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Economic Women

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“Absolutely Miss Fairlie’s own”

EMASCULATING ECONOMICS IN *THE WOMAN IN WHITE*



ESTHER GODFREY

“My good friend, you are on the edge of your domestic precipice; and if I let you give the women one other chance, on my sacred word of honour, they will push you over it!”

—Count Fosco to Sir Percival, *The Woman in White*¹

Nineteenth-century literature abounds with stories of women’s struggle to secure their futures through fortunate marriages to wealthy husbands. Throughout the period, women lacked equal access to the law, education, or the workforce, and, unless women were independently wealthy, marriage often proved essential to their economic stability even as it deprived them of economic autonomy. This sexual economy largely benefited middle- and upper-class men, who could capitalize on gender inequities to exchange their wealth for youth and beauty. Thus, the logic of the marriage between Marianne Dashwood and Colonel Brandon in Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811)² makes perfect sense to Mrs. Jennings, who assumes the match settled equitably: “For *he* is rich and *she* is handsome.” Fictional accounts of the nineteenth-century traffic in women are commonplace and, by the end of the century, lead to direct

¹ Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (1860; Ontario: Broadview, 2006), 334. All subsequent parenthetical citations refer to this text.

² Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 36.

attacks on marriage as socially sanctioned prostitution in works such as George Bernard Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (1893) and George Gissing’s *The Odd Women* (1893). As conventional (and disturbing) as this trope is, however, it fails to present a sufficient picture of mercenary marriages in which women, instead of men, possess fortunes. Focusing on the possible marriage between Marianne and Colonel Brandon, for example, directs attention away from Marianne’s other suitor, Willoughby, and his eventual marriage to Sophia Grey—a marriage he enters not for love, youth, or beauty, but for her £50,000. Such a marriage serves as a counterpoint to the recent argument put forth by Elsie Michie; tracing the development of the heiress in the nineteenth-century marriage plot, Michie argues that a hero’s overwhelming preference for the “poor woman” over the “rich woman” demonstrates the cultural anxiety that rapid economic development and increasing materialism might corrupt moral sentiments.³ Ultimately an antihero, Willoughby makes the wrong decision, teaching by example the negative consequences of privileging fortune over feeling.

Yet, as Michie acknowledges, the ramifications of the heiress’s wealth change when she is sought by two men. Although Michie is certainly right to suggest that in Victorian fiction women must “choose the man who represents love rather than the love of money” (5), I’m most interested here in an heiress’s relationship to her own wealth, both before and after marriage. Though the ability for women, and especially married women, to control their finances remained limited for much of the century, women did wield capital, and their wealth not only made them consumers (as well as objects) in the sexual market but also made masculinity itself—even that of their chosen husbands—vulnerable. In Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860), the anxieties that arise after Laura Fairlie’s marriage center less on materialism than on the way that money had the potential to trouble gender. While studies of nineteenth-century marriages often run the risk of promoting compulsory heterosexuality, this essay suggests that gender identities are both fluid and economically driven and that marriage is unavoidably queer.⁴ As Kathy Psomiades⁵ points out, myths of compulsory

³ Elsie Michie, *The Vulgar Question of Money: Heiresses, Materialism, and the Novel of Manners from Jane Austen to Henry James* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 7, 24.

⁴ See Sharon Marcus’s *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007) for a parallel argument that women’s homosocial relationships actually helped to produce many of the heterosexual marriages of Victorian literature.

⁵ Kathy Alexis Psomiades, “Heterosexual Exchange and Other Victorian Fictions: ‘The Eustace Diamonds’ and Victorian Anthropology,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 33 (1999): 93–118, 116–17.

heterosexuality and the traffic in women emerge in periods of increased male anxiety, and they resurface as comfortable and familiar narratives to reify gender roles. The idea of a traffic in women is critically expedient but reduces the complexities of sexual economies to the foregone conclusion of women's victimization by men. Instead of looking solely at women's mercenary marriages, we need to consider the ways in which fiction presents the desire for male financial security, while also suggesting how independent wealth could both empower and imperil women. Examining this dynamic in fiction reveals a multiplicity of evolving and varied economic scenarios. Within these sexual economies, men are not always the agents nor are women always the victims; in fact, the process of valuation and exchange destabilizes gender so fundamentally that critics must recognize such identities as intrinsically flawed. Although, as Eli Zaretsky⁶ and other feminist scholars emphasize, sexism predates capitalism, fictional representations of nineteenth-century economic conditions point to weaknesses in a seemingly monolithic and insurmountable gender system rather than just stabilizing or simplifying a patriarchal order. Wealth offers one avenue to power, and, because gender remains inextricably linked to power, wealth—or the lack of wealth—has the potential to rewrite gender identities.

I. THE THREAT OF *FEME SOLE*

The Woman in White appears to follow a familiar master narrative: Sir Percival Glyde, a forty-five-year-old baronet, marries twenty-year-old Laura Fairlie, and the storyline of a woman's advantageous yet troubled marriage seems understood—even trite. Laura is sweet, fair, delicate, dutiful, and not as smart as her darker, stronger, and mustached half-sister Marian.⁷ Laura quickly suppresses her emerging feelings for Walter Hartright to fulfill the desires of the men in her life who have more immediate claims: her deceased father, her effeminate uncle, and her prospective husband. Following the advice of conduct-book writer Sarah Stickney Ellis and other midcentury women, Laura tries to “suffer, and be still” in a loveless marriage, and she explains to her sister, “Whenever you and I are together,

⁶ Eli Zaretsky, *Capitalism, The Family, and Personal Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

⁷ See Cindy LaCom's essay “Ideological Aporia: When Victorian England's Hairy Woman Met God and Darwin,” in *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 4.2 (2008), for further discussion of Marian's moustache and its gendering effects.

Marian, we shall both be happier and easier with one another, if we accept my married life for what it is, and say and think as little about it as possible” (235).⁸ In becoming Lady Glyde, Laura gains a title but loses much more. Yet the novel’s titillating sensationalism comes not from its ability to replicate the trope of women’s victimization and economic disadvantage, but from problematizing that pattern by emphasizing men’s precarious hold on wealth and women’s economic agency. *The Woman in White* reveals that Sir Percival has no fortune and that he marries Laura not because she is pretty, well-bred, and half his age, but because she is rich and he is poor. Sir Percival’s title seems to promise a good return on Laura’s investment, and, though the choice to marry Sir Percival is not entirely her own, Laura is an active participant in the transaction. Her marriage into the ranks of nobility increases the value of her family, and, as such, her acceptance of Sir Percival is “an engagement of honour, not of love” (111). As the novel explains, Laura is not especially excited about her acquisition, but, since she has not met Walter at the time of the engagement, she considers it a fair deal: “she herself neither welcomed it, nor shrank from it—she was content to make it” (111). Thus, while the novel emphasizes the continued abuse of women within a male-centered Victorian economy, it also reveals the anxiety produced by the transitory nature of wealth. If power is economic and tied to material wealth, rather than to masculinity, then financial fictions provide the potential to trouble gender relations. I do not claim that *The Woman in White* pretends to court such trouble; in fact, the novel teems with gender essentialism, from its opening line, “This is the story of what a Woman’s patience can endure, and what a Man’s resolution can achieve” (49), to its conservative conclusion that presents Laura’s son as the heir to her estate. I also grant that Laura’s purchase of a title benefits her father and uncle at least as much as it does her. But these conventional renderings of gender compensate for anxieties raised by debates over married women’s property and by the destabilizing effects that women’s separate property enabled.

Ultimately, the novel recognizes that even women’s limited exercise of financial freedom threatens the conventional marriage plot in sensational ways. Despite her solicitor’s unease that faulty provisions in her settlement could award all of Laura’s wealth to Sir Percival upon her death without children, prenuptial arrangements keep her property from falling into his

⁸ See Sarah Stickney Ellis’s *The Daughters of England, Their Position in Society, Character, and Responsibilities* (London: Fisher, 1842), microfilm, 94. In *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 65–85, Karen Chase and Michael Levenson expose irony and resistance in Ellis’s life.

hands during the marriage and place the traditional angel in the house in an unlikely position of economic authority.⁹ Sir Percival's gambling debts have led him to take desperate measures, but he attempts to gain control despite his economic weakness. Trying to lay claim to Laura's separate assets and satisfy his creditors, he commands her to sign a document without informing her that it will relinquish her rights:

"What is it I am to sign?" she asked, quietly.

"I have no time to explain," he answered. "The dog-cart is at the door; and I must go directly. Besides, if I had time, you wouldn't understand. It is a purely formal document—full of legal technicalities, and all that sort of thing. Come! come! sign your name, and let us have done with it as soon as possible."

"I ought surely to know what I am signing, Sir Percival, before I write my name?"

"Nonsense! What have women to do with business? I tell you again, you can't understand it."

"At any rate, let me try to understand it. Whenever Mr. Gilmore had any business for me to do, he always explained it, first; and I always understood him."

"I dare say he did. He was your servant, and was obliged to explain. I am your husband, and am *not* obliged. How much longer do you mean to keep me here? I tell you again, there is no time for reading anything: the dog-cart is waiting at the door. Once for all, will you sign, or will you not?"
(267)

Sir Percival's desperation and Laura's power are evident; he assumes the role of pushy salesman—"How much longer? . . . there is no time . . . the dog-cart is waiting"—and she of reluctant buyer. And, although he openly demeans her ability as a woman to negotiate finances and misrepresents his power as husband, he all too clearly concedes that Laura remains in control of their resources. His repeated commands, while oppressive in their insistence, nevertheless recognize her authority and economic understanding

⁹ Settlements in a court of equity provided an alternative to the coverture of common law. See Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 25–26. Laura remains passive throughout the settlement process, but her lack of savvy here is indicative more of her youth than of her gender. Later in the novel, she becomes more interested in her finances. For a somewhat earlier treatment, but one that also discusses alternatives to coverture, see Amy Louise Erickson's *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1993), which argues that ordinary women were more likely than the common law suggests to have settlements (130).

and belie his threat that he is “*not* obliged to explain.” It is Laura’s choice whether to sign or not, and the legal necessity for witnesses to the signature limits the duress she faces. Because he must have witnesses, he also cannot forge her signature and assume control of her property. Laura refuses to allow her writing to be used against her; she does not sign.

The complex laws surrounding coverture and the intermingled Parliamentary debates concerning married women’s property and divorce during the 1850s increase the significance of Laura’s refusal and emphasize the impact of women’s economic independence on contemporary debates about gender. According to the courts of common law, a married woman was “covered” by her husband, and therefore had no need for rights as a separate individual. Her property, earnings, and body were under the control and protection of her husband.¹⁰ While Lenora Ledwon reads *The Woman in White* as initially “a radical critique of women’s loss of identity under coverture,” she finds that it ultimately “reinforce[es] the ideological assumption that law should work differently for men than for women.”¹¹ While Collins certainly exposes men’s abuse of law and gender roles only to uphold a masculine hierarchy, the inequities in Laura’s marriage to Sir Percival do not stem from coverture. Most women in England did lose their property under the laws of coverture; however, Laura—as made clear in the preceding exchange with Sir Percival—did not.¹² Mr.

¹⁰ See Barbara Leigh Smith, *A Brief Summary, in Plain Language, of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women* (London: John Chapman, 1854), microfilm, 6: “A man and wife are one person in law; the wife loses all her rights as a single woman, and her existence is entirely absorbed in that of her husband. He is civilly responsible for her acts; she lives under his protection or cover, and her condition is called coverture. . . . What was her personal property before marriage, such as money in hand, money at the bank, jewels, household goods, clothes, etc., becomes absolutely her husband’s, and he may assign or dispose of them at his pleasure whether he and his wife live together or not.” Coverture was not without possibilities. Margot Finn (“Women, Consumption and Coverture in England, c. 1760–1860,” *Historical Journal* 39.3 [1996]: 703–22) thoughtfully investigates several methods used by women to subvert their husbands’ power within coverture, including wives’ ability to amass debt in their husbands’ names. Finn argues that “the purchase of coverture in the sphere of consumption was partial and contested, rather than monolithic” (703). See also 168–90 in Erika Rappaport’s “A Husband and His Wife’s Dresses” in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, ed. Victoria de Grazia with Ellen Furlough (London: University of California Press, 1996), 163–77. For more on the possibilities of coverture, see Janette Rutterford’s essay in this volume.

¹¹ Lenora Ledwon, “Veiled Women, the Law of Coverture, and Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 22 (1994): 1–22, 1.

¹² As I state earlier, Laura does lose other rights upon marriage (under English law, Sir Percival has conjugal rights as well as the right to commit her to an asylum), and Marian compares Laura’s marriage to her death (211). Nevertheless, Marian is aware that married women are not entirely unprotected; she demands to see bruises on Laura’s arm to use in court as a

Gilmore, Laura's family's solicitor, goes into painstaking detail about protecting her separate assets, which include a life interest in an estate worth over £3,000 a year and an inheritance of £20,000. Gilmore does not receive all the stipulations he wants in "a proper settlement"—it is crucial to the plot that Sir Percival is to be the sole beneficiary of the £20,000—but there is no question of Laura losing her assets during marriage through common law (179). Women like Laura with substantial property and male protectors were able to evade common law through the courts of equity. As Gilmore explains, "This sum was absolutely Miss Fairlie's own, on her completing her twenty-first year; and the whole future disposition of it depended, in the first instance, on the conditions I could obtain for her in her marriage settlement. . . . The whole amount was to be settled so as to give the income [the interest] to the lady for her life; afterwards to Sir Percival for his life; and the principal to the children of the marriage" (180). Not only is the principal "absolutely Miss Fairlie's own" and, even after marriage, absolutely Lady Glyde's own, but so is the yearly interest earned by the principal. Some of the novel's sensationalism does stem from the abusive powers of men, but in Collins's fiction, Laura is also made vulnerable through her own wealth, which leaves her open to Sir Percival's plotting and, at least initially, prevents her from achieving traditional domestic happiness. Thus, what Ledwon deems "a radical critique of women's loss of identity" could more aptly be hailed as Collins's conservative response to what he perceived as women's rising economic independence.

Collins notably places the beginning of the novel in 1849—before the well-publicized agitation for married women's property reform in the 1850s—but *The Woman in White's* concern over men's potential disenfranchisement reflects growing gender unrest that was evidenced in and caused by contemporary reform literature and Parliamentary debates. As Harriet Martineau acknowledges in her 1859 essay "Independent Industry for Women,"¹³ the very idea of women's economic dependency had "been out at elbows" since Waterloo (301). Martineau clarifies that by 1851 over half of Britain's women were employed and one-third were "independent in their industry . . . self-supporting, like men" (301). Thus, by

"weapon" against Sir Percival (317). See Marlene Tromp's discussion of *The Woman in White's* treatment of marital violence in *The Private Rod: Marital Violence, Sensation, and the Law in Victorian Britain* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 69–102.

¹³ Harriet Martineau, "Independent Industry for Women" (1859), in *The Voice of Toil: 19th-Century British Writings about Work*, ed. David J. Bradshaw and Suzanne Ozment (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), 300–304.

midcentury, a significant number of women were responsible for the economic vitality of households, but, in most marriages, coverture deprived them of their right to control their resources. Real-life accounts of women suffering under coverture, such as the case of Caroline Norton, led to open agitation for reform of married women’s property rights. Harriet Taylor Mill’s “Enfranchisement of Women” (1851),¹⁴ Barbara Leigh Smith (later Bodichon)’s *A Brief Summary in Plain English of the Most Important Laws of England Concerning Women* (1854), and Norton’s *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1854)¹⁵ condemned the illogic and injustice of wives’ economic inequality. Simultaneously, calls for expanded access to divorce were separate from, but paralleled, the demands for equal access to property. Before 1857 divorce was an option only for the elite, as it actually required Parliamentary approval.

Both the 1856 Married Women’s Property Act (which failed) and the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act (which passed) influenced the 1860 novel, since they both brought substantial challenges to entrenched systems of male entitlement.¹⁶ Stories of abusive and adulterous husbands (many of the same stories made public in the debate over property) shattered myths of men as women’s protectors, and, whereas Parliament rejected measures to legislate gender equality within marriage, it did decide to provide more women with a way out.¹⁷ The years preceding the novel’s publication reflect the deep social ambivalence regarding gender, marriage, and economics. Something was wrong with marriage; examples of the failure of husbands to provide for their families were too numerous and too egregious to ignore, but Parliament was not ready for full reform. Referring to the 1857 Act by its more common name, Shanley explains, “[The] Divorce [Act] simply gave legal recognition to de facto marital breakdown. A married women’s property law, on the other hand, would have recognized the existence of two separate wills within an *ongoing* marriage” (46). Passing the Divorce Act allowed some women a path back to the economic

¹⁴ Harriet Taylor Mill, “Enfranchisement of Women” (1851), in *The Complete Works of Harriet Taylor Mill*, ed. Jo Ellen Jacobs (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 51–73.

¹⁵ Caroline Sheridan Norton, *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1854; Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1981).

¹⁶ Agitation continued, resulting in the 1882 Married Women’s Property Act, which dramatically increased married women’s access to their property.

¹⁷ Because the novel is set before 1857, Laura would have needed to apply directly to Parliament if she wanted a divorce, but she had no legal grounds for such an action. Even the new divorce law perpetuated male privilege; for example, a man could divorce his wife for adultery, whereas a woman would have to prove her husband’s adultery, plus another grievance such as sodomy, bestiality, or gross cruelty.

independence of unmarried women, but the failure of the Married Women's Property Act denied women's individualism within marriage.

In its evasion of common law and coverture through equity, *The Woman in White* engages contemporary calls for reform by giving Laura her separate estate. Equity law allows the sexual economies within their marriage to work as if the Act had passed, and the novel thus explores the anxiety and even dangers that women's economic independence and men's economic dependence might engender.¹⁸

Sir Percival's relative poverty unmans him. His rank and estate, rather than signifying elite masculinity, are both fraudulently maintained by hiding his illegitimate birth and enormous debt. Sir Percival resents the uneven distribution of wealth in their marriage and the fact that he knows himself to be an unwanted husband; Laura loves a man almost twenty years younger than himself.¹⁹ When Laura asks if he will build her a tomb like Marcus Crassus erected for his wife Cecilia Metella on the Appian Way, he responds bitterly: "If I do build you a tomb, it will be done with your own money. I wonder whether Cecilia Metella had a fortune, and paid for hers" (280). Even what would have been considered the most basic conjugal rights of any Victorian husband to his wife's body are denied to him because of his financial straits.²⁰ He cannot risk sex with Laura because producing an heir would immediately curtail his access to the £20,000. Thus, when Count Fosco questions him about the possibility of Laura being pregnant, Sir Percival admits that "she is not in the least likely" to conceive (342). His age, his secret, and his debts further devalue his already dwindling stock in masculinity and spawn his sensational attempts to recoup his losses.

While Collins clearly intends Sir Percival to be a villain, Laura's economic independence instigates much of the novel's mischief. Knowing that Sir Percival cannot obtain Laura's signature, Fosco suggests her "death" as an alternate solution: "Here is your position. If your wife lives, you pay

¹⁸ Even progressive reformers such as Charlotte Tonna, Edith Hogg, and Friedrich Engels lamented capitalism's ability to complicate traditional gender roles. Women in the factories, for example, undercut men's wages and led to women being the primary breadwinners in many working-class homes. In *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845; Moscow: Progress, 1973), Engels complains of seeing a husband mending garments by the fire at home, while his wife worked at a factory (184). See selections from Tonna (434–45) and Hogg (598–608) in Bradshaw and Ozment, *The Voice of Toil: 19th-Century Writings about Work*.

¹⁹ Percival is forty-five, Walter twenty-eight.

²⁰ See Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England*, chap. 6: "A Husband's Right to His Wife's Body: Wife Abuse, the Restitution of Conjugal Rights, and Marital Rape" (156–88).

those bills with her signature to the parchment. If your wife dies, you pay them with her death” (343). Collins suggests that under coverture the drastic steps of placing Laura in a madhouse and faking her death would have been unnecessary: women would not have equal rights, but they would not provoke such extreme actions from men. Under this faulty logic, Collins depicts Laura longing for her wealth to disappear, as if poverty promised the resolution, rather than the intensification, of wealth’s power dynamics. She tells her sister, “How often . . . I have heard you laughing over what you used to call your ‘poverty’! how often you have made me mocking speeches of congratulation on my wealth! Oh, Marian, never laugh again. Thank God for your poverty—it has made you your own mistress, and has saved you from the lot that has fallen on *me*” (279). Poverty and spinsterhood do allow Marian certain gendered liberties, but it does not follow that women’s wealth is responsible for male tyranny.²¹ Indeed, as the existence of Laura’s illegitimate half-sister Anne Catherick suggests, poor women were frequently depicted as the prey of wealthy men, rather than as their contented wives, so the romance plot often failed to offer security to the poor as well as to the wealthy.²² Blaming women’s abuse on married women’s property rights misdirects the source of the crisis. In the sensational upending of the traditional marriage plot, we see the dramatic stakes of male disempowerment.

II. “TREASURES BEYOND PRICE”: GENDER AND VALUE

The presumably happy love affair and eventual marriage between Laura and Walter also highlight men’s increasingly precarious value in mid-nineteenth-century England, and the novel compensates for this state of affairs through the hyperfeminization of its heroine. Walter is below Sir Percival on the economic ladder; although Walter does not have Sir Percival’s debts, he does not have his title or estate either. When Anne Catherick questions if Walter is a man “of rank and title,” he responds “a little bitterly”

²¹ My article “*Jane Eyre*, from Governess to Girl Bride” (*Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 45 [2005]: 853–71) explains how Jane’s economic disadvantages encourage her gender ambiguity (853–60). Like Jane, Marian is free from many class-based gendered conventions.

²² See, for instance, Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 151: “We need only think of fictional heroines from Richardson’s Pamela to Brontë’s Jane Eyre to Disraeli’s Sybil to appreciate the cultural power of the competing idea of marriage as the route to upward mobility for ‘women of the people.’”

that he is “far from it” (67). Walter must work as a drawing master for his money—like a governess, an employee of the wealthy—and Walter opens his narrative by confessing that “the fading summer left me out of health, out of spirits, and, if the truth must be told, out of money as well” (50). He eagerly accepts a salary and accommodations for teaching Laura and Marian to paint; he betrays his class difference when he gushes about his private sitting room to the servant (80). On the surface, Walter is “masculine.” He is young, chivalrous, and handsome. At least initially, however, his lack of wealth and title overrides his claim to masculine power, offering another example of how economics can trouble gender.²³

Throughout the novel, Walter struggles with his economic disadvantages and repeatedly reassures himself that he is not in a weaker position than Laura, despite her enormous wealth. When he considers the offer of employment, he welcomes the promise that “he was to be treated there on the footing of a gentleman” as much as he looks forward to the generous compensation (59). His sister bolsters his delusion: “Such distinguished people to know . . . and on such gratifying terms of equality, too!” (60). At Limmeridge, eating Limmeridge food, enjoying the Limmeridge grounds, and being cared for by Limmeridge servants, Walter can pretend that he is a guest of the house rather than its employee. This fantasy of economic equality with Laura facilitates his attachment to her, but it is the possibility of a relationship with her that tears down this façade. When he realizes he is in love, he can no longer play that he is the gentleman he pretends to be. Begging the reader’s forgiveness for overstepping the “conditions” of his “term” of “hired service,” he admits, “I should have remembered my position, and have put myself secretly on my guard” (101, 102). No longer “on equal footing,” Walter reveals the unstated conditions of his business contract:

It had been my profession, for years past, to be in this close contact with young girls of all ages, and of all orders of beauty. I had accepted the position as part of my calling in life; I had trained myself to leave all the sympathies natural to my age in my employer’s outer hall, as coolly as I left my umbrella there before I went up-stairs. . . . I was admitted among beautiful and captivating women, much as a harmless domestic animal is admitted among them. (102–3)

²³ Charles Kingsley’s revival of muscular Christianity, beginning in the mid-1850s, is one testament that respect for physical prowess as a measure of masculinity had declined and was in need of reviving. See, for instance, the sustained emphasis on physicality in Kingsley’s *Two Years Ago* (1857) and Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1861).

Here, Walter seems aware of not only the emasculating effects of class hierarchy, but the dehumanizing ones as well. Heretofore, his position has unsexed him like a neutered dog, and, even more powerless than Sir Percival, he is not even allowed to enter into the marriage market.²⁴

When Marian asks Walter to leave Limmeridge, she claims that her request is not based on “social inequalities” (109). Marian, economically disadvantaged like Walter, means to avoid “humiliating reference to matters of rank and station” in rejecting the possibility of a relationship between Walter and Laura, yet ultimately “blame[s] the misfortune of [his] years and [his] position” (109). Laura’s engagement to Sir Percival is never the real obstacle to Walter marrying Laura; even with Sir Percival out of the picture, the taint of class difference is too much. Giving Sir Percival an opportunity to break their engagement, Laura clarifies her intentions that “you do not leave me to marry another man—you only allow me to remain a single woman for the rest of my life” (198). Laura’s fortunes soon turn, however, and Collins intentionally balances Walter’s lower value with her new lack of wealth. Sir Percival fakes her death and places her in a madhouse; she escapes, but, until she can prove her identity, Laura cannot claim her name or wealth. Poor and living secretly with Marian and Walter, she is unsexed and dehumanized like Walter, the female equivalent of a “harmless domestic animal.” “Sorrow and suffering” traced “profaning marks on the youth and beauty of her face” and left her with “weakened, shaken faculties” (441). Doggish, Laura looks now with “poor weary pining eyes” (441) instead of with the “lovely eyes in colour, lovely eyes in form” (89) she formerly possessed, and Walter and Marian entertain their pet by taking her on walks and giving her treats (442). Though the abrupt cessation of sexual desire between Walter and Laura seems unlikely, Walter now swears, “God knows,” that he regards Laura only as a “father or brother might have felt” (459).²⁵ His disclaimer soothes Victorian unease with their cohabitation—though she is legally dead, she is technically still married to Sir Percival—but also emphasizes the interwoven status of

²⁴ Middle-class men could not responsibly marry until they could financially afford a wife and family and often had to delay marriage until midlife (see Erika Rappaport’s essay in this volume). With Laura out of reach because of her wealth, Walter muses ironically that he also cannot marry within his rank and “innocently wondered whether I should ever leave my lonely chambers and have a wife and a house of my own” (150).

²⁵ Scholars have recently given more attention to incestuous desire in nineteenth-century literature. Both Robert Polhemus in *Lot’s Daughters: Sex, Redemption, and Women’s Quest for Authority* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005) and Mary Jean Corbett in *Family Likeness: Sex, Marriage, and Incest from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008) show that familial ties did not necessitate lack of sexual desire.

their gendered, sexed, and classed identities. Laura's poverty additionally allows for the restoration of Walter's masculinity. Walter can now be the breadwinner for Laura that he never could be before. Just as the unequal distribution of wealth was the means of Walter's disempowerment, it also proves to be the means of the novel's reestablishment of traditional gender roles. Poor, Laura again falls under coverture. Though she is not legally married to Walter or technically restricted by coverture, the novel reasserts a distinctly conservative position by imaginatively extending the law's reach. Walter now controls her finances—indeed, he kindly ensures that she has little.

In this new "marriage," Laura objects to the altered economic realities. Walter supports their meager lifestyle through his artwork, and Laura wants to contribute: "You work and get money, Walter. . . . Why is there nothing I can do? . . . don't, don't, don't treat me like a child!" (480). Laura displays a "breathless interest" in the household economy and a "feverish eagerness" to work, so Walter constructs an elaborate ruse. "You know that I work and get money by drawing," he explains as he places a sketch in front of her, so "finish this little sketch . . . when it is done, I will take it away with me; and the same person will buy it who buys all that I do" (480). Walter promises she will keep her profits "in her own purse" and that Marian will ask for her money for household expenses (480). Thus, Walter reconstructs the separate "estate" that Laura enjoyed under equity law, and Laura is thrilled, in Walter's words, "longing to assume her own little position of importance" (481). The critical difference is that now Laura's financial independence is an illusion, an "innocent deception" (481). Walter can speak patronizingly of her pride as a wage earner because he controls the means of both production and distribution. In truth, he never sells Laura's art; he never even attempts to sell it. Instead, he explains, "I set aside a little weekly tribute from my earnings, to be offered to her as the price paid by strangers for the poor, faint, valueless sketches, of which I was the only purchaser" (481). Laura's drawings never enter the open market, and Walter makes any chance of her resuming the economic authority that she once held impossible. Her pen was valuable for her signature as Glyde's wife, but worthless now, except in its symbolic register of her domestic infantilization and her new dependence upon a man. Walter can enjoy the restoration of accepted gender roles and claim financial and masculine privilege. Laura's attempts to participate in the household economy—when she "proudly brought out her purse to contribute her share towards the expenses" and when she "wondered, with serious interest, whether [Walter] or she had earned the most that week"—are intended to be laughable

moments (481). They are endearing to Collins and his hero Walter because they are ridiculous, drawing attention away from the power her pen has held, from the midcentury reality of women in the workplace, and also from the capital that Collins’s own competition—middle- and upper-class women—were earning through writing and drawing. As these moments of “innocent deception” reinforce masculine identity, Walter keeps Laura’s drawings “hidden” after they are married so that he may refer to them when he desires. Thus they are not “valueless,” as Walter first suggests, but admittedly “treasures beyond price” because they increase his false sense of superiority within their marital economy (481).

These restorative moments attempt to reassert male control, but Laura’s first marriage to Sir Percival, and her second marriage to Walter Hartright, represent the larger unraveling of the fabric of gendered power because of the threat of women’s financial independence. The novel applauds man’s traditional role as the breadwinner; Walter is rewarded for financially supporting Laura throughout Sir Percival’s conspiracy by finally gaining her hand in marriage, producing a son who legitimates his own sexual prerogative, and thereby restoring masculine control of wealth. But this control is tenuous at best. In the previous generation, men held traditionally empowered positions: Laura’s father’s financial superiority to Laura’s mother affords him access to his mistress Mrs. Catherick, and Sir Percival’s estate, however illegitimate, comes from his father, not his mother. But even primogeniture fails to preserve male dominance. The younger generation of men—Sir Percival, Walter, and even Count Fosco—all need their wives’ money. Laura’s position as a wealthy woman has threatened the all-male hold on power so fundamentally that such superficial coverings as the novel’s pat conclusion fail to hide underlying anxieties about women’s ability to assume power, and transcend gender, through wealth.

