanly in the world” (360). Her disgust with the “Girl of the Period”, as she titled her essay, attempts to instigate change, but of a different kind than Mill and Cobbe were working toward. Linton, like Ruskin, attempted to reinforce or reinvigorate feminine ideals which were being challenged, as well as stop the changes which were altering the traditional English rose into a coarse, vulgar, vain, and materialistic creature. Linton ends her essay with a prayer that the “national madness” (360) will soon end, resulting in the return of long-established gender roles.

Whereas Mill and Cobbe focused on legal ramifications of traditional roles being upheld, Linton and John Ruskin attempted to illustrate the negative consequences of evolved gender roles. According to Ruskin and Linton, these new roles weaken the family dynamic

and eventually affect society as a whole. John Ruskin's lecture "Of Queens' Gardens" demarcates the woman's role in society, acting as a companion piece to his essay detailing men's roles. Ruskin doesn't believe in discussing gender superiority because "each has what the other has not: each completes the other, and is completed by the other: they are in nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give" (58-59). For Ruskin, women are made for certain tasks and should make it their priority to excel at them. Women, like men, have certain characteristics which they alone possess and they should not, therefore, attempt to mimic male traits. Men, for example, are "active, progressive, defensive" (59). Ruskin writes that man is "eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender" (59). The same is not true for women, who have a different set of characteristics.

Women, according to Ruskin, have power to rule, not to battle, and they should use their intelligence for "sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision" (59). Continuing his catalogue of the female character, Ruskin writes:

So far as she rules, all must be right, or nothing is. She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise – wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side: wise, not with the narrowness of insolent and loveless pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable, because infinitely applicable modesty of service – the true changefulness of woman (60).

Excelling in feeling, women should only be educated insofar as it benefits her marriage. Mill's criticism of female education decries the very fact that education requires "complete

abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections” (Mill 70). In contrast to Mill’s progressive stance, Ruskin maintains a belief that female education should help a woman better understand and communicate with her husband. For Ruskin, a woman should be educated in “whatever her husband is likely to know” (64). While the husband is allowed specific knowledge, Ruskin believes that women’s knowledge should be “general and accomplished for daily and helpful use” (64). There is no conception of education for the sole purpose of intellectual growth, only knowledge that will aid in her ultimate purpose as man’s helpmate. In Collins’ dealings with women’s issues, he attempts to navigate between the conservative positions espoused by Ruskin, and the more progressive and forward-looking ideas proposed by Mill; while Collins most often veers in the latter direction, his descriptions of women and their attitudes often reflect the general Victorian understanding of gender differences that Ruskin describes. Collins replicates some of the gendered divides, but he is also more able to recognize that if variations occur, they need not necessarily be condemned.

The idea of a woman as sweet, wise, morally correct, and in the service of her husband was the general sentiment of the Victorian period. While the movement to change traditional roles and legal rights was underway, conduct books and education did not change significantly at the time of the sensation novel and each popular author interpreted and presented the tensions surrounding the debate differently.

Sensational Issues in Sensation Novels

The women question had a major place in public debates and sensation fiction was an ideal forum for dialogue on the subject. According to Deborah Wynne, author of *The Sensation Novel and the Family Magazine*, the sensation novel articulated many anxieties of

the day, particularly issues “surrounding shifting class identities, financial insecurity, the precarious social position of single women, sexuality, failed and illegal marriages, insanity and mental debilitation, [and] fears of criminality” (2-3). Authors translated these popular concerns into gripping tales designed to maintain readership over a long period of time, as was the case with most serialized novels published in family magazines (Wynne 12). While taking serious issues and translating them into popular productions, not all authors took the similar liberal stance exhibited by Wilkie Collins, but all attempted to recreate the most radical aspects of the issues in order to increase readability.

As a genre, the sensation novel has certain key characteristics that distinguish it from other novels of the time. Patrick Brantlinger explains that the sensation novel deals with “crime, often murder as an outcome of adultery and sometimes of bigamy, in apparently proper, bourgeois, domestic settings” (30), containing “violent and thrilling action, astonishing coincidences, stereotypic heroes, heroines, and villains, much sentimentality, and virtue rewarded and vice apparently punished at the end” (33). While sensation novels might push the boundaries with some of the content, most writers were content to end with more traditional tropes and happy endings, as we can see by examining novels like *Uncle Silas* or *Lady Audley's Secret*: two bestsellers of the 1860s. When dealing with murder and vice, the sensation novel did not wish to go the route of the traditional gothic horror, located in distant lands and in remote castles; instead, sensation novelists situated violence, crimes, murder, and bigamy into “genteel domestic settings” (Wynne 9) and “threatened their first readers’ cherished assumptions about women, marriage, and the fair appearances of the Victorian scene” (Brantlinger 39). The reader of the sensation novel, familiar with the issues of the day, would be scandalized and titillated, exploring the seedy side of respectable society.

By attempting to undermine and expose the darker parts of high society, sensation fiction triggered a backlash from those who were offended primarily by the depictions of women. In Susan David Bernstein's article "Dirty Reading: sensation fiction, women, and primitivism", she explains that Margaret Oliphant and other literary thinkers "deplored these 'sensation' women of passion, whether within fiction or in their avid female readership. These 'women driven wild with love' were an affront to the domestic ideal heroine of the mainstream fiction cherished by the literary establishment" (Bernstein 214). The focus on the transgressing female cropped up most obviously in relation to *Lady Audley's Secret*, an extremely popular and controversial novel. Braddon's novel shocked the reader with unexpected gender characterisations and a startling look at domestic codes of conduct, as well as with the mercenary and selfish main character, driven by greed instead of love.

The Popular Authors

Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins' friend and sometimes publisher, is more often labelled a comic realist as opposed to a sensationalist. Still, many of the characteristics of the sensation novel apply to Dickens' work. *Bleak House* centers around several mysteries; what secret is Lady Dedlock keeping? Who killed Tulkinghorn? Who are Esther Summerson's parents? While Dickens' label may be up for debate, his influence on Collins is not; the pair were known to work together, although, as Sue Lonoff points out that Collins received and accepted more help from Dickens than Dickens did from Collins. This was, according to Lonoff, partly due to the fact that Dickens could not avoid "feelings of competition, perhaps even feelings of resentment against a younger writer who was still in his prime" (163). While Dickens did influence his younger friend, their styles remain different and Collins did not always agree with Dickens' influence or suggestions. Lonoff points out quite rightly that on

“sexual subjects, Dickens was notoriously sentimental or evasive, and his novels, unlike Collins’s, avoid displays of adult sexuality” (156). This is partly due to the fact that Dickens often presented more conventional female characters who regularly embody the characteristics that both Linton and Ruskin valued.

In *Little Dorrit*, Dickens creates the ultimate self-sacrificing woman, determined to care for all those around her, acting as a mother to her older siblings and her incompetent debtor father. Amy Dorrit meekly accepts that she will follow and care for her father, disregarding her personal desires in order to fulfill her duty. It is her acceptance and belief in the importance of self-sacrifice as duty that most clearly illustrates her embodiment of traditional female roles. Her sister, Fanny, works as an actress, disrespects her family, marries for money, and is an unappealing character: impossible to sympathize with as she takes advantage of her younger sister’s generosity and abuses the power she holds over Amy, which follows traditional understandings of her profession. Dubbed “Little Mother”, Amy embraces her role as caretaker, as does her father who confesses to Arthur Clennam: “We should all have been lost without Amy. She is a very good girl, Amy. She does her duty” (96). Dickens repeatedly emphasizes Amy’s attention to others, focusing on her caretaker attitude and her voluntary subjection of her own desires. When her family leaves Marshallsea, Amy does not adjust well to the sudden wealth and remains uncomfortable until she is able to resume the mantle of caregiver, this time to Arthur as his wife. She embraces her role and humbly accepts her return to financial degradation, telling Arthur:

I never was rich before, I never was proud before, I never was happy before. I am rich in being taken by you, I am proud of having been resigned by you, I am happy in being with you in this prison, as I should be happy in coming back to

it with you, if it should be the will of GOD, and comforting and serving you with all my love and truth. I am yours anywhere, everywhere! (845).

Arthur Clennam is a wonderfully likeable character who adores Amy. Dickens offers her the perfect happy ending for the perfect submissive woman who embraces her role wholeheartedly. Amy's docile and accepting nature contrasts with some of Collins' female characters, who struggle with their roles as submissive women. Marian Halcombe, for example, from *The Woman in White*, balks at taking orders from the male figures upon whom she is dependent. While she takes on a maternal role with her sister Laura, she is more aggressive and insistent, and never entirely docile.

Like Amy Dorrit, Esther Summerson, in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, struggles to find her place in society when she is elevated from a poor, unloved, and degraded orphan to housekeeper and companion to the wealthy wards of Jarndyce. Esther frequently reminds herself that she must exhibit humility and gratitude, internalizing her aunt's early instruction that Esther's life would be a combination of "submission, self-denial [and] diligent work" (30), never asking for more than what is offered. Her constant refrain for the early part of the novel is "duty, my dear!" (103). Ada Clare, one of the wards, gleefully informs Esther: "You are so thoughtful [...] and yet so cheerful! and you do so much, so unpretendingly!" (58). She earns the nickname Mother Hubbard, among others, because of her domestic sensibilities and her mothering habits, much like Amy Dorrit's moniker Little Mother. The reader learns that Esther is in love; while never directly articulating her passion, something she avoids surreptitiously, she cannot avoid mentioning Allan Woodcourt because of her scrupulous attention to detail and duty. She omits any mention of Woodcourt when she describes the dinner where they met and adds, at the end of her account, four lines about the surgeon,

writing: “I thought him very sensible and agreeable. At least, Ada asked me if I did not, and I said yes” (214). She understands, if she resents, the disapproval that Arthur’s mother has toward Esther because she does not think very well of herself; while she is more assertive than Amy Dorrit, Esther remains a humble figure.

Yet Esther is given more authority and more autonomy than Amy, as she narrates a third of the novel. The ability to control the flow and pacing of the tale implies a certain amount of power, yet does not mark any innovative changes as female narrators are common enough. As Richard Currie argues in his essay “Against the Feminine Stereotype: Dickens’ Esther Summerson and Conduct Book Heroines”, the idea of Esther as nothing more than a submissive woman misses important clues about the heroine who “exhibits anger and sexual desire” (14). Currie explains that Esther relies on conduct-book directives but “[b]uried in the conduct-book heroine is a woman struggling with rage” (18). While this is certainly true, what is most important is the fact that Esther does rely on etiquette and behaviour guides when analysing how to react to a situation; she consciously attempts to be the ideal woman: sexless, undemanding, and nurturing. As the narrator, Esther discloses to the readers the struggles she endures, but she remains a quiet and submissive character, much like Ada Clare. Dickens chooses to give her a voice, making her more human to the reader, but her actions do not undermine conventional ideas of femininity. In Collins, even his most conventional heroine, Laura Fairlie, offers resistance against some of what is expected of her and overtly expresses these dilemmas, refusing to bury them like Esther Summerson.

While sensation novelists might deal with daring issues, they do not always present daring stances relating to women, often relying on traditional gender roles. Sheridan Le Fanu’s Maud Ruthyn, in his sensation-gothic novel *Uncle Silas*, resembles Dickens’ Amy

Dorrit in her deferral to patriarchal authority, but *Le Fanu* plays more closely with the gothic tradition in literature than with the realism. Maud describes herself on the first page of the novel, revealing that she is “slight and rather tall, with a great deal of golden hair, dark grey-eyed, and with a countenance rather sensitive and melancholy” (9). Like a gothic heroine, Maud faces countless dangers, attempts to solve the mystery of her dishonoured uncle, and struggles against her malicious and foreign governess. Madame de la Rougierre, who acts as the apparent villain for most of the story, embodying all things unfeminine; she is bald, crude, sexual, and thieving. Indeed, de la Rougierre is almost witch-like in appearance:

tall, masculine, a little ghastly perhaps, and draped in purple silk, with a lace cap, and great bands of black hair, too thick and black perhaps to correspond quite naturally with her bleached and sallow skin, her hollow jaws, and the fine but grim wrinkles traced about her brows and eye-lids. She smiled, she nodded, and then for a good while she scanned me in silence with a steady, cunning eye, and a stern smile (27).

There is nothing nurturing about the governess and Maud quickly senses that she is in danger, as do the other women in the house, relying on feminine instinct. Her first impression of the governess is to have “more than an apprehension of her temper and fear of possibly abused authority” (26). Joan Burstyn writes that in the nineteenth century women were often thought of as “insightful and sensitive, but without the ability to concentrate or weigh evidence in making judgements” (70). Maud instinctively cringes away from Madame de la Rougierre but cannot articulate or convince her father that her fear is rational; her behaviour, while insightful, reinforces the idea that women are emotive and irrational beings. In *The Law and the Lady*, the main character also makes use of insight and instinct, but she pushes beyond

these initial emotions and attempts to find solid proof which will support her impressions; Maud, on the other hand, passes on her knowledge and waits for her father to take control.

While Maud's father may seem unreasonable in refusing to trust his daughter, Maud frequently undermines her own credibility by emphasizing her inability to handle situations and a tendency to be overwhelmed by her emotions. Maud admits "I *was* nervous, and growing more so" (Le Fanu 38). Later in the novel she believes a safety pin sold to her by a gypsy will bring her protection after having her fortune read. Maud also fears she is being haunted by her father's ghost when she attempts to object to the terms of her guardianship (178). Madame de la Rougierre notices Maud's weaknesses and plays on them in order to cow her young pupil into obedience. While Maud recognizes that de la Rougierre is manipulating her, she cannot shake her fear. She declares that her governess "began sometimes to mingle in my dreams, too – always awfully; and this nourished, of course, the kind of ambiguous fear in which, in waking hours, I held her" (38), further emphasizing her feminine weakness.

In her anxiety, Maud figures as the perfect helpless gothic victim. She senses danger but can do nothing about it because her father refuses to believe in her instinctual terror. He gives her the mighty task of clearing his brother's name, bestowing the dishonoured brother with guardianship of his young daughter after his death. Maud's cousin is appalled at the action and attempts to contest the order, berating Maud until she accepts, cowed by yet another authority figure, but to no end. Maud is sent to live with Uncle Silas, willing to believe the very best of her uncle despite the terrible treatment he offers his own daughter. Maud's naiveté becomes even more frustrating when she refuses to question Silas' motives for hiring Madame de la Rougierre as her governess. What has been shockingly clear to the

reader all along, that Uncle Silas does indeed have foul plans for his niece, only begins to dawn on Maud when she is imprisoned in her own home near the end of the novel. The reader and Maud learn that Silas holds her fate in his hands and she is terrified, suddenly aware of the “dark certainty that never were men more deeply interested in making away with one human being, than were Uncle Silas and Dudley in removing me” (391). Teresa Magnum points out that “even a failed, ineffectual, effete male head of household like Silas can pull the strings of all the women in his domain” (231). Through his control of de la Rougierre, in the figure of employer, Silas holds complete dominion over his niece, and Maud’s only escape is in hiding away from her uncle and her cousin, watching while Dudley mistakenly murders her governess.

Maud, like Esther Summerson, does have some authority in the text as the narrator of her own history. She is revealing her story to the reader, attempting to incite sympathy throughout the tale, writing “only, reader, if you happen to be a rather nervous and very young girl, I ask you to conceive my fears and imaginings, and the kind of misery which I was suffering” (Le Fanu 82), and later, “you would have fancied that one so young as I, born to wealth so vast, and living a life of such entire seclusion, would have been exempt from care. But you have seen how troubled my life was with fear and anxiety during the residence of Madame de la Rougierre” (115). The narrator does acknowledge how foolish her younger self was, speaking from a position of greater authority and claiming victory over the patriarchal influences which attempted, in her seventeenth year, to destroy her. Nevertheless, Maud’s early history paints the picture of an entirely powerless individual, often overwhelmed by her own emotions, and incapable of controlling her fears. Magnum writes that Maud “as a minor, a child, and a female – has little agency despite her ultimate narrative control of the story”

(225). However, can we read Maud's story as somehow undermining patriarchy? By adhering to her father's wishes and believing in Silas, the paternal stand-in, Maud is almost murdered in her sleep. Even when she attempts to contest her guardianship she can do nothing as her father holds complete control over her future and the guardianship can only be broken with Silas' consent, which he adamantly refuses to give. If Le Fanu is attacking patriarchy, the reader can only assume that that is not his primary focus; unlike in the work of Dickens or Collins, there is not an obvious satirical edge in Le Fanu's writing. Regardless of Le Fanu's intent, even the older Maud does not question the authority that was placed over her, only the unfortunate events that transpired. There is no sign at the end of the novel that Maud resents her father's choices or rebels in any way against feminine conventions. While *Uncle Silas* fits nicely into the category of sensation fiction because of the time in which he is writing and by revealing the scandalous underbelly of an outwardly perfect and wealthy home, Le Fanu borrows more directly from the gothic tradition, with fears of the other and an overwhelming sense of claustrophobia driving the plot, perhaps making his writing more regressive than progressive.

Braddon, author of *Lady Audley's Secret*, is situated more firmly within the sensation genre and her novel features a beautiful bigamist murderess. Bernstein writes that the sensation woman was feared because she was "an aggressive woman of intense desires 'underneath' the pristine, desexualized angel of the house extolled in domestic novels" (214). Lucy Audley embodies these contradictions, behaving in a child-like manner, relying on her large blue eyes and her golden hair to win people over, all the while driven by an intense desire for physical luxuries and a life of ease. Michael Audley's proposal is met with a

panicked acceptance and she admits that she does not love him, explaining her motives by saying:

Poverty, poverty, poverty, trials, vexations, humiliations, deprivations! *You* cannot tell; you, who are amongst those for whom life is so smooth and easy; you can never guess what is endured by genteel paupers. Do not ask too much of me, then. I *cannot* be disinterested; I cannot be blind to the advantages of such a marriage. I cannot, I cannot!" (Braddon 9)

Braddon's manipulative Venus readily states that her decision is influenced by worldly considerations, dashing Lord Audley's hopes and revealing a woman not primarily concerned with romance and love; it is even more shocking when the reader later learns that on top of entering into a marriage with calculating motives, she is also already married, making her transgression that much worse.

Braddon creates in Lucy a character who seemingly embodies all of the ideal characteristics in a woman: Her

very childishness had a charm which few could resist. The innocence and candour of an infant beamed out of Lady Audley's fair face, and shone out of her large and liquid blue eyes. The rosy lips, the delicate nose, the profusion of fair ringlets, all gave to her beauty the character of extreme youth and freshness (44).

Everything about Lucy speaks directly to the ideal conception of womanhood. Joan Burstyn, author of *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood*, quotes Constance Maynard as writing "Innocence was made an idol among women of the upper classes [...] The simple and blooming girl with her smile, and her curls, and her rosy cheeks was the ideal" (34).

However, while Lucy does appear to embody perfection, she falls woefully short of meeting the moral standards, using her appearance to influence others into committing moral transgressions. Burstyn reminds the reader that while it was understood that a good woman could manipulate men, “her influence was indirect and benign” (33). In contrast, Lucy actively attempts to control circumstances, endeavouring to convince her husband that his suspicious nephew is, in fact, mad.

Braddon’s creation undoubtedly caused backlash by fulfilling the sensation fiction mandate to expose and illustrate hidden crimes of the upper crust, but Lucy Audley was widely regarded as an abomination, within the novel and by the critics responding to it. The primary character in the novel, Robert Audley, feels no sympathy for Lucy, despite her compelling narrative recounting her ill-treatment and neglect by her first husband; while he acknowledges her motivation, he believes her to be a female monster and locks her away. Also, Braddon carefully illustrates Lucy’s selfish behaviour, as Lucy is entirely willing to kill her female companion’s husband in order to be rid of Robert. Her doting husband shuns her entirely although he is not familiar with the extent of her crimes, and one of the final impressions the reader is left with comes from a psychiatrist who declares “The 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!” (Braddon 321). If the reader felt sympathy for the young woman, it would be buried under the recriminations piled upon her by her husbands, her nephew, her sister-in-law, and any other individual privy to the secret of her past actions. Lucy is not a trailblazer, but a viper with no redeeming qualities.

In a more subtle fashion, Braddon illustrates that she does not entirely question gender roles through her treatment of Alicia Audley, Michael's daughter who yearns for reciprocated affection from Robert. Instead, Robert finds Alicia annoying and thinks to himself that he could never be married to her; he finds Alicia too unconventional. Watching her one day, he thinks:

What a pretty figure, too, and a fine candid, brown, rosy face; but to fly at a fellow like that, without the least provocation! That's the consequence of letting a girl follow the hounds. She learns to look at everything in life as she does at six feet of timber or a sunk fence; she goes through the world as she goes across country – straight ahead, and over everything. Such a nice girl as she might have been, too, if she'd been brought up in Fig-tree Court! If ever I marry, and have daughters [...] they shall be educated in Paper Buildings, take their sole exercise in the Temple Gardens, and they shall never go beyond the gates till they are marriageable, when I will take them straight across Fleet Street to St. Dunstan's Church, and deliver them into the hands of their husbands (Braddon 101).

Disliking her outspoken tendencies, Robert marries his best friend's sister, a demure young woman, while Alicia follows her father in his travels, helping him forget his second wife. Braddon's treatment of Alicia contrasts sharply with Collins, who valued his outspoken characters, such as Anne Silvester, who gets a marriage and a happy ending in *Man and Wife*. Robert, a likeable and astute character, touts the importance of raising women as sheltered and quiet, and his hard work exposes Lucy as a jezebel figure. Marriage, often seen as a reward at

the end of a novel, is denied to Braddon's unconventional women, with Lucy alone in a madhouse, and Alicia as the travelling nursemaid.

Dickens, Le Fanu, and Braddon, were popular novelists, contemporary to Wilkie Collins and, therefore, interacting with issues most often related to the sensation genre. When creating their female characters, neither Dickens, Le Fanu, or Braddon stray very far from conventional understandings about gender differences or gender roles. Dickens produces meek female characters who lack depth and tow the line, much like Le Fanu's Maud Ruthyn, and Braddon ends her most famous novel with the reestablishment of conventional behavioural parameters. In contrast, Collins interacts with the genre by creating a wild array of female characters who, much like the subject matter of sensation fiction, defy conventions. Clearly influenced by the understanding most Victorians had about women, Collins still manages to create characters who move beyond the simple sketches of feminine virtue described in, for example, a Dickens novel, and succeeds in breathing life into wilful, rebellious, and interesting women; even Collins' more conventional women offer fascinating glimpses at progressive understanding of gender.

Chapter Two

The Secondary Characters

Over the span of forty years as a popular novelist, Wilkie Collins wrote twenty-seven books, developing his style and his preferred format, like all authors, over the course of his career. His most famous and well-respected novels tackle important legal issues, often revolving around concerns related to women's rights. Collins' trademark is sometimes thought to be the complex women he creates; the primary characters in *No Name*, *Man and Wife*, *The Law and the Lady*, and *The Woman in White*, to name a few, interact with women's issues of the day and are tangible creations who give life to abstract issues. Combined with his legal interests, Collins also creates intricate plots which grip readers and drive them to read on, capturing audiences with the sensational twists and turns he offers as well as the fascinating characters he introduces.

Like all sensation writers, Wilkie Collins was concerned with the consumers who would purchase his novels, and strived to create works that would incite the reader to continue buying the serial installments. In order to increase tension and make the stories more compelling, the main characters had to overcome obstacles, battling through great opposition. His primary characters often act against gender and social conventions, thereby increasing the struggle when overcoming the carefully crafted hurdles. Setting the stage for these central figures are the secondary characters who create resistance for, or, alternately, aid the characters, all the while adding another level to Collins' gender critique. It is important to look at these secondary characters in order to understand the thrust of Collins' argument; with the minor characters, Collins is able to paint desperate and exaggerated women who cling to

the very societal conventions his novels often strive to undermine. While secondary characters are important to the novels, they are not the main focus of the plots; they may push the story forward and add depth to the primary characters, but their individual plights are not the focus of the book. In *The Woman in White*, *No Name*, and *Man and Wife*, Wilkie Collins creates rich worlds of secondary characters who offer glimpses of alternative destinies for women, while also illustrating that the passivity he portrays in some of his central characters is significantly different because he allows these main characters independence and self-awareness. By creating extreme or radical secondary women who interact with the same kinds of issues as his central characters, Collins is able to provide more cutting commentary about the Victorian understanding of ideal femininity. Where his primary women are all rebellious in some way, the secondary characters who surround the Marian Halcombes and the Anne Silvesters of Collins' work are rigidly subservient, mainly taking two forms: the Patriarchal Villainess or the Submissive Servant. Patriarchal Villainesses promote and uphold patriarchal authority, while Submissive Servants are the victims of that authority.

The Patriarchal Villainess

In stories where primary female characters attempt to undermine traditional order and find a unique place for themselves despite censure and disapproval, the most appalling secondary characters are those females who attempt to reinforce expected customs. Collins creates women who abide by patriarchal authority and attempt to enforce it at all costs, ignoring the potential hurt they may inflict and refusing to pay attention to the injustices to which Collins wants to draw the reader's attention. These Patriarchal Villainesses abide by traditional rules even more than the male patriarchal figures, who can occasionally see the grey areas in the situations they encounter. In *Man and Wife*, Sir Patrick Lundie marries the

fallen woman, Anne Silvester, because he understands her merit and can see past her indiscretion while Lady Lundie refuses to do the same. In *No Name* George Bartram sees the injustice of the Vanstone settlement and is more than happy to offer Magdalen her birthright, whereas Mrs. Lecount supports her childish master and does all in her power to uphold the unjust decision. Collins refuses to pigeonhole men or women into specific behavioural modes and allows the male characters to defy reader expectations in much the same way as that his female characters do.

The Patriarchal Villainess respects the status quo and attempts to uphold it. These figures are set in contrast to the likeable and compellingly human characters Collins uses to argue for more open understandings of acceptable femininity. In *The Woman in White*, Madame Fosco was once the image of a flighty and vain English beauty until she was subdued in her marriage to the domineering Count Fosco. Madame Fosco follows orders from her husband and is more than willing to betray her niece if it serves her husband's interest, and thereby her own. The reader's first introduction to Madame Fosco comes from Marian who declares "Madame Fosco, in her maiden days, was one of the most impertinent women I ever met with – capricious, exacting, and vain to the last degree of absurdity" (Collins 193). This description is followed by the assertion that Marian and all members of her family would be eternally grateful to Count Fosco if he had managed to subdue his wife's early habits.

Marian's assessment is the height of irony as Fosco's powers of subduing women cause problems for Marian and her beloved sister later in the novel. The reader's second glimpse of Madame Fosco comes from Laura, who writes to her sister that Madame Fosco is "so much changed for the better – so much quieter and so much more sensible as a wife than she was as

a single woman” (Collins 203). Marian, upon first meeting her, agrees completely with her sister. She writes in her journal:

As Eleanor Fairlie (aged seven-and-thirty), she was always talking pretentious nonsense, and always worrying the unfortunate men with very 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 without saying a word, frozen up in the strangest manner in herself. The hideously ridiculous love-locks which used to hang on either side of her face, are now replaced by stiff little rows of very short curls, of the sort that one sees in old-fashioned wigs. A plain, matronly cap covers her head, and makes her look, for the first time in her life, since I remember her, like a decent woman” (Collins 218)

It is of immediate interest that Marian describes Madame Fosco with words that circulate around the concept of immovability. She is “frozen” and remains still. Her hair is “stiff” and “old-fashioned”, once again hinting at the fact that Madame Fosco cannot move forward, even in matters of fashion. When Marian continues with her description, she writes that Madame Fosco sits “speechless in corner” and her hands are “dry” and “chalky” (Collins 218), both words circulating around the image of Madame Fosco as a stone creature. Her only activity is to roll her husband’s cigarettes or “monotonous embroidery work” (218). Her eyes are “cold blue” and are either fixed on her work or on her husband (219). Marian does not like what she sees in Laura’s aunt and describes Madame Fosco’s gaze as that of “mute submissive inquiry which we are all familiar with in the eyes of a faithful dog” (219). While Marian’s first description approvingly indicates that Madame Fosco looks like a decent woman, she describes Madame Fosco as essentially inhuman, perhaps indicating that her clothing and

appearance are mere costume; although Marian approves of the initial changes she sees, her descriptions indicate that upon closer inspection Marian no longer considers Madame Fosco as a woman. Marian, already suspicious of Sir Percival, interprets these changes in Eleanor as a signal of potential danger, particularly when she views the territorial affection Madame Fosco has toward her husband. Aside from spats of jealousy, however, Marian writes that she could detect very little emotion in her sister's aunt and declares her to be "cold as a statue, and as impenetrable as the stone out of which it is cut" (Collins 219).

Marian's belief that Madame Fosco's stony exterior hides "something dangerous in her nature" (Collins 219) is a haunting suspicion from an astute young woman already afraid of her sister's perilous living situation. Before the marriage, Marian had reason to believe that Sir Percival had mercenary motives for marrying Laura and his behaviour after the marriage only serves to enhance Marian's suspicion that he is in desperate need of Laura's money. Given that Count Fosco managed to tame his formerly strong-minded wife, Marian is aware that the real danger in the house ultimately comes from the cool and calm Count Fosco, and not the more hot-tempered Sir Percival. Madame Fosco, however, never outwardly acts in a manner that would justify suspicion. Her job is, instead, to insinuate herself into Marian's confidences and influence both sisters in ways which benefit her husband, thereby helping Sir Percival; as a woman she is able to gain the confidences of other women, taking full advantage of her womanly sphere of influence. When Madame Fosco first exhibits friendly tendencies towards Marian, the narrator is surprised, writing that to her "unspeakable amazement" (Collins 258) Madame Fosco chattered on and would not let Marian part from her side. Eleanor's outward display of affection and familial warmth, Marian later learns, is a ruse to keep her from discovering Count Fosco's meddling with her correspondence. It

becomes clear that nothing Madame Fosco does is without purpose and without her husband's direction. Marian writes of Madame Fosco receiving "orders" (Collins 260), emphasizing her entirely subservient and dependent position. However, Madame Fosco revels in her position; Marian writes "her cold blue eyes almost warmed" when she spoke of her position within her marriage and that "she looked actually proud" (Collins 260) of her situation.

While Madame Fosco's comportment characterizes her as a villainess for Collins, it also renders her an ideal Victorian woman. As Joan Burstyn claims: "Since it was believed that women were inferior to men both in mental ability and in bodily strength, they would enhance their nobility by being simple and compliant, retiring and subservient" (43). While women were allowed to have education, it was expected that once married, a woman would subsume herself to the superior capacities offered by men. Given the reader's knowledge of Eleanor's bachelorette days, it is evident that Collins is attempting to present Madame Fosco as a product of her marriage and one who conforms to traditional expectations. She is the obedient wife, following her husband's directives and never questioning her master. In this way, Collins is exaggerating the conception of the ideal wife, making the obedient and submissive creature found in the pages of conduct books ridiculous and ominous. Laura, already meek before her marriage and sensitive to expectations of her as a wife, is clearly in danger of ending up tamed, like her aunt. Sir Percival's approach, however, does not match Fosco's as he is much more heavy handed with Laura, indicating that although Laura may be broken, she will not relish in her position as tamed wife in the same way that her aunt does. Collins makes the connection between the tempestuous Marian and Eleanor more explicit, but since it is clear that Sir Percival wants control over his wife, it is easy to perceive a similar, if not identical, danger to Laura. By having Fosco refer to his wife as "my angel" (Collins 238),

Collins recalls Coventry Patmore's famous poem "The Angel in the House", thereby calling negative attention to the most notorious of feminine domestic stereotypes.

Madame Fosco's eagerness for her husband's approval and her willingness to participate in unsavory behaviour on command places her in the company of other Patriarchal Villainesses. However, the next two examples are of women who do not have a domineering male force influencing their actions. While Madame Fosco's machinations are despicable, she has the excuse of a powerful and manipulative husband looming over her. Both Lady Lundie of *Man and Wife* and Mrs. Lecount of *No Name* are widowed women rigidly adhering to the concept of duty and fulfilling theirs with a vengeance.

Lady Lundie, the venomous stepmother to Blanche and reluctant acquaintance to Anne Silvester, is painted immediately as a character to be wary of. Upon first introducing her, Collins describes her as having "a cruel aquiline nose, an obstinate straight chin" (Collins *Man and Wife* 57) and a general air of being "inexpressibly monotonous and wearisome" (57). She has a "suspicious hatred" (Collins 88-89) of Anne and does her best to catch the governess in telling situations in order to shame Anne. Lady Lundie's dislike flies in the face of her stepdaughter's absolute love of her governess, a woman she thinks of as a sister. This wild affection frustrates Lady Lundie most of all as she is spectacularly conscious of all issues relating to honour and propriety, and as a governess, Lady Lundie dislikes the integral role Anne has within the family. Lady Lundie's discomfort reflects more general anxieties about the situation of governesses within the family, but her strong investment in bringing about Anne's disgrace is exaggerated and overly enthusiastic, pointing, once again, to the ridiculousness of the Patriarchal Villainess's investment in convention. She informs Sir Patrick Lundie that her quest to find out Anne's secret is her duty, attempting to recruit Sir

Patrick to her way of thinking; he is, after all, the titular head of the family, as Lady Lundie reminds her brother-in-law repeatedly. She acts in the role of feminine advisor, ostensibly refusing to step out of her role as the submissive widow to Sir Patrick's brother, all the while attempting to manipulate or force Sir Patrick into her misogynist way of thinking. Sir Patrick's disapproval of Lady Lundie's actions does nothing to deter her and the narrator writes: "Does any other form of human resolution approach the firmness of a woman who is bent on discovering the frailties of another woman, whom she hates?" (Collins 110), emphasizing the pettiness of Lady Lundie's quest but also her unwavering determination, and the distinctly feminine approach to the patriarchal conventions she is enforcing. However, Collins is also reinforcing the belief that women have a natural tendency to be vindictive and petty. Collins is still writing from within specific understandings about gender, as expressed most clearly by Ruskin; it should not be forgotten, however, that the idea of vindictiveness or pettiness as being feminine traits is something that still holds with many to this day. Despite her obvious enthusiasm and quasi-delight in performing her duty to discover the truth of Anne's disappearance, Lady Lundie takes the pose of a "martyr to duty", emphasizing her Christian imperative to ensure herself of the truth of Anne's marriage because, she declares, she is "in a manner, morally responsible" (Collins 110). After all, she reasons, as Blanche's guardian she needs to ensure that Anne, Blanche's governess, has not been a corrupting influence on her step-daughter.

Lady Lundie's reliance on the importance of doing her self-imposed duty overrides any other consideration. Despite the obvious anguish she causes Blanche and the discomfort she inspires in Sir Patrick, Lady Lundie does not sway from her course. While it is obvious that Lady Lundie is inspired more by spite than her Christian duty, the fact that she hides

behind the semblance of duty and moral authority makes her a Patriarchal Villainess. Joan Burstyn writes that while women were thought to lack powers of reasoning, their intuitive abilities greatly exceeded those possessed by men (71) and they were generally thought to possess moral superiority (31), often acting as the moral compass for their husbands. With Lady Lundie's husband deceased, she attempts to act as Sir Patrick's moral advisor; she is, therefore, acting in a theoretically appropriate manner. Once again, Collins has created a woman who lives up to conventional standards but in so doing becomes an incontestably vile example of womanhood. Setting her in direct opposition to Anne, a highly sympathetic fallen woman character, emphasizes that true womanly virtue cannot so easily be regimented and described.

As the story progresses, Lady Lundie's impotent frustrations with the former governess verge further into the ridiculous. Lady Lundie refuses to utter Anne's name, simply referring to her as "The Person" (Collins 375). The narrator ironically describes her as "the most virtuous of living women" (375), continuing her moral quest even after Blanche is married and no longer under her protection. She extends her concern to Arnold, Blanche's sympathetic husband, declaring that she is only looking out for his "moral welfare" (376). While a decidedly meddling character, Lady Lundie's behaviour results in disastrous consequences for Anne and Blanche, indicating that Collins does not want the reader to dismiss the threat Lady Lundie poses. Lady Lundie's acidic tongue and her inability to see moral shades of gray lead her to inform Blanche that her best friend may in fact be married to her husband through a twist in Scottish marital laws. Preying on her stepdaughter's sensitivity, she forces Anne to reveal herself as, in fact, married to Geoffrey Delamayn, the actual villain of the novel and the man who ruined Anne and attempted to abandon her. It is here that

Collins draws connections between Blanche and Lady Lundie; while she sides with her stepmother, Blanche never entirely divorces her sympathetic emotions from her desire for moral rectitude. Collins places them on the same side whereas before they had only ever been in opposition; he carefully paints a picture of two women performing similar actions but with very different motives. In this way, it becomes clear, if it wasn't already, that Lady Lundie is a corrupt version of ideal womanhood whereas Blanche has a pure heart and does operate with a sense of moral adroitness that women purportedly possess. Through Blanche, Collins illustrates that Lady Lundie's rigidity and lack of sympathy take away from her ability to play the moral authority.

By the end of the novel Collins has righted most of the wrongs committed by misunderstanding and malice but he saves Lady Lundie's fate until the very end. Focusing on the widow closely for the first time in the novel, the reader sees Lady Lundie as isolated from her family, "having heard absolutely nothing of her relatives for the last six months" (Collins 640). Once again relying on social conventions and rules of conduct, she forces her guests to reveal news of Blanche, Arnold, and Sir Patrick, the most surprising of which is news of Sir Patrick's marriage to Anne Silvester. Ever one to pay attention to titles and roles, Lady Lundie is "not only struck out of her place as the chief woman of the family, but (still on the right side of forty) she is socially superannuated, as The Dowager Lady Lundie, for the rest of her life!" (641). Collins chooses to end the novel with Lady Lundie's discovery that Anne Silvester is the new Lady Lundie, offering the Dowager Lady Lundie no voice but simply introducing the shock through the capitalization of Anne's name. Collins thereby replaces Lady Lundie and forces her to a lower station and rank than the woman she avidly pursued

and shamed. Her punishment for using duty as a justification for cruelty is to force her to do her duty to Anne for the rest of her life as matriarch of her family.

The final woman who earns the title of Patriarchal Villainess is Mrs. Lecount of *No Name*. Mrs. Lecount is an interesting case as her high level of intelligence situates her as the major obstacle in Magdalen Vanstone's road to revenge for most of the novel. Whereas Lady Lundie plays a peripheral if crucial role and Madame Fosco acts as gleeful spy-on-command, Mrs. Lecount is, along with the British laws of inheritance, the true villain of the piece. She is still, nevertheless, a secondary character as the novel focuses more closely on the Vanstone sisters, and Mrs. Lecount, while pushing the action forward, is not actually directly concerned with the outcome of the action; once she gets what she wants, she fades out of the story.

When Captain Wragge begins his investigation of both Michael and Noel Vanstone in order to help Magdalen determine how best to approach the re-appropriation of her inheritance, he writes of a housekeeper "who has lived in [Mr. Vanstone's] service ever since his wife's death, and who has acquired a strong influence over both father and son. She is a native of Switzerland, elderly, and a widow" (Collins 244-245). Once Mr. Vanstone dies, without having made a will, the housekeeper is left "dependent on Mr. Noel Vanstone's sense of gratitude" (251). Wragge comments that "if Mr. Michael Vanstone had made his will, there is no doubt she would have received a handsome legacy" (251), yet as it stands, Mrs. Lecount is left in a similar situation to the novel's heroines. Unlike Magdalen, however, she has the opportunity to alter her situation by remaining with Mr. Noel Vanstone and encouraging a generous settlement by manipulating and influencing her weak-minded master. Although their circumstances are close in nature, Mrs. Lecount does not sympathize with Magdalen and Norah and, instead, takes the opposite stance and upholds the position held by her late master.

Communication with Noel Vanstone is intercepted by Mrs. Lecount who takes it upon herself to answer the letter. The letter, as described by Captain Wragge, illustrates her antagonism:

She takes the highest moral ground, in a tone of spiteful politeness. Mr. Noel Vanstone's delicate health and recent bereavement, prevent him from writing himself. Any more letters from Miss Vanstone will be returned unopened. Any personal application will produce an immediate appeal to the protection of the law. Mr. Noel Vanstone, having been expressly cautioned against Miss Magdalen Vanstone, by his late lamented father, has not yet forgotten his father's advice [...] She has endeavoured to express herself in the most conciliatory language she could select; she has tried to avoid giving unnecessary pain, by addressing Miss Vanstone (as a matter of courtesy) by the family name; and she trusts these concessions, which speak for themselves, will not be thrown away" (253).

While it becomes clear later in the novel that Noel Vanstone himself is a petty and spiteful creature who does not pose much of a threat or a challenge for Magdalen, it is Mrs. Lecount's vigilance and dedication to the interception of Magdalen's attempts at justice which prevent her success. Mrs. Lecount looks upon her antagonistic role as part of her continued respect for her deceased master and she takes the role of Noel Vanstone's protector. Her sharp observational powers allow her to see through Magdalen's disguises and her work tracing Magdalen's path allows her to expose Noel's cousin's schemes. Once Mrs. Lecount catches up to Magdalen and Noel, she easily cows her spineless master, talking over him when he attempts to contribute to her machinations and bullying him to take the measures she decrees in removing Magdalen from the will. And she is victorious.

Mrs. Lecount foils all of Magdalen's plans and succeeds in protecting Noel Vanstone's inherited fortune. In so doing, she also manages to secure herself a fortune of five thousand pounds "free of Legacy Duty" (Collins 562), righting the wrong done to her by her first master. Mrs. Lecount leaves the story once Noel Vanstone dies and she receives her legacy, but it is because of her vigilance that Magdalen cannot get her hands on the fortune. *No Name* is one of Wilkie Collins' most interesting novels as the primary character is a woman with righteous motives but who commits many unsavoury actions in her attempts to restore her birthright; Mrs. Lecount, therefore, is not punished in the conventional sense. While she is an unlikeable character, she is doing her duty and fulfilling the orders left to her by her master, which results in her comfortable retirement. Unlike Lady Lundie, who overstepped her bounds, or Madame Fosco, who committed crimes, Mrs. Lecount was justified in her behaviour. Nevertheless, she qualifies as a Patriarchal Villainess because she refuses to question the injustice committed against the Vanstone family; furthermore, she thwarts the plans of the character Collins is setting up as a justified revenger, rendering Mrs. Lecount highly unsympathetic. While he cannot punish her, he also does not present a virtuous and kind woman; rather, Mrs. Lecount is a selfish woman who dislikes her charge but fulfills her duty with the final goal of monetary compensation always on her mind. Her righteous shunning of the Vanstone sisters speaks to her unforgiving nature and even the criminal Captain Wragge, also interested in personal gain, comes across to the reader as more likeable than the cold housekeeper.

Patriarchal Villainesses are not likeable characters because they represent feminine virtues taken to rigid extremes. Collins uses this archetype to illustrate the dangers of

emphasizing black and white conceptions of feminine roles, pointing also to the fact that pure moral guardians can be rendered similarly corrupt as the traditional masculine villain.

The Submissive Servant

With the recurring figure of the Patriarchal Villainess, Collins presents women who embrace and enjoy their rigidly defined social roles, exploiting expectations as much as they can and within the parameters of conventional expectations. By creating these rather unlikeable characters, Collins satirizes some of the common roles and paradigms set up for women. With the Submissive Servant, he presents a different kind of woman, one who has been broken by the roles offered her and who presents a depressing portrait of female prospects. The lack of a female voice in society has resulted in victims of abuse who skirt the edges of insanity and illustrate the importance of veering away from being too submissive and accepting. The Submissive Servant is a woman to be pitied. Although Madame Fosco embodies the servility and passivity of the Submissive Servant, her joy in her situation and her manipulations move her away from this category of women into the Patriarchal Villainess camp. While both of the examples below are from women of the lower classes, the word servant does not imply that those of the lower class necessarily embody these characteristics; Mrs. Lecount, for example, is a Patriarchal Villainess despite her lower position within society. Because so much of what creates the submissive servant relates to abuse and degradation, it is more likely to occur within the lower classes; as Frances Power Cobbe writes, "In his apparently most ungovernable rage, the gentleman or tradesman somehow manages to bear in mind the disgrace he will incur if his outbreak be betrayed by his wife's black eye or broken arm, and he regulates his cuffs and kicks accordingly" (295). Interestingly, in *The Woman in White*, Laura Fairlie's marriage offers a glimpse of the

potential for bourgeoisie wife-abuse; Sir Percival enjoys embarrassing his wife in public and constantly berating her in private. The following characters, however, are from the lower classes and offer a stark contrast to the aggressive enjoyment displayed by the Patriarchal Villainesses.

In Collins' novel *Man and Wife*, the final details of the plot turn around the figure of Hester Dethridge, Lady Lundie's mute servant who terrifies Geoffrey Delamayn early in the novel and later provides him with the information he needs to murder his unwanted wife. Upon first introducing her, the narrator quickly goes over the unfortunate circumstances of her life, which sound remarkably like the sketches drawn years later by Frances Power Cobbe in her essay "Wife-Torture in England". Collins writes:

Her character (given by the clergyman of the parish) described her as having been married to an inveterate drunkard, and as having suffered unutterably, during her husband's lifetime [...] On one of the many occasions on which her husband had personally ill-treated her, he had struck her a blow which had produced very remarkable nervous results. She had lain insensible many days together, and had recovered with the total loss of her speech (113).

Lady Lundie dislikes Hester's nervous energy and often attempts to surprise her into speech, particularly when she attempts to discover where Anne escaped to, but it is Geoffrey Delamayn's reaction to her, and her reaction to him, which is most worthy of attention.

Seeing her "sorrow-stricken face" (Collins 240), Geoffrey approaches the mute servant in the garden. While he attempts to strike up a conversation with her, he notices her eyes on him, "staring at him, cold, dull, and changeless as the eyes of a corpse" (240). Her gaze

frightens him and he attempts to leave her but finds he cannot break away from her intense stare. His scrutiny of Lady Lundie's cook allows him to notice the sudden "sinister" change that comes over Hester as she stares over his shoulder (241) and before he knows what is happening she runs away from Geoffrey and he presumes that she is mad. Hester's odd reaction hints at her own dark past, as well as the dark streak in Geoffrey's nature. The reader is already aware that Geoffrey's selfish and worldly concerns override moral obligation, but Hester's reaction to him also speaks to his cruelty and the danger Anne faces if she succeeds in tying Geoffrey to her in marriage.

Hester's sad past haunts her everyday life and she is frightened by the visions which serve as a reminder that she killed her husband after suffering years of abuse. That she sees the vision repeatedly when faced with Geoffrey hints, once again, at the kind of man he is. It also points to the sad fact that she cannot be rid of her husband, even after he has been dead for years, which, in turn, comments on the situation facing abused women in England. In Hester, Collins illustrates the problems that arise when a married woman has no recourse to escape her husband and his abuse. Collins clearly wants to illustrate these dangers as he offers Hester a voice by revealing Hester's private journal to Geoffrey. Although Geoffrey misinterprets the journal and decides to use it as a way to murder his own wife, the reader's sympathy for Hester grows after learning about her life as told through her own words. Hester serves as an example of the kind of life Anne could be trapped into because of one moment of poor judgement, calling into question the label of "fallen women" and also the permanence of marriage when one's partner is abusive and cruel. A fallen woman cannot regain status and the label is supposed to be a permanent mark against the woman, but by describing Anne's redemption, Collins undermines the categorization, just as he calls into question the lack

of justice surrounding women's divorce rights. Hester writes: "If – instead of my running off from him – it had been all the other way, and he had run off from me, something might have been done (as I understood) to protect me. But he stuck to his wife. As long as I could make a farthing, he stuck to his wife" (Collins 589). Through Hester's story, Collins not only criticizes the Scottish marriage laws, but he also looks at the British state of marriage, focusing not on how easy it is to become married, but on how difficult it is to end a marriage.

Collins returns to this topic in *No Name* with the character of Mrs. Wragge, a large and unintelligent woman who was married for her modest fortune. Captain Wragge, who helps Magdalen in exchange for money, is a predominantly unlikeable character who is greedy, untrustworthy, and cruel to his stupid wife. In *Man and Wife*, Geoffrey and Hester Dethridge's husband were likened in their cruelty and their greed. However, in this story, it is Magdalen who seeks to marry for money, pairing her with the unkind husbands and placing Noel Vanstone as the unfortunate victim. We should not, however, read the story in that manner. Collins stresses that Magdalen does not seek to take more money than is her due if the inheritance laws had been just while Captain Wragge has no concern for justice and is, instead, looking out only for his own self interest. His wife, described as meeker than a lamb (Collins 202) despite her six foot three stature, is afraid of him but still happy with her choice to marry him from among her suitors, declaring "He was the smartest and the shortest of them all. He took care of me and my money. I'm here, the money's gone" (Collins 206). Mrs. Wragge approached the situation in practical terms; she didn't want to work as a barmaid forever and decided to settle on the man she thought would best take care of her, clearly not thinking that a marriage based on love could ever come to pass. Collins is using Mrs. Wragge as more than an example of an unhealthy marriage; Mrs. Wragge stands for problems inherent

with Victorian feminine ideals. While *No Name* focuses closely on the importance of marriage, money, and situation, Magdalen's status as an outcast and a shameful woman despite never having actually "fallen" opens the question of what is an appropriate way for Victorian women to survive financially. Without fortune, Magdalen decides to take to the stage instead of becoming a governess like her sister which makes her an unsavoury character for all of polite society as actresses were often seen as fallen women. The question then arises as to what Magdalen could have done and what kinds of justifiable expectations should women be held up to.

While Magdalen chooses a more scandalous route, her sister Norah selects the most obvious employment for young and educated women, and embarks on a life as a governess. Mrs. Wragge, born in the lower classes and without the benefit of an education, acted as a barmaid before her marriage. This situates Norah and Mrs. Wragge in similar, if not identical, situations and it is to Norah's benefit that she decides not to marry simply to escape her life of drudgery. Despite following conventional expectations and taking the opportunity to marry, Mrs. Wragge's embracing of traditional roles does not lead to a particularly happy life, even if she seems content overall. It is to Norah's credit that she turns away from an opportunity for a happy marriage based on love, which I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, for reasons of conscience. This decision marks a divide between the two women. Norah can see beyond simple paradigms of feminine behaviour to the true moral direction behind it, unlike Mrs. Wragge who follows traditional roles unthinkingly and looks to marriage as a woman's ultimate goal in life.

Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, in *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels*, writes of Mrs. Wragge:

As an image of feminine meekness and gentleness, of submission and self-abnegation, Mrs. Wragge's freedom of expression or self-assertion is, in fact, inversely proportional to her height. Mrs. Wragge actually embodies Victorian womanhood in its most crippling aspects, being objectified from the very first [...] and subjected to her heartless husband's manic sense of order (139).

Captain Wragge's insistence that his "constitutionally torpid" (Collins 203) wife enact all of the roles set out for Victorian women serves to highlight the often unfair conventions held up for women to fulfill. Magdalen is shamed for straying from the ideals of submission and gentleness with her career onstage, but Mrs. Wragge's life is not one that the reader would envy despite the fact that she fulfills all of the requirements set out by conduct manuals. It is Norah's interpretation of Victorian womanliness which offers the most self-respecting and plausible course of action.

Mrs. Wragge's absolute lack of intelligence mixed with her all-consuming desire to be perfectly obedient is another facet of Collins' commentary on the Victorian woman. As previously quoted, the Victorian woman was expected to be naturally intuitive – organic intelligence not based on education – but easily guided by her husband or father (Burstyn 33). In her role as meek wife, Mrs. Wragge does not question her husband, and he does not share information with her, resulting in events which play a key role in directing the plot of the novel. Burstyn writes that the Victorian woman was expected to be morally pure and to "teach the whole world how to live in virtue" (Burstyn 32). Mrs. Wragge, morally pure and with an inability to understand the concept of deception, reveals to the wretched Mrs. Lecount that the woman about to marry her master is Magdalen Vanstone. It is clear that Mrs. Wragge is not entirely to blame and Magdalen does not even attempt to chide her but Collins is

commenting through her character that the belief in a rigid and unyielding view of femininity is flawed because it does not take into account the possibility of exceptions. Mrs. Wragge does what she does because she cannot understand vice and deception, but this naiveté is a problem when the reader's sympathy is with the person who is being protected by trickery. Collins is making a mockery of the lack of value placed on women's intelligence and the belief that women have a rigid moral compass that allows them to instruct in the ways of virtue.

Collins' focus on the vexed question of femininity allows the reader to trace and examine the problems Collins has with popular contemporary ideas. Hypocritically moral or alarmingly devoted characters who uphold the status quo with a vengeance offer a glimpse of feminine ideals taken too far in one direction, while the beaten, passive, and simple female characters illustrate the dangers of passivity taken too far in the other. Both the Patriarchal Villainess and the Submissive Servant are incarnations of aspects of ideal femininity pushed beyond traditional expectations. The vehemence of the Patriarchal Villainess renders her a distinctly less likeable character type whereas the Submissive Servant can be seen as a victim; the question of agency arises when considering the two types. Characters like Hester or Mrs. Wragge feel that they have no options and attempt to survive as best they can. The aggressively self-righteous posturing of characters like Lady Lundie or Mrs. Lecount offer the reader a glimpse of vacant adherence to patriarchal values, but they enjoy their position and fight to protect it. While one type is more likeable than the other, Collins paints them both as failed examples, neither one being particularly tenable. None of the characters would be mistaken for the heroines of the novels but Collins uses this technique to put pressure on the characteristics they embody, which in turn places doubt on the traditional constructions of

femininity. There are substantial connections and parallels between the main female characters and the secondary characters discussed, particularly with the passive who adhere more closely to conventional feminine behaviour. With the secondary characters, or Collins' bad examples, taken care of, I will now examine how the passive doubles to the primary characters continue the exploration of ideal femininity.

Chapter Three

Redeeming the Passive

Famous for authoring unconventional women who break social taboos, Wilkie Collins provides a host of main female characters who are ahead of their time. *The Woman in White*, Collins' breakthrough novel, introduces the character of Marian Halcombe, the shapely yet ugly woman who succeeds in rescuing her half-sister from a mental asylum and who risks her life to uncover the secret Sir Percival Glyde is hiding from his wife. In *No Name*, Magdalen Vanstone plots and schemes to recover her lost inheritance, becoming an actress and a con-woman in the process. Finally, in *Man and Wife*, Collins follows Anne Silvester, a fallen woman, in her quest to establish her marriage and recover her reputation. In the previous chapter, I examined the ways in which the secondary characters add depth to Collins' attempts to undermine expectations of feminine behaviour in order to establish a new ideal. In *The Woman in White*, *No Name*, and *Man and Wife*, Collins makes various attempts at sketching this ideal through the character of the milder, meeker, and passive women in contrast to their bolder, attention-grabbing counterparts. While Anne Silvester, Marian Halcombe, and Magdalen Vanstone overtly challenge expectations, the more passive characters offer an interesting solution to the problem of feasibility. The main characters' transgressive natures succeed in making a forceful point about femininity, but Collins is not suggesting that these characters should be seen as ideal or potential alternatives to the contemporary notions surrounding femininity. Instead, he uses the passive female counterparts to illustrate a workable femininity that quietly and subtly breaks with convention. These characters

maintain a strong sense of self by refusing to act against their conscience even in the face of strong criticism, while also preserving their virtue, thereby refusing to undermine their positions.

Laura Fairlie, from *The Woman in White*, Norah Vanstone, from *No Name*, and Blanche Lundie, from *Man and Wife*, are three figures who are often thought of as entirely traditional and boring counterparts to their far more interesting doubles. In *Victorian Heroines: Representations of Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Art*, Kimberley Reynold and Nicola Humble explore the various ways that Victorian authors portray women. According to common belief, the Victorian woman is “the sexually passive and angelic wife, sister, and/or mother, or she is the sexually charged and demonic mad-woman-in-the-attic” (Reynolds 2). While sensation fiction allowed authors to begin exploring ways in which women could break free from this simple dichotomy, Collins subtly plays with the reader’s expectations of such a division, yet moves beyond it; to read Norah and Magdalen as complete opposites would be to overlook the subtle ways in which Collins manipulates his characters.

When Freud defines doubling, he describes it as being inherently uncanny, writing that “the ‘double’ has become a vision of terror” (426). In the double, there can exist self-criticizing tendencies and “all those unfulfilled but possible futures to which we still like to cling” (Freud 426). Essentially, the double represents a separate part of the self which is familiar, but also different because of the separation. The double is frightening because it is “familiar and congenial [and] concealed and kept out of sight” (Freud 420). The only instance of this kind of alienating doubling in Collins’ three novels comes through the character of Anne Catherick, the woman in white. When Collins pairs Laura and Marian, Blanche and Anne, and Norah and Magdalen, he is not doing so in order to create a sense of uncanny fear

about their connection. However, in their doubling there is the sense of potential futures and possible fates intertwined yet the characters remain separate. The close relationships between the female characters, stemming from childhood, bring them together, while their individual choices take them on separate paths. By using doubles, Collins illustrates two possible destinies begun in close proximity; his use of the trope binds the characters together and humanizes those women who step out of bounds. His use of the technique also hints at the fact that, in these novels, Collins is struggling to create assertive female characters who defy conventions, yet also characters who are womanly and pure. Instead of following conduct manual prescriptions about one way for proper women to behave, he splits his positive female characters in two, further illustrating singular models of femininity are not accurate. Kathleen O'Fallon declares that the rebellious female figures are often set against secondary characters who "are used to highlight the heroine's dual nature through contrast and mirroring" (231). While O'Fallon is correct in drawing attention to the technique, the passive female characters are an important part of the dual nature Collins wants to portray in his female characters. Instead of using doubling to complement the active characters, Collins uses it to complete them by presenting their more conventional, yet indispensable, sisters.

Accounting for The Woman in White

Laura Fairlie, in *The Woman in White*, is one of Collins' most ridiculed women, often entirely undercut and likened to Collins' more useless female characters. Richard Barrickman refers to Laura when he declares that Collins' heroines are passive beyond the point of being believable, U.C. Knoepfelmacher writes that Laura is "insipid" (65), and Reynolds writes that to be an innocent heroine and, therefore, vulnerable to attack, the character needs to be "rather stupid" (110), citing Laura as the embodiment of that problem. Laura, the earliest of Collins'

passive heroines, differs from his later heroines in many ways. To begin, although Laura is never given direct control of the narrative, she is the primary female figure who is rewarded with marriage to the hero of the novel. Also, Laura is much more in tune with conduct book behaviour than her later versions. Finally, Laura interacts with two double-figures in the novel, both her half-sisters, and both offering different comments about feminine virtue and behaviour.

While Laura never takes direct control of the story, she figures prominently in all of the narratives in the novel, a detail which is important yet not particularly groundbreaking; the quest to save a woman or to marry her is a common plot device. Walter Hartright, the detective-hero who enters the book as a simple drawing master, falls in love with her early on. Upon first introducing her, he offers the reader a description of her which stands in stark contrast to his earlier analysis of her half-sister Marian Halcombe. Where Marian is “swarthy” and “masculine” (Collins 32), Laura is fair and beautiful; Hartright describes her as having “lovely eyes in colour, lovely eyes in form – large and tender and quietly thoughtful – but beautiful above all things in the clear truthfulness of look that dwells in their inmost depths, and shines through all their changes of expression with the light of a purer and better world” (49). Hartright wishes the reader to think of her as an ideal woman, declaring that when imagining Laura, the reader should imagine the first woman who “quickened the pulses” (49) within the reader. Collins sets Laura up immediately as the ultimate female, with Marian informing Walter that Laura suffers from “essentially feminine malady, a slight headache” (33). She is also prone to faintness and becomes ill more easily than either of Collins’ later heroines, a factor which plays heavily within the plot of the novel. Her passive traits remind the reader of Amy Dorrit or Maud Ruthyn, yet Collins establishes a willfulness within Laura

which we do not see in the aforementioned characters who are known primarily for their docility.

Despite her passivity, Laura risks upsetting a powerful male character in order to maintain her integrity. As she plans to reveal to her fiancé, Sir Percival Glyde, that she is in love with another, she declares to her sister: “I ought to deceive no one – least of all the man to whom my father gave me, and to whom I gave myself” (165). Collins emphasizes in those lines what the reader had already learned earlier in the novel, that Laura’s nature is too “truthful to deceive others, [is] too noble to deceive itself” (65). Collins suggests that embracing aspects of traditional conceptions of femininity can undermine patriarchal power or authority, yet the corrupt Sir Percival refuses to adhere to gentlemanly conventions himself, thereby rendering Laura’s assertive move useless.

In creating the character of Laura Fairlie, Collins emphasizes all the essentially feminine traits which Dickensian heroines often embody, and, more importantly, the characteristics expected of ideal women in conduct manuals. Deborah Gorham indicates that girls “were encouraged to accept dependence on the male as a natural and inevitable part of the feminine condition” (102). Burstyn reminds us that feminine virtues were thought to be “self-denial, forbearance, [and] fidelity” (32), as well as silent endurance (105). Laura fulfills the paradigms that these authors describe; she is sweet, innocent, unable to practice deception, and embraces patriarchal control. When she justifies her marriage to Sir Percival, she indicates that she will marry Glyde because her father wanted it, declaring: “I have lost him now; I have only his memory to love; but my faith in that dear dead friend has never been shaken. I believe, at this moment as truly as I ever believed, that he knew what was best, and that his hopes and wishes ought to be my hopes and wishes too” (Collins 170). By embracing

the idea of patriarchal authority, Laura consents to enter into a union she does not desire, but not without insisting that her feelings have a justified place within her father's expectations for her future.

In many ways, Laura appears to be an entirely passive heroine with very little that can possibly empower her. Unlike Collins' later passive women, Blanche and Norah, who subtly resist acting against their desires, Laura's decision to marry Glyde upholds convention. However, Laura does stipulate that her beloved sister, Marian, must be allowed to live with her, and although she attempts to respect the sanctity of marital relations by refusing to divulge embarrassing details of her relationship with Percival to Marian, Laura is able to stand up to the intimidation perpetrated upon her by her tyrannical husband. When Sir Percival demands that she sign her name to mysterious documents without explanation, Laura refuses. After he presents her with the papers, Laura asks: "I ought surely to know what I am signing, Sir Percival, before I write my name?" (247), and although Percival pressures her, she makes no move to sign the documents, declaring: "If my signature pledges me to anything [...] surely, I have some claim to know what that pledge is?" (248). Laura does not back down despite the harsh words Percival visits upon her and Marian, the picture of stubbornness and firm character in the novel, is proud of her sister. While this may seem a small triumph, the early seeds of Laura's resistance offer a glimpse of what Collins works to achieve in his later passive heroines. She is stubborn because she knows she is right; were she to give in, she would begin to transform into the Submissive Servant type I examined in the previous chapter. Instead, she stands her ground and wins a battle against her tyrannical husband.

These incidents, however, do not entirely remove Laura from the realm of a simple archetype of feminine docility, but they do point to the kinds of resistance that Collins is

playing with in the earliest of these novels. Laura clings to certain rights that she continues to hold within the marriage and, while attempting to act in a manner appropriate to her situation, is able to recognize when things are not as they should be. Nevertheless, Laura's discomfort and resistance cannot hold up once her double, Marian, becomes ill and can no longer offer her support. At the end of the novel Laura is confused and weak, requiring constant attention from her new husband and her ever-present sister. While she reclaims her identity and is happy, she is less present than she was at earlier stages in the novel when she fought her own battles against Sir Percival.

The doubling or mirroring technique, which Collins uses in all three of the novels, is especially complex in *The Woman in White* because Laura willingly and gratefully cedes control to her sister, resulting in a greater split between the doubles than we find in either of the later novels. By giving over control, Laura no longer complements Marian and instead acts as a shadow. Laura's identity is obscured because of narrative tropes, but also because she does not have a strong desire to regain control. She essentially becomes a child who must be rescued by her sister and Walter. Barickman writes: "In her innocent rectitude and passivity, her refusal to violate her narrow sense of feminine honor by calculated, wily, or defensive actions, Laura loses control of her own identity so far as society is concerned and even acquiesces in the process" (116). While she recovers slightly by the end of the novel, Laura's happy ending is to be the simple, innocent wife to her adoring husband with her unattractive and loyal sister as her constant companion. Anne Catherick, the woman who is Laura's physical double in the novel, does not reflect the character splitting that takes place with Marian, or even the partnering that occurs in *No Name* or *Man and Wife*. Anne, instead, seems to point to the direction in which Collins' heroines are heading; Anne escapes from the

asylum, finds help in old friends, and attempts to warn Laura of the danger she is facing while also keeping herself free. She is the strange figure who haunts the main characters with her odd familiarity and her discernible differences, creating a spooky effect which benefits the sensational story. In the novel Anne is relegated to the sidelines and dies without particular emphasis, but the influence of this character extends to Collins' later novels. Her dedication and her belief in right and wrong can be seen in Norah and Blanche, as well as the lead figures in those in Magdalen and Anne Silvester, who demonstrates that even if a character is mistreated and in an almost powerless role, she retains the choice of rebellion.

The Forgotten Sisters

For the modern reader, the characters of Magdalen and Anne, the rebellious and active characters in *No Name* and *Man and Wife*, are much more appealing than characters who struggle against expectations within conventional behavioural patterns. Many have disregarded Norah and Blanche as reflecting the Victorian ideal to a laughable conclusion, declaring that they are uninteresting, passive, feminine paradigms, especially when compared to their active sisters. However, Norah Vanstone and Blanche Lundie should not be disregarded so quickly. Their passivity does not stand in opposition to Anne and Magdalen's activity; instead, each character rebels against the ideal female archetype, albeit in very different ways. By examining the less obvious ways in which Blanche and Norah chafe against convention, it will become obvious that Collins is doing more with these characters than simply recreating Dickensian women.

Magdalen Vanstone and Anne Silvester are undeniably interesting to the modern reader. They are independent, daring and defiant. Magdalen, the much more active and

rebellious of the two, schemes, plots and tricks those around her in a desperate attempt to right the wrong committed to her family by her uncle and the legal system. Anne's quest is less grand and she is more sedate than the younger Miss Vanstone. Having already given herself to him sexually, she wants Geoffrey Delamayn to claim her as his wife, thereby avoiding complete ruin and degradation. Her quest leads her to challenge the athletic hero of Britain and sacrifice herself to save Blanche. In *No Name* and *Man and Wife* Collins focuses closely on the trials and tribulations of these two women while Norah and Blanche are pushed to the sidelines and occasionally forgotten by the reader. After all, what is it that they are doing that could divert our attention from trips across Scotland and daring deceptions?

Given that Collins places greater emphasis on his more active characters, it is easy to see why some critics place little importance on the passive leads. While he does set up dichotomies, he is doing so in order to draw attention to differing feminine constructions, binding the doubles together through mutual affection, and shared devotion. In *Man and Wife*, Collins begins by illustrating the ways in which Blanche and Anne are closely bonded despite their differences. Even as children, Blanche and Anne have different dispositions; Anne is "frail and delicate, with a pale sensitive face" while Blanche is "light and florid, with round cheeks, and bright, saucy eyes – a charming picture of happiness and health" (*Man and Wife* 17). Upon initial introduction, the reader could assume that Blanche will cause more problems for Victorian sexual norms; Collins describes her as "saucy" (17) and she is more physical than Anne. Anne's body is "frail and delicate," (17) making it difficult to imagine that her transgression will be with that very same body. However, as soon as Collins has set up this initial dichotomy, he plants the idea in the reader's mind that Anne's fate will mirror that of her unfortunate mother. The pairing and contrasting of the two continues into

adulthood, at times suggesting and highlighting their differences, while always remembering to draw the reader back to their sameness, rooted in their love for each other.

Blanche is young, pretty, plump, and fair; her clothing is very fashionable and she enjoys her position of prominence in the summer gathering where her friends and family have assembled (56). Collins then describes Anne in almost opposite terms: “Strangers, who saw her for the first time, saw a lady in the prime of her life – a lady plainly dressed in unornamented white – who advanced slowly, and confronted the mistress of the house” (58). Anne does not like the spotlight and quietly tries to extricate herself from involvement in the gathering, made easier by her role as governess within the Lundie family. The reader begins to understand more fully that it is not happy Blanche who threatens Victorian female conventions, but the quieter, yet inexplicably sexual and appealing Anne who has stepped outside the bounds of decorum. Anne is undeniably alluring to men, who are drawn to her, while women seem to have a natural abhorrence or suspicion of her; it is to Blanche’s credit that she sees beyond what most other women see, marking her as unique among her sex. However, it is also important to note that Blanche is appealing to all the characters in the novel, marking her as more of an ideal than Anne, whose sexual appeal is more dangerous and alienating than Blanche’s minx-like purity. Deborah Gorham, author of *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, describes the ideal young female as providing “gentleness and cheerfulness” (38). The adult Blanche stands out as infinitely satisfied with her life, very happy and lovely to be around. Anne, on the other hand, is unsociable, unhappy, with “the devil’s own temper” (*Man and Wife* 61).

These contrasting traits combine with turns in the plot to create an apparent dichotomy, particularly when Geoffrey Delamayn and Arnold Brinkworth provide the final,

and most important, separation for the two young women: Blanche is desired by Arnold who actively pursues her for marriage. Blanche, although very much in love and desiring a union with Arnold, maintains her virginity, always remembering that he must be encouraged “within limits!” (*Man and Wife* 72). The same does not hold true for Anne. She succumbs to her sexual desires when indulging in an affair with Geoffrey, a man whom she does not really like. She then attempts to arrange a meeting with the reluctant and unenthusiastic Delamayn. She concocts a plan to marry in Scotland and Anne is underwhelmed, to say the least, by his reaction. While Blanche’s future seems secure and full of promise, Anne faces scandal because of her sexual indiscretion. She shouts at Geoffrey: “You villain! if you *don’t* marry me, I am a ruined woman” (79). Anne has succumbed to the “sleeping passions” (76) when she has sex with Geoffrey. Anne had “lived on to the prime of her womanhood – and then, when the treasure of her life was at its richest, in one fatal moment she had flung it away” (76). Within a sensation novel, Anne’s predicament offers an interesting platform for a spectacular story, and one which allows Collins to examine the importance of feminine virtue, legal loopholes, and strength of character, following Anne’s adventures with Geoffrey, and her attempts to avoid utter ruin. Blanche’s happy storyline, an uninteresting tale of genuine love eagerly waiting for marital union, falls to the sidelines. One could argue that Blanche no longer serves any purpose other than as a foil to muddy Sir Patrick’s investigation and force Anne to claim Geoffrey as her unwilling husband to save the sanctity of Blanche’s own marriage. If the reader made those assertions, however, she would be missing the intricacies of Blanche’s character, as well as her redeeming love and devotion to the woman she has embraced as a sister. Just as Collins presents Anne as a woman who is at once frail and passionate, Blanche also embodies more than one feminine trait and her importance should

not be underestimated. While seemingly on separate paths, Collins twines their stories together, further binding the two women and offering Blanche more opportunities to step outside of the role of meek and forgettable woman.

The parallels between Norah Vanstone and her younger sister are equally emphasized through the descriptions that Collins offers. Kathleen O'Fallon writes that Collins uses physical appearance, the same techniques that dramatists use, to "disclose important character traits" (227). The pleasant and joyful character in *Man and Wife*, the woman who upholds feminine virtue, is the character who spirals out of control in *No Name*. While Collins uses these physical clues to indicate certain behaviour potentials, he then undercuts these tropes by attributing unlikely behaviour to unlikely characters. In *No Name*, the sullen, dark, older woman refuses to break under the pressure of her fate, while the younger, joyful sister's actions remove her from polite society.

Collins introduces Norah by describing her as a less beautiful version of her mother. Both are dark and rosy cheeked, but Norah's face has

less interest, less refinement and depth of feeling in her expression: it was gentle and feminine, but clouded by a certain quiet reserve, from which her mother's face was free. If we dare to look closely enough, may we not observe, that the moral force of character and the higher intellectual capacities in parents seem often to wear out mysteriously in the course of transmission to children? (*No Name* 11)

Collins draws the reader's attention to Norah's moral and intellectual deficiencies in order, perhaps, to encourage the reader into making assumptions about Norah's fate. He describes

her as cat-like, with light-brown hair “to some tastes, it was dull and dead” (13), with pale eyelashes and “discordantly light” (13) eyes. Where Norah is dark, Magdalen is light, descriptions which might incline readers to consider these women as opposites.

Their dispositions are similarly contrary. Magdalen is of “fervid temperament” (52), with a desire to act on the stage. Magdalen speaks when she is angry and does not attempt to curtail her wild emotions. On the other hand, Collins describes Norah as being cold, with an “icy reserve” (70), or an “unconquerable reserve” (74). Her eyes are “soft, secret, hazel eyes” (51). Perhaps the following passage is the most damning of the early descriptions: “Her opinions were unchangeable – but she never disputed with anybody. She had the great failing of a reserved nature – the failing of obstinacy; and the great merit – the merit of silence” (51). Norah’s character, the upholder of understated female virtue in the novel is much less likeable in these early descriptions than her tempestuous, but genuine, younger sister. Collins further reflects these differences in his description of their relationship

Unlike in *Man and Wife*, the story does not begin with sisters as great friends.

Whereas Anne and Blanche are not actually related, yet are as close as real sisters, Norah and Magdalen are not united in common purpose when the novel commences. Norah attempts to block Magdalen’s marriage to the ne’er-do-well neighbour and is quickly overruled by the other members of her family. Collins emphasizes the discord between the sisters by repeatedly commenting on Norah’s rather unpleasant disposition and Magdalen’s frustration with her. More than in *Man and Wife*, Collins has managed to cast these two characters in seeming opposition. With one rapid stroke, however, Collins changes the trajectories of his two female characters, uniting them in grief and altering Norah’s personality.

Norah Vanstone begins the novel as a rather unpleasant character, but after the death of her parents, she develops a surprising strength and demonstrates her compassion and resilience. Instead of describing Norah as implacable, Collins writes that Norah has “patient sympathy” (110) and Miss Garth, the family nanny, thinks she has been mistaken in thinking that Magdalen was the better child. In her worry Miss Garth dwells on the changes that have occurred and thinks: “Was the promise of the future shining with prophetic light through the surface-shadow of Norah’s reserve; and darkening with prophetic gloom, under the surface-glitter of Magdalen’s bright spirits?” (147). Collins begins to break down their opposition by demonstrating Norah’s concern for Magdalen and her desire to help her sister through her grief. By creating such seemingly opposite characters only to change them, Collins emphasizes the fluidity of character and his refusal to box women into two entirely separate camps. Collins does not believe in stagnant characters who are destined to end the novel without having changed or evolved. Norah can be hard and cold, but she is also loving, protective, and dedicated.

While they are closer than when the novel began, there are still important separations between them, the most significant lying not with their dispositions but with their actions following their disinheritance. Norah is willing to become a governess and patiently bear her fate, whereas Magdalen is determined to get revenge. Magdalen frightens the family lawyer with the “furtive light” (166) in her eyes and begins to plot her revenge almost right away. The physical and moral separation does not, however, break the sisters apart entirely as Norah refuses to give up on her sister and Magdalen’s actions are motivated in part by her desire to restore Norah to her former position of leisure (209). Once Magdalen has left her sister,

Collins transports the reader on a journey focused almost entirely on Magdalen, with the secondary female character, Norah, confined to the sidelines.

Kimberley Reynolds writes that “the Victorian novel treads a moral tightrope: attempting to provide heroines with knowledge and experience of sexuality without compromising them and so invalidating them as role models” (14). In *Man and Wife* Anne is more than simply sexually aware; she has completely given herself to a man, thereby nullifying her chances at becoming a role model. Reynolds later goes on to write that sensation novels split

the ‘heroine’ into separate parts. This could result in a diminution of female significance in the narrative, and a lack of focus for the (female) reader’s identification, but in fact it invariably represents a radical expansion of the possibilities for female identity and behaviour (106).

While Reynolds elsewhere indicates that the passive and idealized female characters like Norah or Blanche are less important or significant than Collins’ more brash ladies, her quote applies nicely to the way the passive heroine complements, but does not compete with, the active heroine. However, not all follow this line of thinking.

Many of the critics who have written about *No Name* seem to be in accord when it comes to the character of Norah Vanstone. Norah is “the passive, pallid, good girl who accepts disinheritance and disgrace as submissively as she accepted the idle security of middle-class respectability” (Barickman 121). Kimberley Reynolds declares that Norah is the embodiment of the angel-in-the-house ideal (112) with “a strength to endure, not to act” (112). Both Barickman and Reynolds demonstrate a kind of indifference to Norah; she is passive,

submissive and does nothing to change her fate. Richard Barickman declares that Norah spends the novel “passive [and] waiting for rescue” (122). Overall, Barickman declares that the “good” heroines in Collins’s novels are “passive to the point of ludicrousness” (113). What these authors have failed to account for, however, is the resilience and dedication that Norah and Blanche both demonstrate, not to mention the actions they take when attempting to recover their lost sisters.

While Blanche and Norah may not take center stage in the novels, their roles within the stories are significant. This is particularly true of Blanche, who does everything she can to reunite with Anne. Despite the fact that her actions do not always lead to the best results, the reader cannot question Blanche’s dedication to Anne. She journeys out late at night to find Anne at the inn before her stepmother does (daring behaviour that potentially risks her reputation as a virtuous woman) and begins to investigate Anne’s whereabouts whenever given the opportunity. She questions both Geoffrey Delamayn and Bishopriggs to no avail. In fact, Blanche’s questioning places stumbling blocks in the way of the investigation, but her actions prove that she is not willing to simply sit by and hope that Anne will return. She actively disobeys her “superiors” when trying to reunite with Anne. Her actions are even more justified when considering Sir Patrick’s decision to give up. He declares: “We must accept the position in which Miss Silvester has placed us. I shall give up all further effort to trace her from this moment” (*Man and Wife* 298). While Blanche’s efforts do not result in the discovery of either Anne’s location or her reasons for leaving, she does prolong the search for her beloved friend.

Norah Vanstone expresses similar feelings of loyalty which bring her closer to her sister. While Norah takes up even less space in Collins’ narrative than does her counterpart

Blanche, Norah's devotion to her sister is even more admirable. Norah knows that Magdalen's actions are disreputable and her friend Miss Garth, as well as the family lawyer, have all told Norah that Magdalen is no longer worthy of her esteem. Time and again Norah refuses to cast off her sister. She writes to Mr. Pendril: "Even if it should not be so, my sister – do what you may – is still my sister. I can't desert her; I can't turn my back on any one who comes at me in her name. You know, dear Mr. Pendril, I have always been obstinate on this subject" (528). We will return to the actions which accompany this letter at a later point, but for now it is simply important to notice Norah's refusal to even consider abandoning her sister. Earlier in the novel, she abandons her post as governess without a second thought once her employers disparage Magdalen. Miss Garth informs Magdalen: "your sister – who has patiently born all hardships that fell on herself – instantly resented the slur cast on *you*. She gave her employers warning on the spot" (312). Norah's dedication separates her from the stereotypes of a simple, upright and unimpeachable angel-in-the-house which many critics attempt to make her out to be. Kathleen O'Fallon writes that Collins' heroines are "postlapsarian women with minds of their own and the strength of character to insist they be allowed to use them" (228). Her assertion can just as easily be applied to Norah and Blanche as it can to Anne and Magdalen.

Redeeming Norah and Blanche requires more than a simple demonstration that they are loyal, although their loyalty in the face of sexual indiscretion and inappropriate behaviour in the nineteenth century certainly renders them more interesting. More than loyalty, however, Blanche and Norah demonstrate that the ultimate goal in their life goes beyond marriage and children. Deborah Gorham's book explores in detail the important values instilled in female children in the Victorian period. While education was emphasized, she

writes that “they should perceive that education as a preparation for ‘woman’s mission’: for femininity and domesticity” (109). Girls should remember that the ultimate purpose of education is “to make them pleasant and useful companions to men, and responsible mothers to their children” (102). Essentially, many believed that a Victorian woman’s ultimate goal should be marriage.

Blanche does get married in the novel, but her primary concern is not Arnold. While she wishes to marry him, she never even considers the possibility that Anne will not be a part of her new life. Early in the novel she interprets Anne’s sadness as a belief that Blanche’s marriage will result in their separation. She quickly reassures Anne, saying, “You fancy we shall be parted, you goose? As if I could live without you! Of course, when I am married to Arnold, you will come and live with us” (74). The idea of a marriage including a lonely third person occurs in many Victorian texts and does not mark too significant of a departure from the norm. Nevertheless, even after her marriage, Blanche is more concerned about her best friend than with enjoying her honeymoon. She returns to her uncle’s home and immediately asks: “Well! [...] Is Anne found?” (387). Her desire to find Anne supersedes her desire to be the traditional wife, concerned only about her husband’s happiness.

In a more dramatic departure from domestic ideals, Norah refuses marriage altogether in order to remain united with her sister. Norah genuinely loves and cares for George Bartram, yet when he proposes marriage to her, she refuses him. Bartram retells the tale to his uncle, saying:

She spoke in the sweetest and kindest manner; but she firmly declared that ‘her family misfortunes’ left her no honourable alternative, but to think of my own

interests, as I had not thought of them myself – and gratefully to decline accepting my offer (682).

Once again she places her love for Magdalen over her own personal desires or well-being.

Miss Garth attempts to explain the circumstances to George Bartram, writing:

When I tell you that Norah's faithful attachment to her sister still remains unshaken, and that there lies hidden under her noble submission to the unhappy circumstances of her life, a proud susceptibility to slights of all kinds, which is deeply seated in her nature – you will understand the true motive of the refusal which has so naturally and so justly disappointed you (684).

Norah's refusal to wed Mr. Bartram emphasizes exactly how deeply in opposition to the feminine ideal she truly is. While she is passive, she is not without a streak of rebellion.

Gorham writes that this kind of rebellion and refusal to “look up to men” was thought of as being “strong-minded”, something which girls were counselled to be very wary of becoming (104) and both Blanche and Norah easily fall into that category by refusing to submit to traditional influences when deciding how to conduct themselves with their sisters.

While Norah and Blanche are admirable and loving sisters in both *No Name* and *Man and Wife*, the passive yet loyal sisters both commit an inadvertent and deeply hurtful betrayal to their other halves. This betrayal further demonstrates that Collins is attempting to place Blanche and Norah somewhere between the perfect paradigm of female virtue, and the rebellious or fallen figure that Magdalen and Anne represent. While their betrayals can be interpreted as signals by the author that Norah and Blanche are not positive characters, their

betrayals have surprisingly positive outcomes; they allow for the bond between the sisters to grow stronger and allow for a further emphasis of the love shared.

When Blanche is told by Lady Lundie the unfortunate truth of Anne and Arnold's marriage (presented as fact and in a skewed fashion), she understandably feels betrayed and no longer trusts her friend. The ultimate betrayal comes, however, when she demands that there be actual proof that her marriage to Arnold is valid. Her concern is not unreasonable given the fact that if Blanche is pregnant, her child could potentially be considered illegitimate. Also, having read the prelude to the novel, the reader is especially understanding of a desire to be certain that you are committed to a valid marriage with no possible recourse for legal trickery later in life. Providing proof, of course, results in the cementing of the marriage bond between Anne and Geoffrey. This horrible fate is what draws the two women back together and what demonstrates that Blanche is willing to do anything to save her friend. It is also Anne's self-sacrifice which secures her undying loyalty from Blanche's uncle, resulting in her surprise marriage to Sir Patrick Lundie.

It is not Blanche, but Lady Lundie, who ends up appearing foolish, judgmental, and cruel. Although Lady Lundie is set up as a small-minded woman throughout the novel, it is her manipulation of her stepdaughter which is most shocking and damns her in the eyes of the reader. Collins describes Lady Lundie as full of "venom" (505), "merciless" (505), impatient (507), and "unaffected" (516) by Anne's grief. Blanche appears even less culpable and much more sympathetic when contrasted with her spiteful stepmother. Lady Lundie's inability (or refusal) to change her mind about Anne separates her further from Blanche and demonstrates, through true contrasting, that Blanche's love and devotion to Anne is indeed noteworthy.

Unlike Blanche's self-preserving motives, Norah's betrayal is driven entirely by her desire to find her sister. The search also shows Norah as a more active character. She follows her sister's trail, eventually encountering her future husband on the way. Norah's activity, like Blanche's amateur detective work, endears her to the reader and highlights once again the value which Norah places on her sister's wellbeing. It is her desire to find her sister which leads to her eventual collaboration with Mrs. Lecount and the discovery of Magdalen's hideaway with her new husband. Norah's actions alone do not endear her to the reader however, but rather Magdalen's refusal to hold Norah's actions against her cements our feelings for the elder sister. Magdalen writes:

I have no harsh feeling against Norah. The hope I had of seeing her, is a hope taken from me; the consolation I had in writing to her, is a consolation denied me for the future. I am cut to the heart – but I have no angry feeling towards my sister. She means well, poor soul – I dare say she means well. It would distress her, if she knew what has happened. Don't tell her (589).

Knowing, as the reader knows, what lengths Magdalen has gone to in order to secure her inheritance, her continued love for her sister enhances our feelings for both female characters. Norah's devotion in her quest for her sister is all the more admirable because she searches Magdalen out with Mr. Pendril's and Miss Garth's complete disapproval.

The purpose of the betrayal in both novels does more than simply demonstrate uncomplicated love, but also serves to debunk the idea that Norah and Blanche are perfect; for Collins, however, these imperfections simply serve to make them more ideal. Both Norah and Blanche pursue courses of action that end up causing more grief than good for their sisters.

Collins thereby demonstrates that they are not faultless. Also, since what separates the sisters originally are the choices they make at key moments, he is highlighting the potential for any character to make that kind of mistake. Where Magdalen chooses not to accept the legal verdict about her fortune, Norah chooses to move past their loss of fortune. Anne succumbs to a moment of passion, and Blanche insists on waiting for marriage. If Anne and Magdalen may seem at fault for placing too much emphasis on passion, Norah and Blanche rely on their emotions in different ways when they later make decisions which alter the course of their lives and the lives of their sisters. Had Blanche simply accepted Anne at her word, Anne would not have had to escape an attempted murder plot. Had Norah ceased her search for her sister and not involved Mrs. Lecount, Magdalen would have inherited her fortune upon Noel's death. What, however, does it mean that the bad decisions or the betrayals on the part of Norah and Blanche result in the successful endings, involving penitence, retribution, and marriage?

The most convincing answer to that question may be that Collins needs to punish his errant heroines in some way before they are allowed to end happily. Because his heroines often behave in a fashion occasionally attributed to the villainesses of novels, Collins' decision to redeem them already breaks with convention. Anne's confinement in Geoffrey's home acts as a short yet torturous jail sentence. Because Anne is a very sympathetic character, her punishment is quite mild. Blanche's betrayal also has a positive result; Anne's self-sacrifice is what finally makes Sir Patrick Lundie fall completely in love with Anne, thereby securing her position as the new Lady Lundie at the end of the novel. Magdalen's punishment is much more severe, befitting her much more awesome crimes; she loses her fortune and her health. However, it is during this convalescent period where she encounters her future husband and Magdalen has time to repent. The real result of all of Magdalen's

scheming is her sister's marriage, which is what eventually restores their lost fortune. It is Norah's "gentle retiring manners" (518) which intrigue George Bartram but only with Norah's and Magdalen's actions combined can the Vanstone fortune return to its rightful owners. Most critics who find Collins' transgressive heroines interesting fail to note the important role he offers the gentler sisters, which points to a need to re-examine the passive characters.

It is at this point that we must now return to the Kimberley Reynolds assertion that the sensation novel uses the split heroine to undermine traditional notions of femininity. Reynolds seems unwilling to accept the value of a more passive model of femininity, describing the passive characters as necessarily "stupid" (111). In so doing she misreads Collins' use of doubling. By demeaning the passive counterparts to the active heroines, what Reynolds and other critics do is establish a hierarchy in Collins' novels which does not entirely exist. They have pitted Norah against Magdalen and Blanche against Anne. A close examination of Collins' work demonstrates that he is more subtle than that. His passive heroines are not "passive to the point of ludicrousness" (Barickman 113), nor are his active female characters set up as ideals. More accurately, they work in tandem, and the morally unimpeachable sisters act as ways to elevate their less pristine counterparts. Many have called this technique mirroring, but once again, by simply relegating the Norahs and the Blanches of Collins' novels to mere reflections, the critics are effectively denying them complete status as characters with an alternative option to action. In so doing, the critics are also underestimating Collins' skill; his female characters are sensational and have specific and interesting purposes.

Wilkie Collins' first big hit focused on plot and mysteries uncovered, yet the reader can find evidence of the unconventional female characters he would later be known for,

mostly in the form of Marian Halcombe. Most readers, like Count Fosco within the novel, are more interested in Marian than in her ideal sister, and in later novels Collins abandons the trope of placing the rebellious female as a side character clothed in masculine adjectives, and focuses on them directly. While the rebellion in Magdalen and Anne is significantly more obvious, Norah and Blanche's refusal to give up on their sisters, especially in the face of censure and reprimands, belies a powerful force of rebellion. The astute reader will realize that although the passive characters are much less obvious, the course of the novel would not have been the same, nor would our perception of the primary characters, had the passive characters been simple paradigms of traditional virtue. Collins does not discard the feminine ideal in his novels, but rather he moves slightly further away from conventional expectations and creates women who are a mixture of dutiful and passive characteristics with the welcome addition of strength of mind and conviction. In so doing, he creates gentle, confident characters who are able to navigate between torpid passivity and feasible assertiveness.

Chapter 4

Detecting the Ideal Woman

The two novels Wilkie Collins is most famous for are detective novels. Collins is often credited with having shaped the modern detective novel with his book *The Moonstone*; it is therefore fitting that the character who is closest to being an ideal woman, combining the characteristics of his earlier active and passive characters, also takes shape in a detective novel. Although it has not received significant critical attention, *The Law and the Lady*, written in 1875 and late in Collins' career, features Valeria Woodville as the central character and the acting detective. To fully understand the distance Collins has travelled with this character, one must consider the two earlier detective novels that Collins provides for us: *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*. Both feature female characters, yet in neither novel do women act entirely independently and neither offers the opportunity for the female character to claim credit for the unraveled mystery. Ellen Burton Harrington, in her article "From the Lady and the Law to the Lady Detective: Gender and Voice in Collins and Dickens", writes that Collins' use of a female detective may be the result of changing ideals and mind-sets (21), which explains why this character appears in his later novel and why Marian Halcombe, memorable and clever though she is, is not granted the glory of beauty, marriage, and active detection at the end of *The Woman in White*. The same does not hold true for Valeria Woodville, who earns her happy ending through perseverance and scrupulous detective work.

The detective genre of the Victorian period was in its early stages as Collins was writing. A.D. Hutter indicates that Victorian detective fiction, such as *The Moonstone*, "involves the transformation of a fragmented and incomplete set of events into a more ordered

and complete understanding” (175). Hutter indicates that mystery and detective novels at the time take from the gothic tradition, as does sensation fiction more generally, and play with tensions “between subjective mystery and objective solution” (192). Ronald R. Thomas points to the “Newgate” novels as important influences on the Victorian genre, opening the reader up to tales of criminal exploits (65). Both writers point to *The Moonstone* as a significant influence on the genre as it progressed later in the period. Thomas highlights the importance of forensic techniques and Hutter emphasizes the presence of unpredictability within the novel’s resolution. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that one of the most significant components of a good detective novel lies with the overall intelligence and observational skills of the acting detective. Mark Hennelly Jr. argues that in order to tame the mysteries of life, detective fiction “vicariously solves life’s mysteries by providing a perfect paradigm for imposing rational order on an irrational universe” (92) and that for the plot to resolve neatly, it is necessary to have a character who can unravel the mystery.

While *The Moonstone* may offer important insights in the detective genre as a whole, the characters who “detect” are singularly male, like Sergeant Cuff or Franklin Blake; Rachel Verinder plays the role of the victim who offers no help in solving the crime and instead obstructs the investigation in order to protect the man who she believes has perpetrated the theft. Interestingly, although she witnesses the first stage of the crime, her assumption that her cousin is the thief is wrong – she is not anywhere near acting as a detective within the novel. Collins’ earlier novel, *The Woman in White*, has the female character of Marian Halcombe penning part of the narrative and acting as one of the most competent and dedicated detectives in the novel. The ultimate title of detective, however, goes to Walter Hartright, who takes over both the narrative and the physical aspects of the job once he returns in the second half of

the novel; Walter is also in charge of compiling the various documents into one cohesive tale. The last novel I will be discussing, *The Law and the Lady*, introduces only one detective, Valeria, who searches for the truth about her husband's past that will exonerate him in the eyes of the British public. In *The Law and the Lady*, Collins creates a character who blends many of the characteristics we have seen in earlier novels, yet he allows Valeria to take the stage by herself, refusing to offset her rebellion with a tamer counterpart, and reigning in her more unconventional behaviour by providing her with noble and selfless motives.

The Masculine Mind at Work: Marian Halcombe

The mystery at the center of *The Woman in White* surrounds the identity of an enigmatic woman, the secret she keeps, and her tormentor's (Sir Percival Gylde) dark motives. Marian Halcombe, Laura's half sister, offers indispensable aid to the primary detective in the novel, Walter Hartright, and is one of Collins' most memorable creations. She can rightly be labeled Collins' first female detective but her physical description tells the reader a lot about the limitations of Marian's character. When Walter first encounters Marian he is shocked to see her masculine face, writing:

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; and thick coal-black hair growing unusually low down on her forehead. 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 (32).

Marian's feminine body is undermined by a decidedly masculine face. Many critics have interpreted this move as Collins' way of distancing the intelligent and astute character from her gender. On more than one occasion Marian utters similar sentiments, expressing dissatisfaction with the feminine art of drawing on one occasion, and suppressing the urge to physically chastise Sir Percival for his disrespectful tone, checking herself only when she reminds herself that, as a woman, that recourse is not permitted. When she cries in front of Laura she describes her tears as "weak, women's tears of vexation and rage" (183), writing that she hated this particular feminine weakness above all others. When Fosco attempts to influence and control Marian, she writes: "He flatters my vanity, by talking to me as seriously and sensibly as if I was a man" (225), a technique that Marian is aware of but is flattered by all the same. Nevertheless, Marian Halcombe is a woman and her bravery and intelligence should not be dismissed because Collins endows her with masculine attributes. Indeed, she is not even an undesirable woman, exciting passion and admiration from Count Fosco who is drawn to her spirit as well as her intellect.

Marian's formidable intellectual abilities shape the narrative as well as the plot. It is through her dedication that she and Walter are able to discover the identity of the mysterious woman in white. After Walter informs Marian of his chance encounter, she decides to carefully read through all of her mother's old letters and journals in an effort to uncover the woman's identity. Marian also carefully documents everything that happens in her new home with Laura, and her attention to detail later aids them as they attempt to reconstruct a timeline to prove Laura's identity. It is also Marian's daring climb out onto the ledge outside of Sir Percival's room which results in her uncovering what Fosco and Percival want from Laura. Her meticulous nature is such that although she returns to her room chilled and ill, she

carefully transcribes in her diary what she heard before succumbing to a dangerous fever. Lisa Dresner, in her book *The Female Investigator in Literature, Film, and Popular Culture*, points to Marian as one of the earliest women detectives, although she believes that Collins removes credit from her by devoting the final parts of the book to Walter's narrative and adventures. She points to Marian's illness after her bold "act of investigation" as implying "some sort of inherent feminine bodily weakness – men wear similar thickness of clothing and don't get sick; women apparently need more protection" (24). Dresner's reading of the novel, while interesting, removes Marian's agency and importance, something which Collins never does. Fosco ends the novel still enamoured with her brilliance and Walter and Laura owe their entire happiness to Marian's dedication and bravery; had Marian not discovered the switch and rescued Laura from the asylum, Walter would never have been able to pursue his brave acts of detection and restore Laura's identity.

All the same, Marian is not the primary detective in the novel, nor is she the central figure around which the story revolves. As a secondary character she ends the novel as the ugly spinster aunt attached to Walter and Laura's home, tangentially enjoying their happy ending. Only in *The Law and the Lady* does Collins allow his daring female protagonist to fully embrace the detective title.

The Selfless Detective

Valeria Woodville narrates *The Law and the Lady*, interacting with her imagined readers, explaining why she acts in a manner not always befitting a lady. Valeria is, therefore, very aware that public opinion might condemn her unorthodox behaviour, but she writes in an attempt to convince the reader that her motivations are honorable and her actions are

justifiable. Valeria has evolved from the character of Magdalen Vanstone, who is justified in her frustration with British inheritance laws, however her behaviour breaks with legal and moral conventions. Valeria becomes a detective and steps outside of the traditional feminine realm to restore her husband's reputation and solve a crime; she is acting on the side of the law and using legal means to achieve her goal. Detectives, while occasionally unconventional, do not often break the law and are, in fact, attempting to uphold it. In this way, by creating a female detective Collins sidesteps the problem of having an undomestic heroine who is allowed to prosper and triumph; she has pure motives and does not break any laws. While some readers may object to her behaviour from a moral standpoint, Valeria's frequent interjections and attempts at justification insulate her from the kind of censure that Collins' earlier active heroines might have to endure.

When Valeria first introduces herself, she describes herself as a woman who would not be noticed as attractive on the street because "she fails to exhibit the popular yellow hair and the popular painted cheeks" (10). Instead,

The whole picture, as reflected in the glass, represents a woman of some elegance, rather too pale, and rather too sedate and serious in her moments of silence and repose – in short, a person who fails to strike the ordinary observer at first sight; but who gains in general estimation, on a second, and sometimes even on a third, view (10-11).

By describing herself in detached and sometimes unflattering terms, Valeria attempts to create objectivity, and establish herself early in the novel as a voice to be trusted; while she may not be the most beautiful, she is a likeable woman who is not prone to unthinking, passionate

escapades. By distancing herself from women with “painted cheeks”, Valeria indicates that she is not prone to deception of any kind, nor is she guilty of vanity. Nevertheless, she is aware of her power as a woman and can resort to manipulating traditional feminine methods of seduction in order to achieve her ends, although always keeping in mind that her actions are justified by her just motives.

In case there was any question about her womanly nature, Valeria attempts to emphasize the value she places on her husband when she recounts the story of their courtship. Valeria is sincere and in love, eager to do anything that will allow her to remain with Eustace. Her story, however, indicates that her passion for her husband is both a virtue and an alarming fault. Eustace indicates misgivings because Valeria’s family is not particularly impressed with her beau but Valeria refuses to part with him; she cries out: “Go where you may [...] I go with you! Friends – reputation – I care nothing who I lose, or what I lose. Oh Eustace, I am only a woman – don’t madden me! I can’t live without you. I must and I will be your wife!” (21). Unlike some of Collins’ earlier heroines, Valeria channels her ardour through entirely appropriate channels, expressing a desire to be with him, but only as his wife. While Anne Silvester in *Man and Wife* succumbs to her overriding desire for Geoffrey Delamayn, resulting in her status as a fallen woman, Valeria’s conduct more accurately mirrors Blanche’s.

Once Valeria discovers that she has married a man who operates under an assumed name and once she has determined that their marriage is valid all the same, her friends counsel her to “leave things as they are [...] be satisfied with your husband’s affection” (47), advice which she is unable to take. Unlike her friends, Valeria cannot be satisfied with her married situation because she refuses to participate in a marriage that is not based on trust and honesty. The secret between them leads Valeria to declare “Life, on such conditions as my good friend

had just stated, would be simply unendurable to me. Nothing could alter my resolution – for this plain reason, that nothing could reconcile me to living with my husband on the terms on which we were living now” (47). Although she continues to love her husband and she yearns for a happy marriage, she cannot forget the deception. Valeria desires an equal partnership with a solid foundation; she would be content to assume the traditional feminine role, but she will not act the part of the perfect wife unless she can be certain of her husband’s motives and identity: he must play his part. While Valeria seeks reassurance from Eustace, it is important to note that she does not wish for an unblemished past; her sole requirement is honesty and trust. Kathleen O’Fallon writes “the masculine Valeria is determined to carry out her quest for knowledge, but the feminine Valeria desires love and family stability – the two things that Eustace denies her as long as she insists on seeking the truth about him” (234), which results in the temporary splintering of their marriage. By describing the different aspects to Valeria’s journey in binary terms (masculine vs. feminine), O’Fallon is simply recreating the understanding of separate spheres that Collins defies. Valeria seeks knowledge because of her feminine desires, not in spite of them.

Eustace is decidedly unhappy with Valeria’s curiosity and her insistence on full disclosure, scolding her by saying “I thought I had married a woman who was superior to the vulgar failings of her sex. A good wife should know better than to pry into the affairs of her husband’s with which she has no concern” (54). For Eustace, his ideal wife would not care to learn about his past as he does not believe Valeria should have any requirements upon entering the marriage; like Valeria’s friends, he believes that his love should be enough. Conduct manuals, as described by Deborah Gorham, would be strongly against Valeria’s wilful behaviour, indicating that girls “must learn to control their ‘impetuous and unregulated

feelings” (112); by allowing herself to be overcome by her desire for truth to the point of disobedience and deception, Valeria is allowing impetuous and unregulated feelings control over her life and her marriage. Instead of submitting to her husband’s demands, she takes matters into her own hands and decides to discover the truth by herself, turning to mild forms of deception, in her absolute determination to solve the mystery.

The early stages of Valeria’s investigation revolve around discovering why Eustace changed his name when he married her and it is in this section of the novel that Valeria is at her most independent, defying convention and propriety, and disobeying her husband. Her motives, as previously indicated, stem from a need for equality and openness in her marriage, but her very desire for a balanced marriage separates her from her family, her friends, and convention. While the novel later provides more acceptable motives, the early stages of the novel paint the portrait of an independent woman who will not be satisfied to yield to the reign of husband over wife. While Gorham indicates that women who desired independence, in the form of gainful employment without financial necessity were termed “outlandish” (119), Valeria’s desire for independence only stretches so far as it will allow her to have a more solid marriage. Therefore, even while she is behaving in a manner that would seem to undermine her status as a pure-minded ideal woman, her goal is ultimately to return to her feminine role within a marriage that is secure and her independent gestures do not lead to questions about the validity of her marriage. We must remember, of course, that once she discovers that Eustace has married her under an assumed name, Valeria and those around her fear that she has, in fact, not been married at all; because of Eustace’s secretive actions, Valeria’s reputation and her status as a respectable woman was compromised – her actions can therefore be seen as justifiable, if only to ensure that no such confusion ever arises again.

Valeria stoops to deception in her quest for truth and puts on a disguise of sorts, reminiscent of some of Magdalen Vanstone's attempts to retrieve her money. However, where Magdalen attempts to entirely disguise her identity and trick people into confidences simply to bring her closer to an object she needed, Valeria does not disguise who she is. In fact, she uses the truth of her situation in an attempt to win sympathy and understanding. Her "disguise" takes the form of makeup and special attention to physical appearances. When Valeria attempts to find out the truth from Eustace's friend, she knows that she must appeal to him as a woman and decides to prey on his weakness. One of the fellow residents at the inn where Valeria is staying offers to help turn Valeria into a woman who men can immediately desire instead of relying on her ability to win men over as time passes. As Valeria looks at herself in the mirror, she writes:

I saw, in the glass, my skin take a false fairness, my cheeks a false colour my eyes a false brightness – and I never shrank from it. No! I let the odious deceit go on; I even admired the extraordinary delicacy and dexterity with which I was all done. 'Anything' (I thought to myself, in the madness of that miserable time), 'so long as it helps me to win the Major's confidence! Anything so long as I discover what those last words of my husband's really mean!' (57)

Valeria's discomfort with the makeup and the necessary deception is evident in her description of herself, but it is also evident that her actions stem from a concern for her husband and over her husband's warning that should she ever discover the truth, her "days will be days of terror; [her] nights will be full of horrid dreams" (54). Eustace's cryptic warning offers Valeria no comfort and only increases her desire for the truth; with a secret as impressive and all-powerful as the one Eustace hints at continually, it is not surprising that

Valeria cannot feel comfortable in her marriage. However, she does not see her quest for the truth as a way to test Eustace but to prove to him that she will never change the way she feels about him. As Eustace tries to warn her away by declaring that his past should be none of her concern, Valeria replies:

Is it no concern of mine [...] when I find that my husband has not married me under his family name? Is it no concern of mine when I hear your mother say, in so many words, that she pities your wife? It is hard, Eustace, to accuse me of curiosity, because I cannot accept the unendurable position in which you have placed me. Your cruel silence is a blight on my happiness, and a threat to my future. Your cruel silence is estranging us from each other, at the beginning of our married life (54).

It is Valeria, and not Eustace, who is acting in the best interest of their union. She is attempting to secure their future while his secrecy accomplishes the opposite.

Joan Burstyn writes that Victorian men were supposed to ensure chivalrous treatment to protect women because of “their essential physical weakness” (31). What is more, in order to ensure a healthy and happy marriage, men and women had to stick to their separate spheres, with the wife’s concerns largely surrounding domestic issues and the husband’s influence and protection extended around her; by remaining in their separate spheres, it was generally believed “mutual respect would flourish” (Burstyn 63). Eustace’s behaviour threatens Valeria’s reputation and, as he is not performing his duty well, a balanced and happy marriage cannot occur. Instead of allowing the marriage to crumble, however, Valeria decides to partially step out of her sphere in order to restore balance to their union.

Once Valeria unearths the secret of Eustace's past (a Scottish verdict of Not Proven over the death of his first wife, which indicates that the jury did not believe in the accused innocence, yet did not have enough evidence to find the defendant guilty), Valeria's feelings of unease over the marriage dissipate. She believes that their marriage will continue, stronger than ever, and as a team they will be able to prove Eustace's innocence. His fears that she would doubt his innocence and suspect him appear to be unfounded as she declares "Why have you let three years pass without doing it? [...] You have waited for your wife to help you. Here she is, my darling, ready to help you with all her heart and soul. Here she is, with one object in life – to show the world, and to show the Scotch Jury, that her husband is an innocent man!" (106). Her dedication to her marriage is once again evidenced in her words; she believes, without reservation, in Eustace's innocence, motivated by love and respect. Eustace, however, cannot return the favour, and is still haunted by the belief that Valeria will doubt him or turn against him; instead of waiting for this, he abandons her, leaving her to take up the cause alone. Valeria is not disheartened by Eustace's decision, and she once again displays her strength by declaring "I will hope for two, and will work for two" (116).

Ellen Harrington sees Eustace as a weak man, describing his behaviour as an "inert acceptance of martyrdom" (25), indicating later that his nervous ailments later in the novel are reminiscent of "a stereotypical hysterical female" (27). As Eustace vacates the sphere which the powerful, protective husband should occupy, Valeria decides to temporarily step in and take over until Eustace's name has been cleared and all can return to normal. It is Eustace's abandonment that "allows her to escape the confines of the more narrow, domestic role, as the desertion of her husband allows her to become a detective on his behalf, but her eventual goal is the reestablishment of the domestic sphere and her place in it, a desire that many Victorian

readers would accept as natural” (Harrington 20-21). Harrington also notes that Valeria’s direct contact with the reader through asides and directions to her audience “permeate the novel, insistently characterizing her as the primary force of justice in the novel” (26). Where Walter ultimately controlled the narrative in *The Woman in White*, Valeria claims that honour in Collins’ later work.

While Harrington sees Valeria as a powerful force and an intelligent and capable investigator, Lisa Dresner reads *The Law and the Lady* as containing thinly veiled misogyny. For Dresner, Valeria’s “investigative mastery” (31) is constantly being undercut; Dresner sees Valeria as brave and wilful, but complains that her logical leaps and assumptions about the true perpetrator behind Sara Macallan’s murder are often off the mark. While Valeria’s first conclusions are sometimes wrong, her mistakes do not, as Dresner suggests, discredit Valeria as a female investigator. Faulty assumptions and misdirected guesses are common fare in detective novels, such as *The Moonstone*, wherein Sergeant Cuff, a well-respected prototype detective, assumes Rachel Verinder is behind the theft of the moonstone and is eventually proven incorrect; he, nevertheless, remains a competent detective in the eyes of the characters in the novel and the critics interpreting it.

Valeria takes a feminine approach to detection and often listens to her emotions and her intuition. In Burstyn’s analysis of the Victorian understandings of gender divisions, she writes that many assumed women were gifted in the areas of insight, sensitivity, and intuition: “while men reached their conclusions by careful analysis, women flew to theirs” (71) and would only later follow a more analytical path. In *The Law and the Lady*, Valeria is proud that her emotions drive her, and she more than once indicates her distrust of the male investigators and lawyers who examined the case before her: sentiments which reinforce her

strong belief in her husband. Her uncle mocks her by decrying “you are conceited enough to think that you can succeed where the greatest lawyers in Scotland have failed. *They* couldn’t prove this man’s innocence, all working together. And *you* are going to prove it single-handed? Upon my word, you are a wonderful woman” (120-121). D.A. Miller notes in *The Novel and the Police* that official forms of power and regulation are often sidelined in novels and regulation is secured “in a major way in the working-through of an amateur supplement” (11). Therefore, while some of the people surrounding Valeria doubt her ability to do more than the officials assigned to solve the case, Miller would argue that it is exactly because she is outside the formal realm of protection that she is able to solve the crime, combined, of course, with the uniquely feminine approach she brings to the case. Collins is making the point that Valeria *is* a wonderful woman and the conclusion of the novel demonstrates that she does succeed where the greatest lawyers in Scotland could not.

Although Valeria jumps to incorrect conclusions about Miserrimus Dexter, she also senses that something more needs to be discovered relating to the madman’s knowledge of Sara Macallan and her death. By writing of Valeria’s intuition, Collins is once again emphasizing the feminine nature of the investigation. Citing Craig and Cadogan, Harrinton writes that Valeria “is the first woman detective whose investigative exploits are built on step-by-step deduction; she knows when to proceed painstakingly and when to take off and follow a hunch” (29). The lawyers did not think to prod into Dexter’s story and therefore did not learn all that could be learned about the events that passed with the first Mrs. Macallan. Burstyn also writes that feminine intuition was often thought to be helpful to men, who could use a woman’s sensitivity to help them discover information (72); in *The Law and the Lady*, Valeria is the one who decides to make use of the opposite sex’s gendered capabilities to

unearth the truth. Valeria relies on Mr. Playmore and she informs him of her progress and often turns to him for advice. Dresner cites the fact that Valeria requires male help to prove that she is not a capable investigator. However, Valeria also uses her mother-in-law as a resource, a fact which Dresner overlooks. Furthermore, by acknowledging her innocence in matters of both law and investigation, it is only good sense that she turns to someone with more wisdom since her husband is not there to help her. Mr. Playmore does not seek to take credit away from Valeria; on the contrary, he declares:

Your rash visit to Dexter, and your extraordinary imprudence in taking him into your confidence, have led to astonishing results. The light which the whole machinery of the Law was unable to throw on the poisoning case at Gleninch, has been accidentally let in on it, by a Lady who refuses to listen to reason and who insists on having her own way. Quite incredible, and nevertheless quite true! (277).

Valeria's careful questioning of Dexter and her bravery in returning again to his home despite all evidence of danger turn her onto the path of the truth, but not before Collins decides to reinforce the reasons behind Valeria's actions: her future with her husband.

While Eustace is away in France fighting, he is injured and his mother travels to Valeria to inform her of her husband's perilous condition. While his mother seriously undervalues him, once declaring that Valeria has married "one of the weakest of living mortals" (196), she is grateful for Valeria's unflinching devotion. Upon learning of Eustace's injury, Valeria immediately abandons what she is doing and follows her mother-in-law to France to offer her support and stay by Eustace's side. At this point in her investigation,

Valeria is nearing the truth, but the possibility of solving the case does not matter to her if her husband is no longer alive to benefit from his redeemed reputation; Collins emphasizes that Valeria's main motivation is to clear her husband's name. She thinks of nothing but Eustace while he is dangerously ill, but once the immediate threat is gone, Valeria attempts to return to her investigation. She declares to her mother-in-law "it is hopeless to persuade him that I believe in his innocence: I must show him that his belief is no longer necessary" (311), only to have Mrs. Macallan persuade her to act against her inclinations. Valeria changes her mind again, however, when she learns that she is pregnant. Victorian conventions against the mention of pregnancy make Valeria's new determination to return to the investigation once she learns that she is pregnant all the more groundbreaking.

Valeria's pregnancy serves two purposes. The first is to motivate her further; she must not only consider her husband, but she must also consider her child. Perhaps the only duty that trumps a wife's duty is a mother's. While Mrs. Macallan could successfully persuade Valeria not to leave her husband, Valeria cannot give birth to a child without ensuring that the marriage into which it is entering will not be broken again if Eustace loses faith in his wife. Her passion for her husband was impressive, but once she learns she will be a mother, Valeria declares "If God spared me for a few months more, the most enduring and the most sacred of all human joys might be mine – the joy of being a mother" (313). She must, therefore, clear her child's father's name before the birth.

The second reason, has to do with issues surrounding fertility and relates to Collins' positive stance toward Valeria. Some Victorian thinkers believed that undue brain activity could result in infertility, in either men or women (Burstyn 94), although women tended to be more susceptible to the negative effects of over thinking, probably because many thought that

women should be doing significantly less thinking than men. Valeria, despite having devoted herself entirely to Eustace's case for months, is able to conceive and give birth to a healthy child. Collins refuses to deny her fertility and motherhood because of her gendered transgressions, indicating that he does not entirely believe that her behaviour is transgressive. Marian Halcombe cannot reproduce and she ends the novel as a spinster aunt; Anne Silvester and Magdalen Vanstone end their novels newly married, but without the official stamp of reproductive approval. Valeria is not censured at all; even her husband's abandonment is not seen as reflecting poorly on her but as indicating that he is a less-than desirable husband and she is an extraordinarily special wife, or as Mrs. Macallan declares "Will my poor Eustace ever know what a wife he has got!" (307).

Upon returning to the investigation, Valeria lands upon the trail of the truth once again and sends Mr. Playmore onto the path of discovery. However, once Eustace is fully recovered, he sends a message to Valeria that he wants her back, resulting in a major crisis: should she continue the investigation when it is close to its resolution, continue her "grand enterprise" (Collins 362), or should she return to her marriage before the investigation is concluded? Her decision is made for her when Eustace's health fails him once again; Valeria has already sent Mr. Playmore to investigate the dust heap at Gleninch but she writes to Mr. Playmore "telling him what my position was, and withdrawing, definitely, from all share in investigating the mystery which lay hidden under the dust-heap at Gleninch" (368). While Dresner declares that because Valeria steps back from the investigation she "is never allowed to bring her investigation to a successful conclusion through her own efforts" (39), the physical discovery of the truth is not nearly as important as the fact that Valeria turned the investigation in that direction. To deny credit to Valeria simply because she was with her

husband, and not in Scotland overseeing the sorting of rubbish, is to place too much emphasis on the actual discovery, and not enough on the discovery of the clues that led to the end result. By having Valeria walk away right as she is about to see the end of the investigation in favour of being with her husband, Collins ensures that Valeria cannot be reprimanded for unwomanly behaviour; after all, she was pursuing the investigation for her husband. Valeria Macallan, as she stands at the end of the novel, knows enough to realize that sometimes acting in Eustace's best interests (and consequently hers, as his wife) means disobeying her husband, but she also knows when to return to his side and step back into the role of the obedient wife. Kathleen O'Fallon describes Valeria's merit succinctly when she writes that

with *The Law and the Lady* Collins has taken a large strike forward in the presentation of his heroines. He makes Valeria act as she believes she must, even in the face of opposition from those who claim to love her. In doing so, she jeopardizes both her marriage and her personal safety (235),

yet the novel ends happily, with the promise of a solid future for Valeria, her child, and her husband.

In *The Law and the Lady*, Collins creates a situation where his main female character can draw upon her intelligence and dedication in order to step outside the bounds of traditional feminine behaviour. In his earlier novels, the heroines who attempt to do this are touched with scandal or, in the case of Marian Halcombe, separated from their sex. Valeria embraces the fact that she is a woman and uses her feminine virtues to move the investigation forward, all while remaining within the bounds of propriety. O'Fallon writes: "In Valeria Brinton (Woodville) Macallan, Collins has finally given his readers a heroine who acts effectively

without the supervision of a man; who is assertive and determined, yet untainted by selfish, ignoble motives; and who does not repent of what she has done” (232). What is important to remember, however, is that Valeria has no need to repent. The active heroines, who are adored by readers, including O’Fallon, break moral or legal paradigms that require repentance. In contrast, Valeria finds ways to bend within rigid conventions, like Blanche and Norah, and distinguishes herself when she refuses to stray from the ultimate goal of her mission. By having Valeria act as a detective questing to rescue her husband’s reputation, Collins gives Valeria the perfect excuse to channel the more assertive qualities that his earlier heroines exhibited, yet he remembers the passive counterparts who were often forgotten, though never unimportant to his narratives. While prototypical Laura Fairlie simply hints at what his “passive” heroines will later accomplish, Valeria’s character offers both the enduring love seen in Blanche Lundie and the stubborn dedication in the face of doubt exhibited by Norah Vanstone, embodying the “best qualities of the women who have preceded her” (O’Fallon 236). Valeria is Collins’ ideal woman, not only because she is brave, intelligent, daring, and somewhat unconventional, but also because she is genuine, intuitive, and dedicated.

Conclusion

Final Thoughts

By closely reading *The Woman in White*, *Man and Wife*, *No Name*, and *The Law and the Lady*, I have attempted to demonstrate the ways in which Collins struggles against replicating traditional Victorian feminine types. Instead, he works to create women who display various levels of rebellion and self-awareness. Collins' so-called passive women illustrate his understanding of subtle gender constructions; these women can embrace certain traditional feminine behaviours, yet still stand apart from other "good" female characters. In carefully studying several popular female figures from other Victorian novelists, it has become evident that Collins' ideal women are not always selfless, not always right, and certainly not perfect. He also creates a diverse array of secondary characters who embody the kinds of criticism he is aiming at traditional Victorian understandings of femininity. By examining his peers' female characters, as well as his own secondary figures, it is clear that Collins understands and offers his readers complex constructions of gender; there are more options for female behaviour in Collins' novels than in those written by his fellow authors, making him especially unique and important.

When Collins begins writing, he struggles with expressing his radical ideas, often creating characters who demonstrate early signs of what will later come, but whose resistance is not entirely realized. With Marian Halcombe, Collins created a character who defies gender stereotypes and pointed to this behaviour with his description of her masculine face. He endowed her with intelligence, fire, and drive, but he constructed his heroine in much more conventional terms. As his writing progressed, he began to explore the ways in which

Marian's admirable characteristics could be more greatly appreciated and he created characters like Magdalen Vanstone. Nonetheless, he balanced these passionate and unconventional women with milder versions, offering the reader two slightly imperfect women in one novel. In *Laura Fairlie*, he offered the seeds of resistance, but allowed her to deteriorate into a hysterical and ineffectual child-woman, requiring constant care and unable to save herself from any forms of danger.

As he progressed as an author, Collins began to create more daring characters, women who defied conventions like Magdalen Vanstone, or who crossed sexual borders and returned nearly unscathed, like Anne Silvester. His passive women also progressed, upholding certain traditional ideals, yet possessing more spirit, more resolution, and more rebellion than Collins had allowed *Laura Fairlie*. His frequent use of the doubling motif even led Richard Barickman to declare "clearly, Collins sees no way as a Victorian writer of making his active heroines triumph as whole women" (130), yet *The Law and the Lady* offers just such a heroine. Valeria Woodville Macallan steps out of the female sphere, motivated by love, solves a mystery which the Scottish courts and the most respected lawyers could not unravel, and returns to her husband, a contented wife and mother. In *Valeria*, Collins demonstrates the fluid understanding of gender characteristics he played with in his earlier creations, and succeeds in creating an ideal woman who is not bound by the idea of separate spheres.

After examining the ways in which Collins' passive women, both earlier and later versions, exemplify the fluid understanding of gender roles he explores in his novels, a question arises: do the passive female characters' rebellions really matter when compared to Collins' more obvious critiques? While the line between acceptance and minor rebellion may appear negligible, the significance lies within the consciousness of the character. Many of

Collins' contemporaries, for example Le Fanu with his lead character Maud Ruthyn, fail to articulate any questioning of gender stereotypes. In contrast, Collins, by displaying a variety of female characters in his novels, characters who offer various interpretations of expected gendered behaviour and turn against expectations, illustrates an awareness of complex and diverse gender types. His passive characters, while accepting much of what is expected of them, do not blindly follow the rules as dictated by patriarchal influence; instead, there exists within these characters a true self which must interact with and balance widely held expectations with individual core beliefs. Collins works toward creating characters who are rebellious without being entirely outside of normal prescribed behaviour; he pushes the boundaries with his passive women, but by testing and placing pressure on said boundaries, Collins is illustrating the rigidity of conventions and the various ways to interact with them. He is not offering just one example of rebellion, but many, and he is working toward an understanding of how best to defy or test gender expectations. Collins is not simply recreating a binary, where women are either entirely accepting or entirely rebellious; he is sketching a scale of characters, from minor to major, who struggle with or embrace what is expected of them, and in so doing he raises questions about traditional conceptions of ideal femininity.

The ideal and quiet women of his novels are more than just examples of alternatives; they offer a glimpse at a Victorian popular writer who struggled with static understandings of womanliness and attempted to create a fully-developed array of characters who, while fulfilling important plot functions, nevertheless validate independence and autonomy. It is too simple to look at the characters who aim to stay within prescribed behavioural modes (for the most part) and dismiss them; they offer insights into the ways Collins worked with, through,

and beyond other major writers of the time, and the ways in which rebellion need not necessarily involve abandoning all of societal dictates.

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