

Utah State University

DigitalCommons@USU

All Graduate Plan B and other Reports

Graduate Studies

5-2016

Sufficient for Herself: Women & Silence in Wilkie Collins's Novels

Shannon Branfield
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/gradreports>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Branfield, Shannon, "Sufficient for Herself: Women & Silence in Wilkie Collins's Novels" (2016). *All Graduate Plan B and other Reports*. 786.

<https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/gradreports/786>

This Report is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Graduate Plan B and other Reports by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.



“Sufficient for Herself”:
Women & Silence in Wilkie Collins’s Novels

Shannon Branfield

Utah State University
Logan, UT

The Unsaid of Society

Wilkie Collins is a major sensation author of the Victorian period, known for introducing the form of the novel to detective fiction. His novels contain biting social critique and dynamic, multidimensional characters, the majority of whom are women, making his novels rich material for an examination of gender norms, power dynamics, and difference in Victorian society. His major works include *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868), the two novels on which I focus. Previous critics have focused on the anxious male narrators in these novels and their attempts to establish positions of authority by taking control of the narrative. A necessary result of this seizure is the oppressive silencing of the women of the text, as their voices are ignored or rewritten. While it is certainly true that women often have trouble being heard within a patriarchal society that dismisses their experiences and perspectives, the uses of silence within Wilkie Collins's novels are more complex. In these novels, women do not necessarily have silence imposed upon them; they often choose silence as a means of exerting control over their lives. In contrast to elusive narrative control, elective silence enables women to establish their own distinct power within, but separate from, the patriarchal system. They can then use this power to protect those who are excluded from the patriarchy and provide justice that the legal system cannot.

During the Victorian period, the ideology of the separation of spheres posited men as part of the public world of politics and law, while women were sequestered in the private world of home and family. Men earned their participation in the public world through work and their resulting contribution to the nation; women, on the other hand, were “private persons, not public someones” (Hall 169). This division excluded women from active participation in the public world; instead, they were assumed to exercise power through their positive moral influence on

the men in their life (Hall 156). Not only did this belief in the moral guidance of women serve to excuse their relegation to the domestic sphere, since they nominally had access to power and representation, but it also established women as delicate and morally vulnerable, in need of protection from the harshness of public life. This separation was not merely ideological, however. It was concretized in a legal system which denied married women legal standing as individuals. While single women had the right to own property and make contracts, upon marriage, a woman was subsumed into her husband, who was the sole legal representative for both of them. Married women's property passed immediately to their husbands and they had no legal right to make contracts, sue, or be sued (Hall 97). They had no legal control over the disposition of their income or property. From a legal standpoint, women essentially ceased to exist after their marriage. This practice of coverture granted the husband near absolute authority over his wife, creating the potential for abuse of that power and allowing little legal recourse for wronged wives.

However, throughout Collins's novels, women repeatedly find strength, agency, and a space of their own by electing silence. Often acting unobtrusively, they nevertheless exert considerable control over the action of the stories and are able to resist having their narratives and experiences turned against them. Although patriarchy equates voice with power, this standard often fails male characters, fostering the desperation with which they act. In many of these novels, the loudest characters, the ones who speak the most, are the weakest characters. It is the characters whose silences allow them to linger in the background that have the greatest influence. Rather than competing for public testimony, female characters recognize the limitations of the system, as well as their exclusion from it, and establish power and control by operating outside of that system. Hall notes that "the absolute assumption of their subordination

meant that their activities were hidden,” a marginalization that women used to their advantage (88). Circumventing the procedures of the public world, they enact justice for those failed by the legal system. In these novels, elective silence affords these women self-expression and agency, rather than trapping them in limited social roles. This tension between silence and self-expression offers insight into how women undermine patriarchal control without directly opposing it.

While silence has often been examined as a lack, these novels complicate that idea. Adrienne Rich writes, “In a world where language and naming are power, silence is violence” (204). This perspective has commonly been the view of literary scholars who have focused on the exclusion of women from these texts. However, it is also possible to read silence as agency and resistance. In a study of Virginia Woolf’s novels, Patricia Laurence argues that silence can be “a refusal to enact a subordinate position” (58). In this way, women can become the true narrators of novels from which they seem to be excluded by representing “the unsaid of society” (67). In a similar vein, Carol Senf reads narrative silences in Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) as a means of calling attention to narrative gaps and the way that women’s views are usually silenced by society (455). Working from this perspective, Keith Grant-Davie argues that silence can draw attention to that which is usually overlooked and thus unsettle the audience, causing it to question assumptions and read more critically (2). However, he argues that control over the silence is essential to using it effectively and to its full capacity (3). Thus, it is crucial to understand the nature of the silences in these novels.

In order to understand the variety of silences that occur, a more precise terminology is needed to evaluate similarities and differences. Grant-Davie provides five scales that can be used to evaluate silence and its rhetorical effects. The first scale examines whether a silence is

voluntary or *involuntary*. Next, he turns his attention to whether a silence is *significant* or *incidental*, examining the level of intent involved. Then, turning to perceptions of the silence, he evaluates whether the silence is *unexpected* or *expected*, as well as whether the silence is *active* or *static*. An active silence is one that the audience notices as a silence, often creating a feeling of discomfort, while a static silence slips into the background and is often unnoticed behind the other activity occurring (3). Lastly, silence can be evaluated as *temporal* or *topical*, based on whether the silent person is silent for a period of time or on a particular topic. This argument examines elective silence, so all the silences discussed are considered voluntary and significant. However, the silences under analysis vary according to the last three scales, creating a more complete picture of the types of silences occurring in these novels.

Sensation novels involve crime in middle- or upper-class domestic settings, mixing realism with Gothic romance, Newgate novels, and society novels (Brantlinger 1). By revealing the secrets behind the seeming virtue of domesticity, sensation novels are subtly subversive, undermining Victorian respectability without overtly addressing social or political issues. This undermining of Victorian moral authority parallels the structural undermining of the narrator's authority. Since sensation novels are so reliant on secrets to build suspense, authors were required to create new narrative techniques in which the narrator both reveals and withholds information. However, the narrators' deliberate withholding of information undermines their authority and their credibility, making them suspicious and untrustworthy (Brantlinger 15).

In an attempt to combat this implicit narrative unreliability, both *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* stress the creation of an objective, factual, reliable narrative through first-person, eyewitness testimony, likening it to court documents in order to give the narrative more credibility. However, this endeavor only enhances narrative unreliability, forcing the editors to

constantly defend their project. In *The Woman in White*, Walter Hartright opens the story by writing:

[T]he story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness – with the same object, in both cases, to present the truth always in its most direct and intelligible aspect ... by making the persons who have been most closely connected ... relate their own experience, word for word. (1)

Similarly, *The Moonstone* opens with the same promise: “we should all write the story of the Moonstone in turn – as far as our personal experience extends, and no farther” (9). Franklin Blake, the collector of the documents, further attests that “nothing will be added, altered, or removed... as genuine documents I shall preserve them, indorsed by the attestations of witnesses who can speak to the facts” (230). However, both novels fail to keep these promises, raising questions about gendered differences in narrative agency and control.

In *The Woman in White*, the disregard for the promised first-person testimony is blatant. Midway through the novel, Walter asserts his control of the narrative, saying “The story of Marian and the story of Laura must come next. I shall relate both narratives – not in the words (often interrupted, often inevitably confused) of the speakers themselves” (373). This is a direct contradiction of the plan that he laid out at the beginning of the novel and is particularly notable given that one of the characters thus deprived of voice, Marian, had previously contributed a narrative. In *The Moonstone*, the missing pieces in the compiled documents are less obvious. However, Rachel is the gem’s owner, the victim of the crime, and the only eyewitness to the theft, so the collection that Franklin assembles is fundamentally incomplete without her testimony. This lack is even more curious given Franklin’s rebuke of her for not telling her story,

saying, “If you had spoken when you ought to have spoken.” It is significant, therefore, that her silence during the initial investigation is resumed during Franklin’s collection of narratives two years later (408). In both these cases, female characters with deep involvement in the events of the story and material information to share do not take part in the narrative action, a suggestive silence.

While previous criticism has focused on the oppression of women within the texts, arguing that their silence is enforced by the patriarchal structure, I argue that women in these novels use silence electively and strategically. By juxtaposing women’s narratives intertextually, I am interested in creating a fuller picture of the variety of silences throughout Collins’s work. Although I focus my analysis on *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White*, similar feminine silences occur in *Man and Wife* (1870), *The Law and the Lady* (1875), and *The Haunted Hotel* (1879), indicating a larger pattern in play. Through an examination of these novels, ranging across twenty years of Collins’s literary endeavors, I identify a pattern of female characters protecting their individual selves through elective silence, an ownership of their personal narrative that is constantly threatened by male usurpation of their stories whenever they are related, verbally or in writing. Once usurped, these stories are used against the female characters, illustrating the need for such careful reticence. When female characters are able to elect silence, they use that silence to circumvent the legal system and provide justice that the legal system is unable, or unwilling, to provide.

Much critical attention has been paid to the abrupt narrative shift in *The Woman in White* when Hartright suddenly abandons his plans for first-person testimony and presents himself as an objective narrator for the remainder of the novel. As an overt instance of a male character taking control of the words and stories of female characters, critical discussion of this event has focused

on the gender dynamics at work within the novel. D. A. Miller argues that the male characters in *The Woman in White* are threatened by female freedom and, consequently, spend the entirety of the novel trying to confine the untethered, and therefore uncontrolled, female characters (112). Thus, Hartright's seizure of the narrative is an attempt to exert control over Marian and Laura, one that furthers their enclosure in a domestic space that Hartright heads. However, Miller argues that "confining or containing the woman cannot succeed in achieving narrative quiescence or closure," illustrating the futility of these "anxious male imperatives" (130, 125). He also notes that the characters who are the least reliant on legal standards of evidence most successfully discover the truth. Just a few years later, Pamela Perkins and Mary Donaghy extended Miller's analysis, arguing that, although Hartright is attempting to dominate the women of the novel because he is threatened by them, Collins does this intentionally to highlight Victorian gender inequities, not to reinforce them (392). By showing how even Hartright, the male protagonist, is warped by this unjust system, Collins critiques contemporary social conventions (401).

Later criticism focused increased attention on issues of identity, although gender continues to play a main role in these critical analyses. Gwendolyn MacDonagh and Jonathan Smith focus on the ways in which the male characters use writing to establish their identity. They note that all of the male characters, Glyde, Fosco, and Hartright, use writing to fill blank spaces and establish their identity (275). Reading Hartright more critically than previous scholars, they argue that, if villainy in the novel is based on the creation of false narratives, Hartright has much in common with the antagonists (277). Looking at gender differences in the practice of writing, they contend that, for female characters, power lies in erasure and the blank spaces that the men are so desperate to fill, not in the creation of texts, establishing distinct differences in the power of men and women (281). Similarly, M. Kellen Williams argues that, contrary to Perkins and

Donaghy's sympathetic reading of the text as social critique, Collins was in fact reifying gender norms and sexual difference in the face of the contemporary breakdown of strict gender differences (92). Williams argues that, as Hartright's control of the narrative and establishment as head of their household comes only after he recognizes the difference between Anna Catherick and Laura Fairlie, *The Woman in White* not only represents women as different, but different in an empirically verifiable way and illustrates that male identity and security rests on being able to recognize that difference (99).

Recent criticism has continued the focus on gender, agency, and identity, with Ann Gaylin analyzing the distinct narrative opportunities that male and female characters have. Braiding together many strands of earlier criticism, she emphasizes Hartright's control and manipulation of the narrative, as well as the importance of writing in establishing identity, and argues that the novel is concerned with female mobility and the danger of women acting outside of their socially approved roles and spaces (304). Eventually, that mobility and narrative control must be restrained by conventional, patriarchal structures. However, reading the same social critique that Perkins and Donaghy did, she argues that, while the surface containment would reassure conventional readers, the "narrative overkill required subtly contests its permanence" (Gaylin 324).

In *The Moonstone*, however, questions of narrative agency and gendered differences are subtler than in *The Woman in White*, so much critical attention has been focused elsewhere. Many of the scholarly articles on *The Moonstone* read the text as a critique of British imperialism, given the restoration of the gem to its native land. Still others focus on science and rationality, examining the interplay of different ways of knowing and drawing conclusions about the varying levels of success and certainty that these different ways can provide. As the first

detective novel, *The Moonstone* is also studied for its conversion of a short story form to a novel length and its resulting impact on the genre. Some critical attention has been paid to narrative strategies at work within the novel, however. Lewis Roberts examines the tension between knowledge and disclosure with which detective fiction experiments. Roberts argues that *The Moonstone* reflects the gender bias of conventional Victorian narratives, which commonly feature female characters who gain power through withholding information, while male characters gain power by achieving knowledge (172). As such, Rachel is most interesting while she keeps her secret, slipping into the background once her secret is revealed (171). Ultimately, Roberts argues that women are correlated with absence and silence, while men are correlated with presence and narration (171). This reflects similar dynamics at work within *The Woman in White*, providing evidence for a larger pattern within Collins's work.

For His Sake, For Your Sake, and For Mine

Rachel Verinder's lack of narration in *The Moonstone* is a notable absence in the text, a gap that calls the seemingly complete collection of testimonies into question and entices the reader to read between those testimonies. The premise of the collection is that "the whole story" will be told and "we should all write the story of the Moonstone... as far as our personal experience extends" (8,9). Franklin's use of the word "all" is not spoken lightly. His efforts to create a comprehensive account extend to seeking out old family papers, reestablishing contact with a member of the extended family with whom he has an antagonistic relationship, and soliciting testimony from every individual remotely connected with these events, even when their personal connection is so limited that their contribution is only a few pages long, such as Murthwaite's. In addition to this comprehensive gathering, Franklin assures the reader of the

integrity of the narratives throughout the novel, saying “not a line will be tampered with any where, from first to last,” as contributors have been instructed to confine themselves to their “own personal experience of persons and events... in the capacity of actual witnesses” (230, 284). The absence of a narrative from Rachel is startling and significant. She is the owner of the jewel, the only living witness to its theft, and the one whose silence caused the “suffer[ing] under suspicion” that Franklin seeks to counteract with this collection (9). In fact, Franklin and Miss Clack both refer to Rachel as “the person chiefly concerned” (229). The text insists on both her centrality and the comprehensive nature of the documents, a contradictory claim that forces the reader to see her silence as unexpected and, therefore, significant.

However, there is little evidence to suggest that her silence is forced upon her. Rather, there is evidence throughout the story that, in her silence, she is resisting the demands of society for her speech and acting according to her own desires. This propensity for action based on individual preference and choice, rather than conformity with social standards, is presented as a fundamental part of her character in her initial introduction. Betteredge describes her as having “one defect... that she had ideas of her own, and was stiff-necked enough to set the fashions themselves at defiance, if the fashions didn’t suit her views” (63). More specifically, this dangerous social resistance is her inclination to silence. She “never asked your advice; never told you beforehand what she was going to do; never came with secrets and confidences to any body” (63). She is “sufficient for herself,” a threatening position in a social structure that demands the active compliance of all members in order to maintain itself (63). Rachel illustrates this ability to resist external demands when she refuses the entreaties of Franklin Blake, Sergeant Cuff, and her mother to break her silence, a silence she maintains for the majority of the novel. This silence is topical and active, drawing attention to itself and forcing those around her to speculate about its

cause. Unlike her narrative silence, a static silence that often goes unnoticed, her silence during the investigation is at the foreground of the novel.

When she finally does break her silence and reveals her knowledge to Franklin, saying “I would have spared you now, if you had not forced me to speak,” she defends the justness of her silence, despite the harm it has done to the reputations of all involved (402). “I spare him, when my heart is breaking,” she says (408). “I screen him when my own character is at stake” (408-09). Again rebuked for not speaking, she defends, not just her right to silence, but the strategy involved, saying, “If I had spoken out before other people, ... you would have been disgraced for life! If I had spoken out to no ears but yours, you would have denied it, as you are denying it now” (413). This defense establishes her position as someone who is using silence intentionally and strategically, not as someone who is prevented from speaking. In choosing silence, she has considered the potential outcomes of speech and made the decision that best accomplished her purposes. In fact, she goes further, saying “I left nothing unsaid that I *could* say,” illustrating the care with which she chose her words and the deliberate choices in her mix of silence and speech (411).

Given the elective nature of this early silence, something that is repeatedly referenced throughout the novel, it is consistent to examine her narrative silence as elective as well. Through the preceding course of events and investigation of the Moonstone’s theft, she has chosen not to speak, in order to protect Franklin and herself. However, this topical silence is maintained even after her confrontation with Franklin. She remains openly antagonistic to the investigation of the theft, a position that does not change. When Jennings approaches her about the scientific experiment, she doesn’t see “the slightest need (so far as she is concerned) of putting [the] assertion to the proof” (464). She accepts Franklin’s innocence and continues her

personal opposition to the investigation and discussion of the matter, although she does permit the experiment to take place. With this precedent, it is reasonable that, when Franklin approaches her about his desire to collect documents and tell the story of the Moonstone, Rachel is uninterested in contributing her testimony of the events or assisting the project. Reading this lack of narrative as enforced silence is inconsistent both with her actions and with Franklin's repeated appeals for her to speak. Reading this as elective silence, on the other hand, continues the pattern of behavior established throughout the novel and positions her as a character of considerable will and agency.

Like Rachel, Rosanna Spearman protects Franklin out of love, using her silence to bridge the class divide and draw him into a relationship of sorts. From the beginning of the book, Rosanna's interest in Franklin is discussed and noted as significant. However, this attachment is immediately posed as foolish and hopeless. After all, Rosanna is "a house-maid out of a Reformatory, with a plain face and a deformed shoulder, falling in love, at first sight, with a gentleman" (54). Her situation is described by Betteredge as "an absurdity," but the reader is invited to look past his superficial assessment when his daughter chides him for being "cruel" (54). This exchange highlights the seemingly unsurpassable obstacles in Rosanna's way while presenting her emotional connection as sympathetic, despite its transgressive nature. However, Rosanna is unable to attract any kind of attention from Franklin, despite "constantly put[ting] herself in Mr. Franklin's way – very slyly and quietly... He took about as much notice of her as he took of the cat: it never seemed to occur to him to waste a look on Rosanna's plain face" (69). This all changes after the theft of the Moonstone.

In a shift from her earlier invisibility, Rosanna alludes to her silence to make Franklin aware of her presence and her actions. Not only does Franklin engage in multiple conversations

with her, conversations that she believes signify an unspoken connection between the two of them, he also expresses concern for her, saying, “I can’t bear the idea of getting the poor girl into a scrape” and “I can’t and won’t help Sergeant Cuff to find the girl out” (110, 171). Although he remains mystified and withdrawn, and no further relationship develops between the two of them, Rosanna has succeeded in bringing herself to his attention and causing him to consider her position and well-being. He is unaware of the underlying meaning of her actions but acknowledges their connection, despite his lack of understanding. Positioning herself as his savior and protector, Rosanna alludes to a topical silence she maintains, saying, “They will never find the Diamond, Sir, will they? No! nor the person who took it – I’ll answer for that” (109). She makes this silence active, bringing it to Franklin’s attention in order to exert an influence on both him and the further action of the novel. This degree of narrative influence is significant in a member of the serving class. Her silence gives her power beyond her class position, offering a way for lower-class female characters to exceed those boundaries. Interestingly, silence for lower-class female characters is more often transgressive than for their upper-class counterparts, a reflection of their more limited social agency. The increased degree of transgression for lower-class characters is indicated by their fates at the ends of the novels. In contrast to the normative happy endings achieved by the upper-class women, silent lower-class women are usually dead or institutionalized by the end of the novel.

This limited social agency also contributes to the way Rosanna chooses to break her silence. Prevented from the opportunity for a long conversation with Franklin, and wounded by the only partial success of her strategy, Rosanna writes a letter explaining her silence and revealing her knowledge. Although it seems as though Franklin breaks her silence after her death, removing her agency, he is only able to do so because she has set up such an outcome. She

wants him to know her story, but only after she has committed suicide and is no longer able to be harmed. Unlike Rachel, who knows she is upholding honor by remaining silent, Rosanna is aware of the social disapproval and disgrace that would follow her story – not because she acted (as she thought) to aid a thief, not because she lied, but because she dared to love a man above her station. As a result, she can only tell her story “with the quicksand waiting to hide me” (367). She is as aware as Rachel of the potential negative consequences of speech and makes deliberate choices to protect herself from her story being used against her.

Aside from the personal protection that silence offers, Rachel and Rosanna’s focus is protecting Franklin, and their silences are effective in doing so. Despite their incomplete understanding of Franklin’s actions, both Rachel and Rosanna use their silence to shield his involvement, which buys him valuable, and necessary, time. Knowing that Mr. Candy surreptitiously dosed Franklin with laudanum is essential to uncovering the truth about the theft of the Moonstone; that information was not immediately available. Mr. Candy’s delirium does not set in until the fourth evening after the theft of the Moonstone and Jennings needs additional time after that to decode Mr. Candy’s ramblings and fill in the missing words. Without that information, witness testimony describing Franklin removing the Moonstone from Rachel’s room and physical evidence placing him there would not have solved the case or revealed the truth about the Moonstone’s disappearance. Judging only by the available, surface level information, the law would have considered Franklin guilty, just as Rachel and Rosanna did. Franklin would have been condemned for a crime that he did not commit, the investigation would have been considered closed, and the true guilty party would have escaped. Whatever legal and personal consequences Franklin would have faced, he would have been punished unjustly and would likely not have had the freedom to pursue his own investigation of the

Moonstone's disappearance, eventually discovering the actual thief. This success takes elective silence from a theoretical idea to an effective implementation of power.

This use of silence to protect another is not confined merely to Rachel and Rosanna. In *The Woman in White*, Laura uses silence to protect those close to her. Although Laura often escapes reader attention and is dismissed as a flat character who models the womanly submission and self-effacement expected in Victorian society, a closer analysis shows that she, too, acts with deliberation and intent. Although she appears silent throughout the entirety of the novel, she is, in fact, only silent to the reader. Within the world of the novel, Laura is completely open and honest with Marian, sharing all of her thoughts and feelings with "fearless candour" (189). This changes, however, when she marries. Marian comments that Laura is "provokingly circumspect and silent" (178). Her silence is a topical one, as she shares many details of her travels with Marian, refraining only from "the subject of her husband's character and conduct" (178). This silence, to the reader, blends in to Laura's static narrative silence, but, for Marian, this an active silence. When Marian confronts her about this silence, Laura says "I would tell you everything, darling, about myself, ... if my confidences could only end there. But they could not – they would lead me into confidences about my husband too; and now I am married, I think I had better avoid them, for his sake, and for your sake, and for mine" (187). This reveals an element of consideration, deliberate choice, and action often overlooked when considering Laura's character. The inclusion of elective silence, even in an otherwise entirely submissive and domestic woman, is indicative of the importance of strategy regarding a woman's voice. Acting as a counterpoint to the other female characters in the novel, Laura nevertheless shares with them the use of elective silence, signifying the necessity for women to carefully consider what they say, and to whom.

The Woman Herself Was in His Power

In *The Woman in White*, Walter's zeal for a complete account exceeds even Franklin's, as he attempts to compensate for the hole that these missing testimonies leave. Making promises similar to *The Moonstone*, Walter claims that *The Woman in White* "present[s] the truth...in its most direct and most intelligible aspect... by making the persons who have been most closely connected with them, at each successive stage, relate their own experience, word for word" (1). He compares these narratives to Court testimonies, hoping to attribute a similar gravity and authority to his collection of narrative. This endeavor quickly fails, however, when Walter declares, "The story of Marian and the story of Laura must come next. I shall relate both narratives – not in the words (often interrupted, often inevitably confused) of the speakers themselves" (373). This direct contradiction of the underlying premise of the book is notable because, although it appears to the reader as a sudden change, it has actually been the intended arrangement all along. At the time that Walter proclaims the absolute firsthand experience of these narratives, he has already collected these documents and knows that the last third of the account does not conform to the standard he has just established. Highlighting this discrepancy, and perhaps because of it, Walter takes extreme measures to establish a comprehensive set of accounts, including multiple short narratives from household staff, one paragraph testimonies from the doctor and the village woman who attended to the body, and even a copy of the engraving on the tombstone, as he strives to bolster the credibility of his collection.

Given that Walter announces his intent to tell Marian and Laura's stories and rewrite their words, it is easy to read this moment as Walter's usurpation of narrative control. However, as the collector of the documents and the initiator of this project, Walter's editorial control is clear throughout the novel, as is his desperate desire for a complete, authoritative, and unassailable

record. Since Marian has a lengthy narrative at the beginning of the novel, it does not make sense that Walter would allow her narrative power early in the account and then strip her of it. This inconsistency draws attention to another inconsistency in this situation: Walter's unsubstantiated criticism of Marian's narration. Defending his appropriation of her story and replacement of her own words, he says that her account would be "inevitably confused" (373). This pretext is not credible, however, as readers have their own first-hand experience that contradicts it. They have just read more than one hundred and fifty pages of clear and credible narration from Marian, an account that provides the bulk of the foundational material for the action of the story, and they know Walter's charge to be untrue. This distorted explanation of the missing narrative highlights Walter's awareness of the lack this introduces, a weakness that Walter has little motive to create.

In addition, it is clear that Marian still exhibits narrative control, despite her apparent lack of narrative presence, undermining Walter's supposed usurpation. When Walter relates his means of putting together the narratives of Marian and Laura, he reveals that "the first source of information to which I applied was the journal kept... by Marian Halcombe. There were passages in this diary... which she thought it best that I should not see. Accordingly, she read to me from the manuscript..." (393). This description presents Walter as the applicant requesting permission and Marian as the controller of the narrative, granting him limited access and retaining physical control. It is significant that Marian doesn't just retain editorial control, selecting what information he is allowed to have and what will remain her private story, but that she also retains physical possession of the diary. This would read very differently if she physically handed the diary over to him for him to read and copy, merely granting or denying permission for use. Instead, however, she is in physical control of the document and Walter receives only the information she dispenses. This is a powerful position for her to be in and

ensures that, although she may not be directly, or officially, contributing a narrative, she still controls her own story. This agency, then, strongly suggests that her silence in the latter half of the novel is elective, rather than enforced.

Applying Grant-Davie's theory reveals important differences between Rachel and Marian's silences that illustrate the dangers of women's writings. Unlike Rachel's topical silence, Marian's silence is temporal, an abrupt shift that happens in the last third of the novel. The fact that she would choose silence partway through the story, instead of maintaining silence throughout, as Rachel does in *The Moonstone*, emphasizes the need for women to be strategic in their speech acts. Rachel's silence distances her from the drama and danger of the story. Although harm is done to her reputation, she is repeatedly described as self-sufficient, collected, and self-reliant. She is aware of the consequences of her silence, saying, "I have sacrificed myself – I had a right to do that if I liked" (247). Yet, her silence carves out a space for her to make her own decisions and act according to her own reasoning and beliefs. Reflecting on her silence, even before the mystery is solved, Rachel says "I accepted a dreadful responsibility... I involved myself in the keeping of a miserable secret – but it will be clear as the sun at noonday that I did nothing mean!" (277). These words highlight the active, deliberate nature of her choices. She was not given or burdened with a great responsibility – she "accepted" it. She was not caught up in or involved in a secret – she "involved [her]self" (277). Accused of being a jilt, a serious charge in Victorian England, Rachel says, "I have exposed myself to worse misconception than that... and I have borne it patiently," referring to the scandal the Moonstone's disappearance has brought to her name (304). She can resist the social scrutiny and disapproval because she has maintained her integrity through deliberate action and consideration of her choices.

Rachel offers a counterpoint to Marian, whose attempt to enter the traditionally male world of legal testimony brings physical danger and violation, causing her to choose silence later in the novel. Although the events are taking place in her domestic space, the matter at hand is essentially a public one, concerning inheritance and property. Involving herself in these public affairs, instead of distancing herself, as Rachel does, places her in immediate physical danger. She becomes seriously ill as a direct result of her involvement and this illness leaves her open to worse dangers. Unconscious, Marian is defenseless when Count Fosco intrudes on her private space, entering her bedroom and reading her diary. In itself, the reading of her personal material is a significant trespass, but he compounds it further by then writing in her diary, an act that has been read as symbolic rape (Gaylin 317). Given the intimacy of a diary as a repository of one's most personal thoughts and feelings, the insertion of another person's narrative is invasive and violent. This transgression is the last time we see Marian's writing or hear Marian's own words. However, despite her seeming disappearance, Marian continues to contribute to, and influence, the narrative. She still exerts control behind the scenes and retains ownership of her story and her words. Her silence gives her power and protects her, without diminishing her authority.

This appropriation of women's writing by men, often without their consent and often to be used against those same women, is not confined to Marian but recurs throughout Collins's novels. When women write something, whether personal or public, it opens them to censure, critique, and doubt. In *The Moonstone*, Rosanna leaves her testimony behind her, needing the protection of death to "own the truth" (367). Her fears prove to be well-founded. Franklin grows "bitterer and bitterer against Rosanna Spearman," until he can no longer read her letter and gives it over to Betteredge. Neither of them show any confidence in her words, thinking there's only "a bare chance" that they "might discover something... which might be useful," despite the fact that

her possession of the stained nightgown should prove to them that she has new and important information pertaining to the mystery. Once they finish reading the letter, they see no value in it and want only to put it out of mind. They pity her, but they also use the letter to disregard her story and instead, see her only as a “poor,” “miserable,” “unfortunate,” “unhappy” woman, “self-doomed to destruction” (387-89). The understanding that eluded her in life has not been achieved by her writing; her letter has only served to lock her more firmly in her gender and social class, negating the little progress that her silence had created.

Rosanna is not the only woman whose reputation suffers when Franklin gains access to her writing. Franklin uses editorial comments to introduce doubt into women’s narratives, something that he does not do to his male contributors, no matter how they meander, editorialize, or introduce personal feelings. Given that these narratives are personal testimonies and that all the writers are reporting what they imagined other people’s motivations to be, not what they guarantee they were, it is significant that Franklin only intervenes to clarify the erroneous perceptions of the female narrators, leaving incorrect male assumptions to stand on their own. When Rosanna says she is “certain, Sir, you saw me,” Franklin adds a footnote saying that she is “entirely mistaken” (381). When Miss Clack writes, granted, spitefully, about Rachel, Franklin adds a footnote declaring that Rachel has no concerns about the representation of her character by Miss Clack as “Miss Clack’s pen...[has] unquestionable value as an instrument for the exhibition of Miss Clack’s character” (230). This editorial addition blatantly signals that Miss Clack’s writing will show her to be an unreliable narrator of Rachel’s character, creating a general distrust of her narrative. Certainly, Miss Clack is an unreliable narrator and a poor judge of character, but no such comment is deemed necessary to clarify that Betteredge is unreliable

when he judges people based on their belief in Robinson Crusoe's prophetic powers. It is only the female characters who are openly contradicted in their narratives.

An examination of Collins's other works shows a larger pattern of women's writings being taken and used against them. The most striking example is *Man and Wife*, in which Collins explicitly contrasts elective silence with the co-opting of women's writing. Hester Dethridge, a woman driven to murder by her husband's repeated abuse and the inequitable marriage laws of Victorian England, has chosen silence as a penance for her violent actions, living as a mute, even though she is physically capable of speech. Despite the casting of this silence as ordained and guilty, it is significant that it is described repeatedly by Hester as a means to a "separate life," a way for her to be "set apart" (603-4). Regardless of her religious rationalizations, Hester identifies the same privacy and protection in silence that Rachel and Marian have. There is no mistaking the elective nature of her silence, a silence which "draws attention to who speaks and who is silent" (Surridge 119). However, due to the quasi-medical explanation that Hester insists on, within the world of the novel, her silence is expected. It is only the reader that is aware, eventually, that her silence is voluntary and significant. Like Marian, Hester initiates a temporal silence after an instance of physical danger and harm. This silence creates a space for her to create the stable life she has been seeking, a stability that is threatened only when she breaks her silence.

By writing down her experiences, Hester opens herself to the same dangers that other Collins female writers have faced. Geoffrey, the male antagonist, discovers her writings, takes them and reads them without her consent, then uses them to blackmail her into violent criminal conspiracy. Exulting in his discovery, Geoffrey knows that "while the woman's Confession was in his pocket, the woman herself was in his power" (607). When confronted with his seizure of

her writing, all she can do is offer “lifeless submission” (624). She no longer has any of the agency that she had previously exercised in her independent life. The first thing that Geoffrey commands her to do is rescind her eviction of him from her house. His entry into her private, domestic space parallels Count Fosco’s intrusion into Marian’s bedroom. Again, women’s writing fails to achieve positive ends and results only in vulnerabilities that the men in the novel are able to exploit for their own ends. Of the women in these novels, only Rachel is invulnerable to external manipulation, because she best maintains her silence, an ability afforded to her by her social class. Although she does break her silence once, the demands of the mystery novel make unceasing silence an unrealistic standard. The correlation of silence with secured space and speech with vulnerability still maintains, repeating throughout the stories and across novels.

Collins’s use of elective silence to such effect in this novel calls for a closer reading of earlier, less obvious elective silences in his other novels. In *The Haunted Hotel*, the Countess’s desire to commit her crimes to paper, paralleling Hester’s choices, slowly drives her insane and, ultimately, kills her. Again, this personal destruction is tied to breaking a silence. When she first discusses writing a play, she says, “I have had strange adventures; I have heard remarkable stories; I have observed; I have remembered” (81). These are all images that imply detachment and self-containment. However, she abandons this detachment for personal involvement and begins to write a play, knowing that it will lead to her “day of discovery, and to the punishment that is [her] doom” (49). Interwoven with this plot is the fatalism that occurs in many Collins novels, but the Countess’s devolution as she writes her story and the control and assessment of her play by the male characters echoes the treatment of women’s writing in other Collins novels. On a smaller scale, these novels are filled with women’s letters that go astray, written appeals for help that are never answered, documents that are hidden or stolen. Repeatedly, it is made clear

that while women can produce writing, they cannot control what happens to it or how it is used. This lack of control makes writing, at best, an uncertain activity; at worst, a dangerous one.

A Sealed Secret

Given Wilkie Collins's known concerns for the status of women in Victorian society, particularly their vulnerability to unprincipled men, I argue that is no coincidence that Collins focuses such attention on the ways that women's actions are misinterpreted, misrepresented, and manipulated by men, as well as the lack of official recourse that women have to combat this. Lacking true legal standing because of their gender and subject to biased laws, Victorian women were unable to petition the court and receive justice. The legal system was not written for women and had no place for them. This inability for the court system to deliver justice for women in particular is evident in many Collins novels. The plots of *The Woman in White* and *Man and Wife* both center on, not only the inability for the courts to protect women, but also the way existing laws actually endangered women. Although Collins's novels are often criticized for normative endings of marriage and domesticity, they first must remove the threat of corrupt male power. Endangered female characters are usually saved by the deaths of the male antagonists, acknowledging the threat of uncontrolled male power and its propensity for abuse. Elective silence, then, offers women a chance to effect justice in a way that a court of law would not, or could not. Although these instances of justice remain, for the most part, undetected and do not counteract the official story, they do create a meaningful difference for the affected parties.

In *The Moonstone*, Rachel's silence impedes Cuff's investigation, preventing further legal involvement or resolution. After Cuff is thwarted, Rachel's silence allows a different standard of justice to unfold. Her silence circuitously results in Godfrey's death and the

Moonstone's return to India, providing justice that neither party would have received from the courts. If Godfrey had faced legal repercussions for theft, embezzlement, and forgery, his social standing would have likely protected him from severe consequences. Although death may seem like a harsh punishment for his illegal activity, Godfrey's duplicity, lack of integrity, and sociopathic willingness to use other people make him one of the most hated characters in the novel, and his death at the end is a satisfying resolution for the reader. The legal system would have been unable to enact any sort of justice for the damage his vices and poor character cause, making this extralegal justice necessary. Likewise, a great injustice in *The Moonstone* is the removal of the Moonstone from India. This is the initial theft of the Moonstone, one that is often overlooked amidst the scurrying back and forth to London and the science experiment. Yet, the novel opens and closes with the gemstone in India, indicating that this is more than merely a backdrop for a British adventure. In the Victorian period, at the height of British imperialism, there was no legal recourse for the Indian people to petition for the return of their sacred stone. Again, failed by the court of law, the Indian people receive justice only when Rachel's silence sets into action a course of events that leads to the Moonstone's return to India.

In a more complex instance, *The Law and The Lady* brings together these different elements – women's writings, protection, and justice – highlighting the moral value of such actions. However, these ideas are complicated by the intersection of Valeria's and Sara's silence. Valeria spends the course of the novel seeking to prove her husband's innocence and publicly clear his name, only to suppress that proof when she finds it. A topical silence, Valeria's decision not to reveal her knowledge is active and unexpected both within the world of the novel and to the reader. When Sara Macallan's letter is discovered, it contains the suicide confession that Valeria has been seeking, but, instead of publishing it, she keeps it "a sealed secret... out of

compassionate regard for [Eustace's] own peace of mind, as well as for the memory of the unhappy woman who was once his wife" (410). In doing this, however, she is silencing another woman, preventing Sara's words from reaching the public audience that she had intended. Just as Rosanna's letter was used to malign her character after her death, Valeria knows that Sara's letter would reflect badly on her and open her up to the judgment and censure of those who read it. Applying that lesson to her own life, Valeria comments that she is writing "from memory, unassisted by notes of diaries," a significant difference between her and the male narrators in other novels who constantly reiterate their reliance on documentation to support the reliability and worth of their narratives (399). Similarly, just as Rachel tried to shield Franklin from his actions, Valeria also wants to shield Eustace from realizing the pain he unknowingly, and often unintentionally, caused his first wife. In this instance, Valeria decides that justice is best served, not by public vindication in a court of law, but by allowing Sara's secrets to die with her, reaffirming this separation between women and the legal system.

Although this paper has focused on elective silences, those are not, by any means, the only silences that occur in Wilkie Collins novels. A study of all the different silences is beyond the scope of this argument, but it is worth noting the counterpoint offered by enforced silence. Although the space that women can create for themselves has been examined as a positive result of silence, the elective nature of that silence is essential. In *Man and Wife*, Anne is endangered by her enforced silence and isolation, not liberated. Unlike the positive terms used to describe the space women create for themselves, Anne's isolation is described in sinister terms. She is "as absolutely isolated from all contact with the humanity around her as if she lay in her grave" (556). She is immediately aware of her danger and describes herself as a prisoner, a word that others react to with alarm, not disbelief. Geoffrey attempts to prevent her from sending

messages, engaging in private communication, or leaving the house, all parts of his plan to murder her. His attempts to silence her fail, however, as do his attempts to compel Hester by invading the personal space that silence has afforded her. Despite Anne's survival, her enforced silence and isolation makes her vulnerable, highlighting the dangers of external silencing.

When women are able to elect silence, however, instead of having it forced upon them, silence allows them to resist patriarchal standards that insist on their invisibility by carving out a personal space in which they have control and agency. Despite the seeming withdrawal of silence, a withdrawal that appears to conform to the patriarchal separation of spheres, female characters use this space to circumvent the restrictions and limitations of the public world and, through their own circuitous ways, effect justice for the many people not protected by the British legal system. Without opening themselves to the dangers of overt rebellion, they are able to reveal instabilities in public institutions, undermine repressive laws, and protect overlooked populations. This ability to effect change from within makes silence an opportunity for power and influence, not necessarily an external removal of one's voice. Throughout these novels, female characters regularly defeat male power, both private and public, revealing strength and independence through resistance and silence.

Works Cited

- Brantlinger, Patrick. "What is 'Sensational' About the 'Sensation Novel'?" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37 (1982): 1-28. Print.
- Collins, Wilkie. *The Haunted Hotel*. 1879. New York: Dover, 1982. Print.
- . *The Law and the Lady*. 1875. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. Print.
- . *Man and Wife*. 1870. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. Print.
- . *The Moonstone*. 1868. New York: Harper & Brothers, 2013. Print.
- . *The Woman in White*. 2nd edition. 1860. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1982. Print.
- Gaylin, Ann. "The Madwoman Outside the Attic: Eavesdropping & Narrative Agency in *The Woman in White*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 43 (2001): 303-33. Print.
- Grant-Davie, Keith. "Rhetorical Uses of Silence and Spaces." *Silence and the Silenced: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Eds. Leslie Bolt, Corrado Federici & Ernesto Virgulti. New York: Peter Lang, 2013. 1-12. Print.
- Hall, Catherine. *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism & History*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- Laurence, Patricia Ondek. *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993. Print.
- MacDonagh, Gwendolyn & Jonathan Smith. "'Fill Up All the Gaps': Narrative & Illegitimacy in *The Woman in White*." *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 26 (1996): 274-91. Print.
- Miller, D.A. "Cage Aux Folles: Sensation & Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*." *Representations* 14 (1986): 107-36. Print.
- Perkins, Pamela & Mary Donaghy. "A Man's Resolution: Narrative Strategies in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*." *Studies in the Novel* 22 (1990): 392-402. Print.

Preston, John. "The Silence of the Novel." *The Modern Language Review* 74 (1979): 257-67.

Print.

Rich, Adrienne. *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*. New York: Norton, 1995. Print.

Roberts, Lewis. "The 'Shivering Sands' of Reality: Narration & Knowledge in Wilkie Collins's

The Moonstone." *Victorian Review* 23 (1997): 168-83. Print.

Senf, Carol A. "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall: Narrative Silences and Questions of Gender."

College English 52 (1990): 446-56. Print.

SurrIDGE, Lisa. "Unspeakable Histories: Hester Dethridge and the Narration of Domestic

Violence in *Man and Wife*." *Victorian Review* 22 (1996): 102-126. Print.

Williams, M. Kellen. "'Traced and Captured by the Men in the Chaise': Pursuing Sexual

Difference in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*." *The Journal of Narrative*

Technique 28 (1998): 91-110. Print.