

BETWEEN THE SPHERES: BREAKING THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SPHERES IN WILKIE COLLINS'S *THE WOMAN IN WHITE* AND WILLIAM HOLMAN HUNT'S *THE LADY OF SHALOTT*

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Abstract: The nineteenth-century notion of a public sphere for male-authored content and a private sphere for female-authored content made the female diary an apt literary device to incorporate female narration into fiction. The hypothetical effects of breaching the boundary between these two spheres precipitates a move from a state of order to a state of chaos, through the medium of text in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*¹ and through painting in William Holman Hunt's *The Lady of Shalott*².

Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and William Holman Hunt's *The Lady of Shalott*, two artefacts created in the latter half of the nineteenth century, both explore the idea of public and private spheres and the effects of movement between them. Both artefacts present a woman's text created within the private sphere, a male catalyst, and an instance of the male catalyst initiating a breach in the boundary heretofore confining the woman's text to the private sphere. In each artefact, the moment when the boundary between private and public sphere is breached initiates a movement from a state of order towards a state of chaos.

The concept of two distinct and gendered social spheres is of importance in nineteenth century works generally, and central to this analysis³. The public sphere was considered a male domain and a suitable platform for published work, politics and open social communication. Whereas women, and thus their texts, were expected to exist within the realm of the private sphere, adhering generally to Coventry Brown's ideal of the *Angel in the House*.⁴ This nineteenth-century proprietary notion of women belonging in the private sphere made diaries an acceptable female form of writing. Diaries could be written in the home, based on domestic happenings, and they were not written for an audience, so they could remain within the private sphere upon completion. This proprietary suitability makes the diary a common literary device for

1 Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). (Subsequent references within the text to '*The Woman in White*' are to this edition.)

2 References to Hunt's *The Lady of Shalott* in this work refer to his final treatment of the subject, the 1890-1905 oil on canvas version seen in Figure 1.

3 The separate spheres concept was prominent in Victorian England, the premise being that men and women were inherently different (through biology and God's will) with men suited to activities in the public sphere such as commerce, politics and law. Women were thought best-suited to domesticity, child care, housework and religious study which existed within the private sphere of the home. See generally, Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland, and Jane Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

4 Joan M. Hoffman, "'She Loves with Love That Cannot Tire': The Image of the Angel in the House across Cultures and across Time", *Pacific Coast Philology*, 42 (2005), 264-271 (p. 264): Brown's poem was popular in the late nineteenth century as an account of the perfect woman and idealised femininity. The term 'angel in the house' became synonymous with an ideal Victorian woman – a wife and mother who was submissive to her husband and completely focused on serving her children and family.

incorporating female narration into nineteenth century novels.⁵ The distinctions and gendering of these two spheres and the potential for breaching the boundary between them, provide a plane upon which to consider *The Woman in White* alongside *The Lady of Shalott*.

The premise of the *Lady of Shalott* is a cursed Lady imprisoned in isolation who must observe, indirectly through a mirror, the events of King Arthur's reign, and document them in a woven tapestry. Unable to engage with the life she observes in the public sphere, she toils at weaving her observations into tapestries. Hunt describes the Lady as, "weav[ing] her record, not as one mixing in the world...but a being sitting alone; in her isolation she is charged to see life with a mind supreme and elevated in judgement."⁶ This authorial quality imbued in the weaving suggests that the Lady is not merely recording but imposing a layer of analysis as a narrator would. Roland Barthes characterised the role of weaver as more than a mere maker of textiles, but rather a, "maker of texts".⁷ Through these interpretations, the Lady is a diarist. Her weaving is her diary created from her observations made within the private sphere and which, owing to her isolated confinement, has no intended audience and thus will remain solely in the private sphere. The Lady's diary takes on an additionally-feminised form; rather than being created from base units of words and language (the tools of publication, commerce and law) it is created through weaving: a decorative medium, conventionally female-crafted, and produced in the private sphere of the home.



Figure 1. William Holman Hunt. *The Lady of Shalott* (1890-1905), oil on canvas.⁸

5 Catherine Delafield, *Women's Diaries as Narrative in the Nineteenth-century Novel* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1988), p. 158. (Subsequent references within the text to 'Delafield' are to this edition.)

6 Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, William Holman Hunt: *The Lady of Shalott*, (Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 2014) <<http://www.thewadsworth.org/ladyofshalott/>> [accessed February 2014]

7 Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Trans. Richard Miller (New York. Hillard and Wang, 1975), p. 64.

8 Hunt, William Holman. *The Lady of Shalott*. 1890-1905, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, William Holman Hunt: *The Lady of Shalott*, (Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 2014) <<http://www.thewadsworth.org/ladyofshalott/>> [accessed February 2014]

The Lady of Shalott depicts the moment when the Lady breaks from her assigned role of diarist confined to the private sphere. The Lady's gaze is redirected from the mirror, which symbolically redirects her gaze back into the private sphere, through the open window. In that instant, the boundary between the private and public spheres is disrupted.

Amidst the range of narrative voices which *The Woman in White* employs is a lengthy section which the reader is told comes from Marian Halcombe's diary. The reader is informed that excerpts from her diary, which are irrelevant to the novel's plot, are omitted but that the content is otherwise unaltered. Thus Collins introduces Marian's narrative as a found document: a woman's record of happenings around her. Marian, like the Lady, is a lone female diarist working within the private sphere to record events in a text which, with no intended audience, is expected to remain within the private sphere.

Marian's section of the novel ends abruptly. The plot device Collins uses to achieve this is a fever which physically prevents Marian from continuing her diary. Without interrupting the epistolary style of the section, Collins lets the reader discover this through a postscript written in Marian's diary by another character, Count Fosco. It is through this postscript that the reader learns that Fosco has stolen, read and added his own entry into Marian's diary. Fosco has reached from the public sphere into the private sphere rupturing the boundary between the two. By the acquisition of an unintended audience, Marian's diary moves with Fosco into the public sphere.

The Woman in White's plot, and mystery, steadily develop until the reader encounters Fosco's post-script. That moment serves as a turning point for the narrative trajectory to move towards a state of chaos. Fosco's theft of the diary serves this purpose by providing the means for Marian's suspicions and observations to pass into Fosco's knowledge. Marian's voice, by way of her diary, is silenced which creates a gap in written records which becomes crucial at the novel's climax when solving the mystery is dependent on contemporaneous written records, such as a diary could provide. Without the diary's movement from private to public sphere, the progress of the narrative could not logically follow the same path to the climax of the mystery. From the moment that Fosco disrupts the boundary between the spheres, a course of events is put into action which includes two women's identities being swapped, one being wrongly committed in an asylum, and an international network of espionage and secret societies being revealed. In short, all knowns and constants disintegrate and the order and social propriety which had previously existed in the novel are replaced by chaos.

Fosco's postscript also serves to create an awkward triangular relationship structure between diarist, diary-reader and novel-reader. The readers, who in standard novel convention believed they had been privately reading Marian's diary, "discover that Fosco has beat them to it, and has been watching them – so to speak – over their shoulders".⁹ Collins has aligned the reader's sympathies with Marian throughout the course of her level-headed, good-humoured diary. The interruption by Fosco may offend the reader's allegiance with Marian, but it must be, "overlooked in favour of a coherent narrative".¹⁰ The switch in narrative voice makes the reader suddenly aware that the knowledge he or she has read in a private diary has already been revealed to the story's arch villain, affecting the plot and also bringing another fictional reader into the reader's consciousness. This creates a meta-textual situation where the reader is startled by

⁹ Adrian Wisnicki, *Conspiracy, Revolution, and Terrorism from Victorian Fiction to the Modern Novel* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 99.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Anderman, 'Hysterical Sensations: Bodies in Action in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*' in *From Wollstonecraft to Stoker: Essays on Gothic and Victorian Sensation Fiction*, ed. by Marilyn Brock (North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc, 2009), 79–90 (p. 85).

Fosco's voyeurism and his or her imagined privileged access to the diary is lost, thus his or her attention is drawn to the fact that he or she, as a reader, is also a voyeur deriving pleasure from reading Marian's diary.

The Lady of Shalott similarly depicts a descent into chaos caused by the disruption of the boundary between the private and public spheres. Hunt paints the instant when the Lady's gaze is diverted from her mirror and her weaving out the window. An earlier treatment of the subject by Hunt, depicting the Lady prior to her fatal look out the window, still restless at her weaving is described as a, "severe, straightforward visual treatment of the scene [...] demure and modest".¹¹ Demure modesty is replaced by fiery energy in Hunt's final version which focuses on the moment the boundary between the private and public spheres is ruptured. Central to the painting is the path of the Lady's gaze: straight out through the open window to Lancelot in the public sphere. Visual chaos surrounds the Lady as viewer and the path of her gaze down to Lancelot. The unleashed hair and the unravelling tapestry's threads violently circle the painting suggesting a vortex or disorderly orbit of energy. There has clearly been a recent transition from order to chaos, not a sustained period of disruption: tapestries which were once completed are now coming undone, which, "echo[es] the motif of hair in the tangled ends of the unravelled weaving".¹² The unravelling tapestry also suggests a destruction of gender roles as the Lady's redirection of her gaze out of confinement into the world has caused, "women's quintessential gendered duty, weaving [to be] savaged by the curse."¹³ An image of Pandora's Box on the painting's frame, also designed by Hunt, reinforces the theme of a sudden release of chaotic energy, which has been described as, "a muffled but powerful explosion."¹⁴



Figure 2. Hunt's 1850 Sketch for the *Lady of Shalott*.¹⁵



Figure 3. Another of Hunt's *Lady of Shalott* sketches featuring -- the demure, modest Lady.¹⁶

11 Sharyn R. Udall, 'Between Dream and Shadow: William Holman Hunt's "Lady of Shalott"', *Woman's Art Journal*, 11 (1990), 34-38 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/135838>> p. 34.

12 Richard L. Stein, 'The Pre-Raphaelite Tennyson', *Victorian Studies*, 24 (1981), 278-301, (p. 294).

13 Udall, p. 36.

14 Ibid.

15 Hunt, William Holman, *Sketch for the Lady of Shalott* (1850), chalk, pen and ink, <<http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/whh/leng/2.html>> [accessed February 2014]

16 William Holman Hunt. *Sketch for the Lady of Shalott — the lady sitting cross-legged*. 1850. <http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/whh/drawings/28.html> [accessed February 2014]

Beams of light, “shadows and shafts of sunlight, extending from the front to the back of the scene,” suggest an ability to penetrate through all planes of the painting evoking a movement through the boundary between private and public spheres such as the Lady's gaze has done. The light which, “shin[es] into the world of the canvas from the direction of our own real world,”¹⁷ draws the viewer into the painting and, as in *The Woman in White*, creates an awkward triangular structure between viewer, and characters in the artefact. The painting's viewer looks at the Lady who looks at Lancelot, but only the Lady is on the cusp of a fatal punishment for her act of looking. This suggests a meta-textual awareness that as Lancelot is being watched by the Lady, both are being watched by the viewer of the painting. The relationship between viewer, Lady and Lancelot can be seen as, “an erotic triangle,” in which the Lady is the object of the viewer's (and painter's) gaze and also the controller of the gaze at Lancelot.¹⁸ Of all the gazes present, it is only the Lady's which breaks from convention by rupturing the boundary between private and public spheres and prompts the movement from order to chaos within the painting.

In both artefacts, the catalyst for the diarised content's move from the private sphere to the public sphere is linked to gender and initiated by a male figure. This male influence is more overt in *The Woman in White* with Fosco unequivocally responsible for purloining and altering the diary. Fosco first assumes physical possession of the diary by taking it out of the ailing Marian's hands. Second, he reads the diary, giving it an audience which was neither intended nor sanctioned by its author. Third, he alters the diary by adding his own text, changing both the diary's authorship and its contents.

The male catalyst in *The Lady of Shalott* is more subtle, but still present. Although it is ultimately the Lady's action of redirecting her gaze from the mirror to the window which brings upon the curse, it is Lancelot's presence which prompts the Lady's look out the window. Lancelot is a comparatively small and faintly-coloured figure in the painting, but is positioned at virtually the centre of the canvas. The painting's composition has been described as a wheel shape, with a series of images arranged in a circular pattern around a central point.¹⁹ Lancelot occupies this central point around which the rest of the images are arranged. Considering the painting as a wheel formation, Lancelot is the hub or static centre point around which the painting's chaos visually orbits. The wild, undone hair, the visual allusions to Pandora and Medusa, the discarded shoes, and the unravelling tapestry all circle around the fixed, sunlit Lancelot presumably unaware of the chaos which his presence has prompted.

Both Fosco and Lancelot have an exponential impact in comparison to the comparatively small presence which they occupy in their respective artefacts. Although Fosco's post-script is of minute length compared to the dozens of pages of Marian's narrative which precede it, it is the few paragraphs of Fosco's writing which change the nature of the diary and shock the reader. While Marian recounts events, Fosco, “re-appropriates the narrative agency – the ability to direct and shape the course of events.” Fosco colonises Marian's textual body of work and, “possesses its narrative and controls its ending,” leading critics to label his postscript a, “textual rape.”²⁰

Lancelot's presence in *The Lady of Shalott* is similarly fractional and faintly coloured in relation to the Lady and indeed the rest of the painting. Despite seeming a small visual

17 Stein, p. 294.

18 Udall, p. 35.

19 The wheel formation is seen in Hunt's 1850 sketch of the subject seen in Figure 2. The wheel motif decreased in prominence in his later treatments of the subject, but the series of images arranged around a central hub can still be seen in the final oil painting.

20 See, for example, Ann Gaylin, *Eavesdropping in the Novel from Austen to Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 128., Anderman, p. 87.

addendum to the painting, a viewer familiar with the legend will recognise that this small element is ultimately the catalyst for the rest of the happenings in the painting.

In addition to the gendering of the movement between private and public sphere, sensuality is also implied in each work when the curtilage confining the woman's diary to the private sphere is breached. Hunt presents the chaos of the curse in *The Lady of Shalott* in a sensualised fashion. The painting is set within the imprisoned Lady's private room, immediately positioning the viewer in a locus of intimacy. The Lady's shoes are discarded and her feet are bare. Although fully clothed, her sleeves are pushed up to her elbows and, what appears to be, a petticoat is visible where her dress is pulled up by the tangle of unravelling threads. Likewise, the threads ensnare her and pull her loose-fitting clothing close to her body to reveal the contours of her figure causing, "her gown [...] to reveal the attractive outlines it ought to conceal in graceful drapery."²¹ Her whole state of dress appears dishevelled in an intimate fashion in which a woman would not be seen outside the privacy of her own rooms. One of the most prominent features of the painting is the dramatic fan formed by the Lady's hair swirling above her head. Long, flowing women's hair is a common symbol in Pre-Raphaelite art consistently associated with female sensuality, and Hunt himself considered it integral to this work, stating that he spent a significant portion of time perfecting the Lady's hair.²² Mirroring the symbolism of female sensuality is the male sexuality suggested by Lancelot's phallic sword appearing to penetrate a loop of thread in the foreground.²³ Thus an implied sensuality is suggested between the Lady and Lancelot, linking them and spanning both sides of the boundary between the spheres.

Immediately prior to Fosco's interception of her diary, Marian is stricken by the fever which allows Fosco to extricate the book from her. Marian's last writings become increasingly focussed on the symptoms which the fever wreaks on her body. She documents, "heat that parches [her] skin," while she is, "shivering from head to foot," and aware that a, "chilled, cramped feeling [leaves her], and the throbbing heat [comes] in its place."²⁴ Previously, Marian's narrative has been limited to observational commentary of other characters. Her own physicality is only presented directly before Fosco's intervention adding a level of intimacy, and thus violation, to Fosco's entrance. Following Marian's descriptions of her increasing physical distress, Fosco interjects with descriptions of his excitement and pleasure at reading her diary proclaiming himself, "charmed, refreshed, delighted".²⁵ This has been said to heighten the, "sexual transgression of Fosco's act of reading,"²⁶ and to create an, "inter-textual penetration."²⁷ Collins further heightens the anxiety with, "repetitive language and circular images," from Marian's writing as she drifts from lucidity closing with, "I can write but the lines all run together," and, "the strokes of the clock, the strokes I can't count keep striking in my head,"²⁸ leaving Marian, and by extension the reader, "breathless and agitated – embodied."²⁹ Fosco's assertions of the, "intellectual pleasures,"³⁰ of reading Marian's diary are undermined by the physicality of her last words and the reader is left to feel the intrusion, "evokes a much more carnal pleasure."³¹

21 Stein, p. 294.

22 Christopher Wood. *The Pre-Raphaelites*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1981), p. 109.

23 Stein, p. 295.

24 Collins, pp. 341-342.

25 Ibid., p. 343.

26 Anderman, p. 85.

27 Sebastian Faulks, *Faulks on Fiction: Great British Villains and the Secret Life of the Novel* (London: BBC Books Random House, 2011) p. 323.

28 Collins, p. 342.

29 Anderman, p. 86.

30 Collins, p. 343.

31 Anderman, p. 86.

Fosco's oleaginous post-script has prompted numerous commentaries equating the episode to a narrative rape. Fosco's arousal by, first, his voyeuristic act of reading, then, his penetrative act of writing combined with Marian's physical anxiety, and the transfer of power from Marian to Fosco with his assumption of physical and narrative control of the diary, add weight to this analysis. The physicality and sensuality are pernicious and aligned with power rather than pleasure. Peter Brooks posits that Fosco acts not merely against Marian, but also the reader as, "our readerly intimacy with Marian is violated."³² An awkward triangular relationship between two characters in the artefact and the reader is again formed when the boundary between the private and public spheres is breached. The underlying sexuality present when this boundary is breached is one-sided: a symbolic rape, a power struggle initiated and won by Fosco when Marian loses consciousness and with it sovereignty of her diary.

The moment of breaching the boundary between the spheres in *The Lady of Shalott* incorporates elements of power and sensuality in a markedly different way. The Lady's sensuality appears linked to a different kind of power than the power struggle for the narrative voice between Marian and Fosco. Unlike Marian's physical weakness, which allows Fosco's exploitation of her diary and enables his voyeuristic pleasure, the Lady's act of looking through the boundary at Lancelot appears to bring her pleasure and power. In spite of her knowledge that her actions have brought the curse upon her, Hunt paints the Lady in a lioness-like stance of defiance, with a flaming mane of hair around her. Her posture is confident, with her hand strongly planted on her waist. Her face displays no fear, and her steely gaze is fixed on Lancelot through the window rather than showing any interest in the destruction of her tapestry diary. Hunt shows her welcoming her destiny in which, although fatal, she has played a part. She appears to be deriving pleasure from looking out the window into the public sphere rather than retreating into the chaos of the room. Unlike Marian whose physical weakness is what allows Fosco's eyes to reach from the public sphere to scrutinize her diary in the private sphere, the Lady's act of piercing the boundary into the public sphere is her most decisive act, and Hunt presents her confident in her newfound (albeit short-lived) agency. The Lady commands the gaze which disrupts the boundary between private and public spheres, whereas Marian becomes a gazed upon object when the boundary is pierced. Although doomed, the Lady appears as a victor over the boundary between the spheres, unlike victimised Marian for whom the boundary was not impenetrable enough to prevent her narrative sovereignty.

In their exploration of the idea of the broken boundary between the private and public sphere, *The Woman in White* and *The Lady of Shalott* both envisage the artistic causes and effects of such a breach similarly. Each artefact contains a woman's text within the private sphere, the imposition of a male catalyst on that text which leads to a breach in the boundary between the private and public spheres. While the concept of chaos is conveyed differently through the fluidity of text and the stasis of painting, the overlapping elements of gender, sensuality, power and chaos suggest a nineteenth-century notion that the boundary separating the private and public spheres is safest left unbreached.

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