Music and the Queered Gaze: The Extradiegetic Narrative in Fywell’s *The Woman in White* (1997)

Abstract

This paper explores the queer body and gaze within Wilkie Collins’ sensation novel *The Woman in White*, as it manifests in the character of Marian Halcombe, a masculinized “man-in-woman” who seems to have a desire for her half-sister - the feminine ingenue Laura Fairlie. I am particularly interested in a contemporary translation of Collins’ novel, specifically Tim Fywell’s 1997 BBC telefilm, and how the queer body/gaze is translated and adapted from the novel. While on the surface there is no explicit queer narrative, the camera’s gaze (which is, notably, Marian’s) acts in conjunction with the telefilm’s score to potentially enable an extradiegetic, unresolved queer narrative. How does the music teach us to look and interpret the relationship between the characters of Marian and Laura? How does music highlight the relationship between these characters, and perhaps enable a queer interpretation of this relationship, which is now centered? And finally, how are we as the film’s spectators guided to look at this relationship within the context of the gendered gaze and score? After exploring Marian’s potential queerness in the Wilkie Collins novel, I will be analyzing and encoding the telefilm’s scores in juxtaposition with the camera’s gaze by drawing from various sources in queer theory, film studies, and music theory as well as incorporating my own knowledge of music forms (my ability to read music, and knowledge of certain chords and their produced “affect”) into my analysis.
Wilkie Collins’ sensation novel *The Woman in White* has been the subject of several queer renderings, especially concerning the character of Marian Halcombe and her narration. The gaze in Marian’s narration quite noticeably lingers on her half-sister, feminine ingenue Miss Laura Fairlie, in a manner that could enable a queer interpretation of the text. The gaze explored within this narration acts in accordance with some of the other varied narrations in the novel - most notably Walter Hartwright’s gendering of Marian as a man caught in a woman’s body. In the 1997 telefilm adaptation of *The Woman in White*, director Tim Fywell makes a perhaps “feminist” choice to center the narrative solely around Marian (in contrast to Collins’ multiple, mostly masculine, narratives); the film is narrated through her voice and the gaze which the camera follows is hers. As a medium, film cannot rely solely on the colorful, sensational language from the original Collins text, and instead must turn to other forms that incorporate a gaze: the gaze of the camera and how it guides us as spectators and identifiers, and the film’s score functioning within the production of affect in relation to this gaze. Considering the juxtaposition of Marian’s now-centered female gaze at Laura with David Ferguson’s unsettling scoring of the telefilm, Tim Fywell’s rendering of *The Woman in White* enables an extradiegetic queer counter narrative to a “feminist” heterosexual plot narrative.

My queer lens in interpreting the 1997 adaptation of *The Woman in White* stems from the provided scholarly queer renderings of the Wilkie Collins novel. The origin of the term “homosexual” to describe same-sex relationships first dates back to the late 19th century. Still, the absence of the term “homosexual” from the cultural consciousness of the time the novel was written (1859) has not dissuaded scholarly work that positions Marian as a potentially queer character. D.A. Miller’s “*Cage aux Folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins’s The Woman in White*” offers an intriguing analysis of Marian’s status as a queer character in terms of both gender and sexuality. The first description of Marian as a masculinized soul and face trapped in/on a woman’s body is demonstrated through Walter Hartwright’s description of her:

> Never was the conventional maxim, that Nature cannot err, more flatly contradicted - never was the fair promise of a lovely figure more strangely and
strongly belied by the face and head that crowned it. The lady’s complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. She had a large firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair, growing unusually low down on her forehead (Collins 25).

Miller interprets this description of Marian, not quite situated in femaleness or maleness, as a resistance of “phallic binarism” - her “lovely figure” denotes female; her “prominent piercing, resolute brown eyes,” the windows to the soul, denote male (Miller 128). Marian’s masculinity, when juxtaposed with her hatred of men - “Men! They are the enemies of our innocence and our peace!” Marian exclaims to Laura - points to a certain queerness in her character (Collins 203). What Miller warns the reader, of, however, is to not confuse Marian’s complex intersection of masculinity, desire for Laura, and hatred of men with lesbianism: “Important as it is not to censor the erotic feeling between women in the text...it is perhaps more important to recognize that what would also get absorbed here under the name of lesbianism is a woman’s unwillingness to lend her full cooperation to male appropriations of her…” (Miller 128). According to Miller, Marian is “lesbian” in the sense that she is rendered as lesbians typically are in male representations, in which which she actively resists heterosexuality and heteronormativity until an “inevitable” initiation into a heteronormative lifestyle or a male seduction.

It is important to note here that “queerness” in the context of the Walter Hartwright passage one of a queerness of gender rather than a queerness in sexuality, and that this does not necessarily point towards lesbianism - though, to complicate Miller, there is a complex intersection of Marian’s masculinity and her desire for Laura in the novel. This desire, which trods an interesting line on the homosocial-homosexual spectrum, is exhibited in both Marian’s gaze at and interactions with Laura. Consider the following excerpts from an intimate conversation between Marian and Laura concerning Laura’s engagement to Sir Percival Glyde:

I saw the pure, innocent heart, in the loving eyes that looked back at me - and the poor, worldly cautions and objections that rose to my lips, dwindled and died away in their own emptiness. I hung my head in silence.
…

I could not find it in my heart to say anything, but I pointed to the book and shook my head. She reached both hands up to my cheeks, and drew my face down to hers till our lips met (Collins 143).

Laura proves the only character who has the ability to silence Marian - there is a motif of Marian’s lapsing into sorrowful silence while looking into Laura’s “innocent” feminine eyes, especially when Laura speaks of her heterosexual love interests. In addition, the presence of homosocial kissing is quite prominent, vivid, and sensual. The kiss is not quick, and not dismissive - Laura reaches up to cradle Marian’s cheeks, and Marian does not just quickly kiss her - she draws her “face down to hers” until their lips meet. The desire between the two women exists - whether this desire is erotic or platonic is up to interpretation. If it does not denote, as it very well may, a desire that skews towards the homosexual side of the homosocial-sexual spectrum, it certainly denotes a great flexibility in female homosocial relationships in the novel. Regardless of Wilkie Collins’ intentions, what is important here is that an interpretation of Marian as queer is enabled - a reader’s queer interpretation becomes possible.

Of course, Marian’s suggested queerness must be regendered and resituated within a heteronormative context - as with the other infractions characteristic of the sensation novel, it is horrified by and drawn to abolish itself. Marian’s resolution is a fittingly complex one. Collins has already established Marian as a character with a dislike for men, so pairing her with a male romantic partner would be hypocritical, and would require a thorough explanation that would strip focus away from both the main plot of the novel and Marian’s love for Laura. In addition, Marian has already been established as a character with a masculine appearance (even villain Count Fosco’s apparent desire for her is later framed as a manipulative strategy to get information), and a male’s attraction to her masculinity, within the existing heteronormative structures, may have feminizing or queer implications. Collins’ route to right his transgressions,
then, is not through the pairing of Marian with a male mate, but with the establishment of her as a Victorian “domestic angel,” as framed in Hartwright’s concluding narrative of the novel:

‘Child!’ she exclaimed, with all her easy gaiety of old times. ‘Do you talk in that familiar manner of one of the landed gentry of England? Are you aware, when I present this august baby to your notice, in whose presence you stand? Evidently not! Let me make two eminent personages known to one another: Mr. Walter Hartwright - *the Heir of Limmeridge.*’ So she spoke. In writing those last words, I have written all. The pen falters in my hand; the long, happy labour of many months is over! Marian was the good angel of our lives - let Marian end our story (Collins 564).

Marian’s exclamation denotes her satisfaction with these resolved circumstances and with the place she has been put in: Laura is safe, Laura and Walter Hartwright are married, and Marian, un-mated, remains by her sister’s side, caring for their son and heir. Marian, who earlier in the novel describes her hands as too much like a man’s for certain types of housework, is resituated and regendered as a domestic angel and motherly child caretaker. Hartwright even labels Marian as “the good angel of our lives,” hinting at the Victorian domestic angel trope.

There is a trajectory of Marian’s queerness in its two forms (gender and sexuality), and how the two forms come together. Marian’s queerness is justified through the intersection of Marian’s masculine appearance/soul and potential female desire; if Marian is a “man-in-woman,” then that heterosexual man trapped inside her would of course be attracted to females and repulsed by males. This genderqueer-ness, while acknowledged as a transgression by traditional male lead Walter Hartwright, is allowed to be present temporarily, as the intersection of Marian’s masculinity with her intelligence is a flattery of the male psyche. Marian’s queerness is ultimately partially abolished but is still left as an open-ended question. She is resituated within a heteronormative “motherly” context but is never provided a heterosexual mate; she remains with Laura, the homosocial-sexual object of her affections but these affections, if potentially romantic, are never fulfilled. Her potential desire for Laura acts in accordance with her masculinity as a function of “the novel’s anxious male imperatives...because
the *anima virilis* includes...a male identification” (Miller 128). Potential lesbianism and masculinity are connected in the world of *The Woman in White*, and in the establishment of Marian as a domestic caretaking angel, Collins kills these two birds with one stone.

How does this exploration of queerness, then, lend itself to a translation of *The Woman in White* into a 1997 telefilm format created more than one hundred years later? To enable a queer rendering of the film, we must first examine possible gendered and feminist readings of both the film itself as an adaptation of Collins’ *Woman in White* and as one directed by Tim Fywell.

Looking at Fywell’s body of work, it becomes clear that he centers his films around the homosocial bonds between women. Interestingly, these homosocial bonds, while acting as the primary focus of Fywell’s films, ultimately end up reinforcing the films’ heterosexual relationships: in *Ice Princess*, for example, after Casey performs her final successful ice skating routine encouraged by her mother, she receives flowers and a very public smooch from her male love interest Teddy; the bond between the two sisters in *I Capture the Castle* contains a narrative of simultaneous love and jealousy that is ultimately resolved when each sister is paired off with a male mate. The homosocial bonds we see here are prominently familial (mother and daughter; sister and sister), dismissing queerness as a viable option - after all, incest is an even less accepted taboo, and contemporary positive mainstream portrayals of incest are practically nonexistent. Instead, the homosocial bonds are framed within a feminist narrative of “women supporting other women,” a narrative which, post the bra-burning and lesbianism stereotypes associated with the second-wave feminist movement, can still exist while the heroines are paired off in suitable heterosexual partnerships.

Given Fywell’s body of work, it is tempting to read his adaptation of *The Woman in White* as a straightforward liberal feminist narrative resolved with a joyful heterosexual ending. The telefilm reorients the narrative to center around Marian as a main character (who, as I will touch on later, is conventionally attractive with the absence of a mustache) with whom the
female spectator is encouraged to identify with and admire. The story, narrated through her voice, becomes hers and hers only, in contrast to the multi-narrative Wilkie Collins tale bookended by Walter Hartwright. The relationship between Marian and Laura is portrayed, in Hartwright’s words, as “very close,” but they are half-sisters, after all. A revealing review of the telefilm in Liora Brosh’s *Screening Novel Women: From British Domestic Fiction to Film* notes the translation of the castrating asylum narrative into a domestic abuse narrative, in which Sir Percival Glyde physically and sexually abuses Laura, and therefore:

Laura’s second marriage is represented as a feminist triumph, one in which a female character has escaped from an abusive marriage into a better one with a respectful, heroic husband. Indeed, Hartwright and Laura even have a daughter, rather than the son they have in the novel. In a seemingly feminist twist, the suggestion is made that this marriage engenders a more female-friendly environment and that the daughters of the future will live in a better world than earlier generations of women (Brosh 126).

The decidedly heterosexual romantic story arc of Laura and Walter Hartwright is portrayed as a “feminist triumph” over a relationship characterized by domestic abuse. However, the potentially erotic gaze of the camera and the unsettling score that accompanies it troubles and opens up Fywell’s narrative. Whether Fywell’s intentions for his adaptation of *The Woman in White* were queer ones or not is unknown - the potential homoerotic implications of the relationship between women are never explicitly stated in the film, and interviews concerning the telefilm are limited. However, if we consider how the camera’s gaze is set up to be a female one, specifically Marian’s, its tendency to linger on Laura as an object of desire juxtaposed with a score that is decidedly eerie and unsettling potentially teases homoeroticism.

From the opening of the telefilm, trembling violins sing in a minor key. In terms of music producing affect, the minor key, with some notes resting a half-step below what would make the key major on the piano, produces an unresolved, eerie sound, while the major key, resolved, produces a more cheery, uplifting sound. A soprano woman’s voice eerily enters the musical
conversation as if to haunt it with a ghost-like presence, descending also in a minor key: “Oo, ooo, oo.” This eerie theme is repeated through the telefilm in a term we can appropriate for film called a “leitmotif”: a short, recurring, musical phrase first used in regard to Wagner’s operas and then later extended to other musical compositions, including film scores: “the leitmotif draws attention to itself; it must be heard to perform the semiotic function attached to it. The leitmotif says listen to me, for I am telling you something significant. So long as it remains music, however, the meaning remains veiled (Buhler 43). The leitmotif can be used to position a character as an object of desire or as a subject to identify with, depending on the order of introduction and the musical elements incorporated. Given this leitmotif’s early presence in the film and the lack of a body with which to identify with at this point, this initial leitmotif is characterized as one belonging to a subject that the audience follows. Film studies Professor Claudia Gorbman justifies this with her psychoanalytic perspective on the function of the leitmotif:

The underlying pleasure of music can be traced to originary hallucinations of bodily fusion with the mother, of nonseparation prior to the Oedipal crisis of language and interdiction. If music plays in a film...if it is in the background, it works on the spectator-subject most effectively, fusing subject to film body, bypassing the usual censors of the preconscious (Gorbman 45).

If background music invokes bodily fusion with the mother and “fusing subject to film body,” then the first leitmotif that is introduced is the fusion of the audience with the first film body one sees. This leitmotif, in addition, is in an eerie minor key, leaving the audience unsettled by the failure of the key to resolve. This unsettlement only further encourages the audience to find a body to identify with, to find a subject who is equally unsettled by the haunting minor key.

Whose leitmotif - and whose psyche - is it, then? The audience is left to wonder until two minutes in, when we hear Marian’s voice for the first time: “The bad dreams always come back again like unwanted friends. And last night I found myself in Limmeridge Churchyard.” The camera pans from a gray gravestone up to reveal Marian’s anguished face, her eyebrows creased,
her lips pursed. She, like the audience, is also unsettled and haunted. From here we make an association between Marian’s voice-over, Marian’s face, and the telefilm’s theme: the eerie violins are Marian’s leitmotif, and Marian is established as the audience’s narrator and guide. Her gaze is the one that the camera follows. And, furthermore, the theme that is associated with Marian remains in a minor key that is never resolved into a more uplifting major key - and thus, the audience associates anguish and unsettlement within Marian almost as a character trait.

It is interesting to note that the “reveal” of Marian’s face here is much different compared to the novel’s reveal. Tara Fitzgerald plays Marian in the telefilm, and her face is distinctively feminine; her hair is dark, but the moustache and any hint of ugliness are absent. Her sharp cheekbones may perhaps denote a tenseness associated with masculinity, but that is the extent of the association. The “shocking reveal” of Marian’s face as repulsively masculine, and the comedy that results from it - “This woman was ugly!” - from Mr. Hartwright’s perspective is completely absent. Instead, the audience is guided to identify with a character decidedly feminized face - in a choice Fywell most likely wants us to label as feminist, the subject that the audience is asked to identify with is female. In order for the audience to identify with Marian immediately, she must be not only anguished and intelligent, but also conventionally attractive.

This erases hints of Marian as genderqueer in terms of appearance in the film’s visual narrative; however, Marian’s leitmotif, representing her psyche, also contains higher violins and lower cellos playing a minor melody in unison - if we are to interpret the violins as feminine and cellos as masculine, Marian’s leitmotif sets up her psyche as one that is in-between maleness and femaleness. So, while Marian’s genderqueer implications in the novel are erased with her appearance in the film, these genderqueer implications are introduced and confined to the extradiegetic sound narrative but are still present. This sets up a potential battle between the main plot narrative and the extradiegetic sound-gaze narrative that is always at odds with itself and never quite resolves.
Since Marian is reframed as feminine in the main plot narrative but remains masculine in the sound narrative, how do we interpret her longing gaze for Laura? The visual gaze is not a masculine one, since the implications of masculine appearance have been erased. Marian’s gaze at Laura is one of a female looking at and desiring another female, whether we want to frame this within a “gal pals” narrative or a “queer” narrative. In either sense, the tension between the two narratives is prominent, since the audience’s desiring gaze at Laura is always filtered through Marian’s eyes.

Take the establishment of Walter and Laura as love interests, for example. Walter and Laura’s love theme is characterized by a piano duet that is in every essence symbolically heterosexual. This piece is introduced when Marian’s faltering gaze at Laura cuts to a scene of her playing cards. Her gaze cuts over to Laura playing the piano - and Walter is, of course, watching her. The upper hand and the lower hands on the piano interact with one another in a flirtatious duet between higher and lower voices. The lower hand provides a constant, underlying counterpart that fluctuates between four notes - a stable supporter for the dazzling, higher melody from the upper hand. The piano’s higher melody and lower counterpart set up a subject-object relationship typically represented in the depicted heterosexual relationship: the deeper male counterpart as support is the subject, and the higher female melody as spectacle is the object.

At one point, when Laura hits a particularly high resolving note with her upper hand, she glances immediately at Mr. Hartwright, to make sure he is still listening to the spectacle she has created. Their eyes connect, and the camera slowly shifts to the right, setting up the expectation that someone is watching, if not with a certain pain, then with a certain suspicion. This “someone” is most likely Marian, as she has suspiciously watched their interactions thus far in the novel, and we, as functions of the camera’s gaze, have been guided from the very beginning
to identify with her. Since the camera’s gaze has already been established as Marian’s, we can only assume that we are viewing the scene through the interrupting eyes of Marian.

The piano scene cuts to a “love montage,” and the two hands on the piano remain in conversation with one another, with the addition of violins. The violins act as an interruption always in the background of the love montage - an added, perhaps melancholy presence of an additional voice (consider the “melancholy violins” film trope). The camera cuts between several scenes in which Walter and Laura interact in an intimate manner, and Marian interrupts them either with a longing gaze or a more active interruption - for example, laying Laura’s head in her lap. At the end of the montage, as the triad between the upper and lower hands of the piano and the violins continues, the camera cuts to a scene where the three are riding in a carriage, Marian and Laura on one side, Mr. Walter Hartwright on the other:

Laura: Ah, there are too many bumps!
Marian: Indeed. And with all this jolting and interruption we can confuse Mr. Hartwright with nature as it is when he looks up-
Laura: And nature as it is not when he looks at our work.

The carriage jolts, Laura and Mr. Hartwright both reach to grab the sketchbook - and their hands end up touching. Mr. Hartwright lingers for a second, and then slowly withdraws his hand. The music fades, and the camera immediately cuts to Marian’s stoic, yet pained face. Marian is the ultimate interruption of this love story, and since the audience has been guided to sympathize with her, the audience is by extension also the interruption of this love story. The nature of the conversation also has interesting implications, particularly when Marian remarks: “with all this jolting and interruption we can confuse Mr. Hartwright with nature as it is when he looks up…” Symbolically, this remark could be taken, in accordance with the extradiegetic narrative, to have queer implications: the “jolting and interruption” that confuses Mr. Hartwright is Marian’s affection toward and protection of Laura. The “nature as it is” could be the confusing nature of Marian’s affection toward Laura. Marian baits Laura with “nature as it is when he looks up…”
providing the expectation that the response will be “nature as it is not when he looks down,” a
phrase that hints at Marian’s lack of a phallus. Laura, however, responds with “nature as it is
when he looks at our work,” correcting this potentially homoerotic phrase. And, to correct it
further, the homosocial-sexual moment between the two women is interrupted with the
heterosexual touching of hands.

Marian’s gaze at Laura, then, is framed as a gaze of anguish that acts in accordance with
desire - and an anguish that is at constant odds with the feminist-heterosexual plot narrative. This
anguish in regards to Laura is never resolved. The telefilm ends, notably, with a nod to Collins’
joyful “domestic angel” narrative, but with the return of Marian’s anguished leitmotif. “But I can
never forget the cruel cycle that began long ago,” Marian narrates in a voice over. The leitmotif,
with its sorrowful violins and cellos, gradually fades in, both a reminder of Marian’s anguish and
of her potential genderqueer-ness. She smiles at the child that runs past her - but then, the camera
cuts to the child running to her parents, the married Laura and Mr. Hartwright. The camera
lingers for a second on the couple, and then cuts to a closeup of Marian’s face, which has now
melted into her familiar anguished gaze: the creased eyebrows, the faded smile. Laura and Mr.
Hartwright turn to Marian, sending the child over, and Marian turns to face them, noticeably
correcting her mouth upwards into a smile.

“And I have one waking prayer,” Marian’s voice over cuts out as she cradles the child in
her arms. The on-screen Marian murmurs, a little sadly: “Let it be over.” She kisses the child.
The camera rotates to show Laura and Mr. Hartwright holding one another in the background,
and Marian’s smile once again turns downward, sad and pensive, as the screen fades to black.
The music continues to hover in minor, and, like Marian’s anguish, is never resolved into a
happy major key. Depending on whether the audience follows the plot narrative or the
extradiegetic narrative, this anguish is either the anguish of a feminist woman haunted by
memories of her and her sister’s past, or the erotic anguish of an unsatisfied queer woman caring
for the child of the woman she desires and her heterosexual partner. The extradiegetic narrative, while still nodding to Collins’ plot, offers an alternative to Marian as a satisfying regendered, de-queered domestic angel by hinting at her pain both concerning her haunting past and her unresolved desire for Laura. Marian is an unresolved, unsatisfied character - and, significantly, the audience identifies with her.

While Collins’ novel *The Woman in White* ultimately re-genders and de-queers Marian, the extradiegetic narrative in Fywell’s *The Woman in White* significantly does not. While Marian’s face is feminized and the heterosexual relationship is fulfilled as a nod to the novel’s plot, the music, in conjunction with Marian’s gaze is never resolved, and is therefore at odds with the original Collins (and the telefilm’s main) plot. Intentional or not, the queer extradiegetic counter-narrative that Fywell’s film enables certainly poses a question that challenges assumed compulsory heterosexuality: how far do we have to push on the lesbian continuum to reach a “sexual” interpretation?
Works Cited


