

“She Left the Window”: Challenging Domestic Ethos in Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*

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Abstract: *Historically, literary critics have considered Wilkie Collins’s Woman in White as yet another example of a novel that tentatively endorses alternate versions of acceptable femininity but ultimately confines women within the traditionally confines of domesticity by the novel’s close. To draw such a conclusion, however, would be to overlook Collins’s intertextual relationship with artists and paintings of this time. By employing the lens of visual rhetoric, a reader has a better understanding of how Collins uses Marian Halcombe’s proximity to windows throughout the novel as a means for challenging domestic ethos to the very last page.*

Keywords: *feminist rhetoric, Pre-Raphaelite art, Wilkie Collins, Victorian art, sensation novels, domestic ethos*

“I have got nothing and she has a fortune. I am dark and ugly and she is fair and pretty. Everybody thinks me crabbed and odd (with perfect justice); and everybody thinks her sweet tempered and charming (with more justice still). In short, she is an angel and I am—Try some of that marmalade, Mr. Hartright and finish the sentence, in the name of female propriety, for yourself “

— Marian Halcombe, *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins

Wilkie Collins’s sensation novel *The Woman in White* (1859) was a runaway bestseller. As demonstrated by the quotation above, Marian Halcombe cannot be located within the restrictive categories of Anglo femininity that circulated in mid-nineteenth-century Britain. Marian’s identity crisis rings true considering the popularity of a singular paradigm of middle-class femininity, the Angel in the House, as coined by Coventry Patmore in his 1854 narrative poem of that title. According to Patmore, an ideal woman exists to please men and to please “is a woman’s pleasure” (Patmore 2). Iterations of the pleasant and subservient Angel virtually flooded Victorian culture. As Marian’s inability to finish her sentence in the above quotation from Collins’s novel suggests, alternative

models of feminine behavior were rarely offered or if they were, they were not embraced.

Reflective of the Angel's pervasiveness in nineteenth-century culture is her dominance in our own treatments of women's nineteenth-century rhetoric. Specifically, we see rhetorical studies of how women were able to harness the ethos of the Angel, or more generally domestic ethos, in order to make their way into the public sphere. Lindal Buchanan, for example, looks at how Victorian actresses strategically chose roles that cultivated a virtuous persona, "transforming the theater into a parlor and casting themselves as its presiding matrons and mothers" (281); Carol Mattingly examines how women speakers could use certain clothing to appeal to the virtues of women at home while making public appearances; Leigh Gruwell studies visual ephemera that accompanied public speakers which worked to bridge the gap between the women on lecture tours and the women at home; and Nan Johnson explores how middle-class women were able to extend parlor rhetorics as a means of subtly transitioning from the home to the public podium. Collectively, this work looks beyond the oral tradition, emphasizing how multimodal arguments allowed women of this time to "craft an ethos within the strictly conservative cultural lens of the nineteenth century" which in turn allowed them to "work within the confines of these rigid gender roles" so as to function "effectively in the masculine public sphere" (Gruwell 5). While it is essential to understand how these women cleverly negotiated expectations, we have much to learn from representations of women who truly existed *outside* of these parameters.

There are numerous rhetorical studies on the significance of the Angel in the House or the Angel of the Hearth but little to no discussion of her darker, powerful sister, the Pre-Raphaelite Stunner as coined by the Pre-Raphaelite

Brotherhood (PRB)¹. The Angel in the House was a beacon of virtue but the Pre-Raphaelite Stunner captured the public's imagination. Unlike the delicate Angel, the Stunner was known for her statuesque physique, large eyes, thick hair, and sensuous lips. The painters often chose key literary figures such as Shakespeare's Ophelia, the mythological Prosperine, and the biblical Virgin Mary and Magdalen, just to name a few. The Angel in the House was often featured indoors, in proximity to a window, as a reminder that the outdoor world belonged to men; the Stunner was often featured looking through a window or in natural, romantic settings. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Pre-Raphaelite artists and their models became a cultural phenomenon, "a heady mixture of beauty, poetry, intellectual challenge and personal magnetism" (Christian 27) that "gradually spread to all aspects of Victorian popular and high culture" (Andres xv). In order to fully appreciate how this aesthetic not only permeated Victorian culture but also was used to challenge traditional conventions of femininity, I am suggesting that we not only look at this aesthetic in fine art and theater (as I have done in my earlier scholarship)² but also evaluate the significance of this aesthetic in Victorian literature.

In this essay, I will first assert the importance of looking to literature when examining nineteenth-century rhetoric. Then, I will delineate the ways in which Collins renders Marian with a Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic as way of endearing the readers to a protagonist who did not adhere to the Angel in the House trope. Finally, I will demonstrate how Collins also borrows from the Pre-Raphaelite

1 The PRB was founded in 1848 by the following men: William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Together, these painters chose to defy the mainstream principles endorsed by the Royal Academy of Art in several ways. First, they believed that art that postdated the Italian Renaissance painter, Raphael, was grandiose and unnecessarily ornate. They preferred art that was more true to nature and emotion. As will be further discussed in a later section of this paper, they deviated from realism by ignoring the principles of space and depth in favor of conveying the emotional truth of the painting. Second, while most Victorian art featured domestic nineteenth century scenes, the PRB focused almost exclusively on literary figures of the past, specifically women. Royal Academy paintings often depicted the life of the bourgeois; the PRB included the fallen and the poor. Third, perhaps most noticeably, they represented women with sensuality and compassion. As art critic Jan Marsh observes, "a large element of their artistic inspiration came from the very desire to elevate and idealize women" (Marsh 18).

2 see "Painting an Ethos: The Actress, the Angel, and Pre-Raphaelite Ellen Terry"

aesthetic when constructing the window as a rhetorical space in *The Woman in White*. In focusing on a fictional character in this way we can a) recognize the degree to which the art world informed the creation and reception of literary figures and b) appreciate a character's use of gendered space as yet another mode for highlighting and critiquing the Angel in the House and the confining doctrine of spheres. In tracing the multimodal ways in which Collins renders Marian as deviating from domestic ethos, we can better understand the available means for not only challenging the conventions of how women should look but also how they behaved³.

Why Look to Literature?

Historically, we have removed literature from discussions of rhetoric. Melissa lanetta laments the bifurcation of these scholarly traditions: "repeatedly, literature and rhetoric are constructed as parallel traditions with minimal acknowledgement of their considerable overlap" (401). However, there are those, lanetta included, who insist that fictional accounts enrich our understanding of the rhetorical discourse present at any given place and time. For instance, in her study of pulpits as rhetorical spaces in nineteenth century novels, feminist rhetorician Roxanne Mountford asserts that we should examine literature "because writers, like all spectators of life, offer fresh lenses for understanding the nature of rhetoric" (48). Patricia Bizzell, too, argues that novels can be read as a blueprint for how the public could or should respond to women in the public eye. Bizzell states that when novelists created "utopian moments" in which women succeed in the public realm, these texts assisted readers in imagining what could be "achieved by accepting the woman speaker as a force for good" (388). Notably, the personas of real public women can arguably be seen as "fabricated" as fictional texts (see Corbett; Davis; Engel; and Gale & Gardner for studies of autobiographies at this time). While real women were constrained by convention, fictional women could "speak" freely. Further liberating these imagined figures, we must note that the Pre-Raphaelite artists and Wilkie Collins were all men who could imagine the frustrations of women and critique the system without real consequence.

3 According to Sophia Andres' *Pre-Raphaelite Art in the Victorian Novel*, we might not only look at the women characters of Wilkie Collins but also the characters created by Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Thomas Hardy who can be said to be rendered with a Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic.

⁴ Considering these factors, it can certainly be argued that the thoughts and speech of imagined characters might be read as "real," if not more so, than those produced by public women at this time. In this essay, I will be arguing that "speaking" can also include how a woman made use of space in both fiction and in art. By examining the relationship between both mediums, we have a better understanding for multimodal arguments could be used to combat gender stereotypes and subtly make room for new ways of thinking.

The Window as a Rhetorical Space in the 19th Century

Before charting Marian's navigation of space in this novel, it is important to remember how rhetorical space functioned in the nineteenth century. In her work on nineteenth-century schoolhouses, Jessica Enoch defines the rhetorics of space as "what the space should be, what it should do, and what should go on inside it...[r]hetorics of space have the potential to make a space either powerful or diffused by giving value to the activities that happen inside that space and by suggesting or prescribing the kinds of occupants that should (and should not) move into and out of that space" (276). Nineteenth century spaces were strictly coded as outdoor/indoor, public/private and male/female, respectively. Women only had power inside the home, the power of the hearth, the domestic ethos. While there were some women who were working in the public sphere, most cultural materials still encouraged this separation. As Nan Johnson observes in her study of efforts to regulate American women's rhetorical behavior, "conduct literature of this time emphasized these separate spheres by overtly discouraging women from having strong voices, literally and culturally, and by reminding American readers that, if happiness was to be secured, women should keep to their former place at home and do

4 Many critics have noted that Collins's treatment of women is unorthodox and they have cited a number of potential reasons for his choices. Collins was also unorthodox in his own lifestyle: "He kept a respectable family home with his mother for many years, while setting up his mistress Catherine Groves in a house nearby" (Luckhurst). Secondly, gender issues, especially as they pertained to the law, were relevant to the times and thus provided easy material for Collins's stories. In fact, "Collins was known to keep a cuttings book of newspaper reports that might inspire plots" and in his novels, "he exploits debates about the rights of married women, fresh in the mind from the passage of the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, which allowed civil divorce in England for the first time" (Luckhurst).

it quietly" (222). Representations of the window in nineteenth century were used as a shorthand symbol for reminding women of where they should and should not be.

Borrowing from Roxanne Mountford's definition of space in her study of the pulpit, I define the window frames that were typically associated with Angel in the House imagery as "gendered locations" that "carry the residue of history upon them" while also embodying the "physical representation of relationships and ideas"(42). Like the pulpit, the window is a gendered rhetorical space; the Victorian window symbolized the intransigent barrier between indoor/passive/female space and outdoor/male/active space. Most artistic depictions of the Angel in the House not only render the Angel inside but also in front of or next to a window frame reminding the viewer that her domain was indoors.⁵

Remaining consistent in their defiance of tradition, Pre-Raphaelites had quite a different relationship with space than their contemporaries. As mentioned earlier, many Pre-Raphaelite Stunners were featured outside – in gardens, in the woods, in the water, in fields, etc. Secondly, Pre-Raphaelites dismissed the generally accepted rules of perspective. If one adheres to the governing principles of the Royal Academy, images in the background should be "partially concealed by shadows and therefore less finished than those in the foreground" (Andres 76). Pre-Raphaelites, however, conveyed background material with painstaking detail.⁶ The result is a very sensory-stimulating collusion of background and foreground space. With this aesthetic, windows no

5 Art historian Elaine Shefer notes, "the Victorian window, even when open, did not offer freedom" (14). Shefer notes that from the 1850s to late 18902, there "are hundreds of paintings with this motif" such as John C. Horsley's *The Soldier's Farewell* (1853, Plate 1), William M. Egley's *A Corner of Her Home* (1860, Plate 2), George E. Hicks's *The Last Rose of Summer* (1866, Plate 3), Sir James D. Dinton's *Waiting* (ca. 1865, Plate 4) and Alfred W. Elmore's *Lost in Thought* (1850s, Plate 5) (14). Art critic Tim Barringer observes that images like these are a means for reminding women that a "woman's work is inside the home, while the active work in exterior world belonged solely to men" (Barringer 142). Behind the window, the Angel was, as art historian Susan Casteras observes, a "cultural symbol of feminine purity and unavailability...literally cloistered womanhood" (20). Bourgeois happiness and the domesticity of women were conflated in such cultural products.

6 for examples, see John Everett Millias's *Ophelia* (1851-2), William Holman Hunt's *Awakening Conscience* (1853) or Dante Rossetti's *Lady Lillith* (1868-73).



Left: John Everett Millais, *Mariana*, 1852. Oil on canvas.

Right: close-up of leaves through window and on floor

longer looked like boundaries because the two planes were no longer distinct. Furthermore, when Pre-Raphaelite women were featured near windows, they were often restless or agitated.

In order to appreciate the rhetoric of the window in Collins's novel, it is essential to acknowledge a very famous painted predecessor. The most famous example of the subversive window-as-blurred boundary can be found in Pre-Raphaelite artist John Everett Millais's *Mariana* (1851-2). Not only was Millais a very close friend of Collins but also *Mariana* was incredibly well known at this time. In fact, it was considered, as the esteemed contemporary critic John Ruskin asserted, the "representative picture of that generation" (165):

As can be seen in the image above, the woman featured is by a window but she is not an Angel in the House. She is visibly restless, weary, and agitated. She has abandoned her domestic duties, the monotony of her embroidery. The window is open and the detailed leaves are floating inside (see close-up image on right), further dissolving the boundary of indoor/outdoor space.⁷ The detail of the wallpaper collides with the detail of the outdoor space, enhancing

7 Even more intriguing than the general popularity of this painting is that it appealed so strongly to women. When William Michael Rossetti attended a private viewing at the Royal Academy in May 1851, he reported that "*Mariana* appeared to be a great favorite [sic] with women," but he was unable "to determine why this might be" (91).

for the viewer Mariana's emotional truth: her claustrophobia. While there is no documentation that this painting directly informed Collins's heroine,⁸ both Millais and Collins are using the window as a rhetorical space to highlight and critique the doctrines of separate spheres.

Why Study Marian?

Many authors borrowed the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic but typically the literary Stunner was included for sensational impact or as a villain. Stunners in literature have included figures such as the manipulative Gwednolyn Harleth from George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, the murderous Lady Audley from Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, George Paston's vengeful actress from *A Writer of Books*, and the duplicitous Magdalen Vanstone from another Collins novel, *No Name*. While these characters received mixed if not all together negative responses, Marian was universally beloved by other characters in the book and by the public. Marian deviated from traditional expectations of femininity in both speech and appearance while also deviating from the expected use of gendered space. Regardless, Collins's narrator ends the tale by referring to Marian as the "Angel of the Story." Indeed, novelist Edmund Yates relates Collins's account of having received, immediately after the publication of *The Woman in White*, "a number of letters from single gentlemen, stating "their wish to marry the original of Marian Halcombe at once" (qtd. in Sucksmith 5). In this way, Marian was Collins's masterpiece. But why did this figure thrive when others did not?

In part, Collins succeeds in making Marian so lovable by rendering the novel's Angel in the House figure, Laura Fairlie, almost comically boring. Collins's descriptions of Marian's sister Laura are limp at best: "her hair is of so faint and pale a brown-not flaxen, and yet almost as light; not golden and yet almost as glossy." Her eyes are "lovely eyes in form—large and tender and quietly thoughtful—but beautiful above all things in the clear truthfulness of look that dwells in their inmost depth" (Collins 51). Laura is akin to a watercolor painting for she is nearly "colourless" and "bleached into nonentity" (Hughes). As those around her take active measures to solve the mystery of the woman in white, Laura is in the periphery of the action, posed and silent.

8 John Everett Millais and Wilkie Collins were reportedly together on the night that the idea for *Woman in White* was conceived. According to Millais's son, the men were walking home when they heard a piercing scream only to see a "beautiful woman in flowing white robes that shone in the midnight" who seemed to "float" and then vanish. See *Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais* p. 281.

As critic Jane Smiley observes, Collins does not avoid "the damsel-in-distress clichés," he "embraces them" (381). Notably, Laura is also "denied a formal narrative voice" (Pedlar 75) and her personality is so nondescript that Emily Allen described her as the "vanishing lady whose identity is up for grabs" (405). From a rhetorical standpoint, she carries no power, orally, visually, or spatially. Via Count Fosco, the novel's villain, Collins calls attention to her lack of influence. Fosco has no concern for Laura as an intellectual adversary and refers to her as "that poor flimsy pretty blonde" (Collins 331). Laura conjures, for the nineteenth-century reader, traditional paintings of this era that depict nondescript women waiting passively for love and marriage, such as Arthur Hughes's *April Love* (1856).

By contrast, Collins uses vivid visual description to direct the reader's emotional attention towards Marian. In her work on Victorian novels, Sophia Andres highlights Collins's close relationship with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, suggesting that like them, he "draws" his protagonists "uncharacteristically and unexpectedly" (Andres 77). As can be seen in Walter's description of Marian, she has the distinctive curves and physique of a Stunner: "Her figure was tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat; her head set on her shoulders with an easy, pliant firmness; her waist, perfection in the eyes of a man, for it occupied its natural place, it filled out its natural circle" (Collins 24). She is described as "ugly" (24), "almost swarthy and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache" (35). Marian is not just Pre-Raphaelite in appearance; Marian dominates the conversation and her handshake is firm. She is assertive, logical, and unafraid of confrontation. Like John William Waterhouse's *Lady of Shalott, Looking at Lancelot* (1894), Marian does not avoid eye contact with those who look at her.

As with Laura, Collins again uses the other characters didactically, instructing the readers on how respond to Marian. Walter refers to Marian as a "highly-bred woman" with "unaffected self-reliance" (59) and he compliments her easy possession of "wit" and "grace" (88). Fosco lusts after Marian and refers to Marian as "this magnificent woman" (331). Laura has fears, perhaps not unfounded, that one day, Walter will "end in liking Marian more" (562). In rendering these women within familiar artistic tropes and creating scenarios in which the Stunner is preferred to the Angel, Collins challenges the reader to consider what it means to be an ideal woman in terms of speech and appearance.

In directing the reader's reception of Marian, Collins uses not only dialogue and physical descriptions but also deliberate representations of space that would have been recognized by a Victorian reader. By his representation of windows throughout the novel, Collins extends his arguments about how women look and how they should behave to where they might belong.

“She Left the Window”: establishing patterns of rhetorical space

In the novel, the use of windows remains consistent with the rhetoric that delineates the differences between the Angel in the House and the Pre-Raphaelite Stunner. As Mountford describes in her discussion of the pulpit in novels, novelists used space to “amplify their character’s genders” and Collins is certainly using the window to amplify associations with Victorian tropes of femininity (42). Laura’s passivity is enhanced by her traditional Angel in the House relationship to indoor/outdoor space and window frames. As Clair Hughes describes, Laura is almost always inside: “[o]ften too weak to leave her room, ill, believed dead, incarcerated in a lunatic asylum, and then reduced to such infantilism that even speech fails her.” The window’s physical frame, whether we are looking through a window at Laura or she is standing in front of a window, emulates the borders of a figurative canvas. For instance, when we first encounter Laura, the male protagonist, Walter Hartright, and Marian are walking and conversing, whereas Laura is “standing near a rustic table, looking out at the inland view of moor and hill presented by a gap in the trees and absently turning over the leaves of a little sketch-book that lay at her side”(Collins 50-1). Although a window is not literally mentioned, we realize that Laura must be in front of one in order to be looking at the “inland view” from inside her summer home. Laura is a static image. Marian, however, has an amazing amount of freedom and movement throughout the novel.

Marian’s proximity to windows, her ability to exit rooms through windows, and her ability to use windows to obtain information, challenges the rhetoric of masculine and feminine space. Collins establishes a relationship between Marian and windows from the very moment she is introduced into the story. Living in a house with Laura and her uncle, the elderly Frederick Fairlie, Marian is the head of the household. As such, it is she who greets the young artist, Walter Hartright, who has come to instruct Laura in drawing. Walter Hartright narrates this scene:

I looked from the table to the window farthest from me, and saw a lady standing at it, with her back turned towards me. [...] She had not heard my entrance into the room; and I allowed myself the luxury of admiring her for a few moments [...] She turned towards me immediately. [...] She left the window-and I said to myself, The lady is dark. She moved forward a few steps-and I said to myself, The lady is young. She approached nearer-and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), The lady is ugly! (34)

Even before Marian moves or speaks, Collins toys with a Victorian reader's expectations about a woman by the window. Collins writes that "she left the window" and "she moved forward a few steps," highlighting Marian's constant association with motion; she refuses to stay in "her place." Syntactically, this passage echoes "Lady of Shallot" which reads, "She left the web, she left the loom/ she made three paces thro' the room." However, while Tennyson's Lady of Shallot (1833,1842)—and the many painted versions of this character—faces impending doom, Marian receives no punishment for disrupting Walter's pleasure in gazing at her. In fact, by the end of this introduction, Walter decides he finds her demeanor refreshing and immediately decides she is worthy of respect. Through Collins's rendering of her appearance, her speech, and her use of space, we see a fictional rendition of multimodal argumentation, a scene that Bizzell would refer to as a "utopian moment."

Collins's staging of the initial window scene with Marian and Walter foreshadows other key instances in which Marian's use of this space is linked to an exploration of gender hierarchies. Even the villains of the novel, Count Fosco and Sir Percival, realize that Marian complicates the rhetorical conventions of the window as a gendered space. As the two men plot to steal Laura's inheritance, Marian overhears this conversation:

'What's the matter?' I heard Sir Percival say, in a low voice, 'Why don't you come in and sit down?'

I want to see the light out of that window, replied the Count softly.

'What harm does the light do?'

'It shows she's not in bed yet. She is sharp enough to suspect something, and bold enough to come down stairs and listen, if she can get the chance. (317)

Count Fosco recognizes that Marian is not the sort of woman who will stay in her place – figuratively, out of the way of his plans, and literally, behind her bedroom window. The Count does not know that, at this point, Marian is actually listening, already using the open window to her advantage. The Count's remarks about Marian's window affirm the conventional assumption that if women were behind windows, they would be kept from information. Again, the Count underestimates Marian, for he only considers that Marian might go down the stairs and he does not even imagine the course of action that Marian actually takes: she goes out *through* her window.

Although the men lower their voices in order to ensure secrecy, Marian is not deterred. To hear their conversation, Marian creates a way that will allow for her to escape her room and keep tabs on the men's doings. As depicted in the poster for the stage production of this novel, she decides to climb through

her sitting room window. In this scene, we witness Marian's transgression on a number of levels as she moves from the private, feminine sphere to the public, masculine one. First, she acquires information that she cannot obtain while inside, metaphorically echoing a desire to access the knowledge and education that women were not privy to when confined indoors—the sort of desire to which Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* alludes. Second, she becomes liberated physically via her dress. To enact these acrobatics, she changes her attire:

A complete change in my dress was imperatively necessary, for many reasons. I took off my silk gown to begin with [...] I next removed the white and cumbersome parts of my underclothing...In my present dress, when it was close about me, *no man could have passed through the narrowest spaces more easily than I* (emphasis mine, 319)

In crossing from indoor to outdoor, Marian transgresses more than one boundary. As rhetorician Carol Mattingly notes in her discussion of women's dress, Victorian fashion for women was particularly restrictive. There was a move away from the empire waist designs, which "permitted garmets to flow loosely around the waist," and towards a "focus on the waistline, often with narrow skirts of clinging material accompanying low-cut bodices and exposed shoulders, or fuller skirts with elaborate petticoats, hoops and bustles and crinolines, often gathered at the side and back to further define the corseted and laced midsection" (Mattingly 9). Marian's change in dress certainly reflects the limitations of this burdensome clothing and, whether intentionally or unintentionally, foreshadows the eventual adoption of bloomers and breeches. In removing these ornamental trappings, Marian has become even more powerful than a man, for this daring change is unexpected.

Traditional readings of "the window scene"

It is fair to read this scene as a didactic and punitive moment. After all, Marian leaves her window and bad things happen. While on the roof, it begins to rain. She becomes terribly sick from her excursion. She loses control of the narrative, Count Fosco steals her diary, and Collins gives the narrative voice to Walter Hartright. Marian fades from her status as protagonist to a secondary character. Critics focus on this scene, and the repercussions, as Collins punishing Marian for moving from the private/passive/feminine sphere to the public/active/male sphere. Jerome Meckier notes that she "eavesdrops like a man" (114) and Ann Gaylin describes her eavesdropping as an "improper activity on the border between inside and outside, private and public" (303). Meckier comments on the storm during this scene noting that "satirically, Collins elevates propriety into an elemental principle: the heavens open up to reprimand Marian for overstepping the role imposed on her sex" (114). Alison

Westwood argues that this moment and the "Lady of Shallot" both "suggest a nineteenth-century notion that the boundary separating the private and public spheres is safest left unbreached" (89). These conclusions do not account for Marian's continued relationship with windows through the remainder of the narrative. While Marian may have become ill and while she may have lost her "voice" at this point in the novel, *she did not die*. Furthermore, if we give weight to Collins's relationship with Pre-Raphaelite art, we look beyond the oral tradition as his only means for making argument. With this lens in mind, we can examine the other ways that Collins allows Marian to "speak" to a reader through her negotiation of windows throughout the text; if we examine the story via rhetorical space, her story does not end here.

Walter's narrative dominates the remainder of the novel, but Marian maintains personal agency, as seen through her continued use of windows. In order to protect her sister, Marian keeps a vigilant watch over their house. As Marian is "walking about and setting things right," she sees the villain, Count Foscoe, through the window talking with the owner of the asylum. Determined once again to obtain whatever information possible, Marian "remained at the window looking at them from behind the curtain" (545). The aftermath of her earlier excursion does not prevent her once again from using the window. She runs down to the first-floor landing and waits, "determined to stop him if he tried to come up-stairs" (545). When the Count sends her a message asking her to speak with him, she runs into the street where she engages in a conversation with her nemesis. During this experience, Marian is disgusted to learn that she has earned the Count's respect and, moreover, won his affections. Verbalizing her desire to not only enter the sphere of men but also to be able to act in this sphere, Marian reports that as she spoke with the Count, "her hands tingled to strike him, as if [she] had been a man!" (546)⁹. From this adventure, she returns to her home physically unscathed. Without assistance, she packs up their belongings and moves herself and Laura to another location. Unhindered this time by illness, Marian recounts these events to Walter, providing the information needed to protect them from Count Fosco once and for all. Throughout this sequence of heroic actions, Marian is once again constantly moving. She secretly obtains information. She leaves the window, flees the house, and survives her time of danger in a public space. When Fosco

9 For more on Marian's masculinity, see Rachel Ablow's "Good Vibrations: The Sensationalization of Masculinity in *The Woman in White*" and Richard Collins's "Marian's Moustache: Bearded Ladies, Hermaphrodites, and Intersexual Collage in *The Woman in White*."

declares his admiration for Marian, we could even say that she has mastered (masculine verb intended) the public sphere.

A reader sees the potential for Marian to be an agent of change when realizing that she will become the teacher for Walter and Laura's children. Often overlooked in criticism of this novel, Marian promises the couple that she will "teach [their children] to speak for me, in their language; and the first lesson they say to their father and mother shall be – We can't spare our aunt!" (Collins 696). Via the children, she will leave the window yet again, for her knowledge will be disseminated beyond the domestic realm. Thus, even though she is "ugly" by Victorian standards, even though she is assertive, even though she will not stay "in the house," this narrative allows Marian to resist multiple frames and to potentially be an entirely new kind of "angel."

Many literary scholars read Collins's novels as formulaic, for they begin by allowing the heroine's autonomy but ultimately, this power becomes subdued or restricted by masculine influence. Gaylin suggests "the novel itself represents a space of female narrative activity which is eventually constrained and enclosed in reassuring patriarchal structures" (304) and that this "ending of *The Woman in White* emphasizes Marian's status as a reformed " 'good angel'" of the house" (320). And indeed, the concluding words of the novel are, "Marian was the good angel of our lives, let Marian end our story." Even though Walter's narrative commentary tries to force Marian back into her "place," a rhetorical reading does not suggest that Marian, and those like her, will stay put.

Collins was truly a master at simultaneously pushing boundaries and maintaining the affection of his readers. As Sue Lonoff observes, Collins was "immensely concerned with the public...wanting to be widely read" (1) while also very skilled at introducing "distasteful topics and unpopular views without alienating the public"(19). Through his allusions to Pre-Raphaelite art, Collins succeeded in packaging transgressive femininity in a pleasing and familiar way. By providing the readers with a plot that ended with a traditional marriage (Laura and Walter), the novel was reassuring. The repeated emphasis on space, however, continued to work on the reader even after the novel's end. As Roxanne Mountford observes in her study of the pulpit in nineteenth-century novels, "this literary exaggeration of a common rhetorical space...communicates something to the audience quite apart" from the text alone" (48). In this case, Marian and her use of space became a literal and metaphorical window that could not be closed.

Keeping the Window Open: Influence on Readers and Writers

Both the text and Marian were well received by the general public. As Jon Varese testifies in his recent piece on the 150th anniversary of the text, the novel received "drastically mixed reviews" from the critics but it was "a mad success with the public." The novel was lucrative for Collins and "Sampson



Frederick Walker, The Woman in White, 1871, Woodcut.

Low's first printing of 1,000 copies of the three-volume edition in August of 1860 sold out on publication day" (Varese). Like Fosco, the public seemed to heartily agree that Marian was the ideal woman.

Marian's use of space, too, lingered in public imagination. When Collins adapted the novel for stage purposes in 1871, a number of key scenes were omitted or altered. While there are a number of ways Marian could have eavesdropped on the other characters, her window scene remains, adding potency to the visual leagacy of this moment.¹⁰ Furthermore, the window scene was artistically interpreted by Frederick Walker (1840-1875) and reproduced as the play's marketing poster ¹¹:

While we do not have access to Walker's notes on why he chose to create the image in this way, we can imagine why he believed this image would be so captivating for his contemporaries if we consider this discussion of windows as rhetorical space. In this image, Marian is quite literally depicted between frames. One foot is in the domestic sphere in a jarring *tromp l'oeil* effect while the other is presumably stepping onto the roof. Marian is looking over her shoulder as if questioning her decision to leave her window. It is not difficult to imagine that playgoers would identify with Marian as she wrestled with her

10 See Marian's window scene and multiple references to windows in the set notes in the script for this play <http://www.wilkie-collins.com/the-woman-in-white-play/>

11 It was novel for a real artist to create such a poster. According to Kenneth Robinson, one of Collins's biographers, Walker's design "mark[ed] the birth of modern English poster art" (252).

indecision. By entering the theater, and enjoying a tale that so deviated from the norm, an audience could enjoy transgression without harm. More importantly, by watching Marian bravely navigate the public sphere, they could imagine a world in which women were not so confined.

The niche that Collins carved inspired women imitators to try their hands at sensation writing, including the very successful novelists Mrs. Henry Wood and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. In a magazine interview, Braddon acknowledged that she owed the success of her novel, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), to Collins's *The Woman in White*. As Clair Hughes observes, readers were "in fact delighted in their millions when in 1862, Mary Braddon gave them Lady Audley, a heroine with Laura Fairlie's looks and Count Fosco's wicked ingenuity and energy." Braddon, like Collins, relies on a Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic for the construction of Lady Audley.¹² Although lesser known, George Paston (Emily Morse Symonds), too, follows in Collins's wake with Bess Heywood, a Pre-Raphaelite actress-as-political activist in *A Writer of Books* (1891)¹³.

Suggestions for Future Rhetorical Studies

In her work on epideictic rhetoric in Victorian fiction, Kathryn Summers observes that acknowledging the intersections of rhetoric and fiction allows us to "address the ways in which artistic discourse...participate[s] in the negotiation of values, beliefs and power in our society (Summers 33). In my studies on Pre-Raphaelite art and the Victorian actress, I examined the ways in which women performers could harness the fictional narratives of the roles they performed and the ethos of the fine art world to combat negative stereotypes and cultivate ethos. In this study, I'm suggesting that fictional Pre-Raphaelite heroines also contributed to the multimodality of these arguments. When focusing on characters like Marian, who walked the line between repulsive and fascinating, within a rhetorical inquiry, we have a much better understanding for how fictional characters could inspire real change; or, as rhetorician Faye Dudden remarks in her work on fictional performers, how these characters "whispered to women about transformation, self-creation, even power" (2). If we assume that space, and representations of space were well understood as rhetorical discourse in the nineteenth century, then our readings of literature should include analysis that accounts for the impact of this subtle but powerful argumentative mode. Furthermore, if we acknowledge the relationship

12 See Clair Hughes "Lady Audley: The Woman in Colour" for further study

13 See my essay "Self-Appointed Executioner: The Late Nineteenth-Century Actress and George Paston's *A Writer of Books*"

between art and literature at this time, we can better appreciate the many ways in which artists and authors could create multimodal arguments which served to highlight, critique, and resist the oppression of women.

In her speech to the Women's Service League in 1931, Virginia Woolf argues that in order for women to truly become free, they must actually *kill* the Angel in the House. In moving forward, we can focus on a) how authors gender rhetorical space in the novel; b) how the intertextuality between art and literature could alter or enhance the didactic message of a novel or a work of art; c) how subversive representations of women introduced by men like the Pre-Raphaelite Brothers or Wilkie Collins informed newer, more ambitious models of feminine behavior in both fiction and real life. In doing so, we have a better understanding of who helped to let the Angel *out* and how. Ultimately, it is well worth examining all rhetorical artifacts in order to create a more nuanced understanding of rhetorical discourse and those who created it in the nineteenth century.

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