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Elisabeth Rose Gruner

University of Richmond, egruner@richmond.eduFollow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/english-faculty-publications>Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Fiction Commons](#)

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Plotting the Mother:
Caroline Norton, Helen Huntingdon, and
Isabel Vane

Elisabeth Rose Gruner
University of Richmond

The proper Victorian heroine neither acts nor plots. Heroines as disparate as Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park* and Gwendolen Harleth of *Daniel Deronda* prove their virtue by failing as actresses.¹ When Fanny protests, "Indeed, I cannot act," we know that it is because she cannot be other than what she is: virtuous.² Gwendolen Harleth's aborted attempt to make a career as an actress seems, in *Daniel Deronda*, to signal her essential difference from the Princess Halm-Eberstein, the mother who has abandoned Daniel in order to pursue her acting career. Gwendolen is flawed, but at least she is not an actress. In the dominant literary form for women writers, the courtship novel, the heroine is a modest woman, usually passive, unconscious of her sexuality, in transition from the father's house—or a substitute therefor—to the husband's house. We follow her gradual awakening as others plot and act around her—for her marriage, for its frustration, for money or power or influence—until their plots finally converge with her (heretofore unarticulated) desires, and she is married. Or, perhaps, their plots prevail, she transgresses, and she dies.³ In either case, her story usually ends when she must cast off one role—usually that of daughter or eligible young thing—for another—usually that of wife, although sometimes (in the case of the transgressive heroine) mother or mistress. Heroines of the Victorian novel must, it seems, be one thing only; they must not *act* roles, but embody them. Motherhood is particularly problematic, then, for as Marianne Hirsch notes, "the multiplicity of 'women' is nowhere more obvious than for the figure of the mother, who is always both mother and daughter"—and often wife and/or lover as well.⁴

This difficulty about motherhood provides one possible explanation for why heroines of Victorian novels are so rarely mothers.⁵ As Hirsch continues, "the nineteenth-century heroine . . . tends not only to be separated from the figure and the story of her mother, but herself tries to avoid maternity at all costs."⁶ Victorian heroines, especially heroines of novels by women, such as *Jane Eyre*, *Dorothea Brooke*, or *Maggie Tulliver*, tend to be motherless or

unmothered, and their own maternity is either stymied or obscured by the novels' conventional closure in either marriage or death. The maternal subject,⁷ whom Hirsch identifies as arising in novels of the twentieth century, figures in few nineteenth-century novels; when she does, she provides a critical commentary on the courtship plot and its hegemony both in Victorian literature and in the construction of women's roles.

A *Fraser's* reviewer commented on this state of affairs in 1856: "all novels, with . . . rare exceptions . . . represent only one section, so to speak, of love, stopping short at marriage, as if the whole business ended there." In attempting to analyze the situation, s/he suggested, among other possibilities, that love's "subsequent existence is like a retirement into private life, where the public have no right to follow it; or that it becomes so flat and uneventful, and so much a mere emotion of routine, as to possess no interest whatever outside the family circle."⁸ While the development of the sensation novel, soon after this writer's complaint, makes clear the erroneous assumptions embedded in the second possibility, many reviewers and writers seem to have agreed with the first: the private matters of family were no subject for public viewing. The popularity of divorce court proceedings would seem, however, to prove otherwise, as would the works of several women writers at midcentury whose novels not only expose the workings of love after marriage, but demonstrate what the *Fraser's* reviewer does not even begin to imagine, the importance and interest of maternity in the development of the female self. I will examine the impact of maternity on the plots of three novels—two generic misfits and one popular sensation novel—analyzing particularly the relationship between these novels' plots and the plots engendered by the debates over the 1839 Infant Custody Act, the first act of Parliament to focus especially on mothers as a separate class of citizens. Although all three novels follow the Custody Act, none responds to it directly; rather, the refiguration of maternity implicit in the act's language, and especially in the language of the debates, opens a space for the considerations of maternity in the novels. Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is centrally concerned with a heroine, Helen Huntingdon, whose flight from her marriage follows directly from her maternal ethic; Isabel Vane in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*, conversely, abandons her children for a lover and then spends the rest of the novel in various attempts at reunion with them. Caroline Norton's *Lost and Saved* is of interest both for the author's involvement with the Custody Act and for its own odd revisions of courtship and seduction novel plots. All three share a concern with a maternity detached from courtship or marriage; all three exhibit unusual plotting, false closure, narrative intervention, and even, arguably, artistic failure in their single-minded focus on the multiplicity of female roles. Rather than a historical progression, the three represent moments in an ongoing reevaluation of female identity in the novel.

The maternal subjects of these novels—Helen Huntingdon of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Isabel Vane of *East Lynne*, and Beatrice Brooke of *Lost and Saved*—and of the custody debates, including Norton herself, differ widely from each other but share a common fate: to be shut out of the expected plots of women's lives. All are cast in multiple roles in their stories; mothers and desiring women, wives and daughters, they find no models for their situations in the fiction or the law that surrounds them. Their stories involve the struggle of the mother to make sense of her position; refusing to cast off one role for another (daughter for wife, wife for mother, mother for lover), the heroines attempt to play them all.⁹ In their efforts, however, we see the ironic gesture that infuses their maternity: in order to maintain their privacy as mothers and guardians of the home, all four “go public.” Maternity empowers them, but in a circumscribed way, as the novels, and the custody debates as well, must always conclude with a reward or punishment for the mother, determined at least in part by her maternal morality. Far from reinscribing the ideology of domesticity, however, these maternal narratives demonstrate the complex interplay of public and private in the maternal role, and the complex operations of desire in the maternal plot.

My first plot is not fictional but legal, and it sets the stage for the drama of maternity exhibited in the mid-Victorian novel. It begins with Caroline Norton's exoneration in her husband's action against the Prime Minister for criminal conversation with his wife, the former Caroline Sheridan.¹⁰ Although George Norton lost his case, it was his wife's reputation and life that were irrevocably damaged by the action. After two earlier separations, they separated again after the trial—although owing to her “exoneration” in the trial they could not be divorced—and Caroline Norton was shocked to discover that she had no legal right to remain in contact with her children. Not only did she not automatically retain custody of them, she could not even petition for redress; there was no provision in the law for a wife's challenge to paternal custody. As the father's property, the children could not be separated—or “alienated,” as the legal language goes—from him. Already a writer and editor, whose labors had supported her family since her marriage ten years earlier, Norton now took action to keep her three young sons with her, writing pamphlets and working privately with a sympathetic MP for the passage of a new custody law. Norton's efforts were instrumental in the passage of the Infant Custody Act of 1839, which, in a case of separation or divorce, granted women who had not been found guilty of adultery or other marital misconduct the right to petition for custody of their children under the age of seven. The bill's passage did not benefit Norton herself, however. Her husband moved their children to Scotland out of reach of the new law; only after one died, owing partly to his father's neglect, was she allowed partial custody of the remaining two sons. By this time they were in boarding school during most of the year, so her custody remained nominal.¹¹

The trial and the debate over the custody case made Norton a public woman in ways that her career as a writer had heretofore not done. She became notorious, a heroine—but also a byword. It was said of Norton late in her life, “She is so nice, what a pity she is not *quite* nice; for if she were quite nice she would be so *very* nice.”¹² This ambiguous “niceness” marks the ambivalence with which her efforts on behalf of women were greeted. In her own writings on custody she shapes her trials into a story, indeed, almost a novel. “Had there been no such proceedings,” she wrote about her continuing legal trials with her husband, “then, instead of this pamphlet, the work I was occupied upon, would have appeared; harmlessly to amuse those who had leisure to read it. I give them, in lieu of such a work, this ‘Story of Real Life’; taking place among the English aristocracy.”¹³ In later novels, she does not return directly to her own story, but consistently centers narrative interest on married women and mothers, rejecting the notion, derived from their legal status, that after marriage women ceased to exist.¹⁴ For Norton, married women do exist, they are interesting—and they can be heroines.¹⁵

Norton’s discovery of the failure of her conventional “plot” (marriage after her second “season”) and of her legal non-existence thereafter led her to invent both new plots and new laws, but her arguments consistently downplay novelty in favor of convention. In her pamphlets, Norton’s arguments tend especially to draw on the conventionalized mother’s role; the private woman who maintains the home for a loving but somewhat distant husband remains her ideal. George Norton’s own counsel observed at the time of the couple’s separation:

I found Mrs Norton anxious only on one point, and nearly broken-hearted about it; namely, the restoration of her children. She treated her pecuniary affairs as a matter of perfect indifference, and left me to arrange them with Mr Norton as I thought fit.

I found her husband, on the contrary, anxious only about the pecuniary part of the arrangement, and so obviously making the love of the mother for her offspring, a means of barter and bargain, that I wrote to him I could be “no party to any arrangement which made *money* the price of Mrs Norton’s fair and honourable access to her children.”¹⁶

As the lawyer’s comments demonstrate, Norton’s family had become a parody of Victorian gender relations, in which the man concerns himself with financial affairs and the woman with the family. Rather than challenge this gendered division of labor, however, Norton’s arguments—and her novel—would uphold it and, even after divorce or separation, would maintain women as primary caregivers for their small children and men as still-distant fathers. Although her own circumstances had forced her into a public role, her rhetoric consistently associates women with the private, the family, the sphere of domesticity. “Let those women who have the true woman’s lot,

of being unknown out of the circle of their homes, thank God for that blessing: it is a blessing; but for me, publicity is no longer a matter of choice," she wrote to the *Times*.¹⁷ Yet of course simply by speaking, Norton was challenging the division of labor she seems so insistently to support. Her public career—first as writer and editor, then as pamphleteer and polemicist—opens up the distinct possibility, indeed necessity, for women to take on more than one role and for motherhood, their "natural calling," to be by definition a "role," thus something that can be played, acted out. Norton's rhetoric in the custody debates and in her later novels works consistently against itself in this manner; while she calls for her own return to the private, she demonstrates not only her exceptional ability to act in public, but the narrative and dramatic possibilities of maternity itself.¹⁸

The debates over the Infant Custody Act of 1839 reveal a deep anxiety about wifehood and motherhood, privacy and publicity, that goes far beyond the deceptively simple question about the best interest of the child to focus instead on women's roles within the family and on the relations between men and women. Limited though the act was, it nonetheless proved a watershed in that it was the first instance in which the interests of husbands and wives were dealt with separately by Parliamentary law; for this to occur, however, the wife had to be recast in legal terms as primarily a mother. Earlier legal decisions involving women always took the married couple to be the primary building block of society; as this act and others later in the century proved, the category of "woman" could be separated from "husband," but only if reattached to "child" in the mother-child dyad.¹⁹ Thus this potentially progressive law, which recognized women as legal and familial subjects in their own right, did so only by redefining them solely in terms of motherhood. Women's maternity became their only source of political power.

The debate over custody quickly became a debate over contesting definitions of motherhood and women's nature. Sir Edward Sugden, one of the bill's fiercest opponents, believed "that [the bill] would lead to many separations between women and their husbands, if the woman had this absolute right [of custody]."²⁰ He later argued further:

Under the present law, parents, mothers especially, had a great inducement, from the natural love and affection they bore to their children, to put up with many petty trifling differences and annoyances which there were no means of remedying, because the marriage tie remained unbroken: the children formed the common link which bound the parties together. But this bill would lead to collision of interests between the father and mother, as regarded their children, and, in many cases, separations, followed by divorces, would ensue, simply because of the facilities afforded mothers of indulging their natural love, by access to their offspring.²¹

Sugden's argument quickly shifts from a consideration of parents to one of

mothers only. His vision of the family here is of a benign prison with the husband/father as the only guard. Granting women custody of their children, or even in this instance access to them, would be in Sugden's argument to release them from the custody of marriage.

Interestingly, both pro- and anti-reform speakers seem to agree that marriage is often intolerable for women. The pro-reform argument frequently casts husbands as ogres rather than wives as potential adulteresses in need of constant surveillance and control, but the rhetoric regarding the marital dynamic is startlingly similar. Sergeant Talfourd, who had originally brought the bill to the house, argued:

[The conservative] argument was a strong one in favour of the bill, for what was more deplorable than that this depth of feeling should be the last link to prevent a virtuous woman from separating from her husband who ill uses her, and that only by this iron bond should they have the power of inducing the wife to remain under her husband's roof, and that the husband should be allowed thus to torture and to play upon the feelings of his wife, whatever cruelty he might have used towards her.²²

Again, the issue at stake seems to be the custody—even incarceration—of the wife rather than the custody—or care—of the child.

Both sides similarly agreed with the *Fraser's* reviewer that domestic life was hardly a fit subject for public discussion. Mr. Shaw, speaking against the bill, claimed "that no woman of a delicate mind would submit to call upon a court to interfere and to exercise these powers"—the inference being, then, that any woman who would do so must *ipso facto* not be of delicate mind and not be a fit mother.²³ Talfourd agreed with Shaw's characterization of proper mothers, but argued the other way:

He knew that women had a strong disinclination to bring their wrongs before a public court, and to claim the last comfort which they could enjoy in this life; it was only, therefore, in cases where the natural feelings of the mother were exceedingly strong, that the courts of law were at present called upon to interfere. . . . But then it was alleged that applications to the judges would tend to disclose private scandal: it would have a directly opposite effect—it would prevent the disclosure. As the law now stood, husbands must apply by attachment against their wives, and the wives outraged the laws of their country by removing the children, rather than outrage the dearer ties of nature. Now, these applications were made in public courts, where all proceedings were legally reported; but his object was, to have the cases heard before a private tribunal, which would be above suspicion, where the cases would be shielded from the public eye.²⁴

Talfourd suggests, in contradistinction to Sugden, that it is precisely their delicate mindedness that brought women in conflict with the present law and that his bill, requiring "exposure" only before a private tribunal rather than in open court, would therefore alleviate their distress.

Norton would have concurred, as it was indeed her public criminal conversation trial, in which her own silence was legally enforced, that had first exposed her marital woes and made her a public domestic figure. That is, while she was already a public figure of a sort, as a poet and editor of literary magazines, her domestic life had been shielded from view. In her attempts to regain custody of her children, and again in her legal battles to protect her property, however, Norton relentlessly publicized her own story, writing to the *Times* and publishing pamphlets to expose her husband's cruelty and her own efforts to restore domestic peace and privacy. Like the silent women discussed in the all-male Parliament, Norton "went public" to protect her already shattered privacy.

Helen Huntingdon of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* evinces a similar concern with privacy, a concern that is undercut by the novel's structure, in which a private diary becomes public property, handed over to a suitor and then shared with a friend in an odd gesture of mastery and authority. The novel, written in 1848 but set some twenty years earlier, nests a rather Gothic critique of marriage and patriarchal privilege inside the authorizing narrative of a husband and father. This novel, difficult to classify generically, has troubled readers since its publication in 1848 with its frank depictions of brutality and domestic abuse.²⁵ Unlike *Wuthering Heights*, however, with which it is often discussed, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is centrally concerned with what it means to be a mother. While the mothers of *Wuthering Heights* die young or give up their children, mothers are omnipresent in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, from Gilbert Markham's over-protective mother, to the scheming Mrs. Hargrave, to the heroine herself, Helen Huntingdon (aka Helen Graham). Indeed, maternal desire, or at least maternity, might be said to unify the two segments of the book, as we see Mrs. Markham's overbearing love for her son Gilbert, the narrator, mirrored and revised in Helen's pedagogical nurture of little Arthur.

The novel troubles in part because the frame narrative, a conventional courtship plot, encases a far less conventional tale, one that calls into question the viability of the courtship frame. Gilbert Markham, the frame narrator and eventual husband of Helen, tells his love story to his brother-in-law, Halford. Gilbert's story, deprived of the embedded diary, tells of a growing love between himself and the mysterious Helen Graham: a love obstructed by her family and her history, but which finally overcomes all obstacles and ends in the marriage of true minds. In this bare outline, the plot appears almost tiresomely conventional.

It is the "obstacles" that are unusual in the novel, for Helen is already married when Gilbert meets her, and her tale of marital abuse, relayed through her diary to him and ultimately to Halford (and subsequent readers), calls all marriage, and thus all courtship plots, into question.²⁶ Indeed as we investigate further, even Gilbert's story will not stand up as a conventional

courtship plot. His first real contact with Helen is mediated by her son, when Gilbert catches him falling out of a tree. Far from being the virginal heroine of the traditional courtship plot, Helen is always presented as already a mother. Ever after, Gilbert's relationship with Helen is mediated by little Arthur, as Gilbert brings him books and a dog, plays with him and takes him riding, and finally finds himself introduced to Helen's aunt as "Arthur's friend."²⁷

Throughout the novel, motherhood provides the impetus for plot, the reason for action. Helen's husband Arthur is abusive, intemperate, and adulterous, yet Helen submits to him until she feels that their son is endangered. She writes to her aunt that although she has endured Arthur's earlier abuse, "in duty to my son, I must submit no longer; it was absolutely necessary that he should be delivered from his father's corrupting influences" (p. 391). Although Helen does not specify the "corrupting influences" in this letter, it is clear from the context that she is especially eager to remove young Arthur from the influence of his new "governess," Arthur's mistress. Although she has previously submitted to her replacement as conjugal partner, if not wife, by Annabella Lowborough, she cannot submit to being replaced as a mother. Rather than do so, she risks poverty and shame to live as "Helen Graham," widow and artist, in Wildfell Hall.

Helen's story mirrors the "monstrous" tale outlined by Norton in one of her letters in support of the Custody Act ten years earlier:

Is it not utterly monstrous, that in a country professing the faith which is first pure and then peaceable, there should be a law absolutely tending, as if framed on purpose, to encourage in the husband the vices that destroy household purity and peace? Is it not monstrous, that a man may marry a woman for her money, treat her like a dog, turn her out of doors on a pittance, bestow her own property on his profligate companions, withhold her young children from her, and bring up those children to despise and revile her, among associates that must end in making them as bad as himself?²⁸

While Brontë refrains from making Arthur's a mercenary marriage, much of the rest of the plot follows precisely the outline of Norton's outrage. Yet Brontë focuses less on the legal oppression suffered by Helen than on the difficulty of establishing and maintaining her multiple identities—wife, mother, friend, sister—under Arthur's tyrannous rule, a rule that continues to control her even after she leaves him.

Helen's life at Wildfell Hall is a masquerade from start to finish. Like the other novelistic mothers I discuss, she must conceal her identity in order to maintain her maternity. Her constant fear for Arthur—kidnapping—is made plausible by the stories retailed in the debates over the custody bill and the novel's setting ten years prior to the bill's passage.²⁹ Along with masquerade, then, comes a nearly obsessive concern with privacy—a concern, however, that the novel persistently undoes.

Jan B. Gordon notes that the novel opens with a flurry of gossip, most of it centered on the “widow” who has taken Wildfell Hall. Helen seeks to stanch this flow of gossip by retreating ever further into domestic privacy; this retreat, however, only increases both the gossip and its wild inaccuracy. Finally, in an effort to clear her name with Gilbert, she reveals to him her story, written down in her private diary. As Gordon argues,

[Helen’s] attempt to use the private confessional form to combat the meta-language of the community [i.e., gossip] is only partially successful, because the diary has some of the limitations of gossip: once exchanged, it tends to be replicated in successive versions; in the process of disclosure, the private world becomes public, making for more or less equal access. . . .³⁰

Helen, like Caroline Norton, ironically discovers that the only way to maintain her status as a private, domestic woman, and a mother, is to “go public” with her story, at least to Gilbert. Once the story is in Gilbert’s hands, however, it becomes a public document; he uses it to combat the gossips’ tales of Helen, and, perhaps more oddly, to negotiate a relationship with his brother-in-law twenty years after the events of the diary narrative.

Helen’s masquerade similarly fails to preserve her privacy. Her refusal to speak of her family, her background, and her previous residence merely incites the community’s curiosity. Her false initials and false names on pictures condemn her in their eyes. It is of course precisely the propriety that the community cannot find in her that Helen seeks to maintain in her refuge from her husband: propriety and her son’s (and thus her own maternal) virtue.³¹

As Naomi Jacobs notes, masquerade is not merely a thematic or plot device in the novel; it might be said to structure it as well in the layered personae of author, pseudonym, narrator, and protagonist. As Acton Bell, Anne Brontë prefaces her novel with a defense, echoed later in Helen Graham’s defense of her child-rearing practices. Novelist and mother come together, then, as moral teachers—but moral teachers in disguise. In her persona of Acton Bell, Brontë writes: “if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain” (p. 30). Helen Huntingdon similarly muses over her new role as mother: “[I shall] be his shield, instructor, friend—to guide him along the perilous path of youth, and train him to be God’s servant while on earth, a blessed and honoured saint in heaven” (p. 252).

“Acton Bell” further argues in her preface for the essential similarity of men and women,³² and thus the appropriateness of the novel for both male and female readers, in the same kind of language that “Helen Graham” uses to defend her unusual child-rearing practices:

All novels are or should be written for both men and women to read, and I am at a loss to conceive how a man should permit himself to write anything that would be really disgraceful to a woman, or why a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming for a man. (p. 31)

You would have us encourage our sons to prove all things by their own experience, while our daughters must not even profit by the experience of others. Now *I* would have both so to benefit by the experience of others, and the precepts of a higher authority, that they should know beforehand to refuse the evil and choose the good, and require no experimental proofs to teach them the evil of transgression. (p. 57)

Helen's argument here neatly defends the novel, as teaching by others' experience, and her own maternal practice, while simultaneously undercutting any conception of an essential gender identity. Masculinity and femininity are taught in this novel and can be played, revised, changed—as Gilbert himself learns.³³ Even maternity, then, is not essential—and Helen indeed calls for her husband to share in what she insists on calling “parental feelings” (rather than maternal). Gilbert's approach to Helen through her son guarantees him a greater success than her husband, Arthur, who can see a child only as a rival for his wife's now divided attentions. The novel closes with Gilbert's ruminations on their life together and “the promising young scions that are growing up about us” (p. 490); shared parenthood has, we are reassured, brought the couple peace and happiness.

Shared parenthood seems an unlikely goal in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*, which nonetheless raises issues of both paternity and maternity as social functions rather than simply biological facts. Like *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Wood's novel engineers its heroine into the position of actress as she attempts to preserve her role as mother, and it unifies dual plots through a consideration of maternal desire—both Isabel's and Mrs. Hare's. While *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*'s Helen Huntingdon is forced into the role of widow in order to explain her single parenthood, *East Lynne*'s Isabel Vane plays the governess in order to maintain a connection to the children she has abandoned. Her plot of domestic failure and recuperation, however, is continually interrupted by the murder plot involving the Hares and Afy Hallijohn. Although the plots coalesce in the person of Sir Francis Levison, both Isabel's seducer and Hallijohn's murderer, the double focus of the novel has bothered many readers, who therefore usually concentrate on one or the other in their discussions.³⁴ Yet the plots share a thematic and structural interest in motherhood or, more broadly, parenthood. For example, we are first introduced to both Richard Hare and Isabel through the failures of their fathers and the self-sacrificing purity of their mothers. William, Earl of Mount Severn—Isabel's father—has failed to provide adequately for her. His fiscal irresponsibility is offset, or so we are led to believe, by her mother's moral training. This

training, however, has not been enough to prevent Isabel from eloping with the persuasive Sir Francis.³⁵ Similarly, Justice Hare, in his overzealousness for justice, fails to protect his son from either his mother's excessive fondness or the more dangerous murder charge. And Mrs. Hare's maternal concern for her child, expressed especially in her prophetic dreams, puts her at odds with her husband, fulfilling the fears the debaters over custody had earlier expressed about maternal agency in child custody.

Both *East Lynne* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, like Norton's *Lost and Saved*, seem centrally concerned with the question of the maternal role; and all bring their rather melodramatic plots to a halt, at least once, for a discussion of proper parenting. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the discussions of parenting recur throughout the text, the first coming as part of our introduction to Helen, when she argues with the neighbors about teaching Arthur not to drink. *Lost and Saved*'s discussions of parenting come in the form of authorial intervention and in implicit comparisons between Beatrice and her foil, Milly Nesdale. The following scene from *East Lynne* is representative of them all for the way in which it puts maternal and conjugal desire into play against each other and for the odd confusion it engenders in both auditor and reader. The scene takes place, more than halfway through the novel, between Isabel Vane and her husband's second wife, and it exemplifies the conflicts over maternal feeling that suffuse the novel.

Isabel Vane is about to start serving as the governess to her own children, whom she has earlier abandoned to elope with a lover (who has now inherited a fortune and a title and abandoned her). Believed dead after a railway accident that horribly disfigured her and that did kill her illegitimate son, she has returned to her husband's home in disguise to serve as the governess. The second Mrs. Carlyle is speaking to the first, whom she knows as Madame Vine, in an attempt to engage her as a governess. I quote the passage in its entirety because part of the discomfort it generates seems to derive from its length. This is the only sustained conversation between these two characters, rivals for the same man, in the novel.

"I hold an opinion, Madame Vine, that too many mothers pursue a mistaken system in the management of their family. There are some, we know, who, lost in the pleasures of the world, in frivolity, wholly neglect them: of those I do not speak; nothing can be more thoughtless, more reprehensible; but there are others who err on the opposite side. They are never happy but when with their children; they must be in the nursery; or, the children in the drawing-room. They wash them, dress them, feed them; rendering themselves slaves, and the nurse's office a sinecure. The children are noisy, troublesome, cross; all children will be so; and the mother's temper grows soured, and she gives slaps where, when they were babies, she gave kisses. She has no leisure, no spirits for any higher training: and as they grow old she loses her authority. One who is wearied, tired out with her children, cross when they play, or make a little extra

noise which jars on her unstrung nerves, who says, 'You shan't do this; you shall be still,' and that continually, is sure to be rebelled against at last: it cannot be otherwise. Have you never observed this?"

"I have."

"The discipline of that house soon becomes broken. The children run wild; the husband is sick of it, and seeks peace and solace elsewhere. I could mention instances in this neighbourhood," continued Mrs Carlyle, "where things are managed precisely as I have described, even in our own class of life. I consider it a most mistaken and pernicious system."

"It undoubtedly is," answered Lady Isabel, feeling a sort of thankfulness, poor thing, that the system had not been hers—when she had a home and children.

"Now, what I trust I shall never give up to another, will be the *training* of my children," pursued Barbara. "Let the offices, properly belonging to a nurse, be performed by the nurse—of course taking care that she is thoroughly to be depended on. Let her have the *trouble* of the children, their noise, their romping; in short, let the nursery be her place and the children's place. But I hope I shall never fail to gather my children round me daily, at stated periods, for higher purposes: to instil into them Christian and moral duties; to strive to teach them how best to fulfil life's obligations. *This* is a mother's task—as I understand the question; let her do this work well, and the nurse can attend to the rest. A child should never hear aught from its mother's lips but winning gentleness; and this becomes impossible, if she is very much with her children."

Lady Isabel silently assented. Mrs Carlyle's views were correct.³⁶

Note particularly in this passage the threat of marital dissolution Barbara Carlyle holds out as the punishment for a woman too interested in maternity: "the husband . . . seeks peace and solace elsewhere." This neatly reverses the threat of the custody debates, in which the woman allowed to maintain a maternal tie will easily abandon a marital one; Barbara's threat suggests, rather, that husbands will refuse to compete with children for the mothers' affection and will abandon the home rather than lose such a contest.³⁷ To avoid such a fate, the mother becomes a moral teacher, not a hands-on caregiver, as Barbara outlines her duties.

Clearly what is going on here is a lesson in proper middle-class parenting, in which the delegation of certain duties to servants and "professionals" bolsters the mother's, and the father's, status.³⁸ Yet the ironies of the situation are multiple. Isabel Vane, while the center of narrative interest, might be presumed to have lost our sympathy by abandoning her children; nonetheless, her discomfort here is palpable. Barbara Carlyle, her successor, has always been presented sympathetically; but her social climbing seems transparent here, and it reminds us that Isabel's social status was originally far above hers. Although the narrator and Isabel both "assent" to Mrs. Carlyle's views, Isabel is in fact about to be in the position of nurse or governess to her own children; in the maternal division of labor outlined, she will be the one to endure "the *trouble* of the children, their noise, their romping." And endure it she does, through some two hundred more pages, gladly and unselfishly.

We might also ask what this passage is doing in the novel, at the point when we are waiting breathlessly to find out if Isabel will be discovered and, perhaps more importantly, whether Barbara's brother will be cleared of a murder he did not commit (coincidentally, Isabel's former lover will eventually be charged and convicted). By stopping the plot, however, and increasing both Isabel's and the reader's discomfort to an unbearable pitch, the passage makes clear the anxiety about female roles evinced throughout the novel in its central theme of masquerade. This repeated trope—for Isabel Vane is not the only character to disguise herself—enacts a discomfort with the instability of familial roles. Who or what is a wife, a mother, especially if her husband and children do not recognize her? And, most importantly, can her role be played, either by herself or others? The same issues raised by the Custody Act reappear here almost thirty years later.³⁹

Caroline Norton's pamphlet, "A Plain Letter to the Lord Chancellor on the Infant Custody Bill," highlights a variety of injustices to women: that they could not own property, that they could be divorced for adultery alone while they had to prove both adultery and desertion (or cruelty—but always two injustices) against their husbands to obtain a divorce, that they could rarely remarry after divorce although their husbands could, and that in the case of a trial for adultery a woman could not speak in her own defense. Yet she raises these examples not to debate them, as we might expect, but merely to claim that they are lesser injustices, even paradoxically justifiable injustices, while depriving innocent mothers of child custody is not. That is, inequities between husband and wife are to be expected; as she claims, "to say that a wife should be otherwise than dutiful and obedient to her husband, or that she should in any way be independent of him, would be absurd" (p. 6). Women, as wives, are rightly in "an inferior position, that is, a position subject to individual authority" (p. 5). She goes on to note that in the worst abuses of such authority, most women (that is, though she fails to qualify this, most educated women with familial and financial resources) did have some redress, some exceptional access to the law. Only in the case of infant custody was such access denied, and yet for Norton it is in such a case especially required.

While the child is of such tender years [she writes] that the custody of the father *must*, from the nature of circumstances, be purely nominal; while he is obliged to provide it with a nurse, or some other substitute for its banished mother; in short, during that period of its life which God and nature point out as only fit for female care and tenderness—the right of the *male* parent [is] strictly enforced and supported; so strictly, indeed, that the mother who attempts to retain a child against her husband's will is liable to *imprisonment* for her contumacy. (p. 4)

Maternity is woman's natural calling, according to Norton's argument, and

a father can provide only a pale substitute for maternal care. Yet the functions Barbara Carlyle arrogates to herself in the passage above are precisely the functions a custodial father could be expected to serve: moral training, not the hands-on care for which, both sides agree, fathers seem to be ill-adapted. If fathers cannot perform such functions, it must be because maternity, not paternity, confers a natural link with morality. This puts women in a theoretical double bind: either maternity is natural and naturally moral—which the “fallen” or adulterous mothers of the debates seem to disprove—or it is a role performable by others. If fallen mothers prove the first proposition false, however, both *East Lynne* and *Lost and Saved* seem to reject the second, insisting above all else on a “natural” mother’s superiority as a caregiver. By arguing so, Talfourd was able to force passage of the Custody Act. In a further elaboration of the double bind, women’s natural spirituality is closely linked with the domestic ideology of self-sacrifice frequently articulated by Sarah Ellis and other conduct book writers; and indeed in *East Lynne*, the maternal role finally straitjackets Isabel into a self-sacrificial death in her former husband’s house. Her death is explicitly cast, however, as punishment for her acting: having played at being a wife, mother, and lover before taking on the “role” of governess (itself already a role, a substitution for motherhood), Isabel dies alone, separated from her children.

Barbara Carlyle, who sets wifedom above motherhood, represents the “conservative” position in the debate; yet she also articulates an allegiance to motherhood as a moral calling, which the defenders of maternal custody were able to call into play for their own arguments. Like Isabel, Barbara herself becomes a plotter and learns to play a role; yet unlike Isabel, she maintains a control that prevents the role from overwhelming her (as it threatens to overwhelm her brother Richard).

Barbara’s plots involve her efforts, undertaken with Archibald Carlyle’s help, to clear her brother of Hallijohn’s murder. Unlike Isabel, she manages to sublimate sexual desire to the familial, repressing her passion for Archibald as she works with him on her brother’s case. What appears to be an illicit affair between them (an appearance that finally helps drive Isabel away) is not, yet Barbara is eventually “rewarded” for her plotting by marriage to Archibald, after the report of Isabel’s death. Barbara’s plots succeed, then, because she is able to keep her roles straight: as sister and daughter she works tirelessly for her brother and mother; as wife she puts her husband first; as mother she is a respectable and respected moral teacher. Ironically, only Afy Hallijohn, of all the other women in the novel, is as successful in her plots. Unlike Isabel and Mrs. Hare, Barbara and Afy are able to compartmentalize their various desires and protect themselves when and if those desires come into conflict.

Closure for the heroine of *East Lynne* and her maternal foil involves not reward but release: Isabel is released from her multiple plots, masquerades,

identities, while Mrs. Hare is released from the tyranny of her husband and the need to repress her maternal desire. While Isabel and Mrs. Hare both live to see their maternal identities validated, the costs of maternal desire are great: for Mrs. Hare, a lifetime of repression finally repaid with her husband's debilitating stroke; for Isabel, years of servitude followed by a self-sacrificial death.

Like *East Lynne*, Caroline Norton's *Lost and Saved* begins conventionally as a courtship novel, with a love-at-first-sight plot.⁴⁰ We see the heroine, Beatrice Brooke, initially in the domestic idyll of "The Home," a home presided over by her widowed father, Captain Brooke, and her maternal half-sister, Mariana. Her courtship by Montagu Treherne is hindered by a conventional, capricious will dictating that he must marry one of his cousins in order to inherit his uncle's fortune; but Beatrice passively accepts her position until Montagu elopes with her in a scene reminiscent of Maggie Tulliver's flight with Stephen Guest. Beatrice, less self-willed than Maggie, soon finds herself a kept woman, tricked by a false marriage. Her illegitimate son galvanizes her into action; she leaves Montagu when he refuses to acknowledge her as his wife and reveals that he cannot legitimize their son. Beatrice is distinguished from her lover's earlier mistress by her lack of knowledge of the public, especially the parliamentary, world, but she learns to negotiate the less seemly side of London in order to support her illegitimate child. Her maternity authorizes her to act. Even before her abandonment by her false husband, her maternity forces her into a variety of roles—wife, mistress, widow—which she plays out in a vain attempt to preserve her relationships with father, false husband, and son. Motherhood—not self-preservation, financial necessity, or even sexual passion—motivates the role-playing, plotting heroine of this tale.⁴¹

Sexual passion and financial greed do motivate two other female plotters in the novel, and they are distinguished from Beatrice throughout by their enjoyment of the play for its own sake (Beatrice likes to go to the theater, to her lover's distress, but her own acting is far from accomplished), by their foreignness, and by their rejection of the maternal role. Myra Grey, the murderess who eventually relieves Beatrice of her faithless lover by accidentally poisoning him, is a mother who is never seen with her children, who is a "deceptive Hindoo," and who is a plot-machine. While Norton's cavalier shorthand reveals her own prejudice and that of her times, Myra is far less "Hindoo" (Norton uses the term interchangeably with "Indian" and "Oriental") than she is simply wicked, as is her niece, Milly Nesdale, Montagu's mistress. Both Milly and Myra carry on deceptions and intrigues for their own sake; they are accomplished liars, who play at innocence and motherhood with equal facility. Milly brings her children along for a rendezvous with Montagu; Beatrice first learns of his faithlessness when she sees

him playing with one of Milly's children in a way he has never played with his own illegitimate, sickly son Frank. Unlike Milly's and Myra's, Beatrice's plotting and role-playing remain essentially domestic; she lives in a woman-centered world in London, relying on her companion Parkes for contact with the outside world. Milly and Myra claim to wield political influence through their intrigues,⁴² while Beatrice does not even know what it means for the House to be "counted out" (II, 135).

As in her political pamphlets, then, Norton here creates a maternal heroine who rejects the spotlight into which she is forced and who prefers to leave "business" to men, if only they would take it on responsibly. Like her predecessors Helen and Isabel, Beatrice is unmothered and comes to maternity "naturally." Yet this natural state involves role play, class fall (Beatrice spends a good portion of the novel as a lace-mender, being unfit for any other occupation), and rejection. Like Isabel and Barbara in *East Lynne*, Beatrice also learns of the limits of fatherly love: Captain Brooke, who has seemed almost feminized in his love of domesticity and family, rejects Beatrice when he learns of her pregnancy, despite her insistence that she is "married, but it was not to be owned."⁴³ Like Justice Hare, he too rigidly insists on the demands of law and authority.

But unlike Isabel, Beatrice finally finds happiness in a return to her mother's homeland of Italy⁴⁴ with a somewhat gloomy Count whose wife has abandoned him, as Montagu has abandoned her. When both inconvenient "spouses" die—and not before, despite the Count's entreaties—the two marry, and Beatrice fulfills her maternal nature by mothering the Count's neglected daughter and raising her own "dark-eyed robust babe" in a new "Home" that represents her connection to her dead mother as much as to her new husband (III, 298). The conclusion to *Lost and Saved* provides a different vision from *East Lynne*: here the second wife combines both "natural" maternity and the important care-giving Barbara Carlyle delegates. Beatrice, who fails as a plotter, succeeds as a mother. Norton's heroine—like Norton, "nice, but not *quite* nice"—is still gossiped about at the novel's end, but reaps nonetheless the traditional benefits of the courtship novel. Norton's novel, then, depicts the machinations of patriarchal law and the victimization of women under it. At the same time, however, it fails signally to imagine any alternative future: the novel's closure simply recapitulates the past in a new setting.

While Isabel Vane's story ends tragically, Helen Huntingdon, Beatrice Brooke, and Norton herself seem to come through their plots empowered by a maternity that turns aggressive rather than self-sacrificial.⁴⁵ Norton outlived her husband; in her novel, she allows her heroine Beatrice to outlive her false husband, who is poisoned—accidentally, but gruesomely. Helen, fearing for her husband's soul, famously nurses him across the bar; his wrenching alcoholic terrors as he dies suggest a vaguely sadistic retribution

for Helen. The dyad of the couple, which has been so limiting for all three heroines, is reinscribed as a larger unit of family: Beatrice's son dies, but her second marriage is mediated through shared parenthood, as she marries a man whose daughter she mothers; Helen and Gilbert are raising children together at novel's end; and even Archibald and Barbara, at the close of *East Lynne*, end by reflecting on Isabel's loss and their mutual familial responsibilities. Furthermore, like *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *East Lynne* offers the possibility of redemption in a future generation. In the closing pages of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Gilbert Markham notes that his stepson Arthur Huntingdon has married Helen Hattersley and lives in his paternal manor of Grass-dale, scene of his mother's greatest unhappiness. This recuperated pair, Arthur and Helen, redeems the first couple and has been made possible by Helen's unyielding maternal care. *East Lynne*, similarly, ends with the suggestion that the second generation will redeem the first; Isabel's namesake, Isabel Lucy, seems destined to marry her cousin, the future Earl of Mount Severn, and will thus resume the position her mother lost. Identity is not only multiple and fluid in these novels, it seems to be continuous across generations, as the children who bear their parents' names repeat and revise their plots.⁴⁶

Motherless themselves, Helen, Isabel, and Beatrice discover a "natural" maternity that leads to new courtships and marriages, a new closure for the novel. Although *East Lynne* ends tragically for its heroine, leaving promise only for the next generation, Brontë and Norton reward their heroines, pushing the boundaries of women's plots through the empowering fiction of an essential maternity. And yet, as motherhood empowers, it may also hinder. All three novels, like the custody debates themselves, raise the issue of sexual desire in mothers,⁴⁷ and then sublimate the sexual to the maternal, finally reinscribing domesticity as the only legitimate locus of woman's desire. Norton's heroine, like herself, can never be *quite* nice; while she lives happily ever after, she does so in a self-imposed exile in Italy (home as well to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's famously fallen mother, Marian Erle). While Norton and Wood redeem their fallen women through motherhood, the novels raise dangerous issues of maternal sexuality and desire that the plots—revised, radicalized, and self-conscious as they are—cannot entirely contain.

NOTES

¹ While Austen's Fanny cannot literally be classed a "Victorian" heroine, her refusal to act, along with other differences from Austen's more lively heroines, suggests a rather prophetically "Victorian" incursion of propriety into a Regency setting.

² Acting, of course, takes on multiple meanings in this novel and in many nineteenth-century novels and is a subject too large for me to deal with adequately in the scope of this paper.

³ I am drawing on a variety of useful feminist texts in this *précis* of women's plots; most important to my own thinking are Ruth Bernard Yeazell's *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); and Marianne Hirsch's *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). To characterize the Victorian heroine as completely passive is to produce a caricature; Elizabeth Langland's work, among others, has demonstrated how, with attention to history and ideology, we can read in the domestic heroine's seeming inactivity a masked but active management of, among other things, class relations: see Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995). This masking nonetheless seems to me crucial, and Victorian critics seem to have expected a demeanor in their heroines in which overt plotting is cloaked, obviated, or rendered impossible. See, for example, Margaret Oliphant's comment in "Novels," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 102 (September 1867), 259, that "[young women's] own feelings on this subject [of marriage] should be religiously kept to themselves"; or George Eliot's characterization of the typical heroine of a "silly novel" as possessing a "sweet solemnity of . . . demeanour" and a "fainting form," in "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," *Westminster Review*, 66 (October 1856), 442-61, quoted in John Charles Olmstead, ed., *A Victorian Art of Fiction: Essays on the Novel in British Periodicals 1851-1869*, 3 vols. (New York: Garland Press, 1979), II, 280.

⁴ Hirsch, p. 12.

⁵ Gaskell's *Ruth* offers a variation on the fallen woman's plot of transgression and death; for Ruth, as for the heroines I shall be discussing, maternity is both redemptive and generative of plots. Nonetheless, her death at the novel's end seems to me to signal a capitulation to the conventions I have outlined. Roxanne Eberle's work on Romantic novels by women suggests that there were more options for fictional heroines in this earlier period; plots and possibilities for heroines seem to diminish as the novel surpasses poetry as the dominant literary form ("Interrupting the Harlot's Progress: The Radical Fictions of Wollstonecraft, Hays, and Opie," paper delivered at the Fifth Annual Conference on Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers, University of South Carolina, 21-23 March 1996). Recent treatments of motherhood in the Victorian novel, in addition to Hirsch's useful opening chapters, include Joan Manheimer's "Murderous Mothers: The Problem of Parenting in the Victorian Novel," *Feminist Studies*, 5, No. 3 (1979), 530-46; Sally Shuttleworth's "Demoniac Mothers: Ideologies of Bourgeois Motherhood in the Mid-Victorian Era," in *Rewriting the Victorians: Theory, History, and the Politics of Gender*, ed. Linda M. Shires (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 31-51; and Shires's "Of Maenads, Mothers, and Feminized Males: Victorian Readings of the French Revolution," in *Rewriting the Victorians*, pp. 147-65. All of these provide useful discussions of the usually negative thematic treatments of motherhood in the Victorian novel. In this essay, I will focus on the way the maternal presence in the novel alters and directs the plot.

⁶ Hirsch, p. 14.

⁷ By “maternal subject,” I mean—as I believe Hirsch does—a heroine whose maternity is central to her identity as heroine. I am not, however, specifically concerned with subjectivity in a psychoanalytic sense, as is Hirsch.

⁸ “On the Treatment of Love in Novels,” *Fraser’s Magazine*, 53 (April 1856), 405-18, in Olmstead, ed., II, 269-70.

⁹ Teresa de Lauretis argues that female desire is difficult to represent in cinema (or, I would argue, in literature) because it is often divided or double: “The real task is to enact the contradiction of female desire, and of women as social subjects, in the terms of narrative; to perform its figures of movement and closure, image and gaze, with the constant awareness that spectators are historically engendered in social practices, in the real world, and in cinema [or fiction] too,” in *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 156. Jay Clayton offers a rationale for the generic difficulty of novels that do attempt such a representation: “If women are capable of oscillating between opposed modes of desire, then it should be possible for the artist to provoke that oscillation, call attention to it, and uncover the contradictions that structure woman’s place in narrative,” in “Narrative and Theories of Desire,” *Critical Inquiry*, 16 (Autumn, 1989), 48.

¹⁰ “Criminal conversation” is a legal action whereby a husband could recover damages for his wife’s adultery; it was also usually the precursor to a divorce suit brought in Parliament. The accused was not allowed to testify or even to be present at a trial for criminal conversation.

¹¹ See Dorothy E. Zbarsky, “Domestic Anarchy and the Destruction of the Family: Caroline Norton and the Custody of Infants Bill,” *International Journal of Women’s Studies*, 7, No. 5 (Nov.-Dec. 1984), 397-411; S. Bailey Shurbutt, Introduction, *Lost and Saved*, by Caroline Norton (Delmar, New York: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1988), pp. 3-28; and Joan Huddleston, Introduction, *Caroline Norton’s Defense: English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1854; rpt. Chicago: Academy Chicago Press, 1982), pp. i-xiii, for more on Norton’s biography and her engagement with infant custody and other legal issues. See Dorothy M. Stetson, *A Woman’s Issue: The Politics of Family Law Reform* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), for more on the Custody Act and family law in general.

¹² Charles and Frances Brookfield, *Mrs. Brookfield and Her Circle*, 2 vols. (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1905), II, 525.

¹³ Caroline Norton, *Caroline Norton’s Defense*, p. 141.

¹⁴ As Mary Poovey says, the debates over infant custody and other legal issues involving women in the mid-nineteenth century “called the public’s attention to the paradoxical fact that in Britain, when a woman became what she was destined to be (a wife), she became ‘nonexistent’ in the eyes of the law,” in *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 52.

¹⁵ Norton herself is said to be the model for the heroine of George Meredith’s novel *Diana of the Crossways*. This correspondence is inexact, however, and in a telling way: Meredith’s heroine, like most Victorian heroines, is childless.

¹⁶ *Caroline Norton’s Defense*, p. 125.

¹⁷ *Caroline Norton’s Defense*, p. 122.

¹⁸ I am here and throughout using the terms “public” and “private” as I believe

Norton herself to have understood them. As many other critics have noted before me, and as Norton's own career makes amply clear, the "wall" between public and private was never so permeable as when it was being most strenuously defended by Victorian writers.

¹⁹ Laura C. Berry, who generously shared her work on custody with me while it was in manuscript, notes that "the legal, even financial, bond of marriage has disappeared, only to be firmly replaced by the 'iron bond' of mother and child," in "Acts of Custody and Incarceration in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *Novel*, 30, No. 1 (1996), 36. Berry's work, while focusing on the child instead of the mother, has been very helpful to me in thinking through my own argument.

²⁰ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates: Third Series*, XLII, 29 March-18 May 1838 (London: Thomas Curson Hansard, 1838; rpt. New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1971), p. 1050.

²¹ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates: Third Series*, XLVIII, 6 June-6 July 1839 (London: Thomas Curson Hansard, 1839; rpt. New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1971), p. 160. It is worth remarking here that between the bill's introduction in 1837 and eventual passage in 1839 it was revised several times and also that the debaters frequently exaggerated its potential changes for effect. The bill never contained a provision for mothers' absolute custody of their children; some versions provided all separated mothers access to their children, but the version that eventually passed contained the provision that "no order shall be made by virtue of this act whereby any mother against whom adultery shall be established . . . shall have the custody of any infant or access to any infant," quoted in William Forsythe, *A Treatise on the Law Relating to the Custody of Infants in Cases of Difference Between Parents or Guardians* (London: William Benning and Co., 1850), p. 140.

²² *Hansard's Third Series*, XLII, 1054.

²³ *Hansard's Third Series*, XLII, 1053.

²⁴ *Hansard's Third Series*, XLII, 1053-54.

²⁵ Naomi N. Jacobs cites early reviews that, disturbed by the domestic violence portrayed in the novel, "sought to reassure themselves and their readers that education, cultivation, and civilization will preclude brutal behavior, and objected to powerful fictional representations contradicting this premise," in "Gender and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 16, No. 3 (1986), 206. Reviewers of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* frequently found it "morbid" and "unhealthy."

²⁶ Critics since George Moore, including the influential Brontë biographer Winifred Gérin, have seen the inclusion of the diary as an artistic mistake. Juliet McMaster neatly sums up these critics and powerfully defends Brontë's technique, noting "the fine art by which a deteriorating relationship is recorded with dramatic immediacy," in "Imbecile Laughter" and 'Desperate Earnest' in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 43, No. 4 (1982), 363. Jan B. Gordon and Jacobs discuss the specific effects of the structure of the novel, in which an "authorizing" frame narrator is repeatedly undercut by an internal narrative that threatens to overwhelm his frame. See Gordon, "Gossip, Diary, Letter, Text: Anne Brontë's Narrative *Tenant* and the Problematic of the Gothic Sequel," *ELH*, 51, No. 4 (1984), 719-45, and Jacobs, "Gender and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*."

²⁷ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, intro. Winifred Gérin, ed. G. D. Hargreaves (1848; rpt. London: Penguin, 1985), p. 478. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text.

²⁸ Norton, *A Letter to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Exeter, on the Custody of Infants* (London: Edward Churton, 1839), pp. 4-5.

²⁹ Most of the debates over the Custody Act included some consideration of a fear of kidnapping, either by a separated wife desperate to maintain contact with her children, or (more frequently) by a father insistent on protecting his paternal rights. It seems to have become commonplace in this context to retell the story of a child torn from its mother's breast by a tyrannous father. Norton's version, for example, reads this way:

In the year 1804 there was a recorded case of disputed custody, between a separated couple of the name of de Manneville, where the husband entered by force and stratagem the house of his wife's mother, (whither she had withdrawn from his brutality and violence,) and seizing her infant, (then at the breast,) carried it off in an open carriage in inclement weather.

See Norton, "A Plain Letter to the Lord Chancellor on the Infant Custody Bill, by Pearce Stevenson, Esq." (1839), in *Selected Writings of Caroline Norton: Facsimile Reproductions*, with an Introduction and Notes by James O. Hoge and Jane Marcus (Delmar, New York: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1978), p. 69. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text. This tale and others like it were retold in virtually every debate over the proposed bill.

³⁰ Gordon, pp. 727-28.

³¹ McMaster argues, in this context, that the novel narrates the shift between Regency standards of masculine behavior and a rising Victorian sense of propriety, often cast as feminine.

³² According to Jacobs, the novel (and *Wuthering Heights*, which she also discusses) demonstrates that for Emily and Anne Brontë "gender is a ragged and somewhat ridiculous masquerade concealing the essential sameness of men and women" (pp. 204-05).

³³ McMaster argues that the novel demonstrates Gilbert's attainment of a Victorian standard of masculinity. Early in the novel he is spoiled and violent, not unlike Arthur Huntingdon in some ways, but under Helen's influence he begins to promote a new, more domestic standard of masculinity.

³⁴ Jonathan Loesberg is a notable exception; see his "The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction," *Representations*, 13 (Winter 1986), 115-38. Loesberg notes that the plots are unified by the shared concern with loss of class identity: both Richard Hare and Isabel Vane lose their class status as they masquerade, Richard in order to escape imprisonment, Isabel in order to maintain her status as governess. While Loesberg's argument is convincing and well argued, what he sees as a loss of identity I see as a multiplication thereof. Both Isabel and Richard are always at least two people at once; indeed, their inability to lose their "original" identities is the real problem as they attempt to negotiate within their new roles.

³⁵ Isabel's flight with Sir Francis indeed reiterates her mother's flight with her father, although the earlier flight ends in marriage at Gretna Green rather than adultery, disgrace, and abandonment.

³⁶ Mrs. Henry Wood, *East Lynne*, ed. Norman Page and Kamal Al-Solaylee (1861; rpt. London: Everyman/J. M. Dent, 1994), pp. 415-16. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text.

³⁷ The strength of maternal attachment is never called into question in the debates over custody as it is, to some extent, in *East Lynne*. In Norton's "Plain Letter to the Lord Chancellor" she clearly anticipates no argument or dissent when she asserts that "a man cannot love his wife better than a mother loves her child; not though he felt for her every sentiment of esteem, respect, tenderness, and admiration, which ever combined to give root to strong attachment" (p. 48).

³⁸ Lyn Pykett reads this passage, as I do, as revealing "the division of labour, and the dependence on servants in the domestic hierarchy which sustains this version of mothering. It also reveals the splitting of the mother herself: her function of moral guardian and guide, and her supposedly natural role as carer, both of which are integral to the 'womanly woman' ideal, are shown to conflict," in *The "Improper" Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 129. Pykett, like other critics of the novel, defines Isabel's sin as "excess"—she is excessive both in her passion for Francis Levison and in her maternal passion. Shuttleworth similarly reads the passage as embodying the Victorian conflict over the roles of wife and mother; by reading Isabel as "powerless to control the workings of both sexual and maternal desire," however, she seems to me to discount the active role Isabel takes in reasserting her maternity (p. 49). Although the governess position is offered to her somewhat coincidentally, Isabel takes great pains to ensure that she will be able to fulfill it undetected.

³⁹ As later nineteenth-century legal treatises indicate, the passage of the Custody Act in 1839 by no means settled the question of competing claims to children. Throughout the century, in legal treatises on the status of children, writers remark on the continued bias of the court in favor of paternal custody, despite the new law.

⁴⁰ *Lost and Saved*, less well-known than the other two novels I discuss here, receives somewhat short shrift in my analysis for that reason. The novel's length and complexity make it difficult to discuss without extensive summary and paraphrase; I prefer simply to focus on points of contact with Norton's own "plots" and those of the novels I have already discussed.

⁴¹ Sylvia Shurbutt summarizes the novel thus:

Spirited, passionate, and beautiful, Beatrice Brooke is tricked into a false marriage by the handsome, unprincipled Montagu Traherne [sic], an immensely appealing young wastrel smitten by her beauty but unable to obtain his family's sanction for their real marriage, due to the terms of a will controlling the family estate and Traherne's destiny. . . .

As Traherne has been manipulated by terms of the family will, so in turn does he manipulate Beatrice by convincing her that theirs is an honorable, though secret, marriage; and as all good Victorian wives, she remains obedient and passive, an angel in the house, until circumstance proves their marriage a sham and Traherne's infidelity and deceit a fact. Any typical, mid-century heroine worth her stuff would, at this point in the story, meekly sink into oblivion or into some nameless tarn, but Beatrice chooses to survive, survive through her own action rather than through the charity, pity, or guilt-ridden

conscience of the man responsible for her fall. The difficulties, however, in choosing independence are many; the sadnesses that multiply in her life, extreme—not the least of which is realizing her child's bastardy. She becomes destitute, sinking to a low few Victorian heroines were allowed in popular fiction, yet she survives; she survives precisely because she refuses any longer to be manipulated or owned. By the novel's conclusion, she has regained her self-esteem and has reordered her life for herself. By the time she comes face to face again with Traherne, she discovers [sic], surprisingly, that the force of her own will has conquered even the self-consuming love that she had felt for him, a love she had always imagined would imprison her. (Introduction to *Lost and Saved*, p. 8)

Shurbutt's summary is accurate and helpful as far as it goes, although it elides the subplots dealing with Beatrice's sister, brother, and cousins, whose futures, especially through marriage, are also at issue. She also downplays the importance both of Beatrice's son, Frank, whose life and death are structurally central to the novel, and of the companion, Parkes, on whom Beatrice relies in her destitution. Parkes, companion to Beatrice's aunt, the Marchioness of Updown, secures employment and lodging for Beatrice and tends her and her sickly son. Norton's attention to Parkes's story bespeaks a familiarity with and interest in the lives of "distressed gentlewomen" and even working class life unusual, I suspect, in Norton's circle.

⁴² Norton herself, of course, claimed a certain political influence as well, first through her friendship with Lord Melbourne and later through her pamphlets. Meredith develops this theme in *Diana of the Crossways*, making a love and aptitude for politics one of his heroine's most important characteristics. Milly and Myra seem to present Norton's worst-case scenarios for herself somewhat as Mary Crawford, the attractive "bad woman" of Austen's *Mansfield Park*, suggests a negative alter-ego for her author.

⁴³ Caroline Norton, *Lost and Saved*, 3 vols. (London, Hurst and Blackett, 1863), I, 243. Subsequent references will be to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

⁴⁴ Norton relies rather heavily in the novel on conventional associations between character and geography: Myra, the "Hindoo," is deceitful and sly; Beatrice and her brother, whose mother is Italian, are passionate and occasionally hot-tempered. Italy seems feminized by its association with motherhood, as it is at the end of *Aurora Leigh*.

⁴⁵ See Berry, p. 44.

⁴⁶ *Wuthering Heights* famously repeats and revises the story of its first generation in its second. The endings of both *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, according to Gordon, suggest "that a passing beyond the passionate hell of the first is necessary to a second generation's salvation" (p. 736).

⁴⁷ Shuttleworth has argued that motherhood, particularly when sexualized, is often cast as "demonic" in Victorian literature (p. 44); in these novels motherhood seems potentially dangerous, and it certainly complicates the plot lines, but finally it is simply cleansed of its sexual aspects and recast in purely moral terms. The residue of "inappropriate" desire, however, remains in the generic complications of these plots and particularly in the "other" women: Annabella Lowborough in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Afy in *East Lynne*, and Myra and Milly in *Lost and Saved*.