

THE PARADOX OF UNIFIED FEMALE SELFHOOD:
SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND THE CREATION OF MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

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ABSTRACT

THE PARADOX OF UNIFIED FEMALE SELFHOOD: SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND THE CREATION OF MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

by Amanda M. May

Victorian social codes imposed on women were intended more often than not to unify their identities. Daughters received an identity only from their parents and the clergy, and they were taught to esteem marriage from an early age. After marriage, the doctrine of separate spheres and the law of coverture similarly reduced a woman's identity to domestic terms. Women were expected to live for others within the home, which left little or no time for self-development. However, the literature of the era presents female identity differently than the ideal uniformity set forth by Victorian mores. Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853), Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), and Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) demonstrate that, rather than reinforcing a unified state of identity, Victorian social codes instead fragmented and multiplied it. Ruth's identities begin to fragment when she becomes an apprentice and continue to do so after her fall until her death, which allows her to transcend her socially imposed identities and become a Christian martyr. Lucy, on the other hand, actively uses her appearance as ideal to gain identities of her choosing, but when Robert begins investigating the disappearance of George Talboys, his friend and Lucy's first husband, she suffers exposure as both a bigamist and a madwoman. Her identity is eliminated after her banishment to an asylum outside of England. Helen's identity also becomes fragmented through marriage. After Huntingdon threatens the moral wellbeing of her son and her identity as mother, she flees and poses as a widow to conceal her past identities. Although she does so successfully, she eventually marries Gilbert after Huntingdon's death allows her to become an actual widow.

These novels show that multiple identities granted women the ability to temporarily transcend, manipulate, and evade society's attempts to limit them.

INTRODUCTION

During the Victorian era, social codes considerably limited a woman's identity. "The Angel in the House," the title and subject of Coventry Patmore's long poem (1854), remained the most popular paradigm of ideal middle and upper class female identity during the remainder of the Victorian era. Kimberly Reynolds and Nicola Humble, authors of *Victorian Heroines: Representations of Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Art*, argue that the Angel in the House was considered the only good woman of the period (63) because, as a result of focusing on others, she became selfless or "I-less" (134). Despite this paradigm of selflessness, Victorian women possessed an identity, one that was not unified but multifaceted. Although Reynolds and Humble suggest that the Angel in the House experienced a lack of self, Victorian women actually embodied multiple identities shaped by social codes, many of which were focused on helping others rather than on further developing identities, as represented in the novels of the period. A closer examination of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853), Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), and Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) demonstrates that each protagonist's identity is not unified by these social codes. Instead, because circumstances disable them from perfectly adhering to Victorian mores, Ruth, Lucy, and Helen, the novels' female protagonists, must maintain a multiplicity of identities to remain a part of society, revealing the actual complexity of female identity rather than sustaining the ideal uniformity.

Historically, a woman's identity was shaped mainly by mores related to her marital status. Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, and William Veeder's *The Woman Question* explains that in the Victorian era, an unmarried woman, or *feme sole*, possessed an identity of her own, but she often lacked the authority to shape it. Instead, her parents influenced it to fit

Victorian expectations. Although both parental and religious figures taught women to regard matrimony as the pinnacle of their achievements from an early age, wifehood also signified “the end of a woman’s autonomous existence” (Helsing 2: 3). Once married, a woman’s political identity was covered by her husband’s, and she became a *feme covert*.¹ While this transition provided her with access to her husband’s belongings and hence a greater legal status,² marriage also signified the end of her right to own property. In her book *Victorian Women*, Joan Perkin notes that any possessions a *feme sole* owned became her husband’s property the moment she was married (73-4). Common law extended this ownership to everything a married woman possessed and produced, including children. The passage of the Infant and Child Custody Bill in 1839 only granted women permission to request custody of children under the age of seven and to visit older offspring in cases where husbands were proven adulterous (Helsing 2: 12-13).³

Regardless of whether a woman was a *feme sole* or *feme covert*, the doctrine of separate spheres further limited her identity. While men could travel between the private sphere of home and the public sphere outside the home, women remained confined in their domestic environment. For the *feme sole*, this meant being contained in the identity of daughter. Whereas sons ventured into the world, daughters remained more attached to their families, often becoming caretakers for their parents (Perkin 7). The *feme covert* similarly became trapped by the doctrine of separate spheres in her identity as wife. Once married, a woman acquired more

¹ Helsing 2: 4-5; Perkin 73; Shanley 477. Although women lost their legal identities, Helsing writes that women also escaped persecution for their crimes; the blame instead fell on husbands, who were expected to influence and control their wives’ behavior (2: 4-5).

² Mary Lyndon Shanley explains that marriage functioned as a transfer of rights and that through marriage, fathers lost their exclusive control over their daughters (477).

³ The Married Woman’s Property Act of 1870 granted women a greater amount of control over their property. As Helsing notes, it allowed women to earn a marginally small income, but husbands still had the rights to most property. Twelve years later, in 1882, a second Married Woman’s Property Act was passed, granting women ownership of all the property they owned before marriage and granted them access to anything they earned after marrying (Helsing 2: 21).

domestic responsibilities, which prevented her from developing her own identity. Because a Victorian woman's only real public duty was philanthropy, she lacked opportunities to focus on herself and instead was expected to focus wholly on others.⁴ Although a wife exercised the most authority in the private sphere (Helsing 1: 11), the expectation of obedience to her husband frequently superseded her domestic power.⁵ In *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, Richard Altick refers to this condition as "Women's serfdom" (46). Despite the prevailing view on obedience, wives were paradoxically expected to exert moral influence over their husbands.⁶ In addition, women were also expected to bear children, particularly sons, which was one of the most valuable tasks a woman could perform (Perkin 6). As mothers, Victorian women also exerted moral influence over their children, particularly sons, and were expected to instill male offspring with a sense of "public spirit" (Morgan 39). Married women lacked options outside of motherhood and domestic management because marriage granted a husband the conjugal right to sex, a right that wives could not refuse (Showalter, *Literature* 189).

In contrast with becoming a married woman and mother, the worst possible fate a woman could suffer was losing her virginity outside of marriage and becoming a fallen woman. Those who became pregnant after such affairs were frequently abandoned by their lovers. These women, Perkin writes, were the least fortunate of all, as they were not only fallen but also isolated from a community that may be willing to support them (180). Although abortion and abandonment were both options for unwed expectant mothers, those who chose to become mothers also had to devise a means of financial support (181). As Eve W. Stoddard notes, becoming fallen meant exclusion from respectable work, so these women often became prostitutes (56), a fate that

⁴ Helsing 1: 4; Morgan 75, 90.

⁵ Helsing 1: 31; Lawrence 250.

⁶ Helsing 2: 109; Morgan 39.

Victorians widely viewed as “worse than death” (Helsing 2: 150). With few exceptions, fallen women are condemned to death in Victorian novels and refused the role of protagonist.⁷

Although many historians have studied the Victorian era and its various social tenets, literary critics have focused on the matter of Victorian female identity, both in terms of external factors shaping a woman’s identity and in terms of the individual identities themselves. Many critics examine the effects of mores on a woman’s identity. In *A Literature of their Own*, Elaine Showalter finds that, as girls matured, their parents discouraged them from revealing their identities. Similarly, in *The Female Malady*, Showalter demonstrates that men controlled the concept of madness and used it to condemn independent or sexually liberated women, yet the mundane nature of marriage often contributed to a woman’s madness.⁸

Many critics also research how professions like writing and painting created tension between female identities. In *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth Century Women’s Writing*, Margaret Homans argues that although a woman’s gender overshadowed her identity as writer and isolation caused many female authors to adopt male pseudonyms, society expected good women writers, like ideal women, to be selfless. Showalter (*Literature*) explores gender’s precedence over writing, a point also explored by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their *The Madwoman in the Attic*, but Gilbert and Gubar add that women writers needed to reconcile internally the images of angel and monster. Helsing, Antonia Losano, and Laura C. Berry argue that society often excluded women writers and artists, many of whom struggled against their isolation.

⁷ Helsing 3: 113; Reynolds 65. Two examples include Esther from Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) and Lady Dedlock from Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853).

⁸ In *The Female Malady* Showalter notes that several Victorian contemporaries, including William Moseley, W.A.F. Brown, and John Conolly, all acknowledged that “the intellectual and vocational limitations of the female role... were as maddening as its biological characteristics” (59-60). However, women continued to lose opportunities for self-development and professional development as a result of marriage’s typically stifling “family life, boredom, and patriarchal protectivism” (64).

A number of critics also find that Lucy from *Lady Audley's Secret*, Helen from *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and Ruth from *Ruth* all experience situations where their identities conflict with the prototypical Victorian moral structure. Lynn M. Voskuil focuses the correlation between Lucy's madness and her role as a social threat. Laura Kay Chesier writes that Harry, the son of an upper class family, reacts to Ruth's fallenness in a manner that demonstrates how society shapes identity, whereas Nicole A. Diederich focuses on common law's elimination of Helen's identity as professional artist. Sook Kyong Hyun argues that in *Ruth*, "public image" does not always correlate with "self-conception" (109), which is similar to Jeffrey Spear's point that Lucy's portrait varies from her self-presentation. Erin Marie Smith and Jenny Bourne Taylor both note that Victorian writers used melodrama to portray this tension.

To escape the consequences of their deviation from Victorian standards, Ruth from *Ruth*, Lucy from *Lady Audley's Secret*, and Helen from *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* all conceal identities that would otherwise make them socially unacceptable. Despite Voskuil's assertion that authenticity was expected of middle-class women, concealment frequently appeared in mid-Victorian novels. N. M. Jacobs and Jonathan Loesburg explore how sensation fiction usually includes the revelation of concealed identities. Rebecca Stern examines performative identity and its relation to madness in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Losano and Jacobs argue the importance of concealment in *Tenant*, as do Gilbert and Gubar, who claim that Helen uses art to both reveal and conceal her identities. Taylor and Maria Fitzwilliam argue that widowhood similarly acts as a concealing factor in *Ruth*.⁹

⁹ When concealment was not an option, women could form communities with other women, which in turn affected a woman's identity development. Showalter (*Literature*) focuses on the development of a writer's identity in a community, whereas Auerbach's *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* focuses on how communities empowered Victorian women. Christine Colón focuses on *Tenant* as a revision of *Jane Eyre* and an attempt to emphasize the importance of community. Hyun writes that self-understanding is impossible without a form of community called "triangulation" between the self, the object, and the other.

Whereas many critics, including Showalter, Perkin, Homans, and Nina Auerbach, focus on the social factors influencing a woman's identity, others explore the identities themselves, generally in terms of a single identity. Two exceptions are Colleen Denney and Winifred Hughes, both of whom refer overtly to multiple identities in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Of the identities mentioned, some critics focus prominently on the implications of childhood and orphanhood in relation to female identity. Leslie Anne Crowley argues that *Ruth's* narrator identifies maternal absence as the cause of Ruth's fault of innocence and need for affection. While Reynolds and Humble note that Gaskell frequently writes about the orphan's struggles to work and act freely in a confining society, Nadya Chishty-Mujahid suggests that Ruth's illness returns her to a state of childhood; Natalie Schroeder indicates that Lady Audley's marriage to a man nearly four decades her senior yields similar results.

Critics also frequently examine identities related to marital status. Cornes, Nataalka Freeland ("Economies"), and Nancy Armstrong discuss the economic implications of marriage. Perkin states that marriage was important regardless of class, even for widows, because of its sexual implications. Ruth Beinstock Anolik argues that wives become trapped by their husbands in Gothic fiction. Ian Ward notes that wives in *Tenant* lack a political identity and that separation was impossible, whereas Diederich argues that Helen's apparent widowhood grants her full access to other identities.

Some critics have also considered the identity of motherhood. Crowley indicates that motherhood is a balance between social ideologies and biological factors, arguing that, despite the tension between purity and sexual knowledge, motherhood empowers women. Like Crowley, Homans and Perkin note the importance of motherhood in relation to Victorian mores. In "Economies," Freeland argues that Ruth's motherhood argues against the economic system of

marriage. Chishty-Mujahid focuses on motherhood's redemptive power in *Ruth*. Whereas Anolik notes that Helen's motherhood traps her in marriage, Berry writes that Helen's marriage to Gilbert stabilizes her identity as mother while simultaneously undermining it via custody laws.

Although Victorian social codes attempted to confine women to the "Angel in the House" paradigm, various social pressures drew women out of a state of selflessness and a unified state of identity. As a result, Victorian mores forced the women of the period to adopt and maintain multiple identities that were not always mutually exclusive in order to meet expectations. In this thesis, I explore how the Victorian social structures that frequently advocated a woman's single identity or selflessness paradoxically complicated, compounded, and forced a multiplicity of identities on the protagonists of *Ruth*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

In Chapter 1, I explore the multiplicity of a fallen woman's identities in Gaskell's *Ruth*. Ruth begins as an innocent and sexually inexperienced orphan girl whose caretaker forces the identity of seamstress on her. This employment exposes her to Bellingham, who manipulates Ruth and causes her fall. Concealing her identity as fallen woman and posing as a widow gives Ruth access to the respectable identity of governess despite her preexisting motherhood, and though Bradshaw's discovery of her fallenness makes this identity impossible to maintain, Ruth recovers her respectability by becoming a caretaker to the community and eventually nursing Bellingham/Donne. By doing so, she contracts his illness and dies,¹⁰ but her innocence endures in the public eye even after her death.

In Chapter 2, I argue that, in *Lady Audley's Secret*, Lucy's active use of her ideal beauty, innocence, and apparent passivity allows her to ascend to the upper class and to cover her less desirable social identities with identities that she actively creates. However, her identities unravel

¹⁰ Laura Kay Cheshier notes that Ruth's fever signifies an identity crisis and a "self-centered" lovesickness (127).

when Robert Audley, the friend of Lucy's first husband and the nephew of her second, begins to investigate the demise of his friend and discovers not only Lucy's bigamy but also her madness. Once exposed, Lucy suffers the revocation of all of her created identities, and Robert labels her as something outside of femininity. Because of the danger she poses to social stability, Robert banishes Lucy to an institution and ultimately to a state of non-existence. Her death completes the total elimination of her selected, discarded, and inherent identities.

In Chapter 3, I examine how marital status shapes Helen's identities in Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. As a *feme sole*, Helen has enough independence to maintain an identity as artist, but she cannot escape her aunt's social pressure to marry. Huntingdon's interference influences Helen's choice of husband, signifying the establishment of his authority over her identities. After marriage, Huntingdon's debauchery requires Helen to maintain some of her old identities as well as to shape new ones through her diary. Eventually, he forces exposure by taking Helen's diary and reading it, which delays but does not entirely thwart her efforts to escape. Helen then assumes the identity of widow, which simultaneously allows her to maintain her independence as a *feme sole* and a professional painter, and puts her in a position to return to the state of *feme couvert*. By marrying Gilbert, Helen relinquishes all of her identities except those of wife and mother, suggesting that marriage is paradoxically one of woman's greatest achievements and losses.

Although the protagonists in these three novels have complex and fractured identities, previously published criticism in this area generally focuses on a single identity. My thesis not only examines the social causes of these multiple identities but also considers the effects of social codes on female identity and the interrelation between identities. Examining female

identity in the context of social structures reveals how women paradoxically submitted to and counteracted Victorian expectations concerning identity.

CHAPTER I

MAIDENHOOD, MOTHERHOOD, AND WIDOWHOOD: SOCIALLY GENERATED IDENTITIES IN *RUTH*

Like many Victorian women who utilized the novel as an agent of social change, Elizabeth Gaskell frequently aimed to “humaniz[e] rigid social codes” in her works (Cheshier 156). *Ruth* is just one of Gaskell’s works that falls into the genre of what Freeland calls “social problem fiction” (“Politics” 799). The novel confronts fallen woman ideology not merely through the redemption of its eponymous, fallen protagonist but also through her possession of multiple identities. Throughout Ruth’s life stages of maidenhood, motherhood, and widowhood, social forces overpower her ability to control her identity. In maidenhood, Ruth lacks awareness of the social codes that contribute to her externally perceived identities, and while she is externally molded into a desirable form by various authority figures, including her caretaker, her employer Mrs. Mason, and her seducer Henry Bellingham, she maintains some control over her internal identity by clinging to memories of her mother. Ruth’s increasing knowledge of social codes gradually grants her authority over her social identities. When combined with her enduring moral purity, her social awareness enables her to transcend her external fallenness and demonstrate her internal innocence. Throughout her life, Ruth encounters various authoritative characters who impose a multiplicity of social and internal identities upon her. By learning to resist and defy these influences, Ruth successfully surmounts them to reveal her internal identity as one that is pure, which paradoxically is recognized by those who enforce the social codes that cause her earlier identity fragmentation.

As an orphaned member of the working class, Ruth’s childhood is underscored by her role as apprentice. This identity is imposed by her circumstances as an orphan and by the maltster of Skelton, who becomes Ruth’s caretaker after her father’s death. Kimberly Reynolds

and Nicola Humble note that class plays a significant role in determining the fate of the orphaned child. Whereas middle and upper class orphans were absorbed into the families of close relations, lower class orphans posed a problem and often lacked caretakers (25), a plight which Ruth embodies. In addition to inheriting the role of caretaker, the maltster also inherits her father's debts and, to ease his financial burden, "inquire[s] for a situation or apprenticeship of some kind for poor heart-broken Ruth; heard of Mrs Mason's; arranged all with her in two short conversations; [and] drove Ruth over in his gig..." (Gaskell 35). Ruth cannot resist the externally determined identity of apprentice because of her impoverished circumstances, and her acceptance demonstrates both her passivity and her powerlessness in the matter.

Although Ruth lacks a choice in accepting or rejecting her apprenticeship, she maintains the ability to extend internally her identity of happy child, which is indicated by her difference from the other apprentices. Many of Mrs. Mason's apprentices become absorbed in stretching or continuing to scrutinize their handiwork whenever they receive a break (7). Conversely, Ruth's uses her time to observe "the lovely sky of a winter's night" and goes beyond simply stretching to relieve discomfort: "But Ruth Hilton sprang to the large old window, and pressed against it as a bird presses against the bars of its cage" (8). This sentence demonstrates a contrast between Ruth and the other apprentices with the use of "but," and also shows the interplay between Ruth's caged worker identity and her former childhood self. Ruth's manner of "spr[inging]" suggests the continuation of her youth despite her impoverished circumstances. The metaphor of "a bird press[ing] against the bars of its cage" highlights Ruth's captivity in her apprenticeship; she lacks the agency to externally resist her occupation as seamstress despite her dissatisfaction with it. While standing by the window, Ruth "dream[s] of the days that were gone," a past that she cannot return to (8). Even after Jenny joins her at the window, she remains distinct from her

companion as both become absorbed “deep in separate trains of thought” (9). Ruth’s differences manifest not only in her actions but also in her tendency to seek relief from the rigors of her labor in memories. Rather than submitting to the identity of caged worker, Ruth resists by clinging to her childhood. The opposition between her desired identity of happy child and her socially imposed apprenticeship results in the first fragmentation of Ruth’s identity.

While orphans can be characters that portray liberation or confinement (Reynolds and Humble 28), Ruth attempts to fulfill the expectations of her new identity by internalizing her desire for liberation and remaining entrapped in her apprenticeship. Upon arriving at the window, Ruth longs to leave the identity of caged worker behind and escape into nature: “The impulse was strong upon her to snatch up her shawl, and sally forth and enjoy the glory; and time was when that impulse would have been instantly followed; but now, Ruth’s eyes filled with tears, dreaming of the days that were gone” (Gaskell 8). The strength of Ruth’s “impulse” demonstrates the residual traces of Ruth’s childhood spent in a rural setting with her parents, further highlighted by her reflection on “days that were gone.” The social expectations surrounding Ruth’s identity as apprentice also restrict her actions. In contrast with the other apprentices, Ruth must restrain herself in an effort to fulfill expectations, and the effort demonstrates Ruth’s attempts to conform to her new identity despite its numerous hardships. The narrator notes that she is “not yet inured to the hardship of the dressmaker’s workroom” (9). The word “yet” suggests the expectation that Ruth will acclimate to her working conditions and become more like Mrs. Mason’s other apprentices, who mindlessly scrutinize work that has already been performed or alleviate the physical discomfort of their labor. By taking refuge in memories of her childhood, Ruth resists fully conforming to apprenticeship and, because of Mrs. Mason’s rigid expectations, establishes the beginnings of her multiple selfhood.

Ruth's identity as a happy child also persists through her memories of her mother, which further hinders a unified identity as apprentice by reinforcing the first of several splits in Ruth's self. When visiting her mother's bedroom, she "see[s] nothing of what was present" but instead witnesses "a vision of former days – an evening in the days of her childhood" (43). The ability of the past to displace the present in Ruth's mind demonstrates the importance of memory in maintaining her identity as a child, which is further demonstrated by a momentary suspension of the present: "...for a moment it seemed so present in the old room, that Ruth believed her actual life to be the dream" (43). Ruth's objective in visiting Millham Grange is to return to her mother's old bedroom (39). By doing so, Ruth briefly suspends her identity as caged worker and reenters her identity as daughter, which is perpetuated even after returning to Mrs. Mason's establishment by "think[ing] the old holy thoughts which had been her childish meditations at her mother's knee, until one after another the apprentices returned, weary with their day's enjoyment..." (32). Memories of Ruth's mother and her mother's Christian lessons linger in Ruth's mind despite the return of the other girls. By choosing not to interact with them, Ruth demonstrates the degree to which she is absorbed by these memories. Her continuing identities as daughter and Christian disciple provide partial relief from the discomforts of apprenticeship. Through an internal continuation of her identity as daughter, Ruth avoids succumbing entirely to the identity of seamstress.

Paradoxically, while Ruth's internal identity of happy child allows her to resist a unified identity as apprentice, it simultaneously places her in a position of moral danger due to the social ignorance her childhood entails. When Ruth laments the physical barriers separating her from Millham Grange, Bellingham states, "Nonsense, Ruthie; it is only six miles off; you may see it any day. It is not an hour's ride" (38). Bellingham suggests that visiting the Grange is entirely

possible but fails to mention the questionable nature of accompanying her, which he intends to do, and because Ruth lacks knowledge of the social codes dictating a woman's propriety, she is blind to the danger he poses. During her sojourn to Millham Grange, she receives an ominous scriptural warning from Thomas: "...remember the devil goeth about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour; remember that, Ruth" (45). Thomas's warning about Bellingham emphasizes the importance of remembering by repeating the word twice in the same passage. However, whereas for Thomas memory refers to the moral content of the Biblical passage, Ruth remembers the passage differently than he intends: "The words fell on her ear, but gave no definite idea. The utmost they suggested was the remembrance of the dread she felt as a child when this verse came into her mind..." (45). For Ruth, the verse's significance lies in its ability to elicit discomfort rather than in its moral substance, which Ruth is too innocent—and too ignorant—to grasp. Thomas' inability to instill an actual lesson highlights her unfamiliarity with the social conditions surrounding her, which becomes related to her identity as a happy child by an immediate note that the recollection of the trepidation she experienced in childhood. For Ruth, childhood is a state of innocence and ignorance that prevents her from perceiving Bellingham as anyone but an affectionate anchor in an unaffectionate world, whereas in actuality, Bellingham already exercises significant influence over her current identities.

Ruth's fall results in part from her exhibition of the ideal female traits of ignorance and passivity, and the repeated emphasis on purity and innocence highlights the shortcomings of a singular identity. Ruth exhibits these traits when she enters Bellingham's carriage: "She was little accustomed to oppose the wishes of any one – obedient and docile by nature, and unsuspecting and innocent of any harmful consequences" (53). The situation signifies Ruth's ignorance not only of social codes but also of sexual acts altogether, and her obedience shows

her ignorance of what is about to transpire. Both Ruth's obedience and her ignorance in this situation make her an exemplar of the Victorian maiden. Since the duty of educating women on sex was not a maternal duty but a spousal one,¹¹ Ruth would not be expected to possess sexual knowledge or experience. In addition to her sexual ignorance, Ruth is altogether uneducated on the topic of romance: "She had heard of falling in love, but did not know the signs and symptoms thereof" (40). Because Ruth loses her mother, the educational pillar of her youth, at a young age, she lacks the advantages of a socially moral education: "She was too young when her mother died to have received any cautions or words of advice respecting *the* subject of a woman's life" (39). Since Victorian mothers were responsible for morally educating their children, the maternal absence in Ruth's life significantly contributes to her moral danger and highlights her inability to understand Victorian social codes. By repeatedly drawing attention to Ruth's innocence and orphanhood, Gaskell criticizes the Victorian ideal of a unified female identity that entails inexperience and ignorance.

Ruth's identity becomes fragmented further by a repeated social recognition of her beauty, another characteristic of the ideal Victorian woman. Her beauty does not escape the notice of her fellow apprentices or Leonard, nor do members of the upper class, including Mrs. Bradshaw and Mrs. Pearson, fail to perceive it. More importantly, Mrs. Mason not only acknowledges Ruth's beauty but also capitalizes on it. Her insistence that "Ruth Hilton must appear" at the ball as a seamstress reveals her ploy to use Ruth's beauty to attract business (13). Bellingham also notices Ruth's beauty, which makes her an object of interest to him and places her in a position that will significantly change her social identity: "His thoughts had been far more occupied by Ruth than hers by him, although his appearance upon the scene of her life was more an event to her than it

¹¹ Helsinger (2: 25), Reynolds (229), and Stone (315) all argue this point.

was to him” (Gaskell 29). The placement of Bellingham’s musings at the beginning of the sentence draws attention to the lack of agency Ruth has in this identity-shaping situation and highlights her blamelessness. Both the class and gender difference between Bellingham and Ruth determines the degree to which this event affects their lives. While Bellingham’s perception of Ruth’s beauty foreshadows the further fracturing of Ruth’s identities and the loss of many childhood identities, her beauty also serves to create misperceptions. Considering the social emphasis on beauty, it comes as no surprise that Ruth “could not help” being aware of her beauty, “for many people have told me so” (14). Like her external identities, Ruth’s self-perception of beauty is instilled by a social recognition of that trait. This in turn leads to a fragmentation of identity via social perceptions. Because Ruth recognizes her beauty, she is later presented by Mrs. Mason as “a forward creature, boasting of her beauty” (91). Because Mrs. Mason uses Ruth’s beauty, Ruth experiences a further fragmentation of identity in becoming not only Bellingham’s object of interest but also (mis)perceived as conceited from Mrs. Mason’s viewpoint. In both cases, Ruth can only passively accept the identities resulting from her beauty.

Ruth’s identity as Bellingham’s object of interest is initiated at the ball, which she attends due to Mrs. Mason’s authority. His influence over her identity begins when he presents her with a camellia during one of the dances. Although Chishty-Mujahid argues that garden and flower imagery generally indicate sexuality (60), the case of the camellia signifies Bellingham’s authority over Ruth’s identity, whereas the camellia itself represents Ruth’s passive reception of his attentions. When offered the flower, she naively accepts it: “she had no idea that any association made her camellia precious to her. She believed it was solely on account of its exquisite beauty that she tended it so carefully” (Gaskell 18). Ruth’s ignorance of Bellingham’s true intentions and of her own sentiments contribute to her identities as she becomes the object of

Bellingham's attentions and thus experiences increased moral danger. Even after Bellingham re-enters the dance, he continues noticing her, using the camelia he bestowed as an identifying marker for Ruth: "...his eye sought for the camelia. It was there, snowy white in her bosom" (18). Although Bellingham does not attain control over Ruth's identity until their walks begin (Chishti-Mujahid 60), the flower establishes Bellingham's authority over Ruth's perceptions of him prior to their walks. Much like Ruth's mother, who allows Ruth to maintain her childhood through memories and dreams, Ruth internalizes Bellingham in a similar manner. The evening following the ball, "she dreamed of Mr Bellingham, and smiled" (Gaskell 19). Bellingham's appearance in Ruth's dreams further highlights his influence over her identity. She does not perceive Bellingham's potential authority to change her identity, but by entering her dreams, Bellingham, like Ruth's mother, becomes capable of changing her existing identities and creating new ones.

Bellingham succeeds in manipulating Ruth's identity not merely because she is ignorant of social conventions but also because he skews her moral perceptions. Before visiting Millham Grange, Ruth questions the social correctness of her relationship with Bellingham, asking "But do you think it would be right, sir? It seems as if it would be such a great pleasure, that it must in be in some way wrong" (39). Shortly after dreaming of Bellingham, Ruth also questions whether or not her dream of Bellingham was "a more evil dream than" than the one of her mother (19). Despite her doubts, Ruth falls victim to Bellingham's rhetoric, which he uses to overturn Ruth's uncertainty by providing her with the illusion of power: "But you don't mean to be governed by Mrs Mason's notions of right and wrong... don't pin your faith on anyone, but judge for yourself. The pleasure is perfectly innocent; it is not a selfish pleasure either" (39). Bellingham presents the opportunity of visiting the Grange as liberation from Mrs. Mason, an authority figure who

imposes the identity of apprentice on Ruth, and while these actions do liberate her from apprenticeship, she is not aware of the social implications behind her appearance alone in public with Bellingham. Bellingham's fraudulent representation presents the illusion that she not only has control over her situation but also authority over her own identity when, in reality, he is one of the figures controlling it.

The consequences of Bellingham's deception of Ruth, particularly in regard to her identity, are enormous. Mrs. Mason sees the couple walking alone and, "with her sharp, needle-like eyes," notes "the attitude in which Ruth had stood with the young man who had just quitted her" (Gaskell 47). The seamstress imagery again recalls Ruth's identity of apprentice and the authority Mrs. Mason has over her identity, whose authority creates an identity-altering situation that eradicates Ruth's illusory freedom. As a result of her perceptions, Mrs. Mason relinquishes her influence by terminating Ruth's identity as an apprentice: "Don't attempt to show your face at my house again after this conduct... Don't say a word. I saw enough" (48). The only identity Mrs. Mason perceives is one in which Ruth is blameworthy for her actions; by silencing Ruth, she removes the possibility of self-representation. While this situation eliminates Ruth's identity as apprentice, Mrs. Mason simultaneously casts her into the identity of pariah, which leaves her at the mercy of a society whose social codes are unfamiliar to her. Like her identity as apprentice, her identity as pariah is inescapable as long as she remains in the unnamed town. The social and moral unacceptability of Ruth's presumed position with Bellingham becomes, by virtue of Mrs. Mason's misperceptions, a stigma on Ruth's otherwise stainless social image, one that she has no power to remove in life.

As a result of being banished, Ruth becomes dependent on Bellingham for an identity that will connect her to society. He first attempts to eliminate her identity as pariah by asking her

to accompany him to London. Soon after, he reminds her, “There is no other course open to you; my poor girl has no friends to receive her” (50). Bellingham stops deceiving Ruth with the illusion of authority over her identities but instead reminds her that he possesses complete power over them. Accepting his offer would remove the socially imposed identity of pariah, and by doing so, Ruth accepts Bellingham’s authority over her identity. The only remaining obstacle is Ruth’s epiphany that she can stay with Thomas at the Grange rather than travel to London: “And she thought, in her simplicity, that he would instantly consent when he had heard her reasons” (53). Because Ruth continues to be oblivious of social codes, she fails to realize that she has not been liberated but instead placed in a position in which her identity is controlled by Bellingham. Ruth lacks the voice to generate her own external social identity and must instead succumb entirely to Bellingham, who tricks her into entering the carriage and travels not to the Grange but to London, which enables him to take complete control of her social identity and results in further identity fragmentation, as she is transformed from Bellingham’s object of interest to his mistress.

Although Ruth’s role as mistress transforms her into an unmarried *feme covert*¹² and thus enhances Bellingham’s power over her identity, Ruth also faces the influence of public opinion. She becomes, at least in her own mind, “an extension of Bellingham” (Chesier 121). While the internal aspects of “feeling, and thinking, and loving” are central to Ruth’s identity (Gaskell 64), Ruth cannot maintain a stable internal identity due to Bellingham’s focus on her outward appearance and her virginity, which Ruth loses while traveling with him to London. Although he wields immense influence over her identity, Bellingham cannot prevent Ruth from perceiving other opinions of her socially unacceptable conduct. Jenny, the maid at the inn, takes

¹² For a full discussion of this concept, see Introduction, pages 6-7.

note of the peculiarity of Ruth's situation, exclaiming, "Indeed! and she's not his wife" (56). News of Ruth's fallenness spreads throughout her current locale, even occupying the minds of children. When Harry, the son of an upper-class family, strikes Ruth after she attempts to kiss his younger sibling, he declares, "She's not a lady! [...] She's a bad, naughty girl – mamma said so, she did; and she sha'n't kiss our baby! [...] it's true, nurse; and I heard you say it yourself" (62). Harry thus not only notes her lower class by declaring that Ruth is "not a lady," but also highlights her fallenness by voicing society's negative opinions, which emphasizes her youth, her class, and her socially deviant behavior. After hearing Harry's comments, Ruth's internal identity shifts; she undergoes moments of guilt during her relationship with Bellingham that signify her realization of her fallenness (Cheshier 113-14). However, Bellingham does not permit her to continue outwardly showing her feelings. After Bellingham complains about her "gloomy" mood, she endeavors to be cheerful to please him (Gaskell 62). The moments of guilt resulting from the public's negative reactions to Ruth signify the beginning of her social enlightenment, thus demonstrating a change in her internal identity and an augmentation in her awareness of social mores. However, the fact that Bellingham forces her to internalize her emotions generates another division in her identity in that she is forced to be externally cheerful, as wives were expected to be (Stone 250), when she is in reality questioning her identity as Bellingham's mistress.

Ruth must face her internalized uncertainties about Bellingham when she is confronted by his mother Mrs. Bellingham, who alters Ruth's identity by casting blame. After learning of Ruth's socially unacceptable behavior, she seizes power over Ruth's identity and, in much the same manner as Mrs. Mason did, exiles her: "Young woman, if you have any propriety or decency left, I trust that you will not dare to force yourself into his room" (Gaskell 73). In this

instance, Mrs. Bellingham appeals to “propriety or decency,” both of which are social constructs that Ruth is not fully aware of until her confrontation with Mrs. Bellingham. Bellingham supports her banishment, requesting that his mother “Dismiss her, as you wish it; but let it be done handsomely, and let me hear no more about it” (77). By shutting out even the mention of Ruth, he willingly relinquishes the power over her identity, which he was once so willing to exercise, to his mother. Ruth becomes temporarily non-existent to him, and his mother transforms Ruth into the scapegoat for the social misconduct of her son and any other man Ruth entices: “you will not have your own guilt alone upon your head, but that of any young man whom you may succeed in entrapping into vice” (78). Ruth accepts her exile and participates in it by “ke[eping] herself close prisoner in the room to which Mrs Morgan accorded her” (74). The elimination of Ruth’s identity as mistress makes Ruth aware of her social fallenness. Mrs. Bellingham’s authority and its ability to alter Ruth’s self-perceptions demonstrates the influence of social codes on Ruth’s external identities and affects her internal identities by awakening her to her social fallenness.

Despite Ruth’s fallenness, the dissenting minister Mr. Benson never perceives Ruth as a fallen woman and focuses instead on Ruth’s internal innocence. As a result, Ruth becomes a dependent of the Bensons with practically no identity, being only “a poor sick girl, whose very name he did not know” (93). Faith is slightly more hardened than her brother in this instance, but shortly after meeting Ruth, she glimpses Ruth’s inner purity: “When she saw her, she could no longer imagine her to be an impostor, or a hardened sinner; such prostration of woe belonged to neither” (96). The religious overtone, generated by the label of “sinner,” transforms the issue of the fallen woman into one that is not merely social but also religious. Despite her social guilt, Ruth still maintains an internal, spiritual innocence in the Bensons’ eyes, and as a result, they

intend to help her salvage what they see as her dignity by helping her remain independent of the man who caused her fall. Benson says to his sister, "If she consents to let us take care of her, we will never let her stoop to request anything from [Bellingham], even for his own child. She can live on bread and water. We can all live on bread and water rather than that" (106). From Benson's religious standpoint, Ruth would benefit more from staying with them than from depending on Bellingham's support because doing so would undermine her blamelessness. By agreeing to the arrangement, Ruth attains the identity of dependent and becomes a member of the Benson household. Both identities extend into her expected motherhood and persist even after her social fallenness is revealed, thus adding to her already multiple identities.

By abandoning Ruth, Bellingham not only completes her transition into social fallenness but also generates additional identities for Ruth, including abandoned lover and expectant mother. These identities, along with that of invalid, are all apparent in the contrast between Ruth's and Faith's emotional responses to Ruth's new identity as member of the Benson household: "Thus [Miss Benson] grew warm and happy in the idea of taking Ruth home; but Ruth remained depressed and languid under the conviction that he no longer loved her. No home, no future, but the thought of her child, could wean her from this sorrow" (107). The condition of dependent is seen in the welcoming reaction of Faith, whereas Ruth's discouraged mood occurs due to Bellingham's abandonment. Only Ruth's thoughts of her new identity as mother can help her overcome her lost identity of mistress. The inseparability of these two identities further amplifies the suggestion of multiple identities. At the same time, Ruth does not demonstrate a complete willingness to succumb to either of these identities; to further fight against her status as abandoned lover, Ruth utilizes the clothing Bellingham purchased for her in London to sew clothing for her child (133). Additionally, she exerts subtle resistance to the role of dependent by

selling Bellingham's watch to pay her own medical expenses, which Faith considers "a sacrifice" (108). Both instances demonstrate that while Ruth has not lost all of her compliance, she can exert some agency over her identities after acknowledging her fallenness.

Ruth's identity is further multiplied by the Bensons when, in order to reinstate her respectability and preserve that of her child, they transform her from an abandoned, unmarried woman into a false widow. The combined efforts of the Benson family ensure that Ruth conforms in every way to widowhood, at least externally. To begin this process, Ruth rejects her mother's name of "Mrs Hilton" and instead takes the name of Faith's mother: "Let me call you Mrs Denbigh. It will do very well, too. People will think you are a distant relation" (109). By accepting Faith's suggestion, she discards her old identity of Ruth Hilton while maintaining the innocence, compliance, and youth from her maidenhood. Her new name ultimately signifies a new external identity. Rachel Worth notes that Ruth must purchase a widow's garb in order to adhere to the strict Victorian dress codes governing mourning practices (56). Sally, the Bensons' servant, also contributes to Ruth's disguise by cutting Ruth's hair and declaring, "I'll have no half work in this house" (121). Sally's attention to detail reinforces the importance of perfect conformity and adherence to public mourning standards and the prescribed appearance of a widow. Benson adds a wedding ring as the finishing touch, and Ruth, as recipient, "h[angs] down her head, and redd[ens] deep with shame" (120). The "deep shame" indicates her increased awareness of the social codes and signifies her departure from her identity as abandoned lover: "she had dreamed out her dream, and she had awakened from the vision of love" (110). By the time Ruth's fallenness becomes publically known, Ruth's widowhood is in some sense actual, but rather than mourning for a husband, she mourns for her lost virtue (Fitzwilliam 9). However, Fitzwilliam's argument does not distinguish between social virtue and religious virtue. Because

her ongoing innocence stabilizes her religious virtue, the thing Ruth mourns for is her virtue in the public eye and her ability to maintain a public identity that is both respectable and actual. The insular nature of Ecclestone stabilizes Ruth's false widowhood as long as the perception remains undisturbed.

Bellingham forces Ruth to undergo another identity transformation aside from widow: she must become a mother. This identity is sustained by the Bensons, for initially Ruth demonstrates her inexperience in this identity. After crying on Leonard's face, Sally chastises Ruth, saying, "Any one but a child like thee... would have known better than to bring ill-luck on thy babby by letting tears fall on its face before it was weaned. But thou'rt not fit to have a babby, and so I've said many a time" (Gaskell 145). Sally's accusation indicates Ruth's unfitness as a mother while also serving to solidify her new identity as mother. Ruth realizes the tears are selfish ones, indicating her passing maidenhood, while her effort to overcome these tears demonstrates her willingness to embrace motherhood. Sally's comment and Ruth's maternal instinct strengthen her motherhood to the point that Sally soon after admits, "Thou'lt be a mother, after all" (145). In a similar manner, Faith struggles to accept Ruth's identity as mother, a reluctance overcome not by Ruth but by Leonard, whose "baby-touch called out her love" (135). Once Faith accepts Ruth's motherhood, she becomes another social figure who nurtures Ruth's developing maternal identity. Although Ruth chooses to accept her identity as mother, social figures such as Faith and Sally enforce and enhance it. Through motherhood, Ruth's internal identity also undergoes a change; she not only gradually acquires wisdom, which replaces her social naivety (Chishti-Mujahid 61), but she also overcomes her social fallenness (Chishti-Mujahid 64; Crowley 174) and sustains her internal innocence despite her sexual experience.

Maternity results in a further fracturing of Ruth's identity, and because she has become dependent on the Bensons, she must take on additional identities in order to care for her child. As a result of her motherhood, Ruth asks to become Benson's student (Gaskell 154). Her objective in doing so is not personal enrichment: "Indeed, she did not think of herself at all, but of her boy, and what she must learn in order to teach him to be and to do as suited her hope and her prayer" (156). Ruth's selection of this identity and her initiation of it demonstrate her increasing power over the extent to which she attains an identity. At the same time, this reflects an internal change since she becomes a student not for herself but for her son. Still, even in educational enhancement, Ruth demonstrates some submissiveness in her "quick perception and ready adaptation of truths and principles, and her immediate sense of the fitness of things" (155). The information provided by Benson is not questioned by Ruth but simply accepted. Despite her selfless motives and her complacency in accepting that which is given to her, Ruth still enhances her own identity by actively seeking to learn, thereby demonstrating her limited authority over the development of her identities.

Within the confines of Eccleston, Ruth is a widow who escapes the boundaries of her fallen woman identity by virtue of both her external representation and internal innocence. As a result, she gains several respectable social identities that in turn further multiply her selves. Fallen women typically became prostitutes because they were prohibited from taking more socially acceptable situations (Stoddard 56). However, Ruth's false widowhood makes her eligible to attain respectable social identities, particularly in the Bradshaw home, that further fragment her identity. Ruth's widowhood allows her to become a governess, a position that was open to "an educated middle-class virgin" but not to a fallen woman (56). As a governess, Ruth cares for and educates the two youngest Bradshaw girls, Mary and Elizabeth, who "loved Ruth

dearly” and share “many profound secrets” with her (Gaskell 177). The close relationship Ruth has with her pupils indicates her acceptability in the public eye, which is only made possible by her perceived identity of widowhood. Through her position in the Bradshaw household, Ruth also attracts the attention of the eldest daughter, Jemima, who admires Ruth as a role model and companion, a position Ruth is allowed to maintain only until she is exposed as a fallen woman. Because of her false widowhood, Jemima presumes Ruth’s complete innocence, thinking, “with your still, calm, heavenly face, what are you to know of earth’s trials?” (188). In the midst of her own moral dilemma, Jemima demonstrates her own ignorance of Ruth’s transgression. This situation serves to multiply Ruth’s identities further: Ruth is allowed to become both governess and Jemima’s role model as a result of her false widowhood.

Because Bradshaw is aware of his daughter’s esteem for Ruth, she becomes eligible to enter the role of spy, which both eliminates some of Ruth’s identities and creates new ones based on Jemima’s misunderstandings. After Jemima acts inexplicably coldly towards Farquhar, Bradshaw requests that Ruth “take some opportunity of observing [Jemima]” (187). Although Ruth is initially ignorant of Bradshaw’s expectations, she “disliked the glimpse she had gained of the task very much” (187). She eventually concedes to examine Jemima in order to discover her “secret feelings” for Jemima’s sake rather than for her father’s. (188). By doing so, Ruth in some sense undermines Bradshaw’s purpose for her identity. When Mrs. Bradshaw draws attention to Ruth’s actions, Jemima assumes Ruth’s inquiries are a result of her father’s authority rather than Ruth’s personal choice. The concern Ruth exerts in Jemima’s favor becomes “Management,” and, as a result, Ruth becomes “peculiarly revolting; so much so, that she could hardly bear to believe that the seemingly transparent Ruth had lent herself to it” (197). Because of Bradshaw’s control over Ruth’s identity, Ruth loses her identities as Jemima’s friend, confidante, and role model and

instead becomes “dislike[d]” (204). Jemima’s dislike increases further when she begins to see Ruth as a rival for Farquhar’s affections, which is in part enabled by the social eligibility resulting from her identity as widow, once a positive contributor to her perceived identities.

When Bellingham reappears as Donne, he not only destabilizes the numerous identities stemming from Ruth’s widowhood but also uses them in an attempt to regain authority over Ruth. Once Bellingham discovers her identity as mother, he uses Leonard as “the spell to make her listen at last” (238). Bellingham’s confidence that he will capture Ruth’s attention with his words signifies his confidence that his own authority will prevent Ruth from rejecting him. At the same time, Ruth demonstrates her awareness of social codes governing custody, knowing “that a child, whether legitimate or not, belonged of legal right to the father” (239). Ruth’s consciousness empowers her to reject Bellingham/Donne’s marital advances. She exerts her authority over her son’s fate by exerting her motherhood: “You shall have nothing to do with my boy, by my consent, much less by my agency” (249). Although Stoddard argues that this is a sign that Ruth has gained “self-respect and integrity” (57), the situation also shows the ways in which Ruth’s experience has augmented the power she has in shaping her own identities. By resisting Bellingham, she refuses to jeopardize her social image in Eccleston or endanger Leonard’s moral development. The effort of declaring authority over her identities results in a state of physical and mental numbness. After overcoming Bellingham, she is left alone on the sands with “no strength, no power of volition... She could not think or remember. She was literally stunned” (250). Ruth’s loss of internal perceptions foreshadow the greater selflessness of death that occurs at the end of the novel and, in addition, demonstrates the difficulties a Victorian woman faced when trying to exert authority over her identities.

Despite Ruth's best efforts to control her identity, her widowhood is obliterated by the entrance of Mrs. Pearce, who condemns Ruth as a fallen woman while within Jemima's earshot. As a result, Jemima wonders, "Could it be false? Could there be two Ruth Hiltons?" (Gaskell 268). On the surface, this question asks whether or not there is an entity separate from Ruth Denbigh who is Ruth Hilton. When Jemima realizes that Ruth Denbigh is Ruth Hilton, her ponderings ultimately call into question the existence of two Ruth Hiltons within Ruth herself. The use of Ruth's maiden name signifies the resurfacing of her fallenness, one that she is entirely powerless to stop because it is imposed by Mrs. Pearce, a social authority figure, and reinforced by Bradshaw, who voices his opinion of "wantonness" as the "one sin I hate – I utterly loathe – more than all the others" (276). Her exposure prompts Bradshaw to eliminate Ruth's identities of widow and governess by exiling her from his home: "If you ever, or your bastard, darken this door again, I will have you both turned out by the police!" (280). Neither Leonard nor the Bensons are exempt from the consequences of Ruth's exposure; whereas Leonard is cast out due to his illegitimacy, the Bensons also suffer socially because of their active role in creating Ruth's false widowhood (Freeland "Politics" 808). Despite Ruth's best efforts, any stability of socially perceived identity is ultimately illusory; she lacks the control to maintain a permanent identity of social innocence because her identity and its multiple facets are dependent upon social perceptions. Those involved with the forging of her identities, as well as the progeny resulting from her sexual behavior, are equally powerless to correct the exposure.

Much like Bellingham's reappearance, Ruth's second social fall destabilizes her motherhood. Ruth perceives herself as incapable of providing for Leonard and resolves to abandon him: "At last she whispered (for she could only speak in a whisper), 'To Helmsby – I am going to Helmsby'" (Gaskell 290). Ruth's decision to accept her own exile and to entirely

relinquish her identity as mother signify an attempt to regain authority over her identity, but the fact that she can only whisper demonstrates the limited power she possesses. Faith again maintains Ruth's maternal identity by stating, "You have no right to sever the tie by which God has bound you together" (292). In much the same way Bradshaw transforms Ruth's social transgression into a moral one through his perceptions, Faith transforms motherhood from a merely social obligation to a religious duty. In addition, Benson reminds Ruth that "you know we love you" (291). Ruth's exiles by Mrs. Mason, Mrs. Bellingham, and Bradshaw, all of whom exert power over her identities, are nullified by the Christian love exhibited by the Bensons, who are willing to let Ruth become their dependent again despite her sin. According to Cheshier, this second social fall enlightens Ruth "of herself as a repentant sinner, remaining meek in the face of somewhat brutal social opinion" (170). However, Ruth demonstrates that she has constantly been repentant. Even after her fall, Ruth "felt just as faulty—as far from being what she wanted to be, as ever... She did not feel much changed from the earliest Ruth she could remember" (Gaskell 321). This inability to perceive change results from the stability of Ruth's inner identity of innocence, whereas her social identities are constantly changing due to the authority figures exerting power over how she is perceived.

Ruth does not become entirely "meek" after this second public fall. The omission of Ruth's false widowhood and her increased social awareness provide her with the ability to enter new identities. Even so, she retains the name of Mrs. Denbigh despite her exposure as a fraudulent widow. Through the identity of dependent, she also preserves her identity as mother, and Faith reassures her of other possible employment opportunities despite the termination of her employment as governess (Gaskell 294). When the opportunity presents itself, Ruth becomes a nurse and, as argued by Sarah A. Malton, makes a positive social re-entry into society (197). Dr.

Wynne grants Ruth the opportunity to willingly enter the identity by offering her the option rather than forcing her to accept it. This identity not only results in a full restoration of her motherhood, which occurs when Leonard declares, “She is my mother” (Gaskell 352), but also provides Ruth with legitimate positive social recognition. Her attempts to redeem herself within the private sphere have ultimately failed; in order to redeem herself socially, Ruth must enter the public sphere and seek redemption “outside the home” (Hatano 637-8). This can only be done through establishing a social identity. Although Bradshaw continues to isolate Ruth, other citizens of Ecclestone acknowledge her moral innocence, demonstrating the superiority of religious innocence over socially perceived vice and the power of moral innocence to gradually replace lost social innocence. In terms of identity, this allows Ruth to continue participating in society, although she is confined to the working classes.

The identity of nurse initiates a process by which Ruth’s identity is unified into that of higher innocence. After treating Bellingham/Donne and contracting his illness, Ruth enters a state of selflessness which gradually eliminates her multiple identities until only her innocence and childlike nature are left. She loses her memory of “who the sleeper [Bellingham] was” (Gaskell 363) and passes “into a whirling stupor of sense and feeling” (364). The external social identities which are imposed on Ruth lose their significance; all that matters to Ruth is the identity of innocence she has possessed throughout the novel. Eventually, she loses all memory of the figures who have served to represent or shape her identity: the Bensons and even Leonard are forgotten (366). Through death, Ruth attains complete liberation from the public influence over her identities, even Bellingham (Chishty-Mujahid 70-1), who “recoil[s], even in thought,” when Faith bestows an affectionate kiss on Ruth’s dead lips (Gaskell 369). Ruth becomes repulsive to Bellingham precisely because she is liberated and entirely beyond his influence.

Chishty-Mujahid argues that Ruth's death is a buying back of innocence (70). Similarly, critics posit that Ruth's death is necessary for her redemption.¹³ However, these claims do not take into account Ruth's enduring purity and instead suggest that her purity changes after her fall. Death does ensure her complete social redemption, but Ruth needs no redemption religiously. Her final words before dying are, "I see the Light coming... The Light is coming," and her final action is reaching for that Light (Gaskell 366). The capitalization of "Light" and its repetition imply its relation to the divine, and Ruth's action of reaching for it signifies her willingness to relinquish her worldly roles and enter a unified identity of purity. Stripped of all social identities, Ruth demonstrates her ability to pass through the fallen woman ideology while still maintaining and even augmenting her inner purity. At the same time, death endows her with power over her identities, a power that Ruth is not aware of due to her decayed awareness.

Although death terminates many of Ruth's identities, it at the same time serves as the force that unifies her social and internal identities into innocence and completes her social redemption. Despite her death, Ruth still maintains an identity in the memory of those who knew her in life. Her innocence overpowers Benson during her memorial service (Smith 113).

Although Ruth no longer possesses identities in a physical sense, the recollection of her true innocent self continues past her death by existing in memory. Crowley argues that "Ruth cannot be both fallen and pure, nor is she ever really both fallen and redeemed. Her redemption, which she is able to work towards only as a result of the Benson's [sic] social lie, does not entail her own moral development but rather that of the people around her" (196). However, Crowley does not take into account the difference between social and internal identities. Although society itself is redeemed in a sense by acknowledging Ruth's innocence, this only occurs because Ruth

¹³ Smith 110; Stoddard 58.

pursues social redemption by becoming a nurse. Internally and spiritually, she is already redeemed because of her blamelessness. Whereas social figures like the Bradshaws exile Ruth for her fallenness, Benson possesses the ability to see past the social to her internal innocence. When Ruth dies, the social and the religious converge: “From the pulpit, Mr Benson saw one and all – the well-filled Bradshaw pew – all in deep mourning, Mr Bradshaw conspicuously so” (Gaskell 373). Benson’s recognition of Ruth’s innocence demonstrates her ability to overcome social norms and remain innocent despite her fall. Bradshaw’s feeble effort to recognize Ruth’s innocence publically via the purchase of a headstone further emphasizes the superiority of the religious. His financial effort becomes a mere footnote when compared with the significantly longer passage describing to Benson’s religious epithets.

In being characterized as innocent and childlike throughout the novel, Ruth escapes the typical bounds of fallen womanhood with the help of a false identity. Ruth only gains the opportunity to prove that she is redeemable through her apparent widowhood because it establishes her position in a society that can be re-entered even after being exposed as fallen. Throughout her life stages, Ruth’s social identities are fractured by the authority figures around her. However, as she progresses in life, she gains knowledge of the social mores that impose identities, which permits her to be an agent in the creation of identities. As Ruth’s life progresses and she becomes a false widow, she becomes more active in seeking roles that will enhance her maternal identity and secure her and her son’s place in society. Once Ruth is exposed after a decade of false widowhood, she temporarily loses power over her social identities, then gradually regains them by choosing to become a nurse and initiating a process of genuine social redemption. Her selfless service results in her demise, which does not eradicate her identity but instead liberates her from social influences and unifies her identity. Only her genuine purity

remains in the wake of her death, a purity that endures throughout the novel. Ultimately, the only way Ruth can gain power over her social identities is to perish, for not even innocence provides her with the ability to shape her social identities. Through this conclusion, Gaskell indicates that while social identities determine much of a woman's life, she can gradually gain freedom from them even after death if she is able to stabilize her internal identity.

CHAPTER II

THE MADNESS OF SELF-DETERMINED MULTIPLICITY: THE ACTIVE IDEAL AND THE CREATION OF MULTIPLE IDENTITIES IN *LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET*

Much like Ruth, the protagonist of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* also perishes at the end of the novel, but the implications of death are entirely different for these characters in terms of identity. Whereas Ruth's identity becomes unified into a purer innocence after contracting Bellingham's disease, Lucy Audley's/Helen Talboys's/Mrs. Taylor's death involves the total annihilation of her multiple identities. On the outside, Lucy appears to be an ideal Victorian woman, whom Gilbert and Gubar describe as "[p]assive, submissive, unawakened [with] a pure white complexion which betrays no self-assertive consciousness, no desire for self-gratification" (615-16). Lucy also exhibits a "'naturally' sexless" quality, which Reynolds highlights as an additional ideal characteristic (49). Because Lucy outwardly exhibits these ideal qualities and covertly manipulates them, she becomes capable of transitioning from one social class to another through her marriage to George Talboys. After the disinherited George goes to Australia to better his fortunes, Lucy uses her apparent status as a distressed gentlewoman to establish the identity of governess, which positions her to marry Sir Michael Audley and secure a position in the upper class. However, the interference of his nephew, Robert Audley, makes it impossible for her to uphold these multiple identities and results in her exposure as a bigamist and madwoman. Lucy's identities shift from those of the working class through the upper middle class to the upper class through her active use of the ideal female traits of beauty, youth, passivity, and innocence, but some of the identities she gains as a result of her marriage to Sir Michael, particularly those of employer and aunt, serve to undermine her power. Lucy's exposure transforms her from a member of the upper class to a non-entity, and her fate

shows that although women can use their ideal traits to transform their social identities, any such ability is ultimately temporary due to the separation of spheres and an unalterable inner identity.

When Sir Michael Audley first encounters Lucy Graham, she willingly occupies the upper middle class identity of governess, which barely makes her eligible for marriage. Even after just entering the neighborhood, Lucy finds herself showered with encomium for her ideal traits: “Every one loved, admired, and praised her... everybody, high and low, united in declaring that Lucy Graham was the sweetest girl that ever lived” (Braddon 6). The kindness she displays, coupled with the admiration she receives, generates a perception that Lucy is an ideal Victorian woman. In part, the identity of governess provides Lucy with the public recognition she needs to attract Sir Michael’s attention and gain authority over his perceptions of her: “He could no more resist the tender fascination of those soft and melting blue eyes; the graceful beauty of that slender throat and drooping head, with its wealth of showering flaxen curls; the low music of that gentle voice; the perfect harmony which pervaded every charm, and made all doubly charming in this woman; than he could resist his destiny” (6). Lucy’s physical features and personality make her seem ideal, at least in appearance, and endow her with the authority to present herself as an eligible woman despite her previous marriage to George. The underlying conviction throughout the Dawson family that “whenever Sir Michael proposed, the governess would quietly accept him; and, indeed, the simple Dawsons would have thought it something more than madness in a penniless girl to reject such an offer” highlights the degree to which Lucy deceives those around her (9). Unaware of her true marital status, the Dawsons assume that she will act in the expected manner and consent to marry Sir Michael. They fail to realize Lucy’s motive for pursuing marriage: to secure her position in the upper class. She gains success

because of her ability to conceal her past identities and appear in the guise of a financially distressed gentlewoman.

Lucy attracts Sir Michael's attention using a variety of traits that also help her present herself as a beautiful, passive, innocent woman, including her youthful appearance and temperament. In Sir Michael's eyes, Lucy is, at least externally, the ideal wife. Schroeder notes that Lucy is "passive" and "angelic... perfectly innocent and sexless" (90). In addition to endowing Lucy with the identity of Lady Audley, her marriage returns her to a state greatly resembling childhood, an identity that works in her favor. The four-decade disparity between the ages of Lucy and Sir Michael, as well as her similarity in age to Alicia, his daughter, combine to transform Lucy into a child again (Braddon 91). The heavy emphasis on Lucy's youth appears in language that also aligns her with childhood: "All her amusements were childish. She hated dreading, or study of any kind, and loved society" (52). Lucy's marriage to Sir Michael permits her to "free herself from the confinement of drudgery, maternity, and poverty" (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 72). Once Lucy marries Sir Michael, her chief interest becomes interacting with members of the upper class. She avoids difficult and strenuous tasks by placing herself in the dependent role of wife, which reinforces her outward passiveness. Her childlike description also endows her with a certain degree of innocence, also an ideal feminine trait. Lucy's infantile appearance further emphasizes her characteristic youth. Despite the parallels to childhood, marriage endows Lucy with the material means, as well as the authority, to create and seek out additional social identities that she finds desirable. Lucy's deliberate use of her femininity gives her the ability to alter and secure her own class status. Her active class ascension diverges from her appearance as an angel in the house precisely because Lucy does not passively submit to society's restrictions. Her marriage, which grants her the identity of Lady Audley, solidifies her

position as a member of the upper class, signified by her change in name and financial status. Lucy should not be eligible for such a marriage due to her true working class identity, but “her personality beguiles with its childish exuberance and gaiety; her looks are the acme of the ideal” (Reynolds and Humble 108). Lucy uses this idealized image to create an identity of marital eligibility that functions despite the social limitations that should complement her position as governess.

In a sense, Lucy’s apparently ideal characteristics become even more prominent after her marriage because society continues to admire her for them, which serves to further reinforce her upper class status and identities. During Lucy’s honeymoon, Phoebe notes her mistress’s constant position at the center of the social circle: “She set every body mad about her wherever she went... She was always the talk of a place, as long as we stayed in it” (Braddon 28). The recognition Lucy enjoys as a result of her elevated status is nearly continuous and functions to perpetuate society’s (mis)perception of her as ideal. Because of her marriage, Lucy has successfully ascended into the upper class and is now worthy—at least externally—of being admired. Phoebe also notes that Lucy has “a crowd of gentlemen always hanging about her; Sir Michael was not jealous of them, only proud to see her so much admired” (27). As Lady Audley, Lucy enjoys her position among higher class members of society, particularly among the gentlemen who constantly express their admiration and thus reinforce the perception of Lucy as a legitimate upper class woman. At the same time, this passage underscores the resulting isolation from her husband, a factor which contributes to Lucy’s authority over the social perception of her identities: “...so complete was the dominion which Lady Audley had, in her own childish, unthinking way, obtained over her devoted husband, that it was very rarely that the baronet's eyes were long removed from his wife's pretty face” (55). In this instance, the only thing

connecting Lady Audley to Sir Michael, aside from their marriage, is his gaze, which follows her as long as she is present. Her power to guide Sir Michael's eyes, a direct result of her innocent demeanor and beautiful features, implies her ability to manipulate his perceptions, not just the direction of his eyes. As long as Lucy wields power over Sir Michael, she can continue to conceal her true internal self, and Sir Michael can see her only as his wife. After marriage, she thus acquires the precise identity that Sir Michael wants her to possess, not because of social conventions but because of how she outwardly presents herself. Sir Michael is unaware not only of her previous marriage but also of her original social class. Furthermore, she maintains the persona of an Angel in the House through her active manipulation of the female traits linked with this trope. Much of Lucy's ability to wield power over her social identities depends upon maintaining her façade, both to her husband and to society.

Through her marriage to Sir Michael, Lucy attains her aspirations by acquiring access to a vast amount of material wealth because of his willingness to provide her with gifts. She wears a variety of rings, all of which are embellished with various gems, among them "a ruby heart" and "an emerald serpent; and about them all a starry glitter of diamonds" (87). Lucy's abundant possessions verify the success of her marriage. Her willingness to pursue her desires makes her dangerous, and much like her concealed insanity, her actions undermine the passivity that she displays in social settings. Her boudoir is entirely overrun by signs of material wealth: "My lady's fairy-like embroideries of lace and muslin, rainbow-hued silks, and delicately-tinted wools littered the luxurious apartment" (294). Lucy's possessions take over her life in much the same way these fabrics take over her living space. She uses this material wealth to sustain and enhance her ideal appearance, particularly with Sir Michael. The rings given to her by her husband are

decorations that she wears for him to observe on “her pretty fingers” (87), which makes her appear more ideal by enhancing her beauty and appeal.

Lucy’s marriage to Sir Michael also results in her exchanging her identity as governess for that of stepmother to Alicia. However, this identity is undercut by the disdain they have for one another. Shortly after Lucy’s marriage to her father, Alicia tells Robert, “Papa is perfectly absurd about his new wife, and she and I cannot get on together at all... she is so irretrievably childish and silly” (Braddon 48). Alicia views Lucy as beyond help; her youthful temperament, a source of admiration to most, has the opposite effect in Alicia. Her disdain enables her to resist Lucy’s identity as stepmother, which is only truly rejected when Lucy’s negative sentiments are revealed: “My lady hated Alicia for her frank, passionate, generous, daring nature; she hated her step-daughter, and clung to this pale-faced, pale-haired girl [Phoebe], whom she thought neither better nor worse than herself” (299). Unlike Alicia, Lucy internalizes her hatred rather than voicing it. Lucy’s true feelings show only as a nuance in her gaze, as is the case when Lucy, viewing Alicia’s picture, gazes at it “with scornful hatred flaming in her blue eyes” (315). What differentiates Lucy’s dislike from Alicia’s is not merely its manner of expression but also its intensity. Lucy’s abhorrence for her stepdaughter greatly outweighs Alicia’s distaste for her stepmother’s ideal passivity and beauty. Their mutual dislike culminates into a rift in which covert warfare occurs as “brief feminine skirmishes and transient wordy tempests” (290). Although both women reject Lucy’s identity of stepmother, it is ultimately Lucy who seizes the power to refuse the external identity of stepmother by harboring her dislike. The identity of stepmother is not necessary for maintaining her status as a member of the upper class, so Lucy simply rejects it by harboring antipathy for Alicia. This distance makes it impossible for Alicia to discern any of Lucy’s secret identities because Alicia cannot possibly get close enough to disrupt

them. Lucy's rejection of the stepmother identity enables her to uphold the identities connected to her marriage by avoiding any opportunity for Alicia to expose her.

As a result of the tension between Lucy and Alicia, Lucy becomes a competitor for Sir Michael's affections. She uses the same youth that she used to attract Sir Michael to triumph over Alicia: "Lucy was better loved and more admired than the baronet's daughter. That very childishness had a charm which few could resist. The innocence and candour of an infant beamed in Lady Audley's fair face..." (Braddon 52). Lucy's immensely childish temperament paradoxically endows her with enough influence to defeat her rival and monopolize Sir Michael's affections. As a wife, Lucy should possess a certain degree of influence over Sir Michael in terms of his morality, but she instead uses her influence to supplant Alicia as the mistress of the house: "Little by little my lady's petty power made itself felt in that narrow household; and Alicia saw her father gradually lured across the gulf that divided Lady Audley from her step-daughter, until he stood at last quite upon the other side of the abyss, and looked coldly upon his only child across that widening chasm" (293). Ultimately, Lucy's identities as child and wife combine to significantly weaken Sir Michael's connection to his only daughter and thus increase her authority over her husband's perceptions of her identities.

Another identity created by Lucy's social ascent that helps sustain her multiple identities is that of employer. During her time as Helen Talboys, Lucy was a member of the working class much as Phoebe continues to be after Lucy's marriage. Both worked in the Dawson house, and this point of similarity causes Lucy to promote Phoebe "from the post of lady's-maid to that of companion" (104). The relationship is founded on the mutual need of both women: Phoebe requires Lucy's financial support, and because she dislikes solitude, Lucy requires Phoebe's company. At the same time, Lucy exerts her authority over how close Phoebe gets to her

identities by virtue of her position as employer. She does so by choosing how to interact with Phoebe and alternates between “very confidential” or “rather reserved” (57). By maintaining an authoritative position over Phoebe, Lucy is able not only to enjoy the benefits of being a member of the upper class but also reinforces her identity as Lady Audley, although this authority only goes so far. Her companionship with Phoebe simultaneously serves to undercut the secrecy of her identities. Unbeknownst to Lucy, Phoebe uncovers material evidence of her old identities and shares these with her cousin Luke. When Phoebe shows Luke into Lucy’s boudoir, she brings a man into a place where only Phoebe is explicitly permitted. After discovering the keys that lock Lucy’s jewel chest, Phoebe invades this private space, finding not only numerous jewels from her husband but also “a baby’s worsted shoe rolled up in a piece of paper, and a tiny lock of pale and silky yellow hair, evidently taken from a baby’s head” (30). The concealment of these possessions transforms them into symbols of Lucy’s past life as Helen Talboys and her identity as mother. Phoebe sees a great deal of worth in this knowledge and tells Luke, “I’d rather have this than the diamond bracelet you would have liked to take... you shall have the public house, Luke” (31). This proof of Lucy’s true identity provides Phoebe with the ability to expose Lucy’s secret identities; her use of this knowledge then destabilizes all of Lucy’s upper class identities, including that of wife.¹⁴ Throughout the course of the novel, Lucy literally and metaphorically pays for her secret identities. Phoebe and Luke use blackmail as a factor to control which of Lucy’s identities are exposed. Her loss of power is evident from her compromise with Luke, in which Lucy offers him fifty pounds, he demands one hundred, and she ultimately provides seventy-five (110). Although this situation demonstrates Lucy’s loss of power over her identities,

¹⁴ Phoebe’s willingness to use the information she gains about Lucy demonstrates the upper class perception of the danger servants pose in Victorian households: by allowing them into the private sphere, servants become capable of invading Victorian privacy and engaging in surveillance (McCuskey 359).

it also demonstrates her unwillingness to relinquish her authority entirely since Luke does not receive the amount he asked for. Ultimately, this loss of power later proves to be detrimental to her social identities.

As their marriage progresses and Lucy takes on additional identities, different members of society begin to view her in a manner different than her husband. This variance in perception, particularly between Sir Michael and Robert, can be seen in the supernatural descriptors that depict her. Shortly after her marriage, Lucy is described as angelic: “she was something too beautiful for earth, or earthly uses, and that to approach her was to walk in a higher atmosphere and to breathe a purer air” (56). While Lucy’s influence is still fully active, she becomes capable, at least in terms of description, of bringing others closer to divinity by virtue of her presence. Lucy and her possessions are also frequently characterized as “fairy-like” prior to the initiation of Robert’s investigation. She occupies “a fairy-like boudoir” (29), writes “a pretty, fairy-like note” (64), and owns “a pair of fairy-like, silver-mounted embroidery scissors” (77). These images not only call attention to her obsession with the material but also serve to highlight her ideal traits of innocence and beauty. As Robert’s suspicions grow, he begins to view Lucy as a supernatural being. In one of his dreams, she appears as “a mermaid, beckoning his uncle to destruction” (246). In a later encounter, Lucy is described as an “amber-haired syren” (283). The images of the syren and the mermaid emphasize Lucy’s other-worldly beauty, but at the same time, they highlight Robert’s perception of her as dangerous to his uncle. As a result, Lucy can no longer control how Robert views her identities; he suspects that she is responsible for murdering George Talboys and thus becomes the antithesis of ideal, at least for Robert. She becomes a danger, a factor that generates further suspicion and eventually unravels her identities.

By the time Sir Michael reinforces Lucy's identity as aunt, Robert's curiosity about Lucy has transformed into the suspicion that drives him to unravel her identities. Although Lucy has great power over forging and maintaining identities in the private sphere of Sir Michael's estate, Robert's ability to travel between the public and private spheres allows him to seek out Lucy's past identities in the public sphere. Although he is initially enamored with his aunt in much the same way Sir Michael is¹⁵, Robert becomes significantly more interested in the fate of his friend, George: "Foul deeds have been done under the most hospitable roofs; terrible crimes have been committed amid the fairest scenes, and have left no trace upon the spot where they were done... I believe that we may look into the smiling face of a murderer, and admire its tranquil beauty" (140-1). Although Lucy still possesses her outwardly ideal traits, Robert transcends their influence to pursue Lucy's secret identities. Much like Phoebe, who detracts from the stability of Lucy's identities by taking the jewels associated with her status as wife, Robert's investigation serves to undermine her power over her perceived identities not only outside the private sphere but also within it. Robert's ability to search out these identities is not merely, as Judy Cornes argues, a result of Robert's "intelligent tenacity," nor is it because of Lucy's weakness, her "hubris" (187) but instead it is linked to Robert's perceptions. Stern argues that Robert's ability to see Lucy's conventional feminine characteristics "*as performances*" contributes significantly to his ability to unravel Lucy's identities (48). Robert's perception of Lucy allows him to see

¹⁵ Lucy's marriage to Sir Michael endows her with an identity as Robert Audley's aunt, which spawns some curiosity on Robert's part that, at one point, borders on romantic. Initially, Robert's curiosity drives him only to see "this fair-haired paragon, my new aunt" (Braddon 51). The desire to witness Lucy's beauty firsthand, although innocent in its presentation, has the potential to transform Lucy into an adulterer within the sphere of the Audley home as a result of Robert's growing interest in her. Shortly after meeting Lucy for the first time, Robert confesses to George that he "[is] falling in love with [his] aunt" (56). The temptation of Lucy's ideal traits thus poses a threat to her superficial monogamy, but Sir Michael prevents any further pursuit of these interests by reminding his nephew that "You and Lucy must be good friends, you know, Bob; and you must learn to think of her as your aunt, sir; though she is young and beautiful" (218). By observing Robert's interactions with Lucy, Sir Michael concludes that he needs to instill a greater sense of respect to Lucy despite her age and reminds Robert to treat Lucy as his aunt. In doing so, Sir Michael reinforces Lucy's identity as aunt and perpetuates the identities tied to her marriage. His willingness results from both Lucy's identity of wife and his ignorance of her hidden identities.

past her external façade to her secret interior identities. Ultimately, the identities of employer and aunt, both of which Lucy gains by becoming Sir Michael's wife and securing her place in the upper class. At the same time, these identities paradoxically increase the risk of exposure by bringing both Phoebe and Robert into closer proximity and creating opportunities for them to investigate her secret identities.

Lucy chooses to give up several of her old identities to improve her own life. Before Lucy Graham enters Dr. Dawson's house as a governess and begins to forge her identities connected with being Lady Audley, she undergoes a failed attempt to escape her poverty. As Helen Maldon, Lucy uses her ideal traits of beauty and innocence to attract the attentions of the wealthy George Talboys, who soon after marries her. Rather than liberating her from her poverty-stricken state, however, Lucy becomes more ensnared by it. She perceives this as "a separate wrong done me by George Talboys" and finds it unfair that "His father was rich; his sister was living in luxury and respectability; and I, his wife, and the mother of his son, was a slave allied for ever to beggary and obscurity" (353). Lucy's discontent with her domestic identities stems at least partly from the lack of material wealth she experiences. Her personal opinion on the situation bears no weight in comparison to the opinion of George's father, Harcourt Talboys, who tells Robert, "My son did me an unpardonable wrong by marrying the daughter of a drunken pauper" (182). Having trapped herself by marrying George Talboys, Lucy lacks the ability to control her financial condition. Her motives for marrying George center solely on the acquisition of material wealth. Without that element, the identities of both wife and mother become vexing to her. She makes no attempt to sustain her motherhood after George leaves her. George tells Robert, "I didn't like mamma... and she didn't like me. She was always crying" (91). Despite her son's youth, Lucy selfishly displays her discontent with her marriage

around him, making no effort to conceal the injustice she suffers as a result of this marriage. Even in this condition, however, her traits provide her with the authority to become “much pitied by the Wildernsea folks... for she was very pretty, and had such nice winning ways, that she was a favourite with every body who knew her” (245). As Helen, Lucy still possesses enough beauty to charm those around her. Although this does nothing to change her identity and situation, it does demonstrate the potential power of Lucy’s ideal characteristics.

When an opportunity to escape the identities poverty and marriage presents itself, Lucy utilizes it. After enduring three years of poverty, she resolves to assume her husband is dead and actively seeks a marriage to Sir Michael. Shortly thereafter, she receives news that a ship carrying the husband she thought was dead will land in England in three weeks, which poses a threat to her newly formed identity of Lucy Audley. Around the same time, Lucy hears of Mrs. Plowson, whose daughter Matilda is ill and dying. Two points of similarity are enough for Lucy to carry out her scheme: “[Matilda] entered the house a Mrs. Talboys; she was attended by a Vantor medical man as Mrs. Talboys; she died, and her death and burial were registered in that name” (357). As a result of the wealth and status acquired through her marriage to Sir Michael, Lucy becomes capable of controlling her identities by manipulating another woman’s identity. Backed by her fortune, Lucy acts to stabilize her current identity by literally eliminating the old one. Matilda’s death as Helen Talboys signifies the death of Lucy’s old identities, at least for her. However, she relies on the coincidence of a body double in order to sustain her false identity (Cornes 190). Lucy’s ploy to gain power over her identities succeeds insofar as George fully believes, at least for a short time, that she is dead. As a result, Lucy stabilizes the identities of employer, aunt, and wife, all of which are linked to her status as Lady Audley.

Lucy's efforts to maintain her status as Lady Audley are not simply hers, however. Her father, Captain Maldon, attempts to assist in spheres where her influence fails by presenting false information to Robert. He lies about George's whereabouts, claiming that "he is not here now, but he had been here... Late last night; he came by the mail" (Braddon 91). Lucy's influence fails in the Maldon home because it is beyond Sir Michael's estate and thus beyond the private sphere of her current identities. In a conversation with Robert, Georgey reports Maldon saying "that she—the pretty lady, I think he means—uses him very hard, and that he can't keep the wolf from the door" (174). Georgey's comment demonstrates Lucy's utilization of her limited outside sources in order to stabilize and sculpt her identities, but more important still is the subtle hint of power she has over the situation despite her absence. She is an authority figure that Maldon cannot fend off. Although she cruelly takes advantage of him, he is incapable of putting up a rebellion. Maldon's willingness to help Lucy preserve her secret identities connected to the name Helen Talboys is ultimately undermined by the suspicion he generates by his imperfect concealment. Robert uses the partially destroyed material evidence to uncover Lucy's ostensibly destroyed identities. Although Maldon "promise[s] to do all in his power to assist [Lucy]" in preserving her place in the Audley household (355), he proves to be "entirely useless" to her (356). While Lucy's ability to influence those around her stabilizes her social identities, the stability of these identities is undermined by her lack of influence in the public sphere, as demonstrated by Maldon's inability to help Lucy preserve her identities. Robert's ability to travel between the public and private sphere makes her ability to retain her social identities only temporary.

Lucy's identity as Georgey's mother serves to undermine her control. As a mother, Lucy is practically absent, although she does appear several times to him in the guise of "the pretty

lady.” In his naivety, Georgey does not grasp the importance of keeping her a secret and as a result candidly shares details about her visitations with Robert, insisting, “I may tell this gentleman” (Braddon 166). Aside from highlighting the point that Lucy is keeping her past identities a secret from people who may destabilize them, this also demonstrates Georgey’s inability to recognize his mother due to her absence from his life as a maternal figure. Lucy’s ability to reject her motherhood in one sense demonstrates her authority to forge her own identity. The very act of rejecting her role as mother is highly unconventional, and separating herself from this identity allows her to enter other identities that more closely reflect her personal desires. However, Lucy’s concealment of her identity as mother from Georgey, while it delays the revelation of her other identities, serves to increase Robert Audley’s suspicions of her. When Maldon overhears Georgey’s conversation with Robert, he instantly attempts to remove Georgey from the room. As a result, Robert subtly voices his increased suspicions: “A suspicious person might think from your manner that Mr. Maldon and you had some conspiracy between you, and that you were afraid of what the boy’s talk may let slip” (166-67). Lucy’s absence from her home thus serves as a factor that simultaneously sustains and undercuts her upper class identities. While her presence would ensure a greater degree of caution, one that Maldon is incapable of enforcing, it would also expose her as Helen Talboys and thus eliminate her role as Lady Audley and all its related identities.

Beyond the identity of Helen Talboys, Lady Audley, and Lucy Graham, Lucy conceals an even deeper identity, her inner identity of madwoman, although subtle hints of this identity appear throughout the narrative, particularly in Lucy’s portrait. After arriving at the Audley estate, Alicia allows both Robert and George to enter Lucy’s chambers while she is absent in

order to view her portrait. The description of this portrait serves as one of the first indications that Lucy is not entirely what she appears to be:

No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have painted, hair by hair, those feathery masses of ringlets, with every glimmer of gold, and every shadow of pale brown. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid brightness to the blonde complexion, and a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes. No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait.

(70)

In this description of her portrait, every detail emphasizes the juxtaposition between beauty and wickedness. Lucy's hair contains both glimmers and shadows, her eyes are blue but "sinister," and her "pretty pouting mouth" possesses undertones that are both "hard and almost wicked." Overall, the portrait leaves an impression that Lucy possesses "the aspect of a beautiful fiend" (71). As a result of seeing this painting, George enters a trance-like state, which Cornes explains by arguing that he has become enlightened by the glimpse of his former wife (193). Conversely, Robert, who has seen a glimpse of Lucy before, does not realize that Lucy possesses any identities other than the ones she presents within the Audley estate and sees the sinister nuances as something entirely separate from Lucy: "The picture is—the picture; and my lady is—my lady" (Braddon 72). The uncanny nature of Lucy's portrait makes it impossible for Robert to fully reconcile the two, at least initially. As the narrative progresses, the degree to which Robert becomes capable of seeing the evil in the portrait increases: "the lines about her pretty rosy mouth, those hard and cruel lines which Robert Audley had observed in the pre-Raphaelite portrait, were plainly visible in the firelight" (285). This increased visibility is not merely a result

of the portrait's placement but also the result of Robert's increased suspicions. The aspects of portrait that Lucy once locked away have become more apparent in her, indicating that, as Robert comes closer to the truth, she can no longer prevent her madness from being revealed.¹⁶

The double quality her appearance sometimes takes on, particularly when her secret is threatened by Robert, further indicates Lucy's duplicity and insanity. When confronted by Robert about her identity as Helen, she undergoes a drastic change in temperament: "She had been transformed from a frivolous, childish beauty into a woman, strong to argue her own cause and plead her own defense" (288). In a moment of desperation, Lucy becomes a mature woman who possesses the strength to express her alibi verbally. When a similar confrontation occurs, Lucy's demeanor is similarly transformed: "Her attitude reflected the state of that mind—it expressed irresolution and perplexity. But presently a sudden change came over her; she lifted her head—lifted it with an action of defiance and determination" (316). The sudden alteration from hesitance to fortitude highlights Lucy's devotion to maintaining the identities she has gained despite interference. She struggles against Robert to hold onto them, refusing to let his interference confine her to simple weakness and instead rebelling, but in doing so actively, she undermines her outward passivity, an ideal trait that she relies on when manipulating Sir Michael. In other instances, however, these changes are not planned, and Lucy shows a lapse of control over her own behavior when her distress increases: "She was very pale; but there was no other trace of agitation visible in her girlish face. The lines of her exquisitely molded lips were so beautiful, that it was only a very close observer who could have perceived a certain rigidity that was unusual to them" (311). Although the stability of Lucy's identities tends to influence her self-representation, she fails to conceal every sign of displeasure. She cannot change her loss of

¹⁶ Oscar Wilde uses a similar device in *A Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).

color, nor can she control her lips well enough to fool a very close observer. Her ability to conceal her identities depends not only upon circumstances but also on the viewer. For instance, when Sir Michael jokingly accepts Lucy's theory that Robert is mad, she misinterprets his statement as an earnest consideration. As a result, a change in her complexion occurs: "My lady's face was so much in shadow, that Sir Michael Audley was unaware of the bright change that came over its sickly pallor as he made this very commonplace observation" (281). Although Sir Michael is not serious about his accusation, Lucy's appearance changes because she initially believes he is. She recovers from her pallor almost instantaneously, but he remains oblivious of the alteration because he still perceives her as an ideal wife. When Lucy fails to control her expressions, only those beyond her influence take notice, but she still maintains her ability to conceal herself from those who are still under her influence.

Because Lucy loses control over Robert's perception of her identities, she becomes a suspect, which initially has little effect on her social identities but becomes an idea that gradually gains power as the novel progresses and as Lucy's control over her identities dwindles. Once Robert becomes suspicious about the disappearance of George Talboys, he begins to pursue the truth, which is tangentially related to Lucy's past identities. When discussing her altered perceptions of wealth with Robert, Lucy recounts an instance in which she gave a silk dress to Mrs. Dawson. In response, he remarks, "...it is a change. Some women would do a great deal to accomplish such a change as that" (117). Robert's comment subtly hints at the alteration Lucy has undergone, one not only in wealth but also in identity. Her response, much like the subtle changes in her expression, is involuntary and impossible to conceal from Robert: "Lady Audley's clear blue eyes dilated as she fixed them suddenly upon the young barrister... their colour seemed to flicker and tremble betwixt blue and green... The small brush fell from her

hand, and blotted out the peasant's face under a widening circle of crimson lake" (117). Lucy's physical response is accompanied by an action, the descent of the brush onto her watercolor painting. The face that it blots out indicates her own blotting out of her less fortunate past self, Helen Talboys, whereas her involuntary action shows that Robert can and does disrupt the identities tied to the name Lady Audley. Robert pursues the materials Lucy left behind when she eliminated her identity as Helen Talboys. He finds a variance between the hair of Lucy's body double and the actual Helen Talboys (158). In addition, he matches a sample of Lucy's handwriting with one from Helen with the intent to expose her identities to Sir Michael as "a designing and infamous woman" (239). Using his evidence, a variety of material proofs that link Lucy and Helen, Robert undermines Lucy's identities. Lucy's materialism, her greatest motivation for marrying Sir Michael, becomes the trail that Robert follows to reveals her internal identities. By using her tenacity, she is only able to delay the revelation of her old identities until her final confrontation with Robert. As a result of her exposure, Lucy's internal identity of madwoman becomes an external identity that serves to eliminate the social identities she created.

The identity of madwoman undermines Lucy's control over her internal identities, but as long as she presents herself as a sane individual and the wife of Sir Michael, and as long as she can deceive people into believing her external representations, she safely preserves her secret identities and maintains a steadily decreasing authority over her identities. The identity of wife provides her with the means to pay off her blackmailers and perpetuates her position in the Audley household as well as her upper class identities of wife and employer and the social privileges connected with them. However, the social circle Lucy enjoys as Sir Michael's wife and as a member of the upper class threatens to expose her bigamy and insanity. As time progresses, the jewels in Lucy's chest dwindle due to the prolonged blackmail, reduced from

abundance to a collection that is “not worth a couple of hundred pounds, now that I have got rid of the best part of them” (316). As the jewels in Lady Audley’s chest dwindle and as Robert approaches the truth, she gradually begins to lose her authority over her external identities.

Although Robert’s objective in pursuing Lady Audley’s old identities is to discover the truth behind George’s disappearance, Loesburg argues that his true object is the exposure of her “double identity” (130). To achieve this, Robert must change his perceptions of Lucy’s ideal feminine traits (Stern 48). However, prior to exposing her entirely, Robert must see her as something less than female: “Henceforth you must seem to me no longer a woman... I look upon you henceforth as the demoniac incarnation of some evil principle” (Braddon 345). In order to truly expose Lucy, Robert must revoke her femininity. From a social standpoint, she has invoked the ideal traits of femininity: beauty, innocence, youth, and passivity to transcend the social boundaries between classes, which undermines both the Victorian class system and traditional views of Victorian femininity. She becomes de-feminized and de-humanized, reduced to nothing more than an inhuman representation of malevolence. Once Robert has resolved to see Lucy this way, he gains the authority to overpower Lady Audley’s identities in their entirety: “...her opponent’s hand had been too powerful for her, and he had won” (372). In the game of deception, Lucy ultimately loses because Robert overpowers her. He forces her to confess her false identities in their entirety to Sir Michael (Cornes 196), which demonstrates his authority to eliminate the identities that she has shaped.

Lucy repeatedly demonstrates her temporary authority over her external identities, yet she routinely struggles against her madness, an identity that she cannot discard by taking up a new name and marrying another husband. Because of her madness, Lucy cannot control her personality; she is characterized instead as the “slave” of “the three demons of Vanity,

Selfishness, and Ambition” (297). In being characterized as a “slave,” Lucy is depicted as the victim of her vices, which overwhelm her life in much the same way material wealth does. Lucy is ultimately powerless to alter her inner identity of madness; although she can suppress it, she is ultimately enslaved by her condition and becomes “the quintessential narcissist” (Cornes 184), absorbed with maintaining her beauty and engaging in frivolous social interactions. Lucy claims her insanity comes from her mother, which reflects the Victorian belief in inherited insanity identified by Elaine Showalter (“Victorian Women” 170). Even so, Lucy’s insanity may be caused by other social factors that cause her condition to emerge. Showalter cites both “social class and income” as “major determinants of the individual’s psychiatric career” (*The Female Malady* 161). This was particularly the case with women once more facilities were built to accommodate those in poverty. Lucy’s insanity could be influenced by her lack of wealth since Victorians believed that poverty could cause madness (*The Female Malady* 54). However, it could also be explained by her gender, as Victorians believed that women were more susceptible to madness than men (7). States like menstruation and childbirth were also believed to jeopardize the mental stability of women (171). Lucy survives childbirth, the “crisis which had been fatal to [her] mother,” without consequence, aside from her increased irritability (Braddon 352). Ultimately, in keeping with Victorian conceptions of madness, Lucy’s madness is something that she has no control over. Her inner identity is the deciding factor; it is the force that shapes her (Voskuil 625). Although Lucy can alter her social identities by utilizing her feminine traits, she is unable to change her internal self, although she can delay its outer manifestations.

In the Victorian era, the label of madness ultimately became associated with “any act of feminine passion, self-assertion, or violence” (Showalter, “Victorian Women” 175). In terms of Victorian culture, madness could be used as a label to undermine a woman’s ability to attain

“professional independence and sexual freedom,” typically in the form of “hysteria and degeneration” (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 146). Such is the case with Lucy, who aspires to become more than her social class has allowed her. After Lucy “spuriously misplay[s] the natural roles of women” (Voskuil 614), she suffers the loss of all her social identities and the reduction to the singular identity, both internal and external, of madwoman. After Robert revokes her femininity and Sir Michael announces his intention to separate from Lucy, she is bestowed the name Mrs. Taylor and sent to an asylum in Belgium, thereby eliminating her chosen identity of Lucy and her past identity as Helen Talboys. Stern argues that Braddon’s novel, much like Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White*, “triumphantly reduces multiple, performative identities to single characters, names, and bodies” (Stern 44). Lucy, however, is reduced beyond singularity; she becomes non-existent. Shortly after Lucy makes her confession, Sir Michael voices his “earnest wish never again to hear that person’s name” and refuses to hear any “arrangements” Robert makes for her (Braddon 398). In forbidding even the mention of Lucy’s name, Sir Michael essentially eliminates his acknowledgement of her existence, thus making her a non-entity. Once Lucy is transported to Belgium as “Mrs. Taylor”, she remains off-stage for the remainder of the narrative, which involves Robert’s search for and recovery of George. Only at the conclusion is she mentioned again, this time only as the subject of a letter that reports “the death of a certain Madame Taylor, who had expired peacefully at Villebrumeuse, dying after a long illness, which Monseuiur Val describes as a *maladie de langueur*” (Braddon 445-6). Death terminates any remaining identities Lucy had at the end of her life. After death, Lucy is gradually forgotten: “That dark story of the past fades little by little every day, and there may come a time in which the shadow my lady’s wickedness has cast upon the young man’s life will utterly vanish away” (446). Over time, Lucy is banished geographically and from memory not merely because

she is mad but because of her active agency in the creation of social roles. The asylum also provides an opportunity for Lucy to receive the care she may need to reform through John Connelly's practice of "moral management" (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 29). While this effort ultimately fails, it follows the Victorian views of madness in that perceptions of madness were constantly controlled and altered by men (Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 19) and that part of managing madness within asylums involved the "arrangement of space" (18). Lucy experiences both male control (through Dr. Mosgrave's diagnosis) and confinement as a result of Robert's decision to banish her. The male members of the Audley family view the duration of Lucy's presence as a stain on their reputable family name, so the only way to correct the family circle is to cast her out. Because she has presented herself as the ideal woman to attain new social identities, Lucy's right to an identity, and her identity itself, is entirely expunged.

Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* explores the consequences a woman faces when she succeeds in forging her own identity. Throughout the novel, Lucy's numerous social identities become tied to her material possessions. She possesses the most wealth when she has the most authority over her social identities. Ironically, material possessions become the tool with which Robert Audley links her present identities to her past ones. Lucy actively creates the social identities involved with being Lady Audley using her beauty and youth, as well as her supposed passivity, that conceal her inner identity in much the same way her portrait is locked within her room and the materials indicating her role as wife and mother are concealed in a locked drawer or on her person. Robert uses the very possessions Lucy covets to uncover her past identities and revokes her power to shape her identity by exposing her as a bigamist and madwoman. Her constant inner identity of madness, apparent throughout the text in subtle hints, permeates her other social identities, and although she can suppress her madness, Lucy ultimately fails to erase

it. While she manages to shape several relevant social identities using her rise in social class, her exposure ultimately serves to undermine her authority and reduce her beyond a single identity to nothingness. In Braddon's novel and in her time, women who attempted to wield power over their own identities did so at the risk of being exposed, condemned, stripped of their femininity, and banished from society and memory, becoming in essence a non-entity with no right to possess any identity, whether self-crafted or socially imposed.

CHAPTER III

THE CAPTIVE WIFE AND MOTHER: CONFLICTING IDENTITIES IN *THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL*

In opposition to Ruth and Lucy, the protagonist of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* experiences a significantly different ending: Helen survives the ordeal of her marriage, which forces her to create multiple identities in order to escape, only to remarry into a more unified state of identity. The driving forces behind Helen's multiple identities, marriage and motherhood, are emphasized by her first-person written record of her ordeal, later transcribed by her second husband, Gilbert, after their marriage. During her marriage to Arthur Huntingdon, Helen's identity is strictly limited, which transforms her traditional female roles of wife and mother into identities that make her a captive. After escaping from Arthur, Helen attempts to maintain her identities by isolating herself from society, but the social forces in her life make it impossible for her to entirely privatize her identity. Helen's need for multiple identities is spawned by her status as a mother, but the resulting identities are only partly a product of her maternal duties. The combination of varying social attitudes and the strict Victorian social codes ensnare Helen in multiple identities while simultaneously lessening her ability to create and maintain private identities. Ultimately, Brontë's novel highlights how Helen's captivity in marriage undercuts her already limited authority and forces her to acquire multiple identities to defy her captor/husband.

Helen begins her narrative as a *feme sole* who is available for marriage, but she experiences constant pressure from her Aunt Maxwell to fulfill the social obligation of marriage. Shortly after introducing the role of painting in her life, Helen writes an account of a conversation with her aunt about marriage, notably the first conversation between them that she records. After reflecting on the abysmally low number of candidates that she would accept,

Helen attempts to reject the institution of marriage by telling her Aunt that the probability of marrying a man she desires is relatively small (Brontë 111). Aunt Maxwell immediately responds, “That is no argument at all” (111), which shows that there is no option for the proper Victorian woman in regards to marriage. Society obligates Helen to marry and as a result to exchange her chosen identity of *feme sole* for that of *feme couverte*. The early appearance of marriage in Helen’s diary strongly suggests its importance in Helen’s life. Twice, Aunt Maxwell comments on the importance of marriage, once when she calls it “*a serious thing*” (112, original italics), and again when Boarham proposes and she explains to Helen that “This is no trifling matter” (117). Helen’s aunt views marriage as pivotal in a woman’s existence because it is her only option. Her aunt’s social pressure traps Helen in her future identity as wife, leaving her no escape from the inevitable transition into a *feme couverte*. When Helen’s courtship with Huntingdon becomes unstable, her rejected suitors “renew their advances” and begin seeking her hand in marriage again (138), which makes Huntingdon seem all the more attractive. Between the rejected men’s advances and her aunt’s suggestions, Helen endures constant social pressure to accept the identity of wife, which she cannot reject despite her identity as a *feme sole* and her views on marriage. Her financial dependence upon the Maxwells further eliminates any possibility for Helen to reject the identity of wife and demonstrates the limited authority Helen has over her future identities.

Helen’s only authority in becoming a *feme couverte* is choosing her husband by accepting his proposal and voluntarily becoming trapped in whatever identities he determines for her. However, Helen’s aunt attempts to utilize some social authority over Helen as her guardian by influencing Helen’s choice, but Helen chooses to resist her aunt’s power of influence as guardian to retain her liberty. Aunt Maxwell offers her opinion on Huntingdon, stating, “I have heard your

uncle speak of young Mr. Huntingdon. I've heard him say, 'He's a fine lad, that young Huntingdon, but a bit wildish, I fancy.' So I'd have you beware" (115). By cautioning Helen about Huntingdon's questionable behavior, Aunt Maxwell provides Helen with a chance to reject Huntingdon's advances and the undesirable identities he may impose on her. After her aunt becomes suspicious of Huntingdon, she demands to know whether or not Helen would accept a proposal of marriage from him, to which she responds, "Of course not—without consulting uncle and you" (125). Helen acknowledges the need to consider the opinions of her guardians when determining her answer to a marriage proposal due to her identity as niece. Although such factors are significant in marital matters, Aunt Maxwell notes that Helen's own response is the most important thing: "It is no matter what I said. What will *you* say?" (117). Helen's decision is the only one that matters because although she cannot resist the identity of wife, she is the only one who can accept a marriage proposal. Although she receives suggestions from her aunt, who tries to sway Helen's decision to the point of openly favoring Boarham, Helen obstinately retains her independence, stating, "in such important matters, I take the liberty of judging for myself, and no persuasion can alter my inclinations" (120). In saying this, Helen highlights her authority to reject the potential identity of Lady Boarham. She also exerts this authority by rejecting her uncle's suggestion to marry Wilmot (116). In addition, Helen questions the legitimacy of her aunt's suggestions, stating that "Her councils may be good, as far as they go—in the main points at least;—but there are some things she has overlooked in her calculations" (113). Helen demonstrates her doubt of Aunt Maxwell's suggestions and instead chooses to rely on her own independent viewpoint. Aside from her suitor's willingness to propose, Helen is the only one who exerts any power to change her current identities. By realizing the authority of her *feme sole* state, Helen makes the choice to maintain sole power over who she marries and hence who has

control over her future identities. She delays the inevitable transformation from single woman to wife by continuing to reject her suitors while maintaining her authority to accept a wifehood of her own choosing.

Unfortunately, Aunt Maxwell's efforts fail, partly because Helen chooses to disregard her warnings. By ignoring her aunt's advice and exerting her independence, Helen increases the danger of erring in her matrimonial choice, a danger created in part by Huntingdon's ability to trap Helen using her own emotions against her. After saving Helen from Boarham's undesirable company, Huntingdon almost immediately infiltrates her thoughts, as shown by her repeated attempts to capture his face using her paintbrush: "I cannot get him out of my mind—and indeed, I never try" (110). Helen is incapable of diverting her thoughts from Huntingdon and relinquishes all attempts to do so, a situation that highlights Helen's choice while at the same time portraying it as dependent upon Huntingdon's advances. Her selection comes without her aunt's advice and demonstrates the establishment of Huntingdon's authority over her identities. Once Huntingdon discovers her secret identities by examining the backs of her sketches, in his opinion "the most important and interesting part of their concern" (132), he begins pursuing her in earnest. Helen's internalized identities, those that Huntingdon does not have access to as a mere suitor, are the most enticing to him, and he manipulates Helen's internalized identity as a lover to further ensnare her. After discovering Helen's affections, Huntingdon's interference significantly reduces Helen's authority over her identities. The theft of Helen's sketch symbolizes Huntingdon's attempts to rob Helen of her control over her emotions and identities. As a result, Helen struggles to maintain a grasp over her identities, one that should remain until her marriage, but is instead undermined by Huntingdon's repeated interferences. Although his first attempt succeeds, Helen struggles against him when he endeavors to steal a miniature of

himself after ripping her portfolio out of her hands (137). She reclaims her authority by burning the miniature, only to experience another loss of power as Huntingdon manipulates Helen's emotions by exchanging her company for Annabella's and laying the final snare that will end in Helen becoming completely trapped. The moment she accepts his proposal of marriage, Helen not only relinquishes her own authority over her identities but also undermines the moral protection of her aunt. She only consults Aunt Maxwell about details such as the date of her ceremony (152), which demonstrates Huntingdon's ability to supplant her aunt's authority. At this point, Helen's identities can no longer be protected by her aunt as the social code of coverture will unite their identities.

Helen's marriage results in her exchanging the identity of single woman for that of wife. However, rather than succumbing entirely to Huntingdon's authority, she thwarts the rules of coverture by continuing to forge and preserve her identities in her diary. Prior to her marriage, Helen vows to use her diary as "confidential friend into whose ear I might pour forth the overflowings of my heart" (130) and continues to do so despite her transformation because of Huntingdon's flaws. The diary functions to assist Helen in discovering her true self (Hyun 92-3). It liberates her from the confines of Huntingdon's expectations and allows her a freedom that she can never truly attain outside of its pages. Through the diary, Helen continues to determine her private identities since Huntingdon does not interfere with or alter what she writes. She preserves her identities in ink since she cannot express herself to Huntingdon freely and thus diverts from the social code of coverture by keeping identities of her own. However, the diary cannot preserve all of her identities as a *feme sole*. As Diederich notes, Helen's identity as painter wanes after marrying Huntingdon because she becomes a caretaker to others rather than herself, showing that Helen does in some ways submit to nineteenth-century social norms (27), whereas prior to

marriage, Helen's painting serves the purpose of "self-expression" (26). Helen loses this luxury after marriage, but her resolve to record her own sentiments in the diary perpetuates her self-expression in a different medium and provides her some relief from captivity.

Helen's identity as Huntingdon's wife ideally should endow her with the authority to enforce moral behavior within Grassdale Manor. Marriage has joined Helen and Huntingdon not only in name and estate but also in identity, but Helen becomes partly trapped in her husband's identity and consequently his poor morality. When Helen confronts Huntingdon about his debauchery, she states, "Don't you know that you are a part of myself? And do you think you can injure and degrade yourself, and I not feel it?" (Brontë 217). Notably, Helen does not claim that Huntingdon is her whole self but only part of it. She acknowledges the identity of wife in doing so but at the same time highlights that she has her own identities to uphold in light of her less than ideal husband. The result is partial coverture. Rather than fully taking on her husband's immoral identity, Helen continues to preserve some identities of her own using her diary, thereby situating herself between the two. Moreover, Helen separates herself from Huntingdon as far as her married station will allow by shutting herself in her room to show Huntingdon that "my heart was not his slave, and I could live without him if I chose" (177). Although she is now legally a *feme covert*, Helen attempts to use her independence to reign over Huntingdon's base habits. However, unlike the identities she records in her diary, he is impossible to control because as a husband he possesses the authority to change Helen's identities and even manipulate them. Huntingdon abuses his power over Helen's identities to distort wifedom from a moral influence to a justification for his own immorality by arguing that Helen "drive[s] him to [drinking] by [her] unnatural, unwomanly conduct" (273). Helen resists taking the blame, exerting in her diary that it is "not my fault!" (274), which allows Helen to maintain her identity as a woman who

preserves her own morality and absolves herself from any blame for Huntingdon's behavior. She resists succumbing to Huntingdon's ideas of wifedom and his blame by continuing to internalize and conceal her identities. In this way, Helen maintains limited authority over her identities despite her married state.

In addition to distorting the identity of wife, Huntingdon manages to exert similar control over Helen's identity of mother, which she obtains as a result of her wifedom and which provides her with another opportunity to exert moral influence, this time over her son. However, this opportunity rapidly erodes when the self-centered Huntingdon transforms maternity from an identity coupled with that of wife to one of competition. He declares, "I shall positively hate that little wretch, if you worship it so madly! You are absolutely infatuated about it" (204). Helen's maternal affections demonstrate her adherence to the Victorian ideals of motherhood. However, Huntingdon's concept of a wife as "someone who exists solely for her man, someone who should be selflessly devoted to the care of her husband" comes in direct conflict with the tenants of motherhood (Hyun 117-8). By this definition, Helen should focus on her identity as wife rather than that of mother, and Huntingdon's formulation of what a wife's identity should entail makes it impossible for Helen to be ideal in both the wife and mother roles. To further meddle in Helen's identity as mother, Huntingdon reduces and nearly eliminates her moral control over young Arthur, a right to which she should be entitled by the standards of Victorian motherhood. Despite Helen's efforts to maintain control, Arthur's developing virtues gradually deteriorate as a result of his father's negative influence: "So the little fellow came down every evening in spite of his cross mamma, and learned to tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr. Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man, and sent mamma to the devil when she tried to prevent him" (Brontë 296). Huntingdon's manipulation of motherhood reduces Helen's ability to fulfill her

maternal duties and prevents her from escaping her identity as wife, thereby providing her with the identity of captive as well as wife and mother. Anolik argues that Helen becomes imprisoned in her identity as wife by her motherhood (35), which is true to an extent as she maintains some of her identities. Despite the Victorian social codes dictating the duty of a mother to morally educate her children, Helen cannot leave Huntingdon because English laws governing maternal rights to custody had not yet been developed. *Tenent's* chronological setting and publication both occur prior to the ratification of the Infant and Child Custody Bill¹⁷, so the novel highlights “what happens when paternal rights interfere with a sanctified notion of motherhood” (Berry 39). As a result of her marriage, Helen cannot remove Arthur from his father’s corrupting influence, not even if they separated, since custody would remain with Huntingdon. She must maintain her identity as wife to maintain her identity as mother.

Only after becoming a mother does Helen discover Huntingdon’s affair with Annabella, which serves to fully transform Helen into a captive. As Anolik argues, women in Gothic novels are the most imperiled of characters. Rather than detracting from danger, marriage instead functions as a trap that transforms husbands into captors (25-6). Similarly, Helen becomes a captive after discovering Huntingdon and Annabella’s affair, which reduces wifedom to a nominal identity that she cannot reject her public identity because doing so also means discarding her identity as mother. After Huntingdon denies her request to depart with Arthur, Helen resolves to “stay here, to be hated and despised. But henceforth we are husband and wife only in name” (Brontë 260). Helen agrees to fulfill her domestic duties because Huntingdon’s authority over her identities, including that of mother, makes it impossible for her to return to a *feme sole* state. Despite the public acknowledgment of their union and Helen’s continuing public

¹⁷ See page 2 of the Introduction for a full explanation.

identity as wife, she completely loses all respect for Huntingdon: “The word stares me in the face like a guilty confession, but it is true: I hate him—I hate him!” (263). Helen relinquishes any wifely attachment to Huntingdon within the private sphere and within her internal self, thereby making her identity more fragmented. Since Helen cannot separate from Huntingdon without abandoning her identity as mother, her role as wife is entirely displaced by her identity as captive. As a result, Helen is reduced to “nothing more than a mere instrument that fulfills [Huntingdon’s] selfish needs and desires” (Hyun 118). As a captive, Helen continues to maintain her diary and her private plans of escaping, but the social codes binding her to Huntingdon force Helen to maintain her wifehood in the public sphere. Thus, Huntingdon’s own lack of morality serves to both alter and multiply Helen’s married identities since she publically sustains the identity of wife despite their emotional detachment.

When Helen formulates her plan of escape, her initial plan is to confide in no one, but several men soon interfere with her plan, including Hargrave and her husband. Hargrave encounters Helen in the library, and she reluctantly confesses her plans to him. However, he creates only a minor detriment to her initial plot. After Helen records a detailed account of her escape plan, Huntingdon uses her diary to expose all of her internalized emotions and identities: ““With your leave, my dear, I’ll have a look at this,” forcibly wrested it from me, and, drawing a chair to the table, composedly sat down to examine it: turning back leaf after leaf to find an explanation of what he had read” (Brontë 309). Huntingdon exerts his control over Helen’s identities by physically forcing the diary from her possession, which results in her partial coverture being overturned and exposes not only her plan to escape but also her identities. Huntingdon then proceeds to claim a more complete authority over Helen’s identities by burning the artwork and art supplies Helen intended to use to finance her escape (310). Common law

grants ownership of and access to all of Helen's belongings and identities to Huntingdon (Losano 33), so his destruction of the paintings reflects his ability to control Helen (Diederich 28-9). This control exists not only in terms of property but also exists in terms of identity. As Huntingdon destroys Helen's ability to generate income, she can only observe the immolation of her hopes for escaping her *feme covert* identities. She suffers the loss of any and all property she can use to reenter a *feme sole* state and thus remains trapped in the identities tied to the name Mrs. Huntingdon. In addition, Huntingdon's control over her paintings demonstrates his ability to enforce and eliminate Helen's identities. Burning her painting materials leads to a complete and utter removal of any opportunity to be a painter, even as a domestic accomplishment. Without her tools, Helen cannot maintain that identity and instead remains trapped in the identity of wife.

Huntingdon is not the only man who attempts to ensnare Helen in unwanted identities. After Hargrave becomes romantically interested in Helen, he attempts to trap her in the identity of adulterer by confessing his love, but she spurns his efforts and escapes because she has continued to maintain the morality at the core of her identities and because of common law. Hargrave is not her husband and thus cannot exert direct control over her identities. After being rejected, Hargrave attempts to force a change in Helen's identity by correlating their identities and declaring, "you shall be happy also, for if you *are* a woman, I can make you so—and I *will* do it in spite of yourself!" (Brontë 281). By retaining her moral structure, Helen becomes capable of resisting Hargrave's attempted imposition. However, she is not entirely capable of escaping the effects of his confession, as Grimsby's witnessing the act threatens to destabilize Helen's respectability. In this manner, Hargrave nearly alters perceptions to cast Helen as an adulterer, but Helen prevents this identity from becoming entirely public by recruiting Hattersley

who, having witnessed Hargrave's confession and Helen's rejection of it, maintains her innocence in the public eye:

"I don't care *what* he sees," said I, "or what he imagines; "but you, Mr. Hattersley, when you hear my name belied and slandered, will you defend it?"

"I will. Blast me if I don't!" (306)

Helen manages to sustain her identity as a faithful (but not loving) wife in Hattersley's view because he directly witnesses Helen's reaction to Hargrave's proposition, but Grimsby's slanted reports still threaten to endow her with a negative identity in the public eye. Carol A. Senf states that in *Tenant* and in Victorian society, "both law and custom give greater power (and voice) to men" (450). Helen's right to publically portray her identities by speaking is essentially undermined because Huntingdon would more than likely credit a man's report more than her own. However, Helen maintains her innocence, both to Gilbert and to the reader, by recording the event in her diary. Thus, Helen's identity as innocent can only be stabilized by the opinions of a few male members of society rather than through her own merit within Grassdale Manor, but her true identity appears in the pages of her diary, and her written self-portrait sustains these identities beyond that sphere, particularly when she willingly exposes them to a limited audience.

Despite the obstacles, Helen manages to escape Huntingdon and recover her *feme sole* status because of the same identity that traps her within marriage: her motherhood.¹⁸ As the marriage deteriorates, Helen becomes less preoccupied with herself and more concerned about her son, mainly for "that influence over him which, for his own advantage, I would strive to

¹⁸ Victorian women had very limited opportunities for separation. Legally, there were two types of divorce: *divorce a mensa et thoro* (divorce from bed and board), which was only used in cases of extreme cruelty and did not permit remarriage or grant women control of any property, and *divorce a vinculda*, a true divorce granted only to upper-class citizens, mainly men, by a private Parliamentary act (Helsing 2: 23). Although the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 improved a woman's condition after divorce, women still could not apply for *divorce a vinculda* (2: 26).

purchase and retain, and which for very spite his father delights to rob me of” (Brontë 277).

Although Helen’s initial escape fails, she endures her captivity to maintain limited control over her son’s moral development but ultimately fails to do so because of Huntingdon’s control over her identities. He attempts to replace Helen with a governess on the grounds of his contention that “[she] was not fit to teach children, or to be with them” (324). Although Helen asserts her belief within the diary that she “was full competent to the task of teaching him myself” (323), she is incapable of asserting such a belief verbally because of Huntingdon’s authority. Once again, Helen’s right to verbalize her identities is undermined by Huntingdon, and her identity as mother suffers as a result. Hiring a governess would effectively strip Helen of her maternal duties and hence transform her motherhood into a nominal identity much like her wifhood. After Huntingdon revokes her identity as mother to trap her fully in the identity of wife, Helen determines to retain her maternal rights despite a lack of custody laws and removes Arthur from his father’s corrupting influence. Because Helen has for the most part retained a constant internal identity, one that adheres to a greater moral power than social codes, she breaks away from her corrupt husband in order to preserve the morality of her son, illustrating that Helen’s identity as mother is more important to her than her marriage and her identity as a wife. Her ability to choose this path, much like the burning of the portrait, serves as a rebellious act against her husband and a physical demonstration of her authority over her identities.

Because Huntingdon eliminates Helen’s ability to generate income, she must rely on her identity as sister to fund her escape from the identities Huntingdon has imposed on her. Mr. Lawrence, Helen’s brother, provides her with enough financial support to restore a portion of Wildfell Hall but at the same time expresses his wish that Helen “would not take advantage of it unless circumstances should render it really necessary” (316). Mr. Lawrence does not endorse

Helen's desire to separate from Huntingdon and return to a *feme sole* status because doing so would endow her with power she does not possess as a *feme covert*. He hesitates to provide her with assistance, and when he finally agrees to do so "at length," he entreats Helen to rely on "circumstances" to determine whether or not such actions are necessary. In doing so, Lawrence avoids overtly supporting his sister's attempts to revert to a *feme sole* but still provides Helen with the means to do so. Initially, Mr. Lawrence opposes Helen's "project," viewing it "as wild and impracticable" (316). His hesitation is justified based on Victorian social codes. He demonstrates awareness that a *feme covert* should not possess the authority to sculpt any public identities, and Helen is no exception. However, his acquiescence, along with Helen's temporary success, shows that the opportunity for Helen to create and sustain identities as a *feme sole* requires some outside assistance. Although Helen has the power to determine her internal identities on paper, she lacks the power to make such drastic changes to her identity outside the private sphere and must instead rely on her brother to escape.

When Helen first enters Gilbert's sphere as an apparent *feme sole*, she assumes her right to motherhood and her ability to shape her public identities by presenting herself as a widow, which demonstrates her temporary freedom. With her servant Rachel's help, Helen constructs an external identity of widow by dressing in "mourning" when she travels to Wildfell Hall and by using her mother's maiden name of Graham to distance herself from her old identities as captive and wife (330). The marital status of widow, although it is false, permits Helen to establish herself in Gilbert's locale as the tenant of Wildfell Hall. While this identity is convincing enough to fool members of Gilbert's social circle and grant her respectability, it is also destabilized by the potential for remarriage. When discussing Helen, Gilbert describes her as "Some romantic young widow... come to end her days in solitude, and mourn in secret for the dear departed—but

it won't last long" (15). In viewing the identity of widow as transitory, Gilbert highlights his certainty that Helen will remarry and return to the status of *feme covert*. Although Helen alters her marital status within Gilbert's locale, Gilbert's comment demonstrates that social expectations effect the duration of a woman's role as a *feme sole* and that Helen cannot have a lasting authority over her identities because of social pressures to marry.

To maintain appearances and her authority over her apparent widowhood, Helen isolates herself from the public sphere as much as possible, but her efforts ultimately fail. Losano notes that much of *Tenant's* plot centers on the issue of concealment (31), but this factor depends heavily on Helen's isolation. When Mrs. Markham invites Helen to a social gathering, she declines politely, stating, "Thank you, I never go to parties" (Brontë 26). By distancing herself from their social circle, Helen sustains her apparent identity as a widow. Emerging in public would put the identity she constructed at risk not only from discovery but also against alteration. Despite her initial success, Helen lacks the ability to prevent members of society from entering her private sphere, as Gilbert, Fergus, Eliza, and Rose's visit to Wildfell Hall shows. Although she admits them to her home, she does express enough subtle displeasure to alert Gilbert of her temperament: "I do not think Mrs. Graham was particularly delighted to see us: there was something indescribably chilly in her quiet, calm civility; but I did not talk much to her" (52). Helen's reserve results partly from her desire to protect her identities from the social forces that can expose or alter her identities. Social attention poses a danger to her identity of an apparent *feme sole* and the authority that accompanies it. Although Hyun argues that "Self-understanding is [not] achieved... in isolation" (85), the solitude Helen gains at Wildfell Hall is her only protection against social interferences. Only through isolation can she determine and maintain her outward widowhood and her authority to sculpt her identities.

Acquiring the identity of widow allows Helen to restore her identity as artist in a slightly altered form: after leaving Huntingdon, she uses her solitude to become a professional painter and by doing so supports herself and her son. Helen's ability to transform her old *feme sole* identity as artist into a profession depends partly upon her identity "[a]s an ersatz widow" (Diederich 31) because that identity endows her with the respectability necessary to establish a profession as painter. Typically, women who chose to engage in artistic pursuits were forced to integrate them with their domestic roles (Losano 29). Despite her status as a *feme sole*, Helen must balance her motherhood with her identity as an artist and must at the same time sustain it to provide for her son. The identity of professional artist is somewhat obligatory given Helen's circumstances. She tells Gilbert, "I cannot afford to paint for my own amusement" (Brontë 41). Helen's lack of any alternative mode of income drives her to paint solely for economic purposes, yet the very implications of a profession involve contact with the public sphere in order to turn a profit, contact that Helen herself cannot fulfill as she needs to remain isolated to sustain her identities. As is the case with many of Helen's identities, isolation factors largely into the creation of her identity as artist (Losano 26). Because this is not simply an identity for Helen but also a profession, it necessitates a reliance on the public in order to turn a profit, and she requires someone else to sell her paintings for her. Helen cannot enter the public sphere herself because of her need to protect her other identities, so she must recruit someone to transport and sell her paintings. At the same time, Helen's inability to sell her paintings reinforces her isolation from the public sphere and hence allows her to continue controlling her identity within a very limited sphere despite her intrusion on the "male business enclave" (17). Ultimately, while Helen's identity as professional painter allows her to sustain the identity of widow and reclaim an

identity that she lost through marriage, the public nature of her profession puts the stability of these identities at risk.

Despite Helen's initial success, she finds it impossible to maintain an insular state as a result of society's constant interferences triggered by the curiosity of Gilbert and his immediate acquaintances, a factor that serves to draw her closer to another identity trap. Shortly after Helen moves in, the Markhams and the Millwards become interested in exposing details of her identity and begin making serious efforts to do so:

They tried all they could to find out who she was and where she came from, and, all about her, but neither Mrs. Wilson, with her pertinacious and impertinent home-thrusts, nor Miss Wilson, with her skilful manoeuvring, could manage to elicit a single satisfactory answer, or even a casual remark, or chance expression calculated to allay their curiosity, or throw the faintest ray of light upon her history, circumstances, or connexions. (Brontë 13)

The Wilsons' initial failed efforts to discover the details of Helen's life mark the success of Helen's evasiveness. She exercises great care when interacting with them and manages to get through the conversation without being exposed or giving way. However, Helen is notably less successful beyond Wildfell Hall. When she travels beyond its boundaries and visits the Markhams, Fergus immediately begins interrogating her about her nationality and origins. She provides vague answers, stating that she is "an Englishwoman" and then immediately prevents any further inquiries from surfacing by adding, "I am not disposed to answer any more questions at present" (54). By providing a single answer, Helen demonstrates that beyond Wildfell Hall, her ability to maintain her identities is slightly less effective than that within the building's walls, suggesting that only in her own private sphere can Helen truly maintain her self-determined

identities. At the same time, Helen maintains that power and her privacy, preventing any further questions from surfacing by withholding details and limiting knowledge of her identities to her own private sphere at Wildfell Hall. The impossibility of maintaining complete secrecy demonstrates that despite her status as a *feme sole*, society still wields the authority to expose parts of her identities. Helen can never have complete control over her identities because, despite her isolation, she can still become ensnared by the curiosity of others.

After emerging from her solitude and entering the public sphere, her identities of widow and mother are challenged by the well-established social figures in Gilbert's locale. Like her widowhood, Helen's motherhood is similarly challenged. Widowhood grants Helen temporary custody of Arthur (Deiderich 31), but she is not immune to social criticisms of her parenting methods. Inevitably, this identity is challenged by Mrs. Markham, who calls Helen's interference in Arthur's moral development a "fatal error" (Brontë 28). Both Reverend Millward and Gilbert argue with her views, but rather than succumbing to this authority over her motherhood, Helen seizes control over the identity by claiming that she "would rather that [Arthur] died tomorrow!—rather a thousand times!" than become "a man of the world" who succumbs to vice (31). Helen claims her right to continue her maternal methods despite social views, which demonstrates her resistance against social control over her identity. By doing so, she resists being bound by their concept of motherhood and instead sustains her own viewpoints, but at the price of social approval. Berry argues that Helen's narrow escape from Huntingdon, combined with her willingness to transport her son with her, "both give[s] and refuse[s]" her "custodial care" over her son (51). The social reactions to Helen's methodology sustain this point and demonstrate that while she refuses to let society determine the effectiveness of her methods, social opinion poses a threat to Helen's authority over her identities. Even so, her resilience in

the face of such opposition demonstrates that while other identities may be bound by social expectations, she refuses to let motherhood become any sort of trap again.

Once Helen emerges into the public sphere, Gilbert attempts to transform her identity of widow back into that of wife and trap her once again in the *feme covert* status. She begins as an object of Gilbert's interest due to his curiosity, an identity that she does not choose but that Gilbert assigns her: "I confess, I looked with some interest myself towards the old family pew, appertaining to Wildfell Hall..." (Brontë 15). Gilbert's "interest" could be romantic attraction, but at the same time, it could also be nothing more than curiosity about the new occupant of Wildfell Hall. In either case, Helen does nothing to elicit this attention, as Gilbert intends to affirm his power silently over Helen's perceptions of him: "She thinks me an imprudent puppy... Humph! She shall change her mind before long, if I think it worthwhile" (16). From Gilbert's standpoint, Helen's opinion of him, as well as her connection to him, depends on his own whims. Much like Huntingdon, Gilbert ignores the authority she has over her identities as a *feme sole* and instead plots to trap her in an identity of his own choosing. Helen maintains enough authority to remain an apparent widow despite his efforts, as demonstrated by the slow rate of progression in their relationship, and her resistance, much like that she expresses to Huntingdon, depends upon her internal identities. Despite the fact that Helen has abandoned her husband, she is still his wife in certain locales and in spite of her appearance as a widow. In the same manner that she rejects Hargrave's advances, Helen resists Gilberts for the sake of remaining true to herself. Contrary to his earlier conviction, Gilbert comes to realize her control when he says, "I shall not fall seriously in love with the young widow, I think,—nor she with me—that's certain—but if I find a little pleasure in her society, I may surely be allowed to seek it" (45). Gilbert is more "certain" about Helen's resistance to his advances than he is about his own

ability to avoid falling in love with her. Despite his certainty, Gilbert's determination to remain in Helen's company for the mere sake of enjoying himself brings Helen closer to Gilbert's social sphere and thus begins to destabilize her control over her identities.

As Helen draws closer to Gilbert and the social sphere, the legitimacy of her motherhood and the respectability of her widowhood become destabilized because of the suspicion that Lawrence is Arthur's father. As a result of these suspicions, Helen attains the identity of an immoral woman. Eliza asks Gilbert for his opinion of "these shocking reports about Mrs. Graham" (66). Society's refusal to believe the legitimacy of Helen's motherhood erodes her right to participate in society. Although both Rose and Mrs. Markham refuse to believe these rumors, Reverend Millward insists that Helen is "not worth it!" (80). As a result of the varying social opinions, Helen's identity becomes multiplied even more: some see her as a respectable widow, others as a promiscuous woman who gave birth out of wedlock, and others beyond the Linden-car sphere view her as Arthur's wife. These opinions become more unified over time. Shortly after Millward expresses his disapproval, Mrs. Markham also states her suspicions of Helen's motives for being isolated. As Rose informs Gilbert, "[M]ama says if [Helen] were a proper person, she wouldn't live there by herself" (81). After hearing these accusations and expressing some misgivings of his own, Gilbert resolves to trust her, claiming that he "should be unworthy the name of a man if [he] could believe anything that was said against her own lips" (81). The varying opinions of social figures provide Helen with a multifarious social identity, particularly in terms of respectability. She attains the identities of both object of interest and suspect as a result, which demonstrate that even as a widow, Helen's control over her public identities is very limited. Her identities become more multiple due to inconsistencies in social opinion, particularly in terms of Helen's morality.

The marriage plot between Gilbert and Helen is interrupted by the amplification of negative social opinions of her and her subsequent exile from the social circle, which results in her acquisition of an identity as pariah. When reports of Helen's supposed indiscretion reaches the reverend, he approaches Helen: "It is my—duty—as—your pastor... to tell you both everything that I myself see reprehensible in your conduct, and all I have reason to respect, and what others tell me concerning you" (84). Millward invokes his status as a reverend, a social figure who derives authority from the church, to condemn Helen for her supposed affair with Lawrence. By sharing this information with the Markhams, he publicizes her perceived misconduct and creates a dubious reputation for what is supposed to be a respectable social identity. To further destabilize Helen's social respectability, he also publically affirms his determination "that my daughters—shall—not—consort with her. Do you adopt the same resolution with regard to yours!" (84). Millward ensures that his daughters will be safe from Helen by eliminating any opportunity for contact with them on his own estate and by encouraging Mrs. Markham to adopt a similar policy within her own private sphere. The social interference with Helen's identities and the creation of the identity pariah thrusts Helen back into seclusion to an extent, not of her own free will but due to society's assumptions about her identity. The result of Helen's emergence from her isolation is thus an attempt to return her to isolation by endowing her with a social identity that will make it virtually impossible for her to form relationships with anyone who does not have knowledge of her true identities.

Millward also attempts to sway Gilbert but without success; instead, this only encourages him to seek Helen out by trespassing on her estate, an action that only serves to renew his suspicions and transforms her own property into a device that traps her in her identities. After crossing the fence around Wildfell Hall, a symbolic barrier that seals in Helen's identities,

Gilbert discovers her walking with “a young man... the voice confirmed it—it was Mr. Lawrence” while trespassing in Helen’s private sphere (91). Because Linden-car’s residents are unaware of Helen’s identity as Lawrence’s sister, Gilbert concludes that their meeting is in actuality a romantic tryst. As a result, Gilbert assigns Helen the identity of deceiver: “to find myself deceived, duped, hopeless, my affections trampled upon, my angel not an angel, and my friend a fiend incarnate” (93). After sighting Lawrence and Helen in the garden, Gilbert perceives the social identities Helen has presented as false when in reality her only false identity is that of widow. The incomplete information leads him to misperceive her entirely. When confronted with Gilbert’s misperceptions, Helen attempts to remedy them by providing him with the diary that chronicles the development of her marital identities, instructing him to “Bring it back when you have read it; and don’t breathe a word of what it tells you to any living being—I trust your honour” (109). Although she expresses her faith in Gilbert, she also subjects him to the same secrecy she herself exercises because she has allowed Gilbert and only Gilbert access to her previous identities and by doing so escapes being completely confined in any of her identities within the public sphere. However, her surrender of the diary is not entirely willing, as Gilbert explains his suspicions clearly enough for Helen to comprehend them and desire to give him an accurate portrayal of all the identities she has internalized. The only option Helen has for maintaining her connection with Gilbert is to surrender information of her secret identities to him, with the omission of its last few pages (109). By withholding these pages, Helen exercises the power to keep some of her identities private by refusing to confess her love. In doing so, she reinforces her identity as a seeming *feme sole* while at the same time overtly refusing to become a bigamist despite Gilbert’s pressures. The situation demonstrates Helen’s ability to remain liberated from immoral identities despite Gilbert’s attempt to transform her into a captive.

Only after Arthur's death is Helen able to revert to a true *feme sole*, but she only does so temporarily. After revealing her private identities to Gilbert, her identity as his love interest becomes stable despite her married state, one that Helen now willingly accepts. With Huntingdon's demise, Helen's identity as wife is erased, as is his ability to threaten her motherhood. The reality of Helen's widowhood endows her with not only this inheritance but also provides her with authority over her son's estate and potentially one-third of Huntingdon's (Losano 34). In addition, her poverty is abated by her inheritance of her uncle's estate and by Huntingdon's death. This financial acquisition in part supplies Gilbert with the ability to present Helen publically as his love interest. The marriage between Gilbert and Helen is significant because Helen returns to a *feme covert* state. As a result, Gilbert gains control over her identities and undermines her authority to determine and withhold her identities. By marrying Gilbert, Rachel K. Carnell argues that Helen relinquishes her identity as a professional painter and her voice (13). She also loses custody of herself and of her son, both of which go to Gilbert by common law (Berry 52). This transfer of authority is symbolized by Helen's presentation of the winter rose to Gilbert. When presenting the flower, she states, "This rose is not so fragrant as a summer flower, but it has stood through hardships none of them could bear... Look, Gilbert, it is still fresh and blooming as a flower can be, with the cold snow even now on its petals.—Will you have it?" (Brontë 411). Poole argues that the rose symbolizes Helen herself (864). While this may be true, it is incomplete in terms of identity, for in that sense, the rose signifies Helen's willingness to share her inner identities with Gilbert and to relinquish all rights to shaping them. Once Gilbert overcomes his misunderstanding of the rose, he and Helen become engaged and eventually marry, but she is notably silenced afterwards (Carnell 5). The silence is an indicator of her powerlessness (Jacobs 208). Ultimately, remarriage serves as a return to the domestic for

Helen (Diederich 38) and a complete loss of power over her identities. As her husband, Gilbert displays his power over Helen's identity by sending the information from her diary to Halford, a character who never appears in either locale. Diederich questions whether or not Gilbert will be any different than Huntingdon, noting that Gilbert, in marrying Helen, gains the authority to control her artistic aspirations by common law (35), an issue that runs parallel to her identities and her ability to control them. By showing the diary to Halford, Gilbert disregards Helen's desire to expose those identities to anyone but him. At the end of the novel, Helen regresses to a state in which her identities depend on the control of her husband. Although the novel endows Helen with a voice and demonstrates how often she is silenced by the men in society (Senf 455-6), she is ultimately silenced and reduced to the ideal domestic identities of wife and mother by her marital state and by the social doctrine of coverture. These are the only two identities that Helen possesses at the beginning of the text. Helen's motives for returning to this state are unclear, but the fact that she does so demonstrates her willingness to become a captive again and Victorian England's inability to provide any alternatives.

Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* portrays identity in a significantly more intimate manner by its usage of first-person narrative, even if that first-person is framed by Gilbert's narrative and presented by him in a letter to Halford. Overall, the novel demonstrates how marriage affects a woman's identities and her authority over them. As an unmarried *feme sole*, the youthful Helen initially spurns society's attempts at controlling her identities, but her love for Huntingdon eventually puts her and her identities at his mercy. She reserves some power to conceal her sentiments, a factor closely tied to her identities, but her reservations are shattered when Huntingdon forcibly unveils her identities by robbing her of her diary and forces her into the identity of captive. Once Helen escapes and assumes the identity of a widow, she regains

some control of her identities by isolating herself from society, but her solitary state is temporary because of social pressures that force Helen to emerge and allay curiosity. The multiplicity of social opinions fragments her identities until her marriage to Gilbert reduces her simply to the identities of wife and mother while also reestablishing a husband's control over her identities. Brontë's novel shows that in the cases of both Arthur Huntingdon and Gilbert Huntingdon, the captive elements of marriage, a Victorian woman's greatest aim in life, overturn her freedom to create her own identities.

CONCLUSION

In the novels *Ruth*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, female identities function differently because of the protagonists' individual personalities and the differences in their circumstances. Ruth's acquisition of multiple identities shows her growing awareness of Victorian mores; once she begins accepting these identities, she becomes capable of transcending the social boundaries that limit her roles in life. Conversely, Lucy's multiple identities demonstrate a woman's ability to manipulate existing ideals to gain transitory authority over her identities. Finally, Helen's situation illustrates that multiple identities can be used to escape a completely unified identity of wifehood yet retain the identity of mother, despite her eventual return to wifehood and subsequent loss of voice. The issue of multiple identities also highlights women's ability to escape, temporarily or permanently, the social codes that limit them. That such social codes require women to acquire multiple identities only to unify them again reveals the shortcomings that Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Anne Brontë perceived in the overly rigid Victorian social structures.

Although Ruth begins as socially ignorant, she gains an awareness of social codes as she becomes more active in acquiring identities. Initially, her identities of apprentice, fallen woman, and mother are forced upon her, and she accepts them without question. The result of such naivety is fallenness, which not only initiates her social awakening but also complicates the plurality of her identity. She maintains the identity of widow, but once again she does not actively pursue it herself. Rather, she submits to the Bensons and their alterations to her external identities. By accepting the identity of widow, Ruth can become a governess and again participate in respectable society, a benefit that most fallen women did not experience. Once Bellingham returns as Donne, Ruth begins actively to shape her identity. After rejecting Donne's

petition for marriage and the resulting identity of wife, Ruth attains the identities of nurse and caretaker, enabling her to participate in a wider society despite having been exposed as a fallen woman. Even so, her unified identity as Christian martyr, redeemed at last by death, becomes clear and shows that through her multiple identities she has transcended her society, thus highlighting the inadequacy of simply condemning fallen women.

Lucy, by far the most active of the three protagonists, never demonstrates ignorance of social codes despite her excessive frivolity. Full awareness of Victorian mores grants her the opportunity to manipulate the ideal and escape her first marriage and, by extension, poverty. Her middle-class status, gained through her first marriage, allows her to become a governess. She then uses her beauty to attract Sir Michael, whom she marries, which grants her a more comfortable and more desirable identity as Lady Audley. These identities conceal those aspects of herself that she finds less attractive, including both her madness and her status as an impoverished wife. Unlike the other protagonists, Lucy is self-centered; she acquires these identities for herself alone, abandoning her identity as mother in order to fully acquire more comfortable identities. Essentially, Lucy is the antithesis of Ruth: the Victorian view considered Lucy so utterly unacceptable that she is entirely exiled from England and forgotten. Her fate illustrates that a single undesirable identity, such as madness, can entirely override all others, a fact that is both unjust and inevitable.

Similarly, Helen becomes trapped in her identity as wife in much the same way Ruth's fallenness and Lucy's insanity trap them. As a *feme sole*, Helen remains caught in the social pressures of marriage, although she exercises marginal authority by choosing whom to marry. By accepting Huntingdon, Helen rebels against her aunt's definition of an appropriate husband. Their marriage provides a portrait of the undesirable husband, who attempts to impose a single

identity on Helen – wifehood – that excludes her identity as mother. In order to fulfill the Victorian expectations of mothers, Helen must paradoxically resist those of marriage; she maintains some of her pre-marital identities by keeping a diary and ultimately escapes by presenting herself as a widow. Later, despite her marriage to Gilbert, Helen's multiple identities show that conflicting interests between different expectations create situations that require women to break away from Victorian mores to achieve their personal desires. Because Helen retains her motherhood, and because her marriage to Gilbert allows her to continue that role in addition to her role as (presumably happier) wife, she in some sense triumphs over the system despite her loss of voice.

Exploring multiple identities in these three novels not only presents the intricacies of female identities and their relation to social codes but also raises other questions about the origins of female multiple identities resulting from social codes, as well as how multiple identities function for Victorian men. *Ruth*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are only three novels among many written by women during the mid-Victorian era; a more thorough examination could incorporate other works by Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, or Anne Brontë, such as *Wives and Daughters* (1866), *Aurora Floyd* (1863), or *Agnes Grey* (1847), as well as works by other writers including Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, Harriet Martineau, or George Eliot. This thesis also invites speculation about other ways in which women attempt to liberate themselves from social codes, which could reveal more about the precise changes in social codes that began creating multiple female identities. Examining the workings of fractured and multiple identities in these novels reveals both the multi-faceted nature of Victorian female identity and the various ways in which women relied on these multiple identities to transcend, manipulate, and escape the social codes that attempted to limit them.

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