

Transgressive Wives: Representations of married women in Victorian popular culture

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This article will explore two representations of women as wives from the mid-nineteenth century. Wilkie Collins' Armadale (1864) presents us with the figure of Lydia Gwilt; bigamist, murderer and fraudster. From 1859, John Leech's 'Punch' illustration Husband-Taming depicts a wife displaying her husband bathing a child in a public lecture theatre. In looking at these depictions the article will explore how the figure of the wife was displayed in print culture during the mid-nineteenth century, suggesting that in the print culture of the 1850s and 1860s the public are presented with the negative figure of the transgressive wife. In addressing these representations as examples of mass culture from the mid-nineteenth century, the article will ask what these depictions of women can tell us about popular opinions on the changing position of women in society. Using Theodor Adorno's critique of 'mass culture', it will suggest that those in control of mid-Victorian culture used these negative images to uphold the patriarchal status quo during a time of instability in the role of women.

'He hesitated (so like a husband!). And I persisted (so like a wife!).'

— Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, 1875¹

As the above quotation from Collins' female protagonist in *The Law and The Lady* suggests, for mid-century Victorians husbands and wives had clearly defined (and often oppositional) roles. The proper role of a woman as a wife was a topic of great discussion in this period, permeating literature, anthropological theory and medical science. Lyn Pykett notes that a 'proper' type of femininity was entangled with a woman's marital and domestic status. The 'ideal' woman was 'wife and mother', creator and protector of the 'middle-class home'.² The perfect Victorian wife is epitomised in the figure of the 'Angel in the House', a figure created by Coventry Patmore modelled

¹ Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 389.

² Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Women Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 12.

on his own angel-wife.³ The oppositional state of the roles is best seen through the popular ideology of separate domestic and public spheres. In this theory women were in control of the private household life, and man was dominant in the public, outside world. This theory of separate spheres was emphasised throughout all manner of Victorian culture, and it was posited that this was the natural and correct truth of gender identity.⁴ It would seem then that the ‘wife’ role had clearly defined boundaries. The mid-nineteenth century, however, was a period of great change and upheaval, specifically in the social and economic position of women. Reformations surrounding marital legislation impacted the position of women in society. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 was seminal in the destabilisation of the marital home. In moving the power from ecclesiastical courts to civil courts, the act effectively made divorce legal for the first time. Richard Altick notes the relation between changes in marital legislation and the emerging topic of the period: ‘the woman question’.⁵ Furthermore, Mary Poovey explains that contemporary debates in culture regarding the reformation of the marital institution had important repercussions for women: ‘In acknowledging the fact of marital unhappiness, they inevitably exposed the limitations of the domestic ideal’.⁶ The Victorian domestic ideal was greatly based on the stability of gender roles within the marital household. If, therefore, the institution of marriage was unstable, then the clearly defined role of the wife became fallible. From the changes in marital legislation then, debates surrounding divorce exemplify that this core institution was becoming destabilised. The previously solid perception of the institution, and the gender roles that lay at its foundation, were shaken. These contemporary anxieties surrounding the stability of marriage as an institution were addressed in all forms of cultural output, and in Collins’ character and Leech’s print we can see the emerging angst that was ‘the woman question’.

Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer addressed mid-twentieth century contemporary ‘mass culture’ in ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’ (1944). Adorno and Horkheimer argue that mass culture is a means through which a capitalist society can control the desires of the population by means of ‘manipulation and [...] need’.⁷ The essay suggests that whilst mass culture may look like pure art (or literature), output is dependent on industry and the economy. They are

³ Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, Project Gutenberg ebook

<<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4099/4099-h/4099-h.htm>> [accessed 20 February 2019].

⁴ For a further exploration of discourses surrounding separate gendered spheres see Lyn Pykett’s ‘The Subject of Woman’ in *The ‘Improper’ Feminine: The Women’s Sensation Novel and the New Women Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 11–21.

⁵ Richard Altick, *The Presence of the Present: Topics of the Day in the Victorian Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), p. 123.

⁶ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989), p. 52.

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’ in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), <https://web.stanford.edu/dept/DLCL/files/pdf/adorno_culture_industry.pdf> [accessed 20 February 2019], p. 95.

therefore subject to the interest of money and power. This suggests that behind any cultural output there is an intentionality to that which is produced. Moreover, the essay suggests that the intentionality behind cultural output is mediated through the desires of those with economic or political power. As such mass culture is a means through which those at the top of social hierarchy control the masses at the bottom. Whilst the essay was in response to the popular culture of the 1940s (cinema, radio, etc.), this argument may productively help us read mass culture of the Victorian era. Print publications boomed in the second half of the 1800s, due in part to a reduction in printing costs, which meant that printed stories, pamphlets, magazines and images were available *en masse* and at a low price. Furthermore, increasing literacy rates among the poor meant that printed culture was having a wide impact across all classes in society.⁸ Law in ‘The Professional Writer and the Literary Market Place’ observes that during the mid-nineteenth century there was a ‘literary business’.⁹ Print culture was, then, mass culture for the Victorian public. In addressing these items as popular culture, we can assess whether their depictions of transgressive women were indicative of contemporary anxieties surrounding the destabilisation of the institution of marriage.

Punch magazine was founded in 1841 by wood engraver Ebenezer Landells and writer Henry Mayhew. Its popularity grew over time and by the 1860s it was ‘almost a national institution’.¹⁰ The first *Punch Almanack*, an annual issue with illustrations, sold 90,000 copies, huge numbers for a Victorian publication.¹¹ The magazine engaged with many contemporary social, economic and political discourses, and ‘the woman question’ was no exception. In 1859 a woodcut engraving by John Leech entitled ‘Husband-Taming’ featured in the pages of *Punch*. The piece’s satire is created around the inversions of socially acceptable Victorian gender roles. The woodcut shows a group of women viewing a husband and child at bath time in a public lecture theatre. That the male, presumably a husband and father to the child, is engaged with his domestic task is a direct inversion of Victorian household ideals. Leech emphasises this through his manipulation of the gaze within the piece. The female audience, positioned from a higher vantage point, watch the man and child with great interest. The female at the centre of the engraving gestures towards the male and child with an outstretched arm, leading her peers to look at the spectacle of the man and child. Her gaze however is turned away from the task and is actively engaging with her peers instead. The active

⁸ For an exploration into developments in Victorian print-capitalism (particularly in reference to Collins) see Graham Law’s chapter ‘The Professional Writer and the Literary Marketplace’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, ed. by Jenny Bourne Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 97–111.

⁹ Graham Law, ‘The Professional Writer and the Literary Marketplace’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, ed. by Jenny Bourne Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 109.

¹⁰ C. L. Graves, ‘*Punch* in the “Sixties”’, in *The Eighteen Sixties: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), p. 149.

¹¹ PUNCH, ‘A Brief History’, *PUNCH* [Online] <<https://www.punch.co.uk/about/index>> [accessed 20/02/2019] (para. 5).

gaze of the females exists in tension with the unawareness of the male and child. Leech creates a domestic intimacy in the exchanged looks between the male and child. Apparently unaware of his onlookers and surroundings, the male lifts the child closely and looks intently into its face. This intimate gaze is returned by the child, emphasised by the child reaching out physically towards the father's face. Here the gazes of each of the three main onlookers is indicative of the gender inversion which lies at the centre of the piece. In this satirical illustration the wife shuns her duties, which are taken on instead by an angel-husband. This role reversal is a topic of satire, and the wife figure is not a positive one. Her eyes averted from the domestic scene of the husband, she is the inversion of the caring angelic wife she ought to be. That she looks away from her duty is an indication that she looks away from the correct behaviour of a wife. Furthermore, in her gaze engaging with the other female characters she is perpetuating her transgression by teaching those around her. The female at the centre of the scene, then, is a transgressive wife. Her role of caregiver and protector is inverted; instead she instructs and exposes the private domestic sphere to the view of outsiders.



Figure 1. John Leech, Husband-Taming (1859), in *John Leech's Pictures of Life and Character*, Volume 2 (of 3): From the Collection of Mr. Punch [Online] <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/50428/50428-h/50428-h.htm>> [accessed 20/02/2019], p. 175.

The gender inversion of a male figure taking on feminine domesticity highlights a further dichotomy that is being turned upside down in Leech's woodcut. The male/female binary was implicitly linked with the public/domestic opposition which is also reversed. In this illustration the private, domestic scene of bath time has become a

public spectacle. This is particularly emphasised in the dress of the main female, the man, and the child. The female figure at the front and centre of the piece points towards the man and child with a riding crop: she instructs and controls the scene. To add to the sense of command over the man she is dressed in a dark, formal dress with a black top hat on her head and a riding crop in her hand. Reminiscent of a horse rider, her attire plays with the title *Husband-Taming*, suggesting her control over the male figure. Furthermore, not only is her formal attire appropriate for entering the public sphere, her dress asserts that in this sphere she will command and 'tame'. In contrast, the male figure is in casual clothing, with a white apron covering most of his body, and the child is naked. The humble clothing of the man highlights the domesticity of the task he is engaged within. The contrast between a woman all in black and a male in a white apron again creates a dichotomy reminiscent of the figure of the 'Angel in the House'. The female in her dark, formal and public attire is directly opposite to the light, informal and domestic apron which the husband wears. Through dressing the wife in black, and contrasting with the husband, there is a moral condemnation of her transgressive behaviour.

Miss Lydia Gwilt, the central female figure of Collins' *Armadale*, is clearly transgressive in her repetitive law breaking. Gwilt is perpetually attempting to hide her past, which is represented in the concealment of her face. Collins does not give a linear exposition of Gwilt's marital status; instead it is alluded to throughout: 'it is one advantage of the horrible exposure that followed my marriage, that I seldom show myself in public, and never of course in such a populous place as London, without wearing a thick veil and keeping that veil down.'¹² That Gwilt herself hints to her previous marital state adds interest, and it is her status, either married or not, that becomes her defining feature throughout the narrative. It is only at the end of the fourth book that we are given a potted history of Lydia. The history is mediated through the voice of Bashwood the Younger's reportage of the trial papers: "'How will you have it?'" he asked. "Long or short? I have her whole life here."¹³ Gwilt's past life is mediated through three levels of voices: the male lawyers who gathered her history, Bashwood the Younger's interpretation of these, and the omniscient narrative voice through which the passage is controlled. Male censorship and authorial control over the female's history are emphasised by Bashwood's assertion that he has removed 'the pith' of Gwilt's life in order to give a relevant history to his father. It is through this three-times-over male narrative that Gwilt's marital history is finally exposed.¹⁴ She has been formally married. Even more sensational than the concealment of her marriage is the fact that Gwilt has also hidden the death of her husband and her consequent trial for his murder from the knowledge of those at Thorpe-Ambrose. Bashwood is sensationalist in his exposition of the facts: 'All that is known is, that before the mark of the whip was

¹² Wilkie Collins, *Armadale* (London: Penguin Classics, 1995), p. 216.

¹³ *Armadale*, p. 520.

¹⁴ *Armadale*, p. 527.

off his wife's face, he fell ill, and that in two days afterwards, he was a dead man.'¹⁵ The events of the husband's physical abuse of his wife and of his death are linked by Bashwood the Younger. This implicit causation is then made explicit through the production of evidence: 'The evidence of the doctors and the evidence of the servants pointed irresistibly in one and the same direction; and Mrs Waldron was committed for trial, on the charge of murdering her husband by poison.'¹⁶ The evidence, which was gathered, mediated and presented by men, is what condemns Gwilt in the trial. Here Collins is showing that the actions of Gwilt are, in part, made transgressive and defined by the male narrators in control of her story. It is the evidence gathered by male lawyers that defines Gwilt as a murderess.

At the time of publication, the central female figure of *Armadale* gained almost universal critical condemnation and she was branded 'one of the most hardened female villains whose devices and desires have ever blackened fiction'.¹⁷ Collins uses multiple narrative voices in *Armadale* as a way of controlling the reader's interaction with characters. Switching between third person narrative, letters and personal diaries of his characters, Collins uses narrative form to deny his reader a clear moral reading. A large part of the narrative voice is given to Gwilt, through either her letters or her personal diary. In giving narrative control to the character, Collins is denying the moral direction of a third person narrative, and the readers are exposed to the thought processes of the murderess Gwilt. The narrative often places Gwilt's 'desires and devices' at the forefront of the novel. This forces a closeness between the readers and the female villain. It could be this proximity to the machinations, and the lack of clear narrative condemnation, of a villain that contemporary critics found so problematic in Collins' depiction of Gwilt. The motivations behind Gwilt's criminal actions are made explicitly clear in her diary entries. Her dubious lineage and 'the prospect next week of debtors' prison' form the impetus which drives her to plan bigamy, fraud and murder: 'A name that can't be assailed, a station that can't be assailed, to hide myself from my past life. Comfort, luxury, wealth!'¹⁸ Gwilt is driven by her social and economic position to commit the crimes that make her such a hated villainess. That Collins allows these words to come from the character herself, rather than be mediated through a third-person narrative, removes a clear moral indictment of these actions. Inevitably the reader is aware of what drives her machinations. It is not madness or moral depravity but circumstance which drives Gwilt. It could be this closeness and the empathy which it engenders that contemporary critics found so repellent in the transgressive Gwilt.

¹⁵ *Armadale*, p. 527.

¹⁶ *Armadale*, p. 527.

¹⁷ H. F. Chorley, 'Unsigned Review', *Athenaeum*, 2 June 1899, 762–733, reprinted in Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage, *Critical Heritage*, ed. by Norman Page (London: Routledge, 1974), p. 147.

¹⁸ Chorley, p. 447.

In both Leech's illustration and Collins' novel we are presented with transgressive Victorian women. The transgressions of the figures are dependent on their marital status. Lydia Gwilt's crimes are a result of her socio-economic position as a poor, unmarried woman. The central figure in Leech's image is transgressive because she acts outside of expected societal boundaries of the angel-wife role. That these transgressive women are figures that inspired public vitriol or were at the centre of satirical condemnation could possibly suggest that in popular culture transgressive women were looked down upon and vilified. However, it is here that Adorno's criticism may be enlightening in its condemnation of popular culture. Mass culture is controlled, disseminated and approved by the ruling classes. In Adorno's essay this means that capitalism controls popular culture, and goes about fulfilling their industrial requirements through manipulation of the masses. If we apply this to the print culture of the mid-eighteenth century then we must turn to the powers that be. That printing presses were owned and predominantly used by white, middle-class men suggests that they are the capitalists of Adorno's theory. In this way then, the negative depiction of transgressive wives in popular culture could be a move to control and maintain patriarchal hegemony in Victorian society. Both of these depictions of married women are negative; perhaps they were an implicit warning to women who wished to operate outside of the domestic ideals: that to transgress gender boundaries would result in at best ridicule, or at worse criminality and death.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Leech, John, *Husband-Taming*, in *The Project Gutenberg EBook of John Leech's Pictures of Life and Character, Volume 2 (of 3)* [Online] <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/50428/50428-h/50428-h.htm>> [accessed 20 February 2019]

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