# WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY JOURNAL

## VOLUME VI

## 1986

# THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

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Wilkie Collins Society Journal

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Kirk H. Beetz, Editor

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# Editor's Note

Laurence Ince's "Wilkie Collins: The Intimacies of the Novels" is sure to be controversial. By researching records of births, deaths, and marriages, Ince tracks down Collins's mistresses Caroline Graves and Martha Rudd, with surprising results. His evidence calls for a re-examination of Collins's love life and will send some back to the novel Basil for a reconsideration of the biographical implications of Collins's declaration that "I have founded the main event out of which this story springs, on a fact within my own knowledge." Robert Ashley returns to these pages with an evaluation of one of Collins's novels recently reprinted by Dover Publications: A Rogue's Life. It is a novel worthy of more comment than it has heretofore received. Steve Farmer rounds out this issue of the WCSJ with an edition of one of Collins's harder-to-find writings. Collins provides a candid discussion of the Victorian theater from the theatergoer's point of view.

This issue of the Wilkie Collins Society Journal is dreadfully late, and I beg your forgiveness and thank you for your patience. Promised articles were not delivered and your editor was slow to deal with the problem.

K.H.B.

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# Wilkie Collins: The Intimacies and the Novels

Laurence Ince

The Woman in White, remarkable for its power and immediacy even a century after its creation, may mirror the experiences of its author more than has previously been thought. Skilled in hiding clues and maintaining dramatic credibility and consistency in his two most famous books, Wilkie Collins seems to have displayed an equally remarkable skill in developing and hiding secrets in his own life. So successful was he at this that it has taken much research to trace and verify several important strands of his private existence.

Wilkie Collins was 36 when his fifth major novel, The Woman in White was published in 1860. The haunting central experience of the book is a meeting that occurs between the artist Walter Hartright and a strange woman. The meeting is thus described:

> I had now arrived at that particular point of my walk where four roads met--the road to Hampstead, along which I had returned; the road to Finchley; the road to West End; and the road back to London. I had mechanically turned in this latter direction, and was strolling along the lonely highroad--idly wondering, I remember, what the Cumberland young ladies would look like--when, 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.
>
> I turned on the instant, with my fingers tightening round the handle of my stick.
>
> There, in the middle of the broad bright highroad--there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven--stood the figure of a solitary woman dressed 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.
>
> ("The Narrative of Walter Hartright," III)

The story of the artist Walter Hartright and his attempts to unravel the mystery of the strange woman in white hit the right note with the Victorian reading public. The novel first appeared as instalments in Dickens' magazine All the Year Round with the first chapters being published in November 1859. The serial was an immediate success and in one particular month 35,000 back numbers of the magazine were sold. The mystery of Anne Catherick's secret became a favourite topic of conversation at Victorian dinner tables and when the complete volume appeared it went through seven impressions in six months. After twelve years of writing Wilkie Collins was now a popular public figure.

The novel is full of the melodrama that the Victorians relished: the appearances and disappearances of the woman in white, her strange connections with the heroine Laura Fairlie, the machinations of Count Fosco and the key to the mystery--the secret held by the dastardly Sir Percival Glyde. The plot and ideas for the novel came to Wilkie Collins from various sources but the initial meeting of Walter Hartright and Anne Catherick is based on a strange meeting that happened to Collins himself. The following account of the meeting appears in The Life of John Everett Millais written by his son J. G. Millais and published in 1899:

> One night in the '50s Millais was returning home to 83 Gower Street from one of the many parties held under Mrs. Collins's hospitable roof in Hanover Terrace, and, in accordance with the usual practice of the two brothers, Wilkie and Charles, they accompanied him on his homeward walk through the dimly-lit, and in those days semi-rural, roads and lanes of North London . . . It was a beautiful moonlight night in the summer time and as the three friends walked along chatting gaily together, they were suddenly arrested by a piercing scream coming from the garden of a villa close at hand. It was evidently the cry of a woman in distress; and while pausing to consider what they should do, the iron gate leading to the garden was dashed open and from it came the figure of a young and very beautiful woman dressed in flowing white robes that shone in the moonlight. She seemed to float rather than run in their direction, and, on coming up to the three young men she paused for a moment in an attitude of supplication and terror. Then suddenly seeming to recollect herself, she suddenly moved on and vanished in the shadows cast upon the road.

> "What a lovely woman!" was all Millais could say. "I must see who she is, and what is the matter," said Wilkie Collins, as, without a word he dashed off after her. His two companions waited in vain for his return, and next day, when they met again he seemed indisposed to talk of his adventure. They gathered from him, however, that he had come up with the lonely fugitive and had heard from her own lips the history of her life and the cause of her sudden flight. She was a young lady of good birth and position, who had accidentally fallen into the hands of a man living in a villa in Regent's Park. There for many months he kept her prisoner under threat and mesmeric influence of so alarming a character that she dared not attempt to escape, until, in sheer desperation, she fled from the brute who with a poker in his hand, threatened to dash her brains out. Her subsequent history, interesting as it is, is not for these pages.[1]

In fact, the subsequent history of the woman was that she became Wilkie Collins' mistress living with him at various addresses in London. This story is repeated by Kate Dickens who married Wilkie Collins' younger brother Charles. In her volume of recollections she was to add the facts that the woman was named Caroline and that she was of gentle birth.[2] Collins' biographers have accepted these stories and have been able to identify the woman as Caroline Elizabeth Graves, widow of George Robert Graves. Mrs. Graves was born in around 1834 and at the time of meeting Collins she had an infant daughter named Elizabeth Harriet.[3]

However, using birth, death and marriage certificates and also Victorian directories for London, a clearer picture of Mrs. Graves and the strange relationship that she shared with Wilkie Collins can be uncovered. The woman in question was born Elizabeth Compton in around 1834 in Bath. The story of her gentle birth appears to be a fabrication that Wilkie Collins was certainly more than happy to let circulate. She was, in fact, the daughter of a mason. On the 31st March 1850 Elizabeth Compton married Robert Graves, the son of a carpenter.[4] The marriage took place at Walcot Parish Church, Bath, and the husband's occupation was given as an accountant, with his residence being registered as situated in the parish of St. James, Clerkenwell, London.

After the marriage celebrations the couple took up residence at 11 Cumming Street, Clerkenwell. Graves had now taken up a position as a shorthand writer and solicitor's clerk and on the 3rd February 1851 his daughter Elizabeth Harriet was born in Clerkenwell.[5] Unfortunately Graves was not to see his daughter's first birthday for he was soon seriously ill with tuberculosis. He travelled back to his native Bath to recuperate but died on the 30th January 1852 at Moravian Cottage, Weston.[6]

Perhaps there had been a rift between Mrs. Graves and her family for she did not return home to Bath but continued to live in London until that fateful evening when she mysteriously met Wilkie Collins. This meeting must have taken place before 1855 for in Millais' account of the meeting he mentions that he was walking back to his residence in Gower Street, a home he occupied only until his marriage to Effie Ruskin in 1855. From Collins' own writings it appears that Mrs. Graves was conducted to lodgings in the area around Howland Street where Collins was to be a frequent visitor. A few years later in 1859 Collins moved out of his family home to take up residence with Mrs. Graves at 124 Albany Street, then at 2A New Cavendish Street and then to 12 Harley Street which is where he was living when he wrote The Woman in White.

Perhaps to hide her true identity Mrs. Graves adopted the name Caroline when she went to live with Collins. Certainly there appears to have been an attempt to cover up her early life, for her daughter, when she married in 1878, was convinced that she had been born in around 1854 and not as the certificates testify in 1851.[7]

For the next nine years Collins and Mrs. Graves lived together. During this period Collins successfully published more novels, including No Name and Armadale. It was not until 1868 that he produced a work of equal merit to the Woman in White, when The Moonstone was published. 1868 was therefore a year of significance in Collins' public life and it was also important in his personal life, for in that year Mrs. Graves left him to marry another man. In 1867 Wilkie Collins had taken out a lease on 90 Gloucester Place and Mrs. Graves' name had appeared in directories as the occupant, but on October 4th 1868 Caroline Elizabeth Graves left the residence to marry Joseph Charles Clow at St. Marylebone Parish Church.[8] The register informs us that Clow was the son of a distiller, but an examination of directories for the late 1860s tells us a slightly different story. Joseph Charles Clow was the son of Leonard Clow, who kept the Western Counties Hotel at

the corner of London Street and Whitfield Street. Here Clow operated as an agent for Dublin stout, ale and whisky. Wilkie Collins attended the wedding and later reported the happenings to his sister-in-law Kate. Kate recorded the conversation in her volume of recollections. The conversation was curtailed with Collins stating, "I suppose you could not marry a man who had ————————," whereupon Kate broke in, "No I couldn't."[9]

What was it that Kate Collins could not bear to hear and why had it caused a rift between Mrs. Graves and Collins? The biographers of Collins have not deeply investigated the matter and have also been prepared to suggest that at this time Wilkie Collins transferred his affections from Mrs. Graves to a woman named Martha Rudd. Collins recognised in his will that he had three children by this woman who adopted the name Martha Dawson, namely Marian born at 33 Bolsover Street in 1869, Harriet Constance born at the same address in 1871, and a son William Charles Collins Dawson born on Christmas day 1874. Only the boy's birth was registered, the informant being Martha Dawson, and the father's name was given as William Dawson, Barrister-at-Law.[10]

However, the accepted version of events does not explain a sentence in Thomas Seccombe's article on Wilkie Collins in the Dictionary of National Biography, namely that, "intimacies formed as a young man led to his being harassed after he became famous, in a manner which, proved very prejudicial to his peace of mind." It is the present author's considered opinion that Wilkie Collins had first become involved with Martha Rudd in the early 1850s, this friendship and the one with Mrs. Graves being the so called intimacies formed as a young man. I would suggest that Collins' early association with Martha Rudd was a confusing and unhappy experience for him and that it resulted in the writing of the novel Basil which was published in 1852. Basil is the story of a young man's love for a girl of inferior social position. The hero, Basil, bears some similarity to Collins, one example being that he is trying to complete the writing of an historical novel, which is something achieved by Collins in 1850 with the publication of his first novel Antonina, or the Fall of Rome. Even in the dedication to Basil, Wilkie Collins goes to some pains to explain to the reader that the volume contains autobiographical information:

> I have founded the main event out of which this story springs, on fact within my own knowledge. In afterwards shaping the course of the narrative thus suggested, I have

> guided it, as often as I could, where I knew by my own experience, or by experiences related to me by others, that it would touch on something real and true in its progress.

Basil, the younger son of a member of the landed gentry, falls in love with the daughter of a linendraper. At first the social position of the girl is unknown to him but when he makes the discovery of the girl's background he is horrified:

> A linen-draper's shop--a linen-draper's daughter! Was I still in love?--I thought of my father; I thought of the name I bore; and this time, though I might have answered the question, I dared not.

In the novel the girl's name is Margaret Sherwin; in Collins' own life the girl was named Martha Rudd. In the novel Mr. Sherwin is described as keeping a large linendraper's shop in one of the great London thoroughfares. Rudd is not a common name in the directories of Victorian London but a Thomas Rudd kept a linendraper's shop in Newcastle Place just off the Edgeware Road.[11] Martha Elizabeth Rudd was born around 1830 and so this gives her a similar age (early twenties) to Margaret Sherwin in Basil (1852).

It is obvious from a reading of Basil that Wilkie Collins was besotted by this lady in the early 1850s. Yet the relationship did not develop at that stage. We must remember that Collins was an aspiring writer and was also at that time courting the friendship of the Dickens circle. In the status conscious Victorian society a connection with a linendraper's daughter might well have cast a shadow over the novelist's progress. This affair was ended by Collins and we must view his actions at this time as fitting in with the Victorian code of morals and not take a too serious view of those who would hold Collins up to be a moralistic revolutionary.

However, by the mid 1860s Collins was a wealthy man and a novelist of repute. He reformed his association with Martha Rudd and it was this action that upset Mrs. Graves and prompted her to marriage to Joseph Clow. The whole business greatly upset Collins for he had great affection for both women. From a reading of Kate Collins' recollections it appears that Wilkie Collins proposed marriage to Mrs. Graves to keep her with him and perhaps we can add those final words that Collins was unable to utter to his sister-in-law:

"I suppose you could not marry a man who had already a mistress."

The whole affair was traumatic and did nothing but harm to Collins' health. His nervous afflictions worsened and his use of laudanum increased. He continued to live at his home in Gloucester Place while Martha Rudd, alias Mrs. Dawson resided at a few minutes walk away in 10 Taunton Place.[12]

There was another change in Collins' domestic arrangements when Mrs. Graves returned to Gloucester Place in the 1870s, possibly in 1876 when Joseph Clow died. Mrs. Graves continued to live with Collins up to his death in 1889. In his will Wilkie Collins left his estate to be shared out equally between Mrs. Dawson (Rudd) and their children and Mrs. Graves and her daughter.[13]

Although Wilkie Collins did as much as he could to cover up his far from normal private life, his intimacies were revealed in one important and very public way, and that was in his novels. It has already been demonstrated how some of Collins' own experiences are chronicled in Basil and The Woman in White, but his own problems, relationships and prejudicies are to be found sprinkled through many of his other works. Wilkie Collins had been frustrated in the 1850s in his relationship with Martha Rudd because of her social standing, and later when he took up again the relationship it was to mean the loss of Mrs. Graves, the woman he had saved, looked after and fallen in love with after the rejection of Martha Rudd. This incident even moved Collins to propose marriage and the turning down of his suit merely reinforced his own beliefs in the futility of marriage. It is the futility and frailty of marriage that often occupy the characters in many of Collins' major novels.

In No Name (1862) the herione, Magdalen Vanstone, is disinherited on the death of his parents when it is discovered that they were not legally married at the time of her birth. Attempting to recover the fortune she enters into marriage with her cousin Noel Vanstone, a loveless match that does not achieve her aims. The labyrinthine novel Armadale (1866) also explores the pitfalls of marriage with the villainess Lydia Gwylt trying to marry into the Armadale fortune. The intricacies of the Irish and Scottish marriage laws are examined in Man and Wife (1870) when the luckless Arnold Brinkworth finds himself married in the eyes of Scottish law because to save embarrassment at an inn he declares himself, when he visits Anne Vanborough, to be her husband. In this particular volume Collins summons

up all his hostility to the matrimonial state in the following description of a marriage ceremony:

> Then the service began--rightly considered, the most terrible surely of all mortal ceremonies--the service which binds two human beings who know next to nothing of each other's nature to risk the tremendous experiment of living together till death parts them--the service which says, in effect if not in words, take your leap in the dark: we sanctify but we don't ensure it.

The theme of the frailty of marriage is dealt with in some of Wilkie Collins' later novels, particularly in The Evil Genius (1886) when the collapsing marriage of Herbert and Catherine Linley is examined in some detail.

We must recognize that Collins' entangled private life had a major bearing on his writings and it is hoped that some of these threads have at last been traced and understood.

## NOTES

[1] John G. Millais, The Life and Letters of John Everett Millais (London: Methuen, 1899), vol. I, pp. 278-279.

[2] Gladys Storey, Dickens and Daughter (London: Muller, 1939), p. 213.

[3] Kenneth Robinson, Wilkie Collins: A Biography (London: John Lane, 1951), p. 132.

[4] General Register Office, Kingsway, London, marriage certificate of George Robert Graves and Elizabeth Compton, Bath, 31st March, 1850.

[5] General Register Office, Kingsway, London, birth certificate of Elizabeth Harriet Graves, 3rd February, 1851.

[6] General Register Office, Kingsway, London, death certificate of George Robert Graves, 30th January, 1852.

[7] Robert Ashley, Wilkie Collins (New York: Roy, 1952), p. 74.

[8] Robinson, p. 134.

[9] Story, p. 214.

[10] Robinson, p. 134-135.

[11] Post Office Directory for London, 1854. Thomas Rudd is listed as a linendraper at Addison & Rudd, Linendrapers, 6, Newcastle Place, Edgware Road. In the 1869 Post Office Directory Thomas Rudd is in business on his own at 141 Praed Street, Paddington.

[12] Post Office Directory for London, 1876.

[13] Robinson, p. 324.

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# A Rogue's Life: Who Ever Heard of Frank Softly?

Robert Ashley

When Kirk Beetz asked me to write a review of Collins's novella A Rogue's Life, recently reprinted by Dover, my heart sank. Not only could I remember nothing about the book, but even the title failed to ring a bell. In my diligent graduate pursuit of Collins, could I have overlooked the Rogue? Somewhat panic-stricken, I reached for my biography of Collins and checked the "R" section of the index. No Rogue's Life. Perhaps, I reasoned hopefully, I had indeed read it, but dismissed it as unworthy of mention in a biography only one hundred pages long--you can't include everything. Next step: Consult your Ph.D. thesis since a doctoral dissertation, especially a ponderous two-volume tome like mine, does include everything. Apparently not mine, however. There being no index, I ran through the Table of Contents. Several novellas, and even a couple of short stories, were listed in the lengthy, descriptive chapter titles, but no Rogue. Thoroughly shaken (Dover had thought worth reprinting a work of which I was seemingly ignorant!), I took another look at my biography. There halfway down the list of "Novels and Novelettes" appeared the entry "1879. A Rogue's Life." So I was at least aware that Collins had written something called A Rogue's Life, though evidence still suggested I had never read it, a fact I found distressing to say the least. Then fate, in the most approved Collins manner, came to my rescue. The last page of the section entitled BOOKS BY COLLINS slipped through my fingers and my eyes rested on the first page of the INDEX. There, as the fourth entry under the A's, was A Rogue's Life, followed by three page references. The first of these informed me that the novella had made its debut as a five-part serial in the 1856 volume of Dickens' periodical Household Words. This gave me a hint. Back to the dissertation. At the very bottom of the first CONTENTS page I saw "Chapter XIII Contributions to Household Words"; with logic that would have delighted Wilkie, to say nothing of Sherlock, I deduced that in Chapter XIII I would find the Rogue. I did find him, and I also discovered that I had found him entertaining. With my self-esteem somewhat restored, I still faced a question or two: Why, if I had found the Rogue amusing, was he so forgettable? Why, if he was so forgettable, did Dover decide to reprint the novella, of which he was the central character? Re-reading A Rogue's Life only partially answered these questions. I felt as if I were

reading it for the first time; none of the characters, incidents, or scenes struck a responsive chord. Except for "A Terribly Strange Bed," The Woman in White, and The Moonstone, which I used in courses; and Basil, A Dead Secret, and Man and Wife, which I reviewed for this journal, I have re-read nothing by Collins in nearly forty years. Yet I felt that even his most trivial short stories would have produced the reaction, "Oh, yes, I remember reading that."

**********

A Rogue's Life is a first person, somewhat picaresque narrative of the life of Frank Softly "From His Birth to His Marriage." An impudent, irresponsible scion of a genteel, but impecunious family which disowns him, Frank is successively medical student, caricaturist, portrait painter, copyist of Old Masters, secretary to the Duskydale Literary and Scientific Institute, counterfeiter, jailbird, disguised clergyman, transported convict, and, like Magwitch, winner of fame and fortune in Australia. Unlike Magwitch, however, he gets a girl, too. In one of the neater touches in the novella, she has followed him to Australia and he fulfills part of his indenture as her servant.

The most notable features of A Rogue's Life are its gay, bantering tone, rarely a characteristic of Collins's work, and the use of several Collins plot devices and motifs for comic rather than melodramatic purposes. The fifty-five year old Collins felt obliged to apologize, somewhat wistfully, for his youthful exuberance:

> The critical reader may possibly notice a tone of almost boisterous gaiety in certain parts of these imaginary Confessions. I can only plead, in defence, that the story offers the faithful reflection of a very happy time in my past life. It was written at Paris, when I had Charles Dickens for a near neighbour and a daily companion, and when my leisure hours were joyously passed with many other friends, all associated with literature and art, of whom the admirable comedian, Regnier, is now the only survivor. The revising of these pages has been to me a melancholy task. I can only hope that they may cheer the sad moments of others.
>
> (Collins, iii)

This gaiety of tone, perhaps due, as Collins implies, to the presence and influence of Dickens,

pervades the entire novel. The reader is neither shocked by the peccadilloes of the hero nor concerned over his troubles, any more than is the hero himself. The villain, Dr. Dulcifer, is a "master criminal," omniscient, suave, mannerly, and mysterious, but he is a gay, good-natured, benevolent criminal, who cheerily waves good-bye to his frustrated captors as he disappears through a trap door. In temperament and physique, he is the closest approach in the early stories to Fosco. His house, with its barred windows, iron doors, peep-holes, speaking tubes, and trapdoor, is a "sinister house," but it is a gaily sinister house reflecting the personality of its chief inhabitant. Similarly, an anomalous will helps advance the comic plot, and Scotch marriage laws benefit rather than frustrate the hero and heroine. Other typical features are love-at-first sight, the author's use of his knowledge of art, hide-and-seek, and the resolute heroine. Throughout the novel Collins writes in a bantering, gently ironic tone, good-naturedly poking fun at a variety of people and things--English public schools, the Old Masters, the ridiculous pretensions of genteel but impecunious families. At one point Collins even makes fun of himself:

> When I rang the bell at No. 1, did I feel no presentiment of the exquisite surprise in store for me? I felt nothing of the sort. The fact is, my digestion is excellent. Presentiments are more closely connected than is generally supposed with a weak state of stomach. (67)

Usually, Collins's weak-stomached characters are experiencing presentiments all over the place.

At least two Collins biographers find "significance" in A Rogue's Life. Nuel Pharr Davis considers it Wilkie's "final farewell to the ghost of William Collins. With the detachment of a man looking into a monkey cage, he reviewed all the little currying tricks his father had used to get on with patrons. Father-son conflict . . . was presented at the level of low comedy" (182). William Marshall, on the other hand, calls it "the first full instance of Collins' fiction of social purpose . . . . In the manner of Thackeray's The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon Esq. (1884), the outlaw tells his own story, thereby passing significant judgment upon the society that has superficially judged him" (46). Sue Lonoff has made the point that Collins was very adept at concealing his criticism of the Victorian world from all except his most perceptive readers. I must be among the less perceptive, since A Rogue's Life was, forty years ago, and still is merely

a forgettable piece of fluff, though entertaining and even suspenseful. As Collins himself said, the Rogue has two merits: "He is never serious for two moments together; and he 'doesn't take long to read'" (iv). In his "Introductory Words" Collins states that his "old friend, Mr. Charles Reade" urged him "to enlarge the present sketch of the hero's adventures in Australia. But the opportunity of carrying out this project has proved to be one of the lost opportunities of my life" (iii). Consequently, he settled for republication with only minor changes. No one need shed any tears over the lost opportunity.

Why did Dover select the Rogue for reprinting? I can only guess: 1) It is short and consequently inexpensive to reproduce and to purchase, and 2) it reveals Collins in an uncharacteristic guise. Was it worth reprinting? Definitely. Almost anything by Collins is worth reprinting and A Rogue's Life is unique among Collins's works. I still hope that Dover will take a chance on one of Wilkie's undeservedly neglected later novels.

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# "The Use of Gas in Theatres"
# or
# "The Air and the Audience: Considerations on the Atmospheric Influences of Theatres"

Wilkie Collins

Edited with Notes and Commentary by Steve Farmer

Wilkie Collins wrote the following rarely mentioned article in 1881. It was first published in 1885 by Allen Thordike Rice and was reprinted in 1924 in The Mask: A Journal of the Art of the Theatre.[1] Though Collins casually dismisses it as "harmless gossip," the article actually offers its readers a brief look at the writer's views of two issues which concerned him mightily for much of his adult life: his health and the state of English drama in the mid and late nineteenth century.

Much has been written about Collins's health. Rheumatic illnesses plagued him by his thirties, and chronic gout and a subsequent addiction to pain-deadening laudanum followed soon thereafter and stayed with him the rest of his life. Reminded of these health problems by the very issue at hand in "The Air and the Audience," the reader easily sees Collins's intended lightheartedness disappear when he shifts from a somewhat flippant discussion of lucky American theatergoers (with their "ozoned air") to a concerned examination of the possible problems caused by unventilated English theaters. The description of "minute particles . . . charged with disease" and the thought that "playgoers of consumptive tendency . . . may sow the seeds that results in the future on which . . . we had better not dwell" suggests a horrified and hypochondriacal Collins, not a Collins who had intimated at the start that his article was designed to amuse.

About Collins's concern for the stage, less has been written, although he always maintained that "if I know anything of my own faculty, it is a dramatic one."[2] As early as 1858, Collins used the pages of Dickens's Household Words to discuss, in unfavorable terms, the state of the English stage. "Dramatic Grub Street (Explored in Two Letters)" examines possible reasons for the utter lack of good English drama; drama so bad, Collins claims, that it delighted only "a fast young farmer from the country, or a convivial lawyer's clerk who has never read anything but a newspaper in

his life."[3] Collins returns to the state of the English stage again in "The Air and the Audience," but by 1881 he had either been mellowed by the years, or he had witnessed a change for the better, for in this article he attacks those who condemn English drama and uses as ammunition several "notorious examples of good dramatic writing." Though his argument comes in an infrequently discussed article, it nevertheless serves to remind the reader that Collins's interest in the theater was as important to him late in life as it was during his youth.

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I

The treatment of this immense study is perhaps a little irregular. It assumes the form of a question, in the first place.

Is it in the pecuniary interests of a manager to consult the health and comfort of his audience, by improving the atmosphere of his theatre? or , to put it in plainer language still: If the announcement of two theatres--one of which is cool and clean, and the other hot and dirty--happen to present nearly equal dramatic attractions, how many persons, in doubt which place of amusement to prefer, will allow the consideration of sitting at ease, in breathable air, to influence their decision? Not one in one hundred.

On the sixth of April last, (1881) Mr. Steele Mackaye, author of the most popular play thus far written by an American dramatist ("Hazel Kirke") opened a new theatre in New York.[4] Already indebted to this gentleman's exertions, not only as a writer but as an actor, his countrymen have now to thank him for a public service of another kind. He is builder and manager of one of the most luxurious places of public amusement in the world.

Among other ingenious inventions, which it is not necessary to mention in this place, he has contrived to associate an evening at the theatre with the sanitary results of a visit to the seaside. This lucky audience breathe "ozoned air"; and are helped to enjoy it by means of folding chairs, arranged for them in groups of three or four so that they cannot be troubled by persons pushing by, on the way to vacant seats.[5] Have these novelties, and many more all directly contributing to public health, public comfort, and public pleasure, helped to draw large audiences on their own merits? The last accounts which have reached

England state that the new play written by Mr. Mackaye for the opening of his theatre has not yet met with the appreciations which it deserves.[6] What has the new ventilation (not forgetting the comfortable seats and the beautiful theatre) done towards tempting the public to judge for themselves of the merits of the play? Little or nothing. Pure air has not, as it seems, sufficiently interested the audience to make them talk about it. The friends of the manager urge him to increase his number of advertisements, and to mention particularly that he is the author of "Hazel Kirke". In short he appears to be in just as much need of getting all the help to notoriety that money can buy, as if he was proprietor of the hottest and dirtiest theatre on the face of the civilized earth.

In a city on the other side of the Atlantic--let me not say particularly in what part of Europe that city may be found--is a theatre which makes no new concession of any sort to public comfort. This place of amusement has been crammed from floor to ceiling for hundreds of nights more. Nobody who wants to see the popular play of the moment is kept away by the horrid atmosphere or the uncomfortable seats. No cries for more air or more room rise from the perspiring and aching audience. While they have got what they want on the stage, the manager is at perfect liberty to deprive them of the blessing of ventilation in the theatre.

And what is the moral of this?

The moral is, that we must consider the existing case of our lung and our skins, in the air of the theatre, without much hope of any general change for the better. The truth is that we offer no encouragement to reform. Do the two or three theatres in London which have generously given us the pure electric light, empty the other theatres which economically persist in poisoning us with gas? Only let those other theatres provide us with our favorite laugh and our delightful vulgarity--and they may give us any air or no air just as they like.

## II

The prospects of improvement in ventilation being now disposed of, consideration of the theatrical atmosphere, as it is at present, claims its turn next.

Sensible invalids who have to take a dose of physic never add to the terrors of the prospect by dallying with the bottle, and thinking how nasty it looks. They spare themselves an interval of disgust--

and swallow the detestable mixture before they have time to feel sick.

What scientific knowledge has to say about the air that we breathe in theatres is our moral dose of physic, at the present moment. Let us get rid of it at once--as pleasantly as possible.

You and I are at the theatre. Towards the latter part of the performance, we wipe our streaming face; and you say to me, "Hot, isn't it?" and I cordially agree with you. If we were not two ignorant playgoers, we should express ourselves more accurately. You would remind me that we want a certain quantity of oxygen in the air that we breathe. And I should reply, "Yes indeed, my friend. For the last two hours we have been engaged (assisted by the gaslights) in madly exhausting our oxygen, and in supplying its place with a vile infusion of carbon, which would end in suffocating us if the performance only lasted long enough." And if--appalled by the prospect--I happened to stop there, who would be happier to reflect the scientific side of my memory than my companion. "Don't forget", this intelligent person would add, "that there is another, and a more horribly vitiated atmosphere, which we are also making for ourselves. Minute particles, dear boy, are being 'given off' by us and by our perspiring fellow creatures. We are inhaling, each other's particles. And, worse still, if there happen to be any playgoers of consumptive tendency present, <u>their</u> particles may be actually charged with disease, and may sow the seeds that results in the future on which (as we are here for our pleasure) we had better not dwell. Shall we stay for the last piece? or shall we adjourn--?"[7]

I take my friend's arm, and hurry away with him before he can finish his sentence. I know what he means.

The system of Nature is a system of compensations. All mortal evils have their attendant remedies. In the horrid tropics, the venemous serpent glides to attack us over the very herbs which preserve our lives from the poison of his fangs. In our happier temperate zone, the theatre (and its destructive atmosphere) is the near neighbor of the preservative shell-fish shop, and the remedic public house. Does the man live who can honestly say that he has never enjoyed oysters and stout as he enjoys them after leaving the theatre? How does the great master of fiction write of his visit to his friend Terry at the old Adelphi? "I was glad to see Dan's theatre as full seemingly as it could hold. The heat was dreadful . . . . We had rare good porter and

oysters after the play". Rare and good Walter Scott![8] Happy, thrice happy provisions of Nature, which poisons us in the theatre, and brings us to life again by the genial agency of an oyster knife and a pewter pot!

III

Is this flippant? In that case let us go to the other extreme, and make a few sensible remarks.

Experienced playgoers have often observed the curious difference in the effect produced on the temper of an audience, when a theatre is too hot and when a theatre is too cold. In the first case--infinitely the worst case of the two--the semi-suffocated public not only submits with admirable resignation, but if the play happens to present an interesting story, becomes absolutely insensible to discomfort, and utterly oblivious of the small maladies under which it suffers at home. On these occasions, the tremendous silence of a crowd of human beings mastered by one supreme interest which holds them in thrall, is never disturbed by the cough which certain members of the assembly have brought with them into the theatre, and have indulged in freely while the proceedings have been opened by the performance of the overture. But the play has begun; the story is rising, through an artful succession of scenes, to its climax of interest. The ladies, who have been looking disparagingly at each others dresses, are all looking at the stage now; and the people in the pit, without room to sit in, sit contented nevertheless. Under those conditions the author carries his sweet-tempered public with him; and the actors increase the enormous circulation of their photographs when the shops open the next morning.

But let the circumstances be completely altered; let the season be late in the autumn, and the theatre be subject to a cool flow of air. If they feel the blessed change disagreeably, the women have their mantles, the men have their great coats. Protected in this way, do they appreciate the reviving purity of an atmosphere which deodorizes the emanations from gas and from the not universally-washed public that sits in its light. Far from it. With rare exceptions, the audience is out of temper. Nothing will rouse their interest; nothing will win their applause. No excellence of dramatic writing, no exhibition among the actors of perfect art, will charm away the ungrateful distrust of fresh air, the meanly needless dread of catching cold, which has got possession of men and women alike. The theatre which prospers, at the cool period of the year, must be heated to the summer temperature; and be rigorously careful never to have a door open, from top

to bottom of the building, while the performance is in progress. Is this exaggeration? When you are out in the streets, at a late hour look up at the bedroom windows, and see for yourself how many of them are raised, even by an inch or two, to let in the favourite object the public dreads--night air.

IV

Among other curious influences exercised by the theatrical atmosphere, want of sufficient oxygen seems (in certain remarkable cases) to end in want of sufficient memory.

For example, those distinguished playgoers who use their pens to lament over the condition of the modern English Drama, appear to be all affected by that melancholy object of contemplation in one and the same manner. Condemning with excellent reason, the wretched average of theatrical entertainments offered to our public, they are all unable to remember the production--say, during the last thirty years--of a single genuine English work which has been a creditable example of the art of dramatic writing. Setting aside living names, is it just, is it even honest--after venting righteous indignation on loathesome burlesques and idiotic adaptations from the French--to pass over the hopeful signs in the past which justify hope in the future; and to leave without a word of notice such original English plays as the "Masks and Faces" of Charles Reade and Tom Taylor--the Comedies of Robertson--and the "Our Boys" of Mr. Byron, which has lived through the longest "run" on record, and has achieved the rare honours of foreign translation and foreign performance?[9] It is impossible to imagine that men, bound in justice to present both sides of the question fairly, can have wilfully suppressed notorious examples of good dramatic writing which speak for themselves. The one other alternative is to suppose a remarkable failure of memory, and to hold the absence of oxygen accountable for it.

V

The end that comes to all things, big or little, must come even to such harmless gossip as this. Having shown that the air of theatres is decidedly injurious to people who breathe it, have I in conclusion any further suggestions to make? Only one--which is sure to please you. Let us go to the play.

NOTES

[1] Kirk Beetz, Wilkie Collins: An Annotated Bibliography, 1889-1976 (Metuchen, N.J. & London: The Scarecrow Press, 1978), p. 65.

[2] Wilkie Collins, "Memorandum, Relating to the Life and Writings of Wilkie Collins," in Wilkie Collins and Charles Reade: First Editions (with a few exceptions) in the Library at Dormy House, Pine Valley, New Jersey, ed. M. L. Parrish and Elizabeth V. Miller (London: Constable and Company, 1940), p. 5.

[3] Wilkie Collins, "Dramatic Grub Street (Explored in Two Letters)," in Household Words, 17 (March 6, 1858), p. 266. Collins also discusses the stage, good and bad performances, and theaters, comfortable and uncomfortable ones, in the following articles from The Leader: "La Promise," 5 (June 17, 1854), p. 572; "The Courier of Lyons," 5 (July 1, 1854), p. 619; "The Arts," 5 (July 8, 1854), pp. 644-645; "Les Diamans de la Couronne," 5 (July 15, 1854), p. 668; and "Theatres," 5 (July 29, 1854), p. 717. And of particular interest to readers of "The Air and the Audience" is "A Breach of British Privilege," Household Words, 19 (March 19, 1859), pp. 361-364, an article in which Collins assumes the role of J. Bull to complain, with tongue firmly in cheek, of the mollycoddle British theatergoers who were unashamedly allowing themselves to watch drama in the comfort of T. H. Wyatt's (1807-1880) New Adelplhi Theatre (1858).

[4] Steele Mackaye (1842-1894) was an American playwright whose most successful play, "Hazel Kirke" (1880), ran for over 500 nights without interruption at The Madison Square Theatre, which featured a double stage and folding theater chairs, both invented by Mackaye. The parenthetical date seems to be incorrect; the Madison Square Theatre opened in 1880.

[5] "Ozoned air" refers to a rudimentary artificial ventilation (air conditioning) system dependent on compressed ozone, whose subsequent expansion leads to a cooling of the surrounding air.

[6] Mackaye's "new play" was probably a dramatization of Albion Winegar Tourgee's (1838-1905) A Fool's Errand, a piece written in 1879 and produced in the Madison Square Theatre by Mackaye in 1881.

[7] Not only does this passage suggest a real fear of illness on Collins's part, but it also shows his fascination with the details of science. It was a

fascination that worked its way into much of his fiction.

[8] Walter Scott (1771-1832), much admired by Collins, had reason to relish seeing "Dan's theatre as full seemingly as it could hold." Dan is Daniel Terry (1780-1829), who, in 1825, used his friendship with Scott to secure a £1250 pledge from the author for the purchase of the Adelphi Theatre, London. Terry later encountered financial problems, and Scott ultimately had to make good on the pledge.

[9] Charles Reade (1814-1884), a close friend of Collins, wrote "Masks and Faces" (1852) with Tom Taylor (1817-1880), a dramatist and editor of Punch. Robertson is Thomas William Robertson (1829-1871), an actor and dramatist. Robertson is noteworthy as a writer of several comedies and for having created stage adaptations of Dickens's "The Battle of Life" and "The Haunted Man." Mr. Byron is Henry James Byron (1834-1884), whose domestic drama "Our Boys" (1875) enjoyed a record four year run at the Vaudeville Theatre.

## Notes

Gothic has begun a new series, with volume one appearing in 1986. The first issue includes Karen McGuire's "The Artist as Demon in Mary Shelley, Stevenson, Walpole, Stoker, and King" and Kenneth Gibbs's "Stephen King and the Tradition of American Gothic," as well as reviews. A handsomely presented journal, Gothic is published annually. Subscriptions are $6.00 (U.S.A.) for two issues. To subscribe or query for more information, write to the editor, Gary William Crawford, P.O. Box 80051, Baton Rouge, LA 70898.

Oxford University Press plans to publish Wilkie Collins: Selected Letters, edited by Kirk H. Beetz, in 1989. Dr. Beetz continues to prepare a collected edition of the letters and would be delighted to learn of letters in libraries or other collections. Please write to him at: 1307 "F" Street, Davis, CA 95616-1101 U.S.A.

## Notes on the Contributors

Laurence Ince is a resident of Olton, Solihull, West Midlands. He writes: "I became interested in Collins after reading The Woman in White, which I was unable to put down until the final page. I then set out to try to find out more concerning the woman in Wilkie's life which the novel was based on. I pursued Wilkie and his women by using directories of London for the Victorian period and registry certificates."

Robert Ashley's work has appeared often in the WCSJ. Dr. Ashley was a professor of English at West Point and later at Ripon College in Wisconsin. Now retired, he continues to take a lively interest in Wilkie Collins. His many articles and his 1952 book Wilkie Collins are familiar to nearly all Collinsians.

Steve Farmer is a graduate student at the University of Kansas. His dissertation, in progress, discusses Collins's nonfiction.