ESLJ
THE EDINBURGH STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL

Possession and Patriarchy: Gendered Ownership in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*

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August 2025

'[Men] take us body and soul to themselves and fasten our helpless lives to theirs as they chain up a dog to his kennel' (Collins 159)

In Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855), female protagonists Marian Halcombe and Margaret Hale appear to defy conventional gender roles, with Marian's intellect and Margaret's moral strength suggesting alternatives to the submissive ideal of Victorian womanhood. However, both narratives show how patriarchal systems assert ownership over women's bodies, voices, and identities through the male gaze, societal scrutiny, and narrative control, with legal and marital systems, in particular, becoming vehicles for this ownership that transform female characters into objects within a social and symbolic economy. By the novels' conclusions, marriage and societal 'stability' re-establish patriarchal dominance, underscoring the inability of these texts to critique the very systems they depict. This article analyses *The Woman in White* and *North and South* within a contemporary pattern of entrenched patriarchal values of ownership in the 'Great Victorian Novel'. Although the novels feature moments of resistance, legal, societal, and narrative constraints limit the autonomy of their female protagonists, ultimately upholding the traditional gender hierarchies they may appear to critique.

In Gaskell's *North and South*, our first introduction to womanhood is through Edith, our protagonist Margaret Hale's frivolous and status-concious cousin. In an infantilising introductory image, Edith had "rolled herself up into a soft ball of muslin and ribbon and silken curls and gone off into a peaceful after-dinner nap" (Gaskell 2), in which the verb "rolled" reflects a seamless, deep entanglement between herself and her possessions, making her an inseparable part of the commodified world she inhabits. The items Edith buys and wears and her identity collapse into one "soft ball," presenting a model of ideal Victorian femininity in which she becomes a highly prized, commodified object fetishised within the marital economy. This introduction illustrates how, in *North and South*, economic ownership extends beyond finances

and factories to encompass relationships between men and women, in which women's identities and bodies are commodified, controlled, and traded within the social and marital economy.

Although *North and South* opens within a sphere of high-class domesticity, the novel's protagonist, Margaret Hale, is presented as both participating in and subtly distanced from this patriarchal, commodified world. While Edith indulges in the pleasures of wedding preparations, Margaret is asked to pick shawls, acting as a mere "lay figure" (6) for display — a role that gestures toward her objectification within this environment, even as she appears ill at ease within it. The novel's early setup evokes the conventional framework of a narrative centred on high society and marital pursuits but ultimately withholds this trajectory. Margaret's rejection of Henry Lennox's marriage proposal exemplifies her resistance to occupying the position of a desirable, marriageable object, replying, "I don't like to be spoken to as you have been doing," (30). While this moment does not directly address objectification, it nevertheless signals her assertion of autonomy and discomfort with being positioned as a romantic commodity within the marital economy. This resistance mirrors Jane Eyre's refusal to become Rochester's dependent, affirming a proto-feminist rejection of structures that commodify women's identities. Yet, while Margaret's early defiance positions her as a potentially progressive heroine, her later actions complicate this interpretation. In Milton, she increasingly adopts the role of caretaker and emotional support for the men around her — from her ailing father to Mr. Thornton — and ultimately accepts marriage to the same man she had earlier resisted, suggesting a reconciliation with, rather than a complete rejection of, the gendered expectations she initially seemed to challenge.

Just as Margaret contrasts with Edith, Marian in *The Woman in White* contrasts with her sister Laura, who, like Edith, embodies the Victorian ideals of beauty and passivity. In contrast,

Marian is marked by her intellectual strength and independence, evident in her investigative prowess and critique of patriarchal authority. Marian remarks, "[men] take us body and soul to themselves and fasten our helpless lives to theirs as they chain up a dog to his kennel" (Collins 159). Marian explicitly identifies marriage here as a form of ownership and uses the metaphor of a chained pet to emphasise its dehumanising effects. However, even Marian's independence is subject to male scrutiny and attempts at codification. Marian is introduced, for example, through the forensic gaze of Walter, who praises her waist as "perfection in the eyes of a man" (24). However, as Marian turns around and comes closer, transforming from a "figure" (24) into a living, breathing human being, Walter harshly labels her as "ugly" (24). This reflects the Victorian tendency to categorise women based on their conformity to idealised femininity, positioning Marian as unattractive and unmarriageable due to her divergence from these norms. Crespo suggests that Collins "constructs Marian's uniqueness to deconstruct it" (Crespo 159), cautioning against emulating her independence in a time when marriage was a woman's main aim, as it could lead to being seen as a "repellent spinster" (162). Ultimately, Collins decides Marian's outcome, denying her any romantic prospects and highlighting that women who defy traditional femininity not only risk being unmarriageable but also face invisibility and a lack of control over their lives.

In *The Woman in White*, Walter's gaze upon Laura is emblematic of the aestheticised male gaze, as he transforms her into an object of artistic possession. As a professional artist, he might rationalise his intricate, obsessive portrayal of her features — like the "aquiline bend" of her nose (40) and her "slight nervous contraction when she smiles" (40) — as part of his artistic process. However, such scrutiny betrays a more possessive mentality. By characterising Laura as a "visionary nursling of your own fancy" (41), Walter perceives her not as an independent,

realistic individual but as a passive canvas for his and others' imaginative projections. This appropriation reflects the dominating tendencies of antagonists like Percival Glyde and Count Fosco, complicating Walter's status as a supposed saviour. Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* offers a valuable theoretical framework for understanding this dynamic, exploring how the male gaze functions as a control mechanism that reduces women to objects of desire. Referencing Freud's notion of scopophilia — when "this pleasure in looking becomes a perversion" (Freud 157) — Mulvey shows how both Victorian fiction and later visual culture reinforce women's passivity and subjugation within patriarchal structures.

Walter's profession as an artist may allow him to rationalise his gaze, but it also reflects how he views gender: as something to be analysed, understood, and ultimately controlled. Walter's "artistic fascination," as O'Brien notes, transforms her into his "own personal creative project" and, as a result, "demonstrates a possessiveness toward her that is profoundly oppressive and disenfranchising" (O'Brien 142). O'Brien's description of Laura as a passive muse suggests that Walter, despite his seemingly innocent intentions, is complicit in the broader patriarchal system that objectifies women. His gaze diminishes Laura's agency before she can even speak, turning her into an object to be admired and possessed, much like he treats her portrait on his desk as though it were art in a gallery, using it as a benchmark for his initial evaluations of her, further emphasising his distorted and idealised perspective.

In *North and South*, the male gaze operates through Margaret's discomfort with being seen as a sexual object, particularly in contexts that intertwine desire and possession. In Henry Lennox's marriage proposal, his "sudden possession of her hand" (29) to connect their two bodies literalises his attempt to claim Margaret within a framework of romantic ownership. Margaret's response, however, is marked by hurt and a rejection of his advances, which reflects

her unease with being perceived as an object of desire within a marital economy. Her declaration, "I have never thought of you, but as a friend," (30) starkly contrasts with Lennox's possessive affection, highlighting the discord between his intentions and her preference for a platonic relationship. This tension between the male and female gaze aligns with Mulvey's observation that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey 837), providing insight into the miscommunication that often seen in Victorian novels, such as *Far From the Madding Crowd*'s Bathsheba and Oak, *Middlemarch*'s Sir James and Dorothea, and *Jane Eyre*'s Jane and St. John.

This theme intensifies after Margaret shields Thornton in the protest scene, which is misinterpreted by society and Thornton as a performance of romantic desire. Mulvey notes that "in their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey 843). This idea of women connoting "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" is a vital tool for understanding this moment in *North and South*, as Margaret's bloodshed and her public act of self-sacrifice are read as markers of her entry into a sexualised marital economy. Thornton's male gaze eroticises Margaret's actions, while she frames them through a moral lens. This dynamic is echoed in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, where Bathsheba's efforts to dispel a false rumour lead Oak to misunderstand her intentions as a romantic gesture. His subsequent proposal, similar to Thornton's, demonstrates how a woman's actions, even when intended to assert her autonomy or protect her reputation, can be misinterpreted by men as signals of sexual interest. Both Margaret and Bathsheba are trapped by male assumptions, with their true intentions obscured by prevailing narratives of male desire. By asserting that "we all feel the sanctity of our sex" (230), Margaret attempts to reclaim her integrity, framing her actions as

moral expressions of womanhood, not desire. This tension is further underscored by Scupham's assertion that "Margaret is continually framed as an object of desire, and readers are explicitly pointed to regard Margaret through this gaze" (Scupham 8). Scupham's observation supports the argument that Margaret's attempts to assert herself in a public, political space are ultimately undermined by the overwhelming influence of society, which continues to sexualise her regardless of her intentions.

Narrative ownership is particularly evident in *The Woman in White*, as the narrative structure itself emphasises male authority and silences female voices. Walter's reclamation of narrative control upon his return to the country reasserts his authority and ownership of the story and consequently marks not only the conclusion of Marian's voice, but also its subjugation. Walter notes during the editing process with Marian that "I took the notes I wanted as she went on" (393), the active voice here underscoring his dominance in deciding what parts of Marian's perspective are worthy of inclusion. This selective curation mirrors dynamics in *Middlemarch*, where Casaubon's refusal to let Dorothea assist with his scholarship reflects his belief in his sole expertise. While this differs from Marian's edited work, Casaubon's dismissal of her collaboration shows a desire for control, revealing how both Walter and Casaubon express their masculinity by monopolising creative and intellectual authority.

Marian's diary, edited and recontextualised by Walter, therefore serves as a means for his own heroic self-construction. This manipulation parallels his artistic profession; much like an artist creates through their subjective lens, Walter shapes the narrative, presenting women under his ideals and desires. Kim and Kim argue that Walter "symbolically demonstrates his authority as a patriarch of a new family of his own by depriving their voices" (Kim and Kim 45). Therefore, it is by subsuming Marian's brilliance within his narrative that Walter affirms his

masculine identity as the architect of the text and the tale's hero. His success relies not only on vanquishing Fosco and Glyde but also on preserving control over the voices and agency of Marian and Laura.

Count Fosco's appropriation of Marian's diary introduces another dimension to the idea of narrative ownership, one steeped in violation. Fosco's act of taking Marian's private text, reading it, and inscribing his signature transforms it into a symbolic act of ownership and textual rape. Miller, drawing on this same comparison, states that "the most important fantasy feature of rape is the reaffirmation of the rapist's unimpaired capacity to withdraw the integrity of his body (if not his victim's) recovered intact". This is seen here as Fosco–by taking, reading, and signing the diary and returning it–claims ownership of Marian's voice, leaving it irrevocably marked by his intrusion (Miller 128). Fosco's description of his experience—"charmed, refreshed, delighted" (302)—further underscores the sexual undertones of his textual violation. By taking, reading, and vandalising her possessions, Fosco takes ownership of Marian, reducing her from a participant in the narrative to an object of male desire and control.

In their theories of literary paternity, Gilbert and Gubar assert that "if the author/father is owner of his text and of his reader's attention, he is also, of course, owner, possessor of the subjects of his text" (Gilbert and Gubar 7). Walter and Fosco, therefore, both position themselves as possessors of Marian's story, denying her the autonomy to frame her and her sister's own experiences. Gilbert and Gubar further argue that 'lacking the pen/penis, which would enable them to counter one narrative with another, women in patriarchal societies have historically been reduced to mere properties" (Gilbert and Gubar 12), a reality demonstrated by Marian's erasure as an autonomous narrator, unable to resist as she gradually fades into the background throughout the novel. These layers of narrative control highlight the central issue of ownership,

as, by the novel's conclusion, Marian and Laura's voices are subsumed by Walter's narrative dominance. Collins' illustration of these power dynamics reflects wider Victorian concerns about gender roles and the importance of controlling female bodies, voices, and stories to maintain patriarchal order.

At the conclusion of these novels, the female protagonists are depicted as subdued and weary. Margaret grapples with the loss of many loved ones, shouldering emotional burdens, while Marian and Laura endure exploitation at the hands of Percival and Fosco. Margaret's personal and political growth stalls, culminating in a marriage that signifies a reversion to societal norms—a stance she initially seemed to contest in the novel's opening. Margaret's eventual marriage to Thornton, described by him using the language of ownership—"I shall claim you as my own" (519)—aligns with the broader Victorian trope of marriage as a consolidation of patriarchal power. In this context, Brown argues that, in *North and South*, no women are shown as "having life choices beyond marriage or achieving an independent existence outside the domestic sphere" (Brown 346). This theme resonates in *Jane Eyre*, where Jane's ultimate union with Rochester takes place only after he has been physically diminished, creating an appearance of equality. However, Rochester's previous treatment of Jane as a "pet" (Bronte 258) remains present in the subtext, prompting enquiries about whether the resolution truly transcends the conventions of marital ownership. In both instances, marriage operates more as a reinforcement of patriarchal dominance than a genuine partnership. Margaret, "glowing with beautiful shame" (520), expresses her unease with her new status as an object of desire, reflecting her prior opposition to being viewed through the male gaze and treated as a commodity in the marriage market.

In contrast to Margaret's earlier displayed courage, *The Woman in White*'s Laura is depicted as a much more passive character, with her near-fatal marriage to Percival leaving her voiceless and drained by the end of the novel. Yishai notes, "by subsuming Laura's identity into his, Walter not only enacts a Victorian patriarchal ideal but uses this convergence of identities to project the present back onto the past" (Ben-Yishai 158). Consequently, Laura's marriage to Walter reinforces patriarchal norms, completely diminishing her autonomy. Despite the financial independence that Laura and Marian aim to secure for her throughout the novel ultimately being transferred to Walter, he positions himself as her savior. Yishai's observation that Walter "projects the present back onto the past" indicates that he uses narrative control to assert his role as if reclaiming his status as Laura's husband, despite there being no formal romantic union between them. In doing so, Walter not only reasserts his perceived rightful place but also secures substantial financial stability.

Marian is an intriguing character who, contrary to the common trope in Victorian novels of marrying off female characters, is never considered a marriage prospect. While Margaret and Laura enter into marriage, Marian remains single; nonetheless, she experiences a transformation that ultimately aligns her with societal gender expectations. Despite her independence and her more 'masculine' qualities—her assertiveness, intellect, and physical strength—Marian is ultimately pushed into the 'angel of the house' role as Walter concludes the novel with, "Marian was the good angel of our lives" (569). This trope idealises women as self-sacrificing domestic figures and still limits Marian's agency and autonomy. Her story, therefore, ends not in true independence but in a form of ownership, as since the male gaze cannot view her as desirable, it reduces her to a passive, nearly invisible figure, embodying an ideal of Victorian womanhood that patriarchal society accepts.

Margaret's shame; Laura's silence; and Marian's invisibility illustrate the narrative that female ambition, independence, and passion are ultimately unsustainable. The marital resolutions we observe in all texts suggest that societal stability relies on women surrendering their autonomy and accepting patriarchal control. As Pullan argues, in Victorian society, married women "will never be able to fully regain control of her property until she ceases to be the property of her husband," thus emphasising the women's challenge of maintaining an "autonomous identity" (Pullan 500). I argue, therefore, that marriage in these novels is depicted less as a partnership and more as a form of male ownership, reducing the heroines to symbols of societal conformity rather than feminist victories.

In conclusion, in *The Woman in White* and *North and South*, notions of ownership are central to portraying women's lives, and shape their agency, identities, and resolutions. While Collins and Gaskell initially present heroines who challenge traditional gender roles, these moments of resistance are ultimately constrained by the pervasive forces of patriarchal control, operating through the male gaze, narrative authority, and the institution of marriage. Female bodies, voices, and actions are commodified and subsumed within a framework that reduces them to possessions within a legal, social, and symbolic economy. By the novels' conclusions, societal stability is achieved not through liberation, but through the consolidation of male ownership over female autonomy. Margaret's shame, Laura's silence, and Marian's erasure are stark reminders that in these Victorian narratives, ownership is not just a theme but the foundation upon which gendered power structures are maintained, rendering women objects to be controlled rather than subjects of their own stories.

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