Title of Paper: Equal Partnerships: Ideal Androgynous Marriages in *Jane Eyre* and *The Woman in White*¹
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Section: Articles
Date of Publication: March, 2014
Issue: Volume 2, Number 1

Abstract:

I stretch the denotation of androgyny and frame the characters from *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *The Woman in White* (1859) around a new connotation. Not only can androgyny be analyzed in terms of the individual, but I extend the term to the forms of marriage. I argue that the most optimal marriage in Victorian literature (and arguably today) is one in which both partners are androgynous, but also that the relationship is founded on friendship and equality, which I term an androgynous marriage. Unsuccessful marriages in the novel can be viewed as masculine when they rely solely on sexual intercourse for intimacy. Further, in the feminine marriage, the wife must be beautiful, obedient, passive, and perhaps obligated to marry her husband. Therefore, both Jane and Rochester, and Laura, (Marian) and Walter have a successful marriage, whereas Laura and Sir Percival and the Count and Madame Fosco have unsuccessful ones. Lastly, I argue that the character that dies in the unsuccessful marriages represents a gender polarity or abnormality, as well as serves in a male-dominant dutiful or sensual partnership.

Keywords: gender; androgyny; marriage, Wilkie Collins, Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*

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¹ A longer version of this paper includes a section on Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. This section is available upon request.
“I believe that our future salvation lies in a movement away from sexual polarization and the prison of gender toward a world in which individual roles and the modes of personal behavior can be freely chosen. The ideal toward which I believe we should move is best described by the term ‘androgyny.’ This ancient Greek word—from andro (male) and gyn (female)—defines a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes, and the human impulses expressed by men and women, are not rigidly assigned. Androgyny seeks to liberate the individual from the confines of the appropriate.”  

While the eighteenth century marked a theoretical shift in thinking about gender, the nineteenth century actually applied these theoretical frameworks about gender in practical ways. Specifically, the Victorian era in British history (1837-1901) marked a shift in gender schema. Women had more freedom to step outside of “what Barbara Welter dubbed the ‘cult of true womanhood’ [which] prescribed the attributes of the proper…female between 1820 and 1860. She was to be pious, pure, submissive and domesticated, for the true woman turned her home into a haven for all that was civilized and spiritual in a materialistic world.” Amanda Vickery continues on in her essay to emphasize this misconception: “in popular understanding ‘Victorian’ has long served as a general synonym for oppressive domesticity and repressive prudery.” Though Welter and Vickery identify a sense of gender rigidity in the early part of the Victorian era, this conception of gender quickly changed with the rise of industrialization in England. Esther Godfrey attributes this phenomenon to the workplace and explains, “Men, women, and children worked in mixed company in the mines, wearing little clothing because of the heat, and created an androgynous workplace where the notion of separate spheres and often gender differences themselves did not exist.” Thus, By the mid- 1840s, the increasing effects of industrialism and capitalism coincided with the processes that undermined and reinstated gender identities…rather than experiencing a dramatic division of a masculine workplace and feminine domesticity, working-class laborers witnessed an increased blurring of gender division by the mid- 1840s. Agrarian notions of men’s and women’s work dissolved as both men and women were utilized in the growing industrial economy. Moreover, the corresponding polarization of male and female realms within the middle class can be read as the result of a larger societal anxiety about gender identities that emerged from the instability of working-class gender roles in the new social framework.

3 Vickery 384
4 Vickery 386
6 Godfrey 854
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In the working classes, we begin to see the emergence of androgyny. Carolyn Heilbrun explains that “Androgyny suggests a spirit of reconciliation between the sexes; it suggests, further, a full range of experience open to individuals who may, as women, be aggressive, as men, tender; it suggests a spectrum upon which human beings choose their places without regard to propriety or custom.”\(^7\) More specifically, *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “androgyny” as the “Union of sexes in one individual.”\(^8\) To the modern reader, this can be reworded to say the “union of [genders] in one individual.” Therefore, “androgy nous” means the “uniting of the (physical) characters of both sexes, at once male and female” or “hence, of men: womanish, effeminate.”\(^9\) Again, I manipulate this definition to read, “uniting the characteristics of both genders, at once masculine and feminine.” In this chapter, Jane, Rochester, Marian, and Walter will be defined as androgynous characters, while St. John, Blanche, Madame Fosco, Count Fosco, and Sir Percival will be read as representing a gender polarity.

Though industrialization had a strong effect on the blurring of gender boundaries in the working classes, there was still a division of labor in place, especially in the upper class. Women were confined to the domestic sphere, while men generally were demarcated to the labor sphere. Godfrey explains one consequence of this gender confusion for the middle class: “In reaction to this unsettling ambiguity regarding gender identities, middle-class Victorians began to push masculine and feminine constructions to extremes, reinforcing the divisions between male and female spheres of power and influence.”\(^10\)

Not only can we use gendered terms to describe individuals and characters, but we can also use these terms to categorize different marriages. Indeed, these definitions of androgyny in particular can be layered onto marriage. Lee Anna Maynard writes about Wollstonecraft’s idea of the ideal marriage in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and connects it to the marriage between Jane and Rochester:

> Wollstonecraft’s notion of marriage as passionless friendship is perhaps not so very different from what Jane and Rochester achieve by the end of the novel, where the sexually and culturally charged nature of his first proposed union…has been purged. Marriages both purely dutiful (as offered by St. John Rivers) and solely sensual (as expected the first time by Rochester) promise boredom and stasis in *Jane Eyre*, because the result of either the utility option or the ‘beauty’ possibility would be Jane’s subordination. The marriage

\(^7\) Heilbrun x-xi  
\(^8\) “Androgyny.” *Oxford English Dictionary*  
\(^9\) “Androgy nous.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, definitions 1 and 2  
\(^10\) Godfrey 856

Maynard touches on a key component of marriage: she rightfully analyzes the relationship between the dutiful and the sensual marriages, but I want to extend it further to say that the dutiful marriage represents the purely feminine choice/obligation, and the purely sensual marriage symbolizes the masculine choice. In the dutiful marriage, the wife must be beautiful, obedient, passive, and perhaps, obligated to marry her husband. This can clearly be seen in the marriages between Sir Percival Glyde and Laura Fairlie, and Count and Madame Fosco in \textit{The Woman in White}. However, with the last marriage, Marian Halcombe plays an instrumental role in their union by sacrificing her own happiness for Laura’s future. Further, in the sensual marriage, the wife is more of a sexual object, and lust is more prominent than true love. Maynard recognizes that this is the marriage Jane and Rochester would have had if Jane had accepted Rochester’s proposal the first time.

For this paper, I stretch the denotation of androgyny and frame the characters from \textit{Jane Eyre} (1847) and \textit{The Woman in White} (1859) around a new connotation, suggesting that Wollstonecraft’s insights in the 1790s into the fluid gender identities that might produce equality could, by the middle of the next century, be fully imagined in literary works. Not only can androgyny be analyzed in terms of the individual, but I will extend the term to the forms of marriage. I will argue that the optimal marriage in Victorian literature (and arguably today) is one in which both partners are androgynous, but also that the marriage is founded on friendship and equality—which I term an androgy nous marriage—instead of obligation (feminine) or lust (masculine). Therefore, both Jane and Rochester, and Laura/(Marian) and Walter have a successful marriage, whereas Laura and Sir Percival and the Count and Madame Fosco have unsuccessful marriages in which one partner is killed off. Lastly, I argue that the character who dies in the unsuccessful marriages represents a gender polarity or abnormality, as seen in Sir Percival and Count Fosco. Both the dutiful and the sensual marriages are male-dominant, which is why they are unsuccessful, and also why the failed marriages end in the death of the dominant males. Both Charlotte Brontë and Wilkie Collins comment on the social status of marriage, and by killing off the hyper-masculine characters, they both seem to be biased toward the androgynous relationship. Even Rochester gets seemingly punished for his early hyper-masculine behavior in the beginning of the novel: he is maimed and blinded in the house fire, which is a catalyst for his newfound androgyny at the close of the novel. First, by looking at some individual characters in both novels, I will determine who is a successful androgynous character, and who fails because of their gendered polarity.
Gendered Revisions in Victorian Literature

Despite the polarized gender expectations during the nineteenth century, Victorian literature began to display a kind of shift and blurring between gender categories. Nancy Armstrong discusses how “Victorian fiction used the gender binary both to establish and to deny the continuity between these contradictory ways of being human, a continuity that advantageously destabilized the individual so that it could be reconstituted in ever new and updated forms.” These “updated forms” of gender can be seen in two quintessential novels in Victorian literature: Jane Eyre and The Woman in White. First, with Jane Eyre, Godfrey recognizes that while challenging gender identities, the text does more than simply transfer power from the patriarchal grasp of Rochester to the powerless hand of Jane, and it does more than feed post-Butlerian critical perspectives; the text highlights the anxieties and complexities of the Victorian understanding of gender by paradoxically dismantling and reifying nineteenth-century notions of masculinity and femininity…Jane's roles as governess and as girl bride associate her with complex and often contradictory notions of androgyny and femininity, sexuality and innocence.

This is quite interesting, especially in light of Heilbrun’s observation of Charlotte Brontë. Heilbrun writes,

> The author of Jane Eyre was blamed for having no insight into ‘the truly feminine nature…the hold which a daily round of simple duties and pure pleasures has on those who are content to practice them’ at the same time as she was castigated for being the most unfeminine ‘in the annals of female authorship. Throughout there is a masculine power, breadth and shrewdness, combined with masculine hardness, coarseness and freedom of expression,’ the contemporary viewer announced. Charlotte Brontë’s books were repeatedly called ‘masculine,’ blamed for qualities which, attractive in men, are despicable in women; such relativity in assessing moral and imaginative ideals was acceptable in no connection but that of gender.

Although Brontë’s novel was condemned in her own time, Jane Eyre is undeniably significant in highlighting shifting gender conventions in the Victorian era. These claims that Brontë had no insight into femininity are of course outdated; her insight was indeed provocative and more sophisticated than her contemporaries gave her credit for. Because her novels were viewed as masculine, the modern reader can appreciate Brontë as a revolutionary female author of her time.

Similarly, Wilkie Collins, although he was writing as a male in the Victorian era, accomplished much of the same revolutionary nature in his novel The Woman in White. Heilbrun describes his characterization,

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12 Armstrong 535
13 Godfrey 853-4
14 Heilbrun 78-9
Wilkie Collins’s female characters, self-reliant and surprisingly competent for their time, are no less surprising seen through the passage of years. Marian Hargrave is the feminist heroine no female writer has managed to portray…Collins in The Woman in White does not give his heroine of the lovely body and ugly face a lover, except by proxy…Neither beautiful nor passive, therefore not the heroine; not a man, therefore not the hero, [Marian] is a startlingly original invention of Collins’s. He tried to do in fiction what life could not accomplish: find a place for a highly competent woman who is intelligent, generous, and resourceful, and avoid writing fantasy at the same time.\textsuperscript{15}

Collins creates an androgynous heroine who thrives at the close of his novel, which, although similar to the ending of Jane Eyre, went against the expectations of the time and served to change the way readers conceptualized successful women both in fiction and in Victorian society. Taking all of these points into account, then, it is clear that the Victorian era marked a time in which gender schema were under construction because, while the working class seemed content with the rise of androgyny, the middle and upper classes seemed resistant to this “middle” gender category and fought to maintain traditional masculinity and femininity. At the end of the Victorian period, however, androgyny did prevail, as seen in much of the literature during the time. Perhaps the literature helped to propel androgyny to its proper status of a legitimate gender category following Wollstonecraft’s strong outcry at the end of the eighteenth century.

The Individual in Jane Eyre

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.\textsuperscript{16}

Jane Eyre immediately establishes her rebellious and strong-willed nature in the beginning of the novel at the Reed house when she fights back against her cousin John:

I felt a drop or two of blood from my head trickle down my neck, and was sensible of somewhat pungent suffering: these sensations for the time predominated over fear, and I received him in a frantic sort. I don’t very well

\textsuperscript{15} Heilbrun 71

\textsuperscript{16} Brontë, Jane Eyre 109
know what I did with my hands, but he called me ‘Rat! rat!’ and bellowed out loud.\textsuperscript{17}

Being only ten years old at the time, and being four years younger than John, Jane’s actions are not only impressive but extremely bold. John is her superior in the house in terms of familial ties, age, and gender. Jane literally strikes out against his oppression, and figuratively fights against the scripted gender schemata that girls are supposed to be submissive and obedient to their superiors. This aggression can also be seen in her stay at Lowood School where she is confronted with more oppression from Brocklehurst and the other teachers. After she witnesses Helen getting beaten by her teacher, she later tells Helen, “‘And if I were in your place, I should dislike [your teacher]; I should resist her; if she struck me with that rod, I should get it from her hand; I should break it under her nose.’”\textsuperscript{18} From an early age, the reader can see that Jane has masculine characteristics, such as aggression and obstinacy toward authority. It is interesting to consider that while Jane flourishes despite her masculine traits, Helen, a dutiful female, perishes in the school, dying early on from consumption. Even in her last hours, Jane acts against the teachers’ wishes and lies with Helen as she slowly passes on, and Jane does not contract the disease. Here, Charlotte Brontë comments on the power of the strong-willed female versus the futility of the purely obedient one.

When St. John reveals to Jane that she has an inheritance, the reader expects her to react with excitement and perhaps tears. However, Jane remains rational and calm, all the while thinking of her family. She rationalizes her reaction to the reader,

One does not jump, and spring, and shout hurrah!...one begins to consider responsibilities, and to ponder business…and we contain ourselves, and brood over our bliss with a solemn brow…And then this money came to… my isolated self. It was a grand boon doubtless; and independence would be glorious…\textit{that} thought swelled my heart.\textsuperscript{19}

Her level-headed response to this news reveals her inner-masculinity: like a man, she immediately considers her obligations to her family members, she “ponder[s] business”—which was seen as an exclusively male domain—and she remains solemn when remembering she has never before had a family of her own. Her consolation is that she will now be able to be independent and to provide solely for herself without relying on a man like Rochester or St. John. Jane becomes free to venture out on her own and provide for her cousins. Her decision to give away three-fourths of her fortune reflects her female nurturing instinct to care for others (especially family), but also her male instinct to provide financially for her immediate relatives. She acts both selflessly and dutifully, which makes her action quintessentially androgynous in nature.

\textsuperscript{17} Brontë, \textit{Jane Eyre} 11

\textsuperscript{18} Brontë, \textit{Jane Eyre} 55

\textsuperscript{19} Brontë, \textit{Jane Eyre} 382
Jane also exerts her independence when speaking to Rochester throughout the story. When Rochester and Jane have their first extensive conversation in Thornfield Hall, he asks Jane, “do you think me handsome?” and Jane responds, “No, sir.”20 She continues to have a lengthy conversation in which she speaks straightforwardly, confidently, and clearly, which completely enchants Mr. Rochester. When he forgets that Jane is his “paid subordinate,” he recollects himself and asks, “will you agree to let me hector a little?” and Jane responds, ‘No, sir, not on that ground: but on the ground that you did forget [my subordinate position], and that you care whether or not a dependent is comfortable in his dependency, I heartily agree.”21 A typical submissive female would normally have answered his question with a simple “Yes,” but instead Jane wants to make her motives clear so that she and Rochester can participate in a platonic conversation, where she can be free to express her opinions despite Rochester’s status. Because Jane does not tell Rochester what he wants to hear, and instead puts forth her own beliefs unfiltered, she participates as an equal, as any one of Rochester’s male friends may speak to him. She directly rejects the female expectation to be restrained and docile, and instead embodies a male character with her frankness.

Jane’s resoluteness remains intact even after she falls in love with Rochester and he proposes to her. She refuses to take all the extravagant silk gowns that he offers her, she does not wish to wear the expensive jewels, and most significantly, she denies herself happiness with him upon finding out that he is married to Bertha. Laurence Talairach-Vielmas argues that Jane refuses the jewels and gowns, preferring to remain plain. He writes, “Jane’s feelings of ‘physical inferiority’ result from her lack of conformity, which subjects her to punishments.”22 One punishment can be seen as the postponement of her wedding to Rochester. After the pair returns to Thornfield Hall from the church, she tells Rochester that she cannot marry him while he is married to Bertha. Rochester becomes infuriated, and Jane narrates,

“I saw that in another moment, and with one impetus of frenzy more, I should be able to do nothing with him…a movement of repulsion, flight, fear, would have sealed my doom—and his. But I was not afraid: not in the least. I felt an inward power: a sense of influence, which supported me…-- ‘Sit down; I’ll talk to you as long as you like, and hear all you have to say, whether reasonable or unreasonable.’23

She understands the severity of the situation when she acknowledges that any kind of sudden movement would cause him to go into “frenzy.” Here, Jane speaks to

20 Brontë, Jane Eyre 131

21 Brontë, Jane Eyre 134


23 Brontë, Jane Eyre 302
Rochester calmly as a man would have spoken to a woman to calm her down in a fit of passion. The “inward power” that Jane feels in this moment was not something that a typical woman would feel because women did not possess any power, especially when speaking to a man of superiority. Jane, however, embodies this power to give her the strength that she does not naturally have as a woman in this situation.

Moreover, Rochester takes on the feminine role, allowing himself and his emotions to be controlled by Jane in this conversation. He loses his agency, knowing he is to blame for her rejection. Rochester, then, becomes an androgynous character as well, putting himself at Jane’s mercy. This gender reversal is crystallized later in their conversation,

‘Preconceived opinions and foregone determinations, are all I have at this hour to stand by: there I plant my foot.’ I did. Mr. Rochester, reading my countenance, saw I had done so…My eye rose to his. ‘He responds, ‘Consider that eye: consider the resolute, wild, free thing looking out of it, defying me, with more than courage—with a stern triumph.’

Jane acts as the rational, calm male, while Rochester acts as the hysterical female. She stands by her “preconceived opinions and foregone determinations,” which are her religious beliefs and moral obligations. Jane’s embodiment of the male role contributes to her androgyny, and makes her not only a balanced female character, but also a moral woman who does not give in to her desires without considering the consequences, both being characteristics that Rochester finds desirable in a wife. Further, Rochester gives in to his more feminine emotions, making him a feminine male character, or an androgynous male. Although Jane and Rochester cannot be together at this point of the book due to legal issues, the blended female and male characteristics in both of these characters ultimately brings them together in marriage at the close of the novel.

Instead of following the stereotypical feminine duties outlined in her narration, Jane questions authority from a young age, she makes her own money, supports herself, refuses Rochester’s initial illegitimate proposal, aids Rochester during his blindness, and yet maintains her feminine role as governess and loving wife. Therefore, Jane proves that her womanly self-worth is not vested in an idealistic beauty, but rather in her strong-mindedness, good morals, intelligence, and independence, making her an idealistic androgynous character in Victorian literature. This is a sharp contrast to Blanche Ingram, who wishes to marry Rochester for his money and thinks her appearance and status will be enough to entice him to propose. However, her lack of morals and resoluteness of character makes her an unsuccessful hyper-feminine character. Jen Cadwallader succinctly writes in her essay, “Blanche’s hyper-awareness of herself is a mark of her cynicism: she is willing to shape her persona to fit an ideal that she thinks will give her the power to attract a husband… Blanche flattens herself, choking off any depth that might point to the real rather than the

24 Brontë, Jane Eyre 317-8
Perhaps if she was more masculine, meaning at least more confident in her intelligence and independence in society, she would have been able to marry Rochester, but she was merely looking for a dutiful marriage instead of an equal partnership, and so failed in her pursuits.

Just as Blanche is a hyper-feminine character in the novel, St. John is a hyper-masculine one. He proposes to Jane and relentlessly pursues her, even after she declines his offer. St. John wants to marry her out of duty so that he would not be bringing a single woman with him to India. He does not love her, although his sexual undertones are quite disturbing. He scorns her up until the night he leaves, and also leaves a note to remind her of her duty to accompany him. He even tells her that she had already promised to go with him, which is untrue. His scheming behavior and relentless pursuing of Jane makes him a hyper-masculine character, which is why Jane cannot marry him. Marrying St. John would have shackled Jane into a feminine marriage based on obligation and would have eliminated any hope for happiness.

**Marriage in Jane Eyre**

“Must marriage—or love—be sacrificial? Must union involve the compromise or annihilation of individuality and, particularly, of woman’s individuality?”

Lee Anna Maynard critiques two paths for women in the Victorian era as seen in the Reed sisters, “[Georgiana and Eliza] have become not just women but types; in fact, they represent the two options for women in the world of this novel—the useless, beautiful, marriageable woman and the useful, unbeautiful spinster.” Maynard goes on to dichotomize the two female life choices,

While Eliza Reed embraces this course of action (or rather course of meaningless activity), and Georgiana Reed derides it and instead claims the option open only to those endowed with beauty, Jane rejects both the boring routine of utility epitomized by Eliza and the equally boring and static life of the intellectually inactive (and usually beautiful) typified by Georgiana.

Here, the “static life of the intellectually inactive” can be seen as the feminine lifestyle, one in which a man typically works long hours, makes money, and generally supports his family as a dutiful obligation, and the wife stays at home, knits, reads, and dresses nicely for house guests. On the other hand, the “boring routine of utility” can be seen as the masculine lifestyle, where the woman works to support herself financially, but never marries. Eliza and Georgiana nicely embody these polar

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27 Maynard 19

28 Maynard 28
opposite lifestyles, whereas Jane blatantly rejects both options, preferring a blended androgynous lifestyle.

Instead, Jane receives her inheritance, rejects St. John’s marriage proposal, and seeks Rochester. Putting Jane and Rochester’s marriage into Wollstonecraft’s terms, Jane and Rochester become “friends/companions coexisting in an equal and almost symbiotic relationship.”

Jane immediately agrees to aid Rochester through his blindness for the rest of their lives, proving her undying and unconditional love for him. He must rely on her physically, while the pair will rely on each other for reciprocal love for the rest of their lives. Jane blissfully relates the state of her marriage at the end of the novel:

I have now been married ten years. I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love most on earth. I hold myself supremely blest—blest beyond what language can express; because I am my husband’s life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh. I know no weariness of my Edward’s society: he knows none of mine, and more than we each do of the pulsation of the heart that beats in our separate bosoms; consequently, we are ever together. To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay in company. We talk, I believe, all day long: to talk to each other is but a more animated and audible thinking. All my confidence is bestowed on him; all his confidence is devoted to me: we are precisely suited in character; perfect concord is the result.

She writes that she lives “entirely for and with” Rochester, and the feeling is completely mutual for Rochester as well. They are akin to best friends who have fallen deeply in love. Lee Anna Maynard comments on their marriage: “for Jane [friendship] becomes a site for the breakdown of binaries of power, whether teacher/student, familiated/orphaned, beautiful/sublime, or master/servant, and it is the ability to transcend these binaries that will lend her relationship with her husband a progressive rather than static quality.”

Maynard’s words and Jane’s narration indicate that Jane has found her perfectly balanced androgynous relationship: they are able to converse with and confide in each other, which is uncharacteristic of both the dutiful marriage and the sensual marriage. The dutiful marriage would not include such intimacies because there would be a lack of romantic love. Similarly, the sensual marriage would be devoid of these same intimacies because the focus would be on the physical relationship, instead of the intellectual and romantic relationship. As Jane writes, the two have found a “perfect concord,” a concord which I term the androgynous marriage. Millicent Bell writes in her article, “Brontë wants to show that Jane’s nature can give and take most fully only in the ardor of a passionate and equal

29 Quoted in Maynard 32

30 Brontë, Jane Eyre 450-1

31 Maynard 33
Both Jane and Rochester are not motivated by obligation or by lust, but purely love and commitment; they live in perfect harmony, relying on each other for support, and trusting each other so completely.

**The Individual in *The Woman in White***

D. A. Miller perceptively registers the confusion of distinct, rigid gender categories in this novel. Marian Halcombe, the most compelling female character and narrator in the novel, represents ‘anima virilis in corpore muliebri inclusa’: a man’s spirit imprisoned in a female body.  

This quotation proves androgyny’s saliency in *The Woman in White*: not only is Marian androgynous, but so is her male counterpart Walter Hartright. Marian plays the moral character when she tells Walter to leave the house while he is drawing master because Laura is already engaged to be married; she acts as advisor to both Walter and Laura; she plays messenger at Sir Percival Glyde’s house when arranging the details for her sister’s first wedding; and she helps Walter uncover the truth in order to free Laura from unjustified alienation. As for the male characters, Sir Percival and Count Fosco are hyper-masculine, both wanting control over their wives, and both dictating Laura’s fate. Sir Percival and Count Fosco die by the end of the novel, while Walter Hartright persists and marries Laura.

First, Marian Halcombe’s appearance defies the simple categorization of “female:” Walter’s first encounter with her is most memorable for his description of her perfectly shapely body, yet ugly face. He narrates,never was the old conventional maxim, that Nature cannot err, more flatly contradicted—never was the fair promise of a lovely figure more strangely and startlingly belied by the face and head that crowned it. The lady’s complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. She had a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair, growing unusually low down on her forehead. Her expression-bright, frank, and intelligent—appeared, while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete. To see such a face as this set on shoulders that a sculptor would have longed to model…and then to be almost repelled by the masculine form and masculine look of the features in which the perfectly shaped figure ended—was to feel a sensation oddly akin to the helpless discomfort familiar to us all in sleep, when we recognise yet cannot reconcile the anomalies and contradictions of a dream. (My emphasis)

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34 Collins, *The Woman in White* 32
Here, Walter comments on the contrasting feminine form and her “masculine mouth and jaw,” to which he cannot possibly be attracted. However, he instantaneously notes her intelligent expression, a comment which becomes validated throughout the novel. From the beginning of the novel, Walter forces the reader to believe that Marian is the “ugly duckling” (however intelligent she may be), while her sister Laura is beautiful and feminine. Ann Gaylin makes an intriguing claim regarding Marian’s appearance that,

In this catalogue of appearance, traditional notions of feminine beauty combine with hints of the woman yet to be encountered. She is shapely, yet that shape is visible because she does not restrict her body with the usual accoutrements of fashion: the stays that normally confine a woman’s body. Even her body resists enclosure.\(^{35}\)

The “hints of the woman yet to be encountered” surely imply her intelligence, bravery, and masculinity. Gaylin’s idea that Marian’s form is visible because she does not conform to wearing the “stays that normally confine a woman’s body” implies Marian’s resistance to restriction in general. Gaylin keys into a crucial aspect of Marian Halcombe: that she makes her own decisions, regardless of the gender scripts for women, thus making her quite a radical character in terms of her masculinity. Therefore, Marian is a perfect physical embodiment of androgyny. Karen C. Gindele poses a provocative question: “How better to suggest the shortcomings of a patriarchal, British, conservative conception of women than to show Walter defining Marian as masculine if she doesn't fit the feminine paradigm? The shock at Marian's appearance comes only from Walter. Fosco is unreservedly attracted to her.”\(^{36}\) Gindele is correct in stating that Walter is the only male character who is not attracted to Marian. More importantly, however, Gindele accurately attacks the “British, conservative conception of women” by deeming it wrong; I will add that this conception could (and should be) expanded today to deem independent and androgynous women as desirable, instead of only the fragile, docile, obedient women. The Count already accepts Marian despite (or perhaps because of) her masculinity, which is a rather progressive idea in Collins’s novel.

Marian also proves her androgyny when she speaks about her own sex. She seems frustrated throughout the novel that she was born female, and she seems to suggest that she would have been perhaps happier if she had been born a male because she would have had more freedom in her actions and decisions. During her first conversation with Walter, she bluntly states, “‘You see I don’t think much of my own sex, Mr. Hartright…no woman does think much of her own sex, although few of them confess it as freely as I do…are you surprised at my careless way of talking?...[if so] I will…do all a woman can (which is very little, by-the-by) to hold my tongue.’”\(^{37}\) Her

\(^{35}\) Gaylin 313


\(^{37}\) Collins, The Woman in White 33
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self-condescending and sarcastic tone reveals Marian’s frustration with her own sex. She admits that she is a free-thinker who finds it extremely difficult to “hold [her] tongue” when she holds a strong opinion. This characteristic is also a masculine one in that females were generally supposed to keep their opinions to themselves, and merely agree with their husbands (or men in general). Her refusal to submit to this norm makes her androgynous.

Marian Halcombe provides a nice foil to her male counterpart, Walter Hartright: throughout the novel, there are several instances where Walter’s emotions reveal his femininity. For example, when Marian tells Walter that Laura is engaged to be married, she forcefully tells him,

‘Crush it!...Here where you first saw her, crush it! Don’t shrink under it like a woman. Tear it out; trample it under foot like a man!’ The suppressed vehemence with which she spoke; the strength which her will—concentrated in the look she fixed on me, and in the hold on my arm that she had not yet relinquished—communicated to mine, steadied me. We both waited for a minute, in silence. At the end of that time, I had justified her generous faith in my manhood; I had, outwardly at least, recovered my self-control.

Ann Gaylin succinctly comments on this passage,

Walter’s first narrative emphasizes her assurance and her ‘will’ which continually bolster his own lack of ‘manhood’…In response to Marian’s ‘fearless sympathy which me[ets him] on such mercifully equal terms,’ Walter evinces a general ‘loss of self-control’ and ‘weakness’…His position is that of emotionally overwhelmed, speechless, and submissive femininity; hers, that of ‘fearless,’ self-possessed, determined masculinity. When he leaves Limmeridge, she presses his hands ‘with the strong, steady grasp of a man’ while ‘[his] voice falter[s], [his] eyes moiste[n] in spite of [himself]’ (148). Just as with Jane and Rochester, Marian and Walter reverse their gender roles, Marian playing the calming male figure, and Walter playing the emotional, helpless female character. Marian refuses to submit to her female role: she could have consoled Walter here with a hug and some calming words, but instead she told him to basically “man up,” which proved effective. Her striking tone makes her unassailable and she carries this tone with her through the toughest times in the novel, never fully submitting to any female weaknesses. Her refusal to submit to her emotions makes her androgynous; oppositely, Walter does give in to his emotions, making him androgynous like Marian.

Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco represent hyper-masculinity in the novel. Sir Percival marries Laura in order to receive her inheritance, and uses his friendship with Mr. Fairlie to get to her. He completely abuses his power, imprisons Laura, Marian, and Anne Catherick, all the while concealing his own deadly secret. He has no

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38 Collins, The Woman in White 71

39 Gaylin 314
sympathy for any other character in the book, and his motives are purely selfish. This is most clearly seen when he tries to fool Laura into signing over her inheritance without her reading the document:

‘Nonsense! What have women to do with business? I tell you again, you can’t understand it...[Mr. Gilmore] was your servant, and was obliged to explain. I am your husband, and am not obliged...The next time you invite yourself to a man’s house, Miss Halcombe, I recommend you not to repay his hospitality by taking his wife’s side against him in a manner that doesn’t concern you.’

Sir Percival shows a complete lack of sympathy and respect for the two sisters. He does not feel it necessary to explain business matters to a woman, although not because Laura will not understand, but rather because he is trying to dupe her out of her future financial security in order to pay his own debts. Sir Percival exceeds his masculine role in chastising Marian for trying to help his wife, and for criticizing the pair of them for trying to invade an exclusively male business domain. This exclusion and reprimanding makes him hyper-masculine, and therefore doomed to fail in his marriage to Laura.

Count Fosco is a troubling character in *The Woman in White*. He serves as the puppet master of the story by conniving his way to Laura’s inheritance and ruin; serving as confidante and advisor to Sir Percival; and taming everyone and everything in which he comes into contact. Although some critics, including Gindele see Fosco as androgynous because of his love for his animals and sweets, I find the Count to be hyper-masculine. Gindele argues,

> He himself remarks, ‘in his softest tones and his tenderest manner,’ that a ‘taste for sweets is the innocent taste of women and children. I love to share it with them—it is another bond, dear ladies, between you and me’ (311). This bond subverts gender differences in his own person. He has both masculine and feminine qualities.

Contrary to Gindele’s argument, the Count does not share the “taste for sweets” or use the “softest tones and his tenderest manner” purely for self-pleasure (although I do believe that he genuinely loves these dainties); rather, he does this as a way to win the women over and blind them to his grand scheme. Every move the Count makes contributes to his master plan. Therefore, on the surface, it may appear that the Count is quite feminine, but actually he performs intentionally, creating a façade so the women will sympathize with him. Thus, his feminine pleasures are not enough to deem him androgynous because of how he uses these pleasures to his advantage.

Even when he plays with his canaries and mice, this only proves that he has the ability to tame anything he wishes. Even Marian agrees that the Count has this power: “He looks like a man who could tame anything. If he had married a tigress, instead of a woman, he would have tamed the tigress. If he had married me, I should have made...

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40 Collins, *The Woman in White* 247-9

41 Gindele 5
his cigarettes for him as his wife does—I should have held my tongue when he looked at me, as she holds hers.\(^{42}\) As Marian is arguably the strongest character in the novel, her admission of the Count’s power over her is credible. She would be the last person to make a man’s cigarettes for him; the fact that she admits that she would do it for the Count is something that cannot be ignored. Judith Sanders agrees: “huge, domineering Fosco purposefully pretends to be effeminate and child-like. Rather than strive to be virile…Fosco sheathes his iron fist in frilled velvet…Such effeminate and childish pleasures flimsily camouflage his diabolical masculine super-power.”\(^{43}\) Because of his power as a hyper-masculine man, the Count is successful until the very end of the novel. Until his death, he has complete control of the plot, as well as control over all the other characters in the novel, as he is able to tame them to act exactly as he wishes. However, his “diabolical masculine super-power” ultimately ruins him, and Collins kills him off.

**Marriage in The Woman in White**

Sir Percival and Laura Fairlie become engaged when Mr. Fairlie lies on his deathbed and requests that the two be wed. So, Laura marries Sir Percival purely out of duty to her late father. When Laura returns from her honeymoon, Marian can tell that Laura is not happy with her marriage, but Laura does not disclose her pain to her sister. Marian grievously admits,

> None of her letters had prepared me for a personal change in her. On the contrary, they had led me to expect that her marriage had left her, in appearance at least, quite unaltered…The second change, the change that I have observed in her character, has not surprised me, because I was prepared for it, in this case, by the tone of her letters. Now that she is at home again, I find her just as unwilling to enter into any details on the subject of her married life, as I had previously found her, all through the time of separation, when we could only communicate with each other by writing.\(^ {44}\)

Because Laura does not wish to talk about her marriage, Marian discerns that Laura is unhappy in her marriage, and throughout the rest of the novel, Marian learns why: Laura has entered into a feminine marriage based on female duty and obligation instead of a marriage founded on equality and friendship.

Sir Percival acts with civility when Laura tells him that she is in love with another man, and Glyde still wishes to marry her. However, he shows his true colors when he arrives at Blackwater Park. Marian narrates,

> He greeted me, on the evening of his return, with little or nothing of the ceremony and civility of former times—no polite speeches of welcome—no

\(^{42}\) Collins, *The Woman in White* 219


\(^{44}\) Collins, *The Woman in White* 213-4
appearance of extraordinary gratification at seeing me—nothing but a short
shake of the hand, and a sharp ‘How-d’ye-do, Miss Halcombe—glad to see
you again.’ He seemed to accept me as one of the necessary fixtures of
Blackwater Park; to be satisfied at finding me established in my proper place;
and then to pass me over altogether.\textsuperscript{45}

This suggests that Sir Percival was only acting kindly toward Marian and Laura so
that Laura would marry him. Indeed, the readers find out that he only wanted to marry
her for her inheritance. He is overbearing with his orders toward both Marian and
Laura, and he goes to great lengths to protect his family secret that would ruin his
reputation forever. Sir Percival and Laura’s marriage, then, is a purely dutiful
marriage, completely male-dominated, and ultimately highly undesirable and
unsuccessful. There is a complete lack of love from both parties. In fact, Marian
questions Sir Percival when he locks Laura in her room, “‘Am I to understand, Sir
Percival, that your wife’s room is a prison, and that your housemaid is the gaoler who
keeps it?’” He retorts, “‘Yes, that is what you are to understand…Take care my gaoler
hasn’t got double duty to do—take care your room is not a prison, too.’”\textsuperscript{46} He thinks
of his wife as a prisoner in her own house, instead of his partner who shares all their
possessions. Further, Sir Percival condescends Laura in the business meeting where
she is to sign over her inheritance blindly,

“‘Scruples!...Your scruples! It is rather late in the day for you to be scrupulous. I
should have thought you had got over all weakness of that sort, when you made a
virtue of necessity by marrying me.’”\textsuperscript{47} When looking at Sir Percival’s general ill-
tempered mannerisms and distasteful conduct toward the two sisters and combining
that with Sir Percival’s actions at the business meeting, Sir Percival is indeed a hyper-
masculine character who ultimately must die to restore the book to its gender stasis.

The marriage between Count and Madame Fosco is also feminine, dutiful and male-
centric; Count Fosco dominates the marriage when he tames Madame Fosco and
gives her orders as to her conduct. He also manipulates her into helping him ruin
Laura’s reputation at the end of the novel. Madame Fosco is completely tamed, and
does not mention her opinion unless the Count approves. Marian remembers her aunt
as being an independent, strong woman and recognizes the Countess’s radical change
into a tamed, calm, submissive housewife:

Never before have I beheld such a change produced in a woman by her
marriage as has been produced in Madame Fosco…As Madame Fosco…she
sits for hours together without saying a word, frozen up in the strangest
manner in herself…she sits speechless in corners…On the few occasions
when her cold blue eyes are off her work, they are generally turned on her

\textsuperscript{45} Collins,\textit{ The Woman in White} 216-7

\textsuperscript{46} Collins,\textit{ The Woman in White} 298

\textsuperscript{47} Collins,\textit{ The Woman in White} 250
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husband, with the look of mute submissive inquiry which we are all familiar with in the eyes of a faithful dog.\textsuperscript{48} The image of her as a “faithful dog” is quite pitiful, as she has no agency of her own, and must answer to the Count. When Marian confronts the Countess’s newfound passivity, Madame Fosco answers, “‘I wait to be instructed…before I venture on giving my opinion in the presence of well-informed men.’”\textsuperscript{49} Marian responds, in a question that evokes the spirit of Wollstonecraft’s \textit{Vindications}, “I remember the time, Countess, when you advocated the Rights of Women—and freedom of female opinion was one of them.” Madame Fosco then submissively deflects the insult to her husband, “‘What is your view of the subject, Count?’” She immediately allows the Count to respond for her, even though his opinions do not match her own. The Count squelches her voice in their marriage, something that is characteristic of a dutiful, feminine marriage.\textsuperscript{50}

Not only does the Countess defer to her husband in discussions, but she also obeys him without him even having to ask her to. For example, in the business meeting between Sir Percival, Count Fosco, Laura, and Marian, Madame Fosco gets up to leave. “‘You needn’t go,’ said Sir Percival. Madame Fosco looked for her orders again, got them again, said she would prefer leaving us to our business, and resolutely walked out.”\textsuperscript{51} She masks the fact that the Count orders her out of the room by saying that she would rather leave the business to the men, making it seem like those are her wishes, even though she was silently given orders to say that in front of the others. Following orders is not a characteristic of a healthy, “symbiotic” relationship between companions, as Wollstonecraft terms; on the contrary, following orders fits into the feminine marriage category, where the woman is completely dependent upon and obedient toward the man.

Even though it seems as though the Count flatters his wife, he merely puts on a ruse so he can continue manipulating the other characters. Madame Fosco gets jealous when he looks at Marian (or any other women), and the Count patronizes her into believing he adores her. She defers to the Count when speaking to Marian and Laura and the Count rewards her behavior, “‘Pray allow the Count to proceed,’ said Madame Fosco, with stern civility. ‘You will find, young ladies, that he never speaks without having excellent reasons for all that he says.’” The Count responds, “‘Thank

\textsuperscript{48} Collins, \textit{The Woman in White} 218-9

\textsuperscript{49} Collins, \textit{The Woman in White} 236

\textsuperscript{50} Here, it is difficult to ignore the reference to the “Rights of Women.” Collins may be providing a parody of Wollstonecraft’s famous work “The Vindications of the Rights of Woman.” Madame Fosco then could represent a woman who used to align with Wollstonecraft’s ideals when she was a single woman, and then later comes to embody exactly what Wollstonecraft condemns in her work.

\textsuperscript{51} Collins, \textit{The Woman in White} 246
you, my angel…Have a bonbon?” He adores her because she is obedient to him. She makes him cigarettes, and she continuously stands up for him when Marian tries to argue with him. Thus, the Count’s hyper-masculinity, and Madame Fosco’s newfound hyper-femininity create an unsuccessful and unbalanced marriage in which the Count must be killed off.

Contrary to the dutiful marriages in the novel, Walter marries Laura out of obligation to save her reputation. Although he claims to love her in the beginning of the novel when he serves as her drawing master, Walter’s love for her is based on her beauty rather than a deeper emotional connection. In fact, Rachel Albow provocatively argues that Laura is not the first person with whom Walter falls in love. After all, Laura is not the first woman to alter Walter's pulses. She may be the first to stir them, but by the time he meets her, his heartbeat has already been arrested by her half-sister on the moonlit highway. As a result, the very attribute that Walter claims is unique to Laura serves to associate her with the woman he claims to know she is not.

Here, Albow suggests that Walter actually loves the woman in white, Anne Catherick, before he ever meets Laura. She implies that Walter transfers these loving feelings onto Laura when he notices the similarities in their appearances. Also, Laura attracts Walter because she masculinizes him as Sanders argues. Laura, the prototypical white women, the fill-in-the-blank muse who inspires Walter’s masculinization through his brutal colonial adventures, for whose love he endures beatings, stalkings, and all the other hardships of his quest to make her his wife, is rendered more dependent as Walter grows more powerful.

Sanders claims that Laura actually becomes more dependent upon Walter and Marian as the pair work to restore her identity. As she suggests, Laura is “the fill-in-the-blank muse” for Walter, which coincides with Albow’s argument that Anne Catherick can also be Walter’s muse. If Collins had written the novel with the two women switched (Laura as the woman in white and Anne as Laura Fairlie), it is probable that Walter would have loved Anne the way he loved Laura, and he would have worked just as hard to restore her reputation.

Taking these points into consideration, since Walter merely loves Laura for her beauty, it makes sense that Walter needs another woman to fill the void that Laura cannot possibly fill herself. Therefore, Carolyn Dever writes, Marian and Walter are similarly dedicated to Laura. They band together to protect her from Glyde and Count Fosco, going so far as to join households in order to care for her and reclaim her shattered identity – and, not

52 Collins, The Woman in White 238
54 Sanders 75
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coincidentally, her lost inheritance. Thus when Walter wishes to propose to Laura, he triangulates that proposal through Marian, reporting that ‘Marian’s eyes met mine affectionately – I could say no more. My heart was full, my lips were trembling’ (p. 575). Conjoined by the masculine Marian…Walter and Laura enter a marriage anchored by its essential bisexuality. Providing a masculine companion for Walter and a feminine one for Laura, Marian is a full partner in this marriage of three.\textsuperscript{55} I agree that the three participate in a triangulated marriage; however, I do not see Marian as bisexual. Rather, Marian provides companionship to both partners in the legal marriage and she compensates for Laura’s deficient androgyny and therefore fulfills Walter’s intellectual needs. Also, since Marian is not beautiful, Laura serves as Marian’s beauty proxy in the triangle. The marriage as a threesome is androgynous, with Walter being an androgynous male, and Marian being the androgynous female. Laura’s femininity goes almost unnoticed since she has very little agency; she does not even serve as a narrator in the story. Her voice goes literally unheard unless it is filtered through another character’s narrative. In fact, the only noticeable quality in Laura is her beauty, and her function in the marriage is purely sexual. Sanders comments on the marriage scene at the close of the novel, “Everybody onstage has an identifiable, conventional English gender role and secure class privileges…Everyone is securely settled in the comfortable, familiar domestic realism of hearth and family, here blessed with a particularly happy combination of middle-class values and aristocratic wealth.”\textsuperscript{56} Thus, just as Jane and Rochester experience a happy marriage founded on friendship and equality, this atypical triangular marriage promises happiness, companionship, and equality among its three members.

\textbf{Conclusion}

After discussing individual and “marriage androgyny,” it is evident that both Charlotte Brontë and Wilkie Collins prefer marriages based on equality and companionship instead of obligation/duty or physicality. First, in \textit{Jane Eyre}, St. John and Jane would have entered into a feminine, dutiful male-centric marriage, had Jane accepted his proposal and gone to India since St. John is a hyper-male destined to oppress his wife and to serve only God. Although St. John does not die, he spends the rest of his life (presumably) alone, serving no one but God. Similarly, if Jane would have gone through with the first marriage to Rochester, it would have been deemed a masculine marriage based on physicality, which would have also been male-centric because at the beginning of the novel, Rochester is also a hyper-male. However, Rochester transforms from being a stubborn hyper-male into a sensitive, androgynous male with whom Jane can share power. Therefore, Rochester’s second proposal promises equality and friendship, which I term a successful androgynous relationship.

Similarly, in *The Woman in White*, Sir Percival and Laura Fairlie enter into a feminine marriage based on a promise Laura gives to her father on his death bed. Sir Percival completely dominates the marriage by ordering Laura around and manipulating the other characters in order to steal Laura’s money. Sir Percival is a hyper-male, and their marriage fails due to his total lack of sympathy and otherwise raw emotional detachment. Collins kills off the hyper-masculine Percival in a church fire, seemingly as a suicide. Moreover, Count and Madame Fosco share a seemingly symbiotic relationship, but in reality, the Count has total control over the Countess’s every move, making their marriage feminine as well. The Count is a hyper-male as well as he plays on the other characters’ weaknesses in order to ruin Laura’s life; speaks with a condescending, didactic tone at all times; dominates conversation as well as physical space with his stature; and participates in a political Brotherhood that eventually gets him killed. Therefore, his hyper-masculinity ultimately ruins his marriage, and Collins also kills him off. Lastly, Marian, Laura, and Walter enter into an androgynous marriage, as Walter is an androgynous male, Marian is an androgynous female, and Laura is a feminine female. Marian compensates for Laura’s intellectual deficiencies and provides companionship to both partners. They each serve their respective roles in the household, and each individual is deemed equal to the others.

Both *Jane Eyre* and *The Woman in White* illuminate Victorian society’s desire to have an androgynous marriage with their partners. Brontë and Collins imply through their fictional works that the stringent gender categories of their time were not conducive to successful relationships. Thus, they seem to respond both to what Wollstonecraft argued in her works fifty years prior and to the increase of androgyny in the workforce in the nineteenth century. Females should not be bound to the domestic sphere, and men should not be confined to the business and labor sphere. Instead, it is perfectly acceptable to have two intellectual partners in a relationship, and in fact, that paradigm is more appealing than one based on rigid gender expectations.
Works Cited


