



A COMPANION TO  
**SENSATION**  
*FICTION*

EDITED BY  
**PAMELA K. GILBERT**

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## A Companion to Sensation Fiction

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A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2011  
© 2011 Blackwell Publishing Ltd

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

*Registered Office*

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A companion to sensation fiction / edited by Pamela K. Gilbert.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4051-9558-4 (cloth)

1. English fiction--19th century--History and criticism. 2. Sensationalism in literature.
3. Literature and society--Great Britain--History--19th century. I. Gilbert, Pamela K.  
PR878.S44C66 2011  
823'.0872--dc22

2011012208

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book is published in the following electronic formats: ePDF 9781444342208; ePUB 9781444342215; Wiley Online Library 9781444342222; oBook 9781444342239

Set in 11 on 13 pt Garamond 3 by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited

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# Introduction

*Pamela K. Gilbert*

Evidence enough has been adduced to show that sensation novels must be recognised as a great fact in the literature of the day, and a fact whose significance is by no means of an agreeable kind. Regarding these works merely as an efflorescence, as an eruption indicative of the state of health of the body in which they appear, the existence of an impure or a silly crop of novels, and the fact that they are eagerly read, are by no means favourable symptoms of the conditions of the body of society. But it is easier to detect the disease than to suggest the remedy. (Henry Mansel 1863: 267)

There has arisen of late years a popular idea as to the division of novels into two classes, which is, I think, a mistaken idea. We hear of the sensational school of novels; and of the realistic, or life-like school. Now, according to my view of the matter, a novel is bound to be both sensational and realistic. And I think that if a novel fail in either particular it is, so far, a failure in Art .... Let an author so tell his tale as to touch your heart and draw your tears, and he has so far done his work well. Truth let there be; – truth of description, truth of character, human truth as to men and women. If there be such truth I do not know that a novel can be too sensational” (Anthony Trollope 1870: 124)

“We have become a novel reading people” observed Anthony Trollope in 1870, who certainly contributed his share to Victorian fiction: “Novels are in the hands of us all, from the Prime Minister, down to the last appointed scullery maid” (1870: 108). Indeed, the Victorian era was the great era of the novel: never had so many literate readers consumed so much fiction so affordably. John Sutherland estimates that 60,000 novels were published in the period (1988: 1), and of course novels were by no means the only literature, nor even the only fiction, that Victorians read. But novels were always considered somewhat suspect – by audiences ranging from evangelicals who distrusted all fiction to critics who particularly abominated the “light reading”

thought to be largely consumed by women, as Kate Flint points out. And one of the most distrusted – and most popular – forms was what came to be known as “sensation fiction.”

Sensation fiction emerged in Britain as a distinct genre around 1860, though the term had been in common use to describe exciting, eventful stories in the US a few years prior. The new genre was distinctively transgressive in that it was thought to appeal directly to the “nerves,” eliciting a physical sensation with its surprises, plot twists, and startling revelations. It was also distinctive in its popularity, often across a range of readerships, and in its commercial, as well as cultural, success. In Britain, there was particular concern about literature that crossed class boundaries, and sensation seemed not only to cross “down” – from mistresses to servants – but also “up,” as startling “penny-dreadful” plots seemed to be moving into the middle-class three-decker. Sensation fiction tended to be associated with women readers and often, though not always, women writers. It was thought to be written and read quickly rather than discerningly; a “mass-produced,” disposable consumer product. These novels typically featured ordinary upper- or middle-class families in domestic settings experiencing startling emotions and occurrences, and were up to date in their subject matter, often taking up themes recently of interest in the newspapers. Finally, the genre was distinguished by the tone of the period’s critical responses to it: unwillingly attentive, sometimes even grudgingly admiring, but also censorious of its “low” appeal to physical appetites for “sensations” whether erotic or pleasurably horrifying, its questionable morality, and inadequate or inappropriate style.

Although the term’s use waned in the 1870s and began to be superseded by other designations, writers associated with sensation continued to write through the turn of the century – and often continued to write the same sort of “sensational” plots. Just as often, works initially caught in the broad net of critics’ denunciations of sensation fiction were only tangentially related to the more central examples of William Wilkie Collins or Mary Elizabeth Braddon, who themselves wrote in a variety of genres. And as astute readers of earlier and later literature may have thought while reading the prior paragraph, most of the characteristics of sensation are not unique to the genre. Indeed, it was a combination of traits appearing in several bestselling novels in short succession and of anxieties on the part of influential review writers that constructed a category, popularized a name for it, and made it stick.

This volume is geared toward making this rich body of literature and its scholarship accessible to undergraduate students of the literature, as well as offering scholars of the genre a provocative survey of the state of the field and providing a springboard and inspiration for future work. Offering detailed coverage of sensation and its authors, the book first aims to reconnect the genre to its literary precursors. Hence, the first section includes essays on earlier types of fiction. The silver fork novel of the early to mid-century was characterized more by an interest in high life and politics than is sensation, but its luxurious attention to commodities is taken up by the later genre, and isolated instances continued the focus on wealthy protagonists. The Newgate novel’s interest in crime and in the motives and psychology of criminals, as

well as in social critique, continues in the sensation novel. Although the sensation novel was perhaps less openly critical of social issues than the Newgate or the realist novels of the late 1840s and 1850s, often that criticism can arguably be found incorporated less obviously but no less significantly in the very structures of sensation plots, rather than in open narrative exhortation that characterized some earlier fiction.

Victorian literary critic H. L. Mansel, in his famous 1863 denunciation of sensation novels, observed that:

[O]ur task would be incomplete without some notice of the cheap publications which supply sensation for the million in penny and halfpenny numbers. . . . These tales are to the full-grown sensation novel what the bud is to the flower . . . They are the original germ, the primitive monad, to which all the varieties of sensational literature may be referred, as to their source, by a law of generation at least as worthy of the attention of the scientific student as that by which Mr. Darwin's bear may be supposed to have developed into a whale. (1863: 505–6)

Recent scholars have taken up Mansel's challenge, which has brought with it a host of new questions. Penny dreadfuls are both precursors to and continuous with sensation: indeed, sensation is arguably the middle-class reader's version of the penny dreadful's exciting plots and shocking revelations. But beyond the accumulative model of simply adding penny fiction to the growing list of "literature one really should read," scholarly work on popular literature demands new approaches to scholarship. We must understand a different economy of reading, and see these fictional texts as part of an intertext that may include vastly different information in the same periodical volume, for example.

But it also demands that we examine our now traditional commitment to close reading. Reading "great" literature supposedly demands that we establish a text – an authoritative version, usually the last author-corrected version – that becomes the authoritative work. However, this approach has always been more problematic than it first appeared. In the case of Victorian fiction, the very profusion of textual data poses difficulties. Often we try to work from the author's intention, or from the first audience's experience, but this, too is fraught with peril. Is it the first serial version? The first three-volume version? This is usually the loose rule literary scholars have used, both because it is usually the version most widely circulated in a more persistent form and because, for that reason, it is the one with which we are most familiar. But should we use the bound novel? Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867) was originally one-third shorter in periodical form than the bound novel, and the ending was changed significantly as she padded her word count to please the publisher. The ending of her other 1867 novel, *Not Wisely But Too Well*, changed so radically in response to the outraged comments of manuscript reader Geraldine Jewsbury that the protagonist, shot dead by her lover in the original, not only is never shot, but survives her lover for some years, becoming a sister of mercy who practices nursing in slums. These are not minor differences: which, then, is "the" text? Of course the readership

was often quite different in these diverse contexts – differences which were classed, but also gendered (Ouida's first readers for *Under Two Flags* in serial form were men). And what of all the readers who came to the text in a condensed, rewritten, or plagiarized version? Or through theatrical adaptations? Which is their established text? Studying popular fiction, because of its focus on immediacy and the site of consumption, has highlighted a broader problem in studying Victorian literature that few scholars have carefully considered in reading Eliot or Tennyson, though they probably should: readings that hinge on particular words in a particular context are likely to be called into question once situated in the broader context of the non-linear, mutating, increasingly rhizomatic structure of Victorian literary, publishing, and consumer culture.

The Victorian novel also had a vexed partnership with the stage. Taking many ideas from the theater and often writing with the stage in mind, fiction writers nonetheless suffered both monetary and artistic wounds when theatrical companies stole, staged, parodied, and revised their work for their own audiences and purposes. Any novel that had success was certain to appear on the stage – and if it was very successful, it was likely to morph into crowd-pleasing storylines and to include events or scenes designed to highlight the abilities of its actors rather than being true to the author's vision. For example, a popular staging of *Under Two Flags* included several equestrian stunts not in the novel, taking advantage of the lead female's abilities and happy possession of a talented equine performer (Jordan 2010). Melodrama takes up a larger mode of writing that is best known for its travel from stage to page in the period, as well as its reverberations across the larger cultural and political spectrum. Three chapters, on penny dreadfuls and serial fiction, melodrama, and the theater, take up these questions in various ways, as well as showcasing the latest work in these important areas.

The last three chapters in this section take up what might also properly be called modes of narration in fiction, rather than genres of fiction per se, as well as the large literary category of poetry. The Gothic, with its emphasis on the surprising, the supernatural, and the mysterious, is a direct influence, though sensation tends to avoid the supernatural as a primary plot element and domesticates the Gothic's exotic settings. The spasmodic poem, with its emphasis on extreme, often pathological, mental states and dramatic situations, is an earlier craze that also parallels sensation fiction's fascination with the extremes of human experience. And, perhaps most importantly, mid-Victorian realism, with its clinical descriptiveness and emphasis on psychology, is sensation's twin and double, from which it is distinguished rather uncertainly by sensation's (often) less probable and more complex plotlines and apparently more schematic moral tone. In short, sensation is not a neatly differentiated phenomenon, and to understand it requires the broader context of mid-century literature, as indeed, understanding Victorian literature generally demands, absolutely, an understanding of sensation.

Following this initial contextualization, at the heart of this volume is a varied palette of chapters devoted to individual authors and texts, including many that have

been long-term foci of research in the area and some that are just now again coming to light. In a period as rich with possibilities as this one, any selection would be partial; the section herein points to the range of approaches possible as well as bringing the reader up to date on the existing criticism on these texts and authors.

Two great names of the period that have intrigued scholars most over the past fifteen years or so of criticism on sensation are Mary Elizabeth Braddon and William Wilkie Collins, though they are slowly settling into their natural place in a wider pantheon of writers. Both prolific, successful authors, they emerged as serious contenders in the marketplace at roughly the same time (1860 and 1862, with *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* respectively). Braddon's top sensational "bigamy" novels penned at the same time, *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* (1863), each merit a chapter here. Braddon herself cited the division between sensational and "good" literature, attempting to write both. *The Doctor's Wife* (1864) was a significant adaptation of *Madame Bovary*; it was also Braddon's first attempt to achieve what she described as "something like excellence," (qtd. in Wolff 1979: 165). One chapter is devoted to that novel, and another addresses the somewhat later *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* (1876), another work focusing on psychological realism. Both Braddon and Collins have chapters devoted to their general authorship, and Collins has additional chapters on *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* (1868), each examined here at length.

Ouida and Mrs. Henry Wood also burst onto the literary scene in the 1860s, and both were immediately classified as sensational, although their work differed significantly from the fast-paced mysteries of Braddon and Collins. Ouida, influenced by the silver fork school, blended her early novels of decadent high life with exotic adventure, as was the case in the wildly successful *Under Two Flags* (1867), which has a chapter here after one devoted to the author. (Though her later work branched out into quite different areas, she was always more or less *sui generis* until much later imitators.) Mrs. Henry Wood is another major figure of the period to have a chapter of this volume devoted to her. Though she often wrote in sentimental contexts, she became a popular phenomenon with *East Lynne* (1861), which, though riven with sensational subplots, is primarily and finally focused on domestic melodrama.

Moving a bit away from these heavyweights, we find other novelists categorized as sensational who also were significant figures on the literary scene of the time, to each of whom this volume devotes a chapter: the well-known Irish Gothic writer Sheridan LeFanu; his niece Rhoda Broughton, whose ironic domestic tales were shocking enough in their depiction of women's desires to be initially lumped in with sensation; the powerhouse social-problem novelist Charles Reade; the sensational/spiritualist Florence Marryat; and the clubby gentleman writer Edmund Yates. A few additional less well-known writers bring us to broader connections: Mary Cecil Hay and Charlotte Brame wrote for the provincial periodical market, and a comparative view of their careers clarifies much about the marketing of fiction in that context, as well as the transition from the mid- to late century. Amelia Edwards, best known for her Egyptological work, emerges here as a contributor to the mid-century sensational

scene. Dora Russell, the domestic sensation phenomenon, is discussed as the workhorse of Tillotson's "Fiction Bureau." And the final chapter in this section surveys the often ignored but numerous short stories of the time published side by side with parts of serialized novels and comprising an important aspect of their literary context.

The third section of the volume turns to significant themes in both the literature and its scholarship. With a return of interest in both women writers and popular fiction, sensation was a natural candidate for critical revival in the period of scholarly feminist recovery in the late 1970s through the turn of the century. This genre, dominated by women and viewed as transgressive, was quickly linked to the feminist concerns circulating broadly in the culture, as well as being seen as a precursor to the New Woman novels of the *fin de siècle*. Having recovered a body of work through the efforts of these scholars, scholarship refocused on the task of fleshing out and deepening our understanding of these works in a wider variety of contexts. The scholarship moved beyond the early critical binary in which these works were either seen simply as reinforcing or transgressing traditional gender roles, or were considered only in relation to the history of feminism.

Since then, feminism has continued to be of central interest to scholarship on this material. But now this work is inflected by the interests of gender studies, focusing on masculinity and queer theory in addition to the broader range of material and commodity culture reflected in this very commodified literature, its topicality and modernity, its emphasis on science and medical understandings of the body, its fascination with technology and temporality, and its peculiarly Victorian reflections on an emerging global order. As we have moved beyond initial rediscovery to a deeper scholarship on both this genre and its broader place in the literary marketplace, sensation has both lent itself to all possible existing interests in Victorian literature and opened doors which revise our most basic questions about how to read Victorian material. Early studies of the marketplace and readership by Richard Altick (1957) and Patrick Brantlinger (1998) opened questions of audience, economics, and circulation that often were elided in studies of canonical fiction. More recently, detailed studies of periodical publication by such scholars as Laurel Brake (1994), Graham Law (2000), and Andrew King (2004) have revised the most fundamental assumptions we have historically made about how literature was read. We now must think of these texts in dialogue with other verbal texts, with their audiences (often communicating with authors and publishers as serial parts were written), and with the visual information that was also an integral part of the literature – as true for Dickens as for these authors, but under-studied until questions about the "popular" led scholars to see the canonical (often, of course, also popular) with new eyes.

Scholarship on the genre often started with the question of why these texts had been considered sensational and how they came to be elided from canonical consideration, so the question of readership has long been central. Scholars began by looking at the criticism in Victorian periodicals that defined the genre and represents the early and sometimes only detailed documentation of readers' experiences of the texts at the time of their publication. A chapter on critical responses, both initially and up to the

present, clarifies this history. The next two chapters explore gender's relationship to sensation and the queering of sensation respectively, thereby extending and bringing the reader's understanding of this foundational critical discussion up to date. Race and class were early preoccupations of the scholarship as well, as the genre was thought to be consumed promiscuously across class boundaries and to appeal to low and uneducated tastes; the next chapter surveys both this critical material and representations of race and class in the literature. A fifth essay takes us into the broader context of empire and representation of the imperial other. A concern that has not been adequately explored in the past is the role of religion – a more central concern in all Victorian culture than has been understood over the last several decades – and our next chapter points the way for research in this area.

The destabilization of faith in the period has often been cited as a cause of Victorians' growing fascination with other ways of establishing knowledge. Victorian realism and sensation have both been read extensively in the light of scientific and medical developments. From Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots* (2009) to Lawrence Rothfield's *Vital Signs* (1992), scholars have understood the emergence of modern science and of the clinical gaze as crucial to the period's worldview. Moreover, descriptive techniques of novelistic writing are closely aligned with techniques of positivistic research developed from the late eighteenth century onward. Two chapters address these themes, one on the intersection between sensational fiction and popular writings on science, and the other on representations of medicine in sensation fiction, using the example of drugs. Another essay addresses literary scholarship's recent interest in disabled bodies, well represented in Victorian culture generally and especially in sensation fiction, with its focus on physical sensations and extreme states. But the scientific method was not only applied to understanding the mysteries of the body. Another mode of establishing truth that fascinated readers of Victorian fiction was the law. Two chapters here focus on this emerging field of interest for literary scholars, one on the impact of marriage and divorce laws so fundamental to sensation plots, and another on detection, the enduring and vital genre that emerged largely out of this literature's focus on legal procedures, rational deduction, and mystery plots.

Sensation fiction was particularly marked by its topicality – it was generally set in the historical moment in which it was published, and was rife with references to the latest cultural crazes. Not only does sensation follow the silver fork novel in its tendency to catalog luxury objects, but its realistic narrative technique freights the text with specific brand-names and detailed descriptions of consumer objects. If its negotiations of class are deeply enmeshed in the late stages of industrial capitalism, it is also one of the premier literary venues for the depiction of commodity capitalism, explored in a chapter here. Of course, the novels were themselves objects of consumer desire and a sign of a well-developed leisure economy. Moreover, like other commodities, the novels relied on appeals to visual culture. Often heavily illustrated, and published in a period in which all literature was more interdependent with illustration than it was in earlier periods, the novels referenced developments in high art as well as relying on newer, cheaper lithographic techniques to enrich their meaning and

appeal to their audiences. Two chapters here explore sensation's connection to illustration and to painting, respectively.

The volume closes with a series of chapters on the impact of sensation on later forms and movements in the late nineteenth century. The New Woman novel is the most obvious connection for two reasons: both genres tend to feature transgressive heroines and themes, and the early feminist scholarship on sensation, most notably by Lyn Pykett (1992), explicitly drew this comparison, shaping the critical work that followed. However, sensation's lingering attachment to the supernatural provides a link between earlier Gothic spiritual quest novels such as Bulwer's *Zanoni* (1842) and the *fin-de-siècle* religious and mystical novels of Marie Corelli, who is the principal example in the chapter on spiritual and metaphysical novels. Talia Schaffer (2000) has elsewhere established the connection between Ouida and *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism; here, she continues to explore those connections more broadly. Realism, of course, has long been critically acclaimed as the most significant contribution of the period to literature, and here we see sensation's impact on the late century's realist novels, especially Meredith, Hardy, and Gissing. The final chapter takes us to the present, examining the neo-Victorian revival that has lately influenced both popular culture and scholarship.

Despite the reach of existing scholarship on sensation represented here, much remains to be done. Scholars of periodical publication are now beginning the task of examining the circulation of texts across national borders, how they change in different contexts and how they influence the texts produced in those new contexts. By the time sensation entered the scene, as Graham Law (2000) has shown, there was an extensive network of provincial and international publication for metropolitan periodical fiction. Additionally, Mudie's sent triple-deckers to the subscribers in British India and all over the world. Moreover, publishers routinely pirated foreign materials: Dickens bemoaned American pirated editions of his work, and British publishers routinely appropriated foreign materials as well. The fact that the very term "sensation novel" seems to have originated in the US context suggests an intriguing avenue for further research. French serials like *The Mysteries of Paris* not only spawned imitators like Douglas Jerrold's *Mysteries of London*; they were taken up in hastily produced translations and resold on the streets of London (Léger-St-Jean 2010). Plays and fiction were adapted, translated, and outright plagiarized, in addition to influencing more respectful homages like Braddon's aforementioned revision of *Madame Bovary*, *The Doctor's Wife*. French realism had a significant impact on British sensation fiction, which borrowed its commitment to clinical description of "low" human behavior in the service of its scarcely more melodramatic plots. German Romanticism continued throughout the period to thread through scenes of horror or psychological abjection, and was a generally understood context for them: when Alicia considers that the rather demonic Pre-Raphaelite portrait of Lady Audley may reveal hitherto hidden capacities of the sitter, Robert shudders, "Don't be German! . . . I'm not metaphysical; don't unsettle me" (Braddon 2003: 108).



Moreover, the colonial and imperial context provides a rich (and under-studied) source of material as well as a convenient parking place for characters who need to be away from Britain: fortunes are made in the gold fields of Australia; diamonds are stolen from Indian temples and pursued by Hindu priests desperate to restore them; mysterious characters arrive in Britain from the Caribbean, having acquired murky histories and peculiar tastes. From the broader context of exoticism come the survivors of scalplings in the Wild West, opium-puffing Chinese, and smooth-talking Latin Americans with knife scars, beautiful daughters, and large investments in non-existent railroads. And of course, in many of these locations, writers in other languages were reading British fiction and writing their own challenges, responses, and appropriations. Generations of Indian writers have written their own novels which ironically cite, subvert, and sometimes pay homage to the modern novel form first introduced to the region by the Raj. British novels were first brought into India as a means of inculcating British values in the subordinated population, as Gauri Viswanathan (1989) explains; now, the fiction of former colonies forces a re-evaluation of the understanding of “Western” literature.

Finally, much scholarship remains to be done on medicine, science, the history of production, and sensation’s relationship to other arts. We have just begun to understand Victorian fiction’s relation to visuality, introduced in studies by scholars such as Kate Flint (1993), Jennifer Phegley (2004), and Sophia Andres (2005). The role of music has yet to be more fully explored, and the Victorian love of Wagner hints at the links between Romanticism in music and sensation in literature. We continue to delve into the relation of medicine, the social sciences (such as the link between anthropology and psychology investigated in Peter Logan’s *Victorian Fetishism: Intellectuals and Primitives* [2009]), and of political concerns outlined in such studies as Lauren Goodlad’s *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society* (2003). This Companion will give the reader both the broad understanding of sensation and the specific information on the state of scholarship necessary to advance in the comprehension of the literature as well as the production of new scholarship; it is also to be hoped that it will increase the pleasure of those approaching this rich material for the first time, as well as those well initiated into its mysteries.

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Part I

Before Sensation, 1830–1860



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# “The Aristocracy and Upholstery”: The Silver Fork Novel

*Ellen Miller Casey*

One of the progenitors of the sensation novel was the “silver fork” or “fashionable” novel. These novels, perhaps the first bestsellers, portray in detail the social lives of aristocratic exclusives during the Regency. They reigned from the mid-1820s to the mid-1840s and survived through the 1850s. As late as 1887, Marianne Stanhope’s 1827 novel *Almack’s* was reprinted in a three-volume edition, which the *Athenaeum* thought worthwhile in order to take the sense of a wider audience on this chronicle of *haut ton* in the reign of George IV (review of *Almack’s*, 1887: 253). In 1890 “H.R.H.” authored *Lothair’s Children*, a novel which Graves derided for its devotion to “the aristocracy & upholstery” (Graves 1890: 433).

These late Victorian comments echo the responses made by reviewers of silver fork novels sixty years earlier. Those reviewers saw fashionable novels as realistic, but dismissed them as trivial and often attacked them as immoral. The novels also provoked parodies, notably by Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, and William Makepeace Thackeray. After 1850, however, silver fork novels were largely ignored. It was not until 1936 that Matthew Rosa published the first book on them, *The Silver-Fork School: Novels of Fashion Preceding Vanity Fair*. Rosa does a thorough job of describing silver fork novelists and summarizing their works, but, as his subtitle suggests, he sees fashionable novels as an interesting popular phenomenon with little intrinsic value. For him their primary importance lies in leading to the apogee of the genre, Thackeray’s 1848 masterpiece, *Vanity Fair*. Kathleen Tillotson’s *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* similarly suggests that silver fork novels are important only as they increase our understanding of those authors, such as Thackeray, who reacted against them (1954: 5).

It was almost fifty years later, in 1983, that the next significant work on these novels appeared: Alison Adburgham’s *Silver Fork Society: Fashionable Life and Literature from 1814–1849*. Like Rosa and Tillotson, Adburgham dismisses silver fork novels as

essentially trivial. While she provides much useful information, she is primarily interested in using the novels as a source of historical information, a task for which their verisimilitude makes them well suited.

Recently, however, fashionable novels have received renewed attention and a critical re-evaluation. In 2005, Harriet Devine Jump edited *Silverfork Novels, 1826–1841*. Jump's collection includes six novels: *Granby* by Thomas Henry Lister (1826); *Romance and Reality* by Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1831); *Godolphin* by Edward Bulwer, later Bulwer-Lytton (1833); *The Victims of Society* by Marguerite, Countess of Blessington (1837); *Cheveley: A Man of Honour* by Rosina Bulwer (1839); and *Cecil, or the Adventures of a Coxcomb* by Catherine Gore (1841). (In addition to authoritative texts, the collection provides a general introduction to the genre and an essay on each novel.) Silver fork novels were the subject of a special edition of *Women's Writing* in 2009, edited by Tamara S. Wagner. These essays trace the novels' reception by Victorian reviewers and elaborate on contemporary references such as Almack's, the exclusive dance club run by Lady Patronesses. Most importantly they discuss the genre's literary legacies, both individual novelists such as Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot, and later genres such as the Victorian domestic and sensation novels.

Besides Wagner, the most significant critics of silver fork fiction are Winifred Hughes, April Kendra, and Muireann O'Coinneide. These critics reject the notion that fashionable novels are inherently trivial or important only for providing historical information or leading to *Vanity Fair*. Rather, they examine the genre as important evidence in the transition from the Romantic to the Victorian novel. They interrogate the grounds for excluding fashionable novels from the literary canon, place them in the context of the shift from the novels of Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott to those of Dickens, Thackeray, and Eliot, and examine their influence on subsequent fiction, especially the Victorian novel of domestic realism.

The descriptor "silver fork" was coined by William Hazlitt in his 1827 *Examiner* article, "The Dandy School." In this attack on the genre, Hazlitt's primary targets were Theodore Hook's *Sayings and Doings* (1834) and Disraeli's *Vivian Grey* (1826–7). Perhaps alluding to the *Don Quixote* proverb that "Every man is not born with a silver spoon in his mouth," Hazlitt insists that the fashionable novelist is concerned only with "the admiration of the folly, caprice, insolence, and affectation of a certain class" and that "provided a few select persons eat fish with silver-forks, he considers it a circumstance of no consequence if a whole country starves" (*Works*, 11: 353, 355).

Hook's *Sayings and Doings*, a three-volume collection of stories, was the first work of silver fork fiction. His tales of "the balls, the dinners, the hunts, the teas, the gossip, the electioneering, the opera, the theater, the clubs, the marriage settlements, the love marriages, the fashionable marriages, the gambling, and the dissipation" contained all the components of fashionable fiction and proved so popular that they were followed with two subsequent collections in 1825 and 1828 (Rosa 1964: 62). The first full-fledged fashionable novel was Robert Plumer Ward's *Tremaine, or the Man of Refinement* (1825), an atypically moralistic tale which traces the search of a wealthy young man for an appropriate occupation.

Other early examples of fashionable fiction were Lord Normanby's *Matilda* (1825), Lister's *Granby*, and Disraeli's *Vivian Grey*. *Matilda* traces the love story of Lady Matilda Delaval and Augustus Arlingford, later Lord Ormsby. Persuaded that Arlingford is unworthy, Matilda marries Sir James Dornton, only to re-encounter Ormsby, realize her mistake, and elope with him, eventually dying in childbirth. *Granby* is a courtship novel, in which Sir Thomas and Lady Jermyn consent to their daughter's marriage to Harry Granby only when he rather than his cousin is proven to be the rightful heir to a title. *Vivian Grey* is a *Bildungsroman* which follows the adventures of a precocious young man who, searching for a vocation, settles on politics and becomes organizer in chief of the political faction headed by the Marquis of Carabas. After the scheme collapses, Vivian kills a political rival in a duel and escapes to Germany, where he drinks with Rhineland dukes and meets Beckendorf, prime minister of Reisenberg, whose success leads Vivian to reflect on his own failures.

Collectively these early examples illustrate the typical plots of the silver fork novel. Intellectual and self-educated young men, searching for an appropriate way to distinguish themselves, settle on politics. Beautiful and wealthy young women, searching for appropriate husbands, are pressured by family and friends into inappropriate matches. All of these tales are set against vivid descriptions of balls, dinner parties, teas, clothes, food, and shopping.

At the height of their popularity, silver forks dominated the circulating libraries. In 1838, the London Statistical Society tabulated the volumes held by ten of the humbler libraries. Of the 2,191 volumes available, 1,488 (68 percent) were fashionable novels. Forty-one were by "Theodore Hook, Lytton Bulwer, etc.," 439 were "Fashionable Novels, well known," and 1,008 were "novels of the lowest character, being chiefly imitation of Fashionable Novels, containing no good, although probably nothing decidedly bad" (Altick 1957: 217–18). While this list counts volumes and not titles, it still attests to the popularity of fashionable novels, as well as indicating the breadth of that popularity.

Despite these large numbers, only two handfuls of fashionable authors have survived. Rosa suggests that only eight of them deserve attention; Hook, Ward, Lister, Disraeli, Bulwer, Blessington, Lady Charlotte Bury, and Catherine Gore. Further, he allows only Disraeli, Bulwer, and Gore more than historical interest. Of these three, Disraeli and Bulwer wrote only two fashionable novels apiece, *Vivian Grey* and *The Young Duke* (1831), and *Pelham* (1828) and *Godolphin* (1833), respectively. After that, Disraeli moved to political and social problem novels, while Bulwer turned to historical and mystical ones.

Gore, on the other hand, wrote a substantial number of silver fork novels and was the only one of the three who continued writing them into the 1840s. Among Gore's best novels are *The Hamiltons* (1834), the story of a heartless dandy who marries a young girl and is then unfaithful; *Mrs. Armytage, or Female Domination* (1836), which tells of a wealthy mother who attempts to rule her son's life; *Cecil, Or the Adventures of a Coxcomb* (1841), the memoir of an aging roué; and *The Banker's Wife, Or Court and City* (1843), which traces the life of an ambitious and dishonest banker.

Of Rosa's eight authors, Jump's six-novel collection keeps Lister, Bulwer, Blessington, and Gore, and adds Landon and Rosina Bulwer. Lost are such authors as Charles White, who wrote *Almack's Revisited* (1828) and *The Adventures of a King's Page* (1829); Samuel Beazley, who wrote *The Roué* (1828) and *The Oxonians: A Glance at Society* (1830); Robert Pierce Gillies, who wrote *Basil Barrington and his Friends* (1830); and Caroline and Henrietta Beauclerk, who together wrote *Tales of Fashion and Reality* (1836). Even more completely lost are the many anonymous authors whose identities have not been unmasked.

It must be noted that the majority of fashionable novels were published anonymously, or at most as by "the author of" a previous novel. This enabled publishers to exploit the possibility that the authors were actually aristocrats, and readers to presume that the material in the novels was the expression of inside knowledge, which was a major attraction to readers of fashionable novels. It was assumed that the novels were *romans-à-clef*, a belief reinforced by the publication of "keys" to the more popular of them, such as *Vivian Grey* (1826), *The Exclusives* (1829), and Blessington's *The Repealers* (1833).

While some of the fashionable novelists such as Lady Charlotte Bury, the daughter of the Duke of Argyll, and Constantine Phipps, the first Marquess of Normanby, were actual aristocrats, many others were, at best, on the edge of aristocratic society. Marguerite, the Countess of Blessington, for example, began life as Margaret Power, the daughter of a newspaper publisher. She married the abusive Captain Maurice St. Leger Farmer and was rescued from him by Captain Thomas Jenkins, with whom she lived for about six years. She then attracted the attention of the Earl of Blessington, with whom she lived until the death of her husband in 1817 enabled them to marry (Rosa 1964: 159–61).

Despite this questionable and scandalous biography, Blessington's title was enough to assure her insider authority. The value of such authority is indicated by the differing amounts paid by publishers depending on an author's title. In 1836, for example, *Lady Blessington* was paid £800 for a novel and *Mrs. Gore* only £120 (O'Connell 2008: 53). This was so even though most of Blessington's novels "would never have been published if she had been untitled and obscure" (Rosa 1964: 159).

The dubious qualifications of fashionable authors were often recognized by reviewers, and piercing their anonymity became a game for them, though their identifications were often inaccurate. As a reviewer of *Matilda* indicates:

It has been much the fashion, of late years, to ascribe anonymous novels to persons moving in the higher ranks of life. Thus *Tremaine* has been imputed to several noblemen, without being as yet owned by any body; thus, too, *Matilda* has already glittered under four or five distinguished names . . . (review of *Matilda*, 1825: 435)

Besides identifying anonymous authors, reviewers also delighted in suggesting that the authors of silver fork fiction were not aristocrats but rather their footmen or maids. The *Athenaeum* suggested that some of the novels



were produced by the fashionables themselves, and some by the footmen of those fashionables; some by literary young gentlemen, who occupy fourth stories, in retired situations, and whose knowledge of the great world is acquired through the medium of Sunday promenades in Hyde Park, and a rare visit to the Opera, when their finances permit the sacrifice of half a guinea. (review of *The Exclusives* [1829]: 782)

The following year the *Athenaeum* went even further. Andrew Picken proclaimed that since “every lady or gentleman, no matter how incapable, who was known, or was supposed to be known, in the fashionable world” was encouraged to write, it was clearly no longer the work but the author who mattered. And of these fashionable authors, he asserted, nine-tenths were frauds: “demireps and black-legs, broken-down gamblers, roués, and half-pay dragoon officers, with a sprinkling of imbecile honourables and romantic spinsters,” all “as cheap as Irish labourers” (Picken 1830: 626).

Nonetheless, the presumption of aristocratic authorship and therefore authority was widespread. For example, when the author of *Vivian Grey* was discovered to be Benjamin Disraeli, not only “an obscure person for whom nobody cares a straw” but also “a mere Jew boy,” there was a critical outcry which so upset Disraeli that he worked unsuccessfully for years to suppress the book (Rosa 1964: 101–2).

The content of silver fork novels was generally dismissed as stereotypical and predictable. Like other popular genres such as Newgate and historical novels, they are easily identified by their titles. *High Life* (1827), *A Marriage in High Life* (1828), *The Young Duke*, *The Fair of Mayfair* (1832), *The Victims of Society* – these are typical titles which announce their aristocratic subjects. Reviewers repeatedly suggested that these novels were written according to a formula which included a ball at Almack’s, a duel, a visit to a gambling club such as Crockford’s, an arranged marriage, and at least the suspicion of adultery. The *Athenaeum* suggested that such novels typically included “coronets, fine gentlemen, and still finer ladies, court plumes, diamond necklaces, the Prince Regent, masquerades, money-lenders, vindictive Italians, vicious tempered old dowagers, gay Lotharios” and that it was a great curiosity if a novel lacked the “dukes, silver forks, kitchen stuff, mysteries, foundlings, murders, suicides, dueling” of silver fork fiction (qtd. in Casey 2009: 254).

As indicated by “coronets, fine gentlemen, and still finer ladies,” an essential part of the silver fork formula was its aristocratic characters. As the *Athenaeum* exclaimed, “When did a novel ever prosper without a Lord!” (review of *The Merchant’s Daughter*, 1836: 883). The social life of these exclusives, centered on the London Season and London clubs, formed the center of fashionable novels.

Another component of the silver fork formula was its location in London. In the 1820s, the novel moved from the country to the city, from Austen’s small villages and country houses to metropolitan London. While the other bestseller of the period, the Newgate novel, was set in the East End, the silver fork novel was set in the West End, and, in particular, west of Regent Street and south of Oxford Street.

Formally, silver fork novels were characterized by plotlessness. Most of the novels were picaresque in form, following the adventures of a male protagonist in his travels

across Europe or the movement of a female one from shop to tea to dinner party to ball. This plotlessness troubled Victorian critics, who saw it as a “convenient symbol for the wider bankruptcy of the traditional ruling class” (Hughes 1995: 205).

The formulaic nature of the novels was reflected in the number of “recipes” offered for their writing. Normanby’s *Yes and No: A Tale of the Day* (1828) gives this recipe for a silver fork novel:

Do you know the modern receipt for a finished picture of fashionable life? Let a gentlemanly man, with a gentlemanly style, take of foolscap paper a few quires, stuff them well with high-sounding titles – dukes and duchesses, lords and ladies, *ad libitum*. Then open the Peerage at random, pick a suppositious author out of one page of it, and fix the imaginary characters upon some of the rest; mix it all up with *quantum suff.* of puff, and the book is in the second edition before ninety-nine readers out a hundred have found out that the one is as little likely to have written, as the others to have done, what is attributed to them. (qtd. in Adburgham 1983: 70–1)

A few years later, in 1841, *Punch* published “Literary Recipes: How to Cook up a Fashionable Novel”:

Take a consummate puppy . . . – baste with self-conceit – stuff with slang – season with maudlin sentiment – hash up with a popular publisher – simmer down with preparatory advertisements. Add six reams of gilt-edged paper – grate in a thousand quills – garnish with marble covers, and morocco backs and corners. Stir up with magazine puffs – skim off sufficient for preface. Shred scraps of French and small-talk, very fine. Add “superfine coats” – “satin stocks” – “bouquets” – “opera-boxes” – “a duel” – an elopement – St. George’s Church – silver bride favours – eight footmen – four postilions – the like number of horses . . . and serve with anything that will bear “frittering.” (“Literary Recipes”)

While these formulae and recipes create the sense that silver fork novels were homogeneous, they occlude important distinctions and oversimplify the genre. As April Kendra argues in “Gendering the Silver Fork,” for example, there are two major subcategories of these novels, the masculine “dandy novel” and the feminine “society novel.” The first concerns “a swaggering male protagonist whose experiences lead him to greater self-awareness and maturity,” while the second follows a large cast of interdependent characters with an “emphasis on family and community relationships” (Kendra 2004: 26–7), typically recording the introduction of an innocent female protagonist into high society (O’Cinneide 2008: 48).

The gendering of these types is at once supported and undermined by the most famous of the dandy novels, *Cecil, or Adventures of a Coxcomb* and *Cecil, A Peer*, both published anonymously by Gore in 1841. Although by this date Gore regularly published either under her own name or as the author of previous novels, she deliberately published these two anonymously in order to preserve the believability of their

first-person male narrator, the dandy Cecil Danby. She succeeded, for in the furor of speculation that ensued, the novels were attributed to several male writers, including Disraeli and Thackeray. These identifications were aided by Cecil's convincing voice and by Gore's publication that same year of a series of comic essays in *Bentley's Miscellany* as by "Albany Poyntz, the author of *Cecil*." On the one hand, the reviewers' presumption that the Cecil novels must be by a masculine hand confirms Kendra's categorization of dandy novels as masculine and society novels as feminine. On the other hand, Gore's successful ventriloquism of Cecil's masculine voice undercuts the idea that the sex of the author determines a novel's subject.

The satirical "recipes" for silver fork fiction illustrate the negative response to fashionable fiction by most Victorian critics, if not by the readers who made them so popular. Victorian reviewers attacked silver fork novels as superficial and trivial, dismissing their "fashionable gabble," their "fopperies of exclusiveness," their "hackneyed affectations," and their preoccupation with "Turkey carpets, and artificial flowers, and wax candles." They judged them as immoral and blamed them for clothing characters "either in foppery or harlotry." They thought these novels cheapened readers with their "blighting influence of artificial manners, cynical egotism, and corrupted morals." Even when they praised them for presenting an accurate picture of "the well-padded, curled, painted, and perfumed body of fashion," there was a satiric note to the praise (Casey 2009: 255).

This satiric note was extended in a number of parodies of the genre, the most noteworthy of which are those by Carlyle, Dickens, and Thackeray. Ironically, these parodies have survived better than their originals. "The Dandiacal Body" in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833–4) attacks fashionable novels in general and Bulwer's *Pelham* in particular. Professor Teufelsdröck, Carlyle's philosophical mouthpiece, observes that England's newest religious sect is the Dandiacal Sect, which boasts "great hereditary resources" and which attracts to itself the Positive Electricity of the nation, namely its money (Carlyle 1987: 216–17). The sect's Sacred Books are Fashionable Novels, which put Teufelsdröck to sleep when he tries to read them, and its "mystagogue, and leading Teacher and Preacher" is Pelham, who provides the "Articles of Faith" (1987: 210–12).

In chapter 28 of Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–9), Kate Nickleby reads aloud to Mrs. Witterly from a new three-volume novel entitled *The Lady Flabella*, in which "there was not a line . . . from beginning to end, which could, by the most remote contingency, awaken the smallest excitement in any person breathing." The novel's bad French, its description of "blue satin slippers," "rich hangings of silken damask," and "two valets-de-chambre, clad in sumptuous liveries of beach-blossom and gold," and most of all a letter to Lady Flabella from "Befillaire, the young, the slim, the low-voiced" overwhelm Mrs. Witterly because they are "so voluptuous . . . so soft" (Dickens 1982: 270).

The most extensive parodies of silver fork novels were written by Thackeray. In 1847 he published several burlesque novels in *Punch*, including "*Lords and Liveries, by the authoress of 'Dukes and Dejeuners', 'Hearts and Diamonds', 'Marchionesses and Milliners'.*"

This was aimed primarily at Gore, who had actually written *Peers and Parvenus* in 1846. In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray imagines how he might have set his story in Grosvenor Square and told “how Lord Joseph Sedley fell in love, and the Marquis of Osbourne became attached to Lady Amelia with the full consent of the Duke her noble father” (Thackeray 1994: 49). More vividly, when Becky appears at Lord Steyne’s “private and select parties,” Thackeray imagines the “August portals” of the elites guarded by grooms of the chamber with “flaming silver forks with which they prong all those who have not the right of the *entrée*” (1994: 500). *Vanity Fair* as a whole, of course, is both a repudiation of the silver fork genre and its apex.

One value which Victorian critics saw in fashionable novels was their historical accuracy. In Gore’s *Women as They Are* (1830), Lord Willersdale defines the aim of such novels “to be the amber which seeks to preserve the ephemeral modes and caprices of the passing day” (qtd. in Rosa 1964: 117). Sydney Owenson Morgan echoes this notion of historical value when she suggests:

We are inclined to assign to Mrs. Gore’s novels a rather prominent place among the historical documents of the day; and we would bind her volumes up, with those of Mr. Dickens, the forthcoming reports of Chartist trials, and a few similar books of fact and fiction, as contributions towards an encyclopaedia of the class-morality of the nation. (Morgan 1839: 888)

The sources of the silver fork novel were various – literary, commercial, and socio-political. The novels owed their literary origin to the picaresque novels of the eighteenth century, to the German *Bildungsroman* epitomized by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795–6; translated by Carlyle in 1824), to Byron’s *Don Juan* (1819–23) and Byron’s own notorious life, and to the novel of manners by such authors as Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen. Silver fork novels modified these forms, however. While “the intellectual dandy is, in essence, a picaresque rogue” (Rosa 1964: 9), dandy novels melded the picaresque with the *Bildungsroman* and the European tour. The dandy was searching for meaning in a way that his eighteenth-century predecessors had not, and his travels went beyond the English countryside of Tom Jones to the courts of Europe. Society novels often began rather than ended with a marriage, which not infrequently resulted in a separation or even a divorce. Both types moved their eighteenth-century models up the social ladder. As Gore said in her preface to *Pin Money*, they worked “to transfer the familiar narrative of Miss Austen to a higher sphere of society” (Rosa 1964: 127).

Commercially, the novels owed their greatest debt to Henry Colburn, who published the majority of fashionable novels. Rosa estimates that Colburn was responsible for publishing nine out of ten silver fork novels (1964: 178), while Sutherland suggests that a figure of 75 percent (1989: 577). Regardless of the exact number, Colburn was more than just the presenter of the genre. He was its concealer, producer, editor, publisher, and – most effectively – promoter (Aldburgham 1983: 23). He originated

the genre, publishing all five of the earliest examples cited above. He recruited aristocratic authors such as Normanby and Bury so that he could assure readers that his novels were written by insiders. He published novels written by non-aristocrats anonymously so that he could hint at nonexistent aristocratic identities.

Colburn was an expert “puffer,” adept at exploiting both the mystery of his authors’ identities and the *roman-à-clef* nature of their products. He used his own journals, the *London Literary Gazette* and *New Monthly Magazine*, to hint at forthcoming novels “of outstanding interest to high society,” at their aristocratic authors, and at the originals of their characters (Adburgham 1983: 25). He bought ads in other journals as a bid for favorable reviews and advance notices. Most subtly, he placed “paid paragraphs” in these journals. These “advertorials,” the Victorian equivalent of “infomercials,” looked like reviews but were in fact paid for by the publisher.

The “review” of Disraeli’s *Vivian Grey* which appeared in the *Literary Gazette* describes the “hubbub” this anonymous novel caused and is illustrative of Colburn’s adeptness at puffing and of the advantages of anonymity:

Some ten or twelve months ago a two-volume work under this name appeared, and has excited, from then till now, a great deal of curiosity. The newspapers have teemed with conjectures about the authorship, and whole coteries have disputed about the application of the characters to living individual. (review of *Vivian Grey*, 1827: 134)

As Henry Fothergill Chorley noted years later, “A temporary mystery as to the authorship . . . is a ‘sure card,’ as Mrs. Gore found out when she played it so dextrously on behalf of her Cecil . . .” (1866: 330).

While Colburn’s puffs may have sold books, they did not always persuade reviewers. In its review of *Crockford’s, or Life in the West*, the *Athenaeum* rejected the attribution of the novel to an aristocratic author:

We see there have been some puffs in the papers, intimating that the work is by “a certain sporting nobleman.” The impudence of this is too sublime; for the writer of these volumes has about as much knowledge of the manners and habits of civilized society as we have of the natives of Timbuctoo. (1828: 83)

Even though not always successful, Colburn’s role in promoting silver fork fiction contributed greatly to its status as a commodity text, one produced by a publisher such as Colburn who “from the returns of his ledger . . . collects with statistical accuracy the sort of book which is wanting” and dictates to “‘tradesmen’ authors how to appeal to ‘customer’ readers and produce works which the publisher drives through the market” (Casey 2009: 258).

The sociopolitical sources of the fashionable novel lie in the social tensions which arose in the battle over the Reform Bill of 1832. The old order, in which wealthy landowners who had always had power got to keep it, was under attack from the newly rich manufacturing classes, who felt that their money entitled them to political

and social power. Silver fork novels are a culturally important expression of a newly unstable society which could no longer presume that birth alone defined a gentleman and in which the central issue was a mediation of inclusion and exclusion. It had become necessary both to define “gentleman” and to protect the aristocratic hegemony which was perceived as under attack. One way in which fashionable novels reveal this social instability is by demonstrating the extent to which the Regency dandy was dependent for his identity on the gaze of others. The dandy, who, Carlyle argues, wants to be looked at, unsettles his age because his gentlemanly status is revealed not as essential but as the creation of others.

Silver fork novels appealed to two audiences, “great people” who took pleasure in hearing about themselves, and “little people” who delighted “in hearing about great people” (review of *The Exclusives*, 1829: 782). The details of aristocratic life provided by the novels’ information about Almack’s, tailors, brand names, and merchants led upper-class readers to examine them for accuracy and to look for characters modeled on their friends and acquaintances. At the same time, these details appealed to middle-class voyeurism and enabled readers from the rising bourgeoisie to mine them for instructions on how to move up the social ladder. In *The Voyage of Aylmer Popanilla* (1828), Disraeli sneered at these novels which aimed to educate the newly rich – termed Millionaires – who

picked up a considerable quantity of very useful knowledge; so that when the delighted students had eaten some fifty or sixty imaginary dinners in my lord’s dining-room, and whirled some fifty or sixty imaginary waltzes in my lady’s dancing-room, there was scarcely a brute left among the whole Millionaires. (qtd. in Rosa 1964: 111)

At a time of newly permeable class boundaries, fashionable novels reflected a society in which it was possible to move into elite society by acquiring the right dress and manners and provided instructions for how to do so.

But if silver fork novels served both to confirm the status of the exclusives and to instruct the rising middle class in how to achieve that status, they also attacked the materialism of the elites. In *England and the English* (1836), Bulwer argues that the middle classes hoped to be quasi-aristocrats and therefore they

eagerly sought for representations of the manners which they aspired to imitate, and the circles to which it was not impossible to belong. But as with emulation discontent also was mixed, as many hoped to be called and few found themselves chosen, so a satire on the follies and vices of the great gave additional piquancy to the description of their lives. (1836:)

Bulwer even suggests that fashionable novels helped to bring about the Reform Bill, by revealing “the falsehood, the hypocrisy, the arrogant and vulgar insolence of patrician life” and by rousing the indignation of all classes of readers (1836: 212).

Bulwer was not the only Victorian to recognize this complex tone of mixed adulation and satire. As the reviewer of *The Exclusives* notes, in early days the portraits of the leaders of fashion were

done with proper humility and respect for the great personages brought upon the scene. But a bolder spirit has appeared among men, and the avowed object of the work before us is to trample upon the pride of the exclusives . . . and to hold up their morals and manners to the contempt and ridicule of readers . . . (1829: 782)

Recent critics have explored this tonal intricacy in detail, refusing to read fashionable novels as simple *romans-à-clef* or as unproblematic glorifications of high society. As O'Conneide argues, the silver fork novel combined "a display of opulent, leisured fashionable life and a moralising strain on the wickedness of such a life" (2008: 47). Hughes suggests that fashionable novels manifested a "radical instability of tone," for whether the rising middle class "wanted to emulate or to abolish the ruling elite" (1992: 330) they could not ignore them. As a result, the novels celebrated and attacked, glamorized and censured, defended and satirized the lives of the Regency aristocracy, expressing "both nostalgia and disapproval" (1996: 160).

While Rosa declares that the fashionable novel was a "weedy growth" whose popularity led to overproduction and a loss of interest (1964: 98), recent critics argue that the novel gradually and inevitably was modified into other forms, contributing to the later political novels of Disraeli, to the domestic realism of the mid-Victorians, and to the sensation novels of the 1860s. Early criticism dismissed silver fork novels as compositions of fad and fashion written only to appeal to popular taste and to make money, but recent work has embedded them in the history of the novel and explored their influence on subsequent fiction.

Hughes, for example, analyzes the ways in which Gore's dandy and society novels document the shift from Regency aesthetic frivolity to the moral seriousness and bourgeois democracy of the Victorian domestic novel. Other critics have explored fashionable novels' connections to the sensation novel. Royce Mahawatte suggests that the Gothic, the silver fork, and the sensation novel all seek "to link the experience of the material to the construction of meaning" (2009: 330). Tamara Wagner discusses what she names "silver-fork sensation novels" which explored the shabby-genteel and the class "amphibiousness" which it created.

While the sensation novel would move down the social ladder and leave London for the country, it owed a significant debt to silver fork fiction. Prior to the marriage reform law of 1857, fashionable fiction such as Gore's "The Divorcée" in *The Fair of Mayfair*, Bury's *The Divorced* (1837), and Rosina Bulwer's *Cheveley* established as a topic for fiction the unhappy marriage, a subject which the sensation novel continued in such novels as Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860) and Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861). Further, fashionable novels anticipated the sensation novel's relation to its readers, instituting the bestseller and developing as a subject secrets in the houses of one's neighbors. It is perhaps no accident that one of the best known of

the sensation novels, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), has a title which could be that of a silver fork novel.

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## Newgate Novels

*Edward Jacobs and Manuela Mourão*

As Keith Hollingsworth details in his still definitive 1963 survey, the Newgate novel was “a series of novels having criminals as prominent characters” (1963: 14) that between 1830 and 1847 became immensely popular and controversial. Much like the sensation novel, the Newgate novel was “a school defined by its contemporary critics” (Hollingsworth 1963: 14), who named it after London’s notorious Newgate prison, and who – like critics of sensation novels in the 1860s – defined the genre by attacking a small corpus of popular novels by a handful of authors: Edward Bulwer-Lytton, William Harrison Ainsworth, and Charles Dickens.

The genre began in 1830 with Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *Paul Clifford*, which – like most Newgate novels – is set in the eighteenth century and draws upon the crime journalism that emerged as a mainstay of popular reading after 1718, when the enterprising publisher John Applebee contracted with the ordinaries (or chaplains) of Newgate prison to publish their accounts of condemned felons, which were supposedly based upon the criminals’ confessions, and were often sold at the Tyburn gallows on the day of execution (Linebaugh 1977). Editions of *Select Trials at the Sessions House in the Old Bailey*, which offered trial transcripts made in court by reporters who paid a fee for the right (Howson 1970: 325) but also included narrative “accounts” of the criminals’ careers, appeared in 1730, 1734–5, and 1742, and were much excerpted and plagiarized, as for instance in *Annals of Newgate* (1776). A host of subsequent anthologized “Lives” and “Histories” of executed criminals, based largely on these two sources, culminated in 1773 with the first (five-volume) edition of the famous *Newgate Calendar*; updated and “improved” editions followed in 1816 and 1828, and some version of it has remained in print to the present day.<sup>1</sup> Although the eponymous hero of *Paul Clifford* is not based upon a specific criminal recorded in this journalism, his exploits closely parallel those of several felons made famous by it (Hollingsworth 1963: 68). An orphan raised in a public house, Clifford is wrongly arrested at 16 and,

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*A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, First Edition. Edited by Pamela K. Gilbert.

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once in prison, is seduced into the criminal life. During a robbery he falls in love with Lucy Brandon, who turns out to be his cousin and the daughter of the licentious and corrupt William Brandon, the very justice who first wrongly committed him to prison, and who – despite discovering that Clifford is his son just before pronouncing capital sentence on him for a latter crime – is forced by legal protocols to transport him to Australia, whence Clifford escapes to America, is reunited with Lucy, and becomes an upstanding citizen (Hollingsworth 1963: 66–8). Unsurprisingly, given that Bulwer-Lytton was elected to Parliament as a Radical weeks after the novel appeared (Hollingsworth 1963: 65), criticism of the novel for encouraging sympathy with criminals tended to link such sympathy to radical politics (Hollingsworth 1963: 81–2), especially since Bulwer-Lytton ends the novel with this quote from the Radical politician John Wilkes: “The very worst use to which you can put a man is to hang him!” (Hollingsworth 1963: 68). In 1832, Bulwer-Lytton followed up with *Eugene Aram*, based on the life of a village schoolmaster executed in 1759 and made famous by the *Newgate Calendar*. In Bulwer-Lytton’s version, Aram is a withdrawn, self-taught scholar who by degrees falls in love with Madeline Lester, a young woman in the village of Grassdale, but who is arrested on the morning of their impending marriage after Walter Lester, Madeline’s cousin and Aram’s unsuccessful rival for her love, accidentally discovers that fourteen years earlier Aram, in a fit of passion, had murdered Walter’s long-lost, profligate father and hidden the body in a cave (Hollingsworth 1963: 85–7). Far less concerned with social criticism than *Paul Clifford*, the novel is essentially a Gothic exploration of Aram’s guilt and doomed fate, but critics nonetheless reviled it for romanticizing crime in morally and socially subversive ways (Hollingsworth 1963: 97–8). Ainsworth’s *Rookwood* (1834), a quasi-Gothic tale of ill-fated love and sinister heritage centered around Luke Rookwood, was for the most part implicated in the Newgate genre only retrospectively, on the grounds that it makes the famous eighteenth-century highwayman Dick Turpin a secondary protagonist who, amidst efforts to aid the hapless Luke, commits robberies, sings licentious criminal slang songs, and rides non-stop from London to York to evade arrest (Hollingsworth 1963: 106–9). The genre reached its height of popularity and notoriety with Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1838) and Ainsworth’s *Jack Sheppard* (1839), whose overlapping serialization in *Bentley’s Miscellany* launched a Victorian institution, for the first time demonstrating the enormous profit to be made from serializing novels in magazines (Erickson 1996: 161–2). Dickens’s novel follows an illegitimate orphan, who after fleeing the brutal parish workhouse system instituted by the 1834 New Poor Law,<sup>2</sup> falls into the clutches of the Jewish crime lord Fagin, a character based upon a notorious fence of the time, Isaac “Ikey” Solomon. Condemnation of it focused on Dickens’s sympathetic portrait of Nancy, a member of Fagin’s gang who risks her life in order save Oliver from Fagin’s machinations, evincing a moral capacity that critics saw as unrealistic (Hollingsworth 1963: 112–31, esp. 124 and 128–9). *Jack Sheppard* was by far the most vilified of the Newgate novels. It was condemned mainly for glamorizing an eighteenth-century housebreaker whose astounding prison escapes in the 1720s had already made him a folk hero, but also for representing Jonathan

Wild – the notorious “Thief-Taker General of Great Britain” who was hanged in 1725 and who in the novel demonically persecutes Sheppard and his family – as a sanctioned agent of the British government (Hollingsworth 1963: 131–65; cf. Howson 1970). Dickens’s *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), a historical novel about the Gordon Riots of 1780, which had resulted in several days of mob violence culminating in the burning and partial destruction of Newgate prison,<sup>3</sup> is often discussed as a Newgate novel (for example by Joyce 1995: 313–18), but despite the continuing outrage over *Oliver Twist* and *Jack Sheppard*, few contemporaries criticized it as a part of the Newgate school (Hollingsworth 1963: 177). The Newgate novel ended as a viable fashion in 1846, when Bulwer-Lytton’s *Lucretia, or the Children of Night*, based on the contemporary forger, fraud, and wife-poisoner Thomas Griffith Wainewright (1794–1847), prompted a year-long critical assault not only on Bulwer-Lytton’s novel but also on previous works in its “school” that led Bulwer-Lytton as well as Ainsworth and Dickens to abandon the project of writing novels centered on criminal protagonists (Hollingsworth 1963: 191–202).

Like sensation novels, Newgate novels were condemned primarily for popularizing and glamorizing criminal and other indecorous behavior (Hollingsworth 1963: 14–15). Beyond condemning their transgressive content, critics of both genres particularly reprehended the ways they “polluted” the mainstream periodical press and the novel genre with content and modes allegedly originating in and more appropriate to the lower-class penny press, as well as the ways that the novels themselves were spawning theatrical adaptations and other merchandizing schemes, such as the “Sheppard bags” of housebreaking tools offered at theaters staging adaptations of *Jack Sheppard* (Ainsworth 2007: 32) or the *Woman in White Waltz* and *Fosco Gallop* that became fashionable after the publication of Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860) (Radford 2009: 3, n. 12).<sup>4</sup> Hollingsworth (1963) tends to stress contemporary critics’ moral outrage at the ways Newgate novels glamorized criminals, but his summaries of reviews also indicate how widely critics reprehended both the genre’s intrusion of lower-class material and genres into the novel and its hegemonic publishing venues, and the extent of theatrical adaptations and other uptakes of the novels into popular culture. The most pointed critiques of Newgate novels on the last two scores are probably the unattributed review of *Jack Sheppard* in the 26 October 1839 *Athenaeum* and John Forster’s review of the same novel in the 3 November 1839 *Examiner*. Both reviews are extensively excerpted in Jacobs and Mourão’s edition of the novel (Ainsworth 2007: 502–8 and 509–19). For key instances of these tropes in contemporary criticism of sensation novels, see the summaries in Radford (2009) of the following reviews: Thomas Arnold’s 1866 *Macmillan’s Magazine* article (67–8); Henry Mansel’s 1863 essay on sensation novels in the *Quarterly Review* (71); and W. Fraser Rae’s 1865 review of Braddon for the *North British Review* (71–2).

However similar the Newgate and sensation genres may be in the amount of controversy they raised and in the grounds on which critics attacked them, the two genres differ significantly in how they locate criminality within the Victorian class structure, in how they narrate crime and punishment, in the role that gender plays in the author-

ship and content of their narratives, and in the ways that they represent the psychology of criminality.

### Criminalizing Class

Contemporary critics condemned both Newgate and sensation novels for glamorizing criminals, but as both those criticisms and latter scholarship indicate, whereas sensation novels scandalized their age by revealing criminality within hegemonic, middle-class culture, Newgate novels typically project criminality onto an alien lower-class culture. In an article in *Temple Bar* for 1870, Alfred Austin crystallized the objections of contemporary critics to the way sensation novels represented crime and criminals as present in the middle-class home:

When before did it ever enter the head of the writer of romance to find a field for the exercise of his more awful powers just at his own door or round the corner? . . . It is on our domestic hearths that we are taught to look for the incredible. A mystery sleeps in our cradles; fearful errors lurk in our nuptial couches; fiends sit down with us at table; our innocent-looking garden walks hold the secret of treacherous murders; and our servants take £20 a year from us for the sake of having us at their mercy. (qtd. in Radford 2009: 83)

Instead of a haven, a Ruskinian “shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, division,” (Ruskin, qtd. in Radford 2009: 119), the bourgeois home is depicted as a site of danger and “foul deeds.” Robert Audley, the self-appointed investigator in Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*, seeks to intimidate Lady Audley precisely by suggesting that he is not fooled by her performance as the angel in the house:

What do we know of the mysteries that may hang about the houses we enter? . . . Foul deeds have been done under the most hospitable roofs, terrible crimes have been committed amid the fairest scenes, and have left no trace upon the spot where they were done . . . I believe that we may look into the smiling face of a murderer, and admire its tranquil beauty. (Braddon 1862: 140–1)

Sensation novels’ strong suggestion that the Victorian ideal of peaceful domesticity might be a fiction was thus instrumental in contributing to their excoriation.

By contrast to sensation novels’ naturalization of criminality within the very culture of middle-class readers, nearly all Newgate novels (excepting *Eugene Aram* and *Lucretia*) not only represent a distinctly lower-class criminal underworld, but, more importantly, exoticize that criminal class as a different “race” with an alien culture, much as did the “criminal anatomy” genre that Gladfelder identifies (2001: 21–32, esp. 23–4) in early eighteenth-century crime writing, upon which so many Newgates drew. Perhaps most pointedly, characters’ use of “flash” criminal slang in *Paul Clifford*, *Rookwood*, *Barnaby Rudge*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Jack Sheppard* (especially pervasive in the

latter two) literally makes the criminal world represented half-intelligible and alien to mainstream readers. Yet all of these novels extend this linguistic othering of the criminal “race” to culture, environment, and physicality by detailed exposés of criminal gambits, defamiliarizing evocations of slum milieus, and a profusion of physical grotesques, ranging from Fagin’s caricature Jewishness and the miniaturization of adulthood by the Artful Dodger in *Oliver Twist* to the Amazonian size and fighting prowess of Poll Maggot and the “almost mulatto” (Ainsworth 2007: 71) swarthinness of Blueskin in *Jack Sheppard*.

One practical (and highly marketable) effect of the ways Newgate novels exoticized a criminal “class” was to heighten the shock value and frisson for middle-class readers of traversing into an “alien” culture. And in contrast to sensation novels’ intrusion of criminality into the hegemonic culture familiar to most of their readers, Newgate novels’ exoticization of a criminal class in many ways allowed middle-class readers to consume them without feeling implicated in the transgressions they represented, especially since, as Hollingsworth (1963: 141) notes, most Newgates were also historically distanced to the eighteenth century, before (allegedly) curative reforms to Britain’s juridical-penal system.

But however much Newgate novels do abject criminality onto an alien “class” and different time, an assemblage of tropes in Newgates also pushes readers toward sympathy and identification with their protagonists – and usually with a handful of other individual criminals close to the protagonist. Most commonly, Newgates incite readers to identify with individual “good criminals” by having those characters enact unarguably hegemonic virtues – often in morally trying moments of crisis – as for instance with Jack Sheppard’s willingness to be captured and eventually to hang in order to rescue his mother from the clutches of Jonathan Wild, or Nancy’s willingness to risk her life because of a “feminine” pity for Oliver Twist. This attribution of mainstream virtues to criminals is typically supported by the representation of them as victims of social injustice, which has caused them to fall into the criminal world, and which is blamed more than their “natures” for their criminality and other moral failings. Thus, in *Paul Clifford*, the hero’s initial imprisonment for a crime he did not commit precipitates his turn to crime, while Oliver Twist’s flight from the brutality visited on him by the New Poor Law workhouse system exposes him to Fagin’s criminal world, and Jack Sheppard turns to crime not only because of Jonathan Wild’s persecution of his entire family but also because Mrs. Wood, the wife of the carpenter to whom he is apprenticed, unjustly strikes him when he tries to tell her that one of the guests at a dinner she has thrown in support of the 1715 Jacobite rebellion is actually Jonathan Wild in disguise. This trope of Newgate protagonists and their allies as victims of the corrupting and alien world of crime into which injustice has cast them is in turn often supported by an appeal to what Peter Linebaugh and Simon Joyce identify as an “excarceral politics,” whereby the “escapes, flights, desertions, migrations and refusals” by which characters attempt to escape unjustly “carceral” institutions such as “workhouse, factory, hospital, school and ship” (Linebaugh 1991: 23; cf. Joyce 1995 and Ainsworth 2007: 15–23) are rewritten as evidence of their moral natures rather

than as signs of immorality or rebellion against the status quo. Joyce rightly stresses *Oliver Twist* and *Jack Sheppard* as the Newgates that most virulently appealed to this excarceral counter-ethics, but *Paul Clifford*, *Rookwood*, and *Eugene Aram* also deploy the trope powerfully, if in ways that bear on state institutions less directly than *Oliver Twist* and *Jack Sheppard*. A final part of the standard narrative assemblage by which Newgates incite middle-class readers to identify with select “good” criminals is to narratively ascribe middle- or upper-class status to those criminals, either (as in *Oliver Twist* and *Jack Sheppard*) by revealing the protagonists to be high-class by birth, or (as in *Paul Clifford* and *Eugene Aram*) by stressing their ability to “rise” into hegemonic culture – despite their criminal past – by adopting hegemonic values and in turn acquiring the class status for which in Victorian culture those values were a prerequisite.

Contemporary critics of Newgate novels routinely ridiculed and decried these narrative ploys for morally redeeming criminals as unrealistic, much as contemporary critics of sensation novels a quarter-century later saw the genre as immoral in large part because its “sensational” revelations of criminality within “our own hearth and next door” were so unrealistic as to constitute a libel upon the middle class. As Hollingsworth (1963: esp. 128–9, 148–9, and 156–8) stresses, William Makepeace Thackeray spearheaded the attack on Newgates for their lack of realism, but this complaint is also central to the condemnation of *Jack Sheppard* by John Forster in the 3 November 1839 *Examiner* (excerpted in Ainsworth 2007: 509–19) and J. Hamilton Reynolds in the February 1840 *Fraser’s Magazine* (excerpted in Ainsworth 2007: 519–28). In an 1864 article on sensation novels in the *Saturday Review*, the writer complains that “the murderers and forgers and bigamists and adulterers are people like ourselves, such as we might meet any day in society” (qtd. in Radford 2009: 36). Similarly, Geraldine Jewsbury notes in an article in the *Athenaeum*:

If, in after times, the manners and customs of English life in 1864 were to be judged by the novels of the day, it would naturally be believed that people, in the best regulated families, were in the habit of marrying two wives, or two husbands . . . and of suppressing the one that proved inconvenient, by “painless extinction” or by more forcible methods. (qtd. in Radford 2009: 81)

W. Fraser Rae, in his 1865 essay on Braddon, further emphasizes that writers of sensation novels manipulate realist conventions “for the sake of effect,” and thus offer representations that are “grossly untrue to nature”:

Into uncontaminated minds they will instill false views of human conduct. . . . A novel is a picture of life, and as such ought to be faithful. The fault of these novels is that they contain pictures of daily life, wherein there are scenes so grossly untrue to nature, that we can hardly pardon the authoress if she drew them in ignorance, and cannot condemn her too strongly if, knowing their falseness, she introduced them for the sake of effect. (qtd. in Radford 2009: 16).

While there were some critics who pointed out that newspapers were full of equally extraordinary events, for most, one of the main problems with sensation novels remained that they “represent[ed] life neither as it [was], nor as it ought to be” (qtd. in Radford 2009: 16).

The fact that critics of both genres attacked them for violating realism underscores the embattled hegemony of novelistic realism within both periods, as critics and the culture they spoke for sought to hold a line against the melodrama, the Gothic, and other allegedly anti-realist popular genres. The critical clamor against both genres for betraying realism also underscores their shared use of criminality as an occasion to interrogate class structure and ideology, since critics of both genres found them scandalously inaccurate to the realities of Victorian class. Yet this linking of realism to class by contemporary critics also reiterates the differences stressed above in the ways the two genres located criminality in Victorian class structure. For whereas critics of the sensation novels complained that they were unrealistic because they implied that middle-class people could be, and regularly were, immoral and criminal and that hegemonic institutions like the Victorian family potentially cultivated that criminality, critics of Newgate novels complained that they were unrealistic because they implied that some members of the lower-class race could by nature be good and familiar, rather than criminal and alien.

Contemporary objections to the realism of how the two genres located criminality within Victorian class structure also highlight the shared ideological ambivalence in the two genres about class permeability (see, for example, Pykett 2003: 32). For much as Newgate novels rehabilitate individual criminals from the alien race into which they have fallen by rewriting them as exemplars of higher-class values, sensation novels open up a space for indicting middle-class culture for motivating the “domestic” crimes they represent, but ultimately reinstate its hegemony as the criminals are, most often, ejected from the middle class by subjection to hegemonic institutions of punishment or discipline, such as the law or the madhouse. Like Newgate novels, sensation novels hence appeal to the potency within the Victorian period of Linebaugh’s and Joyce’s “excarceral politics.” Yet, as the final two sections of this essay argue, and as this section has stressed, Newgate novels appeal to the ethical and political necessity of escaping from discrimination against lower-class status, while sensation novels appeal to the necessity of escaping from the strictures of middle-class and domestic culture.

## Narrating Crime

Much as sensation novels and Newgate novels relate the shared topic of crime to class in different ways, the two genres narrate criminal acts and their causes and consequences in three significantly different ways.

First, whereas sensation novels narrate crime as a mystery and its detection as a revelation in ways that parallel detective fiction,<sup>5</sup> most Newgate novels make little



effort to hide criminal acts from readers, on the contrary detailing crimes as events of high adventure and moral crisis (see Pykett 2003: 34). As the summaries of Newgates above suggests, *Eugene Aram* and *Lucretia* are, much like sensation novels, structured around hidden crimes that inevitably come to light, and significantly, the Newgate novel genre was critically howled out of existence by the outrage over *Lucretia*, published only fifteen years before the sensation novel genre emerged into popularity and notoriety. Still, neither of these Newgates stresses the detection of crime as a juridical and social inevitability to the extent that sensation novels do, with Walter Lester's discovery of Eugene Aram's secret crime, for instance, resulting almost accidentally from Walter's search for his long-lost father and being pointedly distanced from Walter's agency. On the other hand, as contemporary critics objected, all other Newgates in fact revel in dramatizing (and glamorizing) their protagonists' crimes as adventures. Perhaps more importantly, the detail afforded in Newgates to these criminal acts foregrounds them as moments of moral and narrative crisis that overtly influence the later fates of the protagonists, as for example with the account in *Jack Sheppard* of his robbery of his former master Owen Wood, during which Sheppard's compatriot Blueskin, against Sheppard's orders, cuts the throat of Wood's wife, causing Sheppard to rebel against the "slavery" (Ainsworth 2007: 281) entailed by working in Jonathan Wild's criminal network, a rebellion that in turn intensifies Wild's persecution of Sheppard and his mother and ultimately leads to Sheppard's arrest and execution. Similarly, in *Oliver Twist*, during the midnight robbery by Fagin's gang of Mr. Brownlow's house Oliver is shot and captured, which immediately results in his adoption by the goodly Brownlows and ultimately leads to the revelation that he is the nephew of Brownlow's ward, the virtuous Rose Maylie.

Second, whereas the mystery-and-detection plot of sensation novels requires them to devote much of the middle and end of their narrative to the process of detecting crime – and to the figure of the detective – the quasi-biographical narrative structure adopted by most Newgates, reflecting their sources in eighteenth-century criminal narratives like the *Newgate Calendar* (see above), entails little attention to the detection of crime, but instead devotes its beginning to elaborating the process by which criminals fall into and become trapped by the culture of criminality. Given these different narrative structures, Newgates render the causes and contexts of criminality in far more detail than sensation novels typically do. In part this is so because, by hiding the substance of the crime until late in the narrative, sensation novels structurally crowd narration of the crime, its causes, and its consequences into the end of the narrative, which usually gives relatively synoptic, retrospective accounts of the crime act (usually by the detective figure) and of its causes (usually by a combination of the detective and the criminal protagonist). By contrast, the structural origins of most Newgate narratives in eighteenth-century criminal biographies allow – and by tradition predispose – them to start by exploring the question of why and how their protagonists turn to crime. This origin of Newgates in eighteenth-century criminal biography also narratively allows and generically predisposes them to devote the

middle of their narrative to elaboration of their protagonists' criminal acts as moments of moral and narrative crisis, as discussed above. Thus, the first "Epoch" of *Jack Sheppard* narrates his birth into the criminal underworld into which his mother has fallen by the persecution of Jonathan Wild, while the second details Sheppard's oppression as an apprentice to Mr. Wood and his classist wife, which leads (ambiguously) to his first crime. Similarly, the first movement of *Oliver Twist* focuses on how Oliver's oppression for allegedly being the son of a prostitute motivates his flight from the workhouse system implemented by the New Poor Law, which ultimately leads to his capture by Fagin's criminal underworld. Similarly, *Paul Clifford* begins by narrating the protagonist's adoption by a virtuous widow, his unjust imprisonment, and the corruption that results.

Third, and most broadly, whereas the quasi-biographical plot of Newgate novels ideologically foregrounds and naturalizes the inevitability of fate and the pervasiveness of "carceral" strictures on the choices and opportunities available to individuals, the mystery-and-detection plot of sensation novels ideologically foregrounds and naturalizes the inevitability of discovery and the pervasiveness of surveillance. Largely in response to D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* (1988), scholarship on the sensation novel has widely explored how (and to what extent) the genre deploys panoptical discipline and "creates universal suspicion" (Pykett 2001: 203). Grossman (2002: 137–63) has argued that Newgate novels also ideologically foreground the combat between individual volition and the various regimes for policing individual license in ways that echo the naturalization of surveillance regimes that scholars have found central to the sensation novel. But for the most part scholarship on Newgate novels has rightly stressed how the genre, like the tradition of eighteenth-century criminal narratives that it draws on, foregrounds criminal protagonists' attempts to escape from a "carceral" fate dictated by their socio-economic circumstances far more than it naturalizes (as sensation novels do) the pervasiveness and inevitable potency of institutions for detecting crimes once they have been committed.

## Gender

Directly connected with the types of plots characteristic of sensation and Newgate novels is the issue of gender. Sensation fiction typically features female protagonists, many of whom, like Marian Holcombe in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, challenge traditional expectations of Victorian respectable femininity or, worse, like Lady Audley in Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, turn out to be implicated in crimes as shocking as murder and bigamy. Because the representations of womanhood in these texts were seen to be unrealistic and even shocking, and because women were not only the subjects but also the authors and readers of these novels, a substantial part of contemporary critical objections to the genre focused precisely on gender. Margaret Oliphant, one of the most influential reviewers for *Blackwood's Magazine*, objected:

What is held up to us as the story of the feminine soul as it really exists underneath its conventional coverings, is a very fleshy and unlovely record. Women driven wild with love for the man who leads them on to desperation . . . women who marry their grooms in fits of sensual passion . . . such are the heroines who have been imported into modern fiction. (qtd. in Radford 2009: 86)

The “fleshy” aspect of the representations of middle-class women was especially scandalous, and elsewhere Oliphant “maintain[ed] that the ‘eagerness of physical sensation’ expressed ‘as the natural sentiment of English girls’ and ‘offered to them . . . as a true representation of themselves’ was not only pernicious but also psychologically incorrect” (Radford 2009: 87).

The female authorship of many of these novels raised strong objections as well. Henry James, commenting on Braddon’s fiction, expressed dismay at how her novels “betray an intimate acquaintance with that disorderly half of society which becomes every day a greater object of interest to the orderly half. They intimate that, to use an irresistible vulgarism, Miss Braddon ‘has been there’” (qtd. in Radford 2009: 69). But the greatest objection to sensation fictions was their potential for exerting a pernicious influence on a preponderantly female readership: what “our sisters and daughters may learn from these works” (James, qtd. in Radford 2009: 69).

By contrast, the protagonists of Newgate novels were almost exclusively male, as were their authors. Because of this, and the fact that most Newgate characters are pointedly lower-class, the criticism of these fictions did not highlight their potential pernicious influence on respectable middle-class women – though they decried the extent to which they acquainted women readers with vice and cant – but rather their unrealistic attribution of virtue to female characters who were criminals or destitute. Their depiction of female characters in a highly melodramatic manner, such as Mrs. Sheppard in Ainsworth’s *Jack Sheppard*, or as ancillary to the criminal protagonist, as exemplified by Nancy in Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, are nevertheless suggestive, for they reflect the implicit conformity to gender expectations in these novels.

## Conclusion

Although the Newgate and sensation genres both focused on criminal acts in ways that contemporary critics condemned, and although Newgate novels surely prepared an audience for shocking accounts of crimes that sensation novels exploited, the two genres differ in significant ways. Specifically, sensation novels diverged from the Newgate novel tradition by locating crime in the familiar space of middle-class domesticity rather than in an exotic lower-class culture, by focusing on contemporary rather than historical criminals, by narratively privileging the detection of secret crimes over the genesis of known crimes, and by associating crime with femininity rather than with socio-economic disadvantage.

## NOTES

- 1 Faller (1987) is probably the most comprehensive account of eighteenth-century criminal narratives, although Gladfelder (2001: 19–92) is more precise about the various genres of the age's crime writing, discriminating anatomies, picaresque fiction, providential fictions, crime reports in newspapers, last dying speeches, trial transcripts, and criminal biographies as distinct genres both in narrative form and in mode of publication.
- 2 Under the New Poor Law of 1834, administration of aid to the poor was centralized under a Board of Commissioners in London, with the aim of eradicating the tradition of "out of door" relief for the poor and instead requiring all who applied for relief to enter a workhouse, where conditions were by design harsh. Longmate (1974) gives a comprehensive account of the workhouse system and how the New Poor Law departed from earlier traditions.
- 3 The Gordon riots broke out on 2 June 1780, after George Gordon, president of the Protestant Association, organized a march on Parliament in protest of a "Bill for the Relief of Papists from certain Penalties and Disabilities." The mob, about 100,000 strong, quickly degenerated into vandalism and banditry that lasted six days, during which Newgate was set afire and many of its prisoners freed. Renovations to Newgate begun in 1767 had only been completed a year earlier, and repairing damage to the prison cost £20,000. Gordon later died in Newgate (Griffiths 1983: 289–302).
- 4 For details on the *Woman in White Waltz* and Fosco Gallop, see, respectively, Teukolsky (2009: 425, fig. 2), which reproduces the cover of the sheet music to the dance written in 1861 by C. H. R. Marriott in 1861, and the *Musical Standard* (1872: 15), which has a brief review of the Fosco Gallop, written by G. Richardson.
- 5 As *Fraser's Magazine* (68 [Aug. 1863: 126]) complained, "a book without a murder, a divorce, a seduction, or a bigamy, is not apparently considered worth either writing or reading, and a mystery and a secret are the chief qualifications of the modern novel." See Radford (2009: 34–63, esp. 34–6) for summaries of similar comment by twentieth-century critics on the narrative dependence of sensation novels on secrecy and its detection.

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## “Literature of the Kitchen”: Cheap Serial Fiction of the 1840s and 1850s

*Andrew King*

In 1865 the critic W. F. Rae denounced Mary Braddon for being able to “boast of having temporarily succeeded in making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing room” (Rae 1864: 204). What was this “literature of the Kitchen” that, according to Rae, was welcomed by “the lowest in the social scale, as well as in mental capacity”? How can it help us understand the sensation fiction of the drawing room?

Braddon herself goes some way to answering these questions in her novel about the dangers of reading, *The Doctor's Wife* (1864). Set initially in 1852, we meet

Mr Sigismund Smith . . . a sensation author. That bitter term of reproach, “sensation,” had not been invented for the terror of romancers in the fifty-second year of this present century; but the thing existed nevertheless in divers forms . . . Sigismund Smith was the author of about half-a-dozen highly-spiced fictions, which enjoyed an immense popularity amongst the classes who like their literature as they like their tobacco – very strong. Sigismund had never in his life presented himself before the public in a complete form; he appeared in weekly numbers at a penny . . . (Braddon 1864 in King and Plunkett 2005: 306)

While publishing *The Doctor's Wife* in a drawing-room shilling monthly, Braddon was also appearing “in weekly numbers at a penny” and even less (see Carnell 2000). The creator of Sigismund Smith knew what she was talking about.

Braddon may even have named her author after a real model. John Frederick Smith was the star British author of penny fiction weeklies of the 1850s. His third serial for the *London Journal* had raised circulation to 500,000 a week over 1851–2 (the period when we first meet Sigismund). *Minnigrey* was dramatized numerous times, and we know that Braddon acted in one version. Even greater sales and more theatrical adap-



Figure 3.1 George Cruikshank, "The Sentimental Novel Reader" (Mayhew 1847: opposite p. 214)

tations were achieved by J. F. Smith's subsequent serials, and again the theatrical troupes that Braddon played with staged adaptations of them (see Carnell 2000: appendix).

J. F. Smith was not, of course, the only author read below stairs. If "the literature of the Kitchen" is taken as a synonym for the reading matter of the poor, rather than simply of servants, it ranged from the moralistic publications of the Religious Tract Society, the instructive manuals of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge and the Bible to radical newspapers, the social-purpose fiction of G. W. M. Reynolds, of Harriet Martineau and of Hannah More, songbooks, and second-hand volumes of all sorts. The extent and variety of such reading cannot be mapped in one article: Altick (1998), James (1974, 1976, 1982), Mitchell (1981) and King and Plunkett (2005) give general overviews; Humpherys and James (2008) and Peterson (2006) discuss Reynolds, and Martineau and More respectively. If the term is restricted to

“strong” fiction such as Sigismund Smith wrote, then besides the fiction of his name-sake, the penny serials published by Edward Lloyd need to be examined. Lloyd’s serials – often erroneously called “penny dreadfuls,” a term which strictly refers to a form of boys’ serial dating from the 1860s (see Springhall 1994) – were associated with the kitchen by the Mayhew brothers in their 1847 satire *The Greatest Plague of Life*, which described the kitchen maid Betsy as so wrapped up in Lloyd’s “sentimental” publications that she was quite unable to do her job. This threatened the very foundation of the middle-class home: work discipline was disrupted, social hierarchy was upset, and even the mistress was affected in ways that 1860s sensation was later to be accused of doing (cf. Flint 1993: 277–8)

Hoity-toity! was there ever such a sight! – I thought I should have dropped down when I saw it. My beautiful kitchen for all the world like a cheap Jack’s cart at a fair – sauce-pans here, kettles there, crockery everywhere, while my beauty was sitting with her toes cocked up on the fender, and that trumpery “GIPSY GIRL OF ROSEMARY DELL” in her hand, as I live, and crying water-spouts over that stupid, disgusting “OUTCAST” of an “ELA”. . . (Mayhew and Mayhew 1847: 214)

Before focusing on what exactly was perceived as causing this commotion, it is necessary to outline the commercial imperatives that drove it. After that I shall examine some specific examples of serials published by Lloyd, and finally consider Smith’s *Minnigrey*. Why were these publications so popular? What similarities with and differences from the later sensation fiction of the drawing room can be established?

### The Penny Fiction Market

As the poorer classes became more and more literate over the nineteenth century, the market for cheap reading grew exponentially. Already in 1800, around 60 percent of males and 45 percent of females could read; by 1871 the figure had risen to 81 percent and 73 percent respectively. A standard three-volume novel or the minimum subscription to lending libraries like Mudie’s cost a servant more than a month’s pay or a teacher a good fortnight’s salary. Even shilling monthlies like *Temple Bar* were too expensive for most people’s incomes. While the market for second-hand fiction in volumes thrived, even cheaper was the form of fiction that Sigismund Smith composed.

While the origins of serial publication as a form lie in the second quarter of the eighteenth century (Wiles 1957), it was not always cheap. In the 1820s there were experiments in lowering the price of serials to 2*d.* and 3*d.*, but in the 1830s and 1840s more widespread use of technology lowered the cost of paper and printing, and this, in turn, enabled the profitable publication of weeklies that cost just a penny. This was based on the business model of what a contemporary called “economic literature” whereby profit could be sought through small margins per item and high circulation



as opposed to through the previous norm, high prices and limited circulation (“Address to Readers,” 1845). Serials were especially useful for publishers following the new model because the sales of one part could pay for the publication of the next. At first, to minimize costs, publishers preferred to print works whose copyright had lapsed or which were foreign, as in either case no writer’s fee had to be paid. But unlike the novel in the drawing room which involved a one-off purchase or a subscription to a lending library, the new business model was predicated on repeat purchase. Compilations and reprints from a previous age were neither an inexhaustible resource nor a sufficient incentive. From the 1850s, international copyright agreements increasingly narrowed the source of possible pirate editions. New kinds of fiction had to be invented that addressed the concerns and anxieties of consumers in a form that made them want to return again and again. This new fiction appeared in two main forms: periodicals and part-issue novels.

Penny fiction periodicals were illustrated or not, but they always had a masthead, date, and price, and usually comprised sixteen pages with a variety of matter: one or two serial narratives, single-episode tales, poetry, “[p]ickings from *Punch* and *Plato*” (Collins 1858 in King and Plunkett 2005: 213) and often a column of “Answers to Correspondents.” Twopenny periodicals of this type for the lower middle classes, such as *The Mirror of Literature* (1822–49), had appeared in the 1820s, but it was the non-fiction *Penny Magazine* (1832–45), whose first issue reportedly sold over 200,000 copies, that demonstrated that periodicals costing a penny could sell well. The great flowering of penny fiction weeklies occurred a decade later with the *Family Herald* (1842–1940). This was followed by the *London Journal* (1845–1928), *Reynolds’s Miscellany* (1846–69), and, later again, *Cassell’s Illustrated Family Paper* (1853–67). By the mid-1850s, while Dickens’s twopenny *Household Words* (1850–9) was enjoying a steady sale of 38,000 a week, these four cumulatively were selling almost 2 million copies. Based on calculations usual at the time of four to six readers per issue, that meant that their audience consisted of over 50 percent of the British population. Their owners made vast sums: Biggs, the first publisher and proprietor of the *Family Herald*, left a fortune of almost £50,000 when he died in 1859; in the 1860s W. S. Johnson, the then owner of the *London Journal*, was making £1,000 per month from that periodical alone. Lloyd, who published periodicals, newspapers, and part-issue novels, was the most successful of them all, leaving no less than £565,240 at his death in 1890. Such incomes put these men well within the richest 1 percent of Victorian Britain. Whatever signs of “subversion” or “unconventionality” we may identify in works they published, we should never forget that these texts are the result of business models that situated their publishers high amongst the economic elite and their readers in a majority.

### The Part-Issue Serials of Edward Lloyd

Penny weekly part-issue novels were proportionately more expensive than periodicals as they comprised just eight smaller pages with an illustration on the first. Nonetheless,

these were what Betsy and thousands of others consumed with great enthusiasm, evidently prioritizing the quality of feeling they experienced over the quantity of words. While this form of fiction was particularly associated with Edward Lloyd, who published these weekly serials in great numbers from his offices in Salisbury Square, London (they were sometimes referred to as “Salisbury Square” fiction), James (1974: 212–15) lists over seventy other publishers in the same field.

Lloyd inaugurated his career a few years before the great decade of the penny fiction periodicals and was later to enter that market as well. During the serialization of Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers* (1836–7) he brought out a sixty-part compilation, *Lives of the Most Notorious Highwaymen* (1836–7). Soon there followed *The History of Pirates of All Nations* (1836–7) and many others. Accurate sales figures are impossible to recover, but it seems that if these serials did not achieve the cultural penetration of the later penny periodicals, they still sold by tens of thousands. From the titles just cited it might be supposed that they comprised cheap variants of “Newgate” fiction – tales of criminals written in the 1830s and early 1840s, most prominently Bulwer-Lytton’s *Paul Clifford* (1830), Harrison Ainsworth’s *Rookwood* (1834) and *Jack Sheppard* (1839–40), and Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1837–9). While the generic term for Lloyd’s serials is “bloods” because of their association with illustrations of criminal wounding and mutilation, the Newgate “blood” is only a section of his portfolio. Lloyd was adept at spotting all sorts of market opportunities and commissioned writings and rewritings of anything he thought would sell. *Lives of the Most Notorious Highwaymen* was, it is true, capitalizing on the success of *Rookwood*. But soon other works followed by an author who would become one of Lloyd’s most prolific, Thomas Peckett Prest. Under the signature “Bos,” Prest produced *The Penny Pickwick* (1837–9; 112 parts), *Oliver Twiss* (1838–9; 80 parts), *Nickelas Nicklebery* (1840; 43 parts), and possibly other Dickens rewritings. They lampooned the originals from the perspective of a working-class audience skeptical of middle-class squeamishness. A parody of the murder of Nancy takes place in part 50 of *Oliver Twiss*, for example. Poll (= Nancy) warns that she will inform the police unless Jem Blount (= Sykes) gives up his life of crime. Jem threatens to leave her, she tries to prevent him, he threatens to stab her and, finally, strikes her down with his hand. Alone, she realizes Jem no longer loves her and prepares to take poison. But first she feels she has to “offer[] up a fervent petition to heaven for pardon and mercy” (“Bos” 1838–9: 400). During her devotions, Jack White (= Charley Bates) creeps up, thinks the poison is something good to drink, takes a sip – and has to have his stomach pumped (see Figure 3.2). That this would be a scene described, let alone illustrated, is unimaginable in more upmarket texts – even sensation fiction – and indicative of a much more direct attitude to the body.

These revisionings of Dickens soon ceased, and there followed a stream of titles by Prest and the equally prolific Malcolm Rymer which had other models. Some developed the Newgate tradition by concentrating on crime while others focused on the plight of women under a patriarchal society in the vein of the eighteenth-century sentimental novel. Others, like *Varney the Vampyre* (1845–7; 109 parts – an acknowledged influence on Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* [1895]), continued the Gothic.



Figure 3.2 From Bos 1838–9: 397

Perhaps the most famous example of the Newgate development is Rymer's eighteen-part *The String of Pearls* (1846–7), the story of the demon barber of Fleet Street, Sweeney Todd, and of Mrs. Lovett, the maker of cannibal pies. It was serialized in a Lloyd penny weekly, the innocently named *People's Periodical and Family Library*. Unlike Ainsworth's and Bulwer's Newgate fiction, with its focus on the glamorous rogue, *The String of Pearls* is fundamentally a detective story. It centers on the disappearance of the sailor Lieutenant Thornhill, who is taking a pearl necklace to the beloved of his friend Mark, who has seemingly been lost at sea. Before delivering his charge, Thornhill stops by Todd's for a shave, never to be seen again. Colonel Jeffery, a friend of Thornhill's, notices the latter's faithful dog outside Todd's, and sets about to investigate. Tobias, Todd's servant, also becomes suspicious of his master and is packed off to a madhouse run by a complaisant superintendent. Meanwhile, the suspicions of Mark's sweetheart, Johanna, persuade her to dress up as a boy and replace Tobias. Tobias escapes the madhouse, and, after an elaborate deception where a magistrate conspires with Johanna to impersonate a wealthy country farmer who comes to Todd's for a shave, Todd is summarily arrested and the remains of hundreds of victims are found in a church crypt. It also transpires that Mark, Johanna's beloved, has been imprisoned beneath Mrs. Lovett's pie shop and forced to work as her cook. He escapes through the very mechanism by which Mrs. Lovett raises her pies to her shop. Meanwhile Todd has poisoned Mrs. Lovett, and is summarily hanged. Typically interested more in the procedure of the plot than in its resolution, the serial concludes with a few paragraphs explaining that Johanna and Mark live happily ever after.

As the sensation novel was to do, *The String of Pearls* explores the dark underbelly of apparently respectable society through tropes we recognize well from *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), *The Woman in White* (1860), and others. A friend investigates a disappearance, inconvenient people are falsely imprisoned for madness, there are disguises, false trails, and unexpected reappearances of characters presumed dead. Here too we find gender reversal – Mark is the captured Gothic heroine and Johanna one of the investigators. Like sensation fiction, *The String of Pearls* is set in a familiar, traceable part of London, even if set in the past. Unlike sensation, however, the story begs to be read allegorically in a way that Michael Denning (1998) noted as typical for American popular fiction and Catherine Gallagher (1985) for British. It is a warning about the dangers of capitalism in a city where people are reduced to commodities and alienated from the production processes of what they consume. In the end, love triumphs over the inhumanity of the profit motive, a conclusion that suggests the vitality, even in the midst of horror, of the sentimental.

It will have been observed already that the title to Cruikshank's illustration of Betsy (Figure 3.1) affiliates Lloyd's serials to the "sentimental" literary tradition. We need to pause a moment to consider what "sentimental" means in this context and what other terms it is associated with. Betsy's copious tears link her through the sentimental to the culture of sensibility, most famously today embodied by Marianne in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). This was a development of an eighteenth-century set of priorities that reacted against the encroaching calculations of capitalism by valorizing sympathy – fellow feeling – above utility. Indeed, it argued that sympathy between people was necessary to make capitalism bearable. Sensibility, of which sympathy was a part, became the marker not only of altruism and compassion, but also of the ability to make fine distinctions in the arts. Its dissociation from labor inevitably coupled it to the wealthy leisured classes, and hence high status. Yet, relying for its value on individual bodily reactions, it suggested too that whoever could feel was intrinsically worthy. Strong feeling thus had the capacity – in fantasy at least – to upset established social hierarchies. This is exactly what is happening in the relation of Betsy and her mistress. By participating in the sufferings of her heroine Ela, Betsy can put herself on a level with, if not higher than, a mistress who rejects them as "stupid, disgusting." It is hardly surprising that capitalist print media used the principle to attract and organize its audiences.

In Betsy's beloved *Ela the Outcast; or the Gipsy of Rosemary Dell* by Prest (1837–9; 104 parts) the heroine seeks to solve problems rather than mysteries and, like Johanna, does so through courage, ingenuity, and determination. Ela appears first as a mad gypsy collapsed with hunger and fatigue whose noble features contradict her clothes and situation. She violently refuses the generosity of the country lady Mrs. Wallingford, to whom she is brought for aid, explaining that the father of Ela's daughter is none other than Mrs. Wallingford's husband. The next chapter cuts to the arrogant Mr. Wallingford who, summoned by the doctor because his wife has collapsed, on his journey home (here part 2 begins) encounters a mysterious gypsy hag who reminds him in verse that "A curse shall attend the deceiver's race" (Prest 1837–9: 10).

Arriving home, he finds his wife has given birth to a stillborn child. The third chapter suddenly cuts back eight years to the meeting of Ela and Wallingford (in the middle of which part 3 begins). Chapter 4 leaps back another ten years to the story of Ela's father, an exiled Italian aristocrat disguised in England as a farmer, before Wallingford rescues Ela and her mother from a fire. Of course, this rescue only encourages Ela's feelings for her rescuer, but on finding Ela and Wallingford "giving free scope to their sentiments" (Prest 1837–9: 24), her father forbids further meetings. (Part 4 begins.) Wallingford protests. Meanwhile, Ela has another and more appropriate admirer whom her father prefers. He declares his love and Ela rejects him, but immediately after their meeting she is kidnapped by two masked men and her admirer is shot trying to protect her. (Part 5 begins.) Ela is taken to London, where she finds her kidnapper is Wallingford. In subsequent episodes, he arranges a mock-marriage, Ela has a child, discovers his deception, flees, and so on for almost another hundred parts.

The exploitation of stereotypes from melodrama is very apparent here: the innocent country maid, the aristocratic cad, the loyal rustic youth, the kindly lady of the manor, and so on. Indeed, like a good deal of Victorian fiction, penny serials had a synergistic relation to the stage. They not only raided the commonplaces of melodrama for their plots and characters but also were often based on plays currently popular on stage. Some illustrations even show the curtain of a proscenium arch drawn as if to reveal the scene. Many serials in turn were adapted for performance. *Ela* was one. In the preface added at the end, Prest thanks the theatrical adaptor and actors for an excellent run lasting a hundred performances.

Yet the very commercial challenges of the serial seem to have exhausted at least some of the stereotypes – they could not generate enough narrative – while giving birth to others. Neither were "strong" situations enough in themselves: they had to arise from social dissonance and somehow resolve it.

If in her youth a foolish virgin and descendant of Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe* (1748), Ela later learns how to cope with the tribulations of being a woman in patriarchal society. Found and again abandoned by Wallingford, this time to his fellow libertine Rackett, Ela murders the latter in self-defense, flees, and finds herself amongst gypsies. She is suspected of being a thief and then an infanticide, incurring the wrath of the gypsies when she refuses to allow the chief's son to marry her daughter. Meanwhile, she has also become a commanding figure who actively takes care of herself and others. Significantly inheriting her mother's (rather than her father's) fortune, she flees to Italy and then Spain, pursued by a gypsy assassin. She does not hesitate to wield a pistol in defense or to face down the lecherous attentions of an aristocrat to her daughter. The latter, despite her illegitimacy, happily marries a lord, and all three return to England. Wallingford's wife dies and he and Ela become friends. The triumph of sympathy seems complete. In the last number, however, when her gypsy persecutor suddenly reappears and tries to stab her after shooting Wallingford dead, she "seize[s] his arm with masculine strength . . . and with a wild, and almost superhuman laugh of exultation, burie[s] the knife] in the murderer's heart . . . Ela

lived many years afterwards, and to become the grandmother of a numerous family” (Prest 1837–9: 832).

This happy end for a heroine who, in the drawing room, would be a fallen woman and murderess, is typical not only of Lloyd’s serials but, as James (1982), Mitchell (1981), and others confirm, of a good deal of Victorian popular fiction. Like Johanna in *The String of Pearls*, ideal women in this market sector do not need to be passive Laura Fairlies. Indeed, that gender ambiguity opened them to identification with oppressed and disenfranchised men (cf. King 2004: 175–94). By the same token, illegitimacy has a very different resonance from that depicted in middle-class fiction such as Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1852–3) or Collins’s *Woman in White* and *No Name* (1862). Not ignored, it is regarded only as something external to the intrinsic worth of the individual. Rosenman is surely correct in seeing popular fiction’s “plot of noble illegitimacy” as linked to the “imaginary construction of a foundational, inclusive British nation . . . through shared fantasies of entitlement and restitution” (Rosenman 2008: 220). In Lloyd’s sentimental fiction, that inclusivity must also include the female victims of aristocratic seducers. The latter, however their victims may forgive them, must in the end pay for their crimes.

If ideologically and affectively democratic, what of the specific form of Lloyd’s penny part serials? In the preface to *The Lone Cottage; or Who’s the Stranger?* (1844–5; 35 parts), Prest makes the distinction between fiction in volumes which permits “rest for the mind” and what he regards as the more difficult serial which has to stimulate the reader at all times. His and Rymer’s serials display undoubted skill in intercutting fast-moving, multi-plot narratives where something exciting or mysterious occurs every week. One might therefore expect each issue to follow a pattern of reprise to remind readers who the characters were and what the plot was, followed by further development, with a cliffhanger at the end. But as indicated by the summary of the first few chapters of *Ela*, this was not the case. It was quite normal for each weekly number to end in the middle of a sentence.

Even if written as books in pieces rather than as serials with carefully constructed episodes, neither narrative and character coherence, thoughtful concision, nor typographic precision had the same priority they had in drawing-room volumes. Like *Ela*, Rymer’s *Varney the Vampyre* offers numerous interpolated tales that complicate further its already convoluted narrative. There is sometimes confusion over who is who, and the author himself seems literally to lose the plot at times. The editor of the recent edition of *Varney* was confronted with “hundreds of printing and spelling errors, plot mistakes, words printed upside-down, shifts in tense, amazing run on sentences . . . illegible sentences due to publication smudges, and sentences that simply end mid-thought” (Herr in Rymer 2008: 29). Authors and printers were both paid by quantity, and this shows not only in the agglutinative plot and hasty typography but also in the padded dialogue on almost every page:

“Marchdale,” added Henry, after a pause of some moments’ duration, “I will sit up tonight with my sister.”

“Do – do!”

“Think you there is a chance it may come again?”

“I cannot – I dare not speculate upon the coming of so dreadful a visitor, Henry, but I will hold watch with you most willingly.”

“You will, Marchdale?”

“My hand upon it. Come what dangers may, I will share them with you, Henry.”

(Rymer 2008: 46)

Lloyd’s serials curiously seem to show off that they were force-grown in the hot-house of capitalism: they do not seek to conceal it with notions of artistic originality or elegant design. They seem openly to declare that, unlike high-status publications, they were honest commodities. They parade their stereotypes, their deviations from good taste and parodies of the respectable. They flaunt visceral effects that play on the bodies of readers as much as on those of their protagonists. They brandish epistemological fragmentation and social dissonances which together set up enigmas relevant to readers’ lives. Why should a wronged woman be cast out from society? How could she then take charge of her own life to make it better? The very mess of the serials’ form forces readers to participate actively to solve not only the mysteries deliberately set up but also those added by hurried writing and unchecked typography. Often, when the serial ends, many mysteries have yet to be explained – a poignant uncertainty that mirrors the inexplicability of everyday life.

### J. F. Smith

Systematizing, polishing, and playing with many of the themes and narrative techniques of Lloyd’s publications, Smith’s novels directed the mass market towards what would later be called the middlebrow. Gone is the flagrant display of commodity status: Smith’s serials are carefully written and decently typeset, with reasonably reproduced illustrations that draw their inspiration from gallery art as well as the theater (see Figure 3.3). By this time circulation had grown so high and profits correspondingly large – and an authorial “star” system had arisen – that the business model was adjusted to pay more for content and production. Smith was paid £10 for each weekly installment by the *London Journal’s* publisher George Stiff (twenty times what Lloyd doled out to his serialists); Cassell paid him £15 from 1855. Although his name did not always appear under his serial’s titles – he was often called “the author of [a previous serial]” – Smith’s star status was assured. While one source claims that they were written with northern factory girls in mind (Vizerelly 1893: II, 12–13), they actually seem more suitable for the lower-middle-class parlor with some pretensions to gentility. They seem to hover between the kitchen and the truly bourgeois drawing room.

Like Lloyd’s serials, Smith’s are involved, multi-plot, picaresque romances motivated by lost inheritances and mysterious genealogies that owe a good deal to the

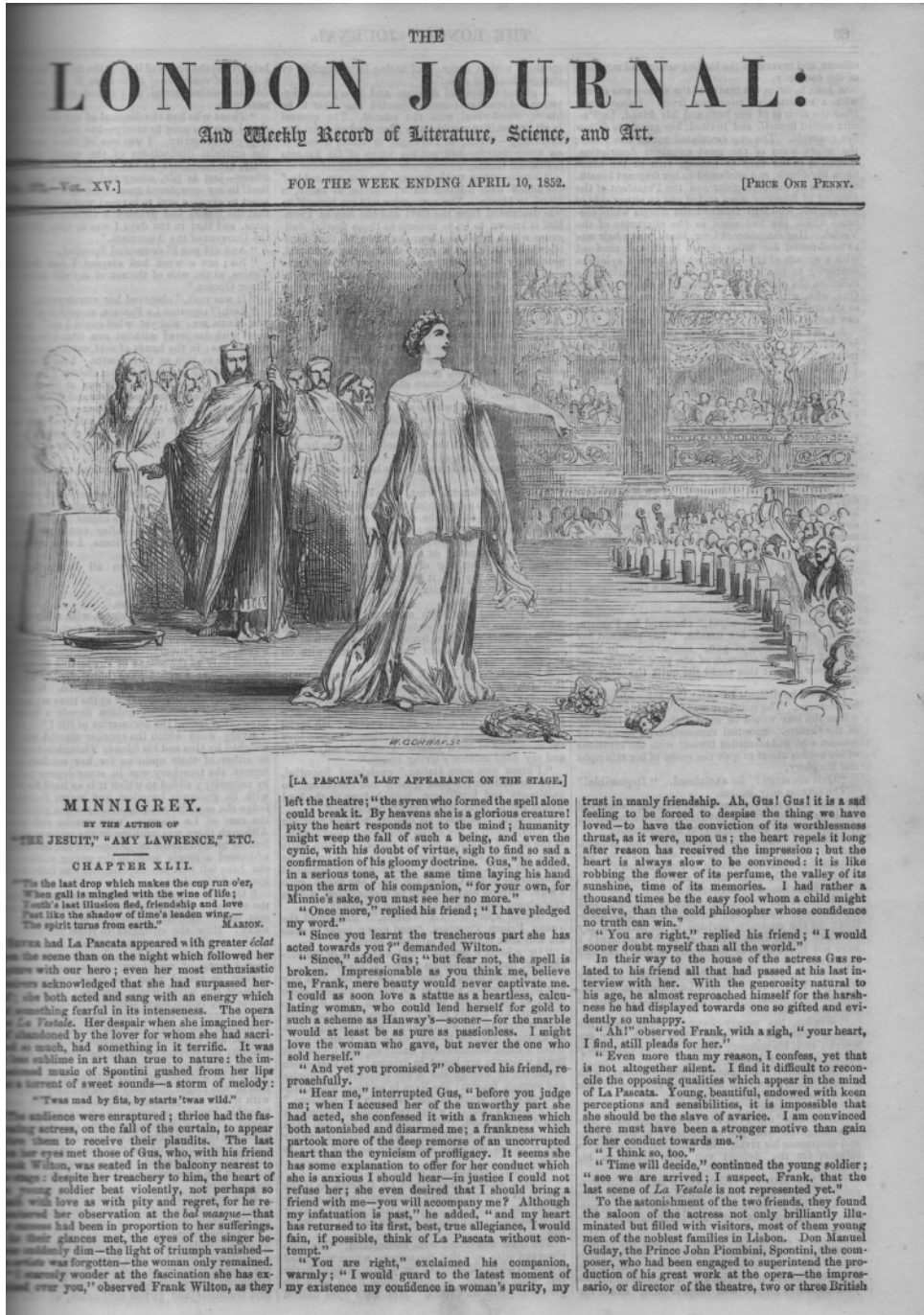


Figure 3.3 "La Pascata's Last Appearance on the Stage" (Smith 1851–2: 65)



sentimental tradition. They are *Bildungsromanen* whose central characters are young men brought up respectably in the lower classes who, realizing they are somehow out of place, go in search of their identity. The mystery at the heart of the novels is always that of the family romance: what is the protagonist's parentage? The hero sets out on a journey to find out. En route, he is beset by enemies who try to prevent him from finding out, and encounters allies who help him. At bottom, there lies a history of misappropriated funds and an aristocratic title which are eventually restored to the hero when he has proved his worth. The aristocracy, now purged of corruption and energized by the sympathies of its new member, is now able to take up its rightful role in caring for and managing its dependants.

Such a resolution may seem like the resurrection of an archaic rural paternalism or even propaganda of Tory 1840s Young Englanders who promoted the notion that the aristocracy and working classes should ally themselves against the avarice of the middle classes. But Smith's politics are not so clear-cut. Rather, they work toward the establishment of a nostalgic vision of a stable world from which the reader, in the midst of an incessantly modernizing industrial and commercial city, may well have felt exiled. Before arriving at stability, the hero has to negotiate the treacherous sands of unstable times, undergo exile, participate actively in historical events, and identify enemies and allies. At the happy conclusion he is never alone but always married and surrounded by friends of all social classes. To that extent, Smith's plots are affirmative: rather than reminding readers of the hopelessness of their situation they promote action, not just on an individual level but also through the formation of community. If they do offer a dream of Young England, it is one where, as in Lloyd's serials, individual worth is valorized: rank is merely an external confirmation of internal value.

As in *Ela*, the path to the confirmation of worth is experience. The hero must pass through various trials of his moral fiber and learn from them: can he be a faithful friend? can he handle money wisely? how courageous or honorable is he? will he stand up to abuses of authority? can he be constant to the girl he left behind? The first is interesting in light of claims of "subversive" homoerotic content in sensation fiction. That has been discussed elsewhere (King 2004: 195–209), so here I shall show its heterosexual counterpart, considering how in one episode Smith portrays a *femme fatale* who tempts the hero's loyalty to his sweetheart. This discussion will enable both exploration of the sentimental affiliations of Smith's novels and demonstration of how the creases that Lloyd's publications flaunted have been ironed out. No longer do we find the week's portion ending in the middle of a sentence and jumbled narratives and grammar, but well-shaped episodes and plots. If the following appears a self-contained interpolation such as we read in *Ela* or *Varney*, it is nonetheless thoroughly integrated, having been prepared for over several episodes.

La Pascata is an opera singer in Smith's most famous novel, *Minnigrey*. She has previously been presented as a siren luring the hero onto moral and economic rocks while he is on campaign in Lisbon during the Peninsular War. She has, however, fallen in love with him against her will to the extent that she declares her passion. At first sorely tempted, the hero discovers her treachery and rejects her.

The episode in question opens with what she plans to be her last performance on the stage (see Figure 3.3). Playing the Vestal Virgin in Spontini's *La Vestale*, who breaks her vow of chastity for love and is rewarded by heaven, La Pascata is a triumph because, as the text points out, she is able to blend life and art in the part. Both the hero and his friend are moved by the performance and, once more awake to La Pascata's charms, they debate whether they should go to a reception she is holding that night. They arrive to find the room full of her admirers, for she has managed her farewell performance not only on the stage but in the serial: she is going to tell her life story to the assembled guests. Starting from a description of her marriage to an exploitative, dissolute husband who takes and squanders her earnings, she is further trapped by men when her husband is imprisoned for murder. To save him from the gallows, she explains she was forced to give nine-tenths of her income to the Corregidor and tempt the hero to part with his money. Meanwhile, a prince had agreed with La Pascata's husband that, in exchange for liberation from jail, the prince might enjoy her. The prince and the son of the Corregidor, both enraged at La Pascata's revelations, rapidly kill each other in a fight. The hero persuades her to escape to France where she may continue her career. But first, displaying her melodramatic and operatic heritage, she proudly faces down the Corregidor. To ensure that he will not harm the hero in revenge, she publicly allies herself with the French General Junot, "whose passion for [her] had been the talk of Lisbon" (Smith 1851–2: 15:68): "Cast but a pebble in his path . . . and the scaffold you have threatened me with shall be dressed for you." The installment ends ready-made for the melodramatic (or, indeed, operatic) stage:

"Remember the promise of La Pascata!"

"Curse her!" exclaimed the Corregidor; "curse her!"

*(To be continued in our next)*

Like much drawing-room fiction, Smith's plots are usually set a generation or so in the past. Yet the form in which they were published encouraged ideas of their topicality. The fashions and the props in their illustrations tended to come from the year of publication, and plot elements are often tied into articles that were appearing in newspapers or elsewhere in the magazine. Typically, the story of La Pascata is a more extreme version of the life of the real-life opera diva Giulia Grisi, who, leaving her debauched husband for her co-star, was forced to continue paying her husband until his death. The illustration indeed looks as if it could have been modeled on Grisi in one of her most famous roles, Norma, which she played frequently in London. Even more significantly, a performance of extracts from *La Vestale* took place in London the week this episode came out. The "proximity" of the sensation novel to its readers that has seemed one of its distinguishing features was well established by the previous decade.

Spontini, a real-life composer, plays a minor role in *Minnigrey*, as historical characters often do in Smith. *La Vestale* really was first performed in 1807 as in this episode, just as Junot occupied Lisbon in December of that year. But Smith is more

concerned to associate his protagonists with history in a suggestive rather than a strictly accurate way. He promises readers a vaster set of connections that they might never otherwise make, between past and present, between inside and outside the novel (is La Pascata “really” Giulia Grisi?), that offers explanatory power and a more or less coherent picture of the world without ever having to be pinned down. Such an effect may be the result of the manufacture of what Mary Braddon called “the combination story” which neatly arranges “all the brightest flowers of fiction” (*The Doctor's Wife*, qtd. in King and Plunkett, 2005: 309–10). Such a mode of reading is also encouraged by the publication of serials in magazines which “present a cluster of apparently unrelated texts at the same point in time and pace, all having the potential to be read in relation to one another” (Wynne 2001: 20).

This vague but powerful drive toward coherence is observable not just in the narrative but in the serial's organization of its audiences. The sympathetic relations between characters apply also to those between reader and text, as we saw in the case of Betsy. Of particular interest in the La Pascata episode is the increasing role that celebrity was playing in the market: stars of the stage, especially, were already taking up a good deal of print space in newspapers and periodicals. Now a regular subscriber to the *London Journal* would already know almost everything that La Pascata relates. What her autobiography does is show the events from her point of view almost as if she were giving an interview thirty years before real celebrity interviews became common. Her revelation of her private life allows the hero to vocalize the ideal reaction of readers: “never, never can the man who has listened to the sad history of your sorrows, sufferings, trials, think of you without pity and respect” (Smith 1851–2: 15:67). Her confession brings her closer to her public than her technical artistry alone can do. As we saw, it is the combination of life and art that enables her success as *La Vestale*. Such a public combination encourages the formation of a community centered on sympathetic reactions to the celebrity's life as well as admiration for her skill. Smith seems to have recognized that celebrity is a powerful force around which markets can be organized. By now *Minnigrey* was generating half a million sales per week. The happy community at the resolution of the star author's stories therefore not only signifies a political state of class harmony, but is also a fantasy of the results of the mass consumption of his stories. United by the same sympathetic reactions to the same stories and figures and to the possibility that the hero and author, art and life, are one, readers might even feel that the very activity that defines them as readers forwards a beatific vision of a community cohesive with narrative and feeling. The sentimental presuppositions of the serials validate the act of consuming them.

It will be clear from the above descriptions that the power of capitalism to adjust its business models generated commonplaces and techniques decades before the drawing-room sensation novel took them on: suspense, mystery, complex narratives, emphasis on bodily shocks, cross-dressing detective heroines, fallen women who wield a pistol or their voice, illegitimate children, foundlings, and even reflection on the very operation of mass-market narrative. To dismiss such “economic literature” as inferior or uninteresting not only replicates attitudes once shown toward sensation

fiction, but also too passively views it through typographic and narrative conventions inherited from the cartel of wealthy publishers whose business model successfully aimed at the monopoly of expensive, high-status "Literature." To escape their domination of cultural space, we should remember readers like Betsy, whose sympathetic reactions to the heroine's plight validated her own sense of self. Perhaps, as Austen's Marianne scorned Edward for not enthusing sufficiently over Cowper, Betsy's reading even allowed her to despise critics in the drawing room as much as they despised her in the kitchen.

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# Melodrama

*Roban McWilliam*

“Dead! Dead! And never called me mother” is the line we most associate with *East Lynne*. Readers of Mrs. Henry Wood’s novel (1861) will, however, search for the much-quoted words in vain. They come in fact from T. A. Palmer’s 1874 stage adaptation, which was just one of a large number of adaptations of the novel that dominated repertory theaters in the later Victorian period.<sup>1</sup> Victorians were as likely to encounter sensation fiction on the stage as on the printed page. Popular novels frequently provided stories that were immediately purloined for the theater. Just as modern bestsellers frequently generate film adaptations, the Victorian stage abounded with Lady Audleys, Aurora Floyds, and women in white. But the relationship with the stage went both ways.

Theater in the nineteenth century was a genuinely popular form, enjoyed by all classes from Queen Victoria down to the working classes of London’s East End, who flocked to the Britannia Theatre, Hoxton. It was, however, the taste of the latter that really shaped drama in the first half of the century, and what it loved was “melodrama.” Most plays conformed to the conventions of melodramatic performance with its blood and thunder, heightened emotions, moustache-twirling villains, swashbuckling heroes, comic rural yokels, romantic brigands, and victimized heroines. This essay will show how melodrama helped shape the sensation novel.

Significantly, the critical reputation of melodrama parallels that of sensation fiction. Both were for a long time ridiculed, and even now the word “melodramatic” can be a term of abuse. It is a commonplace that no great plays were written between the late eighteenth century and the theater of Wilde, Shaw, and Ibsen in the late Victorian years with their focus on naturalism and realism. The popularity of melodrama became a vehicle in the twentieth century for highlighting the peculiar taste of the Victorians. In 1964 the historian W. L. Burn commented: “Perhaps few things

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*A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, First Edition. Edited by Pamela K. Gilbert.

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are better calculated to show the difference between the mid-nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century than the experience of reading C. H. Hazlewood's adaptation of *Lady Audley's Secret* . . . and trying to see it as other than farcical" (Burn 1964: 50). The reputation of the sensation novel was damaged by its association with the stage.

Melodrama has been mocked for its absurd plots based on coincidence, its simplistic characterizations, and its preference for spectacle. Its performers are often associated with ham acting and over-the-top gestures. Melodrama was considered a form of lower-class fiction and therefore inferior. Even more strikingly, it was seen as trivial because it was enjoyed by women. These criticisms echo those made of the sensation novel from its inception. Both melodrama and the sensation novel were held to lack the ambition of Victorian poetry and of novelists such as George Eliot. The two forms enjoyed an ambivalent relationship with respectability; actresses were sometimes equated with prostitutes, whilst female sensation novelists were criticized for exploring sensual matters that Victorian ladies should not know about.

Yet significantly both have been reappraised in recent years. Scholars have begun to see melodrama as a form that underpinned the construction of modern consciousness, providing a lens through which people could make sense of their world. In other words, it provided part of the cultural capital of modernity. In the nineteenth century, melodrama's engagement with poverty and exploitation helped people negotiate social and economic change. As Martha Vicinus notes, it was "a psychological touchstone for the powerless" (Vicinus 1989: 174). Theater and literary historians such as Michael Booth and Louis James have argued that we need to take melodrama seriously as a component of the Victorian imagination (Booth 1965; James 1977). Despite far-fetched plots, melodrama contained elements of realism (or stylized realism), both in depicting social conditions and in creating elaborate sets that offered lifelike representations of street scenes and other locations. Melodrama has also shaped much of modern popular fiction, from Hollywood blockbusters to the soap opera. Theorists of film commonly argue that melodrama is central to the aesthetics of cinema, and trace modern movie themes back to the Victorian stage (Bratton et al. 1994). There is also greater respect for the ways in which melodrama has addressed women's consciousness in the modern age.

Curiously, the relationship between melodrama and the sensation novel has rarely been discussed; its influence is usually taken for granted. But what was the relationship between the two forms? Was the sensation novel simply a continuation of stage melodrama? Answering these questions requires us to move away from any simple distinction between the theater and the printed page. Both were closely linked to one another and to other forms such as reportage and painting. We will find that melodrama was a mode that could not be contained by the proscenium arch but shaped the wider culture, including human behavior itself. This exploration will consider the origins and nature of melodrama and then look at the ways it shaped sensation fiction. It will examine the relationship between the sensation novel and the popular stage, and end with the afterlife of both forms in the cinema of the silent period.

## The Cultures of Melodrama

What is melodrama? Like the sensation novel itself, it is difficult to define and defies standard forms of categorization. One Victorian critic called it a “hodge-podge drama” as it drew on so many other sources (von Rosador 1977: 93). Like a sponge, melodrama absorbed different elements in the culture, from fairy stories to newspaper reports, romantic poetry, and painting. Not quite a genre, literary critics have opted to define it as a structure of feeling or, as Elaine Hadley puts it, a “mode” or strategy that was employed to make sense of experience in the nineteenth century (Hadley 1995: 3).

Melodrama was a sentimental form of theater that laid bare the struggle between good and evil through tales containing heightened emotions and deep passions. Plays frequently featured scenes based on elaborate coincidences and scenes of peril. They employed stock characters who were defined as essentially good or bad with little attempt to explore any further complexity of motivation. Melodrama was based on a contract between stage and audience that narratives would offer moral absolutes and foreground romantic love. Martha Vicinus argues that “much of the emotional effectiveness of melodrama comes from making the moral visible” (Vicinus 1989: 181). Melodramas could be comic or tragic, but they reveled in the dramatization of excess, employing romantic plots that contrasted with everyday experience. At the end of the play, order or harmony is usually restored, the neatness of the ending providing a form of catharsis for the audience, a soothing narrative closure.

Melodrama originated in the later eighteenth century, part of the reaction against the Enlightenment that characterized Romanticism with its emphasis on emotion. It also had its roots in a new form of Christian humanitarianism whereby spectators were encouraged to identify with the sufferings of others. Thus the purpose of melodrama was to move the audience (which explains its sentimentality).

Melodrama is derived from the French term *mélo-drame*, meaning a “play with music.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau used the term in this sense to describe his play *Pygmalion* (1770). Although melodrama came to mean far more than this, music remained integral to melodramatic performance, heightening the emotional core of a scene (much as incidental music does in film today). The term has also been employed by some modern literary critics to mean any kind of drama from Aeschylus onwards in which characters are affected by events external to themselves and which they cannot influence (Smith 1973: 7–8). In other words, it is plot-driven rather than character-driven.

However, melodrama, as we know it today, really originated on the Parisian stage during the French Revolution. It was a radical breakthrough because the stage in both London and Paris was heavily censored. In both cities the spoken word had been restricted to a number of licensed theaters, which alone were permitted to put on plays in which actors spoke. Melodrama, however, grew up in unlicensed theatrical spaces on the fringe, such as fairs. As speech was not permitted, actors created drama based on music, dance, dumbshow, gesture, mime (or what became known as “pan-



tomime”) and the expression of emotions through the face. The moments of hysteria that punctuate so many sensation novels draw on this cultural repertoire, on emotions and feelings that cannot be spoken but must be expressed through gestures such as fainting or pleading. In France, this situation was transformed by the revolution of 1789, when speech was allowed on stage and modern melodrama was born. It was therefore a medium that came into being at a time of political and social transformation when forms of traditional authority were under threat. Unlike the previous repertoire, it put ordinary people center stage and dared to dignify everyday life.

We associate the form particularly with the French writer René-Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt, one of whose most popular plays was *Coelina* (1800). This was seen in Paris by the English playwright Thomas Holcroft, who then presented his pirated version two years later at Covent Garden in London under the title *A Tale of Mystery*. It helped generate the British appetite for melodrama. However, British melodrama was not a simple import from the French. Melodrama on both sides of the English Channel (and eventually around the world) was also rooted in other narrative modes. It owed a great deal to popular songs and earlier forms of theater, including mediaeval mystery plays and Renaissance drama. We can find anticipations of it in John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728), with its portraits of criminals and urban low life, and in sentimental drama such as George Lillo’s *The London Merchant* (1731). The Gothic novel was another source, as was German Romanticism in the form of plays such as Friedrich Schiller’s *The Robbers* (1781).

Melodrama took off in Britain even though the spoken word had been restricted since 1737 to licensed theaters and was censored by the Lord Chamberlain, who had to approve the text of every play performed. Unlicensed or “minor” theaters, however, sprang up, offering melodramas for a popular audience. Songs were often introduced so that shows could be passed off as burlettas rather than straight plays to appease magistrates who in any case rarely enforced the law. Melodrama came into its own in these illegitimate theaters (including the Surrey and the Royal Coburg theaters in London), establishing itself as a theatrical form that appealed to working-class people. The Theatre Regulation Act of 1843 allowed spoken drama to be performed everywhere.

Melodrama developed its own sub-genres very quickly. Gothic melodrama gave way to a craze for outlaw melodrama, featuring stories of rogues and brigands, often with an exotic, oriental background. Britain’s participation in the Napoleonic Wars sparked the development of military melodrama in which the figure of the Jack Tar became a popular hero and repository of national identity. There were military spectacles such as *The Battle of Waterloo*, which played at Astley’s Amphitheatre in 1824. The most enduring sub-genre of melodrama (and the one that most shaped the sensation novel) was domestic melodrama. These were plays such as W. T. Moncrieff’s *The Lear of Private Life* (1820), J. B. Buckstone’s *Luke the Labourer* (1826), and Douglas Jerrold’s *The Rent Day* (1832). They placed working-class characters at the center of the action and idealized the family life of the poor, often revealing the ways in which it was under threat, particularly from aristocrats bent on the seduction of plebeian

women or from those who had forgotten about the responsibilities of paternalism. Jerrold's *The Rent Day* features the travails of a poor family whose poverty means that they fail to play the rent. At the end, bailiffs attempt to remove their property. In the struggle that ensues, the back of a chair is ripped open and gold sovereigns flow out (secreted by a rich ancestor in a bygone age) which saves the day. Such absurd contrivances damaged melodrama's reputation even at the time with sophisticated critics although, equally significantly, this did not prevent the general public from lapping them up. Domestic melodrama provided women with a central role as wife, mother, or daughter, while sub-genres emerged devoted to fallen woman, *femme fatale*, and mother sacrifice plots. This paralleled the foregrounding of women in the sensation novel. Palmer's adaptation of *East Lynne*, for example, highlighted the sacredness of domesticity. When Lady Isabel realizes she has abandoned her husband for a vile seducer and is now a fallen woman, the orchestra plays "Home, Sweet Home" (Palmer 1874: 29).

What was the ideological work of melodrama? Some melodramas offered social criticism and even drew on the concerns of political radicalism. John Walker's *The Factory Lad*, performed during the Reform crisis of 1832, took the side of workers who destroyed the machinery that was putting them out of work. These plays, however, were rare. Melodrama usually took a populist stance, sympathizing with the plight of the poor without offering any precise political solutions. Indeed the threat of the evil aristocrat was usually countered by the intervention of a good aristocrat. This was because scripts had to be vetted by the Lord Chamberlain, who censored any controversial content (a situation that continued up to 1968). Melodrama could therefore be conservative. For all the images of disorder that feature in its narratives, the social order is usually restored at the end of the play. In this respect, it also resembles the sensation novel, which often aroused subversive anxieties only (according to some critics) to neutralize them with endings that did not encourage readers to substantially challenge how things were (Showalter 1977: 180–1).

Melodrama became the basis of mass market, formula fiction and thus a source of the sensation novel. Newgate fiction, such as Harrison Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* (1839–40), exploited the melodramatic fascination with outlaws and brigands. In the United States, Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), drew on the resources of melodrama to highlight the injustice of American slavery and immediately spawned a huge number of stage adaptations.

Melodrama was clearly an influential form on the stage and the printed page, but modern scholars have argued that its impact went far wider than this. I describe this tendency elsewhere as the "melodramatic turn" because a large number of scholars have employed melodrama as a device not only to recover nineteenth-century mentalities but also to understand culture up to the present (McWilliam 2000: 58). They have argued that melodrama influenced art, music, poetry, and arguably human behavior more generally. Peter Brooks, the literary critic who really generated the melodramatic turn with his book *The Melodramatic Imagination* in 1976, has described melodrama as a "mode of conception and expression . . . a certain fictional system for

making sense of experience . . . a semantic field of force, a sense-making system" (1976: xiii). Brooks argues that melodrama became a powerful mode that shaped how people saw the world because it offered the rigors of morality in a secularizing society. Its origin in the French Revolution was not a coincidence. He contends that melodrama became the "principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era" (1976: 15). Even psychoanalysis, with its talking cure and concern with the hystericized body (where bodily gestures cannot necessarily be conveyed by words), had its roots in melodrama.

In Brooks's wake, critics and historians became preoccupied with the role of melodrama in shaping modern culture. Melodrama emerged as a key site for interdisciplinary dialogue involving scholars in literature, history, art history, film studies, and women's studies. Inevitably, theater historians have focused on melodrama, propelled by a belief that making sense of the theater, and of theatricality and performativity more generally, can make a contribution to understanding cultural history, popular taste, urban life, postmodernism, structures of feeling, spectatorship, and even love itself.

What was this larger culture of melodrama? How was it manifested? Melodrama, we now see, shaped the language of journalism with its tendency to sensationalize the news, making events and scandals legible through the language and categories of the stage. The movingness of melodrama explains why politicians often structured their appeal to the wider public through its tropes. It helped construct contemporary views of gender, as a number of women's historians have shown. Judith Walkowitz argues that revelations about child prostitution and the crimes of Jack the Ripper were filtered through the language of melodrama, generating a series of moral panics in the 1880s which reinforced traditional notions of separate spheres and domesticity (Walkowitz 1992: chs. 3, 4, and 7). Ruth Harris studied trials of women in late nineteenth-century Paris who had been arrested for *crimes passionnels* (murdering their husbands or lovers). She found that these women often presented themselves in the courtroom through the conventions of the melodramatic stage, explaining their actions as forms of emotion over which they had no control. This form of defense was often effective in securing their acquittal but had the larger consequence of reinforcing a stereotype of women as innately hysterical (Harris 1989: 213–28). The cultural impact of melodrama was therefore substantial, and helped shape the sensation novel.

### Melodrama and the Sensation Novel

Was the sensation novel simply a continuation of what was being performed on the Victorian stage? Yes and no. The sensation novel of the 1860s represented a cultural upgrading of melodramatic themes for a middle-class audience, the kind of people who patronized railway bookstalls or circulating libraries such as Mudie's. The sensation novel was based around a greater complexity of human motivation than had been the case on stage, where characters were categorized as simply good or bad (although

stage melodrama by the 1860s was itself offering more complex characters). The fascination of sensation fiction was that characters were not as legible or as easy to interpret as they were on stage. Melodrama never emphasized ambiguity, whereas a figure like Lady Isabel in Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* abandons her family not because she is an intrinsically bad person but because of a series of misunderstandings that lead her to believe (wrongly) that her husband has been unfaithful to her. Braddon's Lady Audley is very different from the victimized heroines of the stage because she is an attractive villainess who attempts to control her own destiny (although she did lead to the figure of the *femme fatale* becoming a staple on the stage thereafter). Sensation novels featured coincidences, as occurred on stage, but the stories were more richly plotted. Indeed playwrights were not too concerned with plots that made sense. By contrast, Wilkie Collins's focus on pursuing all the lines of a plot to their logical conclusion created not only the sensation novel but an early version of the detective story as well (Hughes 1980: ch. 5). Elaine Showalter argues that, whilst female sensationalists were preoccupied with crime and mysteries, "Their secrets were not simply solutions to mysteries and crimes; they were the secrets of women's dislike of their roles as daughters, wives and mothers" (Showalter 1977: 158). The sensation novel proved a medium for exploring female selfhood in a way that melodrama never could. Whilst sensation writers could not talk openly about sexuality, they were not as heavily policed as playwrights were through the operation of the Lord Chamberlain. Thus sensation novels could draw on issues such as bigamy that were codes for talking about sexuality (Hughes 1980: 31).

On the other hand there are important links and continuities. In a mid-Victorian context, the popularity of both forms was an example of the greater social harmony that characterized these years, which witnessed the expansion of the vote to some urban workers in the Reform Act of 1867. They were the products of a more consensual mass culture that could appeal to all. Both attempted to draw on issues that were topical, or indeed that were drawn from popular newspapers. Terrible murders made their way onto the stage (for example, Maria Marten's murder in the Red Barn), whilst Charles Reade made it his stock in trade to pluck sensational news stories out of the headlines and turn them into bestselling novels. Mrs. Henry Wood was inspired by the notorious Yelverton divorce case (which involved bigamy) when writing *East Lynne*. This provided the stories with an immediacy and relevance. Scenes in which heroines had to defend their honor from villains owe something to the stage. Aristocratic evildoers such as Count Fosco and Sir Percival Glyde in Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860) also evoke their equivalents who featured regularly in melodramas.

Whilst melodrama was enjoyed by all classes, it was often rather disapproved of by some middle-class people, especially those who disdained the theater for its artifice and alleged promotion of immorality. The theatrical was an object of suspicion because it threatened to undermine the authenticity to which middle-class Victorians subscribed. We can see similar fears in the response of some mid-Victorian critics to the sensation novel, which was disdained for its desire to simply entertain rather than

build character, its focus on nervous reactions, and its excessive sentimentality. Both were criticized for their purely commercial motivation.

Part of the hostile response was shaped by issues of gender. Both the stage and the sensation novel provided opportunities for female authors. Increasing numbers of women (now mostly forgotten) began to write for the stage in the nineteenth century, whilst the sensation novel provided a vehicle for female novelists to find a voice (Newey 2005). Women were eager consumers of the two forms and featured prominently as protagonists in the stories. Even plays written by men highlighted female experience in ways that shaped contemporary consciousness. In melodrama, women were mainly presented as inherently virtuous or as corrupt (the figure of the *femme fatale*) with not much in between. Sensation novelists tried to go beyond this binary divide to uncover more complex motivations for women and deeper psychological responses.

The social landscape in both melodrama and the sensation novel is not dissimilar. Each often includes incidents that take place within high society, whether the world of the aristocracy or the upper middle class. There is, however, a difference in that the sensation novel did not feature working-class characters in central roles in the way that at least some melodramas had done. Both forms, however, often suggest that high society can have links to the criminal underworld.

Stories containing mistaken identity, and the adoption of disguise and of unauthorized identities, can be found both on stage and in the sensation novel. There is a fascination with doubles which we can find in Boucicault's play *The Corsican Brothers* (1852), about swashbuckling twins. Plots frequently require characters to take on new selves, generating drama out of liminal identity. Thus the genre often placed an emphasis on secrets, which characters have to uncover. This reflects a culture in which a strict demarcation was developed between the public and the private (one of the characteristics of middle-class society). More deeply, these stories raise issues of identity, questioning the truth of outward appearances and the performance of the self. They appeal because they suggest that respectability may be a performance or lack authenticity.

### Dramatizing Sensation Fiction

In the early 1860s the term "sensation" was increasingly employed to describe not only novels but also a new phase of melodrama influenced by the playwright Dion Boucicault. By this time the stage was beginning to lose its negative reputation and was courting middle-class respectability (much as the sensation novel took the pleasures of street literature and made them respectable). Boucicault's "sensation dramas" like *The Colleen Bawn* (1860) addressed this audience. He became notorious for contriving spectacular episodes on stage that recreated scenes such as train crashes and horse races. Such theatrical verisimilitude increased the thrill of the story. The reality effect was heightened by contemporary settings (whereas earlier melodramas had often

been set in the past or in exotic locations). Stage mechanics took a huge leap forward in the mid-Victorian years, and it was not unknown for the designer to take a curtain call on the first night. The modern equivalent of the sensation drama would be films that depend on computer graphics and other special effects. Michael Diamond comments: "*The Colleen Bawn* was to the sensation drama what *The Woman in White* was to the sensation novel" (Diamond 2003: 218).

It is not therefore surprising that sensation fiction frequently found its way onto the stage during the mid-Victorian era. Novels were often adapted even while they were being serialized. There was a distinct genre of sensation novel adaptations, which continued for the rest of the nineteenth century. Mrs. Henry Wood confessed in 1875, "I cannot help thinking that a portion of 'East Lynne's' success is owing to its being so much represented on the stage. Go where I will, I mean into country places, I am sure to see the walls placarded with 'East Lynne'. People see the play and next day send and buy the book" (Maunder 2006: 173). Novelists often did not receive any direct income from these pirated versions but, as Wood realized, gained from increased sales. When Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* was presented at the St. James' Theatre in London women in the audience were seen explaining the plot to the men who accompanied them, an example of the way the sensation novel was a distinctly female form to some extent (Diamond 2003: 224). These adaptations allowed for strong female roles. Miss Herbert's performance as Lady Audley was widely acclaimed.

The adaptations varied in their success, although the number of sensation novels adapted testifies to the appetite for them. In 1863 there were no fewer than five different productions of Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* playing in London. There was a problem with telescoping the complex down to a reasonable length. The *Times* complained that the Adelphi's *Aurora Floyd* ran for four and a quarter hours, which was "too much." However, it noted the opposite problem with the version at the Princess' Theatre, where the main characters were reduced to "representations of a painful moral position than definite personages" ("Adelphi Theatre": 10). In other words, the latter adaptation interpreted the novel within the context of the kind of simplistic melodrama that was now becoming out of date. The heavily commercial impetus behind the stage adaptations has led many critics to ignore them but they are an important part of the history of sensation fiction and offered different ways of interpreting the stories. They were performed around the world, adding to the global reach of the sensation novel.

It would be a mistake to assume that sensation novels and their stage versions were the same thing. Adaptation inevitably involves compression, but also reinterpretation of the texts. Dramatizations of female sensationists were undertaken by men, which sometimes led to their complex presentations of female selfhood being expunged. Lady Audley's villainy is attributed on stage to madness, whereas Braddon's original had opted for a more searching explanation (Powell 1997: 111–14). As scholars such as Andrew Maunder have shown, the middle-class sensation novel had to be rethought for a working-class audience. *East Lynne* first arrived on the English stage in 1864 at the Effingham in London's East End under the title *Marriage Bells*. Working-class characters and issues such as poverty were far more prominent at the Effingham than

they had been in Wood's original novel, or indeed in versions aimed at a middle-class audience (Maunder 2006: 180–1).

Many of the chief sensation novelists had links to the theater. Wilkie Collins was stagestruck and, from his early career onwards, wrote plays; it was his involvement in amateur theatricals that helped cement his relationship with Dickens. The latter dubbed Collins's first play, *The Lighthouse* (1855), "a regular old-style melodrama" (Davis 2006: 170). In the 1870s he began to focus as much on the stage as the novel, adapting his own books and attending rehearsals. He adapted *Armada* (1866) under the title *Miss Gwilt* in 1876, as well as *No Name* (1862) in 1870, *The Woman in White* (1860) in 1871, *The New Magdalen* (both novel and play, 1873), *Man and Wife* (1870) in 1873, and *The Moonstone* (1868) in 1877. Collins's plays explored the psychological possibilities of the melodramatic form. *The New Magdalen* was conceived both as a novel and as a play (the novel was released after the play's premiere). It became a major international success, and the dramatized version has recently been interpreted as a forerunner of the late Victorian social problem play, although earlier melodramas had, as we have seen, touched on social questions (Law and Maunder 2008: 122–3). The play was slightly shocking because its heroine is a former prostitute who, in order to gain access to a wealthy household, impersonates a person thought to have died.

Like Collins, Charles Reade devised stories that could become both novels and films. For example, his play *Free Labour* (1870) was adapted from his recent novel *Put Yourself in His Place* (1870), which dealt with violence during strikes and adopted an anti-trade union perspective. In 1868 he actually joined forces with Dion Boucicault to write the novel *Foul Play*, which was then dramatized by Boucicault in a version that played at the Holborn Theatre in London and by Reade in a version that played at the Theatre Royal, Leeds. Like so much of Reade's output, it was inspired by real life: a case in which shipowners scuttled their own ships to claim the insurance.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon was, briefly, an actress in the 1850s, employing the name of Mary Seyton. She maintained a career as a playwright alongside her more lucrative output for the printed page, which explains the strongly theatrical dimension to her writing and is the reason why her novels proved so easy to adapt for the stage. Her play *Genevieve*, which was staged in Liverpool in 1874, featured an avalanche and thus drew on the vogue for post-Boucicault sensation drama (Holder 2000: 169). Braddon's image as a bohemian female novelist daring to write about things she should not know about (such as bigamy) had a strongly theatrical dimension. Was she herself Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd rolled into one? Katherine Newey argues that, although Braddon "left the stage as a performer, her fiction writing never left a heavily theatricalized realm which tended to fuse the identities of female author and female protagonists" (Newey 2005: 92).

This cross-pollination of melodrama and the sensation novel proved enduring. In the later nineteenth century melodrama went into decline, although its presence on stage was still considerable. Theater itself became an increasingly middle-class affair. A new style of acting developed that was low-key and abandoned some of the

histrionics of melodramatic performance. However, the New Drama that we associate with Ibsen and Shaw owed far more to melodrama than was once thought. Melodrama found its way into silent cinema and has formed the basis of most popular fiction right up to today. Filmmakers of the early twentieth century frequently looked to what had been popular on stage during the late nineteenth century. Silent cinema took over the conventions of melodrama, especially the variety that developed after 1860 with its focus on spectacular effects and spectacle as well as its focus on female characters. A. Nicholas Vardac famously argued that cinema was the product of greater demands for scenic realism. Film was able to do everything that stage melodrama could do but better (Vardac 1949: xviii). Significantly, the American director D. W. Griffith (who helped shape the language and possibilities of cinema with films such as *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915) began his career on the stage as an actor. Many of his films employed the stories and conventions of melodrama.

We should therefore not be surprised that the afterlife of the sensation novel was in the cinema. Whilst (with the exception of Wilkie Collins), sensation fiction remained unread for much of the twentieth century, it enjoyed a late flowering on the silent screen. There were four versions of *Lady Audley's Secret* between 1906 and 1915, and three versions of *Aurora Floyd. East Lynne* clocked up a staggering ten adaptations between 1902 and 1915. There were even four versions of Collins's *The New Magdalen* in this period. Theda Bara, the first great screen sex symbol (famous for playing vamps), appeared in a version of *Lady Audley's Secret* in 1915, followed by *East Lynne* in 1916. These were both American films, indicating the global reach of the sensation novel. Other melodramas, such as Tom Taylor's *The Ticket of Leave Man* (1863), also made it on to the screen as filmmakers believed these melodramas were a good commercial proposition. By 1931, however, with the film *East Lynne on the Western Front*, Victorian melodrama had become a subject simply for burlesque, although Tod Slaughter, the last great actor of the melodramatic stage, was still performing into the 1950s.

In recent years there has been something of a revival of interest in melodrama both in the world of academic scholarship but also, appropriately, within the theater itself. There have been a number of revivals of plays such as Boucicault's *The Shaugraun* (1874) and *The Colleen Bawn*, and of Douglas Jerrold's *Black Ey'd Susan* (1829). However, it has been in the area of the musical theater that melodrama has had most impact. The two most successful musicals of modern times have been *Les Misérables* and *The Phantom of the Opera*, which derive much of their impact from reviving aspects of the melodramatic idiom for a modern audience. The episode in *The Phantom of the Opera* where a chandelier crashes into the stage evokes Boucicault's sensation scenes. When audiences are moved by the plight of the poor in *Les Misérables* they are experiencing not only the pleasures of the music but the persistent power of melodrama in making social issues visible. It therefore made sense when, in 2004, Andrew Lloyd Webber composed a musical version of *The Woman in White* that played in London and New York. The show drew on the sentimentality as well as the thrills that we associate with melodrama.



It is a mistake to view sensation fiction as something simply encountered on the printed page. Many of the writers we associate with the sensation novel took the stage seriously as a vehicle for storytelling, but also acknowledged the melodramatic roots of their narrative mode. Melodrama, the sensationalists recognized, was a source of pleasure but also a way of exploring some of the serious issues in Victorian society. The links between the stage and the sensation novel were very deep. This is because the nineteenth century was infected by the melodramatic imagination.

## NOTES

- 1 The line is actually, "Oh, Willie, my child me, never called me mother!" (Palmer 1874: 38).  
dead, dead, dead! And he never knew

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## 5 Sensation Theater

*Heidi J. Holder*

On Boxing Day 1863, H. J. Byron's *1863; or, The Sensations of the Past Season* delighted audiences seeking a holiday comedy at the St. James's Theatre. The piece showed an author desperate to find some matter for a theatrical burlesque; he is assisted by an embodiment of Fancy, who spins through the options presented by the last year's productions, including Italian opera and melodrama, and introduces various characters, including Byron's Manfred and ghosts from *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and the *Corsican Brothers*.<sup>1</sup> Fancy settles, inevitably, on *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), which is embraced as just the thing. What follows is a frantically speeded up version of the dramatization of that novel – Lady Audley wistfully laments here that she has had no time to commit arson – with the comic actor J. L. Toole in a curly wig as Lady Audley and the actress Fanny Josephs in the breeches role as Robert Audley. Reversing the gender of the actors in these key roles plays havoc with the sexual politics of the piece, as the rather large Toole huffs menacingly at the decidedly portly actor (Paul Bedford) playing “her” husband George and the sylph-like actress playing her nemesis Robert. Toole's Lady Audley loudly announces her descent into a frenzy of rage:

George Tallboys [*sic*], mark me, mark me – if you dare!  
You know my temper when it's roused is horrid;  
I feel that I'm becoming very florid,  
My temples throb and burn with heat that's torrid,  
And every vein's a swelling in my forrid.

(Byron 2003a: 85)

The careful pattern of mutual suspicion, stalking, and pursuit found in M. E. Braddon's novel is ultimately reduced to a “pantomime rally” – the melee at the end of the

harlequinade in which all the characters race about throwing fruit and vegetables at each other. George Tallboys pops his head up out of the well into which his bigamous wife has, famously, pushed him to contribute the reassuring words, "I'm all alive, oh! / I did survive, oh!" (Byron 2003a: 91).

Such burlesques of hit pieces had long been a beloved theatrical staple. They often targeted the great "effects" of successful plays, what would come to be known as "sensation scenes." When melodramatic spectacle invaded even London's most exalted theaters in the early nineteenth century, its excesses were gleefully and promptly parodied. Matthew "Monk" Lewis's *Timour the Tartar* – an 1811 work that brought troops of horses into the sacred precincts of Covent Garden – was within a few months mocked on the boards of the Haymarket Theatre in George Colman the Younger's *The Quadrupeds of Quedlinburgh; or, The Rovers of Weimar*, which proudly displayed battles among armed knights wearing wicker horses and a climactic rescue of a lone fat virgin on a donkey. In the 1840s the Adelphi Theatre, one of the leading houses for blood-and-thunder melodramas, was happily lampooning the tastes of its own audience in works such as J. S. Coyne's 1847 Adelphi farce *How to Settle Accounts with Your Landdress*, in which a young tailor, appalled at the apparent self-drowning of his fiancée in his own water-butt (her feet, actually those of the tailor's dummy, stick straight up out of the barrel, adorned with a pair of familiar shoes), laments the inevitable theatricalization of the gruesome scene: "the vital spark extinct! Oh! It's too dreadful a sight for human feelings: them legs, and them green boots .... What an awful sensation 'twill make when its [*sic*] found out .... They'll make three shocking acts out of one fatal act at the Victoria, and they'll have the real water and water-butt at the Surrey" (Coyne 1974: 161). These parodies and burlesques flourished in mid-century, when what was called the "sensation drama" took hold of the British theater, with playwrights such as Gilbert Abbott à Beckett, F. C. Burnand, H. J. Byron, William Brough, and Mark Lemon guying the sensation dramas of Dion Boucicault and the popular adaptations of sensation novels by such authors as Mrs. Braddon.

The parodies draw much humor from the deflating of sensational effect, homing in on precisely those elements that most thrilled audiences: moments of wild, uncontrolled emotion (especially but not only on the part of women), violent spectacle (battles on horseback, leaps, falls, fires, explosions, murders, drownings), and dazzlingly authentic recreation of places and images from "real life" (the minutely realized courtroom of the Old Bailey in Boucicault's 1863 *Trial of Effie Deans* at the Theatre Royal Westminster [Astley's]; the panoramic view of London's skyline in Watts Phillips's 1867 *Lost in London* at the Adelphi). Through the looking-glass of burlesque, Lady Audley, rather than setting a blaze to kill her enemies, is reduced to flinging fruit and vegetables. Eily O'Connor, the pathetic victim of an attempted drowning in a famous scene from Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn* (Adelphi, 1860), proves literally unsinkable in H. J. Byron's parody *Miss Eily O'Connor* (Drury Lane, 1862), where, over and over again, she rises "provokingly, in the manner of a clown" (Byron 2003b: 40). As in the case of the burlesque "George Tallboys," who quickly and reassuringly pops his head up out of the well, there is no space allowed for the usual privilege of

the audience at a sensation drama: the luxurious delectation of shock and horror. The customary amazing rescue, reappearance, or reclamation in sensation fiction of the lost, exiled, or presumed dead – George Talboys in *Lady Audley's Secret*, Laura Fairlie in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), Isabel Vane in Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), Eily O'Connor in Gerald Griffin's *The Collegians; or The Colleen Bawn* (1829) – happens now in burlesque time: instantaneously.

Attention to such parodies undoubtedly assists in a reading of sensational effect on the stage. Even before the official arrival of the "sensation drama" in the late 1850s and early 1860s, the kinds of plots and scenes associated with that form were well under development. Critics including Martin Meisel, Michael Booth, and Nicholas Vardac have tracked the rise of pictorialism and elaborate visual effects on the nineteenth-century stage. Meisel's *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (1983) stands as the most comprehensive examination of the Victorian theater's strong connections to the novel and to the visual arts. In his analysis of the use of the tableau, the scene – often an act drop – that freezes and highlights a moment of emotional and/or visual "realization," Meisel draws us back to the importance of *time* in sensational effect:

One cannot help but be aware of a severe tension in the theater of the nineteenth century between picture and motion; between the static image, halting (and compressing) time so that the full implication of events and relations can be savoured, and the achievement of a total dynamism, in which everything moves and works for its own sake, as "wonder" and effect. (1983: 50)

For a useful example of such tension, consider the common sensation scene in which someone leaps or is thrown from a bridge or building. In the theater, these are moments of shocking movement. However, they are often known to us, and to some members of the original audiences, from theatrical engravings and other images, in which the figure is frozen against the backdrop, as in a frequently used advertising woodcut for Dion Boucicault's *After Dark* (Princess's Theatre, 1868; Figure 5.1). Action and illustration achieve opposite effects.

Booth and Vardac also point to some of the unresolved tensions and problems inherent in a pictorial theater. Booth, in *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850–1910*, details the challenges faced by the actor in such works, where the scenery and special effects can be overwhelming: "The problems which the actor encountered in spectacle theatre were manifold . . . there was no easy way of distinguishing him from a scenic environment into which he was now fully integrated" (1981: 27). In fact, as critics often pointed out at the time, the scene painter had come to dominate many productions. Innovations in lighting and special effects (not only fires and explosions but the use of collapsible structures and water tanks) contributed to a more detailed, kinetic, and intrusive *mise-en-scène*. As Booth observes, "in a real sense melodrama and pantomime were creatures of technology" (1981: 64). Nicholas Vardac, more than any other critic, has taken as central the technological element of spectacular theater. His *Stage*



Figure 5.1 Fanny Dalton's leap from Blackfriar's Bridge in Dion Boucicault's *After Dark* (1868). From Stanley Appelbaum, *Scenes from the Nineteenth-Century Stage in Advertising Woodcuts* (1977). Courtesy Dover Press

to Screen. *Theatrical Origins of Early Film: David Garrick to D. W. Griffith* sees such developments on stage as an indication of “the birth of the need for the motion picture” (1949: xvii). In Vardac’s view, the taste for elaborate stage realism, as in the trial scene in *Effie Deans*, the shipwreck scene in Andrew Halliday’s adaptation of *David Copperfield*, *Little Em’ly* (Olympic, 1869), or the railroad scene in Augustin Daly’s *Under the Gaslight* (Pavilion, 1867), leads inevitably at the end of the century to the obsessively constructed (and highly expensive) sets for productions by Augustus Harris (manager of Drury Lane Theatre) in England and Steele MacKaye and David Belasco in the United States, whose works embodied a “photographic ideal” (Vardac 1949: ch. 4, esp. pp. 108–35). The acme of this ideal is the oeuvre of D. W. Griffith, who transplants it to its natural home on film.

More recent critics have complicated this notion of a pictorial or photographic ideal in their readings of specific elements of the sensation scene. Jane Moody, in *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840* (2000), offers a more political interpretation of the rise of sensational effects on stage, placing it firmly in a class context. At the time of the emergence of melodrama and spectacle on the popular stage, the spoken drama was legally restricted to two (at times, three) theaters; not until 1843 would this theatrical monopoly be ended by Parliament. This peculiar legal situation gave rise

to an alternative popular and intensely visual theater, one more of action, music, image, gesture, and inarticulate emotion than of words. The features of this “illegitimate” drama would infiltrate the “legitimate” theaters, as in the case of the production of the hippodrama *Timour the Tartar*. Moody offers a particularly sharp reading of the taste for literally explosive denouements in melodramatic productions, as in Isaac Pocock’s *The Miller and his Men* (Covent Garden, 1813), which ends with a mill full of bandits being blasted to pieces. Moody marks here the emergence of the “blow-up” effect, a spectacular detonation that resolves the conflicts of the play: “It makes representable in an entirely new way that irreducible confrontation between freedom and despotism, good and evil” (2000: 28).

While Moody looks back to the staging practices of the illegitimate theaters, Nicholas Daly’s very astute 1998 article in *Victorian Studies*, “Blood on the Tracks,” looks ahead to the imperatives of modernism in an analysis of the paradigmatic sensation scene in which a hapless victim is tied to railroad tracks, a scene that long ago became a cliché. Daly usefully considers the original source of this fraught image, often taken to be Augustin Daly’s *Under the Gaslight* (he casts doubt on this assumption). The effect of this particular sensation scene again seems driven by a sense of time: the crucial interval between the threat of danger and the relief of rescue, so comically shortened in burlesques, is here rushed, impelled by the pressure of the timetable of the railroad, of the machine: “the historical roots of the popular railway rescue, and indeed of spectacular melodrama in general, lie in the experience of industrial technology and modernity” (Daly 1998: 49). Daly thus extends the analysis of technology in the sensational theater beyond that of Vardac and Booth, so that it becomes not only an element of the *mise-en-scène*, but also itself a subject of dramatic representation.<sup>2</sup>

Lynn Voskuil, in *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (2004), looks not to technology but to mid-Victorian commodity culture for a reading of sensational theater, an interpretation that reconciles, in a new way, realism and spectacle:

the plots and sets of sensation plays helped to solidify consumer culture even more firmly by appearing to work almost magically, by using verisimilitude to evoke awe and wonder in spectators who had become invested in the idea that commodities were possessed of special faculties. This enigmatic doubleness – sensation theater’s dual emphasis on authentic and heightened spectacle – was key to their appeal and to their role in the consolidation of consumer culture. (2004: 76)

Voskuil’s analysis posits a deeply involved and knowing audience. Just as theater-goers could enjoy both a spectacular melodrama and its ruthless burlesque, so too could they enjoy the highly touted “authenticity” of such dramas while maintaining an awareness of their deep theatricality. Voskuil’s study helps us make sense of one of the oddities of Victorian spectacular realism: intense realism in domestic detail, or “cup-and-saucerism.”

During the heyday of sensation drama in the 1850s and 1860s, audiences were gripped by a fascination with the replication of domestic detail on stage. Plays such as Tom Taylor's *The Ticket-of-Leave Man* (Olympic Theatre, 1863) and Tom Robertson's *Caste* (Prince of Wales Theatre, 1867) entranced theater-goers by placing before them the mundane and familiar. Reviews of Taylor's play reveal a delight with local detail in such settings as a suburban tea garden, a city office, and a church yard. The notice from *The Times* is typical:

the tone of thorough reality which characterizes the plot . . . is fully carried out by the stage appointments. Mr. Gibson's office [the setting for Act 3] is no conventional establishment, but looks like a place where real business may be transacted .... The city church-yard in which the catastrophe takes place, and which is to all intents and purposes a "sensation scene," is not only one of Mr. Telbin's masterpieces, but is just that sort of obscure nook which is to be found nowhere in the world beyond the jurisdiction of the Lord Mayor. (review, 1863: 5)

The scenes and stage business for *Caste's* two settings were quite detailed: in the Lambeth lodgings the wallpaper is soiled, preparations for tea are laid out, and the decor of the room is firmly established by such details as benefit bills under the bookshelves, a ballet shoe and skirts lying about, and the placement of worn rugs and doormats; for the house in Mayfair the setting includes a table set for dessert, claret in a jug (with two wine glasses half full), a real piano, embroidery work and a basket of wool, and such other props as cigarettes, flowers, and paintings. Robertson was notable not simply for including a large amount of domestic detail (Madame Vestris had already done that) but for engaging his characters in a great deal of interplay and stage business with these familiar objects on stage. Much of this interaction is carefully designed to seem routine or improvised: the two acts at Lambeth both feature an extensive comic tea-scene, and the Mayfair scene includes casual piano-playing interspersed throughout the scene, and mock-military business with hats and a parasol. It is the seemingly thoughtless quality of this business that gave Robertson's plays a rather ostentatious lack of ostentation in staging.

The objects so lavishly presented in these productions – food, furniture – are being used for an effect, and a sensational one. The common is being depicted as something extraordinary. Bert States, in his study on theater and phenomenology, reminds us that what is put on stage is changed in the audience's perception: "it becomes an event in a self-contained illusion outside the world of social praxis but conceptually referring to that world in some way" (1985: 19). The advent of domestic realism on the English stage indicates that the use of these objects – "things imported from the realm of the real" (States 1985: 41) – would by their very appearance affect the audience perception of the world offstage to which they refer. The usual categories of "spectacular realism" and "domestic realism" are actually closer in nature than they might seem: in domestic realism the familiar becomes illusion and spectacle, the native is exoticized, in scenes that construct an ever-intensifying realism as the play progresses.



There may seem to be a great distance between the mesmerizing spectacle of onstage tea service and the more obviously sensational explosions, shipwrecks, and leaps from buildings and bridges. But sensationalism in the theater must be viewed across a spectrum of effects. The stirring of emotion, the thrill of recognition or revelation, can be evoked in gestures and actions large and small. Many sensation dramas (even those pre-dating the application of the term) pointedly connect literal and metaphorical levels: scenes of falls, fires, and explosions parallel heightening moments of emotion, ending in violent outbursts or “floor scenes” in which the stricken drop to the ground. Fires often provide signs of repressed but finally uncontrolled emotion. Take for example the burning of the factory in John Walker’s *The Factory Lad* (Surrey Theatre, 1832). This work has a very specific context in labor history: replaced by steam power, the men rebel. The outcast Rushton is at the head of a mob that sets the fire; we see it burning in the distance in two separate scenes at the beginning of the second act: “This has been a glorious night, to see the palace of the tyrant leveled to the ground – to hear his engines of gain cracking – to hear him call for help, and see the red flame laugh in triumph!” (Walker 1974: 141). Rushton’s maniacal laughter at the end of *The Factory Lad* as he stands over the body of the factory master Westwood is prefigured in a pattern of shock, despair, and near-lunacy that begins in the first scene. Rushton knocks Westwood to the ground repeatedly, twice standing over him with a “lighted ember.” The frantic wife, Jane, wails that “a whirlwind rushes through my brain!” (1974: 149). The hero Allen, distracted, cries, “Where shall I fly? My brain is giddy. My legs feeble” (1974: 144). Rushton is repeatedly tormented by visions of his wife and children, killed by “savages” in the new world.

This rising note of hysteria is a regular feature of such dramas, particularly in female representation, and appears often in adaptations of works of fiction. See, for example, George Lander’s version of Dickens’s *Bleak House* (Pavilion Theatre, 1876), in which Lady Dedlock falls prostrate before the accusing specter of the Ghost Walk, and C. H. Hazlewood’s version of M. E. Braddon’s *Aurora Floyd* (1863), in which Aurora, her husband John, and her first husband James meet in the woods. Aurora forces a laugh, “which suddenly turns into an hysterical one, wild and piercing, so as to express great mental agony – this requires to be done with great force so as to achieve a climax as she falls into the arms of John” (Hazlewood [1863]: 17).

Contemporary Victorian critics often see only a cheapening of effect in the adaptations of the works of Dickens, Collins, Wood, Braddon, and others. And it is hard to avoid that conclusion. Take Lady Audley’s acts of violence, which are so deliciously veiled in the novel. We are left in the dark as to the fate of George Talboys until quite near the story’s end – Lady Audley only comes clean in order to torment her nemesis Robert. Her burning of the Castle Inn seems almost an act of will: after a “sardonic smile” at the room’s draperies, she sets a flaming candle close to the “lace furbelows,” “so close the starched muslin seemed to draw the flame towards it by some power of attraction in its fragile tissues” (Braddon 2003: 334). Just as the delicate fabric seems more active here than the woman, so in the scene at the well appears a similar kind of deflection: She saw Talboys “leaning upon the dusty windlass, in which the rusty

iron spindle rattled loosely whenever he shifted his position”: “I drew the loose iron spindle from the shrunken wood, and saw my first husband sink with one horrible cry into the black mouth of the well” (Braddon 2003: 398).

A loose spindle, a fragile lace curtain. Such subtlety is lost on the stage. So, what do we get in exchange? Only a coarsening of effect? Take William Suter’s adaptation of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, staged at the Queen’s Theatre in February 1863 (this version prompted a lawsuit on Braddon’s part; a sanctioned adaptation by George Roberts appeared at the St. James’s Theatre in the same month). The slightly occult quality of the novel, according to which Lady Audley’s actions are rarely viewed straight on, is entirely absent, and there is no lingering mystery as to her husband’s sudden disappearance. Here is Suter’s staging of the scene at the well:

TALBOYS. No power on earth shall turn me from my purpose, which is, to take you to the man you have deceived, and make you tell your terribly wicked story.

*During the last speech, LADY AUDLEY’S hand has been working convulsively beneath the bosom of her dress, and at the end of the speech, she, unseen by TALBOYS, partly draws forth a poniard, thrusting it instantly back to its hiding place.*

LADY A. (*advancing fiercely towards TALBOYS*) I defy you – I defy you! denounce me to Sir Michael, I will declare you to be a madman, or a liar, and I defy you to convince the man who loves me, blindly worships me, that you have any claim to me – farewell, (*is hurrying off* L. u. E. – TALBOYS follows, seizes her by the wrist, and drags her back)

TALBOYS. You go not yet.

LADY A. (*shaking him off*) You have bruised my wrist! (*again thrusting her hand beneath her dress*)

TALBOYS. Your infamous cunning shall no longer avail you; by heaven! if there were but one witness of your identity, and that witness were removed from Audley Court by the width of the whole earth, I would bring him there to swear to your identity and to denounce you.

LADY A. Ah! (*with a wild exclamation she suddenly brings her hand holding the poniard from her dress; turns rapidly on TALBOYS and stabs him; he utters a cry, staggers back against the wall of the well; the wall gives way with a crash, and he disappears, falling down into the well; LADY AUDLEY throws her poniard amongst the brushwood and hurries off, L. u. E. – Music.*)

(Suter 1863: 42)

There is certainly a loss of psychological interest in the scene, and *this* Lady Audley has no secrets from the audience. Even George Roberts’s somewhat more stately adaptation, in which the well scene is left tastefully offstage to be viewed and commented on by the menacing figure of Luke Marks, was taken by critics as a model of compressed and hectic action. Henry Morley wrote:

it is only in two acts; and the putting of the superfluous husband into the well follows so closely on the bigamy, the glow of the arson, again, so closely on the stain of murder, and the interesting heroine goes mad so immediately, with the glow of the house she has burnt yet on her face, and the man she has burnt in it dying on a stretcher by her side, that the audience has a pudding all plum. (Morley 1863: 168)

C. H. Hazlewood's version (Victoria Theatre, May 1863), in turn, shows Lady Audley creeping up behind Talboys and striking him on the head with the iron handle from the well, after which she exults, arms raised in triumph: "I am free! I am free! I am free! Ha, ha, ha!" (Hazlewood 1972: 248). There are so many variations on this image of a wife putting her cast-off husband down a well that a theatrical woodcut designed for use by managers in publicity for any version shows an all-purpose image of Lady Audley giving George a good shove (see Figure 5.2).

A similar expansion of verbal and visual effect appears in George Lander's adaptation of *Bleak House* (Pavilion Theatre, 1876), which extended and gave pattern to the sufferings of Lady Dedlock, another hunted figure guarding her secrets. Lady Dedlock's response to the news that her daughter in fact lives is, in the novel, elaborately contained:

As Sir Leicester basks in his library, and dozes over his newspaper, is there no influence in the house to startle him; not to say, to make the very trees at Chesney Wold fling up their knotted arms, the very portraits frown, the very armour stir?



**Figure 5.2** *Lady Audley's Secret* on stage: Lady Audley pushes George Talboys into a well. From Stanley Appelbaum, *Scenes from the Nineteenth-Century Stage in Advertising Woodcuts* (1977). Courtesy Dover Press

No. Words, sobs, and cries, are but air; and air is so shut in and shut out throughout the house in town, that sounds need be uttered trumpet-tongued indeed by my Lady in her chamber, to carry any faint vibration to Sir Leicester's ears; and yet this cry is in the house, going upward from a wild figure on its knees.

"O my child, my child! Not dead in the first hours of her life, as my cruel sister told me; but sternly nurtured by her, after she had renounced me and my name! O my child, O my child!" (Dickens 1998: 338)

On stage, in Lander's version, the ending is just a start:

LADY DEDLOCK. (*With a passionate cry and coming c.*) Oh, my child! my child! Not dead in the first hours of her life, as my cruel sister told me, but sternly nurtured by her after she had renounced me and mine. Bear up, my heart! and Heaven, give me strength to hide its passions! Oh! what a wretched creature. I am envied by those who, if they knew what was beneath the mask I wear, would loathe and shun me. Two things I have heard to-night: his wretched life and death, and that my daughter lives. The ghostly legend is true: when calamity or death is coming to the house of Dedlock, the phantom of its ancestress walks. I have heard its ghostly step upon the terrace, and knew it walked for me. I feel its baneful influence about me Air ! air ! (*She hurries with faltering step to the window, and draws the curtains, revealing a ghostly female figure, costumed in the fashion of King Charles the First's time, standing on the terrace, with its gaze directed full upon her, and the forefinger of its right hand pointed menacingly at her; the left hand rests on a crutch stick. The face of the figure is stern and forbidding. The lime light is full on the figure. As Lady Dedlock glimpses the figure, she drops the curtains, and utters a loud shriek of terror, falling prostrate; or she may be caught in the arms of SIR LEICESTER DEDLOCK, as he and MR. TULKING-HORN come on at her shriek. Act drop quick.*) (Lander 1876: 39)

The two narrative scenes from the novels, in which action and emotion are forced into view and then strongly suppressed (Braddon's Lady Audley, remember, stands quietly by the well for a quarter of an hour after Talboys sinks from view), become, on the stage, extended scenes of wild emotion and frantic movement; they also provide occasions for more interaction than in the sources. This insistence on a deeper level of engagement with other characters, including ghosts, can extend even to the women's deaths. Braddon's Lady Audley dies well out of view, mewed up in a French asylum. On stage she fast-forwards through madness to an unexplained death tableau in which George Talboys kneels over her in pity (Hazlewood), or takes poison and dies promptly and grandly amid the assembled family (Suter). In Lander's adaptation of *Bleak House*, Esther reaches her mother just as she is dying at the pauper's graveyard; an earlier, anonymous version, staged at the Strand in 1852, goes much farther, granting Esther a final chat with her mother as various other characters – Sir Leicester, Bucket, Mr. George, and Mrs. Rouncewell – join in the farewell scene. The graveyard gets quite crowded.

The *business* of such moments, the persistence of interaction for the sake of drawing out emotional effects, links this style of adaptation to other elements of

sensation theater. Just as extended stage business with common household or office items, as in *Caste* or *The Ticket-of-Leave Man*, imbued objects on stage with emotional life and intense reality, so actors in more special-effects-laden scenes must literally climb the scenery, sink beneath the waters of a tank, drop through a trap, or leap through flames. Sensational theater, whatever the level of its *mise-en-scène*, demanded deep physical engagement – among actors, between cast and set, and stage and audience.

Analysis of one final image brings us back to some of the issues of movement versus stasis and the expansion of time versus its compression raised not only by critics such as Meisel but also by those very burlesques that fed off of the conventions of sensationalism. In April 1862, as sensation drama was heading toward its peak, Mrs. Henry Young saw her play *Jessy Ashton; or, The Adventures of a Barmaid* staged at the Effingham Theatre in Whitechapel – a rather lower house than many. As a dramatist, Young's choices lean toward works that feature elaborate set pieces and constantly shifting scenes. The serialized source, *Jessie Ashton*, appeared in *The Welcome Guest, a Journal of Recreative Literature* in sixty-three chapters (thirty-nine numbers), beginning in late November 1861 and running into March 1862.<sup>3</sup> The source, as well as the play, begins in an underground vault, from which Jessie must escape by climbing up into a house and then down the outside of it on a rope. After hiding from her enemies at an inn in Hampstead, she is discovered and kidnapped in the night: one of the villain's henchmen carries her unconscious form as he scales the side of a building. This henchman stows Jessie in a house which promptly burns down, necessitating Jessie's "leap for life" from an upper window (Figure 5.3). Later she is set adrift in a leaking boat and locked in yet another house from which she is yet again abducted. The narrative offers a sequence of confinements, and of literal rises and falls. What is striking about the kind of source material on which Young relies is not the presence of these scenes – one or even two would be expected – but the sheer iteration of such moments that it displays. The actor–set interplay is amazingly intense.

Young maintains a remarkable number of these scenes – the story is too long to keep them all – despite their difficulty of realization on the stage. Her notes to the scene in which the unconscious Jessie is carried over the shoulder of a climbing man do indicate that the stage must be darkened for the effect of "dummy Jessie" to work. However, the leap from the burning building was, apparently, performed by the actress herself. Jessie on stage, as in the source, is a most restless, peripatetic character. And Young clearly delighted in putting female characters into complicated set pieces involving entrapment, climbing, and falling; danger, escape, and rescue. Such effects intensify the heroine's status as isolated and homeless. She is, literally, placeless and disoriented. There is a recurring scene (the opening provides the first instance) of Jessie awakening with no knowledge of where she is; another repeated action involves an attempt slowly to negotiate a darkened room without discovery. The intense use of sensational moments, in which Jessie is either strongly active or strongly acted upon seems to point us toward a problem of agency. And



**Figure 5.3** Jessie's Leap for Life from *Jessie Ashton*. *The Welcome Guest*, 4 January 1862. With the permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford

not only female agency. Sensation theater, essentially an offshoot of melodrama, comes with a built-in problem, a tension between the representation of fear and paranoia on the one hand, and the presence of Providence on the other. Injustice and persecution appear alongside the benign moral order toward which the play will eventually move. So, is the emotional content of the sensation scene evocative of a sense of human will, of agency, or of helplessness and reliance on the hand of Providence?

Take Jessie's leap from the flaming building (Figure 5.3). This image alone captures some of the contradictory nature of female representation in Young's play. In the

source, Jessie still wears the handcuffs put on her by her captors (this accounts for the odd “praying” posture). She is lowered on a rope by a detective. When the rope burns, she falls and is caught by the crowd. This strikes me as a paradigmatic image of female helplessness, one we might think typical of melodrama (which was never that simple). In the play, Jessie, unrestrained, climbs out of the window and jumps. She’s a more active figure. But I would suggest that Young is relying for effect here in part on an interplay between the image from the serialized text and the image on stage, and a similar effect might have been at work in many other such moments, such as the young woman’s leap off the bridge in *After Dark* (Figure 5.1).<sup>4</sup> Young wrote her play only weeks after the serial ended. She made canny use of the images from the text in the creation of most of her “sensation scenes,” going so far as to paste them into her manuscript (although they were ripped out before it was sent to the Lord Chamberlain’s office for licensing). She could count on most of the audience knowing the images, and that mental image of the scene would contribute strongly to the effect of its realization on stage. Many of the theater-goers would thus “see” two images here, the one calling to mind the other: one passive and idealized, the other active and present in the moment. While many examples of “realization” on the Victorian stage – recreation of known images from paintings and illustrations – are based on scenes that are static, that can be held as tableaux, Young persistently chooses instances of action – especially female figures in motion. Such scenes cannot of course be held, be frozen, so they give rise to an automatic and inevitable perception of contrast. Sensational theater, in the end, worked hard at negotiating such conflicted opposites: time and stasis, outburst and suppression, isolation and engagement – even, in some cases, living actor and mechanized set. The calculating craziness of J. L. O’Toole’s farcical *Lady Audley* neatly captured the paradoxical, at times impossible or nonsensical, nature of sensational effect.

## NOTES

- 1 Byron’s *Manfred*, first published in 1817, was rarely staged. It appeared at Covent Garden in 1834, and was revived at Drury Lane in 1863 (a burlesque, *Mad Fred*, was simultaneously offered by the Surrey Theatre). *Hamlet* received productions in 1863 at both the Princess’s Theatre and the Adelphi; *Macbeth* at Her Majesty’s and the Surrey; and *The Corsican Brothers*, first staged at the Princess’s Theatre in 1852, at the Marylebone.
- 2 Daly’s just-published book, *Literature, Technology, and Modernity, 1860–2000* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) is certain to expand on this article, but it was not available at the time of writing.
- 3 According to the licensing copy in the collection of the Lord Chamberlain’s Plays at the British Library, Young’s adaptation is entitled *Jessy Ashton; or, The Adventures of a Barmaid* (Add. MS 53013S). However, in the MS the character is consistently referred to as “Jessie,” and the name is spelled thus in the original source; I therefore refer to the character from both the play and the serial as “Jessie.” The publicity for the play is inconsistent in the spelling of the name.
- 4 Some fine work has been done on the connection between illustration/ephemera and the texts (narrative and dramatic) of Braddon’s work. See King (2002) and Mattacks (2009).

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# 6

## Gothic

*Patrick R. O'Malley*

The word “Gothic” appears only once in Wilkie Collins’s 1860 sensation thriller *The Woman in White*, but when it does it erupts into the novel laden with meaning. The clerk at Old Welmingham church admits Walter Hartright to the decaying vestry where a marriage register lies, the text of which – through its nonconformity with an authoritative double – will reveal Sir Percival Glyde’s fatal secret: that his parents were not married. On his way, the clerk laments the failure of attempts to reconstruct the church:

They made speeches, and passed resolutions, and put their names down, and printed off thousands of prospectuses. Beautiful prospectuses, sir, all flourished over with Gothic devices in red ink, saying it was a disgrace not to restore the church and repair the famous carvings and so on. There are the prospectuses that couldn’t be distributed, and the architect’s plans and estimates, and the whole correspondence which set everybody at loggerheads and ended in a dispute, all down together in that corner, behind the packing-cases. (Collins 2008: 509)

Seemingly marking only the clerk’s own obsession with the useless signifiers of an outdated cultural capital, “Gothic” here registers a deep literary genealogy linking the sensation novel itself with its textual forebears. Locked up in the ramshackle vestry, the “Gothic devices” themselves trope not only the myriad enclosed and threatened bodies – mostly female – that struggle against their live burial in the ecclesiastical prisons of the traditional Gothic novel but also the other confined persons – again, mostly female – of the sensation novel, particularly those locked up on the pretext of madness: *The Woman in White*’s own Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick, for example, and (shortly thereafter) Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Lucy Audley. They stand as an index

not only of *The Woman in White's* insistent textuality but also of the Gothic's transformation in the nineteenth century as it, like its culture, engages increasingly with the metaphorical spaces of an embodied psychology.

As a literary genre or mode, the "Gothic" has been notoriously difficult to define. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick once wrote that "While there is very little difficulty in identifying or setting a date to the Gothic novel proper, most Gothic novels are not worth reading, making it otiose to labor a definition for their sake" (Sedgwick 1980: 3). The dates of the "Gothic novel proper" that seemed so clear in 1980 were its beginning with Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* in 1764 (or 1765, when the second edition gave it the subtitle "A Gothic Story") and its conclusion with the 1820 publication of *Melmoth the Wanderer* by Charles Robert Maturin, the so-called "last of the goths." The period between those dates saw the publication of the novels of Clara Reeve, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, and those other writers whose works are so exquisitely parodied in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817). Jerrold E. Hogle has noted, on the one hand, "how pliable and malleable this type of fiction-making has proven to be, stemming as it does from an uneasy conflation of genres, styles, and conflicted cultural concerns from its outset" and, on the other, "how relatively constant some of its features are":

a Gothic tale usually takes place (at least some of the time) in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space – be it a castle, a foreign palace, an abbey, a vast prison, a subterranean crypt, a graveyard, a primeval frontier or island. . . . Within this space, or a combination of such spaces, are hidden some secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise. (Hogle 2002: 2)

In many cases, that haunting is supernatural, although in some of the central texts of the tradition, the appearance of the supernatural element is an illusion, a signature aspect of Radcliffe's novels that Walter Scott highlighted as early as the 1820s.

The critical notion of the Gothic as a historically delimited genre has largely been superseded, in part due to Sedgwick's own claim that "I want to make it easier for the reader of 'respectable' nineteenth-century novels to write 'Gothic' in the margin next to certain especially interesting passages, and to make that notation with a sense of linking specific elements in the passage with specific elements in the constellation of Gothic conventions" (Sedgwick 1980: 4). The "elements" that have become central to Gothic studies in recent years – particularly those that engage with any combination of criminality, gender, sexuality, embodiment, narrative suspense, rationality and irrationality, or reader response – have inevitably drawn Gothic studies into the analysis of such later popular genres as detective and sensation fiction. Nicholas Rance has noted that "The plot of *The Woman in White* intermittently echoes that of one of the most famous and enduring of Gothic novels, Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* [1794]" (Rance 1991: 96). And Hogle points out more broadly that the Gothic

scattered its ingredients into various modes, among them aspects of the more realistic Victorian novel. Yet it also reasserted itself across the nineteenth century in flamboyant plays and scattered operas, short stories or fantastic tales for magazines and newspapers, “sensation” novels for women and the literate working class, portions of poetry or painting, and substantial resurgences of full-fledged Gothic novels – all of which were satirized for their excesses. (Hogle 2002: 1)

Certainly, the quick allusion to “Gothic devices” in *The Woman in White* tropes both the putative obsolescence of the mode and its persistence: after all, this is a passage that describes the re-emergence of the past’s hidden secrets within an antiquated ecclesiastical space.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the resonances of enclosed spaces – imprisoning, protecting, penetrated, contaminated – have been fundamental to the notion of the Gothic from the beginning. It is no accident that so many Gothic tales take as their titles the names of places – Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Eliza Parsons’s *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793), and Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, for example. At the same time, as Sedgwick observed, the Gothic works to confound the distinctions between “inside” and “outside,” between the “dream” and the “reality” (Sedgwick 1980: 29) putatively external to it: “The worst violence, the most potent magic, and the most paralyzing instances of the uncanny in these novels do not occur in, for example, the catacombs of the Inquisition or the stultification of nightmares. Instead, they are evoked in the very breach of the imprisoning wall. . . . Similarly, no nightmare is ever as terrifying as is waking up from even some innocuous dream *to find it true*” (Sedgwick 1980: 13). The obsessive doubling that Sedgwick notes – between characters, scenarios, milieus, and events – also infects the relationship between text and reader, confounding the inside and the outside of the novels themselves.

As Hogle has observed, the traditional Gothic novel’s obsession with confined bodies (in castles, in prisons, in cloisters, in confessionals, in tombs, or in the labyrinthine strictures of textuality itself) focuses most particularly on women:

Even as early as *The Castle of Otranto* . . . women are the figures most fearfully trapped between contradictory pressures and impulses. It is *Otranto*’s Isabella who first finds herself in what has since become the most classic Gothic circumstance: caught in “a labyrinth of darkness” full of “cloisters” underground and anxiously hesitant about what course to take there. (Hogle 2002: 9)

Kate Ferguson Ellis opens *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* with a similar characterization of the Gothic that focuses specifically on the containment of women: “The strand of popular culture we call the Gothic novel can be distinguished by the presence of houses in which people are locked in and locked out. They are concerned with violence done to familial bonds that is frequently directed against women” (Ellis 1989: 3).

It is in that very invocation of women behind the walls of castles and cloisters that Chiara Briganti has read Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861) as a reworking of the late eighteenth-century Gothic:

Audley Court used to be a convent, and in fact the first human presence in this desolate place overgrown with moss, reminiscent of the ruined mansions dear to the authors of Gothic tales, is that of the quiet nuns who have walked there hand in hand. These women, surrounded by ancient walls, are the first female icon in the text, the first of a series of versions of femininity that is offered, and their presence suggests the possibility that in spite of apparent differences, *Lady Audley's Secret* may still be struggling with the legacy of the Gothic tradition. (Briganti 1991: 190–1)

Indeed, Sedgwick's suggestion of "live burial" as one of the most important "conventions" of the Gothic novel, existing at "literal, figural, and structural" levels (Sedgwick 1980: 5), finds its suggestive analog in the very title of the chapter of Braddon's novel in which Lucy Audley is confined in an asylum: "Buried Alive."

The convent – as Audley Court (with its "Gothic gate" [Braddon 1998: 264]) itself once was – provides for the Gothic novel and its descendants a particularly evocative image for the confinement and control of women's bodies and actions as well as a corrupted version of normative domesticity. Gothic heroines from *Otranto's* Hippolita on frequently face the threat of immurement in a convent as the punishment for resistance to male prerogative. As Ellis notes, "the Catholic Church in the Gothic functions mostly as a provider of parodies of family life" (Ellis 1989: 120), and this is nowhere more clear than in the increasing Gothic emphasis on Catholic nomenclature that mimics and undermines the structures of the family, generally understood in the English Gothic novel as at least crypto-Protestant, even if (as in most of the early Gothic novels) the protagonists are themselves putatively Catholic. Thus the villain of Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797) is *Father* Schedoni; thus the power-mad abbess in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) is *Mother* St. Agatha; the corrupt Laurentini of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* conceals the crimes of her past under the name *Sister* Agnes.

But while Gothic novels, like the later sensation novels, often locate their threats in organizations (like the Catholic Church in the works of Radcliffe or Lewis) that are portrayed as inimical to English Protestant domesticity, they can also undermine the putative differences between them. As Maggie Kilgour has pointed out, the spaces in a novel like *Udolpho* come to mirror each other, regardless of whether they are ostensibly "domestic" or "Gothic": "Udolpho is a gothic version of La Vallée. . . . La Vallée was isolated to keep *out* exactly the forces, passions, and conflict, that Udolpho . . . will wall *in*" (Kilgour 1995: 119); it is a claim that presages Maureen Moran's about the sensationalized fiction of the mid-nineteenth century: "the Roman cloister and the English hearth cast remarkably similar shadows" (Moran 2007: 126). In a novel like *Udolpho*, the term "house," the nomenclature of domesticity, expands in the course of the text from naming first and foremost the pleasant home of Emily's family in an

idealized Gascony (e.g. Radcliffe 1998: 18) to including the imprisoning Apennine fortress of the villainous Montoni at Udolpho (e.g. 1998: 246) to encompassing the convent itself and all of the submerged violence that it contains (1998: 642). “Gothic” and domestic spaces come increasingly to look the same.

Similarly, at the end of *Melmoth*, when the demonic Wanderer finally confronts young Melmoth, the character who has heard all of the overlapping and nested tales that make up this complex narrative, he comes not as a foreign villain but as a relative returning – literally – to the domestic space that constitutes the family: “Your ancestor has come home” (Maturin 1998: 537). Like Radcliffe, Maturin evokes the complicated resonances of the term “house,” here even more insistently pointing to the corruption of the domestic space. The first time that it appears in the text, it refers to the home of old Melmoth, John Melmoth’s dying uncle (Maturin 1998: 15, 27, and others), but it quickly spreads to include both the insane asylum (“Melmoth could not forebear remembering the *incommunicable condition* proposed to Stanton in the mad-house” [1998: 237]) and the monastery (“no punishment, however severe, could make me submit to the ordinary discipline of the house” [1998: 123]). Even the rhetoric of aristocratic rank (“I am, Senhor, as you know, a native of Spain, but you are yet to learn I am a descendant of one of its noblest houses” [1998: 73]) becomes that of Catholic ecclesiastical pretension: “This house [i.e. the monastery] was the first in Madrid, and the singular circumstance of the son of one of the highest families in Spain having entered it in early youth . . . had set the imagination of all Madrid on fire” (Maturin 1998: 164). Repeatedly, as the Gothic novels progress, they locate their anxieties not in the opposition but in the collapse of the distinction between the foreign threat and the domestic refuge.

At the same time, however, they also increasingly develop a phenomenology of terror that depends upon somatic affect and a notion of the mind as itself a haunted space. What I will suggest here is that one of the key connections between the “Gothic novel proper” and the sensation novel is the development in the Gothic of a theory and practice of textual effect that aims to produce a material (and corporeally experienced) psychological state. That relationship between the structures of the mind and those of material space – the confining monasteries and fortresses and asylums – fundamental to the effects and affects of the sensation novel is implicit in the earliest Gothic texts, but it comes more specifically into focus as those texts increasingly engage with the psychological theories of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As Alan Richardson has noted, the “emergent biological psychologies . . . constitute a crucial segment of the Romantic discursive field; they give new dimensions to terms like ‘sensibility,’ ‘nervous,’ ‘organic,’ ‘natural,’ ‘universal,’ and ‘brain’” (Richardson 2001: xiv). Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who at one point in the 1790s toyed with the idea of “the corporeality of *thought*” itself (qtd. in Richardson 2001: 51), specifically takes up the identity of somatic and mental experience in his 1828 (unpublished) essay “On the Passions”: “An Action in the mind is a Passion in the Body: and Actions of the Body are reflected as Passions in the mind” (Coleridge 1995: 1420).

We can see a gesture toward what might be termed a somatic psychology, also structured around the notion of “passion,” in Radcliffe’s *Udolpho*. While the early books of the novel register their affiliation with eighteenth-century affects through their emphasis on *sensibility*, the later more Gothic sections shift toward *sensation*. Toward the close of the fourth and final volume, the withered and mysterious Sister Agnes, herself confined within the convent of St. Clare, reaches out an ominous hand to Emily St. Aubert, the text’s heroine, and addresses her with a startling appellation: “Sister!” exclaims the nun, “stretching forth her cold, damp hand to Emily, who shuddered at its touch”:

Sister! beware of the first indulgence of the passions; beware of the first! Their course, if not checked then, is rapid – their force is uncontrollable [*sic*] – they lead us we know not whither. . . . Such may be the force of even a single passion, that it overcomes every other, and sears up every other approach to the heart. (Radcliffe 1998: 646)

“Passion,” for the dying Sister Agnes, is a problem not only for the priest but also for the physician, as she describes the effects of passions in terms of a swift and dangerous infection. Like the agent of contagion, passion conflates subject and object, turning its sufferers into the unwilling carriers – and promoters – of its baneful effect: “Possessing us like a fiend, it leads us on to the acts of a fiend” (1998: 646). The sufferer of passion experiences that passion as though it were a fiend but then is herself transformed into a fiend, one more link in the chain of contagion.

Sister Agnes’s touch continues and intensifies Emily’s journey through what Patrick Brantlinger has called “the realm of the unexpected” and identified as a key element of the mid-nineteenth-century sensation novel (Brantlinger 1982: 27). Indeed, in her irrepressible “shudder,” Emily unconsciously registers not only her surprise but also her physiological implication in the erotics of sexual passion that underlies the older woman’s horrible transgressions; at the same time, the appellation “Sister” with which Agnes names her transforms Emily into a metaphorical nun, the mirror of the corrupt Sister Agnes herself. This contagion of affect both among characters and between text and reader – “Oh! I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life in reading it,” Jane Austen’s Catherine Morland would exclaim about *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (Austen 2002: 61) – is one of the keynotes of the Gothic’s relationship to the sensation novels that would arise six decades after Radcliffe’s tale. While D. A. Miller has called the sensation novel “one of the first instances of modern literature to address itself primarily to the sympathetic nervous system” (Miller 1988: 146), the antecedents of this display of “the somatic experience of sensation itself” (Miller 1988: 147) include the infectious – and fiendlike – passions of Radcliffe’s conventual terrors. As George Haggerty has observed, “Gothic form . . . is affective form. It almost goes without saying that these works are primarily structured so as to elicit particular responses in the reader” (Haggerty 1989: 8).

Radcliffe herself directly addressed physiological response in her narrative essay “On the Supernatural in Poetry,” which was published posthumously in 1826; in it,

her speakers distinguish between “terror” and “horror”: “Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them” (Radcliffe 2000: 168). The response that Radcliffe describes hovers at the boundary of the mental and the embodied, the psychological and the physiological, that characterizes what would become known as generic “sensation.” Radcliffe’s notion of horror in particular – in its specifically physiological suppression of cognition itself – presages Miller’s description of the sensational effects – and the sensationalized affect – of *The Woman in White*: “Far from encouraging reflective calm, the novel aims to deliver ‘positive personal shocks of surprise and excitement’ that so sensationalize the reader’s body that he is scarcely able to reflect at all” (Miller 1988: 158, quoting Margaret Oliphant).<sup>2</sup>

Increasingly, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, Gothic novels turned to the mind as a physicalized space of threat. As early as *Udolpho*, Radcliffe selected an epigraph (from Samuel Rogers’s 1792 *The Pleasures of Memory*) that troped mental processes as occurring in a sort of architecture: “Lull’d in the countless chambers of the brain, / Our thoughts are link’d by many a hidden chain” (qtd. in Radcliffe 1998: 580). As later Gothic novels took up that work, the imprisonment of the dungeon or the convent began to look more and more like the imprisonment in the mind, itself conceptualized as a physical space. Maturin’s *Melmoth*, for instance, makes the shift explicit. Stanton, one of the text’s many nested narrators, finds himself confined in an insane asylum that echoes many of the characteristics of the conventual tombs in which characters of earlier Gothic novels (*The Monk’s Agnes*, for example) were immured; as Melmoth taunts the prisoner, “You must be content with the spider and the rat, to crawl and scratch round your flock-bed! . . . Aye, and when the feast fails them, they make a meal of their entertainer! – You shudder – Are you, then, the first prisoner who has been devoured alive by the vermin that infested his cell?” (Maturin 1998: 55). Quickly, though, Melmoth’s description moves from the horrors of filth to those of insanity, as the Gothic threat moves from the body (and the physical space itself) to the mind:

A time will come, and soon, when, from mere habit, you will echo the scream of every delirious wretch that harbours near you; then you will pause, clasp your hands on your throbbing head, and listen with horrible anxiety whether the scream proceeded from *you* or *them*. . . . The mind has a power of accommodating itself to its situation, that you will experience in its most frightful and deplorable efficacy. Then comes the dreadful doubt of one’s own sanity, the terrible announcer that *that* doubt will soon become fear, and *that* fear certainty. Perhaps (still more dreadful) the *fear* will at last become a *hope*. (Maturin 1998: 56)

In the asylum, Stanton is

shut out from society, watched by a brutal keeper, writhing with all the impotent agony of an incarcerated mind without communication and without sympathy, unable to exchange ideas but with those whose ideas are only the hideous spectres of departed

intellect, or even to hear the welcome sound of the human voice, except to mistake it for the howl of a fiend, and stop the ear desecrated by its intrusion. (Maturin 1998: 56)

In *Melmoth*, the mind itself – materialized, spatialized – is “incarcerated,” the head that contains it subject to “intrusion.” This conflation of interiority and corporeality, figured as pure sensation, is made even more explicit in the embodied response of another of Maturin’s confined victims, Alonzo Monçada:

All this detail, that takes many words to tell, rushed on my soul in a moment; – on my soul? – no, on my body. I was all physical feeling, – all intense corporeal agony, and God only knows, and man only can feel, how that agony can absorb and annihilate all other feeling within us. (Maturin 1998: 192–3)

Further, as in the sensation novel, the physiological experience of the reader of the Gothic is both modeled by and produced as an analog to that of the threatened characters of the narrative itself. The spatialized titles of the novels align the confinement of the characters within the walls of the convent or castle with the experience of the reader. And if Radcliffe’s Emily St. Aubert is, at points, immobilized with suspense – and if the wandering passions of Sister Agnes find a resting place inside a coffin contained within a convent – so too is Austen’s Henry Tilney, trapped in *Udolpho* as surely as Emily is trapped in Udolpho: “The Mysteries of Udolpho, when I had once begun it, I could not lay down again; – I remember finishing it in two days – my hair standing on end the whole time” (Austen 2002: 120). In the Gothic of Radcliffe and Lewis, Kilgour has argued, “convents don’t wall *passion* out, but rather wall it in” (Kilgour 1995: 126). But not, as the example of *Udolpho*’s Sister Agnes suggests, well enough. Somatized, the thrilling but abjected passions escape not only the convent but also the text and, indeed, the genre of the traditional Gothic novel itself.

In connecting mental processes directly to somatic experience – whether it is the physical contagion of Sister Agnes’s “passion” or the embodied response of Henry Tilney to his reading – the Gothic novel takes up the contemporary question of what constitutes the “mind” and what relation it bears to the (material) brain. And it also begins to move the Gothic out of the realm of religion and toward the more secular threats of psychological terror. Fourteen years before Maturin’s novel, Charlotte Dacre’s 1806 rewriting of Lewis’s *The Monk*, entitled *Zofloya; or the Moor*, registers the Gothic’s move from threats against the body to those against the mind. In fact, it represents two generations of seducers: the vicious Count Ardolph, who leads his friend’s wife, Laurina Loredani, into adultery; and the similarly titled Conte Berenza, whom Laurina’s daughter Victoria, the anti-heroine of the novel, ultimately marries and betrays. Ardolph, with “inclinations naturally vicious, and the contamination of bad example,” is a sort of force of erotic chaos endowed with an almost animalistic physicality:



[H]e plunged into such a stream of depravity as rendered him in a few years callous to every sentiment of honour and delicacy; but the species of crime, the dreadful and diabolical triumph which gratified his worthless heart, was to destroy, not the fair fame of an innocent, unsullied female – not to deceive and abandon a trusting, yielding maid – no, he loved to take higher and more destructive aim – *his* was the savage delight to intercept the happiness of wedded love – to wean from an adoring husband the regards of a pure and faithful wife – to blast with his baleful breath the happiness of a young and rising family – to seduce the best, the noblest affections of the heart, and to glory and to exult in the wide-spreading havoc he had caused. (Dacre 1997: 43)

In contrast, Berenza is coldly calculating, a sort of proleptic sociologist: “he came from an investigating spirit, to analyse [Venice’s] inhabitants, and to discover, if possible, from the result of his own observation, whether the mischief they had caused, and the conduct they pursued, arose from a selfish depravity of heart, or was induced by the force of inevitable circumstances: he came to investigate character, and to increase his knowledge of the human heart” (Dacre 1997: 58).

While Ardolph could easily appear as a villain in Lewis’s novel, Berenza – the seducer of Dacre’s second generation of misled women – is something new: he is urbane, sophisticated, intellectual, and, above all, professional. His appeal, and his danger, is psychological as well as physiological. In that, he enacts the late eighteenth-century shift, described by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, toward the production of individualism through examination, analysis, and discipline:

*The examination, surrounded by all its documentary techniques, makes each individual a “case”:* a case which at one and the same time constitutes an object for a branch of knowledge and a hold for a branch of power. The case is no longer, as in casuistry or jurisprudence, a set of circumstances defining an act and capable of modifying the application of a rule; it is the individual as he may be described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his very individuality; and it is also the individual who has to be trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc. (Foucault 1979: 191)

It is not insignificant that Dacre stresses Berenza’s aim “to increase his knowledge.” Nor is it insignificant that Dacre’s move toward the interiorization of the Gothic that comes to fruition in a sensation novel like *Lady Audley’s Secret* is accompanied by the tightening noose of professionalism that also finds a climax in Braddon’s novel, with its physician and lawyer (the “confessors of this prosaic nineteenth century” [Braddon 1998: 374]) colluding in the confinement of *its* anti-heroine in a continental mental asylum. Even the broadly described “historian” of Dacre’s first paragraph is an insistently male-gendered *professional*, rather similar to Berenza himself: “The historian who would wish his lessons to sink deep into the heart, thereby essaying to render mankind virtuous and more happy . . . must ascertain causes, and follow progressively their effects; he must draw deductions from incidents as they arise, and ever revert to the actuating principle” (Dacre 1997: 39). It is possible that Dacre’s novel disrupts this ideological move to a rationalized and professionalized psychology through the almost

nihilistic incoherence of its closing meditation on causes and effects (and the failure of its putatively authoritative voice to grapple with what the rest of the novel has been about), but it is clear where the new battle lines have been drawn.

The horrors of Dacre's Gothic move inexorably into the domestic space, as both Ardolph and Berenza represent threats to the ideally orderly structure of the family. But they also, just as inexorably, move into the mind, led by what Richardson has identified as Romanticism's "embodied epistemology" (Richardson 2001: 111). In a gesture back to the physical confinement of women that Radcliffe had so powerfully detailed, Dacre's Victoria is, toward the beginning of *Zofloya*, confined in an estate surrounded by almost impenetrable walls; increasingly, however, as the novel progresses, she is less a physical prisoner than she is an early case study. And yet she is no less trapped in the discourse of a professionalized proto-psychology than she was in the country estate. In that, she presages not only Maturin's Stanton but also Collins's Anne Catherick and Braddon's Lady Audley. She also represents a step in the path toward a psychologization and secularization of Gothic sensationalism. For Maturin (a Church of Ireland minister), a primary task is to distinguish his work from what he calls "Radcliffe-Romance," with its "persecutions of convents, and the terrors of the Inquisition." In place of those, he offers (or claims to offer) "that irritating series of petty torments which constitutes the misery of life in general" (Maturin 1998: 5). And it is in part this move to the quotidian that marks the shift from the Gothic to the sensation novel. As Maureen Moran has noted, the perspective of Radcliffe's Schedoni

is portrayed as outmoded and deviant when compared to the contemporary reader's Enlightenment values. Unsurprisingly, he is vanquished by the ethical, social and political values of the modern benevolent state. However, rather than standing in opposition to the prevailing culture, the monsters of Victorian sensationalism are embedded within the middle-class domestic world. They are not curious remnants, but a present problem. (Moran 2007: 12)

Or as Rance has put it, while "Sensation novels dissociate themselves from Gothic sensationalism, not least by frequently alluding to it . . . [t]he new sensationalism is preoccupied by earthly rather than supernatural terror" (Rance 1991: 3–4).

For all of its outré characters and shocking events – indeed, for all of the sensationalism of its sensation – the mid-century English sensation novel's threats are largely domestic. And domestic in two senses: they engage both with the hidden secrets of the family (divorce, bigamy, obstacles to marriage, what we have come to call domestic violence) and with the specifics of *British* life. Braddon's Lady Audley differs from *Udolpho's* Madame Montoni in a number of ways (including social class), but one key distinction is that Lady Audley is married to an English baronet rather than an Italian signor – or to Dacre's diabolically seductive count. And Collins's Count Fosco is all the more insidious for his infiltration of the family of another (putative) English baronet, Sir Percival Glyde. As Brantlinger observes, "the sensation novel

involves both the secularization and the domestication of the apparently higher (or at any rate, more romantic) mysteries of the Gothic romance” (Brantlinger 1982: 4). In Moran’s words, “Dark, claustrophobic enclosures – the monastic dungeon and the prison – are transformed into the familiar, protective institutions of British culture” (Moran 2007: 13). This is both an association and a distinction that was clear to Victorian readers themselves: Henry James, in a review of sensation novels, almost irresistibly evokes Radcliffe precisely to observe the move that Collins and Braddon had made into the English landscape:

To Mr. Collins belongs the credit of having introduced into fiction those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors. This innovation gave a new impetus to the literature of horrors. It was fatal to the authority of Mrs. Radcliffe and her everlasting castle in the Apennines. What are the Apennines to us, or we to the Apennines? Instead of the terrors of “Udolpho,” we were treated to the terrors of the cheerful country-house and the busy London lodgings. And there is no doubt that these were infinitely the more terrible. (James 1865: 593)

For James, that move lies at the very heart of the phenomenology of sensation: “Of course, the nearer the criminal and the detective are brought home to the reader, the more lively his ‘sensation’” (1865: 593).

But by the second decade of the nineteenth century the Gothic has already begun to take that path, moving its terrors from monastery to (materialized) mind, from castle to “house,” from prisoner to case study, and from the Continent to the newly United Kingdom. Indeed, the later Gothic novel has even begun to theorize what “sensation” itself might mean. Seeing the Wanderer in a theater, Stanton (before his entrapment in the insane asylum) experiences the encounter in terms that underline the physiological dimension of his mental state: “The heart of Stanton palpitated with violence, – a mist overspread his eyes, – a nameless and deadly sickness, accompanied with a creeping sensation in every pore, from which cold drops were gushing, announced the” (Maturin, 1998: 43). And there the sentence ends, leaving only a series of asterisks before it picks up the narrative at a later moment. Words themselves, in this text, seem to fail to communicate actual meaning. All that remains is the body and the embodied mind (Stanton’s own materiality entrapping him as surely as the asylum will later do), and – of course – the reader’s body, somatically aligned with Stanton’s, her own heart beating, her own brow sweating. This is sensation in all of its contagion and all of its physicality, just as Miller would describe it for the sensation novels forty years later: “The fiction elaborates a fantasmatics of sensation in which our reading bodies take their place from the start, and of which our physiological responses thus become the hysterical acting out” (Miller 1988: 148). But it is also an encounter with its own contemporary theories of mind and body. For Keats, “sensation” becomes a key term precisely because of its Romantic-era usage as a bridge between psychology and physiology: in Keats’s medical notes, Richardson observes, “Sensation is not a uniform, disembodied psychological faculty but a biological

process" (Richardson 2001: 120). It is for Maturin as well, and it would be for such sensation novelists as Braddon and Collins later in the century. But in taking up an embodied psychology, an affect of readership, indeed the complicated notion of "sensation" itself, those writers not only presage some present-day cognitive theory but also look back to a Gothic Romanticism that prepared the way.

## NOTES

- 1 Sensational in its subject matter, the Gothic novel was also sensational in its popularity. The £500 that Radcliffe received for her 1794 novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, for example, was at the time the largest ever paid for an English novel (Radcliffe 1998: xxvii).
- 2 Oliphant's own description, in her review of *The Woman in White*, both explicitly invokes "terror" and, in praising Collins's novel, evokes what, since Scott's *Lives of the Novelists*, had been recognized as the distinctively "explained supernatural" of Radcliffe's Gothic in contrast to the explicitly supernatural Gothic of writers such as Matthew Lewis and Charlotte Dacre: "A writer who boldly takes in hand the common mechanism of life, and by means of persons who might all be living in society for anything we can tell to the contrary, thrills us into wonder, terror, and breathless interest, with positive personal shocks of surprise and excitement, has accomplished a far greater success than he who effects the same result through supernatural agencies" (Oliphant 1862: 566).

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# Realism and Sensation Fiction

*Daniel Brown*

## A Brief History of Realism

Realism is generally considered a quintessentially nineteenth-century phenomenon, although its literary precedents can be traced back at least as far as the eighteenth century and it still exists in various forms today. Many important eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century authors in England and France, such as Daniel Defoe, Jane Austen, and Honoré de Balzac, paved the way for literary realism. However, it was not until the 1850s that realism fully emerged as a specific, literary and artistic, concept. Realism then remained the dominant mode of representation until it was challenged in the final decades of the nineteenth century and eventually supplanted by modernism at the turn of the century.

Critics generally agree that realism evolved out of the seventeenth-century Enlightenment philosophies of figures such as René Descartes (1596–1650) or John Locke (1632–1704). The Enlightenment understanding that individual identity was formed by taking in sensory information, rather than existing prior to experience, led to an increased concern with particular details in literature. Literature thus came to focus increasingly on the details of the everyday lives of ordinary people (as opposed to epic heroes or historical figures) situated in highly specific times and places (rather than in universal or mythical circumstances). Literature also started to move away from the idea that human nature is constant and unchanging, towards a belief that consciousness varies with each individual. Finally, literature took on an increasingly scientific, empiricist view of existence, concerned mainly with the appearances and actions of material objects and less with metaphysical systems that might underlie those objects (as in a Platonic or Christian view of the world). These literary changes,

instigated by Enlightenment thought, eventually culminated in the mid-nineteenth century with the advent of realism.

Mid-eighteenth-century fiction was dominated by the romance, a genre focusing on the ideal, the marvelous, and the strange. One type of romance was the Gothic, typified by Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) or Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), in which inexplicable and emotionally charged events drive the plot. By contrast, realism shows individuals responding to events in rational ways and developing autonomy in the process. Daniel Defoe (ca. 1659/61–1731), author of such works as *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722), is the first major author critics tend to cite when tracing the roots of British literary realism. According to Ian Watt's influential history, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), "[Defoe's] fiction is the first which presents us with a picture both of the individual life in its larger perspective as . . . historical . . . and in its closer view which shows . . . ephemeral thoughts and actions" (Watt 1957: 24). Defoe's fiction also shows an exceptional interest in material objects, as "in *Moll Flanders* there is much linen and gold to be counted, while Robinson Crusoe's island is full of memorable pieces of clothing and hardware" (Watt 1957: 26). Because of Defoe's early focus on the quotidian thoughts and actions of his characters, specific historical settings, and preoccupation with material objects, he is generally considered a sort of "forefather" to literary realism.

In the early nineteenth century, the novels of Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) and Jane Austen (1775–1817) are thought to further the trend towards literary realism by undermining the competing genres of the Gothic novel and romance. Scott's historical novel *Waverley* (1814) imagines life during the 1745 Jacobite rebellion, but with an emphasis both on the specific historical setting and on the psychology of its characters. According to George Levine's *The Realistic Imagination*, such "psychological elaboration means the end of romance, since the focus of romance remains primarily on action and plot. Scott is in the process of creating a fiction in which there is a radical disparity between the external and internal, or psychological, action" (Levine 1983: 100). Mystery exists in Scott, but only in the form of past superstitions which can be understood rationally in the present (Levine 1983: 110). Scott also admired Austen and believed that, after her, any "novelist who relied on exotic situations and extravagant emotionalism . . . would be found lacking" (Armstrong 2005: 6). Like Scott's, Austen's novels worked to supplant the competing literary form of the Gothic. Her *Northanger Abbey* (1817) openly satirizes Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, where "the heroine takes in Radcliffe's depictions . . . and uses them to read 'human nature . . . in the midland counties of England'" (Armstrong 2005: 19). However, Austen simultaneously set a precedent which caused literary realism to incorporate elements of the Gothic (as in the "haunted" Thornfield Manor of *Jane Eyre* [1847]), only to explain them away through "adult" rationalization (Armstrong 2005: 22). Scott and Austen both shift the focus on literature away from the shocking and inexplicable events of the Gothic and towards the sober explorations of individual psychology which distinguish realism.

To fully appreciate the culmination of literary realism, however, one must look across the Channel, to developments taking place in nineteenth-century France. Critics tend to see France as “the country in which the realist novel was most consciously pursued, debated, acclaimed and denounced throughout the century” (Morris 2003: 47). Just as in Britain, French writers in the realist tradition were influenced by Enlightenment thinking and embraced the role of scientific observer with ever-increasing sincerity. Following from the period of Scott and Austen, Stendhal (1783–1842) and Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) did much to shape the rising tradition of realism. Both continued to draw attention to the effects of historical change on the character of individuals, and to document the details of changing historical settings (Morris 2003: 61). Balzac was also especially fascinated with the emergence of modern, commodity capitalism: “for Balzac every thing declares its money value” (Morris 2003: 61). While Stendhal and Balzac were both very influential in developing what would later be known as realism, the term itself was not yet in wide use to describe artistic or literary works.

Realism, as a term to describe art or literature, came to the forefront in France in the 1850s to label the controversial works of a painter, Gustave Courbet (1819–77). Courbet acted against earlier conventions in painting, which required that subject matter be portrayed according to strict conventions in order to express universal ideas of beauty and harmony. In his 1855 “Statement on Realism,” Courbet defended his paintings against charges of vulgarity, stating that his intention had merely been, “To record the manners, ideas and aspect of the age as [he himself] saw them” (Courbet 1998b: 372). In an 1861 “Letter to Young Artists,” he went on to state his belief that, “art can be nothing other than the representation of objects visible and tangible to each artist” (Courbet 1998a: 403). Just as in literature, realism in painting was marked by a new focus on “ordinary people,” “the connection between history and experienced fact,” and “scrupulous examination of . . . evidence, free from any conventional accepted moral or metaphysical evaluation” (Nochlin 1971: 23). Although the term was first applied to painting, it was not long before it was also applied to works of literature.

Gustave Flaubert’s (1821–80) *Madame Bovary* (1857), which, like Courbet’s paintings, sparked considerable controversy, is often considered the seminal work of literary realism. Flaubert worked to harmonize a poetic sensibility with “the meticulous, impersonal objectivity of the scientist” (Morris 2003: 64). Flaubert believed this “impersonal objectivity” should extend so far as to make the author (in his own words) “like God in creation, invisible and omnipotent” (qtd. in Morris 2003: 65). For instance, in *Madame Bovary*, the narrator does not “appear to assume any evaluative attitude towards Emma . . . [which] contrasts with Balzac’s frequent authorial commentary to explain and moralise upon his characters for the reader” (Morris 2003: 66). At the same time, the novel “extended the democratic reach of the genre by the serious and sympathetic treatment of average people, like Emma Bovary[,] who had previously not figured in literary traditions” (Morris 2003: 69). Flaubert’s impartial, yet highly detailed and historically situated, treatment of an unremarkable and



relatively uninteresting person is considered by many critics to mark the epitome of literary realism.

In Britain, the first usage of the term in relation to literature or art is cited as appearing in *Modern Painters III* (1856) by the prominent art critic and essayist, John Ruskin (1819–1900) (“Realism” 2009). Ruskin’s extensive writings on art and society did much to change the way Victorians viewed their environment. Like Courbet, Ruskin objected to the eighteenth-century practice in painting of stylizing subject matter in order to express what he considered a false sense of poetry. Responding to an eighteenth-century tract written by the highly influential painter and head of the Royal Academy of Art, Joshua Reynolds (1723–92), Ruskin says:

Reynolds had no right to speak lightly or contemptuously of imitative art . . . It is *not* true that Poetry does not concern herself with minute details. It is *not* true that high art seeks only the Invariable. It is *not* true that imitative art is an easy thing. It is *not* true that the faithful rendering of nature is an employment in which “the slowest intellect is likely to succeed the best.” (Ruskin 1987: 295)

In defending imitative art, Ruskin also defended the mainstays of realism: faithful rendering of specific and historically contingent (as opposed to “Invariable”) details. Like Flaubert, Ruskin saw realism as a potentially “high” or “Poetic” form of representation and certainly something that should be taken more seriously than it had been. While Ruskin was defending a form of painting, his views were applied equally to literature.

Although earlier British writers are often included in the tradition of literary realism, the first arguably “pure” realist writer was George Eliot, whose major works were published in the late 1850s and throughout the 1860s and 1870s. Eliot admired and was heavily influenced by Ruskin’s writings. In her first novel, *Adam Bede* (1859), Eliot states her intention to:

Give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed; the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath. (Eliot 2005: 238)

Like Balzac and Flaubert, Eliot is committed to the realist role of a meticulous scientific recorder of people and events as they appear in the world around her. Although she is aware of the limitations posed by her own consciousness, she is nonetheless committed to providing as accurate a representation of her perceptions as possible. Furthermore, like Flaubert, she avoids intervening to pass judgment on her characters: “These fellow-mortals, every one, must be accepted as they are; you can neither straighten their noses, nor brighten their wit, nor rectify their dispositions” (Eliot 2005: 239). From the beginning of her career, Eliot shows a strong realist commitment to detail and a refusal to embellish the truth in order to render subject matter

more beautiful or harmonious. Her many novels of the 1860s and 1870s, which include *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Middlemarch* (1871–2), continue in the same realist fashion.

Realist claims to scientific and impartial depictions of human nature, however, became the basis for rising objections that culminated with the advent of modernism at the turn of the century. The realism of the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s seemed increasingly dissatisfying to writers and artists of the closing decades. Authors from the movements of aestheticism or naturalism, such as Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) or Thomas Hardy (1840–1928), respectively, or younger generations of realists, such as Henry James (1843–1916), found mid-century realism naive and stylistically clumsy. A formal break from realism happened at the turn of the century, however, when modernist writers, such as T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) and James Joyce (1882–1941), finally asserted that reality was too “elusive, complex, multiple and unstable” for realism to convey (Morris 2003: 17). Modernism moved away from realism’s meticulous descriptions of surface details and towards explorations of shifting and temporal states of human perception (as in stream-of-consciousness prose). The modernists even challenged the Enlightenment thinking on which realism was based, claiming it led to a restrictive, possessive, and exploitative outlook on the world (Morris 2003: 18–21). After modernism, realism was never taken quite as seriously as in the nineteenth century; modernist objections continued to influence critical understandings of realism throughout the twentieth century.

### Realism and Sensation Fiction: A Critical History

Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel* is one of the earliest and most influential critical works to attempt a clear definition of realism and its origins. According to one scholar, it “remains the important starting-point of discussions of the realist tradition” (O’Gorman 2002: 96). Watt’s theory that realism is rooted philosophically in the Enlightenment is still generally accepted by most scholars, as is his tracing the tradition of British literary realism back to the eighteenth century. He has drawn criticism, however, for overlooking the ideologies sustained by realism and for ignoring other, earlier influences, such as Renaissance developments in perspective (O’Gorman 2002: 97). His emphasis on the Enlightenment has also caused him to overlook important genres of fiction, such as sensation, which were influenced by the Romantic tradition and which developed alongside realism (Armstrong 2005: 22–3).

Since Watt, George Levine has been one of the most strident advocates of realism, and his *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (1983) arguably did more than any other recent critical work to allow for serious, scholarly discussions of realism. Levine accepts Watt’s premise that realism stems from an Enlightenment epistemology, but denies that there was anything naive about it. “Nineteenth century writers,” he says, “were already self-conscious about the nature of their medium” (Levine 1983: 4). They wrote “with the awareness of the possibilities

of indeterminate meaning and of solipsism, but they wrote *against* the very indeterminacy they tended to reveal" (1983: 4). In other words, realist writers realized, contrary to many critical assumptions, that there is not a direct connection between words and things and that representations are always mediated through an author's consciousness. However, in spite of this awareness (and perhaps because of it), they tried to make sense and meaning out of the world around them. Although realists attempted to create the appearance of scientific objectivity, then, they were well aware of the limitations of their medium. Realism was not, in fact, naive, but rather a highly self-conscious form of representation.

Levine's definition of realism is deliberately broad, although he does lay down a few rules which realism follows. First of all, the world the realists created "belongs . . . to a middling condition and defines itself against the excesses, both stylistic and narrative, of various kinds of romantic, exotic, or sensational literatures" (Levine 1983: 5). Secondly, realism "always implies an attempt to use language to get beyond language, to discover some non-verbal truth out there" (1983: 6). However, he argues that the term itself is full of "sticky self-contradictions" and that his main interest "is not with a definition of 'realism,' but with a study of its elusiveness" (1983: 7). Instead of proposing realism as one, monolithic category, Levine says its "actual embodiments were polymorphous" and that it "was always in process as long as it was important to nineteenth-century fiction" (1983: 11–12). Realism is more like a current of thought, then, running throughout the various works of nineteenth-century fiction. Its concerns were with the representation of a world that would appear immediately recognizable to its readers – thus void of "excesses" – but this might manifest itself in extremely diverse ways.

Ultimately, Levine believes that realists were responding to changes in their environment in ways that would help readers make sense of the worlds they inhabited. With dramatic changes brought about by the Enlightenment, industrialization, and speculative capitalism, the Victorians found themselves in a world that seemed profoundly different from that of their ancestors. The realists assumed the role of mediator in this new environment, to free readers from older and misleading forms of literature and also to suggest ways to "reorganize experience and reinvest it with value" (Levine 1983: 12). That is, they pointed to what was seemingly new and confusing and provided readers with familiar and meaningful ways to understand these things. Realist "writers all share a faith that the realist's exploration will reveal a comprehensible world . . . Its relation to reality may be mediated by consciousness, but it is authenticated by the appeal of consciousness to the shared consciousness of the community of readers" (Levine 1983: 18). Realism, then, was a restorative method of representation, an attempt to bring about a sense of order to a generation of readers for whom the world seemed hopelessly fragmented and complex.

While Levine finds an important, restorative value in realism, many of his contemporaries believed it to be dangerously deceptive, fostering conservative ideologies that had contributed to the atrocities of the twentieth century. According to literary scholar Francis O'Gorman, Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice* (1980) and D. A. Miller's *The*

*Novel and the Police* (1988) both contributed heavily to this belief. Belsley argued that the “the classic realist novel . . . flattered [the reader] as a coherent, non-contradictory self, and as the privileged individual who perceived the meaning of the text from a superior vantage point of knowledge” (O’Gorman 2002: 121). This false sense of superiority carried out “the work of ideology because it papered over the contradiction of the reader’s real self, the inevitable product of the dehumanizing conditions of modern capitalism” (O’Gorman 2002: 121). In a similar light, Miller “proposed that nineteenth-century fiction was a discourse that did disciplinary work, policed the subjectivities of its readers, and acted as an agent in the management of the social body” (O’Gorman 2002: 133). The perspective of scholars like Belsley and Miller is that, if realism fostered a sense of community, it did so at the expense of individual liberties. Furthermore, the community fostered by realism was one in line with the destructive forces of capitalism and the repression of the police state. Any forms of subjectivity not in line with those endorsed by realist representation were considered abhorrent. Readers would thus identify only with those forms of subjectivity privileged by realism and reject those it eschewed, leading them to hate and suppress contradictory traits they found in themselves and others.

Several feminist scholars in the 1980s continued work on the ideologies of realism, usually seeking alternatives to the oppressive, patriarchal forces to which it seemed aligned. One approach these scholars took was to look at “how classic realist texts appropriated forms of non-realist writing,” such as the Gothic novel (O’Gorman 2002: 134). Another approach “was to emphasize absences in the realist text . . . in order to expose the significant silences” (O’Gorman 2002: 134). Others felt that neglecting realist texts was in itself too much akin to patriarchal oppression, however, and seemed “to be shutting the door on powerful literary documents” (O’Gorman 2002: 135). Penny Boumelha’s essay, “Realism and the End of Feminism,” from *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism* (1988), argued that, “Rather than listening to the silences of the text, or tracing non-realist discourses, critics . . . should be returning to the realist material itself. But . . . in a way that was alert to ideological resistance” (O’Gorman 2002: 135). Instead of assuming that the realist novel only reinforced the status quo, Boumelha suggested that the realist novel, especially when written by a female author, might also offer resistances to dominant ideologies. Through their various approaches to realist ideology, feminist scholarship of the 1980s drastically reshaped the ways critics viewed realism.

One important scholar from this tradition, Nancy Armstrong, whose influential *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987) was recently updated in her *How Novels Think: British Fiction and the Limits of Individualism* (2005), contributed heavily to an understanding of realist ideologies and of the non-realist genres realism appropriated. *How Novels Think* challenges Enlightenment assumptions that an individual possesses “a self-enclosed and internally coherent identity” (Armstrong 2005: 1). In the Enlightenment model, an individual takes in sensations from the environment and learns from them; this model, of course, led to the development of realism. As an alternative to the Enlightenment model, Armstrong presents

the Gothic model, in which objects come already “loaded with meaning and charged with feeling before we set eyes on them” (Armstrong 2005: 15). Such objects cause a breakdown in the rationalist belief in an impermeable, self-contained identity. However, as stated in the previous section, from the novels of Jane Austen onwards, realism supplanted but also incorporated the Gothic. Thus, realism continually finds itself faced with the uncanny, only to overcome it through a process of self-enclosed rationalization. Yet certain novels, such as H. Rider Haggard’s *She* (1887) and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), reveal powerful re-emergences of the Gothic against the realist tradition (Armstrong 2005: 23). These re-emergences of the Gothic also suggest alternatives to Enlightenment thinking which might undermine the dominant and oppressive ideologies it sustains.

Sensation fiction is one genre in which the Gothic is thought to mix with realism in ways that also threatened to undermine realist rationalism, as Patrick Brantlinger discusses in *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (1998). Brantlinger considers sensation fiction a hybrid form in which, “the Gothic is brought up to date and so mixed with the conventions of realism as to make its events seem possible if not exactly probable” (1998: 147). The seemingly unlikely events in sensation fiction thus draw from the Gothic to reintroduce a sense of strangeness and mystery into the everyday worlds of realism; murder, adultery, and blackmail lurk just below placid, domestic exteriors. Unlike those of the Gothic, however, the mysteries of sensation fiction are strictly of a secular variety, usually centered around crimes which eventually offer clear solutions (1998: 155–7). Therefore, sensation tends to portray a Manichean world, “radically split between the warring forces of good and evil,” whereas the worlds created by realism tend to be “more complicated, morally ambiguous, and symbolically undecidable” (1998: 160). Although the sensation novel then challenged realism for missing much of what happened below the everyday veneer of society, it did so in ways that seemed regressive (1998: 162–3). Ultimately Brantlinger finds that, although sensation fiction did suggest some limitations to the muted version of society represented by realism, it was not as powerful a force of ideological resistance as it might have been.

Other critics have looked at the Victorians’ privileging of realism over sensation fiction as itself a matter of ideological bias. In a recent essay, Richard Nemesvari argues that the very term “sensation fiction” was coined only in order to create a distinction which would strengthen the dominance of realism (Nemesvari 2006: 17–19). Similarly, in *Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women’s Popular Novels* (1997), Pamela Gilbert argues that the mixing of genres found in sensation fiction moved critics to relegate it to a diseased and undesirable category (1997: 70). Sensation fiction was considered a “feminine” genre and one that dangerously “undermined conventional notions of causality and motivation” (1997: 75). The critical neglect of sensation fiction has thus been seen as a result of the oppressive, patriarchal ideologies of realism; as a corollary, sensation novels have recently drawn much critical attention looking at ways in which they subverted these same dominant ideologies.

## Realism and Sensation Fiction: A Comparative Analysis

This section will look at some works of a representative realist, George Eliot, and of a representative sensationalist, Mary Elizabeth Braddon. In particular, it will analyze common plot points in Eliot's quintessentially realist novel, *Middlemarch*, and Braddon's lesser known sensation novel, *Eleanor's Victory* (1863), to compare and contrast treatments. First, though, it will look briefly at both of these authors' views on the differences between realism and sensation.

George Eliot expresses her views on the inherent superiority of realism to sensation in her short story, "The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton," published in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858). Barton, recently established as reverend in a provincial community, struggles to find favor with the locals or to earn enough money to support his family. Well-intentioned but not especially competent, he fails to advance in his profession, falls victim to slander, and must eventually leave the community. Before he leaves, though, his wife, overburdened with housework, sickens and dies. At one point in this melancholy tale, the narrator stops to address the reader:

The Rev. Amos Barton . . . was . . . in no respect an ideal or exceptional character; and perhaps I am doing a bold thing to bespeak your sympathy on behalf of a man who was so very far from remarkable, – a man whose virtues were not heroic, and who had no undetected crime within his breast; who had not the slightest mystery hanging about him, but was palpably and unmistakably commonplace . . . "An utterly uninteresting character!" I think I hear a lady reader exclaim . . . who prefers the ideal in fiction; to whom tragedy means ermine tippets, adultery, and murder. (Eliot 1973: 80)

Real life, the narrator insists, is made up of unremarkable people and ordinary events, not of virtuous heroes or sinister secrets. The imagined reader – here gendered female – prefers highly stylized stories of "adultery and murder" and will be unable to appreciate an ordinary tragedy such as Barton's. Such a statement draws the stereotypical connection of sensation fiction with a feminine lack of seriousness (as Eliot also does in her essay, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists"). It also suggests that sensation fiction depicts a childish view of the world, preferring to indulge in escapist fantasies over confronting the complexities of everyday life. Eliot clearly degrades the value of sensation fiction here, in comparing it with realism.

Perhaps no novelist was more sensitive to the negative comparisons made between realism and sensation fiction than Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Although ostensibly a writer of sensation fiction, Braddon was well read in French realism and an admirer of Balzac and Flaubert (Braddon 1998: ix). In 1864 she published *The Doctor's Wife*, a rewriting of *Madame Bovary*, in the hopes of earning critical respect. Like Emma Bovary, the protagonist, Isabel Gilbert, spends much of her time reading the sort of romantic literature considered antithetical to realism. And, just like Bovary, her reading choices lead to considerable personal difficulties. *The Doctor's Wife* is not completely inimical to non-realist writing, however, as it favorably portrays a character

who writes sensation fiction for a living, Sigismund Smith. Of Smith's profession, the narrator says:

That bitter term of reproach, "sensation," had not been invented for the terror of romancers in the fifty-second year of this present century; but the thing existed nevertheless in divers forms . . . Sigismund Smith was the author of about half a dozen highly-spiced fictions, which enjoyed an immense popularity amongst the classes who like their literature as they like their tobacco – very strong. (Braddon 1998: 11)

The defensive tone used over "that bitter term of reproach" doubtless reflects Braddon's own sentiments. Through Smith, Braddon lightheartedly affirms the role of sensation fiction, which at least satisfies the tastes of its working-class readers. Nonetheless, *The Doctor's Wife* keeps largely to realist conventions in exploring character development and downplaying dramatic plot elements. When the novel does threaten to drift into the realms of the sensational – as when Isabel's father is revealed to have a hidden, criminal past – the narrator defensively declares, "This is *not* a sensation novel. I write here what I know to be the truth" (Braddon 1998: 358). Indeed, one of the frequent defenses of sensation fiction was that its more shocking revelations were no different from those found in daily newspapers and police reports. Sensation fiction suggested that the sordid and the criminal might just be as real as the domestic and the provincial.

In fact, in spite of their alleged differences, realism and sensation address many of the same concerns, and considerable overlap exists between the two. The sordid and the criminal certainly appear in Eliot's novels, although usually in the form of moral dilemmas and with more ambiguous outcomes than in sensation fiction. In sensation fiction, the protagonists tend to stand in clear opposition to the criminal, although even then there is usually some ambiguity. The differences between the two tend to be mainly in regard to style rather than content, with realism concerned more with exploration of internal states and sensation more concerned with detailing external events.

For example, Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Braddon's *Eleanor's Victory* both contain episodes in which two copies of a will exist which will produce decidedly different outcomes for certain characters. In *Middlemarch*, many hopes rest on the substantial inheritance of the curmudgeonly Peter Featherstone. One hopeful legatee is Fred Vincy, son of the local mayor, whose love interest, Mary Garth, works as a nurse for Featherstone. One evening, Featherstone calls Mary to his bedside and, revealing that he has made two wills, demands that she help in burning one of them. When Mary refuses to get involved, Featherstone asks her to call for Fred. At the mention of his name, "various ideas rushed through her mind as to what the burning of a second will might imply. She had to make a difficult decision in a hurry" (Eliot 1994: 317). The reader is not told what these "various ideas" are, but can certainly imagine; Mary stands to be married to Fred and, by complying with Featherstone's morally and legally dubious demands, she might generously provide for their future. Ultimately,

though, she refuses to assist Featherstone and only later does she question “those acts of hers which had come imperatively and excluded all question in the critical moment” (Eliot 1994: 318). As it turns out, by not complying with Featherstone, she costs Fred (and, consequently, herself) a substantial inheritance. What matters, though, is not the outcome of the inheritance, but the way Mary responds to a demand that might influence her own stake in it. Ultimately, it is not clear if she made the right decision regarding a situation which is in itself morally ambiguous.

In *Eleanor's Victory*, a situation regarding two wills and a substantial inheritance is presented in more morally certain terms. In this novel a young woman, Eleanor Vane, has sworn revenge on the man who provoked her spendthrift father to commit suicide by cheating at a game of cards. In time, she discovers that this man, Launcelot Darrell, is none other than the son of the woman in whose home she has been employed (under an assumed name) as a governess. Darrell hopes to inherit a substantial amount of money from a man who also happens to have been a close personal friend of Eleanor's father. With the help of a conniving Frenchman, Darrell creates a convincing forgery of the will and attempts to surreptitiously exchange it with the real one. Eleanor observes him attempting to make the exchange, however, and hopes to use this discovery to get her revenge. Yet she is thwarted by the Frenchman, who runs off with the real will, leaving Darrell with the inheritance. When she happens to encounter the Frenchman later in Paris, he, having fallen out with Darrell, attempts to sell her the real will. She complies but then manages to obtain it without paying his fee when she finds him incapacitated with delirium tremens. As it turns out, after having made a favorable impression on her father's friend, Eleanor, not Darrell, receives the main portion of the inheritance. The forger is exposed and the heroine is rewarded.

Whereas the dramatic tension in *Middlemarch* turns around a difficult moral decision, in *Eleanor's Victory* it turns around the events of the plot. The plot elements in *Eleanor's Victory* are in themselves those melodramatic ones stereotypically associated with sensation fiction: suicide, revenge, disguise, forgery, stealth, deceit, and extortion. Yet *Eleanor's Victory* contains deeper subtleties than its largely convoluted and improbable plot might suggest. For one, the revenge plot is complicated by the facts that Eleanor's father, being reckless with money, is at least partially responsible for his own downfall, and that Darrell is motivated more by shiftlessness than malevolence. In the end, Eleanor grants Darrell forgiveness at the behest of his mother and he suffers no legal punishment; as the narrator says, “If this was a victory, it was only half a victory” (Braddon 1996: 380). While the story does rely heavily on “sensational” plot devices, then, these are tempered by a realist awareness of individual psychology and moral uncertainty.

Nor is *Middlemarch* completely devoid of “sensational” plot devices, which are most strikingly present in the relationship between the sanctimonious banker Nicholas Bulstrode and his old associate John Raffles. Although Bulstrode holds a respectable position in Middlemarch, he and Raffles were once partners in a sordid criminal affair. By chance, Raffles winds up in town, causing Bulstrode to fear for his reputation. Raffles extracts money from Bulstrode to keep quiet but still hangs about the vicinity.



The turning point comes when Raffles, who suffers from an alcohol addiction, winds up severely ill and in Bulstrode's care. Although Raffles's life is in danger, Bulstrode is told he might recover so long as he doesn't drink alcohol. However, Bulstrode does not tell his housekeeper this and, when she asks for brandy to relieve Raffles's suffering, he allows it. In the morning, he finds Raffles dying:

As he sat there and beheld the enemy of his peace going irrevocably into silence, he felt more at rest than he had done for many months. His conscience was soothed by the enfolding wing of secrecy, which seemed just then like an angel sent down for his relief . . .

And who would say that the death of Raffles had been hastened? Who knew what would have saved him? (Eliot 1994: 711)

There is an ambiguity posed through the final questions of this passage. While, on one level, Bulstrode is rationalizing his actions to himself, the narrator is also stating the uncertainty as to whether or not Bulstrode's actions had any real effect. For Raffles might well have died regardless. And although the reader might not approve of Bulstrode's actions, he or she might nonetheless identify with Bulstrode's fear of exposure and sense of relief that the threat has been removed. The scenario between Bulstrode and Raffles is one which might very well take place in a more typically "sensational" novel; yet, as with Mary Garth's dilemma over Featherstone's will, what matters is not so much the situation or its outcome as how the characters respond to it.

The differences between realism and sensation can ultimately prove difficult to discern. Both utilize the same empiricist technique of describing the particular details of existence. Sensation fiction has been considered to be more concerned with the sordid and the criminal. However, the two differ not so much in terms of content but in the approach taken towards that content. In realism, characters tend to react to events through internal thought processes and decision-making. In sensation, characters tend more to have events act on them and are pushed along by the needs of the plot. However, realism still shows characters provoked by dramatic events and sensation still shows an interest in the internal thought processes and motivations of its characters. Just how different the two genres really are still remains a matter of debate.

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8

## Poetry and Sensation

*Kirstie Blair*

In November 1868 the first part of a new serial publication appeared in print. Based closely on a murder trial, it used the narrative technique of successive first-person accounts made famous by Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*. In its story of a young pregnant wife, unhappily married by her parents to a man of rank and title, who elopes with a handsome priest and is consequently pursued and murdered by her husband, it followed themes familiar to novel-readers of the 1860s: female transgression, marital woes, deceptive identities (the heroine is revealed after her marriage as the unwitting daughter of a prostitute, not of her wealthy adoptive parents), criminality, and murder. The text is, of course, Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, the poem that finally brought Browning widespread critical acclaim.

The content of *The Ring and the Book* is highly topical and closely related to the plots of sensation fiction, though its seventeenth-century Italian setting removes the element of "proximity" famously identified by H. L. Mansel as essential for sensational effect (Maunder 2004: 38). Browning's decision to publish in serial form also created an audience of readers eager for the next installment, despite the fact that the events and outcome of *The Ring and the Book* – and Browning's own take on the story – are evident from Book I. Readers of the first part could exercise their detective abilities in unpicking the "truth" behind the gossip, rumor, and biased accounts of bystanders in "Half-Rome" and "The Other Half-Rome" and could tentatively assign blame, but as the major characters take their turn to speak, Browning weights the dice so heavily towards Pompilia's innocence and Guido's monstrosity that the teasing ambiguity of heroine and villain evident in much sensation fiction largely disappears.<sup>1</sup> The poem deliberately turns its back on the sensational events themselves, and looks towards the larger questions of truth and knowledge raised by differing interpretations of historical events, including the interpretation put forward by Browning himself.

As this instance suggests, sensational content and characterization in mid-Victorian narrative does not necessarily differ widely between the genres of poetry and the novel, though the treatment of such content does. The bestselling poem of this period, Tennyson's *Enoch Arden* (1864), centers on a bigamy plot, though, like Browning's epic, it eschews deliberately sensational effects, since Enoch chooses not to disturb his wife's happy marriage to his rival by revealing himself. Contemporary readers and reviewers also saw Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, particularly the first four books published in 1859, each of which focused in effect on relationship problems, as akin to sensation fiction in its plots and depiction of female sexuality. Indeed, while the function of poetry within sensation fiction lies largely outside the scope of this essay, more than one novelist deliberately deployed allusions to the *Idylls*. Rhoda Broughton's *Red as a Rose is She* (1870) casts her heroine Esther, torn between duty to her fiancé and love for another, as both Guinevere and Vivien, the two temptresses of Tennyson's poem (Broughton 1887: 210, 255). M. E. Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* (1862–3) refers repeatedly to the *Idylls*, among other poems by Tennyson, linking the central love-triangle of Talbot Bulstrode, John Mellish, and Aurora to Lancelot, Arthur, and Guinevere, with Lucy Floyd as Tennyson's Elaine (Braddon 1996: 77, 96). Braddon's allusions are slightly deceptive, hinting at adultery when the eventual revelation is of bigamy. They also work to cast Mellish, rather than Bulstrode, as the perfect gentleman and ideal husband, innocent, as in Tennyson's "Guinevere," of any possible wrongdoing by his wife. Allusions to Tennyson lend cultural capital to these two novels, and display Broughton and Braddon's familiarity with "high" literary culture, yet they also insinuate that the laureate's grand heroic epic had much in common with these sensational fictions, given that he was equally concerned with gender roles and transgressive relationships.

If novelists perceived straightforward connections between their work and Victorian poetry in terms of content, for poets and critics it was not simply content that defined a work as sensational, but affect. Poetry had a certain advantage over the novel here in terms of form. Shocking subject-matter could be toned down by a judicious use of poetic form, while on the other hand formal effects (rhythmic disturbances, for example) were considered capable of embodying and creating physiological responses, acting directly on the reader. It is a commonplace in both nineteenth-century and recent criticism that sensation fiction seeks to work upon the reader's nerves, to create somatic, physiological effects through its shocks and thrills. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics of the novel, however, have rarely observed that this emphasis on sensational affect used terminology common in discussions of poetry and poetics from at least the early nineteenth century. Wordsworth's "[S]ensations sweet / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart" ("Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey," 27–8 [Wordsworth 1936]) for example, offered poetry as the channel for emotions, experienced as motions in the physical body, that were in harmony with religious and domestic affections, inspiring and hopeful. As Noel Jackson has recently argued in *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry*, one of few studies to associate poetic notions of sensation with the mid-Victorian novel, Wordsworth's "rhetoric of embodied

aesthetic experience . . . describes and models a form of inwardness firmly grounded in a regime of the bodily senses” which is not experienced as isolation but as a state of constant interaction with nature and society (2008: 7). Sensations, Jackson suggests, should be read in terms of their social and political content as well as in relation to contemporary scientific developments. He traces a line of influence that runs to Walter Pater and the criticism of the mid-Victorian period, concluding by linking Collins and sensation fiction back to Wordsworthian sensational aesthetics.

While Jackson does not focus in detail on Victorian poetry, other works in this field have investigated the relation between poetry and physiology in ways that resonate with similar studies on fiction. Kirstie Blair’s *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* describes an ongoing concern with pathological affect, centered on concepts of the heart, which is strongest in Victorian poetry but also relevant to fiction. Dino Felluga, in *The Perversity of Poetry*, argues that the “rhetoric of pathology,” which he traces in early nineteenth-century poetics and criticism, meant that poetry was increasingly represented as a potentially “viral” and poisonous form, using terms familiar from contemporary criticism of sensation fiction (2005: 124, 150). Jason Rudy’s *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics* demonstrates convincingly that nineteenth-century poets and critics – particularly around mid-century – were heavily invested in a “physiological poetics” which modeled the experience of poetry in terms of electric shocks, perceiving affect as an immediate, physical sensation. Rudy’s work on the “spasmodic” poets (discussed below), here and as co-editor with Charles LaPorte of a special edition of *Victorian Poetry*, has also helped to reintroduce the work of forgotten writers who were heavily invested in sensational poetics. The inclusion of the “spasmodists” and others in the expanding canon of Victorian poetry has arguably redrawn the map in the same way that the critical recovery of sensation novels has altered our perceptions of the canonical Victorian novel. Poets such as the Della Cruscan of the late eighteenth century, women writers like Letitia Landon and Felicia Hemans, and largely working-class radical poets like the spasmodic school all practiced various forms of a poetry of “sensibility” (as defined by Jerome McGann’s groundbreaking study) or sensationalism, and their incorporation in critical studies means that more “canonical” works, such as Tennyson’s *Maud* (1855) or Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856) now seem considerably more invested in a sensational, bodily poetics than they might previously have done.

Direct connections between Victorian poetry and sensation fiction have received little critical attention. Agnieszka Setecka’s chapter on *Idylls of the King* (Setecka 2008) argues that Tennyson’s revisions of Malory, which highlight the love-stories, bring the *Idylls* into line with the concerns of popular fiction of the period. Nancy Welter makes a case for the inclusion of poetry and the short story in the sensation genre with “Women Alone: Le Fanu’s ‘Carmilla’ and Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market,’” in Harrison and Fantina’s recent collection (Welter 2006). The most important recent work on the blurred boundaries between sensational poetry and fiction, however, is Heather Seagroatt’s “Swinburne Separates the Men from the Girls: *Poems and Ballads* and Sensation Fiction” (2002). This excellent article examines in detail how both

Swinburne's poems and the debate over his 1866 collection were informed by the "language and issues of the sensationalism debate," and argues that Swinburne knowingly exploited the controversy over *Poems and Ballads* to distance himself, somewhat disingenuously, from a popular, female mass readership: the readership associated with sensation fiction (Seagroatt 2002: 43). Catherine Maxwell's 2006 introductory study of Swinburne in the *Writers and Their Work* series also does an good job of assessing contemporary anxiety about Swinburne's readership, and briefly discusses his relation to sensation fiction, noting that he read these novels voraciously (Maxwell 2006: 14–15). As these critics suggest, *Poems and Ballads* was undoubtedly the poetic text most associated with sensation fiction. But Swinburne's poems were also perceived as a follow-up to spasmodism, as well as part of the "fleshy school" in Victorian poetry, associated by the critic Robert Buchanan with the Pre-Raphaelites, particularly Dante Gabriel Rossetti. As we shall see, moreover, although Tennyson's status as Victoria's laureate partially exempted him from critical attacks, his poetry was also strongly associated with a mid-Victorian culture of sensation.

From the early Victorian period onwards, poets had been anxious that adopting Keats's maxim "O for a Life of Sensations rather than Thoughts!" might lead not to sensuousness but to sensuality. Arthur Hallam famously claimed in his 1831 review of Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* that Keats and Shelley were "poets of sensation rather than of reflection":

So vivid was the delight attending the simple exertions of eye and ear, that it became mingled more and more with their trains of active thought, and tended to absorb their whole being into the energy of sense. (Hallam 1972: 87)

But several paragraphs later Hallam experiences a qualm at the implications of being absorbed by sensation: "We do not deny that it is, on other accounts, dangerous for frail humanity to linger with fond attachment in the vicinity of sense" (1972: 88). The "temptation" that Hallam refers to on this page is clearly sexual in nature, but he hastily reassures the reader that such temptations are of slight moment: "Not the gross and evident passions of our nature, but the elevated and less separable desires, are the dangerous enemies which misguide the poetic spirit" (1972: 88). Hallam hopes to dismiss sexuality as "separable" from poetic desires, but is simultaneously aware that his emphasis on sensation brings his poetic doctrine dubiously close to "the vicinity of sense."

Hallam demonstrates that even a critic sympathetic to sensation had problems with its sexualized connotations. In the hands of less sympathetic writers, Tennyson's alleged sensationalism was a blot on his reputation. Citing early poems such as "Fatima," where a female speaker describes the shuddering and throbbing sensations of love, "A thousand little shafts of flame / Were shivered in my narrow frame," critics such as Alfred Austin identified unmanly emotional excess as integral to Tennysonian poetics.<sup>2</sup> In *The Poetry of the Period* (1870), Austin argues that it was with the advent of Tennyson that the "manliness" of Walter Scott gave way to effeminacy: "What is

*Maud* about? Woman. What is *The Princess* about? Woman, woman. What are the four *Idylls of the King* about? Woman, woman, woman, woman" (1870: 96). Austin, in effect, blames Tennyson for leading to Swinburne, and makes an analogy between Tennyson's influence on Swinburne and the influence of earlier female novelists on writers like Braddon and Broughton:

Our "proper" feminine novelists have but led the way for our "improper" feminine novelists; and the, on the whole, "proper" feminine muse of Mr. Tennyson was only the precursor of the "improper" feminine muse of Mr. Swinburne. (1870: 105)

Pointing out that Tennyson's poems frequently feature not just women, but women engaged in illicit passion, Austin observes:

The man who wrote "Vivien," and the parting scene between Guinevere and Lancelot, has not invariably been a moral milkman. Mr. Tennyson has such immense skill as a craftsman, that he successfully passes off upon proper people what they would call shocking improprieties if proceeding from a less dexterous hand. (1870: 90–1)

Robert Buchanan, writing in *The Fleshly School of Poetry* (1872) (a lengthened version of his anonymous *Contemporary Review* article, from 1871), agreed with this assertion, and went so far as to argue that all the "fleshly" writers he identifies were "sub-Tennysonian" in nature:

In the sweep of one single poem, the weird and doubtful Vivien, Mr. Tennyson has concentrated all the epicene force which, wearisomely expanded, constitutes the characteristic of the writers at present under consideration; and if in "Vivien" he has indicated for them the bounds of sensualism in art, he has in "Maud" . . . afforded distinct precedent for the hysteric tone and overloaded style which is now so familiar to readers of Mr. Swinburne. (1872: 32)

Both Austin and Buchanan take "Vivien" from *Idylls of the King* as a key example. Published originally in 1859, it was disturbing to critics primarily for its depiction of self-conscious female sexuality. Vivien infiltrates the court of Camelot and seeks to undermine the unity and purity of king and knights – or, in her terms, expose their hypocrisy – by "defaming and defacing" (l. 802) their names with rumors of sexual misconduct and by seducing and imprisoning Merlin. Rather like Braddon's Lady Audley, Vivien is expert at manipulating the tropes of conventional femininity, using her beauty to her advantage:

And Merlin looked and half-believed her true,  
So tender was her voice, so fair her face,  
So sweetly gleamed her eyes behind her tears

(ll. 398–400)

In her prolonged attempt to persuade Merlin to trust her with the charm that will imprison him, Vivien presents herself as “like the tenderest-hearted maid / That ever bided tryst at village stile” (ll. 375–6), continually emphasizing her weakness, humility, and childishness. Her seductive intentions are blatant – Tennyson particularly notes how her dress “more exprest / Than hid her” (ll. 220–1) – yet she recoils at a deliberate sign of affection like “A virtuous gentlewoman deeply wronged” (l. 909). Placed off-balance by these sudden shifts of mood and half-persuaded by Vivien’s skillful dissimulation, Merlin gives way and is promptly imprisoned. Tennyson leaves the reader in no doubt as to the correct reading of Vivien’s character by referring to her in the closing lines not by name but as “the harlot” (l. 969).

Vivien is dishonest, scheming, manipulative, selfish, cynical, sexually knowing, amoral, wildly attractive to an elderly man who should know better, and ultimately triumphant. It is not hard to appreciate why Austin and Buchanan saw impropriety in this description, nor why Austin made the connection between “Vivien” and the heroines of sensation fiction. Yet Tennyson’s responsibility for creating the poetry of sensation goes further than his depiction of an Arthurian kingdom haunted by deviant female sexuality. Buchanan’s mention of *Maud* (1855) is crucial in this respect in that it implies a deeper stylistic, linguistic, and formal link between Tennyson and the poetry of the 1860s. *Maud*, highly controversial on its publication, does feature a sensational plotline of suicide, murder, and doomed love and, unlike the mythical setting of *Idylls of the King*, this is placed against the contemporary backdrop of the Crimean War. Most importantly, however, it presents its narrative not in the controlled and proper blank verse of the *Idylls* but in a cascading series of formally varied and fractured lyrics. *Maud* is a poem of nervousness, palpitation, and encroaching insanity. The speaker, haunted from the outset by his father’s suicide, is a victim of “morbid hate and horror” (I. vi. 264) for himself and for his society, and while his love for Maud might initially seem to offer salvation, its intensity comes to suggest a kind of monomania. Like the heroes and heroines of some of Tennyson’s earlier poems, he experiences love as a form of possession, taking over the soul and, crucially, the body:

We stood tranced in long embraces  
 Mixt with kisses sweeter sweeter  
 Than anything on earth.

(II. iv. 148–50)

This kind of physical transport links the sensuous (and sensual) experience of love to the deranged visions and trances of the speaker’s later insanity, after he has killed Maud’s brother in a duel and then learnt of her death. In the immediate aftermath of the duel he already has difficulty distinguishing the real from the imaginary:

Is it gone? my pulses beat –  
 What was it? A lying trick of the brain?



Yet I thought I saw her stand,  
 A shadow there at my feet,  
 High over the shadowy land.  
 It is gone: and the heavens fall in a gentle rain,  
 When they should burst and drown with deluging storms  
 The feeble vassals of wine and anger and lust,  
 The little hearts that know not how to forgive:

(II. i. 36–44)

The abrupt questioning and punctuation in the first lines embodies the disturbance to the speaker's pulses caused by this ghostly vision, and this section only regains some kind of poetic equilibrium in "High over the shadowy land," settling into metrical pattern and rhyme with the assonance, unstressed beats, and rhyming conclusion of this line. But the gentling of the verse is again interrupted by an outburst of rage and contempt, now directed outwards at society. Form here mirrors the shifting and unstable moods of the speaker, and unsettles the reader, who does not have the security of a clear rhythmic pattern and consistent tone. By representing insanity in this manner, Tennyson threatens to reproduce its effects in the reader's mind and body.

*Maud* can be read as a "spasmodic" poem, influenced by a group of young poets who were themselves heavily influenced by early Tennyson. Shifting forms and varied dramatic utterances were important to these poets, although they rarely possessed Tennyson's mastery in marrying form to content. Spasmodic poems tend to feature a deranged poet-hero who seeks to experience the ultimate in sensations, believing that this intensity of feeling is essential for poetry. In language of convulsion, shock, spasm, and palpitation, these speakers both exalt and are subject to acute sensation, and in the somewhat dim and tenuous plotlines of the poems they are often carried away by their passions to deviant ends. Examples of these poetic tendencies can be found as early as the start of the 1840s: one of the outstanding, and little-known, instances of sensational poetry, for example, is Ebenezer Jones's *Studies of Sensation and Event* (1843), in which male bodies repeatedly "throb exultingly" ("Egremont," p. 13), shiver "with mysterious passion" and shake with ecstasy ("Emily," pp. 34, 36). Jones's speakers experience love as a painful yet highly pleasurable physical collapse:

The gentlest movement of her form,  
 My nature to its centre shook  
 With rapturous agony; a storm  
 Of joy rushed o'er my startled being –

("Emily," p. 36)

While words such as "nature" and "being" avoid specific reference to the body, the language makes it clear that the speaker's response to his lover's "form" is physiological. Jones was a working-class poet with links to Chartism, and the deliberate sensationalism of his poetry, its celebration of bodily impulses in defiance of societal norms, can be associated with his radical politics. *Studies of Sensation and Event* was ahead of

its time in 1843 – this little-known collection was rediscovered and reprinted in the 1860s by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, among others, and critics including Theodore Watts, later Swinburne’s close friend and companion, celebrated Jones’s work.

When, however, Victorian critics of the sensation novel refer to “spasmodic plot” or “spasmodic ramifications in the erotic direction” (see “The Sensational Williams” [1864], in Maunder 2004: 98; Buchanan 1872: 32), the poems they have in mind (besides *Maud*) are probably the two leading instances of the “spasmodic school”: Alexander Smith’s *A Life-Drama* (in *Poems*, 1853) and Sydney Dobell’s *Balder* (1854). Both these poets also came from lower-class, dissenting backgrounds, and achieved brief fame after being ushered into print by the Scottish critic George Gilfillan. Smith and Dobell’s heroes repeatedly suffer from uncontrollable physical impulses, leading to amoral or immoral actions. Dobell’s *Balder*, describing a nightmare of his wife’s death, typically references “The throbbing functions of my desperate life” and recounts how “My inner frame convulsed / Quaked and rocked Reason from her seat” (1854: 173). Hoping to experience Death, the ultimate sensation, in order to further his grandiose poetic ambitions, *Balder* is rewarded with the death of his child and consequent insanity of his wife, Amy. The poem ends with a sensational climax as *Balder* is on the verge of murdering Amy to spare her further pain: the last line is “To kill thee. – Now” (1854: 283).

The hero of Smith’s “A Life-Drama,” Walter, also dedicates his life to the pursuit of poetry – “fierce within my soul / A passion burns from basement to the cope. / Poesy! Poesy!” (1853: 2) – but, as in *Balder*, a passionate attachment to poetics tends to blur into a general commitment to sensation for sensation’s sake. It is only at the close of the poem that a chastened and guilt-stricken Walter admits that he has abandoned the attempt “to drain / The rapture of a lifetime at a gulp” (1853: 197). Along the way he has seduced and temporarily abandoned the virtuous daughter of a wealthy landowner, Violet, an act which nicely occurs in one exclamation:

WALTER. Our cheeks are close, our breaths mix like our souls.  
We have been starved hereto; Love’s banquet spread,  
Now let us feast our fills.

VIOLET. Walter!

(1853: 167)

Whether Violet’s cry indicates assent or resistance is never made clear, but the fact that this seduction ultimately leads both to Walter’s success as a poet and his eventual marriage to Violet means that the poem comes dangerously close to approving such moments of sensual abandonment.

Ten years after “A Life-Drama” appeared, Smith anonymously reviewed the new trend in sensation fiction for the *North British Review*, disapprovingly stating that “Everything in these books is feverish and excited; the reader is continually as if treading on bomb-shells” and suggesting that they were tainted by an “unhealthy atmosphere of crime and madness” ([Smith] 1863: 184, 189). Smith’s use of language

that recalls the content and criticism of his own earlier poetry seems unselfconscious, but it does imply a connection between the genres of spasmodic poetry and sensation fiction. As J. H. Buckley noted in his classic account of Victorian literature, containing a thoughtful assessment of spasmodic poetry:

{S}ome of the energies that had animated the Spasmodic School may have been diverted, through the sixties, into the sensational fiction which carried a similar rant and melodrama and a like interest in exploring insane passion. (1957: 60)

Indeed, Victorian reviewers were not slow to spot similarities between these genres. Mansel's well-known review stated near its opening that:

The sensation novel is the counterpart of the spasmodic poem. They represent "the selfsame interest with a different leaning." The one leans outward, the other leans inward; the one aims at convulsing the soul of the reader, the other professes to owe its birth to convulsive throes in the soul of the writer. But with this agreement there is also a difference. There is not a poet or poetaster of the spasmodic school but is fully persuaded of his own inspiration and the immortality of his work. He writes to satisfy the unconquerable yearnings of his soul . . . Not so the sensation novelist. (1863: 33)

Mansel takes spasmodic poems at their own value here, though there is a slight hint of skepticism in "professes." In order to damn sensation fiction, he overplays the differences between poetry, which he represents as solipsistic and unconcerned with worldly affairs, and the novel, written with a cynical eye to the public. It is true that the heroes of spasmodic poems tend to focus obsessively on the convulsions in their own soul, and, represented as independently wealthy characters, affect total unconcern about the readership or publication of their work. But Smith and Dobell, like many other lower-class poets, saw poetry as a stepping-stone to higher class status and better employment and were anxious for the commercial success of their poems. Few Victorian poets other than Tennyson could hope to command a substantial income from poetry alone, but writing poems that would shock, and that would cater to a public taste for drama, excitement, and passion, could be a step towards financial security.

As a counter to the excesses of spasmodism, the critic and poet W. E. Aytoun published a damning parody, in the form of a review and fake spasmodic poem, *Firmilian*, in 1854, which hit its target with such accuracy that it destroyed the credibility of spasmodic poetry and significantly damaged the careers of those seen as practitioners (see Weinstein 1968). Yet the poetic influence of spasmodism lingered on in Swinburne, who took the models offered by Tennyson and these 1850s writers and pushed them to extremes (see Blair 2006b and Morton 2008). Poems such as "Anactoria" and "Dolores" from *Poems and Ballads*, to single out those most often censured by Victorian critics, offered a vision of sexual perversity and sadomasochistic pleasure, in which bodies were subject to sensational excesses. "Anactoria," in a particularly shocking move, attributes the desire to "vex thee with amorous agonies, and

shake / Life at thy lips, and leave it there to ache” to a female speaker, Sappho (Swinburne 1904: 58). “Dolores” declares:

As of old when the world's heart was lighter,  
 Through thy garments the grace of thee glows,  
 The white wealth of thy body made whiter  
 By the blushes of amorous blows,  
 And seamed with sharp lips and fierce fingers,  
 And branded by kisses that bruise;  
 When all shall be gone that now lingers,  
 Ah, what shall we lose?

Thou wert fair in the fearless old fashion,  
 And thy lips are as melodies yet,  
 And move to the music of passion  
 With lithe and lascivious regret,  
 What ailed us, O gods, to desert you  
 For creeds that refuse and restrain?  
 Come down and redeem us from virtue,  
 Our Lady of Pain.

(Swinburne 1904: 162–3)

The rejection of Christianity and conventional morality here, in conjunction with the apparent worship of sensuality and celebration of lust and violence, would have been particularly shocking for Victorian readers. It is made more so by Swinburne's mastery of linguistic and formal effects, as alliteration, assonance and consonance, and the swaying anapestic rhythm create a hypnotic effect, engaging the reader with the poem's sensuousness if not sensuality. Swinburne's poems to some extent take the opposite tack to *Maud*: where the latter's formal variations often signal the speaker's instability and insanity, making his opinions suspect, the soothing, mellifluous surface of “Dolores” might suck the reader into a kind of assent to its unorthodox sentiments. As Maxwell argues, “Form gives language its teeth so that the finished poem is itself a pleasurable violence exerted on the sensibility of the reader” (2006: 21).

Swinburne's association with sensation fiction was not necessarily read in terms of its influence on his work, but often vice versa. In a satire on the “Literary Culture of the Period,” in *The Period* (1870), Swinburne was envisaged at a committee meeting with writers including Ouida and Rhoda Broughton, at which Broughton defended her work by stating:

For her part, she was so well convinced of the truth and propriety of her opinions, that she begged leave to conclude her remarks with a quotation from a poet whose works only required to be better known to be thoroughly appreciated. (The lady, after quoting the concluding stanza of *Les Noyades* . . . resumed her seat amidst loud applause). (qtd. in Maunder 2004: 235)

“Les Noyades,” from *Poems and Ballads*, relates a lover’s delight in a fate that will see him tied naked to his beloved and drowned; in the final verse, he declares:

But you would have felt my soul in a kiss,  
 And known that once if I loved you well;  
 And I would have given my soul for this  
 To burn for ever in burning hell.

(Swinburne 1904: 51)

Broughton is specifically identified here as the author of *Red as a Rose is She*, which casually references the scandal caused by Swinburne’s works and seems particularly attuned to them in its account of the “sharp, stinging pleasure” shooting “along [the] young, full veins” of Esther and St. John in the pivotal scene of their physical embrace. “The vocabularies of pain and delight are so meagre, that each has to borrow from the other to express its highest height and deepest depth” (1904: 179), Broughton comments on this moment, in language that seems to refer back to the poet.

Thomas Baynes, in the *Edinburgh Review* of July 1871, saw Swinburne’s poetry as sensationalism “in a more intense and concentrated form” than that of novelists, commenting, “Much of his poetry is sensationalism run mad, foaming at the mouth, snapping rabidly at everything in its way” (qtd. in Hyder 1970: 134). The “intense and concentrated” form of Swinburne’s rabid sensationalism, the review implies, stems from the forms of his poetry. This notion of Swinburne as *more* corrupting than sensation novelists, partly due to his choice of genre, was still evident in the 1890s in Marie Corelli’s pious rejection of his works in *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895). Sibyl, driven to suicide by her adulterous passion for Prince Lucio (Satan), blames *Poems and Ballads* for her loss of morality:

[T]here are many women to whom his works have been deadlier than the deadliest poison, and far more soul-corrupting than any book of Zola’s or than the most pernicious of modern French writers. At first I read the poems quickly, with a certain pleasure in the musical swing and jangle of the rhythm . . . but presently, as though a lurid blaze of lightning had stripped a fair tree of its adorning leaves, my senses suddenly perceived the cruelty and sensuality concealed under the ornate language and persuasive rhymes . . . Was there no God but Lust? Were men and women lower and more depraved in their passions and appetites than the very beasts? I mused and dreamed – I pored over the “Laus Veneris,” “Faustine” and “Anactoria,” till I felt myself being dragged down to the level of the mind that conceived such outrages to decency. (Corelli 1998: 325)

Again, the pleasures of rhythm and intricate poetic language serve here as methods to ease the reader into assent to Swinburne’s outrages, to drag her down unwittingly.

Comments such as these indicate that poetry could be perceived not as a pale shadow of the sins of the novel, but as a “more concentrated,” and hence more

dangerous, dose of sensationalism. For Buchanan in the *Fleshly School*, criticizing Rossetti for “virtually . . . wheeling his nuptial couch out into the public streets” (1872: ix) in sonnets such as “Nuptial Sleep” (which, as the title suggests, depicts a couple immediately after a sexual encounter), the general fleshliness of Victorian culture and society reached its apotheosis in Pre-Raphaelite poetry. This is in part because of the perceived identification between speaker and poet: in a sonnet sequence like Rossetti’s *The House of Life* (1870–81), or George Meredith’s account of adultery and marriage breakdown, *Modern Love* (1862), there is no sense of authorial distance from or pious disapproval of the sentiments expressed, as there often is in even the most scandalous novel. It is also because of a lingering perception that poetry should be a higher and purer art form than the novel, hence when Buchanan approves of poets, such as Walt Whitman, he describes them as “spiritual” (despite the admitted emphasis on physiological sensations in *Leaves of Grass* [1855]) (1872: 96n).

Rossetti and Swinburne, outraged by Buchanan’s accusations, defended their works by claiming their ultimate allegiance to spirit or soul rather than flesh. Yet Buchanan’s attitudes and the poets’ responses to him, despite both ostensibly claiming to defend the high-class status of poetry, indicate that poetry was inevitably enmeshed in popular culture and that the distance between the sensuality “lurking in the covers of three-volume novels” (Buchanan 1872: 2) and “Nuptial Sleep” or “Dolores” was minimal. “Poetry,” Wordsworth wrote in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, “can boast of no celestial Ichor that distinguishes her vital juices from those of prose; the same human blood circulates through the veins of them both” (1936: 736). His physiological image suggests that, far from lofty claims of spirituality, poetry is just as human and vital as prose, and therefore just as prone to disturbances in its smooth circulation due to passion and emotion. In representing these disturbances, indeed, sensation fiction was in part playing catch-up with Victorian poetics, and arguably never exceeded its mastery of sensational affect.

## NOTES

- 1 For an excellent account of how serial publication affected reviewers’ perceptions of the poem and the characters, see Hughes and Lund 1991: 89–108.
- 2 “Fatima,” ll. 17–18. All references to Tennyson’s poems are drawn from the selected edition of his works, edited by Christopher Ricks (Tennyson 1989).

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Part II

Reading Individual Authors  
and Texts, 1860–1880



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# Mary Elizabeth Braddon

*Lyn Pykett*

Mary Elizabeth Braddon has long been acknowledged as the doyenne (or demon) of the sensation novel and a catalyst for debates about sensation fiction. She first enjoyed success and endured notoriety as a sensation novelist with the publication of *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861) and *Aurora Floyd* (1862) at the beginning of the 1860s, followed in rapid succession by *Eleanor's Victory* (1863), *John Marchmont's Legacy* (1863), *Henry Dunbar* (1864), *The Doctor's Wife* (1864), and *Sir Jasper's Tenant* (1865), all before the end of 1865. Braddon was also at the forefront of the twentieth-century rediscovery of the sensation novel. *Lady Audley* and *Aurora Floyd* featured prominently in critical discussions of the sensation phenomenon and also reached a wide range of new readers through various new editions and, in the case of *Lady Audley*, adaptations for television and radio – by Donald Hounam for Carlton TV in 2000, Bryony Lavery for BBC Radio 4 in 2000, and Theresa Heskins for BBC Radio 4 in 2009. Braddon's early success as a sensationalist launched a long, varied, and productive (some would say over-productive) career as a novelist in a wide range of genres and styles (including melodrama, naturalism, romance, domestic realism, social satire, the historical novel), a writer of short stories and plays (the latter mostly unpublished and unproduced), and editor of the magazine *Belgravia* and the Christmas annual *The Mistletoe Bough*. Always alert to the changing tastes of readers and a shifting literary marketplace, Braddon nevertheless remained something of a sensationalist until well into the 1880s. This essay outlines Braddon's formation as a writer, and the changing contexts of a writing career which lasted from just before the American Civil War until after the outbreak of the Great War in Europe (she died in 1915) and explores her role in the sensation debates of the 1860s and in the rediscovery and reconceptualization of the sensation novel that has taken place since the 1970s.

Born in London in October 1835, the third child of Henry Braddon, a disreputable solicitor from a respectable Cornish family and his English-educated, Irish wife, Fanny

White, Braddon had a rather peripatetic childhood with her mother, following her parents' separation when she was 4. She briefly attended three schools, but was mainly educated by her mother, to whom she attributed both her precociousness and her "introduction to the great world of imaginative literature" (Holland 1911: 702). As her mother's "constant companion and confidante" she was told "much that is not generally told to a [young] girl" (Braddon's unpublished memoir, *Before the Knowledge of Evil*, quoted in Carnell 2000a: 7), and her love and knowledge of literature was nurtured by her mother's "cultivated mind . . . and . . . natural taste for what was best in the literature of the time," and especially her love of Shakespeare and Scott (Holland 1911: 702). Her early reading included Scott, Charles Lamb, Dickens, and Maria Edgeworth's *The Parent's Assistant*, which contained "the most enchanting stories . . . so real, like slices of life" (*Before the Knowledge of Evil*, quoted in Carnell 2000a: 88). Braddon's literary tastes were also formed by her mother's cook, Sarah Hobbes, who introduced her to the popular fiction of the *Family Herald* and *Reynold's Magazine* and condensed editions of novels such as Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834). This avid reader began writing fiction at the age of 8, employing as promiscuous a range of genres as her later creation Sigismund Smith in *The Doctor's Wife*. Between the ages of 8 and 11 she began:

a historical novel on the siege of Calais – an Eastern story suggested by passionate love of Miss Pardoe's Turkish tales and Byron's "Bride of Abydos" . . . a story of the Hartz Mountains, with audacious flights in German diablerie and . . . a domestic story . . . [followed by a] sentimental period, in which my unfinished novels assumed a more ambitious form . . . modelled chiefly upon Jane Eyre, with occasional tentative imitations of Thackeray. Stories of gentle hearts that loved in vain, always ending in renunciation. (Braddon 1893: 20 and 23)

She also wrote plays and frequently visited the theater with her mother, and it was the theater and acting, rather than writing, to which she first turned for a career when she needed to augment the family income in the early 1850s. She began acting professionally as early as the autumn of 1852 (see Carnell 2000: ch. 1) and, using the name Mary Seyton, appeared in provincial theaters before making her London debut in 1856. After a further period on the provincial circuit she gave up the stage in 1859, but retained a life-long interest in theater. For most of her stage career she had been writing plays – and failing to get them performed. She had also been writing poetry, and in 1857 had begun to publish poems – including poems on Garibaldi and Italian reunification and the Indian Mutiny – in the *Brighton Herald* and the *Beverley Recorder* (Brighton, and Beverley in Yorkshire, were both places where she had acted). By the end of the 1850s she was an author in search of a genre: her play *The Loves of Arcadia* (1860) was staged in London, she began a historical novel (after reading Thackeray's *Henry Esmond*), and was commissioned by her patron John Gilby to produce a volume of poetry. Perhaps more significant for her subsequent career direction was the commission from a Beverley printer to produce a serial in the style of Charles Dickens

and G. W. M. Reynolds, which appeared in penny weekly parts in 1860 as *Three Times Dead*. The most decisive event in determining her future direction, however, was her meeting, in April 1860, with John Maxwell, proprietor of the magazine *The Welcome Guest*, with whom she was to share both her professional and private life (bearing him six children before his wife's death enabled them to marry in 1874). Braddon began publishing stories in Maxwell's magazine in 1860. Maxwell also arranged a kind of apprenticeship for her at the *St James's Magazine* and reissued *Three Times Dead* in volume form as *The Trail of the Serpent* in 1861, boasting that it sold 1,000 copies in its first week.

Thus began an intense period of literary production which was to come to a temporary halt only with Braddon's complete breakdown following her mother's death in 1868. During 1861 Braddon had at least five serials appearing anonymously in four different magazines: *Ralph the Bailiff* in *St James's Magazine*; *The Lady Lisle* in *The Welcome Guest*; *The Black Band* and *The Octoroon* in the *Halfpenny Journal: A Magazine for All Who Can Read* (Maxwell's new magazine for the lower classes, edited by Braddon's mother); and the first eighteen chapters of *Lady Audley's Secret* in Maxwell's short-lived weekly *Robin Goodfellow*. By popular demand *Lady Audley* began its run again in the launch issue of a new Maxwell monthly *The Sixpenny Magazine* at the same time (January 1862) that the serialization of *Aurora Floyd* began in another Maxwell monthly, *Temple Bar*. When Tinsley Brothers published a three-volume version of *Lady Audley* a few months before the end of its second serial run, it was a publishing sensation.

In many ways the sensation novel was as much a publishing phenomenon as it was a fictional genre. It was associated with a brash, entrepreneurial style of publisher who sought new ways of maximizing publicity, profits, and what we would now call "market penetration." Using puffery and exaggerated reports of sales figures to promote their novels, Maxwell and the Tinsley brothers capitalized on the success of their most popular writers by ensuring that reader demand was fed (and bred) by a regular supply of new work from their favorites. Thus the success of *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* was not an opportunity for Braddon to rest on her laurels, or to "write for Fame & do something more worthy to be laid upon your altar" (as she put it in a letter to her literary hero and mentor Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1863, quoted in Wolff 1979: 135). Rather, it was a catalyst for further production in a similar vein. In Braddon's case this involved supplying two markets: the lower-class audience for whom she continued to produce anonymously authored thrilling "penny bloods," and the wider audience for M. E. Braddon's equally thrilling, but more literary and sophisticated, tales in a different social register. It was not until towards the end of the 1860s that Braddon's double writing life became public, when Maxwell reissued in volume form one of her *Halfpenny Journal* serials (*The Banker's Secret*) as *Rupert Godwin* (1867).

From 1862 until the end of the decade, in addition to her anonymous work, Braddon had at least two serials running each year in a range of periodicals: *Once a Week* (*Eleanor's Victory*), *Temple Bar* (*John Marchmont's Legacy*, *The Doctor's Wife*, and *Sir*

*Jasper's Tenant*), *The London Journal* (Henry Dunbar and *Run to Earth* as well as re-serializations of *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* following their success as three-deckers); *St James's Magazine* (*Only a Clod* and *The Lady's Mile*), and *Belgravia* (*Birds of Prey*, *Dead Sea Fruit*, and *Charlotte's Inheritance*). Most of these novels repeated the formula that had brought her initial success, deploying various of the stock ingredients of the sensation novel: bigamy, murder, disguise or impersonation, madness, blackmail, fraud, theft, kidnapping or incarceration, and inheritance plots. However, Braddon also sought to rise above the sensation formula. *John Marchmont's Legacy*, for example, deploys much of the usual sensation machinery: a gloomy Gothic country house; a complex series of marriages and a hint of bigamy; a conspiracy related (in part) to an inheritance, in which a jealous, obsessive woman (Olivia Arundel) plots with her stepdaughter's uncle to make the girl disappear and lose her sanity. However, it was also a self-conscious attempt to improve her writing by following Bulwer-Lytton's advice to make her plots arise naturally from character. Much of the story derives from the character of the novel's most striking protagonist, Olivia Arundel, a tormented woman, whose distorted nature has been created in large part by the frustrations of her situation as the daughter of the aptly named Swampington Rectory in the gloomy Lincolnshire countryside.

Olivia Arundel had lived from infancy to womanhood . . . performing and repeating the same duties from day to day, with no other progress to mark the lapse of her existence than the slow alternation of the seasons, and the dark hollow circles which had lately deepened beneath her grey eyes . . .

These outward tokens, beyond her own control, alone betrayed the secret of this woman's life. She sickened under the dull burden which she had borne so long, and carried out so patiently. The slow round of dull duty was loathsome to her. The horrible, narrow, unchanging existence, shut in by cruel walls, which bounded her on every side, and kept her prisoner to herself was odious to her. The powerful intellect revolted against the fetters that bound . . . it. The proud heart beat with murderous violence against the bonds that kept it captive (Braddon 1999: 68).

Olivia's story is yet another "miserable . . . record of sin and suffering . . . in the history of woman's life" (Braddon 1999: 87), and perhaps even more than in the case of either *Lady Audley* or *Aurora Floyd*, a profound psycho-social secret underlies the machinations which make her into the woman-with-a-criminal-secret who is the staple of the sensation plot. In *Eleanor's Victory*, on the other hand, Braddon modifies this formula by making her heroine not a demon-with-a-secret but a secret detective who seeks out other people's secrets in order to avenge her father's death by proving the guilt of his destroyer. Like Magdalen Vanstone, the heroine of Wilkie Collins's *No Name* (which began its serial run in *All the Year Round* exactly a year before the first installment of *Eleanor's Victory* appeared in *Once A Week*), Eleanor marries a man she does not love in order to pursue her quarry, the painter Launcelot Darrell. Braddon's plot, like Collins's, propels her heroine into the world of the theater, and into situations in which she must take the initiative and live by her wits,

before the plot reaches a resolution which requires her to discover the value of the love of a good man and accept a “feminine” role. In this case the heroine is reunited with the husband who had left her, having misread her obsession with Darrell as an adulterous love, and accepts a “feminine” role after a period of impersonating a “masculine” one (in this case aping the role of detective): “after all, Eleanor’s Victory was a proper womanly conquest, and not a stern, classical vengeance. The tender woman’s heart triumphed over the girl’s rash vow; and poor George Vane’s enemy was left to the only Judge whose judgments are always righteous” (Braddon 1863: III, 312).

The rhetorical flourish with which the narrator of *Eleanor’s Victory* announces the restoration of the “natural” order of things is just one example of this novel’s highly developed self-reflexivity about its own fictional mode, which Deborah Wynne has argued is part of Braddon’s “campaign to justify her work to critics” (Wynne 2001: 115), by making a melodramatic storyline the vehicle of a debate about the value of melodrama and other popular forms of representation. The characters of this novel are variously presented reading and discussing magazines and books (including, notably, French sensation novels by Paul Féval and Frédéric Soulié), making or discussing paintings, and visiting or being involved in theatrical productions, as Braddon seeks to demonstrate both the emotional value and danger of melodrama and sensation and the sensational elements of high art. Braddon’s next novel, *The Doctor’s Wife*, written in the wake of a number of extremely hostile reviews in the heavyweight quarterlies, is perhaps an even more self-conscious response to her “Frankenstein” of sensation, as W. Fraser Rae put it in his essay on Braddon in the *North British Review* (Rae 1865: 197), both in its witty portrayal of Sigismund Smith, the writer of popular serials, and in Braddon’s attempt to bypass the sensation genre by adapting for an English setting and a middlebrow audience the plot of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, which had caused a great furor when it appeared in France in 1857, but was not yet translated into English in 1864. Unlike Braddon’s earlier successes and Sigismund’s productions for his “penny public,” *The Doctor’s Wife* does not seek to supply “plot and plenty of it; surprises and plenty of ’em; mystery as thick as a November fog” (Braddon 1998: 45). It contains no lost wills, kidnappings, elopements, or bigamy, and its central story of the love of Isabel Gilbert (the wife of the worthy but dull doctor, George Gilbert) for an aristocratic poet (Roland Lansdell) does not end in adultery; indeed, however implausibly, the dreamy, Byron-reading heroine does not appear to see this outcome as a possibility. The use of the heroine’s criminal father (a forger and fraudster) as the nemesis of her beloved is clearly a sensation device, but for the most part this novel is a relatively plotless story of provincial life which explores the gap between romance and poetry and the mundane realities of the life of a half-educated, lower-middle-class girl. Like *Eleanor’s Victory*, *The Doctor’s Wife* also seeks to demonstrate that “dangerous reading” is a particular practice of reading rather than a matter of content or genre. Like Eleanor’s reading of French sensation fiction in *Eleanor’s Victory*, Isabel’s reading of the poems of Byron and Roland Lansdell is an overly self-identified form of passive consumption.

Braddon's adaptation of Flaubert might be dismissed as nothing more than the sensation novelist's habit of recycling other people's plots. However, the self-conscious literariness of *The Doctor's Wife* suggests that this would be to underestimate both Braddon's literary ambition and her attempt to keep up with or anticipate changing literary fashions and tastes. Her borrowing from Flaubert was, in part, motivated by her admiration for his ability "to make manifest a scene and an atmosphere in a few lines – almost a few words" and also by his possession of "a kind of grim humour equal to Balzac" (letter to Bulwer-Lytton, qtd. in Wolff 1979: 162), whose "morbid-anatomy school" was her "especial delight" (letter to Edmund Yates, qtd. in Wolff 1979: 137), and whose style, mastery of detail, and mixing of social criticism and melodrama she greatly admired. Balzac's conception of the group novel influenced her own linked pair of novels, *Birds of Prey* (1866–7) and *Charlotte's Inheritance* (1868–9), complexly interwoven tales of murder, fraud, and marriage plots. Moreover, *Birds of Prey* refers directly to Balzac's fiction – presenting it, through the reactions of different characters, as both cynically truthful and as marred by "the odour of the dissecting-room" (Braddon 1867: II, 49). She also read Zola's novels before they were widely available in English translations, and some of her novels of the early 1880s have a suggestion of Zola's influence: for example, *The Golden Calf* (1883), in which the examination of a marriage affected by the husband's developing alcoholism is clearly indebted to Zola's *L'Assommoir*, although its melodramatic conclusion, in which the wife is miraculously rescued by her disguised admirer from the burning house in which her husband has destroyed himself, owes more to Braddon's sensational mode.

Braddon's career is in many ways both a model of the career pattern of the successful professional woman writer in the mid- to late nineteenth century and a guide to changing literary tastes and publication practices in the period. Building on her initial success as a sensation novelist, she followed the route taken by several of her female contemporaries by becoming the editor of a literary magazine, editing Maxwell's *Belgravia* (aimed at a middle-class readership) for a decade from its launch in 1866. Like Mrs. Henry Wood's *Argosy* (which Wood owned and edited from 1867), *Belgravia* was a vehicle for its editor's own work. Braddon produced much of the content of the early numbers herself, either under her own name, pseudonymously as Babington White, or anonymously, and all but one of her novels in the first half of the 1870s appeared first in its pages. Braddon not only used *Belgravia* to create and feed a taste for her own brand of fiction, but also as a platform for defending popular fiction in general and the sensation novel in particular against its critics (see below).

Braddon was quick to exploit new, mass-market, modes of disseminating fiction. During the early 1870s she became one of the first major authors to sign up with W. F. Tillotson, who pioneered the syndication of fiction in weekly newspapers prior to volume publication. For example, in 1873 *Taken at the Flood* appeared simultaneously in eleven different newspapers in the north, south, and west of England as well as in Dublin and Dundee (see Carnell and Law 2000b: 138). Maxwell played a key role in fostering this link, working closely with Tillotson particularly on the syndication of



Braddon's novels in the USA in the early 1880s. Thus throughout the 1870s and 1880s Braddon remained tied to the exigencies of the weekly serial – “the curse of serial writing and hand to mouth composition,” as she had put it in a letter to Bulwer-Lytton in 1862 (qtd. in Wolff 1979: 11). What she wrote about her method of composition in 1862 was equally true in 1882 (and beyond): “I have never written a line that has not been written against time . . . I have written as conscientiously as I could; but more with a view to the interests of my publishers than with any great regard to my reputation” (qtd. in Wolff 1979: 11). This speed and volume of serial production and the rapid reissue of the serials in volume form adversely affected both Braddon's marketability and her literary reputation, but the weekly newspaper serial format undoubtedly enabled her to play to her strengths and produce well-structured, complexly plotted tales of mystery, suspense, crime, and detection like those of the sensation novels with which she made her name. *Taken at the Flood* (first published in weekly installments between August 1873 and April 1874), with its echoes of *Lady Audley's Secret* and *John Marchmont's Legacy* as well as Collins's *The Woman in White*, is a good example. Its plot turns on the mercenary marriage of the rebellious Pre-Raphaelite beauty Sylvia Carew to an elderly man whom she subsequently incarcerates in a private asylum, having swapped his identity with that of his recently dead brother in order that she can marry (bigamously) her first love. A suspenseful subplot involves the attempt of her husband's steward to use his knowledge of Sylvia's secret to blackmail her into marriage. Sylvia is a more sympathetic version of both the impoverished adventuress Lucy Audley and Olivia Arundel's frustrations with conventional middle-class existence, and the novel challenges gender stereotypes and mid-Victorian mores in its extremely sympathetic treatment of the heroine's feelings of entrapment and claustrophobia and her frustrations with the limitations of her lot.

While she was writing her weekly newspaper serials Braddon also continued to produce novels for initial serialization in the metropolitan magazines – for example *Asphodel*, which appeared in *All the Year Round* (between July 1880 and March 1881), and *Ismael*, a historical epic of the Paris Commune which appeared in the *Whiteball Review* (between January and September 1884). More ambitious and more carefully written and revised than the newspaper novels, these novels were sometimes treated more positively by reviewers. For example, her 1875/6 *Belgravia* serial *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* (published in volume form as *Joshua Haggard*) was reviewed by the *Athenaeum* as a realist novel, influenced by George Eliot, which relied for its effects on “analysis of character rather than . . . complication of incident” (qtd. in Wolff 1979: 275). This tale of a middle-aged Methodist preacher and his family owes something to Eliot's histories of provincial life set in the recent past. However, the complicated plot which develops from the increasingly jealous passion of a middle-aged widower for his flax-haired new wife, the machinations of his daughter and his shrewish sister, and his misreading of scenes which he witnesses (often covertly) more closely resemble Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) and Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, or even the sensation-influenced fiction of Thomas Hardy.

Often in the vanguard of changes in the mode of production and distribution of fiction, in the 1890s Braddon sought to stave off the demise of the three-decker that had served her so well but also shrewdly prepared for the inevitable by writing three shorter single-volume novels in 1893, 1894, and 1895 for publication in 1896 (*London Pride*), 1897 (*Under Love's Rule*), and 1898 (*Rough Justice*). In the early years of the twentieth century she continued to accommodate herself to the changing requirements of the shorter one-volume novel by developing a terser style and an increased focus on character, recognizing that the day of the golden-haired heroine had passed: "Less detail of heroines is wanted now and more character study. Readers are not satisfied with incidents alone; they like to see character evolve as events move" ("Miss Braddon at Home" 1913: 9).

Of course, most nineteenth-century critics (as opposed to readers) had never been satisfied with golden-haired heroines, and plots driven by incident rather than the evolution of character. Hence the furor about the sensation novel in the 1860s, and the continued critical vigilance against the privileging of incident-filled plots over character analysis and development. Braddon's work was often singled out as a target of the attacks on the sensation phenomenon in the 1860s for a number of reasons. These included the extraordinary success of *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*; her rate and volume of production in the 1860s; and the fact that she was a clever, witty, and accomplished writer whose books were eagerly read by both genders and all classes, including some very distinguished figures (such as Tennyson and W. E. Gladstone) and some of those who were otherwise hostile to sensationalism. Braddon was also a particular target for disapproving comment because of her unconventional private life: reviewers particularly identified her novels with mistresses, would-be mistresses, and bigamists, and several of the negative criticisms of the sensation novel's preoccupation with bigamy and irregular liaisons focused on her novels and made allusions to her personal situation with Maxwell. There was also *ad feminam* comment on Braddon's theatrical background (with all the connotations of dubious respectability which attached to the actress in the mid-nineteenth century), on her association with low cultural forms (such as the penny press), and on her social status. Criticisms of her melodramatic style, for example, made reference to the offerings of the Surrey Theatre (see Rae 1865: 195 and Oliphant 1867: 261), and an 1863 essay on "Mrs Wood and Miss Braddon" in *Littell's Living Age* also referred disapprovingly to recent newspaper reports that Braddon "was a provincial actress" (1863: 99). Social solecisms and supposed failures of truthfulness to life in the representation of character were attributed to her lack of knowledge of good society: Oliphant, for example, accused her of not knowing "how young women of good blood and good training feel" (Oliphant 1867: 260) and Rae claimed that the only realistic character in *Lady Audley's Secret* was the lady's maid (Rae 1865: 190). Rae also claimed that she had temporarily succeeded in "making the literature of the Kitchen the favorite reading of the Drawing Room" (Rae 1865: 204). Other critics felt that she had an inappropriately wide knowledge of the world of the theater,

men's talk, and the racetrack – although Henry James, in his 1865 essay on Braddon, was not entirely alone in thinking that this breadth of knowledge added to the interest and power of her writing. Braddon's novels were often a specific target of critiques of the genre's representation of women as restless, duplicitous, passionate, sensual creatures with a tendency to be discontented with their lot. A particularly interesting example is the review of *Eleanor's Victory* and *John Marchmont's Legacy* in the *New Review*, which makes explicit the linking of Braddon's fiction with the "woman question" which is implicit in several other reviews, asserting that the interest of Braddon's heroines derives from "that half-serious, half-smiling curiosity with which the world is at present watching the efforts of the female sex to take up a stronger position" (qtd. in Wolff 1979: 193). This review suggests that the current talk about women's employment as a cure for the social evil of prostitution is just as likely to cause it, and notes disapprovingly that Braddon's heroines are the kind of women who "would have become mistresses, just as soon as bigamists" (qtd. in Wolff 1979: 193).

Braddon was a significant participant in the sensation debate as well as being one of its chief targets. As already noted, she used her novels to comment on the sensation phenomenon and on the value of other popular cultural forms such as melodrama – for example, her portrayal of Sigismund Smith in *The Doctor's Wife* and her exploration, in *Eleanor's Victory*, of the appeal and value of popular melodrama. Braddon also used her position as editor of *Belgravia* both to conduct a defense of sensation fiction and other "light literature" and to attack those highbrow critics and periodicals that set themselves up as cultural police. As both Jennifer Phegley (2004) and Solveig Robinson (1995) have so clearly shown, Braddon used both the fiction and the essay content of *Belgravia* to educate her readers about the use and value of light literature and about the critical practices and standards that were appropriate to such fiction. In particular she used two articles commissioned from George Augustus Sala to launch a counter-attack on Oliphant's anonymous hostile review in *Blackwoods* in September 1867, to attack the cant of modern criticism in general, and to mount a defense of the sensation novel. In both "The Cant of Modern Criticism" and "On the Sensational in Literature and Art" Sala repositioned the sensation novel from the margins to the center of culture by constructing a long sensation tradition which included both high and low culture and which, in the nineteenth century, included such figures as Dickens, Millais, Ruskin, and Darwin, as well as Braddon. In Sala's account sensation fiction was at the cutting edge of culture: Braddon, George Eliot (in *Adam Bede*), and Charlotte Brontë (in *Jane Eyre*) were cited as representatives of "the modern, the contemporary novel of life and character and adventure – the outspoken, realistic, moving, breathing fiction which mirrors the passions of the age for which it is written" (Sala 1867: 52).

A target of much of the animus directed at the sensation novel by "highbrow" reviewers in the 1860s, Braddon was also at the center of the late twentieth-century rediscovery and rethinking of sensation fiction. Feminist and feminist-influenced

critics (such as Showalter 1977 and Hughes 1980) seized upon Braddon as an example of a forgotten or undervalued writer, focusing on her inversion of the feminine ideal and her subversive depiction of the constraints of women's lives and women's desires – although some, like Showalter, argued that her nerve tended to fail in the final volume. Braddon's fiction also benefited from a radical reappraisal of popular cultural forms and a questioning of traditional literary judgments in the latter part of the twentieth century, which, in some ways, resembled the shifts of focus that she sought to bring about in the pages of *Belgravia*. In the last thirty years Braddon's sensation novels have been resituated within the field of popular fiction and used to explore how it functions, its effects, and its ideologies and aesthetics (examples include Pykett 1994, Gilbert 1997, and Phegley 2004). Perhaps even more importantly, rereadings of Braddon's fiction have also figured prominently in attempts to rethink the relationships between popular and high culture and to redraw the map of the nineteenth-century novel. Those nineteenth-century novels that have come to be regarded as canonical look different when read alongside their popular counterparts. For example, we have a fuller and richer understanding of the fiction of a major theorist and practitioner of realism such as George Eliot when we read it in the context of our knowledge of Braddon's sensation novels, their popular and critical reception, and the ways in which the realist novel and sensation fiction interacted with and borrowed from each other (see for example Gilbert 2000). In their attempts to understand and account for the popularity of Braddon's sensation novels, twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics have explored how they represent and speak to the anxieties, fantasies, and aspirations of both male and female readers and readers of different classes (Pykett 1992, 1994; Gilbert 1997). Braddon's novels and the contemporary critical response to them have also been mined for what they reveal about (among other things): mid-nineteenth-century attitudes to women – as writers, readers, and subjects of fiction; gender and sexual relations (Pykett 1992, 1994; Flint 1993); the legal discourses on marriage and divorce and changing attitudes to marriage and the family; the power and constraints of the domestic ideology; class identities and class relations at a time of political reform and accelerated social mobility; nineteenth-century medico-legal discourses on insanity and its moral management (especially in relation to women); the literary representation of the body and the bodily effects of reading (Flint 1993; Gilbert 1997); the politics of affect (Cvetkovich 1992); the mechanics, aesthetics, and meanings of melodrama; and the fluidity of identity. Moreover, as scholars have extended their scrutiny of Braddon's novels beyond the initial exclusive focus on *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*, rereadings of Braddon (see Tromp et al. 2000; Harrison and Fantina 2006) have contributed significantly to a wider understanding of the hybridity of sensation fiction, its mixing of genres, its tendency to segue into the form of detective fiction, the ways in which the sensation novel uses, modifies, challenges, and comments on the techniques of literary realism, and the ways in which some of its preoccupations and techniques overlap with those of the New Woman novel of the 1880s and 1890s.

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# Lady Audley's Secret: How *Does* She Do It? Sensation Fiction's Technologically Minded Villainesses

*Louise Lee*

In his disquisition on *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) Henry James commented that innovation, or more specifically technological innovation wrought by a female character, was one of the defining attributes of sensation fiction. As he observed, "The novelty lay in the heroine being, not a picturesque Italian of the fourteenth century, but an English gentlewoman of the current year, familiar with the use of the railway and the telegraph" (James 1865: 593). This description of the kind of female technological knowledge reproduced in *Lady Audley's Secret* is notable for one reason: it so clearly understates the case. The apparently effortless strategic thinking demonstrated by Lady Audley, combined with her seeming instantaneous mastery of the new discourse networks and perceptual regimes of the 1860s, considerably exceeds what James deemed as mere "familiarity" with the railway and telegraph (Kittler 1990: ch. 4). Indeed, what sensation fiction appears to proffer, or reimagine, is something far from familiar, and perhaps even revolutionary, a new kind of power relationship – a knowledge economy – where being the master, or, as is more often the case, the mistress of a situation is based on the ability to read the seemingly chaotic and disparate signifiers of the fast-moving modern world.

Through technology, Victorian femininity expands its accomplishments: the Luciferian pulling power of Lady Audley or *Armadale's* Lydia Gwilt is that while they are both formidable drawing room *femmes fatales* in the quasi-traditional mold (highly skilled pianists who dutifully beguile those around them), they are also gifted and resourceful manipulators of newfangled inventions. In these novels, technology (in the form of railways, telegraphy, fast steamships, and science) is configured as a peculiarly feminized culture. For all Lucy Audley's apparent simpering helplessness at her aristocratic husband's Essex mansion (her "bewitching" inability, say, to carve a pheasant when it's placed in front of her), she is still able to pop down to London when

the need arises, arrange a burglary in her nephew's chambers, and catch the downtown train to Colchester in four hours (see Catherine Wells-Cole's introduction in Braddon 1997: vii). Speed, mental acuity, and a precise grasp of the modern world around her makes this crinolined malefactor more than a match for her male pursuers. She proves equally at home manipulating modern media, faking her death through the columns of *The Times*, after pulling off the comparatively Herculean task of arranging for the wrong woman to be declared dead and buried under a tombstone bearing her name.

Apparently freed from the humdrum impedimenta of modern travel, Lady Audley is never shown sending a telegraph, poring over train timetables, missing trains, or even (heaven forbid) waiting for late ones. Braddon's readers are merely required to believe that Lady Audley's proficiency at channeling modern invention, and its effects, is unassailable. Even at the moment of her unmasking, technology again contrives to come to her aid, when the train that Dr. Mosgrave must catch contributes to a hastily conceived "mad not bad" diagnosis and the medical man departs with the words: "Good day to you, Mr Audley . . . my time was up ten minutes ago, it is as much as I shall do to catch the train" (Braddon 1998b: 374). In Wilkie Collins's *Armadale* (1866), technology again proves to be, in the hands of a Machiavellian female protagonist, a finely choreographed social device. When the flame-haired Gwilt corners the well-meaning but dim-witted young heir-to-be Allan Armadale at the Thorpe Ambrose railway station, she invites him to enter a carriage under the full gaze of local gossips to create the impression that they are possibly to be married:

There was no escaping her this time. The station wall was on his right hand and the line was on his left; a tunnel was behind him and Miss Gwilt was in front, inquiring in her sweetest tones whether Mr Armadale was going to London. (Collins 1995: 464)

Here overweening sexual power colludes and collaborates with locomotive power to symbolically constrain male sovereignty. As Christopher Keep asserts, many Victorians saw the railway as "the obliterator of a traditional way of life . . . [and] a model of social relations that valued continuity, custom, and community" (Keep 2002: 141); a theme that is richly explicated by Wolfgang Schivelbusch's seminal work on railway time and space (1986) and in Michael Freeman's (1999) exploration of the cultural impact of railways on the Victorian imagination.

Yet the heroines of sensation fiction, from Lady Audley, Lydia Gwilt, Magdalen Vanstone, and Aurora Floyd to Marian Halcombe, greet these changes with striking vitality and a sense of barely restrained liberational dynamism. Railways and other new communication technologies collapse the boundaries between the public and private spheres, creating a new and decidedly proximate spatiality. From Brentwood Station to Earl's Court to Southampton, Lady Audley negotiates the outside world, the world of the railway, the world of half-built London streets, and of gloomy and deserted provincial housing, with the same airy insouciance and confidence as if she were ambling through her own bedroom. Meanwhile, Lydia Gwilt, as John Sutherland observes, uses "the machinery of the modern metropolis with the expertise of a

Victorian James Bond” (see Sutherland’s introduction to Collins 1995: ix). There is no misty-eyed nostalgia for a bygone pastoral life for Lydia: she is a city-dweller who abhors rustic living so much that she must take copious amounts of laudanum to withstand it (Collins 1995: ix). But she is also extremely well acquainted with the tools of her ultra-modern trade: train times, the penny post and its multiple daily deliveries, newspaper adverts, telegrams and “electric fluids,” and anything from “cipher” codes, hair potions, and face creams to the latest line in high-tech domestic poisoning techniques. Characters like Lucy Audley and Lydia Gwilt give the lie to E. S. Dallas’s comment in *The Gay Science* that “the life of women cannot well be described as a life of action” (Dallas 1866: II, 297). This is peripatetic femininity on the move, powered up by Smilesian self-help and resourcefulness, and by (an often) demonic energy. Indeed, it is part of the exhilarating experience of reading these novels that infernal female intelligence is electrified and given flight when applied to the machinery of the modern world.

But if female characters are, unfeasibly, highly conversant with the latest scientific and mechanical developments in Victorian Britain (and are, what’s more, distinguished by their technophilia), many of their male counterparts seem stripped of all agency and autonomy by the advent of industrial modernity. The ability (or not) to assimilate the changes of contemporary life is registered in gender-specific images of high speed and mobility (associated with female characters), which led G. H. Lewes to complain of a “breathless rapidity of movement; whether the movement be absurd or not matters little, the essential thing is to keep moving” (Lewes 1866: 890). Conversely, slowness is emblemized in a long line of exhausted and physically enervated men, from *The Woman in White*’s “prostrated” Frederick Fairlie and *No Name*’s Noel Vanstone to the symbolically immobilized Miserrimus Dexter, and even the rhadamanthine Harcourt Talboys, an unlikely (but nonetheless convincing) refugee from the modern world. While, as Schivelbusch has argued (1986: xiii), speed has decidedly utopian connotations, masculine stillness and masculine illness are nonetheless ways of buying time in sensation fiction (Frederick Fairlie pleads for “three days of quiet”) or else of harking back to halcyon bygone days. In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, a similar sort of ideological stasis and conservatism is replicated in both the body and temperament of the “constitutionally dawdl[ing]” (Braddon 1998b: 82) Robert Audley. A Baudelaire-style figure, Audley is characterized as a voguish city gent of sorts, a “young philosopher of the modern school” (1998b: 207), yet his is a particular kind of resistant modernity that dramatizes the anxieties of the privileged bourgeois male threatened by a rapidly industrializing and democratizing Victorian society.

Such is the chronic state of Audley’s zeitgeist-induced lassitude that he has not managed to break into a fast walk “since . . . Eton” (Braddon 1998b: 63). He is described as “the most vacillating and unenergetic of men” (1998b: 223), who reads French novels and spends many vitiated hours over-smoking his cigars – to the point of biliousness. Yet Audley’s queasiness is not so much physical as philosophical: he is strung out to the point of almost passive non-entity by mechanization, contemplating “the dreary mechanism of life . . . [the] unflinching regularity in the small wheels



and meaner mechanism of the human machine, which knows no stoppage or cessation" (1998b: 206). In a suggestive critical re-evaluation of Audley's maladroitness, Richard Nemesvari looked beyond his position as historical subject to argue that the secret that governs the novel is not Lady Audley's at all, but Robert Audley's: his homosocial desire for George Talboys, which eventually finds a conventional romantic transference in the form of George's sister Clara (Nemesvari 1995: 515–28). Whether Audley is suffering the pangs of thwarted love, or overburdened consciousness, he is nonetheless prone to splenetic and fulminating rages which, at times, reach almost paranoiac levels, and in which he explicitly equates the hyperactive 1860s world with what he sees as the self-aggrandizing claims and advancements of Victorian womanhood: "To call them the weaker sex is to utter a hideous mockery. They are the stronger sex, the noisier, the more persevering, the most assertive sex. They want freedom of opinion, variety of occupation, do they? Let them have it!" (1998b: 208).

In addition to bad-temperedly observing these petticoat infractions on his own sense of distinctiveness, Audley is also outraged by many of the other new social formations and liberal governances which accompany industrialization. In one particularly comic display of the tetchy resistance to the encroachment he feels from the modern world, he insists on smoking his cigar in a railway carriage, against rail company bylaws, as if striking a blow for a certain kind of old-fashioned but increasingly obsolete manhood: "I shall take the liberty of enjoying my cheroot as long as I've half-a-crown left to give the guard" (1998b: 146). Guarded, but also caught off guard, is how Audley begins the novel: his refusal to step up to the racketing pace of Victorian life is depicted as a somnolence from which he must be awoken. In this respect, he joins a number of narcoleptic male characters, from the sleeping (and ailing) Sir Michael, who, rather inexplicably, spends the second half of the novel slumbering and "sick" with a non-specific illness; the concussed but recovered George Talboys; and the comatose Luke Marks, mortally injured after the blaze at the Castle Inn.

It is important to note that the only time that Lucy is caught actually restfully sleeping is when she is deserted by Talboys, "with her baby in her arms" (Braddon 1998b: 23). From that moment, hyper-vigilance and constant alertness is her default state. In modernity, you cannot afford to be caught napping. (See Gilbert's discussion of "alienated patriarchy" and the failure of all male roles in the novel [1997: 94].) On the sunny afternoon that George Talboys goes missing, Audley is asleep with a fishing rod in his hand at the edge of Audley Court's lake. The reassertion of Audley's masculine purposefulness (or his awakening) is defined in terms of his use of technology: the countless express trains he catches between London, Yorkshire, Dorset, and Portsmouth; the telegrams he sends to Clara Talboys; and the discovery of the remnants of a telegram at the house of Lieutenant Maldon. The trajectory of the novel is such that, just as he uncovers the real history of his uncle's wife, he also discovers something of the true nature of the technological landscape about him, taking him out of his backward-looking, antiquated, and pastoral delusions into the new, high-speed world of the 1860s.

What is described here, then, is not a random set of dissociated actions but rather a bold new type of behavior; one that is imaginatively enabled by the advent of new transport and communication technologies. In the reordering of time and space that occurred in the 1860s as a result of the exponential mechanization of daily life, Braddon reimagines a world where two distinct and contrapuntal philosophies exist: between female knowingness or epistemology, and, conversely, (as many of these novels belatedly reveal) male “epistemophilia,” or the rage to know (see also Keep 2002: 146). But in *Lady Audley's Secret* it is female knowledge that comes first, and operates *a priori*, while male detection only happens after the fact – as a response to invisible and embedded female ratiocination that stages false realities as a series of pre-planned effects. When, for example, George Talboys peruses a newspaper and finds the fallacious death-notice placed by his wife, he can be seen to be suffering from a malaise peculiar both to his time, but also to his gender: “The suddenness of the blow had stunned him. In this *strange and bewildered state of mind* he began to wonder what had happened and why it was that one line in *The Times* newspaper had had such an effect on him” (Braddon 1998b: 40; emphasis added). Talboys’s reading-in-disbelief moment is a common trope in sensation fiction, signaling, in the news-driven world of the 1860s, an unprecedented permeability between fiction and reality, one which was exploited to the full by sensation fiction novelists (see Boyle 1989; Rubery 2009). But the “strange and bewildered state” in which Talboys finds himself is also symptomatic of a masculine public sphere that is feminizing at an exponential rate. In the last part of this essay I will be suggesting a reason why women like Lady Audley and Lydia Gwilt seem proactively in control of modernity, whilst men seem merely reactive. But before that I want to consider some contemporary and recent critical reactions to *Lady Audley's Secret* and the role that new Victorian print technologies played in vastly expanding the horizons of both Lady Audley and Braddon herself.

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In an unsigned article in the *North British Review* of 1865, W. Fraser Rae observed that “in drawing [Lady Audley], the authoress may have intended to portray a female Mephistopheles; but if so: she should know *that a woman cannot fill such a part*” (Rae 1865: 186; emphasis added). The clear implication that a woman, or a female character, somehow does not have the right stuff – either agency or nastiness – to be properly malfeasant, is an attitude that is tested to *reductio ad absurdum* extremes in the character of Lady Audley. But Rae’s quip also reprises precisely the kind of gendered *misreading* performed by nearly all of the male characters in the novel, who mistake Lady Audley’s highly feminine “characteristics” for her character (see Felber 2007). Indeed, Rae appears to have rather sensationally missed the point about Lady Audley. Yes, she is a villain; no, she does not look like one. It is this radical instability between the idealizing male gaze and malevolent female agency that plays out so tellingly throughout the novel. But, crucially, what makes the difference to Lady Audley’s potentiality – what gives her a helping, or perhaps prosthetic, hand – is the

mechanizing world of the 1860s. Lady Audley certainly could not have much of a “secret” in the age of the carrier pigeon, the village hall, and the horse and cart. But in modernity, with its railways, telegraphs, and newspapers, and with its disaggregated and urbanizing social realm, a bold new set of possibilities presents itself. It is what Jenny Bourne Taylor calls the “sense of continuous and rapid change, of shocks, thrills, intensity [and] excitement” (Taylor 1988: 3) that allows Helen Talboys, née Maldon, the blue-eyed trickster with the exceptionally complicated past, to use the new dislocations and discontinuities of ultra-modern Victorian life to her advantage, to rebrand herself at will, and to engender and imagine as yet undetermined new outcomes. This means that, as Lady Audley, she can act the role of a conduct manual angel (the docile, biddable woman that Rae imagines all women to be) and yet also be plotting and orchestrating her secret life of “adventures” in the city with Phoebe Marks, beyond the domestic hearth, and, what’s more, with the apparent confidence that the outside world, the public sphere, is as manageable and controllable as her own home.

In many ways the life of Braddon herself was not dissimilar to her most winning and calculating anti-heroine, combining a busy (if, in reality, pretty unconventional) domestic life with a career as a writer, one of strategizing and imaginative plotting (see Wolff 1979). And like Lady Audley, Braddon was a far more formidable and far-sighted opponent than she might at first have appeared. From the moment *Lady Audley's Secret* sashayed onto the literary marketplace in 1862, resulting in such public clamor that eight new editions were issued within just three months, Braddon opportunistically took steps to maximize both her publishing impact and her public profile in a highly controlled performance (Diamond 2004: 197). Acknowledging literary paternity to Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860), she also boldly departed from his model, refashioning her kind of fiction as peculiarly feminized and peculiarly marital. With the publication of *Aurora Floyd* (1863), Braddon’s sensation fiction became, briefly at least, a byword for bigamy, with the author being interchangeably characterized as “the inventor of the fair-haired demon of modern fiction” (Oliphant 1867: 283). But again, like Lady Audley, who throws back the compliments she receives as if she were being “pelt[ed] . . . with roses” (Braddon 1998b: 32), Braddon spent little time glorying in her own success, but rather planning and replanning her future movements. As Lyn Pykett describes in this volume, not only were Braddon’s novels and stories carefully placed across social registers to satisfy the restrictive tastes of Mudie’s circulating library, they were also written in a number of aliases and different aesthetic styles in a bid to mitigate the effects of what Winifred Hughes has called the “grammar and morals” debates (Hughes 1980: 108). Determined to keep one step ahead in the authorship stakes, Braddon published an upscale novel of “character,” *The Doctor's Wife*, in 1864, and later deployed her magazine *Belgravia* as, in part, a campaigning voice-piece for the furtherance of sensation fiction as a genre. This clear-sighted shaping of public perception was accompanied by many behind-the-scenes orchestrations to stabilize and fortify her position. As Carnell and Law argue, Braddon was instrumental in syndicating her novels in both the provinces and

in the British colonies (see Carnell and Law 2000; Johnson-Woods 2000), engendering a warm, personalized relationship between author and readers, with the much the same relish and energy as Dickens.

Such winning ways with readers did not, however, prevent Braddon from being seen as a profound threat by establishment-minded critics. Indeed, it was precisely because of the extent of *Lady Audley's Secret's* cultural reach and reading saturation that it caused such alarm. As Rae (again) commented, “[Miss Braddon] may boast without fear of contradiction of having temporarily succeeded in making the literature of the kitchen the favorite reading of the Drawing Room” (Rae 1865: 204). Rae’s reference to “temporary” dismissively alludes to what was perceived to be the disposable culture of the “newspaper novel” or “railway novel” (as sensation novels were also called), but there was also a specifically gendered focus. Margaret Oliphant railed against *Lady Audley* as “this piece of imposture” (Oliphant 1867: 263) and proclaimed that “one of the earliest results of an increased feminine influence in our literature [has been] a display of what in women is most unfeminine” (1867: 274). Oliphant considered that the mechanisms of modern life were manufacturing an unnatural kind of womanhood, an idea that found wider cultural resonance in metaphors of disease, bad food, and addiction (see Gilbert 1997: ch. 3). The rhetoric of internalization was also accompanied by the rhetoric of trespass, which related particularly to clubbable, all-male enclaves. Henry James wryly observed, for example, that the author of *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* appeared to know a little too much about racetracks and form: “Miss Braddon deals familiarly with gamblers and betting-men, and flashy reprobates of every description. She knows much that ladies are not supposed to know, but are glad to learn” (James 1865: 593–4). The slightly unsettled addendum “glad to learn” hints at one of the fears that sensation fiction engendered: that in its spatial largesse and imaginative ubiquity it provided female readers with a manifesto of uncontainment; a how-to guide for traversing the country in double-quick time without being noticed; a new panorama of open access and no restraints; a world of femininity gone AWOL, aided and abetted by the most up-to-date machineries of industrialized Britain.

Yet if cultural clout is measured in terms of subversive potentiality then it is quite remarkable that, in the six decades before female suffrage, the story of Lucy Audley, an unashamedly popular form, written by a female author virtually from her kitchen table, gave Braddon the kind of visibility and power that were, as yet, denied to most women in wider socio-medical-legal debates taking place in Victorian Britain. Recent critics have been divided, though, as to whether or not Braddon squandered that voice. D. A. Miller, in his paradigmatic *The Novel and the Police*, argued that *Lady Audley's Secret*’s final resting place in a European madhouse “portrays the woman’s carceral condition as her fundamental and final truth” (Miller 1988: 171). As a counter to this, I argue that *Lady Audley's Secret* operates first and foremost as a fantasy of becoming. It gave a form, but by no means the definitive form, to the chaos of desires that circulated around the “woman question,” and to which technology had very recently become an extremely empowering new agent. But, like the motor that drives the reading of serial

fiction itself, it is surely better to travel hopefully than to arrive. It is the thrill of expectation that is the animating force of *Lady Audley's Secret*, not the secret itself. It is enough, then, in the first generation processing massive new changes to daily life, that Lady Audley's thought transforms into exploit, or, as Nicole Fisk puts it, "when [she] wants to act, she does so – instead of merely fantasising about what she would do if she were a man" (Fisk 2004: 24–5).

This imaginative leap between thinking and doing, between planning and accomplishment, is the fictional boon that Braddon grants Lady Audley, by means of the technical inventions of the Victorian world. Yet, as Pamela K. Gilbert observes, this new high-powered female wherewithal comes at a price. As a number of critics have argued, the economy of sensation fiction commodifies both female bodies and female affect (Cvetkovich 1992; Pykett 1992). And in terms of *Lady Audley's Secret*, it is Lady Audley's body, not Robert Audley's, that is constantly put under examination. As Gilbert asserts, "the man's body is un-presentable; the patriarch's genitals must remain veiled, as the lack of the phallus . . . is intolerable" (Gilbert 2000: 191). I agree that the female body is put under scrutiny in *Lady Audley's Secret*, but disagree that the reason for the cover-up is to divert attention from the male phallus, or the lack of it. Rather, the feminine body is used as a diversion for a far more subversive cause: to disguise newly discovered female phallic power in the recently technologized world. It is this juxtaposition of female sexuality – as perceived by men – and female agency and ratiocination as a value withheld, known, but un-revealed by women, that is the truly dangerous and hidden presence of the novel.

\* \* \*

For the last part of this essay I want to explore what appears to be a fundamental gender-swap that occurs in sensation fiction: why does industrial modernity feminize men, and imbue women, if not quite with masculine attributes (Lucy and Lydia Gwilt, are, after all, ravishing Pre-Raphaelite beauties), with masculine access and the kind of insider expertise that had previously been denied them? In order to answer this, I want to turn to one of the most suggestive and compelling recent accounts of sensation fiction, by Nicholas Daly. In his "Railway Novels: Sensation Fiction and the Modernisation of the Senses" (1999) and in *Literature, Technology and Modernity* (2004), Daly reads sensation novels through Walter Benjamin's essay on Baudelaire (see Benjamin 1999a) as dramatizing the shock of the modern through a series of emasculating assaults on the human sensorium, based on the physical and nerve-racking jolts of the industrializing process. Taking Henry Mansel's famous indictment of the sensation genre as "preaching to the nerves" (Mansel 1863: 482), and drawing on work by D. A. Miller (1988), Daly argues that what sensation novels dramatize first and foremost is the middle class's confrontation with modernity and technology. Singling out the railway crash, with all its limb-grinding potential, as the defining trope of mid-Victorian life, he depicts a community of nervousness, psychosomatic

anxiety, and shock in these novels; one that is practically bred from within its readership, in an age that is literally and metaphorically traveling too fast.

For Daly, the spine-tingling apprehension of sensation fiction becomes literalized in contemporary medical accounts of “railway spine” and early cases of post-traumatic stress disorder (with Dickens, as a survivor of the Staplehurst railway crash, being the most famous victim). Through the sensation novel, he asserts, “history becomes somatized” (Daly 1999: 462–3). The breathless, nervous physical sensation that the novels induce replicates the reaction that modern machinery promotes in the Victorian subject. While Daly’s account is rightly attentive to the somatic aftershock of new technology, rendering a compelling account of male pusillanimity and nervousness, he fails to explain why, if modernity is so all-encompassing, female villains do not appear to suffer in the same exhausted and shell-shocked way. The question remains, why is men’s nervousness greeted by women’s apparent *nervelessness*?

To explore this further, I want to consider another facet of Benjamin’s arguments on the effects of historical modernity, discussed in his epic study of nineteenth-century consumer and industrial culture, *The Arcades Project* (1999b). Benjamin’s central premise is that, under conditions of capitalism, industrialization brings about a re-enchantment of the social world, and through it, a reactivation of mythic powers. This might be a surprise, for in a world of mechanized contraptions and precision we might expect to see a relentless trajectory of rationalization and systematization. But Benjamin argues that in the modern world we frequently glimpse its flip-side, a contrary formation in which the processes and the effects of modernity are themselves mythologized:

[I]n the course of social development, the old never sets itself off sharply from the new; rather the latter, striving to set itself apart from the recently outmoded, renews archaic ur-temporal elements. The utopian images that accompany the emergence of the new always concurrently reach back to the ur-past. In the dream in which every epoch sees in images before its eyes the one that follows it, the images appear wedded to ur-history. (qtd. in Buck-Morss 1991: 116)

According to this definition, what is new is actually *new*, but history also shrouds this newness in what Marx calls “deceptions” and “spirits of the past” (cited in Buck-Morss 1991: 122). As a consequence, there is a complex overlapping between the historic and the modern that melds the Gothic and the systematic, the fairy and the factual, the forensic and the fanciful. The old world struggles to assimilate the riot of new signals, information, and images that the new world presents to it, and in doing so creates its own new belief systems, many of which are shadowy, illusory, and/or mythic. The rambling ancestral home of Audley Court, with its new wings built on to it through the ages, provides a useful paradigm for thinking about modernity and its place in time as represented in sensation fiction:

[It is a] glorious old place; a noble place; inside as well as out in which you *incontinently lost yourself*, if ever you were so rash as to go about it alone; a house in which no one

room had any sympathy with any other, every chamber running off at a tangent into an inner chamber. (Braddon 1998b: 4; emphasis added)

*Losing yourself.* This so aptly describes the splintered reality of modernity in which nothing seems to resemble anything else. It is a sense, indeed, that is radically reflected in the disconnected and multiple narratives of sensation fiction. Wilkie Collins's readers often complained that his intricate plots made them feel "stupid," yet there is a sense in which everyone feels stupid in the technological maelstrom of the 1860s: no man (or woman, for that matter) is fully apprised of the facts nor in command of his or her world. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, just as the novel Alicia Audley reads is called *Changes and Chances*, so the confused Victorian subject, in a state of constant flux and disturbance, is inclined to either misread or over-read the bewildering signals around him. In the randomness of the modern world, a totalizing view is just not possible: thus providing a very productive site for mythology.

The ambiguous place of agency in modernity explains, in part, the illusory overstatement of women in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Yet if we accept that the power devolved to women is a mythic trick, why the apparent alliance with technology? What I want to suggest here is that, as we read these novels ultimately through the *éclaircissement* of the male heroes, both women and technology are configured as outsiders, foreign agents, and, as such, part of the challenge to the old-world order. What sensation fiction does is to cast women as diabolic troublemakers – an enjoyably mystifying fantasy – and to relegate modern machinery to a mere prop, flying in the face of the technological revolution of the 1860s. But I want to reverse that paradigm and suggest that women in these novels are not actually the cause but the effect: what they become are aestheticized agents of technology. Benjamin observes that it is a particular feature of the modern world that, while it fetishizes newness, it also has a tendency to dress it up in old clothes. The first railway stations, he argues, were made to look like chalets; electric lamps were styled to resemble old gaslights, while early photographs were modeled on landscape painting. In modernity, new forms cite the old ones out of context (Buck-Morss 1991: 111). As such, women are the domesticated face of technology: the means by which its unsettling effects are processed by the generation of the 1860s.

\* \* \*

But that is not the last Victorian literature hears of the quick-thinking Lucy Graham. She re-emerges a decade later in a short story, "The Telegraph Girl," by Anthony Trollope: deciphering signs and interpreting signifiers would seem to be something of a *métier*. And, indeed, Lady Audley's ability to accurately speed-read situations using new technology is illustrated by one particularly prescient scene early on in her new career as a bigamist in which she engineers a plan involving a telegraph to take herself out of Audley Court, so as to avoid re-encountering her first husband Talboys:

It was late the next morning when Lady Audley went down to breakfast – past ten o'clock. While she was sipping her coffee a servant brought her a sealed packet and a book for her to sign. "A telegraphic message!" she cried; for the convenient word telegram had not yet been invented. "What can be the matter?"

She looked up at her husband with wide-open, terrified eyes and seemed half afraid to break the seal. The envelope was addressed to Miss Lucy Graham, at Mr Dawson's, and had been sent on from the village. "Read it my darling," he said, "and do not be alarmed; it may be nothing of any importance." It came from a Mrs Vincent, the school mistress to whom she had referred on entering Mr Dawson's family. The lady was dangerously ill, and implored her old pupil to go and see her.

"Poor soul! . . . Dear Sir Michael, I must go to her."

"To be sure you must dearest . . . Put on your bonnet, Lucy: we shall be in time to catch the express"

"You will go with me?"

"Of course, my darling! Do you suppose I would let you go alone?"

"I was sure you would go with me," she said *thoughtfully*. (Braddon 1998b: 61–2; emphasis added)

Here a double manipulation occurs, combining the complex instrumentality of the "telegraphic message," the medium that is so new and advanced it does not even have a shorthand form, and Lucy's orchestration of the emotions of the love-"fevered" Sir Michael. Lucy has planned this intricate tableau but it has not quite gone as anticipated.

Nonetheless, the word that resonates in this extract is "thoughtfully." Lady Audley did not foresee Sir Michael Audley's expeditious enthusiasm for accompanying her to London. He (rather ironically) cannot imagine his pretty young wife going anywhere on her own – not realizing that she has been traveling alone, and under the wrong papers, for the entirety of the novel. But Lucy's "thoughtfulness" here is noteworthy: it is a moment of privacy in publicness, of taking stock of the situation, which infuses her performativity with more than mere tossed blonde ringlets and phatic statements. It is a fluid approach to outcomes, contingent and subject to nuance, which is also replicated by Phoebe Marks, who is "silent and self-contained [and who] . . . seemed to hold herself with herself" (Braddon 1998b: 135). This same connection to female ratiocination – strategic, watchful, and unvoiced – is made by Gilbert, who observes: "Throughout the novel, women express a clear understanding of the relations of power which underlie cultural relations while male characters prefer . . . 'pretty stories'" (Gilbert 1997: 98).

Yet ultimately for Lady Audley, as for everyone else, modern life proves unreadable: the plot performs a switchback on the fair-haired reader of motives and precognizant anticipator of reactions. Talboys is not dead down a well but prospecting rather efficiently on the New York stock exchange. And, despite all her ingenuity, cunning, and resourcefulness, Lucy submits to being incarcerated – "buried alive" – in a Belgian *maison de santé*, as a kind of jejune parody of the quiet domestic life that she might have lived as a Victorian wife (and one that Alicia Audley *does* lead by the end of the



novel). Nonetheless, it is something of an infernal mystery that Lucy as the new Madame Taylor does not, considering her flamboyant past form, attempt to dispatch herself *tout de suite* to the nearest chateau, after beguiling Monsieur le Docteur. Instead, Lady Audley “died abroad” which, after all her manic energy, is a notable fictional *non-condition*. (Indeed, one might also add the postscript: presumed cause of death – boredom.) As Tim Dolin has observed, “the evacuation of meaning from character to plot in the sensation novel implies that protagonists are rarely able to act openly or freely except where they are extraordinarily or unusually diabolical or powerful figures. Only villains and aliens are fully and vividly realised, genuinely alive” (Dolin 2006: 18).

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to Mark Knight for his help in discussing the ideas in this article.

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“Going in a little for the subjective”:  
Textual and Moral Performance  
in *The Doctor’s Wife*

*Richard Nemesvari*

Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *The Doctor’s Wife* (1864) is perhaps unique among Victorian novels in that modern criticism cannot analyze the text without immediately acknowledging the intertext that shadows its characters and plot. The letters Braddon wrote to Edward Bulwer-Lytton while she was conceiving and writing the book explicitly acknowledge that “[t]he idea of the Doctor’s Wife is founded on ‘Madame Bovary’” (qtd. in Wolff 1979: 162), a fact that, once recognized, irrevocably links her story to Flaubert’s masterpiece in ways that Braddon both intentionally desired and ambivalently evaded. Thus in his essay “French Realism Englished: The Case of M. E. Braddon’s *The Doctor’s Wife*,” P. D. Edwards asserts that on the one hand “[t]he heroine of *The Doctor’s Wife* . . . is innocence itself in comparison . . . with Emma Bovary” (Edwards 2008: 114), while on the other the “achievement of *Madame Bovary* that Braddon emulates most effectively is the projection of the heroine’s disenchantment with her marriage on to her surroundings” (2008: 117). Supporting this second idea, Anne Heilmann, in “Emma Bovary’s Sisters: Infectious Desire and Female Reading Appetites in Mary Braddon and George Moore,” suggests that “[l]ike Emma Bovary, Isabel Gilbert, the heroine of Braddon’s *The Doctor’s Wife*, is discontented with the prosaic reality of middle-class domesticity” (Heilmann 2003: 32), although she also goes on to argue that Braddon “consistently resists the Flaubertian plot in both its moral and sensational configurations” (2003: 38). Melissa Schaub takes this position a step further by asserting, in “A ‘Divine Right to Happiness’: The Sublime, the Beautiful, and the Woman Reader in *Madame Bovary* and *The Doctor’s Wife*,” that Braddon’s novel is “not a bowdlerization of Flaubert, but an answer to him” (Schaub 2003: 23), since “the two women differ in more than just the actions they take – their motivations are fundamentally different as well” (2003: 24).

But the duality perceived by these critics in Braddon's treatment of the earlier French text also reflects a more personal division in her literary aspirations, since as Robert Lee Wolff points out her imitation was part of a project begun in 1863 in which

writing two novels a year, she each time relegated one to the class of pure sensation fiction, content to turn it out as neatly as possible, while giving to the other her best artistic effort. In the second year particularly . . . she strove anxiously and mightily in *The Doctor's Wife* to achieve high art. (Wolff 1979: 162)

By co-opting *Madame Bovary* Braddon attempts to co-opt the status of the realist/naturalist novel of character associated with Flaubert, the form that as the 1860s progressed was increasingly granted the standing of true art, while sensationalism's plot-driven fictions were more and more "relegated" to the inferior position of profit-driven commodity.

Braddon appears, therefore, to have internalized the vehement criticisms aimed at sensation fiction during the intense critical debates of the period, an understandable response given that she and her works were often the specific target of attacks both literary and personal. At the core of Braddon's rewriting of the French author's novel, therefore, are questions of genre and the attendant assignment of cultural value and prestige that directly influenced her career and reputation while at the same time reflecting epistemological debates about English prose fiction as a whole.

This being the case, however, *Madame Bovary* seems a strange choice of textual model. Its serialization in 1856–7 resulted in a *cause célèbre*, with both Flaubert and the magazine that published the novel, *La Revue de Paris*, being prosecuted for irreligion and immorality. Despite author and journal's eventual acquittal, *Madame Bovary's* representation of impassioned female desire, sexuality, and (double) adultery, along with the eventual suicide of its eponymous main character, is at least as sensational as the events of *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*, the two novels that had made Braddon (in)famous. Obviously if *The Doctor's Wife* is meant to stand apart from these earlier texts it cannot reproduce such plot elements, and Catherine J. Golden is right to describe Braddon as "[l]aunders the sensationalism of Flaubert's work" (Golden 2006: 30) by making sure that her female protagonist succumbs to neither the temptation of illicit sex nor that of self-destructive despair. Having largely rejected her source's transgressive story line, the other celebrated aspect of its method she might have sought to reproduce was Flaubert's detached narrative voice, which in the letter to Bulwer already quoted she described as a "style . . . which struck me immensely" (qtd. in Wolff 1979: 162). Yet even a cursory reading of *The Doctor's Wife* reveals that its narrator bears very little resemblance to Flaubert's. Despite the removal of a number of extended narrative passages for the one-volume stereotyped edition, Braddon's text still relies heavily upon the type of intrusive third-person commentary Flaubert chose to forgo.

The question remains, then, as to just what Braddon does imitate in the text of her French predecessor, and Lyn Pykett identifies the crucial feature succinctly when

she notes that “[l]ike Emma Bovary, her Flaubertian original, Isabel Gilbert, the doctor’s wife, is a romanticist who lives in a world of books and dreams” (Pykett 1998: xiii), an idea that follows Pamela K. Gilbert’s earlier recognition that Isabel “reads novels constantly, imagines herself the heroine in a novel, and is unfitted for real life because of this” (Gilbert 1997: 108). Thus both novels partake in nineteenth-century disputes over the dangers of improper female reading, demonstrating, as Kate Flint notes, how “over-absorption in reading could be used to create a dramatic scenario illustrative of the dangers attendant on abnegating one’s responsibility towards others in favour of self-satisfaction” (Flint 1993: 261). Golden reinforces this by stressing that each work presents “a major theme of cautionary tales and advice books warning against the novel-reading habit” (Golden 2003: 99), but also asserts that “Braddon constructs the image of Isabel as an obsessive romance reader even more immediately than Flaubert” (2003: 106).

Taking up this last point, I would argue that Braddon develops her theme in a way that forcefully denies that such dangerous textuality can be avoided *at all*, because her novel insists on the inevitable constructedness of both individual and social identity. Indeed, Pykett’s assertion that Isabel “lives in” her dreams and Flint’s observation that over-absorbed reading creates “a dramatic scenario” each suggest the trope that undergirds the book. *The Doctor’s Wife* is pervaded by representations of performance, and of course the work itself is a kind of performance as Braddon attempts to enact a different mode of writing in order to vary her authorial appearance on the public stage.

Her declaration to Bulwer-Lytton in yet another letter that for this novel she was “going in a little for the subjective” (qtd. in Wolff 1979: 161) was meant to signal her commitment to the realist project’s psychological exploration of character, but the implementation of this purpose leads as well to a sensational perception. In one of the more famous attacks on sensation fiction, published in the same year as Braddon’s book, the Archbishop of York insisted that sensation novels were pernicious because “[t]hey went to persuade people that . . . their comfortable and easy-looking neighbour had in his breast a secret story which he was always going about trying to conceal” (*Times*, 1864: 9). It is just such a “secret story” that Isabel continually tells herself in order to cope with the loveless marriage that turns her into “the doctor’s wife,” an enforced role that she plays externally, all the while acting out a very different psychodrama internally. Braddon, attempting to follow Flaubert into the labyrinth of individual subjectivity, ends up returning to where she started by creating a more subtle sensationalism that problematizes the relationship between texts, action, morality, and social evaluation, exposing the fragility of comfortable Victorian certainties about how to read the proper woman, or how to read any woman properly. That this takes place in a novel that foregrounds its own performative nature reinforces the instability of interpretation and the inadequacy of assigned categories, ideas as potentially disconcerting as any more literal revelation of hidden identities or buried indiscretions. As Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick assert, “if a spatialized, postmodernist, performative analysis . . . can demonstrate any one thing, surely it is

how contingent and radically heterogeneous, as well as how contestable, must be the relations between any subject and any utterance” (Parker and Sedgwick 1995: 14). The text and its characters attempt to perform their consciously established and culturally determined roles, but generate instead a performativity of conflicted cross-signals that subvert any possibility of speech act unity, exposing the sensationally precarious foundation of supposedly secure Victorian literary and gender evaluative standards.

The most obviously self-referential element in *The Doctor's Wife* is the character Sigismund Smith, identified by the title of volume I, chapter 2, as “A Sensation Author” (Braddon 1998: 11), whose “pronouncements on his own writing and on sensation writing in general act as a partly insouciant, partly defiant *apologia* for Braddon’s fictional practices to date” (Pykett 1998: ix). For my purposes, however, the opportunities Sigismund gives Braddon to comment on the vicissitudes of publishing Victorian popular fiction are less interesting than his demonstration of the interconnected performance of literary form and authorial identity. To start, the character’s unusual first name is pure fabrication – a kind of “stage name.” When George Gilbert, Isabel’s eventual husband, expresses surprise that his old friend Sam is now Sigismund, this is the response: “Yes; Sigismund Smith. It sounds well; doesn’t it? If a man’s evil destiny makes him a Smith, the least he can do is to take it out in his Christian name. No Smith with a grain of spirit would ever consent to be a Samuel” (Braddon 1998: 10–11). Although presented here as a purely personal decision, this change also has professional ramifications for Sigismund, since his newly minted and romantic name now matches the romantic sensationalism of his plots. This, however, creates a problem, as this “very mild young man, with the most placid blue eyes . . . and a good deal of light curling hair” (Braddon 1998: 13) later confesses to Isabel:

“You’ve no idea what a lot of people have invited me out to tea – ladies, you know – since the publication of *The Mystery of Mowbray Manor*. I used to go out at first. But they generally said to me, ‘Lor, Mr Smith, you’re not a bit like what I fancied you were! I thought you’d be TALL, and DARK, and HAUGHTY-LOOKING, like Montague Manderville’ . . . &c. &c.; and that sort of thing is apt to make a man feel himself an impostor. And if a writer of fiction can’t drink hot tea without colouring up, as if he had just pocketed a silver spoon . . . why, my idea is, he’d better stay at home.” (Braddon 1998: 188)

Sigismund finds himself trapped in a version of Foucault’s author function, through which “the author’s name, unlike other proper names, does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it; instead, the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being” (Foucault 2003: 382). Sensation fiction produces (despite obvious contradictory evidence) the exotic identity associated with a name like Sigismund, while someone named Sigismund can only produce sensation fiction. His response to this dilemma is not to insist on the reality of his mild, everyday nature, but rather to simply stop socializing with his readers, leaving them free to

compose whatever version of his character they find most congruent with his texts. Feeling that he has inadvertently become an “impostor” because he cannot meet his readers’ expectations, Sigismund succumbs to the power of generic textuality and, physically withdrawing from public view, accedes to the fantasized *dramatis persona* generated by the public reception of his novels. Braddon here protests her own entrapment as an author whose name is so heavily identified with one (reprobated) form of writing that it cannot escape the assumptions automatically invoked when it appears, thus revealing that “the author is not an indefinite source of significations that fill a work . . . [she] is a certain functional principle by which . . . one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction” (Foucault 2003: 390). By dramatizing this situation in one of her characters, Braddon attempts to escape its constraints herself by reifying genre distinctions in order to demonstrate that the sensationalist/realist dichotomy is objectively quantifiable, therefore establishing that she is a “different” author when writing this particular text. This attempt fails, however. Instead, Sigismund Smith’s sporadic intrusions into the story reveal the porous nature of generic distinctions, reinforcing that genres are “performative structures” (Frow 2007: 1633) fully dependent on subjective contextualities.

In his study *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* Alex Woloch makes the following argument:

[m]inor characters exist *as* a category . . . only because of their strange centrality to so many texts, perhaps to narrative signification itself. But this is not to say that once we acknowledge the significance of the minor character, he suddenly becomes major. . . . The minor character is always drowned out within the totality of the narrative: and what we remember about the character is never detached from how the text, for the most part, makes us forget him. . . . The strange significance of minor characters, in other words, resides largely in the way that the character disappears, and in the tension or relief that results from this vanishing. (Woloch 2003: 37–8)

This provides a useful additional way of considering Sigismund’s role in *The Doctor’s Wife*. The insertion of a sensation author into a work strenuously attempting to escape the label of sensationalism is meant to foreground Braddon’s overt generic intentions, since his status as a minor character within the main realist plot marginalizes the literary form he represents, as does his frequent employment as light comic relief. Yet Sigismund’s often abrupt introduction into, and equally abrupt withdrawal from, the novel’s “character system” creates a “character space” (Woloch 2003: 177) that disrupts his intended purpose. On one level Sigismund fulfills a demarcation function. The novel’s portrayal of the lurid and ludicrous plots he manufactures for the penny press is meant to produce a clear contrast between them and the book in which he is embedded, confirming, as the narrator tendentiously declares, that “This is *not* a sensation novel” (Braddon 1998: 358). By presenting two types of fiction within a single narrative, one described and assigned to a secondary character and the other enacted by the main character, Braddon hopes to demonstrate her commitment to the

psychologically complex situation of Isabel, while Sigismund's one-dimensional presentation is ultimately meant to be, as Woloch puts it, "drowned out within the totality of the narrative." And while for the most part Braddon succeeds in making us forget Sigismund while we follow Isabel's struggles, finally he ends up confirming the necessary interrelation of the genres the novel is attempting to separate. Sigismund's reappearances reinforce the awareness that realism can only be defined in terms of its non-realist Other, and the mutual dependency between the "real" and the "sensational" in *The Doctor's Wife* is confirmed by the novel's closure.

The "relief," to again use Woloch's word, which has been achieved by this minor character's relegation to the edges of the plot is undercut by the text's finale, as its concluding paragraphs focus on Sigismund's continued experiences as a sensationalist. The reader is told that when he visits the now-widowed Isabel "[t]elegrams from infuriated proprietors of penny journals pursue him in his calm retreat" (Braddon 1998: 403), that "[a]mongst the wild-roses and new-mown hay . . . Mr Smith finds it sweet to lie at ease, weaving the dark webs of crime which he subsequently works out upon paper in . . . his Temple chambers" (1998: 404), and that he is now contemplating marriage because, as the book's last sentence declares, "a gentleman who lives chiefly upon bread-and-marmalade . . . may amass a very comfortable little independence from the cultivation of sensational literature in penny numbers" (1998: 404). Sigismund and what he represents cannot vanish because, as an integral aspect of narrative signification, sensationalism must return as the dangerous supplement that generates writerly awareness. Having constructed a work whose specific goal is to create a new authorial role for herself, Braddon only succeeds in demonstrating that performative effects "do not exclude what is generally opposed to them, term by term; on the contrary, they presuppose it, in an asymmetrical way, as the general space of their possibility" (Derrida 1988: 19). And this may be the novel's most foundational divergence from both the realist and naturalist aesthetic projects, for the kind of generic play Braddon's text foregrounds breaks the putative transparency upon which they both rely. The result demonstrates what, ironically, was always potentially discernible in her Flaubertian model: that the division between sensation fiction and high art is a mediated subjectivity rather than an immutable, objectively discernible distinction.

But now, in order to mitigate any accusation of an asymmetry in my own argument, I would like to turn from the minor character of Sigismund Smith to an exploration of how the novel's presentation of its main character also reinforces its subtextual theme. Certainly Isabel has a familial foundation in performance through her father, and Sigismund's description of him to George is guaranteed to set off alarm bells for any experienced reader of Victorian fiction:

"Not but what Sleaford's a gentleman; he's a barrister. I don't know exactly where his chambers are, or in what court he practises . . . but he *is* a barrister. I suppose he goes on circuit sometimes, for he's very often away from home for a long time together, but I don't know what circuit he goes on. It doesn't do to ask those sort of questions . . . I



don't think he's rich, that's to say not rich in a regular way. He's flush of money sometimes, and . . . talks about going to Australia some of these days." (Braddon 1998: 15–17)

Given this description it is scarcely surprising that Sleaford is later revealed to be the notorious forger Jack the Scribe, perfectly capable of falsifying both documents and his own death and then later re-entering his daughter's life as "Captain Morgan . . . in the merchant service, – just home from the Mauritius" (Braddon 1998: 310). Sigismund may feel like an imposter, but Isabel's father is (oxymoronically) a real fake, and his fraudulent identities illustrate society's questionable ability to see past even patently unconvincing impersonations.

Predictably, then, Isabel's internalized romantic fantasies, provided by the novels and poetry she reads, leave her exposed to widespread misinterpretation, so that Braddon's presentation of this "flaw" is significantly ambiguous. Whose failure is more serious – Isabel's dreaming inability to focus on the social world she inhabits, or that world's imputation of the worst possible motives and desires to her actions? That Isabel is prone to self-dramatization can hardly be denied, because the novel provides us with an explicit illustration of this quality. When forced by her father's abandonment to take a position as a governess she makes a great impression on her two young female charges, who assert that "they loved Miss Sleaford *dearly*. She was *so nice*; and sometimes, at night, when they begged her very, very hard, she would ACT (the orphans uttered this last word in an awfully distinct whisper); and, oh, that was beautiful!" (Braddon 1998: 169). Isabel's nocturnal theatrics provide an echo of Braddon's own experience on the provincial stage, since they represent both freedom and desperation – freedom to express the emotions Isabel must repress, and desperation about whether or not she will find a legitimate outlet for her passion. Her acceptance of George's eventual proposal, therefore, is made in a haze of confused thoughts about the marital situations of the characters in Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1848), and Isabel never actually says "yes" to him, which makes sense because "never once, in any dream or reverie, in any fantastic vision built out of the stories she loved, did the homely image of the Graybridge surgeon find a place" (Braddon 1998: 75). Nonetheless, Isabel finds herself swept into a role as "the heroine of . . . a domestic story" by a husband who has "no power to divine that there was any incongruity in the fancy; no fineness of ear to discover the dissonant interval between the heroine and the story" (1998: 78). The sudden intrusion of Roland Lansdell, however, a character much more amenable to Isabel's fantasy life, allows her the opportunity to recommence her romantic enactments, and provides Braddon the opportunity for additional explorations of performative subjectivity.

As a handsome aristocrat with a noble estate who has published a volume of (self-indulgent) verse, Roland embodies the hero of Isabel's imaginings. His growing interest in her, and the resulting long walks and quasi-clandestine meetings they arrange, would seem to be preparing for the type of fallen-woman narrative that made *Madame Bovary* notorious, but because Isabel's love is more aesthetic than sensual she

never follows her French counterpart into adultery. Roland gives Isabel the chance to act *out* her desires without acting *on* them, so the reader is presented with what might be called, in both senses of the word, “pure” performance. Isabel’s essential innocence means that she is satisfied with playing the role of Roland’s beloved, since she cannot, despite her reading about transgressive women, conceive of any other way of being with him. Indeed when Roland, who has a more explicit relationship in mind, proposes that she abandon George and run away with him to Europe her response is a hurt and shocked repudiation of the very idea.

Something like a cry of despair broke from Isabel’s lips.

“You ask me to go away with you!” she exclaimed, looking at Roland as if she could scarcely believe the testimony of her own ears.

“You ask me to leave George, and be your – mistress! . . . Oh, Roland! Roland . . . you must despise me – you must despise me very much . . . or you would never – ”

She couldn’t say any more; but she still leant against the bridge, sobbing for her lost delusion. (Braddon 1998: 270)

Roland’s response to this heartfelt cry is, in the context of the novel’s overall thematic pattern, bitterly ironic: “Is this acting, Mrs. Gilbert? Is this show of surprise and indignation a little comedy, which you play when you want to get rid of your lovers?” (1998: 271). Isabel is accused of acting at the very moment in which she is most herself, and in which she has been forced to abandon the romantic drama she has been playing in her mind by the very man she thought understood her best. Although the collapse of her “delusion” is in some ways an appropriate punishment for her unsophisticated dalliance with another man, it is clear that the reader is meant to sympathize with Isabel’s sense of loss here, which in turn complicates the text’s moral positioning.

Thus the narrator’s un-Flaubertian intrusions into the text, meant to reinforce its conventional morality and signal proper reader response, often have a much more ambivalent effect. The evaluation of Isabel presented in the following example provides a case in point.

It was all very wicked of course, and a deep and cruel wrong to the simple country-surgeon, who ate his dinner, and complained of the under-done condition of the mutton. . . . It was very wicked; but Mrs. Gilbert had not yet come to consider the wickedness of her ways. She was a very good wife, very gentle and obedient; and she fancied she had a right to furnish the secret chamber of her mind according to her own pleasure. . . . What did it matter if a strange god reigned in the temple, so long . . . as she rendered all due service to her liege lord and master? He *was* her liege lord and master, though his fingers were square at the tips, and he had an abnormal capacity for the consumption of spring-onions. . . . She was very wicked, and she thought perpetually of Roland Lansdell. (Braddon 1998: 183)

The use of free indirect discourse here appears to create a distinction between narrator and character, as Isabel’s “wickedness” is asserted by the third-person voice even as

her naively unaware sense of self denies it. Yet the acknowledgment that George is her "lord and master" is Isabel's, reconfirming the essential loyalty to him that prevents her from becoming a fallen woman. The transitional assertion that "She was a very good wife," therefore, cannot simply be dismissed as self-justification, and acts to offset the reiterated declaration that Isabel is "very wicked." Indeed, the repetition of this phrase three times in such a short textual space exposes an insecure sense that this appraisal of her morality needs to be declared because it is not very convincing on its face. Isabel is shown engaging in a notional "wickedness" whose performance hardly seems to warrant the designation, since its ultimate expression will be a *refusal* to betray her husband. Isabel eventually internalizes and accepts this presumptive failure, so that the narrator can assert "[s]he was beginning to feel that people guessed at her wickedness and tried to cure her of her madness. Yes; she was very wicked – very mad. She acknowledged her sin" (Braddon 1998: 230), but even statements like this imply the cultural constructedness of such designations, since her guilt is created by her growing awareness of social disapproval. The novel appears to accept the idea that sin can exist without actual sinful action, but the strain required to support this position reveals its subjectivity.

Obviously one of the reasons Braddon has Isabel refuse Roland's adulterous offer is to avoid the controversy that would have arisen among her readers had the character really committed such a sin. Yet within the novel Isabel's reputation is fully compromised *despite* the fact that she remains true to her husband. Thus Lady Gwendoline Ruysdale, Roland's cousin and one-time fiancée, excoriates Isabel by informing her that "[p]eople say that you are a false wife . . . a false wife in thought and intention, if not in deed; since you have lured my cousin back to this place; and are ready to leave it with him as his mistress whenever he chooses to say 'Come'" (Braddon 1998: 260). Although what "people say" proves to be completely mistaken, this is revealed as beside the point since, as Judith Butler notes,

acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* . . . through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence of identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (Butler 1999: 173)

That Isabel's apparent infidelity is as damning as the actual "deed" is Braddon's obliquely critical comment on her culture's validation of performed propriety. Rather than employing a standard exposure of hypocrisy, *The Doctor's Wife* strikes deeper and questions whether external ethical judgment, individual or collective, can *ever* discern more than the self-dramatizations of cultural enactments.

It is for this reason that the novel's repeated allusions to *Dombey and Son* are important. Certainly "only the most resistant readers of Dickens would be likely to regard Edith Dombey (one of Isabel's frequently invoked heroines) as a happy role model for

the young wife of a country physician” (Pykett 1998: xvi), but as a counter-example of performance for a reader encountering both books Edith is invaluable. Where Isabel agrees to marry Gilbert with no clear idea of what that entails, Edith is fully cognizant of her position with Mr. Dombey:

“You know he has bought me. . . . Or that he will, to-morrow. He has considered of his bargain; he has shown it to his friend; he is even rather proud of it; he thinks that it will suit him, and may be had sufficiently cheap; and he will buy to-morrow. God, that I have lived for this, and that I feel it!” (Dickens 1982: 332)

Edith’s recognition that she has been prostituted through marriage leads her to show her husband an “intense, unutterable, withering scorn” (Dickens 1982: 437) that is very different from Isabel’s discontent with Gilbert’s square fingertips and enjoyment of spring onions, so that contrasting ways of performing a loveless marriage are portrayed, and very much to the advantage of the doctor’s wife. Here again Braddon’s novel calls attention to its self-aware textuality, since her main character’s admiration for another author’s more melodramatic character suggests the subtler sensationalism her own novel employs. And this becomes most obvious in the non-act shared by Isabel and Edith, in that both ultimately refuse to commit adultery. Of course Edith’s absconding with her husband’s business manager, James Carker, is a performance of adultery, its intention to humiliate Dombey being fully realized since “[w]hat the world thinks of him, how it looks at him, what it sees in him, and what it says – this is the haunting demon of his mind” (Dickens 1982: 600). Her refusal to consummate her illicit relationship with Carker, whom she despises as much as Dombey, ironically leaves her technically faithful, although she has intentionally sacrificed her reputation in order to socially destroy both men: “I have resolved to bear the shame that will attach to me – resolved to know that it attaches falsely – that you [Carker] know it too – and that he [Dombey] does not, never can, and never shall. I’ll die, and make no sign. . . . Nothing can save you now” (Dickens 1982: 640). All of this, therefore, exposes how female behavior simply cannot be judged in straightforward terms, and the excess of Edith’s annihilating passion mitigates Isabel’s romantic playacting to the point that its designation as “wickedness” seems absurdly overstated, even as *The Doctor’s Wife* illustrates that the consequences of such comparatively minor social transgressions can be out of all proportion to their causes. *Dombey and Son* may not have the intertextual significance of *Madame Bovary*, but the allusions to Dickens’s novel demonstrate more than that Isabel is a simplistic reader. They generate a parallel narrative that comments on the “the danger of deceptive surfaces” (Sparks 2000: 200), and especially the danger of deceptive female surfaces, in a way which uses the overt sensationalism of the earlier text to hint at the more indirect sensationalism of the later.

The sudden reappearance of Isabel’s father, with his demand that she keep his identity secret and furnish him with fifty pounds, provides a distractive cover to

Braddon's commentary on the performative subjectivity of female character through its introduction of more familiar sensation fiction tropes. It also, however, generates further opportunities for misevaluation, since in performing the role of dutiful daughter by clandestinely meeting with him to make the necessary monetary arrangements she leaves herself open to yet more accusations of sexual impropriety, and this time not just by Graybridge society but by a frantically jealous Roland as well. The title of volume III, chapter 7, "I'll Not Believe But Desdemona's Honest," overtly theatricalizes Isabel's experience while its allusion to *Othello* asserts how easily falsely interpreted evidence may ruin a woman's name. In Isabel's case, however, there is no plotting Iago or insecure Moor needed to defame her reputation; all that is required is a society unwilling to acknowledge its dependency on "corporeal signs" when defining identity, and unable to recognize the powerful subjectivities that underlie seemingly easy-to-decode actions. Perhaps equally interesting, however, is the suddenly introduced idea of performing duty, in opposition to the putative wickedness that has dominated the text to this point.

The return of Sleaford into the plot occurs at the same moment that George falls ill with typhoid fever, requiring Isabel to spend an increasing amount of time nursing him. Once again Roland, in his bitterness at her rejection of his advances, can only perceive her as "playing at devotion" (Braddon 1998: 325), but this time he is perhaps closer to the truth, although not in the way he thinks. The narrator is quite explicit in asserting that "[t]he Doctor's Wife was at peace . . . and she was prepared to do her duty . . . and to watch dutifully, undistracted by any secret fear and anguish, by George Gilbert's sick-bed" (1998: 363). This ability to enact duty, despite the equally blunt narrative assertion that "[s]he did not love her husband. . . . She was only sorry for him; [and] tenderly compassionate of his suffering" (1998: 366), once again seriously compromises the supposed ease with which women's motives may be determined. As Natalie and Ronald A. Schroeder observe, "she does not love Gilbert, but she understands her obligation to be dutiful and obedient nevertheless. In fact, Isabel successfully separates duty and love" (Schroeder and Schroeder 2006: 165). Isabel is not the hypocrite that Roland imagines, but neither is she the emotionally dedicated wife that her position by George's deathbed suggests. The confused cultural signals being sent while Isabel struggles to do her duty to both her father and her husband, as her covert meetings with the first are taken as further indications of her betrayal of the second, suggest the indeterminacy of this most foundational of Victorian values. Thus Isabel is subjected to a final set of accusations by one of her own servants, who at this extreme moment repeats the bitter charge "you're a wicked woman and a wicked wife!" (Braddon 1998: 367). But even as he dies, George will not accept this evaluation, with his last breath insisting "Wicked! No, no! . . . Always a good wife; always a very good wife," and the narrator concludes the scene with the statement "[h]e died, with Isabel's hand clasped in his own, and never, throughout his simple life, had one pang of doubt or jealousy tortured his breast" (1998: 368). This is certainly not a luxury afforded Charles Bovary, whose grim death overtakes him after the full scandal of his wife's infidelities envelops and destroys his medical practice, his

health, and his family. To the only man who truly counts, Isabel Gilbert has, fully and successfully, performed her role as the doctor's wife.

Braddon's declared intent to write herself a new authorial and generic role through her intertextual employment of *Madame Bovary* produced the kinds of resistances inevitable in such an overtly formulated project. The murder of Roland Lansdell at the hands of Jack the Scribe late in the text provides the novel with explicit elements of melodrama and sensationalism, but its efforts to divide sensation fiction from realism/naturalism had been rendered problematic long before these plot developments occur, since "[i]n such a typology, the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance [*l'énonciation*]" (Derrida 1988: 18). The pervasive representation of performativity in *The Doctor's Wife* encourages its reader to question rote assignments of textual and moral value even as it appears to accept standardized hierarchies of merit, so that the staged nature of the evaluative process itself becomes a subtextual theme. Braddon's attempt to reproduce Flaubert's thematics may not in the end come very close to replicating the French author's aggressively distinctive method, but her text nonetheless manages to generate its own subtle challenge to the Victorian assumptions and subjectivities that circumscribed her life and fiction.

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Mary Elizabeth Braddon's  
*Aurora Floyd*

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*Aurora Floyd*, Braddon's next bestseller after *Lady Audley's Secret*, tells the story of a likeable yet untraditional Victorian heroine who becomes entangled in a bigamous marriage and, later, a murder mystery, bringing scandal to her home and family. Mary Elizabeth Braddon frequently employs the language of the stage to describe the turbulent domestic life of her eponymous heroine. For example, the arrival in volume II of *Aurora Floyd* at the home of her father, where she flees to ask for money that will enable her to conceal her bigamous marriage, prompts the narrator to contrast ancient and modern tragedies. The narrator notes that "our modern tragedies seem to occur indoors, and in places where we should least look for scenes of horror" (Braddon 1998: 289). The place "where we should least look for scenes of horror" is, of course, the home; however, a main characteristic of the sensation novel is that the sensational originates in the domestic sphere. In contrast to the foreign settings and supernatural trappings of Gothic novels, the sensation novel is an "everyday gothic," "a civilized melodrama, modernized and domesticated" (Hughes 1980: 16). This theatrical language comes naturally to Braddon, who was a provincial actress in her twenties, though she was not the only writer to make a connection between fiction and the theater. Braddon's fellow sensation writer Wilkie Collins, for instance, argued that the "Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the family of Fiction; that the one is a drama narrated, as the other is a drama acted" (Collins 2008: 4). *Aurora Floyd* and the critical work on it show that Braddon both appropriates and rejects the language of the stage to argue that, while a transgressive female like Aurora threatens the home, she need not completely destroy it; in fact, she can be redeemed and the element of tragedy expelled from the domestic sphere.



Though Mary Elizabeth Braddon is perhaps still primarily known for her first bestselling novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861–2), *Aurora Floyd*, serialized contemporaneously with the former (1862–3), was just as popular with Victorian audiences.<sup>1</sup> Braddon herself seemed to have expressed a preference for *Aurora Floyd* when, in a December 1862 letter to her friend and mentor Edward Bulwer-Lytton, she wrote, “I venture to hope that you will like ‘Aurora Floyd,’ (which I am to finish this month) better than ‘Lady Audley,’ as it is more boldly written, & less artificial than the latter” (qtd. in Wolff 1974: 10). Geraldine Jewsbury considered *Aurora Floyd* a “superior book” in “some ways,” mainly because she found Aurora a more realistic and likeable heroine than Lady Audley, saying “Aurora is a woman, – not a fiend, nor a maniac” (Jewsbury 1863: 144). Darkly beautiful and loved by all, Aurora Floyd prefers horses and horseracing to so-called proper feminine pastimes, making her what Victorians called a “fast” young lady, or one thought to be unrefined and unfeminine (Braddon 1998: 62). After she spends too much time with her father’s lower-class groom, James Conyers, Mr. Floyd sends Aurora away to a French boarding school, where the groom follows and persuades her to marry him.<sup>2</sup> When her husband is both abusive and unfaithful, Aurora returns to her father’s home, where later she reads in the newspaper an incorrect report of her husband’s death in a racing accident. Thinking she is free to remarry, Aurora accepts the hand of a Yorkshire squire, John Mellish, not only to discover that her first husband is alive but also that John Mellish has hired him as his groom. When Conyers turns up dead, Aurora, who inadvertently committed bigamy, is also under suspicion of having murdered him, signaling a transition from a sensation to a mystery novel in the last third of the story.<sup>3</sup>

In discussions of *Aurora Floyd*, critics frequently compare and contrast the novel with *Lady Audley's Secret*, which is natural given that Braddon herself lumped together these texts, calling them her “pair of Bigamy novels” (qtd. in Wolff 1974: 12). These critics agree that characterizations of Lucy Audley and Aurora allow Braddon to challenge the female fictional stereotypes of angel and demon. Karen E. Tatum argues that a comparison of the novels shows how Braddon “subverts our expectations of the conventional light and dark heroines” to remind us that “what we presume to be innocent is truly dangerous, and that what we presume to be dangerous is really not horrifying at all” (Tatum 2007: 504). Lucy Audley, with her “soft blue eyes” (Braddon 1998: 6) and “fair hair” (1998: 8), is not an Angel in the House at all but a woman capable of murder, while Aurora is, in Tatum’s words, a “dark femme fatale who turns out to be completely benign” (Tatum 2007: 510). Similarly, Lyn Pykett notes that that Lucy Audley seems to be an example of the “feminine ideal,” though she is “bigamous, murderous and possibly insane,” and that Aurora has a “racy and, apparently, criminal exterior” while on the inside “beats the eternal heart of domestic, maternal woman” (Pykett 1992: 88). In a slightly different formulation of the angel/demon pairing, Jeni Curtis suggests that, in the case of Lucy Audley, the angel and demon are figured within the same character, but in *Aurora Floyd*, the two extremes are embodied in two women: “passionate Aurora and her passionless cousin

Lucy” (Curtis 2000: 77–8). Lucy Floyd, in contrast to Lucy Audley, is the epitome of angelic womanhood both inside and out.

But if recent studies continue to see Lucy Floyd, Aurora’s cousin and foil, as “the perfection of conventional womanhood,” others rightly provide more complicated readings of this character (Nemesvari and SurrIDGE 1998: 21). Unlike the motherless Aurora, Lucy is educated with care by her mother and raised to be a perfect wife: “Purity and goodness had watched over [Lucy] and hemmed her in from her cradle. She had never seen unseemly sights, or heard unseemly sounds” (Braddon 1998: 94). While Aurora studies *Bell’s Life*, the sporting paper, Lucy continually reads High Church novels, considered suitable reading material for young ladies. If the text does not “criticize Lucy,” argue Nemesvari and SurrIDGE, it “undercuts the [Victorian angel ideal] itself as infantilized, ignorant, hemmed in, and – most damning of all – boring” (Nemesvari and SurrIDGE 1998: 22). Tatum similarly suggests that Braddon represents Lucy’s “angelic innocence as dull-witted ignorance” (Tatum 2007: 512). But other critics observe complexities in Lucy’s seemingly straightforward character. Lillian Nayder, for example, adds that Lucy is far from “transparent” and acknowledges that there are “depths that lie beneath Lucy’s transparent” surface (Nayder 2006: 196–7). Jeni Curtis observes that Lucy is “more aware” than she appears to be to other characters, and that it is Lucy who first discovers Talbot’s love for Aurora (Curtis 2000: 87). These new interpretations of Lucy Floyd will help ensure that her character is not neglected and underestimated by scholars as she is by many characters in the novel.

Just as Braddon makes clear that neither the angel nor the demon label is an entirely accurate description of Aurora, so does she show how Aurora refuses to conform completely to the role of tragic heroine. After Talbot Bulstrode, to whom Aurora is engaged prior to John Mellish, breaks off his engagement to Aurora because she will not share with him her secret (that she married James Conyers), Aurora falls ill for months. According to the dictates of tragedy, Aurora “ought, no doubt, to have died of shame and sorrow after Talbot’s cruel desertion,” but she instead recovers and slowly begins to feel affection for John Mellish, who never leaves her side during her recovery (Braddon 1998: 182). In contrast to lovers who “die for love” in tragedies, the narrator argues that in “real life,” the “worms very rarely get an honest meal off men and women who have died for love” (1998: 182).<sup>4</sup> Talbot Bulstrode even sounds disappointed that Aurora doesn’t die after losing him when he sees her happily married to another: “what a pitiful farce had the tragedy ended!” (1998: 213). The narrator again refers to her story as a “real life-drama” at the beginning of the second volume of the novel, after Aurora has married John Mellish and her cousin, Lucy, has married Talbot Bulstrode:

Now my two heroines being married, the reader versed in the physiology of novel writing may conclude that my story is done, that the green curtain is ready to fall upon the last act of the play, and that I have nothing more to do than to entreat indulgence for the short-comings of the performance and the performers. Yet, after all, does the

business of the real life-drama always end upon the altar-steps? Must the play needs be over when the hero and heroine have signed their names in the register? Does man cease to be, to do, and to suffer when he gets married? (Braddon 1998: 222)

Here the narrator's conflation of novel and play echoes Collins's comment about the novel and play being "twin-sisters." Despite referring to the novel as a "performance" and the characters as "performers," the narrator continues to differentiate between tragedies of old and her more "real" domestic drama, which not only concentrates on courtship but marriage as well. Sensation fiction often focuses on "marriage, rather than on the courtship which formed the main narrative trajectory of most Victorian fiction," observes Lyn Pykett (1992: 6). But as we have seen, Aurora resists dying tragically for love and instead enters a happy marriage with John Mellish, though the above passage ends ominously, hinting at suffering to come, and leaving open the possibility of Aurora becoming a tragic heroine after all.

Despite the narrator's distinction between real-life drama and other tragedies, and Aurora's resistance to the role of tragic heroine, the language of the theater still permeates *Aurora Floyd*. In the opening chapter of the novel, set twenty years before the novel's present, we learn that Aurora's wealthy father, Archibald Floyd, fell in love with Aurora's mother, Eliza Prodder, who died in childbirth, after seeing her perform on a Lancashire stage. As Ruth Burridge Lindemann points out, the history of Aurora's actress mother establishes a "theatrical subtext for the entire novel" (Lindemann 1997: 283). Eliza's lower-class background shapes her daughter, as Aurora was "her mother's own daughter, and had the taint of the play-acting and horse-riding, and the spangles and the sawdust, strong in her nature" (Braddon 1998: 62). Aurora's maternity, therefore, contributes to her feeling more at home in the stable than the drawing room, the traditional sphere of an upper-class woman.

Essentially, it is Aurora's own cross-class relationship with Conyers that makes the domestic sphere vulnerable and turns Mellish Park into a theater of sorts, plagued by drama. Various characters reflect upon their roles in the "domestic drama," a recurring phrase in the novel (Braddon 1998: 369, 443). Talbot Bulstrode watches the family party at Feldon Wood, the home of Archibald Floyd, as if he "looked at a scene on the stage from the back of the boxes" (1998: 93). Noting the associations of the open window in *Aurora Floyd* and the stage, Lillian Nayder discusses the importance of the window as a liminal site in this novel (Nayder 2006: 189). She argues that Aurora's frequent portrayal on thresholds "suggests her own failure to uphold social codes and class boundaries, and her passage through them signals her potential fall" (2006: 191). Aurora's being on the brink of a fall reinforces the notion of her as a tragic heroine.

Yet if the narrative strengthens the reading of Aurora as a tragic heroine by continually linking her to tragedies such as the story of Adam and Eve in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Macbeth*, the plot ultimately undercuts this idea because the parallels ultimately do not hold. Perhaps the strongest association lies between Aurora and Eve; as Aurora acknowledges: "the fruits of that foolish seed, grown long ago in the day of her disobedience, had grown up around her and hedged

her in upon every side" (Braddon 1998: 403). In other words, because she disobeyed her father and entered into a forbidden relationship with Conyers, her Eden, or her home with John Mellish, is now threatened, and the "serpent" in her garden is the groom Steeve Hargraves, called the "Softy" (1998: 256). Superficially, too, Aurora resembles Lady Macbeth when, in realizing she cannot change the past, she echoes Lady Macbeth's consolation to her guilty husband that "what's done cannot be undone" (1998: 278). The narrative also likens Aurora to Hecate, one of the hags in Macbeth, on the fateful night that she decides to meet Conyers before his death (1998: 343). But unlike Lady Macbeth, Aurora does not have blood on her hands because she is not guilty of the murder of her first husband (1998: 475). *Aurora Floyd* is also in many ways a reworking of *Othello*, with Conyers, the "Softy," and Mrs. Powell all at various points being likened to Iago in their attempts to cast doubt on Aurora's reputation and honesty. But unlike Shakespeare's play, Braddon's novel ultimately is not a tragedy because John Mellish remains true to his wife, and only briefly wavers in his opinion of her. Significantly, most of Braddon's allusions to these tragedies occur in the second volume of the novel when Mellish Park is most vulnerable. But the allusions diminish in frequency in the third volume, when it becomes increasingly clear that Hargraves, and not Aurora, killed Conyers.

It is Lucy, not Aurora, who more closely resembles a tragic heroine. When she grows ill during the courtship of her cousin and Talbot Bulstrode, Lucy is compared to Elaine of Astolat in Arthurian legend, who dies of unrequited love for Lancelot. Unlike Aurora, who refuses to die for love when her engagement with Talbot ends, Lucy actually hopes for such an outcome when it appears she has no future with the man she loves:

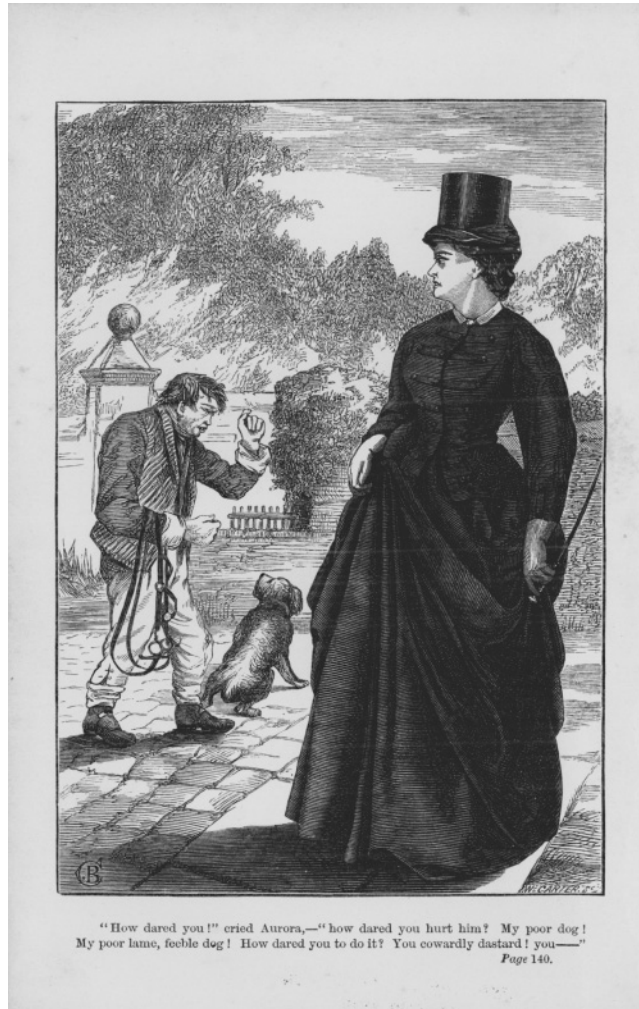
So Lucy Floyd, having nothing better to do, nursed and made much of her hopeless passion. She set up an altar for the skeleton, and worshipped at the shrine of her grief; and when people told her of her pale face, and the family doctor wondered at the failure of his quinine mixture, perhaps she nourished a vague hope that before the spring-time came back again, bringing with it the wedding-day of Talbot and Aurora, she would have escaped from all this demonstrative love and happiness, and be at rest. (Braddon 1998: 127)

Talbot Bulstrode also dreams of Lucy as an Elaine or Ophelia figure in a scene that surely provides a powerful visual image in readers' minds of Lucy dying for love. Bulstrode dreams of Aurora pointing down to a pool of water where "the corpse of Lucy" can be seen, "lying pale and still amidst lilies and clustering aquatic plants" (Braddon 1998: 147).<sup>5</sup> Even after Bulstrode proposes to Lucy, her life is still characterized as a tragedy because she is not able to reveal her true feelings in the way in which the passionate Aurora does. Women like Lucy, the narrator reveals, are always at a disadvantage: "Their inner life may be a tragedy, all blood and tears, while their outer existence is some dull domestic drama of everyday life" (1998: 220). Thus, Lucy is a tragic heroine in disguise, struggling internally with tragedies that more visibly surround Aurora.

It was not Aurora's bigamy, but the iconic scene when she horsewhips a servant, which generated the most debate amongst Victorian critics, and continues to interest scholars today. This scene has a stage-like quality and resembles a tableau. John Mellish finds Aurora whipping the groom Steeve Hargraves in the stable after the latter has kicked her beloved dog. Contemporary critics called the scene "revolting" (Jewsbury 1863: 145) and a "fatal mistake" ("Popular Novels" 1863: 261), while another protested that no lady of Aurora's "position" could have acted in the way she is "represented to have done" (Rae 1865: 190). In a detailed discussion of the scene in *The Private Rod: Marital Violence, Sensation, and the Law in Victorian Britain*, Marlene Tromp, noting how the narrative links both Aurora and her dog Bow-Wow and John Mellish and the Softy, concludes that, ultimately, Softy's attack on Bow-Wow becomes an "encoded performance of marital violence" (Tromp 2000: 115). The scene dramatizes, Tromp argues, not only a "husband's assault on his wife" but, more sensationally, Aurora's ability to "strike back" against such violence (Tromp 2000: 116). This moment, then, is another example of Aurora violating gender codes and acting in an unfeminine fashion. Nemesvari and Surridge similarly view the whip scene as Aurora "acting out her aggression in her new marriage," though they suggest that Hargraves doubles not with Mellish but with Conyers, so that the scene evokes the continuing consequences of Aurora's earlier sexual relationship with a stable hand (Nemesvari and Surridge 1998: 26). Thus, in this brief and powerful scene, Braddon is able to dramatize many of the dangers that threaten Mellish Park, especially unleashed female aggression and sexuality.

The frontispiece illustration to the Tinsley Brothers eighth edition of the novel, dated 1864 (see Figure 12.1), depicts the moment preceding the dramatic scene when Aurora horsewhips the Softy and reinforces the notion of it being an example of a transgression of gender norms. In this illustration, a towering and fierce-looking Aurora stands in the foreground with the whip in her hand looking back at a diminutive Steeve Hargraves, who has just kicked her cowering dog. The caption reads, "How dared you!" cried Aurora, – "how dared you hurt him? My poor dog! My poor lame, feeble dog! How dared you to do it? You cowardly dastard! you – ." The illustration successfully conveys the importance of the scene, just as Braddon's narrator does by referring back to it repeatedly as an example of unfeminine behavior.

Many sensation novels, by nature melodramatic and theatrical, were adapted for the stage, and *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* were the Braddon novels most frequently adapted (Holder 2000: 166). Nemesvari and Surridge point out that several contemporary stage versions of *Aurora Floyd* support the interpretation that the crux of the horsewhipping scene is that Aurora emasculates her husband and appears to dominate in the marriage. More specifically, in *Aurora Floyd; or, The Dark Deed in the Wood* and *Aurora Floyd; or, The Banker's Daughter*, the horsewhipping scene is preceded by added scenes where Aurora henpecks her husband, note Nemesvari and Surridge (1998: 25). Another change between novel and play in multiple adaptations of *Aurora Floyd* is the omission of Eliza Prodder, Aurora's actress mother (Lindemann 1997: 283). Ruth Burridge Lindemann has noticed in many stage adaptations of Braddon's



**Figure 12.1** Frontispiece illustration to the Tinsley Brothers eighth edition of *Aurora Floyd*. With thanks to the following institutions and individuals, who made it possible to find and acquire this image: University of Florida Interlibrary Loan, University of Florida Digital Library Center, Ohio University Interlibrary Loan, Helene Gold, and Stephen Addcox

novels the erasure or minimization of references to the stage and theatrical characters (1997: 279). She accounts for these theatrical alterations by suggesting that, to maintain its relatively new image as a respectable middle-class profession, the theater tended to err on the side of being more conservative in its adaptations of sensation novels (1997: 280). Nevertheless, given how Mary Elizabeth Braddon herself blurs the line between novel and play in *Aurora Floyd*, and the many stage adaptations

of the novel, it is fitting that the author lived to see a 1913 film version of *Aurora Floyd*, allowing her to take on the role of spectator of her own novel (Tromp et al. 2000: xxiv).

The whip scene highlights another interest of several recent studies of *Aurora Floyd*: violence, both real and imagined, against the transgressive heroine. Tromp focuses on Aurora as an orientalized, colonial other who, because she is capable of violence herself, must be “contained and civilized,” even if “great violence” is needed to achieve that end (Tromp 2000: 122). Aurora is described in the narrative (usually by Bulstrode) as an “Eastern empress” (Braddon 1998: 87), “Assyrian” (1998: 116), and like an “alcoholic preparation; barbarous, intoxicating, dangerous, and maddening” (1998: 78). As a way of dealing with this perceived threat, various male characters, including Bulstrode, Mellish, Conyers, and Hargrave, imagine violence against Aurora over the course of the novel. Tromp further relates her discussion of the colonization of Aurora to parliamentary debates about the Contagious Diseases Acts. Like the prostitutes who were seized, examined for STDs, and often contained under the terms of the Acts, Aurora too is identified as a “sole contaminant” who must be controlled and reformed (Tromp 2000: 140). Though the language of the novel often parallels the language of the Acts, Tromp explains that debate about the CD Acts appeared only after the publication of *Aurora Floyd*, suggesting that Braddon’s novel, by insisting that Aurora ultimately is victim rather than victimizer, helped to spark the anti-CD Acts literature and, eventually, the repeal of the Acts themselves (Tromp 2000: 107).

Inherent in these analyses of violence is the role of the body. In *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction*, Andrew Mangham, like Tromp, notes the frequent association between women’s bodies and violence, and he argues that the male imagination is responsible for the linkage of the two (Mangham 2007: 69). But instead of relating his discussion of the novel to parliamentary legislation, Mangham connects the discourses of *Aurora Floyd* and the notorious “Road Murder” of 1860, in which Constance Kent eventually confessed to killing her young stepbrother, a case that Braddon refers to implicitly in the novel. Like Tromp and Mangham, Jeni Curtis concurs that there is a preoccupation with the taming and, to echo Curtis’s language, pruning of women’s natures and bodies. Noting how often Aurora is associated with a growing plant, Curtis shows that this particular metaphor was also frequently used in conduct books and other nineteenth-century texts, including those by Sarah Ellis and John Stuart Mill, instructing women how to be “natural” (Curtis 2000: 79). Yet, significantly, this metaphor often takes on “violent implications,” as it does in *Aurora Floyd*, so that the “womanly body is mutilated to train it into the maternal ideal” (Curtis 2000: 85). The pervasiveness of violence directly relates to the tragedy and melodrama of the novel.

Because Aurora is (or is imagined to be) transgressive and violent, she becomes subject to surveillance and the gaze of others, who act as spectators of the performing Aurora. Indeed, several critics have focused on metaphorical spectatorship in the novel. In *The “Improper” Feminine: The Women’s Sensation Novel and the New Woman*

*Writing*, Lyn Pykett notices that Braddon's narratives "habitually stage the feminine as spectacle" (Pykett 1992: 91), not only because most of her heroines have something to hide and are "to that extent actresses" (1992: 89), but also because characters like Aurora become both the object of a male gaze as well as the reader's gaze (1992: 99). Pykett argues that the male gaze, often Bulstrode's, typically directs its attention to the female body, creating the representation of "female sexuality as voyeuristic spectacle" (1992: 101). Because of the dominance of the male gaze, it should be no surprise that, despite the novel's omniscient narrative voice, readers are privy to the thoughts of male characters more than to those of the eponymous heroine. But as Pykett indicates, the shifting point of view is complicated and ensures that Aurora is both passive object of a gaze and active agent (1992: 102). The degree of Aurora's agency can thus be elusive.

Lillian Nayder posits that Braddon both represents male surveillance and challenges it, noting that not only does Bulstrode gaze at Aurora, but she gazes back (Nayder 2006: 195). This "mutual gaze," says Nayder, allows Braddon to challenge the sexual double standard of the virtue of transparency in women but not in men (2006: 195). In addition to the gendered component of the surveillance in the novel, Nayder's article also emphasizes the class component. She notes that the window is a "gathering place for resentful and curious servants eager to bring low their employers" (2006: 189). Mrs. Powell, Aurora's companion, and the groom Steeve Hargraves, especially, are guilty of continually spying on Aurora, hoping to find out her secret and expose it. By depicting characters watching each other in the domestic sphere, Braddon emphasizes a problematic private spectatorship.

The fear of turning her private life into a public spectacle is one of the main reasons that Aurora does not pursue the option of divorcing James Conyers, though an anachronism and a couple of factual errors in the novel raise the issue of whether Aurora would have been entitled to a divorce in the first place.<sup>6</sup> Several times, the narrative mentions the possibility of Aurora divorcing Conyers, though she could not have divorced him in 1857, the year she is supposed to have left him in the novel, because the Divorce Court did not open until 1858. When Conyers begins working for John Mellish, he calls Aurora's bluff about revealing their marriage to the world, knowing that such information would make a "nice bit of gossip for the newspapers!" (Braddon 1998: 351). Aurora understands the truth of Conyers's taunt and later tells Bulstrode that she did not opt for a divorce for her "father's sake," who would be hurt by the public's scorn for his daughter (1998: 434). Though the truth about Aurora's bigamous marriage does eventually come out, her friends, especially Talbot Bulstrode, do everything in their power to contain the gossip.

Despite the excellent work that has been done on metaphorical, private spectatorship, more attention should be paid to actual, public spectatorship in the novel. An example of this latter type is when the Mellishes attend the York spring meeting to watch their bay filly, named Aurora, compete in a "weight-for-age race" (Braddon 1998: 200). In another instance, Samuel Prodder ironically takes in a "nautical drama" when he returns to London to distract himself from the domestic drama that he wit-



nessed at Mellish Park (1998: 458), emphasizing the slippage in the novel between actual and metaphorical drama. In Aurora's case, passion for the world of spectatorship leads to spectacles in her private life.

Braddon also shows the crossed line between public and private spectacle in the novel when Mr. Grimstone, the detective brought in to investigate the murder of Conyers, notices on the doorpost of the Doncaster theater juxtaposed images of play bills and a reward poster. Next to old bills of "dramatic performances that had long taken place" hangs a poster offering a reward for the discovery of the murderer of James Conyers (Braddon 1998: 526). The narrator refers to the poster as a "record of a drama as terrible as any that had ever been enacted in that provincial theatre" (1998: 526). The blurring of the public and private in the novel is the subject of Gina M. Dorré's chapter on *Aurora Floyd*, titled "Horsebreaking and Homemaking." As various critics have pointed out, Aurora is figured as a "horsey" heroine or pretty "horse-breaker" (slang for prostitute) in the novel, but Dorré adds that Aurora is conflated with an actual horse when her husband names their filly Aurora (Dorré 2006: 83). Dorré further suggests that the narrative's taming and domestication of Aurora becomes a kind of "reenactment of the horsebreaking spectacle" (2006: 83), a practice popularized in the late 1850s and early 1860s (2006: 65). Hence, Aurora is frequently linked to the public spectacle of horsebreaking, rather than the more preferable role of private homemaker.

The novel's conclusion suggests that Aurora will continue to be drawn to public spectacles like horseracing. Scholars debate whether or not Braddon, despite the novel's sensational plot, ends on a conventional note when she describes Aurora in the concluding paragraph as a "little changed, a shade less defiantly bright, perhaps, but unspeakably beautiful and tender, bending over the cradle of her first-born" (Braddon 1998: 549). Karen E. Tatum suggests that, though Braddon seems to enforce "Victorian domestic ideology" by purifying the heroine, the important thing to take away is that the author "reveals the dark heroine's [ultimate] innocence" (Tatum 2007: 522, 523). Tromp notes the "tensions" in the closure, but finally argues that, instead of capitulating to social expectations, Braddon's novels "betray social contradictions," as in the title's use of Aurora's maiden name, which Tromp says signals the "discomfort" the text produces over the "shape of marriage" (Tromp 2000: 152). Natalie and Ronald A. Schroeder see Aurora bending over the cradle as "too much of a set-piece" to be anything but "ironic" (Schroeder and Schroeder 2006: 103). And though most critics focus on the last part of the novel's final sentence, "I doubt if my heroine will care so much for horseflesh," one should also attend to the first part of this sentence. This clause describes equestrian alterations and additions, including "loose-boxes for brood mares" on the site of the north lodge (where Conyers resided) and a "subscription tan-gallop," suggesting that the Mellish household (including Aurora) will be just as interested as ever in horseflesh (Braddon 1998: 549). Regardless of how one reads this passage, it is clear that once Aurora legally marries John Mellish after the death of Conyers, and Hargraves is found to be guilty of the murder, the domestic sphere is again made safe. As the narrator states in the conclusion, the "element of tragedy" in

the life of the Mellishes is “banished,” signaling Aurora’s triumph rather than her capitulation to the role of tragic heroine (Braddon 1998: 547).

## NOTES

- 1 Though anecdotal evidence suggests that *Lady Audley's Secret* is still the Braddon novel most often taught in the classroom, increasing critical attention is being paid to Braddon’s other novels. Tromp, Gilbert, and Haynie note that their collection “explodes the predominating conception that Braddon’s work is summed up in [*Lady Audley's Secret*]” (2000: xxi).
- 2 Novelist and critic Margaret Oliphant critiqued the portrayal of women in sensation fiction, deploring novels that depict “women who marry their grooms in fits of sensual passion,” clearly referring to *Aurora Floyd* (1867: 259).
- 3 Sandra Kemp discusses the relationship between the sensation story and the detective plot in her introduction to Collins’s *The Moonstone*. Nemesvari and Surridge posit that by shifting from sensation plot into murder mystery in *Aurora Floyd*, Braddon transfers the guilt to outside the home, “away from the middle class and from her controversial heroine” (1998: 27).
- 4 Nemesvari and Surridge explain that in the later, single-volume Stereotyped edition of the novel, much of the narrative commentary, including the passage from which these quotations are taken, was removed (1998: 38). The distinction that Braddon’s narrator is trying to make between real-life tragedies and theatrical ones is therefore clearer in earlier editions of *Aurora Floyd*.
- 5 Talbot Bulstrode has essentially created his own tableau here, with Lucy playing the role of both Elaine (who featured in Tennyson’s recent *Idylls of the King*) and Ophelia (*Hamlet*). Talbot’s dream would have also called to mind for Victorian readers John Everett Millais’s painting *Ophelia* (1851–2). Thus, this scene suggests layers of representation and art media (novel, play, painting, and photography), emphasizing *Aurora Floyd*’s frequent association with performance and spectacle.
- 6 Nemesvari and Surridge discuss the heavy burden of proof that fell upon women when attempting to divorce their husbands. Conyers’s adultery alone would not have entitled Aurora to a divorce (1998: see 434n).

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Mary Elizabeth Braddon's  
*Joshua Haggard's Daughter*

Anne-Marie Beller

Given the considerable critical interest in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's work over the past twenty years or so, there has been surprisingly little attention paid to *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* (1876), the novel that Robert Lee Wolff, in his landmark biography, termed her "masterpiece." Significantly, Wolff's assertion of Braddon's accomplishment rests on his implicit identification of this novel as a realist text, in which the author successfully eschews the "coarse" sensationalism of her more famous early works. For Wolff, *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* is "a deceptively simple rural tragedy, its melodrama held well within bounds by a classic dignity of theme and treatment" (Wolff 1979: 257).

In a rare exception to the general critical neglect of *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*, Pamela K. Gilbert has demonstrated the ways in which this novel renders problematic the conventional distinctions between realism and sensationalism, bringing such an opposition into question, while also interrogating the assumptions that lie behind the categorization. By examining "the apparently 'obvious' distinction between these modes," Gilbert seeks to inquire "how, precisely, the difference is to be articulated" (Gilbert 2000: 184, 183–4). Her analysis also reveals how the critique of masculine failure and "the abuse of patriarchal authority" (themes implicit, though "displaced," throughout Braddon's early sensation novels) are explicit and comprehensive here, in her purportedly realist novel (Gilbert 2000: 194).

Taking Gilbert's insights as a point of departure, this essay will consider the idea of containment in *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*, a central concern of the novel, which shapes both theme and form. Not only are characters' lives and passions in various ways contained, confined, and repressed, the realist framework itself also works to echo this thematic concern. Wolff's semantic choice is interesting when he claims that

Braddon's melodrama is "held . . . within bounds," because this is a text which repeatedly attempts to restrain strong feeling and excessive emotion, while simultaneously implying the futility of such an attempt. In the endeavor to keep sensation "within bounds," Braddon produces a novel in which both figurative and literal images of confinement proliferate. In terms of form, the narrative does not so much aim to expel sensation as attempt to contain and confine its persistent eruptions. Consequently, Braddon's particular appropriation of the realist mode is one wherein the prosaic and the aberrant, the banal and the passionate, the commonplace and the sensational exist and compete in a constant state of tension.

Before offering a discussion of *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* in terms of these tropes of eruption and containment, I wish first to establish a context for such a reading by briefly considering Braddon's positioning in relation to realism during the period prior to the writing of this novel. As Wolff points out, *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* was Braddon's first novel to be written free from the pressures that impinged on her early career. Married to John Maxwell, Braddon had finally achieved the social respectability which, coupled with the financial security her own literary success had brought, enabled her to write after her inclination rather than purely to the demands of the commercial market.<sup>1</sup> In the letters to her mentor, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Braddon makes frequent references to "the public shilling" which "can only be extracted by strong measures" (qtd. in Wolff 1974: 139), comments which indicate the financial imperatives driving her early work, and which tend to support Wolff's argument. Nevertheless, there are problems with accepting this wholly as an explanatory framework for Braddon's career trajectory.

The implication that *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* heralded a dramatic shift of style in Braddon's fiction, or signified some sort of turning point in her writing, is simply not an adequate account of her development as a novelist. Not only did the author continue to employ the conventions and techniques of sensationalism throughout her life, she was also, in *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*, merely developing a trend of realism which had always been present in her work. As early as *The Doctor's Wife* (1864) she was striving to achieve something more than a mere popular success, informing her literary mentor, Edward Bulwer-Lytton that, once the imperative to financially provide for herself and her mother was fulfilled she would "then try and write for Fame, & do something more worthy to be laid upon [his] altar" (qtd. in Wolff 1974: 13). In Braddon's own judgment, "something worthy" or artistic meant fiction in which the plot issued from the characters, rather than the other way around, but to say as much is not to imply that the sensationalism she employed was against her natural inclinations. Undeniably, Braddon exploited the contemporary taste for sensation, often viewing it as a necessity in her bid for financial success. She complained to Bulwer that "the 'behind the scenes' of literature has in a manner demoralised me. I have learnt to look at everything in a mercantile sense, & to write solely for the circulating reader whose palette [*sic*] requires strong meat, & is not very particular as to the quality thereof" (qtd. in Wolff 1974: 14). Yet neither did she yearn to write quiet domestic realism after the manner of Anthony Trollope or Charlotte Yonge. Braddon's

personal taste in literature inclined to the dramatic, and though she admired George Eliot's work, she was truly a disciple of the more sensation-oriented author of *Jane Eyre*:

{Charlotte Brontë} seems to me the only *genius* the weaker sex can point to in literature. Great as George Eliot may be, in her somewhat passionless style, her work appears to me to be rather the outcome of a fine mind cultured to the highest point, than to [*sic*] the fiery force of that genius which . . . does what it must. (Wolff 1974: 150)

The preference indicates Braddon's continued belief that what the critics called "sensation," and what she termed dramatic interest, constituted an important part of fiction. A repeated complaint to Bulwer is that contemporary realism had come to be incompatible with the depiction of any but the most mundane situations and events. Braddon states clearly her disaffection from the current theories of realism prevalent in her own country in a letter of 1866:

English realism seems to me the deification of the commonplace. Your English realist lacks the grim grandeur of a Balzac who can impart an awful sublimity to the bruises [*sic*] of a persecuted servant girl – or the senile sorrows of a Pere Goriot. Except George Eliot there is no realistic writer I care to read – & she seems to me above all criticism. (Wolff 1974: 134)

Despite later calling her "somewhat passionless" (see above), the fact that Braddon singles out Eliot here as the only English realist she admires might suggest her recognition of those sensational tendencies in Eliot's work which recent scholars have discussed (Hughes 1980: 170–91; Cvetkovich 1992: 129; Pykett 1994: 69–72). The reference to Balzac in this excerpt, moreover, coupled with her admiration of Flaubert and later Zola, serves as a reminder that Braddon's rejection is not of realism *per se*, but of the specific form that she perceived it to have taken in mid-Victorian England.

In *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*, then, Braddon appropriates the realist form, incorporating many of its accepted outward features, yet persistently undermines the contemporary critical partiality for this "deification of the commonplace" through the repeated inclusion of sensational tropes and techniques. In doing so, she complicates attempts by anti-sensational critics to construct a binary opposition between two forms of fiction by suggesting that they are indeed coexistent. If, as Richard Nemesvari has persuasively argued, "the sensation fiction controversy served not to oppose a new genre to a preexisting one, but rather that the formulation of 'the sensational' was an essential, constitutive strategy which reified 'the realistic' in ways which had been unachievable before" (Nemesvari 2006: 17), then Braddon's deliberate appropriation and disruption of the realist narrative works to oppose this project. Aiming to establish her own style of sensational realism as a legitimate mode, Braddon litters her novel with textual allusions to the literature of canonical writers of the past, such as Shakespeare, Fletcher, and Marlowe, and to consecrated contemporary poets including Swinburne, Browning, and Barrett Browning – all of whom are evoked to reinforce

the point that "great" literature is engaged with the "sensational" rather than the "commonplace."<sup>2</sup>

In a similar way, Braddon aligns her novel with respected literary forms other than contemporary English realism by suggesting an association with Romanticism (and earlier German influences on the Romantic movement) through the dominant role played in the narrative by the poetry of Byron and, primarily, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). Not only is this latter text used to mirror the events of Braddon's plot, it also serves as a commentary on the generic tensions at work within it. *Werther* is described as "a picture painted in delicate half-tints at the beginning – the strong colouring comes afterwards" (Braddon 1876: 210), which could serve equally as a description of *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*. Elsewhere Goethe's novel is referred to as "that fatal romance of real life" (Braddon 1876: 239), which posits an interesting juxtaposition of realism and romance, and recalls Winifred Hughes's definition of sensation fiction as a "violent yoking" of these two modes (Hughes 1980: 16). In this way, Braddon aligns her fiction with Goethe's masterpiece and implicitly suggests an authoritative tradition for her techniques and subject matter.<sup>3</sup>

An important feature of the social realism practiced by writers such as Eliot, at least as discerned by mid-Victorian critics of the novel, was the inclusion of descriptive passages and artistic delineations of the natural world. Several reviewers of *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* singled out this element of the work as evidence of Braddon's departure from her early sensation novels, including an anonymous critic for *The Era*, who remarked:

We must commend this new feature in the recent works of this popular and prolific writer. We do not want Miss Braddon to become a sort of Wordsworth in fiction, and give us pages of rhapsody about the grandeur of mountains and the glory of waterfalls, but a dash of description does not come amiss when it is as gracefully introduced as we find it in several of her recent novels. ("Joshua Haggard's Daughter," 1876: 3)

The reviewer was also astute enough to recognize that *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* was not without its sensational features, but appeared to consider that the addition of descriptive sketches of nature counterbalanced this: "The consequence is that the sensational incidents – for Miss Braddon could not get on without making her readers hold their breath occasionally – are rendered all the more striking by contrast with the loveliness of nature" (1876: 3). What the various reviews failed to perceive was that the extensive descriptions of sleepy Combhaven and the surrounding Devonshire and Cornish coastline actually function as part of Braddon's implicit critique of the realist "deification of the commonplace," and that the open spaces and natural beauty serve only to emphasize the constrictive narrowness of the characters' lives. These geographical spaces are, moreover, carefully gendered, and while the open countryside and particularly the sea are associated with men, women's lack of access to these wider horizons is repeatedly emphasized.

The main protagonist, Joshua Haggard, is a Methodist preacher who, in his younger days, “used to wander about the country preaching in the open air” (Braddon 1876: 48). His daughter Naomi, “a young woman of energetic temperament [whose] energies were beginning to feel cramped by the narrow bounds of Combhaven” (1876: 32), yearns to follow her father’s example. However, Naomi’s ambitions are frustrated, not only by the confines of parochial village life, but also by the patriarchal oppression of her father’s creed:

She had talked to her father of her desire for missionary work, and he had answered her in the words of St. Paul, “let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak”. Very hard words they sounded to Naomi. . . . [she] began to despair of ever releasing herself from the prison-chamber of life in a village. (1876: 60)

The image of life as a “prison-chamber” for the central female characters is fundamental to their “realist” presentation, but it also develops a key theme from Braddon’s early sensation fiction. The claustrophobic images which abound in *Joshua Haggard’s Daughter* echo the treatment of characters such as Olivia Arundel, who asks “is my life to be all of one dull, grey, colourless monotony” (Braddon 1999: 136), and who agrees to marry John Marchmont chiefly because “the new prison might be worse than the old one, perhaps; but it would be different” (1999: 171).

These themes of women suffocating in the restrictive domestic realm, and their lack of opportunity for any more fulfilling role, have frequently been discussed in relation to sensation fiction (e.g. Pykett 1994), but such concerns are also central to many mid-Victorian “realist” novels, particularly those written by women. Female vocation is, of course, important in George Eliot’s novels, for example in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Middlemarch* (1872), and the stifling sense of narrowness experienced by Naomi in Braddon’s novel is expressed by both Esther Lyon and Mrs. Transome in *Felix Holt* (1866). Eliot states of Esther that “she was not contented with her life” and that “it had been a pleasant variety in her monotonous days to see a man like Harold Transome.” Mrs. Transome similarly complains of her “monotonous, narrowing life” (Eliot 1987: 159, 289, 104). In *Joshua Haggard’s Daughter*, the narrowness of the female sphere is suggestively linked to realist fiction, and it is the introduction of “sensation” which punctuates this “monotony” and offers the chance of escape from the “prison-chamber.”

Braddon’s novel opens by establishing Combhaven at the beginning of the nineteenth century as the epitome of the commonplace: “Very tranquil was the progress of life in Combhaven. None of those bubbles called events rippled the calm surface of that Devonian millpond” (Braddon 1876: 59). The first eruption into this tranquility, and the very literal disturbance of that “calm surface,” comes when a fearful storm causes the near-drowning of Oswald Pentreath, the local squire’s son, who is sensationally rescued from the sea by the Evangelical preacher Joshua Haggard. Oswald begins a friendship with the Haggards, which culminates in his proposing marriage to



Joshua's grave daughter Naomi, and despite the reservations about the difference in their respective stations voiced by his stern sister, Judith, the minister bestows his blessing on the young couple, though stipulating that they must wait two years before becoming engaged.

Oswald is a character in the style of Roland Landsell in Braddon's 1864 novel *The Doctor's Wife*. He is well-meaning and generous, but irresolute of purpose and, ultimately, a danger to himself and others through the lack of any specified or useful role, and the enforced idleness that ensues from this. Due to the squire's penny-pinching ways and his refusal to allow Oswald any involvement in the management of the estate the young man has few resources, and devotes most of his time to literature, particularly after the loss of his yacht. As he states to Joshua, "Fancy is sometimes sweeter than reality . . . and real life has given me very little to do" (Braddon 1876: 212). In some ways, Oswald can be seen not only as a parallel to Roland Landsell, but also to Isabel Sleaford of the same novel, who also uses literature as an escape from reality, and suffers through her inability to separate fact from fiction.

Having "very little to do," Oswald is thus positioned with the female characters of the novel, whose similar lack of fulfilling occupation contributes to the tedium that Braddon constantly emphasizes. The repetition of the Haggards' daily routine is stressed, with the family gathered "according to their custom from year's end to year's end, at the parlour table. . . . That afternoon gathering in Joshua Haggard's parlour was apt to be rather a dull business" (Braddon 1876: 23, 24). Against the stifling domestic spaces in the novel Braddon opposes the recurrent image of the sea, which represents vastness and vitality. Naomi declares early in the novel that she loves the ocean: "It seems somehow as if the sea's alive, and the land dumb and dead" (1876: 26). "Love of the sea" is also "innate in [Oswald]" (1876: 43), and even Joshua states that he was "almost as much on sea as on land when I was a boy" (1876: 26).

Oswald's relationship to Braddon's extended metaphor, however, is somewhat ambiguous. Despite his "innate" love of being out in his yacht it is the sea which nearly claims his life and, unlike his brother, Arnold, a professional sailor, Oswald is "grounded" and ultimately confined within the land, quite literally. His early observation to Naomi that "our race has sent its roots deep into the soil" (Braddon 1876: 49) becomes an ironic prophecy when he is later killed by Joshua and his body concealed in a disused mine shaft. Appropriately, Oswald proposes to Naomi on the beach – a liminal space between the open sea and the "dumb and dead" land – which suggests the problematic nature of their relationship. Naomi's final union is significantly with Arnold, "stouter and stronger built [than Oswald] . . . a man of tougher fibre altogether" (1876: 205), who literally comes to her from across the sea.

Just as the dramatic storm and ensuing sea rescue disturb the otherwise tranquil rhythms of the Combhaven existence, so too does Oswald's incursion into the Haggards' family circle ultimately disrupt their previously monotonous, but harmonious, lives. Oswald, with his dangerous addiction to sensuous Romantic literature, and Goethe in particular, intrudes the specter of illicit passion into Joshua's placid home,

an eruption of the sensational which proves more difficult to contain than a violent death by drowning.

Though sensation fiction had been associated with violent feelings and emotions since its first appearance as a critical concept in the early 1860s, by the end of the decade “sensation” had for some opponents of the genre become synonymous with sexual passion. In 1867 Margaret Oliphant lamented the “sensuous raptures” of the typical sensation heroine who was perceived to yearn for “flesh and muscles, and strong arms that seize her, and warm breath that thrills her” (Oliphant 1867: 259). In a letter to Bulwer that has been frequently quoted, Braddon indignantly rejected the idea that such descriptions could be applied to her heroines. In response to Oliphant’s comments, which contained a veiled personal attack, Braddon defied her critics “to point to one page or paragraph in [*The Doctor’s Wife*] – or in any other book of mine – which contains the lurking poison of sensuality” (qtd. in Wolff 1974: 132). Braddon appears to distinguish here between “sensuality” and “passion,” the latter of which she considers to be a vital component of that literary “genius” she identifies in Charlotte Brontë. In an essay on her early devotion to *Jane Eyre*, Braddon writes in admiration of Brontë’s “characters in whom the passionate life throbs strong and fierce! How marvellous the escape out of that dull and melancholy existence” (Braddon 1906: 176).

In *Joshua Haggard’s Daughter*, however, passion remains largely the preserve of the male characters and, in fact, women often dissatisfy through their prosaic realism. Oswald, aligned with Romanticism, is constantly irritated by Naomi’s reserved and sensible nature, complaining: “You are not like Byron’s women. . . . They are love incarnate, ready to sacrifice themselves or their lover at the shrine of love” (Braddon 1876: 104). In a similar way to Isabel Sleaford in *The Doctor’s Wife*, Naomi disappoints her lover by failing to live up to a certain literary image of womanhood, an image which Oswald here culls from Romanticism, but which was also descried (and decried) in sensation fiction during the 1860s. Oliphant’s comments about “women driven wild with love for the man who leads them into desperation” and “who give and receive burning kisses and frantic embraces, and live in a voluptuous dream” (Oliphant 1867: 209) embody the image of Oswald’s ideal, an image which, ironically, is rarely one to be found in the pages of Braddon’s novels. Naomi’s lack of overt passion or “sensation” continually frustrates Oswald, who informs her: “I wish you had less thoughtfulness and more feeling” (Braddon 1876: 105). Naomi cannot be the type of woman that Oswald’s romantic nature craves, and he resents this, just as he fails to appreciate her strength and wisdom. When Naomi attempts to explain to her lover that he “ha[s] not sounded the depths of [her] heart,” Oswald replies that it is impossible to do so “because you keep its treasures too closely guarded” (1876: 105). Effectively, Oswald requires Naomi’s passion to be on display in the same way that the sensation heroines criticized by Oliphant present their passionate outpourings as spectacle. However, Naomi enacts the repression which is elsewhere imposed on her, and which the realist text seems to demand: “No life could have been more self-contained than Naomi’s” (1876: 240).

Later, Oswald compounds his inability to understand Naomi when he falls in love with Joshua's young wife, who appears to him as romance and passion personified. Once again he follows Roland Landsell in allowing his literary perceptions to color his understanding of reality, which leads to a similar misreading of the object of his desire: "passion was an unknown element in this purely sentimental and poetic nature. Love for Cynthia could never mean storm and fever, guilt and ruin" (Braddon 1876: 221). Pamela Gilbert's point that Joshua is a "dominating reader," one who "impos[es] his own concerns on the text" (Gilbert 2000: 188) might apply equally to Oswald, who sees in Cynthia (as Roland does in Isabel) merely a reflection of his own desires.

Cynthia's story is another instance of the punctuation of the realist narrative by the sensational. On his journey to visit an old pupil who is opening a new chapel, Joshua encounters Cynthia, a young orphan who has run away from a brutal life with a traveling fair. Touched by her innocence and beauty, and her tragic story, Joshua assumes responsibility for this lost sheep and takes her to Penmoyle, a place even more out of the world than Combhaven, which "lay off the beaten tracks, and was about the sleepest place imaginable" (Braddon 1876: 76). Here he places her with two spinster sisters, members of his widespread flock, in order that the ignorant girl may learn to become a servant and a good Christian. A year later he visits Cynthia and, finding her not only more beautiful, but now the embodiment of grace and virtue, Joshua marries her and takes home his teenage bride, to the horror of his family. Echoing the domestic power struggles in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), the indignant Judith refuses to allow the young wife to usurp her own established position in the household, and thus "the young eager spirit yearned for work of some kind, and was flung back upon the dull blank of idleness" (Braddon 1876: 180). Cynthia is forced to share the stifling narrowness endured by Naomi, and her subsequent lack of purpose and fulfillment is directly linked in the narrative to her later temptation by Oswald.

When Joshua becomes aware of the problems in his marriage, he muses that the "quiet life" to which he has brought his wife is causing her to feel constrained: "Cynthia was a wanderer, used to motion and variety – to crowds and noise. How can she help it if the longing for the old gypsy-life comes back to her? How can I blame her if she wearies of my dull home[?]" (Braddon 1876: 227). Perceiving so much, Joshua yet fails to reach a full understanding of the situation of his womenfolk. Ironically, he reflects that "Naomi is different. She has been brought up to this quiet life" (1876: 227). Yet Naomi finds life in Combhaven more unbearable and stifling of her ambitions than ever her gentle stepmother does: "The quiet monotony of life hung upon her heavily, like an actual burden" (1876: 57). Naomi constantly chafes at her "eventless, unvarying" life, and experiences longings "for something loftier and wider, which stirred in her breast like the wings of imprisoned birds" (1876: 57–8).

Moreover, Cynthia's life with the traveling fair has not been one of freedom either, and her descriptions of those early memories echo the claustrophobic images prevalent elsewhere in the novel: "The first thing I can remember is a little close room upon

wheels, a room that was always moving, the hedges and trees going by outside . . . and I remember the little dark corner where I slept, squeezed in by the wall, and how I used to be almost smothered sometimes" (Braddon 1876: 71). Although Cynthia is "always moving," her environment remains the same smothering space. Movement and change are located "outside," whereas Cynthia is confined inside, within a "close" and "little" space, which foreshadows Naomi's image of the prison-chamber, and her own later domestication in the "sordid sameness" of Combhaven (1876: 243).

Braddon's novel suggests that one of the consequences of the "narrowness" experienced by these women is the potential distortion of personal and familial relationships. Robert Lee Wolff interprets the main theme of *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* as the incestuous love Naomi has for her father. Admittedly there are grounds for such a reading; Braddon often refers to the "almost romantic love" Naomi has for Joshua (Braddon 1876: 61). However, elsewhere, Naomi's different love for Oswald is emphasized: "Life was so empty without [Oswald]! She had her father – always the first in her esteem *she had told herself* . . . but Oswald's absence took the sunshine and colour out of everything" (1876: 226; emphasis added). Furthermore, Joshua is blindly adored, not merely by his daughter, but by all his womenfolk, including his severe sister, Judith, whose proprietorial devotion to Joshua, "the one object of [her] reverence and love" (1876: 24), is an important factor in the tragedy that ensues. Naomi's excessive love for her father is another instance of the narrow confines of her life, wherein there literally is no one else towards whom the young woman can direct her affections: "He was still the one most perfect man her *little world* held; perfect as the best of those good men she had read about in her *narrow range* of literature" (Braddon 1876: 62; emphasis added).

Accordingly, the arguably ill-matched pair of Naomi and Oswald ensues through sheer lack of choice for both young people. To focus on Naomi's passionate love for Joshua is to ignore the plethora of ambiguous, quasi-incestuous relationships in the novel: the affection between Oswald and Naomi is repeatedly described as passionless and that of siblings rather than lovers; Oswald's brother Arnold falls in love with Naomi, but tells himself, "She shall be my sister" (Braddon 1876: 292); Cynthia's position in the house is described as being that of a daughter rather than a wife, and when Joshua proposes he "kissed her – with a kiss which was fatherly in its protecting gentleness, lover-like in its suppressed passion" (1876: 146). Passion is shown to be repeatedly suppressed, repressed, or misdirected. Thus Braddon's novel portrays a distortion of familial relationships, whereby the Gothic specter of incest intrudes into and threatens to disrupt the domestic realist space.

Having once saved Oswald from violent death, Joshua becomes, through the intrusion of "sensation" into the realist realm, personally responsible for taking the life of the man he has previously rescued. Joshua's murder of Oswald, motivated by jealousy and a partial misreading of the relationship between the squire's son and the preacher's wife, leads the Haggard family fully into the territory of the sensation novel, transforming the original realist premise into a murder and detection plot. Naomi, having witnessed her father's return from the scene of his crime, suspects the truth upon

Oswald's subsequent disappearance. Just as in a sensation novel, the reader is left in ignorance of Oswald's fate, though s/he suspects, along with Naomi, that Joshua has killed him. From this point, the novel begins to rehearse the themes and scenarios of another of Braddon's early sensation novels, *Henry Dunbar*. Arnold Pentreath returns to Combhaven and embarks on an investigation to uncover his brother's fate. Naomi's plight echoes that of Margaret Wilmot, as she attempts to shield her guilty father, a task that is complicated both by her love for the man she believes he has murdered and by her burgeoning attraction to the brother who is like "her lost lover . . . come back to her with a nobler mind and larger ideas" (Braddon 1876: 304).

Joshua's guilt places Naomi in the familiar sensation role of the "woman with a secret," as she rejects Arnold, but refuses to divulge the reason for her decision: "There is a reason which you must never know" (Braddon 1876: 304). Arnold's discovery of his brother's body reveals Naomi's true reasons for refusing his love, and like Clement Austin of *Henry Dunbar*, he accepts that duty to Joshua will prevail over love for him: "He knew her well enough to be very sure that she would cling to her father till death" (1876: 322).<sup>4</sup> Like Austin, Arnold must wait until after the death of the culpable father before he can claim Naomi as his wife.

Wolff's assertion that *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* has nothing in common with the earlier sensation novels is difficult to substantiate. Braddon revisits plots, themes, and character types from her 1860s fiction, such as *Lady Audley's Secret*, *John Marchmont's Legacy*, *Henry Dunbar*, and *The Doctor's Wife*. Conventions of melodrama, sensationalism, and the detective story repeatedly punctuate Braddon's "realist" text and effectively complicate Victorian assumptions regarding genre.

While *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* adopts certain key features of the mid-Victorian realist novel, it resists the full ideological import of the form. As Jennifer Phegley has argued, "[t]he slippery nature of realism is, in part, a result of its function as both a descriptive term to define a genre of fiction and a signifier of the author's and critic's own professional power to shape middle-class values" (Phegley 2004: 25). Braddon's sustained castigation at the hands of the critics, particularly during the early years of her career, taught her to be skeptical of their prejudices, even while she remained frustrated at their persistent dismissal of her own brand of fiction. Her refusal to deify the "commonplace" led Braddon, in *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*, to rewrite the realist novel to her own script, incorporating the sensationalism which had made her famous. In doing so, she slyly suggests the dullness of much contemporary realist fiction. Following the example of approved "realist" novelists such as Eliot and Hardy, Braddon chooses a setting in the recent past, fifty years prior to the time in which she is writing. However, in contrast to the tendency of many Victorian writers to mythologize and idealize the past, Braddon's novel presents this earlier period as irrevocably dull and backward compared to the present: "Time had crawled for these villagers, winters and summers creeping slowly on their sluggish course; much labour, little pleasure. They must have felt a century old at least" (Braddon 1876: 8). The point had previously been made by her friend and champion, George Augustus Sala, who roundly declared in an article for *Belgravia* in 1868, that "everything is

'sensational' that is vivid, and nervous, and forcible, and graphic, and true" (Sala 1868: 457). In both Sala's article and Braddon's novel, the sensational is linked to modernity, for without sensation, they claim, people would be forced to "go back to the calmly dull, to the tranquilly inane, to the timorously decorous," where "Dulness reign[s] triumphant" (Sala 1868: 458).

The closure of *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* effects a compromise between the domestic realism beloved by the critics and the dramatic plot interest championed by Braddon. In the promise of marriage between Naomi and Arnold (Oswald's "better," stronger double) we are offered both an expurgation of the past and continuity with it. The deaths of Joshua, Oswald, and Cynthia signal the containment of the violent and illicit passions which typify the sensation novel, even though the traces they leave point to the certainty that such eruptions can never be entirely contained or erased. For Braddon, the truly realist text is the one which acknowledges the inevitable disruption of the commonplace by the irrepressible sensationalism of real life.

#### NOTES

- 1 Braddon had lived with John Maxwell since 1861, bearing him six children, a situation that placed her outside of conventional social respectability. They were unable to marry because Maxwell could not legally divorce his wife, Mary Anne, who suffered mental health problems. Mary Anne's death in 1874 meant that Braddon and Maxwell were finally able to legalize their union.
- 2 These allusions are most evident in the chapter titles of *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*.
- 3 Related to these issues is the manner in which Braddon asserts the legitimacy of her fiction in *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* (and earlier in *The Doctor's Wife*) through a self-reflexive treatment of reading and readers. Since this is an aspect of her work which has received sustained attention elsewhere (see Flint 1993; Gilbert 1997, 2000; Pykett 1998), I do not intend to address it in any detail here.
- 4 This phrase echoes the strikingly similar words of Clement Austin in *Henry Dunbar*: "I knew . . . that, in all the blackness of his guilt, Margaret Wilmot would cling to her father as truly, as tenderly as she had clung to him in those early days" (Braddon 2010: 344).

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## Wilkie Collins and Risk

*Daniel Martin*

If there is one thing to be said about many of the sensational characters that have graced the pages of Wilkie Collins's novels, shorter works of fiction, and dramatic works, it is that they tend to engage in risky activities and behavior, or in general risk their reputations on devious or transgressive conspiracies. To "run a risk" in a Collins novel is normal behavior, whether financially or socially, in the private or public sphere, even while the frequency of risk-taking in his fiction often verges on the pathological. Risk haunts the pages of Collins's fiction, and serves as the mechanism through which individual identities shift and mutate. The sensation novel genre of the 1860s exhibited a morbid fascination with modernity and its nervous conditions, resulting in a type of fiction that critics believed emphasized too extensively the art of plot and incident over character development. Victorian reviewers lauded Collins as a master of the art of storytelling, even while they would always remain steadfast in the belief that mere "incident" ruled the pages of his novels to the detriment of true literary achievement. Collins was a mechanic of plot, an engineer of the improbable, and yet, as Christopher Kent has argued, his fictional works "are not so much about the probability of representation" as they are about "the representation of probability" (Kent 1995: 59). Indeed, there seems always to be something formulaic about risk-taking in the major novels. Risks emerge like semantic ticks, almost as if Collins sensed that he need only add a "run the risk" to any tense moment to enrich the affective force of his storytelling.

This essay offers a brief summary of Collins's writing career and the critical reception of his fiction from his contemporaries to the present day. However, the focus will be on the risky activities at play in Collins's vision of a modern world both overrun by accidental phenomena and full of dark and mysterious forces guiding human



interactions and events. Subsequent essays offer sustained readings of Collins's two most popular sensation novels, *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868), so we will limit our discussion here to his two other sensational works of the 1860s, *No Name* (1862) and *Armadale* (1866). The goal is to suggest how we might read Collins's sensational works through their most basic building blocks, risk and accident, in ways that pay full attention to their commentary on the correlation between large-scale social change and the everyday realities of living in an emerging age of risks.

Collins's reputation as a prolific storyteller and critic of social mores, hypocrisy, and what, in the prefatory note to *Armadale*, he calls "Clap-trap morality" continues to grow in current literary criticism, owing in large part to the emergence of the linguistic and cultural studies of the last few decades. Critical work on Collins's fiction has always tended to stem initially from readings of his attention to plot construction. *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* are now considered prototypes of the mystery and detective fiction genres because of their provocative epistolary narratives, through which Collins's fiction often introduces an element of suspense and the unknown – an epistemological uncertainty – into the reading experience. Spanning over a nearly forty-year period, the novels from *Antonina* (1850) to *Blind Love* (1890) introduce complex portrayals of modern institutional practices in the fields of medicine, psychology, and the law, each channeled through Collins's taste for stories of disaffected, outcast, fallen, afflicted, melancholic, and transgressive social identities. The range of Collins's critique of the polite morality of the mid-Victorian period covers such diverse contemporary issues as suburban development (the dark, risky places of English society in his novels are often emerging London suburbs), the legal boundaries of marriage in England and Scotland, the plight of fallen women, the anti-vivisection movement, wrongful incarceration, the experiences of the disabled (including the blind and deaf), the legal limitations of wills and estates, and the physical health movement of the 1860s and 1870s, among others. In recent years literary critics have turned their attention to such subject matter, especially in Collins's lesser-known works of fiction. The appearance of several collections on Collins's oeuvre is indicative of this renewed attention to the early and later novels (Smith and Terry 1995; Bachman and Cox 2003; Taylor 2006; Mangham 2007). Skimming the table of contents of these collections reveals a wealth of commentary on Victorian social practices, legal reforms, abject bodies, and the fraught relationships between men and women.

Collins's biographers often contend that the sensationalist content of his worldview is reflected in his rather bohemian personal lifestyle. Collins lived unconventionally, never fully settling in one place. His cohabitation with two different women also contributed to his bohemianism, prompting a series of coded words amongst his friends in their written correspondence about Collins's private affairs. With a kind of nudge and wink in his letters, Collins refers on a number of occasions to his "morganatic family" (Baker and Clarke 1999: I, 404, 560) arrangement with a woman of lower-class status named Martha Rudd, who gave birth to Collins's first child roughly a year after they met. While Collins, Rudd, and their children would live under the

assumed family name of Dawson up until his death, Collins remained in a close unwedded relationship with another woman, Caroline Graves, who had a child of her own from a previous marriage. Refusing to marry either woman during the course of his lifetime, Collins nevertheless left his estate in part to both upon his death in 1889 (Clarke 1988: 1–8). The details of Collins's private life and personal correspondence can be found in a number of impressive biographical works and collections of letters (Robinson 1951; Clarke 1988; Peters 1991; Baker and Clarke 1999; Baker et. al. 2005; Law and Maunder 2008). While the consensus has been that Collins's lifestyle brushed against the grain of polite Victorian society, serving as an influence for the sensational content and social criticism in his writing, the general picture of his personal life is also one of a dedicated writer aware of the requirements of the literary marketplace, and who provided modest financial security for his potentially scandalous extended family (Clarke 1988: 169).

As a young man Collins entered a number of professions, including clerk in the office of a tea merchant and student of law at Lincoln's Inn, before trying his hand at writing for a living. Some early success as a journalist set the stage for his career in fiction, beginning with his first published novel, *Antonina*, which appeared in print roughly two years after his first published book, a biography of his father, the well-known landscape painter William Collins. *Antonina*, a romance with Gothic trappings, received moderate critical acclaim, enough to show the promise of a young novelist. Collins's career as a writer would really begin to grow as a result of his association with Charles Dickens. The two authors met in 1851 and became close collaborators for a number of years. The nature of their relationship tends to be understood as one of student and teacher, in which Dickens would instruct his protégé in the requirements of the literary marketplace and its demands on a writer's time and energy. While recent literary criticism has challenged such assumptions about their collaborative process (Nayder 2002), Dickens would nevertheless prove to be a consistently sober reader and critic of the early novels and the four major sensational works that would ultimately situate Collins in posterity as one of the Victorian period's most popular writers.

Dickens's comments on *Basil* (1852) and *Hide and Seek* (1854), Collins's first forays into the fiction of contemporary life, express enthusiastic, yet critical, evaluations of Collins's developing skills as a storyteller. Referring to *Hide and Seek*, Dickens wrote, "I think it far away the cleverest novel I have ever seen written by a new hand" (Page 1974: 61). Such praise surpassed Dickens's criticism of *Basil*, Collins's previous novel, which he felt was burdened by too many "probabilities here and there" (Page 1974: 49). Indeed, Collins's early novels of the 1850s were already beginning to forecast the stretching of the limits of realism that would motivate his novels of the 1860s. In *Basil*, the title character details the seemingly improbable events of his infatuation for a young woman named Margaret Sherwin. Basil's intense jealousy of Margaret's affection for another man leads to a violent assault and a corresponding vow of revenge by Basil's victim, the fendish Mannion. While not as dark in its portrayal of contemporary London, *Hide and Seek* is equally as reliant on sensational

and improbable events, as the family secret of Madonna, the mysterious and deaf dependant of the painter Valentine Blyth, comes to light through a series of accidents and coincidental acquaintances. As provocative as Collins's early novels were in their construction of suspense, even at this early stage in his career his reviewers already recognized an excessive reliance on improbable coincidences, despite the author's significant talent for storytelling. As a reviewer for *Bentley's Miscellany* suggested of *Basil*, "there is something artist-like even in [the novel's] apparent want of art" (Page 1974: 47). Similar reviews would follow Collins throughout his career. Even in the watermark novels of the 1860s Collins would never escape criticism of his reliance on plot construction over insight into the human condition. Critics branded Collins as an author with no potential for literary achievement beyond the ephemeral demands of the circulating library. As one reviewer declared, "Mr. Wilkie Collins is an admirable story-teller, though he is not a great novelist" (Page 1974: 83).

Nevertheless, among the major sensation novelists of the 1860s, Collins is no doubt the most read by students and critics today. His fiction has been adapted for stage, television, and radio, and internet fan sites and blogs have contributed extensively to Collins's legacy as one of the great mystery writers of modern times. Throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, his reputation was one of an extraordinarily popular, yet still "minor" Victorian novelist, whose literary achievements ranked well behind those of Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, and George Eliot. Beginning in the late 1980s, however, a new kind of Collins emerged, as literary critics, influenced by ideological and cultural theory, found much of social substance in his representations of sexuality, gender, class, and race. Jenny Bourne Taylor argues, for example, that Collins's fiction "works at the uneven limits of Victorian ideology by manipulating and interweaving an extraordinarily wide range of contemporary psychological writings, drawing on aspects of those theories to explore social and psychic contradictions" (Taylor 1988: 2). From a Marxist perspective, Nicholas Rance (1991) makes a similar argument for the subversive nature of Collins's critique of the Victorian ideology of self-help. These are but two of the more prominent literary studies of the late 1980s and early 1990s that attempted a re-evaluation of Collins's fiction, producing a radicalized image of a writer willing to expose the hypocrisies of Victorian society. Whether Marxist, Foucauldian, feminist, or psychoanalytic in methodology, ideological literary critics tend to see elements of a subversive commentary on psychic dissolution and social transgression in Collins's fiction. However, there is also the tendency in the storytelling towards the apparent containment of subversive elements. As Caroline Dever argues, with reference to the many marriage plots in the later fiction, Collins "produces erotically pluralist novels under the protective, authorizing cover of the conventional marriage plot" while at the same time using "that form against itself, turning the marriage plot inside out to feature affirmative, loving, nonmarital bonds" (Dever 2006: 114). As such an argument indicates, current studies have resulted in a rather unchallenged view of Collins's appreciation for disaffected and transgressive members of Victorian society, but where disagreement lies is in the

extent to which his appropriation of conventional plot construction contributes to or contains his representations of subversive social elements.

Such criticism from the heyday of poststructuralism and ideological literary criticism has been reworked in recent years. Literary critics have begun to reintroduce Collins scholarship to the historiography of Victorian print culture, authorship, and the transatlantic literary marketplace (Wynne 2001; Nayder 2002; Hanes 2008). Some of the ideological fire of the early years of the cultural studies turn has been put out by attempts to understand the complexities of Collins's literary accomplishments in the Victorian publishing industry and its social practices in terms of authorship, copyright law, and the affective forces at play in serialized fiction. This is not to say that such literary scholarship has resulted in a depoliticization of Collins's fiction, but rather that critical interest has moved away from poststructural theorization to readings focusing on the effect of market forces. This return to Victorian literary and print culture owes much to the wealth of research on Collins's biography and his personal correspondence. Such work reveals not only what Collins thought about his literary practices, but also his awareness of the complexities of the publishing business and the law of copyright both in England and abroad.

When the sensation novel first appeared in the Victorian literary marketplace, England was already well in the midst of profound economic changes that would impact the nature of book and periodical publishing. Central amongst these changes in everyday life were the expansion and refinement of the railway, telegraph, and postal networks (Daly 1999). Suddenly faraway places seemed both literally and figuratively closer. Travel was democratized, and with the coordination of telegraphic communications connecting England, the Continent, and, eventually, the Americas, tourism became a vital industry of modern life. This is the world of the sensation novel – one in which developments in communications and transportation created a new playing field for emergent identities, criminal activity, foreign secrets, conspiracies, rumors, and scandals, all coming through the wire or down the tracks. When H. L. Mansel wrote his review of the genre for the *Quarterly Review* in 1862, he pinpointed modern industry as symptomatic of the morbidity of sensational narratives. Collins was central amongst the novelists of the period who catered to the literary demands of “periodicals, circulating libraries and railway bookstalls” and the “market law of demand and supply” (Mansel 1863: 483). While reading any of Collins's sensation novels of the 1860s, one finds a series of ephemeral narratives premised on the continual circulation and exchange of both bodies and information.

Collins's novels are rife with railway references – anything to cause a sensation, or even to merely keep a plot in motion – from railway pursuits, poorly interpreted railway timetables, and public scandals between men and women in railway cars to perhaps the fundamental iconic event, the railway accident. Collins often employs railway travel in his novels as symptomatic of social developments – conditions embodied by an increasingly palpable sense of living in an age of risk and an excessive number of accidental phenomena. Railways (in addition to steamships and circulating letters and telegraphic messages) function as prime movers in Collins's art of storytell-

ing, but to say that the characters who employ modern technology are merely “so many lay-figures on which to exhibit a drapery of incident” (Mansel 1863: 486) is to miss the point of Collins’s vision of society. For, surprisingly, there are very few railway accidents in his novels. Certainly, there are examples, such as the railway accident in *No Name* that kills Norah and Magdalen Vanstone’s father, but more often than not transportation and communications serve a more systemic purpose in Collins’s storytelling. The temporality of the railway network and the new narrative requirements of the railway timetable become preconditions for Collins’s tales of modern life. In *Man and Wife* (1870), for example, poor connections through the system create the conditions for a scandalous, unintentional Scottish wedding.

Between the 1830s and 1860s, a period that saw the emergence of the railway and telegraphic networks as well as the rise of the popular press, Victorian journalists and critics were already beginning to sense a change in social life which would be realized, in part, through the science of statistical analysis and the quantification of modern risks of all kinds – steamship disasters and wrecks at sea, railway collisions and derailments, factory and colliery accidents, and fires – each exploited for sensational effect through the Victorian press. Accidents, of course, were not new to modern life, but their treatment in the press did represent a fundamental shift towards a kind of “risk society” in which the Accident would be the primary symbol of the dialectic of progress/catastrophe in modern life (Beck 1992; Freedgood 2000). The modern language of “risk” begins to take effect in the nineteenth century through the shift from a primarily Christian to a secular, mechanistic, or even Darwinian universalization of chance and accident. Through Victorian periodicals and newspapers, information about risks would be disseminated not just locally but globally through telegraphic correspondence, imperialist pursuits, and international capitalism. For many contemporary writers of the period, the universe now seemed arbitrary and capricious, chancy and extraordinarily risky. Collins would become one of Victorian culture’s most successful literary appropriators of the mood or tone of this new era.

Risk and the accidental are important, albeit neglected, concepts for any discussion of the sensation novel of the 1860s, for not only do they serve as cues for the modernity (or morbidity) of sensational narratives, but they also introduce a speculative uncertainty into the art of storytelling, and even the psychology of character. Accidents are everywhere in Collins’s major works of fiction, but not always as only a means of plot arrangement. They also serve as a philosophical ground for storytelling, which becomes in the novels of the 1860s a conduit for the new time-based economy. Collins’s Letter of Dedication to *Basil* offers a guiding rationale for the intimacy of accidents and realism in the later novels. Beginning with the assumption that attention to the “Actual” would bring his story closer to the “Ideal,” Collins justifies the frequency of “extraordinary accidents” in his novel through appeal to “the ordinary accidents and events which may, and do, happen to us all” (Collins 2008: 4). It is no coincidence, then, that *Basil* is riddled with references to “accidental circumstances” (12), the “capricious rule of chance” (29), “the accident of an idle day” (38), the “knowledge of pure accident” (107), “terrible accident[s]” (146), “hidden catastrophe” (155), and

“the slightest accidental noise” (259). Collins’s early rationale for his reliance on chance and accident would be renewed in the prefatory material for later novels, in an effort to remind reviewers and readers of his literary intentions and to justify his belief that his novels do in fact demonstrate an attention to the realities of modern life, despite reviews to the contrary.

Collins’s frequently over-determined emphasis on the concepts of risk and accident seems, at first glance, to confirm much of the criticism of his contemporary reviewers, namely that there is something artificial or mechanical about his fiction. Yet there is also something darker and more philosophical in Collins’s continual reliance on these two foundational concepts of modern narrative. Risks are always speculative and thus introduce a notion of haunted time; they emerge in the limit points between the actual and the possible, always resisting stasis and change. They contain the possibility of *future* rewards (whether financial or social), but they are the result of calculations that rely on probabilistic patterns of normativity. They rely also on the smooth operation of communications networks. Risks operate in the intersections of realism and melodrama in Collins’s novels, the possibility of accidental interference being both its accomplice and enemy. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the two other sensation novels of the 1860s, *No Name* and *Armadale*.

Collins’s second sensation novel, *No Name*, appeared serially in Dickens’s *All the Year Round* from 15 March 1862 to 17 January 1863 (and was published in volume form in 1862). The novel tells the tale of Norah and Magdalen Vanstone, two young women who find themselves the victims of the Victorian law of inheritance. When their father dies in a railway accident, which shortly thereafter leads in turn to the death of their grief-stricken mother, the Vanstone girls become legally “Nobody’s Children” (Collins 1994: 109). The plot turns on the early revelation of a family secret, that Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone were never legally married, and that Mr. Vanstone’s death occurred suddenly before he could rewrite his will to include his now illegitimate daughters. Norah resigns herself to her lot in life, unlike her more determined younger sister. Refusing to live without an inheritance that is theirs by right (though not by law), Magdalen enters into a series of daring social “risks” in order to regain an estate of £80,000, which has passed to Michael Vanstone, their father’s brother and sworn enemy. Magdalen’s risks, and there are plenty of them, include the adoption of multiple disguises and a successful conspiracy to marry Michael Vanstone’s son Noel, who inherits his father’s estate and the £80,000 that should have gone to the Vanstone sisters. The novel is a more daring, and in some respects darker, vision of modern society than *The Woman in White*, although contemporary reviewers felt it did not live up to the achievements of the former novel (Page 1974: 143). Magdalen’s significant skills as a “mimic” (Collins 1994: 190) of human behavior are punctuated, during her conspiratorial pursuits, by numerous narrative ruminations on the nature of risk-taking. Although governed by an “invisible, inward disposition” (Collins 1994: 116) to return the Vanstone inheritance to its proper place, Magdalen’s sense of identity is not as substantial as Collins’s narrator might imply. Her moods shift and alter, sometimes determined, at other times despondent, according to her knowledge of the

“risks” she takes with her many performances. In one particular scene involving one of her many masquerades, Magdalen summarizes the general state of risk in her behavior: “I know how to disguise myself in other people’s characters more cleverly than you suppose,” she tells one of her servants; “Leave me to face the chances of discovery – that is my risk” (Collins 1994: 503). Such pronouncements about her risks permeate seemingly every page of Collins’s social drama. In fact, the story becomes essentially a series of interrelated struggles between Magdalen and Wragge and their equally conspiring contestant, Mrs. Lecount. The winner in their game of risks will be, essentially, the one who can successfully avoid the most accidents.

*No Name* contains all the improbabilities of Collins’s earlier novels. The most truly sensational element of the story, though, is Magdalen’s determination at all costs to regain her social identity in the eyes of the law. Adding significance to Collins’s exploration of Magdalen’s “mad risks” (Collins 1994: 143), the story is set in 1846 during the period of the great railway mania, in which excessive railway speculation led to an initial economic boom before the inevitable market crash of the following year. Collins refers to the railway mania on a number of occasions, especially during his introduction of Captain Wragge, who recovers from financial ruin through a series of risky and fraudulent ventures, and makes his career from careful calculations of human behavior. He is a con artist with a ready series of “skins to jump into” in case of emergencies. Similarly, Collins describes Michael Vanstone, the inheritor of the Vanstone estate, as a “bold speculator” who survived the economic crash in a far more financially secure situation than Wragge, only to succumb to old age shortly thereafter, thus passing his estate to his son Noel. While these references to the risks of railway speculation illuminate Collins’s bleak vision of modernity and the permeability of identity, they also further enhance the language of social risk in the plot of Magdalen’s daring and manipulative ventures, lending an aura of speculation to her transgressive social dramas. Having no name, legally speaking, she has no reputation to risk. Throughout the novel, she thus frequently calculates the many risks she must run in her efforts to seduce Noel into marrying her under her assumed name of Miss Bygrave. The novel’s ruminations on the social risks of transgressive femininity construct a conflict between Magdalen’s and Wragge’s conspiracy and the many possible accidents that might interfere with their ultimate success. In one instance, for example, Magdalen asks Wragge to destroy all of the remains of her acting career because she wishes “to be free from everything which might accidentally connect me with them in the future” (Collins 1994: 260). Through such conversations between the two conspirators, Collins unfolds a dark vision of a society governed by the capricious arbitrariness of accidental phenomena, yet one still full of many possible conspiracies for those willing to “run the risks” of public exposure.

Rather than indict Magdalen for her scandalous and at times criminal risks, Collins introduces a dynamic representation of a woman determined to run her risks to the very end, a decision that infuriated many of his contemporary reviewers (Page 1974: 132, 142, 143). Collins’s next novel, and the third of the four sensation novels of the 1860s, goes even further than *No Name* in its exploration of chance, accident, and

the risks that a transgressive woman will take to establish a respectable position in society. Published serially in the *Cornhill* from November 1864 to June 1866, *Armadale* was Collins most financially successful novel, garnering an advanced payment of £5,000 before he even began the writing process (Baker and Clarke 1999: I, 198). The novel has a sprawling and convoluted plot, involving dream visions, calculations, espionage, risks, accidents, and false identities. In a letter to his mother during the novel's composition, Collins declared, "I am making my own flesh creep with what I am writing just now of the new book" (Baker and Clarke 1999: I, 250). The scene that caused this sense of creeping flesh is no doubt a pivotal one in which Allan Armadale and Ozias Midwinter, two close friends who meet by accident but are connected by mysterious forces of the past, must spend a night on board a wrecked ship at sea. Allan tells Ozias of a dream that does not bode well for their friendship. The dream's three central visions are each realized sequentially throughout the novel until they finally reveal the truth of past events that connect Armadale, Ozias, and the devious and calculating Lydia Gwilt, a woman determined at all costs to marry into the Armadale family name in order to secure an income of £1,200 per annum.

"One of the most overplotted novels in English literature" (Hughes 1980: 155), *Armadale* is also Collins's most deliberate exploration of fate and accident in the universe. A reviewer for the *Athenaeum* referred to the story as "a 'sensation novel' with a vengeance" (Page 1974: 146), and rightly so, given Collins's meticulous layering of family secrets, shifting social identities, coincidental relationships between characters, and elaborately constructed conspiracies. Despite its many improbabilities, two primary factors involving the corresponding concepts of risk and accident reveal themselves throughout the story, namely Lydia's extraordinarily risky conspiracy to marry into the Armadale estate and Ozias Midwinter's brooding, fatalistic sense that he is destined to bring great harm to Allan through their friendship. Unlike Magdalen, whom Collins redeems through her marriage to Captain Kirke, Lydia takes risks that seem to parody the conventions of the genre that Collins had already mastered with *The Woman in White*. The semi-epistolary narrative provides insight into Lydia's personal correspondence and diary, both of which provide some sense of a gesture towards redemption of her character through her insistence that she might possibly be capable of true love. We also see in her personal letters a conniving woman with a mental capacity for constructing elaborate conspiracies. Her personal risks include forgery, bigamy, adultery, murder, theft, attempted poisoning, and staged "accidents." She is, in effect, as sensational as they come, the result of what one reviewer called "a period of diseased invention" (Page 1974: 147). Yet she is also the keystone that holds Collins's critique of modern society in place, for Lydia's numerous commentaries on the palpability of the emerging time-based economy of the period enhance the novel's more philosophical questions about fate and accident. "The worst of all risks to run," she observes at one point, "is the risk of losing time" (Collins 1999: 348).

In *Armadale*, concerns about accidents have less to do with their introduction of chance and contingency into the world than with Ozias's melancholic indecisiveness



about his own role in the hereditary transmission of the sins of the past. If Allan's dream vision "was proved to be no longer a warning from the other world," it would follow, Ozias surmises, "that accident and not fate had led the way" (Collins 1999: 338) to his close friendship with Allan, despite his father's deathbed wish that his son avoid any and all contact with anyone remotely associated with the name Armadale. Ozias's brooding melancholy turns consistently on his inability to perceive the difference between fate and mere accident. Hughes has argued that Collins's fiction "explicitly poses the philosophical questions of fate in opposition to accident, and of character in opposition to both" (Hughes 1980: 136). Yet such a clear-cut distinction between the two is not as obvious in *Armadale* as it may seem, especially when Lydia's frequent commentary on her "frightful risks" (Collins 1999: 546, 559) forces her to trust what she calls the "chapter of accidents" (1990: 720, 746) as her conspiracy unfolds. Instead we should think of accidents in terms of Collins's preoccupation with their fabrication. Lydia realizes effectively that accidents can be staged if one is willing to accept the risks of such calculated machinations. She stages an "accident" at sea through the help of her former husband, Manuel, and after Allan survives the wreck she attempts another "accident" at Dr. Le Doux's sanatorium.

Lydia's frequent metacommentary on the Chapter of Accidents and the novel-like nature of her actions both offer considerable insight into Collins's *modus operandi* in his sensation novels of the 1860s. Not only does she realize that, in an age of industrial, scientific, and economic progress, one can effectively manufacture "accidents," but her devious commentary on her conspiracy's similarity to criminal tales in contemporary fiction and the press reflects Collins's sense of the reality of his seemingly improbable plots. "I am not afraid of my design being permanently misunderstood," Collins writes in his prefatory note to *Armadale*, while acknowledging the story's singularity as "a book that is daring enough to speak the truth" (Collins 1999: 4). What Collins means by this truth is unclear, but we might understand it as a statement about the material conditions of everyday life that, through the collapse of time and space by advances in transportation and communication, allow for the probability of the seemingly implausible. In one particularly intriguing moment Collins writes, under the guise of the lawyer Pedgift Junior, about the explosive capacity of telegraphic communications. "If you want to upset the whole town," Allan's young counsel suggests, "one line will do it. With five shillingworth of human labour and electric fluid, sir (I dabble in a little science after business hours), we'll explode a bombshell in Thorpe-Ambrose" (Collins 1999: 429). Such audacious commentaries on the explosive temporality of modern information, although set at odds with Lydia's own risky machinations, nevertheless conform to the novel's overall design, which is itself also a kind of manufactured social catastrophe.

After the four great sensation novels of the 1860s Collins would continue writing at a great pace, despite suffering debilitating pain from his many ailments. His novels of the 1870s and 1880s continue his long-standing fascination with narratives of modern life, even while their attention to the language of risk and accident is modest compared to the sensational social commentary of *No Name* and *Armadale*. The

“sensation mania” had begun to run its course by the 1870s, although, as with any genre, its fundamental elements were still viable in the popular literary marketplace. Collins’s sensational treatment of unstable or transgressive social identities and disabled or deviant bodies, and his improbable storylines, are still present in most of the later “mission novels,” such as *Man and Wife*, *The New Magdalen* (1873), and *Heart and Science* (1883), but their affective forces are quelled by Collins’s call for social reform. Even the later novels, which do not express any definitive social mission, rely only tangentially on the residue of sensation. Novels such as *The Two Destinies* (1876) would reintroduce readers to Collins’s fascination with fate and destiny, but the result is far more domestic and melodramatic than *Armada*’s crippling philosophizing of interrelated forces of fate and accident. After the 1860s Collins would remain one of the period’s most popular novelists, even though we do not find the same attention to the interrelatedness of storytelling and modernization of his four major novels. The decade of the “sensation mania” would always remain the period of his most intense and most socially powerful ruminations on the risky business of modern life.

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# *The Woman in White* and the New Sensation

*Elizabeth Langland*

Wilkie Collins's *Woman in White* played a critical role in ushering in a new sub-genre of the novel, one which focused on sensation. Although not formally dubbed a "sensation novel" when it was published in 1860, *The Woman in White* is now recognized as an exemplar of the genre. The characteristics of this late Victorian sub-genre may, by now, seem relatively well established. However, authors did not set out to create a distinctive sub-genre; reviewers identified similarities among several novels published in the 1860s and dubbed them sensational. Ronald R. Thomas notes that "they coined the term and created the category to describe and contain a disreputable form of literature that they generally regarded as morally diseased, aesthetically bankrupt, and socially dangerous" (1994: 480).

Whereas contemporaneous critics linked these novels through their treatment of "scandalous domestic situations" and their "appeal to physical and emotional sensation rather than to the higher rational faculties" (Thomas 1994: 480), the work of recent critics has complicated and destabilized that picture. Andrew Maunder has recently argued that "the sensation novel's diversity in terms of genre, form and subject matter, [suggests] that the genre is not as easy to label as it first seems" (2005: 1). In her essay "Collins and the Sensation Novel" Lyn Pykett summarized that diversity in this way: "Seen by many commentators as a hybrid form, combining realism and romance, the exotic and the everyday, the gothic and the domestic, the sensation novel was also deemed to be a mutant or mutating form" (2006: 51). It appears, indeed, that a work becomes identified as sensation fiction not because of the presence of sensational incidents but because of their frequency and priority in the plot. Increasingly, in fact, critics identify multiple manifestations of the sensation novel, abandoning the notion of a seamless, fairly homogeneous group (Maunder 2005: 5). Thus to talk now about

*The Woman in White* as sensation fiction requires us to specify the precise ways in which Collins, often uniquely perhaps, stimulates and sustains that emotional frisson that lies at the heart of this sub-genre.

### Sensation and Real Events

The origins of sensation plots were often found in real events and crimes, and Collins's are no exception.<sup>1</sup> In an 1879 interview with Edmund Yates, Collins identified the inception of *The Woman in White* in a letter he received "asking him to take up some case of real or supposed wrongful incarceration in a lunatic asylum" (Yates 1973: 591). Yates recounts his narrative "almost in the words in which we have heard it described by Mr. Collins's own lips." He reports of Collins that, "His thoughts being directed into this groove, he next came upon an old French trial turning on a question of substitution of persons, and it at once struck him that a substitution effected by the help of a lunatic asylum would prove a strong central idea" (1973: 591). From event Collins turned to character:

The victim to be interesting must be a woman, to be very interesting she must be a lady, and as a foil to her, the person who is to represent her must be of inferior birth and station. Now as there is a person to be injured – innocent and beautiful of course – there must be a villain. It is not difficult to construct a villain; but a brand-new villain, a villain like the immortal Count Fosco, is not built up in a day. He is the quintessence of a hecatomb of villains, not English, but foreign. (Yates 1973: 591)

Finally, this consummate villain must be matched with a "minor villain . . . a weak shabby villain, the tool of Fosco. Sir Percival Glyde then steps on the scene. To stamp his character with contempt he must commit a mean crime; therefore he is made a bastard, and must attempt to destroy a forged register" (Yates 1973: 592).

These outlines of the plot were distinct in Collins's mind before he determined his narrative technique and "hit upon the drawing-master and Marian Halcombe" (Yates 1973: 593) as his primary narrators. Then he ruthlessly pruned redundant incidents to sustain the initial chill of the touch that Walter Hartright experiences on that lonely and dark road to London late at night.

### Sensation as Tone and Technique

One quality that makes Wilkie Collins's literary achievement in this work both memorable and distinctive is his seemingly intuitive grasp that "sensation" comprehended more than a subject whose plot is driven by unsettling coincidences, forgeries, seductions, kidnappings, insanity, wrongful imprisonment, murder, and the imminent possibility of violence. Sensation is also, in its most effective manifestations, a

distinctive tone and technique. Thus, even though sensation fiction has a familiar, domestic setting (distinguishing it from sub-genres like the Gothic novel for instance), from the novel's opening pages – before there are any significant events – readers are aware that they are inhabiting a different realm, one at a remove from domestic realism. In sensation fiction, the privacy of the familial setting frequently facilitates rather than prevents the commission of crime.

*The Woman in White* opens with a preface in which the novel is presented as an experiment. Collins elucidates: “The story of the book is told throughout by the characters of the book. They are all placed in different positions along the chain of events; and they all take the chain up in turn, and carry it on to the end” (Collins 1973: xxix). The omniscient narrator appears only once, to set the stage for the novel's multiple narratives. The novel presents the Court of Justice as the analogy for his technique, in which a judge hears many witnesses: “As the Judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now”; the object of the novel and a court case are the same: “the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect” (Collins 1973: 1).

Curiously, the rigorously logical procedural technique creates uneasiness. First, the novel's opening paragraph is a single, summative, somewhat hyperbolic sentence, whose balanced structure explicitly sets up a series of oppositions. “This is the story of what a Woman's patience can endure, and of what a Man's resolution can achieve” (Collins 1973: 1): woman/man, patience/resolution, endure/achieve. Almost as an echo, the narrator's subsequent insistence on procedure, emphasizing evidence and reason, evokes the pervasive destabilizing presence of their opposites: intuition and emotion and the instabilities generated by uncertainty.<sup>2</sup>

These initial oppositions set the tonal foundation for the story to come, as Walter Hartright begins his “testimony.” Hartright, a drawing master, speaks of his “gradual suffocation” in his “airless chambers” in the heart of London, in contrast to the “purer air” of his mother's house in Hampstead (Collins 1973: 14). The metaphor of suffocation finds an echo in Hartright's literal rescue from drowning of his Italian friend, Pesca, earning him the man's undying gratitude.

Pesca speaks also of his gratitude to England for affording him “an asylum [or refuge]” (Collins 1973: 3), but then that word takes on its own oppositional and ominous meaning when Hartright, walking back to his quarters in London from his mother's house, is confronted by the spectral woman in white, who, he is shocked to learn, has “escaped from [an] Asylum,” or place of sequestration, if not imprisonment (1973: 22). This is a world in which interpretation is tenuous and vulnerable to sudden shifts in understanding, creating a sense here that intuition may take precedence over reason and that suspicions that lack evidence are liable, over time, to be proved valid. Thus, with little justification but complete conviction, Walter quickly associates Sir Percival Glyde with the baronet whom Anne Catherick is fleeing, and that association arouses his fear and foreboding regarding Laura Fairlie. The overall effect of Collins's technique, then, is to destabilize and disturb a reader's assumptions about how truth and perception are related.

## Sensation, Character, and Gender

Even as we are frequently reminded of the demands of resolve versus the pains of endurance throughout the novel, so, too, are the characters set in stark opposition or related through uncanny similarities. Marian Halcombe contrasts vividly with her half-sister, Laura Fairlie. Where the former is dark, the latter is fair; where Marian is resourceful and mature, Laura is helpless and childish. Walter's introduction of the two women sets these contrasts in stark relief. In Walter's first view, Marian has her back to him, and he dwells on the "rare beauty of her form": "Her figure was tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat" (Collins 1973: 25). He notes her "easy elegance" as she moves toward him, sees next that "the lady is dark," then that "The lady is young," and he concludes:

with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express, The lady is ugly! . . . The lady's complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. . . . Her expression – bright, frank, and intelligent – appeared, while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete. (Collins 1973: 25)

Walter's observations set in motion several uneasy tensions – Marian as masculine woman; Marian as transgressive woman; Marian as sexual woman – and they raise the specter of unlawful sexual desire generated by the unconventionality of this respectable woman. These tensions play out through the novel: in the ardor she fuels in the Count and her own – unwilling – physical response to him, as she confesses that, "his eyes seemed to reach my inmost soul. . . . His voice trembled along every nerve in my body, and turned me hot and cold alternately" (Collins 1973: 261–2). And they are further evident in her frustration with her feminine role, as for example when she rails about being "nothing but a woman, condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats, for life," and "try[ing] try to compose myself in some feeble and feminine way" (1973: 178). They also create a continuing thread of sensational disturbance that marks one sharp difference between this novel and realist or domestic fiction, which can allude only in the most oblique ways to the energy, resolve, and sexuality of middle-class female protagonists.

Marian creates uneasiness not only in her own bearing and presence, but also through the stark contrast she presents with her half-sister Laura. What Marian lacks, those "feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability" (Collins 1973: 25), Laura possesses in abundance. Although Walter's immediate sexual attraction to Marian's physical body is evident in his description, he is enraptured by Laura, whom he portrays in terms both sexless and disembodied: "The woman who first gives life, light, and form to our shadowy conceptions of beauty, fills a void in our spiritual nature that has remained unknown to us till she has appeared" (1973: 41–2). He

waxes metaphoric: "Let her footstep . . . be like that other footstep to whose airy fall your own heart once beat time. Take her as the visionary nursling of your own fancy" (1973: 42). As Laura becomes more infantile through suffering and Walter relies more heavily on Marian for partnership, the tension between Walter's unacknowledged, abjected sexual attraction to Marian and his idealized passion for Laura adds to that frisson of uneasiness that is at the heart of sensation.

Even after Laura ostensibly recovers from her trauma, it is hard to imagine Walter living exclusively with her, absent Marian. Count Fosco's embrace of Marian, "this grand creature," "this magnificent woman" ("Can you look at Miss Halcombe, and not see that she has the foresight and the resolution of a man?") may even force us to condemn Walter's conventional preference for "that poor flimsy pretty blonde wife" of Sir Percival (Collins 1973: 296). The importance of Marian's position in the marriage of Walter and Laura is confirmed in the novel's last tableau, when Marian speaks the final words, and Walter concludes the narrative: "So she spoke. In writing those last words, I have written all. The pen falters in my hand; the long, happy labour of many months is over! Marian was the good angel of our lives – let Marian end our Story" (1973: 584).

A similar contrast exists between the two Italians: Pesca and Count Fosco. This, too, magnifies the sense of disruption and unease that lies at the heart of Collins's sensational technique. As depicted in the narrative, the two men are, like Marian and Laura, physical antitheses. "Without being actually a dwarf," Walter informs us, "Pesca was, I think the smallest human being I ever saw, out of a show-room" (Collins 1973: 3). He is passionate, impulsive, rash, and emotional. In contrast, the Count is "immensely fat," self-controlled, discreet, patient, and analytical (1973: 196). Although Marian observes that the Count is "as nervously sensitive as the weakest of us [women]," his almost histrionic sensibility clearly serves mainly to maximize his calculated control of others (1973: 197). Yet the self-possessed, controlled Fosco *fears* the diminutive man: "A mortal dread had mastered him, body and soul," Hartright informs us, "– and his own recognition of Pesca was the cause of it!" (1973: 531). Ultimately, and ironically, the small man becomes the fulcrum to dislodge the big man and unmask the full conspiracy.

Whereas some characters, like Fosco and Pesca, Laura and Marian, are carefully contrasted with one another, it is the uncanny resemblance between two women – Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick, the woman in white – on which the entire plot pivots. Walter's early passion for Laura and the "vivid impression produced by the charm of her fair face and head, her sweet expression, and her winning simplicity of manner," is shadowed by "another impression, which . . . suggested to me the idea of something wanting" (Collins 1973: 42). That "sense of an incompleteness" haunts the narrative, generating unease in the reader as we anticipate the plot's conflation and confusion of each woman with the other. Even when Walter believes he has solved the mystery of the "something wanting" in Laura – by finally identifying the "ominous likeness between the fugitive from the asylum and my pupil at Limmeridge House" – the sheer improbability of the coincidence, the idea of deficiency, and the unfolding



collapse of Laura's intellect to mirror Anne's continue to generate the thrill of sensation (1973: 51). As Laura gradually recovers her beauty and understanding, Walter is simply unable, short of the concrete proofs of dates and journeys and eyewitness testimony, to persuade the attorney Kryle, Laura's uncle, and the longtime residents of Limmeridge House that Laura is in fact, Lady Glyde, and not the weak-minded Anne Catherick.

### Sensation, Mystery, and Plotting

Language, character, and event make important contributions to the sensation in *The Woman in White*, but the primary burden of sensational effect depends on the way in which Collins combines those elements in the plotting of his novel. Although sensation fictions are often described as formulaic, Collins sustains an extraordinarily engrossing narrative in this novel, from the opening pages with the electrifying "touch" of Anne Catherick's hand upon Walter's shoulder, "when, in a moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop" (Collins 1973: 15). From that first touch, the reader, as well as Walter, is nervously alive to hints and suspicions.

Thereafter, the mystery of this woman and her appearance on that lonely stretch of road in the dark of night is only intensified by the discovery of the association of this ostensibly poor woman with the upper-class inhabitants of Limmeridge House, the location to which Walter is now bound to take up a position as drawing master. That first mysterious association is further intensified by Anne's flight from, and fear of, a baronet and Laura's betrothal to a baronet from the same neighborhood. Anne's anonymous letter of warning, the passivity of those with the power to act (like Frederick Fairlie and Laura), and the powerlessness of those with the will to act, like Walter and Marian, conduce to the gathering sense of doom.

Once Marian's suspicion of Sir Percival's heinous motives hardens into certainty, Collins sustains the tension by removing or constricting the forces for good. Walter has left England for the wilds of South America, where he must three times "escape from peril of death. Death by disease, death by the Indians, death by drowning" (Collins 1973: 373). Of course, the providential nature of these repeated escapes suggests that he is being tempered for a later contest. And the fact that he makes such narrow escapes helps build the reader's concern for the ability of the forces of good ultimately to solve the mystery.

Meanwhile, back home, Marian is first outmaneuvered in her contest with the Count and then incapacitated by a crippling fever, leading to her sequestration in a remote and uninhabited wing of Sir Percival's estate, Blackwater Park. On her recovery she is greeted by the news of her half-sister's death, and she relapses. Nonetheless, her trials only strengthen her unshaken "suspicion of the circumstances described as attending her sister's death" (Collins 1973: 384), suspicions that she ultimately confirms, leading to her plan to procure Laura's escape from the asylum.

Collins has thus set the stage for a contest of another sort, one no longer governed by suspicion but by certainty, in which the forces of evil are fully gauged, known, and vulnerable to exposure while the powers of good, still weakened mentally and physically by privation and illness, are increasingly tempered to a steely resolve. In these shifts from one source of tension to another we see the brilliance of Collins's skill in plotting suspense.

Mystery and even events themselves are not inherently sensational – indeed, they can comport with the most pedestrian of narrative effects. Collins's good friend and fellow writer, Charles Dickens, who is credited with inventing the first detective novel in *Bleak House* (1852), also embeds a mystery of Esther Summerson's identity in events of illegitimacy, betrayal, and murder. Were that plot the entire novel, Dickens might well also be credited with inventing the sensation novel. But Esther's story remains only one element in the complex representation of a world with the enmired processes of Chancery Court at its heart, and Dickens describes his own novel as a "romance."<sup>3</sup> A comparison is clarifying – incidents in both Dickens's and Collins's novels are driven by illegitimacy and startling resemblances – this time of a mother and her unacknowledged daughter rather than of half-sisters. The similarities do demonstrate the somewhat arbitrary distinction between Dickens's romance and Collins's sensation, but they especially highlight Collins's focus on heightening the suspense produced by the events themselves, while Dickens uses them to enhance his representation of a world in which corruption and bureaucracy spread contagion into every corner. So, the revelation of Lady Dedlock's secret, the murder of her nemesis, Tulkinghorn, and the discovery of her daughter, believed dead, are tentacles of social contagion that blast hopes, defeat the innocent, ensnare the honorable, and leave no one unscathed. By comparison, the trials and tribulations of Walter, Marian, and Laura seem simply to demonstrate their worthiness and establish their right to the fortune and title that are bequeathed them at the end of the novel. That is not to say that Collins's plot does not engage in significant ways with the values of the culture and society he depicts, as we shall see next. However, the problems his narrative depicts are more tidily and conventionally wrapped up in the denouement than are Dickens's: the evil characters are dispatched; the good are rewarded. The moral complexity of Dickens's conclusion, in which his protagonists are scarred through disease and destroyed in the meshes of the court system, finds only a faint echo in Laura Fairlie's temporarily diminished wits.

### Sensation, Gender, and Violence

The deep-seated tensions that Collins sets in play through events and plotting are further intensified by instabilities in gender, class, and nationality at the heart of his novel. Collins is a master at exploiting these instabilities, and a number of recent critics credit him with probing fears and anxieties in ways that move this fiction

beyond ephemeral effect to a trenchant analysis of unstable gender and class identities in mid-Victorian England.

On one level, *The Woman in White* mounts a dramatic challenge to the established patriarchal order by representing corrupt or ineffectual male authority figures. Innocent and simple-minded Anne Catherick has been committed to an asylum to protect Sir Percival's secret. It becomes clear in the novel that, although she knows there *is* a secret, she does not know what it is. Laura Fairlie has been committed in marriage to Sir Percival – a man twice her age – by her father, Sir Philip Fairlie, who has totally failed to perceive the vicious nature of his friend and companion. And, despite ominous warnings, Laura Fairlie insists on a faithful, even fatalistic, deference to her dead father's wishes – that father who carelessly fathered at least one other daughter out of wedlock – the unfortunate Anne Catherick. And although she has a guardian at hand in her uncle, Frederick Fairlie, his enervation and incapacity, his desire to escape all exertion and engagement, ensure that Laura is entirely unprotected. Almost his first words to Walter anticipate his behavior throughout: "exertion of any kind is unspeakably disagreeable to me" (Collins 1973: 34). In this novel, patriarchy has run amok, and a woman's deference and her much-celebrated patience leave her exposed to both selfish indifference on the one hand and vicious exploitation on the other.<sup>4</sup>

The critique of patriarchy begun in the portraits of Frederick Fairlie and Sir Percival Glyde take a deeper, more ominous tone in the depiction of Count Fosco, who maintains that

human ingenuity . . . has hitherto only discovered two ways in which a man can manage a woman. One way is to knock her down. . . . The other way . . . is never to accept a provocation at a woman's hands. It holds with animals, it holds with children, and it holds with women, who are nothing but children grown up. (Collins 1973: 295)

Marian recognizes instantly that the Count is a master of the latter technique; he is a man "who could tame anything. If he had married a tigress, instead of a woman, he would have tamed the tigress. If he had married *me*, I should have made his cigarettes as his wife does – I should have held my tongue when he looked at me, as she holds hers" (1973: 195). And she perceives he rules his wife – who is now "frozen up in the strangest manner in herself" (1973: 194) – with a "rod of iron . . . a private rod," which "is always kept up-stairs" (1973: 200).

Equally interesting in this gender dyad is the figure of Marian. We have already noted that her comely form and plain face produce emotional conflicts that Walter can resolve only by marrying her half-sister and insisting that Marian make up a member of their household as a kind of neutered "aunt." The Count's volcanic ardor for Marian vividly illuminates Walter's deep-seated conventionality in his response to this unusually perceptive and clear-sighted woman.

Marian's female gender, combined with her "masculine" resourcefulness and courage – fully equal to Walter's – pointedly question the priority that Victorian culture accords to men. The novel sees a dramatic rise in status for the humble drawing master,

Walter, as his son ultimately becomes “*the Heir of Limmeridge*,” but it leaves Marian in the role in which she began: as familial supporter (Collins 1973: 583–4). Despite challenging certain deep-seated assumptions of class privilege, as we will see, *The Woman in White* ultimately affirms long-standing gender roles. Collins is not unique in this tendency ultimately to reinscribe the patriarchal values that his novel’s plot had, at times, seemed to challenge. He shares similar impulses in novels by Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Eliza Lynn Linton to reassert the established order by authorizing the *right* patriarch. If Count Fosco’s corpulence points to a dangerous gluttony and Mr. Fairlie’s “frail, languidly-fretful, over-refined look” (Collins 1973: 32) to the slothful enervation of the aristocratic class, we are finally invited to blame not the patriarchy but an effete and enervated or over-gorged and complacent aristocracy that is part – but not all – of it.

### Sensation and Class

The class conflicts are as central to the plot as are the gender tensions. Dallas Liddle argues that the sensational thrill derived in part from the novel’s implication “that both personal and class identity in contemporary Britain were fluid and unstable rather than secure” (2004: 97). At the outset of the novel, Walter, a poor drawing master, cannot aspire to the hand of heiress Laura Fairlie. She is destined for aristocracy. Yet the man who wins her hand, Sir Percival Glyde, is in reality an imposter, who has forged his parents’ marriage records to claim a title that is not rightfully his. Although Collins’s plot seems initially to depict the overthrow of a corrupt aristocrat by a righteous middle-class professional, that plot is more complicated because events ultimately expose the would-be aristocrat as a bastard. Sir Percival’s uncontrollable temper and intemperance mark him as doomed once he is freed from the constraint of the Count. His illegitimacy becomes a signifier of an inherent corruption.

Laura’s guardian, and ostensible protector and master of Limmeridge House, is her uncle, Frederick Fairlie. Yet, as we have seen, his manifest failures as patriarchal protector of his niece also highlight his bankruptcy as a member of the landed gentry. He cannot serve as guardian of an individual – much less of a nation. Thus, the feelings that animate both Walter and Marian at the beginning of the narrative – that Walter would be presumptuous to aspire to Laura’s hand in marriage – are gradually transformed into a conviction that he is not only entirely eligible to claim her hand but also eminently authorized to do so.<sup>5</sup> The early scenes at Limmeridge House, where Walter attends the ladies as drawing master, depict his “helplessness and humiliation” (Collins 1973: 57) when his love for Laura is discerned. Marian counsels him to take his love and “Crush it! . . . Here, where you first saw her, crush it! Don’t shrink under it like a woman. Tear it out; trample it under foot like a man” (Collins 1973: 61). Marian’s evocation of gendered idioms to express the task before Walter bespeaks the importance of an emerging conception of authoritative masculinity that privileges tested and tempered character over inherited rank. Marian subsequently applauds

Walter's disciplined behavior in terms that confirm his inherent nobility, confiding that, "You have nobly deserved everything that I can do for you, as long as we both live" (1973: 110).

Walter's complete transformation requires that he leave England and successfully escape three encounters with death that test, strengthen, and validate his conviction, his resolution, and his right:

From thousands on thousands of miles away; through forest and wilderness, where companions stronger than I had fallen by my side; through peril of death thrice renewed, and thrice escaped, the Hand that leads men on the dark road to the future, had led me to meet that time . . . She was mine at last! Mine to support, to protect, to cherish, to restore. Mine to love and honour as father and brother both. Mine to vindicate through all risks and all sacrifices – through the hopeless struggle against Rank and Power, through the long fight with armed Deceit and fortified Success, through the waste of my reputation, through the loss of my friends, through the hazard of my life. (Collins 1973: 381)

In effect, Walter first *replaces* corrupt and absent guardians, who have abdicated their responsibilities as "father and brother." Then he defeats and supplants rank and power, before he lays claim to Laura's hand as her husband and equal, with his son now the heir of Limmeridge.

The Italian aristocrat Count Fosco is a more serious adversary, and his past is shrouded in mystery. His corpulence, love of sweets, white mice, and small birds, and, more pointedly, his foreignness, intimate a deeper corruption. In a telling detail, Collins has set the events of his novel just prior to the Exhibition of 1851, which brought large numbers of foreigners to England and established a melting-pot in which the classes could mingle. This exhibition introduces issues of nationality as well as class into the context, and, certainly, the Count's ambiguous origins and impecunious state make us suspect his actual rank and class. But his un-English "foreignness" is indisputable, and his power over the women he encounters unleashes tensions that can only be contained by his exposure as a traitor and through his brutal death. The narrative of the powerful foreigner competing with an honorable British professional man anticipates in subtle ways the threatening and seductive foreigner that Bram Stoker will introduce in *Dracula* several decades later, a figure capable of captivating Britain's women and raising the specter of exogamy, in which English women will be expropriated from honorable, decent, and ordinary Englishmen by powerful, corrupt, sexually enticing foreigners. I would not argue that this issue is fully engaged in *The Woman in White*, rather that its presence as an undercurrent anticipates in compelling ways a British suspicion and fear of the foreign Other that is just beginning to emerge in mid-Victorian England.

It is Wilkie Collins's genius in *The Woman in White* that, in the process of brilliantly "electrifying the nerves" and sustaining the emotional thrill that marks sensation fiction, he also engages in substantive ways issues of gender, class, and even nationality

(Henry Mansel, qtd. in Maunder 2005: 5). And despite being wrapped into a concluding tableau of a happy, victorious upwardly mobile middle-class professional that seems to elide their serious engagement, the issues don't completely disappear.

Of concluding a novel, Henry James would later write, "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so."<sup>6</sup> Sensation novelists may seem to draw that circle more absolutely and definitively than realists like James, but it is Collins's achievement in *The Woman in White* that he found meaningful and fruitful ways to build sensation on issues of class, gender, sexual identity, and race that could unsettle his Victorian readers in 1859 in ways that are still effective today.

### NOTES

- 1 Thomas Boyle, *Black Swine in the Sewers of Hampstead*, discusses the importance of newspapers as a regular source of sensational stories and events; they often "unabashedly blurred the lines between fiction and fact" (Boyle 1989: 5).
- 2 Ann Cvetkovich has aptly characterized the technique as one that "invites the reader not just to participate in a process of rational inquiry but to enjoy the thrill of being shocked by the unexpected" (1989: 25).
- 3 In the preface to *Bleak House* Dickens wrote: "In Bleak House I have purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things."
- 4 Maunder notes that, "Through the figure of Laura, Collins anticipates the revelations brought to public attention by Frances Power Cobbe in her 1878 article 'Wife Torture in England,' that men's lack of respect for women, fostered by women's degraded status within the family . . . contributes to the burden of violence borne by women both inside and outside the home" (2005: 17–18).
- 5 Ronald R. Thomas (1994: 488) has defined this pattern in *The Woman in White* as one common to typical sensation novels: "It makes manifest the decline of the old gentry in the person of a fraudulent aristocrat (like the pretender Percival Glyde) or a weak and ineffectual one (Like Laura's ailing uncle Frederick Fairlie). . . . The professional classes . . . establish themselves in (and by way of) these texts as the new aristocracy, the true elite."
- 6 Preface to *Roderick Hudson* (James 1907: 471).

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# Opium, Alcohol, and Tobacco: The Substances of Memory in *The Moonstone*

*Susan Zieger*

## The Critical History

Sex, drugs, and bling: Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) features rather un-Victorian objects of fascination. The sex, of course, takes place at the metaphorical level: a young woman's diamond – the gem of the title, with its feminine, lunar associations – is stolen from her bedroom in the thick of night, and she begins acting strangely; A. D. Hutter reads this as Rachel Verinder's "symbolic seduction" by her lover Franklin Blake, who was in a drugged trance at the time (Hutter 1998: 185). Not only does the theft result in an obscenely stained nightdress when Blake brushes past the wet paint on her doorframe, it throws Rachel into ambivalence and confusion, which the story ultimately resolves into marriage and a child. Hutter's interpretation refined earlier psychoanalytic readings, which applied the Oedipus complex broadly, both to Blake's discovery of himself as the criminal, and to readers' desire for detective fiction's characteristic resolution of mystery into reasoned order. D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* (1988) significantly revised such psychological readings by pursuing the philosopher Michel Foucault's theory that power – rather than negating or repressing rebellious impulses as in the Freudian model – operates through a diffuse, insidiously ordinary mode of policing. Thus the smeared nightgown speaks less of sexual residue than of the household's tight control of its inmates by recording their laundry in the washing-book. From illicit sex to laundry: the turn from Freudian to Foucauldian readings foregrounded the banal, but it also aligned criticism of *The Moonstone* with a more generalized turn in the scholarship of literature and culture.

Miller imagined Victorian novels operating in the Foucauldian style of power, but he saw that power as effectively monological, or speaking in a single voice: his reading



made it seem monolithic, undifferentiated. Both Lillian Nayder and Ian Duncan attacked this aspect of his argument, drawing attention to a specific form of power structuring in the novel, imperial rule. In Nayder's view, *The Moonstone* critiqued an older model of facile cultural superiority – one that automatically suspects the Indians of the theft when the true culprit, Godfrey Ablewhite, is English – through its depiction of Gabriel Betteredge and his absurd devotion to that icon of imperial ideology, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) (Nayder 1992). Duncan suggests that the restoration of the diamond to its multitude of Hindu worshipers produces a terrifying “Indian sublime” that induces British imperialist panic (Duncan 1994: 319). These essays were not the first on the imperial theme, but they richly suggested its critical possibilities. Indeed, the diamond's original looting at Seringapatam, the suspicions raised by the Brahmin “jugglers,” Blake's drugging by an orientalized substance, opium, Ezra Jennings's racial hybridity, and the novel's relationship to the relatively recent Indian Mutiny (1857) have become the focus of most subsequent interpretations.

Critics found that psychoanalytic anxieties could be reread as English imperial and racial ones; hence Tamar Heller, for example, reinterpreted Blake's metaphoric theft of Rachel's virginity as an echo of imperial conquest. Women's sexuality is connected to racial difference: the sinister, vaginal shivering sand has a “brown face,” linking it to the Indians, and forming a Gothic trope of “buried writing,” as it hides Rosanna Spearman's erotic confession (Heller 1998). For Timothy Carens, the diamond's disruption of a quiet English country house anticipates Freud's notion of the uncanny, or the unfamiliar within; it draws on discourses of evangelicalism and evolutionary anthropology, in which savagery was part of the self, to prefigure Freud's installation of the irrational and savage within individual psychology (Carens 2003). From such a point of view, psychoanalysis became less relevant to *The Moonstone* as an overarching interpretive method or analogy, as it was for Hutter, and more as a specific technique of knowledge and power, informing imperial rule. Thus, for Ronald Thomas, the novel's culminating preoccupation with the scientific legibility of Blake's physiology, so reminiscent of the methods and justifications of psychoanalysis, eventually overwhelms its agenda of imperial critique. In Ezra Jennings, “and in the scientific disciplines he represents, the underlying motives for the crimes of empire are reduced to questions of bodily fluids, nervous reactions, and intoxicating drugs” (Thomas 1991: 241). These kinds of readings forced open both Hutter's Freudian reading and Miller's seamless account of power, specifying its vectors and relations. Applying Foucault's insights historically, rather than as a grand theory, critics weighed the novel's constructions of race and empire.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, scholars disputed whether *The Moonstone* successfully critiqued the British empire, or seemed to subtly collude with its violence and exploitation. The very first essay on this topic, by John Reed, had contended that the Indian priests' destruction of Ablewhite exposed “the crimes of which all English society is guilty” (Reed 1973: 285). For Duncan, although the novel falls short of such exposure, or of producing sympathy for oppressed colonized people, it articulates “a demonic counter-imperialism” (Duncan 1994: 300). Others disagreed. Jaya Mehta claimed that

the novel merely relocated imperial violence to India, where it is easily forgotten (Mehta 1995). The obliviousness extends to the novel's abandonment of its own anti-looting argument: although the diamond remains ill gotten, and the Verinders shun Herncastle for his theft and attendant murder, they forget their moral outrage once Rachel inherits the fascinating gem. Similarly, Ashish Roy contends that, although the novel's prologue utters a provocation regarding Queen Victoria's diamonds being cursed, the novel nonetheless recuperates empire. A critical focus of such discussions is the novel's publication ten years after the Indian Mutiny of 1857 when English public opinion was still outraged by over-embellished accounts of Indian sexual and homicidal violence against their Anglo-Indian rulers. As Mehta suggests, this explains why Collins set the novel in 1848, and why he referenced Seringapatam, a more clear-cut case of English guilt: he had to gingerly approach English fury against "savage" Indians in the aftermath of the Mutiny.

### Collins's Drug Novel

*The Moonstone* is a novel about empire, but it is also a novel about drugs. Most criticism that calculates its imperial politics also weighs its representation of opium. For the staid nineteenth-century British middle class, opium was both an orientalized substance evoking the mysterious East and also an ordinary household medicine. Dissolved in alcohol, in the form of laudanum found in the Verinders' medicine cabinet, opium motivates the two most important events in the plot: it causes Blake to remove the diamond and to forget doing so. As the object of addiction, it characterizes the enigmatic Jennings, who orchestrates the opium experiment by which Blake will re-enact the events of Rachel's birthday. Reading opium along with the diamond and Jennings himself as foreign cultural traces, Barry Milligan finds that their allure reduces the English characters to "willess, hypnotized children," unable to confront cultural and racial differences within English culture (Milligan 1995: 82). Mehta's analysis of opium is more damning: "Blake's dose of opium is both his and the novel's alibi for the enabling amnesia at the narrative's core. Thus the mystery of who is guilty is a mystification of guilt" (Mehta 1995: 645). Following this lead, Marty Roth suggests that the tradition of British detective fiction beginning with *The Moonstone* obscures responsibility for Britain's trade in opium, and the two Opium Wars it fought to protect it (Roth 2002). Opium thus indexes a British failure of memory and self-recognition, both at the level of the plot and in the larger context of imperial politics. A full description of Collins's novel requires us to recall the multiple, intertwined histories of opium and other drugs.

The 1860s was a turbulent decade in the modern history of drug use, and *The Moonstone* captured the excitement, confusion, pleasure, despair, exoticism, and banality of intoxicating, habit-forming substances. Dr. Candy's mischievous secret dosing of Blake reflects this casual, open attitude increasingly associated with the past in which the novel was set. By 1868 the specter of overdosing – accidental and

intentional – led the Pharmacy Act to restrict the sale of opium to pharmacists, but it remained easily obtainable. By enthusiastically prescribing hypodermic morphine to their patients, physicians had helped create addictions for which they had no cure. Collins had firsthand knowledge of iatrogenic or physician-caused addiction: to treat his rheumatic gout, he wrote, “I am stabbed every night at ten with a sharp-pointed syringe which injects morphia under my skin – and gets me a night’s rest without any of the drawbacks of taking opium internally” (qtd. in Peters 1991: 315). Collins well knew the paradox of opium: the immense relief with which it could dispel physical suffering, and the frustration of becoming helplessly dependent upon it. This ambivalence is conveyed in the Greek term *pharmakon*, which can be translated as both cure and poison. Collins wrote both dimensions into the famously hybrid Jennings. He also played with the second meaning of *pharmakon*, elucidated by the philosopher Jacques Derrida: it also refers to writing as the cure that poisons memory (Derrida 2003: 25). That is, writing things down helps us to remember them, but if we become too dependent upon this practice or technology, our natural ability to remember may erode. In *The Moonstone*, Collins makes his characters’ consumption of alcohol, opium, and tobacco, like writing, into practices that both supplement and deplete their memories. Whereas Blake’s single instance of unwitting laudanum consumption seems to destroy his memory, Jennings’s habitual use of opium causes him to remember too much of his painful past. As I will show, Jennings resembles a Romantic figure, imprisoned by opium and tormented by memory’s continuous presence; the more modern Blake displays the erosion of memory – and with it, character – through casual consumption.

The very ordinariness of Blake’s laudanum intoxication indicates *The Moonstone*’s broad but subtle configuration of imperial politics. The novel foregrounds the domestic use of tobacco, opium, and alcohol as key to the mystery. The amateur detectives debate the effects of the amount of wine Blake had drunk on the night of the theft, and the number of drops of laudanum to give him in the experiment to reconstruct his behavior; he must also quit smoking cigars a second time, to recreate his disordered nerves. Ronald Thomas links such minute focus on Blake’s consumption of substances to the rise of forensic science and criminal anthropology: those sciences help the body to tell the story Blake has repressed. (Thomas 1991). But, just as Blake never actually recalls what he did, so too does he not repress it. Jennings, rather than Blake, is the character with a “deep” subjectivity, in which memories continually resurface. Instead, Collins constructs Blake – as well as several of the other English characters – superficially, as a modern consumer who habitually forgets the imperial economic framework that makes his pleasurable acts of consumption possible. It is in this way that *The Moonstone* fulfills its reputation as the first detective novel, foreshadowing later fiction in which the detritus of consumption, such as cigarette smoke and ash, becomes clues to the criminal actions of comparatively “flat” characters. Habit-forming substances reveal the imperial dependence on colonial resources and labor – a dependency felt physiologically, at the intimate physical level of craving– and yet forgotten most easily in the effects of oblivion.

No genre emerges fully formed. Accordingly, *The Moonstone* retains aspects of sensation fiction, particularly those associated with feminine consumption, at the same time that it attempts to relabel itself as masculine-dominated detective fiction. Collins's distinctive narrative form, the archive of witnesses' memories, supplies the deficiencies of Blake's laudanum-poisoned memory. As the characters share information, collect evidence, read letters, and conduct experiments, they compensate for Blake's missing memory; but in the process of this "cure," they also cheerfully catch an infectious "detective fever." Betteredge's name for this imagined nervous illness obscures its roots in the most clearly sensual – and putatively feminine – facet of sensation fiction, its pleasurable, habitual consumption. Kate Flint has chronicled critics' lament that sensation novels spread a disease similar to addiction among their female readers. (Flint 1993). H. L. Mansel commented in 1863 that such novels had been "called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contribut[ed] themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply," going on to compare this sickness to that of the dram-drinker (Mansel 1863: 483). Betteredge models this compulsive desire to consume sensation fiction when he describes his own heightened desire for hidden narrative information: "The horrid mystery hanging over us in this house gets into my head like liquor, and makes me wild" (Collins 1999: 205). And yet this simile also moves the metaphor of intoxication to a masculine context: literate, respectable, middle-class women novel readers may have seemed habituated to sensation fiction, but they were not accused of the kind of violent, intoxicated mania Betteredge describes. Also, the compulsions and dependencies of the female characters – Rachel's and Rosanna's self-destructive love for Blake – are presented as abject forms of illness, hysteria and poisonous addiction. In such terms, Rachel laments her love for Blake: "How can I make a man understand that a feeling which horrifies me at myself, can be a feeling that fascinates me at the same time? It's the breath of my life . . . and the poison that kills me – both in one!" (Collins 1999: 299–300). *The Moonstone* represents this feminine desire, so prominently transgressive in sensation fiction; but – with the help of its androgynous addict Jennings – it also busily refocuses compelled sensation on masculine and quasi-masculine bodies that enact the detective plot.

### Opium and Sympathy

Collins activates a familiar, unsympathetic attitude to opium in order to complicate it later in the novel. He first references opium in his characterization of the ruthless Sir John Herncastle, who has plundered the diamond and murdered its guardians during the storming of Seringapatam. His family shuns him, and he becomes the subject of scandal and rumor: "Sometimes they said he was given up to smoking opium and collecting old books; sometimes he was reported to be trying strange things in chemistry; sometimes he was seen carousing and amusing himself among the lowest people in the lowest slums of London. Anyhow, a solitary, vicious,

underground life was the life the Colonel led" (Collins 1999: 85). Collins's description links De Quincey's *Confessions* (1821) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), helping to form a continuous thematic strand in which opium use connotes the dilettantism, esotericism, and vice of antisocial characters. Herncastle's activities resemble De Quincey's recreational use of laudanum, his scholarly dabbling in Kant, and his Saturday evening wanderings among the urban working class. Dorian Gray's wayward Decadence is similarly conjured through opium, exotic collections, and carousing in slums; his murder of Basil Hallward occasions strange doings in chemistry to dispose of the body, and, shunned by reputable society, he lives a reclusive, vice-ridden life. Opium becomes the symbol of self-imposed exile from society. Collins engages a genealogy in which the opium-smoker, like other drug users, "cuts himself off from the world, in exile from reality, far from objective reality and the real life of the city and the community . . . he escapes into a world of simulacrum and fiction" (Derrida 2003: 25).

Within the novel, the seemingly fictive, simulacral world is that of India. As a mode of inducing hallucinatory visions, Herncastle's opium-smoking threatens to conjure India within his mind and body, and within England. Nothing signifies this cultural transgression so much as his smoking opium rather than eating it or drinking laudanum: smoking most resembled Chinese and Indian customs; it was treated with suspicion and rarely suggested as a mode of medical use. (Berridge 1999: 204–5). Opium, like the diamond, thus collapses the distance that insulates the metropole, or imperial seat, from its colony. Milligan notes that the diamond's fascinating power breaks the confines of Rachel's Indian cabinet, wreaking havoc just like the opium Blake ingests. The diamond even occasionally obscures opium as the focal point of readers' interest in exotica and racial difference. More conservative authors would develop lurid plots in which white characters' opium-smoking causes them to degenerate, such as Charles Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1871), Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Man with the Twisted Lip" (1890), and Frank Norris's "The Third Circle" (1897). But Collins leaves Herncastle's potential racial metamorphosis undeveloped. He briefly posits his transgressive, antisocial opium-smoking at the novel's outset so that he can overturn this depiction later on.

With Herncastle, Collins relies on his readers' "mistrust of opium," but later in the novel his character Ezra Jennings urges them to revise this "ignorant" opinion. Jennings's primary role in *The Moonstone* is to educate readers about opium habituation, and, as an opium addict, to obtain their sympathies. Jennings takes opium only as an analgesic for his terminal illness; rather than affording him the pleasure associated with recreational smoking, it mires him in the agony of addiction. As he explains to Blake, "The one effectual palliative in my case, is – opium. To that all-potent and all-merciful drug I am indebted for a respite of many years from my sentence of death. But even the virtues of opium have their limit. The progress of the disease has gradually forced me from the use of opium to the abuse of it. I am feeling the penalty at last. My nervous system is shattered; my nights are nights of

horror" (Collins 1999: 448). Collins's use of the word "penalty" is ironic: Jennings has done nothing wrong to deserve punishment. The memories opium evokes testify to this unfair suffering. Blake observes him discarding a bouquet of wildflowers "as if the remembrances which it recalled were remembrances which hurt him now" (1999: 446); similarly, "His whole being seemed to be absorbed in the agony of recollecting, and in the effort to speak" (1999: 447). Collins never reveals the content of these memories, but given Jennings's colonial past – he was "born, and partly brought up, in one of our colonies" – his suffering memorializes a generalized painful relationship between Britain and its possessions (1999: 439). Jennings emerges as the antithesis of Herculio's solipsistic opium use and homicidal imperial violence. Collins develops him as a colonial figure who recalls a past of victimization and exile by the English within England.

Jennings's addiction and exile helps us to understand the function of his hybridity in the novel. Critics frequently draw attention this quality, pointing to his mixed-race parentage ("My father was an Englishman; but my mother – We are straying away from our subject, Mr. Blake . . .") and his androgyny ("Physiology says, and says truly, that some men are born with female constitutions – and I am one of them!") (Collins 1999: 439, 441). Even Jennings's visually striking, contrastive hair has become critically significant: Heller sees it, "in all its unabashed Gothic Otherness, as a symbol of the new directions in Collins studies" (Heller 2003: 362). Jennings's biraciality and colonial origin, joined with readerly sympathy for his suffering, revises the representation of opium, race, and empire established by De Quincey's *Confessions*. De Quincey's narrator's opium nightmares were laden with racism derived from his overwhelmed confusion: the imagery of his "oriental dreams" filled him with "amazement," "horror," "astonishment" and "terror" that subsided into "hatred and abomination of what I saw" (De Quincey 1985: 74). By contrast, Jennings's nightmares preserve the horror of being unable to distinguish between people and things, but they omit De Quincey's racism: "At one time, I was whirling through empty space with the phantoms of the dead, friends and enemies together" (Collins 1999: 466). Further, as Charles Rzepka has also observed, De Quincey's nightmares connoted imperial guilt: "Vishnu hated me: Seeva laid wait for me. . . . I had done a deed, they said, which the ibis and the crocodile trembled at" (De Quincey 1985: 74; Rzepka 2008: 219). Jennings is the inverse of this imperial guilt and fear of revenge. De Quincey's narrator's white consciousness is sustained in tension with the racial anxieties coloring his unconscious memories and dreams, but Jennings's psychology is not racially stratified. Instead, his "gipsy complexion" causes anxiety in those around him, and he constantly faces the racism of a Yorkshire community in which servants scowl and avoid him (Collins 1999: 436–7). Jennings's hybridity becomes an occasion for softening readerly racial prejudice. Similarly, sympathy for his terminal illness and palliative addiction helps readers to detach opium from the De Quinceyan context of sensual indulgence and imperial guilt associated with Herculio. Of nineteenth-century representations of addicts, Jennings is the most original and progressive.

### “Was I Drunk?”

Collins uses Jennings's addiction to give him psychological depth, but he makes Blake's brushes with opium superficial. Blake's intoxication by alcohol signifies this domesticization: unlike Jennings, Blake does not ingest opium but laudanum – opium dissolved in alcohol – a far less exotic remedy that Victorians relied upon extensively to treat aches and pains. In keeping with this quotidian connotation, and the one-time, temporary nature of his intoxication, Blake has less psychic depth than the tormented Jennings. Betteredge's narrative establishes Blake's pattern of absorbing and reflecting his environment, resulting in a superficial, comic cosmopolitanism that dispels any unique depth: “He wrote a little; he painted a little; he sang and played and composed a little – borrowing, as I suspect, in all these cases, just as he had borrowed from me” (Collins 1999: 68). Preoccupied mainly with solving the puzzle of the missing diamond and securing his jeopardized reputation, Blake is not a deeply self-divided character. Accordingly, the pattern underlying Blake's psychological events is furnished by a model based on a humdrum anecdote. Collins references alienist John Elliotson's narrative of an Irish porter who gets drunk and loses a valuable parcel; he must become intoxicated again before he can recall its location. This is the novel's most quotidian iteration of the *pharmakon*: the porter uses alcohol as a technique of memory, to help him access the remote areas of his brain where his sensory impressions are stored. In contrast with the unstated dramatic, painful memories that opium brings to Jennings's consciousness, the drunken porter remembers only trivial information. Accordingly, far from demonstrating conflict between different desires within Blake's character, the experiment proves nothing striking about Blake's altered mental state – merely the consistency of his good intentions, since he was acting to protect the Moonstone when he removed it from Rachel's boudoir. Indeed, under the “stimulating influence” of laudanum, Blake's concerns transform from worry and delay into “practical action”; it pushes him toward the achievement of his objective, then covers its own traces. Unlike Jennings's opium habituation, Blake's laudanum-induced actions reflect his single-minded intention, confirming his status as the novel's hero. For Taylor, laudanum produces Blake's unconscious as “tacitly still regulated, a state of passive derangement that does not necessarily involve or imply the disintegration of Blake's social identity” (Taylor 1988: 186). Unlike the porter, Blake never recalls his actions. In the novel's project of making him a psychologically unified hero, he re-enacts them because the narrative requires him to prove his character to others rather than to himself.

The novel briefly voices another banal hypothesis regarding Blake's behavior and memory loss. Having read and discussed Rosanna Spearman's letter, Blake asks Betteredge, “Was I drunk on the night of Rachel's Birthday?” (Collins 1999: 400). Their ensuing conversation focuses on Blake's typical habits – according to Betteredge, “it's the great defect of your character, Mr. Franklin, that you only drink with your

dinner, and never touch a drop of liquor afterwards!" This quip establishes Betteredge as the comic relic of a more bibulous, Pickwickian age, and Blake as an unexpected paragon of modern abstemiousness. Betteredge recalls giving him watered-down cognac: "A child couldn't have got drunk on it – let alone a grown man!" (1999: 400). Here the consumption of alcohol comes under scrutiny as the characters calculate how it might have altered Blake's mental state and behavior. There is not much difference between such drunken forgetfulness and what actually happens, except that Blake, who is no Irish porter, requires a more elaborate physiological mystery commensurate with his status as a gentleman.

This new focus on the everyday detail of Blake's drinking reminds us that consuming alcohol was largely unremarkable for the British middle class in the mid-nineteenth century. Alcohol was a common part of family and social life; it was not restricted to adults, as Betteredge's comment hints. The novel offers numerous instances of such ordinary drinking: Rachel's birthday is celebrated with cognac and champagne, and Betteredge slyly hints that Miss Clack has "a pretty taste" for the latter (Collins 1999: 252). Though Blake doesn't drink after dinner, he does drink during the day, when Betteredge serves him brandy with soda-water, as well as sherry, and grog (103, 235, 379). In keeping with his rustic, elderly tastes, Betteredge himself drinks hot grog (202) and ale (254). Cuff and the gardener drink Scotch whisky as they debate rose-growing (197), and the Yollands serve Cuff gin when he visits (186). The medicinal use of alcohol as a "stimulant" is seen in Jennings's treatment of Candy with champagne (440). Even one of the Verinder's dogs gets "pot-liquor" to treat a rash (252). Alcohol is thus part of the everyday life of the household, signaling hospitality, mediating social interactions, and healing minor illnesses. Yet such forgettable instances could become important under the narrative gaze of detective fiction, in which, to quote Cuff, "there is no such thing as trifles" (159). In Miller's Foucauldian interpretation of *The Moonstone*, the novel promulgates its norms insidiously, through the power of social surveillance and discipline. The consumption of alcohol is one of the domains of everyday life that increasingly comes under this surveillance, both in the novel and in late nineteenth-century culture more generally.

Alcoholic intoxication thus helps effect the novel's transition to detective fiction; as a metaphor for the compulsive consumption of narrative information, it also implicates masculine bodies. As noted above, Betteredge explicitly likens the unfolding of the plot to drunken excitement that makes him "wild." Betteredge, Blake, the clairvoyant boy, and Gooseberry all embody intoxicated vision as stimulated excitement. Blake's consumption of alcohol, as laudanum, puts him in an altered mental state similar to that of the clairvoyant boy, whose visions derive from his gaze into a pool of "a thick, sweet-smelling liquor, as black as ink" (Collins 1999: 104). The comparison between liquor and ink – the medium of the novel itself – reminds readers that both liquids activate the imagination. Liquor, ink, and the boy's body as sensory interface act as the media or transmission points of the story itself, as it crosses from colony to metropole. Like his unnamed forerunner,



Gooseberry's body also forms the medium through which the narrative of the diamond's movements unfolds. Gooseberry offers a precise instance of the novel's transition from the feminine consumption of sensation fiction to the masculine realm of detective fiction. As a "very meritorious" young detective who earns Cuff's approval, Gooseberry figures as the future of detection. His large, rolling eyes suggest the increasingly broad and deep focus of the detective's gaze into hitherto unseen areas. Yet in the scene of Ablewhite's unmasking, Gooseberry's eyes also recall those of the excited readers of sensation fiction: whereas Blake looks away in horror, Gooseberry's "hideous . . . enjoyment of the horror" and "breathless interest" allow him to watch and narrate the process. As the medium through which narrative information is relayed, Gooseberry's unnaturally large eyes signify a transformation from femininely consumed lurid sensation to the visionary masculine knowledge central to detection.

### The Divine Weed

One other substance draws together empire, consumption, amnesia, gender, and genre: tobacco. Blake's quitting smoking initiates the causal chain leading to the theft of Rachel's diamond. Indeed, a reviewer of a theatrical adaptation quipped that "The lesson to be gained from *The Moonstone* is, don't give up smoking, or you will walk in your sleep, and steal the jewels of your lover" (Collins 1999: 713). Blake quits to win Rachel – a well-known narrative convention in domestic realism and tobacco writing. When she spurns him, he lapses, voicing a comic, misogynistic ode to disposability: "You choose a cigar, you try it, and it disappoints you. What do you do upon that? You throw it away and try another. Now observe the application! You choose a woman, you try her, and she breaks your heart. Fool! take a lesson from your cigar-case. Throw her away, and try another!" (1999: 236). Blake recommits to Rachel by forsaking tobacco for Jennings's experiment, but he struggles, ultimately resorting to throwing his cigar-case key out of the window. Intermittently remembering the pleasures of tobacco, the novel signifies ambivalence about reproducing the domestic sphere. Tobacco discourse appealed to imperial memory, frequently extolling England's triumphant colonization of the New World and introduction to smoking by Native Americans. *The Moonstone* references – and mocks – such fabled glory in Betteredge's smoky perusal of *Robinson Crusoe*, the imperialist primer whose protagonist depends on tobacco as both medicine and investment. By the mid-nineteenth century, tobacco-smoking represented the leisured withdrawal of the middle-class man from the complicated problems of the outside world, including the global reaches where the weed was produced. Different styles of smoking connoted varying degrees of masculine removal from the colonies: Betteredge and Cuff, older and more ensconced in traditional imperial values, smoke pipes; Blake, with his continental persona, favors cigars; and Murthwaite, reflecting his Indian travels, puffs a cheroot. Collins highlights the contrast between such degrees

of separation when he has Betteredge push *Robinson Crusoe* on Jennings, who records that he “produced a dirty and dog’s-eared book, which exhaled a strong odour of stale tobacco as he turned over the leaves” (1999: 478). As Betteredge attempts to undermine Jennings’s experiment, we see the traditional imperial model of Englishness associated with pipe tobacco in unflattering contrast with opium, which – in its association with Jennings – now connotes serious medico-scientific procedure and an openness to those of colonial origin.

Try as he might to achieve a respite from feminine demands and more unsettling legacies of colonial violence, the English tobacco-smoker cannot help but recall them. Collins stages these disruptions of memory when tobacco signally fails to quell masculine nerves upset by the feminine and racially marked aspects of the mystery. Tobacco usually helps Betteredge forget his anxieties, but the mystery of the diamond represents “the first trouble I remember for many a long year which wasn’t to be blown off by a whiff of tobacco” (Collins 1999: 196). Tobacco similarly fails to calm Blake, at the very moment when he extols its capacity to do so. On the verge of finding the nightgown and letter that Rosanna Spearman has left under the Shivering Sand, Blake smokes in order to attenuate suspense: “This was one of the occasions on which the invaluable habit of smoking becomes especially precious and consolatory. I lit a cigar, and sat down on the slope of the beach” (1999: 374). Collins mocks his erstwhile hero, because this cigar does little to help quell the “horror of its false brown face under a passing smile . . . . The turn of the tide came, before my cigar was finished” (1999: 374). In this moment, the feminine aspect of sensation fiction interrupts and overwhelms the masculine detective.

Likewise, weightier Indian cultural values triumph over the increasingly apparent English tendency toward disposable consumption. In an appropriately throwaway line, Murthwaite tries to impress upon Betteredge the gravity of the situation from the Brahmins’ point of view: “Do you care much for the ashes left in your pipe, when you empty it?’ ‘No, sir.’ ‘In the country those men came from, they care just as much about killing a man, as you care about emptying the ashes out of your pipe. . . . The sacrifice of caste is a serious thing in India, if you like. The sacrifice of life is nothing at all’” (Collins 1999: 130). Collins contrasts trivial, temporary English habits with Hindu values that transcend individual lifetimes. In so doing, he unfolds a difference in the meaning of memory itself. On the brink of a modernity that produces, consumes, disposes, and forgets at an accelerated rate, *The Moonstone* contrasts itself with Hindu traditions it perceives to be ancient, continuous, and self-aware. In this way, trifles such as tobacco, alcohol, and opium form the antithesis of the diamond, properly understood as the object of Hindu veneration. In the half-century following the novel’s publication, tobacco would become the pre-eminent sign of imperial mass consumption, with all its nervousness and ennui. Collins’s novel, shifting between sensation and detection, records a historical moment when such nervous stimulation could still occasionally be leavened with the comic innocence of an earlier, more naturally forgetful era.

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17  
Ouida

*Jane Jordan*

For the Victorians, “The name of Ouida [was] in itself a sensation” (review of *Tricotrin*, 1869: 2). Her novels had a notorious reputation, characterized by “Red-hot passion and ultra-Swinburnian fleshiness” (review of *Moths*, 1880a: 835). Unlike fellow sensationalist Braddon, who could be “trusted never to outrage propriety very grossly” (review of *Fenton’s Quest*, 1871: 45), Ouida became a byword for “undisguised sensuality” (review of *Two Little Wooden Shoes*, 1874: 823). The fact that her novels were issued by Chapman & Hall, “one of the first houses in the trade” and “have a very large and increasing circulation” ought, felt the *Contemporary Review*, to “be a matter of painful interest to every decent man and woman in England” (Murray 1873: 935). Indeed, Ouida’s frank depiction of sexual relations convinced reviewers that she was a man – possibly a Frenchman. The *Pall Mall Gazette* hazarded that her pseudonym had a “smart, dashing, turfy, horsey sound, like the smack of a whip upon a booted leg” (review of *Strathmore*, 1866: 12).

The fact that Ouida was a woman writer only became known after her move to the Langham Hotel (her “home” from 1866 to 1871). At the Langham she gained notoriety for her “causeries intimes,” a salon emulative of George Sand, but which was frequented almost entirely by men eminent in the fields of literature and politics, explorers and army officers. The publisher William Tinsley recalled her instructions to her guests: “smoke and drink as if you were at the club; talk as if you were in the smoking-room there” (Tinsley 1900: I, 85). It was this rather louche public image of Ouida that persisted, despite the fact that in 1871 she moved to Florence and there wrote very different novels: socially realistic tales about the Italian peasantry and satirical attacks on the lax morals of the British upper classes abroad. As late as 1881, *Punch* commissioned Linley Sambourne to produce an affectionate cartoon of Ouida

reclining against sumptuous cushions, a hookah at her feet, wearing a three-quarter-length dress that reveals her ankles. Ouida was by then a mature 42, but Sambourne depicts her in her Langham heyday, flanked by a portrait of “Strathmore,” eponymous hero of her second novel, and blowing smoke-rings from a cigarette (the name of the heroine of *Under Two Flags*).

Although she adopted a rather Bohemian persona, Ouida was one of a new breed of women writers to emerge in the early 1860s, identified by Elaine Showalter, for whom “All the commercial, competitive, self-promoting aspects of the literary life . . . were conspicuous in [their] careers” (Showalter 1984: 154). Ouida was a prolific writer, consistently producing a new novel each year, as well as shorter fiction and more than sixty essays for the periodical press, a number of which contributed to late Victorian debates about literary censorship, and international and dramatic copyright. She negotiated her own contracts and, as is clear from her correspondence with her English publishers, Ouida was deeply involved in the marketing and appearance of her works, as well as the timing of different editions. She also understood the market well enough to recognize the importance of maintaining her “mystérieuse” identity (Ouida 1868: 3).<sup>1</sup> It was not until the publication of her profile in the series “Celebrities at Home” for Edmund Yates’s *the World* (September 1876), that Ouida revealed the origin of her pseudonym, which was derived from her childish attempts to pronounce her “real” name, Louise de la Ramée (in fact an embellished form of her baptismal name, plain Marie Louise Ramé [Yates 1877: 243]). That may be, but the choice of pseudonym evidently had other points of origin. It served to deflect gender-specific criticism for some years: once her identity was known, Ouida was said to have “unsexed herself” by her depiction of the “demi-monde” (review of *Moths*, 1880b: 3). It also signaled not merely her identification with her father’s nationality (Ouida was born in Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk, to a French father and English mother), but her outsider status “in relation to English literary culture [and] her refusal to be bound by English codes of sexual morality” (Jordan 2009: 108). Ouida preferred to think of herself as a French writer – with a French literary sensibility – who wrote novels in English.<sup>2</sup>

Regularly denounced by reviewers for making Zola appear “clean-tasted by comparison” (review of *Friendship*, 1878: 2), Ouida was nonetheless a tremendously popular novelist, and was regarded by Mary E. Braddon as one of her chief rivals (Braddon and Ouida were the only two women writers to feature in Yates’s “Celebrities at Home” series). Braddon wrote to Bulwer Lytton (20 July 1872) that the “Broughton and Ouida novels are those that sell in the 3 vol. form next best to – or on a level with – I scarcely know which – my own romances” (qtd. in Wolff 1974: 154). Thus when, in 1874, Andrew Chatto, who had recently bought up the firm of J. C. Hotten, set about purchasing the backlists of popular novelists to form the centerpiece of his fiction lists, it was to sensation novelists Wilkie Collins and Ouida that he turned, successfully buying up Collins’s backlist from Bentley in 1875. The ruthlessness with which Chatto went about securing the rights to Ouida’s early novels is testament to her commercial standing, and the transaction is well documented.<sup>3</sup> Undeterred by

Ouida's own wish to remain with Chapman & Hall, her publishers since 1865, Chatto approached Chapman directly, and bought up the complete rights to her work. In September 1874 Chatto was able to advertise all twelve titles as well as a new novel from Braddon, *Lost for Love*.

Despite her popularity, Ouida has largely been omitted from the late twentieth-century Anglo-American critical revival and rehabilitation of the sensation novel. Showalter (1977), Hughes (1980), Pykett (1992) and Flint (1993), all make a case for reading female sensationalists in a unique way, as women writers writing for women readers, and focus their discussion on the leading exponents: Mary Braddon and Ellen Wood. Despite the expansion of interest in the sensation novel, one of a number of popular nineteenth-century genres to have become a fixture in the canon, Ouida's position as a sensation novelist remains notional – as I have argued elsewhere (Jordan 1995: 75). Her revival has been slow: John Sutherland's Oxford World's Classics edition of *Under Two Flags* (1995) was for ten years the only modern reprint available until the publication of Natalie Schroeder's scholarly edition of *Moths* for Broadview (2005).

Schroeder was the first critic to examine fruitfully the relationship between Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and Ouida's *Strathmore* (1865) in her 1988 article on "Feminine Sensationalism". Despite the fact that the two sirens Lady Audley and Marion Vavasour are ultimately "emasculated" (Schroeder 1988: 98), Schroeder demonstrates that in each case the narrative dramatizes the (unequal) power struggle between the hero and heroine, in which woman's sole source of power is her sexuality, manifested both inwardly (narcissism) and outwardly (aggression and cruelty). Schroeder's recent book-length study of Ouida's fiction, *Ouida the Phenomenon* (2008), written in collaboration with Shari Hodges Holt, plays down the relationship with Braddon – as if Schroeder and Holt begin to doubt that Ouida *can* be regarded as a sensation novelist. This latest, and much-needed, attempt to rehabilitate Ouida ironically risks reassigning her to a canonical backwater due to the authors' insistence that she is a phenomenon, an anomaly, a woman writer who resists categorization within established genres. Talia Schaffer's study, *Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, as her title makes clear, is keen to revisit Ouida as one of the foremost female aesthetes, and, in the process, to revise current definitions of aestheticism, which, as Schaffer argues, wasn't exclusively addressed to an elite readership (Schaffer 2000: 2). Schaffer's original and rewarding analysis of Ouida's bestselling *Under Two Flags* is therefore positioned outside the context of sensationalism. The two academic conferences held in 2008 to mark the centenary of Ouida's death, at , London, and at Bagni di Lucca in Italy, signaled a resurgence of interest in Ouida's later Italian romances and her journalism.

Perhaps the most useful work on the popular novel of recent years, moreover an approach that enables us to reposition Ouida as a sensationalist, is Pamela Gilbert's *Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels* (1997). Gilbert reminds us of the generic multiplicity of literary texts and of the often arbitrary nature by which genres are assigned to texts by literary reviewers and critics ("In any text, there

will be as much or more that falls outside a particular generic category as within" [1997: 59]). She also points out that texts we might call "aggressively multiple" risk being "declared hysterical or unreadable – and consequently, left unread" (1997: 61). Ouida's novels of the 1860s encompass sensationalism, romance, the silver fork novel, the muscular Christian novel, and the male adventure story. She was accused of imitating writers as diverse as Braddon, Bulwer Lytton, Kingsley, and George A. Lawrence. It is not, though, necessary to redefine sensationalism in order to accommodate the peculiarities of Ouida's style. For all their multiplicity, her early novels reflect key aspects of the sensation novel: an interest in illicit sexuality, bigamy, and matrimonial law more generally, and in aggressively ambitious and sexually dangerous heroines, and an overturning of fixed conceptions about gendered identity. In one respect she stands apart from fellow sensationalists: Ouida's conception of idealized masculinity was unashamedly aristocratic – the sensation hero's conventional "emergence into a properly socialised [i.e. bourgeois] masculinity," as described by Lyn Pykett (1992: 104), is a completely foreign notion to Ouida. And this was understood at the time to be one of the reasons for her enduring popularity – her gentlemen heroes may possess superhuman strength and live in unimagined luxury, but they provided "the ideal excellence to which the lower classes aspired," and allowed working- and middle-class readers the chance to "enjoy these professed revelations of the sphere just beyond their reach" (review of *Cecil Castlemaine's Gage*, 1867: 11).

Ouida has resisted categorization for the most part because she appears to write sensation novels for men rather than women: her early novels address a specifically male reader, "mes frères," and they reveal male secrets. To adapt Showalter's definition of female sensationalism, Ouida's novels of the period express "a wide range of suppressed [male] emotions . . . by tapping and satisfying fantasies of protest and escape" (Showalter 1977: 159). Despite more recent attempts to widen the definition of sensationalism (Gilbert, for example, reminds us that "in the early 1860s, the category was often used as an indiscriminate label for popular literature, usually by women, that seemed in any way transgressive" [1997: 181]), the sensation genre, as it has been defined by feminist critics, is chiefly characterized by its independent heroine who can be seen to express the frustrations of women readers during a particular decade, the 1860s, in which the social role of middle-class women was significantly expanded through their involvement in a number of social and political campaigns.

Yet there is much to be gained by realigning Ouida's work with Braddon's. Braddon and Ouida began their careers at the same time, and Lord Lytton was in fact a literary mentor to both. A regular contributor of short fiction to *Bentley's Miscellany* since 1859, Ouida's first full-length work, the bigamy novel *Held in Bondage*, was serialized in the *New Monthly Magazine* (under its original title of *Granville de Vigne; A Tale of the Day*) from January 1861 to June 1863, and thus ran concurrently with Braddon's first two sensation novels, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861–2) and *Aurora Floyd* (1862–3). They also shared a publisher: both *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Held in Bondage* were published by the Tinsley Brothers. Like Braddon, Ouida was a woman novelist

accused of writing outside her designated sphere (“Horse-racing, fighting, and camp life at home or abroad are not fit subjects for a woman’s pen; and the less she knows of them the better” [review of *Under Two Flags*, 1868b: 6]). We risk limiting our understanding of the sensation novel if we fail to acknowledge the strong similarities between, for example, *Strathmore* and *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Although *Lady Audley’s Secret* is regarded as the definitive female sensation novel, the novel’s central consciousness is not that of Lady Audley herself but of her languidly effeminate nephew by marriage, Robert Audley, whose quest to recover the body of his friend George Talboys provides the narrative trajectory. Braddon’s golden-haired siren, who not only separates the two male friends but attempts to murder first one and then the other, provides the model for Ouida’s *femme fatale*, Marion Vavasour.

One needs to go back to the reviews of Ouida’s early novels in order to appreciate the hostility towards women writers who attempted to cross generic boundaries. The *Westminster Review*, perhaps flattered by the fact that it is read by Sabretasche, one of the protagonists of Ouida’s *Held in Bondage* (Ouida 1900: 100), had no trouble in defining Ouida’s first novel as sensational, although they positioned it at the far end of the “Braddon” spectrum: “The words are those of [G. A. Lawrence’s] *Guy Livingstone*, but the plot is that of Miss Braddon.” In all, Ouida, whom the *Westminster* took to be a male author, was credited with having developed a “delicious . . . new kind of sensation” (review of *Strathmore*, 1865: 568). When, a year later, the *Westminster* discovered that Ouida was a woman, her novels were judged by a different set of criteria. In a lengthy and vituperative review of *Chandos*, her third novel, Ouida was now criticized for her hybrid style (“equal portions of Bulwer and Braddon” [review of *Chandos*, 1866: 525]). As a presumed male novelist, Ouida had been commended for “his” skill in mixing identifiably masculine and feminine sub-genres in order to create something new; as a woman novelist attempting not only to master a masculine genre but to adulterate it with a mixture of feminine sensationalism, and to do so under the guise of an unconventional pseudonym, Ouida had stepped beyond her prescribed limits. As the *Saturday Review* advised, “when this class [of fiction] comes to be described by a lady the result is at once offensive and incredible” (review of *Under Two Flags*, 1868a: 121).

George Lawrence’s first novel, *Guy Livingstone; or, Thorough*, was the hit of 1857, and it was unsurprising that Ouida should try to emulate his success or that her first novel was accepted by the Tinsley Brothers, who were also Lawrence’s publishers from 1863 to 1866. *Guy Livingstone* tells of the severed friendship between two handsome young guardsmen, virile Guy (“the perfection of muscular power” [Lawrence 1857: 356]) and Charley Forrester, who possesses an effeminate style of beauty. Both run into trouble with their respective brides: Guy, wishing to put his womanizing youth behind him, courts the pure but frigid Constance, yet is pursued all the while by a dangerous siren, Flora Bellasys; Charley recklessly elopes with Guy’s spirited cousin, Isabella, whose fiancé Bruce tracks them down and murders Charley. Denied revenge for the death of his friend (Charley’s murderer goes insane with guilt) and romantic consolation with Constance (she fades away to her death believing that Guy has been



won over by Flora), Guy falls from his horse and is paralyzed from the waist down. The novel concludes with Guy's death, mourned by a repentant Flora.

Ouida sensationalized *Guy Livingstone* whilst retaining key features of its narrative mode and structure: in *Held in Bondage* she adopts Lawrence's effeminate yet oddly marginal narrator, through whose eyes we appreciate the physical beauty of the two male protagonists; in her first, and subsequent, novels Ouida presents a deep-rooted friendship between two men (one muscular, one effeminate) which is threatened by an aggressively sexual siren. Ouida's *femme fatale*, whom *Punch* would give the generic title "Lady Regula Baddun" ("Strapmore!" 1878: 130), doesn't unman the hero with a mere kiss, but seduces him or tricks him into the "bondage" of marriage. In *Strathmore*, it is the eponymous hero who (mad with jealousy) kills his effeminate friend and rival. Where Lawrence withholds reconciliation between the two comrades, and also withholds heterosexual fulfillment for either, Ouida provides the consolatory figure of idealized (pubescent) feminine purity who is, of course, the antithesis of the aggressively independent heroine, the definitive heroine of sensation fiction. In her first three novels this child-bride is discovered to be the daughter of the hero's closest friend. She satisfactorily replaces the dangerous sexuality of the siren *and* ensures the uninterrupted continuation, even rejuvenation, of male friendship, binding the comrades with a fresh tie.

Ouida's conscious reworking of *Guy Livingstone* is less remarkable when one considers Braddon's own debt to the George Lawrence novel: in *Lady Audley's Secret* she too provides us with a *femme fatale* who severs a male friendship, a male quest that both exposes her villainy and sees her disposed of, and allows for the restitution of the male friendship, sublimated or contained through the marriage of the hero to his friend's sister. Braddon's originality is in putting the *femme fatale* center-stage and switching around the gendered identity of the two male friends – in *Lady Audley's Secret* it is not the effeminate hero who comes to grief, but the "heavy dragoon" (Braddon 1991: 19). Ouida restores the gendered dynamics of *Guy Livingstone*, but her *femme fatale* is a sexed-up version of Lady Audley. Lucy Audley's feathery golden ringlets, which make "a pale halo round her head when the sun-light shone through them" (Braddon 1991: 8), are replaced in Ouida's *Strathmore* by Marion Vavasour's intoxicating golden tresses which are scented with "a soft, subtle, amber-scented perfume, such as the tresses of Lesbia might have borne as she came from her odorous bath" (Ouida 1893: 54). The sexual connotations were not lost on Ouida's readers: as one reviewer joked, Strathmore "makes love with his nose" (review of *Strathmore*, 1865: 568). Marion is not, however, the first pretty blonde to enter the text: in the opening chapter the reader is introduced to Strathmore's bosom friend, the David to his Jonathan ("the free, frank, *bon camarade* communion of a friendship that was closer than brotherhood and stronger than the tie of blood . . . before a woman laid the axe to its root" [Ouida 1865: 142]). Bertie Erroll's "long fair hair sweeping off a forehead white as the most delicate blonde's," made him "almost as attractive to men as to women"; indeed, "a woman might envy him his golden hair" (Ouida 1893: 6, 147). Marion Vavasour does just that. As Lady Audley murders George Talboys, or attempts to, so Marion goads

her lover Strathmore into believing that Erroll has attempted to seduce her. Strathmore shoots his friend dead in a duel and tellingly presents Marion with a trophy: “The golden curl of the dead man’s hair lay in her lap, in pledge and proof that her bidding had been done” (Ouida 1893: 227). This being Ouida, Marion is not unmasked as a simple bigamist, as is Lady Audley. The Vavasours’ open marriage, which has been the source of much disquiet, is exposed as a sham: the couple were never actually married and Marion has no right to the title of Vavasour and Vaux. Late in the novel it is revealed that the Marquis picked her up in Mauritius, the orphaned child of planters, and while refusing to marry her, agreed to accord her the dignities of a wife if she became his mistress.

How, then, does the narrative resolve the havoc caused by Marion Vavasour? Strathmore’s relationship with Erroll is restituted, not through a Clara Talboys, but through Erroll’s orphaned daughter, Lucille, who is burdened with the role of replacing both her father, and thus “correcting” Strathmore’s sexual orientation, *and* replacing or effacing the memory of Marion Vavasour. Lucille is a 16-year-old blonde beauty, as was Marion when she first met Vavasour. This resolution is not without its difficulties – in marrying Strathmore, Lucille is marrying her father’s murderer, a crime, Strathmore acknowledges, “accursed as incest” (Ouida 1893: 372) – but it is a conclusion typical of Ouida and typical of the sensation novel. *Strathmore* responds to *Lady Audley’s Secret* in the way that *Lady Audley’s Secret* responded to *The Woman in White*: as Braddon rewrote Laura as Lucy, so Ouida rewrites Lucy as Marion. Furthermore, in her idealized conception of the child-bride in *Held in Bondage*, *Strathmore*, and *Chandos*, Ouida takes us back full circle to Collins’s pessimistic conclusion that, under patriarchy, childlike, vacuous Laura Glyde is the feminine ideal.

Writing in the Lawrentian tradition, there is no room in Ouida’s first three novels for the kind of autonomous heroines conceived of by Braddon and Collins. Her next two novels, *Idalia* and *Under Two Flags*, signal an abrupt change of direction. Here, Ouida takes her characteristic generic hybridism to its limit by positioning an identifiably sensational heroine at the heart of an identifiably male adventure story. In doing so, she collapses the notion of an essential sexual difference between men and women, as generic conventions are subverted time and again. It makes sense to read *Under Two Flags* in relation to *Idalia*, since the two novels were serialized concurrently and both were published in 1867.<sup>4</sup> Both place the aristocratic British hero in an unfamiliar, exotic, landscape, where he is confronted with an unorthodox heroine who threatens his masculine authority, and whose source of power is not so much her sexuality but her ability to hold her own in an exclusively male sphere. *Idalia* recruits young men to revolutionary causes throughout Europe; Cigarette, the illegitimate child of a French soldier serving in Algeria, fights alongside the army in their many skirmishes with the Arabs. *Idalia*, in particular, demonstrates the extent to which gendered identity had become rigidly codified by the 1860s, so that for the hero, or indeed any male character, to cry or show moral weakness is consistently and deliberately labeled “womanly,” whilst *Idalia*’s scholarship, psychological penetration, sense of honor, and sheer courage, are labeled “masculine” or “far beyond

the common range of women” (Ouida 1878: 192). The effect upon the reader of Idalia’s transgressions against the feminine ideal is to question the very ideology of separate spheres: what it means to be a woman is consistently contested and redefined by Idalia herself.

Ironically, it is in *Under Two Flags*, the finest of Ouida’s manly romances, that she introduces her most original and overtly masculine heroine, Cigarette. This is all the more unexpected in a novel so preoccupied with definitions of masculinity, and written ostensibly for a male readership. It concerns Bertie Cecil’s self-imposed exile from Britain after his younger brother disgraces the family name by forging a cheque in the name of Cecil’s bosom friend Lord Rockingham, or “Seraph.” Cecil effects his disappearance by enrolling in the French army in Algeria under a false name. The *Saturday Review* was so impressed with Ouida’s authentic rendition of military life that it felt sure the novel was based upon “recent personal observations” (review of *Under Two Flags*, 1868a: 121). Serialized first in the *British Army and Navy Review* (to which Ouida had begun contributing short stories and articles in 1864) whilst *Idalia* was running in the *New Monthly*, Chapman & Hall’s 1867 edition carried a prefatory note from the author, advising that it was chiefly for her military readers that the novel was “now specially published in its present form” (Ouida 1995: 2).

That Ouida was as concerned to explore unorthodox representations of femininity as those of masculinity is signaled at the beginning of the second volume by the first appearance of Cigarette, the pretty camp *vivandière*, and also that of the novel’s hero, Bertie Cecil, under his adopted pseudonym of Louis Victor. Both characters are associated with a dismantling and revision of orthodox, or perhaps peculiarly British, notions of gendered identity – a dismantling which is neatly symbolized by the crumbling structures upon which they briefly rest: Cigarette is first seen “perched astride the broken fragment of a wall” (Ouida 1995: 175), Louis Victor, “sitting alone on a broken fragment of white marble, relic of some Moorish mosque” (1995: 181). This is not to suggest that the text remains unambivalent about such radical revisioning. The fact that both Cigarette and Victor, for all their personal identification with the Arabs, are fighting on the side of a colonial power means that they are implicated in the colonial spoliation of Africa. In a text that can accommodate eloquent critiques of Western imperialism, the fact that Cigarette and Victor are associated with symbols of cultural vandalism is all the more interesting. Cigarette, for example, dances the can-can and advertises her trade in wine and spirits “where once verses of the Koran had been blazoned by reverent hands along porphyry cornices and capitals of jasper” (1995: 191).

As this quotation suggests, it is the figure of the manly woman who elicits a greater degree of cultural unease, even distaste. Through her rejection of Western, and Eastern, conventions of femininity, Cigarette also poses the greatest threat to masculine identity in this novel, and in this Ouida can be seen to take up one of the major themes of the early sensation novel. Ouida, like Collins and Braddon before her, was able to conceive of strategies to accommodate male effeminacy by transforming the weak and ineffectual hero – like Walter Harrington, Bertie Cecil is effectively

sent abroad to become a manly man. Yet Cecil's "logical complement," as Gilbert calls Cigarette (Gilbert 1997: 145), the manly woman, whose non-conformity is at first championed, cannot be so easily accommodated, and her defiant "blending" of masculine traits with her womanly desire for Victor (Ouida 1995: 176) remains problematic to the end. As Schroeder and Holt rightly point out, Cigarette's gendered identity is less "blended" than left unresolved (Schroeder and Holt 2008: 75–7).

More manly than Louis Victor, a polished breastplate serves for Cigarette's mirror; she can shoot from the saddle, saves Victor's life three times, and leads the decisive charge at the battle of Zaraila. In one of their first encounters, Cigarette challenges Victor, "If you have a woman's face may I not have a man's soul? It is only a fair exchange" (Ouida 1995: 203). The answer, given by Victor, is that independence "unsexes" a woman, and this is a judgment apparently upheld by the text. Gilbert, for example, notes the number of grotesque allusions to Cigarette's (open) mouth (which we might understand to represent "all the openings of the body") (Gilbert 1997: 147). In a culture in which femininity is so narrowly defined, and so reliant upon the notion of sexual purity, Cigarette is rendered "fallen," her womanhood lost, never to be regained, and she must die. In its companion-piece, *Idalia*, a less complicated romance, Ouida resolutely contests the idea that the heroine is in any way tainted or "unsexed" by her independence or her familiarity with male society. *Idalia* may well receive male guests, and in their company smoke, drink, and gamble, yet she remains pure and is rewarded with marriage to the hero. Cigarette, on the other hand, as Schaffer puts it, is "too revolutionary for the novel to contain her" (Schaffer 2000: 126). Whilst the dying French soldier Léon defends Cigarette's unorthodoxy ("There will always be a million of commonplace women ready to keep up the decorous traditions of their sex, and sit in safety over their needles by the side of their hearths" [Ouida 1995: 309]), the Arabs' respect for Cigarette's heroism is tempered by the underlying fact that she is, in their eyes, "abandoned and shameful amongst her sex" (1995: 515). Ultimately, the text demands her sacrifice in order that Louis Victor be allowed to return to Britain, and to his family seat Royallieu, as Bertie Cecil, his friendship with the Seraph newly forged through Cecil's marriage to the Seraph's correctly feminine sister, Lady Venetia (a passive femininity pointedly rejected by Cigarette).

Cigarette's end is swift. She dies shielding Victor's body from the firing squad (where he is to be executed for defending Lady Venetia's honor!) – thus Cigarette's death enables his rebirth. Yet just prior to her execution Cigarette is threatened with a far more violent end. Riding furiously across the desert in order to deliver Victor's reprieve in time to save his life, Cigarette encounters a band of Arabs who seek revenge for their humiliation at the battle of Zaraila. The violence they conceive towards her is pointedly sexual in nature: "they longed to draw their steel through the fair young throat, to plunge their lances into the bright bare bosom, to twine her hair round their spear handles, to rend her delicate limbs apart . . . to torture, to outrage" (Ouida 1995: 513). Cigarette's greatest crime, her successful

infiltration of the masculine sphere, is, we fear, to be punished by a brutal assertion of male sexual power. As we have seen, Ouida transmutes this gruesome fantasy of gang-rape, mutilation and dismemberment. Furthermore, Cigarette's sacrificial execution is offset by the closing words of the text which serve to honor, and reassert, Cigarette's masculine identification. The novel which began as a male adventure story ends with the text on Cigarette's tomb which defiantly reinscribes her unorthodox gendered identity: "ENFANT DE L'ARMÉE, SOLDAT DE LA FRANCE" (Ouida 1995: 528).

In his 1873 article on "Ouida's Novels," Vincent Murray criticized their morality: "Is not the motto of Ouida's heroes – 'to enjoy' – the motto of society, and every day more openly, more shamelessly avowed?" (Murray 1873: 935). For Murray, as for many reviewers, popular fiction such as Ouida's threw "an evil light upon the social corruption of which they are an exhalation" (1873: 935). Ouida's generic hybridism is one aspect of her striving to supply the popular market, experimenting with a range of sub-genres. Reading Ouida is also a sensuous or sensory experience. Noted for her lavish descriptive writing, whether detailing the interior decoration of a dandy's apartment or recreating a breathless horse-race, Ouida was uniformly criticized for "produc[ing] a sense of dissipation in the reader" (review of *Idalia*, 1867a: 283). Ouida does not merely supply "the temporary demand for amusement on the easiest terms," however (review of *Idalia*, 1867b: 476). Through her reworking of established sub-genres, Ouida examines the nature of male "enjoyment" and the role of women as conduits for male pleasure. Male pleasure requires a certain kind of femininity. In her acknowledgment that the ideal feminine is an artificial construct necessary to the upholding of patriarchal authority, Ouida's early novels can be seen to anticipate John Stuart Mill's conclusions in his 1869 work, "The Subjection of Women". Mill argues that women are brought up ("cultivated" is the term he uses), solely "for the benefit and pleasure of their masters" (Mill 1989: 139). The motto of Ouida's first novel, *Held in Bondage*, is indeed that "Men's aim is pleasure" (Ouida 1900: 63), and concerns the attempts of the two middle-aged heroes to rid themselves of their (aggressively sexual) first wives in order to remarry young women prized for their "freshness." By the time of her late romance-cum-sensation novel, *Moths* (1880), Ouida offers a devastating critique of such a union. The entire focus of the novel is now the unequal marriage between a middle-aged, libidinous aristocrat and an unwilling, economically dependent child-bride (Vere Zouroff is 16), who is subject to her husband's casual acts of sadism. In the very chapter in which Lady Dolly attempts to coerce her daughter into marriage to Prince Zouroff and to school her into understanding "what the girl of your time must be if she want to please" (Ouida 2005: 115), the narrator informs us that Zouroff, in his hedonistic quest for new pleasures, "contrived to indulge all excesses in any vice that tempted him" (2005: 114). In conjoining female sensationalism with overtly masculine narrative structures, Ouida demonstrates consistently that the satisfaction of male desire, the enabling of male "enjoyment," rests upon unequal power relationships and, also, wholly artificial constructions of femininity.

## NOTES

- 1 The Parisian paper *Gaulois* claimed in September 1868 to know the true identity of “la célèbre Ouida, l’auteur aussi admirée que mystérieuse” – a Mrs. Montgomery Atwood who had just remarried at the English embassy in Paris. Ouida denounced her impersonator in a letter to the editor of the *Morning Post*, but refused to give away her real name (Ouida 1868: 3).
- 2 See, for example, her statement to Marie Corelli: “My works were once said in a French paper to be ‘Romans français écrits en anglais’ and it is more correct than it sounds. I am so very little English that my words & expressions must be often alien to the English mind, whilst many an English fetish, social & moral, is in my sight an absurdity to be destroyed as so much rubbish” (Ouida 1890).
- 3 For a detailed account of the transaction, see Jordan (forthcoming) and Phillips 1978.
- 4 *Idalia* began serialization in the *New Monthly Magazine* in May 1865, after the conclusion of *Strathmore*, and was published in January 1867. *Under Two Flags* began serialization in the *British Army and Navy Review* in August 1865, but the magazine folded in June 1866, and its readers had to wait until the publication of the first edition in December 1867 in order to know Cigarette’s fate. The timing of the first edition was delayed owing to Ouida’s having been persuaded to offer the MSS to Richard Bentley (who had bought up the *British Army and Navy Review* in January 1866). Bentley thought highly of *Strathmore*, but he eventually turned down *Under Two Flags* on the advice of his Reader, Geraldine Jewsbury, who told him that there was no doubt that “the story wd SELL,” but that it would “lower the character of your house if you accept it” (Gettmann 1960: 196).

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*Under Two Flags**Natalie Schroeder and Ronald A. Schroeder*

In 1867 Frederick Chapman published Ouida's *Under Two Flags* in a three-volume edition. By that time, Ouida (pen name for Marie Louise Ramé) had published three novels and "at the age of twenty-eight, was already a notoriously successful novelist, although ignored, much to her wrath, by some 'respectable' review columns" (Phillips 1978: 67). *Under Two Flags* turned out to be Ouida's most popular novel of the 1860s, and in the next hundred years more than sixty different editions of the novel followed, along with "innumerable unauthorized dramatizations of the novel" and four film versions. As Celia Phillips concludes, "Ouida's reputation waxed and waned as popular taste in fiction changed, but interest in *Under Two Flags* remained remarkably constant" (1978: 68, 69).

*Under Two Flags* was first published in the decade of the sensation novel, the 1860s. Ouida may even have written *Under Two Flags* in a spirit of competition with the sensation novel's most famous practitioners. There is evidence, for example, that she borrowed materials from Mary Elizabeth Braddon, who by that time was the "Queen of the circulating libraries" (Carnell 2000: 47). Pamela Gilbert has noted that *Under Two Flags*' Bertie Cecil shares much in common with Robert Audley, the sensation hero of Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (Gilbert 1997: 145), and the unconventional female Cigarette has antecedents in Braddon's work as well. Ouida incorporates other distinctive elements of sensation fiction into *Under Two Flags*, and she broadens the appeal of the form by targeting male readers as well as female ones.

In 1868 the *Examiner* reviewed *Under Two Flags* and took notice of its sensation elements: "Of course we do not expect to find a story in the present day without a forgery, or a murder, or some exciting infraction of the decalogue" (review, 1868: 37–8). By contrast, recent critics of the novel have been reluctant to address *Under Two Flags* as Ouida's addition to the canon of sensation fiction in the 1860s. In the



last few years, criticism of the novel has followed by now well-established theoretical trends. Studies by Pamela Gilbert (*Disease, Desire, and the Body*, 1997), Natalie Schroeder and Shari Hodges Holt (*Ouida the Phenomenon*, 2008), and J. Stephen Addcox ("Inoculation and Empire," 2009) specifically address Ouida's depiction of imperialistic practices and rationales. Similarly, contemporary interest in gender studies has led to works that examine the homoerotic implications in *Under Two Flags*. In her essay, "Ouida: The Enigma of a Literary Identity" (1995), Jane Jordan argues that *Under Two Flags* has a "homosexual subtext" (1995: 92). "[R]ather than furnishing her novels with the requisite romantic hero and heroine," Jordan claims, "Ouida takes for her subject the close friendship between two men" (1995: 93). Talia Schaffer, in *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes* (2000), claims the novel is one of "homoerotic thrills, in which what oft is thought never does get expressed" (2000: 125). Schroeder and Hodges Holt (*Ouida the Phenomenon*) also examine Bertie's androgynous nature, but Gilbert (*Disease, Desire, and the Body*) offers perhaps the most thorough consideration of Bertie's androgyny and its homoerotic implications. She considers Bertie's "feminine" characteristics to be "the signs of Cecil's aristocratic lineage," which "are balanced by a 'masculine' self-control and sense of honor" (Gilbert 1997: 145). She analyzes Bertie's homosocial relationships with Rake, his valet, and with the Seraph, his best friend, and she maintains that, disguised in Africa as a lower-class male, Bertie is "feminized" in his relationship to Venetia (1997: 155).

Even more than their interest in Bertie Cecil's ambiguous sexuality, gender-oriented approaches to *Under Two Flags* have focused attention on Ouida's representation of Cigarette, one of the most memorable characters in her canon. Cigarette is unconventional, heroic, yet feminine. As Eileen Bigland observes, "hundreds of writers . . . have tried to imitate her. They have never quite succeeded. Cigarette remains Ouida's and Ouida's alone" (Bigland 1951: 47). Gilbert (1997) analyzes Ouida's depiction of Cigarette's body, with especial attention to "all the openings of the body" that connect to Cigarette's sexuality and "femaleness." Moreover, "Ouida's description of Cigarette's heroics are constantly undermined by references to the grotesque body that is both the body of the war-torn France-Africa . . . and that is the female, and therefore by its nature grotesque body of Cigarette, defined by its openings and its permeability" (Gilbert 1997: 147). In an article published in 1999, "Ouida and the Other New Woman," Gilbert observes that Ouida's heroines, like Cigarette, "tend to be racial hybrids. Culturally displaced, of uncertain class origins, fated by their circumstances and 'the doom of sex' to tragic ends, yet honored for their reliance on self-generated codes of behavior which preserve their integrity in situations wherein traditional gender roles lose their explanatory power" (Gilbert 1999: 173). Cigarette's disregard for conventional gender roles is "consonant with the New Woman" (Gilbert 1999: 174). Schroeder and Hodges Holt call Cigarette "the Ouidean New Woman of the 1860s, [who] finds herself in the predicament of wanting an impossible reconciliation between incompatible alternatives" (2008: 74–5).

In *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, Schaffer considers Cigarette to be Bertie Cecil's converse: "a cross-dressing, sunburned, short-haired adolescent girl who vigorously

promotes everything forbidden by the aristocratic code: radical democracy, violence, lawlessness, and unrestrained sexual and personal liberty” (Schaffer 2000: 126). Addcox considers Cigarette’s final martyrdom to save Bertie as a “metaphorical medical intervention,” which he terms “inoculation.” Bertie’s illness “is not physical but cultural and socio-economic” (Addcox 2009: 28). As his “inoculant,” Cigarette “both subverts, because Cecil needs her to make his return, and reaffirms, because she makes his return possible, the British ideal of a landed country gentleman” (Addcox 2009: 25).

Finally, Franco Marucci (“Ouida: The Fascination of Moral Laxity,” 2009) identifies Cigarette as a special female type: “the masculine-feminine ‘natural’ girl, who refuses the traditional images of femininity and slowly undergoes a process of discovery of her femininity” (2009: 596). Further, the second half of *Under Two Flags*, set in Africa, “drags” and is only “vivified by . . . the masculine, orphan, frank, cigarette-smoking *vivandière* of the regiment” (2009: 600).

For our purposes, what is conspicuous in all these recent appraisals of *Under Two Flags* is their relative indifference to the novel’s roots in sensation fiction. Marucci does write that, in the second half of the novel, Ouida “enters the territory of the sensational and the exotic” (2009: 600), but that is the very part of the novel that he also says “drags.” Discussing an 1879 review of Ouida’s fiction, Gilbert concedes that the sensation novel and the novel of society are “clearly contingent, perhaps even overlapping” (1997: 83), but in the end she sees *Under Two Flags* as a combination of the high society romance and the adventure story, and not as a variant of the sensation novel. To that matter – *Under Two Flags* as a sensation novel – we direct our attention now.

Sensation fiction in the 1860s was enormously popular, and the readers devouring sensation novels were middle-class women. In the *Quarterly Review* in 1863, Henry Mansel identified what his contemporaries generally regarded as the principal elements of sensation: “A class of literature has grown up around us . . . and doing so principally . . . by ‘preaching to the nerves’ . . . Excitement, and excitement alone, seems to be the great end at which they aim. . . . A sensation novel as a matter of course, abounds in incident” (Mansel 1863: 482). Above all, the abundance of incidents had to be exciting – “sensational.” Indeed, much of sensation’s appeal lay in the way that its narratives incorporated elements of crime, mystery, secrecy, violence, madness, and illicit passion into the everyday lives of its mostly middle-class characters. In sensation novels, things were not what they appeared to be; behind the facade of the proper Victorian home lay disguise, duplicity, danger, and social indecorum. “To some extent sensation fiction simply provided escapist fantasies for Victorian middle-class women, for they scripted narratives about escapades of sex, violence, and other social improprieties in which their readers could never dare participate” (Schroeder and Schroeder 2006: 17). Although “Women lined up at Mudie’s Select Circulating Library for sensational bestsellers” (Perkin 1989: 271), the critical establishment regarded those bestsellers with alarm. In his review of Ouida’s fiction in 1878, Vincent E. H. Murray declared that sensation novels were

breeding “a pestilence so foul as to poison the very life-blood of our nation” (Murray 1878: 935).

In *Under Two Flags* Ouida avoids the most lurid excesses of sensation, but she nonetheless incorporates into her narrative the type’s most defining and recognizable conventions. Start with a profusion of exciting incidents, narrated in such a way as to intensify suspense and emotional tension. Bertie Cecil is no effete aristocrat but an athletic young man and an accomplished horseman, and Ouida scatters vivid accounts of exciting and dangerous episodes on horseback across *Under Two Flags*. She regales her readers with a thrilling fox hunt and a wild carriage ride. In another incident Bertie wins a difficult steeplechase, even though the stirrup leather on his saddle snaps. Ouida virtually puts her readers in the saddle with Bertie when she describes his jump over a particularly dangerous, potentially fatal obstacle:

One touch of the spur – the first – and Forest King rose at the leap, all the life and power there were in him gathered for one superhuman and crowning effort; a flash of time, not a half second in duration, and he was lifted in the air higher and higher, and higher in the cold, fresh wild winter wind; stakes and rails and thorn and water lay beneath him black and gaunt and shapeless, yawning like a grave; one bound, even in mid-air, one last convulsive impulse of the gathered limbs, and Forest King was over! (Ouida 2009: 40)

In another crucial race, which Bertie must win to save himself from financial ruin, scoundrels drug Bertie’s horse. In an unusual sensational touch, Ouida narrates the ordeal from the point of view of the drugged horse, desperate not to fail its beloved master:

Into his eyes a terrible look of anguish came; the numb and sickly nausea was upon him, his legs trembled, before his sight was a blurred whirling mist; all the strength and force and mighty life within him felt ebbing out, yet he struggled bravely. He strained, he panted, he heard the thundering thud of the first flight gaining nearer and nearer upon him, he felt his rivals closing hotter and harder in on him, he felt the steam of his opponent’s smoking foam – dashed withers burn on his own flanks and shoulders, he felt the maddening pressure of a neck to neck struggle, he felt what in all his victorious life he had never known – the paralysis of *defeat*. (Ouida 2009: 110)

In Africa, Cigarette undertakes an agonizingly painful journey on horseback in a desperate attempt to save Bertie from a firing squad. To reach him she must negotiate her way alone across miles of desert, where vengeful Arabs lie in ambush. Again Ouida’s deft ear for telling details ratchets up the suspense and emotional intensity of the scene along with the dramatic uncertainty of its conclusion:

she rode through the ghastly twilight of the half-lit plains, now flooded with luster as the moon emerged, now engulfed in darkness as the stormy western winds drove the cirri over it. . . . she had but one dread – that her horse would give way under the

unnatural strain, and that she would reach too late. . . . Hour on hour, league on league, passed away; she felt the animal quiver under the spur, and she heard the catch in his panting breath as he strained to give his fleetest and best that told her how, ere long, the racing speed, the extended gallop, at which she kept him, would tell, and beat him down despite his desert strain. (Ouida 2009: 510)

Other incidents of danger and excitement include Bertie's desperate escape from an angry crowd that pursues him when he evades arrest in Baden: he climbs onto the balcony of a Gothic house and narrowly eludes the bullets that hail around him. In Africa, of course, while Bertie is in the French Foreign Legion, battles test the strength and courage of both Bertie and Cigarette. In one encounter, four drunken Arabs assault Bertie, and Ouida graphically describes Bertie's dismembering one of his assailants: "He swept his own arm back, and brought his saber straight through the sword-arm of the foremost; the limb was cleft through as if the stroke of an axe had severed it, and thrice infuriated, the Arabs closed in on him. The points of their weapons were piercing his harness when, sharp and swift, one on another, three shots hissed past him" (Ouida 2009: 274). Cigarette fires the decisive shots that save Bertie.

The battle of Zaralia occasions more sensational acts of bravery. Fighting valiantly against enormous odds, Bertie shows that he is no longer the lazy, effeminate spendthrift of the opening of the novel. Ouida vividly brings the incident to sensational life, with all its danger, its prospects for catastrophe, and its accompanying gore: "With all the *élan* of France they [the French Chasseurs] launched themselves forward to break the rush of the desert horses [the Arabs]; they met with a terrible sound, like falling trees, like clashing metal. The hoofs of the rearing chargers struck each others' breasts, and these bit and tore at each other's manes, while their riders reeled down dead. . . . It was not a battle; it was a frightful tangling of brutes" (Ouida 2009: 352). Finally, even though surrounded by Arabs, Bertie refuses to surrender; Cigarette then sensationally arrives with reinforcements and saves the day.

In addition to episodes of violence, the plots of sensation novels typically included crimes of one sort or another. We have already mentioned the incident of Bertie's drugged horse, an effort by two villains to sabotage a race. Another crime propels Bertie into exile. A corrupt moneylender charges Bertie with forgery. Although Bertie's brother is actually guilty, Bertie acts with gentlemanly honor and refuses to betray him. He also will not exculpate himself, because his alibi would inevitably compromise Lady Guenevere, with whom he is having an affair. Bertie's honorable gesture implicates yet another important convention of sensation: the dangerous secret.

Bertie flees Europe for Africa on a train. Readers learn later that the train crashed, and in England Bertie is presumed dead. Here Ouida invokes yet another familiar trope in sensation: the "dead/alive": "He was 'dead,' therein laid all his security; thereby had 'Beauty of the Brigades' been buried beyond all discovery. . . . he had seen in the calamity the surest screen from discovery or pursuit" (Ouida 2009: 234). Train accidents occur elsewhere in sensation fiction. Just as an accident did for Lady

Isabel Vane in Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), this crash enables Bertie to fabricate a new identity. Having been pronounced dead, he becomes Louis Victor, of the French Foreign Legion. Like Lucy Audley, Bertie reinvents himself. Bertie's identity, thus, becomes another sensational secret.

Bertie does not commit the forgery with which he is charged, but in Africa he does commit a serious crime, though in context it appears justified and honorable. When his military commander, Chateauroy, insults the Princess Venetia Corona, whom Bertie loves, Bertie strikes him. As a consequence, he is sentenced to death by firing squad and only saved by Cigarette's extraordinary martyrdom.

A contemporary review in the *Examiner* noted that "the art of making love is not the principal theme" of *Under Two Flags* (review, 1868: 37); but the novel does have its share of sex, and in particular Ouida does not shy away from sensation novel's penchant for illicit sexuality. Bertie's sexual ambiguity is a case in point. At the outset of the novel Bertie is in debt yet lives in exorbitant luxury, without financial help from his father, who despises him. Bertie is lazy, and despite his athleticism, his sobriquet "Beauty" underscores his pronounced effeminacy. The mixture of masculine and feminine furnishings in his dressing room sums up the ambiguity of his sexual identity:

The hangings of the room were silken and rose-colored, and a delicious confusion prevailed through it pell-mell, box-spurs, hunting-stirrups, cartridge cases, curb-chains, muzzle loaders, hunting-flasks, and white gauntlets being mixed up with Paris novels, pink notes, point-lace ties, bracelets and bouquets to be dispatched to various destinations, and velvet and silk bags for bank notes, cigars, or vesuvians, embroidered by feminine fingers, and as useless as those pretty fingers themselves. . . . [Seated on a soft luxurious sofa, Bertie's face showed] as much delicacy and brilliancy as a woman's. . . . His features were exceedingly fair – fair as the fairest girl's; his hair was of the softest, silkiest, brightest chestnut; his mouth very beautifully shaped. (Ouida 2009: 6, 7)

As other critics have pointed out, Ouida openly depicts Bertie's homosocial attachment to two other men and hints broadly at latent homosexuality. But homosexuality is, as Jordan indicates, a "subtext" (Jordan 1995: 92) that never appears in the surface text. Bertie's behavior never exceeds the bounds of propriety, regardless of the suspicions it may elicit, and Ouida even suggests circumstances that legitimize his bond with the two men. Rake, for example, is his faithful servant. In the tradition of ideal master–servant relations, their attachment goes beyond economics; though differentiated by class, they are bound by mutual loyalty and regard. The Seraph, the second of his homosocial attachments, is his close friend. Their relationship follows the long-recognized tradition of ideal male friendships among equals. Bertie's exile deflects possible homosexual implications in their relationship, and his marrying the Seraph's sister further legitimates their male bond. Marriage to the Princess Venetia Corona commits Bertie to a permanent (and, at least in principle, exclusive) heterosexual relationship that confirms his masculinity and implicitly repudiates homosexual desires.

Ouida also follows sensation's convention of depicting illicit heterosexual affairs. Bertie is no celibate in Africa, where the norms of sexual behavior have the allure of exotic license. He keeps a mistress there. Even in England, where moral expectations are more precisely defined and constraints on sexual behavior more rigidly enforced, Bertie keeps two mistresses. One, Zu-Zu, is a pretty but illiterate young woman from a class decidedly inferior to Bertie's; she is a ballet dancer and courtesan. His other mistress is a married aristocrat, Lady Guenevere. She regards her affair with Bertie as a pleasurable game or entertainment. She is what the era called "fast," but at the same time, she scrupulously avoids publicly violating social and moral conventionalities. Her affair with Bertie, that is, amounts to another sensational secret. Lady Guenevere knows full well that exposure of her sexual improprieties would put her at risk of a divorce, which would cost her position in society and, more importantly, her family diamonds.

The woman in *Under Two Flags* who truly earns the reputation of being "fast," however, is Cigarette. The Friend of the Flag, Cigarette is a youthful camp follower, loved by the French troops that she accompanies. She is a happy, vibrant child of nature, who flouts Victorian norms of feminine propriety: she smokes, drinks, and gambles; she has had many men, none of whom she genuinely loved. When she is first introduced, she is pre-eminently interested in her own enjoyment. As her sexual freedom signifies, she enjoys a degree of female autonomy that is routinely denied women elsewhere, and contemporary critics of sensation fiction dutifully castigated characters like her when they appeared in sensation novels. In the person of Cigarette, Ouida interrogates conventional gender roles that victimize women in particular. Cigarette brazenly enjoys the sexual freedom that is ordinarily reserved for men, and her autonomy pointedly challenges patriarchal norms.

Like Bertie's androgyny, Cigarette's sexual identity suffers from some uncertainty. She fights heroically like a man, yet she is not thoroughly stripped of her femininity:

She was pretty, she was insolent, she was intolerably coquettish she was mischievous as a marmoset, she would swear if need be like a Zouave, she could fire galloping, she could toss off her brandy or her vermouth like a trooper, she would on occasion clench her little brown hand and deal a blow that the recipient would not covet twice. . . . And yet, with all that, she was not wholly unsexed, with all that she had the delicious fragrance of youth, and had not left a certain feminine grace behind her, though she wore a vivandière's uniform, and had been born in a barrack, and meant to die in a battle; it was the blending of the two that made her piquante, made her a notoriety in her own way. (Ouida 2009: 179–80)

Unique as she is, Cigarette nonetheless has recognizable prototypes in sensation fiction. Her independence resembles that of the heroine protagonists in Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861) and Collins's *No Name* (1862). With her reckless horsemanship and her fondness for "fast" behavior, Cigarette is also reminiscent of Braddon's

Aurora Floyd and Florence Crawford (*The Lady's Mile* [1866]). Within a year of *Under Two Flags*' publication, female characters with similar tendencies became almost a cliché. In a controversial essay, Eliza Lynn Linton lashed out at young women in society who adopted attitudes and behaviors like Cigarette's:

The Girl of the Period is a creature who dyes her hair and paints her face . . . [and] whose sole idea is fun. . . . [Her] imitation of the *demi-monde* in dress leads to something in manner and feeling, not quite so pronounced perhaps, but far too like to be honourable to herself. . . . It leads to slang, bold talk and general fastness; to the love of pleasure and indifference to duty; and to . . . uselessness at home, dissatisfaction with the monotony of ordinary life, horror of all useful work. (Linton 1868: 109–10)

Linton's description of the Girl of the Period does not fit Cigarette to the letter, because Cigarette's masculine side is informed by her commitment to the military values of duty and service. But her reference to the *demi-monde* is on the mark, since Bertie's English courtesan Zu-Zu shares some of Cigarette's characteristics.

Just as Bertie transforms himself into an unequivocally masculine hero, Cigarette's sexual identity undergoes an alteration of sorts. At first Cigarette resists Bertie's appeal, but before long she finds that her ineluctable attraction to him confuses her. When he addresses her as "ma belle," "She half liked it – half resented it. It made her wish, with an impatient scorn for the wish, that she knew how to read, and had not her hair cut short like a boy's – a weakness the little vivandière had never been visited with before" (Ouida 2009: 186). She is wounded when she overhears Bertie pronouncing her as "unsexed," and Bertie's continuing indifference to her only aggravates Cigarette's dissatisfaction with her identity. In the course of the novel, Cigarette's "feminine" side does emerge, and she proves herself capable of acting the woman's part. When Bertie lies wounded on the battlefield, crushed by dead Arabs and horses, she pulls him out and revives him. Then, "She was thoroughly woman-like in her passions and her instincts, though she so fiercely contemned womanhood" (Ouida 2009: 365). She arranges for the unconscious Bertie to be taken to the French camp, where she devotedly nurses him through the night. But Cigarette also makes it her first priority to ensure that none of the other men, especially not Bertie, discovers that she has tenderly attended to him: "He would never know that she had saved him thus: he never should know it she vowed in her heart" (2009: 372).

To Cigarette's disappointment and despair, Bertie falls in love with the Princess Venetia Corona, a woman of "courtly negligence . . . regal grace . . . fair brilliant loveliness . . . [and] delicious serene languor" (Ouida 2009: 271). Next to her, Cigarette feels resentful, inferior, and debased. Her freedom and fast behavior violate Bertie's ideal of the properly feminine. As Gilbert notes, "Ouida's offer of sexual freedom without censure only extends to men, and a very few women 'of genius'" (Gilbert 1997: 157). Bertie's artist friend Léon Ramon so admires Cigarette that he paints her portrait, but Bertie does not recognize beauty in Cigarette's vitality and courage. Instead, he sees Cigarette through the eyes of conventional

Victorian – masculine – morality. He links her future to the worst consequences of her sexual freedom and condemns her in the judgmental voice of male prerogative and privilege:

when youth should have fled, and have carried for ever with it her numberless graces, and left in its stead that ribaldry-stained, drink-defiled, hardened, battered, joyless, cruel, terrible thing which is unsightly and repugnant to even the lowest amongst men. . . . [W]hen this youth that made it all fair should have passed . . . when there should be left in its stead only shamelessness, hardihood, vice, weariness – those who found the prettiest jest in her now would be the first to cast aside, with an oath, the charred wrecked rocket-stick of a life from which no golden careless stream of many-colored fires of coquette caprices would rise and enchant them then. (Ouida 2009: 310–11)

Gilbert appropriately observes that “in his newfound fastidiousness, he cannot contemplate her without evoking the specter of her middle age as a diseased prostitute . . . a scruple which never was at issue in his earlier liaisons with London courtesans” (Gilbert 1997: 150). Unhappily for Cigarette, when she compares herself to the beautiful but arrogant Princess Venetia she dimly envisions a future that coincides with Bertie’s prediction. Although she takes pride in her liberation from feminine “trammel,” she cannot escape foreboding:

But, for once, within sight of that noble and haughty beauty a poignant, cruel, wounding sense of utter inferiority, of utter debasement, possessed and weighed down her lawless and indomitable spirit. Some vague weary feeling that her youth was fair enough in the sight of men, but that her older years would be very dark, very terrible, came on her even in this hour of supreme joy, the supreme triumph of her life. (Ouida 2009: 454)

Cigarette’s masculine-transgressive side never entirely disappears, for she is a courageous, valiant soldier, who wins the Cross of the Legion of Honor for her heroism in the battle of Zalaria. But her feminine side never relinquishes its hold on her either, and the two aspects of her identity remain fundamentally at odds with one another until she martyrs herself for Bertie. By throwing herself between Bertie and the firing squad and taking the bullets meant for him, she once more acts with the masculine courage expected of a loyal soldier and with the self-sacrifice that confirms her womanly fidelity to the object of her love.

So into *Under Two Flags* Ouida incorporates the basic conventions of the sensation novel: adventure, danger, crime, secrets, violence, sex, and passion. What sets *Under Two Flags* apart from the vast numbers of contemporary sensation novels is its targeted audience. In overwhelming numbers, sensation fiction spoke to female readers. From the beginning, though, in *Under Two Flags* Ouida addressed men. She herself wrote, “je n’écris pas pour les femmes. J’écris pour les militaires” (qtd. in Sutherland 1995: xviii). *Under Two Flags* first appeared serially, beginning in August 1865, in the *British*



*Army and Navy Review*, a periodical the readership of which was mostly male. The *British Army and Navy Review*, however, ceased publication before the final installment of *Under Two Flags* (Phillips 1978: 67). When the three-volume edition of *Under Two Flags* appeared in 1867, Ouida wrote in her "Avis au Lecteur," "This story was originally written for a military periodical. It has been fortunate enough to receive much commendation, and for them it is now specially issued in its present form" (Ouida 2009: 4).

If the typical sensation novel scripted female fantasies and wish-fulfillment, it might be said that *Under Two Flags* did the same for men. Bertie's adventurous life of action as a horseman and a soldier, particularly as it unfolds in an exotic, foreign setting, offers an alternative vicarious experience for male readers who could appreciate the rigors and dangers of both horsemanship and military action. Moreover, Bertie's growth from sexual ambiguity into hardy and unmistakable masculinity assuages lurking apprehensions that male bonds of loyalty and friendship may somehow not be morally proper. His close friendships and intimacies with other men are therefore legitimate and even socially admirable.

In Ouida's narrative the larger pattern of Bertie's life no doubt appealed to women: Bertie is handsome, masculine, courageous; he acts boldly – even brazenly – to defend the honor of the woman he loves; he is rewarded with marriage to a princess, and with her he is restored to a position of privilege and affluence. More to the point, that larger pattern would also have intrinsic appeal to men. Bertie starts life recklessly, estranged from his father and simultaneously his legacy. He lives carelessly, extravagantly, enjoying horses and women. But he also acts with unflinching honor to save the reputations of his brother and his mistress, both of whom are undeserving of his self-sacrificing gesture. He narrowly saves his life, fleeing into exile. Believed by those at home to be dead, he has the opportunity to reinvent himself. Although he must relinquish his claim to privilege and wealth and accept the rank of someone in an inferior class, he can prove his intrinsic worth and create a new identity for himself through heroic service in the military. He fights valiantly in dangerous and costly battles and survives desperate wounds. He honorably risks his life for the woman he loves, bravely facing what are sure to be fatal consequences. Then he is unexpectedly rescued by another woman's heroic martyrdom for his sake. (Even though Bertie does not love Cigarette as she loves him, her self-sacrifice is flattering.) Finally, he marries the woman he loves and recovers his aristocratic identity, fortune, and privilege. Bertie's life traces a pattern of progress from failure to achievement, which confirms his innate worth. After taking great risks, he ends up higher than he started, worthy of the status and privilege he ultimately enjoys. He is a triumph of social respectability and success, the kind of model that men might admire, or envy, or wish they could emulate. Fortunately for Ouida and male readers of sensation novels, dramatic improbabilities and extraordinary coincidences are not fatal to fantasies.

Above all, though, Cigarette is the ultimate male fantasy. She is young, attractive, vital, and her interests coincide with the interests of the men she accompanies and

sometimes resembles. She is brave, resolute, strong, independent – not the sort of woman whose life becomes a man’s responsibility and social obligation, like a wife. She gives the lie to any ideology of “separate spheres.” She will not desert her comrades in battle. She could be a good hunting or drinking companion as well as a good sexual partner, all the more so because she is young, foreign, and experienced. Her sexual energy and initiative trump the passivity and indifference of respectable women. Cigarette is the answer to a question that plagued Ouida’s male readers: why can’t women be more like men without being more like men? If she were truly alive in 1867, Cigarette would be disruptive, subversive, and eminently dangerous. Contained as she is in sensational narrative, she is an exciting, albeit imaginative, object of admiration and desire.

Bertie cannot love Cigarette because she represents so much that lies outside the boundaries of propriety. He views her through the lens of Victorian respectability, with all its power to focus and limit. Sensation temporarily shatters that lens. Ouida knew that, in the privacy of their personal fantasies, male readers would prefer to imagine Cigarette without the distortion that the lens of respectability created.

The 1860s saw the publication of so many sensation novels that the critical establishment reacted with alarm. The type is essentially formulaic, and a talented author like Mary Elizabeth Braddon could turn out a new variation – a new permutation of recognizable elements – in scarcely any time at all. Since Ouida was already a successful novelist when she wrote *Under Two Flags*, it is no great wonder that she might produce a sensation novel of her own, especially if she were thinking that a little subtle satire on (or imitation of) Braddon and her ilk might show recalcitrant critics that she was worthy of their notice. Ouida’s real accomplishment with *Under Two Flags*, though, lies in the fact that she adapted the content of the sensation novel to the interests of a different audience – in this case, one that was not exclusively female. The adaptation worked; *Under Two Flags* has been on the literary scene, in a host of forms and variants, for more than a century. There can be scarcely any doubt that the novel’s sensationalism contributes to its enduring popularity. In *Under Two Flags* Ouida thus demonstrated not only her own dexterity as a novelist but also the flexibility of sensation fiction itself.

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19  
Ellen (Mrs. Henry) Wood

*Andrew Mangham*

Mrs. Henry Wood's contribution to the sensation genre was a determining one, as a number of commentators, Victorian and modern, have pointed out. Although she wrote for a number of genres and styles from the 1850s until her death in 1887, it was in the 1860s that her greatest involvement in shaping the sensation novel took place. In particular, it was Wood's unique ability to combine, thematically, the "ordinary" with the "extraordinary" that marked her out as one of the founding contributors to the "sensation school." In an 1871 parody of the genre entitled *Sensation Novels Condensed*, Bret Harte dedicated his opening chapter to a satirical imitation of the thinly disguised "Mrs. H-n-y W-d" and "Miss M. E. B-dd-n." Although the chapter portrays bigamy and incarcerated family members, reminiscent of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's work, its opening combination of "ordinary" life with "extraordinary" legend is a well-crafted imitation of Mrs. Henry Wood:

The sun was setting over Sloperton Grange, and reddened the window of the lonely chamber in the western tower, supposed to be haunted by Sir Edward Sedilia, the founder of the Grange. In the dreamy distance arose the gilded mausoleum of Lady Felicia Sedilia, who haunted that portion of Sedilia Manor known as "Stiff-uns Acre." A little to the left of the Grange might have been seen a mouldering ruin, known as "Guy's Keep," haunted by the spirit of Sir Guy Sedilia, who was found, one morning, crushed by one of the fallen battlements.

The aristocratic hero, Edgardo, assures his love, Lady Selina Sedilia, that he has seen nothing extraordinary in his journey to meet her:

"And – you – you – have – seen nothing?" said the lady in an agitated voice and nervous manner, turning her face aside to conceal her emotion.

“Nothing that is, nothing of any account,” said Edgardo. “I passed the ghost of your aunt in the park, noticed the spectre of your uncle in the ruined keep, and observed the familiar features of the spirit of your great grandfather at his post. But nothing beyond these trifles, my Selina. Nothing more, love, absolutely nothing.” (Harte 1871: 9–11)

So commonplace was the supernatural in Wood’s fiction that ghost sightings were considered nothing out of the ordinary. In a recent special edition of *Women’s Writing*, dedicated to the work of Ellen Wood, Andrew Maunder and Emma Liggins note that it was this ability to titillate readers by breaking the potential monotony of realism with the melodrama that led to Wood being credited as “the originator and chief of the sensation school” in 1864 (Liggins and Maunder 2008: 151). In keeping with the implications of Harte’s satire, Matthew Piers observes that Wood’s unique contribution to the genre derived from her ability to combine “lurid sensationalism” with “banal English social habits”:

A contemporary reviewer remarked in 1874 that she “resorts to no garnishes for her plain English fare, but serves up murders and mutton, suicides and rice-pudding, stolen cheques and thick bread-and-butter,” while in 2001 the *London Review of Books* entitled Dina Birch’s review of a reissue of *East Lynne* “Fear among the Tea-Cups.” (Piers 2008: 169)

According to Liggins and Maunder, this chameleonic quality is what led to the author’s enormous success. “The subject matter and number of Wood’s texts,” they write, made her “an undeniable force in mid- and late-Victorian literary culture” (Liggins and Maunder 2008: 151). At an unveiling of a plaque to honor the memory of Wood’s “enduring fame” and “literary genius” in 1916, the Lord Alderman of Worcester said that

he was informed on the best authority that the works of Mrs. Henry Wood were more widely read than those of any other author of the Victorian era. Her present publishers announced that they had sold over 5,750,000 copies of her novels. (C. B. Shuttleworth 1916: 8–9)

Despite falling out of critical favor throughout much of the twentieth century, Mrs. Wood’s novels, *East Lynne* in particular, continued to appeal to “successive generations of readers” because of their unique ability to synthesize two apparently irreconcilable methods of writing (S. Shuttleworth 1992: 47).

Wood’s combination of the domestic and the sensational also explains why her work has attracted a growing amount of critical attention. Although symptomatic of the larger renaissance of interest in the sensation novel, studies of the author have been attracted to her double ability to please moralizing censors, by reproducing traditional viewpoints and administering bitter moral lessons, while satisfying the general reader’s desire for intrigue, scandal, and supernatural phenomena. According to Lyn

Pykett, such combinations allowed Wood's novels to question the conservative foundations upon which mid-Victorian domestic realism was constructed:

In her dramas of moral scrupulosity, Wood brings together the conventions of popular melodrama and sentimental domestic fiction. The result is neither a mixing together of the two nor an assimilation of the one by the other. Instead, the two forms exist in what Bakhtin describes as a dialogic relation. In many of Wood's novels . . . this dialogue is a destabilizing process, in which the (originally) lower-class form of melodrama subverts the forms and norms of the middle-class sentimental novel. (Pykett 1994: 67)<sup>1</sup>

Pykett's work is the best example of a trend that continues to dominate critical approaches to Mrs. Henry Wood: namely the belief that the staid aspects of her work reproduce traditional, ideological modes of thinking about certain subjects (especially women and class), while the more melodramatic, Gothic, and sensational aspects conjure progressive ways of thinking about the same issues while destabilizing the traditional beliefs that kept them in place.<sup>2</sup> In my own study of the sensation novel I argued:

While one finds conservative notions writ large in fiction, one may also discover a map of their integral fault lines. This certainly appears to be the case with the sensation novels of the 1860s. [Mrs. Henry Wood] not only echoed some of [her] period's most conservative ideologies, but, in so doing, [she] wrote narratives that provide modern scholars with indications of how those ideologies formed, operated, and failed. (Mangham 2007: 211)

The second half of *East Lynne*, the most melodramatic, haunting, and captivating section of the work she is most famed for, illustrates how Wood excelled in (re)creating popular narrative styles. So why did she never abandon domestic realism entirely, especially when it could be argued that it weighed down the author's sensationalist abilities? The answer may be found in Wood's own bourgeois life story. She was born in 1814 to a successful glove manufacturer, Thomas Price, who appeared to have worked himself out of more humble beginnings. Price educated his children himself and, despite a spinal curvature that developed in adolescence and plagued her for the rest of her life, Ellen excelled at her studies in music and the classics. In 1836 she married Henry Wood, a man who worked for a family-owned banking and shipping firm and whom, according to his son's account, "possessed a mind a little wanting in mental ballast" (C. Wood 1894: 50). Though the exact reason is still unclear, this lack of "ballast" may have had something to do with Wood's leaving his employment in the mid-1850s. It was around this time that his wife started writing short stories for a range of family periodicals, including *Bentley's Miscellany* and the *New Monthly Magazine*.

Mrs. Wood was now her household's only breadwinner and, by the 1860s, she was earning a comfortable income. Her son's biography reveals that she never abandoned her middle-class values. Going to her writing like a salaried clerk, she held firmly to

the belief that authorship could form the bedrock of a successful bourgeois home and, as Sally Shuttleworth has observed, she wrote many a passage in her novels with the aim of supporting that class's advocacy of hard work, thrift, and perseverance (S. Shuttleworth 1992: 48). Indeed, "middle class" is a term that constantly crops up in studies of Mrs. Henry Wood, and rightly so. The author always wrote from firmly within that context. Deborah Wynne argues that, "as the daughter of a successful glove manufacturer," Wood was "well qualified . . . to champion in her fiction the tradesman and entrepreneur" (Wynne 2001: 95).<sup>3</sup> Maunder agrees, adding that Wood "must herself be re-evaluated as a guardian of bourgeois propriety" (Maunder 2004: 69). Indeed, many of Wood's novels read like fictional testimonials to the glories of middle-class professionalism which is in keeping with various concurrent statements about class and status. In his 1859 bestseller *Self Help*, for example, Samuel Smiles reminded his readers of the optimistic view that wealth and respectability were achievable through honest hard work. The barons and earls of old, he said, were being replaced by a "modern," industrial class of up-and-coming hard workers:

The great bulk of our peage is comparatively modern, so far as titles go; but it is not the less noble that is has been recruited to so large an extent from the ranks of honourable industry. . . . The modern dukes of Northumberland find their head, not in the Percys, but in Hugh Smithson, a respectable London apothecary. (Smiles 1968: 138)

Ellen Wood's family, plus that of her husband, were from the same kind of class as Hugh Smithson. As manufacturers, bankers, and clerks, they had worked themselves to a good position in society rather than inherited the same. As Wynne observes, Wood was thus in a perfect position to celebrate the Smithson class. But, I argue, she was also in a good position to spot the same class's weak points, as well as the main problems with its well-trumpeted values. Drawing on the work of scholars that have recognized the dialogism of Ellen Wood's style, it is possible to find a more ambivalent attitude towards bourgeois development. Whatever the motivation was for the injection of sensational elements into her plots, the clash between different styles created schisms, convolutions, and disturbances that say important things about the period's dominant class, as well as the powers of sensation fiction.

Let us concentrate, then, on two of Wood's most conservative novels: *Danesbury House* (1860) and *Mrs Halliburton's Troubles* (1862). Although Wood was known for her successful range of short stories in the 1850s, she had always aspired to writing full-length novels. Because she excelled in the art of shorter fictions, however, the editor of the *New Monthly Magazine*, William Harrison Ainsworth, expressed only a lukewarm response to her bid to serialize a novel in his journal. The later, groundbreaking success of *East Lynne* demonstrated just how wrong he was. Wood's first full-length novel, *Danesbury House*, was not serialized as virtually all of her later works were, but was written instead for a literary competition held by the Scottish Temperance League. Aiming to highlight the hazards of excessive alcohol consumption, the novel tempered the didacticism of its primary aim with spicy moments of trauma, scandal,

and bloodshed. Setting a stylistic pattern that would steer a long and lucrative career for its author, the novel was a huge success and won first prize. The basics of the plot are as follows. When John Danesbury's wife is killed in a carriage accident, leaving his three children motherless, he marries the vinegary Eliza St. George and has two further sons by her. The narrative compares the results of two very different forms of upbringing. The two eldest children, Arthur and Isabel, follow their dead mother's instructions that "a child should never be allowed to drink anything" but water, while the three younger children, William, Robert, and Lionel (of which only the latter two are Eliza's) are indulged in their love of wine and beer (Wood 1860: 15). With the exception of Isabel, who marries a viscount, all of the children grow up to undertake some professional employment. Predictably, Arthur and Isabel live happily ever after due to their abstinence from drink while Lionel's and Robert's predilection for alcohol leads to violent and disgraceful deaths. William, who is not Eliza's child but only raised by her, escapes the same fate because of the influence of his biological mother.

As we shall see, the heavy moral tone and catastrophic trajectory of *Danesbury House* is something that set a precedent for much of Wood's later work. The plot of *Mrs Halliburton's Troubles* is also driven by the comparison of two different methods of rearing children. Following the untimely death of her husband, the middle-class Jane Halliburton is forced to work as a glove sewer and to raise her children in shabby (though still respectable) surroundings. Amidst all her hard work, Jane manages to teach her children the value of perseverance and industry. Gathering them around her, she says:

In all the tribulation that will probably come upon us, the humiliations, the necessities, we must strive for patience to bear them. You do not understand the meaning of the term, *to bear*; but you will learn it all soon. (Wood 1897: 81)

One of the central messages in *Self Help* is the idea that happiness and success will follow the uncomplaining endurance of a hard-working life: "Better to be under the necessity of working hard and faring meanly, than to have everything done ready to hand and a pillow of down to repose upon" (Smiles 1968: 177). Because he has experienced the "necessity of working hard," William Halliburton, Jane's eldest child, emerges as the text's hero and "true gentleman." In direct contrast, Anthony Dare who, like the younger Danesburys, has had his every whim indulged, dies in shocking and scandalous circumstances. Wood's not atypically moralizing narrator concludes: "the Dares had been most culpably indulged. The house was one of luxury and profusion, and every little whim and fancy had been studied. It is one of the worst schools a child can be reared in" (Wood 1897: 161). Like Eliza Danesbury, Anthony's mother, Julia Dare, makes little attempt to condition her children's moral characters: "she had taken no pains to train her children: she had given them very little love" (1897: 161). Lacking the ethical discipline instilled into the Halliburtons, Anthony seduces the family's Italian governess. When she discovers him attempting to seduce a poor Quaker girl, she stabs him through the heart. The narrative thus upholds Smiles's



belief that “far better and more respectable is the good poor man than the bad rich one – better the humble silent man than the agreeable well appointed rogue who keeps his gig” (Smiles 1968: 203). Like much of Mrs. Wood’s literature, *Mrs Halliburton’s Troubles* puts forward a central, didactic, and essentially bourgeois message: avoid excessive indulgences and work hard.

Mrs. Henry Wood’s conservatism does not begin and end on the issue of class. In keeping with ancient ideas of women as inherently flawed and dangerous, plus – of course – the sensation genre’s love of a good villainess, her texts frequently portray women as the seeming cause of masculine failure. The mothers in both *Danesbury House* and *Mrs Halliburton’s Troubles*, for example, seem to bear the entire weight of responsibility for their children’s successes or failures. In his *Pathology of Mind* (1894), psychiatrist Henry Maudsley warned against the dangers of indulging children and neglecting their moral education: “how often one is condemned to see, with pain and sorrow, an injurious education sorely aggravate an inherent mischief.” One such “injurious education” is the “foolish indulgence through which [the child] never learns the necessary lessons of renunciation and self-control” (Maudsley 1894: 208). Maudsley later held “silly mothers” to account for the many calamities that befell cosseted children (1894: 162–3). In Wood’s novels, such warnings were set into narrative form, especially in scenes where dissipated male characters die in front of their silly mothers. Robert Danesbury, for instance, is discovered with razor in hand and his throat cut:

The ill-fated maniac – let us call him so! – was lying on the bed in a pool of blood, the razor clasped in his right hand. He was not dead; but ere the lapse of many minutes he would no longer be numbered amongst the living. (Wood 1860: 237)

His mother then forces her way into the room:

[Her stepson] soothingly strove to lead her away, but she suddenly raised her foot and kicked open the door, and the scene within was disclosed to her. A long shrill shriek ran through the house, and she fell back into Arthur’s arms. (Wood 1860: 238)

Eliza’s witnessing of this scene is meant to underscore the fact that she has had a hand in creating it. She later admits to having two “lost soul[s] upon [her] hands!” and an unforgiving narrator corroborates that “she had ruined her sons” (Wood 1860: 249).

A similar case of the son reaping fruit sown by his faulty upbringing occurs in *Mrs Halliburton’s Troubles*. Anthony Dare’s body is discovered by his parents and the servants:

Mr. Dare, his own life-blood seeming to have stopped, bent over his son by the light of the candle. Mrs. Dare . . . had run downstairs, and [was] now hastening into the room.

“Go back! Go back!” cried Mr. Dare, fencing [her] away with his hands. . . . “You must not come in! Julia,” he added to his wife, in a tone of imploring entreaty, “go upstairs.” (Wood 1897: 312)

As with Robert's death in the earlier novel, the discovery of Anthony's body is a scene in which the desperate mother forcibly involves herself. Although the murdering governess disrupts the chain of causation between Julia and the death of Anthony, Mrs. Dare is still given full responsibility for the death of her son. In a chapter entitled "Fruits Coming Home to the Dares," Julia's husband says:

Had [the children] been reared more plainly, they would not have acquired those extravagant notions which have proved their bane. . . . Julia . . . it might have been well now, well with them and with us, had our children been obliged to battle with . . . poverty. (Wood 1897: 346)

What is interesting about these episodes is the almost complete disregard for the blame that may be owed to other characters, especially the men. Robert Danesbury, Anthony Dare, the governess, and the boys' fathers are apparently absolved by the narrative and responsibility is laid instead upon the "silly mothers." Taken in conjunction with the successes of temperate male characters, the stories of Robert Danesbury and Anthony Dare echo two profoundly conservative messages: that temperance, perseverance, and industry form the cornerstones of bourgeois development, and that the greatest threat to these energies comes from women.

Yet the complex trajectories of both these novels present us with a very important and instructive question: if the successes or failures of the novel's male characters hinge upon the actions of their mothers, then how effective *is* hard work as a viable guarantor of success? In *Danesbury House* and *Mrs Halliburton's Troubles*, Robert Danesbury and Anthony Dare are powerless against the downward trajectory detonated by their mothers' actions during their childhoods. Even the triumphs of the novels' *successful* men are overshadowed by the tremendous influence of the matriarch. In the over-worked endings of both novels, the heroes' mothers are shown to have been crucial to the successes of both characters. In *Danesbury House*, the long-dead Mrs. Danesbury is exhumed in her son's didactic address to his manufactory workers. "Some amongst you," he says, "still remember my mother" (Wood 1860: 316). Similarly, in *Mrs Halliburton's Troubles*, William, a successful glove manufacturer like Wood's father, attributes his achievements to the moral lessons taught by his mother:

What was William thinking of, as he stood a little apart, with his serene brow and his thoughtful smile? His mind was in the past. . . . "Bear up, my child," were the words his mother had comforted him with: "only do your duty, and trust implicitly to God." (Wood 1897: 461)

Despite the fact that Halliburton and Danesbury (now members of the industrial middle class) stand for progress, hard work, and success, the images of their mothers, in these final scenes, reveal a form of psychological deadlock. William Halliburton's reveries are "in the past" and Arthur Danesbury is similarly preoccupied with remembering his childhood. Although Smiles cites a number of cases of successful men being

likewise concerned with “looking back upon the admirable example set . . . by [their] mother,” *Danesbury House* and *Mrs Halliburton’s Troubles* present such reminiscence as undercutting the most pivotal teachings of the self-help philosophy (Smiles 1968: 233). If the achievements of men are always reducible to the actions of their mothers, then “self help” is not as powerful a concept as Smiles would have had his readers believe.

\* \* \*

Preoccupations with the private, home life of men like Halliburton and Danesbury are a recurrent feature in Wood’s 1860s novels. When Mary Braddon ceased contributing to the family periodical *Temple Bar* in order to concentrate on editing her own journal *Belgravia* in 1866, the editor of the former, George Augustus Sala, commissioned a serialized novel from Mrs. Henry Wood, who by then rated alongside Braddon, Collins, and Dickens as one of the country’s bestselling novelists. With a similar title to *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), *Lady Adelaide’s Oath* (1867) provided a murder mystery packed with crime, resurrections from the dead, and other fantastic events. In the opening chapters, an unknown assailant *seems* to push Harry Dane, heir to the wealthy Dane Castle estate, off the edge of a cliff. It later turns out that he actually fell after an argument with his cousin Herbert. The source of their rivalry is their common attraction to their beautiful yet spoiled cousin Lady Adelaide. The latter is the only witness to Harry’s fall; yet because she believes Herbert, her lover, to have pushed Harry, she swears a false oath declaring that she saw nothing. When Harry’s body is not found, it is assumed that it has been washed out to sea. (He has actually survived the fall, is rescued by a passing yacht, and is taken to America in a state of amnesia.) Within months, his parents die and the estate is passed on to his adversary Herbert; the Dane estate is thus lost to one branch of the family. Later on, Harry returns from his watery grave, lays claim to Dane Castle, and reproves Lady Adelaide for giving a false account of his accident. In a chapter headed appropriately “Sowing and Reaping,” Adelaide admits to Harry: “I have looked upon myself as your murderer also in a degree: for, had I told at once what I saw, you might have been rescued; and I did not tell it, in my infatuation for Herbert Dane” (Wood 1898: 426). As with Eliza Danesbury and Julia Dare, Adelaide’s instrumentality in the failures of the Dane estate is figured as an act of murder committed by proxy. Many of Wood’s plots hinge on financial ruin, as Lucy Sussex notes; Wood is particularly “fond of scenes where a family’s household goods were seized by the bailiffs” (Sussex 2008: 164). In *Lady Adelaide’s Oath*, moreover, the weighty burden of masculine failure is laid upon the slender shoulders of one woman. The “resurrected” Harry says to Adelaide: “But for your own conduct . . . that night’s work had never taken place” (Wood 1898: 427). Yet, as in the earlier novels, it may be asked that, if a family’s estate can be brought down by the single oath of one woman, how solid was the family and its chattels to begin with? This is a question that assumes the connections between Lady Adelaide’s oath and the loss of the Dane estate to be unbroken. In fact, Harry Dane himself plays

an important role in his own ruin. On board the yacht, he recovers from his injuries but is overcome with an irrational desire not to tell his parents of his survival. As he confesses later, “my head was confused from the injuries,” adding:

“‘Let them think me dead,’ I said” . . .

“But why?”

“Ah, why! You may well ask it. Why do we say foolish things in our passionate tempers? I was feeling that the whole world was against me; that Heaven had turned its eyes from me; and it seemed to my bitterness – my selfishness, if you will – very gratifying to resent it.” (Wood 1898: 430)

It is significant that this confession is made in the same chapter that Adelaide’s oath is blamed for all of the Dane family’s failures. With his head previously in a whirl and his resolve overcome by an illogical whim, Harry reveals that he is as much to blame for his family’s failings as Adelaide is. Indeed, what the novel seems to suggest is that it is *Harry’s* reticence, not Adelaide’s, that is most accountable for the loss of Dane Castle.

Still, Adelaide’s silence on the subject of Harry’s fall is just one part of a personality that the novel portrays as duplicitous and dangerous. Printed alongside the novel in *Temple Bar* was an article that sought to explore the allegedly deceptive nature of women and its effects on marriage. Written by Lucy Coxon and entitled “A Few Tickets in the Matrimonial Lottery,” the essay claimed that choosing a wife was like taking a risky gamble (Coxon 1867: 138). In an age of “playing coquettes” and “private theatricals,” Coxon alleged, all attempts to select a good wife were essentially a game of chance:

As long as female beauty, fascination and wily cleverness exist, it is useless to preach or give rules to men on the important business of choosing a wife. A lovely face, a perfect figure, the many and nameless snares of a clever woman’s tact and flattery will in a moment cast to the winds the divine eloquence of a Taylor or the persuasive elegance of an Addison or a Steele. (Coxon 1867: 138)

This perceived fear of getting caught in the “snares of a clever woman’s tact” formed the crux of a similar article published in the same magazine two years later. In the fascinating “Girls’ Brothers,” William Black advised his male readers to study their sweethearts’ *brothers* as they “will betray the weak points of the bringing-up, notions, and temper of the whole family. . . . In the case of the brother there are no pretty feminine disguises to conceal the true state of affairs” (Black 1869: 109, 111). Such ideas emerged from wider concerns within the Victorian middle class over whether marital choices impacted on the health of the nation. In particular, medical treatises featured advice on the necessities of a good, well-balanced match. In his *Responsibility in Mental Disease* (1874), Maudsley wrote:

When we observe what care and thought men give to the selective breeding of horses, cows, and dogs, it is astonishing how little thought they take about the breeding of their own species: perceiving clearly that good or bad qualities in animals pass by hereditary transmission, they act habitually as if the same laws were not applicable to themselves; as if men could be bred well by accident. (Maudsley 1894: 25)

A man of morose disposition, he added, ought to marry a woman with a happy temperament in order to produce children who have both those qualities in a well-balanced degree. "Failure in this aim," he characteristically warned, "is punished by manifest degeneration and disease" (Maudsley 1894: 98). The ability to make a good marriage could also be viewed as the self-help concept in its most attainable form. Choosing a worthy wife was the easiest method of authoring one's destiny successfully, as well as of guaranteeing the future happiness of successive generations. Yet, according to the non-fictional pieces in *Temple Bar*, making the right choice was not always straightforward. "The whole affair is a lottery," preached Coxon, "in which success as often attends the bold and desperate player as him who draws his lot by line and rule." Sharing Maudsley's predilection for degeneration imagery, she adds, "when a hasty match turns out badly, the downfall is generally sudden and speedy" (Coxon 1867: 142).

Accordingly, Lady Adelaide, as a deceptive woman, is a characterization that draws on such fears in order to confirm, explore, and, finally, through the inevitable contradictions of the text, negate them. Lady Adelaide's ability to hide the worst aspects of her character is precisely the kind of thing that made it necessary, according to "Girl's Brothers," to watch her *male* relatives scrupulously: women are constantly misleading the men they marry. Women's "minute shades of discrepancy," Black writes, "form a sort of psychical kaleidoscope perpetually offering new combinations" (Black 1869: 111). Despite displaying such protean traits, and being considered "as wild as a March hare" by the novel's more observant characters, Adelaide receives a marriage proposal from a dull-witted squire named Lester (Wood 1898: 115–16). She accepts his hand and, as forewarned by Maudsley and Coxon, ruins his family with her frivolous spending. As Lester's grown-up son Wilfred observes, "It was a dark day for me and [my sister] when my father married her" (Wood 1898: 318). Again in the Doomsday "Sowing and Reaping" chapter, Harry Dane accuses Adelaide of ruining the Lester family as well as his own. Speaking of the squire, Adelaide admits that "'he has been an indulgent husband.' . . . Her [face] flushed, with a burning flush. If the treatment she had pursued towards those children never came home to her before, it came now in all its sin and shame" (Wood 1898: 428). Adelaide is not criticized for indulging children, as Eliza Dane and Julia Dare are, but for spending the money with which they might have indulged themselves had they been inclined to do so. Thus, through her uncommunicativeness on the one hand, and her artful nature on the other, Adelaide's conscience is heavily burdened with the ruin of two families. It follows, therefore, that her story confirms the mid-Victorian view that a good marriage is crucial to family health and that the

fundamentally deceptive nature of women renders the possibility of making such a match very remote.

This is, of course, a narrative full of holes, as becomes apparent when the marriage of Adelaide and Lester is compared with that of Lester's son Wilfred and his wife Edith. The parallel suggests that there is more to a marriage than the initial choice of partner. As with his father's disastrous wedlock, Wilfred's union to Edith becomes a failure, but for very different reasons. Because Edith is dowerless and Adelaide has bankrupted his family, Wilfred is not given his father's consent to wed. When the former clandestinely marries Edith anyway, the latter disowns him. In apparent agreement with the non-fictional advice against "marrying in haste," Wilfred's marriage becomes poverty-stricken, miserable, and sterile (Coxon 1867: 142). The extent of the misery is embodied in the character of the sickly Edith herself:

A fair, fragile girl she looked – her features painfully delicate, her blue eyes unnaturally bright, her light hair taking a tinge of gold in the sunlight. She wore a white wrapper, or dressing-gown, which made her appear still more of an invalid. . . . Wilfred's] heart [was] aching for his wife's sake, his spirit terribly rebellious against his father and Lady Adelaide. (Wood 1898: 314–15)

Lady Adelaide is blamed, once again, for everything; her figurative shadow arches over the failing Edith, vampirically drawing out her lifeblood. It soon becomes apparent, however, that the *main* cause of Edith's illness is her *husband's* behavior, not Adelaide's. Although he is loving and kind to his wife, it is his involvement in poaching and burglary that saps her energies. Notice how, in the following extract, Edith's suspicions exhaust her. She asks:

"Where did you go last night, Willy?"

Mr. Wilfred Lester took a momentary and rapid glance at the speaker. Something in the tone of the voice rather startled his conscience.

"Where did I go last night? Nowhere in particular that I remember. . . . I was out and about talking to one and another."

"So you always say, Wilfred," and the girl's tone dropped to one of dread, and she seemed to shiver as she spoke. "You had your gun with you." . . . The emotion had exhausted her feeble strength, and she lay down on the sofa, white, sad, and only half-convinced. (Wood 1898: 313–15)

Liggins writes that Wood's fiction "advocates the practice of good household management but implies that women's domestic authority may not be sufficient to moderate men's behaviour" (Liggins 2001: 62). While this is supported by Wilfred's marriage, *Lady Adelaide's Oath* also suggests that "men's behaviour," as well as women's, has a fundamental impact on whether or not a marriage would be healthy. It is not the woman who is the deceptive and dangerous half of *this* marriage but the man. The roots of Wilfred and Edith's marital failures, as with Archibald and Isabel Carlyle's in *East Lynne*, lie with the husband's inability to be truthful.

Like much of Wood's fiction, then, *Lady Adelaide's Oath* is a complex and contradictory narrative that exposes the complex ways in which gender impacted on the identity of the ruling class. More broadly, Wood's sensation fiction is a fascinating insight into the philosophies, sensitivities, and values of the Victorian bourgeoisie. The complexities of her narratives, driven by the inclusion of sensational elements in predominantly realist novels, allowed her work to become a series of complex statements about the ideologies forming the bedrock of her culture. Wood's books appear to join in the worship of moderation, perseverance, and self-help, yet they also expose how the middle-class lifestyle generated the very hazards and inconsistencies it was most eager to overcome.

## NOTES

- 1 Pykett's comments support her earlier reading of *East Lynne* in *The "Improper" Feminine* (Pykett 1992: 114–34).
- 2 This style of criticism, common in interdisciplinary approaches to non-canonical female authors of the nineteenth century, is also used in the following studies: S. Shuttleworth 1992, Cvetkovich 1992: 97–127, and Mangham 2007: 126–68.
- 3 Wynne maintains this view of Mrs. Wood as celebrator of middle-class values in her monograph *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (2001: 60–82).

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# Mrs. Henry Wood, *East Lynne*

*Marlene Tromp*

## The Reception of *East Lynne*

Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*, first serialized from January 1860 through September 1861 in *Colburn's New Monthly Magazine*, earned favorable reviews from the start. It enjoyed its most startling success, however, after it was published by Bentley and Son as a triple-decker (or three-volume) novel in 1861. In the oft-repeated assessment of the day, Wood "woke up and found herself famous." The first single-volume edition, which appeared in May 1862, was followed by dozens of other editions in the first ten years. By the turn of the century, the novel had sold more than a million copies (Liggins 2008: 150) – a dazzling achievement in the nineteenth century – and had been translated into most European languages and even Hindi and Gujarati. Though critic and novelist Margaret Oliphant had scathingly remarked that *East Lynne* had only "by some inscrutable breath of popular liking [been] blown into a momentary celebrity" (Oliphant 1862: 567), the novel's popularity was not fleeting. Indeed, it retained its fame into the next century in circulating libraries and public libraries, where it was often the most popular book on the shelves ("What People Read" 1897: 6), and in dramatic productions on the stage from Australia to the English countryside.

One of the three novels for which the "sensation" genre was named, *East Lynne* (like *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Woman in White*) certainly had sensational plot turns, including false identities, illicit sexual acts, and heartrending exposures. Perhaps this was why virtually every reviewer talked about the novel's enthralling storyline, even when they objected to the novel on other grounds. When Geraldine Jewsbury, the highly regarded reviewer who read the novel for Bentley prior to its publication, complained about the novel's poor grammar, she still felt compelled to

read on and confessed she was anxious to read the novel's conclusion. Significantly, Wood managed to walk a careful line between respectability and sensation in *East Lynne*: there may be shocking or wayward characters, but the narrator consistently criticizes them. For some, the compelling narrative pleasure and the novel's manifest moral message was enough. Indeed, the first review in *The Times* – which critics later complained had “puffed” the novel, inflating its sales – suggested that, while the novel was marked by a special “vivacity,” the author had evinced “the tact of a gentlewoman” and avoided “literary hysterics,” while achieving a “moral purpose” (“East Lynne,” 1862: 6).

Several critics shot back, lamenting the novel's endorsement by legitimate reviewers and arguing that, like other sensation novels, *East Lynne* was characterized by an “impatience of old restraints, and a craving for a fundamental change in the working of society[,] drugging thought and reason, and stimulating the attention through the lower and more animal instincts . . . especially by tampering with things evil, and infringing more or less on the confines of wrong.” This series of nightmarish qualities, the review pronounced, “weaken[ed] the established rules of right and wrong” (“Our Female Sensation Novelists,” 1863: 210, 236). The schizophrenic response to *East Lynne* (the novel was moral and tactful/the novel was wholly amoral and tactless) was sometimes echoed in a single journal's stance: *John Bull*, for example, called the novel “brilliant” (“Magazines, serials, &c.,” 1861: 219), characterized by a “natural style [that was] always charming” (“Literary Review,” 1860: 139), but then complained that the novel “minister[ed] to an unhealthy and diseased craving for excitement” (“Literary Review,” 1867: 133).

A Victorian novel with an endearing heroine who betrays both sexual and class codes – even if it presents itself as a morality tale – is bound to produce such tension. Kind and generous Lady Isabel, left penniless by her spendthrift father's early death, suffers at the hands of her vain and jealous aunt when her uncle comes into her father's title. A wealthy middle-class lawyer who had secretly purchased East Lynne, the family's country home, discovers her situation. Touched by her beauty and gentility, he proposes to her, in spite of the differences in their rank and training. Though she lacks feelings of passion for him, she has little choice, and he “rescues” her from the untenable position in which she has been living. While Archibald Carlyle claims that his “chief object in life now is [Isabel's] happiness” (Wood 2000: 195), he works for a living and virtually abandons his young wife with nothing to occupy her but the severities of his sister, a penny-conscious spinster who complains about Lady Isabel's excessive spending. Isabel falls ill in her despair and is sent to the seaside to recover without her husband or her children, whom she adores. Here, she encounters a former love interest (and the novel's aristocratic rake), Sir Frances Levison.

The reawakening of her feelings for him sends her back home to her husband, who, unaware of their past, has invited Levison to stay with them. Worse yet, Archibald's frequent absences are punctuated by his secret meetings with a young middle-class woman in the neighborhood, Barbara Hare. Though his motives are innocent – he hopes to aid Barbara's run-away brother Richard, who has been wrongly accused of

murder – Barbara’s scandalous confession of love for Archibald, combined with the servants’ gossip, creates the appearance of a love affair. Sir Frances exploits both Isabel’s attraction to him and her husband’s secret meetings to convince Lady Isabel of her Archibald’s infidelity. She absconds with Levison, violates her marriage vows, and is laid low by this tragic misstep. Ultimately abandoned by Levison, who refuses to marry her and make their child legitimate, Isabel lives abroad in relative poverty. She bitterly repents her failings, and grieves both the loss of her beloved children at East Lynne and the status of her new bastard son. When her baby is killed in a train wreck that horribly disfigures her, Lady Isabel, too, is mistakenly reported dead, morally freeing Archibald to remarry. Longing for her children, Isabel returns to East Lynne incognito and becomes their governess, Madam Vine.

Here, her former rival, Barbara Hare, has been installed as the new Mrs. Carlyle. Isabel “bears her cross” in the Carlyles’ service, gradually weakening, until two blows leave her on her deathbed: Levison, who has scandalously returned to the neighborhood to oppose Archibald for a seat in Parliament, is convicted of the murder of which Barbara’s brother had been accused, and Isabel and Archibald’s son succumbs to consumption, speaking in his final hours of his fallen and lost mamma. Just before Isabel herself perishes, she reveals her identity to Archibald and receives his forgiveness. Because the novel emphasized Isabel’s torturous suffering, overtly condemning her and holding up her piteous fall as the wages of sin, it complied with many critics’ moral standards, in spite of those scenes that made the novel sensational.

The affection readers felt (and continue to feel) for the fallen Isabel, however, seemed to undermine the tidy condemnation of her crime. *John Bull* called Isabel’s rival Barbara “disagreeable,” and “simply odious” (“New Editions,” 1862: 427), and the *Literary Gazette* “confess[ed] that of the two wives [their] sympathies rather [went] with the first” (“East Lynne,” 1861: 370). Margaret Oliphant, in fact, reserved a special place for *East Lynne*’s fallen heroine in her sweeping condemnation of the sensation novel, complaining that, “From first to last, it is . . . [the Magdalen] alone in whom the reader feels any interest”; Barbara, she charged, was a character who we “should like to bundle to the door and be rid of anyhow.” Because of its sympathy for the fallen woman, even in her lowest moments, Oliphant warned that *East Lynne* was a “dangerous and foolish work” (Oliphant 1862: 567). Even the novel’s Mrs. Hare, Barbara’s conservative and delicate mother, says of Isabel after her daughter’s marriage to Archibald: “I loved [Isabel when she was Archibald’s wife], and I cannot help loving her still. Others blamed, but I pitied her. They were well matched: he, so good and noble; she, so lovely and endearing” (Wood 2000: 487).

### Critiquing Culture: Reading Gender

According to most critics who have written on *East Lynne* in the last forty years, the tension between the overt condemnation of Lady Isabel and the simultaneous affection

the narrative builds for her – between the respectable and sensational – serves to critique cultural norms of the nineteenth century, particularly with regard to gender, class, and institutions like medicine and the law. Focusing primarily on gender, Lyn Pykett, for example, has argued that sensation fiction “focused minutely on individual women’s lives, demonstrating or exploring the contradictions of the dominant ideology of the feminine [and] the contradictions of contemporary marriage and the domestic ideal.” *East Lynne*, in particular, compelled the reader to “think two otherwise contradictory things at once” (Pykett 1992: 5, 94), generating a reassessment of femininity and womanhood. Tamar Heller suggests that the novel “subverts its apparent condemnation of the fallen woman” (Heller 1997: 138), and Elisabeth Rose Gruner argues that the scene wherein Isabel is lectured by her replacement Barbara Carlyle about gender and parenting brings the “reader’s discomfort to an unbearable pitch.” In this way, the novel “makes clear the anxiety about female roles,” and especially maternity, is “evinced throughout . . . in its central theme of masquerade” (Gruner 1997: 315).

Focusing on the psychological tensions in the narrative, Dan Bivona has offered a psychoanalytic reading, arguing that the management of the domestic space is coextensive with the management of self in the novel – particularly Isabel’s pain and suffering, and that this process is “the founding psychological condition of domestic order and peace,” a pleasurable spectacle that renders the depiction of domestic bliss as dubious (Bivona 2008: 118). Taking up a similar thread, Ellen Bayuk Rosenman has described the novel’s masochism, embodied in Isabel, as a means for her to “symbolically flout patriarchal law on two counts, implicitly claiming her right to East Lynne and to her own children” (2003: 27); her reading suggests that dismissing a novel like *East Lynne* as “simplistic or artistically crude is to be taken in by the ruse of suffering and fail to interpret its complex meanings and uses” (2003: 40). Antonia Losano, in another twist on gender, has used the Freudian notion of the uncanny to explore the female doppelgängers in the novel, suggesting that it emerged out of Victorian fears about managing their “surplus” of women (Losano 2004: 113).

Jonathan Loesberg, in some of the early writing on sensation fiction, has also examined these tensions, but shifted his focus to the narrative structure of these novels as “almost deliberately thematically indeterminate,” arguing that *East Lynne*, in particular, can be read as simultaneously subversive and conventional, citing the early feminist responses (in 1976) of both Elaine Showalter’s championing of Wood’s sympathy with Isabel’s “sexual boredom” and Jeanne B. Elliot’s argument that Isabel adheres to the “most rigid of Victorian sexual stereotypes” (Loesberg 1986: 116, 136). Andrew Maunder, one of the critics who agrees with Elliot, reads the narrator’s condemnation of Isabel as “singularly lacking in irony” and contends that the novel functioned as a “tale of identity for the newly affluent middle classes [which] draws upon the discourses of degeneration to reinforce both bourgeois (moral) hegemony and notions of aristocratic decline” – a physical degeneration which he links to the medical and evolutionary debates of the day (Maunder 2004: 61, 63). In the estimation of most

modern readers and literary critics, the tensions in Isabel's predicament and that of other women in the novel, like Archibald's intellectual and independent sister and his second wife, suggest that women were unethically oppressed in Victorian culture – but the novel evidences this theme while overtly complying with Victorian values. Jennifer Phegley has called Wood's work "domesticated sensationalism" (Phegley 2005: 183) – the perfect balancing act.

Wood intimately understood the constraints on women's behavior and engaged in the same kind of balancing act she depicts in *East Lynne* in her own self-presentation. Economic need after the failure of her husband's business and his untimely death had driven her to seek a means to support herself and her family. She felt compelled, however, to maintain her feminine respectability and crafted a facade of domestic retirement (Phegley 2005). For the most part, she succeeded. Victorian critics, reflecting on "Mrs. Henry Wood's" oeuvre (unlike Braddon or Oliphant, she always went by her husband's name professionally, another conservative move) noted that she was a principled woman, who had effectively combined reality with sensation in her novels to achieve a moral end (Grey 1893–4: 670). Unsurprisingly, given the pressures that shaped Wood's entrance into the literary world, a consciousness of the ways that economics pushed people to the limits of social codes was another theme that emerged in *East Lynne*.

### Reading Class

*East Lynne* wrangled with a number of questions of class and economics, expressing ambivalence about aristocratic privilege and compassion for economic hardship. These themes of class have also been recently addressed by critics, who have argued that the novel's vexed representation of class offered a critique of cultural codes as well. Pykett's work has read gender alongside class, suggesting that "the two threads intersect in the production of sexual ideology" (Pykett 1992: 88). Others have fleshed out class more centrally. Loesberg, for example, described the novel's deep ambiguity towards "class fear," fear of working-class dissatisfaction and of class disruption, and argued that Wood used these tensions to drive the narrative, even though the novel thematically disavowed them (Loesberg 1986). Susan Balee situates the novel historically during London's East End bread riots in 1860, and suggests that Richard Hare's physical labor, when he is a fugitive from the law, creates sympathy "for the plight of the working class" (Balee 1993: 144). Just as the disruption of gender codes produced some critical outrage regarding the novel's propriety, the undercurrent of compassion for class oppression and critiques of social power provoked sharp retorts from Victorian readers as well. Most of them suggested that the novel's content made it lowbrow, particularly citing what they read as misperceptions of class or misuses of class structures.

One condemned the novel for the "commercial atmosphere [that] float[ed] around works of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop" (Mansel 1863: 483)

– a stinging critique that suggested the novel itself was nothing more than a crass money-making product with no merit and positioned Ellen Wood as *déclassée* herself. Moreover, he claimed that while novels like *East Lynne* were fashionable, they were mass-produced and inferior, like “so many yards of printed stuff, sensation-pattern, to be ready by the beginning of the season” (Mansel 1863: 495–6). Another critic complained that *East Lynne* came from the hand of a “guess-work novelist [who] jumble[d] ranks and utterly confuse[d] our notion of the social standing of the [characters].” He dubbed Barbara “some milliner’s apprentice,” rather than “an English lady” (“Our Female Sensation Novelists,” 1863: 217), a remark that suggested the author was likely much the same. This disruption of class codes led some Victorian readers to suggest that the novel was suitable only for “cooks and nursemaids whose taste is now leading a fashion in the world of fiction” (“The Literary Examiner,” 1863: 166). Charges that *East Lynne* was lowbrow appeared in publications from India to Manchester – one paradoxically marked the novel as “respectable trash” (“Naked Justice,” 1863: 230). Other headlines noted that *East Lynne*’s popularity in the East End and Whitechapel, working-class communities in London, were a sign of its degeneracy. Though they condemned the novel for rendering indistinct the line between “right and wrong” (“On Novels,” 1881: 325), their outrage did not diminish its popularity, and that popularity crossed class lines.

Certainly, both “lowbrow” and more genteel readings of the novel were possible. Andrew Maunder, writing on its various dramatic adaptations, has pointed out that different versions of the play were produced for the East End and West End (the poor and the rich, respectively) by emphasizing divergent aspects of the novel (Maunder 2006: 175). The play was staged from Capetown, South Africa, to Melbourne, Australia; from Liverpool and Glasgow to Broadway. Sally Mitchell, in her introduction to the novel, has suggested the play was staged somewhere in the US or Britain every week for forty years after it began its run (Mitchell 1984: 12). Billed as a tear-jerker that produced an “unusually brisk trade in ladies’ pocket-handkerchiefs” (“East Lynne,” 1866: 83) – eliciting the same compassion for Isabel on stage as on the printed page – it was so popular that it made many an actor’s career, particularly those who played the complex and nuanced part of Isabel. Wood believed that dramatic productions of *East Lynne* had been effective advertising for the novel, but she never saw any revenue from the plays that made theater owners, actors, and playwrights millions across the century. Nor did she benefit from pirated editions of *East Lynne*, which made a fortune for the rogue publisher, George Munro, in the US (“American Book Piracy,” 1883: 11). Wood’s failure to profit from her story in these arenas stimulated the introduction of legislation in Parliament for author’s copyright with respect to theatrical rewrites and for international copyright laws – neither of which was passed until after her death (a fact that provoked a series of outraged – if belated – editorials in the press when her son’s biography appeared). Ironically, Wood’s inability to pursue legislation herself left her as bereft of justice as some modern critics have argued Isabel was – a third significant theme that readers have addressed.

## Reading Social Institutions

Much of *East Lynne* concerns the inability to achieve justice through ordinary means. Victorian critics fretted about the novel's ignorance of "real" legal proceedings, complaining that women were "quite unfit to control any branch of literature or arts, and wherever they do, there will be decadence" because they "base female ethics upon ignorance" (Martin 1877: 286). It was precisely this new vision of ethics, however, that the novel seemed to welcome. Brian McCuskey claims that the law in *East Lynne* is "prone to unpredictable errors and abuses," revealing the dangers of the domestic space, class codes, and the codes of privacy that kept the law out of women's space in the home. "If justice is to be done," McCuskey argues, "then, the law must be held at a distance from the community, at least long enough for the community to interrogate and police itself before yielding to outside authority" (McCuskey 2000: 368). Pykett has suggested that in *East Lynne* "women's legal subjugation within marriage and particularly their lack of legal rights over their children" became a site of the novel's primary tensions (Pykett 1992: 41). I have argued that the novel bridges the "the schism between justice and the law for women" (Tromp 2005: 200) by rendering Isabel's guilt "fully undecidable," a move that compels us to "reimagine justice" (2005: 210–11) by offering an alternative internal system that counters normative social codes. About its own courtrooms, the novel says that "things were not conducted with the regularity of the law. The law there was often a dead letter .... [E]vidence was advanced that was inadmissible – at least that would have been inadmissible in a more orthodox court" (Wood 2000: 601). In the fictional space of *East Lynne*, however, we cannot only see Sir Francis Levison brought to justice for his crimes through "illegitimate" means, but we can hear of the host of Isabel's very real injuries and provocations, providing us with a means of reconceiving justice outside of the limits of the law and affirming our sense of compassion for her.

Recently, critics have begun to explore other institutions, that, like the law, were central to Victorian life and were reimaged by the novel. Andrew Mangham takes up biology and the medical institutions, arguing that *East Lynne* used strategies that permitted a "female author [to make] important and innovative contributions to debates that were, in the Victorian period, a predominantly male arena" and to "glance the ethical issues that haunted the shadowy recesses of medical science" (Mangham 2008: 286, 290). He provides a fuller discussion of Wood in his *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture* (2007). Following Pat Jalland, Anne-Marie Beller has explored the death and dying in Wood's work and their relationship to Christian beliefs and femininity (Beller 2008: 220). Others have fleshed out *East Lynne's* place in supernatural fiction, an important sub-genre in the nineteenth century. There is much more work to be done on this rich novel, however. Martha Stoddard Holmes's work has opened the gateway of disability studies in Victorian literature, and, given Isabel's marked disability and the way in which it shapes events and Isabel's identity, the novel calls for such a reading. While

postcolonial studies has taken in much of Braddon's work and considered it in the context of this paradigm, there is yet to be a significant conversation in this arena with regard to *East Lynne*. Though some critics have talked about *East Lynne*'s reception in print and on the stage in the US and Britain, no one has fruitfully situated the novel as a profoundly and richly transnational phenomenon – between these nations and across Britain's colonies from India to Australia.

As yet, no one has taken up the framework suggested by Mary Poovey's work on the British economy (2008) to explore institutions like banking or credit in *East Lynne* (or the way in which sensation fiction, as an "economic" genre in Poovey's terms, might be fruitfully explored). All of these elements are crucial not only to the action, but to the tensions surrounding gender and class in the novel. I would like to draw this thread together with the insights of queer studies to gesture towards a new reading of this novel and as a means of suggesting that there continue to be innovative ways to interrogate this text; ways that could very profitably enrich our understanding of both the novel and the period. In this case, I will flesh out a space to which very few critics have attended in *East Lynne*, the novel's unconventional siblings: Cornelia Carlyle, Archibald's half-sister, and Richard Hare, Barbara's brother. Both of these characters are "queer" in that they defy – and "trouble," to use Judith Butler's term – the social norms with regard to gender. In this way, they upset the smooth functioning of domestic life in the narrative and become the "apparatus by which such terms [as male and female] are deconstructed and denaturalized" (Butler 2004: 43). Cornelia and Richard point to a different way of conceiving of "value," gender, and Archibald and Isabel's relationship.

Corny, as she is called, would certainly fit Judith Halberstam's notions regarding female masculinity (Halberstam 1998). While clearly a woman, she doesn't dress as we'd expect a Victorian woman to dress (she "disdained long dresses as much as she disdained crinoline" [Wood 2000: 86]); she doesn't talk like we expect a Victorian woman to talk (she orders everyone about, including her brother, who submits to her rule, and – in a very unfeminine way – she can keep secrets and hold her tongue); nor does she marry like we expect a Victorian woman to do. She rejects many proposals, and when the local curate has the audacity to propose to her, she dashes treacle on him in a rage and sends him packing. Her power, in fact, suggests a much more masculine than feminine characterization. She's not passive about intellectual matters, her livelihood, or her brother's business. Her mind, too, bears a masculine bent: "It was said in the town that she was as good a lawyer as her father had been: she undoubtedly possessed sound judgment in legal matters and quick penetration" (Wood 2000: 88). Significantly, she has a keen business sense and attends, with energy, to questions of finance and money – "the word 'business' always bore for Miss Carlyle one meaning, that of money-making .... Her love for money amounted almost to a passion" (Wood 2000: 87) – a theme I'll return to later. According to Halberstam, such female masculinity "destabilize[s] binary gender systems" (Halberstam 1998: 29), and indeed Corny disrupts notions of who properly wields both power and money. In spite of the fact that she is twice marked as a "freak," the local community clearly respects her



and – whatever a lady's maid might think in passing about Corny's proper place being in a carnival – such criticisms cannot displace the power to which she has access.

This is not the only “queer” aspect of Corny's character, however. Her “intense love of her younger brother” (Wood 2000: 79) also bespeaks Corny's resistance to norms and points to other themes in the novel. So intense is this love that when Archibald marries Isabel, Corny's jealousy compels her to swear that she will never forgive Isabel. She remarks, “had you brought up a lad as I have brought up Archibald, and loved nothing else in the world, far or near, you would be jealous, when you found him discarding you with contemptuous indifference, and taking a young wife to his bosom to be more to him than you had been” (Wood 2000: 182). In fact there are several moments in which the text offers a more than sisterly depiction of her love. Not only are we told that she never marries because of her deep love for Archibald, but – strikingly – that she is the “real mistress” of the household (Wood 2000: 216), even after Archibald and Isabel marry. One of Archibald's greatest marital failings is an “Obedience to [Cornelia's] will” that he can't even overcome as a married man (Wood 2000: 192). For these reasons, when Archibald comforts a jealous Isabel, who has learned of Barbara's love for her husband, the irony rings in Archibald's remark, “you have as much cause to be jealous of Cornelia, as you have of Barbara Hare” (Wood 2000: 230). Not only will he soon marry Barbara, but his commitment to his sister has been steadily undermining his care for his wife. Corny's wishes in significant matters consistently prevail over Isabel's with Archibald, even when the latter has better judgment, such as Isabel's desire to bring her children with her to France (which would have thwarted Sir Frances's inappropriate impositions). Isabel has in fact as much or more reason to be jealous of Cornelia as she does of Barbara.

Cornelia maintains her control over Archibald when he marries through her financial authority, a space where women typically do not tread. In fact, other women are conscientiously fenced out of any interest in money matters. As Archibald tells Isabel, “Expense is no concern of yours Isabel: it is mine. Never let the word expense trouble you, until I tell you that it must do so” (Wood 2000: 250). This sentiment, especially poignant since Isabel's previous misfortunes had been the result of men's bad financial decisions (like her father's) and her own ignorance of the state of affairs, also prevents Isabel from interrogating the limits Corny places on her. Corny suggests to Isabel through “hints and innuendoes . . . that Mr. Carlyle's marriage had been [a] ruinous expense”; she “told [Isabel] continually that [she] was more than he could afford, that she was in fact a blight upon his prospects” (Wood 2000: 216–17). The pressure she applies to Isabel beats the young wife down as much as she was beaten down at her aunt's – in spite of the fact that her marriage was to be her “refuge.” Isabel demonstrates her ability to manage money when she is abandoned by Sir Frances, and later when she lives as a governess, but her consistent marginalization from this world before and during her marriage is a site of tension in the novel.

Richard Hare, Barbara's brother, is also a queer character in the novel, a feminine man to Corny's masculine woman. Another significant figure who never marries, Richard's failings are all gender disruptive. Described as “quite as yielding and gentle

as his mother,” we learn immediately that “[i]n her, this mildness of disposition was rather a graceful quality; in Richard it was regarded as contemptible misfortune” (Wood 2000: 91). He himself complains of his character when he speaks of his own cowardice, “They had better have made a woman of me, and brought me up in petticoats” (2000: 94). When Richard meets with “hysterical and tearful mother,” he is “nearly as hysterical as she” (2000: 98), but his mother – one of the most beloved characters in the novel – is powerless to help her son, socially or financially. Significantly, rather than being invested in economic concerns, Richard remains outside this circuit of power. Thus, his failings are evidenced in his economic fall (one not so far removed from Isabel’s sexual fall). He not only pursues a relationship with a woman below him in rank, who inappropriately “wanted to set up for a lady – [which had] the effect of bringing her up above her station” (2000: 204), but she only pursues him for his money and position. Still, he intends to marry her, after his father’s death if he must, and to shower her with this wealth. This (economically) inappropriate love leads him to a stark descent in class, working in a stable yard and living as a working-class man. So grandiose are his failures that his transgressions help make him a murder suspect. Richard flees (driven by his “feminine” cowardice) and must secretly seek support from his mother and Archibald. Like Isabel, who receives £100 from Archibald before he courts her when her father’s death has left her destitute, Richard can only be sustained through people who have authority in the financial circuit. At the end of the novel, when Richard returns to his place as his family’s heir, his identity becomes even more queer. He dismisses marriage and commits to stay with his mother, who, like a bride, has become “a young and happy woman again” (2000: 672): “Mother mine, I am going to belong to you in future, and to no one else” all those who imagine he will marry are “wrong: my place will be with my darling mother.” In fact, like Corny who displaces Isabel, Richard becomes the “master” in his debilitated father’s place (2000: 673).

All of these queer relationships and inversions of gendered money channels point to a particular problematic. Corny’s financial empowerment and Richard’s financial disenfranchisement forcefully suggest that economic power need not be gendered; indeed, if everyone were permitted, regardless of gender, into the financial circuit many fewer problems would occur. Moreover, when this economic world is rendered illegible – even if it is a male character, like Richard (or Archibald, as when Corny manipulates Isabel financially), dire consequences result, as they have for Isabel throughout the narrative. Corny and Richard’s refusal to marry – to remain in the circle of the family of origin – also highlights a problematic. Entering into any relationship in which both partners cannot engage in the financial dialogue upends the relationship – a fact Wood herself would have understood intimately. Moreover, while *East Lynne* has typically been read as uplifting both the middle class and the novel’s “hero,” Archibald, I propose that *East Lynne*, through these queer characters and their queer relationships, points to the ways in which women’s lack of access to financial authority is the central problem, not simply the “decadent aristocracy,” which is nobly represented by the present Earl of Mount Severn. In this way, we can read Archibald

as problematized by the novel, and Isabel as financially compelled into marriage. "She had . . . esteem[ed Carlyle] greatly, feeling as if [he] were her truest friend on earth, clinging to him in her heart, as to a haven of refuge, loving him almost as she would love a brother . . . . But to be his wife! – The idea had never presented itself to her in any shape until this moment, and her first emotion was one of entire opposition" (Wood 2000: 164). It is, in fact, only after Isabel has lived on her own that she can return and love Archibald at last. These queered relationships reveal how women's lack of access to the financial world leaves them at the mercy not only of men like Sir Frances, but even of the well-intentioned Archibald. In other words, it is the financial system that is queer, not the characters who defy the norms that are in place.

Written during the first wave of the women's movement in the 1860s, *East Lynne* was resurrected by feminist literary critics during the second wave in the 1970s, and attention to the novel has consistently increased in the last forty years. Both the ways in which the novel poignantly speaks to inequalities and its place in the sensation "canon" have drawn wide-ranging critical attention, spurring the publication of several new editions of the novel and new critical studies, including a volume of *Women's Writing* dedicated to Ellen Wood alone. Just as all of Wood's novels indicate that they were written by "the author of *East Lynne*," criticism on Wood today typically attends to this, her first and most popular work.

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# Sheridan Le Fanu

*Anna Maria Jones*

It is fitting that Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (1814–73) has begun to return from obscurity. It cannot be said that he was ever entirely forgotten, but his works have, nonetheless, a revenant quality to them, not only because many of his plots appeared in multiple iterations, first as short stories and then later incorporated into novels, or because he recycled characters from novel to novel, but also because the plots of most of his novels hinge upon past crimes that haunt the present: dead villains return with new faces and names, murder victims awake from living death to reveal their killers, long-buried corpses and their secrets are disinterred, and vengeance, like property, is an ancestral inheritance. And, throughout his novels, even apparently minor actions have fatal results. Le Fanu's fiction explores the persistent problem of individual agency, engaging in Victorian debates about the nature of subjectivity and the limits of individualism.

Sheridan Le Fanu was a Dubliner of Huguenot descent, a member of the famous literary Sheridan family (great-nephew of Richard Sheridan, second cousin of Caroline Norton, and uncle and literary mentor of Rhoda Broughton); he was a frequent contributor to – and from 1861 to 1869 editor and owner of – the *Dublin University Magazine*, as well as a contributor to journals such as *Temple Bar*, *All the Year Round*, and *Belgravia*.<sup>1</sup> Le Fanu wrote fourteen novels and numerous short stories that combine elements of a number of genres: Gothic, horror, supernatural, historical, and, of course, sensation. As critics note, Le Fanu's fiction reflects his knowledge of the classics, art, and painterly techniques. It also bears the imprint of his experience as a member of the precariously situated Anglo-Irish Protestant middle class and of his interest in the occult, particularly the work of eighteenth-century Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg, which detailed the correspondences and communications between the world of the living and the spirit realm (although it is worth noting that actual

Swedenborgians were not particularly impressed with Le Fanu's interpretation of their founder's doctrines).<sup>2</sup>

Some of Le Fanu's works have remained moderately popular since they were written, such as the Gothic-sensation novel *Uncle Silas* (1864) and the short story collection *In a Glass Darkly* (1872), which includes "Green Tea," in which a character is tormented by a demonic monkey when his over-consumption of green tea allows him to perceive the spirit realm, and *Carmilla* (1871–2), in which the eponymous vampire preys upon a young English girl living with her father in remote forests in Styria. Other works have fallen into relative obscurity. In addition to *In a Glass Darkly*, Le Fanu produced several collections of short stories: *Ghost Stories and Tales of Mystery* (1851), *Chronicles of Golden Friars* (1872), and, posthumously, *The Purcell Papers* (1880). He published two Irish historical novels, *The Cock and Anchor* (1845) and *The Fortunes of Colonel Torlogh O'Brien* (1847), and he did not produce another until *The House by the Church-yard* (1863), which is both an Irish-historical and a Gothic-sensation novel. Following this, Le Fanu wrote a string of sensation novels, though he vehemently objected to them being classified as such. Rather, he desired, as he wrote in the preface to *Uncle Silas*, that his work be considered part of "the legitimate school of tragic English romance, which has been ennobled, and in great measure founded, by the genius of Sir Walter Scott" (Le Fanu 2007: 4). Notwithstanding his protestations, one will find the usual sensation plots – murders, frauds, missing wills, insane asylums, family secrets, evil governesses, and so on – in the novels throughout the 1860s and 1870s: *Wylde's Hand* (1864), *Guy Deverell* (1865), *All in the Dark* (1866), *The Tenants of Malory* (1867), *A Lost Name* (1868), *Haunted Lives* (1868), *The Wyvern Mystery* (1869), *Checkmate* (1871), *The Rose and the Key* (1871), and *Willing to Die* (1873). Recently a number of affordable paperback editions of many of the above have become available, a trend which one may hope will continue. Moreover, though others have been mostly out of print since they were written, readers can now find even his rarer works with the increasing availability of digitally archived texts, through projects like Google Books. Le Fanu's novels may not always be as accessible as some of the works of his better-known contemporaries, but they offer richly conceived, psychologically complex characters and intricate, suspenseful plots to reward the reader willing to seek them out.

### Considering the Critical Conversation

The relative neglect of Le Fanu by scholars is of long standing and seems, often, to hinge on his not being Wilkie Collins. Even favorable contemporaneous reviewers suggest that his work is more old-fashioned than Collins's fiction. An essay in *Temple Bar*, for example, argues that while both "are remarkable for the ingenious mystery with which they develop their plots, and for the absorbing, if often over-sensational, nature of their incidents," Le Fanu's work is "more leisurely, and certainly more classical" ("An Irish Poet and Novelist," 1877: 516). Lewis Melville in his 1906 *Victorian*

*Novelists* offers a less flattering comparison, however. Le Fanu, he claims, “is now sinking fast into obscurity,” which is only “the inevitable result of the lack of merit in his works.” Melville concludes, uncharitably: “‘Why,’ one might ask, ‘are the stories of Le Fanu so much longer than those of, say, Wilkie Collins?’ The answer would be, ‘They are not, but they seem so’” (Melville 1906: 238). Notwithstanding its mean-spiritedness, Melville’s assessment that Le Fanu was “sinking fast into obscurity” seems fairly accurate. Writing ninety years after Melville, Tamar Heller remarks that there is “puzzlingly little [scholarship] on Le Fanu,” despite the fact that his “innovative synthesis of [the Gothic] with the historical novel makes him an ideal candidate for new historicizing approaches” (Heller 1996: 354).<sup>3</sup> Heller calls for scholars of Victorian Gothic and sensation fiction, whose work expands the Victorian literary canon, to “avoid simply installing an alternative canon, with separate ghettos for *Dracula* and *Woman in White* Studies” (Heller 1996: 363). Work on sensation fiction over the last three decades has indeed moved beyond “*Dracula* and *Woman in White* Studies,” as the breadth of scholarship in this volume proves. Yet scholarship on Le Fanu as sensation novelist continues to lag behind work on others like Collins and Braddon, and critics still tend to explain him in relation to Collins. For example, David Punter, echoing the *Temple Bar* reviewer, argues that Le Fanu’s lack of popularity in comparison with Collins and Dickens is because he did not modernize the “Radcliffean” Gothic for a Victorian mass audience but instead wrote leisurely “books to ‘stroll around in’” (Punter 1980: 237; see also Milbank 1992).

Of course the lines between the Victorian Gothic and sensation fiction are blurry at best, but it is fair to say that most of the scholarship on Le Fanu, even that which reads him in conjunction with other sensation novelists, has tended to place him in the former rather than the latter category. However, by far the bulk of Le Fanu scholarship, Gothic-focused or not, is in Irish studies. Critics such as Margot Backus, Vera Kreilkamp, W. J. McCormack, and Robert Tracy all place Le Fanu’s novels within the Anglo-Irish tradition, reading even his “English” novels as allegories of Protestant Irish anxieties. As Kreilkamp notes, Le Fanu’s work displays a “preoccupation with a loss of position and prestige, with spiritual and physical decay, and with the guilt of an imperial class fast losing ground to Catholic political challenges” (Kreilkamp 1998: 96). Viewed through this lens, the sensational plots, hidden crimes, monstrous predations, and ghostly hauntings of Le Fanu’s fiction are symbolic of Irish political and social strife. Robert Tracy’s assessment of *Carmilla* may be taken as typical: “Despite its Styrian setting and parade of vampire lore, *Carmilla* is really about Anglo-Irish anxieties about absorption, infection, and displacement by those whose lands they have long ruled” (Tracy 1999: 23). Although the cultural context of Victorian Ireland is unquestionably important to understanding Le Fanu’s work, one should, perhaps, be cautious of analyses that depend too heavily on this “x ‘is really about’ y” logic.

In recent decades several monograph studies of Le Fanu have moved beyond reading him allegorically or within any one generic niche. In particular, W. J. McCormack’s *Dissolute Characters* (1993), Victor Sage’s *Le Fanu’s Gothic* (2004), and James Walton’s *Vision and Vacancy* (2007) present wider-ranging accounts of his oeuvre. Whereas

McCormack's critical biography, *Sheridan Le Fanu*, includes a detailed elaboration of Swedenborg's influence on the plot and structure of *Uncle Silas*, in which he reads the titular villain as the spirit realm version of the heroine's dead father (McCormack 1997: 148 ff.), *Dissolute Characters* broadens the focus to explore the Swedenborgian connections among various European authors, urging that Balzac, in particular, be considered an "intervention" in Irish literary history:

Instead then of the familiar traditions – of Irish gothicism from Maturin to Stoker, and of Irish idealism from Berkeley to Yeats – literary historians will look at the interventions, the discontinuities and the unacknowledged transactions taking place in less brightly lit areas of academic discussion. (McCormack 1993: 18)

Walton likewise takes up the connection between Le Fanu and Balzac, reading both within wider traditions of European literature and art. He argues against a critical myopia in Le Fanu studies that focuses exclusively on *Carmilla* and *Uncle Silas* and, therefore, lacks "a wider acquaintance with his work and indeed a broader range of reference for the purpose of identifying the author's place within the concurrent histories of ghost story and novel" (Walton 2007: 8). Similarly, Sage attempts to remedy gaps in Le Fanu scholarship by presenting an account that "draw[s] together the continuities of reading practice invited by [Le Fanu]" across his oeuvre (Sage 2004: 2). All three authors explore the formal intricacies of his narrative method and present Le Fanu as more than Wilkie Collins's "also-ran" competitor, or the author of one good book among many mediocre ones, or an author all of whose work is "really about" Anglo-Irish anxiety. Rather, they reveal an author of complex, allusive, multifaceted, and even experimental fiction.

Although this essay does not have the scope to offer a comprehensive view of all of Le Fanu's fiction, I hope to contribute to this critical reassessment of his work. In the following pages I offer a reading of one of his lesser-known sensation novels – *The House by the Church-yard* – that suggests some of the threads woven throughout his works and that shows an author deeply interested in questions of individual agency, subjective experience, social interaction, and narrative form. But first it will be useful to consider a particular cultural debate with which Le Fanu's fiction engages.

### Exploring Victorian Individualism

When one thinks of "Victorian" values, one is likely to think of the rise of the middle class, of the emphasis on individualism, self-sufficiency, and industry. In the same year, 1859, John Stuart Mill published his treatise extolling the virtues of individualism, *On Liberty*, and Samuel Smiles published his "how-to manual" for self-made men, *Self-Help*. Each in very different ways argues for the right and duty of individuals to make their own choices and to create their own opportunities. Mill endorses a society that fosters individuality, and values "great energies guided by vigorous reason, and



strong feelings controlled by a conscientious will” over conformity to social custom (Mill 1989: 70). Smiles’s work presents biographical examples that illustrate “the power of self-help, of patient purpose, resolute working, and steadfast integrity” and that reveal “what is in the power of each to accomplish for himself” (Smiles 2002: 21). These emphases on individual “energy” and self-cultivation may be seen in the Victorian *Bildungsroman* novels, such as Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850), in which the plots hinge upon the young protagonists learning to govern themselves and to harness their “great energies.”

One should remember, however, that there is no single “Victorian frame of mind.” Rather, the Victorians sought to understand their world and themselves through multiple, and often conflicting, epistemologies. If 1859 was the year of *On Liberty* and *Self-Help*, those signal publications were bookended by another extremely influential set of volumes: Henry Thomas Buckle’s *History of Civilization in England*. Volume 1 of this unfinished treatise was published in 1857, launching its author immediately to fame; volume 2 was published in 1861. Buckle theorizes history as a scientific discipline, which could, with the aid of statistics (a discipline then in its infancy), predict human actions. The “actions of men,” far from issuing from the individual will, Buckle claims, “must have a character of uniformity . . . [and] must under precisely the same circumstances, always issue in precisely the same results” (Buckle 1882: 19–20).<sup>4</sup> Buckle argues by analogy that, just as the natural world is governed by laws of physics, so too human events are determined by “the great social law, that the moral actions of men are the product not of their volition, but of their antecedents” (Buckle 1882: 30–1). This creates a troubling view of the individual’s place in history, where every individual’s actions instigate other, future actions and events, and are thus potentially immensely powerful; at the same time, the individual cannot be said to be the “owner” or originator of his or her actions, and thus comes to seem radically disempowered. Buckle argues, for example, that in a world where the number and kind of crimes can be predicted with great accuracy from year to year, and location to location, the criminal “is merely the product of the general condition of society, and that the individual felon only carries into effect what is a necessary consequence of preceding circumstances” (Buckle 1882: 27).

Buckle’s *History* created as much of a commotion as any sensation novel, so it is not surprising that when Le Fanu took over editorship of the *Dublin University Magazine* in July 1861, references to his work should be ubiquitous in the journal. The July issue drops his name in its first sentence of its first article, a write-up of the Dublin Exhibition. The August issue includes a lengthy, and highly critical, review of volume two of *History*, in which the author derides Buckle’s positivism. Similarly, the November issue of the magazine – the same in which Le Fanu published the first installment of *The House by the Church-yard* – contains a review essay of several historical works that launches a critique of both the “spiritualist” and the “materialist” schools of historical theory, observing sarcastically regarding the latter that “Given certain conditions of climate and geological structure, Mr. Buckle will tell you what

kind of men and what pitch of civilization are to be found in any part of the world” (“A Triplet,” 1861: 535). The author calls for a reconciliation of the two theories – that which reads human action as the outcome of antecedent forces and that which imagines human action as the result of individual heroism, divinely inspired or otherwise. Of course, we can’t know precisely how much editorial influence Le Fanu exercised over every individual piece in the *Dublin University Magazine*, whether he would have agreed or disagreed with the positions of these reviews, but it is safe to say that the debate outlined here influenced many Victorians in the mid-century and framed, in particular, the problems of individual agency that occupied many sensation novelists in the 1860s, Le Fanu included.

It is not difficult to think of sensation novels that articulate anxieties about individual autonomy; we might recall novels in which the villains rob others of their agency or mask their sinister intentions beneath appealing facades. Transforming those mainstays of the Gothic, castle dungeons and monastery crypts, into modern-day prisons and asylums, sensation novels abound with plots in which legal and financial mechanisms are put into motion to falsely imprison the innocent, as in *The Woman in White* (1860). Le Fanu’s *Uncle Silas* and *The Rose and the Key* both feature innocent young heiresses who are imprisoned by evil relatives. Victorian sensation novels are also crowded with “energetic” villains, both male and female, whose plausible disguises enable them to insinuate themselves into respectable society, as in *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1861). Dissimulating villains prosecute malevolent plots in *The House by the Church-yard*, *Guy Deverell*, *Haunted Lives*, *A Lost Name*, and *Checkmate*. These sensation narratives articulate fears of the Other, of villainy that can mask its true shape, and rob the innocent of life, liberty, and property. Yet, if “too much” individual agency is the problem in these novels, often an energetic agent is also the solution. In novels like *The Woman in White*, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *The Rose and the Key*, and *Checkmate*, dangerous Others are vanquished by self-willed and energetic heroes who discover plots, rescue victims, and punish villains.<sup>5</sup> These novels imagine the possibilities for autonomous, heroic selves – if only one can rise to the occasion, one can defeat the frighteningly powerful forces that threaten life and liberty. However, much of Le Fanu’s fiction exhibits no such faith in “what is in the power of each to accomplish for himself” (Smiles 2002: 21).

In *Guy Deverell*, *The House by the Church-yard*, *Wylder’s Hand*, and *Haunted Lives*, the narratives seem to agree with Buckle’s “great social law, that the moral actions of men are the product not of their volition, but of their antecedents” (Buckle 1882: 30–1). Heroic agency, the ability and energy to combat rapacious villainy, seems strangely absent or attenuated; rather, all individual agency is contingent, and any action, however seemingly inconsequential, has the potential to wreak havoc in the social sphere. These novels articulate a fear that individual actions might be both powerfully influential and powerfully susceptible to influence. In other words, the individual’s actions have the potential to set in motion virtually endless chains of events, and yet, it must be acknowledged, those actions are themselves the necessary result of prior events.

### Reading *The House by the Church-yard*

*The House by the Church-yard* takes place in the village of Chapelizod, outside Dublin, and begins with its narrator, Charles de Cresseron, reminiscing about the village as it was in his youth, fifty years previously, and recalling events farther removed by another fifty years, which were told to him when during a childhood visit and which he has since corroborated with collections of letters from Chapelizod residents.<sup>6</sup> The events in question are brought to light when a funeral unearths a skull that shows evidence of a violent death: two fractures and a large round hole in it. The gravediggers try to figure out *which* violent death could be represented by the skull – could it be the soldier who was executed for striking his superior officer? or the lawyer who was killed in a duel? – until a retired soldier who happens upon the scene tells the real story to the then child-narrator and his uncle (Le Fanu 2007: 6–11).

The main storyline, thus framed, is this: a murderer, Charles Archer, long presumed dead, shows up in Chapelizod under an assumed name, Paul Dangerfield, as the agent of Lord Castlemallard's English estates, visiting to advise about the management of the Irish domain. Meanwhile, Lord Dunoran, the son of the man falsely accused of Archer's crime, who committed suicide in prison, also arrives in Chapelizod under an alias, Arthur Mervyn, to bury his father and to clear his name. Dangerfield is eventually recognized by two people who knew him as Archer and know his crime. When one of these, Doctor Sturk, tries to blackmail Dangerfield, the villain, in turn, attacks him with a shillelagh, leaving him for dead with all evidence pointing, again, to an innocent man: the doctor's rival, Charles Nutter, local estate agent for Lord Castlemallard. Sturk does not die immediately, however, but lingers in a death-in-life state. When Dangerfield attempts to hasten Sturk's death by commissioning an unscrupulous surgeon to perform a trepanning operation, the plan backfires, and the murdered man awakens from his coma long enough to identify Dangerfield as Archer and to lay both his own and the long-past murder at his door.

That "blood will out," the murderer will be brought to justice, and the falsely accused will be cleared of suspicion are the inevitable outcomes of many a sensation plot; however, *The House by the Church-yard* does a couple of interesting things that complicate its narrative. Firstly, its detective, Lord Dunoran/Arthur Mervyn, does very little to discover the truth. Instead, Dangerfield is inadvertently responsible for his own downfall. Secondly, the forward momentum of the plot is frequently detoured or stopped altogether by subplots that seem more appropriate to Gaskell's *Cranford* than to a novel of the sensational school. Interwoven throughout are vignettes of village and garrison life, filled with gossip, social jockeying, minor scandals, comic mishaps, and romances: the Catholic priest, Father Roach, is discovered eating meat on Friday; gullible Mrs. Macnamara is conned by gypsy "fortune-tellers"; the rector's daughter Lilius Walsingham hears a ghost story from her superstitious maid; Lieutenant O'Flaherty drunkenly instigates a duel when he believes (mistakenly) that Nutter has insulted him. Although these digressions might seem flaws in a novel that is meant

to build suspense and create mystery – certainly no such extraneous subplots appear in *The Woman in White* or *Lady Audley's Secret* – they are, in fact, inextricably linked to the events in the main plot.

In particular, the chapters dealing with the duel allow Le Fanu to explore the contingency of human agency. In *The House by the Church-yard*, as in *Haunted Lives* and *Guy Deverell*, dueling represents both the outcome of series of intersecting antecedent events – events both momentous and ridiculous – and the instigation of future fatal occurrences. As the narrator remarks:

The chronicles of the small-sword and pistol are pregnant with horrid and absurd illustrations of certain great moral facts. . . . A duel, we all know . . . [is] a farce of murder. Sterne's gallant father expired, or near it, with the point of a small-sword sticking two feet between his shoulders, all about a goose-pie. I often wondered what the precise quarrel was. But these tragedies smell all over of goose-pie. (Le Fanu 2007: 89)

Dueling dramatizes both an excessive attachment to individualistic selfhood and, conversely, that any individual, in Buckle's words, "carries into effect what is a necessary consequence of preceding circumstances" (Buckle 1882: 27). A duel was a gentleman's obligatory response to a perceived insult to his honor. In other words, a slight upon his reputation demanded that he seek satisfaction, in individual combat, from the one who slighted him, or else be dishonored. On the one hand, a gentleman's honor could only be protected by himself – that is, he was individually responsible for protecting his good name. On the other hand, he could not respond to an insult in any way he wanted but had to adhere to very strict codes that dictated his actions. In the novel, one of the "great moral facts" to be discovered in dueling is that the notion of a self-willed individual agent, while illusory, results in combative and often destructive interactions.

The duel between Nutter and O'Flaherty, spanning ten chapters in the first third of the novel, is indeed a "farce of murder." O'Flaherty takes offense at an imaginary slight – he believes Nutter knows that he wears a toupee and, therefore, that Nutter's incidental references to hair are malicious jibes – and challenges him to a duel. Moreover, while attempts to prevent the duel actually fuel the violence – as when Father Roach urges the duelists " 'don't be led or said by them army-gentlemen, that's always standin' up for fightin' because leedies admire fightin' men. They'll call you cowards, polthroons, curs, sneaks, turn-tails – let them!' " (Le Fanu 2007: 91)<sup>7</sup> – ironically, efforts to prepare O'Flaherty for the duel lead to the dissolution of the quarrel. Puddock, as O'Flaherty's second, administers his "great Aunt Bell's recipe for purging the head" to cure O'Flaherty's hangover so that he will be ready to fight (2007: 80). The remedy, which consists of sachets of " 'nutmeg and ginger, cinnamon and cloves' . . . and every other stinging product of nature and chemistry" placed in the patient's cheeks, backfires when O'Flaherty accidentally swallows one of the sachets (2007: 81–2). Thinking that he has been poisoned, Puddock and O'Flaherty consult Doctor Sturk who, in a fit of pique at amateurs administering home remedies,

prescribes a “cure,” which is really a “reckless compound conceived in a cynical and angry spirit” and which renders O’Flaherty too ill to fight (2007: 92). Thus, Sturk’s malevolence saves his enemy, Nutter, from almost certain injury or death in a fight with a man much larger and younger than himself.

These events are farcical, but they also show the undercurrent of violence and rivalry already permeating Chapelizod before the arrival of interloping murderer Paul Dangerfield. Structurally, the novel reinforces this conjunction of the “horrid and absurd” throughout these chapters. The quarrel that starts the duel occurs in chapter 7, and most of the succeeding chapters deal with the often ridiculous preparations of the two principals and their seconds; however, chapters 11 and 12 interrupt the narrative of the duel to relate the story of the haunting of Tiled House, told to Lilius Walsingham by her maid Sally, with additional supernatural events reported in a letter written by General Chatterworth’s maiden sister Miss Becky (and corroborated third-hand by the narrator who met the cousin of one of the inhabitants who suffered the haunting). The duel is itself an interruption of the mystery of the unearthed skull, and the ghost story, which interrupts the interruption, reminds the reader of the novel’s main points: the past does not remain in the past, and actions do not belong to the individual, for the ghost that haunts Tiled House is not a recognizable person at all, but only a hand: “The person to whom that hand belonged never once appeared; nor was it a hand separated from a body, but only a hand so manifested and introduced that its owner was always, by some crafty accident, hidden from view” (Le Fanu 2007: 76). One may suppose that the hand belongs to the former master of the house, the earl who met a violent death in England and seemingly returned to his home a spirit. But, dead earl or not, whatever haunts the house cannot be understood by those it haunts in terms of a self with motives, will, or intention. It is only a hand, which visits “strange and horrible dreams” upon its victims, placing them into “some sort of ‘trance’” in which they appear to suffer “the pains of death” (2007: 74–5). The narrative of the hand, positioned as it is, serves as an allegory of self-less agency and, thus, foreshadows both the comical conclusion of the duel and the sinister effect that Paul Dangerfield will have on his victim, Doctor Sturk.

Following the ghost story, the duel is concluded in chapter 16, with the suffering but uninjured O’Flaherty being carried off the field. Chapter 17 describes the comical confusion of Colonel Bligh and General Chatterworth – who, secretly watching the duel through field-glasses, think that O’Flaherty has been mortally wounded – and Miss Becky’s indignation at Puddock when she finds that he has been involved in the duel. The next chapter, which continues in this comic vein, however, is also the chapter in which Sturk first sees and begins to recognize Dangerfield, the event that will lead to Sturk’s violent death:

At the dinner-table, [Sturk] was placed directly opposite [Dangerfield], with the advantage of a very distinct view. . . . The image, as a whole, seemed to Sturk to fill in the outlines of a recollection, which yet was *not* a recollection . . . and he lay awake half the night thinking of him; for he was not only a puzzle, but there was a sort of suspicion

of danger and he knew not what, throbbing in his soul whenever his reverie conjured up that impenetrable, white scoffing face. (Le Fanu 2007: 109)

Dangerfield, thus, is an interjection into humorous village conflicts, just as the ghost story interrupts the comic narrative, and he comes to haunt Sturk, even invading his dreams, just as the ghostly hand intrudes upon its victims as they sleep.

This initial description also highlights Dangerfield's indeterminacy: "Sturk thought he might be eight-and-forty or seven-and-fifty – it was a face without a date" (Le Fanu 2007: 109). This sense is one that is reinforced throughout the novel. Dangerfield is described repeatedly as a vampire, the living dead, and he speaks about and apostrophizes to his former self Charles Archer in the same way (interestingly both before and after his identity is revealed to the reader). As he says, for example: "Charles Archer living – Charles Archer dead – or, as I sometimes think, neither one nor t'other quite – half-man, half-corpse – a vampire – there is no rest for thee" (Le Fanu 2007: 375). Of course Archer and Dangerfield are literally the same man, but these apostrophes underscore the idea that, as Buckle claims, "the moral actions of men are the product not of their volition, but of their antecedents," so much so, indeed, that one might view Archer/Dangerfield not as a coherent self, with a defining and unifying will that develops over time – the version of the self upon which the *Bildungsroman* depends – but as the un-self-identical agent(s) of any number of converging forces at any given time. This latter is a version of the self in which the past is vitally important to the present and in which individual actions have immense influence, but in which, at the same time, the will cannot define or control the limits of agency.

The figure of the vampire, an interstitial "un-being," becomes the embodiment of this contingent self, and it is not just Archer/Dangerfield, but his victim Doctor Sturk who occupies, disturbingly, the interstices between life and death. As the narrator reports after the attack: "Strange to say, Sturk was still living. . . . But what did that signify? 'Twas all one. The man was dead" (Le Fanu 2007: 289). Sturk's in-between state – a murdered man who is not yet dead – means that even though he no longer is a living man, he can still affect the course of events. The narrator tells us that after Sturk is returned to consciousness by the trepan that was intended to finish him off, the justice of the peace, Mr. Lowe, taking his deposition, "looked on the stern and sunken features of the resuscitated doctor, recalled, as it were from 'the caverns of the dead and the gates of darkness', to reveal an awful secret, and point his cold finger at the head of the undiscovered murderer" (2007: 454). Sturk is a dead man with agency, a remainder of the past that lingers yet in the present, acting with fatal effect on the events of the novel.

The novel offers a grim refutation of the optimistic versions of self-sufficient or heroic agency lauded by Mill and Smiles. It presents a world of individual agents, carrying into effect the "necessary consequence[s] of preceding circumstances," impinging on one another, with often violent results, if often without design. Yet the novel does imagine "contingent" selves on a less combative model through the very style of its narration. The many-layered structure of the narrative – with "Charles

de Cresseron” repeating twice- and thrice-told tales, often explicitly acknowledging the collective (and subjective) nature of those tales – allows the reader to perceive the various individuals in the novel as something like a collective consciousness. As the narrator remarks, tying together Sally’s and Rebecca Chattersworth’s versions of the ghost story:

But all this is worth just so much as talk commonly is – marvels, fabulae, what our ancestors called winter’s tales – which gathered details from every narrator, and dilated in the act of narration. . . . Under all this smoke there smouldered just a little spark of truth – an authenticated mystery, for the solution of which some of my readers may possibly suggest a theory, though I confess I can’t. (Le Fanu 2007: 70)

In this way, the reader becomes part of the network of consciousnesses that narrate and theorize events, with knowledge, albeit imperfect, gleaned from multiple individual sources who lose their individuality in the telling and retelling of the tales. If the pessimistic version of contingent agency in the novel is the vampire, acting out the consequences of the past in the present, then the hopeful version is the communal consciousness into which the individual is subsumed and which becomes more than the sum of its parts.

Thus, we might read the seemingly loose structure of *The House by the Church-yard* not as flawed, but as a clever theorization of the pitfalls of individualism and the possibilities for alternative models of selfhood. Le Fanu continues his exploration of this theme in his later novels as well. In particular, *Guy Deverell*, *Haunted Lives*, and *Wylder’s Hand* play with the tension between the revenant past and its vampiric agents and the possibilities for conciliatory rather than combative agency. Le Fanu creates sensation plots around suspenseful and violent conflicts, but he often resolves these conflicts through the dissolution of the conflict itself rather than triumph of one agent over another. This may seem to offer less narrative “pay-off” than a heroic victory over some villainous Other, but these novels offer readers opportunities to challenge not just our narrative expectations but our notions of selfhood and social interaction.

#### NOTES

- 1 See W. J. McCormack’s critical biography, *Sheridan Le Fanu* (1997), for one of the most complete accounts of Le Fanu’s life and work.
- 2 A review of *Uncle Silas*, Le Fanu’s most explicitly Swedenborgian novel, in *The Intellectual Repository and New Jerusalem Magazine* concludes: “The author . . . evidently knows little of Swedenborg’s writings, and he has mixed up his views with those of the mystics and spiritualists” (“*Uncle Silas*,” 1865: 182).
- 3 Gary William Crawford maintains a comprehensive list of primary and secondary sources relating to Le Fanu at his website *J. Sheridan Le Fanu: A Database*.
- 4 Today we would be more likely to associate historical materialism with Karl Marx, but in fact Buckle’s work had much wider exposure and currency in mid-century Britain than Marx’s.
- 5 Indeed, in novels like *Lady Audley’s Secret* the hero’s development *as* hero occurs because he

- is called upon to investigate the novel's mystery.
- 6 Charles de Cresseron was the name of one of Le Fanu's ancestors; it was also the pseudonym he used for the novel when it first appeared serially in the *Dublin University Magazine* and the name of the narrator in *Wylde's Hand*.
- 7 Father Roach is bloodthirstily eager to see the "diversion" of the duel, so his intercession is not, perhaps, very sincere.

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# Rhoda Broughton

*Tamar Heller*

In September 1867, Rhoda Broughton received the dubious distinction of having her work singled out in *Blackwood's* by Margaret Oliphant as an example of the moral dangers of female sensationalism. Interestingly, what most outraged the redoubtable critic about the 26-year-old writer's recently published *Cometh Up as a Flower* was not its portrayal of the types of sexual transgression – adultery, bigamy, divorce – associated with the genre. Although Nell, the heroine, begs a former suitor to rescue her from a mercenary marriage, Oliphant was troubled less by this plot than by the girl's articulation of “nasty thoughts” (Oliphant 1867: 275). For Oliphant, Nell's hope that she and her sweetheart M'Gregor will not be merely “sexless, passionless essences” in heaven (Broughton 2004: 273) – an image that evokes sex in paradise – exemplified the sort of speech that, voiced by a woman, was “altogether unendurable and beyond the pale” (Oliphant 1867: 268). Since, as Oliphant saw it, there is “nothing of such vital importance to a nation” as women's “duty of being pure,” the stakes of female readers being encouraged to entertain “unclean” fantasies were nothing less than the fate of English civilization (Oliphant 1867: 275).

Oliphant's identification of *Cometh Up* as emblematic of the “abomination in the midst of us” (1867: 269) – indecent writing by women – is rendered ironic by a fact of which she was presumably unaware when she penned her diatribe. The novel she found objectionable had in fact been published as a more decorous substitute for the story Broughton had originally submitted to the London firm of Bentley and Son, *Not Wisely But Too Well*. So vivid was that work's description of the heroine's physical response to the male lead – a married aristocrat who twice nearly persuades her to become his mistress – that Bentley's reader, Geraldine Jewsbury, calling it “the most thoroughly sensual tale I have read in English for a long time” (Jewsbury 1976: 2 July 1866), begged the press to decline it. Though chronologically the first novel Broughton wrote, *Not Wisely* was the second published in volume format; initially

serialized, like *Cometh Up*, in the journal edited by Broughton's uncle J. S. Le Fanu, the *Dublin University Magazine*, *Not Wisely* appeared as a triple-decker in fall 1867 only after considerable expurgation.

Broughton's controversial representation of female desire – a representation so frank that it delayed publication of her first novel – testifies to the significance of her contribution to the sensation genre. Structured though they often are by sexual scandal, sensation novels tend not to portray female eroticism in convincing detail. Broughton not only defied the taboo against representing female desire but denied the common assumption that such desire was unnatural in middle- and upper-class women. Whereas Oliphant blamed sensationalism for falsely persuading respectable girls that “eagerness of physical sensation” was “natural” to them (Oliphant 1867: 259), Broughton's fiction insisted that bourgeois women did, in fact, have strong sexual feelings. This message apparently resonated with readers; following her successful debut in 1867 – ironically, thanks to Jewsbury's interference, the new author brought out two best-sellers in one year – Broughton went on to become one of the most popular late nineteenth-century writers, producing twenty-four more novels, and some distinguished ghost stories, before her death in 1920.

Given scholarly interest in Victorian sexuality, gender, and sensationalism, it is remarkable that Broughton's provocative fiction has only begun to be rediscovered in the last decade. Prior to this volume, no book-length overview of the sensation genre has contained a sustained discussion of her contribution – though the inclusion of *Cometh Up* in the series *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction* (2004), as well as Pamela Gilbert's Broadview edition of the novel (2010), have helped restore Broughton to the canon of prominent female sensationalists (my own edition of *Not Wisely*, which compares the serial and triple-decker texts, is forthcoming as of this writing). In this essay my focus will be Broughton's “erotic sensationalism” – the label bestowed on her work in the series *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction* – though I will necessarily address, in addition to her pioneering representation of female desire, the cultural constraints that limited its expression. Because of their reputation as sensation novels, the bulk of my discussion will be devoted to *Not Wisely* and *Cometh Up*, but I will comment in closing on sensational aspects of Broughton's work after 1867.

### Literary and Cultural Contexts

This section situates Broughton's erotic sensationalism in several important literary and cultural contexts related to changing gender roles in the nineteenth century. In broaching the edgy topic of adultery, *Not Wisely* and *Cometh Up* have obvious precursors in such sensation fictions as *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) or *East Lynne* (1861), narratives of marital infidelity read by feminist critics as expressions of Victorian women's increasing discontent with domesticity and marriage laws. Yet *Not Wisely* and *Cometh Up* have another significant literary antecedent: the tradition of women's writing, represented by such authors as Germaine de Staël, George Sand, the Brontës,

and George Eliot, which portrays unconventional heroines torn by the conflict between passion and propriety. Representing similar conflicts in her first two novels, Broughton references this feminine tradition in a number of ways, whether explicitly – as in allusions to *Corinne* (1807) in *Not Wisely* (Broughton 1867: I, 79; II, 76) – through obvious revision – as in *Cometh Up*'s paraphrase of the notorious description of Maggie's arm in *The Mill on the Floss* (Broughton 2004: 340) – or by borrowing a plot – as does *Not Wisely* in adopting *Jane Eyre*'s story of a heroine who discovers that her lover is already married (for more on *Not Wisely*'s revision of *Jane Eyre*, see Heller 2006). Indeed, a sympathetic review in the *Spectator* compared *Not Wisely* and *Cometh Up* to such works of “female genius” as *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Villette* (1853), and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), which display a “consciousness of sex,” or awareness of women's unequal status relative to men (1867: 1173). Perceptively, the *Spectator* reviewer hears in Kate Chester's cry in *Not Wisely* – “O, why will not God let us have what we like” (Broughton 1867: I, 122) – a desire for more than sexual gratification alone: “what she really loves is power” (review, 1867: 1173). This expression of a desire for opportunities not usually afforded women causes the *Spectator* reviewer to label Broughton a “novelist of revolt” (1867: 1173).

If, on the one hand, Broughton looks back to women writers such as de Staël and Charlotte Brontë, on the other hand she anticipates the more explicitly feminist fiction of the 1890s. In 1917 Walter Sichel identified the transitional nature of Broughton's portrayal of gender when he claimed her novels span “the distance between the ‘Girl of the Period’ and the New Woman” (qtd. in Wood 1993: 116). The stereotype of “The Girl of the Period,” a precursor of the New Woman, is particularly relevant to Broughton's sensation fiction, as *Not Wisely* and *Cometh Up* appeared only a year before Eliza Lynn Linton's influential antifeminist essay of that title attacking the moral decline of the late Victorian young lady. “Talking slang as glibly as a man, and by preference leading the conversation to doubtful subjects” (Linton 1995: 175), the GOP, as she was called, was described by Linton in terms strikingly similar to those used by Oliphant and other hostile critics to describe Broughton's heroines. Even Alfred Austin, in an otherwise respectful discussion of Broughton's work, admitted that her protagonists were “very outrageous young ladies indeed” in being “unruly, rebellious, ‘fast,’ and at times even what is called ‘slangy’” (Austin 1874: 204).

The gender anxieties animating the GOP stereotype explain not only some objections to Broughton's early work but the type of revisions she made in transforming her first two novels from serial to multi-volume format. Modern readers are unlikely to be troubled by slang, but many Victorians, like Linton, linked women's use of slang to sexual immorality – a link that explains Broughton's promise to Bentley to “expunge” the twin offenses of “coarseness and slanginess” in the serialized *Not Wisely* (Broughton 1976). In her revisions Broughton also muted her heroine's display of the disrespect for authority with which the GOP was associated, toning down, for example, the orphaned Kate's back-talk to such paternal surrogates as her guardian and male cousin. Still, so integral to Kate's and Nell's characters is their indifference to decorum – including the arrangement of clandestine unchaperoned trysts with their sweethearts

– that Broughton inserted in the revised *Not Wisely* the disclaimer: “Let no one think I am defending this girl, or holding her sentiments up as the pattern of what a young woman’s should be” (Broughton 1867: I, 273).

### Sexuality, Marriage, and Ambivalence about the Body

Kate and Nell’s capacity for passion is written, as it were, on their bodies – unabashedly voluptuous bodies which do not fit standard codes of beauty any more than Broughton’s heroines do the demure feminine ideal. The *Spectator* reviewer who called Broughton a “novelist of revolt” recognized this parallel between the unconventional-ity of her brash ingénues and their “full,” “round” figures:

In each story [*Not Wisely* and *Cometh Up*] the central figure is the same – a girl of a full and noble nature, round as to her lines mental and bodily, with full bust and an exuberant mental life, despising conventionality and contemning the usual cut-and-dried formulas for living, ensnared, but not stained, by a burning passion for a man who cannot, or does not, become her husband[.] (review, 1867: 1173)

Though slim, Nell is tall – 5’6” – with a “wide mouth” (Broughton 2004: 228) and untameable hair which, like Kate’s, is that auburn hue identified by Galia Ofek as a popular signifier of sensuality among sensation heroines and Pre-Raphaelite beauties (Ofek 2006: 111–12). Displaying “the ripe womanly development of one of Titian’s Venuses,” Kate’s figure contrasts with the “emaciated prettiness of modern young ladies” (Broughton 1867: I, 239); in particular, her “naturally healthily firm and shapely” waist defies the fashionable “17-inch wasp-waist” possessed by her conventional sister (I, 24, 37). By calling Kate’s (apparently uncorseted) waist “naturally healthily firm and shapely,” Broughton contests the Victorian ideal of “ladylike anorexia” (Michie 1987: 12–29), which denies women’s right to appetite not only for food but, in more symbolic terms, sexuality and independence. Broughton’s implication that women do, in fact, possess such appetites, and that they are both “natural” and “healthy,” constitutes one of her most radical messages, and underscores the link between her heroines and such figures as Jane Eyre, Lucy Snowe, and Maggie Tulliver, also defined through their hunger for types of fulfillment typically debarred from their sex.

For Geraldine Jewsbury, however, repeated descriptions of Kate’s “round” form were linked to *Not Wisely*’s problematic method of making “sensual appeals to the feelings” (Jewsbury 1976: 3 July 1866). In her report for Bentley, Jewsbury called *Not Wisely* “nothing but a series of love scenes (if love it may be called)” in which a “big Titan,” “‘crushes’ & ‘kisses’ & ‘devours’ & ‘holds in [his] iron grasp’” the “‘little’ ‘round’ ‘soft’” heroine (Jewsbury 1976: 2 July 1866). Though disapproving, this summary usefully captures the gendered contrast between the “soft” heroine and the hyperbolically phallic Dare, whom Kate’s brother calls “about as broad as this room,

and as hard as iron" (Broughton 1867: I, 53). Dare's "iron" embraces of Kate are literally sensational in conveying the "eagerness of physical sensation" condemned by Oliphant; in the serial, Kate's response to one of Dare's hugs is even reminiscent of orgasm: "the strain that fulfilled the wild longing, the burning dreams of weeks, was quite painful" (Broughton, Oct. 1865: 414).

Unsurprisingly, this passage was deleted in the triple-decker, along with such others as the original conclusion of Kate's brother's paean to Dare's "hard" body: "'If you could but see the muscle on his back,' he said, rapturously, turning to his sisters" (Broughton, Aug. 1865: 133). This invitation to the reader to imagine a man's naked body was the kind of erotic fantasy that worried Oliphant in her 1867 *Blackwood's* article; cutting some of *Not Wisely's* more daring descriptions of erotic stimuli, Broughton diluted one of the more provocative aspects of her fiction. Yet, given the nature of *Not Wisely's* plot, her expurgations are necessarily incomplete. Responding, indeed, to Sally Mitchell's claim that Broughton "violated her original conception" (Mitchell 1981: 89) in deleting the lines evocative of orgasm ("the strain . . . was quite painful"), Helen Debenham (to whose work I will return later) comments that only an "extremely naive reader" (Debenham 1996: 14) could overlook Kate's arousal by Dare elsewhere in the scene. Moreover, as Debenham argues, female sexuality is symbolically – and obviously – coded by the lush flowers in the conservatory where the scene takes place, flowers over which Kate exclaims with a delight verging on climax: "The wealth of enjoyment in that last 'Oh!' beggars description" (Broughton 1867: I, 239). Similar symbolism may be found elsewhere (as well as unexpurgated embraces).

The second novel Broughton wrote (though the first published in volume form), *Cometh Up* is less racy – and innovative – than *Not Wisely* in its evocation of sensory experience. Nonetheless, it contains such "sensual appeals," as Jewsbury would say, as the "odd shiver" that runs through Nell's body when she looks into M'Gregor's eyes (Broughton 2004: 234), or the "ruddy billows" of her hair cascading over "his great shoulder" in the scene where she begs him to elope (2004: 425). Still, despite having a "great tawny moustache" and the "scar of a sabre-cut" running down one cheek (2004: 232), *Cometh Up's* Major M'Gregor is a less concretely imagined figure than *Not Wisely's* Colonel Stamer. The aptly named Dare is, after all, a hard act to follow, given his sedimentation of a genealogy of literary bad boys including Milton's Satan, Othello, Lovelace, the Byronic hero Rochester, Heathcliff, and the eponymous brooding aristocrat of George Lawrence's *Guy Livingstone* (1857). Certainly, in making M'Gregor more honorable than the satanic Stamer – whereas Dare urges Kate to elope, M'Gregor nobly refuses Nell's offer to do so – Broughton diminished the allure of sexual danger that distinguished her first male lead without substituting other memorable qualities. It is only too appropriate that Nell meets M'Gregor in a churchyard, as there is something disembodied about their love even before their untimely deaths (he of fever in India, she of consumption several years later). The passage that outraged Oliphant – in which Nell hopes that in heaven she and M'Gregor will not be "sexless, passionless essences" (Broughton 2004: 273) – is emblematic of the

relatively vague description of passion in *Cometh Up* that I discuss in my introduction to the novel (Heller 2004: xlii). Sex in heaven may be shocking (witness responses to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "The Blessed Demozel"), but it is necessarily etherealized.

Interestingly, the most vivid descriptions of bodily sensation in *Cometh Up* convey a critique of marriage. Tricked by her diabolical sister into thinking M'Gregor has deserted her, Nell weds the wealthy Sir Hugh Lancaster to please her dying, bankrupt father, a mercenary arrangement that repulses her:

His arm is round my waist, and he is brushing my eyes and cheeks and brow with his somewhat bristly moustache as often as he feels inclined – for am I not his property? . . . for so many pounds of prime white flesh, he has paid down a handsome price on the nail[.] (Broughton 2004: 400)

In their assessments of *Cometh Up*, both Margaret Oliphant and Geraldine Jewsbury were shocked by passages such as these which, recording Nell's disgust at Sir Hugh's unwanted embraces, conjure nightmare visions of marital sex (Oliphant 1867: 267; Jewsbury 2003: 142). Emphasizing the economic imbalance between Nell's and Sir Hugh's positions, Broughton depicts marriage in Wollstonecraftian terms as "legal prostitution" (Wollstonecraft 1988: 148); when Nell refers to herself as an inmate of Hugh's "seraglio" (Broughton 2004: 429), she employs a metaphor used by both Wollstonecraft and Brontë in *Jane Eyre*, where the wealthy Rochester treats the penniless Jane during their engagement with the condescension "a sultan might . . . bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched" (Brontë 2001: 229). Broughton's similar representation of marriage in *Cometh Up* as a site of economic inequality and sexual objectification for women ("Am I not his property?") is a more explicitly feminist version of the critique of marriage laws in *Not Wisely*. In that novel, the predicament dramatizing the inaccessibility of divorce is a man's, as Dare pays a high price for the "boyish folly" (Broughton 1867: III, 32) of marrying at 18 a woman he later finds incompatible. At the same time, however, Kate's sexual self-expression is also limited by this male plight, a frustration experienced as well by Nell, who is unable legally to escape the marriage that transforms her into a commodity.

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Thus far I have addressed the radical aspects of Broughton's sensationalism, but her fiction contains conservative elements as well. In order for Broughton to publish her novels, after all, her bourgeois heroines could not actually become fallen women; she also apparently felt obliged to include copious moral commentary. In *Cometh Up* Nell, penning her first-person account while dying from consumption, repents her "wicked madness" in begging M'Gregor to elope (Broughton 2004: 449) and turns to religion. In *Not Wisely* the narrator repeatedly scolds Kate for preferring, as he says at one point,

“that muddy, polluted flood of earthly love” to spiritual refreshment (Broughton 1867: I, 67); in the story itself the resident super-ego is the clergyman-friend with whom Kate does social work, and who talks her out of a promise to become Dare’s mistress with a lengthy hellfire-and-brimstone harangue.

If she hoped to stave off criticism with such didactic interventions, Broughton signally failed. The *Athenaeum* review of *Not Wisely* (not by their frequent contributor Jewsbury, but in the same spirit) growled “Worse than even the immorality of the whole novel are the stupid, misplaced attempts at sermonizing throughout” (review, 1867: 569). It would, however, be misleading to see such moralistic discourse merely as a ploy to placate the audience. Broughton could scarcely help but be influenced herself by the same cultural anxieties about female sexuality that animated critiques of her novels. In two of the most notable re-evaluations of *Not Wisely*, Pamela Gilbert (1997) and Laurence Talairach-Vielmas (2007) discuss how the novel draws on Victorian tropes for representing female sexual deviance to portray Kate as a source of social contagion. Both critics analyze images of contamination and infection in scenes where Kate, trying to forget Dare, does district visiting in the London slums; shortly before the novel’s end she nurses at the side of her clerical friend, James Stanley, during a fever epidemic which kills him and invades elite parts of the city. Claiming that Kate’s liminal position between the working classes and the bourgeoisie in such episodes reflects her status “on the border between proper, sexually chaste middle-class womanhood and unrestrained passionate transgression,” Gilbert calls Kate a “vector for contagion” (1997: 121) who infects others with her feverish passion. Situating the novel in the context of anxieties about prostitution that informed the 1860s Contagious Diseases Acts, Talairach-Vielmas similarly claims that the “deformed and decaying female bodies” Kate encounters in the noisome slums symbolically link female sexuality to class degradation and social decline (Talairach-Vielmas 2007: 106).

Reflecting her emphasis on female consumerism, Talairach-Vielmas also explores Kate’s association with commodification, finding it significant that the girl’s accidental reunion with Dare in volume III takes place at the Crystal Palace. Symbolizing Britain’s industrial hegemony at the Great Exhibition of 1851, the Crystal Palace was reconstructed as a gigantic theme park at Sydenham Hill in 1854, combining its original celebration of commodities with various historical “courts” (Greek, Roman, etc.) which implied that British culture was the acme of human civilization. According to Talairach-Vielmas, Kate, in agreeing to become Dare’s mistress at the palace, replaces this narrative of progress with one of “Britain’s cultural decline,” a decline thus linked to the “rise of commodity culture” (2007: 99). Throughout the novel the theme of imperial decline noted by Talairach-Vielmas takes the form of that potent Victorian ideologeme, “going native”; the “southern-souled” Kate, variously likened to a “hourii,” a Circassian white slave, and a “dear little negro” (Broughton 1867: I, 283, 228, 235), is an English girl gone oriental, succumbing to Dare’s wiles against the decadent backdrop of nude statues in the palace’s Greek Court.

## The Plot of a Woman's Life: Intertextuality and Romance

In its tension between radical and conservative elements, *Not Wisely* is a rich example of how Victorian women's novels can be, in Nicola Thompson's words, "melting pots of ideological conflict" (qtd. in Maunder 2004: xix). Yet Broughton's work is equally notable for the sophistication with which it complicates its own ambivalence about sexuality. One way Broughton conveys this complexity is through narrative voice. The authority of the narrator's moralistic comments in *Not Wisely* is undercut by his self-identification as a disappointed suitor of Kate's ("[s]he was everything to me, and I was less than nothing to her" [Broughton 1867: I, 11]) – circumstances under which his disapproval could as well reflect resentment at her choice of a rival as concern for her spiritual welfare. Meanwhile, as Lindsey Faber argues in her essay on sisterhood in *Cometh Up*, Nell's apparently artless account, which stresses her innocence, reads upon closer inspection as an artful attempt to distance herself from her duplicitous sister Dolly, a con artist straight out of *Lady Audley's Secret* who looks like a Madonna but secretly worships money as a "god" (Faber 2006: 349).

Further layering the ideological and aesthetic complexity of Broughton's work are her frequent literary allusions, which display an encyclopedic knowledge of conventions for representing female experience. Addressing Broughton's heavy use of "interpolated quotation" (Debenham 1996: 15) in *Not Wisely* – several literary citations often stud a single page – Helen Debenham's Bakhtinian reading of the novel, one of its earliest re-evaluations, sees its intertextuality as "carnavalesque heteroglossia" that "offers useful insights into the young female writer as reader" and demonstrates Broughton's negotiation of both "her right of entry to and her difference from" a male-dominated literary establishment (Debenham 1996: 15, 10). Applying Debenham's theory, we can see the narrator, who compares Kate to such literary *femmes fatales* as Cleopatra and Helen of Troy, as a figure for the male canon itself – a canon which, when it does not depict women as dangerous seductresses, reduces them to passive victims of romance. Along these lines, the narrator's building a mental "secret picture-gallery" (Broughton 1867: I, 11) in which he enshrines a portrait of the dead Kate symbolizes male literary objectification and silencing of women.

Yet, though Debenham claims that Broughton's often parodic references to canonical texts "destabilis[e]" and "question gender-based assumptions" (Debenham 1996: 19), intertextuality can also reinforce stereotypes. For example, the narrator's quoting lines from the "Guenevere" section of *Idylls of the King* while Kate flirts with her cousin George (Broughton 1867: II, 211) compares her with the queen who, in Tennyson's epic, precipitated social disintegration – a misogynistic association likely to color our view of Kate even if we are aware of the narrator's personal reasons for making it.

In representing female desire from a feminine perspective, then, Broughton grapples with innovative ways of accomplishing this goal given generic traditions that stereotype women. Here, again, Broughton is self-conscious about her narrative choices. At one point in *Cometh Up* Nell jokingly asks the reader to help her choose



between types of tragic endings: "Should I practice some picturesque form of suicide? Should I drown myself . . . or should I choose some sequestered spot in which to 'snip my carotid,' and be discovered beautiful but gory?" (Broughton 2004: 313). While such tongue-in-cheek comments parody conventions in the way Debenham notes, they also point to the relative dearth of options for heroines, other than marriage or death. As Kate falls in love in *Not Wisely*, the narrator, claiming that romantic passion is the "main plot of a woman's life" though only "a secondary byplay in a man's," asks "Yes, the play of her life had begun, and whether it was to be a tragedy or a comedy who could tell?" (Broughton 1867: I, 111). Despite the apparent open-endedness of the question, the sole alternative to "comedy" – in its original generic sense of marriage – is tragic death, the outcome for both Nell and Kate, the latter suffering several versions of an unhappy fate depending on whether one is reading the serial or triple-decker *Not Wisely*. In the original sensational ending, Dare, enraged that Kate will not become his mistress, shoots dead first her and then himself, while in the less violent 1867 version he dies of injuries following a carriage accident and she becomes an Anglican nun.

In her quest to find new ways of writing a woman's life, Broughton thus encounters a narrative impasse similar to that found in works by the innovative nineteenth-century women writers – Staël, the Brontës, Eliot – whom I mentioned earlier. In variants on the traditional courtship plot such as *Corinne*, *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and *The Mill on the Floss*, the unconventional heroine who cannot marry her lover dies; *Villette* implies the death of the male lead, and *Jane Eyre* can only achieve the "comedy" of marriage by violently chastising Rochester and killing off his unwanted wife. Interestingly, despite its indebtedness to *Jane Eyre*, *Not Wisely* does not resort to such a *deus ex machina*. At the same time, though, Broughton cannot imagine an outcome for Kate that is not tragic – whether it is being murdered or made "wretched ever after," as the *Athenaeum* put it, as an Anglican nun (review, 1867: 569).

For all that convents in literature have frequently been the dumping-ground of the romantically disappointed, however, Kate's entering one is nevertheless one of the more innovative aspects of the revised *Not Wisely*. Complaining that Anglican sisterhoods deflect women from their "right functions of marrying and being happy" (Broughton 1867: III, 228), Kate's sister voices a critique frequently made of the newly established communities, that they seduced women from domesticity to work outside the home (most Anglican nuns, like Kate, ministered to the poor). In this sense the Kate of the triple-decker anticipates the goal that, as Broughton claimed in an essay published the year of her death (1920), was only attained after the nineteenth century, when marriage (or, as she put it, "the nuptial yoke") "is to many of the girls of to-day an unessential accident, which may or may not happen to them, but which in any case cannot materially affect the serious business of their lives, their professional or political activities" (Broughton 1920: 38). Of course, whatever professional opportunities Victorian sisterhoods afforded women, their existence did not solve the problem of women's troubled relation to heterosexuality that Broughton bravely explores in *Not Wisely* and *Cometh Up*.

### The Later Career

Female desire continued to be a major theme in Broughton's fiction after 1867. Yet she took pains to distinguish herself from sensationalism, warning readers at the beginning of her third novel, *Red as a Rose Is She* (1870), that the book is not for those who relish "the flavour of violent immorality" (Broughton 1899: 3). Rather than contemplating adultery, the heroines of *Red as a Rose* and *Goodbye, Sweetheart!* (1872) are guilty merely of excessive flirtatiousness – or so think their jealous fiancés. Nonetheless, both works, especially the tragic *Goodbye, Sweetheart!*, depict the harsh penalties visited on women suspected of impropriety. Another fiction of this period that brilliantly portrays male anxiety about female sexuality – and, correspondingly, female anxiety about male sexuality – is the Gothic honeymoon tale "The Man with the Nose," published in Broughton's 1873 collection of supernatural stories *Twilight Tales* (originally *Tales from Christmas Eve*).

Returning to the adultery plot with *Nancy* (1873), Broughton contrived to absolve the eponymous heroine from culpability. In this decorous rewrite of *Cometh Up*, a 19-year-old girl who marries an older man does not recognize the advances of a handsome young neighbor for what they are until he enlightens her – allowing her virtuously to repel him. Even so the *Pall Mall Gazette* cast aspersions on the heroine's morality, causing a distraught Broughton to complain to Bentley of the "coarse and indiscriminate abuse with which I am belaboured" (Broughton 1976: 28 Nov. 1873) – and which she continued to find an obstacle to frank expression. Critical carping aside, though, the raciness of Broughton's tales was a main selling point. After disappointing sales of the tame *Second Thoughts* (1880), Broughton, acknowledging that her public liked her work "hot and strong" (Broughton 1976: 22 June 1880), obliged with *Belinda* (1883), in which the young wife of a Casaubon-like scholar arranges to flee her Gothic marriage with a younger man. Though *Belinda*, like *Kate and Nell*, ultimately resists temptation, Broughton deftly milks the situation's erotic tension.

In the last decades of her life, however, Broughton's once scandalous novels no longer seemed shocking. By the post-World War I period, in fact, she was amused to hear that in Italy her work was considered the only English fiction suitable to give "as pabulum" to schoolgirls (Broughton 1920: 38). This shift in literary taste was caused by seismic changes in gender roles heralded in the 1890s by the rise of the New Woman, a being whom Broughton – despite her own earlier association with rebellious femininity – parodied in *Dear Faustina* (1897). Despite this conservatism, though, Broughton continued sensitively to depict adultery, marital breakdown, and romantic disillusionment in works elegantly streamlined by the demise of the triple-decker. Of her oeuvre after 1890 two examples are notable for their relevance to sensationalism. Revolving around an embedded sensation plot, *Scylla or Charybdis* (1895) allegorizes the passing of an older, repressed model of femininity. Breaking off his engagement because he fears developing, and bequeathing, his father's insanity, a young man discovers the long-buried secret of his pious mother's life: he is the off-

spring of an affair she had as a respite from her abusive marriage. Rescued from the threat of hereditary madness, the hero is free to wed a positively portrayed New Woman with whom he will presumably have a happier marriage than his unfortunate mother had in the era of sensation.

The salutary passing of Victorian gender roles is similarly implied in Broughton's last, metafictional novel *A Fool in Her Folly*, posthumously published in 1920 (see Heller 2009). Narrating from the vantage point of the flapper era, the elderly Charlotte Hankey – like Broughton a clergyman's daughter – relates the story of her disastrous girlhood attempt to write sensation fiction. Not only do her horrified parents burn her first novel, a tale of adultery entitled *LOVE*, but Char herself shreds the rewrite following a romantic disappointment and never even reads, let alone writes, fiction again. We can be grateful that Char's creator was more successful than her hapless heroine, and that, thanks to the long-overdue rediscovery of Broughton's work, we are now in a position to appreciate her valuable contribution to the history of sensationalism.

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# Charles Reade

*Tom Bragg*

Charles Reade's two best-known novels – the sensational historical romance *The Cloister and the Hearth* (1861), and the melodramatic critique of private lunatic asylums, *Hard Cash* (1863) – both feature the same subtitle: *A Matter-of-Fact Romance*. Reade appended this same subtitle to no fewer than six of his fourteen novels, including his 1856 breakthrough novel, *It is Never Too Late To Mend*. For Reade the appellation indicated a method as well as a literary product: a “fiction built from truths” whose construction depended on gathering, sifting, and judiciously extracting the most relevant data from the wealth of mass-media sources available to the mid-Victorian reader. Here was a kind of novel, it seemed, that kept up with the times (and the *Times!*), and that spoke with an authority lacking in the “unideaed melodrams for unideaed girls” – as *Hard Cash's* Doctor Sampson describes the typical three-decker British novel (Reade 1863: I, 85). Like the best historical novels, Reade's fictions purported to be a higher, more truthful sort of fictional undertaking; thrilling tales that were nonetheless moral and healthful because they were manifestly based on fact, and their object was instruction; and an antidote to the dangerously attractive, neo-Gothic sensation fiction which proved “a remarkably offensive construct” to Victorian reviewers, including Margaret Oliphant and G. H. Lewes (Liddle 2004: 98).

The factual veracity and moral worth of Reade's works – the two things seem one in many discussions – were hotly contested in his own day, and have since been challenged and problematized in some interesting studies. For instance, Wayne Burns (1961) details the unwieldy research methods Reade employed to construct his novels and reveals how poorly the author made worthwhile use of his hard-won, Gradgrindian “Facts.” But Reade's novels drew dismissals and accusations in their own day as well; it required no gap of decades for some readers to suspect a trick, that Reade's claims

to truthfulness and authority were over-inflated, or at least to decide that Reade's genius was for incidental details of story: the supplemental rather than the constituent elements, however grandly intended and researched. Mocking Reade's extraordinary claim that "I rarely write a novel without milking about two hundred heterogeneous cows into my pail" (Reade 1907: v), one Edwardian reviewer complained that despite all that distillation, "the mustard is good, but the pancakes are naught," though the mustard is so tasty "one actually dines off it, in so far as one can dine off mustard" (Lord 1903: 578). Despite grandiose claims by and about Reade regarding the seriousness and substantiality of his novels, most critics have invalidated the "matter-of-factness" of his productions, preferring only "favorite passages" and techniques with little regard for that truthfulness for which Reade argued so vehemently. "He is greatest in episodes" is a typical piece of faint praise (Elton 1920: 229), while Walter Allen claimed his short scenes were "as effective as a blunt instrument banged on the back of the head" (Allen 1954: 248). As for his considerable popular success, that too fell swiftly after his death.

Given the impermanence of Reade's achievements, one might be excused for forgetting that his novels were among the most popular examples of sensation fiction, or overlooking that he achieved this success less by bringing his much-vaunted factual veracity than by bringing a thoroughly masculinized energy and tone to the genre. Mrs. Oliphant equates Reade ("whom I am always on fire about") with Trollope in quality, seeing both of them as "admirable novelists, full of insight and power" who "have never had justice" (Oliphant 1869: 434). Though Oliphant famously recommends Wilkie Collins in her 1862 *Blackwood's* piece, "Sensation Novels," it is Reade she grumpily prefers to "Miss Braddon or Onida [*sic*] or others of like calibre" in a later piece ("Charles Reade's Novels," 1869) in which, though she does not fail to criticize his faults, she distinguishes Reade from other (mainly female) writers whose "mean motive" of hankering after sensation topics has crowded them to the front of public attention "where they had no right to be" (1869: 488). Oliphant's preference has something to do with artistic power, and not a little to do with factual truthfulness – which she contrasts with those sensation novels "of a character so utterly fictitious that one feels a certain difficulty in allowing them the name of book at all" (1869: 488). But the adjectives she heaps up to describe Reade's writing – noble, daring, imperious, wild, fascinating, attractive – point out the gender assumptions and preference for masculine heroism inherent in her guarded praise. What Reade has done better than the Braddons and Ouidas has everything to do with his novels' maleness, and in that judgment Oliphant was confirmed by those critics who continued to be sympathetic to his work.

This essay explores how Charles Reade achieved this masculinizing effect and so helped legitimize the sensation genre for a Victorian readership chary of "feminine" excesses. First I will provide a brief account of Reade's life and works, along with some critical responses, before turning to two representative novels, *Hard Cash* and *Griffith Gaunt* (1866).

## “Shouting from the Stalls”: Life and Works

Charles Reade's childhood in Ipsden, Oxfordshire, remains something of a mystery, although his complex relationship with his doting mother has been the source of interesting speculation by scholars and biographers. Propelled towards Oxford and a churchman's life by his mother, Reade took his Bachelor's degree in 1835 from Magdalen College, only the beginning of a long fellowship with the college. Although he spent most of the first Tractarian decade in London – studying for the Bar rather than the church – Reade served as Dean of Arts and Vice President for the college and earned a Doctorate in Civil Law in 1847. He in fact continued his Magdalen fellowship throughout his life, despite his emotional disenchantment with Oxford life and temperament, Evangelical sympathies, and growing respect for London's bustling commercial world.

Reade is thus an unusual reference point to a legendary Oxonian moment – an active Fellow who liked to appear unconcerned about the burgeoning Oxford movement, and whose opposition to Newman, Carlyle, and “medievalism” drove him to seek an antidote in “modernism,” via Mill, Bentham, and eventually, the matter-of-fact romance (Burns 1961: 53). Like Shakespeare and Molière, with whom he compared himself – like Zola, whom he would come to admire late in life – Reade considered his art derived from observation and practical engagement with life, as opposed to the haughty detachment of the scholar (Elton 1920: 226). His novels, and particularly their narrating voice, thus offer a fascinating confluence of moods and methods, constructing a supposedly detached and scientific fact-gatherer who pugnaciously defends himself against enemies real and imagined, and a narrator highly satirical of academics who nevertheless peppers his own rhetoric with Latin maxims.

Reade initially wrote for the theater, counting a series of plays (mostly adaptations) as his literary first fruits. Wayne Burns implies that harsh drama reviewers solidified the “feelings of persecution” and paranoia he maintained throughout his career (Burns 1961: 86), but by writing dramas and melodramas Reade acquired some of his most marketable literary skills, such as the genius for plotting stories and creating cliff-hangers that would earn him accolades as a novelist. Small wonder that one critic over-simplified Reade's gifts by claiming that “he recognized no barriers between the drama and the novel” (Cross 1917: 212); another makes a more accurate, if facetious, comparison when he finds novelist Reade's narrating voice “like an author shouting from the stalls during his own play and harassing the audience” (Elton 1920: 225).

Reade's love for the stage led directly to his first novel in 1853, when he adapted his play *Masks and Faces* into *Peg Woffington*, a fictionalized episode from the life of an eighteenth-century actress. Reade followed this moderate success with his most naturalistic novel, *Christie Johnstone* (1853), an account of a Scottish fishing community. His real breakthrough came with *It is Never Too Late to Mend* (1856), a tale of gold-diggers in Australia and the first self-proclaimed “matter-of-fact romance.” Bolstering

its sensationalism with “industrious research on a gigantic scale” (Baker 1903: 51), the novel became famous for its indictment of the British prison system and its abuses. The mixture of apparently serious reforming zeal with titillating details of hardships and tortures struck an extremely marketable chord with the Victorian readership, though what Michael Wheeler calls Reade’s “morbid lingering” over torture instruments in the novel “suggests other reasons for his interest in the subject of prison reform” (Wheeler 1985: 94).

*It is Never Too Late to Mend* set the pattern for Reade’s “new kind” of fiction based on truths, becoming the template in design and mood for Reade’s most characteristic novels. Here is the “realism” that Victorian and Edwardian critics came to praise in Reade, and which created his reputation for being “always a novelist with a mission, bent on exposing current evils” (Allen 1954: 248). The formula is repeated, with varying degrees of success, in *Hard Cash* (1863), which looked at private lunatic asylums; in *Foul Play* (1869), which focused on illegal maritime and salvage practices; and in *Put Yourself in His Place* (1870), which examined trade union abuses. By all accounts, Reade hit his novelistic stride and reached his greatest popularity in the 1860s, adding to these novels two others: his enormously popular historical novel *The Cloister and the Hearth* (1861) and an effective “psychological” study of bigamy, *Griffith Gaunt* (1866).

After the 1860s Reade’s novelistic gifts declined noticeably, due in part to his own quarreling over his novels and stage adaptations, but mainly to Reade’s own waning energies and inability to keep up with the public’s changing tastes. *The Wandering Heir* (1873), based on the recent Tichborne Claimant case, could still draw some topical interest, but Reade’s later efforts are relative parodies of his matter-of-fact formulae, ranging from interesting premises indifferently executed – *A Woman-Hater* (1877), which timidly explores women’s rights issues – to surprisingly feeble hankering after controversial subject matter – *A Simpleton* (1873), which numbers adulterated food scares, inept home contractors, and the medical dangers of tight-laced corsets among its would-be *causes célèbres* (Burns 1961: 290–1). Even the matter-of-factness seemed to peter out in his last productions.

### “The Sort of Thing They Like”: Critical Reception and Engagement

With a few notable exceptions – Oliphant has been mentioned, but Swinburne offers another example of a Reade admirer who kept the faith – critics’ long-term reception of Charles Reade’s works has been of the middling sort. Hot upon Reade’s heyday, George Towle quibbles only slightly about his being the natural successor to Dickens, “for the works of no living novelist are seized, read, and noticed, with more avidity” (qtd. in Towle 1910: 533–4). During Reade’s declining years, historical romancer Walter Besant rang the same bell even more loudly: “of all living men who write novels, he is the most widely known, the most read, and the most admired” (qtd. in



Poovey 2004: 435). But the feeling was exceptional, and when Reade died in 1884, *The Critic and Good Literature* paid him a much calmer compliment by way of epitaph: "Charles Reade was neither a Dickens nor a Thackeray. But he was for all that a great and fine novelist" ("Charles Reade's Men and Women," 1884: 227). Not twenty years later, Walter Frewen Lord, in *The Living Age*, was ready to wax even more mediocre: "Of Charles Reade's novels we may say, as Abraham Lincoln said of the Panorama: 'For people who like that sort of thing, that's just about the sort of thing they like'" (Lord 1903: 577).

No doubt controversy and scandal took their toll on Reade's formerly promising reputation. Certainly he had been willing to address, or at least toy with, moral and specifically sexual taboos in his fiction, and that willingness had done much to secure him an avid readership in the High Victorian years (as had his thoroughly masculine authorial persona, which helped remove the curse from such material). But along with the titillation had come the squabbles, suits, and counter-suits, including the morals battle over *Griffith Gaunt*, the libel action over *A Simpleton*, and a quarrel with Trollope over Reade's stage adaptation of *Ralph the Heir* (first performed in 1872). From all this chaos Reade emerged with seriously shaken credibility precisely because of, rather than despite, his labored insistence on the truthfulness and factuality of his productions. The validating and verifying that had proved such a persuasive claim to "realism" to Victorians looked something like a joke to twentieth-century critics. Reade "gathered, he pigeon-holed, he bequeathed for public inspection great files of cuttings, references, and other evidence, to which he pointed in triumph as the *pukka* brickwork of his evidence," Oliver Elton wrote, adding: "He threw the brick at the heads of those who might question its solidity" (Elton 1920: 225–6).

When modern critics and historians from Lytton Strachey to H. G. Wells began to chip away at Things Victorian, Reade certainly was not immune to this disparagement; with his pseudo-scientific and self-promoted truth-finding apparatus gathered in plain sight, Reade seems remarkably like the mocking naturalist-historian of Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), dipping his bucket into history's pond to gather up "characteristic specimens." Modern critics wondered aloud at their grandparents' fascination with Dickens and Thackeray, so it cannot be too surprising that "It took a mere thirty years for Reade's reputation to collapse" (Poovey 2004: 435) for this writer who was "neither a Dickens nor a Thackeray." Praise still abounded in certain circles for *The Cloister and the Hearth*, which continued to be read mainly by schoolchildren – the fate of so many historical novels originally written for adults – while a select few of Reade's other novels were gathered, along with Collins's and some of Dickens's, into the group now studied as sensation fiction. Walter C. Phillips's *Dickens, Reade, and Collins: Sensation Novelists* (1919) especially emphasized this relationship, although the grouping really dates back to Oliphant's 1862 *Blackwood's* piece. In early assessments Reade's theater background was perhaps the most oft-cited explanation for the features of his work, good and bad. But another commonplace in early critical assessments, both while he

was alive and into the early decades of the twentieth century, was to note his expertise at depicting the different genders truthfully, and particularly to praise his work for bringing a much-needed masculine vigor to the romances of the day – of which more anon.

Wayne Burns's biographical and critical study *Charles Reade: A Study in Victorian Authorship* (1961) remains one of the most important critical interventions not because it differs significantly in its valuation of Reade's abilities and oeuvre, but because Burns actually takes the author at his word and inspects "the *pukka* brickwork" of his evidence. Reasoning extensively from Reade's copious note-card and indexing system – itself a grandiose gesture in a particular style of Victorian masculinity – Burns traces individual ideas, associations, and pieces of research into the novels, sometimes finding mnemonic side-roads Reade did not take but should have, sometimes showing just how dysfunctional Reade's elaborate System was in practice. Burns finds the volatile and insecure Reade a rather pathetic object of study, focusing so much of his critique on Reade's apparent psychology – complete with Oedipal remarks about Reade's relationship with his mother – that his study feels very much like a modernist evaluation: not only of a minor Victorian author, but of a Victorian male's way of thinking about himself. Despite this datedness, Burns's study is especially illuminating for its insight into Victorian constructions of authorship, including questions about research and plagiarism. As biography, the book richly supplements and problematizes Reade's incomplete *Memoir*<sup>1</sup> and John Coleman's *Charles Reade As I Knew Him* (1903).

The general pattern of critical (de-)emphasis of Reade has changed only slightly to the present day. *The Cloister and the Hearth* has become rarely studied, perceived as "much of a muchness" with other, then fashionable, historical romances. However, Avrom Fleishman's noting of its "disturbed sadism" and "modern" take on the Middle Ages – he contends that Reade "turns the historical setting itself into the hero's antagonist" – suggests that the novel is a displaced sensation fiction, and deserves more careful attention from scholars of the genre (Fleishman 1971: 152, 155). Most critical attention in the twentieth century and at present has focused on Reade's "documentary" novels, like *It is Never Too Late to Mend* and, especially, *Hard Cash*. Given its focus on asylums, the latter novel lends itself to critics of sensation fiction interested in the relationship between constructions of insanity and extremes of emotional and social behavior. For instance, in *Victorian Sensational Fiction: The Daring Work of Charles Reade* (2010), the late Richard Fantina makes an insightful case for linking Reade with Foucault in his criticism of power institutions like prisons and asylums, and in his championing of (or at least, his willingness to depict frankly) alternative sexuality; many of Fantina's claims depend upon these two novels for their evidence. In an article in *Dickens Studies Annual*, Ann Grigsby uses *Hard Cash* particularly to critique Victorian values and judgment systems, linking Reade's sympathetic feeling for the insane with other marginalized social groups (Grigsby 1996: 151). It is to this work that I will turn first.

### Ardent Manliness: *Hard Cash* and the Intrepid Male

Reade complained in the preface to the second London edition of *Hard Cash*: “To hear people talk, one would think that this book is all about private asylums. Yet but one-fifth of the story is so employed” (Reade 1863: I, vii). Reade is hardly accurate – far more of the novel is “about” madness than one-fifth – but his assessment of readers’ preoccupation with the depiction of madness has only proven more accurate as time passes. “After the distractions of the first volume,” writes Richard Fantina, “*Hard Cash* settles into its primary business of exposing corruption and brutality in private lunatic asylums” (Fantina 2010: 64). However, while Fantina successfully proves that *Hard Cash* really is predominantly about asylums, Victorian readers would quibble with the idea that the first volume consisted of mere distractions.

As part of their general appreciation of Reade’s narrative machismo, Victorians prized the adventure scenes and nautical derring-do of the novel’s first volume, in which Captain David Dodd sails from China and finds his ship threatened by raiders. Reade’s account of “the fight with the pirates” is forever in the mouths of complimentary critics, while the same account was selected for inclusion in the *Chambers’s Cyclopaedia* as one of two representative passages from Reade (Patrick 1903: 483). For Reade’s first generations of readers, what made it possible to put a healthy construction on these often racy texts was their high masculine valence; so, presumably thin and unhealthy feminine stuff could be imbued with “ardent manly imagination” (Elton 1920: 226). Edmund Gosse praised Reade’s novels mostly for their “intrepidity,” finding in them a “hatred of what was artificial” and “effeminate,” and a chain of “virile directness” connecting him with the early Victorians (Gosse 1903: 319). Reade forges this chain in the “Resourceful Hero” figure, the virile young man of kindness and strength, instinct and logic, sure to triumph over all problems “by means of his own power and ingenuity” (Burns 1961: 53). This figure never changes in Reade’s novels, alleges Wayne Burns, because Reade himself never changed, and the type extends his idea of himself as a virtuous, learned but unpretentious male railing against sham and untruthfulness.

Reade himself explained critics’ preoccupation with the asylum chapters by claiming that “that part of the novel is of real importance to the country, and the rest is not” (Reade 1863: I, vii), thus emphasizing his social critique, as does Fantina. But not only is Reade’s reformer posture itself heroically masculine – muscular and Christian, but more “modern” and scientific than that of Kingsley and other Carlyleans – it also bears remembering that Reade’s enthusiastic celebrations of male heroism and masculine adventure were his stock-in-trade, and also of very “real importance” to the British nation. *Hard Cash* is particularly full of male heroics – from the rowing match that opens the novel, to Captain Dodd’s naval battles, to Edward Dodd’s daring feats as a London fireman. Recovering Reade’s work may indeed depend in part on understanding how it “defies Victorian convention” and “implicitly advocates tolerance,” but will also depend on understanding how his work complements Victorian

convention and complies with the conventional standard of “elevating and purifying” the novel reader (Fantina 2010: 162–3). To a great degree, this means appreciating how Reade masculinized and so legitimized his sensational fictions.

*Hard Cash*'s main premise can be summed up quickly: young Alfred Hardie suspects his father, banker Richard Hardie, of stealing £14,000 from his fiancée's father. To prevent his inquiries, the guilty father has the troublesome son declared insane and imprisoned in various private asylums. The ease with which Hardie Senior is able to accomplish this nefarious scheme comprises the primary abuse that the novel designs to expose and correct. “[I]f a man is rich or heir to wealth,” Reade writes, “he can be easily locked up for eccentricity, temporary depression of spirits, or even for nothing at all but the greed of his kinsfolk,” so the reader – whom Reade implicitly flatters even while he fans their paranoia – had better beware: “Think of it for your own sakes: Alfred's turn to-day, it may be yours to-morrow” (Reade 1863: I, viii, II, 256). From such passages and situations it becomes possible to infer Reade's critique of power institutions as Fantina argues (for not only asylums but also physicians and bankers come under fire here) and even Reade's implicit critique of all Victorian bourgeois institutions as Ann Grigsby argues. But *Hard Cash*'s raucous first volume and the male heroics displayed throughout the book should be accounted for before we grant Reade such high-minded intentions; for the first volume's seeming “distractions” not only include its most celebrated episode, but also indicate what sort of persons – especially, what sort of men – have been injured and outraged by this cowardly scheme.

Reade first establishes Alfred Hardie, Oxford rowing captain and logician, as one of two Resourceful Heroes in the novel (the other being Edward Dodd). For the first few sunny Oxford scenes, Alfred seems poised to play Flashman to Edward's Tom Brown, apparently refusing to lead the Oxford eight against Cambridge. But soon this young Achilles proves composed of true youthful British manliness, having selflessly arranged for Edward Dodd to lead the winning boat and cheering him on from the bank, unaware of Dodd's watchful mother and sister. By evincing unselfconscious virtue, Alfred wins the heart of Edward's sister Julia, the novel's type of young feminine virtue. Burns, Fantina, and others quite rightly point out the sexuality that Reade daringly develops in Julia's characterization, but we should also note how particularly apt is Alfred to solicit this response and, presumably, to reap these rewards from her. Alfred seems at first to elicit a sort of gender confusion from Julia, causing her to apologize for her own unmanly behavior at one point (Reade 1863: I, 47–8). What he actually does over the course of the novel (and in this he is aided by all the novel's males) is to make Julia aware of her sex, and of her role and limitations.

Language and logic are crucial ways in which maleness, ardent and true or otherwise, manifests itself in *Hard Cash*. Specialized language is the tool most frequently employed by the novel's cowardly and ignoble males – doctors, financiers, lawyers – and for their deliberate obscurantism they are reviled and thwarted by the novel's clearheaded, supposedly plain-speaking male protagonists – Alfred, Edward, Dr. Sampson, Captain Dodd. But we should note how the language and reasoning of

neither group of men is clear to the novel's females. Alfred and Edward speak to each other in a mixture of old school slang, classical language, and bits of syllogism that baffles the females, especially Mrs. Dodd, whose dread of Oxonian slang is her particular "Bugbear" (Reade 1863: I, 2). While classical jargon is used by the novel's parade of doctors to show intellectual superiority – "See my rudeness, talking Greek to a lady," says one (1863: I, 60) – this display is confirmed by protagonists who constantly spout jargon themselves, feel sure that "a girl can't learn logic," and instead look to their women to draw them closer to God (1863: I, 54, 122). Over the course of the book, Julia Dodd moves from being a girl who helps her brother learn his logic (despite her presumed deficiency) and would prefer a "she-doctor" to the confusing, untrustworthy male doctors, to a young woman whose admiration of heroic action makes her "long to be a man" and finds it "sweet to be commanded [since] it saves thinking for oneself" (1863: II, 137; III, 23). Such a transformation might be construed as bitter irony in a novelist less disposed to displaying conventional masculine heroism. But Reade's athletic, intellectual, and passionate males helped make his works famous, retaining his readership after the timeliness of his matters-of-fact had passed, and his self-stirred controversies had died away.

This defining of woman's role is not unchallenged by Reade; to argue that would be to put too conventional a stamp on his work. But Reade is certainly not critical of the demonstratively masculine male, nor does he seriously question the idea that such males make female life, subjectivity, and sexuality possible.<sup>2</sup> At one point in the first volume, Alfred and Julia's impending marriage depends on Julia's inheritance – the "hard cash" that heroic Captain Dodd wears close to his heart and battles pirates to bring to her. At another point, Julia's health seems to depend on a pack of baffling, contradictory doctors – actually, her lovesickness for Alfred is severely misdiagnosed. The eccentric but kindhearted Dr. Sampson denounces the doctors and "prescribes" attending a dance with Alfred, which effects Julia's cure. Late in the novel, both Alfred and Captain Dodd are threatened by fire at Drayton House asylum – a fire set by the sexually vindictive and allegorically named Mrs. Archbold, an asylum keeper in love with Alfred. Edward Dodd's heroics result in their rescue: thus, the brother saves both the mother's and sister's lovers in one brave action. Finally, in a particularly wish-fulfilling demonstration, Edward's habitual scrapbooking of miscellaneous articles from *The Advertiser* leads to Alfred's detection and eventual freedom – a move that links Reade with his own bold Resourceful Heroes.

These are the kinds of men threatened by the cowardly, effeminate (in the case of Mrs. Archbold, feminine), and frustratingly indirect actions of the novel's antagonists, whether stage villains like Richard Hardie or grim power bureaucracies like the Lunacy Commission. That, by threatening the sanity and solvency of these men, the villains also threaten their dependent women is a "fact" Reade takes for granted. Not by the ardor, constancy, thrift, and natural piety of females are these machinations foiled, though these feminine habits certainly aid and abet. Rather, male acts of courage and perseverance win the day, whether that means the stuff of conventional adventure stories like the fight with the pirates, or the sort of unconventional learning

espoused by the Resourceful Hero. Neither Sampson's knowledge of medicine nor Alfred's mastery of logic contributes to the novel's happy resolution so much as Edward Dodd's practical knowledge-gathering from the pages of the popular press: by his habitual scanning of the "Tiser," Edward corrects injustice – just as Reade will accomplish for other unjust prisoners, with his own matters of fact.

### Magnificent Virility: *Griffith Gaunt's* Passionate Male

If Charles Reade wrote a novel that challenges gender and sexuality in interesting ways, that novel is *Griffith Gaunt, or Jealousy*. This remains true despite its "broken back," as Swinburne termed its problematic and disappointing ending, which seems all too complacent about rewarding male evil with female good. Although the novel's running commentary on human "foibles" directs the reader to ponder jealousy as its moral theme, *Griffith Gaunt* is about jealousy like *Hard Cash* is about cash: jealousy is an engine of impulse, a pretext for pondering bigamy and other sensational themes. As Burns remarks, jealousy does not "constitute the theme or even the subject of the novel; at most it provides the titular hero with a 'humour' convenient for organizing the disparate elements of the action" (Burns 1961: 265). Yet as Reade's universal comment reminds us – "our foibles are our manias" – jealousy (and by extension sexual desire) is a kind of madness, but more interesting than a prison or asylum because humans cannot escape it (Reade 1891: 16). To Reade, this particular madness is exceedingly male; *Hard Cash* had already constructed jealousy as male rather than female, *contra* literary tradition.<sup>3</sup> *Griffith Gaunt* thus gives Reade a chance to explore "jealousy" and male sexual passion in a way not open to previous novels, despite their ardent heroic displays. Not surprisingly, Edmund Gosse accounted *Griffith Gaunt* "a novel of magnificent virility," and meant that to be praise (1903: 322).

*Griffith Gaunt's* first third describes a fiery courtship and marriage; its remainder follows the near-dissolution of that marriage due to misunderstandings, lies, and infidelity. Like *Hard Cash*, then, the novel's beginning feels composed of different stuff than its more sensational majority. In *Griffith Gaunt*, however, this change in tone and subject is cued by a change in gender – the novel turns from a level-headed and realistic focus on Kate Peyton to a sensational, sometimes Gothic, focus on Griffith's erratic and destructive behavior. The effect is of a genre as well as gender change. The shift in Kate's spiritual advisors – from the "solid, stout and convincing" Father Francis to the "pale romantic," Italianate, and Monk Lewis-esque Brother Leonard – signals the mood change (Elton 1920: 229). *Contra* tradition again, Reade finds maleness to be more scandalous, passionate, and unreliable than femaleness. Yet if passionate male excess is worth cringing over and regretting, it is ultimately worth defending, as *Griffith Gaunt's* complicated courtship story demonstrates.

The novel's plot does not depend on Griffith's jealousy so much as his manly impulsiveness, the hotheadedness that gains favor as often as it loses it. Again, we must account for the novel's seemingly tangential first third to see this relationship clearly. Griffith is by far the more objectionable and difficult of Kate Peyton's two suitors. Yet unlike his rival, the coolheaded and aristocratic Neville, Griffith's raw energy effectively pleads his case with feisty and independent Kate. He is all too quick to take murderous offense at Neville's insinuations in chapter 6, leading to his being wounded in a duel. Yet the near-fatal ball dug from his body ends up being a special love token, exchanged and cherished by the lovers at key moments. This impulsiveness – here rewarded – is essentially the same unguarded, virile behavior that leads to Griffith's jealous misunderstandings, desertion of Kate, and proposal to Mercy Vint in the middle of the novel. And (crucially) Griffith has been encouraged to take these later missteps by a designing woman: Kate's maid, Caroline Ryder. Reade seems not to disapprove of male hot-bloodedness so much as regret its easy mis-channeling by cold-blooded females. Only when Griffith becomes indirect and calculating late in the novel does he become cowardly and unworthy.

For Richard Fantina, *Griffith Gaunt* finds Reade in an exceptionally daring position regarding sexual mores. He adeptly argues that the novel's characters form implicit but daring homoerotic triangles, and that Victorians who objected to the novel's final "coarseness" basically operated from prudishness (Fantina 2010: 145–6). Cleverly persuasive as this argument is, it does not sufficiently account for Griffith's final conventional marriage, a reward out of keeping with his own personal villainy, which far exceeds his tendency to sexual indiscretion. Not merely a bigamist by the novel's end, but also drunken, cowardly, and unrepentantly jealous – even of the doctor trying to save a dying Kate – Griffith is not arrested, transported, or killed, but instead manages to tempt Kate and their daughter Rose to his own estate, recently and conveniently inherited. Reade's sexual frankness notwithstanding, Kate deserves better, Griffith not nearly so good.

The red herring murder mystery occupying the novel's last third may form the best case to argue that Reade criticizes normative male sexual mores, even while he conforms to them. The apparently murdered corpse of groundskeeper Thomas Leicester that turns up in Hernshaw Mere is mistaken for Griffith; this discovery lands Kate Gaunt in the dock for murder. Crucial to the prosecution's case is the distinctive "Gaunt" mole present on the decomposed corpse's face. Yet Thomas Leicester only shares this birthmark with Griffith because he is himself the fruit of a Gaunt's illicit sexual affairs. Because Griffith and Thomas are part of the same cycle of infidelity – Griffith has even borrowed Leicester's name to marry Mercy Vint – the blameless Kate is imprisoned and nearly executed. The "textual" Gaunt mole tells a distinctively moral story, then, and not a flattering one for the over-passionate male. But the novel's main narrative thrust defends Griffith's behavior. It is Kate who has learned "many lessons" by the close – lessons having to do with the regulation of her speech and actions, curbing her own independent tendency to speak and act "with impunity,"

and making her “slower to give offense, and slower to take it” (Reade 1891: 391–2). Griffith’s passions, including his jealousy, have required her to conform to his faults, not emulate his virtues.

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To find in Charles Reade’s novels conformity with Victorian convention is not to confirm that a neglected author should remain neglected. Rather, his acceptance by important critics of the day should help us understand how the subversiveness of sensation fiction threatened that conventional reading public. By celebrating performative masculine heroics and excusing, if not defending, masculine sexual passion, by relating scandalous narratives with the poised diction of the classics professor, Reade helped to validate and popularize subject matter too easily dismissed as exploitative and “low.” Understanding the dynamics of his popularity may ultimately prove more useful to criticism than accepting his reformist ethos – itself one more performative and heroic posture.

#### NOTES

- 1 Edited by the Reverend Compton Reade and published as *Charles Reade, Dramatist, Novelist, Journalist. A Memoir, Compiled Chiefly from his Literary Remains*, 2 vols. (London: Chapman & Hall, 1887).
- 2 The influence of male upon female is not only natural but beneficial and perfecting: when an intelligent girl is “said to fluctuate between childhood and womanhood,” “by her mother’s side she is always more or less childlike; but, let a nice young fellow engage her apart, and hey presto! she shall be every inch a woman” (Reade 1863: I, 93).
- 3 “As a molehill to a mountain, is women’s jealousy to men’s” (I, 281).

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## Ideologically Challenging: Florence Marryat and Sensation Fiction

*Greta Depledge*

Florence Marryat (1833–99) was one of the many impressive nineteenth-century female novelists who published prolifically over a long career; she regularly produced two or three novels a year from her first novel, *Love's Conflict* in 1865, until her death. She also wrote for periodicals, edited the *London Society* journal between 1872 and 1876, wrote plays, married, raised a family, divorced, remarried, separated, acted with the D'Oyly Carte opera company, was a prominent spiritualist, became involved with the Society of Authors in the 1890s, and established her own School for Literary Art. That she began writing her first novel while nursing her children through scarlet fever seems almost too clichéd. Arguably her life contained enough intrigue to serve as a plot for one of her own sensation novels. Indeed, Marryat's 1892 novel *The Nobler Sex* is strikingly autobiographical, with a central heroine whose life includes being unhappily married twice, becoming a successful novelist, converting to Catholicism, and finally developing an interest in spiritualism.

The daughter of the successful novelist of seafaring stories, Captain Frederick Marryat, the married Florence Ross Church chose to publish her work under her maiden name. She sent *Love's Conflict* to her late father's publishers, Bentley's, and in an interview in 1891 for *Myra's Journal: The Lady's Monthly Magazine*, she mentioned this decision: "Mr Bentley, probably glad to have the name Marryat again on his books if they had any merit at all, sent me a cheque within a very short time" (Dolman 1891: 1–2). That Marryat began publishing at the time of the sensation novel phenomenon also proved exceptionally fortuitous. As Andrew Maunder writes in his introduction to *Love's Conflict* for Pickering & Chatto's *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction*, to consider Marryat's novels of the 1860s is to "watch a novelist mining a profitable sensational seam" (Maunder 2004: x).

This essay will explore Marryat's early work from the sensation decade of the 1860s while also appreciating a writing career that lasted until the end of the century.

However, despite enjoying great popularity during her lifetime, Marryat soon disappeared from literary history, perhaps because she was seen by many as “a prolific writer, but not a great one” (Furniss 1923: 10).

Only in the last five years or so has an interest in Marryat’s work gained momentum. Mark Knight’s observation that “one of the ways in which literary critics have traditionally re-energised interest in a subject is by recovering forgotten texts” is most apt (2009: 325). The bulk of critical work produced on Marryat is focused on her 1897 novel *The Blood of the Vampire* (see Macfie 1991; Hammach 2008; Willburn 2008; Zieger 2008). There has also been some interest in her work as editor of *London Society* and her work as a playwright and actress (see Newey 2005; Palmer 2009a, 2009b). The aforementioned introduction to *Love’s Conflict* by Maunder and other scholarly editions of her work that are beginning to appear have cast more light on this neglected writer and made more of her work available to the modern reader. However, Marryat has not, before now, featured significantly in works on sensation fiction.

If Marryat had simply been a writer of sensation novels largely derivative of those by her more well-known contemporaries then the lack of critical interest would be understandable. That is not to say that all the novels she produced are worthy of standing alongside classics of the genre. Her 1869 novel *Véronique* is a weak tale of seduction and desertion in which Marryat harnesses that ever-popular sensation plot of bigamy. Her eponymous heroine undergoes a marriage ceremony in the Neilgherry Hills, shortly after which the “hero” returns to England and contracts a legally recognized marriage, abandoning his first wife. After 600 somewhat tedious pages, the hero and heroine die, hands clasped, on a sinking ship. The *Athenaeum* review said: “Mrs Church, with a curious mixture of pride and simplicity aspires openly to the ‘sensation’ novelist, without possessing the qualifications by which the perishable laurels of sensation novelists are earned” (review of *Véronique*, 1869: 367–8). Marryat’s preface though, is an extraordinary defense of the book, of herself as an author and the genre of sensation fiction:

The word “sensational” has been so twisted from its original meaning by . . . criticism, that it has become difficult to know in what sense it should be applied. To affirm that the story I submit to your approval is not sensational . . . would be erroneous, since it boasts no higher claim . . . a novelist is professedly a delineator of human nature . . . He has no right, in fact, to deny the instinct which is in him, and will make itself heard, since, strive as he may, his best achievement must fall so far short of his lowest ambition, in order to bring his novels up (or down) to the standard of the circulating librarys [*sic*]. (Marryat 1869c: vii–ix)

However, despite occasional weaknesses in her output, Maunder rightly describes *Love’s Conflict*, as one of the most “tautly written” of sensation novels, and there is much that is of interest in her other works (Maunder 2004: xxxiii). Furthermore, her exploration of some aspects of marriage in many of her novels is strikingly forward-looking, and it is through this theme that I will explore more of her work shortly.

Marryat's desire to keep in tune with the literary marketplace and display her acumen as a literary player is evident throughout her work. That the novels she produced in the 1860s had been written with the sensation market in mind is made clear in the preface to *The Girls of Feversham* (1869). Addressing her mother, she writes: "I dedicate to you this little story; the first perhaps, from my pen, in which not a line is to be found which can be called sensational" (Marryat 1869b: n.p.). Whilst Marryat somewhat "disingenuously" claimed that this novel was quite different to anything she had written to date, the novel has a plot which includes deception, seduction, elopement, and past murder: familiar sensation themes despite the authors protestations to the contrary (Maunder 2004: x).

The *Athenaeum* review congratulated Marryat for having dispensed with sensational elements:

If Mrs Church's book were sensational, it would not be entitled to half the praise we now cordially give it, because she would not have accomplished a task requiring so much capacity. As it is, she has added another encouragement to those who, like her, are competent, to provide us with an occasional variation from the monotony of murder, bigamy, and forgery. We trust they will profit by it. (review of *Girls of Feversham*, 1869: 432)

Despite the plot, the preface indicates Marryat's awareness that the end of the 1860s was seeing a subtle shift in narrative form, and that critics were becoming increasingly exasperated with sensational plotlines.

However, Marryat continued to include sensational elements in her later novels (murder, disguise, detection, and adultery all reappear in later works), firm evidence in support of critics who argue for the sensation genre lasting well beyond the 1860s (Harrison and Fantina 2006: xi). The "composite nature" of sensation fiction (Harrison and Fantina 2006: xi) is evident in how Marryat plays with expectations, because while her oeuvre is full of dramatic incident – seduction, fallen women, bigamy, mystery, incest, and fears of illegitimacy – it is not always the central heroine who is responsible for these classic sensation crimes. Still, "wayward girls and wicked women" do indeed feature in her novels (Pykett 1994: 40). Marryat's 1865 novel *Too Good For Him* sees the central hero Rex Reverdon as having "bad and good angels" who both have the misfortune to fall in love with him (1865b: III, 325). Marryat utilizes the classic juxtaposition of female virtue and vice. The bad angel Lizzie Ashton is forced to work as an actress, she admits that she has "been very poor . . . and have sometimes accepted help from my friends" (1865b: III, 225). These friends include Reverdon and a friend of his, Halkett, whom Reverdon assures Lizzie "will often see you" when he no longer can because of his impending marriage to the heiress Isobel Fane (1865b: I, 228). Lizzie's status as the plaything of the privileged man reinforces contemporary gender and class stereotypes. After being forced to leave the stage because of debts she turns to prostitution. Believing that death would be preferable to the life she now lives, when offered help (like so many other prostitutes in Victorian literature) she

says, "It's too late! . . . it's altogether too late" (1865b: III, 324). Marryat clearly pities the plight of the fallen woman; before she disappears into the night at the close of the novel, Lizzie says to Rex "I am his work, Rex – I and a thousand others with me – the work of Halkett and men of Halkett's stamp" (1865b: III, 323). The author closes with the wish that "every man and woman who reads this book would join the prayer, and make it general: God Have Mercy On All Such!" (1865b: III, 325). Whilst compassion is apparent, Marryat stops short of allowing a fallen woman redemption, reflecting the most harsh of social mores.

Harriett Treherne from *Love's Conflict* is another character of Marryat's who falls from grace. Despite being born to an aristocratic family, she is made vulnerable by the death of her mother and elopes with her music-master. She then leaves her husband for a lover who subsequently deserts her. The novel makes clear that she has resorted to prostitution, ultimately dying of a sexually transmitted disease. Her daughter, Hélène, whom she abandoned to be raised by peasants in a Kentish fishing village, is reunited with her grandfather, but the sins of the mother are played out through Hélène's own lack of moral scruples. Marryat is far from coy about the moral transgressions of this character. It is made clear that she has had sexual relations with a young man from the fishing village before she is rescued by her grandfather. Hélène is temporarily redeemed through her grandfather's paternal care and then the institution of marriage – although her cousin George marries her purely to secure his inheritance to the family estate and to spite the main heroine Elfrida. Hélène marries him primarily because he asked.

Ultimately, Hélène has to be punished for her earlier transgressions and she is shot in the face, murdered by her spurned ex-lover, John Read. There is, perhaps, a subtle play here with the plot of Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). John Read is the George Talboys of the text who seeks out his former love who has gone on to better things – both name and identity change. Marryat has the spurned lover commit the murder rather than the villainous heroine (albeit attempted rather than successful in *Lady Audley's Secret*, of course). However, his fate becomes that of Lady Audley. Read is not considered fit to stand trial – as in *Lady Audley's Secret*, the skeletons such a trial would expose are far too damaging – so the magistrate concludes: "the man is evidently mad, and we don't try madmen. We must get him put into an asylum, and then there will be an end of it" (Marryat 1865a: II, 232). This novel conforms to established moral codes within fiction in many ways: a sexually transgressive woman is destroyed and a murderer is incarcerated. But Marryat plays with gender conventions by having the mad man put away in an asylum – a very female punishment – rather than stand trial and be sent to the gallows.

Clearly Hélène's overt sexuality had to be punished – as did that of her mother. Showalter writes that the prostitute (and Hélène has explicitly offered sexual favors for money to another character at the very start of the novel) was "a figure who had always aroused the sympathy, however covert, of women novelists" (1977: 193). Whilst there appears to be understanding for the plight of Lizzie in *Too Good For Him*, in *Love's Conflict* the moral condemnation exemplified in the physical

punishment is severe. What is more, H el ene's death enables her beleaguered husband George to embrace the glory of work, and he leaves England to pursue Victoria's imperialist expansion, serving in India throughout the Mutiny, earning recommendations for the Victoria Cross, before turning his steps to Africa and joining government exploring parties. The narrative trajectory that Marryat follows here is broad and swift, and ideologies surrounding the health of the nation are apparent; anxieties about the sexual health of the nation that dominated the turn of the century seem prefigured by this plotline. By destroying the morally deviant sexual sin of these female characters with their death, our male "hero" helps to fulfill Victoria's desires for empire-building. George is not free while H el ene is alive, but with her death he can become an honorable and industrious man continuing the work of British imperialists abroad. He is also far away from the temptation of Elfrida. This need for a separation of our hero, either by death or distance, from the pollutant of transgressive women seems to indicate that the weight of the nation's reputation and prosperity falls heavily on the shoulders of its sexually deviant women.

H el ene's fate is contrasted with that of Elfrida Treherne in the same novel. Elfrida's near-seduction by her husband's cousin George is transgressive enough to warrant punishment within the strict moral codes of Victorian society. She gives birth to a child who is "bent and twisted" with a "curved spine [and] injured chest" (Marryat 1865a: II, 112). Elfrida sees the predictable death of her child as "God's will, and His chastisement" for her foray into deviant behavior (1865a: II, 122). Yet, again, Marryat conforms to ideological expectations of the time in her punishment of women. In Elfrida's defense, while she flirts quite excessively with George, she resists running away with him. She does, though, fall in love with him, despite being married, and for this she has to endure a lifelong punishment. The reader is briefly teased that her brutish husband will die after an accident, but he recovers. Marryat utilizes the gynocentric punishment of a dead baby followed by a barren life: "Elfrida . . . never had another child, and it is far better it should be so" (1865a: II, 337). In fact, Marryat condemns Elfrida to "a life of duty," albeit one filled with "true happiness," because "it is far better to take up our cross patiently, and acknowledge, as Elfrida does, that the consequences of our evil actions remain with us, and must be endured to the end" (1865a: II, 340–1). That flirtation with an attentive man while married to a brutish "selfish, unprincipled man" is "evil" seems harsh, and Marryat upholds the sanctity of marriage and reinforces contemporary attitudes (1865a: I, 242). The "gospel of self-sacrifice" that was denounced by feminist writers of the late nineteenth century (Showalter 1977: 29) is very evident in Elfrida's story. But her husband does become a better man, and there is a damning conversation between William and Elfrida when he is forced to acknowledge his own role in her downfall by marrying her when she was so very young and subsequently neglecting her. Maunder rightly highlights Showalter's appreciation of Marryat as one of a number of women writers who also produced a "transitional literature . . . that explored genuinely radical female protest against marriage and women's economic oppression, [albeit] still in the framework of

feminine conventions that demanded the erring heroine's destruction" (Maunder 2004: xxviii).

Marryat's sensation fiction from this time and her work throughout the rest of the century explore frustrations and dissatisfactions which her readers would have been familiar with, most especially those within marriage. In *The Prey of the Gods* (1871) she writes "And to woman, marriage is (temporarily) such a loss of identity, which is the reason it so far oftener turns out unfortunately for her than for man" (1871: 228). Many of her heroines slowly challenge the restrictions that bind and chafe them and, increasingly, Marryat questions male roles within the institution of marriage. To the modern reader it can be frustrating to read of feckless men paired with noble heroines, but Marryat is doing more than simply making her heroines epitomize all the virtues of ideal womanhood extolled by Ruskin. She begins to vocalize a need for more equality in marriage, something that becomes a feature of – and without doubt is taken to much greater lengths in – the fiction of the New Woman later in the century. As Pykett rightly argues, the challenging of "social codes [is] even more significant, and potentially more subversive, than her breaking of laws" (1994: 49). Marryat continually looks to moderate a path through ideas of femininity, womanhood, and gender roles. There are no binary opposites of feminism versus subservience, but an attempt to negotiate marriage as a union of mutual respect and understanding. As Kate Newey argues about Marryat's writing for the theater: "Although Marryat's work lacks the explicit political dimension of her near contemporary New Woman writers, her dramatization of the feeling woman as a passionate and powerful speaking subject . . . is ideologically challenging" (2005: 181).

Many of her later novels from the last two decades of the nineteenth century feature strong-minded women who speak out against artificially imposed gender restrictions which have become socially entrenched. Whilst in her 1880 novel *The Root of All Evil*, Regina Nettleship – a girl of marriageable age whose widowed mother is keen to get her comfortably settled – remarks, "I am for sale" (Marryat 1880: 14), Marryat also wrote many novels featuring financially independent women fiercely determined to follow their own path. Even though many of them marry, they marry according to their own wishes, resisting pressure from family and society. But just how radical and ideologically challenging are the heroines from her early sensation fiction? In *The Confessions of Gerald Estcourt* (1867), the central heroine, Ada, who moves in and out of the eponymous hero's life several times before they finally marry, talks of the inequalities of life for women. She laments that the laws of society are "laid down by men, for their own advantage" and that "men expect us to bear quietly from them what they would never bear from ourselves" (Marryat 1867: I, 142–3) – so far, not so very radical, but at this point Ada is only 16 years of age. When Gerald and Ada come together again later in the novel, Ada talks about the degree of purity with which men and women come to marriage:

"the world . . . permits men to indulge in every excess, whilst if a woman has one stain upon an otherwise spotless character, she is supposed not to be fit to become the wife

of one who has run riot up to the moment of his marriage. We accept the verdict . . . but we do not indorse it; we listen to the assertion that such a life is necessary for them and not for us, but we do not believe it; we profess to shut our eyes to their goings on, and our ears to the tales against them, but we both see and hear, and those of us who think – feel. We know that God made no such laws between us; that He never intended to give the one entire liberty without the possible contingency of blame, and the other a life of humiliation for one false step.” (Marryat 1867: II, 56–7)

Ada demands of Gerald: “you must come to me unsullied” (1867: II, 54). Arguably, Ada’s speech here prefigures work seen later in the century by writers such as Sarah Grand, looking to, perhaps, Evadne’s insistence on maintaining a marriage in name only with Colonel Colquhoun when the extent of his past indiscretions are revealed to her the afternoon of their marriage in *The Heavenly Twins* (1893). In fact, Ada breaks off her engagement to Gerald when she hears stories of behavior that she feels break his promise of no longer living “as other men do” (Marryat 1867: II, 55 ). Ultimately Marryat does not achieve the level of feminist writing seen in later New Woman writers; Gerald’s supposed transgression, which caused the break in their engagement, is explained, and his short-lived marriage to a woman who had first lived with him as his mistress is also glossed over. But the double standards that later feminist writers fought so hard to set aside are clearly articulated in Marryat’s work, albeit compromised more readily.

So while Marryat clearly falls into the feminine phase (1840–80) of female writers that Showalter outlines in her structure of women writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, she does prefigure and vocalize the protests seen in those later feminist writers. Moments of radical feminism are inextricably linked with depictions of the sentimental heroine in Marryat’s sensation fiction. Isobel Fane in *Too Good For Him* is as frustrating as she is endearing; she is financially independent, well educated, and also works as a translator to aid an impoverished friend. However, she vacillates between strength and weakness, marrying a man five years her junior who, having run through his own fortune, marries her, initially at least for hers. At first, Rex appears truly reprehensible, moaning to Lizzie, his bad angel, that he “loathes the thought of her [Isobel] . . . She’s three times my age . . .” (Marryat 1865b: I, 228). The juxtaposition of Isobel’s goodness and purity with Rex’s dastardly mercenary motives enables Marryat to vocalize her concern over the vulnerability within marriage which so many women faced. There is also clear criticism of idle men brought up with the expectation of money who, once their money is spent, have no idea how to provide for themselves other than to marry a rich wife. Rex seems to be exactly the sort of creature Marryat later condemns in *The Root of All Evil*:

Say what we will of them, men do not nearly so often sell themselves for filthy lucre as the other half of the creation do. They like luxury, doubtless . . . but it is only the lowest and most unmanly of their sex who will deliberately relinquish all their dreams of beauty in exchange for wealth. (Marryat 1880: 134)



Ultimately the goodness inherent in Isobel – despite the trials Rex puts her through, including trying to raise money to free him from debtors' prison – triumphs. The birth of a son and heir has them looking forward to a supposedly brighter future. For the modern reader, the continual heroism of self-sacrifice that we see Isobel submit to, and her utter devotion to such a reckless man, makes for trying reading. The novel contains attempted murder, blackmail, prostitution, deception, prison, and the return of a long-lost brother, but Isobel's descent from independent woman to slavish wife is, perhaps, one example of why Sally Mitchell refers to Marryat as a writer of "light fiction," a "mode which is essentially sentimental rather than dramatic" (Mitchell 1977: 31).

It is perhaps the inconsistencies in Marryat's work that led to her lack of enduring popularity, inconsistencies that the reviewers believed were due to overproduction: According to the *Athenaeum*, "'*Love's Conflict*' was . . . remarkable. '*Too Good for Him*' suggests the unpleasant conviction that its author has . . . yield[ed] to a too common vice of modern novelists, she is following up her success too quickly for her strength" (review of *Too Good For Him* 1865: 841). Marryat seems to pre-empt this review in the novel:

You won't be satisfied with less than three volumes now-a-days . . . The interest of the plot must be destroyed; everything, in fact, must succumb to the dire necessity for a certain amount of letterpress. You are a foolish public. . . . Never mind, if a story has only sufficient matter to fill two volumes well, you must still have it carried through the legitimate number. (Marryat 1865b: III, 123)

Her third novel of 1865, *Woman Against Woman*, also came in for censure from the *Athenaeum* reviewer: "a tale so idle that we cannot call it harmless" (review of *Woman Against Woman*, 1866: 233). Indeed, this novel does flirt with ideas of adultery, incest, and seduction and, as Maunder rightly points out, although Marryat "claimed her novels had a high moral tone," *Woman Against Woman* decidedly exploits a "taste for voyeurism, titillating readers with desperate heroines escaping (or trying to escape) the sexual boundaries and willing to risk all" (Maunder 2004: x). Ultimately, the central heroine of this novel does nothing wrong, but she does come perilously close to irrevocably damaging her reputation, and the reader is tantalized by hints of an adulterous and incestuous relationship. Perhaps the most interesting and shockingly sensational aspect of this story – but one which the *Athenaeum* fails to comment on – is Rachel's discovery that her mother gave her away as a baby (after a secret marriage) because she did not wish to forfeit money left to her in her first husband's will, which she would do in the event of a second marriage: "For the sake of possessing a few luxuries and comforts, which have never brought me a moment's happiness, I consented to give up my daughter for life," her punishment being a "miserable life" (Marryat 1865c: III, 192–3). Rachel's mother is quite swiftly forgiven for her lack of maternal devotion, primarily because she was married to Rachel's real father, so at least the stigma of illegitimacy does not tarnish Rachel's name. This scenario presents

an interesting view of Victorian moral standards: concealing the birth of a child and then abandoning that same child for the sake of money is considered less morally reprehensible than having a child outside of marriage. Arguably, Mrs. Craven's abandonment of maternal duty is a necessary plot device to position Rachel as essentially motherless and therefore most vulnerable. As Pykett writes, "motherhood is the constant subtext of the women's sensation novel: absent (dead) mothers, neglectful mothers, abandoning mothers . . . ," and throughout Marryat's career her novels regularly feature absent or inadequate mothers (Pykett 1994: 50).

In her autobiographical novel *The Nobler Sex*, the central heroine is tied to a bullying, abusive, and despised husband – unable to escape with her potential lover because of her child:

Nita was there and chained me to her side, although she had not the power to make me happy, and I have often thought since that it was by God's mercy alone that I did not take her in my arms some night, during that maddening time, and plunge with her beneath the waters of the bay . . . (Marryat 1892: 157)

From her earliest fiction, Marryat explores the chains that bound individual women to lives that frustrated them. If not seeking the political and social answers to these problems that many of the New Woman writers sought, Marryat at least vocalized the frustrations many ordinary women felt at the restrictions and expectations placed on them. Sally Mitchell's assessment of women's novels of this period as having "little . . . overt social comment" is perhaps understating the resonance that many of the situations of marital disharmony Marryat explores in her fiction would have had for her readers (Mitchell 1977: 31). In *Woman Against Woman*, Marryat writes, "No single life, however lonely and unblest, can be so cursed, as that of a woman unhappily married" (Marryat 1865c: III, 257). The idea of marriage as an "unsatisfactory or illusory state" is constantly being explored in Marryat's work (Hughes 1980: 107).

That stories about financially motivated marriages littered Victorian fiction is well established, but Marryat takes the concept of marriages of convenience in a more sinister direction in her 1868 novel *Nelly Brooke*, which challenges gender ideologies, such as the vulnerable female confronted with patriarchal control. Marryat writes of a classic Victorian invalid who is afflicted with spinal weakness which renders them sofa-bound, but who controls the entire household with their demands. Furthermore, not only does the invalid have a weak spine but also a diseased brain. The hysterical invalid is not, however, the heroine of the novel *Nelly*, but her twin brother Bertie. Bertie cannot walk unaided and is too weak to sit up, yet he exerts an extraordinary level of patriarchal dominance over his sister. Ultimately Bertie effectively prostitutes *Nelly* in marriage to a doctor who he believes can help with his illness.

In this novel, Marryat subverts gender stereotypes and conflates the classic figure of the male ruling patriarch with that other well-known literary figure, the invalid, although the invalid is, of course, usually a woman. Bertie takes on a feminized role and is threatened with the fate of the nineteenth-century neurotic woman when an

aunt asks “and as for the cripple, couldn’t we get him put in to an asylum or somewhere?” (Marryat 1868: 69). However, Bertie dominates his sister totally, even suggesting a suicide pact:

“I wish we were both dead . . . I often think what a good thing it would be if I . . . put a bullet through your head, Nell, or cut your dear little throat, and made away with myself directly afterwards. There would be an end of misery for us then.” (Marryat 1868: 171)

Nelly hopes to relieve the pressure of life with her brother by marriage to Dr. Monkton. From the start, though, it is made explicit that Nelly shrinks from his touch; this is despite Monkton’s faith that his “powers of pleasing” will make her a dutiful wife (Marryat 1868: 389). The marriage is a disaster; Monkton is domineering and brutal. Bertie does finally acknowledge that he has wronged his sister: “I have sold you for very little indeed, Nell!” (1868: 392). Nelly’s “patient submission” which was “entirely in keeping with the conduct of [her] whole life” is another example of a woman being sacrificed on the marriage altar – in this case, not just to please her husband but also her brother (1868: 358). Eventually, Bertie is banished from the marital home by Monkton, and not long after Nelly learns of his death. Fortunately, Monkton also dies – Nelly’s rabid dog, Thug, bites him, thus securing his mistress’s freedom without Nelly herself having to resort to the villainous crimes perpetrated by other sensation heroines.

Marryat’s exploration of the frustrations and discontentment that women felt throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century is now subject to increasing academic study. However, her contemporary reviewers regularly castigated her for the perceived immorality of her work. For instance, a review of *Woman Against Woman* states:

it is curious that the most questionable novels of the day should be written by women. To judge from their books the ideas of women on points of morals and ethics seem in a state of transition, and consequently, of confusion. (review, 1866: 233)

The acknowledgment of transition and confusion is perhaps more pertinent to Marryat’s sensation fiction than the reviewer appreciates. N. D. Thompson argues that: “All Victorian women novelists, whether we now label them radical or conservative, were fundamentally conflicted in their own beliefs about women’s proper role” (Thompson 1999: 3). The contradiction inherent in Marryat’s heroines reflects the shifting and unstable nature of gender roles at the time she was writing. A review of *For Ever and Ever* states that if it had been “from a man’s pen” he could “give it more unqualified praise than we feel justified in now doing” (review of *For Ever and Ever*, 1866: 427–8). Reviews such as these epitomize the very real problem that many had with sensation fiction – that it was written by women and contained subject matter that society dictated was not appropriate for female writers or readers. In her 1980

study, Winifred Hughes writes that “As long as it occupied the limelight, the sensation novel – brash, vulgar, and subversive – was viewed with undeniable justice as something of a literary upstart” (Hughes 1980: 6), and the “critical guillotine” regularly fell on Marryat (Thompson 1999: 8).

Indeed, Marryat’s fiction at this time seems to occupy a very uneasy place not only in the minds of the reviewers but often in her own. She debates the morality of literature in her work, and this can be seen in her 1866 novel *For Ever and Ever* when the reading material of the hero’s stepmother is critiqued:

For Mrs. Wardlaw, who always cried aloud against novels, and all fictitious literature, as being the results of the promptings of the devil to his own, yet devoured eagerly everything that was not presented to her exactly in the condemned three-volume form, never mind how trashy might be the writing, or weak the moral. (Marryat 1869a: 83)

Marryat constantly interrupts the narrative to assert her authorial voice, adding her own quite censorious moral tone to the text, responding to attacks from critics both real and perceived, arguably attempting to justify her work. A character in *Love’s Conflict* says:

“I like nothing better than a good novel. I do so despise the narrow-mindedness of those who condemn all works of fiction as ‘mental dram,’ because a few inferior ones present us pictures of insipid folly, without moral or meaning in them. I think a novel may be productive of as much good as many a more seriously written book.” (Marryat 1865a: I, 167)

However, when she is teasing the reader, in *Woman Against Woman*, with Rachel’s potential slide towards moral ruination, she depicts her having:

exchanged her evening attire for a loose dressing-gown, she rather appeared settling herself for an uninterrupted perusal of one of the novels which young ladies are so fond of studying at unearthly hours – late at night and early in the morning; for with her loosened hair in shaken masses down her shoulders, and her pretty little feet, thrust into coquettish red slippers, hoisted on another chair, Rachel sat herself down, close by her dressing-table, and commenced to read. (Marryat 1865c: II, 128)

References to sensation fiction within sensation fiction were not uncommon (see Flint 1996: 59), and the relevance of what Rachel is reading to the encroaching moral danger that she faces is clear.

Marryat regularly defended her craft, and her desire for popular novelists to be considered respected producers of literary work is evident. Her awareness of the instability of her profession does not stop her biting back at reviewers who were critical of her:

If you have the ability to write, no amount of bad reviews can rob you of it. They may retard your success, but eventually you will succeed. . . . I have never been deterred from the perusal of a new work by an unfavourable review . . . I think that the more they are abused the more they are read. We have proof of this in some of the most popular novelists of the present day, whose books gain the widest circulation and the loudest blame. (Marryat 1867: II, 73)

As the century progressed, Marryat continued to respond to literary trends – the writing of a novel with a female detective in 1897, *In the Name of Liberty*, tapped into the huge popularity for detective fiction at that time. *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897) is perfectly in tune with the late Victorian Gothic revival. She also increasingly used her writing as a means to promote her beliefs in, and support for, various causes. Her spiritualist beliefs and experiences are seen *The Dead Man's Message* (1894 – also published as *A Soul on Fire*), *The Spirit World* (1894), and *There is No Death* (1891). *The Dead Man's Message* also contains strong anti-vivisection propaganda, a position further explored in *An Angel of Pity* (1898). The development of an anti-vivisection agenda in her writing at this time reflects a similar agenda that emerged in much New Woman writing of the period, further illustrating how Marryat, despite her status as a popular but “ephemeral” writer, both prefigured and kept pace with many of the concerns of more “highbrow” New Woman writers, from her earliest sensation fiction through to the novels she produced at the end of her career (quoted in Maunder 2004: vii).

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# Edmund Hodgson Yates

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Mr Edmund Yates is the Icarus of current fiction. At one time he promised to attain to a considerable altitude, but somehow or other his wings got scorched, the wax melted, and he fell into the sea of mediocrity, where he has since been floundering. . . . *The Impending Sword* is well-adapted to the terrible columns of those penny journals whose object it is to lure on the ignorant from number to number with tales of blood and crime.

. . . We care not to argue whether novelists have created a depraved taste, or whether readers have forced such style of composition upon the novelists; there it is, and Mr Yates has catered for it abundantly. (Smith 1874: 627)

In this haughtily dismissive review, George Barnett Smith positions Edmund Yates as one of the “ultra-sensationalists” (Smith 1874: 627), whose failure to fulfill the promise of his early fiction is evidenced by his slavish dependency on the lurid techniques of “illegitimate” novels emerging from underclass print culture (“tales of blood and crime”). Smith construes Yates’s 1874 novel *The Impending Sword* as a heady concoction, whose amalgamation of scurrilous reportage and the stock-in-trade of “penny journals” is virulent enough to erode the reader’s morally contemplative reactions. Smith uses Yates’s derivative yet potent aesthetic to scrutinize the place of recreational reading in the greatly expanded world of bourgeois leisure. He poses a question that many middlebrow reviewers had pondered in relation to Yates’s oeuvre: was *The Impending Sword* a cause of socio-cultural decay, stimulating a “depraved taste” for escapist solace, or rather the symptom of a malaise that had already taken root in an epoch of vulgar surfeit?<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps not even the scornful Smith could have foreseen the fate which has befallen Edmund Yates in the twenty-first century: near-total erasure from the pages of literary history. Very little of Yates’s fiction remained in print for more than a couple of years

after his death in 1894. My own discussion focuses chiefly on Yates's mid-1860s fiction which attracted the most searching and positive reviews: his debut novel *Broken to Harness* (1864), *Running the Gauntlet* (1865), and *Black Sheep* (1867). As Andrew Gasson observes in one of the few sustained analyses of Yates's extraordinary career, his nineteen novels, written between 1864 and 1875, as well as the nine plays he had produced in the West End, "now seem to be lost" in utter "obscurity" (Gasson 1984: 15). Those who have contributed to the radical rehabilitation of the sensation genre as a field of academic research, inquiry, and exposition have not sufficiently canvassed Yates's notable place in the literary culture of the 1860s. According to P. D. Edwards in *Dickens's "Young Men"*, Yates's "achievements were more considerable," and his professional and private life "more interesting and revealing" than "the near-oblivion" that has engulfed him would imply (Edwards 1997: 2).

Yates's signal contribution to the sensation genre – and a core concern of this essay – is his often acerbic depiction of the ambitious civil servants and journalistic hacks that dream of occupying the more rarefied social space designated as "Upper Bohemia." In this elaborate network of metropolitan gentleman's clubs, theatrical and sporting venues, thresholds of difference are marked then dissolved as lowly clerks watch their affluent employers mingle freely with lionized actors, minor aristocrats, and other privileged figures of the London glitterati. Yates was only 17 when he began his career as a clerk in the General Post Office in 1847, where he remained for over a quarter of a century. As a member of the Garrick and Fielding clubs and as a contributor of reviews, light verse, and semi-documentary sketches to *The Leader*, *Bentley's Miscellany*, *Chamber's Journal*, and the *Illustrated London News*, Yates had better access than his close friend Wilkie Collins to the loftier tiers of London literary life. Like Collins, Yates grew up in an artistic family and "their careers followed parallel paths" (Gasson 1984: 15). However, Yates was in a much stronger position to chart the peculiar rhythms and arcane rituals of "Upper Bohemia." That his father was the renowned actor and manager of the Adelphi Theatre, Frederick Henry Yates (1797–1842), and his mother the well-known actress Elizabeth Yates (1799–1860) no doubt helped him secure the commission of theater critic for the *Daily News* from 1855 to the early 1860s, and it gave him ample opportunity to gauge the complex cultural geography of theatrical haunts.

Unfortunately, Yates's unique insight into these metropolitan cliques and coteries has been consistently overlooked, and he merits only the most cursory mention for his "sub-Collinsian (Wilkie) novels" (Kent 1998: 309), in biographies of Charles Dickens, W. M. Thackeray, and Anthony Trollope. This deletion is all the more striking given that Dickens "served as his chief practical preceptor in the craft of literature. From the founder of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* . . . Yates gained his first knowledge of the technique of magazine management" and of "satisfying the public taste in the periodical press" (Escott 1894: 90).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Yates's *Recollections and Experiences* (1884), published a year after Trollope's *Autobiography* and "arguably rank[ing] second only to Trollope's among literary autobiographies of the Victorian period" (Edwards 1980: 2) is Dickensian in its unfeigned delight in the recondite and



the “raffish” (Yates 1865: 16) as well as its vivid repertoire of “anecdotes of the celebrated men and women he had met” (Corelli 1894: 382). Yates also enjoyed a long-standing fellowship with Wilkie Collins that lasted almost thirty-five years. However, the reasons as to why the *Recollections*, a carefully pondered, elegantly written, and fastidiously indexed opus of 700 pages, should make only a few brief references to what Yates called elsewhere a cordial, mutually respectful camaraderie with Collins “is a mystery almost worthy of Wilkie himself” (Gasson 1984: 16).<sup>3</sup>

Before publishing three-decker novels and plays for the metropolitan stage, Yates was “for some years a constant contributor to periodical literature” (“Edmund Yates,” 1872: 78), and from 1855 to 1863 he contributed a gossip column, “The Lounger at the Clubs,” to the weekly *Illustrated Times*. With this column he later bragged to have refined the style of “personal journalism” that would so powerfully shape the popular press in the final decades of the nineteenth century. T. H. S. Escott, in his 1894 obituary of Yates, described his friend as “pre-eminently the product of his age, the result and reflection of its most characteristic forces” (Escott 1894: 88). Escott’s affectionate account of a key cultural phenomenon harmonizes with the version of Yates adumbrated by his early collection of sketches, *My Haunts and their Frequenters* (1854): full of nonchalant swagger; pursuing a dizzying array of interests; and eager to consolidate “that power of description by which to move the purse-strings and enchain the attention of that large class of persons to whom the ‘shilling book’ is as necessary as the ticket itself” (Yates 1854: i).

In its strenuous and aggressive energy, in its demonstrative ambition, its love of glare, glitter, luxury, and material comfort, its undaunted resolution to push its fortune and to proclaim its cleverness and merits, Edmund Yates was in harmony with, and was a favourable type of, the epoch in which he lived and died. (Escott 1894: 87–8)

Why, then, has Yates, judged one of Victorian Britain’s “most innovative, successful and interesting journalists” (Kent 1998: 307) and, to Escott, a novelist of prodigious versatility, slipped through the net of literary histories of the era? After his first two novels *Broken to Harness* and *Running the Gauntlet*, Yates’s preoccupation with social niceties and dissident moralities would become, according to his biographer P. D. Edwards, buried in more “formulaic sensation-plots, in which crime, mystery and detection provide the chief interest” (Edwards 1997: 85). Recent critical indifference seems to validate the downbeat reaction of the *Saturday Review* to Yates’s novel *A Righted Wrong* (1870), which proposed that Yates lacked the patience, idiosyncratic vision, and single-minded devotion to craft to follow in the footsteps of his more lauded contemporaries Collins and M. E. Braddon, who transcended the sensation school they helped create by consistently subverting their audience’s generic and sentimental expectations. Yates merely offered variations on the tawdry excesses of sensational paraphernalia: “the fiend-born siren with golden hair . . . the silken sybarite with iron muscles” and “the violent machinery of daggers . . . back-stairs, and

prussic acid." By the 1870s Yates's fiction had become "simply colourless and totally devoid of all marked characteristics" ("A Righted Wrong," 1870: 638).

Yet what the *Saturday Review* denigrated as "colourless" was to admirers of Yates's debut novel *Broken to Harness* a supremely flexible, urbane, and eclectic aesthetic that exploited the immense allure of popular and melodramatic stereotypes. The *London Review* hailed Yates's "protean aptitudes" (Edwards 1980: 2) and adroit ability to place his work in a crowded literary marketplace; appealing to the widest possible demographic by cleverly fusing the motifs of silver-fork narrative, topical domestic realism, sensational reportage, and romantic implausibility, without allowing one generic strand to dominate. In *Broken to Harness* he offers tantalizing glimpses of "London life, its amusements, its wildness and its thousand channels of pleasure and regret" (Yates 1854: 2) without incurring the wrath of those reactionary pundits who normally deplored "the 'levelling' tone of society" (Yates 1867: 103). This was no small achievement given that Yates's acute journalistic eye is evident in his fictional response to the spate of scandalous divorce cases that followed the Marriage and Divorce Act of 1857: marital intrigue involving a variety of "fast" women is a crucial plot device in *Broken to Harness*. The title of this novel also impishly alludes to Sir Edwin Henry Landseer's equestrian portrait *The Shrew Tamed*, first displayed at the Royal Academy Exhibition in 1861, which acquired the sobriquet "The Pretty Horsebreaker" (Dorré 2006: 73–5). Yates's novel reflects the controversy occasioned by the portrait in the middlebrow press by developing the key character Kate Mellon (Yates 1884: II, 84), who actually does make her living by taming horses. Yates's Kate Mellon is also the subject of an Academy portrait in which "the horse is more lifelike than its rider" (Edwards 1980: 12). Kate's tribulations are measured against those of the "high-born beauty" Barbara Lexden, whose marriage to the impoverished journalist Frank Churchill is presented without recourse to grotesque effect according to the *London Review*: "Mr. Yates has written a story which is romantic enough to fascinate the ordinary devourer of novels, sufficiently sarcastic to please the cynics who generally despise them" (review of *Broken to Harness*, 1865: 128).

The "sufficiently sarcastic" tone alludes to the distinctive cadence that Yates would perfect over the next fifteen years of his literary career: an arch yet spirited insouciance, revealing a roguish familiarity with the nooks and crannies of metropolitan club-land – gamey enclaves largely inaccessible to novelists such as his Post Office colleague and friend Anthony Trollope. Although Marie Corelli paid lavish tribute to Yates as "an open hater of all things mean and false and hypocritical" (Corelli 1894: 384), his was a scrupulously measured audacity; a boldness within boundaries that ultimately affirmed sober "ideas of respectability" (Yates 1867: 103). Unlike Collins, to whom he is most frequently compared, Yates does not depict with the same unflinching rigor aberrations in the rituals of romantic coupling. His wrongdoers are subject to the expected retributive narrative corrections. As the character Charles Potts muses in *Land at Last*: "the *vie de Bobeme* was perhaps a mistake, and not equal, in the average amount of happiness derived from it, to the *vie de Camden Town*" (1867: 103–4).

Although Yates's correspondence evinces impatience with the "healthy" and wholesome domestic fiction of the 1860s, his own early novels reproduce the cagey and socially conservative "moralizings" he so often denounced in the work of Dinah Craik, Rhoda Broughton, and Charlotte M. Yonge (Yates 1857: 352). So while *Broken to Harness* introduces the "Pretty Horsebreaker" Kate Mellon as a "fast" figure of impudent daring who is unduly fond of tobacco, Yates goes to great lengths to demonstrate that while her slangy flippancy "sets conventionalities at defiance" (Yates 1864: 29), she is also spotlessly chaste. Yates's methodically tailored tactic of appeasing "the subscribers to Mudie's" (Yates 1857: 352) clearly met with the approval of the *Examiner's* reviewer: "Mr Edmund Yates has chosen for the theme of his first novel a phase of domestic life which has not had from our novelists and poets the attention it is worth . . . There is no extravagance of incident" (review of *Broken to Harness*, 1864: 824).

The tortuous subplot of *Broken to Harness*, focusing on the stratagems of Mr. Simnel and the ambiguous parentage of Kate Mellon, augurs Yates's more pronounced stress in later novels on the stock sensational themes of murder, bigamy, and mysterious family secrets. However, this material is overshadowed by a denouement calculated to underscore, rather than debunk, the "recognised laws of politeness" (Yates 1864: 29) and demure standards of orthodox femininity. The "problem" as to who will wed the venturesome and volatile Kate is removed when she is fatally injured in a horse-breaking accident, and the complexities of her fiery temperament are forgotten while Yates indulges the bathos of her deathbed scene (Edwards 1980: 25). Though *Broken to Harness* is replete with vivid images of the "fast" woman inspired by Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*, Yates indicates that the "correct" expression is embodied by the modest and stoically self-possessed Emily Murray, who eventually marries the public servant James Prescott.

*Broken to Harness*, hastily written for serialization in the monthly *Temple Bar*, of which Yates was assistant editor, then editor, from 1860 to 1867, does not, then, strictly adhere to "the highly seasoned article so profusely furnished of late by the sensation-novelist" ("Two Novels," 1864: 40) because of its "sharp eye for social peculiarities" (review of *The Business of Pleasure*, 1865: 100). The *Athenaeum* seized upon the novel's restraint as well as Yates's "chivalric and unobtrusive recognition of feminine goodness. . . . there is not, even in its revelations of Bohemia, a single line that will raise a blush or jar upon the sensitive ear" (Dixon 1864: 706).

The "revelations of Bohemia" distills the essence of Yates's fascination with the sensation vogue in *Broken to Harness*. He documents – with the precision of what *The Reader* termed "a literary photographer" (review of *Broken to Harness*, 1864: 665) – how this "Bohemian" culture casts a pernicious shadow across the domain of decorous respectability and bourgeois thrift. Yates elaborates his own unique perspective on the milieu of Thackeray's *Pendennis* (1850), where "rising artists" (Yates 1864: 30), irresponsible hacks in search of the next fleeting frisson, court patrician ne'er-do-wells and highly trained professionals such as the legal expert Jack Durston in *Nobody's Fortune* (1871) meet. Lawyers, civil servants, and physicians abound in other sensation

fiction of the period; what distinguishes Yates's rendering of these figures is their single-minded drive to enjoy the illicit, twilight pleasures synonymous with "Upper Bohemia," as well as using this loose collective to achieve greater financial reward and professional kudos.

Yates was confident that his droll conception of the callow mandarins from "The Tin Tax Office" in *Broken to Harness*, who dream of savoring the more exotic delights of "Upper Bohemia," would set him apart from a host of imitators. Yet even here Yates's evocation is redolent of Anthony Trollope's "Weights and Measures Department" in *The Three Clerks* (1858), as well as the milieu illustrated by *The Small House at Allington* (1864), which was then being serialized in the *Cornhill Magazine*. Indeed, the *Morning Star* "preferred" Yates's "sketches of life in a Government office" to those of his "brother novelist" Trollope (Yates 1884: 86). What *Broken to Harness* offers in its most incisive passages is a richly textured ethnography of the "Upper Bohemia" through the eyes of the bored young clerks who invest it with such intoxicating glamor. As the opening gambit of *Land at Last* also demonstrates, with its London of indigent young painters at the time of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Yates captures the liberating gusto and capaciousness of "Upper Bohemia"; yet its historical centrality within the mechanics of a system also evinces the stifling marginality of one's hard-pressed existence within it.

[t]hat pleasant Upper Bohemia wherein so many literary men, artists, and actors of that day used to spend their time; not a Bohemia of taprooms and sanded floors, of long clay-pipes and spittoons and two pennyworths of gin, nor of Haymarket night-houses and drunken trulls . . . but a Bohemia of green-rooms and *coulisses*, of sparkling little suppers afterwards at Vauxhall, where wit would flow as fast as the champagne. (Yates 1864: 275–6)

Yates's fiction is preoccupied by how the supposed guardians of middle-class gentility are vulnerable to the temptations of the "turf" and gambling dens; where "the outside ring of the fast stockbrokers" (Yates 1866: 235) apes "the denizens of the marble palaces of Pall Mall" (Yates 1865: 16). Instead of looking to the infractions of a criminal underclass, Yates demarcates an equivocal space in *Broken to Harness* where members of the professional elite, social initiates, decadent aesthetes, and others can, through their exceptional "dexterity with the truth," consolidate immense power, patronage and privilege within the ranks of the bourgeoisie (Kucich 1994: 13).

M. E. Braddon was among the shrewdest commentators on Yates's imaginative mapping of "Upper Bohemia" in *Broken to Harness*; and she was amused as well as flattered by Yates's conception of the "horse-breaker" Kate Mellon. *Broken to Harness* completed its serial run in *Temple Bar* in December 1864, by which time Braddon had already contributed a story called "The Mystery of Fernwood" in 1861. In his *Recollections*, and with typical immodesty, Yates averred he "was pleased to remember" that he had "sufficient editorial sagacity to detect latent genius in the first production of Miss Braddon's ever submitted to my notice" (1884: II, 63). *Aurora Floyd* was

serialized in the magazine from January 1862, giving “a decided fillip” to *Temple Bar*’s “circulation” and “renown” (1884: II, 64).

Yates’s second novel, *Running the Gauntlet* (1865), capitalized on the success of his debut by sharpening its focus on the “dissipated, shabby, debt-encumbered clique of noisy, fast-living people, whose sole connexion with the world of fashion is their tenancy of houses in a fashionable quarter of town” (review of *Kissing the Rod*, 1866: 828). Yates’s signal originality in this novel is manifest in how he shows the cliques of West End roués, actors, and idlers infiltrated by a more bellicose “motley crowd” of “burly roughs,” pickpockets, and financial fraudsters (Yates 1865: 129) who seek the lavish benefits of “upper-middle-class life” (Edwards 1997: 90). *Running the Gauntlet* also adumbrates what would become Yates’s “general method” according to T. H. S. Escott, which was to cluster his vibrant “incidents and personages” around a “strongly defined feminine character” (Escott 1894: 95) such as Katharine Guyon, the anti-heroine of Yates’s *Kissing the Rod* (1866), who melds facets of Braddon’s Aurora with the hard-headed adventuress Madeline Vanstone in Collins’s *No Name* (1862).

The malicious glee with which *Running the Gauntlet* calibrates the stages by which an underclass infiltrates Sir Charles Mitford’s country estate recalls the imaginative terrain of Yates’s close friend and collaborator George Augustus Sala, whose *The Seven Sons of Mammon* (1862) first appeared in *Temple Bar* (Yates 1884: II, 61). Though *Running the Gauntlet* implies in its early chapters that Sir Charles Mitford’s downfall is the result of financial bungling (Yates 1865: 51), Yates’s narrative is more concerned – like Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860) – with the promptings of deviant sexual desire as the cause of patrician collapse. Mitford, the wayward son of aristocratic stock who has been forced into exile even before his unexpected accession to a baronetcy, is the blueprint for a familiar “type” in Yates’s subsequent fiction (Edwards 1980: 21), and invites close comparison with Lionel Brakespere in *Land at Last* (1866), Ramsay Caird in *The Forlorn Hope* (1867), Stewart Routh in *Black Sheep* (1868), Geoffrey Challenor in *The Rock Ahead* (1868), and Lord Pytchley in *A Waiting Race* (1870).

While *Broken to Harness* was widely and justifiably extolled by the middlebrow press (Yates 1884: II, 86–7), the reaction to *Running the Gauntlet* was more mixed. The *Spectator* claimed that the later novel proclaimed its stylistic influences a little too loudly. The depiction of Mitford’s ignominious fall from grace recalled Thackeray’s Lord Steyne. For Yates’s world-weary narrator, the most disturbing facet of this “corner of Vanity Fair” (Yates 1865: 395) is not that young women are effectively sold off by mercenary parents to “the highest bidder” (1865: 50), but that such matrimonial “contracts” afford myriad opportunities for newlywed brides to “flirt” with other partners (1865: 50).

Though *Running the Gauntlet* shows Yates refining the narrative facets that were affirmed in its predecessor – especially the droll sociology of theater- and club-land – the novel disappointed many pundits, not least his mentor Dickens. The “master” wrote to Yates of being “profoundly affected” and “touched deeply” (Dickens 1999: 213) by portions of *Kissing the Rod*. However, he was dismayed by *Running the Gauntlet*, which seemed frankly to relish rather than indict “the lax morality of the age” (Yates 1865: 50):

This new story of yours, altogether beats me. I cannot see any good way through it. There is, somehow, a want of wholesome air in it; and I can find no Archimedes station on which to plant a lever. I don't see what the people are at, and I don't like the people. [Charles] Mitford starts so wrong that you can't get him right. And he gets so right, that you can't get him wrong again. The Colonel [Alsager] has so often caught those ponies that he really ought to take to something else by this time; and in coming to that mysterious young woman, you come too close upon Wilkie [Collins]. . . . I have been completely baffled. (Dickens 1999: 90–1)

Dickens deplored Yates's decision to position Colonel Laurence Alsager as the ostensible protagonist, an egotistical Byronic sensation-seeker who shares Sir Charles Mitford's bored indifference to the "barriers of conventional restriction" (Yates 1865: 73). Alsager's characterization invites detailed comparison with Ouida's dandified English guardsman in *Under Two Flags* (1867) and later Byronic heroes such as George A. Lawrence's *Guy Livingstone* (1857). In Alsager's relations with women "there had been no spice of romance save that spurious romance of the French-novel school, so attractive at first, so hollow, and bad, and disgusting, when proceeded with" (Yates 1865: 116–17). Dickens believed Yates's novel was aggressively pandering to a louche "London society" whose "unfailing circulation of scandal" (Yates 1865: 358) was widely construed as a grievous symptom of the "French-novel school." The "mysterious young woman" refers to Yates's "peculiarly bewitching" adventuress Laura Hammond, who first appears in volume I, chapter 10, of *Running the Gauntlet*. She begins her dubious career in one of the seediest modes of popular theater (the "Mysterious Lady business and all that gaff" [1865: 281]). Yates's "hardened coquette" (1865: 62), who immerses herself in a criminal subculture of spying and subterfuge, in "queer London holes" (1865: 279), was clearly indebted to Collins's vivacious manipulator of intricately plotted suspense, Lydia Gwilt from *Armadale*, then being serialized in the *Cornhill Magazine*.

That Yates may have shared Dickens's unease about Laura Hammond's marked resemblance to Lydia Gwilt may explain why his enduring friendship with Collins receives such scant mention in his *Recollections*. In his subsequent novels of the 1860s, such as *Black Sheep* and *Kissing the Rod*, Yates turns away from "Upper Bohemia" to the mapping of a suburban locale which seems stretched like a thin film over atavistic and unstable energies: "down in Staffordshire . . . or in outlying London districts" one "might surely find hideous ignorance, crime, and brutish unconsciousness of any thing but the lowest instincts of nature, flourishing as luxuriantly as in the Feejee or the Andaman Islands" (Yates 1866: 166–7).

In *Kissing the Rod* and *Black Sheep*, the suburbs possess an unsettling and boundless inscrutability, whose "essence" can only be grasped through a "synthesis" of myriad disparate perceptions (Hapgood 2005: 3). Yates succinctly demonstrates the embryonic and undiscerned literary possibilities of this locale, with its mixture of the homely and the foreign, the mundane and the mysterious. When Yates published *Black Sheep* in 1867, the *Saturday Review* distinguished his brand of "sensational art" from the

grubby “lower” fare of the penny press, whose practitioners “cater for the fiery palates of the kitchen and the pantry”; dwelling only “on the outside details of crime” because “uncultivated people like to have plenty of the objectivities of horror – blood and knives and violent convulsions and skeletons”:

An important distinction ought to be drawn among the various kinds of novels which are commonly all lumped together as sensational. . . . One form of it is vulgar and ludicrous, implying very little in the writer except an unscrupulous defiance of everything like reason and possibility. The other is free from the crude monstrosities which are commonly identified with sensation, and implies a sustained intellectual exercise on the part of the author. The penny story which, with its thrilling woodcut, gives a pleasure nicely proportionate to its horrors to the cook and the knife-boy once a week, is the finest specimen of sensation in its undeveloped stage. *Black Sheep* is a good example of the more worthy sort of sensational art. There is plenty of crime in it, and in one or two scenes a small spice of melodramatic horror. But Medea does not slay her children in the presence of the reader. (review of *Black Sheep*, 1867: 190)

In *Black Sheep*, according to this contributor, Yates cultivates a more probing and incisive attitude to “crime,” discarding “crude” superficial effects by excavating the transgressor’s vexed motivations and inner conflicts. Yates, this reviewer concludes, shows “perfect belief in himself and the [sensational] school of novelists of which he is becoming a very conspicuous member and representative” (1867: 190).

*Black Sheep* occupies an important place in Yates’s oeuvre as it was the only one of his novels to be reprinted in the twentieth century. Dickens, heartened by how his acolyte had seamlessly woven his editorial comments into the imaginative fabric of his previous published novel, *Land at Last*, offered Yates greater publishing opportunities in *All the Year Round*. *Black Sheep* was serialized in *All the Year Round* between 25 August 1866 and 30 March 1867, and when it was published in three volumes carried an oblique tribute to the author of *Bleak House*: “In Memory of ‘The Growler.’” Yates replaced the tone of jaded ennui in *Broken to Harness* and *Running the Gauntlet* with what P. D. Edwards describes as “exuberance more in Dickens’s own style” (Edwards 1997: 95). This “exuberance” manifests itself in a mordant and highly self-conscious deployment of sensational tropes, invoking Newgate, “the grim fortress of crime” (Yates 1868: 466) and “the detectives (capital fellows in their way)” who “have had their heads a little turned since they’ve been made *novel* heroes of” (1868: 152; emphasis added). The Cockney street boy Jim Swain, patently modeled on Jo in *Bleak House*, regards literary sensationalism as a provocatively transgressive and oppositional force which permits him the scope to fantasize about his social “betters” assailed by all kinds of Gothic horrors; indeed “the highly sensational character” of “the illustrated penny literature . . . formed his intellectual food” (Yates 1868: 386–7). Jim’s gleeful immersion in “the exciting fiction which he had been reading” and “which ‘left off’ at a peculiarly thrilling crisis” (1868: 388) mirrors Yates’s puckish manipulation of narrative action. Indeed, he targets those readers who, like Jim’s elderly relative Sally in *Black Sheep*, are “wonderfully quick at discovering the impenetrable mysteries and

unwinding the labyrinthine webs of those amazing productions”; indeed Sally “liked her murders, as she liked her tea and her snuff, strongly flavoured” (Yates 1868: 392).

That *Black Sheep* fails to feature in any of the current reassessments of the sensation genre is all the more disappointing given the *Saturday Review*'s praise of Yates's refusal to indulge the “plain game” in this narrative: “It is the merit of writers like Mr. Edmund Yates or Mr. Wilkie Collins that they leave the conventional moves as far behind as they can, and invent rules and combinations for themselves” (review of *Black Sheep*, 1867: 190). *Black Sheep* rejects the concealed secret motif which provides the impetus for so many novels of the genre: “[w]e want to find out something which it is the author's business until the very last chapter to prevent us from finding out. This was the case in the ever memorable *Woman in White*.” *Black Sheep* ignores such a maneuver by delineating at the earliest possible stage how a crime has been committed: “It is the fact of his not being troubled with keeping any secret from the reader which gives Mr. Yates the opportunity of creating” (review of *Black Sheep*, 1867: 190) Harriet Routh, so “utterly unscrupulous, remorseless and conscienceless a woman” (Yates 1868: 38). The *Saturday Review* concluded by positioning Yates as “a thorough master of the best sort of intellectual sleight-of-hand” (1867: 190).

By 1872, Yates remarked that after “writing novels for nearly ten years” he had “pretty nearly told all [he] had to tell” (Yates 1884: II, 235). Increasingly vituperative reviews must have played a part in Yates's decision to cast about for new publishing opportunities. Richard F. Littledale, surveying the “drastic style” of *A Silent Witness* (1875), categorized Yates as

one of those writers whose works are not laid peacefully to rest at the end of the season, but undergo metempsychosis into the ranks of railway literature, with a regularity which shows that he understands his public. . . . Two murders early in the first volume, one completed and one attempted bigamy in the second, with a fatal accident and a suicide in the third, are, on the whole, a sufficient modicum of stimulant for readers who like a drastic style of fiction, and no doubt Mr. Yates is wise in his generation. (Littledale 1875: 656)

By the time Littledale's withering account was published in *The Academy*, Yates had moved on to his next commercial venture. The second volume of his *Recollections* explains how he harbored a lifelong aspiration to own and edit his own magazine. With E. C. Grenville Murray he founded *The World: A Journal for Men and Women*, and the first weekly number appeared on 8 July 1874. From the beginning of 1875 it was under his sole management and became his sole property. Flourishing its tolerant, progressive, and “liberal-independent politics” for the educated and media-savvy, it became, according to Patricia De Montfort, the “house journal of London society” (De Montfort 2005: 162) as well as an “amusing chronicle of current history” (Yates 1884: II, 319).

Yates's literary career offers a compelling case study of an author whose journalistic obsession with metropolitan subcultures and their peculiar idiolects – reveling in his



semi-fictional persona of “flaneur,” “lounger,” or “looker-on in London” for the 1862 *Northern Star* – supplied a foundation for novels such as *Wrecked in Port*, which depicts the environs of the Cracksideum Theatre (the Adelphi), Covent Garden coffee-houses for socially mobile hacks, and Leicester Square. The “Icarus of current fiction” that George Barnett Smith hoped would disappear from the literary landscape deserves to be salvaged from critical oblivion and positioned alongside Charles Reade as a writer whose nimble blending of social history, satirical verve, and sensational reportage rewards more subtle inspection. What little recent scholarship exists on Yates tends to buttress the mid-Victorian perception of a “synthetic” writer heavily reliant on the stylistic and thematic mannerisms of more acclaimed contemporaries such as Dickens, Braddon, Collins, and Trollope. The truth, however, is rather more complex. Instead of construing Yates as an example of literary gifts that were heedlessly squandered, or an incorrigible borrower with “no coherent vision of life to communicate” (Edwards 1980: 25), we should pay closer attention to his slyly sardonic and parodic fictional strategies which complicate the reader’s responses to the sensational motifs in his work.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 The contemporary reviews of Yates’s novel *Wrecked in Port* (1870) also brood over this problem: “A novel which obtains a certain success simply by reason of the abnormal demand, now of long standing, but happily beginning to wane, for what is generally known as sensation literature, may or may not be worth recording; but if it be, the chances are that such a book is notable, not as a literary production, but as one of many symptoms serviceable to sociologists in diagnosing a social epidemic” (review of *Wrecked in Port*, 1870: 258).
- 2 In the weekly *Town Talk* (12 June 1858) Yates, aged 27, published a gauche and unflattering profile of Thackeray as a man whose “bearing is cold and uninviting . . . his wit biting, his pride easily touched.” Angered by what he construed as a gratuitously hurtful article, and finding his request for a formal apology rudely rebuffed, Thackeray reported to the Committee of the Garrick that Yates, a fellow member for just over a decade, must have spied on him there, so violating the club’s gentlemanly code of honor (see Edwards 1980). Yates appeared before the Garrick Committee with Dickens acting as his chief advocate. In September
- 3 Yates, in his obituary of Wilkie Collins published in *The World*, wrote of “the dapper little man I had met thirty years before at Tavistock House, when he was already distinguished by Dickens’s warm regard; though even then
- 4 1858 Yates was expelled from the Garrick, and both Dickens and Collins resigned in protest. Though Wilfred Partington dismissed this imbroglia as “only a storm in a soup-plate” (Partington 1933: 234), Yates was widely blamed for having worsened the fierce ill will that existed between Thackeray and Dickens, which rumbled on until Thackeray’s death at the end of 1863. Yates’s *Recollections* details this increasingly acrimonious spat. The unwelcome exposure that public row brought Yates was amplified two years later when, in June 1860, he sent the *New York Times* a signed article making scurrilous use of details his famous Post Office colleague Anthony Trollope had innocently told him about the chit-chat at a dinner for the staff of the *Cornhill Magazine*, presided over by Thackeray. Trollope, as an excised passage from his *Autobiography* attests, was apoplectic, and he never forgave Yates for what seemed to him a flagrant breach of trust (see Edwards 1997).

there was something weird and odd in his appearance, something which removed him widely from the ordinary crowd of young men of his age" (Yates 1889: 12). For Yates's assessment of Collins as "without doubt the most conscientious novelist of the present day," see Yates 1857.

- 4 A useful place to start would be *Wrecked in Port*, which was serialized in *All the Year Round* just as Trollope's *Phineas Finn* was nearing the end of its run in *St Paul's Magazine*. Yates's account of a gifted young man with marked liberal-

progressive sympathies who stands for Parliament, and whose political ambitions are nurtured by a patrician older lady, Caroline Mansergh, can be measured against Trollope's novel. However, Yates's treatment is so mischievous that it cannot be dismissed as a cynical piece of slapdash imitation. Whereas *Phineas Finn* depicts a sexual undercurrent to Lady Laura Kennedy's interest in the eponymous hero's burgeoning political career, Yates's Walter Jolly is blithely (and comically) unaware of his patroness's ardent feelings.

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Sensational Variations  
on the Domestic Romance:  
Charlotte M. Brame and Mary  
Cecil Hay in the *Family Herald*

*Graham Law*

Literary history has not been kind to either Charlotte Mary Brame (1836–84) or Mary Cecil Hay (1840–86), both popular writers of melodramatic romances in the decades following the sensation boom of the 1860s. The current British Library Catalogue continues to list the former erroneously under the name of Braeme, while the latest update of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* still records neither the latter's date of birth, nor the pen-names under which most of her work first appeared (Mullin 2004; see also Goodwin 1891). Neither even gets a mention in John Sutherland's monumental *Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction* (1989), which in its preface claims to plumb the "lower reaches" of the literary world, and finds space for entries on close to 900 individual novelists. One general factor must be the low esteem in which romantic fiction by women was and is often held: female authors account for not much more than a third of Sutherland's listing, and prolifically popular sensational novelists of the same period such as Dora Russell are also conspicuously absent. A more particular reason is the relative brevity of the professional writing careers of Brame and Hay alike, both beginning only around the age of 30 but already cut short by death from illness in their late forties. Yet, on investigation, their work proves to be of considerable interest to students of the development of sensationalism, from its roots in the urban forms of popular melodrama characteristic of the early Victorian decades through to the mass-market formulae of mystery, adventure, and romance emerging by the end of the century. This is true with regard both to the complex publishing histories of their work and to the narrative tropes that they explore.

Both Brame and Hay eventually reached their widest social audience in the cheap story papers and dime novel series flourishing in the United States, though their first mass readership was encountered in Britain through the columns of the *Family Herald*,

a weekly family magazine selling at only a penny. The nature of the market for such popular print media both in Britain and elsewhere has as yet received a good deal less than its due attention in scholarly work on sensation fiction. We should perhaps recall here that in the 1860s the “Sensation Mania in Literature” was denounced in the bourgeois press as a virus “spreading in all directions, from the penny journal to the shilling magazine, and from the shilling magazine to the thirty shillings volume” (Wise 1866: 268), while Mary Braddon consciously distanced her own more serious efforts from the term “sensation novel,” instead applying it to that form of popular melodrama – at which she herself was also a deft hand – aimed at “a public that bought its literature in the same manner as its pudding – in penny slices” (Braddon 1998: 12, ch. 2).

Founded in 1842, the *Herald* was the longest-running and most respectable of the Victorian “penny-novel-journals,” as they were designated by Wilkie Collins (Collins 1857: 272), that is, weekly sixteen-page literary miscellanies packed with melodramatic tales and serials for the lower classes. Its early competitors were the *London Journal* (1845) and *Reynold’s Miscellany* (1846), both featuring rather racier fiction and a dramatic woodcut on the front page, thus associating themselves with the “penny bloods” from the notorious “Salisbury Square” publishers. From the beginning, with its reliance on the appeal of the domestic romance, and its supplementary diet of occasional poetry, informative essays, games and puzzles, household hints, and advice to correspondents, the unillustrated *Herald* itself sought a broader family audience. By the 1860s, following the death of the original proprietor James Biggs in 1859, and along with new rivals like *Bow Bells* (1862) and the *London Reader* (1863), the *Family Herald* was aiming principally at a female readership from the respectable working and lower-middle classes and relying heavily on contributions from women writers. In addition to the penny weekly paper obtainable from local news agents and tobacconists, it was then available by post in a sixpenny monthly edition with a more substantial cover. Regular advertisements began to appear even in the columns of the *Times*, lavishly citing praise from more elevated journals such as the *Saturday Review*, which had the *Herald* standing “at the head, both in age and popularity, of all the penny serials” (cited *passim* in the *Times*, e.g. 21 December 1866, p. 5f). At the same time, the new owner William Stevens moved to further exploit the value of the title by launching a series of supplements, including the *Family Herald Extra Numbers* listing healthy outdoor pursuits and indoor amusements for both boys and girls, *Family Herald Handy Books* of the “How To” variety with cookery to the fore, and the *Family Story-Teller*, which reprinted complete novels originally serialized in the *Herald* itself.

Both making their debut in the paper in 1868, throughout the 1870s and early 1880s Brame and Hay represented the leading lights of the *Herald* columns devoted to “The Story-Teller.” On the other hand, there are also significant differences between the two authors in terms of both publishing format and narrative form. Virtually all of Hay’s fiction initially appearing in the *Herald* was afterwards reprinted in the luxurious multi-volume editions sold at thirty shillings or so to the British circulating libraries led by Mudie’s. This was never the case with Brame’s serials, which typically

reappeared only in cheap reprint formats such as the *Family Story-Teller* series. At the same time, through its mixing of crime and mystery with the love interest, Hay's oeuvre corresponds rather more closely to the norms of bourgeois sensation fiction, while Brame's, with its preoccupation with romantic relationships troubled by class differences, tends to echo the concerns of an earlier generation of proletarian domestic romance. In what follows, I will discuss the work of Brame and Hay in turn, focusing in each case first on general biographical and bibliographical questions, before turning to a couple of novels by each author illustrative of their specific generic concerns and narrative characteristics.

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Thanks to the sterling efforts of Gregory Drozd, the main outline of Charlotte M. Brame's life is now clear (Drozd 1984, 2004). She was the eldest daughter of Benjamin Augustus and Charlotte Agnes Law, Master and Matron of the Union Workhouse at Hinckley, near Leicester, at the heart of the hosiery industry. Since her parents converted to the Church of Rome around the time of her birth, Charlotte was brought up a devout Catholic and educated at convent boarding schools, afterwards taking up a series of posts as a governess. While still a teenager she began to publish occasional poems in the local press, at the same time contributing a series of uplifting tales to *The Lamp*, a penny weekly Catholic literary miscellany, where she seems to have received remuneration only in the form of parcels of books (Francis 1927: pt. 3, 3). Following the death of her father, at the age of 27 Charlotte married Phillip Brame, three years her junior, on the same day that her younger sister Fanny married Phillip's elder brother George, both brothers being involved in the jewelry business. Moving with Charlotte to London to set himself up as a wholesale jeweler, Phillip Brame soon proved himself to be an incompetent businessman with a weakness for drink. Despite poor health and a continuous series of pregnancies, by the later 1860s Charlotte Brame obviously decided that it was necessary to bolster the family income through her own literary efforts. She thus arranged for sixteen of her stories from *The Lamp* to be reprinted under her married name in two volumes, *Tales from the Diary of a Sister of Mercy* (1868) and *Angel's Visits* (1869), from the Catholic publishers Burns, Oates and Co. Around the same time she began to submit short stories without any denominational message to the *Family Herald*, her first appearance there being "Our Governess" on 1 February 1868.

Following the immense popularity of her third full-length serial for the *Herald*, *Dora Thorne*, appearing from 16 September to 9 December 1871, according to her eldest daughter Marie Louise, Brame was contracted to produce regular work for the paper (M. Brame 1926). Over the next decade or so, she consistently contributed two or three novel-length serials per annum, plus a novella for both the special numbers at the seaside and yuletide seasons. One Christmas novella and two full-length serials were even issued posthumously, the author presumably having supplied a substantial stock in advance to the publisher. Thus the signature "C.M.B.," under which all her

contributions were issued, made its final appearance as late as 20 March 1886 at the end of the run of *Romance of a Young Girl*, sixteen months after the author's premature death in November 1884. Altogether Brame's contributions to the *Family Herald* between 1868 and 1886 amounted to twenty-six novels, twenty-three novellas, and perhaps around fifty short stories. Furthermore, soon Brame began to contribute to a number of penny journals in competition with the *Herald*, most notably the *Family Reader* (1871– ), where *The Rival Heiresses* and *Lady Brazil's Ordeal* were among the first of many full-length serials, but also to a lesser extent to the aforementioned *Bow Bells*, where the serial *Lord Lisle's Daughter* seems first to have appeared in the summer of 1871, soon to be reprinted under the name "C. M. Braeme" as no. 15 in the illustrated sixpenny paperback series of "Dicks' English Novels." Though the bibliographical details remain far less clear in these cases, a listing of her mother's works in 1926 by Brame's only surviving daughter suggests that the author's total output may have exceeded sixty long serials, in addition to the novelettes and short stories (M. Brame 1926). Such an astonishing output over a period of less than twenty years presumably attests not only to Brame's facility as a writer but also to the pressure of family circumstances.

Typical of the material in the penny-novel-journals, none of this voluminous output of serial fiction was ever reprinted in the luxurious multi-volume sets serving the bourgeois clients of the circulating libraries. However, the lion's share of the longer works submitted to the *Herald* was reprinted in cheap fiction series issued by William Stevens. Beginning with *Dora Thorne* in 1877, eleven of the first twenty volumes in the *Family Story-Teller* series were full-length Brame serials from the *Herald*, with the rest to follow after the author's death; these were slim, small-print volumes in stiff cardboard covers at 1s. 0d. or in fancy green cloth at 1s. 6d., with the most popular titles running into many editions and achieving sales of over 100,000 within a few years ("Topics of the Day," 1885: 3). From around the same time, Brame's holiday novelettes began to be reprinted in pamphlet form with colored paper covers at 2d. each, and around twenty were available following the author's demise. All of these reprints were issued not under the author's initials but as "By the Author of 'Dora Thorne' etc., etc." It seems likely that Brame sold the copyright of all the *Herald* stories outright to Stevens, so that she and her heirs may have received little or no remuneration for these reappearances in cheap volume form.

The widespread reprinting of Brame's fiction in the United States brought the author's work to the attention of an even wider public, but could not have offered much in the way of personal fame or financial reward. Since this was before Congress passed the International Copyright Act (1891), most if not all of these American copies are likely to have been issued without authorization from or payment to the holder of the British rights, though we should note that such "piracy" would only take place in the case of foreign authors of proven popularity. Overlooked by Harper & Brothers, the prestigious and long-standing New York publishers who by then typically offered established British novelists solid rewards for advance sheets of their latest triple-decker, her stories seem to have been first picked up around 1875 by Street & Smith,

publishers of dime novel series as well as the story paper the *New York Weekly*, where Brame's serials from the *Family Herald* and other London journals were regularly reproduced. As Johannsen has shown (Johannsen 1950–62: II, 40–1), initially these seem to have appeared under the simple initials “C.M.B.,” but soon the proprietors began to manufacture a number of more personalized identities for the Hinckley woman, including “Caroline M. Barton” (CMB) and “Bertha M. Clay” (BMC). By around 1877 the latter had “stuck,” and over it appeared not only the bulk of the serials written by Brame herself up until her death, but thereafter several hundred domestic romances written by other hands. Many of these seem to have been anonymous serials lifted without acknowledgment from other British periodicals, notably the *Young Ladies Journal* (1864–1920), an upmarket twopenny weekly with dress patterns, color plates, and sheet music, to which Brame herself never seems to have contributed, while others were clearly written to order by a team of hacks in New York working for Street & Smith (Moore 1991: 10, 12). Quentin Reynolds, the historian of the New York house (Reynolds 1955: 38), states that Brame was paid liberally for her services and that the Clay titles issued immediately after her death were written by her eldest daughter, though there is clearly no evidence to support either claim.

Other dime novel series issued in both New York and Chicago were quick to latch on to the popularity of “the author of *Dora Thorne*,” including George Munro's Seaside Library, which started up only in 1877 but had issued thirty-nine titles under that signature by around the time of the author's death, all but a couple deriving from the *Family Herald*. Given the shortness of Brame's working life, this was a remarkable tally, comparable to those for Margaret Oliphant (41) and Mary Braddon (50) in the same series over the same period. It is also worth noting that such dime novel series traveled far beyond the borders of the United States, so that translations of titles by Brame/Clay soon appeared in Spanish, Arabic, and other languages (Noel 1954: 187). In Japan, for example, where the collapse of the rigid feudal caste system following the Meiji Restoration of 1868 stimulated a fear of and fascination with romance across classes, two separate adaptations of *Dora Thorne* had appeared by the beginning of the twentieth century, the first of 1888 attracting the approbation of the Meiji empress herself (Ito 2002: 358). Well after the turn of the century, in the USA itself many of Brame's novels remained in print in the “New Bertha Clay Library” alongside romances by other hands. Meanwhile in Britain many of her serials were reprinted in shilling paperbacks from Arthur Pearson, and in hardback from a number of publishers including Selwyn & Blount and Wright & Brown. Brame's daughter explains that these were stories from papers other than the *Family Herald*, where copyright remained in family hands, claiming that: “During the war, hundreds of thousands of her books [in paper-covered editions] were sent out to the various hospitals for the poor wounded men, who enjoyed the simple love tales” (M. Brame 1926).

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Forty years earlier, the London correspondent of the *Star of Canterbury*, New Zealand, noting that “shop-girls, seamstresses, ladies' maids *et hoc genus omne*” were the main



consumers of the works of “the author of *Dora Thorne*,” with “vast quantities” absorbed in the colonies alone, characterized them as “highly flavoured stories which invariably deal with the most aristocratic society and describe the fortunes of impossibly persecuted heroines, splendid chivalrous heroes, and the blackest of black-hearted villains” (“Topics of the Day” 1885: 3). This, however, is no more than a caricature. It is in fact exceptional for a Brame romance to be set entirely in the world of the silver fork; more characteristically they move between scenes of glamorous wealth and humble endeavor, persistently raising problems of love crossed by class interests. The trope of the innocent beauty of humble origins pursued by an aristocratic seducer, which, as Louis James has shown (James 1963: ch. 6), dominated the popular domestic romances of the early Victorian period, is here only one of a number of forms that this can take. Moreover, Brame’s protagonists rarely play out a tale of villainy and chivalry in simple black and white, and heroines (such as Ethel Gordon in *Repented at Leisure*, 1875) and heroes (like Norman Arleigh in *Wife in Name Only*, 1876–7) alike tend to undergo long periods of contrition and atonement before attaining happiness. And as Sally Mitchell has shown more generally of the popular romances of high life of the 1870s, in Brame’s fiction also the “overt moral is often at odds with the emotional effect” (Mitchell 1981: 152). The *Family Herald* traditionally maintained a conservative line on the social definition of class and gender roles: a few months before Brame’s first serial *Lord Lynne’s Choice* began to appear in its columns, the paper carried a resoundingly negative review of J. S. Mill’s recent *The Subjection of Women* (10 July 1869). But if Brame’s narrators often offer explicit warnings of the dangers of transgressing the social limits allotted to women or commoners, the narratives themselves, like the author’s own endeavors as a writer, seem contradictorily to celebrate the spirit of activity and enterprise. What follows illustrates these general perceptions with reference to *Dora Thorne* and *Weaker than a Woman*, first published in the *Herald* in 1871 and 1878 respectively.

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*Dora Thorne*, the title typically employed to secure the identity of the author, was initially issued as a forty-four-chapter serial in the *Family Herald* from 12 September to 9 December 1871; in October 1877 the novel appeared in volume form for the first time in Britain at the head of the *Family Story-Teller* series. In the meantime, however, it had been reprinted by Smith & Street both in their *New York Weekly* in 1875 and later as a dime novel, the first of many unauthorized American venues. In terms of the “overt moral” at least, *Dora Thorne* seems to be among Brame’s most socially conservative efforts, with an unwavering support of patriarchal values. Although there are brief interludes in Florence and on the Kent coast, the novel centers on the country estate of Lord Earle, whose picture gallery shows him a descendant of “one of the oldest families in England” (Brame [ca. 1883]: 8, ch. 2); characterized as “one of the fairest spots in fair and tranquil England . . . in the deep green heart of the land,” Earlescourt thus represents no more than a generic, idealized setting

([ca. 1883]: 11, ch. 2). The novel depicts the grave consequences of two cases of *mésalliance*, a key term in the narrative, in successive generations of the Earle family.

In the first generation, the only son Ronald, who in a youthful fit of rebellion passes an evening reading “three chapters of ‘Mill on Liberalism’, [and] four of a sensational novel” (Brame [ca. 1883]: 12, ch. 2), as a prelude to disobeying the solemn admonitions of his parents concerning his future. Rejecting the love of Valentine Charteris, a tall, stately beauty of the nearby Greenoke estate, he secretly marries Dora Thorne, the buxom, blushing daughter of the Earlescourt lodge-keeper, and is thus summarily banished. On the banks of the Arno, where Ronald tries to make a name as a painter, the marriage rapidly falls apart as the noble husband begins to feel the pinch of financial restriction and the common wife becomes jealous of his continuing intimacy with Valentine. But this is not before Dora gives birth to twin daughters, Beatrice and Lillian, who form an even more extreme contrast between restless, daring passion and quiet, gentle submission, with the former inevitably repeating the sin of *mésalliance* in the second generation. Despite the fact that the pair are brought up in rural isolation with Dora’s family on the white cliffs overlooking the English Channel, at the age of only 16 Beatrice falls into a dangerous liaison with the handsome captain of a passing trading ship and promises her hand on the day of his departure. Years later, when the sisters have removed to Earlescourt on the death of Ronald’s father, the sailor returns from voyaging to find that Beatrice has already forgotten him and is about to be married to a man of her father’s class. In the aftermath, Beatrice’s perfidy results in her death by drowning in the lake at Earlescourt. However, her death leads not only to a belated reconciliation between her parents but also to the marriage of her twin sister to the nobleman who, in the absence of a direct male heir, will inherit the Earlescourt estates on the death of Ronald.

In his analysis of the “substantial act of ideological reinscription” carried out by the Japanese author Kikuchi Yūhō in transforming the work into his 1903 serial *Chikyōdai* (The Twin Sisters), Ken K. Ito thus characterizes the original *Dora Thorne* as “a melodrama that . . . pounds away at the dangers of miscegenation between classes and the miseries faced by men and women who fail to live up to certain class-based expectations of gendered behavior” (Ito 2002: 354). While this analysis faithfully reflects the narrative’s overt moral stance – the narrator more than once insists that “loving, gentle submission is the fairest ornament of woman” (Brame [ca. 1883]: 117–18, ch. 19) and that marrying beneath one’s station entails “the sin of . . . wanton disobedience” against the will of the father ([ca. 1883]: 247, ch. 42) – it overlooks the emotional complexity of the narrative. Throughout, all observers are agreed that it is passionate Beatrice rather than gentle Lillian who truly reflects “the Earle spirit and pride” ([ca. 1883]: 92, ch. 15), while in the reconciliation at the denouement it becomes clear that Dora Thorne, through her long experience of patient suffering and her active efforts towards self-education, has indeed earned the right to be considered a fitting member of the house of Earle.

Certainly it would be a mistake to read the abrupt dismissal of “women’s rights” encountered at the end of *Dora Thorne* as an epitome of Brame’s considered position

(Brame [ca. 1883]: 265, ch. 44). Elsewhere, and more noticeably in her serials first issued in magazines other than the *Family Herald*, we encounter a good deal of anger and frustration at the wrongs suffered by women. *Thrown on the World*, for example, first appearing in the columns of the *Family Reader* from late 1874 recounts the trials and tribulations of a woman of humble birth tricked into a false marriage with an aristocrat in disguise, who brutally abandons both her and their young child and blithely proceeds to wed a woman of his own class. The discarded wife's bitter experiences of the hollowness at the heart of high society lead her to cry out against the prevailing sexual double standard: "Is there one law for women . . . and another for men? Is a man's sin to be smiled at, glossed over, made little of, excused in every way, while a woman, for the same sin, must forfeit everything she holds dear on earth, and meet with nothing but scorn and contempt?" To this, the narrator replies sternly and unequivocally: "No; men may think it is so, but the grand, immutable laws of God were made for soul, and not for sex" (Brame [ca. 1892]: 204–5, ch. 46).

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Brame's *Weaker than a Woman* also works with the stereotype of the brutal aristocratic seducer familiar in the proletarian domestic melodrama of the 1840s, though the novel draws closer to the mode of contemporary sensationalism through its more detailed and realized social setting. The story was initially issued as a *Family Herald* serial of forty-nine chapters from 17 August to 23 November 1878, though its first British publication in book form was only in 1890 as no. 59 in the *Family Story-Teller* series. Well before that, though, the novel had been reprinted by Street & Smith under the name Bertha M. Clay both in the columns of the *New York Weekly* and as a dime novel. The story is set specifically in the community of Lilford, Loomshire, which clearly evokes Brame's hometown in Leicestershire, with its bustling marketplace and clattering stocking frames: the hero, like the author, hails from a "great white square house in Castle Street," the leafy main thoroughfare (Brame [ca. 1890]: 9, ch. 1), and attends "the old parish church" with its ivy-covered walls and Norman tower ([ca. 1890]: 69, ch. 13), echoing St. Peter's, Hinckley, which is associated alike with Brame's birth, marriage, and death. Though there are a number of scenes in the green, densely wooded hills around the town, where are situated the halls and estates of the two great landowners, the just and noble Lord Arlington of ancient fame and the vicious and perfidious Sir Owen Chevenix, a newcomer to the area, most of the action takes place within the town itself, with local farmers, shopkeepers, and other members of the *petite bourgeoisie* in the foreground.

The action centers around the financial vicissitudes of the struggling family of the lawyer Darcy Lonsdale, due in turn to an unexpected legacy from a client, a devious and malicious lawsuit for breach of trust, and finally the intervention of Lord Arlington in the interests of English justice. The hero is Felix Lonsdale, the eldest son, honest and handsome, who struggles throughout the novel both to restore his father's business and to select an appropriate mate. His choice lies between the coquettish Violet

Haye, a child of grasping parents who reigns as “queen of the country round Lilford” (Brame [ca. 1890]: 10, ch. 2), and the sweet and gentle Evelyn Lester, an orphan. Violet repeatedly trifles with the hero’s affections, initially promising herself to him but later being seduced by the wealth and name of Sir Owen Chevenix, who after their marriage proves himself to be a foul-mouthed drunkard not above subjecting her to abuse both emotional and physical. On the death of Chevenix in a riding accident, Felix is tempted once more by Violet’s charms, but manages to resist and eventually, after she contracts a second marriage with the even richer Duke of Rokely, comes to realize that his true love belongs to Evelyn, who has remained his faithful friend and mentor throughout the troubles of the Lonsdale family.

When Brame writes under a thematic/metaphoric title – *Thrown on the World* is one of many pertinent cases – she tends to rehearse the phrase throughout the narrative and hammer it home as a capitalized motto in the concluding sentence. *Weaker than a Woman* is an exception in this respect. The title phrase occurs only three times, in each being employed by Violet to Felix in confessing that her capacity for love is not as strong as her desire for wealth and reputation. Indeed, *Weaker than a Woman* overall is far less insistent on an explicit moral than *Dora Thorne*, and in its emotional effect far more uncertain in its reliance on patriarchal values. Though Eve Lester, in her patient, passive waiting on Felix’s realization of her worth, clearly represents the ideal of womanly weakness in the novel, it is the brutal Chevenix whose attitude to women is epitomized in the warning, “submit: it is a woman’s lot” (Brame [ca. 1890]: 199, ch. 36). At the same time, Brame opts to make Evelyn’s guardian a “strong-minded woman” who goes to “extreme lengths in her views about the rights” of her sex ([ca. 1890]: 22, ch. 4). Though she is initially introduced with an air of comedy, Aunt Jane Lester’s support proves finally to be a tower of strength for both hero and heroine.

Thus, though Johannsen dismisses them uniformly as “mushy love stories for the English lower classes” (Johannsen 1950–62: II, 40), in their complex reworkings of earlier proletarian traditions of domestic romance and in their ideological inconsistency with regard to the theme of female submission, Brame’s serials should not be overlooked if we are to understand the diverse ways in which sensationalism developed in the later decades of the nineteenth century.

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Though inevitably far less prolific than Brame, during a career also of less than twenty years Mary Cecil Hay seems to have produced nine full-length novels, plus about a dozen novellas and more than a hundred short stories, apparently finding little difficulty in marketing her wares and establishing a reputation within only a few years. Nearly all of her works thus seem to have appeared via all three print modes prevailing in the later Victorian decades – first in serial format alongside other material for magazine and newspaper subscribers, next in de luxe multi-volume sets for loan to the members of the private circulating libraries, and finally in cheaper compact single-volume editions for purchase by general readers at a bookseller or railway stall.

Moreover, these works appearing in Britain were once again rapidly and repeatedly reprinted in cheap formats in the United States and undoubtedly reached an even wider audience there. Although her own name was well known on both sides of the Atlantic by the mid-1870s, most of Hay's publications appeared initially under one of a pair of male pseudonyms created from her initials – "Mark Hardcastle" and "Markham Howard." (Authorship is assured by reissues under the writer's real name.) Her first volume publication seems to have been *The Arrandel Motto*, a triple-decker novel from the notorious T. Cautley Newby, issued in the first half of 1871 as by "Mark Hardcastle," and likely at the young author's expense. The same pen-name was used for her first three tales to appear in the "fast" London literary monthly *Belgravia*, then still edited by Mary Braddon and owned by her partner John Maxwell, the first being "One Summer Month" in the August/September issues of the same year. Ten later contributions, however, appeared under Hay's own signature, from June 1873 to the Summer Holiday number of 1876, shortly before the miscellany passed out of the hands of Maxwell and Braddon (Edwards et al. [1988]). Over the same period, and indeed on into the early 1880s, Hay published many complete tales and a few serials in her own name in other London literary periodicals, notably the monthly *Argosy*, owned and edited by Ellen Wood, as well as in syndicates of weekly provincial newspapers through W. F. Tillotson of Bolton, Lancashire, a regular business partner of John Maxwell. Thus Hay's first novel made its belated serial appearance in the *Bolton Weekly Journal* and other papers from June 1876, slightly revised under the title *The Arundel Motto* and under the author's true name (Law 2000: 67, 223).

At the same time, a much larger proportion of her literary output appeared initially as by "Markham Howard" in the columns of William Stevens's *Family Herald*, which of course reached a mass audience many times that of shilling magazines like the *Argosy* and *Belgravia* (Altick 1957: 3). Hay contributed to the *Family Herald* continuously from 1868, initially in the form of poems such as "Looking Back" (2 May 1868) and short stories like "On a Monument" (22 August 1868). Though a couple of the early tales appeared over the names "Mark Hardcastle" and "Sidney Howard," each of the serials was signed "Markham Howard," and these included all but the first two of Hay's novels and every novella. Producing serials rather longer than the norm for the *Herald* (typically running four or five months to Brame's three), Mary Cecil Hay was a notable exception to the rule that material from such papers was not reprinted for circulating library subscribers. Normally selling only single serial rights to William Stevens (Law 2000: 167), unlike Brame, Hay appeared only once in the *Family Story-Teller* series, with a collection of tales entitled *A Sister's Sacrifice* (no. 17, 1881), and instead took considerable care in repackaging her serial stories for the libraries. The *Herald* titles were sometimes changed – "Rendered a Recompense" (1872) and "Known by its Fruit" (1873) became respectively the novel *Victor and Vanquished* (1874) and the novella *Brenda Yorke* (1875) – and, though the title remained the same, *Old Myddelton's Money* seems to have undergone particularly extensive reworking, though it was issued as a book before the final installments had appeared in the *Herald* (M. Knight in Hay 2004: xiv–xv). In this way, between 1873 and 1886 Hurst and

Blackett, successors to the old house of Henry Colburn and still specializing in fiction for the libraries, issued a total of thirteen triple-deckers by Hay at a rate of roughly one per year. These represented all of the full-length novels apart from the first, plus five collections of shorter fiction, each headed by a novella occupying most of the first volume, and concluding with *A Wicked Girl, and Other Tales*, which the author saw through the press shortly before she died. That the same publishing house was happy to back her so faithfully, and to issue so many volumes of shorter fiction (generally seen as a drug on the market), is a witness to her steady popularity with Mudie's subscribers. The weekly reviews also seem generally to have greeted her latest offerings with a good deal of enthusiasm and respect. Thus, from 1875 onwards, all of these triple-deckers except *A Wicked Girl*, plus the revised version of *The Arundel Motto*, were reprinted uniformly in cheap single volumes, either in cloth at half a crown (2s. 6d.) or as yellowbacks at two shillings. The increasingly worn stereotype plates of this series were passed on from Ward, Lock & Tyler to J. & R. Maxwell, then to Griffith Farran, and finally to Richard Edward King, thus preserving a popular British audience for Hay's work into the twentieth century.

All the same, this robust performance in the home market was outdone by some margin across the Atlantic, though of course with limited profit to the author herself. Hay's first American publication may well have been "He Stoops to Conquer," her 1874 Christmas story for *London Society*, the literary monthly edited by Florence Marryat, which was copied by the *New York Times* on 20 December, the first of many such duplications. From 1876 onwards, once her popularity was clearly established, all Hay's British publications – not just the tales from periodicals prior to collection but the complete volume editions also – began to be reprinted *ad libitum* and in multiple cheap editions in New York. Harper & Brothers were first off the blocks in their series of Select Novels in double columns from fifty cents, and it seems likely that they were paying Hay or her publisher for advanced sheets; certainly when *Harper's Weekly* began to carry Hay's novellas in installments from early 1878, it was claimed that this was by "Special Arrangement with the Author." However, George Munro was not far behind with his Seaside Library from as little as ten cents. By the time of her death, there were competing dime novel editions from J. W. Lovell as well as Harper's and Munro, the last comprising over thirty volumes, only a handful less than Brame, with four of the most popular also available in large-print editions aimed at an elderly readership.

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The setting of Hay's novels invariably moves between rural and urban, province and metropolis. The typical fictional center of action is the country estate of the local squire, though the scene shifts to the squares and streets of London whenever the heroine is required to bask in social success or hide from social shame. This also allows the author a good deal of freedom to move among different classes of society, with honesty and virtue much more likely to be located in the traditional upper

and lower echelons – farmers, servants, and governesses are frequent subjects of sympathy – while new bourgeois wealth and pretension tend to be objects of satire or sources of villainy. This is all very English, and in most Hay novels (*Dorothy's Adventure* is a marked exception), as indeed in much Victorian melodrama, foreigners tend by nature to be objects of suspicion. The author herself was brought up in the English market town of Shrewsbury close to the Welsh border, the child of the local clock-maker, but moved to Chiswick on the outskirts of the capital from her late teens, though ill health forced her to spend her final years near Worthing on the Sussex coast. (Mark Knight's recent edition of *Old Myddelton's Money* contains the most reliable biographical information.) A number of the novels – notably *The Arundel Motto*, *The Squire's Legacy*, and *Dorothy's Adventure* – are indeed set mainly in the west Midlands, in reach of the port of Liverpool and the coast of North Wales, with the railway into the London terminal of Euston called into frequent use, though others base themselves in Devonshire, southwest England (*Lester's Secret*), or the west of Ireland (*Nora's Love Test*), while *Victor and Vanquished* adopts the upland region of Highshire, a fictional entity.

The standard plot of a Hay novel weaves together romance and mystery. Before the hero and heroine can be happily united there are always complex questions of inheritance to be resolved, whether in the form of lost wills, hidden fortunes, uncertain lineages, ambiguous legacies, false claimants, or criminal indemnities – all of these plot devices can be found within *Old Myddelton's Money* and *Nora's Love Test* alone – and an inquest, a criminal trial, or at least a sustained piece of amateur detection are generally required. Disposable characters are often subject to an untimely demise – the more colorful variations include death by dueling pistol, battery with a blunt instrument, catastrophic train crash, drug overdose, and chloroform suffocation – while shortly before the finale it seems *de rigueur* for grave illness or injury to strike down either the hero (gunshot wounds following a duel in *The Arundel Motto*, typhoid in *Old Myddelton's Money*) or the heroine (mental breakdown in both *Nora's Love Test* and *Lester's Secret*). The protagonists themselves also tend to be formed from a similar mold. The heroine is young, naive, petite, vivacious, pretty, something of a Cinderella, typically orphaned in youth and lacking in formal guidance, but whose natural kindness and intelligence attract all around her, eventually winning over to her side even the most unsympathetic of stepsisters. The hero is always rather older, of higher status and greater experience, who knows his own mind from the beginning but needs patience and fortitude to overcome the obstacles to his suit, whether in the form of the machinations of rivals, the misjudgment of the heroine, or simple twists of fate. The villain is often his strange double, a proud, false guardian who abuses his trust and subjects the childlike heroine to psychological and sexual harassment. The private origins of this complex seem impossible to retrieve, though we do know that Hay was the youngest of six children, lost her father when she was 17 and her mother five years later, at one point was living together in London with her two older sisters, and died unmarried.

A further feature dividing Hay's work from that typically found in the columns of the *Herald* is the style of the dialog, which obviously owes something to Rhoda

Broughton. Like those of Brame, Hay's narrators can go in for moral solemnity and religious sentiment as well as sensation. Especially towards the climax, the trials and tribulations of both hero and heroine encourage an elevated tone and an uplifting moral, and, as Mark Knight has suggested (in Hay 2004: x–xii), Hay is among those sensationalists not averse to combining a melodramatic plot with an evangelical message. (Unlike the devoutly Catholic Brame, Hay must have come from a nonconformist background since she was baptized at the local independent chapel.) More distinctive, though, is the author's striking fondness for conversation laced with puns and allusions, for verbal fencing contests between the heroine and her social critics, between the hero and his romantic rivals, and most of all between the hero and heroine themselves. A witty example, worthy of Wilde himself, occurs in *Old Myddelton's Money* when the hero defends the proposition that an Englishman's "first and deepest care is always bestowed upon his hat" (Hay 2004: 90, ch. 10). Let us now flesh out these bare bones by looking in some detail at two contrasting works by Hay, *The Squire's Legacy* (1875) and *Lester's Secret* (1885), respectively her fifth and her final novel.

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*The Squire's Legacy* was serialized in the *Family Herald* in sixty chapters between 1 May and 16 October 1875, when it appeared in three volumes from Hurst & Blackett, with the stereotype edition issued by Ward, Lock & Tyler around a year later. In March 1876 also it was first published in the United States as no. 455 in Harper's Library of Select Novels, and the following year as no. 23 in Munro's Seaside Library. The title refers to Squire Monkton of the fine historic estate of Kingswood, not far from Minton, a fictional market town about three hours from London on the northwestern line, who dies on his way to town in a catastrophic train crash. However, this is not before he has had the chance to reveal secretly to his only son and heir, the hero Scot Monkton, that he is not in fact the rightful owner of Kingswood. To the surprise of his neighbors and the horror of his London lawyer, Scot nobly renounces his title to the estate without explanation, and struggles to make a living by farming nearby at Black Birches, a wretched smallholding that he holds in his own right. Gradually it emerges that the true owner of Kingswood is the illegitimate child by a French peasant girl of the old squire's deceased elder brother, the baby being abandoned at the London Foundling Hospital; living in desperate poverty once an adult, the true heir himself fathers a boy child by a dancing girl before eventually committing suicide. While his heritage remains unknown, Willy, the abandoned child, is befriended by Scot Monkton – again on the London train – before eventually dying in his arms in Paul Dombey fashion. Throughout the novel Scot Monkton is hounded and harassed by a mysterious, unsavory Frenchman who wants to sell for an outrageous sum the dark family secret that Monkton is in fact already aware of, and who eventually turns out to be the agent of Scot's cousin Stanley, who himself has eyes on the Kingswood estate. At



the climax, the smallholding is burnt down and the Frenchman dies in the blaze, with Scot Monkton accused of his murder, only to be vindicated in a dramatic courtroom scene where the blame falls on the minions of his cousin. As always with Hay, this mysterious legacy plot is interwoven with a touching love romance.

Monkton's chosen love is Doris Egerton, a typical Hay heroine, whose widowed father is an old tenant of the Kingswood estate, but who is introduced to the reader as the 17-year-old fiancée of the London lawyer's son, Kenneth Bradford: "a slight girl, dressed in velveteen . . . with a face full of merriment, yet capable of intense tenderness; a face which, though possessing no positive beauty, was yet winning beyond words in its ever-varying expressions, and the changing lights of sympathy and laughter in its lustrous eyes" (Hay [ca. 1878]: 26, ch. 4). Kenneth neglects his work as a legal clerk to write tragedies in blank verse and dream of glittering prizes in the West End theater, thus bringing into the novel a good deal of light social comedy, gently satirizing metropolitan excess whether bohemian or bourgeois. This takes on a rather darker coloring back at Kingswood, where new wealth is represented by the showy villa of the neighboring Levey family, who are treated with a disdain that is overtly anti-Semitic. Scot Monkton soon falls for Doris, but, in addition to his many other trials, has to wait in manly patience until her betrothed dies conveniently of a burst aneurism on the night of his one and only theatrical triumph late in the novel. It should be said, though, that there is a good deal of preparation for this outcome in the form of prior attention to the condition of both Kenneth's health and the heroine's heart. The novel thus ends with Scot and Doris happily married and in just possession of the parks of Kingswood, their feelings for the poor lost boy transferred to their own young son, a second Kenneth.

In addition to this sustained romantic thread, *The Squire's Legacy* also pays periodic attention to a series of other relationships, treating them in a range of styles from farce to Gothic. Scot's irrepressible Aunt Michal separates from and reunites with her husband on a regular basis; Rose Levey chases money unashamedly and marries the highest bidder, while her brother Bernard Levey is hopelessly infatuated with Doris; Doris's stepbrother Arthur is forsaken by his lover Margaret, as it emerges, in the spirit of self-sacrifice because of the fear of mental illness in her own family; the dancing girl deserts both Willy and his father with casual callousness; the Kingswood tenant farmer Wakely, who graduates from poaching to murder, is also shown to abuse his young wife with great cruelty. Thus in this work originally composed in slices for the penny public, while working with the conventions of popular romance, Hay is still able to employ the narrative vitality and the tonal versatility of the sensational mode to raise complex questions about love, sex, and marriage.

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*Lester's Secret* (1885) was serialized in the *Family Herald* in fifty-five chapters between 1 November 1884 and 21 March 1885, when it appeared as a triple-decker from

Hurst & Blackett, with J. & R. Maxwell issuing the stereotype edition about a year afterwards. By the summer of 1885, however, it had already been reprinted in the United States both in Harper's Library of Select Novels and in Munro's Seaside Library. Completed just over a year before Hay's death in July 1886, it seems to have been written while she was already seriously ill. This supposition is supported by two characteristics which distinguish the work from its predecessors: first, its plotting is less neat than normal, with the final volume in particular appearing somewhat rushed; and second, the tone is more consistently somber, with a greater reliance on Gothic effects. The principal setting is on the edge of the wastes of Dartmoor, and the story opens with a prologue recounting a harrowing incident as a coach passes a remote dwelling on the moor in dense mist and driving rain. The title, it surprisingly emerges, refers not to the detective warp – as often centering on multiple claimants and missing wills – but to the romantic weft of the narrative.

After a typically long and arduous struggle, due here both to the chapter of accidents befalling the experienced older man and to the resistance of the parentless young girl, the novel concludes with the happy union of Gervys Lester and Joy Glenorris, both from the standard molds for Hay's male and female protagonists. What is unusual, though, is that it is revealed in the closing chapters that the couple were already married before the opening, and that their union is thus a reunion, the first encounter being marred by the heroine's mistaken belief that she was desired for her newly acquired fortune alone, and thus leading to a lengthy separation. In the meantime, Joy is courted anxiously by others, to farcical effect by the foppish Sir Hussy Vickery, and in spine-chilling Gothic style by the icy villain Norman Pardy, a land agent who will stop at neither bribery nor threats to get his way. Though Joy is finally saved from Pardy's clutches, his harassment pushes her toward mental and physical breakdown, while his cruel treatment of a former lover, Angela Porch, finally leads both her and her sister Jessie to madness and painful death. In this way, Hay's last novel delves more deeply than before into the dark side of romantic passion.

The mystery plot concerns the rightful heir to the isolated estate of Merlswood, situated in somewhat gloomy fashion on "the wooded heights above Torquay" (Hay [ca. 1887]: 19, ch. 2), following the demise of the landlord, old Mr. Glenorris. At the beginning of the narrative Joy, a distant cousin, is recognized unwillingly as the new owner, although Norman Pardy is convinced that there is a hidden will leaving the entire property to him as a reward for his services to the estate. After all his efforts to locate this seem to have failed, Joy herself comes upon the document that brings about her own disinheritance. In a final twist, though, it emerges that old Glenorris's son Wilfrid died a few days after his father (not before as originally assumed), and that there is another, valid will. This makes Wilfrid's friend and mentor Lester the true heir, so that in the end the reunited couple take over the estate, though the final scene finds them recuperating in a more "sunny spot in France" ([ca. 1887]: 352, ch. 55). Before this can happen though, the legal confusion leads to traumatic experiences for both hero and heroine. Due to the machinations of Norman Pardy, Lester is widely though falsely suspected of the murder of Agatha Porch, and is forced to hide in

London with a parson friend; meanwhile, when she is forced to leave Merlswood, Joy takes refuge at Ravenstor, the lonely farm on the moor encountered in the prologue, where she is joined at midnight by Jessie Porch, who has escaped from the insane asylum nearby. Jessie's violent disturbance and Joy's brave but terrified response are conveyed in harrowing detail ([ca. 1887]: 340–6, ch. 54). Altogether, though *Lester's Secret* may miss the sparkling dialogue and elegant architecture of Hay's earlier works, it employs the sensation mode to provoke and disturb in a manner that, while not out of place the columns of the *Family Herald*, is also reminiscent of Braddon, Broughton, and Wood at their best.

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In terms of both narrative form and publishing history (both at home and overseas), the oeuvres of Charlotte Mary Brame and Mary Cecil Hay thus reveal as many contrasts as parallels. Along with the careers of other forgotten sister writers for the British family story papers – I think here especially of Florence Warden, whose *The House on the Marsh* was a hit for *Family Herald* in the spring of 1883 and led to her assuming the mantle of star serialist on the paper for well over a decade, though Adeline Sergeant had an even longer and more productive stint for the *People's Friend* in Scotland – surely deserve more sustained attention if we are to enhance our understanding of the material and aesthetic complexities underlying developments in popular print media and popular narrative genres in the period following the sensation boom of the 1860s.

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## Amelia B. Edwards

*Anne-Marie Beller*

A distinctive feature of scholarly work on mid-Victorian sensation fiction is the way in which, until quite recently, a fraction of the total number of novels that constituted the “genre” have dominated discussion and, often, provided the basis for generalized judgments about a much wider literary phenomenon. While issues of value, taste, and canonicity account for much of why this is so, there have also been practical considerations, such as the fact that many of the novels involved have long been out of print and their authors largely lost in obscurity. Since recovery of sensation fiction began in the 1970s, Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Ellen Wood have claimed most of the critical attention and, indeed, continue to do so. Although authors such as Ouida, Charles Reade, Florence Marryat, and Rhoda Broughton have more recently experienced a measure of serious critical notice, the host of contemporary novelists who helped to shape the public understanding of “sensation” are either forgotten completely or remembered in a different context.<sup>1</sup>

One such writer is Amelia B. Edwards, who today is known chiefly (where she is known at all) as a pioneer in the field of Egyptology, as an author of scholarly works on archaeology and conservation, and as a travel writer. However, when Edwards’s 1864 novel, *Barbara’s History*, consolidated her reputation as a successful and popular novelist, it also aligned her with the contemporary controversy over sensation fiction, primarily through its thematic use of bigamy. Edwards’s precise relationship to sensation fiction, however, is problematic, not least because contemporary critics tended to perceive her as separate from that genre. Her association with sensationalism by twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarship underlines the extreme heterogeneity of the various authors and novels to which the sensation label has been applied and, by implication, the sometimes dubious nature of the term’s helpfulness in approaching a text.

As it was for Edwards, reviewers' association of many writers with the sensation phenomenon was tangential, transitory, or questionable. These writers often were read as sensational because, as the critical furor escalated, the label itself began to be applied widely and promiscuously, with some reviewers apparently content to decry a work as "sensational" upon increasingly tenuous grounds. Frequently, the inclusion in a novel of isolated melodramatic incidents, regardless of the tenor of the work as a whole, was enough to provoke the accusation of sensationalism, with the result that the original application of the term, which had attempted to define a specific type of fiction, became virtually meaningless. As late twentieth-century critics such as Ann Cvetkovich recognized, "the term 'sensation novel' refers more to the genre's status as mass culture than to its particular narrative style or content" (Cvetkovich 1992: 15). An examination of these lesser-known writers and their novels can illuminate aspects of the contemporary debate in important ways, enriching our understanding of precisely what constituted literary sensationalism for the mid-Victorian reader and reviewer.

Interestingly, in the case of Edwards, reviewers were often inclined to dissociate her fiction from the general run of sensation novels, sometimes on the basis of rather questionable distinctions. The judgment of an anonymous reviewer for the *Standard*, that Edwards's work was "far above the Miss Braddon school" (review of *Half a Million of Money*, 1866: 6), was shared by many critics, who focused on what they perceived to be the superior "tone" and erudition of Edwards's novels as evidence of her elevation above the contemporary scourge of sensationalist literature. Significantly though, these appreciative critics nevertheless felt impelled to review Edwards's writing in the context of sensation fiction, pointing not only to their awareness that there were unquestionable similarities between the two, but also to the way in which the genre had, by the mid-1860s, become a standard critical yardstick against which all new novels were to be measured. By offering a brief account of Edwards's life and her writing career within the context of sensation fiction, I will consider how far her work corresponds to, and diverges from, dominant modern perceptions of sensationalism. In doing so, I hope to elucidate wider questions about the reception, definition, and consumption of sensation fiction in the 1860s.

Amelia Ann Blandford Edwards was born in Islington, London, in 1831. Her father, Thomas, was a half-pay officer, who later took up a career in banking. Edwards was particularly close to her mother, Alicia, the daughter of an Irish barrister connected to the Norfolk branch of the Walpole family. From an early age, Amelia Edwards displayed precocious intelligence, as well as artistic, musical, and literary talent, and was encouraged by her mother in her voracious reading and enthusiasm for learning. Edwards wrote her first story at the age of 4 and had a poem published in a penny journal when she was only 7 (Rees 1998: 5). Similar publications followed and, at the age of 12, a short story which Edwards had illustrated herself caught the attention of the artist George Cruikshank, who offered her an apprenticeship under his tuition. This was not pursued, however, and by her mid-teens Edwards was focused on a musical career. Though she applied herself industriously to music

for seven years, singing, composing, and playing various instruments (as well as giving lessons), by 1851 she had decided to dedicate herself to writing and, in later life, recorded that she bitterly regretted the time she had wasted on music (Rees 1998: 8; Manley 2004: 1).

Edwards had already had stories accepted by a number of magazines, but when *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal* paid her the sum of £9 in 1853 for a tale entitled "Annette" she saw this as a breakthrough and the true beginning of her career as a writer. During the 1850s, Edwards turned seriously to journalism, working on the staff of the *Saturday Review* and the *Morning Post*. She continued to contribute stories to various popular magazines, such as *Household Words*, *Eliza Cook's Journal*, *Literary World*, *The Ladies' Companion*, and the *Illustrated London News*.

From 1853 onwards Edwards traveled extensively in Europe, spending prolonged periods in Paris, where she was part of the bohemian, artistic crowd who gathered in Parisian cafés. According to one of her biographers, Edwards's time in Paris was one of radical experimentation; she smoked cigars, discussed the novels of George Sand, and may have occasionally dressed in male attire (Rees 1998: 12–13, 71). In London, Edwards's circle also included many artists, writers, and young people of "advanced views" and radical politics. The 1850s also saw the publication of her first three novels: *My Brother's Wife* (1855), *The Ladder of Life* (1857), and *Hand and Glove* (1858). All three received positive reviews in the national and provincial press, though it was not until *Barbara's History* in 1864 that critics began to laud Edwards as an exceptional and important contemporary novelist.

Meanwhile, in 1860, Edwards suffered a severe personal blow when both her parents died within a week of one other. It is probable that the loss of the close relationship with her mother compelled Edwards to seek surrogate maternal figures (Rees 1998: 18–19). Most important of these was Mrs. Braysher, whose own husband and daughter died in 1863 and 1864 respectively. Though Ellen Braysher was nearly thirty years Edwards's senior, the two were close friends and companions, and in 1863 they bought a house together, "The Larches" at Westbury-on-Trym near Bristol, which they shared until Mrs. Braysher's death in January 1892, only a few months before Edwards's own. Intimate relationships with a series of women marked Edwards's life, which has led to speculation among modern biographers about her sexual orientation. Although she was engaged briefly in 1851 to a Mr. Bacon, and there appears to have been an unhappy romantic attachment to a male Irish cousin, Edwards never married (Rees 1998: 33). Instead, she shared intimate and rewarding close friendships with a number of women, most importantly Lucy Renshawe, Marianne North, and Kate Bradbury.<sup>2</sup>

By the early 1860s Edwards had become an established and moderately successful writer. She was a regular contributor to *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, supplying many of the Christmas stories, a number of which were erroneously attributed to Dickens. Many of these were later published in two collections, *Miss Carew* (1865) and *Monsieur Maurice* (1873). Besides her eight novels, Edwards wrote countless short stories, many of which continue to appear in modern anthologies, and the travel books

for which she is now chiefly known. She also published two scholarly editions of English poetry and wrote over a hundred essays, papers, and articles on Egyptology, archaeology, and conservation. Other miscellaneous publications include a book of ballads, two books on etiquette, *A Summary of English History* (1856) and *A History of France* (1858), a biographical study of Cervantes, and even contributions to the juvenile market in *Every Boy's Magazine* and *Every Boy's Annual*, as well as translations and original musical and lyrical compositions. Her fourth novel, *Barbara's History* (1864), was her most important critical success, and was followed a year later by *Half a Million of Money* (1865). In the subsequent decade Edwards wrote two more novels, *Debenham's Vow* (1870) and *In the Days of My Youth* (1873). Her final work of fiction, *Lord Brackenbury*, was published in 1880.

A trip to the Dolomites with her friend Lucy Renshawe in 1872 provided the material for her immensely successful and first important travel book, *A Midsummer Ramble in the Dolomites* (1873), later and thereafter published under the better-known title, *Untrodden Peaks and Unfrequented Valleys*.<sup>3</sup> Edwards's extensive traveling found its way into her fiction, too: *Barbara's History* verges on travelogue in places, particularly during the sections which describe the heroine's honeymoon. Edwards had witnessed an eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 1872, an experience which she later recreated in her final novel *Lord Brackenbury*. But it was the 1873–4 trip to Egypt that proved to be a turning point in Edwards's life, and instilled in her a passion for ancient Egyptian archaeology that would inform her activities for the next two decades. Although she did not cease writing fiction entirely, the focus of her interests and energies proceeded to be on Egyptian matters. Edwards set herself upon an exhaustive reading program about Egypt, studied hieroglyphics, and consulted various specialists in the field. In 1877 her account of the Egypt trip was published as *A Thousand Miles up the Nile* to enthusiastic reviews. Of all her work it has achieved the most enduring success. Edwards's tireless work to conserve Egypt's ancient monuments from vandalism, theft, and general neglect, led to the establishing in 1882 of the Egypt Exploration Fund, later to be renamed the Egypt Exploration Society. Edwards was elected one of the honorary joint secretaries, a position she retained for the rest of her life.

From 1889 to 1890 Edwards conducted a successful lecturing tour of the United States, though it was curtailed prematurely when she broke her arm. By this point, she had been awarded honorary doctorates and was considered an authority on ancient Egypt on both sides of the Atlantic. The *New York Times*, writing of the Baltimore leg of her US tour, reported that the "six lectures of Dr. Amelia B. Edwards at the Peabody Institute drew together the largest crowd of the season. The hall was crowded, standing room being at a premium" ("Johns Hopkins Hospital," 1889: 17). Edwards received various honorary degrees from American universities and colleges, including a PhD, an L.H.D. from Columbia, and an LL.D. from Smith College, the latter the first ever conferred on a woman in the US ("Amelia B. Edwards Dead," 1892: 1). The American lectures, and others, were collected and published as *Pharaohs, Fellahs and Explorers* (1891) just months before Edwards's death.



Edwards's later position as a respected Egyptologist, campaigner, and lecturer has overshadowed her earlier career as a popular and successful novelist, so that there remain many unanswered questions about the nature of her fiction and its place in the literary history of the Victorian period. On the whole, contemporary critics did not tend to view or review Edwards as a sensation novelist. Moreover, her current association with the genre owes less to actual assessments of her work by recent scholars, and more to the inclusion of her name in early influential recoveries of sensation fiction. For example, Elaine Showalter, in *A Literature of Their Own*, includes Edwards with M. E. Braddon, Ellen Wood, Rhoda Broughton, Ouida, Charlotte Riddell, and Florence Marryat in her identification of mid-Victorian female sensation novelists (Showalter 1979: 154). Jeanne Fahnestock, too, in her often-cited article on the vogue for "bigamy novels" during the 1860s, includes Edwards's *Barbara's History* as an example of one of several novels to exploit the high-profile Yelverton trial, in this case actually replicating words from the couple's correspondence (Fahnestock 1981: 53, 64). Such instances reinforce the impression that Edwards was perceived during the 1860s to be working within that distinct "school" of fiction, most readily associated with (and even defined by) the works of Braddon, Wood, and Collins, so that it is perhaps ironic that Edwards's early novels, today virtually unknown, share more with the sensation genre (which they pre-date) than her so-called "bigamy novel" of 1864.

The novels published during the 1850s undoubtedly utilize the tropes and techniques which would later come to define sensation fiction in the early years of the following decade. As Tara MacDonald suggests, "[i]t is difficult to define Edwards's first novel, *My Brother's Wife*, published in 1855, as anything but sensational" (MacDonald 2008: 6). Indeed, there are secrets aplenty, a strong element of mystery, a complex plot, plus a murder and a suicide. The story is narrated by Paul Latour, a young Frenchman, who falls in love with the same woman as his reckless and dissipated younger brother, Theophile. The object of the brothers' desire is their beautiful orphaned cousin, Adrienne, who inevitably falls for the indolent charms of Theophile and accepts his proposal of marriage. Adrienne comes to regret her poor choice when Theophile proceeds to abandon her for a fascinating opera singer possessed of flashing eyes and dubious morals. Adrienne is soon widowed, though, when Theophile is brutally murdered by the vengeful former lover of his new mistress.

The moral ambiguity found in many sensation novels of the 1860s is never present in *My Brother's Wife*. The hero Paul is rewarded for his unfailing nobility by marriage with the gentle, patient Margaret. Adrienne, after paying the harsh penalty for her ill-judged marriage, is compensated for her suffering by a new husband, Paul's loyal English friend. Therese Vogelsang, the *femme fatale* opera singer, who has lost one lover to a brutal death and the other to the retribution of the law, follows the prescribed fate of the Victorian fallen woman and obligingly commits suicide by throwing herself in the Thames. At times, *My Brother's Wife* relies on rather unsophisticated melodramatic techniques and there is an over-reliance on coincidence, particularly in the way that several characters turn out to be related to one another. Yet, elsewhere, there are

the hallmarks of Edwards's later mature work, such as in the extended discussions of Italian poetry and the accomplished scenic descriptions.

The second novel, *The Ladder of Life* (1857), is similarly melodramatic, with an exciting and complex plot, arguably surpassing *My Brother's Wife* in terms of improbability. It follows the fortunes of another beautiful orphan, Natalie Metz, who rises from humble beginnings to become the acclaimed prima donna in a fashionable new opera. Along the way Natalie survives robbery, persecution from an iniquitous violinist, and an attempted kidnapping plot, before she achieves her happy ending, reunited with and betrothed to her childhood sweetheart.

Reviews of *The Ladder of Life*, as in the case of *My Brother's Wife*, were generally encouraging. *The Examiner*, for instance, praised this "original novel by a Miss A. B. Edwards . . . in which there are some scenes very neatly sketched, and many indications of that shrewd perception of character in which women frequently excel" ("*Tavistock House Theatricals*," 1857: 38). What is interesting about the reception of these early novels is the general level of acceptance of the sensational aspects. In large part, this is due to the fact that the term "sensation novel" had not yet been coined, and the critical backlash, conducted chiefly in the influential quarterly journals, had not yet begun. Nevertheless, despite the praise, there is implicit in these reviews an unspoken distinction between literature as a serious art form and cheap fiction which primarily functions as entertainment for the masses; the assumption being that Edwards's novels fall indisputably into the latter category. Significantly, all of Edwards's fiction of the 1850s was published in cheap editions, unlike the sensation novels of Braddon and Wood in the early 1860s, which appeared as three-deckers and were therefore perceived as a more direct threat to the standards of middle-class cultural practices. A notice of Edwards's third novel by the *Examiner* tellingly draws attention to the lower-class mode of publication of her work to date, even though this information seems hardly relevant to the point being made:

Miss Amelia B. Edwards produces clever stories. Her "Ladder of Life", published as one volume in a cheap series, contained picturesque matter, and was in many parts unusually well written. Her new story, "Hand and Glove", also first published in a very cheap form, sustains her credit for good writing and liveliness of fancy. ("Books of the Week," 1858: 309)

Underlying the complimentary tone of these reviews are ideologically informed assumptions regarding the function and implied readership of certain types of contemporary fiction. Thus, *The Globe's* recommendation that "[e]ven those who scorn railway volumes . . . will do well to ask for 'My Brother's Wife'" (1855, qtd. in Moon 2006: 27), is echoed by the *Athenaeum's* remark that "*Hand and Glove* makes good railway reading" (Jewsbury 1858: 783).

When Edwards's fourth novel appeared in 1864, not only was it the first of her works to be published initially in three volumes, it also marked a five year gap since her previous novel, *Hand and Glove*. By 1864, the critical controversy over sensation

fiction was at its peak, and the kind of novels that Edwards had been writing in the previous decade had become the target of serious critical concern for a significant portion of the periodical press and other cultural commentators. A key element of these critical attacks on sensation novels concerned their perceived immorality, particularly when plots revolved around sexual crimes and transgressions. In the wake of the phenomenal success of *East Lynne*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, and *Aurora Floyd*, bigamy had become a favored theme for a host of novelists, leading H. L. Mansel to claim in 1863 that "so popular has this crime become, as to give rise to an entire sub-class in this branch of literature, which may be distinguished as that of Bigamy Novels" (Mansel 1863: 490). Whether Edwards's deployment of the bigamy theme in *Barbara's History* was a calculated exploitation of current market trends is a difficult question to answer. Though she had, throughout her career, plied her pen with an eye to what would sell, it may be that the inclusion of bigamy here is incidental, and more a consequence of the novel's general indebtedness to the plot of *Jane Eyre*. Moreover, the suspected bigamy in *Barbara's History* turns out not to have been bigamy at all, a fact which several reviewers held up as a point in the novel's favor. As one critic, in a lengthy review for the *Athenaeum*, suggested, even though Edwards had "consent[ed] to humour the existing taste for bigamy stories, she was determined not to make too great a sacrifice of womanly dignity" and in the event has "effected a compromise between her own sense of right and the depraved appetite of the public" (Jeaffreson 1864: 16). Tara MacDonald argues that this ultimate avoidance of the full implications of the bigamy motif is typical of Edwards's ambiguous relationship to sensation fiction as a genre, and claims of *Barbara's History* that "in its reference to, but simultaneous resistance from, the acknowledged sensational device of the bigamy plot, Edwards has the novel question its status as sensation fiction" (2008: 5).

The relationship of this novel to the sensation genre is complicated in other ways too, not least by the circumstance that, taken as a whole, it is arguably the least sensational work of Edwards's oeuvre. *Barbara's History*, as its title indicates, is essentially a *Bildungsroman*, greatly influenced by two of the best-known examples of that form in the nineteenth-century English tradition, *David Copperfield* and *Jane Eyre*. In the early parts, Edwards reworks Dickens's 1850 novel but with a female protagonist, Barbara Churchill, whose unhappy home life is transformed when she is sent to live in Suffolk with her gruff and eccentric aunt, Mrs. Sandysshaft. Barbara becomes fascinated by her aunt's absent neighbor, Hugh Farquhar of Broomhill, when local gossip encourages the young girl to fancy him a romantic hero. After hearing about Farquhar's purchase of a Paul Veronese painting for £6,000, Barbara is instilled with a fascination for art and the artist's life. She reads all she can about the medieval painters, and is seized with "a restless desire to behold" the Veronese, and also to become a painter herself (Edwards 2000: 34). This passionate interest in both the painting and its owner establishes early on the novel's dual concern with art and love, both explored through the issue of a woman's vocation.

When Hugh finally returns to his ancestral home, Barbara worships him with "a child's idolatry – an idolatry so innocent, so unselfish, and spiritual, as few feel more

than once, if once, in life" (Edwards 2000: 59). Hugh Farquhar is reminiscent of Roland Landsell in Braddon's novel *The Doctor's Wife*, published the same year: "I am a citizen of the world – a vagrant by nature – a cosmopolitan at heart" (Edwards 2000: 54). After five years wandering in foreign lands, Hugh is pessimistic about life and alienated from the conventionalities of respectable English society, and to the 10-year-old Barbara he seems exotic romance personified. Hugh is more masculine and powerful than Braddon's character, though, and is obviously modeled on Brontë's Rochester, with Barbara heavily influenced by the child Jane Eyre.

Contemporary reviewers did not fail to notice the influence of Dickens and Brontë on *Barbara's History*, the *Athenaeum* critic commenting that the author "is greatly indebted to others for the plot, principal characters, and general tone of the book" (Jeaffreson 1864: 16). This recognition, though, did not prevent the critic from praising Edwards's novel in liberal terms. The *Saturday Review* similarly mused that "we fancy we have met all these puppets before," but added "yet it is possible so to pull the wires that our interest is excited anew" (qtd. in Moon 2006: 59). Seemingly, what rescued *Barbara's History* for the majority of these critics was their perception of Edwards's avoidance of the "excesses" of other sensation novels, her erudition, and her "vigorous style of writing" ("Literature," *Bristol Mercury* 1864: 6). *The Times* declared that *Barbara's History* "is not a story of the sensational class. There are no struggles or death thrusts, no poison or pistols. . . . It is just a novel of passion, and sentiment, and character, which never once approaches the purlieu of the police court" ("Barbara's History," 1864: 6). Others agreed that Edwards's novel transcended the generic features which they saw as determining sensation fiction, and they highlighted the "realistic" and "domestic" tone, particularly of the early sections. Though there were negative reviews, one critic in *The Examiner*, for instance, finding "[t]he plot . . . unnatural to absurdity" ("Fifty New Novels," 1864: 278), most were inclined to excuse the "improbabilities in the story" on the grounds that "the work so essentially combines the elements of the romantic novel with the tamer domestic fiction that these things do not jar upon the reader's sense" ("Literature," 1864: 6).

The sensational elements of *Barbara's History* do, in fact, only occupy the late portions of the novel. Having been taken away from her aunt by her selfish father, Barbara is dispatched to school in Germany with her elder sister. Here she rediscovers her earlier passion for art and becomes an accomplished painter, winning the main prize at a local art festival. When Hugh arrives in Zollenstrasse, their early intimacy is rekindled and, although in due course they become engaged, there are recurring hints of a dark secret in Hugh's past. After their marriage, and an extended honeymoon around Europe, the husband is strangely reluctant to return home to Broomhill. He only yields to Barbara's repeated requests when her longing for home threatens her health. Back in Suffolk, the mystery of Hugh's past is shockingly revealed to Barbara when she discovers a strange Italian woman is living in a hidden part of the house. Maddalena is a former mistress of Hugh's, but when Barbara overhears her husband address the woman as "Sposa mia" (Edwards 2000: 373) she fears her own marriage is a sham and flees from her home with her young son. After a protracted period in

Italy, supporting herself by her painting, Barbara is finally reunited with Hugh, and Maddalena, having first helped to resolve the couple's misunderstandings, dies.

If some contemporaries were less inclined to judge *Barbara's History* as sensation fiction because the bigamy turns out to be a fallacy, it is also probable that the gender of the suspected bigamist had an influence on attitudes to the book. In contrast to sensation novels such as *Lady Audley's Secret* or *Aurora Floyd*, the sexual irregularity in Edwards's novel is on the husband's side. Given many critics' hostility to the transgressive heroines of the genre, with their mysterious pasts and present secrets, Barbara's blamelessness is not to be underestimated in accounting for the consensus of critical opinion regarding the "healthiness" of Edwards's plot (see e.g. review, *Sunday Times* 1864: 2). Not only was a checkered past on the man's part far more acceptable to Victorian sensibilities, so too was the non-Englishness and peasant status of the fallen woman, Maddalena. The prominence given to other themes and ideas is also a relevant factor in explaining the critical approval. The bigamy plot is never allowed to dominate Edwards's novel, and much of the narrative is taken up with leisurely descriptions of scenery and architecture, and wide-ranging discussions of music and art. Indeed, *Barbara's History*, like all of Edwards's novels, is packed with information on a staggering variety of topics. The hero, Hugh Farquhar, converses knowledgeably on subjects ranging from art to politics, music to ancient civilizations, and at one point he even predicts climate change (Edwards 2000: 182). Rees sees this aspect of Edwards's fiction as a weakness, arguing that "[h]er novels are stuffed full of information on virtually every subject within the Victorian intellectual sphere. Plot and characterisation are not strong enough to absorb this intellectual matter comfortably" (Rees 1998: 45). The abundance of factual and discursive material does, as Rees suggests, disrupt the narrative occasionally, but it is also one of the chief features that drew the admiration and approval of many Victorian critics, raising Edwards's fiction in their estimation above other contemporary sensation novels. The *Sunday Times*, for instance, commended *Barbara's History* as "one of the best novels of the day" and observed that "[t]he knowledge which its author possesses is signally extensive and varied." There was, the writer continued, a tendency for Edwards to be on occasion "a little pedagogic or ostentatious in the display of her erudition," yet "the weakness is pardonable" because "so much good taste is displayed throughout the work" (review, 1864: 2). *The Times* reviewer had noted the same tendency, but was similarly inclined to excuse it: "the learning, of which the writer makes some parade, is so correct and so adequately phrased that we refuse to cavil at what we might otherwise think its obtrusiveness" ("*Barbara's History*," 1864: 6).

The issue of Edwards's "erudition" is an interesting one, not least because of the gendered way in which it is invariably expressed. Just as Henry James observed of Braddon that "she knows much that ladies are not accustomed to know" (James 1865: 594), Edwards seemingly perplexed certain critics by her familiarity with areas of knowledge assumed to be closed to a woman. Thus, a reviewer of her first novel pondered:

This author, were it not for the name of Amelia B. Edwards on the title page, we should pronounce to be a young man who has travelled, read, and experienced more of life in its widest sense, than the generality. We should presume the author to be of the male sex as much from the absence of certain literary characteristics as from the presence of others which are undoubtedly masculine, though they might be possessed by a woman with advantage. (*The Globe* 1855, qtd. in Moon 2006: 27)

Edwards's unusual independence from the conventional restrictions on a young unmarried woman of the period, her extensive traveling, and her voracious reading all contributed to this perceived "masculine" quality of her writing – although J. Cordy Jeaffreson, in an unsigned review, argued that despite Edwards's "somewhat extensive knowledge of books," she possessed "a mind thoroughly feminine in tone, but strong enough to pass through fields of thought without leaning on a more powerful intellect" (Jeaffreson 1864: 15). Not everyone, though, was persuaded of a woman writer's ability to trespass on male areas of knowledge convincingly. *The Pall Mall Gazette*, in an 1868 notice of Edwards's fiction, complained: "Why is it that lady novelists take delight in writing on subjects of which they must almost necessarily be ignorant?" (qtd. in Moon 2006: 64), and Jeaffreson, in a later review of her 1865 novel, *Half a Million of Money*, ridiculed Edwards for "her ignorance of London [which] betrays itself by a laughable slip" (Jeaffreson 1865: 802). Thus, while Edwards's extensive "book learning" was accepted and praised, her assumption of knowledge about worldly matters, particularly those pertaining to the male world of "club and bachelor life" (*Saturday Review* 1865, qtd. in Moon 2006: 64) was more problematic.

*Barbara's History* secured Edwards's reputation as an important contemporary novelist, but the review press was never again quite so enthusiastic about her fiction. The novel which followed it was significantly less successful in critical terms, and perhaps deservedly so. *Half a Million of Money* (1865), initially serialized in *All the Year Round*, overreaches itself in attempting to combine some half a dozen plotlines, which are never convincingly integrated, and Rees justifiably deprecates Edwards's "narrative inventiveness [which is] exuberant to the point of incontinence" (Rees 1998: 21). *The Standard* compared the novel unfavorably with its predecessor, claiming that *Half a Million of Money* was "far more improbable and sensational." Importantly though, this criticism was qualified by the assertion that, even so, it "ranks far above the Miss Braddon school" (review, 1866: 6). The fact that this critic, and others, felt compelled to make such a distinction offers an interesting insight into the perplexed question of mid-Victorian definitions of literary sensation and highlights the ideological biases and assumptions underlying its contemporary critical reception.

Edwards's place within the discourse on sensationalism, then and now, is a problematic one. In terms of our current understanding of the genre, novels such as *Half a Million of Money*, *My Brother's Wife*, and *Hand and Glove* undoubtedly correspond to the conventions, tropes, and melodramatic treatment of character and situation which usually define the mid-Victorian sensation novel. Why then did so many contemporary commentators, such as the *Standard* critic, deem Edwards to "rank far above" this

type of fiction? Part of the answer, I think, lies in the fact that novels such as *Barbara's History* move beyond the immediate range of sensation into territory more often associated with realist and domestic narratives. Moreover, the perception of Edwards as an erudite and cultured woman, coupled with her tendency to incorporate into her novels extensive discussions of art, history, and politics, made it easier for critics to dissociate her work from a genre that had rapidly become synonymous with the worst class of (sub)literary practice.

Andrew Maunder has accounted for the recent burgeoning of critical interest in the sensation genre by pointing to the crucial role such work plays in enriching our understanding of the Victorian literary field as a whole: "It is now acknowledged that if sensation fiction is cut out of the picture it is impossible to gain an accurate sense of nineteenth-century literary historiography" (Maunder 2004: xii). I would further argue that until novelists such as Edwards, and the countless other writers associated with sensation fiction in the minds of the Victorian reading public, are reinserted into the picture, then our understanding of both sensationalism and the generic conventions operating during the mid-nineteenth century will remain limited and potentially skewed.

#### NOTES

- 1 I am thinking of such writers as Frederick George Lee, Mrs. Gordon Smythies, Frederick Charles Lascelles Wraxall, John Cordy Jeaffreson, George Augustus Sala, Mrs. Mackenzie Daniels, and Mrs. J. C. Newby, among many others.
- 2 There is not space here for a detailed discussion of Edwards's relationships with these three women. See Rees (1998) and Moon (2006) for further information. Lucy Renshawe was Edwards's traveling companion on both the 1871 trip to the Dolomites and the Egyptian expedition of 1873–4. Marianne North was a painter who traveled the world extensively. She and Edwards shared a correspondence for many years which, on Edwards's side at least, was passionate and romantic. Kate Bradbury acted as Edwards's amanuensis in later life, and was a close friend and confidante.
- 3 Edwards had previously published a travel book entitled *Sights and Stories: Being Some Account of a Holiday Tour through the North of Belgium* (London: Victoria Press, 1862).

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# Dora Russell

*Janice M. Allan*

[T]he novels of Dora Russell are so well known and so popular that it is only necessary to say that this one is worthy of its predecessors and of the author's reputation. Abounding in startling incidents of every kind – from smuggling to coining, and from attempted to actual murder – it would be idle to endeavour to give an analysis of it. Readers who like their fiction to be strong and thrilling will find here specimens of every variety of sensationalism. ("Literature," 1892: 3)

This review will inevitably come as no small surprise to many readers of the present volume. For despite the ongoing recovery of "lost" authors fueled by the recent resurgence of interest in nineteenth-century popular fiction, Dora Russell (1830–1905) remains largely forgotten and ignored. Yet in the final quarter of the nineteenth century Russell had a well-established and, to some degree, international reputation as a prolific and popular serial novelist. Deemed "the sole heir of Miss Braddon" (Saintsbury 1894: 64), she published more than thirty novels (as well as a number of shorter narratives) incorporating a range of sensational motifs including murder, suicide, secret marriages, bigamy, adultery, illegitimacy, blackmail, duplicitous identity, and madness.

Focused on "those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors" (James 1865: 593), Russell's novels belong to the category of domestic sensationalism: "not so much a rejection of the domestic novel as an aberrant strain within that genre, in which the darker aspects of courtship and family life . . . are foregrounded" (Daly 2009: 27–8). Taken as a whole, her corpus represents a sustained critique of marriage which is, more often than not, experienced as, at best, a "nameless disappointment" and, at worst, a "hateful slavery" (Russell 1895: 153, 44). Lacking any legal recourse, a surprising number of Russell's heroines – such as Amy Williams

(*The Vicar's Governess*, 1874), Elizabeth Gordon (*Footprints in the Snow*, 1893), and Nell Drummond (*The Drift of Fate*, 1894) – simply abandon their husbands. In an often-repeated pattern, these runaway wives flee to London – a transitional space between the past and the future – only to resurface, having assumed a new name and identity, in the form of a governess or companion who carries her secret into the unsuspecting home of her employers. Masquerading as single women, such characters then indulge, however briefly, in the fantasy that they are free to form new, more appealing attachments. Given the opportunities for the vicarious expression of unwomanly resentment – not to mention agency – offered by such narratives, it is hardly surprising that Russell's novels were particularly popular with female readers. As was routinely acknowledged by the critics, each new publication from her pen was bound to find its way into “the hands of all the young women – and old women too, for the matter of that – in the country” (“Recent Novels” 1879: 5).

Like many of her heroines, Russell's novels assumed more than one guise and identity. Most made their first appearance in the pages of provincial newspapers, only to reappear in triple-decker form for the circulating libraries before being reissued as a single volume “yellowback” for the railway stalls. Hence they reached a large and diverse audience. In volume form, they received attention (albeit not always favorable) in both the provincial and metropolitan literary press where critics – while routinely lamenting Russell's lack of originality and slipshod grammar – were also forced to acknowledge the appeal of her complex and sensational plots. For example, writing about *The Broken Seal* (1887) – classified by *The Academy* as a “‘maniac romance’” (Sharp 1886: 423) – the *Daily Mail* claimed that the element of suspense “is maintained with a skill which would not disgrace the master of this form of the craft, Mr. Wilkie Collins” (“Novels,” 1887: 6). Nor was such praise limited to the newspapers; according to the prestigious *Westminster Review*, “few know better how to invent a good plot for a story than Miss Dora Russell” (“Belles lettres,” 1887: 652).

So high, in fact, was Russell's stature within the late Victorian publishing industry that her name became a “tradable commodity” (Maunder 2005: 24) employed to sell newspapers and promote Tillotson's “Fiction Bureau” – the newspaper syndication agency to which Russell was affiliated for most of her career – to prospective new clients both at home and abroad. The fact that Russell “emerges as Tillotson's highest paid author of the 1890s” (Law 2000: 88) is a testament to her ongoing, if nostalgic, marketability within the new literary landscape of the *fin de siècle*. Demand for reprints continued through the first two decades of the twentieth century and, in 1919, one of her most popular novels, *Footprints in the Snow*, was adapted to film (Low 2003: 286). While never admitted by her contemporaries into the first rank of novelists – sensational or otherwise – Russell's position within the middle ranks was, for more than twenty years, comfortably assured.

In the end, however, it was this very marketability that paved the way for Russell's subsequent neglect. Even at the height of her success, her reputation was tarnished by a taint of commercialism that excluded her from the realm of “high” art. As expressed by a critic in *The Graphic*, her work:

does not belong to a high order of fiction, but rather to the class of literature which a number of deserving workmen and workwomen turn out with strict punctuality, despatch, and attention to business, in order that the average novel reader may not be without at least one new novel a week. ("New Novels," 1891: 531)

Such attacks were hardly unique to Russell. Indeed the strategic marginalization of sensation fiction as a market-driven commodity was, from its very inception, part and parcel of the critical resistance to the genre (Miller Casey 2006: 5). Yet it seems, in the case of Russell, that such attitudes may have been exacerbated by her association with Tillotson's syndicate, where "the various brands of Serial Fiction are sampled and puffed like Cooper's Teas or Gilbey's Clarets" ("Literary Notes," 1891: 1) and, in the process, rendered indistinguishable from any other type of perishable commodity. At the same time, her initial mode of publication – which sacrificed "the luxury of bold type, fine paper and a well-spaced page to the necessarily cramped columns and rough appearance of a local newspaper" ("Notes of the Month," 1889: 419) – further emphasized the transitory nature of her work. For many critics the fate of such "scrubby" productions was clear: they "come in like the Solway and will, we trust, go out like its tide" (Saintsbury 1885: 116). Thus it is difficult, as Graham Law has argued,

to escape the conclusion that the ephemerality of Russell's preferred medium of communication – the copious, fragile and eminently disposable pages of the local paper – contributed to the rapidity with which her fame evaporated. (2004: viii)

There is little exaggeration in Law's claim that Russell's reputation has been completely "obliterated" (2004: viii). Her name does not appear within any of the standard reference works devoted to the period, nor does it warrant an entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Even more conspicuous is Russell's absence from a number of more recent publications that aim to reshape our understanding of the sensation genre by drawing attention to forgotten voices, especially those of a second generation of writers publishing in the 1870s and beyond. Indeed, Russell has received sustained attention from only two scholars: the Chartist historian Owen Ashton, who situates her career within its immediate local context, the radical circle associated with the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, and Graham Law. Given the paucity of modern reprints of Russell's work, Law's 2004 edition of *Beneath the Wave* (1878) represents an important step in her recuperation. At the same time, his discussion of Russell as a leading example of what he calls "newspaper fiction" sheds new light on both her corpus and the wider material culture in which it was embedded. From these two accounts emerge a complex and, at times, contradictory portrait of a late Victorian professional woman writer.

Russell's decision to enter the literary marketplace was determined by economic necessity (here and elsewhere, Mary Braddon serves as a useful point of comparison, as much for the points of divergence as similarity). Born in June 1830 in the

northeastern county of Northumberland – which provides the setting for many of her novels – Russell’s background was solidly middle-class. As was reported in a contemporary biographical sketch, she “was reared in comfortable and happy circumstances. There were large grounds in which to roam, ponies to ride, and every amusement and enjoyment that indulgent parents could provide” (Black 1896: 189). In 1856, however, her father, George Russell, lost his position as colliery agent when a series of floods forced the firm of Bell and Dixon to close some of its mines. Following further “reverses of fortune,” including the death of his wife, he was declared bankrupt in 1863; the family lost its tenancy at Willington Farm, a property of some 400 acres, and was forced to move into rented accommodation in the village of Gosforth, near Newcastle (Welford 1916: 2). Although there are no surviving accounts of how Russell perceived her family’s change in circumstance, her novels are full of irresponsible fathers and impoverished gentlewomen who, like Nancy Loftus of *A Bitter Birthright* (1890), are overwhelmed with feelings of shock and degradation when, suddenly faced with the “miserable, humiliating want of money” (Russell 1890: 32), they are forced to assume duties and responsibilities for which they have been neither emotionally nor educationally prepared. Yet Russell’s own response was decidedly more robust and, in 1868 when she was approaching 40, she took the decision to redress the family’s fortunes by becoming an author.

This decision might well have come to nothing were it not for a fortuitous meeting with the radical journalist Richard Welford, the first in a series of men who would shape and determine the course of Russell’s career. Welford had recently purchased the house in which George Russell was residing with his three daughters and, in February 1869, Dora arranged a meeting to negotiate the financial arrangements attendant on their removal. After steering the conversation to Welford’s experience with the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* and admitting that she had unsuccessfully submitted stories to the *London Journal* and the *Family Herald* herself, Russell brazenly produced the manuscripts for inspection (Welford 1916: 2). Thus the real purpose of her visit was made clear. According to Welford, these manuscripts “were badly punctuated, or not at all, they contained fearfully long and involved sentences, and, although full of colloquial matter, were written from beginning to end in one single paragraph” (1916: 2). Despite such flaws, Welford could detect “considerable constructive ability” and, throughout the spring of 1869, acted as Russell’s mentor and adviser. According to his own account, “I showed Dora how to write, how to punctuate, and how and where to break up her stories into appropriate paragraphs. She proved to be a most apt and docile pupil” (1916: 2). At some point during this tutelage, Welford introduced Russell to the ex-Chartist William E. Adams, who edited the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, and when, in February 1870, Adams announced a new literary competition, Russell submitted what would be her first published piece, “The Two Selbys.”

The *Chronicle* received fifty-five entries for the short story category and, despite displaying “a want of . . . literary culture” (“Prize Stories” 1870: 1), Russell’s entry was awarded third prize, earning her the princely sum of £1. Further work in the *Chronicle* followed, including “The Miner’s Oath” which, together with the novella

entitled "Underground," was published in 1871 as a single illustrated volume by George Routledge, to whom Russell had been introduced by her local champions. In these early narratives it is already possible to trace many of the themes that dominate Russell's fully developed novels. "The Two Selbys," for example, opens with the protagonist admitting a secret "bitterer than death" and closes upon a rumor of adultery and divorce when a young girl wearies of her mercenary marriage (Russell 1870: 2). Combining overt evangelical moralizing with sensational violence, "The Miner's Oath" recounts how a brutal and coarse overseer, jealous of a faithless coquette, seeks revenge on a steady young miner and, in the process, sets off an explosion in which he himself is killed. Notably, the narrator accords a significant portion of blame to the selfish flirt, while the would-be murderer is granted both human and divine forgiveness before death.

The figure of the beautiful but heartless coquette who, like a siren, lures men to their doom, appears repeatedly in Russell's corpus. Two of her most obvious incarnations are the serial adulteress Isabel Trevor and the even more notorious Frances Forth, whose trail of destruction begins when, having miscarried her illegitimate child, she forces her sister to marry the man who witnessed its burial in order to buy his silence (from *Beneath the Wave* and *Jezebel's Friends* [1889] respectively). While such sensational anti-heroines are clearly reminiscent of Lady Audley, they are accorded little of the sympathy awarded by Braddon to their progenitor and, indeed, for Law, Russell is decidedly more conservative than her more successful counterpart (2004: xv–xvi). In "The Curate of Royston," however, we meet, in the character of Mrs. Forbes, the prototype of what is actually a much more significant female figure within Russell's corpus: the "flawed heroine" who is characterized as much by her agency and resolve as her forbearance and submission to duty. As I will argue below, the figure of the "flawed heroine" is both decidedly improper *and* undeniably womanly and thus does not lend itself well to such easy labeling.

Within the pages of the *Chronicle*, Russell's stories were reaching an audience of more than 30,000 (Ashton 2000: 5) while *The Miner's Oath and Underground* received a number of favorable reviews, especially in the local press ("Literary Notices" 1871: 6). In 1874 she felt confident enough to move to London and, over the next three years, published three novels, aimed at the circulating library market, with Tinsley Brothers. The next stage in Russell's career – her twenty-year association with Tillotson's Fiction Bureau – has been meticulously documented by Law (2004), and I would refer interested readers to his work. It is, however, instructive to note the terms on which Russell sold her work to Tillotsons and, more specifically, how these compared to other serial sensationalists such as Braddon. As Law suggests:

It was not only that Braddon could command far higher sums for her stories from Tillotsons (£500 as against £250 for comparable works in 1877, for instance, and the gap got wider), but also that the terms of sale were entirely dissimilar. Braddon merely leased the serial right to her latest fiction for a temporary period, whereas Russell sold entire copyright absolutely to the Bolton firm. This meant, of course, that any and all

profits on those triple-decker and yellowback editions, as well as on the many subsequent newspaper appearances, accrued not to the author but to the agent. (2004: xiv–xv)

Such terms, as well as the more formal contracts that Russell entered into in 1889, may have served her well while she was young and healthy enough to produce a steady flow of new fiction, but when she became seriously ill in 1898 the downside became all too clear. Unable to produce new work and deriving no benefit from past labors, Russell was forced to make two applications for financial aid to the Royal Literary Fund. As Ashton has discovered, the first of these applications, made in October 1898, reveals that her yearly income to that month consisted of a mere £40 and was thus “at least £12 below what was considered to be the minimum threshold for maintaining financial independence for middle-class single women” (2000: 9). Russell was awarded a grant of £40 and, upon a subsequent application the following year, a further £25; an amount supplemented by a public subscription organized by members of the Women’s Writers Club, which Russell had helped to found in 1892 (Ashton 2000: 8). Although her financial situation improved slightly in the final years of her life, she died, in 1905, living the life of genteel poverty and dependence despised and feared by so many of her heroines.

Given the circumstances of her own life, it is not entirely surprising that female dependence and female employment emerge as prominent themes within Russell’s writing. Indeed her novels abound with characters such as *Beneath the Wave’s* Hilda Marston: “timid gentlewomen who are left to fight the world’s hard battles” (Russell 2004: 164). Such women, Russell consistently suggests, have few options. Some, like Laura Clayton of *The Vicar’s Governess*, are forced to endure a daily catalog of small slights and petty degradations as the price of “eating the grudging bread bestowed by rich relations and friends” (Russell 1874: II, 173). Others, such as Hilda Marston and Amy Williams, the titular governess, are forced to support themselves, and Russell’s especial sympathy is reserved for this class of women. Speaking of their most “painful position,” Laura Clayton insists:

“There is none like it. The lower classes have all employments laid out for them, which are open to their choice – the servant, the shop-girl – these are independent. They can work without losing caste, and marry whom they love. But the poor lady – we cannot wonder, perhaps, that they should prefer the humiliation of taking any husband who can offer them a home, to the constant humiliations of seeking new ones among strangers.” (Russell 1874: II, 172–3)

Written in the midst of a very public controversy about women’s right to meaningful and remunerative employment – part of an ongoing campaign to define women as something more than purely domestic creatures – Russell’s depictions of female labor appear decidedly retrograde. But it is important to acknowledge that she is, at the very least, drawing public attention to the very real struggles faced by impoverished gentlewomen. For as the narrator of *Footprints in the Snow* insists:

this is an age when a severe training is required and necessary for almost every possible way of earning a livelihood. Thus women unused and unprepared for the position must ever find the greatest difficulty in obtaining a situation. (Russell 1893: 112)

This assertion is borne out in Hilda Marston's faltering and futile attempts to find work as a music teacher.

She advertised in several papers, but no one, in all human probability, ever read the modest lines in which she announced that she was prepared to receive pupils, although these modest lines cost her a little sum that she could ill afford to spare. Then she asked for permission, and paid for permission, to place her cards in the music-shop windows of the part of the town in which she lived; but still without any result. (Russell 2004: 164)

Close to desperation, Hilda is finally introduced to two prospective students, only to be subjected to a humiliating process of inspection as they looked her over much "as they would have looked over a dress or a shawl lying on a linendraper's counter. She was purchaseable also, so naturally they thought they had a right to examine her" (Russell 2004: 167). Although she does eventually obtain enough work to become self-sufficient, Hilda has, we are told, achieved nothing more than a "bare living and no honour." And this, as the narrator is quick to point out, "is the real truth as regards this world; perhaps in the next the meek daughters of toil may meet with a better reward" (2004: 164–5).

The last option available to women like Hilda and Laura is to sell themselves in marriage; bartering their youth, affection, and self-respect for financial security. Making a clear distinction between mercenary women motivated by greed and the victimized and vulnerable who are driven by necessity, Russell evinces little sympathy for the former. In *Lady Sefton's Pride* (1884) for example, Julia Sefton, a young heiress, sacrifices the love of her cousin Walter to marry the decidedly repulsive and syphilitic Duke of Malvern: a "pale stunted young man, with almost colourless skin and hair, and with the seams of a terrible hereditary disease on his cheek and throat" (Russell 1884: 40). Her ambition is, according to the novel's mores, suitably punished when a long confinement at the hands of her husband and mother-in-law, combined with Walter's refusal to engage in an adulterous relationship, brings out the incipient madness in her blood and she commits suicide. In contrast, those of Russell's heroines who marry only when beaten down by the "constant humiliations" of dependence or drudgery are accorded the narrator's sympathy. Thus when Hilda accepts a proposal from the Reverend Horace Jervis, an individual so worthy that she can view him only as a saint and not as a man, the narrator pre-empts the reader's judgment by asserting:

It is all very well for those who have never felt the want of [money] to talk grandly and largely on the subject. But wait until the pinch of poverty comes, before you can estimate money at its full value. (Russell 2004: 208)

A similar defense is offered for Laura Clayton's decision to marry the wealthy but decrepit Mr. Peel. Reflecting on how her marriage will be viewed by the highly principled George Manners, who here stands for the reader, she determines:

"He will judge me by my acts . . . not by my long endurance of what he would not have borne for a day. But what man can know aright a woman's heart, or dream of the petty insults which a poor girl must ever learn to bear?" (Russell 1874: III, 245)

Seen in these terms, mercenary marriages may be justifiable, but they are rarely happy. Treated more like an employee than a wife, Lady Leman of *A Man's Privilege* (1895) speaks for many when she comes to regret her bargain: "weary of a bondage I despise and hate; of ease and luxury bought at such a price" (Russell 1895: 90).

Through her sensitive and sympathetic portrayal of characters such as Hilda and Laura, as well as her representation of the degradations associated with poverty, dependence, work, and mercenary marriages, Russell effectively foregrounds the limitations and inequities of women's roles both within and beyond the domestic sphere. Like Braddon, she also "foregrounds the conflict between women's sexual/romantic desires and their desires for material objects and money" (Liggins 2004: 80), never letting her readers forget that the "'base coin dug from the bowels of the earth' has indeed a wonderful influence on our destinies" (Russell 2004: 208). Yet such critiques are considerably weakened by her fairytale endings where the hitherto inescapable fetters of poverty and dependence, not to mention unwanted husbands, are, as if magically, swept away.

Consider, as a case in point, Russell's 1894 novel, *The Drift of Fate*. The novel opens with Nell Drummond – who has known "nothing else but poverty and debt ever since she had been able to understand these two grim evils" (Russell 1894: 11) – being quite literally sold in marriage: the price of her father's debt to their landlord. Although she goes through with the ceremony – and thereby rescues her family from ruin – she immediately abandons her husband (she has also purchased a knife with which to dispatch herself should she not be able to escape). Having assumed a new identity, Nell, although legally bound, finds love while working as a companion in Northumberland. When, however, a coincidental sighting at a murder inquest leads to her discovery, she is forced to leave her position and is hounded across the country by lawyers and private detectives. Yet at the very moment when her husband arrives to demand the restitution of his conjugal rights, he suffers an apopleptic fit, not only leaving Nell free to marry the man she loves but also endowing her with a considerable fortune. If, as it seems, the point of this novel is to document the desperate extremes to which individuals can be driven by poverty – the sacrifice of a child, the willingness to commit suicide and, through the subplot, violent murder (committed by a hungry poacher) – then Russell's position is only further undermined by Nell's refusal to accept this inheritance. This idealized and highly principled stance may be required – both as part of the requisite happy ending and



as a valorization of middle-class values (the two are not unrelated) – but it stands in stark contrast to the rest of the novel and effectively undercuts – indeed contradicts – the critique it offers.

The element of simple wish-fulfillment offered by this conclusion should not, however, obscure the complexity of a character like Nell Drummond. By turns calculating and impulsive, full of steely resolve and generous love, Nell is, in fact, an example of what I am calling Russell's "flawed heroine." Neither a self-sacrificing paragon of feminine virtue nor a demonic fiend, she embodies Russell's belief that the "best woman is not an angel; and if she were I don't suppose we faulty mortals would like her" (Russell 2004: 56). And while these characters may not be as obviously or immediately threatening as a murderous Lady Audley or the overtly sensual heroines of Rhoda Broughton, their more lifelike proportions bring them into much closer proximity to the female reader. Recognizably human, they are actually much harder to dismiss than a "monster."

*Footprints in the Snow* offers us a particularly interesting example of the "flawed heroine" in the character of Elizabeth (or Lissa) Gordon. Described as an "exceptional beauty," her physical appearance immediately marks her off from the feminine ideal:

There was an olive tint in the clear skin, and the thick hair that grew low on the broad brow was darker by many shades than is generally seen in this country. She was above the average height also, and her finely developed figure, and the grand outline of her whole physique, made her a strikingly handsome and remarkable looking woman. (Russell 1893: 9)

Although the daughter of a well-born Scottish officer, Elizabeth has, since the death of her mother, lived with her uncle, a prosperous tenant farmer, and his three sons, acting the part of a "pretty Tyrant" (Russell 1893: 22). Secretly engaged to Lieutenant Jasper Tyrell, second son of their landlord, Elizabeth, who enjoys male attention, has also captured the hearts of Jasper's brother, Harry, and her eldest cousin, Richard Horton.

Elizabeth's somewhat complacent state of happiness is, however, shattered when the murdered body of Harry Tyrell is discovered on the border between the two properties. Worse still, Richard provides her with clear proof that the crime was committed by Jasper, presumably in a jealous argument over their engagement. Although convinced of his guilt, Elizabeth's feelings for Jasper remain unaltered, and her first priority is to destroy the evidence – the titular footprints in the snow – that identifies him. Begging Richard not to betray the truth, he agrees to keep silent on the condition that Elizabeth will marry him. Although repulsed by his coarse nature, she agrees. As Jasper was known to be returning to duty on the night of the murder he is not suspected, and the crime remains unsolved. As time passes, however, Elizabeth comes to suspect that Harry's murder was actually committed by Richard rather than Jasper. And when, in a fit of delirium tremens brought on by his

worsening alcoholism, her husband finally confesses to the crime, she determines “to leave her home, in secret to live, and in secret to die, rather than live another day by the side of Richard Horton” (Russell 1893: 97).

The episode of Lissa’s midnight departure is particularly revealing in terms of Russell’s treatment of the “flawed heroine.” Given that she is exercising a decidedly improper degree of agency, one might expect the narrator to establish a clear distance between character and reader; bracketing off and, in effect, quarantining the threat to normative femininity. In fact, however, Russell does exactly the opposite:

Elizabeth left her home, and started forth on a journey the end of which she could not foresee.

There is something rather fearful, is there not, to a woman to be out alone beneath the dusky curtain, visible, yet invisible, which steals down upon the world at night? We start at shadows, and the very breeze seems to whisper strange sounds to our unaccustomed ears. Elizabeth was far from being free from these weak but pardonable terrors of her sex. Nerved as she was by her horror of Dick’s crime – by her determination to escape for ever from a tie grown so hateful to her heart, that she could no longer endure it – she yet shrank from this desolate walk; and trembled as she went along. (Russell 1893: 99)

At the very moment when Elizabeth might be seen to sacrifice her femininity, she is effectively re-feminized through the attribution of the “pardonable terrors of her sex.” Moreover, the pointedly inclusive use of “we” and “our” refuses to acknowledge any distance, or difference, between narrator, reader, and character.

The moral ambiguity of this episode – in terms of both Elizabeth’s actions and the narrator’s response – is typical of the novel as a whole. Months later, for example, when Elizabeth is struggling to support herself in London, she re-encounters Jasper, who asks her to run away with him. Unsurprisingly, she refuses; and while the narrator’s endorsement of this decision is unequivocal, she is quick to remind her readers that such a sacrifice does not come easily or naturally, either to Elizabeth or to themselves:

We will not follow her through all her mental struggles during the long waking hours that she passed. . . . Easy it is, Oh! Reader, to say, “I will do right – I will keep in the straight path, however stony it may be” – but do we not cast many a lingering look back to the broad and pleasant one we must leave behind. (Russell 1893: 145)

Indeed, even as Elizabeth writes to refuse Jasper, she cannot forbear “kissing the lines she wrote; laying her cheeks and lips on them, because afterwards she knew his hands would touch them” (Russell 1893: 146). A signifier both of conventional morality and illicit desire, this palimpsestic text comes to stand for Elizabeth’s inherently contradictory nature, suggesting not simply that women can move *between* a state of purity and a state of fallenness but that such states can, however uneasily, coexist.

When Lissa and Jasper's paths cross for the third time, the death of Richard has freed her from both a hateful marriage and the burden of his secret crime. Jasper, however, has engaged himself, in bitterness and pique, to the young and virtuous Eva Dalziel. Assuming, once again, the part of a "noble" woman, Elizabeth refuses to sacrifice Eva to their love (Russell 1893: 228). It is significant, however, that Russell refuses to represent this sacrifice as its own reward. As Elizabeth acknowledges to herself: "'A good woman would be happy by-and-by, in thinking that Jasper and Eva were happy – but I cannot be – I never shall be'" (1893: 233). Consumed with jealousy and desire, Lissa agrees to meet Jasper one last time, just two days before the wedding, for a final farewell. Unable or, perhaps worse, unwilling to restrain her passion for what is effectively a married man, Elizabeth's decision challenges a number of assumptions about conventional femininity. Yet, once again, the narrator draws her back into the fold, emphasizing the womanly qualities in evidence at the very moment of her worst transgression.

"Come in here," she said, and she led him into the breakfast-room that she had just left, which was dimly lighted by a fire burning low and red in the grate; and Jasper followed her, closing the door behind them, and they two were alone.

"Well, I have come," he said, and he put his arm round her, and Elizabeth's head fell upon his breast.

"It is such a storm," she whispered, thinking, *woman-like*, even then of his comforts, "and you are wet and weary, Jasper."

"It is no matter," he said; "but I have come a long way – for this –"

(Russell 1893: 243; emphasis added)

What follows remains unrepresented and, within the pages of the provincial papers, unrepresentable.

Lest it appear that I am exaggerating the subversive element within Russell's writing, I should also point out that Lissa and Jasper's transgression is not allowed to go unpunished. Here, as in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), retributive judgment comes in the form of a terrible train crash. Yet in a striking and significant departure from the original, the victim is not the transgressive woman but her equally culpable partner. Like Lady Isabel, Jasper is originally thought to be fatally injured and, although he survives, his face is left virtually unrecognizable and he walks with a permanent limp. Yet while Wood compounds Isabel's physical punishment with the emotional masochism associated with her return to East Lynne, Russell refuses to countenance any further sacrifice or punishment. Within days, Lissa and Jasper are married and, although she continues to atone for her transgressions through her work amongst the poor, she is accorded the happy ending normally reserved for the conventionally proper woman.

An amalgamation of womanly and unwomanly traits, characters such as Elizabeth Gordon and Nell Drummond effectively challenge and complicate contemporary constructions of femininity, reminding the reader that life is "a mingled skein, where

good and evil will cross and recross each other in [a] strange, entangled web" (Russell 1893: 286). Inhabiting the very borderline of what Lyn Pykett has described as "the conservative/radical dilemma" (2000: 279), they allow us to move beyond a dualistic understanding of gender and genre – pure or fallen, conservative or radical – and thus warrant greater attention than they have hitherto received. For too long a forgotten name within women's sensation writing, it is hoped that she will now receive the critical consideration she so richly deserves.

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29

## Short Fiction

*Brittany Roberts*

The term sensation fiction has been somewhat misleading the past thirty or so years in criticism of the genre, as studies that have claimed to advance our understanding of the sensational “fiction” of the 1860s (and beyond) have done so in the vast majority of cases at the expense of any fiction that is not the novel.<sup>1</sup> Early writers who first sought to invite sensation into our conversations on Victorian literature and culture did so with no uncertain pretenses. Perhaps taking their cue from either Margaret Oliphant’s (1862) or Henry Mansel’s (1863) famous tirades against sensation “novels,” writers of many of our now landmark studies of the genre (such as Winifred Hughes’s *Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* [1980] or Lyn Pykett’s *The Sensation Novel* [1994]) were not misleading about their intentions – their objective was to trace the rise of a particular kind of *novel* and with it a particular kind of cultural phenomenon. To be sure, the genre has, after all, been championed as the “*novel* with a secret.” But despite the tendency to let it serve as the mantelpiece of sensation fiction, we should not forget the shorter works that helped to develop the genre. While it is no secret that the authors who make up the sensation canon wrote fiction beside novels – fiction that easily shares the same concerns as their longer works – these “minor” stories are infrequently alluded to in criticism.<sup>2</sup> Their stories, along with those of the countless forgotten writers that actually filled the better part of weekly and monthly magazines,<sup>3</sup> were read right alongside serialized novels and were indeed duly responsible for establishing the culture of sensationalism of the time.<sup>4</sup>

Given that the sensation paradigm as we know it is identifiable primarily by elaborate, far-fetched plots that “preach to the nerves” with each unlikely twist and turn, it is not surprising that short stories that serve up the same delicious helping of bigamy, illegitimacy, and other social “secrets” tend to get shelved as crime fiction, mystery fiction, or detective fiction (presumably on the issue of space alone). In reality,

though, "sensation" was as much a buzz word that encapsulated middle-class anxieties about a changing nation as it was a distinct literary genre. Short stories – whether "crime," "mystery," or "detective" – neatly packaged their tabloid thrills in a quick, single-serving dose, and could thematically enliven the central serial installment featured in a middle-class magazine. Deborah Wynne's excellent study of serialized sensation novels in middle-class family magazines investigates this "intertextual approach" editors took in piecing together each issue, an approach that invited their readers to make "thematic connections" between serialized novels and other features by the "power of juxtaposition" (Wynne 2001: 3). Where there was a novel installment that depicted forgery or insanity, for example, so often followed an article or story on forgery or insanity. Wynne suggests that the reason behind "interpellating" readers in this way was not only to enhance their "reading pleasure," but also to "generate debate" (Wynne 2001: 3), and presumably in so doing, to sell lots of magazines.

Still, even if short stories played a supporting role to the serial novel in the drama of magazine sales, it was nevertheless an important one in the tragedy of what Henry Mansel calls the "wide-spread corruption" of Britain (Mansel 2001: 45). Mansel, a political conservative and professor of ecclesiastical history at Oxford University, condemned the periodical press for its role in producing works of an "ephemeral interest" (Mansel 2001: 45), a species of fiction that apparently lacked the substance and quality to be bound and bought by a more conscious, moral consumer. He says that these sensational works were "written to meet an ephemeral demand, aspiring only to an ephemeral existence" (2001: 46), and that their "ephemeral methods of awakening the interest of their readers," causes them "to act as the dram or the dose, rather than as the solid food, because the effect is more immediately perceptible" (2001: 46). While the novels to which he later alludes (*Lady Audley's Secret* [1861] and *The Woman in White* [1860]) might easily be charged with offering a particularly strong "dram" of nervous shocks for an eager reading public, the short fiction they imbibed might actually fall more in line with Mansel's criticism. After all, both novels were published in numerous triple-decker editions (even if they were primarily loaned out from lending libraries instead of purchased) and continued to shape the popular literary climate for many years to come. Short fiction, however, at least through the 1870s, was looked upon by Victorian readers and magazine editors as mere "by-product," or "filler material" to the "central commodity" of the novel (Orel 1986: 2), and truly lived an "ephemeral existence," as the larger portion of these stories were rarely revised or reprinted.

Considering, then, that part of what made sensation fiction so problematic for literary critics at the time was its appeal to transient "bodily" desires for excitation, it makes sense that a relatively low-commitment read like a short story would interest readers in search of low-cost shocks and shivers. We should not assume, however, that these stories are merely abbreviated novels – even if the short story fostered the same kind of excitement and suspense as the heavily plotted sensation novel. These devices had to be uniquely developed within a truncated space, which was often accomplished

by focusing on a particular sensational event rather than a series of dramatic twists and turns in plot. According to Joanne Reardon, the test of a good crime story is that “it promises much, gives you something but leaves you wanting so much more” (Reardon 2008: 60). Implicit in this useful, though general, remark are two key functions of sensational short stories: (1) to engross readers for a short period of time and “dose” them with the thrills they craved, and (2) to make readers want more sensational stories and therefore make them more likely to buy future issues of the magazine. Recognizing the unique role short fiction played in creating the culture of the sensationalism that still intrigues readers and scholars today will not only expand what genres can “qualify” as sensation, but also shed new light on the appeal of longer sensation novels in a changing literary marketplace.

### The Appeal of Short Fiction for Editors and Readers

Although the Victorians are not exactly known for their literary brevity, short fiction had a unique appeal for editors and readers alike. The repeal of the newspaper tax in 1855, improvements in paper-making and print technology, as well as increasing literacy made periodicals quite profitable, and editors sought to fill them with stories that would speak to their readers’ tastes. Even though serialized novels proved to be the most profitable feature a magazine could boast, stories were appealing to editors because they were a cheap way to fill their issues and could be found in ready supply from authors trying to make a quick buck. Dennis Denisoff points out that it was “common for short stories to be written quickly by ‘hack’ writers who were encouraged to emphasize exciting narratives while giving little attention to subtlety of language or depth of character” (Denisoff 2004: 19),<sup>5</sup> a description, it might be added, that has frequently been used to describe sensation novels as well. There was also less of a risk to the periodical if a story was not well received, so there was less pressure on publishers to be overly discerning about the stories they chose. Of course, this does not mean that publishers did not want to make their issues as pleasing as possible to their readers, only that stories did not carry the same kind of responsibility as serialized novels.

For readers, short works were appealing because they, like serialized novels, were inexpensive to buy and quick to read. Also, because novels were the primary motivation behind buying a magazine, stories were sort of an added bonus for making the purchase. Buy one serial installment, get a story and an article free. Such was a great bonus given the lack of inexpensive entertainment for the middle class (Wynne 2001: 3). If editors succeeded in their thematic approach to piecing together an issue, the experience of reading the story could provide yet another source of sensational thrills or complicate the social commentary of the novel. If the story was a bad one, not much time was wasted.

Working-class readers also appreciated short fiction because it could be consumed even when little leisure time could be found. Directed more toward this readership



than middle-class family magazines were “penny dreadfuls.” Described in John Camden Hotten’s *Slang Dictionary* (1865) as “penny publications which depend more upon sensationalism than merit, artistic or literary, for success” (qtd. in Denisoff 2004: 19), penny dreadfuls were read primarily by working-class (often juvenile) consumers and were far more explicit in their handling of violence and sexuality than middle-class magazines. If sensation fiction could provide an escape from the everyday and mundane for middle-class readers, the dreadfuls could provide a more highly spiced escape from daily toils. This sentiment is echoed by Margaret Oliphant, who regretfully concedes that for the “unfortunate masses” whose leisure is “sharpened with the day’s fatigue,” “it is a story, for a story’s sake . . . not a story because it is a good story” that provides the incentive to read (Oliphant 2005: 198, 200).

### What Is a Sensational Short Story?

Any study of Victorian sensation is bound, at some point or another, to run into the problem of genre parameters. Richard Fantina and Kimberly Harrison point out that, while the genre typically involved “mysteries, murders, and social improprieties usually within the respectable middle class or aristocratic home . . . [and] capitalized on the Victorian public’s appetite for scandal,” these characteristics “do not always apply,” which in turn has “open[ed] avenues for critical discussion regarding what *novels* and which authors are indeed sensational” (Harrison and Fantina 2006: xii; emphasis added). This kind of thinking has recently invited authors like Rhoda Broughton and Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu into collections like *Victorian Sensations*, even as it reinscribes the novel as the primary marker of the genre. Though the novel was the principal subject of many high-profile reviews of the most scathing sort, as well as the driving force behind magazine sales, many “exciting” tales of crime and mystery also appeared at the time. In his anthology *Victorian Tales of Mystery and Detection*, Michael Cox draws attention to this proliferation of stories in the middle of the century in an effort to plot the development of the detective story. He claims that it was

within the uniquely Victorian matrix of sensation fiction that the detective story progressed towards maturity. In its key elements – episodic incident, the emphasis on plot rather than character, contemporary settings, the manipulation of actual events, murder, forgery, and robbery, mistaken identity, and formulaic construction – sensation fiction provided the bridge between Poe and . . . Conan Doyle. (Cox 1992: xv)

Cox does not go as far as to call the stories in his anthology “sensation” in and of themselves, opting instead for the title of “crime” or “mystery” stories. His claim that they are “indebted” to the mid-century phenomenon of sensation fiction without actually “being” sensation fiction again testifies to the pervasiveness of the novel as a defining symbol of the genre.

Part of the reason why Cox may have decided against officially calling the stories in his collection “sensation” probably has to do with the fact that the majority of them were not published at the height of the sensation craze. A number of the stories were originally published in the 1850s and 1870s, and a larger portion still in the years leading up to the reign of Doyle. Though such a move may then seem justifiable, Harrison and Fantina point out that “a full understanding of [sensation] fiction requires that we look throughout the Victorian period and not just to the ‘sensational sixties’” (Harrison and Fantina 2006: xiii), because even if debates about sensation fiction had largely subsided by the 1870s, it still continued to be written. The point is, each of these stories reinforces the idea that ordinary people hide extraordinary secrets that can make what would otherwise be a very mundane world a sensational one. They respond to and pose questions about human identity and changing social structures, and do so with narratives that promote excitement and suspense over mimetic realism. Unlike novels, though, the background of the families or individuals involved tends to be outlined in sentences versus chapters; indeed, often when we pick up one of these stories we are dropped right into the action.

Edgar Allan Poe, who is frequently cited as authoring the first detective story with “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), wrote at length about the special considerations a writer of short fiction must bear in mind. A good short story, he says, must be constructed by a “skillful artist,” because unlike a “bulky” novel in which the effect is wrought by “sustained effort,” it must produce a single “preconceived effect” (Poe 1847: 255). To succeed in this effort, per Poe, the author must invent incidents that will deliver the desired effect. For sensation writers, the primary objective was always to stimulate readers, to engross them in the story and make them want to turn the page. Though the content of sensation novels and stories ranges from lurid murders, to family drama, to sexual awakening, the *effect* on readers is the same. If there is no effect then, literally, there is no “sensation.” And while you might be hard pressed to find a nineteenth-century critic who would call a writer of sensation fiction an “artist” (let alone a “skillful” one), many of these authors were incredibly successful in producing the effect for which they strived.

### Writing the Sensational Moment

For writers of short stories, building suspense and exciting readers was primarily achieved by zoning in on one sensational situation or moment. Whereas novel writers could spend chapters, indeed volumes, bringing their characters to a moment of crisis or revelation (often achieved by a series of “mini” revelations throughout the text), those of short stories had to do it in mere pages. Looking at the example of Le Fanu’s “The Murdered Cousin” (1851), a story that would later be developed into *Uncle Silas* (1864), reveals how this technique works. Six of the text’s thirty pages are devoted to back-story, twenty-three to the crisis befalling the heroine, and only three paragraphs to what happens after her adventure. The story later expanded reaches sixty-five

chapters and a conclusion. Even the titles of the works reflect their respective space constraints. "The Murdered Cousin" signals an inevitable crime in which the story will culminate, and gives an obvious hint as to the "type" of story it is. The title *Uncle Silas*, however, provides only an identity that will need to be explored in the novel to have any kind of real meaning.

Originally published anonymously in the *Dublin University Magazine* and later in a collection entitled *Ghost Stories and Tales of Mysteries* (1851), "The Murdered Cousin" has all the makings of a sensational novel in a fraction of the space: murder, mistaken identity, an orphaned heroine, intercepted letters, and an evil, *evil* uncle. The story is narrated by the heroine, the Countess D—, and begins with the same unfortunate revelation true of so many endangered heroines: "My mother died when I was an infant" (Le Fanu 1992: 18). Poe insists that the first sentence of any good short story is importantly implicated in bringing about the author's desired effect, and if it does not, "then in his very first step has he committed a blunder" (Poe 1847: 255). In emphasizing the fact that his heroine is motherless, and therefore vulnerable, Le Fanu foreshadows the dangers she will encounter later in the story. This opening will be changed in the novel, which begins with "It was winter" and elaborates on the setting (Le Fanu 2009: 5).

The background of the story, while briefly conveyed, is important in establishing the family drama in which the heroine is embroiled, as well as setting the tone for the rest of the story. We learn that the family has been brought under a cloud of suspicion by the Countess's uncle, Sir Arthur Tyrrell, whose chief vice was gambling until he is accused . . . of murder! The alleged murder is claimed to have happened after a week's worth of gambling losses at his own residence at Carricleigh. The victim is Hugh Tisdall, an acquaintance (if not exactly a friend) of Sir Tyrrell, and his death poses quite a mystery since he was killed in a second-story room that was locked from the inside. Although the placement of the victim's razorblades by his side makes his death look like a suicide, the jury is not entirely convinced, and a shadow of suspicion hangs over our heroine's uncle. Her father, however, has always believed entirely in his brother's innocence, and so when he dies, he puts his daughter in a rather precarious position: he leaves his entire fortune to her with the caveat that if she should die without an heir that the money will go to his brother. In the meantime, to bring the story to its crisis, she must live in her uncle's house as his ward.

What seems to start as a story set to exonerate an innocent man quickly turns into a nightmarish tale for the young, 18-year-old Countess. Though her uncle successfully feigns a welcoming disposition that makes her "more than ever convinced of his innocence," she finds that her cousin Edward is "exceedingly disagreeable" with his ill treatment of his sister and presumptuous behavior toward herself (Le Fanu 1992: 28, 29). When she turns down his proposal of marriage, a tête-à-tête with her uncle reveals the true ambition of the family: "A single blow . . . would transfer your property to us!! . . . You shall have time to consider the two courses [marriage or death] which are open to you" (Le Fanu 1992: 33). Choosing still to reject her cousin after

the one-month “consideration” period, the Countess finds herself completely at the mercy of her wicked uncle. As she discusses the hopelessness of her situation, it becomes clear that the apex of the story will marry Gothic melodrama with anxieties about the status of women and their property:

No one, from mere description, can have an idea of the unmitigated horror of my situation; a helpless, weak, inexperienced girl, placed under the power, and wholly at the mercy of evil men, and feeling that I had it not in my power to escape for one moment from the malignant influences under which I was probably doomed to fall. (Le Fanu 1992: 40)

What awaits this “helpless, weak, inexperienced girl” is (perhaps not surprisingly) a perfectly designed murder by the two “evil men” who would profit most from her death – the sensational crux of the story.

Having set the stage for the moment of crisis, Le Fanu creates suspense by offering a moment of peace to the Countess: Edward leaves the grounds, her female cousin and companion returns, and overall she feels a “little less uncomfortable” (Le Fanu 1992: 40). With only pages left until the end of the story, however, the more the Countess’s suspicion wanes, the more terrified we readers become. Her momentary comfort and trust simply make what we know is coming that much worse. In the same sentence that the Countess utters she is “less uncomfortable,” Le Fanu immediately undercuts her relative security with the exclamation, “to my unutterable horror, I beheld peering through an opposite casement, my cousin Edward’s face” (Le Fanu 1992: 40). In one moment, indeed in one sentence, the Countess understands that there is nothing good in store for her, even if she is unaware of the exact form her fate will take – how many French novels would Robert Audley need to read and how much opium would Franklin Blake need to consume before they had the same realization? At least a few chapters’ worth, to be sure.

Le Fanu, however, has neither the time nor space for witness interviewing, diary writing, French-novel reading, or opium-induced crime re-enactments. The sensational moment is brought to its crux in the next paragraph when the Countess tries unsuccessfully to fall asleep, as her nervous energy turns into an intuitive sense that something bad is about to happen. She asks her cousin Emily to share a bed with her that evening so as possibly to ward off any offenders; but, when she tries unsuccessfully to wake her when she hears breathing outside the door, she realizes Emily has unknowingly taken a strong narcotic in her tea. After the Countess discovers she has been locked inside her room, the window is opened, and Edward lets himself in. As she hides in the shadows, we know what is about to happen as Edward lurches toward the bed. Instead of killing his wealthy cousin, it will be his sister’s body buried in the Carricleigh grounds. Before leaving via the window once again, he is careful to lock the door from the inside to remove any suspicion of foul play, bringing the mystery of his father’s alleged crime full circle. Ultimately, the Countess frees herself from the house and makes her way to safety in the nearest village.

Though a short story penned by an Anglo-Irish writer, “The Murdered Cousin” clearly shares many characteristics with English sensation novels, which explains why it was viewed as such when expanded into *Uncle Silas*. Le Fanu tried his best to avoid the label, and in his “Preliminary Word” to the novel he begs reviewers to “limit that degrading term” and see his work as part of the “legitimate school of tragic English romance” (Le Fanu 2009: vii).<sup>6</sup> Still, reviewers persisted in calling him “the Irish Wilkie Collins.” The fear of being labeled a sensation novelist, however, was not the only reason for his prefatory remarks. Given that a “leading situation” of the novel directly draws from a short story anonymously published by Le Fanu years earlier, he was afraid that he could be charged with plagiarism. He explains that the novel is an expanded form of a “short magazine tale of some fifteen pages . . . published long ago in a periodical . . . and afterwards, still anonymously, in a small volume under an altered title” (Le Fanu 2009: v). Though he concedes that it is “very unlikely that any of his readers should have encountered, and still more so that they should remember, this trifle” (2009: v), the “bare possibility” that they might have is reason enough for the warning. These remarks speak volumes about the status of the short story in the mid-nineteenth century. On the one hand, Le Fanu devalues the story by designating it a “trifle” which there is only a very slight chance that anyone would ever remember. On the other hand, however, the fact that he valued the story enough to expand it twice, and take from it a “leading situation” in his novel, suggests that the short story *is* quite important. And if the story really is such a trifle, one might wonder about the need for prefatory remarks about plagiarism at all.

“The Murdered Cousin” need not be expanded into *Uncle Silas* to be a sensational tour de force. Murder, mistaken identity, druggings, complicated wills, family drama, and so forth, all lead to a sensational moment that rivals the best heavily plotted novels around. If the effect that Le Fanu sought in writing the story was to thrill, shock, and horrify (and in the process raise questions about the status of women), then Poe would certainly congratulate him on his success. The story is a useful example of how short stories could uniquely develop a sensational paradigm of their own that is at least *as* thrilling as that of novels.

### Ghost Stories

Stories of crime, mystery, and detection were in high demand during the middle part of the nineteenth century, and ghost stories, too, filled the pages of periodicals high and low.<sup>7</sup> Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert have suggested that these stories were “as typically part of the cultural and literary fabric of the age as imperial confidence or the novel of social realism” (Cox and Gilbert 1991: x), and that the explosion of periodical publishing made “the rise of the ghost story a rapid one” that not even the “implacable demon” of science could stop (1991: xv). The perceived “dangers” of reading ghost stories appear to have been less extreme than those of reading sensation fiction, despite the fact that not all ghosts were as pleasant as those who help Scrooge

achieve his social rebirth.<sup>8</sup> Still, these stories of the paranormal do share some qualities with sensation. Like sensation works, ghost stories tend to use domestic settings that would be familiar to the average person. The presence of “a strong vein of realism” would amplify the effect of the story, and in doing so remind readers that no place – especially not the home – is safe from evil insurgents or sinister forces. Most obviously though, ghost stories play with the nerves and produce the same kind of “bodily sensations” as sensation fiction.

While there are certainly many “sensational” elements in ghost stories, they are still quite different from sensation fiction as it was perceived by the general Victorian public. This difference is primarily founded in the ghost story’s reliance on the supernatural to explain the mysteries of the text. The climax – the “answer” – of the ghost story tends to be a question: did these events *really* happen? The denouement of sensation mysteries, on the other hand, depends on the sensational events having some sort of grounding in realism even if the situations are somewhat extraordinary. Indeed, it is Lady Audley (and not the actual ghost of Helen Talboys) who pushes George into a well, and she does so because she is mad. The woman in white is Anne Catherick escaping from an asylum, not an “extraordinary apparition” wandering about in the moonlight as Walter first supposes (Collins 1998: 20). Oliphant, a writer of ghost stories herself, further testifies to both a difference and sameness between the genres when she brings up, but chooses to let alone, the ghost story in her attack on sensation novels:

Of all the productions of the supernatural school, there is none more perfect in its power of sensation, or more entirely effective in its working out, than the short story of the “Haunted House,” most thrilling of ghostly tales; but we cannot enter upon this school of fiction, which is distinct from our present subject. (Oliphant 2001: 41)

Mrs. Henry Wood’s “Murder at Number Seven” published in *The Argosy* (1877) is a good example of a short story that shows all the signs of becoming a ghost story – an alleged specter that roams a nearly abandoned house and causes a housemaid to drop dead – but turns into a sensational story when the paranormal activity is explained away by another housemaid’s jealous temper. The story begins when a squire’s family decides to make an impromptu visit to see a family friend who lives by the sea. Upon arrival, their host Mary Blair explains the unfortunate circumstances that have removed her next-door neighbors in 7 Seaboard Terrace from their residence. The Peaherns, we are told, had only one son, who happened to die mysteriously one night after arguing with his father. A jury decided that the young man was simply insane and the matter was brought to a close.

The only people now left in the home are two servants, Matilda and Jane Cross, the persons around whom the mystery revolves. One afternoon, Johnny (a member of the squire’s family party) watches out the window of No. 6 as Matilda leaves to get beer for supper. When she tries to re-enter the house, she discovers that she is locked out and that no amount of pounding will get Jane Cross to open the door. Matilda is

certain that her friend has gone into a fit because of the ghost of Edmund Peahern, which she insists haunts the place. With the help of Johnny, they are able to break into No. 7 and find that it is not a fit that keeps Jane Cross from answering Matilda's knock, but an untimely death. Lying at the foot of the stairs, it is clear that Jane Cross has suffered a fall, and a "sensation of awe" falls upon each person in the party (Wood 1992: 96). The only clue – and hint of foul play – is a small bit of fabric that has been torn out of Jane Cross's gown. Though Matilda insists she has "fallen against the banisters with fright" (1992: 98), the policeman on the scene checks her superstition: "'Well,' said Knapp, coughing to hide a comical smile, 'ghosts don't tear pieces out of gowns – that I ever heard of. I should say it was something worse than a ghost that has been here tonight'" (1992: 99).

Though the police are not able to solve the crime, Knapp's suspicion that "something worse" than a ghost committed the deed is exactly right: Matilda herself commits the crime when she suspects her would-be lover (a gallant, though somewhat flirtatious, milkman who actually tries to help solve the case) prefers her friend. Matilda, who is described as an "excellent servant" (Wood 1992: 113), "quiet, subdued, and patient" (1992: 90), and even "handsome" (1992: 89), is a far more dangerous murderer than a ghost because she is exactly the kind of person least expected to commit a vicious crime. In fact, when the milkman hints to Johnny that Matilda may have some insider information about the murder, his reaction reveals just how insulated she is from suspicion: "Surely you can't suspect that she – that she was a party to any deed so cruel and wicked!" (1992: 106). Even if the milkman thinks Matilda may know something about the murder, not even he suspects her of committing it; he responds to his confidant's astonishment with a firm "No, no, sir, I don't mean that" (1992: 106).

To protect her secret, Matilda must advance a paranormal explanation for the events: "It is an unlucky house, sir; a haunted house . . . And it's true I would rather die outright than go to live in it; for the terror of being there would slowly kill me" (Wood 1992: 104). Indeed, there is always an undertone present in the text that encourages readers to entertain Matilda's explanation, a superstitious "what if" that arises in light of the strange, violent history of the home. But in the end, Wood writes the "true history of the affair at No. 7" (1992: 123), and it is one that is far more frightening for its suggestion that "quiet," "handsome" servants – the kind that may be in *your* own home – can bottle their jealous rage so perfectly that you would have no idea they are about to push you down a flight of stairs. While such an idea may not seem very realistic, its version of sensationalism is at least *of this world*.

### Short Fiction, Sensation, and the Future

Harold Orel asserts in *The Victorian Short Story* that "remarkably little is known about the history of the short-story genre in England" (Orel 1986: 1), and to a large extent that is still true in 2011. The growing interest in periodical studies is partly a response

to this gross lack of scholarship, and will continue to reveal and problematize the role short fiction played in nineteenth-century print culture. Sensation literature is fertile ground for these investigations because of its association with “ephemeral” works, reader demand, and bodily response. The short story’s reputation – especially in mid-century Britain – as cheap, “throwaway” fiction particularly implicates it in a reading phenomenon supposedly spawned from “mere trash” (Mansel 2001: 47). Further exploration of the sensational short stories that have for too long lurked in the shadows of the novel will be an important part in understanding Victorian reading practices, reader taste, the development of the periodical press, and of course, the culture of the sensationalism that thrived in the 1860s.

### NOTES

- 1 One example is Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina’s recent edited collection *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre* (2006). Out of the twenty articles that seek to “expand the limits of the sensation genre” (2006: xi), only one (Nancy Welter’s “Women Alone: Le Fanu’s ‘Carmilla’ and Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’”) engages fiction that is not a novel.
- 2 An exception to this trend occasionally occurs in works devoted to a single author. For example, Tromp, Gilbert, and Haynie’s edited collection *Beyond Sensation* (2000) has a chapter devoted to Braddon’s “Good Lady Duwayne.”
- 3 Harold Orel (1986) estimates that the number of journals published between 1824 and 1900 exceeds 50,000.
- 4 Dennis Denisoff explains in his introduction to the *Broadview Anthology of Short Stories* that the “fact that short fiction was being consumed by millions from all classes, age groups, and literacy levels made it so common as to be invisible, and so popular as to be seen as unworthy of the exclusiveness associated with scholarly recognition” (Denisoff 2004: 17).
- 5 Hack writer, here, is probably a reference to an unknown author who tries to make a living by writing quick, sensational stories. But it should be noted that writing short fiction appealed to many well-known sensation novelists as side projects to supplement their income.
- 6 Lyn Pykett finds that the novel is a good example of female Gothic, but that it also made “common cause with the sensation novel in its British setting” (Pykett 2001: 202). Devin P. Zuber claims that with “its secret murders, sexually charged undertones of incest, and doppelganger doubles,” *Uncle Silas* “contained the classic ingredients of what made sensation so popular” (Zuber 2006: 74).
- 7 Vanessa D. Dickerson provides an extensive list of ghost stories published in the 1860s in her chapter “Angels, Money, and Ghosts” in *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide* (1996).
- 8 In Elizabeth Gaskell’s “The Old Nurse’s Story” (1852), for example, a ghost child tries to lure little Rosamond out into the snow to her death. The ghost in Rhoda Broughton’s “The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing But the Truth” (1868) literally scares people to death.

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Part III

# Topics in Scholarship



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# Critical Responses to Sensation

*Deborah Wynne*

Critical interest in sensation fiction shows no signs of abating, as this book testifies. Since the concept of literary sensationalism was first discussed widely in periodical reviews of novels in the 1860s, critical responses to the genre have taken a variety of forms. While the first reviewers of sensation novels usually condemned them as morally deleterious, academics in the first half of the twentieth century, concerned with the Leavisite notion of the “great tradition” of English literature, were inclined to dismiss sensation fiction as unworthy of serious study. It is only since the 1980s that major critical re-evaluations of the genre have taken place, stimulated by the rediscovery of authors and texts which have been undeservedly forgotten. This essay charts the main trends in critical responses to sensation fiction from the 1860s to the present, an undertaking which necessarily places greater emphasis on criticism of the last thirty years, for early responses tended to take the form of diatribes against the genre, more or less uncritical, rather than examinations of the genre’s complex cultural work in representing many aspects of Victorian society.

## Victorian Responses

The story of the sensation novel’s origins as a middle-class literary phenomenon is well known. The appearance of three key novels between 1859 and 1862, Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1859–60), Ellen (Mrs. Henry) Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), marked a new literary trend and significant moment in Victorian publishing history. Yet analyses of the new genre were often inadequate; professional literary criticism was rare in the Victorian period, for English literature was not widely studied as an academic discipline until late in the century. Early responses to the sensation genre came from

reviewers who rarely focused on the literary qualities of the work under review, regarding sensation fiction as a shocking sign of the times, specifically designed to stimulate readers by means of representations of transgression, a symptom of moral degeneration. The popularity of Victorian sensation novels with general readers was thus a source of anxiety to early critics, religious commentators, and the upholders of literary taste.

Widely publicized as a fashionable popular form, the sensation novel was, then, largely dismissed as debased and vulgar, a mere commodity of which the reading public would soon tire. This view tended to be expressed either in terms of fervid condemnation or as a refusal to take the genre seriously. Winifred Hughes, one of the first to rehabilitate the genre in the early 1980s, noted that “the sensation vogue undeniably provoked the worst literary criticism of the period,” characterized by “rampant Grundyism [and] sweeping misjudgments of the artistic function” (Hughes 1980: 47). Many reviewers agreed that sensation fiction was particularly modern. Henry James noted in 1865 that the plots of sensation novels were concerned with “Modern England – the England of today’s newspaper – crops up at every step” (James 1865: 593–4), a linkage between sensational fiction and journalism which was emphasized by other reviewers. Indeed, as the availability of cheap periodicals and novels increased dramatically in the mid-Victorian period, many novels made their first appearance as serials in periodicals. This reinforced the idea that ephemeral journalism and ephemeral literature were characteristics of the new literary culture, a particularly modern combination of media, and reviewers complained that authors had gleaned their material from the sensational stories they found in newspaper reports.

The tone of moral outrage against the sensation genre culminated in April 1863 with H. L. Mansel’s review of a number of recent sensation novels in the conservative *Quarterly Review*. Mansel’s position rendered him a spokesman for the establishment: the Dean of St. Paul’s and Professor of Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy at the University of Oxford, he considered the production of sensation novels to be a commercial venture far removed from the traditional values associated with “English Literature.” Mansel presumed that sensationalism would last only for a brief season and he attacked the genre because he feared its influence on middle-class readers. Rather than being a product catering to a long-standing working-class taste for cheap, melodramatic “penny dreadfuls,” he saw the sensation novel as infiltrating the respectable literary marketplace.

Cited by most recent critics as typical of Victorian establishment views of literary sensationalism, Mansel’s review presented a catalog of complaints against the new form. He argued that sensation novels are related only to:

the market law of demand and supply . . . A commercial atmosphere floats around works of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop. The public wants novels, and novels must be made – so many yards of printed stuff, sensation pattern, to be ready by the beginning of the season. (Mansel 1863: 496)

This class-based condemnation suggests that the sensation novelist's need to write for money debases the role of the author, relegating literature to the realm of trade rather than art, resulting in inferior, mass-produced literature. Many reviewers suggested that little skill was needed to write what was considered formulaic commercial fiction. Mansel's analogy also links sensation fiction to the so-called trivial, feminized and fleeting realm of fashion, a comment which also points towards one of the main sources of anxiety expressed by Victorian reviewers of sensation fiction: that female readers, particularly middle-class women, were able to access easily what appeared to be dangerous literature.

At the heart of many reviewers' fears about sensation novels was the fact that they were popular with female readers. This was indirectly blamed on the development of the feminist movement in the 1850s with its calls for reform of the marriage laws and demands for education, suffrage, and employment opportunities, a departure from traditional notions of femininity which alarmed those conservatives wary about the impact of the "Woman Question" on the wider culture. Henry Chorley, in a review of "New Novels" in the *Athenaeum* in 1866, noted that women were unstable and particularly susceptible to new trends, arguing that "the ideas of women on point of morals and ethics seem in a state of transition, and consequently of confusion" ("New Novels," 1866: 733). The sensation novel was seen as a major contributor to this state of "confusion", particularly as so many sensation novelists were women. These, in the words of Margaret Oliphant, presented their readers with "a very fleshly and unlovely record" of femininity (Oliphant 1867: 275). Oliphant's 1867 review singled out Braddon's work in her condemnation of the female characters of sensation fiction:

[W]omen [are] driven wild with love . . . women who marry their grooms in fits of sensual passion; women who pray their lovers to carry them off from husbands and homes they hate; women, at the very least of it, who give and receive burning kissing and frantic embraces . . . such are the heroines who have been imported into modern fiction. (Oliphant 1867: 275)

The importation Oliphant refers to here hints that the heroines of sensation novels had their origin in scandalous French novels, such as Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) (indeed, Braddon herself provided a toned-down version of Flaubert's novel of female adultery in 1864 in *The Doctor's Wife*). Oliphant also suggests that the lively heroines of working-class melodramas and penny dreadfuls had been imported into the middle-class home via sensation fiction. Both importations were noted by other reviewers as grounds on which to condemn the genre. There were, however, a few reviewers who conceded the appeal of sensation novels, particularly those by Wilkie Collins and M. E. Braddon. One reviewer in the *Saturday Review* wrote that "Miss Braddon . . . alone can write of women's things like a woman and men's things like a man. . . . The mixture is piquant" (review of *Eleanor's Victory*, 1863: 396). Her appeal for female readers was also noted by Henry James in his article in *The Nation*,

“Miss Braddon,” when he stated that “She knows much that ladies are not accustomed to know, but they are apparently very glad to learn” (James 1865: 594).

The sensation genre was also attacked because it appeared “unnatural,” a working-class form masquerading as middle-class literary fare, an import from France undermining British moral standards, an attempt to combine literature with journalism. It also seemed concerned to represent the “unnatural,” as a reviewer in the *Christian Remembrancer* suggested: “The one indispensable point in the sensation novel is, that it should contain something abnormal and unnatural; something that induces, in the simple idea, a sort of thrill” (qtd. in Maunder 2004: 107). The idea of middle-class readers consuming sensational stories designed to thrill and shock threatened the newly won status of the novel as a respectable art form. The morally uplifting realist novels of writers such as Walter Scott, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, and George Eliot had, by the 1860s, contributed to the acceptance of the novel as a literary form capable of the heights of the drama and poetry. Yet the new generation of sensation writers, including Collins, Wood, Braddon, and Charles Reade, often appeared to eschew the moral agenda of their realist counterparts. Even conservatives like Ellen Wood could suggest scandal and transgression in ways which disturbed critics acclimatized to the conventions of realist representation.

For Mansel there was even a suggestion that sensation novelists were replacing the clergy, exerting an undue influence on the nation’s morals:

usurping in many respects, intentionally or unintentionally, a portion of the preacher’s office, playing no inconsiderable part in moulding the minds and forming the habits and tastes of its generation; and, in doing so principally, we had almost said exclusively, by “preaching to the nerves.” (Mansel 1863: 495–6)

As well as “preaching to the nerves,” Mansel feared that sensation fiction stimulated readers until they resembled “dram drinkers” in the “grip of perpetual cravings” (Mansel 1863: 485). The addictive qualities of sensation fiction were noted by other Victorian reviewers. Geraldine Jewsbury, in a review of Collins’s *The Moonstone* in the *Athenaeum*, suggested that readers of the serialized novel were victims of a fervid appetite:

When persons are in a state of ravenous hunger they are eager only for food, and utterly ignore all delicate distinctions of cookery; it is only when this savage state has been somewhat allayed that they are capable of discerning and appreciating the genius of the *chef*. Those readers who have followed the fortunes of the mysterious *Moonstone* for many weeks, as it has appeared in tantalizing portions, will of course throw themselves headlong upon the latter portion of the third volume, now that the end is really come, and devour it without rest or pause; to take any deliberate breathing-time is quite out of the question. (Jewsbury 1868: 106)

*The Moonstone* appeared in weekly installments in *All The Year Round* in 1868, and the tone of Jewsbury’s review indicates that by this stage some critics at least were



acclimatized to the sensation genre and were able to recognize its appeal in its ability to generate pleasurable suspense.

Indeed, a minority of reviewers in the 1860s defended literary sensationalism. Dickens's weekly magazine *All the Year Round* (which serialized Collins's *The Woman in White*, *No Name*, and *The Moonstone*, as well as Charles Reade's *Very Hard Cash*) carried an anonymous feature called "The Sensational Williams" which expressed irritation with reviewers like Mansel. The author stated that:

If any one writes a novel, a play, or a poem, which relates anything out of the ordinary experiences of the most ordinary people – some tragedy of love or revenge, some strange (though not impossible) combination of events, or some romance of guilt or misery – he is straightaway met with a loud exclamation of "Sensational!" ("Sensational Williams," 1864: 14–15)

The author went on to suggest that Shakespeare himself would be dismissed by the reviewers of the 1860s as a writer of sensational and improbable plots. The writer highlights contemporary reviewers' inability to place the sensation novel within wider literary contexts and traditions. George Augustus Sala, writing in Braddon's magazine *Belgravia* in 1868, also argued that "sensation" was a term which could be applied to some of the greatest authors, demonstrating that Dickens "is perhaps the most thoroughly, and has been from the very outset of his career the most persistently, 'sensational' writer of the age" (qtd. in Altick 1986: 146). Those writers like Sala and the anonymous author of "Sensational Williams" were more perceptive than the reviewers in the heavyweight quarterlies, for they considered sensation novels as new versions of literary sensationalism which had traditionally been part of English literary culture.

By the end of the 1870s, however, the literary culture was branching into new forms of sensational writing, from the urban Gothic of Bram Stoker and Robert Louis Stevenson to the tales of empire by Rider Haggard and the detective fiction of Arthur Conan Doyle. The dominance of the sensation novelists of the 1860s was declining, as was critical interest in the sensation genre, a situation which lasted well into the twentieth century.

### Twentieth-Century Responses: 1900–1980

With the development of modernism in the early twentieth century the literature of the Victorian period was increasingly seen as redundant, particularly after the social and cultural upheaval of the Great War. If the major realist writers of the Victorian period were often dismissed as irrelevant by a new generation of critics and writers, the popular novelists of the period were at best condemned as philistines and at worst ignored completely. Only a handful of writers felt an impulse to explore the legacy of Victorian sensation fiction. In 1919 Walter Phillips published *Dickens, Reade, and*

*Collins: Sensation Novelists*, offering one of the first attempts to contextualize sensation fiction by relating it to the mainstream novel. By placing Dickens in the company of Collins and Reade, Phillips suggested that sensation writers did not work in isolation to the main strands of the literary culture. Oliver Elton in 1920 also briefly referred to sensation novels in his two-volume work, *Survey of English Literature*, although he dismissed the work of female sensation writers as “absurd” (Elton 1920: IV, 320).

The consolidation of English literature as an academic discipline in the early decades of the century resulted in the emergence of professional literary critics. However, as a way of maintaining the credibility of the subject academics felt the need to restrict their attention to canonical texts and “legitimate” literary histories. This meant that popular genres were usually seen as unworthy and capable of damaging the significance of literary study, thus throwing suspicion upon the value of universities’ investment in the discipline. However, this dearth of interest in Victorian popular literature in the academy was not evident in the wider world, for readers continued to demand sensational novels; *East Lynne*, for example, retained its popularity with readers well into the twentieth century. A few critics offered occasional defenses of sensation fiction. T. S. Eliot, for example, in “Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens,” a nostalgic defense of Victorian melodrama first published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1927, compared Victorian popular culture favorably with melodramatic counterparts, such as cinema, in the twentieth century. While Eliot defended Collins’s achievement with *The Moonstone*, he also stressed that his other novels, despite their evident skill, lacked a place in the literary canon. This was at a time when F. R. Leavis was promoting the idea of an exclusive “Great Tradition,” in the context of which Eliot’s defense of Collins’s work seemed half-hearted. A similarly lukewarm defense of Victorian sensation fiction was evident in the work of Malcolm Elwin in the 1930s. His monograph, *Charles Reade* (1934), offered a sturdy defense of the author’s achievements, but his *Victorian Wallflowers* (also published in 1934) succeeded only in presenting a nostalgic overview of the “forgotten” sensation novelists of the mid-Victorian period.

The critical assessments of the 1920s and 1930s, whether hostile or nostalgic in tone, largely condemned the sensation novel to further obscurity. However, the revival of interest in all things Victorian that emerged in the late 1960s with a fashion for Victorian bric-a-brac, novels, art, and architecture, encouraged academics to turn their attention to the “minor” literature of the nineteenth century. Kathleen Tillotson’s introduction to a new annotated edition of *The Woman in White*, published by Dover Press in 1969, offered a much-needed critical reassessment of “the lighter reading of the 1860s” (Tillotson 1969: ix). Here Tillotson famously defined the sensation novel as “the novel-with-a-secret” (1969: xv). Her essay provided a useful map to a “lost” region of literary history. P. D. Edwards attempted to sustain emerging critical interest in the genre with a pamphlet published in 1971 called *Some Mid-Victorian Thrillers: The Sensation Novel, its Friends and its Foes*. As the 1970s progressed, it became clear that the sensation novel was gaining friends, at least in terms of academics who were

keen to retrieve the genre from its relative obscurity and analyze it from the vantage point of new critical approaches.

The development of feminism and feminist theory in the 1970s, with its interest in tracing “lost” and neglected female authors, as well as filling the gaps in conventional (male) accounts of history, offered a major impetus for the reawakening of critical interest in the sensation novel. Many feminist academics challenged notions of the established canon of English literature (a canon at this time still shaped by the ideas of the highly influential Leavis). In addition to the novels of the Brontë sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot (all of whom had eventually found a place on university curricula) there were numerous female novelists, enormously popular in the Victorian period, who had later been forgotten or dismissed as irrelevant hack writers by subsequent generations. A major task of retrieval was undertaken in the late 1970s and 1980s by feminists tired of the tight, restrictive boundaries enforced by male notions of academic worth and literary taste. Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), a seminal work of gynocriticism, offered one of the first feminist critiques of the novels of female sensation writers of the 1860s. Here she argued that the violence, secrecy, and marital disturbance depicted in novels by writers such as Mary Braddon and Ellen Wood articulated the discontent experienced by many of their Victorian female readers. Showalter’s discussion, while limited to one chapter in a book which covered both nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, proved to be enormously influential, stimulating later critics to make further explorations of the work of the women writers of sensation novels.

### Twentieth-Century Responses: 1980s to the Present

The attraction of sensation novels to recent critics is evident: not only does the genre exist in a fascinating relationship to mainstream Victorian culture, but it has also stimulated a substantial amount of recovery work in the form of the mapping of a little-known terrain and the rediscovery of forgotten texts. The critical work done so far has been heterogeneous, but for many critics two approaches have proved particularly useful. Firstly, historicist approaches which relate literary texts to their contexts, viewing text and society as engaged in a productive dialog, have helped to situate the sensation novel as an important component in a complex of mid-Victorian discourses relating to areas such as reform, medicine, crime, gender, and sexuality. Secondly, since the appearance of Showalter’s feminist interpretation of the work of female sensation novelists highlighted the value of this approach, critics have applied feminist theoretical models to the genre, often in conjunction with historicist and cultural materialist paradigms. What follows is an overview of the main trends in recent interpretations of Victorian sensation fiction, indicating how these developed, as well as the diversity of the new work which has evolved since the 1980s.

The first scholarly monograph devoted to an analysis of the sensation novel was a historicist project which usefully placed the genre in the context of the 1860s.

Winifred Hughes's *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (1980) was originally published by Princeton University Press, a sign that the sensation novel was at last deemed worthy of serious, sustained scholarly attention. Hughes argued that the sensation novel was largely restricted to one decade, the 1860s, and she developed a well-evidenced case for the genre as a subversive form which, for a time at least, had militated successfully against the conventions of realism, temporarily shaking its dominance in the marketplace before fading away by beginning of the 1870s. Many subsequent critics have challenged Hughes's argument, questioning the genre's subversive potential and offering counter-arguments to suggest that sensation fiction preceded the 1860s and continued beyond that decade in a variety of permutations. Nevertheless, Hughes's achievement in terms of her careful research and emphasis on the sensation novel as a crucially significant feature of Victorian literary culture should not go unrecognized. She devoted long chapters to Collins, Reade, and the female sensation novelists Braddon and Wood, interpreting their novels as representations of mid-Victorian cultural anxieties and indicating their relationships to literary realism.

Following the publication of *The Maniac in the Cellar*, the 1980s saw a steady increase in criticism devoted to the examination of sensation novels in specific contexts and from a variety of approaches. Many critics undertook to trace the links between literary sensationalism and various aspects of Victorian society, from the reform movement to the development of commodity culture. Some books examining the Victorian novel from cultural and historicist approaches now began to include chapters on sensation novels, such as D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* (1988). In a Foucauldian reading of the disciplinary function of Victorian novels, Miller explored the homoerotic subtexts at work in Collins's representations of nervousness in *The Woman in White*. Significantly, Miller's chapter had originally been published as an essay in *Representations*, a journal established in the 1980s devoted to new historicist approaches to texts. Jonathan Loesberg's seminal essay, "The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction" was also published in *Representations* in 1986, reading the genre's narrative form in relation to the movement for political reform in the mid-Victorian period. These important and influential essays highlighted the discursive functions of the sensation novel, helping later scholars to realize the benefits of reading sensation novels via new historicist and cultural materialist approaches.

The move towards theory helped the revaluation of the sensation genre, which could no longer be overlooked by academics working in the fields of Victorian literature and culture. The sensation novel particularly lends itself to feminist, historicist, cultural, and queer readings, making the genre attractive to researchers. While monographs had regularly appeared throughout the twentieth century on canonical authors such as Dickens and Eliot, scholars and academic publishers were now interested in producing works devoted to sensation writers, authors who had long been positioned outside the established canon of Victorian literature. Jenny Bourne Taylor's seminal study of Wilkie Collins, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*:

*Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative and Nineteenth-Century Psychology* (1988), asserted the importance of reading Collins's work as an articulation of Victorian scientific theories on psychology, particularly notions of identity and insanity. The subtle, critically sophisticated readings of sensation fiction made by critics such as Miller, Loesburg, and Taylor opened up possibilities for other avenues of research. Gone now was the need to defend an interest in "minor" literature, popular culture, and authors who had failed to register in the traditional guides to Victorian literary history. A new generation of scholars saw the significance of sensation fiction as a phenomenon which revealed much about what the Victorians thought, felt, believed, and feared, things which the more polite form of the realist novel had tended to represent only covertly in subplots and veiled suggestions. An important recent contribution to this vein of theoretically informed criticism is Nicholas Daly's *Literature, Technology and Modernity, 1860–2000* (2004), which builds upon Miller's focus on the representations of "nerves" in the work of Collins by closely relating these to the technological developments of the Victorian period. Daly's latest book, *Sensation and Modernity in the 1860s* (2009), also reads sensation novels in relation to their historical contexts, exploring the role of popular culture in the years immediately before and after the 1867 Reform Act.

In the 1990s and 2000s scholars of sensation fiction produced a considerable output in terms of books and essays, annotated editions of previously out-of-print sensation novels, bibliographies, and collections of the letters of sensation writers. Another important signal of the sensation novel's establishment in the academy was the appearance of a number of guides to the genre aimed at undergraduates, who now studied sensation as part of university curricula. One of the earliest of these introductions to sensation fiction was Lyn Pykett's *The Sensation Novel from "The Woman in White" to "The Moonstone"* (1994), part of the popular "Writers and their Work" series produced in association with the British Council. Two years earlier, Pykett had discussed the work of female sensation novelists in her important book, *The "Improper" Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (1992). Building on the work of Showalter, Pykett helped to position female sensation novelists in the context of those women writers who questioned traditional notions of femininity and offered potentially subversive representations of women. For Pykett, however, the subversive qualities of the genre were by no means straightforward, for sensation novels such as *East Lynne* offered conservative plots riven by contradictions and moments of ideological tension. This view of the genre's complicated ideological message was also taken by Kate Flint in a chapter on sensation novels in her book *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914* (1993). For Flint, however, the anxieties generated by female sensation authors needed to be explored in relation to the female readers of sensation fiction and their supposed "affective susceptibility" (Flint 1993: 274).

Further refinements in the exploration of sensation fiction in relation to gender issues were undertaken by later critics, some of whom sought to explore the relationships between Victorian women and the sensation novel's representations of

femininity. Pamela K. Gilbert's *Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels* (1997), a study of the work of Braddon, Rhoda Broughton, and Ouida, offered an important qualification to those arguments for the subversive potential of sensation fiction. She suggested that the genre's purpose was to provide a safe framework in which to represent transgression: "A novel about a bigamist or a child-murder in a fictional middle-class neighborhood is far less immediate than a newspaper which places such events a block and a day away" (Gilbert 1997: 69). Yet the subversive elements of the genre, as Gilbert demonstrates, work indirectly. Sensation fiction was considered by Victorians to be simultaneously a feminized and a diseased form, particularly when authored by women; according to Gilbert, it functioned as a "promise and evasion of that promise to confirm the boundaries of the self, in its ability to evoke desire and anxiety while sustaining the illusion of fulfillment" (Gilbert 1997: 14). By emphasizing the complex and contradictory work performed by popular literature, critics like Gilbert (and more recently Andrew Mangham in *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture* [2007] and Laurence Talairach-Vielmas in *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairytales and Sensation Novels* [2007]) have shown that the links between the discourses characteristic of Victorian society and the sensation novel can only be explicated satisfactorily by interdisciplinary approaches and theoretically informed criticism.

Interdisciplinarity and new approaches such as queer theory have been a feature of much recent work on sensation fiction. A number of collections of essays devoted to Victorian sensationalism have made valuable contributions to our understanding of the genre. An interesting collection of essays appeared in 2006 with the publication of *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre* edited by Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina, which explores the work of sensation novelists in relation to the scandals of the period. Other collections have helped to further knowledge of specific sensation writers, such as *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, edited by Jenny Bourne Taylor, which appeared in 2006 with fine essays from major Collins experts, including Lyn Pykett on Collins as a sensation novelist, Graham Law on Collins and the literary marketplace, and Lillian Nayder on Collins and empire. An earlier book, *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context* (2000), edited by Marlene Tromp, Pamela K. Gilbert, and Aeron Haynie, had enhanced Braddon's reputation as a diverse and worthwhile author; it not only examined Braddon's sensation fiction, but also her writing for the stage, her relationship to the colonies, her late novels, and her representations of reform. Both collections of essays, while not minimizing the impact of each authors' career as a sensation writer, also attempted to move them "beyond sensation" by demonstrating the full range of their literary achievements. This sense of "sensation" functioning as a limiting as well as a useful label informs much of the recent scholarship on specific sensation authors.

While the focus on women as readers and writers of sensation fiction, as well as the representation of deviant femininity as a staple element of the sensational plot,

has dominated much of the recent criticism of the genre, a branch of criticism has developed which highlights the publishing contexts of sensation novels. This work emphasizes the different readings which can be made by examining sensation novels in their various publishing formats. Graham Law's *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press* (2000), a seminal work which illuminates the complex publishing histories of Wilkie Collins and other popular novelists, demonstrates the ways in which novels were part of a burgeoning publishing industry in which the periodical became a crucial, often problematic, publishing space for the authors of the period. Deborah Wynne's *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (2001) also highlights the magazine contexts of sensation novels, arguing that a discourse of sensationalism pervaded many of the popular magazines aimed at a "family" readership. This focus on the symbiotic relationship of sensation novels and the periodical press (a relationship which has been lost for later generations of novel readers) has also been explored by Jennifer Phegley in *Educating the Proper Woman Reader: Victorian Family Literary Magazines* (2004), which considers Braddon's *Belgravia* as a space for the promotion and defense of sensation novels. Phegley's book analyzes the publishing opportunities offered by periodicals in relation to the disciplinary function of popular texts.

This interest in the publishing contexts of sensation novels is widespread and has stimulated (and in turn been stimulated by) the production of new editions of novels which have long been out of print. Andrew Maunder's six-volume edition, *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction* (2004), offers a selection of novels by authors such as Florence Marryat, Ellen Wood, Felicia Skene, Rhoda Broughton, Mary Cecil Hay, and Dora Russell, all of which are edited by leading scholars in the field and include useful introductions and annotations. The development of the Sensation Press by Jennifer Carnell has helped to further Braddon's reputation as a generically diverse writer with the appearance of numerous carefully annotated editions of her lesser-known novels (see [www.sensationpress.com](http://www.sensationpress.com)). Such recovery work shows few signs of abating as major publishing houses, including Oxford University Press (*East Lynne*, edited by Elisabeth Jay, appeared in its World's Classics series), Penguin, Broadview, and some university presses such as Princeton (Collins's *Iolani*, edited by Lillian Nayder, appeared in 1999), have offered readers high-quality editions of Victorian sensation novels. This tendency is in part a result of the inclusion of sensation fiction on the curricula of schools and universities. Additionally, an increasing number of graduate students are choosing to research the Victorian sensation genre. In recent years numerous theses have appeared on sensation fiction with explorations of the work of hitherto little-known novelists such as Florence Marryat, as well as the application of queer theory, gender theory, and material culture studies to the genre. With the popularity of the neo-Victorian novel, many scholars are exploring the self-consciously "Victorian" novels of authors such as A. S. Byatt, Sarah Waters, and Michael Cox in relation to their conscious deployment of sensation novels. There is a considerable body of work in progress yet to be published and plenty of avenues in need of exploration by students of the future.

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31

## Gender and Sensation

*Emily Allen*

Victoria and Albert. Tea and crumpets. Gender and sensation. Of the many Victorian couplings so tightly bound as to leave one term almost unthinkable without the other, the relationship between the sensation novel of the 1860s and the “new” forms of gender identity and behavior that the novel chronicled – and that in fact made this novel form such a sensation – was a remarkably productive one. The union produced not only a strong desire in the book-buying public to acquire and read such books, but also, and famously, a strong desire in the critical establishment to police this reading. All of which required a lot of paper, and if we were to calculate the sheer weight of the fiction, the reviews, the sermons, the medical tracts, and the hysterical outbursts in print devoted to the linkage of gender and sensational reading, then we would have at least one idea of what is meant by *mass* culture. Indeed, it was the nineteenth-century explosion of the print market and the reading public – the creation of a new “mass” audience made up of all classes and both genders – which made the sensation novel’s dissemination of new, and some thought perverse, gender roles appear all the more dangerous and the critical response to it all the more urgent.

If the desire, perversity, and hysteria described above feel a touch sensational, then you have the right idea. Those who have penetrated this far into this *Companion to Sensation Fiction* already know that the “sensation novel” was so named not only for its depiction of shocking, ripped-from-the-headlines topics, but also for the strong emotional responses that it might elicit from its reader, who was often directly addressed, as you have just been, in the intimate second person. Nowhere was the effect on “you” considered more potentially undermining than in the sensation novel’s shocking and scintillating representation of women and men gone off the rails of proper gender: manly women, effeminate men, and most variants in between. While many of these characters are, of course, actual criminals, they disobey more than the

laws of the land in their refusal of cultural gender norms, and it is often for these gender crimes rather than anything else that they must finally pay.

For the twentieth-century critics who led the resurgence of the sensation novel after its eventual disappearance from popularity and print, the novels' depiction of gender was absolutely critical, if no longer criminal. We can imagine the twentieth-century critical response as inverting the Victorian one: suspicion and outright disapproval of the form and its popular appeal turned to admiration for its risk-taking representations and wide market reach. Here was a fictional form written for a largely female audience by a largely female group of authors that appeared to turn the idealized Victorian notion of gender on its head. What was not to admire? Not all proponents of sensation's resurgence, most of them feminist literary critics, considered the novel to be the locus for a truly radical gender politics, but everyone could agree that the novels provided a fascinating ground for the discussion of Victorian gender norms and their bending. The true *coup de foudre*, though, took place between these modern critics and their Victorian counterparts, whose hyperbole, panic, and outsized faith in the power of the novel to corrupt were simply irresistible. The hysterical critical apparatus surrounding the sensation novel proved that, whether or not the novel could drive cultural change, the Victorians thought it could. Perhaps for how they validate the critical enterprise as political practice, then, the Victorian "sensation debates" (as they were called) became central texts in the twentieth century's reclamation of the form.

This essay begins with a working definition of gender and an overview of the Victorian gender ideals that the sensation novel was thought to disturb. It then goes on to discuss the connection between sensation and gender on four levels: gender in the sensation novel; gender and the sensation reader; gender and the sensation author; gender and the sensation critic.

## Gender and the Victorians

Current gender theory considers gender to be concerned with but discrete from biological sex. Gender is the social dimension of sex, where the dyad of biology (male/female) meets the continuum of culture (masculine to feminine and everything in between). The shifting ground of that meeting place, on which gender is often said to be "constructed" rather than simply given, has been a place of fascination and heated academic and political discussion for decades. While this debate has sometimes polarized academic gender theorists and political activists, for whom there are different things at stake in disconnecting gender from biology, the most pervasive view within intellectual culture holds gender identity to be learned or performed in accordance with cultural norms that favor the dominant power structure. This "patriarchal" power structure is most commonly aligned with the interests of white, heterosexual men of the middle and upper classes. It is not, however, limited to those men, but to all those who benefit from such a patriarchal organization and serve to maintain it. Women, for example, find themselves rewarded under patriarchy for the adoption of stereotypi-

cally feminine behavior, and they may serve to perpetuate a system that nonetheless disadvantages them. Men are similarly rewarded and coerced into normative roles, and their failure to perform can be just as harshly punished, if not more so. As men and women obey established gender norms, such norms are then read backwards as “natural” and held up as biological, rather than cultural, imperatives. One of the goals of contemporary gender studies has been to provide gender norms with a specific history, and so to track the development of these categories into our present moment, where they might be *denaturalized*.

The Victorians were just as fascinated as we are with the complexities of gender and with gender’s relationship to biology, although they generally took the opposite view: gender was considered the natural expression of biological truths, the immutable laws that governed private and public life. In the ideal view, which like all ideals was more potent in myth than true in reality, women and men occupied separate spheres, carving up the world between them and doling out the virtues to one side or the other.

Middle-class women were the creatures of the private sphere, the “angels of the house” as Coventry Patmore’s poem dubbed them, who were naturally given to the domestic virtues of morality, chastity, piety, sympathy, humility, and nurturance. A true woman was a noble creature, without selfish ambition but driven to serve others and to better the world through her care and example. Motherhood was the pinnacle of this woman’s experience, through which she might express the deepest and strongest forces of her nature while shaping, or “influencing,” the next generation. Proper feeling, particularly love, made a woman powerful and enabled the sacrifices she was often called upon to make for others.

To middle-class men was given the public realm, where money and power changed hands greased with raw ambition. Men were nominally the head of the household, but their true calling was in the world, where England had an empire to maintain and an economy to enlarge, which took values other than domestic ones: strength, courage, resourcefulness, drive, intellect, sharpness, confidence, and vision. These men were called upon to protect not only their national and imperial interests, but also their wives and daughters, who by necessity and definition were too soft for the harsh realities of the world. In their love for these women, men were ennobled and called to their best, most gentlemanly, selves.

As a middle-class ideal, then, this dyadic system of gender was calculated to undergird capitalist and imperial expansion while maintaining the patriarchal status quo. The domestic sphere, where women were exalted and trapped, provided both an illusory haven from imperial capitalism and a guaranteed market for its goods, while the need to keep that protective sphere up and running pushed men to succeed in the world. The naturalized gender system thus operated as a perpetual motion machine for the creation of profit and the spread of empire, and, through it, middle-class families were designed to reproduce children, nation, empire, and ideology.

Actual gender practice in the Victorian period was rockier than the smooth narrative of the separate spheres, and the Victorians were perfectly aware of this. For one,

although gender was considered natural and universal, the classes on either side of the middle were often represented as problematic: working-class women and men were both seen as coarser than their middle-class counterparts, at once both less sensitive and less capable of controlling their passions, whereas aristocrats of both genders, those louché holdovers of an *ancien régime*, were often represented as sexually suspect. Any cursory look at the history, not to mention the fiction, of the nineteenth century also confirms that men and women did not always behave according to plan and that the spheres were never all that separate.

Challenges to the domestic ideal appeared particularly acute at the turn of the 1860s in the wake of the passage of the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 (also called the Divorce Act), which for the first time allowed abandoned or mistreated middle-class women to sue their philandering husbands for divorce. The Victorian home became a place that women could now, legally, leave. By 1870, the Married Women's Property Act (first circulated unsuccessfully in 1857) had given married women legal control over their own fortunes, and attempts to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts (1857–70) had focused attention on their ability to control their own bodies.

Some Victorians welcomed these changes as progress, others did not, and fiction was one place where the culture worked through the differences between gender ideals and reality. In much "serious," realistic fiction of the period – like the novels of George Eliot, whose work provided the high alternative to low sensation – male and female roles are under direct scrutiny, which adds to the complexity of characters who are not cardboard heroes and domestic goddesses. Failures of the ideal are pressed into the service of the "real." In Victorian popular fiction, where cultural anxieties tend to be confronted both more obliquely and with greater force, this same shortfall is often exaggerated into a doomsday scenario for normative gender relations.

## Gender in the Sensation Novel

Enter the sensation novel, where exceptional behavior rules. In the pages of the sensation novel, gender runs amuck in many variations and in highly entertaining ways. Sensation fiction is full of women who somehow refuse the angelic role: powerful women who take charge and sometimes multiple husbands; manly or androgynous women; sexually beguiling women; and ambitious and ruthless women who will stop at nothing to get what they want. In their many different versions of extremity, these women take bullets and poison, commit bigamy and murder, lie, steal, cheat, go mad, turn detective, and disappear. They get kidnapped, swallowed by quicksand, and incarcerated. They are arsonists, forgers, and con-women. They are often apprehended, sometimes not, but their biggest threat to angelic norms lies in how artificial they make all gender identities appear. Indeed, it is the genius of the sensation novel not only to portray gender abnormality like never before, but also to take normality itself to such an extreme as to make it appear barking mad. So the domestic angel becomes

either a she-devil, as likely to poison her husband as to influence him with her gentle ministrations, or so angelic as to make us wince at the sound of her wings.

The first sensation novel established gender patterns that would become hallmarks of the genre. In Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), the two heroines split the difference between helpless femininity and manly vigor. The beautiful Laura Fairlie is every inch the proper woman, and she spends most of the novel having things done to or for her. (She is kidnapped, incarcerated, rescued, vindicated, etc.) She never narrates or drives the story; her passive femininity is the sort of narrative blank over which other people compose it. If Laura is the "center" of the narrative, she is also the hole at the center of it – the vanishing lady whose identity is up for grabs. Laura's half-sister, Marian Halcombe, is, on the other hand, a striking presence and a fascinating hybrid: her feminine grace is coupled with masculine rationality and drive, not to mention a small moustache. She is the only woman in the novel who not only stands up to its villains, but also to the task of narration, which she does through her private journals. When Laura supposedly dies, but is truly disguised and committed to a mental asylum so that her evil husband, Sir Percival Glyde, and his Italian partner in crime, Count Fosco, can steal her inheritance, it is Marian who boldly rescues her half-sister and sets about re-establishing her legal identity.

Responses to the half-sisters are telling. Fosco, who, though villainous, is an audience favorite and a man of great mental powers, considers Marian "a magnificent creature" and a worthy adversary, while Laura is "a poor flimsy pretty blonde wife" (Collins 1996: 331). Walter Hartright, the artist-hero of the novel and our narrator for much of it, portrays the sisters through the sensations they evoke. Of Laura, his future wife, he writes, "How can I describe her? How can I separate her from my own sensations, and from all that happened in later time?" (1996: 48). To capture the "mystery" of her feminine beauty, he turns to the reader's experiences of desire:

Think of her as you thought of the first woman who quickened the pulses within you that the rest of her sex had no art to stir. Let the kind, candid blue eyes meet yours, as they met mine, with the one matchless look that we both remember so well. (Collins: 1996: 49)

In an impressive hijacking of the reader's affective memory that makes Walter the subject of identification and Laura the object of nostalgic desire, Laura herself becomes oddly generic: the perfect heroine. Marian, on the other hand, stands out as boldly, uniquely unnatural: "Never was the old conventional maxim, that Nature cannot err, more flatly contradicted" (1996: 32). Again, Walter describes Marian through the trope of vision and through sensational response:

To see such a face as this set on shoulders that a sculptor would have longed to model – to be charmed by the modest graces of action through which the symmetrical limbs betrayed their beauty when they moved, and then to be almost repelled by the masculine form and masculine look of the features in which the perfectly shaped figure ended – was

to feel a sensation oddly akin to the helpless discomfort familiar to us all in sleep, when we recognize yet cannot reconcile the anomalies and contradictions of a dream. (Collins 1996: 32)

Marian creates the feeling that Freud would call “the uncanny,” or the “*unheimlich*” (literally, the un-homelike), which occurs when that which is familiar (“*heimlich*” or homelike) and has been repressed, and which should remain repressed, returns in another form. It is precisely Marian’s feminine form, so at odds with her masculine face and manner, that makes Walter – again piggybacking on the reader’s sense memory – so uncomfortable, but it also this uncanny release from the domestic (home-like) ideal that frees Marian to act in the novel.

The sheer fascination with which we “look” at Marian Halcombe sets the stage for our amazed, discomfited, perhaps slightly turned-on response to the sensational heroines who would follow her. No doubt the most beguiling of these is Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Lady Audley, another beautiful, blonde wife whom we “see” through her strong emotional effect on those around her. But Lady Audley is no Laura Fairlie: she is a bigamist and an attempted murderess. The mystery of *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) spins around this character’s enactment of proper gender roles: is she evil and insane, or just angry with the slim options open to her as a woman under patriarchy? In her argument for the subversive power of “female” sensation novels, Elaine Showalter influentially suggests that “Lady Audley’s real secret is that she is *sane* and, moreover, representative” (Showalter 1977: 167).

Whether or not Lady Audley is actually a subversive character has been hotly debated, but one thing seems incontrovertible: she makes us think about gender, and she makes us think about gender as a potentially fluid category. So, too, do her sisters: the wonderful Cigarette, the gutter-mouthed, sexually experienced French androgyne who takes a bullet for the man she loves in Ouida’s *Under Two Flags* (1867); Aurora Floyd, from Braddon’s book of that name (1863), who does wonders with a horse-whip; and the ever-resourceful Magdalen Vanstone, who in Collins’s *No Name* (1862) responds to the news of her disinheritance by going after it by any means necessary. As different as they are, all of these female characters exist at such an angle to the straight-and-narrow definition of proper middle-class femininity as to make that ideal feel forced, and certainly boring. While only Magdalen Vanstone is a professional actress, all of these women are performers of a sort, and they suggest the scriptedness of proper femininity. Even Lady Isabel from Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861), who after a bout with hysterical, post-partum jealousy runs away from her husband and spends the rest of the long novel paying for her adultery in utter masochistic abjection, performs that abjection with such extraordinary gusto as to make us question both the price of her fall and the system that would require such.

Some form of this subversion/containment dyad haunts much contemporary criticism of the sensation novel. Most arguments for or against the subversive politics of sensation rely on a sense of the ending to produce ideological closure and meaning

retroactively. But if we suspend that closure for a moment, the performances of Lady Isabel, Lady Audley, Cigarette, and company can be seen to pose questions about what it is to be a woman and how women operate in a world run largely by men. By using sensation itself – plots full of coincidence, topics rich in spice – to buy just enough distance from reality, the popular sensation novel is able to work through exactly the questions of women's powerlessness, desire, and artifice posed by the normative gender ideology of the period.

But what of Victorian men, who after all lived under equally stringent, if perhaps less visible, gender norms? Men in the sensation novel fare both better and worse than women: better, insofar as both heroism and villainy are possible within the logic of Victorian masculinity (unlike female villainy, which is by definition unsexing); worse in that transgressions of the male gender code are strongly punished, with few but notable exceptions. While women who break the rules can still be fascinating, even attractive, men tend to be treated with disgust, perhaps because the stakes of refusing proper gender were seen to be higher for men than for women. Where the sensation novel yields some of its most sensational material, then, is where stereotypical heroism falters and men slough off the coils of normative masculinity. Some of these men are weak, cowardly, and insipid. Others are lithe and delicate. Many are hysterical. As with the women, there are many variations on the theme, but the constant remains the refusal of masculine prerogative, which results in a crisis of masculine gender that ripples throughout the genre.

Were we to look back at the novels noted above in terms of their women, we would find that for every female character on the lam from the gender police, there is a male one right behind her. *The Woman in White* has, for example, Laura's selfish and hysterical uncle, Frederick Fairlie:

He had a frail, languidly-fretful, over-refined look – something singularly and unpleasantly delicate in its association with a man, and, at the same time, something which could by no possibility have looked natural and appropriate if it had been transferred to the personal appearance of a woman. (Collins 1996: 39–40)

Again, a first appearance is narrated in terms of affect. Walter reports that “My sympathies shut themselves up resolutely at the first sight of Mr. Fairlie” (Collins 1996: 40). While Fairlie is never the out-and-out villain of the piece – that honor goes to Glyde, whose ham-handed brutality does for patriarchal dominance what Laura's blankness does for feminine submission – he nonetheless comes in for the lion's share of opprobrium since he is the novel's whipping boy of effeminate and hysterical masculinity, the ineffectual patriarch whose malignant selfishness dooms the woman in his charge.

D. A. Miller has famously read this novel as in the grips of homosexual panic, touched off by the need to master and exclude nervous sensations gendered as feminine. As Miller writes of the suffering and violence needed to bring about Walter's marriage to Laura,

Such desperate measures no doubt dramatize the supreme value of a norm for whose incarnation no price, including the most brutal aversion therapy, is considered too high to pay. But they do something else besides, something that the Victorians, in thrall to this norm, suspected when they accused the sensation novel of immorality . . . This is that, recontextualized in a “sensational” account of its genesis, such a norm risks appearing *monstrous*: as aberrant as any of the abnormal conditions that determine its realization. (Miller 1988: 166)

The novel’s desperate measures restore marital and gender order through the narrative of detection, in which Walter becomes the agent of justice, Glyde is burnt alive, Marian retires into domesticity, and Fosco, who is himself a marvelous hybrid of gender types, is hunted down by a group of men known as “the brotherhood,” his dead body exhibited as the sort of sensational spectacle we have come to associate with women. The extreme, indeed desperate, force of closure is such as to make its necessity appear purely ideological.

### Gender and the Sensational Reader

The biggest problem with sensation novels was that people read them. The dynamics of sensational reading have been admirably covered by contemporary scholarship and are discussed in other essays in the current volume. For the purposes of this essay, it is crucial to note that all discussions of the pleasures and dangers of sensational reading are also discussions of gender, as women readers were considered to be uniquely susceptible to the narrative shocks and moral dips of the sensation novel. Victorian critics particularly worried about young women, whose lack of experience made them especially vulnerable to the representations of the novel, and whose delicate nervous systems left them open to excessive stimulation.

The “sensation debates” of the 1860s focused on these vulnerable female readers. While some critics – and some novelists – defended the healthy release of popular reading, the majority of critics represented such reading as diseased and contagious, capable of stirring female readers into a sexualized frenzy of sorts. Sensation novels were thought to “stimulate the very feelings which they should have sought to repress” (“Recent Novels,” 1866: 102), and critics called for domestic censorship: “Husbands and fathers at any rate may begin to look around them and scrutinize the parcel that arrives from Mudie’s” (“Our Female Sensation Novelists,” 1863: 367). The danger here was not only how women read (bodily, hungrily, horizontally), but also what they read. Mrs. Oliphant, the anti-sensationalist critic *par excellence*, warns that the sensation novel’s

Appreciation for flesh and blood, this eagerness of physical sensation, is represented as the natural sentiment of English girls, and is offered to them not only as the portrait of their own state of mind, but as their amusement and mental food. (Oliphant 1867: 259)



"It is a shame for women so to write," she claims, "and it is a shame to the women who read and accept as true representations of themselves and their ways the equivocal talk and fleshly inclinations herein attributed to them" (1867: 275). Fears that over-invested reading would tip normally chaste women over into immorality fueled concerns that reading was itself a form of illicit pleasure.

Given the tone in these reviews, one might be forgiven for thinking that the sensation novel invented dangerous and sexualized reading, but the 1860s was not the first decade in which the critical establishment concerned itself over female novel reading, nor was it the last. (This discussion would once again become super-heated during the 1880s, during the lending library debates over literary censorship and as New Woman fiction appeared on the horizon.) The discussion over appropriate reading for women is actually as old as the novel itself, but it did reach a hysterical peak in the 1860s because of several conditions that we have already observed.

In anticipation of their own reviews, sensation novels are themselves full of women reading, often badly and with poor gender effects. Isabel Gilbert of Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* (1864) virtually gorges herself on popular romances, and she is usually taken as patient zero in discussions of sensation's depiction of sensational readers. Isabel pulls out of it, but not before her addiction has imperiled her marriage, her reputation, and, indirectly, the life of the man she loves. In a novel all about reading the textual record, and in what must be the most overly literal act of reading in the Victorian novel, Laura Fairlie reads someone else's name on her undergarments and loses track of her own identity. Lady Isabel, who returns from her adulterous affair disfigured and disguised as Madame Vine, a governess for her own children, becomes the masochistic reader of her own story, whose blue spectacles literalize the optics of suffering. As she tells her former husband on her deathbed, "Think of what it has been for me! To live in this house with your wife, to see your love for her, to watch the envied caresses that once were mine!" (Wood 2000: 682). That these are also instructions to the sympathetic reader – *imagine how I feel* – seems clear.

While some sensation novels address a male reader, most figure their readers as female. Thus Mrs. Henry Wood's emphatic outburst: "O reader, believe me! Lady – wife – mother! Should you ever be tempted to abandon your home, so will you waken!" (2000: 334). Not one to gild the matrimonial lily, Wood advises readers of Lady Isabel's sad tale to learn from it: "Young lady, when he who is soon to be your lord and master protests to you that he shall always be as ardent a lover as he is now, believe him if you like, but don't reproach him when disappointment comes" (2000: 247). This direct, interpolating address, shocking in its own right, coupled with scene after scene of embedded reading, make the sensation novel a hotbed of what Garrett Stewart (1996) has called "conscripted reading," the practice by which the novel writes the reader. The sensation novel, critics feared, was writing its female readers quite wrong.

Male readers were supposedly made of sterner stuff, with masculine rationality on their side, along with stronger nerves and constitutions to withstand the occasional

jolt and shiver. But even stalwart men can be brought low by readerly emotion. George Talboys, Lady Audley's first husband and the one she flings down a well when he discovers and threatens to expose her bigamy, reads of her (fake) death and reels under the blow:

He began to wonder what had happened, and why it was that one line in the *Times* newspaper could have so horrible an effect on him. . . . He knew that there was a great noise as of half-a-dozen furious steam-engines tearing and grinding in his ears, and he knew nothing more, except that somebody or something fell heavily to the ground. (Braddon 1998b: 40)

In this embedded scene of reading, the wound is once again feminine – the news of his wife's death causes the male reader to faint dead away. In this and other sensation novels, the threat of emotional contagion is countered by turning detective, the figure for the rational – and usually male – super-reader that solves the mystery of the novel by accurately decoding the clues of the narrative. As Patrick Brantlinger writes of detection as narrative mode and thematic, "In this way, sensation novels are always allegories of reading" (1998: 147). The reading such novels obsessively allegorize is a deeply gendered act.

### Gender and the Sensational Author

Reading was a gendered activity for the Victorians, and writing was no less so. But if reading – at least the bodily, appetitive reading that anti-sensationalist rhetoric aligned with uncontrolled female desire – was a female activity, writing for publication was a male one. This is not to say that women did not write and publish novels, because they most obviously did, but that the act of publishing, making public, was considered part of the masculine preserve. The role of *professional* author was gendered male because of its explicit ties to the market, and it was by the mid-nineteenth century considered a legitimate profession for men, as Mary Poovey has shown in her work on the professionalization of the gentleman writer (1988: 89–125).

When Wilkie Collins or Charles Reade dipped their pens in sensational ink, then, they were writing professionally and for profit, not unmanning themselves in the process. Reviewers may have occasionally wished that they had written differently or for a different audience, but the fact of their authorship itself was not cause for concern or regret. Not so with female novelists, upon the proper femininity of whom suspicion was cast by the act of appearing in mass-reproduced print. As Poovey writes, "a woman who wrote for publication threatened to collapse the ideal from which her authority was derived and to which her fidelity was necessary for so many other social institutions to work" (1988: 125). If the proper woman tended the home fires in chaste humility and Christian morality, who was it that wrote highly seasoned popular novels about bigamists and murderesses for a mass audience and for profit?

Anti-sensationalist discourse had an answer to this question, of course, and female novelists like Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Rhoda Broughton were often condemned for acting unnaturally. As with the discussion of dangerous female reading, the critical conversation about female authorship was hardly new: professional female novelists had been under scrutiny as long as there had been a novel to write, and they had evolved numerous strategies for legitimizing their writing and shielding themselves from criticism. These strategies included the pose of the amateur author or the proper lady writer; the use of male pseudonyms (Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell; George Eliot); writing the pedagogical novel aimed at female improvement; writing in the “private” genre of the journal or letter form; and the supposedly “found” manuscript. Few women writers of sensation availed themselves of these shields, with the notable exception of Mrs. Henry Wood, who went down in publishing history under the protective umbrella of her husband’s name. As with the reading debates, the tone of discussions about female sensational authorship was particularly high-pitched.

As the “Queen of the Sensation School,” Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s career is here particularly illustrative. Braddon was a consummate professional. She worked in the publishing world as author, editor, and reviewer and was both enormously prolific and popularly successful. But reviewers of Braddon’s work questioned her talent and her morals, often with recourse to her previous history as what one reviewer sneeringly calls “a provincial actress” (“Mrs. Wood and Miss Braddon,” 1863: 99). Using the Victorian shorthand for impropriety, Braddon is portrayed as a public spectacle and market whore. The satirical journal *The Mask* accompanied an appreciative notice of Braddon’s work with an image of her as an equestrian circus performer, dressed in a revealing ballet costume and jumping through hoops held up by her publisher (and lover), John Maxwell (see Figure 31.1). As a public, authorial figure and the purveyor of bodily sensations, Braddon is seen as having violated the code of private femininity.

## Gender and the Sensational Critic

After causing such a stir among Victorian readers and critics, the sensation novel of the 1860s faded from the limelight as various late Victorian shocks – New Women! Gay men! – jolted the social body. But, as any reader of the sensation novel knows, the dead return. Sensation was rejuvenated in the 1970s, when feminism and academic interest in popular culture renewed interest in the genre. As with its initial success and subsequent infamy, sensation’s return was predicated on its depictions of non-normative gender, its female readership, and the many women writers who called the anti-domestic genre home. The first studies that reinvigorated sensation focused on its subversion of patriarchal imperatives, particularly Elaine Showalter’s groundbreaking *A Literature of Their Own* (1977). Showalter’s focus on women writers inaugurated a string of critical works, like Winifred Hughes’s *The Maniac in the Cellar* (1980), that



Figure 31.1 *The Mask*

reclaimed female sensation novelists and gave them equal billing with their male counterparts.

By the early 1990s, when a great wave of interest in sensation produced new editions of the novels and critical reappraisals of them, focus shifted away from reclamation efforts and from establishing the feminist politics of sensation. In *The "Improper" Feminine* (1992), Lyn Pykett signals this shift away from the familiar patterns of subversion/containment and towards a more nuanced politics of sensation when she suggests that

We should explore the sensation novel as a site in which the contradictions, anxieties, and opposing ideologies of Victorian culture converge and are put into play, and as a medium which registered and negotiated (or failed to negotiate) a wide range of profound cultural anxieties about gender stereotypes, sexuality, class, the family, and marriage. (1992: 50–1)

The critical pattern of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been to focus on gender rather than simply women, to explore gender ideology as connected to other systems (e.g. nation, empire), to think through the complex power relations of masochistic, feminized reading, to provide a rich, complicated historical and material context for sensation's construction of gender ideology (e.g. law, medicine, journalism), and to connect the "sensational '60's" to the decades before and after it. Thanks to the efforts of sensation's recent critics, many of them represented in this volume, the genre no longer appears as an isolated eruption of gender perversity in the calm seas of an otherwise pacific century, but as part of the larger, shifting developments that undergird the narratives of cultural, political, and private life.

As sensational as this popular novel's dalliance with gender has been, then, it has been remarkably long-lasting. That sensation is bound up with the mysteries and politics of gender turns out to be no secret at all.

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32

## Queer Sensation

*Ross G. Forman*

What is it about sensation fiction that makes it an attractive body of literature to be “queered”? And what is the value of applying queer theory and queer reading practices to this genre? Is queerness more prevalent in this body of work because of its investment in topics that Victorian moralists found perverse, such as adultery, bigamy, illegitimacy, murder, and mania? Is it more significant than in other types of literature because of the wide audience sensation fiction reached, because of the “feminization” of the genre (in terms of readers and writers), or because of the use of plot formulas that regularly refract male desire through a female love object? Does the widely touted “domestication” of the Gothic in sensation fiction make queerness British in ways that earlier or other types of texts might have resisted? And is the genre, in the 1860s and 1870s, instrumental in paving the way for more overt representations of sexuality, and especially homosexuality, in *fin-de-siècle* literature?

Perhaps the best starting point for answering these questions comes from Sarah Waters, a contemporary writer who has set a number of queer- and lesbian-themed novels in the Victorian period. Writing in the *Guardian* newspaper in 2006, Waters explains:

Often, when I’m asked about the writing of *Fingersmith*, I say that I used the book as a way of mopping up the various juicy 19th-century titbits I hadn’t been able to fit into my first two novels; and I’m only half joking. Working on *Tipping the Velvet* had given me a sense of the sort of lush, lesbian stories it might be possible to tease out of the Victorian setting, and *Affinity*, with its prison cells and séances, had only drawn me further into the darker, queerer institutions of 19th-century life.

Waters found this “darker, queerer” side of the period in sensation fiction:

By the time I'd finished writing that book, I was hooked on the "sensation novels" of writers such as Wilkie Collins, Sheridan LeFanu and Mary Elizabeth Braddon: novels whose preoccupation with sex, crime and family scandals had once made them runaway bestsellers. Tentatively, I began to piece together a melodramatic plot of my own, drawing on all those aspects of Victorian culture which still fascinated and intrigued me: asylums, pornography, bibliophilia, the world of servants, the world of thieves. (Waters 2006)

Waters's comments highlight not only some of the plot elements that lend sensation fiction its continuing appeal, but also the way that this corpus of literature embraces the risqué. For sensation was a form that was, as Waters adds, "at its best when tugging at the seams of certainties and easy solutions" (Waters 2006).

Sensation's use of a popular-fiction medium to address social and sexual transgressions and its richly ambiguous plotting of moral certitudes have encouraged critics to apply queer and feminist methodologies to it. So has the prominence of women writers, key among them Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Indeed, the hostile critical reactions that many sensation novels received in their own day are reflective not only of male critics' anxieties about female authorship and readership, but also of the attention they drew to issues of unconventional representations of gender and marriage. As Richard Nemesvari notes, the "critical furore" around sensation fiction stems from its "insistence that even the sanctified realm of Victorian domesticity provided no real barrier to 'deviant' criminal/sexual urges that seemed waiting to overwhelm it" (Nemesvari 2000: 110). Recent scholarly interest in notions of affect and sympathy has also encouraged a re-evaluation of sensation literature in terms of queer dynamics that are not specifically – or not primarily – sexual, embracing analyses of female friendships and of the processes through which readers identify with and form sympathetic attachments to characters and plots.

Before investigating how and where queer studies and sensation fiction come together, it may be wise to define the term "queer" itself. Like "gay," originally slang for female prostitutes, "queer" was a derogatory term that has since been reclaimed. In political and activist circles, it is often used to embrace a wide spectrum of people with "non-normative sexualities," including bisexuals, gays, lesbians, the transgendered and intersex, and their sympathizers. In literary criticism, "queer" is often the preferred term because it is more inclusive and less ideologically restricted than "lesbian" and "gay"; "queer" recognizes the fact that sexual desires and the identities surrounding them may be partial, incomplete, shifting, and contradictory, and that even heterosexual desire may itself be queer, rather than normalizing. "Queer" also makes connections with auto-erotic behaviors (masturbation, which the Victorians called "onanism"), erotic stimulation (such as flagellation), incest, and sadism and masochism; these are also non-heteronormative forms of sexual expression that call into question sex and gender roles.

For students of nineteenth-century literature and culture, "queer" is a less anachronistic concept than "gay" and "lesbian" in that it embraces the exploration of

same-sex desires that need not be aligned with contemporary ideas about homosexuality and homosexuals. Victorian men and women may have felt desire for their own sex – and acted on it – but their experiences of what these desires and actions meant would have been significantly different to ours, especially since the homosexual as a medical and legal category did not fully emerge until the end of the century.

When “queering” sensation, we also need to be aware of two sets of reading practices, which influence how we perceive sensation literature itself. The first – as Waters’s comments acknowledge – is our own way of reading, informed both by the history of queer theory and by a clear notion of the relationship and distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality. This reading practice colors our understanding of representations of affectionate friendship in Victorian texts, of tensions of desire and hatred, and of plots in which women serve as “dense” transfer points for interaction between men. It makes it easy for us to see an erotic charge between characters like James Steerforth and David Copperfield in Dickens’s eponymous novel of 1850, whether or not readers in Dickens’s time would have interpreted their companionship in this fashion. The second is the Victorians’ own reading practices. Historicizing sensation fiction and thinking historically about the culture in which it emerged give us tools to access the secrets and stratagems the Victorians used in representing sex and gender, as well as cautioning us not to misread or misconstrue these texts by assuming that our own ways of thinking about sexuality are historically transcendent.

### Queerly Sensational

Queer readings of Victorian literature are indebted to the work of Michel Foucault, and especially to his idea that the silences around sexual “perversions” are productive spaces. The nineteenth century, he argues, saw a proliferation of discussions of sexuality as the private increasingly came to be regulated. As important as the invention of homosexuality, then, is the concurrent invention of heterosexuality, which establishes what behavioral norms and deviations from it are supposed to be. Critics thus search for codes and read the signification of silences in order to reconstruct the “hidden histories” of nineteenth-century cultures. Critics have also been interested in the implications queer readings might have for the form of the novel (such as the ritual of tying together a plot with a marriage in the final pages).

Queer readings frequently rely on the provocative idea of the triangularization of desire, as popularized in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s seminal *Between Men* (1985). Simply put, Sedgwick argues that the pivot for many nineteenth-century novels is a “homosocial” desire between two male characters, which is refracted through a female character, who often serves as a nominal love object for the men. Sedgwick terms this phenomenon “the denied erotics of male rivalry” (Sedgwick 1985: 181). Typically, novels resolve the tension caused by this disruptive desire of men for each other through their repression and substitution with a marriage, which reinstates a norma-



tive, heterosexual order. Desire and its containment therefore constitute a crucial mode of storytelling. This pattern is certainly one that applies to the sensation novel.

In an essay written not long after the publication of *Between Men*, D. A. Miller offers a masterful analysis of the operation of readerly identification in *The Woman in White* (1859–60) as a work that incites the homosexual panic and heterosexual violence integral to Sedgwick's theory. Miller notes that Collins explicitly addresses a male reader and implicates him in the "passive, paranoid, homosexual feminization" that characterizes the first half of the novel; however, these sentiments succeed to "active, corroborative, heterosexual masculine protest" as the novel progresses (Miller 1988: 164–5). The agenda shifts from one of inciting sensation to one of dissolving it "in the achievement of decided meaning," which, for Miller, is "the normative requirements of the heterosexual menage whose happy picture concludes it" (1988: 165). Thus Miller sees Collins's plot as an example of how Victorian fiction encoded and enforced violent homophobia.

Miller's reading of *The Woman in White* can be complemented by seeing a defect in the triangle of desire linking together Sir Percival and Walter through Laura. What is strikingly obvious about Percival's relationship with Laura is his lack of interest in her sexually. Instead, money replaces sex as the erotic pivot. Similarly, Glyde's earlier attachment to Mrs. Catherick, although perceived by the villagers as an illicit liaison, is later emptied of sexual content. Readers discover that Glyde's motive in approaching Anne's mother is to alter marriage records and thereby legitimate his birth, not to make love to her. Again, money (or the things for which it can be exchanged) replaces sexuality. This situation predisposes readers to accept Glyde's villainy, just as his bullying, bad temper, and disrespect for honor mark him as outside the bounds of appropriate manliness for his class (as well as outside appropriate norms of masculinity for the novel's middle-class consumers).<sup>1</sup>

Miller's contention that the last part of the novel accedes to a mode of active, corroborative, heterosexual masculinity also deserves tempering in light of Sir Percival's death scene, which paints a more equivocal picture of assertive manliness. The baronet has accidentally locked himself into the vestry of the church while trying to destroy the evidence of his fraud. The vestry door with its sticky key reminds us of the "postern stair" of Dickens's later *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), which Sedgwick famously reads in terms of sodomy in *Between Men*.<sup>2</sup> In Collins's novel, Hartwright organizes the villagers to wrench a beam from a crumbling house and to use this beam as a battering ram against the locked door, an act similarly symbolic of anal penetration.

Yet these exertions leave the protagonist spent: "My energy of will was gone – my strength was exhausted – the turmoil of my thoughts was fearfully and suddenly stilled, now that I knew he was dead" (Collins 1994: 469). Ironically, Hartwright's hyper-masculine efforts to save Sir Percival – his exercising of force and energy on behalf of another man – land him in a highly feminized state of nervous depletion. So much so that he is unable to control his body and his speech when called upon by the police to recount what has happened. Even this late in the novel, then, Walter is

unable to assert the sort of forthright masculinity needed to shore up the compulsory heterosexuality of the novel's finale. Indeed, if masculine exertion leaves Walter as enervated as the effeminate Mr. Fairlie (Laura's uncle), it is only the accidental elimination of his rival for Laura that removes gender instability and replaces it with heterosexual privilege.

A less violent way to think about Sedgwick's model of triangularization of desire might come from looking at sensation fiction's standard trope of bigamy. As Ann Cvetkovich, among others, has argued, the plot device of bigamy raises questions about women's unbridled sexuality and power (Cvetkovich 1992: 46). Bigamy is essentially a triangle of two men and one woman, a geometry that immediately casts shadows on heterosexual couplings, resulting in a productive tension between characters. Although these shadows are not queer in themselves – the bigamous woman's two husbands do not necessarily desire or compete with each other – the bigamy plot works in tandem with other triangles surrounding the central female figures by making more "natural" pairings unstable. In Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861–2), for instance, the triangle between Lady Audley and her two husbands, Sir Michael and George Talboys, makes possible the triangle between Lady Audley, George Talboys, and his close school friend Robert Audley. It also provides the motive for Robert's expression of homosocial desire through his quest for his lost friend, the quest that propels the novel's plot. In fact, one could ask whether the actual bigamy that women commit in novels like these is reflected in a more abstract bigamy of men who have a wife and a male friend. Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* (1862–3) flirts with this possibility when Talbot Bulstrode first encounters Aurora and her husband John Mellish after their marriage:

"And what are we to do with this poor fellow, Lolly?"

"Marry him!" exclaimed Mrs Mellish.

"Both of us?" said John, simply. (Braddon 1996: 156)

One final point about bigamy: Bigamy, in the sensation novel, is also frequently tied to blackmail. Bigamous heroines such as Aurora Floyd are often enmeshed in complicated plot twists as they seek to escape the blackmailers who threaten to expose their crime. Blackmail, too, is a staple of stories about male–male sex in the nineteenth century. British historians like Charles Upchurch and H. G. Cocks have shown that many legal cases involving sodomy (and later indecent assault) involved one party attempting to blackmail another with the threat of exposure. Often, the blackmailer was of a lower social class than the victim, and in many cases the victims were entrapped by soldiers, guardsmen, and others with a reputation for male prostitution. While there is no way to be certain that the Victorians drew any connections between these two types of blackmail, the way in which blackmail for sodomy was pursued bears a significant similarity to the representation of blackmail in sensation fiction.

Important as Sedgwick's model of triangularization of desire is, it also raises the question of why so much criticism has focused on male desire in sensation fiction,

whereas equally productive (and complementary) readings of female desire can also be produced. (Sheridan Le Fanu's female vampire tale *Carmilla* [1871–2], however, has been a site for some such readings.<sup>3</sup>) It also uncovers a potentially queer way in which women themselves may read such novels: sensation fiction's portrayal of eroticized male friendships can titillate in much the same way that the strand of gay male pornography targeted at women readers today does.

More importantly, as Sharon Marcus points out, "in Victorian England, female marriage, gender mobility, and women's erotic fantasies about women were at the heart of normative institutions and discourses, even for those who made a religion of the family, marriage, and sexual difference" (Marcus 2007: 13). Marcus argues that exclusion, repression, and pathologizing may be less important when studying women than social relationships, which are "not reducible to sex, power, or difference" (2007: 14). And she suggests that strong female friendships often function in a complementary fashion to male–female courtship plots in Victorian novels. "The insistence that relationships between women must heroically oppose the marriage plot has led scholars to define any novel that ends in marriage as hostile to female friendship," Marcus claims, "rather than attend to the remarkably overlooked fact that almost every Victorian novel that ends in marriage has first supplied its heroine with an intimate friend" (2007: 76).

Within sensation fiction, examples of such friendships abound, such as Marian's friendship with Laura in *The Woman in White*. Instead of seeing literature as a site of violent conflict between the homosocial and the homoerotic (Marcus's characterization of Sedgwick's model), we can envisage the homosocial and homoerotic as working alongside the heterosexual. Laura's love for and eventual marriage to Walter Hartwright is actually dependent on her friendship with Marian, and, indeed, Marian is instrumental in the success of the couple's relationship throughout the novel. Readers see her sympathizing with Hartwright when he serves as drawing master in the Fairlie house and falls in love with Laura; rescuing Laura from the asylum in which Sir Percival has incarcerated her; and helping to reconstruct her during the long recovery period in which she, Laura, and Hartwright live together in a happy (rather than tense) triangle towards the end of the novel.

The model of the homosocial as complementary to heterosexuality need not be restricted to women's friendships, either. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Robert Audley seemingly transfers his desire for George onto the latter's sister Clara, ostensibly resolving homoerotic tension into heterosexual conformity. Nevertheless, the men's friendship remains crucially strong. In fact, their attachment to each other is integral to the final success of their relationships with women – and George's relationship with his own son – instead of being in aggressive competition with it. George actually ends up sharing a cottage with "his sister and his sister's husband" (Braddon 1987: 445), hardly a living arrangement that is particularly conducive to the repression of same-sex desires. Meanwhile, his son plays as a brother with the Audleys' baby. The position of George's child in this scenario is especially relevant because one model of compulsory heterosexuality for the Victorian period argues that if heterosexuality's

importance lies in procreation and the perpetuation of a man's name, then the primary bond is not between a man and his wife but between a man and his son. The ending of *Lady Audley's Secret* obviates the need for such a mother–father bond by replacing Lady Audley with George's sister; this plotting produces a configuration that necessarily cements the bonds between all members of the new Robert–Clara–George triangle. Since the text does not acknowledge the possibility of incestuous desires, the sibling relationship between Clara and George makes Robert, as much as Clara, the pivot on which desire turns. (By contrast, Collins's *The Woman in White* does play with the possibility of incest in its depiction of Anne Catherick's weak and perverse attachment to Laura Fairlie and the doubling that results in Laura's imprisonment under Anne's name.)

### Victorian Ways of Reading

The second set of reading practices to consider are those of the Victorians themselves. The rise of sensation fiction took place in the 1860s and 1870s, before the introduction of the terms “homosexual” and “homosexuality” (first used in English in the 1890s). This period also pre-dates the legal changes enshrined in the 1885 Labouchère Amendment, which criminalized all forms of sexual contact between men and lowered the burden of proof needed for conviction, although it postdates the increase in prosecutions for sodomy that historians say began in the 1840s. Cocks also notes a rise in committals for sodomy and related misdemeanors in the early 1860s (Cocks 2003: 23). Writing in a case study as late as 1884, George H. Savage, a doctor at Bethlem Hospital, could claim he had only met one other example of a man with what would soon be called “contrary sexual feelings” and another of a woman with a “powerful lust towards those of her own sex” (Savage 1884: 391). Savage's patient was a man whose “senses seem to be normal in every respect, and his reasoning powers in no way affected” despite his lack of “lust for women” and the fact that “the sight of a fine man causes him to have an erection, and if he is forced to be in his society he has an emission” (Savage 1884: 391). Indeed, the recognition that “pederasty” (sodomy) had a psychic and affective component, rather than a purely sexual one, was only just emerging in this period in works by French writers such as Ambroise Tardieu and German authors such as Karl Westphal and J. L. Casper.

Same-sex behavior among women was even less marked in the Victorian public sphere; because it was not explicitly criminalized, it rarely appeared in newspapers' court reporting or incited blackmail cases the way male behaviors did.<sup>4</sup> In addition, close friendships between women were neither as atypical nor as suspect as those between men. However, this is not to say that lesbian relationships did not exist. Martha Vicinus stresses that “we have too long assumed that women in the past *could not name* their erotic desires, rather than recognizing their *refusal to name* them” (Vicinus 2004: xix). Vicinus's *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778–1928* finds ample archival evidence for women's “romantic friendships” during the Victorian

era. She also explores the Codrington divorce trial of 1864, the subtext of which was a same-sex relationship between Helen Codrington and her friend, the feminist Emily Faithfull (Vicinus 2004: 69–79). Vicinus makes the important point that, “By the 1850s and 1860s, respectable women and men were trying to find a new, appropriate language to discuss nonconforming sexual desires and practices” (2004: 79), which suggests that it was not accidental that this was also the period of sensation fiction’s rise. But this language was very much under development.

If homosexuality was not yet a visible category for mid-nineteenth-century readers – and if the homosexual had not yet turned into a “species,” as Michel Foucault famously quipped – this is not to say that sensation texts themselves do not encapsulate queer desires or deal with complex visions of femininity and masculinity. Nor is it to say that homosexual acts would have been unknown to mid-nineteenth-century readers (including women) or that such acts went unreported in the contemporary press. A number of scholars, including Cocks, Upchurch, and Sean Brady have shown just the opposite, with Upchurch detailing the reporting of convictions for “unnatural vice” in mainstream periodicals such as the *Times* in the years before 1885. Jennifer S. Kushnier sees traces of the Clarendon Commission of investigation in 1861 into the state of English public schools in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. She argues that the repeated association of Robert Audley and George Talboys with Eton creates ambiguity surrounding Robert’s love for George and his obsessive pursuit of Lady Audley, whom he thinks has murdered his friend (Kushnier 2002: 62). Critics like Nemesvari and Richard Dellamora have also pointed to the Damon and Pythias story in *Lady Audley* as drawing attention to Hellenistic models of “Greek love,” although as John Tosh notes, these circulated “in a version which emphasized ideal beauty and cast a veil over genital contact” (Tosh 1999: 190). These models were, however, instrumental in the theorization of idealized homosexuality in the nineteenth century and should have been available to readers clued in on what Miller calls the “open secret” of same-sex desire.

When the idea of the homosexual as a discrete identity did begin to be discussed in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it was often theorized in terms of “psychical hermaphroditism,” of an individual with a woman’s soul in man’s body or vice versa. This notion has clear implications for the way in which readers identify today and identified in the Victorian era through gender with the characters sensation writers created.

## Case Studies

Let us have a look at how the two ways of reading we have identified might work in tandem. In his analysis of Charles Reade and Dion Boucicault’s novel *Foul Play* (1868), Richard Fantina highlights the queer relationship of two sailors, Cooper and Welch, who have a kind of marriage (Fantina 2006a: 130–1). When Cooper dies following a shipwreck, with the last words “For I love you, Tom,” the other declares to the novel’s

protagonist, Robert Penfold, that he will not long survive his friend. Later, Welch is found dead on the desert island where they are marooned, hugging his mate's grave. While this certainly reads like a love story, it might have had other resonances to the Victorians. First, the novel views the scene in which Welch is found dead not in terms of a love that embraces the physical, but in terms of fidelity, likening Welch to a dog who cannot survive his master's loss. "Only a man; yet faithful as a dog," muses Penfold (Reade and Boucicault 1868: II, 55). Second, Cooper's death scene in the long boat replicates the death scene between Lord Nelson and Captain Hardy, immortalized for the Victorians in Robert Southey's perennially popular *The Life of Nelson*. In this famous biography, the dying Nelson asks Hardy to kiss him:

– "Kiss me, Hardy," said he. Hardy knelt down and kissed his cheek: and Nelson said, "Now I am satisfied. Thank God I have done my duty." Hardy stood over him in silence for a moment or two, then knelt again and kissed his forehead. "Who is that?" said Nelson; and having been informed, he replied, "God bless you, Hardy." And Hardy then left him – for ever. (Southey 1849: 344)

However homoerotic this scene might seem today, it would be a mistake to think that the Victorians necessarily interpreted it as such.

Third, since the characters in *Foul Play* have just left Australia, the novel might resonate with stories of same-sex rape emanating out of the penal colonies. Earlier inquiries into conditions on convict ships and the 1837 Molesworth Committee deliberations had uncovered cultures in which sodomy flourished (Aldrich 2003: 219–20) alongside brutalities such as flogging. Significantly, these claims of "unnatural" conduct were rendered in novel form only slightly later than *Foul Play* in Marcus Clarke's 1874 novel about transportation, *His Natural Life*. Itself a work very much in a sensationalist mold, *His Natural Life* details the gang rape of Kirkland in the Port Arthur penal colony. Much like the wrongfully convicted Penfold, Kirkland is religious (he is a committed Methodist) and a white-collar criminal who "was transported for embezzlement though, by some, grave doubts as to his guilt were entertained" (Clarke 1874: 274). Unlike Penfold, however, the novel does not redeem him; instead, it details his rape, following which he is flogged to death by the vengeful commandant. Young, "thin, fair, and delicate" (1874: 274), Kirkland is thrown into the dormitory yard after angering the commandant by rebuking him for blasphemous speech. There can be no doubt what happens in this space. During the night, Kirkland begs to be released: "Kirkland, ghastly pale, bleeding, with his woolen shirt torn, and his blue eyes wide open, with terror, was clinging to the bars" (1874: 275). His sense of shame over what has been done to him drives him to attempt suicide twice on the following day. The sensational, voyeuristic flogging that gives Kirkland a martyr's death much like that of St. Sebastian offers an erotically inflected spectacle that implicates male readers in a system of ritualized homosocial cruelty.

After the rape and before his murder, the other convicts refer to Kirkland as "Miss Nancy," a sexual term detailed in testimony to the Molesworth Committee (Barlow

2007: 39), but more importantly an indication of three points: first, that cognitive links between effeminacy and homosexuality were reflected in mid-Victorian popular literature; second, that discussions of criminalized same-sex behaviors in the political or public sphere filtered into popular fiction; and third, that the authors of these texts expected their readers to understand coded references to homosexual acts.

Reade and Boucicault's novel also enmeshes the characters in webs of desire and criminality. There is the tension between the two male protagonists, Penfold and Arthur Warshaw, who at the novel's start are closely attached pupil and student. The men refract their passionate desires of love and hate for one another through Miss Rolleston, a female figure with limited agency. The crime for which Penfold is convicted – the fraud of passing a bad cheque – is, like blackmail, a crime about signatures. Thus this element of *Foul Play's* plot recalls the threats of prosecution and blackmail surrounding incriminating letters that revealed the writer's homosexual feelings and actions. And like sodomy (for which the death penalty was abolished in 1861), the penalty for fraud had only recently been reduced from a capital offense to a sentence of transportation (in the 1830s).

*Lady Audley's Secret* provides another example of how these two reading methods can temper our analyses of sensation fiction. The link between mania, masturbation, and same-sex acts that sexologists made in the late nineteenth century when theorizing homosexuality encourages us to see queerness in Braddon's repeated use of the term "monomania."<sup>5</sup> Monomania was a condition where one could be "Mad today and sane to-morrow" (Braddon 1987: 403). In the 1860s, monomania referred to so-called partial mania, centered around a single individual or subject. "In every subject not connected with their special delusion, they are like the rest of the world," noted Alfred Taylor in *The Principles and Practice of Medical Jurisprudence* (1865); "they talk as justly upon facts as before the access of their malady, but their general deportment, habits, and character are changed" (Taylor 1865: 1033). Taylor's definition of monomania bears striking resemblance to Savage's "Case of Sexual Perversion in a Man," in which the patient's reason and intellect were only abnormal with respect to one thing, sexual feeling. Braddon puts the term "monomania" in the mouths of both Robert Audley and Lady Audley. The former wonders whether his obsession with Lady Audley's behavior is rational or a kind of *idée fixe*. The latter wonders whether her actions against Audley, George Talboys, and others constitute a form of homicidal monomania, "a state of partial insanity, accompanied by an impulse to the perpetration of murder" (Taylor 1865: 1098). Lady Audley also exhibits tendencies loosely related to "incendiary monomania" when she burns down the inn in an attempt to kill Robert and Luke Marks towards the end of the novel.

But is there any erotic component? Monomania in general was definitely linked to "erotic monomania" (or erotomania) in the mid-nineteenth century, and all forms of monomania were regarded by "alienists" as forms of perversity. But we must be careful about making a causal connection between these facts and the plot of *Lady Audley's Secret*; Braddon wants her readers be unsettled by the nervous mental state of both Robert and Lady Audley, which is certainly erotically charged, but not necessarily in

a focused way. Lady Audley's own self-doubts about monomania also provide some justification for Robert's decision to inter her in an asylum (a *maison de santé*) on the Continent near the novel's end. The diagnosis of one of the doctors who agrees to commit her, that she has latent insanity which can only emerge under great emotional stress, conforms to this understanding of monomania as a condition of partial pathology, one which does not necessarily shake the entire reasoning faculty. As such, it is remarkably like Savage's characterization of his homosexual patient.

Reading practices and theoretical frameworks matter for any body of literature, but is there any way in which they have a special relationship to sensation fiction? Again, the answer to this query involves balancing Victorian views of the genre and contemporary critical study. One response, based on nineteenth-century reactions to sensation fiction, is the assumption that perusing this form of literature acted on the nerves of the reader. This meant that it was a particularly embodied form of reading and of accessing the pleasures of the text: what Miller calls "the somatic experience of sensation itself" (Miller 1988: 147).

Since sexuality is also an embodied form of understanding identity, and since theorists of sexuality during the mid- to late nineteenth century conceptualized it around the reactions of the nervous system to certain mental or physical stimuli, a certain overlap emerges. This overlap extends itself from the parlous nervous state of the characters of sensation novels – the anxiety and potential monomania of Lady Audley, for instance – to that of male readers. These men, by allowing the fiction to act on their own bodies, enter a state of passive receiving tied not to manliness, but to effeminacy. In other words, they are tied to a gendered notion of neurasthenia or nervous exhaustion, a social and medical concept also rising to prominence in the 1860s. Images of nervous exhaustion are also embedded in the novels themselves: in *The Woman in White*, the figure of Laura's invalid uncle provides one instance of a particularly vicious portrayal of effeminate masculinity.

Mid-Victorian critics described sensation as a form that electrified (and disturbed) readers' nerves, and reviewers regularly commented on the potential physical dangers posed by this kind of fiction. The works were also viewed in terms of abnormal or sick appetites, as Pamela Gilbert has shown, and implicated in notions of excess and lack of control over the passions. Henry Mansel, in a well-known screed against the sensation genre, describes it as satisfying "the cravings of a diseased appetite" (Mansel 2004: 33). These concepts of abnormal appetite and nervous stimulation directly parallel certain emerging conceptions of sexual aberrations, which were believed to stem from the improper or over-stimulation of the nervous system. According to this logic, too, the effects of reading sensation fiction were broadly similar to those of masturbating, in that both weakened the subject's constitution and induced nervousness and depression.

The tensions surrounding the control of bodily appetites and their narration are especially apparent in the late history of the genre. By the 1880s and 1890s, gender norms and "deviance" began to achieve greater public definition, and resistance to these positions also became more pronounced. Sensation was one body of literature



that refused to remain silent, and it addressed these new categories of deviance with an unconventionality equal to its earlier handling of bigamy and female desire. In the 1860s, as Andrew Maunder shows using the example of Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1860–1), sensation was strongly associated with notions of degeneration. By the end of the nineteenth century, homosexuality would become a major marker of cultural and “racial” degeneration in the minds of many social commentators. Sensation fiction can therefore be situated along a continuum of literature, leading to Oscar Wilde's 1891 *Picture of Dorian Gray* and beyond, that observers believed had the power to contaminate and enervate British society. Or conversely, its very power to contest social structures and to present alternative possibilities of power and desire made critics seek to contain it by typing it as degeneration.

The fact that sensation plots typically deal with questions of “undisciplined” and inappropriate desire – and that its heroines were incarnations of what Lyn Pykett calls the “improper” feminine – further situates sensation along this continuum. In addition, the engagement with legal issues provides another link. Sensation fiction is often said to arise partly out of the liberalization of divorce law in 1857, and its plots of bigamy were seen as a way of reconciling the possibility of a woman's relationship with (and hence, potential desire for) more than one man. Sensation and homosexuality are therefore tied because they challenge legal conventions of sexual object choice, and both were pilloried for exactly this reason.

This continuum becomes clear when examining work that the first wave of sensation writers produced in the 1890s. In Braddon's story “Good Lady Duayne” (1896), the elderly Lady Duayne keeps herself alive with secret transfusions of her traveling companion Bella Rolleston's blood. This sexually marked vampirism leads predictably to Bella's physical and mental decline. Until rescued by a manly suitor, Bella threatens to become another in a line of companions said to have died “of luxury and idleness” (Braddon 1896: 192). As in many of Braddon's novels, the encounter with unconventional desire is resolved by the story's conclusion, in Bella's marriage to Herbert Stafford.

Perhaps as important, Bella's marriage also resolves the tension surrounding the close female friendship between Bella and her mother on one side and heterosexual romance on the other. “I want no one, mother darling, for I have you, and you are all the world to me,” Bella declares in a letter to her mother when she arrives in Italy with Lady Duayne (Braddon 1896: 190). Although Bella breaks this vow when she marries Herbert, the story ends with these words, drawn from another letter to her mother: “wherever we live there shall be always a room in our house for you. The word ‘mother-in-law’ has no terrors for him” (1896: 199). Given that old Lady Duayne functions as a perverse mother – a mother who devours her young, rather than protects them – the story ultimately posits two models of female companionship: a destructive one which stymies heterosexual coupling and a healthy one which supports it. Bella's choice, and the reader's, is clear.

Another example of sensation fiction's queer continuum comes in *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897), a work by Florence Marryat, who had been writing in the sensation

mode since the 1860s. Protagonist Harriet Bradt patently evinces lesbian impulses in this novel, although, true to the nineteenth century, her lesbianism is coupled and not necessarily in an antagonistic relationship with heterosexual desire. Marryat's coding of lesbianism is not subtle. Harriet has grown up in a convent in Jamaica; by the 1890s, the view that same-sex educational institutions were hotbeds of homosexuality was already a cliché. When the novel opens, Harriet has arrived in Europe, where she exhibits an unladylike appetite for food and other mannish/New Womanly behavior. She forms strongly marked and eroticized friendships with the women she meets there, but she has a peculiarly enervating effect on them. Later, she falls in love with and marries a man in London, but her love drains him, and he dies.

The elderly doctor who explains Harriet's condition to her has various racist and moralistic explanations for why Harriet is the way she is, but he makes two important points: that she literally draws the vital force from those whom she loves and that her condition is congenital and immutable. These were very much the terms of late nineteenth-century medical discourse about homosexuality and its associated panoply of nervous disorders. Yet despite the taint of her past, and despite her deadly effect on those who grow close to her, Harriet remains the novel's heroine. Her moral character and intentions remain good and pure; she is, like the patient in Savage's case study, normal in every sense except for her unwitting vampirism.

Sensation fiction's afterlife in the 1890s also raises the important issue of its symbiotic relationship with mid- to late Victorian pornography. Many key tropes of sensation appeared in or served as models for the burgeoning market in blatantly erotic publications. Themes of the so-called English vices (sodomy and flagellation), of erotic desire between women, and of sympathies of sensation and titillation among characters and readers in erotica chart a parallel, if more submerged, course through nineteenth-century society. And erotic literature raised similar concerns about the dangers of reading, especially for women, about the relationship between reading and bodily sensation, and about literature's participation in a culture of degeneration. Works like *The Romance of Chastisement; or, Revelations of the School and Bedroom* (1876) predict Foucault in asserting, "In a broad sense knowledge *is* power" (*Romance* 1876: 7), and they supply that want with details of floggings only slightly more sensual and voyeuristic than that of Kirkland in *His Natural Life* and of Steeve Hargraves in *Aurora Floyd*.

These symbioses and borrowings across genres give rise to some final observations about the study of sensation. On the one hand, they propose erotic fiction as an instrument for producing new interpretations of sensation fiction that are not trapped in the prison of understanding queerness as merely the "love that dared not speak its name." Denise Hunter Gravatt's reading of *Aurora Floyd* against Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (1870) is a case in point. Similarly, Matthew Sweet urges that we make use of *The Pearl* (1879–80) when analyzing "those passionate same-sex friendships" (Sweet 2001: 196) in novels like Collins's *Armadale* (1866). One of the most popular collections of Victorian pornography, *The Pearl* "suggests that sexual desire between Victorian men was not considered sufficiently marginal to exclude it from representation within non-specialist pornographic texts" (Sweet 2001: 196).

On the other hand, one danger of simply juxtaposing sensation fiction and erotica is that it exclusively encourages the sort of reading that Marcus describes as “symptomatic”: “Symptomatic reading proposes a surface/depth model of interpretation in which the true meaning of the text must lie in what it does not say, which becomes a clue to what it cannot say. The text’s gaps, silences, disruptions, and exclusions become symptoms of the absent cause that gives the text its form” (Marcus 2007: 74). As a complement, Marcus urges us to pay more attention to the text’s surface, where we can see “what social formations swim into focus once we abandon the preconception of strict divisions between men and women, homosexuality and heterosexuality, same-sex bonds and those of family and marriage” (Marcus 2007: 13).

These are some of the very possibilities that Waters asks us to “tease out” in her novel *Fingersmith* (2002), where she melds plotlines cribbed from *The Woman in White* with the biography of Henry Spencer Ashbee. Waters recreates Ashbee, a famous collector of pornography and author of an exhaustive encyclopedia of erotic literature, as a perverse Mr. Fairlie. In *Fingersmith*, she gives us a modern sensation novel where the sexual desires, proclivities, and practices that lie latent in Victorian texts are brought to the surface. And she provides us with a central female character for whom reading not only leads to arousal, but also teaches her how to act on her desire for other women. Through *Fingersmith*, we realize just how queer the sensation novel always has been.

#### NOTES

- 1 For a full discussion of the development of masculinity in the nineteenth century (and the differing aristocratic and middle-class models of manliness), see Tosh 1999.
- 2 The idea here is that the “postern stair” symbolically evokes the body’s back passage, or anus.
- 3 See, for instance, Mason’s chapter, “Vampires, Lesbians and Masturbators” (in Mason 2008), and Major 2007.
- 4 There is no truth to the story that Queen Victoria proclaimed that “Women do not do such things” when legislators considered criminalizing same-sex acts between women in 1885, despite Fantina’s reiteration of this comment (e.g. Fantina 2006: 19). For one debunking of this claim, see Sweet 2001: 199.
- 5 On the development of links between masturbation and homosexuality, see Laqueur 2004: 254–61.

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## Class and Race in Sensation Fiction

*Patrick Brantlinger*

Sensation fiction emerged in the midst of controversies about gender, class, and race. In the 1850s and 1860s many women sought greater equality with men, including the rights of wives to own property and of all women to vote.<sup>1</sup> The lead-up to the Second Reform Bill (1867) brought social class to the fore: the Bill granted “respectable” working men the vote, while excluding many others because of poverty and lack of education. “Sensational” explorations of the urban slums such as Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861–2) also stressed class issues. Mayhew and other urban explorers racialized slum-dwellers, many of whom were Irish. And race acquired an urgency with the Indian “Mutiny” or Rebellion of 1857–8. Debates over evolution, the American Civil War (1862–5), the Jamaican Insurrection (1865), and Irish Fenianism also brought class and race into the headlines.

The first reviewers perceived novels by Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Mrs. Henry Wood as sensational in part because their plots involved transgressions of gender and class proprieties and boundaries. Thus, Braddon’s murderous Cinderella, Lady Audley, fraudulently vaults out of poverty when she marries into the aristocracy; she assumes a false identity, commits bigamy, and twice attempts homicide in the process. Similarly, Lydia Gwilt in Collins’s *Armada* (1866) is willing to commit murder to move upscale and acquire a fortune. Later critics also view sensation novels as challenging bourgeois and upper-class values, because they depict “mysteries, murders, and social improprieties . . . within the respectable middle class or aristocratic home” (Fantina and Harrison 2006: xii). In *The Novel and the Police*, however, D. A. Miller contends that Dickens’s *Bleak House* and Collins’s *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* contributed to their readers’ self-policing, and therefore reinforced the social status quo. In contrast to both interpretations, Jonathan Loesberg asserts that “sensation novels evoke their most typical moments of sensation response

from images of a loss of class identity” (Loesberg 1986: 117). Transgressions of class boundaries are less important than anxieties aroused by their blurring or erasure. So, too, Cannon Schmitt, deliberately employing a racial metaphor, argues that sensation novels “depend upon figurative miscegenation at all levels” (Schmitt 1997: 111), including a mixing and confusion of literary genres as well as classes and races. Pamela Gilbert also observes that class, gender, and race were entangled in various ways in the 1860s, and that in fiction these “entanglements” were paralleled by a blurring or blending of traditional literary genres with supposedly lower-class, popular ingredients (Gilbert 1997: 67).

Loesberg provides a useful overview of the “loss of class identity” in novels by Braddon, Collins, and Wood in the context of parliamentary reform. Other recent critics dealing with social class focus more specifically on servants (Bruce Robbins and Brian McCuskey), on detectives (Anthea Trodd, Ronald Thomas), and on various middle-class professionals including lawyers, doctors, and artists (John Kucich). In regard to race, most characters in most sensation novels are assumed or asserted to be English; when foreigners appear they are usually sinister, like Italian Count Fosco in *The Woman in White*, or at least entertainingly unpredictable, like French Madame Pratolungo in Collins’s *Poor Miss Finch* (1872). Characters who are racially distinct from Europeans are also apt to be suspicious or threatening, like Indians in so-called “Mutiny novels.” Modern critics such as John Reed and Lillian Nayder who deal with imperial issues in sensation fiction must also deal with race.<sup>2</sup>

Sensation novels appealed to middle- and upper-class readers who, it was believed, were more apt to be women than men. But they were also held by many of their first critics to appeal to the lowest instincts in readers – to emotional and bodily “sensations” rather than to supposedly higher intellectual or spiritual faculties – and they were therefore often denounced as pathological or degrading “filth,” bordering on the pornographic. Supposedly diseased, they were sometimes also racialized, because certain diseases – cholera, for instance – were thought to come from India or China (Gilbert 1997: 71–2). They seemed to some of their first reviewers to be little different from the presumably scurrilous French novels that Robert Audley enjoys reading in *Lady Audley’s Secret* (in 1864 Braddon published her remake of Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, *The Doctor’s Wife*, in which she parodies sensation fiction like her own).

With its roots in Gothic romances, stage melodrama, and penny or halfpenny fiction, notes Deborah Wynne, “The sensation novel was the first middle-class Victorian genre to conspicuously retain aspects of its ‘low’ origins . . . while still appealing widely to ‘respectable’ readers” (Wynne 2001: 14). As W. Fraser Rae sarcastically declared, “To Miss Braddon belongs the credit of having . . . succeeded in making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing Room” (Rae 1865: 204). Braddon herself wrote tales for “the Halfpenny reader,” stories she described as “most piratical stuff” and as even less respectable than her better-known sensation novels. “The amount of crime, treachery, murder, slow poisoning, and general infamy required by the Halfpenny reader is something terrible,” she told Edward Bulwer-Lytton; “I am just going to do a little paracide for this week’s supply” (qtd. in Wolff

1979: 163). Lucy Bulstrode in Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* (1862) reads "High Church" novels like those by Charlotte Yonge, but this implies that the novel in which she is a character is neither "high" nor religious.

As for sensation novels in general, "Everyone from the lady of the manor to the lowest scullery maid was reading these 'feverish productions' with feverish voracity," writes Winifred Hughes; "Here, for the first time in an age of increasing literacy, was an undisputed example of 'democratic art,' not only being read by all classes of society but having its origins in the less-than-respectable quarters of lower-class literature" (Hughes 1980: 6). A "democratic" lowering and mixing of standards was the sort of literary "miscegenation" that Schmitt refers to and that Loesberg argues made sensation fiction particularly disturbing in social class terms. Besides cheap periodicals, Hughes has in mind stage melodrama, which as Dickens remarked appealed to "mechanics, dock-labourers, coster-mongers, petty tradesmen, small clerks, milliners . . . poor workers in a hundred highways and by-ways" (qtd. in Hughes 1980: 9–10). Moreover, sensation novels were often held to be little different from newspaper accounts of crimes, like the Constance Kent murder in 1860 and the Northumberland Street homicide in 1861, on which Collins based some of the details in *The Moonstone* (1868). Charles Reade defended the realism of his novels by asserting that they faithfully followed stories in the London *Times*, while Dean Mansel attacked "the criminal variety of the Newspaper Novel" (Mansel 1863: 501).

One way sensation novels made their Victorian readers nervous about class relations is through the importance of servants in them. Key figures in Collins's *The Moonstone*, which takes place mainly in the aristocratic household of Lady Julia Verinder and her daughter Rachel, are house steward Gabriel Betteridge and his daughter Penelope. Like "below stairs" servants in many other sensation novels, Gabriel and Penelope act as amateur detectives, and Gabriel is the chief narrator of the first half of the novel. He is devoted to Lady Julia and Rachel, and yet can comment on upper-class behavior:

Gentlefolks in general have a very awkward rock ahead in life – the rock ahead of their own idleness. Their lives being, for the most part, passed in looking about them for something to do, it is curious to see . . . how often they drift blindfold into some nasty pursuit. (Collins 1979: 84)

like collecting and dissecting spiders and insects. Gabriel and Penelope are examples of what McCuskey calls the "kitchen police," exercising a surveillance that helps recover the diamond.

Positioned within the privacy of the household and able to learn its secrets, servants could either be loyal to their employers or the reverse. Rather than operating as "kitchen police," in sensation novels they are often blackmailers, like Lady Audley's maid, Phoebe Marks. Her murderous mistress has also been a servant, a governess, before marrying Sir Michael Audley. And in *Armada* Lydia Gwilt, too, began as a governess. In Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*, which also takes place mainly on the estates of



wealthy families, the headstrong heroine elopes with her groom. Upon learning from a newspaper of the groom's death in a horseracing accident, Aurora marries the wealthy Yorkshire landowner, John Mellish. But the groom hasn't died; he turns up in Mellish's employment and blackmails Aurora.

*The Moonstone* also features Sergeant Cuff, who is a professional detective, but is hired by Lady Verinder to investigate the disappearance of the diamond, and is therefore a temporary household servant. But to the other servants and, eventually, to Lady Verinder herself, he is an intruder. "The fiction and journalism" of the 1860s, writes Anthea Trodd, "yield ample proof of widespread middle-class fears of police intrusion and surveillance" (Trodd 1989: 7). Like Inspector Bucket in Dickens's *Bleak House*, Cuff is skilled at his work, and yet fails to solve the mystery of the disappearance of the Indian diamond. At first, he suspects the maid Rosanna Spearman, whose mother was a prostitute and who has been in prison for theft. Rosanna attempts to protect Franklin Blake, with whom she has fallen hopelessly in love, by hiding his nightshirt before she commits suicide. Cuff then comes to suspect Rachel of hiding her own jewel, but this makes his investigation especially unwelcome, and Lady Julia dismisses him from the case. It ultimately takes another professional outsider, who happens to be a racial alien, to crack the mystery. This is Ezra Jennings, assistant to the ailing family physician, Dr. Candy.

Detectives' intrusions into middle- or upper-class households were disturbing in part because they were lower-class individuals on familiar terms with crime and criminals. The plain-clothes policeman in Collins's *The New Magdalen* (1873), even though he has been asked to help by Julian Gray and Lady Janet, seems particularly unwelcome. When he appears, "Everybody shrank inwardly, as if a reptile had crawled into the room" (Collins 1993: 171). But the intrusion of other professionals into the privacy of home could be almost as disturbing. Ronald Thomas remarks that sensation novels "tell the story of the rise of a professional class of lawyers and physicians who established themselves as a powerful elite by taking control of the very terms upon which persons would be recognized and authenticated." Thomas adds that in sensation fiction "the class warfare of 1848 has retreated from the street-corner barricades to be restaged inside the confines of the middle-class household" (R. Thomas 1994: 483). But while servants and sometimes industrial workers, as in the trade union violence that Reade foregrounds in *Put Yourself in His Place* (1870), can be menacing, so can lawyers and physicians, although they usually, like the police, are on the side of law and order. Unraveling mysteries is the function of Sergeant Cuff, but also of lawyer Robert Audley, physician's assistant Ezra Jennings, and drawing master Walter Hartright in *The Woman in White* (1860). Through characters like Hartright, moreover, Collins portrays a group of professional outsiders that John Kucich calls "cultural intellectuals," rather like Collins himself, who represent a bohemian "fringe" and who, like Hartright, could be just as successful in unraveling household secrets as professional detectives (Kucich 1994: 81–2).

Moving by false means from the working class into the aristocracy, as does Lady Audley, was sensational. But so was tumbling down the social class ladder. For male

characters, bankruptcy, as in Reade's *Hard Cash* (1863), was a typical way to fall out of the bourgeoisie or aristocracy into poverty. For female characters, adultery was just as typical. In Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), Lady Isabel Carlyle falls, via adultery, from the aristocratic wife of a wealthy attorney to being the governess, in disguise, of her own children. Seduced and abandoned by an aristocratic cad, Lady Isabel herself seems to illustrate the weakness and inutility of the aristocracy, in contrast to her stalwart middle-class husband. Wynne remarks that "the major theme [Wood] pursued throughout her career was class conflict," but hardly in a Marxist way: she portrayed "a righteous bourgeoisie asserting their values over an enfeebled, yet corrupt, aristocracy and infantilized, occasionally troublesome, working class" (Wynne 2001: 62).

In both *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*, the upper-class characters are innocent of any major wrongdoing; crime and evil emanate from below, from servants, from "erring peasants," or from "ignorant," rebellious workers like the Cornish miners whom Talbot Bulstrode in the latter novel champions in Parliament. Aurora and her mother Eliza, who before marrying a wealthy banker was an impoverished actress, are also innocent of any major wrongdoing, so they are exceptions to the rule of evil emanating from below. Presumably because of her lowly origins, Eliza has excellent rapport with the "erring peasants" on her husband's estate. She makes a practice of visiting their cottages and is "frightfully artful in her dealings" with them: "Instead of telling them at once in a candid and Christian-like manner that they were all dirty, degraded, ungrateful, and irreligious," Eliza "diplomitized and finessed with them as if she had been canvassing the county" (Braddon 1998: 59). Through her good nature and generosity, and presumably her own experience of poverty, she helps them improve their morals and their living conditions. Yet there is no hint in Braddon's novels, or in most sensation fiction, that social class is anything other than a natural condition. Peasants are peasants and bankers are bankers, and that's all there is to that. The boundaries are supposedly clear, permanent, and often inherited, which helps to explain why blurring or transgressing them seemed sensational.

In Victorian fiction so-called fallen women like Lady Dedlock in Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) are typically punished by death or else tumble down the social class ladder into disgrace and poverty. Lady Isabel Carlyle in *East Lynne* suffers both penalties. Part of what renders Collins's *The New Magdalen* sensational is that the heroine, Mercy Merrick, does not suffer either penalty. As an impoverished orphan, Mercy was thrust into acting and prostitution. Mercy recalls her time with "the strolling players as the happiest days of my life" (Collins 1993: 236). Having stolen Grace Roseberry's identity during the Franco-Prussian War, Mercy poses as Grace in the household of Lady Janet Roy before the real Grace, who had been presumed dead, reappears. Posing as Grace, Mercy has become engaged to a gentleman, whom she asks: "Is life worth having . . . on less than five thousand a year?" (1993: 124). Apparently not. When her imposture unravels, she confesses and is forgiven by "radical" clergyman Julian Gray, who has fallen in love with her and, despite her past, proposes to marry her at the end of the story. So all turns out well for Collins's beautiful actress, con-woman, and ex-prostitute.

*The New Magdalen* comes as close as any that Collins wrote to being a social protest novel critiquing both the unforgiving treatment of fallen women and the causes of poverty and social class injustice. Early in the novel, Mercy says: "I sometimes wonder if Society had no duties towards me when I was a child selling matches in the street – when I was a hard-working girl, fainting at my needle for want of food" (Collins 1993: 12). And Julian Gray later tells her that he "had no idea . . . of what the life of a farm-labourer really was, in some parts of England, until I undertook the rector's duties":

Never before had I met with such noble patience under suffering as I found among the people. The martyrs of old could endure and die. I asked myself if they could endure, and *live*, like the martyrs whom I saw round me? – live . . . year after year on the brink of starvation (Collins 1993: 70)

while subjecting their children to want, hunger, and disease. Gray attacks "political economy" for justifying a system that leaves the vast majority of the population in poverty and, by implication, forces many women like Mercy into prostitution. Late in the novel, Mercy takes in a "daughter of the London streets," a girl who reminds her of her own miserable childhood. The narrator comments that this "waif" is the "pet creation of the laws of political economy! the savage and terrible product of a worn-out system of government and of a civilisation rotten to its core!" (1993: 267).

The word "savage" hints that the mean streets of London are no more "civilized" than "the dark continent" or than India during the "Mutiny." Collins expresses this idea in several of his novels, most clearly in those that foreground racial and national differences. His first novel, *Iolani: or, Tabiti as it Was* (written in 1844, but not published until 1999), displays his interest in races and cultures other than European. Lillian Nayder notes that it deals with "an aboriginal culture *before* the arrival of Europeans" (Nayder 2006: 141). Collins later dismissed it as a story in which his "youthful imagination ran riot among the noble savages, in scenes which caused the respectable British publisher" to reject it (qtd. in Nayder 2006: 141). Nevertheless, it shows his sympathy for non-Europeans, a sympathy evident in his response to the Indian Rebellion. In 1858 Collins co-authored "The Perils of Certain English Prisoners" with Dickens as a response to the Rebellion. Dickens penned the first and the third, final, chapter, while Collins penned the second. Dickens expressed an overt racial antagonism toward the rebels in his chapters, while Collins took a more ambivalent, ironic position. So, too, in his essay "A Sermon for Sepoys," Collins adopted a more sympathetic stance toward the Indian mutineers than Dickens or most other Victorian writers.

In several of his novels, Collins expresses ideas critical of British imperialism and racism. John Reed, Ian Duncan, and other commentators on *The Moonstone* note that the novel begins with the violent theft of the diamond from a Hindu temple by an English soldier, John Herncastle, during the battle of Seringapatam in 1799. Herncastle murders to get his loot. The episode can be read as a microcosm of what the East

India Company had been doing in India since the 1600s. Moreover, the shadowy Indians who come to England to recover the diamond are viewed as threatening throughout the novel, and yet by the end – even though they assassinate the second English thief, Godfrey Ablewhite, to gain their prize – they are treated sympathetically. Miss Clack unwittingly contributes to Collins's critique of British racism and imperialism when she says: "How soon may our own evil passions prove to be Oriental noblemen who pounce on us unawares!" (Collins 1979: 241).

Though it takes many detectives to solve the mystery in *The Moonstone*, the character who finally understands how the diamond disappeared from Rachel Verinder's bedroom is the racially hybrid Jennings. He tells Franklin Blake that he was "born, and partly brought up, in one of our colonies. My father was an Englishman; but my mother –" (Collins 1979: 420). Jennings is dark as a "gipsy" and has a hooked nose "so often found among the ancient people of the East" (1979: 371). The diamond comes from "the East" and so does the character who is finally able to show how it first disappeared. So, too, does opium – and it is Jennings's familiarity with the drug that enables him to show how Blake himself took the diamond. Jennings's race and some cloud over his past have placed him in the liminal position of medical assistant, yet he proves to be honorable and intelligent.

Racially mixed characters are also important in Collins's earlier sensation novel, *Armada* (1866), in which he "examines the criminal legacy of British slave ownership in the West Indies" (Nayder 2006: 140).<sup>3</sup> At stake is the fortune of the Armadale family, based on a slave plantation in Barbados; most of the events occur after the emancipation of slaves in 1833. Besides Britain's participation in slavery and the slave trade, *Armada* reflects controversies over both the American Civil War and Governor Eyre's brutal suppression of the Jamaican Insurrection in 1865. The novel first appeared as a serial during debates over whether Eyre should be treated as a hero or tried for murder. Lyn Pykett notes that Collins "displaces some of the burden of colonial guilt" into the past and onto Barbados rather than Jamaica (Pykett 2005: 158), but he stresses the "corrupting" effects of slavery on plantation owners and also on their heirs. Like the stolen diamond in *The Moonstone*, which points to the violence and dishonor in the formation of the British Raj, the slave-based Armadale fortune poisons the present, much as Lydia Gwilt tries to poison its owner toward the end of the novel.

*Armada* features two racially hybrid characters, Ozias Midwinter and his mother. At the start of the novel, Alexander Neal is smitten by the mother's beauty and "inbred grace." She is

a woman of the mixed blood of the European and the African race, with the northern delicacy in the shape of her face, and the southern richness in its colour – a woman in the prime of her beauty, who moved with an inbred grace, who looked with an inbred fascination, [with] large languid black eyes . . . (Collins 1977: 14)

In portraying Ozias and his mother, Collins seems intent on confounding Victorian stereotypes about both race and class (Young-Zook 2006). Ozias's mother is married

to the first Allan Armadale, “the largest proprietor and the richest man in Barbadoes” (Collins 1977: 20), which puts her at the apex of that colony’s class hierarchy. Ozias, too, despite “his hot Creole blood” (1977: 351) and his living for some time with gypsies, is as much a gentleman as any of the other Allan Armadales.<sup>4</sup> Like Jennings in *The Moonstone*, the racially hybrid Ozias is an honorable actor in the story; most of the villains, including Lydia Gwilt, are English.

In his 1872 novel *Poor Miss Finch*, Collins briefly revisits the issues of race he broached in *Armadale* and *The Moonstone*. Lucilla Finch is blind, yet has an abhorrence of dark colors and dark-skinned people. She and Oscar Dubourg fall in love. After he is nearly murdered by robbers, Oscar partially recovers but begins to have epileptic seizures. A doctor prescribes silver nitrate, which has the side-effect of turning Oscar dark blue. In a scene illustrating her reaction to dark people, Lucilla goes to a dinner party where she encounters a guest “with a dark-brown complexion and glittering black eyes.” Of course she can’t see this “Hindoo,” which only magnifies her terror: “The instant I felt him approaching my darkness was peopled with brown demons” (Collins 1971: 131). She acknowledges that this response is totally irrational, the result of a “strange prejudice” that Oscar attributes to her “blindness” (1971: 130). Through the rest of the novel, to keep Lucilla from discovering that he is dark blue, Oscar goes into hiding while his twin brother takes his place, with various sensational consequences. Though the “Hindoo” does not reappear, Collins is evidently satirizing racism through Lucilla’s reaction to him and through the bizarre efforts to keep Oscar’s altered skin-color a secret from her.

Still another sensation novel that stresses class and race, including miscegenation, is Dickens’s last, unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1869). The opium den scene at the start, in which a hallucinating John Jasper wakes up among a Chinaman, a Lascar, and a “haggard” old woman who runs the place, presents both lower-class and racial otherness as a threat to English peace and security. Besides his opium addiction, Jasper’s “dark” complexion hints that he may be the murderer of his nephew. The further possibility that he strangles Edwin with his handkerchief suggests Thuggee, an Indian cult of highway robbers and murderers.<sup>5</sup> While Jasper is presumably English, the other chief suspect, Neville Landless, and his sister Helena are racial outsiders. Neville tells the Reverend Crisparkle that he and Helena are from Ceylon (Dickens 1989: 60). Moreover, “I have been brought up among abject and servile dependents, of an inferior race, and I may easily have contracted some affinity with them. Sometimes, I don’t know but that it may be a drop of what is tigerish in their blood” (1989: 63). He and Helena, both of whom are of “the gipsy type” (1989: 56), are probably racial hybrids. Dickens may have intended to exonerate Neville and marry Helena happily to Crisparkle. But *Drood* is more dependent than any of his other novels on fears that the nonwhite races of the world could jeopardize England and that miscegenation could produce degenerate, even criminal offspring. Whether Dickens shared those fears or intended to criticize them is unclear.

In most 1860s novels focused on the Indian Rebellion, race is the key factor dividing the heroic, civilizing British and the treacherous, diabolical, barbaric “mutineers.”

The Rebellion was perforce a sensational series of events, luridly rendered in George Lawrence's *Maurice Dering* (1864), James Grant's *First Love and Last Love* (1868), and Henry Kingsley's *Stretton* (1869). All three novels offer versions of Nana Sahib, perpetrator of the Kanpur (Cawnpore) massacre, and all three portray him, or characters based on him, as treacherous, lascivious, and murderous, stereotypic traits that would be repeated in many subsequent British novels about India. "Had not the Nana Sahib at Cawnpore . . . slain the Christian women by the hundreds and flung them into a well, because not one of them would enter his zenana?" writes Grant (1868: III, 232–3). Grant's account of the atrocities committed by the rebels at Delhi is also both sensational and false: "The [English] women were . . . stripped of their clothing, treated with every indignity, and then slowly tortured to death, or hacked at once to pieces, according to the fancy of their captors. . . . The king, the princes, and leaders [of Delhi] seized" forty-eight Englishwomen whom they supposedly raped, tortured, and murdered most sadistically (Grant 1868: II, 58, 75). These atrocities had long since been officially discredited.

Unlike the authors of most Mutiny/Rebellion novels, several sensation novelists besides Collins took a critical stance toward imperialism, slavery, and racism. Reade's *It Is Never Too Late to Mend* (1856), set partly in the goldfields of Australia, offers a rarity, a sympathetic portrayal of an Aborigine. Jacky is, no doubt, "a stage darky with a boomerang," as Wayne Burns asserts (1961: 146), but he is nevertheless a capable, good-hearted character who can speak his mind (he has spent time in Sydney and can speak English). Similarly, in *Lost Sir Massingberd* (1864), James Payn treats gypsies sympathetically, much as Sir Walter Scott had done in *Guy Mannering*. The old gypsy woman, Rachel Liversedge, condemns "ill-speaking against us Wanderers" (Payn 1892: 133), such as calling all gypsies thieves. She and her "tribe," including her beautiful sister Sinnamenta, are among the victims of villainous Sir Massingberd. Moreover, Payn, like Collins, expresses criticism of British rule in India. Harvey Gerard tells the narrator that in India "in the eyes of the cowering natives, to be white is to be powerful," but not "to be good. Great heavens, what a retribution is waiting for us there!" – an obvious reference to the 1857 Rebellion. With Sir Massingberd in mind, Harvey continues: "If the nabobs we see here [in 1820s England] are specimens of those who rule the East, Heaven help the ruled!" (Payn 1892: 94).

Besides *Armadale*, another sensation novel that deals with slavery is Braddon's *The Octoroon; or, The Lily of Louisiana* (1861–2), which appeared in the *Halfpenny Journal* just as the American Civil War was beginning.<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Carnell notes that Braddon "almost certainly appeared in a stage version" of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "and later she acted with the famous African American actor Ira Aldridge in *The Slave* . . . . Braddon played the Quadroon heroine, Zelinda, who, like Cora in *The Octoroon*, is the object of a villain's lust" (Carnell 1999: xiii). The sensational aspects of Braddon's novel, however, render its anti-slavery message somewhat ambiguous. The story makes clear that slavery is evil and that miscegenation does not produce inferior beings. Cora Leslie, beautiful and nearly white in appearance, is not doomed like most "tragic mulatta" figures in both American and British literature (Manganelli

2009: 517). Cora has been well educated in England and she behaves like a gentlewoman, just as does Ozias Midwinter's mother in *Armada*. Cora winds up happily married to the British hero Gilbert Margrave. Kimberly Harrison notes: "Most sensationally for Victorian readers, in its emphasis on the brotherhood of man, the novel endorses miscegenation" (Harrison 2006: 221). In contrast, William Makepeace Thackeray's mocking treatment of the mulatto Captain Woolcomb in *Philip* (1862) is typical of Victorian attitudes toward miscegenation. Deborah Thomas declares that "'the tawny Woolcomb'" is "a reflection not just of Thackeray's personal thinking but of the widespread view among his contemporaries . . . that blacks could not be gentlemen" (D. Thomas 1993: 167). The same racism is evident in Thackeray's depiction of mixed-race Jamaican heiress Miss Schwarz in *Vanity Fair*.

Despite her obvious sympathy for Cora, in the compass of three paragraphs, Braddon writes:

She, the courted, the caressed, the admired beauty of a London season – she was a slave – an Octoroon – a few drops only of the accursed blood of the African race were enough to taint her nature and change the whole current of her life. (1999: 61)

Here Braddon herself expresses a racist view: the "accursed blood of the African race" "taints" Cora's "nature." Yet Cora is loved by her father and her British suitor. However, Cora does not yet understand that "to the Briton there is no such word as slavery. She knew not that in a free country the lowest labourer in the fields has as full a right to law and justice as the proudest noble in the land" (Braddon 1999: 61). *The Octoroon* allows Braddon to express a standard version of patriotism, contrasting Britain's freedom to slavery in the United States. One wonders, however, if the presumably working-class readers of *The Octoroon* in the *Halfpenny Journal* had also read about "wage slavery" in more radical working-class journals. At any rate, Braddon also ignores Britain's role in slavery and the slave trade before the Abolition Act of 1833. Meanwhile, in capital letters, Cora "was an OCTOROON!"

Yes, the fatal word which branded this lovely and innocent being is contained in those three syllables. She was an Octoroon, removed in the eighth degree from the African race, with a skin purely white as the tint of the lillies sleeping upon the lakes of her native Louisiana. *One drop* of the blood of a slave ran in her veins, poisoned her inmost life, and stamped her with the curse of Cain. (Braddon 1999: 71)

Sensationalizing Cora's mixed-race identity with phrases like "the curse of Cain" does little to subvert racism (Harrison 2006: 222). Yet Braddon's anti-slavery message is forthright. Further, most of the slave characters in her novel are mixed race – "mulattoes" or "quadroons" if not "octoroons" – pointing to the fact that racial hybridization was rampant in the American South.

The authors of sensation novels did not always directly confront social class or racial injustice or the ideologies supporting them. But their narratives were deemed

sensational in large measure because they troubled the boundaries, raising questions about the seeming stability of class and racial identities. Sometimes, too, as do Collins in *Armadale* and *The Moonstone*, Braddon in *The Octoroon*, and Payn in *Lost Sir Massingberd*, they more explicitly criticize the boundaries that their society and its dominant ideologies imposed on individuals of all classes and races.

## NOTES

- 1 The Married Women's Property Act was passed in 1870; the National Society for Women's Suffrage was founded in 1866.
- 2 For more information about criticism of sensation novels in regard to class and race, see chapters 2, 3, and 5 in Andrew Radford (2009).
- 3 Nayder adds that "Collins often links imperial crime to patriarchal oppression, combining a critique of empire and British domination with one of male privilege and enforced powerlessness among women" (Nayder 2006: 140).
- 4 Ozias Midwinter was originally named Allan Armadale.
- 5 A number of literary detectives, including Edmund Wilson, have sought to solve the mystery of Drood's probable murder by arguing that Jasper is a Thug. Thomas Archer, in *The Pauper, the Thief, and the Convict* (1865), describes opium dens in the slums in similar terms.
- 6 Braddon's *The Octoroon* appeared in William Maxwell's *Halfpenny Journal*. Though unmarried, Maxwell and Braddon lived together and raised a family. Because Braddon viewed her fiction for penny or halfpenny readers as lower in the socially classed scale of literary genres than her sensation novels, it is perhaps debatable whether *The Octoroon* should be called a sensation novel. But its treatment of class and racial themes is obviously sensational. It appeared almost simultaneously with Dion Boucicault's melodrama that carries the same title, *The Octoroon*. Braddon had many sources for her story, however. Besides *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she was probably aware of miscegenation as a theme in Captain Mayne Reid's *The Quadroon* (1856) and in Charles Kingsley's *Two Years Ago* (1857), among others (Manganelli 2009).

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## The Empire and Sensation

*Lillian Nayder*

“I want to go to India! . . . I am going to India” (Skene 2004: 10, 13). So the ill-fated Lois Brook insists in the first chapter of Felicia Skene’s *Hidden Depths* (1866), a sensational exposé of prostitution in mid-Victorian England. Lois has been seduced and betrayed by Colonel George Courteney, the brother of Skene’s heroine Ernestine, and hopes to join the colonel on the *Hero*, scheduled to sail for the colony with Courtenay’s regiment, his bride Julia, and a group of soldiers’ wives. Foiled in her attempt to pass for one of the married women authorized to make the trip at the government’s expense, Lois tries to stow away in the ship’s hold only to be discovered by the hands, renounced by Colonel Courtney, and rowed ashore. Pursued by Ernestine, who witnesses her brother’s renunciation of his former mistress in taking leave of him and is appalled by his cruelty toward the woman who “ought to have been, by all Divine laws,” his wife (Skene 2004: 30), Lois drowns herself before she can receive Ernestine’s aid. Too late to help her brother’s victim, Ernestine devotes her missionary efforts to Lois’s sister Annie, seduced and abandoned by an unnamed friend of the colonel, whom Ernestine ultimately identifies as her own fiancé, Hugh Lingard.

With its shocking revelations about the sexual transgressions and cruelty of respectable English gentlemen, their victims driven to suicide, *Hidden Depths* belongs to that sub-genre of the Victorian novel known as sensation fiction. As in many such works, its sensational features serve a reformist end. In *Hidden Depths*, Skene directs her social criticism against the sexual double standard and the class privileges that helped to justify the exploitation of prostitutes in her day. Yet more broadly, her novel responds to the controversy that inspired sensation fiction, most critics agree – the 1850s debate over English marriage law, civil (as opposed to ecclesiastic) divorce, and married women’s property rights. The debate culminated in the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 (which came into effect in 1858) and “both created and fed interest in tales

of marital misalliance, mistreatment, adultery, and intrigue,” Lyn Pykett notes (Pykett 2006: 52). Altering the law so that divorce was no longer a male prerogative, the Act allowed husbands to divorce their wives on the grounds of adultery, and granted wives the right to divorce husbands if the man compounded his adultery with cruelty, bigamy, incest, or bestiality. It also stipulated that legally separated wives were entitled to the same property rights as single women, qualifying the common law doctrine of coverture in their particular case.

Like many other examples of sensation fiction published in the decade following the 1857 Act, *Hidden Depths* can be read as a “bigamy novel,” one that uses the crime of bigamy as its “quintessential sensation device” to dramatize perceived threats posed to the institution of marriage by the introduction of civil divorce, which “weakened the sanctified, indissoluble state of marriage” and, unlike the ecclesiastic divorce *a mensa et thoro*, allowed for remarriage (Fahnestock 1981: 48, 66). Although she does so briefly and comically, Skene broaches the subject of bigamy in her opening scene, when Lois, assuming another woman’s identity, falsely presents as her own the papers of Mary Anne Reed:

The sergeant . . . took up the printed form authorizing embarkation, which he knew so well, and glanced at the place where the names of the women and their absent husbands were inserted. Those marked on the girl’s paper were “Mary Anne Reed,” wife of “James Reed,” private of the –th Regiment, stationed at Lucknow. The sergeant read them two or three times, then looked up keenly at the young woman.

“Are you sure this is your certificate?” he asked.

“Quite sure,” she answered doggedly.

“In that case,” he said coolly, “Jim Reed has two wives, which is one too many for a living man, let alone a dead one, as he is at this present time.” (Skene 2004: 11)

The “bigamy” of James Reed is no sooner alleged than dismissed – unbeknown to Lois, he died of cholera in Lucknow two months earlier. But the same cannot be said of the “bigamous” behavior of George Courtenay and Hugh Lingard. Although their respective unions with Lois and Annie Brook are not recognized as legitimate under English law either before *or* after the 1857 Act, they “ought” to be so by God’s law, the narrator insists, and the love triangles that Skene uncovers among George, Lois, and Julia, and Hugh, Annie, and Ernestine, emphasize each man’s betrayal of his two “wives.” To Julia, for example, George “has sworn a hundred times that she is his first, his only love,” Skene tells us, while he has promised Lois that he “would love [her] for ever and ever” and given her a ring to mark the permanence of their tie (Skene 2004: 41, 26). In seeking to live with Courtenay in India, Lois expresses her sense that their tie is indissoluble; at the same time, she unwittingly suggests the “colonial” nature of their union.

While Skene and her fellow sensation novelists respond to marriage law reform in their fiction, they also respond to revelations about another, equally conflicted type of bond that preoccupied Victorians in the late 1850s and 1860s – the animosities

between British imperialists and members of the so-called “subject races,” brought to light by the “Indian Mutiny” of 1857–8 and the Jamaican Insurrection of 1865. Critics often note the significance of the empire for sensation fiction; it serves as a source of “beguiling and deadly poisons” (Pal-Lapinski 2003: 95), for example, raises “fears of devolution” (Ceraldi 2003: 175), and provides a stage for “veiled encounter[s] with . . . estranged aspects of the self” (Carens 2003: 240). Yet the imperial “union” of exploitation and resistance, martyrdom and treachery, that dates from the late 1850s seems most significant to the sub-genre’s origins and workings. As Christopher Herbert says of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the “imaginative power” of sensation fiction derives, in part, from its “attempt to portray the traumatic inner damage” wrought by colonial conflict, which “haunted the national conscience” yet remained almost too painful to acknowledge or represent (Herbert 2008: 240).

Now known as the Sepoy Rebellion rather than the Mutiny to avoid the “epistemological privilege” conveyed by the latter term (Paxton 1999: 109), the Indian uprising of 1857–8 reflected growing resentment toward British rule, on economic and political grounds. But it was triggered by news spread among the native sepoys employed in the army that the cartridges they would have to bite before loading in their new Enfield rifles were coated in pig and cow fat and hence sacrilegious to Muslims and Hindus. Indians killed British officers, soldiers, women, and children, and were alleged to have committed a range of atrocities, while the British retaliated by blowing mutineers from cannon and hanging suspected rebels without investigation or trial. To some Victorians, the rebellion revealed the innate “treachery” of “that Oriental race,” whose members turned against benevolent British guardians without provocation (Dickens 1995: VIII, 459); to others, it suggested the oppression and lawlessness of British rule, imposed on South Asians against their will and for British profit, under the guise of “civilizing” the colony and its benighted heathen.

The Jamaican Insurrection evoked equally polarized responses among English observers. A colonial possession since the mid-seventeenth century, Jamaica was a crucial point in the British slave triangle, used for the cultivation of sugar cane and the production of sugar. In 1865, three decades after emancipation in Jamaica, during a period of economic distress, a group of former slaves attacked a courthouse in St. Thomas-in-the-East, a deputation having been recently turned away by Governor Eyre in Kingston and the people told to be “industrious” and “prudent” in an address from the Colonial Office. After the militia killed several Jamaicans of African descent, a mob murdered the parish vestrymen and Eyre declared martial law, with hundreds massacred in consequence. Criticized for his repressive measures and recalled by the British government, Eyre was tried for murder but acquitted. Nonetheless, a royal commission criticized his excessive use of executions and corporal punishment. Those who joined the Eyre Defence Committee to support the governor’s actions included such prominent literary figures as Charles Dickens and Thomas Carlyle, while John Stuart Mill and Charles Darwin, among others, called for Eyre’s conviction as members of the Jamaica Committee.

In *Hidden Depths*, Skene allies herself with the critics of empire by identifying her villain, George Courtenay, as a British “hero” of the Sepoy Rebellion. The colonel is “a very distinguished officer . . . decorated by her Majesty” (Skene 2004: 50); he has received the Victoria Cross from “his sovereign” during his leave in England, “the reward of his distinguished bravery” during the uprising, it is understood (2004: 41). But Skene uses his celebrated “bravery” against him, since it is indistinguishable from “deliberate cruelty”:

In character he was indisputably brave, of which he had given abundant proof in the Indian Mutiny – full of energy and decision, – the sort of energy which carried him at the head of a handful of men amongst a swarm of revolted native soldiers; and the kind of decision which, when the victory was gained, made him only wait to smoke a cigar before he had half-a-dozen of the rebels shot . . . in India his black servants found that he never intimated his wishes to them by means of blows, as our freeborn Englishmen are in the habit of doing in that land of their tender adoption, but at the same time they found that he made them work for the gratification of the very smallest of his pleasures till they fainted from exhaustion. (Skene 2004: 17–18)

The coroner who presides at the inquest held on Lois’s death asserts that “they were not there to try Colonel Courtenay, a gentleman of position and high family” (2004: 50). Yet Skene effectively places him on trial in her novel – and for his treatment of “revolted native soldiers” and Indian servants as well as Lois Brook.

In *Hidden Depths*, as in sensation fiction generally, the oppression of Englishwomen and that of native figures are closely tied, as gender relations and imperial relations prove analogous. Each is often represented *as* the other, with courtship plots intertwined with plots of imperial conflict. In the “marriage” that is British India, as sensation novelists sometimes represent the colony, the “feminized” native is protected and exploited much like a Victorian wife, while the wife is subjected to the “imperial rule” of her husband, her lack of property rights and legal autonomy similar to that of a subservient or rebellious native. Thus while Lois Brook practices a “species of idolatry” in her “wild” worship of George Courtenay and has a “look of savage agony” in her dealings with him (Skene 2004: 21, 26, 15), his native servants are subject to his “tender[ness],” as Skene facetiously puts it, and exhaust themselves in satisfying “his pleasures” (2004: 18). Under the circumstances, Lois’s desire to “go to India” resonates with irony, since (in effect) she is already “there” – as much the subject of the colonel’s imperial will as his Indian servants. In drawing such connections, Skene’s sensation novel resembles those of Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Each of these writers conflates the anxieties raised by marriage law reform with those provoked by imperial conflict at mid-century, to a range of political ends.

Among Collins’s novels, several provide imperial frameworks for their tales of marital strife and domestic abuse. For instance, *Armada* (1864–5) opens with a prologue set on the eve of the Emancipation Act (1833), which freed those enslaved in the British possessions, and connects the subjugation of Africans in the West Indies

to that of married Englishwomen, exposing the wrongs of both. It does so through the characterization of the “dusky” wife of Allan Armadale, who “sacrifice[s] . . . her freedom” to him (Collins 1991: 38), through Armadale’s history as a plantation slave owner and rapist, and through the fate of Mrs. Waldron, an Englishwoman incarcerated and horsewhipped by her brutal husband in Yorkshire. The analogy between empire-building and marital subjugation is most clearly Collins’s focus in *The Moonstone* (1868), the sensation novel best known for addressing imperial themes.

*The Moonstone* is a story of violations, imperial and sexual. It calls attention to the ease with which such violations are obscured or forgotten and dramatizes the challenge of bringing them to light. The forms of “amnesia” from which the novel’s central figures suffer, and that *The Moonstone* itself evinces in various ways, reveal the difficulties facing those capable of exposing colonial oppression and the exploitation, through marriage, of Englishwomen at home.

In the novel, eleven narrators trace the movements of a sacred Hindu diamond repeatedly stolen over the course of the tale, with Englishmen committing three of the four thefts. Collins sets his central plot in England in 1848–9 but opens his prologue in India fifty years earlier, immediately before and after the 1799 siege of Seringapatam, a victory that gave the British their foothold in the colony. John Herculastle, an English army officer, steals the Moonstone during the looting that follows the siege, murdering the three Brahmins who guard it. Bringing the gem to England, he bequeaths it to his niece, Rachel Verinder, who receives it on her eighteenth birthday. On the very night she receives it, her cousin Franklin Blake, the man she loves and hopes to marry, steals it; Blake acts unconsciously, in an opium trance, when he takes it from an Indian cabinet in Rachel’s bedroom. Because the opium has been administered to him secretly, he remains ignorant of his crime for much of the novel, though Rachel has seen him commit it. Once the diamond is in Blake’s possession, it is immediately re-stolen by another cousin, Godfrey Ablewhite, an Exeter Hall philanthropist and embezzler in financial straits. One year later, the three Brahmins who follow the Moonstone to England, descendants of its original guards, regain possession of it, murdering Ablewhite and returning with it to India, where, surrounded by thousands of rejoicing pilgrims, they restore the gem to a Hindu shrine.

Like Skene in *Hidden Depths*, Collins uses *The Moonstone* to expose the pretense that India is a “land of . . . tender adoption” for the British, recognizing, instead, the criminality of empire-building. But while he represents more fully than does Skene the nature of British imperial “heroics” – in the looting and murder perpetrated by the troops and officer – he also displaces their wrongdoings historically, focusing on the 1799 siege rather than the 1857–8 rebellion. This act of displacement may suggest Collins’s own hesitations as a critic of empire; more certainly, it points to a still volatile racism among Collins’s readers on the tenth anniversary of the uprising, and to their reluctance to consider South Asians as victims of the British. Since these sentiments were shared by Dickens, who first serialized *The Moonstone* in *All the Year Round*, Collins likely felt the need to address the subject obliquely, though he calls

attention to the mismanagement and self-interest of the East India Company, abolished in the wake of the rebellion, by calling John Herncastle by its nickname, “the Honourable John.”

In *Hidden Depths*, Skene connects imperial with domestic wrongdoings by means of Colonel Courtenay, whose cruel abuse of his mistress mirrors his exploitation of his Indian servants. In *The Moonstone*, Collins uses Franklin Blake to a similar end. Acting for “the Honourable John” in bringing Rachel the diamond, and then stealing it from her in an act suggestive of seduction or rape, Blake is both an agent of empire and a husband-in-training; he anticipates his “rights” over Rachel in taking possession of her property – and, symbolically, her virginity, a woman’s most precious “jewel” – in order to “protect” them. Among the injuries suffered by women at the hands of their husbands and broadly publicized during the debate over marriage law reform, their lack of property rights under English common law was prominent. As the doctrine of coverture stipulated, a woman’s property became her husband’s upon marriage, since they were then “one person,” her legal identity subsumed by his. Without rights to their bodies, furthermore, English wives were subject to spousal rape, though it is unclear how often husbands took advantage of this “privilege.”

Rachel’s sense of outrage after Blake takes her gem, its ties to the moon as well as the evidence that eventually helps convict the thief – a stained nightgown – all point to Collins’s sexual subtext. Because Rachel stores the diamond in an Indian cabinet and is represented with many of the same terms as the Hindus – as “dark,” “lithe” and “supple” (Collins 1986: 190) – her sense of violation and resentment, like her angry desire for independence, mirrors theirs. Collins underscores the connection between gender and imperial oppression by means of his amateur detective, Ezra Jennings, a dark-skinned victim of prejudice with a “female constitution” (1986: 422), whose parentage, as he partly relates it to Blake, not only reveals “the mixture of some foreign race in his English blood” but also suggests the illegitimacy of Britain’s “union” with its colonies:

“You have not always been in England?” I said.

“No. I was born, and partly brought up, in one of our colonies. My father was an Englishman; but my mother – We are straying away from our subject, Mr. Blake; and it is my fault. (Collins 1986: 420)

Jennings’s fragmented account of his birth – his unwillingness to identify his “East[ern]” mother (Collins 1986: 371) – conveys the shame associated with an illegitimate and interracial pairing as well as the inequitable status of the colony as a “mistress” who cannot be openly acknowledged or named.

More generally, Jennings’s silence about his mother and her racial difference, and his evident and abrupt decision *not* to disclose any information about her, point to what Tamar Heller and others see as the “double impulse of the text toward revelation and self-censorship” (Heller 1992: 156), a tension also conveyed in Blake’s convenient “forgetting” of his theft of the Moonstone and the displacement of anxieties generated

by the Sepoy Rebellion with the less threatening associations of the 1799 siege. Blake's alibi for the crime of which he stands accused – his having acted unwittingly, under the influence of the drug – is similarly double-edged because the Indian production of opium, which was imported to China, was one of the most lucrative and controversial "achievements" of the British empire. While Jennings uncovers the truth about Blake's theft by piecing together the fragmentary record, his revelations serve to acquit the Englishman and happily reunite thief and victim. For Heller, these details, like Jennings's desire to serve the English, reveal the ways in which Collins "contains" the "subversive energy" of the "half-caste" figure and that of the novel as a whole. As Heller puts it, "Jennings . . . becomes an image of the writer who reconciles himself to the social order" (Heller 1992: 159). Yet Collins also "underscores" the "ideological doubleness" of his story, Heller argues, rather than simply containing its subversiveness, and his ending allows for "resistance" as well as "repression" (1992: 163). "It may suit your convenience to forget," Rachel tells Blake when she is most enraged, but "it suits my convenience to remember" (Collins 1986: 401).

The tension in Collins's novel between remembering and forgetting, subversion and containment, characterizes sensation fiction as a whole and reminds us that, despite the publicity associated with the sensational, these works are as likely to cover up the wrongs to which they respond as they are to expose them. Complex in their workings and purposes, sensation novels serve conservative as well as radical ends. Thus Collins not only responds to revelations about imperial conflict and crime by representing the violation of a feminized East by "the Honourable John" but also by reiterating fears of an assault on Englishwomen by libidinous South Asian men. In *Poor Miss Finch* (1871–2), he draws on what had become a standard motif of "Mutiny fiction" when he portrays the sexual anxieties of his blind English heroine, who is introduced to a "Hindoo gentleman" at her aunt's home:

The instant I felt him approaching, my darkness was peopled with brown demons. He took my hand. I tried hard to control myself – but I really could not help shuddering and starting back when he touched me. To make matters worse, he sat next to me at dinner. In five minutes I had long, lean, black-eyed beings all round me; perpetually growing in numbers, and pressing closer and closer on me as they grew. (Collins 1995: 118)

Lucilla Finch's imaginings recall the "rumors about the rape of Englishwomen by Indian men [that] widely circulated during and after 1857," racist narratives that "shore[d] up Victorian notions of gender" while also justifying British supremacy and reprisals, their heroines "agency-less victim[s]" who require "male domination," despite the demand for "women's greater political equality" at the time (Paxton 1999: 112).

In *Poor Miss Finch*, Collins plays on British fears of libidinous Indian rebels and associates dark skin with disfigurement. But he also counters the racist implications of his story by revealing Lucilla's anxieties as misdirected and associating them with



her physical blindness. Working a variation on the bigamy theme that preoccupied sensation novelists, he represents his blind heroine as imperiled not by her aunt's Hindu guest, nor by "blackish blue" Oscar Dubourg (Collins 1995: 121), the dark-skinned Englishman to whom she is engaged, but by Oscar's scheming, light-skinned twin, Nugent, who hopes to marry Lucilla by assuming his brother's identity and "falsely obtaining his Marriage Licence, in his brother's name" (1995: 418).

Originally fair-skinned himself, Oscar takes on a permanently dark hue as a result of the medical treatment he receives for epilepsy. As Collins represents it, his dark skin signifies racial difference. Collins refers to Central American revolutions rather than to the Sepoy Rebellion in *Poor Miss Finch*, with "the people of the Southern New World," not those of British India, rising to "declare . . . their independence" (Collins 1995: 1). Yet he sets the novel in 1858, and Anglo-Indian conflict informs it. His Anglo-Saxon heroine must learn to overcome her irrational antipathy to the dark-skinned – a "prejudice" primarily aimed at South Asians (Collins 1995: 117) – and recognize her *real* enemy in an English gentleman who seems "spotless and fair" (1995: 39). The mirror-imaging of Oscar and Nugent, identical to one another in feature yet different in "race," recalls the two-faced Godfrey Ablewhite, who darkens his skin to pass as an Eastern sailor while trying to bring the Moonstone abroad to be cut into smaller but more valuable stones. After he is caught in the act, Sergeant Cuff, a retired Scotland Yard detective, wipes the dark color from Ablewhite's face, revealing the whiteness beneath. In the process, Cuff exposes the fiction of Eastern criminality in narratives of empire-building.

In *Poor Miss Finch*, Collins enables his blind heroine to see, but not by allowing her to overcome her physical blindness. Although Lucilla's eyesight is surgically restored, the restoration is temporary, and she ultimately welcomes its loss and the feminine dependence her handicap ensures, "as tranquil and as happy in [her] union as . . . woman could be" (Collins 1995: 423). She thus stands in sharp contrast to Madame Pratolungo, her outspoken and widowed companion, who narrates the story and punctuates her narrative with accounts of wives who turn the tables on abusive husbands, one beating her spouse "to a jelly" when he is drunk (1995: 27). A Frenchwoman and advocate of insurrection among the colonized, Madame Pratolungo acts in the name of "*la République*" and her self-sufficiency unites resistance against "tyran[nous]" imperial powers with feminist ideals (1995: 1–2).

Madame Pratolungo is a largely comic figure through whom Collins expresses and mocks the independence and political agency of women. His outspoken widow finds a much more menacing counterpart in Mary Elizabeth's Braddon's Lucy Graham, the troubling "heroine" of Braddon's best-known sensation novel. In *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861–2), Braddon uses the fears generated by the Sepoy Rebellion and the desire for revenge against the rebels to represent – and quell – a feminist insurrection. Although critics often represent Braddon as a subversive writer eager to challenge the social status quo, the ways in which she conflates the Indian uprising with a married woman's efforts to "divorce" one husband and "marry" another suggest the need to qualify this view. While certain elements of *Lady Audley's Secret* lend support

to marriage law reform and the quest for gender equity, Braddon also defends the institution of marriage by using the imagery of the Indian rebellion to identify “mutinous” wives as unnatural and ungrateful beings to be punished for their transgressions and restored to their “proper,” subordinate place.

*Lady Audley's Secret* tells the story of a beautiful young governess fortunate enough to marry Sir Michael Audley, a wealthy baronet nearly four decades her senior. The two live at Audley Court with Sir Michael's 18-year-old daughter Alicia, the child of his first marriage. Alicia remains aloof from her stepmother, disgusted by and distrustful of Lucy's childlike and angelic charm. Alicia has reason to object to Lady Audley, whose innocence is assumed and masks a mercenary character.

Following a visit paid to Audley Court by Alicia's cousin Robert and his friend George Talboys, a widower and ex-dragoon, George vanishes, last seen asking at the mansion house for Lady Audley. Braddon's amateur detective, Robert, discovers that his young aunt is a bigamist; he identifies her as Helen Talboys, the wife of George, who left her and their baby to repair his fortunes in the Australian gold diggings. Learning of his imminent return to England shortly after her bigamous marriage, Helen fakes and advertises her death to convince George that he is a widower. When George recognizes and confronts her, threatening exposure, she tries to murder him, removing the rusty spindle from the windlass of the antique well at Audley Court, on which he leans during their argument. She sees her “first husband sink with one horrible cry into the black mouth of the well” and leaves him for dead (Braddon 1992: 393–4). Injured but alive, George escapes and secretly leaves England for America.

Presuming herself a murderer, Lady Audley submits to blackmail by Luke Marks, the abusive husband of her lady's maid, Phoebe, who witnessed the “murder” scene. Luke has proof of George's survival but withholds it. Lucy turns arsonist and fatally injures Luke when she tries to burn Robert as he sleeps at the Castle Inn, where Luke is landlord. Forced to confess by her nephew, she discloses her deepest secret – the madness she allegedly inherited from her mother. Avoiding a trial to protect the family name, Robert conveys Lady Audley to a Belgian asylum and marries George Talboys's sister Clara, while Alicia is united with a young baronet.

Like *Hidden Depths* and *The Moonstone*, *Lady Audley's Secret* exposes domestic betrayal within respectable English homes. Braddon acknowledges the need for marriage law reform at various points in the novel, dramatizing the powerlessness of English wives subject to mistreatment by their husbands. Phoebe Marks is continually plagued by Luke's threats and violence, and some of her social superiors are abused as well. In the view of sympathetic friends, and at times by George himself, Helen is “the wife he had abandoned” (Braddon 1992: 49), “deserted . . . so cruel[ly]” before she reinvents herself as Lucy Graham (1992: 41). When George “marks” Lucy during their confrontation at Audley Court, Braddon shows him to be as capable of physical abuse as Luke. Robert discovers “four slender, purple marks” left by a “powerful hand” on Lucy's “delicate wrist,” one bruise having “a darker tinge, as if a ring worn on one of these strong and cruel fingers had been ground into the tender flesh” (1992: 88). The oppression of wives can be economic as well as physical. Miss Morley, the aging gov-

erness whom George meets en route from Australia, worries that her fiancé will only “welcome [her] for the sake of [her] fifteen years’ savings” (1992: 16). And for all his kindness, Sir Michael considers his first marriage a “bargain” (1992: 6) and keeps Lucy dependent upon him, despite her seeming affluence – “rich in a noble allowance of pin-money” (1992: 53).

While Braddon acknowledges the need for marriage law reform in such instances, however, she also criminalizes it. Instead of supporting the right of Englishwomen to sue for divorce under certain circumstances, or of legally separated wives to claim their own property, she tells a story about a wife’s bigamy and greed, treating such rights as transgressive. In representing adultery, Braddon casts husbands as the injured party, as if such wrongdoing was necessarily female. “Ah, Heaven help a strong man’s tender weakness for the woman he loves,” the narrator tells us:

Heaven pity him when the guilty creature has deceived him and comes with her tears and lamentations to throw herself at his feet . . . Pity him, pity him. The wife’s worst remorse when she stands without the threshold of the home she may never enter more is not equal to the agony of the husband who closes the portal on that familiar and entreating face. The anguish of the mother who may never look again upon her children is less than the torment of the father who has to say to those children, “My little ones, you are henceforth motherless.” (Braddon 1992: 284)

The inequities Braddon depicts here are not political or economic but emotional, with the woman’s suffering “[un]equal” to – that is, lesser than – the “agony” she inflicts on her husband, the victim even as he casts out his wife. Braddon thus promotes the sexual double standard as she associates civil divorce with bigamy. Identifying Lady Audley as a “traitor” and “arch conspirator” (Braddon 1992: 200, 253) as well as a bigamist, Braddon compounds her crime with native insurrection, casting her as a female version of the “demonic” sepoy mutineer.

References to India and the Sepoy Rebellion run throughout Braddon’s novel. Robert rides the train with “an elderly Indian officer” (Braddon 1992: 161), while Lucy “wrap[s] herself in an Indian shawl” worth “a hundred guineas” and serves tea from “a marvelous Indian tea-caddy of sandal-wood and silver” (1992: 373, 223). Sir Michael and Alicia discuss the “fighting in Oudh” (1992: 329) just after Lucy burns down the Castle Inn, a “deed of horror” that reveals her as “the demoniac incarnation of some evil principle” (1992: 345) and recalls acts of arson alleged against the Indian rebels. Braddon ties Lucy to the sepoys more explicitly when characterizing the psychological wound the bigamist inflicts on her husband in 1857 – the year Lucy “marries” Sir Michael – an injury George compares to those his comrades received in India. On the first anniversary of the day Lucy advertised her “death,” just prior to his discovery that she is still living, George speaks to Robert metaphorically of the bullet wound afflicting him:

“Do you know, Bob . . . that when some of our fellows were wounded in India, they came home bringing bullets inside them. They did not talk of them, and they were

stout and hearty, and looked as well, perhaps, as you or I; but every change in the weather, however slight, every variation of the atmosphere, however trifling, brought back the old agony of their wounds as sharp as ever they had felt it on the battle-field. I've had my wound, Bob; I carry the bullet still, and I shall carry it into my coffin." (Braddon 1992: 49)

Braddon strengthens the tie between the bigamous wife and the Indian rebel when Lucy attempts to murder her husband at Audley Court; in depicting the scene, Braddon draws on one of the most notorious images of the rebellion – the well at Cawnpore – repeatedly used by the British to epitomize the demonic nature of their enemy.

In *Rule of Darkness*, Patrick Brantlinger entitles his chapter on Mutiny literature "The Well at Cawnpore" because the site is the "one spot" on which these works converge (Brantlinger 1988: 203). The circumstances surrounding the well and the use to which the Indians put it made it a symbol of native treachery and British martyrdom. In June 1857, after weeks of bombardment, British survivors of a siege at Cawnpore were promised safe travel to Allahabad by the Indian leader Nana Sahib, who ordered their massacre once they were under way. Britons of all ages were shot and clubbed, some mutilated with swords or burned. Over one hundred women and children survived, and were imprisoned in a small building without bedding or furniture. Those who had not died by mid-July were attacked, and most murdered, on the 17th. The following day, the last survivors were dragged out, stripped of their clothing, and thrown into the well with the dead bodies of their companions. A site to which British officers and soldiers flocked after their forces arrived in Cawnpore, the well and its environs supplied visitors with locks of the dead women's hair, among other cherished tokens of suffering.

In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon places the familiar well in the English countryside. It is the spot on which Braddon's narrative repeatedly converges, as the novelist directs her characters there and invites her readers to look down "the long green vista" to "the broken well at the end" (Braddon 1992: 4). During the Cawnpore bombardment, self-appointed "Captain[s] of the well" attempted to provide their companions with water, the men sometimes killed at the spot. The sounds of the well's tackle would "call . . . forth a storm of musketry" and thus much of the machinery and masonry were "shot away" (Hibbert 1980: 184). The well at Audley Court, too, is "ruined," its "massive brickwork . . . fallen away here and there, and loose fragments of masonry [lying] . . . amidst weeds and briars" (Braddon 1992: 272). The decay marks its antiquity, not its military bombardment, but its "rusty iron wheel and broken wood-work seem as if they were flecked with blood" (1992: 24), and Alicia relates to George and Robert a "legend connected with the spot – some gloomy story . . . of sorrow and crime" (1992: 66). In her own sensational tale of "sorrow and crime," Braddon reworks the story of the well at Cawnpore, transforming the fiendish sepop of Mutiny lore into the treacherous English wife, and replacing the Englishwomen martyred at the site with Lucy's victimized husband.

Like the wound Lucy inflicts on George in betraying him, the injury Olivia Marchmont does Edward Arundel, the cousin she loves, in Braddon's *John Marchmont's Legacy* (1862–4) recalls those he suffered during the Indian rebellion, and looks ahead to those he may yet suffer fighting in the East. Olivia has secretly imprisoned his wife Mary, who is Olivia's stepdaughter and successful rival, as part of a vengeful act of fraud that makes Edward think himself a widower and threatens to lead the faithful husband to commit bigamy. Seeking information from Olivia about Mary, Edward "writhe[s] impatiently beneath the torture" she inflicts as she feigns ignorance of his young wife's whereabouts:

Even now, – now that he was in this house, face to face with the woman he had come to question – it seemed as if he *could* not get tidings of his wife.

So, often in his dreams, he had headed a besieging-party against the Afghans, with the scaling ladders reared against the wall; he had seen the dark faces grinning down upon him – all savage glaring eyes and fierce glistening teeth – and heard the voices of his men urging him on to the encounter, but had felt himself paralysed and helpless, with his sabre weak as a withered reed in his nerveless hand. (Braddon 1999: 244)

The Indian sepoys cut Edward on the arm and forehead but Olivia – as "Afghan" – threatens to emasculate him, "his sabre weak as a withered reed."

As she does in *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon uses Eastern "savagery" in *John Marchmont's Legacy* to discredit the desires and ambitions of an Englishwoman whose scheming reflects the perceived dangers of marriage law reform. Yet Braddon employs a second imperial motif – the "self-immolation" of the Indian widow (Braddon 1999: 135) – to suggest that Olivia is herself a victim and to convey the feminine self-sacrifice and submission unfairly demanded of her. With "the ambition of a Semiramis, the courage of a Boadicea, the resolution of a Lady Macbeth," Olivia is conquered by gender expectations and norms. She "act[s] in the spirit of a prisoner" who can, at best, "exchange his old dungeon for a new one" (Braddon 1999: 130). Like so many of the ambitious women who created a sensation among Victorian readers, she discovers that her feminine "empire" can extend only as far as the boundaries of "the tea-table" (Braddon 1992: 222).

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## Sensation Fiction and Religion

*Mark Knight*

The more familiar one becomes with the work of Mary Braddon, Wilkie Collins, and the large army of novelists discussed in this Companion, the more one appreciates that nothing is ever as it seems in the world of sensation fiction. Something similar might be said about our critical comprehension of the genre. In the three decades following the publication of Patrick Brantlinger's seminal essay "What Is 'Sensational' about the 'Sensation Novel'?" (1982), scholars have learnt a great deal by revisiting the question that Brantlinger addresses and thinking about it in relation to other developments in our understanding of the Victorian period. One of the most significant developments in recent years has been the use by Nicholas Daly (2004, 2009) and others of Walter Benjamin's work on modernity, to show how sensation novels encouraged nineteenth-century readers to adapt to the pace of a modern, mechanized world. This interest in the physical effect of reading sensation continues a line of interpretation that goes back to Henry Longueville Mansel, the theologian and conservative cultural commentator who provided a famous critique of sensation fiction in 1863. Mansel's unsigned article in *The Quarterly Review* began:

"I don't like preaching to the nerves instead of the judgement," was the remark of a shrewd observer of human nature, in relation to a certain class of popular sermons. The remark need not be limited to sermons alone. A class of literature has grown up around us, usurping in many respects, intentionally or unintentionally, a portion of the preacher's office . . . by "preaching to the nerves." (Mansel 1863: 482)

Daly is not the only critic to share Mansel's interest in the nerves stimulated by sensation fiction, and his work finds an important predecessor in the more psychological reading offered by Jenny Bourne Taylor (1988). Yet none of the critics who have written on this subject has paid much attention to the overtly religious part of

Mansel's interest in "preaching to the nerves," and it is to the religious dimension of sensation fiction that this essay now turns.

The failure of critics to look at preaching, or other expressions of religion, in the sensation novel reflects a wider pattern of neglect: surprisingly few literary scholars writing in the second half of the twentieth century had much to say about the theological contours of the Victorian period. There is not the space to go into the reasons for this here; it is sufficient to note that a recent resurgence of interest in nineteenth-century religion has begun to influence all areas of Victorian studies, including our thinking about sensation.<sup>1</sup> But there is still a considerable amount of detective work to be done if twenty-first-century readers are to recognize the range of religious voices in the sensation novel and hear what they have to say. I use a sonic trope here deliberately, partly because the acoustic sense offers a vital means of registering the presence of aspects of reality that are easier to perceive than they are to pin down, as John Picker's work on *Victorian Soundscapes* (2003) has shown, and partly with an ear to Mansel's choice of vocabulary at the start of his article. In his remarks about preaching, Mansel alerts us to the religious sounds and echoes that were heard throughout the nineteenth century. Listening to sermons was integral to the rhythm of life for many Victorians, and the parallel between hearing religious instruction on a regular basis and reading weekly or monthly installments of the sensation novel was noted at the time by several commentators.<sup>2</sup> One anonymous and critical contributor to the debate about sensation fiction in the 1860s, writing in *The Christian Observer*, reluctantly admitted that "sensationalism" was not "in itself a necessary evil" and that if it were omitted altogether from "our pulpit exercises, we cannot help thinking that . . . many a strong and telling method of impressing men and moving the conscience would have to give place to tame platitudes and intolerable iteration" ("Sensational Literature," 1865: 810). Elsewhere, in the sensation novels that supposedly usurp the role of the preacher, there are several occasions on which we encounter sermons, even if, as with Reverend Chadband in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852–3), the message is as incomprehensible to the characters in the novel as religious ideas can sound to modern, un-churched readers.

Readers today can find it hard to perceive the religious echoes that reverberate in texts such as *Bleak House*, but the difficulty is not entirely new, at least if some of the nineteenth-century commentators on religion are to be believed. William and Catherine Booth, the co-founders of the Salvation Army, were among those who were convinced that traditional proclamations of the Gospel were no longer audible for much of the population. The Booths insisted that this cultural deafness justified the use of popular and sensational techniques to communicate the Christian message, and William Booth went so far as to insist that the first goal of his movement was to "attract attention" (Booth 1885: 11).<sup>3</sup> Dramatic promotion was a key component of the Salvation Army's work, both in the years after its formal creation in 1878 and in the fifteen years or so beforehand, when the Booths undertook extensive missionary activity in the East End of London. For those in the Salvation Army, sensational preaching was not only preaching that borrowed existing cultural forms to make itself



heard, but preaching that was loud, dramatic, and marked by visible physical effects. American Revivalism may have been less influential in mid-nineteenth-century Britain than it was on the other side of the Atlantic, but it was not isolated to those who worked alongside the Booths. Charismatic addresses by Edward Irving attracted widespread notoriety in the 1820s, and sensational preaching was a mainstay of the popular and well-attended events held at Exeter Hall by evangelical groups in the middle of the nineteenth century. Although figures such as the Booths and Edward Irving reflected one end of a much wider evangelical spectrum, Wilkie Collins was among those who recognized that a commitment to making its message heard meant that evangelicals were prone to adopting a sensational mode of communication. In *The Moonstone* (1868), to take one example, the character of Gabriel Betteredge recalls going to Exeter Hall and being impressed by the rhetorical prowess of Godfrey Ablewhite, a figure who turns out to be at the heart of the novel's criminal activity; at the end of *Armadale* (1864–6), to take another example, Mustapha remarks on how the dubious Mother Oldershaw has moved away from her more criminal surroundings to find a new audience: "They stop acting on the stage, I grant you, on Sunday evening – but they don't stop acting in the pulpit. Come and see the last new Sunday performer of our time" (Collins 1995: 674).

Given that the Salvation Army's mission and worship in the 1870s and 1880s frequently occurred in places of "ill repute," there is, in hindsight, considerable irony in Mansel's objection to the religious use of sensation on the grounds that "[t]o think of pointing a moral by stimulants of this kind is like holding a religious service in a gin-palace" (Mansel 1863: 502). Yet it can be misleading to focus too heavily on the polarized positions of the High Church Mansel and the dissenting evangelicalism of the Salvation Army. In practice there was considerable overlap between religion and sensation, and many writers believed that the sensational mode was not one that had to be embraced entirely or rejected altogether. Mansel inadvertently alerts us to this when he distinguishes sensational novels written "with a didactic purpose" from those "written merely for amusement" (1863: 487). He opposes both types, but is particularly scathing about the sensational qualities of the former: "it is better that the excitement of a sensation novel should evaporate in froth and foam, than that it should leave a residuum behind of shallow dogmatism and flippant conceit" (1863: 487).

Mansel's particular disdain for the didactic branch of sensation writing may well have been motivated by the popularity of this mode among religious polemicists: the capacity of sensation fiction to get people's attention and sustain their interest made the genre an obvious avenue for those who wanted to promote their beliefs. Acknowledging this point, Mansel goes on to complain about "specimens of the theological novel" (1863: 504), arguing that they are overly didactic. Naming *Miriam May* (1860), *Crispin Ken* (1861), and *Philip Paternoster* (1858) as the culprits he has in mind, Mansel attacks the manner in which they employ "the nerves as a vehicle for preaching in the literal sense of the term" (1863: 504). These dismissive comments on the theological variety of the sensation novel alert us to a broader manifestation

of the genre that has been given too little attention in recent decades. Although several religious writers of the nineteenth century shied away from the more overt fascination with criminality that energizes works such as Mary Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and Sheridan Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas* (1864), a number of writers embraced sensational domestic dramas with a religious flavor, particularly from the late 1860s onwards.<sup>4</sup>

Family magazines such as *Good Words*, *The Family Herald*, and *The Argosy* provided domestic dramas that combined sensational elements with a recognizably pious tone. Deborah Wynne has argued that nearly all of the major sensation writers can be read in the context of the Victorian family magazine, and the case she makes is very persuasive; but it is also true that some novelists, such as Mary Cecil Hay, Margaret Oliphant, and Ellen Wood, approached domestic concerns in a more homely and pious manner than their fellow writers. The work of Ellen Wood, editor of the *Argosy* from 1867 to 1881 and author of *East Lynne* (1860–1), *Oswald Cray* (1864), and several other novels, relies upon a moralistic tone that many critics tend to conflate with religion. As well as peppering her novels with narrative interjections that spell out the moral lessons to be learned, Wood makes a considerable effort to distinguish right from wrong in the stories that she tells. Critics today may be able to find moments of ethical ambiguity and subversion, but the majority of early readers would have felt clear about the moral direction of the novels. Wood carefully cultivated a pious style that would reassure evangelical readers, many of whom retained a latent suspicion about the form of the novel and its capacity to encourage sinful thought. Beth Palmer observes that Wood's style involved "overt piety, manifested in her prose as an evangelically influenced emphasis on the felt nature of belief and the suffering of earthly life" (Palmer 2008: 188), and in *East Lynne*, her most famous novel, this is illustrated clearly. Yet there are questions about the religious orientation of Wood's fiction, and this should alert us to the problem of thinking that her moralistic tone is synonymous with evangelical belief, or, more generally, religious sensationalism. I am not commenting here on the authenticity of Wood's personal beliefs or suggesting that her writing is irreligious; instead, I am pointing out that while the moral tone of her fiction may have been written to sound evangelical, it contains more than a few false notes. Most obviously, evangelicalism was far more concerned with the "good news" of the Gospel and the offer of salvation through faith in Christ than it was in good words that dictated how one ought to behave.

Isolating the "evangelical tonalities" (A. Miller 2008: 20) of the novel is as difficult as it is useful, but our efforts to hear the sounds of evangelicalism should not prevent us from listening to the multitude of other Victorian religious voices that can be heard in sensation fiction. Sensation fiction resounds with different expressions and echoes of belief, and it is misleading to imply that Victorian religion is mostly a harmonious affair or to think that the sound of Christianity is always unadulterated. One way of registering the breadth of the religious reverberations in the sensation novel is to consider the contribution of the Broad Church.<sup>5</sup> Although I am not convinced that this ecclesial term refers to a coherent set of beliefs or practices, it does at least signal

the range of religious beliefs that existed in the period and remind us of the permeability between the sacred and the secular. From this perspective, we might recognize the religious ideas in the work of Collins and Dickens, two writers of sensation commonly dismissed as “secular” in spite of their extensive reliance on Scripture, religious motifs, and theological ideas. Carolyn Oulton (2003) has made a good argument for locating them within the Broad Church tradition, and the novels of Dickens, especially, are haunted by a biblical and religious revenant, as Dennis Walder (1981) and Janet Larson (1985) have argued. This revenant is evident throughout the novels’ thematic concerns and narrative apparatus, and offers a powerful reminder of how all-encompassing the term religion can be.

In *Great Expectations* (1860–1), divine providence appears to be superseded by a narrative orchestration that combines the intervention of a human author or “conductor” (to use Dickens’s own terminology) with the efforts of the central character, Pip, to assert his agency. Yet the concept of providence is not dispensed with altogether, as the title of the novel indicates, and the hint of some sort of divine plan is even more explicit in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), a novel whose appearance in the first issues of *All the Year Round* ties it to sensation fiction more closely than the critical tradition has typically suggested. A similar evocation of divine providence can be found in the plot of *Armada*: the reliance on improbable coincidence and the presence of mysterious dreams hints at the idea of fate or divine intervention without quite committing the novel to this possibility. Jerome Meckier (1987) and Thomas Vargish (1985) have both written on the parallels in Collins and Dickens between divine providence and human authorship. Whether such parallels should be read as a sign of the sensation novel’s participation in the process of secularization, or as evidence for some other transformation of the way in which religion is seen in the period, is open to debate. But what is much less arguable is the fact that the sensation novel dispenses with the supernatural machinery so often found in the Gothic novel, an important generic predecessor of sensation. The absence of the supernatural is especially apparent in the novels of Dickens, with events such as the “spontaneous combustion” in *Bleak House* relying on the possibility of a pseudo-scientific explanation.

A number of critics have argued that the minimal presence of supernatural occurrences in the Victorian novel is rooted in the prejudices of British Protestantism, with its distrust of anything or anyone associated with a Roman Catholic belief deemed irrational, outdated, effeminate, and foreign.<sup>6</sup> Among other things, this insight alerts us to the value of thinking about religion and sensation fiction in conjunction with other markers of identity, such as nationality. In *Catholic Sensationalism and Victorian Literature*, Maureen Moran approaches sensationalism as “a particular mode through which Roman Catholicism was constructed in the period” (Moran 2007: 2–3). Rather than limiting herself to authors that we might clearly identify as “sensation novelists,” Moran considers a range of writers who utilize the mode of sensation to engage with a perceived Roman Catholic threat to British Protestant culture. In the case of Robert Browning’s dramatic monologues, “Catholic sensationalism operates as

cultural critique,” with the poems recycling “popular images of perverse Catholic masculinity” and suggesting that “the same moral depravity and hypocrisy permeate Victorian public culture and secular institutions” (Moran 2007: 104); in the fiction of novelists like Benjamin Disraeli and Mary Ward, sensational accounts of conversion to Rome are figured as a “socially transgressive act” (2007: 183).

Like Moran, Patrick O’Malley links religion and sensation with sexual and national identity. In *Catholicism, Sexual Deviance, and Victorian Gothic Culture*, O’Malley turns his attention to *Lady Audley’s Secret* and locates, in the crumbling ruin of Audley Court, a “Gothic secret, which is simultaneously sexually deviant and Catholic” (O’Malley 2006: 106–7). Noting that the building “was originally a Catholic construction,” O’Malley suggests “the mansion itself . . . tropes England’s own progression from monasticism to Protestant domesticity” (2006: 107). As the novel progresses, Audley Court and its inhabitants give up some of their secrets, only to reveal yet more mysteries. The partial unveiling of the novel’s secrets testifies both to British Protestantism’s ongoing fascination with Roman Catholicism and also to an inability to separate itself from the perceived threat of a “foreign” religious heritage. Thus when Robert Audley hears the explanations of the novel’s eponymous villain, the mechanism of confession is firmly associated with the religious practices of the Roman Catholic Church. And as we listen for the lurid details of crime, we are reminded of our fascination with the mysteries of Rome. Locating his reading within the anti-Catholic polemics of the mid-nineteenth century, O’Malley explains: “Whereas the anti-Catholic controversialists depended upon a language of detection – the ability of the intrepid evangelical to see the Romanist corruption behind the veil of Puseyite dissimulation – Braddon insists that that model of detection will ultimately fail, since the world of the Gothic is already coexistent with the world of post-Oxford Movement England” (2006: 113–14).

Further evidence of the sensation novel’s involvement with the British distrust of Roman Catholicism can be found in Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1859–60), a novel in which the principal villain, Count Fosco, is a foreign and effeminate Italian criminal who invades the domestic sphere enjoyed by Laura and Marian. Soon after Laura and Marian meet Fosco, they find themselves arguing with him over the rights and wrongs of criminal activity and the basis for all moral judgments. Fosco challenges the “solid English sense” (Collins 1998: 234) of his host, Sir Percival Glyde, and pokes fun at Laura’s “sound English common sense” (1998: 235), before embarking on the sort of intellectualized ethical argument that Victorian readers would have recognized as casuistry. Although casuistry has a long and venerable philosophical tradition, nineteenth-century British writers frequently viewed it with suspicion. In Gothic and sensation novels, especially, Jesuit priests are presented repeatedly as philosophically trained villains with an intellectual prowess that is intrinsic to their social threat. While Fosco’s priestly credentials go little further than Marian’s description of him as being “like a fat St Cecilia in male attire” (Collins 1998: 230), his artful defense of criminality, on the grounds that “virtue” (1998: 237) is contingent on nationality rather than being trans-national and timeless, marks him out as another agent of

Rome. A few pages later, in a sentence reverberating with grammatical qualifications, Fosco insists: "I am a Jesuit, if you please to think so – a splitter of straws – a man of trifles and crotchets and scruples – but you will humour me, I hope, in merciful consideration for my suspicious Italian character, and my uneasy Italian conscience" (1998: 246). As Fosco's association with Rome is made explicit, we are reminded of the extent to which sensation fiction inherits the Protestant prejudice against Roman Catholicism.

Charismatic speakers, whether they are Protestant or Catholic, real or imagined, offer one way of thinking about religion in the sensation novel. But it is a mistake to think that identifying the person behind the message is the only means of pursuing a religious reading of the genre. Mansel's complaint about "preaching to the nerves" is predicated, at least in part, on sensation fiction's challenge to personal agency: the technological complexity of the modern world described in these novels makes it increasingly difficult to believe that individual characters are capable of determining their own destinies, and the pace of the narrative stimulates readers in a manner that often crowds out space for individual conscious reflection. Given this mechanization, it may be more appropriate for us to focus on what is said rather than the individual who says it. Critics have sometimes been reluctant to do this, recognizing, perhaps, that determining the religious messages in the sensation novel could be an endless and potentially overwhelming task. References to prayer, churches, or other overt signs of Christian activity offer a clear means of talking about religion and sensation, but other elements of the genre also have the capacity for religious readings, even though these are not always immediately apparent. Theological belief affected every area of life in the nineteenth century, and this might lead us to consider how the long-standing critical interest in sensation fiction and the fallen woman can be approached theologically. Likewise, we might usefully think about theological contributions to nineteenth-century debates on psychology and the philosophy of mind, or examine the religious elements in sexual politics, questions of the family, and the place of technology. In noting these examples, I do not wish to imply that such topics must be approached from a religious perspective or that they are primarily religious; instead, I want to insist that there is legitimacy and value in bringing religious perspectives to bear on all aspects of our thinking about sensation fiction.

The question of interpretation offers a good example of how a major concern in the sensation novel lends itself to religious reflection without being an exclusively theological subject. Collins's four novels from the 1860s all demonstrate a concern with issues of interpretation, judgment, and evidence, and although the immediate point of entry is typically legal – Walter talking about juries at the start of *The Woman in White*, for instance – this should not be divorced from the religious and philosophical debates that permeated legal discourse at the time. Jan-Melissa Schramm links these disciplines together in *Testimony and Advocacy in Victorian Law, Literature and Theology* (2000) when she discusses the rise of professional barristers who found a role in interpreting "truth" that was no longer thought to be self-evident. Changing beliefs

about how evidence might be interpreted had major implications for the way that Victorians read the Bible. The publication by leading Anglicans of *Essays and Reviews* in 1860 helped popularize the insights of German Higher Criticism, and those who objected to Benjamin Jowett's view that the Bible should be interpreted like any other book were forced to confront the question of exactly how the Bible should be read. In *The Moonstone*, Betteredge naively opens his copy of *Robinson Crusoe* and seeks divine inspiration, yet Collins's satire on the failure of some Christians to read the Bible properly leaves open the question of what a good hermeneutic might entail. Although German Higher Criticism implied that the reading of Scripture was best left to professional critics, preferably those who were outside the Church and thus allegedly free of the prejudices of personal belief, Collins refuses to substitute the interpretive method of Betteredge with a professional hermeneutic. The German-educated Franklin Blake calls upon the expertise of Sergeant Cuff to help solve the case, but the great detective is unable to solve the crime by himself, and the investigation only succeeds when the characters join forces with the reader and look at the evidence together. This corporate work of interpretation does not have to be read theologically or positively, of course, as critics such as D. A. Miller (1988: 33–57) have made clear. Yet the novel's rehabilitation of certain aspects of a common-sense tradition of interpretation owes something to the debates in the 1860s about how the Bible should be read, and the text's engagement with Hinduism and British imperialism confirms that religious concerns are at the heart of the book.

Victorians disagreed fervently about how the Bible should be interpreted. When one anonymous contributor to the *Evangelical Magazine* called upon readers to forsake the unhealthy stimulants offered by the fiction of the day and return to "that one Book which speaks to us the thoughts of God" ("Character: How It Is Formed and What It Is Worth," 1866: 376), he or she ignored the fact that the sixty-six books of the Bible present a variety of voices, making it difficult to isolate a fixed and wholly unified message. Sensation novels are full of different biblical echoes: from stories of fallen women (e.g. Eve and the Garden of Eden, Hosea's call to marry an adulterous woman, Jezebel the harlot, and the account in John 8 of Jesus and the woman accused of adultery), to advice in the Sermon on the Mount and the New Testament epistles on righteous living; and from the story of the wayward Prodigal Son who returns home in Luke 15, to the Apocalypse's rhetoric of judgment on the wicked. Identifying these scriptural references is only a prelude to thinking about how they are deployed and what they signify in the texts where they appear.<sup>7</sup> The same can be said about other religious voices that we hear in the sensation novel, and it is important to remember that the meaning of these voices cannot be resolved by returning to the personal beliefs of the author. In the case of George Eliot, a writer whose apparent aversion to the sensation novel is betrayed on more than one occasion in her fiction, religious messages do not always accord with their author's beliefs: Harold Fisch (1998) has argued that Eliot's attempts to rewrite the Bible are more constrained than she likes to think; *Daniel Deronda* (1876) displays an obsession with prophecy and mysticism that extends beyond the narrowly rational

accounts of religion that Eliot found in Ludwig Feuerbach and David Strauss, and in *Middlemarch* (1871–2), the scandal of Bulstrode's past and his attempts to keep that history hidden raise more questions about the nature of belief than the text is able to account for.

In seeking to understand his fall, Bulstrode dwells on the moment that he departed from "his early bent towards religion, his inclination to be a preacher" (Eliot 1986: 599), "speaking on religious platforms, preaching in private houses" (1986: 602). The move into business as a pawnbroker accentuates his shady accession to wealth, but the implication of Bulstrode's subsequent attempt to justify his vocational decisions is that religious belief and commercial activity are incompatible: "He remembered his first moments of shrinking. . . . The profits made out of lost souls – where can the line be drawn at which they begin in human transactions?" (1986: 603). Eliot goes on to add many other motivations and factors to her character's complex personality, yet I want to pause briefly on the notion that religion must be purified of anything worldly to be considered authentic. The notion is strikingly similar to the understanding of religious belief that informs Mansel's thought. For the evangelical Bulstrode, a genuine minister and preacher of the Gospel must be free from all taint of worldly influence; for the High Church Mansel, the message of divine transcendence must not be compromised by the finite and material limits of human experience.<sup>8</sup> Mansel's idealist belief in the absolute purity of divine revelation becomes evident towards the end of his article on sensation, when he admits that he is powerless to prevent people from continuing to read the likes of Wood and Braddon:

Even if no remedy can be found, it is something to know the disease. There is a satisfaction in exposing an imposter, even when we feel sure that the world will continue to believe in him. The idol may still be worshipped, yet it is right to tell its worshippers that it is an idol; grotesque, it may be, or horrible in its features, but mere wood or stone, brass or clay, in its substance. The current folly may be destined to run its course . . . . But the duty of the preacher is the same, whether he succeed or fail. (Mansel 1863: 513–14)

Although his 1858 Bampton Lectures focused on the limits of all human attempts to comprehend the divine, Mansel thought that an intellectual style of writing was more godly than an idolatrous and materially oriented genre that preached directly to the nerves. What he failed to appreciate, however, was both the contamination of his own thinking by other non-theological influences (perhaps most evident in his elitism) and the appeal that a fiction which preached to the nerves might hold for a Christian tradition that was as interested in the body and the physical world as it was in the realm of the spirit. Mansel makes the same mistake as a number of recent critics when he presumes that sensation fiction is too base and too worldly to be of interest to Christian writers, publishers, and readers, or, indeed, scholars who want to think about the role of religion in Victorian literature and culture.

## NOTES

- 1 For an accessible account of literature and religion in the nineteenth century, see Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (2006). Other recent work on religion in the Victorian period (not mentioned elsewhere in this article but which has at least some bearing on issues raised) includes: David Bebbington (2005), Aileen Fyfe (2004), Susan M. Griffin (2004), William McKelvy (2007), Victoria Morgan and Clare Williams (2008), and Michael Wheeler (2006).
- 2 For further discussion of sermons and preaching in the Victorian period, see the work by Christine L. Krueger (1992) and Robert H. Ellison (1998).
- 3 A useful discussion of the sensation advertising techniques employed by The Salvation Army can be found in Pamela J. Walker, *Pulling the Devil's Kingdom Down* (2001). Elsewhere, in the anonymous *Behind the Scenes with the Salvation Army* (1882), the criticism of the Salvation Army's early reliance on the sensation mode is very similar to criticism published in the 1860s, attacking the popular and ephemeral techniques employed by writers of sensation fiction.
- 4 A good exploration of the Swedenborgian and religious ideas in *Uncle Silas* can be found in chapter 8 of Alison Milbank's *Daughters of the House: Modes of Gothic in Victorian Fiction* (1992).
- 5 Writing for the *Edinburgh Review* in 1853, W. J. Conybeare described the Broad Church as one of the three parties in the Church of England, alongside the Low Church Evangelicals and the High Church Tractarians. A. P. Stanley used the term "Broad Church" in a similar fashion a few years earlier, and it is difficult to determine exactly when the term came into use. Although the Broad Church was meant to designate the theological diversity of the Church of England, detractors associated the term with theological liberalism and the decline of orthodox belief.
- 6 For further information on anti-Catholicism and nineteenth-century literature and culture, see the books by Victor Sage (1988) and John Wolfe (1991).
- 7 For a more detailed discussion of sensation fiction and the Bible, see my article on this subject in *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature* (2009).
- 8 See Mansel's *The Limits of Religious Thought* (1858).

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## Sensation and Science

*Susan David Bernstein*

The correlation of sensation and science has drawn relatively scant scholarly attention. This neglect may be due to the ways in which Victorian sensation fiction has tended to be characterized by exaggerated passions and plot devices designed to startle or shock readers. As a genre frequently aligned with melodrama or the Gothic, and often opposed to realism, sensationalism seems, on the surface, incongruous with the realm of empirical investigation. Yet by the end of the nineteenth century the affiliations between science and literature were numerous. If late Victorian novels such as H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) inaugurate either science fiction or modern psychological thrillers, the popular sensation fare of M. E. Braddon or Wilkie Collins appears antithetical to the claims of natural history and science. Although sensation fiction and science are not obvious bedfellows, the coincidence in print culture of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* and Collins's *The Woman in White*, in late 1859, encourages us to take notice. On the one hand, many of the fundamental questions posed by sensation novels around identity, origins, taxonomy, and transformation are pertinent to Victorians' preoccupation with evolution in natural history. On the other hand, writing on evolution had a certain shock-value appeal in the print marketplace, not unlike the ubiquitous sensation thriller read widely across class and social divisions. Rather than literary scholars, historians of science and print culture have been in the vanguard to acknowledge this connection in Victorian culture. In the 1860s, the monthly periodical *Belgravia*, when Braddon was the novelist-editor of the magazine, ran a series "Sensationalism in Science" which made explicit this bridge, an affinity that sought to narrow the gap between popular sensation novels and nature writing, or between fiction and science, or – if we can extrapolate from these essays in the context of Braddon's editorial interests – between light reading and serious publications. I will organize this essay around two ways of knitting

together sensation fiction and science: first, through the physiology of reading itself, including the sciences of mind and nerves like mesmerism and phrenology; second, around the historical coincidence of Darwinian evolutionary theory and the Victorian sensation novel in print. By looking at *Belgravia's* series "Sensationalism in Science," I suggest how both these vectors converged.

### Sciences of Reading

Sensation fiction has been either the subject or example of Victorian critical attention or recent scholarly interest in theorizing the experience of reading as an embodied act. Sensation novels in particular, reviewers worried, had the effect of "electrifying the nerves of the reader" (Mansel 1863: 488–9) and thus bypassing intellectual faculties or moral consciousness so that "the route from page to nerve was direct" (Winter 1998: 324). Alison Winter documents how "physiologically charged terms" season reviews of these popular novels in the 1860s and the repeated accounts of readers who claimed "involuntary reactions and excited states of mind" (Winter 1998: 324). One Victorian reader even attributed a magnetic force to the material volume of *The Woman in White* when illness interrupted his reading.<sup>1</sup> The physical impressions associated with such acts of reading were compared with feelings generated by heat, electricity, and galvanism; one critic dubbed the genre "the galvanic-battery type" (Mansel 1863: 487). Margaret Oliphant characterizes the impact of Anne Catherick's touching Walter Hartwright in the first installment of *The Woman in White* as a "spell" cast on the reader as well; Oliphant attributes Collins's success to his generation of such "startling" effects from simple physical contact (Oliphant 1862: 566). More recent readers, both D. A. Miller and Kate Flint, have occasionally diagnosed this somatic reading experience as a form of hysteria that emerges from "the emphatic physicality of thrills" (Miller 1988: 147), a response "mobilizing our sympathetic nervous system" (Flint 1993: 291).<sup>2</sup> The most current scholarly interest in Victorian literature and embodied reading acts is Nicholas Dames's *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction*, a study of Victorian neurological sciences in relation to both physical and psychological facets of readers' reactions to fiction. Dames argues that Victorian "physiological novel theory" rendered normal rather than pathological "sensation fiction's production of occasional readerly shock" (Dames 2007: 13). While he considers the blurring of boundaries between experimental sciences and literary journalism in the way critics attended to the physiology of reading, Dames eschews sensation fiction as the object of his analysis because he prefers "the more self-conscious and detached (if currently more canonical) novels" that embed such contemporary theories shaped by neurological sciences (Dames 2007: 13).

As Dames suggests but leaves unexplored, physiological theories of reading entered directly or implicitly into the content and reviews of sensation fiction. George Eliot's "The Lifted Veil," published anonymously in *Blackwood's* in July 1859, incorporates a range of theories and practices around the physiology of the mind, both its capacity

to read and to be read: phrenology, mesmerism, and clairvoyance.<sup>3</sup> In this instance, Latimer, the narrator, is both a clairvoyant reader and the subject of the magnetic powers of Bertha, the woman to whom he is attracted. Many sensation characters seem to harness unusual powers of reading that resemble animal magnetism or clairvoyance, from Count Fosco's ability to subjugate Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White* to Ezra Jennings's interest in experimental sciences and the trance he produces in Franklin Blake in *The Moonstone*.<sup>4</sup> Collins's interest in mesmerism in print pre-dates these sensation novels; he contributed a series, "Magnetic Evenings at Home," in the form of letters to George Henry Lewes, editor of the *Leader* in which the column ran in 1852, where Collins describes his own encounter with a mesmeric operator (see Flint 1993: xix). This sustained critical attention to the physiology of reading prompted Henry James to pronounce Collins's novels "not so much works of art as works of science" (James 1865: 593–5), more an experiment in physical reflexes that might be compared to the early stages of a mesmeric trance (Winter 1998: 326). Ubiquitous were the comparisons between alternative mental states produced by mesmerism or other parapsychological conditions and the rapt absorption of a reader of or even within a sensation novel. The opening installment of *The Woman in White* highlights the acutely tactile scenes for which these novels became famous as Walter Hartright describes the sensation of an unexpected physical contact where "in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand" (Collins 1859: 101). Over a year later, *Punch* ran a cartoon, "Awful Apparition!" (Figure 36.1), that recycles Anne Catherick's shocking touch of Hartright within the novel, as a reader of that novel displays a startle reflex.

### Reading Sensations

Despite some attention paid to the physiology of reading of and within sensation fiction, in the Victorian era and in current scholarship, there has been minimal notice of other ways in which science and sensation converged in the "sensation decade" of the 1860s. James Secord's *Victorian Sensation*, a cultural history of the capacious and spirited reception of *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* from its initial publication in 1844, briefly links the psychology of reading "sensations," both the novels of Braddon and Collins as "gripping fictional page-turners" and the widespread appeal of *Vestiges* (Secord 2000: 15). A more compelling cross-discursive partnership is the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and the advent of the sensation fiction-reading frenzy. As I have argued (Bernstein 2001), the coincidental print appearance of Darwin's book and the first installment of *The Woman in White* only formalizes a productive resonance between evolutionary science and sensation fiction. From John Murray's publication of the first edition of the *Origin* on 24 November 1859, the periodical press erupted with reviews, articles, cartoons, and fiction stimulated by his provocative argument about evolution, transformation, and "natural selection" as the agent, rather than a divine creator, of new species. Indeed, evidence of this reading



Figure 36.1 "Awful Apparition!" *Punch, or the London Charivari*, vol. 40 (6 April 1861): 140

sensation was ubiquitous. Lewes remarks that "Mr. Darwin's book . . . is at present exciting very great attention" (Lewes 1860: 442), and T. H. Huxley exclaims that "everybody has read Mr. Darwin's book, or, at least, has given an opinion upon its merits or demerits," including the pronouncement that the *Origin* is "a decidedly dangerous book" (Huxley 1860: 295).

Only two days after the first edition of the *Origin* was released, the initial installment of *The Woman in White* appeared in *All the Year Round*, including the scene describing Anne Catherick's startling touch.<sup>5</sup> Later in the run of Collins's novel, the magazine included articles prompted by Darwin's book, such as one titled "Species" and another "Natural Selection," both positioned directly on the page below the chapters from *The Woman in White*. The first essay builds to Darwin's theory of natural selection in relation to the infinite variety of organisms whose descent reveals blurred lines of connection: "creatures so remote in the scale of being as plants and animals are still bound by a web of complex relations" ("Species," 1860: 177). A month later, the periodical ran "Natural Selection" after concluding a portion of Collins's novel, by equating Darwin's theory with "bygone heresies" for which people were once "put to the rack and the stake" ("Natural Selection," 1860: 293). After conveying "the

shock” of the *Origin*, the writer then turns to other theories of geological or astronomical phenomena that once “made people’s hair stand on end” (1860: 293). “Natural Selection” concludes, “If Mr. Darwin’s theory be true, nothing can prevent its ultimate and general reception, however much it may pain and shock those to whom it is propounded for the first time” (1860: 299).

Where the convergence of sensation fiction and sensation science takes a literal turn in the pages of *All the Year Round*, there were fictional fantasies about the thrill of Darwin’s account of human transformation. The *Cornhill* even ran a fictional parable about Darwin’s reading sensation. “A Vision of Animal Existences” tells the story of a man at the London Zoological Gardens who encounters a woman reading the *Origin*, a “green-covered book [which] teaches that the world of plants and animals is a world of incessant change; that, in coming ages, every living thing will be only a metamorphosed shadow of its present self” (Dixon 1862: 312). Referred to as “the woman in blue,” arguably an allusion to Collins’s sensation heroine, this character presents the visitor with her card, which bears her name and official title: “Natural Selection! Originator of Species!” Accompanying her on a ramble through the zoo is her young son, named “Struggle-for-Life.” This “Vision” also manifests the intertwining of science and sensation in the 1860s. Besides such juxtapositions of separate articles and overlapping themes or topics, columns reviewing the latest publications often mingled science and fiction together, as in *The Sixpenny Magazine*’s “Literature, Science, and Art.” Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* was serialized in its pages from February 1862, with this column appearing alongside the first installment. The following month the magazine contents included the second installment of the novel along with an article on Linnaeus and another titled “Animal Life in the Ocean.”<sup>6</sup>

Although sensation fiction and science writing came together in the Victorian print culture of the 1860s both in theme and in paratextual placement, in scholarship this juxtaposition has been remarkably scarce, with the exception of the attention to the physiology of reading and the science of mind. In *Victorian Popularizers of Science*, for instance, Bernard Lightman introduces his study of “those popularizers who offered ‘sensational science’ to the British public in the second half of the nineteenth century” (Lightman 2007: viii), yet nowhere does this book align these prodigious “popularizers” with sensation fiction writers, despite the columns and installments of both often side by side in the same magazines. To juxtapose the reception of Darwin and sensation fiction in a different way, I have contended that debates around evolution and around popular sensation novels concern questions of unstable boundaries and forms (Bernstein 2001: 250–1). Both within and in response to Darwin’s book, the “species question” focuses on the narrowing distinctions across organisms, and most especially between humans and apes. Within and in response to sensation fiction, social differences seem dangerously in flux and porous so that, as one critic put it, Braddon’s novels “succeeded in making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing-room” (Rae 1865: 204). Even the repeated insistence on the genre of “sensation fiction” in the early 1860s functions as a retaliation against an increasing disbelief in the fixity of forms, whether in nature or in culture (Bernstein

2001: 253). Moreover, although direct allusions to Darwin and to evolutionary theory do not surface explicitly in the popular serialized novels of the 1860s, I claim that

sensation fiction incorporates themes and vocabulary consistent with debates over human descent and biological taxonomy: questions of biological inheritance, the role of accident and the status of evidence in narrative teleology, the accumulation of variety into descriptive detail and narrative progression, and hybrid characters whose physical variations and social mutability complicate their assignment to familiar biological and social categories. (Bernstein 2001: 254)

To illustrate this convergence, I offer one passage from a review of sensation fiction and another from the pages of Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* (1862). Henry Mansel's survey of twenty-four sensation novels considers the multiplicity of print forms of popular fiction by using tropes of biological evolution. Accordingly, he claims that sensation novels are "the aristocratic branch" that has descended from "cheap publications which supply sensation for the million in penny and halfpenny numbers" (Mansel 1863: 505). Embellishing this metaphor, he describes these ancestors of sensation fiction as:

the original germ, the primitive monad, to which all varieties of sensational literature may be referred . . . by a law of generation at least as worthy of the attention of the scientific student as that by which Mr. Darwin's bear may be supposed to have developed into a whale. Fortunately in this case the rudimental forms have been continued down to the epoch of the mature development. In them we have sensationism pure and undisguised exhibited in its naked simplicity, stripped of the rich dross which conceals while it adorns the figure of the more ambitious varieties of the species. (Mansel 1863: 505–6)

Mansel's language certifies the parallel anxieties of uncertain borders in biological and literary forms, as he insinuates that Darwin's example of transformation in the world of nature is far more outlandish than the "varieties of the species" of "sensational literature."<sup>7</sup>

A more subtle conjoining of sensation and science occurs midway through *Aurora Floyd* after Aurora's husband has learned that their marriage was an act of bigamy, a breach of contract that unmoors his sense of order and stability in the world. The narrator then addresses the reader about an unraveling of meaning that eventually afflicts even one's sense of self. The passage that follows swerves into speculations about unfathomable transformations in the natural world too:

The slow changes of nature, immutable in her harmonious law, will have done their work according to that unalterable law; but this wretched me has undergone so complete a change, that if you could bring me back that *alter ego* of the past, I should be unable to recognize the strange creature; and yet is by no volcanic shocks, no rending asunder of rocky masses, no great convulsions, or terrific agonies of nature, that the change has

come about; it is rather by a slow, monotonous wearing away of salient points; an imperceptible adulteration of this or that constituent part . . . that the transformation takes place. (Braddon 1998: 398)

Braddon juxtaposes two narratives of wide-scale change: the catastrophist account that aligns with natural theology and the uniformitarianist notion of gradual, almost invisible modifications “by a slow monotonous wearing away.” By pitching natural theology against the steady-state evolution of naturalists like Lyell and Darwin, Braddon ironically conveys the more disquieting or disorienting effects of the unsensational, rather than the catastrophic, display of change. When Braddon took a hand as editor of a new journal, *Belgravia*, which provided a print vehicle for her sensation novels and for the genre’s critical defense, she ran a series titled “Sensationalism in Science” where the phenomena of nature would surpass the hair-raising scenery of contemporary sensation fiction.

### Sensationalism in Science

To show this alignment between sensation and science was a strategy to counter criticism that sensational literature fell outside the pale of realism and respectable reading. Even the inaugural issue of *Belgravia* in November 1866 launched Braddon’s latest serial novel with a title that suggested links to the realm of nature. *Birds of Prey* included in its first installment a description of Philip Sheldon, the villainous dentist, which capitalizes on what I have called “anxiety of simianation,” or a proliferating cultural discomfort about evolutionary links between humans and other mammals (Bernstein 2001: 255): “The teeth were rather too large and square for a painter’s or a poet’s notion of beauty, and were a little apt to suggest an unpleasant image of some sleek brindled creature crunching human bones in an Indian jungle” (Braddon 1866: 13). *Charlotte’s Inheritance* (1868), Braddon’s next serialized novel in *Belgravia*, actually was a sequel to *Birds of Prey* and again had a title that hinted at the theme of evolutionary descent.

But it was not within the pages of these novels that Braddon’s journal contended for a broader reading of “sensational literature.” The argument advances through an array of cross-fertilizing articles on popular science and critical assessments that highlight the similarities rather than differences between sensation in nature and sensation in fiction. George Augustus Sala contributed a few choice essays that defended sensation fiction from the deluge of criticism deprecating these popular serialized novels of the 1860s. In “The Cant of Modern Criticism” Sala rebuts Oliphant’s “Sensation Novels” diatribe – or what he calls a “sermon on Novels” (Sala 1867: 48) – that had appeared a few years earlier in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*. After asserting that *Jane Eyre* and *Adam Bede* too are “clearly ‘sensational,’” Sala then lists Braddon’s popular serials, from *Lady Audley’s Secret* to *Birds of Prey*, as the most recent specimens of this genre. Yet rather than conceding Oliphant’s criticism that sensation characters



are unnatural monsters, he concludes, "But in all these novels the people walk and talk and act, not like the denizens of some phantom land of anthropophagi, where heads do grow beneath the owner's shoulders, but like dwellers in the actual breathing world in which we live" (Sala 1867: 52–3). Sala's next defense, a few months later in *Belgravia*, reaches beyond novels and literary discourse altogether as he avers that, by current assessments, sensationalism populates the work of visual artists like Fuseli and Hogarth, that "Wedgwood was a sensational potter," and Flaxman and Woolner sensational sculptors, Millais and Holman sensational painters. In addition to identifying "sensational" theologians, actors, art critics, and preachers, Sala writes, "Mr. Darwin is a sensational philosopher" (Sala 1868: 457). In effect, Sala normalizes sensationalism by showing its ubiquity across discourses and disciplines and different historical moments.

"The Cant of Modern Criticism" paved the way for the six-essay series "Sensationalism in Science" that began four months later in June 1868. Given the trend in rival magazines to offer essays in science as well as serialized fiction as standard fare, *Belgravia* too needed to compete well in its struggle for print existence. The staggering appeal of topics from astronomy and chemistry to geology and zoology had circulated in *Belgravia* from its earliest numbers. Popularizers of science, Lightman notes, "not only found the cosmic in the awe-inspiring infinite space of the heavens, they also detected it within the structure of the tiniest living organism" (Lightman 1997: 188). These articles tended to capitalize on instability, flux, and unpredictability in nature, just as sensation novels often accentuated the vagaries of social class and individual inheritance. John Scoffern, a chemist who had written for other magazines including *Temple Bar*, contributed a two-part article on the controversial topic of vivisection in March and April 1867, as well as an essay on salamanders in August of that year. If sensation fiction became infamous for their shocking allure, scientific subjects boasted captivating titles, like "Inhabited Planets" (Phipson 1867) and "Nitro-Glycerine and Other Explosives" (Scoffern 1868). Exploiting the current fascination with primates, stimulated by debates about evolution, was "The Gorilla As I Found Him" (Reade 1867), which recycled the African expeditions of Paul du Chaillu.<sup>8</sup>

"Sensationalism in Science" also appended some catchy titles with interrogative syntax, like "Is the Sun Dying?" and "Are There More Worlds Than One?" The tabloid press strategy of riveting headlines first surfaced in Braddon's periodical, especially through this series (Onslow 2002: 163). Joining her campaign to rescue fiction and sensationalism from disparagement and quantities of ridicule, Robert H. Patterson's essays on science and sensationalism were typically sandwiched between installments from Braddon's novels, an arrangement that encouraged the kind of intertextual and interdiscursive play these sequenced articles also prompt. Noting that Patterson's series was "enmeshed within the furious critical debate" around sensation fiction, Barbara Onslow also argues that the "Sensationalism in Science" essays followed the same trajectory as their kindred novels, with initial challenges to the established order and closures that contain such threatened disturbances, much like sensation heroines

whose rebellion against women's subordination is ultimately quashed; accordingly, Patterson's theories were "designed to quieten rather than stimulate public fears" (Onslow 2002: 161, 168). If Onslow maintains that Patterson ultimately restores conventional attitudes and beliefs about humans, nature, and the future, certainly the seeds of more uncertain possibilities linger in the closures of both popular serial fiction and this instance of popular serial science.

Each essay in the series is of modest length, four to six pages, to be read rapidly and engrossingly, much like serial installments of Braddon's novels. First, they pose dramatic narrative possibilities that would jeopardize ordinary Victorian life, such as the exhaustion of Britain's coal resources or the demise of the sun or the eruption of extraterrestrial life. After generating these alarming prospects, Patterson seems to offer a reassuring conclusion, but hints of unrest linger. As in the brief passage in *Aurora Floyd*, this series provocatively highlights the unknowable future of nature and nation, where diverse spheres of power, from Britain and Man to the sun and the earth are all dethroned from dominant positions. Although the essays finish in ways to assure, say, Britain's continued ascendancy, the equivocal endings do insinuate the possibility of upheaval and dramatic transformations.

The uncertainty about class status in sensation fiction, with various characters like Lady Audley leaping up the social ladder, or cosmic power in sensation science, like the chance of planetary revolutions without the sun as nucleus, resonates with larger questions about the relative prestige of science and fiction, or of empirical knowledge and realism in comparison to fanciful entertainment and popular sensation fiction. The opening rhetorical gambit of the initial essay, with the rather prosaic title "Our Coal-Fields," renders stories from science more shocking than fiction, a point that dovetails with Sala's argument about sensationalism everywhere:

It is often said as a reproach that literature as a whole, and especially Fiction, has become "sensational" – that it loves to produce excitement by description of imaginary and unnatural incidents. But what are all the startling scenes portrayed in novels – though we question if there is any of them which has not had its counterpart in real life – to the dreadful catastrophes predicted for us and for all creation in the pages of Science? (Patterson, June 1868: 555)

By linking "the pages of Science" to "descriptions of imaginary crimes and unnatural incidents," Patterson collapses distinctions between what is real and what is invention, in effect conveying that scientific truth is stranger, more sensational, than fiction. While the organizing trope of the series questions both the boundaries between science and fiction, and those between serious and popular writing, through the concept of sensationalism, these essays thematically engage with questions of authority, power, and established order.<sup>9</sup>

"Our Coal-Fields" addresses William Stanley Jevons's prediction of environmental and national disaster if Britain were to exhaust its coal supply so essential to its global industrial prominence. In the opening paragraphs, the repeated use of "catastrophe"

to describe Jevons's prediction serves to anchor the reader's attention, with an insistence that this anticipated disaster is, unlike sensation fiction, "real and not imaginary" (Patterson, June 1868: 558). Patterson paints this alleged cataclysm as a reversal-of-fortune narrative that resonates with popular fiction, as he forecasts "the approaching extinction of our coal-beds, and with it the collapse of England's greatness, the downfall of her position in the world" (558). Given that Britain would then need to import this resource from the United States, Patterson continues, export trade would vanish due to this cost, and the overall result would amount to a "catastrophe in national fortunes" (557), and "America, with its vast coal-fields, would become the centre of all power, the seat of civilisation, the supreme central mass of progressive humanity" (559). So dire would be this redistribution of world power resulting from Britain's exhaustion of its coal supply, in the rhetorical hyperbole of the article, that Patterson likens this event to "the end of the world" (559).

Here Patterson pursues a narrative arc familiar to readers of sensation fiction, one threatening to depose an existing power structure, yet reinstating the status quo by the end. Following this scheme, Patterson seems to affirm Britain's continued supremacy with a narrative of replenishment. "Why should not progress continue?" he asks, and he then speculates that some future discovery or invention will offer Britain additional resources to guarantee its power, a kind of *deus ex machina*. After nearly five pages of exclaiming over this "coming calamity" as the prediction of "so-called solid science" (June 1868: 555), the essay makes its culminating turn to reassure the reader that this exhaustion of fossil fuels will not lead to disaster because of alternative power sources like steam and other "ingenious machinery" (559). Although Patterson repeatedly dismisses these predictions as exaggerated and fear-mongering, his solution is contingent on unknown inventions and discoveries, as he repeatedly asks, "When our coal becomes exhausted, is there to be no substitute for it found?" (560). For uncertainty hovers around the edges of this recapitulation, evident in the glimmers of immense changes in the distant future. Just as Braddon's novels attempt to contain the threatened challenges to the social order by banishing the interloper and concluding with a scene of domestic tranquility, Patterson tries to restore an orderly, familiar life in the future by imagining "the sweet family circle, through generations of our children's children, when all that remains of the reign of Coal is sundry deep holes in the soil, and a few fine relics of the defunct monarch kept in museums, in much the style as we now keep the bones of the mastodon and megalosaurus" (560). Nevertheless, depletion, extinction, and evolution that is not necessarily progressive haunt the future possibilities of life and national prestige as it exists in the present.

The balance of essays address topics of astronomy, and again follow this pattern of dramatic scenes of nature along with calamitous upheavals capped by sugar-coated assurances. As with "Our Coal-Fields," "Is the Sun Dying?" (July 1868) opens by correlating scientific discourse with catastrophic moments in literature, but not necessarily sensation fiction, following Sala's contention that sensationalism has pervaded literary as well as other forms of writing and art for centuries. Patterson's opening

maneuver alludes to an apocalyptic eclipse that results in “the end of the world” in “one of Mrs. Shelley’s poems” (July 1868: 77). Rather than a poem, the image actually appeared in Mary Shelley’s futuristic novel *The Last Man*, published in 1826, eight years after *Frankenstein*, her Gothic novel that imagined horrific consequences from scientific research. The passage that Patterson recalls appeared in a section of the novel about an astronomer who makes a fantastic calculation that there will be an eclipse in 100,000 years that also borrows from predictions in Revelation.<sup>10</sup> Characterizing Shelley’s vision as “poetic license with a vengeance,” Patterson then observes, “Science, as represented by its present hierarchs, startles us with the prospect of a far wider calamity. The sun itself, they say, will soon be used up” (77).<sup>11</sup> Building on the same formula of the first “Sensationalism in Science” essay, Patterson unfurls another story of spectacular horrors from the realm of science speculators. Again, conjoining science with fiction, the essay traces the literary genealogy of this “solar monster” back to Hesiod’s Cronus and Homer’s Cyclops as classical equivalents for the sun as a “cannibal of light” in modern science.<sup>12</sup> Patterson also plays on reviewers’ complaints about sensation fiction generating a dangerous reading appetite by attributing to the sun an insatiable “devouring process” as “an act of hunger” that perpetuates itself. Clarifying the analogy with commodity print culture of popular periodicals, Patterson proclaims that this voracious planet “lives by the circulating medium, like most of us” (78). Patterson’s excessive references to scientific reports on the sun as a cosmic glutton both mock visions of readers as indiscriminate consumers and lampoon the reputation of science as more moderate and credible than sensation fiction. Moreover, the series as a whole repeatedly integrates literary allusions, often to Romantic literature, including De Quincey’s *Opium Eater* and Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*. By doing so, Patterson uses literary examples to explain scientific phenomena, a strategy upholding the value of imaginative writing to comprehend nature.

The third and fourth essays continue to challenge the established order of the universe. “Daylight” (August 1868) undermines the notion of the sun as the origin of cosmic power in the solar system. Rather than affirming a unified and consistent source of power like the sun, Patterson stresses the importance of a democratically distributed “attraction,” the simplest form of cosmic force produced through interactions rather than a hierarchical and one-way effect (Patterson, August 1868: 253). Similar to characters from popular Gothic romances or current sensation fiction, daylight “travels *incognito* through the greater part of his journey” (253). The destabilizing thrust of sensation novels carries over into the fourth article “Are There More Worlds Than One?” (October 1868) where Patterson continues to challenge stability and order, in this instance the earth’s unique status in the solar system as the only planet supporting life. Disputing a geocentric and anthropocentric network, Patterson develops instead a dynamic theory of “cosmical interaction” over and against the sun as the monarch or the earth as the “favoured orb” in the galaxy (Patterson, October 1868: 524).

“Autocracy of the Sun” (November 1868) continues to topple received authorities, whether national, global, or cosmic. The essay assails the notion of a “pure autocracy” and again dethrones the sun, earth, and “Man” in the vastness of the universe:

Earth is but a tiny pebble among the boulders of the sea-shore. And if this be the case of Earth, then what is Man, her puny denizen, but as a mere dust-grain in the universe, – his presence or absence alike unnoted and uncared for by the host of vast worlds ever rolling through space in their shining circular courses? (Patterson, November 1868: 117)

While this passage might echo Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," first published the previous year, in 1867, it also resonates with Braddon's meditation in *Aurora Floyd* on the inevitability of evolution and the perplexity of our own individual transformations. As sensation novels envisioned a world where social order did not reliably adhere, so too "Sensationalism in Science" imagines the possibility of displaced authorities, from Britain's primacy as a global power to the sun, earth, and even "Man."

In the same November 1868 issue of *Belgravia* appeared an essay, "Women and Men," that further questions the autocracy of "Man." Besides the unusual ordering of its title, "Women and Men" details Lydia Becker's presentation at the British Association for the Advancement of Science, in which she made a radical argument for the social construction of gender rather than "woman" and "man" as fixed biological categories (H.L. 1868).<sup>13</sup> Although the author of the article appears to dismiss Becker's argument, the gist of her position again dovetails with the destabilizing of social categories and biological borders in sensation fiction and sensation science.

The publication of the "Sensationalism in Science" articles also assimilated sensation science into the magazine so that eventually Patterson's contributions did not bear the series label. The six essays first appear in the consecutive months of June, July, August 1868, then October and November 1868, and the final article in February 1869. Three months later appeared Patterson's "The Cycles of the World," only here "Sensationalism" has disappeared from the headline altogether, although the substance of the essay follows the same pattern. Surveying different theories from ancient and Eastern cultures to modern Western "Science" on the cycles of nature ranging from the solar system to the weather, Patterson nevertheless harks back to the keynote of flux where "Change is the presiding law of the Universe" (Patterson, May 1869: 423).

The coining of the category of "sensation fiction" by critics in the 1860s and the rebuttal of "sensationalism in science" in Braddon's *Belgravia* near the end of that decade are part of a larger cultural conversation about fluctuating borders, whether in science and nature, or society and culture, including popular print publications. Taken in the broader context of the journal and in periodical culture of the 1860s in which sensation novels were serialized, the "Sensationalism in Science" series juxtaposes legitimacy debates around science with similar struggles around literature which the very term "sensation fiction" encapsulates. While I have focused on Braddon's strategic convergence of sensation and science to justify her own career as author and editor of popular reading, scientific topics enter into the pages of sensation novels in other ways. Besides the physiology of reading and the mental phenomena of mesmerism and clairvoyance are such subjects as the chemical components of arsenic, as in

Collins's *The Law and the Lady* (1875). With *Heart and Science* (1883) Collins weaves a story of a young woman afflicted with a brain disease who becomes the subject of scientific observation and experimentation. The novel was spurred by the contemporary controversy over vivisection, with animal welfare and women's welfare converging in the narrative. By the end of the century, the partnership of science and sensation had taken on new permutations as eugenics and degeneration and neurasthenia loomed large in the public imagination.<sup>14</sup>

During the decade of sensationalism in the 1860s, links between popular science and fiction erupted around dizzy and disorienting scenes of an unstable universe of planets, or society in flux. It is worth noting too that *On the Origin of Species* concludes with a quick allusion to "the Creator" as almost a panacea after hundreds of pages meticulously arguing for evolution through natural selection. But, like "Sensationalism in Science" and sensation fiction, the words of Darwin's final sentence also sketch a very different universe beset by constant and unfathomable changes, as "several powers" that generate "endless forms" beyond a central and ultimate divine force: "There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved" (Darwin 2003: 398).

#### NOTES

- 1 Winter relays the report of Edward Fitzgerald, who claimed that when he stopped reading Collins's novel he felt "a sort of magnetism" from the cupboard where he had stored the volume (qtd. in Winter 1998: 324).
- 2 Flint summarizes D. A. Miller's essay on *The Woman in White* and observes that Miller's analysis "is uncomfortably close to the physiological explanation of sensation fiction's effects which was put forward in the 1860s" (Flint 1993: 291).
- 3 See Small (1999) for background on Victorian interest in these theories of mind and reading as well as an alliance between science and art suggested by Eliot's story.
- 4 See Pearl (2006) for an extended discussion of mesmerism in Collins. See Bernstein (forthcoming) for transatlantic interest in mesmeric powers in "The Lifted Veil" and in Louisa May Alcott's sensation stories.
- 5 The first installment of *The Woman White*, which included the end of Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, includes the Preamble through chapter 3 of Walter Hartright's Narrative.
- 6 *The Sixpenny Magazine* (1861–8) was edited by John Maxwell, first Braddon's editor, then her lover, and finally her husband. *Lady Audley's Secret* ran in this periodical monthly throughout 1862. The first known use in print of the term "sensation novel" occurred in the inaugural issue of *The Sixpenny Magazine* in September 1861 (Carnell 2000: 142). Maxwell's most successful journal was *Belgravia*, which Braddon edited from 1866.
- 7 For a discussion of the critical invention of the genre "sensation fiction" and cultural Darwinism, see Bernstein, "Dirty Reading" (1994: 228–30).
- 8 Chaillu's exploits were common fare alongside sensation novel installments in the 1860s

- periodicals. His *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa* was published in 1861 and became a flashpoint for “ape anxiety” and “anxiety of simianation” (Bernstein 2001: 254–66).
- 9 Even in the final essay of Patterson’s series sensation science foregrounds inexact and fluctuating boundaries, this time through the concept of photospheres which surround planets. The article also spotlights optical illusions as photospheres exaggerate or minimize planetary dimensions, so that there is a gap between appearance and reality. “Photospheres” concludes by citing theories about the interior of the earth as hollow and that “the only real stable form of matter is the hollow sphere” (Patterson, Feb. 1869: 484).
  - 10 The passage from *The Last Man* which Patterson paraphrases is: “On the twenty-first of June, it was said that an hour before noon, a black sun arose: an orb, the size of that luminary, but dark, defined, whose beams were shadows, ascended from the west; in about an hour it had reached the meridian, and eclipsed the bright parent of the day. Night fell upon every country, night, sudden, rayless, entire” (Shelley 1994: 224).
  - 11 H. G. Wells imagines the death of the sun in *The Time Machine*, his futuristic novel which was serialized in *The New Review* in 1894–5, and is credited with launching the genre of time travel fiction.
  - 12 In “Are There More Worlds Than One?” Patterson again mentions Hesiod’s myths as comparable to contemporary scientific accounts (Patterson, Oct. 1868).
  - 13 For additional details on Becker’s arguments about gender, education, and science, and about women presenting at the British Association for the Advancement of Science, see my essay, “‘Supposed Differences’” (Bernstein 2006b).
  - 14 In addition to sensation fiction of the 1860s, there are other possible partnerships between Victorian literature and science and periodical publications: see my “Periodical Partners” (Bernstein 2006a).

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## Medicine and Sensation

*Meegan Kennedy*

Sensation fiction is as fascinated with medicine as it is with the elements often associated with it: crime and female desire. Medicine saturates sensation fiction, in part because it can so readily augment important aims of the genre: a dramatic plot – what Margaret Oliphant called “frequent and rapid recurrence of piquant situation and startling incident” (Oliphant 1862: 568); a preoccupation with mysteries, clues, and interpretations – as the *Saturday Review* noted patronizingly of Collins that “he is a good constructor. Each of his stories is a puzzle” (unsigned review, 1860: 249); striking figurative patterns; and the ability to disorient the reader and to provoke suspense and shock. Victorian medicine was as much art as science, and Victorian physicians drew upon both romantic and realist models to help their narrators navigate each case from uncertainty to knowledge. If, as Winifred Hughes argues, sensation fiction is distinguished by the “violent yoking of romance and realism, traditionally the two contradictory modes of literary perception” (Hughes 1980: 16), then medicine – with its tension between art and science, suspense and resolution, romance and realism – is ideally positioned to provide a site and a tool for sensation authors’ work.

The pattern of illness in sensation fiction does not at first look substantively different from that in the Victorian novel as a whole, which has prompted work on the culture of the sickroom, the invalid, the nurse, and scientific realist discourse. Sensation fiction, however, is fascinated with the body and its responses. Jenny Bourne Taylor argues that the “chain of associations which linked its specific conventions, its effects on the reader, its method of production, and its narrative technique . . . were forged . . . through physiological metaphors, *as* symptoms which themselves had, principally, physiological effects” (Taylor 1988: 4). Through this lens we can more easily see how, for example, George Eliot’s “The Lifted Veil” (1859) and *Silas Marner* (1861) relate to the concurrent bloom of sensation fiction. Furthermore, when

sensation authors refer to medicine, they sometimes exaggerate medical facts or dwell upon what is most grotesque or unusual about the bodies under their lens.

In a twist typical of nineteenth-century romance, which often fetishizes historical authority and documentation, such novels sometimes advertise the factual basis of their sensational medical plots. Wilkie Collins's prefaces, for instance, often boast of his accuracy in medical and legal matters. In *Heart and Science* (1883), he mentions the novel's "allusions to medical practice at the bedside; leading in due course to physiological questions." He attests that "[b]efore the manuscript went to the printer, it was submitted for correction to an eminent London surgeon" (Collins 1996: 39). Charles Reade was also known for his voluminous notes on various social reforms, whether the treatment of the mentally ill, the unhealthy conditions in prisons, or the prohibition on female physicians. Not everyone saw his depictions as factual, however. Medical professionals complained that *Hard Cash* (1863) painted a corrupt medical profession and lunacy commission with too broad a brush; that his "matter-of-fact romance" was not founded on fact at all.

With its blend of medicine, science, and law, and its natural habitat of criminal cases involving poisoning, murder, or insanity, the mid-century field of forensic medicine would seem to be tailor-made for sensation fiction. It is surprising, then, that it does not appear more often, although forensic medicine does shape the genre's treatment of (and perhaps its interest in) poisoning. In *Armadale* (1866) and *The Legacy of Cain* (1889), for example, Collins drew on actual cases and on the toxicologist Alfred Swaine Taylor's text, *Poisons in Relation to Medical Jurisprudence and Medicine* (1848) (Pal-Lapinski 2003: 97). However, Victorian doctors probably enabled more poisonings than they helped prosecute. Some poisons, like opium, were prescribed as medicines, making it difficult to detect malignant intent after a death. In Collins's *The Law and the Lady* (1875), the supposed poison plot turns on the dead wife's proposed use of arsenic "as a remedy for the defects . . . of her complexion" (Collins 1992: 150). Collins's own addiction to laudanum, an opium derivative, made him well aware how easily a medical poison can become integral to daily life.

Besides the medical aspects of murder, suicide, and the like, sensation fiction often uses illness or accident to motivate plot or delineate character. In Reade's *A Woman-Hater* (1877), the duplicitous but charming Ned Severne suffers from a catalepsy-like disorder, finally allowing him (and his secret marriage) to be identified. In Ellen Woods's *East Lynne* (1861), the defining moments of Lady Isabel's false identity are medical events: the railway accident that injures her beyond recognition, allowing her to become governess to her estranged children; her son's death from consumption, where her passionate response undercuts her assumed persona as "Madame Vine"; her own deathbed, which reveals her identity to her former husband. In Reade's *Griffith Gaunt* (1866), Kate Gaunt's fall downstairs not only provides a convenient lever by which to remove her character from her husband's bed, but also dramatizes her hidden desire for another man (see Hughes 1980: 182 and earlier).

Illness serves multiple purposes in a sensation narrative: plot progression, character development, metaphor and symbolism, and solicitation of a reader response. Marian

Halcombe's fever works for *The Woman in White* (1860–1) in a number of ways. Most obviously, it facilitates Count Fosco's nefarious schemes, although (ironically) it results from her efforts to discover those schemes, crouched outside a window on a cold, rainy night. Hours later, she is feverish, and Fosco can read her journal to assess her progress in detection. Marian's extended illness allows Fosco and Sir Percival to remove sympathetic servants, hide her (now delirious), and send Lady Glyde to London, alone. Marian's fever ultimately enables the remarkable sleight of hand by which Sir Percival achieves the "death" of his wife.

But the fever serves as more than a helpful engine of the plot. As a crisis point of the narrative, it punctuates the drive toward discovery, both retarding Marian's efforts and – ultimately – enabling them, by spurring the conspirators to declare themselves through action. The fever plot develops her character, demonstrating both her determination and her surprisingly feminine vulnerability. As metaphor, her fever suggests the physical danger she courts in resisting Fosco's plans. Her fever also allows Collins to play with narrative voice and with the narrative convention of the diary or journal, in ways that amplify the threats implicit in the sensation plot. Fosco's takeover of Marian's voice and diary violates her privacy and (implicitly) her person. And, like Anne Catherick's touch on Hartright's shoulder, Marian's fever interpellates the reader into the sensations, and the sensational world, of the narrator. Marian's approach to delirium pushes readers into the same hurrying, frantic rhythm as her fevered memories. She contends that "there is no confusion in my head yet," but her tone belies that assertion, when she bemoans "the ceaseless writing, faster and faster, hotter and hotter, driving on more and more wakefully, all through the dreadful interval before the house was astir again" (Collins 1985: 357). After this increasing pace of nightmarish anxiety, the narrative shock when Fosco commandeers the journal is all the more abrupt.

Whether the bodies it represents are healthy or diseased, sensation fiction often focuses on the body's physiological responses to sensation, extending and intensifying the relation of nerves and narrators that Athena Vrettos and Peter Logan have identified in novels earlier in the century (Vrettos 1995: 48–80; Logan 1997). The function of the nerves and senses becomes supremely important, as sensation novels record the shocks to their characters' nerves. Most famous is the scene Margaret Oliphant draws attention to in reviewing *The Woman in White*, "when, [Walter says,] in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me" (Collins 1985: 47). The novel can be powered by not only the shock of surprise and fear but also, markedly, a sexual *frisson* – an "eagerness for physical sensation" – that thrills even the female characters (Oliphant 1867: 259).

What enables these "sensational" moments is the remarkable physical and mental sensitivity of the characters in these novels: their nervousness. In *The Law and the Lady*, for example, nearly all the characters suffer from a heightened sensibility. The murdered wife has an "exquisitely sensitive temperament" (Collins 1992: 176). Dexter has "a very sensitive sense of touch," and his sharp hearing is characterized as "dog's

ears” or “the sensitive ear of a dog” (1992: 177, 231, 292). Eustace Macallan, the accused husband, is “a delicate-minded man” who remains in a “state of nervous depression” after he is wounded late in the novel (197, 367). And Valeria, the narrator, “felt every nerve in me shivering under” the cold touch of Dexter’s hand, while merely examining his paintings rendered her “nerves . . . completely upset” (217, 231). His laugh “set every nerve in me on edge” (237). After a prolonged interview with Dexter, Valeria explains, “[M]y nerves had been tried by all that I had seen and heard. . . . I started at the slightest noises; I dreamed of dreadful things; I was ready to cry without reason, at one moment, and to fly into a passion without reason, at another” (261). Even after solving the mystery, she laments “the present excited state of my nerves” (410–11). Deborah Wynne notes that, similarly, “[v]irtually all” of the characters in *The Woman in White* fall ill at some point (Wynne 2001: 44).

This ubiquitous nervousness can present a problem for the protagonist. Jane Wood notes that Ovid Vere’s acute sensibility (in *Heart and Science*) is meant to mark him as “the more humane doctor,” but is still suspect and must be cured by his sojourn in Canada (Wood 2001: 74–5). Yet immunity to nerve-strain is no recommendation either: one review of Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* complains, “The nerves with which Lady Audley could meet unmoved the friend of the man she had murdered, are the nerves of a Lady Macbeth who is half unsexed” ([Rae] 1865: 186).

This “nervousness” of sensation fiction corresponds to what was considered a worrisome element in Victorian culture (Taylor 1988: 33; Wynne 2001: 6; Daly 2004). Indeed, Collins’s Dr. Downward in *Armadale* sets himself up to serve this disorder of the new age. G. Miller Beard argued that nervousness was caused by living and working in a technologically advanced society, and B. A. Morel saw it as a sign of degeneration (Wynne 2001: 44). However, being “nervous” in Victorian parlance could be perceived as a strength. At least one contemporary of Charles Reade praised his “nervous, vigorous, and masculine” style, reverting here, perhaps, to the sense of “nervy” (bold, agile, muscular) (Waddy, *Cartoon Portraits*, 62; cited in Wynne 2001: 132; see also Taylor 1988: 266, n. 9).

Because of the sensation novel’s focus on nervous function, and its interest in recording that function, sensation fiction also mirrors the 1860s rise of technologies, such as the sphygmograph, that graphed body rhythms (Kennedy 2009: 452–6). In recording the functions and effects of the nerves, the novel models itself on the medical report – or even autopsy report, as Collins suggests in *Basil*. The narrator writes “because I think that my narrative may do good, because I hope that, one day, it may be put to some warning use. There have been men who, on their death-beds, have left direction that their bodies should be anatomized, as an offering to science. In these pages, written on the death-bed of enjoyment and hope, I give my heart, already anatomized, as an offering to human nature” (Collins 2000: 25–7).

The emphasis on sensibility in sensation fiction promotes a population of invalids, especially inveterate male invalids like Mr. Fairlie or Ovid, in their pages, despite the possible challenges this may pose to Victorian gender norms; among other effects, male invalids in the Victorian period vex the connections between domestic and

market space (Frawley 2004: 234ff; see also Snyder 2009 and Oppenheim 1990 on male invalids). Regardless, many male characters show at least some signs of invalidism. Wood associates Collins's Basil with George Eliot's Latimer in "The Lifted Veil" and Charlotte Brontë's Crimsworth in *The Professor* (1857) – all sensitive younger sons with outsized sensibility, which are "strategies against, and symptoms of, ideals of manliness" (Wood 2001: 117–18, 85).

Mid-Victorian fears of an increase in insanity were reflected in medical and legal cases and in fiction (Shuttleworth 1993: 198–9). But while sensation fiction sometimes seemed to batten on the reliably extravagant features of madness, these novels also explored more nuanced mental states. Since, as Taylor shows, debates over the nuances of brain and behavior were "a significant feature of Victorian journals and periodicals, an integral part of the contemporary intellectual culture," then not only Collins (as she argues), but most sensation novelists "would have been aware of these debates" (Taylor 1988: 29; see also J. Wood 2001: 116–17). Among these topics were: theories of mind shock and sense transmission, including nerves, electricity, emotion; William Carpenter, George Henry Lewes, and dual-aspect monism; memory; "double consciousness or somnambulism, with spectral delusion . . . the tenuousness of the limits of consciousness and of a single coherent identity"; Carpenter, Thomas Laycock, Henry Holland, and James Prichard on "unconscious cerebration," a dream-like state that can appear as delirium, hallucinations, visions, or supernatural visitation; and John Conolly's "moral management" of the insane, which – Taylor (1988) argues – "provides the overarching ideological framework for Collins's fiction [where] narrative authority and meaningful identity are [both formed and challenged]." Sensation fiction also draws on mesmerism, phrenology, physiognomy, dream theory, and other nineteenth-century sciences of the mind and character.<sup>1</sup>

Engaging with these theories allows the genre to fulfill – but also to experiment with – narrative structure. A number of critics have examined how structure in these texts responds to contemporary medical theories of cognition and consciousness. For instance, Taylor argues that sensation novels refer to such theories "by generating a sense of mystery and suspense within the individual consciousness, by following apparently arbitrary, unconscious processes of association and tracing the hidden secrets of memory back to their equivocal source" (Taylor 1988: 26). Wood suggests that a novel depicting unconscious cerebration can explore a mind temporarily freed of the conventions of society, narrative, and identity (Wood 2001: 115; see also Taylor 1988: 84). Shuttleworth sees the sensation novel as disrupting notions of the psychological coherence of the individual on which the realist novel relies (Shuttleworth 1993: 195).

Because, as Nicholas Daly argues, sensation novels were "a machine for the production of suspense," they were as much about provoking as recording sensation (Daly 2004: 478). Specifically, as D. A. Miller argues, the sensation novel is "one of the first instances of modern literature to address itself primarily to the sympathetic nervous system" (Miller 1986: 95). The serialization of sensation novels was blamed for their shocking qualities and was thought to exacerbate the ill effects of those qualities by

the frequent – often weekly – administration of new shocks, as well as by the chaotic setting in which fiction was jumbled with crime reports and other exaggerated fare, and through which readers might “skip” in a hurried, unfocused manner (Wynne 2001: 13–15).

While the eighteenth-century novel of sensibility similarly sought to evoke emotion in its readers (Wynne 2001: 7), the emotion evoked in sensation fiction is peculiar to the 1860s. In an 1864 letter to his mother, Collins says of *Armadale*, “I am making my own flesh creep with what I am writing just now . . . . Whether the public flesh will follow my example remains to be seen” (Collins 1999b: 250). Oliphant famously notices Collins’s ability to provide “positive personal shocks of surprise and excitement” (Oliphant 1862: 566). Some readers had contrary responses, of course. Mansel complains of sensation novels that “with or without the intention of the writer, are strongly provocative of that sensation in the palate and throat which is a premonitory symptom of nausea” ([Mansel] 1863: 487). Many Victorian reviewers associated the genre with this production of affect (Cvetkovich 1992: 14). For example, reviews in “the *Athenaeum* did define sensation novels by their bodily impact on readers . . . ‘the flesh creeps.’” The novels “‘curdle [readers]’ blood, cause their hair to stand on end, give them ‘pins and needles’ in the region of the heart, and fix their eyes with a rigid stare” (Casey 2006: 4).

While these novels depict the nervousness of both male and female characters, the discourse around the reader’s vulnerability to the genre focuses on what was perceived as the fragile female reader (Miller 1986; Taylor 1988: 69; Flint 1993; Shuttleworth 1993: 194: 146–8; Vrettos 1995: 25, 96–7). This prohibition on sensation fiction for female readers also reflects a concern that, by provoking shock in the female reader, the novel is inappropriately touching her, in a kind of violation of her person and of her “privileged space” (Gilbert 1997: 4).

Despite the complex cluster of meanings loosed by this circulation of sensation between author, character, and reader, Victorian critics focused primarily on its deleterious effects on the body; the genre was frequently associated with physical, mental, and moral “poison” and “disease,” and its frequently female author – “the prostituted hack paid to produce a sensation” (Gilbert 1997: 77) – was even more threatening to Victorian conventions. Henry Mansel considered that sensation novels produced the “cravings of a diseased appetite” ([Mansel] 1863: 483). Indeed, sensation fiction is often associated with food, either savory or spicy/poisonous or like an addictive drug (Wynne 2001: 4–5; see also Brantlinger 1998: ch. 1). And a range of reviews consider sensation fiction as a type of food poisoning (Gilbert 1997: 17–23; also Gilbert 2003: 66–77). Similarly, the reviewer for the *Westminster Review* offers an unnerving image of the genre as a “virus . . . spreading in all directions, from the penny journal to the shilling magazine, and from the shilling magazine to the thirty shillings volume” (unsigned review, 1866: 270; see also Hughes 1980: 41–2). Such reviewers, faced with an epidemic of sensation that disregarded even class boundaries, anxiously sought to contain and purify the offending flow of text. Gilbert, in fact, argues that “the rhetoric of literary surveillance and reform was motivated by precisely the same terrified fas-

cination with transgression as that of sanitary surveillance and reform” (Gilbert 1997: 36). Others thought the disease was inevitable. Henry Fothergill Chorley, in the *Athenaeum*, considers that sensation fiction is itself a symptom of its time, “a period of diseased invention” (qtd. in Casey 2006: 6).

Despite these concerns, the physiological effect of sensation novels was apparently taken literally, and beneficially, by many readers, although it’s sometimes not clear whether these novels were more effective as a stimulant or sedative. Collins reports in a letter to his mother, shortly after the publication of *The Woman in White* in 1860, that “All sorts of good news still reaches me about *The Woman in White*. It is soothing the dying moments of a *young Lady* – it . . . is helping (by homeopathic doses of a chapter at a time) to keep an *old lady* out of the grave – and it is the first literary performance which has succeeded in fixing the attention of a deranged gentleman in his lucid intervals!” (Collins 1999a: 188). Perhaps the appeal of sensation fiction – what Mansel called “the pleasure of a nervous shock” (1863: 483) – could also be considered a beneficial contribution to medicine, in the nineteenth-century tradition of medical galvanism.

Although sensation fiction is interested in recording and transmitting the nerves and senses, its plot often unfurls specifically through the eyes. Visual observation anchors the process of discovery driving many sensation novels. The perspective of the detective – narrator, character, or professional – is often modeled on the searching, keen, evaluative eye of the trained physician. Non-sensational Victorian novels also use this perspective, but the fascination with patterns of interpretation and revelation in sensation fiction makes the “diagnostic eye” particularly relevant and useful.

That interest in diagnosis invites a skeptical look at characters’ bodies in search of clues to their actions and motivations. Since the detective’s searching gaze often deduces from physiological signs, this gaze is necessarily inflected by the close, diagnostic gaze of the nineteenth-century clinical physician. In Collins’s *The Law and the Lady*, Valeria takes on a physician’s assurance when she assesses Dexter’s state late in the novel, listing a range of symptoms from “[h]is features were pinched and worn; the whole face seemed to have wasted strangely in substance and size,” to the “[b]lood-red veins” in his eyes and “sodden and sickly look” of his face (Collins 1992: 329). Such moments serve the plot as they point to the existence of secrets among the characters; allow detecting characters (and us) to attempt to read those secrets; and raise or extend our suspicions of the characters, as when Valeria muses, “I supposed [Dexter] to be secretly following his own train of thought” (1992: 250).

Although novelists from Dickens and Gaskell to Hardy and Stevenson sometimes question medical authority, sensation novels often rely upon a physician to explain the symptoms that serve as clues in an otherwise mysterious narrative. The ostensibly rational and revelatory narrative of medical observation often counterpoints, punctuates, and helps elucidate the narrative of obfuscation and mystification conveyed through anonymous letters, mysterious visitors, uncanny resemblances, and the like. As a result, the medical gaze can also be mystified in these novels. In Reade’s *A Woman-Hater*, the narrator makes much of Rhoda Gale’s skill in observing. When she

meets the protagonist, Vizard, “she fixed her gray eyes steadily and searchingly upon [his] face, so that he could scarcely meet them, they were so powerful” (Reade 1895: 193). We are not surprised to find her proficient at the microscope as well (1895: 287). Similarly, when “the famous Doctor Jerome” is summoned to examine Eustace Woodville’s dying first wife in *The Law and the Lady*, a nurse confides, “The great physician came just in time to see her seized with another attack of sickness. He watched her attentively, without speaking a word. In the interval when the sickness stopped, he still studied her, as it were, in perfect silence. I thought he would never have done examining her” (Collins 1992: 137). Both Doctor Jerome and the local doctor maintain this silent, attentive observation for hours. At first this response adds to the scene’s mystery. Eventually, it relieves the suspense and launches another stage of the investigation: symptoms of acute arsenic poisoning require a watch upon the patient, not as part of any treatment, but to confirm this most serious diagnosis, which confers new meaning upon the wife’s death and her surroundings.

Even laymen demonstrate this keen observation. In *The Law and the Lady*, “[i]t was observed by every one present [at the trial], that the prisoner’s face betrayed the traces of acute mental suffering. He was deadly pale” (Collins 1992: 126). Similarly, the narrator in *Heart and Science* scans Benjulia with a diagnostic eye: “He was so miserably – it might almost be said, so hideously – thin that his enemies spoke of him as ‘the living skeleton’. . . . His great dusky hands . . . showed amber-colored nails on bluntly-pointed fingers” (Collins 1996: 95). The sensation novel is not, of course, the only genre that uses physiological reading to investigate a character. But the interest of the sensation novel in nerves (sensation) and diagnosis (plot) makes these texts especially likely to scrutinize a character’s body and its responses.

Whereas physicians stressed the importance of close medical surveillance in detecting the first or most subtle signs of insanity (Shuttleworth 1993: 202–3), this insistence on surveillance could in itself be a symptom, as is suggested by Forbes Winslow’s *On the Obscure Diseases of the Brain and Disorders of the Mind*, a volume Collins himself owned (Mangham 2006: 115). Winslow’s paranoid view that madness could potentially be found in “every bosom” provokes a pathological culture governed by surveillance (Mangham 2006: 116–24). Indeed, where detection is so universal and so necessary, it becomes “itself . . . a sign of the pathological” (Shuttleworth 1993: 221).

While many sensation characters model their detection on the keen eye of the physician, such an affiliation often enables villainy in sensation fiction, especially in Collins’s novels (see Talairach-Vielmas 2009: 7–9). Fosco demonstrates how medicine can be a tool for both good and ill. He uses his medical knowledge nobly to save the life of Marian, whom he admires even though she is working against him; but he also uses it ignobly to commit Lady Glyde to an asylum as “Anne Catherick” while Anne Catherick becomes “Lady Glyde,” dead of an aneurysm. His powerful stimulant allows Anne Catherick to travel to London to die, and his medicine renders Lady Glyde unconscious and confused, so they can move her (Collins 1985: 483, 421).

Collins’s medical villains suggest that (unlike Charles Reade) he was particularly suspicious of the new scientific medicine. Dr. Downward’s innovative sanatorium in



*Armada* provides the apparatus for the ingenious Lydia Gwilt's planned murder of Allan Armadale, and her eventual suicide. Worse, in Collins's *Heart and Science*, Dr. Benjulia chillingly endorses vivisection for medical experiments. "I do it because I like it," he crows, pursuing "my own satisfaction – my own pride" and claiming, "Knowledge for its own sake, is the one god I worship. . . . Knowledge sanctifies cruelty" (Collins 1996: 190). Dr. Benjulia's cruelties, which drive the plot of the novel, derive from his role as ambassador of the new medicine, for whom vivisection is "travelling on the road to the grandest medical discovery of this century" (1996: 190).

The hero of *Heart and Science*, Ovid, also a medical man, helps us identify what is wrong with Benjulia. Ovid's medicine provides the antidote to Benjulia's, both literally and figuratively, by enlisting an older medical tradition, refusing the vivisection that – for Collins – represents a misguided medical future. Ovid comes upon a cure for recalcitrant "brain disease" when he encounters a poor and wretched patient in Canada. "He, and he alone," Ovid writes home, "has solved a problem in the treatment of disease, which has thus far been the despair of medical men throughout the whole civilized world" (Collins 1996: 159–60). But this farseeing pioneer of medicine explicitly refuses what he calls "the useless and detestable cruelties" of vivisection. He refuses medical jargon, saying "I purposely abstain from using technical language in the statement" he leaves for posterity (1996: 307, 308). Just as his prose is non-scientific, his insight is non-experimental, but instead "wholly derived from the results of bedside practice . . . spread over a period of many years" (1996: 307).

Thus, while medical authority often lends itself to the pathological plots and diagnostic impulse of sensation fiction, individual doctors' authority can be questioned or undercut. Even Benjulia, portrayed as a cold but brilliant scientist, acknowledges the possibility of error. Upon seeing Carmina, he muses, "[W]hen I was at Rome, fifteen years ago, [she] was a wretched little rickety child. . . . I didn't think the mountain air would be of any use. It seems I was wrong" (Collins 1996: 102). While Collins does not challenge Fosco's acute medical knowledge, based on his Continental training as an experimental chemist, *The Woman in White* places him within a medical field fractured by professional debates (Collins 1985: 243). Unlike the local practitioner, Mr. Dawson, Fosco immediately identifies Marian's symptoms as incipient typhus fever (1985: 391–2); he repeatedly warns Dawson that his treatments are incorrect for her condition; he chides Dawson for his unfamiliarity with "the gigantic centres of scientific activity – London and Paris" and their new treatments for fever (1985: 384). Fosco is sure of himself; he is also correct. But both his diagnosis of Marian and his use of the stethoscope – progressive Continental theories and practices resisted by provincial British practitioners – foreground how much nineteenth-century medicine is in flux.

These delicate distinctions between knowledge, uncertainty, and ignorance in medicine help sensation fiction weave complex plots in which judgment and responsibility, and cause and effect, are crucially important yet difficult to determine reliably. Because medicine is inherently an uncertain science, it fetishizes what accuracy is possible. At the same time, sensation fiction centers in on and manipulates uncertainty

to create suspense and to expand the possible meanings of any particular event. The combination can be dizzying. While a physician consulted in *The Law and the Lady* acknowledges that Dexter's eventual "drop . . . into madness" cannot be precisely foretold, he has "little or no doubt" that it must occur, and he warns that the catastrophe "must infallibly take place" as soon as Dexter's eccentric way of life brings the "mischief [to] its culminating point" (Collins 1992: 282).

The sensation novel often productively amplifies the uncertainty of diagnosis accompanying many nineteenth-century illnesses. When the doctor in *East Lynne* comments of little William, "The seeds of consumption must have been inherent in him," Mr. Carlyle asks, "How can consumption have come to *him*? It is not in the family." The doctor responds, "The child's grandmother died of consumption." Mr. Carlyle objects, "They did not call it consumption," but the doctor replies, "I don't care what they called it. It was consumption" (Wood 2005: 518). This usefully ambiguous diagnosis recurs at Lady Isabel's death. As "William was rapidly fading away . . . [s]omebody else was fading – Lady Isabel. . . . Her mother had died in a similar way. Some said of consumption . . . some said of 'waste'; the earl, her husband, said of a broken heart. . . . Whatever may have been [her] malady, she . . . 'went out like the snuff of a candle'" (Wood 2005: 592). These repeated assertions of first certainty, then doubt help to maintain the sensation novel's constitutive atmosphere of anxious uncertainty and nervous energy. While this uncertainty threatens the physician's authority, it is productive for the novel and its readers.

Similarly, *East Lynne* repeatedly comments on the fact that, despite the worrisome, ambiguous nature of this illness, no doctor was called to see "Madame Vine." The concern over the absence of medical examination here suggests a definitiveness about diagnosis that did not, in truth, exist for many diseases at the time. Lady Isabel's refusal of care, by which she supposedly preserves her secret, rather draws our attention to her secretiveness, and allows Wood to amplify the figurative resonance of this illness. Like Lady Isabel's sin, it is hidden and corrupting, and inextricably linked to the body. Wood thus can draw upon both the desired certainty of medical authority and the suspense, mystery, ambiguity, and intense feeling instead called forth by actual bodily illness.

In sensation fiction, detection – like medicine – is portrayed as a science of assessment and prediction that must contend with uncertainty as it tacks toward a hidden truth. A material clue to Benjulia's crime, vivisection, is discovered through Ovid's training in keen observation. When Ovid visits Benjulia, he notices the doctor's big stick, in particular some stains on its handle: "Ovid looked at them with a surgeon's practiced eye. They were dry stains of blood" (Collins 1996: 133). But the novel doesn't follow up this clue right away; it allows this detail to resonate for some time before it is resolved by Benjulia's suicide. In fact, we never find out exactly what act of bodily and mental trauma is indicated by those ominous stains. While the trajectory of detective fiction seems to be toward complete and satisfying revelation, the disturbing energies of sensation fiction function best when not so easily contained. The violence at the heart of the novel, and of the genre of sensation fiction as a whole,

can only be read and righted through signs that are not always fully determined when best understood. Our longed-for certainty is not always generative, as becomes evident when Benjulia finishes up some experiments before his death. The listening servant hears “three smothered shrieks” and suspects (rightly) that he hears “three death-strokes . . . dealt on some suffering creatures, with the same sudden and terrible certainty” (Collins 1996: 323). Benjulia’s gift of “certainty” to these animals represents not the triumph but the defeat of scientific medicine, and of his (and the novel’s) ingenious plot. Whether used in pursuit of plot or character, it is the indeterminate nature of diagnosis that most vivifies the sensation novel.

## NOTES

- 1 For mind shock, see Matus 2009: 174; for dual-aspect monism, Matus 2009: 177; for memory, Dames 2001 and Matus 2009: 179; for double consciousness, Taylor 1988: 56; for unconscious cerebration, J. Wood 2001: 111; for moral management, Taylor 1988: 31; for mesmerism, Taylor 1988: 56; and for dream theory, Taylor 1988: 84.

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## Disability in Victorian Sensation Fiction

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Sensation fiction's relationship to embodiment has been overdetermined from the start, given that its poetics, its plotting and characterization, and its critical reception have used the body as a nexus of expression, experience, and meaning-making. The very phrase "sensation novel" articulates this layered relationship, anchored as it is in the reader's "nervous" reactions to dramatic, surprising, and/or scandalous plotting that often involves characters' parallel bodily crises or transformations.

To give one of the most familiar examples, when readers of *The Woman in White* (1860) vicariously experience the touch of Anne Catherick's hand on Walter Hartright's shoulder, their bodies echo his physiological responses to the provocative experience of being touched by a young woman walking alone on the Finchley road to London, long after midnight. As Margaret Oliphant noted in her 1862 review of the novel, "The silent woman lays her hand upon our shoulder as well as upon that of Mr Walter Hartright" (1862: 571). The Victorian conventions of gender, sexuality, class, and urban cultural geography that inform the moment's sensational quality are all registered through this single bodily event.

Victorianist critics writing on the novels of the 1860s have repeatedly explored such complex deployments of embodiment and sensation, attending closely to the role of gender, sex, "race," ethnicity, and social class in producing the genre's characteristic effects. In contrast, the role of physical and mental disabilities in sensation fiction has been examined infrequently, despite the fact that disabled bodies and minds both appear with striking regularity in the works of the most famous sensation novelists and, like gender, class, and race, are central structural features of canonic fiction in the era, much of which is also marked by the use of sensational elements in plotting and character development.

Disability can be seen as central to the very poetics of sensation fiction. What often drives "sensation" is the work of engaging, representing, and configuring unique

bodily differences (Collins's famous "heroines of irregular features," for example), strange bodily behaviors (like congenital double amputee Miserrimus Dexter's cooking, diet, and brilliant operatic performances in Collins's *The Law and the Lady* [1875]), and disruptions in characters' mental and "nervous" lives (see Fahnestock 1981). Bodies in sensation narratives are always the vehicles through which the texts articulate, exploit, and indeed undermine the seemingly stable binaries of able and disabled, sane and mad, normal and abnormal, familiar and strange – making characters and readers alike question on which side anyone falls (or even further, how mysterious those "mysteries at our own doors" can be). Disabled characters and the notion of disability itself often disrupt a host of such binaries, generating shock, curiosity, and a sense of the uncanny.

We have just seen one example of this coherence of disability and sensation. The reader's most immediate experience of Anne's touch is simultaneously Walter's most displaced one, given that the novel presents itself as a compilation of narratives about past events. What we read, then, is Walter's retrospective story of meeting Anne Catherick, told not only after he has met her, but also after he has learned that she has escaped from a private insane asylum. Disability thus inflects every one of Walter's narratives of Anne, as well as determining his engagement with difference through the rest of the novel.<sup>1</sup> Further, not only the sensational thrill of that first encounter, but also Walter's awareness of Anne's disability, color how he experiences and falls in love with Laura Fairlie, a woman who almost immediately reminds him of Anne, long before he discovers that they are half-sisters.

Gender, sexuality, class, *and* disability, then, combine to produce the sensational charge of what might be argued is one of the most thrilling moments in the nineteenth-century novel.<sup>2</sup> *The Woman in White* is significant not only as a novel that features and evokes various "nervous" responses as it unfolds a mystery, but also one that develops a relevant subplot of mental disability. As the novel continues, other characters' comments, combined with Anne's dramatized actions (her letter to Laura Fairlie, her violent reactions to mentions of Sir Percival Glyde, her fetishization of the whiteness that she associates with Laura's dead mother), create an ambiguous and inconsistent discourse of mental disability, variously articulated as "idiocy," monomania, and madness.

The status of Anne's mental, emotional, and/or cognitive disability is strikingly muddy in comparison to her eventual diagnosis of heart disease. Despite or because of its vagueness, Anne's condition becomes a master identity that is also inescapably linked to Laura Fairlie, long before a conspiracy causes her to literally take Anne's place in the asylum. Walter's description of his first impressions of Laura as expressing "something wanting" not clearly located in either her or himself is Collins's brilliant figuration of the overdetermination of disability in the novel from its very earliest moments. The woman Walter Fairlie marries is thus never only heiress Laura Fairlie, but also asylum escapee Anne Catherick. Idealized womanhood – "the first woman who quickened the pulses within you that the rest of her sex had no art to stir" – is thus indelibly marked as disabled (Collins 1999: 52).

In *East Lynne* (1861), similarly, disability underpins the narrative of fallen woman protagonist Isabel Vane's return to her former home to become governess to her own children. It is Isabel's unrecognizable appearance, "strangely . . . altered" by disablement, that makes the dramatic irony of this plotting possible:

She limps as she walks, and slightly stoops, taken from her former height. A scar extends from her chin above her mouth, completely changing the character of the lower part of her face; some of her teeth are missing, so that she speaks with a lisp, and the sober bands of her gray hair – it is nearly silver – are confined under a large and close cap . . . But she was good-looking still, in spite of it all, gentle and interesting; and people wondered to see that gray hair in one yet young. (Wood 1984: 388)

Here disability, difference, "unrecognizability," and "sensation" all cohere into a single textual dynamic that is the defining element in the production of sensation, and in its (highly successful) attempt to engage a large, diverse audience of readers.

Other examples abound in the sensation genre, most strikingly in the works of Wilkie Collins, architect of the genre. Not only *The Woman in White*, but virtually all of Collins's novels, engage disability in direct terms. In his other most famous sensation novel, *The Moonstone* (1868), it is a central, if subtle, thematic thread. Works by others considered key novelists in the genre, such as Wood (*East Lynne*, *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* [1863], *Oswald Cray* [1864]) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon (*Aurora Floyd* [1862], *The Trail of the Serpent* [1860], *One Thing Needful* [1885], *The Lady's Mile* [1866], *Thou Art the Man* [1894]), also feature disability in many characters and plots. Further, as critics have noted, sensational elements recur among many novels in the mid- to late century that are not considered sensation novels per se. Physical and/or mental disability is central to the plots of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847); Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865); Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878) and *Desperate Remedies* (1871); Elizabeth Gaskell's short story "The Well of Pen-Morfa" (1852) and novels *Mary Barton* (1848), *Ruth* (1853), and *North and South* (1855); and to many of the sensation-tinged "domestic" novels of "Christian Lady Novelists" Dinah Mulock Craik and Charlotte Yonge (for example, *John Halifax, Gentleman* [1856]; *Olive* [1850]; *The Daisy Chain* [1856]; *The Pillars of the House* [1873]; and *The Clever Woman of the Family* [1865]). Disability and the rhetoric of representing it drives, to varying degrees, all of these fictions.

Significantly, though the coherence is clear, the alignment of sensation and disability is not by any means consistent. Some works feature a single disabling moment, while others build a distinctive disabled perspective that emerges through an entire novel; and at times, characters with disabilities are simply part of the realistic "wall-paper" or "presence of the present" of the novel.<sup>3</sup> No generalization about disability and sensation fiction accommodates the range and variety of examples of this relationship. While disability is *always* there, it is not written as a specific formula through which the plot is sensationalized and performed as such. Rather, disability presents a

foundation into which a narrative can choose to link in order to become “sensationalized.” Disability, in its first moment of articulation in the text, is often used as a marker that signifies both bodily difference and an engagement with that difference.

Despite all of these examples and their clear significance, the intersection of sensation and disability is surprisingly undertheorized in critical receptions. While late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century criticism of sensation fiction has generally considered the body, but not so much disability, contemporary critics and those in the first half of the twentieth century both attended to and theorized disability in sensation fiction, treating it as part and parcel of the genre. Notably, John Ruskin included sensation novels in the category of “literature of the Prison-house” or “Fiction mécréoyante” (1908: 276–9). Ruskin’s “Fiction Fair and Foul” (1880) rails against fiction full of illness and violent death, and reads physically diseased, “deformed,” and ignobly dead bodies as a symptom of diseased and deformed genres, produced by morally and physically ill writers to cater to the tastes of morally and physically diseased urban readers deprived of the healthy stimulation of natural beauty and thus addicted to “low” literature.

Ruskin identifies the origin of disability in sensation fiction as “the grotesque and distorting power” of brain disease and other types of “personal weakness” experienced by the authors of “foul” fiction (1908: 278–9):

[I]n Dickens it . . . gives Quilp, Krook, Smike, Smallweed, Miss Mowcher, and the dwarfs and wax-work of Nell’s caravan; and runs entirely wild in *Barnaby Rudge*, where, with a *corps de drame* composed of one idiot, two madmen, a gentleman-fool who is also a villain, a shop-boy fool who is also a blackguard, a hangman, a shrivelled virago, and a doll in ribands. . . . It is this mutilation, observe, which is the very sign-manual of the plague[.] (1908: 279)

This reliance on the author’s illness, trauma, or eccentricity as the most plausible reason for disabled characters dominates twentieth-century critical perspectives as well.<sup>4</sup> For example, Wilkie Collins not only experienced chronic pain from eye, limb, and digestive ailments, but also was configured differently than either his century or ours believed a “normal” man should look. Sue Lonoff, whose readings of Collins’s disabled characters are exceptionally astute, crafts a persuasive biographical argument for them, asserting that his

interest in such topics is certainly rooted in his personal history. He himself was oddly proportioned. . . . Short, unathletic, and inclined to be plump, he became, as the years passed, a semi-invalid, dependent on laudanum but never visibly out of control of his habit. . . . His family was preoccupied with matters of health and, in a period when physical illnesses tended to be common and recurrent, more liable to infirmities than most[.] (1982: 158–9)

Catherine Peters, similarly, suggests that Collins’s “fascination with physical disabilities and their effect on the psyche” was sparked “by his own physique” (1991: 142).



Both Lonoff (1982) and Peters (1991) echo, more subtly, the assertion of Robert Ashley that Collins “had the chronic invalid’s fascination for mental and physical deformities” (1952: 37).

While some evolution from Ruskinian or biographical interpretations of disability in sensation fiction would be both expected and desirable, critical focus on disability and sensation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been limited, notwithstanding Victorianist criticism’s very productive attention to the role of embodiment (the reader’s body, the characters’ bodies and minds; the social body, etc.) in sensation fiction.<sup>5</sup> Studies of Collins cannot avoid addressing his more memorable disabled figures, but most sensation scholarship does not sustain a focus on disability as a key cultural mode of seeing, representing, classifying, and dis/empowering bodies. Lonoff (1982) and Winifred Hughes (1980), for example, both include productive discussions of *The Law and the Lady*’s Miserrimus Dexter, a congenital double amputee, in their works on Collins, but neither focuses on disability as a social construction, embodied perspective, or minority group identity. Teresa Mangum’s more recent (1998) essay on the novel, similarly, while it historicizes Dexter in terms of famous exhibited “freaks” of Collins’s time, ultimately reads him as a metaphor for the woman detective, protagonist Valeria Macallan.

Perhaps because few Victorianist critics have read disability in the critically nuanced approaches devoted to other embodied social identities such as race/ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation, current surveys of the state of “sensation studies” have not registered a focus on disability and sensation as either a recent or future trend.<sup>6</sup> And yet an increasing number of new essays and book chapters make disability and sensation fiction their major or minor focus.

Martha Stoddard Holmes argues (in *Fictions of Affliction* [2004] and in later essays) that Collins and other novelists often significantly displace sensation away from disabled characters, with the result of normalizing disability and counteracting any expectation that its inclusion is merely a device to heighten pathos or suspense. Other relevant analyses of disability in novels with sensational elements include essays on *Jane Eyre*: historicizing and investigating the characterization of “madwoman” Bertha Mason (Donaldson 2002), positing *Jane Eyre* as autistic (Rodas 2008), and exploring the construction of Rochester’s blindness (Bolt 2008). The domestic fiction of Charlotte Yonge, which consistently uses both sensational elements and disability, provides other important exemplars that have been analyzed by Wagner (2008) and Chen (2008). A special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* (2008) that focused on disability and the body in nineteenth-century Britain includes some of the above-mentioned essays.

Two recent studies offer an even more focused analysis of sensation and disability. In his book-length study of mental disability, *Idiocy: A Cultural History*, Patrick McDonagh’s chapter, “Sensational Idiocy,” relates the sensation genre to the representation of mental “defectives.” According to McDonagh, sensation fiction’s “new ways of constructing the reader as subject to ‘sensation’ take shape by juxtaposition to the concept of the uncertainly sensate ‘idiot’” (2009: 22). McDonagh discusses Collins’s

*No Name* (1862) and *The Law and the Lady*, Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*, and Oliphant's *Salem Chapel* (1863). Mark Mossman's essay "Representations of the Abnormal Body in *The Moonstone*" (2009) develops a contrasting argument, reading disability as a cultural perspective that is given authenticity in the narrative, in addition to being the rhetorical feature through which the elaborate plotting of the novel takes place. While it is not focused on sensation novels per se, David Punter's essay on disability and Gothic (which discusses, among other texts, *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Jekyll and Hyde* [1886]) argues that "the history of . . . dealings with the disabled body runs through the history of the Gothic" (2000: 40).

As this recent scholarship illustrates, while disability is a pervasive element in sensation fiction, its use and implications as a signifier vary widely and have a depth and richness that are just beginning to be explored by disability studies scholars. Some key emphases in such analyses include attention to the variety of modes in which sensation fiction makes use of disability, for what purposes, and in what key historical-cultural contexts.

For example, the moment in which Isabel Vane realizes that her son has expired, never realizing that his mother watched at his deathbed, generates a flood of feeling. That feeling is accentuated by the reader's knowledge that Isabel Vane is and is *not* Isabel Vane. On the exterior, her body has shifted out of normalcy and into the realm of unrecognizability and disfigurement – and it is this shift that is the real basis of the "sensation" of the moment. It is not her own internalized feelings as much as it is the play that is occurring between the inside and outside of Isabel herself (the seemingly stable binary of her "self" and her "body"). This play, and its deep problematics, are what Wood exploits and what her Victorian readership understands and sees. More than her flight from the sacred Victorian home, the dynamics that constitute Isabel Vane's shifting, unstable body itself here become "sensationalized," made so strange and shocking that her transformed body is unrecognizable by her own family.

More typically for a sensation novel, the protagonist's beating and disfiguring of Mannion in Collins's *Basil* (1852) uses emotional extremity within a visually sublime landscape to produce a shock in readers. In some cases, disability can also function as a symbol or metaphor, carrying on the function that Christine Gledhill (1994) and Peter Brooks (1976) argue it has in sensation's predecessors, the melodramas of the early nineteenth century. Before restrictions on the spoken word in unlicensed theaters were lifted in 1843, disabled bodies functioned as shorthand for pity, fear, or humor, or to articulate themes of mystery, dispossession, and the work of divine Providence.

In other instances, disability functions as "narrative prosthesis," conforming to the patterns Mitchell and Snyder describe in their theory of disability in literary works, in which disabled characters often function "as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight" (2000: 39). Indeed, disfigurement in particular – or a disabling incident – works a "material metaphor," to use Mitchell and Snyder's useful term, functioning as a handy sign of moral damage (2000: 63).

Thus the criticisms of Collins's contemporaries (and others in the mid-twentieth century) can be read with some appreciation of the charge that he and other sensation novels are bringing in disability with the sole purpose of provoking feeling, but only if we ignore the contexts that make such a response possible. Even singular moments are generally underpinned in sensation fiction by historically dynamic concerns. For example, the shocking revelation in *The Moonstone* that disabled servant and ex-convict Rosanna Spearman has committed suicide because of her unrequited love for Franklin Blake is explicated at passionate length by the letter she leaves behind. Regardless of how Blake dismisses her feelings as a curiosity, the novel makes us aware of Franklin's classist and ablist cruelty towards Rosanna; Collins even revised the novel to emphasize the young man's lack of consideration.

Similarly, while Madonna Blyth's fall from a circus horse and subsequent hearing loss in Collins's *Hide and Seek* (1854) is sensational in the moment, though told retrospectively, most of the novel is concerned with the experience of suddenly becoming hearing-impaired and the longer-term deaf social experience, not the disabling moment. For example, while, in stage melodramas, the moment at which someone is revealed as disabled offers no particular aftermath or explication – it serves as a statement in itself – Collins devotes many pages to the unfolding of Madonna's diagnosis and early treatments, drawing on the contemporary deaf autobiography of John Kitto to make his details authentic.

In the prefaces to his novels, Collins more than once announces his interest in disability not simply as a device to generate audience response or even as an aesthetic theme, but rather as an issue of representation and realism – he will “exhibit” it “as it really is” (Collins 1900: 5). Many of his contemporaries, similarly, tended not simply to deposit a disabled character in the plot to create a sensational charge, but, rather, to investigate disabled subjectivity.

This is especially notable in the area of sexual desire. As Pamela Gilbert has argued, “[b]odies are what sensation has in common with the love story” (1997: 108), and in many sensation novels these bodies are disabled. All of Collins's disabled characters, for example, are drawn to some extent as figures who are desiring subjects and/or objects of others' desire. This in itself is clearly productive of sensation, but the sensation that it produces is far from simple. Wood's characterization of Isabel Vane is compelling in part because she draws her as both disabled and good-looking; Madonna Blyth's narrative is shaped by her attraction for a young man who turns out to be her half-brother; Miserrimus Dexter's involvement in the mystery plot of *The Law and the Lady* is shaped in the past by his love for a friend's wife and, in the present, by his sexual advances towards the married protagonist (who turns out to be pregnant, a detail that caused *The Graphic* magazine to ask Collins to expurgate parts of the serialized novel). These overwrought moments invite us to consider how often sensation is based on all kinds of queerness and irregularity – of bodies, practices, and desires, a theme that Collins reiterates but does not monopolize.<sup>7</sup>

While taxonomies of disability representations in sensation fiction are a useful launchpad for critical commentary, they never encompass the complexity and

irregularity of the representations themselves. Wilkie Collins offers numerous examples, such as *Poor Miss Finch* (1872), which combines the representation of a blind woman's daily functioning not only with a plot involving cataract surgery and regained sight, but also with the theme of racial prejudice, since the man she loves has been turned blue from epilepsy medications. If there are "codes" for representing disability in sensation fiction, derived from multiple antecedents including not simply melodrama and Gothic, but also religious and charitable discourse, Collins and other sensation writers are consummate code-scramblers.

### New Approaches to Theorizing Sensation and Disability

These individual examples suggest some of the larger questions we might investigate about the representation of disability in sensation fiction. In keeping with the disability studies credo to historicize that which has all too often been treated as ahistorical and essential, one central issue is how to most productively contextualize the ways in which sensation fiction represents the forms of human diversity we would now classify "disabilities."

Given sensation's heritage and participation in a cluster of affect-based genres (stage melodrama, notably, but also the Gothic and the sentimental novel), one important area of historicization is simply to study the genre itself as a "feeling" genre and the modes and ramifications of its engagement of disability. In other words, if everything about sensation fiction is designed to generate feeling – both sensation and, at times, emotion – where in this dynamic are disabled characters located, what emotional charge do they carry, and what are the results? This is important both as part of a sustained critical analysis of an under-explored characteristic of much sensation fiction (and other nineteenth-century literature) but also because, like any other embodied social identity, the meaning of disability as a cultural compact, and the resulting experience of disability (one that is closer to universal than probably any other form of "difference"), is significantly inflected by the fictional narratives of past and present. In other words, how sensation novels tell us to feel about disabled characters shapes how we feel about disability.

For example, while the most familiar Victorian disabled character, Dickens's Tiny Tim, is consistently framed in a sentimentalizing discourse of the Christmas story, which directs us to engage in an enjoyable pity for him that is visited on other disabled children, the reappearance in Collins's *Basil* of the disfigured Mannion not only produces a "material metaphor" for his immoral acts, but also embodies Basil's own horror at becoming someone who can beat "not life only, but the semblance of humanity as well" out of another being (1980: 164). Here, Basil behaves in ways replicated by Edward Hyde, that mysteriously "deformed" character of the later nineteenth century. Mannion's appearance is saturated with both forms of horror, and through this particular plotting of disability within a sensation narrative, the message of disability *as* horror (and as sign of moral badness, violence, retribution, and pain) is

carried forward, both in the culture of fiction and potentially beyond it. In the above cases, disability serves genre – and genre, correspondingly, dictates the meaning of disability.

In other sensation fictions, seeing disability is also a key node in the narrative's circuit of sensations, but the affect such a moment generates is quite different.<sup>8</sup> In *The Law and the Lady*, persistent images of Miserrimus Dexter focus both on his androgynous beauty – the broad chest of a man, the long flowing hair of a woman – and on the robe that covers the end of his body, where there are no legs. The narrator (and, accordingly, the reader) focuses on Dexter with curiosity and desire, not horror; as she points out, given

the bright intelligent face and the large clear blue eyes, the lustrous waving hair of a light chestnut color, the long delicate white hands, and the magnificent throat and chest . . . a young girl, ignorant of what the Oriental robe hid from view, would have said to herself, the instant she looked at him, "Here is the hero of my dreams!" (Collins 1992: 213–14)

While the novel ultimately produces a final spectacle of Dexter rejected by Valeria and carried away hidden in the arms of a servant, the earlier, eroticized view lingers and informs the later one, suggesting something fundamentally important about disability's relational quality and its inflection by ideas about "appropriate" sexualities.

Still other narratives defuse any sense that the sight of disability is a plot starter, plot ender, or source of sensation. The incident that burns Ermine Williams in Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* takes place before the main action begins, and is only recounted later in the plot. While there are disablements and deaths that produce excitement in the main action of the story, including both the death of a child and an improbable fatality involving a croquet wicket, the main characters' disabilities are developed in a much more gradual and integral way. In keeping with her refusal of disability as the currency of sensation, Yonge generally envisions permanent disabilities, and narrates them as part of the daily domestic life that is her fictional emphasis.

Other modes of historicization might direct us to find historical referents for the conditions associated with the characters, to unfold the ways in which their characterization in a sensation novel is not only shaped in relation to genre and its demands for emotional charge, but also in relation to historically dynamic concepts of the body and disability. For example, Collins's deployment of deafness in *Hide and Seek* is overtly related both to melodramatic conventions (which he finds limiting) and contemporary memoir (which he uses as a model).

Historicization of this type, however, may not always be completely useful as an approach to disability in sensation fiction. To return to *The Woman in White*, Anne's sensational situation – and Laura's – is described by other characters using key terms for contemporary psychology. Anne is described in one instance as having defects of intellect, in another as having a severe mental affliction, disturbance, or malady; she

is variously termed an idiot or as being insane or delusional. The work of Marchbanks (2006) and McDonagh (2009) illustrates that we can historicize representations of cognitive disability in nineteenth-century fiction as readily as madness has been historicized by the scholarship of earlier scholars. At the same time, however, neither the classification or “diagnosis” of cognitive disability or of madness seems fully to fit Anne. Her behavior suggests monomania: the obsession with whiteness that becomes the fetish for Mrs. Fairlie, the “good mother” who takes the place of her own emotionally detached mother; on the other hand, Walter suspects monomania in himself at one point. Anne is clearly beset with “nerves,” but, as Miller argues, nervous conditions mark nearly every character in this novel: “All sooner or later inhabit the ‘sensationalized body’ where the blood curdles, the heart beats violently, the breath comes short and thick, the flesh creeps, the cheeks lose their color” (1986: 109). Anne is hardly an “idiot,” given that she is verbal and literate. Her tendency towards an apocalyptic style seems to spread to Marian Halcombe’s narrative later in the novel. Indeed, what is most striking about her is the narrative’s utter failure – despite or because of the testimony of multiple narrators – to establish what the nature of Anne’s disability may be, or even to isolate it in Anne herself as opposed to the general state of the novel and its characters.

The vagueness and ambiguity of Anne Catherick’s mental and emotional state is arguably what permits it to produce the sensational charge of the uncanny. Not clearly “other,” Anne’s condition is exciting for readers as they discover – alongside Walter Hartright – its proximity to the condition of his love object, heiress Laura Fairlie. One of the novel’s significant messages is that women are interchangeable, that they exist on a continuum where idealized feminine behavior, done too well, becomes detachment from reality, monomania, and victimhood. More provocatively, the fact that Walter sees Anne Catherick first and Laura Fairlie second suggests that his growing awareness of Anne as asylum escapee, rather than interfering with his desire for Laura Fairlie, may actually direct it. At the very least, the *frisson* Walter and Marian experience when they realize, guided by Mrs. Fairlie’s letter, that there really is an odd resemblance between Anne and Laura, does nothing to deter Walter’s desire for the “normal” woman in this pair. Further, Collins carries the discomfort associated with this realization throughout two sections of the novel before finally burying and memorializing Anne – but leaving her ambiguous whiteness at large in the plot.

To take such analysis a step further, viewed through contemporary lenses for discussing mental and emotional disturbance, Anne “reads” as suffering from post-traumatic stress brought on by wrongful abduction and incarceration – and perhaps, earlier than that, from whatever form of abuse at the hands of her mother led her to fixate on Mrs. Fairlie. Broaching historicism and entering the realm of present-mindedness may be the only way either to make sense of her or to mine sensation fiction’s most interesting insights that are applicable to the present day.<sup>9</sup>

One of the most sustained explorations of disability’s relation to the genre of sensation fiction is Mark Mossman’s essay on *the Moonstone*, which argues that

[t]hrough contemporary disability studies it is possible to read the emergence of the detective and sensation genres or forms as the articulation of a larger cultural dynamic, so that these forms function as instruments of normative culture, specifically as subversive tools that solidify a rigid dichotomy of the normal and the abnormal in the nineteenth century . . . representations of abnormalcy in *The Moonstone* become the location of a disabled perspective on the workings of Victorian cultural practices. (2009: 483)

Mossman theorizes that in these sensationalized moments, which so often appear in both canonic fiction marked by sensational elements and in the actual “sensation novels,” there is articulated a link between marginalized subjectivity and the emergence of an organized modernity – a modernity organized and defined by the performance of bodily norms, the disciplining and norming of bodies that are different. What the sensational does is to disrupt these formal terms; its cultural work is built on the engagement with these norms and then the disruption rather than the perpetuation of them.

What the genre yields, then, in the form of such shocks, is (at least) twofold: disability – and the sensational provocations associated with it – can be seen as the emergence of modernity within the Victorian novel. At the same time, especially in texts by Collins and others who unfold the subjectivity of their disabled characters, disabled subjectivity is both revealed and privileged not simply for being marginalized, but as a harbinger of a modern subjectivity that the text cannot often accommodate, but at the same time, cannot forget.

## Conclusion

The use of disability in sensation fiction both provides a focal point for the genre’s emphasis on embodiment and signals writers’ radical revisioning of an emerging Victorian society centered on the identification of bodily norms and the simultaneous location of populations within those normative categories (as well as, of course, outside of them). How disability is used in the key, sensational moments that define the genre, however, can counteract this impulse towards normalization, even beginning to articulate, a “disabled perspective of culture” (Mitchell and Snyder 1997: 232). Even if narrative resolutions seem to eradicate disability and other sensations, the enticing irregularity associated with bodily difference persists, if under erasure, as a distinctive feature of many sensation novels.

In these terms, the genre itself is a vehicle – co-opted or not – for larger political statements, using the entertainment of popular forms like melodrama and the Gothic to articulate serious consideration of the circumstances of bodies that are different, and often narrating those considerations themselves through a perspective or narrative position that is, again, different.

The body, gender, sexuality, race, and class have all offered productive frameworks for investigating the power and pleasure of sensation fiction. New work in disability

studies reminds us that the genre's meaningful effects have in no way been exhausted by critical study.

#### NOTES

- 1 For example, his first encounter with Marian Halcombe, another scene whose unforgettable impact on Walter, and thus on the reader, is grounded in uncanny embodiment. See Collins (2003), but also LaCom (2008) for a disability studies reading of this famous scene.
- 2 *Pace* John Pikoulis (1976), who argues this status for Margaret Hale's bodily protection of John Thornton in *North and South*.
- 3 The term "the presence of the present" is drawn from Richard Altick's study of the same name. See Altick (1991).
- 4 Curiously, Ellen (Mrs. Henry) Wood's disabilities – she had scoliosis or spondylitis – have not dominated critical perspectives on her characterization of Isabel Vane.
- 5 See, for example, Miller (1986); Taylor (1988); Cvetkovich (1992); and Gilbert (1997).
- 6 See, for example, Knight (2007) and Maunder (2005), neither of whom discusses disability at all.
- 7 See, for example, Lucas Malet's *The History of Sir Richard Calmady* and Rachel O'Connell's essay on it (O'Connell 2008).
- 8 See Garland-Thomson (2009) for useful taxonomies of looking.
- 9 The characterization of Miserrimus Dexter in *The Law and the Lady* may be a parallel case. See Holmes, "Queering the Marriage Plot" (2008).

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# The Law and Sensation

*Jane Jordan*

The archetypal sensation plot, with its “fantas[y] of protest and escape” from an unhappy marriage (Showalter 1977: 159) was directly related to the sexual inequalities within nineteenth-century divorce law: “The moment of the sensation novel was also one of intense public discussion about women and the law, about the state of modern marriage, and about women’s role in the family” (Pykett 1992: 20). To understand the emergence of the sensation novel in the early 1860s, it is necessary to consider the context of the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, “the first major piece of British legislation to focus attention on the anomalous position of married women under the law” (Poovey 1989: 51). The reform of English divorce law was vigorously debated throughout the 1850s, and that debate centered around the recommendations of the 1853 three-volume report of the Royal Commission on Divorce, Lord Cranworth’s Divorce Bill of 1854, reintroduced in 1856, the Select Committee of the House of Lords, also in 1856, and two Married Women’s Property Bills of 1857. Yet the legislation passed in August 1857 made only minor concessions to those pressure groups seeking greater protection for wronged wives. Its failure to enact significant reform provided the agenda for fiction published in the following decade. As Lyn Pykett puts it, the sensation novel was “produced by, and productive of, controversy” (1992: 7).

Since Elaine Showalter’s rediscovery of the female sensation novel, analyses of the legal position of married women by feminist historians have informed the study of popular fiction of the period. Lee Holcombe’s *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women’s Property Law in Nineteenth Century England* (1983), Mary Shanley’s *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England* (1989), Mary Poovey’s inclusion of Caroline Norton’s legal campaign in her 1989 study *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian Britain*, and Maeve Doggett’s *Marriage, Wife-Beating and the Law in Victorian England* (1992) all serve to contextualize the fictional treatment of matrimonial law and the narrative strategies adopted by those who sought to

articulate women's grievances publicly. Undoubtedly, the parliamentary debates about divorce and married women's property "established a context in which women's concerns about their disadvantaged position in marriage could be narrated" (Humpherys 1999: 43), but Poovey's analysis of Caroline Norton's campaign to reform matrimonial legislation – a campaign with its basis in personal experience – demonstrates how difficult it was to argue for changes to the law that contested the ideology of coverture. Under coverture, a wife's identity was subsumed in her husband's – a legal non-existence that had an economic basis: in return for his wife's money and property, a husband became her legal protector and legal representative, and was responsible for her debts. Norton's strategy in her 1854 pamphlet *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century* was not to demand greater legal powers for wronged wives ("Masculine superiority is incontestable"), but to beg Parliament to grant them greater protection: "Women have one *right* (perhaps only that one) – to the protection of man" (qtd. in Poovey 1989: 69)

While, as Shanley recognizes, feminists changed the whole rationale for legal reform, the original remit of the Royal Commission appointed in 1850 was purely bureaucratic, and "initially manifested a striking indifference to women's needs and concerns" (Shanley 1989: 35), its purpose being to recommend a means by which the authority to hear divorce cases could be transferred from a number of ecclesiastical courts to one centralized civil court. The pre-1857 procedure was certainly in need of shaking up: antiquated and cumbersome, the three-stage process of divorce began with a hearing in a church court, followed by an action at law, culminating in a private Act of Parliament which officially dissolved the marriage and enabled either party to remarry if they so wished. The action at law was crucial here. Having established the facts of the wife's "criminal conversation" with her lover, it enabled the aggrieved husband to claim financial compensation from his wife's seducer, this part of the proceedings being of course limited to *husbands* petitioning for divorce. The 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act in effect gave us the modern divorce: a single procedure heard in a court of law.

With regard to the grounds upon which wives could petition for divorce, the Act passed in 1857 in fact served to consolidate the husband's position and, if anything, upheld the sexual double standard: a husband could still divorce an adulterous wife (lest she make him responsible for another man's bastard children), whereas a husband's adultery was regarded as insignificant and could only be grounds for the dissolution of a marriage if "aggravated" by one of the following circumstances: bigamy, incest, or (physical) cruelty. Only four women had successfully sued for divorce prior to 1857 (two for bigamy and two for incestuous adultery). Yet, presented with a catalog of other possible "aggravating" causes to consider (rape, sodomy, desertion, transportation and penal servitude), Parliament chose to stick with the pre-1857 arrangements, only conceding a new clause relating to cruelty. The only women assisted by the Act were those wives deserted by their husbands, who could now apply to a local magistrate for an order giving them control over their earnings and property. Why, then, given the opportunity to undertake a significant reappraisal of divorce

law, did Parliament determine to leave the position of unhappily married women virtually unchanged?

It was Parliament's intention that women should be denied equal access to divorce. Campaigners like Norton and the feminist Barbara Leigh Smith were pressing for radical reform of married women's rights to their property and earnings, and, in the case of wronged wives, legal protection from abusive husbands, but were confronted by the attitudes of England's lawmakers – at best conservative and at worst reactionary. As Shanley observes, Parliament's unwillingness to widen women's access to divorce was "a reflection of their ardent desire to change the traditional law of marriage, and the traditional status of married women, as little as possible" (Shanley 1989: 44). During debates in the House of Lords, for example, it was proposed that wives found guilty of adultery should be prohibited from remarriage, and even that a woman's adultery should become a criminal offense (Stone 1990: 380). Specifically with regard to the question of whether wives should be granted equal access to divorce (i.e. on the grounds of a husband's simple adultery), the Lords' opinion was unequivocal: 71 to 20 against (Stone 1990: 379). Not until 1923 was the law made equal in this respect.

Given Parliament's failure to provide greater protection to wronged wives, it is unsurprising that the literature of the period took up the question, or that a new genre of sensational literature emerged. Since divorce was available to so few married women, and was also seen as such a morally reprehensible action for a wife to take, however wronged, the only course open to those women sufficiently goaded, or sufficiently bold, were the sensational crimes of adultery, bigamy, or even murder. While Victorian feminists kept up the pressure for reform of the property laws (that is, for all married women, not just abused or deserted wives), and indeed won significant amendments to the law, in 1870 and 1882,<sup>1</sup> agitation to revise divorce law was dropped as a cause that couldn't be won. Given the sensitivity of such issues as women's sexuality and their rights to remarriage, campaigners channeled their energies into less contentious causes, such as the demand for women's access to higher education (Shanley 1989: 49). It is popular literature that gives strongest expression to women's frustrations with the injustices of divorce law and the rigidity of England's lawmakers. This is interestingly evident in three key sensation novels which engage with different aspects of matrimonial law and its effect on women: Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), and Ouida's *Moths* (1880).

The sensation novel has, until recently, been criticized on the grounds that it merely exploited public familiarity with, and interest in, the scandalous divorce cases that were reported in the press following the 1857 Act. The average number of divorces per annum rose from 3.3 to 150 (Wolfram 1985: 158), and the more celebrated cases were widely reported. Many sensational plots drew on actual trials, involving divorce, bigamy, or murder. While the public appetite for domestic scandal was undeniable, recent scholarship has demonstrated that sensation fiction more seriously "participated in, shaped, and was shaped by the political-legal debates of the era" (Tromp 2000:

71). Wilkie Collins's 1870 novel, *Man and Wife*, which exposes the inconsistencies between English and Scottish matrimonial law, is both a sensation novel and a "novel-with-a-purpose" (Pykett 2005: 134).<sup>2</sup> Collins's preface assures the reader that his exposure of "the present scandalous condition of the Marriage Laws" is "founded on facts" (Collins 1990: xiii), and women sensationalists were given praise for their understanding of legal processes. The *Saturday Review*, for example, marveled that Ellen Wood had "an accuracy and method of legal knowledge about her which would do credit to many famous male novelists" (review of *East Lynne*, 1861: 187). With his legal training, Collins, in particular, was well placed to offer an astute analysis of English matrimonial law. It is, though, his first sensation novel, *The Woman in White* (1860), which arguably offers Collins's most sophisticated critique of the legal status of married women. In doing so, it serves to dramatize Barbara Leigh Smith's critique of coverture, "A Brief Summary, in Plain Language, of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women" (1854), in particular Leigh Smith's exposure of the anomaly in the way in which the law (and wider society) regarded single and married women: "A woman of twenty-one becomes an independent human creature, capable of holding and administering property to any amount," but the moment she marries, so Leigh Smith argued, "she is again considered as an infant . . . she loses her separate existence and is merged in that of her husband" (Smith 1987: 31). Collins first alerts us to Laura Glyde's vulnerability by comparing her legal and social identity to that of her half-sister, Marian Halcombe, a spinster. Laura's remark to Marian that she is "so much better off as a single woman" (Collins 1986: 235) can be taken literally. Glyde and Fosco's plot to get their hands on Laura's assets, some of which have been tied up in trusts, by faking her death, stealing her identity, and confining her in an asylum, gives very effective expression to the legal non-identity of wives under English law. Crucially, it is the unmarried Marian's access to her personal savings of £700 that enables her to bribe the asylum nurse and rescue her sister. As is typical of the genre, characters in *The Woman in White* show a heightened awareness of matrimonial law: hence Marian's awareness of the significance of Laura's bruised arm if she is later called to testify to Sir Percival's cruelty;<sup>3</sup> hence Laura's principled refusal to sign a legal document at her husband's behest before she understands what she is signing; and hence Fosco's scruples about allowing his own wife to act as co-witness to Laura's signature, since, as he observes, "it is certainly desirable that those witnesses should represent two opinions which are perfectly independent the one of the other. This cannot be if my wife signs as well as myself, because we have but one opinion between us, and that opinion is mine" (Collins 1986: 265).

Anne Humpherys, in her examination of the treatment of divorce in fifteen novels published between 1837 and 1869, argues that the very topic of divorce disrupts and destabilizes the conventional marriage plot of domestic fiction and serves to render the novel "multi-voiced", and able to accommodate "all varieties of argument" – a characteristic more commonly associated with the modernist novel (Humpherys 1999: 42, 50). This is an important point, since it requires us to adjust the focus given to the sensation novel by second-wave feminist critics who prioritized its role as a vehicle

for women's frustration and anger at their proscribed position. Pykett concurs, pointing out that the none of the novelists she studies offers "a single ideological perspective nor, indeed, a coherent and unified range of perspectives, whether radical or conservative," a textual instability which reflects "the ideological battles, contradictions and confusions of the mid-Victorian period" (Pykett 1995: 81). To take one example: equal access to divorce was by no means always seen as the answer to marital ills. The narrative incoherence identified by Humpherys and Pykett can be seen to reflect contemporary nervousness about the secularization of divorce and the implications of this in terms of the status of marriage itself, and woman's role within marriage.<sup>4</sup> There was also uncertainty about the legitimization of second marriages, since the Church regarded the remarriage of divorcees as legalized adultery. It is important to remember that the government allegedly received 90,000 petitions *against* divorce and that 16,000 married women petitioned the queen, fearing that unscrupulous husbands would take advantage of any easing of the law (Stone 1990: 372–3).

One manifestation of public nervousness about the legality of the remarriage of divorced couples was the number of sensation novels that might more properly be termed "bigamy novels." As early as 1863, H. L. Mansel identified "an entire subclass" of sensation fiction, noting that a third of the two dozen sensation novels he had reviewed that year concerned the crime of bigamy (Mansel 1863: 720), a fact wryly alluded to in Ouida's first novel, *Held in Bondage*, published that year. As Deborah Wynne notes, the serialization of this novel in the *New Monthly Magazine* (under its original title of *Granville de Vigne; A Tale of the Day*), overlapped with that of *East Lynne* by nine months, whilst the subject of polygamy was the focus of an article on the Mormons published in the March 1861 issue (Wynne 2001). In a dramatic denouement, Ouida's female bigamist, Lucy – no doubt an allusion to Braddon's Lady Audley – is unmasked by her first husband. But in doing so he doubts that she knowingly committed a crime: "She thought I was drowned, or else she would have been too wide awake to go in for bigamy. Clever women don't do that foolery out of novels!" (Ouida 1863: 472). Maybe so, but outside novels bigamy was a realistic alternative to divorce at a time when legal action was prohibitive, expensive, and resulted in social ostracism for women. More significantly, the topic of bigamy enabled novelists to confront the wider issue of the legitimacy of second marriages.

*East Lynne* is not, technically, a bigamy novel, but the remarriage after divorce of Archibald Carlyle is thrown into doubt. For all Carlyle's moral unease about the legal (that is, secular) dissolution of his marriage and his decision not to remarry until his adulterous ex-wife is dead, his worst nightmare comes true: the first Mrs. Carlyle returns and claims that they will be reunited in heaven ("My sin will be remembered no more there, and we shall be together with our children for ever and ever" [Wood 2005: 617]). Under the eyes of the law Carlyle only has one wife, his second. Nonetheless, he is made to feel that he is a bigamist: "a man of two wives" (Wood 2005: 614).

It has long been recognized that, in punishing unwomanly behavior, the sensation novel ultimately appeared to strengthen marriage and to tutor women readers to

accept the sexual double standard. Furthermore, as Hughes observes, “The narrator’s sympathy . . . is contingent upon the heroine’s remorse, upon the heroine’s total acceptance of the law that she has transgressed” (Hughes 1980: 112). Andrew Maunder has recently updated this assessment of Wood’s novel via D. A. Miller’s Foucauldian reading of the role of popular literature “in a general economy of policing,” in which the reader’s participation in judging social transgression is key (Maunder 2004: 62). This may be so, but the reader has also been intrigued and excited by the subversive action of the novel. Running counter to the moral chastisement of Isabel is the subversive nature of her return to the home of her ex-husband and his second wife. For Maunder, *East Lynne* is “a text that concerns itself with policing and othering of degenerate women” (Maunder 2004: 69). While this is undeniable, I would argue that the novel in fact permits further degeneracy by endangering Isabel’s young children, who are placed at the risk of contamination through instruction from, and consequent intimate physical contact with, their degenerate mother.

Wood’s heroine specifically transgresses one key aspect of divorce law when she returns in disguise to her former marital home. Her residence at East Lynne as a governess employed by the second Mrs. Carlyle, while morally abhorrent, is not in itself a criminal act; the access Isabel thereby gains to her own children most certainly is. As a woman divorced on the grounds of her proven adultery, Isabel, had she lived (she is of course believed to have perished in a train crash), would have been denied access to her children, however young.<sup>5</sup> Custody of the children went, as a matter of course, to the wronged husband. Yet we are told that Isabel “could not keep away from [her] unhappy children” (Wood 2005: 588):

[N]ot the least that she had to endure now, was the thought that she had abandoned them to be trained by strangers. Would they be trained to goodness, to morality, to religion? . . . Of late, the longing had become intense . . . Oh! That she could see her children but for a day, an hour! That she might press one kiss upon their lips! Could she live without it? (Wood 2005: 389–90)

Undercutting Miller’s point about the part played by such literature in the “disciplining process” of women readers (Maunder 2004: 588), Wood’s narrator expresses unequivocal sympathy for Isabel, whom she portrays not as a *déclassée* wife duly chastised by a legal judgment, but simply as a mother *unnaturally* parted from her children, and, further than that, a mother primarily concerned for the moral and spiritual welfare of her young family.

Ouida’s late sensation novel *Moths* (1880) offers an equally ambivalent response to divorce law. Exotically set in the south of France and in Russia, the novel reflects English social issues. Informed in part by John Stuart Mill’s essay “The Subjection of Women” (1869), and also by the feminist Elizabeth Wolstoneholme’s campaign for the recognition of marital rape, the novel offers a sustained critique of matrimonial law and the ideology of coverture. In particular, it deals with the issue of a wife’s inability, under the law, to refuse her husband his conjugal rights. In its portrayal of



a husband's systematic cruelty towards his wife, Ouida drew on the parliamentary debates that preceded the passing of the 1878 Matrimonial Causes Act, which offered a new form of separation together with maintenance to battered wives, but only on the grounds that it was judged necessary to protect such women from *future* occasions of domestic violence. In the novel, Vere Zouroff endures marital rape and threats of brutality, and also insults from her husband's latest courtesan, and is finally struck across the bosom by her husband. Given the legal significance of Zouroff's brutality towards his wife, the reader is led to expect a denouement in which Vere will be rewarded with a divorce on her own terms: " 'You have all your rights now,' he cried brutally, with a rough laugh that covered his shame at his own act. 'You can divorce me, Madame, "*sous le toit conjugal*," and "*violence personnelle*," and all the rest; you have all your rights. The law will be with you' " (Ouida 2005: 474).

Ouida does not, however, conceive of divorce as an adequate solution to Vere's wrongs (Vere herself argues that the status of a divorced woman is little better than that of an adulteress). Consistent with the sensation novel's ambivalent attitude to the possibility of *legal* redress for abused wives, and its seeking alternative forms of escape and/or retribution, the public defense of Vere's honor takes place not in a court of law but through a privately staged combat between her husband and the man who loves her, the opera singer Corrèze. The satisfactory *literary* resolution devised by Ouida is for Corrèze to challenge Zouroff to defend his wife's name (a cartoon has been published in the press falsely accusing Vere of an affair with Corrèze), and when he refuses, to denounce Zouroff as an adulterer and to strike him three times. The point is a significant one: Zouroff's marital infidelity (his sexual promiscuity is undisputed) is precisely a crime unrecognized by English divorce law. A duel follows (ever the gentleman, Corrèze refuses to shoot Zouroff but is himself shot in the throat). In the final chapter of the novel, a single sentence informs us that under Russian divorce law "no wife [is permitted] to plead against her husband," and that Zouroff has won his divorce on the evidence of servants who falsely testify to his wife's adultery (Ouida 2005: 542). That Russian divorce law is scarcely less barbaric than its English equivalent would seem to be Ouida's point here.

In its extended analysis of a degrading marriage, and its drawing on the rhetoric of Mill and Elizabeth Wolstoneholme, *Moths* anticipates the polemical concerns of later New Woman fiction. Whilst it is the case that married women were eventually granted autonomous rights to their earnings and property (1882), which thus undermined the economic basis of the ideology of coverture, the principle that a husband had absolute rights to his wife's body, and also absolute rights of custody of children from that marriage, proved much harder to challenge. A woman's autonomous rights over her own body became the focus of a number of related late Victorian feminist campaigns, such as Frances Power Cobbe's exposure of a widespread culture of wife-beating, and Josephine Butler's leadership of the Ladies' National Association, whose campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts (1870–86) utilized constitutional law to contest the forcible examination of prostitutes. As a consequence of this greater frankness about such issues, the sensation novel, whose emergence was a direct

response to the passing of the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, was superseded in the latter decades of the century by the New Woman novel, a genre which confronted sexuality and the marriage question more openly and with less ambivalence.

#### NOTES

- 1 The 1870 Married Women's Property Act permitted married women to retain inheritances up to £200, and crucially gave them absolute rights over their earnings. The 1882 Act pronounced that henceforth married women would be treated as *femmes soles* with regard to their independent income and property. For the full text of these Acts, see Holcombe 1983: appendices 4 and 5.
- 2 Collins was chiefly concerned with the primitive and informal nature of the marriage ceremony as practiced in Scotland, but it was also the case that under Scottish law a wife could obtain a divorce on the grounds of her husband's simple adultery.
- 3 See Marlene Tromp's original reading of this aspect of the Glyde marriage through which Collins can be seen to revise assumptions that domestic violence was confined to working-class husbands (Tromp 2000: 69–82).
- 4 The secularization of marriage was a relatively new idea and slow to take off. The 1836 Act for Marriages provided for marriage in registry offices, but Wolfram notes that this only accounted for 5 percent of marriages prior to 1857 (Wolfram 1985: 178).
- 5 The Custody of Infants Act (1839) gave the Court of Chancery discretion to award mothers custody of their children under the age of 7, and access to those under the age of 16. But these limited rights would be lost if the mother had been found guilty of adultery in an action at law or in an ecclesiastical court. Not until the Infant Custody Act of 1873 were divorcees whose adultery had been proven permitted to petition the court for custody or access, but this was still a matter for the court's discretion. See Shanley 1989: 136–40.

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## Sensation and Detection

*Heather Milton*

Detective fiction as a recognized genre, or sub-genre, did not exist in the mid-nineteenth century and only later developed more established conventions in Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories in the 1880s and 1890s, yet it is clearly indebted to the sensation novels of the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s. At mid-century, the Victorians would have been familiar with popular representations of crime and criminal behavior from the earlier so-called Newgate novels, but Newgate novels differ from sensation novels in that they do not emphasize surveillance and detection and typically focus on lower-born characters rather than the domestic intrigue of the middle and upper classes. According to Ian Ousby in *Bloodbonds of Heaven*, "In earlier Newgate fiction an interest in crime had led to an almost exclusive concentration on the criminal himself" rather than the detective, who emerged as significant in the sensation novels (Ousby 1976: 81). Moreover, as Ousby notes, "sensation novels . . . are rarely concerned solely with crime" (1976: 81). In sensation novels, techniques of psychology, science, especially medicine, and the law converge in the process of detection to obtain evidence of a crime and to determine motivation for deviant behavior. The detective, whether official police detective or amateur, becomes as important as the criminal.

Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) is usually regarded as the first fully realized detective novel, containing many of the features, such as the country house setting, large cast of suspects, red herrings, numerous plot twists, and the use of the least likely suspect as culprit, that modern readers would recognize as characteristics of detective fiction. Yet it was preceded by Edgar Allan Poe's popular short stories about the brilliant and eccentric detective Auguste Dupin, and earlier sensation novels such as *The Woman in White* (1859–60), *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), and *Aurora Floyd* (1862–3), as well as novels with sensational subplots like *Bleak House* (1852–3), and

*Salem Chapel* (1863), that contain either amateur or police detectives. In addition, Dickens's *Household Words* ran a series of essays on a fictionalized version of a real police detective beginning in 1850. Heather Worthington has recently argued, in *The Rise of the Detective in Early Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction*, that the detective and the narrative structure of the case study developed in periodical literature between approximately 1820 and 1850, and that medical and legal investigators were the predecessors of police detectives in fiction, echoing Robert Audley's observation in *Lady Audley's Secret* that "physicians and lawyers are the confessors of this prosaic nineteenth century" (Worthington 2005: 3; Braddon 1998b: 374). Prior to the 1860s, the reading public was already invested in narratives of surveillance, knowledge production, and the revelation of secrets.

Clearly, however, something occurred in the sensation novels of the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s that facilitated the development of detection. Of course, not all novels categorized as sensational also revolved around exposing mysteries or detection. As Patrick Brantlinger points out in "What Is 'Sensational' about the 'Sensation Novel?'," isolating genres can be difficult; however, he does draw a distinction between earlier Gothic and later detective fiction and the sensation novels that peaked in popularity in the 1860s (Brantlinger 1982: 2). Some of the generic characteristics of later detective fiction, such as the numerous plot twists and red herrings, show up only occasionally in sensation novels with detectives. Of course, what red herrings do is suggest the possibility that anyone could be guilty, and part of what makes sensation novels sensational is the suggestion that everyone is guilty, that crime is far more widespread and dispersed than polite society wishes to acknowledge, and all the more insidious for being hidden. According to Brantlinger, one of the elements that characterizes sensation fiction is its use of mystery to structure the novel: "the introduction of mystery into a novel form that seems otherwise to follow the conventions of domestic realism posed disturbing questions" (Brantlinger 1982: 3). The genre particularly disturbed Victorian readers because of its location of mystery within the domestic sphere.<sup>1</sup> Sensation novels reveal, as Count Fosco declares in *The Woman in White*, that "English society . . . is as often the accomplice, as it is the enemy of crime" (Collins 1998c: 238). The home and family function both as cause and site of deceit, instability, class contagion, and violence. As Elizabeth Rose Gruner observes about *The Moonstone*, the detection of crimes within the family potentially creates as many problems as it solves by exposing the idea of the family as a refuge from the threatening public sphere as a facade (Gruner 1993: 127).

What happens in sensation novels isn't just a response to a perception of an increase in crime, it is a response to anxiety about the middle-class family and corruption from within. F. S. Schwarzbach notes that the Victorian novel is obsessed with crime, yet historians generally agree that violent crime actually fell during the period (Schwarzbach 2002: 228). Although actual crime may not have increased, by mid-century middle-class Victorians felt increasing anxiety about crime and contact with criminals as the population and urban space swelled dramatically and fears about cross-class contact intensified. As Albert D. Hutter states, "the police were needed to

'read' a city which had grown far beyond the easy knowledge of its inhabitants" (Hutter 1975: 194). Yet although the rapid growth of London in the nineteenth century prompted fears about the growing anonymity of the city and its inhabitants, the crime in sensation novels is typically committed by characters that readers know and also trust, at least initially, because they occupy a high social station and maintain an appearance of virtue. What made sensation fiction particularly disturbing as well as exciting was its exposure of women's capacity for violence, and the inability to detect a woman's purity or "real" identity. Hence, in the sensation novel, the woman as the center of the home becomes the special object of detection as female virtue is investigated and subjected to inquiry, exposing the bourgeois family to outsiders and lower-class men.

Certain historical factors in the development of policing contributed to the appearance of detectives as crime-solvers in sensation fiction. In 1829 the Metropolitan Police Act established policing in London, and a special unit of detectives was created in 1842 as part of Scotland Yard. Moreover, newspapers popularized crime and domestic secrets, and the 1858 Divorce Acts meant that once private marital conflict was being exposed in the courts and press, fanning anxiety about the middle-class family as the site of crime. The 1860 Road murder case, in which Constance Kent, a 14-year-old girl, was accused of murdering her younger brother in their middle-class home, shocked the press and public, who were unwilling to believe that a pure young girl from a respectable family could have committed an act of gross brutality because it violated their beliefs about both a girl's proper behavior and the middle-class home as a place of refuge from violence. Wilkie Collins borrowed some of the details of the investigation, particularly the disappearance of a nightgown, in *The Moonstone*, underscoring the infiltration of the bourgeois home with a criminal element. Anthea Trodd points out that although Collins softens the details of the Road murder, he "is still confronting the fears of Road" about the guilt of the person supposed to be the most innocent, and about police intrusion into the home (Trodd 1989: 28).

Perhaps related to the historical reasons for the appearance of detectives in sensation fiction as representing a need to "read" an increasingly anonymous and transient society, critics have also pointed out structural reasons for the appearance of the detective in the mid-nineteenth century. The withholding of secrets as a plot device makes omniscient narration impossible, and the novels may contain multiple narrative points of view, as in *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, or use a first-person point of view, as in *The Law and the Lady* (1875). According to Brantlinger, the detective serves the specific narrative function of replacing a more omniscient narrator (Brantlinger 1982: 16). Although detectives do not have all the answers, they do have the ability to uncover them: "they can follow the clues that the no longer trustworthy narrator-author places in their path, leading towards a restoration both of social order and of some semblance of narrative omniscience" (Brantlinger 1982: 16). The lack of narrative omniscience also invites the reader to participate in the process of detection. As Mark Hennelly points out about the arresting scene in *The Woman in White* when Walter Hartright sees Anne Catherick for the first time alone on the high road at

night, the mystery creates sensations, or “visceral and cerebral, pleasures of detection” for the reader (Hennelly 1980: 449).

### Police vs. Amateur Detectives

Although police detectives such as Inspector Bucket in *Bleak House* and Sergeant Cuff in *The Moonstone* demonstrate great skill and mental acuity in detecting the criminal element, especially amongst the lower classes, *Bleak House* and *The Moonstone*, along with other novels such as *Aurora Floyd* and *Salem Chapel*, all demonstrate an uneasiness about the class identity and proper role of the police detective once he turns his attention to higher-born characters, particularly women. As Jonathan Loesberg has argued in “The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction,” sensation fiction is sensational because of fear of slippages between the classes that could lead to a loss of one’s legal and class-based identity. Although Loesberg’s article is not ostensibly about detection per se, he does analyze the class fears and fear of identity loss, specifically legal and social rather than psychological identity, that are the object of detection in so many sensation novels (Loesberg 1986: 117). He states, “Class fear then is not really a fear of the lower classes. Its logic is that when one loses one’s legal and class identity, one enters an anonymous world that operates by no rules one has ever learned before” (1986: 120). Through their historical and class associations as well as their ability to expose the fiction of the nineteenth-century bourgeois home as a safe haven and refuge from the public sphere, police detectives threaten the very boundaries they attempt to fix, thereby remaining profoundly ambivalent and disturbing characters, all the more disturbing because of their pronounced ability to uncover secrets.

In *Bloodbonds of Heaven*, Ousby notes how easily Inspector Bucket in *Bleak House* moves through different social strata; his “seemingly supernatural mobility is related to the easy nonchalance with which Bucket moves between the disparate milieus and social groups in the novel” (Ousby 1976: 99). Like Bucket, Sergeant Cuff in *The Moonstone* is also notable for his ability to move amongst different social classes. Yet it is also this presence of permeable boundaries between the classes that makes detection sensational and the detective a liminal, ambivalent figure in the novels. While the middle classes feel relief that the police control the working-class criminal element, that feeling is combined with dread of the intrusion of the police into the middle-class home and anxiety about their status as something in between a paid employee and an external authority (Trodd 1989: 7). As Trodd states, in the 1860s, “The police detective is a character still in search of a genre,” not yet the center or driving force of the plot (1989: 13).

The novels particularly demonstrate uneasiness over the confrontation between a police detective of lower social status confronting young middle- and upper-class women and contaminating them by exposing them to violence and illicit desires. Trodd points out that in Margaret Oliphant’s novel *Salem Chapel* (1863), which contains a sensational subplot, Oliphant makes the young, innocent heroine unconscious

when the police detective arrives to interrogate her about a crime to avoid a confrontation that might contaminate her (Trodd 1989: 15). The police detectives in sensation fiction also have a hard time interpreting the feelings, and thereby motivations, of women correctly. In *The Moonstone*, Cuff is unable to interpret Rosanna Spearman's or Rachel Verinder's odd behavior – that of women in love – correctly. He fundamentally misinterprets Rachel's actions as selfish, suspecting her of stealing the diamond herself to pay off gambling debts, rather than as a selfless desire to protect Franklin Blake. Although Cuff is supposed to be able to handle the servants, especially the female servants, he does not understand women's interiority, the subjective landscape of so much of the nineteenth-century novel. Similarly, Grimstone in *Aurora Floyd* can't "read" Aurora's fundamental goodness (though neither can her husband). Even Inspector Bucket in *Bleak House* is diminished in importance by end of the novel and needs Esther's help to find Lady Dedlock.

Because the official police detective cannot solve the crime, particularly with female suspects, "the crime is solved by confession, providence, genteel amateur detection" or some combination thereof, as Trodd notes, and the police move to the margins of the narrative (Trodd 1989: 29). While the police detective plays an important role, he is not always the most integral character and is ultimately displaced in the narrative. The class anxiety prompted by the intrusion of the police detective into the middle- and upper-class home is alleviated when he is replaced by other characters, usually, though not necessarily always or exclusively, a gentleman detective. The gentleman detective usurps the lower-class police detective and thereby expels the threat of infiltration from and exposure of the middle- and upper-class home. As D. A. Miller has observed, the gentleman functions as a discreet detective whose goal is to protect rather than to expose the family (Miller 1988: 15).

The detective plot also becomes a way for middle- and upper-class, seemingly useless, unproductive men (Walter Hartright, Robert Audley, Franklin Blake) to demonstrate their worthiness and character and therefore establish their patriarchal rights and entitlement to a high social station. Through the process of detection, the gentlemanly detective fixes himself; that is, he creates and secures his class identity and/or social position, which may have been tenuous. For the middle- and upper-class male, detection also functions as means of forming a proper, heteronormative male subjectivity, channeling energy into producing a family. Prior to embarking on his quest to discover the whereabouts of his friend and the truth about his aunt, Lady Audley, Robert Audley suffers from an effeminate ennui, only capable of summoning the energy to read French novels. Through the process of detection, however, he must overcome inertia and learn to become a man in an appropriate fashion, and because detection is associated with unsavory, lower-class behavior, he ultimately applies his skills at knowledge production to the more suitable gentlemanly profession of barrister.

As Tamar Heller has pointed out in *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic*, the production of knowledge can function as a form of patriarchal control of women. This battle for masculine control over language and interpretation is most apparent in *The Moonstone*, both in the scene in which Franklin Blake penetrates the Shivering



Sands with his phallic stick to retrieve Rosanna Spearman's letter and when he forces Rachel's confession that she has known all along who has stolen the diamond. Heller states,

Collins' staging of this scene makes it clear that the battle to break women's silence is, like the scene on the Shivering Sand, a battle over the control of knowledge. . . . Blake's role as a detective, his search to repossess Rachel's knowledge, reinforces the control over women that Victorian gender ideology gave to men within courtship and marriage. (Heller 1992: 152)

*The Woman in White* also reveals a similar attempt to control and rein in the outspoken Marian Halcombe and end her role as detective when Count Fosco, sexually attracted to her, violates her innermost thoughts and reads her journal, effecting a symbolic rape as he wrests textual control from her. Moreover, as Heller notes, it is Hartright who solicits and structures the narrative and thereby frames the story and its interpretation (Heller 1992: 115).

Although it is through the confessions of Rosanna Spearman and Rachel Verinder that the mystery of who stole the Moonstone begins to unravel, the confessions in sensation novels fundamentally differ from those in crime narratives earlier in the century which, according to Worthington, lack an interest in or exploration of the criminal's psychology and interiority (Worthington 2005: 14). The confession alone is insufficient to establish a complex chain of events, and the detective, or detectives, must perform the hermeneutic function of mediating and interpreting the confession. Noting a shift from early crime narratives to detective narratives, Worthington argues that "The admission of guilt in confession and the community-based observance patterns of early crime narratives are no longer sufficient or effective: surveillance, whether direct and visible or as a concept of the self as an object of an unseen gaze, is central to the structures of disciplinary power in later narratives of detection" (Worthington 2005: 41). In sensation novels it frequently takes the combined efforts of the police, legal system, and medical experts to unearth secrets and establish, or recreate, the truth and construct a cohesive narrative of events. Ronald Thomas points out that the opium experiment in *The Moonstone* succeeds because of its reliance on forensics and a "science that focuses on the body of the suspect as a text to be read" (Thomas 2006: 67). Ezra Jennings must interpret Franklin Blake's unconscious and bodily intentions and render intelligible Mr. Candy's seemingly incoherent ramblings, and sensation novels abound with numerous other examples of partial and fragmentary texts that must be correctly pieced together and interpreted.

## Detection and Surveillance

The ability to control the production of knowledge has been a focus of scholars of sensation and detection, following Michel Foucault's insights into the workings of disciplinary practices in the nineteenth century in *Discipline and Punish* and volume I

of *The History of Sexuality*. Critics such as D. A. Miller, Peter Thoms, Ronald Thomas, Heather Worthington, and Caroline Reitz all discuss the workings of surveillance and discipline in the process of detection in the novel as part of the larger nineteenth-century cultural shift towards the internalization of disciplinary practices once the sole province of the state. Thoms notes of *Bleak House* that guilt and surveillance permeate society and that the process of detection is internalized so that detectives become unnecessary, for example because Esther and Lady Dedlock police themselves (Thoms 1998: 74–7). Even when a confession appears voluntary, the criminal has simply internalized the disciplinary practices of surveillance. Franklin Blake discovers in *The Moonstone* that we “become objects of inquiry to ourselves” as he sets the full narrative and medical knowledge-gathering apparatus upon himself (Collins 1998b: 362). Indeed, Thomas argues that this internalization of surveillance “is the realisation in which this detective story is most deeply invested” (Thomas 2006: 74).

The process of surveillance permeates the sensation novel so that, in *The Moonstone*, virtually everyone eventually participates in the process of detection, caught up in what Gabriel Betteredge calls “*detective-fever*” (Collins 1998b: 131). Moreover, the participation in detective fever is not limited to the characters in the novel. As Sandra Kemp points out, Franklin Blake explicitly invites readers to participate in the correct reading of his manuscript by comparing the different author’s versions: “The reader grows to distrust the story’s antithetical narrators, and acts as a surrogate detective who responds to and reconstructs the conventional double narrative of the detective story (the story of the diamond and its disappearance, and the story of its investigation) to recreate the story on another level for him/herself” (Kemp 1998: xxv).

Whether the detective, or the detective function dispersed over multiple characters as in *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, and the act of interpreting a mystery perform a conservative social function has formed one of the biggest critical debates surrounding detective fiction. In his analysis of Inspector Bucket in *Bleak House*, Ousby argues that “his actions show that the detective can play an important role as the bringer of truth and clarity to a society crippled by mystery and confusion” (Ousby 1976: 105). Yet in *Detection and Its Designs: Narrative Power in 19th-Century Detective Fiction*, Thoms argues that the “inherently self-reflexive form” of novels in which solutions to mysteries are constructed out of fragmented texts draws attention to the solution as an “artifice” (Thoms 1998: 1). Thoms does not regard detective fiction as inviting closure but, rather, as self-consciously exposing it as an interpretation (1998: 8).

Not surprisingly, *The Moonstone* and its complex narrative structure, with its multiple narrative points of view as well as its framing device with the beginning and ending occurring in India outside of the control of any of the English characters, have prompted the biggest debate about the degree to which the detective achieves some kind of resolution. Albert D. Hutter, who takes a psychoanalytic approach to detective fiction, argues for the indeterminacy of the end of the novel: “The novel does end with a solution; but the reader’s experience throughout *The Moonstone* is weighted the other

way: it encourages us to distrust closure. This particular mystery may be solved, but the mystery of the characters and the shadowy space between their actions, their observations, and their intentions are meant to puzzle" (Hutter 1975: 197). While some scholars such as Kemp have pointed out the multiplicity of voices that arises because so many characters contribute their own point of view, Miller notes that the multiple narratives all arrive at the same interpretation (Kemp 1998: xxv; Miller 1988: 53). However, scholars such as Reitz who emphasize the importance of the epilogue and colonial impact of the novel tend to argue for its ambivalence, while Heller argues that as much is buried as revealed in *The Moonstone*. Although Ezra Jennings is integral to uncovering the mystery of why Franklin Blake stole the diamond, his insistence that his own story remain untold shows how "detection defers rather than fixes meaning, uncovering mysteries only to suggest that others stay covered up" (Heller 1992: 142).

However, just as scholars like Ann Cvetkovich and Jonathan Loesberg have argued that we should not oversimplify the ideological implications of the structure of sensation fiction, sensation and detection are best understood within a political, social, and cultural context and not solely in terms of its structure or plot. As Reitz points out, rather than simply an agent or representation of power, the detective "is himself a mixture, a site of profound cultural struggle over the meaning of English authority" (Reitz 2004: xxi). Even when the detective figure or figures may restore a semblance of order at the end of a sensation novel, the ideological landscape is never quite what it was at the beginning of the novel. The sanctity of the home has been violated and exposed, and the efforts to conceal and contain the violence and corruption within the family are extensive. A facade of orderliness may be imposed, but it is clearly a facade, and a fragile one at that.

Moreover, sensation novels are as much about concealing secrets as revealing them, and Gruner points out that *The Moonstone* is founded upon a dark family secret, the original theft of the diamond from India; Godfrey Ablewhite was, in fact, the second family member to steal the diamond. The desire to cover up the truth, rather than the detection of secrets that readers might expect, drives the novel. As Gruner observes, everyone in the novel is complicit, and the narrative structure facilitates the concealment of secrets: "Franklin Blake's editorial strategy seems designed to this end: he has chosen witnesses loyal to the family, unreliable as observers . . . and often monomaniacal to the point of selective blindness. . . . They are, singly or together, almost incapable of telling 'the truth'" (Gruner 1993: 128). Similarly, Miller also points out that the detective figures who step in after Cuff leaves "have no intrinsic interest in detection at all" (Miller 1988: 48). He describes the ideological move that detection performs in *The Moonstone* as establishing the "social innocence" of the community (1998: 36). According to Miller, the fact that the detective function has to be spread out amongst so many people in the novel indicates how inept and unfamiliar they are with crime and the policing of it, creating "the perception of everyday life as fundamentally 'outside' the network of policing power" (1998: 37). Miller argues the police detectives are frequently ineffectual in completing their job in part because

the middle- and upper-class community polices itself, and therefore the police and their threatening cross-class contamination are expelled (1988: 47–8).

Sensation novels also reveal the disruptive power of the amateur detective, as Cvetkovich observes about *Lady Audley's Secret*. Although Robert Audley may emerge at the end of the novel as a heteronormative, professional man, it is only by destroying his own family that he ascends to the role of functioning patriarch. Furthermore, the location of the process of detection within the family creates other ideological problems by blurring boundaries between public and private spheres: "Because detection occurs in its midst, the family can no longer serve as a refuge and instead becomes the scene of conflict and anxiety" (Cvetkovich 1992: 52). Winifred Hughes points out that Walter Hartright succeeds in restoring Laura Fairlie's legal and social identity in *The Woman in White* precisely "because he has learned to act in the manner of Fosco," attacking his enemies' weaknesses (Hughes 1980: 142). Indeed, detection can reveal secrets about the family that are worse than murder. In *The Law and the Lady*, Valeria Macallan discovers that her husband's first wife was not, in fact, murdered by him but committed suicide because of his cruel neglect and indifference, revealing his lack of gentlemanly compassion and the hypocrisy of their marriage, which must itself be concealed even if it means that he continues to suffer the social stigma of being a suspected murderer.

Although the detective function is most commonly, though not exclusively, performed by male characters in sensation novels, recent critical attention has turned to the role of the female detective beyond that of Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White*. Collins uses a female detective in the sole or primary role in *The Law and the Lady* and "I Say No" (1884), while Braddon's *Eleanor's Victory* (1863) also has a female detective.<sup>2</sup> These women detectives take on assertive, independent roles, defying convention and expectations of normative behavior in their quest for the truth. As Jenny Bourne Taylor observes about *The Law and the Lady* and "I Say No," these women "overturn the 'Gothic' figure of the passive heroine" (Taylor 2006: 91). Ousby argues that by the 1870s and 1880s the public had become "disillusioned with the police detective" as a result of corruption scandals, and, therefore, writers of that later period "often resort to the complete amateur, a character drawn into detection by purely accidental involvement in a mystery or crime" (Ousby 1974: 134). This association of detectives with corruption may help to explain the later use of female detectives, who more easily embody purity and innocence as well as dissociation from the sullied public sphere. These women are far removed from knowing the workings of criminals or the process of detection. It is Valeria Macallan's desire to establish her identity and marriage, and therefore her own purity, that initially drives the plot of *The Law and the Lady*, and Eleanor, a teenage girl at the beginning of *Eleanor's Victory*, ultimately needs assistance from a man to obtain the information she needs to confirm her suspicions because she is too naive to know how to conduct an investigation.

In *The "Improper" Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing*, Lyn Pykett suggests an important distinction in novels with female detectives. She notes that, in *Eleanor's Victory*, detection of the father's secrets does not drive the plot.

Rather, "it is Eleanor's own deliberate concealments which sustain – and provide the necessary complications for – the narrative trajectory" (Pykett 1992: 84). Although Eleanor is the detective, she is also the object of inquiry, and her inner struggle towards the "proper" feminine is what needs to be discovered in the novel. The revelation is not a whodunit, but a revelation about Eleanor's heart and her capacity for forgiveness, and the novel therefore investigates how detection affects the development of female subjectivity and interiority. As Tamara Wagner notes, Eleanor's forgiveness and renunciation of revenge at the end of the novel and return of her attention to her proper domestic role as wife "undoes the woman detective's 'unsexing'" that her actions threaten in the rest of the novel (Wagner 2006: 81). *The Law and the Lady* is also at least as much about the detective Valeria Macallan as her husband, the presumed criminal, and her first-person narrative emphasizes her psychological development. We know little about her husband, Eustace Macallan, and care even less. Yet, like so many sensation heroines, Valeria goes through multiple name changes throughout the course of the novel. Her legal and social position is insecure because her identity is contingent upon her husband's assumed identity, and it is unclear if her marriage is bigamous and if she is a fallen, kept woman or wife. The real conflict in the novel revolves around her and her ability to extract the truth from Miserrimus Dexter and solidify her own tenuous legal and social identity, which depends on that of her husband.

More recent criticism on sensation and detection has also addressed the relationship between detection and the British imperial project, examining the relationship between surveillance and knowledge-gathering and the oversight and control of the empire. In *Detecting the Nation: Fictions of Detection and the Imperial Venture*, Reitz argues that understanding detective fiction, just like sensation fiction, as a sub-genre unrelated to other literature fails to appreciate its larger cultural and ideological function and participation in both empire-building and the construction of a national identity. Although Hughes has argued that the prologue and epilogue of *The Moonstone* "confirm the existence of realities beyond the reach of the detective, the appropriate emissary of modern rationality and legal sanctions" (Hughes 1980: 164), Reitz counters that *The Moonstone* shows "the necessity for the English detective in an imperial culture" (Reitz 2004: 57). She argues that the importance of Murthwaite's role as detective in the epilogue is often overlooked in criticism about *The Moonstone*. She states that "Collins asserts both that an agent of Empire is an English figure and that detective work, privately undertaken for an English family, requires a mastery of information about the imperial world," knowledge that Murthwaite provides both in England and in his pursuit of the diamond in India in the epilogue (Reitz 2004: 62). Thomas also makes the significant point that techniques of surveillance such as fingerprinting were developed to identify criminals in India before being adopted by the Metropolitan Police in London, indicating that strategies of detection within England depended upon state control of the colonial subject (Thomas 2006: 69–70).

The detective, with his special powers of observation and knowledge of science, medicine, and the law, was necessary in the sensation novel precisely because the

criminal blended so well into the middle-class family. Criminals like Godfrey Ablewhite and Lady Audley appear to be the most virtuous and innocent members of society and pass undetected except to the most astute eye. Although the amateur detective is invested in keeping secrets within the family, and thereby policing the family from within, the sensation novel reveals the ambivalence about both the police and the amateur detective as the amateur detective must develop unsavory skills associated with lower-class characters to conduct surveillance over members of his own social class. In response to this liminal status and as part of the larger trend of professionalization, the detective develops into the professional but private detective, culminating at the end of the century in Sherlock Holmes. As a new professional expert, Sherlock Holmes privately assists the police yet unquestionably remains a gentleman, never motivated by nor much interested in money, but rather pursuing his intellectual passion.

## NOTES

- 1 In contrast, Anthea Trodd notes that the Sherlock Holmes stories later in the century do not depict the home as a place of sacrosanct refuge, and therefore the revelation of the home and family as both setting and impetus for violence is not sensational (Trodd 1989: 158).
- 2 Joseph Kestner's *Sherlock's Sisters* (2003) primarily focuses on late Victorian and Edwardian fiction; however, he does discuss some female detectives in the 1850s and 1860s.

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## “Come Buy, Come Buy”: Sensation Fiction in the Context of Consumer and Commodity Culture

*Kimberly Harrison*

The birth of consumer culture is often traced to the late eighteenth century, with roots earlier in that century and even into the late seventeenth century. Yet it is in the mid- to late nineteenth century that consumerism blossomed, reaching the full spectrum of the middle classes and, after 1870, the working classes, with what is often termed mass consumption. Industrialization, along with the commercial power of the empire, created new markets and new products. Development of a consumer society was also enabled by demographic shifts: the drastic population growth in England and Wales from 5.5 million in 1700 to 21 million by 1851 (Mitchell 1978: 8) and urbanization, a population migration from the countryside to cities and towns. During the course of the nineteenth century, standards of living increased, along with the desire for consumer products, urged by new forms of advertising and new ways to shop. Such consumer demand in Britain transformed the British economy, with more people than ever before able to acquire material possessions. The consumer revolution was “the necessary analog to the Industrial Revolution, the necessary convulsion on the demand side of the equation to match the convulsion on the supply side” (McKendrick 1982: 9).

Scholars often focus on the mid-nineteenth century in locating what was, as Thomas Richards observes, an “outburst of the phantasmagoria of commodity culture” (1990: 18). Distinguishing between the terms “consumer” and “commodity” culture, scholars including Richards recognize that consumption itself was not a new social phenomenon, but what was new within industrial society was the quantity of commodities produced, the plethora of discourse about commodities, and the commodities’ cultural force. Not just a form of exchange, commodities became spectacles, with representational qualities, decontextualized from their place and process of production.



Sensation novels were themselves products in an increasingly commercialized literary marketplace that responded to increased literacy rates as well as new contexts for reading. For example, as rail travel increased, the popular novels became fixtures in railway bookstalls as travelers sought to ease the monotony of their journeys. Patrick Brantlinger has argued that sensation novels' status as "mass-cultural commodities" led to their critical devaluation (1998: 163), and Ellen Miller Casey's review of contemporary literature reviews supports his argument. Casey points to numerous reviews in which sensation fiction is criticized through comparison with products of mass production, labeled, for example, "machine-made" and specimens of the "automaton toy novel" (2006: 7). Contemporary critic Henry Mansel assailed sensation novels for feeding a consumer appetite that was abnormal and insatiable. As he lamented in his often-cited critique,

[W]orks of this class [belong] to the morbid phenomenon of literature . . . called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply. (1863)

Mansel was indeed correct about the desire that the novels generated. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* demanded eight editions in the first three months of its publication. The most popular sensation novels spurred their own line of merchandise, with Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, for one, inspiring products such as cloaks, dances, bonnets, and perfume. Sensation authors including Collins, Braddon, and Ellen (Mrs. Henry) Wood were household names. Braddon, in her 1864 novel *The Doctor's Wife*, enters into the debate about the lures of the literary marketplace through the character of Sigismund Smith, a "sensation" author who earns a comfortable living, not writing the great novel to which he aspires, but writing for a "public that bought its literature in the same manner as its pudding – in penny slices" (Braddon 1998: 12).

Sensation novels were written and published alongside an increasing commodification of Victorian life and a changing consumer culture. Victorian society celebrated the growth of mass production and its subsequent market of increasingly available goods once considered luxuries for the few. Yet anxiety also surrounded this burgeoning market and its consumers. Reading sensation fiction within the larger framework of revolutionary movements such as the industrial and consumer revolutions, key demographic shifts such as massive population increases, and the development of a more urban society highlights the novels' participation in and commentary on national discourses surrounding related societal changes in gender, commercial relations, and class. Within their pages, they mirror, critique, satirize, expose, and, at times, cultivate cultural anxieties about the consumer's role, the public's appetite for new products, and the mysterious values of commodity culture. Looking both to commodity and consumer culture, the following discussion first offers further historical contextualization before focusing on sensation fiction's engagement in cultural conversations

surrounding increased consumerism and commodification as related specifically to gender and class identities.

### Satiating Consumer Desire: Shopping

The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations (or, more simply, the Great Exhibition) of 1851 is often seen as cultivating mid-century commodity culture. The exhibition was, as Richards argues, the “first department store,” the “first shopping mall,” and, as such, placed the commodity for the first time at “center stage in English public life” (1990: 17–18). The fair’s exhibition hall, the Crystal Palace, was a purely modern prefabricated structure of glass and iron that covered over eighteen acres in London’s Hyde Park. Bearing comparison to a vast, palatial greenhouse, it offered for display, but not for sale, more than 100,000 exhibits, mostly industrial products. Attracting over 6 million visitors in its first five months, the Great Exhibition encouraged browsing through and lingering over the vast number of displayed commodities. Although the exhibit was international in scope, with its attention to British industry it communicated a message of British industrial creativity, ingenuity, and success, reflecting Victorian confidence and ideas of progress.

Karl Marx, in his 1867 first volume of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, labels a cultural phenomenon in which commodities are “mysterious” “mystical,” and “enigmatical” a “commodity fetish” (Marx 1999: 43, 42, 41). While they might appear simple, he writes, they are “in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (1999: 42). Separated from their use-value, commodities are, Marx argues, “social things,” and “commodity fetishism” describes the forming of “a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.” Commodities, he asserts, enter “into relation both with one another and the human race” (1999: 43). Like Wilkie Collins’s Indian diamond the Moonstone, commodities could take on various meanings and values depending upon their contexts.

In the 1860s, the decade that saw the publication not only of Marx’s treatise but also of some of the most popular sensation novels, the commodity was finding new avenues of display through new forms of advertising and shopping experiences, realizations of ideas often traced to the Great Exhibition. William Whiteley, for example, owner of Whiteley’s, one of England’s first department stores, credited his frequent visits to the Crystal Palace for inspiration to expand his originally small shop to what would become an emporium that sold a large variety of consumer products (Rappaport 2000: 27–8). With the expanding retail revolution, shops and their functions changed. Traditional forms of retail included local fairs, traveling merchants, and markets, and while such forms had not completely disappeared by the late nineteenth century, they were gradually being replaced by modern shops. Shopkeepers began taking advantage of new products such as plate glass and gas lighting to showcase their wares in large, often changing window displays intended to tempt and cultivate consumer desire.

London's West End developed as a premier shopping and entertainment district, attracting patrons with its lush surroundings, spacious parks and squares, stately private clubs and homes, and its myriad of entertainment offerings that historian Erika Diane Rappaport describes as creating a "center of power, wealth, and pleasure in the empire" (2000: 9).

Department stores especially changed the shopping experience and the role of the shopper. While previously merchants had specialized in specific products, with, for example, butcher's shops offering meat and haberdasheries clothing, department stores began to open in Britain in the 1860s and offered a new shopping experience, providing a multitude of products under one roof. Additionally, the products were attractively displayed, allowing and encouraging customers to move among, look at, touch, and try on a variety of luxury goods. Department stores, through their layout and their in-store restaurants and tea-shops, encouraged patrons to spend hours, even a whole day, browsing, and ultimately buying. In traditional shops, wares had been behind the counter, brought out by the shopkeeper or shop assistant according to the customer's need. Contrastingly, a visit to the department store did not have to be need-based. Shopping became an increasingly popular leisure activity, especially for women, and provided its own sensations.

### **Women and Sensational Consumer Desire**

Much cultural discussion regarding the changes in consumer society focused on women. The Victorian woman shopper was charged to purchase responsibly while selecting items to showcase family wealth and taste. The same women's publications that paraded the latest fashions, cuts, and colors also ran advice columns that encouraged women's prudent spending (Walkowitz 1998: 6). While shopping provided women with increased responsibilities, it "simultaneously exposed them to new dangers," subjecting them to "the seduction of men and sales promotion and to their own uncontrollable impulses" (Walkowitz 1998: 5). Chronicled by scholars including Walkowitz and Deborah Nord, shopping could call into question social distinctions between the respectable woman and her counterpart, the prostitute. As respectable middle-class women took to the streets to scour the shops and department stores, some were mistaken for "public" women, or prostitutes, and harassed as such, with the lines of acceptable femininity uncomfortably blurred.

Both the prostitute (the woman as product) and the kleptomaniac (the woman consumer out of control) were widely circulated images of deviant femininity. By mid-century, "shopping disorders" had been pathologized, with kleptomania described both as a disease and a crime. As scholars including Elaine Abelson (1992), Mary Louise Roberts (1998), and Krista Lysack (2008) have illustrated, within the context of the new department stores, aristocratic and bourgeois women who were not motivated by need shoplifted to satisfy irrational consumer desire. With the shoplifter the extreme example, however, even the average woman shopper was often culturally

figured as a potential threat whose appetite for consumer goods could spin out of control. Through her potentially uncontrollable desires, she challenged Victorian gender ideals, such as the passionless “Angel in the House,” and threatened the Victorian family with financial ruin if her spending went awry. The figures of the prostitute and the kleptomaniac embody Victorian cultural anxiety surrounding the lure of commodities within an increasingly consumer culture, specifically as this culture challenged gender conventions (Roberts 1998: 818).

In an 1868 essay, Victorian journalist Eliza Lynn Linton famously condemned “the girl of the period” for her consumerism. The modern “girl,” in contrast to the English ideal,

is a creature who dyes her hair and paints her face . . . whose sole idea of life is plenty of fun and luxury; and whose dress is the object of such thought and intellect as she possesses. Her main endeavor . . . is to outvie her neighbors in the extravagance of fashion. (Linton 2002: 91–2)

Such desire for fine clothes, cosmetics, and entertainment, Linton contends, leads to

slang, bold talk, and fastness; to the love of pleasure and indifference to duty; to the desire of money before either love or happiness; to uselessness at home, dissatisfaction with the monotony of ordinary life, and horror of all useful work; in a word, to the worst forms of luxury and selfishness, to the most fatal effects arising from want of high principle and absence of tender feeling. (2002: 92)

Linton could be referring to a number of sensation fictions’ notorious vixens, driven by desire for wealth and privilege to social improprieties and crimes such as bigamy, and even attempted murder. In sensation fiction, women’s appetite for material goods often signaled gender improprieties of a larger order. Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley* (Lucy Graham) is the ideal case in point. Established at Audley Court, Lucy is shown as an enthusiastic child-woman surrounded by “new and costly toys” (1985: 44). Her daily activities are not reading or studying; instead, she spends her time admiring her possessions. As Braddon describes,

With her maid Phoebe, she would loll on one of the sofas in her dressing-room, discussing a new costume for some coming dinner-party, or sit chattering to the girl, with her jewel-box beside her, upon the satin cushions, and Sir Michael’s presents spread out in her lap, while she counted and admired her treasures. (1985: 45)

Even as the novel ends and Lucy prepares to leave Audley Court, she takes pleasure and comfort from her possessions: “It seemed a pleasant excitement to her, this folding and refolding of silks and velvets, this gathering together of jewels and millinery” (1985: 323). Literary scholar Krista Lysack positions *Lady Audley* in mid-century medical classifications of women’s shopping disorders. Just as middle-class women shoplifters disrupted stable meanings of gender and class, Lucy’s “compulsive con-

sumption,” Lysack posits, threatens the status quo as it is “central to her economic manipulations and her ambitions of class mobility” (2008: 53, 60).

Braddon centers her readers’ attention on Lucy’s relationship with her treasures, describing the goods in sensuous detail and inviting the reader to partake in their pleasure along with Lucy, implicating the reader in Lady Audley’s material pleasures that the text ultimately condemns. Braddon’s emphasis on consumer products calls to mind Christina Rossetti’s luscious description of the goblins’ wares in *Goblin Market*, her poetic commentary on, among other themes, women in a masculine marketplace: “Come buy our orchard fruits, / Come buy . . . / Plump unpecked cherries, / Melons and raspberries, / Bloom-down-cheeked peaches, / Swart-headed mulberries, / Wild free-born cranberries / . . . All ripe together / In summer weather, – “ (2002: 846). Likewise, Braddon describes deep-colored velvet dresses, luxurious upholstery, sparkling jewels, and dark mahogany furniture.

In addition to Lady Audley, other female characters of sensation fiction are associated both with their love of luxury products and with deviance from gender norms, what Lyn Pykett (1992) would call the “improper feminine.” *Armada*’s Lydia Gwilt is a sensation villainess driven to crime and other social improprieties by desire for material possessions. Her jealousy for what the wealthy Allan Armadale will provide his new wife, “her own riding horse; her own pony-carriage; her own beautiful little sitting room upstairs at the great house, and so on” (Collins 1995: 555), prompts her to verbally insult him and serves as motivation for her murderous scheme. In addition to sensation heroines such as Audley and Gwilt, minor villainesses, including *The Woman in White*’s Mrs. Catherick, are marked by jealousy and their desire to emulate the upper classes by acquiring material markers of wealth and privilege. Mrs. Catherick’s desire for material goods and the “respectability” she assumes they will bring enables Sir Percival Glyde to elicit her cooperation in his deception by bribing her with presents, particularly a gold watch and chain from London. “I longed for the gold watch,” Catherick explains, her longing offered as a rational motivation for her role in concealing Percival’s secret (Collins 1999: 530). Along with being a wayward consumer, Catherick is also a fallen woman and a bad mother, with feminine consumer desire again linked to deviant femininity.

Along with Linton’s “girl of the period,” sensation heroines are likely to marry not for love but for material gain and social status. With the prospect of becoming Lady Audley, Lucy Graham admits to her suitor Sir Michael that she does not love him, cannot be “blind to the advantages” of his offer, and has always “been selfish” (Braddon 1985: 9). *No Name*’s Magdalen Vanstone marries to reclaim her lost inheritance and to avenge her father, questioning, “Thousands of women marry for money. . . . Why shouldn’t I?” (Collins 1994a: 400). Lydia Gwilt connives to marry the landed Allan Armadale though she finds him a “rattle-pated young fool – one of those noisy, rosy, light-haired, good tempered men, whom [she] particularly detest[s]” (Collins 1995: 284).

Scholars including Pykett have pointed out sensation fiction’s “satirical treatment of the marriage market and . . . its focusing on the situation of the purchased wife”

(Pykett 1992: 65). In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Sir Michael's proposal to then governess Lucy quickly forgoes the language of romance in favor of the language of the marketplace: "[I]f you do not dislike me, and if you do not care for any one else, I see no reason why we should not make a very happy couple. Is it a bargain, Lucy?" (Braddon 1985: 10). By blatantly portraying marriage as an economic move, sensation fiction does not simply condemn its heroines, but also questions the Victorian institution of marriage itself, exposing women as commodities in the marriage marketplace. Rhoda Broughton's heroine of *Cometh Up as a Flower* describes marriage as "the most matter-of-fact piece of barter in the world; so much young flesh and blood for so much current coin of the realm" (1868: 130). Even *The Woman in White's* upper-class Laura Fairlie, conventionally read as the true love of the novel's bourgeois hero Walter Hartwright, is interpreted by Ann Cvetkovich as a "commodity," whose acquisition through marriage secures Walter's social rise (1998: 128).

In a number of sensation novels, women's physical beauty goes on sale, with characters such as Lady Audley and Lydia Gwilt contemplating the "value of a pretty face" (Braddon 1985: 253). In addition to a pretty face, sensation heroines' abundant and vibrant red, raven, and golden hair enhances their sensuality and thus their marketable value. As Galia Ofek has argued, at mid-century, women's hair was not only a sexual but also a commodity fetish (2003: 185–6). Both Audley and Gwilt, with their pretty faces and their golden and red locks, respectively, were entangled in the marketplace even before entering the specific marketplace of marriage. With beauty their primary value, they both serve as living advertisements: Lucy for the girl's school where she was employed, described by the headmistress as "only ornamental: a person to be shown off to visitors" (Braddon 1985: 202) and Gwilt as a living "advertisement" for a traveling doctor peddling cosmetics and using the young girl's beauty to promote his products (Collins 1995: 521).

### Class and Consumption

Yet as potentially subversive as the questioning of Victorian gender norms and the institution of marriage is, sensation fiction also frequently calls into question the stability of class identity. Sensation novels, themselves commodities, blurred class identities as they were consumed by readers of various social positions. Contemporary critic W. Fraser Rae complained of Mary Braddon that she had made "the literature of the kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing Room" (qtd. in Tromp 2000b: xvi). Victorian social critics expressed apprehension about what Thomas Carlyle labeled the "Cash Nexus," in which human relations were no longer based in personal ties but in desire for profit. Such a shift away from paternalist obligation led some to fear that modern society would be more prone to revolution. Anxiety stemmed from European revolts of 1848, and debates surrounded political reform as the 1832 and 1867 Bills expanded the franchise. Further blurring class lines and identities, products such as certain household items, clothing, and personal accessories, previously avail-

able to only the most privileged consumers, became accessible to the bourgeoisie and even to some of the working classes by the later decades of the nineteenth century. Traditional material markers of class privilege were no longer stable and limited to the well-born.

Sensation fiction frequently probed conventional class boundaries, finding them fluid, and questioned what might result if outward manifestations of class privilege were assumed by those who were not so well-born. For example, when Phoebe, Lady Audley's maid, contrasts herself and her beautiful mistress, Lady Audley counters the idea of such difference, suggesting, "Why, with a bottle of hair dye, such as we see advertised in the papers, and a pot of rouge, you'd be as good-looking as I any day, Phoebe" (Braddon 1985: 49). If Lucy (formerly Helen Maldon), the daughter of a "drunken pauper" (Braddon 1985: 164) could become Lady Audley, then Phoebe could, with the right clothes, make-up, and hair dye, be a lady as well. Critic Katherine Montweiler reads Braddon's quintessential sensation novel as a "subversive domestic manual" that "teaches women readers how to pretend to be members of a class into which they were not born" (2000: 44, 43).

Wilkie Collins, as well, questions the legitimacy of aristocratic birth and ponders the power of well-worn clothes, accessories, and attitudes of entitlement in establishing social identity. In *The Moonstone*, servant Rosanna Spearman asks her unrequited love Franklin Blake, himself devoted to her mistress Rachel Verinder, to "[s]uppose you put Miss Rachel into a servant's dress and took her ornaments off –" (1994: 314). In *No Name*, Collins similarly takes up the theme of fluid class identity with the novel's emphasis on acting and disguise. For example, Magdalen Vanstone proposes to switch identities with her maid Louisa simply by exchanging dresses and familiarizing herself with the duties of a servant. When Louisa balks at her mistress's idea, stating, "I am not a lady," Magdalen retorts, "Shall I tell you what a lady is? A lady is a woman who wears a silk gown, and has a sense of her own importance. I shall put the gown on your back, and the sense in your head" (1994a: 503). Likewise, Captain Wragge, a swindler, can pass himself off as a country English gentleman. With his high collars and carrying a "bran-new campstool," he is made "respectable in a frock-coat, a stiff summer cravat and a high white hat . . . a buff waistcoat, grey trousers, and gaiters to match" (1994a: 291). With such commentary, the novels critique assumptions of class, even momentarily, as they suggest that it might be clothes, cosmetics, and a cultivated bearing that make the lady and gentleman, not birth.

### The (Un)Sensational Male Consumer

While much critical interpretation has focused on the indulgent consumer appetites of the larger-than-life sensation heroines and, more generally, on women as consumers, recently attention has turned to the Victorian male consumer, whose consumption could also mark him as properly, or improperly, masculine and of respectable class.

In regard to fashion, British conduct literature of the period instructed “proper gentlemen” to wear dark and quiet clothes that would not attract attention (Shannon 2006: 27). The popular etiquette manual *Routledge’s Etiquette for Gentlemen*, first published in 1864, advised, “A gentleman should always be so well dressed that his dress shall never be observed at all” (qtd. in Shannon 2006: 28). Such preference for subdued masculine fashion was labeled the “Great Masculine Renunciation” by psychologist J. C. Flugel in his 1930 publication *The Psychology of Clothes*. Flugel argued that, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the shift to sober men’s fashions was in rejection of the fashion extravagance of the overthrown French aristocrats, who were known for their colorful and elaborate frocks (1930: 111–13).

In sensation fiction, men whose clothing elicits attention and who pay too much attention consumer products often deviate from the Victorian values of hard work and industriousness. *The Woman in White’s* Italian villain Count Fosco is figured suspiciously through his love of fine fashion, which Marian Halcombe considers an “incomprehensible oddit[y]” (Collins 1999: 221), and Walter Hartwright judges as “ostentatious” (1999: 546, 566). Fosco’s passion is for colorful and oversized waistcoats, though even in mourning he wears a fine mourning suite, carries a large ornamental cane, and sports “perfectly-fitting black kid gloves” (1999: 569). Unlike Fosco, Walter Hartwright’s fashion as he ascends the social ladder draws no notice. While Walter is mistaken as Sir Percival, and thus as a gentleman (1999: 514), Collins makes no reference to clothes in this misidentification. Apparently his clothes speak for him through their silence. Yet earlier in the novel, after Walter’s banishment from Limmeridge House due to his inappropriate feelings for the well-born Laura and prior to his excursion in Central America, an imperialist project that Marlene Tromp (2000a) has argued imbues him with authority to carry out his domestic mission and social rise, Walter *is* noticed for his clothes. Solicitor Vincent Gilmore describes his “slovenly” dress of which he would “have been ashamed of the appearance . . . on one of my own clerks” (Collins 1999: 155), linking Walter through his clothing to the lower middle class. However, as Walter prepares to take his place through marriage in the landed classes he can pass as a gentleman, and his clothes, presumably quiet and subdued, draw no explicit attention.

Other of sensation fiction’s male characters are coded with either class or gender improprieties through their consumer habits. In *The Woman in White*, Walter himself is a victim to his “extravagant” spending as the novel begins (Collins 1999: 10). Villains Fosco and Sir Percival both overspend. Lady Audley’s nephew and nemesis, Robert Audley, before he turns amateur detective, neglects his legal profession and prefers spending his time consuming French novels, smoking a German pipe, and lolling in the Temple Gardens “with his shirt-collar turned down and a blue silk handkerchief tied loosely about his neck” (1999: 27). *The Moonstone’s* John Herncastle is shut out of society because of his violent quest for the diamond, which marks him as “savage” (Collins 1994b: 40). Likewise, in the same novel, Godfrey Ablewhite’s criminal acts are to satisfy his secret life built around pleasure and consumption. While living a public life as a respected barrister and patron of numerous Christian



charities, he keeps hidden a luxurious villa containing artworks as well as “furniture tastefully selected and admirable made; and a conservatory of the rarest flowers” and a well-kept woman with “jewels which are worthy to take rank with the flowers, and . . . carriages and horses which have (deservedly) produced a sensation in the Park” (1994b: 447).

While *The Moonstone*'s Godfrey, for example, is the son of a banker of a “low station in the world” (1994b: 63), sensation fiction also links wayward consumption to the gentry, often in contrast to the hard-working and responsible men of the middle classes. Lady Isabel Vane, *East Lynne*'s aristocratic fallen woman turned repentant governess, descends from the Earl of Mount Severn, a “spendthrift among spendthrifts” who dies in ruin (Wood 2005: 5). He thus leaves his daughter dependent upon marriage to the successful solicitor Archibald Carlyle, who can purchase Isabel's childhood home, East Lynne, and establish her again as its mistress. Her return, however, is short-lived, as she, like her father, is misled by her appetites.

Collins's Frederick Fairlie in *The Woman in White* is perhaps the most satirically drawn of sensation's materially consumed gentry. Fairlie shuns human interaction, living surrounded by his sumptuous collections including marble statuettes, paintings, and exquisite furniture “loaded with figures in Dresden china, with rare vases, ivory ornaments, and toys and curiosities that sparkled at all points with gold, silver, and precious stones.” Collins describes the commodities as shrouded in a “soft, mysterious, and subdued” light (1999: 41). “So glad to possess you at Limmeridge,” Fairlie announces when meeting Walter (1999: 43). And, requiring his servant to serve as his living portfolio stand (1999: 158), Collins shows Fairlie, the “over-refined” (1999: 42) representative of the gentry, as unable, or simply not interested, in cultivating relationships beyond that of object and consumer. His description of Fairlie's treasures as shrouded in a mysterious light foreshadows Marx's attention to commodities as “mysterious” “mystical,” and “enigmatical” (Marx 1999: 43, 42, 41).

From early critical explorations, such as Winifred Hughes's 1980 *The Maniac in the Cellar*, scholars have explored and questioned sensation fiction's seemingly transgressive portrayal of Victorian culture. What impact, critics have asked, have such representations had on the reading public? In regard to sensation fiction's characterization of the Victorian consumer, whether a *femme fatale* with a shopping addiction or an Italian villain marked by his love of colorful waistcoats, did sensation fiction cultivate social anxiety surrounding the consumer role? In their portrayal of a commodity-focused culture, illustrated by Frederick Fairlie's relationship with his treasures or Captain Wragge's ability to impersonate those of the upper classes by donning the trappings of the well-to-do, did they represent or even promote cultural criticism? Or did the narrative structure in which order was often restored with the closing chapter contain unease and quieten cultural critique? Such questions continue to provide avenues for scholarly inquiry, especially with the recovery work of scholars such as Jennifer Carnell, through her Sensation Press, and Andrew Maunder, through his series *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction*. Such work brings into the conversation new sensation texts that provide additional windows through which we

view, interpret, and better understand Victorian consumers, consumer anxiety, and a developing commodity culture, and in turn, also better recognize the sensation genre's contribution to such cultural conversations.

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## Sensation and Illustration

*Mary Elizabeth Leighton and Lisa Surridge*

Since 1982, when Patrick Brantlinger asked, “What Is ‘Sensational’ About the ‘Sensation Novel?’”, few scholars have mentioned illustration as crucial to the genre. Critics have developed a complex understanding of sensation fiction, highlighting its “pseudo-documentary surface” (Sutherland 1991: 243); its shocking plot elements such as bigamy, murder, seduction, adultery (Hughes 1980: 4), and middle-class domestic crime (Trodd 1989); its indebtedness to newspaper (Boyle 1989: 146) and divorce-court reporting (Surridge 2005: 135–42); its covert femininity (Pykett 1992) and homoeroticism (Nemesvari 1995); its “explorations of disabled women’s sexual[ity]” (Stoddard Holmes 2003: 7), personal identity (Houston 2003: 29) and class instability (Loesberg 1986); its address to the sympathetic nervous system (Miller 1986: 107); its emphasis on domestic spying (Sutherland 1991: 245); and its training of the reader in the careful reading necessary to survive “in the new Victorian culture of information” (Houston 2003: 28). However, surprisingly few have focused on the extensive archive of illustrated sensation novels from the mid- to late nineteenth century, an era that, in the words of Théophile Gautier, did not always have time to read, but always had time to see: “Notre siècle n’a pas toujours le temps de lire, mais il a toujours le temps de voir” (qtd. in Bacot 2005: 80).

There is ample evidence of Victorian consumers’ “boundless . . . appetite for visualized narrative” (Witemeyer 1979: 157), a predilection that William Wordsworth deplored as a “backward movement” (qtd. in Skilton 2007: 3) and Lewis Carroll celebrated through the figure of Alice, who demands, “[W]hat is the use of a book . . . without pictures . . . ?” (1998: 9). As they competed in the fierce literary marketplace, mid-Victorian publishers seized upon illustration’s popularity. Novels of this “pictorial” period (Anderson 1991: 2) were often thick with illustrations, a selling point for serials and volume editions alike. When Dickens left Bradbury and

Evans to start the unillustrated *All the Year Round*, for example, his former publishers launched *Once a Week*, a lavishly illustrated weekly that published both realism and sensation fiction and that dedicated a large budget to illustrations (Buckler 1952: 926), its prospectus stressing “the modern department of Pictorial Illustration” (Bradbury and Evans 1859: 1). If, to adopt H. L. Mansel’s metaphor, publishers produced sensation fiction as commercial product – “so many yards of printed stuff, sensation-pattern, to be ready at the beginning of the season” (1863: 483) – then illustration constituted a key element in this pattern.

Not all sensation novels contained illustrations, but many were “richly illustrated,” the phrase used by *Harper’s Weekly* to describe its serialization of Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (4 January 1868: 5). As Laurie Garrison observes, sensation novels “nearly without exception” were “first published in periodicals” (2008: 113) – that is, in serial form – and many were illustrated: Charles Felix’s *The Notting Hill Mystery* in *Once a Week* (November 1862–January 1863), Frederick Greenwood’s *Margaret Denzil’s History* in the *Cornhill Magazine* (November 1863–October 1864), and Collins’s *The Law and the Lady* in the *Graphic* (26 September 1874–13 March 1875) are examples. Some famous sensation novels were unillustrated on one side of the Atlantic but illustrated on the other, as in *The Woman in White* (26 November 1859–4 August 1860) and *No Name* (15 March 1862–24 January 1863), both unillustrated in *All the Year Round* but lavishly illustrated in *Harper’s Weekly*. Conversely, Charles Reade’s *Griffith Gaunt* ran illustrated in the British *Argosy* and unillustrated in the American *Atlantic Monthly* (both December 1865–November 1866). Unillustrated serials often later appeared in illustrated volume editions, as in Richard Bentley’s edition of Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1884). Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (21 March 1863–15 August 1863) boasts perhaps the most complex publication history, appearing illustrated in the *London Journal* after unillustrated serials (incomplete in *Robin Goodfellow* and finished in the *Sixpenny Magazine*). If we consider Collins the “grand inaugurator” of the genre with *The Woman in White* (Rance 1991: 6), then it becomes apparent that the wave of sensation novels coincided with the 1860s’ “golden age” of book illustration. This genre that critics reviled as “redolent of the manufactory and the shop” (Mansel 1863: 483) exploited illustration’s consumer appeal and signifying possibilities.

Sensational illustrations helped create the genre’s trademark nervous reader (Miller 1986: 109–10), building atmosphere through the use of white space and depictions of turbulent fabric, hair, air, and water. They foregrounded salient plot ingredients, featuring blackmail, bigamy, adultery, and murder. *Lady Audley’s Secret*, for example, foregrounds blackmail through images of Phoebe and Luke “Ransacking [Lady Audley’s] ‘Secret Drawer’” (caption, 28 March 1863: 201) and then “Exact[ing] a Hundred Pounds” from her (caption, 25 April 1863: 265). Sensational illustrations also suggested the vulnerability of middle-class identity and ideologies of gender and domesticity by depicting women involved in unchaperoned nighttime activity, heightened emotional states, or physical collapse: Isa Blagden’s *Santa: A Woman’s Tragedy* (1862) in *Once a Week* opens with an image of a mysteriously cloaked female

figure in the gaslit street. Images of characters poised on thresholds (doorsteps, windows, beaches, or cliffs) conveyed the destabilization of identity categories (Leighton and SurrIDGE 2009: 222). Finally, pictures of disaster or death lured readers into plot speculation: part 4 of *Margaret Denzil's History* features a chapter initial of Arthur Lamont's (apparently) dead body on a beach beside the chapter title "Over the Cliff" (Figure 42.1). Far from a minor detail, illustration played a major role in sensation, as it did in Victorian culture generally (Skilton 2007).

While illustrations heightened the genre's excitement, they also, paradoxically, contributed to its reality effect. Sensation fiction's documentary surface combined the illusion of "facts" with improbable plots, a technique central to the genre. As Winifred Hughes observes, sensation fiction "fused opposites, both possible and improbable . . . documentary and yet far-fetched" (1980: 16). As Simon Cooke notes, pictorial realism in illustrations helped to embed the genre's improbable events in believable settings (2002: 91–3). In Braddon's *Eleanor's Victory* (*Once a Week*, 7 March–3 October 1863), for example, nautical details in George du Maurier's image for part 1 concretize Eleanor's departure from domestic femininity upon her unchaperoned voyage to Paris (Cooke 2002: 93).

The recognition of illustration as key to sensation fiction has coincided with the visual turn in Victorian studies and the explosion of interest in book history and print culture. Critics have argued for illustration's importance to many nineteenth-century novels, seeing illustrated Victorian fiction as a "bitextual" form (see Kooistra 1995) that combined "two systems of knowing and representing the world" (Patten 2002: 91; see also Allingham 2009; Cooke 2001, 2002; Leighton and SurrIDGE 2008, 2009; Maxwell 2002; Sillars 1995; Skilton 2007; Thomas 2004; and Turner 1998). Arguing that illustrations are "not the text pictured," scholars have called for an end to criticism that "compare[s] text with picture" (Patten 2002: 91), instead exploring the complex interplay of visual and verbal elements. As Julia Thomas suggests, "meanings are generated . . . in the very interaction between the textual and the visual, the points at which they coincide and conflict" (2004: 15). So far, studies of illustrated sensation fiction are limited in number but rich in potential: Simon Cooke, Claire Douglass, Andrew King, Deborah Wynne, and Laurie Garrison model a methodology that considers "verbal and visual elements as integrally linked," participating in "creating sensation fiction's emphasis on mistaken identity, female volatility, emotional turbulence, suspense, detection, surveillance, and the fraught relation between the domestic and public realms" (Leighton and SurrIDGE 2008: 68).

In turn, book historians argue that editions are incomplete if they fail to reproduce the images so crucial to Victorians' reading experiences (Steig 1978: ix). Yet editions of sensation novels frequently omit original illustrations. Spurred by increasing interest in popular fiction as well as second-wave feminism's recuperation of women's writing and texts about women's lives, such editions reached the market starting in the late 1970s. While Dover's facsimile editions of Collins's novels reproduced the original British or American illustrations in *Armada* (1977), *No Name* (1987), and

## Margaret Denzil's History.

(Annotated by her Husband.)

### CHAPTER X.

#### OVER THE CLIFF.



WOKE next morning to the pattering of a swift autumnal shower upon the stones in the street—pattering with a noise which was loud enough to make my eyes to open, but not so loud as to scare away quite what was not so much slumber as a long dream of soft inarticulate whisperings. So it is in the days of youth. Then, sleep is like a clear spring. Slowly we sink to the bottom of the cool waters, and all night long the ripples overhead are heard. Sleep sings its own

sweetness to senses which are never so much a-slumber but that they understand; and when at daybreak the waters flow away, we step upon the earth with glowing limbs, strong, red; with eyes like jewels in a bath, and ears that are as capable as the wide heavens themselves. That is in the days of our youth: mine are already gone.

The rain pattered on the ground with a loud susurrantion; it was that, perhaps, which seized upon my waking mind, and held it so still. But not altogether that. Somewhere in its depths there was a sense of troubled happiness, which had not yet awakened to consciousness, so that I said to myself, "What can it be?" The answer did not come on the instant; but while I wondered, down came the prodigal rain with a wilder noise, and at the same moment all the scenes of yesterday rushed tumultuously into my mind. "Arthur Lamont!" my lips exclaimed, without leave or licence of me.

Then I rose, ashamed and troubled. I thought of how I had sat at my bed-foot in the dark last night, asking myself foolish questions—for so I called them now when it was broad daylight. But though I blushed, and even trembled at my nonsense, as if there was some-

*The Dead Secret* (1979), Oxford World's Classics' *No Name* (1986), *Lady Audley's Secret* (1987), and *Man and Wife* (1995) left out the illustrations from *Harper's Weekly*, the *London Journal*, and *Cassell's*, significantly altering plot and character. Recent Broadview editions, however, combine a sophisticated critical apparatus with original illustrations, as in Natalie Houston's edition of *Lady Audley's Secret* (2003) and Maria Bachman's and Don Cox's edition of *The Woman in White* (2006). Importantly, Houston reproduces Thomas Hood's "Maurora Maudeley; or Bigamy and Buttons," an 1865 parody of illustrated sensation fiction (Figure 42.2). This parody, whose heroine's name pokes fun at Aurora Floyd and Lady Audley, features a condensed plot involving stock elements such as bigamy, transportation to Australia, the heroine as governess, murder, a trial, a detective, and the dead alive. Its cartoon-like images similarly allude to many of the genre's clichéd visual elements: "detailism" (Bernstein 1994: 216), thresholds, turbulence, nocturnal scenes, white space, and disguised characters (Wynne 2001: 165). The parody's existence makes clear not only illustration's centrality to Victorian sensation but also its key role in the genre's consolidation by 1865.

While illustration was central to the selling and reading of sensation, authors exercised varied degrees of control over illustrators. Some, like Charles Reade, seized fierce command: he "bullied his illustrators into giving him precisely the effects he demanded" (Cooke 2001: 321). In contrast, Collins wielded almost no control over Harper's illustrations for *The Moonstone*. He did arrange to forward the manuscript in time to allow for illustration, and, falling behind schedule, provided "subjects for the artist" (Farmer 1999: 599). However, he did not see the images until they were in print, then admiring the artist's "real intelligence" and criticizing only the error of depicting Gabriel Betteredge in livery (Farmer 1999: 599). Like Collins, Braddon saw the illustrations to *Eleanor's Victory* only after publication; as Du Maurier records, author and illustrator met at the Royal Academy, where Braddon expressed herself "much delighted" (Du Maurier 1952: 205). Sometimes there exists no record of authors' control over or response to illustrations of their work. This lack of information may have inhibited a generation of critics who emphasized authorial intent, viewing illustration as secondary to letterpress. A later generation of scholars – trained to understand the material book as signifying object and to locate meaning in reader reception and interpretation – has demonstrated willingness to focus on text–image relations without reference to authorial intent (see Kooistra 1995: 2).

If we consider illustrated sensation novels as material objects, it becomes clear that for Victorian readers visual information was often primary: they usually saw illustrations before reading the verbal text. This observation applies across the numerous formats of illustrated sensation. Monthlies like the *Cornhill*, for example, featured full-page illustrations on thick paper, tipped in before the letterpress, using both touch and vision to draw readers' attention to images of the verbal plot to come. Some serials also featured chapter initials, which similarly conveyed visual before verbal information. Large-format publications such as the *Graphic*, *Harper's Weekly*, and the *Illustrated London News* integrated text and image on the same page, featuring an often complex array of interrelated images representing various plot events from the



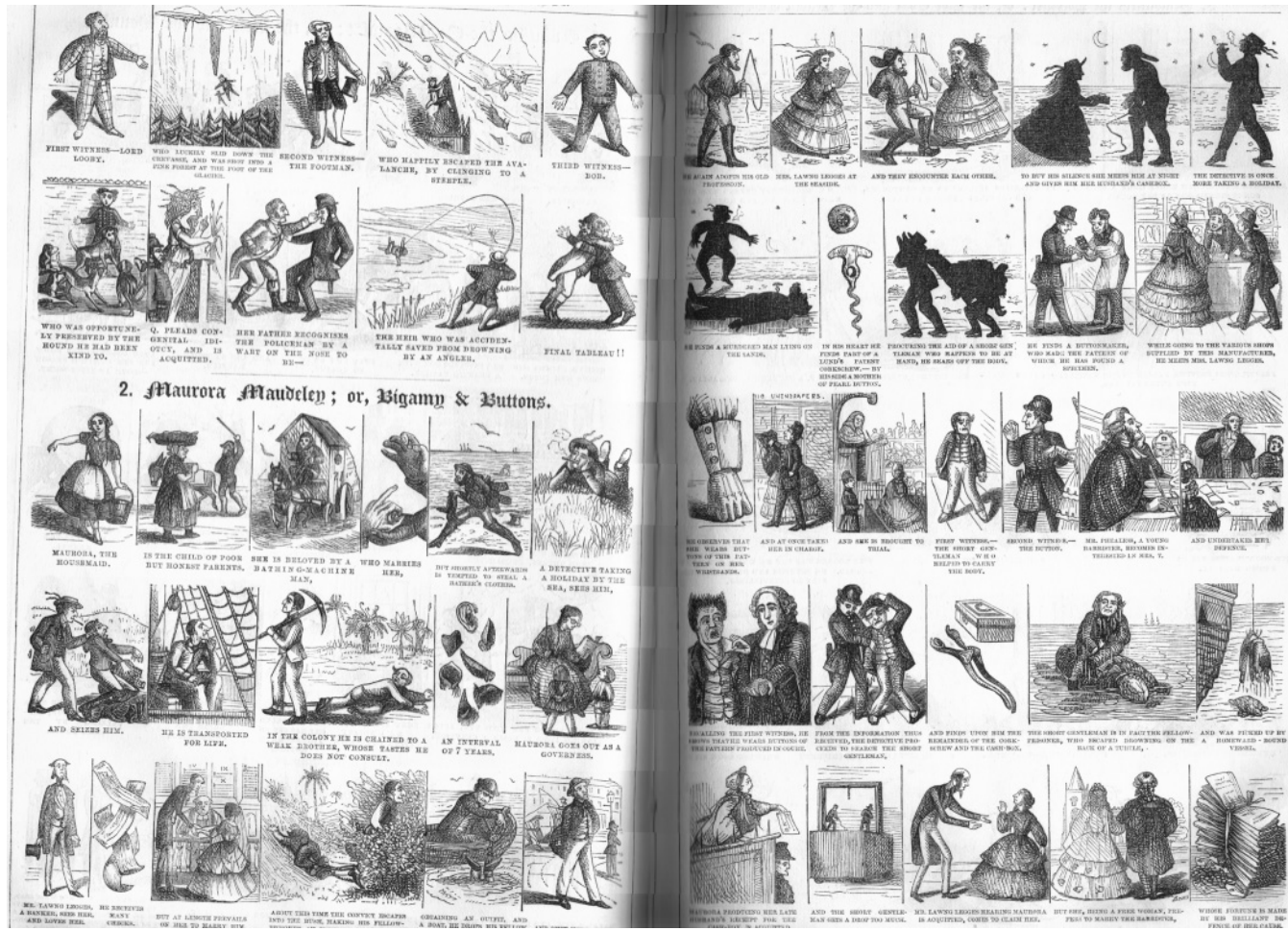


Figure 42.2 Thomas Hood, "Maurora Maudeley; or, Bigamy and Buttons." "Four Illustrated Sensation Novels." *Beeton's Christmas Annual* (1865): 78–9

installment to come. In volume editions, frontispieces teased readers with future plot events stripped of context. Many illustrations were captioned, inviting readers to match the moment in the letterpress to the illustrated plot event while suggesting multivalent interpretive possibilities for both image and caption. Across these varied formats, then, images delivered information to readers before the letterpress. This simple fact significantly shifts critical understandings of sensation fiction's narration, plot, and point of view; of its themes; and of its characterization – in short, of the genre itself.

The primacy of visual information in illustrated sensation fiction affects how sensation plots work at a narratological level. As we have seen, illustrations are largely proleptic, anticipating the letterpress to follow. The verbal text then reiterates and elaborates on what the illustration has already shown and readers wait to see when it meets (or fails to meet) their visual expectations. In relation to the letterpress, illustrations can also be analeptic, referring back to a previous illustration or plot event; repetitive, representing different plot events with comparable elements; iterative, representing repeated action; extradiegetic, representing scenes that do not appear in the verbal text; or even interpictureorial, referring to popular cultural images (Leighton and Surridge 2008: 66–7). The rich archive of illustrated sensation fiction provides numerous examples of this complex visual–verbal interplay.

Visual prolepsis alone has a momentous effect on the sensation genre. Nicholas Daly sees sensation as “a machine for the production of suspense” (1999: 478), but we must modify this observation in light of illustration's anticipation of plot detail. In *Griffith Gaunt*, for example, William Small's illustration to part 9 shows a body being pulled out of a moat (Figure 42.3), a development at which the letterpress takes time to arrive. We thus read most of part 9, including a scene in which the heroine hears her husband crying, “Murder!” (March 1866: 187), knowing that someone will die and a body will be found. Given this flagrant visual prolepsis, Arthur Pollard's description of the novel as rife with “mystery” and “surprise” (Pollard 1975: 225) must be amended. Illustration refines readers' questions from “What will happen next?” to “Whose body will be found? Who or what killed this person?” Indeed, some proleptic illustrations gave away so much plot as to become intertwined with the genre's trope of fatality, as in Collins's *Armadale*, in which part 2's illustration of “The Two Armadales” sitting together (December 1864: 639) must have had a striking effect on the serial reader, who had ended part 1 reading the injunction, “Never let the two Allan Armadales meet in this world” (November 1864: 546). Suspense still exists here, but the reader becomes an active plotter, imagining different narrative possibilities in light of visual information combined with the verbal plot thus far: “How will the two Armadales meet? Will the father's injunction have no force? How can friendship develop between the sons of murderer and victim?”

A different but striking effect of visual prolepsis is found in *Lady Audley's Secret* (Figure 42.4). Part 1's illustration, dominating the top of the page, shows a woman asleep with a newborn while a man steals from the room; it bears the caption, “Talboys Deserts his Wife and Child.” The image invites readers to ask, “Why is



"GRIFFITH GAUNT."

Page 104.

Figure 42.3 Charles Reade, *Griffith Gaunt*. *Argosy* (August 1866): facing p. 169

Talboys leaving? Where is he going? What will his wife and baby do next?" The letterpress (running under the novel's title, *Lady Audley's Secret*, and the chapter title, "Lucy") offers one possible answer to these questions. It begins with the arrival of the lovely "Lucy Graham" as governess near Audley Court, followed by her marriage to Sir Michael. Only then does the letterpress shift to the conversation in which George Talboys reveals to his fellow traveler that he abandoned his wife and child to seek his fortune in Australia. The *London Journal's* juxtaposition of image and text has, however, already prompted readers to infer Lady Audley's secret: she is Helen Talboys. George's analeptic narrative merely elaborates the information conveyed in the opening image of the abandoned mother and child, which (with the illustrated plot's altered unfolding) arouses readers' sympathy for Braddon's heroine in a way never achieved by the unillustrated letterpress.

In volume editions, frontispiece illustrations were also proleptic, preceding the entire letterpress; they could suggest a shocking plot event long before the verbal text. John Everett Millais's 1864 frontispiece for *No Name*, for example, showed a beautifully dressed Magdalen Vanstone gazing out of a window, her hand moving ominously towards a bottle. As Douglass observes, "we see Millais's illustration of Magdalen's potential suicide. . . . [This image] heightens the anxiety of the text by freezing this gripping moment in the life of Magdalen. Interestingly, rather than simply waiting and watching . . . Magdalen appears in the process of reaching for the poison" (Douglass 2007: 64). At the letterpress's opening, readers of this illustrated

March 21, 1863.]

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[VALDOYS DESERTS HIS WIFE AND CHILD.]

## LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET.

BY THE  
AUTHOR OF "AURORA FLOYD."

## CHAPTER I.

LUCY.

It lay down in a hollow, rich with fine old timber and luxuriant pastures; and you came upon it through an avenue of limes, bordered on either side by meadows, over the high hedges of which the cattle looked inquisitively at you as you passed, wondering, perhaps, what you wanted; for there was no thoroughfare, and unless you were going to the Court you had no business there at all.

At the end of this avenue there was an old arch and a clock-tower, with a stupid, bewildering clock, which had only one hand; and which jumped straight from one hour to the next, and was therefore always in extremes. Through this arch you walked straight into the gardens of Audley Court.

A smooth lawn lay before you, dotted with groups of rhododendrons, which grew in more perfection here than anywhere else in the county. To the right there were the kitchen gardens, the fish-pond, and an orchard bordered by a dry moat, and a broken ruin of a wall, in some places thicker than it was high, and everywhere overgrown with trailing ivy, yellow stonewort, and dark moss. To the left there was a broad gravelled walk, down which, years ago, when the place had been a convent, the quiet nuns had walked hand in hand; a wall bordered with espaliers, and shadowed on one side by goody oaks, which shut out the fat landscape, and circled in the house and gardens with a darkening shelter.

The house faced the arch, and occupied three sides of a quadrangle. It was very old, and very irregular and rambling. The windows were uneven; some small, some large, some with heavy stone mullions and rich stained glass, others with frail lattices that rattled in every breeze; others so modern that they might have been added only yesterday. Great piles of chimneys rose up here and there behind the pointed gables, and seemed as if they were so broken down by age and long service, that they must have fallen but for the straggling ivy which, crawling up the walls and trailing even over the roof, wound itself about them and supported them. The principal door was squeezed into a corner of a turret at one angle of the building, as if it was in hiding from dangerous visitors, and wished to keep itself a secret—a noble door for all that—old oak, and studded with great square-headed iron nails, and so thick that the sharp iron knocker struck upon it with a muffled

sound; and the visitor rang a clanging bell that dangled in a corner amongst the ivy, lest the noise of the knocking should ever penetrate the stronghold.

A glorious old place—a place that visitors felt into raptures with; feeling a yearning wish to have done with life, and to stay there for ever, staring into the cool fish-ponds, and counting the bubbles as the roach and carp rose to the surface of the water—a spot in which Peace seemed to have taken up her abode, setting her scolding hand on every tree and flower; on the still ponds and quiet alleys; the shady corners of the old-fashioned rooms; the deep window-seats behind the painted glass; the low meadows and the stately avenues—ay, even upon the stagnant well, which, cool and sheltered as all else in the old place, hid itself away in a shrubbery behind the garden, with an idle handle that was never turned, and a lazy rope so rotten that the pulley had broken away from it, and had fallen into the water.

A noble place; inside as well as out, a noble place—a house in which you incontinently lost yourself if ever you were so rash as to go about it alone; a house in which no one room had any sympathy with another, every chamber running off at a tangent into an inner chamber, and through that down some narrow staircase leading to a door which, in its turn, led back into that very part of the house from which you thought yourself the farthest; a house that could never have been planned by any mortal architect, but must have been the handiwork of that good old builder—Time, who, adding a room one year, and knocking down a room another year, topping over now a chimney coeval with the Plantagenets, and setting up one in the style of the Tudors; shaking down a bit of Saxon wall there, and allowing a Norman arch to stand here; throwing in a row of high narrow windows in the reign of Queen Anne, and joining on a dining-room after the fashion of the time of Hanoverian George I. to a refectory that had been standing since the Conquest, had contrived, in some eleven centuries, to run up such a mansion as was not elsewhere to be met with throughout the county of Essex. Of course, in such a house, there were secret chambers: the little daughter of the present owner, Sir Michael Audley, had fallen by accident upon the discovery of one. A board had rattled under her feet in the great nursery where she played, and on attention being drawn to it, it was found to be loose, and so removed, revealing a ladder leading to a hiding-place between the floor of the nursery and the ceiling of the room below—a hiding-place so small that he who hid there must have crouched on his hands and knees or lain at full length, and yet large enough to contain a quaint old carved oak chest, half filled with priest's vestments, which had been hidden away, no doubt, in those cruel days when the life of a man was in danger if he was discovered to have harboured a

Roman Catholic priest, or to have had mass said in his house.

The broad outer moat was dry and grass-grown, and the laden trees of the orchard hung over it with gnarled, straggling branches that drew fantastical patterns upon the green slope. Within this moat there was, I have said, the fish-pond—a sheet of water that extended the whole length of the garden, and, bordering which, there was an avenue, called the lime-tree walk; an avenue so shaded from the sun and sky, so screened from observation by the thick shelter of the over-arching trees, that it seemed a chosen place for secret meetings, or for stolen interviews; a place in which a conspiracy might have been planned, or a lover's vow registered with equal safety; and yet it was scarcely twenty paces from the house.

At the end of this dark arcade there was a shrubbery, where, half-buried amongst the tangled branches and the neglected weeds, stood the rusty wheel of that old well of which I have spoken. It had been of good service in its time, no doubt; and busy nuns have, perhaps, drawn the cool water with their own fair hands; but it had fallen with disuse now, and scarcely any one at Audley Court knew whether the springs had dried up or not. But sheltered, as was the solitude of this lime-tree walk, I do not very much if it was ever used in any romantic uses. Often, in the cool of the evening, Sir Michael Audley would stroll up and down smoking his cigar, with his dog at his heels, and his pretty young wife dawdling by his side; but, in about ten minutes, the baronet and his companion would grow tired of the rustling limes and the still water, hidden under the spreading leaves of the water-lilies, and the long, green vista, with the broken well at the end, and would stroll back to the white drawing-room, where my lady played dreamy melodies by Beethoven and Mendelssohn, till her husband fell asleep in his easy chair.

Sir Michael Audley was fifty-six years of age, and he had married a second wife three months after his fifty-fifth birthday. He was a big man, tall and stout, with a deep, sonorous voice, handsome black eyes, and a white beard—a white beard which made him look venerable against his will, for he was as active as a boy, and one of the hardest riders in the country. For seventeen years he had been a widower, with an only child—a daughter—Alicia Audley, now eighteen, and by no means too well pleased at having a step-mother brought home to the court; for Miss Alicia had resigned supreme in her father's house since her earliest childhood, and had carried the keys, and jangled them in the pockets of her silk aprons, and lost them in the shrubbery, and dropped them into the pond, and given all manner of trouble about them from the hour in which she entered her teens, and had, on that account, detested herself into the sincere belief that for the whole of that period she had been keeping house.

Figure 42.4 Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*. London Journal (21 March 1863): 185

edition subsequently encounter the happy Magdalen in her family home and may ponder, “What will bring her to contemplate suicide?” and “Will she kill herself?” The unfolding of the verbal text becomes an answer to these questions, ones that would never have occurred to readers of an unillustrated version. The radically proleptic nature of illustration, then, shifts the unfoldings of plot and the machinery by which sensation fiction achieves its effects. While diminishing one form of suspense (“What will happen next?”), illustration augments the reader’s role as inventor of plots that may explain events depicted in proleptic images. D. A. Miller characterizes sensation fiction readers as “repeatedly jumping to unproven conclusions,” stimulated by a genre that brought to Victorian literature a “technology of nervous stimulation” (1986: 114). This observation applies even more forcefully to illustrated sensation fiction, whose material form included proleptic and shocking images that stimulated nervous readers by “jumping” ahead of the verbal plot.

Sensational images could also be analeptic, referring to plot events already described by the letterpress. In *Armada!e*, for example, part 4’s chapter initial reminds readers of the situation left hanging by part 3: the two Allan Armadales are trapped on the wrecked ship where one’s father murdered the other’s (Figure 42.5). Similarly, the illustration for part 6 of *Margaret Denzil’s History* depicts the closing paragraphs of part 5, a moment of sexual tension when Margaret is interrupted by her future lover while reading his letter; her abrupt movement causes the letter to “[flutter] . . . to the ground” (March 1864: 384). Philip Allingham notes that analeptic images may serve as an *aide mémoire* reminding readers where the last installment broke off (2009: 126). This is true; however, in sensation fiction particularly, the analeptic image often thrusts readers back into a moment of terror or tension, exacerbating the genre’s “technology of nervous stimulation” (Miller 1986: 114).

Other narratological effects of sensational illustration include extradiegesis, when an image depicts a scene absent from the letterpress, and iteration, when images show repeated actions. A salient example of extradiegesis occurs in part 6 of *The Moonstone*, in which Harper’s illustrators represented the diamond in an Indian landscape, a scene never represented in the verbal text. This chapter initial aligns the stone with the Moon God’s religious order (symbolized by the moon) and with Indian culture (represented by the dome), strongly suggesting that India is the diamond’s true home (Leighton and Surridge 2009: 230). Iterative images have an important place in Victorian fiction: in realism, they underscore the daily activities that form the fabric of the genre; in sensation, they emphasize key tropes or themes. In *The Moonstone*, for example, repeated threshold images (people standing at doors, windows, on cliffs, or at the sea) suggest how the plot’s sensational events push characters out of comfortable assumptions and into the liminal spaces of their identities, both social and personal (Leighton and Surridge 2009: 218–22).

Illustration affected not only sensational plots but also point of view, suggesting alternative ways of seeing the same events. Often the verbal text embodied one point of view and the image another, anticipating the filmic technique of shot–reverse shot. This technique appears in *Armada!e*’s parts 18 and 19, in which the verbal text

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FEBRUARY, 1865.

*Armada!.*

BOOK THE SECOND.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SHADOW OF THE PAST.



**O**NE stepping back under the dark shelter of the bulwark, and one standing out boldly in the yellow light of the moon, the two friends turned face to face on the deck of the timber-ship, and looked at each other in silence. The next moment Allan's inveterate recklessness seized on the grotesque side of the situation by main force. He seated himself astride on the bulwark, and burst out boisterously into his loudest and heartiest laugh.

"All my fault," he said; "but there's no help for it now. Here we are, hard and fast in a trap of our own setting—and there goes the last of the doctor's boat! Come out of the dark, Midwinter; I can't half see you there, and I want to know what's to be done next."

Midwinter neither answered nor moved. Allan left the bulwark, and, mounting the forecastle, looked down attentively at the waters of the Sound.

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embeds readers in Lydia Gwilt's consciousness, forcing them to identify with her as she plans to murder Armadale and Midwinter. However, the illustrations allow readers a third-person (potentially judging) perspective, as they see Lydia scheming with Manuel and Dr. Downward. The text thus refuses to allow readers to rest in one perspective, forcing them to see events from radically incompatible viewpoints. Reviewers who characterized *Armadale* as the "big black baboon" of sensation fiction ("Contemporary Literature," 1866: 270) may in part have been responding to the way the novel thus pits text against image, identification against moral judgment.

A similar alternation of verbal and visual points of view plays a salient role in *Harper's* serialization of *The Woman in White*, although to different effect. In the Blackwater Park section, when Marian and Laura are held in Fosco's and Percival's power, the verbal text embeds readers in Marian's diary but the images maintain a third-person perspective, showing her surrounded by villains. In part 15, for example, the text focalizes through Marian's diary, but the illustrations show Fosco and Percival trying to force Laura to sign over her money and Marian sending a letter to the post, seeking help from a lawyer. Similarly, the illustration to part 22 that accompanies Fosco's reading of Marian's diary shows her powerless and faint at her desk, over the caption, "Oh, My God! Am I going to be ill?" (21 April 1860: 253). The alternation of first- and third-person viewpoints reverses the effect of *Armadale*, consolidating identification with Marian and Laura but suggesting their resistance's futility. In particular, the illustrations to the Blackwater section repeatedly show documents being read, carried, written, and signed under duress, depicting texts as subject to conflict and manipulation. Read in this light, Fosco's reading of Marian's diary merely ups the ante in the power struggle over textual production and circulation. Images, then, do not merely add to sensational letterpress, but change the unfolding of plot and point of view, altering techniques of reading.

Indeed, Houston argues that sensation "demonstrates the necessity of new ways of reading . . . necessary . . . to survive in the new Victorian culture of information" (2003: 28). Attending to illustration allows us to extend Houston's argument to see visual reading as a key component of literacy. Many sensational texts feature villains in disguise, under aliases, or incompatible with standard depictions of villainy. Lady Audley (bigamist and would-be murderer), for example, is a golden-haired, blue-eyed beauty; Lydia Gwilt (bigamist and murderer) seems a modest governess; and Fosco (spy) is fat and jolly, a lover of opera and pets. Sutherland notes that William Palmer's 1856 trial had showcased an accused murderer who did not look evil (1991: 248–9): as Charles Dickens wrote, "there is something admirable, and difficult to reconcile with guilt, in [his] bearing" (1856: 505). In the sensational world where appearances do not match character, illustrators faced a problem: how to portray evil that does not appear on the surface (Wynne 2001: 165). Sensational illustration variously addressed this difficulty, sometimes deploying captions, sometimes alternating idealized and villainous-looking portraits; however, a common trope emphasized the detective's scrutiny of visual detail, a skill that models the necessity of careful visual reading. In

*Lady Audley's Secret*, for example, Robert's main task is to penetrate his aunt's beautiful facade; to do so, he must link Helen's life with that of Lady Audley, an identification that rests on luggage labels, handwriting, and descriptions of Helen. Lady Audley's Pre-Raphaelite portrait provides a linchpin in this identification, revealing to George that Helen is Lady Audley. Part 4's key illustration emphasizes visual interpretation: it shows George holding a candle to the portrait and scrutinizing it, with Robert's figure in the background. Readers view this scene from behind the easel: we do not see the portrait, but we see the process of visual reading that will lead George and Robert to the truth.

This scene of visual interpretation finds a parallel in *Eleanor's Victory*, where Eleanor must identify the gambler who fleeced her father as Launcelot Darrell, heir to the neighboring estate. As in *Lady Audley's Secret*, proof lies in visual form, this time in both memory (Eleanor saw Darrell on the night of her father's suicide) and a sketch that Darrell had drawn of Vane and himself at a Paris gambling house, dated the night of Vane's suicide. *Once a Week's* artists depicted Eleanor as she makes the connection that will lead to the villain's downfall. As in *Lady Audley's Secret*, readers do not see the sketch itself; rather, we see Eleanor gazing at it, with the painter Richard behind her. As Garrison observes, the letterpress depicts Eleanor's identification of Darrell as photographic: "this sudden conviction . . . flashed upon her" (qtd. in Garrison 2008: 121). The presence of Richard, a visual artist, echoes that of Robert, standing behind George: for both, facility with visual reading will lead to knowledge in this increasingly visual age.

Indeed, the visual facility associated with detection carried its own thrill, as many sensational illustrations position readers in vicarious identification with lurking, spying, and eavesdropping characters. Readers could share Marian Halcombe's mid-night excursion on the rooftop when she spies on Percival and Fosco (*The Woman in White*, 14 April 1860) or Eleanor's nighttime investigation when she witnesses Darrell and his co-conspirator burning a will (*Eleanor's Victory*, 8 August 1863: 183). At times, however, illustrated sensation fiction suggested visual reading's limits: part 7 of *The Moonstone* shows a gestural sketch of Rosanna Spearman against a dark sky (Figure 42.6). By reducing Rosanna to a dark shape, this image suggests interpretation's limits; the lower-class disabled woman's desire for Franklin Blake is almost illegible in Victorian culture (Leighton and Surridge 2009: 227).

The visual literacy required by sensational readers extends beyond the reading of portraits and sketches to include the documents pervading the genre. Sensation created a "pseudo-documentary surface" (Sutherland 1991: 243), buttressing its far-fetched plot machinery via letters, witness statements, wills, and death certificates. Publishers used typography and woodcuts to convey the "real" nature of these invented documents. For example, part 1 of Collins's *The Law and the Lady* in the *Graphic* included the heroine's signature in the wedding registry, a document that (as we later discover) includes her husband's false name (26 September 1874: 302; Figure 42.7). In a related typographical effect, Part 1 of *Margaret Denzil's History* similarly represents a burned letter with crucial information missing:



lled in Algeria  
his sad career has  
is my deathbed  
dignity,

(November 1863: 594)

Such pseudo-documents position the reader as a witness interpreting the “evidence” of a trial, as Collins suggested in *The Woman in White*: “As the Judge might once have heard [the story], so the Reader shall hear it now” (26 November 1859: 753). Miller notes, however, that “Nothing . . . could be less judicial, or judicious, than the actual hermeneutic practice of the reader of this novel . . . [which delivers] ‘positive personal shocks of surprise and excitement’” (1986: 114). Such typographically reproduced documents lured readers into the frisson of reading other people’s apparently private papers and replicating for the reader the illicit thrill of rifling through people’s hiding places, such as Lady Audley’s drawer (“ransacked” by Luke and Phoebe for evidence of her bigamy) or Eugene’s dressing case in *The Law and the Lady* (in which Valeria finds a photo of his first wife, for whose murder he stood trial).

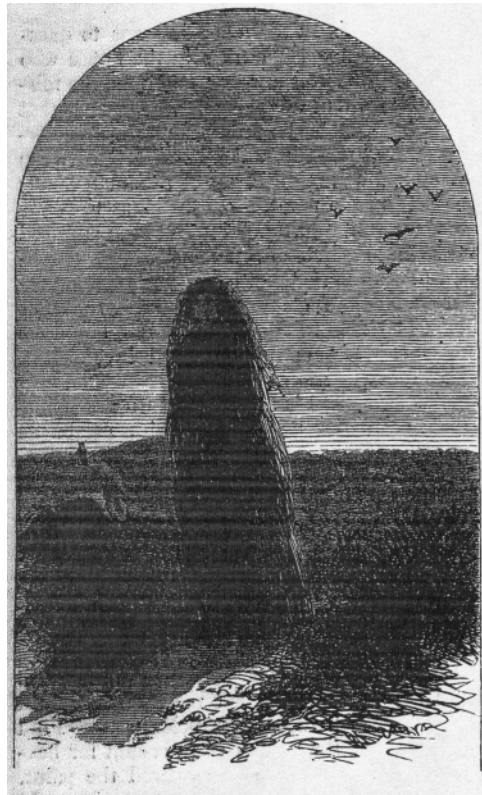


Figure 42.6 Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*. *Harper's Weekly* (15 February 1868): 101

“What!” cried my uncle, in his loudest and cheeriest tones, “you have forgotten your own name already? Well! well! let us hope you will never repent parting with it so readily. Try again, Valeria—try again.”

With trembling fingers I struck the pen through my first effort, and wrote my maiden name, very badly indeed, as follows:—



When it came to my husband's turn I noticed, with surprise, that *his* hand trembled too, and that *he* produced a very poor specimen of his customary signature:—

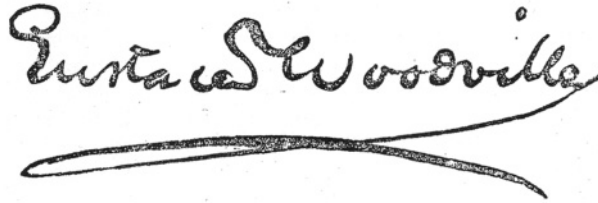


Figure 42.7 Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*. *The Graphic* (26 September 1874): 302

Illustration therefore foregrounds the necessity and pleasure of reading not only letterpress but also images in order to puzzle out plots and to survive in the new Victorian culture of verbal and visual information. Unsurprisingly, then, sensation fiction's most significant and jarring scenes are visual, testing this skill to its limit: Lady Audley witnessing Robert Audley as he returns alive from the fire she set to kill him or Hartright seeing Laura Fairlie standing over her own grave (Figure 42.8). If realism owes a debt to the documentary effect of photography (Armstrong 1999), then we may say that sensation fiction's plots hinge on the reader resolving textual scenes that seem like trick (or spirit) photography – scenes of apparently radical incongruity that illustration may represent but not decode. Notably, *Harper's Weekly's* illustration of Hartright confronting Laura Fairlie over her own gravestone precedes the letterpress's narration, so that the reader is shocked visually, then verbally by the scene. The scene is rendered more uncanny by the fact that it reiterates an earlier illustration of Marian's dream in part 17: “[Hartright] was kneeling by a tomb of white marble; and the shadow of a veiled [*sic*] woman rose out of the grave” (17 March 1860: 174).

Sensation fiction also exhibited remarkable self-reflexivity about its connection to visual culture, habitually featuring characters who specialize in print and visual literacy. Richard from *Eleanor's Victory* is a scene painter who scouts sensational scenes;



Figure 42.8 Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*. *Harper's Weekly* (19 May 1860): 309

Miserrimus Dexter from *The Law and the Lady* is an artist. Hartright from *The Woman in White* is an artist, engraver, and art teacher, a point stressed by the illustrated serial, which shows him studying engravings with Mr. Fairlie and teaching Laura to draw. Moreover, sensational letterpress often used the vocabulary of visual art, describing scenes as pictures. Hence, on relating his first meeting with Laura Fairlie, “standing by a rustic table . . . and absently turning over the leaves of a little sketch-book that lay at her side (10 December 1859: 795), Hartright describes not the woman but the drawing he made of her, which lies on his desk as he writes. Importantly, one of the illustrations for this part shows Laura in the pose Hartright describes, with the caption, “She Was Standing Near a Rustic Table – .” To the reader, it is not clear if this depicts the artist’s rendering of Laura or his rendering of Hartright’s own portrait of her. This self-reflexive episode captures the extent to which sensation fiction weaves into itself an awareness of the creation and interpretation of images.

If sensation fiction preached to the nerves (Mansel 1863: 482), then, it often reached them via the eye. For many sensation novels, illustration formed a central part of plot, suspense, atmosphere, characterization, and theme. The genre not only features scenes of visual reading, but demonstrates awareness of its own central place in visual culture.

Recent criticism of the genre has started to acknowledge illustration's crucial role in producing meaning in so many sensation novels; as new editions of sensation novels reproduce illustrations, no doubt this acknowledgment will increase as scholars actually see the visual-verbal interplay that Victorian readers first encountered in the heady years of the sensational 1860s and thereafter. A knowledge of this interplay should be central to the critical study and teaching of all illustrated sensation novels. As Douglass argues, "We compromise the creative nuances and thrilling sensation envisioned by their creators and experienced by their first readers when we ignore these illustrations and their organic relation to the text" (2007: 71).

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## The Pre-Raphaelite Realism of the Sensation Novel

*Sophia Andres*

Like transfixed spectators of Pre-Raphaelite art, some critics of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Pre-Raphaelite portrait of Lady Audley have attempted to explain its fascinating appeal by tracing it to Pre-Raphaelite paintings. In her discussion of the novel, Virginia Morris, for instance, comments, "Robert Audley attributes the sinister beauty of Lady Audley's revealing portrait to some unnamed Pre-Raphaelite. Edward Burne-Jones captures that quality in his portrait of the seductress Sidonia von Bork" (1990: 94). Braddon's readers, Andres points out, "could have imaginatively matched this portrait to an array of Pre-Raphaelite femme fatales, as, for instance, *Bocca Baciata* which caused an outrage when it was first exhibited" (2005: 2). Kate Flint, on the other hand, sees Lady Audley's portrait as Braddon's response to "the moral equivocation of art critics commenting on the unorthodox attractions of Pre-Raphaelite female models" (1993: 283). Besides, Katherine Montwieler contends, "although Braddon might simply be flaunting her familiarity with the contemporary art scene and her opinion of art critics, I recognize the portrait's debt to the Pre-Raphaelites as a mark of Lucy's erotic power" (2000: 50). Lyn Pykett, in *The "Improper" Feminine*, offers an interpretation not only of this particular portrait but of Braddon's various allusions to Pre-Raphaelite art in her other novels as well: "Braddon's women rise up from the page like the heavily sensualised female subjects of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, and are offered as the object of the reader's rapt gaze" (1995: 98).

Like Braddon, Wilkie Collins has also been associated with his Pre-Raphaelite friends. His memorable portrait of Marian in *The Woman in White* has been traced to Millais's *Mariana* (Richard Collins 2003: 136), while other critics have commented on Collins's Pre-Raphaelite attention to minute details in his drawing of landscapes (Frick 1985: 12–13). Like other sensation novelists, Charles Reade also drew on

Pre-Raphaelite art in his fiction. In *Christie Johnstone*, for instance, as Wayne Burns has already shown, Charles Reade's transparent affinity with the Pre-Raphaelites is voiced through Charles Gatty, a young painter who expresses the early principles of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: "It is as if Holman Hunt or the young Millais were speaking; every word fits the Pre-Raphaelite pattern – from the arguments concerning an 'out-o'-door scene' to the criticism of the Academy and the necessity for reform" (Burns 1945: 1151–2).

Such critics as Kate Flint, Lyn Pykett, Marlene Tromp, Pamela Gilbert, Aeron Haynie, and Richard Fantina have emphasized the crucial role the sensation novel played in subverting Victorian gender ideology endorsed by the realist novel, yet these critics have overlooked the role of the Pre-Raphaelites in the sensation novel's resistance not only to conventional gender constructs but also to the critics' denigrating remarks concerning its status in the literary hierarchy. Here I wish to delve into some of the reasons sensation novelists associated their genre with Pre-Raphaelite art by examining contemporary reviews of the sensation novel and by discussing Braddon's and Collins's redrawings of Pre-Raphaelite art.

Margaret Oliphant's often quoted vituperative attack on the sensation novel in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1867 is representative of other reviewers' condemnation of the genre to the "lower strata of light literature" (qtd. by Nemesvari and Surridge in Braddon 1998a: 601). Yet, like other contemporary reviewers, she was at a loss to explain its spectacular popularity and, more importantly, the approval it continued to receive from the highly acclaimed *Times* and other major critical journals. Though apparently censuring the heavy reliance of sensation novelists on extraordinary incident at the expense of the psychological development of characters or the cultivation of morality, Oliphant essentially exalts realist fiction while condemning sensation fiction as inferior. Yet instead of juxtaposing the verisimilitude of characters in realist novels to the outrageous representation of those in sensation novels, she commends the wholesome representation of gender constructs in romances, which also strained realistic representation:

Now it is no knight of romance riding down the forest glades, ready for the defence and succour of all the oppressed, for whom the dreaming maiden waits. She waits now for flesh and muscles, for strong arms that seize her, and warm breath that thrills her through, and a host of other physical attractions, which she indicates to the world with a charming frankness . . . but were the sketch made from the man's point of view, its openness would at least be less repulsive. (qtd. by Nemesvari and Surridge in Braddon 1998a: 602)

Replete with contradictions like the aforementioned one, Oliphant's critique captures contemporary responses to the phenomenon of the sensation novel, perceived as a threat to realist novelists for its blatant subversion of contemporary class and gender ideology and its enormous popularity.



Unlike the realist novel, which was carefully crafted, the sensation novel, for its detractors, was a mass-produced commodity lacking artistic value. George Eliot's letter to John Blackwood on 11 September 1866 is representative of this perspective:

And yet I sicken again with despondency under the sense that the most carefully written books lie, both outside and inside peoples' minds, deep undermost in a heap of trash. I suppose the reason my 6/- editions are never on the railway stalls is . . . [that they] are not so attractive to the majority as "The Trail of the Serpent"; still a minority might sometimes buy them if they were there. (qtd. in Nemesvari and Surridge 1998: 12)

Like Oliphant, Eliot condemns the sensation novel to the lowest strata of the literary hierarchy but at the same time envies its success. In the same vein, Henry Mansel dismissed sensation novels as "mere trash" that were "called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply" (qtd. by Nemesvari and Surridge in Braddon 1998a: 574–5). Appealing to "excitement, and excitement alone" (1998a: 573) the sensation novelists, in Mansel's view, never pursue a "deep knowledge of human nature, graphic delineations of individual character, vivid representations of the aspects of Nature or the workings of the soul – all the higher features of the creative art" – the features of the realist novel (1998a: 575).

In such a hostile climate then, Braddon's cry, "Can the sensational be elevated by art, & redeemed from all it's [*sic*] coarseness?" was not just her own concern but that of other writers of the sensation novel who had been ostracized from the realm of the highly elevated genre of the realist novel (letter, May 1863: Wolff 1974: 13–14). In Pre-Raphaelite art, which in its early years had also been vehemently condemned in terms of "corruption" and "disease" similar to those used by the detractors of the sensation novel, I believe sensation novelists sought a new realism which would unveil aspects of reality that the realist novelists had hitherto overlooked or were forbidden to discuss.

A brief overview of Victorian reviews of literature or painting points to the contemporary bias for the amalgamation and expansion of the temporal and spatial arts rather than their separation and distinction. Paintings were interpreted as if they were narratives, and narratives in terms of painterly techniques (Andres 2005: xviii–xix). A reviewer's comments on *The Woman in White* are representative of the prevalent tendency to interpret sensation (as well as realist) novels in pictorial rather than in narrative terms: "He does not attempt to paint character or passion," the reviewer contends; his characters "are not staring at the spectators, or, if they are, they are staring listlessly and vacantly . . . their eyes bent in one direction . . . half-painted, sketchy figures" (1860, qtd. in Page 1974: 83–4). Sensation novelists were keenly aware of reviewers' demands for visual narratives and the fact that the Pre-Raphaelites had initiated new modes of perception, a new realism which extended aesthetic, class, and gender boundaries.

## The Pre-Raphaelite New Realism

In his review of *The Awakening Conscience* (1853–4; Figure 43.1), Ruskin elaborates on the Pre-Raphaelites' ability to express psychological realism through visual signifiers. Countering the contemporary critics' objections to the plethora of objects, which they saw as insignificant distractions that call attention away from the two figures in the painting, Ruskin declares the importance of the distinctness and sharpness of each object in capturing the intensity of the emotion the depicted woman experiences at the moment of the realization of her fall from innocence: "Nothing is more notable than the way in which even the most trivial objects force themselves upon the attention of a mind which has been fevered by violent or distressful excitement" (qtd. in Andres 2005: 17). Recent critics have discussed the correspondence between the Pre-Raphaelites' sharp and minute representation of objects and the intensity of the emotions their subjects, and by extension their viewers, experience.



Figure 43.1 William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience* (1853–4). Oil on canvas, arched top, 76.2 × 55.9 cm (30 × 22 in.). © Tate London 2010

Through their egalitarian treatment of details in the background and the foreground, the Pre-Raphaelites created new modes of perception. Unlike their predecessors, who followed the established laws of light and shade and created a hierarchical order which confirmed the spectators' own preconceived notions of hierarchical social structures, the Pre-Raphaelites depicted reality with scientific accuracy, making new demands on the spectators, compelling them to see hitherto overlooked details, further disturbing them by subverting their hierarchical modes of perception. In effect, the Pre-Raphaelites were teaching their viewers to engage in unhabitual modes of perception, new ways of knowing, and thus better understand the world and those around them.

*The Awakening Conscience*, the first Pre-Raphaelite painting to grapple with prostitution, is representative of the Pre-Raphaelites' new modes of perception, in this case Hunt's attempts to engage his spectators in new ways of perceiving and understanding the motif of the fallen woman. Unlike Ruskin, who in his interpretation of the painting discussed the inexorable future predicament of "the lost girl" (qtd. in Andres 2005: 38), Hunt made a contrary observation on the same subject (in reference to Egg's *Past and Present*): "It is by no means a matter of course that when a woman sins she should die in misery" (qtd. in Landow 1979: 48). Moral ambiguity rather than rigid morality, psychologically complex individuals rather than the types of domestic genre paintings govern such Pre-Raphaelite works as the *Awakening Conscience* and *Found*, as well as numerous other Pre-Raphaelite paintings representing the fallen woman motif. These paintings' indeterminacy still perplexes and engages modern critics as they did at the time they were first exhibited.

### Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Pre-Raphaelite Gender Constructs

In her famous Pre-Raphaelite painting of Lady Audley, Braddon does not merely describe Pre-Raphaelite techniques, the attention to details like "those masses of ringlets with every glimmer of gold, and every shadow of pale brown," "the pretty pouting mouth," and "the new expressions never seen before," but simultaneously aligns the sensation novel with the Pre-Raphaelite modes of perception which revealed the hitherto concealed, compelling readers, like the Pre-Raphaelite spectators, to see the world from a new perspective, to experience the intensity of emotions that the discovery of such perspectives involves and to accept the multiplicity and complexity of individuals beyond the boundaries of contemporary gender constructs. Simultaneously, the portrait captures the contradictory demands placed on women, also represented in Pre-Raphaelite paintings, as for instance, Ford Madox Brown's *Take Your Son Sir* (1856–7) which juxtaposes and simultaneously deconstructs opposing ideas – Madonna and the fallen woman – or Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (1849–50), which conflates a spiritual with a sexual encounter. Similarly, Lady Audley's portrait captures conventional femininity, associated with innocence, "feathery masses of ringlets with every glimmer of gold," "deep blue eyes," "a delicate face," but it also expresses fiery

sensuality, the emasculating threat of the *femme fatale*, “the red scarlet of pouting lips,” “her fair head peeping out of the lurid mass of colour as if out of a raging furnace.” Alicia’s interpretation of the portrait interweaves the Pre-Raphaelite painter’s technique with the sensation novelist’s narrative strategy. To Robert’s dismissal of the portrait as “odd,” Alicia counters: “I’ve a strange fancy on that point. I think sometimes a painter is in a manner inspired, and is able to see, through the normal expression of the face, another expression that is equally a part of it, though not to be perceived by common eyes” (Braddon 1998b: 70–1).

Like Pre-Raphaelite art, the sensation novel transgressed aesthetic, social, and gender boundaries, revealing hitherto unexplored perspectives, as, for instance, unconventional beauty in conventional ugliness, feminine fragility in masculinity, masculine strength in conventional femininity. Yet at times, in order to gain acceptance from more conventional readers, the sensation novel, like Pre-Raphaelite art, hovered on the borderline between the unconventional and the conventional. Through Pre-Raphaelite art, Braddon expressed the sensation novel’s new Pre-Raphaelite realism, which represented gender constructs the realist novel often obfuscated. Her Pre-Raphaelite portraits of Lucy throughout the novel are fluid and indeterminate, constantly subverting gender constructs and stereotypes, eluding the reader’s attempts to contain her within established boundaries. Furthermore, in the process of re-drawing Pre-Raphaelite works often inspired by literature, Braddon is also subverting conventional gender constructs entrenched in literature and art.

Associated with witchcraft and sorcery, Lucy’s portrait evokes Edward Burne-Jones’s *Sidonia von Bork* (1860), as we have seen, or Rossetti’s *Lucrezia Borgia* (1860–1). Yet *Sidonia von Bork* cannot be interpreted without her counterpart, Clara von Bork (Figure 43.2), whose portrait Burne-Jones painted in the same year, the good innocent woman who falls victim to *Sidonia*’s schemes in Wilhelm Meinhold’s *Sidonia the Sorceress*. George’s sister Clara, the “respectable” Victorian woman, is also represented as Lucy’s counterpart; nevertheless, she is not Lucy’s but patriarchal society’s victim. When she first speaks with Robert, she voices the repression other women of her period experience: “I have grown up in an atmosphere of suppression . . . I have stifled and dwarfed the natural feelings of my heart, until they have become unnatural in their intensity” (Braddon 1998b: 200). Initially attracted to her for her resemblance to her brother – “she was so like the friend whom he had loved and lost, that it was impossible for him to think of her as a stranger” (1998b: 202) – Robert marries her as a surrogate for his friend George, for whom he cannot express his homoerotic feelings. In her interpretation of *Sidonia von Bork* and *Clara von Bork* (1860), Elizabeth Prettejohn refers to Meinhold’s story where both women are punished with violence: “Nonetheless, men, and male-dominated society are absolved of responsibility” (2000: 208). Both Lucy and Clara are silenced at the end of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Lucy in a *maison de santé* in a remote town in Belgium and Clara in a marriage to the misogynist Robert. Whether a woman abides by the strictures of conventional behavior or transgresses them, she is ultimately penalized. Men of the upper classes on the other hand often enjoy impunity. As Gail Houston comments,



**Figure 43.2** Edward Burne-Jones, *Clara von Bork* (1860). Watercolor 34.2 × 17.9cm (13½ × 7 in.).  
© Tate London 2010

cruelly forcing Lucy into confinement for her sins against men, Robert never mentions or conducts an unofficial legal investigation of Michael Audley's offense of expecting a young wife's absolute devotion, and George's transgression, desertion of both wife and child. Nor does he question the legal position a married woman was put in when her husband deserted her. Indeed, the male self-interest upon which the laws are made rationalizes George's behavior as for the good of the whole, sets aside Talboys's obsessive rejection of his son as mere idiosyncrasy. (Houston 2000: 28)

No doubt Sir Michael's marriage proposal to Lucy is fraught with contradictions shielded from exposure by the sanctity of tradition. Whereas he begins with romantic notions associated with the occasion, he lapses into the cynicism of emotional self-aggrandizement:

“I scarcely think there is a greater sin, Lucy,” he said solemnly, “than that of the woman who marries a man she does not love. . . . I would not have you commit such a sin for any happiness of mine . . . nothing but misery can result from a marriage dictated by any motive but truth and love.” (Braddon 1998b: 9–10)

Lucy’s response to his proposal is quite unorthodox and yet appropriate in this context, which connects the institution of marriage to legal prostitution: “in the growing twilight, she fell on her knees at his feet. . . . She was still on the ground at his feet, crouching rather than kneeling, her thin white dress clinging about her, her pale hair streaming over her shoulders, her great blue eyes glittering in the dusk” (1998b: 10–11). The scene borrows details from Rossetti’s *Found* (1869; Figure 43.3), apparently representing prostitution, but fraught with contradictions (Andres 2005: 35–6). “Is it a bargain, Lucy?” Sir Michael asks, and though Lucy answers in the affirmative, he leaves “as if he had carried the corpse of that hope which had died at the sound of Lucy’s words. . . . He must be contented, like other men of his age, to be married for his fortune and his position (Braddon 1998b: 11–12).

The narrator evokes the same painting in a later scene where Robert appears at Audley Court when Lucy assumes he has been killed in the fire she set at the inn where he was staying:



Figure 43.3 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Found* (ca. 1869). Oil on canvas, 91.4 × 80 cm (36 × 31¾ in.). Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, USA/Samuel and Mary R. Bancroft Memorial/The Bridgeman Art Library

As he approached her more closely her knees sank under her, and she dropped to the ground; not fainting, or in any manner unconscious; but sinking into a crouching attitude and still crushed into the angle of the wall; as she would have made a tomb for herself in the shadow of that sheltering brickwork. . . . He assisted her to rise; and she obeyed him, very submissively. (1998b: 342)

Indeed, the brickwork in Rossetti's *Found* is as prominent as the subjects of his painting. Once again this painting is invoked when Robert, having discovered Lucy's identity and her previous marriage to George Talboys, accuses her of murdering him and forces her to make her confession to Sir Michael: "When first my lady had fallen on her knees, Sir Michael had attempted to raise her, and had remonstrated with her; but as she spoke he dropped into a chair close to the spot upon which she knelt" (1998b: 347). Replete with the inequities which propelled Lucy to deception, her confession neither moves Sir Michael to empathy nor does it make him aware of his complicity in Lucy's exploitation. Instead, on this occasion, he sees himself as the victim rather than the victimizer as he recalls his marriage proposal, and feels remorse, not for having taking advantage of a beautiful, very young woman but for miscalculating the advantages he could garner from that situation:

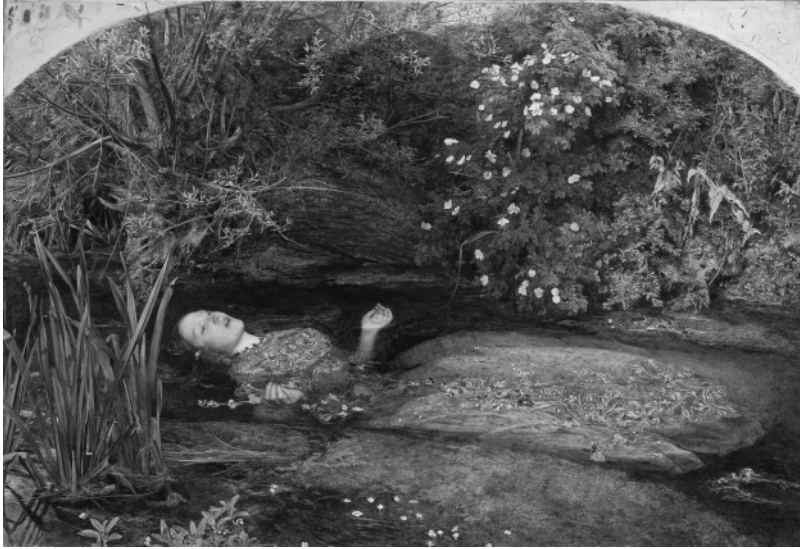
The dream was broken. Sir Michael Audley remembered that summer's evening, nearly two years ago, when he had first declared his love for Mr. Dawson's governess; he remembered the sick, half-shuddering sensation of regret and disappointment that had come over him then . . . (1998b: 351)

Thus Sir Michael absolves himself of any responsibility in Lucy's plight and does not question the legality of Robert's investigation.

Braddon's engagement with Pre-Raphaelite art becomes even more complex and involved in her next sensational bestseller, *Aurora Floyd*, where instead of the general and indirect allusions to Pre-Raphaelite art, she reconfigures specific popular Pre-Raphaelite representations of women and freely criticizes them for entrenching dominant stereotypes. Throughout her novel she demonstrates the absurdity of a culture abiding by restrictive conventional boundaries which stifle identity formation and the expression of subjectivity. When John Mellish, for instance, informs Bulstrode that Lucy is in love with him, Bulstrode dreams of Aurora

standing on the brink of a clear pool of water in a woody recess at Felden, and pointing down through its crystal surface to the corpse of Lucy, lying pale and still amidst lilies and clustering aquatic plants, whose long tendrils entwined themselves with the fair golden hair. (Braddon 1998a: 147)

Here no reader could have missed the redrawing of Millais's famous and popular painting, *Ophelia* (1851–2; Figure 43.4). Braddon's narrative reconfiguration of this painting on numerous occasions in the novel depicts the narcissistic nature of male objectifications of women, simultaneously interweaving lifeless female stereotypes with male fantasies and revealing the violent impulses such fantasies conceal.



**Figure 43.4** John Everett Millais, *Opheelia* (1851–2). Oil on canvas, 76 × 102 cm (30 × 40 in.). © Tate London 2010

Later on in the novel when Bulstrode asks Aurora to justify her year-long absence from a French finishing school and threatens to break the engagement, his fiancée

rose from her chair, and tottering towards him, fell upon her knees at his feet. It seemed to him as confession of guilt. But what guilt? what guilt? What was the dark secret of this young creature's brief life? . . . "Rise from your knees, Aurora; you are killing me with this shame and humiliation." . . . She did not obey him, but sank lower in her half-kneeling, half crouching attitude, her face buried in her hands, only the coils of her black hair visible to Captain Bulstrode. (1998a: 156)

Once again Braddon redraws Rossetti's *Found* only to demonstrate the absurdity of stereotypes which do not apply to strikingly beautiful, wealthy, upper-class women. Leaving Aurora after this scene, Bulstrode can only conceive of Aurora's future within the strictures of conventional boundaries of femininity, the abandoned woman languishing for her departed lover. The dismal sound of the door he closes behind him triggers the "thought of some frail young creature abandoned by her sister nuns in a living tomb. He thought that he would rather have left Aurora lying rigidly beautiful in her coffin, than as he was leaving her to-day" (1998a: 158). Projecting himself as a Lancelot and Aurora as the Lady of Shalott, the protagonist of Tennyson's poem which inspired over a hundred Pre-Raphaelite paintings, Bulstrode is bitterly disappointed when he later on reads in the *Times* of her marriage to his rival, John Mellish, wishing he was reading about her death instead.



Bulstrode's wish for the silencing of the unattainable Pre-Raphaelite stunner is never granted; instead, Braddon goes on to ridicule male fantasies of women projected in and perpetuated by literature and art. A year after Bulstrode breaks his engagement with Aurora, we are told, Aurora returns home happily engaged to John Mellish, "while worthier Marianas moped in the moated granges till grey hairs showed themselves in glistening bandeaux" (1998a: 181). Braddon thus ridicules Millais's popular *Mariana* (1851), inspired by Tennyson's eponymous poem, yet another aberrant male fantasy of the forsaken woman who renounces self-fulfillment to the consecration of the memory of the lover who forsakes her. Amused by the absurdity of this stereotype, the narrator ridicules it even further by associating Mariana with a male rather than a female character: Conyers, Aurora's groom and former husband who constantly blackmails her by threatening to reveal her secret. In this scene, Conyers, like Mariana, is listlessly waiting for his former lover – not to be reunited with her, but to collect £2,000 as a bribe to disappear from her life. In a chapter titled "He only said, I am a-weary" (1998a: 307; the refrain in Tennyson's "Mariana"), Conyers is looking out of his window, an image reminiscent of women in numerous poems and Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Like Mariana, he is blind to the beauty of the landscape, but, unlike her, he is ironically granted his wish, and is killed that night.

Thus Aurora's illicit marriage becomes legitimate and Aurora is left "happy ever after" at the closing of the novel in spite of her audacious transgressions of gender boundaries. Yet readers do not remember the conventional Aurora in the last paragraph of the novel, "a little changed, a shade less defiantly bright, perhaps, but unspeakably beautiful and tender, bending over the cradle of her first born" (1998a: 549). It is the "barbarous intoxicating, dangerous, and maddening" heroine of over 500 pages that we recall (1998a: 78), who defies the boundaries of conventional femininity by her aggressive, unorthodox behavior, her love of horses, her wild riding outdoors, her impetuous and passionate nature. And in spite of her outrageous conduct, Aurora is triumphant at the end of the novel, thus inspiring her readers to question the absurdity of the restrictive social constraints imposed upon them by their culture, then and now.

### Collins's Pre-Raphaelite Interplays of Light and Shadow

A long letter Collins wrote in response to William Holman Hunt's exhibit in 1886 reveals not only the important principles of Pre-Raphaelite art but also the techniques Collins interwove in his own narrative art: "As a painter of human expression, the most difficult of all achievements in your Art, there is no man among your living English colleagues." He goes on to discuss the spectators' admiration for Hunt's *A Converted British Family Sheltering a Christian Missionary from the Persecution of the Druids* (1849–50), concluding, "slowly and surely that fine work was pleading the good cause with people ignorant of the subtle beauty of it; but insensibly discovering its appeal to their sense of nature and truth" (Collins 1999: II, 251–2; 24 July 1886). In this

letter Collins emphasizes the principles that served as the foundation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and represented their resistance to the canonized aesthetics of the Royal Academy and, by extension, to the contemporary ideology: naturalism, unconventional subjects, an emphasis on expression rather than beauty, the representation of the moment of change rather than of an event of universal appeal.

Collins's *Woman in White* was preceded by several Pre-Raphaelite women in white, as, for instance, his own brother's Charley Collins's *Convent Thoughts* (1850–1), the vulnerable Virgin in Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, idealist conceptions of conventional femininity on one hand with ambiguous, puzzling, disturbing, and transgressive women on the other, such as Ford Madox Brown's *Take Your Son Sir* (1856–7) or William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1853), which represented cultural anxieties about the other, the fallen woman, the outcast.

Besides these figures with whom Collins's woman in white shares affinities, several other Pre-Raphaelite subjects are also redrawn in the novel. Even a cursory look, for instance, at Rossetti's *How They Met Themselves* (1850–60; Figure 43.5) seems but an



**Figure 43.5** Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *How They Met Themselves* (1850–60). Pen and brush, 26.9 × 21.3 cm (10½ × 8 3/8 in.). Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, UK/The Bridgeman Art Library

illustration of the doppelgänger theme in *The Woman in White*. Laura's reaction to Anne Catherick, when the two first meet in the boathouse, is reminiscent of the expressions and the fate of the women who meet in the forest in Rossetti's drawing. Recounting that meeting to Marian, Laura describes her shock at the discovery of her resemblance to Anne:

While I was looking at her, while she was very close to me, it came over my mind suddenly that we were like each other! Her face was pale and thin and weary – but the sight of it startled me, as if it had been the sight of my own face in the glass after a long illness. The discovery – I don't know why – gave me such a shock, that I was perfectly incapable of speaking to her for the moment. (Collins 1998: 282)

As in the legend of the doppelgänger, Anne dies after her encounter with her double, while Laura is presumed dead. By transposing the illegitimate Anne Catherick with her respectable half-sister Laura Fairlie-Glyde, the outcast with the privileged, Collins, like his Pre-Raphaelite friends, undermines contemporary concepts of femininity, demonstrating that women, as long as they are kept uninformed, run the same risks whether they are outcasts or honored members of the upper classes.

In addition to themes for his novel, Pre-Raphaelite paintings provided Collins with his primary narrative technique in *The Woman in White*, namely his treatment of light and shade. Early reviews of such Pre-Raphaelite paintings as, for instance, Millais's *Mariana*, Collins's *Convent Thoughts*, and William Holman Hunt's *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus*, reveal the critics' outrage with the Pre-Raphaelites' unorthodox and primitive treatment of light and shade. A reviewer of these paintings in the *Times* of 7 May 1851 contended: "Their faith seems to consist in an absolute contempt for perspective and the known laws of light and shade, an aversion to beauty in every shape" ("Exhibition" 1851: 8). As mentioned above, the Pre-Raphaelites established new modes of perception through their naturalistic and scientific representation of light and shade and trained their spectators to see details hitherto overlooked by previous painters, thus making them aware of the details which they missed when perceiving the world and those around them. Most often Collins positions his characters in scenes partially lit and partially darkened, surrounded by objects that readers can hardly detect. His landscapes often evoke states of consciousness between waking and dreaming, and forms of knowledge between the real and the imaginary, where conventional boundaries collapse. The Pre-Raphaelite influence on *The Woman in White* did not go unnoticed by contemporary critics. *The Critic*, for instance, noted "that there is an inclination of over-minuteness we cannot deny, but pre-Raffaellitism [*sic*] is in the ascendant" (25 August 1860, qtd. in Page 1974: 82).

As a teacher of drawing, Hartright is naturally sensitive and receptive to his surroundings, admiring "the soft alternations of light and shade" at the beginning of the novel when he is startled by the sudden appearance of the solitary figure of Anne Catherick, the woman in white: "[T]here, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven – stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed

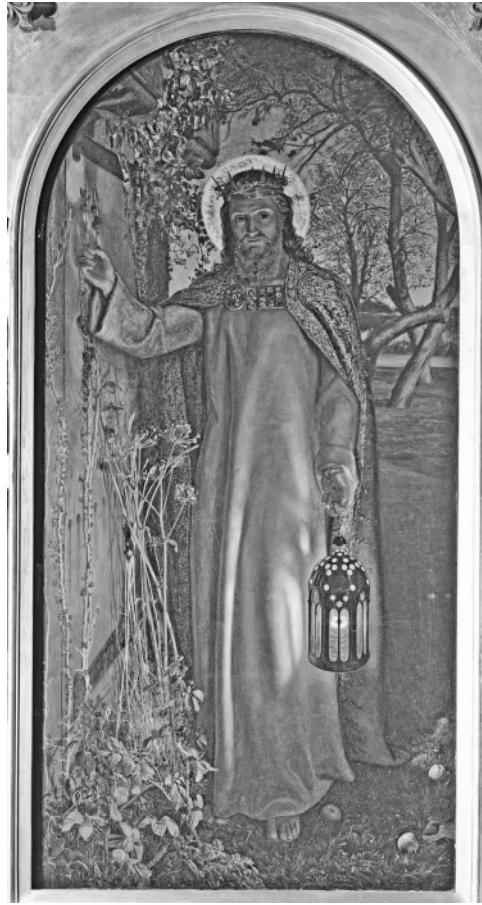


Figure 43.6 William Holman Hunt, *The Light of the World* (1851–3). Oil on canvas, over panel, arched top, 125.5 × 59.8 cm (49½ × 23½ in.). Keble College, Oxford, UK/The Bridgeman Art Library

from head to foot in white garments, her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her” (1998: 19–20). Anne’s ghostly figure silhouetted in the moonlight, her hand raised, evokes Hunt’s *The Light of the World* (1851–3; Figure 43.6) also painted in the moonlight. Collins had visited Hunt at the Rectory Farm in Ewell in 1851 while Hunt was working on this painting (Hunt 1905: I, 302). Exhibited at the same time, *The Awakening Conscience* was conceived by Hunt as “the material interpretation of the idea in “The Light of the World”” (1905: I, 347). Associating this painting with the woman in white, Collins conflates the spiritual and the profane, interweaving them with cultural anxieties and contradictions.

Hartright’s first encounter with Marian at Limmeridge is also drawn in the ambiguous space of the interplay of light and shadow, highlighting and simultaneously

challenging Hartright's conventional response. As Marian is standing by a window gazing outside with her back turned to Hartright he is unable to see her, yet he indulges in the stereotypical male/female, spectator/spectacle gender binaries, only to be shocked by the disjunction between his expectation of a beautiful woman and her appearance when she approaches him – "the lady is ugly" (Collins 1998: 31). Yet when he, like a Pre-Raphaelite artist, focuses on her expression, "bright, frank and intelligent," he realizes the limitations of his conventional perception (1998: 32).

Marian's name, as well as her pose, is reminiscent of John Everett Millais's *Mariana*, but unlike either Tennyson's or Millais's Mariana, who languishes in grief over the lover who has deserted her, Marian is fiercely independent, without any romantic attachments, and places herself in a conventionally masculine role by becoming the rescuer of both her half-sister, Laura, and Walter. When Walter hears from Marian about Laura's engagement to Sir Percival and decides to leave Limmeridge, forsaking his love for her, he bids Marian goodbye. But here, in contrast to his first encounter with her during which he was constrained by his tendency to judge her by the conventional standards of femininity, Walter, like a Pre-Raphaelite artist, focuses on her expression rather than the lack of conventional beauty: "She caught me by both hands – she pressed them with the strong, steady grasp of a man – her dark eyes glittered – her brown complexion flushed deep – the force and energy of her face glowed and grew beautiful with the pure inner light of her generosity and her pity" (1998: 125). At the end of the novel, though he sees himself as instrumental in reinstating Laura's identity, he nevertheless realizes that his accomplishment would not have been possible without Marian's (conventionally male) rescue of Laura (her identity exchanged with that of the dead Anne Catherick) from the asylum and her protection from Sir Percival's and Count Fosco's schemes: "I was indebted to Marian's courage and Marian's love," he admits (1998: 557).

It is in the interplay of light and shadow when Hartright first comes to recognize the resemblance between the impoverished Anne Catherick and the wealthy Laura Fairlie, half-sister to both Marian and Anne. Resembling a Pre-Raphaelite woman enveloped in light and shadow, Laura dressed in white, as she is walking on the terrace bathed in the moonlight, becomes a replica of the apparition-like figure he had earlier encountered on his way to London, who he later realizes is Anne Catherick, Laura's half sister (1998: 87). Thus Walter's life becomes entangled in someone else's fate, in spite of his efforts to extricate himself from an involvement in the life of the woman in white.

Throughout *The Woman in White* Collins fuses the shadow of the other with that of the self, exploring the psychological anxieties generated by the incongruities inherent in conventional gender constructs. Like the Pre-Raphaelites, Collins connects the effects of images in the interplay of light and shadow to the very identity of the observer and, by extension, to that of the reader. In order to understand who he is, Walter must learn to shape his identity not according to prescribed modes of perception but to the discoveries he makes through his own perspectives that reveal what lies behind the shadows of convention.

By redrawing Pre-Raphaelite paintings in their novels, Collins and Braddon, the founders of the sensation novel, enabled their readers to see not just figuratively but literally as well. Even if their readers could not visit art exhibits, they could see widely circulated engravings of Pre-Raphaelite paintings either as separately sold copies or in illustrated papers such as the *Illustrated London News*, the *Athenaeum* and even *Punch*. Thus sensation fiction was grounded in reality. By the 1860s, when these two writers published their bestsellers, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Aurora Floyd*, and *The Woman in White*, even those critics who had denounced Pre-Raphaelite art in the early 1850s now commended it as genuine and quintessentially British. Certainly reconfiguring Pre-Raphaelite painterly techniques as narrative strategies or redrawing Pre-Raphaelite subjects were methods which would elevate the status of the sensation novel, relegated by some critics to the lowest strata of the literary hierarchy.

Yet the critical approbation was but one of Collins's and Braddon's concerns. More importantly, the Pre-Raphaelites offered new ways of perceiving, feeling, and representing reality, which revealed ideological contradictions inherent in conventional class and gender boundaries. Neither Collins nor Braddon, however, merely replicated Pre-Raphaelite subjects, but, as we have seen, often took them as their point of departure to further expand gender boundaries or reveal contradictions masked by contemporary ideology. In the process of redrawing such popular Pre-Raphaelite paintings as *Ophelia* and *Mariana*, Braddon, for example, subverts literary and painterly representations of women which entrench stereotypes. Like the Pre-Raphaelites, interweaving contradictory motifs such as the sacred and the profane, as in the case of their redrawings of *Found* and *The Light of the World*, both Braddon and Collins compelled their readers to see the arbitrary nature of conventional social and gender constructs and in the process accept the multiplicity and complexity of individuals beyond established ideological boundaries.

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Part IV

After Sensation:  
Legacies



# The Legacy of Sensation Fiction: Bodily Power in the New Woman Novel

*Molly Youngkin*

Since the first attempts by second-wave feminists to recover nineteenth-century women writers and their work, the relationship between sensation fiction of the 1860s and New Woman fiction of the 1890s has been complicated. Elaine Showalter, in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977), characterized sensation fiction as the “Age of Brass” after the “Golden Age” of the Brontës, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot (Showalter 1977: 153), yet she praised sensation fiction writers, especially Mary Elizabeth Braddon, for the “witty inversion of Victorian sentimental and domestic conventions” via heroines such as Lady Audley, who were “dangerous” precisely because they looked like the “fragile blonde angel of domestic realism” (1977: 164–5). These heroines were particularly effective, Showalter argued, next to the New Women of the 1890s, who were the products of feminists’ “defensive womanhood” and tendency to focus on the same themes and concepts over and over:

[I]t was unfortunate that the [feminist] rebellion took place just as the literature of the sensationalists was opening up genuinely radical and experimental possibilities in feminine domestic realism. The high spirits and comic exuberance of the sensationalists were soon submerged in the portentous anthems of the feminists. (1977: 181)

Showalter’s privileging of sensation fiction over the New Woman novel was revised significantly by Lyn Pykett in *The “Improper” Feminine: The Women’s Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (1992), where Pykett showed that the New Woman novel need not be placed strictly in contrast to the sensation novel, since the oppressive nature of the Victorian home was exposed both in sensation fiction such as *Lady Audley’s Secret* and in New Woman novels such as Mona Caird’s *Daughters of Danaus*. Of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Pykett wrote:

[T]he domestic idyll of Audley Court is unmasked as a hollow sham, and through this unmasking the economic and power relations of an aristocratic marriage (and the passions it represents) are also exposed. (Pykett 1992: 92)

Caird used similar themes in *Daughters of Danaus*, Pykett argued:

Like the sensation novelists Caird focuses on the constraining and claustrophobic nature of the domestic space . . . sharply contrasted with the freedom of the moors surrounding Hadria's familial home . . . with the free space of the Priory . . . and with the licensed liberty of the Garret . . . in which Hadria and her siblings construct an alternative world of sexual equality. (Pykett 1992: 146)

By exposing this oppression but also offering alternatives to traditional marriage – from bigamous relationships in the sensation novel to free unions in the New Woman novel – Pykett pointed out that both genres were subversive in a way Showalter did not recognize.

Yet while Pykett's work brought together the genres of sensation fiction and New Woman writing, very recent criticism has returned to an emphasis on the differences between the two genres. Jennifer Hedgecock, in *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat* (2008), argues that the *femme fatale*, who includes sensation fiction heroines such as Lady Audley and Lydia Gwilt from Wilkie Collins's *Armada*, is different from the New Woman because she is not “revolutionary” enough:

Unlike the *femme fatale*, the New Woman is a revolutionary who wants to change the structure of society, while the *femme fatale* does not struggle for such change. She simply uses the hegemonic power structure to her own advantage. In this way, the *femme fatale* is aloof and refuses to commit to a social cause, whereas the primary concern of the New Woman is social and economic independence. (Hedgecock 2008: 17–18)

In light of this return to separating the sensation fiction heroine from the New Woman, I would like to re-establish the connection between the two figures, but with a slightly different emphasis than that of Pykett's study. Instead of focusing on the similarities between domestic spaces in the two genres, I focus more fully on the bodies of sensation fiction heroines and New Women, particularly how both use their bodies to control sexual relations in order to effect change on both an individual and a cultural level. In taking this approach, I show how a key aspect of the sensation fiction heroine, her elusive beauty, was used by New Woman authors, making the New Woman novel a legacy of sensation fiction.

The sensation fiction heroine's body is central to her ability to effect change. Lady Audley, for example, uses her body to rise from the “penniless little girl, the daughter of a tipsy old half-pay lieutenant” (Braddon 1987: 18), to the mistress of Audley Court, surrounded by “pictures and gilding, and great looking-glasses that stretch from the ceiling to the floor” (1987: 27). Then, under threat of exposure by her

nephew Robert Audley for the crime of killing her first husband George Talboys, Lady Audley reveals her “slender form” and leans her “beautiful head” on Sir Michael Audley’s knee to convince him that Robert is the one who is mad (1987: 280–3). Lady Audley herself recognizes the power of her beauty – she thinks of “her loveliness as a divine right” (1987: 296) – and ultimately, Robert must “tear away the beautiful veil under which she hides her wickedness” in order to expose Lady Audley’s crime (1987: 253).

While the argument has been made that Lady Audley’s manipulation via her beauty is done with her own individual interests in mind, Gail Turley Houston, in “Mary Braddon’s Commentaries on the Trials and Legal Secrets of Audley Court,” has shown how Lady Audley’s actions cannot be read in such a narrow context; they must also be understood in the context of cultural issues such as land enclosure, marriage law, and consumer culture. In Houston’s reading, Robert Audley’s “misogynist private opinions affect his practice of the law,” and “Audley Court . . . becomes a legal court pitting Robert Audley against Lady Audley” (Houston 2000: 23, 21). Lady Audley’s resistance to Robert, then, is rooted not in her own personal desires but in the desire to combat the legal restrictions placed on women in the nineteenth century.

Equally central to the sensation fiction heroine’s ability to effect change at both an individual and a cultural level is her possession of a secret, since her secret drives her actions and prompts her to use her body to change her circumstances. Lady Audley’s secret as the impetus for her actions is seen in a letter she writes as Helen Talboys, in which she states that “the *secret* which is the key to my life” is what urges her to leave her father’s house at Wildernsea in order to “seek another home and another fortune” (Braddon 1987: 250), thus beginning the series of actions that leads her to try to kill Talboys and to resist Robert’s attempts to put her on trial for this crime. In fact, Lady Audley fulfills Mary Ann Doane’s definition of the *femme fatale*, who “never really is what she seems to be” and who “harbors a threat which is not entirely legitimate, predictable, or manageable” (Doane 1991: 1). The “threat of the woman,” Doane says, becomes a “secret, something which must be aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered” (1991: 1), a characterization that sums up well the culturally informed tension between Robert and Lady Audley.

The sensation heroine’s use of her body to resist and change cultural expectations of women helps us better understand the New Woman, whose cultural and political impact has been well articulated in studies such as Sally Ledger’s *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (1997) and Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis’s *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact* (2001). Yet the New Woman is still sometimes misrepresented as the woman whose penchant for masculine dress renders her asexual, unable to create change unless she de-emphasizes her femininity. In fact, the stereotypical dress of the New Woman belies what is hidden underneath: a feminine body, which can be used just as the body of the sensation fiction heroine is used – to advance women’s standing in Victorian culture. Although the New Woman is not often thought of as possessing a “secret,” there is a certain elusiveness to many New Women. Sarah Grand, in “The New Aspect of the Woman Question,” describes

the New Woman as someone who has been “sitting apart in silent contemplation all these years, thinking and thinking, until at last she solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman’s-Sphere” (Grand 2000: 29–30), suggesting that the New Woman, despite her proclamations about what is just for women in society, is also elusive, never quite fully revealing all of her plans until the right moment.

The elusiveness, and therefore the threat, of the New Woman is often linked to her unconventional sexuality, and male authors of the 1890s show this threat, while also offering an alternative to marriage via the free union. In Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1895), controversial at the time of its publication but now part of the literary canon, Jude and his cousin, Sue Bridehead, break convention and live together as lovers, after both of their marriages fail. Sue’s expression of the problems with conventional marriage – that it creates a feeling of obligation rather than honoring the feeling of desire people have for each other (Hardy 1998: 272) – makes her threat to conventional society apparent, and her beauty is powerfully elusive to Jude. He is drawn in by her “untranslatable eyes, that combined . . . keenness with tenderness, and mystery with both” (1998: 89), and the attraction between Jude and Sue is so strong that both withstand criticism from the wider community for their decision to live together unmarried.

Grant Allen’s *The Woman Who Did* (1895), now less well known than Hardy’s work but wildly popular in its time, also features a New Woman whose elusive beauty prompts her lover to enter into a free union. After asking Alan Merrick to live with her as long as they both love each other, Herminia Barton uses her body to convince Merrick to follow through.

She stretched her arms out pleading; she turned those subtle eyes to him, appealingly. She was a beautiful woman. Alan Merrick was human. The man in him gave way; he seized her in his clasp, and pressed her close to his bosom. (Allen 1895: 46)

Though Herminia’s advocacy of the free union is ridiculed not only by members of society but by her own daughter, the novel’s popularity suggests that late Victorian society was interested in reading about alternatives to traditional marriage, made possible by women’s embrace of unconventional sexuality.

The sexual power of the New Woman is perhaps taken to its greatest extreme in H. Rider Haggard’s *She* (1887), where a dictatorial Arab woman, Ayesha, engages in a fantastical free union with Kallikrates, a beautiful Adonis who holds Ayesha enraptured. Jealous over Kallikrates’ marriage to another woman, Ayesha kills Kallikrates and then uses her own “sublime” beauty to seduce the Englishman Holly, friend and guardian of Kallikrates’ descendant, Leo Vincey. Ayesha’s overpowering beauty reduces Holly to “babbling confusedly” (Haggard 2001: 160), and he follows every order she makes, since he is “too much involved in the web of her fatal fascinations to say her no” (2001:180). Though it is perhaps questionable what kind of message about women’s ability to create cultural change can come from the story of an Arab woman

who rules over the native people of Africa with particular cruelty, Ayesha does reverse the typical power relations between English men and non-English women, suggesting that the actions of strong women can create cultural change in an even wider venue, the British empire.

The New Woman's sexual power, then, is what makes her a legacy of the sensation fiction heroine, and the lesser-known women writers of the 1890s have drawn attention to this sexual power in ways not fully explored by writers such as Hardy, Allen, and Haggard, since women writers' texts represent a wider variety of alternatives to marriage, alternatives in which women control reproduction in a way they cannot in a free union. Three texts – Sarah Grand's *Ideala* (1888), Ménie Dowie's *Gallia* (1895), and Mary Cholmondeley's *Diana Tempest* (1893) – illustrate well how the elusive New Woman's body is put to use to control reproduction and shape sexual relations in the late Victorian period. In *Ideala*, traditional marriage and the free union are rejected in favor of social purity, where women remain single until society applies the moral standard expected of women – purity until marriage – to men. In *Gallia*, the alternative offered is marriage for reproductive purposes only, signaling that women can control the terms of marriage, albeit via a mate-selection process based on genetics, and in *Diana Tempest*, choosing husbands based on genetics is critiqued by a storyline in which women propose marriage to genetically and economically unfavorable men, creating a marriage of equals out of unequal partners.

*Ideala*, whose journey to feminist consciousness is narrated by her friend and admirer Lord Dawne, breaks from her unfaithful husband and contemplates a free union with a doctor at a mental hospital, Lorrimer. But Lord Dawne, espousing the views of social purity feminists of the period, convinces *Ideala* to resist a relationship with Lorrimer, and *Ideala* instead travels to China, where she focuses on helping other women after witnessing Chinese women refusing to bind their feet. This educational aspect of the story emphasizes how patriarchy is often registered directly on women's bodies, and *Ideala* is well aware that English women have their own version of binding, via the tightly laced corsets they wear in order to stay in fashion, despite the detrimental effect on their health. Upon her return to England, *Ideala* devotes herself to helping “the useless units of society,” sometimes interpreted as the prostitutes Josephine Butler helped in her campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Act, a campaign Grand herself joined while still in her teens (Forward 2000: 1–2). In the novel, *Ideala* helps these women become “worthy,” suggesting that control of the body and restraint from sexual relations was key to Grand's view of how women's emancipation might be achieved.

Along this journey to feminist consciousness, *Ideala*'s own body is both elusive and powerful. As Ann Heilmann argues in *New Woman Strategies: Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird* (2004), Dawne, a painter by profession, focuses so intently on *Ideala*'s body that he “transforms *Ideala* into a sequence of erotic stills” (Heilmann 2004: 56–7). Still, there is power in the erotic effect *Ideala* has on Dawne and others. “It was said that she was striking in appearance, but cold and indifferent in manner,” Dawne states early in the novel, yet he also says that *Ideala*'s look draws other people

in: “Without effort, without eccentricity, without anything you could name or define, she impressed you, and she held you – or at least she held *me*, always – expectant” (Grand 2008: 7). The effect of Ideala’s body on Dawne is further emphasized when he describes a picture of her “dressed in a gown of some quaint blue and white Japanese material, with her white throat bare” (Grand 2008: 22). While he stops short of “catalogu[ing] her charms,” since he thinks it “indelicate to describe a woman, point by point, like a horse that is for sale,” it is evident that Ideala’s impact on Dawne is very much through her body.

An elusive yet powerful presence, Ideala’s body functions as a site for commenting on the absolute need for women to control sexual relations in late Victorian society. When Ideala’s husband locks Ideala out of the house one night after she refuses to submit to his wishes, his patriarchal attitude registers directly on her body, yet her body also resists this oppression. Dressed only in a “ball gown” and a “thin shawl,” the night air makes her “fatigued,” yet she does not fall ill, precisely because she is a “healthy organism” (Grand 2008: 42). Later in the story, Ideala again finds strength in her body and leaves her husband after he hits her for refusing to submit to his physical desires, something she cannot bring herself to do because she knows her husband is involved with other women (2008: 76–7). She spends time with Lorrimer, whom she believes will love her whole person (2008: 121), yet she ultimately decides she cannot allow Lorrimer to love her, since she would be subject to her own bodily desires (2008: 132, 151). So she physically removes herself from the situation and travels to China. Upon her return, Ideala still exerts a bodily influence over Dawne, but the nature of this influence has changed. According to Dawne, she still has an elusive quality, but she also exhibits all the characteristics of a strong woman:

She wore a long robe, exquisitely draped. . . . I cannot describe the fashion of this robe, or the form, but I have seen one like it somewhere – it must have been in a picture, or on a statue of a grand heroic woman or a saint; and it suggested something womanly and strong, but not to be defined. (Grand 2008: 165)

The elusive quality of Ideala’s body at the end of the novel indicates that she retains the important qualities of the sensation fiction heroine, but these qualities are pushed in a new direction via the New Woman’s use of her body to control sexual relations. Ultimately, Ideala rejects the roles of wife, mother, and even lover in favor of social purity, which allows her to focus on helping other women, whose own bodies have been controlled by patriarchy. Ideala’s rejection of these roles, via her own bodily actions, is iterated when Dawne presents his final painting of her, “an allegorical picture of her as a mother nursing the Infant Goodness of the race” (Grand 2008: 186). When Ideala sees the painting, she does not realize she is the subject and comments: “What a gaunt creature! and that baby weighs at least twelve stone!” (2008: 186). Ideala’s inability to see herself in the picture suggests that she doesn’t perceive herself as a mother figure, even as a race-mother, as some progressive women of the period did. She remains outside any category the men in her life, even her friend



Dawne, might impose on her, and Dawne seems to accept her rejection of patriarchal ideals. He does not complete the painting, and the last time he describes Ideala, she is nothing like the race-mother he imagined her. Instead, she is “a beautiful woman,” who is “straight as an arrow, young-looking, and fresh” (2008: 187). Yet Dawne also describes Ideala as still holding people “expectant” through her “infinite variety,” suggesting that Ideala continues to possess the mystery of the sensation fiction heroine, even as she has adopted the socially oriented purpose of the New Woman. Ideala’s effectiveness as a New Woman is directly linked to the mystery of the sensation fiction heroine, even if she doesn’t possess the deadly danger of Haggard’s Ayesha.

A more threatening representation of the New Woman’s ability to control sexual relations and reproduction can be seen in Dowie’s *Gallia*, where the central woman character rejects marriage based on either economic convenience, traditionally accepted by many Victorian women, or love, which might appear to be a modern alternative to the more traditional form. Instead, she chooses marriage for reproductive purposes only, a conclusion she comes to after experiencing her own failure with love with the genetically undesirable Hubert Essex. Angelique Richardson, in *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (2003), articulates well the appeal of marriage for reproductive purposes to late Victorian women, who “argued that their contribution to the nation and empire might be expanded if they assumed responsibility for the rational selection of reproductive partners” (Richardson 2003: 9). The appeal for *Gallia* is perhaps more personal, related to her experience with her own mother, who loved her unconditionally but dies shortly before *Gallia* embraces marriage for reproductive purposes. *Gallia* thinks:

A mother has those feelings [of unconditional love] . . . because she has done something for the child, because she has borne it. . . . A woman gets a good deal out of motherhood; more than she does out of marriage. (Dowie 1995: 91)

Having come to this conclusion about the benefit of motherhood (and marriage as a means to motherhood), *Gallia* shifts her focus to Mark Gurdon, who is better suited to be the father of her children than Essex is. *Gallia*’s initial impression of Gurdon is strictly physical – “there was a firmness and a faint pinkness about his face . . . his eyes were bright and clear . . . his teeth were perfect; not too small, and very white” (Dowie 1995: 121) – and, in a reversal of Lord Dawne’s hesitation to catalog a woman as a horse dealer might in *Ideala*, *Gallia* sizes up Gurdon precisely in this manner, “as a dealer might notice the points in a horse” (1995: 121). Still, *Gallia* later connects Gurdon’s physical qualities – “all the bone and muscle and blood and fibre that a man ought to have – to a particularly character, describing Gurdon as possessing “virility . . . keen[ness] . . . iron self-control” (1995: 178), qualities which will be beneficial to the family-oriented future *Gallia* envisions for them.

Nevertheless, while Gurdon may possess all these qualities, *Gallia* must come to terms with his “colourful” past (Dowie 1995: 148), in order to marry him. When she first learns he has a mistress, *Gallia* feels a “strong moral revulsion,” but believes this

revulsion is an “elemental sex impulse speaking in me, and not personal feeling” (1995: 148). The alternative to marriage offered in *Gallia* privileges biological response over emotional response, rejecting emotional response because it is associated with the weaknesses of women. When Gallia works out the details of her marriage with Gurdon, she makes it clear that too many women have responded to marriage proposals with emotion rather than reason (1995: 185, 193). But Gallia resists the “dead women of the world,” who are “pushing and constraining me to act as they did,” and refuses to follow the conventions (1995: 186). Most importantly, in resisting the expected emotional response, she makes it clear that their marriage will not be based on love, but on her desire to be a mother: “I have only yearned to be a mother – I can’t explain and say more about it than that, even to you; I have wanted the father of my child to be a fine, strong, manly man, full of health and strength” (1995: 192).

Just as Gallia recognizes Gurdon’s potential as a mate, he recognizes that she is “magnificent,” based only on “one astonishing glimpse” of her “face and figure” (Dowie 1995: 99). This assessment may appear to be based only on looks, without any connection to the suitable character Gallia recognizes in Gurdon, but readers know that Gallia is magnificent precisely because she is “healthy” – both in the physical sense and with regard to her character. Shortly before Gurdon sees Gallia for the first time, we are told that Gallia’s look has changed because of the experience she has had caring for her dying mother in Algiers. Before her mother’s death, Gallia does not appreciate her mother’s unconditional love, but caring for her changes Gallia’s character, making her more aware of the power of this love (Dowie 1995: 91). Further, the time Gallia has spent in the Maritime Alps after her mother’s death contributes to her new look, and when she returns to England, her aunt recognizes that she is altered both physically and with regard to her character. Not only has “[h]er idle, out-of-door mountain life had made her more beautifully healthy than usual,” but she has a new set of values that influence how she interacts with the world, since “her eye . . . had the far outward look of a person who had thought through something, who had found foothold beyond” (1995: 98). Gallia’s physical beauty, then, is linked to her character, just as it is for Gurdon, and this connection convinces Gurdon to embrace the alternative to marriage Gallia offers.

This alternative was threatening to some contemporary reviewers of the novel, such as the anonymous reviewer for the *Saturday Review*, who wrote that Dowie had

promptly stepped in where even a Grant Allen has not dared to tread, and Gallia, the girl who didn’t, can look down from a giddy height of audacity on Herminia, the woman who did. (“Gallia,” 1895: 383)

The reviewer finds Gallia’s views about marrying for motherhood “extraordinary . . . not to be wished in the interests of the children” (1895: 384) and sums up the review by saying that her views,

if adopted, take away one of the distinguishing characteristics of man, and degrade him to the level of mere animals, which are moved to reproduction not by affection but by the physical pressure to satisfy a bodily want practically of the same nature as hunger or thirst. (1895: 384)

We too may find the views expressed by Gallia in the novel threatening, for she believes in a mate-selection process that privileges certain genetics over others, but the novel does show that the New Woman, following the elusive yet powerful bodily presence seen in the sensation fiction heroine, embodied new roles with regard to sexual relations in late Victorian Britain.

The opportunities for women to control sexual relations are further explored in Cholmondeley's *Diana Tempest*, in which the genetics-based selection of mates is critiqued by a storyline in which women choose genetically and economically unfavorable men to create a marriage of equals. This strongly sensational story centers on Diana and her cousin John, who has inherited the family estate that should have gone to Diana's father, Colonel Tempest. A generation earlier, both John's father and Colonel Tempest competed for Diana's mother; John's father proposed first, but the Colonel eloped with her before John's father could marry her. Upon learning that he will not inherit the estate because of this history, Colonel Tempest hires a group of hit men, led by a man named Swayne, to trail John Jr., in the hopes he will be killed and the estate will shift to the Colonel's side of the family. The Colonel later regrets this decision, and John and Diana's relationship becomes the key to resolving the family feud, a resolution that is dependent on both romantic love and genetic beauty.<sup>1</sup>

Like Lady Audley and Ideala, Diana has the type of beauty that affects others immediately, and like Gallia, her beauty is genetically sound. "She was beautiful with the beauty that is recognized at once," the narrator tells us early in the novel, since she has "beauty from both parents . . . the tall splendid figure of the Tempests, with their fair skin and pale golden hair" (Cholmondeley 2009: 47). Though some people think Diana's features are too large, men in particular "saw that she was beautiful, and that was enough" (2009: 47). The ability of men to recognize Diana's beauty is evident the first time she and John meet, yet John is not among the men who immediately admire her. He tells his relative Lord Frederick Fane, who later is revealed to be John's biological father, that he is more interested in a Miss Delamour, who is even taller than Diana. But Lord Fane points out that members of the Delamour family are "too thin," with "neither mind, body, nor estate," and that Diana exhibits the traits that will "wear well" over time (2009: 55–6). John does recognize Diana's power at this initial meeting – "the steady keen glance that passed between them was like the meeting of two formidable powers" (2009: 56) – and later in the story, when he sees Diana walk by his rooms as he recovers from one of the many accidents he has at the hands of Swayne's hit men, "the momentary glimpse struck him like a blow. His head swam, his heart, so languid the moment before, leapt up and struggled like a maddened caged animal" (2009: 109).

Diana's assessment of John's looks after their first meeting shows that she, like Lord Fane, is aware of the role genetics play in continuing the family line, since she thinks John "looks as if he had been cut out with a blunt pair of scissors" and is "sorry" for this "because he is a Tempest, and Tempests ought to be handsome to keep up the family tradition" (2009: 61). She believes that she and her brother Archie better exemplify "the looks of the family," but realizes that, having been left out of their uncle's will, "it does not matter so much what we look like, as it does with the head of the family" (2009: 61). Still, Diana eventually comes to find John attractive, particularly after she visits him at the family estate, and he takes her to the church where her relatives are buried. There, John reads aloud the biblical lesson for the day, and this changes Diana's view of him.

All he did and said, even when in his gentlest mood . . . had a hint of power in it. . . . He stood before her as the head of the race, his rugged profile and heavy jaw silhouetted in all their native strength and ugliness against the uncompromising light of the eastern window. (Cholmondeley 2009: 169)

The connection between physical traits and ability to represent the family well is an integral part of the story, then, and this line of the narrative intersects well with sensation elements of the plot regarding John's vulnerability to Swayne's hit men. On the night John plans to propose to Diana, one of the hit men tries to shoot John, but Diana throws her body in front of his and manages to save him from death, showing that she too can represent – and protect—the family via her body (Cholmondeley 2009: 215). Still, Diana's views about marriage – she wishes for "something one could be between an old maid and a married woman" (2009: 61) – have previously led her to use her body to resist a romantic relationship with John. Nevertheless, though Diana resists falling in love with John for some time, once she comes to see him as fit to represent the family, she finds a form of marriage she can embrace. John believes he should no longer marry Diana because of his illegitimacy (2009: 243), but she argues that he is worthy to represent the family and asks him "to keep your present name and home for a little while, until – they both will become yours by right again – the day when – you marry me" (2009: 300). A marriage of equals despite unequal circumstances, then, is initiated by Diana rather than John, and it is clear at the end of the novel that Diana and John do have children, despite John's "bad" genetics (2009: 310). Though it could be argued that the ending of *Diana Tempest* is more traditional than the endings of *Ideala* and *Gallia*, since some form of marriage is upheld, the novel is also subversive for its message that late Victorian culture might benefit from a more diverse view of the role genetics plays in continuing family lines.

Discussed alongside *Ideala* and *Gallia*, *Diana Tempest* rounds out the range of alternatives to traditional marriage presented by women novelists in the 1890s, and as I have argued in this essay, these diverse alternatives were shaped by certain aspects of sensation fiction. In 1866, when E. S. Dallas wrote in *The Gay Science* of the sensation fiction heroine, "The life of women cannot well be described as a life of action" because

“they must be urged to a false position . . . rushing into crime, and doing masculine deeds” (qtd. in Regan 2001: 61), he might as well have been writing about the New Woman, for she too would come to play the same threatening role sensation fiction heroines had played in the 1860s. Yet there were authors and readers who recognized the benefits of making women central to the plot. However threatening strong women were to Victorian culture, they indicated how society’s views about sexuality, marriage, reproduction, and the family might be reformed. With strong women at the center of the plot, the alternatives available to real-life women, even if they were only imagined, multiplied.

## NOTES

- 1 Tamara Wagner, in “‘Social Suicide – Yes’: Sensational Legacies in *Diana Tempest*” (2010), also examines how John and Diana’s marriage contributes to the novel’s status as a hybrid text, which combines aspects of the sensation novel and the New Woman novel. Wagner does not explicitly address the issue of eugenics in the novel but focuses instead on how the sensational storyline – of Colonel Tempest’s efforts to have John killed, John’s escape from this plot, and his discovery of his illegitimacy – indicates Cholmondeley’s reworking of a typical sensation fiction plot to create, if not a New Woman novel, a distinctly *fin-de-siècle* novel, in which traditional ways of viewing marriage and family are overturned. Wagner argues that John’s revelation of his illegitimacy signals a rejection of hereditary custom that amounts to “social suicide” (2010: 22), but by marrying Diana, who “rights the disrupted marriage plots of the past by putting an end to the family feud” (2010: 23), John is “reinstate[d]” into the Tempest family, “underscor[ing] the value of hereditary estates and of a desirable hero after all” (2010: 12). While the “neat closure” at the end of the novel may “undercut the novel’s affinities with New Woman fiction,” Wagner believes “it also evinces the complexities of *fin-de-siècle* engagements with reworked plots” (2010: 23).

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Corelli's Religious Trilogy:  
*Barabbas*, *The Sorrows of Satan*,  
and *The Master-Christian*

R. Brandon Kershner

Life and Work

Marie Corelli (1855–1924) was an unprecedented literary and social phenomenon. A biographer has claimed that “While Queen Victoria was alive, Miss Corelli was the second most famous Englishwoman in the world; afterwards, there was no one to approach her” (Masters 1978: 6). Corelli’s novel *The Sorrows of Satan* enjoyed a greater initial sale than any other novel ever published in the United Kingdom, selling 25,000 copies in its first week and 50,000 in the first seven weeks, while her effusive, argumentative, and self-promoting personality earned her the nickname “the lifeboat of journalism” (Bigland 1953: 225). She was impressively prolific, publishing at least one novel each year for most of her writing career, and at times as many as three. Her popularity waned following World War I, but by her death in 1924 her first novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, was in its thirty-eighth edition, *Barabbas* its fifty-fourth, and *The Sorrows of Satan* its sixtieth. She published some twenty-four novels, most of them quite lengthy; four collections of stories; and three volumes of non-fiction, including the contentious *Free Opinions Freely Expressed* (1905). A scrapbook in the Corelli archives collects over 140 obituaries and articles on the occasion of her death (Federico 2000: 162). In 1932 Queenie Leavis, in her ground-breaking though snobbish investigation of popular reading, included Corelli among “the great names of popular fiction” (Leavis 1965: 62). Yet by the 1980s she was unknown to any sort of general audience, excepting a group of enthusiasts of the occult who managed to keep a small number of her books in circulation.<sup>1</sup>

Born in London, Corelli was the illegitimate daughter of Dr. Charles Mackay, a rather unsuccessful journalist and poet, and his servant Mary Elizabeth Mills. Mackay married Mills after the death of his first wife, and in order to avoid scandal the family maintained that Minnie Mackay had been adopted. At the age of 11 the girl was sent

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*A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, First Edition. Edited by Pamela K. Gilbert.

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to a European convent for her education; soon after she returned to London, four years later, she attempted a career as a piano *improvisatrice*, adopting the name Marie Corelli. Eventually she abandoned the musical career but retained the continental name on beginning a career as an author in order to help support her father and her indigent half-brother Eric, both of whom she adored. Despite her obviously middle-class origins, Corelli insisted on identifying herself as the descendant of Italian aristocracy; she was an admirer of Ouida, who had genuine aristocratic connections, and who was annoyed at her advances. Although her fiction generally treated the (decadent) high life of Britain and the Continent, her readers spanned social and economic classes, from clerks and milliners to Victoria, Gladstone, Tennyson, Meredith, and (at the beginning of her career) even Oscar Wilde. Later, Wilde, in Reading gaol, was asked by a guard whether he considered Miss Corelli a great writer, to which he replied, "Now don't think I've anything against her moral character, but from the way she writes *she ought to be here*" (Bigland 1953: 164).

From the start Corelli's writing was regularly and emphatically "slated" by the critical establishment. When, in *Sorrows of Satan*, Corelli portrayed at some length a beautiful young woman whose books were immensely popular with the public but attacked by the critics – a cultured and very spiritual young woman whose virtue could tame the devil himself and whose initials were "M.C." – William Stead commented that he found it "touching to see this attempt at self-portraiture" (Bigland 1953: 163). Corelli fought back on two fronts: at the publication of many of her books, starting with *Sorrows of Satan*, she refused to send out review copies, a practice that did not seem to affect her works' sales adversely. She also launched a crusade attacking the critical establishment, which she accused of venality, perverse tastes, slavery to literary fashion, and ignoring the judgment of the general reading public.

Her crusade was carried out in widely read essays, in popular speeches, but also in the very fabric of her novels. Ironically, the position she took against the bourgeois critical establishment aligned her in many ways with elite modernists such as Joyce, Lawrence, or even Flaubert, who claimed that a work's value could be judged by the amount it is attacked. In Corelli's first novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, she laid out a spiritualist system she named "Electric Christianity," a creed that she never abandoned although her later novels did not directly expand upon it. The novel's heroine, a pianist, meets a brilliant and mysterious painter on the Riviera; when he discovers she is ill, he directs her to his "master" Heliobas for a cure. Heliobas and his sister Zara both have mastered the electrical force embodied in ancient Chaldean wisdom to such an extent that they can make strangers do their bidding, give dogs elaborate commands, and take astral journeys. Zara in fact throws an importunate suitor across the room with her electric power. They also seem able to delay aging indefinitely, a trick that the young heroine also masters.

Corelli's book elicited strong emotional responses and a huge amount of correspondence from readers, and in responding she refused to distinguish between the heroine's experiences and her own: "A Romance of Two Worlds . . . was the simply-worded narration of a singular psychical experience, and included certain theories on



religion which I, personally speaking, accept and believe. . . . There was nothing of self in the wish I had, that my ideas, such as they were, should reach the public, for I had no particular need of money" (Corelli, "My First Book," 1893: 239) Her continued refusal to be interviewed or photographed intensified her air of mystery, and her identification with a self-created spiritual cult attracted both enthusiasts of the occult and readers dissatisfied with the established churches but unwilling to abandon Christianity. Perhaps surprisingly, she abhorred the vogue for séances and the occult despite the fact that her expressed beliefs were similar to those of Theosophists and their kin, including her belief in reincarnation, which she worked into several of her novels as a plot device.

By 1901 Corelli, famous and quite wealthy, had moved to Stratford-upon-Avon for good, accompanied by her lifelong companion Bertha Vyver. There she was seen as a mixed blessing by the authorities, in that she worked for the preservation of period buildings while simultaneously working relentlessly to publicize herself. Corelli's emotional and sexual life is something of a mystery and a paradox. Clearly her home was an emotional hothouse where she was slavishly devoted first to her father and then to her elder brother, who represented for her a model of cosmopolitanism from his time in Europe and an exemplar of artistry from his unrewarding attempts at publishing poetry. But later her brother's jealousy as she became world-famous no doubt furnished her with a pattern of the male jealousy of female artistic accomplishment that is one of her recurring literary themes. From middle life Bertha Vyver was obviously important to her as her emotional partner, although her biographers doubt that their relationship was anything other than platonic. Finally, at the age of 51 she conceived a hopeless passion for the married painter Arthur Severn that caused her great distress when he refused to reciprocate her feelings. Annette Federico has neatly summed up a group of paradoxes centering on gender identity and its negotiation:

From the start of her career Corelli was scorned by reviewers yet adored by readers; . . . she was a highly successful woman who insisted publicly on woman's intellectual equality in a competitive market controlled by men, yet she cultivated an image of hyperfemininity and abhorred the New Woman; she was unmarried and lived intimately with another woman her entire life, yet her books dwell on displays of heterosexual passion, sometimes to the point of erotic frenzy; she was an anti-intellectual yet wished to appear well educated in history and modern languages. Corelli's novels attack or expose Victorian vice, hypocrisy, and injustice with all the fire and brimstone the public could crave, yet they also indulge the pleasures of social, moral, and sexual transgression. (Federico 2000: 2–3)

### Critical Issues

Until comparatively recently little literary or cultural analysis was focused on Corelli. She did inspire a substantial group of biographies, however: T. F. G. Coates and R. S. Warren Bell, *Marie Corelli: The Writer and the Woman* (Philadelphia: G. W. Jacobs,

1903) and Bertha Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli* (London: A. Rivers, 1930), both essentially hagiographies; George Bullock, *Marie Corelli: The Life and Death of a Best-Seller* (London: Constable, 1940); William Stuart Scott, *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship* (London: Hutchinson, 1955); and the two most useful sources, Eileen Bigland, *Marie Corelli: The Woman and the Legend* (London; Jerrolds, 1953) and Brian Masters, *Now Barabbas Was a Rotter: The Extraordinary Life of Marie Corelli* (London; Hamish Hamilton, 1978). Bigland's book is fairly neutral in tone, if lacking nuance, while Masters is condescending and generally misogynistic, but has amassed an impressive amount of information. His title, memorable as it is, loses much of its parodic force once we realize that the line appears nowhere in Corelli. But none of these biographies contains much actual literary or cultural analysis, and most to varying degrees assume the conventional posture of condescension toward a popular phenomenon. None of them works from the premise that Corelli's career raises serious issues regarding both the social norms and the literary culture of the time.

My 1989 essay "Joyce and Popular Literature: The Case of Corelli" spends several pages trying to establish that artifacts of popular culture are significant in the formation of "popular consciousness," and that Corelli's enormous fame deserves investigation despite the fact that she was generally forgotten later in the century.<sup>2</sup> But Corelli is present in the essay mostly courtesy of Joyce because a character in *Ulysses* alludes to Stephen Dedalus's plan to have six medical students write *Paradise Lost* at Stephen's dictation and to entitle it *The Sorrows of Satan* (Joyce 1986: 184). I argue that Corelli's work doesn't fall into the genre of sentimental domestic romance in which most of her rivals wrote. Finally, I explore the unexpected parallels between Joyce and Corelli, both of whom used elaborate self-portraits in their novels (Stephen Dedalus and Mavis Clare), while Dedalus and the diabolic Rimanez of *Sorrows of Satan* are strangely similar.

For of course Stephen plays out his own diabolic role, from casual blasphemy to his ultimate *non serviam*, at one moment metaphorically destroying the universe [as does Rimanez more literally at that book's climax], at another cowering at the crack of thunder. A performer throughout, Stephen disavows even his most complete work of art in the book, his Shakespeare soliloquy . . . claiming not to believe in his own theory. As Rimanez observes when questioned about whether he believes in what he has just said, "I think I was born to be an actor . . . I speak to suit the humour of the hour, and without meaning a single word I say." (Kershner 1989: 64)

In a subsequent essay, "Modernism's Mirror: The Sorrows of Marie Corelli" (Kershner 1994), I develop my analysis of similarities between the protagonists of Corelli and those of some modernist novelists. This essay analyzes the contradictions of the positions she espoused as a public figure, in relation to gender. It also explores the connections between the spiritualist movement of which Corelli was an important exponent and female sexuality (see Oppenheim 1985). As Oppenheim argues, séances sometimes involved the appearance of minimally dressed female "spirits," and even

when they did not, "one can surmise that the holding of hands and the caressing of spirit forms might have been stimulating not only to the sitters, but also to the young women whose emerging sexuality was denied natural means of expression" (Oppenheim 1985: 21). Although many of her novels were closer to romances than to the elaboration of a new spiritualism that Corelli proffered in *Romance of Two Worlds*, she never abandoned her interest in that controversial social movement or her claim to religious authority. The last section of "Modernism's Mirror" explores the implications of Corelli's use of melodrama. Citing the argument of Suzanne Clark's *Sentimental Modernism* (1991) that modernism's exclusion of the sentimental from the approved canon is related to the arbitrary exclusion of many women writers from that canon, I point out that melodrama in both its dramatic substance and its formal attributes can often be found in the work of modernist writers (cf. Brooks 1976). In other words, Corelli's relationship to modernism is more intimate and more complex than critical consensus held it to be.

A similar view of Corelli's work can be found in Felski's *The Gender of Modernity* (1995). In an attempt to read Corelli as standing in for (female) popular culture generally, she pursues a "cluster of themes – escapism, fantasy, melodrama, sentimentality – as an important aspect of women's popular fiction and of modern culture more generally" (Felski 1995: 117). Felski invokes the "sublime" in Lyotard's sense of that which is unrepresentable, yet which lies at the heart of politics and aesthetics; she also echoes Ann Cvetovich in suggesting that "the sublime may be nothing more than the culturally prestigious version of a structuring of affect that can also be found within the feminized and devalued forms of melodrama, sentimental writing, and sensationalist fiction" (Felski 1995: 120). But Felski does not mean to suggest that Corelli's writing automatically embodies resistance simply because it is transgressive of cultural codes. In fact, the last paragraph of her essay rather disappointingly argues that "we need to take more seriously the distinctive and determining, rather than simply determined, nature of generic forms such as romance and melodrama in shaping the culture of modernity" (Felski 1995: 144). This is certainly a reasonable conclusion, but one which most progressive critics had reached a decade earlier. A more original aspect of her argument regards "the ambiguous politics of the popular sublime," whose pursuit she sees as "a critical response to irresolvable tensions within the social," and closely related to the utopian gestures of modernism (Felski 1995: 143). Corelli is an excellent example of the popular novelist whose narrative regularly peaks in moments of romantic transcendence, culminative emotional extremes that we can find in Joyce's *Portrait*.

The first and so far the only full-length critical study devoted to Corelli is Annette Federico's *Idol of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture* (2000). Federico announces at the outset, "my approach falls somewhere between literary criticism, women's studies, and cultural studies" (Federico 2000: 2), and her book benefits from the breadth of this approach; it also suffers somewhat from a lack of clear focus, in that Corelli raises so many broad issues regarding literary celebrity: the status of women (particularly artists); the relationship between popular literature and

high art or modernism; the impact of professional reviewing; the effects of the literary portrayal of sexuality, especially as linked to violence and misogyny; the social and literary role of religion, both conventional Christianity and occult or spiritualist variants; and so forth. Like me, she invokes the context of Clark's *Sentimental Modernism* and Peter Brooks's *Melodramatic Imagination*, and like Felski, that of Ann Cvetkovich's *Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism*.

An important dimension Federico adds to the discussion is her attempt to relate Corelli's work to the *fin-de-siècle* decadent movement – an insight that doubtless would have enraged Corelli herself, who was opposed to most extreme contemporary cultural and aesthetic movements, from naturalism and writings of the New Woman to art nouveau. Recent work on Corelli includes a scattering of articles on a variety of topics: Corelli and British francophobia (MacLeod 2000), Christianity and women's channeling (Galvan 2003), Buddhism in *Romance of Two Worlds* (Franklin 2003), Corelli's female revision of *Faust* (Guest 2005), Corelli's "magnetic revitalizing power" (Siebers 2006b); and a group of essays included in a special issue of *Women's Writing* (June 2006, vol. 2) edited by Carol Margaret Davison, who provides a useful "critical reappraisal" of Corelli. These include studies of the popularity of her early novels (Moody 2006), her anti-modernist romances (Hipsky 2006), the Genius figure in *Ardatb* (Siebers 2006a), the electric creed (Hallim 2006), the Gothic mode (Hartnell 2006), and "generic transition" in *Sorrows* and *Barabbas* (Fisher 2006). At least, compared to most of the twentieth century, there has obviously been a minor critical "boom" in Corelli since about 1995, during which time a great deal of work has explored numerous facets of her authorship and celebrity.

### Genre, Sensation, and Electric Christianity

One such facet that has not been much investigated is the relationship of Corelli's work to the novel of sensation. Clearly there appeared to be a significant parallel, in that Corelli was often attacked by those who objected on moral grounds to the sensation novel, and for similar reasons. On the other hand, where the novel of sensation was generally seen as an extension or hypertrophy of novelistic realism, Corelli's books, even the most shocking of them in terms of the events portrayed, tended to avoid realistic detail; for the most part they were read as romances, reflecting Corelli's expressed hatred of the degenerate "French school" of literary naturalism. At times Corelli would seem to intend that a given work should be read as an example of another genre, such as the "silver fork" romance or novel of high life, like most of the works of Ouida. Unfortunately, unlike Disraeli, Bulwer-Lytton, or Ouida herself, she had too little acquaintance with that life to write convincingly about it, and her aesthetic in any case would prevent her from including the sort of telling social detail that would render the portrait convincing. Corelli's structural use of persistent spiritual and Christian themes had few precedents within the sensation genre, which was more likely to remind readers of the content of the cheaper newspapers than of their

Bibles; but Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur* (1880), published just six years before Corelli's first work, was the bestselling American novel of its time, and had set a precedent for the popularity of explicitly Christian themes within a framework of historical adventure. Robert Hichens contributed to the exploitation of a sub-genre of combined romance and Christianity with *The Garden of Allah* (1904). Here he echoed Corelli's vague romantic mysticism (Cockburn 1975: 52–3). A number of Corelli's novels fairly easily fit this emergent sub-genre, and some works of her rival Hall Caine had a similarly Christian spiritual element, although he was a far less controversial figure.

Corelli's work neatly bridges the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, and continues more weakly after World War I. If she can be viewed as a novelist of sensation (and I believe she can), then she is a unique and peripheral contributor to the genre, both *sui generis* (in some respects) and also gesturing toward several future interests of the popular novel. But if Corelli resembles sensation novelists of the mid-Victorian period, it is equally evident that her vogue is a cultural formation primarily of the 1890s, reacting to and sometimes against the continuing vogue of spiritualism as well as aestheticism, French naturalism, the New Woman, and the increasing cultural presence of agnosticism, none of which contributed to the same extent to the mid-Victorian milieu. But if it is difficult to call Corelli a sensation novelist in any straightforward way on the basis of content, her popularity with ordinary readers was much the same as that of Collins, Braddon, and Wood. Ann Cvetovich has argued that as it was used by Victorian critics, "the term 'sensation novel' refers more to the genre's status as mass culture than to its particular narrative style or content" (Cvetovich 1992: 15). Corelli's massive appeal both to the middle and the lower class was undoubtedly one of the reasons responsible middle-class critics felt compelled to attack her work with such vehemence and to deny that it might be evaluated for its strengths rather than being generically and condescendingly dismissed as sub-literary.

Of course genre is not usefully approached ahistorically as a set of formal requirements; genres – as individual examples are consumed – are intimately involved in and defined by their cultural and historical circumstances in a dialectical or dialogical process. Evidence of the social embeddedness of the sensation genre is Richard Nemesvari's argument that the popularity of major examples of the genre was not simply a literary but a broad cultural phenomenon. Discussing the advent of Collins's novel, he remarks, "Aside from the astonishing popularity of the book itself, the appearance of *Woman in White* perfume, *Woman in White* bonnets, and of course the *Woman in White* dressing gown, all demonstrated a response to the text which, while no doubt gratifying to the author, did not contribute much to the aspiring dignity of novelistic fiction" (Nemesvari 2006: 26). He adds that Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) and Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) caused similar reactions; his implication is that such books might better be approached as popular commodities than as literary contributions. He might well have added Corelli's *Romance of Two Worlds* or *Sorrows of Satan* later in the century, since Corelli's auratic presence as a voice in the culture, through newspapers, gossip, public addresses, the management and

manipulation of her public photographs, and so forth undoubtedly contributed to the impact of her writing. But the main point is that the novelistic identity of writers, including the genre expectations of their readers, was a matter of negotiation within the culture as a whole, and was greatly carried on through the pages of the popular media.

### The Christian Trilogy

Despite her distaste for theosophy, Corelli's work was most often regarded as another manifestation of spiritualism; her novels were seen to combine mystical romance with didactic attacks on both organized religion, especially Catholicism, and the degeneracy of social high life in Europe and Great Britain. But they were attacked by social commentators, and some of them banned by Mudie's, because of their intensely passionate scenes of sexual attraction and murderous violence. Corelli was able to position herself as a defender of morality in a degenerate modern world who portrayed the actions inevitably following from emotional extremes; to her critics she was a hypocrite, playing to the baser appetites of her readership, while to her defenders the sensational scenes were justified in that they reflected a spiritual reality, if only as parable. But certainly her insistence that her worldview was Christian was key to her self-presentation. Robyn Hallim has pointed out that "in 1911, writing in the 'Author's Prologue' to *The Life Everlasting*, she offered seven of her texts as the basis of a creed she had been developing over the preceding 25 years. The seven novels are *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886), *Ardath* (1889), *The Soul of Lilith* (1892), *Barabbas: A Dream of the World's Tragedy* (1893), *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895), *The Master-Christian* (1900), and *The Life Everlasting* (1911)" (Hallim 2006: 269). Setting aside her first novel, which is unique in many ways, the three most interesting are probably *Barabbas*, *The Sorrows of Satan*, and *The Master-Christian*, all three novels directly treating major figures from Christian mythology, and featuring as characters either Christ himself or Satan.

Corelli wrote at fever pitch – as an anonymous critic described it, "at the top of her voice." Her style is elevated, rather lyrical, and surprisingly complex in linguistic structure for a bestselling author. Her plots on the other hand tend to be relatively simple. In *Barabbas* we follow the eponymous protagonist as, having been pardoned for his assassination of a citizen, he accompanies Christ to Calvary and becomes a reluctant convert mostly through having experienced Christ's personal charisma and physical presence:

Such radiance, such power, such glorious union of perfect beauty and strength in one human form, Barabbas had never seen or imagined before, and he gazed and gazed till his soul almost lost itself in the mere sense of sight. . . . His bare rounded arms [were] crossed now on His breast in a restful attitude of resignation, yet in their very inertness suggesting such mighty muscular force as would have befitted a Hercules. Power, gran-

deur, authority, and invincible supremacy were all silently expressed in His marvelous and incomparable Presence. . . . (Corelli 1893: 19)

Pilate is portrayed as very reluctant to condemn Jesus, and in a vision foresees him crowned with thorns; but “above the crown of thorns there glittered a crown of light – light woven in three intertwined rays of dazzling gold and azure which cast prismatic reflections upward, like meteor-flames flashing between earth and heaven” (1893: 56). Pilate, breaking into a fit of weeping and delirious laughter, faints where he is standing. Meanwhile Barabbas is soon joined by the mysterious Egyptian king Melchior, one of the three wandering wise men, who assures his companion that “those of my race and calling have known of Him these thousand years and waited for His coming” (1893: 139). Melchior, who appears to have more than human knowledge and abilities, mostly functions to berate Barabbas in bitterly ironic terms; for example Barabbas is slow to recognize that his beloved beauty Judith Iscariat, sister of Judas(!), is hopelessly evil. Melchior in this regard served as a rough draft for Prince Lucio Rimanez, the Satan figure of *Sorrows of Satan*, whose main function seems to be to berate the putative protagonist Geoffrey Tempest as to his own and society's failings.

The twin villains of the novel are Caiaphas, the corrupt Egyptian high priest, and Judith, who is having an affair with him; Caiaphas convinced Judith to tempt her brother to betray Jesus' location, arguing that then he would prove his divinity by resisting the soldiers. When this does not happen, Judas commits suicide rather horribly: “His body hangs lifeless from a gnarled leafless branch like some untimely fruit of hell, – some monstrous birth of devils! – the very air seems poisoned by his livid corpse! Horrible! . . . Horrible!” (Corelli 1893a: 135). The Gothic, grotesque element is seldom far from the surface in Corelli, and the description of the crucifixion is no exception:

The beautifully arched, delicate feet of the Divine Sufferer were roughly seized, crossed over and held in position by one executioner while another placed the nail in the nerve-centres of the tender flesh . . . – and swiftly the hurt veins rebelled against their wrong in bursting jets of innocent blood. The crimson stain welled up and made a piteous rose on the torn skin's whiteness. . . . (Corelli 1893: 102–3)

The style here is not far from the excesses of minor Metaphysical poets, and has a clear appeal to sado-masochistic appetites. Another influence from a different genre is the obvious trace of Shakespearean drama, such as the scenes when Judith has lost her reason in grief at her brother's death and wanders about the town indulging in soliloquies and expostulations reminiscent of the classic “mad” scenes in the Bard's tragedies. But the most powerful influence on the novel's form, as I argued in “Modernism's Mirror,” is probably that of the *tableau vivant*. Corelli's novels usually progress from one highly charged dramatic tableau to the next, with the transitional stretches mostly occupied by dialog, much of it didactic. Her characters are often

walking symbols who act out the attributes with which Corelli endows them: Judith, narcissistic and dedicated to her own pleasure and powers of seduction, becomes elevated to a principle of evil, balanced by the Virgin Mary's counter-elevation to a principle of good.

Like the conflicted Barabbas, a variety of doomed Byronic hero, Lucio Rimanez in *Sorrows of Satan* is an exception to this rule, in that he is a complex, seriously divided personality, torn between his angelic wish for God to triumph in the world and his satanic desire for evil to prevail; although he tempts aspiring author Geoffrey Tempest with money, an entrée into high society, and the beautiful but corrupt Lady Sylvia, underneath it all he hopes Geoffrey will reject him, as he finally does. Rather strangely, the main plot motivator is Tempest's wish to become an author: he has produced a good work that was not much noticed, but through extensive bribery Rimanez arranges for his next book to be "puffed" outrageously. This success is paralleled by his "purchase" of Lady Sylvia, who treacherously falls in love with Rimanez, who rejects her contemptuously in a sadistic, drawn-out dramatic scene. She proceeds to commit suicide in slow motion, writing a record of her experience as she slips into an afterlife of eternal punishment. But if Sylvia comes to embody corrupt modern woman, irremediably tainted by reading modern novels, especially French ones, Mavis Clare embodies all that is sweet, innocent, youthful, and pure in womanhood, and is a genius of a writer as well. It may be no accident that she is without male suitors; Corelli hints that male jealousy is almost inevitable.

*The Master-Christian* is the least satisfactory of the trilogy, perhaps because it depends upon a young boy who is Christ returned to earth, although none of the characters fully recognizes him as such; as a waif, his sphere of action is quite limited. He is named Manuel and adopted spontaneously by the good Cardinal Bompré in Rouen, and soon heals a crippled boy while the cardinal looks on. When the pope's minions hear of this they summon Bompré to Rome, where he goes with Manuel and his niece the painter Angela Sovrani. Sovrani is engaged in painting her masterwork, which turns out to be a satiric portrait of Catholic Church dignitaries exposed as venial frauds. She is engaged to the minor painter Florian, who has hidden his jealousy from her. But when she reveals the painting and he realizes its greatness he stabs her in the back with a dagger; he later explains that "there is not a man born that does not hate too pure a woman; it is his joy to degrade her if he can!" (Corelli 1900: 542). Sovrani would have died following this except that Manuel lays hands upon her and she miraculously recovers. It is not always the woman who pays in these situations, though; a spoiled priest early in the novel is unexpectedly confronted by a mad young woman he had ruined years ago, and she stabs him to death. Corelli's message of sympathy for women seems to be a mixed one, but in any case suggests that the mutual desire of the genders is highly dangerous. *The Master-Christian*, a sustained and melodramatically overdrawn attack upon Rome, of course suggests the anti-Catholic sub-genre of adventure novels pioneered by "Monk" Lewis; and several sections of the Corelli novel, set in a ruined abbey, are appropriately imbued with the gothic. Like all her work, *The Master-Christian* exemplifies Corelli's genius for generic



transgression, strangely but effectively combining unremitting didacticism with romantic melodrama to produce literary effects that belong wholly to neither the nineteenth nor the twentieth century.

## NOTES

- 1 Oddly, when asked to name the ten greatest authors Henry Miller included Corelli as number eight, just ahead of Dostoevsky (Wallechinsky et al. 1978: 227).
- 2 Among the discussions of bestselling books in Great Britain that provided useful background were Cockburn 1975; Cruse 1938; Dalziel 1957; and Bloom 2008. There is some discussion of popular literature in Trotter 1993.

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# Realism after Sensation: Meredith, Hardy, Gissing

*Tabitha Sparks*

At the time of its explosion onto the literary scene in the early 1860s, the sensation genre swiftly came to characterize the profane to realism's sacred: the dramatic, unseemly, plot-driven form that relied on scandal, crime, and mystery to titillate its readers. Realism, meanwhile, was the more respectable genre that did not stoop to such levels, and instead forewent mass readership for the more discerning tastes of the intellectual. The opposition of these genres was, in literary circles, rigidly asserted. In a recent article, Richard Nemesvari considers what the pitting of the two genres against each other accomplished in and for the evolving characterization of the Victorian novel.

For close to a decade [in the 1860s] the conflict between sensation fiction and the realist novel was a constant theme of often overheated reviewer comment and analysis. . . . The manifest purpose of [this] debate was to generate a canon of legitimate fiction. The point was not just to define realism and sensationalism in relation to each other, but to generate a clear set of expectations that the first was superior to the second. (Nemesvari 2006: 16, 19)

The early separation of the two genres into an artistic hierarchy was modative, Nemesvari argues, to realism's survival during a time when it could not compete economically with sensation's great market success. In effect, realism came to signify "serious" literature, with low sales that reflected its elite appeal and critical stature, while sensation signified the profitable domain of popular (and critically negligible) novels, readers, and writers. Pierre Bourdieu's sociological assessment of "cultural capital" in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979) provides a context for this division; Bourdieu ranks the cultural status of an object, text, or institution as inversely proportional to its accessibility, so that truly elite cultural objects

(classical poems, for instance) gain their stature from the exclusivity of their audience instead of their profitability in the marketplace.

The division between realism and sensationalism that Bourdieu's work explains in terms of high and low culture, and that Victorian critics vigorously charted along this same continuum, could suggest that their coexistence in a novel signified failure – the realist's concession to a lower literary norm. Indeed, to most Victorian critics, realist authors devalued their work when they made use of sensational conventions, as an anonymous reviewer puts bluntly in an 1862 article, "The Philosophy of 'Sensation'," published in *St. James Magazine*:

We are sorry to be obliged to add that even great artists sometimes condescend to adopt the tricks of sensation writers, for the sake of popularity, and present the public with hybrid combinations of the mean and the noble, the modest and the impure, the hero and the scoundrel, and the angel and the tigress. They may succeed in making highly dramatic pictures by grouping such characters on their canvas, but we must be permitted to remind them that the truly illustrious masters of their art were content with representing virtue as virtuous, and vice as vicious. ("Philosophy of 'Sensation,'" 2004: 21)

This phenomenon whereby "great artists" compromise their skills "for the sake of popularity" commonly appears in reviews during the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s. The author of "Recent Novels: Their Moral and Religious Teachings" decries the fact that even George Eliot "has not wholly escaped" this tendency to resort to dramatic incident and excitement: her *Felix Holt*, "one of the greatest and most remarkable books of the day," is degraded by Eliot's "inability to resist the temptation of interweaving a mystery into the tale" ("Recent Novels," 1866: 56).

The facility with which these reviewers distinguish sensation from realism (and vice versa) is important to a discussion of sensation's influence on later Victorian realism by the canonical realists considered here: George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, and George Gissing. First of all, while the sensation genre yielded a relatively stable description, one that conventionally noted exciting and convoluted plots, a focal crime and/or mystery, and characters who fall into categories of good and evil, the constitution of realism was (and is) a more disputed category. For most Victorian reviewers, realism connoted the depiction of common experience, what the author of "Recent Novels" calls "[q]uiet pictures of common every-day life, with their great struggles and practical lessons (1866: 55). In a later review entitled "Modern Novels" in the *Cambridge Review* (1880), another critic defines realism according to the function it serves. Realism satisfies those readers who "wish to gratify an extremely human and natural interest in the artistic rendering of the incidents and deeper personal experiences of the ordinary human being" ("Modern Novels," 2004: 275). Other versions of Victorian realism emphasized, more negatively, a mimetic reflection of human life that shied away from commentary, or what critic Justin McCarthy bemoaned as "close details, [a] trivial round of common cares and ambitions . . . petty trials and easy loves" (qtd. in Stone 1972: 25). Finally, realism also could connote the representation

of life's most sordid and depressing actualities, delivered by the novelist to his or her readers as a kind of combative truth-telling.

Differences in realism's Victorian characterization aside, what these critics did agree upon was that the genre evaded improbable events (murder, bigamy, crime) and reflected the everyday, whether palatable or not. It is this ordinariness, moreover, that links together the sensational and realistic in the novels discussed here. Since the sensation novel had such broad appeal with Victorian audiences, and was read by everyone from the literate working classes to the idle rich, then the realistic novel that took on "everyday Victorians" quite necessarily covered those mainstream and numerous readers of sensation. Realism may have been the art form preferred by intellectuals, but its representational project was not limited to the lives of the educated elite. Rather, Meredith, Hardy, and Gissing were all committed to exploring and documenting the experiences of a broad range of society, including uneducated, middle-class, intellectual, and aristocratic people. Their realistic novels of the later part of the century, then, incorporated sensational perceptions and expectations, those inheritances of sensational reading, as part of the project of representing the late Victorian experience.

The argument that sensation novels infiltrated the minds of late Victorians (and hence, even their realistic novels) makes use of an understanding of realism that recent critics have explored richly. George Levine, perhaps the contemporary critic who has most influenced and contributed to our current understanding of this topic, writes in *The Realistic Imagination* that realism in the nineteenth-century novel was not "a solidly self-satisfied vision based in a misguided objectivity and faith in representation, but a highly self-conscious attempt to explore or create a new reality" (Levine 1981: 19–20). The inevitable pitfall of this attempt was the realist author's understanding that, in creating a new reality, he or she was straying, necessarily, from the actual one under observation. And so the project of "realist fiction" became a contradiction in terms, but one that inspired a fascinating range of texts that confronted, evaded, and held this representational paradox at bay.

While Meredith, Hardy, and Gissing interpreted "realism" in different ways, none of their versions of the realistic disregarded the impact or conventions of sensation. To varying degrees, this trio wrote predominantly realistic novels that made use of sensational plots and conventions; they depicted either characters that were themselves shaped by sensational reading, or a culture that had absorbed, if problematically, a sensational frame of mind. Considering their novels, then, allows us to rethink an axiom about the sensation novel: that after its brief and spectacular heyday in the 1860s and first years of the 1870s, it was eclipsed by a variety of later-century forms including realism, New Woman fiction, the scientific romance, and the detective novel. This cordoning off of sensation to a decade-plus of prominence underestimates the genre's lasting influence. As we read in the General Introduction to *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction*, "'sensation mania' is typically labeled as an 1860s phenomenon . . . [but] the sensation novel cannot be contained tidily within one decade" (Maunder 2004: xiii).

## George Meredith (1828–1909)

Author of fourteen novels and five books of poetry, Meredith's reputation by the 1880s as the leading figure in English literature took decades to establish. His first major novel, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859) had limited commercial success because Mudie's Circulating Library deemed the novel indecent in its portrayal of sex and seduction and banned its circulation. For nearly the next two decades, Meredith's novels commanded critical attention but attracted few readers. Q. D. Leavis, in a historical discussion of Victorian and modern authorship, regarded Meredith as the first "highbrow" novelist, one whose literary goals evaded the understanding of an ordinary reader (Roberts 1997: 8). Early in Meredith's career, Justin McCarthy boldly claimed that "no man . . . has more resolutely gone into literature with a total disregard of popularity" (McCarthy 1971: 124). But Meredith's career was not without a struggle to reconcile his own interests with those of the public, and some of his earlier novels (such as *Rhoda Fleming* [1865] and *Vittoria* [1867]) imitated popular and sensational works in their suspenseful plots, their revelations of mysteries, and their inclusion of dramatic and sinister characters.

These sensational devices, however, depart from the sensation genre in the narrative sophistication of Meredith's writing, and one critique that followed Meredith throughout his career was the charge of impenetrability. Reviewer A. J. Butler, discussing Meredith's *The Adventures of Harry Richmond* (1871), writes that as a serial publication the thread of the story was difficult to follow, whereas its publication in a single volume allows "the connection of [its] curious figures [to] become a little more distinct," and so the novel takes "as coherent shape as any story of Mr. Meredith's is likely to do" (Butler 1971: 155). Since serialization was the dominant form of the popular novel, at least until lowered production costs aided the rise of the single-volume novel in the 1880s, the unsuitability of Meredith's complicated plots to serial reading presumably intensified the difficulty of his novels and their relegation to intellectual readers.

But herein lies the perhaps unexpected rise of Meredith's growing popularity that Ioan Williams dates to the publication of *Beauchamp's Career* (1876), *The Egoist* (1879), and *Diana of the Crossways* (1885). By the publication of that latter novel, Williams writes, Meredith's reputation "spread beyond the circle of enthusiastic admirers to affect, if not the widest novel-reading public, the whole number of those who pretended to culture or education" (Williams 1971: 9). This description of Meredith's success points to a somewhat ironic consequence: the selectivity of his readership generated its own prestige and so led to his greater popularity. What Meredith's success did, then, was push forward a new objective for novel readers who sought not just entertainment but intellectual challenge and cachet (heralding the modernist enthusiasm for cryptic and difficult fiction such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*).

In comparison to the sensation-versus-realism debates of the 1860s that strictly divided the genres, Meredith's success in the 1880s suggests an easing up of this rigid

critical separation. Reviewing *Diana of the Crossways*, C. Monkhouse catalogs the novel's "extravagance" and "most startling incidents," including its disastrous marriage, political scandal, and divorce plot, all of which are "quite sufficient to form of the basis of a very 'sensational' novel." But Meredith's "realistic force" in portraying both scenes and characters makes their improbability plausible, and appreciates "the truth that fact is stranger than fiction" (Monkhouse 1971: 262).

In addition to making seemingly sensational events and characters appear realistic, another feature of Meredith's fiction that calls upon the conventions of the sensation novel is his parodic reference to the form and ideology of that and other popular genres. Many of Meredith's novels imitate conventional plots only to upset them in ways that highlight their idealism or predictability, as we see in the broken engagement between Sir Willoughby and Clara Middleton in *The Egoist*. Clara rejects rich, landed, and respected Willoughby as her ideal suitor in a complication of the stock romantic plot that weds the deserving heroine to the most illustrious hero. Beyond the disruption of the presumed marriage itself, this plot subverts the ideological resolutions typified in sensation novels by placing personal character above social criteria in a marriage plot. Sensation novels were (and are) routinely accused of simplistic characterizations in which class and appearance supply the rudiments of character, as opposed to the richly idiosyncratic personalities we see in Meredith's fiction.

Furthermore, Meredith often uses the sentimental and idealistic rhetoric identified with sensation and other popular genres as a way of exposing a character's dishonesty, as we see in Dacier's clichéd and insincere romantic advances to Diana in *Diana of the Crossways*. In his 1877 essay "Comedy and the Comic Spirit" Meredith praises seventeenth-century French dramatist Molière for this same technique of comic inversion: "The farce of [Molière's play] *Précieuses* ridiculed, and put a stop to, the monstrous romantic jargon made popular by certain famous novels" (qtd. in Adams 1979: 432). We cannot claim that Meredith's exposé of novelistic jargon eliminated it from the cultural or literary script of the late nineteenth century, but its framing of such jargon as deceitful makes the case for realism's superiority to the genres that deploy such language. Nevertheless, Meredith's parodic perspective depends upon the influence and familiarity of the kind of language associated with sensational (and sentimental) fiction. The success of Meredith's realism derives in part from his pastiche of "lower" literature.

### Thomas Hardy (1840–1928)

Hardy, who wrote novels, plays, short stories, and poetry, earned critical acclaim for his novels, but suffered also from negative reviews, most of which complained about his almost unrelenting pessimism. After especially harsh reviews of *Jude the Obscure* (1896), Hardy gave up novel-writing entirely. Many of his novels, including *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Return of the Native* (1878), and *The Woodlanders* (1887), carefully document a rural life that was becoming obsolete in Hardy's own time; his

precise representation of agricultural laborers (including their dialect) underpinned his status as a realist, as did his appeal to a select and educated audience. In the words of one Victorian critic, Hardy's "fame has probably always been greater among [the] brethren of letters than among the mass of novel-readers. . . . He has never been the subject of what is popularly called a 'boom'" (Butler 1886: 384). Because of his select appeal, critics often linked Hardy to Meredith. In an article entitled "The Popular Novel" (*The Quarterly Review*, 1901), W. H. Mallock praises these novelists, if indirectly, for their lack of popularity, in the tradition that marked intellectualism as an acquired taste:

Mr. Meredith and Mr. Hardy are those whose circle of readers is the smallest. Why is this the case? The reason cannot be that Mr. Hardy and Mr. Meredith are suffering from any accidental neglect – that they are not read because they happen to have escaped notice. They are read and admired by a minority quite sufficiently numerous to have forced them on the attention of the majority, had the majority been able to appreciate them . . . (Mallock 1901: 4)

But to complicate once again the demarcation of sensation and realism described above, Hardy's lack of appeal to a popular audience, his focus on ordinary lives, and his narrative sophistication do not conspire to exclude sensational elements from his novels. Indeed, his first published novel, *Desperate Remedies* (1871), reflects the sensation genre as if by prescription, as a brief plot summary demonstrates: a beautiful lady's maid, Cytherea Grey, is pressured to marry the mysterious Aeneas Manston. Unknown to Cytherea, Manston is already married to an actress, whom he tries to do away with by plotting her death in a fire. Cytherea is rescued on her (illegitimate) honeymoon by her brother and the earnest young man, Edward Springrove, who loves her – and whom, in turn, she loves. Further intrigues, including the return of the supposedly dead actress and Manston's suicide, oppress Cytherea until her triumphant marriage to Springrove. Do the illicit relationships, secrets, bigamy, murder, and suspense in *Desperate Remedies* reflect Hardy's immature search for a style? Is the novel an artistic concession to the publishing industry's preference for entertaining works over the graver, more realistic novels that became Hardy's trademark? Certainly both these factors influenced the novel, but so did advice to Hardy from Meredith, a reader for Chapman & Hall, the publishing company that rejected Hardy's first manuscript, *The Poor Man and the Lady*. When Meredith met Hardy in 1869, he advised the aspiring novelist to attempt "a more complicated plot" in his next novel (Jones 1965: 37). Hardy took Meredith's counsel perhaps too literally in *Desperate Remedies*, and critics protested the novel's intricate crimes, improbable plot, and its "low curiosity" about the darker impulses of human nature.

Even though Hardy later distanced himself from *Desperate Remedies*, his subsequent, more critically acclaimed, novels contain some of the sensational elements – the crimes, mysteries, coincidences, and malevolent characters – of that early novel. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), no fewer than four characters are purported, falsely,



to be dead, and three of them are resurrected dramatically. The seduction, murder, and hanging scenes in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), as well as that novel's theme of misplaced inheritance, recall staples of the sensation novel. The objections to the sexual frankness of all of Hardy's novels echo a common complaint against sensation novels.

No work of Hardy's generated charges of immorality as vigorously as *Jude the Obscure*. In its candid critique of modern marriage, which includes heroine Sue Bridehead's refusal to "submit" to her husband Richard Phillotson, and her illegitimate relationship with her cousin Jude Fawley, Hardy's final novel inspired a great moral backlash. Novelist and critic Margaret Oliphant claimed that "nothing so coarsely indecent as the whole history of Jude in his relationship with Arabella [his legal wife] has ever been put into English print . . . from the hands of a Master" (Oliphant 1896: 137). Oliphant's moral outrage and her description of Hardy as a "Master" revives the sensation/realism division of the 1860s; no "serious" artist, she implies, should compromise his work by resorting to licentiousness. Hardy resented such absolute interpretation of generic categories, as he wrote in his notebook:

The division of novels into sensational & anti-sen[sational] or realistic [is] a mistake- [which] arises from the inability of the imperfect artist to be at the same time realistic and sens[sational]. *A good novel should be both*, and both in the highest degree . . . No novel is anything, for comedy or tragedy, unless the reader can sympathize with the characters. If the author can thus touch his reader's heart, & draw his tears, he cannot be too sens[sational]. (qtd. in Nemesvari 2006: 26; my italics)

The cross-purposes of Hardy's defense of the sensational are revealing: on the one hand, he offers a *de facto* justification of his own novels' mingled use of realist and sensational techniques. Yet on the other hand, he confirms the opposition between the genres by replicating it in his definition of "good" fiction. In effect, Hardy's professed resistance to "[t]he division of novels into sensational & anti-sen[sational]" is still caught in the debate itself.

In a parallel expression of feeling caught between opposing demands, Sue Bridehead in *Jude* reflects on the rationale behind social institutions:

"I have been thinking . . . that the social moulds civilization fits us into have no more relation to our actual shapes than the conventional shapes of the constellations have to the real star-patterns. I am called Mrs. Richard Phillotson, living a calm wedded life with my counterpart of that name. But I am not really Mrs. Richard Phillotson, but a woman tossed about, all alone, with aberrant passions, and unaccountable antipathies . . ." (Hardy 2000: IV.1)

The gap that Sue perceives between her official role as Mrs. Phillotson and the "real" self that escapes such clear definition seems analogous to Hardy's frustration with the conventions of fiction that critics so often held against him. Both the novelist and his

character are driven by the conflict between accepted – if somewhat arbitrary – norms and their individual desires to a state of unproductivity: Hardy stops writing novels, and Sue returns to her passionless marriage.

### George Gissing (1857–1903)

If Meredith and Hardy amalgamated sensational plots and techniques while maintaining their status as “master” realists, Gissing’s relationship to sensation was more analytical. His novels seldom evince sensation plots or characters, but often they explicate sensation’s influence on publishing and English culture at large.

Gissing wrote fiction steadily from 1880 to his death in 1903, publishing over twenty novels in all. He received critical commendation but, like Hardy’s, his novels were considered unnecessarily pessimistic. Gissing embarked upon his fictional career with a percipient understanding of the gap between his interests and writing style and the fictional preferences of most readers. Even with the publication of his first novel, *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), he warned his brother to

not entertain great hopes from the financial results; for I know very well that the book cannot be popular, like Dickens, or Miss Braddon, or Mrs. Henry Wood. There is much of desperate seriousness in it, & it must be accepted by intellectual people, if at all. (Gissing 1990: 242)

Gissing was correct about the reception of the novel, and even “intellectual people” did not embrace its manifesto-like assessment of working-class life. Gissing’s audience remained elusive for some time, as a reviewer for *The Unclassed* confirmed in 1884: “[i]t is difficult to say to what order of readers [the novel] appeals” (qtd. in Coustillas and Partridge 1972: 71). The genre of Gissing’s writing, however, was easier to pin down, and as this reviewer continues, “as its title indicates, [*The Unclassed*] treats of persons and subjects which have been by general consent excluded from English fiction. Not that Mr. Gissing has made any attempt to make sensational capital out of his subject – nobody need fear in him a pioneer of the school of M. Zola” (1972: 70). In 1885 Gissing was advised by Meredith, who admired the younger novelist’s work, to give more weight to the preferences of his audience. As Gissing relates in another letter to his brother, “Meredith tells me I am making a great mistake in leaving the low-life scenes [in his novel *Isabel Clarendon*]” (qtd. in Coustillas and Partridge 1972: 64). *Isabel Clarendon* did not find a large readership, but was critically admired; one anonymous reviewer for *St. Stephen’s Review* was reminded of Meredith when reading the novel: “Mr. Gissing is evidently a great admirer of the greatest of our living novelists . . . [the novel] is thoroughly readable, and far beyond average” (qtd. in Coustillas and Partridge 1972: 95).

Gissing’s later novels do not evade unpleasant details of poverty or “low life,” but increasingly throughout his publishing career he focused less on using literature as

an agent for social change and more on representing English culture's growing commercialization. For Gissing, literary art was one victim of this modern trend. As Stephen Arata explains, in his intense preoccupation with "what the novel does, what functions it performs in the world," Gissing cynically determined that realism was "a dying genre, inadequate to contemporary concerns" (Arata 1995: 27, 29). "Realistic" to Gissing was synonymous with "unpopular," as he writes in his essay "The Place of Realism in Fiction":

[Realism] contrasts with the habit of mind which assumes a novel is written "to please people," that disagreeable facts must always be kept out of sight, that human nature must be systematically flattered, that the book must have a "plot," that the story should end on a cheerful note, and all the rest of it. (Gissing 1978b: 85–6)

Gissing characterizes realism's struggle against these pleasing criteria most famously in *New Grub Street* (1891). The novel's realistic novelists, Edwin Reardon and Harold Biffen, are doomed by their artistic preferences for "high art." At first resistant to compromising his art for the marketplace, the genuinely talented Reardon gives in to this demand at the urging of his wife, who resents his inability to make money. He writes a "popular" novel, and a "sensational" story, but when these fail to improve his finances, his wife and son leave him, and Reardon dies from illness brought on by exhaustion and hunger. Biffen's example is even more extreme: he maintains that "whatever a man writes *for effect* is wrong and bad," and accordingly, he aims for "an absolute realism. . . . The result will be something unutterably tedious. . . . If it were anything but tedious, it would be untrue" (Gissing 2008: 166). As a case in point, Biffen's realization of his vision, *Mr. Bailey, Grocer*, has no plot and fails miserably with readers and critics. Soon after, the impoverished Biffen commits suicide.

For Gissing, realism's dismal fortunes largely extend from the impact and market success of popular fiction (including sensation), as well as the movement in journalism towards similarly entertaining, frivolous, and undemanding writing that captured the attention of an increasingly urbanized and often newly literate audience. As Matthew Arnold laments in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864) (and in *Culture and Anarchy*, 1869), the industrialization of the publishing market and its focus on quick production of expendable material signaled for Gissing the end of learned culture. Gissing's critique of exactly this process, which constitutes the plot of *New Grub Street* and surfaces in many other novels, including *The Odd Women* (1893) and *The Year of the Jubilee* (1894), realistically analyzes the power, reach, and appeal of sensational and popular writing. In *The Odd Women*, the characters with the greatest appetite for sensational and/or romantic fiction also and not coincidentally demonstrate the worst personal judgment. Virginia Madden feeds her addiction to alcohol at the same time that she reads romances, implying that what she calls "the detrimental effects of the novel" are both cause and effect of her similar escape into drinking. Her sister Monica's affinity for sensation novels seems to set in motion her attempt to have an extramarital affair and, more tragically, young Bella Royston's "racy"

reading predicates her equally melodramatic suicide. Life's imitation of fiction in *The Odd Women* is not only true for sensation readers; Monica's (estranged) husband Edmund Widdowson's life is as sober and plodding as the course of the improving (and non-fictional) literature that he commits to master.

To return to *New Grub Street*, this realistic novel about the failure of realistic novels also inspired Gissing's best reviews, and is still considered one of his greatest works. Gissing thus managed to do what his characters in the novel could not: write a realistic novel that would be successful, readable, and yet still intellectually astute. It seems that Gissing, cleverly, gets to have it both ways. He heralds the end of the realist novel by emphasizing the commodity market's appeal to unsophisticated readers, but he circulates this claim through the same marketplace that he derides. Gissing's overt confirmation of the realism/sensation divide, then, is undermined by his realistic examination of popular literature, which enables his greatest success.

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As part of their mission to explicate Victorian society, the realistic novelists examined here benefited from sensation's rise to influence and the ideologies that it popularized, either through a selective use of sensational techniques or through a damning analysis of the genre itself. At the same time, Meredith, Hardy, and Gissing all felt threatened by sensation's commercial success, and their novels and careers document an uneven effort to negotiate between artistic integrity and marketability, still consistent signs of "high" and "low" culture.

A more extensive discussion of "realism after sensation" would include the work of realists examined elsewhere in this volume, in particular George Eliot and the New Woman writers of the 1880s and 1890s, all of whom respond to, accommodate, and update sensationalism in ways as inventive as those of Meredith, Hardy, and Gissing. As that claim and this essay argue, though, "realism after sensation" is not a before-and-after story whereby realism eclipses the lowly if profitable genre of sensation, and moves on to higher artistic objectives. Instead, it is a story about a dynamic relationship between two capacious and mutable genres. Despite the lasting traces of their oppositional places in an artistic hierarchy, novels by Meredith, Hardy, and Gissing demonstrate and benefit from the fault-lines in the generic categorization of realism and sensation.

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## Aestheticism and Sensation

*Talia Schaffer*

At first glance, it may appear odd to have an article about aestheticism in a *Companion to Sensation Fiction*. After all, the two movements seem to have little in common. Aestheticism occurred decades later, spoke to another audience, and aimed for a different effect on the reader. Yet when we examine these movements more closely, we find that aestheticism actually shared certain features with sensation fiction. Both were controversial movements that eschewed the culturally accepted Victorian rules for good literature. Both aimed to generate vivid, intense visual effects. Both worked to produce strong feeling in the reader. And in their own time, both were perceived as pandering to inept readers in order to achieve a spurious, temporary popularity. Indeed, studying aestheticism helps us see that sensation fiction had a more complex influence than critics recognize. Most scholars know that sensation fiction helped pave the way for the popular adventure and detective fiction to follow, but what is less well known – if equally important – is that sensation novels also prepared readers to appreciate fiction that challenged dominant beliefs about literature’s moral effect, sentimental appeal, and realistic style. By opening up this alternative way of writing, sensation fiction made aestheticism possible. In turn, because aestheticism praised art that directly affected the reader’s feelings, aestheticism could prompt a reconsideration of the achievements of sensation fiction. Many texts published between the 1860s and the 1890s showed the influence of these two movements, and their confluence helped define an emerging type of popular literature.

In this essay I offer a brief introduction to aestheticism, considered especially in its relation to sensation fiction. Instead of trying to cover all of the aesthetic movement, I have aimed to highlight those aspects of aestheticism most interestingly connected to its sensational predecessor. My hope is that reading aestheticism against sensation will help us see just how these apparently different movements interrelated

and why that connection was crucial for popular writing in the second half of the nineteenth century.

“Aestheticism” names a cultural movement, emerging in the 1870s and ebbing in the 1910s, that tried to make every aspect of life a form of art. For aesthetes, “Art” became comparable to religion, an ideal to which one should aspire, a higher code expressed in the design of every possession, from teacups to bookbindings. Walter Pater wrote in the manifesto of the aesthetic movement, the “Conclusion” to his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), that “art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake” (Pater 1977: 239). To immerse oneself in art would be to burn with what Pater famously called “a hard gem-like flame,” in other words to live one’s life fully, intensely, with maximum pleasure (1977: 237). To live one’s life according to the laws of art, the aesthetes thought, would teach fine lessons: respect for the maker’s individual creative skill and appreciation of the artifact’s beautifully balanced form, honest materials, and simple lines. For some aesthetes, art became a way of teaching morality. Steeped in artistic virtues, the aesthete would be capable of recognizing and rejecting the pretentious falsities that the aesthetes diagnosed in Victorian design. Once one learned to value honesty in art, one could appreciate it in life.

What made for good art? Pater explained that “all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music” (1977: 135). He meant that good art would have formal play, structural beauty, and minutely skilled craftsmanship.<sup>1</sup> These qualities defined art – not its subject or message. Indeed, “a great picture has no more definite message for us than an accidental play of sunlight and shadow for a few moments on the wall or floor” (1977: 133). Just as music is a non-representational, abstract play of sounds, so too, the aesthetes thought, the quality of writing and painting ought to be measured by how successfully they used their chosen medium. Such form “should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter” (1977: 135). Aesthetic texts are radical in their insistence on their own craft, and their refusal to hew to normative Victorian values of realism and moralism.

Those Victorian values were wholly opposed to Pater’s. Ten years before Pater’s *The Renaissance*, the critic and thinker G. H. Lewes wrote:

Art is a Representation of Reality – a Representation which, inasmuch as it is not the thing itself, but only represents it, must necessarily be limited by the nature of its medium; the canvas of the painter, the marble of the sculptor, the chords of the musician, and the language of the writer, each bring with them peculiar laws; but while thus limited, while thus regulated by the necessities imposed upon it by each medium of expression, Art always aims at the representation of Reality, *i.e.* of Truth; and no departure from truth is permissible, except such as inevitably lies in the nature of the medium itself. Realism is thus the basis of all Art. (Lewes 2001: 37)

Lewes insists on fidelity to reality as the absolute basis of art. He also, interestingly, treats the medium in which the artist works as an impediment to pure truth. For

Lewes, canvas, marble, chords, and words “limit” and “regulate” access to truth. Artistic techniques and materials are merely inconvenient obstacles.

Lewes specifies that accurate depiction of realism is not enough; while any artist can copy a village group, the true artist will throw “a sentiment into his group which every spectator will recognize as poetry” (Lewes 2001: 38). In other words, what is necessary in art is both the technical skill to replicate reality and the sentimental skill to infuse it with emotional meaning. While Lewes presumably would have repudiated this association with sentimental fiction (he was focusing on what he thought of as the highest forms of art), the fact is that his ideas were very much in line with the kind of feeling that popular readers wanted from their novels. In the saintly deaths of children, in the sufferings of animals, in the tragedies of families torn apart, the reader’s feeling of outraged misery could be purged cathartically and could also be redirected (as Dickens’s fiction encouraged) into social activism.

A generation later, aestheticism abjured both realism and sentiment. Lewes had seen words, chords, and canvas as impediments to realism, but the aesthete saw realism as interfering with the free play of color, form, and sound. It was quite inconvenient to have to interrupt one’s exploration of the medium for some futile attempt to replicate reality. “As a method, realism is a complete failure,” asserted Wilde (1969b: 303). He accused literature that incorporated governmental statistics and verifiable facts of being dreadfully dreary, and insisted that in fact “art never expresses anything but itself,” for “the more abstract, the more ideal an art is, the more it reveals to us the temper of its age” (1969b: 313–14).

We see this attitude in James McNeil Whistler’s art, which Whistler saw as pure studies of color and form, not representations. Whistler gave his paintings musical names, such as “nocturnes,” to emphasize his fidelity to the Paterian view of art. Whistler’s title deliberately deterred a potentially sentimental reading of his most famous picture. Calling it an *Arrangement in Grey and Black: The Artist’s Mother* forced readers to consider it primarily as a formal arrangement, only secondarily as a picture of Whistler’s mother. (The subject’s uncompromising grimness also militated against a sentimental reading of motherhood.) Similarly, Whistler’s paintings of the Thames at night used quasi-abstract arrangements of color and light to baffle and block representational identifications. His daring led to art critic John Ruskin denouncing his *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* as “flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face” (Ruskin 1907: XXIX, 160). Whistler sued Ruskin for libel, which produced a famous trial in which Britain’s leading art critics testified as to whether this new form of painting counted as art or not. The judge ruled in Whistler’s favor, but awarded him only a shilling, which meant that his attempt to have his work legally declared art bankrupted his art career.

Victorian readers (and critics) not only wanted realism and sentiment, but also demanded that art teach moral lessons. In Wilde’s caustic summation, “the good ended happily and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means” (Wilde 1975: 343). Braddon and Wood sometimes interrupted the narrative to warn the reader directly against the kind of sexual adventurism of their main characters, recasting the



story as a tract of moral education. And sensation novelists were usually careful to ensure that crime was punished in the end. Here again, aestheticism took another tactic. Art existed simply for its own sake, to offer the world a beautiful artifact. It did not exist for the sake of some exterior moral lesson. Aesthetes felt that if it was artistically pleasing to have the good end happily, by all means write it that way, but do not write such an ending if it violated the structure of the drama or fiction. As Wilde commented, “no artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an author is an unpardonable mannerism of style.” Indeed, even more drastically, “vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art” (Wilde 2007: 3, 4). In other words, the artist needs to view morality simply as a way to produce an effect. The needs of the art determine the artist’s use of moral ideas, not the other way around.

When aestheticism rebelled against mainstream Victorian literary values, we have to wonder whether the movement learned a lesson from sensation fiction. In one sense, sensation fiction strongly embraced mainstream Victorian literary goals. Indeed, sensation fiction created an intensified version of what mid-Victorian readers wanted. Sensation fiction wasn’t content with seeming realistic; rather, it aimed to achieve a kind of documentary accuracy, with Wilkie Collins, for instance, famously utilizing real train timetables to organize characters’ journeys and researching the effects of various poisons. Sentiment? Nothing in Victorian fiction is a better tear-jerker than the ending of Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne*, with its devastating portrayal of an estranged mother/wife who cannot reveal her identity or restore her relationships.

Yet sensation fiction often paid lip service to these cultural desiderata, creating a deeply subversive undercurrent that violated the interests that these criteria served. In other words, if a novel was supposed to teach a moral lesson, it was in order to train readers to make good moral choices. But in sensation fiction, if a novel taught a moral lesson, it was often to provide a culturally acceptable gloss over its more profoundly anti-moral ideas. After a reader had spent several hundred pages thrillingly identifying with an adulterer, a murderer, or a bigamist, the character’s last-minute punishment hardly reversed this subversive sympathizing. Contemporary critics despised sensation fiction’s failure to meet moral standards. W. Fraser Rae wrote in 1865:

Tested, then, by a purely literary standard, these [sensation] works must be designated as the least valuable among works of fiction . . . Hence it is that the impartial critic is compelled, as it were, to unite with the moralist in regarding them as mischievous in their tendency, and as one of the abominations of the age. Into uncontaminated minds they will instil false views of human conduct. (Rae 1998: 591)

Certainly, sensation novels generally ended with the good characters rewarded and the bad characters punished, but they boasted hundreds of pages in the middle in which the reader’s ardent sympathies were with the villain(ness), and it was this sympathetic, passionate identification with a criminal figure that so appalled critics like Rae. Similarly, if a reader sobbed sympathetically, it might only prove that she or he wanted

the wrong person to do the wrong thing. Sentiment might be a dangerous weapon, unleashed on behalf of the villainous rather than the virtuous.

More profoundly, sensation fiction and aestheticism shared a different aim than Lewes's "Real Art." Unlike respectable mainstream fiction of the nineteenth century, popular genres often aimed to generate excitement. Gothic novels in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Newgate novels in the Regency and early Victorian period, shilling shockers, penny dreadfuls, and, of course, sensation fiction at mid-century, all aimed to arouse the reader to a sense of breathless suspense, anxiety, fear, and horror. H. L. Mansel wrote: "excitement, and excitement alone, seems to be the great end at which [writers of sensation fiction] aim – an end which must be accomplished at any cost" (Mansel 1998: 573). But where sensation fiction aimed for thrilling, adrenaline-packed emotion, aestheticism wanted to evoke a fleeting mood, a languorous rapture or melancholy fatigue, in which the reader is caught gazing at pure beauty.

In this respect aestheticism merged lessons from Romanticism with the sensation novel genre. Aestheticism ushered the reader into a rich imaginative realm without many events, just as Keats's nightingale transports one into an eternal poetic space where one must "in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet / Wherewith the seasonable month endows" (Keats 1999: 43–4). The suspension of conscious thought, the entrance into a kind of delicious trance where one feels it "rich to die," is entirely typical of aesthetic writing. So, too, is the entry into an enchanted imaginary realm like Coleridge's "shadow of the dome of pleasure" which "floated midway on the waves; / Where was heard the mingled measure / From the fountain and the caves" (Coleridge 1999: 31–4). If sensation fiction taught aesthetes to aim for readerly emotion, it was Romanticism, not sensationalism, that provided the model for that emotion.

Coming thirty or forty years after sensation fiction, aestheticism rejected the values that had governed a century's worth of writing. While sensation fiction adapts, intensifies, and redirects the dominant values of realism, moralism, and sentiment, aestheticism flouts them, creating an entirely different kind of writing, a formal play with images and language. Its real goal is to induce pleasure in the reader.

An early practitioner of this style was the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, whose verses generated a kind of swooningly musical pleasure in spite of their disturbing meaning. Swinburne, who wrote during the heyday of sensation fiction, shared the sensation novelists' interest in intense feeling. It is hard not to think of the infamous flogging scene in *Aurora Floyd* (1862), with its arousal and violence, when we read Swinburne's celebration of pain in "Dolores" (1866): "By the ravenous teeth that have smitten / Through the kisses that blossom and bud, / By the lips intertwined and bitten / Till the foam has a savour of blood, / By the pulse as it rises and falters, / By the hands as they slacken and strain, / I adjure thee, respond from thine altars, / Our Lady of Pain" (Swinburne 2003a: 105–12). Just as Whistler flirted with pure abstraction, Swinburne explored the limits of meaning, as we can see in his self-parody, "Nephelidia" (1880):

From the depth of the dreamy decline of the dawn through a  
 notable nimbus of nebulous noonshine,  
 Pallid and pink as the palm of the flag-flower that flickers with  
 fear of the flies as they float,  
 Are they looks of our lovers that lustrously lean from a marvel  
 of mystic miraculous moonshine,  
 These that we feel in the blood of our blushes that thicken and  
 threaten with throbs through the throat?

(Swinburne 2003b: 1–4)

This is art aspiring to the condition of music, as Pater advised. Pure, pleasurable sound with little or no relation to sense, aesthetic writing like Swinburne's could celebrate immersion in art, eschewing larger lessons.

The 1860s also saw the emergence of a kind of male figure that would later be associated with aestheticism. In *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–5), Eugene Wrayburn and Mortimer Lightfoot demonstrate an insouciant, satirical lassitude, preferring their comfortable male partnership to real work. Similarly, Robert Audley's sensuality, self-indulgence, appreciation of fine dining, immersion in leisure activities, and refusal to earn a living mark him as a proto-aesthete. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Robert has to be reformed. As many critics have noted, perhaps most famously Richard Nemesvari (1995), he has to become a properly heterosexual, bourgeois subject by the end of the novel. Similarly, Dickens's Eugene Wrayburn becomes a conventionally appropriate middle-class male, hard-working and happily married. Aesthetic tendencies – present if not yet named – are one of the worrisome trends of the 1860s.

Finally, the 1860s saw the heyday of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti's swooning, sensuous women, John Everett Millais's intensely detailed, richly colored realism, and Edward Burne-Jones's pensive fables. The Pre-Raphaelite movement is often identified as the beginning of aestheticism. Yet the Pre-Raphaelites were also associated with sensation fiction, as Chapter 43 in this volume demonstrates. Here was a moment when aestheticism and sensationalism converged: Pre-Raphaelitism's disturbingly sexualized females and richly detailed visual settings appealed to both movements.

As Pre-Raphaelitism gradually melted into *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism, the aesthetic movement moved further away from many of its sensational connections. Where sensation fiction prized immediacy, suspense, modernity, and quasi-journalistic crimes, aesthetic texts often liked to transport the reader into a misty nostalgic fable, decorate the story with deliberately archaic language or epigrams, and focus on the achievement of a mood rather than the resolution of an exciting mystery. While Wilde's epigrams are well known, Max Beerbohm, in "A Defense of Cosmetics," provides an example of another style of aesthetic language:

Loveliness shall sit at the toilet, watching her oval face in the oval mirror. Her smooth fingers shall flit among the paints and powder, to tip and mingle them, catch up a

pencil, clasp a phial, and what not and what *not*, until the mask of vermeil tinct has been laid aptly, the enamel quite hardened. And, heavens, how she will charm us and ensorcel our eyes! (Beerbohm 2007: 68)

Beerbohm's language draws attention to itself, with its repetitions ("oval"), its archaisms ("phial"), its unusual terms ("vermeil") and its odd formations ("ensorcel"). Aesthetic writing calls attention to itself *as* language. Unlike the apparent immediacy and transparency of sensation fiction's style, aesthetic writing aims for thickness.

Aestheticism's insistence on high art, too, meant that it aimed for a different class association than its sensational forebear. Sensation fiction, in the infamous words of W. Fraser Rae, "temporarily succeeded in making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing room" (Rae 1998: 592). A literature previously associated with servants and working-class subjects had made its way into middle-class homes. But aestheticism, by contrast, demanded that one affiliate oneself to an aristocratic pose. Because aesthetes gained cultural status from demonstrating their leisured, indolent connoisseurship, they had to perform the kind of lifestyle that would allow for the accumulation of such esoteric knowledge. If the prototypical aesthete was the languid, velveteen-clad artiste gazing at a lily (made famous by parodies by George du Maurier and Gilbert and Sullivan), one imagines the prototypical sensation-fiction character to be the grimly determined, dogged, energetic subject hell-bent on exposing (or concealing) the crime. If the imagined reader of aesthetic texts was the classically educated, Continentally traveled, leisured man of letters, the imagined reader of the sensation novel was the hard-working middle-class man or woman.

If sensation fiction infamously focused on crime, aestheticism focused on danger. Sensation fiction gained its thrills from showing that alcoholism, abuse, abandonment, colonial violence, bigamy, arson, theft, violence, and extramarital affairs existed in apparently happy, wealthy families. Aestheticism aimed for a different pleasure when it depicted the underworld, demonstrating that the aesthete was not hemmed in by retrograde Victorian morality, that all subjects were alike to art. Dorian Gray's jaunt to the filthy opium den, or Mrs. Vane's residence in the flyspecked gas-flaring flat, or the locale of "The Harlot's House" demonstrate how Wilde tried to use art to depict the underside of Victorian night life. The poems of Ernest Dowson and Arthur Symonds are overwhelmingly concerned with the seamy side of London life: brothels, dance halls, night scenes, drug scenes. If both sensation fiction and aestheticism liked to show the horrors, their class orientation was quite different. Sensation fiction showed the unseen miseries lurking in the greatest families, while aestheticism showed the common revulsions of impoverished city life.

Although these aesthetic texts highlight contemporary urban decay, another aspect of aestheticism favored a very different kind of setting – a vague, romantic, misty past. This differentiates it from sensation fiction's obsession with absolute contemporaneity; sensation novels often referred to events recently in the news. By contrast, Dorian may go to the opium den, but he also immerses himself in a richly quasi-medieval atmosphere through his famous collections of vestments, gems, and per-

fumes. Aestheticism incorporated elements of the medieval revival (including William Morris's designs), as aesthetes gloated over tapestries, antique silver, and Jacobean wood carving.

One of the major differences between sensation fiction and its successor is that they became associated with different genres. Sensation was primarily associated with novels, although, as this volume demonstrates, it also appeared in poetry and drama. Meanwhile, until recently, the only British text widely accepted as an important aesthetic novel was *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Like Romanticism a century earlier, this turn-of-the-century movement used intense, fragmentary, interior forms rather than the extended realistic scene-setting of fiction. Although more recent critics have developed a more extensive list of aesthetic novels, those who study aestheticism still tend to think of poetry, prose, dialogs, or drama as the movement's primary fields, rather than fiction.

Studies of aestheticism are complicated by its relation to decadence, another *fin-de-siècle* movement which had significant overlaps with aestheticism, so much so that the two are often paired. If *Dorian Gray* is the key novel of British aestheticism, the major text of (French) decadence is J. K. Huysman's *A Rebours*, and scholars often couple the two. One of the earliest anthologies of the movement, edited by Karl Beckson, was called *Aesthetes and Decadence*, and in some contexts the terms are used interchangeably. Decadence may be seen as a mood of fatigue within aestheticism, but some critics treat it as a counter-movement, or an unrelated cultural event. Thus Shafquat Towheed, in a recent article, describes decadent reading as a desultory, impressionistic activity that aims for sensory effect rather than deep immersion. In Towheed's telling, the very reading of decadent texts makes one a participant in decadence's alienation (Towheed 2006: 3). For decadence shared aestheticism's signature move, the desire to evoke a mood or describe a scene rather than to teach a moral lesson. But decadence exaggerated the amorality of aestheticism and made it an end in itself. Decadence is usually seen as a celebration of decay, as the name would imply. In the words of Arthur Symons, it has "an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity . . . this representative literature of to-day, interesting, beautiful, novel as it is, is really a new and beautiful and interesting disease" (Symons 2007: 71). The style Symons refers to is, in his words "spotted with corruption" (2007: 72). The most famously decadent lyric is Ernest Dowson's "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae," generally just called "Cynara," which begins:

Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine  
 There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed  
 Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;  
 And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,  
 Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:  
 I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

Dowson 2007: 73–4)

Dowson's speaker captures a mood of pensive regret, of revulsion at satiety, of intimate discontent that is quintessentially decadent. Similarly, Swinburne's necrophiliac, perverse, masochistic lyrics can be seen as decadent although they pre-dated the decadent movement by decades. Aubrey Beardsley's drawings, with their devastatingly skillful sinuous lines limning ambiguously sexual grotesques, provided a visual analog. "Cynara" demonstrates how decadence aimed to provoke feeling in the reader, but whereas sensation fiction aimed for excitement, terror, and shock, decadence went for a world-weariness, a cynical arousal, and a fascinated revulsion.

If decadence provided a space for expressing illicit desires, it was also very much associated with male writers; its tone of weary sexual knowledge was extremely risky for British women writers, although some French women writers like Rachilde (Marguerite Eymery) managed it. The aunt-niece couple who wrote as Michael Field, Edith Cooper and Katherine Bradley, would seem like an ideal example of decadence, with their steamy, sensuous lyrics like those in "Unbosoming," which compares love to an iris "brimful of seeds," "packed in a thousand vermilion-beads / That push, and riot, and squeeze, and clip, / Till they burst the sides of the silver scrip" (Field 1898: ll. 3, 5-7). Like the iris, the lover's "harvest-secret is burning red, / And I would give thee, after my kind, / The final issues of heart and mind" (Field 1898: ll. 14-16). However, the two women, as Michael Field, wrote "the one prayer / From decadence, Good Lord deliver us!" and were so appalled by the *Yellow Book* they demanded their submission be returned unpublished (Leighton 1992: 217). Michael Field's horror of decadence serves to alert us to another side of the movement. Innovative as it was stylistically, decadence could be quite reactionary politically. Decadence could be used to deplore the decay of high culture, classical knowledge, traditional Christianity, in the face of a modernity that felt blatant, garish, and commercial. Decadence, in other words, was opposed to precisely the kind of best-selling cheap fiction that sensation novels represented.

Thus where sensation fiction featured women writers who were as successful, or more so, than their male counterparts, aestheticism had a more complicated gender balance. Oscar Wilde edited a women's magazine, *The Woman's World*, befriended many women writers and worked to help them in their careers, and paid considerable (and serious, respectful) attention to aspects of women's culture that had rarely received notice from male writers: lace, jewels, tea sets. Part of the aesthetic movement's rationale was that, in Wilde's words, "one should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art" (Wilde 1969a: 434). Everything from one's clothing to one's armchair ought to partake of the qualities of good art.

Aestheticism therefore embraced aspects of women's culture. Whereas female sensation writers were seen as dashing recklessly into tales of crime that ought not to concern them, female aesthetes could retain approval for their continued femininity (so long as they did not verge on decadence). Aestheticism also conferred cultural status upon its participants in a way that sensation fiction distinctly did not. To be an aesthete was to be a cutting-edge artistic innovator, aware of recent art theories and conversant with international cultural movements. To be a sensation-novel writer

– at least according to the critics – meant to abandon higher literary goals to grossly pander to a popular audience. Prominent aesthetic writers included Alice Meynell, the renowned poet and essayist nominated for poet laureate, and Lucas Malet (Mary St. Leger Kingsley Harrison), the author of some of the most widely admired and controversial fiction of the turn of the century.

Perhaps the most famous work of aesthetic fiction is Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). The plot is too well known to need retelling here, but what is significant for our purposes is that when Dorian switches identities with his portrait, he literally lives out the rest of his life as a work of art. In this novel, Wilde asks what it would really mean to become a work of art. Perhaps to his own surprise, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* ends up endorsing moral guidelines, condemning a life lived in pure pursuit of pleasure. Dorian's chief adviser, Lord Henry Wotton, teaches Dorian a debased Paterian philosophy. Lord Henry is indeed the "critic as artist" (to quote the title of one of Wilde's most famous dialogs), a critic who creates the work of art, Dorian. Meanwhile, Basil Hallward, the painter, is tragically helpless to alter his own beloved icon, Dorian. *Dorian Gray* tests the main tenets of aestheticism and, fascinatingly, finds them dangerous.

However, *Dorian Gray* can also be read as a successor to sensation fiction. After all, it boasts an exciting plot which includes opium addiction, suicide, secret crimes, concealed identity, forbidden love, and magnificent material objects. As Regenia Gagnier points out, "just as Wilde had dedicated his stories and tales to women of Society who would thereby ensure his reputation, he constructed the narrative of *Dorian Gray* from the standard elements of a certain genre of upper-class women's literature: art, psychology, sin, and luxury" (Gagnier 1986: 66). The centerpiece of the aesthetic movement was built, at least in part, on the armature of the sensation novel.

Why would Wilde want to connect his novel with this critically disdained movement of a few decades earlier? First, he enjoyed the writing of Mary Elizabeth Braddon and remained friendly with her throughout her life (Wolff 1979; Carnell 2000). Second, resurrecting the sensation novel made political as well as commercial sense. As a popular genre with enormous sales and a loyal long-term audience, it would have attracted Wilde, and as a genre with prominent female practitioners it fit into Wilde's interest in heretofore despised feminized culture. And third, the sensation novel offered a useful precedent for combining beautiful characters with magnificent possessions, and secret, dastardly deeds.

But it is the phenomenally popular novelist Ouida (Marie Louise Ramé) who forms the strongest link between Wilde and the sensation novel. In the 1860s Ouida's early novels used sensation tropes, with dashing adventure stories, seductions, and aristocrats with sexual secrets. In *Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels*, Pamela Gilbert explains that Ouida's sales of *Under Two Flags* (1867) rivaled those of Braddon and Wood, with sixty-three editions in England alone (Gilbert 2005: 142). But Ouida kept writing, and by the 1880s she was pioneering the aesthetic novel. Her career connects these two points, and demonstrates just how these apparently different genres could find common ground.

During the 1880s Wilde and Ouida became friendly, attending each other's parties, reading each other's work, and helping each other professionally. Ouida wrote articles for Wilde's magazine, *The Women's World*, and in the same magazine Wilde reviewed her novel *Guilderooy*. Wilde's review lists the best epigrams from *Guilderooy*, making it clear that he was studying Ouida's style. Indeed, Wilde's epigrams are extremely similar to Ouida's in both their subversive content and their condensed, inverted structure. *Dorian Gray* shows how much he learned from her. Ouida writes that "when we were young our mere life was a poem," and Lord Henry tells the eternally young Dorian that "your days are your sonnets" (Ouida 1866: 495; Wilde 1981: 217). Princess Napraxine "would sacrifice [her] own life for an epigram," someone observes dourly – just as Dorian claims "you would sacrifice anybody, Harry, for the sake of an epigram" (Ouida 1885: I, 56; Wilde 1981: 205).

By the 1890s aesthetic writers were pointing out that Ouida had pioneered aesthetic style. It was in the manifesto of the aesthetic movement, *The Yellow Book* (1895) that G. S. Street published his influential appreciation of Ouida. In 1895 Alice Meynell commented:

Things improbable at the first glance in connection with her are to be traced to Ouida: amongst others the "epigram." . . . Many and many a little author to-day would perhaps become less frivolously cheerful on finding the most modern of his inversions in the decorated pages of his half-forgotten Ouida. The *pose* itself need no longer be copied by author from contemporary author, for it can be had, at no more than second-hand . . . from her. (Meynell 1965: 8)

Meynell's point is apt. It was Ouida who popularized epigrams and inversions, who influenced the younger generation of aesthetes and helped produce that signature aesthetic style. Max Beerbohm dedicated his book *More* (1899) to Ouida, and his chapter about Ouida pays homage to her enormous vitality, her endless interest in beauty, and her vividly absorbing plots.

Ouida's descriptions of artistic culture may also have interested Wilde. In her play *Afternoon* (1883), Ouida wrote about a supercilious dandy, "this Ruskin of the drawing-room; this æsthetic of æsthetics" (Ouida 1883: 153). His friend and acolyte is a man named Aldred Dorian, whose home is described in the following stage directions: "Studio of Aldred Dorian. Tapestryed Walls, Paintings, Marbles, Bronzes, Carved Chairs, Artistic Litter" (Ouida 1883: 164). This Dorian achieves fame for his collections of antique tapestries, china, and silver, and he gives exquisite parties to the artistic elite. He is also a painter of portraits. Although Dorian determines to sell all his collections and flee abroad, his mentor ensures that he can never manage to escape his all too spectacularly artistic home. *Afternoon* is likely to have helped shape the more famous Dorian a few years later.

And it is Ouida who gives us our conclusion here. Her sensational tales often feature abandonment, long-lost family members, exile, child abuse, and marital rape. Yet she describes them with the intense visual richness of aestheticism, and with a sharp



epigrammatic wit that Wilde copied. Beerbohm speculated about her development from her sensational early novels to her aesthetic later fiction, commenting that, although Ouida lost her “naughtiness,” she kept her poetry, wit, and romance (Beerbohm 1899: 114–15).

From Lady Audley’s sables and Sèvres vases to Dorian Gray’s beryls and pearl-powdered copes, one of the strongest connections between sensation fiction and aestheticism was the passion for beauty. In the rare antiques they praised, and the exciting writing they practiced, sensational and aesthetic writers shared something crucial. They brought style to popular writing, and they popularized style.

#### NOTES

- 1 Pater himself felt that great art combined form and content, but for Wilde, true art was simply a matter of form. It is Wilde’s slightly more radical position I am describing as typical of aestheticism here, although I am retaining Pater’s famous formulation.

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## Neo-Victorian and Pastiche

*Grace Moore*

The sensation novel sits uncomfortably alongside early twentieth-century attempts to reinterpret the Victorians as upright and repressed. With its scandalous forays into murder, bigamy, and insanity it is an awkward reminder of just how prepared popular Victorian novelists were to handle “taboo” subjects and just how salacious and exciting nineteenth-century writing could be. It is therefore hardly surprising that what we now term neo-Victorian fiction has been in an almost constant dialog with the sensation genre since its inception.

Neo-Victorian fiction is a broad category, encompassing parodies, pastiches, revisions, and historical novels, and I shall begin by positioning the revisionist novel in relation to recent scholarship in the field, before moving to think more specifically about the comparatively neglected sub-genre, neo-sensationism. While it is not a new phenomenon – as I have argued elsewhere, reinventions of the Victorian began early in the twentieth century through the iconoclastic work of writers like Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey – the form has gained popularity in recent years (see Moore 2008). As Andrea Kirchknopf suggests, these works often engage with the “connotative meanings” of Victorian, meanings which have shifted for each generation (Kirchknopf 2008: 56). Thus, while for many Edwardian writers it was important to signal a departure from Victorianism by figuring it as repressive and authoritarian, by the middle of the twentieth century attitudes towards the Victorian had shifted and become nostalgic and positively reverential. Cora Kaplan neatly encapsulates the ebb and flow of our engagement with the Victorians when she asserts,

The variety and appeal of Victoriana over the years might better be seen as one sign of a sense of the historical imagination on the move, an indication that what we thought we knew as “history” has become, a hundred years or more after the death of Britain’s

longest-reigning monarch, not so much lost as permanently restless and unsettled. (Kaplan 2007: 3)

The idea of our relationship with the Victorian as “unsettled” is, I think, particularly helpful when considering neo-Victorian fiction, which often deliberately returns to classic texts and seeks to destabilize them, either through “updating” them or altering them in some way so that we view the master texts on which they are based in a different light.

Andrea Kirchknopf asserts that the 1960s marked an important watershed for neo-Victorianism:

In the sixties, two conflicting attitudes to Victorianism emerged through the discourse of sexuality: on the one hand, *Victorian* referred to everything that stood in the way of sexual freedom; on the other hand, due to the increasing temporal distance from the era, the deconstruction and reassessment of the Victorians’ supposed sexual repression began to take place. (Kirchknopf 2008: 56)

Kirchknopf’s observations here are important not simply because they show a polarized response to the Victorians, but also because the debate shows just how relevant the Victorians had become as a yardstick. As Kaplan puts it, “the libertarian impulses of the 1960s, so invested on the one hand in driving a final stake through the heart of Victorian values, reanimated them on the other through its prurient curiosity about the period” (Kaplan 2007: 86). Academics thus gradually began to re-evaluate the importance of the Victorians, and the study of nineteenth-century literature and culture became more widespread. Works including Steven Marcus’s *The Other Victorians* (1967) and Michel Foucault’s monumental *History of Sexuality* (1976) sought to interrogate myths of Victorianism and to reclaim the Victorians from the charges of prudery and hypocrisy laid against them in the early twentieth century. As a result, our understanding of the diversity of Victorian culture and society became much more nuanced and multifarious. As Richard D. Altick has described, it was only as the last Victorians died that Victorian culture began to be valued and thought worthy of preservation (Altick 1982: 3).

Today the Victorians permeate every aspect of our lives through what Miriam Bailin refers to as “the self-confident adaptation of antique styles and cultural borrowings” (Bailin 2002: 44). While Bailin is discussing the renewal of interest in Victorian interior design, she might just as easily be considering the large numbers of neo-Victorian novels to have been published from the late 1960s onwards. With increased attention to feminism and the effects of decolonization, novelists writing from marginalized positions have seized on classic texts, seeking to probe their silences and to give voices to those who were silenced in the nineteenth century. Considering the surge of interest in the Victorians, Andrea Kirchknopf has commented, “the current investment mainly involves a drive to unearth – or invent – material not part of the

official historiography of the nineteenth century, and [to] utilise this to reinterpret the Victorians” (Kirchknopf 2008: 58). Robin Gilmour has suggested that, in addition to the various political reasons for returning to the nineteenth-century novel, novelists who reimagine the period are driven by a form of reactionary aesthetics:

Using the Victorians has offered a sophisticated way to get back to the unsophisticated, or at least to certain powerful narrative simplicities that the contemporary novel has been wary of: the pleasures of plot . . . Romance . . . romantic love . . . as well as the tantalizing sublimations of desire and death about which the modern novel . . . has been so impatient. (Gilmour 2002: 198)

Thus, for Gilmour, the agenda of the neo-Victorian writer can be as simple as wishing to pay tribute to the craft of the Victorians or to encourage readers to return to lengthy narratives of the nineteenth century. His suggestion that we are “using” the Victorians, however, points to a type of need or dependence and suggests that we are grafting our own problems onto the past.

Our society is not alone in its propensity to define itself by looking back to other historical periods. The Victorians regularly measured themselves alongside the Elizabethans, and writers including William Morris and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, were drawn to medieval culture as a source of inspiration. The contemporary novel’s engagement with the Victorians is, though, a sustained one, and critics including Raphael Samuel and Simon Joyce have pondered the period’s attraction. Samuel (1996), at least partly, credits the former British conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher and her love of so-called “Victorian values” such as thrift and hard work with the revival of interest in the nineteenth century. Simon Joyce takes Samuel’s analysis one step further, arguing for a “politics of nostalgia” and unraveling the meaning – in literary and political terms – of a return to the Victorian in the final decades of the twentieth century (Joyce 2007: 142). Writing of novels that specifically engage with Dickens’s writing, Joyce argues that they are symptomatic of a yearning for connectedness between classes and nations in an increasingly disparate world. For Joyce, “we can see these fictions as helping to construct the sense of a society that was being eroded by a conservative politics in the 1980s and 1990s” (2007: 143) and as such, these texts are involved in an act of reparation.

In addition to trying to understand the reasons behind this fascination with the nineteenth century, scholars are still working to define the characteristics of the various types of neo-Victorian novel. Linda Hutcheon’s term “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon 1999: 5) is highly useful when considering postmodern intertextuality, while Robin Gilmour helpfully compiled a list of six categories representing the most common features of the “use” to which the Victorians have been put in contemporary writing.<sup>1</sup> Christian Gutleben favors the more playful labels “pseudo-Victorian” and “retro-Victorian” (Gutleben 2001: 50). However, at the same time he draws attention to the elusive nature of these diverse texts when he notes,

Retro-Victorian fiction as an artificial conglomerate resembles an iceberg whose visible part is constituted by a few well-known novels which perfectly exemplify the postmodern Zeitgeist and whose less conspicuous part is made up of a whole series of novels which resist the experimental spirit of postmodernism and seem to partake of Habermas's category of "neo-Conservative fiction." (Gutleben 2001: 165)

Gutleben's comments here perfectly encapsulate the slipperiness of neo-Victorian writing and its general resistance to taxonomy. Indeed, even an apparently straightforward form like the sensation novel is difficult to classify when it is revised for the modern literary marketplace. While the original age of sensation may have been little more than a decade in length, the form has, of late, experienced a revival or afterlife.

The resurgence of interest in the sensation novel in the last twenty years or so has, interestingly, coincided with a heightened concern with neo-Victorianism. The sensation novel's renaissance has certainly informed neo-Victorian writing, which frequently invokes plots involving incest, bigamy, insanity, and suppressed wills. The sensation novel is clearly an attractive source for the author wishing to revisit or revise the nineteenth century, hoping to capture a more "authentic" representation of the underworld that ran contrary to the bourgeois respectability we so frequently identify as Victorian. Noting the "reticence" of the Victorian novel in relation to sanitation, extreme poverty, and sexual relations, Charles Palliser, in an "afterword" to his neo-Victorian masterpiece, *The Quincunx* (1989) speaks of "suppressed issues that are only just pushed out of sight [and] keep threatening to break loose and disrupt the unruffled and seamless surface that Victorian public ideology . . . tries to present" (Palliser 1990: 1204). Given this agenda, which many neo-Victorian writers share, it is hardly surprising that sensationism has risen to prominence in texts hoping to recover a lost version of the nineteenth century or to take issue with totalizing attempts to pin the Victorians down to a particular set of values. The sensation novel and its modern-day successor both seek to subvert official representations of the nineteenth century, and both forms are a response to change and uncertainty in the wider world.

Robin Gilmour, echoing John Sutherland, reminds us that our understanding of the Victorian novel is limited, shaped by school syllabi and the availability of "classic" texts. As scholars have gradually begun to examine rare and out-of-print Victorian works, our understanding of the novel form and what it meant to be a Victorian has begun to expand, and will continue to do so as we learn more about the texts which have not stood the test of time. Our increased ability to print or download rare texts on demand will offer us access to neglected Victorian novels that will – as with the recovery of sensation novels in recent decades – supplement and extend our knowledge of the nineteenth century. The neo-Victorian novel therefore implicitly reminds us of the mutability of our understanding of history and should alert us to what we have still to learn about nineteenth-century society.

Kelly A. Marsh has done more than any other critic to identify the neo-sensation novel as a separate sub-genre. According to Marsh, today's revisions of the nineteenth-

century novel can assist us in understanding their original sources, perhaps unsettling our expectations of what it means to be Victorian and forcing us to re-evaluate awkward silences surrounding issues like madness and entrapment. Mark Llewellyn likewise reads the neo-Victorian novel as a “mediator,” arguing that such novels are “processes of writing that act out the results of reading the Victorians and their literary productions” (Llewellyn 2008: 168), serving as connectors back to the nineteenth century. Marsh is clear about the overlap between sensation novels and realist writing, pointing to Charles Dickens as an influential figure whose plots informed sensation writing while aspiring to a more lasting literary legacy. She lays out the characteristic of neo-sensation fiction, noting that, as with its original, the action usually takes place in the present, but the plot is usually caught up with the past. Marsh goes on to assert,

While the neo-sensation novel does not represent a return to the particular concerns implicit in the Victorian novels, neither is it a parody or critique of the sensation novel of the nineteenth. Rather, the neo-sensation novel is a self-conscious usage of a Victorian form in the service of a project which shares with that earlier form an impulse to question a dominant ideology. (Marsh 1995: 110)

For Marsh, then, the neo-sensation novel is not simply a “novel with a secret,” it is also intrinsically subversive and, she argues, in a case like that of A. S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990) (which she identifies as neo-sensational), goes so far as to undermine the postmodern theoretical foundation that legitimates its cavalier approach to history. Marsh continues, “Just as the original sensation novelists made use of the concept of ‘sensation’ to undermine the strength of a dominant strain of Victorian ideology, the neo-sensation novelists have used the concept to challenge a particular strain of postmodern ideology” (Marsh 1995:111). Neo-sensational writing is, then, quietly working to reassert fiction over theory, sometimes sabotaging attempts at critical analysis by setting traps for the too-clever reader. Charles Palliser revels in this process when, in the afterword to *The Quincunx*, he comments, “I was fascinated by the idea of trying to think myself into the attitudes of a Victorian novelist and appearing to abide by the conventions, but then ‘breaching the contract’ by taking the situations past the limits of decorum” (Palliser 1990: 1212).

Both the neo-sensation novel and its realist counterpart revel in a postmodern awareness of their difference from their originals and the license that their authors enjoy as twenty-first-century novelists. Sarah Waters, for instance, in *Fingersmith* (1999), reworks elements of Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1859–60), itself a remarkably unconventional Victorian novel, with its resourceful and masculine heroine, Marian Halcombe. Abigail Dennis has described Sarah Waters’s writing as “the skilful appropriation of Victorian plotting and stylistic techniques, combined with embedded references to twentieth-century literary, cultural, and queer theory” (Dennis 2008: 41), and this comment neatly summarizes the major features of Waters’s writing. On the one hand, Waters is faithful to her original sources, working her

meticulous research on class, criminals, and the asylum into her writing with great subtlety, following the “orphan narrative” pattern of nineteenth-century sources such as *Oliver Twist* (1837–8), and splitting the narrative between two characters. Yet on the other hand, the protagonist Sue Trinder’s obvious physical relationship with Maud Lilly marks the novel out as different from mainstream Victorian fiction, where lesbian relationships are almost always disguised as close friendships. Thus Waters speaks back to the nineteenth-century novel’s privileging of the heterosexual romance plot, while the novel’s overt engagement with the shadowy world of Victorian pornography also highlights its difference from its original model.

Adopting Gutleben’s “iceberg” metaphor, there are some texts that protrude from the water and should obviously be regarded as representative of the “neo-sensational.” Novels that would clearly fit into Marsh’s category include Palliser’s *The Quincunx* (1989), Peter Ackroyd’s *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1995), Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), Kylie Fitzpatrick’s reworking of *The Moonstone*, *The Ninth Stone* (2007), Dan Simmons’s *Drood* (2009) – which is actually narrated by a fictitious Wilkie Collins – A. N. Wilson’s updated version of *The Turn of the Screw*, *A Jealous Ghost* (2005), and Michael Cox’s *The Meaning of Night* (2006) and *The Glass of Time* (2008). Each of these texts is modeled on the work of nineteenth-century sensation writers, including Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Wilkie Collins, and Charles Dickens, and each overtly engages with the sensation form. More subtle examples of texts that might be aligned with the neo-sensational category include A. S. Byatt’s scholarly quest-narrative *Possession* (1990), John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs* (1997), and Graham Swift’s *Waterland* (1984), to name but a few. These novels are more conventionally realist in format, but represent a type of writing that draws on the sensational from time to time.

According to Beth Palmer, as with their Victorian forebears, modern-day sensation writers like Michel Faber and Sarah Waters “are writing at a time of great stress and change in the publishing and print industries” (Palmer 2009: 87). Palmer argues that, just as the novelists of the 1860s wrote at a time when print culture was in transition and the demography of readers was changing, so today’s neo-Victorian writers are engaging with shifts in the way we consume the written word, as developing technology threatens to make the book obsolete. Palmer contends, writing of Faber and Waters, that “their neo-Victorian novels demonstrate that self-consciousness regarding a book’s place in print culture is a legacy of the sensation novels they pastiche” (Palmer 2009: 90). She then goes on to point to the material form of the (often unwieldy) neo-Victorian novel to suggest that it is deliberately reacting against the shorter novels of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Palmer extends her discussion to consider the reading matter of the prostitute, Sugar, in *The Crimson Petal and the White* (she is addicted to sensation novels). She argues that Faber’s detailed account of his character’s literary taste points to a knowing parallel between past and present – an argument that is borne out by the novel’s curious postmodern ending, which transcends intertextuality with its abrupt farewell and its connection of the act of storytelling with the act of prostitution. Palmer observes that “sensation fiction’s most significant and



lasting legacy is a self-consciousness about how the contemporary moment is constructed in and by print culture as it mediates the past” (Palmer 2009: 87) and, she continues, the neo-Victorian novel shares a similar self-awareness. Certainly, both writers are acutely aware of a scholarly readership. Waters’s first novel, *Affinity* (1999), emerged from her doctoral research, while Michel Faber’s meticulous attention to detail led to frequent consultations with the members of the VICTORIA-L listserv when he was in the final stages of drafting the novel. However, while they are conscious of readers who share their expert knowledge of the period, establishing their credentials as researchers can also enable neo-sensation writers to argue with and reinvent the past.

Kelly Marsh reminds us that the sensation novels of the nineteenth century were written to “shock” the reader, and I would suggest that this task is much more of a challenge for authors of neo-sensation novels (Marsh 1995: 101). Competing for attention in a crowded literary marketplace in which scandal is the norm, the neo-sensation novel is forced to push the boundaries of sensationism, for what seemed deliciously scandalous to the mid-Victorians is almost a commonplace to today’s readers. Thus, Peter Carey reimagines the sudden death of Dickens’s sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth, as the result of a botched abortion in *Jack Maggs* (1997), a scene that echoes another abortion in Graham Swift’s *Waterland*, a work that is itself indebted to *Great Expectations* (1860–1), while in what seems a very un-Victorian move, Michel Faber boldly positions a courtesan as the central protagonist of *The Crimson Petal and the White*.

Like Waters, Faber shows an in-depth knowledge of the nineteenth-century sex trade, but his novel is much more obviously self-conscious about its impostor status as a revisionist text. Cora Kaplan helpfully notes that it is “an engagement with [John] Fowles, with the sexual revolution and with feminism,” suggesting that Faber inverts, but ultimately shares Fowles’s antagonism towards powerful women. Curiously, Kaplan goes on to criticize Sugar’s ascent from a life of prostitution to become, at first the mistress of the soap manufacturer William Rackham, and then later the nurse and governess to his daughter as “the least credible of its plot developments” (Kaplan 2007: 99). However, in this assessment Kaplan downplays the novel’s clear connection to Ellen Wood’s extraordinarily successful sensation novel *East Lynne* (1861) and its gentle parodying of the hapless adulteress Lady Isabel Vane, who after a series of misadventures involving an elopement and a train crash, returns heavily disguised to her marital home, where she becomes governess to her own children. While Isabel tortures herself by watching her rival, Barbara Hare, take her place as a wife and mother, Faber envisages co-operation and camaraderie between Sugar and William’s wife, Agnes. Indeed, rather than working to oust the woman who should be her rival, Sugar saves Agnes from incarceration in an asylum and abducts Rackham’s daughter, Sophie, to raise as her own child.

Developments in psychoanalysis and the new frankness that they encouraged surrounding sex are, according to Silvana Colella, responsible for the racier content of neo-Victorian writing by novelists like Faber and Waters. She comments,

Post-Freudian readers . . . are likely to find sexual explicitness more compelling and authentic than self-repression or respectability. Hence the high incidence of sex scandals in historical fiction: the “unprettified truth” of sex comes across as more accurate, in historical terms, than the pretence of prudery. (Colella 2010: 93)

Whether or not Freud is responsible for this climate of frankness, we should bear in mind that censorship, either on the part of the state or of cautious publishers and booksellers, is nowhere near so widespread as it was 150 years ago. Thus, while nineteenth-century sensation novelists had to take care not to offend the sensitivities of such arbiters of public taste as Mudie’s Circulating Library or the influential railway booksellers W. H. Smith, those engaged in reinventing the Victorians have no such constraints. Today’s readers are inured to the Victorian brand of sensation and are surprised when novels do not contain graphic content. As a result, the neo-sensation novel is much more than a pastiche of the original, self-consciously pushing the boundaries of the sensational to encompass new and shocking events.

John Sutherland cites the reprinting of nineteenth-century pornography from the 1960s onwards as an explanation for the revisionist novel’s fetishization of Victorian sexuality. Writing of what he has termed “the neo-Victorian low-life, high filth novel,” Sutherland suggests that the form has become somewhat predictable and even, echoing Edgar Allan Poe’s famous formula for writing a *Blackwood’s* article, offers up a recipe for any would-be authors seeking to write a piece of pseudo-Victorian fiction (Sutherland 2002: 28). Sutherland argues that Michael Sadleir’s 1940 novel *Fanny by Gaslight* should be regarded as the originator and the exemplar of these explorations of the seedier side of Victorian Britain. While modern-day imitators can undertake the type of painstaking research Byatt depicts in *Possession*, their work will always lack the essential connection to the Victorian that, for Sutherland, infuses Sadleir’s writing. While Jonathan Loesburg argues that *Fanny by Gaslight* is a “refusal of Victorian prudery” (Loesburg 2007: 367), Sutherland sees it as offering a direct line back to the nineteenth century. Sadleir, who was born in 1888, was writing about a world he knew, and is able to convey the sights and sounds so much more vividly than contemporary writers who can only know the Victorians through the archives.

While *Fanny by Gaslight* offers a bridge between the Victorians and the modernists, other neo-Victorian texts also frequently speak back to one another, colluding in their fabrication of the past. Sometimes the revisionist work deliberately echoes or invokes its original, while other works form part of what Kirchknopf identifies as “adaptive chains” in which a sequence of novels and novelists respond to each other (Kirchknopf 2008: 75). Kirchknopf exemplifies this chain by referring to reworkings of *Jane Eyre* (1847) from Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) onwards, although other novels that have been subjected to the same process include Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Dickens’s *Great Expectations*.

Kirchknopf’s “chains” are often reflective of a political agenda (*Jane Eyre*, for instance, is first revised by the feminist Rhys, before being re-evaluated from a post-colonial perspective by novelists including V. S. Naipaul and Maryse Condé). However,

the chains can also register influence or pay tribute to a “parent” text. In *The Glass of Time*, for instance, Michael Cox demonstrates his indebtedness to predecessors including Charles Dickens and Peter Carey. In addition to naming the head gardener “Mr. Maggs” (at once invoking Carey’s revisionist novel *Jack Maggs* and one of Dickens’s proposed names for the character who eventually became David Copperfield), Cox later gives an informant the unlikely name of Tobias Barley, gesturing once again to Carey’s novel and its cruel caricature of Dickens’s Tobias Oates. Moreover, the novel’s detective, Inspector Gully, is a hybrid of Wilkie Collins’s Sergeant Cuff and Dickens’s Inspector Bucket, with his wife who acts as a professional partner and his propensity to itch whenever he picks up a trail. The novel is littered with other references to Victorian novels and popular culture, such as Sweeney Todd the demon barber and repeated parallels between the novel’s heroine, Esperanza Gorst, and Jane Eyre.

Cox’s plot owes much to the intricate, labyrinthine structure of Palliser’s *Quincunx* and its apparently unending sequence of wills and codicils and its atmosphere of surveillance, and the combined length of his two novels (Cox had originally planned to write a trilogy, but illness, and then death, prevented him from doing so) certainly recalls Palliser’s hefty volume. Cox sets up a disinheritance plot in his first novel, *The Meaning of Night*, in which Edward Glyver is deprived of his rightful inheritance and goaded into the murder of the poet, Phoebus Daunt. In his sequel Cox reintroduces Emily Carteret, the object of Glyver’s obsessive love, who is now the twenty-sixth Baroness Tansor. More than twenty years have passed since Daunt’s murder, and Emily is now a stately middle-aged woman who bears more than a passing resemblance to the icily beautiful Lady Dedlock of Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1852–3). The central protagonist, Esperanza Gorst, is initially employed as Emily’s lady’s maid, having been instructed to apply for a position below her station as part of a grand plan, which is slowly disclosed to her (and the reader) as the narrative unfolds. Cox’s brace of novels is, in my opinion, among the best examples of an effort to capture the structure and form of a piece of sensation fiction, and this is perhaps because Cox seems to have been driven only by aesthetics and not by a need to settle a score with the Victorians.

Cox’s writing offers a superb pastiche of the fast-paced style of the sensation novelists. The narrative is recounted primarily in the first person by Esperanza, but as with novels like Collins’s *The Moonstone*, other voices come into play in the form of letters, diaries, and extracts from newspapers. The scene towards the end of the novel in which Esperanza watches Lady Tansor take justice into her own hands offers an example of the type of pastiche to which Marsh alludes. While Cox represents a woman on the brink of suicide (a fate usually reserved for fallen women and failed financiers in Victorian novels, and usually not described in any detail), by evoking the proud and haughty Lady Dedlock’s death in *Bleak House* and drawing on the Gothic qualities of the stately home he is also able to capture the thrilling, melodramatic tone of a sensation novel:

It was an uncanny sight. She was wearing the long white nightgown that had once belonged to Phoebus Daunt, which, trailing out behind her in the near-darkness, seemed

like the winding-sheet of some poor wandering wraith, newly risen from the grave . . . Candle raised, her long hair streaming down her back, slippers feet pattering softly on the stone flags, she passed the portrait of the Turkish Corsair, and quickly turned into a long vaulted corridor, flanked on either side with faded banners, shields, crossed weapons, and other martial accoutrements. (Cox 2006: 471)

The scene is a lengthy one, and in the best Victorian tradition it continues for several pages, building suspense and protracting Esperanza's agony as she oscillates between inertia and an attempt to save Emily. With her flowing hair and white nightdress, Lady Tansor calls to mind any number of Victorian *femmes fatales*, yet in her final moments she also recalls the drowning Virginia Woolf in the opening pages of Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998), offering a delicate hint of the novel's postmodern intertextuality.

According to Kelly Marsh, "The neo-sensation novel works as a pastiche . . . it presents images that recall the nineteenth century, and it recreates the experience of reading the nineteenth-century novel" (Marsh 1995: 110). In spite of his exhaustive knowledge of the Victorian underworld, Michel Faber, in direct contrast to Cox, makes no such attempt to replicate the style of the sensation novel, deliberately drawing attention to the historical distance between himself and his characters through the voice of his worldly omniscient narrator:

A hundred lies he's swallowed; lies about the superior size of his prick to other men's, the erotic potency of his chest hair, the inevitability of Rackham's one day being the foremost manufacturer of toiletries in England; but this he cannot believe. (Faber 2002: 649)

This scene, in which the character William refuses to believe that the wife he wishes to lock away in an asylum is exhibiting calm, sane behavior is, according to Marsh's criteria, a failure. Rather than recreating the experience of reading a nineteenth-century novel, the narrator goes out of his way to remind us, through his overt sexual references, that we are *not*, and that as a consequence the plot need not follow the well-trodden path in which yet another inconvenient woman is buried alive in a madhouse. The postmodern critic Linda Hutcheon would perhaps argue that Faber is seeking to assert the strength of his narrative against the genre of pastiche in order to play with concerns like authenticity and originality. As Hutcheon expresses it, "Postmodern texts contest the view that the role of criticism is to enunciate the latent or hidden, be it ideological or rhetorical. They decode themselves by foregrounding their own contradictions" (Hutcheon 1999: 211).

Revisions of the Victorian novel can be symptoms of nostalgia, affection, or frustration, but, regardless of authorial agenda, they show that the nineteenth century remains topical and exerts influence over lives in the twenty-first century. The most convincing pastiches of the Victorian novel engage in a type of ventriloquism which can extend to the tone and style of the work, or which can be confined to letters or

poems embedded within the text. The contributors to Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham's *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past* develop the idea of mimicry to suggest (following Kathleen Renk) that neo-Victorian fiction is haunted by "spectral and textual tricks" (Arias and Pulham 2010: 38). I would develop this idea to suggest that if modern-day revisions of the Victorian novel are haunted, then it is the sensation writers of the 1860s who are providing the ghostly presence. Novelists like Braddon, Collins, and Wood in their differing ways challenged the conventions of Victorian writing from the inside, politicizing the condition of women and engaging with topics not generally considered fit material for respectable writers. It is therefore fitting that these fearlessly progressive writers should provide a bridge between the contemporary world and the nineteenth century, catering to readerly demands to be shocked and frightened. Given their shared mission with the neo-Victorian novelists to look beneath the veneer of propriety and respectability, not to mention the energy and modernity of their writing, the original sensation writers still have much to tell us about silences and suppression.

## NOTES

- 1 Gilmour's detailed and helpful list breaks revisionist writing down into the following categories: "the historical novel written from a modern perspective . . . pastiche and parody . . . the inversion of Victorian ideology . . . the subversion of Victorian fictional norms . . . the modern reworking or completing of a classic Victorian novel . . . the research novel" (Gilmour 2002: 190).

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