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Gendered Texts: 
Deconstructing the Church and the Law in Wilkie Collins’ “Miss Jeromette”

Rachel Wise ’06

Wilkie Collins is felt by many to have defined the “sensational” novel genre of the Victorian era. Critic Marlene Tromp argues that the violence in much of this literature beggars our attention as it contrasts the picture of middle-class morality we associate with this time period. These stories often deal with issues of domestic violence and the function of “law” in the public and private spheres. Despite the seriousness of these topics, Tromp notes that calling a novel “sensational” marginalizes and manages its content, keeping it from being “seriously” analyzed (2-3). Collins’s ghost story, “Miss Jeromette and the Clergyman” is similarly marginalized despite critical attention now given to his other works. Indeed, the ghost story today occupies a place of critical and academic obscurity. Perhaps we, in the end, value “realism” as the Victorians did. Or perhaps there is something in the ghost story that we find disturbing and chaotic, perhaps something that whispers of an instability inherent in our most basic social structures. The threatened collapse of these normative structures—in this case, the law and church—causes the academic and amateur alike to recoil from seeing the ghost story as anything beyond the sensational.

Wilkie Collins’s ghost story, “Miss Jeromette and the Clergyman,” connects the church and the law as two institutions that, in a mutually constitutive way, shore up patriarchal power and privilege. The tragedy of Miss Jeromette challenges patriarchal society’s narrative that depicts the church and the law as transcendent and just institutions. Through her interactions with men around her, her eventual murder, and the court’s failure to rightly convict her husband, Collins undermines the authority of our most basically accepted cultural institutions by revealing the way that justice is, in fact, made inaccessible to women via the very structures that profess to guarantee, inform, and prize it. Quite literally connecting the church and the law through the lawyer-turned-clergyman male who narrates the tale of Miss Jeromene, Collins plays with the legitimizing idea that the law is informed by Christianity and is therefore likewise transcendental, fair, and good. Rather, in this short story, the church is revealed to be the patriarchal, subjective source of our ideas of transcendental moral law, of which the ironically named justice system becomes a similarly flawed manifestation. Miss Jeromette’s story plays with the religiously vested “crime and punishment” narrative by disrupting the model of the transgressive woman deserving a violent end, as seen in The Newgate Calendar. To this end, it reveals the way in which the church and the law, rather than seeking to achieve justice on behalf of women, sexually manage them and shore up patriarchal power. Applying a feminist lens to Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of the law, as well as understanding the role of Michel Foucault’s confessional, will be instrumental in helping us identify what made/makes this ghost story unsettling.

The church has been the institution to most influentially shape western ideas of a transcendent moral law. It operates on the basis of a body of divine commands that are undergirded by an authority aptly encapsulated in the biblical story in Exodus of Moses on Mount Sinai, descending from the heights with ten commandments etched into stone by the very finger of God. The law’s perceived immutability is here signified by the use of stone as a medium and by seeming divine sanction. The more detailed codes of Leviticus follow in this vein of eternal rightness. The church has historically held that the Bible contains a moral law that does not consider our weaknesses as human beings or take into account our sinful heredity or infirmities, instead demanding we be absolutely moral. The church professes a moral law that never changes, either for the highest or lowest of persons. Ordained by God, it is meant to be enduring and forever the same, remaining absolute for all time and eternity.

Yet, with the rise of feminism, theories of evolution, increased discourse surrounding homosexuality, debates about the appropriateness of divorce, and the ever-controversial imperial project, the issue of religion and morality in the nineteenth century was far more complicated. As critic Nancy Cervetti notes in her study of “Faith, Religion, and the Nineteenth Century Novel,” many Victorians rejected the security and constraint of traditional religion. She uses the work of George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Samuel Butler, and Thomas Hardy to examine how these authors explore the way traditional religion fails certain characters. “Although numerous representatives of the clergy populate nineteenth-century novels, there is no pervasive feeling that ‘trailing clouds of glory do we come from God, who is our home’” (94). It is unsurprising then that the church should figure so prominently in Collin’s short story and that we might expect this portrayal to be less than positive.

How, specifically, Collins treats the church is revealing. One of our two male narrators tells the story of how he came to be a clergyman. It is his mother’s dying request that he should fulfill his father’s most fervent desire of seeing his son enter the service of the church. He consequently leaves his profession as a lawyer to become a clergyman. Here we quite tangibly see the intertwining of the church and the law, or justice system. It is crucial that he makes the move from the law to the church, giving deference to the wishes of a patriarchal figure. For the church’s claim to a transcendent moral law has resulted in the historical collusion of church and law, so that in many instances the church has defined and arbitrated the pursuit of justice. Inquisitions, witch hunts, blue laws, divine monarchy, the authority of the pope, all suggest that the Christian religion has undergirded the inception, passing, and implementation of laws or the consequences for disregarding them. Today, Western nations like the United States and Great Britain continue to find the nominal Christianity of a candidate to be an underlying factor in the way they vote and in the perceived morality of a candidate. As the cultural narrative goes, the church is uniquely able to say what is universally good, and religious adherence makes universally good men. It is a gendered notion acted out in an exclusively male priesthood, an overwhelmingly male clergy, and the connected and continued resistance to female politicians.

It is therefore highly revealing that the our narrator moves from the law to the church, not from the church to the law, because it is the church that shores up the legitimacy of the law. The clergyman’s father desires for him a position of supreme patriarchal authority. The church is the source of the concept of transcendent moral law, and the law the enforcement of this concept. This is exemplified in the sermon the clergyman gives while visiting a church in London. “Admitting that the best of us were frail mortal creatures subject to evil promptings and provocations like the worst among us, my object was to show how a Christian man may find his certain refuge from temptation in the safeguards of his religion” (207, emphasis mine). In effect, it is only religion that can presumably keep the man from giving into provocations. The law can only punish, rather than deter, this giving in. Again, the church is here structured as a gender specific institution, even to the extent that the patriarchal male figure seems to be judged less harshly because of this “provocation.” The church’s duty is here constructed as male-oriented, striving to keep men from being subject to the law, thereby consolidating and reinforcing patriarchal power.

The connection between law and religious institutions is implied in the title of Jacques Derrida’s collection, Acts of Religion. His theories of deconstruction are important to understanding how the story deals with law and its intersect with religion. As Gil Anidjar notes in the introduction to this book, “Derrida’s writing on religion has indeed consisted of a manifold and powerful effort to situation and raise again questions of tradition, faith, and sacredness and their relation to the premises of philosophy and political culture” (3). In the chapter titled “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” Derrida looks at the way that law is given a
religious authority, an authority that is therefore presumed to be absolute and unchallengeable. “Justice,” after all, has its root and association in the biblical text, the Old Testament God passing out judgment. He deconstructs the law in order to distinguish it from justice—two words we usually see as interchangeable. The authority of the law depends on the concept of justice, however mythical the connection between the two might be. Justice is a concept that depends on objectivity, whereas the law, or a verdict rendered in a trial, is temporally, culturally, and experientially bound. Once a verdict is given or a law made, they are frozen in time. The law in particular is meant to be static and unattained to the specifics of each case. Justice on the other hand, is fluid, complex, even contradictory, and ultimately unreachable—a concept that does not fit readily into the religious narrative of transcendent moral law. Equally condemning is the story’s suggestion that the church is also subjectively bound. In a trial, Derrida also notes there is an urgency in reaching a verdict, which, among other things, limits the breadth of information permissible in court, rendering impossible its attempts to implement justice (228-98).

In this way, Derrida seeks to deconstruct our ideas of law and therefore divest it of its religiously rooted, absolute legitimacy. Likewise, this must necessarily disrupt the totalizing vision offered by the Christian church. Perhaps this might seem like a bold, even erroneous, statement. After all, we have countless examples of groups that take up the mantle of legitimacy or another structure, which are called down without also calling down the source of that resulting authority. As suggested to me, the presidency and the war in Iraq are prime examples of this. The media and most citizens could agree that our efforts were not going well, but for a long time the president took almost no heat, despite being commander in chief. My argument is that the deconstruction of the justice system critiques the dominate narrative of the church’s transcendent moral authority over peoples. If religion etymologically means “that which binds,” that which holds together, then a flawed law, which finds its legitimacy and inception in the Christian church, opens the possibility of critiquing this notion. It threatens to shift the church and its patriarchal power structures from the center of the ways we make meaning and societal conceptions of authority and legitimacy. If religion is no longer “that which binds,” no longer that which can judge the rightness of all other spheres of society, one might see patriarchy’s lament in the famous William Butler Yeats poem: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned; the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” There is the potential for chaos.

In their initial conversation, the two brothers begin an underlying struggle in the narrative to determine the efficacy of law in attaining justice. On seeing the specific trial his brother is reading about, the clergyman grows pale and says, “I know this . . . The prisoner was guilty” (198). His brother meets this statement with incredulity. “Guilty? . . . Why, the man was acquitted by the jury, with the full approval of the judge! What can you possibly mean” (198)? This reveals an assumption about the justice system that must be held by the majority of society in order for the structure to maintain legitimacy. It is beyond the scope of the brother’s imagination to entertain the idea that perhaps the verdict rendered was in error. A guilty man might have gone free.

While it might seem at first that the clergyman, an officer of the church, is indicting the law, the fact that he figures the story as a confessional suggests otherwise. Michel Foucault argues that the confessional is meant to produce a kind of truth, functioning as one of the ways that Christianity interiorizes society’s sexual discourse. The confessional represents a kind of self-surveillance, the structure of which helps us to understand the clergyman’s story better. In this way, he can tell his story to his brother without indicting the church or the law, for the confessional is figured in a personal, individual way. It is particularly marked as this type of narrative by the moral the clergyman suggests his story has: “The world will not be the worse, and may be the better, for knowing one day what I am now about to trust to your ear alone” (199). Throughout the narrative, one gets the sense that this moral involves other men learning from his mistakes to steer clear of sexually transgressive women like Miss Jeromette. He continually reflects back on their involvement with regret: “So I entered—doubting nothing, foreboding nothing—on a scene in my life, which I now look back on with unfeigned repentance and regret” (202). It seems not to be his failure to aid justice that he regrets, but that he made decisions that lead him to be in the position to have such information about Miss Jeromette’s murder in the first place. The confessional therefore, as Foucault argues, shores up the power and privilege of patriarchal structures like the church and the law.

Yet the text remains a sight of tension concerning the church and the law. While the clergyman has figured his story as a confessional, the narrative itself manages to continually undermine the idea that the offense is a personal, rather than institutional, one. It is the clergyman’s very position in the church that leads to his remaining silent at the expense of justice. “There are circumstances connected with that Trial . . . which were never communicated to the judge or the jury—which were never so much as hinted or whispered in court” (198). This should remind us of Derrida’s assertion that the information given in a trial can never be total and the verdict given can never, in part for this reason, be just and transcendentally correct. In the case of Miss Jeromette’s murder, this pertinent information was never heard in court because the clergyman decided not to divulge it until years after it could be legally relevant. He asks his brother to make a promise: “You will keep what I tell you a secret as long as I live. After my death I care little what happens” (199).

Though he never directly reveals why he choose to remain silent even though it meant a guilty man going free, as the narrative unfolds, we are given the clues to hazard a likely guess. In fulfilling his mother’s deathbed request, he “tear [himself] from all unworthy associations.” This includes Miss Jeromette, a woman with whom he seems to have had a sexual relationship—a fact suggested by the key he has to her house and his referring to her as “the unhappy woman who was not, who never could be, my wife” (204). Perhaps telling the story of his pupil and Miss Jeromette would have led to his own past indiscretions coming to public light—not something a successful, well known clergyman would desire. His career and authority depend upon his own holiness. Justice is here forsaken by a male character wishing to advance himself in the world, among powerful men like his senior pupil’s father. The clergyman’s fear for his reputation and impulse to maintain the patriarchal authority of the church, allows the pupil to get away with his crime, thereby protecting the privileged male’s status. For testifying in court would not have allowed him to structure the narrative as a confessional and would have likely brought ridicule upon the church. Are we then to think that the clergyman would have revealed what he knew if he were not employed by the church? Perhaps then the story suggests that the church is the root of patriarchal law and injustice. Suggestively, it is to the church that the pupil runs to avoid his marital duties, his involvement with the church that allows him to put off doing right by Miss Jeromette.

Further tightening the connection between the law and the church, between the misogynistic murderer and the clergyman, the pupil’s reason for hating the woman we later find out is Miss Jeromette also resembles the reasons the clergyman never reveals what he knows about her murder: “A person is in the way of my prospects in life . . . A person provokes me horribly” (211). She is a Frenchwoman without connections who lives in a shabby part of town and colors miniatures for photographers to supplement a small income of her own. She is not a proper wife among powerful men like his senior pupil’s father. The clergyman’s fear for his reputation and impulse to maintain the patriarchal authority of the church, allows the pupil to get away with his crime, thereby protecting the privileged male’s status. For testifying in court would not have allowed him to structure the narrative as a confessional and would have likely brought ridicule upon the church. Are we then to think that the clergyman would have revealed what he knew if he were not employed by the church? Perhaps then the story suggests that the church is the root of patriarchal law and injustice. Suggestively, it is to the church that the pupil runs to avoid his marital duties, his involvement with the church that allows him to put off doing right by Miss Jeromette.

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shock in comprehending the parallel attitudes of the clergyman and the murderer, a shock that underscores the instability of our concept of religiously informed justice. It forces the reader to ask if the church, rather than being the root of a transcendently fair and just law, isn't the root of and collaborator with a subjective and unjust system. As I argued previously, the church and the law shore up patriarchy and their own patriarchal legitimacy in a mutually constitutive way. In the same way that destabilizing the law causes us to question the authority of the church's totalizing moral narrative, so does destabilizing the church's own structural morality cause us to question the fairness of the law. If the source of Western ideas of law and justice hinges on a church that the story reveals is fundamentally corrupt, then society's belief in an effective and fair justice system is destabilized, leaving the theorist room to critique a structure that is neither natural nor unchangeable. It leaves us with the possibility of change. The system is divested of its divine legitimacy, becoming approachable and observable through different, and illuminating critical lenses.

We have not been able to discuss the ways that the church and the law fail to "get at" justice without mentions of "patriarchy" and "misogyny," without looking at the relationships between men and women. So while Derrida proves instrumental in our deconstructing concepts of law and religion in "Miss Jeromette," applying a feminist theoretical lens would demand that we go a step farther. While Derrida looks at the universal ways a religiously legitimated law fails to fully get at justice, the unique experience of our title character as a woman in Victorian England compels us to look at the ways in which women in particular have been denied justice under the law. All institutions and power structures, like the law and the church, reflect patriarchal interests. It is a myth to suggest the law lies outside of gender constructs. We must ask how Miss Jeromette's selfhood and self-expression have been affected by patriarchal male power embodied in the religiously informed law. For instance, the story of Miss Jeromette is a framed narrative. One of the frames represents church patriarchy. We are twice removed as readers—to the story by the brother of the clergyman who knew the young Frenchwoman. The story opens with a male narrator holding a book of Trials in his hand, referencing The Newgate Calendar. Already, we see that the law and justice system are to be read and wielded by the hands of a man. Thus, we can use Derrida's deconstruction of the law to highlight the disconnect between law and justice that is particularly acute in the female experience.

Perhaps it seems surprising then that the pupil eventually consents to marry Miss Jeromette, though only "on the condition that she would engage to keep the marriage a secret, though only "on the condition that she would engage to keep the marriage a secret, that the clergyman in which she appears to have had some marginal power before he entered the church, which, as the source of patriarchal power and legitimacy, could see her as nothing but a fallen women, could see involvement with her as nothing but soiling.

Further hints of the sexual nature of Miss Jeromette's transgression can be found in imagery and suggestive phrasing throughout, perhaps most especially in the Gardens scene. The fact that it takes place in a "garden" raises connotations of lushness and fertility, of the female body in particular. The clergyman then launches into a narratively disruptive tangent about how a man ought to carefully choose his cigars. The image is blatantly phallic and compares women to cigars: "I was still absorbed in choosing my cigar, when I heard these words behind me—spoken in a foreign accent and in a woman's voice" (201). While he acts to stop an insolent blackguard from harassing Miss Jeromette, the text suggests that he actually sympathizes with the blackguard's advances, remarking on how little and pretty she is, especially with her suggestively curly black hair. The phallic suggestion in choosing one's cigar carefully also places her as his sexual conquest. Winning the dispute with the blackguard after police intervention, the clergyman leads her away and remembers, "She had one great merit: she made no fuss about it" (200). This comment can function in many ways, not the least of which is to conjure issues of rape involved in men's conquest of women. Even with the police's intervention, they clearly don't provide her with much protection. She is shuffled from the grasp of one male conqueror to another. This lends poignancy to Miss Jeromette's lament, "I have no will of my own," a comment that is completely unintelligible for our narrator, a man whose will is embodied in the church, the law, and institutionalized patriarchy.

When the pupil does finally agree to marry her—an attempt to do her justice—Miss Jeromette's murder becomes a scene of domestic violence. This takes us back to The Newgate Calendar mentioned before and requires us to look at how this story diverges from those formulaic ones. The Calendar ran from 1719-1841, detailing tales of crime and punishment recorded by prison chaplains who wanted to make extra money but also retain their anonymity. As Tromp discusses, the accounts are usually told by an authoritative narrator who justified the punishment of the crime and often dwelled on the immorality of both the perpetrator and victim. It most often detailed the murders of working-class women by their husbands and implicitly allows that the patriarch was justified in his anger, if not his action, because of a wife's perceived "failed womanhood." (37-8). This often involved suggestions of adultery.

Our narrative speaks back to this text. "Miss Jeromette" is so unlike virtually every other account in The Newgate Calendar. There is no guilty verdict or criminal in Newgate Prison on whom an ordinary priest would have written. We have a narrator that cannot tell the tale with any amount of moral authority. He is guilty and unclean himself, having withheld this information, having had an illicit relationship with a woman to whom he was not married. He does not seem to condemn the victim as the trial narrative formula would call for. He cannot justify the punishment rendered because no punishment was, in fact, given. "Miss Jeromette" turns The Newgate Calendar's pretense of "justice served" on its head. Instead of attributing a woman's murder to her failed womanhood, the narrative destabilizes our conception of the law as just, revealing it to instead be a gendered text written, read, interpreted, and implemented by men.

In the clergyman's narrative, we dramatically see how the law often fails to work for women as Miss Jeromette is being harassed by a drunk man in the park. Our narrator proceeds to interfere, though before his reputation can be tarnished by a fight in public, a policeman swoops in and turns the drunk man out of the Gardens. Where was the law when Miss Jeromette ordered the harasser to leave her alone? The law does little to intervene until a privilege male is involved, and it is this protection of patriarchal privilege that the narrative suggests the church and the law though she realizes he is a threat to her. She tells the clergyman (still a lawyer then), "I believe I shall die young, and die miserably" (206). In this way she defers to patriarchal authority, even while she appears to have had a sexual relationship with the clergyman in which she appears to have had some marginal power before he entered the church, which, as the source of patriarchal power and legitimacy, could see her as nothing but a fallen women, could see involvement with her as nothing but soiling.
are all about. Her only defense is to shoot the narrator an entreatying look, "which it was not in manhood . . . to resist" (200). To be sure, she is wielding a sort of power here, but it also demonstrates that a woman does not have direct access to the law or its protection. A male must always serve as a conduit.

Further pointing to this reality, Miss Jeromette appears to him after her death, as if pleading for justice to be done. She connects all the dots for him--points to the photograph with the murderer's name and her handwriting on it, points to her bloodied neck. It is an appeal beyond the grave, one that is still done voicelessly and requires a man to act as an intermediary between the murdered woman and the law. This man fails. Justice is not rendered. Because this patriarchal, reputation-protecting figure does not speak where Miss Jeromette now quite literally cannot, "The Law--advancing no further than this--may have discovered circumstances of suspicion but no certainty. The Law, in default of direct evidence to convict the prisoner, may have rightly decided in letting him go free" (217). The clergyman suggest the law has operated as it should methodologically, but that this has nonetheless failed to get at justice.

"I repeat it, after his death--as nearly as I can in his own words" (199). The reader receives the story as an approximation. It is a testimonial given by a man concerned with his reputation and retold years later upon his death by his brother. In this way, the story can ever only be representative--a part of the "truth" to which it points. In the same way, a trial can only reach for truth, a verdict and the law can only reach for justice. Justice proves, as in Derridean thought, to be unattainable. Woman is made unable to speak in this male realm, the realm of the law. The laws and the men who would act as intermediaries fail her, thereby challenging the idea of transcendentally just law. They are men either a part of, or sheltered by, a similarly patriarchal church concerned with shoring up its power and influence. The law is not divinely ordained, and the church is revealed to be less of the holy, objective authority it is thought to be. Rather we find both to be precarious, gendered structures--an idea that still chills to the bone.

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