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THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

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Wilkie Collins Society Journal

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Editor's Note

This issue features some fine criticism that is sure to be of interest to members of the Wilkie Collins Society. "A Terribly Strange Bed" is the most often discussed of all of Collins's short stories, yet its themes can seem impenetrable. Dr. Rance's approach to illuminating the story's is welcome and should be of interest to those who are interested in Gothic literature in general, as well as to those of us who have a special interest in Collins. Muriel Smith again graces the Journal with a critical study, this time with a daring comparison of how Jane Austen and Collins handle the same theme. In his review of Twelve Englishmen of Mystery, Robert Ashley calls into question the practice of treating Collins as a "serious" writer, thereby suggesting that an increasingly popular critical approach to Collins's achievements may be misdirected. To round out this issue, Nick Rance calls to our attention the significant publication of a new critical edition of the novel No Name.

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"A Terribly Strange Bed": Self-Subverting Gothic

Nick Rance

The sensation novel recurrently alludes to Gothic fiction, the preceding literary sensationalism, to mark a distinction. In The Woman in White, the Limmeridge schoolboy mistakes the figure who transpires to be Anne Catherick for a ghost and is rebuked by the schoolmaster:

If I hear another word spoken about ghosts in this school, it will be the worse for all of you. There are no such things as ghosts, and therefore any boy who believes in ghosts believes in what can't possibly be . . .¹

Anne Catherick is more disturbing than any mere ghost. The suspense of the famous first "sensation scene" of The Woman in White derives from the challenge which she presents to the early Victorian orthodoxy which Hartright has imbibed at his mother's cottage in Hampstead and from his late father: "Thanks to his admirable prudence and self-denial, my mother and sister were left, after his death, as independent of the world as they had been during his lifetime."² Prudence, self-denial, independence: these were the characteristic bourgeois virtues. Hartright sounds like a character in a morality play, and as such in the mid-nineteenth century society was conventionally perceived. Those with a right heart succeeded, while others failed. Hartright accordingly assumes the worst of Anne, meeting her "at that suspiciously late hour and in that suspiciously lonely place"³ in the course of his walk back from Hampstead to Lincoln's Inn.

Anne, on the other hand, protests the innocence which her wearing of white symbolically asserts:

You don't suspect me of doing anything wrong, do you? I have done nothing wrong. I have met with an accident--I am very unfortunate in being here alone so late. Why do you suspect me of doing wrong?⁴

Provisionally almost convinced that Anne's misfortune is not symptomatic of a wrong heart, Hartright is traumatized.

It was like a dream. Was I Walter Hartright? Was this the well-known, uneventful road, where holiday people strolled on

Sundays? Had I really left, little more than an hour since, the quiet, decent, conventionally-domestic atmosphere of my mother's cottage?⁵

If ghosts in Gothic fiction signified a past as liable to erupt into an enlightened present, Collins substitutes the present for the past as a source of dread.

One may then look again at some of the apparently straightforwardly Gothic short stories of Collins, or at least some of the earlier ones, keeping in view the insistence in the sensation fiction of the 1860's on the distinction between its own and the Gothic mode of sensationalism. As was typical of the Victorian short story, several of Collins's stories involve the supernatural, while some which do not, like "A Terribly Strange Bed," to be taken as the exemplary Gothic-seeing story here, have a pronouncedly Gothic flavour.

Amid a dread and awful silence I beheld before me--in the nineteenth century, and in the civilized capital of France--such a machine for secret murder by suffocation as might have existed in the worst days of the Inquisition, in the lonely inns among the Hartz Mountains, in the mysterious tribunals of Westphalia!⁶

One might assume that in the short stories we have a Collins bowing to rather than reconstructing popular taste, or a Collins at play, or note that "A Terribly Strange Bed" appeared as early as 1852, the year of Basil, which has its Gothic moments, with Mannion in the closing scenes as mobile among the Cornish elements as Frankenstein's monster at the North Pole. What is intriguing about "A terribly Strange Bed," however, is the degree to which it prefigures the break between the sensation fiction of the 1860's and preceding merely sensational fiction.

What would seem the transplanted Gothic prop of the title is situated above a gambling-den in modern Paris. As well as being in Paris, the bed has an origin more homely than the Hartz Mountains:

a four-post bed, of all things in the world to meet with in Paris--yes, a thorough clumsy British four-poster, with the regular top lined with chintz--the regular fringed valance all round--the regular stifling, unwholesome curtains . . .⁷

Like the narrator and near-victim of the bed, who is an Englishman in Restoration Paris, the bed is British. Although adapted by an "infernal ingenuity"⁸ which might be referred to the Hartz Mountains or even merely to foreign parts, and the title of the story would seek to isolate the foreign aspect of the bed, the bed has not been transformed. "The regular stifling, unwholesome curtains" always have been suffocating.

The narrator has put himself in danger by breaking the bank in the shady gambling-den. In Restoration Paris, however, gambling is not restricted to the disreputable.

My friend proposed a visit to Frascati's; but his suggestion was not to my taste. I knew Frascati's, as the French saying is, by heart; had lost and won plenty of five-franc pieces there, merely for amusement's sake, until it was amusement no longer, and was thoroughly tired, in fact, of all the ghastly respectabilities of such a social anomaly as a respectable gambling-house.⁹

The disreputable gambling which is favoured by the narrator and implied to be less anomalous is within the confines of the Palais-Royal. Until 1780, when the duc de Chartres, the future Philippe Egalité, inherited, the palace was exclusive to the aristocracy. In cooperation with the big-businessmen and financiers who had undertaken to transform Paris, the duc de Chartres converted the Palais-Royal into a meeting-place for all classes. From 1787, the Palais-Royal became a focus of popular agitation. In 1789, Arthur Young noted that the coffee-houses

are not only crowded within, but other expectant crowds are at the doors and windows, listening à gorge déployée to certain orators, who from chairs or tables harangue each his little audience; the eagerness with which they are heard, and the thunder of applause they receive for every sentiment of more than common hardness or violence against the present government, cannot easily be imagined. I am all amazement at the ministry permitting such nests and hotbeds of sedition and revolt . . . ¹⁰

In the story's title, the English colloquialism, "terribly strange," may be perceived as evoking foreign or French terror. But what is then "terribly strange" about the bed is that it is British.

In the story, England persists in intruding on or merging with France. The ex-grenadier with whom the narrator celebrates his winnings by drinking champagne flatters him as "the amiable, gracious Englishman, in whose veins circulates the vivacious blood of France!"¹¹ Feverishly lying awake in the bed the top of which he will shortly observe to be descending on him, the narrator is thinking of England. "The moonlight shining into the room reminded me of a certain moonlight night in England--the night after a picnic party in a Welsh valley."¹² He is struck by the association of ideas. "And what cause had produced in a moment the whole of this strange, complicated, mysterious effect?"¹³ He can think only that the scenes have moonlight in common, which leaves the matter where he found it.

The narrator's gambling acquaintances are not dismissible as so many blackguards. They are reminiscent in their destitution of the revolutionary sans culottes. "I had entered the place to laugh, but the spectacle before me was something to weep over."¹⁴ The narrator, however, is not to be deterred from his winning streak at the evocatively-named rouge et noir.

At first some of the men present ventured their money safely enough on my colour; but I speedily increased my stakes to sums which they dared not risk. One after another they left off playing, and breathlessly looked on at my game.¹⁵

Finally, "the whole floating capital of the gambling-house was waiting to pour into my pockets!"¹⁶ The disreputable gambling-den on the particular evening might be Restoration society in miniature: witness that society as rendered by one of Collins's literary heroes, Balzac.

E. J. Hobsbawm has remarked on how analogous were the histories of England and France in the early 1830's.

The Reform Act of 1832 corresponds to the July Revolution of 1830 in France, and had indeed been powerfully stimulated by the news from Paris. This period is probably the only one in modern history when political events in Britain ran parallel with those on the Continent, to the point where something not unlike a revolutionary situation might have developed in 1831-2 but for the restraint of both Whig and Tory parties.¹⁷

An English revolutionary of the beginning of the seventeenth century is elliptically introduced into the story. Over the bed is a portrait of

a swarthy, sinister ruffian, looking upward-- it might be at some tall gallows at which he was going to be hanged. At any rate, he had the appearance of thoroughly deserving it.¹⁸

Actually, the gaze is directed at the bed-top which is about to descend on the narrator. The ruffian in the portrait wears a hat "of conical shape, according to the fashion supposed to have been favoured by Guido Fawkes."¹⁹ The name of the narrator is not revealed until the second from last paragraph of the story, when he is addressed by a policeman as "Monsieur Faulkner."²⁰ Thus the narrator himself does not escape the revolutionary taint. Carlyle, in The French Revolution, to be followed by Dickens in A Tale of Two Cities, began by blaming those who had provoked revolution no less than those who were committing atrocities in the streets. When the narrator reports to the police, he is at first taken to be not a victim but a criminal: "a drunken Englishman who had robbed somebody . . ."²¹

If capitalists and careerists dominated Balzac's France, the principles of laissez-faire capitalism in the first third of the nineteenth century in England had the status of a religion. In Shirley, her novel of the Luddite era, the mill-owner, Robert Moore, is depicted by Charlotte Brontë as one of the worshippers. Having narrowly avoided suffocation, Faulkner in "A Terribly Strange Bed" is thereafter a sadder and wiser man, who forswears playing at rouge et noir. "The sight of a green cloth, with packs of cards and heaps of money on it, will henceforth be for ever associated in my mind with the sight of a bed canopy descending to suffocate me in the silence and darkness of the night."²²

"A Terribly Strange Bed" is not a puzzle or allegory. The Gothic facade of the story is integral. Gothicism corresponds with the relatively optimistic perspective which would ascribe revolution to "infernal ingenuity," as the modified bed is ascribed, rather than to pre-existing social tensions. The technique of Collins in the story is to embroil Gothic motifs with those of sensation fiction, which will induce terror not through supernaturalism but by assigning to unrest or revolution specific historical causes which the Gothic albeit current Victorian concept of "infernal ingenuity" would merely seek hysterically to evade.

Infernal hints notwithstanding, "A Terribly Strange Bed" eschews supernaturalism. Alternatively, in some of the early tales of the supernatural by Collins, as in, for example, "The Dream Woman" (1855), the supernatural element is "framed" and the fears precipitating the demonology implied. Such tales are not different in kind from "A Terribly Strange Bed." Self-conscious and self-subverting Gothicism is not confined in the period to the fiction of Collins. James Malcolm Rymer's popular and not quite interminable serial, Varney the Vampire, concludes with an orgy of vampires on Hampstead Heath, which includes one Brooks, who "was known to have been such a respectable man."

He went to the city every day, and used to do so just for the purpose of granting audiences to ladies and gentlemen who might be labouring under any little pecuniary difficulties, and accommodating them. Kind Mr. Brooks. He only took one hundred pounds per cent. Why should he be a Vampyre? Bless him! Too severe, really!²³

Here Rymer is using the metaphor of the vampire in precisely the same sense as Marx, who wrote that "Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks."²⁴ The Gothic metaphor is deconstructed, since what is purportedly a threat to society from outside and from the aristocratic past (Varney is a baronet) turns out to be merely a projection of the ruling capitalist economy.

Varney the Vampire appeared in original serial form in 1847, and it is in the late 1840's and beginning of the 1850's that the plots of all four of Collins's sensation novels completed in the 1860's are set. Hartright's crisis of faith in the ideology of self-help would be alleged to have occurred in 1849. The consensus among modern historians of the Victorian period has been to concur with Collins in his dating of the first significant stirrings of doubt. Thus J. F. C. Harrison remarks that

It was clear to many middle-class sympathisers before 1850 that self-help as a means of raising the labouring classes as a whole had severe limitations. A minority of exceptional working men could be relied on to respond to such opportunities; but for the vast numbers of the labouring poor the suggestion of self-help was simply advice to lift themselves by their own bootstraps.²⁵

Samuel Smiles and vampires are liable to seem strange bedfellows. The tendency alike of the creed of self-help and the literary vogue of the vampire would be, however, to exculpate the mid-Victorian social system. Properly social anxieties may either be rendered in terms of the lack within the individual of the requisite prudence, self-denial and independence, or projected on to demonic forces outside society. Eschewing the vampires, infernal devices and ghosts discredited in Collins's shorter fiction, the new sensation fiction would then unmask a more domesticated kind of evasiveness.

NOTES

¹ The Woman in White (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 108.

² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁶ Tales of Terror and the Supernatural (London: Dover, 1972), p. 34.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁰ Travels in France during the years 1787, 1788, 1789, Dublin, 1793; ed. C. Maxwell, Cambridge, 1929. Quoted in Jacques Godechot, The Taking of the Bastille (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 59.

¹¹ Tales of Terror and the Supernatural, p. 27.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

- 16 Ibid., p. 27.
- 17 The Age of Revolution 1789-1848 (London: Mentor, 1962), p. 139.
- 18 Tales of Terror and the Supernatural, p. 31.
- 19 Ibid., p. 32.
- 20 Ibid., p. 38.
- 21 Ibid., p. 36.
- 22 Ibid., p. 39.
- 23 Varney the Vampire (London: Dover, 1972), p. 756.
- 24 Capital Volume 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 342.
- 25 The Early Victorians 1832-51 (London: Panther, 1973), p. 172.

"Everything to My Wife": The Inheritance Theme
in The Moonstone and Sense and Sensibility

Muriel Smith

"Everything to my wife": these are Sir John Verinder's instructions to his lawyer, who has the will drawn and signed within ten minutes. He sees no reason to ask Sir John to reconsider it. Lady Verinder is not only worthy of unreserved trust, as all good wives are, but is capable of properly administering the estate.¹ Julia Herncastle, as she was, nobly born but with nothing much of a fortune, and well past her girlhood when she settled for a Yorkshire baronet, has been managing him since the day they married.²

Collins here indicates his preference for a strong capable woman, but Sir John's will is also essential to the story. Had Sir John made an elaborate settlement for his daughter's protection, Rachel Verinder's cousin Godfrey Ablewhite would know all about it and would not need to make the enquiries about Lady Verinder's will that reveal him to Mr. Bruff as a mercenary scoundrel.³ Lady Verinder's will, tying up Rachel's fortune to give her and any man that she marries a handsome income but no power over the capital, is again essential to the story, but not a mere plot device. It is a necessary precaution. Rachel is an intelligent and determined young woman, but she is very young and we know that she is financially an innocent from her misjudgment of her cousin Franklin Blake.

Though heavily in debt, Blake is not in difficulties about money because most creditors are content to wait and charge interest: he is a rich man's only child. The French creditor, whose lawyer arrives at Lady Verinder's demanding repayment of money without which his client will be ruined, is quite an exception. Lady Verinder instantly pays the money and is furious. Rachel is deeply and understandably shocked.⁴ But, at not quite eighteen and with a mother who sees to everything, she gets the general situation quite wrong. Everyone else realizes that Blake has no financial motive for stealing the Moonstone: Rachel does not. Otherwise, when she sees him take it, she might reasonably conclude that he is worried about its safety and is transferring it to a better place. This is indeed the truth, though he is acting unconsciously under the influence of opium. Without Rachel's misconception there would be no story, but the mistake arises from her situation and subsequent developments

from her character, with nothing arbitrarily contrived purely to keep the plot going.

Mr. Ferrars is another gentleman who has left everything to his wife.⁵ Possibly she has only a life interest with reversion to the children, but she has unrestricted power to apportion money and real estate between them. Unfortunately, and unlike Lady Verinder, she is not fit to be trusted. Lady Verinder is a benevolent despot, but Mrs. Ferrars is a petty-minded tyrant. She can disinherit for any reason or none the natural heir, her elder son Edward, and disinherit him she will should he persist in an imprudent engagement, meaning an engagement to a girl without fortune: this is her only criterion. As it happens, Edward's youthful entanglement with Lucy Steele really was foolish: he has no wish to marry her but stands by his engagement from a sense of honour. His mother, a fundamentally stupid woman, endows his brother Robert with an estate that she had meant for Edward, had he married to please her. Lucy thereupon grabs Robert and his independent income, and Edward is free to engage himself to Elinor Dashwood. A grudging ten thousand pounds from his mother⁶ enables them to marry, but they are never insulted by her real favour and preference.

It must be said that, taking the basic idea of the masterful widow, Collins has incorporated her more deftly into the plot in The Moonstone than Austen in Sense and Sensibility, where the situation is in fact arbitrary. So fundamental an idea could not be eliminated by any rewriting, but there are signs that Austen was not satisfied with it. The dragon of Pride and Prejudice, the fire-breathing Lady Catherine de Bourgh, has no power over Mr. Darcy's income. Nor in the other novels that she published or left in a publishable state did Austen use the disinheritance theme. It was only when she was into her forties and dying of Addison's disease that she created another dragon armed with money power. She began in January 1817 and died in July leaving only the beginnings of a novel, but the disposition of Lady Denham's money is obviously to be a major theme of Sanditon.⁷ This time everything is accounted for. The rich Miss Brereton married firstly the rich and elderly Mr. Hollis who left her everything; her second marriage gave her nothing but the title of Lady Denham, but she gave nothing in return. Everything remained and remains in her own power, and the Breretons, the Hollises and the Denhams all live in hope.

For Sense and Sensibility it can be pleaded in mitigation that it is early work. Austen was nearly thirty-six when she published it in November 1811, but

it had been long in preparation. Cassandra Austen's note on her sister's novels⁸ gives First Impressions, later retitled Pride and Prejudice, begun October 1796 and finished August 1797, and Sense and Sensibility begun November 1797 but with the same story and characters as an earlier Elinor and Marianne.

There is material in Sense and Sensibility dating from the 1797 writing, notably the duel between Colonel Brandon and Willoughby over Willoughby's seduction of Brandon's ward. This strongly resembles the duel, on Sunday October 1, 1797, between Colonel Robert King and his cousin Colonel Henry Fitzgerald, who had seduced King's young sister Mary. Each fired six shots at the other and missed every time: Brandon and Willoughby likewise are both unwounded. Since King sent a report to The Times, the affair was widely known.⁹ I have argued elsewhere¹⁰ that Austen was too conscientious to use in a novel a duel unessential to the plot without real-life authority.

Elsewhere there is material apparently re-used which may help in dating Elinor and Marianne. In the autumn of the Dashwood's arrival in Devonshire we hear of Colonel Brandon's sister living at Avignon.¹¹ Avignon, papal territory until the French Revolution, was annexed in September 1791 and a massacre of political prisoners followed in October. For an invalid lady, an October at Avignon cannot be later than 1790. The canvassing which Mr. Palmer has recently been doing "against the election" can be for the 1790 general election.¹² Period feeling, too, points in the same direction. Love and Friendship,¹³ dated at the end June 13th 1790, consists of Laura's letters to her friend Marianne. Laura is the farcical version and Marianne Dashwood the realistic version of a recognizable type. Each possesses exquisite sensibility, but besides this they are liberals with revolutionary sympathies, of a type not uncommon around 1790. Marianne's sort of innocent enthusiasm, not overtly political, dates from before the Terror, not from the Post-Robespierre period around 1795.

I cannot accept Southam's dating of Elinor and Marianne to the earlier part of 1796, immediately before First Impressions.¹⁴ The action of the story being in 1790 and 1791, the reasonable date is 1792: I would say probably begun immediately after the History of England,¹⁵ which is dated at the end November 26, 1791. The Ferrars inheritance, then, belongs to a plot which Austen will have devised when she was barely sixteen.

In his advice to readers of the Pall Mall Gazette,¹⁶ the Regency authors that Collins mentions are Scott and Mrs. Inchbald: the latter's A Simple Story is worth seeking out. The praise of Scott is no mere conventional tribute: Collins reiterated it in private.¹⁷ There was no special need to mention Austen: she had been printed and reprinted in Bentley's Standard Novel series since 1833 and even inexperienced readers could be assumed to have heard of her already. His silence should not be taken to imply that Collins had laid Pride and Prejudice aside in despair, along with Clarissa. But are there any signs that he did read and learn from Austen? I think there are.

Collins first stated his artistic creed in 1852 in the dedication to Basil. With his first requirement, a solid foundation of fact, Austen certainly complies. She, however, kept chiefly to the everyday realities, whereas Collins insists that the dramatic and exceptional incidents of life are equally legitimate subjects; and in Basil he certainly accepts, consciously or unconsciously, the invitation in Mansfield Park: "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery."¹⁸ His literary experiment might perhaps be defined as crossing Austen with Radcliffe: the irruption of the sensational into the domestic.

In The Moonstone, his subject forced Collins to have an older generation of Regency people. The Herncastle family history is merely sketched in, but to get away from Victorian stereotypes he needed a source for what Regency England was actually like. For the landed families, living on medium-sized estates, Austen was and is an important source, and it is hard to see what other Collins could find of equal authority. In particular there is Sir John Verinder, brought up in the Regency period. Since he has to leave everything to his wife, it might well be a comfort to have a realistic writer genuinely of the Regency authorizing the device by using it herself. Anyhow, Sir John is a more convincing leftover from the Regency than Sir Leicester Dedlock--which is not to claim that The Moonstone is a more important novel than Bleak House or Collins greater than Dickens.

What is a fact is that Collins could do some things better than Dickens. Rachel Verinder, as the heroine of a Victorian novel written by a man, is quite outstanding, and she is only one of the many fine female portraits for which Collins is so justly praised.¹⁹ His method, as he explains it, is that he takes several examples of a type that he has observed, keeps these living models in mind and draws on them for his character.²⁰ Yes: but can a writer observe

effectively without some preliminary briefing? Who then, in his early reading sensitized Collins to the feminine? Not Scott: scarcely Inchbald. I am merely conjecturing, but a heavy diet of Austen in boyhood would account for much. The dates do fit: Collins born in 1824, Bentley begins pushing Austen in 1833.

NOTES

¹ Wilkie Collins, The Moonstone (hereafter M.) Everyman Library edition with introduction by Dorothy L. Sayers (London: J. M. Dent & Sons; N.Y.: E. P. Dutton, 1944), p. 244 (Mr. Bruff's Narrative Chapter 1).

² M. p. 8 (Betteredge Chapter 2). She cannot be much more than twenty years younger than her brother John, who was at least twenty-two in 1799 (p. 27 Betteredge Chapter 5); I put her at thirty-five when Rachel was born. Her fortune will be the same as Mrs. Blake's--seven hundred a year (p. 13 Betteredge Chapter 3).

³ M. p. 247 (Bruff Chapter 1).

⁴ M. pp. 308-309 (Blake Chapter 6).

⁵ Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility (SS.), ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford & N.Y.: Oxford Univ. Press, 3rd ed., 1933, reprint 1986), p. 15 (Vol. I, Chapter 3).

⁶ SS p. 374 (Vol. III, Chapter 14; Chapter 50 in consecutively numbered editions).

⁷ Jane Austen, Minor Works (MW.), ed. R. W. Chapman (OUP, 1954), pp. 375-376.

⁸ Illustrated in MW. facing p. 242; text in B. C. Southam, Jane Austen's Literary Manuscripts (OUP, 1964), p. 53.

⁹ SS. p. 211 (Vol. II, Chapter 9; Chapter 31); Jack Smith-Hughes, Six Ventures in Villainy (London: Cassell, 1955), pp. 194-196.

¹⁰ "Jane Austen and the State of the Nation," Jane Austen Society Report, 1975, pp. 15-16.

¹¹ SS. p. 63 (Vol. I, Chapter 13).

¹² SS. p. 113 (Vol. I, Chapter 20).

13 MW. pp. 76-109; Austen was fourteen (born 16 December 1775).

14 Southam, pp. 46, 58.

15 MW. pp. 139-150. The unfinished stories Lesley Castle (pp. 110-139) and Catherine (pp. 192-240) I would assign to 1791: the 1792 dates appended will be dates when Austen copied out works definitely abandoned not to be continued.

16 "Books Necessary for a Liberal Education," February 11, 1886; reprinted in Wilkie Collins Society Journal, 5 (1985), 23-26.

17 Sotheby & Co. Catalogue of Sale 29/30, October 1962, No. 198. Extract from Letter to J. A. Stewart January 9, 1888.

18 Ed. R. W. Chapman (OUP, 3rd ed., 1934, reprint 1986), p. 461 (Vol. III, Chapter 17; Chapter 48).

19 E.g. by Sayers in Introduction M., pp. viii-ix.

20 Sotheby ut supra, No. 197. Extract from Letter to Nugent Robinson August 28, 1860, with reference to Marian Halcombe.

A Daily Dozen: Twelve Englishmen of Mystery

Robert Ashley

Wilkie Collins is the lead-off man in a series of essays on British mystery writers from the nineteenth century to the present day, published by the Bowling Green University Popular Press and edited by Earl F. Bargainnier.¹ Until his death early in January of 1987, Bargainnier was Callaway Professor of English at Wesleyan College of Macon, Georgia. A well-known writer on detective fiction, he has also edited Ten Women of Mystery and co-edited Cops and Constables: American and British Fictional Policemen. The author of the piece on Collins is Jeanne F. Bedell of Virginia Commonwealth University, whose special interests include nineteenth-century sensation fiction as well as twentieth-century mystery and espionage.

Ms. Bedell belongs to the "Collins is a serious writer" school. This school has enrolled many distinguished scholars, including Collins himself, but it is one which I have always been a bit reluctant to join. Perhaps, like Shakespeare's "man who hath no music in himself," I am not to be trusted, since I consider Dorothy Sayers a snob and P. D. James a bore. The latter thinks she's the Jane Austen of the late twentieth century; when a mystery writer begins to think like that, give me Agatha Christie.

However, Bedell makes a pretty convincing case. In her view, Collins's "attention to important social issues; his careful and accurate descriptions of middle-class mores and values; his spirited and loving portrayals of independent women" (11); his refusal to accept "the indirect censorship of circulating libraries like Mudie's and Smith's, which he called 'twin tyrants of literature'" and to recognize "'young people as the ultimate court of appeal in English literature'" make him far more than "a 'good constructor,' a puzzle-maker, and an 'architect' of plots" (11, 12). Bedell admits that Collins can, in his lesser works, lapse into the worst kind of melodrama and sacrifice both characterization and credibility to the demands of suspense and plot. But she maintains that "at his best, seemingly melodramatic scenes or techniques are charged with psychological or social significance" (15). As keystones of her argument she cites a scene each from Collins's two best novels. In The Moonstone, the shivering sands represent both "a stunning use of foreshadowing" and "a metaphorical parallel to life at the Verinder estate after the

disappearance of the Indian diamond has disrupted its placid serenity" (15). In The Woman in White, the famous scene where Laura Fairlie stands beside her own grave, "her physical and mental health shattered, her fortune lost, and her identity destroyed" is "symbolically . . . one of the most powerful scenes in sensation fiction . . . that challenged Victorian attitudes about women and revealed their discontent with the limited sphere to which they were confined" (15-16). Bedell's summation is that Collins at his peak "wrote original, exciting, suspenseful novels which offered richly detailed pictures of Victorian life and subversive, challenging criticism of Victorian society" (29).

Where does this leave us? It probably leaves us in a position where we can have our cake and eat it too. Certainly, Collins is most successful when he is least insistently and obtrusively "serious," as in The Woman in White and The Moonstone. Most readers enjoy these novels for their incredibly ingenious and suspenseful plots; for their marvellous dramatic scenes and incidents like Hartright's midnight encounter with Anne Catherick, Laura's standing by her own grave, and Franklin Blake's drug-induced re-enactment of his own theft of the diamond; the marvellous originals like Count Fosco and Marian Halcombe and the amusing caricatures like Gabriel Betteredge and Frederick Fairlie. These readers really don't care that the two masterpieces also offer social commentary on the plight of Victorian women (married or unmarried), the abuse of lunatic asylums, the power of money in the courts, religious hypocrisy, British imperialism and racism. But these "extras" do exist, and they help raise Collins's finest work above the usual level of thrillers and whodunits. Does this make Collins a serious novelist who is also thrilling or a thrilling novelist who is also serious? Perhaps it doesn't make any difference, but for me he is the latter.

Bargainnier's other Englishmen of mystery, together with their sleuths and a representative novel, are 1) A. E. W. Mason, who imitated Poe in creating a French detective, Inspector Hanaud of the Paris Surete, and then saddling him with a colorless narrator, a device which only Conan Doyle and Rex Stout employed with conspicuous success (At the Villa Rose, 1910). 2) G. K. Chesterton, father of Father Brown, the most famous of the priestly sleuths (The Innocence of Father Brown, 1911). 3) H. C. Bailey, creator of Reggie Fortune, a medical consultant to Scotland Yard, once tremendously popular but now largely forgotten, who appears only in short stories (Call Mr. Fortune, 1920), and of Joshua Clunk, a shyster lawyer as unattractive

as his name (Garstons, 1930). 4) Anthony Berkeley Cox, one of the most original of mystery writers: As Anthony Berkeley, he invented Roger Sheringham, an amateur detective almost as obnoxious as Clunk and considerably more fallible (The Poisoned Chocolates Case, 1929, the classic multiple solution mystery in which Sheringham's solution is not the correct one); as Francis Iles, he popularized the inverted detective story, in which the interest lies not in the solving of a mystery but in watching the evolution of a crime and examining the mind of the criminal (Before the Fact, 1932). 5) Nicholas Blake, pseudonym of poet laureate C. Day Lewis, whose Nigel Strangeways, an amateur, shared many of his creator's personal traits and thus imparted a polished literary sheen to such whodunits as The Beast Must Die, 1938. 6) Michael Gilbert, lawyer, author of all kinds of crime fiction, and creator of all kinds of detectives, amateur and professional; now in his seventies, he is still going strong and proud to be categorized as an "entertainer" (Smallbone Deceased, 1950). 7) Julian Symons, a man of many talents: poet, critic (both literary and social), anthologist, biographer (Carlyle, Dickens, and Poe), author of Bloody Murder (a history of crime fiction sometimes entitled Mortal Consequences), and current president of Britain's Detection Club; like Gilbert he has a wide range, doesn't mind being called an entertainer, and is still going strong in his seventies (The Color of Murder, 1957). 8) Dick Francis, an ex-steeplechase champion, who makes frequent use of his horse-riding background; unlike most crime writers, he does not rely on a series sleuth, and unlike most Britishers, he favors the hard-boiled school; immensely popular, he is not, for reasons I don't quite understand, my cup of tea (Odds Against, 1965). 9) Edmund Crispin, pseudonym for Robert Bruce Montgomery, composer of both serious music and film scores and unabashed practitioner of old-fashioned Golden-Age mysteries; his detective is Gervase Fen, an Oxford don whom I find as precious as his name (The Moving Toyshop, 1946). 10) H. R. F. Keating, a prolific writer on crime literature and creator of Inspector Ghote of the Bombay C.I.D.; Keating is widely praised as a kind of minor-league E. M. Forster in interpreting the culture of India, although he had never been there until ten years after writing his first Ghote novel (The Perfect Murder, 1965--the title refers not to the perfection of the crime, but to the name of the corpse, which I don't find terribly clever. 11) Simon Brett, undergraduate president of the Oxford Dramatic Society and award-winning producer of radio and television shows, another mystery writer who doesn't mind being called an entertainer, but also a clever satirist, both of the stage as an entity and as a microcosm of British

society; his sleuth is Charles Paris, a not very successful alcoholic actor (Cast in Order of Disappearance, 1975).

The choice of authors to include in a critical series is always arbitrary. Bargainnier himself regrets omitting Freeman Wills Croft, Arthur Upfield, Andrew Garve, Cyril Hare, Henry Wade, Colin Watson, Peter Dickinson, and Peter Lovesey (2); he also admits that his selection reflects his personal preference "for the 'traditional' British mystery, whether one calls it Golden Age, puzzle, or whodunit" (2). Only such a bias justifies the selection of Crispin, who added nothing to the genre, but merely followed the well-worn trails blazed by his predecessors. Two genuine innovators, Crofts and R. Austin Freeman, would have added variety and rounded out the list: Crofts popularized the British police procedural; Freeman created the most famous scientific sleuth (Dr. Thorndyke) and also anticipated Francis Iles in developing the inverted crime story. The omission of Doyle is, of course, understandable.

Nonetheless, this is a book to be savored by all whodunit fans. The individual essays are uniformly high in quality, if not always absorbing. Perhaps most importantly, they often provide the most extensive treatments available of the authors selected.

NOTE

¹ Earl F. Bargainnier, ed. Twelve Englishmen of Mystery (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1984).

Collins, Wilkie. No Name, ed. Virginia Blain. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986. (World's Classics.)

Nick Rance

The publication of the World's Classics No Name, edited by Virginia Blain, a past contributor to this journal, is a gratifying event, not only in itself, but in helping to break the vicious circle whereby with much of the fiction out of print, publishers will be apt to regard critical works on Collins as poor commercial risks, and if there is a lack of visible critical interest, so much the less reason for reissuing the novels. While Dover Publications has led the way in reissuing several of the lesser known works, a difficulty for those keen to install the fiction of Collins beyond The Woman in White and The Moonstone on teaching syllabuses has been that Dover books must appear nowadays as comfortably beyond the averagely impoverished student's pocket.

This edition of No Name has further claims on our regard, since it will now be the standard edition which scholars read and to which they refer. The text, in the words of the editor, "is a photographic reproduction of the 1864 one-volume reprint of the three-volume edition of 1862." The reviewer is no bibliographer: the advantages of the 1864 text, however, as the editor explains them, are that while an abundance of printer's errors were corrected from the three-volume edition, hardly any were introduced. The method of this edition is then to elucidate such remaining errors in the "explanatory notes," which also contain intriguing information about changes between the serial version in All the Year Round and the three-volume edition and about such matters as the identity of the Joyce of "Joyce's Scientific Dialogues" and the extent to which Captain Wragge was indeed indebted to him. The Dover edition of No Name, it may be noted, is a republication of the Harpers American edition of 1873, which, as compared with the 1864 text, remarks Virginia Blain, "not only introduced a much larger proportion of substantive errors, but also repunctuated, often with considerable insensitivity." It may be said in favour of the Dover edition that one would recommend this rather than the World's Classics edition to anyone particularly myopic. On the other hand, until more expansive times, when as near as possible to a definitive text can be published, which does not need to be adjusted occasionally in "explanatory notes," the World's Classics edition will be the one to read if we

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want No Name by Collins rather than No name by Collins and assorted printers.

Virginia Blain has written a stimulating introduction. She is rightly dismissive about the insistence of so many contemporary reviewers that the elaborately plotted novel was precluded from being a novel of "character": as E. S. Dallas bravely argued at the time, what may be implied by the "novel of plot" is a different conception of "character," one which is acted upon and shaped by social forces, rather than being abundantly possessed of free will. Blain also has suggestive comments on the undermining of mid-Victorian moral stereotypes which is so much a feature of Collins's fiction of the 1860's. She remarks about the subversive presentation of "good" and "bad" female characters, so that the "good" may be seen as merely passive and the "bad" as admirably rebellious, that "Such a deconstructed opposition between 'good' and 'bad' behaviour adds a dimension of subtlety to the text belied by the conventional binary oppositions of melodrama."

No Name's preoccupation with the inadequacies of moralism may be stressed further. Blain comments on the play made by Collins "with suggested or shadow parallels which are effective in their very understatement" between apparently unlike characters, and instances Frank Clare and Noel Vanstone. Such parallels signal that version of "character" which Dallas would claim as typically emanating from the "novel of plot." Clare and Vanstone may thus alike be read as products of a period of crisis of belief in the hitherto dominant bourgeois creed of self-help which Collins in this novel, as in The Woman in White and Armadale, and modern historians of the Victorian era have tended to concur, precisely locates in the late 1840's. Noel Vanstone remarks: "Lecount, there, takes a high moral point of view--don't you, Lecount? I do nothing of the sort. I have lived too long in the continental atmosphere to trouble myself about moral points of view."¹ The question is posed of Frank: "Was it Frank's fault if he had not got the stuff in him that engineers were made of?"² Like No Name, Samuel Smiles's Lives of the Engineers was published in 1862: The Life of George Stephenson had appeared in 1857. Both characters signify, in the face of the moralists, the decreasing opportunities in mid-Victorian England of linking material well-being with any conceivable merit. At a time when in Britain and the United States alike there is an attempt to resuscitate "Victorian values" ("the first time as tragedy, the second as farce," wrote Marx in a different context), the anatomizing in Collins's fiction of the earlier career

of the notion of self-help should be a modern selling-point as well as its feminism.

It is a pity that the rendering in the introduction of the name of "Falkland" should be inconsistent and wrong both times, and that "Lecomte" is another casualty. On the other hand, the handsome cover illustration of York circa 1840 is decidedly a plus of this edition.

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¹ No Name, 1986, p. 209.

² Ibid., pp. 26-27.

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The important Victorianist R. C. Terry has arranged a convention to mark the one-hundredth anniversary of Wilkie Collins's death. The Department of English of the University of Victoria will sponsor the gathering from September 29 to October 1, 1989. Scheduled speakers already include Michael Booth, Fred Kaplan, Christopher Kent, Sue Lonoff, Catherine Peters, and John Sutherland. For further information, please write to:

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Wilkie Collins Centennial Conference
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Professor Terry has arranged what will be a marvelous event that will be exciting for us all.

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