



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

THE MYSTERY OF *THE WOMAN IN WHITE* IN LEICESTER

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Wilkie Collins delayed writing his own dramatisation of *The Woman in White* until 1870-71, more than ten years after serialisation in *All the Year Round*. In the meantime others had jumped on the bandwagon of the novel's popularity. Serialisation finished in July 1860, the first three-volume edition was published in August 1860, and by the beginning of November that year the management at the Surrey Theatre, a popular transpontine theatre in London, had mounted an adaptation by J.RWare. The theatre was at that time under fairly stable management by Richard Shepherd, who was there from 1848-1869, and Mr Creswick, who played Count Fosco. Collins was of course outraged that a dramatisation was appearing without reference to him: 'I am asked to go to law about that', he wrote on 31 October 1860 to Edward Marston of the publishing firm Sampson, Law and Co. 'I will certainly go and hiss – unless the manager makes a "previous arrangement" with me' (Baker & Clarke, I, 191).

The play was well reviewed in the *Era*, the theatrical trade journal, and in the *Illustrated London News*. As the latter puts it: 'Mr Wilkie Collins's tale...has been dramatised...and placed on these boards with all the effect that good scenery, appropriate costumes, and excellent acting could ensure' (*Illustrated London News*, 10 Nov, 1860). In the *Era*'s review a particular term of commendation is naturalness: Mr Ersser Jones as Mr Fairlie, Mr Fernandez as Walter Hartright, and Miss Forester as Marian are all praised for their 'natural' acting. Both papers express admiration for Creswick's playing of Fosco, characterised in the *Era* as a 'cold, cautious, and yet unscrupulous villain' (*Era*, 11 Nov, 1860). However, this review goes on to comment on the way that uncertainties and ambiguities in the book are lost in the process of adaptation for the stage: lacking 'the halo of mystery' that is created in the novel, the character becomes 'a familiar individuality'. The journal recognises the great difficulty of dramatising a novel, but feels that this adaptation 'might have been improved in some respects'. Apparently, despite the length of the script, too much was left out. It is the problem of dramatisation that preoccupies the writer of the review in *The Times*, who remarks that the audience's ability to fill in the gaps depends on their familiarity with the novel (*Times*, 8 Nov, 1860). Clearly the play attracted a large audience, and this critic comments on the inference that can be drawn as to the popularity of Dickens's journal, *All the Year Round*. The playhouse audience are not interested, he maintains, in the quality of the adaptation: they 'only want to see the personages they have read about clothed with a visible form'. Of these 'personages' it is clearly Count Fosco who created the greatest impression on stage, for this review, too, draws particular attention to the acting of Mr Creswick, who, whilst 'refraining from the assumption of a foreign accent', apparently made an excellent job of portraying the Count's 'peculiarities'.

In an interesting and scholarly paper given at the Sheffield conference in 2005 and shortly to be published in a new collection of essays, *Questioning the Boundaries of Sensation*, Janice Norwood reviews the dramatic versions of *The Woman in White* that appeared in the years after 1860. Of the adaptations that were produced in the nineteenth century, only two others, apart from Ware's version (and of course Collins's own), were submitted to the Lord Chamberlain for licensing. An anonymous adaptation (January, 1861) was intended for the Theatre Royal, Norwich, and one by W.Sidney was put on at the Sadler's Wells Theatre, London (August, 1861). Norwood also refers to a production at the Theatre Royal, Cambridge in 1862, for which no script was submitted to the Lord Chamberlain.¹ She does not, however, mention the performance at the Theatre Royal, Leicester on 26 August 1870, which is frequently referred to by writers on Collins. Miss Heath, 'principle Tragedienne' of the Drury Lane and Haymarket Theatres, was giving a provincial tour, which after Leicester moved to Hull, Halifax, Exeter and Cardiff. She was accompanied by Wilson Barrett, who was in the early stages of what was to become a successful career as an actor, theatre-manager and playwright. The mainstay of the tour was *East Lynne*, and the only reference I can find to *The Woman in White* is for this one performance in Leicester as a benefit for Miss Heath. Miss Heath, as seems to have been customary, played both Laura and 'the Woman in White', with Barrett as Count Fosco. The reviews in the Leicester papers congratulate the players and remark on the good attendance throughout the week, but give little detail for *The Woman in White*. Since the papers were published on a Saturday (in this case 27 August), and since *The Woman in White* was only performed on the Friday, there would not have been time, I imagine, to get a review of this play in. Neither is the name of the playwright given in the review that appeared in the *Era* on 4 September, 1870, though this does give a cast list.

It is strange that it is this one performance of a play in Leicester that has attracted comment by writers on Wilkie Collins, and not the other productions at Sadler's Wells, Norwich or Cambridge. But the mystery thickens because of the disagreement as to whether this performance of *The Woman in White* was a revival of the Surrey Theatre production, or a pre-London run of the adaptation by Collins himself which was to open at the Olympic Theatre on 9 October 1871. Andrew Gasson in *Wilkie Collins: An Illustrated Guide* (1998) says that it was a revival of the Surrey Theatre adaptation, and this information is repeated in Jasper Rees's programmes notes for the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical currently playing at the Palace Theatre in London. However, an alternative view is put forward by Kenneth Robinson (*Wilkie Collins: A Biography*, 1951) who says that the Leicester production was a preliminary try-out for the Olympic, 'but for some reason London did not see the play until more than a year later' (253). In *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage* (1974), Norman Page reiterates that *The Woman in White: A Drama in Three Acts* was a dramatisation by Collins that was put on at the Theatre Royal, Leicester, on 26 August and subsequently revised and published in 1871, as *The Woman in White: A Drama in a Prologue and Four Acts*. Richard Leacroft's short history of the Theatre Royal makes no mention of the play being performed there.

In fact it seems to me unlikely that the play put on in Leicester was by Wilkie Collins, whose own version was only submitted to the Lord Chamberlain in the autumn of 1871. The Leicester press refers to the play as 'a dramatic adaptation of Wilkie Collins's novel' (*Leicester Advertiser*, 27 August 1870). This wording does not suggest that it was Wilkie Collins who made the adaptation. Given his concern to establish his rights over his own intellectual property, I would expect any publicity or review material to make clear Collins's authorship of the dramatisation, as indeed it did when the production at the Olympic opened. Since, unfortunately, there is no copy of the Leicester dramatisation in the Lord Chamberlain's Collection, the only

¹ Andrew Gasson has located yet another production, staged by James Henry Chute's company at the Theatre Royal Bristol on 12 February 1867.

information I have found about this version is the list of characters which forms part of the review in the *Era* (4 Sept 1870), and which includes characters who do not appear in the Collins dramatisation, though they are present in the novel: Spadro [sic], Jacob Postlewaite [sic], Dempster and Louis. [It is strange that there is no mention of Mr Fairlie, but since Louis is his manservant, I assume the master, too, was included in the cast.]. Furthermore, none of the actors from the Leicester performance appeared in the London production, and the performance in Leicester is not mentioned at all in the 'Recollections of Wilkie Collins' of Wybert Reeve, who played Walter Hartright at the Olympic and later Fosco when the play went on tour, and who became a good friend of Collins. Reeve does, however, write about the difficulties in rehearsals for the production at the Olympic, and, indeed, an announcement in the *Illustrated Times* mentions that the opening night at the Olympic has been postponed 'very wisely' from 'last Monday' (*Illustrated Times*, 7 October 1871). None of this indicates a production that has already been run in the provinces; nor does it seem likely that a new play would be tried out as a benefit performance for a single night, a full year before its official opening in London.

On the other hand, I can find no conclusive evidence that the Leicester performance was a revival of J.R.Ware's adaptation for the Surrey.² It is conceivable that Spadro (Leicester) corresponds with Spado (Surrey), and both productions contain a female character called Molly, 'a North Country thick-headed Servant Girl', according to a Surrey Theatre playbill reproduced in William G. Knight's history of the Surrey theatre (283). But at Leicester she is unaccountably played by no fewer than three actresses, according to the press: Mesdames Ormsby, Lawrence and Ennis (*Era* 4 Sept 1870). In Collins's novel there is no servant of this name; it is Sir Percival's horse who is called Brown Molly, but I cannot imagine that that is the reason for having three actresses playing the role! The inclusion of Dempster and Jacob Postle(th)waite in the Leicester production indicates some reference, at least, to the characters inhabiting the schoolroom at Limmeridge. There is nothing of this in Ware's version of the play, where background information and local colour are provided by an assortment of rustic characters: Josiah Bladder, Jacob Spud, Robin Rust and Giles Clouter. These minor characters do not appear in Collins's dramatisation of his novel, which also omits both Mr Fairlie and his servant. It is further worth noting that Collins specifically names Anne Catherick in his cast of characters, and indeed the critic for *The Daily News* (October 11, 1871), commenting on the difference between Collins's own dramatisation and the pirated version put on at the Surrey, remarks that Collins 'takes the audience into his confidence as to the true name of the Woman in White' (Collins, *Olympic Theatre. The Woman in White*, 5). On the other hand, all the cast lists I have discovered for both the Surrey and the Leicester productions refer only to 'the Woman in White'. It is conceivable that Miss Heath and Wilson Barrett (who did become a playwright) adapted Ware's play to their own resources, which as a touring company would, I surmise, have been more limited than the Surrey's, but I can find no evidence that the production at the Theatre Royal, Leicester was a pre-London run of Collins's adaptation.

² I have not found any suggestion that the Leicester production was a revival of any of the other adaptations mentioned here. Nor is this possibility encouraged by a comparison of the cast lists.

Manuscripts in Lord Chamberlain's Collection

The Woman in White, Adap. J.R.Ware, Royal Surrey Theatre, licensed 30 October 1860. Add. MSS 52997B, British Library.

The Woman in White, Adap. W.Sidney, no theatre named, licensed January 1861. Add MSS 53000C, British Library.

The Woman in White, Royals Sadler's Wells Theatre, licensed 17 August 1861. Add MSS 53006D, British Library.

Newspapers

Era

Illustrated London News

Illustrated Times

Leicester Advertiser

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