

CRIMINAL RESPECTABILITY: THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH BIGAMY  
NOVEL

BY

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## ABSTRACT

In this project, I work to establish a wider understanding of the bigamy novel as a nineteenth-century genre, moving beyond the classification of the novel as a mere subgenre of sensation fiction. I will also explore the way that bigamy novels responded to the complex and real anxieties about respectability and marriage in Britain over the course of the nineteenth century. One of the objectives of this project is to expand the lens through which scholars view the genre itself, moving beyond the common categorization of the bigamy novel as merely a subgenre of sensation fiction and toward an understanding of the genre as a longer-ranging phenomenon that responded and engaged with anxieties about marriage and respectability at different points during the period.

While Victorians viewed a complex and conflicted concept like respectability as a central and even crucial part of their public lives, they also took much about respectability for granted. Along with asking important questions about what respectability really was during the nineteenth century, the bigamy novels that I have selected for this project form a significant body of work within the history of the concept of respectability itself. To critique the concept, all of these texts also must confront it head on; this results in a series of frank discussions about how to be respectable in British society. The bigamy novel may seem like a strange, sudden phenomenon when viewed solely in the context of sensation fiction, but when the scope of the genre is enlarged to take into account bigamy texts from throughout the century, their true importance both in the history of the novel and in the history of British respectability is revealed.

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## INTRODUCTION

### RESPECTABILITY AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BIGAMY NOVEL

The basic plot of the British bigamy novel starts out much like many other nineteenth-century narratives. A character falls in love with another character. She reciprocates his love, and he proposes marriage. But the majority of courtship plots would stop here. Darcy would marry Elizabeth, or Margaret would agree to marry Thornton. The reader, often a woman, would close the novel after having been reminded once more of the position that society expected her to inhabit and the role it expected her to perform. But the bigamy novel moves a step further, exploring life after the courtship ends. For the bigamy novel, a wedding is only the beginning of the story, and the content that follows questions whether marriage is really the best institution around which to organize a “respectable” society. The man and woman marry, and sometime after the wedding – sometimes even after the birth of a child – the wife begins to harbor suspicions about her husband’s behavior. She discovers that he is hiding a secret: he was already married to another woman when they said their marriage vows. He hid his wife away because the marriage did not work – she could not adequately fulfill the role of wife, or she could not give him children, or both – and because society offered him no legal ways to remove himself from the marriage. By marrying again, he has placed his “second” wife in an extremely precarious position legally, morally, and socially. Does she leave him? Does she stay and keep up appearances? And what does she do about the woman who is the rightful owner of the position she holds? The tension and excitement that results from the various answers to these conundrums helped drive the popularity of the bigamy novel to incredible heights in the nineteenth century,

making novels about a very specific and unusual crime into some of the most popular books of the era.

Devoured by the reading public, and almost completely dismissed by contemporary critics, novels that used bigamy as a key plot device were indeed among the most popular works written in Britain during the nineteenth century. Though the genre reached its zenith during the “sensation decade” of the 1860s, bigamy novels were published throughout the period. Because the nineteenth century was a period of upheaval and overhaul of the way that the British understood and defined the concept of marriage, novels featuring bigamy plots, which dramatize and magnify anxieties about spouses and marriages, were especially useful in engaging with contemporary debates about the makeup and status of the institution of marriage. The novels tapped into real, contemporary social anxieties about marriage. As F.M.L. Thompson notes, worries about the status of marriage and the family structures that it regulated were rampant at the time; he states that many feared “that socialist ideas were attacking the very concept of matrimony” (90). The perceived devaluing of marriage as a regulatory institution, Thompson argues, threatened some of the most central aspects of British society:

For many [Victorians] the most menacing, because the most insidious, problem of all was what they saw as the disintegration of the family, eating away like a worm at the very foundations of the social order. Disintegration, it was thought, was being produced by the factory system, by large-town living conditions, by irreligion, and by the weakening and destruction of traditional moral and social bonds and restraints on the unbridled and irresponsible indulgence of individual lusts and selfish appetites. Feminine rebellion against the duties and functions of childbearing and home-keeping seemed to be looming; and with the approaching collapse of parental, particularly paternal, authority, the end of



the family as the basic unit of education and social training, or socialization, which transmitted all the habits and standards that enabled society to function. (85)

Thompson argues, however, that far from turning away from marriage as an unnecessary institution, Victorians embraced the institution as a key part of establishing a good reputation. He points to the lengths to which many were willing to go to obtain a socially-recognized marital status as evidence, arguing that actions like bigamy, common-law marriage, and even wife-selling “indicated acceptance of formal and legal marriage as the norm, and a compelling need to find irregular substitutes when some impediment made the norm unattainable” (91). Britons, he suggests, were willing to commit serious crimes in the name of the institution of marriage and the respectable status that reputable marriage conveyed. By focusing on the lengths to which characters will go to establish respectable, though sometimes not legal, marriages, bigamy novels emphasize the importance placed by Victorian society on making the right kinds of relationships and connections.

Along with emphasizing the importance of marriage, and marriage to the right kind of person, bigamy plots also often reflect real-life confusion about what precisely makes a couple legally married. Novels will often exploit common misunderstandings about complicated marriage laws to place an innocent character in a bigamous situation. Bigamy novels can also demonstrate how these convoluted and sometimes contradictory marriage laws could be manipulated for nefarious reasons. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, each part of the United Kingdom – Ireland, Scotland, and England/Wales – had its own rules and regulations governing marriages; the Yelverton trials of the early 1860s demonstrated that it was actually possible to be legally married in one part of the country and not legally married in another. Moreover, marriage in Britain was administered largely by the state-sponsored church and was

virtually indissoluble, with a rare and expensive Private Act of Parliament the only way to legally end a marriage.<sup>1</sup> By the century's end, the power to regulate British marriage had been shifted from the church to the state, divorce was legal, civil marriage was an option, and married women had obtained a whole slate of new rights, including those related to the ownership of property and the custody of children. None of those remarkable changes happened overnight; all involved lengthy political, religious, and cultural debates, and many continued to be controversial after they were adopted. Anxieties about changes to such a central social institution also led to worries about the way that the population was conducting itself, which were coded by the Victorians as debates about social class and respectability. The bigamy plot was used by novelists to react to these legal and cultural shifts and to respond to general anxiety about marriage and its relationship to social respectability.

The relationship between the crime of bigamy and respectability is one of the most important ideas expressed in the nineteenth century bigamy novel, and it is central to the arguments made in this dissertation. Through this project, I hope to expand the scholarly discussion of the bigamy novel in two specific ways. I will work to expand the understanding of the place of the bigamy novel within larger history of the nineteenth-century British novel. Rather than simply viewing it as a subgenre of 1860s sensation fiction, the bigamy plot should be understood as a form used by writers throughout the century. This wider understanding of the bigamy novel is necessary because it demonstrates that authors used bigamy plots over the

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<sup>1</sup> Very few of these divorces, which could only be initiated on grounds of adultery, were actually granted. The official website for the UK Parliament states that between 1700 and 1857, only 314 of these Acts were recorded. Robert E. Emery notes that of these, only four were granted to female petitioners (683). Although there were means of legal separation available through the ecclesiastical courts, a Private Act of Parliament was the only means of totally ending a marriage so that one or both spouses could then subsequently remarry.

course of the nineteenth century to make important points about marriage and respectability. While the courtship novel reaffirmed the importance of marriage as an institution that certified husbands and wives as good people worthy of respect, the bigamy novel works to reveal the differences between respectability and morality in a society that continually tried to conflate the two concepts. By revealing the immoral, criminal measures that could be taken to make society believe that two people were legally married, bigamy novels also ask implicit questions about the ideas that underpin the narrative of British respectability as a whole. These questions about respectability, morality, and marriage are present in each incarnation of the bigamy novel discussed in this project: the Gothic bigamy novel, the sensation bigamy novel, and the imperial bigamy novel.

### **Defining the Bigamy Novel**

What set of criteria, then, must a Victorian novel fit to be considered a part of this popular and controversial genre? The major criterion is a simple one: an act of bigamy, in which a person marries someone while already legally married to someone else, must be a part of the novel's plot. That act can be the central part of the plot – the secret, for example, that a character like Lady Audley guards and that affects every character's story throughout the majority of the text. In many bigamy novels, however, the act of bigamy itself is subordinate to other, more central parts of the plot. At times, it is a mere complication that acts to delay the eventual marriage of a protagonist; in other cases, it emerges as a *deus ex machina* at the end of a narrative to provide a convenient resolution to the plot. Acts of bigamy in these novels can be intentional or accidental, real or invented. Revelations that bigamy has or has not occurred can serve as proof of a villain's true character or as evidence that a character is truly good and innocent. In some novels, not all

characters agree that an act of bigamy has taken place at all – consider the remarriage of Archibald Carlyle in *East Lynne* (1861), which is not legally bigamous (as his previous marriage was legally dissolved) but is considered to be so by Carlyle, who does not believe in the legitimacy of divorce. And in other novels, the act of bigamy is threatened but does not really happen, as is the case in one of the best-known examples of the genre, *Jane Eyre* (1847). Whether central or incidental, a text can be categorized as a bigamy novel if it dramatizes, or even considers, a marriage that is illegal based on a previously-established contract of marriage.

The bigamy plot was used by authors throughout the nineteenth century in Britain, but it is helpful to delineate three major periods in the genre's implementation. The first half of the century saw the incorporation of the bigamy plot in Gothic novels as a part of that genre's overall environment of secrecy, doubt, and terror. These novels, of which *Jane Eyre* (1847) is the most famous example, tend to feature women who learn that their lovers or husbands are already married to another woman and who must then confront the terrifying figure of the first wife. From around 1860 until 1870, the bigamy novel evolved to become a significant part of another literary category: sensation fiction. A cousin of the Gothic novel, sensation fiction moved the terror of the Gothic to familiar settings and played into the public's hunger for the details of notorious contemporary crimes, including bigamy. The majority of nineteenth-century bigamy novels were produced during this period;<sup>2</sup> *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) is perhaps the best-known of these sensation bigamy novels today. After the sensation novel's heyday ended, the number of bigamy novels published decreased significantly, but the genre did not disappear entirely from the literary landscape. Instead, for the last quarter of the century, the bigamy plot

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<sup>2</sup> See chapter three of this dissertation for a more thorough examination of the number of bigamy novels published during the sensation period.

was taken up by establishment writers like Thomas Hardy and Anthony Trollope, whose *John Caldigate* (1879) is one of the most enduring late-century bigamy novels. These writers used bigamy to explore questions of empire and respectability, moving away from plots designed specifically to shock or terrify and toward more sustained discussions of pressing cultural and political issues.

Although we can now look back on the genre's transformation throughout the nineteenth century and see its changes and developments more clearly than the Victorians would have been able to do, nineteenth-century critics were keenly aware of the bigamy novel as something unique and worth attention (although not all of it good). The identification of the bigamy novel as a significant literary type in the nineteenth century is not merely a categorization imposed by later scholars. Victorian critics noticed and commented upon the use of bigamy as a plot device in contemporary fiction, although they did not fully take stock of the importance of the genre until after its popularity grew at an incredible rate in the early 1860s. One of the most significant of these contemporary critics is Henry Mansel, who wrote an important (and unsigned) review of the sensation genre for the *Quarterly Review* in 1863. Within that review, he devotes a significant amount of attention to eight novels that he identifies as using bigamy as plot device.<sup>3</sup> Mansel's review, which is perhaps the most frequently quoted assessment of the sensation genre as a literary phenomenon, demonstrates his contempt for sensation novels in general, and the review expresses an even greater level of disdain for the bigamy novel. Although he heaps scorn

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<sup>3</sup> The eight bigamy novels that Mansel reviews in his piece are Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863), Frederic Lascelles Wraxall's *Only a Woman* (1860), Matilda Charlotte Houstoun's *Recommended to Mercy* (1862), Frederick George Lee's *Clinton Maynyard* (1862), Harriet Gordon Smythies's *The Daily Governess* (1861), and two anonymous novels, *The Woman of Spirit* (1862) and *The Law of Divorce* (1861), which was attributed to "A Graduate of Oxford."

on the literary value of the genre, his review provides one of the first and most significant recognitions of the genre's existence as something separate and identifiable:

Of particular offences, which are almost always contemporary and sometimes personal, undoubtedly the first place must be given to Bigamy. Indeed, so popular has this crime become, as to give rise to an entire sub-class in this branch of literature, which may be distinguished as that of Bigamy Novels. It is astonishing how many of our modern writers have selected this interesting breach of morality and law as the peg on which to hang a mystery and a dénouement. (39)

For Mansel, texts that use bigamy as a part of their plots are essentially a “sub-class” of sensation fiction (called here “this branch of literature”), but the instances of novels using bigamy plots has by 1863 become so prevalent that those novels can be “distinguished” as belonging to their own special grouping. Mansel's two basic criteria for a text's inclusion as a “Bigamy Novel” are that a) the text is a sensation novel, and b) the novel features the “particular offence” of bigamy in its plot. Of course, Mansel only considers sensation novels for his review, so he does not include novels about bigamy that are *not* categorized as sensation narratives in his survey.<sup>4</sup> Subsequent critics of bigamy novels have built upon Mansel's definition of the genre, but even with the ability to view nineteenth-century British literature from a broader and more distanced perspective, they too have largely failed to expand their consideration of bigamy novels beyond those which were produced during the 1860s.

Indeed, the number of nineteenth-century texts that include bigamy as a part of their plots grows even greater when novels written outside of the “sensation decade” are included. Because

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<sup>4</sup> For a more thorough examination of Mansel's review of bigamy novels, see chapter three of this dissertation.

more sensation bigamy novels were produced, and the unexpected volume of those texts led to the identification of the genre, most of the minimal scholarship that exists on the bigamy novel has also focused specifically on that manifestation of the genre. Much more critical work is needed on the novels that helped to pave the way for the explosion of the sensation bigamy novel; in turn, the novels that came after the sensation novel's popularity waned also need to be connected to a larger discussion of the genre. Texts that provide an in-depth meditation on the crime of bigamy as well as those that use it as a mere plot device are covered under the umbrella of the genre, which means that a vast number of novels produced by a range of nineteenth-century writers qualify. Even though there is an immense amount of material available within the genre, the critical attention given specifically to bigamy novels has been relatively minor and has not adequately reflected the entire nineteenth-century range of texts in the genre. More than thirty years after its publication, Jeanne Fahnestock's article, "Bigamy: The Rise and Fall of a Convention" (1981), remains the most complete study of the bigamy novel.<sup>5</sup> Fahnestock highlights bigamy novels as an identifiable type, but, reiterating Mansel's century-old categorization, she explains that they are "usually seen as a subcategory of the popular sensation genre of the 1860s" (47). Fahnestock limits her study of the genre almost exclusively to sensation bigamy novels produced between 1861 and 1871. While she does concede that bigamy novels were produced before 1860, explaining that bigamy "was no new plot device in the 1860s" (48), she names only *Jane Eyre* as an early example. The rest of Fahnestock's pre-sensation examples (the "immediate precursors" of the genre, which "illustrate the conventional

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<sup>5</sup> Scholars are beginning to pay more attention to the bigamy novel as a separate and significant genre of nineteenth-century British literature; for example, a forthcoming book by Maia McAleavey will likely provide a much-needed update on Fahnestock's article.

use of bigamy before the sensation novel” [49]) were all published in 1860<sup>6</sup>; all could reasonably be categorized themselves as sensation texts. Fahnestock also fails to consider examples of the genre published after the popularity of the sensation novel had waned.<sup>7</sup>

Though her study ultimately lacks scope, in part because she aims to chart the “growth and demise” of the genre as a “typical case” of waning and ebbing interest in certain “literary fashion[s]” rather than examining the use of the plot over a larger period of time (48), Fahnestock establishes a useful vocabulary to use about the problems of intention and sympathy that exist within certain examples of the genre. She explains,

The novelist who sat down to write about bigamy had a pair of oppositions to choose from and combine .... Bigamy, no matter whether in the main plot or subplot, must be either real, involving two technically correct marriage services, or only apparent. To have apparent bigamy, whatever impediment supposedly nullifies the second ceremony must not really exist. Bigamy also must be either accidental, caused by fated circumstances, or intentional, caused by villainy. By, in effect, choosing from each of these oppositions, the novelist creates one of four basic permutations of the convention: real/accidental, real/intentional, apparent/accidental, or apparent/intentional bigamy. All of these combinations

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<sup>6</sup> The three examples are Wraxall’s *Only a Woman* (1860), Sala’s *The Baddington Peerage: Who Won, and Who Wore It* (1860), and Stewart’s *Atheline: or, the Castle by the Sea* (1860). While Stewart’s novel arguably has more in common with gothic novels than sensation fiction, Wraxall’s and Sala’s works fit easily into the sensation mold. *The Baddington Peerage* has been identified as a possible influence on Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), especially its villainous, female bigamist. Wraxall’s novel was one of the eight bigamy novels included by H.L. Mansel in his *Quarterly Review* study of the sensation genre.

<sup>7</sup> See chapter one of this dissertation for a more thorough discussion of the way Fahnestock’s survey of bigamy novels fails to account for novels published before the 1860s.



were used in bigamy novels in the 1860s, and each was given even further twists and elaborations. (60-61)

Fahnestock's classification of novels within the genre is intriguing because it is based on the central questions of legitimacy and intent that sit at the heart of the crime of bigamy itself.

Character sympathy is an important part of the bigamy genre: can you sympathize with someone who has violated the moral and legal constructs of marriage? Doing so is certainly easier when the legal underpinnings of the institution are so convoluted that it is easy to be confused about whether or not a legal marriage has taken place. What Fahnestock points to here is a difference in the way bigamous characters can be understood: as villains who exploit the problems with marriage law for their own gain, or as victims who are able to be exploited because of the system's vulnerabilities. Perhaps the only addition that would make Fahnestock's categorization method even more useful would be that of "potential" bigamy, both in terms of bigamy that may or may not really have happened, and in terms of acts of bigamy that characters intended to commit but, for various reasons, did not (for example, Rochester's failed attempt in *Jane Eyre*).

Beyond offering a helpful set of terms for the discussion of the genre, Fahnestock also provides useful links between the explosion of popularity of the bigamy novel and contemporary events. She notes that the bigamy novel "in particular owes its popularity not only to the force of popular models but also to a contemporary scandal and trial, to public outrage over the confused state of marriage laws, and finally to its unique ability to satisfy the novel reader's desire to sin and to be forgiven vicariously" (48). Fahnestock's first reference is to the Yelverton trials of the early 1860s, which were the result of one of the most famous bigamy accusations of the century. The worries over the convoluted British marriage laws were caused in part by the Yelvertons as well; one trial declared that the couple was legally wed in Ireland, while another court decided

that they were not legally married in Scotland. The coverage of the case in the *Times* was geared toward making the salacious trial appropriate for a respectable newspaper to print, so the editors coded much of their reporting in terms of the legal and constitutional implications of the Yelvertons' marriage rather than the scandalous details of the couple's lives.<sup>8</sup> Fahnstock's final point, that the novels allowed readers to imagine what it would be like to commit a crime and be absolved without actually having to risk damaging their reputations, taps into one of the key concepts underpinning British society in the Victorian era: the issue of personal and cultural respectability.<sup>9</sup> Bigamy novels from throughout the nineteenth century react to different contemporary issues regarding marriages and the way they can be made and broken, but all of the novels share an important thing in common: they present marital crimes as crimes committed in order to ensure public respectability.

### **Bigamy and Respectability**

Bigamy novels became such a central part of the literary landscape of the nineteenth century in part because they engaged with one of the most important (and unstable) regulatory concepts in Victorian society: respectability. In the pages of these texts, characters repeatedly express a willingness to violate the moral and social boundaries established by the institution of marriage in order to obtain, ensure, or reaffirm their public reputations. This motivation is a major part of what drives characters to commit bigamy; it is also one of the major motivations that drove the activities of everyday Britons during the nineteenth century. To obtain and retain power in

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<sup>8</sup> See my case study in *Victorian Periodicals Review* on how *The Times* in particular attempted to retain its own respectability while covering the sensational Yelverton bigamy trials.

<sup>9</sup> Maia McAleavey's presentation at the 2013 MLA conference, "Destiny and Bigamy: The Problem of Choice in Victorian Marriage," also focused on this aspect of the genre.

Victorian Britain, it was crucial that a person be able to command the respect of his or her peers and of his or her inferiors. As the burgeoning middle class became a dominant force within the British social hierarchy, their supposedly stellar morals, worthy of notice and respect, were touted as the reason for their ascendancy. Victorians were committed to the notion that, unlike profligate aristocrats or the unreliable working class, the middle class could be trusted to serve as a model of correct and proper behavior for the rest of society. It was their respectable appearance and behavior – which was considered by many Victorians to be reliable, visible evidence of good moral character – that qualified them to take over positions of power from those who had previously held them solely by virtue of their wealth and birth, as well as to serve as models for the “improvement” of the working class. The role of normalizing the behavior of the working class and creating an aspirational value system to which they could ascribe was a key part of the concept. Peter Bailey calls respectability “a clearly recognized and much exalted contemporary ideal” (32) and emphasizes the significance of the idea of respectability in that sense, defining the term as “a highly specific value system of considerable normative power, whose most important consequence was to incorporate a minor but significant sector of the working class into the social consensus that assured mid-Victorian society in particular its overall cohesion and stability” (30). Carolyn A. Conley pinpoints attire and behavior as the two major outward identifiers of respectability during the time period; she notes that “maintaining respectable status required that one dress and behave as befitted the circumstances” (5). The main requirement for a respectable presentation of the body, she argues, was “tidiness,” accompanied by clothing that was “modest, in good repair, and appropriate to one’s status” (5). To pass the first test of respectability in Victorian society, it was essential to look the part. In terms of behavior—of acting the part of respectability—Conley stresses, was largely a matter of *not* doing things.

“Most historians,” she argues, “have agreed that the behavioral standards were largely negative” (5). These standards could include prohibitions on drunkenness, improper speech, and other immoderate indulgences. They also included strict adherence to the rule of law and a respect for authority – including the kinds of government and church institutions that governed marriage.

Whether or not a person was considered worthy of respect by others in society was crucial in determining where he or she was located in the all-important hierarchy of the Victorian social world and whether he or she could participate fully in that society. Bailey suggests that respectability was “a principal prerequisite for true citizenship” (32). He cites *Cornhill Magazine*’s Victorian-era definition of the concept, which stresses that to be respectable is to “come up to that most real, though very indefinite standard of goodness, the attainment of which is exacted of everyone as a condition of being allowed to associate upon terms of ostensible equality with the rest of the human race” (32). To be coded disreputable, then, is to be almost rejected from society entirely. Along these lines, Conley presents respectability as one of a trinity of Victorian social concepts: “Victorian justice was shaped by three of the central concerns of Victorian society: respectability, public order, and class. Although not synonymous, the three were intimately connected; each was measured on a scale determined by the other two” (173). Indeed, as David Scott Kemper reminds us, “Respectability was not the same thing as social class; there could be respectable labourers just as there were dissolute noblemen” (83). Even as shifts happened in the cultural acceptance of ideas like trade and enterprise, a Victorian person’s class continued to be largely determined by the situation to which he or she was born. However, if a person were particularly respectable, he or she could potentially transcend that pre-determined social status—to a degree, at least. The loss of respectability, in turn, could also result in a demotion, shutting a person out of social groups that would otherwise have welcomed

him or her as a natural and expected part of a social circle. In theory, as Conley suggests, respectability was also supposed to help maintain public order, as those who were not respectable would look to model their behavior on those who were, making society more moral and just as a result. People would resist the temptation to engage in disreputable behavior – there would be less criminality, less drunkenness, and less sexual deviancy – because of their greater desire to be a part of a respectable middle class that had power, status, and financial stability as a result of their good behavior.

While respectability was an easy thing to achieve in theory (be good, and you can have a chance at a better life as a result), in reality, it was a complex and fraught concept. This facet of respectability – the fact that a person could appear to be respectable while not actually possessing the kind of strong moral character that Victorians associated with the concept – is the aspect of the idea that is revealed by bigamy novels. Conley notes that respectability did not prevent a person from violating the law and being caught doing so: “References to respectability are ubiquitous in the comments of attorneys, defendants, judges, policemen, and journalists. Persons identified as respectable were accused and sometimes even convicted of murders, rapes, robberies, theft, vandalism, riot, public drunkenness, and assault” (173). All of this happened, she explains, “despite the belief that crimes were committed by criminals” and not by those who were deemed respectable (173). This is, in large part, because although some believed that those who were respectable in their dress and behavior must be moral, respectability and morality are two separate concepts. Beth Kalikoff notes that characters in Victorian drama “do terrible things in the name of respectability,” demonstrating that criminal behavior in plays is often directly tied to attempts to gain respectability and climb the social ladder (153). She argues that some of these works posit that “nature is criminal, and crime is natural. Respectability does more than simply

conceal murder and theft. The motives for being respectable and prosperous are the same as those for committing crimes . . . . It becomes difficult to distinguish between motives for crime and motives for evicting the poor or being generous to a son-in-law who can be helpful” (155). Like stealing money in order to live the lifestyle of a member of a higher class, bigamy is a crime committed in the name of respectability. Morality is something innate; Victorian respectability was, essentially, a performance of morality. Whether or not that performance was genuine depended on the intention behind it. Mike Huggins and J.A. Mangan note that “there was a necessary and often thick patina of ‘overt’ decency and ‘covert’ indecency” existing in Victorian society because of the high behavioral standards required to meet certain expectations of respectability (xiv). A person’s true moral character could easily be masked or glossed over by a careful deployment of respectability in physical behavior and appearance. If looking and acting respectable were the central requirements for actually *being* respectable, respectability itself was incredibly open to the threat of fraudulent self-presentation. Every respectably married man could, theoretically, be hiding a wife in an attic; every respectably married woman could have a secret first husband at the bottom of a well.

But the fact that respectability could be “faked” was not the only complication involved with the concept in the Victorian era. As Huggins and Mangan explain, “Definitions of the morality associated with respectability could be fluid, and the use of the term in relation to class identities should be cautiously exploratory rather than assertively confident” (xii). Performances of respectability could be intentionally false, certainly, but all performances of respectable behavior could differ depending on the standards of respectability to which they were targeted. Respectability could not exist in a vacuum. Though a person could be innately moral, respectability always required interaction with another: the other person who decides whether or

not an individual is worthy of his or her respect. Because respectability must be certified by another person, what exactly constituted “respectability” could vary greatly depending on which person or societal institution was doing the judging. Even the *Cornhill Magazine* definition admits that the “standard of goodness” which respectable people must meet is “real” but also “very indefinite” (Bailey 32). From a modern perspective, Huggins and Mangan assert that respectability “clearly was adapted to circumstances, occasions and events. The same actions could mean different things to different people at different times” (xx). Kemper argues that “the struggle for respectability always takes place in cultural contexts” (95).<sup>10</sup> Because the standards of respectability could be so varied, deciding precisely what was respectable or not respectable in the Victorian era is an almost impossible task if the context of an action is not taken into account. Brian Harrison argues that respectability was “always a process, a dialogue ... never a fixed position” (161). Andy Croll and Martin Johnes note that “historians have become increasingly aware that the boundary between the respectable and its ever present ‘Other,’ the disreputable, was far from stable and fixed” (154). Those fluid boundaries mean that “notions of respectability were contested and malleable” throughout the period, and that “the precise meanings of ‘respectability’ depended on the contexts within which they were being articulated” (155). For Croll and Johnes, the idea that there was a stable and fixed definition of what was respectable and what was disreputable is a result of nostalgia for a simpler, but ultimately fictional, past. Scholars largely agree, ultimately, that there was no firm agreement in Victorian society

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<sup>10</sup> Kemper examines the role of Sunday newspapers in “creat[ing] a cultural space” where activities that would generally be deemed disreputable, like gambling, “could be seen as a respectable recreation” (100). He notes that certain newspapers “articulated a language of respectability that was designed to appeal specifically to a working-class readership” (100-01). This language of respectability could not only vary significantly depending on context but also be exploited to encourage Victorians to keep doing certain activities that were looked down upon by “superior” parts of society.

regarding what was respectable, only many different voices offering varying opinions about what deserved or did not deserve respect.

As Huggins and Mangan argue, however, the fact that there was no single, agreed-upon definition for respectability did not prevent Victorians from believing that they knew precisely what respectability was. Again, as Conley argues, the idea of “negative” perception is key. If Victorians could not always agree on what *was* respectable, they certainly believed that they knew exactly what was *not* respectable. Huggins and Mangan explain that Victorians believed “that disreputability could be located, described, and categorized” (xvi). Moreover, Croll and Johnes argue that “many late Victorians remained as convinced as their predecessors had been that the disreputable could be identified and surgically separated out from the reputable” (161). The way that the Victorian press treated the concept of respectability was largely responsible for the public’s belief that they could easily pick out the disreputable among them. The sensation genre—to which the lion’s share of popular nineteenth-century bigamy novels belong—was built in part on the idea that the public was hungry for stories of the disreputable, because they wanted to read stories of negative behavior against which they could read themselves. Sensation novels, read in this way, were less a threat to Victorian respectability (because they could tempt readers into engaging in behaviors that were disreputable) and more a way of bolstering it (because readers could be satisfied in their own respectability by comparing their behavior against that of the characters in the texts). As Croll and Johnes note, “Newspapers sold to members of respectable society were filled with gratuitous accounts of the sordid, the disreputable, and the sinful” (162). They suggest that sensational narratives were popular because they “served as timely reminders of the need to keep to the paths of righteousness, or, failing that, of the need at least to keep all such misdemeanors out of the public gaze” (162). Additionally, these texts gave



the reader a chance to certify his or her own respectability without having to appeal to a third party to do so. One could measure his or her respectability against the outrageous and flagrantly disreputable behavior exhibited in a broadsheet or a novel and almost always derive a favorable result.

The rise of sensational narratives in literature, journalism, and other forms of Victorian media coincided with a major change within a central Victorian institution. In 1857, Parliament passed a law that reformed the way that marriage was administered and regulated in Britain. Marriage was one of the most – perhaps the very most – significant institution available to middle-class Victorians to certify their respectability to society. The creation of a family, headed by a benevolent and paternalistic husband and managed by an angelic and morally-sound wife, was an important milestone for the Briton who wanted to be a part of respectable middle-class society. As Thompson notes, even when Britons seemed to be straying from the institution of marriage in favor of less savory alternatives, marriage remained an incredibly important part of the life of the average nineteenth-century British subject, acting as a milestone, a form of social acceptance, and a way of certifying respectability. In theory, marriage made all who entered into its bonds more moral. It offered them a respectable way to express sexual desire, gave them the chance to raise children who could serve as evidence of their good moral guidance, and offered proof that another respectable person was willing to join them in a religious and legal union. Until the nineteenth century, the Church of England was the sole institution responsible for conducting and regulating marriages. The process of marrying within the church also offered a person the chance to be doubly certified as respectable: the successful reading of the banns would show that no one objected to his or her marriage, and the sacred seal of approval on the union would confirm his or her standing within the church and before God. But as the nineteenth

century progressed, the Anglican Church's stronghold on the institution of marriage—and, therefore, on an important facet of Victorian respectability—began to crumble. In 1836, civil marriage was introduced in England and Wales, removing the requirement that couples be married in a religious ceremony (previously only marriages conducted in the Anglican, Quaker, or Jewish traditions were recognized by law). Civil registrars were now able to certify marriages, shifting the onus to confirm each spouse's respectability from the church to the state. Twenty years later, an even greater shift occurred when the jurisdiction over ending marriages was removed from Anglican ecclesiastical courts to a new secular divorce court.<sup>11</sup> Marriage was becoming wholly the responsibility of the government rather than of earthly representatives of God, and the resulting shift in the cultural understanding of marriage and of respectability was reflected in the sensation narratives that were produced in the late 1850s and early 1860s.

As Britons struggled to decide which institutions had the authority to define them as respectable people, sensation writers churned out narratives that both addressed the newly-changed status of marriage and provided yet another opportunity for the reader to satisfy his or her respectable status by comparison to disreputable characters. But while sensation bigamy novels are tied most closely to a specific marriage reform, the 1857 Act, all of the bigamy narratives published during the century express anxiety about the need to establish and maintain respectability within the context of marriage. Gothic bigamy novels present marriage as an inescapable prison; sensation bigamy novels ponder new possibilities for the institution as it begins to go through a series of major reforms; and late-century bigamy novels examine the way

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<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Stone's work on marriage and divorce in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain provided the lion's share of the cultural context for this project, including information on the various marriage acts, how and when they were passed, and the consequences that followed. His work on the divorce reforms of 1857 in *Road to Divorce* (see chapter twelve) were extremely valuable.

that respectability and marriage can be sustained as concepts across a vast and varied set of imperial spaces. Even as marriage began to undergo a set of radical changes – the establishment of civil marriage, the legalization of divorce, the distribution of women’s property both in and outside of marriage, and decisions about custody of children – the problem of defining someone’s respectability by his or her marital status (when the presentation of that marital status can be so easily manipulated) is a concern from the early years of the century through to its end.

### **Project Outline**

In the following chapters, I will attempt to offer a more complete survey of the bigamy novel as a nineteenth-century genre, moving beyond the classification as a mere subgenre of sensation fiction. I will also explore the way that bigamy novels responded to the complex and real anxieties about respectability and marriage in Britain over the course of the nineteenth century. Although the genre reached the zenith of its popularity in the 1860s, bigamy novels were published throughout the century, and the genre participates in different conversations about respectability at different points in the century. One of the objectives of this project is to widen the lens through which scholars view the genre itself, moving beyond the common categorization of the bigamy novel as merely a sub-genre of sensation fiction and toward an understanding of the genre as a longer-ranging phenomenon that responded and engaged with anxieties about marriage and respectability at different points during the period. This broader view of the genre also creates opportunities to reread the sensation bigamy novels of the 1860s in a larger context.

To that end, I will be moving through the century chronologically, devoting one chapter to the earlier bigamy novels, two central chapters to the height of the period with the sensation bigamy novel, and a final chapter to the later bigamy novels and their links to the height of

imperial Britain. The first chapter of the project begins with a consideration of three pre-sensation bigamy novels. Through an exploration of novels by Catherine Gore, Sheridan Le Fanu, and Charlotte Brontë, I will look at the way that the texts work to set out tropes and norms for the genre. I will also look at the connections these early novels have to the Gothic, as well as the way that the novels respond to early nineteenth-century anxieties about respectability. In chapter two, I will consider the bigamy novel written by Theresa Longworth Yelverton. Her *Martyrs to Circumstance* (1861) presented a fictionalized version of the real-life bigamy accusations she lodged against her purported husband, Major William Charles Yelverton. Because many critics point to the Yelverton trials as one of the catalysts that sparked the rise in the genre's popularity, I will explore the ways that her novel raises issues about respectable British womanhood at home and abroad, as well as the way that the act of writing provided her with the opportunity to create a new kind of respectability after becoming a notorious public figure.

The project's third chapter takes a fresh look at the sensation bigamy novel, focusing on the way that a specific set of these texts seeks alternatives to the Anglican church and the British government to certify marital respectability. Tapping into the cultural anxieties about shifting authority over marriage from one institution (the Anglican church) to another (the state), I will examine the way that *Lady Audley's Secret*, the most enduring novel from Henry Mansel's important review of the genre, explores the financial marketplaces as a possible alternative for structuring and understanding both marriage and respectability. I will read the novel through the lens of Thorstein Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption, viewing Lady Audley's bigamy as an attempt to enter into a respectable economic marketplace that excluded women and treated them as commodities. The project's final chapter, on Anthony Trollope's *John Caldigate* (1879)

and Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), looks at the late-century bigamy novel's implicit critiques of imperialism, with a focus on the way that bigamy not only happens as a result of an attempt to reclaim respectability but also threatens to destroy that respectability permanently. Contributing to a larger dialogue about the duality of imperial spaces, these bigamy novels also posit questions about the duality of identity that accompanies an act of bigamy – and how to establish a coherent sense of self both at home and abroad.

While Victorians viewed a complex and conflicted concept like respectability as a central and even crucial part of their public lives, they also took much about respectability for granted, even though it was such a nebulous and undefined position. Along with asking important questions about what respectability really was during the nineteenth century, the bigamy texts that I have selected for this project form a significant body of work within the history of the concept of respectability itself. To critique the concept, all of these texts also must confront it head on; this results in a series of frank discussions about how to be respectable in British society. The bigamy novel may seem like a strange, sudden phenomenon when viewed solely in the context of sensation fiction, but when the scope of the genre is enlarged to take into account bigamy texts from throughout the century, their true importance both in the history of the novel and in the history of British respectability is revealed.

CHAPTER ONE  
THE GOTHIC BIGAMY NOVEL

For decades, novels featuring bigamy plots have been consistently categorized as belonging to a subgenre of sensation fiction, the literary phenomenon that exploded in Britain during the 1860s in response to an increasingly sensationalized press and the scandalous real-life crimes that it covered. Indeed, some of the most enduring examples of the sensation genre used bigamy as a central conflict, including novels like Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862)<sup>12</sup> and Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861). The sensation novel is defined by Jeanne Fahnestock (building upon Kathleen Tillotson's definition) as "a novel with a secret and a contemporary familiar setting" that usually includes "one or more striking scenes or incidents which produced a sensation of fright or horror or amazement in the reader" (47-48). These "striking scenes or incidents" were often based on real-life crimes, especially "murder, theft, fraud—usually the kind that disinherits—and bigamy" (48). Lyn Pykett, whose work remains important in the study of sensation fiction two decades after its initial publication, has produced the one of the most widely quoted definitions of the genre, defining it as "a mushroom growth, a new kind of fiction which appeared from nowhere to satisfy the cravings of an eager and expanding reading public possessed of suspect, or downright depraved tastes" (*Sensation* 2-3). Pykett's assertion that the sensation novel "appeared from nowhere" has been contested by critics from multiple perspectives, especially historically and generically. Many scholars point to two historical events as causes of the increase in popularity of sensation novels, especially those

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<sup>12</sup> See chapter three of this dissertation for an examination of the way that *Lady Audley's Secret* explores the use of bigamy as a means of attempting to establish financial respectability for its central character.

featuring bigamy as a major plot point: first, the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, which moved the jurisdiction over divorce from ecclesiastical purview to the secular judicial system and sparked a new series of cultural conversations about the makeup of marriage as a social institution, and second, the infamous bigamy trials of Major William Charles Yelverton, which spanned from 1861 to the middle of the decade and highlighted the inconsistencies that existed in marriage laws throughout the different realms of the United Kingdom.<sup>13</sup>

But although the historical precursors of the genre have been significantly established, Pykett's claim that the sensation novel sprang suddenly into prominence without a clear connection to the literature published before it has also been revised and contested. Winifred Hughes, Patrick R. O'Malley, and Maureen Moran, among others, have worked to situate sensation fiction within the large context of the development of the novel itself. Critics have offered several other genres as ancestors of sensation fiction, including the Gothic novel, the Newgate novel, the melodrama, and even the silver fork novel. In this chapter, I am interested in continuing to build on previous scholarship that argues that the sensation novel, and more specifically the bigamy novel, was never an isolated phenomenon but was instead a descendant of other literary forms that also interrogated criminality, respectability, confinement, and fear. Bigamy novels feature in numerous texts written both before and after the sensation decade, and they often offer a counterpoint to the dominant courtship plot, reflecting various contemporary anxieties about the definition and social position of marriage as an institution. In her groundbreaking exploration of the bigamy novel as a significant and identifiable literary type,

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<sup>13</sup> The second chapter of this dissertation focuses on the challenges faced by Yelverton's accuser, Theresa Longworth Yelverton, to regain her respectability after the public damage to her reputation that occurred during the trials; it also explores the way that her bigamy novel, *Martyrs to Circumstance* (1861), reflects the limited options available for women who wanted to play a part in respectable Victorian society.

Jeanne Fahnestock explains that bigamy novels were written and read before the sensation novel's rise to prominence: "Bigamy was no new plot device in the 1860s. Fifteen years earlier, *Jane Eyre* had raised the threat of Rochester's intended bigamy, though significantly Jane is spared the illegitimate marriage" (48-49). *Jane Eyre* (1847) is the only example of a bigamy novel cited by Fahnestock that was published before 1860, though she does suggest that "more immediate precursors" to sensation fiction exist.<sup>14</sup>

In this chapter, I will endeavor to expand upon Fahnestock's examination of pre-sensation bigamy novels, arguing that the bigamy novel began its development as an identifiable, established type during the first half of the nineteenth century. Building upon Fahnestock's identification of *Jane Eyre* as an important, influential text for writers of sensation bigamy novels, I will consider it alongside two other early novels that feature bigamy as the central conflict of their plots: Catherine Gore's historical novel, *Theresa Marchmont* (1824) and Sheridan Le Fanu's novella, "A Chapter in the History of a Tyrone Family" (1839).<sup>15</sup> All three

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<sup>14</sup> In her overview of the bigamy novels of the sensation period, Fahnestock includes numerous examples of the genre, including texts both widely read and long forgotten. However, she cites only *Jane Eyre* (1847) as a pre-1860s example. She argues, "More immediate precursors can be found which illustrate the conventional use of bigamy before the sensation novel gave it new prominence" (49). She goes on to identify three examples of bigamy novels published in 1860 – Captain Lascelles Wraxall's *Only a Woman* (1860), George Augustus Sala's *The Baddington Peerage* (1860), and Louisa Stewart's *Atheline* (1860) – but it is not entirely clear whether these three are the "immediate precursors" that she references. Fahnestock sees the Yelverton trial (the publicity for which dates back to 1858) as the catalyst for the popularity of sensation-era bigamy novels; for her, the first real bigamy novels published as a part of the sensation genre seem to be *East Lynne* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, both of which she believes "perhaps owe some of their extraordinary popularity to the Yelverton scandal" (53).

<sup>15</sup> The novella first appeared in *Dublin University Magazine* and was later collected in *The Purcell Papers* (1880); the story was rewritten by Le Fanu and republished as *The Wyvern Mystery* in 1869, apparently in hopes of capitalizing on the surge in popularity of sensation fiction. Reworking one of his shorter pieces of fiction into a longer novel several decades later wasn't unusual for Le Fanu; another short story published in 1839, "Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess," was later rewritten as *Uncle Silas* (1864).



texts are bigamy novels; they can all also be classified as Gothic novels<sup>16</sup> and, even more specifically, as examples of Gothic novels that rework and reimagine the tale of Bluebeard. Although all three of the novels offer exaggerated versions of the problems and conflicts faced by most of their readers within the British institution of marriage, they, like their sensational descendants, offered readers a space to imagine their responses to the kinds of marital crises that marriage-plot novels would often not even acknowledge. Moreover, like sensation bigamy novels, their Gothic predecessors are progressive in their focus on the position of women within marriages; the bigamy plot offers its characters (and its readers) a significant amount of imaginative space, allowing them to consider themselves as both married and not married, as both wives and not-wives. Gothic bigamy novels confine and restrain women, but they also give women a significant amount of power to effect changes in the structure of their relationships and marriages, offering an intriguing alternative viewpoint to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's assertion that Gothic novels are primarily about relationships between men.

Like a locked trunk or a forbidden wing, the Gothic bigamy novel allows space for possibility. A character may be moral or corrupt; may be respectable or disreputable; may be villainous or innocent. The women in these novels, many of whom exist in a kind of liminal state of wifhood, are simultaneously both wives and not-wives until the legality of their marriages is

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<sup>16</sup> *Jane Eyre* is not consistently categorized solely as an example of a Gothic novel, but various critics recognize its relationship to Gothic fiction. Daniel Brown notes that the novel is an example of "literary realism" that "incorporate[s] elements of the Gothic" (95), while Diane Long Hoeveler calls the novel one of the "archetypal exemplars of what might be called 'the melodramatic comic' female gothic" (16). Donna Heiland cites Gilbert and Gubar's assessment that *Jane Eyre* is linked to "gothicism in its dealing with the uncanny," arguing, "If the presence of the uncanny in Jane's life defines her experience as gothic, then it is her growing ability to reimagine the uncanny as a familiar and even intimate part of her life that allows her to transform the gothic into something else" (121).

either certified or denied. They exist in an undefined space in which they are allowed the unusual opportunity to consider the effects of legal and social structures on their identities and their senses of self. Even more significantly, these liminal spaces provide some of the female characters in these texts with a level of personal agency not afforded to many women in the early nineteenth century. Because they exist in a state of uncertainty, they are able to entertain various options for moving forward once their legal statuses – and therefore also their public reputations – are more clearly defined. They are able to consider what their lives might look like from both outside and inside the institution of marriage and, at least temporarily, imaginatively remove themselves from the position of *feme covert* to think about themselves instead as independent entities, all without having actually to risk the social consequences of a full separation from their marriages.

In this chapter, I will work to expand the traditional scope of the bigamy novel, extending its history back nearly forty years before sensation writers used it to such incredibly successful lengths. In doing so, I also aim to establish that the hallmarks and conventions of the bigamy plot, especially its uses of metaphorical space, its inclusion of morally-dubious characters, and its focus on unconventional roles for women, were recognizable and familiar to the readers who encountered them in the context of sensation fiction. I will explore the way that the Gothic novel allowed writers of bigamy plots to use the traditional landscapes and spaces of the genre as metaphors for the restrictive, confusing, and decaying institution of marriage in the years before the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act launched a series of reforms and reconsiderations of the institution in Britain. I will also link the Gothic bigamy novel to the subgenre of Bluebeard Gothic, examining the way the novels play on the ideas of threatening husbands and escaping wives. Finally, I will argue that the Gothic bigamy novel goes beyond depicting women solely as

prisoners of their husbands and their societies by exploring the ways that women were beginning to grasp social power, especially as it relates to reputation and respectability. All three of these points will, I hope, help to illuminate the shadowy territory gestured toward by Fahnstock and to establish that the tropes and norms of the bigamy novel were indeed established long before Theresa Yelverton, divorce reform, and rise of the sensation novel.

### **Confining Castles: Domestic Space in the Gothic Bigamy Novel**

While sensation fiction is notable for locating the threats and anxieties of modern society close to the home bases of its readership, the Gothic novel is better known for transporting those fears to exotic, unfamiliar locales. Like other Gothic texts, these three Gothic bigamy novels all remove their plots from the everyday space of their readers, locating them in more remote geographical and temporal locations. *Theresa Marchmont*, though set in England, takes place far from the center of power, with most of its action happening in an aristocrat's far-flung northern castle. Even more importantly, it takes place in the seventeenth century, nearly two hundred years before its date of publication. Le Fanu's novella is set in Ireland, told "nearly twenty years since" by a woman to the now-deceased "compiler" of the Purcell papers, Father Purcell (31). And although it is very clearly set in the Brontës' home county of Yorkshire, *Jane Eyre*'s position within a historical time setting has, unlike the historical precision of *Wuthering Heights* (1847), proved notoriously difficult to pin down precisely; the difficulty of determining exactly when the novel is set works to make the plot feel a little less immediate. All three texts present variations on the same basic bigamy plot: a young woman marries (or nearly marries) a man, discovers that the man is already married to someone else, and is forced to decide whether to perpetuate her fraudulent relationship with him or leave and start a new life on her own. There are varying

levels of physical and emotional violence imposed on the young woman by her *quondam* spouse and/or his legal wife as she attempts to make up her mind; there are also varied attempts by each author to paint the man who commits (or intends to commit) bigamy in a sympathetic light. Significantly, in all three cases, this basic plot employs tropes familiar to readers of Gothic narratives: horrifying secrets, the perceived threat of the outsider, doubled identities, tenuous boundaries, and remote, forbidding spaces.

Kate Ferguson Ellis identifies space as a central concept within the Gothic genre: “The strand of popular culture we call the Gothic novel can be distinguished by the presence of houses in which people are locked in and locked out. They are concerned with violence done to familial bonds that is frequently directed against women” (3). Gore’s, Le Fanu’s, and Brontë’s texts all use these kinds of Gothic houses as metaphorical spaces that represent the secrets and the crimes of marriage committed by the male bigamist, who violates the sacred space of the family and the norms of the institution of marriage. He gives various reasons for the violation of both the physical and metaphorical domestic spaces, from an attempt to find happiness after a failed first marriage to a desire to enhance his social and financial standing by making a more advantageous second match. Each plot also takes place within a landscape that recalls the Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe, although they are located in rural, remote parts of the United Kingdom rather in continental countryside. But there’s a central difference in the way that Gothic bigamy novels employ these kinds of Radcliffean spaces: while secret, threatening interiors in Radcliffe’s novels are almost always revealed to be empty (demonstrating that the anxieties and fears tied to those spaces are a product of the mind rather than of real, external threats; Jane Austen lampoons of these kinds of empty threats in *Northanger Abbey*), those spaces in Gothic bigamy novels are always full – and, importantly, they are full of marginalized and sometimes terrifying women.

The Gothic houses that contain these incarcerated women become symbols of the bigamous relationships themselves, full of secret and forbidden spaces, and difficult for the women who unknowingly enter the already-full relationship to traverse (at least at first). This connection between domestic spaces and the marriages and relationships that exist within them is a significant part of the Gothic tradition; Ellis notes that Gothic novels traditionally feature

haunted castles owned by usurping aristocrats, heroines who are persecuted but not “ruined” by these false owners, and young men of the sentimental-hero type who marry the heroines in the end. What does it mean for the castle to be haunted? It means that the owner of the castle is trying to conceal a secret upon which his continued ownership depends. In consequence, the castle becomes a space where the next generation cannot be produced, or more generally, where the domestic activities over which women are beginning to “rule” cannot be carried on. The exposure of the secret, then, sometimes accompanied by the destruction of the castle, frees the female protagonist to reassert the primacy of “home” and its values... (37)

The Gothic bigamy novel takes this traditional presentation of domestic space and makes it even more sinister. The castle in these Gothic novels are “haunted” by the women who have been both persecuted and ruined already by the aristocrats who own the homes; the usurpation occurs when the aristocrat offers the position of chatelaine to another woman even though his legal wife already rightfully occupies the role. The bigamy in each novel is at least partially motivated by the husband’s desire to try to produce another generation within the domestic space after his first wife fails to do so. And the second, non-legal wife is only “free” in the text once she discovers that she, like the first wife, has also been persecuted and ruined by the house’s owner. The

outcome, then, is also more varied: the second wife expels the husband from his domestic space, usurping power once again; the second wife flees her “marital” home in favor of a return to parental protection; the second wife leaves but, empowered by newly-gained wealth, returns to the haunted castle. In all three of the novels, the “castle” – all actually manor houses – plays a significant role in attempting to help the central male character to retain his respectability and continue the family line, even though he must commit criminal acts to do so. Rochester’s Thornfield (and his marriage to Bertha Mason), Glenfallen’s Court of Cahergillagh (and his marriage to Flora Van-Kemp), and Greville’s Greville Cross (and his marriage to Theresa Marchmont) are all occupied spaces that work to both attract and repel the second women to enter them. Although Thornfield, with its infamous attic prison and its fiery demise, is certainly the most iconic of these spaces, the houses dreamed up by Gore and Le Fanu also reflect the marriages that exist both legally and extra-legally within their walls. Domestic space becomes a metaphor for marriage in these early bigamy novels, a reference that is carried through to their sensational descendants, albeit in the forms of more public structures, especially hospitals and asylums.

The primary home of Gore’s bigamist, Lord Greville, is a castle in Kent. However, the action of her story is sparked by an unexpected visit to one of his other properties, Greville Cross, “a dreary and exposed mansion on the coast of Lancashire” (1). The property “had formerly been a Benedictine monastery” that was appropriated by the nobility during Henry VIII’s dissolution, though “it had never been a favorite residence of the Greville family” (2). The Cross takes its name from “a large iron cross which stood in the centre of the Court yard” (2), emphasizing the structure’s former function as a religious building. The name also appropriately suggests sacrifice and burden, as it is a building that acts both as a cross for the Greville family

to bear and as a sanctuary for another of the family's burdens: the mad first Lady Greville. The monks who formerly occupied the house seem to haunt the space, just as Lady Greville "haunts" the home as she floats listlessly from one room to another. Hugh, the son of Lord Greville and his second wife, Helen Percy, remarks on their arrival to the Cross:

Do you know that the figure of King Herod, cruel Herod, the murderer of his wife, and the slayer of innocents, stalks down every night from the tapestry in my sleeping room, and wanders through the galleries at midnight; and then the Cross, where the three Jews were executed a long, long time ago, in the reign of King John I think; they say that it drops blood on the morning of the Holy Friday. (24)

These supernatural acts, all of which are depicted as figments of a child's imagination but which also gesture toward the criminal confinement of a living person inside the space, bleed into the depiction of Theresa Marchmont, who is initially mistaken by Helen for one of the Cross's ghostly religious residents. Where the madwomen in the *Le Fanu* and *Brontë* texts are barely contained by the houses in which they have been imprisoned, Theresa almost seems to have been absorbed into the house itself, existing as one of a cast of spectral characters within its walls. Confined within a former monastery, she takes on something of a monastic character, existing in silent, nearly invisible routines that do not go beyond the boundaries of the property.

Beyond its ghostly (and ghost-like) inhabitants and its Catholic history, the Cross is also especially Gothic because the non-ruined parts of its structure seem to refuse any attempts at modernization. The narrator notes that its "massive walls and huge oaken beams would neither permit the enlargement of its narrow windows, nor the destruction of its maze of useless corridors" (3). Even the mere act of entering the house causes appropriately Gothic sensations in its residents; those feelings act as yet another deterrent to potential entrants. When Helen

“crosse[s] the portal” for the first time, she experiences “a sensation of terror ill-defined, but painful and overwhelming . . . such as we feel in the presence of a secret enemy” (20); Lord Greville also feels “increasing uneasiness and abstraction” which is attributed to the building itself rather than solely to the secret, his legal spouse, that he has concealed within the space (20). The house guards all of its secrets carefully, and therefore it is appropriate that Greville has chosen to install his first wife, who is in the grips of socially-stigmatizing madness, within its walls. After he constructs the fiction of Theresa’s death as a means of safeguarding his own respectability (and allowing him to seek greater happiness – and increased social status – through a second marriage), he consigns her to the Cross. He tells others that she has been “interred” there, and he stays away from the house totally until the visit that provides the conflict for Gore’s novel (6). It is a visit that is designed ultimately to secure Theresa’s incarceration even more fully; Greville has come to the Cross to replace one of the servants who has cared for Theresa, hoping that appearing in person to take care of the matter will ensure his employees’ continued silence about Theresa’s real situation. Although Greville initially wanted to make the journey alone (to avoid an encounter between Theresa and Helen), the entire family becomes “inmates” at the Cross (19). But curiously, Greville does not go to Rochester-like lengths to keep Theresa and Helen apart. Where Bertha Mason must break through numerous barriers to terrorize Rochester and Jane, Theresa’s boundaries are relatively few, suggesting that Greville knows about the power of the structure that confines his first wife and naively trusts that the house itself will work to keep the two in separate spaces.

Ultimately, the boundaries within the home are not enough to prevent Greville’s two wives from encountering each other. Similarly, the Gothic home in Sheridan Le Fanu’s novella, the Court of Cahergillagh, also struggles to contain and regulate its mad inhabitant, Flora Van-



Kemp. From the start, Lord Glenfallen's house is depicted as having both natural and supernatural aspects, sharing things in common with the environment within which it is situated, but also containing inhabitants and occurrences that cannot be explained rationally. The reader first sees the home through the eyes of Fanny, the second wife of Glenfallen; her first impression is of the similarities between the landscape and the home. She notes the "wild heathy hill" that leads up to the estate itself, lending an air of disorderliness and discord to the surroundings (61). The house itself is composed of "an ancient square tower, with many buildings of a humbler character, forming together the manor house," which is covered with "rich, dark ivy" (62-63). Glenfallen calls the house "the enchanted castle" (62), though he also warns Fanny that he prefers not to live in crumbling Gothic edifices:

You must not, my love . . . imagine this place worse than it is. I have no taste for antiquity—at least I should not choose a house to reside in because it is old.

Indeed I do not recollect that I was even so romantic as to overcome my aversion to rats and rheumatism, those faithful attendants upon your noble relics of feudalism; and I much prefer a snug, modern, unmysterious bedroom, with well-aired sheets, to the waving tapestry, mildewed cushions, and all the other interesting appliances of romance. (64)

Of course, Glenfallen is attempting to create a "snug, modern, unmysterious bedroom" via his second marriage with Fanny, all while keeping Flora confined to a separate space, which is much more allied with "waving tapestry, mildewed cushions, and . . . romance." Glenfallen's description of the Gothic home, foreshadowing the Gothic secrets that exist within its walls, is a starkly material one, focusing on decay and infestation as its prominent attributes. Rather than creating the kind of supernatural mystery surrounding the house, as it does in Gore's Greville

Cross, Le Fanu establishes that the threats existing in Glenfallen's home are earthy, physical, and extremely real; this is a home that could make its residents physically ill as well as driving them into paroxysms of Gothic madness. The most terrifying features of the Gothic home here become "appliances" – routine, everyday machines that are frightening because their lack of regular use has made them disgusting rather than fascinating or alluring.

While the earthiness of this Gothic home foreshadows the physical violence that will occur later in the text, there are also elements of the supernatural clinging to the structure. Fanny's first encounter with one of the maids coincides with an incident that could be taken straight from a Radcliffe novel: as she enters her apartments, "something like a mass of black tapestry, as it appeared, disturbed by my sudden approach, fell from above the door, so completely as to screen the aperture" (68). No one but Fanny sees the ominous drape fall across the door, physically barring her from entering her bedroom, but the maid exclaims that such a vision is a bad omen: "Whenever something—something *bad* is going to happen to the Glenfallen family, some one that belongs to them sees a black handkerchief or curtain just waved or falling before their faces" (72). Although Glenfallen is dismissive of the supernatural, the falling of the veil is seen as something of a rite of passage for Fanny – it is this action, ominous as it is, that codes Fanny as "belong[ing]" to the Glenfallen family, although she is not legally Glenfallen's wife. The house itself acts as the final verifier of a person's membership within the family structure, certifying her respectability as a wife even as it prophesies danger ahead. Membership in the family comes with official residency in the house, which like any good Gothic structure works to keep the unsavory aspects of the family's life – like the truth about bigamous relationships – hidden away from the outside world.

While Thornfield, home of the almost-bigamous Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, is also intended as a fortress to shield Rochester's secret wife from society, it too has trouble fulfilling its Gothic purposes. At first, Thornfield is inscrutable; when Jane first arrives at the house, which she recognizes only as having a typical "long front" exterior, she is led into "a room whose double illumination of fire and candle at first dazzled me, contrasting as it did with the darkness" (113). Once her eyes adjust to the room, she describes it as "cozy and agreeable," but that first image – of illumination so bright and so confusing that it actually makes the space more difficult to see and understand – reflects Thornfield's doubled position as an outward sign of English respectability and a hiding place for a secret that could completely destroy the reputation of its owner. As is the case with many manor houses, Thornfield's interior is designed to reaffirm the status of the Rochester family. Jane describes the hall of the house:

I halted there a minute; I looked at some pictures on the walls (one, I remember, represented a grim man in a cuirass, and one a lady with powdered hair and a pearl necklace), at a bronze lamp pendant from the ceiling, at a great clock whose case was of oak curiously carved, and ebon black with time and rubbing.

Everything appeared very stately and imposing to me, but then I was so little accustomed to grandeur. (117)

For Jane, the stateliness of Thornfield is conveyed through the items placed within its interior: and a lamp whose material connects it with antiquity.<sup>17</sup> But those objects act as a distraction and a bluff – a dazzling light intended to distract the viewer from the realities that lurk beneath its

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<sup>17</sup> Jane describes the interior of the home as being really much more impressive than the exterior; when she first views the outside of the house in daylight, she notes that it is "three stories high, of proportions not vast, though considerable; a gentleman's manor-house, not a nobleman's seat" (117-18).

roof. However, while the home manages to assert its importance and its legacy through its appearance, it fails to properly do its Gothic duty by keeping its secrets fully hidden. Although the structure is able to contain the secret of Bertha Mason from the knowledge of society at large, it cannot keep her contained within the boundaries of the home's interior. As a legal wife, she should rightfully have control over much of the domestic space of the home, and she asserts that position several times in the novel by escaping from the room where she has been imprisoned. Though Rochester has decided that she does not belong as a part of the family's legacy – there is no portrait of the real lady of the house among the pictures in the hall – he is unable to imprison her fully within domestic space that should ultimately be hers.

Ultimately, although they are domestic spaces that should be under the control of women, the homes in each novel are complicit with the attempts of their owners to neutralize and confine wives who either will not or cannot help to perpetuate the family's legacy. As physical representations of the respectability and longevity of each family, the continued existence of the homes themselves are in jeopardy if the family line cannot be extended to future generations. Even so, each space proves that a home is not a prison, and that domestic rooms cannot be successfully turned into jail cells. Ellis notes that the conclusion of the Gothic novel is “sometimes accompanied by the destruction of the castle” (37). This is not the case in each of the Gothic bigamy novels; while Bertha Mason famously succeeds in burning down Thornfield, both of the other homes remain intact after the bigamy of their owner is discovered. But neither of them remains unchanged, and in both cases, the revelation of the crime concludes with the death of the owner and a subsequent transfer in ownership of the home. The structure of the home may not be destroyed in Gore's and Le Fanu's texts, but the family line that the edifices represent is indeed interrupted and ended.

## Bluebeard Gothic

In all three of the Gothic bigamy novels considered here, the exterior and interior facades of the homes – walls, tapestries, portraits, decorative objects – act as a first line of defense against the discovery of the family secret. However, all three homes also include spaces which are designed to imprison the mad first wife and keep her away from the public gaze (and even the less public gazes of servants, other family members, and guests). Theresa Marchmont is imprisoned within the Cross, with the entire house essentially acting as her prison; this level of confinement is sufficient, apparently, because her mental illness has manifested as docility and quietness, leaving her so removed from reality that Greville “doubts her very existence” (99). Flora Van-Kemp, who attempts to murder her husband’s second wife, is supposed to be restricted to one wing of the house, though she manages to find her way to her old bedroom, which has been taken over by Fanny. Bertha Mason suffers the most confined existence of all; she is imprisoned in “the third story” of Thornfield, in “one of its mystic cells”; hers is “a room without a window,” behind a door covered by “hangings,” which is within another locked room (242, 338).

The locking up of wives in small spaces links each of these novels to a very specific type of Gothic novel: the Bluebeard Gothic narrative. Building on the work of Anne Williams, Heta Pyrhönen argues that the Bluebeard fairy tale, first published in Charles Perrault’s *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé* (1697), “condenses all of the central generic conventions of the Gothic,” including

a vulnerable and curious heroine; a wealthy, enigmatic, and usually older man; and a mysterious house concealing the violent, implicitly sexual secrets of this man. Like Bluebeard’s mansion, Williams observes, the Gothic house always

reflects its male owner. Not only does the chamber mirror his guilty secret, but also the layout of the house echoes his duplicity. The public spaces of his mansion proclaim his wealth and respectability, while the secret closet refers to the crimes he commits in private. Thanks to the sexual nature of his secrets, the heroine has to resolve what her relationship is to the other women who play or have played a role in the hero's life. It is the eerie setting of the hero's home that changes the other elements unmistakably into Gothic. (6)

Just like Gothic homeowners Greville, Glenfallen, and Rochester, Bluebeard's Gothic structure conceals former wives; however, unlike the living, imprisoned wives in the homes of Gothic bigamy novels, it is the corpses of Bluebeard's murdered wives that are hidden away in a forbidden room in his house. While none of the three men in these Gothic bigamy novels are murderers (although one *does* fail to prevent an execution), all of them engage in behavior that is strikingly similar to that of Bluebeard: imprisoning a wife in an enclosed space, and then forbidding or preventing a second wife (or fiancée) from entering that space and discovering the secret.

Pyrhönen argues that Gothic novelists who incorporated aspects of the Bluebeard folktale into their narratives opened up a richer world of interpretive possibilities for their novels. She notes that the Bluebeard tales themselves are read in a variety of ways, with various critical readings placing “an emphasis on the difficulties and dangers of intimate relationships,” “a focus on the suppressed secret of patriarchy's ultimate impotence,” “a stress on mimetic doubling and rivalry,” or “a concentration on the tale's self-reflexive narrative and intertextual strategies” (8). But as these Bluebeard Gothic novels are also Gothic bigamy novels, the echoes of the folktale resonate through the depiction of marriage as an obscure and even dangerous institution, one in

which power can be easily abused in the name of respectability. The fairy tale leaves little room for question when it comes to Bluebeard's villainy; significantly, it also fails to provide a psychological motive for the murders he commits, especially the first one. In contrast, the authors of these Gothic bigamy novels make a concerted effort to provide the reader with a reason to sympathize with the actions of the Bluebeard-esque character. Each of them attempts to exchange an improper wife for a proper wife, not only because they have not been able to carry on a harmonious domestic relationship with their improper wives but also because having improper wives threatens their respectability and, therefore, their position in society. When their ancestral homes fail to uphold their owners' respectability by giving up the secrets consigned within their walls, the husbands themselves must attempt to convince their second wives that their actions were justified, in the hopes that those wives will help them to continue the charade. In the process, each man also highlights the problems that exist within the institution of marriage as it was designed pre-1857: a contract that provided no way out for either party, not even when the relationship had been damaged beyond repair.

The connections between the Bluebeard tales and *Jane Eyre* are not merely the invention of critics; indeed, soon after Jane arrives at Thornfield, she references the folktale herself:

Mrs Fairfax stayed behind a moment to fasten the trap-door. I, by dint of groping, found the outlet from the attic, and proceeded to descend the narrow garret staircase. I lingered in the long passage to which this led, separating the front and back rooms of the third story – narrow, low, and dim, with only one little window at the far end, and looking, with its two rows of small black doors all shut, like a corridor in some Bluebeard's castle. (126)

The reference neatly allows Brontë to foreshadow the presence of a hidden woman on the third floor of Thornfield and to link her novel to the questions raised by the Bluebeard folktale, identified by Pyrhönen as issues about “ethics, gender, morality, and power” (8). Unlike Bluebeard, however, Rochester acknowledges that at least some of his actions – generally those that have harmed Jane, not those that have harmed Bertha – violate many ethical and moral norms. He admits to the repulsive nature of the crime he nearly commits by marrying Jane, and yet he spends a good deal of time trying to justify his reasons for attempting to do so. “Bigamy is an ugly word!” he exclaims as his wedding to Jane is interrupted, admitting that his actions *sound* horrible, but failing to acknowledge that his intentions were bad (279). Rochester is only prevented from committing bigamy by the sudden appearance of his brother-in-law, but he freely admits that he “meant . . . to be a bigamist” (279), however distasteful he finds the concept (or at least its semantic representation).

Brontë presents Rochester as a man who has carefully considered the legal implications of his marital status – and the moral correctness, or lack thereof, of the marriage laws to which he is subject. After introducing Jane to Bertha, he explains the reasoning to place Jane in such a precarious legal, moral, and spiritual position. When Jane reiterates that Rochester’s “wife is living,” and that any further relationship contracted between them would make her into a “mistress” rather than a legal wife (291), Rochester becomes agitated, saying,

I am a fool! . . . I keep telling her that I am not married, and do not explain to her why. I forget she knows nothing of the character of that woman, or of the circumstances attending my infernal union with her. Oh, I am certain Jane will agree with me in opinion, when she knows all that I know! Just put your hand in mine, Janet – that I may have the evidence of touch as well as sight, to prove that



you are near me – and I will in a few words show you the real state of the case.

(292)

Rochester argues that his marriage was contracted practically without his consent – “a marriage was achieved almost before I knew where I was” – by his father and elder brother in order to secure Bertha’s fortune (293). The marriage may have bolstered the family’s respectability by ensuring its financial security, but Rochester says that he is legally yoked to a woman whom he claims is of questionable character and morality, the expression of which would be exceptionally damaging to that reputation. Bertha, he maintains, is “the true daughter of an infamous mother” who has “dragged [him] through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste” (294). Of the four years during which Rochester and Bertha lived as man and wife, he claims that these qualities made themselves known slowly until there was no denying his wife’s true character. Bound to a woman whom he does not love, Rochester rationalizes that he simply should not be forced to live a life he did not choose for himself with a woman who repulses him (without giving any thought to the notion that Bertha may have similar feelings).

As he works to convince Jane that his attempted bigamy was justified, Rochester asks for sympathy not only for his emotional state but also for the precarious position in which his reputation was placed as a result of his marriage. He explains that during the crisis point of his marriage he

approached the verge of despair; a remnant of self-respect was all that intervened between me and the gulf. In the eyes of the world, I was doubtless covered with grimy dishonour; but I resolved to be clean in my own sight – and to the last I repudiated the contamination of her crimes, and wrenched myself from

connection with her mental defects. Still, society associated my name and person with hers . . . and besides, I remembered that I had once been her husband . . . moreover, I knew that while she lived I could never be the husband of another and better wife; and, though five years my senior . . . she was likely to live as long as I, being as robust in frame as she was infirm in mind. (354)

Rochester's explanation reveals that he is dealing with many of the same issues faced by women who were compelled into marriages during the nineteenth century: the inability to choose their own partners, the privileging of finances as the most significant aspect of marriage-making, the discovery that their spouses' personalities and values are incompatible with their own, and the feeling of imprisonment within a marriage that cannot be legally dissolved. For a wife, generally the only way out of such a union was either her own death or that of her spouse; in 1847, marriage cases in Britain were governed by ecclesiastical courts, and the only real way of procuring a divorce was through an act of Parliament – an expensive and highly unrealistic prospect. However, Rochester's privileged status as a man with power, resources, and an advantaged social position (even if he feels that status is "covered with grimy dishonour") allows him simply to decide that the law is wrong, and therefore, he should be able to violate it. He is able to overpower Bertha both physically and mentally, marginalizing her to the point of total erasure from society and making her "a goblin's cell" to match his own feelings of legal entrapment (356). He does not want to be married, and although he cannot pursue a legal strategy to achieve this goal, he is able to use his advantaged position to present himself to the world as an unmarried man. Rochester even claims that, in the process of transforming himself back into a single man, he received an imagined response from the virtue "Hope" to his decision: "That woman, who has so abused your long-suffering, so sullied your name, so outraged your honour,

so blighted your youth, is not your wife, nor are you her husband” (356). With this imagined permission granted, based largely on the perceived damage that Bertha has done to his respectability, Rochester grants himself a kind of rebirth, and he proceeds to live as an unattached man in a society that knows nothing of his Caribbean wife.

Rochester wants to be free of his wife, and he is nearly able to will that desire into reality, but for the timely appearance of Richard Mason. Rochester explains, “. . . it appeared to me so absolutely rational that I should be considered free to love and be loved, I never doubted some woman might be found willing and able to understand my case and accept me, in spite of the curse with which I was burdened” (357). He is unwilling to accept any responsibility for his part in cementing the marriage itself – surely his father and brother did not speak his marriage vows for him – and paints himself as a person in a victimized, powerless position, so exploited by others that he has no choice but to violate legal and moral codes in order to attain some measure of deserved happiness and respectability. And, to some extent, the reader does sympathize with him; Bertha clearly is suffering from a mental illness, their marriage certainly was unhappy, and Rochester’s love for Jane seems both genuine and founded on principles of compatibility and intellectual equality. But the real problem with Rochester’s rationalization of his behavior – and the fact that he can find bigamy ugly while still intending to become a bigamist – is that he depicts himself as a victim who lacks agency, when he is actually consistently exercising decisive power to reshape the world around him into a place that better suits his own desires and preferences. Although he is not a murderer like Bluebeard, he engages in the same sort of autocratic rule over his own domain, disregarding legal and moral principles that do not fit with his own perceptions. Rochester claims that he is only reacting to a terrible situation that has been created for him by others, while his own attempt to resolve that situation destroys one woman

and nearly destroys another. Bertha takes her own life in an attempt to free herself from the prison made for her by Rochester; after Jane leaves Thornfield, she compares herself to a “lost and starving dog,” questioning her status, her place in society, and her identity, to the point of feeling almost completely emptied of selfhood (377). Rochester experiences the terrifying threat of lost respectability because of his marriage and his aborted attempt at bigamy; however, it is the women in Rochester’s life – Bertha and Jane – who experience true marginalization and crises of identity as a result of Rochester’s attempts to achieve marital felicity.

Like Rochester, the inability of Greville’s wife, Theresa, to provide him with the life he desires leads him to bigamy. Theresa agrees to marry Greville only after being informed that her true love, Hugh Percy, is dead; she also agrees to the marriage in part to escape the advances of King Charles II, in whose court she serves as a lady-in-waiting to Queen Catherine. The marriage fully breaks down when Theresa gives birth to a stillborn child and suffers a mental break as a result. While Rochester was able to cover up Bertha’s existence completely from English society because their marriage took place in Jamaica (exploiting imperial space in a way that writers of later bigamy novels explored more thoroughly), Theresa and Greville’s relationship develops at court, in the very center of power. In order to hide her away, he must concoct a fictional death for her, and then consign her to virtual imprisonment so that he can re-enter society as a single man. Whether Greville’s subsequent decision to marry Helen, the sister of the man whom Theresa truly loved, is an act of coincidence or revenge is unclear. He notes, “The very name of Percy had become ominously painful to me, and yet it inspired me with a strange and undefinable interest” (95). The Percys, based on a real English aristocratic family, have significant social connections, and linking himself to the family would provide Greville with a boost to his own respectability. He claims to have been drawn to the family, and to Helen

in particular, by some kind of strange magical “spell” (95). He befriends the family, who had never been made aware of their son’s romance with Theresa, even though he knows about the secret link between them and his wife.

From the start, Greville compares his second wife to his first, especially in terms of their characters:

The playful girl towards whom my age enabled me to assume an almost paternal authority, while I exercised, in turn, the parts of playmate and preceptor, beloved as she was in all the charms of her dawning beauty, and artless naïveté, inspired me with no deeper sentiment; not even when I saw her gradually expand into the mature pride of womanhood, and acquire that feminine gentleness, that dignified simplicity of character, which had attracted me in Theresa Marchmont. (96)

Greville finds in Helen a younger version of his wife, one who is young enough never to have formed any romantic attachments with others. She is pure, innocent, and “artless” – she will not betray him the way that Theresa has done. And, even better, Greville sees her from the start as a young woman for whom he could become both an authority figure and a companion. More Pygmalion here than Bluebeard, he could form her into precisely the kind of wife he wants, instead of a woman whose commitment he must question even at the altar. But he claims that at first he did not see Helen in romantic terms, and not until he has recognized his feelings and has subsequently tried to deny them does he decide that he cannot resist her. He returns to the Cross, where he realizes the gravity of his situation:

In my hour of loneliness and sorrow, I had no kind friend to whom to turn for consolation; and for the first time the sterile and gloomy waste over which my future path of life was appointed, filled me with emotions of terror and regret. My

very existence appeared blighted through the treachery of others; and all those holy ties which enrich the evening of our days with treasures far dearer than awaited us even in the morning of youth, appeared withheld from me, and me only. (98-99)

The justification for his decision is clear – it is not his fault that his wife has gone mad, because it was her own betrayal and her dishonesty about her affections that led her there. The “holy ties” of marriage become shackles; although he has imprisoned Theresa in the Cross, like Rochester, he sees himself as the real prisoner. His decision to commit bigamy by marrying Helen Percy, he believes, is not his fault – it is the fault of the “treachery of others,” including Theresa, Hugh Percy, and the king. He makes himself into the victim, accusing Theresa of being “occupied by a passion whose violence had deprived [him] of [his] child, and herself of intellect and health” (100). Although Theresa’s madness generally manifests itself in a disconnection with the world, Greville depicts her as a criminal, responsible for her child’s death, her madness, and his own unhappiness, rather than a sad, docile ghost.

Clearly feeling trapped, Greville justifies his own betrayal of Theresa as an appropriate response to the harms which she has done to herself, to their child, and, most importantly, to him. But Greville also blames Theresa for committing crimes of respectability herself – against the Greville family and its lineage. He claims that he sees his “inheritance destined to be wrenched from [him]” because he will never have a legal heir who can succeed to his title or his entailed properties. In this sense, Theresa has committed a violation against the very fabric of the social structure that confirms the elevated position of the upper classes and keeps their property firmly in the hands of their own descendants – that is, against the very things that define them as “respectable.” The problem for the reader, however, is that we have been asked to sympathize

with Theresa's sad plight throughout the novel, not with Greville's. His anger may have caused him to see his wife as a criminal, but we see her as a victim of patriarchal abuse, unable to marry her true love because of an oppressive class structure, harassed by a monarch who believes he can stake a claim on her body simply because of his superior place in that class structure, and villainized by a man who feels entitled to her love largely because he had envisioned himself as a hero to her damsel in distress. In some ways, it is easier for a reader to feel sympathy for Rochester, in large part because the reader never sees Bertha depicted as anything but a troubled and violent woman; but Greville and Gore's narrator both paint Theresa as a good woman deserving of sympathy up to the point when Greville can no longer sympathize with her himself. It is difficult for the reader to follow his lead.

Greville does, however, possess enough self-awareness to be cognizant that he has been constructing the justifications that allow him to achieve his desired goals:

Such were the arguments by which I strove to blind myself to my rising passion for another, and to smother the self-reproaches which assailed me when I first convinced the fatal project . . . How often did the better feelings of my nature recoil from such an act of villainy—how often was my project abandoned, how often resumed at the alternate bidding of passion and virtue! (100-01)

If Theresa is a criminal for loving another (though never committing adultery) and being driven to madness by a series of passion and griefs, Greville also becomes a criminal here: a Bluebeard whose victim is his own morality and conscience. Using specifically sensory imagery, he depicts his attempt first to keep himself from loving Helen, and then later to quiet the moral impulses within him that try to prevent him from marrying again. Caught between reason and passion, Greville does violence to both; however, it is the desire for personal happiness, and for the

continued societal recognition of his respectable position, both of which he feels have been wrongfully taken from him, that ultimately lead him to marry Helen Percy illegally and to conceive of his legal wife only as “an object” that is no longer worth “the sacrifice of [his] entire happiness” (102).

While both Greville and Rochester cite the twinned motivations of happiness and respectability as justifications for bigamy, the motivations driving Le Fanu’s bigamist, Glenfallen, are more complex and sinister by far. Greville and Rochester both feel that they are entitled to happiness that has been stolen from them by their wives, but Glenfallen’s affections toward the women in the novel are never made clear. Happiness does not seem to factor into any of his decisions; instead his decisions are much more clearly based on the desire to bolster his finances and his reputation, using marriage as a means of increasing both. Glenfallen marries Fanny Richardson shortly after the death of her sister makes her the heiress of her family’s considerable fortune. Although Fanny is only sixteen, her expected wealth is enough to attract a large number of suitors. Moreover, Fanny’s parents promote the idea that their daughter is a financial prize to be won on the marriage market. Her mother ensures that her daughter’s wealth is evident by displaying it all over Fanny’s body; after a ball, Fanny notes that she spends a considerable amount of time “rapidly divesting [herself] of the rich ornaments which, in profuseness and value, could scarcely have found their equals in any private family in Ireland” (47). Glenfallen, who already possesses a title and an estate, is in dire need of money, and his marriage to Fanny is negotiated so that the Richardsons will gain social capital while Glenfallen will attain the financial capital he desperately needs to make sure that he remains in a respectable social position. Glenfallen and Fanny’s mother are careful to present his proposal in terms of affection, but neither party is really in it for love. Glenfallen wants money and respectability;



Fanny wants a way to escape from her parents' home. Of the relationships in each of these Gothic bigamy novels, theirs is the one which is most clearly a transaction.

Much like the villain of the Bluebeard tales, Le Fanu is careful to present Glenfallen as a remote figure whose ultimate motives are difficult for both Fanny and the reader initially to untangle. Although he is never a figure of sympathy like Greville or Rochester, it is difficult to decide whether he is a part of the schemes of his legal wife, Flora, to kill Fanny, or whether he is, like the other Gothic bigamists, burdened by a wife who needs to be contained. The continuing relationship between Flora and Glenfallen is difficult to decipher, but Glenfallen's true affections seem to be directed at neither Flora nor Fanny. He is most concerned throughout the novella with keeping up the appearances and the lifestyle appropriate for an aristocrat. After he and Fanny arrive at Cahergillagh, he quickly decides that they must take immediate steps to secure their financial and social positions, which have been damaged by his own financial misfortunes and by the continued existence of Flora Van-Kemp. He exclaims,

I have it—I have it! We must go abroad, and stay there too; and if that does not answer, why—why, we must try some more effectual expedient. Lady Glenfallen, I have become involved in heavy embarrassments. A wife, you know, must share the fortunes of her husband, for better for worse; but I will waive my right if you prefer remaining here—here at Cahergillagh. For I would not have you seen elsewhere without the state to which your rank entitles you; besides it would break your poor mother's heart. . . (85)

Fanny's safety and comfort are presented as secondary concerns; what is most important is that the Glenfallens appear to be financially-secure aristocrats who are in complete control over their own situations and capital. Such concerns led Glenfallen to commit bigamy, and here they lead

him to consider abandoning Ireland completely. Fanny balks at leaving the country, but not because she has a particular love for her homeland. Instead, she is concerned that if they were to go abroad, she would no longer have “a remedy within reach, in the protection and support of [her] own family” should Glenfallen’s “violent” temper escalate into actual physical violence (85). Unlike Jane and Helen, neither of whom are physically afraid of the men in the texts, Fanny intimates from the very start that she is indeed afraid of Glenfallen – even though she takes no steps to leave or protect herself from him.

Like *Jane Eyre*, “A Chapter in the History of a Tyrone Family” makes explicit links between Lord Glenfallen and the Bluebeard folktales. Here, however, it is Glenfallen himself who jokes about being like Bluebeard during a conversation with Fanny about whether or not women can keep secrets: “Now I shall make a test of you . . . I shall be your Bluebeard—tush, why do I trifle thus? Listen to me, dear Fanny; I speak now in solemn earnest. What I desire is intimately, inseparably, connection with your own happiness as well as my own” (75-76). What he desires, of course, is that Fanny not visit the portion of the house where Flora lives, a command that Fanny scrupulously follows, unlike the curious heroine of the Bluebeard stories. It is Flora who breaches the walls of her prison, not Fanny. Glenfallen is the only one of the Gothic bigamists who actually ends up deliberately causing the death of his wife – after Flora attempts to kill Fanny, he deliberately undermines Flora’s credibility at her trial, leading to her execution. When Fanny confronts Glenfallen with evidence of his bigamy, he also turns on her, attempting to discredit her and chastising her for casting doubts upon his reputation. He declares,

I now tell you that this is the last time I shall speak to you upon this subject, and, in the presence of the God who is to judge me, and as I hope for mercy in the day of judgment, I swear that the charge thus brought against me is utterly false,

unfounded, and ridiculous; I defy the world in any point to taint my honour; and as I have never taken the opinion of madmen touching your character and morals, I thinking it but fair to require that you will evince a like tenderness for me. . .

(97-98)

Rather than calling on Fanny's own knowledge of his character, Glenfallen asks her to recognize that the world sees him as an important, upstanding figure. Obsessed by reputation and appearances, Glenfallen appeals to both as a way to deflect the suggestion that he may have committed bigamy. He plays upon the belief that respectable people were also inherently moral people, and therefore incapable of committing such an act. He is a respectable man, with a title and an estate to act as outward confirmation of that fact, while the woman who has accused him of such a heinous crime, Flora, is unreliable not only because she is mad but also because she lacks both position and status. Glenfallen is powerful enough – and Flora powerless enough – that even her public accusations of bigamy fall upon deaf ears. Le Fanu demonstrates here why the conflation of respectability and morality is so dangerous, as the presumption that respectable people could not commit moral offenses places them in a nearly unreachable position in terms for those who would seek justice against them.

Glenfallen gets away with both of his crimes: bigamy and the marginalization, trial, and execution of his wife. Ultimately, however, it is his own guilt over both of these acts that ruins him mentally and physically. His perceived respectability can cover up his moral injustices in public, but in private, he must wrestle with the results of his actions. In a twist on the presentation of madness in the Gothic bigamy novel, Glenfallen is the character in the novella who suffers the worst mental breakdown. Flora may have been physically handicapped, volatile, and justifiably angry about her life, but Glenfallen is the one who seems truly to have lost his

mind. Fanny notes after Flora's execution that she "plainly perceived that if Lord Glenfallen were not relieved, and that speedily, insanity must supervene" (124). And she is right – Glenfallen believes that he sees the dead Flora still living in the house, and he continues to try to lock her imagined person away. But while a mad wife in a Gothic bigamy novel can be contained and maintained by a powerful male figure, a mad husband can depend only on himself for containment. Glenfallen cannot lock himself away in a forbidden room; as the owner of the house, and a living symbol of the history of his family's prestige and power, his public presence is a crucial part of the pantomime of respectability. He cannot act as both prisoner and warden. In the end, his suicide is perhaps the only means by which he can ensure that he is fully separated from a society that would discard his carefully established and protected respectability should the truth about his crimes or his mental condition be made public. Although he mimics Bluebeard in his treatment of both of his wives, Glenfallen is his own final victim.

### **Second Wives and the Restoration of Respectability**

When the owners of Gothic homes fail to ensure their respectability even after hiding away the secrets of their pasts, and the houses themselves fail to keep those secrets hidden, the responsibility for restoring the reputation and the moral standing of the family falls squarely on the heroines of Gothic bigamy novels: the second wives. These young women are sharply contrasted with the legal wives of the men in the texts. Where the wives are mad, the heroines are rational; where the wives are dangerous and coded as "other,"<sup>18</sup> the heroines are examples of

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<sup>18</sup> This "otherness" is emphasized by the fact that each of the legal wives comes from a space that is removed from the centers of British power. Flora Van-Kemp is Dutch, and Bertha Mason is from the colonial space of the Caribbean. Theresa Marchmont is English, but she is marked as "other" because she is from a rural, remote part of the country, rather than London. Her ruralness is continually referenced by others at court.

good, proper Englishwomen. In many ways, these Gothic bigamy novels are largely about the differences between these two categories of women – the “proper” and the “improper” – and the way that one group is responsible for restoring domestic order after the first group has proved unable to do so. The male crime of bigamy (and it is exclusively a male crime in these early novels) can only be forgiven and corrected by the presence of a respectable woman who also possesses a keen sense of morality, restoring the moral balance that is supposed to underpin true Victorian respectability.

Each of the three novels draws clear distinctions between the legal wives and the bigamous wives of the men in question. While the wives who have been married (or almost married) bigamously are generally portrayed as innocents, the legal wives are all excellent examples of the “improper feminine,” a phenomenon that Lyn Pykett also identifies as playing a central role in sensation fiction. Pykett argues, “Within the patriarchal family, of which she was supposedly the cornerstone, woman was defined in terms of the discourse of the proper feminine, as meekly submissive, the very model of and for decorum and propriety” (56). In various ways, Theresa, Flora, and Bertha all fail to fit into this mold of proper femininity. In part, they fail to be properly feminine because they cannot submit to the will of the men they have married; it is their very inability to obey the commands given by their husbands that has led to their containment and separation. But without women who cannot possibly live up to society’s demands, Pykett argues that identifying “properly” feminine women would be impossible. She notes that “the proper feminine was itself always defined in terms of its contradictory other, the improper feminine,” who is associated with wildness and animalistic tendencies rather than with the controlled behavior of the proper feminine (56). Narratives that explore the failures within patriarchal institutions, like both Gothic and sensation bigamy novels, are prime territory for

locating the improper feminine, because these novels work to reveal the secrets confined within both the structures in the texts and in the structures of respectable society. Pykett explains that “the improper feminine could only be contained within the patriarchal family, an institution which it also constantly threatened to dissolve or destroy” (56). For Pykett, it’s the “discourse of containment and threat,” used within the texts to “reinforce masculine control of both women and the family,” which is such a central and “important component in the discourse of the sensation novel” (56). The “improper” wives in the Gothic bigamy novel are also a means of shedding light on the extent of the male-dominated power structure of the family; they also foreshadow the centrality of the “improper” woman in sensation bigamy novels, where they move from the background to the forefront of the narrative. Neutralized from society through her containment within the boundaries of the Gothic house and of patriarchal marriage, the “improper” wife nevertheless constantly threatens to expose the injustices and the inequalities of both her own marriage and of the entire institution itself.

The job of the second wife, then is to act on behalf of society as a sort of kindly repairwoman. She can acknowledge the plight of her predecessor, but because she is a “proper” representative of femininity, her real work is in reordering the domestic space that the “improper” feminine has disrupted. Because each of the husbands has proved himself unable to reconstruct a proper, respectable space of domesticity in a moral way – his only solution is to discard moral norms and set up a façade of domesticity within his existing home – the second wife is afforded a significant amount of agency in her efforts to put the situation to right. This also means that she, not her *quondam* husband, is the one who frequently must act as a mediator with the marginalized first wife. The encounters between the first and second wives in Gothic bigamy texts (and the varying emotional reactions that result) can be read as an inversion of the

male homosocial/homosexual doubling that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies as a crucial part of the Gothic novel's framework. Sedgwick argues that the romantic triangles in Gothic novels that pit two male suitors against each other for the love of one woman should actually be read in terms of the men's relationship with each other.<sup>19</sup> The relationships in Gothic bigamy novels are notable for their depiction of the interaction between the two women who have been married (or almost married) by one man, and even more complicated is that, by marrying twice, each bigamist creates two women inhabiting a single legal identity.

The struggle over whether to reject or embrace one's bigamous double (i.e., the other wife) can be read in Sedgwick's terms as perhaps a more significant question on the part of the "proper" second wife than those surrounding the relationship between the heroine and the husband. Such a reading suggests that the mad/sane wives are two sides of the same coin – that they exist as two different parts of a single coherent yet conflicted identity, one that is simultaneously proper/improper and respectable/disreputable. (And indeed, each author is careful to clarify that the wives do share similarities beyond their married names and their relationships to the central male figure – think Jane Eyre's and Bertha Mason's colonial inheritances and Theresa Marchmont and Helen Percy's similar character traits.) The doubling also makes it clear that it is the second wife, the counterpart to the woman who has been marginalized and wronged, who must wrest control over the family dynamic away from the husband in order to recreate order. This reading suggests that, unlike many other Gothic novels, the Gothic bigamy novel is primarily about female relationships rather than relationships

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<sup>19</sup> Donna Heiland notes that the "relationship that matters most in the triangle is not either of the male-female relationships that one sees at first glance. Rather, it is the relationship between the two men, who are rivals for the one woman, and have what Sedgwick describes as a 'homosocial' connection with each other" (17).

between men; it also presents a rare situation where a woman is able, at least temporarily, to take a dominant position in a patriarchal institution.

What each of these heroines does with the power she is given as a result of her husband's bigamy differs slightly. Fanny, the heroine of Le Fanu's novella, provides perhaps the least interesting resolution to any of these Gothic bigamy novels by rejecting the agency given to her and simply retreating into the passivity that defines the "proper" feminine. Throughout Le Fanu's novel, Fanny is regularly controlled by those around her. She is compelled to marry Glenfallen by her mother; she is compelled to stay silent about his possible crimes even after she learns that she may not be a lawful countess; and she is above all else stymied and paralyzed by her own fears and uncertainties. Even when Flora is standing over Fanny's bed, ready to strike, Fanny cannot bring herself to act; instead, she lies passively, frozen in fear, and waits for resolution: "I was fixed as if in the tremendous spell of a nightmare. I could not stir even a finger; I could not lift my voice; I could not even breathe" (11). Fanny attributes her lack of reaction to "the terrific fascination which had locked all [her] powers so long," and she does not move until the point of Flora's knife is actually on her throat (112); even then, she claims that she "know[s] not" how she managed to move away (113). She remains with Glenfallen even after she suspects that their marriage is not legal; she stays with him through Flora's threats and violence, as well as her trial and execution. Not until she realizes that Glenfallen has suffered a nervous breakdown following the trial does she finally decide to get away from him and from Cahergillagh, when she has become "so convinc[ed]" of his guilt that she writes to her father, "detailing the grounds of [her] fears, and imploring him to come to Cahergillagh without delay, in order to remove [her] from [her] husband's control, previously to taking legal steps for a final separation" (123). Even as she finally acts, Fanny maintains her position within the patriarchal power structure, beseeching her



father to come and “remove” her from her husband’s house and place her back under parental control. In many ways, Fanny’s complete inability to handle the agency that is handed to her as a result of Flora and Glenfallen’s crimes is a symptom of her “proper” femininity; she has clearly been raised to be an appropriate, submissive wife, and she does not know how to take power within a system that has shaped her to be powerless. But while her behavior nominally codes her as the perfect nineteenth-century wife, it proves frustrating for the reader that she cannot act to save herself.

In contrast to Fanny’s almost-paralyzing passivity, the heroines of Gore’s and Brontë’s novels both take major steps to reshape their situations after learning about the crimes committed by their lovers. Where Fanny remains firmly entrenched in her husband’s Gothic home even after learning about his crimes, Jane flees from Thornfield swiftly after Rochester’s attempt at bigamy is revealed. Although to a modern reader, Jane’s decision to leave seems much more logical than Fanny’s decision to stay, Jane places herself in an incredibly risky situation by deciding to remove herself from an already-risky set of circumstances. Jane is in a complicated position socially even before she faces the challenge of Rochester’s attempted bigamy; she is an orphan of few means, a woman born into a respectable family who is then forced into poverty and made to seek employment after being placed with an uncaring guardian, Mrs. Reed. Mary Poovey’s work helps to illuminate the gray areas of identity that Jane would already have been experiencing because of her position as a governess. She is a woman of respectable birth, and so, as a governess, she is suitable to enforce morality in her charges; however, she is on the fringes of respectability because she has been reduced to seeking employment (an “unnatural” state for respectable women), and so she is ultimately a moral and sexual threat within the middle-class Victorian household. Poovey explains that governesses occupied a contradictory space, as they

were expected to be “bulwarks” against “the erosion of middle-class assumptions and values” (126-27), but as respectable, middle-class women who worked, they threatened both the notion of the domestic (by commodifying it, marketing their ability to create proper domestic spaces) and the public position of men (by glutting an already crowded marketplace).

The liminal space of identity inhabited by Jane is magnified by her almost-wife status. If she stays at Thornfield, she will almost certainly be compromised; just the notion that the governess was *almost* married to her employer would be enough to destroy the respectable nature of her relationship with Rochester, even if the two of them never engaged in a physical relationship. Rather than allow herself to inhabit the identity position of the “fallen” woman, Jane chooses to leave Thornfield behind, entering into a completely unknown space where she has no connections with society, no sense of where she belongs, and, for a time, no conscious relationship with the world around her, as she takes refuge from her pain on the heath. As she realizes that she has found her way to a place totally outside the bounds of any society that she knows, Jane muses,

What was I to do? Where to go? Oh, intolerable questions, when I could do nothing and go nowhere! – when a long way must yet be measured by my weary, trembling limbs before I could reach human habitation – when cold charity must be intreated before I could get a lodging; reluctant sympathy importuned, almost certain repulse incurred, before my tale could be listened to, or my wants relieved! (372)

Here Jane’s dilemma of identity becomes clear – either she can stay at Thornfield and face becoming a ruined woman, losing her religious and moral convictions and her respectable reputation in one fell swoop; or she can face the challenge of rebuilding her sense of self in an

unfriendly and even hostile environment, depending on “cold charity” and “reluctant sympathy” from strangers. Jane’s surrender to the vagaries of the natural world destabilizes her identity nearly to the point of madness, emphasizing once again the links between her and her double, Bertha Mason. But it is her choice to leave that also opens up the chance for her to return. After she rebuilds her respectability – and inherits enough money to make her independently powerful financially – she is able to choose to go back to Rochester on her own terms. She has asserted her independence and her agency, and therefore she can reenter Rochester’s domestic world and bestow upon it the respectability she has carefully cultivated since her departure.

Jane’s decision to return to Rochester even though she believes him still to be married to Bertha is a radical choice on her part; her respectability at the end of the novel is secured largely because Bertha has died during her absence. More than twenty years earlier, however, Catherine Gore created a heroine who makes even more radical choices after discovering that she is married to a bigamist. Helen Percy’s surname signals that she is a (fictional) member of one of the most historically well-connected noble families in England, giving her an enviable position of power from the start. But to reinforce Helen’s status as a “proper” woman, Gore takes pains to emphasize her positive wifely qualities: along with her “naturally domestic disposition,” Helen is an especially good wife because she is also appropriately chaste (7). Although her family is linked with power, Helen “knew but by report the licentious, but seductive gaieties of the Court of Charles, and she had not the slightest wish to increase her knowledge of such dangerous pleasures” (10). Where Theresa needs containment, Helen possesses self-control. She is largely content with her lot, she has no desire to trade a quiet life for the glamour of the king’s court, and she expresses proper “veneration” for her husband (10). Helen is an ideal mother and an ideal

upper-class wife – except that she is not legally married. She nurtures, she comforts, she entertains, and she demonstrates mastery over the domestic space she inhabits.

At the same time, rather than exalting her to the hallowed position of “angel in the house,” marriage has put a damper on Helen’s spirits to the point that her family finds her increasingly “pensive” behavior worrisome. Even before she discovers her husband’s secret, she suffers as his behavior becomes colder and more withdrawn. Her unflinching loyalty to Greville, however, turns out to be more connected to her understanding of the proper role for a wife than to any specific affection for her husband. Although, like Fanny Richardson, Helen Percy has been raised to be the perfect “proper” wife, she suffers none of Fanny’s reluctance to act; as soon as he has confessed that his first wife is still living, Helen rejects Greville entirely. But this choice ultimately is consistent with the positive qualities that make her such a good wife, especially the strength of her moral convictions. The narrator notes, “Helen’s was no common character. Young, gentle, timid as she was, the texture of her mind was framed of ‘sterner stuff’; and she nourished an intensity of wife-like devotion and endurance, which no unkindness could tire, and a fixedness of resolve, and high sense of moral rectitude, which no meaner feeling had yet obtained the power to blemish” (16). Devotion to her husband gives way to devotion to the ideals of marriage when she learns of his betrayal. Helen seizes power in her relationship when it becomes clear that she needs to work to reconcile her moral position in the face of her husband’s crime.

Helen’s tendency to take control of a failed situation does not seem to have developed simply as a response to this particular challenge, however. Even though she is a (nominally) married woman in a time when coverture was law – giving her husband control over her body, her finances, and her children – Helen expresses an understanding of herself as a being with

agency and power from the start. She calls Greville “the husband of [her] free choice” (16), suggesting that she still considers herself to be a person with powers of agency – a philosophy that serves her well once she discovers that she is really a fallen woman, not a legal wife. Although she initially finds “her faculties” to be “stupef[ied]” after her husband’s confession (109), she quickly demonstrates the “wisdom to extricate herself from the perils by which was assailed” (110), working swiftly to protect her reputation, that of her son, and – in an unexpected move – that of her husband’s legal wife. Indeed, the actions that Helen takes to secure the safety and well-being of her own double, Theresa, marks her as a truly progressive female character. She takes a step that it is difficult to imagine many other nineteenth-century literary heroines taking: she makes a commitment to care for and support the first wife whose continued existence has destroyed Helen’s family and endangered her respectability. Helen informs Greville that their relationship is over, but that she will “assist [him] by every means in [her] power in the preservation of the secret on which [his] very existence appears to depend” (112). But even further, she declares, “I will myself undertake that attendance on Lady Greville, which cannot be otherwise procured without peril of disclosure” (112). Helen’s decision to take charge of Theresa’s care herself means that the public will not discover Greville’s crime – and therefore will never discover that Helen is not a legally-wed wife. It also, though, implies a decision on her part to humble herself, taking on a role that was previously assigned to a servant (and, more specifically, a servant who had been a nanny to Lord Greville when he was a boy). Helen assigns the care of her own son to his father (because “seclusion” with his mother and his father’s legal wife at the Cross “would be prejudicial to his interests and to the formation of his character”), but she takes on Theresa as a sort of surrogate child, reinforcing once again Helen’s own superior domestic virtues (114).

But though Helen takes on the appropriately feminine role of mother-figure to Theresa, her decision to step in and take control of Theresa's care also means that she has essentially stepped into the role of husband, too. She usurps the dominant power position in the relationship from Greville, who first hurries back to Kent, and then shortly dies, "a prey to remorse [and] humiliation" (116). The promises she makes to Theresa in the wake of Greville's departure from the Cross are strikingly similar to marriage vows. "You will never abandon me, will you?" Theresa asks; Helen replies, "Never—never—so help me heaven!" (120). The narrator describes the interaction as a "sacred promise" that "remained unbroken" until both were dead (120); and, indeed, when Helen eventually leaves the Cross, she takes Theresa with her. Having replaced both Theresa's "nanny" and her husband, Helen's patriarchal power is further confirmed when Greville grants her the ability to decide how to distribute his assets after his death:

Previous to his decease, in contemplation of the nobleness of mind which would probably induce the nominal Lady Greville [Helen] to renounce his succession, he framed two testamentary acts. By one of these he acknowledged the nullity of his second marriage, but bequeathed to Helen and her child all that the law of the land enabled him to bestow; by the other he referred to Helen only as his lawful wife, and to her son as his representative and successor; adding to their legal inheritance all his unentailed property. Both were enclosed in a letter to Lady Greville [again, Helen] written on his death-bed, which left it entirely at her own disposal *which* to publish, *which* to destroy. (117)

Helen selects the second option, ensuring that the secret remains safely guarded and that her son receives his inheritance. She also ensures by her decision that she retains a significant measure of control over Greville's property; although the public believes her to be his legal wife, she knows

that the property has been legally willed to Theresa, for whom she continues to act as guardian and caretaker. Like a husband who gains control over his wife's asset, Helen becomes the person responsible for the administration of a woman's property, reinforcing the fact that she has stepped into the powerful, traditionally-masculine position in the family. In a final confirmation of Helen's claim on that patriarchal role, her son is granted "the royal sanction to use the name and arms of Percy" (118), which fully erases the Greville name from her son's identity and that of all of her son's future descendants. Helen becomes not only the substitute for Greville as caretaker and spouse but also the substitute for him as a father, taking over his paternal role and inheriting the right to pass on her own surname and legacy. Fanny Richardson waits for others to come and rescue her; Jane Eyre leaves, recovers her own respectable status, and then returns; but Helen Percy stays and takes control. Her answer to the problem of the Greville family's broken morals and endangered respectability – to take over the primary power position herself – is perhaps the most radical response by any Gothic bigamy heroine, and it demonstrates the extent to which women had the ability to regulate and correct the moral failings of those whose actions jeopardized the public perception of the family's respectability.

As Fahnestock notes, *Jane Eyre* stands as the most important and influential early novel in the formation of the bigamy plot that dominated sensation fiction more than a decade later. However, the legacy of the bigamy novel is even richer than that, encompassing earlier texts like Gore's novel and Le Fanu's novella, both of which also interrogate significant questions about the status of marriage and the potentially negative impacts that the institution could have on those who were disadvantaged and powerless. The ideas posited by these Gothic bigamy novels, including the importance of space in regulating and revealing immoral behavior, the possibility

of sympathy for those who committed the crime of bigamy, and the opportunities for women to exercise power and agency within established social structures, would all be raised and expanded upon in the sensation bigamy novels that became so popular in later years. And perhaps most importantly, these early novels demonstrate that questions about respectability and its definition – what constituted respectability, who was able to bestow respectability on another person, and whether respectability and morality were compatible concepts – were being asked and debated long before the sensation novel made them such a central part of the literary landscape. Sensation fiction may have seemed as if it “appeared from nowhere,” but it’s difficult to imagine Lady Audley without Bertha Mason or Helen Langton<sup>20</sup> without Helen Percy. It’s also difficult to imagine that the public would have reacted to the Yelverton case in precisely the same way had *Jane Eyre* not appeared a decade earlier. In the following chapter, I will examine the case of a “first wife” who had to assert her sanity, her morality, and her respectability after learning that the man to whom she believed herself legally married had subsequently married someone else.

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<sup>20</sup> The protagonist of Matilda Charlotte Houstoun’s *Recommended to Mercy* (1862).



## CHAPTER TWO

### RESPECTABILITY AND THERESA YELVERTON'S *MARTYRS TO CIRCUMSTANCE*

Early bigamy novels, including the Gothic bigamy novels explored in the previous chapter, established the norms and tropes of the budding genre, setting the stage for the explosion in the novel's popularity in the middle of the nineteenth century. But that surge in popularity would likely never have happened – or at least would have been much less significant – without the influence of a series of very public bigamy accusations made by Theresa Longworth Yelverton against her alleged husband, Major William Charles Yelverton. She claimed that he had married her legally not once but twice; he argued that neither marriage service had been legal and that she had been only his mistress, never his legal wife. By the time the House of Lords ordered that no more appeals of the Yelverton verdicts could be heard, budding British novelist Theresa Longworth Yelverton was facing a crisis moment in terms of the public perception of her respectability. Infamous because of the public trials in which she had accused an aristocratic Irish army officer of marrying her and then committing bigamy, her reputation was in tatters. While one court had decided that Theresa and William Charles Yelverton were married, two others had declared that they were never legally wed. Because of that, the sexual relationship that the two engaged in was not sanctioned by societal institutions, leaving Theresa open to accusations of immorality.

For Theresa<sup>21</sup>, there were really only two choices available to her in the face of the public ruination of her respectability: she could either exit the public sphere completely or stay in the

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<sup>21</sup> In this chapter, I will refer to Theresa and William Yelverton by their first names to avoid confusion. This choice does not reflect any implications on my part about Theresa's marital status or her right to use the name "Theresa Yelverton" in her public life or in her writing career.

public eye and find a way to rebuild her reputation. The media urged her strongly to do the former. But for Theresa, who had sought social interaction regularly long before she was made famous by her lover's alleged crime, the idea of retiring from public life was never a real option. Instead of removing herself from the gaze of the public, Theresa endeavored for the rest of her life to carve out a new way of existing as a respectable woman in society. Her bigamy novel, *Martyrs to Circumstance* (1861), reflects the difficulty of finding a place in society by depicting the limited roles available to unmarried women who wished to take part in social life. Unable to certify her respectability by marrying (because to marry again would be to admit that her first marriage was not valid), Theresa turned to her career to give her an opportunity to participate in public discourse and reiterate her belief in her respectability. Writing gave her the chance to assert her name in a public forum, to appear in prominent positions at public events, and to craft the narrative of her respectability in a way that could be consumed by an audience. It also offered her a means to travel the world, providing her with more material for her books and with more chances to assert her respectable identity across the globe.

Theresa's life story can be read as evidence of the way that Victorian society attempted to restrict and neutralize any woman who dared to transgress its established boundaries of respectability; her work can also be viewed through the same lens. But it is also possible, and perhaps more fruitful, to examine the lengths to which Theresa went to continue to exist publicly and respectably as a Victorian woman in the face of a society that attempted to marginalize her. Although Victorians were primed by the established tropes of the bigamy novel to view a first wife as a being that needed to be caged, hidden, and discarded, Theresa asserted her respectability and her identity in the wake of her public disgrace, refusing to allow society to forget her. In this chapter, I will discuss the challenges that Theresa faced in asserting her public

respectability before, during, and after the trials that made her a minor celebrity. I will also examine the way that her anxieties about public female respectability are manifested in her debut novel, *Martyrs to Circumstance*, which was released in the midst of the publicity surrounding her legal case. Finally, I will explore the ways that, through her writing career, Theresa was able to assert her right to be considered as a respectable woman by society even after she was deemed not to be William Charles Yelverton's legal wife. Theresa's story has been written as a tale of woe and a tale of passion; I will argue instead that Theresa Yelverton stands as an example of a Victorian woman who faced public ruin and still defied attempts by society to marginalize and silence her.

### **Theresa's Respectability and the Yelverton Bigamy Trials**

By the summer of 1861, any literate person in Britain who had regular access to a newspaper would undoubtedly have heard of the Yelverton marriage case. The sensational series of bigamy trials, held in Dublin, Edinburgh, and London, were heavily covered by the press. The cracks that the case revealed in the cobbled-together legal systems of the United Kingdom led to debates about British marriage laws on the floor of parliament. Collections of the trial testimony and the Yelvertons' personal correspondence were sold at railway book stalls. Newspapers like the *Times* were publishing accounts of the court proceedings on a near daily basis. Within the year, Mary Elizabeth Braddon had published a bigamy novel, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), that was said to be inspired by the huge publicity surrounding the Yelverton trials; Wilkie Collins, J.R.

O’Flanagan, and Cyrus Redding all also published novels<sup>22</sup> that co-opted the Yelvertons’ story as plot lines. Britain had bigamy fever, and the Yelvertons seemed to be the root of the madness.

From the start of their relationship, there was a social gulf between Theresa Longworth and Major William Charles Yelverton. He was a younger son of an Irish peer, Viscount Avonmore, and following the early deaths of his brothers, he would eventually succeed to his father’s titles and estates. His military career was one of the occupations considered respectable for a younger son from an aristocratic family. Theresa, on the other hand, was born in Manchester, the daughter of Thomas Longworth, an English silk manufacturer. Thomas Longworth was a wealthy man, but because he was engaged in trade, he and his family were a part of the growing nineteenth-century middle class – a step down from the aristocratic position of the Yelvertons. In a society where a person’s position in the class hierarchy depended in large part on the class status of his or her parents, Longworth’s wealth was relatively unimportant. Duncan Crow notes that “Longworth’s ancestry was solid but undistinguished – a fact that had some bearing on his youngest daughter’s future happiness” (18). Indeed, Theresa’s lack of “gentle blood” was commented upon at length during the bigamy trials; it was used by William as a justification for seducing her without ever intending to legally marry her. But Theresa was not completely without significant social connections. Her maternal aunt, Eleanora, was married to a French count. One of Theresa’s sisters also married a Frenchman, Aimable Lefebvre, who served as a government minister to Napoleon III.<sup>23</sup> While these connections to people in

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<sup>22</sup> These are Collins’s *Man and Wife* (1870), O’Flanagan’s *Gentle Blood; or, the Secret Marriage* (1861), and Redding’s *A Wife and Not a Wife* (1867).

<sup>23</sup> Another sister, Sara, was married to a Welsh solicitor; two of her brothers, Jack and William, left England for Australia in pursuit of wealth in the gold fields. The sixth Yelverton sibling, named Thomas after his father, entered trade – he worked as a draper in Derbyshire. See Crow for more biographical details on the Longworth family.

positions of power were emphasized by Theresa's legal counsel to try to bolster her social status, they weren't enough to elevate her to a position equivalent to William's in the eyes of British society. Even so, Theresa clearly felt herself to be the equal of the Yelvertons – she never once suggests that she occupies a lower social position, instead emphasizing the connections she has and brushing off suggestions that she was aiming above her station in her relationship with William.

While Theresa had solid middle-class connections, her fragmented childhood left her vulnerable from the start to attacks on her respectability. After her mother's early death, she was sent with one of her sisters to France to be educated at a convent school. Although her parents were not Catholic, Theresa converted to Roman Catholicism as a result of her time at the school. It was a decision that would have major consequences later for her relationship with William and for the public's perception of her during the trials. The fact that she was educated at all would also be damaging for her respectability during the trials. William's lawyers argued that the time she spent in school had cultivated her skills of linguistic expression to a sharp degree, with the insinuation that she was able to convince and confuse those around her because of her facility with language. Additionally, her education was translated by his legal counsel into wisdom and knowledge. They argued that a woman as smart as Theresa should have known from the start that she was being seduced, not courted. An education must have seemed like a luxurious advantage for a woman in Theresa's position when she was a child; however, as an adult, her intelligence became yet another target for attacks on her respectability.

The way that Theresa and William met and conducted their early relationship, however, jeopardized Theresa's reputation to an even greater degree. The couple met aboard a steamer traveling from Boulogne to London in 1852. The two renewed their acquaintance some time later

when she discovered that he was stationed in Malta and would be able to forward letters for her to a cousin stationed with the foreign diplomatic service. They met once more during the Crimean War, where she was working as a nurse with the French Sisters of Charity; though Theresa had converted to Catholicism, she never seems to even have entertained the possibility of taking religious vows. Theresa claimed that William promised her marriage while they were in Turkey, and that he suggested that they marry in secret in a Greek Orthodox ceremony (William later denied doing so, testifying that he only planned to make her his mistress, never his wife). A public marriage was apparently impossible because he was controlled by an uncle to whom he owed a great deal of money; William claimed that said uncle would cut him off if he found out that he had married. Theresa refused the offer of a secret marriage, but she and William did have some sort of physical encounter on a ship just before she left Turkey. In court, William gave lurid details about the incident that led to the judge ordering the ladies present out of the courtroom, but Theresa claimed nothing untoward occurred. They renewed their romance later in Scotland, where William was stationed with his regiment. Theresa affirmed that they promised to marry each other while in Edinburgh, because William told her that Scotland recognized such a promise as a binding contract of marriage. William claimed that the two consummated their relationship in Edinburgh, but Theresa denied this, arguing that she was unsure that the ceremony was valid and that she first wanted to have her marriage recognized by the Catholic Church. To satisfy her scruples, Father Bartholomew Mooney, a priest in Rostrevor, Ireland, married them secretly in 1857, after which they lived as man and wife. But William abandoned her in France in early 1858, and when he returned to Scotland, he married Emily Forbes, who was already pregnant with the couple's first child on their wedding day.

After Theresa learned of William's marriage to Mrs. Forbes, she took legal action against him. Because she could not sue him herself (wives could not take legal action against their husbands, so to do so would be to admit that she was not legally married to him), her landlord, Mr. Thelwall, sued William on her behalf, claiming that the major was responsible for Theresa's expenses and therefore owed Thelwall money. The case was heard first in Ireland (where a jury decided that Theresa and William were married), and then in Scotland (where a judge decided that they were not married), and finally in the House of Lords (where the decision of the Scottish court was confirmed and further appeals were prohibited). Over the course of these sensational trials, the relationship between William and Theresa was examined and revealed in minute detail, including testimony from both of them and the reading of their private correspondence in court. Such an extensive publication of personal information had major consequences for Theresa's reputation. All of the information presented in the trial was freely reprinted and disseminated by the press. Lawyers, judges, and reporters all commented on Theresa's reputation, her virtue, and even her appearance. The public interest in the story even grew to the point that authors were co-opting the story as a plot for their own novels. Though she was able to assert her own side of the story during cross-examination at the Irish trial (she and William were both barred from testifying in the second trial in Scotland), Theresa was clearly in danger of losing control over her own narrative, and her respectability was damaged nearly beyond repair.

At first, press reports about the Yelverton case were complimentary toward Theresa, depicting her as a model of appropriate British womanhood. An item in the *Freeman's Journal*, an Irish daily, which was excerpted by the *Times* described her as follows:

During the prolonged ordeal [a lengthy cross-examination] Mrs. Yelverton was never for a moment deserted by that dignified and ladylike demeanour which has

characterized her throughout these three days. She has maintained an imperturbable coolness, without in the least appearing too confident or too clever, while her self-possession has elicited the highest admiration from all who have been able to procure admission to the court, and observed her in the trying position in which she was placed. The manner, too, in which she replies – the seemingly unreserved, candid, and outspoken frankness of her replies call forth the warmest approbation, and prove that the Hon. Mrs. Yelverton is not only a lady most highly educated, but that she possesses an intelligence, a quickness of comprehension, and a power of language rarely met with in a lady, even in the present intellectual age, when the education of females receives so much attention. These high qualifications are revealed without the slightest effort, affectation, or departure from that graceful ease, placidity of manner, and composed dignity which should always distinguish a lady. No matter how severe the interrogatory of counsel – no matter how painful even to hear or embarrassing to answer, she always replies directly to the point of the query without confusion of language; and not unfrequently has she reminded the learned gentlemen by whom she was cross-examined of the impossibility of replying with accuracy to some questions which he proposed. (10)

It is evident from this report that Theresa did not endeavor to disguise her intelligence and her facility with language while testifying, but it's also clear that she was careful to use words, gestures, and behaviors that coded her as a respectable woman. Sounding too confrontational or too erudite could have put her in danger of being perceived as overly masculine; sounding too confused might have made her seem unreliable. Her appearances on the witness stand convinced



the *Freeman's Journal* reporter that she was a lady, but her behavior and demeanor during her testimony was also used by William's counsel as a part of their systematic attempt to dismantle her respectability.

According to the *Times* reporting on the trial, Mr. Brewster, the head of William's legal team, began his remarks in the courtroom on March 5, 1861, as follows:

I wish to say that with the exception of the absolute, indispensable, inevitable necessity I am under in treating of her credit as a witness, I do not mean to say a single word of her in general disparagement. Gentlemen, I mean to present her to you as she presented herself to us all. I mean, in calling attention to her position and circumstances, not to add anything to her language, but endeavour to put together the account she has given herself from time to time in her own letters.

(10)

Brewster, it seems, had hoped to demonstrate without saying so that Theresa was engaging in a performance on the witness stand – that she was, in essence, pretending to be something that she was not, and that her true character, contained in the letters she had written to William during their courtship, would be revealed to be quite different from the one that she had presented on the stand. Brewster uses the word “talent” liberally to describe Theresa, arguing that “she is a woman of extraordinary talent – perhaps greater talent than you ever had an opportunity of seeing before. For my part I never saw her like. But she is more than a woman of talent – she is a woman who has had that talent cultivated to the highest possible pitch” (10). The implication is that the respectable character she has performed in the courtroom is an artificial construct, something that she has deliberately “cultivated” in order to gain sympathy and win the case.

Respectability is indeed essentially a performance, not something inherent, and Brewster was ultimately asking the jury to recognize that fact.

Because Theresa's respectability depended on an external power – an institution, another “respected” member of society, etc. – to certify it, Brewster was essentially trying to lead the jury to consider whether or not they would affirm Theresa's good name. Turning the burden of proof to her, arguing that she needed to prove that she was respectable in order to prove that William ever would have entertained the idea of legally marrying her, shifted the attention away from William (who was, after all, the party who had been accused of criminal activity and, therefore, was the one whose reputation was supposed to be under the most severe scrutiny). Brewster had to weigh his words extremely carefully, because if he was to prove that William was telling the truth when he claimed that he never intended to legally marry Theresa, he had to paint Theresa as a highly disreputable woman: a woman who pursued William, who had sex with him without marrying him, and (it is implied) who wished to prove that she was married to William in order to secure a higher position for herself in society. But he also had to be careful not to appear to be attacking a respectable woman in the courtroom – something that would surely have turned the jury against his client. With questions of respectability placed in the forefront, the Dublin trial became as much about deciding which Yelverton was more respectable, and the presentations that each of them made on the witness stand were crucial in appealing to the jury. Yelverton ultimately did prevail in the Dublin trial, and largely because she was indeed playing a role during her testimony. She was undoubtedly aware of the fact that she was acting a deliberately-crafted persona during her courtroom appearances – that she was presenting herself in a specific way in order to elicit sympathy from the jurors and the public. But this is not to suggest that she was perjuring herself or lying on the witness stand. The

answers she gave to the questions posed during the cross-examination may have been wholly true; however, the gestures and the language that she chose to employ in the giving of her answers were certainly designed to prove that she was a respectable woman (and therefore likely also a respectable *wife*).

As much as Theresa wished to emphasize her respectability during the trial, there was no way for her to avoid revealing potentially damaging information to the jury during her testimony. The Yelverton trials were so sensational in part because of the sordid and scandalous revelations made by both parties during cross-examination. Both Theresa and William provided details of their relationship while on the witness stand. William claimed that he had always intended to make Theresa “his mistress-in-law” rather than his wife.<sup>24</sup> Theresa revealed on the witness stand that she had sought a marriage certificate from Father Mooney because she thought that she was expecting a child, and she wanted to be sure that the baby would be recognized as legitimate.<sup>25</sup> William made one of his greatest missteps during the trial when asked about that unborn child.<sup>26</sup> He noted that Theresa had indeed told him that she suspected she was pregnant, and in an awkward cross-examination, he admitted that he had urged her to find a way for the birth of the child “to be avoided.”<sup>27</sup> When lawyers pressed him on whether or not he had encouraged her to

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<sup>24</sup> “Ireland (From Our Own Correspondent),” *The Times*, March 5, 1861, 10.

<sup>25</sup> Over the course of the Dublin trial, Father Mooney himself raised doubts over the legality of the Irish wedding at which he had presided, something that so incensed Theresa that she named his corresponding character in *Martyrs to Circumstance* “Father Looney.” Mooney, however, was not likely making statements that harmed Theresa’s case merely out of spite. He was walking something of a tightrope himself in the case, as a priest who knowingly married a Protestant to a Catholic was in danger of being tried and, if convicted, transported.

<sup>26</sup> “Ireland (From Our Own Correspondent),” *The Times*, March 5, 1861, 10.

<sup>27</sup> “Ireland (From Our Own Correspondent),” *The Times*, March 5, 1861, 10.

have an abortion, he demurred that he had been concerned about Theresa's health, and that he "understood that if a woman was in great danger from childbirth that the doctor would manage . . . to get the child born alive without letting it go to its full term." His verbal gymnastics on the witness stand were a part of his attempt to be truthful without completely tarnishing his character, but he was ultimately unsuccessful. But the episode perhaps had an even greater impact on Theresa's reputation, establishing that she had engaged in a sexual relationship with William, even if she did believe herself to be his legal wife.

In his closing argument, Theresa's lawyer, Mr. Whiteside, tried to play on the sympathy of the jury. In his statement, Whiteside passionately argued that Theresa was motivated by no more than her genuine feelings for William, noting that "she gave him that affection; she gave him that love—a woman's love. Who can fathom its depths? Who can measure its intensity?"<sup>28</sup> Whiteside carefully coded her feelings for William in terms of feminine affection rather than unfeminine and inappropriate sexuality. She loved him rather than desired him—and therefore she was an appropriate woman and likely also an appropriate wife. Finally, Whiteside made a case for her reputation: "Therefore I now call upon you to do justice to that injured woman. You cannot restore to her the husband she adored or the happiness she enjoyed . . . you cannot relieve the sorrows of her bursting heart; but you may restore her to her place in society." James Godkin, who reported on the trials for the *Times*, notes that Whiteside's pleas on Theresa's behalf spurred applause from those in attendance, adding that "hats and handkerchiefs were waved, and a scene of enthusiasm was presented such as has been rarely witnessed."<sup>29</sup> Theresa may have lost her

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<sup>28</sup> "Ireland (From Our Own Correspondent)," *The Times*, March 5, 1861, 10.

<sup>29</sup> "Ireland (From Our Own Correspondent)," *The Times*, March 5, 1861, 10.

husband and had her reputation questioned, but by the end of the trial in Dublin, there was no question that the people of Ireland had embraced her fully and enthusiastically.

But after the Dublin trial ended, Theresa would never again experience the kind of public certification of her respectability that she did following the Irish verdict. William essentially won all major legal actions that were subsequently filed.<sup>30</sup> A Scottish court declared that the couple were not legally married, and eventually, the House of Lords concurred, barring Theresa and her legal team from making any more appeals in the case. William's marriage to Emily Forbes was declared to be legal, and their children were officially legitimized. Theresa, on the other hand, was left in incredibly precarious territory. Details revealed during the trials revealed that she had indeed engaged in a sexual relationship with William; as a result of the final verdicts, she was now classified as "fallen" based on that sexual relationship, even if she truly believed that she had been a married woman during its consummation. The language used by the judge who decided the Scottish case was especially pointed in its reference to Theresa's lack of chasteness. Reproduced in the pages of one of the most widely read newspapers in Britain,<sup>31</sup> Lord Ardmillan's judgment stated that Theresa, intelligent woman that she was, was responsible for the state of her relationship with William and for the damage to her reputation. Ardmillan concluded:

This judgment has been reached after much anxiety, and not without sympathy for the sad fate of the pursuer [Theresa], but with a clear conviction that it is according to the truth of the case. For the conduct of the defender [William] there

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<sup>30</sup> Theresa's legal team did eventually win one of their appeals in Scotland, but the House of Lords verdict took precedence over that decision.

<sup>31</sup> "The Yelverton Marriage Case." *Times*, July 7, 1862, 5.

can be no excuse; but he was not the seeker, the seducer, or the betrayer of the pursuer. The tone, even the intense and persevering devotedness of the passion by which she was impelled—must excite interest, pity, and sympathy; but she was no mere girl, no simpleton, no stranger to the ways of the world, no victim to insidious arts. She was not deceived. She fell with her own consent.

Had she been properly feminine, appropriately virginal, she would surely have been William's legal wife. But the court, after making their own judgments on her character through their reading of her letters, decided that she was not proper and not chaste, but instead sophisticated and more than aware of the consequences of her relationship with William. She could not be a wife, because the Scottish court had not found her to embody the qualities of an appropriate, feminine woman. She was surely fallen, for why would William have married her if he could have slept with her even without a promise of marriage?

Ardmillan's verdict was not only read aloud in the courtroom in Edinburgh; it was also published in newspapers across the country. The public had convenient access to an official, institutional rebuke of Theresa's respectability, and she clearly felt she had no choice but to defend herself. She had been taking similar steps for years, filing two significant libel cases against those she claimed were slandering her. One was lodged against William's brother-in-law, who had called Theresa "a most deranged woman" in a letter to a family member; she won this case and was awarded five hundred pounds in damages (12). The other, more high-profile suit was the one she filed against *The Saturday Review*, taking issue with an article that the magazine ran following the final verdict from the House of Lords. She claimed that their comments comparing her to a famous courtesan constituted libel; they argued that their comments about her were "fair criticism," even the remarks in which they had declared that Theresa was "out of

keeping with society, both as it is and as it ought to be.”<sup>32</sup> Theresa’s complaint against the publication revealed that she was keenly aware of the differences in audience for various press outlets, and that a disparaging word from a particularly reputable source could be especially damaging. The counsel for *The Saturday Review* argued that “if public journalists were to be restrained from making legitimate comments on matters which had been made the subject of public inquiry, there would really be an end to . . . the liberty of the press.” Theresa’s lawyer pleaded, “she may have lost the social position of being Major Yelverton’s wife . . . [but] she has placed in your hands a more valuable stake . . . You cannot bring back to her the health that has fled in these long days of care, sorrow, and distress. But you can preserve to her the only thing that is left her . . . her fair fame and reputation.” *The Times* reporter who covered the proceedings notes that this statement garnered loud cheering in court, much as similar statements had in the courtroom in Dublin. Even so, the case was decided in favor of *The Saturday Review*.

*The Saturday Review* was not the only publication that engaged with questions about Theresa’s respectability. *The Times* published multiple editorials on the Yelverton case over the duration of the trials. The earliest of these pieces, including two editorials published after the Dublin verdict in 1861, and another following in early 1862, use the Yelvertons as an example within a larger opinion piece on the problems with inconsistent marriage laws across the United Kingdom. (Much of the parliamentary debate in which the Yelvertons are mentioned also follows this line.) In December 1862, however, the editorial staff took to the pages for the first time to deal directly with the specifics of the case, which was at this point being heard again in the Scottish courts. Theresa and her counsel had appealed the verdict of Lord Ardmillan and the

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<sup>32</sup> “Miss Longworth and the *Saturday Review*.” *Times*, December 6, 1865, 12.

Scottish court, an appeal which would eventually be decided in her favor, largely because of a technicality present in the complex laws of Scotland. In their recap of the different verdicts on the marriage so far, the editorial staff is absolutely scathing. He lambasts Theresa and her pursuit of recognition as a respectable, legitimate Victorian wife:

This contest is in reality a contest between two women, each contending for a respectable position and a “good name.” One or the other must, according to the ultimate event of these proceedings, be placed in a discreditable social position, and must submit to see her offspring bastardized. Surely, if there is to be any “feeling” in such a matter, the sympathies of all honest men ought to be with her who has taken upon herself the position of a wife with all the lawful publicity which is supposed to make the bond secure, rather than with her who seeks to convert the position of mistress into that of a wife at the expense of a rival against whom society has no reproach. If we are to have sensation verdicts and sensation judgments, let us, as an honest people and a moral people, sympathize with the silent suffering matron who is married before the world rather than with the melodramatic “pursuer.”<sup>33</sup>

Beyond yet another public excoriation of Theresa, and a reaffirmation of the notion that women, like Emily Forbes, who are silent, suffering, and dutiful are “proper” women (and therefore women whom men would marry), the *Times* here offers yet another litmus test by which to decide whether or not a couple is married. Appropriately, the paper has decided that a couple who are married without the “lawful publicity” that is general provided in the press (that is, the

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<sup>33</sup> Editorial, *The Times*, December 22, 1862, 8.



publication of marriage banns in the weeks before a marriage, followed by an announcement of the marriage in the newspaper) are most likely not legally married. The press here becomes yet another institution, along with the church and the courts, which has the power to sanction marriage and declare whether a relationship has been officially and legally cemented (or not).

In the face of challenges like these to her respectability, Theresa wrote her own letter to the editor of the *Times*.<sup>34</sup> Her letter is an unguarded plea to the paper and its readership to understand the consequences of the court's actions for her reputation. She writes, "Perfectly agreeing with you that it can be no satisfaction to be the wife of Major Yelverton, yet the nature of the action brought against me and the defence set up in answer to mine are such as to deprive me of honour and fair fame, unless I succeed in establishing my wifehood. The very petition of the action is such as to indelibly brand any woman against whom it should be granted." She calls the potential loss of the case a "sentence," depicting herself as an innocent who would face unjust condemnation and separation from society should the courts decide against her. At this point, the case had been essentially decided, and Theresa was running out of options. Saving her reputation in court was no longer a realistic prospect; saving her reputation in the public arena, using the *Times* as a mouthpiece, must have seemed like a last resort.

But the *Times* was apparently not prepared to let Theresa use the paper as a soap box. In the same issue, a mere three pages later, the paper published another editorial in direct response to her letter.<sup>35</sup> The editorial staff offers that even though it is entirely possible that, legally, Theresa is "Mrs. Yelverton in Ireland and Miss Longworth in Scotland," they "are tempted to think her neither one thing nor the other, and to be certain of nothing that but the whole case is

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<sup>34</sup> "The Yelverton Case," *The Times*, July 30, 1864, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Editorial, *The Times*, July 30, 1864, 8.

one of inextricable confusion.” The editorial grants that one of the biggest issues to come out of the mess of the Yelverton case is the need for the reform of marriage laws in the United Kingdom, so that the kind of “ambiguity” found in this case should be completely “impossible.” But even so, the piece lashes out at Theresa’s claims about her reputation, excoriating her for placing herself in the public arena at all. The editorial laments, “Why . . . cannot she let him go his way for good or bad, accept a release from a position which would give her ‘no satisfaction,’ and retire to the privacy from which she must profoundly regret that she ever emerged?” For the editorial staff, Theresa’s biggest sin is her insistence that her voice must be heard in public. Emily Forbes, who never utters a word in public during the trial, is clearly more suitable for the role of wife, simply because she is a woman who is both private and quiet. Theresa is unsuitable and disreputable, at least in part, because she won’t stop talking.

Theresa’s letter argued that she was forced to continue her fight, because to fail to do so would be to accept the ruin of her name and her reputation. The editorial has a response for this point as well:

She considers that “her honour and fair fame” depend upon her obtaining a favourable legal decision. We would willingly have avoided expressing any opinion on this point, but her letter makes it necessary to say that her honour and fair fame cannot be established by a doubtful decision on the question either of law or fact . . . Miss Longworth’s misfortunes, her talents, and her severance raise for her a great deal of sympathy . . . At the same time, if the truth must be spoken, a woman of high honour and properly sensitive of her fair fame would not place herself in a position in which it could be denied by Courts of Law that she was the wife of a man with whom she had cohabited.

The editorial recycles some of the language used against Theresa in court by William's lawyers, most notably the loaded word "talent" to describe her intellect and her mode of self-expression. Moreover, it repeats the argument that Lord Ardmillan gave when deciding against Theresa in the first Scottish trial: that if she is really as smart as she seems to be, there is no way that she would not have been able to see that William was not interested in marrying her. Once again, the blame for William's behavior toward her is heaped at her feet, and her continual intrusion upon the masculine public space of the courtroom and the newspaper is simply more proof that she is not a respectable woman and likely never was. Theresa's pleas to the public to recognize her as a respectable and proper woman may have gained sympathy on the initial readings of her letter in this respectable news outlet, but the pronouncements of the *Times* on her character and her propriety only a few pages later surely undid any of the good that her letter could have achieved. Theresa may have wanted the public to resemble the Dublin jury in terms of sympathy; what she got instead was a facsimile of Lord Ardmillan. If the judges in some of the highest courts in the country *and* the editorial staff of one of its most respected newspapers agreed that she was not a respectable woman, making the British public sympathetic to her cause must have felt like a nearly impossible feat.

But Theresa did not retire from public life. She refused to let the damage to her perceived respectability prevent her from continuing to engage with society. Instead of shrinking away from the public eye, she turned to writing to provide her with a respectable public role outside of the traditional opportunities available for women of the period. Her work allowed her to assert her name in a public forum and to travel all over the world, doing readings to support her career. Perhaps most importantly, however, it also gave her a place to express the challenges of being a respectable, unmarried woman in public during the Victorian period. Her anxieties about her

“honour and fair fame” can be found throughout the pages of her debut novel, *Martyrs to Circumstance*, which asks significant questions about the place of women in the “respectable” Victorian public sphere.

### ***Martyrs to Circumstance***

In the wake of the first bigamy trial, Theresa began a veritable campaign to regain control of her story and to reassert her identity in the face of institutions that denied her the ability to do so. She wrote letters to newspapers, launched libel suits against those who slandered her, and performed public readings of her correspondence with William. But the most significant of these efforts to reaffirm her respectability was the semi-autobiographical novel that she published in 1861: *Martyrs to Circumstance*. The novel was designed in part to emphasize her side of the story: she and William both appear in the text as thinly-veiled versions of themselves. Their fictional counterparts engaging in a romance that is genuine on both sides, take part in legal marriage ceremonies, and then are tragically parted when external forces work to separate them; however, they find a semblance of a happy ending, reuniting just before their deaths. The text, however, is not merely a melodramatic reinterpretation of the real-life story of the Yelvertons. It is also a rich source of information about the experience of British womanhood during the middle of the Victorian era. *Martyrs to Circumstance* raises important questions about the position of women within traditional, patriarchal institutions that sought to restrict and regulate them. It also dramatizes the efforts of a series of female characters of various marital and social statuses to reconcile their positions within society while still seeking agency, respectability, and freedom. In terms of marital status, the novel features a diverse cast of female characters, including nuns, spinsters, ingénues, and respectable chaperones. The experiences of each of these

women as they navigate the complicated world around them, both seeking and rejecting the public sphere of society, reflects the turmoil that a woman like Theresa must have felt while trying to decide how to exist publicly in a society that did not have a dedicated place for her.

The timing of the publication of *Martyrs* coincided with Theresa's enforced silence during the trial in Edinburgh. While she had been able to testify in Ireland, the Scottish courts did not permit Theresa or William to take the witness stand. During the second trial, their words had to speak for themselves; their letters were read and scrutinized for meaning, but neither party could offer context or clarification. For Theresa, the experience of the Edinburgh trial must have significantly emphasized the power and the vulnerability of written meaning, something that she would have been doubly important because she was finishing *Martrys* while the trial was being held. Duncan Crow claims that Theresa had begun writing the novel in April 1860; the first volume was published in April 1861, a few weeks after the Irish trial had ended, and the second and third volumes were released in June of the same year, while the Scottish trial was in full swing (235). During the period in which she was unable to testify – and therefore perform a persona that would help reinforce her respectability and proper femininity – Theresa published a fictional universe in which characters struggle with the need to fit in with specific perceptions of “appropriate” gender performances.

The female characters in *Martyrs* – nuns, married women, single women, mothers, spinsters, servants – embody different kinds of Victorian femininity in different kinds of circumstances. Each woman's role is slightly different, and some are considered more respectable and appropriate than others, but all essentially present different aspects of the Victorian Woman: different roles she can play and different genders that she can *do*, to employ the term used by Judith Butler (187). The three women in the novel who most vividly engage in

performances of British womanhood are the narrator, a married woman who has freedom and agency; Thierna Saxelhurst, a woman attempting to establish her legal marital status and therefore attain the same level of freedom as the narrator; and Miss Saxelhurst, Thierna's unmarried aunt, who is so trapped in her spinsterhood that she can barely leave her bedroom. Although Thierna is Theresa's fictional doppelganger, each of these three female characters shares some characteristics with her creator. Each of them can be read both as potential futures for Theresa going forward after the impact of the trials on her respectability as she attempted to carve a path for herself that included a public life and a renewed reputation.

The character in *Martyrs* who most successfully performs the kind of respectable British womanhood that Theresa desires is not Thierna, the author's fictional stand-in, but the narrator. The narrator of *Martyrs*, an unnamed woman who has traveled to Turkey to be nearer to her soldier husband during the Crimean War, acts as the reader's entry point into two interior spaces: the fictional world of the novel itself and the complex, unfamiliar space of the Galata convent, where a significant part of the first volume of the novel is set. She is neither a nun nor a Catholic; she takes lodgings at the convent simply because it is convenient. Her outsider status is emphasized by the room to which she is assigned: the narrator describes her quarters as "a room resembling a birdcage, lined with glass, and which was hung out or projected from the main building" (2); she is literally suspended from the rest of the structure. The sisters are willing to follow the rules of hospitality and give her lodging, but they are not willing to house her in the inner reaches of the convent, instead granting her a room that reminds her both that she does not belong in the convent and that her position as a resident is precarious at best. Moreover, the "birdcage" is transparent; its glass lining reveals the narrator's personal space to the world around her both figuratively, as the reader is allowed into her own inner dialogue, and literally;

the narrator mentions multiple times that the structures surrounding the convent, as well as the convent itself, have roof terraces, meaning that the rest of the population can likely see inside the narrator's room. The transparency can also be read as a measure of her trustworthiness; nothing about the narrator is hidden, and so her account of the events occurring within the space must be reliable. Even so, the barrier between the narrator and the rest of Galata (and the reader) is not fully permeable. Because the "birdcage" is "lined with glass," the narrator can be seen but not heard or accessed. Others can watch her, and she can watch them, but she cannot fully communicate with them, casting doubts on the full reliability of her narration. Like the women who inhabit the convent, she too is trapped, but in a transparent, suspended cell that reveals her completely to the world and yet keeps her out of reach.

The intense scrutiny that the narrator faces because of her transparent position and her transparent lodgings mimic the challenges faced by women who must consistently perform respectability in public. Because the narrator is married, she is firmly situated in the position set out as most appropriate for a woman of her status within the framework of British legal and social institutions. The narrator may not live permanently within a visibly and permanently restricted space like a convent or harem, as many of the other female characters in the first volume of the novel do, but she is still required to conform to certain norms set out by those institutions that govern her. She may feel able to travel and reason and think more freely than the women in the harem or the French sisters, but she is only able to do so because she is protected by certain social structures. The fact that she is a married, British, middle-class woman theoretically veils her in society as much as the literal veils worn by nuns and women in harems shield them from the world while allowing them to move about in public. Just like her transparent bird-cage lodgings allow her to see and be seen while still protecting her from the

reach of outsiders, her British womanhood – and wifedom – acts as a sort of invisible veil that allows her to travel without risking harm or disrespect from others. The narrator is so confident in her own status that she does not even bother to offer her name to the reader; she simply states that she is married, and that suffices. Her husband is a non-entity, first far away at battle, and later closer physically but still largely absent from the narrative itself. Ultimately, though, it isn't important to whom the narrator is married; it's simply crucial that she's married at all. Her marriage is like a kind of currency that she is able to trade on in certain social situations, and in the eyes of society, it is indeed worth more than the spiritual marriages contracted by nuns like Mère Mabile. The role of respectable British wife is a valuable one that affords her license to explore foreign spaces like the Galata convent. For Theresa, imagining such a position would have been an exercise in fantasy – still hopeful that the courts will grant her the status of a legal wife, she can imagine being able to travel within public spaces, guarded by the respectable veil of marriage. The fact that the husband in the equation is wholly absent suggests that she was seriously considering the consequences of her legal actions on her relationship with William. Though she claimed that she still loved him during the trials, she clearly knew that their romance had come to a definite end, and her ideal depiction of the respectable, public British wife is that of an independent woman. Marital status is the key to respectability here, not the relationship itself.

The narrator, whose marriage makes her able to travel the world alone, cloaked in the respectability of her husband's surname, stands in stark contrast to the character of Miss Saxelhurst, Thierna's unmarried aunt. While the narrator can move about freely, Miss Saxelhurst's lack of a husband has made her a superfluous part of the institution of British womanhood. Expunged from society, Miss Saxelhurst exists in a kind of arrested state; she rarely



leaves her bedroom, and her clothing and appearance make it seem as if she is wholly aware of her inability to play the role that society requires of her, even as she half-heartedly attempts to costume herself as a respectable woman:

Her features were small, regular, and expressive; her eyes soft, deep, and dreamy; but what seemed to stamp her whole character was her hair, which, untouched by time, still retained its auburn hue. It grew in the wildest luxuriance, uncombed, unfettered in any way, a perfect *chef d'oeuvre* of confusion, being thrown back from her forehead and hanging in rich masses over her shoulders. She had evidently had some intention of putting on a cap, for a coral pin held a piece of antique dirty lace to the side of her head, as though it had been blown there. Her clothes were draped rather than fastened upon her by any modern appliance of hooks or buttons. Her dress was of a light blue spun silk, quilted in patches, and very much too long. She carried it up when she walked, forming a train behind, and for this reason always had much difficulty in walking. She wore an India silk scarf twisted about the upper part of her person, but not so as to conceal her plump white arms, or a great part of her neck, which was also *à la* old picture style of *très-décolté*. Her costume, like her ideas, belonged to the past. (24-25)

Miss Saxelhurst's dress is a parody of the proper attire of a woman in 1860s Britain. She knows that she should cover her head – veiling herself as the nuns in the Galata convent and the Muslim women in the harem must do, essentially – yet the soiled lace she wears cannot hide the natural wildness of her hair, and she makes little effort to try. Her dress – half wedding gown, half strait-jacket – engulfs her in excesses of fabric; its train, which echoes that of a wedding dress and which prevents her from moving freely, suggests that although marriage might have been

appropriate and respectable (and, to some extent, freeing), its trappings regulate and restrict as much as the habit of a nun would. The narrator argues that Miss Saxelhurst's display of shoulders and cleavage, despite her attempts to cover them, signals that she is taking her clothing cues from the past. Indeed while the Grecian draping of her dress and the exposed flesh of her upper body do call back to the turn of the nineteenth century and the Empire era of fashion, it also seems significant that the parts of Miss Saxelhurst's body that are unable to be contained by her clothing (her shoulders, her breasts, her hair) are also the parts of the body that are associated with femininity – but only when properly guarded and disguised. Like the nun's veils and the Muslim women's *hijabs*, both of which signal the promise of hidden sexuality beneath modest fabric, Miss Saxelhurst's cap and shawl should serve to regulate her body but ultimately cannot – or could, if she were committed to maintaining the rigorous standards of regulation set out for her body by her society.<sup>36</sup> It's not simply that Miss Saxelhurst is living in the past; it's that Miss Saxelhurst, declared null by an institution that has no use for her outside of traditional marriage structures, can no longer be bothered to audition for a respectable, public role in which she has little hope of being cast.

Miss Saxelhurst is presented as a sort of amalgamation of tropes about the nineteenth-century spinster – she is partly Dickens's Miss Havisham<sup>37</sup> and Charlotte Brontë's Miss

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<sup>36</sup> Miss Saxelhurst's shawl, significantly, is made of "India silk" – a product of the Empire that is unable to aid a British woman in maintaining standards of modesty and respectability. (The coral pin that fastens her lace cap to her head is also sourced from outside the British mainland, probably from the Mediterranean.) Compare this with the scene in Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) in which Margaret Hale is draped like mannequin in a pile of India shawls from her cousin's trousseau.

<sup>37</sup> Miss Havisham, from Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860-61), is almost certainly the inspiration for a good deal of Miss Saxelhurst's characterization. The novel was in serial publication during the composition and publication of *Martyrs*, with the last installment of Dickens's text published in *All the Year Round* in August 1861.

Marchmont, partly Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott*, even partly Brontë's *Bertha Mason*, with the wildness of her appearance and her exile to a remote area of the house. Disappointed by the man who was meant to marry her, Miss Saxelhurst isolates herself at home rather than face embarrassment in public; her appearance calls to mind nineteenth-century images of "savage" peoples, unkempt and uncivilized. Her "unfettered" hair links her to her niece, Thierna, whose hair is so distracting to the sailors in the Crimea that simply veiling it is not enough; she also chops it off, using the discarded curls to make a wig for the statue of a saint. But although she is an outsider in British society, the narrator (relating a story told to her by Thierna) does not code Miss Saxelhurst as foreign in the same way that she does the communities of the convent and the Turkish harem. Instead of becoming "other," an outsider in the performance of respectable British womanhood like Miss Saxelhurst essentially ceases to exist entirely. Thierna observes that her aunt "live[s], if I may use such a contradiction, a dead life in the dead past" (25); however, it seems more accurate to observe that she lives a suspended life in a paralyzed present, markedly unable to travel mentally, spatially, or geographically. Miss Saxelhurst does not leave the family's castle, occupying herself instead by making astrological charts (calendars that predict but do not progress) and reading fashion magazines from the days of her youth (which certainly accounts for her serious commitment to neo-classical draping). At the same time, she is not described as vapid or silly – she is apparently highly educated and well-read, with a mind full of "inexhaustible legendary lore, with mythology and mysterious traditions. Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, Pope, Spenser, and every poet of the day were her familiar spirits who furnished her with hourly thoughts and dreams" (25-26). She guards her knowledge to the point that Thierna is not even allowed to remove a book from her aunt's rooms. Like all other aspects of Miss Saxelhurst's space and person, Thierna codes her aunt's ideas as markedly feminine –

“poetical and romantic” rather than the “scientific” pursuits of her uncle, Miss Saxelhurst’s brother, with whom Thierna “ponder[s]” philosophers like “Newton and Locke” (25, 26).

Although Miss Saxelhurst is a non-married woman like the nuns in the Galata convent, the narrator’s assessment of her is far kinder than those of the other women in the text who exist outside traditional marriage structures (and, therefore, outside of traditional performances of respectable British womanhood). This may be in part because of the perspective from which it is relayed: the reader is introduced to Miss Saxelhurst in a flashback that is told by the novel’s heroine, Thierna, to the narrator, and so although it is naturally filtered through the narrator’s consciousness, it is clear that the words are meant to be understood as Thierna’s. Thierna’s affection for her eccentric aunt is evident. She tells the narrator that “had it not been for Cyril [she] should most inevitably have been a second Miss Saxelhurst” (27), suggesting that Miss Saxelhurst’s marginalization from society is what unmarried women must face – and likely reinforcing Theresa’s own fears about her fate should the courts decide that she is not legally married. The kinds of lives lived by the Sisters of the Propaganda are apparently not even an option in Thierna’s mind; the self-imposed exile in which her aunt exists is implied to be a better option than living within a community and performing menial tasks which are, according to Mère Mabile, fulfilling (but which are, according to the narrator, tedious). Thierna’s understanding that she could be her aunt – or could be Mère Mabile, or could be the narrator – signals that she understands that her own future, and her future gender performance, is still in flux. Indeed, much of the novel traces Thierna’s desire to establish the kind of respectable female persona embodied by the narrator. Her dogged pursuit of a legally-recognized relationship with Cyril Etherington (the fictional version of William Yelverton) is also the pursuit of a respectable

legal identity that affords her the freedom to travel, observe, and comment, just as the narrator does.

If the narrator can be read as embodying the respectable female role that Theresa firmly hopes to be able to inhabit herself, and Miss Saxelhurst as embodying the most terrifying possibilities of societal rejection and marginalization for Theresa, Thierna Saxelhurst represents a woman who, like Theresa, is in a liminal state of respectability. Thierna is a highly complex character. At the beginning of the novel, she is living and working alongside Mère Mabile and the rest of the Sisters of the Propaganda in the Galata convent (much as Yelverton worked and lived with the Sisters of Charity). Thierna dresses like a nun, lives in a convent hospital, and nurses soldiers alongside Catholic sisters, but she is revealed almost from the start to be playing a role: she is neither a novice nor a nun, and she only wears the garb of a nun to fit in with the community so that she is allowed to work as a nurse. Rather than a duplicitous woman who uses her ability to inhabit various characters to swindle others, Thierna, it seems, is simply adept at adjusting her performance of self to the circumstances around her. She is at times both wild and dedicated, both carefree and burdened. The narrator's initial impressions of Thierna reveal the mutability with which Theresa endows the character:

Under the dark lashes there was usually a dreamy and mysterious expression, as of some awful past, or foreshadowing a future fate of no common vicissitude. It was a strange face, with more underneath than the imagination could ever guess at; but when in conversation there was a magnetic fascination, from the influence of which it was impossible to escape. Her eyes were luminous, and said a thousand things for which words fell short; they flashed with haughty defiance, or grew cold with stern decision; were soft and melting in pity or love; or brimmed

over with archness. She was a Lady Macbeth, a Desdemona, or a Diana Vernon in rapid succession, as circumstances called each character forth. She was in earnest reality what Lady Hamilton so ably personified, and made me both weep and laugh more than I had done for years. (20)

Some of Thierna's character qualities are romantic tropes of the era: flashing, captivating, brimming eyes; hair so distracting that it must be chopped off or hidden by a veil; the innate maternal instincts that allow her to nurse wounded soldiers; and her ability to charm men with her beauty. Thierna takes the last of these a step further, as her charm is so powerful that it transcends national and linguistic boundaries; she's allowed to board ships and care for foreign prisoners of war, even though she sometimes can speak neither their language nor the language of their captors.

At the same time, the narrator's assessment of Thierna and her comparison of the character to famous literary figures suggest that Thierna's changeability is not merely natural and effortless; it reinforces the performative nature of concepts like gender and respectability. Thierna can play some of the most famous roles from the nineteenth-century stage; she can be as ruthless and cunning as Lady Macbeth, as steadfast and tragic as Desdemona, or as frank and active as *Rob Roy's* Diana Vernon. The comparisons strongly imply that Thierna is aware of the effects of her behavior on the people around her and knows how to adjust and target her performance to gain specific reactions from specific people. Even so, the narrator does suggest that there is something "earnest" about Thierna's performance of femininity – that she is not mere artifice, as Lady Hamilton was when posing as famous women from history, but is genuine

in her experiences and emotions.<sup>38</sup> But the text still suggests that Thierna is playing with different kinds of gender performances designed to elicit different reactions – in the case of the narrator, both weeping and laughing – that also reflect very real feelings on the part of the performer. Or, to take things a step further, the performances themselves may be earnest because the performer believes them to be so. Butler explains that “gender cannot be understood as a *role* which either expresses or disguises an interior ‘self,’ whether that ‘self’ is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an ‘act,’ broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority” (195). Victorians like Theresa Yelverton and the narrator viewed gender as a wholly stable and innate aspect of a person, something unchanging and entrenched; Butler’s conception of the performative nature of gender was something unavailable to them. But as much as they wanted to believe that respectability was a stable societal category – stable enough to use to draw boundaries that excluded certain people from respectable status – they do seem to have been aware that respectability was something that could be “done,” not something that was innate. Theresa was keenly aware that the persona she acted in her society was, ultimately, the person she was. To be the free woman she wanted to be, with the agency to make decisions about her life and the ability to travel around the world, she needed to be certified as a wife, as a Mrs. Yelverton; and to be Mrs. Yelverton she needed to convince the public, if not the courts, that she was Mrs. Yelverton. The

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<sup>38</sup> This assertion is also key as it regards the reader’s perception of Thierna’s purity. As Claire Tomalin notes that the theater “existed outside the world of Victorian middle-class values of careful self-respect and dignified self-improvement. It appeared to be sexually emancipated, in that it displayed women who were willing to show themselves off, tendering a promise of sophisticated pleasure. Its market values were also more down to earth – some would say more honest – than those of the drawing room” (7). Thierna’s ability to perform different roles in different situations helps her to elicit various reactions from those around her, but her theatrical nature also potentially places her reputation in peril.

surname “Yelverton,” and the marital status that accompanied it was her glass birdcage, her nun’s veil – the means by which she could travel around the world as a respectable and respected woman. The charges of bigamy that Theresa lodged against her maybe-husband were less about the want of a partner than they were about the need for a marriage. Indeed, the need for married status was greater for Theresa than the need for Major Yelverton himself.

Thierna and Cyril’s feelings for each other in the novel are genuine. The forces that separate them and compel Cyril to commit bigamy are external, created by members of Cyril’s family and motivated by greed. Throughout the ordeal, Cyril continues to love Thierna; he believes that they are legally married, even though he has entered a second legal marriage with a scheming heiress. He is hapless, even pathetic, but unlike his real-life counterpart, he demonstrates significant loyalty. At the end of the novel, Thierna’s respectability is still in question. Although she and Cyril remain steadfast in their love, the two have been separated and have suffered as a result of that separation – they are the “martyrs to circumstance” named in the novel’s title. In the final scene of the novel, the pair are unexpectedly reunited, once again in the role of soldier and nurse. He has been wounded; she discovers him in the hospital. The pair reaffirm their love and die in each other’s arms. Because their reconciliation is essentially a totally private moment, it doesn’t affect Thierna’s respectability before her death. Her status remains in question, although Theresa is careful to assert Thierna’s purity and chasteness. Even if society questions Thierna’s respectability, the reader understands that her morality – a related but separate concept – is solid. Through Thierna, Theresa reinforces the narrative that she presented on the witness stand during the Dublin trial. She also mirrors her own anxieties about her uncertain marital status (and, therefore, uncertainties about her respectability) through Thierna’s character. Changeable, mutable, able to play any role in any given situation – these



give Thierna an extraordinary ability to adapt to her surroundings in the text, but they also make it exceptionally difficult for her to form a stable sense of her authentic self and her place in the world. Thierna's constant need to adjust her self-presentation to appeal to various audiences mimics Theresa's own need to present different selves in different public situations – something that is both an advantage and a great pressure on her.

The Yelverton case was far from decided when *Martyrs* was published, and each of these three characters represents a possible future available to Theresa once the final verdict was announced. She could continue to participate in public life, as Thierna does, even though she possesses a dubious reputation. Such a choice, however, would leave her in a constant state of uncertainty, would require her to constantly perform her respectability for a disbelieving audience, and would never allow her to achieve satisfactory answers to her questions about William and about her own place in society. Alternatively, she could completely withdraw from society, as Miss Saxelhurst does, and refuse to acknowledge the changing world around her, attempting to live in the past. But like Miss Saxelhurst, who continues to exercise her mind while in seclusion, Theresa would surely be compelled to continue to participate in cultural and intellectual pursuits. The publication of the novel itself stands as Theresa's formal rejection of calls for her to shut herself away from society to avoid further damage to her reputation. She asserts her right to be involved in public conversations by releasing her fictionalized autobiography, even as many others were calling for her to be silenced. Theresa clearly hoped that she would be able to take on a role similar to that of the third significant female character in the novel, the narrator. The verdict handed down by the House of Lords two years after the novel's publication essentially made that impossible; the narrator's respectability is underpinned and assured by her marital status, something that was fully denied to Theresa. Nor could she

simply rehabilitate her respectability by marrying another, as to do so would be to admit that she was not legally married to William. Theresa never entered into another marriage; she seems to never have engaged in another significant romantic relationship during her lifetime, at least not publicly. She maintained until the day that she died that she was indeed the true Mrs. William Charles Yelverton – and, after he succeeded to his father’s title, the true Viscountess Avonmore.

### **Creating New Avenues for Female Respectability**

Theresa’s decision to continue to assert that she was legally married to William could have turned her into a recluse. The decisions of the Scottish court and the House of Lords turned her into a social outcast; she was a woman who was admittedly no longer a virgin, and she was not (and had never been) legally married to anyone. The avenues for a “fallen” woman in Victorian society to continue to exist in the public sphere were incredibly limited. But rather than accepting the courts’ decisions to deprive her of her good reputation and to brand her as a fallen woman, Yelverton made the bold decision to assert her identity as Mrs. Yelverton regardless of their judgments. Her continuing literary career – in which she published an additional novel, *Zanita: A Tale of the Yo-Semite* (1870), as well as numerous books and articles detailing her world travels – served both as a means by which she could support herself monetarily and a means by which she could continue to “establish [her] wifedom” through her byline. Her works were attributed first to “The Hon. Mrs. Yelverton” and later to “Viscountess Avonmore,” after Major Yelverton inherited his late father’s aristocratic title. Yelverton spent the rest of her life performing the role of Major Yelverton’s wife. Unable to escape from the legal and social institutions of Victorian Britain, Yelverton simply chose to work within their bounds, asserting her identity as a respectable, married British woman even after two of three British courts

declared that it was not hers to assert. If she could not actually *embody* the kind of respectable British womanhood that the narrator of *Martyrs* possesses, Yelverton could – and did – perform the role for the rest of her life.

Indeed, the details of Theresa's writing career suggest that she deliberately chose to perform a specific authorial role for the rest of her life, patterning her authorial role after that of the greatest living writer of the period, Charles Dickens. For a woman seeking to assert her public respectability, Dickens was both a rational and yet deeply intriguing role model. He was cherished by the public as a model of Victorian respectability, and yet in private, he cast aside the wife who bore him ten children in favor of an eighteen-year-old actress. In her biography of Nelly Ternan, Dickens's mistress, Claire Tomalin describes the balancing act that Dickens was able to achieve regarding his public reputation:

Nelly was a blot on the good name of Dickens, and the Dickens machinery for public relations was unrivalled. Dickens wished to be, and was, generally worshipped – the word is not too strong for a person who evoked comparison with Christ at the time of his death – as a man of unblemished character, the incarnation of broad Christian virtue and at the same time of domestic harmony and conviviality ... Amazing as it now seems, the break-up of his family left [his image] unaffected; Dickens preserved his renown as the jovial keeper of hearth, home, children and dogs at Gad's Hill even as he was ridding himself of wife and children. (4-5)

Dickens depended on the protection of his wide circle of literary friends to help keep up the fiction of his domestic life in public. Writers like Wilkie Collins remained studiously silent on the drama unfolding in Dickens's home; so did Anthony Trollope, whose brother was married to

Nelly Ternan's sister, Fanny. It's difficult to know whether Theresa Yelverton would have known any of the details of Dickens's struggle to maintain his own respectability. Their scandals broke at precisely the same time: in 1858, the year that Theresa accused William of bigamy, the news of Dickens's affair was confirmed by Thackeray outside the Garrick Club in London, an admission that ended the friendship between the two writers (Tomalin 7-8). But Dickens had power where Theresa lacked it, and a simple statement published in the *Times* was enough to quash the public rumors about Nelly Ternan. The editorial staff offered no rebuke of Dickens's words, although they excoriated Theresa for essentially doing the same thing.

Whether or not Theresa Yelverton's ties in the literary community of London went deep enough for her to learn the truth about Dickens's domestic drama, she would certainly have observed his public campaign to ensure that his reputation remained untainted. Her novels, especially *Martyrs to Circumstance*, demonstrate her affection for his work – character names, the sequence in which Thierna embarks on a madcap dash to Ireland, and the Havisham-esque figure of Miss Saxelhurst all bear clear markers of Dickensian influence – and her post-trial writing career suggests that she studied his authorial persona as much as his novels. Shortly after the trials ended, Theresa began offering public readings of her fiction and, clearly aware of her audience's real interest, the letters she exchanged with William. One of the advertisements for these readings appears in the *Times* just below an advertisement for a similar performance by Dickens. And, like Dickens, she embarked on a tour of America, traveling across the continent, offering readings and composing a travel narrative, *Teresina in America*, that bears considerable resemblance to Dickens's *American Notes*. If Dickens was able to rescue his reputation from the brink of public humiliation simply by being Dickens, it seems reasonable that Theresa would have decided to follow his lead while trying to reclaim her own respectability.

Theresa faced seemingly insurmountable odds when trying to reassert her right to define her own respectability in society, but in the end, she did manage to reclaim it. In July 1871, the Galata convent sections of *Martyrs* appeared once again; but this time, rather than as the opening scenes of a novel, they were presented as an independent article in a travel magazine, Bret Harte's *Overland Monthly*. The text of the article, attributed to "Therese Yelverton" and titled "With the Sœurs at the Golden Horn," is virtually unchanged from its initial appearance in *Martyrs*. However, because the piece appears in a travel magazine, without any indication that it was originally intended to be read as fiction, the distinction between narrator and author collapses completely – Yelverton becomes the narrator's "I" and, by extension, she also fully inhabits her position as a respectable and appropriate British woman. The magazine reviewer for the July 13, 1871 issue of *The Nation* certainly read the *Overland Monthly* piece as non-fiction and, apparently unaware of the Yelvertons' complex marital history (although aware that the "Sisters of the Propaganda" were the French Sisters of Charity), assumes that Yelverton was the married narrator of the piece:

The *Overland* has for its first article a sketch, by Mrs. Thérèse Yelverton (Viscountess Avonmore), entitled 'With the Sœurs at the Golden Horn.' The writer informs us that her husband being before Sebastopol, and she being unwilling in her anxiety to live so far away from him as at Malta, got herself put under the protection of the Sisters of Charity at Galata, and there was a witness of their life. She describes it well and with feeling, and the article is worth reading.

(31)

Denied the role of wife by the British legal system, and therefore denied the socially-sanctioned position of respectability, ultimately it is through writing that Yelverton is able to situate herself

in a position of power within an oppressive series of institutions. She becomes the character she imagined for herself while crafting the narrative point of view of *Martyrs* – a woman, nominally married to a military officer, who is able to travel the world and share her experiences with a reader. Her writing offered her a way to justify her continued involvement in society, acting as a sort of veil, just like the ones worn in her novels by nuns and Muslim women. It allowed her access to the world, but it also filtered the world's access to her. Because she fictionalized her life story in *Martyrs to Circumstance*, and continued to do so in *Zanita*, she was able to present the reading public with a filtered version of her life. Her books promised to reveal the truth beneath the guarded exterior, but the truth that readers uncovered had been carefully shaped and crafted by Theresa. Because she wrote frankly about the world she observed while traveling, she was still vulnerable to critical attacks on her respectability and femininity – critics in Britain savaged one of her travel books, *Teresina Peregrina*, as not being “a work that we would place in the hands of unsophisticated youth of either sex, for the cool way in which the writer goes, with perfect calmness, into delicate matter which a man would hesitate to name or even hint at” (Schama 186) – but her ability to continue writing and publishing publicly at all, despite critical pushback, demonstrated that she had been able to carve out a way to live a public life even after a public disgrace. Veiled in an authorial persona of her own creation, and imitating the writing career of the greatest novelist of the era, Theresa managed to work and travel for the rest of her life while writing. While she is most remembered for her role in the notorious trial that sparked a nation's fascination with narratives about bigamy, Schama argues that it was her persistence in seeking a public role, maintaining that “an unemployed, unoccupied life was unproductive and unappealing” for women as well as men, that was perhaps her greatest legacy.

Theresa's work and her writing career demonstrate that a Victorian woman, even when denied the legal status of a wife, could take steps to create a respectable public role for herself. Even though her reputation was put under an incredible amount of public scrutiny, she persisted in wresting control over her name and her life story away from other writers. She provides us with a real-life example of the kind of agency exercised by the heroines of Gothic bigamy novels, just as her characters reflect the kinds of anxieties felt by real women who were placed in precarious social positions. Because the Yelverton trials were so widely publicized, and because their story was reimagined over and over by the sensation novelists of the period, she also represents a crucial influence on the female characters that are found in works like *Lady Audley's Secret*, *East Lynne*, and *Aurora Floyd*. Even though Theresa was neither a bigamist nor a criminal – if anything, she was one of the victims of another's deception – her assertiveness and her unwillingness to conform to the role that the courts and the press decided she should play anticipate the actions of some of the most threatening women of the genre. Her influence can especially be felt in the character of Lady Audley, a woman who went to great lengths to reinvent herself after she was abandoned by her first husband. Theresa may not have gone to the lengths that Lady Audley and characters like her go in order to preserve their public reputations, but her insistence on her right to live as a respectable woman in the public sphere is reflected in their motives and in their willingness to take extraordinary steps to secure their reputations.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET* AND THE SENSATION BIGAMY NOVEL

As the marriage reforms of 1857 began to go into effect in Britain, and the Yelverton trials made bigamy a household word, the literature of the 1860s began to reflect society's fascination with the way that the unwritten rules of respectable marriage could be so easily manipulated and violated. Writers adapted the tropes and norms of the Gothic bigamy plot to reflect the concerns and debates in contemporary culture, translating the remote spaces of the Gothic novel to settings that would have been very familiar to readers in the United Kingdom in the 1860s. Although bigamy novels were not an innovation of the 1860s, as established by the first chapter of this project, they reached the height of their popularity during the "sensation decade." Of all of the sensational crimes that were included in the plots of these scandalous novels, bigamy was one of the most prominent, building on the publicity of the Yelverton trial and the public conversation about marriage regulation sparked by the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act. Jeanne Fahnestock estimates that fifty-nine novels were published between 1862 and 1866 that featured bigamy, that "quintessential sensation device," as a prominent feature of the plot; she also notes that this approximation is "undoubtedly on the short side," as it is based largely on the novels reviewed in the *Athenaeum*, not a sampling of all novels published during that span of time (48, 55). Some of these novels used bigamy as a central part of the novel's content, raising questions about the structure of marriage and its regulation by various social institutions, while others incorporate it more minimally, often as a surprising or convenient way to resolve the plot's complicated conflict. The quality of these novels also ranges significantly, from the accomplished to the amateur. Some of the texts were published simply to capitalize on the



public's fascination about bigamy and to satisfy their hunger for more, while others were more serious in their exploration of the issues that surrounded bigamy, including the reliability of institutions and the reputations that they certified.

In this chapter, I will explore the way that questions of respectability are manifested in the bigamy plot as it was used by sensation writers. My examination of the bigamy novel in this period is based on one of the most important contemporary critical reviews of sensation fiction, published in 1863 by Henry Mansel. As Britain tried to adjust to a new way of thinking about making and breaking marriage bonds, the sensation bigamy novel dramatized varying reactions to the new system of administering the institution, from embracing the changes to outright rejections of them. One of the most interesting reactions, however, is the attempt by characters in some of the sensation bigamy novels to find alternative ways to certify their respectability when marriage, even after the reforms, failed to do so adequately. The second half of this chapter will explore the way that the title character of one of the novels reviewed by Mansel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, sought success and respectability through a view of marriage as a series of commercial and financial transactions rather than as an emotional union based on tenets established by the church or the state. Lady Audley takes the initiative and agency shown by the second wives of the Gothic bigamy novel and by Theresa Yelverton herself and pushes it further, manipulating the institution of marriage itself as a way to seek a more advantaged social and financial position for herself. Her failed attempt to become more respectable by marrying bigamously once again demonstrates the difference between morality and respectability. While a bigamous husband in a Gothic novel could seek sympathy for his actions, Lady Audley ends up in the disadvantaged position of the failed "first wife" in the bigamy plot, incarcerated and neutralized. Her blatant and unrepentant revealing of the truth about Victorian respectability – that it was an elaborate

performance as much as a legitimate measure of a person's goodness – ultimately proves too dangerous to be sustained.

### **Henry Mansel and the Sensation Bigamy Novel**

Novels, like *Lady Audley's Secret*, which were so critical of the way that central, important social concepts like respectability were understood and employed, were viewed highly unfavorably by Victorian critics. Among these critics was Henry Mansel, who wrote an important and enduring (and anonymous) assessment of sensation fiction for the *Quarterly Review* in 1863. Eight of the novels included in his survey of the genre are identified by Mansel as sensation novels about bigamy: Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863), Frederic Lascelles Wraxall's *Only a Woman* (1860), Matilda Charlotte Houstoun's *Recommended to Mercy* (1862), Frederick George Lee's *Clinton Maynyard* (1862), Harriet Gordon Smythies's *The Daily Governess* (1861), and two anonymous novels, *The Woman of Spirit* (1862)<sup>39</sup> and *The Law of Divorce* (1861), which was attributed to "A Graduate of Oxford."<sup>40</sup> Although these eight texts are only a fraction of the many bigamy novels published

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<sup>39</sup> It is tempting to compare this anonymously-published novel with Theresa Longworth Yelverton's *Martyrs to Circumstance* (1861) and *Zanita, A Tale of the Yo-Semite*. The works share significant similarities, including versions of the same unusual character names; however, the presentation of a wholly unlikeable heroine is atypical of Yelverton's writing. Moreover, Yelverton used her writing as a way of asserting her public identity as a married, respectable woman, and it seems highly unlikely that she would publish anonymously.

<sup>40</sup> "A Graduate of Oxford" is also, of course, the pseudonym used by John Ruskin for the publication of *Modern Painters* nearly twenty years earlier. Although I have not found any critics who have discussed a possible Ruskin connection with this particular novel, it seems far more likely that the anonymous author of *The Law of Divorce* used the pseudonym to try to capitalize on its link to a famous (and by this time scandalous) writer. The novel does feature a young woman who leaves her husband and obtains a divorce, but in circumstances far different than those surrounding the notorious annulment of Ruskin's marriage to Effie Gray.

during the 1860s, they provide a nice range of examples, varying in length, in quality, and importantly, in their use of the bigamy plot (which varies in the novel from central plot focus to mere footnote). The sample also include novels that have received regular critical attention from scholars (specifically the two novels by Braddon) and texts that are rarely (if ever) discussed by critics.

The novels identified by Mansel as using bigamy plots have also become a significant set because of the importance of the review itself; it is perhaps the most frequently quoted contemporary assessment of the sensation movement as a literary phenomenon.<sup>41</sup> If the bigamy novel was problematic for conservative Victorians because it shed too much light on the precariousness of respectability as a concept by which a society could be organized, Mansel turns the issue of respectability back on the novels themselves, arguing that they are potentially damaging to the moral fiber of the readers who consume them. Deborah Wynne notes that Mansel's "tone of moral outrage" was typical of the criticism lobbed at sensation novels, and indeed, Mansel was extremely worried about the effects of too much sensation on the larger readership (especially the *female* readership, as women were major consumers of the genre).<sup>42</sup> Mansel's review is also significant in his identification of bigamy as a primary plot within the sensation novel. Mansel writes:

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<sup>41</sup> Deborah Wynne argues that Mansel's review is so frequently cited by today's scholars because Mansel was "a spokesperson for the establishment" and the review is "typical of Victorian establishment views of literary sensationalism" (390). It makes sense, then, that he would not venture toward viewing these novels, which critique a specific part of that establishment, in the light of more sustained institutional critiques.

<sup>42</sup> Wynne: "At the heart of many reviewers' fears about sensation novels was the fact that they were popular with female readers" (391). She also notes that a significant number of sensation novelists were women.

Of particular offences, which are almost always contemporary and sometimes personal, undoubtedly the first place must be given to Bigamy. Indeed, so popular has this crime become, as to give rise to an entire sub-class in this branch of literature, which may be distinguished as that of Bigamy Novels. It is astonishing how many of our modern writers have selected this interesting breach of morality and law as the peg on which to hang a mystery and a dénouement . . . Much of this popularity is, no doubt, due to the peculiar aptitude of bigamy, at least in monogamous countries, to serve as a vehicle of mysterious interest or poetic justice. If some vulgar ruffian is to be depicted as having a strange influence over a lady of rank and fashion, it is a ready expedient to make him conscious of the existence of another husband, or the child of another husband, supposed to be long dead. If lowly virtue is to be exalted, or high-born pride humiliated, the means are instantly at hand, in the discovery of a secret marriage, unsuspected till the third volume, which makes the child of poverty the heir to rank and wealth, or degrades the proud patrician by stripping him of his illegal honours. It is really painful to think how many an interesting mystery and moral lesson will be lost, if Sir Cresswell Cresswell's Court continues in active work for another generation.

(39)

Here Mansel places a specific distance placed between “us” and “them” – that bigamy is popular in a “monogamous” country like Britain because it is an aberration rather than a part of the norm. But Mansel’s efforts here go further. Bigamy is a popular novelistic device, he suggests, not solely because it is exotic but because it is extremely convenient – an easy device to create conflict within a plot that takes little effort or skill on the part of the sub-par novelist. He’s not

entirely wrong; of the eight bigamy novels he surveys, many use bigamy casually, in some cases not even raising the issue until hundreds of pages into the text. (Furthermore, at least two of the novels use the revelation of bigamy as a background detail to change the social status of a main character, but they do nothing to explore the complexities of the situation.) Even though he strives to make distinctions between Britain and societies that normalize bigamy, Mansel does see cultural reasons for its prominence. He makes the connection between the bigamy novel and the divorce court that resulted from the 1857 act; however, he fails to see bigamy plots as reflective of any real-world anxieties about that court or the changes in marriage laws that engendered it. Instead he sees it as a tool of shoddy writers who are not inventive enough to come up with new and more interesting complications for their novel's plots. As a part of his larger dismissal of the sensation genre, he bemoans the loss of originality in these novels rather than further investigating the causes of the surge in bigamy novels' popularity, an investigation that might have led him into more fruitful and engaging critical territory.

Henry Mansel was far from the only Victorian critic who expressed major anxieties about the way that Britons were portrayed in sensation novels. For the carefully-constructed narrative of their innate respectability to hold, British people couldn't simply perform respectable lifestyles and personas; conservative critics believed that the nation's art also had to work to reinforce that respectability. Hence the dominance of the courtship plot in the Victorian novel: it is a narrative that charts the progress of a young person (usually a young woman) in her journey toward respectable British womanhood, in which she must generally reject an unsuitable partner (who is not a model of British respectability) in favor of a suitable one, reinforcing the status quo as well as the dominant narrative of Britishness. The bigamy novel, however, depicts something entirely different: it follows the experience of couples after they are married, and it often

explores the problems that are faced by one spouse upon learning that the person he or she married is not respectable at all. No wonder the popularity of the sensation bigamy novel was so nerve-wracking for Victorian literary critics. It was too popular, too sordid, and most of all, they were afraid that it made Britain look bad.

One of the harshest critics of the bigamy novel on the issue of respectability was Geraldine Jewsbury, who was worried less about the quality of the novels themselves than with the impression that they might give readers about the lives of the British public. Jewsbury's review of the genre for the *Athenaeum* in 1864 concluded,

If in after-times the manners and customs of English life in 1864 were to be judged from the novels of the day, it would naturally be believed that people, in the best regulated families, were in the habit of marrying two wives, or two husbands, as the case might be; and of suppressing the one more inconvenient, either by "painless extinction" or by more forcible methods, regardless of the cost of suffering to the victim. Heroes and heroines of the present generation of novels rarely dispense with the marriage ceremony altogether,—it would be a want of propriety which would shock both author and reader; but illegal marriages and supernumerary ceremonies are the order of the day. Novels have always some basis of probability; they seldom paint an entirely false picture of manners; and as bigamy and the conditions to which bigamy is allied form the basis of every second novel that has been published for some time past, we must conclude that there is a great deal of latent sympathy with this state of things, which an author can appeal to with the certainty of exciting the reader's lively interest. (qtd. in Chase and Levenson 201-02)

The notion that literary creations have some root in contemporary society—“some basis of probability”—is the crux of Jewsbury’s argument. If the characters in bigamy novels must be sourced at least in part from the realities of society, their mere existence suggests that British society contains a significant number of people who recklessly flaunt the norms of marriage and, therefore, also the norms of social respectability. And while the instance of bigamy in society could not possibly match the glut of bigamy novels on the market, the fact that so many bought and read such novels suggests that they were at the very least *open* to sympathizing with those who committed such flagrant violations against the conventions established by the government and the Church. Such sympathy, Jewsbury implies, threatens not only the perception of the British as a respectable people but also the actual moral fiber of the British nation.

Jewsbury’s fears, and those of many of her fellow critics, were perhaps not as outlandish as they might initially seem; consider that French novels featuring plots about adultery were often used as yet another means for the English to disparage the morality of the French people. A line from Mansel’s *Quarterly Review* piece makes this clear: “There is a school of fiction the practical lesson of which seems to be to reduce marriage to a temporary connexion *durante bene placito*, and to exalt the character of the mistress at the expense of that of the wife. This is a favourite theme with French novelists of a certain class; and the tale entitled ‘Recommended to Mercy’ may claim to be considered as an English exponent of the same doctrine” (42).

*Recommended to Mercy* features a heroine who rejects marriage altogether, choosing instead to live with her lover, first in India, and then back in Britain.<sup>43</sup> She is a character with whom the audience is clearly expected to sympathize, and that bothers Mansel:

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<sup>43</sup> Intriguingly, although Helen and her lover are the main characters of the story, neither of them are accused of bigamy. Instead, it is her lover’s wife who is accused of the crime. In the end, the wife is not guilty of the accusations aimed at her, although she is a rare case (like John

In truth, we much doubt the wisdom or the morality of drawing fictitious portraits of noble-minded and interesting sinners, by way of teaching us to feel for the sinner while we condemn the sin. We do not deny that the feeling is a right one, nor that such characters may actually exist; but it makes all the difference in the world to the moral whether we meet with the persons in real life or in a novel. The real person is a human being, with human qualities, good or bad, to which the particular sin in question attaches itself as one feature out of many. The fictitious character is but the sin personified and made attractive as the source and substance of many virtues. In the one, the person is the principal figure, the sin is accessory; in the other, the sin is the primary idea, to embellish which the rest of the character is made to order. (42)

In Mansel's mind, Helen Langton, and real individuals like her, may genuinely be worthy of sympathy, but it is the danger of making sex without marriage an attractive and real possibility for readers (or, more realistically, for *female* readers – Mansel talks specifically about “female virtue” only a few lines later) that makes Mansel so uncomfortable. Both his and Jewsbury's reactions suggest that there was an established reputation (or perception) of respectability in Britain that was in danger of being tarnished by novels that featured British characters doing less than respectable things. If readers learn that sin is attractive, as Mansel argues they will, the moral consequences are potentially problematic; he outlines a classic slippery slope argument to make his point: “From vice to crime, from the divorce-court to the police-court, is but a single

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Caldigate) of a character in a bigamy novel who must go through the processes of the legal system before the charges are found to be groundless.



step.” But for Jewsbury, it seems that the threat of future readers even *thinking* that the citizens of the United Kingdom in 1864 were an amoral people is the especially disturbing prospect.

But the concept of British respectability to which Mansel and Jewsbury are clinging so fiercely – which, in the context of the novels that they are reviewing, is based on appropriate sexual behavior within the context of legal, Christian marriage – was ultimately as fictional as any of the wild and fantastical bigamy novels that were being sold in circulating libraries or railway stalls. The Yelverton trials alone had already proven by this time that real people did enter into quasi-legal relationships, that sexual desire was not always “respectably” quelled, and that bigamy was a genuine possibility, if for no other reason than because everyday people had difficulty understanding the complicated and contradictory marriage laws of the day. Ultimately, bigamy is the perfect crime for a society that is concerned with keeping up appearances but is plagued by those who are able to exploit the system while still appearing to be respectable. Bigamy is, at its heart, the same thing as adultery: one person engaging in a relationship with another while still legally bound to a different person altogether. In French novels, after all, adultery was the failed marriage plot of choice. But in Britain, where social anxiety about personal respectability was clearly high, the popular plot is one in which characters engage in adulterous behavior but attempt to disguise that behavior as respectable. Beth Kalikoff notes that characters in Victorian drama “do terrible things in the name of respectability,” demonstrating that criminal behavior in drama is often directly tied to attempts to gain respectability and climb the social ladder (153). She argues that some of these works posit that “nature is criminal, and crime is natural. Respectability does more than simply conceal murder and theft. The motives for being respectable and prosperous are the same as those for committing crimes . . . . It becomes difficult to distinguish between motives for crime and motives for evicting the poor or being

generous to a son-in-law who can be helpful” (155). Like stealing money in order to live the lifestyle of a member of a higher class, bigamy is a crime committed in the name of respectability. After all, if the matter of one’s reputation were not an issue, there would be no need to have a second relationship “sanctioned” by the authorities of church and state – adultery could be committed freely and with impunity.

Moreover, even bigamous relationships contracted for reasons that are mercenary rather than romantic – for example, because a person wishes to increase his or her financial or social position – are also tied to respectability. Bigamy is a façade placed over a criminal act in hopes that the act will not be discovered and that respectability will remain untarnished or even improved. Though many of the novels from this period that incorporate bigamy into their plots do so merely for sensation’s sake, some of the texts function as more serious meditations on the nature of the crime of bigamy and its relationship to respectability. *Lady Audley’s Secret* is one of the novels that presents a more complicated view of what a successful marriage looks like. With a main character like Lady Audley, who is so good at recognizing ways that the institutions that govern respectable society can be manipulated for her own benefit, the novel asks implicit questions about the effectiveness of marriage as a means for measuring respectability, even after the reforms of the 1850s. As Lady Audley shapes her life to fit within a societal role that gives her access to greater financial and social security, she reveals the ease with which a person could play the part of a respectable British subject while possessing none of the innate moral qualities that a respectable person was supposed to have. Her attempts to enter the world of financial prosperity, using bigamy as her chosen tool, demonstrate the difficulty that women faced in establishing access to societal institutions that were often closed to Victorian women. By engaging in a kind of conspicuous consumption of spouses, Lady Audley mimics the

acquisitional attitude toward marriage held by a significant number of Victorian men. If marriage was a way to have one's respectability confirmed and certified, and if marriages were essentially transactions, Lady Audley's bigamy can be viewed as an effort on her part to ensure her respectable status by entering the Victorian marketplace through an act of excessive consumption. Her punishment at the end of the novel can be read, then, as a rebuke of her attempts to establish a respectable role for herself using an economic framework that was almost exclusively restricted to men as much as a punishment for the criminal acts in which she engages. Lady Audley's bigamy can be viewed, ultimately, as less a crime against society and more an attempt on her part to infiltrate the economic world as a means to gain agency and financial security for herself, as a way of escaping the laborious but purposeless leisure activities required of a middle-class nineteenth-century wife.

### **Bigamy and Respectability in *Lady Audley's Secret***

For a Victorian woman, one of the few ways to move into a higher social bracket was to marry a respectable man who already possessed a more vaunted social position. If economic advancement was a part of her desired social destination, marriage was also one of the only viable avenues available to her. Although laws were being amended over the course of the century to give women more control over their own financial status<sup>44</sup>, women still faced

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<sup>44</sup> The Matrimonial Causes Act (1857) offered women a means (albeit a complicated and difficult means) by which they could remove themselves from abusive marriages. Two Custody of Infants Acts allowed women first to petition for custody of children under the age of seven (1839) and then later to retain custody of children under sixteen (1873), giving women the ability to make decisions about their children's care and upbringing. A series of Married Women's Property Acts allowed women to keep any earnings they received after their marriage (1870), accrue debts in their own names (1882), keep property they had obtained before marriage (1882), and acquire and exchange their own assets and property, including stocks (1882). Significantly, the 1882 Married Women's Property Act established the concept of married women as *feme sole*

significant obstacles if they wanted to engage in work that allowed them to make money, acquire assets, and participate in acts of exchange. In the Victorian era of mass industrialization and the rise of the businessman as a rival to the aristocratic landowner, power was often located within these financial fields, and although by the end of the century even married women were legally entitled to maintain their own legal and financial identities, participate in exchanges of items like goods, property, and stocks, and even accrue debts, they were still largely shut out of the paths to economic power and respectability. One way to consider why women faced significant difficulty in breaking through these barriers is to examine the problem through the work of nineteenth-century American economist Thorstein Veblen. His *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) surveys the economic landscape of the period with a sharp eye on the way that work, leisure, and domesticity functioned to create notions of respectability. Veblen's identification of the concept of "conspicuous consumption," or the acquisition and display of objects to help enhance one's social position, helped bridge the gap between the public and private spheres. Because Veblen pays careful attention to the roles that husbands and wives were expected to inhabit within this economic culture, his work also offers a helpful tool through which economic efforts by female characters in Victorian fiction can be viewed, assessed, and better understood.

Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption and its power within Victorian society starts with an identification of what it means to be wealthy. Essentially, he argues that true wealth is linked with the concept of leisure; to be wealthy (and therefore powerful both socially and economically), a person has to have enough resources to be thoughtlessly wasteful with

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rather than *feme covert*, meaning that a wife continued to inhabit her own personal legal identity even after marriage rather than being subsumed into her husband's legal identity. For more on nineteenth-century legal changes to marriage and their impact on women, see Mary Lyndon Shanley's *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England* (1989).

them. This requirement can be applied to different kinds of resources, including money, goods, and even time. The richer a person is, the more expensive these consumed and wasted resources become, as a mark of what Veblen calls “punctilious discrimination” to “qualitative excellence” (53). Those who are lower than the wealthiest on the social ladder aspire to be like their wealthier counterparts, and so they deliberately consume resources wastefully to mimic the economic habits of their superiors. Unless a person was poor enough to lack the basic resources needed to sustain life, Veblen argues that they were always striving to consume in a way that imitated the deliberate and conspicuous consumption of the higher classes in an attempt to meet society’s standards of respectability. He notes, “The leisure class stands at the head of the social structure in point of respectability; and its manner of life and its standards of worth therefore afford the norm of respectability for the community” (59). To gain respectability, consumers must acquire, consume, and display resources in a way that conforms to the lifestyle established by those at the top of the social pecking order.

Although I have used gender-neutral language in describing the Victorian consumers that Veblen discusses, he makes it clear that the system is made up of primary consumers, who are male, and the dependents, including women and servants, who engage in vicarious consumption to help bolster his reputation. The role of the woman<sup>45</sup> within the conspicuous consumption model is as a supporter rather than a consumer in her own right. As participating in trade and other business occupations became more and more acceptable for men, Veblen states that wives were required to engage in what he calls “vicarious leisure and consumption,” stepping in to

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<sup>45</sup> Really, this should be the role of the *wife*; as may be expected for an economist working in the late-nineteenth century, Veblen’s work does not engage in significant analysis of the position of the single woman, whether divorced, widowed, or never married, in the economic system.

complete the acts of leisure required to meet the standards of social respectability (57). But a wife's leisure is not merely time spent in inactivity. Veblen explains,

The leisure rendered by the wife ... is, of course, not a simple manifestation of idleness or indolence. It almost invariably occurs disguised under some form of work or household duties or social amenities, which prove on analysis to serve little or no ulterior end beyond showing that she does not occupy herself with anything that is gainful or that is of substantial use ... [The] greater part of the customary round of domestic cares to which the middle-class housewife gives her time and effort is of this character. Not that the results of her attention to household matters, of a decorative and mundificatory character, are not pleasing to the sense of men trained in middle-class proprieties; but the taste to which these effects of household adornment and tidiness appeal is a taste which has been formed under the selective guidance of a canon of propriety that demands just these evidences of wasted effort. (57-58)

On first glance, Veblen seems to be doing little here other than demeaning domestic work, suggesting that it is useless and designed only to please men who have been conditioned to respond positively to a certain kind of domestic environment. But read as an analysis of the way that women are required to attempt to fit into the conspicuous consumption model rather than as an indictment of their specific activities, it reveals the extent to which women were marginalized within the economic world of the Victorian age. Unable to do any productive work beyond the maintenance of the domestic world, and unable to reap any results or benefits from their work, which must all be done in service of their husbands' public reputation, women who wanted to take a more active role in society had to do so in the face of a society that valued them for their

ability, essentially, to be lovely and to waste time. And, as Veblen notes, although legally women had gained ground toward a new sense of independence, the economic system kept them essentially in the same subservient place they had occupied before: "...the wife, who was at the outset the drudge and the chattel of the man, both in fact and in theory—the producer of goods for him to consume—has become the ceremonial consumer of goods which he produces. But she still quite unmistakably remains his chattel in theory" (58). This, Veblen contends, is the work of the conspicuous consumption model, because "the habitual rendering of vicarious leisure and consumption," which is what a Victorian wife is compelled to do, "is the abiding mark of the unfree servant" (58). A wife might be legally entitled to work for her own wages and benefit outside the home by the end of the century, but even then she was thwarted by a system of conspicuous consumption that required her to continue engaging in domestic work and vicarious leisure in order to maintain a good public reputation for her husband (and therefore, by extension, for herself). Published almost forty years ahead of Veblen's work on the conspicuous consumption model, *Lady Audley's Secret* sits on the cusp of the major, systemic economic changes that inform Veblen's theories. Greg Howard argues that the novel's characters "wander into a social battlefield largely defined by the negotiation between the male entrepreneur, an identity that gained power with the spread of industrial capitalism, and the more historically entrenched landed gentry, a class on the defensive against stereotypes of effeminacy and its own historical obsolescence" (33). This tension is embodied in the novel by the characters of Sir Michael Audley, a member of the declining landowning class, his heir, Robert Audley, who (at least nominally) does work in the public sphere as a barrister, and George Talboys, the son of a rich family who must seek work after his father disowns him for his choice of wife.

In Veblen's terms, Sir Michael is the man of leisure who is able to engage in the needed consumption and leisure activities; Robert, who has an occupation (or at least is "supposed" to have one), is the man who needs dependents to engage in leisure activities on his behalf (35). This distinction between the two, however, is not a precise or neat one. The novel charts Robert's journey from dilettante to detective, during which he learns the value of intellectual labor as he works to uncover the secret that Lady Audley is hiding. But initially, Robert does his best to act like a man of leisure, even during his time at the office. His work activities consist of "smoking his German pipe," "reading French novels," and stepping outside the office to "stroll into the Temple Gardens, and lying in some shady spot" where he "would tell the grave benchers that he had knocked himself up with overwork" (35). While Veblen argues that respectable men were increasingly expected to engage in conspicuous work, Robert tries to continue living as if he were a man of leisure. Only his investigative work into Lady Audley's past helps him to become a man who does legitimate work and has dependents (including Clara and George) to engage in vicarious leisure for him. After he has successfully solved the mysteries of Lady Audley's past and of George Talboys's disappearance, Robert muses, "Was it I to whom life was such an easy merry-go-round? Was it I who was one of the boys who sit at ease upon the wooden horses, while other boys run barefoot in the mud, and work their hardest in the hope of a ride when their work is done? Heaven knows I have learnt the business of life since then" (394). Robert's metaphor of the merry-go-round fits nicely with Veblen's depiction of vicarious leisure, as the rider sits and watches the world while riding comfortably and entirely without purpose, as the ride covers the same ground over and over again.

Immediately after reflecting on how he has changed in regard to useful occupation, he notes that he needs a wife (specifically Clara) – a dependent to do the job of vicarious



consumption and leisure for him now that he has dismounted the carnival ride in favor of doing productive work. Clara plays an important role in reinforcing the conspicuous consumption model provided by Veblen; before she agrees to marry him, she lays out the role that she expects him to play as a husband: “She recommended Mr. Audley to read hard and think seriously of his profession, and begin life in real earnest. It was a hard, dry sort of existence perhaps which she recommended; a life of serious work and application, in which he should strive to be useful to his fellow-creatures, and win a reputation for himself” (428). If she is to be a wife whose entire existence is focused on engaging in activities that are designed to bolster her husband’s reputation rather than to produce useful results, she argues that Robert needs to be prepared to take on the counterpart role of the productive entrepreneurial man. Clara’s demand largely does the trick – though their union is only fully complete when it is complemented by the presence of George, who acts as a second dependent. By the time Robert inherits Audley Court, it seems likely that he will be ready to help transform the job of the gentleman of leisure into an entrepreneurial occupation. Robert’s growing acceptance of the idea of work rather than leisure as his prominent activity puts him on the right side of history, as gentlemen like Sir Michael, who must leave England to escape damage to his reputation that no level of conspicuous consumption could help mend, are becoming an endangered species.

The novel also dramatizes the difficulty that some men accustomed to a lifestyle of leisure face even when they acknowledge the need for an occupation and actively pursue public work. George Talboys, Lady Audley’s first husband, is the son of a wealthy family who had purchased an officer’s commission in the army. When he meets Helen Maldon, who later transforms herself into Lady Audley, he marries her despite her poverty; his father, upon hearing that George “had married a penniless little girl,” cuts him off, leaving him with only “two

thousand pounds” (23). But that money is spent profligately, as the couple attempts to replicate the kind of leisure lifestyle that George’s family would have been fiscally able to live. When it becomes increasingly clear that he needs to find another means of income, George explains that he “ran up to London, and tried to get a situation as a clerk in a merchant’s office, or as an accountant, or book-keeper, or something of that kind. But I suppose there was the stamp of a heavy dragoon upon me, for do what I would I couldn’t get anybody to believe in my capacity” (24). While George attributes his failure to employers’ prejudice against his military bearing, the issue of his capacity is perhaps also significant here: specifically, the capacity of a person who has been raised to live a life of conspicuous leisure to engage in sustained, regular work. But perhaps the two issues – that of being a “heavy dragoon” and that of being a rich man, and therefore a poor worker – are not so disparate. When the direness of the Talboys’ financial problems are further explored later in the text, Helen/Lucy’s dismay over their poverty makes it clear that she assumed marrying a dragoon would ensure a wealthy and comfortable future for her:

I thought dragoons were always rich .... Girls always want to marry dragoons; and tradespeople always want to serve dragoons; and hotel-keepers to entertain dragoons; and theatrical managers to be patronised by dragoons. Who could have ever expected that a dragoon would drink sixpenny ale, smoke horrid bird’s-eye tobacco, and let his wife wear a shabby bonnet? (185-86)

She speaks here from the point-of-view of a person who has always seen Veblen’s model of conspicuous consumption from a disadvantaged position; because her father was poor, and therefore never able to aspire to engage in the kind of consumption required to be respectable, she cannot fathom the idea that conspicuous consumption of the kind described here could be

anything other than a sign of legitimate wealth. The notion that a dragoon might be participating in these sorts of activities – courtship, exchange, and leisure – without sufficient capital does not seem to have crossed her mind, even as she and George live a lifestyle far above his actual financial means. To the outside world, George’s military past may indeed act as a sign of his financial status. To be a dragoon means to consume conspicuously, even if the occupation also theoretically involves some of the most difficult work (military engagement) possible. To find employment, George must move outside of the sphere that uses his appearance and his past exploits as a means for determining his fitness for work: for George, that means seeking the less-rigid social world of imperial Britain. George proves that he is capable of doing serious work when he travels to Australia and toils for years in the gold fields before striking it rich; but even that manual labor is associated with risk and with the acquisition of high-quality and rare materials.

While the male characters in Braddon’s novel are struggling to secure a place for themselves within the shifting Victorian economic landscape, women in the novel are largely shut out of the economic world entirely. The novel demonstrates that, in order to participate in male-dominated systems of exchange, women must transform themselves into active creatures who are subsequently judged as transgressive, unfeminine, and even mad. Men are allowed to evolve and change in response to their shifting financial and social conditions; Robert and George can learn to do real work rather than simply engaging in leisure activities. However, women who attempt to change in similar ways are swiftly normalized and marginalized. The transgressive nature of female work is reinforced by the way that the term “work” is used by Braddon when characterizing activity in which women are engaged. Indeed, when the word

“work” is used in the text in terms of tasks completed<sup>46</sup>, it refers more frequently to work done by women than by men<sup>47</sup>: either to the physical labor performed by female servants (such as the “work” done by Mrs. Maloney, Robert’s Irish laundress [158]), or, more commonly, to the domestic labor in which the female characters are engaged – that work identified by Veblen as designed to either to support the reputation of a husband or simply to lack productivity and purpose. Work done by Phoebe Marks includes darning her husband’s socks and “knitted work” designed to improve the shabbiness of the bedroom she shares with her husband (318). Robert first encounters Clara Talboys over a basket of “work”: “There was a second person in the large room, towards whom Robert glanced after saluting Harcourt Talboys, doubtful how to proceed. This second person was a lady, who sat at the last of a range of four windows, employed with some needlework, the kind which is generally called plain work<sup>48</sup>, and a large wicker basket, filled with calicoes and flannels, standing by her” (189). Clara’s association with handicrafts – appropriate, feminine work – signals her position in the narrative as the ideal feminine figure. Although she is a foil for Lady Audley, Clara is not powerless – but she is only able to exercise the amount of authority allotted to her by the economic system in which she exists. She can

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<sup>46</sup> The sense I’m using roughly corresponds to *OED* definition 4a: “Action involving effort or exertion directed to a definite end, esp. as a means of gaining one’s livelihood; labour, toil; (one’s) regular occupation or employment.”

<sup>47</sup> Men’s work is mentioned in the text – especially in terms of the work done by male servants (like valets) or the farm work done by Luke Marks. George works in Australia and has to do “hard work” to get himself out of the well (434); Robert gains a new understanding of what it means to work. However, these uses of the word are straightforward and lack the nuanced, multiple meanings of “work” done by women; the word is also used less frequently when discussing men’s occupations and activities than that of women.

<sup>48</sup> It is important to note, however, that the “work” in which Clara engages is more useful than the frivolous, decorative needlepoint that Lady Audley does – this work, which includes the mending of clothes – serves an actual purpose. Even so, it is still marked as feminine work.

encourage Robert to work, and she can engage in vicarious and conspicuous leisure underpinned by non-productive work, but she does not attempt to exceed the bounds of her socially-acceptable role.

Of course, this is precisely what Lady Audley does: dissatisfied with her position, she creates a fictional self and engages in transgressive exchange practices in order to secure a more powerful and more prestigious role for herself. But she starts out just like Clara, associated with a basket of work – albeit needlepoint that is wholly decorative. When George searches for his wife at the beginning of the novel, he arrives in Ventnor to find her supposedly dead, with her “work” one of the only trace of her that is left behind: “Her work-box, with an unfinished piece of work; her album, full of extracts from Byron and Moore, written in his own scrawling hand; some books which he had given her, and a bunch of withered flowers in a vase they had bought in Italy” (43). Abandoning her unhappy position as the maybe-widow of George Talboys and the daughter of the destitute Captain Maldon requires Lady Audley also to abandon the pretense of domestic work in favor of actual, productive occupation and employment. The narrator refers to the birth certificate found and confiscated by Phoebe and Luke Marks as “hidden relics” (28), but the relic of the work-box is the one displayed in public as a means of sanctifying the “dead” wife and mother. Moreover, it is the relic that Lady Audley intended to serve as real evidence that she was no longer in existence. Like Clara, the work-box becomes associated with her; but her dissatisfaction with the purposeless life led by the domestic woman, whose work serves to benefit others and provides no real rewards for her, leads her to leave the work-box, essentially, for dead.

The term “work” – and more specifically the phrase “woman’s work” – is used once more in the novel, this time by Robert. While trying to solve the mystery of George’s disappearance, he muses,

I hate women .... They’re bold, brazen, abominable creatures, invented for annoyance and destruction of their superiors. Look at this business of poor George’s! It’s all woman’s work from one end to the other. He marries a woman, and his father casts him off. He hears of the woman’s death and he breaks his heart—his good, honest, manly heart, worth a million of the treacherous lumps of self-interest and mercenary calculation which beat in women’s breasts. He goes to a woman’s house and he is never seen alive again... (208)

Woman’s work here is transformed from the decorative arts of needlework and embroidery to abstract notions of deception and scheming. And yet, their work is still focused on men – but this time, instead of working to please men and ensure their continued respectability in society, women are depicted as thwarting men’s goals, wrenching them away from their filial connections, causing them grief and pain, and – it is implied, at least – even ending their lives. Women are heartless creatures here rather than angels in the home, and it is notable that Robert casts their nefarious acts in largely economic terms. This work is done out of “self-interest” after careful “mercenary calculations,” designed to extract maximum profit with minimum effort. Their hearts, cold and calculating as they are, are measured against men’s “good, honest, manly” hearts in terms of worth, with men’s hearts at an exchange rate of a million to one woman’s heart. Here too roles seem to be reversed; while the nineteenth-century considered women to be the heart of the home, able to influence all members of their household with their superior morality and affections, men are depicted as the true location of unselfish and genuine love.

Robert's invective against women's "work," which is sparked both by his suspicions of Lady Audley and by his realization of his growing attraction to Clara Talboys, may reek of misogyny; however, it also represents one of the few sustained passages in the novel in which a male character considers women as powerful creatures. Although he considers them to have overwhelmingly negative effects on men, he also acknowledges their level of savvy and control. He describes the "petticoat government" run by wives in detail, as they herd their husbands through life: "She drags her husband on to the woolsack, or pushes him into Parliament. She drives him full butt at the dear, lazy machinery of government; and knocks and buffets him about the wheels, and cranks, and screws, and pulleys" (207-08). Women are acknowledged to be superior managers and motivators, and yet they are still cast in the supporting role, making sure that institutions like the government run, but doing so by compelling their husbands to work, not by engaging themselves. Even so, Robert recognizes that powerful people inevitably are dissatisfied with merely working to support others. He notes that women are "the stronger sex, the noisier, the more persevering, the most self-assertive sex" and proclaims, "They want freedom of opinion, variety of occupation, do they? Let them have it. Let them be lawyers, doctors, preachers, teachers, soldiers, legislators..." (208). Here he goes beyond acknowledging women's capability and presses toward recognizing their dissatisfaction with the "work" they have been consigned to do. He does not just state that women are capable of engaging in work within the public sphere but argues that they *want* to do that work. Even so – as is always true with Robert's character – there is a caveat to his sudden burst of feminism. He wants women to be afforded more power and more opportunities, but only if it will silence them. After his list of professions that women should be allowed to occupy, he adds a qualification: "...but let them be quiet—if they can" (208). It is female chatter that galls Robert, and he argues that women talk

endlessly about meaningless domestic tasks because they have been shut out of productive work: “Forbid them to hold forth upon the freedom of nations and the wrongs of mankind, and they’ll quarrel with Mrs. Jones about the shape of a mantle or the character of a small maid-servant” (208). Robert seems to recognize that women focus on domestic issues because they are forced to engage in acts geared toward the conspicuous display of leisure and wealth, but he only wants to allow them to step into the shoes of the entrepreneurial man if they will cease all noise – therefore continuing to exist invisibly within the public sphere, able to be ignored and, therefore, continuing their marginalization.

Lady Audley, of course, is one of the few women in the novel who takes on an occupation outside the home.<sup>49</sup> This kind of woman’s work – “hard work” (347) – is what it takes for her to separate herself from an economic situation in which she is beholden to men. Initially, this work is done merely to try to keep herself and her family afloat after they are abandoned by George. Her resentment of this – of having to provide for her family in the absence of the husband who is supposed to be responsible for doing the providing – is clear:

I looked upon [George’s departure] as a desertion, and I resented it bitterly – I resented it by hating the man who had left me with no protector but a weak, tipsy father, and with a child to support. I had to work hard for my living, and in every hour of labour – and what labour is more wearisome than the dull slavery of a governess? – I recognized a separate wrong done me by George Talboys. His father was rich; his sister was living in luxury and respectability; and I, his wife,

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<sup>49</sup> The other women with jobs include people like Phoebe Marks, Lady Audley’s maid, and the servants who work for Robert Audley.



and the mother of his son, was a slave allied for ever to beggary and obscurity.

(347)

Always aspiring to a higher social status, Lucy cannot bear to see other women living more respectable lives while she is forced to labor merely for subsistence. She casts herself in the role of a slave, forced to do work without her own consent and without benefits for herself. But she is only disdainful of her work while it is done under circumstances over which she has no control. When she decides to leave her family and start a new life for herself, she paints a much different picture of her working life. It is no longer slavery; it is an opportunity for change. She takes the initiative to reply to an advertisement for a governess in *The Times*, and “presented [herself]” to her employer “under a feigned name” (348). With her newly-created identity comes a new sense of agency, and for the first time, she is a partner in an economic exchange rather than a commodity to be traded.

Robert Audley may (conditionally and flippantly) condone the entry of women into the public world of work, but the novel reinforces over and over the near impossibility women face in trying to break through the barriers set up by society to keep them out of the world of economic exchange. Jennifer M. Woolston identifies women in the novel, most significantly Lady Audley, who attempt to transgress these social boundaries as “economic ‘other’” (157). She argues,

Lady Audley serves as an economic “Other,” climbing the social ladder through marriage while additionally being defined by her ensuing worldly possessions.

Marriage to Sir Michael was a dream come true for Lucy ... [and] a very fortunate end to Lucy’s poverty, although its very proposition aligned her with the opposite of wealth. Instead of being a rich socialite, Lucy came from the other end

of the economic spectrum. Here, in a very basic way, Lucy is defined as “Other” in that she is a lucky outsider about to enter the world of opulence... (157)

Woolston’s framework here is helpful, though it benefits from further complication. Lady Audley is not merely an economic other because she is poor; she is marginalized by an economic system that does not recognize the capability, aptitude, or desire of women to make a change from work that merely supports others to productive work of their own. Marriage to Sir Michael makes Lucy richer in terms of possession, but it does not make her his equal in terms of economic power. However, her decision to change her identity and become first Lucy Graham and then Lady Audley marks a significant shift in the way she views herself and is viewed by others. Helen Maldon is an economic “other” because she is located entirely outside of the structures of economic power. She is an object to be exchanged and consumed, and a dependent whose sole purpose is work geared toward supporting the respectability of husband, father, and son. Lucy Graham/Lady Audley is a figure of agency who is treated as a partner in economic transactions rather than a commodity to be traded. Her personal power grab is connected to her decision to become a consumer whose purpose is the bolstering of her own social position; her object of consumption, essentially, is men.

Braddon also uses marriage in more complicated ways to discuss the problematic economic situation of women during the period. Proposals of marriage are characterized over and over again in the novel as sites of economic exchanges between men and of economic marginalization of women. From the start, George Talboys makes it absolutely clear that Helen Maldon had no part in the negotiations over their marriage; it was a transaction conducted solely between George and Captain Maldon:

I saw through all [Captain Maldon's] shallow tricks to catch one of us for his pretty daughter. I saw all the pitiful, contemptible, palpable traps he set for big dragoons to walk into. I saw through his shabby-genteel dinners and public-house port; his fine talk of the grandeur of his family; his sham pride and independence, and the sham tears in his bleared old eyes when he talked of his only child. He was a drunken old hypocrite, and he was ready to sell my poor little girl to the highest bidder. Luckily for me, I just happened then to be the highest bidder; for my father is a rich man ... and as it was love at first sight on both sides, my darling and I made a match of it. (23)

Helen here becomes an object to be traded within an economic exchange between men. Her father uses her beauty as bait and clumsily tries to engage in the kind of conspicuous consumption that would make the family seem respectable to potential buyers. Where the language of economics regarding marriage transactions often crops up in Victorian texts – it is not unusual to see negotiations over a woman depicted in these kinds of terms of exchange – here the transaction takes on an especially blatant tone. Maldon does not merely offer his daughter to potential suitors (who can then also offer him a more stable and respectable financial situation in return); he auctions her off, suggesting that wealth is the only important quality to be had in a future son-in-law.<sup>50</sup> George adds, as a postscript, that he and Helen were in love, and suggests that she was an equal partner in deciding to marry (they “made a match of it”), but that notion is undercut by all of the language that goes before. Marriage, as depicted here, is an

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<sup>50</sup> Captain Maldon's selling of Helen “to the highest bidder” is reminiscent of the infamous wife-sale in a later novel, Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), which I will explore in more detail in the following chapter.

economic exchange of women between men that must be covered over by assertions of romance as a way of legitimizing it within the increasingly dominant cultural narrative of marriage based on romantic love.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, George depicts himself as the “lucky” partner in the exchange, because he had enough money (courtesy his wealthy father) to place the winning bid. Helen’s luck – at gaining a husband who is kind to her, or at having a more secure financial situation for herself, or even at falling in love with someone – is not considered here. She is an object to be transferred from one party to another, and George’s “purchasing” of her is a means of reinforcing his own respectability and his social standing. She becomes the conspicuously consumed object, a marker of her husband’s status because she is a marker of his purchasing power.<sup>52</sup>

It should come as no surprise, then, that when Helen – now Lucy Graham – later decides to try to further assert her own economic freedom, she chooses the conspicuous consumption of *husbands* as a way to elevate her own status. Lucy has been used as an object by men to elevate their status for years, first as a daughter who could lure in a wealthy son-in-law, and then as a lovely wife who represents her husband’s financial power. When Lucy commits bigamy, she is merely parroting the behavior of the men in her life; she has seen them use marriage as a means

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<sup>51</sup> Stephanie Coontz argues that the “Victorians were the first people in history to try to make marriage the pivotal experience in people’s lives and married love the principle focus of their emotions, obligations, and satisfactions” (177). For more on the cultural shift from marriage based on economic and social concerns to the concept of marriage based on love, see her *Marriage: A History* (2005).

<sup>52</sup> Robert Audley’s fantasy of his future daughters’ marriages is equally problematic in economic terms. He imagines that his daughters would “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” (120). Here Robert imagines the development of the female commodity from birth to education to the finished state, in which he will simply “deliver” his product “into the hands” of waiting consumers, removing all agency from the women in question.

of acquiring power and respectability, and she follows their example of conspicuous consumption by marrying another husband. Wives – those all-important dependents who do the vital work of vicarious consumption and leisure – are crucial to a man’s ability to take on employment while still living a respectable life. Lucy emphasizes repeatedly that a respectable life is the one she wants, and in order to acquire it, she must act like a man acquiring dependents to consume vicariously for her.

And indeed, where the marriage contract between Helen Maldon and George Talboys was settled by *Captain* Maldon and George Talboys, the marriage of Lucy Graham and Sir Michael Audley is depicted as a transaction between a man and a woman. Once Sir Michael is satisfied that Lucy does not love any other man (or, indeed, as she exclaims, “I do not love any one in the world” [17]), he offers, “Well, Lucy, I will not ask too much of you. I dare say I am a romantic old fool; but if you do not dislike me, and if you do not love any one else, I see no reason why we should not make a very happy couple. Is it a bargain, Lucy?” (17). When Lucy agrees to this proposal, she is acquiescing to a statement of companionate marriage, one in which her future husband asks her to accept him only if she loves no other person and, importantly, does not dislike him. But even more important than that, this proposal, unlike her previous one, is a bargain rather than a sale. She is not a commodity to be exchanged here: she is the equal partner in an economic deal. And, significantly, she is not being asked to give “too much” of herself away in the process – she is able to negotiate her own position, acquiring a new husband and participating in a mode of conspicuous consumption where she is not herself the object being consumed.

After Lucy becomes Lady Audley, she is still a wife within Veblen’s conspicuous consumption model, and so her role is still in part to look, act, and consume in a way that reflects

well on Sir Michael's reputation. But her new financial power also allows her to begin to engage in acts of economic significance on her own terms. Even after her "bargain" with Sir Michael, she continues to be able to make her own economic decisions. She begins hiring her own staff (Phoebe Marks) and distributes financial assets as she sees fit: "I had been poor myself, and I was now rich, and could afford to pity and relieve the poverty of my neighbours. I took pleasure in acts of kindness and benevolence. I found out my father's address and sent him large sums of money, anonymously" (348-49). Of course, by engaging in acts of charity, Lady Audley does not step outside of the bounds of acceptable female behavior of the time period; however, the agency that she is able to exercise after the acquisition of her second husband is significant. No longer obliged to work only for the benefit of her husband, she can choose to do work that benefits the disadvantaged, rather than engaging only in non-productive work that supports her husband's reputation within the leisure culture. Moreover, supporting her father is now an act of choice rather than an obligation – she is able to decide to share her wealth with him rather than toiling solely to provide him with the ability to continue living beyond his means.

But Lady Audley is only able to pull off her economic coup because she cloaks her ambition in the non-threatening garb of proper Victorian femininity. She may have transcended her previous status as an exchangeable object, but she hides herself within the realm of things to keep her crimes secret. Fiona Peters notes that "women, viewed as both the cause of desire and desirous object, can use the masquerade to undermine her position as image," ultimately deriving power from the ability to perform femininity through conspicuous consumption (201). Indeed, one of the reader's first extensive glimpses into Lady Audley's character comes when Phoebe and Luke Marks make a secret visit to her apartments. Viewed through Luke's eyes, which are unaccustomed to looking on such expansive displays of conspicuous consumption, the objects in

Lady Audley's rooms become an intrinsic part of her characterization. We see "a heap of dresses" scattered carelessly about the room, "exactly as its occupant had left" them, and a "massive walnut-wood and brass inlaid casket" full of "diamonds, rubies, pearls, and emeralds," with "ornaments glittering on white satin cushions" (33). Like any spectacle, Lady Audley's dazzling possessions attempt to distract the viewer from perceiving the truth beneath the display. Similarly, the portrait of Lady Audley that sits unfinished in her bedroom – the one that causes such a reaction in George Talboys – both represents the surface reality of Lady Audley and hints at something unstable beyond the surface, something that cannot be detected on looking at the real person.

However, not all of the objects with which Lady Audley hides her true self are such sumptuous luxury goods. One of the most significant associates between the woman and an object is that of Lady Audley and the letter she writes to Alicia. When Robert reads the note, he decides that his new aunt can essentially be reduced to paper and ink: "...upon my word I think that if I had never seen your aunt<sup>53</sup>, I should know what she was like by this slip of paper. Yes, here it all is – the feathery, gold-shot, flaxen curls, the pencilled eyebrows, the tiny straight nose, the winning childish smile, all to be guessed in these few graceful up-strokes and down-strokes" (66). While a letter might often be viewed as a representation of a person's character, based on the views and thoughts expressed in its content, Robert searches for surface characteristics – does the handwriting *look* like Lady Audley looks? Does the form of each letter match the form of her face, her hair, and her smile? One of the physical characteristics that Robert imagines he can divine from the text – Lady Audley's "pencilled eyebrows" – is a clear sign of the constructed and performative nature of her appearance (as she is deliberately changing them for

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<sup>53</sup> This is Robert's mistake; Lady Audley is *his* aunt, but she is Alicia's stepmother.

some reason, be it conforming with expected standards of beauty or attempting to make herself look different), but Robert does not catch on, even when comparing one penciled object (the letter) to another (the eyebrows). Woolston argues, “Feminine performance is what allows for Lady Audley’s success, as she effectively succeeds in her fortune-hunting and becomes—at least for the men around her—equated with possessions” (158). While women like Phoebe and Alicia are able to more easily look past the glut of objects that blocks the truth about Lady Audley’s identity, men like Luke Marks and Robert are more susceptible to the performative distraction.

The letter that Lady Audley sends to Alicia may be another successful component of her performance of distraction through the use of objects, but a second piece of paper holds the key to dismantling her spectacle. Although she uses conspicuously-consumed objects as a way to express her power and to confirm her respectability, Lady Audley’s failure to disassociate herself completely from sentimental and personal connections to things eventually causes her downfall. She successfully uses more and more possessions to shield her true self from the world, but she also uses them to try to mask the objects that actually can speak volumes about her identity: her son’s birth certificate and a lock of his hair, both of which are stolen by Phoebe and Luke Marks. While Lady Audley’s madness – I would contend her *performance* of madness in the face of her impending loss of power<sup>54</sup> – eventually crumbles the carefully-constructed identity that allowed her to exercise agency and economic power, it is ultimately her inability to disengage totally with the evidence of her previous life of domestic work that leads to her downfall. She is able to leave behind her work-box, but she is not able to destroy all links between her new and old lives.

Bigamy gives Lady Audley power and an entry point into the male-dominated world of

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<sup>54</sup> I tend to agree with Elaine Showalter’s classic reading of the novel, in which she argues that Lady Audley’s real secret is that she is not mad at all.



commodity exchange, but Braddon is perhaps suggesting here that, until women are able to divorce themselves completely from the roles that society imposes upon them (marriage, motherhood, domestic work), they will not be able to participate equally in the economic system. Indeed, the act which allows Lady Audley to flourish as an equal to men in economic terms – the act of bigamy – is a criminal, illicit act; she must step outside the bounds of law and morality in order to access the kinds of power that would make economic agency possible. As men must evolve from creatures of aristocratic leisure to entrepreneurial businessmen in order to survive in the changing Victorian economic world, so women too must be prepared to see themselves differently if they are to be able to break through the barriers that prevent them from reaching equal status within that world.

Such changes are not easy to make, especially when they require an individual to radically rethink her place within a society that has nurtured her in the direction of certain goals. For Greg Howard, Lady Audley's madness is not only genuine but also a specific response to her economic exclusion. He argues that

Lady Audley's spectacle can be traced to the economic realm open to Robert and Sir Michael yet denied to women participants .... If Lady Audley's attempts at "invasion" fail miserably in *this* book, this failure only highlights the paucity of options open to her even if she had made different choices. If Lady Audley had allied herself to the burgeoning capitalist identity, instead of to the aristocrat, there would be no space for her to do so apart from the strictly domestic space of the housewife—the path she chooses when she marries Sir Michael, but which unsurprisingly fails to empower her. From these conditions springs the larger

question of madness as a response to feminine exclusion from the economic battlefield. (48)

While Howard's reading fails to take into account the varied and nuanced roles of the "housewife" within different marital situations (something that Veblen's theories help to clarify in terms of a wife's roles and responsibilities regarding vicarious consumption and leisure), the notion that the novel demonstrates the incoherence that accompanies the Victorian woman's position within the economic world is an important point. Whether Lady Audley's madness is clinical or performative, such a reaction would not be an unreasonable one when the obstacles toward developing coherent economic agency are considered. Lady Audley must commit bigamy in order to be able to gain economic freedom and a stronger sense of personal agency. She must commit attempted murder and countless deceptions to attempt to sustain the fiction that keeps that agency intact. The real secret of the text, in the end, may be the one that even Lady Audley is unable to discover: a way for a woman to participate as a free, autonomous, and respectable adult in an economic world that values her most for her ability to pretend happily that her lifestyle of drudgery takes no effort at all.

Ultimately, of course, Lady Audley does swap one institutional framework for another, as she is removed from Audley Court and her marriage to Sir Michael and placed in an asylum. Like marriage, the asylum is designed to reinforce respectability – but the respectability of the larger social group, not of an individual. While bigamy novels often support the idea that women had a significant amount of power to make a family respectable, as characters like Helen Percy and Jane Eyre do in Gothic bigamy texts, *Lady Audley's Secret* demonstrates that there is a limit to the powers that a woman was able to exercise in her attempt to secure her own place in

respectable society. Women who work to serve the interests of their families are given more leeway to make changes that will enhance those families' reputations and social standing, but a woman like Lady Audley who works to assert her own independent respectability at the expense of others must be marginalized. The bigamy novel reveals the often-troubling gulf that lies between respectability and morality in Victorian society, but it generally does not go so far as to condone the behavior of women who would exploit and harm others in order to improve their own reputations. Edward Rochester can be forgiven for harming Bertha in order to preserve his family's reputation, and even a female bigamist like Braddon's Aurora Floyd can be forgiven for her crimes, because they are committed accidentally. But in the hands of the person who is supposed to be the moralizing and ameliorating force within the Victorian family, the wife, deliberate flaunting of the moral code to serve her own interests apparently cannot be presented in a sympathetic light. Indeed, as we will see in the next chapter, women who seek to bolster their own reputations at the expense of others can be figures of sympathy in the bigamy novel – but only if they code such actions within the framework of maternal concern for the welfare of children and family.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE BIGAMY NOVEL AND THE CRITIQUE OF BRITISH IMPERIAL RESPECTABILITY

Although the majority of bigamy novels written in the nineteenth century were published in the 1860s during the heyday of the sensation genre, bigamy novels continued to be written and published as the century drew to a close. And just as there are significant differences between the novels published before the 1860s and the sensation novels that followed, the bigamy novels that were published in the 1870s and 1880s addressed different concerns than those published a decade or two earlier. The late-nineteenth-century bigamy novel can be read as participating in conversations about one of the dominant narrative and cultural concepts of the time: imperialism, and more specifically, the crucial concept of respectability that underpins the imperial project. These imperial bigamy novels create a dialogue between their fictional universe and the real British Empire in two significant ways. One is perhaps the more obvious: many of these novels are set, at least in part, in the far-flung locales of the empire. The tendency of writers about bigamy to use the spaces of imperialism as spaces of convenience for their novels goes back much further than the novels of the 1870s and 1880s; Gothic bigamy novels often feature characters who are connected to spaces of colonial settlement and imperial power, as does *Lady Audley's Secret* and other sensation novels. However, late-nineteenth-century bigamy novels are more likely to actually follow their characters to these imperial places, describing and engaging with them, than these earlier texts, which often bring outsiders from the colonies into British spaces to cause conflict and uncertainty. *Jane Eyre's* Caribbean, for example, is crucial to the novel's plot: it is the birthplace of Bertha Mason (whose madness is linked repeatedly with her colonial heritage), is the location of Edward Rochester's ill-fated marriage to Bertha, and is also

the source of the money that allows Jane to operate independently at the end of the novel.

Without her Caribbean inheritance, Jane would have been unable to make the decision to flaunt the conventions of society and return to Rochester, whom she believes is still a married man. But Brontë never allows us to see Bertha's Jamaica or Uncle Eyre's Madeira; they are remote places off the page, where crucial things happen but where a woman like Jane Eyre is not able to go.<sup>55</sup>

The colonies are important in terms of their direct impact on English spaces rather than as problematic and complicated spaces in their own right.

The bigamy novel's use of the spaces of empire begins to shift during the rise of the sensation novel in the 1860s. Unlike its Gothic predecessors, the sensation bigamy novel *does* venture with its characters to faraway parts of imperial Britain. In the series of bigamy novels reviewed by Henry Mansel in the *Quarterly Review* in 1863, characters travel to Ireland, India, Australia, and the islands of the Pacific, both using and abusing imperial space as an opportunity to engage in acts which would gain significant disapproval in Britain proper. Away from the commitments they have made in Britain, characters can establish new lives and new relationships in areas of the world still under British domain but removed from the scrutiny of society back home. The duality of selfhood experienced by these characters, who frequently live one life in Britain and a radically different second life in the colonies, mimics the duality of the colonies themselves, which are British and not-British simultaneously. The bigamy novel is especially

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<sup>55</sup> We do, of course, actually visit one exotic location with one character in *Jane Eyre*: that would be India, with St. John Rivers, in the novel's famous epilogue. Critics have argued for years about why the novel, which is narrated by Jane and focused on her life, should end with a fleeting glimpse of St. John's death. If St. John is essentially a foil for Jane (complete with a name that echoes hers) – a male version of Jane who does not have the courage to choose companionate love over duty – it is fascinating that we follow him to a colonial fate that Jane has so utterly rejected. Perhaps the final paragraphs of the novel subtly hint that the reader should also choose England, not the dangerous spaces of the Empire, as a home?

well-situated to emphasize the liminal status of colonial spaces like Canada or Australia (which, significantly, were both settler colonies<sup>56</sup>), as bigamy itself is also a liminal status, causing confusion about legal roles and instability about personal identities. Even if, as Marc Ferro argues, the colonizers in spaces like these were successful when they were able to “‘reproduce’ [themselves] in different spaces” (Ferro qtd. in Johnson 59), that reproduction was never going to be absolutely perfect; these colonies were always going to be both Britain and not-Britain, something new created in between by the arrival of one culture in an area previously settled by another. Nicholas Birns notes that bigamy “images the ways in which Australia is both something uncanny and yet also a copy whose mores are reassuring in their familiarity. Australia’s status as a ‘second England’ parallels the sense of duplication inherent in bigamy, its combination of the difference of a new person with the sameness of a reproduced legal status” (188). The notion of duplication complicates the binaries often cited when thinking about both bigamy and imperialism: neither is an either/or situation.<sup>57</sup> Beyond exploring the complexities of the status of these faraway places, bigamy novelists also use imperial space as a convenient dumping ground of sorts, making bigamy possible by making characters disappear into the imperial mists. George Talboys’s voyage to Australia in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) and Jessie’s shipwreck in the Indian Ocean in Captain Lascelles

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<sup>56</sup> Robert Johnson notes that “the colonies of white settlement enjoyed a special status. They were regarded as a part of ‘greater Britain,’ and the settlers were the agents of British civilisation who took with them British tastes and values” (59).

<sup>57</sup> Anne McClintock argues for a similar understanding of the complexities of imperial power structures: “In my view, imperialism emerged as a contradictory and ambiguous project, shaped as much by tensions within metropolitan policy and conflicts within colonial administrations—at best, ad hoc and opportunistic affairs—as by the varied cultures and circumstances into which colonials intruded and the conflicting responses and resistances with which they were met. For this reason, I remain unconvinced that the sanctioned binaries—colonizer-colonized, self-other, dominance-resistance, metropolis-colony, colonial-post-colonial—are adequate to the task of accounting for, let alone strategically opposing, the tenacious legacies of imperialism” (15).

Wraxall's *Only a Woman* (1860) are prime examples of this tactic. Neither character actually disappears permanently, but because they are removed from England to such a remote part of the world, it is plausible that other characters would reasonably assume that their spouses are dead and that they are now free to begin new relationships; Birns calls this the "when the cat's away, the mice will play" problem caused by the British Empire's sheer size (188). The remoteness also allows for a surprise factor of sorts – because parts of the empire are so far from Britain, it is not only plausible that a person could disappear and never be heard from again but also possible that they could disappear and then unexpectedly reappear without warning.

Beyond using the empire as a convenient staging ground or complication for their plots, the later bigamy novelists engage with the questions surrounding the imperial project in a second and more complex, sustained way. For them, the empire – or, more specifically, the way that the British perceive themselves in relationship to that empire – becomes a problem in and of itself. At heart, bigamy novels function as a critique of British respectability, that notion that the British people are civilized and ordered and moral. That concept of respectability is also the underpinning for the entire imperial project, as the British justified their colonial endeavors by arguing that they were bettering the lives and the situations of the people they encountered, conquered, and exploited. British respectability is the justification that was used to attempt to certify that mission, and if the British are shown to be flawed and imperfect in their own marriages and relationships, questions about their suitability to rule others are inevitably called into question. As imperialism reached new heights in the 1870s and 1880s, bigamy novels begin to foreground the issues of imperialism and social respectability, juxtaposing them in a way that allows the reader to consider them as connected problems. In this chapter, I will be examining two bigamy novels, Anthony Trollope's *John Caldigate* (1879) and Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor*

of *Casterbridge* (1886), that were written during this period of acceleration of the British imperial project. Each novel uses a settler colony as the backdrop for the misdeeds committed by its characters (Trollope's novel visits Australia, while the trouble in Hardy's text results from one character's forced abandonment of Wessex for imperial Canada); places that are almost – but not quite – home are used as places to commit crimes that would be wholly unacceptable in familiar domestic spaces. But more than merely using the spaces of empire as conveniences, each novel uses those spaces to question the validity of British respectability as a national trait. I will argue that the spotlight that each novelist puts on the bad imperial behavior of their British characters – a kind of excessive indulgence and exploitation of colonial power that each novel ties to the use and abuse of marriage laws and contracts – acts as an implicit critique of imperialism as a concept. If the empire becomes a place of frivolity and exploitation, where Britons can escape the responsibilities and the unpleasantnesses of their lives back home or work to reestablish themselves in an attempt to regain respectability lost in Britain, rather than a place where Britons can participate in activities that create economic stability for the United Kingdom and that assert their cultural dominance by reproducing proper, respectable Britishness abroad in the colonies, the narratives of triumphant British imperialism and sober British responsibility are undercut entirely. But even while the novels illuminate the problems with assigning the moral policing of the globe to the often less-than-moral British, both novels suggest that it's ultimately the responsibility of their fellow Britons – and in the case of both *Caldigate* and *Casterbridge*, their fellow *female* Britons – to clean up their moral messes and reaffirm the dominance of British respectability once more.

### **Perceptions of British Imperial Responsibility and Respectability**



Before considering the way that Trollope and Hardy use bigamy plots to undercut the conventional view of the good imperial gentleman, it is important to establish precisely what that conventional view was. Of course, there was no one “accepted” opinion on the validity (or lack thereof) of the imperial project and its participants even during the nineteenth-century. Plenty of nineteenth-century voices were raised in opposition to the expansion of the Empire; there were arguments made against imperialism on moral, political, and practical grounds. Even so, a great deal of the journalism of the day accepted as inevitable the continued involvement of Britain in aggregating and maintaining colonial spaces. Take, for example, the attitude displayed toward the British administration of India in this *Saturday Review* piece on famine in Madras, published in September 1877:

To what extent the resources of India can be trusted to supply the necessary relief we do not know. So far as they are adequate for the purpose, they ought to be freely used; but the determination of the point at which they cease to be adequate must be left to the Government. What Englishmen are chiefly concerned with is what is to be done when the Government comes to the conclusion that the resources of India are exhausted. We cannot think that after all that has been said and written during the last six months about the importance of an open road to India, there will be much controversy or hesitation upon this head. If the maintenance of our Empire in India is a matter of such vast moment as it has almost universally been acknowledged to be, it will not be denied that that Empire should be exercised over living men rather than over dead bodies . . . . The question whether it is well for the State to attempt to stand between the Indian people and starvation may be an arguable question at another time. But it is not an

arguable question when the State has already committed itself to the conflict.

(256)

The unnamed writer is firm on several points about the imperial agenda, especially the underlying notion that the Empire is a vital part of the economic stability and success of Britain, and that consequently steps should be taken at any cost to preserve the Empire for economic reasons. Even so, the major argument of the piece is this: that once Britain has committed itself to involvement in a colonial space, it has a responsibility to carry out the necessary actions to ensure that the people in that space thrive. The writer does concede that there are continuing debates in British society about the extent of the government's responsibility to ensure and underwrite the basic survival of its people. Practicality in economic terms rather than compassion for a conquered people is clearly at the forefront of the writer's mind. However, the writer suggests that once Britain has taken control of a foreign land, there's no turning back.

Respectable Britain, embodied in the government that took over the rule of India two decades earlier, has shouldered the responsibilities of the care of the people in India and other colonial territories, and Britain's continued respectability demands that those imperial responsibilities be met.

This dominant strand of the public conversation about imperialism and its accompanying responsibilities also resonates in the presentation of the archetypal imperial hero in the literature of that period. Rudyard Kipling's famous enumeration of the responsibilities of the Englishman in the colonies, "The White Man's Burden" (1899), is perhaps the most famous work from a much larger body of late-nineteenth century texts that sought to canonize the British as good imperial guardians, and although both *John Caldigate* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* pre-date the poem, it is a good example of the attitudes toward colonialism that dominated during the last

quarter of the nineteenth-century.<sup>58</sup> The poem calls on the British to use their “natural” superiority to provide guidance and instruction for those who are their “natural” inferiors:

Take up the White Man's burden--  
Have done with childish days--  
The lightly proffered laurel,  
The easy, ungrudged praise.  
Comes now, to search your manhood  
Through all the thankless years  
Cold, edged with dear-bought wisdom,  
The judgment of your peers! (49-56)

For Kipling, the imperial project was indeed a burden – a responsibility that men have to govern the native peoples of the colonies, whether they want to do so or not. Imperialism is serious business, and it requires serious men to put away all frivolous pursuits and focus on the mission, even though it is depicted as one that is at best thankless and at worst fraught with resistance from those people the “white man” is trying to “civilize.” Kipling’s poem is not so much a celebration of the current state of colonial government but a reminder to readers that they, the respectable men of Britain, have a God-given responsibility to guide and shape the lives of the people they have conquered and to be good stewards of the land they have claimed as their own. But the reminder is ultimately just that – a reaffirmation of what most Victorian readers already believed to be true: that they were the dominant, civilized people who had been anointed by God

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<sup>58</sup> Again, however, it is important to remember that there were voices raised in opposition to the ideas that Kipling and some of his contemporaries expressed in their work. One of these voices belonged to Henry Labouchere, the politician and publisher of *Truth* magazine, who wrote “The Brown Man’s Burden” (1899) as a scathing satirical response to Kipling’s poem.

to be guardians of the entire world. The abominations committed by the British and the other “white men” of global imperialism were glossed over in the literature of the period as necessary, utilitarian actions taken to improve the status of the many, even at the expense of the few.

Kipling’s depiction of the serious, successful imperialist is one that resonates throughout the writing of the period. The entire narrative hinges on the innate ability of the British to be and do good things; if the British people are not innately moral and, even more important, innately civilized, their imperial project becomes suspect – possibly motivated simply by power and greed rather than by any “moral” agenda. Indeed, Laurence Kitzen argues that the dominant portrayal of imperialism by Victorian writers was in part calculated to assuage the fears of those who were worried that imperialism was not a good thing after all. He notes that the language of Christianity was invoked over and over again in the description of the “missions” of imperialist conquerors, “counterbalanc[ing] the acquisitiveness” that lay beneath the surface of Pears’ soap and crisp white linens (9). Acquiring new territory across the globe was good for the people whose land was confiscated by the British, because they would now be made good, moral, civilized Christians; and even more, it was better for the British, too. Kitzen states, “Acquisition now had to have a more clearly moral purpose” for those back home as well; the British could justify their actions with the notion that a “society that conscientiously carried out its imperial mandate was a morally better society, and the improved morality contributed to success in a potentially hostile world” (9, 10). In this understanding of the imperial agenda, the British would theoretically make life better for those they now governed abroad, and because of those positive actions, they would also be better citizens back in Britain (and would be better liked globally as well).

For Britons who traveled to imperial settler colonies like Canada and Australia, however, this notion of good imperial administration took on a slightly different tone. By the time that Trollope and Hardy were writing, the native peoples in these settlement colonies had already been marginalized to such an extent (or in some cases completely removed) that white British settlers were able to envision themselves as arriving in a new, virgin land, devoid of inhabitants and waiting for people to come and reap the benefits of the land and its resources. But although the narrative of the British people beneficently sharing their bountiful moral resources with a grateful native population is less applicable to settler colonies, the notion of upright British respectability still resonates throughout works written about colonies of white settlement. These settler colonies attempted to reproduce the cultural norms of Britain proper in faraway places, and the central values celebrated by Victorian society – domesticity, the centrality of the family, paternalism, and respectability – were as key in underpinning the narratives that attempted to validate the creation of these new Britains abroad as they were in attempting to validate the civilizing mission of imperialists who conquered lands still inhabited by native peoples. Tamara S. Wagner argues that the “changing representation of the growing settler world, of new homes across the empire, transformed the idea of home itself – arguably the most central idea in Victorian culture – and the modes of reproducing it” (1). “Home” was not now merely the islands of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland; British “home” was now being recreated in New South Wales, in Nova Scotia, and in other far-flung locales across the globe.

Settler colonists did not have to justify their taking of land from native peoples through complicated arguments about their moral superiority and their ability to civilize the native peoples they encountered; the native inhabitants of the lands that would be settled by white Britons had been marginalized almost to the point of total non-existence by previous “good”

imperialists before the settlers arrived. These settler colonists, however, still had to work to justify why they, and not other white Europeans, were entitled to the ownership of these new spaces. As other European powers, like France, Germany, Italy, and Portugal, began to amass large swaths of territory to bolster their own imperial agendas, British settlers needed to be able to justify their ownership of enormous settler colonies like Australia and Canada (which had, after all, been taken from the French). They did not need to argue that they were ordained by God to civilize natives, but they did need to argue that they were better suited than all others to act as stewards of these resource-rich lands. Again, the concept of respectability, especially as demonstrated through domesticity, is key to the justification of these imperial efforts. Wagner notes that the narrative of “the empire’s ‘domestication’ of the globe” was a central part of the notion that the British were doing good work by conquering new lands, marginalizing or “civilizing” their populations, and recreating a version of their own societies in these new places (9).

As bigamy novels strike specifically at the idea that the British are good stewards of their own domestic spaces, they also function as potentially damaging critiques of the settlement projects of places like Australia and North America. Recreating British cultural abroad meant canonizing Victorian values and cultivating them as the right and proper way of living in these newly-colonized spaces; by casting doubts on the Victorians’ claim to be the most upright and respectable people of the world, these novels also question the imperial project of cultural replication. Moreover, as Linda H. Peterson points out, a perfect recreation of Britishness abroad was simply impossible. In her exploration of the way British colonial women’s memoirs demonstrate the attempt to reconstruct British domesticity in North America, she notes that various texts show that frontier spaces are “not place[s] for reproducing the hierarchy of British

classes,” but instead are territories where “class assumptions are challenged” and the “middle-class version of domesticity tested” (64). Dorice Williams Elliott argues that the class and value systems that underpinned concepts of respectability were equally difficult to export to colonies like Australia:

Gentility in England, of course, depended not only on the amount of economic capital a family might possess, but also on an elaborate system of customs and behaviours viewed as “natural” or inherited, partly so as to exclude the nouveaux riches who had recently acquired wealth but could attain only outward forms of cultural capital . . . . Transferring this value system to Australia, or to any of England’s colonies, was problematic since few successful members of England’s gentry had reason to emigrate . . . . By the time that free emigration became common, Australia became a popular place for the English gentry to send younger sons and black sheep who were unable to maintain their position in England financially. Because these men had the manners and bearing of gentlemen, though without much economic capital, they and their families usually held an automatic advantage in Australian social circles. (30)

Because British colonial society is not a perfect replica of the social system back home – it reflects the values and norms of Britain, but it is also altered because of the different circumstances and situations encountered by those settling new spaces. In the bigamy novels that are set in these spaces, the attempts to transport British respectability to settlement colonies like Canada and Australia lead characters to examine the system more closely than they have before, and these examinations reveal some of the inconsistencies and problems that lay beneath the smooth façade. Distance, space, and freedom all lead to a radical reevaluation of the mores that

underpin “respectable” British society, and this kind of critical questioning of established norms ultimately threatened the status quo, especially when applied to fragile yet socially central institution like marriage. Bigamy novels always question (and, to some extent, reinforce) the validity and value of marriage; and as marriage and family are such central concepts within the narrative of Victorian British respectability, any novel that questions the way that marriage functions within imperial spaces also necessarily questions the narrative itself, especially as it is used to justify so many aspects of the imperial project. The imperial bigamy novel of the end of the century saw established and esteemed writers like Anthony Trollope and Thomas Hardy using stories of bigamy and betrayal within their novels, too. If sensational plots were a credible threat to British respectability even when deployed by writers who were not considered important (as is demonstrated in chapter three of this dissertation), having “serious” writers like Trollope and Hardy delve into sensational territory must have felt even more threatening. But in the hands of these two novelists, the perception of British respectability and the imperial project that it underpins is more than merely threatened; it is thoroughly questioned and, arguably, destabilized to the point of near destruction.

### **Respectability, Bigamy, and Empire: Trollope’s *John Caldigate***

Anthony Trollope’s imperial bigamy novel, *John Caldigate* (1879) is a text that incorporates aspects of many different genres: it is also a romance, a colonial adventure novel, a legal thriller, and even arguably a *bildungsroman*. Its eponymous main character, John Caldigate, is a young man who resembles lots of other literary young men of his era: he is a young man who violates the boundaries of respectability before learning his lesson and conforming to the norms of society. When the novel begins, the reader finds Caldigate plummeting from a position of



respectability to one of disgrace. He has gone up to university, fallen in with the wrong crowd, accrued a massive number of debts, and fallen out with his father as a result. He spends much of the rest of the novel trying to reestablish himself as someone worthy of inheriting his father's estate, a process which is significantly complicated by the reappearance of an actress with whom he had a relationship while in Australia. After regaining his fortune and returning to England, Caldigate seems to have reclaimed his respectable position, which is solidified when he marries the virtuous daughter of a family friend. But the careful façade he has constructed crumbles when he is accused, tried, and convicted of bigamy. In true Trollopian fashion, the combination of a character named Bagwax and a letter featuring a distinctive postmark exonerates him of the crime and restores his good name, but not before significantly clouding the image of the respectable gentleman in the empire.

Questions about what precisely makes a person respectable are raised over and over again in *John Caldigate*. The central conflict of the novel always revolves around Caldigate's relative level of respectability. He starts off as a man whose respectable position in society is absolutely assured: he is the son of a landed squire whose estate is entailed, ensuring that John will one day inherit both his father's title and his family's lands; he is also receiving an education befitting a gentleman, first at Harrow and then at Cambridge. Even his gambling habits do not disqualify him from respectable status; remember Veblen's discussion of conspicuous spending habits signaling membership in an elite class. The catalyst for his fall from respectability is his father's disapproval of his son's debts, which leads to a mutual agreement between father and son to break the entail and exclude John from inheriting his father's fortune. The younger Caldigate makes light of the change, insisting that he never wanted to be the guardian of the estate in the first place; however, all of his actions afterward, including his journey to Australia to attempt to

strike it rich (and, therefore, pay off his debts), are geared toward recouping his respectability and his inheritance. Although he is initially blasé about losing his future position, Caldigate swiftly realizes that he does indeed want to inherit his family's money, title, lands, and position.

Caldigate's decision to attempt to reclaim his respectability through travel to the colonies links him with a larger Victorian philosophy about degeneracy and the ruling class in Britain. McClintock explains, "In the public and political debates of the late nineteenth century, the swelling superfluity of women and men was figured as a malady and contagion in the national body politic that could be countered by leeching off the bad fluid and depositing it in the colonies. At the same time, much of this interest in colonial emigration was figured within the image of the family. Not a few of the 'riddlings of society,' as [H. Rider] Haggard called them, came from the depressed gentry and the upper classes" (237). More than merely a white man's burden, through this lens the spaces of the empire become a white man's opportunity – space with a vast range of available resources in which a "degenerate" member of society (including the disrespectable John Caldigate) could go to rehabilitate himself. Although transportation of convicts to Australian penal colonies had ceased by the time Trollope wrote *John Caldigate*, there's a sense that Victorians still viewed their colonies, especially settler colonies where a facsimile of British society had been established, as potentially rehabilitative spaces – albeit rehabilitative spaces that required voluntary commitment. And with the discovery of gold, these "degenerate" white men, who possessed pedigrees but lacked respect and resources, could use Australia as a means to gain both. McClintock quotes Victorian historian J.A. Froude's 1876 speech on the subject: "You who are impatient with what you call a dependent position or home, go to Australia .... There work for yourselves. There gather wealth .... Come back if you will as rich men at the end of twenty years. Then buy an estate for yourselves" (238). In a settler colony

like Australia, there was no need to act as a shepherd for others who needed to be “enlightened”; they were seen rather as blank slate opportunities, full of chances to discover new wealth and learn the true meaning of work. This empire is not a burden; it is a means for self-improvement.

On his journey back to respectability, the reader follows Caldigate through two imperial spaces – that of the Goldfinder, the ship that carries him to Australia, as well as the colony of Australia itself – as he attempts to remake himself as a respectable man worthy of his father’s esteem. The ship especially becomes a kind of liminal space of respectability where the normal rules of society do not necessarily apply:

There is no peculiar life more thoroughly apart from life in general, more unlike our usual life, more completely a life itself, governed by its own rules and having its own roughness and amenities, than life on board ship . . . . No work is required from any one . . . . Pater-familias receives no bills; mater-familias orders no dinners. The daughter has no household linen to disturb her. The son is never recalled to his books. There is no parliament, no municipality, no vestry. There are neither rates nor taxes nor rents to be paid. The government is the softest despotism under which subjects were ever allowed to do almost just as they please. (38-39)

But even though so many rules are relaxed on the ship, and the dull routines of daily life on land are largely absent, the narrator asserts that class distinctions are not erased but in fact are reinforced by the passengers themselves within the first and second class framework established by the ticketing process: “How completely the society has formed itself into separate sets after the three or four first days! How thoroughly it is acknowledged that this is the aristocratic set, and that the plebian! How determined are the aristocrats to admit no intrusion, and how anxious

are the plebians to intrude!” (38). Although Caldigate is theoretically entitled to first-class status on the vessel, his own personal assessment of his class status as he begins his voyage is, in part, signaled by his willingness to travel on a second-class ticket. He claims that doing so saves vital funds, which it does; but he also seems almost excited to be traveling as someone who is not held to higher standards of respectability. The space of empire becomes a place for Caldigate to play “poor,” testing out other kinds of roles and positions before returning to his place in the rigid British class system – Euphemia Smith even comments that Caldigate is “making a delightful experiment in roughing it” (51). But this experiment ultimately is clearly recognized as an experiment to others around him, who quickly identify him as a member of the elite, and his actions are not without the condemnation of those who wish to keep up the boundaries of class. Though Caldigate asserts his place as a second-class passenger on the boat, for example, other passengers routinely challenge that identity, claiming that they know him to be a gentleman and exhorting him to act the part to which he was born. The ship’s captain even intervenes at one point, at the behest of “the first-class passengers,” to advise him to stop acting like someone he is not (65).

The reason that the captain feels the need to warn Caldigate – Caldigate’s liaison with a fellow passenger, Mrs. Euphemia Smith – can be read as a continuation of his attempt to break free of the confines of conventional respectability. She withholds information about her identity, she consorts with male passengers in public without a chaperone, and even more damning, she is apparently traveling alone. Caldigate is attracted to her immediately, but that attraction is also partly rooted in the fact that he has decided that she is *not* a lady – not merely in sexual terms, but also in terms of her class position. Caldigate’s voyage into the empire offers him the chance to accrue the resources he needs to go back to Britain and reclaim his respectability, but it also

gives him the opportunity to live outside of those bounds of respectability while he is in the spaces of empire. Because of the restraints of propriety and respectability at home, Euphemia Smith is the kind of woman with whom Caldigate would only have been able to associate in private in England; he could not marry her, and he could not engage in a relationship with her that was not veiled in secrecy. Her own respectability is the issue: it is clear to nearly everyone else on the boat – and, ultimately, to Caldigate as well – that although she is “the most attractive female on board the ship,” Mrs. Smith is not a respectable woman (64). Euphemia is herself an actress, which immediately casts doubt on her moral fiber, but even more, she offers only hazy tidbits of information about her connections. Caldigate learns that she is the “nameless widow of some drunken player” and that she is also traveling to Australia for a fresh start (76). The fact that Euphemia will not share more about her past seems to excite Caldigate as well as unnerve him, but his passion for her outweighs any rational thought, and by the end of the voyage, he has promised to marry her.

The relationship is much more troubling to Caldigate’s fellow passengers, who wish to replicate the strict boundaries of class in Britain aboard the ship. But because Caldigate and Euphemia’s relationship violates only social norms, there is nothing that those on board who cling to the class system can do about it: “What could be done? Mrs. Smith could not be locked up. No one,—not even the Captain,—could send her down to her own wretched little cabin because she would talk with a gentleman” (65). The limited space of the vessel removes many of the normal “punishments” that society could exact for the kinds of social code violations that Caldigate and Euphemia engage in aboard ship. The close quarters aboard the *Goldfinder* lead to intense scrutiny of Caldigate’s behavior; however, the vast spaces of the empire itself allow him to conduct a relationship with Euphemia without further damaging his respectability back home.

He can engage in behavior that would be socially unacceptable in England without facing the consequences for doing so. He can return home without dealing with any stigma or disapproval over his behavior. Through Caldigate's character, Trollope hints that the ideal of the respectable British gentleman in the imperial world is a function of the way that he is perceived when he returns home rather than of the way he actually conducts himself in the vast reaches of the empire. Keeping up the notion of the good imperial Englishman requires that any misdeeds done while in the far reaches of the empire are kept completely hidden and separate from that Englishman's life at home in Britain.

Indeed, the reader watches Caldigate behave in non-respectable ways while in Australia: most notably, he continues his involvement with Euphemia and then abandons her, even after promising to marry her. He fails to uphold the rigid standards of the British class system – Trollope's narrator emphasizes that Caldigate allows some of the men with whom he is working to call him "John," a liberty he has rarely ever allowed anyone else, especially not anyone at home. He also engages in manual labor alongside the other men in the mining camp. Caldigate lives a life in Australia that doesn't conform to the expected standards of respectability of a gentleman in Britain. Imperial space is freeing – because it is both Britain and not-Britain, a character like Caldigate is able to live in a space that is familiar and relatively easy to navigate socially and still try out different kinds of lives without facing the criticism and scrutiny he would back home. Even so, Caldigate's actions are far from revolutionary. He may try on the lifestyle of someone of a different class, but in the end, all of his actions in Australia are still geared toward reclaiming his lost social position back in Britain. As Helen Lucy Blythe points out, Caldigate's attempts to live like a member of a lower social class are always an act – he is an actor in the imperial world as much as Euphemia Smith is an actress on the stage. Blythe notes

that “Caldigate’s privileged origins are inscribed on his body” – class is seen as something innate and inescapable (135). His rejection of traditional notions of class while in Australia is only temporary, and he is careful to completely separate himself from that imperial act when he returns to England. He cuts all ties to the business that has restored his fortune; he even abandons Dick Shand, the friend with whom he traveled to Australia in the first place. By returning alone, with no one else to bear witness to the life he has lived in the empire, Caldigate is able to represent himself as the respectable imperialist that Victorian writers carefully crafted. He is returned to his father’s good graces, and he’s even able to marry Hester over the objections of her family, who dislike him but cannot find a concrete reason to prevent the union.

But, as Laurie Langbauer notes, the plot of *John Caldigate* is cyclical, always returning again to the fallout from Caldigate’s continuing problem with respectability. She identifies this as a kind of “adolescent recurrence,” arguing, “In *John Caldigate*, the continued recurrence of adolescence organizes the classic plot of the prodigal son” (123). Langbauer argues that, in *Caldigate*, Trollope has a hero who does not undergo significant growth; instead, he makes the same mistakes over and over again, always succumbing to impulse and never learning to implement that very Victorian skill of self-control. She notes that Trollope’s publisher criticized the novel for having “a dangerous sameness throughout,” in large part because of Caldigate’s desire to continue to get what he wants without having to make uncomfortable sacrifices (123). Langbauer notes that “Caldigate redeems his undergraduate blunders, but then, years later, the whole cycle starts over; the mysterious woman comes back to accuse him of abandoning her, he is tried for bigamy, convicted, and imprisoned. The problems of adolescence repeat themselves in Caldigate’s middle-age” (123-24). In Langbauer’s view, Caldigate’s journey to the antipodes does little to rehabilitate him – he is still ultimately the same person he was at the beginning of

the novel, and that person is not the ideal imperial gentleman envisioned by the likes of Kipling. He still needs help from external forces in the reclaiming of his social position and his respectability. Indeed, as Caldigate does not seem to learn much over the course of the novel, the positive changes in his life are largely due to a combination of chance and of the influence of other people – most notably, that of his wife. When the empire fails to help Caldigate become respectable again, Trollope suggests that only a woman can manage to rehabilitate his image.

Caldigate's marriage to Hester, not his sojourn through the empire, is perhaps ultimately the most significant contributing factor to his (initially) reclaimed respectability. The empire wasn't the only entity that a Victorian "degenerate" like Caldigate could use to make himself respectable once more. Along with his use of imperial land as a means of restoring his financial status, the other significant way that Caldigate attempts to reestablish his respectability is through the acquisition of a respectable wife. The legacy of Coventry Patmore's "The Angel in the House" resonates clearly here; women are supposed to be a moralizing force for good. However, beyond actually improving the lives of those who enter their domestic spheres, these women can also significantly improve the social standing of their husbands. The right wife can be a major boon to the Victorian man in need of respectable rehabilitation, and that notion provides important subtext for Caldigate's wife search. He entertains three potential wifely choices before going to Australia – his cousin, Julia; his friend's sister, Maria; and the daughter of a family friend, Hester – but ultimately makes no promises to any of them before leaving to try to seek his fortune abroad. In a way, this decision is in and of itself a marker of Caldigate's sense of paternalistic responsibility; he declines to yoke himself to a woman when he has no means of supporting her. Oddly enough, however, two of the women (Julia and Maria) make clear overtures to him, even though they are aware that he is no longer his father's heir.



Questions of respectability do not appear to trump desire for these women; one makes physical advances, while the other smuggles a book of poetry into Caldigate's luggage before he embarks. It comes as no surprise, then, that upon his return to England Caldigate chooses Hester, the meekest and quietest of the three, to marry; once more, female silence is essential to female respectability. Until the illusion of Caldigate's post-imperial respectability is shattered, their marriage is largely conventional and successful.

Trollope's novel does not merely depict the journey of a man who is able to conform to the persona of the correct, respectable imperial gentleman; it also shows how fragile such a construction really is. In Trollope's case, the weapon used to try to dismantle Caldigate's respectability is an accusation of bigamy. Although he was careful to keep his life in Australia separate from his life in England, Caldigate is foiled when Euphemia Smith surfaces and accuses him of having committed bigamy by marrying Hester after marrying her in Australia. Unlike the majority of the sensation novels that preceded *John Caldigate*, which solve suspected cases of bigamy neatly, quickly, and – most importantly – privately through various discoveries and conveniences, Trollope takes his protagonist through the entirety of the legal process that results from the accusation: Caldigate is tried, publicly humiliated, and jailed before Euphemia Smith is proved to have been lying all along. The members of his family, especially Hester, who has just given birth to a son, are also forced to deal with the dismantling of Caldigate's reputation and with the repercussions for their own respectability. Caldigate is ultimately exonerated, and the plot is resolved happily for Caldigate and for Hester, but the damage of the accusation lingers in the mind of the reader. How many other troubling secrets are hiding in the imperial pasts of those “white men” whose imperial “burden” Kipling and his contemporaries so carefully outline? Caldigate is ultimately lucky, perhaps, that only one of his secrets, which he thought was

permanently confined to distant spaces both temporal and geographical, returns to haunt him. The other crimes he may have committed while in Australia – his wholly ungentlemanly treatment of Euphemia and his marginalization of Dick Shand, for example – remain hidden.

Even so, bigamy as a metaphor for the problematic status of the imperial Englishman is not without bite. Again, respectability is the key – bigamy is, at its heart, a crime that attempts to disguise improper behavior by veiling it in propriety. And the same is true for imperialism, as the exploitative and even horrific behavior of those who colonize and conquer a territory is frequently validated by paternalistic claims of civilizing, moralizing, and bettering a society – or, in the case of settlement colonies, by claims that British domesticity is a product worth exporting to new lands. The façade of respectability is central to both concepts, and in both cases, it is a façade that does not stand up well to scrutiny. Moreover, marriage can be read as an economic venture similar to that of colonialism, as territory (in the case of marriage, a bride and her dowry) changes hands and is claimed by a conquering power (or husband) in order to parlay that newly-conquered territory into political power or resources. In this vein, Anne McClintock carefully outlines the way that the imperialistic attitude toward foreign land mirrors that of men toward women’s bodies, using Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* as an example. The map that leads the travelers to the treasure-filled mine, McClintock argues, when inverted, “reveals at once the diagram of a female body. The body is spread-eagled and truncated—the only parts drawn are those that denote female sexuality” (3). Treasure lies within the bodily locus of female sexuality; the idea that the landscape/body lies in wait for the white settler to penetrate its hidden spaces and reap the resources found there reinforces the myth of colonized lands as empty and virgin, casting the colonizers as husband and the land as bride. McClintock notes this “doubled theme—the disavowed agency of women and the colonized,” arguing that “within colonial

narratives, the eroticizing of the ‘virgin’ space also effects territorial appropriation, for if the land is virgin, colonized peoples cannot claim aboriginal territory rights, and white male patrimony is violently assured as the sexual and military insemination of an interior void” (30). The struggle of women to claim the rights to their bodies, possessions, and identities from the dominating white patriarchal power, and the struggle of the colonized to claim the rights to *their* bodies, lands, and identities from the same power structure play out in parallels during the period in which Trollope was writing. If a nineteenth-century marriage involves a man claiming the rights and property of a woman, bigamy is essentially the exploitation of that power; through that lens, imperialism also involves the claiming, essentially, of too much land.

The linking of the feminine and the colonized suggest that the two categories have a common cause and perhaps, in some cases, a common enemy; it is perhaps surprising then that the character most willing to stand behind Caldigate after he is accused of bigamy is his wife, Hester. Although she finds herself in essentially the same position as a colonized person, Hester sides with the white male patrimony, whole-heartedly supporting the status quo and her marginalized position within it. Even after another woman steps forward to claim the identity that Hester has inhabited since her marriage – that of Mrs. Caldigate<sup>59</sup> – Hester stands firm. Such a stance is potentially fraught with incredible risk for Hester, whose central sense of self, as well as her legal identity, is at stake. Trollope was apparently keenly aware of this; Birns notes that Trollope even “flirted with calling the novel *Mrs. John Caldigate*,” which suggests that he had to know that, for a large portion of the narrative, “the suspense lies in just what the name denotes”

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<sup>59</sup> Much is made about the different identities that Euphemia Smith claims over the course of the text, from Mrs. Smith to Mademoiselle Cerrutti to Mrs. Caldigate, but uncertainty over whether she has the right to use those names is always present. One man asked to identify her expresses significant doubts: “The woman had certainly called herself Mrs. Caldigate, and had been called so by many. But she had afterwards been called Mrs. Crinkett” (354).

(189). But Hester sees no suspense involved in the situation at all, in large part because she refuses to recognize that any woman other than herself could inhabit the identity of Mrs. John Caldigate. She is quite literally immovable; after her parents compel her to leave her marital home and return to their house with her newborn son, she positions herself in the hall and refuses to move as a way to signal her loyalty to Caldigate. She tells her husband,

Unless it be to do your bidding, I will not stay here [in her parents' house] willingly. And, John, I will not move upstairs. I will remain here [in the hall]; and if they choose to give me food they may bring it to me. Unless they carry me I will not go to my bedroom. And they shall tear me to pieces before I will let them carry me. Poor baby! poor baby! I know he will be ill . . . but what can I do? They do not care for my baby. If he should die it will be nothing to them. (338)

Hester's refusal to willingly separate herself from her husband is absolute. She is even willing to sacrifice her child's health in her attempt, prioritizing her wifely role over her maternal one. But even this cannot have been an easy choice, as the stakes for Hester in this situation are incredibly high. Because her marriage is no longer certain to be legally valid, her identity and legal status are also in limbo. If Caldigate were proved to be her legal husband (as he eventually is), any stance she might take against him would damage their continuing marriage. But if he were found to be a bigamist, and legally married to Euphemia Smith, Hester would be left without an assured legal position; moreover, their son would be illegitimate, potentially losing all claims to the Caldigate estates. Trollope's sympathy for women who are marginalized by society resonates through Hester's plight. Jane Nardin notes that Trollope became more interested in the difficult situations that women like Hester often faced in the late Victorian era, to the point that his interest in women's issues ran the risk of alienating his readership: "Despite the fact that

attitudes toward women were growing more liberal as Trollope wrote them, his later novels were too liberal to please his public. Part of the falling off of Trollope's popularity during the 1870s undoubtedly resulted from the unorthodox view of women that the novels of this period suggested" (179).<sup>60</sup> If Caldigate's respectability was the major issue during earlier sections of the novel, the fallout from Euphemia's accusations places Hester's respectability squarely in the danger zone, and Trollope allows the character to make significant choices on her own about how to move forward. Rather than attempt to separate herself from a potentially damaging situation, Hester chooses total entrenchment, declaring her unwillingness to surrender her name, her family, or her place in society. Hester firmly believes that her husband is innocent of all charges, but to maintain that innocence is a significant risk. Other characters in the text know this, too – Hester's parents and brothers rail against Caldigate and strenuously try to save Hester from further degradation. Even so, the Boltons' attempts to break Hester's will fail, and "no further force would be justified. She had proved her power, and must be allowed to go" (347). In the face of social annihilation, and in the midst of an identity crisis that places her in a liminal state, Hester could choose simply to allow herself to be placed under the protection of another paternal force, that of her father and brothers. But instead she exercises agency to the point of shocking her family. Hester's decision to stand by Caldigate, risking her own respectability and her very sense of self, is one that she makes on her own.

The precarious position that Hester finds herself in as a result of her husband's possible bigamy mirrors in many ways the problematic positioning of the colonized self. Separation from

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<sup>60</sup> Curiously, Nardin excludes Hester from her study of the heroines of Trollope's later novel. She chooses instead to focus on more canonical Trollope novels, particularly texts from the Palliser series, including *The Eustace Diamonds* (1873) and *The Prime Minister* (1876). Her work, though it is now twenty-five years old, remains one of the few book-length analyses of women in Trollope's novels.

the power structure could prove more damaging than profitable, and although continuing to exist within the current relationship to the patriarchal imperial system may lead to corruption and even destruction, the options for a colonizer to throw off the oppressor and forge a new kind of identity are extremely limited. But although women like Hester were subject to some of the same patriarchal forces as the colonized peoples of the empire, both McClintock and Iveta Jusová point out that the relationship between British women and the imperial project was not so simple. McClintock notes that “colonial women” were “ambiguously placed” within the project of imperialism, suggesting,

Barred from the corridors of formal power, they experienced the privilege and social contradictions of imperialism very differently from colonial men . . . . colonial women made none of the direct economic or military decisions of empire and very few reaped its vast profits. Marital laws, property laws, land laws and the intractable violence of male decree bound them in gendered patterns of disadvantage and frustration . . . . Nonetheless, the rationed privileges of race all too often put white women in positions of decided – if borrowed – power . . . . As such, white women were not only hapless onlookers of empire but were ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting. (6)

Although white British women were subjugated in Victorian society just as colonized peoples were, McClintock’s point that they were nonetheless higher in the power structure is important. Hester may be marginalized by her society to the point that her own reputation totally hinges on that of her jailed husband, but she does have reason to support the status quo. To remove herself from the power structure entirely would be to jeopardize the small measure of power that she is

able to exercise. These complicated tensions existing within the female experience of empire also resonates through Jusová's readings of work by New Woman writers; she argues that even liberal nineteenth-century women could find themselves supporting a kind of "imperialist feminism," which Jusová contends was "inspired by [a] personal investment in the imperial status quo" and "endeavored to stress and capitalize on the connection between British upper-middle-class women's presumed bodily self-discipline and the state's imperial power in order to seize some measure of social influence for (certain select) women" (10). The notion that the unassailable respectability of middle-class British womanhood could translate to agency and power is on display throughout Hester's protest in *John Caldigate*. Where her husband is constantly battling against a desire for excess, Hester displays a remarkable amount of self-control and self-discipline, using her control over her own body as a means of taking control over the entire situation. Hester may occupy a disadvantaged position in the power structure, subject to the control of her husband, but when that power position is made less definite by the bigamy accusations that destabilize her identity and her social role, Hester uses her middle-class respectability not only to assert her agency but also to reaffirm a social structure that largely denies the agency of women. Paradoxically, Hester is most powerful in the novel when she is arguing that she is subject to the power of her husband. It is a loud and confident assertion of her own sense of identity – that *she*, and not Euphemia, is Mrs. John Caldigate – but it is also an assertion made that supports the dominant cultural narrative of marriage and the subordinate positioning of women within that institution.

Euphemia's accusations of bigamy, therefore, do succeed in calling into question the narrative of good, white, patriarchal imperialism, embodied by fictional heroes whose actions bear little resemblance to the actual behavior of British men in the colonial territories.

Theoretically, the notion that a British gentleman could criminally mismanage his marriage should call into question the “innate” respectability that underpins the paternalistic narrative that the British used to justify their imperial efforts: that they are good, civilized caretakers who can be trusted to better the lives of the people whose lands they seize. But because Euphemia is eventually proven to be a liar and a fraud, Caldigate is able to escape from further damage that could be caused by revelations of his imperial behavior. Bigamy accusations in Gothic novels, in which the husband is always the accused and generally is quite guilty of the crime, perhaps ultimately do more damage to the notion of a patriarchal power structure in which men possess an innate paternalistic ability than the same accusations do in novels like *John Caldigate*, which directly engage in a conversation about the place of the British gentleman within both the colonial and marital landscapes. But this reinforcement of the status quo is depicted as the prerogative of the female characters; if Hester had not decided to defend Caldigate and her marriage, the outcome for Caldigate’s respectability (and the way that that respectability reflected on the imperial project in which he participates) might have been very different indeed.

### **Power, Coercion, and Respectability in *The Mayor of Casterbridge***

*The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) is probably not the first novel that comes to mind when one searches for plots that involve empire or bigamy in the works of Thomas Hardy. More likely, that first novel would be *Jude the Obscure* (1895), which features a character who, like John Caldigate, commits bigamy with the help of the anonymity provided by Australia as a distant British space. But although the word bigamy is never explicitly used in the novel to describe the marital transgression at the center of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the novel presents one of the most unique bigamy plots of any nineteenth-century text in the genre, and that bigamy plot does



have significant imperial links. Because of this, the novel deserves to be considered as equally important in critical discussions of Hardy's engagement with marriage law as texts like *Jude* or *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). Moreover, it is an intriguing text when paired with Trollope's *John Caldigate*; both texts feature men whose main drive is the cementing of their respectability and women who must make decisions that are crucial in either bolstering or destroying the respectability of those men. Both John Caldigate and Michael Henchard must face the damage that committing marital crimes does to their reputations, and both also must negotiate the positioning of those reputations within the context of imperialism.

William A. Davis, who has written extensively on Hardy's preoccupation with marriage and divorce laws in Britain, notes that in Hardy's work one can see a particular focus on instances of what Davis calls "matrimonial divergence" (110). These include "marital desertion, which appears in a half dozen novels and as many short stories; wife sale (the central crime in *MC*); physical violence aimed at women; restraint and imprisonment of women; matrimonial cruelty; marriage to one's sister-in-law (or 'deceased wife's sister'); wife murder; restitution of conjugal rights; adultery; collusion; and divorce" (110). Hardy's depiction of a husband forcefully rejecting his wife in *Casterbridge*, according to Davis, is only a part of a sustained questioning throughout Hardy's work of the way that marriage is understood and administered within his society. But although it is a part of a broader engagement with questions about problematic marriage, the wife sale is one of the most remarkable marriage crimes to be committed in all of nineteenth-century British literature. It is an act that neatly embodies all of the symbolic objectification and commodification of women within a "marriage market" in one simple transaction; moreover, it also creates an environment in which a person (in this case, Susan Henchard) is *compelled* to commit bigamy rather than deciding to do so on her own (or, as

Jeanne Fahnstock reminds us, accidentally doing so). Michael Henchard's sale of his wife and daughter to Newson is a double crime, then, because it involves his shameful rejection of his wife and child and places Susan in a situation where she has little choice but to falsely represent herself as Newson's legal wife. She becomes a Lady Audley wholly without the agency and power of choice that Lady Audley so masterfully exercises in Braddon's novel.

Even though it has a major continuing impact throughout the novel, the wife sale itself happens early and is relatively simple in its depiction. Michael Henchard, his wife Susan, and their young daughter Elizabeth-Jane all stop at a fair on Michelmass Day sometime "before the nineteenth century had reached one-third of its span" (5). The three have been traveling by foot while Henchard, a hay-trusser, looks for work. When they decide to stop at the fair, Henchard wants to go into the tent advertising Beer, Ale, and Cyder" (7); Susan convinces him instead that they should go to the tent selling furmity (or "frumenty"), which the *OED* defines as "a dish made of hulled wheat boiled in milk, and seasoned with cinnamon, sugar, etc." But Susan's attempts to keep her husband away from alcohol backfires when Henchard discovers that the woman running the tent is more than happy to add rum to his bowl of furmity for an extra price. As the family eats, surrounded by others, Henchard becomes increasingly intoxicated, to the point where he engages the surrounding people, first in conversation, and then in a makeshift auction with Susan as the chattel being sold. A fellow fairgoer serves as auctioneer, and even over Susan's initial protests and the continuing objection of some of the others in the tent, Henchard sells his wife (and daughter) to a sailor for the sum of five guineas. Until the moment when Susan dares Henchard to take the money that the sailor has offered, it is not clear to the reader or the characters whether the entire interaction is a farce. But when pressed, Henchard

drunkenly decides to take the money. His wife and daughter leave the tent with the sailor, whose name is not given, and Henchard promptly falls asleep.

Although Henchard later blames his actions on the alcohol he has consumed, leading him to swear off drink completely as a kind of penance, Hardy is careful to show that the sale is not just the fault of Henchard's alcohol consumption. Our first glimpse of the family presents Henchard and Susan as two isolated, lonely figures who merely co-exist in their relationship. The narrator offers:

What was really peculiar, however, in this couple's progress, and would have attracted the attention of any casual observer otherwise disposed to overlook them, was the perfect silence they preserved. They walked side by side in such a way as to suggest afar off the low, easy, confidential chat of people full of reciprocity; but on closer view it could be discerned that the man was reading, or pretending to read, a ballad sheet . . . . Whether this apparent cause were the real cause, or whether it were an assumed one to escape an intercourse that would have been irksome to him, nobody but himself could have said precisely; but his taciturnity was unbroken, and the woman enjoyed no society whatever from his presence. (5)

The silence that exists between Henchard and Susan is significant enough that the narrator takes pains to communicate to the reader how unusual it really is. Hardy presents us with a marriage that is in trouble long before Henchard makes the drunken decision to sell his wife. The two do not argue on the road, although their interactions during the wife sale scene make it clear that they do have arguments. Instead, the narrator depicts a weary young couple who are joined together legally (and by the child they share) but who have absolutely nothing to say to each

other, not even to pass time as they make a long journey together. A couple in a good, functional relationship would, according to the narrator, speak to each other; they would exist in a state of “reciprocity.” Even before they stop at the furmity tent, and even before Henchard begins to drink, they are already emotionally divorced from each other. But the narrator also rather contradictorily states that the lack of connection between Henchard and Susan is a clear sign that the two of them *are* married: “That the man and woman were husband and wife, and the parents of the girl in arms, there could be little doubt. No other than such relationship would have accounted for the atmosphere of stale familiarity which the trio carried along with them like a nimbus as they moved down the road” (6). It is worth noting that the narrator never says that a good *marriage* requires the kind of reciprocity he imagines would usually be seen between a couple walking together as the Henchards do. But Hardy presents us with a strange first taste of marriage as a concept in *Casterbridge* when he has his narrator first remark that “any casual observer” would note that the behavior of the Henchards is strange, only to then quip that the “stale familiarity” that exists between them would cause those same observers knowingly to note that Henchards were just like most married couples. *Casterbridge* establishes from the very start that marriage is something difficult to define and understand, setting up an environment in which Susan can easily represent herself to be Newson’s legal wife even though she is not.

The wife sale that turns Susan Henchard into a bigamist is ultimately the responsibility of her husband; Henchard makes the final decision to send his wife away, choosing to take the sailor’s money and allowing her to take their daughter away with her. Even so, Susan does give consent at key points during the wife sale scene. It is significant that her first word in the novel is “no,” as she rejects Henchard’s desire to go to the beer tent at the fair, and she does object several times to Henchard’s blustering bravado as he first lectures the other fairgoers about the

damage that marriage does to a young man's prospect and then offers to sell his wife to the highest bidder; with that simple rejection, she establishes herself as a woman who is able to voice her opinions and desires. She goes with the sailor at least partly of her own volition, whether out of a sincere wish to get away from her husband or out of resignation to her situation: when Henchard asks if she "agree[s]" to the final price, she silently "bow[s] her head with absolute indifference" (11). She may also not fully believe that Henchard is serious about the transaction, even after money has changed hands; after all, earlier in the scene she reminds him that he has "talked this nonsense in public places before," adding, "A joke is a joke, but you may make it once too often, mind!" (10). The fact that Henchard has tried to sell her in a public place before – or at least joked about wanting to sell her – reinforces the discord that exists within their relationship. Susan ultimately may see the wife sale as a convenient way out for her, too. Unlike her husband, the anonymous sailor is careful about seeking her consent before finalizing the deal, making the entire transaction conditional upon her assent: "'Tis quite on the understanding that the young woman is willing . . . I wouldn't hurt her feelings for the world" (12). Hardy's narrator points out that the sailor utters these words "blandly" rather than with seriousness or conviction; however, even blandly sought consent affords Susan more agency than Henchard attributes to her throughout the scene. Indeed, although the sailor seeks Susan's consent, it is Henchard who initially responds that "she is willing" (12). Only when the sailor presses her on whether or not that statement is true does she respond "I do" – and even that utterance is motivated by the fact that she sees no joking or "repentance" in Henchard's face (12). Rosemarie Morgan notes, when considering actual historical wife sales (several of which were written about by Hardy in his notebooks), "Reading between the lines and the wording of the acts of consent it would seem that wives exercised some control over the proceedings despite the ancient patriarchal trappings

of spousal ownership” (80). Susan’s reluctant willingness ultimately constitutes consent, but while Morgan argues that historical examples of wife sales indicate that the transactions were often jointly planned by a husband and wife, the intentions behind this wife sale are far less clear – and are further complicated by anger and alcohol.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, when Henchard later realizes what he’s done, he actually blames her for not stopping him, arguing that she should have known that he was not serious: “Yet she knows I am not in my senses when I do that! . . . why didn’t she know better than to bring me into this disgrace” (15).

Henchard’s own potential disgrace is the focus not only of the wife sale scenes but also of the novel as a whole. When Henchard wakes up and realizes what he has done, his first reaction is not concern for his family but for his own reputation. Significantly, rather than worry about his wife or daughter, he worries about whether he “[told his] name to anybody” the night before (15). He does subsequently begin searching for his family – but that is thwarted by the fact that Richard Newson was equally careful to keep his name and reputation out of the wife-sale transaction; the reader does not learn the name of the anonymous sailor who purchased Susan and Elizabeth-Jane until the two women return to Wessex nearly twenty years later. Like John

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<sup>61</sup> Morgan explains, “According to historians these market-place divorce rituals were rarely undertaken without the full agreement of the wives who, by prior arrangement with their husbands and lovers, travelled from local villages to nearby towns where the re-marriage ceremony could be publicly ordained (against the rule of church and state) – the contract being ratified by the Bill of Sale. This required, by custom, a nominal fee, a token figure which would pay for the post-ritual drinking party” (80). In Hardy’s novels, none of the expected rituals of the wife sale are observed. There is no planning, and there appears to have been no pre-arrangement between Henchard and Susan (although her remark does suggest that he has tried to do this before. There is no ordination of the new marriage contract between Susan and the sailor Newson, although she represents herself publicly as Newson’s legal wife from that point forward. There is also no Bill of Sale. The money that Henchard receives for his wife is carefully calculated and guarded in a way that suggests that the amount was not “nominal” for Henchard. And, significantly, the drinking party takes place before and during the sale – it motivates the sale instead of celebrating it.

Caldigate, Michael Henchard spends much of the novel working to establish himself as a respectable man after living a life of excess. Indeed, in both novels, the inability to exercise self-control in the face of a desire for excess is perhaps the most fundamental threat to the notion of Victorian male respectability, a concept that is almost wholly underpinned by the ability to exercise control over one's desires and wants. Caldigate's weakness for excess is manifested through his gambling; Henchard's is manifested through consumption of alcohol. In her study on alcoholism in *Casterbridge*, Jane Lilienfeld identifies Henchard's inability to satisfy his desire for excess as the root of his problem with drink, arguing that in the novel's wife-sale scene, "Henchard's problem with alcohol is revealed: the more he drinks, the more he wants. As he drinks, he exhibits anger, self-pity, grandiosity, and aggression. The chemical effects of alcohol on his body lessen what self-control he had shown before he began drinking" (27). The same desire for *more* of things in life is ultimately also what leads him to sell Susan: the narrator remarks that Henchard speaks about the "ruin of good men by bad wives, and, more particularly, the frustration of many a promising youth's high aims and hopes and the extinction of his energies by an early imprudent marriage" (9). If only Henchard had not married Susan when he did, he could have had so much more. For Henchard, what he possesses is never enough; and the reason he does not possess the *more* that he desires is always because of someone or something else, be it a wife or a bottle of rum dumped into a bowl of firmity.

While John Caldigate battles one problem with excess (gambling) by essentially seeking a different *kind* of excess in a different place (more territory, more gold, more money, more sex), after selling his wife, Henchard chooses to abstain from excess as a way to gain power and position. This is also true of their marital actions: Caldigate accrues too many women, while Henchard casts them off one by one: first Susan and Elizabeth-Jane, and eventually Lucetta, too.

He does the same with alcohol, making a twenty-one year vow of sobriety (and note that here he is careful to verbalize his whole name as a part of the oath): “I, Michael Henchard, on this morning of the sixteenth of September, do take an oath before God here in this solemn place that I will avoid all strong liquors for the space of twenty-one years to come, being a year for every year that I have lived” (16). Henchard’s oath of sobriety is not a complete and permanent denial of alcohol, of course; he is careful to specify the kind of alcohol he will still be able to consume, as well as the length of time he plans to be sober. Even so, from the perspectives of many Victorians, who elevated temperance as a key part of respectability, this action is exceedingly noble. But while his sobriety is designed to be a part of his penance for selling Susan, it clearly does not remove the sense of shame that Henchard still feels about his actions in the furmity tent. The narrator notes that one of the reasons Henchard is not able to find Susan or Elizabeth-Jane after the sale is that “a certain shyness of revealing his conduct prevented [him] from following up the investigation with the loud hue-and-cry such a pursuit demanded to render it effectual” (17). Henchard knows that a full search would require him to reveal the crime he has committed; as he is now on the road to sober Victorian respectability, doing so would have damaged his reputation even more, perhaps totally beyond repair.

Henchard’s sharp focus on his own respectability and his desire to climb the social ladder are made all the more pointed by Hardy’s deliberate yoking of Henchard to a dying center of power. Susan and Elizabeth-Jane are taken away to a burgeoning locus of power – imperial Canada – while Henchard remains in Wessex. The place in which Henchard seeks to enhance his respectability has important consequences on his ability to be ultimately successful in his endeavors. David Musselwhite argues that, like Caldigate, Henchard’s journey in *Casterbridge* is one in which he attempts to raise himself from a lowered position to a more respectable status –



after all, the title of the novel refers to Henchard by his eventual title, Mayor of Casterbridge, and indicates that his “character” is his most important characteristic.<sup>62</sup> But Henchard, tied to the center of imperial power by Hardy’s Roman comparison, faces more than a simple battle of upward mobility in his society: as he is connected to history, the past, and the idealized English pastoral, Henchard’s journey is ultimately stalled by the coming of modernity. Musselwhite notes,

The great opening scene of the novel – the wife-sale at Weydon-Priors – offers us, as in an overture, the major themes of the text. Out of the landscape emerges the dust-bestrewn Henchard and his wife and child. Henchard himself at this stage, hung about with his rustic tools, more “an anthropological object” than “a man of character.” The furmity tent, the furmity woman, and the furmity itself – a kind of primitive, albeit nutritive, biotic soup – are like a last enclave of a doomed territorial regime, residual and already corrupted from within by the insidious presence of alcohol. Once intoxicated, Henchard, a kind of “drunken king,” indulges himself with a bout of cantankerous bragging such as he has done many times before without any dire consequences – but this time, suddenly and unexpectedly, a new force intervenes from without, the sailor Newson – the name itself suggestive of a new order – and changes the whole complexion of the game with his “five crisp pieces of paper.” (53)

Henchard is able to climb to the heights of power in Wessex, although the respectability that he shoulders is one that is markedly dated and even provincial. He becomes the emperor, the

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<sup>62</sup> Of course, the title of the book also potentially refers to Farfrae, who becomes the town’s mayor; his modern, sober, Scottish personality is a marked contrast to that of Henchard.

“drunken king,” of imperial Casterbridge, which is compared by Hardy’s narrator to imperial Rome: “Casterbridge announced old Rome in every street, alley, and precinct. It looked Roman, bespoke the art of Rome, concealed dead men of Rome. It was impossible to dig more than a foot or two deep about the town fields and gardens without coming upon some tall soldier or other of the Empire, who had lain there . . . for a space of fifteen hundred years” (55). Unlike the British Empire, which was approaching its highest point of success at the time the novel was composed, Casterbridge is a relic of a dead empire. It feels imperial – it even looks imperial – but those, like Henchard, who rule the place are working against the tide of progress, and the only reinforcements they have in the maintenance of their imperial power are the dead soldiers who lay beneath the soil.

Casterbridge needs to be brought into the present, taken out of its imperial and pastoral history and updated to move with the current times. The comparison to Rome, Jane L. Bownas argues, also supports the notion that Casterbridge is lagging behind the times: “J.R. Seeley, writing in the 1870s at the height of imperial expansion, contributes to this discussion as a defender of the British Empire, suggesting that the British were more interested in introducing economic and industrial development in their colonial territories, as opposed to the Romans, who were mainly interested in conquest as a means of acquiring wealth” (32). Hardy’s Wessex, including Casterbridge, often seems to be more connected to a nostalgic pastoral English heritage than to the British imperial present; by the time the main action of the novel starts, the citizens of Casterbridge are facing the encroachment of modernity through such innovations as the railroad. It should come as no surprise then that Henchard is unable to maintain his grip on power and respectability; rather than a mission of modernizing, Henchard’s rise to power was motivated largely by a personal desire to better himself. Challenged by outsiders, he cannot fend off

modernizing invaders who are determined to change the way that Casterbridge functions. The Scottish Farfrae, with his agricultural machinery, promises to bring progress and modernity; born away from the center of power, he engages in a sort of reverse colonial mission, bringing new concepts and tools from the fringes to one of the crumbling old edifices of imperial power. While John Caldigate goes to a place where new power is growing as a means of transforming himself, Henchard instead chooses a place where the most glorious days are long past; he becomes associated with old ways that are losing their appeal and their influence, and his inability to adapt to new ideas is one of the faults that leads to his ultimate downfall. Instead, it is Susan who goes abroad – and she ends up coming back all the more powerful for having done so.

Like Farfrae, Susan is an outsider who moves from a colonial space to the center of power; although her movements were not of her own volition (she only goes abroad as a result of her sale, and she only comes back to England when Newson's work returns them home), her time in an imperial space has a major impact on her character. When Susan returns to Casterbridge eighteen years to the day after Henchard sold her, she does so after spending many years living abroad with her "husband," Newson (and their daughter, the second Elizabeth-Jane), in British Canada. Rather than committing a marital crime within the anonymous spaces of empire, Henchard commits the crime at home and unknowingly sends his wife out into a faraway space where she can live within a bigamous relationship with little threat of discovery. The narrator sums up her missing eighteen years thusly:

Absolutely helpless she had been taken off to Canada, where they had lived several years without any great worldly success, though she worked as hard as any woman could to keep their cottage cheerful and well-provided. When Elizabeth-Jane was about twelve years old the three returned to England, and

settled at Falmouth, where Newson made a living for a few years [...] He then engaged in the Newfoundland trade, and it was during this period that Susan had an awakening. A friend to whom she confided her history ridiculed her grave acceptance of her position; all was over with her peace of mind. When Newson came home at the end of one winter he saw that the delusion he had so carefully sustained had vanished for ever. (21)

While Susan signals her (at least grudging) consent during the wife sale at Weydon-Priors, this narrative is much more like an early American captivity narrative than the story of a woman who happily leaves her husband and begins again with a new family.<sup>63</sup> The emphasis on Susan's "helpless[ness]" and the "delusion[s]" created by Newson suggest coercion or even a kind of brainwashing. The narrator even goes so far as to suggest that Susan simply may not be intelligent enough to really understand what was happening to her: "Her simplicity – the original ground of Henchard's contempt for her – had allowed her to live on in the conviction that Newson had acquired a morally real and justifiable right to her by his purchase" (21). It takes another woman to point out to Susan that she has been taken advantage of by the men in her life. Where she was content simply to trade one man for another at first, that contentment turns into total ambivalence. When she hears the (ultimately inaccurate) news that Newson's ship has been lost at sea, she views the event as solving "a problem which had become torture to her meek conscience" (21). Henchard suffers from a crisis of conscience after he sells Susan, and after she realizes that she has been treated like chattel rather than like a human, she suffers a similar break. Even so, she does not try to free herself from the situation – she leaves only after she believes

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<sup>63</sup> The description of Susan's crisis of conscience, in which she realizes that her situation is placing her in great moral peril, also resonates with the language of another North American tradition: that of the Puritans. The choice of the term "awakening" seems deliberate here.

that Newson is dead. While Henchard is able to harness his shame over the wife sale and make a new life for himself, Susan is stuck. She is deeply ashamed of what has happened to her, and apparently of her own role in the making of her situation, but she still cannot leave her not-husband or their daughter together behind. Bigamy here is yet another marital trap for a woman; while some female bigamists, like Lady Audley, are able to manipulate marriages and husbands as a means of getting what they want, for Susan, this is merely one more way that a man has been able to marginalize and control her using marriage as a tool.

Susan's confusion about her marital status is reflected in the narrator's references to her upon her return to Weydon-Priors. In the span of a single chapter, the narrator refers to her as follows: "the young wife of Henchard on the previous occasion" (17), "Susan Henchard" (17), "the mother" (18), "the other" (18), "her mother" (18), "Mrs. Henchard" (19), "Mrs. Newson," (19), "Mrs. Henchard-Newson" (19), and "her customer" (19). The shifting names and labels reflect the narrator's confusion about Susan's marital status and identity; they also act as reminders of Susan's own confusion and shame about her personal sense of identity.<sup>64</sup> And even more importantly, all but one reinforces Susan's status as a commodity to be possessed and traded, a status established early on by the wife-sale. "Susan Henchard," "Mrs. Henchard," and "the young wife of Henchard" all establish that her identity is tied to and based on her marriage to Michael Henchard; likewise, "Mrs. Newson" bases her identity on her relationship to Richard Newson. Both express her identity in terms of ownership – she is essentially labeled as the property of a husband. "Mrs. Henchard-Newson" recreates the confusion over which marriage is valid. Susan has represented herself in public places as the wife of each man, and it is difficult to

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<sup>64</sup> Susan herself clearly subscribes to the notion that names have power; consider the fact that she gives her second daughter the same name as her first (deceased) daughter as a way to try to resurrect her dead child (a fact she reveals in her deathbed confession letter to Henchard).

know which identity she really considers herself to inhabit – or to which man she “belongs.” The labels of “the mother” and “her mother” also express ownership, but this time the claim belongs to her daughter, Elizabeth-Jane. “Her customer” suggests ownership by the furnity woman; Susan has located the woman in hopes that she can lead them to Henchard. The notion that the furnity woman has some possession of Susan, or at least has had a hand in her reduction from person to object, is reinforced by the interaction between the women in which the furnity woman, as she had done two decades before, offers to lace Susan’s furnity with rum. But the label of “customer” also reflects Susan’s growing sense of personal strength, as well as the control which she will go on to exercise over her own identity and fate throughout the rest of the novel. Susan begins the novel as a commodity, but by the time she returns to Weydon-Priors, she has developed a new sense of her own power and exists as a person who trades and purchases goods rather than as a good to be traded or purchased. The narrator may have identified her as intellectually deficient, but her increased awareness of her own power as a consumer is evident after her return to the scene of Henchard’s crime.

The only label given to Susan by the narrator that is fully divorced from a concept of ownership is that of “the other.” The narrator’s reference works on one level simply to differentiate Susan from Elizabeth-Jane, who is referred to as “the maiden” in the same interaction (18), but the label welcomes more complicated readings as well. Much has been made in contemporary scholarship about the position of the Other – the person who exists outside of the status quo, who is notable for what makes him or her different from the norm rather than for any intrinsic qualities. Others are defined negatively – by what they are not – rather than positively – by what they are. In most cases, such definitions are incredibly problematic, especially when a person or a community has been deliberately “othered” as a means of

marginalizing them and keeping them out of arenas of power. Susan's connections to imperial spaces – specifically her time in Canada – do link her to this understanding of the term. She has been exiled to the colonies and has now returned; and, like a true Other, her presence is a potential threat to the continued dominance of the status quo. (In this case, that status quo is the power and respectability of Henchard.) Although the narrator does not remark specifically on Susan's demeanor as having been influenced by her time in Canada, markers of otherness are present in her daughter, the second Elizabeth-Jane. In his analysis of Elizabeth-Jane's name, which she shares with her dead half-sister, Musselwhite argues that "it is almost as if Elizabeth-Jane is coming from the past of a territorial, or pre-signifying order to find a place in a signifying regime of signs" (65). Henchard comes from the past, but an imperial one; Elizabeth-Jane is from the "primitive" past of a territory which is comparatively newly conquered and colonized, and Susan seems to exist somewhere between those two extremes. Julian Wolfreys notes that "Elizabeth-Jane's face is haunted by Susan's" – both women share an existence in imperial space that informs their characters. Susan has been changed by the empire in positive ways, making her more assertive and powerful; Elizabeth-Jane is depicted as needing to be "civilized" again in order to fit it with the world at the center of power. She must be taught how to speak correctly, reeducated until she is prepared to willingly "inscribe herself within the patriarchal order" of the United Kingdom (Musselwhite 70). Such reeducation is either unnecessary or unimportant where Susan is concerned; she is a woman who has been changed by imperial space, but she is not a child of the empire in the same way that Elizabeth-Jane is.

Susan's history in the empire is an important facet of her character, and ultimately it is her time in Newfoundland that allows her to understand her situation and her own feelings about her marriages more clearly. As such, the idea that she is "other" can also be read as an

empowering statement, and one that has little to do with physical or geographical difference. If Elizabeth-Jane is referred to by the narrator in this particular interaction as a “maiden” – again, a status that references a woman in terms of her relationship (or, in this case, lack thereof) to a man, especially in terms of commodification (because a virginal bride is more valuable) – then the opposite of that term might be “the wife,” “the mother,” “the widow,” or even “the woman.” One term references a lack of sexual experience; it would be logical that the subsequent, differentiating term would reference a woman who has sexual experience (and because Susan is a bigamist, perhaps even a derogatory reference to having *too much* sexual experience). But Hardy’s narrator chooses a different term altogether. By calling Susan “the other,” he does make it clear that she is *not* a maiden, but he also erases any reference to her sex or gender roles at all. She becomes not a maiden, not a wife, not a whore, but someone totally sexless.<sup>65</sup> Susan’s position throughout the narrative is almost always relative in terms of the men who claim ownership of her; the reader never learns anything about Susan’s premarital history, not even her “maiden” name. Here, however, no one has any claim on her but Susan herself. The wife becomes the customer – another genderless term – and by doing so, she becomes the other, transcending the bonds that have kept her tied to men, defined by her relationships to them and their children and able to be traded between them at will.

A reading of *Casterbridge* that focuses on the increased power wielded by Susan Henchard as a response to the forced bigamy she endures as a result of the Weydon-Priors wife

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<sup>65</sup> The notion of Susan as a woman made into a sexless “other” as a result of the transactions that made her a bigamist is especially interesting when read against Elaine Showalter’s classic feminist reading in “The Unmanning of the Mayor of Casterbridge.” She argues that the novel dramatizes the “unmanning” of Henchard through “an overlapping series of incidents ... which reverses and negates the pattern of manly power and self-possession” that Henchard displays early in the text (401).



sale requires careful attention to what Susan does when she finally is able to relocate her legal husband, Michael Henchard. Susan's growing sense of power and control allows her to take steps to attempt to restore her public reputation and her private conscience, but even so, she is still a married woman, and any restoration of her respectability must also be tied to the respectability of her husband. When she and Elizabeth-Jane finally find Henchard in Casterbridge, the narrator is careful to catalogue (through Susan's eyes) all of the aspects of Henchard's that signal his elevated, respectable status:

He was dressed in an old-fashioned evening suit, an expanse of frilled shirt showing on his broad breast, jewelled studs, and a heavy gold chain. Three glasses stood at his right hand; but, to his wife's surprise, the two for wine were empty, while the third, a tumbler, was half full of water. When she had last seen him he was sitting in a corduroy jacket, fustian waistcoat and breeches, and tanned leather leggings, with a basin of firmity before him. Time, the magician, had wrought much here. (28)

Henchard is now wealthy, respectable, and sober; Susan and Elizabeth-Jane are struggling in the wake of Newson's death. It is perhaps not surprising that Susan should choose to renew her relationship with Henchard after seeing him in all of his respectable glory; it is difficult to imagine her doing the same had she found him as drunk and impoverished as he had been two decades before. But the novel is careful not to depict Susan primarily as a woman of ambition or greed. All of Susan's subsequent actions in the novel – remarrying Henchard, convincing him that Elizabeth-Jane is the same child he sold at Weydon-Priors – are done, the narrator argues, because Susan wishes to better Elizabeth-Jane's station in life. The respectability of her daughter is always mentioned as the main driving factor behind Susan's actions; she sees that Henchard

has become respectable, and she seizes the chance to make her daughter respectable as well, something she's been striving for since Newson's death: "She asked herself whether the present moment, now that she was a free woman again, were not as opportune a one as she would find in a world where everything had been so inopportune, for making a desperate effort to advance Elizabeth" (22). Both the narrator and many critics take pains to emphasize Susan's meekness and earnestness, and the notion that she does what she does because of motherly instincts works to bolster this reading of Susan as a selfless, maternal woman. Her desperation is, the narrator says on Susan's behalf, all the result of her immense desire to see Elizabeth-Jane respectably settled in the world. When Susan dies, she is able to die peacefully, believing that she has established a good life for her daughter.

But the novel also hints at the fact that Susan knows that her actions have a very convenient side effect: that of creating a respectable reputation and a comfortable future for herself as well as for her daughter. Consider Elizabeth-Jane's revelations about the new life that has been made available to her because of her position as Henchard's "daughter": "The reposeful, easy, affluent life to which her mother's marriage had introduced to her was, in truth, the beginning of a great change in Elizabeth. She found she could have nice personal possessions and ornaments for the asking, and, as the medieval saying puts it, 'Take, have, and keep, are pleasant words'" (68). Those three "pleasant words," it should be noted, are very close to the promises made during a marriage ceremony (and are all opposites of the word that Henchard once used to rid himself of his wife and daughter: "sell"). Henchard's renewed marital promises to Susan does not only bring that "reposeful, easy, affluent life" to Elizabeth – it also makes that life available to Susan. Convincing Henchard to once again represent himself in public as her husband results in newfound respectability and prosperity for Susan, who has labored for years

as the wife first of an itinerant worker and then of a frequently-absent sailor. Becoming the wife of the Mayor of Casterbridge brings Susan into a respectable position that is radically different from both of those previous incarnations. Indeed, the narrator describes Susan's remarriage to Henchard as "a Martinmas summer of Mrs. Henchard's life ... with her entry into her husband's large house and respectable social orbit" (67); a "Martinmas summer" is comparable to what some might call an "Indian summer" – a time of unexpected warmth in usually colder, late months. Susan may have argued that her actions were all for the betterment of her daughter, but regardless, she has found unexpected comfort late in her life. The narrator may take pains to establish a depiction of Susan as meek, earnest, and guileless, but she has truly become a "customer" – a participant in transactions and a beneficiary of the contracts she makes – rather than an object to be traded and sold.

Susan Henchard's conscience does require, however, that the truth behind her deceptions is eventually revealed. Before she dies, she writes a letter confessing that Elizabeth-Jane is Newson's daughter, not Henchard's. Susan clearly indicates that the letter is not to be read until Elizabeth-Jane's wedding day (again, further ensuring Elizabeth-Jane's future stability, as she will continue to have a place to live and a respectable married name even if Henchard rejects her upon discovering the truth), but Henchard takes advantage of a broken seal (which the narrator blames on Susan's incompetence) and reads the missive right away. Susan writes,

My Dear Michael,—For the good of all three of us I have kept one thing a secret from you till now. I hope you will understand why; I think you will; though perhaps you may not forgive me. But, dear Michael, I have done it for the best. I shall be in my grave when you read this, and Elizabeth-Jane will have a home.

Don't curse me, Mike—think of how I was situated. I can hardly write it, but here

it is. Elizabeth-Jane is not your Elizabeth-Jane—the child who was in my arms when you sold me. No; she died three months after that, and this living one is my other husband’s. I christened her by the same name we had given to the first, and she filled up the ache I felt at the other’s loss. Michael, I am dying, and I might have held my tongue; but I could not. Tell her husband of this or not, as you may judge; and forgive, if you can, a woman you once deeply wronged, as she forgives you. (96)

Like Lady Audley before her, Susan uses marriage as a tool to better a person’s situation; however, unlike Lady Audley, the person Susan is nominally attempting to benefit is her daughter, not herself. Because of this, it is possible to read Susan in a highly sympathetic light: as a model maternal figure who is willing to put the happiness and future of her child ahead of her own happiness. But Susan’s letter is a bit more complex than that. She is clearly working to assure that Elizabeth-Jane is comfortable and cared for, but Susan also takes the opportunity to chide Henchard once more for his past wrongdoings, reminding him that he “sold” and “deeply wronged” her. She gives him the power to decide whether to tarnish her posthumous reputation by revealing Elizabeth-Jane’s true paternity to an imagined future husband, but her words implicitly remind Henchard that in order to do so, he would have to tell the truth about the Weydon-Priors wife sale, something he has previously been unable to do. Susan ensures the safety and good reputation of her daughter; she also assuages her own guilt over her actions by leaving her deathbed confession. But even so, she confesses in a way that almost certainly assures that her reputation and respectability will not be tarnished after she is gone. More than a meek and mild example of a “proper” wife who is caught in a terrible situation not of her own making, Susan proves herself to be quite capable of grabbing the reins of her own destiny.

Moreover, she is able to do so covertly by presenting her actions as maternal sacrifice, simply by failing to mention that by cementing her daughter's future respectability she is also cementing her own.

The colonial settings of each of these late-century bigamy novels emphasize the inconsistencies that existed within social concepts like respectability; the attempt to transfer cultural standards and norms from one space to another revealed this issues in the process. It seems only right, then, that a character like Susan Henchard would only realize that she had been taken advantage of by the men in her life while she was in Canada, or that John Caldigate would have found reasons to alter his behavior while in Australia. Caldigate's wife, Hester, and Susan also both demonstrate a willingness to take control of a situation in order to ensure the respectability of themselves and their families. However, while Lady Audley was punished for the criminal measures she employed to try to enhance her financial and social standing, both Hester and Susan manage to recover their reputations successfully and without major social consequences. This is in part because both of them are essentially victims within a possibly criminal situation – Hester's husband has been accused of bigamy, placing her in the "second wife" position, while Michael Henchard's sale of Susan has compelled her into bigamy. Like Helen Percy in Gore's early bigamy novel, both women express their fears about their own reputations within the larger context of their families, coding their concerns as maternal, domestic matters. Even though the real Theresa Yelverton and the fictional Lady Audley were both reacting to damage done to their reputations (Yelverton's second marriage and George Talboys's desertion), their reactions are perhaps more problematic because they are assertive on individual grounds. They are both criticized for their personal ambition; while the actions of Susan Henchard and Hester Caldigate are equally ambitious, they are done within a properly

feminine, maternal context, and the extent to which those actions benefit the women themselves is a secondary point. Female characters are still charged with creating and maintaining respectable environments, giving them a significant measure of power within the context of marriage and family; however, women who were outside of those contexts still struggled to assert their reputations in public. By the end of the century, the conditions for married people in Britain had changed greatly, but these novels suggest that the anxieties about respectability had not.

## CONCLUSION

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the regular use of the bigamy plot by British writers largely also came to an end. The bigamy novel was, in many ways, a phenomenon unique to nineteenth-century Britain, borne out of specific circumstances in the personal lives of Britons, in the growing Victorian literary marketplace, and in the British colonial system. Because of this, the genre endured only while those circumstances were still extant. Once divorce became easier to access and more socially acceptable, there were fewer reasons for people to contract bigamous marriages. Moreover, the reasons for committing bigamy that remained – fraud, in particular – were much more difficult to paint in a sympathetic light. Bigamist characters in the twentieth century could not claim to feel the weight of the same pressures that their nineteenth-century counterparts lamented, because ending a marriage had become much less socially stigmatizing. While respectability remained a central part of the British class narrative, the first half of the twentieth century saw a radical reevaluation of the concept, in large part because of the destruction and devastation of the two World Wars. As the concerns and anxieties of Britons changed, the bigamy plot became less useful in reflecting contemporary issues.

The bigamy novel was also less useful in the hands of writers from other countries outside the bounds of imperial Britain. My research into the genre has uncovered very few examples of the bigamy plot, for example, in American literature of the nineteenth century. Again, I think that the different conditions within American culture, specifically the separation between government and religion, is a major reason that the bigamy novel never became as popular in America as it was in Britain. (That is not to say, of course, that British bigamy novels

were not popular with an American readership, but rather that American writers produced few bigamy novels of their own.) Bigamy novels in Britain were popular because they were so specifically connected to the fears, anxieties, and circumstances of the day; in other places and other situations, the plots simply may not have resonated the same way with readers. In nineteenth-century America, there was much more attention paid to a different kind of marital phenomenon: polygamy, specifically as practiced by early members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Karen Lynn argues that nineteenth-century texts about Mormon polygamy exhibited significant similarities to British sensation fiction. She notes that examples like Fanny Stenhouse's *An Englishwoman in Utah* (1880) and *Salt-Lake Fruit: A Latter-Day Romance* (1884) include considerable sensational content.<sup>66</sup> The British were also fascinated by tales of Mormon polygamy; the first Sherlock Holmes novella, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), is centered on a conflict sparked by a polygamous Mormon community. But while there are examples of sensational texts that are similar to the bigamy novel in other literatures, no country or culture embraced any of these as strongly as the nineteenth-century British readers devoured bigamy novels.

Ultimately, the nineteenth-century British bigamy novel provides critics with an opportunity to explore a genre that was extremely commercially successful and also engaged with some of the most pressing concerns surrounding marriage and respectability in Victorian Britain. From early examples of the genre during the Gothic period to sensation and imperial bigamy texts, the bigamy novels selected for this project highlight the unique position that the genre held within nineteenth-century British literature. These selected bigamy novels, all of

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<sup>66</sup> See Lynn's "Sensational Virtue: Nineteenth-Century Mormon Fiction and the American Popular Taste" in *Dialogue* 14 (Fall 1981).



which dialogue with questions of respectability, marriage, and identity that formed a central part of nineteenth-century British cultural narratives, stand as important documents within a larger cultural history of respectability itself. More than just a genre that elicited sensational thrills, and more than a phenomenon that became suddenly popular only to fade away, the bigamy novel's rich nineteenth-century history demonstrates the usefulness of the plot in engaging with arguments about respectability – and the lengths that some would go in order to obtain it.

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