Chapter 4

“Ink Stands and Law Books”: Domestic and Legal Violence

The miller’s daughter of fourteen could not believe that high gentry behaved badly to their wives, but her mother instructed her—“Oh, child, men’s men: gentle or simple they’re much of a muchness.”

George Eliot, Daniel Deronda

To ____.

Here lies a Beauty,
Whom to love was a duty,
She married a Fool,
Not to make him a tool,
But only to vex
Both herself and his Sex.

Benjamin Robert Haydon, Diary

The honeymoon ended quickly (literally and figuratively) for the Nortons, who were married on June 30, 1827. The couple returned to London after a brief wedding trip and spent a few days in George’s chambers at the Temple before moving into their own apartment. While there, George, reportedly under the influence of drink, hurled an “ink stand, and most of the law-books, which might have served a better purpose, at the head of his bride” (ELW 15). He could scarcely have chosen more appropriately symbolic objects, for the pen—hers, not his—became a primary point of conflict between them and the

R. Craig, The Narratives of Caroline Norton
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law became the principal means by which he attempted to accomplish what physical violence could not: suppression of his wife’s independent spirit and spirited language. When the tailor in Daniel Deronda remarks that a “quarrel may end wi’ the whip, but it begins wi’ the tongue, and it’s the women have got the most o’ that” (DD 401), he succinctly diagnoses the origin of the Nortons’ troubles. Sarcasm at her husband’s expense—in this instance, to the effect that he might make better use of the instruments of his profession—was the weapon that Norton most often employed against the man whose violence did not end with these errant missiles. Unequal to the “javelins hurled by an Amazon,” George on another occasion doused her writing materials with brandy and set them afire, warning her “not to brave him” in the future (ELW 32).

When Daniel Maclise drew Norton demurely superintending the ceremony of tea, he could have no idea that her husband would “deliberately [take] the tea-kettle, and set it down upon my hand; I started up from the pain, and was both burnt and scalded” (ELW 32). A violent quarrel in the summer of 1835 prompted her to leave home. She agreed to return—a fateful act in the eyes of the law, for in so doing she “condoned” his violence and would be unable to secure a divorce on grounds of cruelty. The abuse resumed almost immediately, and she suffered a miscarriage in August.3 In March of the following year, George removed the children from the family home and left his wife to fend for herself. Despite attempts to reconcile after the Melbourne trial, they would never again live together. Separate establishments brought an end to the physical violence—except on the occasions when Caroline tried forcibly to remove the children from their father’s custody—but the legal assault, symbolized by the objects George first threw at his wife, persisted for many years.

It is likely that this experience accounts for a three-word paragraph in Woman’s Reward: “He struck her” (WRR 2:308).4 Lionel Dupré’s attack upon his wife is an isolated occurrence, as is Stephen Penrhyn’s angry assault on his wife in Stuart of Dunleath, but neither assault is a surprise. Each man is a thorough egoist, indifferent to his spouse, except when she disrupts his convenience. Lady Clarice is eventually driven to leave Lionel not so much because of a single violent episode but because of his “cruel neglect, the utter forgetfulness of [her] suffering” (WRR 3:3). Unhappy couples occupy a significant place throughout Norton’s fiction. In two of them, however, spousal neglect is punctuated by violence, and broken bones and bruises become the stigmata of the invisible injuries resulting from indifference and infidelity.