

Theatrical Weddings and Pious Frauds: Performance and Law in Victorian Marriage Plots

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THEATRICAL WEDDINGS AND PIOUS FRAUDS:
PERFORMANCE AND LAW IN VICTORIAN MARRIAGE PLOTS

by

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ABSTRACT
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This study investigates how key Victorian novelists, such as Anne and Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, emphasize performativity in their critiques of marriage. Given the performative nature of weddings ceremonies, this project focuses on wedding descriptions in select novels by the aforementioned authors. Such a focus highlights an interesting dilemma. Although we often think of Victorian novels as overwhelmingly concerned with marriage, the few wedding descriptions found in Victorian fiction are aborted, unusually short or announced after the fact. Those Victorian novelists who do feature weddings often describe them as grotesquely theatrical to underscore the empty performativity associated with contemporaneous wedding rituals that privilege form over substance, and to stress deception and inauthentic play-acting in marriage. In these ways, the key Victorian novelists draw attention to a gap between the empty formalism of marriage as a legal, religious and social institution, and the reality of many Victorian marriages.

Nevertheless, many of the same novelists who show their general distaste for the empty performativity of weddings acknowledge that theatricality itself plays a more complex role in their marriage plots, raising questions about authenticity, fraud and pious deceptions in marriage. For example, Wilkie Collins complicates the argument about theatrical weddings by stressing that quiet weddings, performed without much pomp and ceremony, may also signify deceptive marriages. Moreover, Thomas Hardy emphasizes the value of festive public weddings, which solidify the spouses' connection to their community. Additionally, both the realist and sensation novelists discussed here, especially Anne Brontë, Dickens, Braddon, and Collins, condone temporary play-acting and deception, which extend beyond weddings, if such performances allow their characters to circumvent inflexible and unjust marriage laws.

In sum, this dissertation analyzes how key Victorian novelists redefine courtship and marriage by focusing on the performative aspects of marriage as a legal and social institution. Those redefinitions are, at times, non-linear, contradictory, and rooted in the continual enmeshing of two primary modes of Victorian narrative, realism and sensationalism, which complicate the view of performative marriages as purely artificial or authentic.

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Adrienne A. Wojcik, B.A., B.S., M.A., J.D.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This dissertation, which examines the theatricality of courtship and marriage plots in Victorian literature, began with a simple but important question. If Victorian novels are primarily concerned with marriage, why do they so rarely feature wedding ceremonies? Ironically, the most famous wedding descriptions in Victorian literature represent weddings that never occur. In *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charlotte Brontë aborts the first wedding of Jane and Edward Rochester. In *Great Expectations* (1861), Charles Dickens presents Miss Havisham as a bitter bride jilted on her wedding day. In *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), Thomas Hardy describes Sergeant Frank Troy storming out of his wedding to Fanny Robin when she is late to the ceremony. To the extent that Victorian novelists describe successful weddings, they do so by indirectly summarizing them after the fact or merely implying that they took place. From Jane Eyre's retrospective announcement that she has married Rochester to Dorothea Brooke and Will Ladislaw's off-stage wedding in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Victorian literary characters often marry without readers ever witnessing their weddings.

The paucity of wedding descriptions in Victorian fiction is remarkable for at least two reasons. First, the Victorian audience did not lack an appetite for opulent wedding ceremonies. The marriage of Queen Victoria to Prince Albert was a wedding spectacle *par excellence*. An article in the February 1840 issue of the *London Times* muses over the Queen's wedding cake: its multiple layers featured the royal pair, turtle doves, colorful cupids, and "a dog representing a faithful attachment."¹ Although the royal wedding

¹ Molly Dolan Blayney, *Wedded Bliss: A Victorian Bride's Handbook* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1992), 106. See also Georgene Muller Lockwood, *Your Victorian Wedding: A Modern Guide for the Romantic Bride* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1992), 154.

hardly represented other weddings in nineteenth-century England, some contemporary wedding manuals and magazines also implied that a Victorian wedding could be a grand affair, particularly for those who could afford it. Joan Perkin, in her history of Victorian women, explains that in the first half of the nineteenth century “upper-class weddings were quiet, private ceremonies, celebrated within the family circle.”² However, as the century went on, and ideal marriages were centered more on “love rather than on practical dynastic considerations,” upper class weddings turned into social events, featuring the rituals of the wedding in white, the family reception, and the honeymoon.³ Those who “could not afford the big white wedding” still celebrated weddings with a breakfast for friends in the morning, even if the newlyweds returned to work in the afternoon.⁴ Although there is evidence that, in some cases, Victorians tried “to avoid a public church wedding,”⁵ they still treated the act of getting married ritualistically. While—as John Gillis illustrates—wedding rituals and celebrations of British Victorians varied widely throughout the nineteenth century depending on the period, class, and geographical location,⁶ most of them sentimentalized weddings as festive occasions, observed with a certain degree of ceremony. In sum, since Victorians sentimentalized weddings, it is puzzling why Victorian novels feature so few wedding descriptions.

In addition to Victorians appreciating wedding ceremonies, other artistic media did not eschew the dramatic cache of wedding ceremonies, which also makes the seeming lack of detailed wedding descriptions in contemporary novels significant. Victorian plays,

² Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* (London: John Murray, 1993), 62.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵ Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: England, 1530–1987* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 129.

⁶ See Parts II and III in John R. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

especially productions of Shakespeare's comedies, often culminated in lavish representations of wedding scenes. Nineteenth-century operas also typically turned weddings into grand finales in which a massive chorus celebrates the main characters' marital happiness. Since the nineteenth century, the famous "Bridal Chorus" from Richard Wagner's 1850 opera *Lohengrin* (known today in English-speaking countries as "Here Comes the Bride") has traditionally announced the bride's conspicuous entrance at formal weddings on and off the stage. In 1858, the march was even famously used as the processional at the wedding of Victoria the Princess Royal (the eldest child of Queen Victoria).⁷ As such, both theatrical and musical entertainments in Victorian England often featured weddings as meaningful, dramatic events.

Given the festivity of nuptial ceremonies in Victorian life and theater, why do weddings in Victorian novels frequently never occur, happen off stage, or receive a mention in passing? Such a literary phenomenon is particularly puzzling given the discursive possibilities of the realist novel, which seems especially well-suited for describing the exterior details of wedding attire and ceremony as well as representing the interiority of brides and grooms. Why does the Victorian marriage plot largely bypass weddings, considering that the nineteenth-century novel provides a perfect vehicle for celebrating them, as did contemporary British culture and other prominent art forms?

In my dissertation, I argue that key Victorian novelists—such as Anne and Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy—often exile descriptions of ceremonious weddings from their narratives because they are wary of associating weddings with theatrical spectacles, which would conjoin marriage

⁷ Elizabeth Hafkin Pleck, *Celebrating the Family: Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 212.

with performance. Nevertheless, they appreciate some aspects of performance in courtship and marriage, if such temporary performance leads to more authentic marriages.

My argument about the theatricality of weddings largely stems from the performative nature of legal and religious wedding rituals. The Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753, the first legislation in England to require a formal ceremony of marriage, "terminated the old rights of betrothal [which bestowed access to conjugal rights prior to marriage] and clandestine marriages."⁸ However, it also created multiple performative requirements for weddings, which restricted the way in which couples could legitimize their relationships. For example, "after 1754 no vow other than that made in the Church of England, Quaker Meetings, or Jewish Synagogue had any legal standing in marriage."⁹ A couple also had to announce their wedding publicly, arrange for the calling of wedding banns, sign a wedding register, say marriage vows in the presence of clergy, have proper witnesses to the ceremony, and go to a sanctioned church in order to become married under the law.¹⁰ While the performance of such legal and religious rituals was meant to highlight the reverence and validity of marriage and counteract the problems occurring with clandestine and irregular marriages, the standardization of formalities and rituals legitimizing marriage also restricted the way in which Victorians legalized their relationships as well as appeared to privilege outward form over inner desires.

⁸ Gillis, *For Better, For Worse*, 110.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁰ See Rebecca Probert, *Marriage Law and Practice in the Long Eighteenth Century: A Reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 230. See also Jennifer Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012), 111.

The Victorian novelists discussed in this dissertation respond to the number of legal formalities governing nineteenth-century marriage in two ways. First, they criticize inauthentic play-acting enabled by certain religious and legal rituals, which in many cases require outward displays of marital ideals disjointed from the reality of loveless, mismatched, and even abusive marriages. To be clear, I do not suggest that the novelists object to the idea of rituals and customs governing romantic relationships or that they endorse violations of Hardwicke's Marriage Act. However, all the Victorian authors discussed in this dissertation imply that both the excessive use of external accoutrements associated with weddings and the performative requirements of marriage law and religious ritual often outweigh the formation of sincere relationships. Moreover, while marriage law itself does not endorse deception and insincerity, its focus on performative requirements often enables untoward actors to engage in deception and insincerity. As such, the novelists discussed in this dissertation typically resist the empty performativity of contemporary marriage law and customs, best illustrated by lavish wedding ceremonies, which often turn marriages into spectacles that disrupt the course of "true love." As an exception, Wilkie Collins challenges this argument by stressing that quiet and unceremonious weddings may be as insincere as ceremonious ones. For example, Magdalen Vanstone's quiet wedding to her cousin in *No Name* (1862) is a theatrical act, even if she engages in such deception for a noble purpose. Thomas Hardy further complicates the treatment of weddings in Victorian novels by embracing public, ostentatious weddings as valuable communal rituals in *The Woodlanders* (1887). Nevertheless, in general, all the authors described in this dissertation resist outward displays of ceremonies that fail to reflect or distort the couple's intentions.

Second, notwithstanding their rejection of empty theatricality that often encourages insincerity, the Victorian novelists discussed in this dissertation also recognize that even the noblest of characters must occasionally engage in temporary play-acting and deception if such performances allow them to circumvent inflexible marriage laws. For example, Helen Graham in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) asserts control over her abusive husband, whom she cannot legally divorce, by assuming a false identity. Her pious fraud (deception for a noble purpose) starts the pattern of various noble deceptions in courtship and marriage throughout the Victorian literature from Osborne Hamley's secretive marriage in Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1864) to John Harmon's staging of his death to ensure his bride's well-intentioned marital commitment in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). This pattern culminates in the works of two popular sensation fiction writers, Wilkie Collins and M. E. Braddon, who encourage multiple identity changes as well as the liberal use of make-up and costume that enable women to circumvent marriage law when such law creates injustice. Although George Eliot criticizes sensation novels, stressing that deception in courtship and marriage generally leads to relationship breakdown, even she appropriates performance into her marriage plot to highlight her point about deception. Thomas Hardy embraces the performance of communal wedding rituals, stressing that eschewing such traditions may connote the insincerity of one's intentions; however, he distinguishes communal rituals from legal wedding formalities. In sum, all the authors discussed here include and even embrace some form of performance in their marriage plots, even if they differ in their treatment of such performance.

All the authors discussed here also criticize Victorian marriage law to some extent, though they vary in the degree to which they denounce the law and with regard to the aspects of the law that concern them. While the Brontë sisters rebuke the inflexibility of marriage law, which disadvantages women, they recognize that the performative requirements of the law may also protect women. For example, the law impedes Jane's desire to marry Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1847) by forcing him to honor his commitment to Bertha Mason. However, the theatricality of Jane's aborted wedding—particularly the performance of a legal custom that involves voicing objections to an impending marriage—protects both Jane and Bertha from becoming the victims of bigamy. The later novelists, however, portray marriage law as progressively more unfair and arbitrary. For example, both Dickens and Collins criticize legal documents associated with marriage, asserting that the state's focus on outward appearance allows for frequent manipulation, which may legitimize unjust and fraudulent marriages. Perhaps the strongest critique of the marriage law comes in Hardy's *The Woodlanders* (1887) in which the main character, Giles Winterborne, unmaskes the 1857 Divorce Act—which promises freedom from unnatural unions but, in fact, forces people to remain in unhappy marriages—as futile and deceitful. As such, while divorce law may have been nominally beneficial, it did not achieve its supposed goals. In sum, the novel's critique of marriage law focuses mainly on the idea that legal formalities and seeming protections often fail to reflect the reality of marriages.

By focusing on the performative requirements of marriage law as well as various performances that circumvent such law, this dissertation also incorporates the conversation between two primary modes of Victorian narration: realism and

sensationalism. On the one hand, as shown through the few wedding descriptions readers find in Victorian literature, realism and sensationalism contradict each other. For example, in *No Name* (1862) Wilkie Collins glorifies Magdalen Vanstone's sham wedding to her cousin under a false name as the heroine's noble attempt to regain her family's rightful inheritance. However, in *Romola* (1863), George Eliot rebukes Tito's sham marriage to Tessa, criticizing both law and religion for condoning such marital fraud through their emphasis on the external performativity of wedding rituals. In other ways, however, realist and sensation novels intersect and even complement each other. For example, the previously mentioned Helen Graham, who reinvents herself under a new name and identity in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, serves as possible literary inspiration for the character of Lady Audley in Braddon's famous sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). Although Helen does not engage in bigamy as Lady Audley does, both heroines save themselves from abusive or neglectful marriages through performance.

George Eliot warns against certain dramatic excesses in the sensation novel, which allow for unrealistic and even unethical elements in marriage plots. Specifically, she warns her readers against conflating novel writing with theater, as the two genres serve different ends and operate through different means. For instance, the dramatic courtship plot of Dorothea and Ladislaw in Eliot's masterpiece *Middlemarch* (1872) culminates in silence—an abstraction unfit for a theatrical representation, which highlights the important differences between theater and the realist novel. Yet readers find a continuous enmeshing of realism and sensationalism throughout the Victorian marriage plot because both genres emphasize the performative nature of marriage law.

For example, despite her separation from most sensation novelists, Eliot embraces certain non-legal and quasi-theatrical ways of understanding marriage plots. As with Wilkie Collins, she elevates the importance of dreams about theatrical weddings as valuable prophecies about marriage. As such, both realist and sensation fiction authors condemn empty theatricality based on superficial appearances and insincere intentions. However, they also recognize that a certain degree of social performance and even temporary deception in courtship and marriage plots is unavoidable and even desirable—especially if it helps to circumvent an unjust law or gain some additional insight about marriage.

Contributions

My argument in this dissertation focuses on the theatricality of Victorian marriage plots by highlighting the performative aspects of wedding ceremonies. Such a focus provides a new explanation for the gradual dismantling of traditional courtship and marriage plots throughout the nineteenth century. Literary scholarship on marriage in Victorian fiction has long recognized the breakdown of the traditional marriage plot in which courtship culminates with a stable and happy conclusion. Following Joseph Allen Boone's arguments in *Tradition Counter Tradition*, many critics stress that the Victorian novel contains uneasy wed-locks.¹¹ Kelly Hager even argues that Dickens's novels, traditionally assumed to end in domestic idylls, "plot marital failure."¹² Some critics have also noted that the Victorian marriage law was one of the main reasons for

¹¹ See Joseph Allen Boone, *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

¹² Kelly Hager, *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce: The Failed-Marriage Plot and the Novel Tradition* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 5.

contemporaneous literary representations of unhappy, unstable, and abusive marriages.¹³ However, the current scholarship does not examine in detail how the nineteenth-century novel dismantles the conventional marriage plot by highlighting the performativity of Victorian marriage law and customs. As such, my focus on wedding ceremonies and other performative aspects of courtship and marriage in the Victorian novel sheds new light on these novelists' critique of marriage because of its performativity. I argue that key Victorian novelists—such as Anne and Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy—generally ascribe the collapse of the traditional marriage plot to the conjoining of marriage and performance, especially within the context of marriage law that often privileges outward form and ritual over inner desires. Nevertheless, they also appropriate some aspects of performance in the courtship and marriage plot, implying that certain type and degree of performance is conducive to the formation of more authentic marriages.

Critics have also discussed Victorians' interest in performance arts and, more specifically, the theater's influence on the novel. In general, the Victorians exhibited a mixed attitude toward theater. On the one hand, as Emily Allen points out, though the Victorians generally “loved theater in all forms,” many of them also harbored a certain anti-theatrical prejudice that derived mainly from “the impropriety of the actress”¹⁴ and often associated theater “with the lower classes, crowds and grossly unregulated

¹³ See Maeve E. Doggett, *Marriage, Wife-Beating and the Law in Victorian England* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993). See also Marlene Tromp, *The Private Rod: Marital Violence, Sensation, and the Law in Victorian Britain* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000) and Jennifer C. Kelsey, *Changing the Rules: Women and Victorian Marriage* (Leicestershire: Matador, 2016).

¹⁴ Emily Allen, *Theater Figures: The Production of the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003), 5.

consumption.”¹⁵ Additionally, she suggests that the novel itself nourished the anti-theatrical prejudice, even if it used theater “as a negative example by which to tout its own interior processes.”¹⁶ As such, the nineteenth century, often referred to as the “Age of the Novel,” frequently privileged the novel over the theater. On the other hand, the critics also point out that many Victorians not only enjoyed theater but also engaged in social acting off the stage. Deborah Vlock argues that Victorians “read novels, newspapers, social criticism . . . through the lens of popular performance.”¹⁷ Richard Pearson, who explores the connection between Dickens, Collins and the stage, also stresses that the Victorians “did not sit by the fire reading novels and periodicals every evening.”¹⁸ Additionally, Pearson reminds us that, even if today readers study the novels (rather than the plays) of Dickens and Collins, those writers both enjoyed and contributed to the theater.¹⁹ Even George Eliot considered writing *Daniel Deronda* as a play.²⁰ Martin Meisel’s ground-breaking work specifically explores the importance of theatrical metaphors in Victorian fiction.²¹ Joseph Litvak argues that theatricality, which pervades the novels of Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, enforces social norms while introducing opportunities for novelists to resist them.²² In summary, there is considerable scholarship on both the antagonism and kinship between the Victorian novel and the theater.

¹⁵ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶ Ibid., 6.

¹⁷ Deborah Vlock, *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theater* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

¹⁸ Richard Pearson, *Victorian Writers and the Stage: Plays of Dickens, Browning, Collins and Tennyson* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., 2–3. On page 2, Pearson stresses that “Dickens had six plays performed professionally” and “Wilkie Collins had eleven.”

²⁰ Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 471.

²¹ See Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

²² See Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

To contribute to this scholarship, I offer the argument that a gradual dismantling of the traditional marriage plot throughout the nineteenth century stems in part from Victorian novelists' resistance to the empty theatricality of courtship and marriages fostered by various social and legal conditions. The Victorian novelists discussed in this dissertation emphasize performance and theatricality most saliently in their courtship and marriage plots precisely in response to the heightened legalization of marriage in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In other words, they develop novelistic techniques in tandem with the legal evolution of marriage. My goal in this dissertation is to both illustrate and emphasize how Victorian novelists negotiate their treatment of theatricality as both a means of resisting certain legal developments in contemporary marriage law as well as dismantling and rewriting the traditional marriage plot framed by such law.

Historical Context

Since I argue that Victorian fiction criticizes contemporaneous marriage laws because of their performativity, unfairness, and inflexibility, an overview of the nineteenth-century marriage law places this argument in context. The following is a brief timeline of the major landmarks in Victorian marriage and divorce law:

- 1835 Marriage Act. This act prohibited dissolving marriage with a mentally ill spouse if the spouse were sane enough at the time of the wedding ceremony to understand the nature of the commitment involved.²³
- 1836 Civil Marriages Act. After Parliament passed this law, the Church of England lost its monopoly over marriage; non-Anglicans were able to marry either in their own churches or in registry offices.
- 1837 Registration Act. This legislation made it compulsory for civilians to register all births, marriages, and deaths at a registry office; the office

²³ See John Sutherland, *Can Jane Eyre Be Happy? More Puzzles in Classic Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 72.

issued certificates for each occasion and retained a copy at Somerset House in London.

- 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act. This act legalized divorce and transferred authority over marriage from the church to secular courts. However, the law limited a woman's ability to divorce to such cases where she could prove a specific cause for divorce other than adultery, which was insufficient as a lone cause.
- 1870 Married Women's Property Act. This act allowed women to keep £200 of their own earnings after marriage.
- 1882 The Married Women's Property Act. This act allowed all married women to continue as the separate owners and administrators of their property after marriage.

Even a cursory glance at the Victorian marital legislation reveals the increasing formalization of marriage in nineteenth century, such as additional registration requirements, the complexities of divorce, as well as the double standard for men and women under marriage law.²⁴ Although the law gradually offered increased rights to married women throughout the century, those rights were still significantly curbed. While my primary goal in this dissertation is neither to summarize nor to analyze Victorian marriage law and its literary representations, I highlight novels that discuss both the performative requirements of the law as well as the theatricality needed in many cases to circumvent the law's injustice and inflexibility.

Focusing on the performative requirements of the law helps to underscore its theatricality. As J. M. Balkin and Sanford Levinson argue, "law, like music or drama, is

²⁴ For more details discussions about the history and content of Victorian marriage law, see Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850–1895* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Lee Holcombe, *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983). For discussion on the historical developments of nineteenth-century marriage and divorce laws, see also Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce*.

best understood as a performance, the acting out of texts rather than the texts themselves.”²⁵ In other words, the law legitimizes, prohibits, and punishes certain behaviors by requiring those who interpret, enforce, and comply with it to employ certain gestures, rituals, conventions, and words, the performance of which either makes something “legal” or “illegal.” As Julie Stone Peters argues, even if the law itself extends beyond performance or resists theatrical means, “performance and theatricality (both as effect and idea) matter to law.”²⁶ As such, the performative requirements of the law support the idea that, at times, the law functions like a theater—at least to the extent that the law relies on external performativity and appearance.

Putting the performativity of law in a historical context, the Marriage Act of 1753 (also known as Lord Hardwicke’s Marriage Act), “set the basic rules of marriages in England for nearly a century.”²⁷ The Act was designed to stop clandestine and irregular marriages by standardizing the requirements for a valid marriage. Until the Marriage Act of 1753, marriage law in England was largely controlled by the canonic law of the Church of England.²⁸ Although the Church required the performance of certain formalities, such as the calling of the banns and obtaining a marriage license prior to marriage, these requirements were not consistently enforced. As such, “the institutional chaos of 1650s in the matters of church administration”²⁹ widened “the gap between the

²⁵ J. M. Balkin and Sanford Levinson, “Law and Performance,” *Law and Literature: Current Legal Issues*, ed. Michael Freeman and Andrew D. E. Lewis, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 729.

²⁶ Julie Stone Peters, “Law as Performance: Historical Interpretation, Objects, Lexicons, and Other Methodological Problems,” in *New Directions in Law and Literature*, ed. Elizabeth S. Anker and Bernadette Meyler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 196.

²⁷ Stone, *Road to Divorce*, 123.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

law and popular custom”³⁰ with regard to wedding formalities, created a lack of uniformity and arbitrariness in validating marriages, enabled many clandestine marriages, and even encouraged fraud in marriage registers.³¹ The passage of Lord Hardwicke’s 1753 Marriage Act tightened the existing ecclesiastical rules regarding marriage, making a marriage “null and void unless an entry was recorded in a parish register and signed by the bride, and groom, at least two witnesses, and the officiating clergymen.”³² Additionally, the law required those under twenty-one to have parental consent if they married by license.³³ The increased formalization of marriage continued into the nineteenth century, allowing the state greater control over the institution of marriage. The 1836 Civil Marriages Act “permitted both civil and non-conformist marriage” (non-Anglicans could marry either in their own church or in registry offices), but the law did not eliminate various legal rituals and formalities.³⁴ In fact, the 1837 Registration Act made it compulsory for all births, marriages, and deaths to be registered at a registry office, requiring participants to obtain certificates for each event.³⁵ As such, the validity of a marital commitment depended on the fulfillment of legal formalities and rituals. This is not to suggest that the fulfillment of such formalities and rituals always amounted to empty performances or that Victorian marriage law endorsed deceptive and insincere commitments. However, the increased standardization and formalization of marriage law in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which determined the legitimacy of a given

³⁰ Ibid., 74.

³¹ See Ibid., 6–116.

³² Ibid., 124.

³³ Leah Leneman, “The Scottish Case That Led to Hardwicke’s Marriage Act,” *Law and History Review* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 161–69. See also Probert’s *Marriage Law & Practice*.

³⁴ Gillis, *For Better, For Worse*, 239.

³⁵ See James Thomas Hammick, *The Acts Relating to the Registration of Births, Deaths, & Marriages: And the Duties of Registration Officers* (London: Shaw & Sons, 1875).

union based on the execution of legal rituals or the appearance of legal documents, often enabled the deception of villainous characters.

In addition to the formalities of Victorian marriage law, its substance also contained a certain gender bias. For example, Gillis states that “a woman’s freedom of choice and her bargaining power [in the marriage market] were much greater under the old customs of betrothal than under the new law of marriage.”³⁶ Unlike the betrothed who “had a legal and social position,” a wife under Victorian marriage law “was feme covert, without legal identity or rights apart from her husband.”³⁷ While the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act (the Divorce Act) legalized divorce, the law made petitioning for divorce much easier for men than women. The Divorce Act allowed a wife to sue for divorce only if her husband committed adultery and if that adultery was compounded by certain additional crimes, such as desertion or brutality.³⁸ The 1878 Amendment to the Matrimonial Causes Act relaxed the grounds for divorce by permitting women to seek a legal separation order through a local magistrate if her husband was convicted of assaulting her.³⁹ Yet such a proceeding still required many legal formalities. Moreover, even if the court granted a separation order, neither party could legally remarry as they would with a formal divorce. The 1886 Maintenance in Case of Desertion Act reinforced the 1878 amendment to the Matrimonial Causes Act by expanding the possible causes of separation and maintenance to include desertion and neglect,⁴⁰ and in 1895 lawmakers

³⁶ Gillis, *For Better, For Worse*, 183.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Allen Horstman, *Victorian Divorce* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 78–79.

³⁹ Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law*, 169–70.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 150–51; See also Perkin, *Victorian Women*, 130.

added “persistent cruelty” as a legitimate cause for formal separation.⁴¹ It was not until the 1923 Divorce Law Reform Bill, however, that women could divorce their husbands for adultery alone.⁴²

Under the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, men could seek a divorce based on adultery alone. However, even though the law made divorce easier for men than for women, poor men could not afford to prove that their wives were adulterous, even if that were the case. As such, even if Dickens had published *Hard Times* after the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act instead of in 1854, it is doubtful that the law would have helped Stephen Blackpool because he could not have afforded to divorce his alcoholic wife. Given the difficulty of obtaining a legal divorce, many Victorians resolved unhappy marriages in pragmatic, as opposed to legal ways, such as desertion and elopement. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Thomas Hardy’s 1886 novel, readers learn about the ritual of wife-sale, an unofficial folk custom by which a husband publicly sold his wife to another man.⁴³ Stone stresses that wife-sale involved elaborate rituals designed to “make the sale appear as legally binding as possible, especially with respect to any future responsibility by the husband for the wife.”⁴⁴ Therefore, Victorians created various legal fictions and found creative ways of using quasi-legal means of escaping marriage law.

The Victorian novel plays a proactive role in opposing the inflexibility of Victorian marriage law, describing ways of circumventing such law in order to free characters from unhappy wedlock. For example, in *David Copperfield* (1850), Betsey

⁴¹ A. James Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship: Conflict in Nineteenth Century Married Life* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 41.

⁴² Stone, *Road to Divorce*, 395–96.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 143–48.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

Trotwood pays her cruel husband to achieve separation by mutual consent. Such literary examples of escape and/or separation from one's spouse do not necessarily encourage lawlessness but rather highlight the many shortcomings of contemporary marriage and divorce law. The sensation novels, in particular, feature characters who engage in trickery and deception in order to manipulate marriage laws. On the one hand, those novels criticize such deception by fully exposing its horrors. In Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), for example, Sir Percival confines his wife Laura Fairlie in a mental asylum and switches her identity with the terminally-ill Anne so that Anne's death can be presented as Laura's, allowing him to inherit money legally upon her death. On the other hand, sensation fiction authors allow for some deception, especially by women, if such deception helps them to circumvent unjust marriage laws. For instance, as mentioned, Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) features a bigamous heroine who assumes various names and personas to defy the law that prevents her from remarrying after her first husband abandons her. While Braddon does not necessarily condone her heroine's many transgressions, especially her attempted murder of several people, the novel highlights the notion that marriage law fails to protect the heroine's interests against a husband who neglects her and their child.

Definitions

Since this dissertation focuses on how the novel represents the theatricality of legal rituals, social customs, and individual behaviors associated with courtship and marriage, it is important to clarify the terms "theatricality" and "performance." Although performance is often regarded as a much broader concept than theatricality, as it incorporates behaviors and practices that are not necessarily related to the theater itself, in

this dissertation I use the terms performativity/performance and theatricality interchangeably. As such, I define both terms as any behavior relating to or invoking theater, dramatic representation, and acting. While I discuss actual actors or theatrical performances, such as Mr. Crummes's theater troupe in Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), I primarily focus on play-acting detached from a theatrical stage. Multiple characters in Victorian novels undergo identity and costume changes, partake in the performance of religious and legal rituals, and engage in play-acting outside of a theatrical stage. This kind of play-acting illustrates Thomas Postlewait and Tracy Davis's argument about "the expansive meanings of theatricality," which suggests that theatrical activity can be abstracted from the theatre itself and applied to all aspects of human life.⁴⁵ Such a concept also relies on Erving Goffman's philosophy that various utterances and behaviors in everyday life are produced through performance,⁴⁶ as well as J.L. Austin's performative speech theory, which specifically discusses the use of "I do" at a wedding to demonstrate that even certain words have performative connotations.⁴⁷

In an effort to distinguish performance from other social behavior, performance theorist Richard Schechner stresses that performance is a "twice behaved" behavior.⁴⁸ That means that a performer is conscious of his or her performing, and that a performance distinguishes itself from other social behavior because it cannot escape reflection. While certain poststructuralist discussions of theatricality suggest that "performance [can] *not*

⁴⁵ Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait, ed. *Theatricality: Theatre and Performance Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3.

⁴⁶ See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959).

⁴⁷ See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, ed. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

⁴⁸ Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 35, 36, 52.

be set apart as distinctive” from everyday life,⁴⁹ the examples of performativity described in this dissertation all tend to support Schechner’s argument that performance is a conscious act. Even characters such as David Copperfield or Stephen Blackpool, who experience disassociation from the performances of their wedding ceremonies, still engage in and reflect upon such performances, however passively.

The consciousness of engaging in a performance does not depend on whether or not a given performance is noble or ignoble. As this dissertation shows, performance can be perceived in both a pejorative or a positive manner. On the one hand, theatricality, associated with both the stage and in the context of sensation fiction, seems to connote pompousness or spectacular and extravagantly histrionic displays. On the other hand, theatricality also incorporates a wide range of acting and expressive possibilities. Although Victorian novelists generally criticize any insincerity associated with theatricality, they also suggest that theatricality does not always incorporate false appearances. Rather, in some cases, it may also serve as a means of expression and/or understanding that leads to truth, as well as liberation for those who adopt new identities to circumvent unjust law.

The distinction between sincerity and authenticity helps to highlight why Victorian novelists discussed here both reject and embrace certain aspects of performance in the marriage plot. Lionel Trilling’s famous essay “Sincerity and Authenticity” draws a distinction between the concept of sincerity—“the absence of dissimulation or feigning or pretense”⁵⁰—and the concept of authenticity, “a more exigent conception of the self and

⁴⁹ Julia Stone Peters, “Law and Performance,” 200.

⁵⁰ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 13.

what being true to it consists in.”⁵¹ Although Trilling never offers a simple, concise definition of “authenticity,” he suggests that being true to oneself is not always the same as “the avoidance of being false” to others.⁵² Authenticity is about being true to oneself, but it may still involve a certain degree of “feigning” or theatricality because playing one’s part on “the stage of the world on which the moral life is played” sometimes differs from one’s “real function” and purpose in life.⁵³ In other words, what is expected of us socially does not always match who we truly are as people. Perhaps that is why Lynn M. Voskuil, who relies on Trilling’s philosophy, argues that Victorians did not necessarily perceive theatricality and authenticity as binary opposites but rather as two halves of the same apple that “functioned dynamically together.”⁵⁴ She bases this argument on the concept of “natural acting” advocated by popular Victorian drama critics, such as William Hazlitt and George Lewes, who believed that acting and nature could be brought together in ways “that defy our own poststructuralist partitioning of the two.”⁵⁵ In other words, they contended that a certain degree of performance can provide the route to discovering truths about oneself and the world. Readers perceive this notion in Victorian novels, particularly when considering the examples of pious fraud or other temporary deceptions that lead to noble ends.

This project focuses on different types of performance within the context of Victorian courtship and marriage plot. First, I discuss literary representations of the

⁵¹ Ibid., 11.

⁵² Ibid., 5.

⁵³ Ibid., 86.

⁵⁴ Lynn M. Voskuil, *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 2.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 3.

performative requirements involved in the execution of the legal, religious, and social rituals that legitimize marriage. Although Victor Turner, an anthropologist, makes some distinctions between ritual and theater, he specifically defines ritual as “a performance”⁵⁶ and stresses that such a performance is “complex and many-layered.”⁵⁷ To the extent that the rituals associated with courtship and marriage function like performances that represent or celebrate everyday life faithfully, they provide “a meta commentary, implicit or explicit . . . on the major social dramas” of humanity.⁵⁸ However, Turner aptly indicates that the “mutual mirroring, life by art, art by life” is never completely faithful; rather, it involves an exchange in which “something new is added, something old is lost and discarded.”⁵⁹ When the novelists described in this dissertation demonstrate wariness of legal and social rituals associated with courtship and marriage, they reveal their fear that such rituals privilege outward forms over inner desires and, as such, often distort rather than represent life.

Second, as already discussed, I analyze the extent to which literary characters engage in performance to circumvent inflexible marriage and divorce laws. Since the external forms, rituals and precepts of marriage law often distorted one’s sense of “being true to one’s own self,”⁶⁰ the characters in Victorian novels, which are the subject of this dissertation, frequently engage in pretense and deception to remain true to themselves and their own values. However, all the key Victorian novelists described here also stress that such pretense and deception should be only short-lived and utilized for a noble

⁵⁶ Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publication, 1982), 79, 112.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁶⁰ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 5.

purpose of correcting unjust or false outcomes. As such, the examples of pious fraud, examined in this dissertation, suggest that any theatricality or performativity condoned in Victorian novel functions as the temporary means to a better end rather than constitutes an end itself.

The concept of theatricality, which permeates this dissertation, also relates directly to the discussion about both the differences and similarities between realist and sensation novels. Scholars have often considered sensation fiction a literary extension of the theater because the genre depends heavily on theatrical elements, such as disguise, mistaken identity, mystery, and heightened emotions. Many sensation novelists drew on the influences of melodrama and wrote for the stage. The realist novelists also employed theatricality by utilizing charades and disguises in their marriage plots. However, to the extent the realist writers utilize theatricality in the marriage plot, they do so primarily to deconstruct the opposition between theater and reality by unmasking the artificiality of marriage as a social and legal institution. The novelists in both genres also distinguish between noble and ignoble performances, condemning the latter.

Organization

The five chapters comprising the body of this dissertation discuss Victorian novels in chronological progression—from early realist novels, through the sensation novel, to George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. My reading focuses on the few wedding descriptions in Victorian novels as well as on various examples of play-acting and deception in courtship and marriage. Such examples include secret courtships and marriages, identity and name changes, social performances, lies and pious frauds. Although such literary representations of theatricality in courtship and marriage do not

unfold in a neat, linear manner, examining the theme chronologically reveals the treatment of performance in courtship and marriage plots throughout the nineteenth century. The progression also unveils the outliers and intertextual connections within that subject.

Chapter II focuses on Charlotte and Anne Brontë as well as Elizabeth Gaskell. This chapter begins with an analysis of three wedding scenes in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847): Edward Rochester's pantomime wedding to Blanche Ingram, his aborted wedding to Jane, and Jane's wedding to Rochester, which the novel never describes. I argue that, as Jane changes from a mere spectator at the pantomime wedding, through her passive, spectator-like participation in her own aborted wedding, to her final, conscious choice to marry the man she loves, she gradually asserts her narrative control, which culminates in her famous, first-person announcement: "Reader, I married him."⁶¹ By highlighting the theatricality of both the pantomime wedding and Jane's aborted wedding, Brontë criticizes the empty performativity of wedding rituals, disconnected from true intentions of brides and grooms as well as the complex reality of marriage. In contrast, she connects private wedding ceremonies, such as Jane's anti-theatrical second wedding, with authenticity. Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) explores possible solutions to the dilemma a woman faces when her private desires and needs in marriage diverge from the social and legal expectations of marriage. In that novel, the main protagonist, Helen Graham, assumes an alternate identity when the deception helps to shelter her and her son from an abusive husband. However, Helen's pious fraud,

⁶¹ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Norton, 2001), 382.

though liberating, is not only ridden with difficulties but also robs her of her identity, for she must pretend to be someone else in order to maintain her ruse.

Like the Brontë sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell unmasks the false assumptions behind an ideal, companionate marriage between mismatched partners. In *North and South* (1855), Margaret Hale's refusal to see herself as a wife stems, in part, from the idea that marriage as a model for social harmony cannot work if it is based on female economic subjugation. In *Wives and Daughters* (1864), Gaskell builds on the Brontë theme of marital deception by discussing secret marriages and engagements. She allows for Osborne Hamley's illegal marriage to his French wife, when such a deception helps him to protect his wife and son, but she juxtaposes such noble deception against the story of Cynthia Kirkpatrick who becomes secretly engaged to Mr. Preston in exchange for a dress she wants to buy. While Gaskell can appreciate some degree of deception to foster love in the case of Osborne Hamley, she does not sanction Cynthia's lies about her relationship with Mr. Preston when they mask clear wrong-doing. As such, Gaskell's views on theatricality and deception as the means in courtship and marriage vary depending on what such means accomplish.

Chapter III concerns both unceremonious and theatrical weddings in Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), *David Copperfield* (1850), *Hard Times* (1854), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). Dickens follows a general pattern of presenting simple, quiet weddings described with the restraint characteristic of realism, which highlights the discursive possibilities of a novel. On the other hand, in *Nicholas Nickleby* the novelist appropriates the very theatrical extravagance he criticizes in weddings to stress the empty performativity of certain marriages. To the extent that Dickens equates the empty

performativity of wedding rituals with artificial play-acting, he satirizes the theatrical trappings of showy weddings as farcical and antithetical to the novel's construction of interior character development, emotional spaces, and privatized family values.

By the 1850s Dickens embraced theater in his novels as a medium that generated much more self-awareness than fictional play-acting. For example, his plotting of David Copperfield's wedding to Dora does not fit neatly into the simple dichotomy of the simple/sincere versus theatrical/insincere weddings. Although Dora's nuptials are almost as farcical as Miss Petowker's, the novel's technique of the first-person reflection allows David to view his life on the stage as if he were a mere spectator and not an actor himself. In *David Copperfield* (1850), Dickens also shifts his critique of theatrical behavior in marriage to his critique of empty marital formalities. By comparing ecclesiastical judges to actors and marital disputes to private theatricals, he suggests that the performative aspects of the marriage law highlight its artificiality and even falsity. Additionally, marriage law itself, which relies heavily on external appearances, often creates legal fictions disjointed from the reality of married life.

Dickens also allows for individual deception as a temporary means of achieving long-lasting marital happiness. In *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), his last completed novel, he expands the concept of pious fraud in courtship to include self-discovery and finding more suitable marriages. John Harmon believes he must stage his own death to avoid marrying a stranger. Dickens sees John's temporary deception of Bella Wilfred as a means of ensuring his eventual sincerity of affection towards her. Such a strategy allows Dickens to represent the various gradations between authenticity and falsehood. The novel also captures the complex tensions of Dickens's troubled marriage as well as his

personal secrets in his later life by featuring a society obsessed with external appearances and social proprieties. Dickens still finishes the novel with a somewhat theatrical wedding between his two heroes, John and Bella, which combines his advocacy for quiet weddings with his appreciation for certain theatrical rituals.

Chapter IV focuses on some of the most popular Victorian sensation novels: Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859) and *No Name* (1862) as well as M. E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863). Elevating stage actresses to Victorian heroines and encouraging the liberal use of costume, makeup, fake names, and legal documents, the sensation novel embraces theater as a way of exposing the falsity of many social and legal norms. At the time when Victorian wives lacked any legal identity without their husbands, sensation fiction provided them with the creative freedom to reinvent themselves under false names and personas and, as such, allowed them to challenge their dependent, domestic roles more effectively.

Collins's *The Woman in White* portrays performance as both the means of conspiring to deprive married women of their property and of exposing such a conspiracy. Sir Percival's attempt to forge a marriage register exploits the idea that a bad actor can manipulate the law by changing the appearance of a legal document. Additionally, he exploits the theatrical device of an identity swap by exploiting his wife's physical resemblance to the terminally-ill Anne Catherick. While Collins overtly condemns this kind of deception, he generally embraces other kinds of fictions, such as the theatrical wedding dream or Marian's costume changes, as a means of unfolding the truth about unjust marriage laws and abusive marriages. In *No Name* (1862) Collins also allows his heroine Magdalen Vanstone to reinvent herself under the new identity of Miss

Bygrave to regain her family's fortune. Unlike Jane Eyre, who does not know she is about to enter a bigamous union, or David Copperfield, who weds Dora as if in a dream, Magdalen plays the part of a fictitious bride consciously in order to use the law to acquire her inheritance. While theater gives Magdalen the freedom that the law denies her, there are limits to her perpetual performance. Not only does she continually risk unmasking, but her plan to regain her fortune depends entirely on her ability to pretend that she is someone other than herself. Additionally, Collins' novels, particularly *The Woman in White*, highlight the importance of non-legal means to the truth—such as dreams, hunches, and premonitions. On the one hand, by structuring *The Woman in White* as a trial procedure, Collins seems to embrace the legal process as the best way to ensure fairness and accuracy. On the other hand, as he employs the legal procedure, he also points out its imperfections. By stressing the investigative limitations of the law, Collins emphasizes that the law, like the theater, concerns itself with external appearances.

As with Collins, in *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon stresses the notion that one's determination to solve cases through circumstantial evidence can lead to incorrect conclusions and twisted justice. Robert Audley's focus on hard facts while investigating Lady Audley's secret prevents him from resolving her case justly. Moreover, elevating Lady Audley to the status of a heroine, Braddon indirectly warns readers against idealizing Victorian wives and thereby turning them into inhuman, passive, and decorative creatures. Yet while Braddon portrays Lady Audley sympathetically, she suggests that the heroine eventually goes too far in her deception and violence. Braddon's choice to soften some of the excesses of *Lady Audley's Secret* in *Aurora Floyd* helps her to highlight the idea that even women innocent of crime can be easily accused of

sensational transgressions, such as bigamy or even murder. Given that Aurora's bigamy is inadvertent, her transgressions relate mainly to her theatrical personality. Her decision to flout convention and downplay the law, leads her to an unhappy marriage, which becomes the proximate cause of both her inadvertent bigamy as well as her murder trial. What distinguishes Aurora Floyd from other sensation heroines is her faith in the just legal system. While other sensation heroines feel the need to circumvent the law for being unjust, Aurora believes that the law—even if stacked against women—is still essentially just. Such a belief represents Braddon's hope that both the institution of marriage and the legal system governing it can be reformed.

Chapter V focuses on George Eliot's revisions of the techniques of sensation fiction. With her emphasis on the complexity and indeterminateness of marriage, Eliot shows that compressed chronology, stark contrasts, shocking descriptions, and closures—typically associated with sensation fiction—dramatically falsify reality. However, Eliot's realism is not a simple rejection of theater or even theatrical elements in a novel, but rather a revision of melodramatic theatricality often associated with sensation fiction. Her narrative innovations require a certain ethical and psychological depth in narration, which sensation fiction often lacks. Part of Eliot's revision of sensation fiction involves her representation of intense emotions, often associated with theatricality and sensationalism, by having her characters experience them internally rather than express them outwardly through melodrama.

The chapter discusses Eliot's realist revisions of sensationalism in the marriage plots of three novels *Romola* (1863), *Middlemarch* (1872), and *Daniel Deronda* (1876). In *Romola*, neither of the two weddings (Tito's sham wedding to Tessa and Fra Luca's

vision about Romola's wedding) serve as a traditional ending to the courtship plot. Instead, the unconventional narrative placement of those weddings, as well as their questionable status, encourage analysis of the dangers of combining marriage and play-acting. By conflating religious vows with a theatrical performance in the sham wedding of Tito and Tessa, Eliot not only exposes the performativity of wedding rituals, but also demonstrates that both law and religion condone marital fraud by focusing on external performativity. Setting the "real" wedding of Tito to Romola off stage, Eliot seems to continue *Jane Eyre's* tradition of quiet, sidelined weddings relegated to mere announcements. However, Romola's wedding is also very much unlike the Brontë's personal narrative experience or the quiet weddings of Dickens' heroes. Here, the "offstage" wedding serves as a chronologically ambivalent prophecy highlighting the dark secrets of Tito's soul and attempting to prevent the heroine from marrying a villain.

The marriage plot in *Middlemarch* includes examples of marital failures based on unrealistic illusions and inauthentic play-acting. Although the novel contains some sensational marriage subplots involving Mr. Bulstrode, Julia Casaubon, and Joshua Rigg, Eliot revises these examples of sensation as soon as she introduces them. She also counteracts them with other anti-sensational subplots, such as Reverend Camden Farebrother's selfless, internalized courtship of Mary Garth. Eliot highlights the anti-sensationalism of authentic relationships by depicting the final coming together of Dorothea and Will as a silent moment. The scene is of such enormous emotional and psychological importance that the reader learns of Dorothea and Will's feelings for each other almost entirely through omniscient narration and free indirect discourse because the characters barely speak in the scene. Additionally, Eliot's argument that real marriages

lack clear narrative boundaries is well illustrated by the fact that Dorothea does not realize that she and Casaubon are a poor matrimonial match until after they wed, and that she does not find her true love Will until after her marriage to Casaubon.

For the two central characters of *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen and Daniel, their wedding day also marks the beginning of a new narrative in their lives, which foregoes narrative closure. Additionally, the novel casts Gwendolen in an acting role though it distinguishes her social acting from the performance of a professional actress, Princess Alcharisi. In contrast to Alcharisi, Gwendolen's social acting gives her power over men in the marriage market but also becomes part of the reason for her hapless marriage to Grandcourt. Eliot suggests that Grandcourt and Gwendolen's performance in their marriage makes them immune to each other's feelings and becomes a proximate cause of the husband's death. In the end, Eliot revises the sensationalism of Gwendolen's cold passivity in the moment of Grandcourt's death by having her learn from her marital horrors and become more aware of human suffering.

Finally, in Chapter VI, I discuss three of Hardy's major Wessex novels: *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Woodlanders* (1887), and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Plotting a socially acceptable betrothal to a womanizer, an aborted wedding, marriage declarations to a corpse, an escape from marriage to a traveling circus, and the pursuit of love outside wedlock, Hardy's novels reflect late-Victorian cultural, economic, and sexual anxieties about marriage, where human motives and desires are continually threatened, thwarted, and undermined by the Immanent Will, Hardy's term for a blind but powerful force that affects people's lives without any concern for them. Although the sensational events, dramatic suspense, irony of circumstance, and reversal of fortune in

Hardy's marriage plots strain the probability of his novels, they also help to highlight the tragic character of his heroes and heroines.

Far from the Madding Crowd, Hardy's first major literary success, retains the remnants of a traditional marriage plot but also dismantles that plot by featuring unusually long, unresolved courtships; an aborted wedding ceremony; and an abandoned marriage. Bathsheba Everdene does marry Gabriel Oak in the end but requests a secret, plain wedding. Her fear of becoming a spectacle at her own wedding echoes the dreadful image of Frank Troy waiting at the altar to wed his absent bride while the church audience watches. Hardy further minimizes the value of a wedding ceremony by having Fanny and Frank function as a married couple in the novel even though they never wed. Frank's eventual secret wedding to Bathsheba, his abandonment of her for a traveling circus, as well as his voyeurism under the guise of a circus performer suggest that loveless and mismatched marriages are doomed.

Stressing the tragedy of loveless commitments, Hardy clearly distinguishes between legal and communal wedding rituals, embracing the later in his later novel, *The Woodlanders*. The novel's protagonist, Grace Melbury, touts the value of a church wedding in the presence of her village friends while her fiancé, Doctor Fitzpiers, insists on a quiet registry wedding. Yet, Grace's desire to make her impending marriage to Doctor Fitzpiers a matter of common knowledge among the villagers also puts her in an uncomfortable situation when she must marry Fitzpiers, even after she suspects that he had spent the night with another woman. As such, the novel explores both the benefits and drawbacks of letting one's courtship and marriage unfold on a public stage. Additionally, by highlighting that Grace becomes Fitzpiers's wife by accidentally falling

into his arms during a mating ritual, which he manipulates, the novel examines the complicated relationship between chance, mishap, and accident in Hardy's courtship and marriage plot. Finally, the novel criticizes the 1857 Divorce Act, which fails to free Grace from her loveless and emotionally abusive marriage to Fitzpiers.

The unnaturalness and the simultaneous inescapability of marriage also constitute the main themes in *Jude the Obscure*. Hardy exposes the complicated relations between the four parties in the novel by analyzing various wedding descriptions and legal rituals. For example, Sue treats her artificial wedding to Phillotson as an amusing performance rather than a solemn, life-altering moment. Although she approaches her potential wedding to Jude more seriously, the novel stresses that Jude and Sue do not wed because the artificiality of legal and religious wedding rituals discourages them from doing so. They famously conclude that legitimizing their love with a marriage certificate would destroy it. Disillusioned with both legal and religious wedding ceremonies, Jude and Sue decide that they can govern their relationship without having it legitimized by either. Tellingly, their unwed relationship ends in tragedy because it is illegitimate. Therefore, Hardy criticizes legal marriages and advocates for reforms to divorce law, but he also seems to endorse the view that bad marriages, even if unnatural, are inevitable. Marriage, including all its problems and eventual breakdown, is one of the natural consequences of a world that is fallen and corrupt. The novelist blames bad marriages on the ache of modernism, which exposes the repercussions of the extinction of rural life, gender inequality, and Social Darwinism, all of which separate humans from nature and each other.

In summary, across these chapters I develop my argument that key Victorian novelists—such as Anne and Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy—express concerns against turning weddings and other nuptial rituals into theatrical spectacles that render marriage a mere performance. By highlighting the frequent disconnect between the form and substance of marriage in their novels, the novelists caution against privileging outward displays of social and legal wedding formalities over the sincerity of one's commitment. They also specifically highlight how marriage law, both its performative requirements and its substance, often enable insincerity in marriage. Nevertheless, the novels discussed here also appropriate some aspects of performance in courtship and marriage to highlight the need for more authentic marriages. While the key authors mentioned above differ in their critiques of performativity in courtship and marriage, all of them shape such plots by discussing performance and its influence on both the formation and dissolution of marriage.

II. UNMASKING COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE IN CHARLOTTE BRONTË, ANNE BRONTË, AND ELIZABETH GASKELL

Scholars have rarely discussed the seminal nature of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) in terms of its emphasis on theatricality in marriage, particularly in the context of a wedding ceremony. After all, the novel does not narrate Jane's actual marriage to Edward Rochester. Instead, Jane merely announces the wedding after the fact by famously proclaiming, "Reader, I married him."¹ And yet, it is the novel's portrayal of weddings as either empty charades or off-stage events that propels Brontë's critique of inauthentic marriages and initiates the gradual dismantling of the traditional marriage plot in Victorian fiction. By focusing on the performative aspects of a marriage ceremony, often represented as empty gestures and utterances disconnected from any sincere intentions to create a genuine commitment, *Jane Eyre* emphasizes the theatrical nature of many courtships and marriages, questioning their authenticity. The novel also provides a template for notions about the performative aspects of marriage in other social novels of the 1850s and 1860s, such as Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* as well as *Wives and Daughters*.

Utilizing the motif of unmasking, typically associated with the long satirical tradition in literature, in the preface to *Jane Eyre*, Brontë announces that the novel "will pluck the mask from the fact of social hypocrisy."² Such an unmasking of marriage as social and legal fiction becomes most apparent in Brontë's theatrical representations of wedding ceremonies throughout the novel. First, she describes Jane's aborted wedding in

¹ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Norton, 2001), 382.

² *Ibid.*, xxvii. On satire and the novel, see Aaron Matz's *Satire in an Age of Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) and Frank Palmeri's *Satire, History, Novel: Narrative Forms 1665–1815* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003).

external terms, using the first-person narration, but without providing much insight into the main character's thoughts or feelings. Second, she provides no description of Jane's actual wedding, which takes place off stage. Brontë's detailed account of Jane's aborted wedding to Rochester juxtaposed against her choice not to describe Jane's final, successful wedding serves as the catalyst for the novel's discussion about the intertwining concepts of interiority and theatricality. Interiority is typically defined as a character's thoughts and feelings, which readers learn about in a novel through either first-person narration or free indirect discourse. Theatricality refers to a character's external utterances, gestures and actions. In *Jane Eyre* Brontë suggests that theatrical weddings impede the character's interiority.

This chapter compares *Jane Eyre*'s treatment of wedding ceremonies with Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) as well as Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) and *Wives and Daughters* (1864). Like *Jane Eyre*, all these novels associate theatrical weddings with empty performativity and insincerity, while connecting quiet, off-stage weddings with interior depth and authenticity. However, while Charlotte Brontë implies that Jane discovers her authenticity and gains narrative control in the novel only when disassociating herself from wedding charades and other performances, both Anne Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell condone a certain degree of performance in the courtships and marriages of their heroines. They both recognize the necessity of some play-acting to circumvent the marriage law, which fails to protect women from physical abuse or economic disadvantage. As such, *Jane Eyre* inspires other contemporary novelists toward an intertextual discussion about theatricality in courtship and marriage, even if their ideas on the subject differ from those of Charlotte Brontë.

Unlike *Jane Eyre*, which is about the “quest and passage” towards a more companionate marriage, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* deals with the “aftermath” of a marriage that lacks true companionship.³ Since the two novels treat opposite phases of courtship and marriage, they represent the subject of theatricality differently. While Charlotte Brontë generally rebukes all theatricality in courtship and marriage as insincere, Anne Brontë allows her heroine, Helen Graham, to flee from an abusive husband under the theatrical disguise of a new assumed name and identity. By doing so, the novelist introduces the concept of pious fraud into Victorian marriage plot, later used by Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, and especially sensation novelists. Pious fraud is a deception practiced with a good end in view. Nevertheless, Anne Brontë acknowledges the various limitations of pious fraud, including the fact that Helen’s disguise makes her eschew her narrative control in the novel, as she tells her story through Gilbert Markham. In other words, as Helen assumes her new identity, she also gives up her voice in the novel. Perhaps that is why Charlotte Brontë does not advocate pious fraud in *Jane Eyre*, given she wants her heroine to discover her own voice as she matures.

The two novels by Elizabeth Gaskell discussed in this chapter, *North and South* (1855) and *Wives and Daughters* (1864), apply the Brontë tradition of unmasking inauthentic courtship and marriages to the social novel of 1850s and 1860s. Sharing Charlotte Brontë’s wariness of empty legal rituals and theatrical weddings, Gaskell disassociates her main female protagonists from the traditional role of a bride. As with *Jane Eyre*, both Margaret Hale and Molly Gibson are wedding spectators rather than brides. The ostentatious weddings of Gaskell’s secondary characters—Edith Shaw in

³ Jill Matus, “Strong Family Likeness”: *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 99.

North and South and Mrs. Kirkpatrick in *Wives and Daughters*—are empty public spectacles that expose the inauthenticity of the brides’ intentions toward their respective spouses. They focus on wedding clothes and external appearances rather than the spouses’ desire to make a life-long commitment. Gaskell further juxtaposes such theatrical weddings against the quiet wedding of Osborne Hamley to the love of his life, his French wife, Aimée. Although Osborne’s marriage is both illicit and unrecognized under English marriage law, given he marries a Catholic French maid, Gaskell glorifies it as the prime example of true love in the novel. Osborne’s marriage to Aimée is authentic, even though it does involve some deception, because it puts the sincerity of their affection for each other before any legal, religious, or social mores.

The intertextual discussion of theatricality in marriage between the Brontës and Gaskell initiates important revisions to the marriage plot in Victorian literature. First, by focusing on theatricality in marriage, the three novelists unmask the many thorny aspects of marriage, typically disregarded or marginalized under the traditional paradigms of courtship and marriage. For example, in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong aptly observes that while “Austen’s heroines marry as soon as their desire has been correctly aimed and accurately communicated,” the Brontës’ heroines often “desire the one man, which the society forbids them to marry.”⁴ Such a clash of personal desire and social interest triggers the Brontës’ discussion about the falsity of many legal and social conventions, which fail to reflect the true desires of fiancées and spouses. The marriage narratives of the Brontës and Gaskell portray unduly delayed engagements, broken marriage proposals, feminine disinterest in marriage, as well as sham weddings and

⁴ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 192–93.

inauthentic marriages—all of which highlight the frequent gap between the uncertainty and changeability of individual desire versus the public interest in efficiently codifying romantic relationships under the law.

The three novelists are uniquely positioned to discuss the social and legal impediments to female desires in courtship and marriage. Unlike Anne Brontë, who never married, or Charlotte Brontë, who resisted marriage for a long time only to experience it briefly before her premature death, Gaskell was happily married. However, she knew how unusual it was to mother a family and fulfill her own professional desires. Gaskell's daughters had courtship struggles.⁵ For example, her daughter Marianne was involved in a long-term courtship with her second cousin whose father opposed it. As such, Marianne's courtship had remained secret for a long time, and her marriage had to be postponed. Witnessing Marianne's courtship struggles gave Gaskell insight into the difficulties of marriage, which she often addressed in her novels. Moreover, Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* criticizes Patrick Brontë for pressuring Charlotte not to marry, which implies that Gaskell understood the complexity of Charlotte's marital choices—not only her initial rejections of multiple suitors but also her final decision to enter a marriage which, though not unhappy, led to her early death.⁶ In sum, all three novelists experienced the complexities of keeping up appearances in courtship and marriage, which informed their views on theatricality in marriage.

Second, the three novelists also highlight the fiction of many legal marriages, which fail to foster genuine companionships. They reveal that marriage law requires spouses to utter vows of mutual love and support but then fails to protect married women

⁵ See Winifred Gerin's *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 274–75.

⁶ See Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (New York: Penguin, 1997).

from abusive and adulterous husbands, leaving them to the questionable workings of benevolent paternalism. Writing on *Jane Eyre* in the 1960s, Robert Bernard Martin argued that the novel demands our “recognition that the same heart and the same spirit animate both men and women, and that love is the pairing of equals in these spheres.”⁷ While Charlotte Brontë stresses the independence of genuine emotional companionship from the performative aspects of marriage law, Anne Brontë exposes the ways that Victorian marriage and custody laws fail to protect wives trapped in marriages in which husbands fail to love, honor and be faithful to their wives, as promised through the vows in the Book of Common Prayers. Elizabeth Gaskell, on the other hand, approaches the idea of a companionate marriage by challenging the patriarchal system that puts women at an economic disadvantage.⁸ By stressing that women should be less passive and more self-reliant, while men should be more dependent and tender, Gaskell advocates for a kind of marital “androgyny,” which “will allow a marriage of partnership rather than one of dominance and passivity.”⁹ In sum, all three novelists effectively advocate for a companionate marriage by exposing the complicated truth of many marital arrangements, which the law fails to consider, oversimplifies, or misrepresents.

The novelists’ focus on both marriage law and its treatment of women relates to the profound legal, social, and economic changes in Victorian society between the 1840s and the 1860s. Prior to 1857, divorce was governed by the ecclesiastical courts. An

⁷ Robert Bernard Martin, *The Accents of Persuasion: Charlotte Brontë’s Novels* (London: Faber, 1966), 93.

⁸ Until the Married Women’s Property Act of 1882, the married couple was a single legal entity, placing the husband in control of all the wife’s property and earnings.

⁹ Laurie Buchanan, “Marriages of Partnership: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Androgynous Ideal,” in *Joinings and Disjoinings: The Significance of Marital Status in Literature*, ed. JoAnna Stephens Mink and Janet Doubler Ward (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 1991), 98.

ecclesiastical divorce was rare, complicated, cumbersome, and did not allow for remarriage. The type of divorce, which separated the parties *ex vinculo matrimonii* (“from the chains of marriage”) and did allow re-marriage, required a private Act of Parliament and was restricted for the wealthy.¹⁰ The 1857 Divorce Act simplified the divorce process but it also created a double standard. While a man could divorce a woman if she committed adultery, a woman could not divorce a man unless she could prove his adultery, in addition to an aggravating factor, such as desertion (for two years) or cruelty, rape, sodomy, incest, or bigamy. Thus, even if legally possible, divorce was not a viable option for most Victorians, especially women.¹¹

Both Brontë sisters and Gaskell criticize marriage law for its inflexibility when it comes to ending bad marriages, implying that a lack of viable divorce options encourages deception in both courtship and marriage. Although *Jane Eyre* questions the state of family and divorce law in the 1840s less directly than *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Ian Ward argues that Rochester’s unhappy legal marriage to Bertha highlights the fact that “up until the 1857 Divorce Act spouses who later discovered that they had married a lunatic had little recourse in law.”¹² Moreover, given that, prior to the Married Woman’s Property Act of 1870, women could not keep earnings or property acquired after their marriages, Gaskell’s novel raises important questions about married women’s property.¹³

¹⁰ Mary Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law, 1850–1895* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 36. See also Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: England, 1530–1987* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 191–92, 236, 362; and Allen Horstman, *Victorian Divorce* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 4–5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² See Ian Ward, *Law and the Brontës* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 74.

¹³ See Lee Holcombe, *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women’s Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983).

The legal debates about the Victorian marriage and divorce laws were also inextricably linked to the questions of child custody, which Anne Brontë explores in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The Infants' Custody Act of 1839, inspired by the story of Caroline Norton, allowed divorced women to petition for the custody of their small children, up to the age of seven. By 1848 the debates about the legal custody of children had regained their intensity because many feared that the Infants' Custody Act might encourage women to leave their abusive husbands while keeping their children.¹⁴ The main protagonist of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* escapes from her husband by assuming a new identity because she fears that his drunkenness will harm their son.

Notwithstanding their critique of the performative aspects of marriage law, as well as its substance, all three novelists recognize the importance of legal and social rituals in women's lives. *Jane Eyre* implies that the legal custom of voicing objections to someone's marriages saves the main protagonist from bigamy. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* suggests that Arthur Huntingdon's transfer of custody in writing would validate Helen's legal rights regarding their son. *North and South* acknowledges some social rituals associated with courtship and marriage as important rites of passages. In sum, all three novelists argue that the concepts of external performance and interior authenticity in marriage plots can both contradict and complement each other.

***Jane Eyre* (1847)**

Charlotte Brontë's various references to theater and theatricality in *Jane Eyre* corroborate the notion that the novel invites a discussion about the connections between

¹⁴ See Danaya C. Wright, "The Crisis of Child Custody: A History of the Birth of Family Law in England," *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 11, no. 2 (2002): 175–270.

interiority and externality, authenticity and performance, drama and prose. For example, Chapter 11 starts with a conspicuous comparison between a play and a novel when the narrator announces that “a new chapter in the novel is something like a new scene in a play.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, the phrase “something like” implies that, though the divisions between theatrical drama and prose are not insurmountable, the two forms of literature also differ from each other.

The novelist highlights the differences between the interior authenticity of the novel and the external performativity of the theater most saliently through her descriptions of wedding ceremonies. All the weddings described in detail in *Jane Eyre* are charades, either purposely disconnected from the spouses’ intentions to marry or incapable of validating their marital commitment. Rochester and Blanche merely pretend to marry in their pantomime wedding designed to mock wedding rituals. While Rochester’s romantic intentions towards Jane are presumably more serious and sincere, his attempted wedding to her is also disingenuous since he is already married to Bertha. As such, Brontë associates the performance of wedding rituals with empty theatricality, which she finds inauthentic—both from philosophical and narrative standpoints.

The descriptions of wedding ceremonies in *Jane Eyre* also relate to the gradual development of Jane’s narrative control in the novel. Brontë links Jane’s off-stage wedding to Rochester with the heroine’s famous proclamation, “Reader, I married him,” to emphasize the notion that Jane finds her authenticity, asserted through her first-person narration, by dissociating herself from viewing marriage in terms of external performativity.¹⁶ Carol Bock argues that “nearly all of Jane’s attempts to interpret her

¹⁵ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 79.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 382.

experience and tell her story involve a struggle for power to assert her own reading against those fictions that others would narrate about her.”¹⁷ Following that idea, Jane wins the contest for narrative control in the end of the novel. She creates and tells her own story, no longer needing Rochester, posing as a gypsy woman, to read her fortune. However, she can both become Mrs. Rochester and gain narrative control of her story only after her narrative voice overcomes the empty performativity of mere custom and convention.

Brontë’s critique of the empty performativity of wedding rituals involves casting Jane in the role of a wedding spectator rather than a bride. Jane either watches other women (Miss Temple and Blanche Ingram) marry or plays a would-be bride who is denied a wedding as soon as she steps up to the altar. Her disassociation from the role of a bride stems partly from her earlier memories of weddings as painful harbingers of loss rather than happy acts of unification. When Rev. Mr. Nasmyth marries Miss Temple, he takes her away from Jane and Lowood. Instead of feeling happy for Miss Temple, Jane feels forlorn. She remembers the sad event as follows:

I watched the chaise mount the hill and disappear beyond its brow; and then retired to my own room, and there spent in solitude the greatest part of the half-holiday granted in honor of the occasion.¹⁸

The grown-up Jane feels even more brokenhearted when she sees her beloved Rochester marry Blanche Ingram in a pantomime wedding in his drawing-room. Although Jane understands that such a wedding is only a show, she still feels despair over watching Rochester and Blanche play bride and groom. Based on those experiences, Jane does not

¹⁷ Carol Bock, *Charlotte Brontë and the Storyteller’s Audience* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 102.

¹⁸ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 71.

see weddings as joyful celebrations, but rather scenes that connote disappointment and even pain.

The pantomime wedding between Rochester and Blanche exposes social and legal marriage customs as empty rituals, which do not reflect the couple's love or true intent to marry. The charade features frequent curtain changes and the tinkling of a bell, which announces subsequent acts of the play. Sir George Lynn and Amy Ashton wear white sheets and play the roles of wedding officiants. Mrs. Dent and Louisa Eshton act as witnesses. The pantomime also features a large book that stands for a wedding register. When Miss Ingram, "with a long veil on her head and a wreath of roses round her brow," enters the scene, followed by Adèle, scattering round flowers in front of her, Blanche looks much more like a bride than Jane does on her "real" wedding day.¹⁹ However, these nuptial accoutrements do not signify the couple's actual marital commitment. Although Rochester teases Blanche, "remember you are my wife; we were married an hour since, in the presence of all witnesses," he never plans to really marry her.²⁰ As such, the pantomime wedding, exaggerating the performative aspects of a marriage ceremony, exposes the emptiness of some marriages made solely for the sake of social appearances.

The excessive language, costumes, and props of the pantomime wedding differ drastically from the simplicity of Rochester's attempted wedding to Jane, which takes place at a small church and features only the priest "in his white surplice at the lowly altar" and the clerk.²¹ In the pantomime wedding, both Rochester and Blanche mock the wedding conventions and rituals as ostentatious theatrics, which lack any real value. In

¹⁹ Ibid., 156.

²⁰ Ibid., 157.

²¹ Ibid., 246.

fact, Blanche ceases to be Rochester's "intended" beyond the first act of the pantomime. The second act already casts her not as herself, but rather as "some Israelitish princess."²² Mr. Rochester wears shawls and a turban on his head. His face is covered with soot to make him look like an Eastern emir. Blanche wears "a crimson scarf tied sash-like round the waist: an embroidered handkerchief knotted about her temples" and raises her bare arms in support of a pitcher on her head.²³ Rochester and Blanche reenact the scene from Genesis, the story of Abraham's servant Eliezer giving Rebecca jewels to seal her betrothal to Isaac after the kindness she had demonstrated in offering water to Eliezer's camels. Thus, even while performing in a pantomime, Blanche stops playing the role of a bride and instead transforms into another character.

Notwithstanding the clear allusion to the Hebrew Bible, Blanche's exotic wedding attire also recalls the idea of a submissive Islamic wife, strongly attacked by Victorian critics of Mohammedanism. In his *Studies in Mohammedanism* (1892), John J. Pool criticized the treatment of Muslim women: "nowhere on earth will you find woman so degraded as in countries where Islamism reigns supreme! A Mohammedan regards woman not as a companion and helpmate for him, but as a plaything, a pretty toy, as soulless almost as his turban, his pipe, and his amber mouth-piece."²⁴ It seems that Brontë anticipates Pool's arguments by presenting Blanche as an oriental bride. When the turban-clad Rochester presents Blanche with sparkling jewels, she indeed looks like "a pretty toy" from John J. Pool's nightmarish bridal scenario. But the pantomime wedding lampoons Islamic marriages as much as Christian marriages, which often fail to reflect

²² Ibid., 156.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See John J. Pool, *Studies in Mohammedanism, Historical and Doctrinal, with a Chapter on Islam in England* (London: Archibald Constable and Company, 1892).

the marital companionships they idealize. Blanche's pretty, exotic passiveness is not worse than Bertha's ugly imprisonment in the attic.

The pantomime wedding also underscores Blanche's acting skills, which only exacerbate Jane's unfavorable view of her. After watching Blanche flirt with Rochester, Jane accuses her of acting out her feelings by making the following observations about her:

She advocated a high tone of sentiment; but she did not know the sensations of sympathy and pity; tenderness and truth were not in her. Too often she betrayed this, by the undue vent she gave to a spiteful antipathy she had conceived against little Adèle: pushing her away with some contumelious epithet if she happened to approach her; sometimes ordering her from the room, and always treating her with coldness and acrimony.²⁵

The novel stresses the acting backgrounds and skills of many female characters in the novel, besides Jane. For example, Céline Varens is a Parisian opera performer. Blanche is a showy socialite and a pantomime performer. One woman tricks Rochester into questionable fatherhood; the other attempts to marry him by playing an oriental princess. Representing other love interests in Rochester's life as mere actresses and juxtaposing their acting against Jane's "plain" behavior, Brontë associates acting and theatricality with insincerity.

The seeming artlessness of "plain" Jane not only connotes her overall sincerity but specifically manifests itself in her rejection of any wedding accoutrements.²⁶ She considers even a conventional wedding dress as nothing more than a costume if such a dress fails to symbolize her wedded reality. A few days before her aborted wedding, Jane awakes to see Bertha Mason, Rochester's legal wife, trying on Jane's wedding veil. As

²⁵ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 158.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

Jane looks in the mirror right before her wedding, she cannot stop thinking of “a robed and veiled figure, so unlike my usual self, that it seemed almost the image of a stranger.”²⁷ The memory of veiled Bertha causes Jane’s disassociation from her own role as a bride because Bertha’s veiling highlights the emptiness of the conventions at her own wedding. The wedding veil was once a part of the wardrobe in which Bertha became Mrs. Rochester but now it is a mere theatrical prop, given that, though Bertha and Rochester are legally married, they are estranged. Still, Bertha’s tragic donning of Jane’s wedding mars Jane’s bridal excitement and foreshadows the drama of her aborted nuptials.

Since Jane’s first aborted wedding to Rochester is a mere performance (Rochester cannot legally marry her as he is already married to Bertha), Brontë casts Jane in the role of a spectator rather than an active participant in the charade of her own wedding. Perhaps that is why, though unaware of Rochester’s marital status, Jane watches her own aborted wedding to him as if she were merely looking at it from the outside. With the exception of one comment on her feelings (“My nerves vibrated . . . as they had never vibrated to thunder”), Jane remains silent about her emotions at her interrupted wedding.²⁸ She describes herself as “collected” and “in no danger of swooning,” as if Mr. Briggs’ shocking announcement about Rochester’s marriage to Bertha did not affect or even concern her.²⁹ By describing her interrupted wedding, Jane ceases to function as a bride and becomes a third-party narrator who merely reports on how Mr. Rochester looks and interacts with Mr. Briggs and Mr. Mason under the strange circumstances. The entire

²⁷ Ibid., 244.

²⁸ Ibid., 247.

²⁹ Ibid.

wedding scene is a heated conversation between the three men rather than an account of Jane's nuptials. Jane's attempted marriage is brokered between men, not her and the potential spouse. In that sense, Jane's role in her own wedding is not much different from the role she plays while observing Blanche's pantomime wedding. In both cases, Jane merely observes a wedding ceremony, which does not lead to an actual marriage.

Despite Brontë's decision to dissociate Jane from any theatrics, Joseph Litvak points out that Mrs. Reed sees the "plain" Jane as "a precocious actress."³⁰ Litvak suggests that, although Jane's spectatorship appears to signify her anti-theatricality, it in fact functions as a kind of an act. Jane pretends to be a simple governess who has no say in whom her master marries, but—as mentioned—she continually comments on Blanche's flaws as Rochester's presumptive bride. Jane also pretends to care for Adèle regardless of her illegitimacy yet she vows never to teach Adèle how to become the English Céline Varens, which shows contempt for Céline. Finally, Jane runs away from Thornfield after her first interrupted wedding but she never blames Rochester for deceiving her about imprisoning his wife in the attic. In sum, Litvak sees Jane as opinionated, biased, and even manipulative, at times. In his view, Jane is not only capable of deceit but also theatrics.

Nevertheless, Jane's authenticity prevails in the novel because she remains honest about her own desires in the most crucial parts of the plot. When, after her aborted wedding to Rochester, Jane removes her wedding dress and replaces it with her ordinary

³⁰ Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 34. For more discussion on Jane's use of performance in her self-representation, the novel's theatricality, and the relationship between the novel and theater in the Victorian period, see Lauren Ellis Holm, "Jane Eyre's Stage Presence," *Brontë Studies* 40, no. 1 (January 2015): 34–43.

“stuff gown,” she can finally think and feel like her true self.³¹ Notwithstanding her genuine love for Rochester, she leaves him—not simply because the law prevents her from marrying him (“that I am not Edward Rochester’s bride is the least of my woes”³²), but because she wishes to live in an authentic union with the man she loves. Jane realizes that this is not possible with Rochester since he is already married to Bertha, even if she understands his marital unhappiness. For the same reasons, Jane also refuses a legal marriage proposal from St. John Rivers, whom she does not love. In sum, Jane will not enter any relationship, lawful or unlawful, that disregards the truth about her own circumstances and desires.

The novel also reflects Brontë’s commitment to authenticity, which is evident in her decision to limit any play-acting in the novel. While she allows for theatrical representations of wedding ceremonies, such as the pantomime wedding or Jane’s aborted wedding, she does so to underscore the emptiness of wedding customs that are disconnected from the parties’ desire to marry. However, she does not legitimize permanent deception in a genuine love relationship. Therefore, *Jane Eyre* curtails the charade of Rochester’s bachelorhood by staging it in the privacy of his drawing room. He may pretend to be unmarried when he acts out a wedding in a pantomime with Blanche but he cannot continue his deception about Bertha when trying to marry Jane.

Brontë halts Rochester’s marital farce by using the law, which curtails his attempt to enter a bigamous marriage with Jane. The law serves a double purpose in Jane’s aborted wedding: it impedes Jane’s desire to marry Rochester, but it also protects both her and Bertha from becoming the victims of bigamy. Although Jane longs for a simple

³¹ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 252.

³² *Ibid.*, 253.

wedding unencumbered by too many onerous traditions and legal formalities, she actually benefits from a legal objection to her wedding, which leads to her discovery of Bertha.³³ Jane mocks the *pro forma* wedding ritual, which requires the clergyman to ask for any obstacles to the impending marriage (“When is a pause after that sentence ever broken by reply! Not, perhaps not in the hundred years.”)³⁴ Yet, it is that very wedding ritual that saves her from committing the illegal and shameful act of bigamy. Mr. Briggs’ proof of a legal marriage certificate between Bertha and Rochester provides sufficient evidence to justify the cessation of Jane’s wedding. The solemn legal jargon of the marriage certificate makes Bertha and Rochester’s wedding genuine and real:

I affirm and can prove that on the 20th of October A.D. --- (a date of fifteen years back), Edward Fairfax Rochester, of Thornfield Hall, in the county of ---, and of Ferndean Manor, in ---shire, England, was married to my sister, Bertha Antoinette Mason, daughter of Jonas Mason, merchant, and of Antoinetta his wife, a Creole, at --- church, Spanish Town, Jamaica. The record of the marriage will be found in the register of that church—a copy of it is now in my possession.³⁵

Waiving the marriage certificate in front of him, Solicitor Briggs reminds Rochester that, even if he does not recognize Bertha as his wife, the law does. Thus, Brontë concedes that, though Victorian marriage law often disadvantages women, it also has the power to protect women under certain circumstances.

Brontë’s point that the law becomes a means to discover the truth about Rochester’s marriage is consistent with her overall critique of inauthentic legal commitments and the social conventions framing marriage. She highlights the legal prohibition against bigamy to make a larger point that honesty should guide human

³³ In Chapter 24, Jane stressed that she does not want an ostentatious wedding dress or a big wedding party paid for by Rochester because she refuses to become the English Céline Varens (Ibid., 230).

³⁴ Ibid., 246.

³⁵ Ibid., 247.

relationships. Jane leaves the altar not only because she cannot violate marriage law by committing bigamy, but also because it would be both immoral and dishonest for her to play Rochester's mistress when she desires to marry him. After much torment caused by her internal battle between her feelings and conscience, Jane remarks that she must leave Thornfield because of "the law given by God [and] sanctioned by man."³⁶ Such God-given law comprises not only of Rochester's marriage vow to Bertha, which Jane respects, but also Jane's moral obligation to be true to herself and those she loves.

Before the clergyman inquires if anyone else objects to the impending marriage between Jane and Rochester, he first turns to the wedding couple, asking them to reveal any potential impediments to their wedding:

I require and charge you both (as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed), that if either of you know any impediment why ye may not lawfully be joined together in matrimony, ye do now confess it; for be ye well assured that so many as are coupled together otherwise than God's Word doth allow, are not joined together by God, neither is their matrimony lawful.³⁷

The clergyman's warning connects the law and God together to underscore the notion that marriage vows constitute not only a legal contract but also a moral commitment to each other. In that context, any lies or even omissions of truth are subversive because they undermine the very foundation of the promise to keep and protect one another. If Briggs and Mason had not arrived at the church on time, Rochester could have potentially circumvented marriage law and wedded Jane; however, his actions would still have been fundamentally dishonest toward the woman he claims to love. In his confession about Bertha, Rochester himself admits that Jane "thought all was fair and legal and never

³⁶ Ibid., 270.

³⁷ Ibid., 246.

dreamt she was going to be entrapped into a feigned union with a defrauded wretch, already bound to a bad, mad, and embruted partner!”³⁸ Both Brontë and Jane reject such a union.

Brontë’s emphasis on the importance of sincerity and authenticity in marriage seems to downplay the immense difficulties and ethical dilemmas involved in situations in which individuals try to reconcile their private desires with the public interest. She glosses over the theme of Rochester’s attempted bigamy and deception, portraying him as a good man who falls into the trap of an arranged marriage that causes him to take immoral actions out of desperation. She also kills Bertha to enable Jane and Rochester’s eventual romance and marriage. Jane remains heroic, even when she makes a questionable choice to return to Rochester, not knowing that Bertha is dead. Such a narrative resolution, which employs the theatrical tool of *deus ex machina* that eliminates any legal and moral obstacles to Jane’s eventual marriage to Rochester, is highly unrealistic. It also fails to address the ethical dilemma that occurs when one cannot escape an inauthentic marriage—a topic undertaken in Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

***The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848)**

While Charlotte Brontë criticizes the empty performativity of weddings, Anne Brontë explores the ways in which performance may help one to escape an inauthentic marriage after a wedding. The main protagonist of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Helen Graham, assumes a new name and identity to protect herself and her son from her abusive husband. Although *Jane Eyre* addresses legal impediments to Jane’s marital happiness,

³⁸ Ibid., 249.

the novel's main goal of legitimizing Jane's desire to enter an authentic relationship sidesteps the difficulty of divorce. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, on the other hand, presents a scenario in which Helen Graham marries Arthur Huntingdon legally and out of love only to discover both the misery and inescapability of such a marriage.

Helen's story undermines the traditional paradigm of a dramatic courtship that resolves itself into a happy wedlock. The unease of her wedlock, which she does not discover until after getting married, challenges the notion of domestic felicity, as well as dramatic closure. When her aunt asks Helen whether she ever thinks of marriage, Helen replies that she does so only "sometimes," and she thinks "there must be only a very, very few men in the world that [she] should like to marry."³⁹ Despite her early skepticism about marriage, Helen rushes into marriage with the spoiled, selfish, and self-indulgent Huntingdon, who flirts with Annabella (the future Lady Lowborough) even before marrying Helen. Blinded by her love for Huntingdon, she tries to reform her wayward husband, that is, until he reminds her that marriage requires a state of settling down rather than changing. Notwithstanding Helen's initial naiveté about the complexity of marriage, the novel suggests that the formal constraints of the traditional marriage plot, which ends in happily-ever-after, often fail to account for the changing nature of many marriages, as well as their underlying unhappiness and abuse.

Anne Brontë raises the rather obvious question never answered by her sister, Charlotte, in *Jane Eyre*: What if a woman discovers that her private needs diverge from the social and legal expectations of marriage after she has already taken her wedding vows? Charlotte Brontë presumably prevents such a scenario when Jane rejects St. John

³⁹ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (New York: Broadview, 2009), 46.

Rivers' proposal of marriage. Jane does not want to be a mere helpmate, so she chooses not to embark on a sexless marriage, which would likely make her unhappy. However, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* explores in depth the misery of a wife who weds willfully and even happily, just to discover marital problems over time. After all, unlike her friend Millicent, who marries Ralph Hattersley against her will, Helen appears to love Huntingdon initially, and she does not become a victim of his abuse until after their marriage. She pities Millicent who "professes to have discovered numberless virtues and perfections in her husband, some of which . . . less partial eyes would fail to distinguish."⁴⁰ However, after the years Helen herself cannot find any virtue in the man whom she married for love, either.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall juxtaposes the changing reality of marriage with the legal idea that wedlock is unbreakable. The novelist contemplates the nature of wedding vows, highlighting the fact that nuptial promises often trap wives into inauthentic play-acting. They force women to honor and obey their husbands even if the husbands betray, abuse, or neglect them. For instance, in Chapter 27, Helen accuses her husband of not keeping his marriage vows:

Are the marriage vows a jest; and is it nothing to make it your sport to break them, and to tempt another to do the same? Can I love a man that does such things, and coolly maintains it is nothing?⁴¹

When Helen scorns her husband for not taking his marriage vows seriously, he replies with a similar accusation.

"You are breaking your marriage vows yourself," said he, indignantly rising and pacing to and fro. "You promised to honor and obey me, and now you attempt to

⁴⁰ Ibid., 208.

⁴¹ Ibid., 214.

hector over me, and threaten and accuse me, and call me worse than a highwayman.”⁴²

Arthur Huntingdon’s philosophy of the wedding vow stems from his chauvinist nature, as is evident when he declares, “I won’t be dictated to by a woman, though she be my wife.”⁴³ Such a statement is also a convenient way to deflect attention from his own immoral behavior. But his emphasis on the binding nature of marriage vows cannot be ignored given the state of contemporaneous marriage and divorce law. As mentioned, while the Victorian law showed little concern for the quality of marriages, it was intractable about divorce. That is why Huntingdon uses wedding vows against Helen when he learns of her plans to escape from him by reading her diary. He thwarts Helen’s initial escape and burns her art tools with which she had hoped to support herself because, under the law, he has control of Helen’s body and possessions.

Since marriage law offers her no recourse from a bad marriage, Helen abandons the marriage under the guise of a new identity. Under the law, Helen Huntingdon may have to obey her drunken and abusive husband unconditionally. However, a woman with a different name and identity may evade the law more easily. That is why, after her successful escape from Huntingdon, Brontë allows Helen to lie about who she is to protect herself and her young son, Arthur.

Helen’s deception, however, limits her ability to retain narrative control of the novel. First-time readers initially know the novel’s main protagonist only as Helen Graham, a single mother and a painter—not Helen Huntingdon, a bride and wife. The readers learn about Helen’s marriage to Huntingdon and his drunken revels at Grassdale

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

only from the novel's other protagonist, Gilbert Markham, who, in turn, reads about those events in Helen's diary. As such, the truth about Helen is masked by the multiple layers of narration, twice removed from the heroine's actual experience (first, because Helen's wifedom exists only as an unhappy story memorialized in her diary; second, because Markham reads the narrative to the audience). Narrating Helen's pious fraud in such a manner serves a double purpose. It helps to conceal her identity and as such protect her from her abusive husband. However, it also highlights the convolution of her precarious situation. The success of Helen's pious fraud depends not only on her assuming a new name and identity, but also eschewing her voice in the novel.

Like her sister Charlotte, Anne Brontë recognizes that every performance (even pious fraud) has its limits. Not having the option to divorce, Helen runs away from her husband, but she knows that abandoning her husband is illegal. As Ian Ward stresses, "Helen is clearly aware that her husband can demand the return of his son at any time."⁴⁴ In fact, Helen eventually does return to Huntingdon when, on his deathbed, he requests to see his son. In other words, the law, as well as Helen's social and religious mores, make it impossible for her to abandon her husband permanently.

Recognizing the limitations of Helen's performance, Anne Brontë does not recommend that other abused wives follow in Helen's footsteps. Rather, she uses Helen's dramatic story to advocate for changes in contemporary marriage and custody laws. Helen's engagement in pious fraud highlights the ways in which inflexible marriage laws force honest wives and mothers to lie to protect themselves and their children from abusive marriages. The novel also stresses the notion that the Victorian marriage law

⁴⁴ Ward, 36.

offers wives no protection from marital mistreatment. It makes no difference whether a woman, forced into marriage, simply “gets accustomed” to her husband’s “loud voice, and abrupt, uncourteous manners,”⁴⁵ or whether she marries out of love only to discover that her husband’s faults cannot be redeemed. The law simply forbids an abused wife to leave her husband.

Despite Anne Brontë’s advocacy for a legal reform, it was not until the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878 that a physically abused wife could obtain a divorce. Although *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was published almost a decade before the original 1857 Divorce Act, the novel still exposes the double standard of men and women seeking divorces under the law. While Helen cannot legally divorce herself from Huntingdon, Lord Lowborough can divorce his wife, Annabella, who is having an affair with Huntingdon. Not only is Lowborough permitted to divorce his wife, but fate also rewards him with a loving second wife—a plain middle-aged woman, who makes a nurturing stepmother to the children he had with Annabella. By setting her novel prior to the passage of the 1839 Infants’ Custody Act Anne Brontë also “ensures that the first minimal reforms in custody law would not be available to her heroine”⁴⁶—even if custody issues are immaterial without Helen’s ability to divorce. Helen’s deception is justified by a complete lack of legal recourse in the novel.

Despite the law’s failure to protect Helen and her son, Arthur, Anne Brontë also explores how Helen may use the law to her advantage. Writing to Huntingdon on his deathbed, Helen insists that he grant her full legal custody of their son before she allows

⁴⁵ Brontë, *The Tenant*, 208.

⁴⁶ Matus, 108.

him to see Arthur *filis*.⁴⁷ Having experienced Huntingdon's disrespect for his marriage vows ("I cannot trust your oaths and promises."),⁴⁸ Helen insists that he execute a written agreement that would make her Arthur's sole legal guardian. Although Huntingdon swears to God that he will legally transfer their son's full custody to her, Helen refuses to settle for anything less than a legal document on the matter. As Ian Ward reveals, such a document "has no legal force."⁴⁹ Although Huntingdon is Arthur's legal guardian, he does not have the authority to change the law by voluntarily transferring the full legal and physical custody of Arthur to Helen—unless the agreement constitutes Huntingdon's testamentary statement granting custody to Helen in his will. However, the mere legal appearance of a written agreement to offer Arthur to Helen, solemnly signed by Huntingdon on his deathbed, is enough for Helen to legitimize her custody request. This scene exemplifies how Anne Brontë inspires women to use a legal fiction to their advantage. Since marriage, divorce, and custody laws are often legitimized by the deceptive half-truth that what is legal must be right, Helen hopes that a legal document will also legitimize her natural right to keep her child. Still, Helen must stoop to deception and legal tricks to protect her son.

The burdens of Helen's deception are highlighted again at the end of the novel, when Gilbert Markham mistakenly believes that she is about to remarry and plans to thwart her second marriage on a snowy night. Markham's planned interruption of what he believes to be Helen's wedding is reminiscent of Jane Eyre's aborted wedding. Although, unlike Briggs, Markham intends to stop the wedding for romantic rather than legal

⁴⁷ All references to Arthur in this paragraph are to the son. Huntingdon refers to the father.

⁴⁸ Brontë, *The Tenant*, 358.

⁴⁹ Ward, 36.

reasons, he still storms into the small rural church, filled with “the white favors bedecking the servants and horses” and “the merry voices of the village idlers assembled to witness the show” intending to terminate Helen’s wedding.⁵⁰ He runs inside the church, breathless and worried that the ceremony is over, only to learn that the bride is not his beloved Helen, but rather Eliza Millward marrying Frederick Lawrence. However, such a happy revelation takes place only after Markham takes a closer look at the veiled bride. Markham recounts:

A long veil shrouded half her graceful form, but did not hide it; I could see that while she carried her head erect, her eyes were bent upon the ground, and her face and neck were suffused with a crimson blush; but every feature was radiant with smiles, and gleaming through the misty whiteness of her veil were clusters of golden ringlets! Oh, heavens! it was not my Helen! The first glimpse made me start—but my eyes were darkened with exhaustion and despair. Dare I trust them? ‘Yes—it is not she! It was a younger, slighter, rosier beauty—lovely indeed, but with far less dignity and depth of soul—without that indefinable grace, that keenly spiritual yet gentle charm, that ineffable power to attract and subjugate the heart—my heart at least.’⁵¹

The fact that Markham initially confuses Helen with Eliza implies that Helen’s pious fraud almost prevents her from remarrying happily. Gilbert Markham’s mistake of confusing her with another bride implies that Helen’s shifting persona creates confusion about who she is. Helen Lawrence Huntingdon Graham appears an available marital prospect when she plays a widow while, in fact, she is Huntingdon’s wife in hiding. Although, like Charlotte, Anne Brontë closes the novel with a happy and lawful marriage between Helen and Graham, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* presents a troubling picture about how marriage laws and conventions often force women to betray their authentic selves and engage in deception to survive mismatched and abusive marriages.

⁵⁰ Brontë, *The Tenant*, 388.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 389.

North and South (1855)

Although Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* is not principally a marriage novel, it still advocates for the ideal of companionate marriage between social and economic equals. In addition to unmasking the false assumptions about marriage between individuals with different economic standings, the novel also criticizes the empty performativity of wedding rituals that are disjointed from the thorny truth about the complexities of marriage. While the novel acknowledges the value of some wedding rituals, it dismantles the traditional marriage plot by opening, rather than closing, with a wedding, criticizing the theatricality of a wedding ceremony, separating its heroine from the role of the bride, and highlighting the disjunction between wedding vows and the complex economic realities of married life.

As Hilary M. Schor points out, the novel's main protagonist, Margaret Hale, rejects all the traditional possibilities typically offered to women in Victorian fiction, including marriage.⁵² She dismisses the idea of becoming a bride at the beginning of a novel when she rejects a marriage proposal by Henry Lennox. Although, by the end of the novel, Margaret agrees to marry John Thornton, their engagement is assumed rather than explicit. In the final scene, where John and Margaret acknowledge their feelings for each other, John brings Margaret roses from Helstone. Since the roses signify the place "where Margaret grew" and "what she is," Gaskell implies that a companionate union requires knowing one's true identity and maintaining such authenticity in one's

⁵² Hilary M. Schor, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 126.

marriage.⁵³ However, the novel does not end with any explicit marriage proposal or wedding ceremony.

Instead, the novel opens with the wedding preparations of a secondary character, Margaret's cousin Edith Shaw. The main purpose of such an opening is to juxtapose Edith's bridal vanities with the idea of a simple wedding advocated by Margaret. Edith, a sleeping bride covered in "white muslin and blue ribbons," spends weeks on her lavish wedding preparations.⁵⁴ When her groom, Captain Lennox, lists all the wedding rituals, "Cinderella's godmother ordering the trousseau, the wedding-breakfast, writing the notes of invitation," Margaret wonders if all the time-consuming prenuptial ordeals are "necessary troubles."⁵⁵ Margaret stresses that, if she ever marries, she does not want to have "so many bridesmaids, and to have no wedding-breakfast."⁵⁶ As such, the novel's heroine eschews the idea of an ostentatious wedding, focused on external appearances, suggesting that such weddings are empty shows disconnected from the prosaic reality of one's marital commitment.

Gaskell's critique of Edith's theatrical wedding stems from the fact that the bride seems more interested in her wedding preparations than in her fiancée. As such, the wedding rituals do not merely highlight the seriousness of her substantive commitment but rather function as empty performances disjointed from the true purpose of marriage. Edith's main preoccupation surrounding her impending marriage is her wardrobe: how no expense was spared on her trousseau and how she inherited all the beautiful Indian shawls from her mother. Edith spends many weeks talking to Margaret:

⁵³ Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 425.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 12–13.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

about wedding dresses, and wedding ceremonies . . . and the difficulty of keeping a piano in good tune (a difficulty which Edith seemed to consider as one of the most formidable that could befall her in her married life), and what gowns she should want in the visits to Scotland, which would immediately succeed her marriage.⁵⁷

In sum, Edith seems more focused on getting married (her wedding trousseau and her wish for a house in Belgravia) than on her married future at Corfu with Captain Lennox.

Although Gaskell criticizes Edith's shallow obsession with the excessive wedding accoutrements, she nevertheless acknowledges the value of certain wedding customs. Captain Lennox, for example, defends the need for proper wedding preparations by stressing that "there are forms and ceremonies to be gone through, not so much to satisfy oneself, as to stop the world's mouth."⁵⁸ Lennox's claim that social marriage customs may be necessary exemplifies Gaskell's concession that wedding ceremonies should not be eschewed altogether. While Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre* defends some legal customs, which protect both Jane and Bertha from bigamy, in *North and South*, Gaskell recognizes some legitimate social reasons for wedding ceremonies.

Gaskell acknowledges that, even if weddings are partly about satisfying personal vanities, such sentiments may be more profound than silly personal extravagances. For example, since Mrs. Thornton dislikes her future daughter-in-law Margaret, she argues that planning the wedding helps her, as a mother, to push aside "all the dreary changes that would be brought about to herself by her son's marriage."⁵⁹ That is why she spends hours focused on buying fresh household stocks of linen, tablecloths, and napkins for the couple-to-be. The way Mrs. Thornton handles her exquisite Dutch linens, which are

⁵⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 206.

marked “G. H. T.” for George and Hannah Thornton, indicates that wedding preparations form an important rite-of-passage. She unpicks the G. H. in the linens, which “had been her pride when she was first married,” as a symbol of their transference to her son and his future bride. She changes the initials on the linen sheets with the utmost reverence while contemplating “a series of visions passing before her, in all of which her son was the principal, the sole object,—her son, her pride, her property.”⁶⁰ To Mrs. Thornton, being a wife signifies “honor, love, obedience, [and] troops of friends,” which she likens to “jewels on a king’s robe.”⁶¹ Therefore, her rituals in preparing for her son’s wedding mark a change in her social position and personal life.

While Gaskell acknowledges the subtle complexities of wedding rituals, both their dangers and values, she unmasks the false assumptions about marriage vows, which fail to reflect complicated legal arrangements between the spouses. According to a common marriage vow in the Church of England, “a man promised to endow his wife with all his worldly goods,” but in reality, it was the wife who forfeited her legal identity, as well as her property, to him.⁶² In 1854, Barbara Leigh Smith (later Bodichon), the unmarried daughter of a radical member of Parliament, published her *Brief Summary in Plain Language of the Most Important Laws of England Concerning Women*, pointing out how the law handicapped married women with regard to their property.⁶³ That publication inspired a petition for a legal change to both Houses of Parliament in 1856, which was signed by thirty-five hundred women, including Elizabeth Gaskell, Jane

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 207.

⁶² Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* (London: John Murray, 1993), 74.

⁶³ See Pam Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, 1821–1891: Feminist, Artist, Rebel* (London: Pimlico, 1999).

Carlyle, Harriet Martineau, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.⁶⁴ Yet, the Married Women's Property Act, which allowed married women to own and control property in their own right, was not passed until 1882. Social contract theory, developed as a challenge to the patriarchal view of marriage, may have seemed emancipatory on its face.⁶⁵ Yet, nineteenth-century British women were not free and equal individuals in the legal process because, under the doctrine of coverture, they were the subjects of their husbands. Since the husband was considered abler and stronger than his wife, his physical and legal domination over the wife seemed justified by nature.⁶⁶ Although the advocates of such a marital philosophy stressed that the husband's power over his wife automatically included his obligation to care for her, many husbands did not follow through on their marital promises to protect their wives and children.

Recognizing the complexities of married women's property rights, Gaskell stresses that marital companionship is inauthentic if it is based on female economic subjugation. Perhaps that is why Margaret and Thornton's discovery of mutual love for each other and their marriage proposal coincide with the time when Margaret also presents Thornton with her generous business proposal to save his mills. True marriage, according to Gaskell, must be a contract between mutually consenting equals of comparable social and economic freedoms. Unlike her cousin Edith, Margaret refuses to engage in the fiction of courtship, unless such courtship leads to an authentic companionship between social and economic equals. Her continuing refusal to see herself

⁶⁴ Perkin, 90.

⁶⁵ Maeve E. Doggett, *Marriage, Wife-Beating, and the Law in Victorian England* (Columbia: South Carolina Press, 1993), 81.

⁶⁶ Doggett, 81–82, citing Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

as a wife, as well as the awkwardness of her romance with Thornton, stems from the fact that the two characters come from differing social and economic backgrounds. He is a wealthy manufacturer in the bustling town of Milton, whom she perceives as unfeeling towards his mill workers. She is the daughter of an intellectual pastor from the idyllic southern village of Helstone, whom he sees as haughty. By equalizing their economic positions, Gaskell changes Margaret's and Thornton's perceptions of each other, which allows them to see each other's viewpoints.

Thornton's final marriage proposal invokes theatricality as much as it resists it. First, Thornton never asks Margaret explicitly to marry him, even though his proposal is implied at the end of the novel. Second, Margaret avoids responding to what she senses is a marriage proposal, "[veiling] her luminous eyes by dropping her forehead on her hands."⁶⁷ Margaret's act of hiding her face behind a metaphorical veil connotes the image of a stage curtain that descends after all play-acting is over. While Gaskell does not use this image to suggest that the two lovers have been insincere with each other, she does suggest that marriage requires allowing the other to see you as you truly are. Thornton's gesture of offering Margaret a rose from Helstone, her hometown, instead of any showy marriage proposal, is a sign of his better understanding and appreciation of who she is.

***Wives and Daughters* (1864)**

Elizabeth Gaskell's final novel, *Wives and Daughters*, highlights theatricality in marriage plots in three major ways. First, the novel juxtaposes Mrs. Kirkpatrick's emotionally empty and ostentatious wedding with Molly Gibson's lack of interest in marriage. Second, after stressing the economic disadvantages of marriageable and

⁶⁷ Gaskell, *North and South*, 424.

married women in *North and South*, in *Wives and Daughters* Gaskell endorses the performances required of bourgeois women in the marriage market. While she criticizes Cynthia Kirkpatrick's multiple, long-lasting engagements as disingenuous, she also acknowledges her need to engage in occasional performance and even deceit. Third, Gaskell also allows for Osborne Hamley's pious fraud regarding his illegal French wife, when such deception helps him to protect her and their son. However, the novelist highlights the importance of authenticity in long-lasting relationships, acknowledging that any successful deception is only temporary.

Like Charlotte Brontë, Gaskell criticizes empty wedding rituals. Mrs. Kirkpatrick's wedding to Mr. Gibson is a sartorial and social event rather than a ceremony celebrating love and genuine commitment. Dressed "from head to foot," Mrs. Kirkpatrick is excited to "be led to the hymeneal altar by a belted earl."⁶⁸ However, she does not notice or care for anything else—including the groom. Plotting a marriage ceremony, which does not contain any religious or legal vows, Gaskell implicitly rebukes shallow weddings that look more like fashion shows than commitment ceremonies.

The novelist further exposes the emptiness of wedding ceremonies by casting in the role of the bride Mrs. Kirkpatrick, a "morally blind and egotistical" social actress, preoccupied with external appearances.⁶⁹ Mrs. Kirkpatrick is ready to act in whichever role she must play at any given moment, if it boosts her image in society. She is a frivolous widow, a bashful coquette, a conniving match-maker, an opinionated gossip, and even a child-like plaything in Lady Cumnor's hands. At one point, Mrs. Kirkpatrick, a grown woman, "had taken above an hour to arrange her hair in some new mode

⁶⁸ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 159.

⁶⁹ Buchanan, 104.

carefully studied from Mrs. Bradley's fashion-book," just to be ordered by Lady Cumnor to change her hairdo, "as if she had been a little child."⁷⁰ While Mrs. Kirkpatrick's obsequious attitude toward Lady Cumnor may derive from her economic vulnerability, it also highlights her continued dependence on social acting.

Gaskell further criticizes Mrs. Kirkpatrick's preoccupation with external appearances by juxtaposing her bridal vanities with the humility of the main heroine of the novel, Molly Gibson. Molly never thinks of an ostentatious wedding and is not even considered a prospective bride in her father's eyes. When Mr. Coxe writes her a surreptitious love note, Mr. Gibson chastises him for daring to even pursue Molly, accusing him of violating "laws of domestic honor" and prescribing bashfulness to him.⁷¹ Doctor Gibson suggests that Mr. Coxe should not only have suppressed his irresponsible feelings for Molly but also presented any romantic offers to the doctor first. In reply, Mr. Coxe asks what the doctor's answer to such an offer would entail. This exchange implies that the proclamations of love and any subsequent marital promises occur between the two men. Molly is tellingly absent from this conversation. She is neither a beloved nor a bride. In fact, one wonders if Molly is even human, as her father likens her to Una, the embodiment of purity in *The Faerie Queene* ("So pure and innocent, as that same lambe, / She was in life and every virtuous lore."⁷²).

Mr. Gibson's patriarchal control over his daughter's courtship mirrors his subtle manipulation of his own engagement to Mrs. Kirkpatrick. Notwithstanding her shallow approach to their impending wedding, Mr. Gibson does not primarily think of Mrs.

⁷⁰ Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters*, 141.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 55; Spenser, bk. 1, canto 1, st. 5.

Kirkpatrick as his loving partner, either. When challenged by Molly, he recapitulates all the advantages of his impending marriage to Mrs. Kirkpatrick: she is old enough (“must be nearly forty”), respected by Lord and Lady Cumnor, has “an agreeable and polished” manner, is known for economical housekeeping, and has a daughter Molly’s age.⁷³ In sum, he thinks of Mrs. Kirkpatrick as a smart acquisition rather than a loving wife: “[I]f he had not believed that a second marriage was the very best way of cutting the Gordian knot of domestic difficulties, he could have made an effort without any great trouble, and extricated himself without pain from the mesh of circumstances.”⁷⁴ As such, he is simply “drifting into matrimony,” without giving much thought to the legal or social commitment he is making in marriage.⁷⁵

Given the pragmatic rather than romantic considerations of most marriages in *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell endorses the performances required of bourgeois women on the marriage market. Her character, Cynthia Kirkpatrick, lacks any quixotic expectations about the romantic nature of courtship and marriage. For example, she never intends to marry Mr. Preston, but merely becomes engaged to him to show gratitude for a dress he had once purchased for her. She also soberly acknowledges that her delayed engagement to Rodger Hamley may not end in marriage. In Cynthia’s words:

I think the chances are equal—the chances for and against our marriage, I mean. Two years! It’s a long time! He may change his mind, or I may; or someone else may turn up, and I may get engaged to him.⁷⁶

⁷³ Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters*, 112.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 378.

Although Molly is appalled by Cynthia's seemingly careless attitude regarding her engagement, Cynthia sounds like Lady Cumnor, who stresses that "one-third of the engagements I have heard of, have never come to marriages."⁷⁷ Moreover, Cynthia's frank remark about the tenuousness of many engagements justifies, to some extent, her flirtatious disposition. Playing the role of an eligible bride to multiple men allows her to maximize her chances in the competitive marriage market, which is subject to uncertain circumstances.

Commenting on Gaskell's complicated attitude towards honesty, John Kucich argues that Gaskell associates duplicity and lies with women. Mrs. Kirkpatrick and her daughter Cynthia are "the most extreme examples of the duplicity,"⁷⁸ and so is "the feminized Osborne Hamley" who conceals his illegitimate marriage from his family.⁷⁹ Patricia Beer also points out that, though Gaskell most admired honesty in women, she struggled with defining female honesty in her novels.⁸⁰ The character of Cynthia illustrates that struggle well. On the one hand, Cynthia fascinates readers precisely because she is frank and outspoken about the fickleness of many romantic arrangements, including her own. Gaskell condones Cynthia's coquetry and social acting to some extent because she recognizes them as vital skills for women who must navigate through the marriage market. On the other hand, Cynthia becomes too selfish and dishonest in her relationship with men. For instance, she vilifies Mr. Preston, even though she owes him at least an explanation about why she wants to escape their long-term engagement. She

⁷⁷ Ibid., 129.

⁷⁸ John Kucich, *The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 129.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 130.

⁸⁰ Patricia Beer, *Reader, I Married Him: A Study of the Women Characters of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot* (New York: Barnes & Nobles, 1974), 170.

also demonstrates a lack of respect for her commitment to Rodger by openly flirting with other men during his time in Africa. Even the meek Mr. Gibson becomes appalled by Cynthia's conspicuous dishonesty and scolds her for her behavior:

I should not feel satisfied with the conduct of any girl, however free, who could receive marked attentions from a young man with complacency, and so lead him on to make an offer which she never meant to accept. But what must I think of a young woman in your position, engaged—yet “accepting most graciously” for that was the way Coxe expressed it—the overtures of another man?⁸¹

In sum, Gaskell can appreciate some artful flirtation and some frankness about the thorny complexity of Victorian courtship and marriage. However, she cannot sanction Cynthia's veiled lies, when they mask clear wrong-doing. For instance, Cynthia's inauthentic engagement to Mr. Preston not only disrespects him but also incidentally besmirches Molly's reputation. Having deceived both Mr. Preston and Rodger and caused harm to innocent people, Cynthia has little choice in the end but to settle for a marriage with Mr. Henderson, a man she neither loves nor wants to marry.

While Gaskell rewards honesty in courtship and marriage, she also allows for temporary deception to circumvent any legal and social conventions that stand in the way of true love. Osborne Hamley's secret marriage to his French wife, Aimée, finally earns his family's acknowledgment because the marriage is based on sincere intentions. Although Mrs. Gibson refers to Osborne's secret marriage as a deception that she cannot easily forgive, Osborne and Aimée still become the novel's most exemplary romantic relationship. Additionally, it is the very secretive and forbidden nature of that relationship, as well as Osborne's long-time concealment of it, which together create the necessary complications in the novel and move the action forward.

⁸¹ Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters*, 405.

The concealment of Osborne Hamley's mysterious French wife gives the novel the flavor of sensational fiction and ensures her protection. Osborne's parents discuss decorating their drawing room to the liking of his future wife and giving her a new carriage. Based on such plans, Molly imagines Osborne's wife as "some beautiful grand young lady, whose very presence would make the old Hall into a stately, formal mansion, instead of the pleasant, unceremonious home that it was at present."⁸² Once Osborne reveals that his wife, Aimée, is poor, French, and Catholic, their marriage automatically becomes socially unacceptable and potentially illegal.

The legality of Osborne's marriage is of utmost importance because, since the Hamley property is entailed on "heirs male born in lawful wedlock," the future of Osborne's child depends on whether his parents' marriage is legitimate under the law.⁸³ Osborne's struggles with answering Rodger's questions about the legality of his marriage stem from the fact that the legal nature of his marriage does not really concern him, even though it affects the future of his child. Osborne "believes" his marriage "to be legal" because he and Aimée signed some legal papers in the French Prefecture and then went to the nearest English chaplaincy where they wedded the next day.⁸⁴ However, when pressed for details about a marriage certificate, Osborne explains, in a convoluted fashion, that he believes his friend Morrison took care of the certificate and that Osborne "got the préfet's papers somewhere."⁸⁵ Osborne's lack of concern about the legality of his marriage suggests that his intent to marry Aimée is natural rather than forced by any

⁸² Ibid., 211.

⁸³ Ibid., 350.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 351.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 351–52.

legal or social mores. He stresses that his marriage is “bona fide in intention.”⁸⁶ When Rodger suggests that perhaps Osborne and Aimée shall validate their marriage in England by re-marrying at a local parish, Osborne dismisses such a suggestion as “unnecessary trouble and unnecessary expense.”⁸⁷ He suggests that religious and legal weddings are of secondary importance, if the bride and groom have honest intentions to love and support each other. As he explains, “Neither Aimée nor I are of the sort of stuff to turn scoundrels and deny the legality of our marriage.”⁸⁸ The purity of Osborne’s commitment to Aimée is highlighted by the fact that the novel’s main heroine, Molly, has “no doubt that Osborne was really and truly married.”⁸⁹

Although Gaskell romanticizes Osborne’s dismissal of onerous wedding rituals, she also understands the importance of having a marriage that is both legally valid and socially accepted. Not only does the future of Osborne’s son depend on the legal formalities of Osborne and Aimée’s conjugal arrangements, but Osborne’s family and friends (including Mr. Gibson) question Aimée’s status as Osborne’s legitimate wife. It is not until Molly reads Squire Hamley Osborne’s marriage certificate in French that Squire Hamley acknowledges the legitimacy of Osborne’s commitment to Aimée. Moreover, although Osborne’s mysterious bride is finally unveiled to the Hamleys, such an unveiling comes too late, given Osborne’s death. Squire Hamley accepts her primarily as his grandson’s mother rather than Osborne’s long-awaited bride.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 351.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 352.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 563.

Conclusion

By highlighting the theatricality of courtship and marriage, the Brontë sisters and Gaskell undermine W. R. Greg's argument that women are "mysteriously and mercifully veiled" with regard to "the strange science of sexual affection," and as such, incapable of writing great novels about love and marriage.⁹⁰ Contrary to Greg's dated assumption about female writers, all the novelists discussed in this chapters understand "the strange science of sexual affection" well enough to navigate the many complexities of courtship and marriage.⁹¹ Their novels reveal that many engagements and marriages constitute fluid, temporary, and mismatched arrangements, neither driven by private desire nor capable of guaranteeing individual happiness. Such a plotting helps to unveil the thorny interactions of private desire, sexual politics, and legal customs governing courtship and marriage.

The Brontës and Gaskell's emphasis on theatricality in the marriage plot, particularly their treatment of wedding ceremonies and deception in courtship and marriage, also challenges Ian Watt's famous statement that "the great majority of novels written since *Pamela* have . . . concentrated their main interest upon a courtship leading to marriage."⁹² In contrast, all the novels discussed in this chapter represent courtship in terms of play-acting, unduly delayed engagements, broken marriage proposals, and sham

⁹⁰ William Rathbone (W. R.) Greg, "False Morality of Lady Novelists," *National Review* 8 (Jan 1859), reprinted in *Victorian Print Media: A Reader*, ed. Andrew King and John Plunkett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 54.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 148–49.

weddings. As such, they dismantle the traditional paradigms of courtship and marriage and defy Watts' description of a marriage plot.

However, the Brontës and Gaskell's brides and wives do not fit neatly into Joseph Boone's counter-tradition, either.⁹³ Jane Eyre, Helen Graham, Margaret Hale, and Cynthia Kirkpatrick do more than merely unsettle the traditional narrative of a happy wedlock. They either refuse to play the roles of traditional brides and wives or use performance to circumvent unjust marriage law, which fails to protect them.

⁹³ See Joseph Allen Boone, *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987). Boone argues that "the novelistic tradition of love and marriage [overtook] the mainstream of 'respectable' nineteenth-century fiction" and became "axiomatic of the genre" (65). This tradition followed a basic pattern of courtship that resolved in marriage, and perpetuated gender inequality within that marriage ideal. However, some Victorian novelists, such as Emily Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, exposed the conflicts built into such a traditional code of conjugal love, creating the so-called "counter" tradition that unsettled the traditional narrative of a happy wedlock (141–42, 151).

III. THEATRICALITY IN DICKENS'S MARRIAGE PLOTS

Charles Dickens's focus on the performative nature of courtship and marriage reveals the tension between two strands in his art: his intense interest in theatrical performance, often associated with artifice, and his innovations in narrative realism that stress sincerity. In the marriage plot, these two strands often intertwine in paradoxical ways, particularly through Dickens's literary representations of weddings. Given the dramatic possibilities of wedding ceremonies, Dickens could have created a set of wedding rituals that would have come to be known as a "Dickensian wedding"—much as he is said to have invented Christmas through *A Christmas Carol*. Instead, throughout his career he generally promotes simple, quiet weddings described with the restraint characteristic of realism. However, notwithstanding his advocacy for quiet weddings, as well as his explicit critique of a theatrical wedding ceremony in *Nicholas Nickleby*, in his later novels, such as *David Copperfield*, *Hard Times* and *Our Mutual Friend*, he also appropriates certain aspects of the very theatricality he criticizes in weddings as a means of depicting more authentic marriages.

The quiet weddings in Dickens's novels imply that marriage ceremonies should be mere symbols of genuine commitments rather than noisy shows conducted for their own sake. They also criticize the legal and social constructions of marriage, which often focus on exteriority, in favor of its private, interior, and sincere aspects. Because in his novels Dickens resists the idea of turning one's marriage into a mere performance, the weddings of his most virtuous characters are muted and, as such, theatrically uneventful. In *David Copperfield* (1850), David's wedding to Agnes is a "quiet wedding" with only a

few guests in attendance.¹ In *Hard Times* (1854), Stephen Blackpool's girlfriend, Rachel, loves and supports him more than his lawful wife does. Since Stephen is already married to another woman and "no word of a new marriage had ever passed between" him and Rachel,² their quiet commitment to each other implies that genuine love and support exist independently of wedding celebrations and formalities. In *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), Eugene and Lizzie's wedding is filled with lugubrious silence (except for the occasional weeping from Bella and Jenny Wren). After the bedside wedding, Lizzie places her head upon the pillow by her dying husband's side, as if the two were about to fall asleep peacefully. In summary, although Malcolm Andrews argues that in general Dickens was attracted to the theater's "overcharged expressions of passion" and "flamboyant artifice," most of the wedding descriptions in his novels reveal that he also resisted representing weddings in his novels as superficial spectacles.³

The trope of silence, associated with the weddings of Dickens's heroes, highlights the unique discursive possibilities of a novel, which allow for complex representations of interior character development, emotions, and privatized family values. Elaine Hadley argues that the late-eighteenth-century English culture "[emerged] from a theatricalized society that widely imagined identity in social terms, with comparatively little emphasis on inner-outer paradigms"; however, in the first half of the nineteenth century the disjunction between "inside" and "outside" personae were perceived "in distinctly theatrical terms."⁴ As such, Dickens shows great caution in representing the ideas of

¹ Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 869.

² Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 82.

³ Malcolm Andrews, *Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves: Dickens and the Public Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 40.

⁴ Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800–1885* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 84.

privacy, interiority, and sincerity through a dramatic representation, which many of his contemporaries often associated with external artifice.

Moreover, while the novelist famously said that “every writer of fiction. . . writes, in effect, for the stage,”⁵ he also realized the limitations of theater. For example, since theater depends on external expressions and appearances, quiet courtships and weddings are difficult to represent on stage. However, they can be well-described and analyzed in a novel, which—unlike theater—allows for nuanced representations of human abstractions, such as silence. The novel also relies on certain literary tools, which are not utilized on stage. For instance, the juxtaposition of omniscient and first-person narration, as well as the use of free indirect discourse (which offers the essence of a first-person direct speech reflecting one’s inner thoughts and feelings filtered through a third-person narration), allow Dickens to describe interiority in the marriage plot of his novels more complexly than he could have done so in a drama.

At the same time, Dickens not only recognizes that theater can be much more than play-acting, but also stresses that certain performances supplant falsehoods and offer ways of discovering the truth about oneself and others.⁶ As such, he embraces theater to the extent that it can positively shape emotions, personalities, and—by extension—relationships. For example, in *Our Mutual Friend*, his last completed novel, Dickens appropriates the very theatricality he criticizes in earlier wedding ceremonies, which

⁵ Charles Dickens, “Speech at the Royal General Theatrical Fund on 20 March 1858,” in *The Speeches of Charles Dickens: A Complete Edition*, ed. K. J. Fielding (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988), 262.

⁶ See Lynn M. Voskuil, *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004). Voskuil echoes some of G. H. Lewes’s claims about the connections between theatricality and authenticity. See *On Actors and The Art of Acting* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1875).

allows for pious fraud in courtship as means to self-discovery and more suitable marriages. Such a strategy allows him to combine the power of theatrical affect with the depth of narrative realism. It also illustrates Emily Allen's point that "the novel is a notoriously loose genre, a baggy assemblage of narrative styles and modes."⁷ Writing his novels "against the popular and very public form of theater,"⁸ Dickens adopts certain theatrical tropes, such as role reversal and mistaken identity, into his later writing—not merely as farcical elements, but as a means of elucidating the various gradations between authenticity and falsehood.

Literary criticism on theatricality in Dickens generally focuses on the seeming paradox of Dickens's interest in and appropriation of theatricality in his novels as well as the novelist's association with the Victorian anti-theatrical sentiment. Many scholars stress the author's personal involvement in theater and the fact that Dickens often constructs his novelistic, interior space by using theatrical devices.⁹ For example, Deborah Vlock and Malcolm Andrews argue that, given Dickens's highly dramatic public readings of his novels and the fact that virtually all of his novels were adapted for the stage, the author actually wrote his novels with the stage in mind.¹⁰ However, other

⁷ Emily Allen, *Theater Figures: The Production of the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003), 9. For further discussion on the relationship between novel and theater, see also David Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁸ Allen, 3.

⁹ Carol Hanbery MacKay stresses that Dickens was "obsessed by the theater," performing as an amateur actor and engaging in public readings of his novels. See *Dramatic Dickens* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 1. Edwin M. Eigner shows how Dickens shapes his characters on pantomime. See *The Dickens Pantomime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). Juliet John suggests a new way of understanding the cultural implications of melodrama in Dickens by examining the theatricality of Dickensian villains. See *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Deborah Vlock, *Dickens, Novel Reading and The Victorian Popular Theater* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Vlock suggests that a Dickens novel "expresses itself . . . visually and vocally as well as narratively" (9). See also Andrews, 40, 100.

scholars, such as Emily Allen, argue that Dickens saw theater as “antagonistic to the novel’s own charmed circle of middle-class domestic reading and true sentiment (as opposed to the false sentiment of play-acting).”¹¹ John Glavin also discusses an ambivalent, often unexpectedly antagonistic relationship between Dickens and Victorian theatricality. He argues that, “Dickens believes, at his most optimistic, in a theatricality that can not only exhibit, but actually generate the self. (That’s why people get the sense that he loves theater). He also believes that theater kills (That’s the part people tend to miss).”¹² Taking readers back to the scene of Dickens’s missed theatrical audition and his humiliation in the window at Warren’s Blacking, Glavin argues that theater kills when it exhibits the player as a mere spectacle, rendering him defenseless and vulnerable.

However, literary scholarship on theatricality in Dickens remains largely separate from literary scholarship on his marriage plots. Scholars in the latter camp stress that—despite his image as the quintessential celebrant of the domestic ideal—Dickens’s novels are populated with fractured and unhappy families. In spite of their arguments about “the Dickensian domestic idyll,”¹³ Karen Chase and Michael Levenson acknowledge that Dickens’s novels feature failed marriages, the subject that Kelly Hager examines in detail in *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce*.¹⁴ Yet, the critics’ acknowledgment of marital failure in Dickens does not detail how the novelist uses theatricality to expose the failures of Victorian marriage.

¹¹ Allen, 105.

¹² John Glavin, *After Dickens: Reading, Adaptation and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 67.

¹³ Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 9.

¹⁴ Kelly Hager, *Dickens and The Rise of Divorce: The Failed-Marriage Plot and the Novel Tradition* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010). See also Catherine Waters, *Dickens and the Politics of the Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

This chapter explores how Dickens's treatment of theatricality in courtship and marriage shapes his marriage plot. Specifically, I argue that Dickens's wedding descriptions function as his *modi operandi* in exposing the different degrees of theatricality in his marriage plot, which he both rejects and embraces depending on its result. Discussing weddings in Dickens, it seems impossible to overlook the most famous Dickensian bride, Miss Havisham, and the decaying remnants of her empty, incomplete wedding in *Great Expectations* (1861). The artifacts of Miss Havisham's unperformed wedding drama, succumbing in realist fashion to the inexorable depredations of time, illustrate how Dickens uses the conflicting aesthetics of realism and theatricality to depict the complex problems of Victorian marriage. It is also plausible to imagine Jane Eyre as the revenge-crazed Miss Havisham, had Bertha not conveniently died away.

Despite the theatricality of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* as well as the novel's connections to *Jane Eyre*, this chapter focuses primarily on Dickensian grooms and their engagement in the performance of courtship and marriage. I choose to focus on groom characters in part to explore Glavin's argument that male characters are the typical subject of Dickens's "gratuitous" dramas, which "shame, annul, even kill because the performer allows himself, or is forced to, become a spectacle."¹⁵ On the one hand, this chapter corroborates Glavin's argument by demonstrating that many Dickensian grooms who wed in theatrical ceremonies often function as mere supernumeraries in their weddings.¹⁶ By focusing on women's lavish preparations, the grooms remain silent and

¹⁵ Glavin, 69–70.

¹⁶ For example, Edmund Sparkler becomes overshadowed as a groom by the excessive theatricality of Fanny Dorrit's Italian wedding in *Little Dorrit* ("nobody notice[s] the Bridegroom" amidst the busy circus of Fanny's wedding). See Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (New York: MacMillan, 1894), 580. The same is true in the case of Mr. Lillyvick, a groom in *Nicholas Nickleby*, whose wedding I discuss in detail in this chapter.

detached from the process, such as Mr. Lillyvick who weds Miss Petowker in *Nicholas Nickleby*. On the other hand, I stress that Dickens also develops the depth of certain groom characters by either disassociating them from the performance of their wedding rituals or by allowing them to engage in a temporary, conscious performance for their own benefit. Notwithstanding his general advocacy for quiet weddings, Dickens uses theatrical tropes to illustrate the fluidity and metamorphosis of his grooms—to emphasize not how theater “kills” them, but rather how it leads them to greater self-awareness, and helps them build stronger relationships.

My discussion of this subject focuses on four novels presented chronologically: *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), *David Copperfield* (1850), *Hard Times* (1854) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). Dickens’s character development of grooms in these novels demonstrates well how the novelist’s perception of performance in marriage both prevails and changes over the course of his literary career.¹⁷ For example, while *Nicholas Nickleby* reveals Dickens’s skepticism about theatrical weddings disjointed from the challenges of a real marriage, the conflict between theatricality and realism becomes more complicated in *David Copperfield*, where the novelist emphasizes a first-person narrator whose psychic conflict emerges as David both participates in and watches his own wedding as a spectator. David’s wedding, then, extends beyond a theatrical farce into a means of self-discovery. In *Hard Times*, Stephen Blackpool’s theatrical dream

¹⁷ This chapter does not include my discussion of Pip as a putative groom in *Great Expectations* because the novel does not describe his wedding, and his character’s transformation is unrelated to any explicitly performative aspects of courtship and marriage. In contrast to Pip, the Dickensian grooms in the four novels I discuss all change and gain greater awareness of their actual or prospective marriages through performance.

about his wedding turns into a nightmare about his own funeral and becomes a metaphor for his dysfunctional yet inescapable marriage with a drunk and abusive wife.

Both *David Copperfield* and *Hard Times* also discuss the fiction of certain social and legal formalities, such as marriage rituals and certificates. Dickens shows that such formalities often exemplify the artifice of the social and legal construction of marriage, which do not represent the reality of marriage they purport to control. It is this kind of empty performativity that Dickens rejects in weddings, while he occasionally embraces theatrical elements as means to his characters' self-discovery.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens renews his early skepticism over theatrical weddings by denouncing the insincere nuptials of the Lammles, while at the same time condoning the pious fraud John Harmon perpetrates on his future wife to ensure the sincerity of her marriage plans. In sum, the wedding descriptions in all four novels foreshadow and symbolize the difficult marriages of Dickensian grooms. While they emphasize the dangers of empty performativity, they also suggest that a certain degree of performance may be useful in creating more authentic marriages.

***Nicholas Nickleby* (1839)**

Theatricality in *Nicholas Nickleby* is important for reasons other than Nicholas's and Smike's acting adventures with Mr. Crummles's troupe. First, the novel marks the beginning of Dickens's decision to create his own authorial persona. In the two years following *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens successfully negotiated with his new publisher, Richard Bentley, for more money, a better contract, and more control over his

copyrights—all the things that would “free him from journeyman drudgery.”¹⁸ Since, in the 1830s Dickens also became a husband and a father, such shrewd business deals allowed him to support his growing family.¹⁹ However, supporting his family came with a very real cost of pleasing his readers and writing for profit. As such, Dickens’s authorship itself became a kind of public performance, linking his inner values of privacy and domestic happiness with his commercial image. Allen reminds readers that, “in 1838 the author known as ‘Boz’ unmasked as Charles Dickens, and the final double number of *Nicholas Nickleby* ran with the portrait of the artist as a middle-class gentleman.”²⁰ According to Robert L. Patten, this portrait by Daniel Maclise, “became the canonical way of representing the bourgeois writer for the next decade.”²¹ The portrait was accompanied with Dickens’s signature, “Faithfully yours, Charles Dickens,” cementing what Patten calls “the relationship between the author *in propria persona* and his readers.”²² However, the unmasking of “Boz,” in fact, became just one of many costume changes for Charles Dickens, the public figure. After all, as mentioned above, Dickens continually had to shape both his own image and his works in ways that would meet the approval of his readers.

Dickens’s creation of his public persona as a proper gentleman and a stellar family man did not entirely mirror his private life. His own domestic arrangements with Georgina Hogarth, his wife’s sister, who joined the Dickens’s household shortly after the

¹⁸ Robert L. Patten, “From *Sketches to Nickleby*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 21.

¹⁹ He married Catherine on April 2, 1836 and became a father for the first time in 1837.

²⁰ Allen, 103.

²¹ Patten, 31.

²² *Ibid.*, 32.

publication of *Nicholas Nickleby*, indicates that his family life was not as simple as his readers may have wanted to believe. Even if Dickens had no “desire to marry Georgina,” as Michael Slater claims, she had provided, since 1842, “vital domestic continuity for him in his family upheavals,” and in some ways, played the role of his housewife.²³ Although young Dickens seemed relatively happy as Catherine’s husband (surrounded by women who complemented each other in bearing him children and taking care of his household while he wrote his novels), even his early family life was more complicated than the Dickensian myth of the domestic idyll may have suggested.

In addition to marking the birth of Dickens’s own public image, *Nicholas Nickleby* also reveals certain concerns with marriage as both a social and a legal institution. By plotting Miss Petowker’s wedding as a theatrical farce, the novel exemplifies the realist novel’s trend of denouncing the empty performativity of marital rituals, which fail to reflect the truth about Victorian marriage. Published almost ten years before *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Nicholas Nickleby*’s “dandified masquerade”²⁴ of Miss Petowker’s nuptials is echoed in the charade of Rochester’s pantomime wedding to Blanche. The exaggerated theatrics of both wedding scenes exemplify the realist mistrust of showy weddings that fail to reflect the seriousness and complexity of a marriage commitment.

The wedding of Miss Petowker, an actress in Mr. Crummles’s theatrical troupe, to Mr. Lillyvick, a local collector of the water rate, represents weddings as empty theatrical acts. The wedding procession features dressed-up bridesmaids “with artificial flowers.”²⁵

²³ Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 167, 171.

²⁴ Patricia Marks, “‘On Tuesday Last, at St. George’s . . .’ The Dandaical Wedding in Dickens,” *Victorian Newsletter* 78 (1990): 12.

²⁵ Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (New York: Penguin, 1999, reprinted in 2003), 315.

One of the wedding guests, Miss Ledrook, pins to her breast “the miniature of some field-officer unknown, which she had purchased, a great bargain,” that she purports to represent her sweetheart.²⁶ The other ladies also display “several dazzling articles of imitative jewelry, almost equal to real.”²⁷ Mr. Crummles impersonates the bride’s father, “by arraying himself in a theatrical wig, of a style and pattern commonly known as a brown George, and moreover assuming a snuff-colored suit, of the previous century, with grey silk stockings, and buckles to his shoes.”²⁸ In addition to his showy apparel, he sobs so dramatically that the pew-openers suggest he calm himself down before the ceremony. The wedding procession walks in a solemn and previously rehearsed manner (“Mr. Crummles, with an infirm and feeble gait; Mrs. Crummles advancing with that stage walk, which consists of a stride and a stop alternately”).²⁹ In sum, the theatrical appearance and behavior of the wedding party depict the wedding as a farce.

However, Miss Petowker’s wedding farce extends beyond mere entertainment. It exposes the social and legal problems with Victorian marriage: the excessive performativity of wedding rituals and formalities so often disjointed from the real intentions and feelings of the marrying parties. Although *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) is not typically read as a “social problem” novel, it does implicitly respond to two contemporary changes governing marriage law. First, the 1836 *Civil Marriages Act* allowed non-Anglicans to marry either in their own church or in registry offices. The law resulted in the Church of England losing its monopoly over marriage services but it still underscored the need for registration and other legal formalities necessary to make one’s

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

marriage valid. Religious groups other than the Anglicans could conduct weddings, but only after first applying for registration and subsequently marrying in the presence of at least two witnesses. Second, the 1837 *Registration Act* made it compulsory for all marriages to be registered and legitimized with a certificate.³⁰ It is such emphasis on form over substance that Dickens criticizes through Miss Petowker's wedding.

While Dickens does not reject wedding ceremonies altogether, he stresses that such ceremonies do not ensure the authenticity of marital commitments. For example, even though Mr. Crummles solemnly wipes his spectacles before signing the wedding register with the utmost reverence, Miss Petowker leaves her groom for a handsome captain shortly after the wedding.³¹ As such, the novel juxtaposes the seeming reverence for irrevocable wedding vows and the unpredictability of marriage. The high theatricality of Miss Petowker's wedding makes the ceremony farcical until Mr. Folair, another actor and a wedding guest, reminds the poor groom, Mr. Lillyvick, that getting married is more than temporary play-acting. In Mr. Folair's words, weddings, just like suicides, are brief, rushed acts that have long-lasting, irreversible consequences.

“The tying up—the fixing oneself with a wife,” replied Mr. Folair. “It don't take long, does it?”

“No, sir,” replied Mr. Lillyvick, coloring. “It does not take long. And what then, sir?” “Oh! nothing,” said the actor. “It don't take a man long to hang himself, either, eh?”³²

Miss Petowker's wedding is so farcical that it is easy to treat it as a mere comic relief rather than an expression of Dickens's philosophy about marriage. And yet, Mr. Folair's

³⁰ Joan Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Routledge, 1989, reprinted 2014), 22. For a more general discussion on the history of Victorian marriage, see John R. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

³¹ Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, 315.

³² *Ibid.*, 316.

sobering comparison of weddings to suicides highlights the silent suffering in many unhappy marriages. It also implies that, even as a young, contented husband, Dickens showed some skepticism about the legal institution of marriage. It is worth remembering he wrote *Nicholas Nickleby* shortly after his failed romance with Maria Beadnell and prior to the 1857 Divorce Act. As such, he must have been aware of the fleeting nature of romantic excitement as well as the inflexibility and complications of many marital commitments.

Perhaps to maintain his public persona and avoid outright criticisms of marriage, Dickens softens Mr. Folair's morose view of matrimony by presenting it in a conversation between two minor characters within a theater troupe. The novelist has previously criticized the burdens associated even with an apparent courtship in his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836), where Mr. Pickwick finds himself in court on Valentine's Day for his alleged breach of promise to his landlady Mrs. Bardell. However, the lawsuit evokes humor and does not result in Mr. Pickwick's unhappy marriage. In contrast to Mr. Pickwick, Mr. Lillyvick is an unhappy groom, completely overshadowed and eventually abandoned by his bride. Nevertheless, the misery of his marital subplot may seem less conspicuous to some readers because he is not a well-known Dickensian hero, and his marriage to a flighty actress seems somewhat insensible from the beginning.

The novel also features other examples of Dickens's tendency to muffle his critique of certain marriages by expressing it through his minor characters. For instance, Arthur Gride's older domestic servant Peg, stresses that a brief wedding ceremony does not accurately represent time-tested, prosaic arrangements between two people who choose to live together, even outside of the law. Peg, who never marries Arthur but

considers herself his quasi-wife, provides a foil to Mr. Lillyvick who weds Miss Petowker in an official ceremony only to be abandoned by her. Peg views Arthur's impending wedding to Madeline Bray not as a happy occasion but rather as a rejection of all the marital values, which she *de facto* brought into his life:

Wedding indeed! A precious wedding! He wants somebody better than his old Peg to take care of him, does he? And what has he said to me, many and many a time, to keep me content with short food, small wages, and little fire? "My will, Peg! my will!" says he: "I'm a bachelor—no friends—no relations, Peg." Lies!³³

Peg's insistence that her life-long prosaic service to Arthur constitutes a real commitment, unlike a perfunctory wedding vow, helps to highlight the notion that wedding ceremonies and formalities do not always reflect genuine intentions to love and support one another for life. By communicating such unorthodox views through minor scenes and characters, in his early career Dickens removes himself from the forefront of his marriage criticism, while at the same time engaging in it.

While Dickens does not endorse common law marriages, his novels often feature female characters who play the roles of wives outside of the law. Such characters help to emphasize the point that many Dickensian grooms make the mistake of wedding brides who are either incapable of or unwilling to share with them the prose of everyday life. The aforementioned Peg provides a literary template for the later Dickens's character, Mrs. Sparsit, an older widow once deceived by her late husband for money, who keeps Mr. Bounderby's household in *Hard Times* (1854). Since neither Peg nor Mrs. Sparsit ever engage in marriage rituals, they are not legitimate spouses under the law, and yet they function as quasi wives by spending their lives supporting and serving their

³³ *Ibid.*, 667.

prospective grooms (Mr. Gride and Mr. Bounderby). Although acting in a particular capacity also connotes a kind of performance, Dickens seems to embrace the performativity of wifedom by both Peg and Mrs. Sparsit because they are faithful and sincere in their life-long commitments to the men they never legally wed. While Dickens does not necessarily suggest that Peg and Mr. Gride or Mrs. Sparsit and Mr. Bounderby ought to marry, he juxtaposes the faithful devotion of Peg and Mrs. Sparsit with Miss Petowker's fickleness towards the poor Mr. Lillyvick. No excess of wedding celebrations and legal documents can help him force his unfaithful wife to share a life with him.

Dickens's insistence on the authenticity of one's romantic commitments supersedes his criticism of theatrical courtships and marriages. In other words, he accepts some theatricality in relationships, if such theatricality conjoins genuine intentions. For example, Dickens allows for the innocuous melodrama of Mrs. Nickleby's lunatic neighbor who throws cucumbers over the garden wall to court her because such melodrama does not lead to a serious, disingenuous commitment. Mrs. Nickleby's suitor elevates her to the role of a romantic heroine when he kisses her hand, as she "lays the other upon his heart."³⁴ He solemnly offers her his cucumbers as precious romantic mementos from a suitor. Finally, he even proposes marriage and an elopement, the idea that she treats as a serious marriage proposal ("What am I to do?").³⁵ Dickens presents this cucumber courtship as comic relief in the novel. It is as melodramatic and theatrical as Miss Petowker's wedding. However, unlike poor Mr. Lillyvick, Mrs. Nickleby's suitor is not a victim of the "gratuitous drama" that shames and exposes him, as described by

³⁴ Ibid., 460.

³⁵ Ibid.

Glavin.³⁶ The seriousness with which Mrs. Nickleby's approaches her courtship may be dramatic, but it lacks the selfishness of Mrs. Bardell suing Pickwick into a "blissful" marriage on Valentine's Day or Mr. Guppy's proposals to marry Esther "for better or worse" until he notices the scars on her face. Rather, Mrs. Nickleby's suitor voluntarily participates in a temporary light-hearted romantic fantasy, devoid of insincerity.

David Copperfield (1850)

While in *Nicholas Nickleby* Dickens criticizes the gratuitous drama of theatrical weddings, David Copperfield's wedding to Dora Spenlow does not fit neatly into the simple dichotomy of the simple/sincere versus theatrical/insincere weddings. David's wedding contains the elements of both "theatricality and authenticity."³⁷ On the one hand, Dora's nuptials seem almost as farcical as Miss Petowker's. Miss Lavinia spends days "constantly cutting out brown-paper cuirasses" for the wedding. A special dressmaker "boards and lodges" with Dora to ensure that Dora's dress fits perfectly. Miss Clarissa and David's aunt "roam all over London" to find suitable furniture for Dora and David, including "a Chinese house for Jip, with little bells on the top," which ring every time the dog goes in and out.³⁸ On her wedding day, Dora alternates between trembling, acting hysterically, being merry, and being very talkative in the carriage. She also holds Agnes' hand throughout most of her wedding with David, as if the three of them were marrying each other.

On the other hand, although David does not participate in any of the lavish wedding preparations and perceives his actual wedding from the perspective of an outside

³⁶ Glavin, 67.

³⁷ Voskuil, 2.

³⁸ Dickens, *David Copperfield*, 633.

spectator, his courtship and marriage to Dora are sincere. He stresses how genuinely happy he feels walking with her down the aisle. Peggotty signs the wedding register as a witness with the utmost solemnity. Aunt Betsey blesses David with sincere tears in her eyes. Most importantly, after the wedding, David and Dora seem happy together, even if they are intellectually mismatched. Although David's love for Dora is immature and much more perfunctory than heart-felt, his intentions towards her are sincere. How, then, does one explain Dickens's well-established advocacy for quiet weddings and his positive depiction of David's happiness and fulfillment in Dora's theatrical wedding? The answer arises from Dickens's biography, which likely inspired him to view theater as authentically performative.

By the time he wrote *David Copperfield*, Dickens had matured both as a father and an author. For example, he was about to begin writing the novel when his eighth child (Henry Fielding, a future lawyer) was born in January 1849. Shortly after, in 1850, his daughter Dora was born and died eight months later. In addition to his busy and turbulent family life, by 1850, Dickens had become a literary celebrity. He had traveled to Italy and America and published hits, such as *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840), *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843) and *Dombey and Son* (1846). Such personal and professional achievements and responsibilities forced him to wear many social masks and to control his public image even more.

By the 1850s Dickens's appreciation of theater as a means of expression, self-discovery, and even self-preservation had deepened, as compared to his earlier years. According to John Forster, in the 1840s Dickens worked tirelessly as actor and stage manager for his amateur theatricals, often adjusting scenes, inventing costumes, and

generally overseeing the entire production of the performances. Many of his friends were playwrights and actors, such as William Macready. The schoolroom in his home, Tavistock House, was often converted into a theater for small performances, and Dickens's amateur troupe even performed twice for Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.³⁹

Dickens's essay "The Amusement of the People," published around the time of *David Copperfield* in 1850, recognizes the theater's role in the cultural edification of the masses, particularly about marriage. The essay features Joe Whelks, who visits the Victoria Theater. Since Joe is "not much of a reader," Dickens acknowledges that the melodramas Joe watches stimulate his imagination in a way no novel could.⁴⁰ One such melodrama, the play called *Eva the Betrayed, or The Ladye of Lambythe*, features Geoffrey Thornley who marries his father's ward, Eva, knowing that she was engaged to Walter More, a young mariner. Geoffrey himself is married to another person, his lawful wife, Katherine, who brings their marriage certificate to Geoffrey on his wedding day to Eva, determined to expose him. The plot unfolds like a sensation melodrama. Geoffrey stabs his wife and disposes of her body. A hunchback, Geoffrey's servant, who knows his secret, is thrown into the dungeons beneath Thornley Hall but not before he takes the marriage certificate from Katherine's pocket, which he eventually hands to Walter More.⁴¹ Walter saves Lady Eva from her sham husband, Geoffrey, and marries her. In sum, Dickens is mocking such a sensational plot.

³⁹ David Perdue, "Dickens on Stage," David Perdue's Charles Dickens Page, accessed August 28, 2017, <http://charlesdickenspage.com/stage.html>.

⁴⁰ Charles Dickens, "The Amusement of the People: Part One," *Household Words* 1 (30 March 1850): 13–15; Charles Dickens, "The Amusement of the People: Part Two," *Household Words* 1 (13 April 1850): 57–60. Two-part essay reprinted in *Charles Dickens on Theater*, foreword by Sir Richard Eyre (London: Hesperus Press Limited, 2011), 3–18, 4.

⁴¹ Thornley Hall (which sounds like Thornfield Hall) and the marriage certificate that saves Eva from bigamy overtly reference *Jane Eyre* (1847).

While Dickens mocks the sensational elements of cheap melodramas—such as Eva struggling with Walter on her wedding day or Geoffrey wrestling with Katherine’s hair before her death—he sees theater as a medium that extends beyond insincere play-acting. Such a perception of the theater informs his treatment of theatricality in prose. According to Peter Ackroyd, at some point in his career Dickens “gauged the extent to which pathos and comedy could be employed” in his novels.⁴² Although in *Nicholas Nickleby* the novelist utilizes theatrical elements but also associates them with artifice, by the 1850s he moves away from representing theatricality as a mere fiction devoid of sincerity. Even if in general Dickens always implies a certain representational superiority of the novel over the theater, he also acknowledges the importance of theatricality to the development of a character’s interiority in novel writing.

Dickens disassociates David from the theatrics of his wedding to Dora by making him wed as if in “a flustered, happy, hurried dream.”⁴³ David is a groom present at his wedding and yet he watches himself wed Dora through “a mist of half-seen people, pulpits, monuments, pews, fonts, organs, and church windows.”⁴⁴ Although their wedding breakfast features “an abundance of things, pretty and substantial, to eat and drink,” David cannot recall the tastes or scents of anything.⁴⁵ When giving his wedding speech, he feels as if in a haze, “without having an idea of what I want to say.”⁴⁶ By viewing his whole wedding as a dream, David can watch himself acting. He realizes what Jean Ferguson Carr calls “Dickens’s dream of being able to watch himself acting, to

⁴² Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 90.

⁴³ Dickens, *David Copperfield*, 634.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 639.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 584.

obtain a privileged vantage-point from which to observe.”⁴⁷ As such, he is able to go through some of the theatrics of his wedding to Dora as a spectator rather than an active participant. Because David’s intention to marry Dora is pure and sincere, Dickens suggests that David is innocent of any empty theatrics, all of which fall on Dora. Additionally, the characterization of Dora as his “child-wife” only further diminishes David’s responsibility for getting married in an ostentatious way.⁴⁸

David’s first-person narration further removes him from the mere theatrics of his wedding. By telling his story himself and reflecting upon his life, he does not merely play a role on the wedding stage. Instead, he shares internal reflections on his marriage to Dora as the panoptic vision of his life unfolds before him. The novel’s technique of first-person reflection allows David to view his life on the stage, as if he merely watched it from a distance. Therefore, to the extent that David participates in theater, he does not do so gratuitously, in order to deceive himself or others, but rather passively, with a “guileless heart.”⁴⁹ In summary, the novel enables Dickens to explain David’s theatrical experience as a means of personal growth and inner knowledge.

Dickens’s emphasis on David’s “guileless heart” represents a shift in the novelist’s direct critique of the hollow theatricality of individual behavior to his critique of empty marriage formalities, which have the power to lock people in permanent life-long commitments without ensuring that they love and support each other for life. Nowhere does such emptiness of legal formalities become more apparent than on David’s

⁴⁷ Jean Ferguson Carr, “Dickens’s Theater of Self-Knowledge,” in *Dramatic Dickens*, ed. Carol Hanbery MacKay (New York: St. Martin’s, 1989), 33.

⁴⁸ Dickens, *David Copperfield*, 772.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

wedding day to Dora, when he entrusts his marriage license to Traddles. Watching Traddles handle the license, Sophie almost faints because she worries so much that Traddles “would contrive to lose it, or to have his pocket picked.”⁵⁰ Sophie’s extreme concern over the marriage license echoes David’s observation of how “a little document [can] do so much.”⁵¹ In other words, Sophie understands that a marriage certificate not only legitimizes one’s marriage, but also connotes various life-changing rights and obligations. And yet, David also finds it strange that his feelings for Dora have to be legitimized through the purchase of a license, which connotes “a blessing” from both the Stamp Office and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Working as a law clerk, David learns that legal documents are often handled with a lack of logic and justice, which reminds readers of Mrs. Petowker’s farcical wedding. For example, marriage licenses are issued by legal proctors, “monkish attorney[s]” who “play all kinds of tricks with obsolete old monsters of acts of Parliament.”⁵² They specialize in marriages as well as nautical matters, as if “the Yarmouth boatmen having put off in a gale of wind” and the holy matrimony were the same thing.⁵³ Steerforth compares the ecclesiastical judges to “actors” who merely play the role of a judge on a given day, only to perform another job the next day.⁵⁴ In short, marital disputes are “profitable little affairs of private theatricals, presented to an uncommonly select audience” of questionable experts who have no interest in discovering the complexities of the truth about human relationships.⁵⁵ Comparing legal marriage disputes to “private

⁵⁰ Ibid., 639.

⁵¹ Ibid., 634.

⁵² Ibid., 352.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

theatricals” erases any divide between the law (typically characterized as a serious practice based on logic and justice) and theater (often associated with artifice, chaos, and light-hearted entertainment). Representing the law as mere theatrics, Dickens questions its power to decide matters as serious and complex as marriage.

In fact, in the course of his legal apprenticeship, David learns that sometimes the legal system is not only nonsensical and unfair but fraudulent. For instance, legal proctors sell their names to common swindlers, who loiter at the court issuing fake marriage licenses and small probates to unsuspecting parties for money. Horrified at such a corruption of the law, David recalls:

As to marriage licenses, the competition rose to such a pitch, that a shy gentleman in want of one, had nothing to do but submit himself to the first inveigler, or be fought for, and become the prey of the strongest. One of our clerks, who was an outsider, used, in the height of this contest, to sit with his hat on, that he might be ready to rush out and swear before a surrogate any victim who was brought in. . . The last time I was in the Commons, a civil able-bodied person in a white apron pounced out upon me from a doorway, and whispering the word “Marriage-license” in my ear, was with great difficulty prevented from taking me up in his arms and lifting me into a proctor’s office.⁵⁶

Not only does the administration of legal formalities create fraud, but marriage law itself often creates a legal fiction, disjointed from the married reality. For example, David muses over the divorce case of Thomas Benjamin who demands divorce because his marriage license does not list his last name. The court upholds Mr. Benjamin’s argument that the absence of his last name means the marriage license was invalid and so he was never married at all. In David’s words:

I went into Court, where we had a divorce-suit coming on, under an ingenious little statute (repealed now, I believe, but in virtue of which I have seen several marriages annulled), of which the merits were these. The husband, whose name was Thomas Benjamin, had taken out his marriage license as Thomas only;

⁵⁶ Ibid., 569–70.

suppressing the Benjamin, in case he should not find himself as comfortable as he expected. Not finding himself as comfortable as he expected, or being a little fatigued with his wife, poor fellow, he now came forward, by a friend, after being married a year or two, and declared that his name was Thomas Benjamin, and therefore he was not married at all. Which the Court confirmed, to his great satisfaction.⁵⁷

The handling of Thomas Benjamin's case exposes the problems with wedding formalities, which are designed to legitimize a lifetime commitment but can also make some marriages invalid, if there are any mistakes in the wording of the license. While Thomas Benjamin dismisses his legal vows based on a simple misspelling, Emma Micawber insists that, because of her wedding vows, she can never desert her husband. The juxtaposition of the ease with which Thomas Benjamin can be legally free of his wife whom he had married clandestinely and the rigid inflexibility imposed on Emma Micawber by her formal marriage vows highlights the arbitrariness of many marital formalities. In sum, marriage law, which focuses on external appearances, such as the content of a legal license, is often disjointed from the reality of marriage.

Recognizing the legal system's failure to ensure long-lasting and loving marriages, in his later years Dickens allows for individual deception as a temporary means to achieve long-lasting marital happiness. For example, Betsey Trotwood engages in pious fraud (telling David that Agnes is about to marry someone else, even though it is not true) because such fraud propels David to realize his love for Agnes. Reminding readers that "moral characters do tell lies," Edwin Eigner compares Betsey Trotwood to "the benevolent Agent" that "inculcates virtue," and educates David about his true love Agnes.⁵⁸ As Eigner puts it, "a falsehood or fiction perpetrated for the child's good"

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 484–85.

⁵⁸ Eigner, 52, 53.

should be “out of place in a realistic novel because the very notion of education through deception cuts at the heart of the philosophy of realism.”⁵⁹ But Dickens allows for Betsey’s pious fraud as a vehicle to David’s self-discovery about his true love. He explores that theme more fully in one of his final novels, *Out Mutual Friend*, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

***Hard Times* (1854)**

Dickens expands his critique of inequitable marriage laws in *Hard Times*, the novel published a few years after *David Copperfield*. One of the main characters in the novel, Stephen Blackpool, famously asks his employer, Mr. Bounderby, how “to be ridded o’” his drunken, abusive wife, so that he can marry the woman he truly loves, the good-hearted Rachel.⁶⁰ Bounderby stresses to Stephen that the law does not allow him to escape his marriage, however unhappy and abusive it may be. Stephen replies that he had read that the rich people “can be set free fro’ their misfortnet marriages, an’ marry ower agen. When they dunnot agree, for that their tempers is ill-sorted, they has rooms o’ one kind an’ another in their houses, above a bit, and they can live asunders.”⁶¹ In turn, Bounderby explains to Stephen that he would have to go through multiple courts—the “Doctors’ Commons with a suit, and you’d have to go to a court of Common Law with a suit, and you’d have to go to the House of Lords with a suit, and you’d have to get an Act of Parliament”—in order to obtain legal divorce.⁶² This convoluted legal remedy would

⁵⁹ Ibid., 53.

⁶⁰ Dickens, *Hard Times*, 75.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 76.

cost Stephen at least “a thousand to fifteen hundred pound,” which he cannot afford.⁶³ In sum, there is no law that truly protects Stephen and offers any real remedy to his troubles. In Stephen’s words, law is nothing but “a muddle,” a confusing institution designed to help people, which, contrariwise, complicates their lives and makes them unhappy.⁶⁴ Stephen may die of marital misery, his faithful Rachel may wither as a childless spinster, and the law will remain indifferent to both. Stephen cannot understand how such wretched and uncaring laws can deny him a marriage to his love, Rachel.

Dickens uses the theme of a wedding to illustrate how the marriage law that forces Stephen to stay unhappily married makes him emotionally dead. Hopelessly desperate due to his inability to divorce, Stephen dreams “a long, troubled dream” where he stands “in the church being married.”⁶⁵ Although he hopes to marry Rachel, his bride is some unknown woman. The wedding ceremony includes witnesses “many [of] whom he knew to be dead” and contains “darkness.”⁶⁶ The initial darkness suddenly changes into the light, which highlights some mysterious words “in the fiery letters” and reveals a vast crowd of people hostile to Stephen.⁶⁷ Dickens highlights the theatricality of this strange wedding dream by casting Stephen in the role of an unwitting actor who watches his wedding day turn into his funeral:

[Stephen] stood on a raised stage, under his own look; and, looking up at the shape the loom took, and hearing the burial service distinctly read, he knew that he was there to suffer death.⁶⁸

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 77.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 86.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Stephen's nightmarish wedding dream is significant to my argument for a few reasons. First, its dramatic imagery highlights Stephen's metaphorical death in a nightmarish marriage, which cannot be dissolved under the law. The image of poor Stephen standing on a stage watching his own burial service illustrates Glavin's point that theater can "kill"; in other words, Stephen's need to play the role of a husband in an awful marriage metaphorically destroys any life within him. Second, Stephen's wedding dream starts the pattern of dreams about strange theatrical weddings, which foreshadow the dangers of particular marriages in Victorian literature, which I will analyze in subsequent chapters while discussing Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and George Eliot's *Romola*.

The vivid imagery of Stephen's wedding dream underscores the injustice of contemporary marriage law shortly before the passage of the 1857 Divorce Act. John Baird comments that Dickens had to make Stephen's story unusually dramatic in order to argue for divorce to his conservative audience. The novel suggests that Stephen's shrewish wife is not only a useless drunk but also an adulteress, even if he avoids saying so explicitly.⁶⁹ Dickens certainly implies that Stephen is without any fault, while his nameless wife, who "went bad" shortly after their wedding, sells their furniture and pawns his clothes.⁷⁰ Additionally, as Baird stresses, Dickens makes the legislative divorce practically impossible for Stephen "by making the would-be petitioner a humble weaver."⁷¹ Yet, however crafty Dickens may have been in making his case for divorce, Stephen Blackpool's bitter story successfully highlights the injustice of the contemporary

⁶⁹ John D. Baird, "Divorce and Matrimonial Causes: An Aspect of *Hard Times*," *Victorian Studies* 20, no. 4 (1977): 407–09.

⁷⁰ Dickens, *Hard Times*, 73.

⁷¹ Baird, 407–09.

divorce laws, painting them as empty, capricious dictates that uphold a fiction, which fails to represent the complex realities of married relationships.

In summary, both *David Copperfield* and *Hard Times* feature male protagonists who see the truth of their mismatched marriages through the theatrical representations of their weddings. Dickens dissociates both David Copperfield and Stephen Blackpool from such theatricality by making them silently participate in those weddings while dreaming. While David describes his wedding as if he were dreaming, Stephen literally dreams the prophetic vision about his hapless wedding, presented through a third-party narrator. As such, both characters are silent and passive observers of the theatricality that surround them. However, Dickens also appropriates that theatricality to either trigger or highlight their realizations about the inauthenticity of their marriages.

***Our Mutual Friend* (1865)**

Dickens treats the theme of theatricality as means of circumventing the marriage laws perhaps most extensively in *Our Mutual Friend*. John Harmon, an heir to the Harmon estate on the condition of marrying Bella Wilfer, believes he must fake his own death to avoid losing his fortune or marrying the woman he does not know. In John's words, had he married Bella right away, their marriage, "would be a shocking mockery, of which both she and I must always be conscious, and which would degrade her in her mind, and me in mine, and each of us in the other's."⁷² This example shows that Dickens sees John's temporary deception of Bella as a means of ensuring his eventual sincerity of affection towards her. Such deception, which delays their marriage, also allows the mercenary Bella to abandon her obsession with avarice ("the whole life I place before

⁷² Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 366.

myself is money, money, money, and what money can make of life!”) and marry John Harmon out of love.⁷³ As such, John’s silent deception of Bella through his use of mistaken identity allows them to fall in love with each other prior to marriage.

Dickens wrote *Our Mutual Friend* under greatly altered personal and social circumstances. He had witnessed the passage of 1857 Divorce Act. He had acted in Wilkie Collins’s *The Frozen Deep* (1857), which propelled his love affair with the actress Ellen Ternan. In 1858 he also undertook his first public reading of his novels and officially separated from Catherine. Not only did Dickens experience marital unhappiness (“Poor Catherine and I are not made for each other, and there is no help for it,” he explained),⁷⁴ but their legal separation, announced in the *London Times* and *Household Words*, took place on a public stage. Although Dickens claimed he felt compelled to separate from his wife in order to end the “most grossly false”⁷⁵ misrepresentations and accusations of Ellen Ternan and Georgina Hogarth, the announcement was yet another attempt to maintain his own public image as a gentleman. By playing the role of a public defender to Ellen and Georgina, Dickens in fact manipulated public perception of him and his divorce from Catherine. In other words, he controlled how the story of his separation appeared on the public stage instead of becoming a mere victim of such public spectacle. The newspaper announcement about his split from his wife illustrates that even Dickens’s honesty about his relationship with Catherine may be fashioned as a kind of performance for his reading public, which sustained his public image as well as his livelihood.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 455.

⁷⁴ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, vol. 2 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1870), 142.

⁷⁵ Charles Dickens, “Personal,” *Household Words* (12 June 1858), 601.

Our Mutual Friend captures the complex tensions of Dickens's troubled marriage as well as his personal secrets by featuring a society obsessed with external appearances. At the center of such a shallow society stand the Veneerings who made their money from stock market speculation and quack medicine. As aptly suggested by their last name, the Veneerings have no substance beyond their surface appearance. Mrs. Veneering treats the Lammles's wedding reception as an occasion to display her own wealth. She looks like a "jeweller's window" and carries "a baby dressed as a bridesmaid."⁷⁶ Her high-society guests eat at magnificent tables, filled with rich food and the "splendid cake, covered with Cupids, silver, and true-lovers' knots."⁷⁷ The Lammles's wedding reception, organized by Mrs. Veneering, illustrates what Peter Gurney calls "a world of glittering reflections that obfuscate the reality of underlying social relationships" in the novel.⁷⁸

The empty theatrics of the Lammles's wedding are reminiscent of Miss Petowker's wedding in *Nicholas Nickleby*. As Gurney puts it, Mrs. Veneering's "never-ending round of hollow rituals" turn the Lammles's wedding into formulaic play-acting.⁷⁹ For example, Mrs. Veneering ensures that the wedding party goes on as rehearsed, that "the things indispensable to be said are said, and all the things indispensable to be done are done (including Lady Tippins's yawning, falling asleep, and waking insensible)."⁸⁰ At the wedding, Lady Tippins also surveys the wedding scene through her eye-glass.

⁷⁶ Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, 123.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁷⁸ Peter Gurney, "The Age of Veneer: Charles Dickens and the Antinomies of Victorian Consumer Culture," *Dickens Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (2015): 234.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁸⁰ Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, 125.

Standing on the cushion to better see the show, Lady Tippins simply “checks off” every material and physical aspect of the wedding:

Bride; five-and-forty if a day, thirty shillings a yard, veil fifteen pound, pocket-handkerchief a present. Bridesmaids; kept down for fear of outshining bride, consequently not girls, twelve and sixpence a yard, Veneering’s flowers, snub-nosed one rather pretty but too conscious of her stockings.⁸¹

Reducing a romantic ritual to a sartorial inventory causes the reader to forget that the bride and the groom, as well as the wedding party, are “real” people. In fact, they all seem to have less identity than stock characters of melodramas.

While Dickens recognizes that, in the world of appearances, a certain degree of performance may be necessary, he stresses that spouses cannot continually play-act in marriage. Mr. and Mrs. Lammle may keep up their act of a loving couple walking on the sands at Shanklin, where not too many people will “see by their footprints that they have not walked arm in arm.”⁸² But when they shock each other with the revelation that neither one of them has money, they have to face the reality that they married each other on “false pretenses.”⁸³ Having the Lammles accept their disappointing marriage with the deathly finality of their “signed, sealed, and delivered” marriage contract, Dickens punishes their prenuptial greed and falsehood.⁸⁴

John Harmon’s deception of Bella differs from the Lammles’ deception because he never means to lie to his true bride and he engages in his pious fraud only temporarily. The initial idea of “his first deception” (his choice to assume a different name and identity) is a harmless joke meant to last “a few hours or days” and help him see whether

⁸¹ Ibid., 123.

⁸² Ibid., 125.

⁸³ Ibid., 127.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 130–31.

the wife forced upon him by his father has a genuine intention of marrying him.⁸⁵ As previously mentioned, John wants to ensure that he and Bella can truly love each other before they enter into marriage. He claims that “if he had found her unhappy in the prospect of that marriage (through her heart inclining to another man or for any other cause), he would seriously have said: ‘This is another of the old perverted use of money.’”⁸⁶ Thus, in addition to merely testing Bella, John’s deception of her is noble because it helps him prevent a potential matrimonial fraud.

Not only does the manner in which John Harmon devises his pious fraud seem harmless, but it also empowers him as a groom by placing him in control of his courtship and marriage. To use Glavin’s analogy, Harmon’s theater does not “kill” him, making him defenseless and vulnerable.⁸⁷ Instead, it allows him to both direct and act in the kind of performance that reveals the truth about himself, Bella, and their feelings for each other. Unlike poor Mr. Lillyvick, a passive participant in Miss Petowker’s theatrical wedding, John Harmon is an active participant in his own performance by assuming a false identity to control others’ perceptions of him and his plans. His silence about his true identity is deliberate. As such, it does not signify his loss of voice in his own wedding or marriage, but rather empowers him to reach his own goal of having an authentic marriage.

What is perhaps most relevant about *Our Mutual Friend* is that, while John Harmon’s false identity is eventually unmasked and justified as a kind of beneficial theater, Dickens still finishes the novel with a somewhat theatrical wedding between John

⁸⁵ Ibid., 372.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 372–73.

⁸⁷ Glavin, 67.

and Bella. Although their legal formalities are briefly completed (“they have consented together in holy wedlock, you may (in short) consider it done,” John and Bella walk together “with an ethereal air of happiness, which, as it were, wafted up from the earth.”⁸⁸ Bella looks like a fairy gliding through the church porch while her father, Mr. Wilfer, is “the cherub in a white waistcoat.”⁸⁹ Dickens’s literary choice to represent the wedding in such colorful, fantastical terms seems incongruent with his wariness of empty theatricality.

Yet, even if criticized as an example of Dickensian “fairy-tale marriages” that smack of theatrical sentimentality and melodrama, as John Kucich puts it, John and Bella’s wedding does not quite fall into the category of empty performativity that Dickens typically rejects.⁹⁰ First, despite the fantastical elements of their wedding ceremony, Bella and John’s intentions to marry for life are sincere. In that sense, their wedding is not a farce that fails to reflect the true intentions of the parties. Second, the wedding breakfast takes place in “a modest, little cottage” with “snowy tablecloth.”⁹¹ The brightness of their wedding day negates the dark slimy river, which appears to take John’s life in the beginning. Their wedding dinner is more opulent and contains “samples of the fishes of divers color that made a speech in the Arabian Nights,” and all the dishes are “seasoned with Bliss.”⁹² But the wedding feast is not an empty ritual; rather, John and Bella eat at Greenwich in the same room where Mr. and Mrs. Wilfer once dined together. Their wedding reception, then, celebrates genuine love and the generations of happy

⁸⁸ Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, 650.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ See John Kucich, *Excess and Restraint in the Novels of Charles Dickens* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981), 248.

⁹¹ Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, 651.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 654.

families rather than Bella and John's legal arrangement, much like the fairytale ending of *Bleak House* (1853). As such, it represents both the power of theatrical affect and the depth of narrative realism. It allows Dickens to represent married life with the full complexities of dramatic representation without using theater as Glavin's "gratuitous drama," which encourages insincere play-acting and harmful deception.⁹³

Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated Dickens's complicated relationship with theater and theatricality in the context of his courtship and marriage plots. Although scholars have recognized the seeming contradictions of Dickens's intense interest in theater as well as his criticism of it, I argue that such an ambivalent relationship to theater influenced Dickens's view of the performativity in marriage through his literary representations of weddings as well as his construction of groom characters. In general, Dickens rejects the empty theatrics of ostentatious wedding ceremonies and instead promotes simple, quiet weddings characteristic of realism. Unlike theater, the novel allows Dickens to portray such quiet weddings with detailed descriptions of certain human abstractions (such as silence, interiority, and privacy). The rhetorical advantage of realist portrayals of quiet weddings in a novel is to critique the legal and social constructions of marriage, which—like theater—often focus on external performativity.

As his own life and career unfolded, Dickens came to desire greater control over his own public image. Through his experience, in time he recognized performance as a legitimate means of self-creation and expression rather than mere artifice. Therefore, notwithstanding his continuous critique of empty theatricality, Dickens's later novels

⁹³ Glavin, 67.

often use theatricality as a means of both showing the dynamic development of his groom characters, as well as a tool for empowering them to control their own roles in courtship and marriage. In particular, the performativity of John Harmon demonstrates that the novelist treats theater as much more than mere play-acting or as an occasion for shame or insincerity. Although he is wary of empty theatricality and legal fictions, which unnecessarily complicate people's lives and turn them into shows, he does embrace the ways of treating theatricality as a means towards authenticity.

IV. ACCLAIMING FEMALE PERFORMANCES IN THE SENSATION NOVEL

In the 1860s, when the British law still denied wives independent identities, sensation novelists provided their female characters with the creative freedom to re-invent themselves under different names and personas and, as such, more effectively challenge their dependent roles as wives. Under the law, upon marriage a woman “became a feme covert, a hidden person sunk into and merged with the personality of her husband”; she could not acquire property and had no civil rights to assert.¹ The sensation novel challenged such a fixed model of married identity as an idealistic aspiration rendered as both unethical and unrealistic by uncontrollable, psychological drives and complicated external circumstance of many women. By elevating stage actresses and transgressive women to the roles of Victorian heroines, as well as encouraging the liberal use of costume and makeup, the sensation novel embraced theatricality as a way of exposing the falsity of many social and legal norms. Although the sensation novel distinguishes between noble and ignoble performances, and acknowledges the limitations of all performance, it does embrace theatricality as a mode of exposing and circumventing marriage law, which disadvantages women.

One reason why the sensation novel challenged marriage law so effectively is because, as P. D. Edwards asserts, it discussed “all sorts of forbidden passions, especially female passions,” and presented sensational themes (such as arson, deception, bigamy, and madness) “acted out in the most ordinary and respectable social settings.”² Although

¹ Joan Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 2.

² P. D., Edwards, “Sensation Novels,” *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Sally Mitchell (New York: Garland, 1988), 703.

in 1863 Henry Mansel dismissed sensation novels as the sordid genre that feeds “a diseased appetite,”³ in the 1860s, sensation novels enjoyed much popularity among the readerships of different social classes.⁴ Their portrayal of the 1850s and 1860s marriage as the frightening site of conflict, crime, and confusion, effectively challenged the privileged status of marital love in both Victorian law and culture, and advocated on behalf of women by highlighting the complicated circumstances that shaped their transgressive thoughts and feelings. Although Melynda Huskey argues that sensation novels, such as *Lady Audley’s Secret*, warned the earnest Victorian reader against “the bewitching arts” of wicked women, the novels generally portrayed transgressive women in a sympathetic manner.⁵ Even if the sensation novel heroine is deceptive and transgressive, she is also victimized, at least partially relatable, as well as resourceful. By characterizing women in such a complex way and by dramatizing the disasters that befall them, the sensation novel elicits empathy from its readers for the fallen female characters.

The traditional scholarship on the sensation novel, which includes the feminist critics of the 1990s, such as Ann Cvetkovich, Lyn Pykett, and Pamela Gilbert, continues to inspire discussions of how sensation writers presented female characters in complex ways and how they challenged Victorian law’s one-dimensional view of married women and their realities. However, such scholarship is largely silent on how theatricality

³ H. L. Mansel, “Sensation Novels,” *Quarterly Review*, 113, no. 226 (April 1863): 483.

⁴ W. Fraser Rae famously said that in 1860s sensation novels, sometimes referred to as “the literature of the Kitchen,” became “the favorite reading of the Drawing room.” See “Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon,” *North British Review* 43 (September 1865): 204. Lyn Pykett stresses that one of the reasons for the popularity of the sensation novel was its ability to combine “realism and romance, the exotic and the everyday, the gothic and the domestic.” For example, sensation novels were often inspired by contemporary newspaper reports of real crimes, including the murder trial of Madeline Smith who, in 1857, poisoned her lover by putting arsenic in his cocoa. See “Collins and the Sensation Novel,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 51-52.

⁵ Melynda Huskey, “No Name: Embodying the Sensation Heroine,” *Victorian Newsletter* 82 (Fall 1992): 6.

provided a means of circumventing unjust marriage law. This chapter remedies this deficiency by analyzing how sensation fiction advocates for transgressive women by acclaiming their performances. Although my argument builds upon the scholarly framework mentioned above, which emphasizes how the sensation novel redefined a Victorian heroine as an active agent in transgressing Victorian marriage law, I focus on the sensation novel's appropriation of theatrical elements, such as costume and identity changes, as the most successful means of circumventing such law.

This discussion includes two novels by Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (1859) and *No Name* (1862), as well as two novels by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863). On the one hand, these four popular sensation novels differ in their themes and presentations of the female heroines. As Laurie Garrison rightly comments, *The Woman in White*, which focuses on an evil husband trying to stage his wife's death in order to inherit her money, has little in common with *Lady Audley's Secret*, in which an abandoned wife stages her own death and reinvents herself under a new persona in order to attract a new rich husband.⁶ On the other hand, the four novels form an intertextual conversation with one another by featuring female characters who undergo some variation of the same transformation: a victim of unfair marriage laws circumvents those laws through a theatrical means. For example, as Lyn Pykett aptly remarks, Magdalen in *No Name* is a heroine "who combines the roles of Marian Halcombe and Laura Fairlie" from *The Woman in White*.⁷ She is even more independent than Marian, becoming a professional actress to escape her legally-

⁶ Laurie Garrison, *Science, Sexuality and Sensation Novels: Pleasures of the Senses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 1.

⁷ Lyn Pykett, "Collins and the Sensation Novel," 59.

disadvantaged, petticoat existence and to correct injustice. Yet, like Laura, in the end, she “collapses under the weight of circumstances” and must be rescued by a good husband.⁸ Unlike Laura or Magdalen, Lady Audley does not have a husband to rescue her, so she relies on her own ingenuity in playing various roles to protect herself against the marriage laws that work against her. Aurora Floyd, who shares Lady Audley’s strength and independence, is saved by a good marriage, accepting the conventions of society she has rejected as a young woman. In the end, none of these heroines can escape the legal and social norms completely. However, they still take active roles in challenging the unjust laws, which deny them divorce from husbands who neglected or abused them, and disadvantaged them economically. The four novels also imply that the Victorian marriage laws, based on certain fictions, can and should be successfully challenged through theatrical manipulation.

Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon appear together in this chapter for the following reasons. First, both novelists were passionate about theater and infused their novel writing with such passion. As Jim Davis reflects, Collins “liked the theater, wrote plays and published highly theatrical novels, many of which he adapted for the stage, and his engagement with the theater spanned the whole of his writing life.”⁹ Braddon worked as an actress for years to support herself and her mother because her parents separated when she was only five.¹⁰ Second, both authors had unconventional romantic

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Davis also stresses that Collins “had been a keen theater-goer since visiting the Paris theaters in the 1840s.” See “Collins and the Theater,” *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 168.

¹⁰ Heidi J. Holder stresses that Braddon performed many roles “from melodrama to farce,” appearing “in the regional theaters at Brighton, Hull, and Beverley in the 1850s under the stage name Mary [or Mary Anne] Seyton. She also tried to develop a career as a playwright, and even saw “one of her plays staged in the West End: *Loves of Arcadia* at the Strand in 1860. See her chapter entitled “Misalliance: M.E.

relationships. Collins lived with Caroline Graves and her daughter Harriet after 1859, but around 1864 he also cohabitated with Martha Rudd and supported the three illegitimate children she bore him.¹¹ Not only did Collins assume the pseudonym of William Dawson to provide for the children, but his loved ones also often had to assume alternate identities to avoid scandal.¹² Although Braddon and John Maxwell married in 1874 after his first wife had died in a mental asylum, for many years they lived outside wedlock, with Braddon acting as an informal stepmother to Maxwell's five children and bearing him four illegitimate children.¹³ Cohabiting outside of marriage, they also often had to act in a manner that helped them prove their respectability to others, such as when addressing at least three false newspaper notices of their marriage.¹⁴ While Collins and Braddon's unconventional romantic choices did not mean that either author advocated the complete abolition of marriage, their domestic arrangements put them at odds with mid-Victorian, middle-class morality and forced them to rely on performance when facing social opprobrium.

Braddon's Writings for the Stage" in *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context.*, eds. Marlene Tromp, Pamela K. Gilbert and Aeron Haynie (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 165.

¹¹ In *No Name* Collins says that illegitimate children are "like carrion to the winds" because the law not only denies them rights, but also deprives them of any legal identity. See *No Name* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 245. Peter Ackroyd also states that when Collins's first child, Marian Dawson, was born to Martha Rudd, the novelist turned himself into William Dawson, barrister-at-law, and started paying regular monthly allowance of twenty pounds to Mrs. Dawson. He also wrote a will that would include all of his children. As such, he had accepted "the appurtenances of married life without the ultimate declaration." See Ackroyd's *Wilkie Collins* (New York: Doubleday, 2012), 174.

¹² For example, during the late 1850s, the time when Collins worked on *The Woman in White*, the local census listed Caroline's daughter, Harriet or "Carrie" Graves, as a house servant named "Harriet Montague." As Ackroyd explains, the subterfuge may have been designed to placate Collins' conservative landlord. See Ackroyd's *Wilkie Collins*, 113–14.

¹³ Natalie Schroeder and Ronald A. Schroeder, *From Sensation to Society: Representations of Marriage in the Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon 1862–1866* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006), 21.

¹⁴ Schroeder and Schroeder, 21, citing *The Literary Lives of Mary Elizabeth Braddon: A Study of Her Life and Work* by Jennifer Carnell (Hastings: Sensation Press, 2000), 170–71.

In the four novels discussed in this chapter, both authors emphasize that theatricality is an effective means of challenging the institution of marriage, as marriage encompasses a certain degree of performance itself. For example, both Collins and Braddon stress that Victorian wives are expected to play the social roles of ladies and domestic angels. They argue such roles are no less performative than those of transgressive women who use theatricality to assert their rights under the law. Since the very institution of marriage is performative in nature, both novelists elevate the status of actresses, such as Magdalen in *No Name* and Eliza in *Aurora Floyd*, suggesting that their stage skills are useful, and even necessary, to navigate Victorian society and marriage, which preoccupy themselves with external appearances and play-acting.

Yet neither Collins nor Braddon applaud all performance indiscriminately and instead distinguish between various performances depending on the ends they intend to accomplish. For example, in *The Woman in White*, Collins distinguishes between the ignoble performance of Sir Percival, Laura Fairlie's evil husband who uses deception and identity swap to swindle his wife out of her money, and the noble performance of Laura's sister, Marian, who uses costume changes to discover Sir Percival's evil plans, which she thwarts. Collins also stresses that quiet, unceremonious weddings are often no less performative than the theatrical ones because they can conceal the furtive, insincere intentions of one of the spouses. Again, Collins condones Magdalen's unceremonious wedding to Noel Vanstone in *No Name* as a useful masquerade designated to regain her family's inheritance. However, he criticizes Sir Percival's quiet wedding to Laura designed to steal her money in *The Woman in White*, which implies that we should scrutinize the intentions of the performer, rather than the performance itself. Similarly, in

Lady Audley's Secret, Braddon implies that Lady Audley's continuous identity changes lead to her impulsive transgressions, which at times may go too far.

Both novelists also recognize that all performances, even the noble ones, have their limitations, as they cannot last forever and they entail many sacrifices. They highlight those limitations to stress that theatricality is not a long-term solution to unjust laws, but rather the means highlighting their injustice, which may inspire actual legal reform. Nevertheless, by elevating transgressive and deceptive female characters to the roles of heroines, both Collins and Braddon raise many troubling questions about the ideological and material organization of Victorian marriage, such as why the marriage law offers little protections to women neglected by their husbands. Even if their transgressive heroines are incarcerated, go mad, or marry, they still stress a need to make marriage laws more representative of their interests.

By embracing theatricality and performance as means of circumventing marriage laws, Collins and Braddon highlight the limitations of many nineteenth-century legal reforms affecting women.¹⁵ Their novels illustrate what Kieran Dolin calls the Victorians' "acceptance that the ends and means of the law are under human control," and that, under such an imperfect control, the law often causes harm rather than serves as

¹⁵ In *The Nineteenth-Century Sensation Novel* Lyn Pykett observes that the sensation novel's "greatest prominence was the decade which immediately followed the campaigns and debates leading up to the Divorce Act of 1857 . . . the 'surplus women' controversy as well as the associated campaigns for educational and employment opportunities for women." (Horndon: Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 2011), 71. Carolyn Dever also stresses that Wilkie Collins's novels specifically "probe the legal boundaries of the marriage contract in the period that witnessed the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act (1857), the Married Women's Property Bill (1856), and the 1868 Royal Commission attempt to regularize English, Irish, and Scottish marriage laws." See her chapter entitled "The Marriage Plot and Its Alternatives" in *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 112.

“an effective instrument of justice.”¹⁶ Both authors explore the benefits of the legal system, to the extent that it can bolster objectivity and fairness, but they also criticize its limitations. For example, they both emphasize that the male interpretation of circumstantial evidence regarding a woman’s story does not always render a complete picture of her case. Collins, specifically, allows for the use of non-legal means of discovery, such as dreams, premonitions, and hunches. Moreover, both novelists rebuke the use of empty legal formalities that fail to signify authentic commitments or otherwise represent reality.¹⁷ While neither novelist rejects the marriage law altogether, they both criticize the law’s focus on external appearances, which often deceive. In summary, both Collins and Braddon offer critiques of Victorian marriage, even if they advocate for sensible reform rather than revolution. The plots of their novels, which include and even applaud theatrical weddings, false identities, costume changes, and alternative fictions, condone performance as a useful means of social survival and of fighting for more just laws, especially for women. Although neither of them undermines the institution of marriage, they challenge the laws underlying it as unjust and near-sighted.

¹⁶ Kieran Dolin, *Fiction and the Law: Legal Discourse in Victorian and Modernist Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 79. See also Jan-Melissa Schramm’s argument that the novel presents an alternative “in which legal norms can be seen as mere propositions rather than certainties” in “Is Literature More Ethical Than Law? Fitzjames Stephen and Literary Responses to the Advent of Full Legal Representation for Felons,” *Law and Literature: Current Legal Issues*, vol. 2, ed. Michael Freeman and Andrew Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 432.

¹⁷ For instance, in *The Woman in White* Collins reveals the ways in which Sir Percival’s attempted forgery of the marriage register could render him legitimate and, as such, the rightful owner of Laura Fairlie’s inheritance. In *Aurora Floyd* Braddon discusses the ways in which a marriage certificate may be both a meaningful symbol of one’s genuine commitment and a meaningless piece of paper, which merely purports to represent marriage.

***The Woman in White* (1860)**

Wilkie Collins's gravestone at Kensal Green identifies him as "author of *The Woman in White* and other works of fiction."¹⁸ My discussion begins with the novel for which Collins is best remembered because it presents performance as both a means of manipulating marriage laws that deprive married women of their property and as a means of exposing such conspiracy. The novel's villain, Sir Percival Glyde, takes advantage of the law's preoccupation with physical appearances by staging his wife Laura's death by switching her identity with the terminally-ill Anne Catherick, which would allow him to inherit the former's money. He also attempts to forge a marriage register to hide his parents' attempted bigamy and his own illegitimacy, which would prevent him from inheriting Laura's money. Collins condemns this kind of deception, which is designed to cause evil, by depicting Sir Percival as a clear villain. However, the novelist embraces other kinds of performances, such as Marian's theatrical disguise to spy on Sir Percival, as a means of unfolding the truth about his evil plans towards her sister Laura. In other words, Collins distinguishes between ignoble and noble performances, embracing the latter.

When discussing the performativity of weddings, Collins implicitly criticizes his friend Charles Dickens's preference for quiet weddings. Such a critique may have stemmed from Collins's personal experience with Dickens, who cautioned against excessive theatricality of weddings in his novels (see Chapter III), but acted with a certain theatrical flair at his own daughter's wedding. At the time of publishing *The Woman in White* (first serially in 1859 and next in a book form in 1860), Collins

¹⁸ Ackroyd, *Wilkie Collins*, 120.

witnessed his younger brother, Charles Collins, wed Dickens's daughter, Kate, at Gad's Hill Place on July 17, 1860.¹⁹ Dickens had qualms about marrying off Kate to Charles Collins, in part because he considered Charles "weak-willed and dilatory."²⁰ Contrary to his novels' depiction of quiet, simple weddings, Dickens "put on a showy wedding at Gad's" for his daughter, which ended even more theatrically when he wept into Kate's wedding dress, blaming himself for the marriage.²¹

Collins also argues that—contrary to Dickens's assertions about the value of quiet weddings—such weddings often highlight the furtiveness of the parties' ulterior motives. In addition to connoting insincerity, quiet weddings may denote calamity and be as performative as the theatrical ones. For example, the readers of *The Woman in White* never read about Laura Fairlie's wedding to the mercenary Sir Percival. Unlike Jane Eyre, Laura herself does not talk about her off-stage wedding, either—as if her marriage deprived her not only of her money but also of her voice. Instead, Laura's sister, Marian, simply recounts how Laura is given away by a family friend, Mr. Arnold, at Limmeridge Church, and "not one of the neighbors is to be invited to the ceremony."²² Such a quick, quiet wedding connotes the eeriness of a funeral. Marian states that writing about Laura's marriage is "like writing of her death."²³ Indeed, the church grounds are both the site of Laura's wedding and her funeral grounds, given—shortly after the wedding—Sir Percival switches his bride's body with Anne Catherick and erects Laura's tombstone in the

¹⁹ Ibid., 114. According to Ackroyd, Collins wrote the last episode of *The Woman in White* "just nine days after the wedding."

²⁰ Ibid., 114.

²¹ Claire Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 318.

²² Collins, *The Woman in White* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 187.

²³ Ibid., 185.

churchyard. In other words, he quickly turns his wedding with Laura into a staged funeral. Therefore, Laura's wedding, though quiet, is also theatrical.

Notwithstanding his critique of ignoble deception, such as Sir Percival's manipulation of his marriage to Laura, Collins embraces theatricality in dreams and premonitions as a way of unfolding the truth. Shortly before Laura's actual wedding, Marian intercepts an anonymous letter, which contains a dream vision of Laura's wedding to Sir Percival. In the dream, the letter writer stands behind altar rails in a church, watching Laura walk down the aisle in her white dress. The wedding chapel is filled with rays of lights, highlighting the seeming brightness of this blissful wedding ceremony. However, as soon as the rays touch the groom's chest, they illuminate the repellent darkness of the groom's heart.

I looked along the two rays of light; and I saw down into his inmost heart. It was black as night; and on it were written, in the red flaming letters which are the handwriting of the fallen angel, "Without pity and without remorse. He has strewed with misery the paths of others, and he will live to strew with misery the path of this woman by his side."²⁴

During this morbid revelation, the disturbed clergyman cannot find the marriage service in his prayer book, and the whole wedding falls apart. While the dream wedding is quiet because it features no dialogue, it is also theatrical because it features dramatic visual symbols and messages that remind of stage props.

Collins's theatrical dream is a form of truth, which exposes the fiction of the law that falsely suggests Sir Percival will protect Laura in marriage. Although the wedding dream is narrated by the dreamer/letter writer and not acted out on stage, it conveys theatrical visual effects that expose Sir Percival's evil intentions towards Laura. For

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

example, the vivid display of the light rays and the red flaming letters on the groom's chest reveal Sir Percival's sinister character by illuminating the darkness of his heart. Consequently, the theatrical wedding dream, though a kind of fiction, constitutes a meaningful revelation about Sir Percival's evil intentions towards his bride, which results in saving Laura's life.

The wedding dream also exemplifies the way in which, according to Lyn Pykett, the sensation novel "domesticates the Gothic and makes use of the natural supernatural."²⁵ The uncanny dream vision represents Marian and Walter's unconscious fears about Laura's wedding through a familial event, a wedding ceremony, which turns into a nightmare. By embracing the dream as an important means in the discovery process, Collins suggests that what propels one to effect justice is greater than one's knowledge of pure facts; even one's mere hunch that something is wrong needs to be addressed. The novel continues that theme when, soon after Walter learns that Mr. Gilmore, the Fairlies' attorney, is preparing Laura's marriage settlement, he feels "a jealous despair."²⁶ It is such an instantaneous, passionate feeling that inspires him to take a second look at the anonymous letter, which exposes Sir Percival's villainy. Unlike Mr. Gilmore, who takes for granted Sir Percival's good reputation, Marian and Walter investigate him beyond common appearances. Such an examination leads them to find the truth behind Sir Percival's rush to marry Laura. As such, their feelings, visions, and hunches become the means to saving Laura and her family.

Highlighting the importance of non-legal evidentiary tools (such as dreams, hunches, and premonitions), Collins reveals his ambivalence about the value of the legal

²⁵ Lyn Pykett, "Collins and the Sensation Novel," 56.

²⁶ Collins, *The Woman in White*, 82.

process as a way of discovering the truth of a matter. On the one hand, by structuring the novel as a trial procedure and discussing it in legal terms, he expresses his life-long interest in the law and implies that the law may help to ensure fairness and accuracy if applied correctly.²⁷ For example, the opening pages of *The Woman in White* stress that “no circumstance of importance . . . shall be related on hearsay evidence.”²⁸ That is why Collins unfolds the case against Sir Percival through a series of first-person witness testimonies by multiple characters, including an impersonal tombstone. As Ackroyd argues, such a narrative, resembling a criminal trial, creates the appearance of a greater objectivity and “encourages suspense and speculation,” which makes the reader question the difference between appearance and reality.²⁹ Therefore, Collins acknowledges that the legal means of discovery can be both fair and entertaining. On the other hand, Collins also stresses that “the machinery of the Law” cannot be completely “depended on.”³⁰ Comparing the law to “the pre-engaged servant of the long purse,” the novelist implies that the law is subject to manipulation.³¹ Therefore, even as Collins employs legal procedures, he underscores its imperfections. After all, witness testimonies depend on credibility determinations and still present only a partial perspective.

Pointing out the imperfections of the law, Collins stresses that the law, like theater, concerns itself with external appearances and often relies too heavily on perfunctory formalities as the absolute indicators of validity. In Kucich’s words, the law

²⁷ Though he never formally practiced law, Collins was a trained lawyer. In 1846 he began studying law and in 1851 passed the bar. See Tim Dolin, “Collins’s Career and the Visual Arts,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 13.

²⁸ Collins, *The Woman in White*, 9.

²⁹ Ackroyd, *Wilkie Collins*, 117.

³⁰ Collins, *The Woman in White*, 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*

in Collins is “an erratic institution . . . susceptible to the kinds of accidents and manipulation that render it an unreliable index to social legitimacy.”³² Such a critique of the law is particularly evident in the Collins’s treatment of legal documents. To the extent the witness testimonies should be believable performances emphasizing the facts, the official character of legal documents automatically makes readers treat them as objective, uncontroverted evidence, uncolored by human experiences and biases. Yet, like Dickens, Collins warns us that legal documents often only purport to certify the truth. Had Sir Percival succeeded in his forgery of his parents’ marriage certificate in an attempt to conceal his own illegitimacy, his few false scribbles in the marriage register could have invalidated his mother’s first Irish wedding and transformed him into a legitimate baron. Not only does Sir Percival use the legal fiction of his origins to render himself eligible to inherit Laura’s money upon her death, but he also uses an official death certificate to stage’s Laura’s death. As Walter Hartright puts it:

In the eye of reason and of law, in the estimation of relatives and friends, according to every received formality of civilized society, “Laura, Lady Glyde,” lay buried with her mother in Limmeridge churchyard . . . Dead to her uncle, who had renounced her; dead to the servants of the house, who had failed to recognize her; dead to the persons in authority, who had transmitted her fortune to her husband and her aunt; dead to my mother and my sister, who believed me to be the dupe of an adventuress and the victim of a fraud; socially, morally, legally—dead. And yet alive!³³

Even the tombstone, erected to “the Memory of Laura, Lady Glyde, wife of Sir Percival Glyde,” creates the appearance that Laura’s sham death is factual.³⁴ The fact that Laura

³² John Kucich, *The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 98.

³³ Collins, *The Woman in White*, 413.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 405.

appears dead under the law, when she is alive, undermines the authority of the law as a means to discover the truth.

Collins also suggests that, when we fail to question the law's authority, criminal actors can justify their wrongdoing by supporting their actions with the law. For example, Count Fosco, Sir Percival's villainous friend and co-conspirator, vehemently objects to having his wife, Madame Fosco, witness the signing of the settlement between Sir Percival and Laura. Fosco justifies his objection by arguing that the witnesses' opinions must be independent of each other, and—under the legal doctrine of coverture—Madame Fosco's legal persona and opinion is the same as his.³⁵ However, Fosco's explanation for his objection is pre-textual because it is not the real reason why he does not want Madame Fosco (former Eleanor Fairlie) to sign the settlement. He does not want her to sign it because her signature might affect her own inheritance from the Fairlie family. Nevertheless, Fosco's reference to Sir William Blackstone's legal philosophy makes his objection appear legitimate, even if his justification for it is insincere, because he invokes a legal authority.

By stressing Count Fosco's disingenuous deference to the law, as well as his Italianesque flamboyance, Collins seems to connect performance and villainy. Irene Morra suggests that Fosco, who attends operas and ostentatiously plays excerpts from Rossini on the piano, smacks of stage artifice, which the English find foreign and suspicious.³⁶ Although Marian feels temporarily attracted to Fosco's theatrical forcefulness, in general, his emotional expressiveness makes him ludicrous and

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 242.

³⁶ Irene Morra, "Wilkie Collins, George Eliot and Italian Opera," *Essays in Criticism*, 57, no. 3 (July 2007): 217–36.

untrustworthy. In fact, Philip Fairlie removes his beloved sister Eleanor, later Madame Fosco, from his will precisely because she had chosen to marry the untoward count. In sum, Count Fosco's performativity is ignoble because he uses it towards dishonorable ends of controlling his wife and her family's inheritance, as well as helping Sir Percival to do the same with Laura.

However, Collins also condones certain noble characters' engagement in play-acting when such performances serve noble means. For example, the novelist represents Walter Hartright's deception as chivalry when he helps Marian to save Laura's life. When Marian guesses that Walter's honesty will make it difficult for him to deny his feelings for Laura (after her engagement to Sir Percival), she insists that Walter leave the Fairlie household without letting anybody know the reason why. Walter must "assure [Marian] that she might depend on [his] acting in the strictest accordance with her wishes" because his play-acting is imperative to their mutual success of uncovering Sir Percival's conspiracy.³⁷ Walter also saves the "woman in white" by telling the police that he never saw her, as the woman who passed him wore "a lavender-colored gown."³⁸ Since Walter's white lies are innocent and noble, they demonstrate that Collins distinguishes between the performances of villains and heroes, embracing the latter.

Similarly, Collins's focus on costume changes identifies the difference between noble and ignoble uses of sartorial disguise. As the historian Joan Perkin asserts, "the period of 1866 to 1880 was the golden age of the dressmaker's art."³⁹ *The Woman in White* seems to anticipate the late Victorian fascination with female costumes by

³⁷ Collins, *The Woman in White*, 75.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁹ Perkin, *Victorian Women*, 96.

highlighting how the female attire in the novel serves both symbolic and narrative functions. The title of the novel recalls various visual associations based on costumes—from a white wedding to a white skeleton symbolizing death (both of which seem appropriate given that Laura Fairlie Glyde appears dead for most of the novel). The white clothing shared between Laura and the terminally-ill Anne Catherick is not coincidental since we learn that Anne (the “woman in white”) received some of Laura’s “old white frocks and white hats” as a little girl.⁴⁰ The first time Walter sees Laura, she wears “snowy muslin dress—her face prettily framed by the white folds of the handkerchief which she had tied under her chin.”⁴¹ In other words, Laura looks very much like the mysterious woman whom Walter sees at the beginning of the novel— “the living image...of the woman in white.”⁴² However, the eponymous woman in white is also a veiled woman. When Walter tries “to lift the veil that hung between this woman and [him],” he cannot do so, which complicates his task of thwarting Sir Percival’s sordid plans.⁴³ As such, on the one hand, the “whiteness” of clothing conflates the two women (Anne and Laura) into one impersonal figure, which Sir Percival uses to his advantage in his conspiracy to stage Laura’s death.

However, Collins also stresses that women’s unique ability to metamorphose and assume a new identity with a simple costume change empowers them to circumvent their legal and social roles as passive participants. For example, Marian’s metamorphosis from a proper lady into a spy allows her to save her sister, Laura, from Sir Percival. Spying on him, Marian stands on the roof, hiding herself under her traveling cloak, with a hood

⁴⁰ Collins, *The Woman in White*, 60.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 28.

around her face. Like a stage actress, she must undergo “a complete change in [her] dress,” which involves removing “the white and cumbersome parts of [her] underclothing” and putting on “a petticoat of dark flannel.”⁴⁴ Such a costume change makes her unrecognizable and allows her to overhear Sir Percival’s discussion about his true intentions toward Laura. In the end, Marian’s disguise helps her to save her sister from a villain.

Collins condones Marian’s performance as the necessary means to discover the truth and do justice when the law fails to shelter women from dishonest and abusive husbands. Not only is the legal process an imperfect tool for discovery, but marriage law makes women substantively dependent on their husbands for both physical protection and money while failing to account for the husbands’ potential abuses of such power. For example, Collins criticizes the thorny merits of married women’s property law by presenting Count Fosco as a puppeteer performing his questionable principles with a little mouse, which serves as the metaphor for both female domesticity and economic disadvantage. He says:

[Y]ou sell yourself for gold to a man you don’t care for; and all your friends rejoice over you; and a minister of public worship sanctions the base horror of the vilest of all human bargains.⁴⁵

Fosco’s mouse skit and his warning that society forces us to “accept the mask for the true face,” exposes the notion that Victorian married women were disadvantaged under the law.⁴⁶ Although putting husbands in charge of their wives’ property was based on the assumption that they would also take care of their wives, in reality and under the law,

⁴⁴ Ibid., 319.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 235–36.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

men could deprive their wives of their property upon marriage.⁴⁷ In the novel, the law allows Sir Percival to enjoy Laura's money through his marriage to her, but it fails to protect Laura against his greed and physical abuse. For example, he drugs Laura and conveys her to a mental asylum under the false identity of Anne who succumbs to illness and is buried as Laura. By staging Laura's death Sir Percival attempts to gain Laura's family fortune, which under the law passes to him if Laura dies without leaving an heir. Therefore, when Marian realizes that the law is useless to save her sister from Sir Percival's sinister machinations, she finds alternative means, such as play-acting and costume disguises, to expose his villainy.

The novel also contrasts Marian's performance, which is designed to save her sister from an abusive marriage, with the socially-acceptable performance of respectable wives playing a role in their marriages. Kucich comments that "bourgeois ideology has always contrasted its 'natural' reserve—a sign of inner depth or value—to the ostentatious self-display of the lower or the upper classes, which is labeled either vulgarity or theatricality."⁴⁸ Collins dismantles such bourgeois ideology by showing how marriage transforms women, especially those in higher social classes, into passive creatures who lose their identities. For example, Laura's aunt, Eleanor Fairlie, changes from a light-hearted and talkative spinster into the quiet Madame Fosco, who looks like "a faithful dog."⁴⁹ Marian describes Madame Fosco as follows:

The hideously ridiculous love-locks which used to hang on either side of her face, are now replaced by stiff little rows of very short curls, of the sort one sees in old-fashioned wigs. A plain, matronly cap covers her head, and makes her look, for

⁴⁷ Until the Married Women's Property Act of 1870, husbands were the legal owners of their wives' money and property. However, under the philosophy of benevolent paternalism, the husbands were supposed to love, cherish, and support their wives, financially and otherwise.

⁴⁸ Kucich, *The Power of Lies*, 93–94.

⁴⁹ Collins, *The Woman in White*, 216.

the first time in her life since I remember her, like a decent woman...Clad in quiet black or grey gowns, made high round the throat—dresses that she would have laughed at, or screamed at, as the whim of the moment inclined her, in her maiden days—she sits speechless in corners; her dry white hands (so dry that the pores of her skin look chalky) incessantly engaged, either in monotonous embroidery work, or in rolling up endless cigarettes for the Count's own particular smoking.⁵⁰

Although Madame Fosco's matronly persona is just an image, hiding "something dangerous in her nature," marriage forces her to mask her inner self, permanently turning her into a puppet, which looks and acts in accordance with her husband's liking.⁵¹

Madame Fosco's apparent reserve is a disguise every bit as theatrical as the stage acting of Magdalen Vanstone, the heroine of *No Name*, to which I turn next. The important difference between the two women is that, while Madame Fosco's acting imprisons her within the straight-laced convention of a Victorian wife, Magdalen's acting enables her to control her own future. This comparison illustrates that Collins sees theatricality as inextricably linked with courtship and marriage. However, he implicitly encourages women to appropriate that theatricality to improve their social, legal and economic situation.

***No Name* (1862)**

Unlike the victimized Laura Fairlie and Madame Fosco, Magdalen Vanstone, the heroine of Collins's *No Name*, uses performance to control her own destiny. Magdalen's quiet wedding to her cousin Noel is purposely rushed and unceremonious because it is part of the heroine's plan to regain her inheritance. Magdalen's quick and quiet wedding upsets most of her friends who view such a lack of ceremony as improper. For example,

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Mrs. Wragge laments that the wedding is “at a day’s notice!” and that there was “not a single new dress ordered for anybody, the bride included!”⁵² In fact, she is so distraught over the lack of proper nuptial decorum that she thinks “the world had come to an end.”⁵³ Magdalen’s house-servant shares Mrs. Wragge’s horror over the unceremonious wedding by saying:

Did you ever hear of a young lady being married, without a single new thing to her back? No wedding veil, and no wedding breakfast, and no wedding favors for the servants. It’s flying in the face of Providence—that’s what I say.⁵⁴

Magdalen’s unceremonious wedding may challenge social expectations but it is part of the heroine’s intended masquerade, which allows her to protect property.

Describing Magdalen’s wedding, Collins not only reiterates that quiet weddings can be theatrical in nature, as he demonstrated in *The Woman in White*, but that theatricality can be a means of circumventing the law, which deprives Magdalen of her inheritance. Magdalen reinvents herself under the new identity of Miss Bygrave in order to marry her cousin Noel Vanstone and gain access to her family’s money after the marriage.⁵⁵ Unlike Jane Eyre, who does not know she is about to enter into a bigamous union, or David Copperfield, who weds Dora as if in a dream, Magdalen seems in control of her wedding. Fully aware of why she is about to marry her cousin, she stands before the altar, “with tearless resignation . . . as if all the sources of human emotion were frozen up within her.”⁵⁶ Her apparent lack of emotion while marrying her cousin by pretending

⁵² Collins, *No Name*, 410.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 412.

⁵⁵ After the sudden death of her parents, Magdalen Vanstone and her sister Norah discover that their parents had not been legally married—the fact, which invalidates the will that provided the Vanstone inheritance to the sisters. As such, under the law, the money intended for Magdalen and Norah becomes the property of their uncle and his son, Magdalen’s cousin, Noel Vanstone.

⁵⁶ Collins, *No Name*, 418.

to be someone else is an act, but she is determined to do what it takes to receive the financial inheritance denied to her by the law.

Collins justifies Magdalen's nuptial fraud in two ways. First, Noel Vanstone also deceives others in the novel. For example, he sends Mrs. Lecount, his domineering housekeeper who disapproved of his marriage to Magdalen, on a false errand to Zurich, so that she cannot oppose the marriage on his wedding day. Even a swindler, such as Captain Wragge, secretly muses over Noel's lack of inhibitions to lie to a woman who "had served him faithfully."⁵⁷ As such, it is hard to feel sympathy for Noel when Magdalen deceives him about her identity because he himself has been dishonest with other people. Moreover, Magdalen deceives Noel to marry into his money, which she is morally entitled to given it is the money earned by her father. Noel, on the other hand, has no good cause to deceive Mrs. Lecount, other than he simply wants to eliminate her objections when they are inconvenient to him.

Second and more important, Collins encourages Magdalen's nuptial fraud because the law had defrauded her of her family's inheritance by failing to legitimize her parents' authentic commitment to each other. Under the law, the hapless first marriage of Andrew Vanstone, Magdalen's father, to his American wife (who accepted money to separate from him), is more valid than his life-long romantic commitment to Magdalen's mother. Although Magdalen's parents dismiss Andrew's first marriage as "a legal mockery," such a marriage is the reason Andrew's beloved daughters are rendered illegitimate and become not only penniless but also nameless.⁵⁸ Unlike the law, which denies her any legitimate existence as a Vanstone, Magdalen finds that theater helps her to survive her

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

dire financial situation. Whether she plays the role of Miss Bygrave, Lucy the parlormaid, or Miss Garth, Magdalen's multiple disguises allow her to violate social mores and pursue her goal of regaining her family's name and money.

Magdalen's amateur and professional theatrical training enables her to manipulate marriage and inheritance laws in order to achieve the financial reckoning that she considers just. As a little girl, she treats acting as mere entertainment. Poking fun at the melodramatic foreign actress singing in a Beethoven's symphony, she grabs a table plate "to represent a sheet of music" and imitates "the unfortunate singer's grimaces and curtsying," entertaining the family.⁵⁹ As a young woman determined to recover her father's money, she perfects her acting on the professional stage. Although her stage-acting is a trade, it constitutes a valuable rehearsal to Magdalen's acting career. When she abandons her theatrical troupe, she still uses theatrical costumes and props to impersonate Miss Garth, her old governess. Transforming herself into an old lady, she uses "the wig; the eyebrows; the bonnet and veil; the cloak, padded inside to disfigure her back and shoulders; the paints and cosmetics used to age her face and alter her complexion."⁶⁰ Playing the role of Miss Garth lends Magdalen's acting a new meaning. Such a theatrical disguise extends beyond mere entertainment or trade and instead allows her to achieve her personal goal of becoming Mrs. Vanstone.

Collins stresses that Magdalen's performance is not that much different than the various social roles women play in courtship and marriage. For example, Magdalen teaches her housekeeper, Louisa, that being a lady is largely a matter of looking and acting like a lady. She says:

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

Shall I tell you what a lady is? A lady is a woman who wears a silk gown, and has a sense of her own importance. I shall put the gown on your back, and the sense in your head.⁶¹

Magdalen emphasizes that the society's preoccupation with appearances allows women to manipulate their social roles and, as such, control their futures. If a simple costume can turn a servant into a lady, Magdalen can dress as a woman who can marry her cousin and regain her family's inheritance.

Despite Collins's elevation of performance as a valuable means of empowering women in society, he recognizes the limitations of every performance. No matter how well Magdalen disguises herself as Miss Garth, her makeup, which "succeeded by gas-light, failed by day."⁶² Even with a special veil designed to cover Magdalen's face, Mrs. Lecount can see through her disguise calling it "a clever masquerade."⁶³ As such, Magdalen risks being unmasked at any moment and, moreover, her plan to regain her fortune also depends entirely on her ability to pretend that she is someone other than herself. When Captain Wragge, her uncle, wants to sign a contract with Magdalen before he manages her as an actress, she refuses to do so, showing "a morbid distrust of writing her name at the bottom of any document."⁶⁴ While Magdalen's disguise allows her to start a new life and control her destiny outside the law, it forces her to renounce her identity and live in constant fear of being unmasked. Eventually, this lifestyle tires her so much that she attempts suicide by taking laudanum.

Moreover, although she finally fulfills her plan to marry Noel Vanstone under a pseudonym, the marriage fixes Magdalen's identity as "Mrs. Vanstone," giving up her

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 503.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 217.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

freedom to act and making her dependent on her husband. She writes to the real Miss Garth: “You forget what wonders my wickedness has done for me. It has made Nobody’s Child, Somebody’s Wife.”⁶⁵ As a wife, Magdalen is still a person with no separate legal identity whose property is fully contingent on her husband’s will, which he changes under Mrs. Lecount’s pressure. Noel’s new will disinheriting Magdalen as his wife appears legitimate because, under the law, he has full control over their married property and because Mrs. Lecount performs requisite legal actions, which give the will the appearance of legitimacy. For example, she procures two witnesses to the will—even though they are two servants whom she fetches from her grounds. Justifying her actions with legal formalities, Mrs. Lecount creates a legal fiction that prevents Magdalen from inheriting her family’s money through her husband.

Although Magdalen’s performance has many limitations and fails to secure her family’s inheritance, Collins still rewards his heroine at the end of the novel. Not only does Magdalen finally marry Captain Kirke out of love, but her sister Norah inadvertently regains their family’s inheritance through her own marriage. Such an ending is somewhat ambivalent as it does not condemn Magdalen’s performance and proactivity while at the same time it suggests that women secure their happiness through traditional marriage. Given in the 1860s a divorce was not an option for most Victorian women in England (except under limited circumstances) and single women had very few options to support themselves financially outside of marriage, a woman like Magdalen must marry happily, if her story is to end happily. Nevertheless, by elevating Magdalen to the status of a

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 484.

heroine, Collins entertains the idea of a female character who transgresses social rules and expectations and finds empowerment through performance.

***Lady Audley's Secret* (1862)**

Mary Elizabeth Braddon, the famous female sensation novelist, could herself be a heroine in a sensation novel. Braddon's "bigamous" common-law marriage to Maxwell (while his legal wife was still alive), as well as the fact that she both acted on stage and wrote novels, violated marriage conventions and gender norms of Victorian society that idealized women as passive, domestic angels. Theater historian, Tracy C. Davis, describes a middle-class woman's decision to become an actress as "a version of the Fall from virtue."⁶⁶ She argues that, though in time, changing audience tastes and rising bourgeois theater attendance made women actors more acceptable, the "popular association of actresses and prostitutes," and the overall "prejudice" against actresses, continued throughout the century.⁶⁷ As such, Braddon was hardly perceived as a paragon of virtue by many of her contemporaries, even though she contributed to her family's income while bearing and raising children with Maxwell.

Perhaps the most scandalous aspect of Braddon's life was her writing, which elevated transgressive and conniving female characters to the status of heroines. In particular, the titular heroine of *Lady Audley's Secret* turns her life into a continuous theater scene, in which she recreates different names and identities in order to give herself a decent life, which both the law and society deny her. Unlike the soft and yielding heroines of Dickens or a more assertive but still good-natured heroines of

⁶⁶ Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 72.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

Collins, Lady Audley does not hesitate to use any means that would justify her goal of building a better life for herself. Abandoned by her husband, she leaves their little child behind, marries her second husband under a false identity, and then attempts to kill her first husband when he reappears in her life. She succeeds in her deception and wrongdoing for many years due to her ability to change her various personas like an actress—from a poor wife and mother, to a simple governess, to a wealthy lady. At one point, she even orchestrates her own death, reminding readers that women can be conniving, manipulative, deceptive, cold-hearted and—perhaps most importantly—as active as men in shaping their outcomes.

Touting the self-centered and deceptive nature of Lady Audley, Braddon warns her readers against turning Victorian wives into passive and decorative creatures. When Robert Audley, her second husband's nephew, first meets his aunt, Lady Audley, he admires her beauty, looking at her seated behind and almost indistinguishable from a cabinet of delicate opal china. Staring at her painting, Robert notices something dangerous in Lady Audley's beautiful face: "no one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid brightness to the blonde complexion, and a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes."⁶⁸ Viewing Lady Audley as a work of art may objectify her, but also aids her deception. Her outward beauty, which attracts men, is a kind of theatrical mask, hiding a more complex woman, which most men fail to see. Her second husband, Sir Michael Audley, enjoys watching his much younger, pretty wife, Lady Audley, playing the piano in the drawing-room till he falls asleep in his easy-chair, never expecting her to harbor any painful secrets. As long as she

⁶⁸ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 65.

meets the demands of her position as baronet's wife, being a sweet, lovely, childlike lady, there is no reason to suspect her of any evil. In summary, Braddon suggests that the Victorian perception of women as meek and passive both enables and fuels Lady Audley's deception.

Although Braddon does not condone her heroine's wrongdoing, she stresses that Lady Audley does not engage in deception to harm others. Rather, Braddon sees the heroine's performance as a necessary means to ensure her self-preservation. When Robert finally discovers the heroine's multi-transformations—from Helen Talboys, through Lucy Graham, to Lady Audley—he accuses her of being an “artful,” “bold,” and “wicked” woman who inflicted misery “upon the honest heart of the man she betrayed.”⁶⁹ However, such accusations miss the mark since neither his description of Lady Audley as “wicked” nor his estimation of her first husband as “honest” are fully accurate. Lady Audley defends herself, saying even her “worst wickedness” has never resulted from “deeply-laid plots” against others, but rather stemmed from “wild impulses” to protect herself against all the suffering she had to endure.⁷⁰ While confessing her crimes to Sir Michael, Lady Audley explains that her first husband, George, left her with an infant baby and a letter that said he was “going to the Antipodes to seek his fortune, and that he would never see [her] again until he was a rich man.”⁷¹ As such, Lady Audley's deception stems not from pure wickedness, but from a desire to survive. Even if her efforts to maintain deception go too far, initially she does not intend to harm anyone. Moreover, Robert's indictment of Lady Audley as deceitful is hypocritical, because—

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 300.

while accusing her of hiding her real identity—he eventually registers her in a mental asylum under a new name and a new identity: “Your name is Madam Taylor here,” he said. “I do not think you would wish to be known by your real name.”⁷² Consequently, Robert not only fails to understand the complexity of Lady Audley’s motivation for her deception, but also perpetuates the very deception he claims to condemn.

Robert’s inability to understand women like Lady Audley significantly weakens his investigative powers as well as his judgment. This example echoes Collins’s point about the limitations of legal means of discovery. As a barrister, Robert touts the power of circumstantial evidence “strong enough to hang a man.”⁷³ He is fascinated with the idea that seemingly unimportant clues, such as “a scrap of paper; a shred of some torn garment; the button off a coat; a word dropped incautiously from the over-cautious lips of guilt; the fragment of a letter; the shutting or opening of a door; a shadow on a window-blind” may lead an officer to solve a crime.⁷⁴ However, he forgets that circumstantial evidence still requires an interpretation of the various pieces of information that must be woven into a story through assumptions. As such, Robert’s focus on facts prevents him from resolving Lady Audley’s case. What he scribbles down in his “journal of facts” are only select pieces of evidence, which may be enough to compel Lady Audley to confess her crimes, but not enough to understand her story fully.⁷⁵ For example, biased against Lady Audley and rushing to convict her, Robert does not consider that his friend and her first husband, George, is indirectly responsible for her deception. In the end, the reader understands Lady Audley’s story, not due to Robert’s investigative work, but mainly

⁷² *Ibid.*, 332.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

because of her confession, which presents her actions more complexly than what Robert suggests.

Braddon exposes the shortcomings of Robert's investigative process while stressing the notion that one's blind reliance on circumstantial evidence can lead to incorrect and unjust conclusions. Robert's obsession with convicting Lady Audley using every clue he finds against her not only hampers the objectivity and accuracy of his investigation, but turns the pursuit into a witch-hunt. He has no interest in listening to Lady Audley's version of the story, which may produce some mitigating factors justifying her actions. By painting Robert as a "lazy, care-for-nothing fellow," living on his father's money, Braddon undermines the barrister's ability to conduct an intelligent and thorough analysis of Lady Audley's case.⁷⁶ Through his dogged determination to destroy his friend's wife, Robert exposes himself as a biased arbiter while also undermining the credibility of the legal process altogether. His evidence convicting Lady Audley often consists of mere assertions, which lead him to incorrect legal conclusions. For example, he accuses Lady Audley of murdering George, when in fact he is alive. Moreover, Lady Audley's impulsive act of pushing George into a well qualifies as only an attempted murder and even as a potential act of self-defense since the two of them struggled beforehand. In summary, Robert's legal findings and judgments are both wrong and unfair. While he sentences Lady Audley to a mental asylum for her lies, he never holds George accountable for his failure to protect her and their baby, and for his escape to Australia.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

The novel criticizes the limitations of the law to judge women like Lady Audley fairly and implies that the marriage law is partially responsible for her actions. When, as Helen Talboys, she finds herself abandoned by George, starving, and caring for a tiny infant, neither the law nor society help her in any way. Since her social position and financial well-being are inextricably linked to whether and whom she marries, and the law forbids her to remarry, the law prevents her from creating a better life for her and her child. As such, she appears to have no choice but to circumvent such unjust law by staging her own death and reinventing herself under a new identity.

Moreover, because of the law's preoccupation with appearances, the alleged criminality of Lady Audley's actions remains ambivalent in the novel. Although her bigamy is conscious (she receives no indication that George is dead), her multi-step transformation from Helen Talboys to Lady Audley implies that she is not quite the same woman when she re-marries Sir Michael Audley. The marriage license, binding her for life to Michael Audley, lists Lucy Graham, and not Helen Talboys, as the woman marrying Sir Michael. Because of that, according to the law, Sir Michael is not married to Helen Talboys, George Talboys' wife. As such, on paper, Lady Audley's second marriage could be interpreted as legally valid. Moreover, as Natalie and Ronald Schroeder aptly reflect, "although [Lady Audley's] confession of bigamy means that technically Sir Michael is not legally married to her, he nonetheless mandates her future as if he were."⁷⁷ In other words, since his marriage to Lady Audley has the legal appearance of a marriage though is not legal in substance, Sir Michael explores this ambiguity to his own advantage. When he discovers her deception, he renounces their

⁷⁷ Schroeder and Schroeder, *From Sensation to Society*, 51.

marriages and forbids her to use his last name, to highlight that the two of them are not really married. However, he also decides Lady Audley's fate and imprisons her in a mental asylum as if she were his wife and property. Unfortunately, Victorian marriage law condones such a hypocrisy because it allows husbands significant control over their wives' bodies and property, but does not provide women any legal recourse when their husbands restrain their freedom and treat them unkindly.

The novel emphasizes the complexity of female motivations and choices in a bad marriage, which both men and the law often fail to recognize. It also embraces theatrical elements, such as identity changes, as a useful and necessary means of circumventing unjust social and legal situations. While the ending of the novel suggests that such means are temporary and costly, it also forces readers to see Victorian women and their dilemmas in a "manifold" way, as the novel tells us.⁷⁸ In other words, Lady Audley may go too far in attempting to murder her long-lost husband George when he reappears in her life; however, she is still not a pure villain as the readers learn about all the hardships George had caused her, and all the efforts she put into reinventing herself as Sir Michael's wife. As such, the novel implicitly advocates on behalf of transgressive women, such as Lady Audley, emphasizing the difficulties of their situations, which often propel them to break the law.

***Aurora Floyd* (1863)**

Critics have often considered *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* to be Braddon's pair of bigamy novels; however, the two novels treat the subject of bigamy differently. Unlike Lady Audley who remarries without having any clear indication of her

⁷⁸ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, 380.

first husband's death, the eponymous heroine of *Aurora Floyd* commits bigamy inadvertently when she marries John Mellish after mistakenly believing a newspaper announcement that proclaims the death of her first husband, James Conyers. Her bigamy is not even revealed to the readers until well into the novel when Braddon finally tells us of Aurora's secret marriage to Conyers. As far as the reader knows, Aurora is legally free to marry Mellish when she does.

The novel highlights the notion that even women who are innocent of crime and deception can be easily accused of such transgressions, if they defy certain gender conventions. Despite her innocence, Aurora faces accusations of murdering Conyers because her free and passionate behavior renders her suspicious. Although "honesty was a natural and an inborn virtue" in her house, Aurora is painted as deceitful and dangerous because her unrefined passion as well as her unladylike fondness for horseback riding make her unfeminine and, hence, eccentric.⁷⁹ Braddon's resistance to judge individuals based on their appearances echoes John Stuart Mill's theories on eccentricity and liberty. His famous essay, *On Liberty*, published in 1859 (a few years before the publication of *Aurora Floyd*) equates eccentricity with strength of character.⁸⁰ Such ideas were controversial in Mill's time when a bourgeois woman was enjoined to act like an ideal mother, wife, and a homemaker, and to suppress any eccentricities. Inspired by Mill's ideas, Braddon emphasizes that Aurora finds herself on trial for the crime she did not commit mainly because of her theatrical personality. While men find her flamboyant

⁷⁹ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Aurora Floyd* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

⁸⁰ Mill states, "Eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigor, and moral courage which it contained. That so few now dare to be eccentric, marks the chief danger of the time." See John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty, Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, ed. Mark Philp and Frederick Rosen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 66.

behavior attractive, they also suspect her moral character. For example, Talbot Bulstrode, one of Aurora's suitors, is fascinated by her exotic beauty and passion, but he chooses her cousin Lucy for a wife because she is "undemonstrative" and says little except for "her low-consenting murmur which meant Yes."⁸¹ In contrast, Aurora's expressive, theatrical personality makes her unpredictable and, hence, dangerous.

Unlike Magdalen in Collins's *No Name*, Aurora is not a professional actress. She is only connected to the acting world through her mother Eliza, who is a professional performer. Although the different social standings of Aurora's parents make their marriage a scandal (he is a rich, well-respected banker; she is a stage actress), her mother, Eliza, ignores social divisions because on stage "dukes and marquises are as common as butchers and bankers."⁸² Eliza finds it easy to play the role of Mrs. Floyd because theater taught her how to be a lady. She does not feel "abashed on entering the drawing-rooms of these Kentish mansions when, for nine years, she had walked nightly on to a stage to be the focus of every eye, and to entertain her guests the evening through."⁸³ Moreover, she and Archibald Floyd are "one of the happiest couples who had ever worn the bonds of matrimony."⁸⁴ Thus, through her mother, Aurora comes to associate theater and outward expression with a form of truth.

Aurora's expressive personality, which echoes her mother's theatrical roots, not only challenges the social image of a Victorian wife, but also makes her an outspoken critic of Victorian marriage law. For example, at the time when the law forbade married

⁸¹ Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, 160.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

women to own property, Aurora tells John Mellish that she would “prefer to spend [her] *own* money . . . and pay . . . out of [her] *own* purse.”⁸⁵ However, unlike many other sensation fiction heroines, Aurora still trusts in the fairness of the legal system. She believes that the law—even if stacked against women—is still essentially just. Speaking to Mr. Bulstrode about her hapless marriage to Conyers, Aurora argues that she did not need to break the law to free herself from her abusive husband because the law would have protected her against his abuses.

The law would have set me free from him, if I had been brave enough to appeal to the law; and was I to suffer all my life because of the mistake I had made in not demanding a release from the man whose brutality and infidelity entitled me to be divorced from him? Heaven knows I had borne with him patiently enough. I had endured his vulgarity, his insolence, his presumption; I had gone penniless while he spent my father’s money in a gambling-booth on a race-course, and penniless while he drank champagne with cheats and reprobates.⁸⁶

Aurora’s faith in the law is rather surprising, given that divorce was still a very unlikely option in her case. Although the new divorce law (the 1857 Divorce Act) could provide her with legal grounds for divorce if she proved both Conyers’ brutality and infidelity, she probably could not afford to divorce under the circumstances. Moreover, at another point in the novel, she mistakenly believes that Conyers’ mere infidelity could constitute grounds for their divorce when, in fact, the law did not allow for divorce under such circumstances.⁸⁷ Notwithstanding her simplistic and, at times, an erroneous understanding of Victorian law, Aurora’s faith in the legal system implies that she is not consciously an outlaw. It also implies Braddon’s hope that both the institution of marriage and the legal system governing it can be reformed. At least, she seems

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 418.

⁸⁷ Aurora believes that the law would have helped her to break “the fateful chains so foolishly linked together” upon “the discovery of her first husband’s infidelity” (*Ibid.*, 393).

supportive of the idea that the law can be just and offer protection to women who are abused or neglected in their marriages.

Braddon's stance on marriage in *Aurora Floyd* suggests that the novelist embraces the idea of marriage itself, while she criticizes the highly imperfect reality of many Victorian marriages. Unlike Collins, who seemed ideologically opposed to marriage even with the women he loved, Braddon believed in marriage if it allowed women to maintain their own individuality. After she and Maxwell married at St. Bride's Church in 1874, their social standing had not been irreversibly damaged (they hosted parties and saw friends). As with Aurora's marriage to Mellish, Braddon's own marriage had a redemptive quality; it rebuilt her reputation after the past scandals and realigned her feelings with her social expectations without sacrificing the former.

Despite her support for the institution of marriage, as well as her respect for the law, Braddon still makes the point that empty legal formalities should not be sufficient to create an authentic marriage bond. This point is best illustrated in the novel's discussion about the value of a marriage certificate. On the one hand, when John Mellish can legally marry Aurora, he insists on holding onto a copy of his marriage certificate so that no one dares to tell him that his "darling is not [his] own lawfully-wedded wife."⁸⁸ In that context, a marriage certificate is an important signifier of his genuine commitment to Aurora. He stands by his wife even when he discovers the dark secrets of her past. Although he struggles with the accusations against her, he "submerge[s] his very identity into that of the woman he love[s]" and empathizes with her.⁸⁹ As such, their legal bond underlines their loving commitment to each other. On the other hand, John easily

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 334.

dismisses the significance of Aurora's marriage certificate to James Conyers because Conyers deceives Aurora in their hapless marriage. The narrator describes John's reaction to Conyers' marriage certificate as follows:

He unfolded the wretched paper half a dozen times, and read and re-read every word of that commonplace legal document, before he could convince himself that it was not some vile forgery, concocted by James Conyers for purposes of extortion.⁹⁰

As Marlene Tromp argues, Conyers mercenary marriage is inauthentic because he is “the prototypical abusive husband who mistreats his wife and violates the sanctity of the home with adultery and alcohol.”⁹¹ Braddon suggests that his marriage certificate has no real significance because it fails to codify an authentic commitment.

Conclusion

As I have argued in this chapter, the sensation novel acclaims theater, which provides women with the creative freedom to reinvent themselves under assumed names, costumes, and personas, to more effectively circumvent the fixed legal and social roles into which they were placed. The sensation novel challenges the Victorian ideal of marriage by presenting marital narratives that do not match that ideal. It also reminds readers that women are individuals with complicated psychological and sexual drives, who often find themselves in equally complicated external circumstances. Victorian marriage law, which did not recognize both the individuality and the complexity of women's characters and situations, conflated all wives into one fixed archetype of a legal non-entity. As such, the law itself became a kind of fiction, which failed to reflect reality.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 334–35.

⁹¹ Marlene Tromp, *The Private Rod: Marital Violence, Sensation, and the Law in Victorian Britain* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 118.

Since the law disenfranchising married women was based on legal formalities that were performative in nature, theatricality and performativity were often powerful modes of circumventing the legal system and exposing its injustice.

Neither Collins nor Braddon views performance wholly as a form of dishonesty. Rather, both novelists elevate theater as means of female empowerment and a way of exposing the falsity of many social and legal norms. Their appreciation of theater and performance, as well as their exploration of the complex female psyche, are the reasons why the Victorian debate about the merits of sensation novel was “much more complex than a division of two camps of rebellious writers and harshly castigating critics.”⁹² Perhaps these are also the reasons why the novelist who occupies the next chapter, the upright George Eliot—typically associated with the Victorian criticism of sensationalism—shares some viewpoints with both Collins and Braddon.⁹³

⁹² Garrison, *Science, Sexuality and Sensation Novels*, xiii.

⁹³ See Royce Mahawatte’s *George Eliot and the Gothic Novel: Genres, Gender, Feeling* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013).

V. GEORGE ELIOT'S REALIST REVISIONS OF SENSATIONALISM AND THEATRICALITY IN THE MARRIAGE PLOT

In the final chapter of *Middlemarch*, George Eliot famously contrasts marriage as a mere artifice of narrative closure with its complex and open-ended reality. "Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending," the narrator observes.

Marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning, as it was to Adam and Eve, who kept their honeymoon in Eden, but had their first little one among the thorns and thistles of the wilderness. It is still the beginning of the home epic—the gradual conquest or irremediable loss of that complete union which makes the advancing years a climax, and age the harvest of sweet memories in common.¹

As Peter Brooks noticed, the readers desire closure that provides them with certainty and contentment, which reality often denies.² However, Eliot's own plotting of the present infused with the consequences of past actions and hopes for the future stresses the artificiality of narrative boundaries and emphasizes realist indeterminateness.³ Literary realism in nineteenth-century attempted to represent things truthfully by focusing on everyday activities, characters and events. It avoided implausible, romanticized, idealized, supernatural elements and embellishments. As such, as Brooks implies, the duty of the realist novelist is to open her readers' eyes to the endless processes beyond narrative representation, and—in the case of marriage plot—to the married life that happens after a wedding.

¹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 832.

² Brooks reads "plot" as a bounded space, one that is intimately tied with closure. See *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

³ For more discussion on the concept of realistic indeterminateness, see George Levine's argument that realism leads "not to closure, but to indeterminacy." See *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 23.

With her emphasis on the complexity and indeterminateness of marriage, Eliot criticizes certain methods of narration characteristic of leading Victorian genres, namely sensation fiction and melodramatic theatre, because of their distortion of the reader's understanding of emotion. She argues that compressed chronology, stark contrasts, shocking descriptions, and closures—typically associated with sensation fiction—dramatically falsify reality. In her review of Charles Reade's sensation novel *Never Too Late to Mend* (1856), Eliot specifically identifies the dangers of conflating stage and novel writing:

The habit of writing for the stage misleads him into seeking after those exaggerated contrasts and effects which are accepted as a sort of rapid symbolism by a theatrical audience, but are utterly out of place in fiction, where the time and means for attaining a result are less limited, and an impression of character or purpose may be given more nearly as it is in real life—by a sum of less concentrated particulars.⁴

Unlike a dramatist, Eliot suggests, a novelist does not merely entertain the audience by moving the action forward to a final resolution. The theatrical reliance on affect, as well as constrained chronologies that include straightforward openings and closings, distorts the very purpose of novel writing, which is to impress upon the reader how reality unfolds over time in a subtle, un-emphatic, and indirect fashion. Indeed, narratives, according to Eliot, should train readers to accept indeterminacy, contingency, and fallibility as the preconditions of individual contentment and ethical action.

Notwithstanding her acute wariness of empty theatricality, particularly in novel-writing, Eliot appreciated theater as an art form—even if such an appreciation came later

⁴ George Eliot, "Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dread*, Charles Reade's *It is Never Too Late to Mend* and Fredrika Bremer's *Hertha*," first published in *Westminster Review* (October 1856; repr. in *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren [New York: Penguin, 1990], 383).

in her life. When she first visited London in 1838, she found the idea of a theatrical performance so offensive that “she refused to accompany her brother Isaac to the theater.”⁵ Although she did finally attend the theater with the Brays and Herbert Spencer, she still harbored reservations about it. For example, when one evening she saw “a French piece,” done by no other than her future common-law husband George Lewes, she remarked that “it is execrable moral taste to have a storm and a shipwreck with all its horrors on the stage . . . I could only scream and cover my eyes.”⁶ Eliot’s initial suspicion of a melodramatic play stemmed not only from her Evangelical upbringing and its traditional stricture against the theater, but also from her early instinct to reject any theatrical exaggeration as false. However, her relationship with Lewes (not only her partner, but also her mentor, literary agent, playwright, drama critic, and actor) inspired her greater interest in and appreciation for drama.⁷

During their honeymoon in Germany in 1854, Eliot and Lewes frequently attended the theater and read Shakespeare aloud to each other (without her fretting over any shipwrecks).⁸ One may also reasonably assume that they discussed the different functions and meanings of theater. It is likely that while he warned her “to beware of melodrama” (as he did to Charlotte Brontë in 1847), he also encouraged her to be open to the aesthetics of drama.⁹ Although in 1860 Eliot declined John Blackwood’s suggestion

⁵ Margaret Harris, “Theatre,” in *Oxford Reader’s Companion to George Eliot*, ed. John Rignall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 412.

⁶ George Eliot to Charles Bray, 17 April 1852 in *The George Eliot Letters, 1852–1854*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 18; cited in *Oxford Reader’s Companion*, 412.

⁷ Lewes joined Dickens’s amateur theater troupe in 1847 and then briefly tried to act professionally. See *Oxford Reader’s Companion*, 204. See also Rosemary Ashton, *G. H. Lewes: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 4, 71.

⁸ Harris, “Theatre,” 412.

⁹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, first published 1857 (New York: Penguin, 1997), 254. See also Rosemary Ashton, *G. H. Lewes: A Life*, 67.

to write about the theater and composed only one dramatic poem, *The Spanish Gypsy*, she continued to appreciate theatrical performances until the end of her life—dying shortly after taking a chill during a performance of *Agamemnon* by Oxford undergraduates in December 1880.¹⁰

Given the juxtaposition of Eliot's concerns about empty theatricality in novels and her personal appreciation of the theater, the realism of her novels is not a simple rejection of theatrical elements in prose. Rather, it is a revision of the melodramatic theatricality often associated with sensation fiction. For instance, in reviewing Charles Reade's sensation novel, she criticizes him by saying he "errs by excess" and "wearies out emotion by taxing it too repeatedly."¹¹ Despite Eliot's critique of sensation fiction, many scholars have previously noticed Eliot's interest in and even appropriation of sensation novels.¹² For example, in a recent work on Eliot and the Gothic novel, Royce Mahawatte stresses that the complex narratives of Eliot's novels contain "crimes and court cases, secrets, passionate confessions," supernatural elements, and even some "uncanny coincidences"—all of which are the staple of sensation fiction at its most theatrical.¹³ To the extent that Eliot appropriates sensation elements in her writing, she does so in order to harness those features within a realist narrative—just as she does not

¹⁰ Harris, "Theatre," 412.

¹¹ Eliot, "Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dread*, Charles Reade's *It is Never Too Late to Mend* and Fredrika Bremer's *Hertha*," *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, 383.

¹² In 1975, Nina Auerbach compared *The Mill on the Floss* with the sensation novel and, more particularly, the Gothic Romance ("The Power of Hunger: Demonism and Maggie Tulliver," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 30, no. 2 (Sept. 1975): 150–71). Alexander Welsh has suggested that Eliot uses some techniques of sensation fiction. See *George Eliot and Blackmail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985). Kate Flint has observed that Eliot's 1859 novella "The Lifted Veil" could be interpreted as an early entry to sensation fiction ("Blood, Bodies, and 'The Lifted Veil,'" *Nineteenth Century Literature* 51, no. 4 (1997): 455–73).

¹³ Royce Mahawatte, *George Eliot and The Gothic Novel: Genres, Gender, Feeling* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), 4.

reject emotions but rather aims to restructure them. The novelist wrote in one of her letters to Frederic Harrison, her friend and a leading figure in the Positivist movement, that one of her goals in writing *Romola* “was to urge the human sanctities through tragedy—through pity and terror as well as admiration and delights.”¹⁴ Therefore, Eliot recognizes theatricality as a powerful tool for structuring human understanding and emotions; however, her novels require a certain ethical and psychological depth in narration, which sensation fiction often lacks.¹⁵

Three Eliot novels best illustrate her realist revisions of sensation and melodrama for the purpose of turning them towards her philosophical and ethical goals: *Romola* (1863), *Middlemarch* (1872) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Eliot’s revisions of the sensationalism in those novels are most evident in the marriage plot for a few reasons. First, marriage is one of the most persuasive narratives shaping human desire for closure that, in the style of a typical sensation novel, resolves all drama, mystery, and conflict. As mentioned before, Eliot reshapes her readers’ desire for closure by creating what Joseph Boone calls the counter-traditional ending to the marriage plot.¹⁶ For example, unlike a traditional courtship narrative that ends in a happy marriage, *Middlemarch* focuses on Dorothea’s failed marriage to Casaubon as well as her re-marriage. The novel also leaves the reader with Farebrother’s unfulfilled romantic feelings for Mary Garth as well as the breakdown of Lydgate and Rosamond’s marriage. In *Daniel Deronda* the most eligible bachelorette, Gwendolen Harleth, enjoys her widowhood. Such counter-traditional

¹⁴ George Eliot to Frederic Harrison, 15 August 1866, in *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (New York: Penguin, 1990), 249.

¹⁵ As made clear in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, Eliot was determined to tell stories “without trying to make things seem better than they were,” stressing that “falsehood is so easy and truth so difficult.” See *Adam Bede* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1860), 162.

¹⁶ Joseph Boone, *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 142–43.

endings reveal Eliot's conception that authentic human relationships usually thrive outside the frequently false, legitimate marriages described within the traditional marriage plot and the dramatic scheme of sensation fiction.

Second, since marriage is central to social organization, Eliot treats her revisions of her readers' conventional understanding of marriage as a lynchpin for greater social reforms. The novelist highlights the gap between the performative features of marriage dictated by religious and social institutions—evident through ceremonies and contracts—and the ethical nature of a marriage bond. Having performed the role of Mrs. Lewes, which the law denied her, Eliot was acutely aware of the frequent disjunction between the perfunctory rituals dictated by social mores and the complex reality of actual marriages. Her most noble heroines, such as Romola or Dorothea, come to understand themselves and people around them not when they legally wed, but when they face marital conflicts over time. In contrast, Eliot's villains—such as Tito Melema, Rosamond Vincy, and Henleigh Grandcourt—all treat marriage as a play in which they perform the leading role. They fail utterly, never learning through marriage the prosaic lessons of empathy and interdependence.

Eliot's emphasis on empathy and interdependence in marriage relates to her philosophy of social progress and the development of universal sympathy. In 1859, she wrote to her friend and social reformist, Charles Bray, "if Art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally."¹⁷ She further explained, "the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings is that those who read them should better be able to

¹⁷ George Eliot to Charles Bray, 5 July 1859, in *George Eliot's Life As Related in Her Letters and Journals*, vol. 2, ed. John Walter Cross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 118.

imagine and to *feel* the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures.”¹⁸ Additionally, her study of Ludwig Feuerbach’s philosophy inspired Eliot’s conception of sympathy, which depends on “a split in consciousness”¹⁹ that allows one to recognize the difference “between oneself and another, or between the differing impulses of one’s own complex motivation.”²⁰ Such “a double consciousness”²¹ in Eliot’s characters “extends and completes the best possibilities of the other.”²² Therefore, the purpose of any sensational element in Eliot’s plot is to heighten her readers’ sympathies by taking them beyond sensational events to the diffusive and long-term sufferings such behaviors cause. For example, the sensationalism of Tito’s secret marriage to Tessa, Bulstrode’s subterfuge in defrauding Ladislaw’s mother out of her inheritance, and Grandcourt’s treatment of Lydia Glasher is overshadowed by Eliot’s emphasis on the fact that such actions create a moral disorder and disservice to fellow human beings.

Eliot’s revision of the marriage plot also reforms conventional gender roles, including the conventional structure of women’s lives. Unlike sensation fiction heroines, Eliot’s female protagonists do not engage in deception or stage acting, but they also do not marry or go mad. Rather, Eliot’s leading women often find their freedom outside of a traditional marriage arrangement. The eponymous protagonist of *Romola* supports her husband Tito’s mock wife Tessa and their children, creating a feminist version of the domestic hearth. Eliot’s more conservative heroine, Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*,

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, “George Eliot’s Conception of Sympathy,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 40, no. 1 (June 1985): 23.

²⁰ Ibid., 25.

²¹ Ibid., 24.

²² Ibid., 25.

plays the more traditional role of a wife, but learns to insist on her right to feel happy and fulfilled within marriage. Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda* looks forward to widowhood.

Significantly, Eliot's treatment of weddings in the three novels also highlights her realist revisions on sensationalism. In *Romola*, neither of the two weddings (Tito's sham wedding to Tessa and Fra Luca's vision about Romola's wedding) serve as a traditional ending to the courtship plot. Instead, the unconventional narrative placement of those weddings and their questionable status point out the dangers of combining marriage and play-acting. Tito's sham wedding to Tessa is perhaps the most elaborate and most theatrical wedding description between two non-actors in the entire canon of Victorian literature. Yet it merely parodies the empty performativity of actual nuptial rituals, which lack authenticity. Despite her critique of nuptial form over substance, Eliot acknowledges the power of ritual to both impose and dismiss one's moral responsibility in marriage. This literary example, which exposes the shallowness of many wedding formalities, echoes Eliot's personal struggles with both legal and religious obstacles to legitimizing her own happiness with George Lewes, whom she considered her true husband even though he was formally married to another woman.

Eliot continues her unconventional narrative treatment of weddings in her masterpiece *Middlemarch*, where—as indicated in the beginning of this chapter—she pens her famous exhortation against glorifying weddings as the goal of a courtship plot. The novel presents life as winding, unpredictable, and often incompatible with the simplistic view of marriage as a happy resolution to courtship. As Mr. Brooke aptly acknowledges, marriage is “a noose” because it does not often unfold in a linear

manner.²³ Eliot's discussion of how Edward Casaubon and Peter Featherstone attempt to manipulate the law to prevent happy marriages out of selfishness, as well as her exhortation on the inauthentic play-acting in Rosamond Vincy and Tertius Lydgate's marriage, underscore her main argument that the traditional marriage plots do not accurately describe the full complexities of married life. Additionally, her ambivalent closure to the novel, which captures some characters in wedlock but also shows the breakdown of other courtships and marriages, corroborates Eliot's appreciation for the realist indeterminateness of courtship and marriage plots.

Finally, in *Daniel Deronda* Eliot presents Daniel's wedding as the time when breaking with the past intertwines with such past's continuation into the future. As Daniel and Mirah prepare to start Mordecai's mission of Jewish advocacy, they also face his death. Additionally, Gwendolen's wedding curse becomes a prophecy about the punishment she must suffer in marriage for breaking her promise to protect the inheritance of Lydia Glasher's children. Gwendolen's wedding to Grandcourt, then, initiates her true awakening about the horrors of a bad marriage, which social performances cannot counteract.

***Romola* (1863)**

George Eliot's fourth published novel, *Romola*, features elements of sensation fiction, but the novelist reworks them in an effort to bolster her ethical philosophy. The novel's villain, Tito Melema, engages in apparent bigamy by pretending to marry a poor peasant Tessa in a mock wedding, fathering her children, and then marrying the eponymous heroine Romola. Although his wedding to Tessa is only a performance

²³ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 41.

during a peasant's fair, Melema deceives both women without facing any legal or moral consequences. The novel rebukes such an ignoble deception and criticizes the performativity of legal and religious rituals, which enable it.

Although Eliot sets the action of *Romola* in fifteenth-century Florence amidst the religious turmoil of the Italian Renaissance, the novel exposes the dysfunctionality of certain social, religious, and legal conventions in Victorian England. The historical setting turns Eliot's nineteenth-century readers into spectators who learn about their own lives as if they were watching a play set in different place and time. For example, Romola is a classic circumscribed Victorian heroine confined by gender roles and marriage conventions, who nevertheless enjoys freedoms of education and movement as the daughter of a classical scholar in this historical context. Tito Melema is a sly Greek scholar who echoes the Victorian obsession with appearances, charming his way into the influential circles of Florence while deceiving people about his identity. Finally, the spectacular rise and fall of Girolamo Savonarola, a charismatic monk and religious fanatic, reveals Eliot's complicated attitude towards Catholicism, as well as the Tractarian movement in Victorian England.²⁴ There is evidence that Eliot read both *The Oxford Tracks for the Times*, as well as Isaac Taylor's *Ancient Christianity*, which criticized the Church, "from which the Tractarians tried to derive Anglo-Catholic

²⁴ Beginning with Catholic Emancipation in 1829 and the high-profile conversions to Catholicism of prominent Victorians, such as John Henry Newman in 1845 and Henry Edward Manning in 1851, the Catholic Church gained prominence in the mid-nineteenth-century England. The Church emphasized "the role of traditions, sacraments and authority." At Oxford, a group of Anglican academics and clergymen (the Tractarians or the Oxford Movement) criticized the seeming lack of seriousness with which the church establishment regarded its religious duties, as well as its doctrinal laxity and seeming inattention to many aspects of the church's rich ritualistic heritage. At the same time, the growing power of Roman Catholics was counteracted by an anti-Catholic sentiment, including Evangelicals, who perceived Catholicism as "dreaded 'popery.'" See Josef L. Altholz, "High Church," *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Sally Mitchell (London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1988), 361–62.

institutions” as “corrupted with superstition.”²⁵ As such, Savonarola’s open-ended portrayal in the novel reflects the author’s own equivocal attitude towards religion—her disdain for its legalistic, superstitious, and gaudy aspects, as well as her appreciation for her character’s sincere, fervent, and intellectual religious conviction.

Given Eliot’s ambivalence towards religion, it is perhaps unsurprising that her critique of marital deception focuses on two religious wedding ceremonies in the novel. The first wedding, that of Tito and Tessa featured at the beginning of the novel, is a sham religious ritual, staged by street performers, meant to lampoon the performance of religious sacraments. Eliot explicitly describes the staged wedding as nuptial “buffoonery”:²⁶

Several couples had already gone through the ceremony, in which the conjuror’s solemn gibberish and grimaces over the open book, the antics of the monkey, and even the preliminary spitting, had called forth peals of laughter; and now a well-looking, merry youth of seventeen, in a loose tunic and a red cap, pushed forward, holding by the hand a plump brunette, whose scanty ragged dress displays her round arms and legs very picturesquely. “Fetter her without delay, maestro!” Said the youth, “for I have got to take my bride home and paint her under the light of a lantern.”²⁷

What purports to be a holy ritual conjoins the ridiculous and the lascivious to become burlesque. The sacrament of marriage also amounts to nothing more than a perfunctory task: “hot, eaten, and done with as easily as *berlingozzi*!” (a simple cake).²⁸

Eliot’s mockery of the wedding echoes social and religious rituals of Renaissance Florence, which made husbands the ones “to adorn brides with extravagant clothing and

²⁵ Gordon Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 24, 29.

²⁶ George Eliot, *Romola* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 143.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

jewelry, to decorate the nuptial chamber, and to arrange wedding festivities.”²⁹ Marriage vows involved many legal formalities and ceremonies, such as the exchange of nuptial gifts and the transfer of the dowry. Additionally, after the Council of Trent (held between 1545 and 1563), “the validity of the nuptial rite [was] dependent on the presence of the priest and his blessing.”³⁰ In other words, Italian Renaissance wedding, just like many Victorian weddings, involved a large degree of social custom and religious ceremony, which appeared to emphasize matrimonial form over substance.

By conflating religious vows with a theatrical performance, Eliot not only emphasizes the performativity of wedding rituals but also demonstrates that both law and religion condone marital fraud by focusing on performativity. Tito deceives Tessa by making her believe their sham marriage is real because the mock ceremony shares many of the same rituals as a legitimate church wedding:

The altar-like table, with its gorgeous cloth, the row of tapers, the sham Episcopal costume, the surplice attendant, and even the movements of the mitred figure, as he alternatively bent his head and then raised something before the lights, were a sufficiently near a parody of sacred things to rouse poor little Tessa’s veneration.³¹

Tessa believes that the wedding rituals have the power to make Tito assume the responsibilities of her legal husband (“Then you will not go away from me again,” said Tessa . . . “and you will take me to where you live”).³² Those ritualistic similarities between the mock and real wedding ceremonies, as well as Tito’s express proposal to

²⁹ Julius Kirshner, *Marriage, Dowry and Citizenship in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 55.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

³¹ Eliot, *Romola*, 148.

³² *Ibid.*, 149.

marry Tessa, create an external ambiance of legitimacy that makes the sham wedding real for her.

Eliot's focus on the ritualistic similarities between Tessa's sham wedding and a real wedding raises questions about the arbitrary connection between external performance and legitimacy in the marriage context of both fifteenth-century Italy and Victorian England. Unlike Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede*, who is seduced without any guarantee of marriage, Tessa is the victim of a theatrical performance at her wedding. While her innate naiveté makes her a particularly vulnerable audience, Tito exploits the fact that Tessa's wedding looks real to her by forcing her to obey him as a husband when it is convenient for him. For example, he specifically orders her not to wear a betrothal-ring because "no one must know [she is] married" when he wishes to keep their marriage a secret.³³ He also fathers Tessa's children without having to take any responsibility for raising them. Eliot criticizes the idea that Tito can dismiss any moral responsibility for Tessa simply because their wedding takes place at a peasants' fair and is performed by actors, while he would likely be married to her for life and would have legal obligations towards her had a clergy member officiated the same ceremony. She resists the notion that both law and religion create and dismiss certain marital obligations based on mere appearances and arbitrary rationales.

While Tito's subsequent marriage to Romola does not constitute legal bigamy, given he and Tessa are not actually married under the law, his relationships with both women are moral lies, which create the appearance of bigamy. While in *Jane Eyre* the law—in the form of Mr. Briggs—exposes Rochester's bigamy, in *Romola*, Tito's choice

³³ Ibid., 150.

to maintain relationships with both women is not punishable by either law or religion since it does not violate either code. Eliot lambasts both law and religion for failing to recognize Tito's commitment to Tessa, and as such condoning Tito's marital fraud affecting both women. While Eliot does not criticize the idea of legal marriage and wedding rituals altogether, she warns that the mere performance of such rituals to legitimize a commitment does not necessarily make it authentic. She also seems to advocate for legal protections for women, regardless of whether their long-term, romantic relationships with men qualify as marriages under both law and religion.

Eliot connects Tito's deception of both women to his performative nature. Even her early description of him stresses his "adroit and ready speech," which allows him to control even the most uncomfortable situations.³⁴ Tito's eloquence and charm throughout the novel not only help him to court successfully both women, but also contribute greatly to his success in politics. However, Eliot also emphasizes Tito's "innate love of reticence," which turns him into a person "to whom concealment is easy."³⁵ As such, the novelist suggests that, notwithstanding Tito's communication talents, he also purposely chooses not to express his true thoughts and feelings clearly. His frequent deception of others, including Tessa and Romola, stems from his theatrical ability to continually control the degree and manner of his self-expression.

While Tito's marriage to Romola is legitimized by law and religion, his deception of her fails to make such a marriage any more authentic than his dishonest relationship with Tessa. Nancy Henry argues that Tito's dishonesty toward Romola stresses "the

³⁴ Ibid., 91.

³⁵ Ibid., 94.

irrelevance of legal bonds in human relationships, a position which Eliot held with respect to her fictional marriage but serious moral commitment to Lewes.”³⁶ The fact that, in the original manuscript, Eliot dedicated *Romola* “[t]o the Husband whose perfect love has been the best source of her insights and strength” is significant, as the novel’s theme of authentic versus inauthentic marriages reflects some of the novelist’s own marital struggles.³⁷ Eliot thought of George Henry Lewes, to whom she refers in her dedication, as her common-law husband. Their marriage was a legal impossibility owing to Lewes’s marriage to Agnes, which consisted only of formalities. George and Agnes had three children together. Additionally, during their marriage, Agnes also had four children by Thornton Hunt, the son of Leigh Hunt. Since Lewes was named the father of all Agnes’s children on their birth certificates, he was considered complicit in Agnes’s adultery and was not able to divorce her.³⁸ As such, their legal and religious vows not only failed to reflect the legal reality of their lives, but also perpetrated the fraud of their relationship by forcing George and Agnes to stay married when they shared their lives with other people. In contrast, while neither church nor state legitimized Eliot’s common-law marriage to George Lewes, she called herself Marian Evans Lewes and thought of him as her husband. In translating *The Essence of Christianity* she had encountered Feuerbach’s celebration of marriage as “the free bond of love” and approached her relationship with Lewes as such a spiritual union.³⁹

³⁶ Nancy Henry, *The Life of George Eliot: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 144.

³⁷ Haight, *George Eliot*, 373.

³⁸ Ashton, *G. H. Lewes: A Life*, 99–100.

³⁹ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1854), 268, cited in *George Eliot: A Biography*, 137.

Although Tito's legitimate marriage to Romola is not much more authentic than his wedding to Tessa, the actual wedding of Tito and Romola differs from his public and theatrical wedding to Tessa. In fact, readers never witness Tito's actual wedding to Romola. At the end of Book I, the readers learn that Tito and Romola become betrothed at the end of carnival and they are to be married during Easter after Tito returns from a visit to Rome.⁴⁰ Then, the novel immediately skips to Book II, which begins in November 1494, more than eighteen months after Romola's marriage.⁴¹ As such, the novel describes neither their wedding nor the beginning of their marriage. Setting the actual wedding off stage, Eliot seems to continue *Jane Eyre's* tradition of quiet, "off-stage" weddings relegated to mere announcements. However, Romola's off-stage wedding contrasts with Brontë's personal narrative experience or the quiet weddings of Dickens's heroes. In Eliot's novel, the off-stage wedding highlights the dark secrets of Tito's soul and his double-dealings within the marriage arena. For example, it mitigates the issue of having someone who might have seen him wed Tessa in a mock ceremony now witness him wed Romola as well. In fact, Tito's dark motives and deception make his legal marriage to Romola as sensational as his theatrical marriage to Tessa.

Eliot connects both marriage proposals—Tessa's and Romola's—by plotting them at the time of public holidays and the related festivities, which highlights the idea that Tito treats both weddings as jests. Tito's betrothal to Romola occurs at the end of carnival when "masked processions" and "practical jokes of all sorts" remind readers of Tessa's wedding during the peasants' fair.⁴² However, on his way to Romola's house,

⁴⁰ Eliot, *Romola*, 199, 201.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 192.

Tito runs into Tessa who tearfully complains to him about his neglect of her. In order to appease her, he makes her promise “to be good and wait for me” in exchange for his promise to see her when he returns from Rome.⁴³ This exchange of promises echoes Tito’s marriage vows to Tessa during their mock wedding. Although he treats his promise to Tessa as a game, his repetition of what essentially constitutes his wedding vow to her on the day of his betrothal to Romola only highlights the circuitous nature of his lies to both women.

Although the author never narrates Romola’s actual wedding to Tito, Eliot describes such a wedding as the prophecy of Fra Luca’s vision. Like the mysterious dream about Laura’s wedding, which Marian receives in an anonymous letter in *The Woman in White*, on his deathbed Fra Luca tells Romola of his vision of her wedding to a mysterious stranger, the man with a blank face, who will bring pain to her and her father:

And you stood at the altar in Santa Croce, and the priest who married you had the face of death; and the graves opened, and the dead in their shrouds rose and followed you like a bridal train. And you passed on through the streets and the gates into the valley, and it seemed to me that he who led you hurried you more than you could bear, and the dead were weary of following you, and turned back to their graves. And at last you came to a stony place where there was no water, and no trees or herbage; but instead of water, I saw written parchment unrolling itself everywhere, and instead of trees and herbage I saw men of bronze and marble springing up and crowding round you. And my father was faint for want of water and fell to the ground; and the man whose face was a blank loosed thy hand and departed: and as he went I could see his face; and it was the face of the Great Tempter. And thou, Romola, didst wring thy hands and seek for water, and there was none. And the bronze and marble figures seemed to mock thee and hold out cups of water, and when thou didst grasp them and put them to my father’s lips, they turned to parchment.⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid., 196.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 157–58.

Although Romola dismisses her brother Fra Luca's three-time vision as a "sickly fancy," she remains deeply distressed by it.⁴⁵ She remembers the vision, once again, on her betrothal day at Santa Croce when—after walking out of the church—she sees one of the masked processions featuring "ghastly image of Winged Time with scythe and hour glass, surrounded by his winged children, the Hours."⁴⁶ They are followed by "what looked like a troop of the sheeted dead gliding above the blackness."⁴⁷ In summary, Fra Luca's wedding vision is theatrically symbolic of the terrible mistake Romola makes marrying Tito who is unfaithful to her and tied to another woman.

Fra Luca's horrid vision of Romola's future marriage to Tito allows her to foresee her life with Tito, at least metaphorically. Here, a wedding scene in the vision serves not as a dramatic ending leading up to marriage but rather as a chronologically ambivalent prophecy attempting to prevent Romola from marrying a villain. It echoes the wedding dream of Stephen Blackpool from Dickens's *Hard Times* and the wedding dream about Sir Percival's evil intentions in Collins's *The Woman in White*. This intertextual connection between the three novels implies that Eliot shares her belief in the power of symbolism, premonition, and prophecy with other Victorian writers. However, unlike Stephen, who acknowledges the truth of his bad marriage through the dream, or Marian, who uses the dream about Sir Percival as a motivation to help Laura, Romola simply dismisses Fra Luca's vision. Such a dismissal, which ignores her feelings of uneasiness about Tito, shows that her keen sense of intellect and logic are as prone to deception as Tessa's natural gullibility. The "two wives" both rely on their preconceived beliefs about

⁴⁵ Ibid., 158.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 200.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

the seriousness of marriage vows so much that they foreclose the possibility of marital fraud.⁴⁸

Unfortunately, Tito's mock wedding to Tessa starts the seemingly inescapable cycle of deception. Tessa's mysterious husband is called "Messer Naldo," who "never comes near but at dark."⁴⁹ The narrator often simply slides from Messer Naldo to Tito, highlighting the notion that the two characters are one person. Although Tito downplays his marital promises to Tessa as mere play-acting, he assumes a new name and identity in order to continue his relationship with her and their children. Since Baldassarre eventually uncovers the identity of Messer Naldo ("Ah *he* then was the mysterious husband; he who had another wife in the Via de' Bardi"), Eliot implies that neither law nor religion can hide moral lies forever.⁵⁰

Tito's dishonesty in his marriage to Romola, for which there is no legal recourse, forces her, the paragon of virtue, into deception. Under the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, a wife could legally divorce only if her husband were convicted of adultery "aggravated by cruelty, incest, bigamy, or bestiality."⁵¹ Here, although—as argued—Tito's two unions, with Tessa and Romola, give the appearance of bigamy, he does not commit bigamy in the legal sense because his union with Tessa is illegitimate. Therefore, when she finally uncovers Tito's wrongdoing, Romola has no grounds for divorcing him. Instead, she tries to leave him, wearing a nun's costume to disguise herself. However, unlike Dickens's John Harmon, who assumes a new identity to protect himself against a

⁴⁸ Ibid., 432.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 297.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 333.

⁵¹ Mary Lyndon Shanley, "Divorce," in *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Sally Mitchell (New York: Garland, 1988), 223.

potentially bad marriage, Romola cannot use a costume to save herself from a bad husband because she realizes that doing so would violate her wedding vows. Her sense of moral responsibility and religious conviction persuade her to honor Dorothea Brooke's premise that "marriage is a state of higher duties," which requires sacrifices.⁵²

Romola's attempted escape from Tito illustrates how Eliot appropriates some sensation fiction elements in order to offer a realist revision. For example, unlike a sensation fiction heroine escaping an abusive marriage under disguise, Romola's escape plan is thwarted when Savonarola halts her saying: "I have a command of God to stop you."⁵³ As such, it appears that Eliot's sense that a wife owes a moral duty to her husband outweighs Romola's individual desire to abandon her spouse. Nevertheless, Eliot still affords Romola and Tessa options other than staying in abusive marriages or falling into insanity. Consistent with Eliot's idea of universal sympathy, after Tito's death, Romola returns to Florence, establishing a house with Tessa and her children as well as her cousin Monna Brigida. Since the name "Romola" is the Italian equivalent of Romulus, the founder of Rome, the eponymous heroine symbolizes a new foundation for a happy family, one that can exist outside the cage of legitimacy and patriarchy. Instead, the new family that Romola creates with Tessa is based on honesty and "much feeling for the rest of the world as well as ourselves."⁵⁴ The novel presents a seemingly conventional ending with a twist; the "happily ever after" derives from the women's relationship to each other. Like Laura and Lizzie in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," the women of *Romola* live together with their children, restoring each other emotionally, physically, and

⁵² Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 41.

⁵³ Eliot, *Romola*, 355.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 582.

mentally. Their past weddings to Tito become the starting points of transformation in their lives and a mere reminder of the evils of this world.

The final scene of the novel, featuring Romola, Tessa, and the children peacefully at home, mimics another theatrical tableau—a performance of the new holy family. Perhaps such an ending, which reminds of the closure in a domestic comedy, challenges the idea that the novelist resisted definite, happy endings, which mischaracterize the complexity of human emotions and fate. However, what is arguably the happy ending of *Romola* stresses the feminine strength and resilience in the face of marital breakdown rather than exemplifies the happy closure of a marriage plot. Throughout the novel Eliot appropriates the sensational and melodramatic elements of both Tessa's and Romola's marriages in order to restructure her readers' desires, beliefs, and behaviors regarding marriage. She avoids the conventional single-marriage-plot-line culminating with a wedding to instead present multiple and various marriage plots, all of which intertwine in the narrative lines of other characters and historical conditions. In that sense, Eliot disrupts sensationalist/melodramatic temporality, drawing out the consequences of actions at great length and enforcing narrative patience on her readers. The ending of *Romola*, though reminiscent of theater, still invokes the realist indeterminateness and the interconnectedness of human existence characteristic of Eliot's writing.

While in *Romola* (1863) Eliot stresses the complexity and indeterminateness of marriage, which cannot be encapsulated in a simple narrative formula, in *Middlemarch* (1872)—her masterpiece and the novel I will discuss next—she goes even further. *Middlemarch* eliminates the sense of certainty afforded by any historical fiction with a definitive closure, such as *Romola*. While readers know how the distant past unfolded,

they are less certain about the consequences of the immediate past (the 1830s versus the 1870s), just as they (along with the heroine) are left uncertain about the consequences of their own actions.

***Middlemarch* (1872)**

The significance of multiple subplots, the proliferation of characters, free indirect discourse, and retrospective setting in what is perhaps Eliot's greatest novel, *Middlemarch*, all wean readers off the visceral effects of sensationalism, making them attentive to the obscure, unremarkable, incomplete, uncertain, and subtle aspects of life. The novel's multifaceted Victorian world, powered by industrial innovations and sweeping reforms, adds various strands to the fabric of society and simultaneously complicates the marriage plot, which contains examples of marital failures based on unrealistic illusions and inauthentic play-acting. At the forefront of the plot are unhappy wives and husbands, such as Dorothea Brooke and Edward Casaubon, as well as Tertius Lydgate and Rosamond Vincy, in their eroding marriage relationships. However, *Middlemarch* also includes sensational marriage and seduction subplots of Mr. Bulstrode and Peter Featherstone that appear unethical and harmful to society at large. Eliot counterbalances such sensational subplots with anti-sensational ones, such as Mr. Farebrother's courtship of Mary Garth, which involve emotions too powerful to represent externally without turning them into melodrama, as sensation fiction or drama would.

Eliot resists melodramatic representations of marriage in the novel not only because she fears that melodrama tends to falsify reality, but also because she believes that the multifaceted nature of a marriage plot cannot adequately unfold through a one-dimensional dramatic representation. Rather, the nuanced complexity of serious

subjects, such as marriage, is best represented through the novelist's techniques of a third-party narration, such as a free indirect discourse. The sensational subplot of Madame Laure, a temperamental French actress who kills her actor husband on stage, demonstrates that point well. When Tertius Lydgate confesses his love for her and proposes marriage, Madame Laure replies that she does not "like husbands" and reveals how she turned herself into a widow.⁵⁵ Although she explains what happened by saying: "My foot really slipped," she later changes her story characterizing the accident as an intentional act.⁵⁶ When Lydgate hastens to agree that the death of Madame Laure's husband was indeed a fatal accident, he is shocked to hear her say, "I did not plan: it came to me in the play—I *meant to do it*."⁵⁷ Joseph Litvak highlights Madame Laure's shifting rhetoric when describing her late husband's fatal "accident." He stresses her word choices and grammar "[waver] oddly between activity and passivity," suggesting that she is performing even while confessing the crime.⁵⁸ This use of language implies that she continually acts somewhere "between art and reality" without fully acknowledging the seriousness of her crime or letting the reader know what really happened and why.⁵⁹ In fact, Madame Laure's acting—both on stage while killing her husband and later on when telling Lydgate about it—conceals or at least distorts the full truth about both her marriage and its ending, as well as her true character. Therefore, Eliot's main marriage plot in the novel focuses mainly on prosaic marriages, which unfold through a novelist narrative including a third-person narration.

⁵⁵ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 153.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 148.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

In addition to its complex representation of multi-faceted marriage plot, *Middlemarch* also stresses its realist indeterminateness through both its winding timeline and its focus on contemporary legal and social issues. The novel opens with a “Prelude,” which features Saint Theresa, a sixteenth-century religious figure who eschews marriage and becomes a saint. However, such a historical narrative, reminiscent of the setting in *Romola*, also intertwines with the immediate past, the early 1830s when the action of the novel takes place. The diffusive influence from the immediate past (the early 1830s) on the novel’s present (the 1870s when the novel is published) provides a closer retrospective setting than a historical novel, and invites readers to examine a developing view of Victorian law and marriage over the past forty years. For example, *Middlemarch* takes place in the years leading up to 1832, the year the Reform Bill passed for the benefit of middle-class men. While the Reform Bill changed the electoral system in England and Wales, allowing more adult men to vote, it did nothing to enfranchise women. Although the English women still could not vote when Eliot composed the novel in the 1870s, the law provided for some positive changes in married women’s lives by then. For example, the First Married Women’s Property Act (1870) allowed married women to own the money they earned and to inherit property. Notwithstanding such legal improvements for married women, most bourgeois late-Victorian women were still subjected to the idleness of marriage rather than a professional career and lacked any political representation that could change their social and economic status in a meaningful way. For example, in *Middlemarch* Rosamond Vincy’s education at Mrs. Lemon’s preparatory school for young ladies only helps her to attract a man of good breeding as a husband. It does not prepare her for her husband’s patriarchal expectations

of her, their financial difficulties, or finding a career outside of marriage. In summary, the novel's direct focus on contemporary social and legal issues affecting Victorian marriages highlights the complexities of gender relationships within marriage context and resists the idea that a wedding constitutes a happy narrative ending.

The main protagonist of *Middlemarch*, Dorothea Brooke, does not experience a happy ending to her first marriage because she turns her matrimonial narrative into a teleological account of history and suffering. She plays the role of Saint Theresa in the novel, perceiving her marriage to a much-older Edward Casaubon as a saintly vocation. Her spirituality and intellectualism cause her to harbor "very childlike ideas about marriage."⁶⁰ She thinks of marriage as a means to some great, saintly enterprise, such as building cottages for the poor—the lofty goal divorced from the concrete reality of marriage. As Dwight A. Lindley III comments, Casaubon and Dorothea's relationship is analogous to that of Raphael and Eve in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Dorothea "regularly thinks of her potential marriage to the scholar in terms of intellectual satiation"; in Casaubon "she has found her 'affable archangel'" who promises her "the same kind of synthetic education that so excites Adam."⁶¹ Her Edenic conception of marriage, based on her desire for knowledge that can save the world, eventually crumbles because it is defined chiefly in reference to her idealistic version of the world. Like Adam and Eve, Dorothea begins craving knowledge and then falls, in the Biblical fashion, from the despair that she cannot fulfill her own vision of the world. Although her intentions of

⁶⁰ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 10.

⁶¹ Dwight A. Lindley III, "The Way George Eliot Read *Paradise Lost*: Raphael and the Temptation of Speculative Thought," *Christianity and Literature* 62, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 359.

helping others are noble, she labors under a delusion about the way in which her marriage to Casaubon could lead to the achievement of such a goal.

Eliot's argument that real marriages lack a clear narrative trajectory is well illustrated by the fact that Dorothea does not realize she and Casaubon are a poor matrimonial match until after they wed. Their honeymoon in Rome features her as a puritanically dressed, sobbing woman, who feels useless as a scholar's wife. By reversing the ritual of honeymoon from a traditionally joyful celebration of newlyweds into a bitter meditation of a disappointed bride, Eliot chastens her readers' expectations about the typical culmination of marriage plots (living happily ever after) and highlights the realist indeterminateness of marriage.

Dorothea's uncle, the unmarried Mr. Brooke, aptly surmises that marriage is "a noose" because it requires one's unconditional, continuous submission to one another, which is unnatural given that "[l]ife isn't cast in a mould—not cut out by rule and line."⁶² The winding and unpredictable nature of life, then, seems incompatible with marriage, which defines one's duties and responsibilities in a very particular way. Dorothea learns that lesson the hard way when she quickly transitions from being a disillusioned bride into a desperate widow, having to deal with Casaubon's legal will, which denies her his inheritance if she re-marries Will Ladislaw. Although, in theory, she rebuts her uncle's argument about the nuptial "noose" by calling marriage "a state of higher duties," she realizes that such a lofty vision of wedlock is difficult to maintain when "a husband likes to be a master" of his wife even after his death.⁶³ With his will, Casaubon attempts to use the law to control Dorothea's life from beyond the grave. Her marriage, then, does not

⁶² Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 41.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

provide a happy conclusion but rather the beginning of her husband's legally sanctioned and seemingly eternal power to deny her happiness.

Another marriage at the forefront of the novel, which becomes progressively unhappy after the wedding, is that of Rosamond Vincy and Tertius Lydgate. The gradual deterioration of their marriage stems largely from their failure to perceive and understand each other honestly. For example, Lydgate's wife, Rosamond, is an actress in life, just as much as Madame Laure is an actress on stage. Rosamond both courts Lydgate and—later—plays the role of his wife while “having an audience in her own consciousness.”⁶⁴ As such, her acting is as premeditated as Madame Laure's. In fact, she is even more of an actress than Madame Laure because, while Laure distinguishes between her career as a stage actress and her life off stage, it seems that Rosamond does not have an identity separate from acting. When describing her performativity, the narrator writes:

Every nerve and muscle in Rosamond was adjusted to the consciousness that she was being looked at. She was by nature an actress of parts that entered into her *physique*: she even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own.⁶⁵

Since Rosamond's character is the summation of her various social performances, she is only interested in using Lydgate to help her create an image of social importance. Her prescription for marriage does not include Lydgate's “inward life” or “his serious business in the world.”⁶⁶ Rather, her continuous acting and Lydgate's failure to distinguish such acting from reality contributes to the downfall of their marriage.

While Madame Laure's staged murder of her husband is particularly sensational, Rosamond's acting also figuratively kills Lydgate. Her constant material demands leave

⁶⁴ Ibid., 167.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 117.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 166.

him deeply in debt and force him to seek a loan from Mr. Bulstrode, a local banker who made his fortune selling stolen goods. When Bulstrode's scandalous past becomes known and he lets one of Lydgate's patients die, his disgrace engulfs Lydgate, who is assumed complicit in Bulstrode's wrongdoing. As a result, Lydgate has to leave town, never completing his life's ambition of opening a new hospital in Middlemarch and making medical advances for the good of its residents. Eliot also suggests that Rosamond's selfishness in marriage contributes to Lydgate's natural but premature death—he dies “when he was only fifty” and his “hair never became white.”⁶⁷ Her obsession with keeping up appearances and spending money she does not earn destroy her marriage with Lydgate as well as his life. In bitterness, he calls her “his basil plant” explaining that “basil was a plant which had flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains.”⁶⁸ For Lydgate, then, marriage, connotes death, the end of his naiveté, his dreams about a domestic idyll, and—by extension—his own end.

Eliot criticizes the social performance of certain women, such as Rosamond's; however, she also condemns the ornamental treatment of women in Victorian marriages, which encourages performativity. Competing in the marriage market required women to look and act in a certain way. For example, Rosamond's courtship performance includes grooming herself as a lady, sketching, planning her wardrobe, reading novels, and playing the piano. In fact, one of Rosamond's piano performances mesmerizes Lydgate so much that he mistakes her acting for an expression of “her hidden soul” and believes her “something exceptional.”⁶⁹ Although, given his experience with Madame Laure,

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 834.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 835.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

Lydgate should have learned to be wary of feminine wiles, he is easily swayed by Rosamond's musical talents or her one little tear. Eliot certainly understands that performance arts allowed Victorian women to exercise certain powers over men. However, she also recognizes that such power still confined them to their primary vocation of finding a suitable husband.

Eliot contemplates the ideological and material pressures that affect women in courtship and marriage, while stressing the shared responsibility of both genders for marital happiness. This point is best illustrated in her allusion to *The Woman in White* and Count Fosco's theatrical mice puppetry, which demonstrate how Victorian women both are pursued for and chase after money. When commenting on Dorothea's union with Will Ladislaw, Celia says to Dorothea: "Mrs. Cadwallader said you might as well marry an Italian with white mice!"⁷⁰ The remark compares Ladislaw to a foreign street actor, who "performed tricks with trained monkeys and mice while his master played the organ" in Victorian England.⁷¹ Since Ladislaw's paternal grandfather was a musician and Ladislaw's mother was an aspiring actress, in Mrs. Cadwallader's eyes, his connection to actors puts Ladislaw's character and suitability for marriage into question. However, Eliot warns her readers against the kind of hypocritical judgment that questions Ladislaw's character because of his acting heritage yet justifies Rosamond's continual social performance, which ruins Lydgate.

Eliot's wariness of social performance relates to her fear about the disjunction between reality and appearance, and authenticity and hypocrisy, which separate

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 490.

⁷¹ Daryl Ogden, review of *George Eliot and Italy: Literary, Cultural and Political Influences from Dante to the Risorgimento*, by Andrew Thompson, *Studies in the Novel* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 401.

individuals from their community. She illustrates that concern in her famous parable of the pier-glass, which draws on science to suggest the inescapable subjectivity of vision:

Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a center of illumination, and lo! The scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection . . . The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent.⁷²

The pier-glass parable illustrates a universal egotism in human beings and exposes such egotism as the primary obstacle that leads to falsity in marriage. Rosamond interprets what happens around her as actions governed by her private providence. She views herself as an actress fully in control of her audience: Lydgate. As such, her courtship and marriage to Lydgate is nothing more than a chaotic tableau, which she falsely believes she can arrange and control to her liking. When her view of marriage is exposed as a mere illusion, her world collapses. By exposing Rosamond's mistakes, Eliot stresses that the truth about life can be seen only collectively. In the absence of this perspective, individuals' actions and choices—including those in a marital context—are false because they mistake the partiality of understanding about a given relationship for the truth.

Eliot relies on free indirect discourse in the novel to stress that such a novelistic technique presents a more complex and complete picture of a character than drama. This narrative technique allows readers to glimpse into the character's consciousness, allowing us to "see" the character's inner thoughts, feelings and motivations in a way that is much more limited in a dramatic expression. The use of free indirect discourse also enhances

⁷² Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 264.

the narrator's ability to encourage empathy while maintaining omniscience by demonstrating how certain characters' personal perspectives on love and marriage deviate from objective reality. In Lydgate's case, free indirect discourse additionally highlights the divergence between his interior self and how he appears to his own wife and others in the community. While as the new doctor in town he is at the center of social attention, he is also "known merely as a cluster of signs for his neighbors' false suppositions."⁷³ It is because of this disconnect between Lydgate's true intentions and his external appearances that Bulstrode's disgrace engulfs him, as knowledge of the financier's loan to the doctor surfaces. Lydgate's initial failure to realize that his community views him as complicit in Bulstrode's schemes subjects him and Rosamond to general opprobrium. However, others' failure to express his virtues to him also exacerbates his eventual downfall. Even his friend Dorothea's intervention designed to have Lydgate believe he can still have a meaningful medical career after his disgrace fails to restore his optimistic outlook—in part because she is unable to clearly express to him what readers hear her "think" through free indirect discourse. Underscoring the pathos of Lydgate's suffering, the narrator notes in the Finale that "he always regarded himself as a failure."⁷⁴ Yet it seems that Lydgate would not have felt that way had the people around him communicated more openly. As such, Eliot relies on free indirect discourse in the novel to highlight how partial communication between various characters indirectly contributes to certain unhappy endings to the marriage plot.

While Eliot recognizes that expressing thoughts publicly improves communication with others and fosters relationships, she also stresses that her characters'

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 835.

most powerful thoughts and emotions are often best represented not through their words or acts but rather through a careful narration of their interiority. For example, Will Ladislaw expresses his love for Dorothea at the end of the novel almost entirely through omniscient narration and free indirect discourse. The scene is of such enormous emotional and psychological importance that—except for a few words—the characters cannot speak. The passage reads:

There was silence. Dorothea's heart was full of something that she wanted to say, and yet the words were too difficult. She was wholly possessed by them: at that moment debate was mute within her.⁷⁵

The power of this highly emotional scene is based almost entirely on Eliot's masterful description of her character's interiority. As such, the scene subverts any theatrical representation. Any attempt to convert it into a dramatic performance would fail as a piece of mawkish melodrama incapable of representing the full complexities of the characters' thoughts and feelings in that moment.

The anti-sensationalism of Dorothea and Will's romantic relationship contrasts with a few sensational marriage subplots in the novel. However, the novelist revises these examples of sensationalism as soon as she introduces them. For example, Mr. Bulstrode presents himself publicly as an upright, devoutly religious member of his society, even though in reality he has a dark past as a partner at a large-scale pawnbroker. He also eventually marries the widow of the company's owner, depriving their daughter of her inheritance. The daughter is Sarah Dunkirk, Will Ladislaw's mother. Eliot revises such a sensational subplot by exposing Bulstrode's lies when she introduces Raffles, the character who drops hints about Bulstrode's dark past in the middle of the novel.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 811.

Additionally, Raffles' death sparks the scandal that runs the Bulstrodes out of town. Although Bulstrode's wife forgives his sordid past, Ladislav refuses to accept the money that Bulstrode offers him to atone for what he did in the past to his mother. As such, Eliot's realist revision of Bulstrode's sensational subplot emphasizes that one's dark secrets usually come to light in time; however, the harmful consequences of their deception are often long-lasting.

Eliot also revises the sensation subplot of Julia Casaubon's elopement by having Will Ladislav become a member of Parliament and marry Dorothea. The visit Dorothea makes to Lowick Manor, the home of her fiancé Casaubon, involves her sensational discovery that Casaubon's aunt was disowned by her family for eloping with Mr. Ladislav, a Polish musician. The Casaubon family disapproves of Mr. Ladislav because he is neither English nor wealthy. However, Julia knows he is a respectable man and a loving partner. As a result of defying her family's wishes to marry a wealthy Englishman, Julia's children are cut off from the family fortune, and all of the riches go to her nephew, Mr. Casaubon. However, Aunt Julia's son falls in love with the previously mentioned actress, Sarah Dunkirk, and they become the parents of Will Ladislav, who eventually marries Dorothea and runs for a seat in Parliament. As such, Will represents the disowned and disinherited part of the Casaubon family, which eventually becomes the foundation for a new marital model based on love and legitimized by society.

Finally, the story of Joshua Rigg, Peter Featherstone's illegitimate son, stresses that the law, like theater, often relies on appearances and enables deception. However, such deception is short-lived. Featherstone's attempts to manipulate his financial dependents, such as Fred Vincy, by keeping two separate wills, fail when in the end his

natural heir, Joshua Rigg, inherits Stone Court. Such an outcome suggests that Eliot resists the idea of using the law as means to deception, and stresses that the natural connections between people will eventually outlast any artificial forms of interdependence. She also challenges Featherstone's manipulation of his family through the law by having Mary Garth refuse to burn one of Featherstone's two wills when the old man's wishes are likely to harm her and those she loves. Unlike Dorothea who hesitates to defy Casaubon's wishes even after his death, Mary's defiant refusal to succumb to Featherstone's legal manipulation reveals her tough-minded understanding of how one's nuptial beginning depends on the past and the future, entangling the newlyweds in a complex web of various social and legal relations. Mary says, "I will not let the close of your life soil the beginning of mine," refusing to let Featherstone manipulate her beloved Fred's life.⁷⁶ Featherstone's plans to keep Stone Court in the family are further foiled when Bulstrode buys the property.

As the novel both emulates and revises some sensational subplots, it also counteracts them with other anti-sensational subplots. For example, Reverend Camden Farebrother relinquishes his romantic feelings for Mary Garth and remains a bachelor in order to foster her romance with Fred. Such quiet sacrifices involve intense emotions yet have no theatrical value because they happen within the character's internal rather than external space. As such, only prose, not drama, can adequately represent them. For example, Farebrother's tactful handling of his role as a liaison between Mary and Fred, which requires him to conceal certain interactions and his own feelings, still involves a certain degree of performance, but readers learn about it mainly through Eliot's careful

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 316.

narration of his internal struggles rather than through external dramatic acts.

Farebrother's tact also exemplifies a kind of pious fraud because his deception and concealment are selfless and result in others' happiness. The marriage of Fred and Mary, enabled by Farebrother, constitutes the novel's final departure from sensation fiction. The gradual ripening of their relationship illustrates that only mutual transparency and patience create the proper foundation for a happy marriage.

The happy marriage plot of two chief characters in the novel, Dorothea and Will, has perhaps the most anti-theatrical ending. Even when the two finally wed at the end of the novel, their marriage proposal deviates from the expectations of a traditional marriage plot. Not only is Will's expression of love for Dorothea contemplated in silence, as discussed before, but the proposal itself is merely implied. It involves Ladislaw angrily bidding Dorothea goodbye, after somewhat dramatically exclaiming "we shall never be married" in reply to which she finally reveals that she is willing to forgo Casaubon's fortune as she cannot bear parting from Ladislaw again.⁷⁷ However, such temporarily heightened emotionalism of the scene is quickly quashed by more pragmatic considerations. Dorothea and Will hug each other while she sobs, promising to be a frugal wife ("I will learn what everything costs").⁷⁸ Even in the novel's most romantic moments, Eliot's noble characters stress the complex and prosaic reality of living and getting married. Although readers are told that Dorothea and Will marry happily, their wedding occurs off stage without any major declarations of love, perhaps highlighting their shared understanding about the immense but mundane journey it takes to form a family.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 811.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 812.

Making the end of Dorothea's first marriage the beginning of her true love, harnessing her love for Ladislaw with economic considerations, allowing the good men like Farebrother and Mr. Brooke to remain bachelors, and showing the devastation of Lydgate's superficial marriage to Rosamond, Eliot stresses the complexities of courtship and marriage, which cannot be fully and adequately represented on stage. She also foregoes the "happily-ever-after" ending to reveal that a conventional plotting, which culminates in a festive wedding ceremony, mistakenly encourages simplistic views of marriage. Additionally, the multiple examples of marital deception in the novel, which exhibit themselves in the smallest everyday acts underscore the notion that marital problems start with egotism and deception of others as well as oneself. She explores the theme of marital deception even further in her final novel, *Daniel Deronda*, when discussing the marital failure of Gwendolen Harleth.

***Daniel Deronda* (1876)**

In her final novel, *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot depicts the complexities of marriage by utilizing multiple genres. For example, the novel's "emphasis on the non-physical signs of matrimonial conflict and, in particular, on the oppressive power of silence" in the relationships between Gwendolen Harleth and Henleigh Grandcourt reminds readers of psychological realism.⁷⁹ However, Lydia Glasher "play[ing] the mad women"⁸⁰ as well as her "hysterical crying" containing "a strange mixture of acting and reality" would not be out of place in a sensation novel.⁸¹ Finally, Gwendolen's plot also reminds readers of

⁷⁹ Andrew Dowling, "'The Other Side of Silence': Matrimonial Conflict and the Divorce Court in George Eliot's Fiction," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 50, no. 3 (December 1995): 336.

⁸⁰ George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 350.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 351.

the silver-fork novel depicting the materialistic lifestyles and social performances of the upper classes. Readers see this particularly in the opening of the novel with its “splendid resorts” replete with gambling and jewels.⁸² In fact, the first description of Gwendolen verges on a parody of fashionable society: “The Nereid in sea-green robes and silver ornaments, with a pale sea-green feather fastened in silver falling backward over her green hat and light-brown hair.”⁸³ Such a comparison of Gwendolen with a richly dressed, mythological sea nymph deliberately exaggerates the bourgeois society’s obsession with appearances and the corrupting influence of unsound literature. In summary, the novel’s confluence of different genres helps Eliot to depict marriage as a combination of sensational and performative elements, enhanced with the psychological depth characteristic of her writing.

The novel also continues Eliot’s narrative tradition of realistic indeterminateness by portraying weddings as ambivalent beginnings rather than happy endings. The wedding days of the two main protagonists, Gwendolen Harleth and Daniel Deronda, mark the beginning of a new narrative in their lives, which foregoes narrative closure. Eliot represents Gwendolen’s wedding day as a social event and a means to a richer life rather than a commitment ceremony. There is no description of wedding vows or even the wedding ceremony. Instead, the reader learns about Gwendolen’s opulent bridal party “lining the pathway up to the church,”⁸⁴ and hears Gwendolen telling her mother that the marriage will provide her with “splendid houses—and horses—and diamonds.”⁸⁵ However, the brilliance of the occasion is marred by various signs foreshadowing

⁸² *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 356.

Grandcourt's cruelty as a husband. First, the miller's wife, who observes the wedding procession, tells her daughter that "high gentry behaved[s] badly to their wives," just like "Squire Pelton used to take his dogs and a long whip into his wife's room, and flog'em there to frighten her."⁸⁶ Second, Lydia Glasher, Grandcourt's former mistress and the mother of his illegitimate children, sends Gwendolen the diamonds that Grandcourt once gifted her and a letter saying Gwendolen's husband "has a withered heart."⁸⁷ The gesture becomes a kind of prophecy about the punishment Gwendolen must suffer for breaking her promise to Mrs. Glasher to protect her children's inheritance by initially agreeing not to marry Grandcourt. As Mrs. Glasher says, "I am the grave in which your chance of happiness is buried as well as mine."⁸⁸ As such, Gwendolen's wedding day only exacerbates her feelings of dread and terror, which are realized throughout her abusive marriage to Grandcourt.

As in Gwendolen's case, Daniel's wedding is also not a clear happy ending but rather the point of confluence between the past, present, and future. At the time of his marriage to Mirah, Daniel undergoes his Moses-like transformation, discovers his Jewish roots, and embraces Mordecai's mission to lead a life of Jewish advocacy. Their Jewish-rite wedding, where "more truthful lips never touched the sacramental marriage-vine," ensures the honesty of their mutual commitment to each other.⁸⁹ The "humble" wedding feast includes gifts such as "a complete equipment for Eastern travel."⁹⁰ The newlyweds prepare to travel to a new country after Mordecai dies in their arms. Eliot purposely

⁸⁶ Ibid., 353.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 359.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 809.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 810.

muddles the traditional closure of marriage by presenting the wedding day at the time of both new beginnings and goodbyes. Such a complex ending underlines the realist indeterminateness of Daniel's marriage because it stresses that a wedding is not simply a happy ending. Rather, it is the time when breaking away from the past intertwines with its continuation.

While Daniel's wedding to Mirah represents the formation of his Jewish identity and their common life of religious advocacy, Gwendolen's ominous wedding is a partial result of her vain lifestyle, which glorifies social performance. Her theatricality exhibits itself as soon as she enters the drawing room, charming men with her beauty, clothes, and behavior. Like Rosamond Vincy, Gwendolen focuses on appearances, believing in their power to improve her social and economic position. When readers first encounter her at a gambling table, Gwendolen behaves like an actress—she controls her muscles and shows no tremor of mouth or hands, determined to keep playing a particular persona through the loss of her winnings while capturing Daniel as her audience. In this scene, as elsewhere, the seated group of men observes and comments on Gwendolen as they would evaluate an onstage-figure (“A striking girl—that Miss Harleth—unlike others”).⁹¹ As such, Gwendolen's social performance operates as a part of her yearning for superiority, recognition, and dominion over men in the marriage market. She sees herself as “the princess in exile, who in time of famine was to have her breakfast-roll made of the finest-bolted flour from the seven thin ears of wheat, and in a general decampment was to have her silver fork kept out of the baggage.”⁹² Her identity is inextricably linked with her imaginative play-acting, which empowers her and gives her a sense of reality.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 41.

By stressing Gwendolen's reliance on social performance, as she did in the case of Rosamond Vincy, Eliot acknowledges that acting is inherently tied to the life of Victorian women. Given the Victorians' preoccupation with appearances, marriageable women like Gwendolen achieve power and autonomy through their dramatic abilities, which become a means of controlling men, at least throughout courtship. Moreover, as Katherine Newey reminds readers, the confluence of performance and family life increased with the popularity of mid-nineteenth-century home performances, which developed as an alternative to professional plays, "as the new middle classes became wary of the commercial theater."⁹³ In the late-nineteenth century home performances were accepted as "a useful form of entertainment for the hostess to offer."⁹⁴ Such home entertainment only increased Victorian women's awareness of the value of communicating through acting.

Considering Eliot's recognition of performative aspects of courtship and marriage, it is unsurprising that she casts Gwendolen, her most eligible bachelorette, in the role of an amateur actress. However, Gwendolen's acting ambitions fall short because her attitude towards acting is shallow, as she believes acting is simply a matter of maintaining appearances. For example, she thinks herself ready "for some future occasions of acting in charades and theatrical pieces" even though "she had never acted—only made a figure in *tableaux vivant* at school."⁹⁵ She also assures herself that she could act well, "having been once or twice to Theatre Francais" and considering that

⁹³ Katherine Newey, "Home Plays for Ladies: *Women's Work in Home Theatricals*," *Nineteenth Century Theatre* 26, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 93.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁹⁵ Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 54.

she is “more beautiful” than the famous Jewish actress Rachel.⁹⁶ When her mother tells her she could not be “very bold in crime,” Gwendolen already imagines herself as playing one of “the great poetic criminals.”⁹⁷ On the whole, Gwendolen assumes that she can succeed as a stage actress without any special talent or work.

Gwendolen’s role as Hermione near the beginning of the novel demonstrates her power over men but also betrays her immature understanding of a stage performance as well as her limited acting abilities. In this scene, Gwendolen’s admirers, her cousin, Rex, and Mr. Middleton, are all too willing to accommodate her desire to act on stage. When she wishes to appear in her Greek dress, it becomes clear that she chose the part of Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale* based solely on fashion.⁹⁸ However, when she suffers a stage incident (the movable panel discloses the picture of the dead face during her performance), Gwendolen shows a complete lack of theatrical intelligence and flexibility to improvise. Instead, cast from her prepared attitude, she freezes in terror, unable to control her true emotions. Even when Herr Klesmer tries to save her from this uncomfortable situation by pretending that Gwendolen’s irrational mortification was intentionally theatrical (“A magnificent bit of *plastik* that!”), she mistakes Klesmer’s kind comment for an actual compliment.⁹⁹ Unable to interpret the situation correctly, Gwendolen’s selfishness and vanity make her “[cherish] the idea that now he was struck with her talent as well as her beauty, and her uneasiness about his opinion was half turned to complacency.”¹⁰⁰ While everyone realizes that Gwendolen’s reaction to the panel

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 55.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 61.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 62.

incident was not part of the play, she herself lacks awareness of her own failings. Her egotistical belief in her acting skills erases her reasonable self-awareness and self-criticism.

By exposing Gwendolen's shallow understanding of stage acting, Eliot implies that the art of acting requires a certain degree of awareness and intelligence, which Gwendolen does not possess. Joseph Litvak sees the Hermione scene as the start of a new inward capacity in Gwendolen. He suggests that "Klesmer's 'thunderous chord' communicates to Gwendolen" a certain artistic energy, "which she echoes in her 'piercing cry,'" as if trying to improvise.¹⁰¹ But that cry also betrays Gwendolen's inner core that she cannot transform into performance. As such, contrary to Litvak's suggestion, Gwendolen is unable to experience her "Jane Eyre-like expansion into inwardness" while acting.¹⁰² Not only does she not know how to improvise, as a trained actress would, but she even lacks awareness that her behavior on stage betrays her amateurism. Her self-centered interpretation of the failed Hermione performance demonstrates that she is not mature enough to derive a profound value from stage acting.

In contrast to her, Herr Klesmer's acting—both in his piano playing and his later encouragement of her—shows sympathy toward Gwendolen, which implies that performance may be used as means to a noble end. His performance is reminiscent of the pious fraud in Dickens—deceiving someone for a noble purpose. However, such a performance requires a mindful and mature performer, very much unlike Gwendolen. Therefore, Klesmer's act of discouraging Gwendolen from pursuing her singing career serves a double purpose. In the literal sense, he does not believe that her singing talent is

¹⁰¹ Litvak, *Caught in the Act*, 186.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 187, citing *Daniel Deronda* on pages 60–61.

good enough to build a singing career. In a larger, metaphorical sense, Klesmer's rejection of Gwendolen's singing is based on the shallowness of her overall performative skills, which can help her in the marriage market but will not allow her to survive alone as a single woman.

Gwendolen's rudimentary acting skills and her naive attitude toward acting are some of the reasons for her hapless marriage with Grandcourt. Since she enchants men with her beauty and social acting, Gwendolen automatically assumes that she can transfer this kind of power over men to her marital dynamic with Grandcourt without any limitations. She haughtily relishes the thought of Grandcourt falling for her and her rejecting him. As she says, "My arrow will pierce him before he has time for thought. He will declare himself my slave—I shall send him round the world to bring me back the wedding ring of a happy woman . . . he will come back Lord Grandcourt . . . and fall at my feet."¹⁰³ Imagining how she will ensnare Grandcourt into marriage, Gwendolen blurs the distinction between acting and reality, which eventually leads to her downfall. Her plan works only to some extent. Grandcourt does fall under her sway and showers her with diamonds. However, once Gwendolen submits herself to him, their roles change, and he quickly begins to control her.

Gwendolen's initial control over Grandcourt stems from his inability to read her thoughts. During one of their first meetings, their lengthy dialogue is punctuated by the narrator's parenthetical insertions of Gwendolen's thoughts after each fragment of the dialogue. Although Gwendolen and the reader both know her thoughts, Grandcourt does not quite understand them:

¹⁰³ Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 95.

“I run a horse now and then; but I don’t go in for the thing as some men do. Are you fond of horses?”

“Yes, indeed: I never like my life so well as when I am on horseback, having a great gallop. I think of nothing. I only feel myself strong and happy.”

(Pause, wherein Gwendolen wondered whether Grandcourt would like what she said, but assured herself that she was not going to disguise her tastes.)¹⁰⁴

Eliot’s publisher, John Blackwood, found Gwendolen’s parenthetical thoughts important enough to mention them in a letter to the novelist:

That wicked witch Gwendolen is perfectly irresistible, new and yet so true to nature, like all the other characters. Her running mental reflections after each few words she has said to Grandcourt are like what passes through the mind after each move at a game, and as far as I know a new device in reporting a conversation.¹⁰⁵

Blackwood’s comments in the letter referring to Gwendolen’s conversation with Grandcourt as “a game,” a play with stage directions, suggest that she attempts to stage manage her courtship with him through performance. She says and acts in the way that pleases him, even though such words and acts are not necessarily true, and they fail to reveal the complexity of her mindset and intentions. Such acting, however, has limitations because, while Gwendolen can control her temporary flirtation with Grandcourt, both the law and society consider him in charge of their marriage.

As much as Gwendolen believes that her stage managing will allow her to control Grandcourt in marriage, he also deceives himself by denying the fact that he is incapable of completely understanding his wife. The reader perceives that Grandcourt “had correctly divined one half of Gwendolen’s dread—all that related to her personal pride, and her perception that his will must conquer hers; but the remorseful half . . . was as much out of his imagination as the other side of the moon.”¹⁰⁶ It is those unknown moral

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁰⁵ John Blackwood to George Eliot, 10 November 1875, *Letters*, vol. 6, 182.

¹⁰⁶ Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 596.

qualms and feelings hidden deep within Gwendolen that save her from being completely dominated by her husband and allow her to emerge later to defeat her would-be conqueror. Since Grandcourt cannot know her thoughts, he is unable to perceive her burgeoning hatred for him and unable to predict that this hate may cause her to rebel. Their marital dynamic illustrates how ongoing performance in courtship and marriage encourages the spouses' arrogance and egotism, which only destroys their relationship as well as their own sense of reality.

Eliot describes Gwendolen's marriage to Grandcourt as "a contract where all the ostensible advantages were on his side."¹⁰⁷ Gwendolen's performance includes not only her external reactions and dramatic gestures but also her staged lack of emotion. During her Mediterranean trip with Grandcourt, she is repressed into silence, unlike her usually animated and talkative self. Since her "inward torture [is] disproportionate to what is discernible as outward," the readers cannot comprehend Gwendolen's pain except for Eliot's narration of the heroine's interiority.¹⁰⁸ The language of the novel dwells on her intense inner life, describing her agony over "the husband to whom she had sold her truthfulness and sense of justice, so that he held them throttled into silence, collared and dragged behind him to witness what he would, without remonstrance."¹⁰⁹ Such a powerful portrayal of Gwendolen's marital misery could not be represented through drama as adequately as it is by Eliot's fine-tuned narration.

Since he focuses only on her external appearance and behavior, Grandcourt does not understand his wife's thoughts, just as in their initial meeting. Eliot stresses that point

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 669.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 668.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 669.

by connecting Grandcourt's tragic death specifically to Gwendolen's mental state. The narrator repeatedly questions:

Had Grandcourt the least conception of what was going on in the breast of his wife? . . . He had no idea of a moral repulsion, and could not have believed it, if he had been told it, that there may be a resentment and disgust which will gradually make beauty more detestable than ugliness, through exasperation at that outward virtue in which hateful things can flaunt themselves or find a supercilious advantage. How then, could Grandcourt divine what was going on in Gwendolen's breast?¹¹⁰

Like a theater viewer, Grandcourt naively assumes that his wife's obedience and plastered smile are real and render her innocuous. Since he defines Gwendolen through her external words and acts, he does not suspect that her interior unhappiness cannot be observed empirically.

Grandcourt's ignorance about the complexity of Gwendolen's mental state culminates in their last dialogue, which illustrates their complete lack of mutual communication and inability to interpret each other's acting. Gwendolen regains some temporary enthusiasm once Grandcourt announces he will go sailing; since she assumes that he would not want to take her in the boat, she allows herself to fantasize about what she might do with her freedom while he is away.¹¹¹ However, Grandcourt misinterprets his wife's renewed enthusiasm as her wish for a meeting with Deronda who they coincidentally and subsequently meet during that morning in Genoa. As such, in a moment of jealousy, he changes his plans to include his wife in the sailing excursion, which prompts her to protest. In turn, he decides they will then both stay inside, but their ensuing dialogue ends with Gwendolen sobbing, "Let us go, then . . . perhaps we shall be

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 670–71.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 676.

drowned.”¹¹² Her dramatic reaction only confirms Grandcourt’s suspicion about Gwendolen and Deronda. In the end, Gwendolen accurately summarizes their exchange by stressing, “It is all false! You don’t in the least imagine what is in my mind.”¹¹³

Grandcourt’s faulty assumptions about Gwendolen’s words and appearance underline the problem of treating his marriage like theater rather than a narrative. He thinks that his wife’s external statements and gestures, which do not always correspond to her inner thoughts, are sufficient for him to understand her. His lack of discernment regarding Gwendolen’s complexity undermines any chance of repairing their marital strife. However, Gwendolen is also partly responsible for her marital problems with Grandcourt by not expressing her inner thoughts clearly and showing little emotion—even if she acts in such a way to protect herself against her abusive husband. In other words, Eliot implies that Grandcourt’s reliance on surface appearances may be as harmful to his marriage with Gwendolen as Gwendolen’s choice not to express her true emotions.

Moreover, while Eliot generally denounces any exaggerated expression of emotions, she seems to criticize Gwendolen’s lack of reaction to her husband’s boating accident. While she does not actually kill Grandcourt, as a sensation novel heroine might, Gwendolen watches him drown in a surreal way, as if she were watching a play. Her final confession to Deronda is inundated with admissions of guilt about her husband’s death: “I knew no way of killing him there, but I did, I did kill him in my thoughts.” Then she adds, “I only know that I saw my wish outside me.”¹¹⁴ Gwendolen’s lack of physical or emotional engagement during her husband’s death is ethically questionable because by

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 679.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 680.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 695–96.

passively watching him drown, wishing his death, and not attempting to save him, she becomes the proximate cause of his demise. As such, Eliot seems to suggest that playing the part of a passive observer in life may be as harmful to society at large as insincere play-acting.

At the same time, Eliot revises the sensationalism of Gwendolen's cold passivity in the moment of Grandcourt's death by having her learn from her marital horrors and become more aware of human suffering. Even Deronda notices in Italy that, as a married woman, Gwendolen's grace and expression were informed by a greater variety of inward experience. Initially, Gwendolen thinks solely of her own comfort and wealth, which she believes marriage to a rich man will bring her. Through her suffering in marriage, however, she becomes more aware of others' suffering. For example, she is able to better understand Grandcourt's cruelty toward Mrs. Glasher and sympathize with her. She is also able to better appreciate her own friendship with Daniel, her only source of sympathy. Unexpectedly, it is the dissolution of her marriage, rather than its commencement, that allows Gwendolen to begin her personal transformation from a shallow girl obsessed with social performance to a more profound human being.

Gwendolen's marital misery places into question the wisdom of Mr. Gascoigne's philosophy that "marriage is the only true and satisfactory sphere of a woman."¹¹⁵ While Eliot does not criticize marriage in general and instead warns against the insincere play-acting between spouses, she does present alternative careers for women. Daniel Deronda's mother, Princess Alcharisi, chooses work outside of marriage, enjoying her stage career as an opera singer. She also claims that acting is a necessary means of

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 143.

surviving marriage for women who cannot escape matrimony. She observes, “When a woman’s will is as strong as the man’s who wants to govern her, half her strength must be concealment. I meant to have my will in the end, but I could only have it by seeming to obey.”¹¹⁶ Mary Jean Corbett suggests that Alcharisi emphasizes the cultural meaning of feminine theatricality: “The actress epitomizes the unconventional woman who enacts the roles that every woman, artist or not, desires to play.”¹¹⁷ Susan Rutherford argues that Eliot’s writing presents such a nineteenth-century prima donna as “a symbol of achievement and independence” as well as “a voice of freedom.”¹¹⁸ Notwithstanding her feminist symbolism, Alcharisi recognizes, however, the great price women pay for departing from their traditional roles as wives and mothers. She ends up lonely and dying, seeing her estranged son embrace Judaism, which she had tried to reject. She also tells Daniel, “You are not a woman. You may try, but you can never imagine what it is to have a man’s force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl.”¹¹⁹ She reveals that her father had forced her to marry Daniel’s father and that she achieved great success on the stage but had to remarry when her voice failed her. Even when she regained her vocal ability, she was trapped within the confinements of her marriage, unable to return freely to the stage. As a whole, Alcharisi’s story both opens the possibility of female independence and, at the same time, implies that marriage is inescapable or, at least, enormously difficult to escape.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 632.

¹¹⁷ Mary Jean Corbett, *Representing Femininity: Middle-Class Subjectivity in Victorian and Edwardian Women’s Autobiographies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 107.

¹¹⁸ Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 58.

¹¹⁹ Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 631.

Princess Alcharisi's life experience raises doubts as to whether Gwendolen can find happiness as Grandcourt's widow or whether, in time, she will have to succumb to another marriage for social and economic reasons. The uncertainty of her sub-plot confirms the idea of realistic indeterminacy, which resists simple closures. However, one wonders whether such a narration also conveniently avoids the direct acknowledgment of a few possibilities for Gwendolen's future. As a woman who relies heavily on her outward charms and lacks Alcharisi's acting talent, it seems likely that Gwendolen will soon drift into another mismatched marriage. Still, her character's primary purpose in the narrative is to serve as a cautionary tale against the dangers of approaching courtship and marriage as mere play-acting.

A fitting contrast to Gwendolen's unsuccessful marital performance is the authentic marriage between Miss Arrowpoint and Herr Klesmer. Miss Arrowpoint finds happiness in marriage precisely because her feelings for Herr Klesmer do not derive from external appearances. In response to her parents' remark that their daughter should marry "a man connected with the institutions of this country," Miss Arrowpoint exposes their hypocrisy by retorting "but one may say very true things and apply them falsely."¹²⁰ That pointed response emphasizes that often the most socially acceptable performances can be the most deceitful. Miss Arrowpoint and Herr Klesmer certainly subvert the marriage plotting of the fashionable novel and replace it with a belief in a relationship that transcends Victorian preoccupation with appearances, national identities, and the deception of courtship.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 246.

Conclusion

Exposing the falsity of weddings as dramatic endings to the marriage plot, Eliot stresses that the thorny complexities of courtship and marriage cannot always unfold in a linear way, as such a narrative pattern would undermine the realist indeterminacy of life. In addition to constrained timelines, she is wary of heightened emotions and acting in the marriage plot because all such theatrical elements are likely to lead to lies and deception that sunder individuals from their fellow human beings. Despite her wariness of theatricality, she elevates intelligent artists, such as Herr Klesmer or Princess Alcharisi, to the level of “legislators” responsible for social changes.¹²¹ She also appreciates Victorian women’s social and economic hardships, which often require a certain degree of social performance. However, she does not glorify performance in the way sensation novelists do because she understands that any deviation from truth or reality has a potential to cause harm to individuals and the larger community. To the extent she embraces performance and utilizes sensational elements in her novels, she does so only to inspire personal transformation and trigger expressions of sympathy.

Eliot’s complex narratives, which stress the profound long-term consequences of subtle acts, represent the depths of her characters’ interiority as theater cannot, and reform Victorians’ distorted sense of empty sensationalism as mere entertainment. In all three novels discussed in this chapter, *Romola* (1863), *Middlemarch* (1872) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876), she urges her readers to look beyond linear timelines and dramatic events in order to emphasize that reality unfolds in a subtle, prosaic, and indirect fashion, and—more importantly—in forms and ways that can be represented only with the

¹²¹ Ibid., 242.

narrative techniques available to novelists. Her novels train readers to accept narrative indeterminacy and anti-sensationalism as the necessary means of representing marriage in an authentic and ethical manner.

VI. HARDY'S CRITIQUE OF LEGAL MARRIAGE

This chapter links Hardy's interest in the law with his interest in the theater by showing how the novelist uses performance in his marriage plots both to unmask marriage law as a social artifice frequently disjointed from human nature and metaphysics, and to circumvent it. While Dickens and Eliot caution against the empty performativity of wedding rituals as well as artificial closures, they still present legal marriages, approached with sincerity, as both authentic and happy. By contrast, Hardy argues that formal wedding vows, even if spoken sincerely, are irrelevant and perhaps even antithetical to the way people form and maintain romantic relationships. The permanence of marriage, presumed by marriage law which generally disfavors divorce, is incompatible with the nature of the human condition, which always changes and depends largely on various accidents and mishaps. Although Hardy's revisions of the traditional marriage plot fail to offer any happy alternatives outside of marriage, most of his characters, who love each other "honest and true," do not wed in a legal marriage ceremony.¹ As someone who wed happily but grew estranged from his wife only to express his love for her after her death, Hardy had spent his life searching for the meaning behind his formal wedding vows. His novels express a yearning for authentic and sustainable relationships in the world of change and mishap, while highlighting the frequent disconnect between the vicissitudes of romantic relationships and the inflexibility of marriage laws.

¹ Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 320.

Hardy's interest in marriage law as well as his advocacy for legal reform have received extensive critical attention. Trish Ferguson notes that the novelist acted as a magistrate "for most of his fiction-writing career,"² and was keenly aware of the legal statutes, cases and "contemporary debates over legal reform."³ Notably, his fiction highlights the bias against women in the Matrimonial Causes Act (1857) and "explodes the myth that coverture was for the 'protection and benefit' of the female sex."⁴ Additionally, William A. Davis stresses that Hardy emphasizes certain legal forms and ceremonies "to facilitate some marriages and thwart others."⁵ For example, the development of the marriage plot in *Far From the Madding Crowd* depends largely on Fanny abandoning Frank at the altar during their attempted wedding ceremony. While I build on the scholarship concerning Hardy's advocacy for reforms in marriage law, I focus primarily on how Hardy exposes the substance and form of marriage law as both illogical and superficial.

My argument also engages scholarship on Hardy and the performance arts to underscore how he revises the traditional marriage plot by highlighting the artificiality of legal and religious rituals, while embracing the theatricality of communal wedding traditions. Additionally, I discuss Hardy's use of theatrical devices, such as identity swaps and costumes, to circumvent marriage law. Scholars have connected Hardy's novels to the theater before. Joan Grundy calls Hardy's novels literary "operas,"⁶ stressing that "Verdi and Hardy share the same taste for heightened dramatic moments

² Trish Ferguson, *Thomas Hardy's Legal Fictions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁵ William A. Davis, *Hardy and the Law* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 49.

⁶ Joan Grundy, *Hardy and the Sister Arts* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1979), 148.

and striking and often ironic contrasts.”⁷ She also points out that the cyclical structure of his novels and the dramatic tightening of his plots evoke Greek tragedy.⁸ Richard Nemesvari emphasizes the melodrama and sensationalism of Hardy’s marriage plots.⁹ However, in general, the scholars who discuss the connections between Hardy and theater have not considered in detail how the novelist revises the traditional marriage plot by criticizing the ritualism of legal marriage and how he utilizes theatricality to circumvent marriage law.

Hardy’s critique of legal marriage corresponds to his complex views on religion, science, and anthropology, all of which created “a densely intricate web of imaginative connections and qualifications.”¹⁰ A fine and detailed analysis of his philosophy is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, a few basic tenets of Hardy’s ideology help to illustrate how his marriage plots differ significantly from the marriage plots of other Victorian novelists in this dissertation. Hardy believes in the inevitability of human suffering, which undermines the likelihood of a formulaic happy conclusion. Influenced by the Victorian philosopher Herbert Spencer, whose work on evolution suggested that “there might not be any comprehension underlying the universe,” Hardy develops his own conception of the Immanent Will.¹¹ This is an all-encompassing, “unthinking force” governing the universe, “sure to inflict pain on a man.”¹² Moreover, guided by Darwin’s

⁷ Ibid., 152.

⁸ Ibid., 79.

⁹ See Richard Nemesvari, *Thomas Hardy, Sensationalism, and the Melodramatic Mode* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹⁰ Robert Schweik “The Influence of Religion, Science, and Philosophy on Hardy’s Writing,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. Dale Kramer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 54.

¹¹ Ibid., 65.

¹² J. Hillis Miller, *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1970), 13.

theory of evolution, which stressed a continuing struggle for existence in the natural world, Hardy also places his characters at the mercy of their environment, heredity, and adaptability rather than giving them control over their fates or placing them under the protection of some divine power.¹³ In his writings on Hardy, J. Hillis Miller's comments, "events happen as they do happen. They have neither value in themselves nor value in relation to any end beyond them."¹⁴ Richard D. Lehan also stresses that "chance, accident, [and] coincidence" govern Hardy's novels.¹⁵ Courtships and marriages are usually accidental rather than romantically destined or divinely ordained. In such a world, indifferent to human desires and governed by chance, no law—whether human or divine—can maintain permanent control, order, and logic over romantic relationships, let alone ensure their stability and happiness. Perhaps that is why many of Hardy's marriage plots often end in death, implying the metaphorical death of the traditional marriage plot dependent on a happy ending.¹⁶

While Gillian Beer acknowledges that Hardy's marriage plot is "almost always tragic or malign," she also stresses that the novelist gives the reader "the sense of multiple possibilities, only one of which can occur and thus be verified in time, space, and actuality."¹⁷ This chapter explores Beer's idea of "multiple possibilities" in Hardy by

¹³ For more explicit and subtle connections between Darwin and Hardy, see George Levine, "Hardy and Darwin: An Enchanting Hardy?" in *A Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. Keith Wilson (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 36–54.

¹⁴ Miller, *Distance and Desire*, 13.

¹⁵ Richard D. Lehan, *Realism and Naturalism: The Novel in an Age of Transition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 168.

¹⁶ In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Bathsheba Everdene and Gabriel Oak wed only after her long-term suitor murders her long-lost husband. In *The Woodlanders*, Giles Winterborne freezes to death by protecting the honor of his beloved Grace while her lawful husband abandons her and engages in adultery. In *Jude the Obscure*, Jude and Sue suffer the deaths of their children.

¹⁷ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 223.

demonstrating how he deconstructs the internal assumptions and contradictions behind the various definitions of happy marriages proposed by earlier Victorian writers. Posing many philosophical questions about conventional marriage, the novelist erodes the value of marriage as both a legal institution and a narrative goal. Both *The Woodlanders* and *Jude the Obscure* contain open-ended philosophical discussions about whether marriage should be a civil contract or a religious sacrament. While it is clear that Hardy supports legal divorce, he also suggests that wedding vows fail to have any transcendent meaning if a legal decree can easily undo them. In summary, by stressing both the practical and philosophical issues with legal marriage, the novelist unmask it as illogical, confusing and artificial, without offering any happy alternatives to such marriage.

Hardy revises the traditional marriage plot in three major ways, which emphasize the role of performance in courtship and marriage. First, his novels depict marriage commitments as fluid arrangements subject to manipulation through playacting. For example, using a theatrical disguise, Frank Troy in *Far from the Madding Crowd* stages his own death and becomes a circus performer, which allows him to escape from and return to his marriage with Bathsheba as he pleases. The frequency and ease with which certain spouses in Hardy's novels flout marriage law with identity swaps or costume changes suggest that, when such law fails to consider the complexity and changeability of human nature, people will likely disobey it as a legal artifice. Second, Hardy's marriage plots also challenge the conventional sequence of events in a marriage plot by featuring aborted weddings, postmortem marriage proposals, and remarriages after divorces, all of which imply the lack of permanence and orderliness in courtship and marriage.

Third and most important, Hardy suggests that the formalities of marriage, even if approached with sincerity, can thwart true love. The novelist generally rebukes one's superficial approach to weddings, rejecting the idea that genuine romantic commitments depend on external appearances, such as particular wedding accoutrements, as well as wedding rituals and forms required by the law or convention. He makes this point succinctly in a poem entitled "The Catching Ballet of the Wedding Clothes," where a bride prefers a suitor who had provided her with wedding clothes over her true husband ("She who wears a man's bride-clothes / Must be the man's wife").¹⁸ The poem not only attacks "the sentimental view of marriage as life-long companionship," as J. K. Lloyd Jones argues.¹⁹ It also suggests that the excessive focus on wedding formalities often erodes the value of one's marriage commitment.

However, Hardy's stance on the performance of wedding rituals is ambivalent. He criticizes legal and religious wedding rituals in *Jude the Obscure* suggesting that conventional wedding vows cannot constitute a true promise, even if spoken sincerely. If, as William R. Goetz suggests, the marriage oath is "intrinsically infelicitous,"²⁰ then legal formalities are empty utterances and gestures, which lack both efficacy and meaning in an indifferent universe that thwarts human motives and desires. While Hardy generally criticizes the artificiality of many legal and religious wedding rituals, in *The Woodlanders* he embraces communal wedding traditions—notwithstanding their theatricality—because they preserve the authentic character of the nineteenth-century

¹⁸ Thomas Hardy, "The Catching Ballet of Wedding Clothes," in *Thomas Hardy and the Comic Muse* by J. K. Lloyd Jones (London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 172–73.

¹⁹ Jones, *Thomas Hardy and the Comic Muse*, 173.

²⁰ William R. Goetz, "The Felicity and Infelicity of Marriage in *Jude the Obscure*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 38, no. 2 (September 1983): 195.

English countryside. For example, Grace's insistence that she and Fitzpiers marry in her local church functions as a defense against the extinction of a rural life, threatened by the effects of the Industrial Revolution. Jan Jedrzejewski notes that, despite his pessimism of Christian dogma, Hardy appreciated the "theatricality, solemnity and imaginative richness" of religious rituals to the extent that they represented the historical and cultural tradition of the Western world as well as the expression of humanity's need for a sense of moral and social stability within the turmoil of modern life.²¹ There is even a recorded memory of Hardy as a young boy "wrap[ping] himself in a tablecloth, and read[ing] the Morning Prayer standing in a chair, his cousin playing the clerk with loud Amens, and his grandmother representing the congregation."²² However, Hardy's appropriation of rural and religious wedding rituals in some of his novels does not dispel his doubts about the empty performativity of many wedding ceremonies. He also stresses that all rituals are subject to manipulation.

Far from the Madding Crowd (1874)

In *Far from the Madding Crowd* Hardy revises the traditional marriage plot in four major ways, all of which underscore the role of performance in courtship and marriage. First, the novel represents the formalization of marriage as antithetical to romance by depicting weddings as public spectacles. Second, the novel challenges both the conventional sequence of events in the traditional marriage plot by featuring long-unresolved courtships, a postmortem marriage proposal, an aborted wedding, and a temporarily abandoned marriage. Third, the plot is marked by dramatic surprises,

²¹ Jan Jedrzejewski, *Thomas Hardy and the Church* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 120, 129.

²² Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Works of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1985), 20.

mishaps, and accidents that undermine faith in marriage as an orderly merger of private desires and public interests. Fourth, Hardy uses performance to show that people can easily manipulate and circumvent formal ways of regulating marriage.

The novel criticizes the increased formalization of marriage by representing weddings as embarrassing public spectacles that obstruct rather than celebrate true love. When Fanny Robin mistakenly goes to the wrong church on her wedding day, her beloved Frank Troy is left waiting at the altar. Humiliated by the audience of church attendees, he aborts the wedding. Hardy highlights the theatricality of this scene by having Frank pace at the altar as if he were pacing on a stage. Not only does “the grotesque clockwork”²³ with a mechanical figure (which dramatically pops forward and then regresses while striking the bell) amplify every minute of Fanny’s absence, but the church audience comments on Frank’s abandonment at the altar.

“Where’s the woman?” whispered some of the spectators. . . .
 “I wonder where the woman is!” a voice whispered again.
 There began now that slight shifting of feet, that artificial coughing among several, which betrays a nervous suspense. . . .
 The women threw off their nervousness, and titters and giggling became more frequent. Then came a dead silence.²⁴

The nervous whispers and giggling of the spectators at this public spectacle wound Frank’s pride and cause him to reject Fanny. This is a prime example of what William A. Davis sees as “plot-changing moments”; calling off a wedding “produces changes in the characters, in their motivations, in their relationships, and in their subsequent actions.”²⁵ Here, the “plot-changing moment” is brought about by the theatrical spectacle of Frank’s

²³ Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, 414.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Davis, *Thomas Hardy and the Law*, 66.

humiliation at the altar in a wedding ceremony that never happens. The aborted wedding severs Frank and Fanny's relationship, and the two never marry.

Hardy purposefully juxtaposes Frank's melodramatic reaction to his nuptial humiliation with Fanny's rational explanation for her tardiness to illustrate how the excessive focus on wedding formalities can thwart the course of love. The bride's honest mistake of going to "All Souls" instead of "All Saints" church should not, to Hardy, prevent the marriage of two soulmates.²⁶ Fanny argues, "the mistake was not such a terrible thing!" and the ceremony "could be to-morrow as well."²⁷ Although Frank had been ready to marry Fanny for life, he now vows that he will not "go through that experience again for some time."²⁸ Even when Fanny finally appears at a square across from the church, and the two of them talk privately without any spectators, Frank still refuses to marry the woman he loves. Nothing can erase his humiliation caused by the public spectacle of Fanny appearing to leave him at the altar, even if she did not intend to do so.

Fanny's mistake of going to the wrong church for her wedding illustrates the significance of chance, mishap, and accident governing courtship and marriage in the novel. Her desire to marry Frank is thwarted by an unintended action—the mere mistake of going to the wrong church—an accident that indirectly leads to her death and pushes Frank into his unhappy marriage to Bathsheba Everdene. The novel features other similar mishaps that affect the courtship and marriage plots. Bathsheba's hapless act of sending Boldwood a valentine in jest, which he and other villagers interpret as a marriage

²⁶ Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, 413.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 415.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

proposal, propels her into a long and tortuous courtship, which she never intended. Additionally, her failure to read Pennyways's note about Frank's identity and return to Weatherbury also makes her miss crucial intelligence that her husband is still alive. In sum, Hardy suggests that success in courtship and marriage is not exclusively a matter of honest intentions. Rather, it depends, at least in part, on various blows of chance beyond his characters' control.

Bathsheba avoids Frank's fate by marrying Gabriel Oak in a private ceremony. She insists that "all the parish shall not be in Church, looking at her" as they had stared at Frank waiting for Fanny at the altar.²⁹ Such an approach marks a significant change in Bathsheba's attitude toward weddings from the beginning of the novel, where she thinks of a wedding as an empty ritual. Initially, she dreams of playing the role of a bride:

Well, what I mean is that I shouldn't mind being a bride at a wedding, if I could be one without having a husband. But since a woman can't show off in that way by herself, I shan't marry—at least yet.³⁰

The quote suggests that Bathsheba sees her wedding as a matter of external accoutrements, detached from long term marital responsibilities. She likes the idea of looking and acting like a bride, without assuming any serious responsibilities of a wife. Hardy refers to Bathsheba as a "performer" from the opening of the novel when Gabriel watches her observe herself in a looking glass:³¹ She "simply observed herself as a fair product of Nature in the feminine kind, her thoughts seeming to glide into far-off though likely dramas in which men would play a part."³² Bathsheba's belief that marriage is a matter of play-acting conforms with her simplistic vision of relationships as dramatic

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 349.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 27–28.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

³² *Ibid.*, 6.

entertainments she can control. However, after she experiences a difficult marriage with Frank Troy, she requests “the most private, secret, plainest wedding that it is possible to have” when marrying Gabriel.³³ Although the novel ends conventionally with the wedding of Bathsheba and Gabriel, Hardy does not describe such wedding in detail. In fact, their marriage is known only by the fact that the two of them “walk arm in arm for the first time in their lives.”³⁴ Although some local “performers” honor the wedding by playing music on Bathsheba’s porch after the wedding, in general, the ceremony takes place quickly, quietly, and without much celebration.³⁵

Bathsheba’s fear of a large, public wedding also illustrates Hardy’s concern about “the denaturing, by institutionalization, of human love relationships,” as Rosemarie Morgan puts it.³⁶ The marriage of Bathsheba’s parents, for example, demonstrates how formalizing romance destroys it, which only corroborates Frank’s comment that “all [romances] end at marriage.”³⁷ Coggan claims that while Bathsheba’s father truly loved her mother, their marriage changed him into “one of the ficklest husbands alive, after a while.”³⁸ He explains further:

The pore feller were faithful and true enough to [his wife] in his wish, but his heart would rove, do what he would. He spoke to me in real tribulation about it once. “Coggan,” he said, “I could never wish for a handsomer woman than I’ve got, but feeling she’s ticketed as my lawful wife, I can’t help my wicked heart wandering, do what I will.”³⁹

³³ *Ibid.*, 348.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 351.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 352.

³⁶ Rosemarie Morgan, introduction to Hardy’s *Far from the Madding Crowd*, xxxi.

³⁷ Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, 236.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Such a confession, corroborated by the fact that Mr. Everdene eventually “cure[s]” his marriage by making his wife “take off her wedding-ring and calling her by her maiden name” illustrates the novel’s viewpoint that marital formalities often sour romance.⁴⁰ Given how marriage formalities destroyed the romance between her parents, it is possible that, in time, Bathsheba will turn into another fickle wife when she feels suffocated by the formality of her marriage to Gabriel.

While Hardy’s criticism of excessive wedding formalities evokes Dickens and the realist critique of empty theatricality, he complicates this point with his depiction of Frank’s marriage to Bathsheba. Although Frank marries Bathsheba secretly in a private, off-stage ceremony, he later invites the whole village to their wedding feast. The public wedding feast functions as an important plot device foreshadowing the dysfunction and inauthenticity of their marriage because it highlights Frank’s failure as Bathsheba’s true husband. He turns the wedding celebration into drunken chaos, making himself and other men indisposed to help Bathsheba during the impending storm while his wife tries to save the crops with Gabriel Oak, her future husband. As such, Hardy does not so much advocate for or against theatrical weddings, but rather warns readers against the frequent disconnect between wedding formalities and marital reality.

Further, the novel stresses that the course of true love does not follow a conventional narrative sequence of events, implied by the happy conclusion in the traditional marriage plot. For example, though Fanny and Frank never wed, they function as a married couple in the novel. Fanny considers her wedding to Frank a mere formality, given that she is already pregnant by him. Although she initially shows some concern

⁴⁰ Ibid.

about where to announce their impending wedding, she already refers to herself as Frank's wife when she comes to his military barracks trying to clarify their wedding date. The novel continues to highlight the looseness of formal terms, such as "husband" and "wife," when—upon seeing Fanny's corpse—Frank suddenly proclaims her to be his true wife:

This woman is more to me, dead as she is, than ever you were, or are, or can be. . . . He turned to Fanny then. "But never mind, darling," he said; "in the sight of Heaven you are my very, very wife!"⁴¹

First, Frank's melodramatic proclamation, calling Fanny's corpse his wife "in the sight of Heaven," undermines his legal marriage to Bathsheba ("A ceremony before a priest doesn't make a marriage").⁴² While Frank may be particularly unreliable in his romantic commitments to both Fanny and Bathsheba, his final recognition that his earnest bond with Fanny supersedes his legal bond to Bathsheba highlights the nominal function of marriage law, which lacks any actual power to control how spouses feel about each other over time. Second, when Frank first calls off his wedding to Fanny and then refers to her corpse as his wife, he disrupts the conventional sequence of events in a marriage plot. Marriage law enshrines marriage as fixed, permanent, even a divinely-ordained sacrament. The traditional marriage plot, which emphasizes that people marry happily for life, corroborates such a vision of marriage. However, Frank's relationship with Fanny shows that the course of true love rarely unfolds in an orderly manner.

Additionally, Hardy's use of many explicitly theatrical, melodramatic, and sensational elements in the novel likewise portrays marriage as a fluid arrangement subject to manipulation through deliberate play-acting rather than an unbreakable, life-

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 264.

long commitment. While Hardy's unflattering nickname of "trickster" for Frank connotes the author's general disdain for his deception, the novelist also empowers Frank to control his marriage to Bathsheba through performance.⁴³ As mentioned, Frank's theatrical disguise as a circus performer allows him to both escape from and return to his unfortunate marriage as he wishes. Thanks to his costume and makeup, Bathsheba cannot recognize her own husband even when he performs a few feet away from her, playing highwayman Dick Turpin in a circus performance. Frank decides to perform silently and he "judiciously 'lin[es]' his face with a wire" which makes him "safe from the eyes of Bathsheba and her men."⁴⁴ Later, he also sees Bathsheba through a small gap in one of the dressing tents where she also fails to recognize him even though he dramatically almost touches her hand. Additionally, instead of being a mere spectator, Bathsheba unintentionally becomes the center of attention at the circus when Boldwood offers her a seat on a raised bench, which draws attention to her, as if she were part of the show.

Bathsheba immediately found, to her confusion, that she was the single reserved individual in the tent, the rest of the crowded spectators, one and all, standing on their legs on the borders of the arena, where they got twice as good a view of the performance for half the money. Hence as many eyes were turned upon her, enthroned alone in this place of honor, against a scarlet background, as upon the ponies and clown who were engaged in preliminary exploits in the center.⁴⁵

Bathsheba's unusual seating at the circus allows Frank to notice her in the crowd and disguise himself before she recognizes him. In that sense, both his theatrical disguise as well as Bathsheba's position in the audience, give him the upper hand in controlling the situation at the circus. His disguise allows him to feel close to his wife when convenient without any legal and moral responsibility toward her.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 299.

Bathsheba's vulnerability both as a spectator and an unintended actress at the circus mirrors her vulnerability under the law. As Frank is merely presumed dead, she cannot quickly remarry or even court other men. While her missing husband does not offer her any physical or economic protections, she is still legally bound to him. Therefore, when Frank suddenly appears at Boldwood's Christmas party to reclaim his wife, he can legally do so. Trish Ferguson argues that, by plotting such a situation, Hardy implicitly "expands the definition of marital cruelty" to include "emotional and financial abuse."⁴⁶ Marriage laws recognized nothing of the sort, instead allowing Frank to abandon and neglect Bathsheba while preventing her from suing for divorce. At best, as Davis argues, the law implicitly compels Frank to return to his wife because he fears "any liabilities that might befall him as a wife deserter."⁴⁷ Indeed, Pennyways warns Frank against the consequences of his deception by saying:

If a man by changing his name and so forth takes steps to deceive the world and his own wife, he's a cheat, and that in the eye of the law is ayless [always] a rogue, and that is ayless a vagabond; and that's a punishable word.⁴⁸

While Pennyways's warning implies that the law does not condone deception *per se*, Frank's successful escape from his wife demonstrates that the law does little to prevent such deception. In the end, Frank returns to Bathsheba not because he is truly concerned about facing any legal consequences of his abandonment, but rather because he is tired of his life as a performer and jealous of Boldwood.

While Hardy explores the narrative possibilities afforded by the uncertainty surrounding Frank's disappearance, he does not condone Frank's deception. Rather, the

⁴⁶ Ferguson, *Thomas Hardy's Legal Fictions*, 97.

⁴⁷ Davis, *Thomas Hardy and the Law*, 99.

⁴⁸ Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, 317.

novel stresses the harmful consequences of such deception not only for Bathsheba but also for other characters in the novel. For example, Bathsheba uses her uncertain status as a presumed widow to mislead Boldwood about her plans to marry him. She often uses slippery language, subtle insinuations, and unfinished sentences in her conversations with Boldwood to muddle her true intent. Finally, she makes what Randall Craig calls “two proleptic promises: to become engaged at Christmas and to marry six years after that.”⁴⁹ However, such uncertain promises, contingent upon the future and based on Bathsheba’s ambiguous legal status as a widow, only aggravate her deception of Boldwood. Trying to justify her lack of clear commitment, she says:

“You forget that his death was never absolutely proved, and may not have taken place; so that I may not be really a widow” . . . catching at the straw of escape that the fact afforded.⁵⁰

Frank’s deception of Bathsheba allows Hardy to emphasize the dramatic intensity of her tortuous courtship with Boldwood, which twists and turns depending on whether or not she thinks Frank is alive. However, it also enables Bathsheba’s insincerity towards Boldwood, which Hardy criticizes by suggesting that her dishonesty becomes a proximate cause of his tragic ending.

In summary, *Far from the Madding Crowd* criticizes the formalization of marriage in several ways. It depicts weddings as public spectacles, challenges the linearity of the marriage plot, emphasizes the role of accident in courtship and marriage, and illustrates that marriage law often enables deception. Such elements of the marriage plot challenge the traditional vision of marriage as a publicly sanctioned and divinely

⁴⁹ Randall Craig, *Promising Language: Betrothal in Victorian Law and Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 14.

⁵⁰ Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, 307.

sanctioned life-long commitment that unfolds in an orderly, predictable fashion. The explicitly theatrical elements of the novel, such as Frank's disguise as a circus performer, present courtship and marriage as two continually unsettled states that can be easily manipulated through play-acting.

***The Woodlanders* (1887)**

Hardy initially intended for *The Woodlanders* to be the immediate successor to *Far from the Madding Crowd*, but in 1874 he "put aside a woodland story" for ten years.⁵¹ Notwithstanding the period elapsed between *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Woodlanders* the novels share many themes in common, including the role of accident in courtship and marriage. While in *Far from the Madding Crowd* Hardy suggests that conventional marriage destroys romance, in *The Woodlanders* he distinguishes between legal and communal wedding rituals, cautiously embracing the latter. Additionally, Hardy specifically discusses divorce law in the novel. He implies that, even in its reformed state, divorce remains a legal fiction, which merely raises false hopes for women in unhappy marriages.

In contrast to the destructive consequences of legal wedding vows, which result in inflexible marriages, in *The Woodlanders* Hardy embraces communal wedding traditions, even if they are theatrical in nature, as ways of connecting people to their communities and conferring meaning on their intentions. This represents Hardy's departure from earlier Victorian writers who generally eschewed all theatrical wedding rituals. Whereas these earlier writers sought to unmask inauthentic performances, particularly those

⁵¹ William H. Matchett, "The Woodlanders, or Realism in Sheep's Clothing," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 9, no. 4 (March 1955): 245.

required by law, Hardy is now concerned with larger forces that desacralize all human emotions and intentions. Literalizing such dehumanization through Doctor Fitzpiers's offer to buy Grammer Oliver's brain for ten pounds and Mrs. Charmond's requisition of Marty South's chestnut hair, the novelist presents a world in which people are reduced to objectified commodities. He implies that communal wedding rituals may recreate the sacredness of marriage and assert the value of human relationships in an impersonal world.

While Hardy embraces rural wedding rituals as important means of preserving one's communal identity, he does not imply that such rituals can guarantee lasting personal happiness of the spouses. The "gay procession" of Suke Damson and Tim Tangs's wedding party illustrates this point well. Hardy contrasts the symmetry and harmony of such procession and its participants against the mismatched marriage of Grace and Fitzpiers. As Grace thinks of Fitzpiers as "cleverer, greater than herself, one outside her mental orbit . . . her ruler rather than her equal,"⁵² the women in the wedding procession seem evenly matched with their partners to emphasize the idea of marital unity. The narrator observes,

Though the wind was keen the women were in light attire, and the flowered waistcoats of the men had a pleasing vividness of pattern. Each of the gentler ones clung to the arm of her partner so tightly as to have with him one step, rise, swing, gait, almost one center of gravity.⁵³

The wedding procession allows Tim and Suke to celebrate their wedded bliss with a larger community, connecting them to each other, their family and friends. The wedding rituals at the procession also remind them that spouses should live in harmony and

⁵² Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, 166.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 337.

complement each other in marriage. However, the symbolism of the wedding procession alone is insufficient to ensure marital happiness of the newlyweds, which still depends on the vagaries of human nature and condition.

Hardy contrasts rural wedding traditions with legal wedding formalities under the contractual theory of marriage, implying that the latter often undermine the sacredness of marriage. Marriage as a legal contract between two individuals typically excludes their larger community from any role in forming the marriage. Ferguson points out that Fitzpiers and Grace disagree about the form of their wedding because he believes that marriage is a civil contract while she treats it as “an indissoluble tie” created in front of God and family.⁵⁴ Although Hardy does not necessarily privilege one definition of marriage over the other, in *The Woodlanders* he suggests that Fitzpiers’s insistence to marry Grace in a registry office shows his lack of appreciation for the Woodlanders and their belief in weddings as important rites of passage. The novelist also connects Fitzpiers’s request for a quiet registry wedding with the doctor’s desire to conceal his affairs with village women. Fitzpiers justifies his argument for a private, civil wedding as follows:

You see, dear, a noisy bell-ringing marriage at church has this objection in our case: it would be a thing of report a long way round. Now I would gently, as gently as possible, indicate to you how inadvisable such publicity would be if we leave Hintock, and I purchase the practice that I contemplate purchasing at Budmouth—hardly more than twenty miles off. Forgive my saying that it will be far better if nobody there knows where you come from, nor anything about your parents.⁵⁵

Unpersuaded by Fitzpiers’s argument for a registry marriage, Grace insists on being married in the church: “If our wedding can be at church, I say yes,” she answered, in a

⁵⁴ Ferguson, *Thomas Hardy’s Legal Fictions*, 119.

⁵⁵ Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, 165.

measured voice. "If not, I say no."⁵⁶ While she finally gets her way and marries Fitzpiers in the church, their initial quarrels over the form of their wedding foreshadow the haplessness of their future marriage. Grace considers her wedding vows sacred and she feels compelled to keep them, even when Fitzpiers betrays her with other women such as Suke Damson and Mrs. Charmond. Fitzpiers, on the other hand, does not have any qualms about carrying on relationships with other women, both while courting Grace and after marriage.

Although Hardy touts the value of communal rituals, he also recognizes the danger of having one's neighbors meddle into her private affairs. Ferguson comments that "Hardy's tragic heroines succumb to interrogation based on community judgment," and Grace Melbury is a case in point.⁵⁷ Even after seeing Suke leave his house at dawn, Grace cannot break her engagement to Fitzpiers when everyone in the village expects her to marry him. Grace's father, Mr. Melbury, specifically warns her against ending the engagement by saying:

"Well, make fools of us all; make us laughing-stocks; break it off; have your own way."
 "But who knows of the engagement as yet? how can breaking it disgrace you?"
 Melbury then by degrees admitted that he had mentioned the engagement to this acquaintance and to that, till she perceived that in his restlessness and pride he had published it everywhere.⁵⁸

Mr. Melbury's words show that once Grace's engagement to Fitzpiers becomes public knowledge, she no longer can fully control its course. In the end Grace feels she must proceed with her wedding to Fitzpiers, even knowing that their marriage will be a charade.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁵⁷ Ferguson, *Thomas Hardy's Legal Fictions*, 35.

⁵⁸ Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, 168.

Additionally, Hardy suggests that all rituals are subject to manipulation. The “finger of fate” that turns Grace into Fitzpiers’s fiancé at the Midsummer Eve’s mating ritual at first appears to be yet another accident.⁵⁹ During the ritual Fitzpiers “claim[s]” Grace as his future wife by stepping in front of Giles to quickly catch her when Giles’s foot accidentally slips away from Grace.⁶⁰ Although the slippage of Giles’s foot is an accident, Fitzpiers also deliberately manipulates the situation when he takes advantage of Giles’s unfortunate position—both literally (his foot slipping) and metaphorically (his lack of education and loss of house, which temporarily put him in a difficult position to propose marriage to Grace).

Hardy tersely narrates Grace’s wedding day, describing her merely as awaking and then becoming Fitzpiers’s wife a few hours later. Such a minimalistic description of Grace’s wedding symbolizes the absence of her authentic assent to this marriage. Not only does she realize that her “new relations” with Fitzpiers resulted from his opportunism during the mating ritual,⁶¹ but she also feels absent from the marriage in which she has to tolerate her husband’s adultery and abandonment.⁶² Hardy provides more detail when describing Grace’s preparations for her wedding: her “flutter of excitement over the wedding-gown”⁶³ from Exbury and her anticipation to play “the heroine of an hour . . . the wife of a cultivated man.”⁶⁴ She pictures herself walking “towards the altar, flushed by the purple light and bloom of her own passion, without a single misgiving as to the sealing of the bond.”⁶⁵ The emphasis on costumes,

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 173.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

performance and staging of Grace's wedding implies Hardy's agreement with other Victorian writers, such as Dickens and Eliot, who criticize privileging form over substance in marriage. Grace's superficial wedding preparations represent a temporary fantasy rather than a conscious choice to make a life-long commitment. In that sense, Grace's quick wedding to Fitzpiers seems almost as arbitrary as their courtship.

The novel juxtaposes the easiness of Grace's betrothal to Fitzpiers with the rigidity of marriage law that prevents her from divorcing her philandering husband. Hardy presents the 1857 Divorce Act, specifically referenced in the plot, as a legal fiction. Although the act allowed for divorce, it did so only under an extremely rare set of circumstances for women, such as the husband's adultery aggravated by some additional offense. The fact that Mr. Melbury learns about the Divorce Act from Fred Beaucock, a drunk and a "local dandy," further implies that the law is an unreliable agent of hope and justice for abused women.⁶⁶ Reminiscent of a Dickensian incompetent and deceptive lawyer, Beaucock assures Mr. Melbury that "unmarrying is as easy as marrying," and the law treats the rich and the poor alike.⁶⁷ Based on those legal misrepresentations, Mr. Melbury believes that this "new law in the land"⁶⁸ can free his daughter from an abusive marriage "quite easily,"⁶⁹ while Grace idealizes the law by comparing it to "a mysterious, beneficent, god-like entity."⁷⁰ Unfortunately, the divorce court denies Grace's petition for divorce because Fitzpiers has not been "sufficiently cruel" to her.⁷¹ John M. Biggs states

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 289.

that, in theory, matrimonial cruelty when combined with adultery was sufficient grounds for a woman to petition for divorce under Victorian marriage law. However, he also stresses the subjective nature of many marital cruelty cases in Victorian England.⁷² The novel implies that the divorce court acts arbitrarily when it denies Grace's petition for divorce. Further, it suggests that the law should broaden its definition of matrimonial cruelty by recognizing Fitzpiers's adultery and abandonment of Grace as cruel.

Hardy emphasizes that dishonest people, such as Fitzpiers and Mrs. Charmond, take advantage of marriage law that fails to provide actual remedies for wives with adulterous husbands. For example, Giles's unflattering description of Mrs. Charmond as "one who has smiled where she has not loved, and loved where she has not married" highlights her past as an actress and implies that she has a proclivity for deception.⁷³ Nevertheless, marriage law enables her extramarital affair with Fitzpiers by making adultery alone insufficient grounds for Grace's divorce from him. As Davis puts it, the novel demonstrates how "the law, though capable of undergoing positive change . . . is equally capable of holding lives in the balance and then ruining them."⁷⁴ It seems that the tragic ending of the novel, highlighting Giles's death and Grace's uncertain reconciliation with Fitzpiers, could have been avoided had Grace been able to divorce Fitzpiers and marry Giles.

While in *The Woodlanders* Hardy advocates for a fairer and easier dissolution of troubled marriages, he also poses a philosophical question about divorce. Melanie Williams argues that *Jude the Obscure* "presents a complex exposition of the formalities

⁷² See John M. Biggs, *The Concept of Matrimonial Cruelty* (London: Athlone Press, 1962), 9.

⁷³ Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, 227.

⁷⁴ Davis, *Thomas Hardy and the Law*, 129.

of marriage and divorce, providing an interesting record of the informed lay person's filtered reception and knowledge of the technical law and of the play between secular and canonical concepts."⁷⁵ The same observation holds true for *The Woodlanders* in which divorce law seems illogical and arbitrary to the main characters, such as Mr. Melbury, Giles and Grace. On the one hand, they believe that Grace should be able to free herself from her marriage to Fitzpiers because he had abandoned and betrayed her with Mrs. Charmond. On the other hand, as Giles suggests, if wedding vows elevate marriage to the status of a sacred, unbreakable bond, then the law should not have the power to break "the adamant barrier of marriage"⁷⁶ with the "mere dash of the pen" of divorce court judges.⁷⁷ In that sense marriage is "hopelessly unalterable."⁷⁸ In other words, though Hardy advocates for more flexible divorce laws for those already married, he also questions the seriousness of wedding vows if a legal divorce can undo them.

Mr. Melbury, Grace, and Giles continually oscillate between their hopes that the divorce law can set Grace free and their fears that dissolving her marriage would be a sin. When Grace asks Giles to help her escape from her cruel husband, he agrees to do so because "appearance is no matter, when the reality is right."⁷⁹ Since Giles thinks of his breakup with Grace as "the almost irreparable error of dividing two whom nature had striven to join together," he struggles to recognize her legal marriage to Fitzpiers as a natural union.⁸⁰ On the other hand, while he agrees to watch over Grace during her estrangement from Fitzpiers, Giles cannot reside in the same cottage as her because

⁷⁵ Melanie Williams, "The Law of Marriage in *Jude the Obscure*," *Nottingham Law Journal* 5, no. 2 (1996): 168.

⁷⁶ Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, 277.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 308.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 277.

sleeping under the same roof with somebody else's wife would be a sin. Grace views her hapless marriage to Fitzpiers in similar terms. Although she knows that he is not a decent husband, she feels that she must honor her wedding vows, no matter the circumstances, saying "I have promised, and I will pay."⁸¹ In other words, neither Giles nor Grace can disregard marriage law, even if they find it both unjust and incomprehensible.

As with *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Woodlanders* emphasizes the role of accident in courtship and marriage, which often leads to unnatural unions. The novel also criticizes divorce law as immoral since it prevents people, especially women, from freeing themselves from abusive marriages with philandering spouses who abandon them. As the novel advocates for an easier dissolution of cruel marriages, it also questions the value of forming conventional marriage if divorce law can easily dissolve it—a subject that Hardy explores in more detail in his final novel, *Jude the Obscure*.

***Jude the Obscure* (1895)**

Jude the Obscure completes Hardy's deconstruction of the traditional marriage plot by reversing and undermining the conventional meaning of weddings. The novel ends on a grotesque note by featuring two weddings, neither one of which produces a happy ending. Both Jude and Sue remarry their original spouses, whom they had previously divorced, but they do so most unhappily. Upon their remarriage, Arabella and Jude's landlord recognizes "the note of ordinary wedlock"⁸² in their relationship only when he overhears Arabella "haranguing Jude in rattling terms, and ultimately flinging a

⁸¹ Ibid., 307.

⁸² Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 385.

shoe at his head.”⁸³ As such, even if the novel fails to present any feasible alternatives to legal marriage, it unmasks such a marriage as nothing more than a “meretricious contract . . . degrading, immoral [and] unnatural.”⁸⁴

Hardy’s argument against legal marriage in *Jude* stresses that the two final weddings create marriages that are not only unhappy, but also immoral. The novelist clarified his position on legal marriage in his 1912 “Postscript” to the novel, where he noted that “the civil law should be only the enunciation of the law of nature,”⁸⁵ and so legal marriage should end “as soon as it becomes a cruelty to either of the parties.”⁸⁶ In other words, legal marriage has no true value and becomes “essentially and morally no marriage” if it contradicts natural law.⁸⁷ Like a sensation novelist, Hardy further argues that, when civil law makes divorce very difficult, people will continually circumvent such law by abandoning their legal spouses and forming relationships outside of marriage. When Arabella announces to Jude that she is moving to Australia, he has “not the least objection to her going.”⁸⁸ Similarly, when Sue tells Phillotson that she wants to live with Jude, he simply lets her go. Hardy allows his main characters to drift in and out of marriage when such a legal commitment becomes disjointed from their actual feelings and living arrangements. A legal marriage lacks any meaning if it ceases to be authentic. Although, in the end, Jude remarries Arabella, just as Sue remarries Phillotson, such marriages are both unnatural and immoral according to Hardy’s ideal of marriage.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 388.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 467.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 467.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 71.

As Hardy advocates the convergence of civil and natural laws governing marriage, he also questions whether the two laws can indeed converge in the marriage context. While other Victorian novelists criticize the insincerity and empty performativity of many wedding rituals, in *Jude* Hardy suggests that wedding vows are unnatural, even if spoken sincerely, because people cannot genuinely promise how they will feel and what will happen in the future. As William Goetz asserts, *Jude* shows readers that “the convention of the marriage oath is *intrinsically* infelicitous because of the nature of promises and the nature of human emotions.”⁸⁹ The concept of an infelicitous utterance reflects the speech act theory of J. L. Austin, who argued that performative utterances, such as wedding vows, cannot be judged as true or false, only as “felicitous” and “infelicitous,” depending on whether or not the promisor will fulfill the uttered promise.⁹⁰ As Goetz notes, Hardy suggests that wedding vows are promises that cannot be fulfilled regardless of the sincerity of the promisor’s intent. In Sue’s words, even if one’s commitment to another is authentic and based on mutual affection, “it is foreign to a man’s nature to go on loving a person when he is *told* that he must and shall be that person’s lover” (emphasis added).⁹¹ Readers witness this phenomenon in the case of Arabella and Jude’s first wedding. Although Arabella’s entrapment of Jude in marriage is based on deception, as she pretends to carry his child, the couple speaks their first wedding vows in good faith. Nevertheless, the novel implies that Arabella and Jude cannot fulfill their mutual promise “that at every other time of their lives they would

⁸⁹ Goetz, “The Felicity and Infelicity of Marriage,” 195.

⁹⁰ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 5.

⁹¹ Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 259.

assuredly believe, feel, and desire precisely as they had believed, felt, and desired.”⁹² As Davis argues, their wedding vows require them “to do that which logic says cannot be done.”⁹³ Hardy portrays such legal promises as illogical and absurd.

Hardy also shows his skepticism about legal marriage by portraying it as an unhappy state. Jude and Sue are hesitant to marry in part because they believe that a family curse will necessarily make their marriage tragic.⁹⁴ Additionally, Sue’s negative experience as Phillotson’s lawful wife dissuades her from marrying Jude. In her words:

And it seems awful temerity in us two to go marrying! I am going to vow to you in the same words I vowed in to my other husband, and you to me in the same as you used to your other wife; regardless of the deterrent lesson we were taught by those experiments!⁹⁵

Unable to keep her wedding vows to Phillotson, Sue is hesitant to make the same promises to Jude. She fears that repeating her wedding vows to Jude, once she had already broken them with Phillotson, will only render her marriage to Jude meaningless and unlucky. Nevertheless, as Hardy presents the circumstances that disfavor the potential marriage between Sue and Jude, he still contemplates the possibility of them marrying each other.

Hardy’s narrative choice to present Jude and Sue on the verge of marrying each other is philosophically significant because it presents legal marriage as an option rather than a necessity. In the traditional marriage plot, true lovers inevitably and happily wed in the end. Even Hardy’s other novels, such as *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The*

⁹² *Ibid.*, 57–58.

⁹³ Davis, *Thomas Hardy and the Law*, 177.

⁹⁴ Widow Edlin reveals the curse in a sensational tale about Jude and Sue’s ancestors who killed each other while married over their dead child’s body. The husband’s unsuccessful attempt to steal the coffin of their child led to his hanging, which in turn drove the wife to madness. See Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 282–83.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 283.

Woodlanders suggest that a marriage can be happy if it legitimizes the couple's authentic commitment to each other. However, *Jude* challenges the very idea that true love should end in a happy marriage. Jude and Sue's disappointment with both civil and religious wedding ceremonies, as well as the novel's Biblical epigraph that "the letter killeth," erode the value of controlling romantic relationships through formalities.⁹⁶

Although Hardy implies a difference between defining marriage as a sacred vow versus a legal contract, he describes both religious and civil wedding ceremonies in deprecatory terms. He paints the registry office as a repulsive, dirty, and depressing place, filled with unhappy couples, muddy foot-marks, and musty law books. At the office, Jude and Sue observe a half drunken soldier marrying his "sad and timid" bride with "a black eye."⁹⁷ Discouraged by such sordid images that depict legal marriage as a dirty business, Sue remarks:

Jude—I don't like it here! I wish we hadn't come! The place gives me the horrors: it seems so unnatural at the climax of our love! I wish it had been at church, if it had to be at all. It is not so vulgar there!⁹⁸

Sue's disapprobation of the registry office suggests that civil weddings are too impersonal and unromantic. However, a religious wedding, which Jude and Sue hope would be more appealing than the civil ceremony, is equally off-putting. Sue comments that "the flowers in the bride's hand are sadly like the garland which decked the heifers of sacrifice in old times!"⁹⁹ Such a pejorative remark, implying that a bride is being sacrificed at the altar, portrays the religious wedding ceremony as a horrific rite connoting violence and destruction. Perhaps it also serves as an intertextual reference to

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 388.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 287.

the artificial flowers at Miss Petowker's farcical wedding in Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*. Unlike Miss Petowker who embraces the artificial charade of her wedding, Sue rejects both civil and religious weddings as inauthentic and objectionable.

Hardy's criticism of both civil and religious wedding ceremonies does not connote his approval for flouting marriage conventions. He implicitly criticizes Sue's mock wedding to Jude as an insincere charade. When Sue rehearses with Jude in preparation for her first wedding to Phillotson, she treats such a wedding rehearsal as an amusing performance by saying, "We have been doing such a funny thing!"¹⁰⁰ She holds Jude's arm "almost as if she loved him" and insists on walking to the altar with him "as if they were a married couple."¹⁰¹ Although Sue appears more serious at her actual wedding—her face is "nervously set"¹⁰²—she still merely mimes the motions of marrying Phillotson as if she portrayed a character in a nuptial play.

Hardy's critique of Sue's perfunctory approach to her wedding to Phillotson reflects his general rebuke of insincerity in marriage, whether it is the intrinsic infelicity of a wedding vow itself or the infelicity of an insincere promise. Hardy implies that Sue's shallow and inauthentic wedding to Phillotson exemplifies the Victorian society's myopic vision of marriage as performance art. When describing Phillotson's look on his wedding day, the narrator observes:

Phillotson's hair was brushed to a painful extent, and his shirt collar appeared stiffer than it had been for the previous twenty years. Beyond this he looked dignified and thoughtful, and altogether a man of whom it was not unsafe to predict that he would make a kind and considerate husband.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 173.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 172.

¹⁰² Ibid., 175.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 174.

The implication that Phillotson would be a good husband because of the way he is dressed implies that Victorian marriage is a social construct based on surface appearances. This image also echoes the novel's portrayal of Jude and Arabella's marriage as a hoax. It is not until after their wedding that Jude discovers Arabella's attractive dimples and hair are as artificial as her report of premarital pregnancy.

In addition to criticizing superficial approaches to marriage, Hardy questions whether the very concept of marriage is an artificial construct. Notwithstanding his deterministic and tragic view of human existence as well as his acceptance of the inevitability of suffering and evil, Hardy believed that the value of human existence lies in the individual's virtue and sincerity of intention. A legal marriage, in Hardy's view, destroys individuality because, under the principles of coverture, a wife loses her legal identity. Her property, children, and body belong to her husband. *Jude* specifically comments on this legal reality when Sue complains that being Phillotson's wife forces her to pretend she is someone other than herself. She says,

I am called Mrs. Richard Phillotson, living a calm, wedded life with my counterpart of that name. But I am not really Mrs. Richard Phillotson, but a woman tossed about, all alone, with aberrant passions and unaccountable antipathies.¹⁰⁴

Jude agrees that Sue's "wifedom" can "annihilate and digest [her] in its maw as an atom which has no further individuality."¹⁰⁵ As such, the novel criticizes legal marriage for forcing spouses to abandon their authentic selves and to assume new fictitious identities for the sake of a legal construct.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 189.

As Hardy criticizes legal marriage for denying a woman her legal persona, he also recognizes that Victorian women were dependent on men and forced to engage in social acting outside of marriage as well. Ironically, as much as Sue feels uncomfortable with playing the role of Mrs. Phillotson, she chooses to “openly adopt the name of Mrs. Fawley”¹⁰⁶ and calls Jude her “husband”¹⁰⁷ when they cannot find a place to sleep as an unmarried couple. According to Sue, “she was a married woman”¹⁰⁸ by loving Jude and raising a family with him, but according to her “landlady’s sense she was not.”¹⁰⁹ As such, occasionally Sue pretends to be Jude’s lawful wife to procure a home for her family. Even Arabella tells Sue that “life with a man is more businesslike after [marriage], and money matters work better.”¹¹⁰ Additionally, as Penny Boumelha argues, Sue gradually realizes that her individual freedom is “no less constrained or reduced” by Phillotson’s legal right to her body than by “Jude’s emotional demands upon it.”¹¹¹ Therefore, once Sue has children, she gradually lessens her opposition to formal marriage, realizing that life outside of legal marriage inconveniences women as well.

Hardy’s argument, that it is marriage laws that represent “the tragic machinery of the tale” in this novel, stresses that marriage law enables deception.¹¹² Davis argues that Arabella is “the most legally astute character in Hardy’s novels . . . [who] tests the law in every way that suits her purpose” by twice tricking Jude into a legal marriage, entering a criminal second marriage in Australia, and advising Sue on how to become Jude’s legal

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 298.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 312.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 331.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 213.

¹¹¹ Penny Boumelha, *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 144.

¹¹² Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 467.

wife.¹¹³ Additionally, although the four main characters in the novel do divorce, such divorces are only successful because of the collusion and deception between the characters.¹¹⁴ For example, Sue's divorce from Phillotson is based on her alleged adultery even though she does not engage in adultery prior to the resolution of the lawsuit. Moreover, even as the main characters in the novel divorce, their divorce decrees appear only conditional. According to the Matrimonial Causes Act, divorce was initially granted only for three to six months and subject to challenge before it was made absolute.¹¹⁵ That is why the four characters can return to their original legal spouses relatively easily. Additionally, Sue claims that her second wedding to Phillotson is "for form's sake," which implies that her original religious vows to Phillotson were never dissolved, despite their legal divorce.¹¹⁶ By the end of the novel, she seems to believe that a church wedding connotes "an absolute, inviolable 'felicity'" that makes her original marriage to Phillotson indissoluble.¹¹⁷ In sum, Hardy stresses that the inner workings of divorce law are so complicated and confusing that they provide little or no actual relief to most people who wish to dissolve their marriages. At best, people only try to circumvent marriage law and social convention, deceiving each other and society at large.

Highlighting the many shortcomings of legal marriage, Hardy contemplates the possibility of an alternate romantic commitment independent of any formal structures. Jeanette King argues that Jude "finally comes to see all laws as the expression of the forces which everywhere constrict the individual."¹¹⁸ Since his love for Sue is authentic,

¹¹³ Davis, *Thomas Hardy and the Law*, 171.

¹¹⁴ See Davis, *Thomas Hardy and the Law*, 143; Williams, "The Law of Marriage," 174–75.

¹¹⁵ See Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 257–58 and the endnote on page 447.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 360.

¹¹⁷ Goetz, "The Felicity and Infelicity of Marriage," 211.

¹¹⁸ Jeanette King, *Tragedy in Victorian Novel: Theory and Practice in the Novels of George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Henry James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 123.

he deems it superior to any other bond artificially imposed by law, religion, or society. In doing so, he embraces his own sense of natural law, saying:

But you are *my* wife! Yes, you are. You know it. I have always regretted that feint of ours in going away and pretending to come back legally married, to save appearances. I loved you, and you loved me; and we closed with each other; and that made the marriage.¹¹⁹

Jude suggests that his genuine love for Sue bonds them together in a much stronger and authentic way than a legal marriage would. The “Postscript” reference to “moral marriage” proposes the idea of a romantic commitment, independent of any legal and religious norms. However, as Hardy presents the possibility of a happy common-law marriage, he also undermines such a possibility by rendering it short-lived. Jude and Sue suffer the death of their children and eventually remarry their original spouses. Therefore, while Hardy criticizes the inauthenticity of many legal marriages, he also recognizes the complex forces of law, society, and religion, all of which make it difficult, if not impossible, to foster romance and build a family outside of marriage.

Conclusion

Jude the Obscure completes Hardy’s deconstruction of the traditional marriage plot begun in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. The novelist’s portrayal of marriage as unhappy, unstable, and inauthentic challenges the idea of marriage as both a social and narrative goal. The three Wessex novels discussed in this chapter not only lack a conventional happy ending, but also reject the linear chronology of the traditional marriage plot. Additionally, they portray human life and relationships as full of contradictions, paradoxes, and accidents. Such a portrayal undermines formal marriage,

¹¹⁹ Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 360.

which tends to oversimplify both the complexities of human nature and the convoluted operations of Immanent Will that thwarts human plans and desires.

In *The Woodlanders* Hardy sees communal rituals as a potential panacea for the nineteenth century's industrialization, cultural crises, and social upheaval. While he does not imply that such rituals ensure happy marriages, he believes they may help to connect people to their communities and each other. As he embraces communal traditions, he criticizes the legal and religious formalization of marriage, highlighting the unnaturalness of wedding vows, which are intrinsically infelicitous. Although Hardy's novels fail to present any happy alternatives to legal marriage, his focus on the artifice of many legal marriages, inspired modernist novelists such as D. H. Lawrence to reconstruct romantic relationships into unions based on freedom of choice and authentic feelings.

VII. CONCLUSION

I want to close by making what is perhaps an obvious but important observation. When Queen Victoria began her reign in 1837, marriage in England was a well-established institution supported by both church and state, with clearly-defined gender roles and expectations. However, by the time she died in 1901, the Victorians had experienced the passage of divorce laws and the rise of a powerful women's movement, which changed their views on marriage forever. The Victorian era also saw great changes in the scientific publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), as well as in the growing industrialization and urbanization. All those factors influenced the shifting attitudes towards women, science, law and religion, which in turn contributed to the gradual erosion of traditional marriage.

As demonstrated in this dissertation, the changing viewpoints on Victorian marriage during the sixty-four years of Queen Victoria's reign developed in relation to the productive tensions of two emerging aesthetic formations, literary realism and sensationalism. The subject matter of this dissertation, which focuses on the performative aspects of marriage as a legal and social concept in Victorian literature, reveals a new way of thinking about the evolution of realist and sensation fiction. On the one hand, the differences between the two genres help to highlight the theatricality of marriage and its disjunction from the interiority associated with authentic love. On the other hand, the interweaving of the two genres presents performativity as means to authenticity.

By tracing the evolving relationship between performativity and realism in Victorian literature, I demonstrate that sensation novels and realist novels are not just two opposing narrative forms. Rather, they are on a continuum of literary exposés of

the gap between the public image of the naturalness and sacredness of marriage, and the private admissions about marital unhappiness and injustice. I have stressed that the paucity of wedding descriptions in Victorian fiction shows the novelists' general wariness about the theatricality of marriage imposed by society and the law, which in Victorian fiction often clashes with true love. However, I have also shown that, in some cases, the novel condones performance as an effective means of circumventing the unjust and inflexible marriage law. As such, performance in marriage is present not only in sensation fiction, but also becomes a vital element of realist novels as well.

This dissertation focused on the performativity of marriage because in all the novels I discuss the inward authenticity and the outward performativity intermingle, emphasizing both the dangers and the value of performance in marriage. As suggested in Charles Dickens's treatment of David Copperfield's wedding to Dora, authenticity and performance are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, defining marriage as a performance art raises important questions about its purpose and value, as well as its relation to private desire. Additionally, reading marriage as a performance restructures the traditional marriage plot, which presumes that public and private interests eventually always end up merging into one.

Analyzing the Victorian marriage plot through a performative lens also helps to underline the changing and competing modes of literary representation throughout the nineteenth century, as well as their frequent overlaps. Characterized by its literary realism, the "social problem" or "industrial" novel, which emerged in the 1830s, presented marriage in the context of the contemporary anxieties about the human and

spiritual costs of industrial progress. We see this particularly in Chapters II and III, with Gaskell's *North and South* and *Wives and Daughters*, as well as Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* and *David Copperfield*. Stressing the frequent divide between one's authentic inner self and the performative, exterior persona, all these "social problem" novels warn the readers against the dangers of insincere play-acting and secret keeping in marriage. At the same time, they suggest that a certain degree of deception or play-acting may be necessary to counteract various social injustices affecting marriage.

The sensation novel, which I discussed in Chapter IV, achieved popularity in Great Britain in the 1860s and 1870s, and appeared to be the opposite of the realist novel. The critics of the genre, such as Henry Mansel and Margaret Oliphant, argued that the sensation novel's design to grip, shock, and even haunt the reader presented marriage in a grotesquely dramatic and inauthentic manner. However, as shown in this dissertation, the sensation novel played a major role in dismantling the fictitious assumptions of the traditional marriage plot. Whereas romance and realism had been traditionally seen as contradictory modes of literature, they were brought together in sensation fiction by placing seemingly unrealistic stories in a familiar, domestic setting. Moreover, the sensation novel undermined the traditional marriage plot by representing marriage (often idealized by many Victorians) as a site of dramatic conflict, filled with deception and even violence.

The second wave of the realist novel, which appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century, is the Victorian provincial novel. This genre typically focuses on the stories set in a distinctive, non-urban setting. Its famous examples are George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872), discussed in Chapter V, and Thomas Hardy's Wessex novels,

including *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) discussed in Chapter VI. Focusing on the minutia of community life, the provincial novel presented marriage as chronologically complex, full of insincere play-acting, and fluid. Depicting the communal rituals of courtship and marriage, as well as the thorny reality of everyday married life, the novel emphasized the complexity of marriage, which the law and socio-religious rules often failed to consider. Although the provincial novels of Eliot and Hardy arose, in part, in response to the sensation novel, they also integrated certain techniques of sensation fiction in order to achieve a more realistic representation of desire, love, passion, and other emotions associated with marriage.

The different genres of Victorian fiction both contradicted and complemented each other, in the context of marriage plot. Moreover, many Victorian writers reached outside the literary field in which they are now best known. Wilkie Collins wrote plays while producing his best-selling sensation novels. His fellow sensation novelist Mary Elizabeth Braddon also combined acting as well as writing for the stage with her busy fiction-writing career. Even the novelists who were most popular in one genre, still dabbled between drama and prose, realism and sensationalism, interiority and theatricality. For example, as shown in Chapter III, Charles Dickens was the sharp satirist of stage life in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839). However, in the very same chapter we also see him as an enthusiastic proponent of John Harmon's theatrical identity swap in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* may be categorized as a provincial novel, but it certainly contains elements of sensation fiction (such as Bathsheba opening the lid of Fanny Robin's coffin). Even George Eliot, who largely disdained sensational subjects, includes some sensational elements in her marriage plot in

order to revise them. For example, in *Romola* (representing yet another subgenre of the historical novel), Eliot unmasks the sensationalism of a sham wedding to stress how much contemporary law and religion focused on the external rituals governing marriage. The sham wedding also allows her to set up a conflict between two women caught in a quasi-bigamous relationship, which Eliot resolves with a theatrical tableau of Tito's two former "wives" supporting each other and building a new kind of family.

Notwithstanding George Eliot's stern warnings against conflating novel and stage writing, Victorian novelists (including Eliot herself) do not shy away from appropriating theatricality in their marriage plots. In fact, despite their differences with each other, all the genres and authors discussed in this dissertation engage in the intertextual conversation about performance in marriage. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that the literature of what we often refer to as the age of the novel ends up with two late-nineteenth-century dramatists, such as Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw. The theatricality in Victorian novels also helps to pave the way for the arrival of the "New Drama" in the 1870s, in which the ethical, moral and controversial issues, including those associated with marriage, were examined publicly. In sum, reading the Victorian marriage plot through a performative lens helps us not only to see some of the reasons behind its collapse, but also to understand various literary genres and influences that shape post-Victorian literature.

I conclude this dissertation with a chapter on Thomas Hardy in part because his works, full of heightened theatricality and striking contrasts, are a fusion of both narrative and dramatic components, which complement each other. His way of thinking about the novel in terms of dramatic categories, such as tragedy, comedy, melodrama and farce,

reveals the blurry lines between realism and sensationalism. More importantly, the realistic tragedies of Hardy demonstrate that the simple dichotomy between theatricality and authenticity does not always hold up. For example, Hardy's anthropological interest in communal courtship and wedding rituals, which help some of his characters maintain their authenticity, undermines some of the earlier Victorian writers' critiques of the empty performativity of wedding rituals. It also complicates my overarching argument about the frequent disjoining of external performativity and interiority.

As complicated as the relationship between interiority and performativity might be, one of the goals of this dissertation is to stress how reading marriage as a performance helps to underscore the dismantling of and to revise the traditional marriage plot. As I have argued, emphasizing the theatricality of marriage enables us to see the artifice of many social, economic, religious and legal bases used to support the institution of marriage in Victorian England. Since marriage was largely about "what woman ought to be," as noted by John Stuart Mill, the rationale supporting a Victorian marriage depended largely on particular views of gender in Victorian society.¹ Notwithstanding Coventry Patmore's view of women as domestic angels, John Ruskin's unrealistic expectations that Victorian wives be perfectly good and wise, and the early nineteenth-century laws that gave husbands control over their wives' bodies and property, the role and rights of a Victorian woman had changed throughout the century. Although many Victorian women accepted the traditional roles of wives and mothers without questioning their limitations, in time women also became more economically and socially independent. There were

¹ John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill, *Essays on Sex Equality*, ed. by Alice S. Rossi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 73.

“well over three-quarters of a million married women at work” as early as 1851. Those represented “nearly one-fourth of all working women.”² Such facts illustrate the changing social and economic reality for many women and, by extension, the changing view of their roles in marriage. Unable to vote, Victorian women did not have a voice in Parliament, but their voices could not be completely silenced, which led to the “New Woman” phenomena in the 1880s and the 1890s.

The Victorian novel also stressed that, as much as the law, socio-religious norms and economic situations disfranchised women, the so-called natural law did not help to increase the personal freedoms and equalities of married women, either. On the one hand, the Victorian crisis of faith, brought about in 1859 by Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, challenged many of the socio-religious views about marriage and a woman’s role in it. Since Darwin’s theory emphasized competition for survival, it implicitly challenged the view that women ought to obey and be protected by their husbands regardless of how the husbands treated them. On the other hand, the many positive laws made certain references to the natural law and claimed to be based on the principles governing human nature. Even feminists such as Caroline Norton and Eliza Lynn Linton, who supported divorce and married women’s property rights, still “regarded women as naturally inferior to men.”³ Thus, in a way, what some considered “natural law” implicitly supported the socio-religious and legal rules that disfranchised married women because those rules were based on the argument that women’s biological predispositions are inferior to men’s.

² Lee Holcombe, *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 49.

³ Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850–1895* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 18.

The Victorian novel's focus on the performance of marriage helped to dismantle the many false assumptions about women, on which both positive and natural laws were founded. George Eliot's fiction, like that of the Brontës, presents the difficulties arising from the unequal treatment of men and women in Victorian society. It also exposes many religious and legal rules as failed public measures to protect women. Contrary to some traditional assumptions about Victorian heroines, their response to a loveless marriage was the opposite of settling down as wives and mothers. Sensation novelists in particular created heroines who are determined, strong and proactive. Magdalen Vanstone, Lady Audley or Aurora Floyd may be transgressive, and even dangerous at times, but they all defy the Victorian ideal of a passive wife, unfit to fend for herself outside of her proscribed domestic role. Such changing views of women in Victorian novels not only contributed to the gradual collapse of the traditional marriage plot, but also shaped the future heroines of modernist literature. For example, although D.H. Lawrence has been criticized for misogyny by some feminist critics, the women in his novels are strong, independent and complex.⁴ They have sexual appetites and desires, which they assert even before marriage. The Victorian novel's emphasis on the changing economic and social conditions of women, as well as its discussion about the complexities of female psyche and feelings, helped to shape the view of women and marriage in modernist literature.

In addition to redefining gender roles within marriage, the Victorian novel also exposed the thorny clash of private desire and marriage law. By highlighting the performative aspects of wedding ceremonies and other play-acting in marriage, the novel

⁴ See Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

unmasked various marriage rituals and customs, expected under the law, as charades, and juxtaposed them against the reality of marriage of convenience and attempted bigamy. Lee Holcombe points out that, while Victorian marriage law designated the husband as both the legal and moral guardian of his wife, it “failed to provide any effective way of compelling a husband to meet his financial responsibilities for his family if he shirked them.”⁵ We see such a major failure of marriage law in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, where the main protagonist Helen has to reinvent herself under a new name and identity in order to protect herself and her child from her abusive and adulterous husband. In *Wives and Daughters*, Elizabeth Gaskell also condones and even glorifies the illegal, secret marriage of Osborne Hamley to his French wife when their love for each other is genuine—unlike the relationships between other legally-married couples in the novel. In sum, all the novelists discussed in this dissertation, particularly the female writers analyzed in Chapter II, not only promote a greater synchronicity of private and public interests in marriage, but also stress that a legal marriage loses its purpose and becomes dysfunctional when it fails to consider private interests and true feelings of the spouses.

However, as demonstrated in this dissertation, the frequent disconnect between private desire (love) and public interests (marriage) continues and even intensifies throughout the Victorian age. In fact, Thomas Hardy, whose works I discussed in Chapter VI, questions whether love and marriage are compatible at all. His *Jude the Obscure*, published in 1895, effectively marks the eventual collapse of the marriage plot by representing marriage as an unnatural legal and social institution, divorced from romance. Although Hardy does not offer any happy alternatives to marriage in *Jude*, sometime

⁵ Holcombe, *Wives and Property*, 30.

after the novel's publication he famously remarked, "If I were a woman I should think twice before entering into matrimony in these days of emancipation, when everything is open to the sex."⁶ Such a viewpoint on marriage indicates a remarkable shift from 1847 when *Jane Eyre* concludes by bringing love and marriage together, with its heroine proudly announcing, "Reader, I married him" (even if *Jane Eyre* signals the breakdown of the traditional marriage plot by featuring an aborted wedding in the middle of the novel). In sum, the Victorian novel's unmasking of many marriages as empty performances helped to pave the way for a new narrative, which no longer strove for a happy marriage, but rather found some value in marital breakdown and complications.

The traditional marriage plot depended on the eventual confluence of love and marriage, as well as the resolution of all conflict at the end of the novel. However, as shown in this dissertation, many examples of Victorian fiction stressed the tenuous, fictive, and arbitrary status of endings. We saw this most emphatically in Chapter V, which discussed George Eliot's famous redefining of marriage as an uncertain beginning in *Middlemarch*. Other novels discussed in this dissertation also point out the thorny reality of discontented couples after wedding. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* describes the horrific aftermath of marriage. In *The Woman in White*, Laura Fairlie's wedding to Sir Percival is only the prelude to his evil scheme of stealing her inheritance. In *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Frank Troy proclaims Fanny Robin to be his true wife after she dies and after he marries another. These examples highlight disrupted linearity, narrative unreliability, multiple points of view, resistance to closures, all of which led to a collapse of the traditional marriage plot and signaled the arrival of modernist literature. Since in

⁶ Claire Tomalin, *Thomas Hardy* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 17.

fiction marriage serves as a metaphor for order and harmony, the collapse of marriage plot signifies not only the end of a traditional marriage, but also a shift in the way the novel narrates marriage.

Not only did the Victorian novel dismantle the idea of marriage as a happy end, but it also expanded the marriage plot to include passion and adultery. The representations of adultery in English print culture, examined in Barbara Leckie's study of adultery in nineteenth-century England, show that the divorce court journalism provided an account of sexual passions and practices otherwise absent in the English novel.⁷ However, Victorian fiction opened the space for imagining various discursive and sexual possibilities in the novel through sensation fiction. The sensation novel placed sham marriages, adultery and bigamy at the forefront, suggesting that such diversions may be a social necessity in the face of inflexible marriage laws. However, the themes of bigamy and adultery are present even in the so-called realist novels, such as *Jane Eyre* and *Middlemarch*.

The Victorian novelists' treatment of marriage law also helped to erode the marriage plot by questioning the stability of one's identity. The traditional marriage plot was the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries' reformulation of the medieval romance, which focused on royalty and aristocracy. Novels like Richardson's *Pamela*, featuring a lowly maid raised above her station through her subsequent marriage to a lord, extended romance available to working classes. However, the traditional marriage plot still told a limited kind of story focused on two heterosexual lovers defeating fate's cruel efforts to keep them apart and legitimizing their love through marriage. The Victorian novel

⁷ See Barbara Leckie, *Culture and Adultery: The Novel, the Newspaper, and the Law, 1857–1914* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

commonly told stories that wrestled with the social anxieties of the Victorian era, particularly those regarding one's identity and secrets. Victorian novels, spanning over different times and genres, such as *Wives and Daughters*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Daniel Deronda* and *The Woodlanders* explore the themes of confused identities and familial secrets in the marriage context, implying that one's marriage is often as unstable and dynamic as one's identity.

In sum, Victorian novelists paved the way for the creation of twentieth-century modernism by unmasking the artifice of many legal and socio-religious norms, emphasizing the frequent disconnect between private and public desires, advocating for the rights of married women, stressing the fictive status of endings, disrupting linearity, as well as exposing marriage as the site of passion, adultery, violence, secrets and personal struggles. It showed us how to tell love stories that are larger and deeper. It redefined marriage from a fixed ideal to a continuous negotiation involving many dramatic conflicts and temporary deceptions. As the marriage plot continually evolves, reading Victorian fiction through a performative lens helps us to see that the richest and most sincere love stories are those that are not afraid to open up the temporal loop of "happily ever after," address the ambiguities of gender roles, and emphasize the complex relationship between inward authenticity and outward performativity.

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