
Performing Femininity in Ellen Wood's *Parkwater*

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Abstract: Ellen Wood (or Mrs. Henry Wood, as she became widely known to the reading public) was the acclaimed author of more than thirty novels, over one hundred short-stories, and countless articles, as well as the owner and editor of a lucrative and popular periodical: *The Argosy*. Nonetheless, until recently, her multifaceted output has been largely overlooked by critics and researchers: despite her widespread popularity across social classes (which turned her into Wilkie Collins's main literary competitor), most her works have been dismissed as too sentimental, melodramatic, and sensational. By following in the steps of the few scholars who have undertaken a reassessment of Wood's oeuvre, this paper sets out to analyze a truly controversial story divided into two parts, whose plot revolves around a governess who, driven by passion and sexual desire, turns into a murderess: "The Mystery at Number Seven" (1877). As will be shown, on the one hand, Wood delved into the customary connection between violence and insanity (a recurring theme in Victorian sensation novels), focusing on her female protagonist. On the other hand, however, she also succeeded in uncovering the mechanisms of patriarchy and gender inequality.

Keywords: femininity, violence, insanity, Victorian, Ellen Wood, *Parkwater*

This essay will focus on the performance of ideal femininity in Ellen Wood's *Parkwater*, a short novel originally serialized in *The New Monthly Magazine*, in 1857, and later republished with substantial changes in 1875 and 1876. Before delving into the characterization of Sophia May, the controversial leading character of the narrative, whose impeccable appearance and refined manners disturbingly clash with her ethical principles and moral standards, some information on the author herself will be provided. This is intended to underscore her acute awareness of both the social norms regulating Victorian womanhood, and the strategic measures she employed to deftly circumvent and even criticize them. Indeed, as will be shown, Ellen Wood's female protagonist is infused with her own, chameleonic

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ability² to adapt to changing circumstances and external pressures.

In the two existing biographical profiles of Ellen Wood penned by her son Charles – namely “Mrs. Henry Wood. In Memoriam”, published immediately after her death, in 1887, and *Memorials of Mrs. Henry Wood* (1894) –, the author is at pains to highlight his mother’s propriety, unearthly beauty, and untainted modesty. In Charles Wood’s words, Ellen “had the rare gift of perpetual youth”; besides, “she delighted in everything that was pure and lovely” (*Wood Memorials of Mrs. Henry Wood* 2), thus shunning other, more frivolous forms of entertainment. Her charms were ethereal and ineffable; any attempt to describe them would be “almost as impossible and hopeless as it would be [...] to embody the perfume of the rose, or to give form and expression to the scent of the violet” (Wood “Mrs. Henry Wood. In Memoriam” 251). As Mariaconcetta Costantini (4) has elucidated, the two “hagiographic works” actually succeeded in turning Wood into “a paragon of Victorian matronly virtues”. Pious, respectful, and physically delicate³, she fulfilled her biological duty, by getting married and giving birth to five children. Apparently, even her career as a writer originated in a painful personal experience, i.e. the loss of her little daughter Ellen. As Charles Wood clarifies – thus downplaying her actual ambition –, she began to sketch her first stories to distract her mind from brooding on gloomy thoughts. When she became a widow, in 1866, she devoted more time to professional writing; yet, according to her biographer, she never neglected her feminine responsibilities: order, cleanliness, and harmony reigned in her house, and she was always cheerful and jolly whenever a guest paid a visit. Unlike “non domesticated” (*Wood Memorials of Mrs. Henry Wood* 227) literary people, in fact,

No one ever looked more earnestly to “the ways of her household”. The happiness of those about her was ever her first thought and consideration. Her house was carefully ruled, and order and system reigned. Nothing ever jarred; the domestic atmosphere was never disturbed. [...] No home duty was ever neglected or put aside for literary labours. (*Wood Memorials of Mrs. Henry Wood* 227-228).

In truth, Ellen Wood longed to affirm her leading role in the literary arena: she worked at a feverish pace to produce marketable texts (in her life, she published thirty novels, over one hundred short stories, and countless articles), she invested in the purchase of a popular

² Andrew Mangham (245) wrote about the “chameleonic quality” of her works.

³ She had a problem with her spine, a “weakness which eventually produced a serious curvature” (*Wood Memorials of Mrs. Henry Wood* 33).

monthly magazine, *The Argosy* (the perfect venue for her own narratives)⁴, and she skillfully negotiated with publishers for the remuneration she was to receive, as her correspondence with Richard and George Benteley testifies (Maunder 2000: 28). In order to garner the favour of an increasingly large reading public, in her works she simultaneously drew on the gothic tradition, took inspiration from conduct manuals, and blended the defining features of the sensation genre with the typical characteristics of the domestic novel. Nonetheless, as a strategy to shield herself from potential criticism, she assumed the respectable identity of Mrs. Henry Wood, in accordance with the legal doctrine of *coverture*, whereby a married woman's lawful existence became subsumed under her husband's. However, Wood's ambiguity did not pass unnoticed, even in her own times. Ten years after her demise, Adeline Sergeant composed a biographical sketch in which, on the one hand, she depicted the writer as "the Scheherazade of our quiet evenings and holiday afternoons" (Sergeant 174), whose volumes were "purely domestic" (187) and "concerned chiefly with the great middle class of England" (187). On the other hand, Sergeant regretted her making full use of the devices and the mechanisms of questionable (if not infamous) sensation novels⁵: "Mrs. Wood would possibly have taken a higher place amongst English novelists if she had avoided mere sensation, and confined herself to what she could do well – namely, the faithful and realistic rendering of English middle class life" (190-191).

In *Parkwater*, Wood managed to concoct a story that would captivate and amuse her readership; at the same time, the narrative set out to appease the anxieties of those who viewed societal changes with growing alarm, while posing thought-provoking questions about women's genuine aspirations, and men's agency and undisputed authority. The plot revolves around Sophia May, the young and attractive daughter of two servants. Educated beyond her social station, she deviously lures Frederick Lyvett (a promising lawyer and one of the best catches in London) into marrying her, against his parents' will. What Frederick ignores is that, when she was employed as a governess at Parkwater (a lavish mansion in Ireland), Sophia had had a romantic liaison with another man (Captain Devereux), with whom she had

⁴ *The Argosy* had a circulation of approximately 20,000 copies; its primary competitor for readers' sympathy was *Belgravia Magazine* (owned by Mary Elizabeth Braddon), which had a circulation of 16,000 copies (Phegley 186).

⁵ *Sensation novels* appealed to the readers' senses with lurid and transgressive plots featuring cherub-like ladies who, in open defiance of the *Angel in the house* paradigm, turned into cold-hearted offenders. These novels were regarded vulgar, "extravagant and unnatural" (*The Christian Remembrancer* 210).

possibly conceived a son. Readers also gather that little Randy (that is the boy's name) had been immediately entrusted to the care of a peasant woman. At the climactic moment of the narrative, the callous adventuress does not hesitate to brutally murder the child to conceal her scandalous past, thus securing her newly-acquired social and financial position. This tragic turn of events adds a frightening and breathtaking layer to the text, which also functions as a cautionary tale, warning against the dangers of senseless and unscrupulous ambition.

In both versions of *Parkwater*, Wood places a strong emphasis on Sophia's misguided upbringing, highlighting her parents' unwise intention to elevate her above her sphere. In the Victorian period, given what Deborah Gorham (65) has termed "modernization of motherhood", manuals offering advice to inexperienced women on child rearing multiplied: arguably, Wood's text may be viewed as an anti-handbook, illustrating how young wives should *not* behave. Throughout the novel, therefore, the omniscient narrator often intrudes into the story, to express reproach and contempt.⁶ An elucidatory example is placed at the end of the first chapter, concluding with the following lamentation: "Poor Sophia May! Events that really did happen in after life were not so much her fault as the fault of her most foolish parents" (Wood *Parkwater* 11). The very final sentence of the volume, uttered by Sophia May's mother and added to the later (and more pedagogical) editions of *Parkwater*, explicitly attributes the responsibility for Sophia's downfall to her *pernicious*⁷ education:

"I am afraid it was a frightful mistake".

"What was a mistake?" asked [her husband]

"Her bringing up. If we'd not made her into a lady and educated [*sic*] her accordingly, she'd not have despised us, and all this might never have happened. We stuck her up into the wrong spere [*sic*], don't you see [...]" (222)

Corrupted by ill-considered goals, as a child, Sophia already acts like an incipient actress, showcasing feigned manners and second-hand, extravagant clothes aimed at mimicking the attire and demeanors of the upper class: "dressed as she was, in all the colours of the rainbow, flaunty, dirty, and with a profusion of glass beads glittering about her as necklaces and bracelets, she looked like a little itinerant actress at a

⁶ In the 1857 version of the narrative, the narrator's intrusions are scant, while they increase in number in the subsequent versions.

⁷ The adjective "pernicious" is used several times in the text (Wood *Parkwater* 3, 9), particularly in reference to sensation novels, avidly consumed by Sophia and her mother.

country fair” (4). As an adult, after finishing school in France, her innocent masquerade rapidly turns into a dangerous fraud. In characterizing her protagonist, Wood appears to pursue diverse and contradictory purposes. Undeniably, she harshly criticizes the blurring of social boundaries, assuming a conservative stance to forge bonds of sympathy with the most traditional portion of her audience. On the other hand, she clearly demonstrates that the ostensibly *natural* and *inborn* qualities of the *Angel in the house* (i.e. propriety, candour, compliance, and passivity) may be easily parroted and simulated. Just like the author herself, who played several parts in her life, refusing to be bracketed under any single rubric, her heroine is willing to reinvent her persona to suit her ends. Furthermore, the chosen title for the novel – the name of an ancient mansion – proves revealing: the house, which for the Victorians served as the cornerstone of society and was envisioned as an inviolable shelter or a safe haven (Nead 33; Bizzotto 32-33), becomes the site of Sophia’s first major transgression.

As a savvy entrepreneur, Wood carefully adjusted her plot to align with the changing tastes and expectations of her readers, which varied depending on the different outlets for publication. In the 1857 version of her story, issued in a *men’s* magazine (*The New Monthly Magazine*, founded in 1814 by Henry Colburn), Sophia was featured as an indisputably cruel and vicious schemer. The first draft of *Parkwater*, in fact, was meant to caution young and naïve gentlemen against the snares of unprincipled – albeit irresistibly seductive – social climbers. Consequently, Sophia’s violent character and her gruesome crime (all the more aberrant because a woman, *a mother*, was the perpetrator) were delved into and portrayed in full details, to stir the readers’ scorn and indignation. When the girl mistakenly believes she has been deserted by Lyvett, for example, she is depicted akin to a “rabid dog” (Wood “The Lawyers’ Servants” 406). Moreover, she wards off the advances of an unwanted suitor by brandishing a large knife, an appalling act which causes her mother to pronounce a prophetic sentence: “you’ll murder somebody some day” (408). The killing of Little Randy is graphically (or *sensationally*, one would be tempted to say) described and becomes even more revolting and monstrous because Sophia is unambiguously identified as his mother. The woman’s utmost fierceness in tossing and turning the child to stop him from crying – she acts “like a tigress” (Wood “The Countrywoman and the Child” 272) –, and the rope she coiled around his fragile neck to strangle him are notably expunged from later, bowdlerized versions of the novel (Allan 2011: 14).

When, eighteen years later, Wood republished *Parkwater* in *The*

Argosy, a magazine especially designed for women, she extended the plot and transformed Sophia May into a much more complex and nuanced character. Unquestionably, the writer continued to condemn the protagonist's threatening performance of iconic femininity, her destabilizing trespassing of invisible social boundaries. Nevertheless, she also introduced extenuating circumstances to her crime, suggesting the possibility that Randy's death was a mere accident or that the perpetrator could claim temporary insanity. Incidentally, this narrative device had already been exploited by Mary Elizabeth Braddon in *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), an extremely lucrative and popular sensation novel. As an explanation for Sophia's ruthless infanticide, in fact, Mrs. Cooke (the landlady) insinuates that the boy might have fatally entangled himself with the luggage ropes lying around the room. Alternatively, considering that "Mrs. Lyvett was evidently very ill that evening" (*Wood Parkwater* 177), "it is possible that in a moment of temptation – of embarrassment – having a child, she perhaps knew not how to account [to her husband] for, thus thrown upon her hands –" (177); readers are expected to draw their own conclusions, as Sophia's offence is never openly mentioned. It should be observed that, to avoid upsetting her female readers, in the final version of Wood's narrative (unlike in the 1857 publication), the charge of murder is only hinted at – whispered by the policeman to Frederick Lyvett. Besides, since Randy might not be Sophia's son (their real connection is left unexplained), the woman's violation is perceived as (slightly) less shocking and perverse. Sophia's alleged madness might also be connected with her *pernicious* upbringing. Henry Maudsley (208), a renowned physician and pioneering psychiatrist, believed that the "foolish training" of children would lead to lack of self-control in adulthood. What is more, according to the medical theories of the period, the transition between phases in a woman's life (from puberty to menopause, passing through miscarriage or pregnancy) could be the source of mental instability, which might be temporary or lasting.

The final version of *Parkwater* also allows Ellen Wood to cast serious doubts on Victorian stereotypical masculinity. Indeed, Frederick Lyvett – a fragile and emasculated representative of the upper class – is introduced as a volatile dandy, too fond of cigars and fashionable vehicles.⁸ His immature attitude towards life is reflected in his boyish facial features: his moustache "would have been fair had there been enough of it to be seen" (16). As the plot unfolds and the ghastly particulars of the infanticide are uncovered, Frederick feels so

⁸ A parallel may be established between Frederick and Robert in *Lady Audley's Secret*.

powerless and overwhelmed by guilt for his own hasty and thoughtless decisions that he bursts into tears before his mother, who is ready to console him: “the strain upon his feeling of what he had that evening been obliged to undergo, had now reached its extreme tension, and unmanned him” (185). The pillars of Victorian masculinity are visibly shaken by a woman’s transgression, thus revealing their artificiality and vulnerability.

Ellen Wood’s *Parkwater* also challenges the institution of marriage as the ultimate and most desirable achievement for a Victorian lady. The novel abounds in dysfunctional couples who, although physically close, are emotionally apart. An insightful example is provided by Captain Devereux and his wife Harriet, whom he used to ridicule for her looks, before tying the knot with her solely for financial reasons. In his view, in fact, she was far too old (Harriet was only two years his senior) and hideous, due to her “Chinese eyes and African mouth” (62). However, despite such criticism (which is also grossly marred by racism), he had decided to marry her to pay off his numerous debts. In her work, Wood also included a surprising reflection on the joys of celibacy. In a long monologue (absent from the 1857 version of the text), Frederick’s middle-aged mother unexpectedly re-evaluates the status of unmarried women, free from the burdens of married life and motherhood⁹. In an imaginary speech addressed to one of her friends, she thus observes:

Lots are more equally balanced in this world than we suspect [...]. You, I know, have envied me my married life – the great blessings, as you have looked upon it, arising from the companionship of my husband and children. [...] But which fate is the happier, think you, when children bring these dreadful sorrows upon their parents? Ok, Fanny, believe me! many a poor wife, smarting under her sea of trouble, would be thankful to the same Heaven never to have had a husband, to have borne children. She envies you single women then, and wishes with her whole heart that she could be as you are.

To conclude, as this essay has tried to demonstrate, even though Ellen Wood has been largely overlooked by many scholars for being too conservative, melodramatic, or even sensational, her oeuvre deserves to be reassessed. Narratives such as *Parkwater*, in fact, forcefully contribute to shedding light on some of the anxieties that lie behind the impeccable façade of Victorian society, namely the performative nature

⁹ In another passage, she quotes a saying that clearly unveils her mixed feelings towards motherhood: “when our children are young they tread upon our toes, but when they get older they tread upon our hearts” (Wood *Parkwater* 180).

of gender and class distinction, the construction of femininity and masculinity, and women's higher education as a possible threat to social stability.

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