The Contested Secret Room: Sensation Novels

Powerless Landlords: Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*

Wilkie Collins' 1859/60 *The Woman in White* is generally considered to be one of the first novels that inaugurated the short-lived genre of sensation fiction. Domesticating the horrors of the Gothic, Collins portrays female characters who, threatened by a patriarchal system that affords them neither social nor financial security, cleverly subvert the power structures that oppress them. In *The Woman in White*, a text "riddled with sexual and gender anxieties" (Nemesvari 2006: 95), patriarchs of the home are exposed as weak and paranoid, losing control over domestic space, and the secrets contained therein. Collins questions Victorian assumptions about masculine activity and feminine passivity, and eventually has his narrative turn its back on the patriarchal domestic, shifting focus more and more towards liminal spaces, in which power relations, secrets, and identities are re-negotiated. Secrecy, indeed, dominates the novel: "*The Woman in White* is, at its very centre, in its margins, between the lines, and beyond its pages, obsessed with secrecy." (Bachman 2010: 75) The sensation novel in general, as Lyn Pykett remarks, "goes out of its way to foreground the interconnectedness of its use of secrecy as a narrative device (to capture and keep the attention of readers) and its exploration of secrecy as a broader cultural phenomenon" (Pykett 2011: 42). This multi-layered preoccupation with secrecy is inextricably linked, as I will argue here, to questions of gendered power relations and, in particular, masculine self-definition. Homosocial secrecy becomes a source of masculine paranoia, and the compulsive 'need to read' oneself and others according to the rules of heteronormativity. Collins, hence, in an ostensibly heteronormative plot, constructs masculinities that bear the paranoid markers of nineteenth century 'homosexual panic,' "which arises from the existence of just-about-to-be-exposed secrets that are essential to the sensation genre, but that in *this* narrative are always clustered around representations of improper masculinity" (Nemesvari 2006: 98).

The story is told from an array of different perspectives, with a focus on the novel's two main characters: Walter Hartright – whose telling name appears to

make him the ideal masculine hero and perfect lover for Laura Fairlie – and Marian Halcombe, Laura's half-sister, confidante, and the novel's female heroine. Many critics have commented on the effect the confusing variety of narrative voices has on the novel's readers. As Philipp Erchinger observes, Collins creates

"a highly intriguing fabric of individual fictional discourses, managed, manipulated and lined up by an equally fictional editor, Walter Hartright, whose true motives and principles must, by virtue of their fictional character, necessarily remain secret and therefore, despite all his declarations to the contrary, fundamentally unreliable." (Erchinger 2008: 51)

What makes *The Woman in White* compelling, then, is less the suspense Collins creates before revealing the narrative's secrets, but the very impossibility of establishing one absolute fictional 'truth' about the events presented. The novel's readers have to form their own opinion, decide whom to trust, and which parts of the 'evidence' to believe in. As Mark M. Hennelly, Jr. puts it, "the novel […] provides a blank universe pregnant with meaning which each reader must construct, or reconstruct, himself" (Hennelly 1998: 93). What Collins requires of his readers, then, is what Erchinger calls a "performative reading" (Erchinger 2008: 54), a reading that establishes one 'truth,' but can never be *the* truth. Collins, hence, plays with a narrative strategy that Henry James will later carry to prolific extremes: he exploits the 'paranoid reader's' tendency to compulsively look for coherent meaning, and to make sense of the world presented to them. Maria K. Bachman observes: "[F]rom the very first page of the novel, the reader enters a densely plotted labyrinth of secrecy from which there is no turning back because the concealment and disclosure of knowledge – the operating principle of secrecy – stimulates our curiosity, our inquisitiveness, our determined and unrelenting need to know." (Bachman 2010: 78)

Although Bachman expertly analyses the workings of secrecy in the novel, she does not address the gendered nature of these dynamics. Both the women and the men of Collins' fictional worlds have secrets, and Bachman rightly notes that "[t]he concealment of knowledge is a control mechanism, a perpetual, but always tenuous grasp for power" (Bachman 2010: 83). I would like to draw closer attention, however, to the ways in which these dynamics of power become crucially problematic as a constitutive element of masculine self-perception. Collins constructs the 'will to knowledge' Bachman describes as a means for his male characters to establish interpretative authority through their compulsive drive to 'read' the people around them according to their needs, and, more importantly, to be in control of the ways in which they themselves are being 'read' by others. This masculine excess in 'paranoid readings' is staged in domestic and liminal spaces that both

enable to conceal, and threaten to reveal the men's secrets. The male 'paranoid reader' needs a public, and Walter Hartright has the biggest stage as the narrative's fictional editor, who performs his self-fashioning as non-paranoid male hero for his readership in a way that – ironically and inevitably – turns out to be a desperate attempt to be 'hailed' as the only stable man, and heterosexual saviour of the novel's female characters, but employs the same rhetorical techniques that constitute the masculine 'paranoid reader.'

Degenerate Patriarchy: Limmeridge House

After his encounter with Anne Catherick, the mysterious 'woman in white,' in the streets of London, Walter travels to Limmeridge House to take up a post as tutor to the house's young women, "a job [that] entails an emasculation that threatens his sense of male identity and gentlemanly privilege" (Nemesvari 2006: 98). From the start, Collins' portrayal of the house and its occupants questions established domestic power relations and gender stereotypes. Not only is the house built in the shifting, liminal environment of the coastal town of Carlisle (cf. Collins 2003: 32-33), but it is also not its master who welcomes Walter at his arrival. Instead, Marian occupies the spatially and linguistically dominant position of confident manager of the house's affairs. This position corresponds with an extremely androgynous appearance: "The lady is ugly! […] She had a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw […and was] altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability." (Collins 2003: 35) It is also Marian, not Mr Fairlie, who receives the family solicitor, Mr Gilmore, to settle the affairs for Laura's marriage to Sir Percival Glyde: "Miss Halcombe waited on the door steps until the fly drew up; and then advanced to shake hands with [Mr Gilmore]." (Collins 2003: 115) Walter himself is rather awed by this 'manly woman,' "almost repelled by the masculine form and the masculine look of [her] features" (Collins 2003: 35). Wanting – from the perspective of the male protagonist – a certain degree of femininity, Marian's deliberation and activity stand in stark positive contrast to the degeneration of the house's actual master.

Frederick Fairlie is not only "a single man" (Collins 2003: 37), and, hence, jeopardising the continuation of his lineage, but also "an invalid" of unspecifiable suffering: "[T]he doctors don't know what is the matter with him. […] We all say it's on the nerves, and we none of us know what we mean when we say it." (Collins 2003: 37) What is more, Mr Fairlie is tucked away, as it were, in the most secluded, least representative, and most out-of-the-way part of his own house, down "a long second passage," up "a short flight of stairs," across "a small circular upper hall" (Collins 2003: 41), and behind two doors and two curtains. His room has the air of

a closet in the sense of an early modern cabinet of curiosities, in which he keeps religious paintings, furniture from abroad, and other collectibles (cf. Collins 2003: 41). Even Mr Fairlie himself seems to be just another curiosity, an item to be put away in this room in which "the windows were concealed and […t]he light […] was deliciously soft, mysterious and subdued" (Collins 2003: 41). Although Walter calls him "the master of the house," this master lacks all signs of strength, virility, or even real life: "His beardless face was thin, worn, and transparently pale[;…] his hair was scanty[;…h]is feet were effeminately small, and were clad in buff-coloured silk stockings, and little womanish bronze-leather slippers." (Collins 2003: 42) Mr Fairlie is characterised as anything but a 'proper man:' He "seems to belong to an intermediate sex or gender. Combining an excess of sensibility and aesthetic overrefinement with the oversensitivity of the nervous modern subject, he is simultaneously overcivilised and degenerate." (Pykett 2006: 55) Fairlie represents "a foreign unmanliness that implies sexual perversity" (Nemesvari 2006: 100) and sterility. A weak and fading 'non-man,' evacuated of 'masculinity' and desire, Collins eliminates Mr Fairlie as a person of any 'actual' gender, and, hence, as a socially significant being: "[H]e had a frail, languidly-fretful, over-refined look – something singularly and unpleasantly delicate in its association with a man, and, at the same time, something which could not possibly have looked natural and appropriate if it had been transferred to the personal appearance of a woman." (Collins 2003: 42)

Mr Fairlie refuses to take on any responsibility concerning the running of the house, constantly referring to "the lamentable state of [his] health" (Collins 2003: 43). He explicitly gives up the power to make decisions in favour of the two women, thus willingly subverting his own position of patriarchal power: "I wish I felt strong enough to go into that part of the arrangement – but I don't. The ladies, who profit by your kind services, Mr. Hartright, must settle, and decide, and so on, for themselves." (Collins 2003: 47) On a more subtle note, the reference to his garden as a 'hortus conclusus' further associates him with a tradition of feminine virginity: "The garden was carefully walled in, all round[…, a] sacred seclusion." (Collins 2003: 46)

Mr Fairlie's garden, in fact, while serving to illustrate his own unwillingness to take action, increasingly becomes the space in which the other three characters meet and form bonds that undermine Mr Fairlie's theoretical authority. Here, Walter meets Laura for the first time, and falls in love with her (cf. Collins 2003: 50-64), later learning that she has already been promised to Sir Percival; and it is also in the garden that Marian and Walter form a heterosocial bond over the curious case of the 'woman in white' (cf. Collins 2003: 50; 70). The private atmosphere of the garden enables Marian to make Walter understand that she is a woman who 'knows things,' and from whom it is hard to keep secrets: "I discovered your secret

[that he loves Laura] – without help, or hint, mind, from any one else." (Collins 2003: 71) This woman is potentially dangerous to the male-patriarchal system of power over knowledge, both because she knows the men's secrets, and is eager to find them out, and because she refuses to position herself within the established system of a homosocial-heterosexual matrix. Instead, she makes herself unavailable as an object of heterosexual desire, and strives to establish a heterosocial bond with Walter, to act both as manager of the house's affairs, and in the interest of her thus befriended companion: "You are guilty of weakness. […] If you had acted […] less delicately and less modestly, I should have told you to leave the house. […] Shake hands. […] You must leave Limmeridge House, Mr Hartright, before more harm is done." (Collins 2003: 71-72) Ironically, putting herself in a more than conspicuous position as a woman, questioning Walter's own masculinity in making decisions for (and knowing so much about) him, Marian explicitly reminds him of his duty to manliness, aware of his dangerously self-compromising situation: "Don't shrink under it like a woman. Tear it out; trample it under foot like a man!" (Collins 2003: 73) Walter, however, refuses to adopt the kind of brutal, 'masculine' strength Marian seems to expect from him. Instead, he remains sentimentally attached to the garden's heterotopian spatiality he associates with his love for Laura: In the garden, "[I] took my farewell of the scenes which were so associated with the brief dreamtime of happiness and my love" (Collins 2003: 116), an escapist longing he takes even further into the liminal, "over the moor, and round the sandhills, down to the beach" (Collins 2003: 117).

The heterosocial bond between Marian and Walter eventually makes the latter complicit in Marian's subversion of the house's patriarchal power structures. He becomes her confidant and advisor: "You [Walter] are the only person in the house, or out of it, who can advise me. Mr. Fairlie, in his state of health […] is not to be thought of. The clergyman is a good, weak man, who knows nothing out of the routine of his duties." (Collins 2003: 78) Faced with the failure of both secular and clerical patriarchy to deal with her and Laura's troubles, Marian looks to Walter, as her friend, for help. While, however, his love for Laura alludes to an accepted (heterosexual) path to domestic power, Walter's intimate intellectual (heterosocial) friendship with Marian puts him in a position of influence that contradicts the culturally sanctioned 'rules of the game' that are available to the novel's men.

It soon becomes obvious that heterosexual bonding is stagnant in Collins' story. Apart from Walter, all other principal male characters are depicted as decadent, effeminate, and ill – hence far from successfully putting their reproductive organs to use. When Anne Catherick, the mysterious 'woman in white,' warns Laura in a letter not to marry Sir Percival, her fear alludes, not least of all, to his lack of 'manliness:' "[H]is nose [was] straight and handsome and delicate enough to have done for a woman's. His hands the same. He was troubled for a time with a dry hacking

cough." (Collins 2003: 80) Lacking virility and health, Sir Percival is hardly the ideal patriarch within a system that relies on its own reproductivity.

Although Walter's close association with women questions his position within a homosocial-heterosexual framework due to its emphatically heterosocial nature, it is this very association that makes him (for a while at least) the novel's only stable male character. His failure to buy into the structures of domestic patriarchy saves him from an economy of degeneracy that Collins portrays in his other male characters. Walter, in fact, repeatedly moves into liminal spaces that are associated with femininity (such as the garden), and that help him realise his own position within the novel's female-dominated world. When Marian leads him to Mrs Fairlie's grave in the churchyard, Walter feels a strong intuition that Laura's dead mother will be a key to the mystery of the 'woman in white' (cf. Collins 2003: 91); and it is, indeed, here that Walter encounters Anne Catherick (who is, in fact, Laura's half-sister) for the second time: "Under the wan wild evening light, that woman and I were met together again; a grave between us, the dead about us, the lonesome hills closing us round on every side." (Collins 2003: 96) In the liminal space of the churchyard, at the liminal time of twilight, mediated through Laura's dead mother (and Anne's 'substitute mother'), Walter gets the first hints that will help him solve the mystery surrounding the women. He also, however, puts himself in a compromising position: he both acknowledges that he is, in fact, only a messenger in the homosocial traffic of knowledge between women ("Miss Fairlie will keep your [Anne's] secret, and not let you come to any harm." [Collins 2003: 103]), and realises that, in meeting Anne, and helping her escape from the asylum at the very beginning of the story, he has actually discovered (and uncovered) part of a patriarchal secret, namely that Anne was locked away by Sir Percival in the first place ("A man had shut her up – and that man was Sir Percival Glyde." [Collins 2003: 105]). Walter, in a way, has helped Bluebeard's wife escape, thereby intruding on a powerful man's secret (Anne was locked away because Sir Percival assumes she knows the secret of his illegitimacy), without being made homosocial secret sharer.

Walter flouts the rules of patriarchal, male-homosocial bonding, and even helps subvert them, acknowledging his disregard for its inherently misogynist mechanisms: "I am incapable of harming [Anne] or any woman." (Collins 2003: 106) Anne, however, remains suspicious, unable to predict Walter's trustworthiness as a heterosocially interested friend: "[Y]ou know too much; I'm afraid you'll always frighten me now." (Collins 2003: 107) Walter's ambiguous moving beyond the rules of homsociality makes him conspicuous, even to those he is trying to help.

Laura, who has, so far, not been very present in the narrative, turns out to be the novel's embodiment of an 'ideal patriarchal femininity' which does not question the male monopoly on knowledge. She not only feels obliged to marry Sir Percival because it was her father's final wish, unquestioningly accepting the

power of the (F)father ("I have broken my promise and forgotten my father's dying words. […] I was guided by my father, […] he knew what was best, […] his hopes and wishes ought to be my hopes and wishes too." [Collins 2003: 163; 68]), but she also acknowledges that she, as a wife, does not have a right to secrecy: "[I will] tell Sir Percival Glyde the truth, […] and […] let him release me, if he will, not because I ask him, but because he knows all." (Collins 2003: 163) Marian, who is aware of the danger of such a blind acceptance of the economy of patriarchal knowledge structures that will leave women robbed of any power over knowledge themselves, warns Laura to "never lower yourself by making a confession to him. […] He has not the shadow of a right to know." (Collins 2003: 164) Laura, however, has incorporated the laws of the (F)father: "I ought to deceive no one – least of all the man to whom my father gave me, and to whom I gave myself." (Collins 2003: 164) Collins here contrasts two versions of femininity that either confirm, or challenge a male-homosocial power that is based on a monopoly on knowledge to the exclusion of women.

He also, however, affords the two sisters a moment of female-homosocial complicity when Laura puts all the things that remind her of her love for Walter "in a drawer of her cabinet. She locked the drawer, and brought the key to [Marian]." (Collins 2003: 172) Symbolically creating a 'closet' of her own, in which she can keep the secret of her love, which she only shares with her sister, Laura, in a small way, does resist the tyranny of masculine omniscience. In making her sister literally the keeper of her secret ("Keep the key wherever you please – I shall never want it again." [Collins 2003: 172]), she creates an actual and mental space her future husband will never have access to.

Strikingly, although Collins clearly portrays Mr Fairlie as a failing patriarch, and Marian as the person actually in charge at Limmeridge House, neither woman can escape the structural power the nominal master of the house still has over them. Although an inadequate man personally, the position patriarchal society provides Mr Fairlie with keeps the sisters from making decisions for themselves, and both express their resignation to this situation in their own way. Laura "consent[s] to whatever arrangement [her uncle] may think best," and even Marian cannot do anything but express her helpless anger: "I banged the door after me; and I hope I shattered Mr. Fairlie's nervous system for the rest of the day." (Collins 2003: 182) The house of patriarchy is still standing, and the women are its prisoners. In the course of the story, however, it will become clear that the inherently paranoid nature of the male-homosocial system of power portrayed here will eventually have to bend to the subversive forces represented by Marian and Walter. Marian is aware of her potential as a disturbing force in her sister's marriage, a force that irritates the boundaries of the established heterosexual-homosocial matrix: "[N]o man tolerates a rival – not even a woman rival – in his wife's affections […and] in

the position of the chosen depository of his wife's closest secrets." (Collins 2003: 185) What makes Marian dangerous, then, for Sir Percival is both the female-homosocial bond she shares with Laura, an "attachment […which] is presented as problematically erotic and possessive" (Nemesvari 2006: 104), and her potentially 'masculine' attitude as a rival in the triangular competition for influence on Laura. Emotionally, in fact, as Carolyn Dever remarks, "[t]he union of Laura and Marian is the novel's most fully realised 'marriage'" (Dever 2006: 114), and, hence, a real homosocial 'alternative' to the heterosexual bond between Laura and Percival. Collins, then, constructs a full reversal of the normative axes of desire, and contrasts a dysfunctional homosocial/heterosexual norm (Mr Fairlie-Sir Percival-Laura) with a heterosocial/homoemotional/-erotic option (Walter-Marian-Laura).

Paranoid Masculinity: Blackwater Park

Collins constructs Blackwater Park, "'the ancient and interesting seat' (as the county history obligingly informs [Marian]) 'of Sir Percival Glyde, Bart'" (Collins 2003: 196), as the Gothic architecture in which its master can stage his schemes, and in which the women living with this Victorian Bluebeard will have to enact the role of weak female victims. Stephen Bernstein emphasises the importance of the house's fictional architecture for an understanding of the characters' actions, and for any reading of the novel: "Collins is able to inscribe a highly concentrated, at times iconically allegorical, narrative into the very surroundings in which his characters function. The Park's status as a *gothic* setting enables such manipulation, simultaneously drawing on one of the larger generic narratives within which the novel is positioned." (Bernstein 1993: 291)

The house is, as Marian remarks, "the exact opposite of Limmeridge[…,] situated on a dead flat, [it] seems to be shut in – almost suffocated […] by trees" (Collins 2003: 197). Just as out-of-the-way as Limmeridge House, Blackwater Park nevertheless lacks the open qualities of the Fairlies' seaside estate. Rather than a space of unsettling permeability, this is a prison, and a space that is unknown and mysterious, and, hence, uncontrollable to Marian: "I know nothing about the house, except that one wing of it is said to be five hundred years old." (Collins 2003: 197) This is a 'domesticated' Udolpho, a Bluebeard's castle: "Collins is able to put Blackwater Park firmly in line with his gothic precursors by sharing the earlier settings' accent on darkness and the problematics of vision." (Bernstein 1993: 293) Marian is painfully aware of the disadvantage of the gendered position this Gothic spatiality coerces her into:

"If only I had the privileges of a man, I would order out Sir Percival's best horse instantly, and tear away on a night-gallop, eastward, to meet the rising sun. […] Being, however, nothing but a woman, condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats, for life, I must respect the housekeeper's opinions, and try to compose myself in some feeble and feminine way." (Collins 2003: 197-98)

The house itself, however, questions the position of dominance Sir Percival claims for himself, and foreshadows his ultimate defeat. Marian aptly observes that "[m]ost men show something of their dispositions in their own houses, which they have concealed elsewhere" (Collins 2003: 214). She describes the place as full of "dust and dirt," and "the half-ruined wing on the left" suggests nothing but "damp, darkness, and rats" (Collins 2003: 203). Part of the house is in a state of decay, and this fact cannot be concealed by the inhabitable right wing, which is "very elegantly furnished with the delightful modern luxuries. […T]he rooms […] all look pleasant to live in" (Collins 2003: 203). The house mirrors its master in that it tries to hide an ugly and decaying secret from the past (Sir Percival's illegitimacy) under a thin layer of representative cleanliness and respectability, "a mania for order and regularity" (Collins 2003: 214). As do many other fictional Gothic architectures from the eighteenth century onwards, Blackwater Park represents a modern concern with the public and the private, "demonstrating that gothic setting, ideologically charged in its effort to link the spheres of public and private, becomes a central narrative concern" (Bernstein 1993: 294). The question as to what can be contained in private and what can be (or has been) spoken in public, becomes vital for Sir Percival.

After Laura's arrival at Blackwater Park, the rivalry between Sir Percival and Marian over Laura – a variation of Sedgwick's male-female-male triangle of desire – surfaces once again when the sisters realise that Laura's marriage to Sir Percival threatens their homosocial bond: "I [Laura] would tell you everything, darling, about myself, […] if my confidences could only end there. But they could not – they would lead me into confidences about my husband, too." (Collins 2003: 212) Aware, however, that the triangular arrangement affords her a certain sense of security, Laura is willing to try and make this house their (as opposed to Sir Percival's) home by "keep[ing] all [her] little treasures from Limmeridge here" (Collins 2003: 212). She also asks Marian to choose their homosocial over any potential heterosexual bond ("[P]romise you will never marry, and leave me. […Y]ou are so much better off as a single woman." [Collins 2003: 212]), thereby securing herself protection from a woman who, as long as she remains alone, can assume a position of 'masculine' strength more easily than in the socially scripted role of wife and mother.

Blackwater Park has a tendency to make the women that move within its fictional architecture adhere to the rules of patriarchy to an extent they would not elsewhere. Laura becomes the meek and passive woman Sir Percival requires her to be, "sit[ting] for hours together without saying a word, […] like a decent woman, […] with the look of mute submissive inquiry […] of a faithful dog" (Collins 2003: 216). What is more, Marian accepts this change in Laura as "a change for the better, seeing that it has transformed her into a civil, silent, unobtrusive woman, who is never in the way" (Collins 2003: 216), a kind of feminine behaviour Marian would certainly never choose for herself.

Count Fosco, on the other hand, Sir Percival's close friend, is immune to the house's patronising atmosphere. He is the novel's strangest character, evading any normative patterns, while certainly being the most powerful and influential of all of Collins' men. Marian perceives him as "a man who could tame anything. […] The man has interested me, has attracted me, has forced me to like him." (Collins 2003: 217) Equipped with immense charisma, the Count's body does not mirror his character's inherent respectability: He is "immensely fat" (Collins 2003: 217), hence eliminated from a straightforward economy of physical desire. While he bears "a most remarkable likeness […] of the Great Napoleon," and "the power of his eyes" awes Marian, he is not only foreign (Italian), and, hence, the "dangerous other that serves to define proper masculinity by being its opposite" (Nemesvari 2006: 96), but also displays an eclectic taste in animals, bringing with him "a cockatoo, two canary-birds, and a whole family of white mice" (Collins 2003: 218-19), the latter being constantly attached to his body, making it seem disturbingly 'penetrable,' a discomfort Marian phrases as follows: "[T]he sight of [the mice], creeping about a man's body is, for some reason, not pleasant to me." (Collins 2003: 230) All this makes Fosco a contradictory and properly strange character, who resists any categorisation along the axes of genders or sexualities. His ability to "manage [Marian], as he manages his wife and Laura, […] as he manages Sir Percival himself" (Collins 2003: 222), make him a force to be reckoned with, a man who is intensely aware of the mechanisms of power that dominate the society he lives in. Despite his "effeminate tastes and amusements" (Collins 2003: 222), he exerts an eery power over those around him. Always ahead of everyone else, he makes himself indispensible to both his friends and his enemies. His close homosocial relationship with Sir Percival also, however, further undermines the latter's self-definition as a virile, heterosexual man, which is already being significantly damaged by Percival's failure to assert a dominant position within the 'marriage triangle' of himself, Laura, and Marian: "Glyde's [own] foreign background, his intimate friendship with the Italian Fosco, his lack of intimacy with his English wife, and the extreme anxiety that he experiences, all suggest a looming same-sex scandal of the type that punctuated the nineteenth century." (Nemesvari 2006: 102)

At Blackwater Park, the homosocial bond of secrecy between Fosco and Sir Percival is increasingly subverted by Marian, who begins to spy on the two men, an activity she initially scolds herself for: "[I]t was very wrong and very discreditable to listen – but where is the woman […] who can regulate her actions by the abstract principle of honour." (Collins 2003: 225) Ostensibly criticising the weaknesses of her own sex, Marian also questions the validity of such 'abstract principles' as 'honour' – a principle that, as Godwin shows in *Caleb Williams*, often leads men to acts of mindless self-deprecation – and contrasts it with the practical wit of a woman who is ultimately daring enough not to let herself be hindered by the gendered restrictions of either (feminine) 'propriety' or (masculine) 'honour.'

"Eavesdropping – an *improper* activity on the border between inside and outside, private and public – figures transgression in the novel. An eavesdropper steals the secrets of private life and controls their dissemination in the public realm; by withholding or revealing people's secrets, the eavesdropper determines their social identity." (Gaylin 2001: 304)

It is Marian's social significance as eavesdropper that makes her, as a woman, particularly transgressive within the male-homosocial economy of information. As opposed to Laura, Marian is very much aware of the politics of knowledge that could afford her some advantage in this house, and she carefully chooses what to tell whom. When interrogated by Sir Percival about an incident with a stray dog, she "made [her] answers as short as [she] civilly could – for [she] had already determined to check the least approach to any exchanging of confidences between Count Fosco and [her]self" (Collins 2003: 239); and she is eager not to "appear in the very unenviable and very false character of a depositary of Sir Percival's secrets" (Collins 2003: 239). She wants neither of the men to assume any heterosocial bond between herself and either of them that could jeopardise her position in the household. Intruding upon the men's secrets, while keeping her willingness to do so carefully secret from them, Marian becomes a most effective Bluebeard's wife, one who is resourceful enough not to have her visits to the secret chamber discovered.

Actual power at Blackwater Park lies with Count Fosco. This becomes most obvious when Sir Percival tries to make Laura sign a document that would practically disinherit her in his favour. While, in this case, both Marian and Laura are aware of their right to knowing what the document Laura is supposed to sign contains ("I [Laura] ought surely to know what I am signing." [Collins 2003: 244] "[S]ign nothing, unless you have read it first." [Collins 2003: 245]), Sir Percival appears desperate, and not at all sure of himself: "[H]e looked more like a prisoner at the bar than a gentleman in his own house." (Collins 2003: 244) Fosco remains calm,

and apologises for his friend's misconduct, thereby shaming him and questioning his position as master of his own house (cf. Collins 2003: 249). Marian is intuitively aware that Fosco is more dangerous to the women than Sir Percival could ever be: "Whatever you do, [Laura,] don't make an enemy of the Count!" (Collins 2003: 247) Sir Percival, in his bullying manner, is a predictable Gothic villain; Fosco, on the other hand, an opportunist who avoids clear-cut sides, genders, and politics, is an unpredictable element: "I [Marian] felt already, with a sense of inexpressible helplessness and humiliation, that it was either [the Count's] interest or his caprice to make sure of my continuing to reside at Blackwater Park." (Collins 2003: 249) Marian is willing to do all she can to spy on Sir Percival in order to help Laura, but Fosco remains a mystery to her: "How should I know his secrets?" (Collins 2003: 249) Fosco, then, is the novel's most efficient Bluebeard, firmly in control (at least for now) of the keys to his secrets.

When the house itself becomes too oppressive a space for the women to speak their minds, they retreat to the heterotopian space of the boathouse in the grounds of Blackwater Park (cf. Collins 2003: 257). Here, they try to rebuild their relationship that has been disrupted by Laura's keeping a secret from Marian: "That secret is the first I have ever had from you, love, and I am determined it shall be the last." (Collins 2003: 257) Strikingly, Laura's secret is a 'meta secret,' in that it contains her knowledge of having given up the last knowledge she had kept from Sir Percival, namely her love of Walter: "My only secret when I opened my heart to [Walter] at Limmeridge was a harmless secret, Marian. […] The name was all I kept from him [Percival] – and he has discovered it." (Collins 2003: 260) Laura is aware of the disadvantageous position she has put herself in: not only has she given up the last private corner of her mind, but the information she has shared gives Sir Percival ultimate power over her: "Whenever he is angry with me now, he refers to what I acknowledged to him in your presence, with a sneer or a threat. I have no power to prevent him from putting his own horrible construction on the confidence I placed in him." (Collins 2003: 261) Knowledge is power, and Sir Percival, at this point in the novel, has all the advantage on his side.

At the same time, however, when Laura meets Anne in the same liminal space of the boathouse, Anne hints at her (alleged) knowledge of Sir Percival's secret, which would provide Laura with a powerful weapon against her husband: "If *you* [Laura] know his Secret, he will be afraid of you; he won't dare use you as he used me." (Collins 2003: 280) Although Anne does not reveal the secret ("[W]e are not alone – we are watched." [Collins 2003: 281]) – she does, in fact, not know its content – she does inform Laura that Mrs Catherick knows it too (She "has wasted under the Secret half her lifetime" [Collins 2003: 281].). It has become clear, at this point in the narrative, that Sir Percival is threatened by a secret from his past (his illegitimacy), the knowledge of which has (apparently) been shared among women,

and is in danger of being shared more widely. This community of women (all, as we will learn towards the end of the novel, related) is beginning to discover the means to undo their oppressive Bluebeard by finding out his secret.

Failing to get at Laura's money, Sir Percival becomes more and more of a Gothic villain, keeping his wife a prisoner in his house: "Am I [Marian] to understand […] that your wife's room is a prison, and that your housemaid is the gaoler who keeps it?" (Collins 2003: 293) Although this situation is relieved by the Count, who, once again, takes the women's side, and undermines Sir Percival's authority in his own house, it becomes increasingly clear that Sir Percival's real source of weakness is his paranoid constitution. Laura's potential for secrecy is a constant source of worry for him, and drives him into more and more extreme states of mind. Although Laura insists that she "could conceal nothing," Sir Percival suspects secrecy where there is none: "I mean to have the rest of you, […] you know more than you choose to tell." (Collins 2003: 299) Scared that his secret might be discovered, he can never be sure that he is in control of all knowledge that is passed around him. Knowing the powerful dynamics of homosocial intimacy, he is especially concerned about Laura's bond with her half-sister: "There shall be no more plotting and whispering between you." (Collins 2003: 300) Marian, although not knowing the content of the secret yet, is aware of this Bluebeard's self-consuming paranoia: "He *is* mad – mad with the terrors of a guilty conscience. […Y]ou [Laura] were on the brink of discovering a secret, […] and he thinks you *have* discovered it." (Collins 2003: 300)

When the two women feel increasingly threatened by their situation, and an appeal to patriarchal authority (the Law, Mr Fairlie) seems either impossible or futile, Marian decides to take advantage of her intuition of Sir Percival's weakness, and to overhear him and Count Fosco plotting in the library, the domestic centre of the male-homosocial community of letters. Bending the house's architecture to her will to knowledge, Marian climbs onto the roof in the cold rain to spy on the two men's homosocial exchange of information. In this conversation, the Count both claims every real authority in the house for himself ("Thank your lucky star […] that you have me in the house, to undo the harm, as fast as you do it. […Y]ou leave [all direction], for the future, in my hands only." [Collins 2003: 324-25]), and acknowledges the potentially dangerous nature of Marian's gender-bending behaviour ("[S]he has the foresight and the resolution of a man." [Collins 2003: 324]). While Sir Percival is thus deprived of power, Marian also learns part of his secret, namely that he is hugely indebted, and that Count Fosco suggests paying these debts by faking Laura's death. What is more, Fosco is not only aware that Sir Percival keeps the greater part of his secret (that his title is illegitimate) even from him, but he refuses to become his secret sharer, knowing that too much knowledge could compromise his detached position: "You have a secret from *me*, Percival.

[…] Say as little as possible […] in my presence, of the Secret." (Collins 2003: 328; 30)

At the same time, Sir Percival goes increasingly mad because he knows that his secret is not safe: Both (he assumes) Anne Catherick and her mother know that the claim to his title is not legitimate. Fosco comments on the precariousness of this leaking of knowledge out of the realm of the male-homosocial community: "Two women in possession of your private mind – bad, bad, bad, my friend!" (Collins 2003: 330) Knowing that Laura has been in touch with Anne, Sir Percival naturally assumes she knows his secret too – although she does not: "Who can read the letter she hid in the sand, and not see that my wife is in possession of the secret, deny it as she may?" (Collins 2003: 330) Although confident that he can manage Mrs Catherick, the awareness that his secret is now known to three women makes Sir Percival increasingly paranoid.

Once again, Collins contrasts this paranoia with a heterosocial alternative. Having managed to exchange the identities of Laura and Anne, Count Fosco reads Marian's diary – which forms that part of the narrative told from her point of view – thus knowing all her secrets and leaving her no advantage. Fosco, hence, in a movement of what Elizabeth Anderman aptly calls "narrative rape" (Anderman 2009: 85), temporarily reclaims (masculine) narrative authority, and puts Marian back in her 'proper place' as a both physically and epistemologically 'penetrable' woman. He does, however, acknowledge her clever sense of a politics of knowledge, seeing something of an equal in her: "Admirable woman! […S]ublime creature. […] I lament afresh the cruel necessity which sets our interests at variance, and opposes us to each other." (Collins 2003: 336; 37) In a way, then, Fosco is Marian's ideal suitor. Far from appreciating her heterosexually, though, he has a heterosocial fantasy about her, which stands out as remarkably more satisfying for both parties than the normative, homosocial relationship between Fosco and Percival, in which the latter can never meet patriarchal-homosocial expectations of mutual support. Percival causes Fosco inconvenience; Marian would be his equal.

Liminal Spaces: The Search for the Secret

The end of the novel's second part foregrounds its preoccupation with questions of truth. Told from a confusing range of perspectives, this episode's climax is an epitaph entitled "4. The Narrative of the Tombstone" (Collins 2003: 405), which posits the 'truth' of Laura's death. As the reader finds out in the end, however, this physical 'proof' only forms part of a cleverly constructed narrative, fashioned by Count Fosco. Aware of the power of his and Sir Percival's discursive voices, he tells a 'truth' that both takes advantage of Anne's natural death (who thus ceases

to be a danger to Sir Percival), and robs Laura and her friends of any believable voice of their own by giving Laura the identity of 'mad' (and, hence, not credible) Anne. Laura, confined to the madhouse, literally loses her voice and memory, 'accepting,' as it were, Fosco's powerful rhetorical move, which equals her identity with Anne's. Neither any of the characters, nor Collins' reader can now say for sure whether Laura really is herself or Anne, which woman has died and which survived. Instead, Collins presents us with two men struggling for narrative authority and the claim to their 'truth:' Fosco asserts that the woman in the madhouse is Anne, whereas Walter claims her to be Laura. While the space of the graveyard is the centre and anchor of Count Fosco's 'truth,' it is also the space in which Walter and Laura are reunited and start to plot against Percival and Fosco: "[T]he veiled woman had possession of me, body and soul. […] We stood face to face, with the tombstone between us. […] Laura, Lady Glyde, was standing by the inscription, and was looking at me over the grave." (Collins 2003: 410-11) The heterotopian space of the graveyard affords both narratives to exist simultaneously: that of Laura's death, and that of her survival. As in the scene described above, Walter, again, begins to claim agency in the presence of a community of women, bound together beyond death by family ties and their actions: Laura, her half-sister Anne, and Anne's mother.

Moving into the relative anonymity of "a populous and a poor neighbourhood in London" (Collins 2003: 412), Walter becomes part of the family of women he tries to protect: Laura and Marian "are described as my sisters" (Collins 2003: 412). In the liminal "house-forest of London" (Collins 2003: 412), the three of them start a fight with Sir Percival and Count Fosco over whose narrative is more powerful and more effective. Fosco tries to undermine the group by warning Mr Fairlie of 'Anne's' "assuming the character of [Sir Percival's] deceased wife" (Collins 2003: 417). Having taken Laura into the asylum from which Anne had escaped, Fosco sees to it that she gets Anne's clothes put on, thus 'turning her into' Anne: "Look at your own name on your clothes." (Collins 2003: 427) Taking surface for content, and accepting the striking resemblance between the two women as identity, no-one believes 'mad Anne' that she is actually Laura, not even her uncle: "Mr. Fairlie declared, in the most positive terms, that he did not recognise the woman who had been brought into his room." (Collins 2003: 428) Again, the 'pillars of society' fail to see more than what they are led to think they 'know.' When Walter appeals to a lawyer to help them in their cause, the latter declares it as lost because of the 'known facts:' "her aunt's testimony, […] the testimony of the medical certificate, […] the fact of the funeral, […] the inscription on the tomb" (Collins 2003: 441). He insists several times that "it is known" (Collins 2003: 441) that things happened a certain way. Having this definite declaration of 'knowledge' stand in stark contrast with what the reader, whose sympathies tend to lie with Walter, be-

lieves to be 'true,' Collins questions the very process of epistemology, and exposes the way the dominant discourse shapes 'knowledge of the truth.' Laura's physical 'performance' despite herself (wearing Anne's clothes) counts more than Walter's contrary account; and to the reader, neither 'fiction' (that the woman is either Laura or Anne) becomes graspable as an unquestionable 'truth.'

Ironically, then, Fosco constructs Laura as the performer that she actually becomes out of necessity, only making the very role unavailable to her that we assume to be her one 'real' performance: that of her own identity. In doing so, he not only denies the silenced woman access to the personality and position associated with 'Laura, Lady Glyde,' but also deprives her spatially of the place associated with them: her home, which becomes "the place of all others that was now most dangerous to her" (Collins 2003: 430). Strikingly, however, by the very act of casting her out into the liminal non-place of London, in which "all traces of [Laura and her friends] might be most speedily and most surely effaced" (Collins 2003: 430), Fosco and Percival provide Walter, Laura, and Marian with the very starting point from which they can act their way towards revenge, outside the rules of upper(-middle)-class domesticity.

This situation also affords Walter the means to assume the role of protector for the two women, allowing him to perform a kind of virile masculinity he has so far been denied: "All I have done to-day, is to ask another man to act for me. I count from to-morrow[…, b]ecause to-morrow I mean to act for myself." (Collins 2003: 449) He begins to control the women's spatial movements, acting as the domestic patriarch he has not had the chance to be: "[I]n my absence from home, [Laura and Marian] should let no one into their rooms on any pretence whatever." (Collins 2003: 432) Marian, at the same time, gives way to Walter's performance, and opts for an unusually 'feminine' domestic role for herself: "The house-work […] was taken on the first day […] by Marian. […] 'What a woman's hands *are* fit for, […] early and late, these hands of mine shall do.'" (Collins 2003: 432-33) This performance of the nuclear family (father Walter, mother Marian, sister/child Laura) is enabled by the isolated nature of their life together, both spatially and socially: "[W]e three were as completely isolated in our place of concealment, as if the house we lived in had been a desert island, and the great network of streets and the thousands of our fellow creatures all round us the waters of an illimitable sea." (Collins 2003: 433) Count Fosco assumes this to be a space of potential oblivion, and accepts Laura's being safely 'closeted' away there: "The storms of life pass harmless over the valley of Seclusion – dwell, dear lady [Marian], in the valley. […T]he fair companion of your retreat shall not be pursued." (Collins 2003: 448)

Fosco, however, underestimates the little 'family out of necessity's' willingness to take advantage of their relatively anonymous existence, and use their knowledge of Sir Percival's secret and his paranoia as a weapon against him: "Mar-

ian! There is a weak place we both know of in Sir Percival's life[…:] the Secret. It is our only sure hold on him." (Collins 2003: 450) Their challenge, then, is to turn Mrs Catherick, who knows the secret, from Bluebeard's female helper into their confidante. One of the weak spots of Percival's patriarchal secret structure, then, is its one heterosocial element: the fact that the content of the secret has leaked out of the male-homosocial system. The danger can only be contained by threatening and isolating the female secret sharer: "[I]t was Sir Percival's interest to keep [Mrs Catherick] at Welmingham, because her character in that place was certain to isolate her from all communication with female neighbours." (Collins 2003: 471) This Sir Percival has achieved by forcing her into the very paranoid patriarchal economy of 'reputation' and 'honour' which he himself represents: knowing that she got pregnant with Anne while still unmarried, a fact which potentially "compromised her reputation" (Collins 2003: 472), Sir Percival blackmails her into complying with his wishes.

The paranoid structure of Sir Percival's 'closet' soon turns out to have had him jump to false conclusions. When Walter learns about Mrs Catherick's having (allegedly) shared Sir Percival's secret with her mentally ill daughter, it becomes apparent that, in fact, the latter knew no more than the fact of the existence of a potentially compromising secret on Sir Percival's part: "[I]t was perfectly in character with Anne's mental affliction that she should assume an absolute knowledge of the Secret on no better grounds than vague suspicion." (Collins 2003: 475) Sir Percival, nevertheless, reacts according to his paranoid disposition and has to assume the worst – namely Anne's absolute knowledge of his secret – and shuts her away in an asylum.

The key to Sir Percival's secret is to be found in "the vestry of the church" (Collins 2003: 490), the physical space of the very institution that sustains the patriarchal system of power he claims to be part of. The character of Old Welmingham church as a Gothic 'closet' is strongly highlighted in Walter's description of the "ancient, weather-beaten building" (Collins 2003: 495), the vestry of which is protected by "a perverse lock, […] big enough for a prison door" (Collins 2003: 497). The vestry itself, in which Walter hopes to find the marriage register informing him of Sir Percival's family, is "a dim, mouldy, melancholy old room" (Collins 2003: 497). The analogy of vestry and prison, and the parish clerk calling the place "a lost corner" twice (Collins 2003: 498; 99), make this an abandoned Bluebeard's castle, the secret recess of patriarchal clerical authority, in which Sir Percival's secret is 'outsourced,' as it were, to a male-homosocial space outside the domestic, a forgotten room, which, nevertheless, is unpredictable as a hiding place: Walter is "struck by the insecurity of the place in which the [marriage] register was kept" (Collins 2003: 499). The 'house of patriarchy,' it appears, is not safe from intrusion

any more. It is ancient, dilapidating, and has been moved to the margins, to a 'lost corner,' where it can be accessed at will.

When Sir Percival's secret is finally revealed, the power of knowledge, once again, becomes apparent. Although Sir Percival has managed to forge an entry about his parents in the register, Walter suspects there is something wrong and finds proof of forgery in a duplicate. At this point, almost at the end of the story, Sir Percival's secret is out: "[H]e was not Sir Percival Glyde at all, […] he had no more claim to the baronetcy and to Blackwater Park than the poorest labourer who worked on the estate." (Collins 2003: 510) Walter, predictably, is aware of the immense power this knowledge now affords him over his opponent: "The disclosure of that secret […] would deprive him, at one blow, of the name, the rank, the estate, the whole social existence that he had usurped. This was the Secret, and it was mine!" (Collins 2003: 510) Ironically, it is not Walter's word that ultimately destroys Sir Percival, but the latter's own paranoia. Afraid that Walter might discover his forgery, Sir Percival enters his 'closet,' the vestry, locks himself inside, and accidentally sets it on fire: "[T]here was another, and a last, grating turn of the key in the lock. […] 'He is doomed and dead. He has hampered the lock.'" (Collins 2003: 515) Simultaneously attempting to destroy the physical manifestation of his secret, and literally making his own body a prisoner of its self-destructive power, Sir Percival dies in the flames. What kills him, in the end, is the paranoia triggered by the secret that was the foundation of his power. Patriarchy, then, in Collins' fictional world, has a localisable centre of power: the register of legitimacy. The 'closet' it is kept in, however, is institutionalised, and lies out of reach of the individual male empowered by it. Masculine paranoia, hence, is globalised, and raised, as it were, from the private to the public cultural experience.

After Sir Percival's death, Mrs Catherick confesses her own secret to Walter. She was indeed 'Bluebeard's female helper' in that she got him literal access to the 'closet' he could not penetrate on his own: she got him "the key of the vestry, and the key of the press inside it" (Collins 2003: 530). Attempting to take advantage of the heterosocial potential of this situation, Mrs Catherick insists on Sir Percival's sharing his secret with her: "All the conditions I insisted on were that he should take me into his confidence and tell me everything. […] I was determined to have all the truth – and I believe I got it." (Collins 2003: 530) Collins emphasises the power of knowledge *about* a secret, as opposed to knowledge of the secret's content itself, a power efficient enough to trigger Sir Percival's paranoia: Anne "knew that there was a Secret – she knew who was connected with it – she knew who would suffer by its being known – and, beyond that, […] she never to her dying day knew more" (Collins 2003: 538). A rhetoric of secrecy, then, is powerful regardless of its content, and makes Bluebeard blackmailable.

The last male character to be dealt with is Count Fosco, who turns out to be a spy, and, hence, a professional manager of information. While Collins constructs him as the one male character apparently immune to questions of gendered crises (but whose masculine gender is more than questionable), he ultimately fails due to the same mechanisms that ended Sir Percival's life. Following the Count to another heterotopian environment, the opera, a place inherently questioning and laying open the roles we play in life, Walter's friend Pesca scares the Count into an abrupt escape. Learning that the Count and Pesca – both Italian, both foreign, both potentially 'other' – are entangled in the homosocial, secret workings of one of "the political Societies" (Collins 2003: 574), and that the Count has betrayed "the Brotherhood" (Collins 2003: 578), Walter is informed that speaking the society's secrets means certain death. Ironically, Pesca nevertheless does not hesitate to share a secret with Walter, who, in turn, however, refuses to inform the reader of what he now knows: "My first and last concealments from the reader are those which caution renders absolutely necessary in this portion of the narrative." (Collins 2003: 574)

In the last section of his novel, Collins, obviously ridiculing the workings of secret societies, denies all of his male characters freedom from the self-destructive nature of the male-homosocial system of secrecy politics. Pesca, acknowledging that he himself cannot escape being a secret sharer ("I must remain in [the Society] now – it has got me." [Collins 2003: 576]), and although he has already shared some secret with Walter, makes the danger of such secrecy explicit: "Tell me nothing; keep me out of the secret of your thoughts. […W]hatever you discover, whatever you do, tell me nothing!" (Collins 2003: 577) Strikingly, the final confrontation between Walter and Fosco takes place inside the Count's house, making his privacy more public to Walter and the reader than at any other point in the narrative. In an elaborate play of locking and unlocking rooms and drawers, the two men negotiate their terms. Collins cleverly constructs the situation such that the violence and danger both men are in is only ever evoked by references to knowledge that might be used as a weapon. What keeps Fosco from killing Walter is the simple knowledge that if Walter dies, Pesca will make the Count's betrayal public: "Your letter is received. If I [Pesca] don't hear from you [Walter] before the time you mention, I will break the seal when the clock strikes." (Collins 2003: 587) Knowledge, here, really is more powerful than physical violence. Collins, hence, portrays the homosocial community of men embodied by 'the Brotherhood' as infused with paranoia, aptly depicting the mechanisms of nineteenth-century 'homosexual panic' as described by Eve Sedgwick. As Richard Nemesvari puts it,

"Collins' text obsessively explores the threat posed by improper masculinities and their resulting, illicit, homosocial bonds, which are presented as under-

mining not only proper personal relationships but also the very fabric of social stability. […T]he Brotherhood, with its exclusively male membership that must remain secret and that creates a bond that marks the individual in a way that can never be erased, is an encoded representation and encapsulation of all the illicit homosocial and queer heterosexual relationships that have permeated the text." (Nemesvari 2006: 95; 106)

In the end, all principal male characters, apart from Walter, are dead, and all have failed because of their weaknesses as men: Sir Percival dies from his paranoia; Count Fosco is killed by the very secret society that was the homosocial foundation of his power and influence; and Mr Fairlie is simply too weak to survive. Laura and Walter inherit Limmeridge House, and thus the story ends in the domestic setting it started off in. The triangle consisting of Walter, Marian, and Laura stays intact, but it remains unclear how Walter can position himself within it. He acknowledges that Marian, the 'masculine woman,' "was the good angel of our lives" (Collins 2003: 627), and the driving force behind most of his actions. His son will be "one of the landed gentry of England" (Collins 2003: 626), continuing the patriarchal system of power. Far from being "victorious" (Nemesvari 2006: 107), however, as Nemesvari would have it, Walter's own role remains vague: inheriting the house through his wife, relying on Marian to push him to become active, and failing to inscribe himself into the self-destructive, but normative mechanisms of secretive masculinity, he has to establish a 'masculine' role for himself which re-negotiates traditional gender roles. As the novel's only middle-class male character, however, he is surprisingly successful, in that, as Rachel Ablow demonstrates, he ensures for himself a lucrative position as husband to a wealthy heiress by convincing others of her identity as Laura Glyde on no other grounds than his feelings for her: The novel offers "a fantasy of male, middle-class identity […] that, unlike those offered in later sensation novels, revolves around the power of the middle-class man to define himself in highly profitable yet ideologically unproblematic ways" (Ablow 2003: 160). The alternative Collins offers to paranoid masculinity in *The Woman in White*, then, has its power rest on a convincing heterosocial fiction of sympathy with, as opposed to oppression of, women. It is quite obvious, though, that this fiction objectifies Laura just as much as any homosocial-secretive fiction of male supremacy would: Walter's "identity is produced less in relation to [Laura…] than in relation to what he says about himself in relation to her" (Ablow 2003: 169). While Walter's is the only masculinity that Collins portrays as sustainable, his gendered self-definition remains rooted within the very misogynistic discourses of male-homosocial patriarchy it claims to free itself from. After all, "[a]lthough it seems Marian and Walter contribute equally to solving the mystery, Walter ultimately controls what is told to whom" (Gaylin 2001: 305).

What is more, although ostensibly rejecting and escaping from the paranoid mechanisms that destroy Sir Percival and Count Fosco, setting himself apart from their aristocratic 'degeneracy' as a new kind of bourgeois gentleman, Walter is nevertheless a 'paranoid reader,' in that he must constantly read Laura and her story in a way that will confirm his right to a position as wealthy domestic patriarch. His compulsive need to construct a coherent narrative from fragments, as Diane Elam argues, "replicates male phallic desire and attempts to possess woman as truth by narrating, by inscribing, by confining her figure as presence" (Elam 1993: 55), a desire Collins denies fulfilment. This concern with the paranoid search for meaning via the bodies of women is, as demonstrated above, mirrored on a meta-level in Collin's construction of the novel as a narrative of multiple perspectives, in which the 'truth' becomes a matter of discursive power and strategy, rather than any kind of 'objectivity.' Ann Gaylin even argues that novel reading itself is a gendered activity, in that "[t]he novel […] represents a space of female narrative activity and mobility which eventually is contained and enclosed in reassuring, conventional, patriarchal structures […] that confirm the normative gender ideology of the novel's conventional readers" (Gaylin 2001: 305). Following Gaylin's line of argument, Collins' novel is conventional in its portrayal of a male character who ultimately succeeds in asserting his right to an authoritative reading of the narrated events, only, however, making his story his own by including frequent "omissions, concealments and editing" (Pykett 2011: 43), creating a net of 'narrative secrets' that return him to the 'reading gaol' of patriarchal masculinity. It is only in his later novel *No Name* that Collins will create the possibility of a real escape from this economy of male paranoia and compulsive will to supremacy on a level of character.

On the other hand, as D. A. Miller argues in his influential 1986 reading of Collins' novel, the activity of reading as a search for meaning in sensation fiction as such is inextricably linked with 'feminine' hysteria: "[T]he novel makes nervousness a metonymy for reading, its cause or effect. […This] association […] is complicated – not to say troubled – by its coincident, no less insistent or regular association with femininity." (Miller 1986: 110) Elizabeth Anderman makes a similar point in diagnosing the narrative style of Collins' novel as triggering "a kind of reading hysteria" (Anderman 2009: 79) in its readers. As 'paranoid readers' within a text that calls for being read 'hysterically,' Collins' male characters (and his male readers) are all prone to experience a feminisation that turns out to form an inherent part of their patriarchal masculine self-definition. 'Woman,' hence, in *The Woman in White*, is the 'other' that the men both find within themselves, and must, consequently, struggle to emphatically set themselves apart from; and from this struggle, not even Walter – or Walter least of all – as the narrative's meaning-making 'editor' is exempt: "His reading example demonstrates the hysteria of

reading." (Anderman 2009: 81) As M. Kellen Williams puts it, Walter's narrative's objective is "to inscribe, by establishing the difference *between* two women [Laura and Anne], the difference *of* woman, Woman's Difference[…,] the recognizably real, material difference between having or not having a phallus" (Williams 1998: 92). The characters' misogyny, then, is both a fear of "male nervousness [through] female contagion" (Miller 1986: 110) – and, in extension, a nineteenth century homophobia that relies heavily on discourses of effeminacy – and a self-conscious awareness that the masculine-paranoid need to 'read' oneself and others bears at its core exactly this problem of androgyny – the problem, as it were, of where the phallus resides, of whether or not men's bodies succeed in being impenetrable. On a meta-level, then, *The Woman in White* does question the patriarchal urge for an authoritative reading and an epistemological (phallic) monopoly: its structure defies any definite conclusion and absolute truths; it is 'penetrable,' and, as such, foreshadows the kind of 'queer rhetoric' we will encounter in Henry James' writing, which celebrates the 'androgynously' ambiguous nature of genders and sexualities that cannot (or will not) speak their names.

Performing Subversion: Wilkie Collins' *No Name*

Nothing is as it 'should be' in Collins' 1862 novel *No Name*. Patriarchs fail to exert power over a space that is being increasingly invaded and subverted by female characters who understand that theirs is a society in which, while it is crucially important to know who you *are* (socially, economically, culturally), you can break down the barriers that society imposes by knowing *how to play a role* – in terms of gender, social rank, and personal identity itself. In *No Name*, "the natural itself is revealed to be socially shaped" (Taylor 1988: 135). Collins, in his "fictional critique of dominant modes of gender politics" (David 1998: 136) – a novel that is not coincidentally divided into 'scenes' – exposes "the means by which a social identity is constructed, and, equally, how it may be borrowed, invented, dismantled or buried" (Ford 2004: ix). More specifically, he portrays "an identity crisis plaguing Victorian men" (Kucich 2006: 125), who have forgotten how to rule the (domestic) world, and who are confronted with women who see that patriarchal masculinity, built on a politics of secrecy, is crumbling, leaving its failed men effeminate, fooled, or dead, allowing women to occupy the emerging vacuum. *No Name*, which is, like a lot of Collins' fiction, full of "disturbingly cross-gendered androgynous male and female figures" (Taylor 2006: 2), is not only a novel about "the cultural construction of femininity outside and inside the family" (Taylor 1988: 132), but about the arbitrary nature of social gender roles in general, and dysfunctional, patriarchal masculinities in particular.

The performative nature of gender and social identities in *No Name* is, as Kylee-Anne Hingston observes, an extremely physical business: "Managing one's identity and body preoccupies every character[…, and] stable identities and healthy bodies prove to be illusionary." (Hingston 2012: 118) Identity is enacted through malleable bodies within an intricate spatiality of the domestic and the outdoors that places bodies in relation to each other. These spaces turn out to be just as unstable, subversive, and enabling as the characters' bodies themselves.

In his 1862 preface to the novel, Collins points out that "[t]he only Secret contained in this book, is revealed midway in the first volume" (Collins 2004: xxvii). Nevertheless, the management of information, and its spatial concealment and disclosure are the driving forces at the centre of the narrative's gendered conflict. While, in many other specimen of the sensation novel, the reader is asked to participate in and witness the uncovering of a dark secret, here, we are made secret sharers, shifting the emphasis from a 'paranoid reading' to an experience of the power of knowing, the effect of which is an identification with the – ultimately disciplined – heroine: "[T]he reader's investment lies with the transgressor, the plotter, and not the detective." (Jones 2000: 198)

The Idealised Patriarchal Home: Combe-Raven

The story takes its reader to various domestic settings, the first of which is Combe-Raven, the idealised Victorian home of the Vanstone family, a scene which Sundeep Bisla aptly describes as the story's "introductory parody of the domestic novel" (Bisla 2010: 2). Combe-Raven is marked as a sight of Gothic secrecy: "Let the house reveal its own secrets." (Collins 2004: 3) Although Mr Vanstone, a Bluebeard with a secret from his past, is nominally "the master of the house" (Collins 2004: 4), the governess Miss Garth seems to be in charge: She "had hitherto held the position of a high authority on all domestic questions" (Collins 2004: 73). Miss Garth's "masculine readiness and decision of movement" and "air of habitual authority" (Collins 2004: 5) make her the novel's first gender-ambivalent female character. Similarly, Magdalen, the Vanstones' younger daughter, and the novel's protagonist, is also immediately characterised as something of a 'queer fish:' She displays "no recognizable resemblance to either of her parents," and combines "strongly-opposed characteristics" in a "strangely constituted organisation" (Collins 2004: 9). Although feminine in appearance, Magdalen is a strange, 'ungirly' girl. Mr Vanstone comments on both his daughter's, and his housekeeper's non-conformity: "If you're all rakes, Miss Garth, the sexes are turned topsy-turvy with a vengeance; and the men will have nothing left for it, but to stop at home and darn the stockings." (Collins 2004: 10) Although a light-hearted comment at this

point, Mr Vanstone, alluding to Pope's famous line "Men some to Bus'ness, some to Pleasure take; / But ev'ry Woman is at heart a Rake" (Pope 2006: 215-216), aptly summarises the threat that lies at the heart of the novel: that women might not be what they seem, and could subvert established patriarchal norms and gender roles.

What is deviant about Magdalen is the very fact that she fashions her own (gender and social) identity, ignoring established ideals and roles, and crossing boundaries of what is 'proper' for women, and for men. The novel's first part mainly serves to introduce two of her most important characteristics: her refusal to blindly obey the rules of patriarchy, and her uncanny talent as an actress. Not only does Magdalen literally have access to all her father's keys – the symbol of patriarchal control over domestic space – but she also, as if it were a second nature, switches from one role to the next, regularly "assuming the daughter's" (Collins 2004: 12), making no distinction between acting out 'fictitious' or 'real' parts. "Magdalen's various impersonations […] serve to suggest that both social and gender roles are forms of impersonation or masquerade." (Pykett 2006: 60)

Magdalen's talent as a performer is repeatedly emphasised throughout the first scene. At the 'private theatricals' at Evergreen Lodge, the house of a nearby family, Magdalen, enthusiastic to take part, and convinced that she "could act every character in the play" (Collins 2004: 34), fully realises her own performative potential that will serve her well later, but that others perceive as threatening. It quickly becomes apparent that what is presented to the reader here is not a stage within a domestic space, but domestic space *as* stage: the drawing-room is "to be laid waste for a stage and a theatre[…,] creating a dramatic world out of domestic chaos" (Collins 2004: 35). Life is chaos, the narrative implies, and only by performing social roles do we create order. Our being social exists only insofar as we act out our assigned roles: hence, the master and mistress of Evergreen Lodge are only "the nominal master and mistress of the house" (Collins 2004: 35). When Magdalen is finally on stage, her "rare faculty of dramatic impersonation" (Collins 2004: 48) astonishes everyone in the audience.

The second theme that dominates the novel's first part is the destructive nature of patriarchal secrecy. The Vanstone family and their household are threatened by a secret from Mr Vanstone's past: he and his wife never got married, because he already has a wife. Although sharing this secret with his illegitimate lover/wife – who thus becomes Bluebeard's female helper – Mr Vanstone keeps it from his daughters. Magdalen, "openly excluded, for the first time, from the confidence of her parents" (Collins 2004: 15), will soon learn the twofold nature of secrecy: on the one hand, it is this secret from the past that destroys her childhood happiness, but, on the other hand, she understands that, in order to get what she wants despite the constraints imposed by patriarchy, secrecy is vital. Collins' narrator, referring to Mr Vanstone's example, comments on the danger of building an existence on se-

crecy: "Nothing in this world is hidden forever. […T]he inevitable law of revelation is one of the laws of Nature; the lasting preservation of a secret is a miracle which the world has never yet seen." (Collins 2004: 25) The narrator repeatedly alludes to "that past mystery – that forgotten mystery now – of the journey to London" (Collins 2004: 60), where Mr Vanstone, after his first wife's death, was going to finally marry his daughters' mother. It seems as if the secret were forcing its way to the narrative surface. As in earlier Gothic novels, this Bluebeard's secret business is not only mentally, but also spatially hidden: writing a letter concerning the destructive secret of his bigamous relationship, Mr Vanstone "shut himself into the little room, close to the hall-door, which was called his study" (Collins 2004: 76). Here, in his closet, and in the virtual male-homosocial community of letters, he tries to save himself and his family from the destructive power of his secret stigma.

While the secret increasingly begins to overshadow the family's happiness, the houses' inhabitants move further and further into liminal spaces. Even before the actual advent of the catastrophe that will expel her from her home, Magdalen increasingly distances herself from the domestic setting of Combe-Raven, "wander[ing] into the grounds, […going] into the garden, on the shrubbery side; […turning] towards the shrubbery" (Collins 2004: 58; 74; 75). The women sit together near the – protective, but implicitly threatened – 'hortus conclusus' of "the flower-garden and shrubbery; this last being protected at its outward extremity by a fence" (Collins 2004: 25). Later, Magdelen and Frank's – the neighbour's son's – ultimately failed courtship also takes place in great parts in the shrubbery (cf. Collins 2004: 51-54), as well as a meeting between Magdalen and her father (cf. Collins 2004: 55).

Even after Mr Vanstone's – and, shortly afterwards, his wife's – death, the destructive secret of the girls' illegitimacy firmly remains, at first, within the homosocial community of men. While Miss Garth, Magdalen, and Norah are still ignorant of their compromising position, Mr Vanstone's male acquaintances and legal advisors, Mr Clare, and Mr Pendril, are in possession of the crucial knowledge: "*[T]hey* [the women] were in ignorance of the truth." (Collins 2004: 91) To a certain extent, however, Miss Garth takes over the role of 'master' of the house by conducting a business meeting with Mr Pendril in Mr Vanstone's study, "because Mr Vanstone's papers are kept here, and I may find it necessary to refer to some of them" (Collins 2004: 93). Here, Mr Pendril "reveal[s] the painful secret" (Collins 2004: 96). Although law and society act out their power through men, then, it is one of the house's women who, from a discursive point of view, takes charge of information management.

The secret's revelation has a crucial impact on Magdalen, and determines her further development. While Miss Garth tries to hide the secret of the girls' unfortunate position from them, Magdalen, in accordance with her spatially unpredict-

able nature, has already heard it all "under the open window" (Collins 2004: 114), and, having made Miss Garth aware of her knowledge, "glid[es] away alone, until [she] was lost among the trees" (Collins 2004: 114), increasingly turning into a liminal character, an outsider, in a very tangible sense of the word. This liminality scares both Miss Garth and Norah (cf. Collins 2004: 114/15). In the end, the executors of male-homosocial power drive the women out of the house: "Mr Pendril and Mr Clare advanced into view along the garden path, walking arm in arm through the rain" (Collins 2004: 119), bringing the women news of what will happen to them. As opposed to Miss Garth and Norah, Magdalen meets the men's business on eye level, "suddenly mov[ing] the chair closer to the table. Leaning one arm on it (with the hand fast clenched), she looked across at Mr Pendril." (Collins 2004: 121) Magdalen will not play the obedient role that patriarchy has assigned to her, a fact that Mr Clare immediately recognises: "Fools! […] Have they no eyes to see that she means to have her own way?" (Collins 2004: 122) Magdalen is now "an unfathomable mystery" (Collins 2004: 126) to Miss Garth and her sister, and Mr Pendril "had his suspicions of her looks; he had his suspicions of her language" (Collins 2004: 127). The men see that this woman's power of bodily and linguistic performance might well make her a threat to the established order. Mr Clare, in fact, accepts that Magdalen's ability to be 'manly' might serve her interests: when, in a weak moment, she "tried to throw her arms around his neck, […h]e took her by the shoulders and put her back in the chair. […Y]ou may shake hands with me." (Collins 2004: 131) Mr Clare, while unable to undo the rules of patriarchy that condemn the girls, does not treat Magdalen like a weak woman, but like a strong 'man.'

Liminal Spaces: York

The novel's second scene is set in York and picks up the theme of Magdalen's increasingly moving into liminal spaces. Skeldergate and Rosemary Lane are described as a place "where the street ends, […] on the side of it farthest from the river, […by] the ancient walls of York" (Collins 2004: 148). In many ways, this is a space on the margins: spatially, it is at the outskirts of the old city; temporally, it is associated, through the city wall, with ancient times; socially, because the place is "composed of cheap lodging-houses[;…v]ery little light enters it; very few people live in it" (Collins 2004: 148). Here, Magdalen will join Captain Wragge, her distant relative, a contradictory character, "with eyes of two different colours" (Collins 2004: 149), who knows how to handle secrets to his advantage, and is, just as Magdalen, aware of the power of appearances, wearing a jacket that "kept the dark secret of his master's linen from the eyes of a prying world" (Collins 2004:

149). "[H]e organises his life and 'work' on the assumption that social identity is performative." (Pykett 2006: 60) Captain Wragge is very perceptive of the spatial options for a woman on the run in a city like York: he concludes that Magdalen will be "out of doors" (Collins 2004: 153), and, indeed, finds her on "The Walk on the Walls, […t]he quietest place in York: and the place that every stranger goes to see" (Collins 2004: 153). The walls afford Magdalen a certain anonymity among other strangers, and reflect her marginalised social position, "a castaway in a strange city, wrecked on the world!" (Collins 2004: 155).

Wragge's house in York is a good example of the novel's intricate miniature Gothic spaces. Concealed in it lives Mrs Wragge, who is introduced to the reader as an abject figure of pity, no more than a thing: "*its* knees, […] *its* side[…,] *its* upper extremity" (Collins 2004: 162, emphasis mine). She is a woman in the power of the Gothic villain. The narrative, however, immediately ironises this position in having her perform the contradictory move of "looking submissively down at her husband" (Collins 2004: 163). While thus, to an extent, implicitly questioning Wragge's performance as domestic tyrant, Mrs Wragge evokes real empathy and pity in Madgalen and the reader by being "a little slow[…,] a well-trained child" (Collins 2004: 163). She is "a grotesque embodiment of the stereotypical Victorian wife" (Talairach-Vielmas 2005: 66). Captain Wragge performs domestic patriarchal power "as if the whole house belonged to him" (Collins 2004: 163), while, actually, it is a "landlady's" (Collins 2004: 163), that is a woman's house. Wragge has "the air of a prince in his own banqueting-hall[:…']You see my wife, my house, my bread, my butter and my eggs.'" (Collins 2004: 168) Instinctively employing a rhetoric of patriarchal ownership, Wragge, at the same time, conveys a mockery of it to the reader, because none of the possessives he uses are actually accurate; and although she ostensibly illustrates "the narrative's patriarchal discourse which deprives women of a name, of a voice, and even of a language" (Talairach-Vielmas 2005: 66), even Mrs Wragge can be understood as representing subversive femininity in that, in her mental state of confusion, she does not adhere to established scripts of a wife's domestic duties (cf. David 1998: 143-145). Even her body itself "is resistant, refuses normalization, collapsing even the boundaries between femininity and masculinity through its gigantic size" (Talairach-Vielmas 2005: 69). What fascinates Magdalen in Wragge, however, is his seemingly being completely unconcerned with social norms: "His entire shamelessness was really superhuman." (Collins 2004: 169) It is this shamelessness that is dangerous to society, because shame keeps people in their place. Faced with a self-avowed swindler, it is difficult, even for Magdalen, to see who Wragge really *is*. Ironically speaking an obvious untruth, Wragge acknowledges this difficulty on Magdalen's part: "So you see me, exactly as I am." (Collins 2004: 173) In fact, just like Magdalen, Wragge denies other people the possibility of 'making sense of him,' of 'knowing' him,

and, hence, making him predictable. He teaches Magdalen to see the world as a stage: "For the present, I withdraw myself from notice. Exit Wragge." (Collins 2004: 173)

Magdalen not only becomes an increasingly better performer, but also an increasingly better liar. She learns to conceal her secrets and private belongings spatially: in a "white silk bag," she carries with her "a lock of Frank's hair" and "a sheet of paper containing […] extracts […] from her father's will" (Collins 2004: 177). Here, Magdalen hides both the reason for which she has to learn how to act her way through a hostile world, and the remnant of her wish to accept the codes of patriarchy and heteronormativity in her memory of Frank, a memory that becomes almost sexually tangible: "[The lock] fell from her fingers into her bosom. A lovely tinge of colour rose on her cheeks, and spread downward to her neck, as if it followed the falling hair." (Collins 2004: 177) While Magdalen and Wragge now work together professionally, they begin an epistemological struggle over who can better manage and conceal information. Both know that there are things that the other keeps secret from them: "Captain Wragge's eyes dwelt on the little bag, as the eyes of lovers dwell on their mistress. 'Happy Bag!' he murmured, as she put it back in her bosom." (Collins 2004: 186) Desire for knowledge here becomes aligned with sexual desire: Magdalen's body – or, more precisely, her bosom – is the spatial and metaphorical hiding place of her most private thoughts, and Wragge's desire for her secret thoughts blends into a longing for her body.

Wragge helps Magdalen become a better actress, see life as a performance, and "convert all the world into a stage" (Ford 2004: xii), especially the domestic world: "Take the back drawing-room for the stage, and take me for the audience. […] You are a born actress. But you must be trained." (Collins 2004: 183; 184) Magdalen gains an increasing "understanding of the theatrical nature of all social roles" (Ford 2004: x). Thanks to her "extraordinary talent as a mimic[…, her] flexible face, […] manageable voice and […] dramatic knack" (Collins 2004: 190), she soon becomes a successful stage actress. Her identification with the role of the performer, of being able to impersonate anyone, while, at the same time, 'being' no-one, goes so far that Magdalen completely loses interest in having any sort of public 'identity:' "Give me any name you like." (Collins 2004: 194) Even Wragge sees something uncannily threatening in "[h]er knack of disguising her own identity in the impersonation of different characters" (Collins 2004: 198): he calls her his "perverse pupil," and comments on her "infernal cleverness" (Collins 2004: 198; 199). Laurence Talairach-Vielmas argues that this dangerous potential of female performativity lies at the heart of Victorian femininity as such:

"Magdalen […] is both a social void and a representational blank, a signifier lacking a signified. In this way, Magdalen's enterprise in acting on and off

stage aims to [externalise her figurability], hence defining female identity through make-up and beauty accessories. […] Magdalen shapes her person as an endlessly reconstructible self, showing how feminine culture and its beauty aids empower women to achieve multiple identity and to engage in a process of self-representation that patriarchal society usually forbids them." (Talairach-Vielmas 2005: 63-64)

Even more paradoxically, patriarchal society both denies and demands this process from women: a person only becomes 'Woman' by performing it, if necessary through the use of make-up and accessories. At the same time, however, 'femininity' is expected to be 'genuine,' and non-strategic. Magdalen's uncanny performances reveal this paradox at the heart of Victorian gender politics, while simultaneously exposing masculinity to be just as paradoxically 'naturally performed;' because although it is true that, here, a woman's "body is a series of fictions read and written in economic terms" (Talairach-Vielmas 2005: 65), a man's body is equally read and written in terms of the management of knowledge.

Degenerate Masculinity: Vauxhall Walk

The next space the reader encounters, Vauxhall Walk in Lambeth, is dominated by images of decay and degeneracy, strongly associated with the object of Magdalen's pursuit: Noel Vanstone. As in the scene before set in York, the general area of Vauxhall Walk is characterised as a liminal space, a "street labyrinth" with a "maze of houses," where "the hideous London vagabond" (Collins 2004: 210) walks in a district that is dominated by "an awful wilderness of mud and rubbish; the deserted dead body of Vauxhall Gardens mouldering in the open air" (Collins 2004: 211). Associated with nostalgia, death, decay, the outcast, and the dying garden, this space becomes the setting for a domestic power struggle between two women that leaves the only male character weak and superfluous. Performativity, again, plays a major role. In order to be allowed into the house, Magdalen disguises herself as Miss Garth: "[S]he practised the walk […and] exercised herself […] in the disguise of voice and manner. […It was] a triumph in the art of self-disguise." (Collins 2004: 218)

The house itself mirrors the earlier images of decay and degeneracy. Looking into it from the outside before entering, what Magdalen sees is characterised as being "lifeless and changeless as if that room had been a tomb" (Collins 2004: 213); and it will turn out to be the tomb of decaying masculinity. The room is a pastiche that turns the domestic order upside-down: though something like a sitting-room, it contains "[t]wo bedroom chairs," and "a kitchen table" (Collins 2004: 222). The

table features an object that dominates the whole atmosphere of the room, and foreshadows Mr Vanstone's character:

"On the table stood a glass tank filled with water, and ornamented in the middle by a miniature pyramid of rock-work interlaced with weeds. Snails clung to the sides of the tank; tadpoles and tiny fish swam swiftly in the green water; slippery efts and slimy frogs twined their noiseless way in and out of the weedy rock-work – and, on top of the pyramid, there sat solitary, cold as the stone, brown as the stone, motionless as the stone, a little bright-eyed toad." (Collins 2004: 222/23)

It is worth quoting this paragraph in full because it does so much for the atmosphere of the whole scene. The house, instead of making a first impression of the power, strength, and virility of its master, is associated with images of decay, slime, and 'lower' creatures. The toad reveals much about its male owner: It is small, brown, cold, and motionless – i.e. sterile – as stone. Although its 'bright eyes' seem to suggest that the male-patriarchal gaze remains intact, it is contained by a femininity that clearly sets itself apart from the house's decay: Mrs Lecount's "whole personal appearance was little less than a triumph of physical resistance to the deteriorating influence of time" (Collins 2004: 223).

The encounter between Mrs Lecount and Magdalen demonstrates that the actual power struggle here is between the two women, not between Magdalen and Mr Vanstone. Mrs Lecount both instinctively sees through Magdalen's disguise, and dominates the situation's spatial management. In order to properly see Magdalen's face, she "placed a chair for her exactly opposite the light from the window […and] sat so close to the wall as to force her visitor either to turn her head a little further round towards the window, or to fail in politeness by not looking at the person whom she addressed" (Collins 2004: 224/25). Both women, ironically, know that they have to play the game in order to succeed; neither of them, at any point, gives up their social performance. Mrs Lecount makes it very clear, though, that power, in this house, lies with her, not Mr Vanstone: "I am the mouthpiece of Mr Noel Vanstone; the pen he holds, if you will excuse the expression – nothing more." (Collins 2004: 225) With this understatement, Mrs Lecount, in fact, emphasises that, in this house, she is nothing less than the person in charge of the ultimate source of power: language.

By making Mrs Lecount appear first on the scene, she is also given an advantage over Mr Vanstone on a narrative level. Her last allusion to her master's affliction aptly summarises what he lacks: his is "a chronic feebleness – a fatty degeneration – a want of vital power in the organ itself" (Collins 2004: 227). Feeble, degenerate, wanting in vital power (i.e. fertility), Mr Vanstone is anything but

'manly.' Magdalen's actual encounter with him confirms all these allusions: "His complexion was as delicate as a young girl's, […with] a weak little mustache. […] He had a plate of strawberries on his lap, with a napkin under them to preserve the purity of his white dressing gown." (Collins 2004: 228) This man is less a 'man' than a 'girl,' a child, an effeminate, weak being with "a high, thin, fretfully-consequential voice" (Collins 2004: 229). In a culture in which "the body is a measure of masculine and national strength" (Hingston 2012: 120), Vanstone's body is particularly disturbing. He is not even master of his own opinions and actions: he "had been instructed beforehand, what to say and do in his visitor's presence" (Collins 2004: 229). For the whole duration of the scene in Vanstone's room, the two women are in control of space and conversation. Magdalen "dexterously barred the only passage by which Mrs Lecount could have skirted round the large table" (Collins 2004: 229), and "it was Mrs Lcount's habitual practice to decide everything for her master in the first instance" (Collins 2004: 231). While Mr Vanstone busies himself 'delicately' eating strawberries, regularly turning white, or being on the edge of a fit, he is completely oblivious that the two women are battling over politics. This power-triangle clearly departs from traditional constellations: instead of having a woman as the catalyst of a conflict between two men, here it is two women fighting over the – hardly visibly 'male' – body of a man who is no more than an "abject manikin" (Collins 2004: 236). This is doubly ironic, considering that the women not only usurp power, but, to them, it is something of an indignity to have to fight over such a weak specimen of patriarchal masculinity. As this scene, in fact, implies, what makes the patriarchal system most intolerable is that it subjects women to 'inferior' men who can only maintain themselves, because the male-homosocial system bolsters up their privilege – to the disadvantage of women who are much more in control of spatial, epistemological, and even physical power.

Performing in the Theatre of Liminality: Aldborough

As the story progresses, we move more and more into the liminal outdoors, while the domestic remains the focal point of the narrative, mirroring that Magdalen "is both exiled from and enclosed within patriarchal structures" (David 1998: 137). Magdalen's performative plotting reaches its first climax in the heterotopian space of the shores of Suffolk, where the "extraordinary defencelessness of the land against the encroachments of the sea" enables the dissolution of "traditions which have been literally drowned" (Collins 2004: 266). This is a space of unknown possibility that does not stop at the threshold of domestic space: "Viewed from the low level on which these villas stand, the sea, in certain conditions of the atmosphere, appears to be higher than the land." (Collins 2004: 266) Culture, here, becomes

marginal and ephemeral in the face of the sea, and the town (i.e. the social) is no more than a "curious little outpost" (Collins 2004: 267).

The place's liminality crucially reflects and influences Magdalen's behaviour. Here, she and Captain Wragge put on their most ambitious social performance: that of a whole family of three made-up identities. The liminal nature of their surroundings also enables the two allies to be unusually honest with each other: in "a little wilderness of shingle and withered grass[…, in] the lost port of Slaughden, with its forlorn wharfs and warehouses of decaying wood" (Collins 2004: 272), that is, again, in a place of simultaneously spatial, temporal, and cultural 'otherness,' "the time had come to be plain with her" (Collins 2004: 272). This is the first and only moment in all of the scenes between the two that they actively declare their wish to be honest, not to be performers for once: "I tell you plainly. […] She looked round at him for the first time – looked him straight in the face." (Collins 2004: 274; 276) It is also here that Magdalen, once more, displays her tendency to seek out marginal spaces to find the resolution to carry out her plans of domestic politics – in this case, the strength to put on an act that will make Noel Vanstone marry her: "'I am going down to the sea[.'…I]t was as if the night had swallowed her up." (Collins 2004: 280) The further Magdalen pursues her plans that stand in contrast to social normativity, the further she is spatially removed from the centre of society and domesticity. The sea also enables her to let go of the last private bonds that connect her with her old life: "Alone on a strange shore, she had taken the lock of Frank's hair from its once-treasured place, and had cast it away from her to the sea and the night." (Collins 2004: 281) While the liminal outdoors affords Magdalen a certain liberty and ability to face her own thoughts, the privacy of her own room cannot do the same. This space, on the one hand, serves as her 'closet,' and she keeps the keys to its furniture: "[S]he locked [the wardrobe], and put the key in her pocket." (Collins 2004: 291) On the other hand, here, as opposed to outside, she cannot 'unlock' herself and face her fears, which becomes apparent in her inability to look at her own face in the mirror: "For the first time in her life, she shrank from meeting the reflexion of herself." (Collins 2004: 291) Collins' text, then, assumes a female 'I' which, in transgressing the boundaries of normative performativity ('woman,' 'daughter'), cannot be successfully interpellated by patriarchal discourse, and runs the risk of not being able to perform any liveable, recognisable 'identity' at all, and 'get lost' in performance. The liminal, then, while providing the transgressive female with a possible escape from the oppressive spatial semantics of the patriarchal domestic, can only be the temporally limited locus of subversive energies. An ultimate return to a life within patriarchal heteronormativity seems, already at this point, inevitable.

This scene's central space is the town's Parade, which serves as a stage for public social performances. Here, Mrs Lecount can act out the role of protectress

of her "invalid master" Mr Vanstone for everyone to see: "A very domestic person! a truly superior woman!" (Collins 2004: 292) For Magdalen, the Parade is the place in which she will perform the role of the woman that Noel Vanstone will want to marry. Captain Wragge reminds her: "Don't forget to smile, […] [and] look happy." (Collins 2004: 294) Again, the struggle over whose performance on this stage will be most successful does not primarily involve either of the two male characters, but Magdalen and Mrs Lecount. This is the public performance of two women struggling over who will gain access to power in a nominally masculine domestic space – namely Noel Vanstone's house, which, according to himself, is "the only safe house in Aldborough. […] The sea may destroy all other houses – it can't destroy mine. My father took care of that; my father was a remarkable man." (Collins 2004: 298) This claims to be the prototypical patriarchal house: strong, enduring, and handed down in the male line, it represents many traditionally masculine values. It is also, however, flawed: its current master is, as we have seen, feeble and effeminate, and not fit to be its 'patriarch.' He has no sons – or any children – either, so the male line is broken. This is a 'mansion' ready to be taken over by women who have learned the performative language of power politics, a fact that he himself acknowledges: "I can't be left in the house by myself. […] It all depends on you, Lecount." (Collins 2004: 302)

Captain Wragge is the novel's only male character who is not a fool of conventions. Just like Magdalen, he very well understands his society's performative codes. His character, however, is contradictory. When in a domestic setting with Mrs Wragge and Magdalen, he cannot help act like the 'manly master,' like a Bluebeard. On the other hand, he also knows how to use other people's urge to be 'manly' to his own advantage. He manages to convince Vanstone of Mrs Lecount's acting against him by calling on his 'manliness,' drawing him into his confidence by employing the language of homosocial understanding: "Humour her – make a manly concession to the weaker sex. […T]ry the *suaviter in modo* (as we classical men say)." (Collins 2004: 328) Mr Vastone, desperately in need of being treated 'like a man,' is "fully restored to his place in his own estimation" (Collins 2004: 329) by this conversation with Wragge. Similarly, Wragge simulates homosocial respect for the other man's secrets ("I intrude on no man's secrets." [Collins 2004: 333]), only to lure Vanstone into doing the exact opposite: revealing his secrets in the assumed atmosphere of male-to-male confidence. Vanstone, along the same lines, is eager to show Wragge that he is still in control of the management of knowledge in his house: "Of course I can [open the drawer in which Mrs Lecount keeps the account books]. I have got a duplicate key. […] I never allow the account books to be locked up from my inspection: it is a rule of the house." (Collins 2004: 352) In the end, however, Vanstone's feeble attempts to prove his 'manliness' are

nothing but weak protestations. Real power lies with those who actually know how to control space and knowledge: the two women, and Captain Wragge.

It is part of the novel's tendency to apologise for its radical gender politics that Magdalen, the further she dares to subvert the patriarchal world surrounding her, increasingly, in moments of weakness, tends towards a passive femininity. She not only "would do what was required of her[…,] accept[ing] without a murmur, the monotony of her life at Mrs Wragge's work-table" (Collins 2004: 332, 33), but also opts for a self-imposed imprisonment in the house in Captain Wragge's power. Her passivity is also reflected in her seemingly vanishing from any spatial position at all: she "glided into the obscurity of the room, like a ghost. […] 'I have no objection to make; I have done with objecting.'" (Collins 2004: 342) In her weakest moment, Magdalen, who mostly occupies liminal spaces anyway, becomes a liminal being herself, a ghost-like, passive shadow accepting her destiny. This passivity stands in stark contrast to Magdalen's active occupation, penetration, and subversion of domestic spaces, and can be read – just as the novel's exaggerated 'happy ending' – as Collins' attempt to veil his protagonist's radical spatial gender politics. It also, however, foregrounds the actual pain Magdalen inflicts on herself through her politics of revenge, and, thus, makes her, as a character, very human.

Who will 'win' in this scene depends solely on whose performative power will prove to be most effective, and who will be able to penetrate whose secret spatiality: Mrs Lecount's chance to prove Magdalen's earlier performance as Miss Garth is to "obtain[] access to [her] wardrobe" (Collins 2004: 357), and find the dress of which she has a sample. Similarly, she tries to prevent Magdalen and Wragge from gaining access to – and influence on – Vanstone by "privately remov[ing] the keys from the door in front and the door at the back" (Collins 2004: 371) of Mr Vanstone's house during the night. She finally manages to penetrate Magdalen's 'closet,' and see the dress – proof of Magdalen's secret. Enjoying the power of being a secret bearer too much, however ("The secret of the missing fragment of the alpaca dress was known to no living creature but herself." [Collins 2004: 382]), she decides not to disclose it until her return to England, which she leaves after Wragge has tricked her into going to Switzerland. So, in the end, Mrs Lecount – for now – fails, because she falls for those gestures of power that make her 'more of a man:' keeping secrets.

Images of spatial concealment, in this novel, strongly imply mental processes. Before marrying Vanstone, Magdalen, just as she was earlier able to rid herself of her ties to the past by throwing away the lock of Frank's hair, now enacts a very contradictory gesture. Nervously handling a prayer book that both stands for her past (she took it with her from home) and her approaching future (she opens it at the marriage service), she seems to reject an independent, active decision on her further proceedings in an act of repression, putting the book back into her drawer:

"[A]fter turning the lock, she took the key away – walked with it in her hand to the open window – and threw it violently from her into the garden. […] It was invisible; it was lost." (Collins 2004: 395) Caught between her will to actively pursue her ultimate goal, and her tendency to relapse into passivity at the prospect of having to marry a repulsive man, Magdalen tries to refuse herself access to her own secret thoughts, while not revealing them to anyone. This repressed 'closet' of hers, however, in its contradictory nature, drives her to the brink of self-destruction when "[s]he placed […] laudanum in the cupboard, locked it, and put the key in her pocket" (Collins 2004: 403). Trapped in the 'closet' she has created for herself, two options are left to her: remain passive and die, or regain active strength and a position of power.

Although it is, to a certain extent, true, as Deirdre David observes, that, in having Magdalen use her own charms, "Collins makes us see that disinherited middle-class women, deprived of paternal protection, assume an identity that is both inscribed and concealed by the gender politics of their social class – that of sexual object" (David 1998: 139-140), this is not – as should have become obvious by now – the main reason for Magdalen's subversive potential. Becoming the wife of an older, and rather 'unmanly' man does not make her dangerous, but her not obeying the rules that this institutionalised position would entail does. She will not be the passive, 'feminine' wife, but will use her position, in a very active and 'masculine' way, to get what she wants, a fact that David herself observes in describing Magdalen as "aggressive[and] robustly in rebellion" (David 1998: 140), as opposed to passive, 'feminine' Laura in *The Woman in White*. In a similar fashion, I argue against a reading of Magdalen's pursuit of the marriage to Vanstone as a "commitment to masochistic suffering" (Jones 2000: 196). While it is true that the option of masochistic enjoyment of suffering is a common trope of the female Gothic – consider Emily's fascination with instruments of torture at Udolpho – Magdalen's use of her body as sexual object in a marriage contract, her "active agen[cy] in her own suffering" (Jones 2000: 201), is not an end in itself, but only one step on her way to regaining position and fortune in an act of self-determined female agency; and this step, far from giving her enjoyment, disgusts, and, indeed, nearly kills her. Her pleasure can only lie in the challenge and promise to overcome disgust, and is, thus, a pleasure of self-mastery, discipline, and stoicism.

Female Domestic Politics: Baliol Cottage

After Magdalen's plan has succeeded and she has married Noel Vanstone, the reader next encounters them in their new home: Baliol cottage. Far from displaying a scene of domestic happiness though, the narrator immediately confronts us with

a description of the breakfast-table, which "presented that essentially comfortless appearance which is caused by a meal in a state of transition" (Collins 2004: 439). The narrative ponders over this image for a whole paragraph, conveying a sense of unbalance: the master is being left out, left behind with the leftovers of a meal. Vanstone is not master of this house; instead, he calls Magdalen its "mistress" (Collins 2004: 439). He, who was, from the start, clearly unsuitable to fill the position of virile husband and head of the household, is weaker than before: "[H]is marriage had altered him for the worse." (Collins 2004: 439/40) He realises that he occupies no position of domestic power: "I'm left here neglected. […] Am I nobody in the house? […] Is your mistress to go away on her own affairs, and leave me at home like a child[…]?" (Collins 2004: 440/41) Vanstone is not only de-gendered, but also infantilised. The only pleasures he has are those of infantile cruelty, and an immediate satisfaction of basic needs and wishes.

When Mrs Lecount returns to the scene, it soon becomes apparent again that Vanstone is still only a puppet in the power struggle between her and Magdalen. Although "withered and old" (Collins 2004: 442) herself, Mrs Lecount is still way more powerful than Vanstone, and quickly "resume[s] full possession of him, in her own right" (Collins 2004: 442). Her "merciless steadiness" makes him "dr[a] w back […], cowering under her eye" (Collins 2004: 445). There is only one point at which Vanstone displays some resistance to his being told what to think and do. When he gets the sense that both women hide knowledge from him, his last outburst is phrased in gendered terms: "[T]hose words lit a spark of the fire of manhood in him at last. […] 'I won't be threatened and mystified any longer!" (Collins 2004: 446) This 'masculine' protest, however, is not strong enough to match Mrs Lecount's actual spatial power and knowledge. Playing on the image of the male Gothic villain intruding on a woman's private space, Mrs Lecount makes Vanstone do exactly that, not, however, of his own accord: "Take me up into your wife's room, and open her wardrobe in my presence, with your own hands. […] I don't go near it. I touch nothing in it, myself." (Collins 2004: 447; 448) Lecount forces her 'master' to perform an act of 'masculine' violence (the intrusion of a woman's privacy), to be the Bluebeard she cannot be. Ironically – albeit predictably – this in itself turns out to be an act of violence on Vanstone. The knowledge he is forced to discover (that his wife is not who he thinks she is) is too much for him: "He dropped to his knees, and caught at her dress with the grasp of a drowning man. 'Save me!'" (Collins 2004: 449) This effect is heightened when Lecount breaks open Magdalen's cupboard, and finds the bottle of poison. Vanstone, naturally, jumps to a false conclusion: "Poison locked up by my wife, in the cupboard in her own room, […] For *me*?" (Collins 2004: 451) One of the central epistemological acts of the Gothic is, hence, reversed here: instead of gaining power over a woman by denying her privacy and secrecy, the opening of this female 'closet' places the

threat to the master at the centre of his own domestic space – not, however, in the threat of his own secrets being uncovered (Vanstone does not even have any), but in the very act which, in the world of the Gothic, would normally enable power: that of uncovering secrets.

Mrs Lecount takes the final step of exercising complete control over Vanstone when she talks him into changing his will according to her suggestions: "I will dictate […] and you will write." (Collins 2004: 457) Vanstone's last resistance is that of epistemological and agential denial: he "said no more. […] 'I don't remember[.'…] He clenched his hands, and writhed from side to side of his chair, in an agony of indecision." (Collins 2004: 460) Vanstone has given up all control over his own acts; he is completely in Mrs Lecount's power. This is mirrored spatially in his desire to leave his domestic position and escape his responsibilities: "[H]e looked at the door, he looked at the window, as if he longed to make his escape by one way or the other." (Collins 2004: 463)

Mrs Lecount executes heterosocial power indirectly through her influence on Vanstone, and under the guise of male homosociality. Having talked Vanstone into changing his will so that he will leave all his money to Admiral Bentram, she has him add a secret postscript binding Bartram to handing the money down to his nephew George. The contract, hence, seems to be homosocial (between Vanstone and Bartram), while it is, in fact, indirectly heterosocial (between Mrs Lecount and Bartram via Vanstone). Mrs Lecount thus both shows how aware she is of the importance of secrecy ("[T]he secret way is the sure way, with such a woman as your wife." [Collins 2004: 467]), and how she herself can be defeated by what she does not know, namely that, by giving the money to George, it will finally benefit Norah, George's future wife, and sister of the woman Lecount wants to ruin. Collins skilfully constructs a plot that turns established power structures dangerously upside-down, while, at the same time, always demonstrating the limits to the damage these women can do to patriarchal society.

Collins does, however, set an example in the case of Noel Vanstone: "[T]he abject, miserable little man" (Collins 2004: 476) will not survive his position as the traded object in the power triangle consisting of himself, Mrs Lecount, and Magdalen. Having served first as Magdalen's means to regain a position of power, and then as Mrs Lecount's puppet to take it away again, he no longer has any purpose in this world of female power politics, and dies.

Female-Homosocial Secret Sharing: St. John's Wood

Before having Magdalen enter the domestic space of her final attempt to find the secret trust that denies her money and position, Collins inserts a short scene of

confidence between herself and her servant that shows the power of female homosociality. Magdalen, in order to get her maid Louisa to help her, insists on the importance of mutual trust and openness: "I have spoken with the wish to find out more of you and your past life than I have found out yet – not because I am curious, but because I have my secret troubles too." (Collins 2004: 496) Magdalen is aware of the powerful bond the sharing of secrets creates, and Collins here proposes a female alternative to – traditionally much more powerful – male-homosocial secret sharing. Confiding in each other, these two women can help each other get what they want, even – in Magdalen's case – against the powers of patriarchy. The intimacy of the two women's bond is mirrored in Collins' denying the reader explicit knowledge of Louisa's secret: "Magdalen bent over her, and whispered a question in her ear. Louisa whispered back the one sad word of reply." (Collins 2004: 497)

Collins now introduces another ambiguously 'masculine' domestic space. Magdalen's aim is to get into Admiral Bartram's house at St Crux as a servant. When she makes inquiries about the house, it turns out to be – just as all the novel's other houses – not quite the traditional patriarchal household: Magdalen's phrasing of the distribution of power in the house immediately points to the weak standing of masculinity: "The only mistress at St Crux is the housekeeper. But there is a master – Admiral Bartram." (Collins 2004: 500) Not only does the 'master' come second – after the female housekeeper and 'mistress' of the place – but masculinity is generally curiously underrepresented in this house: "[Bartram] will be waited on by women-servants alone. The one man in the house, is an old sailor, who has been all his life with his master." (Collins 2004: 500) This house is inhabited by a man who is not quite his own 'master;' his male companion is the potentially queer figure of the sailor who is associated with the liminal, heterotopian space of the sea; and the rest of the household displays an unusual lack of males. However problematic the standing of masculinity may thus be, the constellation also, again, foreshadows Magdalen's ultimate defeat: while all the servants are women, they will never be anything *but* servants. Domestic power firmly resides with the exclusively male-homosocial, and potentially homoerotic 'couple' Bartram/Mazey. What remains for Magdalen is, just like for Marian in *The Woman in White*, to subvert this heterosexist, misogynistic system as an eavesdropper.

Magdalen is aware of the potentially transgressive position of the female servants at St Crux: "I must find my way into St Crux as a stranger – I must be in a position to look about the house, unsuspected – I must be there with plenty of time on my hands. All the circumstances are in my favour, if I am received into the house as a servant." (Collins 2004: 502) Asking Louise to teach her how to be a good servant, Magdalen already performs a socially subversive act; differences of class and position become mere roles to be performed at will: "Shall I tell you what a lady is? A lady is a woman who wears a silk gown, and has a sense of her

own importance. I shall put the gown on your back, and the sense in your head." (Collins 2004: 503) In a society that depends on people accepting their place in life – be it as a 'woman,' a 'servant,' or a 'lady' – Magdalen becomes an immensely threatening character, because she exposes social norms and conventions to be based on mere performances.

A Queer House: St Crux-in-the-Marsh

The narrative reaches its climax within the intricate architecture of Admiral Bartram's house at St Crux-in-the-Marsh. Here, in a "servant's costume" (Collins 2004: 511), Magdalen puts on her final performance to penetrate this house's secrets. Although Bartram ostensibly behaves like a proper, powerful patriarch, "a considerate master and an impartial man" (Collins 2004: 513), the one male who is actually in charge of what happens in the house to a certain degree is the sailor Mazey, "the admiral's coxswain" (Collins 2004: 511), that is the person 'steering' the admirals 'boat.' The strong naval analogies at the beginning of the chapter serve to associate the domestic space of St. Crux – its being 'in the Marsh' already adding an element of instability – with the liminal, heterotopian space of the sea. The friendship between Bartram and Mazey is clearly 'odd.' Bartram, having given half his food at dinner to his dogs, announces: "I've got a third dog, who comes in at dessert." (Collins 2004: 514) Mazey's position remains ambiguous, oscillating between servant, friend, and merely tolerated 'dog.' His relationship with his master is hard to grasp, which makes it the more loaded with potential meaning in a house in which the two are the only male inhabitants. The homoerotic connotations of this house's sailor are foregrounded when Magdalen overhears him singing a few lines from the song "Tom Bowling" by Charles Dibdin: "His form was of the manliest beau-u-u-uty." (Collins 2004: 516) Powerfully employed by Herman Melville a few decades later in his story "Billy Budd, Sailor," the male-homosocial admiration of another sailor's beauty is a theme that, in a time of accumulating discourses on 'sexual identities,' has a powerful 'queer' potential.

Magdalen, as a servant, is in a position "to make herself acquainted with the whole inhabited quarter of the house, and to learn the positions of the various rooms" (Collins 2004: 515). Ironically, it is Mazey who leads Magdalen through the passages of the house, which proves to be even stranger than its unusual inhabitants and its association with the liminal have suggested. The house is divided: the uninhabited northern part, which contains "the ancient Banqueting-Hall of St Crux," is called "the Arctic Passage" (Collins 2004: 518). It is "foul with dirt and cobwebs; the naked walls […] were stained with damp; […it was a] wilderness" (Collins 2004: 518). Collins neatly combines various layers of liminality within

this one space: geographical (it is associated with polar regions), temporal (it is ancient, and in decay), and immediately spatial (this is a remote and uninhabited part of the house). The narrative pushes this heterotopian quality of the house in its entirety to the extreme: Magdalen finds out that Bartram "likes to shift his quarters, sometimes to one side of the house, sometimes to the other" (Collins 2004: 518), the southern part, "which is all tumbling about our ears" (Collins 2004: 519); and the gardens in between the parts are "neglected […and] overgrown with brambles and weeds" (Collins 2004: 519). Although this place is marked as fading, ephemeral, strange, in-between, and hard to grasp, and could thus be associated with a weak standing of masculinity, its liminal nature is more problematic. Despite its dilapidation, St Crux-in-the-Marsh turns out to be a fully functioning homosocial/heterosexist/misogynistic domestic heterotopia. While Bartram, as we will see below, does bear the paranoid markers of paranoid masculinity, he is protected by Mazey's policing presence, and the two men's 'queer' power makes it impossible for Magdalen to succeed. Within the novel's gender politics, this power is, however, monstrous, in that it not only retains the misogyny of heternonormative patriarchy, but also eliminates both heterosocial and heterosexual desire.

The excessively homosocial nature of the relationship between Mazey and the admiral becomes even more odd when the reader learns that Mazey, in his "dog-like fidelity to his master" (Collins 2004: 521), sleeps in front of Batram's room at night in a passage that is out of bounds to Magdalen. When she asks him about it, Mazey's answers are strangely evasive, only reminding Magdalen that it is not a woman's business to spy on the dealings of men: "Don't be curious. Look in your Old Testament when you go downstairs, and see what happened in the Garden of Eden through curiosity. Be a good girl – and don't imitate your mother Eve." (Collins 2004: 522) The biblical reference, in this context, reminds the reader that patriarchy's reliance on the power of secrecy is an ancient phenomenon. The impression of Mazey's threat is twofold: on the one hand, it alludes to the paranoid structures of Bartram's homosocial secret (the hidden document); at the same time, however, the threat becomes real when Magdalen does 'eat the apple,' only again to be denied epistemological satisfaction and power.

St Crux is full of locks, an accumulation of 'closets' of all shapes and sizes. In the library, "[t]here was a table […] with drawers that locked; there was a magnificent Italian cabinet with doors that locked; there were five cupboards under the book-cases, every one of which locked" (Collins 2004: 525). Bartram regularly displays a "fidgety anxiety about his keys and his cupboards[;…] some private responsibility […] tormented him with a sense of oppression" (Collins 2004: 525). The secret Bartram has been left by Noel Vanstone, in this final scene, comes to stand for the dynamics of masculine secrecy as such. It makes Bartram paranoid and obsessed with the practical and symbolic power of keeping his keys safe:

"[S]ometimes, he took them up to the bedroom with him in a little basket." (Collins 2004: 526)

Unsurprisingly, it is, once again, a liminal space outside the house in which Magdalen literally finds the first keys to the discovery of the secret trust: in the garden. Its liminality is emphasised by its containing "the ruins of [an] old monastery" (Collins 2004: 538), a powerful architectural metaphor that carries multi-layered meanings: the temporal heterotopia of the decaying past in the present; the death of the powerful patriarchal institution of the church; and an allusion to more traditional Gothic architectures on the basis of which this novel's spatial gender politics are constructed. Here, Magdalen finds an array of old keys lying on the ground: "What if she collected all she could find, and tried them, one after another, in the locks of the cabinets and cupboards now closed against her?" (Collins 2004: 539)

It is, ironically, the admiral himself who leads Magdalen to the discovery of the locus of the search, the house's most secret space of all. She gets a first hint from watching him enter the house's east wing, that uninhabited part at the other extreme of the liminal space of the 'Arctic Passage:' "[S]he had accidently surprised Admiral Bartram on a visit to the east rooms, which, for some urgent reason of his own, he wished to keep a secret." (Collins 2004: 544) In a way very much reminiscent of Falkland in *Caleb Williams*, Bartram's masculinity is such that its paranoia creates an urge to disclose the secret, get rid of the burden that simultaneously empowers these men's self-concept, and leads them into crisis. What follows confirms this impression: when Magdalen finally attempts a nightly excursion into the Gothic Banqueting-Hall – in the middle of which a "tripod rose erect on its gaunt black legs, like a monster called to life by the moon – a monster rising through the light, and melting invisibly into the upper shadows of the Hall" (Collins 2004: 546) – and discovers "an old bureau of carved oak" (Collins 2004: 547), she is surprised by the sleepwalking figure of Admiral Bartram, who seems to be driven mad by the secret he has been asked to keep: "My good fellow, Noel, take it back again! It worries me day and night." (Collins 2004: 548) Reduced to a death-like state ("[t]he awful death-in-life of his face" [Collins 2004: 549]), Bartram himself, through his actions and language, confirms to Magdalen that the bureau is the 'closet' she has been seeking to penetrate. What is more, he even leads her back into his own room, unconsciously exposing himself and his keys to Magdalen's access: "She took all the keys from the table." (Collins 2004: 550) Collins confronts his readers with a masculinity that, although protected by a 'queer,' homosocial system of surveillance, remains paranoid.

Even though Bartram's unconscious drive to rid himself of the secret exposes it to female access ("At last, she drew out the inner drawer! At last, she had the letter in her hand!" [Collins 2004: 551]), homosocial control of its content remains intact. One reason for this are certainly Collins' expectations concerning his readership.

He wrote for a popular audience, at a time at which it was expected that the order of things remain ultimately unquestioned. His subversive ideas "are disciplined by the contingent demands of his career, by the male-dominated directives of his culture" (David 1998: 146). He also, however, within the logic of his narrative, demonstrates the potential monstrosity of a purely homosocial, misogynistic power structure. When Mazey catches Magdalen just as she has opened the 'closet,' and got at the secret, he aptly puts her crime against patriarchy into words: "His honour the admiral's keys stolen; his honour the admiral's desk ransacked; and his honour the admiral's private letters broke open." (Collins 2004: 553) Both what the reader knows about Mazey's position in the house, and his current state ("[His] eyes were bloodshot; his hand was heavy; his list slippers were twisted crookedly on his feet; and his body was swayed to and fro on his widely-parted legs." [Collins 2004: 552]), however, give his performance of masculine authority a subtle, but clearly comic touch; and although he claims to know that his "duty is to turn the key on" (Collins 2004: 557) Magdalen, he does not make use of this power, and lets her go. Collins, then, makes it obvious that, although Bartram's paranoid predisposition has helped Magdalen get access to the information she is after, homosocial power cannot be broken. The secret's discovery has been ultimately prevented, but Collins clearly criticises this form of patriarchal, heterosexist, misogynistic power, structured around secrecy. Having the paranoid Bluebeard die ("[O]n the day when the girl's treacherous conduct was discovered, the admiral was seized with the first symptoms of a severe inflammatory cold." [Collins 2004: 566]), he foregrounds the enormous energy patriarchy has to expend in order to keep up its sexist privilege.

Although Collins ostensibly re-establishes the order of things in making Magdalen's subversive project fail, and having her personal story end with a comically exaggerated, heteronormative, romantic plot – she is saved from illness and poverty by another sailor: Kirke, "whom she marries in a symbolic reconciliation with the father figure who left her legitimate but disinherited at the beginning of the novel" (David 1998: 139) – an alert reader will easily conceive that the novel's subversive power is only seemingly reversed. The story of Magdalen's failure and ultimate return to a 'normal' life is told in so brief a space, compared to what precedes it, that it is obvious that Collins did not intend to put an emphasis on the reconciliatory tone of his novel's ending. Many critics have, in fact, negatively remarked on the suddenness of this turn at the end of the novel (cf. Thoms 1992: 87). Others realised that this "conversion runs counter to the true energies of the text, and represents and unnatural taming" (Thoms 1992: 90). It is no coincidence that it is the potentially 'queer' figure of the sailor who stands in as the powerfully male 'saviour,' questioning a re-domestication of the subversive female within the patriarchal system of control. Heternormative bliss is just as foreclosed as female-homosocial independence. Although it is Norah who opens Bartram's 'clos-

et,' and removes the secret trust, she only does so acting for her husband; and while money, name, position, and power return to the female characters, they only do so through male-homosocial inheritance. Collins exposes the weakness of patriarchal, paranoid masculinity, and only has the 'queer fishes' (Wragge, Mazey, and Kirke) survive, but, at the same time, foregrounds a concern with the misogynistic potential of an excessively homosocial society, in which women remain dependent on the economic, epistemological, and political power of men.

A Female Bluebeard: Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*

Over the last decade, the importance of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's fiction for an understanding of Victorian culture has been increasingly recognised in literary scholarship. Her writing was extremely popular at the time, and "crossed boundaries in readership, style, and the politics of socioeconomic identity" (Tromp et al. 2000: xvi). In *Lady Audley's Secret*, her most famous novel, and a "dynamic portrayal of mid-Victorian masculinities" (Heinrichs 2007: 103), epistemological power relations are turned upside-down. While the patriarchal home is the narrative's central space, its actual core is occupied by a female protagonist's intricately shaped secret rooms, rooms that help her protect a secret from her past that – in a complete gender-inversion of the traditional Gothic plot of the Bluebeard type – threatens her very existence as the person in charge of the management of knowledge.

"Women, indeed, rule the novel. It is their actions that determine the course of things." (Klein 2008: 170) Fooling a husband who is reduced to an existence in his bedroom, Lucy Audley is chased by Robert, a man who, in the cultural context of increasingly rigid discourses on sexualities, struggles not only with protecting the system of male-homosocial patriarchy from Lucy's subverting influence, but also with his own 'sexual identity.' Set in a time during which ideas of gender, and especially of masculinity, were being constantly redefined, and "a fading honour-based model of masculinity" (Heinrichs 2007: 103) was increasingly questioned, Braddon not only "speak[s] against […] existing models of passive femininity" (Woolston 2008: 165), but also participates in a discourse that re-negotiates the spatial and social position and 'identity' of men, achieving "a subversive deconstruction of gender stereotypes" (Klein 2008: 162).

While the domestic, as in many sensation novels, proves not to be the safe haven of patriarchal power any longer, "call[ing] into question notions of gendered identity and the domestic order" (Tromp et al. 2000: xvii), the novel's protagonists find themselves increasingly pushed into marginal, heterotopian spaces that lack definite meaning, security, and social structure. Gardens, graveyards, and the sea

become the sites in which masculinity struggles to redefine itself against both a dangerously subversive femininity (Lucy Audley), and the unspoken knowledge of sexual deviance (Robert's 'queer' desire for George). In this "subversive portrait of alienated patriarchy" (Gilbert 1997: 94), men – and a woman! – struggle and fail to perform a stable masculine identity: "Braddon suggests that masculinity is as much a spectacle as femininity, and, thus, questions patriarchal social authority." (Heinrichs 2007: 113) The patriarchal domestic is marginalised, and those characters who are associated with it – like Sir Michael – are ultimately expelled from it. In contrast, those male characters – like Robert and George – who are emphatically associated with the liminal, and increasingly move within heterotopian spaces (the seaside, the graveyard) fail to perform a functional form of masculinity that conforms with patriarchal ideals. In the end, however, they are also enabled to move beyond notions of paranoid masculinity, and find peace in what Braddon constructs as a 'queer' fairy-tale ending, a life together in a country cottage, out of reach of the normative conventions of their society. A stable, heteronormative masculine identity is only temporarily achievable through the spatial marginalisation of the subversive female in an asylum, and the 'closeting' of her existence and the threat she poses. Both Braddon's male characters, and her protagonist Lady Audley strive – or instantly fail – to be Bluebeards, to have and control their own secrets, and to manage the spatial movements of themselves and those around them. Strikingly, Lady Audley as a female Bluebeard is the only character who – temporarily – successfully performs a secretive identity that bears the markers of patriarchal, secretive, paranoid masculinity, which, in the end, is exposed as an unliveable myth.

Female Secret Space: Audley Court

The narrative begins with a description of Audley Court, the house that Lucy Audley is going to be mistress of. It is characterised as a mock-Gothic architecture, a strange place, in which time itself does not adhere to its own rules: the clock tower's "stupid, bewildering clock" is "always in extremes" (Braddon 1998: 7). The house, which used to be a convent, is "very irregular and rambling" (Braddon 1998: 7), and the main entrance is so hidden that it seems that it "wished to keep itself a secret" (Braddon 1998: 8). Although described as a "glorious old place" (Braddon 1998: 8), its best days are past, and the house's exterior seems drained of life, symbolised by "the stagnant well" (Braddon 1998: 8). The building is a pastiche of styles, and the narrator warns us that this is "a house in which you incontinently lost yourself" (Braddon 1998: 8). The narrator, while employing a lot of the language that would be used to describe a castle in the Gothic literary

tradition, at the same time makes fun of these genre-specific allusions: "Of course, in such a house, there were secret chambers" (Braddon 1998: 9), and the lime-tree walk "seemed a chosen place for secret meetings or for stolen interviews" (Braddon 1998: 9). By deliberately employing a rhetoric that simultaneously evokes and creates an ironic distance to the Gothic horrors that Braddon's readership would associate with a description such as this, her narrator paves the ground for shattering false expectations of domestic harmony at Audley Court. This house does have secret rooms; they do not contain the secret of a male Gothic villain, but will turn out to be the house's mistress'; and the lime-walk, as, indeed, all of the surrounding outdoors, will be the space into which the ensuing power struggle is taken. The house itself, as representing masculine power, loses meaning as a site of stability and masculine (sexual and economic) virility: "The novel continually effaces all signs of productivity on the Audley estate, […and] constant images of stagnancy" (Haynie 2000: 70-71) abound.

Lucy is introduced to the reader as a woman with a mysterious past: "No one knew anything of her," and "nobody exactly knew her age" (Braddon 1998: 11; 13). As the reader finds out at the end of the novel, what Lucy hides is the fact that she is already married when she becomes mistress of Audley Court. The house's interior reflects her secret in a very similar fashion to the labyrinthine architecture of the Gothic castles hiding their male owner's secrets. This female Bluebeard's 'closet' is so elaborate that it immediately stands out in the narrative as the most curious and most interesting part of the whole house. Through the eyes of Phoebe, Lucy's maid, the reader learns that one enters her mistress' apartments through "an octagonal chamber" (Braddon 1998: 33), from which a door, veiled by "a heavy green cloth curtain" leads into "a fairy-like budoir" (Braddon 1998: 33), and from there into a dressing room. The space has an unreal atmosphere; both the green curtain and the French and Dutch landscape paintings in the octagonal chamber suggest the foreign, the outdoors, a feminine 'other' space of fairy-tale-like mystery.

At the very beginning of the novel, Lucy's 'closet' is penetrated successfully for the first time: Phoebe and Luke, her cousin and husband-to-be, on their secret visit to Lucy's chambers, during which the young man feels "gawky embarrassment" (Braddon 1998: 33) at being in this feminine space, find "the massive walnut-wood and brass inlaid casket" (Braddon 1998: 33) in which Lucy keeps her jewellery, and the keys to which "she always keeps […] herself" (Braddon 1998: 33). Finding the keys in the room, however, Phoebe opens the casket, and Luke discovers "a brass knob in the framework of the box" that opens "a secret drawer" (Braddon 1998: 34). Here, in the most secret place of Lucy's strange apartments, they discover the hidden clues to her past: "a baby's little worsted shoe rolled up in a piece of paper, and a tiny lock of pale and silky yellow hair" (Braddon 1998: 34). In hindsight, the reader knows that these belong to Lucy's child from her first

marriage with George. Spatially, Lucy's closet has been opened; neither the two characters, nor the reader can, however, read the signs at this point in the narrative. By opening Lucy's spatial closet way before the mental secret can be understood, Braddon provides her readers with strong spatial and physical signifiers that make them look for the missing signified for the rest of the story.

Lucy's rooms also serve to show female-homosocial intimacy that is always on the brink of going too far. When Lucy and Phoebe are alone in Lucy's dressing room, she flirtatiously "throw[s] back her curls at the maid" (Braddon 1998: 60), and tells Phoebe: "[Y]ou *are* like me" (Braddon 1998: 61), and sends her on a secret errand to London to help Lady Audley plot against the latter's male opponent Robert Audley. This kind of female secret sharing between mistress and servant appears shocking to Alicia (cf. Braddon 1998: 60), the daughter by a previous marriage of the novel's nominal patriarch, because it breaks down established barriers of class – as, of course, does Lucy's marriage to her new husband in the first place – but it also has the potential to scandalise its readers due to its potentially erotic undertones: before retiring for the night, Lady Audley says, "Kiss me, Phoebe." (Braddon 1998: 61) Setting the most intimate encounters between Lady Audley and Phoebe in the former's private apartments, Braddon creates a space that strongly plays on the potentially scandalous nature of the *male* closet's homoerotic connotations, but reverses its gender: she is not interested at all in what the master of the house might be doing 'in private,' but Lucy's rooms and its secrets are intriguing. Hence, Lucy's 'male paranoia' that her secret – that she is married to two men – might be found out gets associated with the paranoid structures of the male-'homosexual' secret. So far, however, she is in control over who gains access, and who does not: Before leaving for London, "she paused deliberately at the door of [the octagon ante-chamber], double locked it, and dropped the key into her pocket. This door, once locked, cut off all access to my Lady's apartments." (Braddon 1998: 62)

Remarkably, every time someone plans to go to Lucy's rooms, they do so in a movement from the liminal outdoors surrounding the house. Before taking Luke to see the room, Phoebe meets him in the house's uncanny gardens, because "it's better talking out here than in the house where there's always somebody listening" (Braddon 1998: 30). Similarly, and, once again referring to "[t]hat stupid clock, which knew no middle way" (Braddon 1998: 68), Robert and George meet Alicia, Sir Michael's daughter and Lucy's rival, in the lime-walk, and George observes that this place "ought to be an avenue in a churchyard" (Braddon 1998: 68). The garden, far from being "a safe enclosure, a cultivation of life and fertility, movement from season to season where life is ordered" (Hedgecock 2008: 136), is repeatedly associated with the liminal, the old, the dead, and the strange, always using the same imagery: the weird clock, the ruins, and the old well. Deliberately

over-emphasising the heterotopian qualities of the house's grounds, Braddon creates another 'different space' outside the domestic that is closely linked to Lucy's rooms inside. Both, it seems, are spaces of possibility and action, while the patriarchal domestic – the library, Sir Michael's rooms – get pushed to the narrative's margins. Again mocking the fictional architecture of the traditional Gothic, Alicia leads the men to Lucy's apartment – repeating the denial of the house's 'normal' properties by entering not through a door but "an open French window" (Braddon 1998: 68) – by way of a secret passage that Lucy does not know about. George, just like Luke, feels "out of place […] among all these womanly luxuries" (Braddon 1998: 71). In a parallel movement of penetration to that of Phoebe and Luke earlier, the three characters discover what they have been looking for: Lucy's portrait. What is striking is the reversed epistemological effect: while the artefacts that Lucy had actually hidden did not mean anything to the people finding them, this portrait, as insignificant a signifier as it may seem, is read by George as the actual spatial representation of Lucy's secret. Its peculiar positional and metaphorical value is emphasised by a spatial doubling: displayed in the strange octagonal chamber, the portrait itself was done with Lucy "standing in this very room" (Braddon 1998: 71). The picture itself also seems to speak of Lucy's secret character: the painter has given "a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes," and a "hard and almost wicked look" (Braddon 1998: 72) to her mouth. This portrait exposes Lucy's hidden self in a twofold movement: George, of course, recognises his wife in it; the reader, not knowing as much yet, is further intrigued by the signs the three characters find in Lucy's 'closet.'

George, however, cannot or will not confront Lucy with what he knows within the patriarchal space of the domestic indoors. Their only open confrontation, of which the reader learns conspicuously little, takes place in the liminal outdoors of "the shadowy lime-walk" (Braddon 1998: 80). The mysterious nature of this part of the garden now extends to the narrative in denying the reader an account of what happens there. A spatial and temporal gap in the narrative, however, draws attention to this scene's significance: "It was a full hour and a half after this when Lady Audley returned to the house, not coming from the lime-walk, but from exactly the opposite direction." (Braddon 1998: 80) In the end, we know, of course, that George confronts Lucy in the garden, and she pushes him down the old well, intending to kill him. Whether or not one knows this yet, however, the impression is strikingly similar: while we learn in the end that Lucy actually attempts to spatially enact on George's body what she has already done mentally (namely making him part of her house's secret spatiality by having him disappear in the old and broken well that signifies her secret past), even without this knowledge, it seems that the strange house and its grounds, over both of which Lucy has power, have swallowed up the male who know too much. The very physical level to which

Lucy's attempt to erase her past has come, however, makes her vulnerable: when Sir Michael and George discover "a bruise upon her delicate skin" (Braddon 1998: 90) her body becomes the object of a scrutinising male gaze: "Sir Michael came across the room to look into the matter of the bruise upon his wife's pretty wrist […and] took [it] in his strong hand. […] It was not one bruise, but four slender, purple marks, such as might have been made by the four fingers of a powerful hand that had grasped the delicate wrist a shade too roughly." (Braddon 1998: 90-91)

While Lucy is generally the one who knows how to manage the house's secrets, and the knowledge concealed therein, in this instance, when her body betrays her, she is reduced to her female body and the physical mark on her skin that Robert (correctly) reads as a visible sign of Lucy's dishonesty: "My lady tells little childish white lies." (Braddon 1998: 91)

As opposed to the house, the lime-walk enables the characters to drop their usual pretences and make underlying conflicts explicit. The space also triggers a fundamental change in Robert's behaviour, in that, in the rare confrontations with Lucy, he enacts a strong and active masculinity that he is unable to perform on the 'stage' of the domestic: "It is in these encounters that the previously weak and indolent Robert most displays male supremacy […], takes on an active role and asserts himself as a man." (Klein 2008: 164; 165) In a rare moment of frankness, he confronts Lucy with his suspicions that she is responsible for George's disappearance. During the whole scene, the aggressive conversation is interspersed with the narrator's comments on the liminal nature of the place: "The lime-walk seemed like some cloister in this uncertain light[…,] a gloomy place. […] A winding pathway, neglected and half choked with weeds, led towards [the] well." (Braddon 1998: 263; 268; 270) Braddon constructs a space that, due to its 'otherness,' both enables an unusual openness in the characters, and reflects still unspoken truths. The well that Lucy and Robert are moving towards is where George disappeared, and Lucy's crime is foreshadowed by a focus on the well's "iron spindle [that] had been dragged from its socket, and lay a few paces from the well, rusty, discoloured, and forgotten" (Braddon 1998: 270). The lime-walk's spatiality has an epistemological dimension of its own; it subtly adds additional layers of information, and serves as an enabling background for the characters' behaviour.

Another movement from the outdoors into Lucy's rooms at a later point in the narrative again emphasises both her homosocial/homoerotic relationship with Phoebe, and the power Lucy has over the space she inhabits. While the grounds, and especially the well, which "must have been half choked up with the leaves that drifted about it, and whirled in eddying circles into its black, broken mouth" (Braddon 1998: 109), increasingly reflect the precariousness of Lucy's secrets, she meets Phoebe in the garden, and starts to reflect on the nature of her own situation, remembering a fairy-tale-like "French story […] of a woman who committed

some crime. […] Do you remember how she kept the secret of what she had done for nearly half a century, spending her old age in her family château […until] her secret was revealed?" (Braddon 1998: 109) Of course, Lucy here, in the garden with Phoebe, alludes to her own life, and both the surroundings, and the fairy-tale character of her story from France make the reader remember Count Bluebeard: Braddon is aware of Lucy's position as a woman employing a politics of domestic secrecy that has, for centuries, been a means of power for men. Adopting these strategies of secrecy, however, Lucy also experiences the 'male paranoia' of so many Gothic villains before her. Accordingly, she reverses the gender of a rhetoric traditionally excluding women for the sake of close male-homosocial bonds through her intimate companionship with Phoebe. The homoerotic undertones of this relationship add to the association of Lucy's 'male paranoia' with the paranoid structures of the male-homosexual secret: "While Lady Audley's commission of bigamy is an irrefutable sexual secret, so too may be her hidden physical attachment to Phoebe." (Woolston 2008: 163)

Lucy's paranoia makes her blackmailable. Phoebe, in fact, who wants to leave her position to marry her cousin Luke, makes the reader – and Lucy – aware of Lucy's precarious position by again alluding to the Bluebeard myth, and (naively) turning it on Lucy: she tells her mistress that she thinks "that it is just such men as he [Luke] who have decoyed their sweethearts into lonely places, and murdered them for being false to their word" (Braddon 1998: 111). This is exactly what Lucy, the female Bluebeard, has done. What is more, Luke blackmails Lucy into giving him money by hinting at something he knows about her through Phoebe. The actual content of the supposed secret that is being communicated is never mentioned, which leads to a misunderstanding: Luke threatens Lucy on the basis of what he has seen on his visit to her rooms; Lucy, however, assumes that he and Phoebe must know more. "[R]eaders are left in the dark as to *what was revealed*." (King 2008: 60) The power that Luke holds over Lucy here is simply one of language: the fact that he hints, "with quiet insolence, that had a hidden meaning" (Braddon 1998: 113), at knowing something, is enough to make Lucy afraid. At this point, however, Lucy's mere physical presence still makes her more powerful than Luke in spatial terms: she deliberately stages her meeting with him to make an impression, with "her rippling hair falling about her in a golden haze. Everywhere around her were the evidences of wealth and splendour." (Braddon 1998: 112) While she has to give in to Luke's rhetoric, her body and surroundings still enable her to make "his determined gaze s[i]nk under hers" (Braddon 1998: 113).

It is crucial to emphasise the reversal of gender roles that Lucy performs on the level of epistemological power politics, because this is what makes her character so provocative. While it is true that what must have shocked Victorian readers about the novel was Lucy's "unnatural embodiment of femininity," that she "'looked the

part' of Victorian woman and wife but refused to 'be' it inside" (Voskuil 2001: 614; 613), that she exposed the gaps between a contemporary, almost essentialist notion of 'ideal femininity' as "idealized human subjectivity" (Voskuil 2001: 619), and its actual, potentially merely performative nature, Braddon's subversive move goes further. In making her heroine, who has an uncannily "elastic ability to define and redefine herself" (Nemesvari 2000: 111), perform a role that places her (temporarily) at the (spatial) centre of power over knowledge, a position traditionally associated with masculinity, but at the same time having her experience the equivalent 'male paranoia,' Braddon does not primarily denounce deviant – or excessively idealised (cf. Tatum 2005: 135-155) – performances of *femininity*, but exposes the paranoid mechanisms of a *masculinity* that both bases its power on pathological structures of knowledge, and cannot be performed successfully by *either* a woman *or* a man, as will become obvious later in a more detailed discussion of the novel's male characters. Braddon, hence, does not simply construct Lucy as an "economic, sexual, and criminal 'Other'" (Woolston 2008: 157), who, as "femme fatal, […] subverts the law and acts as a hidden predator" (Hedgecock 2008: 112). Although she is "defined by her idealized asexual beauty and her childishness" (Langland 2000: 11), this is true only (and this is crucial) insofar as she consciously *enacts* this childlike, female 'Other.' Braddon, in fact, places her heroine at the very (spatial) centre of the 'Self' that patriarchal society has constructed as the locus of masculinity, while, at the same time, delegitimising the basis of any gendered power imbalance based on performances that are doomed to constantly fail.

In the end, when Lucy realises she has been found out, losing control over the knowledge of her secrets, she also loses control over the house's spatiality. Leaving the house at night in a last desperate attempt to silence Robert, she walks through its rooms, which seem no longer to obey her will. She passes through another octagonal chamber which, however, now is associated with the library and male power (cf. Braddon 1998: 310); she cannot leave the house through the main doors because "[t]he secrets of the bolts, and bars, and chains, and bells which secured these doors […] were known only to the servants" (Braddon 1998: 310); and the breakfast-room she passes through is "more occupied by Alicia than any one else" (Braddon 1998: 311), her rival, and her persecutors' female accomplice. It seems as though the house itself were expelling Lucy: leaving the grounds, "it seemed as if she disappeared into some black gulf. […] The stupid clock struck twelve, and the solid masonry seemed to vibrate under its heavy strokes, as Lady Audley emerged upon the other side." (Braddon 1998: 312)

Later, having set fire to a nearby public house in an attempt to kill Robert, Lucy tries, once again, to fortify herself mentally and spatially against the danger she is facing, turning her apartment into an actual and mental fortress: "She had locked the door to guard against the chance of any one coming in suddenly and observing

her before she was aware – before she had sufficient warning to enable her to face their scrutiny." (Braddon 1998: 329) Simultaneously, however, shortly before she learns that Robert has survived, her panic makes the whole house seem to drift off further and further into the uncontrollably liminal, a process which reflects Lucy's mental loss of control: "The flat meadows were filled with a grey vapour, and a stranger might have fancied Audley Court a castle on the margin of a sea." (Braddon 1998: 335-36)

When Lucy finally confesses her crimes, she does this in an active spatial movement into the patriarchal realm. When Robert asks her if there is a room in which they can talk alone, "[m]y lady only bowed her head in answer. She pushed open the door of the library" (Braddon 1998: 338). This spatial gesture of a voluntary acceptance of a male verdict is broken, however, in that we learn in the same paragraph that "Sir Michael had gone to his dressing-room to prepare for dinner after a day of lazy enjoyment; perfectly legitimate for an invalid." (Braddon 1998: 338) Although Lucy's power is broken, it is not the house's nominal master who fills the gap; he has been a weak and powerless man from the beginning, a man who mostly occupies the house's more private parts. Prioritising heterosexual sentimentality over his duty to the patriarchal community of men, Sir Michael cannot sustain a position of power in a world which Braddon constructs not only as misogynistic and homophobic, but also excessively homosocial.

In the course of the narrative up to this point, both male protagonists are exposed as representing problematic masculinities, and both are confronted with the fact that the only character who has been successfully managing knowledge has been the deviant woman. The only solution to this, considering that a contemporary readership would expect deviance to be 'normalised,' is for Braddon to make her characters perform linguistic acts that are uncomfortably at odds with their previous actions. Lucy, the deviant woman, must be declared 'different.' Robert, hence, de-genders her ("Henceforth you must seem to me no longer a woman." [Braddon 1998: 340]), and Lucy declares herself mad ("You have conquered – a MADWOMAN!" [Braddon 1998: 340]). While Sir Michael remains the passive reminder of the patriarch's impotence ("[T]hat imperious hand dropped feeble and impotent at his side. […] He sat silent and immovable." [Braddon 1998: 341; 344]), leaving action to Robert ("I leave all in your hands." [Braddon 1998: 361]), the young man feels extremely uncomfortable with this "awful responsibility" (Braddon 1998: 361). Neither man is inclined to actively occupy the spatial power vacuum that Lucy leaves in the house, a fact also reflected in Robert's being accommodated in his "old room" (Braddon 1998: 364), rather than, in Sir Michael's absence, in any spatial position of higher authority. This precarious situation can now only be resolved by introducing a discursive voice that saves the men from making decisions themselves, modern society's deus ex machina: the doctor. His declaring

Lucy insane and shutting her away in a madhouse releases Robert and Sir Michael from their responsibility, but this solution remains unsatisfying: Braddon, while accepting the fate of her deviant heroine, leaves her male characters exposed and weak, an effect she mainly accomplishes through her construction of space.

Suspended Masculinity: Talboys Mansion

Apart from Audley Court, the novel's only other aristocratic mansion is George's father Harcourt Talboys' house. It both stands in contrast to the former, in that it is the novel's only domestic space in which power really lies in the master's hands, and complements it, in that the masculinity it stands for is stagnating. The house itself provides the backdrop for an unstable and unrealisable heteronormative fantasy that Robert's homoerotic desire for George, which I will discuss in detail below, gets mapped onto. To an extent unparalleled by any of the novel's other architectures, Mr Talboys' house explicitly represents its owner, and his excessive desire for a 'correct,' normative existence: "Mr. Harcourt Talboys lived in a prim, square, red-brick mansion. […] The prim, square, red-brick mansion stood in the centre of prim, square grounds, scarcely large enough to be called a park, too large to be called anything else – so neither the house nor the grounds had any name, and the estate was simply designated Squire Talboys." (Braddon 1998: 183)

In its pursuit of correctness, the house achieves exactly the opposite of what its design aims at: being excessively ordinary and mediocre, it lacks the basic quality of being given a name. Striving for normality, then, the house loses identity. This impression can easily be extended to Mr Talboys himself, who "was like his own square-built, northern-fronted, shelterless house. There were no shady nooks in his character into which one could creep for shelter from his hard daylight. He was all daylight." (Braddon 1998: 183) This is a crucial observation, considering that, in this (fictional and real) world, becoming an individual – and especially becoming a man – very much depends on one's ability to manage and, if need be, hide information about oneself. Mr Talboys seems to lack this ability, which makes him uncannily different, even almost inhuman: "The wintry day bore some resemblance to the man. […] Like him, it was sharp, frigid, and uncompromising; like him, it was merciless to distress, and impregnable to the softening power of sunshine." (Braddon 1998: 186) The house's excess in orderliness is stressed repeatedly, and its immovability is associated with death: "The lawn was chiefly ornamented with dark, wintry shrubs of a funeral aspect, which grew in beds that looked like problems in algebra." (Braddon 1998: 187) The house and its master lack life and individuality, and the bell itself seems to be hostile towards the 'queer' and 'other' Robert, "as if it had been insulted by the plebeian touch of the man's hand" (Braddon 1998: 187). Braddon emphatically associates Robert "with a recognizable aristocratic

type possessed of, by this historical moment, clear homosocial/homosexual overtones" (Nemesvari 2000: 114). In the eyes of a masculinity that Talboys mansion struggles to represent, he is deviant on the axes of both 'sexuality' and class: his masculinity is defined by his ambivalent status "as a member of an aristocratic family fulfilling the middle-class role of a barrister" (Nemesvari 2000: 114), and by his potentially deviant 'sexual' identity.

In all his lifelessness and stagnation, Mr Talboys efficiently exerts power over his domestic space, and especially over his daughter Clara, which is reflected in the unequal distribution of the ability to look: Mr Talboys notices everything, "as if he had eyes in the back of his head" (Braddon 1998: 189); "staring at the proceeding," and "his grey eyes fixed severely on his visitor" (Braddon 1998: 189; 190), he establishes a powerful physical presence. Clara, on the other hand, whom "the whole length of the room divided […] from Robert" (Braddon 1998: 189), neither sees nor is seen properly in this scene: her "face dropped upon her clasped hands, and was never lifted again throughout the interview" (Braddon 1998: 194). In all their superficial impression of power, however, Mr Talboys' gestures remain empty performances. He acts out power without really possessing it. Robert is aware of this: "Had [he] been easily embarrassed, Mr. Talboys might have succeeded in making him feel so." (Braddon 1998: 190) Since he does not succeed, Harcourt Talboys leaves an impression on the reader of a suspended and stagnating masculine power that, in its striving for normativity, becomes ineffective. The performance of power loses meaning and remains an act, leaving Harcourt Talboys and his mansion without a name, and without significance.

While the indoors does not allow for any progress or self-realisation for the characters involved, the house's grounds, similar to the gardens at Audley Court, provide Robert and Clara with a space that opens them up, and triggers inner reflection and frankness. As Jennifer S. Kushnier observes, Robert's homoerotic search for George is paralleled by an attempt to 'normalise' his own 'sexual identity:' "Robert is […] on a quest […] to find a means by which he could 'become' heterosexual." (Kushnier 2002: 62) Moving away from a resurfacing of the homoerotic, the grounds at Halcourt mansion allow Robert to project his impossible desire for George onto a more normative object, a move that the nature of the house symbolically influences. On Robert's leaving the place, Clara runs after him and stops him, which makes Robert reflect on the unlikely possibility of a heteronormative encounter between this woman and his own, 'queer' self: "Is it *me* the flying female wants? […] It is an age of eccentricity, an abnormal era of the world's history. She may want me." (Braddon 1998: 197) Clara observes both the stifling influence of the house, and the enabling nature of the outdoors: "How should I dare to betray my love for [George] in that house[…]? […] Will you walk with me inside the plantation? […] We might be observed on the high road." (Braddon 1998: 199)

It is exactly the in-between nature of the 'plantation,' on the margin between the (here emphatically normative) domestic and the public, that enables a strange energy between Robert and Clara. She re-ignites his passion in the search for George ("You will see vengeance done upon those who have destroyed him." [Braddon 1998: 200]), thus simultaneously pushing Robert to finally become the 'active male' (while herself remaining both "ostensibly passive under the rule of a dictatorial father" (Gilbert 1997: 95), and being the active instigator of this change in Robert), and confirming, indeed propagating his homoerotic desire for her brother. At the same time, he projects this desire onto her: "She was different from all other women that he had ever seen. […] Clara Talboys was beautiful. […S]he was so like the friend whom he had loved and lost." (Braddon 1998: 201; 203) Playing with underlying notions of same-sex and different-sex desire, neither option becomes clearly visible. In this scene with Clara and Robert, Braddon not only contrasts two characters who turn Victorian gender ideals upside-down – since Robert's "outstanding quality is his passivity" (Klein 2008: 163), and Clara displays 'masculine' activity and decisiveness – but also paves the way for the novel's 'queer' triangular solution that finally denies any definite identification of desire in a culture in which 'sexual identities' are increasingly defined and negotiated.

The Crumbling Gothic: The Castle Inn

The threat to masculinity that permeates Braddon's story becomes most palpable in one of the most notable architectures in *Lady Audley's Secret*, apart from Lucy's apartments: the crumbling, Gothic-like Castle Inn, which Lucy gives to Phoebe and Luke after their marriage. The wedding of this "very dim and shadowy lady," whose appearance blurs into "pale and uncertain shades," and who looks like "the ghost of some other bride, dead and buried in the vaults below the church" (Braddon 1998: 114), and "Mr. Luke Marks, the hero of the occasion" (Braddon 1998: 114) prefaces the description of the house with the backdrop of the traditional female Gothic, in which the man is master and hero (or villain), and the woman faces the threat of potential extinction. The context also, however, relocates this gendered Gothic conflict, away from the aristocratic, and into the realm of lower-middle-class business – the Castle Inn is, after all, a public house. Still, we find the same narrative techniques here that Braddon employs elsewhere to use the decay of the 'masculine' house as a metaphor of the flawed power of male Gothic domination: "It was not a pretty house to look at; it had something of a tumble-down, weather-beaten appearance, […] a blighted, forlorn look. […] The wind had had its own way with [it]." (Braddon 1998: 115) Verbs and adjectives of decay abound: "[B]roken and dilapidated, […] tor[n] and scattered, […] shattered,

and ruined, and rent, and trampled upon[by the wind…,] the Castle Inn fell slowly to decay." (Braddon 1998: 115) The very material out of which the house was built seems to be lacking something, just as the house's 'master,' as it will turn out, cannot adequately occupy a position of representative power: "It seemed as though the wise architect […] had taken especial care that nothing but the frailest and most flimsy material should be employed in its construction." (Braddon 1998: 134) So far, however, the loss of strength and power is only reflected in the 'performance' of the house's outer appearance. The business itself, the basis of modern, post-aristocratic, capitalist patriarchal power, is thriving: "[F]or all that it suffered without, it was not the less prosperous within doors." (Braddon 1998: 115)

Braddon constructs this place as one of the only domestic sites in the novel in which power is actually fought over indoors – most other conflicts are taken into the liminal outdoors. The Castle Inn will prove to be a house in which one of the novel's 'patriarchs' almost meets his own destruction, and another actually loses his life in Lucy's fight for power. Foreshadowing the danger ahead, the narrator comments, on Roberts arrival at the Castle Inn, that "it was rather a strange fancy of the young barrister to prefer loitering at this dreary village hostelry" (Braddon 1998: 134); and, indeed, Robert's staying there while plotting to find out more about Lucy's secret past places him under the scrutinising gaze, the "active, searching glance" (Braddon 1998: 136), of Lucy's female helper and homosocial companion, Phoebe: "If there's any bad meaning in his coming here, […] my lady will know of it in time." (Braddon 1998: 135) Robert is observant enough to realise the potential role Phoebe could play in the power struggle over the management of knowledge: "That […] is a woman who could keep a secret. […She] would be good in a witness-box, […] it would take a clever lawyer to bother her in a cross-examination." (Braddon 1998: 136) Phoebe's elevated and potentially powerful position within the house is emphasised by "the vague air of refinement that pervaded her nature" (Braddon 1998: 138). She is worried about her husband's inability to contain secret knowledge as well as she does, displaying "an expression of anxiety […] as she glanced from Mr. Audley to Luke Marks" (Braddon 1998: 138). Luke is very much aware that, in her control over knowledge, Phoebe is superior to him: "I suppose you don't want me to open my mouth to this gent. […] You're always putting in your tongue and clipping off my words before I've half said 'em." (Braddon 1998: 139)

Fittingly, it is here that Lucy and Robert have one of their rare confrontations. After initially putting on the act of civility that they are used to performing at Audley Court, with Lucy acting like "a childish, helpless, babyfied little creature" (Braddon 1998: 141), and Robert insisting that maybe he "should be out of the house" (Braddon 1998: 142), they both rise to a level of frankness that, at other points of the narrative, they only manage in the outdoors. Robert voices anxieties

about domestic spatiality and its relation to secrets that infuse the whole genre of sensation fiction, and reflect a typically modern preoccupation with spatial privacy and secrecy: "What do we know of the mysteries that may hang about the houses we enter? […] Foul deeds have been done under the most hospitable roofs, terrible crimes have been committed amid the fairest scenes, and have left no trace upon the spot they were done." (Braddon 1998: 143) The public, yet domestic space of the Castle Inn is the place in which the novel's antagonists' conflict becomes most explicit – before Lucy's confession leads the narrative towards its conclusion.

The Castle Inn is also the space in which Lucy attempts her last destructive blow on Robert, who threatens to expose her secret. On her arrival at the inn in the middle of the night, the weak standing of masculinity in the face of female power is strongly suggested by phallic imagery: "The cruel blasts danced wildly round that frail erection. They disported themselves with the shattered pigeon-house, the broken weathercock, the loose tiles and unshapely chimneys." (Braddon 1998: 314) Lucy's power in this scene is further foregrounded by her uncanny, and strongly gendered impression on Luke, the house's nominal 'master:' she "awed him into silence by the unearthly glitter of her beauty. […] There was another flame in her eyes – a greenish light, such as might flash from the changing hued orbs of an angry mermaid." (Braddon 1998: 316) Lucy becomes the supernatural female who has come to tear down the house of patriarchy. In a highly symbolic act, she takes charge of the house's spatiality by literally turning the key on Robert: "[S]he turned the key in the lock; she turned it twice, double locking the door." (Braddon 1998: 318) Lucy here reverses the Gothic theme of the locked-in woman, and becomes the female Bluebeard, almost succeeding in destroying Robert, and the threat he poses to her. While Luke, the weak and inadequate master and husband, gets fatally wounded in the fire that Lucy allows to break out from the innermost female space of the inn (Phoebe's dressing room), Robert manages to escape. Although Braddon goes very far in dethroning patriarchal power, reflected in both the construction of her characters, and their (inter)actions in space, she stops just before this power is actually broken. Adhering to the rules of the sensation genre, and the expectations of her readership, Braddon cannot let Lady Audley succeed, but she has her go very far.

Heterotopian Spaces: The Homoerotic Chase

Aside from the heterotopian surroundings of Audley Court, which both enable action, and destabilise established power structures, Braddon, in this novel, constructs a striking number of liminal spaces when the domestic is not the centre of attention. These spaces, most of the time, serve to illustrate the relationship

between Robert Audley and George Talboys, a relationship that Braddon makes deliberately hover constantly on the fine line between homosocial and homosexual, constructing a form of desire that makes Robert, Lucy's main male opponent, just as deviant and 'closeted' as Lucy herself. Robert's chase after George, and his attempt to get at Lucy's secret also fundamentally serve to define him as a 'man,' oscillating between the conspicuous performativity of the dandy (especially at the beginning of the narrative), and the more subtle performativity of the gentleman of honourable motives (as the 'saviour' of Sir Michael and George) (cf. Heinrichs 2007: 105-108).

The reader first encounters George Talboys on board a ship, a space that strongly associates his character with the homosocial environment of sailors, and its queer potential. Braddon constructs him as "a very attractive but rather androgynous individual" (Klein 2008: 163), and an object of desire for both the female-heterosexual, and the male-homosocial/homoerotic gaze of the ship's passengers: with his "handsome brown eyes, with a feminine smile in them, […] tall, and powerfully built[…,] everybody liked him" (Braddon 1998: 18-19). In contrast, the way George talks about his wife makes her more of a child-like doll than an object of his desire: "My pretty little wife! […M]y little darling. […M]y pet." (Braddon 1998: 23) George is immediately marked as occupying a position of desired object rather than desiring subject, and it is Robert who will come to desire him most.

Braddon foregrounds Robert's desire for George through Robert's repeated 'closet' rhetoric, a temporary displacement of desire onto George's sister – as demonstrated above – and a spatial displacement of Robert into increasingly heterotopian spaces in his eroticised search for his friend. In the course of the novel, the narrator repeatedly stresses Robert's curious disinterest in his cousin Alicia's attraction to him: "[I]f poor Alicia for a moment calculated upon arousing any latent spark of jealousy lurking in her cousin's breast […], she was not so well acquainted with Robert Audley's disposition as she might have been." (Braddon 1998: 63) Employing this strategy, Braddon stresses "[t]hat Robert prefers a male rather than a female mate" (Kushnier 2002: 65). Additionally, several passages explicitly refer to Robert himself wondering about his 'strange' affection for George: "[H]ere he was, flurried and anxious, bewildering his brain by all manner of conjectures about his missing friend. […] 'And to think that I should care so much for the fellow!'" (Braddon 1998: 84; 97)

Spatially, the displacement of homoerotic desire is reflected in a movement away from the patriarchal and the domestic into liminal, heterotopian spaces. The first of these movements takes place when Robert, who is introduced as "a rather curious fellow" (Braddon 1998: 35), and "the descriptions of [whose] demeanor characterize him as a rather effeminate gentleman" (Kushnier 2002: 66), meets George in London. Telling Robert about his wife ("The idea of your having a wife,

George; what a preposterous joke." [Braddon 1998: 38]), George constructs a triangular relationship that negotiates the desire between the two men through his wife: "I shall take a villa on the banks of the Thames, Bob […]; and we shall have a yacht, […] and you shall lie on the deck and smoke while my pretty one plays her guitar and sings songs to us." (Braddon 1998: 38) Shortly afterwards, however, George learns of his wife's death, and the triangular fantasy is – for now – broken. While their relationship, un-mediated through a woman, cannot grow beyond careful physical expressions of intimacy (Robert "lay[] his hand gently upon the young man's arm" [Braddon 1998: 41].), they go to Lucy's grave at Ventnor together. Here, in the doubly liminal space of the churchyard by the sea, the men, on a very subtle level, seem to grieve not only for the 'pretty wife's' death, but also for the death of their triangular fantasy.

This first movement is paralleled later in the narrative after George has disappeared, and Robert goes searching for him. Alicia mocks Robert, who is "much preoccupied with the one idea of looking for his friend" (Braddon 1998: 85), for this seemingly obsessive friendship: "Pythias, in the person of Mr. Robert Audley, cannot exist for half-an-hour without Damon, commonly known as George Talboys." (Braddon 1998: 87) The reference to Greek mythology adds to the homoerotic undertones of her remark. Following George's traces from his rooms in London, Robert again moves towards the sea, to Southampton, and the further he gets, the more his mind revolves around his friendship with George: "'It isn't kind of George Talboys to treat me like this.' But even at the moment that he uttered the reproach a strange thrill of remorse shot through his heart." (Braddon 1998: 95) Again, it is a physical reaction that makes the reader aware that there must be more to this friendship than is openly admitted. Linguistically, Robert's questions dominate this scene: "What can be the meaning of all this? […] What can be the meaning of all this? […W]hat is the meaning of this?" (Braddon 1998: 95; 98) Physically, Robert moves towards the enabling possibilities of heterotopian spaces, while mentally, he is stuck in a state of disavowal. The space associated with Robert is full of 'closets.' After George's disappearance, he keeps all the documents he collects regarding his friend in a cabinet which he keeps locked at all times (cf. Braddon 1998: 157). George's past, too, becomes associated with a locked trunk he keeps in Robert's rooms. This trunk Lucy breaks into with the help of a blacksmith to steal evidence of her being George's wife (cf. Braddon 1998: 149-53), and Robert later opens it to get close to his allegedly dead friend by "handl[ing his] things with a respectful tenderness, as if he had been lifting the dead body of his lost friend" (Braddon 1998: 157).

Robert's spatial displacement is taken up again much later in the narrative when he goes to the town in which George had met his wife. Wildernsea turns out to be another "seaport town" (Braddon 1998: 239), with "a melancholy [train]

station" in "a sandy desert" (Braddon 1998: 240). Gloomy, rough, and decaying, this is another heterotopian space in which Robert will get closer to discovering his vanished friend. It is striking that the homoerotic search for George can only be accomplished with the mediating help of a woman: the only person at Wildernsea who has knowledge that will be useful to Robert is "Mrs. Barkamb[…,] the person who owns No. 17, North Cottages, the house in which Mr. Maldon and his daughter lived" (Braddon 1998: 243). Robert, a man increasingly associated with the liminal and the outdoors, needs the help of a woman of property who rules over the domestic. That this is indeed a notable unbalance of power is confirmed by George's dream immediately before his visit to Mrs. Barkamb's house:

"[H]e saw Audley Court, rooted up from amidst the green pastures and the shady hedgerows of Essex, standing bare and unprotected upon that desolate northern shore, threatened by the rapid rising of a boisterous sea. […] As the hurrying waves rolled nearer to the stately mansion, the sleeper saw a pale, starry face looking out of the silvery foam, and knew that it was my lady, transformed into a mermaid, beckoning his uncle to destruction." (Braddon 1998: 244)

It is worth quoting this passage in such detail because it illustrates one of the novel's central anxieties. Through Robert's dream, Braddon shows that Lucy's power over her husband's 'mansion' threatens the whole 'house' of patriarchal power relations. Robert's daydream a few pages later mirrors this misogynistic anxiety. Walking thorough Audley churchyard, he reflects: "If my poor friend, George Talboys, had died in my arms, and I had buried him in this quiet church, […] how much anguish of mind, vacillation, and torment I might have escaped." (Braddon 1998: 254) In this morbid fantasy (not coincidentally set in another heterotopia of most final, indeed fatal, possibility), Robert realises the impossibility of his desire, and its incompatibility with the structures and ideals he strives to represent. His problem is that patriarchy at once expects him to prefer homosocial over heterosexual bonds, while, at the same time, denying homosexual desire. Braddon, hence, in juxtaposing Robert's fear of Lucy's uncanny femininity with his homosocial/homosexual dilemma, exposes patriarchal society to be simultaneously misogynistic, intensely homosocial, and excessively homophobic.

In the end, Robert fails to perform any stable gender identity, a fact that is reflected in his spatial positioning in liminal spaces. Robert's role as detective, unravelling secrets he seems to see everywhere, makes him the prototypical 'paranoid reader.' Braddon, as Emily L. King points out, structures her novel such that it questions just these paranoid reading practices, which become especially sig-

nificant in a time during which the reading of the 'open secret' of a newly defined (male-)'homosexual' identity comes to be equated with paranoia as such:

"Within the totalising system of paranoia, nothing is always made into something by both paranoid characters (the 'amateur-detective hero') and by literary critics alike. *Lady Audley's Secret* demonstrates the problems with such a system of interpretation, particularly when nothingness is deliberately employed to bring about a specific something." (King 2008: 59)

I argue that this critique of such defining paranoid readings is also reflected in the way Braddon contrasts Robert's search for definite meaning with spaces that defy just such a teleological approach to interpretation, and pave the way to a more open, non-definite 'queer' reading of Braddon's text. She conspicuously employs the language of the 'open secret,' and combines it with an agglomeration of heterotopian spaces in order to hint at possible 'paranoid' interpretations, without ever making those readings explicit. The eroticised relationship between Robert and George, hence, never becomes 'homosexual,' but allows for the 'queer' – as opposed to the paranoid – reader to experience the pleasure of *maybe* 'knowing,' "knowing without the desperate search for evidence to confirm one's pre-existing belief" (King 2008: 68).

The 'Closet' of Patriarchy: Villebrumeuse

In the narrative's solution, Braddon exposes patriarchal masculinity as a pathological construct that, while finally regaining control over the subversive female, only adds to the supressed secret structures that make up the precarious foundation of its power. Shutting Lucy away in an asylum in Belgium displaces and confines her spatially and mentally, only to make her part of an increasingly 'closeted' culture of masculinity. The underlying fears and anxieties of these structures become visible in Robert and the doctor's 'discreet' treatment of the case: Robert's "greatest fear is the necessity of any exposure – any disgrace" (Braddon 1998: 372), and the doctor agrees "to assist […] in smuggling her away out of the reach of justice" (Braddon 1998: 372). Robert's fear of exposure is the same basic fear that lies at the heart of the Gothic, and of any Bluebeard tale: his anxieties border on paranoia, because the protection of his 'reputation,' and the keeping of his secrets form a vital part of his masculine self-definition.

Braddon has Robert appeal to a doctor and modern medical discourse, one of the great pillars of society, to achieve his goal. The doctor diagnoses Lucy's sub-

versive actions as deviant and dangerous, and makes explicit the necessity to make her part of the 'closet of society:'

"From the moment in which Lady Audley enters that house, […] her life, so far as life is made up of actions and variety, will be finished. Whatever secrets she may have will be secrets forever! Whatever crimes she may have committed she will be able to commit no more. […A]s a physiologist and as an honest man I believe you could do no better service to society than by doing this." (Braddon 1998: 373-74)

Considering Lucy's powerful position that is established in the course of the story, the threat she poses to the men surrounding her, her own implausible self-denunciation, and the increasingly weak position of the male characters, it becomes clear that what, on the surface, seems to be the just punishment of a criminal is actually Braddon's subtle making visible of the structures of paranoid masculinity.

Braddon does not construct the madhouse itself as an architecture representing a system of powerful patriarchal justice either. Instead, it both stands for the lost power of a nostalgic past of patriarchal strength (Villebrumeuse is "an old ecclesiastical town," but now "a forgotten, old world place" [Braddon 1998: 377].), and is a liminal, marginal space, "darker rather than lighter, […a] remote […] city […that] bore the dreary evidence of decay […] on every […] feeble pile of chimneys" (Braddon 1998: 377). This place, while serving as the space in which the men can shut away what threatens them, is simultaneously slippery, and beyond their reach of control, a giant 'closet' space that can never be safely relied on. The same holds for the madhouse itself: its lighted windows "looked out like the pale eyes of weary watchers" (Braddon 1998: 379). Panoptic control, in this place, is no longer alert and awake, but has grown tired.

The madhouse does, however, serve the narrative's purpose of eliminating Lucy's presence, reducing her to a nameless "No. 14" (Braddon 1998: 381), enabling Robert, by ensuring him of the temporal containment of his secret, to fantasise about an unmediated homosocial friendship with George, unthreatened by Lucy's existence: "Mr. Audley appeared suddenly to have forgotten that he had ever heard any mortal appellation except that of himself and his lost friend." (Braddon 1998: 381) The madhouse also causes contradictions in the characters' psychology to surface. Spatially, this is reflected in the strange in-between position of the house's interior, which oscillates between the domestic, the terrorising Gothic, and the heterotopian. It contains "a stately suit of apartments" that is, however, "of a dismal and cellarlike darkness; a saloon furnished with gloomy velvet draperies, and with a certain funeral splendour;" and "a bed-chamber, containing a bed so wondrously made, as to appear to have no opening whatever in its coverings" (Braddon 1998:

381). Seductive and life-threatening, dead and alive, this is a dream-like space that defies any final definition, and in which power relations, while obvious on the surface, become precarious and uncertain on closer observance.

This also becomes apparent in Lucy's not having completely lost control over space. While she cannot fight her spatial confinement within the architecture of the madhouse ("[U]nder no circumstances was she to be permitted to leave the house and grounds without […] protection." [Braddon 1998: 382]), she nevertheless still displays a certain amount of command over the 'domestic' space that she is now to live in, a fact highlighted by Braddon's unexpected use of the present tense: "Madame rises suddenly, erect and furious, and dropping her jewelled fingers from before her face, tells [Monsieur Val] to hold his tongue. 'Leave me alone with the man who has brought me here[.'…] She points to the door with a sharp imperious gesture." (Braddon 1998: 383) Similarly, although she clearly sees that Robert has "brought [her] to a living grave" (Braddon 1998: 384), she controls Robert's movements in this scene: "[S]he held her place by the door, as if determined to detain Robert as long as it was her pleasure to do so." (Braddon 1998: 385) Although Lucy is obviously defeated, and her power is broken, Braddon, through detailed and subtle descriptions of the spatial properties of Villebrumeuse, and the characters' movement within this space, conveys a sense of unease that unsettles the newly established power relations, and leaves the reader positively dissatisfied with the pathological shutting away of female subversive energies in a space that itself lies beyond patriarchal control.

Precarious Peace in a Queer Space: The Ending

It is worth giving a few thoughts to the way Braddon constructs the ending of *Lady Audley's Secret*, because it leads the novel's conflicts concerning gender and desire to surprising conclusions. Although, ostensibly, patriarchal order is re-established, and the deviant woman punished, the novel's last few pages are so full of unlikely turns that it is obvious that Braddon questions her own 'happy ending,' which the conventions of the genre dictate her to provide. There is no doubt that the men have achieved their goal of disempowering Lucy, and displacing her both spatially and mentally. Robert returns to Audley Court "without the woman who had reigned in it for nearly two years as queen and mistress" (Braddon 1998: 388), and Sir Michael has the "earnest wish never again to hear that person's name. […] I seek to know no more" (Braddon 1998: 391). However, although Robert still tries to project his desire for George onto Clara ("[T]he new strength and friendship for the murdered man grows even stronger as it turns to you [Clara], and changes me until I wonder at myself." [Braddon 1998: 394]), he cannot achieve this change

because "[t]he shadow of George Talboys pursued him" (Braddon 1998: 397). Robert can neither deny his desire for George, nor redirect it according to the rules of heteronormativity. He is also confronted with finding that other men seem to know his 'sexual' secret. The dying Luke calls Robert to his bedside, and employs the language of the 'open secret' to allude to Robert's deviant desire: "You was uncommon fond of that gent as disappeared at the Court, warn't you, Sir?" (Braddon 1998: 405) The conversation between the two men is a bravura piece of 'you know what I mean'-rhetoric. Both men speak of a secret that Luke has kept, but while Robert thinks he knows its content, Luke denies this: "[S]uppose my lady had one secret and I another. How then?" (Braddon 1998: 406) While it later becomes clear that Luke is referring to his knowledge of George's still being alive, the effect of this rhetoric in the context of Robert's 'fondness' of George is ambiguously sexualised. This becomes even more apparent when, as Luke finally tells Robert how he helped George, he describes a scene of almost erotic homosocial intimacy: "I got his clothes off him how I could, for he was like a child in my hands, and sat starin' at the fireplace as helpless as any baby; […] nobody was to know of his bein' there except us tow." (Braddon 1998: 416)

With George being alive after all, Robert is still denied fulfilment of his desire for the other man. It would, however, be a simplification to say that "through his conflict with, and destruction of, Lady Audley, Robert determines his 'proper' place on the sexual continuum and therefore learns to 'go straight'" (Nemesvari 2000: 110). Instead of erasing homoerotic desire from her narrative and confirming heteronormative ideals, Braddon achieves a middle way: while Robert claims that Clara is "the woman he loved" (Braddon 1998: 427), it is actually the presence of George that "was always a bond of union between them" (Braddon 1998: 430). "Clara ultimately serves as a commodity to be exchanged;" (Kushnier 2002: 69) and, indeed, when George returns to England, the three of them start a life together as an idealised erotic triangle in the heterotopian environment of "a fairy cottage[…,] a fantastic dwelling-place of rustic woodwork" (Braddon 1998: 435). A place like this and a life like this, which enable Robert to "be with George in a socially acceptable way" (Kushnier 2002: 69), belong to the realm of the fantastic, as Braddon must be aware. It is, however, crucial that she creates a space of 'queer' possibility at the end of her narrative, "destabiliz[ing] the heterosexual norm of [the novel's] closure" (Nemesvari 2000: 120). This space stands in stark contrast with the failed, traditionally patriarchal architecture of Audley Court, which "is shut up, and a grim old housekeeper reigns paramount in the mansion which my lady's ringing laughter once made musical. […P]eople admire my lady's rooms, and ask many questions about the pretty fair-haired woman, who died abroad." (Braddon 1998: 436) Braddon succeeds in creating a subtle portrayal of mid-nineteenth-century occupations with gender, and a "resulting crisis of masculinity. […

She] finds deviance at the heart of masculinity, and, subsequently, at the heart of Victorian social authority." (Heinrichs 2007: 103; 118)