

WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY JOURNAL



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WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY JOURNAL



The *Wilkie Collins Society Journal* is an annual volume, sponsored jointly by the Wilkie Collins Society and the Wilkie Collins Society of North America, and is dedicated to original scholarly essays and reviews of publications relating to Wilkie Collins, his writings, and his culture.

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New Series, Volume 3, 2000

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Editors' Note

We are very pleased to present the following collection of essays on Wilkie Collins and his contemporaries. While ranging widely in their concerns and their critical methods, a number of these essays have a common aim: to place Collins in a context that illuminates his works as well as our own preoccupation with them. Emma Liggins considers Collins's fiction and his treatment of female violence in terms of the changing discourses of criminality in the Victorian period; Mark Knight discusses Collins's relation to the culture of Evangelicalism associated with *The Evangelical Magazine* and such figures as William Booth; Steve Dillon examines Bharadwaj's recent film adaptation of Collins's *Basil*, revealing the ways in which modern directors redefine the Victorians for their own ends. In his essay on Collins's contemporary and rival, Ellen Wood, Andrew Maunder helps us to understand Wood's significance as a sensation novelist, and raises a number of crucial questions about the formation of the literary canon, a process that has unfairly left writers such as Wood largely unknown to modern readers. In addition to these substantial articles, the *Journal* includes two shorter notes: Graham Law considers the links between the brief but glittering literary career of "Hugh Conway" (Fred Fergus) and that of Collins in his declining years, while Susan Hanes discusses Dorothy Sayers's views of Collins and the fascination he held for her, providing details about Sayers's little-known and unpublished notebooks on the Victorian novelist.

As these original essays suggest, Collins studies continue to flourish. Our next issue will also contain a number of reviews of recent work published in volume form which we have not been in time to include in the 2000 edition.

Lillian Nayder
Graham Law

~~Articles~~

Resurfacing Collins's *Basil*

Steven Dillon

Bates College, Maine

The cinema, then, aims at transforming the agitated witness into a conscious observer. Nothing could be more legitimate than its lack of inhibitions in picturing spectacles which upset the mind. Thus it keeps us from shutting our eyes to the "blind drive of things."

Sigfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*

Why are film directors and audiences attracted to historical subjects, "costume pictures," and Victorian topics in particular? What leads talented directors and actors to take part in recent films like *The Governess* (1998, dir. Sandra Goldbacher), *Angels and Insects* (1995, dir. Philip Haas), *Wilde* (1998, dir. Philip Gilbert), or even *Mary Reilly* (1996, dir. Stephen Frears), where Julia Roberts plays the housemaid to Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde? Clearly *our* Victorians are not the same as the Victorians of D.W. Griffith (with one foot in the period itself) or David Lean (whose adaptations of Dickens are still among the finest we have). Like earlier generations, no doubt, we are attracted to Victorian costume and manners for a variety of reasons, some of which have to do perhaps with cultural capital—the notion that we are taking part in "classic" culture, yet with a knowing, condescending look. Hence our satisfaction may be double and even contradictory, as we take pleasure in the sumptuous households and dresses, while at the same time we resist, nowadays, class- and gender-bias from our more and more enlightened perspective. One of our most recent and complex enlightenments, of course, is shown in sexual terms; and movies *will* show us the sex that Victorians would not—both for the sake of honesty (as in *Wilde*) and, no doubt, for the sake of titillation (as in the recent updated version of *Great Expectations*, with Gwyneth Paltrow and Ethan Hawke [1997, dir. Alfonso Cuarón]). Many contemporary films make more than offhand use of sexual visibility as a way not just to satisfy expectations of the male consumerist gaze, but to contrast, often thoughtfully and pointedly, the openness of our own age with the repressiveness of theirs.¹

¹ In discussing *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, John Fowles says, "Magnificent though the Victorian novelists were, they almost all (an exception, of course, is the later Hardy) failed miserably in one aspect: nowhere in 'respectable' Victorian literature does one see a man and a woman described together in bed" (Fowles, 17). This aspect, then, is remedied in both the novel and in the film scripted by Harold Pinter (1981, dir. Karel Reisz). On this point see also Morgentaler's discussion of recent films on Victorian topics, and her comments on the particular problem of updating Victorian sexualities.

Recent critical trends in various disciplines have described, on the one hand, the response to modernity in the nineteenth century, and on the other, the turn towards nostalgia and tradition at the end of the twentieth century. The moment when the nineteenth century turns pre-cinematic, mobilized perhaps by Baudelaire's figure of the *flâneur*, is interestingly related to the moment when the late twentieth-century cult of the simulacrum reacts to the onslaught of visual phantasmagoria and disorientation, and stages a retreat towards the perceived stability of the past, and the Victorian past in particular.² Wilkie Collins's novel *Basil* (1852) and its recent film version (1998, dir. Radha Bharadwaj) provides an excellent opportunity to study this double junction: the Victorian confrontation with the modern, and the modern desire for the Victorian.³ A description of the relationship between Victorian modernity and contemporary Victorianism is the goal towards which this essay travels.

But before reaching that goal, this discussion will have a more humble, practical purpose as well. For holding up even rather free adaptations (such as *The Scarlet Letter* [1995, dir. Roland Joffe]) to their source may help us to understand more completely what the original was about all along. *Basil* as a film is clearly not as successful as *The Governess* or *Wilde*, but neither it is not incompetent; the cast includes well-known and more than just good-looking players, such as Derek Jacobi as Basil's father, Jared Leto as Basil, Claire Forlani as Julia Sherwin (Margaret in Collins), and Christian Slater as John Mannion. Just as Walter Benjamin claimed that we could find a wealth of meaning in a simple shop window, I would suggest that there are lessons to be learned even from theater that is not a masterpiece, and from its relation to an early Collins novel that, for what it does, is rather better than its reputation.

Key characters and aspects of the plot remain, but Bharadwaj has determinedly made a much less "sensational," excessive *Basil*. One of the

² On the nineteenth century and modernity, see Friedberg, and Crary. Important critical works that take on institutionalized nostalgia and commodified memory in Britain are Wright, and Samuel.

³ The film I discuss throughout is that recently released on video by Kushner-Locke (1998). The film was never released in theaters; so except for a few showings at film festivals and on AMC Romance Classics, the work is "Straight-to-Video." In the course of making the movie, there seems to have been substantial disputes between financial executives and the director (and also Christian Slater, one of the producers). The dispute is chronicled briefly by Andrew Hinds in the trade journal *Daily Variety* (13 Jul 1998). Piers Handling, the director of the Toronto International Film Festival, invited *Basil* to be shown there in 1998 ("We were impressed by its innovativeness, emotion, and beautiful performances"), but the Kushner-Locke company would not release its version. One of the conflicts, according to director Bharadwaj, was that chief executive Locke wanted more scenes of female nudity in the film; but she refused, and later attempted to remove her name from the film. So what I have to say about the video release applies, obviously, to that version; it may well be that "the director's cut" would look rather different. Scouring through my various electronic resources, other than basic promotions and cast lists, I see very little other information available on this film.

glories of Collins's novel for fans, no doubt, is the way it conducts its various over-the-top frenzies among resolutely domestic settings (calling out perhaps towards directors like Roger Corman or Ken Russell); yet this film's atmosphere is brooding, clean, and calm. Although we must know that Collins's labyrinthine plots are not signs of incompetence, but basic to his created world, the film reins in the more "unbelievable" and "ridiculous" aspects of plot and character. Still, the exigencies of cinematic time-scale—the quasi-Aristotelian rule that everything must be over in about 120 minutes of spectator time—often require adaptations to sacrifice some thickness and complexity, and so we might take the simplifications to be pragmatic rather than disloyal.

Although we might indeed wonder why someone would choose such a relentlessly frenzied text and then proceed, rather methodically, to vacuum out the frenzy, there's arguably more at the heart of *Basil* than nerves, and the film proves this by providing recurrently compelling "readings" of the book, now developed in far less panicky style. Where we might have expected jittery hand-held cameras or a camera rushing up out of darkness towards sudden light, in order to convey hypersensitive palpitation, here we have what might be termed "cool gothic," slow pans and clean lighting. Are the younger actors themselves too cool to emote, to tremble? Not necessarily, for their less melodramatic playing may still capture the obsessiveness and monomaniacal patience of these characters. Bharadwaj reads Collins's novel as a vicious circle, or triangle: the obsessive love of Basil for Julia (Margaret), the obsessive love of Julia for Mannion, and the obsessive hate of Mannion for Basil's father (Julia calls it a "terrible circle"; Mannion says that "hate is but love's twin"). Fatalistic drive is the keynote, rather than sublime, domestic horror. This "reading" usefully serves to underscore the strains in Collins that afterwards lead to Hardy, in contrast to the monstrous and Piranesian effects that descend to him from Mary Shelley and Thomas De Quincey.

The film version, implicitly and resourcefully, argues that the improbable, labyrinthine twists in Collins's plot ultimately mask over, or reduce to, repetition and doubling. At first glance, it may appear that the whole budget has gone to pay off Christian Slater, since the interior of Basil's family mansion consists, for the purposes of filming, almost entirely of the main staircase.⁴ The film continues to return to the staircase, its red carpet and coats of arms: here the children watch as families pass through on a tour of their

⁴ Stairways are often used in classical cinema to reflect the strange twists and turns of anxious and psychotic minds. See Ryall, 44-45, on the use of stairs in an early Hitchcock film, with further references to German Expressionist cinema. The use of the stairway in *Basil* is obsessively repetitive, but far from *noir*.

estate, here both child and Oxford undergraduate Basil stumble at the foot of the stairs (in a rhyme underscored each time by the maidservant's identical remark), and here finally Basil chases Mannion downstairs, out of the bedroom, and out of the house for a climactic dash to the ocean cliffs. Just so, there are drapes everywhere, not just around windows and beds, but framing the edges of the screen, and hung repeatedly down hallways. The plot goes this way and that, but the sets tend to collapse into themselves. The sets remind us that the plot is not progressing, but rather spiraling or repeating. A particularly effective set doubling occurs in Julia's "apartment." On the way in, we see with Basil a picture of Windemeer Hall (which later we learn was drawn by Ralph's pregnant lover in a nostalgic moment; she later kills herself by aborting the child in a scene as violent and more shocking than the notorious beating of Mannion). What we see inside the apartment itself, then, once through the door, is again all staircase; but this time it looks like the outside steps to the family mansion have been re-built *inside* as a kind of garden. This is where Basil first finds Julia, languorously sitting about with her (emblematically) caged birds.⁵

As the camera travels slowly up Julia's strange staircase, we brush past white leafy fronds and also peacock feathers: the eyes on the feathers meet our gaze. The film thematically foregrounds seeing, which is not only a self-reflexiveness common to movies, but also, once again, an interesting reading of the psychology of sensation. The film's narrative is structured far more linearly than the book, so we spend the opening fifteen minutes with the child Basil, as if this might be a recognizable Victorian *Bildungsroman*, such as *Oliver Twist* or *Jane Eyre*. But there really isn't any development, since the logic of the film is that Basil always will be what he has *seen*. We see what the quiet, round-faced boy sees: his father, on the balcony, washing his hands of brother Ralph; his father kissing a woman beneath a tree (his mother tells Basil, "You did not see what you saw").⁶ These are contradictory primal scenes: the father's expression of sexual passion, and the squelching of a brother's passion by paternal authority. The convolutions of Basil's adult life will always be framed by these origins. Later on the obsessive hatred of John Mannion is explained by this same visual logic; what little John Mannion sees (we watch this ourselves in a flashback) is his dead sister in a pool of blood—sexuality and passion crushed once again.

⁵ Birdcages have a consistent iconography in nineteenth-century fiction, and are here drawn directly from the novel (Collins, 37).

⁶ Our sympathy for Basil is much manipulated in the film, by having the father commit adultery, and before his son's very eyes. Thus the father's transgressions are seen as descending to his son (Jacobi gives a speech to this effect towards the end), and his paternal admonishments (outlandishly prideful in Collins) are now transparently hypocritical.

The sensation novel fires the body's nerves, no doubt, but the sensation novel, *Basil*, begins and ends, psychologically and structurally, in the eye—focused upon the gaze, upon looking. The movie helps us to see this even more clearly. In the novel, the emblematic pair before Basil's rapt attention ("the faculties of observation are generally sharpened, in proportion as the faculties of reflection are dulled, under the influence of an absorbing suspense" [192]) is Margaret and Mr. Mannion—all absorbing Beauty and mask-like Mystery. After his face is destroyed, Mannion underlines the symmetry for Basil: "My deformed face and her fatal beauty shall hunt you through the world" (251). It is true that narrative crises often cross over sense boundaries, as when Basil touches Margaret while riding the bus ("But how the sense of that touch was prolonged!" [29]), or when, above all, Basil hears Margaret and Mannion in the next hotel room together ("I listened; and through the thin partition, I heard voices—her voice, and *his* voice" [160]). But for the most part Basil's suspenseful world depends on acuity and sensitivity of sight. Thus he introduces his father: "It was that quiet, negative, courteous, inbred pride, which only the closest observation could detect; which no ordinary observation ever detected at all" (5). Basil falls into obsessive love at first sight with Margaret on the bus; apparently his bus-riding is both habitual and characteristic:

I had often before ridden in omnibuses to amuse myself by observing the passengers. An omnibus has always appeared to me, to be a perambulatory exhibition-room of the eccentricities of human nature. . . . To watch merely the different methods of getting into the vehicle, and taking their seats, adopted by different people, is to study no incomplete commentary on the infinitesimal varieties of human character—as various even as the varieties of the human face.

(Collins, 27)⁷

Basil begins voyeuristically, but soon finds himself in flames of love. Margaret lifts her veil, and Basil rapturously describes her face: "My powers of observation, hitherto active enough, had now wholly deserted me." His eyes draw him powerfully towards her youth and beauty, but it is a stunned vision: "Those were the days when I lived happy and unreflecting in the broad sunshine of joy which love showered around me—my eyes were dazzled; my mind lay asleep under it" (108).

Vision is, then, the sense above all others in this sensation novel, but it is always a dazzled, half-blinded sight. The catastrophic imagery of *Basil* follows the same archetypal, repetitive logic as *Oedipus the King*.⁸ First Oedipus can

⁷ There are similar passages (put to different uses) in Charles Dickens, "Omnibuses," in *Sketches by Boz* (1839).

⁸ In Basil's "Letter of Dedication," Collins writes that certain elements "add to tragedy" (Collins, xxxvi). A contemporary reviewer notes that "The fatality of the Greek tragedians broods over the drama" (Page, 46).

literally see, but he is blind to his circumstances, then Oedipus blinds himself, to ward off the burning light of truth. The blind prophet Teiresias emblematically rules this play. Thus even though Sophocles' drama provides the perfect example for an Aristotelian fall of total ruin and reversal, the conviction remains that Oedipus is the same on both sides, that there is no difference. The play is about, precisely, reduction and collapse: the three roads that meet at the killing of Laius, the clues that cause relentless Oedipus to discover himself as the murderer, and above all, Jocasta's womb, where Oedipus both emerges and returns.

Like Teiresias, who according to myth turned between female and male, Mannion's crushed face might be taken as the visual counterpart to Basil's mixed, repetitive logic. In the brutal attack Mannion loses the sight in *one* eye; then Basil begins narrating Part III (the book's halfway point, in fact, following on his realization of the truth): "when the blind are operated on for the restoration of sight, the same succouring hand which has opened to them the visible world, immediately shuts out the bright prospect for a time" (168). Even though there may appear to be an absolute change between Basil's hope for wedded bliss and the horrors of shame that come upon him afterwards, in a substantial sense Basil's head swamps with the same frenzies both before and after the hotel room revelation. The palpitations and tremblings of Basil's secretive, loving lust feel a lot like those generated later by shame and fear. Basil is all trembling—trembling under a dozen different names. Both before and after recognition, then, blindness and insight are all mixed up. The only clarity, as we shall see, resides in Basil's perfect sister, Clara.

This veiled, half-blinded, repetitive visuality so characteristic of *Basil* is represented most completely by the plot of Mannion's face: both before and afterwards his face is a mask. Although he may appear entirely different at the beginning and at the end—trusted secretary vs. outcast monster—in fact his face is equally impenetrable either way, and in each case hides bloodthirsty revenge. At their first meeting, Basil thus describes Mannion: "the calm, the dead-calm face of the man beside me—without one human emotion of any kind even faintly pictured on it—I felt strange unutterable sensations creeping over me" (122); and Basil will expend much effort staring on Mannion, attempting to see past that stony exterior. Later, the monstrous disfiguring is simply a different version of the same mask, and although horrible, it does not stop Mannion from continuing to carry out conspiracies and revenge. Mr. Turner, as Mannion is later called, has really not *turned* away from his original, angry *man*.

While recalling one of Basil's spectacular nightmares, where "fiend-souls [are] made visible in fiend-shapes" (124), Dorothy Goldman reads Mannion's

monstrous appearance as a Victorian version of Spenser's Redcrosse unveiling Duessa: "Basil has exposed the inner man" (in Introduction to Collins, vii). Yet are we to think that Mannion is a monster? More monstrous than Basil? Are Mannion's justifications entirely monomaniacal delusions and madness? For we see Basil too behave in sudden, bizarre, extreme ways; we see him, in his turn, obsessively lie, wait, and conspire; we see him take justice into his own hands, decide on homicide, and then premeditate brutal maiming. The film version of *Basil* makes all kinds of effort to gain back our sympathy for Basil, which reminds us, after all, how unsympathetic the book's "hero" really is. Mannion's story, perhaps, is not as sympathetic as the one told by Frankenstein's monster but in the exaggerated terms of Collins novel, its outrageous fervor should not blind us to Basil's own duplicity and cruelty.

Basil and Mannion are inextricably linked, in the logic of the novel and in our judgment. As Lillian Nayder (33) and Tamar Heller (76) point out, they are doubles, who have lived similar careers as writers, and have been overwhelmingly influenced by their fathers. In a famous essay, Paul de Man discusses the exchanges between autobiography and defacement, noting that the "figures of deprivation, maimed men, drowned corpses, blind beggars, children about to die, that appear throughout *The Prelude* are figures of Wordsworth's own poetic self" (de Man, 73). Basil's "autobiography" (for such he calls his prose in Letter III, "From the Writer of the foregoing autobiography" [337]) of obsession and deceit depends on the disfiguring of Mannion to reveal his own guilt, his own loss. After attempting to elude his father's proud, surveillant gaze for the first half of the book, it is no wonder, and indeed almost reasonable, that Mannion's gaze haunts him for the second half. Mannion's monstrous mask does not reveal his own inner, evil soul, so much as justifiably linger over all who try to keep foul secrets. Thus Margaret also bewails: "Water! Water! drown me in the sea; drown me deep, away from the burning face!" (294)

It seems to me that the disfiguring of Mannion's face is the interpretive crux of Collins's novel. I hope to have shed some light on the first question: what is the significance of Mannion's monstrous face? His face implies more than a revelation of his own character, I hope we can agree. Yet we may pose further questions related to this scene. What should we make of the circumstantial details of the attack? And, lastly, to Wilkie Collins, son and biographer of a well-known painter, *what is a face?*

For the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, the face is by definition that which expresses the human, otherwise it is a mask. The expressive face, above all, repeats God's fundamental prohibition: "Thou shalt not kill." The face to face look expresses human commonality and sympathy (see Robbins). In this light,

watch how carefully Basil characterizes his pursuit of Mannion:

He looked up and down, from the entrance to the street, for the cab—then seeing that it was gone, he hastily turned back. At that instant I met him face to face. Before a word could be spoken, even before a look could be exchanged, my hands were on his throat.

(Collins, 164)

As so often in this novel, the actions are described in terms of seeing and looking. Note how Basil describes his own avoidance of the gaze, of human contact, on his way towards murder. He meets Mannion “face to face”, yet almost impossibly, “even before a look could be exchanged.” Basil does not want just to kill Mannion, but kill his human looks; he flings him “face downwards” on the road, to beat out the very “semblance of humanity.” He refuses not only to exchange a word, but even a look, for the face in Collins is as full of language as any book, and even Mannion’s iron visage may speak “don’t kill me” if looked upon.

Yet still, there is something more than the expressively human in these faces. There is something more contextual, more temporal, even ideological. Let us read *Basil* as “the face of man in the age of mechanical reproduction”: the unreadable, stoic face is the *modern* face, and Basil yearns nostalgically for the aura of the expressive face. It is not just to contrast *Basil* with his previous, historical romance, *Antonina* (set in fifth-century Rome), that Collins subtitles the novel, “A Tale of Modern Life.” Basil himself kicks against the age-old name and all its tyrannies (“Our family is, I believe, one of the most ancient in this country” [2]), and omits his family name from the autobiography; yet he ultimately returns to his household, the “old home” of the past with Clara.⁹ A writer himself of historical romances, he cannot bear to look at the newness of North Villa, “the eye ached looking round it” [61]). Everything glares at him, a bright, shiny surface, with a new-moneyed but superficial dazzlement later transfigured by Dickens into the Veneerings of *Our Mutual Friend*. Basil crushes Mannion’s face into a “newly mended” road: it is newness, modernity, and the future which dehumanize. Amid the “wretched trivialities and hypocrisies of modern society,” aptly named Clara is the woman who feels deeply and expresses her feelings, unlike those women who ape the “miserable modern dandyism of demeanor, which aims at repressing all betrayal of warmth of feeling,” and who “labour to make the fashionable imperturbability of the face the faithful reflection of the fashionable imperturbability of the mind” (20). It is no coincidence that Basil’s temptations and crises occur around images of modernity: on the omnibus, and

⁹ Of *Basil*’s conclusion, Jenny Bourne Taylor writes: “Basil’s final recovery and reassimilation into the family with which the story concludes is firmly set ‘in the shadowed valley of Repose,’ and here home becomes a safe place, an asylum, but also a kind of pastoral stasis—a place outside history, outside narrative itself” (Taylor, 77).

in a hotel “in the neighborhood of a great railway station” (158) Mannion’s imperturbable face is the mask of modernity, which conceals the furious patience of class resentment, and Basil grinds that face into its double, the surface, or resurfacing of modernity—face to face, surface to surface—and then retreats, in his turn, to the ancient, pastoral realm of Cornwall (see Nayder, 32-3).

Collins’s sensation novels of the fifties are contemporary with Baudelaire’s *The Painter of Modern Life* (written 1859-60), and may be read as equally vigorous, if more figurative, accounts of the confrontation with urban modernity. The “shock” of experience that Simmel and Benjamin point to as characteristic of modern city life must be related to the sensationalistic poundings of Collins’s mid-Victorian urban gothic. Yet important differences need to be drawn. Collins’s sensationalistic “moment” of ecstasy and terror is always linked to the past, is romantic and terrible. Baudelaire’s “modern” moment of disorientation and ecstasy also points backwards, in a way, and is named the “animal ecstatic gaze of a child,” yet this primality is that which regains innocence upon confronting “something new” (Baudelaire, 8). Following *Rambles Beyond Railways* (1851), which emblematically contrasts the “beyond” of Cornwall with the technological modernity of the railroad, Collins continually uses the archaic Cornish landscape to create confrontations with modernity. In *The Dead Secret* (1857), for example, the rebuilding of Porthgenna Tower in Cornwall sparks the flames for a hypersensationalistic detective story. The frayed nerves and chaotic disorientation of Collins’s sensation novels mirror urban chaos, but Collins, in effect, flees in panic from that chaos. By contrast, Baudelaire’s hero of modernity, the *flâneur*, plunges into the crowd, and loses himself ecstatically in its immense energy. Baudelaire, inspired by the gothic tales of Poe, manages to push himself still further through the horror and debris, to come out the other side, now accepting modern life in all its kaleidoscopic plenty.

Yet even as Basil retreats from the shocks and masquerades of the modern, given the repetitive and fatalistic nature of this text, it will come as no surprise that this withdrawal to the past is itself shrouded in ambiguity and doubt. What sort of past is this? Expressive, domestic Clara, pointedly linked with Basil’s lost mother, loves Basil and shows her love constantly throughout the novel. Notably, Basil’s brotherly feelings for Clara are as intense as his sexual feelings for Margaret, and Basil dreams of the two women paired with one another. Given that the tradition of gothic in which Collins works often resorts to a variety of incest plots, some overt, some suggested, Tamar Heller cannot be far out of line when she sees a subliminal sexual relationship between Clara

and Basil (63-5).¹⁰ The world of *Basil* is caught in a temporal double-bind. Forward is adult sexuality, but also the lying, modern mask; backward is the loving, domestic past, but collapsed in on itself narcissistically. The film version, interestingly, seems to substantiate this reading of the doubtful family home. One of the film's most unnecessary adaptations (it would seem) is to make Clara a half-sister to Basil. Thus when Basil is first aroused by Mannion's cynical, experienced sex talk, he goes first after Clara, kissing her on the stairway. One might take this alternative version as merely indecorous titillation, but I prefer to understand it as a serious interpretation of the siblings' notably intense relationship in the novel.

While Collins enacts a turbulent and confusing confrontation with modernity, by contrast, the film version of *Basil* exudes an airy confidence in its re-enactment of the Victorian. Like many recent adaptations, the film claims an authority over sexual matters that the Victorian novel presumably did not have. The film turns all the male characters into straightforwardly sexual beings; "You are a man now, I can speak to you of a man's passions," says Derek Jacobi as Basil's father"; "God knows, I know their force." Mannion explains his attraction to Julia: "I was a man, with a man's appetites." The audience, I take it, is supposed to, if not admire, then at least comprehend the biological destiny that drives the obsessions of the plot. Yet although "sex" is spoken more clearly and visualized in more detail than in Collins's novel, this cinematic sexuality still seems terribly constrained, made routine and commonplace by all these matter-of-fact confessions. The overall atmosphere of handsome young people dressed in handsome costumes is, in the end, more fuzzily romantic than seriously sexual, enough so that, before descending into the world of video rental, *Basil* aired happily enough on the AMC Romance Classics. And that the cast is so young—Jared Leto, Clair Forlani, Christian Slater—makes the catastrophic decisions seem more like youthful indiscretions. The adaptation makes Mannion and Basil into youthful "buddies," where Mannion gives Basil warnings (he hates the father, but not Basil) and kills himself out of remorse ("I never meant to harm you!"). The film implicitly claims to be more honest and sensible than the repressed, melodramatic Victorians (our tyrannical fathers), but our articulate, scrupulous honesty has the effect of reducing the power and mystery of sexuality. Collins—more accurately?—keeps the strangeness and sheer danger of sexual relationship, and offers no easy alternatives, sympathies, or explanations.

¹⁰ Here Heller also points out Clara's connection with the lost mother, and thus with the past. Related studies of incest in literature include Perry; Hudson, and Irwin.

The contemporary Victorian film is and is not a nostalgia film. We may, in part, admire or yearn for the more orderly social codes of the Victorians, but ultimately we see more limitation than idyll. A recent, very interesting nostalgia film, *Pleasantville* (1998), provides a good indication of contemporary taste. A young man and his sister time warp into their TV set (assisted by Don Knotts) to a “perfect” 1950s world. This world is lovable and quaint, but terribly repressed, and the addition of passion and sexuality slowly turns the black-and-white town, piece by piece, to splendid color. The ending surprises somewhat, in that the sister ends up staying (she began by loathing this archetypally un-cool place) and the boy returns to present reality (it was *his* favorite television show, after all). But the final result is that the movie has it both ways: nostalgia and anti-nostalgia at once, cute and sexual, sentimental and political. The film *Basil*, too, wants us to sympathize with its “rebellions” against Victorian oppression, at the same time that it gives us the serene pleasures and pastoral scenery of masterpiece theater (this Ralph lives out in a country farm, where, after all his mistakes, he finds “the possibility of happiness”). Eternally young and passionate, we are in control of our pasts and presents; we love our enlightened modernity and the way we can make history over into ourselves. Collins’s *Basil* offers us neither alternative, neither a confident present nor a trouble-free past, and it is on this absence of choice and control that our more knowing, free gaze, in its various overly assured and flexible historicisms, refuses to look.

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Ellen Wood was a Writer: Rediscovering Collins's Rival

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On a cold January afternoon in 1916, about fifty people gathered in the nave of Worcester Cathedral, the imposing fourteenth-century church which dominates the skyline of that English market town. They had come to witness the unveiling of a memorial to Mrs Henry Wood, 1814-1887, wife, mother, novelist, journalist, editor, and native of the city. The ceremony was performed by Lord Justice Avory who talked of “the enduring fame of great literary geniuses”, and of a woman whose works were “more widely read than those of any of the authors of the Victorian era.” Unveiling the white marble sculpture, he expressed the hope that it “might serve to stimulate others to follow her example and leave behind them some work for the benefit of posterity, that they might not die unwept, unhonoured and unsung” (“Memorial Unveiled”, *Worcester Daily Times*, 20 Jan 1916, 4).

Since Ellen Wood is now largely untaught, unread, and out-of-print, Avory's optimism has proved misplaced. Indeed there is something so final in the way this once-famous figure has disappeared from view that curiosity is immediately challenged. Here was a novelist widely thought “the best-read writer” (as Margaret Oliphant noted in 1895, 646), whose combined sales had reached 6 million by 1916 (Shuttleworth, 8). It was to Wood's success that Wilkie Collins enviously referred in 1872, claiming that she averaged £1000 a year from her novels in six-shilling editions. “I may certainly, without undue arrogance, consider myself to be a rather better novelist, with a rather wider reputation than Mrs Henry Wood,” he asserted. Yet the contrast between his own sales and those of Wood was not encouraging, a fact which, he remarks, “does not *add* to my faith in the British public!” (cited in Peters, 369). Much has been made of the rivalry between Collins and Dickens but the jostling for position with Wood preoccupied him more. Earlier Wood had compared the scantiness of her own earnings with those of Collins. “Sampson and Low gave Wilkie Collins three thousand pounds for *No Name*. . .” she complained in 1863, “Mr Bentley states fifteen hundred pounds to me, but he is mistaken” (24 Jul 1863, L44, UI).¹

¹ The bulk of the surviving letters written by Wood relate to her dealings with the publishers Richard and George Bentley. They form part of the Bentley Archives held in the British Library (BL), the University of Illinois (UI), UCLA, and the Berg Collection, New York Public Library. All but the Berg materials have been microfilmed by Chadwyck-Healey.

Despite Malcolm Elwin's claim, made back in 1935, that Wood was "the most intrinsically representative woman novelist of the mid-Victorian era" (232), there seems far greater resistance to recovering her reputation than her main literary competitors, whether Collins himself, or Mary Braddon, whose revivals are both now well established. A major study of Wood—the author of the phenomenally successful *East Lynne* (1861), of forty other novels, and over a hundred short stories, the editor and proprietor of her own magazine, *The Argosy*, and the writer of countless journal articles—seems long overdue.

Part of the explanation lies in the difficulty of obtaining copies of Wood's work, but it also has to do with the fashions of literary scholarship. Mrs Henry Wood was recognized for much of her own century as a voice of Victorian convention; but when the reaction against things Victorian arrived in the first decades of the twentieth century she seemed a ready candidate for the critical scaffold. The fact of her wide appeal across the classes also made her suspect as a serious writer. Wood wrote over forty earnest, sentimental novels during a period when novelists were admired for their prolificness, earnestness, and sentimentality. Soon after the First World War she would begin to be mocked for her exhibition of precisely these archetypally Victorian traits. Nor did her association with genres deemed sub-literary—melodrama, mystery, romance—help matters. For Oliver Elton in 1920, Wood was a mere curiosity, the producer of a quaint "species of absurd fiction", for novels characterized by their "simple-minded plots" and "governess mentality" (2:220). But Wood was marginalized in other ways as well. In 1936 in his *History of the English Novel*, Ernest Baker labelled Wood one of the "crude" imitators of Wilkie Collins (214). This is a designation that also seems to have stuck. Nicholas Rance's *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists* (1991) is typical in the way in which it treats Wood as an acolyte of a male mentor. Nor have feminist critics bent on recovering lost women's voices argued for any significant legacy for Ellen Wood. With the single exception of *East Lynne* which, since Elaine Showalter's seminal analysis in the mid-1970s, has continued to surface in a variety of critical contexts, Wood's apparent refusal in her fiction to subvert Victorian clichés has meant she is categorized as conventional, conservative, and thus, by implication, unworthy of sustained attention (Horsman, 222). On every side Wood continues to be dismissed with all the condescension posterity can muster.

Even so, scholarly trends alone cannot explain the lack of interest. It has much to do as well with the professional consequence of the "myth" cultivated by her family during her own lifetime. The only biography of Ellen Wood—*Memorials of Mrs Henry Wood* (1894) by her son, Charles—is central in shaping this myth, presenting us with a saintly woman of wide interests and activities, but which do not conflict in any way. Eulogistic and devoid of dates,

Charles Wood's memoir is a partial one (in both senses of the word). It is also privileged and privileging. It suggests that we, too, can survey the life of Ellen Wood and obtain a comprehensive view. Stricken with illness and too weak almost to hold a pen, Wood is shown writing sensational best-sellers, discussing theology with visiting clergymen, editing her own magazine, turning out article after article for other journals, managing her household, inspiring her husband, children and servants. In the *Memorials*, Ellen Wood's greatness encompasses her femininity and exemplary wifeliness, as well as her public activities in literature and journalism. Charles Wood argues for Mrs Henry Wood's place in literary history (comparing her to Charlotte Brontë) and contends that her multifaceted consistency was itself extraordinary: "nothing ever jarred; the domestic atmosphere was never disturbed" (227). His claim for the value of Wood's life—and the value of the biography—rests on her status as a conventional and, above all, a unified woman. Her prevailing facial expression was one of "absolute repose," as he recalls at one point, "no doubt partly the result of a life lived to a great extent in the retirement of her study . . . Her calmness and serenity in a great measure came from within" (35-36). This ordered, unified life history is spiritually uplifting—a sentiment reinforced through Charles Wood's inclusion of the fulsome tributes paid to his mother on her death. But this reiteration of the condolences her family received adds to the sense that this is a static life. "She was Mrs Henry Wood" noted Margaret Oliphant after reading the *Memorials*, "What more?" (646).

The aim of this paper is not to rediscover the "truth" of Ellen Wood, but rather to suggest why she is worthy of attention and ways in which we might start to understand her.² Wood cannot be contained in a single critical category because she was too aware of the need to be different things to different people. Oliphant felt her to be "unapproachable" (646), a view with which, judging by the silence which continues to surround her, critics today seem to agree. However, if any contemporary critical approach were to be singled out as appropriate for a study of Wood it would be that associated with post-modern developments in biography. Claims that biography is disguised fiction have been put forward, and emphasis has been placed on seeing the life-story as a kaleidoscope of images—to be reconstructed through bricolage rather than a sequential cradle-to-grave narrative. Liz Stanley has argued that we should accept the diversity and complexity of a subject's life, not straighten it out into a single narrative: "She was like that and like that should be its motto" (18).

Wood seems a likely subject for this model precisely because she was a

² For a chronological account of Wood's life and career, see the present author's edition of Ellen Wood, *East Lynne*, 9-17.

person who embodied an ambiguous, shifting persona throughout her life. Meeting Ellen Wood accidentally in 1862, Geraldine Jewsbury saw a woman “as unlike a novel writer as anybody I ever saw” (16 May 1862, L46, BL). One of the striking things about Wood is the contrast between her public and private faces. Despite her status as the typical Victorian, there is something very modern about the way in which she carefully moulds her image through selective publicity and creates her own legend. She did not save her letters or keep a journal on a regular basis. Although she was immensely popular, she took little part in the social side of literary life. She did not preside over a literary salon like Ouida or George Eliot. She did not give paid public recitations like Collins or Dickens; indeed the very idea of a woman appearing on a public platform to engage in an economic transaction would have contravened widely held views on sexual difference. Bourgeois masculinity was hegemonically defined in relation to paid professional work. But, for middle-class women writers entering the public sphere was fraught with danger, since it threatened to equate the authoress with the actress, or worse, the prostitute, who also marketed her person in public. Wood’s absence was not therefore exceptional, but in her case the elusiveness was compounded by self-consciousness about her physical appearance. As the novelist Sarah Tytler recalled:

her figure was spoilt either from original malformation or from some injury related to the spine. I believe the defect was not prominent in her earlier years, but by the time she had reached middle-life, the back had turned into what was equivalent to a slight hump.

(Keddie, 322)

In an age which saw the emergence of the marketing of “star” personalities, Wood thus remained an elusive figure, a celebrity who maintained her fame by making a spectacle of her absence. Indeed, while I have represented Wood’s absence from literary histories and biographies as a twentieth-century phenomenon, in a sense it was always like this. From the beginning Wood was illusory. In 1865, *The Reader* begged to assure curious readers that nothing was known of Mrs Wood: “We are even ignorant whether this lady is stout or thin, tall or short, fair or dark.” (8 Jul 1865, 30). So Wood’s image was fragmented in her own day, but there she vanished in a different sense: into the varieties of representation by which she became known.

Among these, there were two images which became ubiquitous for more than thirty years: a picture of an impassive but respectable Victorian matron, projecting an aura as asexual as that of Queen Victoria herself; and the trademark name, “Mrs Henry Wood” which became as identifiable as any commercial logo. The only known portrait of Wood is an undated miniature by Reginald Easton which shows the novelist dressed in sober black, wearing a lace cap. This image was engraved and used as a frontispiece in later editions of her work. It was the only opportunity the public had to view their idol, since Wood

avoided interviews and never allowed herself to be photographed (unlike her less camera-shy rivals, Collins and Braddon). The authenticity of the likeness was supported by a message from the author—"Very sincerely yours, Ellen Wood". That Wood endorsed not a photograph but an engraving—a form of pictorial image which lacks the immediacy of the photograph and involves instead a process of reinvention—is suggestive of her methods of reworking and blurring her public image. Personal vanity and self-consciousness were important considerations, but Wood's self-fashioning involved display as well as inhibition, disclosure as well as concealment. It is also important to recall that, for a woman writer, looking the part could be important in gaining readers. The popular idea of the literary woman as deviant or unsexed could be rectified by such pictures at a time when what it meant to be a writer could not be divorced from what it meant to be a Victorian woman. By the end of the nineteenth century Wood's physical image, self-constructed as a dainty, respectable middle-class lady, was eventually so widely circulated as to be immediately recognizable even to those unfamiliar with her books.

Although she was reluctant to submit to the invasiveness of the camera lens, Ellen Wood kept the name "Mrs. Henry Wood" constantly before the public, extravagantly displaying herself in print. This second image, together with Wood's insistence that "the Christian name (Henry) is [always] inserted" (8 Aug 1861, L12, UI), has generally been read as an example of her innate conservatism and a recognition of the binding power of patriarchal norms. However, there are other implications. Most obviously it is a reminder that Wood's own identity as a writer was created as consciously as those of her characters. Women writers often took male-sounding pseudonyms thinking that it gave them an air of seriousness. Behind Acton, Currer and Ellis Bell, the Brontës lay in hiding, not wanting to be prejudged according to the double standard prevailing in Victorian criticism. There was also the dilemma that faced a female writer of sensation fiction in the wake of revelations concerning Mary Braddon's career. Braddon had become a bad example, the woman whose unsavoury personal life detracted from her accomplishments as a writer. She was a single woman, a former actress who wrote professionally and lived with a married man and their five children. In contrast, Wood's life was held up as exemplary—she managed to support her parasitic family and lived a life into which no hint of scandal intruded. As Stevie Davies has suggested:

To declare oneself 'Mrs Wood' is to say to the reading world that one is a safe, harmless, respectable, God-fearing, middle-class Englishwoman, probably endowed with children. . . . To add one's husband's Christian name for good measure . . . is to emphasize the point doubly

(Davies, v).

David Lodge has likewise suggested that writers are especially prone to assume

the meaningfulness of names. While it is not “customary for novelists to explain the connotations of the names they give to characters . . . such [names] . . . are supposed to work subliminally on the reader’s consciousness” (37). While the public name adopted by Ellen Wood failed to contain her, there is no doubt that it was a rich signifier of class and gender. At the time of her death the *Pall Mall Gazette* pictured Mrs Henry Wood approvingly

as a good Englishwoman of strong domestic tastes, unaffected by any of the popular fads of the day . . . [who] received . . . only her intimate friends, and rather shrank from the glare of publicity.

(*Pall Mall Gazette*, 11 Feb 1887, 4).

These “intimate friends”—Anna Maria Hall, Julia Kavanagh and Mary Howitt—were formidably respectable women writers, exempt from suspicion of working to support themselves, hesitant to push their own work in case such display threatened their modesty as ladies.

This image of Mrs Henry Wood was reinforced throughout her career. But it was also challenged. While Ellen Wood cultivated an image of respectability she was also willing to take risks for the sake of a large income. As a novelist she could be an unblushing apologist for infanticide, incest, adultery, forgery, and insanity of all kinds as suitable subject matter. In an 1864 review essay, Wood was called “an egregious offender against good morals and correct taste” (406), with *East Lynne* singled out for special censure:

Mrs Wood is a writer who puzzles us. Some of her stories are as pure, as free from anything that could offend, as earnest in their inculcation of virtue as any writings of their class. On the other hand, others are just as unhealthy in their tone and as questionable in their principles. . . . *East Lynne* is one of the most powerful but one also of the most mischievous books of the day. Throughout an exciting, though very improbable story, our sympathies are excited on behalf of one who has betrayed the most sacred trust man can repose in woman. All that the union of beauty, rank, talent and misfortune can do to create a prejudice in favour of the criminal is done, while the sense of the enormity of her crime is greatly enfeebled by the unamiable light in which her husband is presented. To exhibit a woman possessed of every natural gift that could call forth admiration, and then to surround her with her with circumstances that seem, as though by a resistless fate, to draw her into sin, is to inflict serious injury in the interests of morality; for which it is but very poor compensation to find that the sin is followed by a certain amount of suffering.

(*London Quarterly Review*, 44, Jul 1864, 405).

This review articulates some of the key themes that would ‘place’ Mrs Henry Wood among her contemporaries. Although she presented herself as a stalwart of middle-class values, her endorsement of these values was often open to question. In *East Lynne*, an enormous popular success, the adulterous Isabel Vane’s penitent decline is offered as an example to other women, an apparently unsympathetic but powerful lesson in the necessity of suppressing passion and desire. Having committed adultery and repented of it, Isabel dies and is buried in a nameless grave. In the course of the novel Wood uses her heroine’s enforced separation from her children to rehearse an idealization of motherhood that is

both predictable and conventional. But Wood's representation of her heroine is also potentially subversive. It suggests the liberating force of fiction to act out the breaking of cultural taboos that remained binding for herself and her readers. Not only does Wood encourage her female audience to indulge in fantasies of persecution (as Ann Cvetkovich has noted, 44), but she also exposes the kinds of negotiations that any young, penniless but marriageable woman might be expected to undertake in order to meet society's expectations. Specifically Wood portrays Isabel as a victim of the homosocial world of English society. She marries Carlyle, a man she does not love but a man with money, and Wood emphasizes the psychological costs involved. Beyond minor roles for Barbara Hare (Isabel's hated rival), Joyce (Isabel's maid and confidante) and Aphrodite Hallijohn (a lower-class "kept" woman, whose name echoes the commodification of love and marriage that leads to Isabel's downfall), Isabel is depicted as alone in a world of men. These men, most notably her husband, Carlyle, and her aristocratic seducer, Francis Levison, use Isabel as the ground on which their battles are enacted. Displaying more complexity than she has been given credit for, Wood implies that Isabel's performance, which is to say the performance of "woman", is interlocked with this preening display of masculine identity. To quote Luce Irigaray, in *East Lynne*, women act as fetish objects, "inasmuch as in exchanges they are the manifestation and the circulation of a power of the Phallus, establishing relationships of men with each other" (183). What is disconcerting about Wood's novel is not so much that it is sexually charged, but rather that it shows in a particularly unsettling way how received expectations of the woman work via the exchange of the sign that is "woman" to serve the imperatives of masculine identity.

Although she was forever associated with her early hit, Wood proved not be the firework that critics assumed would quickly burn out. By the mid 1860s, "Mrs Henry Wood" was everywhere—on Mudie's shelves, on the covers of periodicals, on the spines of the cheap reprints, and on the bill-boards and press announcements advertising all of these. In the decade following the publication of *East Lynne*, she published another twenty novels, often working on two at a time, beginning with *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* (1863), *Verner's Pride* (1863), *The Foggy Night at Offord* (1863), *William Allair* (1863), *Trevlyn Hold* (1864), *Lord Oakburn's Daughters* (1864), and *Elster's Folly* (1866), all produced at breakneck speed. To read these post-*East Lynne* novels—"expurgated versions of the Newgate Calendar, toned down so as not to offend the most delicate propriety", as *The Reader* put it (22 Oct 1864, 505)—is to watch a novelist carried along by her own momentum. So insidious were Wood's stories that many hostile critics labelled her (rather than Collins) "the originator and chief of the sensation school of English novelists" (*Athenaeum*, 1 Oct 1864, 428). The

same formula was used over and over again but to Wood's army of readers this did not seem to matter. As Geraldine Jewsbury noted, Wood's novels had

. . . a quality that oversees a multitude of sins. Their *readableness* is recognized by those who are most alive to their faults . . . and to the undiscerning and not fastidious people who form the majority of readers they are sources of keen excitement.

(*Athenaeum*, 1 Jul 1865, 12)

In acknowledging the popularity of Wood's novels Jewsbury and her contemporaries appreciated (as twentieth-century critics have not) the distinctiveness of Wood's fusion of decorum and daring—the fact that, beneath a veil of rigid conventionality, Wood allows her readers to glimpse the gaps within contemporary ideology. She implies things readers would rather not hear about middle-class life even as she embraces the common panaceas of religion and resignation. It is, of course, largely owing to Wood's seeming to try (as she does in *East Lynne*) to persuade her readers of the value of self-sacrifice that she has fared so badly among those critics attempting to read in her books a muted message of revolt against female submission.

Wood's construction of an acceptable writing self often seems to reflect the culture of her day, but the simple account of a passive female voice is far from adequate as an interpretation of her novels. For example, in *East Lynne*, Wood's apparent endorsement of her victimized heroine's suffering doesn't prevent the reader from weeping at her self-sacrifice and cursing the novel's male characters for their unthinking selfishness and complacency. Wood can also work from the other end of the melodramatic spectrum, as in *St Martin's Eve* (1866), where she depicts a seemingly malevolent villainess. When Charlotte St John leaves her five year old stepson to burn alive in a locked room (“a dark mass smouldering on the floor at the far end of the room . . . no trace of him, save that shapeless heap from which the spirit had thrown!”, 151) before disappearing into the ghostly mansion's maze of darkened passages, the narrator declares in ringing tones of disapproval that she is both insane and wicked. Yet Wood was fond of secret mansions and underground passageways and her characters invariably have some kind of subterranean existence. The novel is grounded in the form of the female Gothic, with its nightmare visions of the home, a form which Tamar Heller has suggested as characteristic of sensation fiction by women (6). Wood uses the female Gothic's tropes of secrecy and transgression. She draws too, on what Heller describes as the form's associations with “what is ‘other’, subversive, and marginal, and thus the site of ambivalence” (9), to construct a story about female criminality and victimization, but one which, like *East Lynne*, is located in a historical reality that has particular implications for women. On the one hand, the novel's narrator views Charlotte's behaviour as a product of inherited insanity and naturally unstable femininity (Wood gives Charlotte a capacity for criminal cunning which is denounced as feminine and

ultimately monstrous). On the other hand, Charlotte's insanity can be seen as the behaviour of a woman who is trapped by her economic dependency and caught up in the snares of primogeniture which do not acknowledge her claims or those of her own child. Charlotte's actions may be evil, but she is also simply displaying the capacity for maternal love judged acceptably feminine in her society. And, as Wood makes clear, it is the sheer strength of her impulses and her concern for her own child's advancement which make her dangerous. The novel confirms Wood as an important commentator on nineteenth-century gender politics, engaged in a project which is feminist in effect if not intent: that of highlighting the patriarchal and legal obstacles to women's self-expression. Presenting her heroine as pitiful ("this poor young woman", 144) and dangerous ("her mind a every chaos of rebellious tumult", 144), a figure of rage without power to alleviate her suffering or to express it in terms which make sense to society, Wood encapsulates much of what feminist critics might say about the suppression of women's speech and desires.

Despite her seeming conventionality, Wood's novels are important examples of the way in which women writers used their novels explicitly or implicitly to expose the dark side of women's lives. While contemporary reviewers justifiably questioned the plausibility of her plots—a reviewer of *St. Martin's Eve* sneered that the story was reminiscent of the work of those novelists "who used to employ ghosts and revengeful Italians and secret passages and all the rest of it, to produce impossible or exaggerated results" (*Spectator*, 3 Feb 1866, 135)—this same implausibility is meaningful. As Nancy K. Miller has suggested, works of fiction by women which fall short of verisimilitude and depend on unrealistic narrative turns may "manifest an extravagant wish for the story that would turn out differently" (cited in Sinfield, 25). That is, they suggest rebellion against the constraints of the respectable plot. In her own correspondence Ellen Wood justified extremity and her comments tally with those of Miller. In a letter to Richard Bentley she explained that her success lay in her power of providing "distraction to take our thoughts for a time away" from "the many, many cares and perfidies of life" (14 Nov 1881, L102, BL). In her novels transgressive, excessive female figures are condemned (either to death or, as in Charlotte St John's case, to imprisonment in an asylum) but they are also manifestations of fantasies of escape from gender roles.

Although I would not like to claim for Wood's novels too weighty a part in the revisionist project, which consists in discovering feminist forebears in unexpected places, there is no reason to ignore her entirely. It is equally insufficient to accept the rigidity with which a sub-generic form like the sensation novel has been applied as a container for her work, and which for the most part has been used to find her novels less accomplished than those of male

counterparts like Collins. Nineteenth-century reviewers found it rather more difficult to contain Wood in a single critical category. They often located Wood alongside Dinah Mulock Craik, one of the women writers Elaine Showalter dubs a “‘feminine’ novelist” (61). Wood was even occasionally compared with George Eliot. In 1862, *The Morning Post* was enraptured with *Mrs Halliburton’s Troubles*, Wood’s story of a widow’s struggle against poverty and dishonest relatives in a small market town, suggesting that it ranked with *Adam Bede* in its “boldness, originality and social scrutiny” (cited in “Criticisms of the Press”, *Verner’s Pride*, 1895, ii). The *Literary Gazette* was put in mind “of our old and lamented favourite, Maria Edgeworth” (3 Jan 1863, 8). This connection was made by comparing Edgeworth’s tendency to stress woman’s particular talents in advancing social and moral development, and Wood’s own emphasis on Christian fortitude and the middle-class Mrs Halliburton’s beneficent power over the hearts and minds of her successful sons. The novel is indicative of the way in which Wood could move out of the sensation category with apparent ease. *The Channings* (1862), which she described as of “a very different class of story from *East Lynne*” (13 Jan 1862, L17, UI), is a realist study of endurance and self-sacrifice among a middle-class family, set in the cathedral city of Helstonleigh (a version of Anthony Trollope’s Barchester). Unusually for Wood, the worst crime committed in this story is petty theft and the most sensational scenes are those inspired by a schoolboy dressed as a ghost. Yet the novel was another best seller: Mudie’s alone took 1,000 copies, and by 1895, sales had reached 140,000, ranking the novel alongside Charlotte Yonge’s decorous, influential and spiritually uplifting *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1855). These domestic novels were usually seen as extensions or expressions of Wood’s femininity; they also suggest that her textual and physical appearance as a sweetly conventional lady novelist were not merely an affectation. Wood thus did not always write books exposing the myths of domesticity, masculine superiority, or the degradation of society marriages, and instead her novels often function as explicit restatements of her conservative Anglican beliefs.

Wood was not a literary rebel and her fiction was found acceptable by the proprietors of the circulating libraries and their bourgeois readers, but, for some nineteenth-century readers and critics, the significance of Mrs Henry Wood went far beyond that of a “good” woman. For many exponents of high culture she was cast as a vulgar figure, commercial in her aims, a symptom of decline in standards of reading and literary taste. The fastidious *Saturday Review*, labelled her “third rate” (18 Feb 1865, 203) and cited her success as disturbing evidence that there were “apparently no bounds to the insipidity, carelessness, and folly which the public is willing to tolerate, and for which, therefore, publishers are willing to pay” (13 Apr 1867, 475). Making this declaration when readers well

above the servant class were still happily reading Wood—including Harriet Martineau, Leo Tolstoy, Lord Lyttleton, Queen Victoria—papers like the *Saturday*, and the *Athenaeum* attacked the pollution of contemporary culture that Wood's success seemed to symbolize. The very qualities that Wood's voracious readers were drawn to—sentimentalism, emphasis on sin and suffering, melodramatic emotionalism—were dismissed as clap-trap. At the same time, the novels were proclaimed the reading matter of the half-educated, low-brows who are also, reviewers implied, low on the socio-economic scale. *The Saturday Review* found it

impossible that persons of keen perceptions can read her books with pleasure. She grates too much on the refinement which is the second nature of educated people; and to read Mrs Henry Wood is equivalent of listening to the setting of a saw, or plunging one's hands into a bed of stinging-nettles.

(*Saturday Review*, 2 Nov 1872, 577).

It became increasingly commonplace to sneer that Wood and her readers were semi-literate. *The Academy* pictured Mrs Henry Wood as a real-life Mrs Squeers (21 Feb 1885, 265), while the *Saturday* imagined the authoress as the “typical Mrs Brown”, whose novels in their “coarse garrulity” were

especially fitted for and addressed to servant maids, both for the side hints and exhortations she gives to that much-enduring and much inflicting class, and for the pleasure and gossip with which she repeats their gossip and their whole *manière d'être*.

(*Saturday Review*, 22 Oct 1870, 540).

A similar class animus is apparent in the *Athenaeum's* jibe that “her diction and her point of view remind us very much of the housekeeper's room” (24 Jul 1875, 119). Others questioned Wood's ability to produce so many of these books—“coarse, hasty and ill-considered wares” as the *Saturday Review* termed them (22 Oct 1870, 539). Sometimes Wood's prolific output was seen as a case of misused talent; more often it was viewed as a cash-motivated approach to novel-writing and a rejection of aesthetic seriousness. In 1864, the *Saturday* painted a picture of Wood the hack, scribbling away in the family sitting-room, producing ephemeral articles for family magazines. “Emboldened by her success” with *East Lynne*, she had “gone on ever since at the rate of a novel every three months, each successive production weaker and more carelessly written than its predecessor” (16 Jan 1864, 83).

Reading these comments, it is hard to imagine commentary farther removed from the pieties of Charles Wood's account of his mother's career. Throughout the *Memorials* the devoted son strives to convince readers that while money, ambition, or frustration might characterize the adulterous, murderous heroines of *East Lynne* and *St Martin's Eve*, such qualities were singularly absent in Ellen Wood the woman.

Unable to sit up unaided she wrote in a reclining chair and never accepted anything it would be a strain to perform . . . When writing became a serious occupation, her

strength did not admit of anything else. Even after a quiet evening with friends she occasionally suffered from nervous exhaustion that almost felt like death itself. At such times she could only lie back in her chair, her eyes closed, a soft flush upon her face, until rest restored her . . .

(Wood, *Memorials*, 36)

Women writers made gains during the nineteenth century but their bids for professional recognition were often in collision with the preferred mode of womanhood: domesticity. The invalidism and reclusiveness emphasized in Charles Wood's description can be seen as the physical manifestation of a necessary and appropriate withdrawal from the world; the slow fade at the end suggests his mother's serenity and resignation. Written by a man who witnessed the development of his mother's career at first hand, later acting as her agent and personal assistant, the *Memorials* are most striking for the way in which they downplay Wood's role as a professional author in favour of her role as wife, mother and household manager. As noted earlier, Mrs Wood's life thus becomes a model of self-realization through self-renunciation. Charles Wood emphasizes that even when composing her novels his mother never neglected even the most mundane household duties. Her home is a haven of morality from the rapacity of the outside world, a sanctuary—and Charles Wood uses specifically Christian language—guarded by a real-life angel in the house. In fact, as we have seen, Ellen Wood's life was characterized as much by her subversion of these Victorian clichés as by her fulfillment of them. She did work within an ethic of domesticity, shunning publicity, but seen with the benefit of a century's hindsight, she also represents the talent well employed—through commitment to a career, to professionalism, and to financial independence.

Given her long history with Richard Bentley and Son and her frequent work for other major publishers, including Bradbury and Evans, the Tinsleys, and Norman Macleod, Wood should be a prime subject for scholars interested in the business of authorship and publishing. She also had close connections with a diverse collection of magazines including, *Temple Bar*, *The New Monthly Magazine*, *The Quiver*, *Tinsley's Magazine*, *Good Words*, *All the Year Round*, and *Once a Week*. Wood's extensive correspondence also suggests, as nothing else does, that she was far from being diffident and out of the world, as her son suggests. There we see her carefully arranging the marketing of her work in as many different forms as possible (serialization, books in one, two and three volumes, anthologies), rarely parting with a copyright, driving her publishers down to a third or even a quarter share of profits. Her letters to Richard and George Bentley, which cover the period from the 1850s to the 1880s, reveal a meticulous concern with the financial minutiae of contracts. They show that Wood was a regular and demanding visitor to the offices in New Burlington Street, collecting her substantial advances and royalties (preferably in cash) with

determined regularity. “It will I believe be in the morning . . . that I should call”, she once wrote to Richard Bentley, “early” (25 Sep 1861, L14, UI). Wood’s correspondence suggests, too, the keen awareness of her power as a circulating library favourite—what George Bentley cautiously referred to as a “strong confidence” in her own work . . .” (30 Jul 1863, L83, BL). Wood’s letters also reveal that she spent a good deal of her time playing rival publishers off against one another. In 1866 George Bentley complained bitterly to Florence Marryat of Wood’s defecting to Tinsley’s “after we had given her . . . a bonus of £200” (15 Aug 1866, L78, BL). To Bentley this smacked of disloyalty and ruthless opportunism, but Sarah Tytler interpreted it more charitably as Wood’s determination “not to find herself in the cold when her opportunities came to an end.” (320). Wood’s pride in her hard work and success and was of practical as well as psychological importance: she had long assumed the role of family breadwinner, and her self-fashioned persona and clamorous readers represented her ticket to economic security.

I began by suggesting that we should recognize the existence of more than one Mrs Henry Wood and see her multi-faceted image not as problem but as a series of entry points into Victorian literary culture. On the one hand, Wood publicly endorsed the Victorian ideal of asexual domesticity. On the other, she did not spend all her time in household management and her life ran counter to the ideal which she advocated. I want to suggest that these multiple Mrs Henry Woods often appear simultaneously because Wood is capable of gesturing to both spheres at once. An important example of this occurs in 1867 when she takes on her most ambitious project: the editorship of the monthly magazine, *The Argosy*. At that point, *The Argosy* was still reeling from the outcry provoked by its serialization of Charles Reade’s controversial *Griffin Gaunt* (1865-6) which many readers had judged obscene. For the magazine’s strait-laced owner, Alexander Strahan, Wood’s respectability, her popularity, her ability to write for different markets, and her reputation as the most wholesome of the sensation novelists made her a suitable editor with whom to entrust *The Argosy*’s future.

Under Wood’s ownership *The Argosy* achieved an average monthly circulation of 20,000, far in excess of that of its main rival, Mary Braddon’s *Belgravia*. Addressed to the family circle, *The Argosy* was determinedly non-controversial and non-political in its outlook. In 1869, *Bell’s Weekly Messenger* complained that *The Argosy* was “by no means as racy in its literary cargo than it formerly was, since it has had more ‘wood’ piled upon it, its freight has been heavier than is either ornamental or pleasing” (20 Nov 1869, 6). By this time Wood’s once shocking books and ideas had become more assimilated into the suburban world of decency and morality. The tone of her serial novels for the magazine, notably *Anne Hereford* (1868) and *Roland Yorke* (1869), provide a

stark contrast to that found in bolder women's periodicals—Bessie Parkes's *Englishwoman's Journal*, for example, or *The Rose, Shamrock and Thistle*, published by the all-woman Caledonian Press. In the gaps between Wood's serials, *The Argosy* relied heavily on a core of regular contributors—Hesba Stratton, Julia Kavanagh, Alice King and Isabella Fyvie Mayo, a protégé of Anna Maria Hall—publishing articles on female role models from history, or on education and continental travel, discursive pieces which confirmed the middle-class's satisfaction with its own prosperity and the conventional roles assigned to its women. According to Mayo, Wood was a sympathetic, selfless and hard-working editor whose own ill-health gave her “ready comprehension of difficult and trying circumstances” (143). The Victorians valued the bourgeois work ethic as well as that of true womanhood, so Mayo's descriptions of the delicate Mrs Wood labouring dutifully over the submissions fitted both plots at once.

Recently, Phyllis Grosskurth has suggested that “[o]ne of the healthy signs in the development of biography has been the resurrection of otherwise neglected figures” (149). Wood's life and career should make her a prime candidate, with its different segments, its narrative of a promising marriage ending in disillusionment, with its themes of self-reliant struggle against genteel poverty, of interaction between domestic and professional activities. Yet to return Ellen Wood to her rightful place in literary history is not to stabilize her. She remains inherently contradictory. Like a holograph shifting under our gaze, she is at once heroic wife and mother, scandalous sensationalist, and harbinger of the commercial degradation of art. Although she apparently refuses to comply with any of the tropes of successive waves of feminist historiography, it is difficult to dispute that she confounded expectations about women of her time(s), challenging her gender and class by being the first woman in her genteel family to earn her own living. Her work had a cross-class appeal and, although she is now condemned as conservative, one of the attractions of her writing is its polyphony, and thus its potential to resist fixed readings. Wood's novels, which struck such a deep chord with Victorian readers, seem to be worthy of at least partial rescue and reevaluation. Almost the only recent critical attention which Wood has received is that directed at *East Lynne*. Yet other works merit attention, not only as examples of popular fiction but as cultural documents that engage mid-Victorian ideas on gender, morality and the family. The trademark “Mrs Henry Wood” may not be interchangeable with “Wilkie Collins”, “Anthony Trollope” or “George Eliot” but the four participate equally in cultural currents which we will perceive in only a distorted way as long as Wood continues to be banished from cultural memory. While Collins's welcome critical rehabilitation continues, that of his nearest rival is long overdue.

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Of the Violence of the Working Woman: Collins and Discourses on Criminality, 1860-1880

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Debates on the violent impulses of women in the 1860s and 1870s drew on and developed key ideas from discussions of female criminality current at mid-century, seeking to characterize the nature of women who deviated from the norms of Victorian femininity. The prevailing view that female criminals were more depraved than their male counterparts—that “a bad man . . . is not so vile as a bad woman”—contributed to widespread beliefs that they were “irreclaimable” creatures ruled by their “wild”, animal natures (Owen, 152, 156). However, as psychiatrists, prison officers and female philanthropists and visitors began to involve themselves in the plight of criminal women, a more balanced and sympathetic view of their nature emerged, one which took account of factors such as class inequities, lack of education and limited employment opportunities,¹ and attempted to understand, rather than simply vilify, offenders. Violent women on trial in the courts generated debates on the cause of the uncontrollable impulses which prompted them to attack men or employers, as these could be attributed to mental disorders or seen as the outcome of women’s fury about the abuse they suffered.

In this article I will examine various interpretations of the violent working woman in both the press and the crime fiction of Wilkie Collins, whose novels often interrogated current definitions and explanations of the criminal nature, particularly their class and gender implications. At the beginning of a gradual shift from a “moralizing stance to psychological interpretations of the supposedly defective nature of criminal women” (Zedner, 43), both crime reports and popular fiction examined the relation between women’s passions and their violence, questioning newly-developed theories about homicidal mania and “frantic” behaviour and considering the links between abuse, social conditions for women workers and women’s resolution to kill.

¹ See, for example, the views of Susanna Meredith, a prison visitor, who links crime to “want of proper discipline” (236), and Owen’s more constructive comments about the lack of training and education available to poor women (153).

Classifying the female criminal in the press

Assumptions made about the female criminal in the press drew on well-worn stereotypes of the bad woman, emphasizing her lack of control over her sexuality, her unfeminine qualities and her low social position. M.E. Owen described her as “evil” and “unchaste”, prey to lying, drunkenness and slovenliness (153-5). It was generally accepted that “women, once bad, are utterly hopeless” (Martineau, 364). According to the testimony of a woman worker in an Irish reformatory, they proved “more difficult to reclaim than men” and in need of “more surveillance” and “a stronger effort of self-control, than is usually requisite with men” (cited in Martineau, 367). In her discussions of the oppositions between criminality and the virtuous feminine ideal, Lucia Zedner makes the key point that all criminal women came to be seen as sexually deviant, “so that assessment of sexual conduct was used to measure the depth of their criminality” (32).

However, accounts of bad women were tempered by the growing recognition that economic deprivation clearly motivated many female offenders; it was noted that the majority were “from the lower class of domestic servants downwards” (Owen, 153). As Judith Knelman has argued (19, 273), after mid-century murderesses were “better understood as victims of harsh circumstances” who sought “escape or control”. Knelman’s work is typical of developments in feminist criminology which explain female crime in terms of women’s victimization in society. Frances Heidensohn has suggested that we should approach female criminals “in the context of the structure of conformity and constraint” which governs their lives, though she goes on to warn of the dangers of simplification: “if there were a simple equation that ‘poverty and powerlessness equals criminality’ girls and women would be leaders in crime waves” (Heidensohn, 192, 195). Nonetheless, the more advanced views of philanthropists, feminists and criminologists in the 1870s and 1880s moved further away from the idea of crime as a manifestation of female depravity towards an acknowledgement of the links between criminal tendencies and women’s “political powerlessness” (Zedner, 76). Luke Owen Pike, in his *History of Crime in England* (1876), claimed that “the more active and energetic women were, the more apt they were to end up as criminals” (cited in Morris, 52), whereas articles in feminist journals about “our unhappy sisters sunk in crime” helped to strengthen perceptions of criminal women as “somewhat pathetic victims of the social structure, of personal circumstance, or of men’s brutality” (Zedner, 74). Links between criminality and woman’s nature were then being contested around the 1870s as the political disability of women became increasingly prominent in the press, though the stereotype of the unchaste and evil female offender still remained in circulation.

Medical classification of criminals intensified from mid-century onwards as the new sciences of psychology and psychiatry opened up alternative frameworks for interpreting illegal acts, particularly those committed by women. Changes in the law reflected the increased attention paid to the supposed insanity of violent offenders. In 1860, in response to overcrowding in asylums and concern about the insanity plea in criminal trials, under the Criminal Lunatics Asylum Act Broadmoor was established as an institution for offenders pronounced insane, many of whom were convicted murderers (Smith, 23-4). After 1865, it became compulsory for prison inmates to undergo medical inspections, which revealed that large numbers of prisoners did appear to be “mentally defective” or insane (Zedner, 84). According to statistics relating to criminal trials 1860-9, out of the 686 people committed for trial, 63 were acquitted as insane and 36 found or declared to be insane, around 15% of all committed (*The Times*, 31 Mar 1871, 4). Theories about the criminal impulse were developed in response to such findings. Harriet Martineau cited the opinion of a Newgate Ordinary that some criminals committed violence under “some sudden impulse or some single overwhelming temptation” (Martineau, 341), recalling medical research earlier in the century by alienists such as Esquirol and Prichard into the behaviour of homicidal maniacs, where the mind is affected by “partial” insanity (Smith, 37, 62). Legal and medical opinion was divided on this subject, as illustrated in an article in the *Saturday Review* considering the medical evidence on the mental states of three men recently convicted of murder. The medical confirmation of “an irresistible tendency to kill, founded on a disease of the brain” was believed to be “dangerous” by one presiding judge, leading the writer to conclude that “homicidal mania is only a morbid desire for blood” and “many so-called mental disorders are, in fact, only moral depravity” (“Homicidal Mania and Moral Insanity”, *Saturday Review*, 21 Mar 1863, 371-2). Despite the conservative tone of this response, it was apparent that the drive to classify violence in terms of depravity was being challenged by new theories of mental disorder, which provided alternative readings of impulsive acts.

Typically, theories of mental disorder seemed to fit more comfortably into discussions of female than male criminality, given the associations between femininity and insanity current at this time. Eliza Orme noted that women’s prisons were full of “poor creatures who are diseased and often insane” (791), while Mary Carpenter, a prison officer who conducted a study of prison inmates entitled *Our Convicts* (1864), claimed that “[women’s] offences are of a different character, and depend very much on impulse” (cited in Martineau, 364). Yet other female writers were not so sympathetic; whilst accepting that criminals were more likely to suffer from “hysteria, epilepsy and insanity” in

which they “are unable to resist the power of a force, that usurps the direction of their functions,” Susanna Meredith felt that attributing crime to some “extraneous influence” was simply a way of denying guilt and responsibility (Meredith, 217, 223). However, the work of Henry Maudsley, the influential alienist and psychiatrist, lent scientific weight to claims that women were more liable to experience such criminal impulses; in *Physiology and Pathology of Mind* (1867) Maudsley considered the case of a mother’s sudden impulsive attempt to kill her daughter in terms of her “unconscious mental life” (cited in Smith, 52). In 1874 he linked irresistible criminal impulses, including violence, to “the influence of the derangement of their special bodily functions” on women, reinforcing the view of women as ruled by their menstrual cycles (cited in Zedner, 87). Theories about loss of control and unconscious activity lent force to prevalent views of woman’s nature and empirical work on female convicts, often subject to “wilful violence and passion”, leading Mary Carpenter to conclude that “the restless excitable nature of these women requires a vent in something” in order to “calm their spirits” (cited in Martineau, 365). Developments in psychiatry then tended to refocus attention on the mental states of female offenders, implying that they were not depraved but passionate, excitable and disturbed.

Despite these developments, stereotypes of violent women as passionate and lacking in control were perpetuated in the crime reports and transcripts of trials included in the daily press, which often reinforced the perception of the female criminal as sexually deviant. Women brought to trial for violence against men or adults excited curiosity, desire, revulsion and sometimes sympathy, depending on the details about their sexualities, appearances and criminal behaviour included in the press. Although the general view suggested that “aggressive, sociopathic women” did not deserve tolerance or pity, according to Knelman (229), “by mid-century the press had become adept at exploiting public interest in the criminal *because she was a woman.*”² Knelman goes on to examine the disparity between the everyday drabness of murder and the image of the murderess, which acquired a sexual frisson after the celebrated trials of such glamorous criminals as Maria Manning, who in 1849 was hanged with her husband for murdering their lodger.³

² Knelman notes that this was partly because few women hanged for murder at this time: in the period 1861-70 only 7 out of the 124 people hanged for this offence were women.

³ See the discussion in Knelman, 14. Female violence was also likely to be associated with “foreignness” at this time; both Manning and Marguerite Diblanc, a cook who murdered her employer in 1871, were Belgian and accounts of French women murdering their husbands in “crimes of passion” appeared in the English press. See, for example, the reports of a French woman who stabbed and mutilated her husband and of the group of French women who had poisoned their husbands, respectively in *The Times*, 16 Jul 1868, 10, and 11 Dec 1868, 5.

Sexually dominant women and those unafraid to voice their hatred of men formed a significant subsection of violent women. Priscilla Biggadike, hanged in 1868 for the murder of her husband, had proclaimed that she “couldn’t abide” him and was vilified for the “obdurate” tone she maintained after her conviction (*The Times*, 12 Dec 1868, 11, and 28 Dec 1868, 10). Constant allusions were made to the rampant sexuality of Ellen Kittel, tried for the murder of her husband’s former wife in 1872: she was pregnant during her trial due to her “intense” attachment to her husband and the “criminal intercourse” they had enjoyed and she is quoted as having said of him, “That’s the man I want, and that’s the man I’ll have,” even if it meant poisoning her rival (*The Times*, 16 Jul 1872, 11). Many of the women tried for assault, murder or manslaughter had become involved in quarrels with husbands or lovers or were responding to violent or verbal provocation. When their crimes appeared particularly unfeminine, due to the method of killing or related behaviour, they were given harsher sentences: Ann Lane was sentenced to twelve years’ penal servitude for stabbing her lover after a drunken quarrel and Diblanc nearly executed because her use of a mallet to bludgeon her mistress was “certainly more suggestive of the man than the woman” (*The Times*, 7 Dec 1871, 11, and 12 Apr 1872, 8).

In the sample of cases I examined in *The Times* between 1867 and 1872, the word insanity was barely mentioned, though the verdict of “temporary insanity” was frequently used in cases of women indicted for the deaths of children. Reflecting changing perceptions of women’s mental states, the reports tended instead to highlight women’s excitable, passionate natures and their subjection to impulses beyond their control. In the case of Mary Sadler, indicted for feloniously wounding her lover in 1871, her epilepsy, “violent paroxysms of rage” and “hysterical attacks” are confirmed by a doctor, who claims that she became “very much excited, partly . . . from stimulants and partly from mental emotion.” Although her sexually dominant personality is linked to her violence, the judge still debated her degree of control, putting forward the notion that the act might have been “committed under circumstances of such great excitement that the mind had no time to form any intention at all.” She was ultimately found guilty of unlawful wounding, because the evidence suggested that “the state of her mind was such that she could not control herself in the use of the weapon” (*The Times*, 18 Aug 1871, 9). In a similar case in which the woman’s violence did result in the death of her partner, the judge used the same argument to stress Flora Davy’s guilt, claiming that “there was something like provocation on the part of the deceased, and that it was under the influence of excited feelings that this unhappy event occurred” (*The Times*, 17 Jul 1871, 12). Although she was

proved to have stabbed Frederick Moon impulsively during a quarrel, this impulse was not linked to a specific mental disorder but to the passionate nature of women, as the prosecuting counsel reiterated phrases such as “a violent fit of passion” and “a frenzy of passion”. The prosecutor went on to imply that a woman who picked up a knife must by definition be a “woman of violent passions” and asked: “What a temper and state of mind did that exhibit?” Although Flora claimed that her lover was also behaving violently, her testimony was seen as irrelevant. In the Diblanc trial, the cook was ultimately recommended to mercy and her sentence commuted, presumably because it was felt that her attack on her mistress, “the result of sudden and irresistible impulse”, had been provoked by Madame Riel’s insults and refusal to pay her servant (“The Park-Lane Murder”, *The Times*, 22 Jun 1872, 9).

Issues about provocation, women’s passions and the violent impulses experienced in quarrels sparked off a debate about the distinctions between murder and manslaughter, relating to the very different sentences women might receive if premeditation could be disproved. One article asked, “is it murder rather than manslaughter if it happens in a quarrel?” and went on to caution “we hope it will not be hastily assumed that murderers who have acted under the impulse of sudden and violent passion have a claim to mercy” (*The Times*, 15 Jun 1872, 9). Given the equation of impulses and violent passions with violent women, this article appears to be articulating the fear that murderous women are receiving lighter sentences because of new medical theories and hence not being sufficiently punished and controlled. Whereas the medicalization of women’s fury sometimes went in their favour, it could also condemn them for responding spontaneously to provocation, particularly if it was implied that their retaliatory violence rendered them unfeminine.

However, as details of domestic abuse were more widely publicized from the late 1860s onwards, particularly by the feminist campaigner Frances Power Cobbe, crime reports began to acknowledge the extent of the provocation some women received prior to their violent acts. Morris has highlighted the violent tendencies of abused women in this period, noting that:

several individual cases publicized in the press aroused enormous public sympathy for the accused woman and corresponding outrage at the abuse which had precipitated the murder . . . After mid-century cases in which women murdered abusive husbands were not always taken to trial.

(Morris, 36-7)

Women’s disturbed mental states could then be seen as products of abuse; in the trial of Sarah Delaney for murdering her lover, it was recorded that she stabbed him “while under excitement, consequent on a blow inflicted upon her by the deceased” (*The Times*, 29 Apr 1871, 5).

Many other cases of violence against men include details of violence or verbal abuse by men. An unrepentant servant remanded for attempted murder in 1871 spoke out in court to the effect that “she was not to blame, that her husband treated her most cruelly, and that what she had done was only in self-defence,” a rare instance of a woman demanding that her abuse be recognized and taken into account (*The Times*, 13 Dec 1871, 9). In the Diblanc case and another involving an attempt by a younger servant to poison her employers, the unreasonable and offensive behaviour of employers is cited as a contributory factor, particularly the mistress’s powerful threat that she will dismiss servants without a character or pay if they do not obey her commands (*The Times*, 10 Aug 1871, 11). Diblanc’s lawyer dwelt on the “offensive” names her mistress used in the quarrel, claiming “any respectable girl would have felt outraged at such a suggestion, especially susceptible as she would be from the very consciousness of her respectability” (“The Park-Lane Murder”, *The Times*, 14 Jun 1872, 10). What is perhaps more significant is that judges and defence lawyers were beginning to emphasize the stories of abuse behind the convictions, as men’s immoral conduct was no longer unspoken. Men who had entered into illicit unions were reminded of the greater dangers that they posed for women, and their drunkenness frowned upon. Narratives which dwelt on the emotional, passionate and angry nature of women were then partially grounded in the details of their abuse at the hands of husbands, lovers and employers, so that violence could be categorized as an understandable response to allegations about sexual conduct, slurs on respectability, reminders of women’s financial dependency and continued domestic violence.

However, unlike their counterparts in France, where women were rarely seen as responsible for crimes of passion against their partners, “English judges and juries, recoiling at the havoc wreaked by furious women, saw to it that they suffered for the indulgence of their passions” (Knelman, 87). The oppression of working-class women had not yet been fully considered as one of the root causes of their passionate impulses, nor were their mental disorders always being recognized, as assumptions about sexually deviant women were still influential in the courts and in the press.

Wilkie Collins’s Violent Women: Abused or Disturbed?

According to Virginia Morris (107), “Collins . . . infuriated the critics by assailing the Victorian assumption that depravity was a primary cause of women’s criminality,” stressing the “normalcy” of the female criminal and downplaying the links between women’s sexual desires and their decision to kill. Arguably, in many of his accounts of women’s violence and the motives

underlying it, often narrated by the women themselves, he considered what it means to explain crime as a response to abuse or as a result of mental disorder. He also sustained an ongoing interest in female servants whose dependency led them to cross the border between crime and respectability, drawing on fears about the class antagonism explored in the Diblanc case. As Anthea Trodd has argued, servants often played “highly visible and sinister roles” in Victorian crime plots, in particular those female servants whose “distraught appearance and unguarded utterances pose a threat of exposure” to the middle-class household (Trodd, 46, 54). Many of Collins’s novels include servant narratives and testimonies, which map out the alienation of the servant within the household, showing how their respectability is governed by a set of rigidly-defined rules. “Servants were showered with advice, abuse and admonitions,” claims Frank E. Huggett (53). They had “few rights” (Huggett, 113), and were generally regarded as criminal and unchaste. Knelman has located the homicidal inclinations of servants in their position as “abused” individuals, fighting back against oppressors; Marguerite Diblanc is only one example of a female servant who used violence to challenge her mistress’s authority (Knelman, 181).⁴ In the texts that I will consider below, *Man and Wife* (1870), the short story “Mr Policeman and the Cook” (1880),⁵ and *The Legacy of Cain* (1888), Collins focuses on female servants and working women, whose violence is rooted in their position as abused victims but who also ambiguously display the signs of mental disorder. Working women might commit murder because their dependence on employers made them feel “powerless to change the system” (Huggett, 158-59), but the fury which led to their criminal impulses did not correspond in a simple way to their sense of powerlessness.

Both *Man and Wife* and “Mr Policeman and the Cook” represent the respectability of servants as a cover for their violence. Servants were dependent on the goodwill of their mistresses for their characters, without which they would find it “virtually impossible to get another situation” (Huggett, 113). Both Priscilla Thurlby in the short story and Hester Dethridge in the novel are described as “trustworthy” servants; Priscilla is proclaimed to be a “good girl” quite fit for “any respectable employment” by the parson who writes her character (Collins, *The Dream-Woman*, 208), whilst Hester is seen as “eminently respectable”, even “one of the best cooks in England” (Collins, *Man and Wife*, 113). However, the latter is particularly valued because she has

⁴ Knelman also discusses the trials of Hannah Dobbs in 1877 and Kate Webster in 1879, who were both found guilty of murdering their mistresses.

⁵ The story was originally published under the title “Who Killed Zebedee?” on 24 Dec 1880 in the *Bolton Weekly Journal* and other weekly newspapers, syndicated by Tillotsons of Bolton, as well as in *The Spirit of the Times* (New York) on 25 Dec 1880, but was retitled “Mr Policeman and the Cook” when reprinted in *Little Novels* in 1887.

suffered loss of speech after an assault by her husband; Patrick Lundie's comment, "A woman who *can't* talk, and a woman who *can* cook—is simply a woman who has arrived at absolute perfection" (Collins, *Man and Wife*, 271), ominously equates women's silence and submission with the ideal fulfilment of a servant's duties. Both wives and servants are described throughout the novel as behaving in a "mechanical" manner, slavishly adhering to men's rules and the "lifetime of personal subordination" which was perceived to be their lot (Davidoff, 409). The instability of the cook's respectability is underlined when Hester is accused of insolence by her mistress for disobeying orders and threatened with dismissal without a character. Geoffrey Delamayn also assumes that she is only "some crazed old servant . . . kept, out of charity, now" (Collins, *Man and Wife*, 241). It is implied that the "insolence" of servants who live "on the brink of dismissal" and must constantly kowtow to their employers might develop into acts of violence: Hester's defiance of her mistress aligns her with criminals such as Marguerite Diblanc, and is bound up with her antagonism towards Geoffrey, who also gives her orders. The power which he is able to exert over her after reading her confession is also the power of the employer: she expresses "the same lifeless submission to him, the same mute horror of him," which an oppressed servant might feel and is said to behave "like a machine waiting to be set in movement" (629).⁶

In the short story *Priscilla kills Zebedee*, her former lover, because of his insults; like Geoffrey, he also lodges in a house where she is employed as cook. She explains to the policeman that "her duties as a cook kept her in the kitchen—and Zebedee never discovered that she was in the house" (Collins, *The Dream-Woman*, 215), implying that her performance of the duties of cook, and the "virtual invisibility" to which servants were supposed to aspire (Trodd, 51), effectively facilitates her violence. In the later tale the homicidal cook appears more sinister; Priscilla is never indicted for the murder and remains "mistress of her own movements" in her search for a new situation (Collins, *The Dream-Woman*, 208), secure in the possession of the "good character" guaranteed by her perfection of the cook's role.

Man and Wife also identifies the abuse of the working wife as a motivating force to kill, where women's fury can be seen as a reaction both to the exercising of male power and to a legal system which perpetuated that power. Hester's confession rejects myths of the criminal woman as depraved in favour of economic explanations; as Morris has pointed out, "Collins repeatedly stresses the social causes of criminality—alienation, abuse, economic deprivation—and shows profound sympathy for women faced with the

⁶ Trodd (66) has argued that Hester "with her professional expertise [and] satisfactory dumbness . . . seems to summarize all the threats which Victorian fiction attributed to servants."

unpalatable choice between suffering and violence” (Morris, 106). In his earlier novel *Armadale* (1866), Lydia Gwilt poisons her first husband as a response to his brutality which culminates in his striking her across the face with a riding-whip. She is later pardoned because her respectable appearance in court helps to convince the public of her innocence. As Donald E. Hall notes (167), in Collins’s fiction “[t]he abused woman becomes an even more active abuser of men.”

The details of Hester’s abuse are taken from the contemporary case of Susanna Palmer, tried for assaulting her violent husband in 1869. Like Mr Palmer, Joel Dethridge subjects his wife to repeated acts of violence. He knocks out her front teeth, sells her furniture and uses her earnings to finance his drinking, both the property and the money being legally his at this time. What is significant in the Palmer case is the sympathy Susanna’s retaliatory violence provoked and the judgment passed on her husband. The *Times* report noted that “the prisoner in her defence told a touching story, which appeared to produce a very strong feeling of commiseration for her among the whole audience,” whilst the judge upbraided the husband for his “abominable” conduct and added that “very few persons who committed crime and were sentenced were half so bad as he was” (*The Times*, 15 Jan 1869, 9). Similarly, the provocation which Hester endured ensures that her story is also “touching”, though her capacity to carry out a premeditated act of violence makes her appear more depraved. In her *Blackwood’s* review of the novel, Margaret Oliphant found Hester to be both an unnatural and improbable character despite the topicality of her challenge to abusive husbands, calling her a “deathly-faced weird woman . . . [who] belongs to the category of sprites and demons” (Oliphant, 630). By contrast Hall has argued that the novel’s revelation of the “traditionally hidden, horrifying experiences of an abused woman” means that “we are in full sympathy with Hester” (Hall, 172), though I would suggest that Collins’s partial vilification of the violent woman militated against such “full sympathy” with murderers. Assault and manslaughter might inspire “commiseration” for women desperate to escape from a cycle of abuse but it still proved difficult to disengage the idea of premeditated violence from images of the murderess as demonic, unnatural and depraved, whatever the provocation she received.

In the later novel *The Legacy of Cain*, Collins expresses even more explicit reservations about sympathizing with women capable of such acts, opening his novel with the story of an unnamed woman awaiting execution for the murder of her abusive husband. Although the beginning of the story takes place between 1858 and 1859, when women were more likely to be hanged for murder than in 1888, when the novel was written, it was still comparatively

rare, suggesting that Collins feels the need to stress the importance of subjecting such depraved women to the ultimate punishment. We are told that:

They had lived together in matrimony for little more than two years. The husband, a gentleman by birth and education, had mortally offended his relations by marrying a woman in an inferior rank of life. He was fast declining into a state of poverty, through his own reckless extravagance, at the time when he met with his death at his wife's hand. Without attempting to excuse him, he deserved, to my mind, some tribute of regret. It is not to be denied that he was profligate in his habits and violent in his temper. . . . If his wife had killed him in a fit of jealous rage—under provocation, be it remembered, which the witnesses proved—she might have been convicted of manslaughter, and might have received a lighter sentence. But the evidence so undeniably revealed deliberate and merciless premeditation, that the only defence attempted by her trial was madness, and the only alternative left to a righteous jury was a verdict which condemned the woman to death. Those mischievous members of the community, whose topsy-turvy sympathies feel for the living criminal, and forget the dead victim, attempted to save her by means of highflown petitions and contemptible correspondence in the newspapers. But the Judge held firm; and the Home Secretary held firm. They were entirely right; and the public was scandalously wrong.

(Collins, *The Legacy of Cain*, 2-3)

The domestic abuse and the violent temper of the husband are all but discounted by the narrating voice of the Prison Governor, who clearly sympathizes with the male victim, as the paragraph quickly moves towards a categorization of the woman in terms of the “deliberate and merciless premeditation” behind her violent act. Despite the provocation, her act is viewed with horror because it is premeditated, rather than impulsive, the “fit of jealous rage” associated with the violent woman. The woman’s denial of madness, and the horror occasioned by her language and unrepentant attitude in prison, serve to bolster views of her “wicked” and “obdurate” nature. At this point there seems little distance between the voice of the narrator and that of the author, so that Collins unmistakably aligns himself with those who condemn her. Here the “topsy-turvy sympathies” of the public identifying with the victimized wife are overruled by the legal verdict, deemed “entirely right”. Issues of wife abuse and the exploitation of the working woman are once again glossed over and details about her life withheld as woman’s fury is once again located in her “wicked” nature.

Images of the murderess as both sexually dominant and activated by the madness of jealousy link this convicted woman to Priscilla Thurlby, who also refuses to attribute her criminality to mental disorder. Typically, the male representatives of the law, the Prison Governor and the policeman in the short story, are attracted to the women they should condemn; both men comment on the women’s bodies, and the policeman shares “delicious kisses” with Priscilla. In a short story Collins published earlier in his career, “The Dream Woman” (1855), violence is linked to sexual dominance in the figure of Rebecca Scatchard, a “fine, fair woman” who significantly attacks her husband with a knife whilst he is in bed. Priscilla stabs the lover who deserted her whilst he is

sleeping in the same room as his new wife, hoping to frame her for the deed. Collins characterizes all three women in terms of their “fury” and their “frenzied”, “frantic” behaviour, linking women’s rage to their inability to sustain their sexual dominance over men. However, he also implies that this fury may be a product of either mental disorder or the menstrual cycle; Rebecca experiences furies of passion, the condemned prisoner has fits and an “outburst of rage”, and Priscilla is introduced to us as a “frantic woman” when she bursts into the police station. Women’s fury is thus used to signal the possibilities of mental disturbance in sexualized female criminals but only in order to distract readers from the more threatening notion that such frantic behaviour may be only a cover for women’s capacity to commit “merciless”, premeditated violence.

In *Man and Wife*, Collins defines madness in terms of the loss of control, inviting a consideration of women’s ability to control their actions in a society bent on confining them. Lillian Nayder’s view that Collins treats Hester’s crime as “the logical outcome of her own victimization under common law” needs to be modified by a consideration of explanations of criminality based on women’s control over their minds as well as their property (Nayder, 98; see also Hall, 173). Hester, like the condemned woman in *The Legacy of Cain*, denies her own madness on the grounds that mad people are those who “have lost control over their own minds” (Collins, *Man and Wife*, 591), acknowledging that her violence was premeditated: “If my husband came back to me, my mind was made up to kill him” (594). Reflecting the clash over the workings of the will by medical and legal authorities, the text draws attention to Hester’s control over her own mental processes whilst also indicating that if she is perfectly sane, her behaviour is threateningly subversive. As Knelman has argued (88, 227, 273), the murder of husbands was seen as subversive and links murder to resistance and the attempt to gain control. In *Man and Wife*, Hester’s behaviour is subjected to medical scrutiny, due to her loss of speech: we are told that “medical men consulted about her case, discovered certain physiological anomalies in it, which led them to suspect the woman of feigning dumbness, for some reason best known to herself” (113). The subtext of her decision to live “a separate and silent life” (604), as a way of setting her “guilty self” apart from others, is that she refuses to speak as a further act of resistance to her employers. Even when Geoffrey has discovered that the dumbness is not the product of a nervous condition, she still refuses to speak, preferring to communicate with him by writing on her slate as if to emphasize the distance between employer and servant and her own “separateness”. The behaviour which is construed as mad by previous employers, the “strange impulses” and “sudden panics” which seize her periodically, affects her ability to work, at one

point leading her to complain of being “overworked with all the company in the house” (247), but she is able to control her reactions to the delusions in order to keep her situations. Susanna Palmer, said to be in “a state of great excitement and mental distress,” had begged a policeman to restrain her after her assault on her husband, claiming that “she could not control her feelings, and, if left alone, . . . feared that she would ‘finish’ him before the morning” (*The Times*, 15 Jan 1869, 9). In contrast, Hester’s violence stems from her ability to control her fury to the extent that she is able to “finish” her husband and his abuse without feeling the need to be restrained by the law.

Having said this, it is undeniable that Collins also implies that some of his murderous women are suffering from the partial insanity of homicidal mania. Morris has contended that he effectively “rejected biomedical explanations [for women’s violence]” perhaps because “they are so often employed . . . to denigrate women.” She claims that “he never suggests, as his medical contemporaries would have done, that the hallucinations that tempt Hester Dethridge to murder may be related to menopause” (Morris, 109). I think this is a reductive reading of Hester’s mental state, not least because the admission “there was a change coming” (Collins, *Man and Wife*, 588) in her confession can surely be read in this light. Hester’s descriptions of the “overpowering strength of the temptation” (606) to kill and the delusions in which an outside force, “the vision of MY OWN SELF” (605), orders her to kill, again recall Maudsley’s and Meredith’s recordings of violent women whose unconscious impulses are attributed to Satan. In Priscilla’s confession, she explains her violence in the same way: “the devil entered into me” and “the thought came to me to do it” (Collins, *The Dream-Woman*, 215). Hester’s condition is later described unequivocally as “the homicidal frenzy raised in her by the hideous creation of her own distempered brain” (Collins, *Man and Wife*, 606). In his research on homicidal mania, however, Prichard demonstrated that this kind of violence was distinguished by a lack of motive, the number of victims killed and lack of accomplices and escape plans, none of which apply to Hester’s case; in 1863 Crichton Browne claimed that it revealed “reflex functions out of control” (Smith, 62, 53). In the final scene where in a “homicidal frenzy” she flies at Geoffrey’s throat “like a wild beast”, she still appears to be challenging medical readings of women’s impulses. Geoffrey’s fears that the premeditated murder of his wife in which she is assisting him might be “more than the woman’s brain can bear” (Collins, *Man and Wife*, 636) are ridiculed as she effectively causes his death, liberating Anne Silvester from her abusive husband and freeing herself from an employer who sought to control her behaviour. This final act of feminine wildness, however, cannot go unpunished, as Hester is confined for life in an asylum, an “unhappy woman”, “unconscious of her

dreadful position” and “resigned to the existence that she leads” (639), rather as if she is returned to the subordinate position of an oppressed servant. The threat of women’s control over their violent impulses has to be contained in order to recast their passionate fury in terms of mental derangement.

Violent women in both newspaper reports and Collins’s crime fiction were then depicted as passionate and angry, capable of both premeditated murder and impulsive acts of violence. Whilst the provocation received by working women abused by men and employers ensured varying degrees of sympathy for their crimes in the courts and in the press, there was still a tendency to interpret their lack of control over their actions as horrific, unfeminine and a clear sign of mental disorder. Social explanations of female criminality gave way to biomedical interpretations, as the uncontrollable impulses attending homicidal mania and other mental disorders were given more credence. In his focus on female servants and working women bound by their dependency on husbands and employers, Collins explored the relation between economic, sexual and biomedical accounts of female violence, suggesting that women’s fury could be interpreted either in terms of class oppression or mental disturbance. As Knelman points out, “there is a fine line dividing murderous rage from insanity” (137). In the variety of working-class women killers he portrayed, the links between female violence and a loss of control attendant on mental disorder are contested as women’s passions and fury have more complex causes. Discourses on female violence from the 1860s to the early 1880s, when theories about the criminal nature provided a variety of contradictory views on female offenders, acknowledged new medical perspectives but had not entirely disengaged themselves from entrenched stereotypes of criminal women, so that the fury of the working woman was never adequately explained.

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Rethinking Bibliolatry: Wilkie Collins, William Booth and the Culture of Evangelicalism

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In 1885 the Reverend Samuel Charlesworth produced a book for private circulation, entitled *Sensational Religion*. The book was written in response to his daughter marrying one of the Booth children and becoming a Salvation Army officer. Charlesworth's experience of the movement dated back to 1870 when it was still known as the East London Christian Mission. Although the methods employed by the movement underwent little change during the 1870s, Charlesworth became increasingly concerned at the Salvation Army's sensationalism. He wrote that:

the Army meetings seemed to me to be far too exciting, in an unhealthy unnatural form . . . The hymns, addresses, prayers and the testimonies of experience all led up to a culminating point of excitement . . .

(Charlesworth, 14)

Charlesworth's concerns echoed the complaints of a number of Evangelical periodicals. One of the more extreme journals—the *Record*—argued that:

No amount of good effected (as they assert) by the Salvationists can justify the use of profane and even blasphemous language so closely connected with it, united to a style of action more suited to the pantomime of a theatre than the solemn worship of Almighty God.

(cited in "Investigator", 7)

One of the most striking things about these criticisms is their resemblance to the attacks that Evangelicals levelled against sensation novels in the 1860s. This is not altogether surprising when we remember that, although the Salvation Army was not officially constituted until 1878, the movement had taken shape as early as the 1860s when William Booth had taken control of the East London Christian Mission.¹ The methodology that began to attract widespread hostility around 1880 as the movement grew, was, in essence, one that had been developed fifteen years earlier. The sensational techniques employed by

¹ According to the recent biography of William and Catherine Booth: "At the end of the 1860s he [William Booth] was everywhere in the East End of London, and it was impossible to pass a public house without being urged to accept one of his pamphlets. His preachers were on every street corner and the sound of his hymns disturbed Sunday morning rest from Limehouse to Whitechapel" (Hattersley, 165).

both William Booth and novelists such as Wilkie Collins in the 1860s attracted a range of criticism. At the heart of this criticism, though, was a complaint about the lack of content. As Patrick Brantlinger reminds us:

While some reviewers commend[ed] Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and other sensation novelists for providing new thrills, they rarely suggest[ed] that their fictions offer[ed] anything more than mere entertainment.

(Brantlinger, 143)

Like other critics, Evangelicals had a number of complaints to make about the use of sensation, but, at least ostensibly, the main concern that emerged was the thrilling yet superficial content. An unsigned article in *The Evangelical Magazine* in 1866 posed the following question:

Are those books which he [i.e. the reader] devours so eagerly sensation novels, or good substantial works, full of solid information and of right sentiments? We by no means prohibit all fiction, but we cannot condemn too strongly much of the trash which daily issues forth from the press . . .

(“Character: How it is Formed and What it is Worth?”, 376)²

The concern about what people were reading provides us with a helpful starting point for a deeper analysis of Evangelical concerns about sensation. This article will begin by examining the way in which Evangelical responses to sensation were shaped by concerns over contemporary revaluations of the Bible, and then move on to consider the way in which Collins’s novels of the 1860s, particularly *Armadale* (1864-6) and *The Moonstone* (1868), addressed related issues. As we shall see, despite their differences, both Collins and Booth possessed a profound understanding of the challenges faced by Evangelicalism during the 1860s.

While readers of mid-Victorian novels had little trouble in recognizing Evangelical caricatures such as Miss Clack in *The Moonstone*, it was difficult to speak about Evangelicals with any precision. Since its beginnings in the 1730s with the revivalism of John Wesley and George Whitefield, Evangelicalism had transcended identifiable ecclesiological groupings. Evangelicals were to be found in both the Dissenting tradition and the Church of England (see Cunningham, Jay). They were not united by membership of a common organization, but by the sharing of similar convictions about the nature of the Christian faith. (We should note, however, the existence of the

² Evangelical disquiet about the reading of novels was not new—previous generations had been resistant to most fiction. While this attitude had softened by the mid-nineteenth century, the continuing apprehension can be seen from a review of Bowdler’s *The Family Shakespeare* in *The Christian Observer* in 1860: “Is it desirable that Shakespeare should be read in Christian families? Is it becoming that *The Christian Observer* should write a line to promote acquaintance with the great tragic poet? We must confess that we are not prepared with a precise answer. But if Shakespeare must be read, this is the edition, and the only edition, that ought to lie upon the table of a Christian family” (360).

Evangelical Alliance, formed in 1846 to foster Evangelical identity and unity, though its influence during the nineteenth century is generally agreed to be relatively marginal.) In *Evangelicals in Modern Britain*, David Bebbington argues that there was a quadrilateral of priorities at the heart of the convictions shared by Evangelicals: conversionism, crucicentrism, activism and biblicism. While all of these beliefs were important to nineteenth-century Evangelicalism, biblicism was the key to Evangelical perceptions of their theological position. Evangelicals saw themselves as people of the Word—hence the charge of bibliolatry that was often levelled against them. *Evangelical Christendom*, the unofficial organ of the Evangelical Alliance, records the recommendation of the committee to include at the organization’s annual conference an address on:

The special importance at the present time of united action on the part of Evangelical Christians, in maintaining the principles and doctrines of the Word of God, against the progress of Romanism and Rationalism.

(*Evangelical Christendom*, Apr 1868, 157).

In the 1860s two events brought Evangelical perceptions of the Bible to the point of crisis. The first was the publication of *Essays and Reviews* in 1860, which, among other things, questioned the Evangelical doctrine of inerrancy. Evangelicals were appalled by the critical treatment of Scripture among fellow churchmen. An essay in *The Christian Observer* in 1860 warned:

But what is all this but a distinct rejection of the Bible, and of Christianity? If the Bible is plainly declared to have a great falsehood intertwined on every page, how is it possible to build anything upon it?

(“Theodore Parker and the Oxford Essayists”, 485).

Especial concern was generated by Benjamin Jowett in his essay on interpretation, which encouraged people to “interpret the Scripture like any other book” (*Essays and Reviews*, 377).

The background to the second event was the increasing amount of time that Evangelicals were spending reading novels in the 1860s, a tendency that was exacerbated by the popularity of the sensation writers who followed in the footsteps of Collins. Many Evangelical periodicals responded to this trend by challenging the reading habits of their subscribers, as can be seen from an article in *The Evangelical Magazine*:

What sort of books do you read? How much of the literature of the day is there, of which we may read whole columns, without there being suggested a single thought to quicken the life of our souls . . . ? . . . If we read little else . . . especially neglecting God’s own word, the flower and crown of all books, it can scarcely be otherwise than that we should have to complain of spiritual lethargy and decay.

(“Cleaving to the Dust”, 792)

The concern over Evangelical reading habits came to a head with the controversy between the *Record* and *Good Words* in 1863. A Scottish publisher, Alexander Strahan, had launched *Good Words* in 1860 with the

moderate Evangelical, Norman Macleod, as editor. The periodical was to offer a broad Christian vision that permitted a variety of articles (including short and serial fiction) from a range of contributors. In spite of Macleod's Evangelical credentials,³ the *Record* quickly launched a series of vicious attacks against the new journal.⁴ Three key factors help to account for this condemnation. The first was the *Record's* fear that the combination of sacred and secular material in *Good Words* would erode the distinctions between different types of literature and confirm the implication of Jowett's essay, that the Bible was simply one book among many. The second factor was the way in which *Good Words* blurred the difference between Sunday and weekday reading. Finally, the popularity of *Good Words* (the first issue sold thirty thousand copies and this had increased to seventy thousand by December 1862), seemed to endorse the growing status of fiction, particularly sensation fiction, among Evangelicals.⁵ The *Record* complained:

These sensation novels are one of the crying evils of the day . . . Hearers who feed on sensation tales all week, and, by the help of *Good Words* and other periodicals, on the Sabbath also, can ill bear the plain wholesome food of sound doctrine from the pulpit. Hearers go to church with a diseased appetite that loathes plain food and diet which is simply nutritive. They demand a stimulus; and the weaker brethren, driven to the wall to maintain a footing, supply it by anecdotes, and stories, and startling texts . . .

(reprinted in *Good Words: The Theology of its Editor*, 56-57)

This concerted attempt by Evangelicals to delineate the parameters of 'acceptable' fiction helps explain the reasoning behind Collins's foreword to *Armadale* in which he attacked the "Clap-trap morality of the present day" (Collins, *Armadale*, 5). On a superficial level, the main issue under discussion was morality, but beneath this veneer ran a deeper debate about where true authority lay. Questions about the status of the Bible left Evangelicals worrying about the implications for the wider culture. As *Evangelical Christendom* put it:

there has been no period since the Reformation—perhaps we might say there has been no period since the beginning of Christianity—when the Church was passing through a more anxious and interesting crisis than at the present moment.

(*Evangelical Christendom*, Feb 1865, 103)

³ Although known as a moderate, Macleod had studied under Thomas Chalmers and was one of the founding members of the Evangelical Alliance. Moreover, his theology was thoroughly consistent with the Evangelical quadrilateral of priorities outlined by Bebbington. Macleod's enthusiasm for Evangelicalism diminished during the 1860s, but he continued to identify with this tradition.

⁴ It is interesting to note the position taken up by other Evangelicals in response to this debate. Periodicals such as the *Patriot* took the middle ground, criticizing the *Record's* hostility while admitting a degree of culpability on the part of *Good Words*.

⁵ Mark Turner (ch. 2) discusses the way in which the competition with *Cornhill Magazine* encouraged *Good Words* to look towards secular novelists to help boost circulation.

The increasing popularity of fiction focussed attention on whether or not the Evangelical's source of identity and authority was really adequate. This is a repeated subtext in Wilkie Collins's fiction of the 1860s, from the empty symbolism of the "smart Bible" placed on the centre of Mrs Catherick's "largest table, in the middle of the room" (Collins, *The Woman in White*, 494), to the way in which Betteredge looks for inspiration in *Robinson Crusoe* rather than the Bible in *The Moonstone*. Moreover, Collins's novels of this period addressed the broader issue of narrative authority. His use of multiple narrators and a variety of narrative styles not only raised the question of where authority lay and whether or not it could be trusted; it did so during a period in which British Evangelicalism was struggling to come to terms with German higher criticism.

Evangelical fears concerning the Bible took the form of two questions that had not been asked for some time: was the Bible intelligible? and if so, was it interesting? *Armadale* provides a helpful insight into the first of these questions. Serialized in *Cornhill Magazine*, it offered an elaborate tale of betrayal, intrigue and murder, in which two young men come close to repeating the sins of their fathers as they fall for the sinister Miss Gwilt. One of the questions posed throughout the novel is whether or not the elder Allan Armadale's deterministic reading of the Bible will be borne out by events:

I look into the Book which all Christendom venerates; and the Book tells me that the sin of the father shall be visited on the child. I look out into the world; and I see the living witnesses round me to that terrible truth.

(Collins, *Armadale*, 47)

As the story unfolds, we are presented with a secular parallel of the Biblical revelation. Not only does the use of letters to advance the story resemble the epistolary form of the New Testament; the narrative also contains a variety of prophetic symbols, such as the dream that the younger Allan Armadale experiences on the shipwreck. Indeed, the biblical parallel is made explicit in the build up to the dream that Armadale experiences. Armadale assures Midwinter: "here's the vessel as steady as a church to speak for herself" (124).

However, the revelation that we find in *Armadale* is notably different to its biblical equivalent. For a start, the disclosures offered by Miss Gwilt are patently unreliable: Gwilt's expertise as a forger is compounded by her admission to Mother Oldershaw that "we all tell lies at the bottoms of our letters" (162). More fundamentally, Collins's revelation is secretive, a point which is reinforced by his repeated description of characters as "impenetrable". Echoing the codified language of Madame Defarge, the story opens with a vision of "the strong young nurses of the coming cripples [who]

knitted impenetrably” (10). Later on, the Reverend Brock struggles to make sense of the obscure events taking place around him:

Little by little, a vague suspicion took possession of him, that the whole series of events which had followed the first appearance of Allan’s namesake in the newspapers six years since, were held together by some mysterious connection, and were tending steadily to some unimaginable end.

(Collins, *Armadale*, 76)

In contrast to the large number of Evangelicals who presumed that the Biblical revelation was clear, Jowett had argued that the multiplicity of existing interpretations demonstrated the need for a more sophisticated hermeneutic. He wrote: “The book in which we believe all religious truth to be contained, is the most uncertain of all books, because interpreted by arbitrary and uncertain methods” (*Essays and Reviews*, 372). In *Armadale* Collins concurs with Jowett’s assessment by showing the inadequacy of simplistic interpretations. The first thing that Mr Hawbury does in his attempt to explain Allan Armadale’s dream is to reject Midwinter’s naïve reliance on a supernatural explanation. And yet the allegorical reading that the doctor offers as an alternative is little better. The foolish enthusiasm with which Armadale receives the doctor’s explanation leaves the reader in no doubt as to its inadequacy: “‘Wonderful! not a point missed anywhere from beginning to end! By Jupiter!’ cried Allan, with the ready reverence of intense ignorance. ‘What a thing science is!’” (150). Aside from its reliance on a crude form of psychology, the doctor’s interpretation resembles the more fanciful allegorical readings of Scripture often delivered from Evangelical pulpits.⁶

Simplistic interpretations are also parodied in *The Moonstone* when Betteredge consults *Robinson Crusoe*, “the one infallible remedy” (518).⁷ His declaration to Franklin Blake that the line “I stood like one Thunderstruck, or as if I had seen an Apparition” is “as much as to say: ‘Expect the sudden appearance of Mr Franklin Blake’” (344), reveals a tendency to read whatever he wants into the text. A similar weakness can be found in Miss Clack, whose

⁶ A good example of this can be found in *Salvation Soldiery*, where Booth justifies the ignorance of his Cadets by likening them to David: “David was all unskilled and undrilled in the then existing rules of war. He knew nothing of armour, and sword, and spear, and shield, and all that... So with your Cadet... He is flagrantly ignorant of grammar, logic, philosophy, knows nothing of the prevalent controversies, can hardly read his mother tongue, to say nothing of writing it” (10).

⁷ Other critics have noted the way in which *Robinson Crusoe* is meant to be read as a parody of the Bible. Joss Marsh (181) describes the tendency among Victorian novelists to encode “their unorthodoxy in what we might call the heretic trope of the Book-within-the-Book”, going on to note that “*Crusoe* was also the classic example of fictional forgery, and as such stood in a sharply oppositional relationship to the truth of Scripture”. In a similar vein, Catherine Peters (306) suggest that “[t]he anti-evangelical theme is continued less obviously in Betteredge’s superstitious use of *Robinson Crusoe* as a secular bible” (306).

crude approach to interpreting texts is evident in the instructions that she gives Lady Verinder to help her read some tracts:

“You will read, if I bring you my own precious books? Turned down at all the right places, aunt. And marked in pencil where you are to stop and ask yourself, ‘Does this apply to me?’”

(Collins, *The Moonstone*, 258-9)

The limitations of Miss Clack’s hermeneutic can be seen from her own failure to interpret the events relayed by Godfrey Ablewhite correctly. Although she claims that she will simply “state the facts as they were stated” (237), the version of the story that she narrates recasts the morally questionable Godfrey as the “Christian Hero [who] never hesitates where good is to be done” (239). Through this episode Collins raises general doubts about the adequacy of Evangelical hermeneutics.

The difficulties involved in interpreting texts become evident in *Armadale* when Miss Milroy and Armadale reflect on the legalities involved in their proposed marriage. At first, the fact that Armadale does not “know anything about the law” (454) does not seem to present a major problem as he can turn to the resources of his large personal library. However, when he tries to interpret Blackstone’s law commentaries, he quickly discovers them to be “[i]nfarnal gibberish” (458) and recognizes the need to go and “consult somebody in the profession” (459). This reliance on professional expertise contradicts one of the central tenets of Evangelical belief, as Elisabeth Jay explains:

Evangelical religion is founded upon a personal apprehension of God . . . The onus of interpreting God’s Word therefore rests firmly upon the individual and there is no appeal to any authoritative body . . .

(Jay, 51)

Evangelicals were firmly committed to the idea that as long as someone had access to a Bible and could read, they were able to understand it. Evangelical resistance to professional interpreters is encapsulated in an article in *The Revival* of 1866:

The truth that the Bible is self-interpreting is as precious and all-important as the corresponding truth that it is the inspired Word of God. The message from heaven would, indeed, be of no use to men if it required any interpreter besides itself.

(“Unity of Creed: The Union of the Christian Church”, 71)

In the face of an effort by Evangelicals to maintain a strict belief in the self-interpreting qualities of God’s Word, critics such as Jowett pointed out that those “who interpret ‘the Bible and the Bible only’ [do so] with a silent reference to the traditions of the Reformation” (*Essays and Reviews*, 331). This inconsistency is something that Evangelicals were slow to acknowledge. This is illustrated by the advice that Booth continued to give his field officers some years later. On the one hand he tried to affirm the self-sufficiency of

Scripture, yet on the other he insisted that it should be interpreted with the help of his own aids. Having warned his field officers against a wide range of publications, Booth provided an exhaustive list of suitable reading material:

- I. Your Bible, and then the Bible, and then the Bible again.
- II. Your [Salvation Army] Hymn Book.
- III. General Orders, of which a portion should be read every day.
- IV. *The War Cry* and books published at our own Stores.

(Booth, *Doctrines and Disciplines*, Section 35)

For many Evangelicals, including Booth, questions about the intelligibility of Scripture were less important than the concern that readers might not be interested in reading the Bible in the first place. This would appear to explain the method of evangelism chosen by Miss Clack in *The Moonstone*. She presents Lady Verinder with tracts rather than a Bible, explaining that they are “all suitable to the present emergency, all calculated to arouse, convince, prepare, enlighten, and fortify my aunt” (258). Although tracts had been popular among Evangelicals for many years (the Religious Tract Society was set up in 1799), the extent of Miss Clack’s reliance on their efficacy is revealing. At the start of the nineteenth century, tracts were often used as a cheap alternative to presenting someone with a Bible, but by the 1860s the profusion of cheap Bibles made this rationale less plausible (see Marsh, 171). While Miss Clack’s use of tracts may be motivated by a belief in their ability to offer a clearer interpretation of the Evangelical gospel than the unedited Biblical text, it seems more likely that they are valued because of their supposed ability to capture Lady Verinder’s attention. One consequence of this is that the repository of truth is no longer confined to the Bible. Miss Clack confesses: “I reflected on the *true* riches which I had scattered with such a lavish hand . . . ” (270). Her allusion to the parable of the sower here (and elsewhere in her narrative) is particularly significant in view of the way that Jesus interprets the parable of the sower for his disciples in Matthew 13. As any committed Evangelical would have known, the seed represents the Word of God. Thus the value that Miss Clack places on her tracts is considerable.

By making tracts a prominent feature of *The Moonstone*, Collins draws attention to the growing need for Evangelicals to make the Bible more appealing by repackaging it. The extent to which this repackaging required an appeal to worldly concerns is evident in the title of the tract that Miss Clack gives to Penelope Betteredge near the beginning of her narrative—“A Word With You On Your Cap-Ribbons”. Yet it quickly becomes apparent that, despite the attempt to appeal to the masses, the tracts have little or no attraction. Penelope Betteredge rejects the tract that she is given, leaving Miss Clack with no other option than to slip “the tract into the letterbox” (237) to

mingle with the rest of the mail. Miss Clack's attempts to encourage people to read her tracts become increasingly ridiculous as the novel progresses. She resorts to hiding them in the bathroom and beneath the canary cage in an attempt to "surprise" Lady Verinder into reading them (269). In describing Miss Clack's missionary activities here, Collins highlights the hypocrisy of Evangelicals who complained about the way in which sensation appealed to "the lowest tastes of the most degraded classes" (*Behind the Scenes*, 6). In addition, Collins provides his readers with a useful analysis of the way in which Evangelicals were trying to adapt their message to meet the change in public tastes. When the strategic placement of tracts proves unsuccessful, Miss Clack changes the literary form, switching from "Preparation by Books", to "Preparation by Little Notes" (273). As we have already noted, a recognition of the need to repackage the Word for the secular market lay behind the formation of *Good Words* in 1860.⁸ It was even more explicit in the methodology adopted by William Booth, who, from the beginning of his work with the East London Christian Mission, utilized sensational and dramatic techniques to attract the attention of the people that he wanted to reach. Booth later defended this methodology in *All About the Salvation Army*: "They are all explained by the first necessity of the movement, which is *to attract attention*" (11).⁹ In the face of considerable criticism, Booth explained that attracting attention was merely a prerequisite to presenting people with the message of the Gospel. Nevertheless, critics feared that his methodology ran the risk of subordinating the message of the Bible to the whims of his audience. Their fears were often justified, for, as Pamela Walker explains (76), "the resemblance to popular entertainment was so strong that occasionally the Army's services were not recognized as religious."

The problem for Evangelicals was that while publicity seemed the best way to make themselves heard, it was fraught with risks. Aside from the danger of pandering to the desires of the heathen, the use of publicity required Evangelicals to set aside the authority of the Bible and become one voice among many. Moreover, the reduction of the Evangelical Gospel to another commercial product threatened to result in the sordid glimpses of

⁸ As Turner (64) points out, Evangelicals began to show an interest in the potential of periodicals to broaden their appeal during the 1850s: "The Religious Tract Society, for example, began publishing two weeklies priced one penny in the early 1850s, *The Leisure Hour* (1852-1908) and *Sunday at Home* (1854-1940)".

⁹ Booth made a similar point in his *Orders and Regulations for Field Officers of the Salvation Army*: "The work of the F[ield] O[fficer] is to publish Salvation, that is to make it known, and those methods must be preferred that most effectually assist them in doing so" (280).

Evangelicalism that are to be found in *The Moonstone* and *Armada*. In *The Moonstone* Godfrey Ablewhite's performances on the platform of Exeter Hall help to sustain his good reputation. However, while his message convinces more people than Miss Clack's tracts, Mr Bruff exposes him as "a smooth-tongued impostor" (317), and even Miss Clack herself describes him as speaking "with all the fascination of his evangelical voice and manner" (280). In spite of his willingness to capitalize on a succession of convincing performances, the false Godfrey Ablewhite claims to dislike notoriety, insisting that "I shrink from all this fuss and publicity" (246). The conclusion to *Armada* presents us with an equally insincere advert for Evangelicalism, this time with the "born again" (583) Mother Oldershaw in the role of preacher. Mustapha cynically invites Pedgrift Senior to attend: "They stop acting on the stage, I grant you, on Sunday evening—but they don't stop acting in the pulpit. Come and see the last new Sunday performer of our time" (674). The superficiality of Mother Oldershaw's performance is symbolized by the make-up worn by the ladies in the front row, who are said to be in "a state of devout enjoyment" (675), and the various references to the transient world of "fashion" (674-5) that accompany this episode. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the content of her sermon consists of a "narrative of Mrs Oldershaw's experience among dilapidated women" (675) rather than the exposition of the Word.

Although Collins's descriptions were deliberate caricatures, he managed to capture something of the tension that Evangelicals themselves faced as they tried to come to terms with the changing status of the Bible. As people of the Word, Evangelicals wanted to reject the methodology of sensationalists such as Collins and Booth, because, as a writer in *The Christian World* explained:

There needs no noisy declaration, no angry controversy, to prove the unspeakable worth of Holy Scripture. The Bible is its own witness, and contains those truths which can never grow obsolete . . .

("On Books", 458)

And yet the growing doubts about the adequacy of Scripture, which manifested themselves in questions about its intelligibility and its interest, left Evangelicals with little choice but to rethink their bibliolatry and turn to the language of sensation to promote their beliefs. When Catherine Booth asked her fellow Evangelicals whether it had "come to pass that Christians have so little confidence in the God of the Bible, and the religion of Jesus, that they must seek an alliance between Christ and the world in order to interest their children . . . ?" (49), the only honest answer was yes.

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~~Notes~~

The Persistent Phantom: Wilkie Collins and Dorothy L. Sayers

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For most of her life, Dorothy Sayers was haunted by the specter of Wilkie Collins. From the time that Sayers first discovered the enchantment of his novels as a child until her death precluded the completion of her Collins biography, he captured her imagination and profoundly affected her methods of composition and style of writing.

Both Collins the writer and Collins the man held a fascination for Sayers. In spite of her hesitation to allow biographical information about her own iconoclastic life to be circulated, she had hoped to write a biography of Collins for many years. It was probably her publisher, Victor Gollancz, who first encouraged Sayers to attempt this project (Brabazon, 139). As early as 1921, she started collecting material on Collins's life, and often expressed frustration that so little information was available about him. In a letter dated June 15, 1921, Myles Radford, a bookseller, asked Sayers when she was going to get her "Life" finished (Reynolds, 196). In 1927 her father wrote Sayers of G. K. Chesterton's reference to Collins in his life of Dickens, and encouraged her to complete her biography of Collins for inclusion in the *English Men of Letters* series. In June of 1928 she wrote to the *Times Literary Supplement* requesting readers to share access to letters and papers to assist her in a "critical and biographical study of William Wilkie Collins" (Coomes, 108).

In spite of the difficulties Sayers faced in researching Collins's life, she was able to complete five chapters by 1931. Sayers included as many details as she could find about Collins's parents, his childhood, school years and family travels, his early writings, and friendships with Dickens and others. These chapters revealed the qualities of Collins's work she most admired and which she set out to emulate (Reynolds, 239). Edited by E. R. Gregory from manuscripts held at the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, these were published in 1977 by the Friends of the University of Toledo Libraries as *Wilkie Collins: A Critical and Bibliographical Study*. In addition to Sayers's published manuscript and notes, she kept two other notebooks (now in the Wade Collection at Wheaton College, Illinois) which contained a

bibliography, and biographical and critical information for a lecture series on Collins.¹ Sayers presented at least one lecture on the detective genre to the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle upon Tyne in the early 1930s, based on these unpublished notebooks.²

Sayers disliked dwelling on the past and despite her later work on Dante, maintained that she disapproved of a biographical approach to literature; she often wrote that authors should be known through their art rather than their lives (Kenney, 54). However, she expressed disappointment that she was unable to learn more of Collins's personal life, although Radford assured her that she had as much information about him “as is likely to come to light, and a great deal more than most ‘Memoirs’ contain” (Reynolds, 370, 197). In her lecture notebook, she commented that “there was nothing very exciting about” Collins's private life. She bemoaned the air of “impenetrable mystery” that hung over him, offering an explanation that “he had no legitimate family to preserve his memory by their piety.” For the rest of her life, Sayers never gave up the idea of completing the biography, as she said in a letter to a friend just before her death, “if and when old age brings leisure” (Hone, 184).

Beyond her biographical interest in Collins, Dorothy Sayers admired him as an author. She described him as “a writer of genuine creative imagination” (Sayers, Introduction to *The Moonstone*, xi), and predicted that he was “going to exercise still more influence on [the mystery-story’s] future development” (Sayers, “Wilkie Collins, 1827-1889,” unpublished lecture in Wade Collection). In much of her literary criticism, Sayers evaluated those attributes of Collins's style that she felt defined his greatness (Reynolds, 239). Sayers admired his skillful construction of complex plots, his descriptive verbal painting, his attention to detail and accuracy, and his gift of characterization.

¹ In his introduction to the partial Sayers’s biography of Collins, Gregory described the manuscript, notebooks and note cards that he consulted in undertaking that project. He also described another notebook, held in the Wade Center at Wheaton College, Illinois, which contained lists of letters, books and articles pertaining to Collins. In a subsequent article, Gregory referred to *two* notebooks that were not part of the HRC collection: one at Wheaton College, and a second, at that time in the possession of Sayers’s son, Anthony Fleming (Gregory). Gregory noted that the description of this manuscript and extracts from it were included in a letter to him from Anthony Fleming, dated 15 October 1977. On 25 September 1975, Clyde S. Kilby, Curator of the Wade Collection, purchased a large collection of the papers of Dorothy L. Sayers from the Sayers estate, through David Higham of London. A checklist for the collection was made by Dr. and Mrs. Joe H. McClatchey of Wheaton College, and a bibliography was subsequently prepared by Gregory in 1978. However, the second notebook was not part of that purchase. Rather, the accession number for the notebook indicates that it was added to the collection in 1981. Its being retained by Anthony Fleming most likely was related to some Peter Wimsey material included in it. The transcription of the second notebook was completed by the present author in 1999.

² Verified through correspondence with Mrs. E. A. Pescod, Librarian, who reviewed the Society archives, 20 October 1999.

In her unpublished lecture notebook, Sayers makes reference to the broad scope of several of Collins's novels. Of *No Name*, Sayers comments on its “nobility and breadth,” calling it more of an epic poem than a novel of sensation. She discusses Collins's fascination with fatality in *Armadale*, and its theme of assertive women who triumph over “weak and vacillating men.” In the lecture “Wilkie Collins, 1827-1889”, she states that the *Woman in White* “takes the mystery genre to a new level by concentrating on the development of the steps to the revelation of a secret.” She also says of *The Moonstone* that it “was the most perfectly conceived and written detective story of this time or any other,” and praises Collins as an innovator who wove the plot of the mystery novel as closely as that of classical drama.

In her own classic of detective fiction, *The Nine Tailors*, Sayers demonstrated her mastery of Collins's techniques. As she was developing the outline of this novel, she was also working on his biography, so that his influence was pervasive. She painted on a large canvas, rich with the locations of her childhood and set in the timelessness of rural life. Within the time span of the story, the reader can experience the atmosphere of the changing of life's seasons as the bells toll for unions and dangers and deaths. The novel begins with church bells, and grows in complexity with broad themes of time and change, of death and reprisal.

Sayers's consideration of Collins's constructional gifts seem to mirror the thoughts of novelist Anthony Trollope, who in 1883, wrote:

When I sit down to write a novel I do not at all know, and I do not very much care, how it is to end. Wilkie Collins seems so to construct his that he not only, before writing, plans everything on, down to the minutest detail, from the beginning to end; but then plots it all back again, to see that there is no piece of necessary dove-tailing which does not dove-tail with absolute accuracy.

(Trollope, 223)

Sayers considered meticulous construction to be paramount to the successful detective novel, and like Collins, her notebooks reveal the intensive work that she devoted to her subject even before she began to write (Reynolds, 240). In her introduction to the 1936 *Tales of Detection*, she stressed that the detective novel should be defined by “a delicate balance of the human and the intellectual elements” which are exemplified in Collins's work (Sayers, Introduction to *Tales of Detection*, xiii). Although she had difficulty at first in accepting a love-interest in detective stories (she believed that the detective needed to stay clear of romance and keep to the business of detecting), she recognized that *The Moonstone* presented a perfect example of love as an integral part of the plot (Reynolds, 138), and later was able to work with Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane, seeing that their growing relationship could serve to broaden the plot-scheme of her novels.

Another characteristic of Collins's writings that Sayers admired and emulated was his attention to detail, which gave readers a sense of realism and involvement. In her unpublished notebook, Sayers points out that *Hide and Seek* gives “a faint glimpse of the real Collins” in its attention to precise descriptive detail, and she comments on his gifts of descriptive verbal painting in her introduction to *The Moonstone*. Collins traveled extensively in order to see for himself the scenes he described in his novels. He visited Aldeburgh to write the scene in which Magdalen looks out at the passing ships from her window and wrestles with her own fate in *No Name*. Knowledge of the Cornish coast helped him to describe the last dramatic scene in *Basil*. His description of the Shivering Sand in *The Moonstone* is based on careful observation along the Yorkshire coast near Runswick Bay. His description of the Norfolk Broads and Hurler (Horsey) Mere is perfectly wrought in *Armadale*:

The reeds opened back on the right hand and the left, and the boat glided suddenly into the wide circle of a pool. Round the nearer half of the circle, the eternal reeds still fringed the margin of the water. Round the farther half, the land appeared again, here rolling back from the pool in desolate sand-hills; there rising above it in a sweep of grassy shore.. .The sun was sinking in the clear heaven, and the water, where the sun's reflection failed to tinge it, was beginning to look black and cold.. .and on the near margin of the pool, where all had been solitude before, there now stood, fronting the sunset, the figure of a woman.

(Collins, *Armadale*, Ch. 9)

In *The Nine Tailors*, Sayers culled from her own experience and conducted careful research, describing the area of Fenchurch St. Paul based on her knowledge of the East Anglian countryside of her childhood. She enlisted the assistance of W. J. Redhead, an architect, in describing the church itself and the complex dam and sluice system which played such a key role in the narrative. The fine details of Sayers's writing entice the reader to step into the picture:

Ahead of them, the great bulk of the church loomed dark and gigantic. Mr. Godfrey led the way with an old-fashioned lantern through the lich-gate and along a path bordered with tombstones to the south door of the church, which he opened, with a groaning of the heavy lock. A powerful, ecclesiastical odor, compounded of ancient wood, varnish, dry rot, hassocks, hymn-books, paraffin lamps, flowers and candles, all gently baking in the warmth of slow-combustion stoves, billowed out from the interior.

(Sayers, *The Nine Tailors*, 26)

Collins was as concerned with accuracy of detail as with clarity of description, whether in train schedules, legal points or drug reactions. His careful timing was of crucial importance in *The Woman in White*. He relied on his knowledge of the legal profession gained in his studies at Lincoln's Inn to add details to such novels as *Man and Wife* and *The Law and the Lady*. His own experience with drugs added credibility to scenes in *The Moonstone*. He sought professional assistance to ensure that his descriptions of blindness and the

treatment of epilepsy in *Poor Miss Finch* were accurate and believable. Collins often sought newspaper accounts of true events to bolster his narratives, for as Sayers points out in her published biography chapters, the more incredible the incident, the more insistent the writer must be that the narrative is founded in fact, and the details are as realistic as possible (Sayers, *Wilkie Collins*, 82).

Sayers's meticulous research on the subject of bell-ringing in *The Nine Tailors* effected descriptions of such perfection that the *Oxford Companion to Music* refers the reader to *The Nine Tailors* for a clear explanation of change-ringing. Sayers was even asked to be vice president of the Campanological Society of Great Britain. As she wrote in her unpublished notebook, "In order to gain the reader's attention in the first place and in order to secure his belief in far more astonishing parts of the narrative, the writer. . . will strive for the...most exact realism in the details of everything that happens within the reader's experience." She agreed with Collins that by drawing romance from the familiar, everyday things in life, the sensational is blended with the ordinary to bring the reader into the story.

Sayers admired Collins's adherence to what she described as the "fair play rule." His carefully worked plots present the reader with all the facts needed to solve a crime before any detecting is done. As she points out in her introduction to *The Moonstone*, compliance with the "fair play rule" marks the difference between a thriller and a true detective story, engaging the reader beyond the role of mere observer (Sayers, Introduction to *The Moonstone*, v). For her novel, *The Documents in the Case*, Sayers painstakingly researched the poison muscarine. With the assistance of Dr. Eustace Barton, she determined the characteristics of the poison in its inorganic and organic forms, and meticulously presented the details crucial to the plot.

The development of character was important to both authors. Sayers praised Collins's gift of characterization, in spite of critics who compared him unfavorably to Dickens. She argues that it is not really fair to compare Collins to Dickens, "the most divinely-inspired creator of character . . . ever known in this country," saying that in searching for a compliment to pay Collins, one could do worse than to say that he was "not quite as good as Dickens" ("Wilkie Collins, 1827-1889," Wade Collection). Sayers approved of such "great women" as Marian Halcombe in *The Moonstone*, Magdalen Vanstone in *No Name* and Lydia Gwilt in *Armadale*, who demonstrate Collins's sympathy with the feminist cause. She notes that Collins infused his carefully constructed plots with a "whole gallery of solidly-built characters" who nonetheless, are subtle and complex human beings. *The Woman in White* produced the "immortal" Count Fosco ("the Napoleon of Crime"). Zoe Galilee, from *Heart and Science*, is described in "Wilkie Collins, 1827-1889" as "one of the best and mostly

truly observed children one could hope to meet in fiction.” Regarding *Poor Miss Finch*, although she calls Lucilla Finch “odd,” she shows a great affection for two other characters in the novel, the audacious Madame Pratolungo and the German doctor Herr Grosse (a “delightful grotesque”). She finds delight as well in Gabriel Betteridge in *The Moonstone*. These carefully developed personalities served as models in her own characterization. In *The Nine Tailors*, the Reverend and Mrs. Venables are richly drawn and red-blooded, while Superintendent Blundell commands the same comfortable humanity as a Sergeant Cuff. The reverend, with butter dripping down the sleeve of his gesturing arm, and his wife, who demonstrates a “competent tranquility” throughout the dangerous and disturbing proceedings of the narrative, are marvelously developed characters after Collins’s own heart. Sayers’s simple description of Superintendent Blundell is typical of the endearing and humorous way that Collins succeeded in making his characters real:

‘Amazing!’ said the Rector. Mr. Blundell uttered a regrettable expression, remembered his surroundings, and coughed loudly.

(*The Nine Tailors*, 296)

Indeed, it is the combination of humanity and humor that makes Collins’s characters responsive and appealing. When Herr Dr. Grosse is belittled by another doctor for wanting to dig into the chicken mayonnaise dish before examining Lucilla:

Herr Grosse—with a fork in one hand and a spoon in the other, and a napkin tied round his neck—stared piteously; shook his shock head; and turned his back on the Mayonnaise, with a heavy heart at parting.

(Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, Ch. 30)

Collins and Sayers knew their characters and understood their humanity, making them believable and empathetic to the reader.

In spite of the fact that Sayers was so favorably influenced by Collins, and displayed such success with *The Nine Tailors*, her experiments with his style did not always work. She greatly admired the brilliance of Collins’s technique of first-person narrative. In *The Woman in White*, Collins uses Walter Hartright to explain his presentation of the story as if it were in a court of law:

... Present the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect; and to trace the course of one complete series of events, by making the persons who have been most closely connected with them, at each successive stage, relate their experience, word for word.

(Collins, *The Woman in White*, Ch. 1)

Sayers explained in “Wilkie Collins, 1827-1889” that Collins is able to succeed with the improbable plot by telling the story “in the most convincing and emphatic way—the lawyer’s way—by the narratives of the eyewitnesses.” In her 1930 novel, *The Documents in the Case*, she tried to emulate such highly regarded works as *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White*. However, her

venture into the epistolary form did not work, since the switching of viewpoints weakened rather than enhanced her carefully constructed plot. By her own admission, Sayers had undertaken a complex plot-line, and by introducing an equally difficult mode of story-telling, her results seem contrived and unconvincing. Although the witty characterization of the priggish Miss Milsom and her knitting is reminiscent of Miss Clack in *The Moonstone*, the other characters are not sympathetic, but flat and undeveloped; they function rather as pawns in the development of the motive for murder. The failure of the love affair of Lathom and Mrs. Harrison to invoke any emotional response in the reader is only highlighted by comparison to Collins's delicate characterization of Rachel and Franklin's relationship or Rosanna Spearman's despair in *The Moonstone*, or of Valeria's devotion to Eustace in *The Law and the Lady*. In *The Documents in the Case*, Sayers failed to reveal the raw emotion that would have been the basis of the relationship of these two people in order for such a heinous crime to have been committed.

In spite of her own remarkable career, Dorothy L. Sayers remained fascinated by Wilkie Collins, and for nearly thirty-five years researched his life, studied his works, and emulated his style. Ralph Hone, in his biography of Sayers, states that the study of Collins made her a better writer and critic. Barbara Reynolds, Sayers's longtime friend, collaborator and biographer agrees. And those generations of mystery-lovers who have been enchanted by her richly detailed, carefully constructed, and warmly peopled novels of detection, must concur.

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“Poor Fargus”: On Wilkie Collins and Hugh Conway

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Fred Fargus joined the family auctioneering business in Bristol as a junior partner at the age of 20 on his father's premature death in 1868, but decided to sell up when his uncle retired in the summer of 1884.¹ By then Fargus was far more widely known as the author Hugh Conway. Under that pseudonym, by the early 1880s he had published a slim volume of verse, the lyrics to several romantic songs, and a handful of short tales of mystery and the supernatural. The stories appeared not only in the *Bristol Times* and other local publications, but also in metropolitan magazines like the weekly *Chambers's Journal* and the monthly *Blackwood's*. Unexpectedly, though, it was a short novel which appeared at the price of sixpence in November 1883 as the third of the paperback Christmas Annuals issued by the Bristol house of J. W. Arrowsmith which became the publishing sensation of the year and brought him sudden national and international fame.²

Less than half of the initial edition of 6,000 of *Called Back*, as the novella was entitled, had sold by the end of the holiday season, but in the new year sales picked up, the story was reissued as a shilling volume in Arrowsmith's Bristol Library, and a total of 30,000 copies were cleared by March 1884. At the same time, in collaboration with J. Comyns Carr, the author rapidly created a dramatic version which enjoyed long runs in both provincial and metropolitan theaters. This sudden turn of events seems to have been precipitated by an enthusiastic notice in Henry Labouchère's widely-read society weekly *Truth*:

Who Arrowsmith is and who Hugh Conway is I do not know, nor had I ever heard of the Christmas Annual of the former, or of the latter as a writer of fiction; but, a week or two ago, a friend of mine said to me, “Buy Arrowsmith's Christmas Annual, if you want to read one of the best stories that have appeared for many a year.” A few days ago, I happened to be at the Waterloo Station waiting for a train. I remembered the advice, and asked the clerk at the bookstall for the Annual. He handed it to me, and remarked, “They say the story is very good, but this is only the third copy I have sold.” It was so foggy that I could not read it in the train as I had intended, so I put the book into my pocket. About 2 that night, it occurred to me that it was nearing the hour when

¹ For a brief biography of Fargus more detailed and accurate than that in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, see “Death of Hugh Conway”.

² The two earlier Arrowsmith's Christmas Annuals, both priced at a shilling, had been failures: the first, a collection of tales entitled *Thirteen at Dinner and What Came of It* appearing in late 1881, had included Fargus's first published story “The Daughter of the Stars” (Arrowsmith, iii).

decent, quiet people go to bed. I saw the Annual staring me in the face, and took it up. Well, not until 4.30 did I get to bed. By that time I had finished the story. Had I not, I should have gone on reading. I agree with my friend—nay, I go farther than him, and say that Wilkie Collins never penned a more enthralling story.

(3 Jan 1884, cited in Arrowsmith, iv)

According to the original agreement Fergus ceded the entire copyright of *Called Back* to Arrowsmith for only £80. However, on the success of the book, this was canceled by mutual consent and a royalty was paid for a period of six years. By summer 1887 over 350,000 copies of the book had been sold throughout the British Empire (Arrowsmith, iii-iv). A much larger number were undoubtedly printed in various cheap and unauthorized editions in the United States, and the story was quickly translated into all the major European languages. Many contemporary commentators, like the *Truth* reviewer or Margaret Oliphant in *Blackwood's* (312), tended to compare the story to Wilkie Collins's sensation novels of the 1860s, but readers are now more likely to recognize Fergus's tale as one of the first examples of the modern best-selling thriller.

Free of his duties as an auctioneer and inundated with commissions, Fergus turned out a vast amount of new fiction in the year following the success of *Called Back*. He wrote both a full-length serial and a trio of short stories for the provincial newspaper syndicates, in addition to regular contributions to metropolitan periodicals. Among these was *A Family Affair*, which was serialized in Carr's monthly *English Illustrated Magazine* from October 1884, before appearing as a triple-decker from Macmillan the following year. It is generally considered the young Fergus's best work, and an indication of considerable literary potential.³ However, Fergus's most popular and remunerative efforts were undoubtedly the two further thrillers for Arrowsmith, *Dark Days* and *Slings and Arrows*, which appeared as the Christmas Annuals for 1884 and 1885 respectively.⁴ However, many of these narratives appeared in volume form only posthumously. Perhaps the excess of literary labour led to physical exhaustion, for early in 1885 Fergus showed symptoms of tuberculosis and was advised to seek rest and recuperation in a warmer climate. While in the Riviera in the spring, following visits to Milan, Florence, and Rome in search of copy, he was diagnosed as suffering from typhoid fever. When convalescent, he caught a chill, suffered a relapse, and died at Monte Carlo on 15 May 1885.

Like almost everyone else in England, Collins was well aware of Hugh Conway's brief moment of glory. Around a month after the writer's death, he wrote to his agent A.P. Watt suggesting that, in order to copyright the title of his

³ Fergus has received little modern critical attention, but this position is the one taken by most reference works, from the *Dictionary of National Biography* to Sutherland.

⁴ *Dark Days* proved particularly successful; it was also dramatized and widely translated, and provoked a parody in Andrew Lang's *Even Darker Days*, also issued in 1884 under the pseudonym "A. Huge Longway."

new story so that it could not be stolen by pirates if used in advance publicity, he should adopt the method pioneered by “Poor Fergus” with *Dark Days* (14 June 1885, PEMBROKE).⁵ This was to issue a “bogus” story of a half-a-dozen pages or so under the same title, a practice in fact adopted with both *The Evil Genius* and *The Guilty River* (see Gasson, 58, 72). Moreover, it seems likely that the narrative form of *The Evil Genius* was influenced by *A Family Affair*, which combines sensationalism with delicate social comedy in treating the themes of adultery and illegitimacy. It is then perhaps not surprising that when J.W. Arrowsmith approached Collins after Fergus’s death to see if he would take over the Bristol author’s role for the Arrowsmith’s Christmas Annual for 1886, Collins was happy to agree to write a story “equal in length to ‘Called Back’” (to A.P. Watt, 18 Aug 1886, PEMBROKE). The result was *The Guilty River*, though it was far from achieving the popular and commercial success of Fergus’s efforts. When Watt wrote to Bristol on Collins’s death to settle the royalty account, Arrowsmith informed him that he still had 25,000 unwanted copies of the Bristol Library Edition of the story on his hands (5 Oct 1889, BERG; see Peters, 418-9). By then Fergus’s mantle had already passed to Walter Besant, who wrote all the Arrowsmith’s Annuals from 1887 to 1890, presumably with greater financial success.⁶ And in the 1890s many Annuals were produced by the rising young stars of imperial mystery and suspense, including Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Great Shadow* (1892), Anthony Hope’s *The Indiscretion of the Duchess* (1894), and Henry Rider Haggard’s *The Wizard* (1896)--all also reissued as short shilling romances in the Bristol Library.

The Guilty River and *Called Back* have more in common than simply their length, and there are grounds for comparing their narrative contents and strategies. Both center on a love triangle, where one of the male rivals is suddenly handicapped by sensory deprivation, the rejected suitor attempts or commits murder, and the result is a transgressive but finally happy union. In *The Guilty River*, the young landowner Gerard Roylake falls in love with Cristel Toller, the brown buxom daughter of the miller his tenant. To achieve fulfillment, however, he has to counter not only the social disapproval of his step-mother and the neighbouring gentry, but also the extreme jealousy of the miller’s mysterious and nameless lodger, a physician of great beauty and promise who has lost both his hearing and his sanity on discovering that homicide runs in the family. In *Called Back* the rich and independent Gilbert Vaughan hastily marries the pale willowy beauty Pauline March, the half-English daughter of an Italian patriot, only to discover at leisure that she is an

⁵ More generally on the relationship between Collins and Watt, see Law, 100-10.

⁶ Besant’s stories for Arrowsmith were: *Katharine Regina* (1887), *The Inner House* (1888), *The Doubts of Dives* (1889), and *The Demoniac* (1890).

amnesiac with the mental and emotional capacities of a child. Thus, before the union can be consummated, the husband needs to assume the role of detective in order to remove the veil from his wife's past. In doing so he simultaneously comes to understand a mysterious and melodramatic incident in his own youth, at a time when he was struck temporarily by blindness. The villain of the piece is the stiletto-wielding Macari whose desire for Pauline led him to murder her brother, in a traumatic scene strangely witnessed by both Gilbert and Pauline, then unknown to each other but finally happily united.

Although we are told that Collins's hero has been educated on the Continent and his villain's mother was a New World slave, *The Guilty River* is set uniformly and claustrophobically in the gloomy woods crowding the banks of a murky river in middle England, one of those heavily symbolic landscapes familiar from the author's early sensation novels (Cooke, 21). At the same time the social issues raised are deeply embedded in the swamps of class prejudice. In contrast, *Called Back* is keener to exploit stereotypes of national and racial identity. Though revolutionary politics are not themselves a serious issue, political conspiracy in Italy and political exile in Siberia provide an exotic background, so that the narrative can move from London's West End to Old Town Edinburgh on a shrieking express train that looks forward to John Buchan, or indeed switch from Turin to Moscow in jet-setting James Bond style.

Fergus had written *Called Back* in less than six weeks (Arrowsmith, iii), but the aging and ailing Collins got into serious difficulties when he attempted to work to a similar schedule. Publication of *The Guilty River* was arranged for 15 November 1886, with a simultaneous appearance in New York in Harper's Handy Series. Collins had been late finishing *The Evil Genius* in March, only a month or so ahead of the newspaper serialization, and was seriously ill for some time afterwards, so that he only set to work on the Arrowsmith story in August and was still less than half way through in early October. He was forced into working twelve hours a day from the beginning of November to complete the story, and even then unrevised proofs had to be sent to New York to meet the publication deadline.⁷ Partly as a result, the pacing of the two narratives is also markedly different. Fergus's tale in fact gets off to a rather slow and laborious start, but, after the murder scene, increases the grip of suspense inexorably until the release of the dénouement. Collins, in contrast, gets in with a strong opening sequence underlining the *doppelgänger* relationship between hero and villain, but after the failed murder attempt, the narrative loses its way and ends in bathos and confusion. The tale "was spoilt for want of room" as Collins put it in a postscript to a letter to William Winter (30 Jul 1887, Collins, 2:540-2).

⁷ See the letters to Watt, 18 Aug and 10 Oct 1886 (PEMBROKE), and to Harper & Brothers, 6 Nov 1886 (PRINCETON).

The greatest contrast, however, is in narrative tone, as evidenced by the following climactic scenes where both heroes are forced to imbibe an unknown liquid. Collins's hero is made to swallow the antidote to the poisoned tea he has naively drunk, by his lover who is quicker to divine the intentions of the villain:

"Drink it," she said, "if you value your life!"

I should of course have found it perfectly easy to obey her, strange as her language was, if I had been in full possession of myself. Between distress and alarm, my mind (I suppose) had lost its balance. With or without a cause, I hesitated.

She crossed the room, and threw open the window which looked out on the river.

"You shan't die alone," she said. "If you don't drink it, I'll throw myself out!"

I drank from the tumbler to the last drop.

It was not water.

It had a taste which I can compare to no drink, and to no medicine, known to me. I thought of the other strange taste peculiar to the tea. At last, the tremendous truth forced itself on my mind. The man in whom my boyish generosity had so faithfully believed had attempted my life.

(*The Guilty River*, Ch. 13)

Stumbling in his blindness on the scene of the crime, Fargus's hero is made to drink a narcotic by the conspirators before he is restored to freedom:

Presently a curious odour—that of some drug was perceptible. A hand was laid on my shoulder and a glass full of some liquid was placed between my fingers.

"Drink," said the voice—the only voice I had heard.

"I will not," I cried, "it may be poison."

I heard a short harsh laugh and felt a cold metallic ring laid against my forehead.

"It is not poison; it is an opiate and will do you no harm. But this," and as he spoke I felt the pressure of the little iron circlet, "this is another affair. Choose!"

I drained the glass and was glad to feel the pistol moved from my head. "Now," said the spokesman, taking the empty glass from my hand, "if you are a wise man, when you awake tomorrow you will say, 'I have been drunk or dreaming.' You have heard us but not seen us, but remember we know you."

(*Called Back*, Ch. 2)

Though neither tale can bear great claims to enduring literary worth, Fargus's use of language is here undoubtedly more crisp, more concise, more modern. In sum, though Collins attempts intermittently to reproduce the light romance of Fargus's thriller, he is constantly seduced by the attractions of heavy Gothic.

Although *Called Back* represented a key intervention in the market, Arrowsmiths of Bristol were not the only progressive house to explore the economic possibilities of publishing new shorter romances in single volumes at a fraction of the price of a triple-decker. Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes story *A Study in Scarlet* appeared at only a shilling as Beeton's Christmas Annual for 1887, while, even earlier, the best-selling tales of adventure which established the reputations of both Stevenson and Haggard appeared as five-shilling volumes from Cassells (*Treasure Island*, 1883, and *King Solomon's Mines*, 1885) or Longmans (*Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, 1886, and *She*, 1887). The only new fiction which Collins seems to have read with much enthusiasm during the last years of his life were these adventure stories by Haggard and

Stevenson. The former was also a client of A.P. Watt at this stage, and when Collins's agent sent him copies of the Cassells editions of *King Solomon's Mines* or *Kidnapped* he responded with by then uncharacteristic animation (4 Jan and 29 Jul 1887, PEMBROKE; see Peters, 419-29). However, the failure of *The Guilty River* seems to have discouraged him from any further attempts at writing thrillers himself. While Collins was struggling to complete his assignment for Arrowsmith, Watt was asked whether the author would also write a short romance of the same type for J. & R. Maxwell, the publishing house now run by John Maxwell's two sons. Collins replied that, though he might be "tempted by a five shilling series," if the offer involved "a shilling or two shilling series, then no" (10 Nov 1886, PEMBROKE). *The Legacy of Cain* and *Blind Love*, Wilkie's last two novels, both rather old-fashioned exercises in sensationalism, thus duly appeared as old-fashioned triple-deckers from Chatto and Windus.

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