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## Economic Women

Lana L. Dalley, Jill Rappoport

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## “She’d give her two ears to know”

THE GOSSIP ECONOMY IN  
ELLEN WOOD’S *ST. MARTIN’S EVE*



TARA MACDONALD

By some defect of organization, the English, taken as a mass, are gossips—decided gossips. Is it not written in the book of the chronicles of their public journals—those bulletins of the national mind? Is it not attested by the avidity with which the most trivial anecdotes of domestic life are circulated and eagerly swallowed, by that yawning gulf, the reading public?

—Catherine Gore, *New Monthly Magazine*, November 1840<sup>1</sup>

In the above quotation, nineteenth-century author Catherine Gore bemoans the English public’s love of gossip, suggesting that what occurs in the privacy of Victorian households has overflowed into public journals and novels. The piece playfully chides the agents of gossip, but it is also an attempt, in the early years of the Victorian period, to come to terms with the nature of the act itself, its connections to other forms of information, and its manner of circulation. Gore goes on to point out that the constant demand for gossip is even more alarming than its actual pres-

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Gore, “Sketches of Modern Character (No. III): The Gossip,” *New Monthly Magazine* 60 (1840): 382–6, 383. Gore (1799/1800–1861) was a novelist and playwright who wrote popular “silver fork” novels in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s (Winifred Hughes, “Gore, Catherine Grace Frances [1799/1800–1861],” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], accessed 1 June 2010).

ence: "it is the appetite for gossip, and not the food which the yearnings of that appetite bring into the market, with which we have to deal."<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I take up Gore's association of gossip with "the reading public" and "the market" in an attempt to consider how gossip, in the Victorian novel, functions as an alternative economic system, but one that nonetheless influences and is affected by other economies. In the analogy above, gossip is linked to consumerism and consumption: it is a kind of food swallowed by a public hungry for "trivial anecdotes of domestic life." In order to be served up, these anecdotes must be "circulated" and brought "into the market." Using Ellen Wood's sensational *St. Martin's Eve* (1866),<sup>3</sup> a text obsessed with gossip and economics, I argue that gossip in the novel, and in Victorian society more generally, constitutes its own economy wherein private information functions as treasured currency.

Like much sensation fiction, Wood's plots frequently turn on women's financial insecurity. As Lyn Pykett writes, Wood was highly aware of the "fragility of prosperity and social position."<sup>4</sup> Her family suffered at least two reversals of fortune: in the 1830s, her father's glove manufactory failed; and in 1856 Wood's husband, the overseas manager of a banking and shipping firm, was forced to retire, an episode that altered the family's financial and domestic life.<sup>5</sup> A year after her husband lost his post, Wood published her first novel, *Danesbury House* (1857), and began a period of high productivity and financial success, providing for her family when her husband could no longer do so. After his death in 1865, she not only continued to write fiction but later bought and edited her own magazine, *Argosy*. Wood was able to engage with the market economy very effectively while still retaining her image as a conventional Victorian woman, wife, and mother.<sup>6</sup> A 1904 survey for *Economic Review*, "What Do the Masses Read?" recorded that Wood was "easily first favourite,"<sup>7</sup> and Lucy Sussex has found that in

<sup>2</sup> Gore, "Sketches," 383.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen Wood, *St. Martin's Eve*, ed. Lyn Pykett, in vol. 3 of *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction, 1855–1890*, 6 vols., gen. ed. Andrew Maunder (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2004). Further references are cited parenthetically.

<sup>4</sup> Lyn Pykett, "Introduction to *St. Martin's Eve*," in *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction: 1855–1890*, 3: vii–xxii, ix.

<sup>5</sup> Pykett, "Introduction to *St. Martin's Eve*," 3: ix–x.

<sup>6</sup> In "Dangerous and Foolish Work": Evangelicalism and Sensationalism in Ellen Wood's *Argosy* Magazine," *Women's Writing* 15.2 (2008): 187–98, Beth Palmer argues that Wood's "perceived conventionality was carefully constructed and complexly shifting" (189). Specifically, she suggests that Wood "cultivated a Christian and conservative reputation in order to distance herself from the more dangerous facets of sensationalism" (187).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Emma Liggins and Andrew Maunder, "Introduction: Ellen Wood, Writer," *Women's Writing* 15.2 (2008): 149–56, 150.

Wood's letters to publisher Richard Bentley, she "hagg[ed] mercilessly on contract and payment detail."<sup>8</sup> Despite her own success, Wood understood that those members of Victorian society who were frequently marginalized by the market economy, namely women and servants, could develop alternative economies, which gave them opportunities to acquire greater agency and control their domestic lives. One of these economies, I argue, revolved around the circulation of gossip, the exchange of information that could prove vital to social status, community regulation, and the marriage market.

Gossip is an important element of virtually all sensation novels, but Wood, whose novels straddle the genres of sensation fiction and domestic fiction, uses gossip both as a sensational plot device and as the everyday exchange of information between servants and their employers. Gossip can be understood politically as the refuge of the disenfranchised: Wood shows how both middle-class women and servants are disenfranchised by the patriarchal structures of the Victorian market economy and how they, in turn, rely on gossip to assess character and achieve domestic security. Gossip therefore emerges as a "feminine" economy, in contrast to the masculine dominion over commerce, employment, and trade (though there are, of course, exceptions to this patriarchal rule, as many of the essays in this volume show). Through their possession and informal exchange of personal information, Wood's women and servants achieve a degree of control over their own destinies and the connected lives of others. By offering pieces of gossip, they can participate in and benefit from "the circulation of meanings, ideas, and identities."<sup>9</sup> In this gossip economy, personal information thus becomes a kind of currency, which is traded and assigned value by others within the economy. Yet men are not absent from this economy, as they, too, can benefit from exchanges of gossip. While men in Wood's novels cannot circulate gossip in the same way as women, they can nonetheless profit from the gossip economy via strategic exchanges with women and servants. Indeed, as I show, male characters frequently supply the motivation for gossiping in the first place.

In her novels Wood frequently emphasizes the power of gossip to influence communities. The narrator in *East Lynne* (1861) emphasizes the

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<sup>8</sup> Lucy Sussex, "Mrs Henry Wood and Her Memorials," *Women's Writing* 15.2 (2008): 157–68, 159.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Beetham, "Women and the Consumption of Print," in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1800–1900*, ed. Joanne Shattock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 55–77, 63.

town's widespread dependence on gossip: "How the world would get on without gossip, I will leave the world to judge. That West Lynne could not have got on without it, and without interfering in everybody's business but its own, is enough for me."<sup>10</sup> While Wood shows how gossip can give individuals and social groups the power to shape communities, she does not depict gossip as a utopian form of exchange; in her fiction, it is just as unstable as the market economy.<sup>11</sup> Like the market economy, gossip creates identities and communities, and unfolds on multiple social planes. It is also unreliable in its movement: like money, gossip circulates, changes hands, and fluctuates in value. Though she maps its movement and potential, Wood is finally ambivalent about the effects of gossip. For faithful servants and flirtatious ladies, gossip figures as an alternative to the market economy and poses a degree of resistance to patriarchal structures. However, it is ultimately a limited refuge for Wood's characters.

On the other hand, gossip as a narrative strategy becomes a vehicle for the sensation novelist to not only survive but excel in the male-dominated literary marketplace. As I later explain, Wood incorporates gossip into her writing style and, in doing so, enters into a gossip economy with her readers. Sensation fiction was frequently linked to gossip in the 1860s and 1870s: in 1870 Alfred Austin writes that "the modern sensational novel gratifies the same petty taste that hungers for depreciatory tittle-tattle and scandalous gossip."<sup>12</sup> Rather than avoiding such comparisons between sensation fiction and depreciatory gossip, Wood embraced them, and cannily created alliances with her readership, made up largely of women and servants.<sup>13</sup> By also receiving direct financial benefit from this exchange, Wood found success in the market economy as well.

<sup>10</sup> Ellen Wood, *East Lynne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 311.

<sup>11</sup> In *Financial Speculation in Victorian Fiction: Plotting Money and the Novel* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010), Tamara Wagner explains that in the Victorian period, "financial instability was a widespread experience and, in connecting personal losses to a broadening spectrum of interlinked economic struggles, a pervasive cultural preoccupation" (24).

<sup>12</sup> Alfred Austin, "Our Novels: The Sensational School," *Temple Bar* 19 (July 1870): 410–24, 424.

<sup>13</sup> This, at least, is what the Victorian popular press insisted. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, for instance, was credited with "making the literature of the kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing-room" ([W. Fraser Rae], "Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon," *North British Review* 43 [1865]: 180–204, 204). Emma Liggins and Andrew Maunder argue that Wood's "middle-brow" status was helpful to her sales but tarnished her subsequent reputation ("Introduction: Ellen Wood, Writer," 151).

## I. *ST. MARTIN'S EVE* AND THE CIRCULATION OF GOSSIP

In *St. Martin's Eve*, the gossip economy is set up against legal systems that favor traditionally masculine economies such as primogeniture. After her husband dies, Charlotte St. John becomes consumed by jealousy over the disparate futures of her son and stepson: her son, Georgy, is left with little, while Benja, her stepson, inherits his father's title, estate, and social rank, and Charlotte, despite her healthy allowance, resides at Alnwick Hall simply as the guardian of the heir.<sup>14</sup> When Benja dies mysteriously, Charlotte's oddly guilty behavior betrays her role in the child's death. We later learn that she locked the boy in his room after he caught fire, thus ensuring her own son's inheritance, and freeing her from the guardianship of a child she despised. Yet this dramatic turn of events does not bring about happiness or financial security for the heroine-villainess. Charlotte's beloved child Georgy also dies: she then loses Alnwick and is left with "just a pittance" as her husband's money passes along the male line (310). Although she attempts to remarry his next heir, her hereditary madness can no longer be disguised, and she, like Lucy Audley before her, is tidily disposed of in a mental institution. The novel has been read as a warning against maternal indulgence and as a condemnation of patriarchal inheritance laws, readings that vary in the sympathy afforded to Charlotte.<sup>15</sup> But gossip, as this paper will show, is crucial both to undermining these patriarchal hierarchies and to Charlotte's eventual undoing.

Within the novel, the value of gossip to Wood's characters cannot be overstated: "For ten minutes' conversation with the serving-woman, Mrs. Darling would have given an earldom" (226); "Madame Baret said she'd give her two ears to know" (277); "Those words were worth a king's ransom" (294); "It seemed he would give half his own undoubted inheritance to set the question at rest" (367). Gossip may be worth aristocratic

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<sup>14</sup> As Benja's guardian, Charlotte has an allowance of £4,000 a year, an amount that is reduced to £2,000 if she is found unfit to care for her stepson.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, in "Demonic Mothers: Ideologies of Bourgeois Motherhood in the Mid-Victorian Era," in *Rewriting the Victorians: Theory, History, and the Politics of Gender*, ed. Linda M. Shires (London: Routledge, 1992), 31–51, Sally Shuttleworth suggests that "Charlotte is not the kind of demonic mother who rejects her child, but one who loves to excess" (45). As I later explain, she also notes that Charlotte's instability is a result of living under a strict "patrilinial legal and economic system" (47). Lyn Pykett, too, argues that St. John's will "emphasizes the disadvantages for women of the operations of a patrilineal system of inheritance, and the extent to which they are dependent on their male relatives" ("Introduction to *St. Martin's Eve*," xiv).

titles, large sums of money, and even body parts in this novel, but such an exaggerated price on language only ensures its continued circulation, since gossip can't actually be exchanged for ears or an earldom. Yet Wood's heroine is noticeably excluded from this system of exchange. The narrator describes Charlotte as "haughty," "quiet," and "proud" (16), and the other characters in the novel are no less forthcoming in their criticisms of her. These aspects of Charlotte's personality keep her at a distance from other women in the novel and make her an object, rather than an agent, of the gossip economy, a position that dually marginalizes her. Charlotte's isolation means that she is shut out from the market of information circulating around her and also turns gossip about her into a valuable commodity. Female readers are thus subtly encouraged to engage in such exchanges, as Wood shows what happens to women who evade them. Furthermore, Charlotte's economic viability is contingent upon gossip, and in this way Wood shows how gossip, through the formation or destruction of character, influences the marriage market and the distribution of wealth in the novel.

As soon as Charlotte moves into Alnwick Hall, as the new bride of George St. John, the servants begin gossiping about her in an effort to understand and evaluate their employer's wife. In Victorian fiction, servants were often represented as gossiping about their middle-class employers. Anthea Trodd argues that Victorians worried that servants might manipulate their "knowledge of the family for their own ends, or at least involuntarily expose and misrepresent it to the outside world."<sup>16</sup> Such exposure could challenge the class hierarchy of the domestic sphere and the notion of the domestic realm as safe and secure. An 1853 *North British Review* article warns, "Everything that you do, and very much that you say at home, is related in your servants' families, and by them retailed to other gossips in the neighborhood, with appropriate exaggerations, until you almost feel that you might as well live in a glass house or a whispering gallery."<sup>17</sup> *St. Martin's Eve* emphasizes the pervasiveness of gossip to the point that the "hushed," "noiseless" gathering of servants in the novel's opening chapter is perceived as so "unusual" that it is "unnatural" (5). A key figure in Wood's representation of the gossip economy is Benja's nursemaid, Honour, as her gossip about her mistress has a material effect on George St. John's will and Charlotte's financial future. Honour's role

<sup>16</sup> Anthea Trodd, *Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 53.

<sup>17</sup> Review of *Nelly Armstrong: A Story of the Day*, *North British Review* 20 (1853): 179–208, 183.

as a gossip is emphasized throughout the novel, and in an early, dramatic instance, she leaves her young charge alone to gossip with the other servants in the kitchen: "Never had Honour so relished a gossip more than the one she now entered on with the servants" (140). Left alone with a candle and a murderous stepmother, young Benja burns to death. While this is a rather extreme case of the price of rebellious gossip and the sympathetic connections it affords servants, Honour's gossip is largely encouraged by her employers in exchanges that are mutually beneficial.

When Charlotte enters Alnwick as George's second wife, Honour is predisposed to distrust her. Honour adores her young charge, Benja, and views Charlotte "in the light of a usurper" (30). As the narrator explains, "A new mistress suddenly brought to an established home, rarely gives pleasure to its inmates. This applies, in an especial degree, to its female servants" (30). Furthermore, Honour senses that Charlotte dislikes the future heir. When George St. John suggests to Honour that he is worried about his health, she exclaims, "If you fear that you will be taken from us, *don't* leave this child in the power of Mrs. St. John" (61). She insists that Charlotte "might become cruel to [Benja] in time" (62). George is shocked by the nurse's words but does not ignore them. Honour's advice, coupled with that of the family doctor, who similarly warns, "Don't leave Benja under your wife's charge" (64), encourages George to introduce a codicil to his will. The codicil allows George's cousin Isaac St. John to remove Charlotte from Benja's guardianship, and from Alnwick, should he deem her unfit. George also arranges for all of the servants to hear the reading of the will, which angers Charlotte, who sees this disclosure of her personal affairs as giving the servants license to gossip. She complains, "That will was read out to the servants on purpose that they might know they have it in their power to carry tales to Isaac St. John" (77). And this, in fact, is precisely what occurs after George's death when Isaac asks Honour if she knows any reason why Charlotte's guardianship should be terminated.

The nursemaid is given unusual legal and financial power as Isaac interviews her in order to ascertain Charlotte's fitness as a parent. He explains to Honour, "you were named to me by your last master as one in whom every confidence might be placed" (123). In exchange for this information, Honour ensures her status as a faithful, confidential servant. Yet Honour receives more than just symbolic remuneration: Isaac "pressed a very handsome present into her hand as he concluded, saying it was in recompense of her trouble and attention to the child" (123). Though the narrator implies that Honour offers this valuable information to Isaac out of her love for Benja and her desire to be a useful servant, she nonetheless takes

the money Isaac offers. And she is aware of the power of her words. Later, when Charlotte threatens to fire her, Honour tells Benja, "If she does turn me away, I'll go every step of the way to Castle Wafer and tell all I know to [Isaac]" (138). Furthermore, by aligning herself with the future heir of Alnwick, Honour ensures her own financial and domestic security. Honour's rival nursemaid, Prance, complains that Honour "thinks she's fixed at the Hall," explaining that when George was dying, "he told my mistress that he should wish Honour to remain with Benja so long as he required a woman attendant" (74). And Honour seems to imagine a future with Benja at Alnwick, without Charlotte and her son. She tells the boy, "when you are of age, my darling, all Alnwick will be yours, and she and Master Georgy must turn out of it. . . . Nobody can live here unless you choose to let them" (139). Benja continues this fantasy, telling her that when he is master of Alnwick, "You shall be mistress, and give all the orders, and we'll have a great wall built up, so that mamma can't come near us" (416). After Benja's death, Honour abandons such fantasies, but notably, she continues to reside with the heir of George St. John's estate and fortune. That is, Honour is rewarded for her exchanges with Isaac St. John, to whom she also supplies information about Benja's death, with a position in his home. Unlike Charlotte, she ends the novel by residing comfortably with the heir of Alnwick. Thus, in addition to her exchanges with other servants in the house, Honour's exchanges with her employers provide her with both symbolic and material economic rewards.

Not all servants in Wood's novels are so forthcoming: some servants keep important information "off the market" and thus ensure their employers' privacy. Yet this withholding of information still contributes to the gossip economy. Annette Weiner emphasizes that reciprocity is only one aspect of exchange, obscuring what she terms "keeping-while-giving." For Weiner, "inalienable possessions" are kept off the market but nonetheless affect other transactions "as a possible future claim and potential source of power."<sup>18</sup> Gossip that is withheld from the market also figures as a "potential source of power" for others, and can likewise affect other transactions. In *East Lynne*, the maid Joyce withholds the key information that Isabel Carlyle has returned to her former household in disguise, and in *St. Martin's Eve*, the nursemaid Prance withholds information that implicates Charlotte in Benja's murder. Prance, who protects Charlotte and Mrs. Darling with her silence, "gratefully liked" them because Mrs. Darling was

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<sup>18</sup> Annette Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 10.

kind to her (22). Her silence can be read, then, as a kind of repayment. Because Prance keeps silent, Charlotte's culpability takes much longer to unfold; yet, in turn, the mystery surrounding the murder and Charlotte's possible role in it makes gossip about her a valued commodity. Prance's silence allows for her mistress's (temporary) domestic security and also secures her own position. Withheld gossip is ultimately different from an inalienable possession, however, since it is always potentially alienable.

In addition to servants, bourgeois women drive the gossip economy, and one of the novel's most inveterate gossips is Charlotte's youngest half-sister, Rose. The narrator explains that Charlotte's mother, Mrs. Darling, exhibits a marked preference for Charlotte, her first child. Mrs. Darling, we later learn, worries about Charlotte's sanity, and so indulges Charlotte's bold behavior. Rose freely admits to Frederick St. John, Isaac's brother, that she does not regard her sister "with any great degree of affection" (185). "If you only knew how mamma has made us bend to Charlotte and her imperious will all our lives, you'd not wonder at me," she insists (186). More than once, Rose's dislike of her sister encourages her to gossip about Charlotte. In an instance in which gossip circulates across class and even national boundaries, Rose encounters a woman recently employed as Charlotte's nurse and insists that she relate her experiences. Mrs. Brayford is happy to oblige, and she explains that Charlotte, overwhelmed by visions of Benja's ghost, collapsed in a hotel in France. Mrs. Brayford insists, "She was mad that night, Miss Darling, as anybody ever was" (312).

Wood shows how gossip circulates in the novel as, soon after, Rose retails the story to Frederick St. John. Rose "disclosed to Mr. St. John all she had heard from Nurse Brayford. It was lamentably imprudent of her, without doubt; but she meant no harm" (344). The narrative seems to exceed the bounds placed by the implied author here, as Rose is no doubt aware that her comments may "harm" her sister's character. In this instance, Rose benefits from a flirtation with Frederick and from insulting her proud sister. Following Rose's imprudence, the story becomes implanted in Frederick's mind, and the possibility of a madwoman marrying his brother haunts him, just as Honour's advice worries George. And just as that earlier gossip diminished Charlotte's authority over her sons' inheritance, in this instance gossip has the power to devalue Charlotte in the marriage market. Again like George, however, Frederick requires further (male, medical) evidence to validate a woman's claims. Fearing that Charlotte hopes to marry Isaac, Frederick attempts to warn his older brother of Charlotte's instability. Yet he is challenged by Isaac, who asks "what grounds you have for saying this" (376). The narrator relates, "Here was Frederick's dilemma:

the stumbling block he had foreseen from the first, if he spoke to Isaac. What grounds had he? None. The reasons that seemed weighty enough in his own mind, were as nothing when spoken of; and it suddenly struck him that he was not justified in repeating the gossip of a careless girl like Rose" (376). Upper-class men can receive and benefit from gossip but they cannot retail it in the same manner as women. Frederick calls in the family doctor, Mr. Pym, who confirms, in writing, that Charlotte's father "had died *mad*" (383). Though this is not in fact evidence that Charlotte herself is mad, it proves that madness runs within her family. So while Frederick benefits from the gossip economy, having received information that has travelled from Mrs. Brayford to Rose, he must recontextualize Charlotte's madness as a medical likelihood in order for it to have value in his own exchange. In a novel where inheritance, of both the financial and blood variety, cannot be underestimated, this taint of madness devalues Charlotte as a marriageable woman.<sup>19</sup> Through the gossip he gains from these women, Frederick works to thwart Charlotte's *second* attempt to gain access to her husband's fortune. Charlotte is again undone by the gossip economy.

Rose, however, is rewarded for her efforts negotiating and exchanging within the gossip economy: her troublesome sister is locked away, and she marries a man who, she says, "heaps such luxuries upon me" (424). Charlotte, the transgressive female figure whose history is exchanged among many characters, is made an object rather than agent of this gossip economy by her silence and solitude. Moreover, her madness, the most frequent topic of gossip in the novel, is exacerbated by her economic marginalization. Though Charlotte's financial and social value increase upon marriage, she is left vulnerable to patrilineal economic systems after her husband dies. Further, as a guest in someone else's home, she is peculiarly open to scrutiny and, consequently, to gossip—making her vulnerable within *both* economies. Sally Shuttleworth suggests that Charlotte's mental instability is intensified by "the very obvious injustices of a patriarchal legal and economic system which insistently disinherits women, a fact which suggests justifiable rage rather than madness as the cause of her behaviour."<sup>20</sup> Wood seems intent on establishing Charlotte's madness, but Shuttleworth

<sup>19</sup> The novel's eugenic thread implies that those who are physically or mentally unfit should not marry or have children. Frederick St. John narrowly misses marrying a woman who dies after bursting a blood vessel. He later muses that it is all for the best, since had "she lived to bear him children" she likely would have "entail[ed] upon them her fragility of constitution" (346). And he later worries about Isaac marrying Charlotte "with that possibility of taint in her blood" (352).

<sup>20</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, "Demoniac Mothers," 47.

is certainly right to suggest that the novel is critical of women's economic dependence upon men. Here, the gossip economy offers no refuge from traditionally masculine economies, and Wood shows how women can just as easily be exposed as protected by its circulation.

Charlotte's example shows that while gossip has potentially positive outcomes (social status, community regulation, domestic security), gossip could also be alienating or malevolent, since it was not—and is not—a strictly regulated economy: gossip constantly moves outward from its source. For women who exhibit signs of madness or who attempt to aggressively surmount class boundaries in the manner of the sensation heroine, gossip can drive one's "price" down. Wood portrays these contradictory aspects of the gossip economy in *St. Martin's Eve*, showing how for faithful servants and select groups of women, the exchange of gossip is largely constructive and valuable, while for the transgressive sensational heroine, whose story is unwittingly traded, the ramifications of the gossip economy are just as damaging as her exclusion from patrilineal economic and legal systems. Thus, while the gossip economy certainly has the potential to empower women by allowing them to "attain (or retain) a social identity within the uncertainties of a capitalist economy," its instability mimics the market economy.<sup>21</sup> Wood's depiction of the circulation of gossip, then, emphasizes women's vulnerability even as it offers a way to challenge the forces that produce this vulnerability.

## II. GOSSIP AS NARRATIVE STRATEGY

Wood asks the reader to sympathize with her misguided heroine. She explains that Charlotte "desperately intended to do right: but passions and prejudices are strong, unusually strong they were in her; and her mind was ill-regulated" (120). The *Saturday Review* critic notes his surprise that Wood "stands by her heroine" as she "speaks of her in terms of pity, and even modified approval."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, though Wood's narrator can be understood to be gossiping about Charlotte much like the women and servants in the novel, she does so with the different aim to "do her justice" (119). The narrator's voice, by competing with others in the novel, enters into and broadens their gossip economy. As this final section will show, gossip

<sup>21</sup> Deborah Wynne, "'See what a Big Wide Bed it is!': Mrs Henry Wood and the Philistine Imagination," in *Feminist Readings of Victorian Popular Texts: Divergent Femininities*, ed. Emma Liggins and Daniel Duffy (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 89–107, 105.

<sup>22</sup> Review of *St. Martin's Eve*, *Saturday Review*, 31 March 1866, 387–88, 387.

becomes not only the currency of fictional characters but an overarching narrative device for Wood. Patricia Spacks argues that the activity of gossip is similar to the exchange between narrator and reader “since what reader and narrator share is a set of responses to the private doings of richly imagined individuals.”<sup>23</sup> Similarities between reading novels and listening to gossip came to the fore with the rise of sensation fiction, a genre devoted to the exposure of personal secrets. In 1860 critic Francis Palgrave complained that novels were becoming indistinguishable from “living gossip”: “People . . . go to books for something almost similar to what they find in social conversation. Reading tends to become only another kind of gossip.”<sup>24</sup> The denigration of gossip and its comparison to high-selling popular fiction also has an economic element. Sensation fiction, as the term was understood in the 1860s, had nearly as much to do with popular success and cheap formats as with an identifiable style. In his 1863 review “Sensation Novels,” H. L. Mansel complains, “A commercial atmosphere floats around works of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, sensation fiction was dangerous to the reading public not only because it mimicked “living gossip” but because these novels did not hide their status as commodities.

Wood, however, challenged gossip’s pejorative associations in crafting her narrative voice and, by doing so, also cannily addressed the problem of sensation’s commodity status. Though her informal style left her open to attacks, it was part of a strategy that allowed Wood to cultivate her largely female audience and obscure her own financial interests by emphasizing the alternative value of the feminine gossip economy. In *St. Martin’s Eve*, the narrator’s frequent addresses to the reader, who is called “you,” make the reader a recipient of gossip as much as an audience for literature, obligating the reader to take an active part in deciphering the narrative.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Patricia Spacks, *Gossip* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 22.

<sup>24</sup> Francis Palgrave, “On Readers in 1760 and 1860,” *Macmillan’s Magazine* 1 (1860): 487–89, 488.

<sup>25</sup> [H. L. Mansel], “Sensation Novels,” *Quarterly Review*, April 1863, 481–514, 495–96. In *The Sensation Novel: From The Woman in White to The Moonstone* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), Lyn Pykett notes that many “early commentators on the genre focused on it as a commodity in an increasingly commercialized literary marketplace” (8).

<sup>26</sup> Wood’s narrator bears similarities to what Robyn Warhol has termed the “engaging narrator,” a narrator who frequently addresses “you”: “Writing to inspire belief in the situations their novels describe—and admittedly hoping to move actual readers to sympathize with real-life slaves, workers, or ordinary middle-class people—these novelists [Elizabeth Gaskell, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and George Eliot] used engaging narrators to encourage actual readers to identify with the ‘you’ in the texts” (“Toward a Theory of the Engaging Narrator: Earnest Interventions in Gaskell, Stowe, and Eliot,” *PMLA* 101 [1986]: 811–18, 812). Warhol identifies in these authors a social element that is not central to Wood’s novels, however.

Wood was criticized by contemporary reviewers for these chatty, personal addresses. In an 1863 review of Wood's *Verner's Pride*, a critic for *Littell's Living Age* complains, "An offensive seizing of the reader by the button for a jerk of personal address is part of the bad taste of the writer: We have such sentences as, 'The old study that you have seen before.' 'You have now seen him do so once again [etc., etc.]"<sup>27</sup> Wood continued her gossipy tone in *St. Martin's Eve*, with statements such as "It was as well to mention this: you will see why, later" (32), and "You have met him before, reader, but Adeline had not" (183), and she even references her novel from the year before, *Mildred Arkell* (1865), when she says, "You have heard of these Carrs before, in a recent work" (198). The *Saturday Review* picked up on Wood's familiar style as well, noting that she takes the reader "in the most affable manner into her confidence, . . . telling him what is coming next, or wondering whether he will recognise so and so."<sup>28</sup> In these instances, Wood serves as a kind of "confidential" informant to her female readership, just as Honour does for Isaac.

In exchange for her stories, Wood not only receives material, financial benefits but demands an engaged readership. Kate Flint argues that while male sensation writers more often craft narrators that withhold information from the reader in attempts to stage suspense, female sensation novelists frequently "invite their readers to join in a process which involves the active construction of meaning, rather than its revelation."<sup>29</sup> In particular, Wood utilizes the positive aspects of gossip in her attempt to create a community of readers, who can engage with her characters' stories. She creates this community precisely through their shared possession of gossip: "Let us do her justice!" she exclaims when explaining Charlotte's motivations (119, my emphasis). Further, Wood implies through the fictional examples of characters such as Honour, Rose, and Charlotte that entering the gossip economy creates the potential for future exchanges, both symbolic and material. Her assumption that loyal readers have "heard of these Carrs before, in a recent work" makes sense in light of this communal construct (198); like Charlotte's mother, those readers might be expected to "give . . . an earldom" (or at least a few shillings) to hear more.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Review of *Verner's Pride*, *Littell's Living Age*, 18 April 1863, 99–103. Reprinted in *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction: 1855–1890*, 1: 63.

<sup>28</sup> Review of *St. Martin's Eve*, 388.

<sup>29</sup> Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 292.

<sup>30</sup> *St. Martin's Eve* was first published as a three-volume novel. The standard price for each volume was ten shillings and sixpence (10/6d), or 31/6d for the entire set. This was beyond what most people could afford to spend on a novel, hence the monopoly of circulating libraries such as Charles Edward Mudie's. When Mudie set up shop in London, he charged only

Wood's supposed "bad taste" is due to her overt acknowledgment of fiction's close relationship to gossip, which was connected primarily to the talk of women and servants. Yet Wood's critical censure was paired with professional and financial success. While characters such as Honour and Rose use the gossip economy for symbolic and material economic benefits, they nonetheless remain under men's financial control, Honour as Isaac's servant and Rose as wife to Baron de la Chasse. As an author, however, Wood not only engaged with the gossip economy, trading and possessing other people's stories: she also profited from the market economy. In his biography of his mother, Charles Wood relates that Wood wrote short stories for ten years anonymously and without remuneration, until she finally "declared her unwillingness to continue these contributions month after month and year after year without acknowledgement."<sup>31</sup> As she came to insist on pay, however, she also cultivated a gossip style that implicitly separated her work from the marketplace, so that it appeared to be merely casual, unprofessional talk between women. Yet Wood's performance of gossip was strategic and came to bear on her position in the marketplace. Jennifer Phegley argues that Wood was a successful author, in part, because she cultivated a persona of herself as an amateur: she presented herself as a hobbyist and stressed her roles as a proper wife and mother, publishing under the name Mrs. Henry Wood.<sup>32</sup> Wood thus adopted a strategy that resulted in a paradoxical outcome: by playing the role of gossipy, feminine amateur, she actually achieved great financial, professional success. Her narrative voice calls attention to the exchanges of the gossip economy within the novel, suggests that this system can benefit women, and shows that she used this alternative economy to further her own success in the marketplace. Though the sensational heroine of *St. Martin's Eve* is denied the benefits of the gossip economy and the marketplace, the sensation novelist was privy to the satisfying exchanges of both.

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one guinea for a year's subscription (Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957], 295).

<sup>31</sup> Charles Wood, *Memorials of Mrs. Henry Wood* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1894), 253.

<sup>32</sup> Jennifer Phegley, "Domesticating the Sensation Novelist: Ellen Price Wood as Author and Editor of the *Argosy Magazine*," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 38.2 (2005): 180–98, 181.