THE BIGAMY PLOT

Sensation and Convention in the Victorian Novel

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The courtship plot dominates accounts of the Victorian novel, but this innovative study turns instead to a narrative phenomenon that upends its familiar conventions: the bigamy plot. In hundreds of novels, plays, and poems published in Victorian Great Britain, husbands or wives thought dead suddenly reappear to their newly remarried spouses. In the sensation fiction of Braddon and Collins, these bigamous revelations lead to bribery, arson, and murder, but the same plot operates in the canonical fiction of Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, Eliot, Thackeray, and Hardy. These authors employ bigamy plots to destabilize the apparently conventional form and values of the Victorian novel. By close examination of this plot, including an index of nearly 300 bigamy novels, Maia McAleavey makes the case for a historical approach to narrative, one that is grounded in the legal and social changes of the period but that runs counter to our own formal and cultural expectations.

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Introduction

> It is painful to inquire where it is that all those stories of bigamy and seduction, those *soi disant* revelations of things that lie below the surface of life, come from.
>
> Margaret Oliphant, "Novels," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (1867): 258

Where, asked Victorian reviewers, did "all those stories of bigamy" come from? We might ask, instead, where have they gone? This book begins with a simple, if startling, fact: although we consider the nineteenth century the province of courtship plots culminating in monogamous marriage, stories of bigamy abounded in Victorian culture. In hundreds of novels, plays, and poems published in Great Britain over the course of the nineteenth century, most noticeably in the 1860s and 1870s, a husband or wife remarries bigamously, believing (or merely wishing) that his or her first spouse is dead. The revelation of a repeated marriage plot precipitates more excitement, including bribery, false imprisonment, arson, and murder. By 1870, the set of narrative events that I call "the bigamy plot" was so recognizable that the reviewer Alfred Austin provided a mocking summary of them in his account of "Our Novels: The Sensational School":

> If, after all this, the reader is not prepared to be poisoned, stabbed, blown into the air; to find a skeleton in every cupboard, and a lost will in every drawer; to meet with an inconvenient number of husbands, and a most perplexing superfluity of wives; and to get rid of them by arson, strangulation, or a deep well, he must be very insensible to the influence and charm of situation.[1]

For Austin, the inconvenience of these superfluous spouses operates as a narrative engine, generating further plot – quite clearly *too much* plot.

The period's generally hostile reviewers remain an excellent source of accounts of the bigamy plot's prevalence. "We admit that, as a situation of fiction, bigamy has great advantages. A good deal can be made of the remorse of the bigamist, and the constant dread of discovery," wrote a

CHAPTER 1

The plot in time: historical bigamy and Sylvia's Lovers

The story of the plot of bigamous return

This story begins with a marriage between a maiden and a sailor. The marriage might take place in a church, or it might be a folk vow – a broom jumped, a handkerchief torn in half. While the wife waits at home, the sailor nearly dies at sea. She is finally convinced – sometimes by his rival, sometimes by her own intuition – that he is dead, and she agrees to remarry. In the story's dramatic twist, the sailor returns to discover that his wife has married another. This, then, is not simply a story of courtship and a wedding, but of bigamy and the disruption of a marriage.

Renderings

Elizabeth Gaskell's historical novel *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) and Alfred Tennyson's narrative poem "Enoch Arden" (1864) both tell this story, which I call the plot of bigamous return.[1] As its title suggests, *Sylvia's Lovers* hinges on a love triangle: Sylvia is betrothed to a dashing sailor, a promise solemnized by splitting a sixpence, but her devoted cousin deceives her into believing that the sailor is dead. When she finally marries her cousin, the sailor reappears, sparking the novel's furiously active final volume, full of improbable coincidences and deathbed reunions. While Gaskell's modern critics tend to consider the novel's ending ungainly,[2] her first readers and reviewers praised the conclusion as "very finely worked up, and . . . as true as it is powerful," and sighed that "the end of the book is like the burden of some true-hearted old ballad tale."[3]

A glowing review of *Sylvia's Lovers* that appeared in *The Reader* explicitly connected Gaskell's novel to Tennyson's poem of the following year: "Rumour has assigned a very similar plot as a subject for the labours of the laureate. We can hardly expect, even from him, a more pathetic rendering of it."[4] Like *Sylvia's Lovers*, "Enoch Arden" is set in a northern

CHAPTER 2

The plot in space: skeletons in the closet in Jane Eyre *and* East Lynne

The narrator of Thackeray's *Adventures of Philip on His Way Through the World* (1862) begins his description of a character's bigamous back-story with the most enduring spatial metaphor for a hidden past:

> What skeleton was there in the closet? . . . Murders, I suppose, are not many – enemies and victims of our hate and anger, destroyed and trampled out of life by us, and locked out of sight: but corpses of our dead loves, my dear sir – my dear madam – have we not got them stowed away in cupboard after cupboard, in bottle after bottle?[1]

Despite his language of death and murder, Thackeray's narrator is describing the secret of a living woman, the first wife of Philip's father, whose marriage was invalidated by his bigamy. "Corpses of our dead loves" are of course most troubling when alive and present. In *The Story of a Governess* (1895), Margaret Oliphant responds to Thackeray's image by identifying the kind of "skeleton" most difficult to bury: a live spouse hidden away in some actual closet in the house.[2]

> Every family has a skeleton in some closet. . . . Thackeray speaks of the wife or the husband in their intimate domesticity going back secretly, each unknown to the other, perhaps upon a youthful past which contained another image than that of the legitimate partner of their days, but that is a gentle sort of skeleton, its bones all covered in soft rounded outlines of imagination. The real skeleton is very different: it haunts the house . . . It is always in the minds of those to whom it belongs. . . . But how could there be anything like this in the house in St. John's Wood? . . . a mystery in the house, a secret inhabitant, a prisoner – It was incredible; it was a thing that could not be.[3]

The phrase "skeleton in the closet" seems to have been first brought into literary use by Thackeray himself in an earlier essay, but is known to have been current at an earlier date.[4] The popular phrase soon became a cliché, but it is particularly prevalent in bigamy novels, where the metaphor is often disturbingly literalized. When Gervase Falcon's doctor is

CHAPTER 3

David Copperfield's *angelic bigamy*

The sudden reappearance of a "dead, yet not dead" spouse is the surprise at the heart of almost every bigamy plot. So ubiquitous was this crucial plot twist that the titles of some bigamy novels even promise to deliver its thrills: John Cordy Jeaffreson's *Not Dead Yet* (1864), Anthony Bathe's *Not Drowned* (1885), Florence Marryat's *The Risen Dead* (1891), and Christopher Howard's *Come Back from the Dead* (1893) all suggest that their story's primary interest will be in untangling the agony created by the disturbing revelation of the living dead. In these novels, a remarriage that seemed perfectly legitimate is shown to be bigamous, but many novels of remarriage hint at a bigamous threat even without bringing a character fully back to life. First spouses in these "dead, yet not dead" remarriage plots are never really dead, and second spouses are never truly subsequent. Victorian novels of remarriage often underscore the threat of bigamy by providing a specific alternative to the first marriage, one that shadows the husband–wife pair during the term of the marriage itself. The death of the first spouse in these cases is preceded by the knowledge of who will replace him or her, rendering even proper remarriage figuratively bigamous. This phenomenon of shadowed bigamy characterizes the period's best-known novels of remarriage: Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850), George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872), and Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874) and *The Return of the Native* (1878).

This chapter and the next demonstrate the relevance of the sensation novelists' "favourite resources" to canonical novels of remarriage, first in a religious Christian context (Dickens's *David Copperfield*) and then in a secular context (Eliot's *Middlemarch*). "Dead, yet not dead" remarriage novels foreground the intersection of the spatial and temporal ideas of plot I have proposed in Chapters 1 and 2. *David Copperfield* is embedded in a Victorian religious worldview that imagines a heavenly reunion with a beloved family and, especially, with a beloved spouse. In this chapter, I first

CHAPTER 4

Dorothea's simultaneous remarriage

Middlemarch is a novel of many marriages and remarriages, but only one honeymoon. Dorothea's two sequential marriages (to Edward Casaubon and Will Ladislaw) share a surprisingly singular origin in one excursion. That honeymoon concludes in "Rome, the city of visible history, where the past of a whole hemisphere seems moving in funeral procession with strange ancestral images and trophies gathered from afar."[1] Rome's visible history is a metonym for Dorothea's overlapping marriages: while Casaubon, who admits proudly, "I live too much with the dead," conducts his research in the Vatican, Dorothea's present life, and future marriage, unfolds with Will Ladislaw (18). *Middlemarch*'s honeymoon chapters use Dorothea's confused response to the jumble of Rome's "Ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present" to suggest the funereal cast of the Casaubons' failed wedding journey (193). Rome may be an Eternal City, and a popular honeymoon destination, but it is also an eternal tomb, the grave of a millennia-old past, and a powerful metaphorization of a dead-but-not-dead past. In *Middlemarch*, Eliot transforms a courtship narrative into the darker plot of "simultaneous remarriage," thus rejecting both the finality of a wedding and the finality of death as narrative endings. One honeymoon suffices for both of her husbands because the two marriages are as simultaneous as they are sequential.

Rome's exposed layers also underpin a bigamy novel from the decade previous to *Middlemarch*, Amelia Edwards's *Barbara's History* (1864). Barbara, seeking refuge from what seems irrefutable evidence that her husband married her bigamously, returns to Rome, the scene of their (in this case, happy) honeymoon. She concedes, in words nearly identical to the ones Eliot will later write ("Rome, the city of visible history . . . "), that Rome "is melancholy, perhaps, to the heavy-hearted, in the sense that all visible history is melancholy; but to those who are happy, it is one of the most charming places in the world."[2] Visible history to Barbara means "Ruins, monuments, records of past generations," and it makes Rome a

CHAPTER 5

Colonial return: Pendennis *and* Lady Audley's Secret

W. M. Thackeray claimed, "If I could plot like Braddon I would be the greatest novelist who ever lived."[1] Yet in comparing Thackeray's *The History of Pendennis, His Fortunes and Misfortunes, His Friends and His Greatest Enemy* (1850) and Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), it is not at the level of plot that differences emerge. Both novels shepherd the development of their heroes from dawdling, self-important lawyers manqués to effective, happily married citizen-gentlemen. Both build a system of clues that lead to sensational revelations about hidden bigamy, misbegotten wealth, and spouses thought dead reappearing inconveniently from the colonies. In both novels, the bigamist is dogged by blackmail, bribery, and extortion. While violence in *Pendennis* remains at the level of fistfights and canings, the novel supplies in fantasy the arson and attempted murder of *Lady Audley's Secret*, whose heroine sends her husband crashing to the bottom of a well. (In *Pendennis*, the languid Sir Francis Clavering, aware that his wife's husband is alive and that his enjoyment of her fortune is therefore illegitimate, wishes various characters dead, coolly observing, "Well, when people bore my life out, I *do* wish they were dead, and I wish Missy were down a well with all of my heart."[2])

The plot these novels share is one of the most common subsets of the plot of bigamous return, laid out in Chapter 1 above: the plot of *colonial* return. In this plot, a spouse thought dead comes back from an extended stay abroad, to find that his or her spouse has remarried bigamously. Rather than returning from the vague and unknowable sea, these bigamous subjects wash up from specific colonial outposts, usually India or New South Wales.[3] Plots of bigamous return run counter to the typical deployment of colonial settings in Victorian fiction. As Raymond Williams observed, Victorian novelists frequently fell back upon the empire as a

> [u]niversally available escape-route: black sheep could be lost in it; ruined or misunderstood heroes could go out and return with fortunes; the weak of every kind could be transferred to it, to make a new life . . . characters whose

CHAPTER 6

The improper end: Aurora Floyd *and* Jude the Obscure

'Tis good to be merry and wise,
'Tis good to be honest and true,
'Tis good to be off with the old love,
Before you be on with the new.
– Motto to Charles Maturin's *Women: or, Pour et Contre* (1818)

This admonishing proverb appears frequently in Victorian courtship novels. Anthony Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds* (1873) offers a paradigmatic example of the quotation's association with badly handled courtship choices. The narrator uses it to flag Frank Greystock's unconscionable flirtation with Lizzie Eustace while he is engaged to Lucy Morris:

> We know the dear old rhyme; -
>
> "It is good to be merry and wise,
> It is good to be honest and true,
> It is good to be off with the old love
> Before you are on with the new."
>
> There was never better truth spoken than this, and if all men and women could follow the advice here given there would be very little sorrow in the world. But men and women do not follow it.[1]

The Scottish ballad collector Allan Cunningham, however, cited what he claimed was an older variant in *The Songs of Scotland, Ancient and Modern* (1825), one that reverses the song's lesson:[2]

> It's gude to be merry and wise,
> It's gude to be honest and true,
> And afore ye're off wi' the auld love,
> It's best to be on wi' the new.

The opportunist who sings these words, however, still remains, like Frank Greystock, within the framework of the laws of courtship, as he specifies in a later verse: