



## THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

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Censoring *The New Magdalen*

Wilkie's brushes with the Lord Chamberlain

by  
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Wilkie Collins Society  
July 2019

42

1st time. May 19/70.



# Olympic Theatre

Lessee ... Miss ADA CAVENDISH.

## PROGRAMME

FOR

## THIS EVENING

THIS EVENING, Production of an Original Drama, by

### WILKIE COLLINS,

Entitled

## "THE NEW MAGDALEN."

In which

### MISS ADA CAVENDISH

WILL APPEAR.

Programme for the first night of *The New Magdalen* at the Olympic Theatre  
Cover: promotional stamps for the production (Archer Archive)

## Censoring the stage play of *The New Magdalen*

In a life of writing plays – the first performed professionally in 1857,<sup>1</sup> the eleventh and last<sup>2</sup> in 1883 – Wilkie Collins only came to the detailed attention of the censors once – over the dramatisation of *The New Magdalen* in 1873.

In the nineteenth century (and indeed up to 1968) theatres were licensed, their hours controlled, and the plays they showed censored. These tasks were done in the name of the Lord Chamberlain and carried out by his Examiner of Plays.

Before a play could be performed it had to be licensed by the Lord Chamberlain. Those manuscript plays submitted for licensing and the record of their licences are held by the British Library and form a major resource of Victorian drama. The correspondence to and from the Lord Chamberlain's department is held separately at the National Archives.

A new examination of this material shows that the censor considered banning *The New Magdalen* and, two months after it opened, the Lord Chamberlain personally intervened to remove a poster for it.

### The play

Many of Wilkie's stories deal with difficult subjects. *The New Magdalen* has a main character who had been tricked into prostitution, tried to reform, but when she found work as a servant suffered frequent dismissals when her past was exposed. The story revolves around her trying to make a clean break with her past by appropriating the identity of a respectable woman Grace Roseberry who she believed had been killed and then, when caught out, repenting and admitting her crime.

The story was serialised in *Temple Bar* from October 1872 to July 1873 and published in two volumes by Richard Bentley on 19 May 1873.<sup>3</sup> Copyright law at the time allowed other writers to dramatise a published story unless the original author had written their own dramatic version which had been produced on stage. Wilkie worked on the dramatisation at the same time as the novel and his script was sent to the Examiner of Plays on 12 May 1873 in time for its first performance on 19 May at the Olympic Theatre.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Lighthouse* ran for 54 nights at the Olympic theatre from 10 August 1857. An earlier production of *A Court Duel* which Collins translated from the French, was performed for just one night at Miss Kelly's Theatre on 20 February 1850.

<sup>2</sup> *Rank and Riches* only lasted six nights at the Adelphi from 9 June 1883. A later production of *The Evil Genius* was simply to secure copyright and was performed once at the Vaudeville on 30 October 1885 (see [2477] to Henry D. Pigott, 13 October 1885). All references to Wilkie Collins's letters are to *The Collected Letters of Wilkie Collins* ISBN: 978-1-57085-269-5 published online by Intellex (2019). The numbers in square brackets are permanently assigned by the editors to each letter and are published in that edition.

<sup>3</sup> See [3240] to Tom Taylor, 19 March 1873 "Monday, May 19th, is the day fixed for the republication of my story in book-form."

The play was produced by the actress Ada Cavendish who had taken on the management of the Olympic Theatre for ten months from 12 December 1872. She played the main character Mercy Merrick with Frank Archer playing the male lead of Julian Gray. Wilkie was very hands-on in the production. Rehearsals began on 16 April, just a week after the death of Wilkie's brother Charles Allston Collins at the age of 45. He wrote on 8 May

Every day I have been occupied by the rehearsals of the dramatic "New Magdalen".<sup>4</sup>

Wilkie's close attention to the production of his plays and his relationship with Ada Cavendish were described by the actor Arthur Pinero who witnessed them in December 1875 at rehearsals of his next play *Miss Gwilt*.

I remember his appearances at rehearsal very clearly. He used to sit, his manuscript before him, at a small table near the footlights, and there he made such additions and alternations as Miss Ada Cavendish [who was financing the production] deemed necessary. He did this with the utmost readiness and amiability, influenced perhaps by her habit of calling him 'Wilkie', a familiar mode of address which, I recollect, surprised and shocked me not a little.<sup>5</sup>

*The New Magdalen* play was controversial not just for its main character being a reformed prostitute who commits perjury, but also for the main male character who was a vicar and a highly unconventional one.

Victorian England still took the view that plays and religion were at opposite ends of the moral spectrum. Plays based on biblical stories were completely banned by the Examiner. He also forbade religious oaths which contained words such as 'by Heaven' or 'damn'.<sup>6</sup> Even expressions of love such as a man referring to a woman as 'my angel' had been censored.<sup>7</sup>

So Wilkie's play was doubly at risk. First, it contained a fragment of a verse from the Bible. In the Prologue the main character Mercy Merrick is explaining her difficult life to Grace Roseberry, the woman whose identity she would steal. She recounted how a young vicar had given her hope when she was living in a refuge for fallen women.

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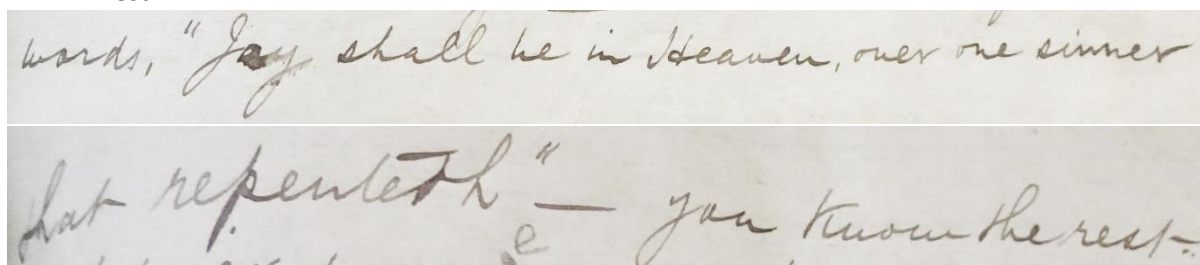
<sup>4</sup> [1332] to George Bentley, 8 May 1873.

<sup>5</sup> Sir Arthur Pinero to Walter de la Mare, unknown date in the 1920s or early 1930s quoted by de la Mare in his essay 'The Early Novels of Wilkie Collins' in *The Eighteen Sixties* ed. John Drinkwater, Cambridge 1932 pp. 68-69, footnote.

<sup>6</sup> Wilkie's only other brush with the Lord Chamberlain was over *No Thoroughfare*, Wilkie's play written jointly with Charles Dickens and first performed 26 December 1867. In a note on the licence The Examiner of Plays specified "Omit in representation - Lord oh Lord &c &c" (BL Add.ms 53704 f.95). There were six uses of 'Lord' as an oath or exclamation in the printed version of the play which was sent for licensing (BL Add.ms 53064W) which were presumably omitted on stage. *No Thoroughfare - A Drama in Five Acts* (London: 1867) see pp. 39, 43(2), 49, 50, 70.

<sup>7</sup> John Russell Stephens *The Censorship of English Drama 1824-1901*, Cambridge, 1980, pp. 92, 93.

I sat under the shadow of the gallery where I could see him, without his seeing me. His text was from the words, "Joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth—" you know the rest.<sup>8</sup>



Extract from the manuscript of *The New Magdalen* sent to the Lord Chamberlain, pp. 14-15  
(BL Add.ms 53122R)

Secondly, it depicted a vicar on stage as a main character and one who not only proclaimed himself a communist but was also anti-church. Stephens notes in his book on censorship on the English stage

Not until as late as 1873 (in Wilkie Collins *The New Magdalen*) was a clergyman introduced into a play in anything other than a peripheral role.<sup>9</sup>

### The censor

The manuscript was sent to the Examiner of Plays William Donne<sup>10</sup> on 12 May 1873.<sup>11</sup> He was minded to allow both these challenging items to pass. However, before he did so he checked with his boss, the Lord Chamberlain himself Viscount Sydney,<sup>12</sup> enclosing a five page summary of the drama.

In my opinion, the drama is a very painful one in its circumstances, but that the moral of it is sound and noble... How will the public, with whom I seldom, and how will the Press, with which I hardly ever agree, interpret this drama? It certainly protrudes a very grave social question, and in that respect, "The New Magdalen" has an unlucky relationship to some French Dramas which are interdicted. And the Press, if not the Public just now, is very alive to the dramatic wrongs of the Gauls...The one and the sole priority is, whether your Lordship thinks the theme fit for the stage.<sup>13</sup>

Sydney was advised by the Comptroller of his office, Spencer Ponsonby, who wrote a note to him that day accompanying Donne's letter

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<sup>8</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The New Magdalen - A Dramatic Story in a Prologue and Three Acts*, published by the author, 1873, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Stephens *op. cit.* p. 109.

<sup>10</sup> William Bodham Donne was Examiner of Plays from May 1857 to August 1874.

<sup>11</sup> The ms of the play has a note written on its title page dated May 12/73. See illustration on p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Viscount Sydney, John Robert Townshend (1805–1890), was Lord Chamberlain from 1868 to 1874.

<sup>13</sup> William Donne to Viscount Sydney, 13 May 1873. National Archives LC 1/275(62b) (Letters Received 1873, 1 to 108).

The play is a painful one, but the Social Evil Element...is all over before the piece begins. In fact the woman is a penitent when the piece opens. I should say from Donne's acct there is not sufficient ground for forbidding this piece.<sup>14</sup>

Sydney agreed to the play being produced but suggested the title should be altered. Donne wrote to Wilkie to convey the news. The letter is missing but it is summarised in the Lord Chamberlain's Register of Letters.

Lord S agrees to Licence, but suggests an alteration of Title.<sup>15</sup>

Wilkie replied to him in a four page letter. Sadly, the text of the reply is unknown. But its existence is recorded in a sale catalogue of 1997 which summarises it

The letter discusses WC's soon to be opened play *The New Magdalen*.<sup>16</sup>

We can only speculate as to the detail in Wilkie's four page reply. But presumably he pointed out that his story of the same name had already been published in parts in the *Cornhill* for several months and was due out in book form this week. He might have added that the text of the play also contained the word 'Magdalen' which the Lord Chamberlain had not objected to. As the title change was only a suggestion of the Lord Chamberlain rather than an instruction he begs to ignore it. His refusal seems to have been accepted as the play was licensed under the name "The New Magdalen" on 15 May with no restrictions.<sup>17</sup>

The Lord Chamberlain was not the only one to be concerned about the title. Charles Mudie, who owned the largest circulating library, had earlier done so in a note to the publisher of the serial and the novel, George Bentley. His objection was given short shrift by Wilkie in his reply to Bentley.

My best thanks for your note. Nothing will induce me to modify the title. His proposal would be an impertinence if he was not an old fool – as it is, I cannot for the life of me help laughing at him.<sup>18</sup>

Ironically, the title of the story which Wilkie was defending had originally been suggested to him by Bentley as he was writing the first part.

I adopt your title – "The New Magdalen."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> National Archives LC 1/275(62a) (Letters Received 1873, 1 to 108).

<sup>15</sup> National Archives LC 3/88 Register of Letters 1873, Sent (56).

<sup>16</sup> [3176] to William Bodham Donne, [14] May 1873. Peter L. Stern, Catalogue 29, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> British Library, Add.ms 53704 f.98.

<sup>18</sup> [1311] to George Bentley, 18 March 1873.

<sup>19</sup> [1244] to George Bentley, 3 July 1872.

The play opened on 19 May at the Olympic Theatre under its original title with the vicar and the half verse from the Bible intact.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Poster**

That was not quite the end of it. Seven weeks into the run of the play the Lord Chamberlain himself wrote to Ponsonby who contacted Donne asking him to refer a poster for the play to the manager of the Olympic Theatre.<sup>21</sup>

The poster in question has not been traced but it seems it quoted the whole verse from which Mercy Merrick uttered a few words at the start of the play

I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.<sup>22</sup>

On 5 July a correspondent wrote to the *Times* under the pseudonym An Occasional Playgoer

Sir,— Passing down Ludgate-hill today, I was not a little surprised to see Mr. Wilkie Collins' new piece at the Olympic Theatre advertised by means of a huge poster headed, "Olympic Theatre" &c. and referring the public to St Luke xv.,7: in other words the identical saying of the Saviour that "Likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons which need no repentance," was used as a medium to draw attention to a modern sensational drama.

I am no hot-headed Puritan, and only a short time since heartily enjoying an evening at this theatre, but cannot refrain from drawing your notice to what, although undoubtedly not ill-meant, is, at least, a piece of very bad taste."<sup>23</sup>

The anonymous letter was published on 8 May. The next day The Lord Chamberlain wrote – via his Comptroller Ponsonby – to the Examiner of Plays. It is summarised in the archives as follows.

A verse of St Luke's Gospel quoted, should call attention of Management.<sup>24</sup>

The letter book shows how very unusual it was for the Lord Chamberlain to write to the Examiner. The letters to him were almost all from members of the public, authors, or other theatres. Donne responded by writing on the same day to Ada Cavendish

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<sup>20</sup> British Library, Add. Ms 52122R ff. 14-15.

<sup>21</sup> Viscount Sydney to Spencer Ponsonby, 9 July 1873 which also contains a line by Ponsonby 'I have begged Mr Donne privately to call the Managers attention to this.' National Archives LC 1/275(87a) (Letters Received 1873, 1 to 108).

<sup>22</sup> Luke 15:7 King James's Version.

<sup>23</sup> The *Times* 8 July 1873, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> Lord Chamberlain, Register of Letters (National Archives LC3/88 letter 87, 9 July 1873).

Mr Donne presents his compliments to Miss Cavendish and is desired to call her attention to the offence given to many persons by a poster headed "Olympic Theatre" & referring the public to St Luke xv.7.

Mr Donne is aware that Miss Cavendish in sanctioning this reference, had no intention of hurting the feelings of people, but he will be glad to hear of the prompt disappearance of this unprecedented & unnecessary allusion to a verse of scripture. Indeed he is of the opinion that far from attracting visitors to her theatre, its tendency may be to keep many away from it who otherwise might be disposed to witness her drama "The New Magdalen".<sup>25</sup>

Before he sent the letter he checked with Ponsonby that it would be suitable, while pointing out that the Lord Chamberlain had, in fact, no right to make such a request.

Bills and Posters being not under the jurisdiction of the L.C. Office, unless in the cases of some flagrant expressions of high treason, contempt of law, personalities, or indecency - even this departure from ordinary custom, however it may shock many persons' feelings, does not come under the head of blasphemy.<sup>26</sup>

Two days later Ada Cavendish replied

Miss Cavendish presents her compliments to Mr Donne and in reply to his kind letter begs to inform him that she gave orders to have the bills he mentions covered up two days after they had been out.<sup>27</sup>

She seems to be claiming that the posters had been 'covered up' – presumably by pasting another version over the top – even before she received his letter.

There is no mention of this incident in Wilkie's extant letters. However, Wilkie had a contractual right to approve the posters and presumably any alteration to them. In his draft agreement with Ada Cavendish he stipulates

Proofs of the Posters Play Bills and of all other advertisements are to be submitted to me – and I am to have the right of altering, adding to, or cutting out any words or expressions to which I may object.<sup>28</sup>

So Wilkie had the right to see and approve the use of the verse in the posters – which he presumably did – and then to agree to them being 'covered up'. Indeed, as an assiduous reader of the *Times* he may have ordered it himself after the letter appeared.

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<sup>25</sup> Lord Chamberlain's Department: Correspondence...Theatres: Letters sent 1873 (National Archives, LC 1/277, letter 73).

<sup>26</sup> William Donne to Spencer Ponsonby, 9 July 1873. National Archives LC 1/275(87c) (Letters Received 1873, 1 to 108).

<sup>27</sup> Ada Cavendish to William Donne, 11 July 1873. National Archives LC 1/275(87d) (Letters Received, 1873, 1 to 108).

<sup>28</sup> See [1326] to William F. Tindell, 22 April 1873, n. 1.4).



## The production

*The New Magdalen* produced by and starring Ada Cavendish and Frank Archer ran for 113 performances over 19 weeks closing on 27 September. After that it went on a provincial tour.

It had already opened in the USA with Wilkie's full approval<sup>29</sup> where it toured before opening on Broadway produced by Augustin Daly on 10 November 1873 under Wilkie's supervision. Pirated productions in the USA proliferated.<sup>30</sup> More than a decade later Collins wrote

When twelve different companies were all acting a stolen "New Magdalen" in the U.S. at the same time, one manager only paid me a fee....The loss I can suffer with some patience – but when I think of the pockets into which the ill-earned money goes, I am not far from going distracted.<sup>31</sup>

The play returned to London at the Charing Cross Theatre with Ada Cavendish in 1875, running for 89 performances from 9 January. A further London revival of 61 performances was staged in the Novelty Theatre from 5 January 1884. In 1876 it was performed in Italian at the Arena Nazionale in Florence.<sup>32</sup> Overall it was probably Wilkie Collins's most performed play.

Wilkie's agreement with Ada Cavendish specified that he paid half the expenses of getting up the play up to a maximum cost of £150. He would then share the profits after expenses.

Wilkie's bank account at Coutts records that he received a total of £241-14s from the Olympic Theatre in nine payments, from 19 June to 22 September 1873. He also received a total of £405-4s-4d from Ada Cavendish in five payments from 8 August to 23 December, possibly relating to its provincial tour.

The 1875 revival at the Charing Cross brought in payments from Ada Cavendish from 6 January to 6 March totalling £331-7s-3d with one further payment possibly associated with these on 27 March of £25-12s.

No income has been identified from the 1884 revival. However, Frank Archer – who revived his role of Julian Gray for the production and was paid £3 a night – noted in his diary of 1884

Collins takes £25 pr week. Salary List at Novelty £75 pr week. Charles [Acting Manager] thought Miss Harris [Nelly Harris, proprietor] lost between 4 and 500 £.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> On 8 May 1873 at the Globe Theatre in Boston starring Carlotta Leclerq as Mercy Merrick. See [1323] to Carlotta Leclerq, 19 April 1873.

<sup>30</sup> [1385] to Sebastian Schlesinger, 31 October 1873 and Hanes *Wilkie Collins's American Tour* (2008) pp. 42-45.

<sup>31</sup> [2477] to Henry D. Pigott, 13 October 1885.

<sup>32</sup> *Era* 24 September 1876, p. 4c and [3183] to Signora Marini who played Mercy Merrick.

<sup>33</sup> Archer Archive.

The payment from the US manager has not been identified and may have been paid to Collins in the USA.

Produced  
Mon 19<sup>th</sup> May 1872  
The New Magdalen  
Olympic Theatre  
May 17/72  
A dramatic story  
in a prologue and three acts.  
by  
Wilkie Collins. 1b  
Persons of the Prologue.  
Men. Horace Holmcroft. (War Correspondent)  
Ignatius Wetzel (German Surgeon)  
A French Captain  
A French Surgeon  
An assistant.  
Women. Mercy Mer-  
Grace Rose-  
Sentinels.  
The Prologue  
(Period 1870. Place - France)  
The scene represents a bedroom  
a cottage on the frontier of France + Ger-  
a side-door on the left. A window clo-  
a shutter on the right. A bed on the left  
standing back in a corner. Above the  
shelf projecting from the wall - with  
hand-looking-glass, and some books  
on it. A round table and two

The manuscript of *The New Magdalen* sent to the Lord Chamberlain, p. 1  
(BL Add.ms 53122R)

THE  
NEW MAGDALEN:

A Dramatic Story,  
IN A PROLOGUE AND THREE ACTS.

BY  
WILKIE COLLINS.

*(Represented for the first time in London at the Olympic Theatre,  
May 19th, 1873.)*

LONDON:  
PUBLISHED BY THE AUTHOR,  
90, GLOUCESTER PLACE, PORTMAN SQUARE.  
1873.

W. CLOWES & SONS]

ENTERED AT STATIONERS' HALL.

[STAMFORD STREET.

Paper wrapper of the printed copy of *The New Magdalen*

This edition of  
*Censoring The New Magdalen –  
Wilkie's brushes with the Lord Chamberlain*  
is limited to 200 copies.

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