Exposing Sensation:
Subversion on Trial in the Victorian Sensation Novel
A Thesis Submitted to the Department of English
and Awarded Departmental Distinction and Honors

Gregory R. Brennen
English 490
Dr. Kabi Hartman
Franklin & Marshall College
5 May 2011

© 2011 Gregory R. Brennen
Abstract

This study surveys eleven Victorian sensation novels from the 1850s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, including works by Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Ellen Wood, and Thomas Hardy. Using the theories of D. A. Miller, Michel Foucault, and M. M. Bakhtin, this paper reveals conservative forces—forces that existing feminist scholarship generally has not recognized—at work in the sensation novel. This paper, therefore, offers an alternative feminist reading of the sensation novel, one that seeks to expand the feminist discourse by illuminating the conservative disciplinary forces at work in the sensation novel and thereby exposing the genre’s abuse of femininity. Using Jane Eyre as a counterpoint, this thesis seeks to demonstrate that the sensation novel serves as a trial space for investigating, exposing, and nullifying secrets of deviance and subversion; the genre thereby effects a conservative enforcement of the dominant Victorian social ideology.

Keywords: sensation novel, sensation fiction, Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Ellen Wood, D. A. Miller
Exposing Sensation: 
Subversion on Trial in the Victorian Sensation Novel

I. Introduction

Bigamy. Murder. Illegitimacy. Madness. All anxiety-inducing in the mid-Victorian mind, and all staples of the sensation novel. Through the 1860s and beyond, wildly popular sensation novels raised the hackles of contemporary moralists by shamelessly capitalizing on the reading public’s fascination with risqué subject matter.

Complex plots, stereotyped characters, mysteries, crime, secrets, and melodrama characterize the classic sensation novel. As distinct from earlier Gothic romances, a sensation novel contains no supernatural elements. Often called matter-of-fact romances, sensation plots deal in complex webs of coincidence and detail. The genre brings the mystery plots that the Gothic romance would have set in fantastical foreign lands home to the English country house.¹

Feminist criticism dominates the scholarship about sensation fiction. The genre lends itself well to feminist readings; it’s home to an abundance of sensational women who deviate from the Victorian angel-in-the-house ideal by acting as detectives, villainesses, and even narrators. Not surprisingly, feminist scholars find in these examples of feminine agency and deviance ample evidence that the sensation novel progressively subverts the patriarchal social system. These scholars are certainly not wrong to see subversive tendencies in the sensation novel; subversive voices are present and audible. However, they fail to see the forces of the patriarchal dominant ideology working hard to contain, cover, edit, and erase those voices. This paper, therefore, offers an alternative feminist reading of the sensation novel, one that seeks to

¹ For Sally Mitchell, “Sensationalism meant excitement, secrets, surprises, suspense; it meant strong emotion aroused by strong scenes, violent death by murder, train, fire, and poisons ranging from chloroform to nightshade; and it meant continual shocks provided by violating decorum” (73). Further scholarly definitions will be forthcoming in the Literature Review.
expand the feminist discourse by illuminating the conservative disciplinary forces at work in the sensation novel and thereby exposing the genre’s abuse of femininity.

Following the lead of D. A. Miller, I will use Michel Foucault and M. M. Bakhtin to develop a theory of the sensation novel as a Foucauldian “punitive city,” a space subject to constant surveillance and discipline—a metaphorical “trial” space. In this space, subversion is put on trial: crimes are investigated, secrets exposed, and deviance punished. I will demonstrate my theory by unveiling disciplinary forces at work in novels by Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Ellen Wood, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, and Charlotte Bronte. Social discipline in the sensation novel goes far beyond lawyers and policemen officially enforcing the law; the entire society represented in the novel acts as an extra-legal disciplinary mechanism that enforces what Foucault calls the “infra-law,” the dominant ideology. In the novels’ trial space, enforcers of the patriarchal ideology work to nullify subversion, to compel deviants to normalize, and ultimately to cover all voices with a Bakhtinian monologism, a unified master-voice. The sensation novel thus provides space for investigative, judiciary, and interpretive disciplinary functions. The sensation novel serves as a trial space for investigating, exposing, and nullifying secrets of deviance and subversion; the genre thereby effects a conservative enforcement of the dominant Victorian social ideology.

---

2 The critical mass of my texts falls in the 1860s, the glory decade of the sensation novel, with the work of Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Ellen Wood, the most prolific and successful sensationalists. My study includes six authors and twelve novels: Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (1847); Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (1852); Wilkie Collins, *The Dead Secret* (1857), *The Woman in White* (1860), *No Name* (1862), *Armadale* (1866), *The Moonstone* (1868), *The Law and the Lady* (1875); Ellen Wood, *East Lynne* (1861); Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), *Aurora Floyd* (1863); Thomas Hardy, *Desperate Remedies* (1871).
II. Literature Review

For most of its history, sensation fiction did not enjoy a secure place in the canon or much critical regard. Mid-Victorian critics and reviewers condemned it as lacking in both literary and moral merit, and the canon-creators have tended to agree with them, at least as regards the genre’s literary quality. However, despite lack of scholarly attention for most of the century or so after its birth circa 1860, sensation fiction never lost the attention of readers: Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, at least, have remained continuously in print. And beginning around 1970, sensation fiction has experienced a flurry of critical attention from mainstream Victorianists as well as from scholars of the various literary theoretical camps. With the rise of theory, the redefinition of the canon, reclamation projects by feminist scholars, and the general expansion of what merits literary study, sensation fiction has enjoyed substantial scholarly attention in the last four decades. If still not exactly mainstream, sensation fiction has earned some standing as a legitimate and fruitful subject of critical analysis. Scholars of all theoretical persuasions have read the sensation novel with an eye to classifying it as either subversive or conservative; most significantly, feminist scholars argue for the genre’s subversion and progressivism. Indeed, with the notable exceptions of D.A. Miller and Ann Cvetkovich, the body of scholarship demonstrates near-consensus in considering the genre progressive if not outright subversive.

The reaction to sensation, of course, properly begins with contemporary reviewers in the 1860s. Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina, editors of *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre* (2006), offer an instructive overview of the early criticism on sensation fiction. Mid-Victorian critics were seemingly uniform in decrying sensation fiction. One oft-cited contemporary critic, for example, called the novels “‘violently’” immoral, likening them to
a “‘virus…spreading in all directions’” (qtd. in Harrison ix). Margaret Oliphant, mouthpiece of mid-Victorian propriety, wrote in an 1867 Blackwood’s article that “nasty thoughts, ugly suggestions, and an imagination which prefers the unclean” characterize sensation novels (Oliphant 275). With all its references to criminality and sexuality, contemporary reviewers condemned the genre for scandalous immorality and impropriety.

Oliphant and her ilk would have been relieved to know that literary scholars generally ignored sensation fiction for a century after the genre’s popularity waned circa 1870. As Harrison and Fantina observe, even the (now) best-known sensation novels received extremely little scholarly attention because “critics considered sensation fiction the bastard child of classic Victorian realism, something to be read as a curiosity but certainly not to be taken too seriously” (x). Moreover, a genre with so much narrative ambiguity and reliance on social history held little appeal to the text-only New Critical literary establishment that ruled much of the twentieth century. While a couple of biographies of Wilkie Collins and a few scattered references here and there throughout the early decades of the twentieth century testify that the literary academy’s collective amnesia was not complete, only in the 1970s and 1980s does the scholarly discourse begin to attend to sensation fiction in any significant way. According to Harrison and Fantina, essays by Kathleen Tillotson and P.D. Edwards in 1969 and 1971, respectively, provide the earliest examples of modern scholars taking sensation seriously (x). Their essays mark the beginning of a scholarly revival of sensation fiction that persists today.

In 1980, Winifred Hughes published The Maniac in the Cellar, a thorough celebration and revivification of sensation novels and novelists, including Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Charles Reade. Hughes’ work may well represent the earliest comprehensive, book-length investigation of the genre. While Hughes admits to having begun by studying
Dickens, the sensation novelists captivated her attention to the eventual exclusion of Boz because, for her, they replace Dickensian moral certainties with rich ambiguity (Harrison ix). Admitting in the preface that the reputedly low-brow sensation novels are, at least in some ways, more complex and interesting than Dickens makes a bold statement for the legitimacy of sensation novels—especially at the early date of 1980. Hughes works to define the genre, arguing that “[w]hat distinguishes the true sensation genre, as it appeared in its prime during the 1860s, is the violent yoking of romance and realism” (16). Thus, Hughes envisions sensation as a synthesis of the two major strains of nineteenth century British fiction. She turns her critical gaze to Ellen Wood and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, two writers whose names are often paired as the leading female sensationalists. She astutely contrasts the two oft-compared writers, however, noting Wood’s innate propriety—her “mawkish and moralizing” tone—as compared to Braddon’s jauntiness, cynicism, and willingness to push the boundaries of formal convention and Victorian propriety (122). Hughes does well to recognize the variety of sensation fiction: she avoids the temptation to generalize the genre as inherently conservative or subversive.

To the extent that any single article can be credited with legitimizing sensation fiction as an area for scholarly inquiry, that article would be Patrick Brantlinger’s “What Is ‘Sensational’ about the ‘Sensation Novel’?” (1982). The inverted commas around sensation novel draw attention to the novelty of writing serious work about the genre, and Brantlinger categorizes sensation as a “minor subgenre” in his opening line (1). However, Brantlinger does make a good argument for why sensation matters, pointing out its position in literary history as the hybridization of Gothic romance with domestic realism and as the precursor to detective and mystery fiction (1). He also offers perhaps the most comprehensive definition of sensation fiction: he argues that sensation plots are driven by mysteries and characterized by a
“disintegration of narrative authority” (2). Further, he observes that crime; adultery; secrets; action; stereotyped heroes, heroines, and villains; and sentimentality are characteristics common throughout the genre (4, 5). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Brantlinger makes his oft-cited claim that sensation subordinates character to plot (12). This claim has proven extremely influential; indeed, later scholars accept as inherited truth that sensation novels have complex plots with simple characters.

In the late 1970s and through the 1980s, sensation fiction became the subject of a substantial body of gender criticism, with attention coming from the feminist and queer theory camps. Harrison and Fantina cite Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) as arguing that female sensation writers used sensation fiction to express discontent with limiting gender roles, and they list Sally Mitchell and Ellen Miller Casey, along with Hughes and Showalter, as major players in the feminist interpretation of the genre (x). Like other feminist critics, Mitchell sees the genre as subversive. She argues, “The subterfuges that novelists had to invent so heroines could have freedom of action and still be pure enough to marry the hero reveal the strain that social limitations imposed on the feminine role” (Mitchell 74). D.A. Miller’s 1988 *The Novel and the Police* applies queer theory in arguing that reading sensation takes on a homosexual aspect; sensation fiction effects nervous sensations in the reader, causing the acting out of repressed feminine sensations in male readers (154). In *Mixed Feelings* (1992), Ann Cvetkovich responds to and builds on Miller by analyzing feminine affect in sensation novels.

As a genre that deals overtly with gender roles in Victorian society, sensation fiction lends itself well to gendered interpretation. By and large, feminists have found the genre to be rather progressive, while queer theorists like Miller and Cvetkovich have proven readier to see conservatism in the texts.
Recent work by feminist and postcolonial scholars demonstrates the ability of sensation fiction to sustain contradictory readings: many scholars read sensation fiction as subversive, while others argue for its conservatism. Because female characters in sensation novels are often “willful and indomitable social actress[es],” the genre can seem generally feminist (Harrison xiv). However, Ann Cvetkovich and Lillian Nayder both argue for the ultimate relative conservatism of Braddon and Collins (xvii). Perhaps Collins biographer Catherine Peters explains the tension best: while Collins “liked women who were intelligent and gifted and spoke their minds,” he “was not in the least interested in female emancipation” (122). Similarly, sensation fiction sustains both imperialist and anti-imperialist postcolonial readings. For example, while Vicki Corkran Willey and Monica M. Young-Zook both read anti-colonialism in Collins, Lillian Nayder points out Collins’ co-authorship of some of Dickens’ aggressively pro-imperialist publications (Harrison xx). Sensation fiction is nothing if not complex. Scholars have argued for radicalism and conservatism on class, race, and empire in sensation novels (Harrison xix). Many of these contradictory interpretations are convincing, and the ability of the supposedly low genre to sustain such contradictory readings speaks to its literary quality.

While sensation fiction remains something of a literary oddball, studies of the genre continue in the new millennium. Some of this work attempts to expand our understanding of the significance and scope of the genre. For example, in her 2006 dissertation, Elizabeth Godke Koonce historicizes sensation fiction alongside nineteenth century legal reforms and expands the definition of sensation fiction to include works by Anthony Trollope, Oscar Wilde, and, of all people, Margaret Oliphant. Koonce’s recent work reminds us that sensation fiction remains fertile ground for scholarly digging. In particular, historicist studies of the fiction alongside socio-legal reforms seem called for. And while a substantial body of scholarship now attempts to
interpret the genre in and of itself, room remains for studies orienting it within the larger literary tradition and situating it historically. Thus, while sensation fiction’s critical revival in the last several decades has been remarkable in contrast to its near-total absence from the discourse for the previous century, much work remains to be done in establishing this erstwhile “minor subgenre” in its rightful place in literary history.

III. Theory: D.A. Miller, Michel Foucault, M. M. Bakhtin

My understanding of the sensation novel owes much to D.A. Miller and his 1988 study of the Victorian novel, *The Novel and the Police*. Miller draws heavily on the theories of Michel Foucault and, to a lesser extent, M. M. Bakhtin. He adapts Foucauldian social theory and applies it to the novel, arguing that the novel is a manifestation of the dominant social ideology. As Miller adapts Foucault, so I attempt to focus Miller onto the sensation novel. I use the Foucauldian concepts of discipline, panopticism, and punishment and the Bakhtinian concept of monologism to contend that sensation novels are Foucauldian punitive spaces in which deviance is disciplined and all voices are normalized into the dominant, monological ideology.

As his title indicates, Miller considers police in the novel, but more to the point he views the novel as the police. In other words, for Miller, the novel enforces social discipline and control. He posits “the possibility of a radical *entanglement* between the nature of the novel and the practice of the police” (2). He asks how police function within the world of the novel, but his larger question asks how the novel functions as part of the societal policing power in the real world (2). Thus, part of his project is to find detectives, policeman, and private investigators in novels and analyze their functions. But, more compellingly, he theorizes that the novel itself has a societal “‘policing function’” (2). He focuses on several traditions of Victorian novel, including Newgate, sensation, detective, and realist novels. Thus, Miller casts his net much more widely
than I do, and it will therefore be part of my project to focus his theory exclusively on the sensation novel in order to better understand this subgenre.

Because the domestic sphere is the province of the novel, the novel extends investigation into “an area that for the most part the law does not cover or supervise” (3). Within the world of the novel, the investigation of a crime or secret restores normality by solving the mystery and withdrawing from the domestic sphere (3). The solution to the mystery and exposition of the crime nullify its subversive effect by reestablishing the status quo. But the investigations conducted in the novel are ultimately less significant than those conducted by the novel. For Miller, “the work of the police is superseded by another, informal, extralegal principle of organization and control” (3). In other words, the novel extends discipline and investigation beyond the explicit work of actual officers of the law. The novel “[i]nobtrusively [sic] suppl[ies] the place of the police in places where the police cannot be” (16). Thus, the novel provides other means of investigation and control. For example, the novel subjects its characters to “social surveillance” of “explicit coerciveness” (18). This surveillance might include observation by other characters in the novel or by the narrator, especially an omniscient narrator. To extend Miller slightly, the very act of reading engages readers themselves in surveillance of the world of the novel.

Panopticism manifests itself in the narrative structure of the novel. Miller suggests that omniscient narrators and seemingly omniscient characters, such as detectives, replace God as regulatory authorities (24). Miller ties the Foucauldian idea of panopticism to Bakhtinian monologism, the “implied master-voice” which “unifies the world in a single interpretive center” (25). Thus, the novel itself has a dominant voice which overpowers and interprets all other voices. This master-voice establishes its authority by “canceling, endorsing, subsuming all the
other voices it lets speak” (25). By “respeaking a characters’ thoughts or speeches, the narration simultaneously subverts their authority and secures its own” (25). To illustrate Miller’s point, consider the narrative structure of Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White*. In each of these works, female voices only reach the reader through male narrators. Thus, I would argue, the patriarchal society neutralizes female expression and asserts its own dominance.

Between *The History of Sexuality* and *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault develops a notion of a society under constant surveillance and discipline. He envisions society as a “punitive city” in which the “functioning of penal power” is “distributed throughout the social space, present everywhere” (*DP* 129). Thus, the power to discipline and punish pervades the social space rather than being concentrated only in individuals or agencies. Mechanisms of power keep everyone under constant surveillance (*DP* 77); those under scrutiny are “fixed by a gaze, isolated and animated” (*HS* 45). Foucault calls this state panopticism, a condition in which everyone is under surveillance by an omnipresent, pan-societal disciplinary mechanism. Panopticism constitutes a “disciplinary society” (*DP* 209). In such a disciplinary society, deviance triggers a “power to punish that [runs] the whole length of the social network” and causes “an immediate reaction of all in relation to the individual” (*DP* 130). Thus, Foucault theorizes a social space of constant surveillance, in which the entire society immediately detects and sanctions deviance.

This social system of surveillance and discipline normalizes individual perspectives into what Bakhtin calls a monologism, a dominant ideological consciousness. In Foucault’s terms, discipline enforces an “infra-law,” effectively a dominant social norm (*DP* 222-3). For both Foucault and Bakhtin, homogenizing social discipline relies on writing and language; as Foucault writes, “a ‘power of writing’” forms “an essential part in the mechanisms of discipline” (*DP* 189). In Foucault’s terms, examination and investigation of individuals result in
documenting them in writing, coding them and homogenizing their individuality, thereby
“captur[ing] and fix[ing] them” (DP 189). For Bakhtin, the act of interpreting and transcribing
others’ voices provides a normalizing power. Hence, in a novel, different voices and ideologies
are subordinated into “a self-sufficient and closed…monologue” (DI 274). Transcribing the
various characters’ voices into a monologism effects “ideological unification” (DI 271). Thus,
the novel re-casts individual voices into the unifying monologism, thereby enforcing the
dominant ideology. In the monological system, any ideas outside the monologism are
“assimilated, repudiated,” or erased (PDP 85). The master-ideology assimilates, rejects, or erases
any dissenting voices. Returning to Foucault, “judging” possesses a “normalizing power,” and
“judges of normality are present everywhere” (DP 304). Even individual stories like testimony
and confession are “incomplete, blind to [themselves]” and only able to achieve “completion in
the one who assimilated and recorded it”; thus, the judge becomes “the master of truth” (HS 67).
In connecting Bakhtin and Foucault, then, it becomes clear that, in the novel, the narrative
performs the normalizing role of interpretation and judgment.

Building on Foucault, Bakhtin, and Miller, I hope to construct a theory of the sensation
novel as a space subject to the surveillance, discipline, and normalization that Foucault sees in
society. Thus, for example, a narrator’s transcription of others’ voices unifies all voices into a
Bakhtinian monologism. Likewise, the novels are spaces of investigation and surveillance,
spaces that detect secrets and punish deviants. All of this culminates in an enforcement of
Foucault’s infra-law to assert a dominant social discipline or ideology. Thus, as Miller theorizes,
the novel takes on the function of the police, enforcing the law of the dominant ideology.
IV. The Investigative Function of the Sensation Novel

The plots of sensation novels rely on deviant women with dark secrets that somehow threaten the social order. These women are strong characters who enjoy substantial agency in the narrative. In looking at powerful women like Marian Halcombe of *The Woman in White* and Lucy Audley of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, one cannot easily dismiss the feminist scholarship that has found in the strong female characters evidence of the subversion and progressivism of the sensation novel. When subjected to Foucauldian analysis, however, these novels prove problematic for any straightforwardly progressive read. As it turns out, while powerful, deviant women do populate the genre, conservative forces in the novels labor to expunge the threats that they pose to the dominant social ideology. Broadly put, the problematic woman either dies or normalizes into a proper Victorian wife and mother. In each case, the punitive trial space of the novel deploys legal and extra-legal forces of surveillance, investigation, and detection against the threatening woman; these forces vindicate the social order by exposing the crime and disciplining the woman with death or assimilation.

*Bleak House* (1853) presents an early and uncomplicated prototype of the sensation plot. Lady Dedlock harbors the secret of an illegitimate daughter, and the static, professional characters Tulkinghorn the lawyer and Bucket the detective policeman relentlessly pursue her to her death. As the wife of the proud baronet Sir Leicester Dedlock, Lady Dedlock dreads the discovery of the secret of her illegitimate daughter, as it would cause her own downfall and permanently stain the majesty of the ancient Dedlock family. Tulkinghorn, the Dedlock family solicitor, tirelessly investigates Lady Dedlock’s secret. He “pursues her doggedly and steadily, with no touch of compunction, remorse, or pity” (*BH* 387). With lawyerly precision, he marshals evidence against her, his implacability rendering her eventual shame inescapable:
Whether he be cold and cruel, whether immovable in what he has made his duty, whether absorbed in love of power, whether determined to have nothing hidden from him in ground where he has burrowed among secrets all his life, whether he in his heart despises the splendour of which he is a distant beam of his gorgeous clients—whether he be any of this, or all of this, it may be that my Lady had better have five thousand pairs of fashionable eyes upon her, in distrustful vigilance, than the two eyes of this rusty lawyer, with his wisp of neckcloth and his dull black breeches tied with ribbons at the knees. (387)

The subjunctive mood of this extraordinarily long sentence casts Tulkinghorn as a force of (human) nature, an inescapable, invulnerable instrument of incisive detection and merciless prosecution. In Foucault’s terms, Tulkinghorn is a mechanism of discipline. Lady Dedlock’s deviance triggers his mechanics, and he advances like a nineteenth century mail train, slow but unstoppable, with Lady Dedlock and her crimes tied to the tracks. As the many-claused subjunctive sentence renders Tulkinghorn’s actual action uncertain but inevitable, so his discovery of Lady Dedlock’s secret is imminent. Similarly, the police detective Mr. Bucket is a panoptic mechanism of social discipline. Mr. Bucket seems to be everywhere at once, and he “notices things in general, with a face as unchanging” as his mourning ring or diamond brooch (306). As elemental as diamond, Bucket appears omnipresent and omniscient, manifestly a part of the panoptic surveillance mechanisms of social discipline.

However, unlike the Dickensian fictional realm, in the world of the sensation novel proper, explicit forces of law and order like Tulkinghorn and Bucket are sometimes present but rarely potent; purely legal means prove inadequate mechanisms of investigation. In The Moonstone, Sergeant Cuff, famed detective of Scotland Yard, takes charge of the investigation of
the stolen diamond. But as Miller observes, Cuff’s investigation ends prematurely in the first half of the novel and even his early theories are eventually disproven; “[t]he detective disappears from what remains a novel of detection…[and] the mystery is solved without his doing” (Miller 37). Cuff’s abortive attempt represents the single foray of formal law enforcement into the mystery, and formal law enforcement proves incapable. Likewise, narrator-protagonist of The Woman in White rules out taking the case to the police or to an actual court of law. He informs us in the novel’s second sentence that “the machinery of the Law” cannot “be depended on to fathom every case of suspicion, and to conduct every process of inquiry,” and therefore the events of the novel will never enter a “Court of Justice” (WIW 3). In The Moonstone, The Woman in White, and other sensation novels, the official forces of the law are addressed and explicitly ruled out as adequate means of solving the mystery at hand.

Indeed, sensation novels often expose the limits of the law in what may seem to be a subversive critique of the social system. For example, the family lawyer in No Name critically laments the law’s inability to protect illegitimate children:

“‘The accident of their father [Mr. Vanstone] having been married, when he first met with their mother, has made [his daughters] the outcasts of the whole social community: it has placed them out of the pale of the Civil Law of Europe.’” (NN 101)

To be sure, this passage can be read as a critique of the law. The lawyer is on one level arguing that the law should extend greater protections to children born out of wedlock. However, the limitations of the official law only serve to emphasize the extra-legal disciplinary power vested in the patriarchy. The lawyer from No Name also reasserts the extra-legal power of the patriarchy to pick up where the law leaves off, noting that “‘the law leaves [Vanstone’s daughters] helpless
at their uncle’s mercy’” (NN 98). Because of the law’s impotence, the uncle, who inherits the father’s patriarchal position along with his money, assumes power over the disinherited young women. The secret of the Vanstones’ illegitimate marriage threatens the normal transmission of property from parents to children, but the patriarchal system does its job, returning money and power to a legitimate male heir. The lawyer’s critique of the law’s impotency thus proves impotent itself, ultimately serving only to emphasize the power of the patriarchy.

Sensation novels often portray the law and its representatives as effeminate and ineffective. Official representatives of the law almost uniformly prove impotent: Tulkinghorn dies before the climax of his investigations, and Cuff withdraws prematurely from his. Moreover, Gilmore, the Fairlie family lawyer in *The Woman in White*, proves manifestly effeminate. At first, Walter Hartright looks to him for the masculine power to save Laura from a potentially bad marriage. He observes that “he was to hear Sir Percival Glyde’s explanation,” “give Miss [Marian] Halcombe the assistance of his experience in forming her judgment,” and “draw the settlement which bound Miss Fairlie irrevocably to her engagement” (*WIW* 115). Hartright clearly views Gilmore as the powerful representative of the law, he whose judgment will shape Marian’s and whose firm hand will bind Laura to Sir Percival. But he expresses surprise to find his appearance “the exact opposite of the conventional idea of an old lawyer” (*WIW* 116). Considering Gilmore’s “florid” complexion, long and carefully brushed white hair, close-fitting trousers, white cravat, and “fashionable” “lavender-coloured kid gloves” (*WIW* 116), one can hardly blame Walter for doubting Gilmore’s potency. Indeed, like Tulkinghorn and Cuff, Gilmore makes an early exit, leaving the investigation and resolution to others. Gilmore’s

---

3 Of the importance of legitimate marriage to the transmission of property, Sally Mitchell writes, “A man can be sure that his name and his estates will be passed on to those of his own blood only if he has absolute possession of a woman’s body” (Mitchell xi).
“continuing to work, early and late” like a young man causes him to have a seizure, so his doctor orders him to “keep out of his office” and “seek repose of body and relief of mind” in vacation on the Continent (WIW 201). Thus, Gilmore’s professional legal exertions directly cause his incapacitation.4

The impotence of law and lawyer enables the virility of the patriarchy’s extra-legal disciplinarians; the withdrawal of the effete lawyer clears the way for Walter’s ascension. As Ann Cvetkovich observes, Walter’s investigation into Laura’s persecution “serves as a vehicle for his accession to patriarchal power,” and the limits of the legal system allow Walter “to step in where…the lawyers leave off” (Cvetkovich 73). The very lapses of the law create the space for Walter to operate as an extra-legal force of discipline. Walter realizes that the lack of legal assistance is “the indirect means of [their] success, by forcing [him] to act for [him]self” (WIW 636). He claims that “the Law” never could have unraveled the conspiracy as he did (WIW 636). Here, Walter emphasizes his own potency relative to the law’s weakness. The limited nature of the law in the sensation novel, rather than merely critiquing the Victorian legal system, in fact emphasizes the power of extra-legal forces of social discipline.

When legal professionals like Gilmore or Sergeant Cuff fade away, what Miller calls extra-legal forces take over the investigation and prosecution. In this model, a young, professional, initially indolent man conducts the investigation after the actual forces of the law, the professional detective or lawyer, prove impotent. While Robert Audley, the detective-figure in Lady Audley’s Secret, is technically a barrister, he never so much as “wished to have a brief” (LAS 32). He does not even pretend to practice law, remaining a “handsome, lazy, care-for-nothing fellow” (32). A less likely dogged pursuer of his bigamous aunt is hard to imagine.

4 I would also suggest that Gilmore’s incapacitation foreshadows Marian’s.
Walter Hartright, perhaps the classic case, begins *The Woman in White* an effeminate aesthete and ends it a resolute and ultimately successful enemy of the villains who imprison his wife in a private asylum. He couldn’t be much less manly early in the novel: he, for example, “habitually” leaves the table with the ladies after dinner rather than remaining to drink wine according to gentlemanly custom (*WIW* 55). Again, not much of a detective. Not dissimilarly, *The Moonstone*’s Franklin Blake enters onto the scene “a bright-eyed young gentleman, dressed in a beautiful fawn-coloured suit, with gloves and hat to match, with a rose in his button-hole, and a smile on his face” (*M* 25). Blake is a far cry from the crusty detective Sergeant Cuff, and yet it’s Blake who eventually solves the mystery. Peculiarly enough, sensation novels frequently displace the detective role onto unlikely, lackadaisical, vaguely effeminate young, educated men.

In order to transform them into mechanisms of discipline, the world of the sensation novel exiles its heroes so that they can return from abroad manly, resolute, and ready to investigate the crime or pursue the criminal. 5Robert Audley spends the better part of a year in Russia before returning to investigate and entrap his beautiful but bigamous and murderous aunt, Lady Audley. His detective-work is so methodical that the object of his inquiries tells him that he “‘ought to have been a detective police officer’” (*LAS* 141). He agrees, responding that he believes his patience would make him an excellent detective (141). Both pursuer and pursued clearly recognize Audley’s role as unofficial enforcer of social discipline and punisher of the deviant woman who threatens the legitimacy of his ancient family line. While Audley provides a suitable example of a detective-hero who undergoes a trajectory from impotence to potency via a period of exile, Walter Hartright again serves as the ideal model. Walter explicitly declares that he emerges from his “self-imposed exile” to Central America “a changed man” (*WIW* 415). He

---

5 Parenthetically, this period of exile plays an important role in the narrative arc by allowing the plot to thicken while the hero isn’t around to do anything about it.
returns to face his future “as a man should” having developed a strong will, a resolute heart, and a self-reliant mind (415). Thus, the sensational world often sends its heroes to be tempered in the crucible of exile. Only after achieving a certain level of masculinity can the men return as extra-legal enforcers of the infra-law in the Foucauldian punitive city that is the sensation novel.

Let’s take *The Moonstone* as something of a hybridized transition between legal and extra-legal forms of investigation. Here, Sergeant Cuff, the famed Scotland Yard detective, fails to solve the crime, so the larger disciplinary mechanisms kick in, engaging everyone from the servants to colonial hybrids. The head steward of the estate at which the moonstone was stolen coins the phrase “detective fever” and admits to being a sufferer. The fever spreads throughout the household and beyond; everyone takes part in solving the mystery. Far beyond the obvious displacement of the detective role from the professional Cuff to the amateur Blake, the novel engages its whole world in exposing the criminal. According to Miller, the novel disperses the “function of detection” throughout the entire community such that “the work of detection is carried forward by the novel’s entire cast of characters” (Miller 42). The extra-legal detective force includes the steward, the family lawyer, the doctor, his biracial assistant, the servants, an eccentric cousin, Rachel Verinder herself, and a slew of odd villagers, all in addition to Blake and Cuff. Almost literally everyone who appears in the novel provides some clue, testimony, or act of detection that leads to the eventual discovery of the thief. And once the thief’s identity is known, a *deus ex machina* in the form of three vengeful Indians appears to punish him with death and reclaim the stolen gem.\(^6\) The work of infra-law enforcement extends far, far beyond

\(^6\) Similarly, in *The Woman in White*, once Walter has prosecuted the villainous Count Fosco close enough to checkmate that he can unravel the conspiracy and restore his wife’s identity, an Italian secret society appears almost from nowhere to murder the Count. In *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White*, the foreign dispensers of vigilante justice provide almost-clumsily obvious examples of mechanisms of discipline engaging to punish the villains.
Her Majesty’s finest; indeed, it extends beyond England, with colonial peoples in the forms of the doctor’s assistant and the Indians taking part in the social discipline.

The entire space of the novel becomes one of detection as everyone engages in a constant surveillance to detect and punish those who threaten the social order. Tapping into Victorian anxieties about disloyal servants, it is often the servants who cast the disciplinary gaze on the deviance of their mistresses. Thus, Aurora Floyd’s three greatest enemies in trying to keep her bigamy a secret are her lady’s companion, her husband’s head groom, and a stable boy. The companion, Mrs. Powell, is “[a]lways on the watch for some clue to the secret whose existence she had discovered” (AF 203). She maintains an unrelenting surveillance on the mistress she hates, so that Aurora’s greatest enemy is within her own home. While a professional Scotland Yard detective eventually turns up to solve a murder, the servants in *Aurora Floyd* conduct the most unrelenting investigation. Similarly, Lady Audley’s maid discovers her mistress’s bigamy and secret child, using the information to blackmail Lucy Audley. In both of these novels and throughout the genre, spying servants or gossiping townspeople place intense pressure on the deviant or criminal character, helping to catalyze the exposure of the secret. The entire community, even within the bastion of the Victorian home, serves as eyes of the disciplinary gaze; the panoptic disciplinary mechanism functions because everyone is always watching.

It is not just illicitly behaving women like Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd whom the social disciplinary mechanism places under surveillance; the gaze spares no one. According to Foucault, panopticism functions so effectively because, while no one is observed all the time, anyone could be observed at any time, so everyone must always adhere to the law of social

---

7 In *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher*, a social history of the 1860 Road Hill Murder, Kate Summerscale notes, “In the mid-Victorian home, servants were often feared as outsiders who might be spies or seducers, even aggressors (SMW 145).
discipline for fear of being detected. Archibald Carlyle’s experience in *East Lynne* exemplifies this principle of panopticism. After (literally) capitalizing on Lady Isabel’s parentless, moneyless state to secure the aristocratic lady for his wife, “The sensations of Mr Carlyle…were very much like those of an Eton boy, who knows he has been in mischief, and dreads detection” (*EL* 123). Carlyle knows that he’s violated a law of the social order. He, a wealthy but bourgeois attorney, has secured a peer’s daughter for his wife by using his capital to rescue her from the poverty in which her father’s insolvent death leaves her. This kind of mixed marriage is in itself socially deviant behavior for a mid-Victorian middle class lawyer. And Carlyle knows that the gaze could be on him at any moment; he fears detection of and punishment for his crime against the social order. Despite his wealth, his natural nobility, his place at the bar, the universal respect of the community, and his generally unimpeachable position in the patriarchal order, Carlyle lives in fear that the panoptic disciplinary gaze will detect his misbehavior and deploy the mechanism of social punishment.

The life of Miss Aldclyffe in Thomas Hardy’s *Desperate Remedies* vividly demonstrates the degree of repression the sensation novel’s punitive space enforces. Miss Aldclyffe harbors a classic secret of sexuality: an illegitimate child. The secret prevents her from marrying her true love for fear that “[h]ad he known her secret he would have cast her out” (*DR* 373). The discovery of such a secret would mean expulsion from the pale of polite society. For as long as her father lives, well into her own middle age, she carries on in “‘enforced silence’” (*DR* 185). The resident patriarch, always the first and best enforcer of social discipline, silences the secrets of her sexuality. Thus she lives most of her life in a state of icy repression. Cytherea, Miss Aldclyffe’s companion and the story’s heroine, occasionally recognizes “the tangible outcrop of

---

8 “Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere” (Foucault, *DP* 195).
a romantic and hidden stratum of the past…clearly defined therein by reason of its strangeness” (DR 71). The metaphor here is telling: Miss Aldclyffe’s exterior is like a layer of cold rock, with an undercurrent of hidden passion occasionally protruding. A lifetime of repressed sexuality, driven by fear of social consequences, leads to passionate expressions of sexuality when she relaxes her guard. She steals into Cytherea’s room in the dead of the night, kissing her “in the outburst of strong feeling, long checked” (DR 80). The entire scene describes expression of long-repressed homoerotic desire: she demands, “‘Cythie, don’t let any man stand between us…I thought I had at last found an artless woman who had not been sullied by a man’s lips’” (DR 82).

The fact that Cytherea is the daughter of her mistress’s former lover heightens the scandalous intensity of the clandestine interaction. This form of illicit sexuality does not receive punishment because “they were woman and woman, not woman and man...so they could not be worked up into a taking story” (DR 111). The harshness and omnipresence of the social disciplinary mechanism drives Miss Aldclyffe to demand kisses from her old lover’s daughter in the dead of the night for fear of the panoptic disciplinary gaze.

A sensation novel rarely lacks a subversive, criminal secret that somehow threatens the status quo. The danger varies. The secret may threaten gender norms, transmission of property, or marriage; it may be murder, theft, incest, bigamy, illegitimacy, or madness. In any case, disciplinary mechanisms deploy to investigate the secret and work to nullify its threat. The conservative tendency of the sensation novel does not lie in a refusal to express deviance or deny the existence of repression—far from it. Indeed, since the plots rely so heavily on dangerous secrets, one might say that the sensation novel is defined by the presence of deviance. But sensation narratives are not ultimately stories of deviance; rather, they narrate the myriad ways the dominant ideology works to counteract threats to its supremacy.
V. The Judiciary Function of the Sensation Novel

Having uncovered the secret or caught the criminal, the world of the sensation novel then serves as judge, jury, and—often—executioner. At times, a patriarchal character within the novel will serve as metaphorical judge, representing the extra-legal system of the novel’s punitive space. Frequently, the narrator explicitly passes judgment on the behavior of a deviant character, usually a poorly behaved woman. And finally, detective-figures like Walter Hartright and Franklin Blake present cases to exonerate the women they love with the entire community of the novel acting as judges. Thus, the men of the sensation novel perform a judiciary function, deciding on the illicitness of behavior and sentencing punishments. For the fallen or deviant woman, the punishment is either execution or assimilation—an early death or a conventional role as wife and mother.

Sensation narrators often explicitly pass judgment on deviant characters, thereby beginning to establish the sensation novel’s judiciary function. For example, *East Lynne*’s Lady Isabel Vane leaves her noble husband, running away to Europe with a scoundrel and bearing his illegitimate child; her sinful actions earn her the explicit judgment of the narrator. The narrator laments that Lady Isabel fails to remain loyal to “her kind, her noble, her judicious husband!” (*EL* 217). Indeed, the narrator wishes that Isabel had immediately confessed her temptation toward another man to her husband, gushing that “[h]e would only have cherished her the more deeply, and sheltered her under his fostering care, safe from harm” (*EL* 217). The narrator overtly endorses the role of the husband as the judge of his wife’s crimes and confessor of her sins. Further, the narrator suggests that an appropriate solution to Isabel’s temptation would be for her husband to cordon her off more completely from the outside world. While a great many characters in the novel condemn Isabel’s behavior—indeed, all those who comment at all are
uniform in their condemnation—the novel asserts its judiciary function most vigorously in the omniscient narrator’s own judgment.

As in *East Lynne*, Aurora Floyd’s narrator casts a judgmental gaze on Aurora’s secret bigamy. The narrator declares that Aurora’s decisions lead her down “thorny and crooked ways” and that “[h]er own hands had sown the dragon’s teeth, from whose evil seed had sprung up armed men, strong enough to rend and devour her” (*AF* 393). The narrator places full responsibility for her sins squarely in Aurora’s own lap. With the benefit of omniscience, the narrator is likewise in a position to editorialize about the harm Aurora’s secret will have on her marriage: the narrator claims that “a secret” severs the bond between husband and wife more powerfully “than any width of land or wide extent of ocean” (*AF* 173). The rather interventionist narrator, who occasionally interjects in the first person, decries secrets of illicit behavior, especially on the part of wives. The narrator enacts the judiciary function of the novel by interjecting in a judicial voice to condemn Aurora’s behavior.

In place of or in addition to a judicial narrator, a patriarchal character often adopts the judiciary function. Returning to *East Lynne*, Archibald Carlyle treats his wife, Lady Isabel, very well, even doting on her, but he also acts as her lord and judge. When Isabel (wrongly) questions his fidelity, he becomes “both annoyed and vexed” and “[stands] upright before her, calm, dignified, almost solemn in his seriousness” (*EL* 181). Carlyle responds to his wife’s questioning by rising into a forbidding, judicial figure, effectively quashing her resistance. Lord Mount Severn, cousin to Isabel and inheritor of her father’s baronetcy, claims outright this patriarchal role as judge of female illicitness. He declares, “‘When these inexplicable events take place in the career of a woman, it is a father’s duty to look into motives and causes and actions…Your father is gone, but I stand in his place’” (*EL* 304). The patriarch stands as the judge, performing a
judiciary function within the family, weighing “motives and causes.” Isabel’s deviant behavior is subject to the scrutiny of her husband and the baronet, the judges of her offenses. Believing herself on the verge of death, Isabel begs pardon from her patriarchal judges. She writes to Lord Mount Severn, asking him to go to Carlyle and express her plea for him to forgive her “crime” (EL 322). Isabel knows that she must seek pardon in the family court, so to speak. She further knows that her death is the only restitution the court will accept: she is “glad to die, to deliver [the family]… from the disgrace and shame she had been to them” (EL 322). Isabel does not even question that a death sentence is the only adequate punishment for paying her debt to the family society. Within the judiciary space of the novel are layers of judgment: while on the macro-level the novel itself represents the passing of judgment, institutions and individuals—families, patriarchs—also perform the judicial role.

In *Aurora Floyd*, the consummately patriarchal Talbot Bulstrode acts as Aurora’s judge and deliberately commutes her death sentence to one of conventionalization. He intervenes to save her from public exposure and the condemnation of society—a condemnation which, as Lady Dedlock reminds us, often results in an untimely death. Aurora and her husband, John Mellish, each seek Talbot’s advice on managing the scandal of Aurora’s bigamy and the mysterious murder of her erstwhile husband. Talbot deploys “the administrative powers of his mind,” wasting no attention on “sentiment or emotion” (356). In his role as the arbiter of patriarchal authority, Talbot contains the scandal, taking action to preserve the *status quo*. His actions establish Talbot himself as part and parcel of the mechanisms of discipline. Aurora tells her father that she is to marry John for the second time after her first husband’s death because “Talbot Bulstrode says that it is necessary, as our marriage was not legal” (365). On Talbot’s advice, Aurora and John legitimize their marriage, redeeming the *status quo*. Similarly, Talbot
tells John, “‘The assassin must be found, John…[otherwise] you and your wife will be the victims of every penny-a-liner who finds himself at a loss for a paragraph’” (411). Talbot catalyzes the search for the dead first husband’s murderer, knowing that finding the culprit will save Aurora from condemnation as the murderess in the court of public opinion. Furthermore, Talbot allies Mr. and Mrs. Mellish with the Scotland Yard detective in searching for the true murderer (412). He therefore effects the investigation that vindicates Aurora and convicts the half-witted Steeve Hargraves. Thus, Talbot protects the system, legitimizing Aurora’s marriage and saving her from scandal by displacing the death sentence onto the half-wit. He realizes his judicial role, feeling “very much pleased with his part in the little domestic drama” and conscious “of being the author of all this happiness” (362). In thinking of himself as the director and author of the Melishes’ domestic happiness, Talbot self-identifies as the judge of the patriarchal order by whose benevolent intercession Aurora survives defamation.

Virile lovers must take up the cases of deviant or persecuted female characters. The lover defends her and argues for her exoneration in the court of the novel, with the whole community serving as judge and jury. In The Woman in White and The Moonstone, Walter Hartright and Franklin Blake are motivated by the desire to exonerate their lovers, who suffer under the condemnatory gaze of society. Walter dramatically declares his mission to Kyrle, his attorney:

[Laura, his past lover and future wife,] has been cast out as a stranger from the house in which she was born—a lie which records her death has been written on her mother’s tomb—and there are two men, alive and unpunished, who are responsible for it. That house shall open again to receive her, in the presence of every soul who followed the false funeral to the grave; that lie shall be publicly erased from the tombstone, by the authority of the head of the family; and those
two men shall answer for their crime to ME, though the justice that sits in tribunals is powerless to pursue them. (WIW 454).

Walter identifies himself as a one-man arm of the extralegal disciplinary mechanism. Without the aid of any official officers of the law or officers of the court, he determines personally to exonerate his wife, punish the villains who stole her identity and her fortune, and restore her to her proper place in society by publicly proving her identity. Walter must act as Laura’s attorney in the metaphorical courtroom of her community, winning his case by convincing her uncle and the townspeople that she is indeed Laura Fairlie. In the end, Walter grandly presents his case and reestablishes his wife’s identity to the entire community. Walter summons the population of Limmeridge to a trial in the breakfast room of Limmeridge House, Laura’s childhood home. Her uncle and Kyrle, the lawyer, preside as judges, and the townspeople act as jurors. Walter presents his case by “read[ing] the narrative of the conspiracy” (WIW 634). The narrative he reads is, of course, the novel as the reader also receives it. When he has done, “Mr Kyrle [rises]…and declare[s], as the legal adviso…that [Walter’s] case was proved by the plainest evidence he had ever heard in his life”; the jury expresses its agreement by public acclamation (WIW 635). Here, the entire community takes part in the trial to restore Laura to her proper place in society, serving as the jury in the extralegal trial space that the novel becomes.

In order to serve as a woman’s legitimate defender in the trial space of the sensation novel, a man must legally be her male relative. Walter Hartright, prototypical as always, again serves as the model. Walter recognizes that, as Laura’s mere friend, he does not have the qualification to enter the trial space on her behalf: “‘I have no claim on her, which society sanctions, which the law allows, to strengthen me in…protecting her…If I am to fight our cause…I must fight it for my Wife’” (WIW 572). In the conservative world of the sensation
novel, Walter has no power to defend Laura until he establishes his “claim” and legitimizes their relationship in society’s eyes through a conventional marriage. Similarly, *Desperate Remedies*’ young architect Edward Springrove recognizes that only by marrying her can he save his lover, Cytherea, from society’s vilifying gaze. Even after Edward rescues Cytherea from an apparently bigamous marriage, her “freedom [brings] no happiness” because the town “invent[s] and circulate[s]” scandalous rumors about her consummating an illegitimate marriage (*DR* 276). Like Walter before him, Edward sees her alienated position under the punitive gaze of society as an indication that she’s in need of a husband. He declares, “Cytherea has been left in a nameless and unsatisfactory, though innocent state, by this unfortunate, and now void, marriage…A marriage with me…would give her a *locus standi*” (*DR* 279). As a woman who went through a sham marriage, she is neither a properly unmarried girl nor a properly married woman.\(^9\) She therefore has no proper position in society in the absence of a husband. Society charges both Laura Fairlie and Cytherea Graye with namelessness, and only husbands vested with proper patriarchal authority can successfully legitimize them when they stand accused.

While the narrators, communities, and characters perform judicial functions, the ultimate judicial role falls to the reader. The sensation narrative sometimes very explicitly frames itself as a court case in demonstration of the sensation novel’s awareness of its own judiciary function. Of course, despite the legal metaphor, the novel by definition operates outside of official law enforcement. Even when the novel is unequivocal about its own parallel to explicit structures of social discipline, its disciplinary function remains extralegal. *The Woman in White* explicitly and immediately establishes itself as an alternative to a real court of law. The narrator declares that the story will never enter a real “Court of Justice” because of the limitations of the “Law,” so

---

\(^9\) N.B.: It eventually becomes clear that the marriage was legitimate after all because the villain had murdered his first wife before marrying the second.
“[as] the Judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now” (WIW 5). The narrator identifies himself, essentially, as a defense attorney marshalling evidence and collecting testimony to place before the solemn gaze of the judge—the reader. Similarly, as Miller notes, *The Moonstone* begins “like a legal deposition,” and the “quasi-legal status of the prologue extends to the entire novel” (Miller 47). In this model, the master-narrator becomes the attorney, the individual testifiers become witnesses, and the reader becomes the judge. The reader’s panoptic judicial gaze conducts constant surveillance of the events of the narrative. By working to satisfy the judicial reader of the guilt of the deviants and the efficacy of the punishment dispensed, the novel seeks to restore the social order.

The trial-novels often restore order by issuing the death sentence to the criminals. Lady Dedlock of *Bleak House* provides an early and apt example of this phenomenon. Burdened with the devastating secret of an illegitimate child and pursued to the brink of exposure, she dies “a distressed, unsheltered, senseless creature” at the gate of a graveyard (*BH* 756). Pursued by the disciplinary mechanisms of a society that is out to punish her, Lady Dedlock pays the price of her youthful sin by dying. In the sensation novel, death is the most common destination for a woman with a secret. Or, as in the cases of Anne Catherick of *The Woman in White* or Lucy Audley, death follows confinement to an insane asylum. In any case, the punitive world of the novel knows exactly what to do with dangerous women. In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the forces of the patriarchy unite seamlessly to confine and ultimately kill the criminal woman. The doctor tells Robert, “‘She is dangerous!’” (LAS 379). In order to “shut her from the world” and thereby “do service to society,” they confine her to the asylum where she ultimately dies (LAS 381). The patriarchal enforcers of the social order understand each other perfectly; the doctor, the superintendent of the madhouse, Robert, and Sir Michael close ranks in condemning Lady
Audley to confinement and death. In order to nullify danger to the social order, the punitive spaces of the novels shut away or kill off the deviant women.

A deviant woman escapes the death sentence only if the court of the novel commutes her sentence to one of mandatory assimilation. The law is very simple: all characters must conform to social norms in order to survive the novel. Characters who fail to normalize die. As Walter Hartright and Robert Audley demonstrate, indolent, effeminate men must masculinize themselves in order to function. Likewise, deviant women, whether their deviance consists of a gruesome crime or merely of independence, must become proper wives and mothers. Magdalen Vanstone of *No Name* is one of the genre’s most powerful deviant women; she disguises herself and marries a man she hates in order to recover her father’s lost fortune. Magdalen ends the novel declaring to her husband, “the one dear object of my life all my life to come, is to live worthy of you” (*NN* 548). Even this woman, who seeks powerfully to undermine the system by exploiting marriage to gain back a fortune, conventionalizes into a model wife and submissively pledges fealty to her husband. Likewise, *Aurora Floyd* closes leaving Aurora “changed…less defiantly bright…bending over the cradle of her first-born” (*AF* 459). The bigamous, duplicitous Aurora escapes death by assimilating into a model Victorian wife and mother. The novel’s punitive mechanism pardons only those deviants who ultimately conform.

Acts of judgment pervade the sensation novel. Narrators judge characters, characters judge each other and themselves, and the reader judges everything. And society’s judgment is not toothless. Rarely does anyone in a sensation novel receive formal sentencing from a literal court of law, but the metaphorical court of the novel dispenses punishments regularly. For

---

10 Some version of the death of the deviant woman occurs in almost every sensation novel I’ve read. And letting the woman off really challenges the genre; for example, *Aurora Floyd* seems only to spare Aurora by displacing the requisite death onto a half-witted stable boy.
villains and subversive women, the most common punishment is death. But rarely is anyone allowed to finish the novel alive and deviant: to survive, everyone, even the male investigator-figures like Walter Hartright, must normalize into a proper gender role.

VI. The Interpretative Function of the Sensation Novel

Along with its investigative and judiciary functions, the sensation novel performs an interpretive, censoring role. The narrative reduces multiple voices into a monological, unified, dominant voice. Having discovered the secret, caught the criminal, performed judgment, and dispensed punishment, the dominant ideology then asserts ownership even of the story of deviance. Implicit in the novel’s judiciary function is its interpretive function. As a punitive space, the novel has the power to interpret, control, and define all voices, so that no story can be told or voice heard without passing through the monologizing censor.

Walter Hartright’s role as master-narrator of the numerous narrative voices in The Woman in White best demonstrates the ability of the sensation novel to reduce various voices into monology; Walter’s role as master-narrator imposes patriarchy on the story and conceals feminine identity and expression. Walter makes all decisions on how to tell the story. Lenora Ledwon discusses some of the ways Walter inscribes his personality on the narrative, pointing out that he literally reads the tale aloud to the Limmeridge villagers when proving Laura’s identity and proclaiming her as his wife (Ledwon 19). Like the community within the novel, the novel’s readers, too, only receive the tale via Walter’s editorial voice. At one point Walter casually mentions, “I tell this story under feigned names” (WIW 556). Therefore, he effectively suppresses the other characters’ identities. Later, he proudly proclaims, “I have disguised nothing relating to myself” (WIW 595). He essentially admits that he only necessarily speaks truly regarding himself. Walter does not even allow Marian and Laura to tell their own stories. He
dismisses the women’s narration as “inevitably confused” and declares that in order for the stories to be told “intelligibly” he will himself relate them in his “studiously simple” prose (*WIW* 422). Hence, the male narrator completely supersedes the two women, denying their right—their ability, even—to speak for themselves. Walter finishes the novel by claiming that he will honor Marian by letting her words “end our Story” (*WIW* 643). In this crowning moment of irony, however, Walter explicitly does *not* allow Marian’s voice or words to close the narrative; his words introduce resounding silence. By interjecting his own voice to inform the readers that he will condescend to let Marian finish the story, he of course reserves the last word for himself. He contrives to silence even the strong Marian. The final, unavoidable force of patriarchy in the novel comes from the fact that no female voice or story is permitted to speak or be told without passing through Walter; the narrator-in-chief is the patriarch.

Similarly, Franklin Blake, along with the family steward and lawyer, orchestrates the narrative of *The Moonstone*—in spite of the fact that it’s a woman’s story they’re telling. The reader never hears Rachel Verinder speak a word without it passing through the voice of her fiancée, her butler, or her lawyer. Miller argues that *The Moonstone* is “thoroughly *monological*—always speaking a master-voice that corrects, overrides, subordinates, or sublates all other voices it allows to speak” (Miller 55). That master-voice is most directly that of Franklin Blake, the lover then husband of Rachel Verinder who curates the narrative. The narrative structure is really a joint project that Blake shares with Betteredge and Bruff—the butler and the lawyer. In other words, three rather conventional representatives of the patriarchy do the narrating. Betteredge, whose voice we hear more than any other’s, is a bumbling old reactionary who often indulges in gentle misogyny or a tirade about the evils of foreign
educations. Thus, it’s safe to call the master-voice of the novel rather conservative. Among them, they “hit on the right way of telling it” (M 9). That way is basically for the three of them to tell the story—Rachel’s story—by recording their own recollections and collecting testimony from other witnesses. As Miller asserts, “discipline” is “inherent in the novel’s technique of narration” (Miller 52). The disciplinary device hinges on the fact that no voice gets to speak without passing under the editorial gaze of Blake and company. Thus, in effect, two old men and her husband tell Rachel’s story in their own master-voices while she spends most of the novel locked in her bedroom.

In nearly every case, the male characters playing the lawyerly roles in the novels consciously decide not to let the case of the crime or mystery at hand go to court; they consider the extralegal trial space of the novel an adequate forum for trying the case. In a real courtroom, there are rules against tampering with evidence, leading witnesses, and distorting testimony. And those activities are exactly what the lawyerly men in sensation novels thrive on. Going to court would mean the unfiltered exposition of the story of crime or deviance without the nullifying, censoring influence on which the novels’ disciplinary function relies. Walter Hartright’s invasive editorial strategies are just the beginning. Walter also leads witnesses, as when, recognizing that Mrs. Clements is “not accustomed to arrange [her] ideas,” he “by watchful questioning, carrie[s] her from point to point” until he hears the evidence he wants (WIW 468-9). Such interventionist questioning by an attorney would quickly garner a sustained objection in a proper court of law. Walter also admits to “careful suppressions and alterations” and “concealments from the reader” in certain parts of the narrative (WIW 588). That sounds rather like tampering with the evidence. Not dissimilarly, in The Law and the Lady, the family solicitor distorts a woman’s suicide note,

11 He, for example, professes that “nota bene, a drop of tea is to a woman’s tongue what drop of oil is to a wasting lamp” (M 103); Betteredge is rather an endearingly condescending patriarch.
an essential piece of evidence. In a mockery of modern forensics, the Scotch lawyer pieces the
destroyed note back together. Where unrecoverable gaps appear in the letter, he “suppl[ies] the
deficiency in exact accordance with what appeared to be the meaning of the writer” (L&L 390).
Any literary scholar will attest to the impossibility of ascertaining the original intent of a writer.
He therefore essentially imposes his own interpretations on the woman’s last words, only
reinforcing the alarming proclivity of men in sensation novels for superimposing their own
voices over those of women—especially deviant women, like Eustace Macallan’s suicidal first
wife. A piece of evidence reconstructed so amateurishly (and by the prosecuting attorney
himself, no less) would never be admissible in a court of law, but it meets the lower standard for
admission into the trial space of the novel. Because the distortion and erasure of female
testimony are indispensible to the *modus operandi* of the metaphorical and literal lawyers in the
sensation novel, they choose to try their cases in the extralegal disciplinary space of the sensation
novel rather than in a courtroom.

When the sensation novel does permit a woman a measure of narrative agency and voice,
the novel’s punitive space punishes her impudence; the patriarchal order harshly reasserts itself,
re-establishing the patriarchal monology in no uncertain terms. *The Woman in White*’s Marian
Halcombe is a powerful woman and a fine example of why the sensation novel might seem to
subvert the patriarchy. Indeed, Count Fosco, the novel’s arch-villain, credits her with “the
resolution of a man” (*WIW* 330). Marian’s intrepid manly resolution comes very close to foiling
the villainous plot against her sister Laura, but the novel’s disciplinary mechanisms engage at the
last moment to punish her deviance and relieve her of agency. In order to eavesdrop on the
plotting villains, Marian removes her silk dress and bulky petticoats and replaces them with a
simple black traveling cloak, declaring that in her new garb “no man could have passed through
the narrowest spaces more easily than I” (326).\(^\text{12}\) Indeed, in equipping herself to pass through narrow places, Marian imbues herself with the symbolic power of phallic penetration. However, the novel punishes her deviance; her exposure to the cold while eavesdropping in gender-neutral clothing incapacitates her and prevents her from foiling the plot despite the knowledge she obtains by spying. The punitive world relieves her of agency when she needs it most, thus punishing her aspirations to masculinity. Marian nearly dies of her illness, and she recovers only with “[p]ain and fear and grief written on her as with a brand” (WIW 419). By the end of the novel, Marian is quite the model woman; as Judith Sanders memorably puts it, “Feisty, sexy Marian is gelded into a nanny, nursemaid, and angel-in-the-houses” (Sanders 63). While Marian’s agency to some degree represents a subversive element in the text, the novel punishes her deviance harshly and completely; she is entirely subdued by the patriarchal “brand.”

Other sensational women who aspire to narrative agency are, like Marian, disciplined harshly by the patriarchal punitive space. Indeed, an experience of narrative violation, a metaphorical rape, is a common punishment for women who attempt to be movers and shakers in the world of the sensation novel. Marian again serves as the prototypical example. Through her diary entries, Marian herself narrates the story of her spying on the villains. As she descends into the illness that eventually incapacitates her entirely, the diary becomes increasingly incoherent and finally stops. At this point in the diary, “another entry appears…in a man’s handwriting, large, bold, and firmly regular” (WIW 343). It proves to be an entry by Fosco, the villain, indicating that he’s taken advantage of Marian’s incapacitation to read her diary. He expresses his “admiration” and thanks her for “awakening the finest sensibilities” in him (WIW 344).

Invading her private diary while she lies prone gives Fosco physical pleasure, and the penetration

\(^{12}\) As scholar Lenora Ledwon observes, Marian symbolically sheds her femininity by casting off her bulky lady’s clothing (Ledwon 16).
of her intimate space feels to Marian—and the reader—like a physical violation. Indeed, Miller terms it “virtual rape” (Miller 162). Fosco’s pleasure in invading her private space represents an escalation of her earlier experience of Walter voyeuristically “allow[ing] himself the luxury of admiring” her “comely and well-developed” body while she doesn’t know he’s watching (WIW 31). Fosco’s violation is the most obvious manifestation of the “brand” that subdues Marian and inscribes “pain and fear and grief” on her face (WIW 419). For the rest of the novel, Marian yearns to revenge herself on Fosco with physical violence, her “hands tingl[ing] to strike him” (WIW 559). Marian’s reward for taking action against the villains and attempting to tell the story herself is to have her narrative violated by a man’s “large, bold, and firmly regular” writing. Fosco invades and superscribes her writing, even endorsing its accuracy (WIW 344). Then, Walter collects it into the master-narrative, exercising substantial editorial discretion. Thus, by intervening in the plot and trying to narrate her own story, Marian triggers the disciplinary mechanisms, bringing down on herself the full punishment of the infra-law.

Similarly, Valeria Macallan of The Law and the Lady suffers punishment for behaving unconventionally in the punitive space of the sensation novel. Valeria is one of the most powerful women in the genre because she fills the roles of both narrator and protagonist. In fact, this novel inverts the usual model of the man laboring to vindicate his lover; Valeria strives to exonerate her disgraced husband. Because a court failed to exonerate him from the charge of murder, Valeria takes it upon herself, declaring, “What the Law has failed to do for you, your Wife must do for you” (L&L 116). However, perhaps unsurprisingly at this point, Valeria’s position in the narrative is not as radical as it seems. She really just wants to clear Eustace so he can resume his proper patriarchal role: in her own words, she proves his innocence so that he can

---

13 As detailed on pp. 30-31.
“be the guide and companion of [her] life” (L&L 241). Valeria enters the public sphere on her husband’s behalf merely so that she can reinstate him to his proper place as her lord and master and return to her own role as submissive wife. And indeed, that’s exactly what she does. She closes the narrative with a final appeal to the reader: “Abuse me as much as you like. But pray think kindly of [her husband] Eustace” (L&L 413). Elevating Eustace back to his proper place in the patriarchy is Valeria’s sole goal throughout the narrative.

Not surprisingly, the disciplinary system punishes Valeria’s deviance. She receives a warning to cease her deviant conduct while interviewing the mad, deformed Misserimus Dexter:

He caught my hand in his, and devoured it with kisses. His lips burnt me like fire.
He twisted himself suddenly in the chair, and wound his arm round my waist. In the terror and indignation of the moment, vainly struggling with him, I cried out for help. (299)

Dexter’s violation of Valeria is reminiscent of Marian’s experience; his burning lips recall Marian’s suffering from the patriarchal “brand.” Significantly, Valeria has this harrowing experience while attempting to perform a masculine role, conducting an investigation and collecting testimony. Through Dexter, the novel’s punitive space sends her a message to return to her place. Sure enough, she promptly seeks the protection of her patriarchal, grandfatherly friend Benjamin, and she never goes near Dexter again without Benjamin accompanying her bearing a large stick. The warning immediately has its intended effect. Valeria recognizes that the “consequences…associated with” her experience form an “insurmountable obstacle” to her ongoing investigation; she “recoil[s] from the thought” of carrying on (300). While Valeria acts in unconventional roles as investigator, narrator, and protagonist, the novel disciplines her unconventionality.
The treatment of women as exchangeable commodities by patriarchal power brokers is far from unusual in sensation novels. For example, in *East Lynne*, Archibald Carlyle uses his bourgeois capital effectively to purchase his wife, Lady Isabel, from her insolvent aristocratic father along with his estate. Carlyle’s capital allows him to purchase the East Lynne estate from the old earl in a secret transaction, court his daughter, and be perfectly poised to take her in when the old man dies. When Isabel later protests, “‘I have nothing to repay you with,’” Carlyle looks “excessively amused” (*EL* 153). Carlyle is amused at her naïveté; of course, she repays his financial investment with herself. *East Lynne* demonstrates that a transaction transferring a woman is not unheard of in the sensation genre, but *Bleak House* takes it a step further. While Esther is one of the few female sensation narrators to escape editing by a male master-narrator, patriarch John Jarndyce explicitly gives her, a narrator, to another man as a gift. Esther agrees to marry Jarndyce, the guardian old enough to be her father, largely from a desire to repay his generosity in taking her in as a penniless, illegitimate orphan (*BH* 575). Later, however, Jarndyce decides to give her to another man. He transfers his fiancée by saying, “‘Allan…take from me a willing gift, the best wife that ever a man had…Take with her the little home she brings you’” (*BH* 797). In fairness, Jarndyce passes his right to Esther to Allan because he knows they’re in love and wishes her to be happy. But the fact remains that he effectively gives her as a piece of property, just like the house he gives along with her. That the benevolent patriarch of the novel transfers one of its narrators to another man only underscores the power of the patriarchal order to control feminine expression. Indeed, in both *East Lynne* and *Bleak House*, women of critical importance to the plot are transferred along with houses from older patriarchs to younger. In the sensation novel, the female voice is a salable commodity.
Finally, the patriarchal figures—those who act as the metaphorical lawyers and judges within the trial spaces of the novels—exercise control over discourse, censoring out any reference to deviance. Thus, after exposing and convicting Lady Audley, Robert Audley instructs Sir Michael’s daughter, “Say nothing to your father that you might not have said…before he married a second wife…avoid all mention of Lady Audley’s name” (*LAS* 362). Robert Audley puts the bigamous, murderous Lady Audley under erasure, censoring her very name from the familial discourse. Similarly, Archibald Carlyle declares of his adulterous ex-wife, “Neither need her name be mentioned again…A barred name it has hitherto been: let it so continue” (*EL* 624). Therefore, the men who have the power in the novels—Audley and Carlyle are both lawyers—consciously and decisively stamp out any reference to the deviant women. They expel deviance from the discourse just as they expel the fallen women from their homes. In both of the cases cited here, the censoring takes place near the end of the novel, thus ensuring that the novel’s punitive space not only punishes the criminals (Ladies Audley and Isabel both die), but erases any reference to them. Hence, the novels end having nullified the deviance.

The *coup de grace* of the conservative tendency of the sensation novel is that the dominant ideology retains the power of narrating and interpreting the story of deviance. Thus, while the sensation novel often gives voice to resistance, those subversive voices only reach the reader through the monologizing powers of the dominant ideology. By censoring, editing, and

---

14 Cvetkovich speaks to the interpretive power Robert holds over Lady Audley: “By casting Lady Audley as a beautiful fiend…Robert Audley exorcises the threat she is taken to represent and consolidates the patriarchal family. […] The construction of Lady Audley as the repository of dangerous secrets and impulses mobilizes Robert Audley’s detective work…he has the power to discover truth and administer the law” (Cvetkovich 50-52). Cvetkovich’s analysis suggests Robert’s awareness of his own interpretive power, of his control over the discourse surrounding Lady Audley; he “casts” and “constructs” her character so as to eliminate the danger she poses and consolidate his own patriarchal power. Thus, “[h]is epistemological power…becomes a juridical power” (61).
interpreting the narration of deviance, the dominant ideology only permits a dangerous story to reach the reader on its own terms.

**VII. Conclusions: *Jane Eyre* and the Complex Conservatism of the Sensation Novel**

As we’ve seen, the sensation genre allows ample stage time to deviant characters, dangerous secrets, and radically powerful women; in short, the sensation novel gives voice to any number of threats to the social system. But the silenced and neutered Marian Halcombe, the confined Lucy Audley, and the dead Lady Dedlock bear (silent) witness to the power of the sensation novel to contain such threats. We as readers hear their voices—for a time. Then we see the forces of the dominant ideology work to contain, edit, silence, interpret, or erase those subversive voices. But the effort shows: the novels cannot be called uncomplicatedly conservative because the very visibility of the efforts to contain subversion ensures that the *damnatio memoriae* remains incomplete. Equally undeniable as the subversive tension is the powerful conservative force at work in the sensation novel. The patriarchal investigators do win. They end the novels happily ensconced in the landed gentry, their investigations having established their juridico-patriarchal power so completely that not even the stories of subversion can emerge without passing through their interpretation. One has only to think of *Jane Eyre* (1847) to realize how peculiarly conservative the sensation novel really is.

*Jane Eyre* bears many similarities to the sensation novel; its pages are replete with secrets, suicide, madness, and bigamy. And *Jane Eyre* offers much to the kind of Foucauldian analysis I’ve been applying to the sensation novel: surveillance and discipline are constantly in evidence. Yet it’s not truly a sensation novel. The difference lies in its lack of patriarchal discipline enforcing the dominant ideology. Jane Eyre’s narrative and social agency establish her

---

15 Indeed, Lady Dedlock’s classically Dickensian name encapsulates the ends of most of the genre’s subversive characters: they wind up either dead or locked up.
as subversive to the patriarchal social ideology, yet no enforcers of that dominant ideology succeed in disciplining or punishing her. She begins and ends a deviant woman on her own terms; no disciplinary mechanism silences, kills, or neuters her. Thus, *Jane Eyre* elucidates what the sensation novel is by demonstrating what it is not; Jane Eyre rises to a height of subversion that the disciplinary trial space of a true sensation novel would never allow.

Jane Eyre enjoys complete narrative agency. She writes in the first person, with no framing narrator or editorial power anywhere in evidence. She declares, “Hitherto I have recorded in detail the events of my insignificant existence…But this is not to be a regular autobiography: I am only bound to invoke memory where I know her responses will possess some degree of interest” (*JE* 83). In this opening statement of a chapter, Jane demonstrates complete narrative agency; she is constructing her own life story on her own terms. In a true sensation novel, such a declaration of narrative agency would come only from a male master-narrator, a Walter Hartright or a Franklin Blake. Like Marian Halcombe, Jane writes her own experiences from her own memory; unlike Marian Halcombe, no male narrator frames or supersedes her voice with his own. Jane also makes clear that she is not a mouthpiece of the dominant ideology. She defies “solemn doctrines about the angelic nature of children” even though society as a whole subscribes to these doctrines; she asserts, “I am not writing…to echo cant, or prop up humbug; I am merely telling the truth” (*JE* 108). Jane suggests that society embraces “cant” and “humbug” that she herself recognizes as false. While other narrators might write to “prop up humbug,” Jane clearly indicates that she does not narrate to reinforce the dominant ideology. An independent woman with full narrative control narrates *Jane Eyre*; the

---

16 Note that “‘Humbug!!’” is a favorite exclamation of Mr. Rochester (*JE* 134). Thus, in refusing to “prop up humbug,” Jane associates Rochester with the ideology she rejects.

17 In Marxist terms, one might say that Jane here sees through the false consciousness.
same can rarely be said of a sensation novel. If a self-narrating female voice appears in a sensation novel, it typically does so only safely embedded within and under a male narrative presence, as is the case for Marian Halcombe. Considering Jane Eyre as a counterpoint, it becomes more difficult to consider even so strong a character as Marian really subversive of the patriarchal order. Indeed, compared to Jane, Marian seems quite powerfully disciplined by the forces of the dominant ideology. Marian, after all, never truly has a public voice. Her voice remains safely locked away in her private diary until male hands break the lock, male eyes read her story, and male voices convey her narrative.

*Jane Eyre* showcases feminist resistance to the judicial power of the patriarchy. Lowood school represents a fine example of a Foucauldian punitive space, one in which the repressive clergyman Brocklehurst enforces “‘Silence!’” and “‘Order!’” (*JE* 45). But *Jane Eyre* gives full voice to a counter-narrative, describing the women of Lowood resisting Brocklehurst’s authority. Miss Temple, the superintendant of the school, resists him, providing a matriarchal alternative to the patriarchal repression. For example, when Brocklehurst’s harsh frugality results in the schoolgirls being given inedible food, Miss Temple orders an extra meal for everyone, declaring “‘It is to be done on my responsibility’” (*JE* 48). The fact that the adult Jane remembers this act of resistance that she witnessed as a schoolgirl attests to the impact of Miss Temple’s rebelliousness on the (also rather rebellious) narrator.

Moreover, Miss Temple overturns the judgment and punishment of the patriarchy, as the Rivers sisters and Jane herself do later. When Brocklehurst, “the dread judge,” unjustly punishes Jane, Miss Temple whispers “counsel” in Jane’s ear (*JE* 65). Brocklehurst here acts as the domineering patriarchal judge, while Miss Temple serves as Jane’s benevolent defense counsel.

---

18 See my analysis of *The Woman in White* on pp. 30-31.
The punishment seems to come right from Foucault: Jane is “exposed to the general view on a pedestal of infamy,” so that she can feel everyone’s “eyes directed like burning glasses against [her] scorched skin” (JE 66). Brocklehurst subjects her to the disciplinary gaze of her community. Miss Temple, however, vindicates Jane; she collects evidence on her behalf and sees her “publicly cleared from every imputation” (JE 71). Miss Temple overturns the unfair judgment of the “black marble clergyman” (JE 66), clearly subverting the patriarchal order. Later in her story, Jane again encounters powerful femininity in the Rivers sisters. Diana possesses “a certain authority,” and she uses it to defend Jane’s right to keep her past a secret from the “penetrating young judge” St. John Rivers (JE 344-346). A strong woman effectively blocks the investigation of a woman’s secret—the direct opposite of a sensation novel’s plot. Jane ultimately internalizes feminine resistance to the patriarchal judicial authority. She declares that her inheritance “could never be [hers] in justice, though it might in law” and redistributes it equitably among herself and her cousins (JE 386). Jane makes herself an authority higher than the law, dispensing justice as she sees fit. If sensation novels are narratives of patriarchs investigating and judging, *Jane Eyre* narrates feminist resistance to such investigation and judgment.

In contrast to the subdual of strong women common to the sensation novel, Jane herself outright refuses to be the angel of any man’s house—and she succeeds in avoiding that fate. Before her proposed wedding to Rochester, she declares, “I am not an angel…and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself” (JE 260). In no uncertain terms, Jane rejects the angelic ideal of femininity, demanding individuality in its stead. Jane’s conscious denial of the angel-role represents a departure from the Aurora Floyds and the Marian Halcombes of the sensation novel.

---

19 Jane acts in a judicial role more than once. She also finds herself “[a]rraigned at [her] own bar” and judges and sentences herself for thinking that Rochester loved her (JE 160-161).
strong women who are reduced to angels-in-the-house by the ends of their novels. Indeed, Jane never loses her independence; no mechanism of discipline intervenes to force her into proper femininity as happens to Marian. Quite the contrary, it is Rochester who experiences punishment. He suffers blinding and maiming, so that when Jane does finally marry him she acts as “his vision” and “his right hand” (*JE* 451). She must describe the world to him, “putting into words” all that he cannot see (*JE* 451). She thus enjoys full power over him, even to the point of narrating and interpreting the world. Narrating and interpreting reality are in the sensation novel functions reserved for men; in *Jane Eyre*, however, far from becoming an angel, Jane achieves and retains power over her would-be patriarch.

I bring up *Jane Eyre* in an attempt to determine what the sensation novel is by demonstrating what it is not. I do not wish to suggest that voices of resistance and subversion are absent from the sensation novel. Marian Halcombe plays a key role in both the narrative and the narration of *The Woman in White*. Lucy Audley, Aurora Floyd, Cytherea Aldclyffe, and other strong women dominate their respective novels. But in the sensation novel, countervailing disciplinary forces deploy to counter subversive voices and resistant characters: Marian is silenced, Lucy and Cytherea are killed, Aurora is conventionalized. Jane Eyre, on the other hand, retains her power. For me, this contrast renders it impossible to consider the sensation novel uncomplicatedly subversive. Subversive tension can and does present itself, but in the sensation novel disciplinary mechanisms of the dominant ideology counter those subversive forces—and more successfully than not.
Works Cited


