

**Redemptive Nursing and the Remarriageable Heroine in  
*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Diana of the Crossways***

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<1>When a protagonist who has transgressed social mores escapes a fatally unhappy ending in a nineteenth-century novel, this deliverance almost always depends upon a redemptive experience of illness. Transformation through sickness and its attendant period of suffering is a commonplace trope in realist fiction. The machinery is so recognizable as to be “a conventional rite of passage issuing in personal, moral, or social recuperation” according to Miriam Bailin, who asserts that “the transposition of social pathologies into bodily ailment serves to reclaim” what she calls “characters in crisis” (5). Novels throughout the century employ redemptive illness in the successful culmination of the marriage plot. In Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), the illness preceding Marianne Dashwood’s marriage to Colonel Brandon is a necessary mechanism to repair the impropriety of her initial attraction to a much sexier man. In Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848), although the eponymous heroine exonerates her working-class lover in the murder of a much wealthier suitor, she must also experience a near-fatal illness before they can marry. In Wilkie Collins’ *No Name* (1862), Magdalen Vanstone must atone for scheming to regain her inheritance through a period of destitution and sickness before being reinstated as a heroine and rewarded with a happy and legitimate marriage. As these examples show, the machinery of the marriage plot repeatedly relies on illness as a way to reinstate a character whose status as the heroine is temporarily thrown into question.

<2>In fiction throughout the period, the trope of illness creates a link between redemption and marriageability. Given that caring for the sick was “as sanctified an act as suffering itself” in the Victorian imagination, one might consider whether nursing held the same redemptive relation to marriageability as illness (Bailin 11). This article examines the connection between nursing and marriageability in Victorian fiction to argue that nursing is a narrative device which can intercede in the plot and comment on the marital relation itself. As a redemptive activity, nursing becomes a crucial test for the unconventional heroine’s chances at remarriage in a plot that includes her fall from social acceptance. In particular, I theorize what nursing does for marriageability by reading Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) in conjunction with George Meredith’s *Diana of the Crossways* (1885). Examining two texts with matrimonial failures that *should* preclude the possibility of a happy second union for the heroine enables us to see the extent to which nursing can guarantee a character’s marriageable qualities.<sup>(1)</sup> I pivot from an investigation of redemptive marital nursing in *Tenant* to consider how amateur nursing between friends of the same gender in *Diana* not only redeems the heroine, but also reconfigures the concept of marriage. In its progression, my argument contends that one way we can approach

thematic questions of remarriage in the marriage plot novel is by filtering the second set of matrimonial relations through the model of care-taking in the nurse-patient relationship.

<3>I have chosen to juxtapose *Tenant* with *Diana* in order to show how a similar narrative can change after the Divorce Act of 1857. In spite of their generic and period differences, these two novels turn out to have the same kind of plot: each heroine makes a precipitous, ill-matched union, decides to break away from her failed marriage, is censured by society for her assertiveness, confirms her conventional femininity through nursing, and finally, maneuvers into a successful second marriage. Reading these texts together reveals how, through different applications, nursing continued to function as a type of social and marital guarantor in nineteenth-century novels. Although a step that would necessarily be extralegal in 1848 is no longer so by 1885, we will find that Brontë is no less willing than Meredith to extract her heroine from a destructive first marriage and offer another that is happier. But because neither establishes a neat separation between the plotting of the first and second marriages, both create the need for a narrative mechanism like redemptive nursing which can authorize the heroine's remarriage. As this article will show, *Tenant* and *Diana* can culminate in conventionally happy endings because of the capacity their heroines demonstrate for nursing in the space between the first marriage and the second. By seeing what the relation between redemptive nursing and remarriageability reveals between these two seemingly unrelated texts, we can begin to understand the pervasiveness of this theme in the Victorian novel.

### **Redemptive Nursing and Remarriageability**

<4>To examine the potential of nursing as a narrative device for initiating remarriage, I begin by exploring the ways in which novels becomingly show a heroine's best qualities through her ability to nurse someone else. We can see the special relation nursing has to conventional marriageability by returning to Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* to recall Elinor Dashwood nursing her broken-hearted sister after learning of her own romantic disappointment. Although Elinor needs no redeeming, this element of nursing in the plot makes her even more deserving of the narrative expedient that finally enables her union with Edward Ferrars. Again, in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1853), Esther Summerson's self-sacrificial nursing of her maid through smallpox, though it leaves her disfigured, attests to the inherent goodness that makes her all the more marriageable in the loving eyes of Allan Woodcourt. Such correspondence between a novel's matrimonial outcome and a prior instance of nursing in the plot can be explained by Martha Stoddard Holmes' assessment that in fiction of the period physical infirmity "catalyzes rather than precludes marriages" (52). When it exemplifies the goodness a character already possesses, a heroine's ability to nurse her family, friends and neighbors can be expected to facilitate her happy union with a worthy mate. This narrative pattern coheres with contemporary domestic ideology which designated "the care of the sick [as] being one of the primary duties and instinctive capacities of the angel in the house" (Bailin 11). Thus, nursing (of the amateur, genteel type performed by Elinor and Esther) commonly functions as an indicator of angelic femininity that confirms the marriageable qualities a virtuous heroine always already possesses.

<5>However, when the angelic capacity to nurse is demonstrated by a heroine who requires redemption in the plot, this complicates a simple formulation of what nursing does for

marriageability. As a narrative device, nursing acquires redemptive power because “the experience *and treatment* of illness [was] deeply bound up with community norms and values, with the complexities of moral valuation, and with one’s sense of identity, self-worth, and placement within the social order”, concerns that Bailin calls “central” to nineteenth-century fiction (9, emphasis added). The examples of Elinor and Esther indicate that heroines who project spiritual purpose conventionally appear the most marriageable. Thus, when a protagonist’s behavior is under suspicion, she must reassert her spirituality in order to reinstate herself in the marriage plot. I suggest that when a novel contains two marriages, one bad and one good, which threaten a heroine’s status as she maneuvers between them, the narrative machinery often relies on nursing for a successful outcome. By earning sympathy for the protagonist as a caring heroine, nursing recovers her from being an undutiful wife and authorizes the romantic love of the second match rather than the first. The treatment of illness allows the unconventional heroine to demonstrate spiritual purpose, occasioning her redemption and remarriageability in the narrative. Representations such as Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth* (1853) challenged Victorian perceptions by using nursing as a means for the fallen woman’s moral redemption.<sup>(2)</sup> Gaskell’s application of redemptive nursing for the apotheosis of a fallen heroine is striking in light of Catherine Judd’s claim that “the Victorian nurse mobilized issues analogous to those raised by the fallen women in terms of class, gender, and sexuality” (6).<sup>(3)</sup> The cultural resonance Judd identifies points to a limitation of redemptive nursing: because the fallen state projects sensual instead of spiritual purpose, nursing cannot manage to redeem a woman like Ruth as marriageable. The sections on *Tenant* and *Diana* that follow in the article draw from both the nursing-figure’s angelic and fallen associations to assess redemptive nursing as a theme that governs the plotting of remarriage in Victorian fiction.

<6>While nursing can be read in line with the conventional marriage plot, it is also a mechanism that can help a heroine to evade a bad marital choice. When it authorizes redemption, nursing challenges the hegemony of the marriage plot because it circumvents the notion that the heroine’s first marriage is her one bid at happiness. The nurse-patient relationship, “characterized by intimacy, informality, and shared meaning”, models a satisfying form of conjugality (Bailin 9). As we will see, nursing has such redemptive power that taking care of a first husband, or even a female friend, can actually be a way of making room for a second husband who brings these qualities to the marriage. Mary Wilson Carpenter has argued that the nurse-patient relationship shares with the Victorian marriage plot the subjects of “not only romantic love but the understanding of feeling and the enhancement of sympathy for others” (Carpenter). Turning to *Tenant* and *Diana*, however, we will find that these subjects are reserved in the plot not for a first, but a second marriage that is shaped by nursing. The remaining sections of this article demonstrate how, over the Victorian period from mid-century to the *fin de siècle*, writers use nursing-figures to evade traditional marriage plot conventions.

### **Marital Nursing in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall***

<7>Generically, *Tenant* is difficult to categorize because of how Brontë structures the plots of marriage and remarriage in her novel. The courtship that leads to Helen Huntingdon’s remarriage frames the failure of her ill-matched, first union in the narrative. Helen’s separation from her profligate husband, Arthur Huntingdon, is extralegal, meaning that she is still married to him in

the account Gilbert Markham gives of courting her. Even as the sensitive treatment of domestic abuse encourages readers to credit Helen's claim to a marital separation, it is framed by a courtship that problematizes her remarriageability within the novel. Brontë varies the marriage-plot structure in a way that makes *Tenant* generically distinct from what Kelly Hager calls the second-chance plot, a variation on the marriage plot which neatly terminates the first marriage through death (or divorce) before introducing the prospects of another.<sup>(4)</sup> In the second chance plot, the heroine's remarriageability is guaranteed through its structure. The narrative entanglement of first and second marriages in *Tenant* more closely anticipates fiction of the 1860s featuring the bigamy plot, a form that "reveals a culture's awareness of the frequent failure of marriage even as it subscribes to matrimony by plotting another marriage for the hero or heroine while they are still enmeshed in one so obviously faulty" (Hager 48 n22). While the bigamy plot often pathologizes conventional marriageability by making it the means for domestic crime, *Tenant* relies on the conventions of marriageability as a means for domestic reinstatement. Without fully implicating Helen in an adulterous fall that would sensationalize the failure of her marriage, Brontë creates the need for her redemption.

<8>Due to *Tenant*'s plot structure, its heroine's remarriageability is by no means assured. As Elisabeth Gruner reminds us, Helen is "far from being the virginal heroine of the traditional courtship plot" (310). The novel's social world buzzes with neighborhood gossip about Helen which characterizes her acceptance of Gilbert's frequent visits to Wildfell Hall as "proof of her depravity" (Brontë 90). Because Gilbert is given authority to narrate his courtship of Helen, readers are apt to share his contempt for the gossip about her. Gilbert's voice partially shields her since descriptions of Helen's behavior are projected through his desire for requited affection. Nonetheless, Helen's mutual attachment to a man who is not her husband is indicated by the intensity with which the text registers her effort to suppress an adulterous attraction: a momentary touch of their hands brings "a flash of extatic [sic] brilliance in her eye, a glow of glad excitement on her face", then almost instantly, "a painful recollection seemed to flash upon her; a cloud of anguish darkened her brow, a marble paleness blanched her cheek and lip" (85). With that blanching, we must also presume a previous flush of passion which is dangerously suggestive of sensual purpose. While narrative events ultimately discredit the community's maligning of Helen, there is enough weight behind the judgment that leaving her husband is "a violation of her sacred duties as a wife" and "a tempting of Providence by laying herself open to temptation" that the plot requires a device of spiritual purpose to sanction her remarriageability (442).

<9>I propose that the novel accomplishes this by using marital nursing for the redemption of its heroine. Criticized for her assertive flight, Helen returns to the scene of her disastrous marriage when Arthur injures himself and requires care. The decision, which Gilbert worries is an "infatuated step" back into the failed-marriage plot, confirms her status as a sympathetic heroine (406). Helen's care-taking projects a spirituality which contrasts with the manner of the "professional nurse, a grim, hard old woman [who] had been hired to attend the wretched invalid" (407). Nursing her abusive, estranged husband conventionally aligns with doing her duty and morally reinstates her within the community. She atones for separating from Arthur and for (unintentionally) forming a second attachment while still married by demonstrating integrity within the scope of feminine stereotypes. Marital nursing resolves the structural tension created when Arthur's illness brings the events from the outer and inner frame stories into collision.

Returning to nurse her estranged husband — more so than his death itself — provides closure to the failed, first-marriage plot. Helen's gesture opens the way for a socially accepted second marriage to play out with Gilbert. Thus, the mechanism allowing *Tenant's* unconventional heroine to navigate around her bad marital union is actually the nursing marital reunion scene itself. Brontë's use of marital nursing as a narrative device to initiate remarriage questions the conventional marriage plot "from the inside out", a function that Hager has attributed to the novel's framing structure (29).

<10>In terms of the novel's marital politics, we can also see redemptive nursing as a trope by which Brontë justifies the route of extralegal separation from a failed marriage. Insisting that her return to care for Arthur is for the "satisfaction of my own conscience", Helen distinguishes the decision from a misguided sense of obligation to her abuser (413). By presenting two different functions for nursing, doing one's duty (as a wife) and satisfying one's own conscience, Brontë uses the latter as a stance from which to interrogate the former. Helen reveals: "I find myself in rather a singular position: I am exerting my utmost endeavors to promote the recovery and reformation of my husband, and if I succeed what shall I do?" (414). Her question dramatizes her situation in relation to the overlap between the failed-marriage and the remarriage plots. The security of Helen's status as a heroine and the sanctioning of her transition from one plot to the other depends upon atoning for acts against her own conscience, not just the social conscience. She satisfies this moral imperative through her sympathetic duty to nurse rather than her duty as a wife. Because marital nursing is able to reassert Helen's integrity in the plot, it justifies her negotiation around the tangled obligations of a failed marriage. Thus, redemptive nursing can extract an unconventional heroine from the failed-marriage plot, excuse the extralegal step of marital separation, and show her deserving of a fulfilling second alliance. Brontë confirms Helen's remarriageability by positioning her as the suitor, who presents Gilbert with a rose by way of a proposal.

<11>Through redemptive nursing, Brontë conceptualizes a more ideal form of marital relations in the plot of her heroine's remarriage. Helen admits that, once again, "my marriage is to please myself alone", the same romantic inclination which guided her, against the advice of her family, to form an alliance with the rakish Arthur (467). However, the different quality of her attachment to Gilbert reassures readers of the rewarding alternative this union presents to the novel's initial marriage. Critics, some of whom object to Gilbert's framing voice as a patriarchal intrusion upon Helen's diary entries at the novel's core, have debated whether his character is really all that different from her first husband.(5) The nursing plot helps to allay these fears about Gilbert by inflecting Helen's second marriage with a mutual concern for care-taking that was absent from her marriage to Arthur. Helen and Gilbert's relationship is characterized as "the unity of accordant thoughts and feelings, and truly loving, sympathizing hearts and souls" (468). These qualities can be traced to the aspects of the nurse-patient relationship in their courtship. Gilbert expresses his love through an impulse to nurse Helen: "she I loved was alone and afflicted, suffering from injured health and dejected spirits, and I was forbidden to console or assist her" (435). Gruner has argued that the courtship plot of *Tenant's* frame narrative "encases a far less conventional tale, one that calls into question the viability of the courtship frame" because Helen's "tale of marital abuse ... calls all marriage, and thus all courtship plots, into question" (309). Rather than calling *all* marriage into question, *Tenant* challenges the viability of marriage when it is not formed on the model of the nurse-patient relationship. The correlation I

draw between nursing and ideal conjugality takes its cue from “the power of infirmity to draw people close”, such that affliction becomes an occasion for bonding and care-taking becomes a model for marriage (Holmes 52). The next section of my argument considers how the marriage plot is revised when this affirmation of love as care occurs between friends of the same sex.

### **Nursing between Friends in *Diana of the Crossways***

<12>*Diana* is a useful text to complicate this discussion because of the role gender plays both in structuring the nurse-patient relationship and in accommodating remarriage in the plot.(6) In Meredith’s novel, the call to nurse a close female friend contains a New Woman character, whose flight from domestic dissatisfaction compromises her reputation and threatens her status as a heroine. Tabitha Sparks’ study of late nineteenth-century novels posits that “aggressive and sometimes fatal medical interventions operate as necessary punishments for errant womanhood, as New Women challenge the traditional boundaries of marriage” (21). Turning to *Diana*, we see how sensitive medical intervention by friends who nurse each other can redeem errant womanhood. In her domestication, the New Woman is rewarded with a marriage that reimagines the traditional husband-wife relation through the solidarity she demonstrates while nursing her friend. Heeding Tess Cosslett’s warning against trying to read friendship between women “as a substitute for or in competition with a male-female relationship”, I see nursing between friends of the same sex as a figure for fulfillment in a male-female relationship (3). My reading of *Diana* uses Meredith’s extended depiction of “a classic friendship between women, the alliance of mutual devotedness men choose to doubt of”, to assess the heroine’s second marriage, notable as the only happy marital relation in the novel (Meredith 70).

<13>The New Woman context of *Diana* makes it notably different from *Tenant* at mid-century. When the nursing-mediated relationship of the mid-century marriage plot gets imported into the world of the *fin de siècle*, it is inflected by issues of female professionalism and assertiveness. To be more specific, the professionalization of nursing as a career for middle-class women parallels the New Woman’s self-assertion. While the profession of nursing is about caring for others, being paid signals its usefulness for one’s self, and as Kristine Swenson points out, “the presence of these educated and independent women who receive payment for performing tasks traditionally assigned to the domestic woman ... inevitably alters the meaning of ‘womanhood’ and the positions of other women in Victorian culture” (2). Likewise, the conventional Victorian woman is allowed assertiveness as long as it is in service to others, not herself; however, what the New Woman adds that is so shocking is that she does things for herself, to advance and to fulfill herself. Although I am explicitly eschewing professional nursing narratives in this article, an amateur marital one like that in *Diana* has to be understood differently than earlier nursing narratives, because now there is a professional model against which to compare it.(7) To go back to one’s husband to nurse him through illness is now a choice whose amateurism, private domestic setting, and voluntary nature become more obvious because it is implicitly contrasted with other women of the same class and age who are doing it professionally for wages or for larger political aims. Ultimately, nursing provides a way to explore not just how *Diana* departs from *Tenant*, but how marriage itself gets reconfigured by the *fin de siècle*.

<14>Nursing between friends changes the trajectory of the New Woman plot in Meredith’s novel, excusing, just as it repairs, Diana Warwick’s assertive separation from the failed-marriage

plot. It enables her relocation into a second marriage with Thomas Redworth, a potential suitor in the original marriage plot who fails to assert himself before she hastily accepts Augustus Warwick's proposal. The possibility of Diana's remarriage is kept open by Emma Dunstane, whose persistent invalid state constitutes the domestic core of the novel and whose wish to see her friend happily settled maintains the second marriage plot at the center all the while. Much like Hager's claim that "the interpolated story in *Tenant* is meant to be read alongside the courtship plot that frames it", I argue not that the second marriage plot in *Diana* starts at the point where the first one ends, but that the two are in conversation throughout the novel, the one interrogating the other via the theme of nursing (29). We might even say that nursing between friends intervenes in Meredith's original intention to culminate *Diana* with the death of its heroine, as Emma's devoted nursing of her friend averts this outcome towards the novel's close. Whereas an inadequate marital match almost always results in tragedy for Thomas Hardy's unconventional heroines, Meredith opts to spare Diana and reinstate her in a marriage that is much different in nature from her first one.

<15>Given the passage of the Divorce Act nearly three decades earlier, it is perhaps not surprising that the failed marriage in *Diana* results in a divorce suit. Although the adultery charge that Augustus raises against his estranged wife is merely false speculation, the legal action undermines her social standing.<sup>(8)</sup> Diana's reputation is further compromised by the romantic attachment she subsequently forms with Percy Dacier. On the verge of running off with Percy, Diana is recalled from this step, that would actually make her a "fallen woman", when Emma undergoes surgery. Diana's devotion to nursing her friend is an "assertion of the enduring bond of mutual dependency" which intercedes in the plot to redeem the New Woman character (Bailin 138). During the scene of Emma's surgery, Diana performs heroic spirituality by her bedside, "bleeding holy sweat of brow for her friend" (267). The act of nursing between friends occurs offstage, while the narrative focus turns to Emma's philandering husband, Sir Lukin, who does nothing more than disingenuously sentimentalize the suffering of his wife. When distinguished from Sir Lukin's empty sentiments, Diana's actions appear all the more loving, and therefore redemptive. This moment in the plot, coming on the heels of our heroine's social disgrace, proves the essential moral integrity of her character. The juxtaposition of Diana and Sir Lukin's behavior towards Emma also comments upon traditional marriage by sanctifying the devotion between friends over and against the lack of compassion in the marital relationship.

<16>A scenario we encountered in *Tenant*—the question of a wife's obligation to nurse her ill husband after the erosion of the marital bond—appears in a more complicated form in *Diana*. Unlike Helen Huntingdon, who conforms to the expectation that it is her duty to nurse even the husband who tormented her in marriage, Diana (whose marital discontents do not include an abusive spouse) declines to return to nurse Augustus. Meredith injects an additional party into the situation between estranged spouses in the figure of Constance Asper, the woman whom Percy throws over in his romantic dalliance with Diana. Constance proposes to nurse Diana's "abandoned husband" herself as a "neatly implied bitter reproach cast on the wife" (271). We have seen how nursing can affirm moral integrity, but here Constance deploys it to challenge the respectability, and thus the status, of the heroine. However, Diana does not see marital nursing as her obligation, but rather suggests it would be hypocrisy given her disgust at the idea of reconciliation. Interestingly, Emma, who ultimately facilitates Diana's remarriage, also absolutely discourages her from returning to nurse her first husband. Early in their relationship,

Augustus commends his wife as “an attentive nurse”, regarding this “as proof of her power to serve” him (62). By refusing to return and care for him after their estrangement, Diana also rejects that which would redeem her as remarriageable in a mid-century novel like *Tenant*. While *Diana* eschews the means by which *Tenant* redeems its heroine and authorizes her remarriage, reading across the century shows us more radical ways that nursing can intervene in the marriage plot. Diana’s successful traversing suggests that redemptive nursing is invested with as much formal power in the marriage plot when it is filtered between same-sex friends as when a wife nurses her husband. In other words, devotion between friends has as much influence in the outcome of the marriage plot as the spousal relation.(9)

<17>When imported into the world of the *fin de siècle*, the nursing-mediated relationship that provides for marriageability occurs, not in a marital reunion, but in a reunion between female friends. Near the end of the novel, Emma revives Diana from an illness brought on by self-starvation, the former coaxing her friend to eat by lovingly telling her: “We two can feed from one spoon; it is a closer bond than the loving-cup” (332). Here, the extension and acceptance of care serves as an alternative to the marriage contract, figured in the sentimental contract of the “loving-cup”. In the text, this intimate nursing scene appears after Diana’s ill-considered first marriage has collapsed under a divorce suit and just before she enters into a second marriage orchestrated by Emma. Cosslett has written about close bonds between female friends, claiming that their identities often merge so that “the powerful, independent heroine [is] made more acceptable” through her association with a more conventional friend, a situation that can be read as “the heroine assimilating to herself the acceptable traits of womanhood” (4). Although Cosslett limits her scope to works by women writers, she identifies *Diana* as one of the only “male” texts fitting a similar formula, as the suitor and “the more conventional friend operate in collusion to prevent the heroine’s more unconventional excesses, and eventually to assimilate her to marriage with him” (184 n9). In contrast to considering a collusion between male suitor and female friend, I see the mutual activity of nursing between intimate female friends as the mechanism by which Diana becomes remarriageable, reducing the role Cosslett assigns to the male in this process of assimilation. While Diana chafes against her loss of freedom at the end of the novel with her marriage to Redworth, Meredith frames the prospects of this union on Diana’s relation with her invalid friend rather than her future husband. Readers are reassured that the remarriage will be rewarding by the way that the plot couples Emma’s role in restoring Diana to health with her role in arranging this second marriage for her friend.

<18>As friends caring for each other in the manner of companionate pair, the nurse-patient relationship in which Diana and Emma mutually engage posits another form of close, personal relations than the marital one, or at least suggests what the marital relation might more ideally be like. Towards the end of the sickroom scene in which Diana is near death, the prospect for her recovery is signaled in the line, “Emma fed her as a child, and nature sucked for life”, which turns on the association of nursing with care-taking as well as with maternity (breast-feeding) (332). A complement to this nursing/maternity scene can be found in the way matrimony is consummated by their friendship in final chapter of the novel, entitled “The Nuptial Chapter”. As Emma expectantly awaits Diana’s return from her honeymoon, she reflects upon letters from her friend which “breathed of the perfect mating” she has orchestrated (397). In these letters that “feed her during her soul-sister’s absence”, Emma hopes for news that Diana is pregnant (396, emphasis added). When the two friends are back in each other’s arms, Diana fulfills Emma’s

wish to “*live long enough* to be a godmother” with a confirmation of pregnancy that also promotes the well-being of her friend (398, emphasis added). Thus, the husband-wife relation at the novel’s close serves a nursing function for the friends. Sharon Marcus similarly reads the involuntary twitch of Diana’s finger in this reunion scene as an unspoken confirmation of Emma’s desire to be a godmother, a response which “underscores that a clearly consummated marriage has not dimmed the romance between female friends” (84). The pregnancy Diana confirms here can also be read as an off-spring that results more so from “the romance between female friends” (solidified through nursing) than the conjugal bond itself, underscoring how the novel reconceptualizes the marital relation. The bond Meredith confirms between Diana and Emma, rather than Diana and Redworth, recalls Helen Huntingdon’s description of her second marriage as “the unity of accordant thoughts and feelings, and truly loving, sympathizing hearts and souls” (468).

<19>Brontë and Meredith both rely on nursing to tackle the problem of remarriage in the marriage plot novel; however, *Diana* presents a different resolution in its redefinition of marital love through female friends dedicated to caring for each other. At mid-century, the nursing-mediated relationship feeds directly into the resolution of the courtship plot with a remarriage modeled on traditional marriage; the second husband is just a more caring, considerate, and suitable match for the heroine. Yet marriage is thrown into question with divorce law and the New Woman figure, both of which challenge the supposed bliss of the conventional marital relation. Thus, as seen in two novels, a similar narrative changes after 1857. While the mid-century heroine is redeemed within the context of traditional marital relations, the late-Victorian heroine’s redemption, because it occurs instead within the context of same-sex friendship, actually changes the marital relation itself. While critics like Marcus usefully reveal how female egalitarian companionship can be read as a model for the reconfiguration of marriage at the *fin de siècle*, my argument is somewhat different. I hope to have convinced my reader that the activity of nursing reciprocated between intimate female friends is a better model for understanding how marriage comes to change in the nineteenth century, as it suggests not just a reconfiguration of a hierarchical relationship into a lateral one, but also the privileging of mutual care that creates solidarity between marital pairs.

<20>In closing, I want to return to the basic claim of this article and affirm why it is crucial to read nursing into the marriage plot in the first place. My argument has drawn a line of reasoning between the idea that nursing is an essential skill of angelic femininity and the notion that being an angel in the house means being good *first* marriage material. I have complicated these formulations in my readings of the primary texts by concentrating on the misalignment they present between nursing and marriage plot conventions. While amateur nursing inherently projects marriage material, in the hands of an unconventional heroine, this angelic capacity can also be made to support remarriageability. Whether applied for the first husband at mid-century in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* or for an intimate female friend at the *fin de siècle* in *Diana of the Crossways*, care-taking skills can upend the traditional marriage plot in service of a second, and finally happy, ending. Across the mid- to late-Victorian period, the nurse-patient relationship operates as a gauge by which we can assess the suitability of a heroine’s second match. For readers of the marriage plot, nursing can offer a crucial way of reinforcing when the right marriage *is* remarriage.

## Endnotes

(1) These novels set nursing in the home, so I do not extend this claim to hospital or professionalized nursing; likewise, neither heroine is actually “fallen”, so I only claim that redemptive nursing has the formal authority to rewrite marriageability when the unconventional heroine’s fallenness is an implication, not a narrative “fact”, as in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth* (1853).(^)

(2) *Ruth* lies outside the parameters of my argument for two reasons: first, its heroine is a “fallen woman”, which precludes marriage as a narrative possibility, and second, while Ruth’s nursing is self-sacrificial, she engages in this work to earn a living (after having also worked as a seamstress and a governess). During the nineteenth century, the medical field became one of the primary vocational inroads for women via the professionalization of nursing, changing the meaning attached to nursing—especially in relation to marriageability. While on the one hand this opened up a potential way for women to support themselves respectably since the work fit the stereotype of feminine activities, professionalized nursing exposed anxieties about female agency and respectability which gave the nurse-figure an uneasy relation to marriage.(^)

(3) Kristine Swenson also cites a “tenacious cultural link between the nurse and the working-class prostitute” in Victorian fiction (5).( ^)

(4) Hager defines this offshoot of the marriage plot in detail and distinguishes its features from those of the bigamy plot; seep. 48 n22.(^)

(5) This critical debate includes McMaster, Langland, and Diederich.(^)

(6) For general context about Meredith’s opinions on marriage and how he works out marital issues in his novels, see Deis.(^)

(7) Other *fin de siècle* texts would certainly fit into this conversation about marriage, nursing, and the New Woman; however, they would extend the discussion outside of what length permits me here to address. Such texts include: Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1895), where Sue goes back to nurse Phillotson, and *Arabella* (sort of) nurses Jude, which seems like a curdled, nasty

reenactment of the nursing marital reunion scene of mid-century, as well as Mary Ward's *Marcella* (1894), where she becomes a professional nurse.(^)

(8)Caroline Norton, the real-life model for Meredith's Diana Warwick, had a humiliating and extremely public experience in divorce court which compromised her reputation despite being exonerated in the adultery suit raised by her husband.(^)

(9)Sharon Marcus makes a similar point in *Between Women* with her idea about the female amity plot; however, her argument does not consider how female friendship is imbricated in nursing; see pp. 82-96.(^)

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