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# Blame : marriage, folklore, and the Victorian novel

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BLAME: MARRIAGE, FOLKLORE, AND THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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in

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by

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## Preface: Blame and “Bluebeard”

My project began, like many studies of folklore in literature, as a study of fairy-tale intertexts, specifically “Bluebeard,” the story of a wealthy husband who kills a series of curious wives.<sup>1</sup> The tale piqued my interest more than a decade ago while I was reading Charlotte Brontë’s novels *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, in which the leading men, Rochester and M. Paul, are both compared to the fairy-tale character. As my study of Victorian literature expanded, so did my list of novels with references to “Bluebeard”: works by Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Wilkie Collins, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Thomas Hardy, to name just some of the most well-known. Beyond the novel, I found “Bluebeard” in periodical essays, nursery tale collections, and chapbooks. “Bluebeard” was also a staple of nineteenth-century drama, appearing in everything from Christmas pantomimes to books designed to teach readers how to stage their own tableaux at home.

As I examined nineteenth-century allusions to and adaptations of “Bluebeard,” I noticed that a central feature of these texts is an interest in determining who is (or should be) blamed for the series of deaths. The tale’s plot establishes a framework for blame that puts a wife’s curiosity in opposition to her husband’s violence. As I will argue in Chapter 1, however, nineteenth-century theatrical versions of “Bluebeard” mock the notion that marital blame could be confined to husband and wife, exploding the circle of potential blamers and blamees to the couple’s extended family and beyond. Rather than classifying “Bluebeard” as a tale about female curiosity or a tale about masculine violence, these adaptations suggest that “Bluebeard” is a story about the assignment of blame.

Charles Perrault’s “La Barbe Bleue” (1697), which is the first printed version, includes a moral warning of the dangers of curiosity. Such a moral seems to blame the wives for the tale’s

disastrously failed marriages. The implicit message is that those who fail to rein in their curiosity will find themselves blamed like the wives that Bluebeard killed. Some scholars, focusing on this moral, have directed their analysis toward the wives' transgression in entering the forbidden room. Bruno Bettelheim is the classic example of this approach toward "Bluebeard." In his psychoanalytic interpretation, the bloody key is, predictably, a phallic symbol, and the wife's transgression represents sexual infidelity (299-303). Feminist scholars have rejected Bettelheim's interpretation. Maria Tatar argues, "If we recall that the bloody chamber in Bluebeard's castle is strewn with the corpses of previous wives, this reading of the blood-stained key as a marker of sexual infidelity becomes willfully wrongheaded in its effort to vilify Bluebeard's wife" ("Introduction" 141). Some readers look to Perrault's second moral, which reassures readers that such events no longer occur, as a sign that the tale does not direct blame at women, while others look past both morals, finding what they see as "anti-patriarchal" or "proto-feminist" elements elsewhere in the tale (Ruddick 37; Davies, *Tale* 44). Considering multiple versions of "Bluebeard," Marina Warner observes, "'Bluebeard' is a version of the Fall in which Eve is allowed to get away with it, in which no one for once heaps the blame on Pandora," even as "Eve is blameworthy too" (244, 246). In sum, she asserts, "It is often difficult to tell which side the authors are on" (247). The "sides" that Warner and many other critics have delineated are violent husbands vs. curious wives.

Nineteenth-century adaptations of the tale expand the number of sides we might consider, although little attention has been given to the way these adaptations circulate blame beyond the married couple. For instance, Jack Zipes describes F.W.N. Bayley's verse *Blue Beard* (1842) as an example of an adaptation by a male author in which "nothing would have happened to Bluebeard's wife if she knew how to tame herself and thus maintain a code of civility that calls

for female subservience without legitimacy” (172). Zipes’s evidence for this claim is the second part of Bayley’s moral, in which wives are advised, “But if you’re obedient, loving, and true / You’ll manage his beard, if ever so blue!” (Bayley 46). Although Zipes notes that he is quoting only an excerpt from the moral, he does not explain that the entire four-part moral spreads blame much more widely than his critique indicates. The first part advises husbands: “That murder and marriage are not on a par; / And that, therefore, it’s going a little too far / To be always inventing excuses to do for them” (Bayley 45). In the third and fourth parts of the moral, Bayley implicates the wives’ sisters, who are supposed to summon help, and the wives’ brothers, who must ride to her rescue. Thus, Zipes’s reading presents a more narrow view of blame in Bayley’s adaptation than what is suggested by the text. The poem does not blame the wife alone for her husband’s violence; rather the poem indicates that the wife should have behaved better *and* the husband should not have looked for excuses to commit murder *and* the wife’s siblings should have been more vigilant. Similarly, Tatar describes Francis Egerton’s farcical play *Bluebeard; or, Dangerous Curiosity and Justifiable Homicide* (1841) as “symptomatic of a trend that perceived the domestic tyrant as a domestic casualty, a man whose murderous deeds are fully sanctioned by the outrageous behavior of his wives” (*Secrets beyond the Door* 134). If I confined my analysis to Egerton’s title alone, I would surely agree with Tatar. However, the play itself is much more ambiguous about where blame should be directed, calling attention to the potential culpability of the bride’s father, Bluebeard, and Bluebeard’s mother.

Aside from the blame implicit in their morals or plots, a second way folk narratives such as “Bluebeard” can be used to blame is through allusion. *Bentley’s Miscellany* reported that Charles Dickens called Lord Palmerston, prime minister from 1855 to 1858 and 1859 until his death in 1865, a “terrible Bluebeard” (“Palmerston and His Policy” 75). Rather than blaming

Palmerston directly (“Palmerston does terrible things”), Dickens alludes to Bluebeard to blame Palmerston indirectly (“Palmerston is like the fairy-tale character who does terrible things”). This type of blaming relies on an interpretation of blame in the fairy tale: If you think Bluebeard is blameworthy, then calling Palmerston a Bluebeard implies that Palmerston is also blameworthy. It also relies on having an audience that will recognize your allusion and share your interpretation of blame; calling Palmerston a Bluebeard would not succeed in casting blame on Palmerston if the audience thought Bluebeard was blameless. In the example I’m discussing, Dickens reveals some uncertainty about how his audience interprets blame by adding the qualifier “terrible” to Bluebeard: Palmerston is not just any Bluebeard (and especially not a blameless Bluebeard); rather, he is a “terrible Bluebeard.” Similarly, one of Dickens’s characters, Dora, implies that her husband, David Copperfield, is blameworthy when she calls him “a naughty Blue Beard,” appending the qualifier “naughty” to clarify that being a Bluebeard is not praiseworthy, while also downplaying her blame of David by using an adjective often applied to mischievous children (642; ch. 44).

In her analysis of intertextuality in Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, Sarah Gates argues that attending to the reception histories of popular characters such as Bluebeard “can help us gain a clearer picture of the ideologies they attract or critique, while studying the mixes of such figures (along with their reception histories) in an author’s work will help us discern some of the complexities in his or her negotiations with those ideologies” (401). Writing specifically of Dickens’s repeated uses of “Bluebeard” as an intertext, Gates advocates exploring whether the tale means the same thing in all of Dickens’s works or whether the author references different versions of the tale at different points in his career (402). If, as Gates implies, the “Bluebeard” intertext evolves within Dickens’s oeuvre, then such changes would reflect the author’s complex

and conflicted attitudes toward the ideologies the tale can be seen as critiquing or promoting, depending on one's interpretation of blame in the tale. And, indeed, Gates' unexplored supposition is accurate. Dickens alternately praises dutiful women who suppress the fatal curiosity of Bluebeard's wives, leaving unchallenged the patriarchal authority of husbands and fathers (as is the case for Esther Summerson and Bella Wilfer), and critiques tyrannical husbands who insist on their right to authority at the cost of their wives' happiness (as is the case for David Copperfield).<sup>2</sup> Folklorist Charles L. Briggs takes a similar view of intertextuality "as a means of creating, sustaining, and/or challenging power relations" (391). One of the qualities of "Bluebeard" that makes it such a popular intertext for Victorian authors is the unsettled question of blame in the tale. Because culpability within the tale was subject to ongoing debate, the tale was available for precisely the type of complex negotiation of ideology that Gates and Briggs describe. Rather than always signifying a one-sided critique of violent husbands or disobedient wives, the tale made possible multiple and shifting engagements with blame for marital woes within an author's oeuvre or even a single novel.

During the Victorian era, "Bluebeard" was the most common fairy tale used to express blame for marital conflicts. Although I only examine "Bluebeard" as an intertext in detail in my first chapter, it is present in novels I examine in the other three chapters as well: Rochester's home is like "some Bluebeard's castle" in *Jane Eyre* (114; ch. 11); *Cheveley's* Trevyllian, who is rumored to have murdered several wives, carries a dagger with "a most Blue-Beardish appearance" (199; vol. 1), while Louis Trevelyan of *He Knew He Was Right* is "a cruel Bluebeard" (187; ch. 20); and *The Mayor of Casterbridge's* Michael Henchard has "a bluebeardy look about 'en" (83; ch. 13).<sup>3</sup> But these intertexts don't tell the full story about blame in the novels. Tracing blame in novels with "Bluebeard" intertexts, I soon realized that "Bluebeard" is



not unique among folk texts and performances in circulating marital blame beyond husband and wife. My initial focus on “Bluebeard” helped me understand the way blame operates in the novel, but I have expanded my focus in order to avoid overstating the role “Bluebeard” plays in that process. The circulation of blame in the novel does not depend on “Bluebeard,” but instead occurs anytime the novel brings together varying folk and legal standards of culpability and responsibility. Thus, I have included two novels in my study that do not have “Bluebeard” intertexts: Wilkie Collins’s *Man and Wife* and Anthony Trollope’s *John Caldigate*.

Shifting my focus from “Bluebeard” to blame, I aim to answer Frank de Caro and Rosan A. Jordan’s call to add a “third step” to Alan Dundes’ well-known process of identification and interpretation of folklore in literature.<sup>4</sup> De Caro and Jordan assert, “In considering folklore in literature, it seems desirable not only to go beyond identification to interpretation of particular literary works in which it is embedded, but also to go beyond interpretation to examine how particular literary uses of folklore fit into a larger, more fundamental concept of what folklore is and how and what folklore communicates” (15). In expanding my consideration of folklore in the novel beyond my initial narrow focus on “Bluebeard,” I hope to provide a more complete picture of the fundamental role folk discourses play in shaping ethical concepts such as responsibility and practices such as blaming.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Among the most recent examples of studies of fairy-tale intertexts are Casie E. Hermansson’s 2001 *Reading Feminist Intertextuality through Bluebeard Stories*, Maria Tatar’s 2004 *Secrets beyond the Door*, Shuli Barzilai’s 2009 *Tales of Bluebeard and His Wives*, Heta Pyrhönen’s 2010 *Bluebeard Gothic: Jane Eyre and Its Progeny*, and Molly Clark Hillard’s 2009 “Dickens’s Little Red Riding Hood and Other Waterside Characters.”

Some folklorists argue that many of the narratives we call fairy tales first originated in print, which they claim as evidence for the literary, rather than folkloric, nature of the tales. Others disagree, insisting that fairy tales circulated orally before they were printed, which makes them folklore. On this debate, see especially Ruth B. Bottigheimer’s *Fairy Tales: A New History*, as well as essays in a 2010 special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* by Bottigheimer,

Dan Ben-Amos, Francisco Vaz da Silva, and Jan M. Ziolkowski. See also Jennifer Schacker (383) and Jack Zipes (43-49). Rather than entering the debate about origins, I am treating the fairy tales in this study as a form of folklore, because they circulated like folktales during the nineteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> On Dickens's interest in the tale, see especially Barzilai (22-42). Harry Stone's *The Night Side of Dickens: Cannibalism, Passion, Necessity* (2004) discusses Dickens's interest in the Bluebeard tale in relation to cannibalistic imagery in his fiction.

<sup>3</sup> On the Bluebeard intertext in *Jane Eyre*, see especially Tatar (*Secrets*, 68-76), Pyrhönen (5-64), Victoria Anderson (111-21), and John Sutherland (68-80).

<sup>4</sup> In his 1965 essay, Dundes laments analyses of folklore in literature that include insufficient identification, as well as those that focus on identification at the expense of interpretation.

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## Abstract

*Blame: Marriage, Folklore, and the Victorian Novel* contends that the intersection of folk and legal discourses of responsibility and culpability shapes the way the Victorian novel imagines blame. Recent studies have drawn attention to the importance of official legal discourses such as trial testimony and standards of evidence to the development of narrative form during the nineteenth century. However, by attending to folk modes for establishing blameworthiness in Victorian novels, I show that folk and legal standards of culpability are mutually constitutive. The legal system is designed to identify the culpable in a fixed process – codified in slow-changing statutes – that begins with crime and ends with punishment. The counter-discourse of folklore – by definition constantly changing – distributes blame more widely than the legal system allows. The resulting circulation of blame blurs the distinction between public and private by showing that the stakes of domestic conflicts extend beyond husband and wife, underscoring the communal investment in failing marriages and their symptoms, which include marital violence, bigamy, and adultery. Examining marital conflicts in works by Charlotte Brontë, Anthony Trollope, Rosina Bulwer Lytton, Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, and William Makepeace Thackeray, I argue that the novels conceive of blame not as a single event but as a process of continuous negotiation and redefinition of standards of responsibility, moral agency, and culpability.

## **Introduction: Blamable Characters**

“Who blames me? Many no doubt.”

– Jane Eyre

Jane Eyre is a character who seemingly likes to escape notice. She hides in the window-seat at Gateshead and behind the window-curtain in the drawing room at Thornfield.<sup>1</sup> But when Jane describes herself as a blamable character she acknowledges that she is noticed, not just by Rochester or John Reed, but by the many she thinks blame her. On one hand, Jane’s assertion could be a sign that she feels persecuted, that the Aunt Reeds and Mr. Brocklehursts of her world judge and punish her. On the other hand, Jane’s statement is a sign that she thinks of herself as having choices that are acknowledged by others. Blame implies the agency of the blamed character. To assert that someone has erred is to imply that he or she could have acted differently. What if Jane were not blamable? What if she stayed hidden behind the curtain and was never noticed or never accused? These questions are inconceivable, because the conditions they imagine cannot be reconciled to the fact that Jane is the protagonist of a fictional autobiography. For Jane to have some story to tell means that she must participate in a plot. She must do things, and, in doing, she must render herself open to judgment. This is true for the other characters of Jane’s novel, as well. Participating in the plot requires action, and acting opens up the possibility of being blamed.

One of the claims of this study is that Victorian novels circulate blame among an array of finger-pointers and culprits. For any given conflict, multiple targets of blame exist. The novels conceive of blame not as a single event but as a process of continuous negotiation and redefinition of standards of responsibility and culpability. Assessments of blame are unstable (and, therefore, shifting) because of evolving definitions of what counts as blameworthy or who

counts as blamable. Psychologist Sharon Lamb observes that what are considered acceptable targets of blame have changed over time. For instance, blaming victims of violence, although it still persists, is becoming increasingly less accepted (Lamb 6-7). Further, as Mary Douglas points out, blame depends on interpretation. She argues, “Knowledge always lacks. Ambiguity always lurks. If you want to cast blame, there are always loopholes for reading the evidence right” (9). Whatever evidence is used to determine blame depends on who is deciding what the evidence is or what it means, creating the possibility that different finger-pointers will reach opposing conclusions about who is to blame.

Two related terms at the heart of this dissertation are “responsible” and “culpable.” These words are sometimes used interchangeably: Culpable means deserving blame, which is also one of the dictionary definitions of responsible (“culpable” and “responsible”).<sup>2</sup> When someone asks, “Who is responsible for this mess?” what they are wondering is, “Who is to blame for this mess?” However, in this study I am distinguishing between the two terms. Among the other dictionary definitions of responsible are the words “capable,” “answerable,” and “accountable,” all implying ability (“responsible”). Someone who is responsible is able to answer or account – able to respond in some way to his or her circumstances. As Gloria Anzaldúa explains, “The ability to respond is what is meant by responsibility” (42).<sup>3</sup> The notion of ability is what links responsibility and blame. A person who is able to respond is a person who can make choices or act with intention. Such a person is thus able to make wrong choices or act with malicious intention. Lamb argues that finger-pointers do not direct blame at those whom they believe had no choice or that “they had only choiceless choices” (37). Although there are exceptions – I will briefly discuss in Chapter 2 the possibility of blaming someone who is thought to be lacking the ability to choose – blame generally presupposes the ability to respond.<sup>4</sup>

However, although responsibility suggests the ability to act with choice or intention, the quality of possessing responsibility is not itself a choice. Emmanuel Levinas defines responsibility as a necessary, unchosen quality of being, stemming from a primordial encounter of the “I” with another. During this encounter, the other “puts me into relation with being” by requiring that “I” respond (*Totality* 212). The call of the other precedes being for the “I,” who is then obligated to the other for the relation that makes being possible. This encounter is a “call [...] to responsibility” (*Totality* 213), and is one that “I” cannot refuse. For Levinas, responsibility precedes ontology; it is “prior to or beyond essence” (*Otherwise* 10). As such, it cannot be added – or discarded. Levinas argues, “The responsibility for the other can not have begun in my commitment, in my decision” (*Otherwise* 10). In other words, being responsible is not a choice. Every “I” is always already responsible to and for every other.

Levinas’s theory is helpful in differentiating responsibility and culpability. Responsibility gives beings the capacity for making choices that could lead to culpability, but it does not determine the shape those choices must take. This is the point where my use of the term responsible differs from that of those who conflate it with the term culpable. Barbara Houston argues, “Part of what we mean by saying someone is responsible is that she or he can (appropriately) be blamed” (134). I would amend Houston’s assertion by taking out the parenthetical. Saying someone is responsible is to say that she or he can be blamed, appropriately or otherwise. Someone who can be blamed is not necessarily someone who should be blamed.

Recent studies by social scientists have shown the importance of distinguishing responsibility and culpability in order to avoid victim-blaming without disempowering victims. For instance, in cases of pregnancy loss, some medical practitioners tell women they are not responsible for the loss in order to avoid blaming the patient. However, such an approach



“overwhelms the mother’s sense that she can act differently in the future to avoid complications in subsequent pregnancies” (Hale 24). In cases of marital conflicts, researchers found that women have higher levels of satisfaction if they blame themselves rather than their spouses, because women who self-blame feel like they have more control over circumstances that affect the marriage (Madden and Janoff-Bulman 664). In both of these examples, being completely blameless means being powerless. Writing about instances of oppression, Sarah Lucia Hoagland calls for separating blame from an acknowledgement of victims’ agency. She describes victim blaming as “holding a person accountable not only for her choice in a situation but for the situation itself, as if she agreed to it” (50). But, she argues, ignoring that a victim has choices is “victimism,” because it “denies a woman’s moral agency” (50).<sup>5</sup> Distinguishing responsibility from blameworthiness is one way to acknowledge moral agency without blaming the victim. One can be responsible in circumstances for which one is not culpable.

I have argued that Levinas’s theory helps differentiate responsibility and culpability. In fact, his theory would be unworkable without this distinction. In one of the thornier aspects of Levinas’s work, he asks us to accept that the victim of persecution has responsibility for the persecutor, describing the call to responsibility as a type of persecution, “a trauma” (*Otherwise* 12). This is not to say that the victim deserves blame for the persecution, for if responsibility precedes being, then so too does the traumatic call to responsibility. As Judith Butler explains, Levinas’s theory of responsibility “does *not* mean that I can trace the acts of persecution I have suffered to deeds I have performed, that it therefore follows that I have brought persecution on myself . . . . No, persecution is precisely what happens *without warrant of any deed of my own*. And it returns us . . . to the region of existence that is radically unwilled . . . in advance of my formation as a ‘me’” (*Giving an Account* 85; original emphasis). Butler relies on the distinction

between culpability and responsibility to explain how persecution calls the “I” to responsibility without making the “I” culpable for the persecution: “I do not become responsible for what is done to me if by ‘responsibility’ we mean blaming myself for the outrages done to me. On the contrary, I am *not* primarily responsible by virtue of my actions, but by virtue of the relation to the Other that is established at the level of my primary and irreversible susceptibility, my passivity prior to any possibility of action” (*Giving an Account* 88; original emphasis).

My purpose in discussing responsibility and culpability is not to determine which characters should be defined as responsible or which characters deserve blame. Other critics have taken up that task in arguing either that particular characters have been blamed unfairly or that characters should have been blamed but were not.<sup>6</sup> In response to such readings, some critics have suggested that we should take a broader view of narrative blaming by expanding the number of characters we view as culpable. For instance, Galina Rebel argues that blame in Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* resides with several different characters, in contrast to critics who have interpreted the text as focusing blame on the character of Prince Myshkin. Similarly, Stella B. Revard discusses interpretations of *Paradise Lost* that call for blaming Adam; Revard argues that blame is shared by Adam and Eve (69-71).

My argument is that blame circulates continuously among multiple characters; it is based on evolving, and sometimes conflicting, folk and legal standards. The mutual influence of folk and legal blaming reflects what Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge call “public culture,” which they define as a “zone of contestation and mutual cannibalization – in which national, mass, and folk culture provide mill and grist for one another” (5). Different “registers of culture” – in the case of blame, the registers I am considering are official (law) and unofficial (folklore) – “encounter, interrogate, and contest one another in new and unexpected ways” (5).<sup>7</sup>

One example of this mutual influence is in sixteenth-century witch trials, where, as Christine L. Krueger has shown, folk beliefs influenced the legal outcome, with female witnesses often called to testify about witch's marks on the bodies of defendants. She argues, "Witchcraft prosecutions occasioned both the production of gender-specific knowledge and its incorporation within legal norms" (49). Moreover, not only do official and unofficial registers of culture influence one another, they also depend on each other. As Robert Glenn Howard points out, what is noninstitutional can only be seen as such in relation to what is institutional: "the vernacular needs the institutional from which to distinguish itself, and in this way the vernacular takes part in the institutional. As a result, no pure vernacularity exists, only degrees of hybridity" (203). In short, I am arguing that folk and legal blaming are interdependent; that is, folklore helps shape legal standards of blame, while the law also influences folk standards.

I am using the term "folk" to distinguish between those acting on behalf of institutional authority – lawyers, judges, juries – and those who are deploying unofficial methods of blaming. During the nineteenth century, antiquarians typically thought of the folk as different from themselves in some fundamental way, as rural peasants whose customs reflected traditions on the verge of extinction in the face of industrialization. My use of the term "folk" represents a contemporary rather than Victorian definition of the word. It is commonly accepted among folklorists today that the folk are everyone. As Barre Toelken observes, "modern folklorists do not limit their attention to the rural, quaint, or 'backward' elements of their culture" (2). Similarly, Alan Dundes notes, "The term 'folk' can refer to *any group of people whatsoever*" (*Interpreting Folklore* 6; original emphasis).<sup>8</sup>

For this reason, there is overlap among those engaged in folk and legal blaming. A member of a jury blames in an official, legal capacity in rendering a verdict. This same person

might engage in other contexts in folk blaming through storytelling or public shaming rituals. One of the qualities that enables these two modes of blaming to shape each other is that both are partly dynamic, partly static discourses. A well-established definition of folklore is that it exhibits the “twin laws” of “conservatism” – which “refers to all those processes, forces, and attitudes that result in the *retaining* of certain information, beliefs, styles, customs, and the like” – and “dynamism” – which “comprises all those elements that function to alter features, contents, meanings, styles, performance, and usage as a particular traditional event takes place repeatedly through space and time” (Toelken 39-40). Any folk text or practice changes with each performance, while also remaining consistent enough to be recognizable as a version of the same folklore type. The dynamic quality of folklore means that it can quickly adapt to changing standards of blame across time and among different locations.

The law is also dynamic, as new laws are passed, and judicial interpretations change the way existing laws may be applied. The law is not as variable as folklore, however, because its status as an institutional discourse means that it requires official processes to change, such as a vote of Parliament to pass a new law or judicial hearings to change the way an existing law is carried out. The law is also less variable at the local level; whereas folk practices might suggest differing standards of blame from neighborhood to neighborhood, acts of Parliament might standardize some types of legal blaming nationally. In addition to being more variable than the law, folk blaming tends to be more repetitive: narratives of blame are told and retold, and public shamings may be staged over several nights in succession. The law, in contrast, aims to establish blame in a fixed process that begins with a crime and ends with punishment. Thus, we have the highly adaptable discourse of folklore, which can react quickly to changing standards of blame,

and the more slowly evolving discourse of law, which also reflects changing standards over time but with less flexibility, and more finality, than folklore.

During the Victorian era, marriage provided a context for the interaction of folk and legal modes of blaming. A reason for this is that the parameters of marriage were debated. What conditions should allow the severing of marriage contracts? What types of remarriage should be allowed? Should married women own property? And, even, which ceremonies constitute the formation of a marriage? Mary Douglas argues that when blame spreads diffusely, it signals unstable patterns of social organization. “By contrast a more stable constitution is supported by people who either pin blame for misfortunes on politically disapproved elements or pin responsibility on the victim so that blaming is checked,” she argues (62). Put simply, when members of a community agree on what their social structures should be, they are more likely to agree about who deserves blame when something goes wrong. In the case of Victorian marriage, the lack of consensus about who should be blamed – Is it the wife’s fault? The husbands? Or neither one? – parallels the lack of consensus about what marriage is. One’s opinion about who should be blamed for marital woes depends on what one thinks marriage should be.

For instance, Victorian writers who thought the legal regulations governing marriage needed reform frequently blamed the law for English marital woes. They lamented weak punishments for wife-beaters, the difficulty of obtaining a divorce, and the lack of property rights for married women. Mona Caird argues that the inability of wives to divorce their husbands removed an important motivation for husbands to try to keep their wives happy: “What could possibly be more fatal to the wife’s continued influence over her husband than the fact that she is his absolutely and for ever, quite irrespective of her wishes or of his conduct? . . . If the wife does not give him all he expects, he is disappointed and angry; if she *does* give it – well, it is

only her duty, and he ceases to value it” (144). If husbands knew that their wives could leave them, Caird asserts, then they would have to take into account their wives’ wishes, and fewer marriages would reach the brink of failure. Similarly, John Stuart Mill argues that marriage law reform is needed. He writes, “If married life were all that it might be expected to be, looking to the laws alone, society would be a hell upon earth” (506). Like Caird, Mill contends that the legalized inequality between husband and wife creates marital unhappiness: “Even with true affection, authority on the one side and subordination on the other prevent perfect confidence” (496). To rectify this problem, Mill advocates women’s suffrage, married women’s property rights, and stricter legal punishments for wife-beaters, among other reforms.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, writers who did not support the extension of married women’s legal rights blamed aberrant individuals, rather than the state of British marriage law, for marital problems. Margaret Oliphant argues, “No law of human origin can reach every possible development of human temper and organisation; injured wives and unhappy husbands are accidents uncurable by law; and it would be almost as wise to legislate for the race, on the supposition that every member of it had a broken leg, as on the more injurious hypothesis that tyranny, oppression, and injustice, rankled within the heart of every home” (381). Believing that miserable marriages are no more common than broken legs, Oliphant contends that the law should not be changed to provide justice in exceptional cases. A second reason Oliphant offers for not expanding the rights of married women is that such women freely chose marriage. She writes, “The law compels no one, either man or woman, to enter into this perilous estate of marriage; but, being once within it, it is the law’s first duty to hedge this important territory with its strongest and highest barriers” (382). Oliphant adds that anyone who does not agree with British marriage laws could simply remain single (386).

In spite of the legal focus of many calls for marriage reform, Victorian writers also recognized that marriage is not governed by the law alone. Eliza Lynn Linton writes, “The man who seduces young girls and tampers with every young wife he comes near, cannot complain if his own wife resents the perpetual insult, and if society punishes by ostracism the foulness of his life. No law can be made liberal enough to include these extravagances” (225). Here Linton indicates that the law is not the only source of blame for marital woes. An unfaithful husband may not be legally culpable, Linton suggests, but he is still subjected to the punishment of neighbors through ostracism. This unofficial form of punishment – in contradistinction to official punishments handed down by courts – shows the role of folk standards in determining the acceptable boundaries of marital behavior. In cases of marital wrongdoing not addressed (or not adequately addressed) by the law, folk fill the perceived void with their own brand of punishment. In other cases, folk governance of marriage is closely aligned with the law. In an essay in the *Westminster Review*, Herbert Flowerdew worries that legal standards are too influential in determining what is blamable (or not) in marriage. He cites as an example: “A suitable couple living together faithfully for true love of each other, but forbidden the sanction of the law to their union through some early mistake or the existence perhaps of a maniac extending a long life in death in an asylum, are ostracized” (295). Flowerdew’s hypothetical case recalls the plot of *Jane Eyre* or the real-life marital woes of William Makepeace Thackeray, whose wife became mentally ill shortly after giving birth (Barzilai 53). Flowerdew regrets that such cases would be met with ostracism, whereas a case he considers far worse would be socially (and legally) acceptable: “An old man who forsakes his mistress and illegitimate family to buy a young girl legally with his money or his title, and the girl who sells herself, are approved” (295). Flowerdew uses these examples to call on his readers to avoid “the greatest evil” of prioritizing

what is legal over “a private code of ethics” (295). He adds, “It is disastrous to the moral sense of an individual or a community to subordinate its decisions to the less subtle and effective ones of the law courts” (295).

Sometimes folk and legal standards for right and wrong marital behavior accord with one another; wife murder, for instance, was both illegal and socially unacceptable during the Victorian era, as it is now. In other instances, a gap exists between what the law allows and the folk sanction, as in some cases of adultery. Moreover, as both folk and legal standards evolve, sometimes areas of conflict become areas of accord. This is the case with wife-beating, which was minimally punished (if punished at all) by the law at the start of the nineteenth century, but which in some cases led to one of the harshest folk censures available: expulsion from the community. During the course of the century, legal punishments for wife-beaters became more stringent and more widely applied, so that legal responses began to accord more closely to folk disapproval of marital violence.<sup>10</sup> Legal standards may filter into folk narratives as well. Folklorist Elaine Lawless describes the influence of the law on personal experience narratives in her study of current and former residents of a battered women’s shelter. She explains how the women refine their narratives in light of legal standards in order to obtain a restraining order or to justify actions they took in self-defense (38).

I have argued that folklore is more flexible than the law in adapting to changing standards of blame. Lisa Rodensky argues that this is true of literature as well. She states, “novels do not carry the responsibility of reducing the many possibilities they present to a single decision. They do not issue verdicts. But the law does. The practical and urgent necessities of the law require it to be guided by general rules and, in the end, to reduce the complexities and ambiguities of a case to a particular holding” (31). Unlike law, which is designed to identify and punish a clear



culprit, the novel can leave ambiguous its characters' blameworthiness. And, I argue, one of the reasons for the novel's "complexities and ambiguities" is that it is considering blame on more than one register, not only based on legal standards of culpability but on folk standards as well.

Several studies have drawn attention to the importance of legal discourses in the novel.<sup>11</sup> Among recent literary critics, Sandra Macpherson attends most directly to blame in its legal forms. She shows the influence on eighteenth-century English novels of the legal concept of "strict liability," in which someone could be held responsible for injuries he or she neither intended to commit nor committed through negligence. Novels that incorporate eighteenth-century legal standards of blaming for accidental harm share with the law "a 'tragic' logic of responsibility, one that conceives of persons as causes of harms that go against their best intentions but for which they are nonetheless accountable" (4). Although Macpherson's analysis of legal forms of blaming in the eighteenth-century novel has been influential for my own work, its application to a study of Victorian literature is limited, because, as Macpherson notes, the strict liability standard of legal harm "goes into a kind of dormancy in the nineteenth century under the pressures of industrialization. . . . The story I've been telling about the novel of tragic responsibility, therefore, might not account for the Victorian novel, whose characteristic interest in detection represents a movement away from accidental and toward criminal culpability that consolidates the genre's preoccupation with character" (190). In other words, the Victorian novel is more concerned with intentional or negligent harm than with accidental injuries.

The movement of the Victorian novel away from a concept of responsibility that encompasses accidental harm toward one that focuses on criminal culpability reflects the shifting legal terrain of the nineteenth century. Rodensky describes this shift as one that gives greater weight "to the relations between states of mind and [criminal] acts" (3). Although Rodensky's

study does not address folklore, this dissertation is indebted to her work, because she illuminates changing (legal) definitions of responsibility and agency during the nineteenth century, arguing that the novel “both challenges the law’s definitions of criminal liability and reaffirms them” (7). I argue that folklore plays an important role in this process. If the Victorian novel alternately depends on and rejects legal standards of blame, it is because the law is not the only discourse at work in the novel’s blame narratives. Instead, interconnected folk and legal discourses shape the way the novel imagines blame.

The form of the novel lends itself to the representation of circulating blame, because it allows for multiple narratives within a single text. The expansiveness of the Victorian novel – filling up three volumes or sometimes a year-and-a-half of serial installments – creates space for numerous conflicts, which then lead to narratives of blame that attempt to account for those conflicts. Take, for example, Bertha’s tearing of Jane’s wedding veil in *Jane Eyre*. This one episode prompts Rochester to tell at least three stories about blame: Jane is to blame for her overactive imagination, Grace Poole is to blame for sneaking into Jane’s room and tearing the veil, and, finally, Bertha is to blame for her mad actions. Rochester must give three different accounts of blame for the veil tearing, because blaming in the novel is underpinned by changing definitions of responsibility and culpability. As these changing standards are brought to bear on Rochester’s account, the answer to the question of who is to blame changes as well. But even as they are ever changing, accounts of blame within the novel help to give meaning to the plot. As characters repeatedly revise their blame narratives, and as others challenge their accounts, characters (and readers of the novel) form their conception of what happened. In other words, blame narratives are a way of making sense of events and identifying the key players. But

because blame narratives are not stable, characters within the novel and readers of the novel must continually reassess what they think they know.

Of course, not every conflict that leads to blame in the Victorian novel relates to marriage. Marriage is, however, a central concern of the Victorian domestic novel, and for the marriage plot to be a plot (rather than marriage as the conclusion of the courtship plot), it must have conflict, and, hence, occasions for blame. Although the Victorian domestic novel might seem to rely on blameless marriages – the ending marriages that bring resolution to the plot’s conflicts with their assurance that the hero and his angelic wife will live happily ever after – in fact, Victorian novels are shot through with marital conflicts and attendant blame. As Kelly Hager points out, the “failed-marriage plot” is the story that follows the courtship plot (7). She argues, “the multitude of novels that plot the failure of marriage . . . suggest that the novel is just as often (often at the same time as it plots a courtship and ends with a wedding) dedicated to showing how a marriage unravels, to uncovering the myth of matrimonial bliss, to revealing how many husbands and wives were trying to escape or miserably enduring the wedlock they had so eagerly sought, as it is to plotting courtship” (5).<sup>12</sup> This frequency of failed or failing marriages in Victorian novels stems in part from real-life concerns about the state of marriage, but it also relates to the needs of plot. Hilary Schor argues that the marriage plot requires female transgression to set the plot in motion: “Only when a curious woman, call her Eve, or Pandora, or Psyche, reaches out her hand, holds up a lamp, and opens a door, can the plot begin” (7). But the novel requires more than a blamable wife. Any character who participates in the plot must be available for blame. A character who does is a character with the potential to do wrong (or right). After all, praise and blame are two sides of the same coin. One who can be credited for making good choices can also be criticized for making bad choices. Lars Hertzberg contends, “a person

could not be taken to be acting within an institution unless he could be blamed for acting wrongly by other participants” (502). In other words, there can be no correct action unless there were also the possibility of incorrect action for which someone could be blamed. Rather than clear heroes and villains, repeat and shifting narratives of blame give us a range of finger-pointers and potential culprits, roles which often overlap in a single character.

The first chapter of this dissertation returns to the origins of my project in the “Bluebeard” fairy tale. The tale is based on a serial blame-punishment plot sequence: Bluebeard blames a sequence of wives for disobedience and then kills them before he is blamed himself for the violence and killed by his final bride’s family. The tale’s blaming repeats not only within the plot, but also through the conventions of theater, with multiple performances of each production, as well as the almost constant presence of Bluebeard dramas on the Victorian stage. These dramas show that the process of blame does not end with punishment; instead, determinations of culpability remain open to reinterpretation even after the supposed culprit is killed. The tale of Bluebeard is an important intertext for William Makepeace Thackeray, who wrote several versions of the tale himself, including a play. His Bluebeards are sometimes villainous and sometimes sympathetic victims of fate. Their wives are sometimes praiseworthy and sometimes petulant, foolish, or manipulative. In his novel *The History of Pendennis*, unhappy marriages and engagements are so common that they are the norm rather than exceptions. These relationships place characters in roles modeled after the mercenary marriages of Bluebeard theatricals.

In Chapter 2, “Pointing Fingers, the Victorian Insanity Defense, and *Jane Eyre*,” I move beyond “Bluebeard” but stay in the realm of folk narrative, considering blame in the fairy tale “The Robber Bridegroom” and the ballad “The Twa Knights.” Whereas my first chapter focuses on the repeated blaming of the serial plot of “Bluebeard,” Chapter 2 focuses on the way folk

narratives represent responsibility through the trope of the severed finger. I argue that Brontë's 1847 novel, *Jane Eyre*, combines this folk conception of responsibility with legal definitions of responsibility stemming from nineteenth-century debates over the criminal insanity defense.

"The Robber Bridegroom" and "Bluebeard" were commonly treated as related tales during the nineteenth century (and still are by many fairy-tale scholars today), because in both cases the title character kills a series of women. Victorian folklorist Edwin Sidney Hartland grouped them as examples of "forbidden chamber" tales, even though "The Robber Bridegroom" does not have a forbidden chamber (193-94). When folklorists created a classification system for categorizing folktales, "The Robber Bridegroom" and "Bluebeard" were grouped as disparate tale types: "Bluebeard" as AT 312 and "The Robber Bridegroom" as AT 955. This categorization reflects the major differences in blame and agency of the two tale types. The victims of "Bluebeard" transgress their husband's prohibition, making them more apparently blamable than the victims of "The Robber Bridegroom," and Bluebeard's final bride is rescued by her brothers, making her agency less apparent than the robber's final bride. Of course, transgressing is one form of agency. But the trope of the severed finger in "The Robber Bridegroom," which the final bride points at the groom to establish his guilt, shifts the focus from the way the victim's agency makes her blamable to the way it enables her to respond to the groom's violence by blaming him.

Questions about the relationship between responsibility and blame are thus about agency: Who is able to commit a blamable act? Who is capable of pointing a finger? Chapter 3, "Personal Narratives, Legal Testimony, and Disputed Marriages," considers agency and blame in relation to contested marriages. If the necessary conflicts of the marriage plot make married subjects available for blame, then one way to remove a character from the plot is to redefine her as not

part of the marriage after all. Whereas narratives in Chapter 2 investigate whether a wife can be defined as not responsible (through violence or imprisonment), the novels of Chapter 3 consider whether wives can be redefined as not wives at all.

Chapter 3 discusses novels that include competing accounts of whether a wedding has taken place – Rosina Bulwer Lytton’s *Cheveley*, Wilkie Collins’s *Man and Wife*, and Anthony Trollope’s *John Caldigate*. In these disputes, both sides try to establish their own account as the most authentic by constructing their opponent as blamable (and themselves as blameless), a process that involves repeated storytelling in both the folk genre of the personal experience narrative and the legal genre of trial testimony. As the characters’ accounts of a marriage/non-marriage unfold, these novels show the interdependence of folk and legal methods for determining authenticity. The folk narrative becomes unbelievable without tangible “evidence” to support it, such as a document, a note, or a postage stamp that reinforces the oral account. Meanwhile, these pieces of evidence depend on the same flexible process of interpretation and authentication as oral narration. Whether a document is evidence – or what it is evidence of – depends on how it is interpreted in variable contexts. For instance, a marriage certificate can be proof of a marriage one day but shown to be invalid the next. Thus, at the same time that characters hold up tangible pieces of evidence as proof, the novels also call into question the reliability of such proof.

As the women risk losing their legal status as wives in the novels, they also are in danger of losing their space in the narrative altogether through either death or criminal punishment. As Russ Castronovo argues, marriage offers citizenship for nineteenth-century women: “Life without citizenship becomes analogous to the late-nineteenth-century heroine’s choice to reject Victorian morality and forgo the sanctity of wedlock: scandal and harassment threaten the

subject who tries to exist independently of the patriarchal guarantees offered by either a husband or state” (231). The difference for the “wives” of *Cheveley*, *Man and Wife*, and *John Caldigate* is that they do not *try* to exist independently of marriage. Instead, these women choose marriage but then find themselves outside the protection marriage should have offered when their “husbands” redefine the relationships as non-marriages. This loss of status is represented in different ways in the three novels. *Cheveley*’s Mary Lee, duped into a mock marriage, first struggles to maintain her sanity after learning she is not legally married and then is threatened with criminal transportation. Whereas Mary ultimately succeeds in holding on to her space in the narrative, *John Caldigate*’s Euphemia Smith/Caldigate exits the novel as a criminal after being convicted of perjury in her unsuccessful effort to prove that she was the wife of the title character. Similarly, the elder Anne Silvester in *Man and Wife* loses her space in the narrative through her death after her “husband” obtains legal advice that allows him to invalidate the marriage.

Although I did not set out to study the bigamy plot, all of my chapters include one or more novels with either bigamy or the fear of bigamy. In *Cheveley*, *Man and Wife*, and *John Caldigate*, the contested marriage is not the only marriage for one of the main characters involved in the dispute. *Cheveley*’s Lord de Clifford is already legally married to Julia when he “marries” Mary Lee. *Man and Wife*’s younger Anne Silvester must prove that she was already married to Geoffrey Delamayn before she accidentally married Arnold Brinkworth, which would have made her best friend Blanche’s marriage to Arnold bigamous. And the title character of *John Caldigate* must convince the court that he did not actually marry Euphemia in order to validate his subsequent marriage to Hester Bolton. Chapter 1’s *The History of Pendennis* includes the Bluebeard-like John Altamont Amory, who lets his wife, Lady Clavering, believe he

is dead while he blackmails her second husband with the threat of revealing that their marriage is bigamous. In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester attempts to marry Jane bigamously while Bertha is still living. My final chapter examines *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, which includes a bigamous marriage in its serial version, and *David Copperfield*, which, Maia McAleavey argues, imagines David's marriage to Agnes as "figuratively bigamous," not only because Agnes is identified as Dora's replacement before Dora's death, but also because he will be joined to both Dora and Agnes in the afterlife (194). The prevalence of bigamy in these novels relates directly to one of my claims about blame in Victorian marriage narratives: Just as blame for marital conflicts exceeds husband and wife, so, too, the bigamy plot is one means of representing the conflicts themselves extending outward beyond husband and wife, sweeping up others in their wake, such as the second wife who is not actually a wife, the children who discover they are not "legitimate," and the communities that are shocked to discover a bigamist living in their midst and find themselves tainted by scandal.

The communal repercussions of blaming become most apparent in my final chapter, "Shame, Charivari, and *David Copperfield*," which examines public shaming and the disciplinary function of blame. I discuss Victorian representations of charivari, a folk performance intended to humiliate wayward spouses for violating community standards of appropriate marital behavior. In these events, performers parade in front of their target's home, making noise, burning effigies, and shouting insults. In my preface I discussed the way fairy-tale allusions serve to blame through comparison, an indirect form of folklore blaming. In contrast, charivari is a direct form of blame, insofar as it identifies a specific culprit and the transgression that culprit is accused of committing. During one such performance, the charivariers called out: "Ran, tan, tan; ran, tan, tan, / To the sound of this pan; / This is to give notice that Tom Trotter /



Has beaten his good wo-man!” (qtd in Chambers 510). In this case the charivariers have gathered in order to blame Tom Trotter for the offense of wife-beating.

Despite the clear identification of culprit and transgression typical of charivari, these performances also show that shame extends beyond the supposed transgressor. The targets of these performances become both involuntary spectators and the spectacles, exposed to the double gaze of watching their likenesses being paraded and burned while the performers are also directing their attention toward them. Focusing on the charivari scene of Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, I argue that the blurring of spectator and spectacle creates a link between the charivariers and their target. Charivaris induce shame in the perceived culprit while also revealing the communal shame that motivates the performance.

I conclude Chapter 4 by using charivari as a model for reading shaming incidents in Dickens’s *David Copperfield*. Although Dickens’s novel depicts shaming in interpersonal – rather than communal – exchanges, these moments operate like charivari in their spectatorial nature, the shared shame of finger-pointer and culprit, and the blurred boundary between public and private spaces. By presenting finger-pointing as a spectacle, *Copperfield* implies that even private exchanges of blame are public acts. This final chapter, then, returns me to the theatrical blaming of Victorian “Bluebeard” adaptations from Chapter 1. Like Thackeray, Dickens makes blame into a show. The difference is that for Dickens, the show provides a glimpse of something that his characters are shamed in seeing – the prostrate woman, the displaced ribbon. Signs of blame are put on display for spectators who are then ashamed of having seen.

Finally, in the Epilogue, I discuss aspects of Victorian blaming that persist today. Recent controversial rape cases in the United States demonstrate differing folk and legal standards about what should count as rape and lead to punishment. In cases where folk object to the actions of

institutional authorities in the wake of rape allegations, they have turned to twenty-first-century forms of social media, gathering online to publicly shame culprits or publicly support victims. Often finger-pointing on social media is directed toward others who are responding to the case rather than the rapists, indicating a wider circulation of blame than those directly involved in the crime.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Beth Newman also discusses Jane's hiding in window-curtains, arguing that it is part of Jane's "deliberate strategy of obscurity" (25).

<sup>2</sup> On the definition of culpable, see also Hale (26).

<sup>3</sup> See also Sarah Lucia Hoagland (120) and Barbara Houston (142).

<sup>4</sup> One ethical theory of moral responsibility is the Principal of Alternative Possibility, "that one is not culpable for an action if one could not have acted otherwise" (Hale 26). Another is the Principle of Possible Prevention, that "a person is morally responsible for a certain event . . . only if he could have prevented it" (Hale 26). See also Carl Ginet (85) and Hoagland (198).

<sup>5</sup> See also Lamb (7-8, 23).

<sup>6</sup> Some examples: Georgia Corrick argues that Edna Lyall "underplays" opportunities to blame male characters in her novels (484). Margaret Flanders Darby argues that critics have been unfair in their blame of Dora Copperfield and that her husband, David, should be blamed for her death (155-69). In another interpretation of a character's blameworthiness, Thomas H. Goggans discusses critical responses to the character of Carol in David Mamet's *Oleanna* that tend either to describe the character as a bad woman or to object to her characterization as supporting a "misogynistic view" (443). He contends that the characterization is more complex than either of those critical positions indicate.

<sup>7</sup> D.A. Miller refers to differing registers of blame in his discussion of literary detection: "In general, the effects of a police apparatus are secured as side effects of their motivation *in another register*. . . . Thus, without having to serve police functions in an ex officio way, gossip and domestic familiarity produce the effect of surveillance; letters and diaries, the effect of dossiers; closed clubs and homes, the effect of punishment" (49; original emphasis).

<sup>8</sup> Frank De Caro and Rosan A. Jordan concur, "Contemporary folklorists largely agree that folkloric communication is virtually a cultural universal" (15).

<sup>9</sup> Other examples include Matilda M. Blake's call for women's enfranchisement and changes in child custody laws in her essay "Are Women Protected?"; Frances Power Cobbe's

arguments for property law reform and stricter punishments for marital violence in *Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors* and “Wife-Torture in England”; and Caroline Norton’s advocacy for greater legal protections for married women in her pamphlet “English Laws for Women.”

<sup>10</sup> On the increasing legal intolerance for domestic violence during the nineteenth century, see especially Martin J. Wiener (170-239) and Russell P. Dobash and R. Emerson Dobash (570-73).

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Welch shows the influence of a growing reliance on circumstantial evidence in novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Jonathan Grossman demonstrates the influence of law courts on nineteenth-century narrative form, arguing, “the period from the 1790s to the 1840s was uniquely dominated by the development of a narrative paradigm oriented to the law courts as a storytelling forum” (4). Kristin Kalsem examines the relationship between law and literature in the writing of nineteenth-century women. Kieran Dolin describes links between nineteenth- and early twentieth-century legal discourse and the novel, “strands including an evidentiary model of narration, a plot concerned with the commission and rectification of crime and civil wrong, and the adoption of a critical tone with respect to official agencies of law” (2).

<sup>12</sup> Other critics who draw attention to failed or failing marriages, particularly in relation to marital violence, are Lisa SurrIDGE (*Bleak Houses*), Marlene Tromp, and Kate Lawson and Lynn Shakinovsky. Helena Michie examines Victorian novels in which the post-courtship conflicts begin with the honeymoon.

## Chapter 1: Blaming in Victorian Bluebeard Theatricals and *Pendennis*

In 1877, *The Examiner* of London undertook a humorous “Apology for Bluebeard,” asserting: “An impartial investigation of the life and fate of this luckless but interesting character will not fail to show that, at worst, if he erred at all, he was more sinned against than sinning; and that there is, indeed, every reason to hope and trust that, in his conjugal deportment, he was wholly and absolutely blameless” (1324). The degree to which Bluebeard might be “blameless” has been a topic of much consideration from the time the fairy tale first appeared in print in 1697, when Charles Perrault’s first moral blamed the wives’ curiosity for the disastrous outcome of the marriages.<sup>1</sup> The question of Bluebeard’s guilt or innocence was of particular concern during the Victorian era, when Bluebeard’s violence was cited in debates over issues ranging from marital violence to the Deceased Wife’s Sister’s Marriage Bill. That the fairy tale calls for the assignment of blame is indicated by some of the titles of Victorian Bluebeard dramas, ranging from the 1841 *Bluebeard; or, Dangerous Curiosity and Justifiable Homicide* (Egerton), in which the writer cites feminine curiosity as a justification of masculine violence, to the 1860 *Blue Beard; or, Female Curiosity!! and Male Atrocity!!!* (Keating), in which the writer calls attention to male violence through increased exclamation. In spite of these titles, this chapter argues that the plays ultimately do not settle blame on either the curious wife or the violent husband. Instead, the repeated acts of blaming generated by both the serial plot and the conventions of theater show that the process of blame does not end with punishment (or with the final curtain); rather, determinations of culpability remain open to reinterpretation even after the supposed culprit is killed and the show has ended.

Additionally, this chapter considers Bluebeard theatricals as an important intertext for William Makepeace Thackeray, whose oeuvre shows his strong and sustained interest in the tale;

not only did Thackeray allude to the fairy tale in most of his novels, he also created an illustrated *The Awful History of Blue Beard* (1833) and wrote the short stories “Bluebeard’s Ghost” (1843) and “Barbazure” (1847), as well as an unfinished comical play (1851).<sup>2</sup> Whether incorporating the fairy-tale character into fiction or drama, Thackeray’s Bluebeard is primarily a figure from the stage. David Kurnick observes, “His hatred of ‘sham’ notwithstanding, Thackeray’s work is everywhere animated by an attachment to an existing theatrical culture” (30). In his novel *The History of Pendennis*, in which two characters have blue beards (and one is nicknamed “Bluebeard”), a proliferation of unhappy marriages and engagements generates multiple occasions for blame. Through theatricality and repetition, the novel presents its characters as acting out culturally scripted roles. In doing so, the novel challenges the effectiveness of placing blame for these failed relationships by suggesting the shared culpability of the community that created those roles.

“Bluebeard” is not a well-known fairy tale today, overshadowed by the likes of “Snow White,” “Cinderella,” and “Beauty and the Beast,” which have all been made into popular animated films – with accompanying toys, books, and children’s dress-up clothes – by the Walt Disney Company. But it would be hard to overstate the tale’s popularity during the Victorian era. The tale was performed repeatedly on the Victorian stage, printed in chapbooks and fairy-tale collections, and retold by Victorian poets and fiction writers. So well-known was the fairy tale, that Bluebeard was used as a name for dogs and horses.<sup>3</sup>

Although no two “Bluebeard” stories are identical, most versions of the tale include the following elements: A wealthy man who has already been widowed several times (the number of previous marriages varies) wishes to marry again. He woos a young maiden who is initially put off by his blue beard and/or troubled marital history but is eventually won over. Soon after their

marriage, Bluebeard gives her all the keys to his castle, warning her not to enter one forbidden chamber. The wife enters the forbidden room, finding the bodies of his previous wives. Her transgression is revealed through a stained or broken key, and Bluebeard prepares to kill her as punishment. Just as he is about to chop her head off, the wife's brothers and/or former lover ride in to rescue her. This tale is based on a serial blame-punishment plot sequence, with Bluebeard blaming a sequence of wives for disobedience or curiosity and then executing them before he is blamed himself for the violence and killed by his final bride's family or friends. As I discussed in the preface, the repetitive blaming within the tale has often led critics of the tale or its retellers to focus on the way the tale seems to blame either the curious wife or the violent husband. Cristina Bacchilega, for example, states, "it should not be surprising that Perrault's narrative has led literary retellers and commentators, especially in the nineteenth century, to identify the tale's central theme and crime as women's curiosity" (106). In contrast, Juliet McMaster asserts that in novelistic treatments of "Bluebeard," "it is the second and more sensational element, the husband's sin rather than the wife's, that has had most attention" ("Breakfast" 199). My aim here is not to discuss who *should* be blamed. Instead, I will examine the ways Bluebeard plays seem to blame everyone, and by doing so, ultimately settle blame on no one.

The tale was one of the most popular subjects of nineteenth-century theater, with plays ranging from elaborate Christmas spectacles – complete with live animals – to amateur parlor plays. George Colman the Younger is largely credited with popularizing stage Bluebeards through his enormously influential *Blue-Beard; or, Female Curiosity!* (1798), which Shuli Barzilai describes as "the *Phantom of the Opera* of its day" (43).<sup>4</sup> Victorian Bluebeard plays frequently borrow elements of Colman's production, including the Turkish setting and Orientalized names, several of which were names also found in English versions of the *Arabian*

*Nights*. The name Fatima for Bluebeard's wife was widely adopted by Victorians, filling a void left by Perrault's tale, in which the wife is unnamed. Following Colman's success, so many Bluebeard theatricals were produced that by 1866 one such drama reassured audiences in its subtitle that the "Worn-out Subject" would be "Done-up Anew" (Bellingham), while the subtitle of an 1860 play promised that it would approach the topic "From a New Point of Hue" (Byron). In the first line of a Bluebeard play patterned after Greek drama, the actress depicting Curiosity announces, "Here I am, once again," noting later that she has been drawn to Bluebeard's palace "again and again," perhaps reflecting the sentiments of Victorian audiences, who were likewise drawn to Bluebeard's palace "again and again" (Duckworth 5).

### **Bluebeard's Responsibility**

With each killing, Bluebeard indicates that he is blaming his wife both for entering the room and for causing her own death, in effect attempting to absolve himself of responsibility for his violence. His logic is that because she chose to enter the room, she must die. This reasoning transfers agency for her subsequent death from the killer to the victim. However, Bluebeard's repeated acts of violence indicate the failure of his attempts to blame and his inability to cast off his own responsibility. As I discussed in the introduction, the term "responsible" is sometimes linked with the term "culpable" to indicate someone who is deserving of blame. In this usage, being responsible means "fulfilling one's duty" (Hale 25). When a problem arises, the person to blame is the one who was responsible for the situation, in the sense of having a duty to ensure that problems did not arise. Benjamin Hale argues, "This notion of a duty makes it possible for us to talk about blame in the first place. Without responsibilities or duties, we would not be able to blame ourselves for acting improperly" (25). This conception of responsibility is contingent on chosen circumstances. One becomes responsible for a particular set of tasks in accepting a job,

for instance, or one becomes responsible for caring for an adopted pet. In contrast, Emmanuel Levinas describes responsibility as a necessary, unchosen quality of being in which the “I” is called into being by an Other who demands that the I respond (*Totality* 212). Because the call to responsibility precedes being, in Levinas’s view, one does not choose to be responsible for another and one can never be not responsible.

Bluebeard plays bring these two versions of responsibility together. Bluebeard imagines his responsibility to his wives as flexible, impermanent, and based in choice. When his wives make the choice to enter the forbidden chamber, Bluebeard believes that he is freed from responsibility toward them. He kills them in an outward sign that he considers their bond severed – that he intends no further response from them to him or him to them. However, the serial plot of the plays undermines Bluebeard’s conception of responsibility by replacing each executed wife with a new one who will call forth Bluebeard’s response again. Returning again to Levinas, the “I” cannot erase his or her responsibility to the Other, even in the act of murder. As Judith Butler argues, “I would have to keep obliterating, especially if there are four hundred men behind him, and they all have families and friends, if not a nation or two behind them” (*Precarious Life* 136). In Bluebeard’s case, he is unable to obliterate his responsibility to the Other, because for each wife he kills, another takes her place. Indeed, in some versions, even his dead wives continue to demand that Bluebeard respond to them. In Eliza H. Keating’s play, for instance, Bluebeard’s dead wives haunt his sleep each night to accuse him of their murders, telling him, “‘You shan’t go to sleep! / ‘You’ve murdered of us wives, full half a score, / ‘Therefore, vile Blue Beard, you shall sleep no more!’” (4). Bluebeard says, “To make these headless beauties keep their distance/ I shall require another wife’s assistance” (4). Rather than accept that he must respond to these wives, he hopes his new wife will respond for him, “to



scold, or drive away those ladies” (4). His effort to transfer responsibility from himself to a wife is thus a process that must be repeated over and over again. Each time he kills one wife to obliterate his responsibility to her, he is haunted by all his wives, who direct blame back to him. He responds to the haunting by selecting a new wife, and the process repeats.

In the end, Bluebeard can never permanently affix blame to any wife, because, in Levinas’s formulation, he still has and will always have responsibility toward the other. At best, redirecting responsibility through blaming grants a temporary reprisal, but such redirecting will need to be repeated over and over again. Butler notes the repetitive nature of responsibility in her formulation of responsibility as accountability. The “I” can never be fully accountable, she argues, because there is never solely an “I.” She writes, “My efforts to give an account of myself founder in part because I *address* my account, and in addressing my account I am exposed to you” (*Giving an Account* 38; original emphasis). The account of the “I” is always narrated in relation to others; this narrative, therefore, is “always undergoing revision” (*Giving an Account* 40). I would add the flip side to Butler’s argument: just as the “I” can never be fully accountable, the “I” can never be fully unaccountable. This explains what René Girard sees as the repetitive quality of sacrifice that inaugurates the “the sacrificial crisis” (49). Girard describes sacrifice as channeling violent impulses to a single victim and displacing responsibility for violence from the community to the victim (39). The repetitive nature of sacrifice not only reveals that the violent impulse must be repressed over and over again, but that the affixing of blame must be repeated because the original responsibility cannot be finally cast off through scapegoating another. Hence Girard’s crisis: the more times sacrifice is repeated, the more apparent it becomes that it cannot perform the work it is intended to do.

The same can be said for the act of blaming. Pointing the finger at some other for a given circumstance can never satisfactorily confine responsibility to that other. As Garrath Williams argues, “So far . . . as our blaming operates to deny our co-responsibility, it undercuts part of its ostensible ambition. . . . Blame that targets a few to the favour of others – and most especially to the favour of he who blames – undercuts the appeal to shared standards and undermines itself” (439-40). The very act of directing blame indicates the existence of alternative possible culprits. Paradoxically, if only one character were blamable there would be no need for blaming. Blaming exposes uncertainty about who or what should be held accountable for a particular problem; if there were no uncertainty, there would be no reason to point fingers. Looked at in this light, Bluebeard’s repeated insistence on his wives’ transgressions can be seen as an indication that he is not successful in lodging blame with the wives. If blameworthiness lies only in female behavior, then why the repeated need to point that out?

The repetitive blaming I’ve been describing is an element of Bluebeard tales in general, but it is an element that is particularly highlighted by Victorian popular theater, in which repetition is also intrinsic to the genre.<sup>5</sup> Repeated words or sounds, for instance, are typical. In one play, after Fatima rushes out of the forbidden chamber, a Chorus exclaims, “Oh, woe! when was such horror seen? / Woe! woe! when was such horror seen? / Oh, woe! when was such horror seen?” (Duckworth 10). Similarly, in another play, soon-to-be jilted suitor Selim encourages future Bluebeard bride Fatima to run away with him, singing, “Start and cease grieving, dear Fatima, / Start and cease grieving, dear Fatima. / Dear Fatima! Dear Fatima!” (Byron 5). Fatima responds: “This is indeed an undutiful start! / This is indeed an undutiful start! / Undutiful start! Undutiful start!” (Byron 5). Many of these lines were set to music that would have been familiar to Victorian audiences, so that both words and tunes contributed to the overall

repetitiveness of the plays. Michael Kelly's compositions for Colman's *Blue-Beard* became so well established as *the* Bluebeard tunes that they were frequently incorporated into shows by other playwrights. Henry Bellingham's *Bluebeard Re-Paired* notes the audience's expectation for Kelly's "Bluebeard's March." As the band begins to play, King Earlypurl commands, "Hold! Michael Kelly must the *bâton* yield, / For Offenbach to-night commands the field" (26).

However, instances when the rhyming couplets are forced undercut the seeming naturalness of the rhythm, calling attention to the unnaturalness of the plays' repetitive violence. For example, in J.V. Bridgeman's 1860 *Bluebeard; or, Harlequin and Freedom in Her Island Home*, King Despotino insists that the royal right is to "torture, burn, imprison," with the word "imprison" ending the line (4). To maintain the play's rhyme pattern, the word "business" is hyphenated, so that "imprison" rhymes with "busin," leaving "-Ess" to begin the next line (4). Of course, theater audiences would not see the line break in print, but the rhyme of "imprison" and "busin-" would only be audible if the actor unnaturally paused mid-word. In Keating's play, an extra syllable is added to enforce the rhyme scheme when Bluebeard tells Fatima's father, "You are poor, -- I, *vice versâ*, / Your daughter give me for better or for worse-a" (5). Henry James Byron's *Bluebeard* rhymes "years" with "hears" and calls attention to the forced rhyme: "You hear, miss -- or to meet the rhyme you *hears*" (Byron 14; original emphasis). This play even suggests that these forced rhymes themselves will be a source of blame. At the end of the play, Abomelique and Fatima request the audience's forgiveness. Fatima says, "Kindly remember if we've failed to please, / We've wounded no susceptibilities -- / Hurt no one's feelings with our ragged rhyme, / Or marr'd the merriment of Christmas time" (Byron 38). The play's ragged rhymes suggest through sound that there is something not quite right about the play's repetition, one element of which is Bluebeard's repeated insistence that his wives must be punished.

Moreover, the repetitiveness of the plot raises questions about Bluebeard's motive for killing his wives, as it indicates that blame and punishment are not serving a disciplinary function in the plays. If every wife commits the same supposed crime, then Bluebeard's punishment is utterly ineffective as a deterrent. Of course, as other critics and some of the plays themselves point out, Bluebeard may not be interested in disciplining his wives. Rather, the serial plot may indicate that Bluebeard actually wants his wives to transgress his prohibition so that he can have an excuse to kill them. As Casie E. Hermansson asserts, "[Bluebeard's] plot is based on unvaried repetition. He invites and indeed presupposes transgression in the very terms by which he gives the prohibition" (*Reading Feminist Intertextuality* 5).<sup>6</sup> In Keating's play, Bluebeard kills a new bride once a week; at the play's opening he has just killed wife number twenty. After marrying Fatima, he is motivated to kill her again not by her curious transgression, but because he finds her tiresome and extravagant in her purchases. He laments, "Why did I marry / In such hot haste? 'Twere wiser far to tarry. / I've wedded now of wives, the twenty-first, / And, by comparison, this is the worst" (17). He concocts the forbidden room test as an excuse to kill her because he considers divorce too "rash a course" (17). He is certain that Fatima will fail the test. As he prepares to leave her with the fatal key, she asks him to buy her a new head dress. Bluebeard tells the audience, "Unconscious victim! I can scarcely bear it. / Head dress, forsooth! she'll have no head to wear it" (18). Fatima's sister, Irene, points out that Bluebeard surely intends for Fatima to enter the forbidden room: "Or, why in the name of wonderment should he, / So very pointedly give you that key?" (20). Similarly, in Bridgeman's play, Bluebeard is certain that he will kill his bride long before she enters the forbidden room. He eyes up Fatima's sister, Anne, on their wedding day, already planning ahead to his next marriage: "She's prettier than her sister – sure as fate, / I'll make her Mrs. Bluebeard No. 8" (15). The play

later attests to the inevitability of Fatima's transgression. After entering the forbidden room, Fatima tells Anne that she disobeyed Bluebeard's command in order to find out the reason for his order. Anne responds, "Why of course you did! / What woman ever does as she is bid?" (17).

These plays thus represent Bluebeard's prohibition not so much as a test but as a trap.

Moreover, the plays call into question Bluebeard's account of his wives' blame by circulating blame among a number of characters. Finger-pointing does not end with Bluebeard's killings because potential culprits still exist. Among the possible culprits are the bride's parents or siblings, Curiosity (either as an abstract quality or, as in one play, a personification), and, of course, Bluebeard himself. Blame is leveled at Fatima's mother in Bridgeman's play, as Fatima is tricked into disavowing her true love, Selim, and marrying Bluebeard when she thinks Selim has abandoned her. It turns out that Fatima's mother hid Selim's love letters from Fatima to coax her into marrying the wealthier Bluebeard (16). In Keating's play it is Fatima's father who is to blame for marrying his daughter to Bluebeard in exchange for money and for parting her from her poor true love, Selim. Fatima's sister, Irene, also comes in for blame in Keating's play, as she covets Bluebeard's riches and urges her sister to marry him; later, she convinces Fatima to enter the forbidden room. When Fatima does learn of her husband's crimes through the ghosts of the murdered women, she initially blames his victims based on their frightful appearance. She tells the ghosts, "Who can blame Blue Beard, if this be true, ma'am, / For ridding us of such old frights as you, ma'am" (22). In Mary Duckworth's Greek tragedy, the chorus partially blames Bluebeard, noting his enjoyment of bull fighting: "A gentle man, and kind, / You'll never, never find / Who loves bloodthirsty games to see" (13). However, the lion's share of blame falls on the personified (and feminized) Curiosity, whose guilt is the subject of the closing "Forensic Contest" (18). Fatima's brother tells Curiosity, "Why, Curiosity, you are the source / Of all the

wrong in which the world's immersed!" (18). In Byron's play, Selim blames Fatima for marrying Abomelique at the same time he blames Fatima's father for forcing her to marry. Fatima's sister Anne casts blame on herself, announcing to the audience that she is a villain before goading Abomelique into the plot to trap Fatima. Abomelique blames Fatima's curiosity, before finally blaming himself – asking Fatima's forgiveness – and blaming Anne – bestowing his forgiveness on her.

Ultimately, though, the plays suggest that blame cannot be settled permanently on any of these possible culprits. As the characters within the plays continually direct and redirect blame, and as multiple productions on the Victorian stage put forth their own various accounts of blame, the question of fault remains undetermined. The lack of finality is suggested by the conclusion of James Robinson Planché and Charles Dance's *Blue Beard: A Grand Musical, Comi-Tragical, Melo-Dramatic, Burlesque Burletta*, first performed on New Year's Day in 1839 at the Royal Olympic Theatre. Following Bluebeard's "death," he sits back up and reassures the audience that he is not actually dead, to which his wife responds, "Perhaps it's better so, and for this reason, / We humbly hope to run you through this season" (28).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in J.M. Morton's 1854 pantomime, after Selim "kills" Bluebeard, the Good Fairy brings him back to life, transforming him to Clown for the harlequinade. In these moments, the plays disrupt their own endings to move audiences to the next beginning. As Peter Brooks argues of narrative, "we know that any termination is artificial" (23). Bluebeard plays not only point to the artifice of the ending through the actors' self-reflexivity, but also undo the finality of the ending by immediately preparing to start the show again. Bluebeard's final punishment, then, is a temporary resolution to the tale's question of blame, one that would be taken up again and again in performances running throughout the nineteenth-century.

## “Bluebeard” and Socio-Political Commentary

Topical references and social and political critique are common elements in Victorian popular theater. Because “Bluebeard” depends on repeated failed marriages, the social and political critiques of Bluebeard theatricals are often aimed at marriage. F.C. Burnand’s burlesque *Blue Beard; or, the Hazard of the Dye* (1883) uses the tale to critique the Deceased Wife’s Sister Bill, which would allow widowers to marry their dead wives’ sisters. This issue was debated in England from the 1830s until 1907, when the prohibition on such marriages was finally lifted (Gruner 424-26). In Burnand’s burlesque, following Bluebeard’s threat to execute his final bride (in this case named Lili), sister Anne takes her customary post on the lookout, where she is supposed to watch for the arrival of rescuers. While she watches, Anne reflects, “Blue Beard is tired of Lili – once he’s rid o’her, / Of course, he’d be an eligible widower; / That I might be his wife I once foresaw, / But the Blue Chamber’s Bill is not yet law” (52). Burnand portrays sister Anne as a mercenary character. Rather than fearing for her sister’s life, she ponders how she might benefit from Lili’s death – if only the Deceased Wife’s Sister Bill were law. Anne’s selfish and calculating endorsement of the bill casts her – and by extension other supporters of the bill – in a negative light. Additionally, by calling the bill the “Blue Chamber’s Bill,” the play links the legal issue to the violence hidden in Bluebeard’s forbidden room, suggesting that a bill authorizing men to marry their deceased wives’ sisters would also promote Blue Chambers, a symbol of the collection of dead women these repeat husbands might accumulate.

Burnand’s play was not the first text to link Bluebeard to this debate. The 1874 poem “The Deceased Wife’s Sister’s Bill” suggests that a man who wishes to marry the sister of a dead wife is like a Bluebeard. The poem, set in England, describes the dilemma of Mr. Brown: he desires all seven of the Smith sisters and cannot decide which to wed. He resolves the matter à la

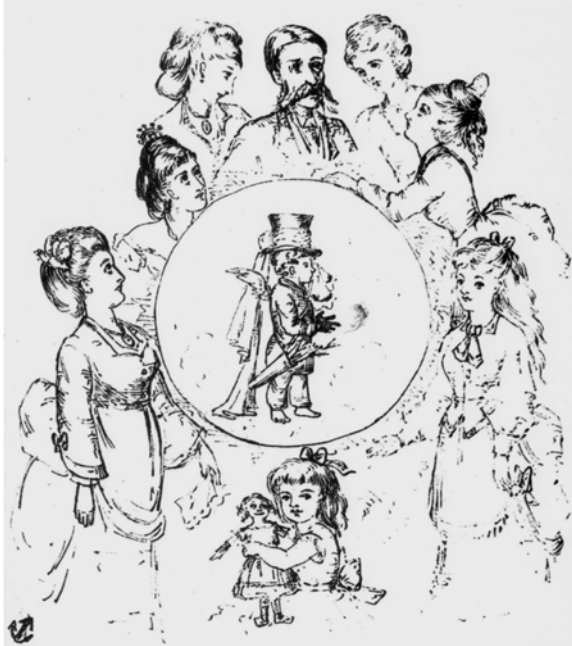


Figure 1: Illustration accompanying the poem “Deceased Wife’s Sister’s Bill.” Reproduced with permission from an image produced by ProQuest LLC for its online product, *British Periodicals, 1681 - 1920*.

Bluebeard. Realizing he need not limit himself to one bride, Mr. Brown tells the sisters: “I have made up my mind, / Dear charmers, to marry you all” (Colomb 51). The Smith sisters think he must be joking, until Mr. Brown explains the pending law that would legitimate his desire: “Too straight-laced our manners have been, / We may now wed all round if we will; / I will read, to explain what I mean, / The new ‘Deceased Wife’s Sister’s Bill” (51). But while Mr. Brown and the Smith sisters seem to welcome the possibility of such a bill, the poem clearly works against it. After explaining the pending bill to the sisters, Mr. Brown

ludicrously proposes marriage to all seven, including one so young that the accompanying illustration depicts her clinging to a doll (Figure 1). Indeed, the five older sisters believe the other two are too young even to listen to a discussion of marriage, telling them: “This matter’s not fit for your ears” (51). Their extreme youthfulness, however, does not deter Mr. Brown, who seems quite happy to have the “kind little dears” pledged to him (52).

Mr. Brown’s apparent enthusiasm for eventually marrying the youngest daughters – an event that would require the deaths of the first five – leads to the comparison between Mr. Brown and Bluebeard: “Said Anne in a faltering mood, / ‘You must promise, whate’er may befall, / That you won’t play ‘old Harry’ (see Froude), / And for ‘State reasons’ murder us all.’ / ‘Sister Anne,’ return’d Brown, ‘calm your fears, / Here an innocent Bluebeard you see” (Colomb 52-53). The



“old Harry” to whom Anne refers is Henry VIII, and the parenthetical instruction to “see Froude” refers to James Anthony Froude, whose *History of England* sparked a series of reviewers to comment on his attempt to “whitewash” the “Royal Bluebeard” (Rev. of *History of England*, 518).<sup>8</sup> Froude defended Henry, insisting upon “the necessity of arriving at a just understanding of a remarkable man” and calling popular opinion of Henry “one of the largest historical misconceptions which I believe has ever been formed” (129). Thus, by invoking Froude’s version of “old Harry,” sister Anne reveals her fear that Mr. Brown will find an excuse for killing his wives, in the same way that Froude justifies Henry’s wife killings for “State reasons.” Sister Anne was not the first Victorian to posit a connection between supporters of the bill and Bluebeard-like behavior. In *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold derides “the attempt to enable a man to marry his deceased wife’s sister,” describing it as the type of behavior “exemplified in that crowned Philistine, Henry the Eighth, – the craving for forbidden fruit and the craving for legality” (132-133).<sup>9</sup> The poet of “The Deceased Wife’s Sister’s Bill” seems to share Arnold’s opinion, as the poem portrays Mr. Brown as a lecherous potential Bluebeard hoping to use a pending law to license his desires.

Such portrayals played a key role in the debate of this issue. As Margaret Morganroth Gullette argues, “Broadly, whether an act is considered correct or legal has a great deal to do with whether the people who commit it are considered criminal types or not. The marriage-prohibition debate turns out to be a war of characterizations” (155). In other words, those opposed to repealing the prohibition on marriages to deceased wives’ sisters characterized those participating in such marriages (or wishing to participate) as criminals. Portraying someone as a Bluebeard-type for desiring remarriage relies on an interpretation of the tale that blames Bluebeard for excessive violence. The poem’s critique of the bill preemptively blames men who

would remarry their wives' sisters for possessing a Bluebeard-like, sinister desire for multiple wives.

The debate over marriage to a deceased wife's sister was not the only Victorian legal issue connected to Bluebeard. Other writers used the tale as an occasion to critique British legal punishment for wife-beaters. In Wybert Reeve's 1875 *Pantomime of Blue Beard, The Great Bashaw; or Harlequin Stormcloud, and the Fairy Starlight Queen*, staged at the Edinburgh Theatre, Stormcloud mocks the idea that a married couple (in this case Bluebeard and his latest bride) would enjoy the "blessings" of matrimony. He says, "Of such a fallacy we've often heard; / But who believes it? very few indeed! / What law in England thinks of wives? we read / A man may thrash *her* till she's nearly dead – / But let him, starving, steal a loaf of bread – / Or children pluck of flowers a posey bright, / Then law, not justice, falls with all its might / Upon the culprits" (28; original emphasis). This pantomime extends the possibility of bad marriages from Bluebeard and his bride to English married couples in general, of which "very few" might still believe the fantasy that marriage is a blessing. The reason Stormcloud offers for this is that the



Figure 2: Illustration for "Panel for the Protection of Ladies" in *Punch*.

law treats domestic violence as a lesser crime than picking flowers or stealing a loaf of bread.

Bluebeard was also connected to marital violence in an 1853 *Punch* essay. The text is accompanied by an illustration depicting the scene from the tale in which Bluebeard prepares to execute his final bride as she pleads for her life. The illustration's

Bluebeard is like the Orientalized Bluebeard of stage productions, complete with turban and scimitar (Figure

2). The essay claims that England's lax punishments for wife-batterers "might make foreigners imagine that our laws, in this regard, had either been enacted by a Parliament of BLUEBEARDS, or dictated by KING HENRY VIII" ("Panel for the Protection of Ladies" 158).<sup>10</sup> The illustration seems at odds with the essay. Whereas the essay imagines foreigners looking with disapproval on the Bluebeards of the British Parliament, the illustration depicts Bluebeard as a foreigner. The displacement of responsibility operates on two levels. One is illustrated in the kneeling wife begging for Bluebeard's mercy. As I've discussed above, Bluebeard repeatedly attempts to displace his responsibility to his wives for his violence. By placing the wife in the position of guilty penitent, the illustration makes apparent that she is blamed. The second way responsibility is displaced is from English to foreign Bluebeard, although this displacement is offset by the accompanying essay. Rather than moving culpability for Bluebeard-like crimes to barbaric, "Oriental" cultures, the essay claims British leaders as the source of women's suffering.<sup>11</sup> This combination of Orientalizing and anglicizing Bluebeard works to simultaneously deflect and recall blame for marital violence. On one hand, the men who would commit such crimes cannot truly be British; they are exhibiting the uncivilized behavior of an inferior nation. On the other hand, it is the British Bluebeard-like members of Parliament who will be looked down upon by foreigners, and a British monarch who set the example for wife murder.

The oscillation between foreign and anglicized Bluebeards is characteristic of theatrical adaptations of the tale. Even when playwrights set the tale in Turkey, following Colman, they often include details that suggest the events are actually taking place in Britain. For instance, J.H. Tully's 1842 burletta, *Blue Beard; or, Hints to the Curious*, performed at the English Opera House, gives the characters Orientalized names and costumes. But these supposedly Turkish

characters refer repeatedly to British products, such as Rowland's Macassar Oil, Hodgson's Ale, and the Greenwich steamboat guide (6, 7, 12).

Thackeray's Bluebeard intertexts reflect the plays' tension of Britishness versus foreignness as well as their social and political commentary. In *Vanity Fair*, for example, Thackeray refers to Colman's Orientalized Bluebeard and also compares Bluebeard to Henry VIII to critique the British marriage market. In the first reference, Becky Sharp imagines herself "mounted upon an elephant to the sound of the march in 'Bluebeard,'" alluding to the elaborate spectacle and well-known march song by Michael Kelly that accompanied Abomelique's entrance in Colman's show (28; ch. 3).<sup>12</sup> Later, Thackeray associates Bluebeard with Englishness by likening the fairy-tale character to an English king as well as to Sir Pitt, an English gentleman with a seat in Parliament. In describing the ability of the abusive, ill-mannered Sir Pitt to attract a new bride after his wife's death, Thackeray points to the allure of material wealth: "a title and a coach and four are toys more precious than happiness in *Vanity Fair*: and if Henry the Eighth or Bluebeard were alive now, and wanted a tenth wife, do you suppose he could not get the prettiest girl that shall be presented this season" (93; ch. 9). In Thackeray's estimation, wealth trumps all else in matrimonial decisions, so that a known wife-beater, or even a repeated wife-killer, can attract a bride for the right price.

Other critics have observed a connection between Orientalism in Thackeray's work and his social commentary. Writing about *The Newcomes*, J. Russell Perkin argues Thackeray's Orientalism deflects blame for English problems to the East, "drawing attention away from the specific English practices that are at fault. Given the general use of the Orient as a source of corruption in the novel, the metaphors relating to marriage tend to suggest that the Orient is somehow to blame for the English problems" ("Thackeray and Orientalism," 309). In contrast,

Sandy Morey Norton argues that Thackeray's "treatment of non-white characters," such as *Vanity Fair*'s Miss Swartz, "while revealing Thackeray's prejudices of race and class, are above all meant to reflect on and ridicule the white characters around them and the domestic positions they embody" ("Ex-Collector" 126-27).<sup>13</sup> Although these critics may seem to represent two conflicting interpretations, my argument accommodates both. Blame in Bluebeard theatricals and Thackeray's novels is not fixed on either the "Orient" or on England, because blame is not fixed anywhere. Just as blame for Bluebeard's failed marriages does not settle with either the curious wife or the violent husband, it also does not settle on a particular national identity, real or imagined.

### **Thackeray's Theatrical Intertext**

Thackeray's theater-inflected "Bluebeard" intertext complements the social and political commentary of his work.<sup>14</sup> One of Thackeray's most common targets is the mercenary marriage, paralleling a theme from Bluebeard theatricals. This critique finds roots in Perrault's fairy tale, in which the final bride is initially put off by the extreme blueness of Bluebeard's facial hair, but after seeing his riches decides that the beard is not "so very *Blue*" (Opie and Opie 137; original emphasis). Bluebeard's series of murdered wives makes the tale an apt vehicle for critiques of the marriage market, because it can be used to suggest that brides (or their parents) would prioritize financial security over physical safety. In Colman's play, this becomes apparent when Fatima's father, Ibrahim, breaks off her engagement to the loving but poor Selim to marry her to the wealthy, but fearsome, Bluebeard, a plot element that repeats in many nineteenth-century Bluebeard productions. In Planché and Dance's play, for example, Fleurette wisely announces that she will not marry a man with a beard so blue. But Fleurette's mother counters: "What signifies his beard, you little flat? / His money's the right colour, think of that" (7). In this case,

the mother's advice is actually an order, as the drama soon makes clear. Having obtained the mother's consent, Baron Abomelique concludes his proposal to Fleurette: "You are quite free to answer, yea or nea, / But I shall marry you, whate'er you say" (8). Thus, when Fleurette is later wooed by Abomelique's riches, it is with the knowledge that she will have to marry him no matter whether she likes him. Fleurette's apparent lack of choice is overlooked by critic Jack Zipes, who views the character as "a demeaning depiction" of a woman "who readily gives up her loyal fiancé when she visits the Baron's castle" (168). Although Fleurette warms up to Abomelique after visiting his castle, her eventual acceptance of him must be weighed against the evidence that she could not do otherwise.

Thackeray pursues a similar theme in "Barbazure," in which Fatima's true love goes off to fight a war; in his absence, her parents persuade her to marry the wealthy Barbazure instead.<sup>15</sup> The narrator describes the parents' reason for opposing her first engagement: "her admirable parents had long spoken with repugnance of a match which must bring inevitable poverty to both parties" (40). Here, Thackeray's language emphasizes the properness of the parents' actions; the parents are "admirable" for seeking financial security over love for their daughter. However, in the next sentence Thackeray calls attention to the outrageousness of what is considered "admirable." Describing Barbazure as beginning to court Fatima on the way home from his ninth wife's funeral, Thackeray exposes courtship in all its unromantic baseness. Thackeray's critique continues as Fatima adheres to her parents' wishes: "Instead of indulging in splenetic refusals or vain regrets for her absent lover, the exemplary Fatima at once signified to her excellent parents her willingness to obey their orders; though she had sorrows (and she declared them to be tremendous), the admirable being disguised them so well, that none knew they oppressed her" (40). Fatima is "exemplary" because she is a dutiful daughter. Yet, Thackeray makes clear his

scorn for Fatima's failure to rebel against her parents' wishes. Fatima is able to hide her sorrows "so well, that none knew they oppressed her," Thackeray implies, because her love was fickle to begin with and easily swayed by Barbazure's display of wealth. Fatima and her parents ignore the danger they know Barbazure poses, focusing only on his fortune. Fatima goes so far as to describe his dead wives as a sign of his worth as a husband: "who knows not that he must be a good and tender husband, who, nine times wedded, owns that he cannot be happy without another partner?" (40). Through the extreme portrayal of a woman courting death for the sake of fortune, Thackeray shows the absurdity and danger of marrying for money.

Thackeray's critique of mercenary marriage is not always directed toward brides and their parents. His short story "Bluebeard's Ghost," printed in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1843, turns the familiar marriage-to-Bluebeard-for-money plot on its head with the possibility of a mercenary groom. The story picks up where the fairy tale ends: the final Mrs. Bluebeard is in mourning for her dead husband. Provided with Bluebeard's fortune, the widow Fatima soon forgets the terror of her final moments with him, describing Bluebeard as "the best of husbands" (509). The newly wealthy Fatima quickly attracts suitors: the rivals Mr. Sly and Captain Blackbeard. Mr. Sly and his uncle – a parish parson and doctor who has his eye on "a fat living which lay in [Fatima's] gift" – attempt to trick Fatima into remarriage, with Doctor Sly telling Fatima she needs a second husband to protect her from Bluebeard's ghost (517, 523). Captain Blackbeard exposes the Slys' trickery and succeeds in marrying the widow. Although the tale seems to end well for the newlyweds, Captain Blackbeard is remarkably similar to Bluebeard, including his name, a "magnitude" of whiskers, a propensity for violence, and a mysterious past liaison with another woman (513). Through the comparison of the two men, Thackeray makes it clear that Fatima is entering dangerous territory with her attraction to Blackbeard, "leaving us to

wonder,” as McMaster notes, “if hers is not a case of out of the frying pan, into the fire” (“Breakfast” 206). Having blinded herself to her first husband’s crimes, she learns nothing from her brush with death and foolishly commits herself to a second potential killer. Financially secure after Bluebeard’s death, Fatima clearly does not need a husband. Indeed, Thackeray implies that she is safer without a husband than she would be with one. The Slys’ attempt to access Fatima’s wealth by claiming to provide protection for her suggests that the ideal of the protective husband exists not for the wife’s benefit, but for the husband’s.

Thackeray’s two short story versions of Fatima show that both the “victim” of the mercenary marriage and the “culprit” share blame. The Fatima who marries for money is portrayed as deserving blame for not staying loyal to her true love. The Fatima who is married for money is portrayed as deserving blame for being foolish. This duality is true for Thackeray’s Bluebeards as well, who range from unfortunate victims of circumstances to conniving villains (sometimes in the same work), reflecting one of the hallmarks of Thackeray’s fiction: Rarely are his characters either entirely good or entirely bad. Instead, most of Thackeray’s villains are at least sometimes likable, while his heroes are at least sometimes fools or worse. This trait is exemplified most famously in *Vanity Fair*, subtitled *A Novel without a Hero*. Here, the scheming, murderous Becky Sharp shows admirable resourcefulness and pluck, while the angelic Amelia wears readers’ patience thin with her pining away for the unfaithful George Osborne.<sup>16</sup> Thackeray’s characterizations resist either/or; he doesn’t oppose categories of good/bad or culpable/blameless. Instead, his heroes are sometimes blameworthy and his villains sometimes exonerated.

In his unfinished play, Thackeray portrays Bluebeard as a sympathetic wife-killer. McMaster suggests that one reason Thackeray never finished the play was that he began to fear



that it would seem “too dreadfully cynical and wicked” to his contemporaries (“Breakfast” 214). McMaster argues of the play, “it humorously suggests that we are all Bluebeards; that Bluebeard himself was not such a bad fellow after all; and that if he did show some bad temper towards his wife, she gave him ample provocation. The work would run afoul of those of Thackeray’s critics who objected to his comic handling of evil, and the consequent tendency of his works to confound good with evil” (214). But although Thackeray’s Fatima is not entirely innocent, neither is she Bluebeard’s scapegoat for blame. In the play, Bluebeard’s friend Butts offers him several opportunities to criticize his wife, calling Fatima lazy and questioning her domestic skills. Bluebeard dismisses this criticism, saying he has enough servants that he doesn’t need his wife to do domestic work. Taking a philosophical turn, Bluebeard opines that one must make the best of one’s circumstances: “And when we cannot get the mutton hot / We eat it cold with the best grace we may” (226). Butts is shocked by the prospect that a wife might serve her husband cold mutton, but Bluebeard corrects him, “There is cold mutton, Butts, in every house” (226). Thackeray underscores the importance of this line to the play by underlining it twice in his manuscript, emphasizing his theme that marital woes are universal. Bluebeard further explains, “Sometimes your lovely wife’s at difference with you / And gives you the cold shoulder, doesn’t she? / . . . Sometimes when you would bare your heart to her / Or tell her of your darling plans and hopes / She lies and thinks about ~~the~~ her milliner / Or the next ball, or that Lady Twinkle’s diamonds / Are handsomer than her’s – of anything / But that wh. interests you. So are we all / All for ourselves, eh Butts?” (227). Bluebeard’s discourse on cold mutton humorously, but also poignantly, discloses the sad state of his marriage. His wife has lost interest in him. When he wants to share his innermost feelings, she would rather talk about dresses or jewelry. This may seem an indictment of Fatima; while Bluebeard is a man of serious contemplation, she is all

shallowness. However, Bluebeard himself tempers this possible blame of Fatima by reminiscing about his school days with Butts and their foolishness in falling in love too hastily.

Bluebeard remembers that Butts' first love was raspberry tarts, which Butts says he does not eat anymore: "We only care for some things when we're boys" (222). Bluebeard remarks: "Oh Butts who has not cloyed of raspberry tarts? / O Butts who has not wearied of first love? / . . . What is it – and the worth of it? and behold / A piece of worthless pie-crust smeared with jam! / And so it is, and so hearts rhyme to tarts, / And so we eat too much and sœ when we eat cloy / ~~And~~ We wonder ~~at the~~ that such rubbish was our joy." (223).<sup>17</sup> This exchange comically reflects a recurring plot of Thackeray's fiction. Thackeray returns again and again to the tale of the young man who falls head-over-heels in love with a dazzling – but unworthy – woman, represented in the play by the "piece of worthless pie-crust smeared with jam." The man ultimately realizes that he has bestowed his adoration on the wrong woman and regrets his early follies. Such is the case with Henry Esmond (*The History of Henry Esmond*), who first falls in love with Beatrix before marrying her mother, Rachel; Clive Newcome (*The Newcomes*), who marries Rosey Mackenzie but is freed to marry Ethel when Rosey does him the favor of dying (in the manner of Dora-David-Agnes in *David Copperfield*); Harry Warrington (*The Virginians*), who foolishly engages himself to his much older cousin Maria but is fortunately released when she learns of his lack of fortune; and, repeatedly, Arthur Pendennis.

In *The History of Pendennis*, in particular, unfortunate romantic relationships seem to repeat over and over again. The danger of making a bad marriage looms throughout the novel. The title character approaches marriage three times with women who are made to seem wrong for him: Emily Costigan, Fanny Bolton, and Blanche Amory. In each case, Pen risks turning his initial – and as it turns out, fleeting – attraction into a lifelong commitment. Although he is at

first enamored of each of these women, on closer acquaintance he learns that they lack the substance he would want in a marriage partner, much as Bluebeard in Thackeray's play has learned that the adored raspberry tart is simply crust and jam.

Not only are Pendennis's fleeting attractions like those of Thackeray's dramatic Bluebeard, but the relationships are also theatrical because Thackeray portrays the characters involved as acting out parts. Pen's infatuation with Emily, a professional actress, begins when he sees her on stage. In costume, with rehearsed words and movement, she mesmerizes Pen with the first performance. Emily continues to perform all through her courtship with Pen. While Pen is wooing her, Emily's "part" is "to appear as if she understood what Pen talked, and to look exceedingly handsome and sympathizing" (91; ch. 6). For his part, once Pen falls in love with Emily, he, too, begins to act a part. He feels himself to be a character, "as much in love as the best hero in the best romance he ever read" (75; ch. 4). He puts himself in the costume of lover with "some of his finest clothes" and then lies to his mother about why he is so dressed (75). Emily's father is also acting a part; he encourages the two lovers, romancing Pen with a fantastic story about his family's honorable past. The narrator tells us, "the Captain was not only unaccustomed to tell the truth, – he was unable even to think it" (81; ch. 5). Even his title, Captain, is part of the role he has created for himself. Pen's relationship with Fanny is also based on performance. Pen meets Fanny at Vauxhall, which, like the theater where he first saw Emily, is a site of spectacle. As Fanny takes in the gardens, on Pen's arm, she sees "a splendor such as the finest fairy tale, the finest pantomime she had ever witnessed at the theatre, had never realized" (491; ch. 46). Like Emily, Fanny is a performer; the same Mr. Bows who taught Emily how to act later teaches Fanny how to sing.

Unlike his romances with Emily and Fanny, Pen's relationship with Blanche is not associated with a paid performance space. However, Blanche is portrayed as constantly acting a part in order to command attention. At a ball, her shoulders "were never easy in her frock for one single instant: nor were her eyes, which rolled about incessantly: nor was her little figure: -- it seemed to say to all the people, 'Come and look at me . . .'" (282; ch. 26). Pen courts Blanche twice in the novel. The first time, Blanche describes their courtship as "only play" (252; ch. 25). The second time, Pen tells Blanche they shouldn't "feign raptures and counterfeit romance," but instead acknowledge that they are marrying for pragmatic reasons (678; ch. 64). However, even when they are not playing lovers in this engagement, they are still acting out parts. Like Fatima in "Barbazure," Pen portrays a loveless marriage as their duty to their families, persuading Blanche, "You see, Blanche, that you and I are two good little children, and that this marriage has been arranged for us by our mammas and uncles, and that we must be obedient, like a good boy and girl" (679). In planning a mercenary marriage, Pen and Blanche play the roles plotted for them by Bluebeard theatricals.

Through the theatricality of Pen's romances, Thackeray foregrounds the social commentary his writing shares with Victorian popular theater. Kurnick argues, "The theater in Thackeray is a densely impacted emblem of social change, one that contains a capsule history of its moment and envisions possible futures" (31). In *Pendennis*, the social moment Thackeray shows us is one in which mercenarily formed romantic attachments fail. In each of Pen's first three romances, Thackeray foregrounds economic issues, just as he does in "Bluebeard's Ghost" and "Barbazure." In the first case, Pen's uncle intervenes to prevent Pen's marriage Emily, whose interest in Pen was based on her father's assumption of his wealth. Similarly, Fanny's mother encourages her toward Pen after hearing an exaggerated account of Pen's wealth. Finally,

in Pen's third romance, Thackeray reverses the gender dynamics of the mercenary motives, much as he did in "Bluebeard's Ghost," when it was the man rather than the woman who wanted to marry for money. Major Pendennis encourages Pen to marry Blanche Amory in order to gain her wealth. The major is open about his economic motives: "The great point in marriage is for people to agree to be useful to one another. The lady brings the means, and the gentleman avails himself of them" (620; ch. 59).

What all of these examples have in common is the involvement of one or more supporting characters who encourage the roles adopted by the main actors in the romances, thus extending blame for the failed relationships beyond the lovers themselves. Among the blamable for Pen and Emily's engagement are Pen's mother, Helen; his friend Harry Foker (who took Pen to the theater); and Emily's father, Captain Costigan. In his relationship with Fanny, blame is directed toward Laura (who previously turned down Pen's offer of marriage), Fanny's mother, and again Captain Costigan; this time he inflates Pen's fortunes to his friend Fanny rather than his own daughter. That Captain Costigan repeats the same mistake in this relationship – one with which he should have nothing to do were it not for the novelist's license in creating incredible coincidences – underscores the repetitiveness of the plot. Having escaped his unfortunate engagement to Emily, Pen nearly finds himself in the same predicament, attended by some of the same companions who shared the blame the first time around. Lastly, in Pen's near marriage to Blanche, Major Pendennis is blamable for pushing his nephew into a mercenary marriage, while Blanche's mother, father, and stepfather are guilty of helping to create the conditions for such a marriage.

None of these potential targets of blame seems satisfactory, though, in the face of repeated failed relationships. The novel presents the types of romantic misjudgments Pen made

three times as commonplace. Although Pen avows early in his engagement to Emily that his love “is contracted once and for ever” (40; ch. 1), it soon becomes clear that this relationship is an example of “a love affair in early life which he had to strangle,” just as his father once had to strangle a similar infatuation (43; ch. 2). Indeed, the novel suggests, who hasn’t suffered misplaced affection? In addition to the title character’s mistakes, Pen is surrounded by other characters who have made bad marriages or engagements: George Warrington, who is nicknamed “Bluebeard,” has a secret wife who is blamed for ruining all of Warrington’s hopes in life; Blanche’s mother is unhappily married to a man who is wasting her fortune, while her first husband, whom she believes is dead, blackmails her second husband; Helen Pendennis’s first sweetheart could not marry her because of a previous engagement he comes to regret; and Harry Foker is pressured by his family into an unwanted engagement from which he is freed only to contract an ill-advised engagement with Blanche.

Thackeray explicitly connects Bluebeard to Pen’s friend Warrington, who possesses “a bristly blue beard” (312; ch. 28). Warrington’s physical resemblance to the fairy-tale character is so striking that Lady Rockminster nicknames him Bluebeard. Thackeray paints a sympathetic portrait of this Bluebeard, who escapes from an unhappy marriage by paying his wife to stay hidden instead of killing her. Like *Vanity Fair*’s Sir Pitt, Barbazure, and Perrault’s Bluebeard, Warrington is successful in courting his working-class bride because of his family’s fortune. In this case, however, Warrington – like *Jane Eyre*’s Rochester – was a naive suitor who was not aware of his future in-laws’ motives, learning only after the marriage of the “coarse artifices and scoundrel flatteries” (596; ch. 57). Warrington describes himself as “hopeless and ruined beyond remission” (597). While his bride lives, Warrington’s chance of happiness is dead; he can never feel “the affection of a woman or child” (596). What Warrington fails to explicitly describe, but

becomes apparent through his narration of his marriage, is his wife's ruined chances for happiness. Warrington admits his wife's innocence in his deception, describing her as "forced into what happened by the threats and compulsion of her family" (596). Like Fatima from "Barbazure" and Bertha Mason, Warrington's wife simply adhered to her duty as a daughter in following her parents' plans for her marriage. Guilty of nothing more than doing what her parents asked, Warrington's bride is forced to stay hidden away from the public.

While Warrington is a sympathetic Bluebeard who teaches Pen from his own mistake, Thackeray provides an openly villainous Bluebeard in the character of serial husband John Armstrong Amory Altamont. Thackeray signals Altamont's connection to Bluebeard when Pen describes his beard: "very black indeed; in fact, blue black" (504; ch. 47). Instead of physical violence toward his wives, Altamont's villainy is linked to financial exploitation. Unlike Warrington, who limits himself to one marriage and provides for his wife financially, Altamont lures wife after wife into marriage, eventually abandoning each one, returning only for monetary gain. He succeeds in siphoning off money from Lady Clavering, who believes him to be dead, by blackmailing her current husband. Significantly, Pen learns of Altamont's villainy only after entering into his engagement with Blanche. Juxtaposing Pen's awareness of Altamont's actions with his own attempt to obtain Blanche's fortune, Thackeray shows the similarities between the two men. By "prostituting" himself in his engagement to Blanche, Pen has engaged in behavior worthy of his would-be father-in-law, a lying convict (732; ch. 70). Through this juxtaposition, Thackeray calls into question the assumed villainy of the one and the heroic status of the other. The extreme portrayal of the bigamist Altamont makes it possible to see the flaws inherent in any would-be spouse driven by financial motives. Jenni Calder argues that Thackeray "fails" in his portrayal of Pen as "weak rather than wicked" (35-36). Yet I believe this portrayal of what

Calder sees as “a decent fellow” is crucial to the novel’s overall message and is made clear by the comparison with Altamont: the system of marriage makes a villain not just of the “wicked” but even of “decent” men (36). This message is furthered by the “good” Bluebeard George Warrington. By showing that Bluebeard characters can be both good and bad, Thackeray complicates the possibility of assigning fixed culpability to this character type.

With every man – even the well-intentioned – a potential Bluebeard and every passion – however sincerely felt – a step toward possible future misery, Thackeray’s novel suggests that the blame game is as futile as it is limitless. Even the conventional ending marriage, which moves Pen from the relationship model of Bluebeard plays to one characteristic of novels, fails to bring resolution to the hero’s relationship woes. On its surface, *Pendennis* seems to end with the happy marriage of its title character. Like *David Copperfield*’s Agnes, Laura is a loving sister and selfless angel, whose “life is always passed in making other lives happy” (785; ch. 75). Carol Hanbery MacKay notes the importance of the angelic women to the endings of *Pendennis* and *Copperfield*: “Now we witness an odd displacement, wherein everything gets shifted onto the women – attention, meaning, hope, idealism, the future. Such displacement reflects not only the idealization of women but the weight placed on marriage” (257-258).<sup>18</sup> However, at the same time Thackeray’s novel shifts the focus of Pen’s hopes and dreams onto the angelic Laura, it also calls attention to Pen’s responsibility for Laura’s happiness. Early in the novel, Pen behaved toward Laura with “yawning sovereignty,” believing that “he had but to ask and have, and Laura, like his mother, could refuse him nothing” (552; ch. 53, 297; ch. 27). After the death of Pen’s mother – Laura’s guardian – the novel suggests that Laura may have no choice but to marry Pen. Lady Rockminster sums up Laura’s predicament: “Miss Bell has only a little money. Miss Bell must marry soon” (694; ch. 66). Although Laura apparently loves Pen, the narrator points out,



“Laura liked Pen because she saw scarcely anybody else” (553; ch. 53). Lacking opportunities to meet eligible bachelors and failing to possess adequate wealth to marry the ones she does meet, Laura cannot afford to be choosy in her love. Instead, she must force herself to be content with a man she knows to be “a dandy and a despot” (552).

The narrator questions the happiness of Pen’s marriage to Laura: “‘And what sort of husband would this Pendennis be?’ many a reader will ask, doubting the happiness of such a marriage and the fortune of Laura. The querists, if they meet her, are referred to that lady herself, who, seeing his faults and wayward moods – seeing and owning that there are men better than he – loves him always with the most constant affection” (785; ch. 75). Pen gains a wife who will overlook his faults, who will sustain his “fits of moodiness” without complaint, and who will devote herself to the happiness of others rather than herself (785). Repeatedly described as unworthy of Laura, Pen nonetheless becomes Laura’s only option for marriage, an option she cannot afford to refuse. Just when the novel seems to displace responsibility for future happiness onto Laura and the ending marriage, the narrator points back to Pen’s responsibility and the likelihood that Laura will not be happy.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, *Pendennis*, like the Bluebeard theatricals, suggests that the end of the narrative does not conclude the occasions for blaming. The plays, through their self-reflexivity about the need to resurrect executed characters for repeat performances, point to the continuation of the blaming process. Likewise, Thackeray’s novel, through its questioning of the ending marriage, implies that even marriage to an angelic wife does not resolve potential relationship conflicts, nor does it foreclose the multiple possibilities of blame generated by such conflicts. Instead, Thackeray leaves readers wondering if Pen and Laura will be any more successful through the expected novel ending than Pen was in his failed theatrical relationships.

My next chapter discusses Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* in light of Victorian legal debates about responsibility and folk narratives incorporating the trope of the severed finger. One of these, the folktale "The Robber Bridegroom," is closely related to "Bluebeard" through its title character, who murders a series of women, but it offers a different model for blame. Unlike the prohibition/transgression series of "Bluebeard," through which the wife-killer repeatedly displaces responsibility to his wives, in "The Robber Bridegroom," the killers attempt to remove the responsibility of their victims by dismembering and eating them. Rather than focusing on the potential blameworthiness of a responsible character, "The Robber Bridegroom" focuses on that character's ability to blame, through the literal pointing of a severed finger.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Perrault's tale was translated into English by Robert Samber in 1729. The Samber version is reprinted in Opie and Opie (137-41).

<sup>2</sup> The play was never published during Thackeray's lifetime, but was edited and published by Juliet McMaster in 1980 in *Dickens Studies Annual* with the title *Bluebeard at Breakfast*. On Thackeray's interest in Bluebeard, see also McMaster's article "Bluebeard: A Tale of Matrimony" (13-17).

<sup>3</sup> Examples of Bluebeard as a name for dogs or horses are found in "Handbook of the Chase" (409) and "The Coursing Calendar" (1).

<sup>4</sup> On Colman's play, see also Michael Kelly (145-48), Frederick Burwick (210-23), Paul Ranger (54-60), Casie E. Hermansson (*Bluebeard* 51-66), Juliet McMaster ("Breakfast," 199, 215-16n5), and Jack Zipes (168).

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of Victorian popular theater, see especially Michael Booth ("Introduction" and *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*) and Jim Davis.

<sup>6</sup> Mererid Puw Davies concurs: "Because Bluebeard asserts his authority by making a secret out of the forbidden chamber in a manner that serves to provoke his wife's curiosity, the imposition of order ultimately generates a disobedience which overturns his authority. In fact, this narrative tradition is explicitly concerned with an attempted imposition of order which proves, over and over again, to generate its own opposite and ultimately to fail" (*Tale* 56). See also Davies' article on German Bluebeard plays, "Laughing Their Heads Off."

<sup>7</sup> In fact, in the first performance of the show, a mechanical malfunction interfered with Bluebeard's stage death before he was even supposed to spring back to life. Composer Michael Kelly, who played the tenor role of Selim, recalled that after he killed Bluebeard, a mechanical skeleton was supposed to rise from underneath the stage and then sink back down. However, on opening night, the skeleton would not go back down. Kelly writes, "I, who had just been killing Blue Beard, totally forgetting where I was, ran up with my drawn sabre, and pummelled the poor skeleton's head with all my might, vociferating until he disappeared, loud enough to be heard by the whole house, 'D-n you! d-n you! why don't you go down?' the audience were in roars of laughter at this ridiculous scene, but good-naturedly appeared to enter into the feelings of an infuriated composer" (147; also qtd in Ranger 59-60). On the self-reflexivity of pantomime exemplified by Bluebeard's direct address to the audience, see Jennifer Schacker (393).

<sup>8</sup> Froude's history was published in twelve volumes, with the first two appearing in 1856. For more on this history and its reception, see Herbert Paul (72-146). See also similar reactions from reviewers in *The Saturday Review* (521), *The British Quarterly Review* (279), *The Examiner* (276), *Westminster Review* (122-25), *New Quarterly Review* (316), and *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Review* (480-81).

Henry VIII's likeness to Bluebeard was much discussed during the nineteenth century because of the monarch's series of six wives, of whom two were beheaded. In an 1848 essay on the "Origin of the Story of Blue Beard," W.C. Taylor denies that the English monarch is like Bluebeard based on evidence of "a supposed prototype of Blue Beard" in French legends, although he acknowledges that "there are few countries in Western Europe which do not claim the equivocal honour of having produced a Blue Beard" (136). Nonetheless, Henry VIII does not fit the model, Taylor argues, because "the manners of which the story [of Bluebeard] portrays, describe a state of society long anterior to the age of the Tudors; they belong to a time when the murder of wives needed not to shelter itself under the form of law" (136). However, neither Taylor's argument nor Froude's defense were successful in convincing Victorians that Henry VIII did not qualify as a Bluebeard. Frequent references to the "Royal Bluebeard" or the "British Bluebeard" indicate that Victorians did see the English monarch as one of the Bluebeard type. Henry VIII is referred to as a Bluebeard in Rev. of *A History of England, in Rhyme* (491), "The New Catholic Episcopacy" (731), and "Wanderings in London" (148) to list a few of many examples. See also Hermansson (*Bluebeard* 18-19 and *Reading Feminist Intertextuality* 26-27).

<sup>9</sup> Arnold's opinion on marriages of widowers to their deceased wives' sisters is discussed by Elisabeth Gruner, who also cites this passage from *Culture and Anarchy* (431).

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Lisa Surrige's *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction* (5-6, 50-51) for drawing my attention to this essay and illustration.

<sup>11</sup> My reading of Orientalizing language and imagery in Bluebeard adaptations is indebted to Edward W. Said's well-known concept of Orientalism, in which "the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (1-2).

<sup>12</sup> On the possible influence of Colman's Bluebeard on Thackeray's work, see especially Barzilai (43, 48) and McMaster ("Breakfast" 199). Hilary Schor mentions this scene as well in

her extended reading of “Bluebeard” in *Vanity Fair*, in which she focuses on Becky Sharp as both a Bluebeard and a Fatima (99-132).

<sup>13</sup> See also Perkin’s response to Norton’s essay, in which he counters that “Thackeray embodies the unthinking racism of an imperial age” (“Thackeray and Imperialism,” 161), and Norton’s response to Perkin (“Imperialism of Theory”). Writing about *Vanity Fair*, Corri Zoli argues that the novel’s colonial tropes call attention to “questions of ‘Englishness’” as well as to the “tired, arbitrary conventions of Victorian fiction” (420, 426).

<sup>14</sup> See also Shuli Barzilai, who discusses Thackeray’s social commentary in both “Bluebeard’s Ghost” and “Barbazure.” Barzilai argues that Thackeray’s extended interest in the Bluebeard tale might relate to his own marital difficulties, as his wife, Isabella, suffered a mental breakdown from which she never recovered (49-60). Jenni Calder notes that the economics of marriage is a theme Thackeray “tackles” repeatedly in his novels (25).

<sup>15</sup> “Barbazure” is a parody of G.P.R. James from 1847’s *Novels by Eminent Hands*.

<sup>16</sup> See also Juliet McMaster (“Breakfast” 214).

<sup>17</sup> Referring to women as raspberry tarts and as having cold shoulders while serving cold mutton, Thackeray seems to be playing with the Victorian association of “Bluebeard” with “The Robber Bridegroom,” which includes cannibalism in many versions. I will discuss “The Robber Bridegroom” in Chapter 2. Harry Stone discusses “Bluebeard” in relation to Dickens’s interest in cannibalism (15-17).

<sup>18</sup> George Orwell picks up on the similarity as well, famously calling Agnes “the real legless angel of Victorian romance,” which makes her “almost as bad as Thackeray’s Laura” (qtd in MacKay, 258).

<sup>19</sup> Calder asserts that Thackeray “was the first novelist to reject marriage as a happy ending,” yet she lists *Pendennis* as an exception in Thackeray’s writing (26). Similarly, Barbara Weiss claims that *Pendennis* is the only Thackeray novel without an “equivocal” happy ending, with Laura his only angel who is not “flawed” (75-76). However, Calder does note that as a happy ending, the final marriage in *Pendennis* does not work, calling the novel an example of “his worst writing” because of the “amiable sentimentality” (27). In contrast, McMaster argues that while *Pendennis* comes the closest to a happy ending of all Thackeray’s novels, it fails to achieve a “real” happy ending because of Pen’s and Laura’s “reservations” (*Major Novels* 88).

## Chapter 2: Pointing Fingers, the Victorian Insanity Defense, and *Jane Eyre*

In the folktale “The Robber Bridegroom,” the groom and his fiancée attend a celebratory feast with their families, at which each of the guests tells a tale. The bride-to-be remains silent until her groom prompts her, “My best beloved, do you not know anything to tell? – do tell us something” (M. Davis 167).<sup>1</sup> As it turns out, she does know something to tell, having witnessed the groom and his gang of robbers kill, dismember, and eat another woman. She narrates what she saw as if describing a dream, displaying the victim’s finger at the end of her tale in a literal finger-pointing that establishes the murderers’ guilt. The bride’s story is one that the groom was not prepared to hear; he thought the tale of his violence had died with his victim, whose finger he mistakenly concluded could never point back at him after her death. What the groom has misjudged is his victim’s responsibility, which the folktale conceives of as her ability to respond. This chapter is about female characters who still have something to tell, long after their male counterparts have dismissed them as unable to respond. I will show how this conception of responsibility – which “The Robber Bridegroom” and other folk narratives imagine in relation to a severed finger or hand – surfaces in Charlotte Brontë’s 1847 novel, *Jane Eyre*, particularly in the character of Bertha Mason Rochester. Further, I argue that the novel juxtaposes this folk discourse of responsibility with Victorian legal discourses of responsibility stemming from 1840s debates over the criminal insanity defense. This juxtaposition challenges Edward Rochester’s attempts to define his wife as insane (and, thus, irresponsible), overturning the logic by which he places blame.

The narratives I examine in this chapter all consider the difficulty of defining someone as not responsible. No matter how convinced a character becomes that another cannot respond (because she is maimed, mute, or mad), these seemingly impaired characters find ways to

respond to their situations. In “The Robber Bridegroom,” the victim initially responds to the gang’s violence against her through “cries and shrieks of distress” (M. Davis 166). This response is overlooked by the robbers who chop her into pieces “without heeding in the least” the victim’s cries (166). Although the victim’s response here is ignored and then silenced when the gang chops her into pieces, her ability to respond is not erased. As Emmanuel Levinas explains, even in the moment of murder, the Other cannot be contained by the power of the murderer: “he [the Other] can oppose to me a struggle, that is, oppose to the force that strikes him not a force of resistance, but the very *unforeseeableness* of his reaction. He thus opposes to me . . . not some superlative of power, but precisely the infinity of his transcendence. This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face” (*Totality* 199). Even in their act of murder, then, the robbers cannot control the outcome, because they cannot predict the victim’s reaction. The folktale enables the victim’s response to transcend her death through the trope of the severed finger, which comes to synecdochically stand in for the victim, retaining a life and an ability to respond that is beyond the robbers’ control. The finger represents in a physical way a responsibility that cannot be denied.

In her reading of “The Robber Bridegroom,” Mieke Bal extends the synecdochic identification between the victim and her finger to the hiding maiden.<sup>2</sup> After the severed finger falls in the maiden’s lap, staining her dress with blood, “the miller’s daughter is not simply metaphorically related to the other girl as a possible victim like her; she is also metonymically, causally related to her, fully identified with her: She is bloodstained *because* the other is murdered” (89). The victim lives on, then, not only in the finger that escapes the robbers, but in the maiden who carries the finger away and speaks the robbers’ guilt with it. The robbers fail to silence the victim because of the “solidarity” between the victim and would-be victim (Bal 88).

The maiden and victim speak together in blaming – literally pointing the same finger at – the groom. Thus, although the gang’s violence aims to erase the victim’s responsibility, it instead sparks the very response that initiates the gang’s punishment.

The ballad “The Twa Knights” also imagines responsibility through a severed finger. In this narrative, one knight is so sure of his wife’s fidelity that he agrees to a wager with his brother: The husband will give his brother all his lands if his brother is able to seduce the wife while the husband is away on a journey. The wife refuses the brother’s advances, but he sneaks into her home while the servants are away and tells her, “I hae it fully in my power / To come to bed to thee” (Child 581). The wife puts him off with a promise to come to his bed the next night and sends her niece in her place. Believing the niece is the wife, the knight rapes her and severs her finger, thinking to use it as proof of her infidelity. However, when the husband returns home, his wife shows him her hand with all fingers intact. The brother thus loses his bet and is himself exposed to punishment: The niece is offered the choice of either branding or wedding him. (She chooses marriage.)

The brother aims to take the wife’s finger to prevent her from effectively responding to his account of her blame. This construction of culpability runs counter to the Victorian legal standard that one must be responsible to be blamed, which I will discuss below, as the wife would be blamable because she could not respond rather than being blamable because she was responsible. The severed finger would have served as proof of the wife’s guilt, regardless of whatever she might say to defend herself. In fact, throughout the ballad, the brother attempts to make the wife’s responses meaningless and thus make her subject to blame: After she rejects his advances, he continues to pursue her knowing that she does not want him. When he tells her that he has the power to come to her bed – whether she consents or not – he is implying that her

response is irrelevant to the outcome: He will make her blamable for infidelity against her intention or choice. The ballad suggests that if the knight had succeeded in violently procuring her finger, the victim would have been rendered culpable: When the husband is shown the niece's severed finger and told that it is his wife's, he prepares to punish her – her father suggests burning her at the stake or hanging her from a tree – without further investigation of how the finger came to be severed. It is only by sending the niece in her place and keeping her own fingers intact that the wife is able to successfully respond to the brother's account. Whereas the victim of the folktale is able to blame the groom and his gang through her finger, in this case the wife protects herself from blame by retaining her own fingers.

This victim-blaming that the wife of the ballad narrowly dodges would seem not to apply to the folktale groom's victims. Versions of "The Robber Bridegroom" in Victorian tale collections do not cast blame on the victims. They provide no explanation for the groom's choice of victims; blame seems lodged squarely where the tale concluded: on the groom and his band of robbers. However, some readers have taken narrative violence in this and other tales as a cue to construct the victim's culpability, much as the brother of "The Twa Knights" would have done. For example, Thomas Ingoldsby (the pen name of Richard Harris Barham) constructs the victim's culpability by filling in an explanation of why the woman deserves punishment in his 1840 version of the tale, "Bloudie Jacke of Shrewsberrie: The Shropshire Bluebeard." In this adaptation, Bloudie Jacke gloats with "fiendish delight" over his success in wooing and wedding his eventual victim, who now wears his ring (171). However, the narrative casts doubt about the legitimacy of the marriage, commenting on the bride: "It's a very odd thing / She should wear such a ring, / While her tresses are bound with a snood" (172). Depicting the bride as wearing a type of hair band typically associated with unmarried women, Ingoldsby's tale suggests that the



bride's marriage to Bloudie Jacke is not a real marriage, a suggestion emphasized by the opinion of the bride's sister: "She deems not her sister a bride!" (172). By making the marriage into a fake marriage, Ingoldsby lays the groundwork for establishing the blameworthiness of the victim. Had she been murdered by a legitimate husband, the perception of her own blameworthiness might be surpassed by the culpability of the husband who killed her, of the parents who approved or encouraged a dangerous marriage, or of the institution of marriage itself that left wives dependent on their husbands' protection. However, instead of highlighting the dangers of marriage, "Bloudie Jacke" becomes a tale of an incautious maiden. Appending a moral to his verse narrative, Ingoldsby warns "young Ladies": "Don't take these flights / Upon moon-shiny nights, / With gay, *harum-scarum* young men, / Down a glen! – / You really can't trust one in ten!" (180; original emphasis). In the vein of "Little Red Riding Hood," Ingoldsby's moral is a warning to women to stay home and out of the glens where men may be waiting for an opportunity to take advantage of them.

The moral's blaming of the victim finds parallels elsewhere. When someone is injured, killed, or held hostage, we want to understand why this bad thing has happened. Why this victim? Sometimes this question becomes: What did she do to deserve this wounding? Discussing a version of the folktale "The Maiden without Hands" in which the father wishes to marry his daughter and the daughter responds to his desire by having her own hands cut off, folklorist Alan Dundes asks, "why should the daughter be punished for the father's crime? . . . [I]f we assume this might be an instance of projective inversion, then the father's wish for the daughter is in fact an expression of the daughter's unconscious wish for the father. This would explain why it is the daughter, not the father, who is punished" (*Interpreting Folklore* 53). Thus, for Dundes, the maiden's mutilation must be explained in terms of what she might have done (or

thought) to make herself a target of blame.<sup>3</sup> This mode of reading presumes that violence is punishment, and that punishment follows a wrong action. If the narrative does not describe the wrong action, then the reader's job becomes determining the nature of the transgression that must have already taken place. In the case of Dundes' interpretation of "The Maiden without Hands," this takes the form of retroactively constructing culpability. The maiden is punished before she has been recognized by the reader as culpable, but her punishment initiates the search for a reason why she could be culpable. In other words, the character is only seen as deserving punishment after she has been punished.

However, it is the violence of the folk narratives that makes apparent the distinction between responsibility and culpability. As I discussed in the introduction, linking responsibility with being blameworthy typically relies on a conception of responsibility involving power, choice, or intentionality. In this view of responsibility, "an agent can be morally responsible for her action only if it is a free action: an agent can merit credit or blame for something she did only if she could have done otherwise" (Ginet 85). In the ballad, the wife escaped blame because she found a way to do otherwise than what her oppressor intended. The ballad posits that she would have been blamed if she had not been able to act freely, if she had not been able to protect herself from violence. In the folktale, the victim's responsibility in the face of violence against her enables her to blame her killer. Indeed, blame itself is a response. Barbara Houston observes that by blaming "we are responding in a wide-ranging way to others based on how they meet our expectation of good will" (135). Hence a paradox: Being responsible may make one a target of blame, but it is also necessary in order to defend oneself from blame or to direct blame toward someone else.

Not being responsible can mean lacking the agency that would allow one to avoid or redirect the consequences of blame. In the ballad, the character of the niece is depicted as not responsible. Whereas the wife is able to devise a scheme to protect herself from violence, the niece is not given the choice of response. Even her final decision of whether to marry or brand the brother seems like a false choice. In the economy of the ballad, the brother has already acquired the niece by obtaining her finger. The other women of the community agree that the niece has chosen wisely – if she can be said to have chosen at all – by accepting marriage. Despite being not responsible, the niece is punished with mutilation, rape, and marriage to the man who maimed her. Although no character in the ballad suggests that the niece is blameworthy, by becoming the wife's substitute, she is made to absorb consequences of the blame that would have attached to the wife.

In the folktale, in contrast, the victim retains agency because she is metonymically connected to another potential victim rather than substituted for her. As Sara Murphy explains, metonymy “speaks of links and associations, while withholding substitution” (155). It serves as “the cornerstone of an ethics grounded in its refusal of the violence entailed in an economy of the same” (155). In the ballad, the wife's substitution works because the brother is unable to distinguish between the wife and the niece. This substitution thus simultaneously relies on the perception of sameness and actual difference: the brother's belief that the two women are the same and the wife's position as distinct from her substitute. Unlike the metonymic identification between maidens in “The Robber Bridegroom,” the ballad's substitution does not prevent future violence against women, because it does not overturn the original logic of blame set out by the knights. If the wife's finger had been severed, she would have been blamed. Instead of rejecting this equation, the wife protects herself from blame by having her niece's finger severed in her

place, shifting the violence from herself to another woman. Because the niece takes her place as victim, the wife retains her ability to respond. The wife sees in her niece a similarity that the hiding maiden sees in the victim of “The Robber Bridegroom”: both recognize that they share membership in the category of those who could be raped or killed (Bal 89). However, unlike the miller’s daughter, who is both tainted (through the bloodstain) and empowered by identifying with the victim, the wife of the ballad is not bloodstained along with the victim, but instead keeps herself intact by sacrificing another woman in her place. That is, the miller’s daughter identifies metonymically with the groom’s victim (I am her), whereas the wife identifies metaphorically with her niece (I am like her). One way the ballad represents the lack of metonymic link between wife and niece is through the economic value of the severed finger: Acquisition of the wife’s finger means possession of land, whereas the niece’s finger brings no wealth, except the “Five hundred pounds o pennies round” the wife promised to pay the niece for taking her place (Child 581). In other words, the niece’s and wife’s fingers are not substitutable in terms of property value. The brother, mistakenly believing that the niece and wife are one in the same, wields a female finger thinking it will bring him land.

### **Finger-Pointing in *The Piano***

The brother’s proposed exchange of severed finger for land in “The Twa Knights” has a parallel in Jane Campion’s 1993 film, *The Piano*, which I will discuss before turning to *Jane Eyre*. Campion describes the film as “a very romantic story in the tone of the Brontë sisters” and says she was inspired by nineteenth-century novelists in making the film (Wexman 37, 125). Additionally, the film’s consideration of responsibility and blame incorporates elements from Victorian folklore, including the severed finger of “The Robber Bridegroom” and “The Twa Knight” and a restaging of “Bluebeard,” which, as I noted in my introduction, was commonly

linked with “The Robber Bridegroom” by Victorians. Because of the director’s own statements about the film’s Victorian influences and its intertextual relationship with Victorian folk narratives, I argue that we can think of *The Piano* as engaging with Victorian representations of embodied responsibility and blame.<sup>4</sup>

Early in the film, Alisdair Stewart believes his wife, Ada, is unresponsive – and therefore not affectionate toward him – because she is mute (and possibly mad, as well). Ada notes that Stewart did not object to her muteness in correspondence with her father; Stewart writes, “God loves dumb creatures, so why not me.” Although he does not mind her muteness prior to marriage, afterward he thinks the condition is to blame for the lack of affection in their marriage. Tobin Siebers argues, “Disabled people are not often allowed to have agency, sexual or otherwise. Rather, they are pictured as abject beings, close to nothing, empty husks” (203). This reflects Stewart’s understanding of Ada at the beginning of the film. Because of the disability of her muteness, Stewart does not comprehend that she is a fully responsive – even sexually responsive – being. Perhaps because Stewart overlooks Ada’s responsibility, her discontent and eventual infidelity seem to take him by surprise. How could this small, silent woman have the capacity for dissatisfaction or illicit passion? Stewart creates this discontent in part by failing to comprehend Ada’s relationship with the piano, which is one of Ada’s primary modes of responding. The piano is Ada’s vehicle for expressing herself through sound. She says (as we hear her thoughts in the movie), “I don’t think myself silent. That is because of my piano.” The piano also allows Ada to respond to the people around her. For example, when Baines attempts to eroticize her piano playing, Ada responds with a light-hearted, upbeat tune that does not match Baines’ erotic mood, making his eroticism seem ridiculous. She is thus able to successfully stifle his sexual advances toward her in this scene.

One reason Ada's musical response works with Baines is that he recognizes that Ada sees the piano as an extension of herself. He shows that he accepts Ada's correlation between herself and the piano in the bargain he makes with her, offering to trade piano keys in exchange for access to parts of her body: first a glimpse of leg, then bare arms, and finally swapping ten keys for a few moments of lying with her naked. In contrast, Stewart fails to recognize the connection between Ada and the piano. Because he sees Ada as unresponsive, Stewart does not consider that her music is a form of response. Instead, he sees the piano as a piece of property he acquired upon their marriage. When Stewart trades the piano for land to Baines, Ada objects, writing "The piano is mine. It's mine" in a note to Stewart. However, Stewart dismisses the possibility that the piano could belong to Ada. When Baines later returns the piano, Stewart objects, "I'm not sure that I want it myself." Baines responds, "It was more to your wife that I gave it." This exchange reiterates a major difference between the two men: Baines associates the piano with Ada, whereas Stewart does not.

Because Stewart does not comprehend the link between Ada and the piano, he inadvertently trades his wife to Baines when he swaps the piano for land. Like "The Two Knights," *The Piano* makes women exchangeable for land. In the ballad, the brother attempts to use his sister-in-law's finger to acquire her husband's lands. By obtaining the finger, the sign that he has also obtained the woman sexually, he would have become the owner of the land as well. The ballad thus correlates ownership of the woman and the land. The film reverses this dynamic: The husband owns the woman but not the land in question, while the man with the land wants the wife. The husband unwittingly trades his wife piece by piece for Baines's land. Folklorist Cristina Bacchilega argues that at Baines's cottage, "Ada is reified or commodified by the two men's trade, and like Bluebeard's dead wives, she is soon being 'dismembered' by Baines's

sexual preying on her ‘parts’: the nape, a leg, her arms, her clothes” (130). The men’s exchange of Ada for land is ultimately literalized when Stewart chops off Ada’s finger and sends it to Baines. The finger is the tangible sign of Stewart’s payment to Baines for the land.

Even before the finger-severing, the film represents the ability to respond physically through hands. The first image we see in the film is an extreme close-up of Ada’s hands, from her own point of view as she holds them in front of her eyes, as if to suggest that it is through her hands that she views the world and that the world sees her. Ada’s hands literally demonstrate responsibility, because, mute from age six, Ada uses her hands to speak through sign language. When not signing, Ada writes messages on small slips of paper, another form of communication involving use of the hands. Finally, Ada communicates through her piano playing. Likewise, the film also emphasizes the role of Stewart’s hands in his responses to Ada, particularly in two scenes in which he literally points his finger at her, which I will discuss below.

Stewart has no problem trading Ada to Baines for land when he thinks of her as unable to respond to affection. It is not Ada’s adultery that precipitates the finger severing but rather the message she sends Baines on a piano key: “Dear George you have my heart Ada McGrath.” Realizing that Ada can feel and communicate love is what prompts Stewart to attack her, along with Ada’s implicit rejection of her husband’s control in signing her name as Ada McGrath instead of Ada Stewart. In attempting to justify his actions, Stewart explains to Ada, “You cannot say I love you to him. You cannot do that. . . . I clipped your wing, that’s all.” It is Ada’s responsiveness to Baines, her expression of love for him, that angers Stewart. Stewart feels threatened by the knowledge that Ada has a life independent of and unable to be controlled by him. His clipping of her wing thus takes the form of limiting her ability to respond by severing her finger, an act that attacks Ada’s ability to sign, write, or play the piano. This act of violence

also seems intended to prevent Ada from responding to Stewart's account of blame with one of her own. By cutting off her finger, she cannot point it at him.

Yet just as the fingers of the folk narratives indicate blame even after they are severed, Ada's finger exposes Stewart to blame. The finger not only indicates that Ada has been blamed for infidelity, but also that Stewart is now blamable for violence toward Ada. A finger-pointer attempts to fix blame on a particular target, but this is never completely successful because the possibilities of blame always exceed the intended target of blame. Blame would be unnecessary if there were only one potential culprit. Narratives about who is to blame are only needed when the identity of the culprit needs to be established. The act of blame itself calls attention to the fact that one culprit is singled out from an array of choices, including the finger-pointer himself. Sharon Lamb observes, "You point the finger, and usually the accused points back" (11). Even if the accused does not point directly back toward the accuser, the possibility still exists that the blamer's account will be questioned. Houston explains: "If you doubt that you too, in blaming another, are exposed or revealed, think of those occasions on which you have blamed someone only to have that person exclaim that she or he has no idea of what you are talking about. The exclamation is often not simply a denial of agency but also an expression of disdain at your sense of reality or of what you consider to be morally important" (141). In Stewart's case, he literally points Ada's finger, which directs blame back to him in a consequence he does not anticipate. Baines raises the possibility that Stewart has blamed the wrong person, telling him, "You punished her wrongly. It was me, my fault." Here, Baines ostensibly blames himself for Ada's adultery by describing it as "my fault." However, his statement also implies blame for Stewart by describing his violence toward Ada as wrong.



In *The Piano*, Ada and Flora are aligned in their shared ability to incur blame, much like the wife and niece of “The Twa Knights.” Stewart blames Ada for her sexual relationship with Baines, and he also blames Ada’s daughter, Flora, for playing a game with the Maori children in which they pretend to be having sex with the trees. Stewart tells her, “Never behave like that. Never in that way. Greatly shamed. You shame these trunks.” We next see Flora scrubbing the tree trunks under Stewart’s supervision. She chooses here to reveal her mother’s indiscretion, deflecting shame – and Stewart’s disapproval – from herself to her mother. Like the wife of the ballad, Flora hopes to protect herself from the consequences of blame by substituting another woman in her place. Lamb argues, “So unbearable is shame that those who experience it are often motivated consciously or unconsciously to defend themselves against recognition of their wrongdoing. [...] The impulse, then, when one cannot hide, is to deny any wrongdoing or to point the finger at someone else” (14). This act of shifting blame to her mother is one in a series of events in the film in which Flora tries to separate herself from her mother. Frequently made to speak for her mother in translating her sign language and conveying her mother’s emotions, Flora sometimes goes beyond the role of translator and tells stories of her own. When Ada wants to send her piano-key message to Baines, Flora is the one who must deliver it, against Flora’s wishes. She takes it to Stewart instead, thereby separating her own agency from her mother’s, but the consequences of this act end up solidifying the connection between mother and daughter. Flora’s attempt to shift blame to Ada backfires, because she cannot fully substitute her mother’s culpability for her own. When Stewart chops off Ada’s finger, Flora is made to bear the punishment as well, as she is splattered with her mother’s blood. By marking Flora with blood, the film connects Flora and Ada, just as the severed finger connects the hiding maiden with the

victim in “The Robber Bridegroom.” Rather than deflecting the blame from herself to her mother, then, Flora has ensured that both mother and daughter are punished.

Additionally, although this blaming is the most memorable one of the film, it is one in a series of times when Stewart points a finger. In one instance, when Ada objects to the loss of her piano and Stewart’s insistence that she give Baines piano lessons, Stewart points his finger at Ada as he tells her, “we all make sacrifices, and so will you.” In another example, when Ada is in bed recovering from Stewart’s assault on her, he points his finger at her as he attempts to explain her culpability. These two scenes connect Stewart visually to the Bluebeard character of the village show. In this performance, the villagers use a sheet and lighting to make Bluebeard’s finger appear supernaturally long as he points it at the wife who has entered his forbidden chamber, telling her, “You, the youngest, and sweetest, of all my wives must be prepared to die.” The connection between Stewart and Bluebeard is further cemented when Stewart takes an axe to Ada’s finger, as a rehearsal for the tableau depicts the Bluebeard actor practicing chopping off a woman’s finger with a prop axe, with a shadow on the screen making the visual effect of finger-severing. Just as Bluebeard repetitively blames a series of wives for their disobedience, Stewart repeatedly blames Ada through finger-pointing. The fact that Stewart must keep blaming Ada over and over again reflects the difficulty of fixing blame on a responsible target. Although it is Ada’s very responsiveness that makes Stewart consider her deserving of punishment, her ability to respond means she can counter or reject his narratives of blame, requiring him to turn his finger back on her again and again to try to assert his control.

Even after limiting Ada’s ability to write, sign, or play the piano by cutting off her finger, Stewart is unsuccessful in controlling her responses. In Ada’s final response to Stewart, he describes hearing her “will” speak directly to him. Stewart tells Baines that Ada has spoken to

him, not in words, but in a message straight into his mind. As he was preparing to rape her, she communicated, “I am afraid of my will, of what it might do. It is so strange and strong” and “I have to go, let me go. Let Baines take me away. Let him try and save me.” In this last response, Ada succeeds both in preventing her rape and in escaping a violent marriage. However, the film leaves ambiguous whether this response is actually coming from Ada. First, we are relying on Stewart’s interpretation of the unspoken message. As Stewart has failed to understand Ada’s responses up to that point, how can we be sure that he accurately interprets what her will is telling him now? Secondly, Ada’s communication separates her will from herself. She represents the will as something inside her that acts independently of her choosing. At end of the film, after choosing not to drown with the piano, Ada’s narration tells us, “My will has chosen life.” Here again, Ada portrays her will as acting separately from her own intention. The choice to live is not Ada’s but her will’s.<sup>5</sup>

These references to Ada’s will underscore the film’s engagement with the questions of who is responsible and who is culpable. Although the film depicts Ada responding in a variety of ways and therefore as punishable in Stewart’s eyes (once he discovers her responsibility), in the end we are left wondering whether it was Ada or her will that responded. If Ada’s will was acting outside Ada’s intentions, then perhaps she is not in control of her responses. Stewart seems to believe that this is the case. Upon hearing the message from Ada’s will, Stewart does let her go with Baines, releasing her from his control and relinquishing her from his blame. What I am arguing, then, is that Stewart’s blaming of Ada changes as his view of her as able to respond changes. First, he considers her unable to respond and overlooks the possibility that she could act in a way that he would consider culpable. Next, he sees proof of her responsiveness

and subsequently blames and punishes her. Finally, he comes to believe it is her will rather than Ada herself who is responding and lets her go.

Stewart's belief that Ada and her will are distinct may have roots in his suspicion of her mental state. Early in their marriage, Stewart wonders whether Ada's muteness is a sign of mental illness. He says, "She is mute, but now I'm thinking, perhaps it's more than that. I'm wondering if she's not brain affected." The notion of an independent will was much discussed in Victorian debates of the culpability of the insane. As Joel Peter Eigen explains, during the nineteenth century, an independent will came to be seen as responsible for reining in passions that could lead to criminal behavior. When such passions went unchecked, one possible explanation was an impairment or "lesion of the will" (*Witnessing* 81). This conception of the will was tied to the gradual acceptance of moral insanity, a departure from earlier definitions of insanity as an impairment of reason or intellect. Eigen observes, "Whatever intellectual level accompanied blind passion, moral insanity spoke to the impulsive nature of the will, which drove the afflicted person into motiveless, revolting activity" (78). The shift to accepting insanity as a moral, rather than strictly intellectual, impairment coincides with the broadening of criminal insanity defenses. Whereas judges and lawyers had been instructing jurors that only a total insanity could absolve a prisoner from culpability – the "Wild Beast" test – by the 1800s, courts were considering the possibility that criminal insanity could be partial or temporary. In some cases, a prisoner was considered insane in only one area – a specific delusion or monomania – while acting with reason otherwise. In other cases, a prisoner might have "lucid intervals" alternating with periods of insanity.<sup>6</sup>

## **The Criminal Insanity Defense and *Jane Eyre***

The character of Bertha in *Jane Eyre* reflects the shift from the “Wild Beast” standard of insanity to one that allowed for “lucid intervals.” *Jane Eyre* was published just four years after the controversial 1843 acquittal of killer Daniel McNaughtan. His trial sparked a debate among Victorians about how to determine which defendants could be held responsible for their actions and subject to criminal punishment.<sup>7</sup> During McNaughtan’s trial, the facts of his action were not in dispute: He shot and killed Edward Drummond, secretary to Prime Minister Robert Peel. What was in dispute, according to the solicitor general, Sir William Follett, was whether McNaughtan was “not a responsible agent” because of mental illness and, therefore, “not answerable to the laws of his country” (“Assassination” 4 March 1843, 5). His acquittal raised fears, expressed in periodicals and in parliamentary debates, that defendants claiming insanity might get away with murder. If a jury found that a killer was not responsible for his actions, then no one could be legally blamed for the killing. Instead of execution, such defendants might earn themselves “a comfortable and permanent abode in Bethlehem Hospital at the expense of the nation,” as one letter writer to the *Times* worried (“Monomania” 5).<sup>8</sup> However, even as some parliamentarians and writers worried that too many might escape blame for crimes, others wondered about the consequences for those defined as not responsible agents. Lord Cottenham told Parliament he feared medical practitioners took too wide a view of who should be classified as insane and subject to institutionalization and that, “There was great danger in permitting the liberty of the subject to be infringed on the ground of insanity” (qtd in Moran, 165). Thus, we see competing concerns following McNaughtan’s acquittal. On one hand, too many defendants might be labeled irresponsible, providing what was seen as an undeserved benefit to violent criminals who would escape blame. On the other hand, being labeled irresponsible was seen as a diminishment of

personal agency, a potential undeserved infringement of liberty that would expose supposedly unblamable people to punishment. At the heart of both concerns was the realization that whether someone was a responsible agent was determined by judges, juries, or medical practitioners who might not (and often did not) agree. In other words, it might not be possible to know for certain who is responsible.

The uncertain status of the legal definition of “responsible agent” is evident in descriptions of Bertha.<sup>9</sup> At times she is the “Wild Beast” of pre-Victorian insanity defenses, as when Jane describes seeing her in the attic, “it [Bertha] snatched and growled like some strange wild animal” (290; ch. 26), or when Rochester describes her living in “a wild beast’s den” (305; ch. 27). Other times, Bertha is described in language reflecting the growing acceptance that an insane person might not be insane all the time. According to Rochester, “she had lucid intervals of days – sometimes weeks” (305). The juxtaposition of older and newer conceptions of legal insanity underscores the increasing ambiguity about moral agency inherent in the broadening of the insanity defense. The “Wild Beast” test, articulated by Justice Tracy in the 1723 trial of Edward Arnold, implied a clear-cut distinction between the totally insane and the responsible agent: “it is not every frantic and idle humour that will exempt him from justice . . . it must be a man that is totally deprived of his understanding and memory and doth not know what he is doing, no more than an infant, than a brute or a wild beast” (qtd in Eigen, *Witnessing* 40). On the other hand, the concepts of monomania and lunacy meant that someone could be sometimes a responsible agent and sometimes not, sometimes animal-like in lacking reason and sometimes morally human. As Jane comments about Bertha, “What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell” (289; ch. 26). The question of whether Bertha has moral agency or whether she is unreasoning in her insanity is central to the novel’s consideration of

responsibility and blame. How is one to determine when Bertha is responsible and when she is not? For what actions, if any, can Bertha be blamed? And if she does have “lucid intervals” of moral agency, how can Rochester be justified in locking her up all the time?

Like *The Piano*'s Alisdair Stewart, soon after marriage Rochester begins to regret his choice of wife. Rochester uses Bertha's mental illness to explain that their failed marriage was her fault, not his; it was caused by a condition in Bertha. Rochester asserts, “Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; -- idiots and maniacs through three generations!” (289; ch. 26). However, by blaming Bertha through her madness, Rochester makes Bertha simultaneously blamable and unblamable. Typically, when we blame someone, we imply that that person has done something he or she shouldn't have done – that other options were available and different choices could have been made. This requires recognizing the target of our blame as a subject, as someone who has the ability to make choices, the ability to respond to her circumstances in various ways. Thus, even though being blamed can feel bad, it is also empowering in the sense that it acknowledges the moral agency of the person being blamed. In blaming Bertha, then, Rochester could be indicating her responsibility and moral agency. However, because it is Bertha's madness that makes her blamable, she has no control over the circumstances for which she is blamed. She could not help what she did because she was acting under the forces of her genetically inherited illness. This justification is one that is disempowering because it denies Bertha's agency, her ability to respond to her circumstances and make her own choices. As Houston argues, someone considered unblamable would experience “loss of moral status” (133). Rochester thus places Bertha in a double-bind: She is blamed because it is her mental illness that causes the marital problems, yet she could not have chosen differently because it is the mental

illness rather than Bertha's agency that causes the problem. In other words, she cannot be blamable at the same time that she cannot help but be blamable.

Jane points out the flaw in Rochester's narrative of blame. She faults Rochester for hating Bertha, noting, "she cannot help being mad" (297; ch. 27). Rochester responds to Jane's approbation by insisting that he does not hate Bertha for *being* mad but for *causing* her own madness. Describing Bertha as "intemperate and unchaste," Rochester claims, "her excesses had prematurely developed the germs of insanity" (302).<sup>10</sup> As Elizabeth J. Donaldson notes, these excesses become the means for Rochester to hold Bertha "morally accountable" for her otherwise genetic condition (21). Rochester thus settles Jane's objection to his hatred of Bertha: he does not hate her for her mad actions, as those cannot be helped, but he can hate her for making herself mad in the first place. Here, Rochester turns to English legal precedent to explain how Bertha can be guilty even though she is insane. In a 1787 trial, the jury was instructed that one who "voluntarily inflames his blood by drunkenness, [and] draws out that madness which before was lurking in it, the law does not excuse him" (qtd in Eigen, *Witnessing* 45). In this way Rochester aims to make Bertha blamable while simultaneously denying her responsibility: Because she *was* blamable, she is now irresponsible. In other words, she is guilty of taking away her own agency, which then justifies Rochester's locking her in the attic: If Bertha already lost her own agency by drinking herself into madness, then Rochester's confinement of her is no infringement of her liberty.

We might think of Rochester's decision to hide Bertha away in his attic and deny her existence as his wife as an attempt to erase Bertha's being, at least at the level of language. Rochester would like other characters – in particular, Jane – to accept that he does not have a wife on the basis of his statement that he has no wife. If we consider the Levinasian conception



of responsibility as a necessary precursor to being, then Rochester's denial of Bertha's existence is also a denial of her responsibility. Central to his justification of his erasure of Bertha is his belief – or insistence – that Bertha is not a responsible agent, because not being responsible makes her subhuman and thus someone who can be denied. This view of responsibility has parallels in Victorian legal discourse about responsibility and insanity, because those considered not responsible by virtue of mental illness were considered less than human, even as legal standards for insanity shifted away from the “Wild Beast” test. For instance, in the trial of William Newton Allnutt, who was indicted in 1847 for poisoning his grandfather, the judge declared that an insane person “is placed out of the pale of society . . . because he is no longer *man*, though he still wears the human form” (qtd in Eigen, *Unconscious* 117). Similarly, in the McNaughtan trial, defense counsel Alexander Cockburn argued that some instances of mental illness “deprived man of reason, and converted him to the similitude of the lower animal” (“Assassination” 6 March 1843, 5). Cockburn's defense hinged on the notion that McNaughtan was not fully human, but rather should be treated like “the lower animal.” Because mental illness has deprived him of the ability to function as a responsible agent, McNaughtan is excluded from human standards of culpability. McNaughtan escaped criminal punishment, but at the price of being considered less than human (and being institutionalized for the rest of his life). Brontë describes Bertha in similar terms in an 1848 letter: “There is a phase of insanity which may be called moral madness, in which all that is good or even human seems to disappear from the mind and a fiend-nature replaces it” (qtd in Shuttleworth, 14). Although here Brontë provides support for Rochester's assessment of Bertha as lacking human reason, I am arguing that the novel provides evidence for a different interpretation.

Both Rochester's and Bertha's actions in the novel challenge the notion that Bertha remains irresponsible after the onset of her insanity, in the sense of the folk conception of responsibility as the ability to respond. Like Alisdair Stewart, Rochester aims to prevent his wife from responding when he imprisons her. Stewart barricades Ada in his house after he spies on her with Baines to prevent her from continuing to respond in a way that challenges his role as husband (through a sexual relationship with Baines). Rochester paradoxically confines Bertha in his attic after defining her as insane – and therefore irresponsible – in order to prevent her from responding to his control in a way that would disrupt his plans to take additional lovers or wives. As Rochester describes it, his primary goal in confining Bertha at Thornfield was to “Let her identity, her connection with [himself], be buried in oblivion” so that he could “form what new tie [he] like[d]” (304-05; ch. 27). If Bertha were lacking agency, then Rochester would not need to keep her hidden to disguise her identity. He could have accounted for her presence at Thornfield through some fiction that he had benevolently taken in the daughter of a friend who had no one to care for her, as he did with Adèle, denying that she had any kinship connection to himself. However, Rochester fears that Bertha does have the ability to respond, as he notes that “her ravings would inevitably betray my secret” (305). It is because Bertha can speak with reason – giving an accurate account of who she is and her marriage to Rochester – and not because she has lost her mind that Rochester keeps her hidden.

Further, just as *The Piano* depicts Ada (or her will) responding in spite of her husband's attacks on her agency, so too *Jane Eyre* shows that Bertha remains responsible in spite of her confinement. By escaping from the attic to light Rochester's bed on fire and to tear Jane's wedding veil, by attacking her brother, and through her unsettling laugh, Bertha refuses to be suppressed. She continuously makes Rochester face the reality of her existence. In the end,

Bertha finds voice enough to make herself known to the surrounding community: “. . . she was on the roof; where she was standing, waving her arms, above the battlements, and shouting out till they could hear her a mile off” (417; ch. 36). Although other characters in the novel generally seem to accept that Bertha’s actions are insane, they could be considered rational responses to Rochester’s treatment of her.<sup>11</sup> For instance, she lights on fire the bed of the husband who keeps her prisoner. If she were without reason, she could have lit a fire anywhere else in Thornfield. However, her choice of target was deliberate and seems logical: she aims to harm the one person she has reason to hate. Similarly, when she tears Jane’s veil, this seems a gesture that communicates a sane message. She could be protesting marriage, the institution that precipitated her confinement. Or, she could be protesting Jane’s marriage, which a sane Bertha would know well is illegitimate.<sup>12</sup>

When faced with Bertha’s possible agency, Rochester employs a number of strategies to deny or redefine her agency as something else. Because he has been approaching the question of responsibility from the standpoint of legal discourse, once he has categorized Bertha as insane, he cannot recognize her as a potentially responsible agent. First, he denies her existence and claims that her responses are the product of Jane’s imagination. For example, when first faced with Jane’s account of the ripped wedding veil, Rochester insists that Jane must have been dreaming. He describes Jane’s story as the work “of an over-stimulated brain” (282; ch. 25). When Jane confronts him with the evidence of the torn veil, Rochester admits that someone entered her room but tells Jane it must have been Grace Poole. After he is forced to acknowledge Bertha’s existence, Rochester then turns to defining her responses as the meaningless actions of a madwoman. In Rochester’s account, Bertha is a raving maniac, a goblin, or a “wolfish” beast, rather than a rational being (304; ch. 27). Through this dehumanization, Bertha would seemingly

lose her subjectivity. Just as the defense counsel Cockburn likened McNaughtan to “the lower animal” to show that he was not a responsible agent, here Rochester’s dehumanization of Bertha would seem to indicate her lack of moral agency.

Additionally, Rochester deflects attention away from what might be considered Bertha’s responsiveness by speculating about things she might have done instead of what she actually did. For instance, after finally acknowledging Bertha’s existence, Rochester returns to the incident of the ripped veil, explaining to Jane: “I thank Providence, who watched over you, that she [Bertha] then spent her fury on your wedding apparel, which perhaps brought back vague reminiscences of her own bridal days: but on what might have happened, I cannot endure to reflect” (305; ch. 27). No longer the work of Jane’s imagination or of Grace Poole, the ripped veil now might be the logical reaction of an embittered wife remembering her own wedding. But rather than dwelling on the possible rationality of Bertha’s action, Rochester attributes guilt to Bertha for something she could have done, rather than what she actually did. Instead of acknowledging her restraint in not hurting Jane, Rochester gives credit to Providence, while suggesting that Bertha is dangerous because of what she might have done. By raising an imagined threat, Rochester distracts Jane from Bertha’s past actions by associating her affectively with the fear of what she might do in the future. As Brian Massumi argues in a discussion of the United States military’s preemptive strike policy in the wake of 9/11, “A threat that does not materialize is not false. It has all the affective reality of a past future, truly felt. The future of the threat is not falsified. It is deferred. The case remains forever open. The futurity doesn’t stay in the past where its feeling emerged. It feeds forward through time” (54). Once Rochester accuses Bertha of a threat she could have carried out, she becomes permanently blamable for what she might do, again justifying her imprisonment. Indirectly, Rochester’s message to Jane is: “Good thing I’ve been

locking her up, because think of what crazy things she could have done otherwise!” Rochester’s array of strategies to redefine Bertha’s potential ability to respond as something else are a sign of the interplay between differing conceptions of responsibility in this novel. Rochester’s reliance on legal discourse alone is not adequate to account for moments in the novel when Bertha seems to have agency.

Rochester is not the only character in the novel who denies Bertha’s responsibility. Bertha’s responses are elided when Rochester and other characters give accounts of her actions. The novel is presented as Jane’s autobiography, with Jane as first-person narrator. Within Jane’s account, other characters are given space to tell their stories. For instance, Jane records Rochester’s account of his marriage in the format of direct quotation rather than a summary, giving the reader access to Rochester’s voice. She similarly records the innkeeper’s account of the fire at Thornfield. But nowhere in the novel does Jane or any other character report direct statements of Bertha’s. Rochester summarizes Bertha’s words: “my ears were filled with the curses the maniac shrieked out; wherein she momentarily mingled my name with such a tone of demon-hate, with such language!” (304; ch. 27). What that particular language is, we are not told. The innkeeper also refers to Bertha’s language without reporting her exact words when he describes her “shouting out” on the roof (417; ch. 36). Thus, Jane as narrator and other characters as narrators within the main narration choose not to recount Bertha’s words, reinforcing her status as not responsible. Judith Butler observes, “narrative capacity constitutes a precondition for giving an account of oneself and assuming responsibility for one’s actions through that means” (*Giving an Account* 12). Bertha is not given narrative capacity in the novel, closing off one possible way in which she might establish her responsibility. This lack of accountability may be a reflection of Bertha’s status as a madwoman, as Victorian courts were reluctant to accept the

testimony of the insane. For example, in the 1850 case of Samuel Hill for the killing of an insane asylum inmate, the only witnesses were other insane asylum inmates. The coroner would not allow their testimony at the inquisition, however, because their status as insane made them not credible as witnesses (Eigen, *Unconscious* 86-87). In the trial, though, one “lunatic” witness was allowed to testify on the grounds that “a lunatic is inadmissible, except in a lucid interval, when he is (correctly speaking) no lunatic” (qtd in Eigen, *Unconscious* 101). The novel holds Bertha to a stricter standard, as even in her “lucid intervals” she is not able to offer her account. Rochester reports that Bertha’s “lucid intervals” were “filled up with abuse of me” and that “her ravings would inevitably betray my secret” (305; ch. 27). Although Rochester calls Bertha’s language “ravings,” his acknowledgement that she is “lucid” when she abuses him and that her words would give away his secret shows his awareness that Bertha is capable of meaningful speech.<sup>13</sup> This raises the possibility that Rochester chooses not to give Bertha’s words not because he finds them meaningless, but because he is afraid they would be too meaningful, pointing to his own blameworthiness. Further, both Rochester and the innkeeper admit that Bertha is capable of deliberate action, although even those acts are classified as insane. The innkeeper notes that Bertha set fire to the bed in Jane’s former room; “she was like as if she knew somehow how matters had gone on” (416; ch. 36). Here, the innkeeper seems to be interpreting Bertha’s actions in light of her insanity designation: *she was like as if she knew* rather than *she knew*. Because she is insane, she cannot be someone who knew what she was doing; at best, she is *like* someone who is aware of her actions.

Although the characterization of Bertha most directly connects to Victorian legal discourses of criminal culpability because of her mental illness, the novel’s engagement with questions of responsibility and agency also extends to its two main characters: Jane and

Rochester. It is by now a critical commonplace to point out parallels in the novel's treatment of Jane and Bertha.<sup>14</sup> By emphasizing the likenesses between Bertha and Jane, the novel suggests that Jane is no more immune than Bertha to being defined by Rochester as lacking moral agency. In the church where they would have been married, Jane says Rochester looked at her "without seeming to recognise in me a human being" (287; ch. 26). When Rochester asks Jane if she thinks he would hate her if she became mad, as he hates Bertha, Jane replies, "I do indeed, sir" (297; ch. 27). And when Rochester describes how "degrading" his relationships with his European mistresses were – "the next worse thing to buying a slave" – Jane takes this as a warning of how he would eventually feel about her (307; ch. 27).

In *Jane Eyre*, the physically maimed character is Rochester, whose hand is crushed in the final fire at Thornfield and then amputated by a doctor. I have discussed Jane's similarity to Bertha. I will now argue that the novel also likens Rochester to Bertha.<sup>15</sup> In terms of 1840s legal discourse, Rochester is the character most culpable in the novel, because when he takes Jane to the altar, he attempts to commit an illegal act that he knows is illegal. According to the McNaughtan Rules, if a person commits an illegal act with the understanding that such an act is against the law, then such a person deserves punishment. The rules associate doing "wrong" with "acting contrary to the law of the land" (169). Hence Rochester's attempts to justify the morality of his actions do not render him free from legal culpability. In contrast, Jane would not be legally culpable for marriage to Rochester because she had no knowledge that such an act would have been against the law; as the solicitor assures her, she is "cleared from all blame" (291; ch. 26). Unlike Jane, Rochester is now culpable under the same standard he used earlier to absolve himself from blame. Attempting to justify himself to Jane, Rochester asks her to consider the case of a young man who committed an error: "Mind, I don't say a *crime*; I am not speaking of

shedding of blood or any other guilty act, which might make the perpetrator amenable to the law: my word is *error*. The results of what you have done become in time to you utterly insupportable; you take measures to obtain relief: unusual measures, but neither unlawful nor culpable” (218-19; ch. 20). At that point, Rochester is not legally culpable, because although he has married badly, confined his wife, and engaged in a series of European affairs, he has not broken the law.

Nonetheless, Rochester describes his non-criminal errors with a mixture of self-blame and justification. He tells Jane, “I started, or rather (for like other defaulters, I like to lay half the blame on ill fortune and adverse circumstances) was thrust on to a wrong tack at the age of one and twenty, and have never recovered the right course since” (141; ch. 14). Here Rochester attempts to justify his actions by attributing his sinning to external circumstances. However, Rochester does not completely deny his own responsibility: “You would say, I should have been superior to circumstances: so I should – so I should; but you see I was not. When fate wronged me, I had not the wisdom to remain cool: I turned desperate; then I degenerated” (142). When not jointly blaming himself and fate for his errors, Rochester blames himself and other characters. Although he blames Bertha’s madness for the failure of their marriage, he blames himself, his family, and Bertha’s family for contracting the marriage to begin with: Rochester’s “avaricious, grasping” father set up the marriage, his father and brother knew of the madness in Bertha’s family but kept it from Rochester as part of “the plot against me,” and Bertha’s family, coveting Rochester’s “good race,” deceived him by displaying Bertha “in parties, splendidly dressed” (301-02; ch. 27). Rochester describes himself as foolish and degraded in agreeing to the marriage: “Oh, I have no respect for myself when I think of that act! – an agony of inward contempt masters me” (301). Even when Rochester blames fate, circumstances, or other



characters for his misfortunes, he reserves some blame for himself. He does not cede his own agency by portraying himself as entirely lacking control.

After the secret of his intended crime comes out, Rochester wants Jane to blame him at the same time that he would like to blame Jane for his future unhappiness. He tells Jane that he would prefer she “had come and upbraided me with vehemence” rather than avoiding him (294; ch. 27). He asks her to chastise him “roundly and sharply” (295). But, while he sees himself as worthy of her blame, he is still prepared to blame her. If Jane refuses to become his mistress or bigamous wife, he tells her, “Then you condemn me to live wretched, and to die accursed?” (312; ch. 27). He also blames her for the wrongs he intends to commit if she leaves him: “You fling me back on lust for a passion – vice for an occupation?” (312). Jane refuses to accept this blame: “I no more assign this fate to you than I grasp at it for myself” (312). Here, Rochester wants Jane to accept that her actions will be responsible for negative consequences at the same time that he would like her not to be able to respond to his account of blame. But Jane does respond, demonstrating one of the dangers of blaming: that the person you blame will reject your account of blame. And Rochester cannot force Jane to accept his account, despite his greater power, as he acknowledges: “I could bend her with my finger and thumb: and what good would it do if I bent, if I upstare, if I crushed her? Consider that eye: consider the resolute, wild, free thing looking out of it, defying me, with more than courage – with a stern triumph. Whatever I do with its cage, I cannot get at it” (313). Even if he killed her, Rochester would not succeed: “Conqueror I might be of the house; but the inmate would escape to heaven before I could call myself possessor of its clay dwelling-place” (313). Just as the folktale groom and his gang cannot fully silence their victim by killing her, and as Stewart’s attack on Ada does not prevent her “will” from speaking to him, so too Rochester recognizes that violence against Jane would

not succeed in gaining her acquiescence to his will. Further, Rochester's statement that "the inmate would escape" his possession in death is a foreshadowing of Bertha's death, the final act in which Bertha shows Rochester that her responsibility escapes his control and leaves the marks of blame on Rochester in the form of his wounded hand and eyes. Some characters in the novel read these injuries as signs that Rochester is culpable for his attempt at bigamy. As the innkeeper tells Jane, "Some say it was a just judgment on him for keeping his first marriage secret, and wanting to take another wife while he had one living" (418; ch. 36). Rochester himself describes his injuries and loss of Thornfield as "[d]ivine justice" (435; ch. 37).<sup>16</sup>

The physical manifestation of Rochester's blame is like that of the female characters of the folk narratives and *The Piano*, but it also resembles the punishment of Bloudie Jacke near the end of Ingoldsby's poem, in which Jacke is ripped limb from limb in a mirroring of his violence toward his brides. Jacke had kept souvenirs of his violence in a cabinet: severed fingers "tied up in bunches of fives," wedding rings, and ". . . in rows, Lie eight little Great-Toes" (175). By the end of the poem, Jacke himself is turned to souvenir, as the speaker addresses Jacke: "they've torn from their sockets, / And put in their pockets / Your fingers and thumbs for a prize! / And your eyes / A Doctor has bottled . . ." (179). Having killed multiple victims and stored their appendages, Jacke becomes the latest in the series who is reduced to collectible parts. Jacke had perceived his victims as interchangeable: equally expendable, equally substitutable, with responses that could be made equally meaningless by his violence. He is ultimately forced to recognize that he has misjudged the women through the final maiden's account of his blame. By punishing Jacke in the same way as he attacked his victims, the narrative shows that it is not only the maidens who are threatened by the violence Jacke initiates but Jacke as well.

Rochester's maiming serves a similar function in *Jane Eyre*. I have argued that the likenesses between Jane and Bertha show that it is not only the insane woman who might be targeted for attacks on her agency and infringements on her liberty. The same could be said for Rochester. The similarities between him and the women he would blame show that he is no more immune to blame and punishment than they are. Like Jacke, Rochester runs through a series of women (in this case a series of sexual relationships rather than murders). After Bertha, Rochester's series of lovers includes the European mistresses Céline Varens, Giacinta, and Clara. Although Rochester blames himself for poor judgment in forming these liaisons in the first place, he invariably blames the women for the relationships' failures, describing them as unfaithful, "unprincipled and violent," and "heavy, mindless, unimpressible" (307; ch. 27). But like any finger-pointer, Rochester cannot eliminate the possibility that blame will be turned back on him. Much as Jacke's final victim communicates Jacke's guilt and exposes him to mutilation, so too Bertha dies in setting the fire that will identify Rochester as a blamed man.

Reading Rochester's physical injuries as indications of his culpability could be problematic, in much the same way as readings of "The Maiden without Hands" or "The Robber Bridegroom" that seek out reasons for the victims' dismemberment. Asking the questions "Why was this victim injured?" or "What might these injuries represent?" could open the door to victim-blaming. Rather than seeing wounds simply as wounds, a metaphoric reading suggests that there must be some meaning or explanation for the injuries, resulting in such interpretations as that the handless daughter has been punished for her incestuous desire or that the murdered maiden was too easily seduced by the robber. In the case of *Jane Eyre*, recent critics approaching the novel from the perspective of disability studies have objected to ableist or ocularcentric interpretations that imply the disabled body is less than the normative body, an implication at the

heart of reading Rochester's injuries as punishment.<sup>17</sup> In light of these objections, I think it is important to distinguish among the readers of and within *Jane Eyre*. Exactly where is the impulse to read Rochester's wounds as punishment coming from?

I noted above that Rochester himself describes his injuries as punishment. We might recall, also, that it was Rochester who represented Bertha's madness as punishment for her excessive drinking and sexual desire. This cause-and-effect approach to thinking about blame is characteristic of Rochester's reliance on legal discourse throughout the novel. For Rochester, as for the law, culprits are punished after they have been found guilty of some crime for which they are responsible. But, as I have argued regarding Rochester's portrayal of Bertha, the novel does not leave unchallenged Rochester's understanding of blame and responsibility. Instead, the novel leaves ambiguous the supposedly disabling conditions that underlie Rochester's perception of culpability. Donaldson argues that a key difference between Bertha and Rochester is that Bertha's disability is "congenital and chronic," whereas "Rochester's is coincidental and curable" (25). Yet Bertha's disability is not quite chronic, the novel suggests, because of "lucid intervals" when she may not be disabled at all. Because Rochester's conception of Bertha's responsibility and culpability depends on her madness, the fact that she is not always mad means that she does not always embody the blameworthiness and the lack of agency that Rochester attributes to her. Similar to Bertha's sometimes sane/sometimes insane state, Rochester's injuries are partially permanent, but partially impermanent in the form of the amputated arm and returning eyesight. The blamed subject does not remain in a permanent condition of blameness, contrary to Rochester's attempt to maintain Bertha in such a state.

## **Blame, gender, and marriage**

Although I have noted similarities in the ways Rochester and Bertha – as well as Jacke and his victims – are blamed, I do not mean to suggest that these acts of blame are equal. Because Jacke and Rochester dispense with a series of women before getting their own comeuppance, it would be inaccurate to say that they are equally subject to blame as the female characters. These narratives take place within a context of uneven social, legal, and economic power. The female characters make for easier targets of blame because they have access to fewer resources which with to defend themselves from narratives of blame. Although being responsible is often linked to being blamable, as I have discussed, those thought least able to respond are often the ones targeted for blame. Discussing scapegoating, a type of blame in which the misfortunes of a community are pinned on a single culprit, René Girard argues that scapegoats are chosen “because they belong to a class that is particularly susceptible to persecution rather than because of the crimes they have committed” (17). He continues, “Sickness, madness, genetic deformities, accidental injuries, and even disabilities in general tend to polarize persecutors” (18). By persecutors, Girard is referring to those who would blame a scapegoat, making the act of blame a type of violence.<sup>18</sup> We might add to Girard’s list of susceptible classes women, especially married women in the Victorian era. As Frances Power Cobbe pointed out in an 1868 essay titled “Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors,” married women were treated like children, criminals, and the mentally ill by the law, insofar as it restricted their ability to enter into contracts or own property: “By the Common Law of England a married woman has no legal existence, so far as property is concerned, independently of her husband. The husband and wife are assumed to be one person, and that person is the husband” (6).

Cobbe's reminder of the legal likeness between the insane and married women brings me back to the origins of my project in the "Bluebeard" fairy tale. Like "Bloudie Jacke," *Jane Eyre* combines elements of "The Robber Bridegroom" with elements of "Bluebeard." One of the key differences between the two is marriage: The heroine of "The Robber Bridegroom" learns her groom's secret before marriage, while the heroine of "Bluebeard" doesn't find out her groom is a killer until after marriage. Hilary Schor argues that "Bluebeard" provides a model for the curious heroines of Victorian novels, in which the heroine must marry in order to learn what she needs to know to find out if her marriage was the right choice. Schor argues, "the first choice a woman makes is of a husband, and only by making that choice can she learn about choosing, but that first choice runs the grave risk of being a fatal error. Given the compulsion to marry, however, a woman may be truly free to choose only *after* she learns from that initial mistaken, uninformed choice" (29). *Jane Eyre* differs from the "Bluebeard" model in that it asks us to consider what would happen if the bride learned her groom's dark secret before the wedding but then chose to marry him anyway. And here we might turn to another of *Jane Eyre*'s intertexts, the *Arabian Nights*, in which Scheherazade chooses marriage to a mass murderer.<sup>19</sup> After all, Jane, like Scheherazade, is a narrator, and, also like Scheherazade, she uses her narrative power to forestall violence. Soon after showing Jane Bertha's attic chamber, Rochester attempts to justify his actions to an unconvinced Jane, imploring her, "Jane! will you hear reason? . . . because, if you won't, I'll try violence" (298; ch. 27). Jane puts off this threat of violence by her promise of narration: "I'll talk to you as long as you like" (299; ch. 27). After marrying her Bluebeard, Jane does not end up silent and buried in the forbidden chamber with the bones of her predecessors. Instead, the novel serves as proof that she remains responsible, accountable, able to tell her story. The murderous groom had asked his bride-to-be, "Do you not know anything to tell?" What she

and other female characters of this chapter know is something that their husbands cannot predict, and, in telling, they undermine their husbands' attempts to define them as irresponsible either through the force of violence or through legal regulations.

Yet the novel suggests that, once told, a story does not permanently disrupt the defining powers of law or violence. Instead, the novel hints that Jane's reprieve from the bloody chamber might be temporary, as Rochester's dark eye fixes on her once again near the conclusion when he partially regains his eyesight. The novel ends not so much with a finale as with a pause, as Jane anticipates news of St. John's death that has not yet arrived, sharing with readers his most recent letter to her in which he quotes, not the last, but second to last verse of the New Testament. I argued in my first chapter that repetition within the "Bluebeard" plot indicates that the process of blaming does not end with punishment. Similarly, the end of *Jane Eyre* resists closure, because its characters' project of determining who is responsible and who can be blamed is one that is never completed. Ultimately, the confluence of folk and legal discourses in *Jane Eyre* shows the continuous negotiation of what it means to be responsible, making assessments of blame that depend on identifying responsible characters unstable as well.

Female characters in this chapter used the power of narration to disrupt their husbands' attempts to define them as not responsible. Female characters in the next chapter find themselves in an even more precarious position: not only is their ability to respond challenged, but also their status as wives. Much like "Bloudie Jacke" classifies the victim of "The Robber Bridegroom" as a seduced maiden rather than a legitimate wife, the novels I will discuss next question the legitimacy of marriages.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am quoting from Matilda Louisa Davis's 1855 translation of the Grimm brothers' "Robber Bridegroom" tale (AT 955). For discussion of this and other English translations of the

Grimm tale – at least eight versions were printed in nineteenth-century English nursery tale collections – see especially Martin Sutton (180-82). In an English version of “The Robber Bridegroom” tale type, “Mr. Fox,” the victim’s entire hand falls into the hiding maiden’s lap, rather than just the finger. “Mr. Fox” is printed in Jacobs (153-58).

<sup>2</sup> Frank de Caro and Rosan A. Jordan also discuss the hiding maiden’s identification with the victim (54).

<sup>3</sup> D.L. Ashliman notes the displacement of responsibility in folktales about a father’s incestuous desire for his daughter: “A common motif in tales of threatened incest is the promise extracted from the king by his dying wife. This promise, combined in many tales with subsequent acts of the daughter, further helps to protect the father’s reputation by shifting the responsibility for his incestuous advances elsewhere, most often to the deceased queen, since the king can fulfill the promise made at her behest only by marrying his own daughter.”

<sup>4</sup> Mererid Pew Davies discusses the connection between “The Robber Bridegroom” and “Bluebeard,” noting their presence in *The Piano* (Tale 38).

<sup>5</sup> Lamb reads this scene as an example of Ada’s agency: “the heroine turns each victimization into a triumph, every oppressive offense against her into an act, not of courage and coping on her part, but of choice and self-assertion. [...] Even the rope that threatens to pull her and keep her under the sea she emerges from unfettered” (218n95). However, I think it is important to attend to the ways in which the film questions agency and control.

<sup>6</sup> The evolving English insanity defense is discussed at length by Joel Peter Eigen in *Witnessing Insanity* and *Unconscious Crimes*, by Nigel Walker’s *Crime and Insanity in England*, and by Richard Moran’s *Knowing Right from Wrong*.

<sup>7</sup> Historians and Victorian periodicals use a variety of spellings for McNaughtan’s surname. I will follow the lead of Richard Moran (xi-xiii) in using the spelling McNaughtan.

<sup>8</sup> We might argue about the comfort of “permanent abode” at Bethlehem, but this was a common sentiment in the wake of McNaughtan’s acquittal. On public reaction to McNaughtan’s acquittal, see especially Moran (2, 19-21, and 147-67).

<sup>9</sup> See also Sally Shuttleworth’s excellent discussion of the influence of Victorian psychological discourse in the representations of Bertha and Jane (49-56 and 148-82). Other discussions of the relationship between Victorian literature and legal discourses of insanity are found in David D. Oberhelman’s article on the McNaughtan Rules and Anthony Trollope’s *He Knew He Was Right* and Ellen L. O’Brien’s chapter on Victorian conceptions of insanity and crime poetry (109-66).

<sup>10</sup> This point is also discussed briefly by Shuttleworth (166).

<sup>11</sup> Jean Rhys’s fictional interpretation of *Jane Eyre* in *Wide Sargasso Sea* also draws attention to the lucidity of this character’s seemingly mad behavior. See also Heta Pyrhönen (60).



<sup>12</sup> Hoagland argues that insanity itself may be a response in reference to *The Yellow Wallpaper*: “Resistance [...] may even take the form of insanity when someone is isolated within the confines of domination and all means of maintaining integrity have been systematically cut off” (44).

<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Christopher Gabbard argues that Bertha’s shouting from the rooftop is “a speech act, one that, considered dialogically, is meant for an addressee. [...] Her rooftop statement is delivered to a *generalized recipient*, one that is diffused over a wide social expanse” (95).

<sup>14</sup> See especially Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s classic reading, in which they describe Bertha as Jane’s “dark double” (360).

<sup>15</sup> Julia Miele Rodas provides a thorough list of similarities between Bertha and Rochester, ranging from physical features to personality traits to the fact that both are constructed as disabled in parts of the novel (“Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*,” 149-51). Additionally, David Bolt points out that following Rochester’s injuries he is described in animal-like language reminiscent of dehumanizing language previously applied to Bertha (36).

<sup>16</sup> Rochester’s description of his injuries as punishment is also noted by Kate Flint (80) and Joshua Essaka (119).

<sup>17</sup> This issue is addressed by several of the essays in the 2012 collection *The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability*, edited by David Bolt, Julia Miele Rodas, and Elizabeth J. Donaldson. See especially Lennard J. Davis (ix-xii), Bolt (32-50), Susannah B. Mintz (129-49), Rodas, Donaldson, and Bolt (2), and Gabbard (104).

<sup>18</sup> Pyrhönen argues that Rochester is like Girard’s persecutor in making a scapegoat of Bertha (18).

<sup>19</sup> Nancy V. Workman examines the *Arabian Nights* intertext of *Jane Eyre* in her article, “Scheherazade at Thornfield: Mythic Elements in *Jane Eyre*.” See also Muhsin Jassim Ali (59-60) and Peter L. Caracciolo (28).

### Chapter 3: Personal Narratives, Legal Testimony, and Disputed Marriages

The status of the relationship between the Hon. William Charles Yelverton and his lover (and possibly his wife), Maria Theresa Longworth (or Maria Theresa Yelverton), transfixed the British reading public in the early 1860s. She claimed the two conducted a clandestine marriage ceremony in Scotland before they were wedded by a Catholic priest in Ireland. He denied that a Scottish ceremony took place and claimed that the Irish ceremony was invalid because he was a Protestant; at the time, it was illegal for a Catholic priest to marry a Protestant to a Catholic. Initially, an Irish jury accepted Longworth/Yelverton's account, validating her claims of marriage. A Scottish court then found in Yelverton's favor before its ruling was overturned on appeal. Finally, the House of Lords ruled for Yelverton, freeing him from the marriage he insisted never happened. This case is most well known as a bigamy case – Yelverton had married another woman when Longworth/Yelverton accused him of already being married to her – but my interest in the case stems from the differing accounts of whether a marriage took place and the fact that different governmental bodies reached opposing conclusions on the question.<sup>1</sup> The truth of whether the Yelvertons were married – or, indeed, whether they were not both Yelvertons after all – depended on who was deciding the case and how skillfully the opponents presented their side of the story.<sup>2</sup> This chapter examines three novels that include similar contested marriage narratives: Rosina Bulwer Lytton's *Cheveley; Or, the Man of Honour* (1839), Wilkie Collins's *Man and Wife* (1870), and Anthony Trollope's *John Caldigate* (1879). In each as in the Yelverton case, a female character claims she married a man who denies that a wedding took place. In these disputes, narrating is a competitive act in which both sides use blame to undermine the authenticity of their adversary.

The characters' accounts of a marriage/non-marriage unfold through repeated storytelling in the folk genre of personal experience narratives and the legal genre of trial testimony. The novels show that methods for determining authenticity in both genres are intertwined. The personal experience narrative is unbelievable without "evidence" to support it, and what counts as evidence is influenced by the legal process. Alexander Welch argues that circumstantial evidence becomes increasingly important to narration from the late eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries: "In this period, narrative consisting of carefully managed circumstantial evidence, highly conclusive in itself and often scornful of direct testimony, flourished nearly everywhere – not only in literature but in criminal jurisprudence, natural science, natural religion, and history writing itself" (ix). However, these pieces of evidence are not meaningful by themselves but depend on the same flexible process of interpretation and authentication as oral narration. Whether a document is evidence – or what it is evidence of – depends on how it is interpreted in a given set of circumstances; its value as evidence may change in different contexts.

In my previous chapter I discussed folk narratives that indicate blame through the literal pointing of a severed finger. In the disputed narratives this chapter analyzes, the hand in its representative form – handwriting – is a highly valued yet not always reliable form of evidence used to assign blame and assess narrative authenticity. Handwritten letters in all three novels are important to the process of deciding whether the disputed marriages took place. However, handwritten and printed documents in the novels also can have false or changeable meaning, such as a marriage certificate that is proof of a marriage one day but shown to be invalid the next. Thus, at the same time that characters hold up written documents as proof, the novels also call into question the reliability of such proof. The first section of this chapter focuses on

*Cheveley*, in which the villain's several attempts to discredit the woman he seduced are eventually thwarted by his own handwriting. Although the woman's claims of marriage are shown to be invalid (because her seducer was already married), her personal experience narrative is accepted as authentic. The second section examines *Man and Wife*, which, like *Cheveley*, has a clear villain who eventually is discredited. Unlike *Cheveley*, however, the dispute is prompted not merely by a seducer's misconduct but also by differing marriage laws within Britain, which leave the question of whether a marriage took place ambiguous and open to conflicting interpretations. The final section of this chapter discusses *John Caldigate*. Like *Man and Wife*, *Caldigate* makes use of uncertainty about marriage law in different parts of the British Empire to fuel the dispute. However, unlike the first two novels, Trollope's novel does not designate a villain, leaving the authenticity of two conflicting personal experience narratives up in the air.

Folklore theory provides of way of thinking about the authenticity of conflicting personal narratives. Although at one time folklorists attempted to determine which folk texts were authentic and which were "fakelore," more recently folklore scholars have considered the ways that the authenticity of folklore is constructed.<sup>3</sup> As Amy Shuman notes, "Where we once considered ourselves to be the arbiters of what counted as authentic performance, we now study how ownership of texts is negotiated within and between cultures" ("Dismantling" 348). In other words, a narrative's authenticity is not a fixed quality that is determined with its first telling. Rather, the authenticity of a given folk narrative is negotiated each time that text is performed in varying contexts.<sup>4</sup> When someone tells a story, the audience makes judgments about whether the story is authentic based on a variety of factors, including whether the story fits accepted paradigms of what might happen, whether the storyteller seems entitled to tell the story, and

whether competing narratives exist that might discredit the story. All of these factors are variable, so that a story might be judged authentic at one telling and inauthentic at another.<sup>5</sup>

Personal experience narratives are one type of folk text routinely subjected to judgments about authenticity. As Judith Butler argues, “the account of myself that I give in discourse never fully expresses or carries this living self. My words are taken away as I give them . . . . This ‘interruption’ contests the sense of the account’s being grounded in myself alone, since the indifferent structures that enable my living belong to a sociality that exceeds me” (*Giving an Account* 36). Put simply, even the account of one’s own experience is never one’s own, because the narrator lives in a community and tells his or her story to someone else. What the story means (or whether it has meaning) is determined not solely by the storyteller, but also by those who hear and interpret the story. These audience assessments can change the shape the story takes in subsequent tellings. For example, folklorist Elaine Lawless shows how the personal narratives of domestic violence survivors change over time, as they learn how to shape their narratives in ways that meet their changing needs: at one time they might need to narrate their tales in a particular way in order to qualify for a room in a shelter, at another time they may need to revise their stories in order to persuade a judge to sign a protective order against their abuser. Lawless notes that a shelter resident will “learn in short order that the story for public, institutional consumption may be a far cry from the story she came into shelter telling” (38).

When two or more people experience the same event, multiple and conflicting personal experience narratives might emerge. In these “contested narratives,” which Shuman defines as those in which different “versions of the events claim a different category for understanding what happened,” judgments about authenticity determine which narrator receives validation or support and who gets blamed (*Other* 15). Lawless gives an example of a woman who told her story to a

prosecuting attorney who, despite the woman's extensive injuries, declined to press charges against the woman's abuser. The attorney explained, "Because it's just your word against his – you don't have any witnesses or anything" (41). In this case, the woman's story was dismissed when put up against the opposing story of her batterer. Lawless argues, "Too often it is his word against hers and he knows the rhetoric, the discourse of the public arena" (52). Shuman describes another type of contested personal experience narrative: narratives of date rape. Until recently, she argues, date rape was not accepted as a viable category in narratives; rape was a crime committed by a stranger, and a victim of sexual assault by someone she knew "was at fault for getting herself into the situation in the first place" (*Other* 15). As Butler notes, "There is the operation of a norm, invariably social, that conditions what will and will not be a recognizable account" (*Giving an Account* 36). Until date rape is accepted as a recognizable category, narratives of date rape cannot be accepted as authentic, and accused rapists remain free from the blame that is turned back on their victims.

### **Sir Liar in Fiction**

Rosina Bulwer Lytton's own experience with contested personal narratives inspired her semi-autobiographical novel *Cheveley*, published in 1839 following her separation from her husband, Edward, himself a well-known author. In the novel, Lord de Clifford verbally and physically abuses his wife, Julia, before moving her into a shabby, isolated country home with a meager allowance while he carries on affairs. The de Cliffords' marriage – including a meddling mother-in-law – has obvious parallels to the author's marriage. Edward's mother bitterly opposed the marriage and never warmed up to Rosina.<sup>6</sup> Edward was unfaithful and abusive, including one incident witnessed by servants in which he bit his wife's cheek. Like de Clifford, Edward separated from his wife, leaving her to live off an allowance she considered

insufficient and far below his means. Rosina spent most of her married life trying to convince others of the cruelty of her husband, whom she took to calling “Sir Liar.” This dispute continued long after their deaths in the works of biographers and literary critics.<sup>7</sup>

Rosina’s purpose in writing *Cheveley* was two-fold: She hoped to expose her husband’s abuse through his fictional counterpart, and she also hoped to earn money from the novel’s publication.<sup>8</sup> However, Rosina struggled to earn money from her writing. She claimed that her husband impeded her literary career by pressuring publishers not to accept her work, a claim that he denied (Devey, *Life* 148-51, 262-64, Blain 229). Moreover, fiction writing is not always a reliable mode of garnering public sympathy, as Longworth/Yelverton learned more than twenty years later when she wrote the novel *Martyrs to Circumstance*, a fictional version of her relationship with Yelverton. What sympathy Longworth/Yelverton had gained for appearing virtuous and naive during the trial was diminished upon the novel’s publication, when critics decided she must be savvier than originally thought. An essay in the *Athenaeum* observed, “*Martyrs to Circumstance* seemed to show that the public had been mistaken about Mrs Yelverton – she was hardly the ingénue she had so convincingly presented herself as” (qtd in Gill 67). In Rosina’s case, *Cheveley* was ineffective in gaining sympathy for the author, in part because of the satirical dedication, addressed to “No One Nobody, Esq., of No Hall, Nowhere,” whom the author identifies as “the only man whose integrity I have found impeachable” (v). Virginia Blain argues, “as a strategy for winning powerful supporters, a display of anger such as *Cheveley*’s preface was necessarily, and by its own premises, self-defeating” (228).

Rosina’s personal story is an example of how a narrative that appears authentic in one historical time and place may seem inauthentic earlier or later because of changing cultural values. As Shuman argues, “We can begin to understand how storytelling is used in negotiations

of power by asking what makes one story tellable and another story not tellable in particular historical and social contexts” (*Other* 19). Today, as I write from the vantage point of a twenty-first century community in which wife beating is largely (though, sadly, not entirely) considered wrong, it is easy to accept the authenticity of Rosina’s account of Edward’s cruelty and to dismiss his attempts to portray her as crazy, extravagant, or a bad mother. Critic Virginia Blain took up the author’s cause in 1990, aiming to draw attention to the “scarcely remembered” author whose life story “has been distorted by unexamined bias” (210, 212). Blain’s work was motivated by the fact that during the author’s lifetime, and even much of the twentieth century, Rosina was widely “dismissed as the ‘obsessed and demented’ wife of Edward Bulwer Lytton” (Blain 210). Although Rosina had friends and supporters who believed her account and who fiercely defended her, her narrative was generally not considered as authentic as that of her husband. Partly this was due to her choice of tactics in publicizing her husband’s abuse. She came across as angry and too vocal, qualities many did not consider part of the ideal Victorian wife (Blain 218). In a letter to A.E. Chalon in 1856, she defended herself for having the “bad taste” to complain about her husband publicly and repeatedly: “Exposure is the only thing that complex monster dreads, and consequently the only check I have upon him” (qtd in Ellis 249 and Blain 219).

Although some today might applaud her boldness and courage in airing her grievances, her method of narrating her personal experience has not won her much sympathy. S.M. Ellis, who edited her letters to Chalon and who accepted her account of her husband’s cruelty, nonetheless wrote in 1914 that her complaints went too far for credibility:

She was undoubtedly in the beginning a much injured woman, for her husband was unfaithful, selfish, exacting, and absurdly egotistical; but as the years of misery seared her soul deeper and deeper, her mind became obsessed by her wrongs and, at times, thrown off the balance of reason. Her subsequent campaign of virulent attacks upon her



husband in speech and letter and printed book cannot be defended, however great the original provocation. (Ellis 10 and qtd in Blain 218)

Even while acknowledging her Edward's abuse, Ellis still blames Rosina for being "obsessed" and lacking reason. A more recent and condensed account of the couple's marriage, last updated by the *Victorian Web* in 2000, perpetuates the narrative of the wife's guilt: "After many violent quarrels, [Edward] and Rosina legally separated in 1836. She continued to plague him for the rest of his life, and indeed outlived him" (Allingham "Sir Edward"). This description casts Edward as the victim of Rosina's plaguing and does not indicate that he physically injured his wife during the "violent quarrels." As late as 1971, a critic was still regretting that Rosina had not been more adaptable in tolerating Edward's abuse: "even the injuries which Edward inflicted on her and the humiliations which he caused her might have been adapted to by a woman more naturally given to role-playing as an acceptable part of her role. However, to Rosina these actions of Edward's were totally unacceptable" (Shores 87). Today, many might agree with Rosina that her husband's violence was "totally unacceptable," but the fact remains that many who have heard or read the couple's story have found Rosina's complaints more unacceptable than her husband's abuse.

Even those during her lifetime inclined to justify Rosina's hostility toward Edward nonetheless had difficulty believing her account. Shuman argues that some stories are untellable because they fall outside the bounds of what listeners are willing to believe could happen. She explains, "These are stories about things that shouldn't happen, rather than about things that didn't happen" (*Other* 20). Such was the case with Rosina's account of the abuse she received from her husband. Jane Carlyle wrote to her in 1851:

When you describe that man and his treatment of you, I feel *amazed* before the whole thing, as in the presence of the Infinite; it is all so diabolical – so out of the course of nature, that I, who have mercifully had to do with only imperfect *human* beings at *worst*,

*never* with an incarnate devil, cannot *realise* it to myself, and cannot get any more intelligent impression from it than from a bad dream, or a Balzac novel. . . . The very *inhumanness* of your wrongs makes it impossible for me to pity them after a right genuine human fashion . . . . (qtd in Ellis 25; original emphasis)<sup>9</sup>

This letter indicates that Rosina's story is difficult to believe because it does not fit into any accepted category of what was thought possible. Rosina's account of her husband's abuse puts him outside of the category human, even imperfect human.

Rosina was well aware that she was losing in the court of public opinion. Her inability to garner public sympathy is reflected in her portrayal of Lord and Lady de Clifford. When Lord de Clifford decides to move his wife to the country so that he can take up with a mistress, he begins to spread rumors that his wife has a terrible temper and makes extravagant purchases, blaming her for their failed marriage. He relies on his masculine privilege and social status to ensure that his version of the story will be accepted. His wife, as de Clifford reminds her, has "neither brother nor father" to defend her (30; vol. 2). The narrator tells us that Lady de Clifford's friends are quick enough to side with de Clifford, who has money and political power. Eventually de Clifford goes to print to make his case against his wife. His mistress's brother is a reporter, and de Clifford gets him "to get a paragraph put in [the Moon] about Lady de Clifford's extravagance" (206; vol. 2). De Clifford's ally Fuzboz explains, "as people are beginning to make themselves impertinently busy about some facts they have got hold of concerning De Clifford, it is necessary for us, and all his friends, to attack his wife in every covert way we can, in order to guard against a meddling world" (206; vol. 2). The irony of this, of course, is that de Clifford is the one going public, rather than his wife. His means of guarding against "a meddling world" is to provide fuel for the meddlers' gossip.

It might seem that de Clifford's socio-economic power enables him to win the battle of competing personal experience narratives he is waging with Julia, as his account that she is

blamable for their failing marriage is the one generally considered credible. However, the novel introduces a second failed “marriage” plot that ultimately unravels de Clifford’s credibility. De Clifford seduces the seventeen-year-old peasant Mary Lee under the pseudonym of William Dale, wedding her in a private ceremony she believes to be real and he understands as a farce (he is already married to Julia). By plotting failed marriage in two separate relationships, both involving the same husband, *Cheveley* shows that both legal and extralegal relationships generate occasions for blame, and that the authorization of law does not automatically confer authenticity on one’s account.

Despite having the status of legal wife, Julia de Clifford is no more protected from her husband’s efforts to discredit her than is his extralegal wife. After de Clifford removes Julia to the country, his mistress, Laura Priest, moves in with him, appropriating the name Lady de Clifford. Julia’s legal right to the name is not enough to make it hers alone. Both Julia and Mary Lee find themselves in the precarious position of being labeled wife one day and not-a-wife the next, which means that their narratives not only aim to establish their blamelessness but also identity. Both women struggle to convince other characters that they are who they say they are – wives – and should be treated as such. Julia wants to persuade others that her legal status as wife is meaningful and should have some correlation to her living conditions. Instead, Laura Priest becomes de Clifford’s de facto wife, while Julia is treated as an abandoned mistress. Julia’s marital woes anticipate Eliza Lynn Linton’s critique of the laws lack of protection for wives: “A gaoler marital may entertain as many ladies light-of-love as he pleases. He may support them out of his wife’s property. . . and leave his lawful lady and her children to want and misery . . . The wife must bear her chains to the grave . . .; she must submit to every species of wrong and tyranny – the law has no shield for her!” (“Marriage Gaolers” 585). Linton draws attention here

to the type of dilemma Julia de Clifford faces, that being a lawful wife does not give her any guarantee that her husband will not bestow his love, name, or the marriage property on some other woman.

Mary Lee has the opposite concern. She is denied the legal status of wife but thinks that the meaning of her relationship with de Clifford should be based on what they did with and said to each other rather than on what the law says. In this case, de Clifford resorts to the protection of the law to justify his actions. In the letter in which “William Dale” informs Mary Lee that they are not legally married, he writes, “as for your brat, thanks to the New Poor Laws, you can have no claim upon me for that” (165; vol. 1). De Clifford is referring to the part of the 1834 law which effectively freed men from having to provide support to their out-of-wedlock children. From a legal standpoint, de Clifford is blameless in abandoning Mary and their child; there is no law requiring him to do otherwise. However, the law alone does not determine blameworthiness. De Clifford’s actions are subjected to folk standards of conduct, as well, and his transgression of those standards could have consequences for his political career. De Clifford’s recognition of this alternate register of blame motivates him to raise doubts about Mary’s credibility.

When Mary accuses de Clifford of marrying her as William Dale, his first strategy for discrediting her is to accuse her of insanity, explaining to his mother, “her madness has now taken the turn of identifying me, or, rather, confounding my identity with that of William Dale, her seducer” (175; vol. 1). This tactic is a precursor to Edward Rochester’s characterization of his wife, Bertha, as insane in *Jane Eyre*, published nearly a decade later, and is prophetic of the author’s treatment by her husband. In 1858, after Rosina publicly denounced Edward, he had her locked up in an insane asylum.<sup>10</sup> She was released after just over three weeks in the wake of a public outcry. Just as Edward would fail to permanently define his wife as insane, the fictional de

Clifford's insanity label turns out to be an ineffective means of discrediting Mary. Although even Mary's own father at first accepts that she is insane, he is eventually swayed by Mary's evidence. Mary asserts that de Clifford has a strawberry birth mark on his throat, matching that of their son. Her father asks de Clifford to debunk Mary's assertion "by showing her that you have no strawberry on your throat" (177; vol. 1). Of course, de Clifford refuses, "and this refusal on his part did more to convince Lee of Mary's sanity than anything she could have done or said" (177-78).

Next, Mary shows the letter written to her by William Dale and compares it with a list de Clifford had just given his maid; the handwriting is the same on both. De Clifford's letters are the main instrument of his undoing. Writing is a privileged mode of communication in the novel, with the characters agreeing that written words carry substantial weight as evidence. When the title character Cheveley learns of de Clifford's seduction of Mary, he asks to see the letters. The words on paper convince him that de Clifford is a "Cold-blooded wretch!" (167; vol. 2). He promises Mary's friend Madge that he will attest to having seen the letters if doing so can ever help Mary. The innkeeper's wife, Mrs. Stokes, also is swayed by the written letters. Having seen both "William Dale" and Lord de Clifford, she cannot believe they are the same person "till I saw his letters to Mary, signed William Dale, and compared them with those to me signed De Clifford" (220; vol. 2).

The importance of writing in establishing de Clifford's culpability is another aspect of the novel prophetic of the dispute between *Cheveley's* author and her husband. After their deaths, competing biographies gave conflicting accounts of their married life. The biography written by the couple's son, Robert, claims letters written by his father prove that he was not a cruel husband. He adds that his account of his parents' marriage is based on "the only authentic

record” (152). In contrast, Rosina’s friend Louisa Devey wrote a biography and published a volume of letters from husband to wife that Rosina left in her possession, to “be used for clearing her memory from the harsh judgment which had been pronounced and circulated to her disparagement” (Devey, *Letters* viii). Devey states in the biography that she wanted to publish the letters “merely by way of showing that there are two sides to every question, and also by way of vindicating his wife’s memory” (vii). She adds that the couple’s son did not approve of her actions and obtained an injunction against further publication of the letters: “But the Earl, being determined that one view, and one view only, of his father’s character should be presented to the world, set in motion the machinery of the law to stifle my humble protest, and still threatens me with its terrors” (vii). Rosina herself believed in the value of her husband’s letters in proving his cruelty to her. She explained in a letter to Edward why she preserved his letters:

“you are apt to forget, and consequently deny, things and promises you have made to me; there are many instances of this short memory; you recollect the Emperor Claudius after he ordered his wife to be murdered! Having quite forgotten the trifling circumstance, he next day set an angry message to know the meaning of her disrespect to him in not appearing at dinner. So, upon the whole, it was lucky the headsman had the imperial warrant to produce; and as I stand in the double capacity of wife and executor of your commands, it is doubly necessary for me to retain the proofs of my vindication” (qtd in Devey *Life*, 89).

Rosina thus believes that her husband’s letters are evidence. She warns him that she plans to use his writing to vindicate herself if necessary, a prediction that would eventually come to fruition.

Rosina’s belief in the value of writing is apparent in her novel. Significant news is typically communicated through writing, and written communications are often treated as credible based solely on the fact that they are written. De Clifford does not at first seem threatened when Mary and her father orally accuse him of being William Dale, but he fears exposure when he learns of the possibility that her account will be published. The Rev. Nathaniel Peter Hoskins threatens to print Mary’s side of the story in a pamphlet, which he would

distribute before de Clifford's next election. De Clifford considers either threatening Hoskins's printer or physically beating Hoskins. His mother advises, however, that neither of those actions would prevent Hoskins from circulating Mary's story. De Clifford decides to try to pay someone else to marry Mary and claim the child, after which, his mother suggests, "then you can write a letter to Clarridge, the editor of the 'Courant,' assuring him you know nothing of Mary Lee, but, hearing she was miserably poor, have given her that money as a dower, which circumstance he can put in the county paper, and it will sound uncommonly generous on your part" (97; vol. 1). Here, de Clifford's mother advises letter writing as a means of establishing his own blamelessness.

The resulting letters call into question characters' faith in the written word. De Clifford's letter to the periodical editor assures him "on the honour of a gentleman" that he is not the father of Mary Lee's baby (98; vol. 1). De Clifford also sends a letter to innkeeper John Stokes, again invoking "the honour of a gentleman" in refuting Mary Lee's account (152-53; vol. 1). Stokes uses the letter to try to silence speculation that de Clifford is the baby's father, telling the gossipers, "hush, don't go for to say nothink of the sort, for here's a letter from my lord his self, who says as it aint himsen, and you may read it" (152; vol. 1). Stokes is predisposed to believing de Clifford's written account solely based upon seeing it in a letter, and he thinks that others will be likewise convinced when they read the letter themselves. Although John Stokes is prepared to accept de Clifford's written word, this tactic of marrying off Mary to another man ultimately fails when both the other man and Mary choose not to take the bribe.

When de Clifford's first two strategies for discrediting Mary Lee fail – labeling her insane and bribing someone else to claim her child – he tries a third tactic: framing Mary and her father for theft. If Mary can be shown to be a thief, then she would be discredited as a narrator,

even regarding narratives unrelated to the supposed crime. Thieves are often understood to be dishonest and unscrupulous; the narrative of a thief can be discounted because of who the narrator is regardless of the content of the story itself. The logic behind this tactic is similar to that of de Clifford's attempt to designate Mary as insane. An insane person is one who is denied narrative authority, because her words are considered meaningless. Similarly, a thief is denied narrative authority because she is not considered credible. This effect is represented in the novel by the punishment de Clifford hopes Mary and her father will receive: transportation. If de Clifford had succeeded in branding Mary a thief, then she and her story would have been banished from the narrative space of the novel altogether. D.A. Miller notes that Victorian novels frequently represent transgressive females as mad and transgressive males as criminal: "The madwoman finds a considerable part of her truth – in the corpus of nineteenth-century fiction, at any rate – in being implicitly juxtaposed to the male *criminal* she is never allowed to be. If, typically, *he* ends up in the prison or its metaphorical equivalents, *she* ends up in the asylum or *its metaphorical* equivalents" (168). In *Cheveley*, however, madness and criminality are not gendered female and male, but instead are both presented as possible ways of identifying a female character in order to discredit her. Nonetheless, de Clifford's theft plot fails just like his other tactics against Mary. Here, as before, the key evidence against de Clifford is his own handwriting, which exonerates Mary and her father at the theft trial.

The confidence characters in *Cheveley* place in using handwriting samples to identify a culprit exceeds that of English courts of the time. During the first half of the nineteenth century, it was generally held that witnesses should not be allowed to testify about the likelihood of two pieces of writing being penned by the same hand. It was thought that such testimony "would complicate the issues, open the door for invidious selection, and raise points on which an



unlettered jury would be incompetent to pronounce” (“Experts in Handwriting” 767). Some judges allowed juries to examine disputed pieces of handwriting, but others did not, on the grounds that an illiterate jury would not be qualified to compare handwriting samples (Harris 276). It was not until 1854 that Parliament intervened, passing a law that allowed the testimony of handwriting experts.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the question of whether handwriting experts should be allowed to testify in court, there was also doubt about what information could be gleaned from a handwriting sample in general. Practitioners of graphology – “the science and art which deals with handwriting as an index to character, &c.; the divination, in fact, of mental and physical peculiarities by the inspection of a person’s penmanship” – published books indicating which handwriting features corresponded to which personality traits (Stocker 1).<sup>12</sup> Some believed that a culprit (such as a forger) would always reveal himself through his handwriting, even if he attempted to disguise it: “Even the most skillful culprit cannot wholly hide his individuality, as he is sure to relapse into his ordinary method occasionally” (“Experts in Handwriting” 768). Others dismissed graphology as a science altogether, acknowledging its value only as a form of entertainment.<sup>13</sup> Still others took a middle ground: “Not knowing a particular person, we may be able or unable to judge what sort of man he is by looking at his handwriting; but knowing both him and his writing, we have a much better chance of determining whether a certain letter or document may safely be attributed to him; or, not knowing him at all, we may judge whether two pieces of writing are by the same hand” (“Handwriting,” *All the Year Round*, 128). In sum, at the time of *Cheveley*’s publication in 1839 (and long after), the question of what evidence handwriting samples could provide was still contested.

Unlike many early nineteenth-century juries, however, in the novel characters are allowed to compare handwriting samples to determine which character to blame. This occurs

informally, as I have described above, when characters outside of the courtroom compare de Clifford's handwriting to that of "William Dale." In addition, handwriting samples establish de Clifford's culpability in the official setting of Mary Lee's theft trial. Defense counsel Sergeant Carrington displays de Clifford's "William Dale" letters in court: "A great reaction appeared to have taken place in the feelings of the court" (269-70; vol. 2). Additionally, proof that de Clifford orchestrated the theft charges against the Lees comes in the form of his handwriting, as the man he paid to pull off the fraud, Miles Datchet, produces a letter in court from de Clifford outlining his instructions. Although the letter was not signed, "his handwriting was too well known to be disputed" (271; vol. 2). Realizing that he has incriminated himself, de Clifford rushes out of the courtroom and dies in a fall from his horse. Rather than banishing Mary Lee from the narrative, de Clifford takes himself out of the novel, freeing his abused wife to remarry the hero. Thus, despite his privileged status as a British lord with a seat in Parliament, de Clifford does not succeed in shifting blame from himself to Mary Lee. However, this he said/she said dispute about their relationship might be more accurately termed a he said/he said, as the novel pits one version of de Clifford's account – that Mary Lee is a crazy thief who got pregnant by another man – against another – de Clifford's own letters indicating that he was Mary's lover and that he orchestrated the theft.

### **"The Letter and the Law"**

Like Lord de Clifford, the villain of Wilkie Collins's *Man and Wife* (1870) finds his version of events in a disputed marriage overturned by his own handwriting. Geoffrey Delamayn seduces Anne Silvester, who becomes pregnant. He agrees to marry her but then changes his mind; by this time, however, he has already written the letter that will eventually serve as evidence that he and Anne are married. The conflict is based on Scottish marriage law, which at

the time had looser standards than English law for determining what constituted marriage. Whereas English law required publicity and registration of weddings, Scottish law required only that the couple declare themselves married.<sup>14</sup> The case of *Dalrymple v. Dalrymple* provided Collins with the legal precedent for establishing marriage based on a written promise to marry. A London court found in 1811 that John William Henry Dalrymple married Johanna Gordon, whom he met when he was stationed in the military in Edinburgh in 1804, by sending her a promise of marriage in writing. She brought the suit after he married another woman in 1808, a marriage that was invalidated when the court ruled that his written promise constituted marriage to Johanna (Macheachen 131).

The disputed “wedding” in Collins’s novel is not a single event, but rather a series of events involving both written and oral communication. Anne arranges for Geoffrey to meet her at a Scottish inn where they would spend the night, calling each other husband and wife, effectively becoming married under Scottish law. Anne arrives at the inn and requests a room, telling the suspicious innkeeper, who does not want to offer lodging to an unmarried woman, that her husband will meet her there that night. However, after Anne leaves for the inn, Geoffrey is called to the bedside of his ill father. He sends his friend Arnold Brinkworth, the fiancé of Anne’s best friend, Blanche Lundie, to the inn with a letter for Anne in which Geoffrey explains the delay and refers to himself as her “loving husband” (154; ch. 12). At the inn, Arnold pretends to be Anne’s husband so that the innkeeper will not evict her and ends up having to spend the night in her rooms because of a thunderstorm. Later, Geoffrey regrets his promise to marry Anne. Learning that Arnold introduced himself as Anne’s husband at the Scottish inn, Geoffrey conjectures that Anne is already married to Arnold (making Arnold a bigamist upon his marriage to Blanche). In short, Geoffrey’s narrative is that he is free from his promise to marry Anne

because she has married herself to Arnold, while Anne's account is that Geoffrey is not released from his promise because she and Arnold are not married. Raising the stakes in this conflict is the fact that several other characters have something to gain or lose based on how the dispute is resolved. Arnold and Blanche (and their supporters) want Anne's account to be accepted so their own marriage will be deemed legal. Geoffrey's new fiancée, Mrs. Glenarm, and his mother want his account to be accepted so that he can marry the wealthier and more socially acceptable widow. Blanche's stepmother, Lady Lundie, eventually joins the dispute on Geoffrey's side because she would rather accept that her stepdaughter has married a bigamist than that Anne, whom she never liked, is vindicated.

Although the characters are split among supporters of Geoffrey and supporters of Anne, the narrator of the novel falls squarely on Anne's side. Like Rosina Bulwer Lytton with *Cheveley*, Collins had a political purpose in writing *Man and Wife*, using his preface and an appendix to call for change.<sup>15</sup> Collins states in the preface, "This time the fiction is founded on facts, and aspires to afford what help it may towards hastening the reform of certain abuses which have been too long suffered to exist among us unchecked" (5). He argues that political reforms are needed to rectify the "scandalous condition" of varying marriage laws in England, Scotland, and Ireland, and to allow married women to own property (5). He also calls for social reform regarding the prestige attached to "physical cultivation" over scholarly achievement (6). The actions of Geoffrey in the novel exemplify the need for the types of reforms Collins advocates. Thus, the narrator of *Man and Wife*, like the narrator of *Cheveley*, takes the woman's side in the debate.

But despite the narrator's partisanship, the novel reveals the process by which other characters determine which account is authentic, with some characters finding most credible the

account the narrator tells readers is false. Within the community of the novel, it depends on the storytellers to present their account more skillfully than their opponent. On separate occasions, both Anne and Geoffrey narrate their version of events to lawyers, who question them as if they were witnesses at a trial. These storytelling occasions blend folk and legal modes of narration. Anne and Geoffrey tell their stories to lawyers in private residences or offices rather than the public space of a courtroom. There is no judge or jury present to audit their accounts. However, the lawyers' legal expertise shapes the narratives that Anne and Geoffrey eventually form. Their stories are determined in part by the order and content of the lawyers' questions, which are chosen based on their knowledge of what details carry importance in the legal arena. Like the residents of the battered women's shelter observed by Elaine Lawless who learn to tell their stories in a way that will seem credible to legal authorities, Anne and Geoffrey learn which details will authenticate their account.

The first of these quasi-legal interrogations is Geoffrey's conversation with Sir Patrick Lundie. Geoffrey approaches Sir Patrick under the guise of wanting advice about an unnamed friend who is unsure whether he is married. Sir Patrick intends to interrogate Geoffrey in order to learn his secret, because he believes, "The one process that could be depended on for extracting the truth, under those circumstances, was the process of interrogation" (226; ch. 21). To hide this purpose from Geoffrey, Sir Patrick first invites him to give his account on his own terms: "Now tell me the circumstances" (226). This open-ended prompt is "puzzling" to Geoffrey, the narrator tells us, because he does not have the skill to maintain "the thread of his narrative" on his own (226). The novel represents Geoffrey, an unscholarly athlete, as uncomfortable with oral storytelling. Later in the novel, Geoffrey hopes to present his side of the marriage dispute to Anne in the form of a letter, and he is angry when he must speak to Anne in person. The narrator

relates, “He had made up his mind to write; and there she stood, forcing him to speak” (251; ch. 23). Geoffrey prefers the detached, impersonal communication of writing, a mode that offers no possibility of instant rebuttal, allowing him to measure his words in advance rather than having to think on his feet.

Because of his discomfort with oral narration, Geoffrey is amenable when Sir Patrick offers to lead him through his story with questions. Although Sir Patrick believes he is “extracting the truth” from Geoffrey, what he is actually doing is training Geoffrey to give his account in a manner that might be considered truthful in a court of law. His directive, “Be as particular as you can,” teaches Geoffrey that specific details – names, dates, times, locations – are important to establishing his story’s credibility. Jonathan H. Grossman outlines the influence of legal forms on nineteenth-century narration and the increasing importance of evidence: “All voices are held to the physical facts; no single voice is authoritatively trustworthy or paramount. In this form of narration telling one’s own story in one’s own words is a less credible procedure than having one’s story reconstructed by an orchestrating third party, namely, the barrister as narrator” (22). But in spite of Sir Patrick’s orchestration, Geoffrey’s details are not evidence enough to definitively prove his account. Rather, Sir Patrick advises, “I say there has been evidence in favour of *possibly* establishing a marriage – nothing more” (232; ch. 21; my emphasis). He adds, “if you choose to apply to one of my professional colleagues, he might, possibly, tell you they are married already. A state of law which allows the interchange of matrimonial consent to be proved by inference, leaves a wide door open to conjecture” (232). In other words, because of the ambiguous state of British marriage law, Geoffrey has evidence that might convince some lawyers that Anne has married Arnold, but not enough evidence to prevent the possibility that his account will be debunked.

In light of the uncertainty about whether his story will be accepted, Geoffrey bolsters his account by portraying Anne as blamable. Mary Douglas describes the connection between blaming and credibility: “Blaming is a way of manning the gates through which all information has to pass. . . . News that is going to be accepted as true information has to be wearing a badge of loyalty to the particular political regime which the person supports; the rest is suspect, deliberately censored or unconsciously ignored” (19). In other words, blaming is a means of discrediting narrators whose stories do not support the side of the finger-pointer. Much as Lord de Clifford tried to discredit Mary Lee by labeling her insane and a thief, Geoffrey tries to discredit Anne by convincing his family and friends that Anne is a fortune-seeker. Initially, Geoffrey’s mother accepts her son’s account, calling Anne “an impudent adventuress” (528; ch. 52). She tells Sir Patrick that she cannot be expected “to espouse the interests of a person who has prevented my son from marrying the lady of his choice, and of mine” (530). Similarly, Mrs. Glenarm, already persuaded by Geoffrey that he is the victim of “the vilest wretch,” is not inclined to believe Anne’s account (546; ch. 54). When Anne tells her, “I am the miserable woman who has been ruined and deserted by Geoffrey Delamayn,” Mrs. Glenarm responds, “It’s false!” (430; ch. 45). Further, Mrs. Glenarm asserts that Anne has no right to even tell her side of the story. When Anne insists, “I have a claim to be heard,” Mrs. Glenarm answers, “You have no claim! You shameless woman . . .” (431). In Mrs. Glenarm’s opinion, Anne – as a “shameless woman” – is not entitled to narrate.

However, Anne does tell her story repeatedly in the novel. She follows Geoffrey’s example by consulting Scottish lawyers to determine the meaning of the events at the Scottish inn. Anne is presented as more comfortable with oral narration than Geoffrey. Whereas he was confused by the prospect of telling his story, Anne “proceeded to state the facts” first to Mr.

Camp and then to Mr. Crum (321; ch. 33). Both men wait until she has finished with her account before they question her. However, the fact that they do follow up her narration with questions means that both lawyers add to her story by prompting her for additional details. Anne might not require as much oral storytelling training as Geoffrey, but her personal narrative is shaped by her interaction with the lawyers. Further, although Anne is able to tell her own story, she depends on the men to tell her what her story means. Just as Sir Patrick warned Geoffrey that different lawyers might form different opinions about the case, Anne gets conflicting advice from Mr. Camp and Mr. Crum. Mr. Camp advises, "I see a plain inference of matrimonial consent in the circumstances which you have related to me; and *I* say you are a married woman" (321). On the other hand, Mr. Crum decides, "No marriage, ma'am" (322). He explains, "Evidence in favour of perhaps establishing a marriage, if you propose to claim the man" (322). Thus, whether Anne's story means that she is married to Arnold is ambiguous and open to the interpretation of men who have the legal authority to offer an opinion on the subject.

The key piece of evidence is Geoffrey's letter to Anne in which he refers to himself as her husband.<sup>16</sup> So important is this letter to the plot of the novel that it is reprinted twice in its entirety (154; ch. 12 and 482; ch. 49). Like Anne's oral narratives, the letter does not have authenticity of its own but must be invested with evidentiary value by the lawyers. The novel presents the letter as lacking value when it is interpreted by women. When Anne shows the letter to Mrs. Glenarm, in hopes of convincing her of her truthfulness, Mrs. Glenarm dismisses the letter as "a forgery," adding, "You have no proof" (432; ch. 45). Anne herself initially fails to recognize the letter's importance. When she first receives it, she crumples it up and throws it into a corner, from where it is later stolen by inn employee Bishopriggs. After Anne succeeds in finding Bishopriggs and buying back the letter, she first plans to tear it up before deciding to



save it in case it might be important later.<sup>17</sup> It is finally Sir Patrick who decides the letter is decisive evidence, in a chapter titled “The Letter and the Law.” After reading the letter and questioning Anne about how long she and Geoffrey had been in Scotland when she received it, Sir Patrick explains that Anne and Arnold could not have been married, because “On the day, and at the hour, when he wrote those lines at the back of your letter to him, you were *Geoffrey Delamayn’s wedded wife!*” (483; ch. 49; original emphasis). Anne later gives the letter to Sir Patrick so that he can use it to legitimate his niece Blanche’s marriage to Arnold, at the same time proving Anne’s marriage to a man who now hates her (and will eventually try to kill her). The crucial evidence authenticating Anne’s story, then, is written by a man and imbued with meaning by another man, to whom Anne turns over the letter to use in a way that will be detrimental to herself.

Like Mary Lee in *Cheveley*, Anne requires her “husband”/adversary’s written account to authenticate her own. Although her version of events is eventually accepted as true, she is not invested with narrative authority in the novel. Anne’s “success” does not mean that she is accepted as an authentic narrator by other characters in the novel so much as Geoffrey is recognized as an inadvertent narrator against himself through his letter. Likewise, in *Cheveley*, Mary Lee’s account was not considered credible, even by her own father, until it was authenticated by de Clifford’s handwriting. In both novels, female oral narratives are not accepted as true accounts on their own; they require authentication through male documentation.

The ability to have one’s narrative heard and accepted is important because those accepted as narrators have the power to establish the terms by which others will be held accountable. This opens up the possibility that those held culpable will be blamed in ways that do not align with their own worldview. In *Cheveley*, for example, Mary finds herself blamed as

mentally ill and as criminal, two modes of existence that do not align with her own understanding of herself. Whatever blame Mary assigned herself would have been for different reasons: keeping secrets from her family and friends, perhaps, or exercising poor judgment in falling for William Dale/de Clifford in the first place. She is spared being blamed on de Clifford's terms only because he unwittingly implicated himself. Similarly, Anne finds herself cast in Geoffrey's narrative of blame as a wealth-seeking, social-climbing adventuress, which does not reflect her self-image. In Anne's mind, she is to blame for misjudging Geoffrey initially and for allowing Arnold to pretend to be her husband, potentially invalidating her best friend's subsequent marriage to him. Like Mary, Anne is freed from Geoffrey's narrative of blame not by her own authority but by his inadvertent written testimony in her favor.

Anne is not the only woman in the novel who relies on men to determine her narratives' meaning. The Geoffrey-Anne marriage plot is shadowed by the subplot of Hester Dethridge, the lower-class widow of an abusive husband who beat her and took what she considered her money and furniture repeatedly before she finally killed him. The parallels between the two marriages are noted by Kate Lawson and Lynn Shakinovsky, who argue, "The two marriages work in structural relationship with each other" (131). During her marriage, Hester learns that her stories are useless in protecting her from this husband. No matter to whom she tells her story – to the Police Court, employers, a pastor, a lawyer, her family – her words fail to bring her any relief. None of her auditors invests Hester's narration with the meaning she ascribes to it: that having paid her taxes, she is entitled to protection from "the Queen and the Parliament" (587; ch. 59). One magistrate tells her, "Yours is a common case . . . . I can do nothing for you" (586). Hester's narrative is ineffective in part because it falls outside the category of what is possible. She believes her husband is stealing her money and furniture, but under the English marriage laws of

the time, it is impossible for her husband to steal from her because there is no “hers;” the money and furniture already belong to her husband. For this story, it is not simply a matter of Hester not being accepted as a narrator, but rather that the story she wants to tell cannot legally be. Jonathan Lear describes a similar phenomenon in Crow narratives at the time of U.S. westward imperialism. When the U.S. government outlawed warfare between Native American tribes, including the tradition of “counting coups,” then narratives of counting coups were no longer possible. He argues, “The issue is that the Crow have lost the concepts with which they would construct a narrative” (32). In Hester’s case, it is not that she has lost the category that her narrative would fit into but that the category never existed in the first place. The story she wants to tell has not yet been accepted by her culture as a narrative possibility.

By the time readers are introduced to Hester in the novel, she has given up speaking to other characters entirely, a chosen rather than physical mutism. Lisa SurrIDGE points out that Hester’s silence is similar to that of Ada McGrath in *The Piano*, which I discussed in the previous chapter (“Unspeakable Histories” 123n7). SurrIDGE argues, “Hester’s silence seems to represent society’s inability to listen rather than her literal inability to speak” (106). Similarly, Lawson and Shakinovsky assert, Hester’s silence “is a symptom not only of the fact that she has been personally beaten into silence but also of a legal and emotional world that has rendered it futile for her to speak” (141). Having failed to make herself heard through oral narration, she communicates by writing on a slate, a type of hybrid communication that shares the form of writing but the impermanence of speech. For the story of her marriage, however, Hester chooses a more permanent form of narration. She puts the tale of her husband’s cruelty and her murder of him in the form of a manuscript, headed with the following title and instructions: “My Confession. To be put into my coffin, and to be buried with me when I die” (571; ch. 57). Hester

carries the manuscript in her dress at all times, intended for no one to see until she is dead. In so doing, Hester aims to ensure that no one will tell her that her account is meaningless; she wants the final word on the story of her marriage and what it means. However, one night when she falls asleep in an armchair, Geoffrey finds and reads the manuscript. He interprets the story of Hester's murder of her husband "as a how-to manual on how to kill one's spouse" (SurrIDGE, "Unspeakable Histories" 107-09). He uses the written confession to coerce Hester into helping him with a plot to murder Anne. Thus, Hester finds her writing used against her. Her oral narration had failed to win her protection from an abusive husband, and now her written narration is appropriated by another abusive husband who wants to kill his own wife. By the end of the novel, Hester's storytelling ability is completely denied in any form, as she is labeled deranged and locked up in an asylum. Having repeatedly failed to determine the meaning of her own stories, either oral or written, Hester is finally rendered a meaningless narrator by the novel through her insanity designation.

Although Collins's novel makes the meaning of female narration dependent on male interpretation, it also calls into question interpretation's reliability. At the conclusive meeting where the disputed marriage is finally established through Geoffrey's letter, the certainty with which the characters involved accept the letter as proof is offset by the apparent flexibility of the law. The meeting constitutes an "informal inquiry" that transfers many of the forms of a legal trial to a private residence. The two adversaries in the dispute, Geoffrey and Anne, are each represented by legal counsel: Mr. Moy for Geoffrey and Sir Patrick for Anne, while Lady Lundie, who presents herself as acting for Blanche, is represented by a "London solicitor" and Mrs. Glenarm's uncle, Captain Newenden, attends on her behalf. These lawyers direct the proceeding by questioning the other speakers, objecting to or approving each other's questions,

and offering their interpretations of the law and “evidence.” At this “trial” – like the one in *Cheveley* – the verdict is pronounced on the basis of the handwritten letter after oral narratives of the contested marriage are deemed insufficient to settle the dispute. Before Sir Patrick produces the letter, he asks Blanche if she will accept Arnold’s and Anne’s oral narratives as fact and leave the meeting with Arnold as his wife. Blanche says that she believes Arnold’s and Anne’s accounts, but that she is not willing to leave the meeting until she is “*certain*” that she is Arnold’s wife (514; ch. 51). In other words, she does not accept Arnold’s and Anne’s narratives on their own and needs some “proof” to consider their accounts certain. Sir Patrick then cites the precedence of the Dalrymple case before explaining to the group:

Loose and reckless as the Scotch law is, there happens, however, to be one case in which the action of it has been confirmed and settled by the English Courts. A written promise of marriage exchanged between a man and woman, in Scotland, marries that man and woman by Scotch law. An English Court of Justice (sitting in judgment on the case I have just mentioned to Mr Moy) has pronounced that law to be good – and the decision has since been confirmed by the supreme authority of the House of Lords. Where the persons therefore – living in Scotland at the time – have promised each other marriage in writing, there is now no longer any doubt. They are certainly, and lawfully, Man and Wife.” (523)<sup>18</sup>

Although Sir Patrick here expresses confidence in the certainty of this particular law, his explanation belies the law’s stability. The application of the law first required a favorable pronouncement by one court and then required confirmation from the House of Lords. Implicitly understood is the fact that either of those decisions could have been otherwise. Sir Patrick’s assertion that “there is *now* no longer any doubt” implies that there was doubt in the past and could be doubt again in the future. Further, after explaining the law, Sir Patrick turns to Mr. Moy and asks him, “Am I right?” (523). This question shows that Sir Patrick’s interpretation of the law is not as certain as he tells the group. Had there been no doubt about the law, there could have been no question about whether Sir Patrick was right in his explanation. That he asks the

question emphasizes that his account of the law is an interpretation, one that requires the affirmation of Mr. Moy to carry weight with the group. Thus, even as the group accepts the letter as certain proof, investing it with more value than oral narration, the novel suggests that the letter's meaning is ambiguous because the law that gives the letter meaning is ambiguous.

Further, the novel sets this primary conflict of the plot against the backdrop of a prologue that undercuts the evidentiary reliability of written documents. Geoffrey Delamayn's father, a lawyer, tells Mr Vanborough, Anne's father, that his marriage to Anne's mother, also named Anne, is no marriage at all, because they were married in Ireland by a Roman Catholic priest when Vanborough had been Catholic for less than a year, a plot element that echoes the Yelverton case. Vanborough hopes the law will invalidate his thirteen-year marriage to Anne so that he can marry Lady Jane Parnell, a widow with social connections that Vanborough believes will help him secure a place in Parliament and a peerage. The resulting confrontation pits Vanborough's story that he is a single man against Anne's story that they are married. Anne, unaware of the legal advice Vanborough has received, insists that she can prove Vanborough is her husband. She hands Lady Jane her marriage certificate, explaining that she had worked on stage when she was single: "The slander to which such women are exposed, doubted my marriage. I provided myself with the piece of paper in your hand. It speaks for itself. Even the highest society, madam, respects *that!*" (37). Anne believes that the marriage certificate, with the weight of institutional authority behind it, is unequivocal proof of her story's truth. She is married, and she has the paper to prove it. Where Anne is mistaken, though, is in her belief that any such document "speaks for itself." The marriage certificate does not have intrinsic value as evidence on its own. It requires an act of interpretation to invest it with evidence, and in this case, the balance of interpretive power is not on Anne's side. The lawyer, a supposedly

disinterested third party, pronounces the certificate “Waste paper,” a verdict Lady Jane happily accepts as it frees Vanborough to marry her (37).

The vagaries of the law mean that while the content of a written or printed document may be permanent, the meaning is not. In the previous chapter, I discussed the evolving standards of the insanity defense. Someone considered criminally insane in one decade might have been ruled sane under the standards of the previous decade, while the criteria for sanity today might constitute insanity ten years from now. The same definitional impermanence applied to British marriage law in the nineteenth century. Changing legal standards meant that some conditions for establishing legal marriage at the beginning of the century were no longer applicable at the end. Additionally, as the Yelverton case and the fictional Vanborough case show, the varied and confusing marriage laws in different parts of the United Kingdom meant that what was considered marriage in one part of the kingdom was not a marriage in another. Non-lawyers who had not studied the intricacies of marriage law could find that the relationship they assumed was a legal marriage was actually no marriage at all, and even trained legal experts could reach different conclusions as to a marriage’s legality. The answer to the question “What is a marriage?” was as unstable as the answer to the question “What is insanity?”

### **No One Knows Who Is Right**

In the fictional disputes I’ve discussed so far between Mary Lee and Lord de Clifford, Anne Silvester and Geoffrey Delamayn, and Anne’s mother and Mr Vanborough, the narrator takes the woman’s side. Trollope’s *John Caldigate* (1879) presents the same type of conflict: A woman claims to be married to a man who insists no marriage took place. However, unlike the narrators of *Cheveley* and *Man and Wife*, the narrator of *Caldigate* does not weigh in on whose account of the (non)marriage is authentic. Instead, the narrator elides the supposed wedding

ceremony and all the action and conversations which took place for months before and after, leaving the reader as much in the dark as other characters in determining which character's account (if any) can be trusted.

Before considering *Caldigate*, I will first discuss Trollope's earlier, and more well-known, marriage-conflict novel, *He Knew He Was Right* (1869), which sets up ambiguity about blameworthiness that will be an important factor in Trollope's later novel. The main characters of *He Knew He Was Right*, Louis and Emily Trevelyan, both agree on the event that leads to their dispute but disagree about how it should be interpreted. Emily's family friend, Colonel Osborne, has corresponded with Emily in a familiar way. Unlike *Caldigate*, in which the disputed event is disputed because one character denies that it even happened, in *He Knew He Was Right*, both husband and wife agree that the event took place. Where they disagree is in what they believe the event means.

Louis, who represents the weight of institutional authority given to English husbands, believes that his wife's correspondence with Osborne is an infringement of his lawful power to demand her obedience. Emily recognizes her husband's legal authority as she thinks about the possible consequences of their dispute: "What if the child should be taken away from her? If this quarrel, out of which she saw no present mode of escape, were to lead to a separation between her and her husband, would not the law, and the judges, and the courts, and all the Lady Milboroughs of their joint acquaintance into the bargain, say that the child should go with his father?" (39; ch. 5). For his part, Louis is forced to the realization that his legal authority is not enough to convince Emily that he is right. The narrator states, "Wives are bound to obey their husbands, but obedience cannot be exacted from wives, as it may from servants, by aid of law and with penalties" (44; ch. 5). Louis would like the law to be the last (and only) word on the



balance of power in his marriage; because he has legal authority, he thinks, Emily should be directed by him. But even though Emily acknowledges that her husband's position would be backed by law, she still believes he is in the wrong. She takes the position that eventually becomes folk wisdom in the novel that Louis errs in the degree to which he demands his wife's submission. On both sides, there is plenty of blame to go around – Louis is overbearing, Emily is indiscreet, Osborne is mischievous – and in the first half of the novel the various secondary characters are divided in their opinions of who is to blame, with many agreeing that blame is shared among the parties to the quarrel.

However, by the second half of the novel, the characters are regrouped into a “contest,” as Louis calls it, between folk and institutional wisdom (742; ch. 79). On one hand is the opinion that Louis must be either bad or mad (“a cruel Bluebeard” [187; ch. 20]),<sup>19</sup> a view adopted by all of the couple's friends and relatives, as well as the various servants and neighbors who come into contact with them. The narrator sums up this viewpoint in the penultimate chapter: “he was mad; – mad though every doctor in England had called him sane. Had he not been mad he must have been a fiend, – or he could not have tortured, as he had done, the woman to whom he owed the closest protection which one human being can give to another” (925; ch. 98). On the other hand is the official wisdom of some of the lawyers and doctors that Louis is neither a bad husband nor insane. The magistrate whom Emily's father consults advises that Louis has neither broken the law nor acted in a way “which could be shewn to be cruel before a judge” (581; ch. 61). A lawyer advises Emily's mother that she has “no case with which she could go into court” (583; ch. 62). And Louis's doctor insists that Louis suffers “more of ailment in the body than in the mind” (900; ch. 95).<sup>20</sup> In the face of the conflicting folk and official discourses of blame, the dispute between Louis and Emily is irreconcilable. Elsie B. Michie argues that the novel

“insist[s] on its inability to allot blame” (“Trollope v. Trollope”). I contend that this inability stems from the fact that there is no single definition of right or wrong. Both Louis and Emily know they are right, and in different registers, both are. *He Knew He Was Right* shows that judgments about blameworthiness are uncertain because they are based on variable, and sometimes opposing, standards of what constitutes right or wrong behavior.

In *John Caldigate*, not only do we not know whether either of the parties to the contested marriage is right, we never learn what events transpired that may or may not have constituted a marriage. The title character sails to Australia (on the aptly named *Goldfinger*) to make his fortune in gold mines. En route, he develops a relationship with Euphemia Smith and promises to marry her. After they land in Australia, John and Euphemia go their separate ways – he to strike gold in Ahalala, she to work on stage in Sydney. However, despite almost instantly regretting his promise to marry her, John writes to Euphemia and visits her in Sydney. What happens next is the crux of the dispute in the novel. Months pass unnarrated before John returns to England, fortune earned, and marries Hester Bolton. Soon after that marriage, Euphemia sends a letter to John accusing him of having married her in Australia, claiming that she has a marriage certificate and can produce witnesses of the ceremony: “Allan, the Wesleyan who married us, has gone out of the colony, no one knows where, -- but I send you the copy of the certificate; and all the four of us who were there are still together. And there were others who were at Ahalala at the time, and who remember the marriage well. Dick Shand was not in the chapel, but Dick knew all about it. There is quite plenty of evidence” (223; ch. 24). She promises to drop her claim of marriage if Caldigate will pay her money but signs the letter as Euphemia Caldigate. The narrator does not weigh in on the truth of the letter: “However true or however false the allegations made in the above letter may have been, for a time it stunned him greatly” (223). Because the narrator neither

authenticates nor discredits Euphemia's letter, the reader becomes one of the novel's detectives, joining the characters in the novel who weigh both sides and their "evidence."

Absent direct confirmation of either side of the story, other characters determine which side to believe based largely on which character appears the most blameless. Both Caldigate and Euphemia appear culpable. Euphemia's letter to Caldigate is an extortion attempt that she has concocted with Caldigate's former mining partner Crinkett. When Caldigate refuses to pay them off, Crinkett and Euphemia travel to England and officially charge him with bigamy. As the trial nears, Caldigate's uncle, Mr. Babington, argues that Crinkett and Euphemia's attempt at bribery should discredit her account of marriage: "But, by George! here is a man comes over and asks for a lot of money; and then the woman asks for money; and then they say that if they don't get it, they'll swear the fellow was married in Australia. I can't fancy that any jury will believe that" (304; ch. 32). Caldigate's father also believes his son entirely. He offers as rationale "the very fact that they had begun by asking for money" (294; ch. 31). It is clear that Euphemia put forward her narrative in an attempt to get money, not out of any righteous belief in the truth, or even a desire to be Caldigate's wife. Because she appears to be culpable for trying to bribe Caldigate, her story is not credible to some characters.

So long as Caldigate refuses to pay Euphemia's bribe, other characters in the novel can accept his credibility. However, despite repeated warnings by his lawyer and brother-in-law not to pay Euphemia, Caldigate eventually does try to pay her off. Neither his lawyer nor the trial judge accepts the possibility that an innocent man would pay off his accuser. In their worldview, there is no such action as an innocent man paying a bribe. His lawyer argues, "No good was ever done . . . by buying off witnesses. The thing itself is disreputable, and would to a certainty be known to every one. . . . The fact of your having paid them money would secure a verdict against

you” (369-70; ch. 39). When Caldigate does pay the bribe, it is considered proof of his guilt. He must be guilty, because only a guilty man would act as he acted. Caldigate thus undermines the possibility that his account will be accepted as the authentic version of events in Australia, overcoming the gender and class bias against his accuser that otherwise would have made Caldigate’s account more plausible to the lawyer and judge.

Further, whether Caldigate is guilty of bigamy or not, he appears to be guilty of something. When rumors about his engagement to Euphemia first start spreading, he lies to Hester and her family about it. When it becomes apparent that Caldigate has lied about his engagement to Euphemia, it also becomes plausible that he might be lying about marriage to her. Once he is caught in a lie, his narrative authenticity is diminished from then on for every story he tells. Eventually Caldigate does admit that he and Euphemia were lovers in Australia. He tells his lawyer, “Having fallen into the common scrape, -- having been pleased by her prettiness and cleverness and women’s ways, -- I did as so many other men have done. . . . All that has to be acknowledged, -- much to my shame. Most of us would have to blush if the worst of our actions were brought out before us in a court of law” (353; ch. 37). Even in the best-case scenario, Caldigate has admittedly engaged in shameful conduct in Australia, has subsequently lied about it, and has foolishly paid a bribe. Regardless of whether Caldigate has actually committed bigamy, a jury could convict him knowing it would not be punishing a completely innocent man.

Although Caldigate seems less credible after lying to Hester’s family about his engagement to Euphemia, the novel also presents the possibility that a personal narrative can be simultaneously true and false and that a small falsehood doesn’t necessarily negate a larger truth. About Caldigate’s version of events, the narrator explains:

He had been foolish, very foolish, as we have seen, on board the Goldfinger, -- and wicked too. There could be no doubt about that. . . . And yet, -- yet there had been

nothing which he had not dared to own to his wife in the secrecy of their mutual confidence, and which, in secret, she had not been able to condone without a moment's hesitation. He had been in love with the woman, -- in love after a fashion. He had promised to marry her. He had done worse than that. And then, when he had found that the passion for gold was strong upon her, he had bought his freedom from her. The story would be very bad as told in Court, and yet he had told it all to his wife! (380; ch. 40).

Caldigate's narrative is a combination of telling all while also holding back details. We learn that Caldigate has been "wicked" without knowing which wicked things he has done. Technically, Caldigate could be honest in claiming he "told it all" to his wife by stating he had "done worse than" promise marriage. But that description covers a wide range of possibilities. What worse thing had he done? The reader might assume the narrator is referring to sex, which Trollope would not have explicitly depicted in his novel. But this passage could also reflect Caldigate's way of honestly lying to his wife. By owning up to wickedness, Caldigate admits to everything and nothing. His confession is so broad that it is practically meaningless. Adding to the ambiguity about Caldigate's honesty is the free indirect style of narration. Although the narrator gives us Caldigate's version of the story here, it is unclear if the words represent Caldigate's account verbatim or the narrator's summary. Thus, the phrase "had done worse" could represent Caldigate's reticence, or it could represent the narrator's prudishness. Jonathan Grossman argues that free indirect discourse allows readers "to imagine a narrator who, rarely rendering explicit judgments, might slide in and out of the characters' consciousness to let the real story piece itself together" (23). Grossman's argument applies to *Caldigate* insofar as the narrator does not render explicit judgment and does not piece the story together for the reader. However, *Caldigate's* "real story" is never fully pieced together, in part because of the narrative style, which muddles the point of view. Although we do know that Caldigate initially lied about his engagement, we cannot be certain how many other secrets the character is holding back or telling his wife and how many the narrator is holding back from us.

In another passage about Caldigate's reticence, he shows Hester the letter from Euphemia, telling her, "I have determined that nothing shall be kept back from you. In all that there may ever be to trouble us the best comfort will be in perfect confidence" (234; ch. 25). However, on the next page, the narrator lets us know that Caldigate does not tell his wife everything: "the promise of marriage, the interference of the Wesleyan minister, the use made of his name, -- of all this he said nothing" (235). Here it may seem that Caldigate is lying: He promises to tell everything, but does not tell everything. Another possibility, however, is that Caldigate believes he is telling everything meaningful. The narrator explains Caldigate's self-justification for holding back the truth about his life in Australia: "He had determined on telling no lie, -- no lie, at any rate, as to present circumstances. That life of his in Australia had been necessarily rough; and though successful, had not been quite as it should have been. As to that, he thought that it ought to be permitted to him to be reticent" (255; ch. 27). The narrator reveals Caldigate's cultural bias here. He believes that his actions in Australia do not count because they took place in Australia. What is a significant event to Euphemia (what she considers a wedding) has no significance to Caldigate (because he does not consider it a wedding). It is possible that he believes he is being honest when he tells his wife he is holding nothing back from her, because he believes the details he holds back constitute a non-event. On the other hand, if he has doubts about what happened in Australia, it is also possible that he expects to be able to use his power as a wealthy Englishman to define his relationship with Euphemia as nothing; he thinks he has the narrative authority to turn something into nothing.

Caldigate is merely guessing about what does or does not constitute marriage in Australia. He tells his brother-in-law Robert Bolton, a lawyer, that the marriage laws in Australia "are the same as ours" (242; ch. 26). But Bolton corrects him: "There at any rate you are wrong.

Their marriage laws are not the same as ours, though how they may differ you and I probably do not accurately know. And they may be altered at any time as they may please” (242). Bolton characterizes Australian marriage law as beyond his and Caldigate’s comprehension: even if they did know what the laws were, which they likely do not, the laws could be changed at any time. Given that even a legal expert considers the state of Australian marriage law unknowable, other characters are willing to give Caldigate credit for making an honest mistake in marrying two women. His lawyer during the bigamy trial whispers to the mayor, “I am inclined to think that there was probably some ceremony [in Australia], and that Caldigate salved his conscience, when he married Bolton’s daughter, by an idea that the ceremony wasn’t valid” (413; ch. 43). Similarly, after the verdict, the judge tells the jury that “he could imagine that the marriage, though legally solemnised, had nevertheless been so deficient in appearances of solemnity as to have imbued the husband with the idea that it had not meant all that a marriage would have meant if celebrated in a church and with more of the outward appurtenances of religion” (417).<sup>21</sup> Because there is cultural ambiguity regarding what counts as a wedding, Caldigate might honestly consider what he did in Australia as nothing while Euphemia considers it something.

However, it is not merely Caldigate’s cultural bias that leads to his dispute with Euphemia. Elsewhere in the novel, it is apparent that John Caldigate and the female characters have different ideas about what constitutes a significant event even in England. After returning to England from Australia, Caldigate has to extricate himself from two other “engagements” besides his relationship with Euphemia. First, he must tell Mrs. Shand that he has no intention of marrying her daughter Maria, who nursed a romantic hope for years after Caldigate kissed her before his voyage to Australia (143; ch. 15). The second entanglement is with his cousin, Julia Babington. Before his trip, Julia and her mother had cornered him in a closet in hopes of getting

him to agree to an engagement. Although Caldigate never explicitly said yes to an engagement, he never said no either, and the women considered the engagement settled. On his return, the narrator says, “Julia did believe that her cousin had been engaged to her, and that she actually had a right to him, now that he had come back, no longer ruined” (148; ch. 16). When Mrs. Shand and aunt Babington learn of Caldigate’s engagement to Hester, both blame him for his conduct toward their daughters. Aunt Babington “boldly declared that the man was engaged to her daughter, and wrote to him more than once declaring that it was so. She wrote, indeed, very often, sometimes abusing him for his perfidy” (185; ch. 20). Meanwhile, Mrs. Shand sent Caldigate a note accusing him of being “fickle” (185). In both of these episodes, Caldigate’s actions meant something different to the women than they did to him. Maria and Mrs. Shand interpreted his behavior as a sign of a serious attachment, while Julia and aunt Babington interpreted his silence in the closet as consent to marriage. For Caldigate, however, both incidents were meaningless flirtations that he never intended to pursue.

The novel avoids establishing with certainty the truth of either Caldigate’s or Euphemia’s accounts by providing two opposing legal judgments on the case. Just as the Yelvertons were first declared married by an Irish jury and then unmarried by the House of Lords, Caldigate is first found guilty of bigamy and then pardoned. The split decision hinges on a disputed letter from Caldigate to Euphemia. Much like the “husbands” of *Cheveley* and *Man and Wife*, Caldigate is initially convicted based on his own handwriting. Caldigate’s accusers produce a letter Caldigate addressed to Euphemia as “Mrs. Caldigate.” Hester’s family accepts Euphemia’s tale of marriage on the basis of the letter, which they consider “damning evidence” (280; ch. 30). Janet C. Myers argues, “Because names in Britain form the basis for the system of primogeniture that maintains firm social demarcations, the name on the envelope threatens the foundations of



the family, and by extension the nation, by questioning the legitimacy of Caldigate's marriage to Hester Bolton, her name, and his son's rightful inheritance" (142). In other words, because Caldigate has himself given his name to Euphemia – whether officially or not – he undermines the validity of his marriage to Hester, which is dependent on there being no uncertainty about who can call herself Mrs. Caldigate. The letter is not the only instance when Caldigate fails to recognize the importance of his name. After paying Euphemia's bribe, Caldigate insists that she sign a receipt and does not object to her signing her name as Caldigate. The narrator tells us, "It would not be fair, he [Caldigate] thought, that he should force her to the use of a name she disowned, and he did not wish to be hindered from what he was doing by her persistency in calling herself by his own name" (378; ch. 39). With both the letter and the receipt, Caldigate hurts his own cause by freely letting Euphemia take his name; he seems not to understand that one of the purposes of the bigamy trial is to determine who should be allowed to use the name Caldigate. Further, the authenticity of Caldigate's letter to Euphemia is not questioned, because "Caldigate's handwriting was peculiar" (280; ch. 30). Combined with the bribe Caldigate paid, the letter convinces the court as well as the general public that Caldigate did marry Euphemia in some form in Australia.

However, following the trial, the evidence of Caldigate's handwriting is countered by evidence of a fraudulent postmark on the envelope. Euphemia had claimed that Caldigate mailed the damning letter from Sydney on May 10, 1873. But the enterprising postal employee Bagwax discovers that the postmark on the envelope is fake. The certainty of Caldigate's handwriting is offset by the details Bagwax discovers with "his official magnifying-glass" and a ruler that measures "to the fiftieth of an inch" (464; ch. 48). Additionally, Bagwax asserts that the stamp on the envelope "had certainly been manufactured and sent out to the colony since that date!"

(498; ch. 52). Bagwax surmises that Euphemia and Crinkett thought Caldigate's letter, written informally, would not constitute as convincing evidence as a letter officially marked by the post office: "So they put their heads together, and said that if the letter could be got to look like a posted letter, -- a letter sent regularly by the post, -- that would be real evidence" (503). Bagwax's fellow postal employee, Curlydown, concurs, "Nothing has ever been considered better evidence than post-marks" (503). Once the evidence of the fraudulent postmark on the letter comes out, it becomes clear that Euphemia and Crinkett have lied in court about the letter. Having lied about that one detail, Euphemia and Crinkett are now suspected of having lied in all of their testimony. Caldigate's bigamy conviction is overturned, and Euphemia is put on trial for perjury.

At her perjury trial, Euphemia denies her guilt and refuses to say more, leaving the resolution of her dispute with Caldigate ambiguous. The narrator observes, "When put into the dock she pleaded not guilty with a voice that was audible only to the jailer standing beside her, and after that did not open her mouth during the trial" (613; ch. 64). Like Hester Dethridge in *Man and Wife*, Euphemia finds that her words can do her no good, so she holds them back. But after she is convicted and sentenced, Euphemia "looked round for Caldigate, to wither him with the last glance of her reproach. But Caldigate, who had not beheld her misery without some pang at his heart, had already left the court" (614). Euphemia's last reproachful look and Caldigate's pang of regret cast doubt on the legal determinations of guilt and innocence. If Euphemia is the guilty one, then what prompts her look of reproach toward Caldigate? If Caldigate is innocent, then why does he feel a pang? The evidence that convicted Euphemia was based on her lying about a postmark; some guesswork was required to interpret her lie about one envelope as a sign of the inauthenticity of her entire story. If Caldigate's account could be true even though he

wrote “Mrs. Caldigate” on a letter, Euphemia’s could be true even though she faked the postmark on the envelope. William J. Overton writes of the novel, “Truth begins to appear relative, dependent on prejudice, until Caldigate’s story is confirmed” (288). Although I agree that truth in the novel appears relative, Caldigate’s story is never confirmed. At the end, the novel suggests that it is not possible to know which account is the truth. Instead, the novel has shown bit by bit how the authenticity of a narrative may be constructed or deconstructed by determinations about the motives of the author or by assessments of “proof” supporting the narrative. At the end of the novel, readers cannot say for certain whether a wedding took place in Australia.

In showing readers the process by which narrative authenticity is constructed (and in fact making readers participants in that process), Trollope’s novel rejects the possibility that any narrative is entirely true or false. As Lawless argues about the personal narratives of shelter residents, “One thing I am *not* particularly interested in is trying to determine whether or not the accounts the women gave to me are ‘accurate’ or ‘truthful’ in some historical or ‘factual’ sense. . . . I believe the narratives reveal a ‘truth’ about how the women view themselves and their world as reflected in these narratives” (6). Similarly, *Caldigate* shows two characters putting forth opposite views of the truth based on their personal experiences. As I discussed above, Trollope’s earlier novel *He Knew He Was Right* shows that two characters with opposite stories about what happened – he wronged me/she wronged me – both reflect some way of constructing truth. In *Caldigate*, the same could be true: Euphemia and John could each believe different truths about what happened in Australia. However, as both are caught in lies, the novel leaves uncertain whether or how much their stories are based on what they consider the truth.

Leaving the facts of the wedding/non-wedding ambiguous, *John Caldigate* turns out to be about the process of constructing narrative authenticity rather than determining historical fact. Readers never learn which account reflects what really happened or whether each storyteller even believes his or her own personal experience narrative. The legal processes that eventually settle the dispute are shown to be as unstable as unofficial methods of deciding what counts as truth. Although John Caldigate is the apparent winner of the he said/she said debate at novel's end, Euphemia's withering glance back undermines the narrative closure. Similarly, *Cheveley* and *Man and Wife* show the open-endedness of assessments of a narrative's authenticity. Rather than leaving disputed events unnarrated as in Trollope's novel, Bulwer Lytton's and Collins's novels indicate which characters' account is false but show how it is constructed as conceivably true in both official and unofficial settings. By demonstrating that an account can be found authentic even if its own author knows it is false, these novels reveal the flexibility of standards of evidence.

In discussing contested marriage narratives in this chapter, I have shown that opponents in each dispute attempt to have their account accepted as authentic in part by convincing their audience of their adversary's blameworthiness and their own blamelessness. This process relies on interested audience members who hear the accounts and form judgments about who is to blame. My next chapter examines more directly the social stakes of blaming through the folk custom of charivari, in which blame is directed by a group rather than an individual.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am referring to Theresa as Longworth/Yelverton in this chapter, because to call her by either surname alone would be to implicitly verify one side in the dispute over their relationship. Although the House of Lords settled the dispute in Yelverton's favor for legal and financial purposes, that decision is no more reflective of the "truth" than the Irish jury's earlier, opposite decision.

<sup>2</sup> The brief summary of the Yelverton case I have provided here does not give the couple's complete history or details of all of the legal proceedings involved. For additional information, see Arvel B. Erickson and Fr. John R. McCarthy, Jeanne Fahnestock, and Rebecca Gill.

<sup>3</sup> Folklorist Richard Dorson coined the term "fakelore" in a 1950 article. See also Dorson's *Folklore and Fakelore: Essays toward a Discipline of Folklore* and Alan Dundes ("Nationalistic Inferiority Complexes").

<sup>4</sup> On the shifting conception of authenticity in folklore studies, see especially Regina Bendix's 1997 *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies*. See also Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin and Debora Kodish.

<sup>5</sup> Although this chapter draws primarily from folklore theories of authenticity, I am also indebted to works on authenticity in literary studies by Jeff Karem, Nathaniel Lewis, and Lionel Trilling, as well as Judith R. Walkowitz's consideration of authenticity and narrative credibility in *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*.

<sup>6</sup> I will refer to Rosina Bulwer Lytton and Edward Bulwer-Lytton (he hyphenated his name, she did not) as Rosina and Edward to avoid confusion.

<sup>7</sup> On the author's marriage, see especially Virginia Blain, Louisa Devey's biography of Rosina and a collection of letters from Edward to Rosina edited by Devey, a collection of letters from Rosina to A.E. Chalon edited by S.M. Ellis, Rosina's memoir *A Blighted Life*, Edward Robert Bulwer Lytton's biography of his father, and Michael Sadleir's biography of the couple. See also Christine L. Krueger (143-152).

<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Caroline Norton took to writing fiction as a means of self-support following the bitter separation from her husband, a case with many parallels to Bulwer Lytton's. On similarities between Bulwer Lytton and Norton, see especially Blain (219-21).

<sup>9</sup> The complete letter is available on *The Carlyle Letters Online*.

<sup>10</sup> Bulwer Lytton might not have appreciated the comparison of her novel to *Jane Eyre*, however. She referred to *Jane Eyre* as "disgustingly coarse" (qtd in Ellis 83). Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* supplies comparison to her incarceration in the asylum, one the author recognized herself. She wrote to a friend, "Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco are very pretty rascals as far as they go, but mere sucking doves compared to the fiends I have to deal with" (qtd in Devey *Life*, 364).

<sup>11</sup> The 1854 Common Law Procedure Act stated, "comparison of disputed handwriting with any other writing proved to the satisfaction of the judge to be genuine shall be permitted to be made by witnesses; and such writings and evidence of witnesses respecting the same may be submitted as evidence of the genuineness, or otherwise, of the writing in dispute" (Harris 282). See also Jennifer L. Mnookin and John D. Lawson.

<sup>12</sup> See especially Richard Beamish, Mildred Boynton, J. Crépieux-Jamin, and Henry Frith.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Rev. of *Handwriting and Expression* (129) and Rev. of *How to Read Character in Handwriting* (511).

<sup>14</sup> On these rules and the discrepancies in English, Irish, and Scottish marriage laws, see especially Fahnestock (58-60) and Gill (61-64, 68-74).

<sup>15</sup> As with Thackeray's novels, Collins's social commentary in *Man and Wife* is theatrical, as he originally conceived of this novel as a play. See Page (xxi-xxii).

<sup>16</sup> On the importance of this letter, see also Tamara S. Wagner (37-43).

<sup>17</sup> Of course, like the female characters, Geoffrey himself fails to realize the import of calling himself Anne's husband in writing. However, he later shows awareness of the consequences of precise wording. When he contemplates sending a letter to Anne telling her that she inadvertently married Arnold (a letter he never actually pens), he struggles with the question of what name to put on the outside of the letter. The narrator comments: "He attached an absurd importance to preserving absolute consistency in his letter, outside and in. If he declared her to be Arnold Brinkworth's wife, he must direct to her as Arnold Brinkworth's wife – or who could tell what the law might say, or what scrape he might not get himself into by a mere scratch of the pen!" (238). Geoffrey worries that if he addresses a letter to Mrs. Silvester, it will prove that he does not consider her married to Arnold, but if he addresses the letter to Mrs. Brinkworth, it may not be delivered to Anne (or she may refuse to accept it).

<sup>18</sup> This Scottish rule factored into the Yelverton case as well. Although the meaning and import of Geoffrey's letter are unquestioned by the characters in Collins's novel, Yelverton's own handwriting was a much more ambiguous piece of evidence in his trial. Yelverton wrote a letter to Longworth/Yelverton that she claimed included the phrase "sposa bella mia," which under Scottish law would serve as proof of marriage. However, Yelverton claimed that he had actually written "possibilemente" (Fahnestock 64n30).

<sup>19</sup> Trollope's Bluebeard-like Trevelyan could be a nod to *Cheveley*, in which the minor character Trevyllian, who is rumored to have murdered several wives, carries a dagger with "a most Blue-Beardish appearance" (199; vol. 1). Trollope's mother, the novelist Frances Trollope, was a friend of Rosina Bulwer Lytton.

<sup>20</sup> On the institutional discourses of insanity in the novel, see especially David D. Oberhelman.

<sup>21</sup> On the characters' perception of different standards for marriage in England and Australia, see Jill Felicity Durey (172).

#### Chapter 4: Shame, Charivari, and *David Copperfield*

Reports of one Victorian “rough music” performance include the following chant, recited to scold a wife-beater:

There is a man in this place  
Has beat his wife!! (*forte*. A pause)  
Has beat his wife!! (*fortissimo*)  
It is a very great shame and disgrace  
To all who live in this place,  
It is indeed upon my life!! (“Wife-Beaters” 477)<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this folk performance, a type of charivari, is to draw attention to the husband’s wrong-doing in a communal finger-pointing. The transgression is indicated in lines two and three of the chant: “Has beat his wife!!” However, the husband’s crime extends beyond harm to his wife; as lines four and five of the chant show, he has also brought “great shame and disgrace” to his community. The rough music aims, then, not merely to defend the battered wife, but also to alleviate the shame community members feel from having a wife-beater in their midst. In this chapter, I discuss shame and its relationship to blaming. I argue that blame is both a cause and effect of shame: Blame generates shame through the public exposure of perceived culprits at the same time that it is motivated by the shame of the finger-pointers. The culprit’s transgressions, as in the case of the wife-beater serenaded by rough music, extend the taint of culpability to the community in which he or she lives. Through the spectacle of public shaming, the finger-pointers broadcast not only the culprit’s blameworthiness but their community’s as well.

This chapter begins with nonfictional accounts of Victorian charivaris, which deploy folk authority through public shaming. By making a spectacle of the culprit, who is also the intended audience of the folk performance, the charivariers leave the culprit in a state of being both part and not-part of the performing group, an ambiguous, shame-inducing position.<sup>2</sup> I then consider two works of fiction with charivari scenes: H.D. Lowry’s 1895 short story “The Good-for-

Naught” and Thomas Hardy’s 1886 novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. In both of these works, the community’s outrage over the misbehavior of the charivari targets is not merely for marital transgressions, as in the wife-beating example above, but also because the culprits have represented themselves as something they are not. In other words, they are shams. Through the discovery that the culprits are shams, the community finds that it, too, is a sham. Although the origin of the word sham is uncertain, the Oxford English Dictionary notes that the word is “[c]ommonly explained as in some way connected with *sham*, northern dialect form of shame” (“sham”). The OED provides a quotation from 1740 as possible evidence of a “genuine tradition” of associating “shame” and “sham,” although noting that some earlier uses of the word sham cannot be accounted for by such an etymology: “The word *Sham* is true Cant of the Newmarket Breed. It is contracted of *ashamed*. The native Signification is a Town Lady of Diversion, in Country Maid’s Cloaths, who to make good her Disguise, pretends to be so *sham’d!* Thence it became proverbial, when a maimed Lover was laid up, or looked meager, to say he had met with a *Sham*” (qtd in “sham”). While the OED’s evidence does not provide a definitive connection between “sham” and “shame” from an etymological standpoint, what it does show is that as early as 1740, the words were connected in actual usage in cases of a disparity between outward appearance and actual station.

The shame of being revealed as a sham is bound up in moments of blaming in Charles Dickens’s 1850 novel *David Copperfield*. The last section of this chapter discusses *Copperfield* and the function of blaming in exposing shammed class status. In my discussion of *Copperfield*, I use charivari as a model to read moments of smaller scale character-to-character finger-pointings and self-blame. The affect of shame creates a visual display even in these interpersonal instances of blaming, because shame reveals itself through physical signs: downcast eyes,



hunched shoulders, red cheeks. Through these visual markers, *Copperfield* suggests that, even in private spaces, acts of finger-pointing are public spectacles.

### **“This Is Our Law”**

English versions of charivari are known variously as “rough music,” “riding the stang,” or “skimmington,” among other terms. The French term charivari itself would not typically have been used by Victorians performing or witnessing the practice, but I use it, following folklore scholarship on this topic, as a generic term for a range of customs sharing some common features, frequently including: a cacophony produced by a group wielding bells, pans, or other domestic instruments; the shouting of insults or chants identifying the culprit and the reason for the charivari; and some form of visual exposure of the culprit, such as displaying an effigy.<sup>3</sup> The custom typically has been used to enforce community standards for appropriate marital and sexual relationships. Prior to the nineteenth century, charivaris frequently targeted shrewish wives or cuckolded husbands; by the Victorian era they were often directed toward violent husbands. A writer for *Saturday Magazine* in 1833 observes, “‘rough music’ is performed in many parts of England at the present day, when the village urchins discover that a husband has forgotten his vow of cherishing his wife, and has adopted the more ungallant habit of chastising her” (“Ancient Marriage Customs” 142). Other reasons for charivaris include infidelity or bigamy.<sup>4</sup>

Charivaris are a form of folk justice, implemented in scenarios not policed – or thought to be inadequately policed – by institutional forms of justice. An 1887 writer explains:

When a person has insulted the parish by, say, beating his wife, or has committed some crime for which the law cannot punish him, the commoners and others collect old cans and pails, and anything else which will make a hideous row, and visit the offender some evening unexpectedly. . . . The origin of the custom would seem to be that on the wild heaths, of which the district has always been principally composed, ordinary legal processes were, until recently, virtually in abeyance, as their execution called for a larger

force and greater expense than could be afforded, except in cases of extraordinary crime, and the inhabitants were therefore forced to become to some extent a 'law unto themselves.' Be this as it may, 'rough music' has a salutary effect in restraining crime, and is valuable as showing the state of public feeling thereupon. ("Antiquary's Note-Book" 74)<sup>5</sup>

Rough music provides a means for community members to assert their sense of right and wrong activities in the absence of legal intervention. In cases in which folk conceptions of justice evolve faster than the law, charivaris may indicate behaviors that are gradually becoming less tolerated. Wife beating is one example. Martin J. Wiener shows that although domestic violence was increasingly subjected to legal punishment during the nineteenth century, there were varying levels of leniency associated with supposed provocations to wife beating (170-239).<sup>6</sup> In this case, increasing legal intervention in cases of domestic abuse comes on the heels of a shift in folk attitudes toward wife beating, evidenced in the transformation of rough music from a custom primarily targeting homes with domineering wives to one primarily targeting abusive husbands.

By pointing out that charivari administers folk law when there is a perceived lack of official policing, I do not mean to suggest a strictly oppositional relationship between folk and institutional forms of justice. In actual practice, the relationship between the two is complex. Discussing sixteenth- and seventeenth-century charivaris, Bruce Thomas Boehrer sees the folk practice as both drawing from and challenging institutional authority: "to the extent that the popular justice of the charivari casts itself as precisely that – as justice – it competes with and absorbs the qualities of the high institutions that are supposedly its great originals" (26).<sup>7</sup> During the nineteenth century, some accounts indicate institutional punishment for charivariers – such as fines for any damages caused during the revel<sup>8</sup> – while other accounts indicate an implicit acceptance of the folk custom. One report describes a charivari directed against an adulterous vicar for three nights in a row, all the while observed by "an amused police-force" (qtd. in Cawte

401). In another instance, Robert Barnes brought a case to the County Petty Sessions at Newport accusing six men of damaging his property during what they intended to be a friendly performance of rough music to celebrate his new marriage. Barnes anticipated the night visit by rigging a bucket of dirty water to fall on anyone who pushed open his gate. This trick so enraged the charivariers that they trampled Barnes's shrubs and threw rocks at his windows. However, Barnes's hope that the charivariers would be punished through the court was unrealized: "The Bench thought the injury to property had been done after the men had been subjected to great provocation, and the case would be dismissed" ("Betrothal and Bridal Customs" 590).

Even in some extreme cases, courts condoned charivariers' activities by letting their damage go unpunished. In a case tried at the Old Bailey in 1866, two defendants were found not guilty of attempted arson after they were accused of putting a burning sack of shavings near the door of Henry Hunt's house. Hunt's daughter, Martha, had previously accused a man of rape, and the man was convicted, which made the Hunts unpopular with their neighbors. It was supposed that the burning sack was a form of retaliation. One key point in the arson trial was whether the defendants were participating in a charivari. In her testimony, Martha Hunt insisted that the burning sack was not an effigy: "this is the sack; it is not an effigy – these arms were not attached to it." However, she did acknowledge that there was an effigy of her "in a blue bonnet in a chair, which was carried about all day, and they said that that was how I was served on the trial – I believe they burnt that at a post in the street." Another witness claimed, contradictorily, "there was no rough music or tin kettles, or frying pans that I saw -- . . . there was shouting, and hooting, and rough music, so that I could not distinguish any sounds in particular." The account of this case gives no explanation for the arson acquittal other than lack of "evidence of intent to burn the house" (*Old Bailey Proceedings Online*). It seems likely that the court surmised that the

burning sack had been a part of a charivari performance rather than an attempt to burn the house. Here, as in the case of the damage to Barnes's house, the court implicitly condoned the charivariers' activities by not issuing punishment. The Hunt case shows how charivari can work both with and in opposition to institutional justice: The charivariers oppose the institutional punishment of Martha Hunt's rapist but are endorsed by the court that chooses not to punish their arson.<sup>9</sup>

One way charivari establishes folk authority is by demarcating a geographic and relational network in which the charivariers hold power. This network is at once ambiguous and specific. As charivariers parade through the streets, they map out the space in which they have the power to enforce communally accepted standards of behavior. The movement of the processional shows specific public spaces in which the charivariers claim authority. However, the noise of the performance extends beyond the streets where the revelers process, because the sound draws together a larger spatial area than that physically touched by the processional.<sup>10</sup> One account of a charivari, for instance, reports, "The noise was heard as far as two miles away" (Palmer 12). The rough music thus makes ambiguous the actual geographic boundary covered by the network of folk justice. How far away is the din heard? During the performance itself, participants and auditors may not have a specific sense of how many people are taking it in.

Additionally, the space of charivari extends, at least symbolically, into the private realm. As Rolande Bonnain-Moerdyk and Donald Moerdyk observe, by parading in front of the offender's home, charivariers link the domestic sphere of the transgressions to the public space of the community (385). Further, the public spectacle of charivari is produced using domestic tools: frying pans, ladles, and the like (386). The location and the instruments of charivari signify that domestic offenses have public consequences. Spousal abuse, for instance, will not remain

behind the closed door of the home but instead will be publicly announced in the street. As Martin Ingram asserts, charivaris are “destroyers of privacy” (99).<sup>11</sup> The performance signals that the folk justice administered by the charivariers can extend to actions supposedly enclosed in the domestic sphere. Indeed, sometimes the charivari literally crosses into the domestic space, in the form of rocks thrown through windows, fires set to homes, or demands for refreshment provided from the cupboards of the charivari target.

The form of charivari is also somewhat ambiguous in designating the limits of the group’s social network. The charivariers are specific in identifying a particular culprit targeted by their performance. The processional typically ends in front of the home of the culprit and often includes a verse or effigy identifying the culprit. However, the nighttime processional is ambiguous in that it may be unclear how many community members participate in the performance. Because the performance often takes place in at least partial darkness and because the geographic boundaries of the performance space are not always clear, charivari creates the impression that any member of the community could be a participant in or an auditor of the revel. As Bonnain-Moerdyk and Moerdyk note, any member of the community could choose to grab a frying pan and join in the performance, a possibility which gives the performance its impact as a show of unity, either real or imagined (385).

This appearance of communal solidarity adds to the sense that charivari absorbs entire neighborhoods into its network of folk justice. In cases where it was uncertain whether a culprit could be reformed through charivari, it was thought that the custom still had value as a lesson for others who might be tempted to transgress community standards. An 1864 article notes, “This system of rough legislation, . . . if not always successful in curing offenders, no doubt was occasionally useful, in deterring others from breaking their contracts, by reminding them of the

penalty which might follow any gross violation of the solemn undertaking made by them when they were united in the bonds of wedlock” (Brushfield 14). A verse recorded from an 1830s stang riding alludes to the possibility that the performance will discipline others beyond the specific target, concluding: “So all you good people that lives in this raw, / I’d have you take warning for this is our law; / And if any of you husbands your wives do bang, / Come to me and my congregation, and we’ll *Ride the Stang!*” (Brockie 123 and Longstaffe 337; emphasis in originals). Thus, although each performance of charivari has a specific target, the performers and observers are aware that any member of the community could be a charivari target, just as any neighbor could be performing in or watching the charivari.

The shame-inducing spectator/spectacle dynamic of charivari is an important part of the way the folk performance sets and enforces community standards. Discussing the role of spectatorship in distinguishing accepted versus transgressive behaviors, Tracy C. Davis contrasts a sympathetic, absorbed audience member with one who withholds sympathy. She argues, “it is the act of withholding sympathy that makes us become spectators to ourselves and others. Is this not how new law is conceived: not by cathecting with victims but by enabling the seeing of acts (sexual harassment, stalking, driving under the influence) where before there was either ‘nothing’ or sympathetic social sanction” (154). Once wife beating, bigamy, or adultery become the subject of charivari performances, they lose the status of being “nothing,” in the sense of nothing worth noticing or nothing worth acting on. By recreating the transgression in the form of paraded effigies or in the words of a rough music chant, the charivariers force their target to see his or her act as a spectacle, as a behavior that the community notices and abhors.

When Davis writes of a spectator who withholds sympathy, she implies a choice on the part of the spectator. But whether a sympathetic connection will occur also involves a choice on

the part of the performer. The form of charivari works to prevent the audience member's sympathetic absorption in the performance by engaging the culprit while also holding him or her apart from the group. The intended audience of charivari is an involuntary spectator. Rather than spectators seeking out the performance, as audience members do when attending the theater, for example, in charivari the performers seek out the audience, bringing the performance to his or her doorstep. The spectator is held hostage by the performance, just as, for Emmanuel Levinas, the "I" is held hostage by the call of the Other, a call that obligates my responsibility for the Other "against my will, that is, by substituting me for the other as a hostage" (*Otherwise than Being* 10). When the Other calls the "I," the "I" must respond; even the choice not to respond is a response. Similarly, in charivari, the spectator cannot choose other than to respond to the performance. Once he or she hears the rough music approaching his house, the target is called to respond. The response may take the form of closing the shutters, blushing in shame, or yelling back at the performers, but there is no way to avoid responding in some form. This does not mean, however, that the spectator is entirely without agency. Although the spectator must respond, the mode of response is chosen. As I noted in Chapter 2, Levinas indicates the impossibility of predicting response even in cases of murder, in which the killer is opposed by "the very *unforeseeableness* of [the victim's] reaction" (*Totality and Infinity* 199, original emphasis). In charivari, the target of the performance cannot help but respond, but the charivariers cannot control the form of the response.

Further, the categories of performer and spectator in charivari are not mutually exclusive. Through the use of effigies, the charivariers make their reluctant spectator part of the performance. The spectator watches his or her own image made ridiculous (and often burned) in the effigy paraded in the street, and the spectator also is subjected to the gaze of performers who

stare back and shout insults at their target. The performers are thus also spectators, observing the effects of their performance on the culprit, while the spectator becomes the spectacle. I argue that this blurring of roles between performer and spectator contributes to the shaming of the target. Silvan Tomkins explains that shame is activated by “the incomplete reduction of interest or joy” (134). In other words, one is shamed if one remains interested at the same time the source of one’s interest is partially blocked. This happens in charivari when the culprit retains an interest in belonging in the community, but that interest is only partially satisfied. The community holds the culprit at arm’s length, including the offender within the performance while also isolating him or her as a spectacle for the other performers. By making the spectator part of the spectacle, charivari creates a liminal state in which the culprit is neither fully incorporated into the group of performers nor able to fully separate from the performance. This ambiguous state “betwixt and between” the roles of spectator and performer generates shame by keeping attention on the offender without offering acceptance (Turner 95). Like the fieldworker posed between two cultures described by Richard Schechner, the charivari target “is not a performer and not not a performer, not a spectator and not not a spectator. He is in between two roles . . .” (108). This state is eventually resolved either through the reincorporation of the culprit into the community, sometimes accomplished when the culprit appeases the charivariers by paying a fine or providing a feast, or through the culprit’s expulsion from the community. In cases in which the culprit does not flee the community or satisfactorily make amends with the charivariers, the performance would be repeated until the culprit relents to the group’s demands.

Besides the liminal position of the charivari target, the performance activates shame through its broadcasting of what the culprit may have thought were private actions. Tobin Siebers argues, “Shame is terrifying because it relies on public exposure” (205). Siebers notes



that the word “shame” is thought to have its roots in a pre-Germanic word meaning “to cover,” because, according to the OED, “covering oneself” is “the natural expression of shame” (Siebers 205 and “shame”). One is shamed either in the moment of exposure or in the anticipation of some future exposure. Charivaris intensify this exposure by putting their targets in the position of both watching themselves in effigy and watching the performers watch them. Typically, one reacts to shame by avoiding the gaze of others, as Tomkins describes: “By dropping his eyes, his eyelids, his head, and sometimes the whole upper part of his body, the individual calls a halt to looking at another person, particularly the other person’s face, and to the other person’s looking at him, particularly at his face” (134). However, the use of effigies diminishes whatever relief culprits might feel by looking away because of the culprits’ awareness that their exposure continues in the paraded likeness.

The culprit is not the only shamed participant of the charivari, however. As I noted above, the event itself is motivated in part by the shame community members feel as a result of the transgressive behavior occurring in their midst and their desire to channel that shame onto the culprit. Robert Chambers’s 1864 *Book of Days: A Miscellany of Popular Antiquities* describes a charivari during which revelers taunted an abusive husband, crying, “Shame! Shame! Who beat his wife? I say, Tom Brown, come out and shew yourself!” (510). This taunt leaves ambiguous to whom the shame belongs: Is it Tom Brown’s shame or that of the group? Indeed, the shame may well be both. The performers shame the perceived culprit in order to dispel the shame he or she has brought to the community. They do so, as the command “shew yourself” indicates, by making a Tom Brown a spectacle. The command underscores the blurred roles of performer and spectator. The charivariers “shew” the culprit by bringing their performance to his doorstep,

forcing him onto display. But they also want the culprit to participate in his shaming as a performer as well, and thus they exhort him to “shew” himself.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Shame of the Sham**

Two Victorian fictional accounts of charivari foreground the role of the community’s shame in motivating the folk performance. In Lowry’s short story “The Good-for-Naught,” Harry Bosanko returns home after spending 10 years in Spain and marries Anna Tregea. Soon after, a Spanish woman finds him, claiming to be his wife. Outraged at the “great shame” Harry has brought to the community and to Anna by marrying bigamously, the townspeople put on a charivari in front of his house, burning effigies of Harry and his Spanish wife (146). The story presents the shaming of the husband as necessary to remove the taint of his scandal from the community. When the town learns of the bigamy, the narrator asserts, “the credit of the town must suffer damage if there was not a prompt demonstration of indignation” (147). The townspeople hope to generate shame in Harry to protect the community’s reputation.

The damage to the town’s reputation stems in part from its acceptance of Harry before his bigamy was revealed. Harry took over his father-in-law’s business running an inn, a place where members of the town frequently gathered for food and drinks. So industrious and well-liked is Harry that the inn soon has more business than ever. However, all the time that Harry has projected the appearance of middle-class felicity and prosperity, he has kept the secret of his first marriage. When the truth comes out, his neighbors realize that Harry is not the man they thought he was; he is a sham. But in discovering Harry Bosanko is a sham, the community discovers it is a sham as well, insofar as it thought it was a community of upstanding, moral citizens (in the way that the community defines morality), and suddenly discovers the imperfection in its midst. The townspeople realize: Our town is not what we thought it was. This man, this upstanding

citizen, who we have held up as a model, shows that we have erred. He pulled the wool over our eyes and made fools of us. Thus, the community is shamed when it learns of Bosanko's shameful behavior, particularly because as a prominent citizen, he could be said to represent the community itself.

In this case, however, the charivari is not successful in transferring shame from the community to Harry, because Harry has already fled. As the effigies burn, Anna steps out onto the porch, and the revelers recognize that she is the wrong spectator for their performance, shouting to her, "We are n't come out against you" (149). Indeed, Anna makes clear that she will not accept their shame herself, telling them: "I care nothing for the scorn of them that think me shamed" (151). With Anna there is no question of the incomplete interest that Silvan Tomkins ascribes to shame, as she has no interest at all in the crowd's opinion of her. The crowd is left with no target for its shame. Instead of making a spectacle of Harry, the revelers find that they have only made a spectacle of themselves, with Anna "surveying them scornfully" (151). Not only do they fail to redirect the initial shame caused by Harry's bigamy, they now are exposed to even more shame on the receiving end of Anna's scornful gaze. Lowry's story underscores the importance of the spectatorship of charivari in alleviating community shame. For shame to be directed from performers to audience, the spectator must be someone who can be made part of the spectacle. Otherwise, the performers remain the spectacle, with no target for their shame. Although Harry's departure from the community reflects one of the common results of charivari – the expulsion of the culprit – he has left too soon for the crowd's goal of sending its shame away with him. Because Harry left before the community expressed its outrage, it is apparent that shame remains in the town even after his departure. The final sentence of the story indicates that shame lingers on for years, as the bigamy "seemed – but never was – forgotten" (151).

I have argued that the blurring of spectator and performer roles in charivari produces shame in the culprit because his or her interest in belonging is only partially satisfied: the culprit is exposed to the revelers' attention without being fully accepted into the community of performers. Lowry's short story shows that the reverse may also be true, that the performers may be the ones whose interest is blocked. Like the intended audience of charivari, the revelers are both performers and spectators: They perform the "rough music" of charivari while also observing the effects of their display on the audience. The crowd's interest is in performing for an interested audience, a spectator who cares about the crowd's opinion and is therefore vulnerable to shame. If the only witness is someone who has no interest in the display, then the performers are left with an unshamable spectator, as well as the shame of knowing their performance did not hold the audience's interest.

Like Harry Bosanko, Lucetta Farfrae and Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* are revealed as shams and targeted by a charivari. Among Victorian novelists, Hardy is one of the most well-known for incorporating regional folk customs into his fiction. Other critics have suggested that one function of references to folk customs in literature is to enhance the realism of a narrative, by providing "local color" or accurate depictions of a particular region (De Caro and Jordan 16).<sup>13</sup> Ruth A. Firor, for instance, describes the skimmington scene in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*: "The naturalness with which the skimmity is planned, the neatness with which it is carried out, the grotesquerie of the spectacle – all mark it as a page from life" (241; ch. 34). Hardy's skimmington is realistic in that it replicates many of the features of the street performances, using sound, movement, and display to make apparent the network of communal justice at work in the novel. However, the skimmity ride also destabilizes the sense of realism in the novel by emphasizing the constructed nature of Hardy's

characters. The sham status of the effigies reflects the discovery that Henchard and Lucetta are themselves shams. The skimmington scene itself focuses less on the “local color” – the details of the performance – than on the Lucetta’s identification with her effigy and fatal reaction to her exposure.

Both Lucetta and Henchard represent themselves as respectable members of the middle class, despite the past transgressions of Henchard’s sale of his wife, Susan, and of Henchard and Lucetta’s intimacy, which in the serial version of the novel extends to a bigamous marriage. The folk of Mixen Lane decide to ride skimmington after learning that Lucetta and Henchard were lovers. They are motivated largely by the prospect of knocking Lucetta down from the high social status she has achieved as Mayor Farfrae’s wife, as Henchard has already fallen in social and economic status by the time of the charivari. The skimmington “represents the leveling of Lucetta to Mixen Lane” (Gatrell, “*The Mayor of Casterbridge*” 59).<sup>14</sup> The resentful Joshua Jopp, who unsuccessfully appealed to Lucetta for help getting a job, says, “I’d like to shame her [...] the proud piece of silk and wax-work!” (255; ch. 36). Here Jopp indicates Lucetta’s sham status by likening her to a patched together piece of silk and wax, akin to the effigies of Madame Tussaud’s museum. Similarly, Nance Mockridge derides Lucetta as a piece of waxy ornamentation: “I do like to see the trimming pulled off such Christmas candles. I am quite unequal to the part of villain myself, or I’d gie all my small silver to see that lady topped” (264; ch. 37). Like Jopp, Mockridge wants to shame Lucetta for taking on the sham accoutrements of a higher socio-economic status.

One way Lucetta tries to make herself into a new person is by changing her name. Lucette Le Sueur from Jersey passes as Lucetta Templeton from Bath. She explains to Henchard that the new name is “a means of escape from mine, and its wrongs” (146; ch. 22). Ruth Marie

Faurot argues that Lucetta's original surname, meaning "sweat," "suggests the curse of working by the 'sweat of thy face' imposed on humanity by the Fall" (83). Le Sueur thus serves as an indicator that Lucetta has been made to sweat by falling into a scandalous relationship with Henchard. Similarly, David Musselwhite points out that Le Sueur is "homophonic with 'sewer,'" a symbol of the lower-status life Lucetta wishes to leave behind when she changes her name (65). Further, Musselwhite notes that Lucetta's original surname connects her to Barbree Sweatley of Hardy's poem "The Fire at Tranter Sweatley's," who also becomes the target of a skimmington ride (86).<sup>15</sup> Both characters' names include a physical reaction to the shame induced by charivari.

Besides changing her name, Lucetta endeavors to keep her past residence in Jersey, where she first met Henchard, a secret, avoiding speaking any French lest it give away her Jersey roots. Moreover, Lucetta indicates that she can make herself into a particular type of person simply by changing her clothing. Deciding between two sets of dresses, bonnets, parasols, and gloves, she tells Elizabeth-Jane, "'You are that person' (pointing to one of the arrangements), 'or you are *that* totally different person' (pointing to the other) 'for the whole of the coming spring: and one of the two, you don't know which, may turn out to be very objectionable'" (165-66; ch. 24).<sup>16</sup> But all of Lucetta's efforts to remake herself give the townspeople the impression that she is "fraudulent and dishonest" (Paterson 169). One villager explains that a skimmity-ride is called for "when a man's wife is – well, a bad bargain in any way" (257; ch. 36). Farfrae thought he was marrying one woman: Miss Templeton from Bath, with her own fortune and respectable manners. Instead, the townspeople think, he got "a bad bargain" when the discrepancy between Lucetta's appearance and her scandalous past becomes known.

Similarly, Henchard had tried and failed to keep his own scandalous past hidden. Henchard's shameful secret is the sale of his wife and all that such an action implies: not only his failure as a husband and father, but the economic failure that led him to consider selling his wife and child in the first place. When Susan finds him after the death of her second "husband," Henchard, then mayor and a successful businessman, hatches a plan to appear to court and marry Susan for the first time, without telling anyone about their previous marriage. He explains to Susan, "This would leave my shady, headstrong, disgraceful life as a young man absolutely unopened; the secret would be yours and mine only" (73; ch. 11). Having attained a position of political and economic power in the community, Henchard does not want to have his respectable reputation destroyed.

Despite Susan's acquiescence in keeping Henchard's wife-sale secret, her reappearance in his life underscores the contrast between his middle-age, middle-class success and his earlier failures. The townspeople remark that she seems an odd choice of wife for a man as successful as Henchard. One comments, "daze me if ever I see a man wait so long before to take so little!" (81; ch. 13). Speculating about the worthiness of his choice of bride leads to talk of Henchard's lower-class origins. Nance Mockridge states, "'tis said 'a was a poor parish 'prentice – I wouldn't say it for all the world – but 'a was a poor parish 'prentice, that began life wi' no more belonging to 'en than a carrion crow" (82). Another refers to Susan as "a mere skellinton," a fitting label, as Susan is the figurative skeleton in Henchard's closet, providing the basis of Mockridge's comparison of Henchard to Bluebeard: "There's a bluebeardy look about 'en; and 'twill out in time" (82-83).<sup>17</sup> Like the well-known fairy-tale character, Henchard has a secret he is determined to keep hidden. Fear of revealing his lower-class origins prompts Henchard to repeatedly blame Elizabeth-Jane for what he sees as uncouth mannerisms. He chastises her for

her “use of dialect words,” asking her, “are you only fit to carry wash to a pig-trough, that ye use such words as those?” (127; ch. 20). Upon seeing Elizabeth-Jane’s “bold” handwriting, Henchard “reddened in angry shame for her,” because “he believed that bristling characters were as innate and inseparable a part of refined womanhood as sex itself” (127-28). And, finally, Henchard scolds her for waiting on Mockridge, who works in his yards, prompting Mockridge to reveal that Elizabeth-Jane had worked in a public house when she first arrived in Casterbridge. This news convinces Henchard that Elizabeth-Jane has done “scathing damage to his local repute and position” (131). Together, Susan and Elizabeth-Jane threaten to reveal the sham of Henchard’s respectable middle-class identity. Susan does not look the part of mayor’s wife, while Elizabeth-Jane doesn’t possess the refinement of a middle-class daughter.

When the secret of Henchard’s wife sale does come out, even Lucetta, his counterpart in hidden pasts, rejects him. She tells him, “it would have been letting myself down to take your name after such a scandal” (209; ch. 29). Lucetta is unwilling to attach herself to Henchard’s shame now that she herself has attained the appearance of respectability. The novel underscores Lucetta’s temporary social supremacy over Henchard during the town’s official welcome of a “Royal visitor” (262; ch. 37). This official spectacle is a “triumphant time” for Lucetta, as she is able to show off her fine clothes and her status as one of the town’s social and economic elite (263). As the mayor’s wife, she is allowed to shake hands with royalty, a privilege denied to most of the townspeople, including Henchard. At this royal welcome, when Lucetta is feeling most satisfied with her respectability, the group of charivariers solidifies its plan to cut her back down. As Jopp explains, “As a wind-up to the Royal visit the hit will be all the more pat by reason of their great elevation to-day” (265). The public shaming of Lucetta in the charivari is in part a reaction to the shaming of lower-class townspeople during the royal visit.



Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the reluctant participant-spectatorship of charivari. The intended spectators cannot help but observe the spectacle in some form, nor can they prevent themselves from participating in the spectacle through a substitute or effigy. Hardy's novel gives us a case of a charivari target who does not wish to be entirely separated from the crowd's gaze. According to Silvan Tompkins, "In shame I wish to continue to look and to be looked at, but I also do not wish to do so" (137). Unlike Anna Tregea of "The Good-for-Naught," who claims not to care what her neighbors think of her, Lucetta desperately wants the approval and admiration of her community. That is what makes her so vulnerable to the shaming of the skimmington ride. She wants to be seen, as she was at the royal visit, in her fine clothes and with her successful husband. However, the skimmington turns this desire to be seen against Lucetta, as she is seen and mocked rather than seen and admired.

Further, during the skimmington, Lucetta feels her exposure before she is even visually exposed to the crowd. The experience of observing a charivari goes beyond what one sees. As the charivari approaches, Lucetta hears "a hubbub in the distance" (274; ch. 39). She then overhears neighboring maids shouting to each other from open windows about the display, with one describing two effigies riding skimmington: "Two images on a donkey, back to back, their elbows tied to one another's. She's facing the head, and he's facing the tail" (274). Even before seeing the display, Lucetta can imagine its appearance based on what she knows of skimmington rides. As a folk custom, the skimmington ride is not a unique spectacle but one that has already been conducted many times in other contexts. Part of its power to shame comes from the custom's accrued history. As the target of the skimmington ride, Lucetta joins the ranks of others so mocked by their neighbors. And from the brief description she overhears from the maids, Lucetta knows that the two images on the donkey must represent herself and Henchard.

Elizabeth-Jane tries to protect Lucetta from the shame of the spectacle by closing the shutters, but Lucetta objects, declaring, “I will see it!” (275). Lucetta moves to the balcony to witness the spectacle, positioning herself not only where she can see, but also where she can be seen. Her eyes, focused “straight upon the spectacle of the uncanny revel,” reflect back the gaze directed at her (275).<sup>18</sup> It may seem odd that Lucetta exposes herself to the crowd by stepping onto the balcony; indeed, the narrator describes her as “wild” and as talking “recklessly” (275). If she had only let Elizabeth-Jane close the shutters, couldn’t she have avoided the shameful spectatorship that led to her collapse? But, I argue, Lucetta’s actions seem an acknowledgment of the spectator-spectacle dynamic of charivari. Averting her eyes from the spectacle would not have eliminated her participation in it. Because charivari is not simply a visual display, one takes in the performance before one actually sees it. Having already heard the “hubbub” and listened to the maids describe the effigies, Lucetta has already witnessed the skimmington in a way. Elizabeth-Jane is too late in her effort to block out the spectacle for Lucetta.

Part of Lucetta’s fatal reaction to the charivari lies in her complete identification with her effigy. When Lucetta sees her effigy paraded outside her window, she cries, “She’s me – she’s me – even to the parasol – my green parasol!” (275). The effigy is so effective in duplicating its original that Lucetta sees herself in the parade, not merely a copy of herself. Lucetta’s reaction underscores the duality of her position in relation to the charivari, as each part of her cry is called out twice: she’s me/she’s me and parasol/parasol.<sup>19</sup> For a moment there are two Lucettas: one in the street performing with the charivariers and one on the balcony watching herself as spectacle. When one dies (through the end of the performance) the other dies with her. Lucetta’s identification with the effigy shows not only that the effigy is Lucetta, but also that Lucetta is the effigy. This reciprocity destabilizes the realism of the character by underscoring that Lucetta is

every bit as pieced together as the effigy. As Marjorie Garson argues, the skimmington can be interpreted as “a parody of the method by which she has been constructed by the text” (96).

When the villagers construct Lucetta’s effigy, they parallel Lucetta’s own making of herself. The skimmington reminds Lucetta – and readers – that, like the effigy, Lucetta herself is a patchwork



Figure 3: “Lucetta’s eyes were straight upon the spectacle of the uncanny revel” by Robert Barnes. Originally printed with the serial installment of the novel on May 1, 1886, in *The Graphic*. Scan by Philip V. Allingham. Illustration provided by the Victorian Web.

of materials put together to embody a particular social status. The skimmington also shows Lucetta that she is not the only agent of her constructed self.

Although, as Rebecca N. Mitchell points out, Lucetta “seeks to control her countenance in order to control [other characters’] readings” of her, the effigy confronts her with the knowledge that she alone cannot determine how she will be interpreted in Casterbridge (77).

Moreover, during the skimmington scene, Lucetta is accompanied in watching the spectacle by another double of herself: Elizabeth-Jane.

As Robert Kiely observes, Lucetta

substitutes herself for Elizabeth-Jane in marrying Farfrae, adopting the identity of “spotless lamb,” whereas the skimmington double identifies her as “the opposite and equally incomplete façade of the harlot” (192). In Robert Barnes’ illustration of the charivari scene, which

accompanied the serial part of the novel, the focus is on Lucetta about to faint as Elizabeth-Jane holds onto her (Figure 1). The caption of the illustration is a line from text, “Lucetta’s eyes were straight upon the spectacle of the uncanny revel.” But, in fact, the illustration shows Lucetta’s eyes closing in a faint. For readers, the spectacle depicted in the illustration is not the charivari but Lucetta and Elizabeth-Jane on the balcony. The illustration thus aligns the reader’s gaze with that of the charivariers. Philip V. Allingham explains Barnes’s choice to draw the women on the balcony rather than the skimmity riders as playing to the artist’s strengths: “Barnes, aware that his strength lies in his ability to depict people and costume, often avoids scenes requiring movement and action, such as the Skimmington, where he elects not to show the raucous procession but dwells instead upon the somewhat melodramatic expressions on the faces of Elizabeth Jane and Lucetta” (33). However, Barnes’s illustration also reflects the spectator-spectacle dynamic of charivari, in which the performers are also spectators, and their intended audience – the target of the charivari – is also spectacle.

The blurring of spectator and performer in charivari extends the doubling of Hardy’s novel. If the skimmington serves to level Lucetta to Mixen Lane, then it also levels Mixen Lane to Lucetta. In Barnes’s illustration, the two women on the balcony replicate in number the two charivariers visible in the background. Hardy’s text also pairs Lucetta with the charivariers: “Almost at the instant of her fall the rude music of the skimmington ceased. The roars of sarcastic laughter went off in ripples, and the tramping died out like the rustle of a spent wind” (276-77). Lucetta’s dying is reflected in the dying out of the rough music. The charivariers continue performing only so long as Lucetta is able to see and hear them. Additionally, after Lucetta’s collapse, it is the performers who now fear exposure. In the illustration, one of the charivariers holds his hat on, partially shielding his face, in contrast to Elizabeth-Jane, who has

just thrown off her bonnet. The performers quickly disperse, hiding their rough music instruments so that investigators cannot determine who participated in the skimmington. When Jopp, one of the primary instigators of the skimmington, learns of Lucetta's death, his "face was lined with anxiety" (284; ch. 40). John Paterson describes the dispersal of the folk after the skimmington: "Having terrorized a helpless woman, they will slink 'like the crew of Comus' back to the miasmal suburbs from which they have momentarily emerged; questioned by the constables, they will answer with a sinister and dishonorable evasiveness" (166). Paterson casts the charivariers in a decidedly negative light. However, in their desire to hide from exposure, they are no more "sinister" than Lucetta, who might also be charged with "dishonorable evasiveness" in keeping her relationship with Henchard a secret from Farfrae.

The charivariers' choice to hide after their performance and to deny participating in it shows that, along with their target, Lucetta, they are threatened by the shame of exposure. Like Lucetta and Henchard, the charivariers are themselves shams, not only in denying their participation in the charivari, but also in their discovery of the shame in their community that prompted the performance. The townspeople selected as their leaders first Henchard and then Farfrae, making those men – and by extension, Farfrae's wife, Lucetta – their representatives. When Henchard and Lucetta are exposed as shams, the shame of this exposure extends to all of Casterbridge, whose residents were taken in and fooled. The townspeople realize: Our town is not what we thought it was. Henchard, held up as a model and made mayor, shows the town's error in judgment. Then Lucetta, who represents the town in greeting the royal visitor, again shows that Casterbridge produces shams as its representative citizens.

Thus, the skimmington in Hardy's novel creates shams to draw attention to the shams already living in Casterbridge. By creating Lucetta and Henchard in effigy, the villagers remind

us of the social stakes of identity formation. The skimmington scene links Lucetta's and Henchard's individual efforts to make themselves over as respectable citizens to a broader communal effort to create and preserve the town's respectability. Through this folk custom, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* makes visible its characters', and their town's, efforts to erase signs of a shameful past.

### **Shame on Display in Dickens**

Shame stemming from the gap between what one wishes to be and what one actually is or has been permeates the autobiographical fragment written by Charles Dickens, included in the biography written by his friend John Forster. Dickens describes his experience, at age 10, of working in Warren's Blacking warehouse while his father was in Marshalsea as a debtor.

Dickens writes:

No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship; compared these every day associates with those of my happier childhood; and felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my breast. The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that, day by day, what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, was passing away from me, never to be brought back any more; cannot be written. My whole nature was so penetrated with the grief and humiliation of such considerations, that even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and wander desolately back to that time of my life. (896)<sup>20</sup>

Dickens makes clear that a source of his "secret agony" is the demotion in class status signified by the difference in his new "every day associates" and the companions of his "happier childhood." His suffering in being made to work as a boy of 10 at the blacking warehouse is not a common suffering he shares with his new associates. Rather, in Dickens's opinion, he is unique in his suffering because he is comparing his current circumstances to the more genteel life of his

childhood. The other boys don't suffer like he does, then, because they are not feeling the loss of status that he feels.

Exacerbating Dickens's shame, perhaps, is the other boys' awareness that Dickens has had a loss of class status. Although Dickens tells us, "I never said, to man or boy, how it was that I came to be there," the other boys know his background is different from theirs (898). Dickens observes, "my conduct and manners were different enough from theirs to place a space between us. They, and the men, always spoke of me as 'the young gentleman'" (898). Dickens is reluctant to let the boys find out how far his status has fallen. When his co-worker Bob Fagin (whose name he later borrows for *Oliver Twist*) offers to walk him home one day, he has Fagin leave him "on the steps of a house near Southwark-bridge on the Surrey side, making believe that I lived there," in order to prevent Fagin from finding out that his father is in the Marshalsea (900).

Dickens is also shamed by the spectacle of his labor. He writes, "We worked, for the light's sake, near the second window as you come from Bedford-street; and we were so brisk at it, that the people used to stop and look in. Sometimes there would be quite a little crowd there. I saw my father coming in at the door one day when we were very busy, and I wondered how he could bear it" (903). As Robert Newsom notes, Dickens's shame is compounded by its public exposure. "In the fact that the shame is shared (or in its denial or in the failure to share it) there is no doubt an additional shame and sense of mutual betrayal. . . . There is the shame of the young drudge of a son before the father . . . but also the shame of the father and son together before the crowd of onlookers" (13). Dickens wonders how his father can see him through the window – and see others watching him through the window – without unbearable shame. Dickens is himself shamed by laboring before an audience and also seems shamed here by his kinship to a father who can watch such a spectacle without shame.

It is a critical commonplace to note the parallels between David Copperfield and the novelist who invented him.<sup>21</sup> The sense of shame Dickens expresses in the autobiographical fragment also permeates David Copperfield's autobiography. A theme of the novel is the shamefulness of reaching beyond one's socio-economic station, attempting to become something one is not, and the attendant blame used to discipline such ambitions. Much as Michael Henchard's and Lucetta Farfrae's attempts to rise in status were thwarted in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, in *Copperfield* a number of characters are blamed for their attempts (or suspected attempts) at upward mobility: Little Emily for trying to become a lady via James Steerforth, Uriah Heep for aspiring to take over Mr. Wickfield's law practice and daughter, and Annie Strong for the suspicion that she married mercenarily. In the midst of these various subplots of blame lie the title character's own youthful, shame-provoking ambitions in his friendship with Steerforth and in his courtship of and eventual marriage to Dora, an impractical wife for a man who must earn his own way in the world. In each of these examples, though, blame is not merely heaped on the status-seeking character, but instead circulates among several characters, including the ones doing the blaming.

In one of the most memorable shaming scenes of the novel, Rosa Dartle berates Little Emily for her affair with Steerforth. This shaming is instigated by Emily's attempt to rise in class, as well as Rosa's shame at the similarities she perceives between herself and Emily. Emily thinks she can become a lady by running away with Steerforth. Indeed, according to the account of Steerforth's servant, Littimer, for a while Emily did succeed in passing for a lady. He tells David, "The young woman was very improvable, and spoke the languages; and wouldn't have been known for the same country-person. I noticed that she was much admired wherever we went" (675; ch. 46). However, no amount of improvement will change the fact that Emily was



born into a lower-class family. As Elizabeth Langland argues, “Emily’s wish to be a lady anticipates her fall; the natural grace and gentility she possesses cannot institute her within the middle class, cannot compensate for her ignorance of that class’s signifying practices” (83). Littimer tells David that Emily was “given to low company” and talked with “the boatmen’s wives and children” (677). He adds, “Mr James was far from pleased to find out, once, that she had told the children she was a boatman’s daughter, and that in her own country, long ago, she had roamed about the beach, like them” (677). Her affair with Steerforth ends when he proposes to have her married off to someone of her own class status, Littimer, who describes himself as “as good as anybody the young woman could have aspired to in a regular way: her connexions being very common” (676).

Rosa blames Emily for her upwardly mobile ambitions. She aims to induce shame in Emily, calling her a “purchased slave” and a “piece of pollution” (724-25; ch. 50). In part, Rosa is successful in shaming Emily, who falls to her knees, “dropped her face,” and admits to feeling “disgrace and shame” (724-25). However, the danger of finger-pointing, as Sharon Lamb observes, is that the person you blame might point a finger back at you (11), and in this case, Little Emily redirects her shame back toward Rosa. She tells her, “If you live in [Steerforth’s] home and know him, you know, perhaps, what his power with a weak, vain girl might be” (725). Emily’s words are shaming to Rosa, because she does know, as Emily suspects, Steerforth’s power with girls. Rosa later describes her relationship with Steerforth: “I descended – as I might have known I should, but that he fascinated me with his boyish courtship – into a doll, a trifle for the occupation of an idle hour, to be dropped, and taken up, and trifled with, as the inconstant humour took him” (806; ch. 56). Describing herself as a doll, Rosa offers a parallel to the effigies of charivari. Steerforth takes her up and drops her much like charivariers take their target into

their hands in the form of an effigy. In blaming Emily, Rosa uses similar language: “I thought you a broken toy that had lasted its time; a worthless spangle that was tarnished, and thrown away” (726; ch. 50). Rosa sees herself and Emily, then, as discarded toys that Steerforth amused himself with until he tired of them. As Mary Ann O’Farrell argues, both Rosa and Emily “have occupied” the same “imaginative space” as “James Steerforth’s fancy” (97).<sup>22</sup> By reminding Rosa that she, too, was “a weak, vain girl,” Emily’s words strike Rosa as a blow, from which she “recoiled” with “darkened” face, recoiling as she might have done when Steerforth threw the hammer that scarred her face (725). Rosa reacts by striking back with a blow to the air and by redoubling her efforts to wound Emily with her words. Both victims of Steerforth, both striking verbal blows at each other, Rosa and Emily have much in common. The novel emphasizes Rosa’s desperation to hold herself above Emily in this episode. Emily implores Rosa, “spare me, if you would be spared yourself!” (723). Rosa replies, “If *I* would be spared! . . . what is there in common between *us*, do you think?” (724). It is a source of shame to Rosa that she was victimized by the same man who set his sights on Emily, whom Rosa thinks is lower than “a kitchen-girl” (725). I have argued above that charivaris are both products and producers of shame, as the group of charivariers seeks to alleviate the community’s shame by pointing blame at a single culprit whose behavior transgressed community standards. In *Copperfield*, we can see that dynamic represented on an interpersonal, rather than communal, scale. Rosa is shamed by Steerforth; she describes herself as “marked until I die with his high displeasure,” referring to the scar on her face (804; ch. 56). In turn she wants to turn that shame on Emily, having told David, as O’Farrell notes, that she “would have her branded on the face,” mimicking her own wound (478; O’Farrell 97). The novel’s emphasis on the similarities between Rosa and Emily suggests that Rosa’s shaming of Emily is a by-product of the shame she feels herself.

Although Rosa directs her blame for Emily and Steerforth's affair entirely at Emily in this episode, both of the witnesses to this scene, David and the prostitute Martha Endell, are also portrayed as potentially culpable. The novel credits Martha with rescuing Emily from the streets of London, as Martha finds Emily and restores her to Mr. Peggotty's care. At the same time, though, the novel suggests that it was contact with Martha that tainted Emily in the first place and led her onto a path of ruin. When Mr. Peggotty and David first find Martha in London, she tells David, "I never was in any way the cause of his misfortune" (689; ch. 47). Although David replies, "It has never been attributed to you," the novel now has, in fact, raised the possibility that Martha *was* the cause of the misfortune. Through her denial, Martha creates the accusation that had not, until then, been voiced. Even after David assures her twice that no one blames her for Emily's fall, Martha is not convinced. She moves from denying that she is culpable to worrying that Emily's friends would blame her: "the bitterest thought in all my mind was, that the people would remember she once kept company with me, and would say I had corrupted her!" (690). Finally, she transfers the judgment of her own culpability from these friends to herself: "How can I go on as I am, a solitary curse to myself, a living disgrace to every one I come near!" (690). The novel underscores Martha's potential negative influence on Emily by posing Emily vis-à-vis Rosa in the same physical position Martha earlier assumed toward Emily, with David serving as witness to both encounters. Previously, David observed Martha prostrate on the floor with "her hair loose and scattered" (346; ch. 22). Now he finds Emily "on her knees" at Rosa's feet with "her hair streaming about her" (724; ch. 50). This positioning gives some credence to Martha's fear that she has brought disgrace to Emily: She has modeled for Emily the fallen position, literally and figuratively, that Emily now assumes.

David, the witness to Martha's and Emily's fallenness, does not escape blame himself for Emily and Steerforth's affair. After Steerforth's death, Rosa tells David, "It was in an evil hour that you ever came here!" (807; ch. 56). The source of David's culpability is similar to Emily's; like her, David is seduced in part by Steerforth's status as a gentleman. He is proud to introduce his higher-class friend to the Peggotty family. David's admiration of Steerforth leads him to do a number of things he will come to regret. For instance, during their school days, David tells Steerforth of Mr. Mell's poor relations; Steerforth uses the information to have Mr. Mell dismissed from the school. David describes his shame at disclosing Mr. Mell's secret to Steerforth, recalling "a flush on my face and remorse in my heart" (110; ch. 7). In another instance, shortly after David moves to London, his desire to impress Steerforth and his friends leads him to drink too much. The next day, David recalls, "the agony of mind, the remorse, the shame I felt" (371; ch. 24). After David learns that Emily has run off with Steerforth, David admits that he has played a role, albeit "unconscious," in Steerforth's "pollution of an honest home" (461; ch. 32). Ham, Emily's fiancé, attempts to absolve David, assuring him, "it ain't no fault of yourn – and I am far from laying of it to you" (460; ch. 31). Nonetheless, just as Martha's self-defense raises the possibility that she could be culpable in tainting Emily, Ham's assurance raises the possibility that David could be blamed; if David were not a viable target of blame, Ham would not need to reassure him of his blamelessness. David is not only to blame for introducing Steerforth to Emily but also for inadvertently preventing others from learning of Steerforth's planned seduction. Miss Mowcher admonishes David, "why did you praise [Emily] so, and blush, and look disturbed? . . . You were hot and cold, and red and white, all at once when I spoke to you of her" (469-70; ch. 32). Miss Mowcher takes David's blushes as signs that he is the one guilty of desiring Emily, and she thus turns a blind eye to Steerforth's designs.

Miss Mowcher's misinterpretation of David's blushes shows that such physical manifestations of shame are not always a reliable sign of culpability. As O'Farrell argues, "The visible alterations physiology works on the body (the alternations of color wrought by the blush) offer themselves for interpretation, but . . . refuse to put themselves out to intelligible service" (99). What Miss Mowcher thinks she sees in David's blush is first shame and then culpability – that he has done or thought something to be ashamed of. David's blush, however, is a red herring, a diversion from the more blameworthy Steerforth, who is not betrayed by a flushed face. Another example of the difficulty of interpreting signs of shame occurs when David misreads Annie Strong's agitation on the evening of her cousin Jack Maldon's farewell party, mistakenly assuming she is guilty of desiring Maldon and that her affection for her husband is a sham entered into in order to benefit from the social and economic benefits of the marriage. David notices during the party that Annie droops her head, trembles, and is unable to sing. When Maldon leaves, Annie is found in a swoon in the hallway. Her mother notices that Annie's red ribbon is missing, having been taken by Maldon, causing Annie to blush "burning red" (254; ch. 16). After the party, David returns to the house, finding Annie on the floor at her husband's feet with a "wild" look upon her face. As Amanda Anderson points out, Annie is thus the first of three women in the novel David spies on the floor at someone's feet (the other two, discussed above, are Martha and Emily) (94, 102). Annie takes on the position that the novel later associates with its fallen women not because she has done something blameworthy, but because she fears others will suspect her of blamable behavior based on the actions of her mother and cousin. Anderson argues, "Suspensions of Annie, and her own suspicion of those suspicions, taint her self-perceptions and contaminate the narrator" (101). Annie's shame that she will be suspected helps generate David's suspicion. David sees in the signs of Annie's shame

“Penitence, humiliation, shame, pride, love, and trustfulness – I see them all; and in them all, I see that horror of I don’t know what” (256; ch. 16). That David admits he doesn’t know what her position signifies does not stop him from concluding it is some “horror.”

In each of these instances of shamed women prostrate at another character’s feet, David is a spectator. Much like the charivaris I discussed above, these spectacles of shame in *Copperfield* intrude upon the private sphere. Looking through a doorway, David sees Annie at her husband’s feet when the Strongs suppose they are home alone together after their guests have left. He observes Martha at Emily’s feet in the kitchen of the Barkis home. He watches and listens to Rosa’s shaming of Emily through a small door in the home where Emily has temporarily sought refuge.<sup>23</sup> By making these homes the site of public viewing, the novel calls into question the privacy of the private sphere. There is no safe space (at least not in England) for Emily to hide from public exposure, as Rosa promises she will seek Emily out in “any refuge in this town” (727; ch. 50). Rosa, as accuser, and David, as voyeur, intrude upon the private space where Emily hides. David offers a feeble excuse for allowing Rosa’s shaming of Emily to proceed, with the result that he is able to continue as spectator. Anderson notes that the figure of the fallen woman in Dickens’s writing is “at once determined and public” (68). By looking broadly at shame in *Copperfield*, I find that the denial of privacy is not unique to prostitutes but is characteristic of moments in which shaming makes one character a spectacle to others. David’s own most intense moments of shame are attended by public exposure. When David is a child, his stepfather Murdstone locks him in his room for five days as punishment for biting Murdstone’s hand. David is “ashamed to show myself at the window” for fear that other children playing nearby will see him and know that he has done something punishable (70; ch. 4). David takes refuge in the private space out of sight of the window, where he can avoid the shame of

public exposure. Later, however, Murdstone broadcasts David's culpability beyond the home by sending David to school and informing the schoolmaster of the biting. David is forced to wear a sign at school that reads, "*Take care of him. He bites*" (90; ch. 5). David describes his feeling of shame: "What I suffered from the placard, nobody can imagine. Whether it was possible for people to see me or not, I always fancied that somebody was reading it. It was no relief to turn round and find nobody; for wherever my back was, there I imagined somebody always to be" (90). Thus, for David the real shame comes not simply in being blamed for biting Murdstone, but in imagining other children perceiving that he has been blamed, either by seeing him imprisoned through his bedroom window or by reading the sign on his back. As D.A. Miller notes, in the case of the placard, David's shame is intensified by the fact that onlookers would view his sign behind him, where David cannot "*look back*" (213; original emphasis). Because of the position of the words, there can be no degree of reciprocity in the spectacle of David wearing the placard. In fact, he cannot even know when he is being looked at.

Dread of public exposure also fuels David's shame in his marriage to Dora Spenlow, as their failure to properly manage their household soon becomes apparent to friends, servants, and even the police. When a servant steals Dora's watch, he confesses in Magistrates' Court to such a long list of crimes against the Copperfields that David admits, "I got to be so ashamed of being such a victim, that I would have given him any money to hold his tongue, or would have offered a round bribe for his being permitted to run away" (698; ch. 48). Worse than the theft, for David, is the publicizing of his status as a victim of theft.

David's household management woes are shameful to him because they provide evidence that he was overly socially ambitious in his first choice of bride. Dora, with all her frivolity, represents a class status that David aspires to but has not achieved. Mary Poovey argues that the

novel suggests the possibility of what would be a disastrous cross-class relationship between David and Emily, one that is actually enacted via Steerforth (98). In his boyhood infatuation with Emily, David set his sights too low; with Dora, he aims too high. It is not until the end of the novel that he, like Goldilocks, gets it just right with Agnes. He is still secretly courting Dora when he learns that his aunt has lost her property. David recalls, “How I thought and thought about my being poor, in Mr Spenlow’s eyes; about my not being what I thought I was, when I proposed to Dora” (510; ch. 35). David fears that he will appear as a sham to Dora and her father. He had presented himself as having money to spare on the frivolities that Dora enjoys. Now he is faced with the prospect of “coming down to have no money in my pocket, and to wear a shabby coat, and to be able to carry Dora no little presents, and to ride no gallant greys, and to show myself in no agreeable light!” (510). Dora’s father objects to David’s wooing of Dora based primarily on David’s socio-economic status. Mr. Spenlow asks him, “Have you considered my daughter’s station in life, the projects I may contemplate for her advancement, the testamentary intentions I may have with reference to her?” (558; ch. 38). As it turns out, David is not the only one with pretensions to higher class status. Upon Spenlow’s death, David learns that he has left behind debts and no will. Spenlow turns out to be a sham himself. He spends more money than he earns, putting on the appearance of greater financial success than he has achieved. To this end, Spenlow has limited his relationship with his sisters, Lavinia and Clarissa. After Spenlow’s death, the sisters complain to David that they were not welcomed at his home after he married. They tell him that their brother “wished to surround himself with an atmosphere of Doctors’ Commons, and of Doctors’ Commons only” (603; ch. 41). They acknowledge that Spenlow would not have approved of David’s engagement with Dora had he lived, but, they note, “Our niece’s position, or supposed position, is much changed by our brother Francis’s



death, . . . and therefore we consider our brother's opinions as regarded her position as being changed too" (601). The sisters' approval of David's courtship is in part an acknowledgment that their own class status is not above his, and because they are now Dora's guardians, she is no longer above David either.

Despite Dora's apparent fall in class status – a fall in appearance only, as her higher-class status had been an illusion of her father's making – she has been formed for a higher-class life and does not have the skills needed to adjust to the practical life David requires.<sup>24</sup> Even though David sets out to mold Dora into practicality, he is proud of her frivolity. As Rachel Ablow argues, "it is clear that much of his first wife's appeal lies in her ability to function as the object of his ambitions" (25). He asks his friend Traddles if his fiancée, Sophy, can play the guitar or paint. When Traddles admits that Sophy cannot do those things, David brags that Traddles can hear Dora play the guitar and see her paint flowers. He reflects, "I compared [Sophy] in my mind with Dora, with considerable inward satisfaction; but I candidly admitted to myself that she seemed to be an excellent kind of girl *for Traddles*, too" (609; ch. 41; my emphasis). David believes himself to be worthy of a higher-class bride than Traddles. Although the practical Sophy is a good choice for Traddles, David is proud that he himself has a more fanciful mate.

However, David's pride in Dora's impracticality is offset by his discomfort once they are married. A practical wife would be able to manage the servant, Mary Anne, so that dinner was prepared properly and served on time. Dora, however, protests that she cannot possibly manage the servant, "because I am such a little goose" (642; ch. 44). The argument that follows can be thought of as an exchange of blame statements. Dora scolds David for his seriousness: "don't be a naughty Blue Beard!" (642). She also blames him for marrying her under what she considers false pretenses: "I didn't marry to be reasoned with. If you meant to reason with such a poor little

thing as I am, you ought to have told me so, you cruel boy!” (643). For his part, David blames Dora for not properly overseeing the housekeeping, although he denies it: “I am not blaming you, Dora. We have both a great deal to learn. I am only trying to show you, my dear, that you must – you really must . . . accustom yourself to look after Mary Anne. Likewise to act a little for yourself, and me” (643). Although David declares that he is not blaming Dora, implicitly he is, as Dora is well aware. By insisting that Dora be responsible for looking after the servant, David implies that Dora is to blame if the servant is late with dinner or steals their spoons. David also blames himself; although he does not articulate the reason for his culpability (that he now demands a practical wife after knowingly marrying an impractical one), he has “a vague sense of enormous wickedness” (644).

In reserving a portion of blame for himself, David resembles Emily, Martha, and Annie, who, as I have discussed above, blame themselves for shame-inducing circumstances even as the novel indicates other possible culprits. All four of those characters explicitly mention the shame and/or disgrace they feel. I argue that such self-blame functions in the novel to indicate a character’s sense of agency. My discussion of shame so far has focused largely on its negative aspects, as something characters seek either to avoid in themselves or to punitively induce in others (or both). Shame feels bad. As Tomkins describes, “shame is felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul” (133). However, shame is not entirely negative. Recent scholarship in the areas of affect studies and queer theory explores the ambivalence of shame.<sup>25</sup> Shame can make one feel isolated, insecure, or guilty, but it also signals one’s agency. Siebers argues, “Having nothing to be ashamed of . . . is a sign of social worthlessness. Any human being will display shame if only his or her social value is sufficient to merit being asked a prying question” (204). In order to do something considered shameful, one must have the ability to choose one’s course

of action, and one must have the social worth to have one's actions subject to scrutiny. Moreover, if being shamed is not entirely negative, it is also true that deflecting blame from oneself is not entirely positive. Denying one's own culpability for a given event means acknowledging that power is in the hands of others. For instance, following the theft of Dora's watch, David tells Dora, "I am afraid we present opportunities to people to do wrong, that never ought to be presented. . . . We are positively corrupting people" (700; ch. 48). When David blames himself and Dora for their servants' corruption, he is paradoxically asserting his and Dora's control of the household. The servants are corrupt because he has made them so, not because the servants are running the household. To acknowledge that he can do nothing to prevent the servants' abuses, as Dora tries to do, would be to admit his lack of power.

Similarly, by giving attention to the shame of Emily, Martha, and Annie, the novel provides space to consider those characters as active agents who have a hand in their own fates. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed Tracy C. Davis's argument that spectacle makes apparent practices that were previously "nothing." By making spectacles of its characters' shame, *David Copperfield* indicates that those characters' actions are worthy of notice. Put another way, Andrew H. Miller asserts, "shame satisfies because it reassures us that we are known to others" (177). Annie Strong is not merely a pawn used by her mother and cousin to extract benefits from her husband. By repeatedly falling at Doctor Strong's feet in a posture of shame, Annie demands to be considered as blamable, and thus a doer of actions, in her own right. When Martha and Emily lament the disgrace they have brought to others, they assume that they are capable of making things happen, of affecting the characters around them. Here I take up O'Farrell's suggestion that the blush (or signs of shame in general) can communicate "local resistance" (7). Anderson has argued that Dickens's fallen women, and in particular Emily, have predetermined

trajectories. The question I am asking is whether Emily's shame signifies agency, whether she is capable of "local resistance." I think this question can be answered by considering Emily's shaming alongside charivari. I have argued that the charivari target cannot choose otherwise than to respond to the performance; choice is limited to the form that the response takes. In Emily and Rosa's case, neither Rosa, nor the spectating David, can predict with certainty how Emily will respond to Rosa's accusations. That Rosa is described as recoiling from Emily's response indicates she is surprised. Emily's power to surprise suggests that she retains some agency, because a character who can surprise cannot also be entirely predetermined or predictable. I should note, though, that in arguing that shame indicates agency, I do not mean to suggest that characters' shaming is entirely positive. Annie succeeds in making her point that she is not her mother's tool, but only through repeatedly falling at her husband's feet. (Despite David's similar penchant for self-blame, we don't see him throwing himself at anyone's feet.) Martha and Emily may have the ability to generate shame around them, but this is a very limited form of power, and one that does not allow them redemption within the community of the novel. In fact, the proliferation of blaming incidents in the novel is accompanied by a proliferation of expulsions: Martha, Emily, and the financially insolvent Mr. Micawber to Australia, Uriah Heep and Littimer to prison, and Dora and Steerforth, among others, to death. Even David endures a temporary expulsion to Europe in the wake of Dora's death.

Reading *Copperfield* alongside accounts of charivari shows similar operations at work, although on an interpersonal rather than communal scale. Motivated in part by their own shame, in part by their outrage at the perceived shaming of the culprit, the blamer(s) shame their targets by making them spectacles, bringing public scrutiny to seemingly private spaces. In Dickens's novel, as in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and "The Good-for-Naught," the result of

these spectacles is frequently the removal of the targeted character from the space of the narrative.

### **The Last Word?**

I have argued that scenes of blaming in *David Copperfield* make seemingly private conflicts into public spectacles. Eight years after *Copperfield*'s publication, Dickens put this conception of blame to work following his separation from his wife, Catherine. In a personal statement published on the front-page of *Household Words*, as well as in other periodicals, Dickens went public in his blame of rumor-mongers he claimed were spreading “misrepresentations, most grossly false, most monstrous, and most cruel.” At the same time that he himself puts his marital woes into the public sphere, he asserts the “sacredly private nature” of his problem. He concludes his statement by shaming those who would keep gossip about Dickens’s marriage in public circulation: “whosoever repeats one of them [the rumors] after this denial will lie as wilfully and as foully as it is possible for any false witness to lie before Heaven and earth” (601).

If this break-up were happening today, when celebrity breakups are commonplace, Dickens would have access to a cadre of public relations consultants who could help him craft his public statement (whether he would have taken their advice is another question). As it was, Dickens’s attempt to deflect blame from himself backfired, succeeding in calling more attention to the rumors he hoped to quell and drawing even more blame on himself for airing his dirty laundry in public. Elizabeth Gaskell summed up Dickens’s self-inflicted damage to his reputation, “Mr Dickens happens to be extremely unpopular just now, – owing to the well-grounded feeling of dislike to the publicity he has given to his domestic affairs” (qtd in Kaplan, 407).<sup>26</sup> Like the charivariers who put on display transgressions in their community in order to

root them out, Dickens publicly blames those gossiping about him in an attempt to shame them into silence. But also like the charivariers, Dickens reveals his own shame in the process.

This dissertation has argued that blaming is open-ended. The numerous possible culprits available for blame, the unpredictability of the blamee's response, and the shifting definitions of what counts as blameworthy mean that the question of who is to blame never has a final answer. In his public statement about his separation, Dickens intended to have the last word on the topic. But blame works against last words. The show goes on, after the final curtain, after death, after legal judgment, as Bluebeard rises from his fatal wound to reassure the audience he'll be back for tomorrow night's show, as the murdered maiden's finger points to the groom's guilt, and as the spurned wife looks back with contempt on the man who would blame her. The folk narratives and novels I have discussed in this study do not establish the blameworthiness of the curious wife, the violent husband, or the madwoman in the attic; instead, they show that blame remains unresolved.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This chant was also printed as a footnote in Frances Power Cobbe's "Wife-Torture in England," and in two articles in *All the Year Round*: "Some Undesirable Customs" in 1874 and "The Folk-Lore of Marriage" in 1887.

<sup>2</sup> I first began considering the spectatorship of charivari in a position paper I wrote for the special-topic seminar "Victorian Spectatorship," led by Tracy C. Davis, at the 2011 North American Victorian Studies Association conference. For providing me with valuable feedback and helping me expand my thinking about the spectatorship of charivari, I am indebted to Davis and my fellow seminar participants: Bethann Bowman, Susan E. Cook, Kenneth Daley, Laura Kasson Fiss, Renee Fox, Tanushree Ghosh, Lauren Wood Hoffer, Mary Isbell, Aileen Robinson, Sarah Tomsyck, and Beth Tressler.

<sup>3</sup> On the history of charivari in England and the various types of charivari customs, see especially Violet Alford, Martin Ingram, and E.P. Thompson. On charivaris in general, including French and American traditions, see especially Natalie Zemon Davis, Bryan D. Palmer, Pauline Greenhill, and Rolande Bonnain-Moerdyk and Donald Moerdyk.

<sup>4</sup> Sometimes charivaris were performed to celebrate a marriage of friends, but written

accounts of such performances in the nineteenth century are vastly outnumbered by their more punitive counterparts. Hardy's 1878 novel, *Return of the Native*, suggests the possibility of confusion between a celebratory wedding serenade and punitive skimmington. A group of revelers, believing Thomasin Yeobright and Damon Wildeve have married, serenade the couple. On hearing their approach, Thomasin says, "it is not skimmity-riding, I hope?" (38). She is worried that news has spread that the wedding ceremony did not take place and that she returned home in scandal. On this episode, see also Ruth A. Firor (238). In her study of Canadian charivari, Greenhill notes that the function of charivari gradually shifted during the twentieth century from expressing disapproval to celebrating a marriage (4).

<sup>5</sup> On the role of charivari where there is a perceived absence of institutional justice, see also George Roberts (534-35).

<sup>6</sup> See also Russell P. Dobash and R. Emerson Dobash (570-73).

<sup>7</sup> This point is also addressed by Giorgio Agamben in *State of Exception* (71-73).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, the *Examiner* of London reports in 1835 the case of two men ordered to pay the damages after breaking windows during a charivari ("Police" 363). An 1838 article in the *Times* of London reports that a group of charivariers were charged with assault at the petty sessions at Billericay and ordered to pay a fine of one shilling each ("Rough Music" 6).

<sup>9</sup> Thompson describes a similar 1817 charivari "following upon the conviction and execution of a local man for rape. As many as two hundred people assembled on successive nights before the house of the prosecutrix, exhibiting obscene effigies of herself and her father and mother, stoning the house, and 'hallooing and charging the family with having hung the man'. The trouble was ended only when four of the actors were imprisoned" (16).

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Attali discusses the potential of noise to create and destroy networks, as well as the networks through which music is distributed (31-34). The importance of noise to charivari is reflected in the fact that the term itself can be used more generally to mean "a confused discordant medley of sounds; a babel of noise" ("charivari").

<sup>11</sup> See also Thompson (9).

<sup>12</sup> Other examples of nineteenth-century charivari chants are found in William Brockie, Mrs. Gutch, Dobash and Dobash, and "A Scene at Staindrop."

<sup>13</sup> See also Bruce Rosenberg (56).

<sup>14</sup> See also Rosemary Jann (415).

<sup>15</sup> This poem was later republished as "The Bride-Night Fire."

<sup>16</sup> On the importance of clothing for Lucetta's self-making and for her identification with the effigy, see J.B. Bullen (113-14), Simon Gatrell ("Dress, Body and Psyche" 157), and Annie Ramel (267-68).

<sup>17</sup> Shuli Barzilai examines the connection between Bluebeard and skeletons in the closet in the works of William Makepeace Thackeray (43-67).

<sup>18</sup> Other critics have discussed the novel in terms of the uncanny and return of the repressed. See especially Roger Ebbatson (170-72) and Julian Wolfreys (163-67).

<sup>19</sup> Genevieve Abravanel discusses the doubling in this episode and the one in which Henchard finds his effigy floating in Ten Hatches Hole; she argues that this doubling is part of a framework of trans-Atlantic exchange.

<sup>20</sup> Dickens's autobiographical fragment is quoted in the appendix to the Penguin edition of *David Copperfield*, and the page numbers reflect that version. I am indebted to Carole Brown, one of my co-panelists at the 2011 Victorians Institute Conference, for reminding me of Dickens's expression of shame in this fragment. On Dickens's work at the blacking warehouse, see also Rosemarie Bodenheimer (18-19, 68-73).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Jeremy Tambling, xviii-xxvi.

<sup>22</sup> See also Bodenheimer (79).

<sup>23</sup> Elsie B. Michie compares this scene to Dickens's tale-taking from the prostitutes of Urania Cottage (93).

<sup>24</sup> On Dora's unsuitability as a middle-class wife, see also Elizabeth Langland (84-86). On David's class-based attraction to Dora, see also Beth Newman (68).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Elspeth Probyn, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Sedgwick and Adam Frank, and the essays in the collection *Gay Shame*, edited by David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub. See also Heather Love's discussion of the political uses of positive and negative affects.

<sup>26</sup> For a more complete account of Dickens's marital separation and the ensuing publicity, see especially Kaplan (367-412) and Lillian Nayder (250-96).



## **Epilogue: Blame, Responsibility, and Rape in the Twenty-First Century**

I have argued that blame in Victorian marriage narratives circulates beyond husband and wife to include an array of finger-pointers and culprits who might not, at first glance, seem involved in the marital conflict. It may seem strange that I am concluding my study with a discussion of blaming and rape today. What the two issues have in common is the negotiation and redefinition of standards of blameworthiness and the way blame spills over from the initial crime to encompass seemingly unrelated people. As I have shown in this dissertation, standards of accepted marital behavior – or even what constituted marriage itself – were contested during the Victorian era through varying folk beliefs and legal regulations. Similarly, rape is the topic of heated debates today that raise questions about who is responsible for preventing rape, whom we should blame when rape occurs, and what types of behaviors we should define as rape and punish. For instance, as Amy Shuman argues, the category of “date rape” only recently became widely accepted and may still be a category “unrecognizable to some listeners” (19). For auditors to whom the category of date rape is unrecognizable, it is not conceivable to think about the culpability of a man who rapes his date, because, for them, “sexual assault had to involve a stranger” (15).

Recently, highly publicized protests directed toward Amherst College and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have focused on the blame that follows rape rather than the act of violence itself. At both institutions, women who told university officials they had been raped were subjected to disciplinary actions themselves, with the Amherst student, Angie Epifano, temporarily removed to a mental health institution and the UNC student, Landen Gambill, charged with an Honor Council violation for supposedly intimidating the man she accused of raping her after she publicly claimed that the university responded inappropriately to her case.

Critics of the universities accuse them of blaming victims, caring more about the rights of perpetrators than survivors of violence, and creating climates in which victims are afraid to blame their attackers.<sup>1</sup>

In the face of perceived inadequate or harmful institutional responses to rape, many people have turned to social media, such as Twitter feeds and blogs, to assert their own conception of blame for these cases. A group of Amherst women created the website *It Happens Here*, which the site describes as “the first magazine about sexual violence at Amherst” (“About”). One component of the website is a photo essay in which survivors of sexual assaults (both male and female) hold up signs displaying comments made by other Amherst students and administrators following the assaults. These comments include such blaming questions as “If you didn’t want to have sex with him, why were you sitting on his bed two weeks before?” and “Why couldn’t you fight him off?” (“Photo Project”). In an essay introducing the project, student Dana Bolger describes the publication of these victim-blaming statements as a means of blaming the blamers, as well as all those (including blamers of the blamers) who contribute to a culture in which victim blaming is acceptable. She writes, “In our impulse to point a finger outward at the Amherst administration, let us not forget to look inward at our own complicity in the creation of a culture that gives Angie’s rapist the power to act and our administration the power to silence and dismiss her experience.” Bolger is cautioning visitors to the site not to get so wrapped up in blaming that they forget their own potential blameworthiness; being a finger-pointer does not prevent one from also being blamed. Much like marital blame in Victorian narratives extends beyond husband and wife, blame in contemporary rape cases extends beyond perpetrator and victim, encompassing those who blame the victim, administrators of the universities where rape occurs, and all those who in some way give rapists and administrators power.

Supporters of UNC's Gambill have used social media to generate communal support for her with the Twitter feed #STANDWITHLANDEN and Facebook page "We Stand with Landen," which has 1,688 "likes" as of March 10, 2013. The "like" function of Facebook, which allows online visitors to the page to publicly display their approval, enables the page to show that it represents the viewpoint of a large group. It is not simply individual bloggers who oppose the UNC Honor Council's attempt to pin blame on Gambill, but the entire 1,600-member-strong "We Stand with Landen" Facebook community.

By creating online groups who communally blame or defend others from blame, *It Happens Here* and "We Stand with Landen" serve a similar purpose as that of nineteenth-century charivaris. Social media provide a means for group formation in order to communicate what the group considers acceptable or blameworthy behavior. When the group's standards differ from those enforced by institutional authorities, the group uses social media to achieve its own version of justice or to effect a change in the institution.

Such was the goal of efforts by the "hactivist" group called Anonymous following a 2012 rape in Steubenville, Ohio, that was photographed and videotaped by numerous onlookers. Although two teenage boys were convicted of the rape in March 2013, many have complained that legal authorities are not doing enough to punish those who should be held responsible. As a result of this perceived lack of institutional justice, hackers procured and released information regarding the case and those associated with it online in an effort to encourage the prosecution of more culprits and to publicly shame those escaping legal punishment. Members of Anonymous have portrayed themselves as a force for folk justice, appearing on television news interviews and public gatherings in Steubenville wearing Guy Fawkes-style masks. But, as writer Amanda Marcotte argues, although legal blaming in this case seems inadequate to many, the type of folk

blaming pursued by Anonymous has its own pitfalls. She contends, “By stepping in and holding people accountable, Anonymous stands a very good chance of taking action that actually does something to stop rape. But: This type of online vigilante justice is potentially invading the privacy of or defaming innocent Steubenville residents.” Thus, the hackers face the same risk as other finger-pointers, that they will themselves be blamed. Just as the legal authorities in Steubenville face blame for not holding enough culprits accountable, hactivists face blame for punishing the innocent. In fact, blogger Alexandria Goddard, who used her website to publicly blame those who participated in or watched the Steubenville assault, found herself targeted by a lawsuit (although the suit was settled in her favor).<sup>2</sup>

Online folk activist efforts can influence the way communities decide what counts as blameworthy, but they do not supplant institutional standards of blame. Instead, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, the two modes of blaming are intertwined in the ways communities assess culpability. The judgments of guilt or innocence issued by courts of law or other institutional regulatory bodies, such as the UNC Honor Council, set standards for blame by letting their constituents know which behaviors they will punish and which they will ignore. Likewise, the public shaming or public shows of support of hactivist groups and websites set standards for blame by letting members of the community know which behaviors will be publicly vilified or encouraged. But neither method is infallible. Standards of blame continuously evolve as folk and legal definitions of culpability open each other up to reassessment.

Following the two rapists’ conviction in Steubenville, another round of blaming ensued, demonstrating another of the claims of this study: the process of blaming does not end with a legal verdict. Journalists reporting on the conviction have been blamed for talking about the case in a way paints the rapists as victims. CNN reporter Poppy Harlow described her reaction to the

verdict, “It was incredibly emotional – incredibly difficult even for an outsider like me to watch what happened as these two young men that had such promising futures, star football players, very good students, literally watched as they believe their life fell apart” (qtd in Wemple). Following statements like that one on CNN and other news stations, social media outlets erupted with blame. Facebook users shared quotes from reporters in their news feeds in order to generate outrage among their online friends. A petition posted to the website change.org demanding that CNN apologize for “sympathizing with the Steubenville rapists” garnered more than 260,000 signatures in less than one week (Garcia). The online petition shows how widely and how fast blame circulates in the digital age. Within a few days of the legal verdict, the number of finger-pointers could have populated a small city.

The Steubenville case shows how blame spreads outward from the initial crime. People who have never met the victim or perpetrators in the case, or have never been to Steubenville, now find themselves blaming or blamed. Like the cases at Amherst and UNC, blame stems not only from the act of violence but is also generated by responses to violence. Accounts of blame aim to show which transgressions will not be tolerated, as well as which responses to crime are acceptable. These cases open up the towns and universities where the crimes occur to judgment from within and without. As with the marriage conflicts of Victorian novels, when someone violates the community’s standards, even in private settings, widespread blaming aims to adjust or reestablish those standards.

Blame circulates because it is communal. Levinas imagines responsibility as preceding being; one cannot be without being in relation to another. The circulation of blame maps out these ties. Although, according to Levinas, one does not choose to be responsible, the manner of

response is a choice. One chooses whether to point a finger and in which direction. Collectively, such choices continuously define and redefine what it means to be culpable.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> For more information about the Amherst and UNC cases, see Epifano, Pérez-Peña, and Stancill.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed account of the Steubenville case and its fallout, see Abad-Santos, Epstein, and Marcotte. Blogger Goddard discusses the lawsuit and other repercussions of her online finger-pointing in a more recent online essay (Goddard).

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## Vita

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