6

‘Dead! And ... Never Called Me Mother’: Ellen (Mrs Henry) Wood

She is mysterious because there is no mystery about her.
Margaret Oliphant on Ellen Wood, 1895

In early 1862 the publisher Richard Bentley wrote to one of his authors, Ellen Wood, asking if she knew anything about M. E. Braddon. The reply was that ‘M. E.’ was ‘a Miss Braddon’ although nothing else could be ascertained. Wood then revealed a keen awareness of Braddon as a literary rival.

Lady Audley’s Secret [is] the best of her works, so far as I have read. I have read one or two short tales of hers very far-fetched in plot, very inferior altogether. Some of her writing I think excellent; some not so. She is a most unequal writer. There is a great sameness throughout her stories; but they are (most of them) far superior to the run of the present day. (Archives of Richard Bentley L147, UI)

Why Bentley asked Ellen Wood (1814–87) about Braddon is unknown, although as they both wrote of murder and deviant femininity, he might have wondered if they were one and the same. By the end of 1862, both women would be rivals in earnest, bestsellers. They led the Sensation school, along with Wilkie Collins and Charles Reade. While professionally the four were sensational, only Wood had a private life that was in Victorian terms irreproachable. She was middle-aged, married to a businessman and mother to a dutiful family.

A façade of formidable and repellent respectability surrounds Ellen Wood. She wrote as Mrs Henry Wood, and her one entry in the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations is: ‘Dead! and ... never called me mother’ (572). The sentimentality of the quotation, and the conventional form of
the name attached to it, seems to epitomize high Victoriana, like the stories of table legs wearing decorous little pantalets. However, like the shrouded legs, it is, if not apocryphal, then certainly dubious. These famous words were not Ellen Wood’s; they appeared in T. A. Palmer’s pirated stage adaptation of her novel *East Lynne* (1861).

*East Lynne* is sentimental and moral – and also a murder mystery, one of many Ellen Wood wrote. The work is complex; yet its creator is known only as a virtuous, dull woman. Henrietta Ward, who knew both Crowe and Wood, wrote:

> I never found any point of contact with her. She was a very nice woman but hopelessly prosaic. Calling upon her one day when she was alone I hoped that perhaps she would reveal some hidden depth yet unseen. But alas! the topics she clung to and fully explored were her servants’ shortcomings, and a full account of the cold she had caught, she being one of those tiresome people who like to trace its career from infancy. (*Memories* 183–4)

Ward here provides a small but significant contradiction of the major biographical source on Wood, the memoirs by her author son Charles. He wrote about his mother first in 1887, in the magazine *Argosy*, and later expanded and revised his memoirs in book form, as *Memorials of Mrs Henry Wood* (1894). He depicts his mother as a perfect housekeeper: ‘The complaints about domestics so often heard in these days were never heard in my mother’s house and never existed’ (‘Mrs Henry Wood’ 260). Indeed, she seems the Angel in the House personified. The only faintly naughty thing Ellen Wood did was to disguise herself as a monk and secretly enter a monastery at midnight. Shades of Gothic? No, a ruse of her husband so that Ellen could witness midnight mass at The Grand Chartreuse (*Memorials* 135–41).

Charles Wood was hampered by various factors. The first was lack of source matter, for his mother was not a diligent diarist, nor a keeper of letters. He therefore suggested her ‘spirit’, rather than ‘presenting a formal or detailed memoir’ (*Memorials* viii) – but without the ‘hidden depths’ sought by Ward. He was also constrained by filial duty, respectability and genre. Charles Wood was primarily a travel writer, most at ease when providing long descriptions of his parents’ journeys in Europe. Ellen Wood was devoutly Evangelical Anglican, and as such a model for Charles was the Victorian religious memoir, a Saint’s Life for Protestants. It tended to hagiography, uncritical, naive and unintentionally revealing: *Clear Shining Light* (1882), Emily Leakey’s memoir of