

Reconceiving Victorian Pregnancy and Childbirth: A Case Study of Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* and *Lord Oakburn's Daughters*

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TRADITIONALLY, it was a truth universally acknowledged that Victorian novels did not represent pregnancy or childbirth. Female characters give birth—that is, babies appear—but are these characters ever represented as pregnant or in labor? This traditional view, summarized by Cynthia Malone in 2000, was that, in the Victorian period, “it became not merely impolite but virtually impossible to speak clearly and directly about pregnancy.”¹ However, recent scholarship has challenged this conventional assumption about pregnancy’s invisibility in the era’s fiction and culture. Indeed, Jessica Cox, Susan Walton, and Livia Arndal Woods call for scholars to reconsider their approaches to Victorian representations of pregnancy. Cox accepts that pregnancy is “notable by its absence from the art and literature of the time” but argues that scholarly investigation of women’s “letters, diaries, and memoirs, as well as medical advice literature, newspapers, journals, and fiction” can “rewrite the maternal body back into history.”² Walton suggests that Victorian novelists used specific, now often-unrecognized literary

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techniques to navigate the “minefield of propriety” surrounding pregnancy representation: such techniques include allusions to dates that enable the reader to calculate a young bride’s possible pregnancy, references to “an expected visit from a trusted female relation as an indication of a pregnancy due date,” and “women’s coded and metaphorical language” regarding pregnancy.³ Finally, Woods models a “somatic reading” of Victorian novels that “elide pregnancy as an embodied condition”: referring to *Middlemarch*’s depiction of Rosamond’s miscarriage, for example, she calls for scholars to recognize “that the circumstances [Rosamond] is described as experiencing without suffering almost always entail suffering” and for this recognition to inform the way scholars approach *Middlemarch* (1871–72).⁴ All three suggest that Victorians did discuss pregnancy—although not in ways or terms that modern readers have been trained to recognize.

The recent burgeoning of criticism on maternity generally and Victorian pregnancy in particular suggests that maternal affect and pregnancy are cultural constructions with rhetorics specific to time, place, and social context.⁵ If we accept that premise, then we cannot expect nineteenth-century discourse to mirror our own vocabulary of or conceptions about pregnancy or maternity. Rather, we should expect difference, even strangeness. Shannon Withycombe models the necessary methodological act of conceiving pregnancy differently in *Lost: Miscarriage in Nineteenth-Century America*. She detaches herself from current preconceptions that miscarriage equates to failure, shame, and loss, finding that Victorian women responded to miscarriage in various ways, including with grief but also with relief, humor—or even joy. Similarly, in arguing that advice manuals of the period “suture[d] [maternal] anxiety to the childcare situation,” Regaignon points out “usefully strange” differences between Victorian and contemporary conceptions of childhood medical conditions.⁶ For example, she notes that childhood convulsions—a common cause of infant deaths—were viewed not as a symptom (as they are now) but as a “distinct disorder,” brought on variously by the mood of the wet nurse or nursing mother, as well as by breathing impure air, teething, or eating an improper diet.⁷ Cox similarly remarks on the strangeness of Victorian pregnancy vocabulary: in one diary, a wife’s pregnancy is “hinted at” by means of apparently contradictory references: “she is variously described as ‘quite well,’ ‘so well,’ ‘very tired,’ and ‘unwell,’” as well as experiencing “hysterics.”⁸

This article builds on these scholars’ explorations of such distinctly Victorian depictions of pregnancy and maternity, seeking to label and

enumerate the literary techniques and vocabulary that Victorian novelists deployed to represent pregnancy and childbirth. Such fictional representations avoid the directness of the eighteenth century and of our own era but nevertheless speak clearly about pregnancy in historically specific ways. The following case study of linked novels by Ellen Wood (1814–1887) demonstrates how literary critics might make visible the pregnant characters populating Victorian fiction and the pregnancy anxieties driving its plots. Wood provides a useful case study because she branded a form of maternal melodrama that appealed to women readers by centering plots around women’s domestic and marital experiences.⁹ We have chosen *East Lynne* (1860–61) and *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters* (1864) because the latter remixes plot elements related to pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum experience from the bestselling *East Lynne*. Moreover, while *East Lynne* has been seen as intensely maternal in theme, its plot has not been recognized as propelled by pregnancy. However, Wood’s vocabulary and formal devices surrounding pregnancy have largely escaped critical attention because they differ so markedly from ours. Studying Wood’s recycling of *East Lynne* in *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters* not only provides evidence of how she represented pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum experience but also models a narratological method for analyzing such representations in mid-Victorian fiction generally.

This article offers three conceptual resources for making visible the pregnant body and its plot effects in Victorian fiction. First, we suggest that authors used what we term *pregnancy calendaring*—that is, intense diegetic narration on the passing of weeks, months, and seasons in relation to a fertile woman’s life—to signal pregnancy’s progression. An 1859 reviewer of George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* objected to this “practice that is now becoming common among novelists . . . that of dating and discussing the several stages that precede the birth of a child.”¹⁰ Several critics have drawn attention to Victorian fiction’s emphasis on dates surrounding pregnancy depictions, with Walton observing that “the inclusion of dates” allowed readers, accustomed to pregnancies swiftly following wedding days, “to keep track of newly-weds with automatic mental arithmetic” and to read references to “the passing of months and seasons as milestones on the road to a likely birth”;¹¹ Woods argues that such references draw “on the reader’s sense of the inescapability of pregnant chronologies.”¹² Our term *pregnancy calendaring* refers not merely to readers’ ability to calculate due dates but to narration that increasingly stresses dates and seasons in literary diegesis—a densification that itself functions as a Victorian code to suggest that a character is pregnant. Paying attention to

this specifically Victorian literary technique restores for modern readers the visibility of woman's pregnant bodies in the era's fiction and explains why contemporary reviewers found some novels grossly explicit even though modern readers may barely discern that characters are pregnant.

Second, we suggest the possibility of reconstructing Victorians' vocabulary and conceptual frameworks for pregnancy by consulting such sources as contemporary novels, media, and advice manuals for women (which, as Regaignon notes, proliferated in the period).¹³ In advice manuals and related media, the vocabulary, symptoms, stages, and recommendations about managing pregnant bodies differ enormously from today's. In terms of vocabulary, Victorian texts rarely use the word *pregnant*, referring instead to characters being *unwell*, *ill*, or *in a delicate or interesting condition*.¹⁴ In terms of symptoms, modern media scan for the so-called *baby bump* (Woods, *Pregnancy*, 2), whereas Victorian news sources discerned that Queen Victoria was pregnant based on her weak ankles and decision to avoid riding and dancing.¹⁵ Finally, whereas modern advice manuals warn about alcohol consumption during pregnancy, Victorian advice books warned about the dangers of inducing miscarriage or premature labor through bumpy train and carriage rides, as well as "horse riding, overexertion, falls, dancing, constipation, and taking purgatives or calomel."¹⁶ Finally, while modern health care focuses on postpartum health, it does not prescribe *lying in* after childbirth, limiting social interactions, or restricting food and activity.¹⁷ Reconstructing this pregnancy vocabulary and conceptual framework allows modern readers to discern pregnancy references that might otherwise escape them, rendering visible pregnant bodies in Victorian fiction.

Third, we suggest applying narratology to Victorian pregnancy narratives, considering who focalizes labor and delivery: family members, servants, doctors, midwives, or (rarely) the mother herself. Victorians often represent labor scenes from outside the delivery room, focalizing through listeners. Labor becomes a soundscape, with the woman's cries implied through the reactions of listeners who plug their ears, pace the room, or show other bodily signs of agitation, thus serving as the laboring woman's proxies. The technique of metonymy also indirectly represents women's experiences of pregnancy: babies' objects (shoes, caps, and clothing) and women's objects (workboxes, lockets, and letters) convey often-unspoken experiences of labor, childbirth, and child loss. Focalization and metonymy are not unique to pregnancy

narration but function as common strategies for indirectly narrating bodily experiences beyond acceptable mimetic representation. These three conceptual resources allow us to see pregnancy narration in plain sight where it might otherwise be barely perceptible. Just as critics such as Cox, Regaignon, Walton, Withycombe, and Woods have begun to uncover the “hidden history” of Victorian women’s maternal experiences, this article models how readers can uncover narratives of pregnant Victorian bodies.¹⁸

To model this recovery, we turn to *East Lynne* and *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters*. While the first is well and the second little known, they share similar plot elements related to marriage, pregnancy, delivery, and lying in. *East Lynne* features an earl’s daughter who marries into the middle class, gives birth in a rare Victorian labor scene, commits adultery due to postpartum vulnerability, gets pregnant outside wedlock, disguises herself to serve as governess to her own children, and dies in her former home. Meanwhile, in related double plots, her lover is revealed as both adulterer (a crime for which he is not held responsible) and murderer (a crime of which he is legally convicted). *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters*, as its title suggests, involves several earl’s daughters. It also involves similar plot elements to those of *East Lynne*: an earl’s daughter disguises herself as a governess, marries into the middle class, gets pregnant, gives birth, and is murdered in her lying-in room. Indeed, *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters* reuses significant elements of *East Lynne* while intensifying its focus on pregnancy, postpartum vulnerability, and lying in. The novel opens with an explicit labor scene, which Cox notes as an exception to childbirth’s general absence from Victorian fiction;¹⁹ its murder plot is set in the lying-in room; and its central metonym, a gold locket, stands for women’s bonds during childbirth. Both novels feature surprisingly explicit representations of childbirth and lying in, experiences that Wood shows as central to women’s lives. Moreover, mobilizing a hallmark of sensation fiction in both novels, Wood adapts the iconic trope of the woman in white—that uncanny symbol of anxieties from illegitimacy to enfranchisement first made famous by Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1859–60)²⁰—to represent gestational trauma and postpartum anxiety, thus producing what we dub *gestational sensation*. These two novels thus provide ideal test cases for considering how Victorian fiction could and did represent pregnancy and childbirth when subject to representational constraints.²¹ Studying Wood’s recycling of *East Lynne* not only shows how she represented pregnancy, childbirth, and maternal

feeling but also models a narratological method for analyzing such representations in mid-Victorian fiction generally.

“LADY, WIFE, MOTHER”: PLOTTING PREGNANCY IN *EAST LYNNE*

Critics have focused extensively on *East Lynne's* maternal themes, including infant custody (Gruner); women's moral power (Kucich); models of motherhood (T. Wagner, “Sensational”), including self-immolating ones (Kaplan); and female readers' shared experiences (Wynne). However, with the exception of Woods, who explores the novel's themes of pregnancy loss, lost children, and maternal death during childbirth (81–82), they underestimate the gestational contexts that imbued the text with affective power. Isabel births her first child in a near-fatal labor narrated from multiple viewpoints outside the delivery room. Her future adultery originates in the lying-in room, after this difficult birth renders her vulnerable to gossip, and is further fomented by her postpartum recovery in France after her third child's birth. The novel's gestational themes gather force when, after her adultery, the narrative elevates pregnancy calendaring to an anxious pitch as Isabel worries that Captain Francis Levison will not marry her in time to legitimize their child. Finally, the novel's conclusion heightens Isabel's pain by having her witness Barbara Hare's second pregnancy, conceived roughly when Isabel arrives, disguised as a governess, in her former home.

When Wood published *East Lynne*, she had borne two daughters and at least three sons, spent twenty years in France, and just published her first novel.²² *East Lynne*, a bestseller and stage hit, recycled aspects of Wood's biography related to marriage and maternity, integrating her grandmother's cross-class marriage, Wood's narrow escape from illegitimacy (she was born two months after her parents' marriage), the death of a child, and her postpartum weakness.²³ Transmuting her own history, she appealed to women's experiences of sexuality, marriage, pregnancy, and lying in. While critical focus on maternal themes generally concentrates on *East Lynne's* last third,²⁴ such themes permeate the entire novel. Wood's gestational sensation novel positioned childbirth and lying in at the heart of female experience, identifying them as life-changing.

Critics probing the novel's maternal themes pay scant attention to its childbirth scene, in chapter 17, “Death or Life,” which happens about a year after Isabel's marriage. Archibald Carlyle has been raised by his half-sister, Cornelia, after his mother's death in childbirth, establishing the

novel's preoccupation with maternal mortality (4–5 deaths per 1,000 births in the period).²⁵ Through pregnancy calendaring, the chapter reveals Isabel's pregnancy's progress: she marries Carlyle on May 1 (revealed in a dated letter [175]) and by February refers to “never feel[ing] very well now” and “not equal to exertion.”²⁶ “I shall be better when baby is born,” Isabel tells the unsympathetic Cornelia (219), saying she is avoiding carriages except with her husband driving, following advice cautioning pregnant women against rough carriage rides.²⁷ She delivers in April, eleven months after marriage.

The chapter skips to the labor scene, deploying multiple focalizers outside the delivery room—and excluding Isabel and her male doctors from focalization. Wood represents two listening spaces: one for women, whose bodily responses serve as proxies for the laboring Isabel, and another for Carlyle, whose agitation contrasts his usual calm.²⁸ The labor scene starts with indirect narration representing Isabel's distraught servant, Joyce, and the unsympathetic Cornelia listening to her labor. Known for creating a female reading community, Wood here narrates childbirth through women's auditory experiences. Cornelia's wadded mantle (covering head and ears) metonymically suggests Isabel's labor cries that the novel declines to represent directly. Additionally, Joyce's bodily responses substitute for Isabel's: her hands are “clasped in pain,” “tears cours[e] down her cheeks,” and she is “faint with apprehension” (220–21). Even Cornelia is “grey” and “shiver[s]” (220–21). The scene depicts shared female anxiety: women wait together, listening to “sounds from the next room” (221). These sounds are not described, but listeners' responses reflect their intensity: Joyce has not heard a horse “tearing off” for help and perceives time as “interminable” (220, 221); Cornelia exclaims, “I can't stand this” (221). Narrative time, previously marking pregnancy by referring to months, here slows to the rhythm of footfalls, the pounding of hooves, and sounds the narrative refuses to describe. Narrative dilation mimics cervical dilation.

The labor scene switches to another room where Carlyle awaits the surgeon's report, thus observing contemporary advice that husbands remain outside the delivery room.²⁹ In this male-focalized scene, Carlyle's body betrays anxieties similar to Joyce's, though differently expressed. He has “paced . . . the whole night,” his movements expressing the duration of Isabel's “protracted” labor (221). His face is “pale” like Cornelia's; his “flush” betrays emotion before the doctor speaks. Their dialogue suggests Carlyle's uncontrolled feelings, unusual for this lawyer:

when the surgeon recommends a clergyman, he utters “a cry” of “half horror, half despair” (221), thinking Isabel is dying. As Woods notes, Isabel had said she would “be better when baby is born,” but her “reproductive body is attended by the threat of death” in this scene (84). The surgeon’s only reassurance is that he referred to the child: in such “protracted cases” (221), the child might die and should be baptized promptly.³⁰ The nineteenth-century infant mortality rate (roughly 150 deaths per 1,000 births) grounds this discussion in reality.³¹ The chapter ends when Joyce emerges from the delivery room with the infant, “her pale face working with emotion” (222). So hurried is the baptism that Carlyle provides the name William before Joyce tells him the baby is a girl.

Isabel and Carlyle’s dialogue after her labor comments on childbirth and its central significance in their marriage, a significance reiterated at her deathbed. Avowing that she “bore it badly,” possibly referencing extradiegetic screams, Isabel says, “Let us be thankful that it is over. How thankful, none can know, save those that have gone through it” (223). This remark, with no referent for “it”—the indirectly narrated labor—suggests that childbirth can be only experienced, not represented. Yet Carlyle responds, “I think they can. . . . I never knew what thankfulness was until this day” (223), intimating that, even outside the delivery room, listeners—and readers—can imagine childbirth’s suffering. Wood thereby invites all readers, whatever their gender, into imaginative sympathy with the laboring woman. And sympathy lay at the heart of *East Lynne*. Despite Isabel’s flaws, sympathy rests with her, through childbirth and its aftermath, to her bearing three more children, committing adultery, and returning as governess to her children.³² Readers who wept over Isabel’s plight were invited to witness childbirth as a transformative experience that formed an essential part of this novel’s appeal.

East Lynne also uses the lying-in period to drive its plot, suggesting that postpartum vulnerability leads to Isabel’s adultery, thus reducing culpability. Because the Victorian conventions surrounding lying in are unfamiliar, modern readers may not recognize the significance of this setting, which conveyed to Victorians the need for physical rest and mental quietude—and evoked vulnerability to false impressions. Thomas Bull’s *Hints to Mothers* (1837), among the century’s most-published advice manuals, defined a one-month lying-in period as quiet and restful, protecting against “injurious” excitement wreaked by careless visitors who “excite and disturb [the new mother’s] system.”³³ As Pye Henry Chavasse wrote in *Advice to a Wife* (1868), in a ten-day to two-week period

of “quietude,” women should remain “horizontal” on a bed or sofa.³⁴ Such care safeguarded new mothers, who, according to James Reid’s *On the Symptoms, Causes, and Treatment of Puerperal Insanity* (1848), were vulnerable to “nervous irritability and excitement”: “[T]he slightest impressions agitate the mind, which is thus ready to receive any false impressions which may be brought out by a sudden shock, or unexpected and exciting cause.”³⁵

The novel identifies Isabel as subject to such postpartum vulnerability at key junctures: first, when, after her first child’s delivery, she overhears gossip concerning her husband’s possible flirtation with Barbara; next, when she recovers alone in France after her third childbirth; and, finally, when she meets with Levison after delivering their illegitimate child. At the first two junctures, Wood depicts Isabel as physically weak and mentally prone to suggestion that leads to adultery; in the third, Isabel shows character strength in rejecting Levison despite such vulnerability. In the first such scene, about a week after childbirth, Isabel lies in a “half wakeful delirium, which those who suffer from weakness and fever know only too well” (225).³⁶ The reference to fever suggests that, beyond general postpartum vulnerability, Isabel has puerperal fever, common in the period.³⁷ In this vulnerable state, Isabel overhears servants gossiping about Carlyle giving Barbara a locket and Barbara collapsing after hearing about Carlyle’s marriage. As Woods notes, “the jealousy of Barbara Hare that eventually prompts Isabel to leave her husband . . . takes root” in scenes that today might be viewed as depicting “postpartum depression, anxiety, or even psychosis” (84). The servants’ gossip violates advice on the lying-in room, into which, according to contemporary advice manuals, neither “chatterers” nor “noisy conversation” should be permitted.³⁸ Notably, this scene also sensationalizes the lying-in room, just as Wood also sensationalizes the “safeguarded” nursery.³⁹ The narrator specifies that Isabel would have ignored such gossip “had she been in strong health” (229). However, postpartum vulnerability and fever affect her judgment: “a pretty state of excitement she worked herself into as she lay there, jealousy and fever, ay, and love too, playing pranks with her brain” (229). *East Lynne* thus identifies postpartum delirium as inciting Isabel’s jealousy of Carlyle and Barbara—and, moreover, her adultery with Levison. Isabel’s postpartum delirium thereby cultivates readers’ sympathy: while morally wrong, she is not fully responsible for that immorality.

The immediate occasion for Isabel’s adultery happens in the vulnerable postpartum period after her third (extradiegetic) delivery, again

reducing her culpability. Isabel is about eleven months postpartum when she suffers “protracted weakness” (245).⁴⁰ Her state recalls Wood’s own experience of “great [postpartum] delicacy and debility.”⁴¹ While Carlyle follows medical advice for Isabel to go abroad for a “change of scene” (245), he leaves her in Boulogne, rendering her vulnerable to the predatory Levison, who happens to be there. Seeing her on her first outing, Levison says Isabel looks “alarmingly ill”, confirming her vulnerability. Levison exploits her illness, suggesting Carlyle will be grateful if he “take[s] care of” Isabel (255). As Woods notes, Levison also “plays on the circumstances of Barbara’s conferences with Carlyle . . . to intensify Isabel’s jealousy,” which was seeded in her vulnerable postpartum state (85). Significantly, the novel also attributes some responsibility for Isabel’s adultery to Carlyle’s lack of understanding of postpartum recovery: when Barbara recovers after her second child’s birth, he sends her to the English seaside but visits “most evenings” (675). After his fifth child’s birth, Carlyle thus comes to comprehend and protect against postpartum vulnerability. Wood thus relates Isabel’s adultery to such vulnerability, situating her adultery in the context of women’s postpartum health.

Incited by postpartum delirium and weakness, Isabel’s adultery takes her beyond her marriage and social acceptability to the continent, for which scenes Wood drew on her years in France. While critics have explored Isabel’s fall through seduction and extramarital pregnancy, few have noted the conventions surrounding pregnancy representation (including pregnancy calendaring) in this section; by contrast, Woods has astutely pointed out readers’ sense of the “inescapability of pregnant chronologies” and the emphasis on time in this section (85). In chapter 29, the ironic title, “Charming Results,” signals the possibility of Isabel’s pregnancy by Levison. In the title’s context, the narrator’s address to the reader as “Lady—wife—mother!” carries irony (334): Isabel is, in social terms, no longer a lady, soon will no longer be a wife (Carlyle is seeking a divorce), but will become a mother again—this time by Levison rather than her husband. Focusing on Isabel, the narrator refers to time with greater specificity, again initiating pregnancy calendaring: “Nearly a year went by; all but some six or eight weeks; when, one morning in July, Lady Isabel made her appearance in the breakfast-room” (335).

Isabel’s pregnancy with Levison is represented with heightened temporal specificity compared to her pregnancies within marriage. References to passing time are marked by her anxiety about the child’s potential illegitimacy. The narrator intimates Isabel’s pregnancy by alluding to “her state of health” (336), a common euphemism, and, more

overtly, to her anxiously awaiting news of the divorce so she can marry Levison “before the birth of her child” (336).⁴² Irony increases as Levison receives two letters from his lawyers, the first (hidden from Isabel) announcing the divorce and the second (revealed to her) his baronetcy, prompting his departure for England. Their ensuing conversation ratchets pregnancy calendaring to an anxious pitch, as Isabel calculates the traveling time to England and back:

“Were you to go to England, you might not be back in time.”

“In time for what?”

“Oh, how can you ask? . . . [Y]ou know too well. In time to make me your wife when the divorce shall appear.”

“I must chance it,” coolly observed Sir Francis.

“Chance it! *chance* the legitimacy of the child?” (339; emphasis in original)

Levison asserts that “there’s a month yet” (340), meaning Isabel is eight months pregnant. He promises to return before the birth. However, savvy readers would realize that his baronetcy will make unlikely a compromising marriage to a divorced lover. By isolating Isabel in France and making her the sole spokesperson for her unborn child, Wood creates a narrative pressure cooker in which pregnancy discussion is unusually overt. Notably, Woods argues that “time” (which appears eighteen times in the chapter) functions here as “a euphemism for pregnancy,” but we suggest that the chapter’s repeated insistence on time and chronology in a narrative concerning a fertile and sexually active woman is an instance of pregnancy calendaring, a common coding strategy used in Victorian fiction, and one that was recognized by contemporary critics.⁴³

Isabel and Levison’s conflict over the child’s potential illegitimacy is ironized by diegetic references to Levison’s other seductions—and suggestions of resulting pregnancies. The narrator identifies Isabel as one of many sexually exploited women, noting that Levison had “not the least intention” to marry her, “any more than he had . . . to [marry] others who had gone before her” (336). The narrator also notes Levison’s “other mistresses” and implies other pregnancies.⁴⁴ In chapter 2, a minor character deems Levison a “heartless” “rake” who “hushed-up” some “business” with a Miss Charteris (58); as an 1883 edition stated, “she went abroad and died,” implying death from childbirth.⁴⁵ Moreover, chapter 12 suggests Levison’s affair with Emma Vane (his cousin, Isabel’s aunt, and Lord Mount Severn’s wife). Wood intimates their affair through carriage rides—ideal occasions for sexual encounters—and Emma’s jealousy when Levison flirts with Isabel. Finally, Levison is

revealed as one of Afy Hallijohn's many lovers as well as her father's murderer. Isabel is thus one of many women with lives transformed by Levison's sexual immoralities, for which there is no legal recourse.

After Isabel and Levison's July conversation, the narrative occludes her August delivery, resuming mimesis in December, with Isabel divorced, alone, and unmarried, with an illegitimate child. Details of her clothing and physicality identify her as being in what contemporaries would have viewed as an intensely vulnerable postpartum state. She is described as convalescing after childbirth and after a "low fever" (341). Clothing signals her postpartum status: she wears an "invalid's cap, and a thick woollen shawl" and shivers constantly (341). When Levison returns, Isabel "beg[s] him, in a subdued, quiet tone, not to draw too near, as any little excitement ma[kes] her faint now" (342). Yet in this vulnerable state, Isabel bravely stands up to her seducer, refusing his money, rejecting marriage with him now that the baby has been born illegitimately, and declaring them strangers henceforth. Isabel's adultery thus begins in postpartum vulnerability and ends in a remarkable scene of courage despite such vulnerability—a sympathetic context that modern readers, unused to Victorian pregnancy codes and lying-in protocols, may miss.

Many critics focus on the pathos of *East Lynne's* final section, when, after her baby dies, Isabel serves as governess to her own children, witnessing her son William's death and Carlyle's "amorous physical interaction" with Barbara, and being subject to Barbara's lectures on child care that critique mothers' "mistaken system in the management of their family" by spending too much time with their children.⁴⁶ While these circumstances are cause enough for Isabel's torture and readers' sympathy, it may not be clear to modern readers that her turmoil is heightened by Barbara's second pregnancy progressing under her eyes. This time, pregnancy calendaring allows readers to construct the timeline of Barbara's pregnancies. As Afy tells Isabel, Carlyle and Barbara married in June, have been married for "fifteen months" (451), and have a baby of "three or four months" (452).⁴⁷ (Barbara conceives within three months of marriage.) When Isabel arrives at East Lynne around October, Barbara is nursing her first baby, who is around five months old. As Victorians understood, breastfeeding reduces the chance of conception (some advice manuals recommended suckling to avoid "rapid succession of children"), but Barbara quickly conceives again.⁴⁸ When Isabel has been there for six months (and the first baby is eleven months old), Carlyle is urged to stand as MP, prompting him to start pregnancy calendaring

concerning Barbara. He also refers to the dangers of travel, alerting contemporary readers to her pregnancy, conceived around Isabel's arrival:

"If I do become their member, I must go up to town as soon as elected: and I don't think it will do for my little wife to be quitting her home to travel about just now."

Barbara's face wore a very blank look. She could not dissent from Mr. Carlyle's reasoning. . .

"I can accompany you very well for a month, perhaps two."

"You think so?"

"I am sure so." (497)

Although Wood observes tact in not visually describing Barbara's changing body, the novel suggests Barbara's pregnant shape through touch, making the pregnant body perceptible through dialogue rather than description of her rounded belly. When her brother, Richard, returns after a long absence, they meet in the dark, Barbara dressed in a mantle cloaking her body. Before she mentions either marriage or pregnancy, they embrace, and Richard exclaims, "you are a wife now!"—a remark that makes sense only if he feels her pregnant shape:

Locked in a yearning embrace, emotion overpowered both. . . . A little while, and then he put her from him, to look at her.

"So, Barbara, you are a wife now!"

"Oh, the happiest wife! . . . I have the sweetest baby; he is now nearly a year old—I shall have another soon, God willing." (560)

This scene contrasts with the one in which Isabel confronts Levison when heavily pregnant in that, as Woods notes, the latter scene allows readers to imagine Isabel's "large belly" but eschews any narrative reference to her shape; here, Richard's immediate verbal and physical reactions express his tactile and then visual recognition of her pregnant state (85). In the end, Barbara's London trip lasts three weeks. "[A]nother baby at East Lynne" is born as William's health "rapidly fall[s] away" (626). The pathos of William's death is heightened by Barbara's pregnancies; he fades as his stepmother blooms.

Indeed, *East Lynne* sets Isabel's childbirth, pregnancies, and adultery against a backdrop of fertility and family life. As Woods notes, the novel is driven by "child loss," in the first half by Mrs. Hare's longing for her exiled son, Richard, and in the second half by Isabel's longing for her lost children with Carlyle (81). The irony of Barbara's fertility is increased by Levison also having a new child: he has married Alice Challoner and has a legitimate son named Francis, as was his child

with Isabel. The marriage is fertile but regretted by Alice, who would leave but for fears that Levison “might keep” the two-year-old (513).⁴⁹ Children abound in *East Lynne*. Isabel gives birth to four (of whom two survive) and Barbara to two in two years of marriage; Carlyle has five between two marriages; Levison has two represented and untold illegitimate ones; the Hares have three, including the eldest, Anne, who gives birth during Richard’s first exile; the organist, Mr. Kane, supports seven on a meager income; Lord Mount Severn has two (of whom one survives); and Squire Pinner has numerous children whom Joyce nurses. In this novel, as in *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters*, Wood situates her brand of gestational sensation in a diegesis teeming with fertility.

This particular brand of sensation fiction comes to the fore in *East Lynne’s* conclusion, when Isabel becomes one of many 1860s women in white. Like Charles Dickens’s Miss Havisham and Wilkie Collins’s Anne Catherick, she becomes a spectral figure of female desire, longing, loss—and sympathy. On the surface, the conclusion punishes Isabel for her marital transgressions: she is prematurely aged and injured by the train crash; her two sons die; and she dies soon thereafter. However, the novel’s main affective impulse surrounding Isabel is not punishment but pathos: her suffering on William’s and her own deathbeds resonated among contemporary readers. As the *English Woman’s Journal* wrote in 1863, “it is the *mother* who claims her place.”⁵⁰ Before William’s death, when a fire alarm rouses the family to evacuate in their nightclothes, Isabel appears to Joyce as the ghost of East Lynne’s former lady, wife, and mother, a position now occupied by Barbara. Standing on the stairs, without cap or glasses, struggling to carry her youngest, Isabel’s ghostly maternal figure prompts Joyce to shriek in “awful terror” and “[a]ll on her knees” (622).⁵¹

Isabel’s power is augmented in the famous deathbed scenes dominating the novel’s conclusion. These scenes connect deathbed and childbed, asserting Isabel’s maternal right to be with her dying son. William’s deathbed scene displays intense maternal intimacy: Isabel “lean[s] over” her dying son, “her breath mingling with his” (549). Praying by his bedside, she recalls her postpartum vulnerability after her first childbirth: “She recalled the day when, her mind excited by certain gossip of Wilson’s—it was previously in a state of fever bordering on delirium—she had prayed her husband, in terror and anguish, not to marry Barbara” (652). William’s deathbed is thus palimpsestic, overlaid with her past experiences of postpartum fever and delirium. When William dies and Isabel “[flings] herself upon” his corpse (652), Joyce calls her

“my lady” (653) for the first time since her return, identifying her loss as a mother’s.

While William’s deathbed scene made the play famous, the *English Woman’s Journal* acknowledged Isabel’s deathbed as “the one scene of the novel, towards which all the rest culminates.”⁵² Controversial for Carlyle’s reunion with his divorced wife, Carlyle’s forgiveness of adultery, and Isabel’s imagining them in heaven with their children, the scene wielded enormous power, linking childbed and deathbed to amplify sympathy for Isabel despite her adultery. As the *English Woman’s Journal* noted, this scene created “an instantaneous perception of its truth in the reader’s heart, . . . scatter[ing] argument to the winds.”⁵³ Like William’s, Isabel’s deathbed recalls her first childbirth. Her dying words to Carlyle confirm that childbirth’s importance: “[D]o you remember when Lucy was born we thought I should have died; and your joy, your thankfulness that God restored me?” (681). William’s and Isabel’s deathbeds both center on maternal feeling and memories of childbirth. Moreover, her explanation to Carlyle of her adultery—“I was mad! I could not have done it in anything but madness” (681)—maps onto contemporary beliefs about postpartum vulnerability. *East Lynne* thus insists on the transformative power of childbirth and motherhood, from rendering Isabel vulnerable to adultery to redeeming her in death.

The novel has hitherto depicted Levison’s power to exploit women with impunity. However, at the end of the novel, the election and murder plots punish him by proxy for this seduction (and, arguably, others), acts beyond the law’s reach. In the final section, the adultery and murder plots converge when Levison, not Richard, is revealed as Hallijohn’s murderer. Wood also adds a gratuitous election plot in which Levison is viciously ducked in a pond. Both the murder and election plots vilify Levison and achieve his punishment. The *Times* identified Levison’s mob punishment as “excessively onerous” and unusual in fiction—but it possibly satisfied readers’ desire for retribution for Isabel’s ruin.⁵⁴

East Lynne’s appeal for women readers thus arose in part from bodily frankness about shared female experiences of pregnancy and childbirth—and the vulnerability to which they might lead. In the decade following *East Lynne*’s success, Wood mined this material in recyclings that further asserted the centrality of gestation and childbirth for women. Of these recyclings, *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters* is the most salient, heightening the explicitness around childbirth, intensifying the focus on lying in, and combining *East Lynne*’s murder and pregnancy plots into one.

THE EARL'S DAUGHTER REDUX: LYING IN AND DYING IN *LORD OAKBURN'S DAUGHTERS*

Reusing sensational plot details of pregnancy, childbirth, and murder, Wood recycled elements of *East Lynne* in *Lord Oakburn's Daughters*. The novel was serialized in *Once a Week* (March 19 to October 8, 1864) and published in three volumes by Bradbury and Evans (1864) as well as in the United States as *The Earl's Heirs*. The novel's titles clearly evoke *East Lynne*, which was adapted for the stage as *Edith, or the Earl's Daughter*, and appeared in the U.S. with the subtitle *The Earl's Daughter*.⁵⁵ Between 1861 and 1864, Wood had published nine novels.⁵⁶ One might attribute her recycling of *East Lynne* to this huge volume of writing, but subtle parallels suggest a more complex strategy. Like *East Lynne*, *Lord Oakburn's Daughters* features an earl's daughter who disguises herself as a governess, marries into the middle class, gives birth in a rare Victorian labor scene, and dies. Whereas *East Lynne* uses the murder plot to punish Levison for adultery and abandonment, *Lord Oakburn's Daughters* not only fuses the seducer and murderer into a single character but, unlike *East Lynne*, fuses the murder victim and the pregnant woman into a single character as well, thereby focusing explicitly on crimes against a vulnerable woman. Instead of focusing on one earl's daughter, the novel divides its focus among four (Jane, Clarice, Laura, and Lucy), disarticulating *East Lynne's* elopement and disguised-governess plots (both involving Isabel) and attributing them to different daughters, who multiply opportunities for representing marriage, pregnancy, and child loss, while focusing villainy on one man, Lewis Carlton. Before their father unexpectedly inherits an earldom, Clarice works as a governess under the name of Beauchamp, marries Carlton, becomes pregnant by him, gives birth under an assumed name in the small town where he lives, and sends her child away to be nursed by a Mrs. Smith. Carlton murders Clarice to avoid the consequences of this impecunious marriage. Meanwhile, not knowing that Clarice and Laura are sisters, he seduces and elopes with Laura, who ends up losing her only child at birth. About a decade afterward, Clarice's son, George, is brought to the small town by his adoptive mother, Mrs. Smith, where Carlton treats him for tuberculosis, and Jane recognizes a resemblance between the dying child and her lost sister. George's death replays William's death in *East Lynne*, and Carlton's arrest for murder replays Levison's. However, whereas Levison is transported, not hanged, Carlton dies before he can be legally tried for murder.

In this recycling of *East Lynne*, experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, lying in, and maternal loss take center stage, as Wood asserts the importance of childbearing for women characters—and readers. Indeed, *Lord Oakburn's Daughters* intensifies *East Lynne's* thematic focus on gestation and childbirth as well as its sensational elements surrounding these. Its labor, murder, and trial revolve around the lying-in space. In addition, by transposing the profession of its principal middle-class characters from law (Carlyle) to medicine (Carlton, the Drs. Grey, and Pepperfly), Wood provides opportunities for numerous diegetic allusions to childbirth, lying-in, puerperal fever, and child loss. However, *Lord Oakburn's Daughters* has been largely neglected by critics. An 1864 review ranked it second to *East Lynne* among Wood's novels for "the originality of its plot"—a remark suggesting that the critic did not perceive the extensive recyclings noted here.⁵⁷ Tamara Wagner notes this recycling, arguing that the novel reuses and dismantles the "massive [Victorian] consumption of sensationalized children."⁵⁸ Finally, Janice Allan notes briefly that the novel stands out for containing "an unusually frank representation of pregnancy" (n.p.), and Cox observes that its depiction of "early labour" is an "exception" to the general absence of labor and childbirth from Victorian fiction.⁵⁹ We build on Allan's observation while showing that the novel's sensational scenes, like those of *East Lynne*, are rooted in anxiety surrounding delivery and lying in.

The novel opens in March 1848 with an explicit childbirth scene when a stranger calling herself Mrs. Crane arrives by railway and omnibus in South Wennock, gives birth prematurely to a boy, and dies of prussic acid poisoning. The chapter title, "The Arrival," puns on an arrival in town and a baby's arrival into the world. The narrative initially focalizes through Mrs. Fitch, the inn's landlady, whose knowing eye recognizes the woman's pregnancy. Before the woman alights from the omnibus, Mrs. Fitch addresses her as "miss" (1.3); as she gets out, the narrator coyly remarks that "something in her appearance more particularly attracted the attention of Mrs. Fitch" (1.3), who apologizes, calls her "ma'am," and declares, "I took you for a young unmarried lady" (1.4). As in the *East Lynne* scene where Richard Hare discerns Barbara's pregnant body, tact predominates here: the narrator does not directly describe the woman's pregnant body, intimating her condition through dialogue. Importantly, the dialogue refers extensively to the shaking omnibus: the narrator says that it "came jolting along" (1.2); the woman calls the shaking "terrible" (1.3); and Mrs. Fitch says that she is "not in a condition to bear" the shaking (1.4). This last reference implies pregnancy,

paralleling Isabel's refusal to ride in carriages unless driven by her husband: Victorian advice manuals warned women about miscarriage or premature labor resulting from "riding . . . over rough roads in a carriage; [or] a long railway journey."⁶⁰ The unknown woman has endured both, doubly jeopardizing her pregnancy.

Focalizing through Mrs. Fitch, readers get a woman's perception of another woman's body, a narrative technique similar to *East Lynne's*, which first conveys Isabel's labor through women's ears. Through this dialogue among women, the chapter offers humor: the young woman immediately asks for wine and a biscuit, then ups her order to a meat sandwich. Wood does not overtly connect her hunger with pregnancy, but, for some readers, her avowal of hunger could be revealing, an invitation to share in Mrs. Fitch's knowingness. By page 5, Mrs. Crane declares that she is "expecting to be laid by" (1.5), and her new landlady indicates that she can rent rooms but must provide "proper attendance" (1.6)—that is, the landlady will not serve as midwife. By isolating the heavily pregnant woman as a stranger new to town, Wood gains an opportunity to deal frankly and pragmatically with the pregnant body's needs, from the jolting omnibus to the sandwich and the references to delivery. This explicitness parallels and exceeds that of *East Lynne's* discussion of Isabel's potentially illegitimate pregnancy with Levison.

Lord Oakburn's Daughters then plunges readers into details about childbirth rare in Victorian fiction—all initially focalized through women. The landlady sees Mrs. Crane turn "ghastly white" and faint (1.9). Mrs. Crane feels "fatigued and sick" and thinks she should see a doctor (1.13). The vocabulary used for labor is one of illness, as was common: the landlady says, "I hope you don't feel as if you were going to be ill!" (1.13).⁶¹ Mrs. Crane asks to send a letter to Dr. Carlton. The practical servant, Judith, asks, "Is she ill . . . ? She looks not unlikely to be" (1.16), and the landlady combines the vocabulary of illness with pregnancy calendaring when she says, "she won't be ill for these two months" (1.16)—that is, Mrs. Crane is seven months pregnant. As the narrator focalizes through women around Mrs. Crane, the symptoms increase: Judith observes her clasping a chair "in evident pain" (1.22), her hair combs are out, and she "moan[s] aloud" (1.22). She rests her head on Judith's shoulder. Her eyes are "wet with tears" (1.23), and she asks for a doctor. Judith and the landlady hear her "great cry" (1.24). Mrs. Crane tells Judith that she is "worse" (1.28), and the narrator observes, with surprising frankness about the body, that "the perspiration induced by pain was running off her as she spoke" (1.28). Mrs. Crane's symptoms

reflect contemporary descriptions of labor: Douglas Fox notes in *The Signs, Disorders and Management of Pregnancy* (1834) that “perspiration bedews the skin, which, at first, is cool; but, as the pains increase in severity, becomes warm.” Mrs. Crane’s clasping suggests the patient’s “desire to grasp and pull” as labor advances.⁶²

Whereas *East Lynne* never grants readers access to the delivery room, *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters* narrates Dr. Grey’s initial assessment of Mrs. Crane. We focalize through his male professional perspective as Mrs. Crane experiences a contraction, standing at a table, with “one hand . . . on it, the other . . . pressed to her side” (1.29). She says, “I am in great pain. . . . Do you think I shall die?” (1.30). Advice manuals viewed first-time pregnant women as especially “liable to . . . suppose that all is not right, . . . or that eventually they shall not survive the difficulties they have to encounter.”⁶³ Grey reassures Mrs. Crane that this is likely a “false alarm” (1.30), a contemporary term for “false labour pains” (now known as Braxton-Hicks contractions).⁶⁴ But, in the narrator’s words, “it was no false alarm. The lady got worse with every minute” (1.30).

Despite the novel’s frankness concerning labor, Mrs. Crane’s delivery remains extradiegetic. In a standard trope of Victorian delivery scenes, the landlady sits on the stairs with her hands over her ears, signifying the unnarrated cries of the laboring woman. The birth occurs in a diegetic summary emphasizing sound and time: “There was sufficient bustle in the house that night; but by the morning quiet and peace had supervened; and Nurse Pepperfly . . . was carrying about, wrapped in flannel, a wee wee infant” (1.33). Having switched to a male focalizer for advanced labor and extradiegesis for delivery, the narrative returns to female focalization and intimate dialogue in the lying-in room, as Mrs. Crane thanks Judith for her kindness during her delivery. Mrs. Crane gives Judith a locket containing her hair, a metonym for the shared experience of childbirth that the novel declines to represent directly. She says that, when she “began to feel ill,” she turned “sick with perplexity” at having only the “timid” landlady with her (1.34).

According to contemporary medical advice, because she is unmarried with no experience of childbirth, Judith is not an ideal birthing companion. As Thomas Bull wrote in 1842, “medical men do not like unmarried females in the room; they are neither the most fit companions for the patient, nor the most useful assistants to the practitioner.” However, Judith’s calm encouragement accords with Bull’s advocacy of a “judicious and affectionate” friend.⁶⁵ Mrs. Crane’s gift thus acknowledges the empathetic leap that Judith, a stranger, takes in attending

her delivery. Judith, in turn, says she will keep the locket till her “dying day” (1.37). The locket, gifted by the new mother to her supporter in childbirth, stands for everything that the narrative has not disclosed: the laboring woman’s experience, her consciousness during that experience, her very identity.

While the novel does not represent delivery per se, it does include a bizarre proxy for delivery: in a scene that mimics a birth, Carlton, a medical man who regularly delivers babies, encounters his own premature infant son in a train station and draws him out of his wrappings. This proxy delivery scene occurs just after Mrs. Crane maneuvers to have Mrs. Smith spirit the vulnerable infant away hours after birth. Her decision flouts advice manuals, which viewed premature infants as likely to survive when born at seven months or more but requiring “delicate attention.”⁶⁶ Readers thereby understand that Mrs. Crane is hiding the baby, but not why or from whom. Her mysterious behavior leads to one of the novel’s strangest scenes. Arriving on the down train (from London) as Mrs. Smith departs on the up train (to London), Carlton encounters his son in the waiting room, left alone while Mrs. Smith buys tickets. He enters the dark room, hears a “feeble cry,” “dive[s] into the wrappings . . . and fe[els] something warm and soft” (1.50–51), a scene reminiscent of delivery as he thrusts his hands in and draws the infant toward him. In a scene that exemplifies what Tamara Wagner dubs the trope of the “sensational baby of Victorian fiction,” Carlton strikes a match to look into the face of his as-yet-unrecognized son.⁶⁷ Set in a railway station and lit by a single match, it parallels other sensational scenes lit by gas or moonlight and creates gestational sensation—that is, scenes of visual shock associated with pregnancy and childbirth.⁶⁸

The novel’s sensationalism increases with the ghostlike figure that haunts the lying-in space just before Mrs. Crane’s death. This spectral figure appears to Carlton with “a man’s face with thick black whiskers, . . . looking stern, white, and cold” (1.91). As in Isabel’s ghostly appearance to Joyce, the scene occurs by “moonlight” and fills the witness with “awe” and “shuddering terror” (1.91).⁶⁹ Revealed at the novel’s end as nothing more than Judith, with her face bandaged because of a toothache, this spectral apparition renders the lying-in room a place of threat rather than familial care. Like Isabel’s spectral appearance on the staircase just before her death, this ghostly figure intrudes on domestic space—in this case, at the most vulnerable moment of Mrs. Crane’s life. Moreover, the narrator connects this spectral figure with maternal death, announcing at the chapter’s conclusion that “ere ten o’clock

had struck, the house *was* haunted . . . by . . . Death” (1.92; emphasis in original). Although not specifying who will die, this sensational prediction foreshadows Mrs. Crane’s death, one that readers might logically attribute to a common cause of maternal mortality in the period, such as obstructed labor, postpartum hemorrhage, or puerperal fever. However, Mrs. Crane’s death occurs not in delivery but by poisoning, an outcome that defies statistical likelihood and displaces the reality of women’s childbirth mortality rate of 4–5 per 1,000 births.⁷⁰ The poison comes in a draught that Grey prescribes to quell agitation after childbirth and for which Carlton substitutes poison in order to kill his wife and be free to marry a woman who is—unbeknownst to him and to readers—his first wife’s sister.⁷¹

Shockingly, Mrs. Crane’s murder takes place in the sanctity of the lying-in room. The vulnerability of the lying-in mother in *East Lynne* is here taken to an extreme of medical exploitation and murder. Carlton has delivered many babies; he thus surely understands lying-in protocols, allowing him to exploit them. He multiply violates this space, disturbing his wife at a moment of postpartum vulnerability and making her “flushed and feverish with excitement” although Grey had left her “calm and well” that morning (1.44). Carlton does so in his medical role, commanding the lying-in space’s privacy immediately after delivery, when manuals advised the monitoring of bladder, bowels, and possible hemorrhaging.⁷² The murder’s lying-in-room setting not only exemplifies what Jennifer Phegley calls “domesticated sensationalism” but also pushes the novel further into gestational sensationalism.⁷³

In subsequent chapters, the lying-in room becomes the setting of fraught and contrasting scenes, one female-oriented scene before and one male-dominated scene after Mrs. Crane’s death. In both, the action surrounds Mrs. Crane, alive in the first and dead in the second. The first scene focuses on women’s experiences of childbirth and postpartum care, with references to Judith’s sleep deprivation for three successive nights, two for delivery and one for toothache. Judith compares Mrs. Crane’s to other postpartum women’s recoveries that require nighttime care, remarking, “It’s a mercy that you [Mrs. Crane] have not required more sitting up than that. Many [women] do require it” (1.95). When Mrs. Crane mentions getting up, Judith articulates the contemporary view that it would be a “danger” to be “too venturesome” (1.95). Judith’s emphasis on “quiet” follows medical advice about postpartum recovery, as does Pepperfly’s arrival in the chamber with “gruel,” recommended in advice manuals as an easily digested supper on the day after

labor (1.96).⁷⁴ The quiet female-centered lying-in space is overshadowed by the narrator's prediction that someone will die "ere ten o'clock had struck" (1.92). The narrator's time marking of the nurse settling Mrs. Crane at "half-past nine or a quarter to ten" creates expectations that something terrible will happen soon (1.97). This dread is realized when Pepperfly administers a "composing draught" (1.96); Mrs. Crane utters an "awful cry of . . . agony" and dies, defeating readers' expectations of a death resulting from childbirth (1.98). She leaves behind a trunk, a workbox, and baby clothes—and several letters crucial to the subsequent murder investigation.

The following scenes—in which Carlton, the Greys, and a policeman examine Mrs. Crane's body and the effects that surround her corpse in the lying-in room—smack of violation and horror. The male investigation of the dead woman and the lying-in space figures in gothic terms the contemporary contest between women and medical men over control of childbirth.⁷⁵ The first investigator is Carlton—who, as readers afterward realize, is at once the dead woman's doctor, husband, and murderer. He conducts a gruesome and sexualized postmortem examination: he bends "over the mouth of the dead, inhaling the breath; or, rather, the odour where the breath had been" (1.101). The lying-in space is invaded, and Mrs. Crane's corpse figuratively sexualized as Carlton "visit[s] her box with his own hands," examines her workbox "searchingly," and rifles though the "loose pocket" found under the pillow supporting the corpse's head (1.115). He then seals the trunk and workbox, controlling their contents. Meanwhile, the sergeant opens a closet containing a "slop-pail" (1.117)—presumably used for excreta, vomit, and/or blood during the recent childbirth. During this invasion of the lying-in space, Mrs. Crane's sexualized corpse lies on the bed: "A fair, pale, sweet face, lying there with its golden-brown hair falling around it. . . . Her mouth was open, and the pretty pearly teeth were visible" (1.115).⁷⁶

Later in the novel, this male-versus-female contestation over the lying-in space continues when Lady Oakburn gives birth while her husband, the earl, lies dying in the same house. Lying-in protocols, so violated in Mrs. Crane's case, are observed to the extreme when Lady Oakburn is not told that the earl is dying. This extreme observation clearly exceeds Wood's more general belief in protecting postpartum women. As the earl's medical attendant declares, a visit is "[i]mpossible." Moreover, he insists that Lady Oakburn cannot even be told of the danger: "[F]or a day or two at all events, it must be kept from her, or he would not answer for the consequences" (2.220). Respecting his wife's

lying in, the dying earl instead summons his daughter Jane (estranged since his marriage). When Jane arrives, the servant maps the spaces of the lying in and the dying: “The countess is lying in that room. My lord is up-stairs” (2.226). Jane protests this strict protection of the postpartum Lady Oakburn, asking, “Is it right to keep [his fatal illness] from the countess?” (2.227). The medical attendant upholds protocols: “I would not for the world allow it to reach her ladyship in her present state of health; we don’t know what the consequences might be” (2.228). Doctors go to the length of hiding the earl’s illness and eventual death from Lucy in case she tells her stepmother. The countess discovers his death when Laura utters a “shriek” of agony—“Dead!”—that reverberates throughout the house (2.228). Her cry prompts the arrival of Lady Oakburn’s spectral figure: “a tall figure, robed in a flannel dressing-gown, with an ashy pale face, came gliding in and stood gazing at the corpse” (2.239). Echoing Judith’s and Lady Isabel’s ghostly appearances, and transposing the 1860s’ sensational phenomenon of women in white into a gestational context, here the woman in white is the postpartum mother, a “sight [that] hushe[s] [them] to silence” (2.239).⁷⁷

Inverting the earlier scene in which men investigated the lying-in space around Mrs. Crane’s corpse, here, women debate lying-in protocols over the earl’s corpse. Lady Oakburn protests with “anguish” (2.239): “You think it right to exclude a wife from her husband’s death-bed?” (2.240). Jane remonstrates that “nothing. . .justif[ies]” withholding such information from a mother, “save peril to her own life” (2.240). Holding hands with Jane in solidarity, the new mother “la[ys] her face upon the pillow by the dead” (2.241). They are joined by Lucy, wearing a nightdress—another figure in white—who protests: “You knew he was dying, and you never told me!” (2.241–42). These two women in white embody the power struggle between medical protection and women’s capacity to control lying in. Both *East Lynne* and *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters* thus transform the sensational image of the woman in white into a representation of gestational and maternal power.

Wood’s novel is unusual not only in its mimetic representation of pregnancy symptoms and labor but also in its diegetic representation of offstage deliveries, pregnancy complications, and deaths from childbirth. An early example of such references, one that seeds the succession of Captain Chesney to the earldom, occurs when the Chesneys see the *Times*’ death announcements for the twenty-one-year-old countess of Oakburn and her newborn. Most of the novel’s mentions of childbirth occur diegetically because four main characters, a midwife and three

doctors, are repeatedly called out to assist with deliveries. When Mrs. Crane goes into labor, for example, Pepperfly mentions that Mrs. Hutton, the town's other midwife, has been "called out" to a woman with "fever" (1.32)—possibly puerperal fever, a major killer of Victorian postpartum women.⁷⁸ Just after Laura finds the letter among the sleeves, Carlton is called to attend the barber's wife, who is in labor (2.69). Pepperfly later mentions that the butcher's wife lost her week-old baby and "didn't get strong as soon as she ought" (3.4). Similarly, she remarks to Carlton that she is going to attend Mrs. Knagg (3.23). The practitioner Lycett is assisting with this "difficult case" (3.31); Carlton joins them, talking intermittently to Pepperfly from a room adjoining Mrs. Knagg's. Although the birth is extradiegetic, Pepperfly's rapid movement "from one chamber to another, like a dog in a fair" (3.39), and Carlton's departure "an hour later" (3.43), suggest the temporal rhythms of delivery. Pepperfly describes these rhythms more generally when she says she is staying with Mrs. Smith between deliveries: "I left my place yesterday, and I expects [*sic*] to be fetched to another in a day or two" (3.3); she notes that her job involves "always a sitting by a bedside, or dandling a babby" (3.2). Childbirth often appears diegetically in this unusual novel, which narrates what other fictions do not.

The novel also includes poignant mininarratives of child loss. Wood is well known for her child deathbed scenes, yet these little-recognized stories told by mothers thicken the diegesis regarding childbirth, gesturing toward the 15 percent infant mortality rate.⁷⁹ Visiting with Lady Oakburn and her newborn inspires Laura to confide her own infant's death thirty-six hours after birth. Holding her half-brother, Laura says, "I wish my own had lived. . . . It was the sweetest little girl ever seen" (2.257). Echoing *East Lynne*, she relates how the baby was swiftly baptized because "Mr. Carlton saw. . . that it would not live" (2.257). Similarly, Mrs. Smith tells Jane about her baby's death at less than three months: "In the December my little child was born, the only one I ever had. . . . I was in great grief at that time, for my child had died" (3.212–13). These brief analeptic accounts of child loss imbue these characters with emotional complexity and maternal longing.⁸⁰

Lord Oakburn's Daughters returns obsessively to Mrs. Crane's labor, delivery, and postpartum death, which are variously narrated by Mrs. Fitch, Judith, the landlady, the midwife, three doctors, and an apprentice, first at the inquest, then to police, and finally to amateur detectives probing Mrs. Crane's identity as well as the child's paternity, legitimacy, and whereabouts. The novel's investigative impulse thus centers on the

birthing and lying-in rooms until its conclusion. Mystery novels serve as vehicles for multiple narrations of the same event, providing occasions to see scenes from different viewpoints to construct a supposedly authoritative account. As in many sensation novels, here, key evidence appears in documents—three letters written by Mrs. Crane (known also as Clarice Chesney, Beauchamp, and Carlton). These letters, written to her husband during pregnancy, bear dates between February 28 and March 12, the two weeks before she delivers at seven months. All are covertly addressed to Carlton because he is hiding their marriage. The letters are revealed to readers after her death; they represent poignant fragments from late pregnancy, read after postpartum death. They thus participate in the novel's intense gestational focus while contributing to its murder mystery.

The first letter, produced at the inquest, is found in a pocket of the dress that Mrs. Crane wore to South Wennock. Hanging behind the bedroom door, the dress (a metonym of the dead) was missed in Carlton's and the policeman's invasive search. An incomplete letter dated the evening of March 10, the day of Mrs. Crane's arrival, starts, "My dearest Husband" (1.189). The unfinished letter, printed in full, intimates her secret marriage—she worries he will be "angry" with her for coming—and her labor, since it ends abruptly with an em-dash and a "great blot" (1.189, 1.188). A document produced at an inquest, the letter forms part of the sensational trope of documentation made famous by *The Woman in White*. As a letter whose "great blot" evokes bodily fluids associated with childbirth, it participates in Wood's brand of gestational sensation (1.188).

The second letter fragment is found by Laura after she marries Carlton. It lies in her drawer under the sleeves sent by Jane: its context is thus balanced between male (Carlton's home) and female (women's clothing). Dated February 28 and in Clarice's writing, the letter (whose contents remain extradiegetic) seems to Laura to have been written by Clarice to Jane. Readers later grasp it was from Clarice to Carlton, written when he was already wooing Laura. As such, it is apparently mundane (written by one sister to another and found by a third) but actually sensational (written by one sister and found by another, both sequentially married to the same man) as well as gestational (written by a woman in late pregnancy to her secret husband before she dies).⁸¹

The third letter, dated March 10 and addressed to Carlton, is found by Laura when she breaks into her husband's safe. The context is professional (the letter is surrounded by Greek and Latin notes) and marital

(Laura is investigating her husband's sexual past). It is also sensationally gestational because it produces an uncanny narrative juxtaposition of Clarice's pregnancy (the note was written when she was pregnant) and her child's looming death (Laura finds the note just as Carlton and the surgeon discuss George's impending death from tuberculosis). Laura recognizes Clarice's handwriting but cannot reconcile the letter's contents with its address to Carlton; she erroneously concludes that Clarice was married to an unknown man.

Only when Laura, Jane, Judith, and Mrs. Smith (the female counterparts to official male detectives) share knowledge is the crime solved. These women—two mothers and two spinsters—are connected by experiences of childbirth, child loss, and lying in. They penetrate the mystery when the law fails to do so, showing that the dead woman and Clarice are one. Their first evidence is documentary: Judith recognizes the letter from the safe (addressed to "My Dearest Husband," signed by Clarice, and found by Laura) as the complete version of the draft found in Mrs. Crane's dress pocket (3.186). However, the locket, a metonym of women's bonds and labor in childbirth, unlocks Judith's intimate narrative of Mrs. Crane's delivery and death. Gifted by one sister to a servant and shown by that servant to a surviving sister, the locket symbolizes women's connections through shared bodily experiences. As Judith tells Jane, "I can tell you what became of her, I think. But the tale is full of horror and distress" (3.201). Jane says, "Tell it" (3.201), returning the novel to its opening, this time focalized through the dead woman's companion in childbirth and narrated to her sister.

However, Judith knows nothing that occurred before Clarice's arrival in town; the remaining narrative of Clarice's pregnancy is focalized through Mrs. Smith and told over George's corpse. The scene echoes William's deathbed in *East Lynne* and the line "Dead . . . and never called me mother!" Jane exclaims to Mrs. Smith, "The dead! He is not dead—that little child? . . . And I never gave him a kiss for his mother's sake! I never knew that he belonged to her. Dead! He was . . . my little nephew" (3.207).⁸² George's identification after death as Clarice's child allows Wood to adapt *East Lynne's* most famous scene, extending its affective range. Rather than George's death dismantling the overt sentimentality surrounding the Victorian child, as Tamara Wagner argues, it extends the conventions of maternal mourning at the child's deathbed to a circle of women beyond biological mothers.⁸³ Jane, George's aunt, mourns with Mrs. Smith, his wet nurse and adoptive mother: "Jane's tears fell upon the placid little countenance, and she stooped and kissed

it" (3.208). Over the corpse of Clarice's biological child, who was Mrs. Smith's adopted son, Mrs. Smith recalls her own lying in, attended by the pregnant Clarice ("She, dear lady, used to sit with me" [3.212]) as well as their bond over Mrs. Smith's baby's death.

Touchingly, in this conversation about her own child loss, Mrs. Smith tells Jane about Clarice's pregnancy: "Towards the next March she got restless; she would be expecting her own illness in May, and she did not like to lie up so far up from her husband" (3.213). The bond between Clarice and Mrs. Smith produces a promise that the recently bereaved mother will breastfeed Clarice's baby: "I looked to that promise like a famished man looks to meat" (3.213). In an era when wet-nursing was viewed negatively because nurses often put their own babies out for hand feeding, frequently resulting in death, Mrs. Smith and Clarice regard wet-nursing as consolidating their bond as mothers.⁸⁴ Clarice's story, told analeptically by Judith and Mrs. Smith, brings the novel to an affective conclusion by completing the backstory of the mysterious pregnant stranger, solving the mystery of Clarice's disappearance, and identifying her son. The trial punishes Carlton, like Levison, for murder, wrapping up the conflated pregnancy and murder plots, but, as in *East Lynne*, the affecting final scenes focus on women and children. In *Lord Oakburn's Daughters*, however, it is not only the biological mother who "claims her place" but all the novel's women who forge bonds through common experiences of childbirth, lying in, and child loss.⁸⁵

CONCLUSION

East Lynne and *Lord Oakburn's Daughters* stand out among the sensation novels of the 1860s not only for their relatively overt representations of labor but also for their placement of pregnancy, childbirth, and lying in at the center of women's lives. In *East Lynne*, childbirth changes Isabel's health: never strong, she suffers from "weakness and fever" after her first child's birth and falls ill again after her third child's birth (225). The adultery that ruins her marriage originates in the lying-in room during postpartum vulnerability. Maternal desire is strong in this novel, but so is awareness of maternity's effects on women's bodies and minds. In *Lord Oakburn's Daughters*, childbirth is the inciting plot event and the lying-in room the scene to which this pregnancy whodunit obsessively returns. Inverting *East Lynne's* violation of lying-in protocols by gossiping women, *Lord Oakburn's Daughters* depicts women bonding

in the lying-in space, despite male breaches of its protocols or domination of its control. In both novels, ghostly women in white signify not modernity but women's common experiences of childbirth, lying in, and child loss.⁸⁶ Isabel appearing on the stairs as her son is dying, Judith haunting the stairs as the mother is murdered, Lady Oakburn appearing from the lying-in room as her husband dies: these ghostly female figures demand a critical rethinking of pregnancy's structural and narratological role in Victorian fiction. Far from being occluded, pregnancy and childbirth lie at the very heart of Wood's sensationally gestational plots.

NOTES

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1. Malone, "Near Confinement," 370.
2. Cox, *Confinement*, 13, 16, 14.
3. Walton, "Pregnant Silences," 1–2.
4. Woods, *Pregnancy*, 3–4.
5. See Knott, *Mother Is a Verb*; Hanson, *Cultural History*; Regaignon, *Writing Maternity*; and Seigel, *Rhetoric*.
6. Regaignon, *Writing*, 591.
7. Regaignon, *Writing*, 110–11.
8. Cox, *Confinement*, 59.
9. Palmer, *East Lynne*, 774.
10. "Adam Bede," 251.
11. Walton, "Pregnant Silences," 2.
12. Woods, *Pregnancy*, 85. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
13. Regaignon, *Writing*, 30.
14. Cox, *Confinement*, 58–59; Leighton and Surridge, "Vocabulary."
15. Leighton and Surridge, "From," 426–28.

16. Cox, *Confinement*, 136. Cox notes “there is evidence to suggest that women wishing to terminate their pregnancies deliberately engaged in some of these behaviours.”
17. See Leighton and Surridge, “Vocabulary.”
18. See T. Wagner, “Sensational”; Cox’s subtitle is *The Hidden History of Maternal Bodies in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cox, *Confinement*, n.p.).
19. Cox, *Confinement*, 89.
20. Loesberg, “Ideology,” 116.
21. Woods notes that the pregnant body was “veiled” in fiction of the period (*Pregnancy*, 7). Cox notes that “public discourses . . . typically avoided references to the details of childbirth” (*Confinement*, 15).
22. Montgomery, “Ladies,” 525; Mitchell, “Wood.”
23. C. Wood, *Memorials*, 5; “Ellen Wood”; C. Wood, *Memorials*, 52–53.
24. Wynne, *Sensation Novel*, 62.
25. Loudon, “Deaths in Childbed,” 1.
26. Wood, *East Lynne*, 1862, 218. All subsequent references to Broadview’s edition (based on the 1862 one-volume edition) are noted parenthetically in the text.
27. Chavasse, *Advice*, 175.
28. Wood’s narrator habitually constructed an implied community of women readers with “shared experience[s]” (Pykett, *Improper*, 115). *East Lynne*’s serial directly addressed male readers, but Wood eliminated these addresses in subsequent editions (Wynne, *Sensation*, 61).
29. Chavasse, *Advice*, 210.
30. Unbaptized infants were banned from consecrated ground.
31. Atkinson et al., “Patterns,” 1269.
32. Oliphant, “Novels,” 170.
33. Bull, *Hints to Mothers*, 206.
34. Chavasse, *Advice*, 246. Regaignon, in *Writing Maternity*, notes that Bull and Chavasse were two medical authors who “dominated the mid-nineteenth-century market” for women’s advice manuals (Regaignon, *Writing Maternity*, 66).
35. Reid, *On the Symptoms*, 3. In *Confinement*, Cox notes that many working-class mothers were forced by economic circumstances to return to hard labor almost immediately after childbirth; she also notes that some middle- and upper-class women found lying-in protocols constraining, with Queen Victoria writing two days after childbirth in April 1843 that “It is rather dull lying quite still & doing nothing” (*Confinement*, 218, 227).

36. The narrator's allusion to "those who suffer" intimates that some women readers share these postpartum experiences.
37. Marland, "Victorian Childbirth."
38. Chavasse, *Advice*, 219.
39. T. Wagner, *Victorian Baby*, 216.
40. This timing coincides with a subsequent moment of vulnerability: "The two principal epochs at which this excitability becomes the most dangerous are *immediately after parturition*, and . . . when the system is exhausted by a too-continued application of the infant to the breast" (Reid, *Symptoms*, 3).
41. C. Wood, *Memorials*, 53.
42. Although *East Lynne* began serialization in 1860 (after the 1857 Divorce Act), the Carlyles' divorce must occur before 1857 because at least five years elapse between Isabel's departure with Levison and her subsequent return to East Lynne (which, logically, occurs pre-1860). Before the 1857 Act made divorce widely available, husbands could petition Parliament for divorce based on adultery. As a first step to divorce, Carlyle sues Levison for "criminal conversation" with Isabel, reflecting "that a husband . . . owned his wife's . . . sexual services" (Shanley, *Feminism*, 24). Carlyle wins but donates the proceeds (360). While Isabel imagines remarrying to legitimize her child with Levison, Carlyle holds that marriage is indissoluble, referring to Luke 16:18: "Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marieth another, committeth adultery" (372).
43. Woods, *Pregnancy*, 85; "Adam Bede," 251. Woods points out that any visualization of this scene must involve "the notable presence of a large belly, at the very least" (Woods, *Pregnancy*, 85).
44. Cleere, "Chaste Polygamy," 219.
45. Wood, *East Lynne*, 1883, n.p.
46. Cleere, "Chaste Polygamy," 215; Wood, qtd. in T. Wagner, *Victorian Baby*, 221.
47. Reflecting his belief in the indissolubility of marriage, Carlyle divorces Isabel but remarries only when Isabel's reported death in a train wreck releases him from his perceived marriage bonds.
48. Fox, *Signs*, 83.
49. Although fathers "had absolute right to custody of their children" under common law, the 1839 Infant Custody Act permitted mothers to petition equity courts for custody of children under seven and "periodic access" to children seven or older. The 1857 Divorce Act permitted judges to award custody to mothers who won divorce

- suits, but, under the act's double standard, Alice could seek divorce only if Levison were guilty of adultery as well as bigamy, incest, and/or "extreme physical cruelty" (Shanley, *Feminism*, 25, 137, 138).
50. "Notices of Books," 61 (original emphasis).
 51. Victorian illustrators used a vocabulary "of visual shock" for sensation scenes: "moonlit, torch-lit, or gas-lit scenes of high contrast between black and white space" (Leighton and Surridge, "'Splendacious' Effects" 33).
 52. "Notices of Books," 61.
 53. "Notices of Books," 61.
 54. Qtd. in Wynne, *Sensation Novel*, 72.
 55. Armstrong, "Next Week!" 752; E. Wood, *The Earl's Heirs*. This subtitle appears on the title page of *The Earl's Heirs*, which identifies Wood as the author of "*East Lynne; or the Earl's Daughter*."
 56. *The Channings* (1862), *Mrs Halliburton's Troubles* (1862), *The Foggy Night at Offord* (1862), *A Life's Secret* (serialized in 1862), *Verner's Pride* (1863), *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* (1863), *William Allair* (1864), *Oswald Cray* (1864), and *Trevlyn Hold* (1864).
 57. "Oswald Cray," n.p.
 58. T. Wagner, "We have orphans," 202.
 59. Landow et al., "Female Body"; Cox, *Confinement*, 89.
 60. Chavasse, *Advice*, 175.
 61. See Leighton and Surridge, "Vocabulary."
 62. Fox, *Signs*, 68, 69–70.
 63. Fox, *Signs*, 65.
 64. Chavasse, *Advice*, 183; Fox, *Signs*, 66.
 65. Bull, *Hints*, 125.
 66. Barker, "On the Management," 3.
 67. T. Wagner, *Victorian Baby*, 216.
 68. Leighton and Surridge, "'Splendacious' Effects," 33. Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) parodies this scene's bizarre combination of elements: the lost baby, the station, and the popular mid-century triple-decker.
 69. The figure appears twice more, always associated with women's vulnerability to sexual predation or domestic crime: first, just before Laura elopes with Carlton (who has married and murdered her sister); and second, when Lucy lies ill with fever in Carlton's home (3.109).
 70. Loudon, "Deaths in Childbed," 2.

71. The opportunity for poisoning arises because Mrs. Crane sends for Carlton upon her arrival, but he is away, so Stephen Grey attends the delivery. Carlton exploits the confusion about who is Mrs. Crane's doctor, a confusion that Chavasse identifies: "there cannot be two masters in a lying-in room" (Chavasse, *Advice*, 193).
72. Chavasse, *Advice*, 237–41.
73. Phegley, "Domesticating," 183.
74. Chavasse, *Advice*, 250.
75. Marland, "Victorian Childbirth."
76. This description of Mrs. Crane's body recalls anatomical wax models displayed from the 1730s onward in London and Italy (C. Wagner, "Anatomical Models").
77. On women in white in the 1860s, see Daly, "Woman."
78. Marland, "Victorian Childbirth."
79. Atkinson et al., "Patterns," 1269.
80. These brief accounts reflect the commonplace experience of maternal child loss, whether from stillbirth or from the high rate of infant mortality. As Cox notes, "Maternal grief was part and parcel of the experience of motherhood in nineteenth-century Britain. . . . [N]o parent could expect to be exempt from such losses" (Cox, *Confinement*, 209).
81. Under Lord Lyndhurst's Marriage Act (1835), it was illegal for a man to marry his deceased wife's sister (Wallace, "On the Deceased," n.p.). Neither Carlton nor Laura deliberately breaks this law: when they marry, he is unaware that Clarice was Laura's sister, and Laura is unaware of his previous marriage.
82. See Palmer, *East Lynne*, 774, for William's deathbed scene.
83. T. Wagner, "We have orphans," 202.
84. Cox, "Breastfeeding."
85. "Notices of Books," 61.
86. Daly, "Woman," 8.

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