Abstract

This essay uses the Victorian freak show as a basis from which to argue that Wilkie Collins uses the unusual characters of Marian Halcombe and Count Fosco to undermine the “traditional” hero and heroine of Victorian Literature. Where Laura Fairlie and Walter Hartright are irritating and uninteresting figures, Marian (drawn from the Bearded Lady) and Fosco (taken from over-sized circus attractions) are fascinating figures, erotically attracted to each other, and attracting the reader’s attention too. The essay draws on freak theory to situate the characters carefully as ideological weapons used by Collins to launch an attack on the dominant gender ideology of the period.

Key words: The Woman in White, freak theory, monstrosity, the sensation novel, gender theory
“In short, she is an angel; and I am—”: Freakishness, Monstrosity and Gender

Subversion in Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*

In *The Woman in White* (1859), Wilkie Collins presents us with a story compiled by Walter Hartright, drawing master to the beautiful Laura Fairlie and her half-sister Marian Halcombe. The story follows Walter’s attempts, together with Marian, to free Laura from her dangerous husband Sir Percival Glyde and his friend Count Fosco. The reader would assume that Walter and Laura, the heterosexual couple at the centre of the story’s romance plot, are the novel’s protagonists. However, Collins engineers the novel so that the reader is distanced from Walter and Laura, while Marian is presented as an engaging and powerful figure along with Fosco, her “adored enemy” (675). I will consider how the novel devalues both Walter and Laura by juxtaposing them with Marian, who is depicted as a strong-minded “masculine” woman and a sexual “freak”. While Walter and Laura as a couple come across as dull and passionless, Collins presents Marian and Fosco as passionate, subversive characters and thus encourages the reader to consider them as the novel’s true protagonists.

Marian plays the role of master detective to Fosco’s master criminal, but the true appeal of Marian and Fosco lies in the challenge they pose to the social norms and binaries that govern Victorian society. Collins provokes his reader to question the limits of “normalcy” when they encounter the abnormal bodies of Marian and Fosco, which embody traits of the freak show performers that were popular in Victorian exhibitions at the time. Collins implements the marketing approach of the freak show by presenting Marian and Count Fosco as simultaneously fascinating, alluring and repellant, fetishing their physical differences in such a way that blurs the line between the freakish and the ideal. In addition, their queer attraction to each other provides a “sexual riddle” for the reader, arousing a perverse speculation about the sexual possibilities of these characters.
The Victorian image of the ideal woman was that of the Angel in the House,¹ a docile, submissive figure who was selflessly devoted to her husband and children. However, at the time of Collins’s novel’s publication in 1859, British censuses revealed a statistical surplus of women over men. As almost one-third of all women aged between 24 and 35 were unmarried (Hollis 33), the Angel in the House became an impossible ideal for many women. These women required a new model of femininity—one which was more compatible with reality—and this came in the form of Collins’s androgynous heroine, Marian Halcombe.²

When Walter first sees Marian, he admires her body from behind, before her “ugly” head is revealed, marked by a “swarthy” complexion and a moustache (30). It is the “masculine form and masculine look” (30) of her face which makes her ugly to Walter, as he is horrified by the shockingly androgynous tension between her perfectly feminine body and distinctly un-feminine face. Shortly after meeting him, Marian openly admits to Walter, “I don’t think much of my own sex” (31). Throughout the novel, we are frequently reminded of Marian’s disdain for her sex, as she laments that she is “only a woman” (270), bemoaning the situation of women and the feminine ideals to which they are expected to conform. In addition to her masculine appearance, Marian also possesses “the foresight and the resolution of a man” (359), which becomes especially clear in her interactions with Walter, as I shall discuss below.

The ambiguity in Marian’s body causes Walter, and the reader, “to feel a sensation oddly akin to the helpless discomfort familiar to us all in sleep, when we recognise yet cannot reconcile the anomalies and contradictions of a dream” (30). Richard Collins considers Marian in contrast with two intertextual archetypes of the Victorian freak show, the Bearded Lady and the Hermaphrodite, and notes how spectators “experienced the frisson of erotic

---

¹ The term “Angel in the House” comes from a poem by Coventry Patmore, published in 1854, in which he presents his wife, an embodiment of this feminine ideal, as a model for all women.
² The masculine woman Collins had constructed also proved very appealing to many male readers. Susan Balée refers to an interview in which Wilkie Collins describes the many letters he had received from men who wanted to marry Marian Halcombe (Balée 200).
horror” (138) as they witnessed these performers at freak shows, a similar “sensation” to that which Walter describes when he first sees Marian. Collins even suggests Julia Pastrana, a woman born with a genetic disorder that covered her body and face with thick, dark hair and exhibited at freak shows as the “Bear Woman”, as a possible inspiration for the character of Marian Halcombe (141).

Figure 1: Julia Pastrana, exhibited at freak shows as the “Bear Woman”

In art, the hermaphrodite is often depicted facing away from the viewer, so that they see only the voluptuous curves of the figure’s back side, leaving the male sexual organs, and hence the hermaphroditism, concealed (Collins 151). For example, when admiring Bernini’s marble sculpture of the “Sleeping Hermaphroditos” (possibly the most famous depiction of the Hermaphrodite in art), the viewer must walk around the piece in order for the figure’s
androgynous nature to be revealed. This is comparable to the first scene in which Walter, and the reader, sees Marian. The rising suspense of the scene is equivalent to that of a striptease, as we enjoy all of the conventional ideals of female beauty (“her waist, perfection in the eyes of a man, for it occupied its natural place, it filled out its natural circle, it was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays” (29)) through Walter’s eyes, until, “at the climactic moment of unveiling, the woman’s head virtually proves her a man in drag” (Miller 126). D.A. Miller interprets Marian as occupying an inter-sex position in which, “unable to compete, ... she cannot be ‘male; unable to attract ... neither can she be ‘female’” (Miller 127). Lacking the crucial sexual organ, Marian is not “manly” enough, yet due to her horrifying ugliness, she is not “womanly” enough.

Figure 2: Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s “Sleeping Hermaphroditos”

Laura Fairlie, a feeble and ethereally feminine figure, can be considered a parody of the Angel in the House. Throughout the novel, Marian’s masculine strength of mind is
continually juxtaposed with Laura’s passivity and weakness, leaving the reader to form their
own opinion as to which is the more admirable heroine. Marian is frequently contrasted with
Laura, and immediately after we hear about Marian’s “masculine look” (30), we are given
our first description of Laura, who conforms to all the dictates of ideal femininity, in
everything from her “fair, delicate” looks (49) to her nerves (we are told she suffers from
“that essentially feminine malady, a slight headache” (31)). Marian herself offers a direct
comparison between herself and her sister:

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.

(32)

Marian leaves Walter to “fill in the blank”, aware of her own ambiguity. In doing so, Collins
also invites the reader to reevaluate the rigid notions of what constitutes female beauty.

Laura is portrayed as a powerless, sexless infant and a possible madwoman. By
devaluing Laura, and in turn devaluing the feminine ideal she embodies, Collins distances her
from the reader, and instead provokes readers to acknowledge Marian as the novel’s true
heroine. We witness Laura naïvely opening herself up to and being easily manipulated by
dangerous men, the ghostly figure of Anne Catherick and even her own family and friends.
Although it is Laura he marries, Marian remains Walter’s most trusted confidante, whom he
takes into his confidence as he would a male friend. Laura becomes aware of her own
vulnerability and worries that Walter “will end in liking Marian better than you like me—you
will, because I am so helpless!” (533). She begs him, “Oh, don't, don't, don't treat me like a

3 Richard Collins asserts that by the end of the novel, the reader will use the same word to describe both Laura
and Marian: “angel” (Collins 146). Marian subverts the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House, and invites a
reevaluation of existing gender and sexual stereotypes. Susan Balee notes that Collins “not only debased the old
icon of femininity, he minted a new one” (211).
child!” (534), yet Walter responds by formulating a scheme whereby he and Marian trick Laura into believing they are selling her sketches to the same man who buys Walter’s drawings. However, Walter admits, “I was the only purchaser” (534), as he carefully hides the sketches from her. This “innocent deception” (535) resembles how a parent would treat a child, comparable to hiding a child’s letters to Santa Claus. In this dynamic, Laura seems to occupy the role of a cherished infant, protected by Marian and Walter in many of the same ways a parent would protect a child. Walter and Marian infantilise Laura by lying to her and being “careful to keep [her] in ignorance” (629) of the reality of their situation.

At Limmeridge, Marian holds the position of head of the house, which is made clear when she instructs Walter not to tell Laura or Frederick Fairlie about his encounter with Anne Catherick, explaining that they are both “rather nervous and sensitive; and you would only fidget one and alarm the other to no purpose” (35). In their domestic circle in London, Walter and Marian play the roles of mother and father, respectively, with Marian again assuming the role of head of the house. In both settings, Marian is posited as a dominant, masculine figure, contrasted with the obedient, childlike Laura and the weak, emotional Walter.

It is interesting that the androgynous, “freakish” Marian is presented not as a madwoman, but as an alternative ideal of womanhood. Laura, on the other hand, who conforms to all the Victorian feminine ideals, is aligned with Anne Catherick, the insane Woman in White. In doing so, Collins encourages readers to associate madness with classically “feminine” traits and behaviours. Consequentially, it is the ethereally feminine figures of Laura and Anne, rather than the eroticised, masculine Marian, who become the insane characters in the text. By positing the Angel in the House as a possible madwoman, Collins further serves to debase the stereotype.

---

4 Sarah Annes Brown notes, “It is significant that Laura’s feminine charm should express itself—or be expressed by Walter—in outward signs which resemble those of Anne’s madness” (40). She refers to a scene in which Walter notices Laura’s “little delicate wandering hand that was trifling with [the sketchbook]” (51), which, considered out of context, may be read as the hand of a child, an invalid or potentially a madwoman.
In descriptions of Laura’s pale, childlike prettiness, as well as her infantilisation, Laura is denied her full status as an adult. She can thus be considered a “sexless” being. Refused an adult sexuality, Laura instead expresses a “diaphanous sexuality, the androgyny of the child whose gender is as yet undifferentiated” (Richard Collins 147). Laura’s sexlessness stands in striking contrast with Marian’s “highly charged, doubled sexuality”, which manifests itself in her hermaphroditism (Richard Collins 147). Collins does not demonise Marian’s biological oddness, but rather eroticises it.

In relation to the eroticised attraction of Marian, her moustache can be interpreted as not only undermining the stable binary of gender identity, but also evoking “the ultimate marker of femaleness, the uncovered vagina” (Richard Collins 18). Although on one hand, an excess of facial hair can signify masculinity (and therefore a lacking femininity), the Bearded Lady’s beard can also be interpreted as a displaced beard—a metaphor for her actual “beard” or pubic hair, transferred from her vagina to her face, and thus stripping her naked. Marian’s clothes no longer cover up what they are supposed to, and her overt adult female sexuality is exposed. Female lips are sometimes read as alluding to the labia, and it is interesting that, once he notices her moustache, Walter’s gaze moves immediately to Marian’s “large, firm, masculine mouth” (30), rather than her nose, which is usually considered the most masculine feature of the face.5

Walter is “almost repelled” (30) by Marian’s face—Marian’s moustache is a kind of “anasyrma, an unveiling that reveals her sex, turns her hidden sex inside out” (Richard Collins 155), exposing and making accessible something the Victorian man would expect a “proper” woman to withhold. Laura appeals to Walter because of her angelic innocence and purity, while he is repulsed by Marian’s heightened female sexuality. While Marian’s

5 Richard Collins suggests it is possibly a variation on Freud’s reading of the Medusa as a “genitalised head”, explained by Elaine Showalter as “an upward displacement of the sexual organs, so that the mouth stands for the vagina dentata” (Sexual Anarchy 145, quoted in Collins). Collins asserts that the move from the moustache to the lips in Walter’s description supports this theory of the “vagina dentata”, a threatening notion that simultaneously seduces men and cuts off the supposed “source” of their power.
androgyny and masculine vigour repulse men such as Walter, she also has the ability to inspire an aggressive erotic passion in Fosco, who is immediately attracted to this physical symptom of her erotic energy. Fosco refers to Marian as “this grand creature, ... this magnificent woman, whom I admire with all my soul” (359). His “volcanic ardour” (671) for Marian stands in sharp contrast with what he feels for his obedient, self-sacrificing wife. Fosco shows no interest in the Countess, who has been tamed to conform to the ideals of the Angel in the House, as he laments: “All the gold of my rich nature was poured hopelessly at [Marian’s] feet. My wife—poor angel!—my wife, who adores me, got nothing but the shillings and the pennies” (671). Fosco even goes on to imagine himself and Marian together as a couple: “Under happier circumstances how worthy I should have been of Miss Halcombe—how worthy Miss Halcombe would have been of ME” (373).

As with Laura Fairlie, the reader is distanced from Walter, who is portrayed as entirely motivated by his nerves and emotions. He is frequently compared to Marian, who controls her feelings like a man (she describes how her tears “come almost like men's tears” (178)). The juxtaposition between Walter’s impotence and Marian’s resolution is strikingly evident in the scene where Marian tells him he must leave Limmeridge House after he has become too attached to Laura. It is Marian, not Frederick Fairlie, who must talk to Walter “man to man”, instructing him on how to manage his feelings “like a man”. Marian recognises Walter’s “hopeless affection” and “weakness” (71), and advises him to “Crush it! ... Don’t shrink under it like a woman. Tear it out, trample it under foot like a man!” (73).

6 D.A. Miller argues that Walter’s disgust “neuters” Marian (127), yet Fosco takes a passionate erotic interest in Marian, culminating in his invasion of her room (which some critics have read psychoanalytically as standing in for her “womb” (Balée 203)), and reading of her diary. The novel encodes this act as a rape, as Marian afterwards falls victim to a violent fever, which turns to typhus, leaving her in an impotent rage against him.

7 The novel opens with the seemingly straightforward line, “This is the story of what a Woman’s patience can endure, and what a Man’s resolution can achieve” (1). The reader generally assumes that Walter is the resolute man in question, and either Marian or Laura the patient woman. However, Balée points out that Marian is described as “resolute” by just about every male character she meets, from Walter, to the solicitor Vincent Gilmore, to Count Fosco (210). Walter, she points out, is patient, as he waits for Laura despite the seeming impossibility he will ever be able to marry her. Balée interprets the opening sentence: “This is the story of what a man with a woman’s patience can endure, and what a woman with the resolution of a man can achieve” (211).
However, Walter is overwhelmed by his emotions, as “something rose within me at that moment stronger than my own will” (75), and he demands to leave that very day, without consideration for the consequences of his departure. Marian turns out to be the more practical of the two, having considered a scheme which will allow Walter to leave without arousing Mr. Fairlie’s suspicions about the real reason for his returning to London. When the time comes for Walter to leave Limmeridge, Marian again proves to be the more rational of the two, displaying masculine composure while Walter is completely overwhelmed by emotion. As he prepares to go, tears form in Walter’s eyes and he struggles to speak. By contrast, he notes, “[Marian] caught me by both hands—she pressed them with the strong, steady grasp of a man” (132). It is Marian who acts like a man, while Walter is portrayed as weak and effeminate.

Marian meets her intellectual match in the form of the novel’s villain, Count Fosco. However, their relationship is complicated by their mutual attraction to and desire for one another. U.C. Knoepflmacher argues that Collins “skillfully encourages the reader to regard this unconventional pair as the true protagonists of the novel”, as Marian and Fosco are presented in such a way that the reader is guided to take their relationship “far more seriously” than that of Walter and Laura (366). Collins undermines the centrality of the heterosexual couple by presenting the gender-ambivalent Marian and Fosco as the more compelling and passionate couple, so that they effectively displace Walter and Laura as the novel’s true protagonists.

Early in the novel, Marian expresses that she is “becoming anxious to know the Count” (207). Before ever meeting him, she feels an attraction to him, as she records how “he excites my strongest interest ... I wonder if he will ever come to England? I wonder if I shall like him?” (207). When Laura meets with Madame Fosco and her husband, she writes to tell Marian, but Marian is frustrated by Laura’s “provoking” silence on the subject of Count
Fosco, “who interests me infinitely more than his wife” (221). After she eventually meets him, Marian admits that is instantly fascinated by him: “I am almost afraid to confess it, even to these secret pages. The man has interested me, has attracted me, has forced me to like him. In two short days he has made his way straight into my favourable estimation” (239). She is quick to “dispose of” his wife, framing her description of Madame Fosco as evidence of the Count’s impressive ability to “[tame] this once wayward English woman till her own relations hardly know her again” (238). Like Fosco, Marian similarly imagines being in a relationship with the Count and fantasises about what it would be like “if he had married me” (238). Despite his being “immensely fat” (239) and “effeminate” (244), Marian clearly has an erotic interest in him, as she describes the “extraordinary power of his eyes” that “forces me to look at him, and yet causes me sensations, when I do look” (240).

The novel establishes a “discourse of effeminacy” (Nemesvari 104) as Fosco is described in androgynous terms throughout. He is acutely aware of his feminine behaviours, as he describes his sweet tooth: “A taste for sweets ... is the innocent taste of women and children. I love to share it with them—it is another bond, dear ladies, between you and me” (319). She also notices his maternal behaviour with and “extraordinary fondness for pet animals” (241) and that he is “as noiseless in a room as any of us women, and ... as nervously sensitive as the weakest of us. He starts at chance noises as inveterately as Laura herself” (241). Marian observes that Fosco “is as fond of fine clothes as the veriest fool in existence” (243), and describes him in his flamboyant fashions as looking “like a fat St. Cecilia masquerading in male attire” (250).

Count Fosco is figured as a truly formidable villain. However, Fosco is not considered threatening merely because of his actions, but because of his abnormal, corpulent body.\(^8\) The

---

\(^8\) Haefele-Thomas discusses how Collins harnesses British fears of the “foreign, queer ‘other’” (10) in his characterisation of Fosco, the genderqueer Italian. Collins capitalises on the Victorians’s ambivalent desire to see foreigners visiting England in his depiction of Fosco, the freakish foreigner, on the loose and unrestrained.
transgressive power of Marian and Fosco lies in their “freakish” bodies, which provoke readers to think of the performers at a freak show. By evoking the imagery and iconography of the Victorian freak show, Collins was able to draw on and exploit readers deep-rooted fears about gender identity, sexuality and desire. Elizabeth Grosz suggests it is not just the physical difference that fascinates and horrifies spectators, but that they experience “a perverse kind of sexual curiosity”, as they are mystified by and wonder about what kind of sex lives are available to bearded ladies and other sexual freaks (64). Sex was a powerful element of the performances at a freak show, as audiences were fascinated by ideas of sex between “incongruous partners”:

Such performances readily inspired images of transgressive sex, ambiguous sex, homosexuality, bisexuality, and group sex, challenging the conventional boundaries between male and female, self and other (Dennett 322).

As well as imagining the freak show performers having sex with one another, Victorians were intensely aroused by imagining having sex with the performers themselves. Leslie Fiedler notes,

All Freaks are perceived to one degree or another as erotic. Indeed, abnormality arouses in some ‘normal’ beholders a temptation to go beyond looking to knowing in the full carnal sense the ultimate other. The desire is itself felt as freaky, however, since it implies not only a longing for degradation but a dream of breaching the last taboo against miscegenation (137).

Similarly, in *The Woman in White*, readers eagerly experience the same tantalising, morbid speculation in reading about Marian Halcombe, the Bearded Lady, and Count Fosco, the freakishly obese, gender-variant foreigner. These characters challenge notions about the

---

Freak shows enabled Victorians both to witness these foreigners, but to do so in a controlled setting (Haefele-Thomas 9).

Andrea Stulman Dennett observes, “It was deeply arousing to Victorians to touch a strange woman in a legitimate, respectable setting, and it was a tantalising and disturbing sight for the other spectators. A wondrously titillating dialectic emerged, in which performers were alluring as well as repulsive” (323).
limits of human sexuality by presenting a “sexual riddle” (323) for the reader, as readers wonder “How do they do it?” (Grosz 64). Portrayed as “a fat St. Cecilia masquerading in male attire”, perhaps Fosco can be seen as an embodiment of the transgender “sexual freak” or the Fat Lady from the freak show, conjuring up images of ambiguous sex when paired with Marian’s Bearded Lady or Hermaphrodite. The two share what Richard Nemesvari describes as a “queerly heterosexual passion” (105), as their gender ambivalence positions them as a perfect match for one another.

The key to the freak’s desirability is their ambiguity, as they occupy the impossible position outside the structure of binary oppositions that determine the parameters of self-identity. The non-conformity of the freak’s body can be interpreted as a metaphor for a sense of rebellion (Church 3). Martha Stoddard Holmes claims that the non-normative body in sensation fiction may be considered a vehicle through which a text interrogates and subverts the ostensibly stable binaries dividing the normal from the abnormal, the sane from the insane, the beautiful from the ugly, and one sex from the other (494). Fosco is perceived as a “rebel”, as his freakish corpulence and genderqueer possibilities call into question the limits of human sexuality. Bodily ambivalence in this way can be seen as a disabling force. At a freak show, spectators experience both a perverse voyeuristic pleasure and an unsettling fear of the disruption of the binary oppositions that secure the “normal”, sane, able-bodied, heterosexual subject in its stable identity and sexuality (Grosz 64). In imagining the transgressive sexual habits of the Bearded Lady, their firm belief in the bipolarity of the sexes is challenged. As the boundaries distinguishing the self from the other weaken, the “normal” subject experiences “the sense of a border crossed” (Fiedler 143).

David Church describes the freakish body as “too excessive” to be contained by a simple binary opposition (4), and quotes Margrit Shildrick, who argues that the freak “cannot be defined to the place of the other; it is not simply alien, but always arouses the contradictory responses of denial and recognition, disgust and empathy, exclusion and identification” (Embodying the Monster 17, quoted in Church).
The novel’s conclusion, and the death of Fosco, can be considered in light of his rebellious non-conformity.11 Walter describes his encounter with Fosco’s corpse as he passes the Morgue in Paris: “A great crowd clamoured and heaved round the door. There was evidently something inside which excited the popular curiosity, and fed the popular appetite for horror” (698). The Morgue, which received its name from the archaic verb “morguer” (to stare), was a site of spectacle, where Parisians would regularly go to see the dead bodies as a form of entertainment. It is there that Walter finds Fosco’s corpse, exposed to the public gaze. The exhibition of Fosco’s corpse is reminiscent of the real life stories of Julia Pastrana, the Bear Woman, and Saartje Baartman, the Hottentot Venus. Both women were exhibited at Victorian freak shows during their lives, and after their deaths, their corpses were put on public display at freak shows and museums. Walter describes how Fosco lies “exposed to the flippant curiosity of a French mob!” (699). However, Fosco still harnesses a sexual charm after his death, as we see his corpse surrounded by a group of mourning Frenchwomen who: “lifted their hands in admiration, and cried in shrill chorus, ‘Ah, what a handsome man!’” (699). Fosco’s corpse continues to feed the audience’s appetite for both horror and “the perverse pleasure of voyeurism” (Grosz 64), and to challenge the boundaries between the freakish and the ideal.

11 In “Fosco Lives!”, A.D. Hutter argues against the belief that Fosco dies at the end of the novel, asserting that in Fosco’s biography (which is supposedly but, according to Hutter, implausibly written by Madame Fosco), “we see the unmistakeable hand of Fosco himself” (198).
As the story draws to a close, we see Marian living with Laura, Walter and their first child back in Limmeridge House. Walter concludes by saying, “Marian was the good angel of our lives—let Marian end our Story” (702). The use of the word “angel” to describe a physically deformed masculine woman emphasises the subversion of the Angel in the House stereotype Collins has been carrying out throughout the novel. Knoepflmacher argues that in this scene, “Collins deliberately toys with the artificiality of this return to convention; he makes it clear that the unconventional sensibility that Marian displayed makes her a potential fellow rebel of Count Fosco” (365). Collins undermines the centrality of the heterosexual couple by portraying Marian, the masculine “spinster”, as essential to the resolution of the marriage plot: “Marian actively functions as a crucial mediator for central heterosexual couple—without Marian, Walter never would have questioned Laura Fairlie’s name on the tombstone” (Haefele-Thomas 14). In doing so, Collins threatens the stability of
heteronormativity. Additionally, rather than growing redundant once Walter and Laura give birth to their first child, Marian becomes even more valuable as an effective third parent to the child. Collins shows the genderqueer, freakish character assuming the parental role in a heterosexual family as it is Marian, not Laura, we see holding the baby as the novel ends. Having already held the role of the “father” in her domestic circle with Laura and Walter at St. John’s Wood, Marian continues after their marriage as the head of the house, usurping Walter’s patriarchal power, and Laura’s maternal power. In suggesting that a gender ambivalent, bodily ambivalent figure holds this dominant position, Collins undercuts the novel’s conventional fairytale ending.

Collins distances the reader from both Walter and Laura by juxtaposing them with the more powerful heroine, Marian Halcombe, and her formidable enemy, Count Fosco. The supremacy and authority of the heterosexual couple is undermined by the freakish, transgressive power of Marian and Fosco. Collins juxtaposes the weakness of Walter and Laura, who function as symbols of stereotypical Victorian notions of gender and sexuality, with the rebellious non-conformity of Marian and Fosco, who subvert and disrupt the existing norms and boundaries governing Victorian life. In contrasting Laura, the Angel in the House, with Marian, the strong-minded “surplus woman”, Collins undermines the Victorian stereotype, offering an alternative icon of femininity. It is Marian and Fosco who carry out the important work in the novel by challenging the reader to question the binary structures determining their notions of self-definition. Portrayed as rebellious, non-conforming characters, Marian and Fosco ultimately eclipse Walter and Laura as the novel’s true protagonists.

12 Haefele-Thomas points out that Collins has Marian write in a stereotypically feminine style “so as not to appear too overtly subversive” (13).
Works Cited


