Covert Female Power Mediating Identity in Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone*

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Wilkie Collins’ text *The Moonstone* is a quintessential detective story which involves the theft of a precious diamond within a dynamic and complex family. The tale is recounted through shifting the narration between numerous characters. On the surface, the story is simple: the infamous Moonstone diamond has been stolen from Rachel Verinder, the heroine of the story. Her love interest, Franklin Blake serves as the hero, acting as the catalyst for the mystery’s narration as he asks the characters to recount “the story of the Moonstone... as far as our personal experience extends, and no farther”\(^1\). He is responsible for piecing the narrative together, while also providing a substantial portion of the novel from his perspective. Indeed, Blake seems determined to solve the mystery.

However, the detection work within the novel becomes more complex than a singular search for the diamond. Anne-Marie Beller argues that while “detection is a necessary quest to find the truth, meaning, and stability”\(^2\), the detection is not “merely concerned with finding out the truth about others, but more crucially about oneself”.\(^3\) Therefore, with Blake at the forefront of the detection, the process develops into a trajectory of self-discovery. Considering Blake’s contradictory sense of self, the mystery instead becomes a narrative about Blake’s identity shift from hero to thief. However, he is unable to uncover his identity alone. Instead, it is the covert forms of power that lower- and upper-class women hold – Rosanna Spearman and Rachel Verinder, respectively – that mediate Blake’s identity shift. It is their withholding of information from the public sphere that maintains Blake’s identity as the hero, and their subsequent reveal of information in private that alters his identity – for both the reader and himself – to a thief.

Victorian sensation novels have been known to “present crime and its solution as an intrinsically personal event” since the characters are often “drawn

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\(^3\) Ibid. 51.
into the detection process by personal motives”.4 While there is a tangible mystery to solve, the investigation process often reveals hidden personal details about the involved characters. Beller argues that alongside the detection process, the central character will “experience a pivotal moment of (self-) revelation, a sudden point of discovery that overturns everything they thought they knew about themselves”.5 This unexpected finding causes a paradigm shift for the central character, serving as a pivotal point in the text where their previous world-view is challenged. During this moment there is “an evocation of personal disorientation – a threat to individual, cohesive identity”.6 While the text’s central focus is on the protagonist’s ability to unveil the mystery through detection, the newly revealed information moves the narrative to a new state, where both the character’s and reader’s perspectives are altered.

In The Moonstone, the central character Franklin Blake experiences this crucial moment of self-revelation as his determination to solve the mystery of the missing Moonstone diamond becomes a trajectory of self-discovery. While the text involves numerous characters that are integral to the narrative, Blake is depicted as the heroic protagonist who is responsible for both the handling of the Moonstone and the subsequent search for it. This is established from the diamond’s first appearance in domestic Britain, when the servant Betteridge notes that upon Blake’s arrival, “Mr. Franklin [pulled] a little-sealed paper parcel out of his pocket”.7 Franklin explains to Betteredge that he is in possession of Colonel Herncastle’s infamous diamond because his “father, as the wicked Colonel’s executor, has given it in charge to [him] to bring down here”8 to give to Rachel as a gift. This personal relationship to the Moonstone carries into its subsequent search, as after it goes missing, Blake asserts that “if time, pains and money can do it, I will lay my hand on the thief who took the Moonstone!”9 His personal investment in the detective process is recognized by the other characters, as Rachel later tells Blake, “you were the active man; you were the leader; you were working harder than any of them to recover the jewel!”10 Following Beller’s argument,

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5 Ibid. 49.
6 Ibid. 60.
8 Ibid. 33.
10 Ibid. 360.
Blake’s position as the central character in the detection process will lead to a “confrontation with a disturbing plurality of self, which encodes a threat to identity”. Upon closer inspection, the detective work in the novel becomes an allegory for Blake’s personal journey of self-revelation.

Ironically, while Blake’s voice becomes the most familiar to the reader (as it consumes a substantial portion of the narrative), the reader knows very little about him. The majority of information about him is supplied by Betteredge, who boasts about Blake’s extensive education in other European countries such as Germany, France, and Italy. Betteredge notes that “[Blake] had come back with so many different sides to his character, all more or less jarring with each other, that he seemed to pass his life in a state of perpetual contradiction with himself”. Rather than his multiple experiences each contributing to a cohesive, well-versed character, Betteredge describes Blake as construction of these different experiences, never settling on a singular disposition. He further states that Blake, “wrote a little; he painted a little; he sang and played and composed a little – borrowing, as I suspect”. Here Blake’s identity is defined as “borrowing” from the cultures he was exposed to rather than an integration of his experiences into his sense of self. Overall, Blake is set up as an enigmatic character in a constant state of contradiction, which speaks to his later oppositional identity shift from hero to thief.

Blake’s newly uncovered identity is not something he is able to discover alone. Rather, it is Rachel and Rosanna, two significant female characters in the text, who control the necessary information to reveal his true disposition from the confines of the domestic space. The Victorian woman was constrained by rigid societal expectations, and as Anne Russell discusses, the “Proper Lady” was “required to adhere to values of modesty, innocence, self-restraint, refinement, and respect for hierarchy, and with it patriarchy”. These ideals required that women exhibited self-control and subordination to men in society, which was a result of the Victorian “divide between the public sphere (viewed as a masculine domain concerned with paid work and national politics), and

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13 Ibid. 19.
the private sphere (viewed as a female domain concerned with home and family)." The increase in industrialization had significant repercussions on social and political climates, as men became encouraged to assert themselves in the public sphere, which left women to the submissive space of the private home. This created expectations for women to take up as little space as possible and exist in the periphery of society: behind closed doors.

Since masculine power was understood by its overt expression, it led to the assumption that the limitation of women’s presence in society rendered them powerless. However, current research on the female occupation of the private sphere is now being re-considered and understood as a space of power, rather than a space of limitation for the Victorian woman. Lewis Roberts argues that “in conventional Victorian narratives female characters tend to gain power and interest by withholding knowledge”. The seemingly submissive acts of self-restraint that appear to situate women as powerless can be used to withhold and manipulate information in a space that is inaccessible to men. As seen in The Moonstone, Rachel and Rosanna’s withholding of evidence is a covert form of power in which they can manipulate the story, and in this case, mediate Blake’s identity.

The pivotal moment at which Blake learns he is the thief is a direct result of Rosanna and Rachel. Unbeknownst to Blake, and consequently the reader, Rosanna holds the only physical evidence that proves Blake stole the Moonstone. Prior to the discovery of Rosanna’s information, Blake’s identity throughout the text comprised of being the nobleman who was determined to find justice for Rachel. It is Rosanna’s withholding of information from the public that allowed Blake to be perceived as this heroic figure to other

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characters and, more importantly, to himself. The view of Blake as the hero dramatically breaks down upon his return to the Verinder home after a hiatus in the search, when Betteredge tells Blake that “Rosanna Spearman left a sealed letter behind her – a letter addressed to you”.17 She left it in the hands of her friend Lucy, who “wouldn’t give it into any hands but [Blake’s]”.18 Rosanna’s refusal to allow the public access to the letter, and her act of entrusting it only with her female friend (who is similarly confined to the domestic space), emphasizes the importance of her knowledge being shared in private with only Blake himself. The instructions within the letter further emphasize this, as she tells him to follow the memorandum “without any person being present to overlook you”.19

When Blake obediently goes alone to the Shivering Sands, Rosanna’s instructions lead him to a hidden box containing a nightgown which bears a smear of paint, a clue which has been established as crucial evidence of the theft. Upon closer inspection of the gown, he writes, “I found the mark, and read – MY OWN NAME”.20 The narrative decision to write “my own name”, rather than stating “Franklin Blake” as it would have appeared on the nightgown, demonstrates the personal effect of this discovery for the reader. After this moment, Blake’s identity suddenly alters, as he realizes that “On the unanswerable evidence of the paint-stain, I had discovered Myself as the Thief” (Collins 318). The deliberate capitalization of “myself” and “thief” reinforces his new identity by dramatically emphasizing Blake’s shift from the familiar state of the hero, to his new characterization of the thief.

Rosanna’s letter further explains her reasoning behind burying the nightgown in the sand, as she wanted it to be placed “where no living creature

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18 Ibid. 310.
19 Ibid. 313.
20 Ibid. 318.
can find it without being first to let into the secret by [herself]”. Rosanna knows that the physical displacement of the evidence in the Shivering Sands is the most effective way to withhold the information and ensures that no one will find the evidence and bring it to the public without her approval. Therefore, this deliberate act of concealing information demonstrates Rosanna’s reclamation of power. By hiding the evidence in the private space, she remains in control of the pivotal piece of evidence. It is only when she chooses to let Blake access this information in private that he can understand his true identity.

While Rosanna’s evidence was the catalyst for the initial revelation of identity, Blake remains weary of its accuracy, as he has no recollection of taking the Moonstone. It is then revealed that Rachel is withholding the only other piece of evidence that can confirm Blake’s guilt. On this account, the men begin to recognize that “the whole of this case… will tumble to pieces, if we can only break through Rachel’s inveterate reserve and prevail upon her to speak out” as she has “been silent all this time”. In a similar fashion to Rosanna, Rachel is following the Victorian female expectation of withholding information in the private sphere. After Blake’s discovery of the nightgown, the men begin to realize the implications of women withholding information, and they deduce that Rachel’s silence must play a role, requiring further investigation. However, Blake repeatedly points out that Rachel “declined to see [him]” and instead prefers to remain in the private sphere of her home, where society has told her she belongs. Rachel takes advantage of this, understanding that due to the social rules regarding the separate spaces for gender, Blake is unable to force himself into her home, and instead must oblige to her preference.

Once Rachel allows Blake to meet her in private, she confirms her purposeful withholding of information as she tells him directly, “I have kept your infamy a secret. And I have suffered the consequences of concealing it”. She acknowledges the social expectations that have been placed on her, stating, “I refrained from alarming the house, and telling everybody what had happened – as I ought to have done”. Due to Rachel’s status as an upper-class woman in Victorian society, she is aware of the expectations of self-restraint women are expected to uphold. She maintains this standard by keeping Blake’s guilt a secret, despite the immoral consequences of doing

22 Ibid. 343.
23 Ibid. 343.
25 Ibid. 353.
26 Ibid. 359.
so. However, her acknowledgment of secrecy merely hints at Blake’s guilt, as even in his presence she continues to resist sharing the crucial piece of evidence necessary to confirm his new identity of the thief. This continual resistance holds Blake’s identity in a state of limbo, which emphasizes her continuing power as long as the evidence is unknown.

Rachel observes that Blake remains uncertain, causing her to finally exclaim, “You villain, I saw you take the Diamond with my own eyes!”27 Her decision to address Blake as a villain in this pivotal moment, while revealing the final piece of evidence, completes the shift in his identity. Blake himself acknowledges this, as he states to the reader, “From the moment when I knew that the evidence on which I stood condemned in Rachel’s mind, was the evidence of her own eyes, nothing – not even my conviction of my own innocence – was clear to my mind”.28 Now that Rachel has revealed the remaining evidence to Blake in the private sphere of her home, he can no longer resist his guilt. It is this reveal of powerful information that gives Rachel the ability to confirm Blake’s status as the thief, demonstrating her covert form of power over his sense of self.

*The Moonstone* begins as a fascinating detective story surrounding the mysterious theft of a precious diamond within the Verinder home. This narrative quickly shifts to a trajectory of self-discovery for the male protagonist Franklin Blake. His identity is depicted in a state of contradiction to the reader from the beginning of the text, as Betteredge explains how his extensive and varying education makes his sense of self appear fragmented. Blake is then illustrated as the hero, due to his dominant role in both the arrival and subsequent search for the Moonstone. However, as the narrative unfolds, it is shockingly revealed that Blake is the perpetrator of the crime, which causes his identity to shift from hero to thief. In order to arrive at this conclusion, the true detective process depends on Rachel and Rosanna, two significant female characters within the text. Both women abide by Victorian social rules, which involve submission to the private sphere. Within this separate space, the women’s withholding of critical evidence gives them a covert form of power in the detective process. It is their silence that allows Blake to maintain his false identity as the hero, and their later revel of information that alters his disposition to the thief.

27 Ibid. 352.
While masculinity is typically at the forefront of detection, in *The Moonstone* women possess power from the private sphere, dominating the presumed heroic power men hold in the public. These two women, from oppositional social classes, each hold equal power over masculine subjectivity in the text through the subversion of social regulations meant to restrain them, allowing them to control the critical information in the detective process. This inversion of feminine ideals demonstrates that female knowledge is the driving force in the mystery, which makes way for an alternative narrative of feminine presence in nineteenth-century Britain, refiguring women across classes as holding power in Victorian society, regardless of social expectations and regulations that claimed otherwise.
Bibliography:


