

Redemptive Portrayals of the Fallen Woman
in Nineteenth Century British Sensation Fiction

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ABSTRACT

HANNAH LACEY BRYANT RIGBY: Redemptive Portrayals of the Fallen Woman in
Nineteenth Century British Sensation Fiction
(Under the direction of Laurie Langbauer)

A study of portrayals of fallenness in the nineteenth-century sensation novels, including those written by Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Ouida, my dissertation locates the genre of sensation fiction front and center in allotting its heroines—bigamists, prostitutes, and the divorced—a potential for redemption unavailable to their counterparts in realist fiction. Novels became best-selling sensations *because* of their risqué subject material, predominantly their positioning of women in places of power, even sexual power; content—which created a sensation in the titillated reader—became synonymous with this literary form. The sensation novelists were under no compunction to reiterate overwrought clichés to argue for a correspondence between sexual purity and moral goodness like their more conventional and canonical counterparts. I argue that because sensation novels allow sexual and powerful women admission into the institution of marriage, all the while insisting their fallen heroines' moral fitness to be wives, the novels actively challenged Victorian ideals of femininity and female virtue and in doing so became a crucial component in the unmasking of nineteenth-century sexual hypocrisy.

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“Mere Trash or Something Worse”: An Introduction to the Sensational Fallenness of Loose Women and Corrupt Novels¹

“For when a woman sins, does she sin alone? Rather for one sinful woman are there not fifty—ay, a hundred—sinful men?”
—Josephine Butler²

—
“These works are censured and ridiculed, but they are extensively read. The author has a hold upon the public.”
—Henry James³

On July 3, 1862, *The Times* of London published an anonymous letter, claiming to be interested in congestion in Hyde Park caused by the ongoing Exhibition (as with the more famous Great Exhibition of 1851, this second International Exhibition featured goods from countries around the globe) and the equally exhibiting riders of Rotten Row, where aristocrats rode to see and be seen. The bulk of the letter, however, seems interested in an entirely different topic, to which its expressed purpose is marginally related: a woman who could cause Victorian traffic jams.

Sir,—Early in the season of 1861 a young lady, whom I must call Anonyma, for I have never been able to learn her name, made her appearance in Hyde Park. She was a charming creature, beautifully dressed, and she drove with ease and spirit two of the most handsomest brown ponies eye ever beheld. (12)

This assertion of ignorance on the part of the author is nonsense, a lie no one believed. Her name, everyone knew, was Skittles, which was not her name any more than Anonyma was.

¹ Henry Mansel wrote, “The sensation novel, be it mere trash or something worse, is usually a tale of our times. Proximity is, indeed, one great element of sensation” (488).

² Butler 156.

³ Henry James here discusses Mary Elizabeth Braddon and her novels (594).

Both sobriquets of Catherine Walters, these two nicknames became synonymous with “pretty horsebreakers” and fair temptresses, up-market prostitutes displaying their wares in equestrienne parade.⁴ The letter continues with a description of the converts Anonyma made of aristocratic ladies, who tried to draw notice to themselves by borrowing her tactics:

If she wore a pork-pie hat, they wore a pork-pie hat . . . if she reverted to more feminine attire, they reverted to it also. Where she drove, they followed; and I must confess that, as yet Anonyma has fairly distanced her fair competitors. They can none of them sit, dress, drive, or look as well as she does; nor can any of them procure for money such ponies as Anonyma contrives to get—for love.

Skittles, then the mistress of Spencer Cavendish, Marquess of Hartington and later the 8th Duke of Devonshire, led the fashion. Crowds turned out in expectation of her rides. She became famous for her famous lovers—including Prince Albert Edward, later Edward VII, who reputedly wrote her over 300 letters—as well as for her beauty, and she ended up living out her life in comfort and ease. She died in 1920 (Aronson), a good sixty-five years after she first embarked on a career as a courtesan.

That women like Skittles lived long, successful lives seems at odds with fictive portrayals and artistic portraits of prostitutes and other fallen women leaping to a watery grave in the Thames or succumbing to disease. Certainly the modern prevailing view that Victorians were horrified by fallen women is confirmed by much of Catherine Walters’s biography. The success of this one courtesan surely came at its own price, very likely

⁴ Catherine Walters’s nickname “Skittles” derives from her youth, when, after running away from a convent school, she worked at a livery stable in Cheshire and possibly played the game skittles quite well (Hickman 279). She may have even worked in a skittles alley; she supposedly met Hartington when he and the Prince of Wales came to play skittles, a game similar to bowling, in the alley (Aronson). Walters’s skill as a rider also dates from this period, and here she learned the art of display too, for her livery stable work involved riding with the hunt to market the stable’s horseflesh (Hickman 279). Walters’s nicknames quickly became the stuff of novels. *Anonyma, or Fair but Frail* and *Skittles: a Biography of a Fascinating Woman* were both published by George Vickers in 1864, with resulting speculation over the identity of the anonymous author. Michael Sadleir’s bibliography of nineteenth-century fiction notes that the so-called ‘Anonyma’ series was just that, a group of novels republished in 1884 by C.H. Clarke that were not necessarily written as a series or even by the same author. Titles of the 1884 series include *Skittles in Paris* as well as novels that were published earlier with attribution to the *Anonyma* author, such as *Cora Pearl*, *Formosa*, *Left Her Home*, *London by Night*, *Love Frolics of a Young Scamp*, *Mabel Gray*, *Revelations of a Lady Detective*, and *Women of Paris* (8-12).

preventing her from marrying Hartington because the stigma of her trade would never allow her to be a respectable society matron. And certainly, the anonymous letter in *The Times* created an uproar. *The Rose, Thistle, and Shamrock* exclaimed in horror, “The frail sisters of the frail ‘Anonyma,’ the ‘pretty horse-breakers’ of Rotton-Row were described as the triumphant rivals of the young, lovely, and immaculate daughters of patrician mothers!” (157). *The Telegraph* pronounced of Skittles, “She is a worthless and shameful jade, and it is a scandal to have mentioned her” (qtd. in Hickman 286). Skittles not only was an aberrance from the social norms of femininity but also from the lot of many fallen women, who were much more likely to be written about in articles on female penitentiaries or “The Seven Curses of London.”⁵ But, at the same time, the uproar she caused expressed only one view, albeit a prominent one. Yes, she was reviled, but it is important to remember that she was also popular, even much copied, in her time. Interestingly, but not so surprisingly, as my study will show, Skittles and women like her have often fallen out of our common knowledge of Victorian womanhood, and recovering the history of such women and the complexity of contemporary responses to them provides a new understanding of a period we thought we knew.

My dissertation examines the portrayal of fallen women in nineteenth-century British fiction by focusing on the social conditions, such as legalized gender inequality and moral indoctrination, that produced these less well-known redemptive moral and social arguments about such women. In examining the ideological divide between women, the virtuous and the fallen, the angel and the demon, this project discusses how conceptions of morality—stimulated by the commodification of women as marriage partners—endorsed or even engendered this binary thinking, thus oversimplifying how we think Victorians regarded

⁵ The actual title of an 1869 *Examiner* article.

these women, and how narrative accountings of the judgment of fallen women divided along genre-specific lines. While conventional, canonical notions of sexual morality prevented the English fallen woman from taking part in the respectable middle- and upper-class worlds, leaving her the choice of noble starvation or life as a sex worker, and while the typical high culture novelistic portrayal of the repentant fallen woman often imaged her as redeemable only by death, popular novels of the 1860s and 1870s opted for a much different story. By showing the fallen woman as desiring redemption and capable of receiving it by conforming to Victorian mores, these novelists challenged the Victorian morality of womanhood—in which fallenness seems irrevocable—creating within the nineteenth-century British novel tradition both a dissenting voice against the moral condemnation of the fallen woman and, virtually in tandem, a new and very popular generic market—the sensation novel. My dissertation, then, argues that women are not only the centerpieces of sensation novels, as has been noted by sensation scholars, but more significantly that sensation novels are themselves rendered sensational largely *because* of their positive, redemptive, and entirely sympathetic treatment of women, most particularly fallen women.

Fallen women appear in a great number of Victorian novels, stories, dramas, and poems. From *Bleak House* to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, from *Ruth* to *The Mill on the Floss*, from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Jenny" to *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, the figure looms large. In every instance of these high canonical novels, the results are expected: exposure, rejection, or even death. Popular novels, particularly sensation novels, break that mold by giving the fallen woman another face and empowering her with the ability to determine its social value. Certain writers—Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Wilkie Collins, for example—wrote on behalf of fallen women, investing them with a desire for redemption. Moreover, as noted by the

Victorian scholar William Acton, who wrote at the time on sex workers of the day, social reintegration was more common, particularly among the working classes, than literature would have us believe.⁶ Accordingly, fallen women in Braddon's and Collins's novels translate the desire for redemption into the possibility of its enactment. While many authors wrote in support of the angel in the house, glorifying chaste domesticity, the writers whom I study here critiqued the hypocritical morality of a system in which women were either demonized or rendered divine.

The vast difference in imagined outcomes by realist novelists and sensation writers begs the question, why would sensation fiction present fallenness so differently? In novel after novel—Charles Reade's *Griffith Gaunt*, Ouida's *Moths*, and Collins' *No Name*, to mention a few—readers of sensation fiction discover biting criticism of a code of conventional morality that keeps the fallen woman from marriage or remarriage. Even those popular novels in which matrimony does not occur to render the fallen woman a wife, nonetheless still portray her as a good woman at root, with the potential to do and achieve good work, often in the role of a Sister of Charity. Interestingly, the novels that actually allow fallen women social redemption through marriage are all the more sensational, translating moral redemption and social reclamation via the bonds of holy matrimony into the salacious stuff of mass consumption; these fictional women have sinned yet still marry well, and thus were seen to pose a threat to chaste wives and marriageable daughters. Sensation novels highlight for readers both the struggle against a goods-based ideology of Victorian womanhood—that is, the idea that sexual purity alone establishes value in the marriage

⁶Chapter Three will further discuss the occupational mobility of prostitutes, drawing on Acton's *Prostitution* in particular. More recently, revisionist scholarship by feminist historians such as Catherine Hall and Lenore Davidoff has challenged our understanding of this issue.

market—and an attempt to replace it with a more capacious understanding of ‘redemption.’ Rejecting fallenness as tantamount to moral bankruptcy, they further endeavor to instill a new conception of feminine virtue. These novels foreground good works, social mobility, and self-definition as alternatives to perpetual fallenness, and encourage readers to help the fallen seek and attain reclamation.

Scholarly work on sensation fiction typically discusses the genre as a set of traits, noting plot devices or characters a sensational novel might include. Criticism on sensation fiction often cites works by literary critics and scholars such as Fraser Rae, D.A. Miller, and Lyn Pykett, often in a brief summary of the genre as defined by its plot features.⁷ For example, Rae pointed out that the novels made ‘kitchen English’ popular in the drawing rooms of London and told readers that behind every door in every country house, secrets abounded; this material is frequently used as part of a descriptive definition of the genre. Pykett describes the sensation novel as “a catholic mixture of modes and forms” (4) with a particularly exciting narrative technique of concealing the truth from both readers and characters (5), and her work points to a contemporary focus on the narrative form of the sensation novel. Patrick Brantlinger and Jonathan Loesberg likewise have engaged with the problem of definition. Loesberg in particular clearly underscores the problem of defining it at all: “Because the genre, at least at first, was as much a creation of the literary journals who

⁷ For other work on sensation fiction in general, see also P.D. Edwards, *Some Mid-Victorian Thrillers* (1971); Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Attic* (1980); Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (1977); Deborah Wynne, *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (2001); and *Victorian Sensations*, edited by Richard Fantina and Kimberly Harrison (2006). Sally Mitchell’s *The Fallen Angel* (1981) discusses novels of the period, including many sensation novels. Much work on individual authors may be found as well, such as Lyn Pykett’s *Wilkie Collins* (2009), Marlene Tromp’s *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context* (2000), and Natalie Schroeder and Shari Hodges Holt’s *Ouida the Phenomenon* (2008). A great deal of thematic scholarship can be found, discussing topics from violence to consumer goods. For example, Andrew Maunder has written about madness and violence, particularly in Braddon’s novels, and Michael Diamond’s *Victorian Sensation* (2004) draws on social history to connect the sensation novel to the interest in ‘sensation’ in the period.

grouped the novels together as it was of the novels themselves, defining it solely in terms of internal features presents classic problems of either defining too broadly or too narrowly” (115).⁸ While both Loesberg and Brantlinger argue for a narrative function of form, each points to a different element of Hardy’s formula, Loesberg to issues of identity loss and Brantlinger to the mystery element—especially the role of the detective—as a key trait, yet a great deal of what we consider and contemporary reviewers considered sensation fiction would fall outside the genre, if thus delineated.⁹

Brantlinger also finds the emphasis on an exciting plot, what he calls “the subordination of character to plot,” an “overriding feature of both melodrama and the sensation novel” (“What”12); similarly, Winifred Hughes contends that reviewers found characters “perfunctory, mere pegs on which to hang unexpected events” (“The Sensation Novel” 265). The concern that sensation novels are novels of incident indeed appeared earlier, such as in Henry Mansel’s assertion that “human actors in the piece are, for the most part, but so many lay-figures on which to exhibit a drapery of incident” (486), and also in discussions of “sensational” novels not commonly considered sensation fiction. Discussing the novels of Sir Walter Scott in 1861, a critic for the *Literary Budget* argued,

It is not difficult to notice how, through this series, excitement gradually displaces interest till the latter is almost extinguished in the last of all. It is hardly too much to say that there is nothing whatever that can properly be called interesting in the ‘Bride of Lammermoor.’ The story is a mere peg to its concluding incident, and the book itself nothing but a preface to the ‘sensation’ of its last pages. (“ ‘Sensation’ ”15)¹⁰

⁸ Indeed, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, the sensation novelists took umbrage with the derogatory application of the term to their work and even then pointed to the problem of definition.

⁹ For example, a *London Review* article from Nov. 29 1862, “The Last Sensation Novel,” differentiates real detective stories, which present problems requiring “a certain amount of ingenuity” to solve, from sensation novels, in which the secret is apparent from the beginning and only needs to be detected by the characters (481).

¹⁰ This quote also prefigures my later argument about the overuse and misuse of the term.

If a common feature is characters-as-plot-pegs, then clearly *The Bride of Lammermoor* must be a sensation novel; however, if sensation novels are only from the 1860s, then *The Bride of Lammermoor*, first published in 1819, cannot be a sensation novel.

The multiplicity of divergent definitions is a tangle indeed. In positioning the sensation novel as a sub-genre that has a narrative style distinct from realism or a specific central figure, such as the detective, critics risk continuing the process of devaluing the sensation novel as a sub-par sub-genre, of defining the genre too narrowly or too broadly. In contrast to much of recent sensation fiction criticism, my dissertation instead focuses on the fallen woman as portrayed in sensation fiction in order to discuss how the derogatory application of the term was intended to distinguish these novels' treatment of women from the conventional morality of the high-culture realist novel. As noted by Ann Cvetkovich, "The hostility that critics of the sensation novel directed toward the genre is part of a longer history of attacks on popular culture, attacks in which a discourse about affect and gender figures prominently" (16). For this reason, to understand the historical and literary context of the sensation novel as it emerged and became popular in the 1860s, we need to briefly consider the genre's heritage and that of the novel writ large.

A Tale of the Times: The Novel Sensation of the Sensation Novel

Significantly, the sensation novel's emergence is linked to the moment in literary history when novels were not only distinguished as good or bad novels, but as good or bad literature.¹¹ Early reviews of novels employ rather derogatory language in discussing the new

¹¹ In the late eighteenth century, the century before the sensation novel, the novel itself had yet to be considered a respectable literary form. Due to its newness, it had no predecessors to reference for credibility, and the first authors of novels in the English tradition, Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, faced arguments over the novel's validity as literature (J.T. Taylor 11). Though some critics tried to argue for the novel as a genre unto itself,

form. In 1761, the *Monthly Review* bemoaned: “So shameful a prostitution has brought this species of writing into such disrepute” (R-d. 415).¹² In 1790, the same periodical complained, “The manufacture of novels has been so long established, that in general they have arrived at mediocrity; and in the similarity in the usual economy of the inundation that still continues to pour on us, renders it difficult to discriminate and decide on their comparative merit. We are indeed so sickened with this worn-out species of composition, that we have lost all relish for it” (“Art. 32” 464). So new, and yet already worn-out, prostituted, and sickening?¹³

others continued to consider it as beneath the traditional literary genres. Even in 1828, a reviewer for the *Athenæum* clearly declared that praise for novels was not intended to throw novels into comparison with other literary forms: “If at any time heretofore we may have expressed approbation of the style and spirit of some of these novels, or if at any time hereafter we may have occasion to utter similar praises of others of them, we wish our panegyrics always to be understood with reference merely to their merit compared with the productions of the same class” (“Mr. Coburn’s List” 735). Some 18th- and 19th-century authors altogether shied away from naming their work novels because of public perception of what novels were (J.T. Taylor 12). Without an established mode, the eighteenth-century novel was “a new and rather shapeless literary kind, with little discipline and no classical tradition” (Tompkins 3) and “an unexact form of literature” (19).

Fanny Burney acknowledged her own discomfort with the application of the term “novel” to her books. Indeed, she had good reason, for the elder daughters of King George III were only allowed to read her novel *Cecilia*, published, in 1782, after a thorough ecclesiastical vetting (15) necessitated by the term: “I remember the word *novel* was long in the way of *Cecilia*, as I was told at the Queen’s house; and it was not permitted to be read by the Princesses until sanctioned by a Bishop’s recommendation” (Burney 264). The same novel received comparatively positive reviews from the *Edinburgh Weekly Magazine* but clearly the journal disparagingly assessed *Cecilia* among “productions of this kind”: “We are happy, amidst the mass of at best unmeaning productions of this kind, which are every day obtruded on the public, when we meet sometimes with a work that repays us for our many hours of languor and disgust.— This, it is true, happens but seldom; for good novels amongst the bad ‘apparent rari nantes in gurgite vaste.’ ” (“Cecilia” 27)

¹² However, the critic writes that, in the right hands, these works can yet be “beneficial as well as delectable.” Of course, the concept of the prostitution of a literary work did not originate with the novel. Dryden’s ode to Anne Killigrew features the following lines on the corruption of the poetic muse: “Oh, gracious God ! how far have we / Profaned thy heavenly gift of poesy? / Made prostitute and profligate the Muse, / Debased to each obscene and impious use. / Whose harmony was first ordain’d above / For tongues of angels, and for hymns of love?” (lines 56-61).

¹³ Perhaps these complaints were brought on by the huge numbers of imitators generated by the more prominent novelists, so that many plots and characters undoubtedly reappeared frequently. In 1796, a reviewer for the *Critical Review* pronounced, “The province of the novelist has been too generally considered as among the very inferior departments of literature: and the only reason that can be assigned for so unjust a decision is, that is more frequently attempted by incompetent persons than any other.” (“Camilla” 26). A 1787 article in the *Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure* asserted that the “degradation” of the novel derived from “men of genius” ceding ground to “unworthy” amateurs: “As few endowments were necessary to judge so few have been supposed necessary to compose a Novel; and all whose necessities or vanity prompted them to write, betook themselves to a field, which, as they imagined, it required no extent of information or depth of learning to cultivate, but in which a heated imagination, or an excursive fancy, were alone sufficient to succeed; and men of genius and knowledge, despising a province in which such competitors were to be met, retired from it in

Debate over the value of the novel inevitably led to debate over the merit of reading novels. Fear of the novel's potential to corrupt the morality of readers developed early in the form's history and grew alongside its popularity. Deeming novel-reading "pernicious both to the head and the heart," the *Westminster Magazine* argued in 1785 that novels "have disseminated folly, levity, and wantonness, more extensively than their most strenuous advocates could have expected them to produce wisdom and lead to happiness." ("Disquisition" 41).¹⁴ Supporters of the novel argued that as "light reading," the novel was a perfect, innocent pastime, particularly if it provided instruction to readers (J.T. Taylor 111).¹⁵

disgust, and left it in the hands of the unworthy." ("Reflections" 118). Certainly, the novel's status was not helped by the rapid increase in the number of novelists, which grew exponentially because of the belief that writing novels was not at all difficult, nor by the output of these writers, which seemed to prove this point. After all, if penning a novel was not considered to be difficult and if a novel could be produced in large quantities to satisfy circulating libraries, surely it could not be art, either (John Taylor 40). Popular writing versus high literature was thus delineated—mass production limited the merit of the goods thus produced.

¹⁴ Part of the issue of the novel's respectability was the common pronouncement that they did not take effort to read (9), a concern wholly divided from arguments over the novel as morally corruptive, as it focused on the mental corruption novel reading incurred. A 1761 *Monthly Review* article argued that novel readers read "not for the sake of thinking, but for want of thought" (R-d. 415). Similarly, in an 1811 lecture, Samuel Taylor Coleridge dubbed the period of time spent reading novels as "kill-time" (qtd. in J.T. Taylor 106). Even in 1828, an *Athenaeum* reviewer disparagingly argued that novels did not require nearly the effort to read as did poetry, as a novel will "kill our emotions" while poetry encourages mental faculties: "When . . . we find the strife and tumult of the faculties painful, and like better to lose the sense of possessing them than to undergo the effort which their undisciplined activity occasions, we court imbecility and inanition in the pages of a novel" ("Mr. Coburn's List" 735-6). The anonymous author of the article further advised against reading novels "except in certain exhausted states, when the effort to think might be physically injurious," thus putting the danger of novel-reading on par with physical injury. Other periodicals and critics also feared novel-reading would so enervate the will to learn that novel reading and serious study must be impossible partners.

¹⁵ Despite oppositional groups, the novel also had large numbers of supporters, even if some of them enjoyed their novels in secret and denied their enjoyment in novels. Dr. John More noted that many of these avid deniers actually *only* read novels. Jane Austen scorned Mrs. Martin's circulating library, which made clear to would-be subscribers that more books than just novels would be available, saying, "it was necessary I suppose to the self-consequence of half her Subscribers" (qtd. J.T. Taylor 7). Her novel *Northanger Abbey*, quite concerned with validating the novel form and novel reading, gives the following conversation between the heroine and her eventual husband, who have both read and enjoyed *The Mysteries of Udolpho*:

'But you never read novels, I dare say?'

'Why not?'

'Because they are not clever enough for you—gentlemen read better books.'

'The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid.' (68)

That Henry Tilney's rival for Catherine's affections evinces no great love for novels and a singular ability for self-aggrandizement proves this point: John Thorpe *is* intolerably stupid, the novel playfully tells us, as is underscored by his emphatic, "Oh, Lord! not I; I never read novels; I have something else to do" (27). In

In 1787, an article in the *Universal Magazine* argued that “superior” novels are “equally calculated to improve as to delight” (“Reflections” 119).¹⁶ Certainly, many readers found pleasure in novels, as the number of novel readers continued to climb. The growing number of novel readers coincided with growing populations and growing literacy (J.T. Taylor 187), and these factors combined to create significant increases in the number of novels published and serialized, which ironically did little to help establish the validity of the form. In 1785, the *Westminster Magazine* snarkily observed of both novels and its rival periodicals, “So universal, indeed is the demand for novels, and so urgent, that be they ever so insipid, or worthless, or so severely condemned by the Monthly and Critical Reviewers, yet the number of readers shall be such as to render the practice of novel writing lucrative and *popularly* honourable” (“Every Man” 302). Later that year, the *Westminster Magazine* again opined, “over-run as our libraries are with novels, there would still have been plenty of readers to give success to them” (“A Disquisition” 41). There is truth to this claim: by the second half of the eighteenth century, the popularity of fiction grew rapidly, and by 1790, serial fiction was available in approximately 30 periodicals, some with up to ten thousand subscribers (Law 4). From the turn of the nineteenth century to mid-century, approximately 3500 “works

contrast, Henry Tilney not only reads novels but also reads them purely for the pleasure of reading. Even Coleridge, in his 1797 review of *The Monk*, which thoroughly condemned Lewis’s novel, also declared, “the praise which a romance can claim, is simply that of having given pleasure during its perusal; and so many are the calamities of life, that he who has done this, has not written uselessly.”

¹⁶ The gentleman-author of the first epistle collected in Maria Edgworth’s *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795), thought to be her father, Richard Lovell Edgworth, roundly condemns female writers, but even he acknowledged “that a taste for literature adds much to the happiness of life, and women may enjoy to a certain degree this happiness as well as men” (23-4). This statement is ironic indeed, given his daughter’s novel-writing and the large female readership of novels.

of fiction” were printed in England (Phillips 4).¹⁷ Yet the expense of paying for novels, even in serials, was still enough to deter some readers.

Circulating libraries certainly made novels more available to readers who could not purchase novels outright, but typically only in urban areas. However, the circulating libraries themselves contributed to the novel’s bad name, for the demand for novels from circulating libraries generated an increasing supply, lowering the quality of the novels being published and consequently available for borrowing.¹⁸ In 1801, a letter to *The Gentleman’s Magazine* fretted over the potential corruption of young scholars who,

instead of confining their reading . . . to the religious works, eagerly learn the obscene songs hawked by ballad-singers and . . . become subscribers to the abominable circulating-libraries that are now established in every petty town, from whence they obtain books that corrupt both their moral and political principles. (A Southern Faunist 491)

Thus in one sentence, the letter writer places the circulated novels on the level of obscenity and disparages both novels and ballads as bad, even injurious. In 1809, a *Monthly Review* critic held a comparable view of the libraries’ offerings, asserting, “[b]y the usual furniture of

¹⁷ This number is a little more than drama and poetry combined, but nearly seven thousand fewer works than the number of religious books printed in the same period (Phillips 4-5).

¹⁸ Leaving the field open for circulating libraries, most public libraries did not stock novels for much of the form’s early history. Though donations of personal libraries to the public began “[as] early as the fifteenth century,” and libraries thus set up by patrons had books technically available to all readers, the offerings of such institutions were such that only the very learned would be able or be interested to read them; in general, they tended to offer theological studies (Altick 214). By the 1820s, prominent voices, like those of Carlyle and writers in the political periodicals, decried the public libraries for their entrenched exclusivity, claiming that the libraries simply did not have texts nor enough of them to engage and supply the common reader (216). In 1849, the Public Libraries Committee, investigating the state of small libraries in rural England, recorded a “Buckinghamshire clergyman” as testifying that his local library had history books but not a single novel, not even the incredibly popular Waverly novels; the clergyman reported the presence of some verse, but no Shakespeare at all in the local lending library, as his work “would be lost on them,” though he admitted local gentry might own these works. Ironically, the clergyman testified that “we require duplicates over and over again of such works as Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, Cook’s *Voyages*, and works of that description; but what we are aiming at is to raise the standard.” In devaluing the romance, the novel, and the reading interests of the village population, the Buckinghamshire clergyman signals his shared opinion with opponents of the novel who believed that fiction could only corrupt, while “books of practical science” and “of a higher description altogether” (220), written in an accepted form and evaluated according to codified principles, should be valorized.

circulating libraries, deceptive views of life, a false taste, and pernicious principles, have been disseminated” (Mo-y 128). The *New Monthly* plainly associated the readership of the libraries with the lower-class in an 1818 article listing “the most common applications of the arts of reading and writing among the lower classes” (D-T 212); this opinion was shared by an anonymous writer for *Blackwood’s*, who in an 1828 article, lambasted the “absurd system of bringing out every sort of trash,” avowing such novels were “degrading to literature, and injurious to the class of persons among whom these books circulate” (X 332).¹⁹ However, in even as these reviewers denigrated the mass market “furniture” of the libraries, they wrote in response to fears generated by the popularity of such libraries. After all, such a market could spread ideas, vulgar and even corrupting ideas, through the masses.

Though initially lessening the prestige of the form, the serial novel printed in periodicals and the libraries which circulated bound novels were the twin keys to overcoming—but by no means quelling—the opposition to novel reading. When new magazines emerged in the 1800s, such as *Blackwood’s* in 1817, serialized fiction was certainly no new thing (Law 5), but these magazines without doubt made reading fiction in this form more widespread. The circulating library also made fiction available at cut rates, as an annual subscription was less than the cost of a bound three-volume novel. Novels were thus cheaper and more widely available, but the circulating libraries had immense influence over the publishing industry and authors.²⁰ After all, the publishing business revolved

¹⁹ In saying as much, the writer, signed as X, clearly implied the classes below the level of fashionable life: “The people who support these things, by taking them from the circulating libraries, are well enough inclined, God knows, to a silly affectation of habits and manners, which do not belong to them” (332).

²⁰ For example, novels were the bulk of business at Mr. Mudie’s circulating library, perhaps the most famous circulating library of the period (Cruse 313). When Mudie moved to a larger space in 1852, his business quickly expanded to adjust to the new premises, so that he had over 25,000 annual subscriptions purchased. Ordering a new novel at bulk rates, he granted the novel the power of his name, such was his fame for picking novels fit for family reading (315). His selectiveness, however, meant that only novels he approved would be available in his

around making money by catering to readers, cheaply selling them the fiction they craved through serials, books, and circulating libraries, all interconnected in the cheapening process.²¹ As a result, fiction marketing targeted particular classes, and periodicals catering to class and taste emerged. In the midst of the high popularity among the lower-middle class of serial fiction in the many penny weeklies, dubbed Penny Dreadfuls for their content, the up-market periodical *Cornhill*, which largely published domestic realism, launched in 1859 and sold 120,000 copies, sporting writers such as Trollope, Thackeray, Barrett Browning, and Ruskin within its pages. The stars had aligned: high-brow literature could be bought at the price of a serial magazine, albeit not a particularly cheap one. The success of serialized domestic realism signaled that perhaps readers of good literature had not altogether disappeared under the influence of the entertaining, even sensational penny-fiction serials. After the first craze tapered off, the *Cornhill's* circulation fell below a hundred thousand but remained high for an expensive shilling-a-month magazine, though many of its initial readers had abandoned it for magazines offering more fiction to read, particularly light and entertaining fiction. As a result, shilling monthlies catering to this desire sprang up (Altick 359), offering other genres to middle- and upper-class readers bored with domestic realism at a price point and literary style considered above the lower-class. These new magazines serialized novels that hopefully would sell copies, and so they printed sensation novels to create a readership (Wynne 1). In November, 1859, Dickens's successor to his miscellany *Household Words*, *All the Year Round*, published the first serial section of Wilkie Collins's

libraries; so many volumes did he buy to placate his subscribers that novels he declined to pick up for circulation were likely to fall far short of their expected sales.

²¹ The serial novel made into book form appeared first as a costly three-volume set just before or approximately the same time that the serial finished its run. As a result of the cost of this first bound printing, readers of the novel in serial form often read the work straight through for the first time using a copy from a circulating library, or they waited until either the libraries sold used copies at reduced rates or the considerably cheaper single volume of the novel came into print (Brake 57).

novel *The Woman in White*, the second novel featured in the periodical (Wynne 39). Having set off a frenzy among writers, readers, and critics, it became known as the first sensation novel.

Attempts to pinpoint the beginnings of sensationalism almost always cite *The Woman in White*, which was swiftly followed by the publication of *Lady Audley's Secret*, and overlook as a historical antecedent the “fashionable novel” of society life, such as Bulwer-Lytton’s novels from decades earlier (Phillips 28), from which sensation fiction drew heavily. Alternatively, in *Dickens, Reade, and Collins*, Walter Phillips offers a variant reading in describing sensation as an arc beginning with Walpole and spanning over Bulwer-Lytton to Dickens and his school, in which he includes Reade and Collins (6). Scholars do frequently point to the sensation novel’s other generic predecessors—notably the Gothic novel, the violent Newgate novel, the domestic novel, and even the newspaper and the stage melodrama, and Deborah Wynne more specifically argues that the sensation novelists coherently distilled these genres to produce fiction fit for middle-class consumption. The resulting works were void of the stigmas attached to a lower-class readership but also provided good entertainment (9). New magazines such as *All The Year Round*, the *Cornhill*, *Macmillan’s*—just some of the more well-known periodicals originating circa 1859 and the following year—allowed the serial novel to be considered decent by middle-class readers (15). Though the actual readership of sensation novels included a cross-section of society, magazines marketed particularly toward the middle class and drew a huge middle-class readership (14); even the *Cornhill* began serializing sensation novels alongside its domestic fiction to tap this market. Wilkie Collins was especially aware of how many readers his

fiction could reach via the inexpensive magazine, dubbing the working class the “ ‘unknown’ millions” who could afford to join his relatively new middle-class audience (15).

The term “sensation” as it became applied to these novels is harder to pin down than the publication history of the serial novels eventually dubbed sensational. Kathleen Tillotson has found examples of the term in use in 1861 (xxi), and Reginald Terry credits a *London Review* article from February 16, 1861 with the first use (181). As noted by P.D. Edwards, the *Literary Budget* referenced sensation fiction in November 1861 (“Sensation Novels” 1860), in an article that firmly blamed America for the term: “We owe the epithet ‘sensation’ to the candid or reckless vulgarity of the Americans. It is intended to express that quality in art, circumstances, entertainments, politics, and social events, which rouses and gratifies their constitutional excitability. We have hitherto been without some similar word in England. . . .” (“‘Sensation’ Literature” 15). Already a source of anxiety for English language purists, American English was “frequently scorned as vulgar” (20), so the association here of the term ‘sensation’ with American vulgarity links two corruptive influences that crossed the pond to assail the English novel and its native tongue.²² Unsurprisingly, a still earlier reference to “sensation novels” in *Blackwood’s* from January 1860, the earliest I have found this usage in an English publication, appears in a travel narrative about rambles in the American South, during which the author would “devour in the cars piles of ‘sensation novels’ at 25 cents each, by eminent American authors” (“Rambles” 103).²³ Sadly, the

²² Beth Newman, in her discussion of vulgarity and the Victorian novel, thus defines vulgarity: “The vulgarity in question is any exercise of language, oral or written, that is stigmatized because it marks its user as a member of an inferior social class—inferior, that is, to the person making the judgment” (17). American attempts to mimic the English of the English is one such example of a language stigmatized as inferior.

²³ This quote also prefigures the development of the nickname ‘railway novels,’ a reference to the books as available in train-station bookstalls for the pleasure of travelers as well as the novels’ foregrounding of 1860s transportation technology, so that rails and cables connect all of England to grant characters ease of mobility and communication.

rambler does not clarify whether the term was part of his English baggage or a slang ‘Americanism’ picked up in his travels.

Perhaps the term is indeed American in origin, as a number of yet earlier references to “sensation novels” and “sensation literature” appeared in American periodicals and other texts.²⁴ One of the earliest instances of the term in an American publication dates from July 11, 1857, when *Dwight’s Journal of Music* addressed an author, “You would be the means of giving to the world a *Book*, not a sensation novel, (we have scores of such, and another one would be little gain to the world), but one of the books that are books. . .” (“A Chance” 119). This parenthetical comment expresses sentiments so much akin to what, years later, flowed from pens of literary reviewers across the Atlantic as to be interchangeable with it. Shortly thereafter, a critique of a novel by Harrison Ainsworth, the editor of *Bentley’s Miscellany* following Dickens’s departure from the post, appeared in Chas Seymour’s *Self-Made Men* in 1858: “ ‘Jack Sheppard’ was viewed in its proper light as an extremely vicious sensation novel, calculated to fling a halo round the gallows, and make every bold thief think that he was a hero” (359). *Self-Made Men* thus features one of the earliest, if not the earliest, christening of an English novel with the term ‘sensation novel,’ and associates the term with

The rambler also notes that the region holds plenty to write about: “If, then, you do not aspire to be a Barth, a Livingstone, or a Burton, and have not imagination enough for a ‘sensation novel,’ let me recommend your visiting the Southern States of America. . .” (103). Never mind that this writer also foresees the rending of the American nation as beneficial and potentially amicable.

²⁴ In 1863, a reviewer for *The Reader* cited France as the sensation novel’s place of origin: “It comes to us from France, and it can only be imported in mutilated condition. Without entering on the relative morality or immorality of French and English novelists, one may say generally that, with us, novels turn upon the vicissitudes of legitimate love and decorous affection; while in France they are based upon the working of those loves and passions which are not in accordance with our rules of respectability.” (“No Name” 15) The point here is quite similar to the *Literary Budget’s* attack on American vulgarity, only focused here on French immorality. The *Saturday Review* agreed with this view of French morals and French literature, if largely to distinguish sensation novels from what is still more dreadful: “Our fiction may be trenching upon ground hitherto barred to English novelists, but the boldest sensation novel is very insipid compared with the highly-flavoured compositions upon which the French have been feeding for some generations past.” (“Fools’ Paradises” 467)

the *demi-monde*, though the novel, published in 1839, considerably predates the sensation craze in England.²⁵ A review of the *Home Monthly*, published in the *Mishawald Enterprise* and collected in the *Home Monthly*'s August 1859 number, criticizes sensation fiction much as English critics would in later years, attributing to it a corruptive influence on the morality of readers: "The July number of the 'Home Monthly' is at hand. It continues to increase in interest and worth, and is doing much to displace the abominable sensation literature which is blistering the hearts and ruining the morals of our country" ("Opinions" 102). The same year, *The Critic* optimistically argued, "The United States are gradually becoming emancipated from the thralldom of "sensation literature," which it describes as lacking "depth of thought" and an "offensive vulgarity of tone and language" ("America" 255). Each instance demonstrates a devaluing of the sensation novel: it is not properly "a *Book*," it is vicious and vulgar, it is ruinous to morals. Though the English would later blame American vulgarity for the sensation novel, clearly American reviewers saw the works as troubling and corruptive long before the moment was ripe for the sensation novel to hit the English literary scene.

In England, opinion over the new novels was quite divisive. "What extraordinary revolutions of opinion have come and passed respecting it!," exclaimed the *Sixpenny Magazine* ("Literature" 365). Despite critics who reviled the novels and feared for their readers, sensation fiction had a very defined purpose. Like other serial fiction, it was a "commercial product fitted to a commercial demand" (Phillips 27), and publishers, periodicals, and libraries marketed the novels accordingly.²⁶ Like Skittles and the other

²⁵ A year later, Charles Jacobs Peterson's 1859 novel *The Old Stone Mansion* features a character who sits "fanning herself while she read the last new sensation novel" (248), perhaps overheated by its salacious content.

²⁶ An advertisement for Collins's *No Name*, found in an American edition of *Aurora Floyd*, provides an example of sensation novel marketing. The ad includes a list of Wilkie Collins's other works (including *The Woman in White*, of course), quotes from reviewers, and a descriptive blurb. The blurb claims, "This work is from the pen of one of the most gifted writers of the day: and "No Name" surpasses in beauty and vigor all of

“pretty horsebreakers” of Rotten Row, the novels became famous by titillating, just as their intended audience desired. After all, the intersection of mystery and fashion in sensational fiction has intentionally incited terror—including some readers’ fears for falling standards of morality—from the Gothic novel onward. The sensational novel of the 1860s differed by being set at home in British towns and manor houses rather than the wilderness or continental Europe (34), which made them all the more exciting.²⁷ Yet the novels, rather than purely entertaining, engaged serious and problematic topics for their readership, such as insecurities about class, the woman question, health, crime, and money—and thereby further engaged readers. According to Deborah Wynne, these topics reappear over and over to create a “discourse of sensationalism” (3), achieved by the magazines’ intentional placement of sensation novels alongside other works to encourage discussion of the overlapping ideas (3) and to buttress the sensational plots of the novels by making them seem plausible (25). Like Wynne, Walter Phillips similarly describes sensation fiction as geared for the current moment and featuring crimes almost straight from current events (13), but most importantly for his argument, he designates these works as romances, a genre he argues to have been preferred above the domestic novel by the reading public for the first half of the nineteenth century. Thus, he submits that realism only became a point of opposition to the romance, mostly as the favored literature of the serious reader, in the decade before sensation fiction began its vogue (21). But if realism was considered more serious, high-brow literature, the ascendancy of the sensation novel, as indicated by sales and readership, points to a divide

his former productions. It is the most popular Novel of 1863—magnificent in plot, diction and narration.” (“New”)

²⁷ In this respect, the novels contradict the lesson taught to readers of the Gothic novel in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, in which Henry Tilney remonstrates Catherine Moreland for supposing that Gothic crimes could occur in England: “Could they be perpetuated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighborhood of voluntary spies; and where roads and newspapers lay everything open?” (128).

between literary critics and the populace. This divide in taste frequently was attributed to class preferences, even as sensation fiction in fact found readers among all classes, to the disgust of critics.

Sensation fiction owed earlier writers a great deal for widening the market for novels: “the high profile of fiction in the magazines of the 1860s is striking; it is an index of the rise in status of English fiction produced cumulatively by the outburst of fine novels in the 1840s” (Brake 60). These novels—the stalwarts of the Victorian canon, novels by Thackeray, Dickens, Gaskell and the Brontës—helped raise the readership and value of fiction, particularly amongst women, and magazines began to cater to women with serialized fiction uninterrupted by politics or other material deemed too weighty for women (60). As indicated by Dickens’s novels wildly outselling Thackeray’s novels, perhaps even to Thackeray’s estimate of four to five novels by Dickens to one of his own, “the domestic was high-brow fiction; the sensational of the Dickensians avowedly popular” (Phillips 107). Thackeray perceived the difference between his work and that of Dickens, stating, “[h]e knows that my books are a protest against his—that if one set are true, the other must be false’ ” (qtd. in Phillips 22).²⁸ During the height of the sensation craze, this opposition between the domestic and the sensational meant that sensation novels were generally perceived as bad literature.²⁹

²⁸ Indeed, for all the favor bestowed upon Thackeray in reviews and by the intellectual elite, his realism simply was not so popular in practice (Phillips 23). Trollope compared the two authors, portraying Dickens as a puppet master charming and warming his readers’ hearts and Thackeray as an intellectual whose work remained too lofty to be popular (Trollope 70).

²⁹ In 1855, the *Saturday Review* prefigured the appellation “railway novel” to the sensation novel: “Mr. Charles Dickens, with all his popularity, reads better on the railway than in the study” (“Mr. Douglas Jerrold’s works” 82). The article thus offers an appropriate venue and application for Dickens’s works, setting them apart from serious literature. Still more uncomplimentary, a self-titled “pauper peeress” wrote a letter to the editor of an anonymous periodical that demeaned the very periodicals in which she sought publication, as well as the authors who were found in their pages: “...it is now patent to every one that this country, socially, politically, and, above all, in its literature, would not, and could not, be the immense sink of iniquity it is, varnished with the most impious hypocrisy, but for the notorious venality and corruption of its time-serving and prostituted Press; that, while it could outrage all morality, truth, and decency, by an apotheosis to such a breaker of all the laws of

An 1864 *Reader* reviewer credited Dickens with the ability to straddle the opposing factions—indeed, many reviewers cite his peculiar genius, which earned him both popularity and critical acclaim—but only with mixed success:

Between the public who read three-volume novels and that which takes its mental food in penny numbers there is a great gulf. With the exception of Charles Dickens, no modern writer has ever succeeded in attracting both sections of the reading world; and even his success has been a partial one. (“Sensational Literature” 597)

If Dickens recognized a distinction between his books and Thackeray’s, he certainly reacted against generic typecasting in general. In his periodical *All the Year Round*, he protested against the categorizing of his fiction as sensational simply because it was not domestic:

But why is all art to be restricted to the uniform level of quiet domesticity? To say nothing of the supernatural regions of imagination and fancy, the actual world includes something more than the family life; something besides the placid emotions that are developed about the paternal hearth-rug. It has its sterner, its wilder, and its vaster aspects; adventures, crimes, agonies; hot range and tumult of passions; terror, and bewilderment, and despair. Why is the literary artist to be shut out from the tragedy of existence, as he sees it going on around him? Why is it necessarily immoral to shadow forth the awful visitations of wrath and evil and punishment, or to depict those wonderful and unwonted accidents of fortune which are just as real as anything that happens between Brixton and the Bank, only of less frequent occurrence? It is very easy to cry “Sensational!” but the word proves nothing. Let it be granted that such things *are* sensational; but then life itself is similarly sensational in many of its aspects, and Nature is similarly sensational in many of her forms, and art is always sensational when it is tragic. (14)

The argument here for understanding literary artistry in a different generic style is clear—Dickens contends the title of sensational only disguises the real merit of works that genuinely depict episodes of life beyond the purview of the domestic, that the incident disparaged in sensation fiction is part of life beyond family life and consequently not less real but simply

God as the pothouse Plutarch, Mr. Charles Dickens!! is equally ready to puff or do dirty work, as occasion may require, for the still living scoundrelocracy of the happily defunct ‘Guild of Literature.’ ” (“Some Experiences” 482) The letter-writer continued, “such vulgar trash as ‘-----’,’ guiltless of wit, humour, fun, or common sense, is much more congenial to the palate of that concrete and omnivorous ass, the British public. . . .”

different. He also points to the problem of solidly defining sensation fiction, citing overuse resulting from a general lack of understanding for a correct usage: “This foolish word has become the orthodox stone for flinging at any heretic author” (14). Indeed, the term was becoming rather overused by 1863, when the *Christian Remembrancer* noted the difficulty of defining the term: “We use the popular and very expressive term, and yet one much more easy to adopt than to define” (“Art. VII” 210).³⁰ In *Some Mid-Victorian Thrillers*, P.D. Edwards likewise notes that literary reviews from the period had indeed adopted the term to the extent that “almost every novel reviewed was either sensational, or remarkable for not being so” (4).

As a result of the criticism, the realist domestic novel was perceived as being a more respectable read than the sensation novel (Wynne 145). Taking a cue from Dickens, in his 1866 preface to *Armadale* Collins attacked reviewers and readers who expected his fiction to conform to a circumscribed set of boundaries based on the domestic novel, like those published in *The Cornhill* alongside *Armadale* in 1864 (Wynne 147). Unfortunately, and no doubt causing Collins’s ire, *Armadale*’s serialization in the periodical had proved unpopular, as the middle-class audience for *The Cornhill* preferred the domestic novel to the sensation novels, though sensation novels proved quite popular in other magazines that had a mix of middle- and lower-class readers (34), suggesting a correlation between sensation novel readership and class, a correlation that reappeared in classist condemnation of the novels by

³⁰ Even in 1879, *The Monitor* still expressed confusion over the term: “It is not easy to give an explanation of what is meant by critics, when they use the term ‘sensational.’ As well as I understand the phrase, it means, when applied to incidents—something lying outside the common boundaries of everyday experience; something which startles the mind by its strangeness or horror, or seeks to affect it by a novelty of combination, or a marvel of coincidence seldom or never met with in real life. As applied to character, it means abnormal combinations of intellectual and moral qualities; crimes and virtues, manifesting themselves in natures where they were least expected, and under circumstances, to all appearance, the least favourable to their growth.” (“Novels and Novel Readers” 148) If its usage was so unclear at the time, there is little wonder than the category often seems so unwieldy to 20th and 21st-century scholars.

reviewers. Just as *The Cornhill* risked financial losses by publishing Collins, given its readership, Mudie's took some risk by offering readers the option of borrowing Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne*, given its subject material of adultery and divorce. But the turn Wood gave the story, creating a penitent sufferer out of Lady Isabel's rash fallen woman, was enough to secure the novel's place in the public's esteem (Cruse 325). A year later, Queen Victoria herself enjoyed *Lady Audley's Secret* (326). Notably, Lady Isabel and Lady Audley die, and in each novel the domestic life of their families, freed from their taint, continues on placidly, so that both novels offer sensational stories of sin and suffering and then uphold the domestic sphere of the home in punishing the beautiful sinners; these novels are sensational even as they slip past censorious readers by virtue of their appropriately domestic outcomes, allowing these sensation novels to attain moral high ground more common to the domestic novel. Gladstone, writing in his diary, points to the divide between sensation and domestic novels, and the relative enjoyment and merit of each: "I did not get to the play last night from finding *The Woman in White* so very interesting. It has no dull parts, and is far better sustained than *Adam Bede*, though I do not know if it rises quite so high." (qtd. in Cruse 322). Indeed, the appeal of sensation novels arose from both their difference from and similarity to the domestic novel, as sensation fiction employed the language of realism and seemed to true to life in its "depictions of the unusual and aberrant which highlighted the dangers undermining contemporary British life" (Wynne 7) even as it subverted realism through its sympathetic portrayals of fallen women, as my study will demonstrate. Some contemporary reviewers saw sensation as a reaction to realism.³¹ Undoubtedly, the

³¹ For example, in 1862, a reviewer for *Temple Bar* wrote, "The latest reaction against realism—one now actively exhausting itself, however—has been called 'sensation.' For examples of the 'sensation' novel, we have only to refer to Mr. Wilkie Collins's *Woman in White* and Sir Edward Lytton Bulwer's *Strange Story*. The tone of the first is morbid and realistic; the tone of the second is morbid and idealistic" (RWB 136). An 1864

combination of realism—sin and punishment—and the sensational—those beautiful sinners—proved radically successful.

The sensationalists themselves argued for the validity of the form, claiming their novels told stories true to life. Charles Reade reputedly asserted that the public was his audience, and the public wanted to read about the world in which they lived, comparing this taste to liking “ ‘a live ass to a dead lion’ ”(qtd. in Phillips 127). Collins likewise claimed verisimilitude. In the 1852 preface to *Basil*, he discussed his preference for foregrounding plot and explained he saw no reason to differentiate his plots and their seemingly-improbable incidents from the lives of real men and the “extraordinary events and accidents” that befall them, especially as he has a “good object in using them” to affect the reader “*beyond* his own experience” (v). In 1863, *Quarterly Review* critic Henry Mansel complained about the interweaving of reality and the sensational: “If a scandal of more than usual piquancy occurs in high life or a crime of extraordinary horror figures among our *causes célèbres*, the sensationalist is immediately at hand to weave the incident into a thrilling tale, with names and circumstances slightly disguised” (489). Though Mansel’s complaint became part of the overarching argument against sensation fiction, and indeed is still much cited by scholars today, many targets of the argument turned it on its head by consequently contesting charges that they made up fantastic stories by pointing out that their novels simply retold the news from the presses. In response to charges that sensation novels’ sensational content could harm readers, George Augustus Sala—author of the 1863 novel *The Strange Adventures of Captain Dangerous*, writer for the *Daily Telegraph*, and supporter and friend of Braddon—penned an article in Braddon’s *Belgravia* in 1867 that mentions by name a number of the

Westminster Review article repeated this notion: “In the first place they are an inevitable reaction against the realism of far greater authors; and in the next place, with all their grievous sins against art and taste, and perhaps even in one sense against morals” (“Art. II-Novels” 27).

more well-known and well-publicized scandals and crimes of the period, many of which had already been rewritten as fiction:

If we read the newspaper; if we read the police reports; if we can laugh at such a case as that of the ‘Honorable Mrs. Geraldine Meurice,’ or weep over such a one as that of ‘Augusta Mitchell;’ if we have ever troubled ourself about a Yelverton marriage, a Titchborne (sic) baronetcy, a Thellusson will, a Road murder, a Cornhill burglary, a gold-dust robbery, a Roupell forgery, a Simla court-martial, we shall take no great harm by reading realistic novels of human passion, weakness, and error. (53)³²

³² Sala provides a list of scandalous, notorious news stories of the period, dating from 1839 to 1867; these stories were intensely followed, and the press often detailed the crimes and the subsequent proceedings of sensational trials, often revealing the juicy secrets made open in court. Geraldine Meurice used an aristocratic name to swindle upscale *modistes* and jewelers out of their wares (“Notes” 323); the Sessions Paper for the Central Criminal Court from Nov. 18, 1867, relates Meurice’s trial for theft and the resulting sentence of eighteen months imprisonment (Central 25). Also in 1867, Augusta Mitchell “was sentenced by Mr. Payne at the Middlesex Sessions to eight months’ imprisonment for appropriating to her own use 5*l.* belonging to a man with whom she cohabitated” (“Case” 329); this punishment was deemed excessive. A *London Review* article discussing the Middlesex Sessions complained that the judge too often pressed for “punishments as monstrous in their severity as that awarded to the unfortunate Augusta Mitchell” (“Justice” 284).

Chapter 2 will later discuss the influence of the Yelverton marriage in particular on bigamy novels of the early 1860s; Parliament ultimately ruled that the marriage in dispute—the case involved differing marriage laws in Scotland, Ireland, and England, which allowed Yelverton to legally marry two women at once in different countries—was invalid, but only after several trials in other courts, including in Ireland. The Tichborne baronetcy heir was born after the death of his father in 1866, and shortly thereafter his father’s older brother, hitherto thought dead, reappeared miraculously to attempt ousting the young heir to the baronetcy (Myra 37); however, the claimant was a pretender, Arthur Orton (Morse 9), who in 1874 was sentenced to fourteen years of penal servitude (234). The Thellusson will stipulated that Peter Thellusson’s fortune would be held in trust during the life of his sons and their sons, with an allowance paid to them, but upon the extinction of these descendants, the whole property would be divided between the eldest male descendant and the eldest son of Thellusson’s second son’s male line; by the time of the division, the fortune was said to be millions of pounds (“Thellusson” 206). The resulting long-term litigation, which ended in 1859, was a possible source for Dickens’s Jarndyce and Jarndyce.

In 1860, Road murder was the scandal of the year, involving the savage stabbing of a boy, supposedly by his 16-year-old half-sister, Constance Kent, who was convicted and served prison time for the murder. After her trial, the *Saturday Review* wrote, “And now we trust that we have heard the last of this miserable creature. She will receive some, though an inadequate, punishment for a crime as horrible as has ever disgraced human nature. But if Constance Kent has perpetrated a great crime against society, the murder which she committed does not exhaust the scandal of which she has been the occasion. We do not remember many popular frenzies more disgraceful than that which represented her as an object of pity and compassion. . . .” (287). But rather than the “severe and life-long seclusion” the writer hoped for her, Constance Kent was released after 20 years (Kyle 148), after which she changed her name and lived out the remainder of her 100 years in Australia, living with her siblings and working as a nurse (153). Other scholars have written on the relationship between the Road murder and the early sensation novels, particularly Andrew Mangham in *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction*, which links the Road murder to the works of Collins, Braddon, and Wood.

In a February 1865 heist known popularly as the Cornhill burglary, thieves successfully made off with £6,000 of goods from Mr. Walker’s jewelry store by cutting through the floor from the room below and opening Walker’s safe (Williams 95); the trial was rather humorous, featuring the evidence of the safe-cracker, who told the Lord Chief Justice he only used “lawful” tools in his line of work—meaning those that made no noise (99). The gold-dust robbery was a botched attempt in 1839 to steal a shipment of gold dust valued at £5000; the father-son culprits were deported (“Central” 412). A series of court cases in 1862-1863 resulted from the Roupell forgeries, which included forged deeds and wills created by William Roupell, the illegitimate son of Richard Roupell, in order to inherit and sell property that rightfully belonged to his legitimate younger brother

Similarly, after his novel *A Terrible Temptation* received a scathing review in *The Times*, Reade notoriously engaged in a very public correspondence with that paper, writing “To the Editor of ‘The Times’” on August 26, 1871, and arguing that the denunciation of his novel’s subject matter was immensely hypocritical, as it had derived from that very publication: “For 18 years, at least, the journal you conduct so ably has been my preceptor, and the main source of my works” (305). He even cited the date the paper published on the disputed topic, the use of the term ‘Anonyma,’ those kept mistresses of the aristocracy.³³ He later wrote of *The Times* review in the letter “Facts Must Be Faced,” in *The Examiner* on September 23, 1871, slamming *The Times* reviewers who “write about literature because they cannot write literature.” Responding to claims made by a reviewer that the periodical’s introduction of the same topic later disputed in Reade’s work was different because of their respective public and private duties, Reade explosively rebuts this distinction on the grounds of his circulation so much exceeding that of *The Times* as to render his work a very public duty indeed:

Private! Why, my English circulation is larger than that of the Times; and in the United States three publishers have already sold three hundred and seventy thousand copies of this novel—which, I take it, is about thirty times the circulation of the Times in the United States, and nearly six times its English circulation.

Writing for so vast a variety of human beings, for more than one great nation, and for more than one generation, I cannot afford to adopt novel and narrow views of my great art. I do not howl because two thousand journalists deal, in their leaded type, with Lunacy, Prisons, Trades Unions, Divorce, Murder, Anonyma, and other great facts; and those who aspire to represent so large a body of sensible men, should bridle their egotism, discourage their pitiable jealousy, and cease to howl because five or six

(Snell 5); in the case of *Roupell v. Roupell*, the sentence was penal servitude for life, and some of the other cases saw the land restored to its true inheritor (“William Roupell” 267). William Roupell was released from prison in 1874 (“Who’s Out” 174). The Simla court-martial controversy arose when, in 1866, Capt. Jervis was court-martialed even after his acquittal for “the grave charge of embezzlement, and of making profit out of the wine and mutton committed to his charge” due to his “hasty expressions, and especially for having refused to deliver up his sword when asked to do so, long after his arrest” (“Simla Court-Martial” 1).

³³ Indeed, he refers to the same article from *The Times* cited at the beginning of this chapter.

masters of Fiction have the judgment and the skill to weave the recorded facts, and published characters, of this great age, into the forms of Art. (954)

This claim that reworking the daily life of the English populace—life made up of “great facts” that thus suitably swell the pages of periodicals as well as the sensation novel—into fiction, which is then digested by simply immense numbers of readers, resolutely argues for the validity of this form of storytelling. Reade’s emphasis on the size of the market for novels recasts the duty of the writer who is thus *intentionally* popular, who *intentionally* draws from the realities of newsprint to recreate it as “forms of Art,” art which is wildly successful, immensely popular, in touch with the masses and their desires, distilled from fact and made palatable by artists such as himself.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon also chimed in to discuss the genre at various points in her career as a sensation novelist, and with good reason. Her work was under constant attack in the press. For example, a blistering review of *Lady Audley’s Secret* appeared in the *London Review* on November 29, 1862, proclaiming that readers “will find stories not one whit worse, and a vast deal more interesting, in the ‘Newgate Calendar’ ” (482)—quite the derogatory comparison.³⁴ Consequently, her letters and novels reflect a continuing vexation with the labels ‘sensation novel’ and ‘sensation novelist.’ In *The Doctor’s Wife* (1864), Braddon created a portrait of a popular sensation novelist, one who writes for penny journals, and used him to argue for her style of writing and denounce the usage of the term given to it: “Mr Sigismund Smith was a sensation author. That bitter term of reproach, ‘sensation,’ had not been invented for the terror of romancers in the fifty-second year of this present century;

³⁴ The full title of the book is fairly explanatory: *Newgate Calendar; Comprising Interesting Memoirs of the Most Notorious Characters Who Have Been Convicted of Outrages on the Laws of England Since the Commencement of the Eighteenth Century; with Occasional Anecdotes and Observations, Speeches, Confessions, and Last Exclamations of Sufferers*. The *Newgate Calendar*, named for Newgate Prison, featured non-fiction biographies of these criminals, supposedly as a didactic tool, but the stories were lurid, crass, and consequently horrifically entertaining (Ousby 676). A preference for these stories over *Lady Audley’s Secret* is a definite sign that the reviewer does not think well of the novel.

but the thing existed nevertheless in divers forms, and people wrote sensation novels . . . unconsciously” (11). In her 1868 Preface to the first bound edition of *Run to Earth*, naturally written after the novel’s serialization and so responding to criticism of this very novel, she responds to what she calls critical “misapprehension” relating to “the province, scope, and intention of the novelist” (vii) and makes a case for the novel and for sensation literature. She quotes a critic from the *Fortnightly Review*, who argues that the content is less important than the author’s treatment of that content, and that reviewers and readers should discriminate between the aim and the means of each novel.

A criminal trial will agitate all England, when another involving similar degrees of crime, but without certain adjuncts of interest, will be read only by the seekers of the very vulgarest stimulants. It is not the crime, but the attendant circumstances of horror and mystery, of pathetic interest, and of social suggestions, which give importance to a trial. In like manner the skill of the story-teller is displayed in selecting the attendant circumstances of horror, mystery, pathos, and social suggestion, bringing the events home to our experience and sympathy. (354-355)

That Braddon ends her Preface with this passage suggests she is fully satisfied with its argument and believes herself a novelist with the necessary skill to create not merely sensation novels, “pure and simple” (vii). Never mind that she completely evades mentioning the rest of the article’s review of her work, which was not particularly kind, and manipulates the article’s text to her advantage, as support for her skill—the critic means to suggest that she does *not* succeed in her treatment of her content.³⁵

The *British Quarterly Review* similarly called out Braddon for entertaining and exciting with her choice of content and her treatment of vice in particular: “many of the writers of ‘sensation’ novels give the homage which vice pays to virtue, by acknowledging

³⁵ The reviewer on Braddon: “I have only read two of her works—‘Lady Audley’s Secret,’ and ‘Sir Jasper’s Tenant’—but from those I have no hesitation in concluding that her grasp of character, her vision of realities, her regard for probabilities, and her theoretical views of human life, are very far from being on a level with her power over plot-interest.” (354)

that the outer form of virtue is desirable. Their ‘Lady Audleys’ and ‘Aurora Floyds’ assume even to themselves an air of innocence. They are worshippers of the world and the flesh. . . .” The article continues, “It is reserved for Mr. Wilkie Collins alone to glorify and embody the world, the flesh, *and* the devil” (“Art. II” 34). The religious language employed here underscores the importance the reviewer places on the “high vocation” of novel writing, suggesting the sinfulness of writing novels to entertain and thus potentially corrupt the flesh with vice dressed as virtue. Yet arguments that Victorian readers *wanted* entertaining stories of their own day rather than books of practical science, moralizing High Church novels, or even novels by Thackeray, were given voice beyond the circle of sensation authors. Though reviewers continued to scorn the novels produced by Dickens, Collins, and their colleagues, the novels’ emphasis on social issues found favor with adherents of the old argument that novels should be instructive, and the books were thus found to have merit (J.T. Taylor 114). Conversely, in 1857, James Fitzjames Stephen saw the popular novelist’s role as producing entertainment rather than social commentary. In the *Saturday Review*, he wrote of *Little Dorrit*, which he found so dreadfully dull “an Act of Parliament would fail to enforce the serious reading” of the novel: “We admit that Mr. Dickens has a mission, but it is to make the world grin, not to recreate and rehabilitate society” (15), suggesting Stephen’s understanding of the purpose of popular fiction devalued its instructive capabilities, rather as he devalued Dickens.

However, these novels did have societal impact, despite disparagement against the popular form. After all, “[t]he subtext of dismissals of the sensation novel as bad art is the fear that it encourages those who enjoy it to rebel against social restrictions” (Cvetkovich 22-23). For example, fear that novel-reading would corrupt values and break down social

barriers fed on the wide readership of the same books, even if only a few became so very popular, among all classes, from the Queen down (a fear expressed by W. Fraser Rae, as noted earlier).³⁶ But instead of creating social unrest, novel-reading had the opposite effect. Richard Altick, in his book-history *The English Common Reader*, depicts the Victorian middle- and lower-classes as voracious readers who happily shared books with their families, a practice which slowly dispelled any fears that education of the poor would lead to social unrest. Instead, entertaining novels palliated social problems by keeping people occupied (5). A writer in Mrs. Wood's *Argosy* opined, "...many of our novelists indulge us with reflections, theories, schemes for universal improvement, and a good deal more which might generally be left out with advantage, is it to be wondered at that we are in our moments of leisure compelled to seek refuge from thought in sensation, and so pass from one extreme to another?" (142). Indeed, the popularity of fiction among the middle and lower classes suggests its role as an escape. As Collins wrote of the unknown millions, " 'Anybody may cram their poor heads; but who will lighten their grave faces?' "(Altick 97).

Lighten grave faces they did indeed, too well for the critics to be pleased. Critics determined to pigeon-hole the sensation novels as bad literature did so by clearly demarking boundaries, just as Stephen sought to distinguish the popular, entertaining novel from meritorious novels of purpose. Ann Cvetkovich has argued that the critics themselves

³⁶ Fears for the ill-effects of reading sensation novels mounted as the novels gained and maintained popularity. The author of "Latter-Day Sensation" in March 1864 feared that sensation novels would lead to violence through their depictions of violence: "That such writings have a corrupting tendency, no well-balanced mind will doubt; and we might not unreasonably trace in them one remote cause of the murders and other grave offenses now so prevalent" (34). The author feared sensation might spread, disease-like, into other art forms: "Moreover, this depravity in novel-writing has reacted upon the stage—upon what we were wont to consider the legitimate stage—until theatres have too often become mere substitutes for bear-gardens and cock-pits in producing vulgar excitement, instead of schools in which manners are softened and minds elevated by the influence of an ingenuous art. Not content with prostituting the arts of Fiction and the Drama, 'sensation' has invaded the realms of the twin sisters Muse and Song; and in our metropolitan music-halls and our popular song-books we have further instances how the fine arts may be abused, or simulated with more or less success, for the production of unwholesome excitement."

deepened this divide: “Rather than accepting that different novels might serve different audiences and purposes, the critics hoped to see the works they deemed to have aesthetic merit achieve the sensation novel’s popularity” (17). Given this argument, it becomes clear that antagonistic criticism did not debilitate the purpose of the popular novel. In writing for the “unknown public,” Collins and the other “sensation” novelists found in the popularity of the form a space, a very public forum indeed, in which to discuss social issues beyond the purview of realism, and told with so much flash and dash as to keep the attention of readers. Thus, their novels became the perfect venue for discussions of social issues, particularly issues involving women. After all, the sensation novel and the woman question seem intrinsically linked. Scholars have noted that in these novels, “sensational representations are very often literally bodies, particularly women’s bodies, whose erotic appeal is part of their sensational appeal” (Cvetkovich 25). Indeed, what is more sensational than a woman behaving badly? The resulting fervor to consume these novels was “constantly referred to as an ‘appetite’ or ‘craving’” (20), in the same terms applied to the appetite for consumer goods, thus linking the pleasures of novel reading to the pleasures of novel buying; this language also echoes Acton and others who discuss sexual appetite—only apparent in men and the wrong sort of women, of course—and thus suggests the desire to consume novels sprang from an appetite for the sensational representations of female bodies offered in the texts.³⁷ A

³⁷ From Acton’s *Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life*: “The occasional indulgence of the sexual feelings is not, in the first place, medically desirable, as it stimulates, without satisfying, the appetite.” (55) Acton also proposed that most women are asexual, perhaps even the sexualized women: “Any susceptible boy is easily led to believe, whether he is altogether overcome by the syren or not, that she, and therefore all women, must have at least as strong passions as himself. Such women, however, give a very false idea of the condition of female sexual feeling in general. Association with the loose women of the London streets in casinos and other immoral haunts (who, if they have not sexual feeling, counterfeit it so well that the novice does not suspect but that it is genuine), seems to corroborate such an impression, and . . . it is from these erroneous notions that so many unmarried men think that the marital duties they will have to undertake are beyond their exhausted strength, and from this reason dread and avoid marriage.” (102)

number of scholars and writers, both contemporaries and later, have commented on how the sensation novel pushed the limits of the woman question, particularly arguing that the sensation novel “declares open season on the Angel in the House” (Reynolds 105). When Henry James noted that instead of the Gothic settings of continental Europe, these novels supplied “the terrors of the cheerful country-house” (593), his readers must surely have realized the subsequent threat to the angels in these houses, the woman at the hearth of these cheery homes. And yet the threat offered to this woman by the sensation novel is smoke and mirrors, a threat that creates suspense yet is not carried out.

Sensational Fallenness

Central to my study is how sensational fiction toys with the two looming stereotypes of mid-Victorian literature, the angel and the whore, and continually deconstructs the boundaries between the two. We as critics need to expand our definition of sensation fiction by understanding that, sympathetic with the angel-in-the-house even as it draws a captivating image of fallen women, the sensation novel reconciles a long-standing antagonism. Charles Reade’s *Griffith Gaunt*, for example, depicts Gaunt’s well-born legal wife and his bigamous but virtuous second wife becoming fast friends after the testimony of the false wife saves the true wife from a conviction for murder (of their shared husband, no less, who is quite alive after all). My dissertation argues that sensation novels present redemption for the fallen as ultimately not threatening to the chaste. This concept would have been a radical departure from the prevailing theories of fallenness in the period. If but one sexual misstep meant, as

Much has been written on female appetite as emblematic of sexual appetite in other Victorian novels, particularly *Dracula*, but also in works from the 1860s, such as *Alice and Wonderland* (1865). See Jasmine Young Hall’s “Solicitors Soliciting: The Dangerous Circulations of Professionalism in *Dracula*,” in *The New Nineteenth Century*. Pamela Gilbert’s *Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women’s Popular Novels* discusses the corruptive potential of the appetite for sensation fiction.

Pride and Prejudice's pedant of piety, Mary Bennet, puts it, "that loss of virtue in a woman is irretrievable—that one false step involves her in endless ruin" (100), then social reclamation was impossible, as it seemed to be in high canonical novels.³⁸ The *Christian Remembrancer* reminded readers, " 'It is easier, in fact, to turn nun, hospital nurse, or sister of mercy, to take up and carry through the professed vocation of a saint, than to work out the English ideal of wife, mother, and presiding spirit of the house, after any wide departure from custom and decorum' " (qtd. in Hughes 44). After all, since "most Victorians rejected such notions as degrees of fallenness or a hierarchy of fallen behaviors" so that a fallen woman was marked for life, regardless of situation, then the potential for complete redemption would accordingly only be in death (Logan 7).³⁹ Reflective of the widespread alienation of the fallen, though often commenting negatively on it, many high canonical Victorian novels written before and after the sensation vogue feature the death of a fallen woman: *Sense and Sensibility*, *Oliver Twist*, *Jane Eyre*, *Bleak House*, *Ruth*, *Mill on the Floss*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure*, to name a few.⁴⁰ The poet Thomas Hood wrote of a fallen woman's return to purity in death:

³⁸ Mary's maxim on fallenness does not prove true when her sister Lydia elopes and eventually marries her seducer, who has been paid to wed her. Lydia's acceptance into the bosom of her family after her marriage is tempered by the belief, at least among those characters with whom readers are supposed to identify, that Lydia has been unusually fortunate to end her adventure a married woman. Though their father does not want Lydia to return to Longbourne, their mother naively acts as though Lydia's marriage is no different from any other marriage. Elizabeth and Jane Bennet reflect a more cautious approach to both condemnation and forgiveness, perhaps more true to life than either extreme.

³⁹ The context of fallenness was a subject of much debate. Many women claimed to have been seduced into prostitution by bad men or lack of options. Others, like Mrs. Percy of Aldershot, fell victim to the Contagious Diseases Act; Percy and her daughter were walking home in the company of soldiers hired to protect them when they were stopped by police, who demanded their examination for venereal disease. Percy's refusal to submit to the exam led to her being branded, even in court documents, a known prostitute; she committed suicide by drowning in a local canal. Her case became a rallying point for opponents of the CDA (Diamond 112-13). Her case shows the difficulty in escaping the label, regardless of her innocence.

⁴⁰ If we include international novels, the list might also include *The Coquette* (1797), *Camille* (1848), *Madame Bovary* (1856), *Les Misérables* (1862), *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), *Anna Karenina* (1873-77), *The Awakening* (1899), and many more.

Touch her not scornfully;
Think of her mournfully,
Gently and humanly;
Not of the stains of her,
All that remains of her
Now is pure womanly. (Hood, lines 15-20)

There is irony in Hood's poem. In committing suicide, then thought to be the greater sin compared with a life of vice (Oulton 142), the fallen woman may again be "pure womanly."

Yet fallen women were not accurately portrayed by realist novelists or even highly sympathetic poets, as many former prostitutes and other fallen women simply moved on with their lives, prostituting only when necessary, marrying, emigrating, finding work, and the like. Poor women could not fall for lack "position of worth from which to fall" (Logan 27), and there actually existed a great "range of experiences" at either end of the spectrum between prostitute and angel in the house. Surveys of the Victorian lower class suggest that their sexual values did not consider prostitution as fallen (28). Indeed, if the author of "The Great Social Evil" is to be believed, young lower-class girls often looked up to such women for their bounty and the allure of achieving similar wealth.⁴¹ It is interesting then that so much energy should be expended by the middle classes in condemning women in a profession that possibly made them quite at home in their own communities. Moreover, why should such women fascinate middle-class readers? The tendency to view women of the working class negatively according to the mores of the middle class led writers such as

⁴¹ The 1858 *Times* article—supposedly written by a kept woman, formerly a prostitute, who signed herself "Another Unfortunate"—asserted: "Some young lady who had quitted the paternal restraints, or perhaps, had started off, none knew whither or how, to seek her fortune, would reappear among us with a profusion of ribands, fine clothes, and lots of cash. Visiting the neighbours, treating indiscriminately, was the order of the day on such occasions, without any more definite information of the means by which the dazzling transformation had been effected than could be conveyed by knowing winks and the words 'luck' and 'friends'. Then she would disappear and leave us in our dirt, penury, and obscurity. You cannot conceive, Sir, how our ambition was stirred by these visitations."

Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Elizabeth Gaskell to create “working-class heroines with an ‘inherent’ middle-class chastity (Logan 29), rather like Victorian Pamelas.

Going against the grain of their society’s ban on discussions of sexual issues—even prostitution was euphemized as a “Social Evil”—reform activists such as Dinah Mulock Craik sought to disturb the sexual hypocrisy surrounding fallenness; in doing so, reformers were themselves at risk of being sexualized by the very topics they sought to put into dialogue, for to discuss issues related to sex meant stepping beyond social norms, particularly the expected behavior for women (Diamond 102).⁴² These women believed in the potential for rescue and transformation, and said so. Craik asserted of the fallen, “Rescue, then, is possible; and they were capable of being rescued” (192). In *A Woman’s Thoughts About Women* (1858), Craik argues that a cultural sense of morality ought not to trump that of morality derived from religious belief: “Yet this is practically the language used to fallen women, and chiefly by their own sex: ‘God may forgive you, but we never can!’—a declaration which, however common, in spirit if not in substance is, when one comes to analyse it, unparalleled in its arrogance of blasphemy” (196). Her point is an interesting one, chalking up the failures of the pure woman who does not forgive as sinful and, more importantly, a denial of the magnanimity of God. Rather than barring the fallen from the company of other women, women should forgive and empathize with them; Craik notes,

⁴² Interestingly, “The Literature of the Social Evil” in the *Saturday Review*, Oct. 16, 1860, complained the language of prostitution was changing to sympathize with prostitutes: “The Social Evil question has become a very popular one—too popular by half. We do not mean that too much pains can be expended in rescuing a street-walker from the inevitable consequences of her wretched calling. She has just the same claims upon society, on prudential grounds, as any other member of the dangerous classes; and, for her own sake, she is as much entitled to charitable succor as any other person engaged in a life immoral, disgusting, and ruinous both to body and soul. But we have got a good deal beyond this. The very fact that we have lost sight of the old-fashioned language in connexion with this matter is significant. We used purposely the term ‘street-walker’ just now; but nobody else uses the phrase, nor that of the prostitute, to say anything of more homely language.” (417) The article goes on to argue, “It is quite true that the moral guilt is the same with the man as with the woman; but the social consequences are, and ought to be, unequal.” (418)

“She must bear her burden, lighter or heavier as it may seem at different times, and she must bear it to the day of her death. I think this fact alone is enough to make a chaste woman’s first feeling towards an unchaste that of unqualified, unmitigated pity” (194). Not only does she thus encourage women to forgive and pity the fallen, but also to help them toward rescue and beyond:

. . .once having returned to a chaste life, a woman’s former life should never once be ‘cast up’ against her; that she should be allowed to resume, if not her pristine position, at least one that is full of usefulness, pleasantness, and respect—a respect, the amount of which must be determined by her own daily conduct. She must be judged—as, indeed, human wisdom alone has a right to judge, in all cases—solely by what she is now, and not by what she has been. (Craik 201)

In fact, the overall trajectory of Craik’s argument seems to place more weight on the potential moral failings of the so-called pure woman who shuns her fallen sisters. For Craik, if the fallen woman can resume a position of respect, judged by her current way of life alone, then other women have a duty to assist in and support this transforming work. Craik underscores the moral bankruptcy of those who see themselves as untouched by the problems of fallen sexual standards, who think “if pollution in any form comes nigh us, we just sweep it hastily and noiselessly away from our doors, and think we are all right and safe. Alas! we forget that a refuse-heap outside her gate may breed a plague even in a queen’s palace” (193).

Popular novels took up the debate as well. Interestingly, the *Athenaeum*—notably in a review of the *Anonyma* novels—blamed female reformers for introducing these topics into the society at large (Mitchell 101). Taking their cue from the reform conversations, the “propaganda” novels of the 1860s, which were didactic rather than sensational even though they treated the same themes as the sensation novel, blame fallen women on men, abjuring women to expect purity from their menfolk in order to change society (102). Felicia Skene’s

Hidden Depths features a lady trying to help her fallen sister, only to discover that no one else will help her (103). Eliza Meteyard's *The Lady Herbert's Gentlewomen* features a man winning back the woman he had seduced, who has born his child, and marrying her after his reform (104). Some novelists had direct experience with reform work. Dickens was famously involved in Urania Cottage.⁴³ He wrote "An Appeal to Fallen Women" in 1849, which addressed women "[s]hunned by decent people, marked out from all other kinds of women as you walk along" and offered them help: "I have been told that those who see you daily in this place believe that there are virtuous inclinations lingering within you, and that you may be reclaimed." His interest in reclamation—though clearly not total social reclamation, given that the cottage's occupants were promised emigration as the goal of their rehabilitation—is evident in the sympathetic portrayals of fallen women in his novels, such as Lil Em'ly of *David Copperfield*, who herself emigrates to Australia.⁴⁴

As in Dickens's more canonical work, other sensation novels prominently feature dubiously respectable women. An 1863 *National Review* article described sensation novels via the sensational acts of the female characters, some of which are also the novels' protagonists:

In one of those novels which have been the delight of a season, the heroine's penchant is for murder and forgery: in another, the graceful charming squire's lady is a bigamist, an assassin, and an incendiary, with the taint of madness in her blood; in a third, we are let off more gently with a stolen register, a false wife palmed on the world, and the real one shut up in a madhouse under the orders of an Austrian spy; in a fourth, a good woman, who has committed adultery because she loves her husband, comes back to educate her children under the eyes of that husband and of her old

⁴³ Dickens's involvement in the project is discussed at greater length in Chapter Two. Dickens was perceived to straddle the line between sensation and rather fantastic realism, even in his own time: ". . . the fact that Dickens in the latter portion of his career has gone more or less into the sensation novel movement has afforded, to those whose jealousy or aversion put them in the position of wholesale detractors, a handle whereby to grasp the whole series of his labours, and drag them forth with the suggestion that they too may be cast into the pit. . ." ("Art. I" 266).

⁴⁴ Others are not so fortunate, but most are sympathetic figures, like Lady Dedlock or Nancy.

rival, his second wife. (“Art. IV—Chronicles of Carlingford” 361).

The first novel is possibly George Sala’s *The Seven Sons of Mammon*, and the following three novels are *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *The Woman in White*, and *East Lynne*.⁴⁵ The anonymous author of the article rather sarcastically discusses the novels’ presentation of the female characters, who may be both “graceful charming” and subject to “madness,” a “good woman” and an adulteress. Some of these women even die, namely Lady Audley and Lady Isabel Vane as mentioned earlier in this chapter, but although these women are fallen, death is tempered by situation and treatment so that neither seems entirely culpable; these women have chosen badly from a limited pool of choices, and their authors use the lack of options for women to explain away guilt and create sympathy. Even Lydia Gwilt, *Armadale*’s would-be murderess, is “softly radiant,” “womanly and lovely once more” as she turns repentant and suicidal (362). As if these sympathetic renderings of highly sexualized women were not sensational enough, novelists followed up in subsequent novels with highly sexualized women who do not die, who *live*, including those I treat in the following pages: Aurora Floyd, Mercy Merrick, and Vere Zouroff. Critics who had found a conventional moral in the death of so-called bad women reacted stridently against these newfangled heroines: “Of course the reviewers profess themselves scandalized by the general threat to morality, but the main objection can be narrowed down to a distaste for female passion and sexuality.” (Hughes 29)

The contemporary critical response to Wilkie Collins’s character Magdalen Vanstone, heroine of his 1862 novel *No Name*, demonstrates this distaste for sexualized female characters. Magdalen creates a false identity in order to marry the cousin who has inherited

⁴⁵ The description of the first novel is so very brief as to make narrowing down the choices difficult. Several novels featuring such a heroine, including Sala’s novel and Capt. Columb’s *Hearths and Watch-fires*, appeared in 1862, in time to be included in this April 1863 article.

her parents' wealth after she and her sister were proved illegitimate; she ends up literally saved from death by a man who saw her but once before, and they agree to marry at the novel's close. A reviewer for the *Reader* found the novel, and particularly Magdalen's return to "the path of innocence and respectability," rather implausible:

To the moral . . . we should be disposed to take exception, if it were not that the story was too unreal to have a moral. The readers of 'Les Trois Mousquetaires' hardly judge Athos, Porthos, and Aramais by the ordinary canons of daily life, and we suppose, in like manner, that we can hardly complain if Magdalen regains the path of innocence and respectability as rapidly and as unaccountably as she falls from it. In real life we should have considered Captain Kirke an ill-used and unfortunate man, but in a sensation novel we do not look to see the working of the inevitable laws which ordain that folly and sin should bring with them their own punishment. ("No Name" 15)

According to the reviewer, Magdalen's swift return to respectability and wealth, through the help of Kirke and her sister Norah, is her critical failing; Collins's moral is impeded by the reviewer's own expectations for realism: the novel is "too unreal," it does not follow after "real life" and its "inevitable laws" and preordained destinies. Collins has toyed with what should be, for though Magdalen has used her powers of attraction for personal gain, she is indeed relatively unpunished for her transgressions (she becomes very ill, but recovers and marries). The moral here is that Magdalen can, as her name implies, sin and be forgiven, completely outside the purview of the ordained and inevitable results of conventional morality.

Collins's fiction "systematically replaces the central tenets of evangelical belief with his own religious thought," which is "based on a central belief in God as merciful and forgiving" (Oulton 132). Accordingly, his fallen heroines are allotted a great deal of sympathy. Some, like *The Woman in White's* Laura Fairlie, have an unusual mobility; Laura moves from heiress to abused patrician wife to asylum inmate to social pariah to the mother

of "*the Heir of Limmeridge*" (260), finally obtaining once more the social position her first husband had stripped away along with her identity and solidifying it in the person of a child. Similarly, *The New Magdalen's* former prostitute, Mercy Merrick, marries a respectable, popular preacher. *The Moonstone* teases us with the possibility of Rachel Verinder's complicity in the mysterious disappearance of her diamond, but the real fallen woman of the novel prevents Rachel's moral fall by, like Rachel, protecting the man they both love. When Rachel retreats into the sanctity and isolation of her bedroom, the housemaid Rosanna, a former thief, commits what in modern jurisprudence would qualify her as an accomplice: hiding the evidence. Though the mistress of the diamond can keep her secret knowledge quite safe by withdrawing into her private domestic space, Rosanna, as a mere servant, has no such right to protect her secrets. Knowing her drawers will be searched, she sinks the evidence and commits suicide to protect their mutual love; upper-class, socially suitable Rachel marries him.

Like Collins, Ouida and Mary Elizabeth Braddon each provided readers with her own particular mix of flamboyant modern culture and sexual morality. Both women wrote of beautiful women who nonetheless act badly, and both novelists offer the potential for reform, garnering similar critical denunciation. *Strathmore's* Marion Vavasour appears to be the seductively lovely wife of a marquis for years and years, and only falls into penury and what is worse, ugliness, after Society discovers they never married. Still, she becomes a 'good' woman by the novel's end. A *Westminster Review* critic complained that Ouida's unrealistic characterization of Marion was a major flaw:

Untruth to nature is shown in the defective treatment of Lady Vavasour, whom we are led to regard as an exceptionally cruel, sensual woman, until we come to the last chapter, when, for the sake of a happy ending to the story, she is transformed into a

converted Christian, foregoes the revenge she has sought for twenty years, and forgives her enemies in the most affecting manner. (“Art. IV—Ouida’s Novels” 367)

Notably, this review cannot resolve the sensual aspect of Marion’s early life with her transformation in later life; this difficulty was the same problem against which social reformers struggled—the idea that the sexualized woman could not be other than what she had been. The fact that her reformation occurs in “the last chapter” and leads to a “happy ending” rankles the critic, who finds the transformation more an implausible fairy tale than a Christian morality play (which indeed provided a precedent for radical character change through religious conversion) featuring an allegory of vanity.

A similarly frustrated *Reader* reviewer of Braddon’s *The Doctor’s Wife* discussed the novel as a retelling of *Madame Bovary* with an unlikely outcome—and with even worse morals.

Here . . . we see how idle indulgence of morbid sentiment leads to sin, and how sin brings wretchedness and works out its own punishment. In the English version we have the same story with a different moral. The heroine has all the pleasures of passion, but stops short at the actual sin, and escapes without any punishment whatever. (E.D. 475)

What frustrates the critic? Perhaps it is that *Madame Bovary* sins and is accordingly punished with a slow and painful death, but Mrs. Gilbert, who is not an adulterer, is not punished for sins she has not committed; thus, the reviewer’s response to Braddon’s novel implies a very interesting conception of justice. Novels featuring genuinely fallen women who escape punishment offered even more dubious morality and lopsided justice, in which forgiveness replaces punishment, and my dissertation focuses on such women, including one of Braddon’s fallen heroines, who were discussed in contemporary reviews as even more far-fetched than Mrs. Gilbert. For example, a critic for the *Christian Remembrancer* complained

Aurora Floyd, like *The Doctor's Wife*, strayed from the Christian morality common to real life:

So far as real life sees, or has ever seen anything like this, it is among the Cleopatras and other witch-like charmers who have misled mankind; not among wives and daughters of repute in Christian or even in heathen times. No doubt discipline, self-restraint, and moral training, stand in the way of this fascination: in every conspicuous example these have all been wanting; still there are people, no doubt, to agree with the sporting community of Doncaster, who, we are told, one and all like Aurora all the better for breaking her whip over a stable-boy's shoulder, and who are led willing captives by the varied and opposite manifestations of unchecked feeling, passion, and impulse, when there is beauty and grace enough to smooth over and conceal their real repulsiveness. ("Art. VII" 235)

Aurora is dangerous because she lacks a set of behaviors she ought to have, and because people in the novel do not seem to notice or much mind this lack, not even Aurora's own husband and father. Though she sins, Aurora suffers but heals relatively unscathed by the events of the novel. The reviewer seems to think that this portrayal, particularly the idolatrous love that this faulty character inspires, might be "more dangerous if it gets a hold, and keeps its ground," so that "Husbands and fathers at any rate may . . . scrutinize the parcel that arrives from Mudie's" (234).

Though many critics found fault with the shaky moral ground of the sensation novel, the new morality of the sensation novel received its due from some critics of a different mind. In a review of Braddon's *John Marchmont's Legacy*, published between *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*, the critic praises the mixture of "fast life" and morality found in Braddon's novels:

The consequence is a strange and amusing mixture of some of the tastes and much of the experience of fast life, which an unaffected love of virtue and appreciation of morality and religion. There is not the slightest reason why this combination should not exist. Countless human beings are, without any fault of their own, exposed to dangerous society, and a fair proportion of the number remain, we will hope, with their native freshness and goodness unspotted. ("John Marchmont's Legacy" 817)

This critic gives credence to circumstance, and in doing so allows the possibility for innate goodness to exist despite exposure to dangerous knowledge. Certainly many of the sensation novelists follow a similar tenet and present us with women who find redemption after their fall because, if anything, of their innate goodness, a goodness not harmed by their sexuality or sexual experiences. My dissertation accordingly focuses on three women who have fallen through bigamy, prostitution, or divorce, yet retain their “native freshness and goodness unspotted.” Moreover, they not only obtain moral redemption—a relatively comfortable notion for readers of the period, as it allows forgiveness for the fallen but not a full return to social position—but also become that ultimate Victorian feminine ideal, the angel-in-the-house, despite their past. Even as this possibility points to the hypocrisy of spouting dogmas of forgiveness yet spurning their practice, the sensation novels in no way suggest that their redeemed heroines are a sham in this position. These heroines illustrate the return of the fallen woman to the domestic life of the home.

Chapter 2 focuses on the second of Braddon's novels to revolve around bigamy, *Aurora Floyd* (1863). Critics concentrate largely on *Lady Audley's Secret*, her first bigamy novel, because it replays preconceptions of fallenness, but *Aurora Floyd* demonstrates the possibilities for redemption we have ignored or overlooked. Drawing on work by Jeanne Fahenstock that links the emerging sensation novel genre to the very real and very infamous Yelverton bigamy trial and its consequent publicity, this chapter sets forth Aurora as a fallen woman who is saved because society bends for her. Rejecting the rigid values of his friend, the strictly upstanding Bullstrode, Aurora's second husband, John Mellish, becomes Aurora's redeemer; for him, and for the sensation novel in general, the scandalous business of Aurora's entanglement and possible guilt in the murder of her abusive first husband merits

concern, not Aurora's accidental bigamy. Mellish's remarriage to Aurora, which takes place well before the capture of the murderer proves Aurora's innocence, allows her to become a dutiful wife and mother, completely untouchable and safely within the purview of the sexual morals of her society.

My third chapter argues that Wilkie Collins' *The New Magdalen* (1873) intends to disrupt binaries between good and corrupt women even as it codifies them. In a discussion of the pitifully desperate Mercy Merrick, a fallen woman and former prostitute, the chapter sets forth Collins as quite deliberately using a penitent ex-inmate of a Magdalen house to show the evils of a society that cannot forgive. Along the way, Collins gives his readers one illustration after another of the nobility of her character, pitting her against a virginal but malicious young girl, Grace, who is not Mercy's moral equal for all her sexual purity. Straightforward in both its social commentary and condemnation, this novel directly confronts the problem of prostitution, offering in its subject matter a radical critique. Drawing on the history of reform penitentiaries and reclamation campaigns, this chapter elucidates that the understanding of redemption at the time was already part of an explicit political and social critique.

Chapter 4 considers the first English narrative of a divorced woman who remarried happily, found in Ouida's *Moths* (1880). The novel serves as commentary on a society that would denounce innocence and reward sin, so long as sin could be socially countenanced. In making its case for its heroine—who is prostituted and abused in marriage, and then divorced by her adulterous husband—*Moths* employs elements of fairy tales to underscore the extent to which society rather than this divorced woman has fallen. As part of my study's tenet that a recovery of social history gives us access to the more complicated status of fallenness at the

time, the chapter includes an overview of divorce law from the Divorce Act of 1857 onward to 1880 to provide a background for a discussion of the novel's preoccupation with evidence and witnesses of marital discord, adultery, and violence.

Arguing that the genre of sensation fiction disappeared once its sensational subject matter—so that the redemption of 'fallen' women no longer seemed so shocking—became conventionalized, I turn here to later texts and contexts. Gesturing toward the mainstream of literary writing using novelists such as George Gissing, I illustrate the extent to which female sexuality became the familiar ground of the novel, ubiquitous in its formulations and entirely separate from the moral judgments that circumscribed writers in earlier generations.

The Accidental Bigamist: Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* and the Redefinition of Fallenness

“When bigamy is intentional, it is simply a matter of villainy. But an unintentional bigamist can commit adultery guiltlessly; ignorance is a form of innocence.”⁴⁶

The eponymous heroine of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's 1862 novel *Aurora Floyd* is a bigamous, upper-class woman who is saved from her fall by her unlawful husband, who marries her a second time, so that Aurora last appears in the novel as an upper-class wife and mother, a woman of position. For Aurora's second husband, John Mellish, her bigamy and fallenness—they have been living together without being legally wed—are beside the point. He is more concerned that her first husband had been beneath her, her father's groom, in fact. After this disturbingly alive groom-husband dies yet again, shot at close range on the Mellish estate so as to leave no doubt this time, Mellish fears Aurora may have murdered her legitimate spouse, but he marries her again in spite of this doubt, later proven baseless. Their remarriage allows Aurora to be, as the wife of a gentleman, completely irreproachable and safely within the bounds of the sexual morals of her society; his status covers her past transgressions, so that rumor never flourishes into social opprobrium.

In contrast, Braddon's earlier bigamy novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) painted for its readers a lovely vision of a woman who, in order to move beyond her position as the abandoned wife of George Talboys, purposefully creates a false second identity that allows her to find a place in Society again. As in *Aurora Floyd*, the legal husband's reappearance

⁴⁶Fahnestock 65.

reveals the invalidity of the second marriage, but here the living, legal spouse also destroys the social world his wife has illegally created through remarriage. To protect her new life, Lady Audley becomes quite the criminal, not only a bigamist but an arsonist and murderess to boot. *Aurora Floyd* reverses the plot of *Lady Audley's Secret* so that the seeming murderess is revealed to be a good woman; her efforts to keep her secrets to herself put her social position in jeopardy, but her honesty—*she* does not try to kill off husbands or burn people sleeping in their beds—wins her place as a wife and ultimately a mother. Aurora is redeemed and rendered respectable through the help of her husband's friend, who keeps Aurora safe within the protective walls of the private home, and the forgiveness and love of her husband, who provides her with the safety of his name. Lady Audley's husbands both renounce her, but it is men, upper-class, well-born men of consequence and property, who maintain Aurora in the position from which she is poised to fall. As the novel reaches its sensational finale, Mellish and his friend, Talbot Bulstrode, become more clearly idealizations of spouse and Society, just as Aurora becomes an ideal wife. Though these men, as in *Lady Audley's Secret*, hold the power to ensure Aurora's ostracization in possessing her secrets, with their help Aurora can be redeemed.

Interestingly, 20th and 21st century scholars of Braddon's work frequently approach her work as depicting a repressive society in which women's struggles come to nothing. For example, much has been written about whether Lady Audley's limited occupational options and inability to be granted divorce from the spouse who has abandoned her make her a figure of sympathy: she struggles and uses her beauty to advance socially, only to be found out and incarcerated in an upscale madhouse—in a chapter entitled “Buried Alive,” no less.⁴⁷ Aurora

⁴⁷ Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* and Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* are certainly sympathetic with Lady Audley's plight, and Natalie Schroeder has argued, “With the incarceration and

Mellish, scholars have argued, may keep her position, but at the cost of obedience to the dictates of hierarchy.⁴⁸ Thus, her compatriot may be exiled to a Belgian sanatorium, but she is tied by the apron-strings, as it were, to Mellish Park and her children, the dutiful life of a dutiful wife: “Aurora is imprisoned in the domestic sphere, a sort of exile” (Tatum 133). The possibility that modern critics overlook, the possibility that Aurora can fall and yet still be the ideal woman, the angel in the house, at the book’s end was at the time, however, particularly unsettling to contemporary readers. The thrill of *Lady Audley* is that she has a secret and is punished for it; the thrill of Aurora is that she has a secret and goes unpunished. Rather than imprisonment, contemporary readers saw in Aurora a woman who had sinned and yet not fallen, who had violated the laws of marriage and of the private domestic space wherein a marriage is lived, only to be found fit to remain safely ensconced in respectability and maternity. For Braddon, deviating from the established path of female chastity does not nullify a woman’s worth; fallenness need not bar Aurora’s resumption of her pre-fall social position, if only others will forgive and forget the past. The moral here is even a didactic one—but the moral is directed at Society rather than the problematic heroine.

In both novels, Braddon very capably orchestrates the audience’s emotional response to each woman, but she shows much more overtly the possibility of social reintegration—granted, within the limitations of Victorian marriage—for the fallen in *Aurora Floyd*. If the novels had not been published practically simultaneously, it might be thought that the critical response to *Lady Audley’s Secret* triggered a new telling of the same story. In light of this

subsequent demise of Lady Audley, Braddon makes a pessimistic statement about marriage and the fate of women who try to exercise their strength for their own ends rather than their husbands’.” (“Feminine Sensationalism” 99).

⁴⁸ Jeni Curtis notes that the happy home at Mellish still traps Aurora: “Aurora is therefore incarcerated as effectively as Lady Audley. Her state only appears to be one of freedom. She is, in fact, domesticated, tamed. Natalie Schroeder agrees that Aurora is tamed: “Aurora ultimately learns she must accept the conventions of society that she first rejected. . . .” (“Feminine Sensationalism” 99).

impossibility, perhaps Braddon, ever aware of the market, penned *Aurora Floyd* as a different, more sympathetic rendering of the bigamist-heroine so as not to repeat her plot exactly. In her second stab at the bigamy novel, a wealthy woman becomes prey to a money-hungry, lower-class man this time round, though once again the lower-class villain of the piece shuffles off this mortal coil for the greater good of Society. Perhaps Braddon simply did not enjoy that her own novel condemned a fallen woman to a madhouse and death, even as she was herself illicitly living with a man whose legal wife was similarly confined. A discussion of the market for sensation fiction helps situate her novels on firmer ground than her biography, and so this chapter begins with a discussion of *Aurora Floyd*'s participation in the genre of the bigamy novel before discussing the novel's offering of reintegration in light of fallenness and the morality of giving and withholding redemption.

The Bigamy Novel, Braddon, and *Aurora Floyd*

Jeanne Fahnestock traces the rise of bigamy novels through the very visible bigamy trials of the period. She points to the Yelverton case from 1861, in which a couple supposedly read the marriage service in private in Scotland and was married by a Catholic priest in Ireland before the husband remarried another woman in Scotland (51), which he was perfectly able to do because of the laws of the various countries involved. Though his wife won a trial in Ireland, Yelverton won in the House of Lords; the heir to a peerage would hardly be considered subject to Irish law by fellow peers. The self-proclaimed Honorable Mrs. Yelverton used her story to write a bigamy novel, *Martyrs to Circumstance*, published in September 1861. Other writers, such as J.R. O'Flanagan and Cyrus Redding, also wrote novels based on the sensational and much-publicized trial (52). Almost simultaneously, Mrs.

Henry Wood's novel *East Lynne* appeared in January 1861, running until September.⁴⁹ Ouida's novel *Granville de Vigne: A Tale of the Day*, also known as *Held in Bondage*, was serialized in *New Monthly Magazine* alongside *East Lynne*, appearing in the same month (Wynne 74). Like *East Lynne*, it featured bigamy as a major plot point, but the dual aristocratic heroes of the novel, both duped into marriage by lower-class women (76), escape marriage by discovering the bigamy of the first wife—what Fahnestock calls bigamy defeated by bigamy (63)—or through the death of the unfaithful wife, thus allowing them to make socially-appropriate marriages. Like much of Ouida's output in the 1860s, her novel leans decidedly in favor of the lions of the aristocracy, offering little sympathy for their fallen wives.⁵⁰ In contrast, *East Lynne* drew a sympathetic portrait, if didactic—didactic in that it imposed conventional social morals, not opposing them as Braddon does in *Aurora Floyd*—of a doomed fallen woman who lives, disfigured and disguised, under the same roof as her husband and his second wife. What exciting issues of the *New Monthly* these must have been! Lady Isabel suffering the pangs of guilt and anonymous maternity in one story, and in the other, Granville de Vigne and Colonel Sabretasche falling in love with well-born women whom they cannot marry!

During the run of Wood's and Ouida's novels, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's first bigamy novel was initially serialized in *Robin Goodfellow* beginning in July 1861; thus, *Lady Audley's Secret* may well have been chronologically able to use the bigamy trial as a

⁴⁹ While the case and the novel are topically related, Wood most likely did not rely on the case for inspiration so much as for spawning interest and sales (Fahnestock 53)

⁵⁰ The titular character Granville de Vigne and his friend Sabretasche both marry badly; de Vigne's wife is found to have a husband living, and so he is free to marry a girl sixteen years his junior, who we discover is his friend's child! Sabretasche had married early in life and left his wayward wife in Italy, where she later had a child. He finds his wife years later in the gutters of Paris, and forgives her on her deathbed. He then is free to marry the London beauty he loves. Both of the lower-class, fallen wives are portrayed as deceitful, unfaithful, and uncouth, but Sabretasche's legitimate daughter is nonetheless a fit wife for a nobleman. Though Sabretasche's wife dies, de Vigne's false wife ends the novel the mistress of a Russian noble, and "thrives upon roubles" (307), hinting that life goes on even after respectability ceases.

historical precedent (Fahnestock 54). The novel's serialization was far from complete, however, when the periodical folded. When Braddon's partner John Maxwell later published the novel a second time, now in his new *Sixpenny Magazine* (Carnell 144), it ran concurrently with *Aurora Floyd's* serialization in *Temple Bar*, though *Aurora Floyd* was published anonymously.⁵¹ As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Queen Victoria read *Lady Audley's Secret* approvingly (Cruse 326), as did other readers, even "many Victorian mothers who allowed their daughters to read it" (326). However, the tale of Aurora Floyd Conyers Mellish was harder to admire because the fallen woman was not punished, though the heroine had accidentally rather than knowingly remarried during the lifetime of her first husband and had not reacted to news of his continued existence by shoving him down a well, as Lady Audley had.

Much of the criticism of Aurora Floyd's accidental bigamy came indirectly through attacks on Braddon's skills and technique as a novelist. Though Henry Mansel disliked the bigamy concept, he did laud the novelist's literary ability, saying that here "the individual characters are drawn with greater skill" than in *Lady Audley's Secret*; he then undercut his praise by commenting that he found the plot not as interesting as that of *Lady Audley's Secret* (493). W. Fraser Rae was still more cutting in his summation of Braddon: "By the unthinking crowd she is regarded as a woman of genius" (180). Conversely, the *Court Journal* praised the then-anonymous novelist's skill in creating "'undoubtedly one of the best works of fiction now making their appearance'" (qtd. in Carnell 146). Margaret Oliphant, in an article

⁵¹ According to Natalie Houston, "The penny novels Braddon published in magazines aimed at the working classes were generally published under a pseudonym or anonymously, and most were never reprinted in volume form" (14). It is interesting, then, that *Aurora Floyd* would be anonymously published in an up-market periodical and *Lady Audley's Secret* published in a half-penny magazine under the author's own name, and also that both novels would achieve great fame despite their different histories. Perhaps Braddon wanted to keep her various literary markets separate, for to publish all her works under the same name would certainly confuse readers.

published anonymously in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, mixed criticism and praise, first suggesting Braddon had “brought in the reign of bigamy as an interesting and fashionable crime” and that *Aurora Floyd's* “unpleasant subject has been in reality the cause of its great success,” but then also allowing Braddon “certain literary claims” and the novel to be “a very clever story,” “well knit together, thoroughly interesting, and full of life” (263). George Sala, responding to Oliphant in *Belgravia*, a magazine edited by Braddon, proclaimed, “There is little need for me to take up the cudgels in defence (sic) of Miss Braddon: she is quite strong enough and quite cunning enough of fence to hold her own. . . .” (Sala 55). Indeed, to Braddon’s critics, her novels’ biting wit and boundless popularity must have smarted.

However, nothing was more irritating to the novel’s critics than the immorality of a bigamist heroine who nevertheless generated boundless popularity, and critics responded stridently. In his 1863 article “Sensation Novels” in the *Quarterly Review*, H.L. Mansel heartily disparaged the character: “She is inferior to Lady Audley, as a pickpocket is inferior to a thug; but there is an important difference, — that Lady Audley is meant to be detested, while Aurora Floyd is meant to be admired” (492). For Mansel, the sympathy allotted to Aurora rendered “the moral teaching of the story . . . more questionable than that of its predecessor,” and certainly he was not the only person to say so. *Fraser's Magazine* chimed in, too, noting, “In *Aurora Floyd* . . . the sympathy is all on the side of the bigamist” (“Popular” 259). The *London Review* lodged a similar complaint:

Aurora Floyd herself is a specimen of the sex whose personal appearance we might admire, but, in spite of the authoress’s evident desire to enlist our sympathies in her favour, she fails to attract them. A masculine woman with a heart is not a loveable being; but a masculine woman without a heart borders on the repulsive. . . . (“Aurora Floyd” 176)

The reviewer clearly means to differentiate between women who act appropriately and those who do not meet the standards for ideal femininity, but the reviewer fails to note the attraction of a questionable heroine to other readers.

The dual effects of Aurora's questionability—critical notoriety and public fascination—became a sore point for reviewers. As noted by the *Christian Remembrancer*, Aurora “does a hundred bad things and prospers in spite of them, both in her own fate and in the reader's favour” (“Lost and Saved” 230). Other critics were quick to complain that reading about such a woman lacked merit. The *London Review* harrumphed, “we do not see what point is gained by making the heroine marry a rich Yorkshireman while she is still the groom's wife, and, the groom being subsequently opportunely shot, live happy ever after” (“Aurora Floyd” 176), while the *Saturday Review* found no moral value in the novel, arguing, “That the book is edifying, or that the fortunes of a lady who has married a groom secretly are in any way worth recording except as a source of marketable literary excitement, it would be idle to pretend” (“Aurora Floyd” 149). Critical expectations of the novel—that the novel will be edifying, the plot worth recording, the conflict gain a point—contrast the real effect of the novel—reader's favor and marketable literary excitement. Thus the high-culture critics reveal their entrenched distrust of the popular novel, even as they also reveal their class consciousness in bemoaning the behavior of a woman who would marry her groom. Moreover, these reviews entirely dismiss the point of the novel, for as this chapter argues, the novel indeed has its purpose.

Advocates of Braddon's novel among the ranks of the critics often cited the titular heroine as a great virtue of the novel. An *Athenaeum* critic found Aurora appealing and a figure of sympathy against personal inclination: “. . . she is a far more pleasing heroine than

her predecessor, Lady Audley; and we cannot help liking her and sympathizing with her, in spite of our better reason and judgment, just as every character in the book is made to do, involuntarily and unwittingly, by sheer force of fascination” (“Aurora Floyd” 144). In the same vein, a *Reader* reviewer found Braddon’s heroines, Aurora included, refreshingly realistic amid the ranks of other heroines, which were deemed too virtuous to be true to life:

The whole of our modern literature has grown so eminently proper and respectable that we welcome any one who has the courage to describe men and women as they are, not as they would be if there was no such thing as passion in the world. Since the death of Currer Bell we have had no writer, till Miss Braddon came, who dared to paint a heroine of flesh and blood. Lady Audley, Aurora Floyd, and Olivia Arundel are, each in their own way, creations of real genius, standing apart from the common run of novel-heroines” (“Miss Braddon’s New Novel” 692)

Heroines “of flesh and blood” appealed to the broad spectrum of the Victorian readership, for without a doubt, regardless of the attacks on their morality or technique, these bigamy novels were immensely popular. As a bound edition, *Lady Audley’s Secret* went into eight editions in three months (Cruse 327). In London alone, the novel spawned three staged versions and *Aurora Floyd* five in the years following their publication (Carnell 196). In 1866, *Aurora Floyd* was republished in the *London Journal*, “the longest running magazine carrying fiction for the lower classes,” which had previously republished *Lady Audley’s Secret*; these reprints show that the novels were widely read across class, whether by people who could purchase the expensive triple decker, the serials, a subscription to a circulating library, or the cheapest and slowest option, the reprint (210). What gave life to this fascination with bigamy, across class? Why did these novels have such a large readership? The reviewer for the *Christian Rembrancer* contended, “Bigamy, or the suspicion of bigamy, is sensational as fully, though in a lower field, as are ghosts and portents; it disturbs in the same way the reader’s sense of the stability of things, and opens a new, untried vista of what

may be” (“Lost and Saved” 211). Bigamy novels like *East Lynne* and *Lady Audley’s Secret* sold so well because they feed their audience’s implicit desire “to sin and be innocent,” to experience “the delights and penalties of having another spouse” (Fahnestock 65, 47).

According to legal historian Joan Perkins, these novels appealed to female readers because a dark theme running in bigamy literature was liberation:

Women lined up at Mudies’s Select Circulating Library for sensational bestsellers such as the bigamy novels of Mary Braddon, Mrs Henry Wood’s *East Lynne*, and Rhoda Broughton’s *Cometh Up as a Flower*; in these novels, the death of a husband came as a welcome relief to the wife, and if death did not occur the wife sought remedy in flight, adultery, divorce or murder. (271)

That is to say, these novels provided fantasies of escape and the possibility of a “new, untried vista,” even by means of violence, crime, and sexual deviance, offering up fallenness as a remedy to unhappiness. The potential for the female characters of these novels to turn to violence, crime, and adultery creates rather a sensation-fiction paradox, for this potential makes the novels both sensational—and so unfit to be read by anyone—and fascinating—and so destined to be read by everyone.

The need for escape through fantasy points to a legal issue. By law, remarriage during the lifetime of a spouse was a felony, and bigamous marriages were voided by the existence of a living spouse. Though provisions existed for remarriage in ignorance that the first spouse was not deceased, bigamy was severely punishable (Perkins 12). In cases of abandonment, as in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, in which the first husband disappears by slipping away to Australia, death might never be proven; in *Granville de Vigne*, the Trefusis’s first husband is believed drowned, but is very much alive, vengefully reappearing to serve his best interest. Also, the laws of the period made divorce virtually impossible for all but the very wealthy, even though the fluidity of marriage within the lower and working classes meant that bigamy was

common practice. It was, after all, virtually impossible to divorce, so moving on with a new “spouse” was immensely practical. In 1845, Mr. Justice Maule sat judge for a bigamy trial, in which the husband had bigamously remarried after the infidelity of his wife. His comments show the absurdity of the law in denouncing as criminal a class of people who could not afford to follow its tenets:

“You ought to have brought an action for criminal conversation; that action would have been tried by one of Her Majesty’s judges at the Assizes; you would probably have recovered damages; and then you should have instituted a suit in the ecclesiastical court for a divorce *a mensa et thoro*. Having got that divorce, you should have petitioned the House of Lords for a divorce *a vinculo*, and should have appeared by counsel at the bar of their Lordships’ House. Then . . . you might have married again. The whole proceeding would not have cost you more than £1000.” (qtd. in Shanley 37)

The bigamist’s reply, “Ah, my Lord I never was worth a thousand pence in all my life,” underscores the need for an accessible escape from marriage. Until and even after the passage of the Divorce Act of 1857, which increased accessibility to divorce if not assuaging its stigma, bigamy seemed a practical and ready-to-hand method for remarriage—so long as it remained a secret. Thus, despite animadversion to the contrary, “the contorted bigamy plots of the 1860s could strike their contemporary readers as probable” (Fahnestock 57), in part due to widely available news of trials such as the Yelverton case. Indeed, England saw nearly 900 bigamy trials in the decade preceding the novels’ rise to fame (58), and like divorce proceedings, these trials were fantastic fodder for both writers and readers.

Because of the fabulous sales of *East Lynne* and Braddon’s novels, bigamy novels spouted from the pens of all manner of would-be novelists and remained popular throughout the 1860s. In 1863, *Fun*’s “To Make a Sensation Novel” advised prospective authors on writing in the style of famous sensationalists, including Braddon:

Take a handsome young lady, a regular screamer, or Aurorer. Let her marry two husbands, mix, and let her murder one of them. Vary by letting some one (sic) else commit the murder and accuse her of it. Put her into a lunatic asylum. Throw the other husbands into wells, and take them out or not as suits your fancy. Call it 'Temple Bar's Secret,' or 'Aurora Dangerous,' or 'The Captain of the Audley Floyd.' Serve in eight editions. This is the novel á la — —. (230)

Serious critics agreed that devising a bigamy novel, albeit not necessarily a very good one, was easily enough achieved. By simply choosing between several aspects of the bigamy plot, “the novelist creates one of four basic permutations of the convention: real/accidental, real/intentional, apparent/accidental or apparent/intentional bigamy” (Fahnestock 61). *Aurora Floyd* falls into the first category, *Lady Audley's Secret* into the second, and *East Lynne* and *Granville de Vigne* into the third. Naturally, their plots were often borrowed in other novels, some that were even published. Of the twenty-four sensation novels discussed in H.L. Mansel's “Sensation Novels,” eight bigamy novels were included: the two Braddon novels, as well as *Clinton Maynyard*, *Recommended to Mercy*, *The Law of Divorce*, *The Daily Governess*, *Only a Woman*, and *The Woman of Spirit* (490).⁵² That nine out of these twenty-four books, including four bigamy novels, were also published without a named author suggests two possibilities: that the stigma of novel writing had not yet passed away, or that, like Braddon, authors may have maintained *nom de plumes* and published anonymously to serve multiple markets simultaneously. Writing sensation novels stained, but popular sensation novels also made their authors into household names and offered the possibility of lucrative compensation, hence the imitators, anonymous and otherwise.

Introducing Aurora: Secrets and Foreshadowing

Since *Aurora Floyd* was published anonymously, the novel would not initially have

⁵² Wilkie Collins's *No Name* and Mrs. Henry Wood's *Danesbury House* also feature on this list.

been known as Braddon's work, but it shares with *Lady Audley's Secret* her trademark step-by-step process creating and maintaining suspense: giving clues, withholding information, and revealing secrets just as more problems are introduced.⁵³ By creating suspense in this fashion, the novels maintained readership throughout the year of serialization, and readers would learn to pay attention to details in hopes of surprising the withheld secrets. Braddon's two introductory chapters inform readers a great deal about the tone of the novel, prefacing and foreshadowing the events that follow, and from the beginning it is clear that there is more to Aurora than meets the eye. Opening with a description of the Kentish woods at dusk on an autumn evening, the text approaches Felden Woods, the home of Mr. Floyd, through meadows and hedgerows, past thatched roofs, through an altogether idyllic, pastoral landscape of farmsteads and village churches. Mr. Floyd's house, however, looks "a-fire", as though "there must be something more than natural in the glitter of those windows" (45).⁵⁴ The house's "broad *façade*" in the bricked Georgian style proves to be nothing but a *façade* indeed, a stage on which our characters shortly will open the scene. The narrator tells us the events of the past thirty years leading up to this moment, of the family history of the Floyds, and of Mr. Floyd's marriage and fatherhood.

The novel's eponymous heroine appears tangentially to these other discussions as the outgrowth of the just-recounted lineage. Her description underscores her inheritance of her mother's working-class traits, manifest most obviously in her physical appearance, rather than her father's merchant-class tendencies. As the novel continues, this distinction of a

⁵³ This process is quite evident in *Lady Audley's Secret*, where the first chapters are very important, hinting to the reader that Lucy Audley has been married (she secretly wears a ring on a ribbon around her neck), has a child (an infant's shoe is hidden in her jewelry case), and even who her husband is (Talboys enters the novel immediately after the description of the ring).

⁵⁴ According to Andrew Maunder, "the sexual connotations behind 'autumn's red finger lightly laid upon the foliage', prefigure how Braddon's novel will represent these threatening, fiery images as not unrelated to the sexual desires of the male onlooker" (65).

literally “low” brow serves as a reminder of Aurora’s origins, and these origins and their resulting taints on Aurora’s character chart the push and pull of class behaviors—namely what a lady is and how she behaves, particularly as concerns a woman who is neither a chaste maiden nor a shameless adulteress—through which Aurora’s every move is interpreted by a number of voyeurs both inside and outside the novel, readers and reviewers included. Her personal history is open to these interpretations, as readers and the Kentish gentry join together in evaluating the girlhood and adolescence of the character, in which Braddon’s narrator gives us many clues that Aurora’s path is not that of the ideal Victorian woman. Her interest in horses, her disobedience to her father, and his inability to tame her contrast with the normative upbringing for a girl of her position; her situation at a Parisian finishing school and the homecoming it necessitates on this rosy evening directly result from these behaviors and the impossibility of controlling them. That Aurora returns to Felden from Paris at dusk, bringing with her a red, fiery atmosphere suited to her namesake, hints that our heroine is perhaps of a fiery disposition. All this do the two chapters, taken together, readily reveal. The narrator not only quickly brings readers up to date with the events culminating in the set piece before them but also has prefigured a great deal of the novel’s ensuing problems and issues. The carriage arrives. Aurora is here.

The appearance of the heroine, however, seems to belie the portrayal of Aurora hitherto given in the first chapters. According to these chapters, Aurora’s personality—the novel describes her as “a bright impetuous being, affectionate and generous”—largely develops from her uncontrolled growth, a gardening metaphor that we see in several places in the novel. Compared to her cousin Lucy, a young flower judiciously tended and hemmed between neat hedges, Aurora is not “trimmed and pruned by the gardener’s merciless hand”

but instead “shot whither she would, and there was none to lop the wandering branches of that luxuriant nature” (61). Her father dotes on her, but cannot control her. “If he could have governed or directed that impetuous nature, he would have had her the most refined and elegant, the most perfect and accomplished of her sex; but he could not do this, and he was fain to thank God for her as she was, and to indulge her every whim.” (63) Yet the woman who descends from the carriage at Felden is no happy young chit, but a gaunt, sad lady. What has transpired to render our happy heroine into this sad creature?

The housekeeper at Felden Woods believes she knows: “ ‘A poor dear young thing, that knows no more of this wicked world than a blessed baby,’ said the housekeeper, ‘all alone amongst a pack of moustachioed Frenchmen!’ ” (65). Her comment foreshadows the truth that will eventually come late in the novel, as does the grief of Aurora’s father during her absence—“he seemed as much dejected by his daughter’s absence as he could well have been by her death”—and Aurora’s unexpectedly haggard and hollow appearance. After the hints given in the introductory chapters of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, insightful readers no doubt must have been on the lookout for hints such as these. Here, the course of study at the exclusive finishing school, described as “too hard” for the heiress, serves as a cover for what has actually happened, the hardness of her secret married life. The novel hints at domestic violence through coupling Aurora’s altered appearance with the conversation between her and her father that brings the chapter to its close:

‘That person – he is dead?’
‘He is.’ (67)

Clearly, Aurora’s father links the changes in appearance to “that person,” a nameless “he” who is hardly likely to be found among the Demoiselles Lespard; accordingly, we readers may feel more than justified in suspecting some mystery concerning the course of study

Aurora has pursued with such ill consequence under the “cruel Frenchwomen” (68). But rather than being trapped in a tedious schoolroom for those months abroad, she became entrapped in cruel wedlock, during which she “no doubt had pined sadly in the close atmosphere” of her husband (68). He has indeed taught her a great deal about this wicked world, and more than a lady in her position was supposed to know of men, mustachioed or otherwise. He has taught her something so dreadful, so brutal, so adulterous, and so dangerous that she flees from him.

While her cousin Lucy becomes a pattern wife, Aurora matrimonially misfires. Aurora’s husband, James Conyers carries himself above his station and tries to convince Aurora that he is the son of a gentleman, but he is employed as her father’s groom. Her secret marriage is as much a secret for this fact as for her elopement. Elopements can be brushed over; grooms, we are to understand, carry the stable with them. H.L. Mansel, showing his caste-consciousness, somewhat uncharitably dubs Conyers, “the Damasippus of her first vows” (493).⁵⁵ The threat of this husband becomes the threat of loss of place and honor through the corruptive influence of the lower class; even in marriage, Aurora may lose place just as though she has fallen. Aurora’s failings include the loss of her virginity, even in marriage, to a lower-class man. That they have established a sexual relationship prior to marriage is hinted by their rides out unchaperoned, but the marriage solidifies this assumption. The sin of this association rather than the sexuality of the heroine seems to be the root problem on which the remainder of the novel builds, for this sexual desire seems to

⁵⁵ In short, ‘Damasippus’ means a groom. In his 1789 book *A New and Literal Translation of Juvenal and Persius*, the Rev. Martin Madan explains the name in a footnote: “The name Damasippus (from Gr. Δ μ ω, to tame, and Ππoσ (sic), an horse) signifies an horse-tamer, and is applicable not merely to any single person, but to all of the same taste. Damasippus, says he, drives furiously by the ashes and bones of his great progenitors; so totally uninfluenced by their examples of true greatness, as to sink into the mean character of a coachman, or charioteer” (394). Madan’s translation, including this footnote with corrected Greek characters, was reprinted several times in the nineteenth-century.

amount to little beside the evidence of that desire: the living first husband who reappears and dies at the home of Aurora's second husband. The relationships with the lower class that come from her marriage to Conyers—familiarity with hostlers and dog-fanciers, for example—also hint at Aurora's fallenness.⁵⁶ Here, in contrast to our critical preconceptions, fallenness really means knowledge of things beyond the ideal woman's ken, whether it be sexual knowledge, knowledge of the lower class, knowledge of masculine pursuits, or knowledge of her own power to control or evade control by others, especially men. Aurora's penchant for horses all but screams to the Victorian reader that she is dangerous, uncontrollable, and perhaps tainted, and much has been written about this.⁵⁷ However, though running away with a groom seems apropos for such a woman, ultimately such behaviors do not permanently effect her social position. Her marriage to a groom, though an outgrowth of her unfeminine behavior, constitutes a social *mésalliance* rather than a moral failing, and her unwomanly interest in horse breeding and racing actually attracts her second husband, a landed country gentleman, who is himself interested in these pursuits.

In addition to Conyers, all the villains of the novel similarly prove to be lower class. In addition to the lower-class husband who beats and cheats her, Aurora's governess-cum-housekeeper, Mrs. Powell, is a shabby-genteel widow of an officer, and she is jealous of

⁵⁶ The introduction of the otherwise marginal character of the dog-fancier reveals a significant piece of information about Aurora: he has a means of procuring money from Aurora. Her connection with this social inferior—he is “the very last person, amongst all the souls between Cockspur Street and the statue of King Charles; who seemed likely to have anything to say to Miss Aurora Floyd” (71), yet he addresses her on such friendly terms, though she herself answers in indignation—and her posting of the valuable bracelet to him underscore the plot's continuing mystery. Indeed, the fancier's presence in the novel is largely functional, as he stokes suspense that might otherwise have died with the mysterious dead man and supplies Aurora with the racing journal to notify her of Conyer's death.

⁵⁷ Gina Dorré's *Victorian Fiction and the Cult of the Horse* argues that horses and women were seen as a dangerous combination, with the term “horsebreaker”—deriving, after all, from *Anonyma*—serving as a soubriquet for prostitute (73). Horses allowed women to leave the protected domestic space and to have more interaction with men in their sphere, and Dorré notes that women who ride in literature—Cathy Earnshaw and Rosamund Lydgate—are punished for their improper freedom (78-9).

Aurora's wealth, beauty, and temperament. The stablehand Softy, who feels he has more right to a place at Mellish Park than its mistress by marriage, hates Mrs. Mellish, who notoriously horsewhips him, and he dreams of violent revenge upon her. Aurora is preyed upon, unsuspecting, by first the groom, then her companion, and finally all three together, as they torment her and force her to flee her home and her position. Though Bulstrode initially sees low traits in Aurora and believes she would disgrace the Bulstrode family honor, even he comes to rally around our black-haired heroine. Only the combined muscle of Bulstrode and Capt. Prodder, a lower-class but self-made man and Aurora's uncle, thwart the plot against Aurora. These distant relatives of Aurora unravel the mystery that seems poised to ruin the domesticity of Mellish Park with scandal, saving both Aurora as well as the greater family from shame and disgrace. Aurora's lower-class enemies might work against them, but the family coming together—Aurora's father provides a clue in note numbers, Mellish allies himself with his bigamous wife, Bulstrode acts as detective and Prodder as secret-keeper and plot-prodder—forms a solid front to protect Aurora. That Aurora foresees the revelation of her past as a future problem and looks to Lucy's house for comfort and help in her troubles shows solidarity among the women of the family as well, and Aurora eventually does run to her cousin for shelter. Lucy, for all her jealousy of Talbot's first love for Aurora, loves her cousin so much that Aurora might well be the only point on which Lucy dares to disagree with her lord and master—and the only point at which she acts out of character. The solidarity of the family unit serves to maintain their social position against the attacks of the lower-class encroachers. Bigamy threatens the stability of a marriage, nullifying the legal bond between two people due to the legitimacy of an earlier bond, but the public revelation of such a secret is a threat to the entire family. The family has a stake, then, in the quelling of

secret-tellers found in the domestic space, like Mrs. Powell and the Softy, who have been privy to family secrets. That this family keeps Aurora within the fold to oust the threat of the lower-class encroachers to the upper-class family unit is quite important; their actions demonstrate the possibility for redemption as beginning within the family, which in practice often rejected the fallen out of self-interest.

Thus, the upper-class family functions pivotally in the novel's rewriting of the bigamy plot. In the principal quartet of the novel—Aurora and John, Lucy and Talbot—who are all eventual members of the same family through marriage to first cousins, Braddon created two heroine-and-hero pairs. Aurora and John are a heroine and hero rather unlike those featured in more stereotypical novels, forming a contrast between the appropriate role of hero or heroine and those characters who here fill those roles in order to comment on types of characters and ultimately individuals. *Aurora Floyd's* characters who are most stereotypical—Talbot and Lucy Bulstrode are a matched pair of hero and heroine in their most ideal forms, him strong and upstanding, her beautiful and dutiful—often fail to attract or keep the sympathy or interest of readers, and certainly not that of Braddon herself, who does too thorough a job of pointing out their deficiencies. Only her flawed characters manage to be deficient in such a way that is engaging, even laudable. Aurora the anti-heroine succeeds in flouting conventional feminine behaviors, at least until the novel's end, when she conforms to the angel in the house model and is almost written out of the novel. Mellish the anti-hero is neither a heartthrob nor a dashing knight-errant, but a great jolly fellow. Though Aurora fits into patriarchal society through her relationships to men—father, groom-husband, fiancé, and gentleman-husband—only Bulstrode and Mellish ultimately determine whether she can remain part of their society, as her father is too doting and her groom-husband too

dead for all but a brief stint in the middle of the novel. Like Robert Audley judging his aunt, these men also decide what her part in society will be. Serving in the novel as the moral standard for their society, Bulstrode and Mellish both evaluate Aurora before and after the instance of her bigamy, and their perceptions of her are quite disparate, as each man assesses Aurora according to his conception of appropriate womanhood, the domestic ideal or the merry beauty on horseback. By the novel's end, Bulstrode has come to see that though Aurora was not his ideal, she is essential for his friend's happiness, and so encourages their legal second marriage that solidifies Aurora's status as an upper-class wife. In Bulstrode's transformation from a cold guardian of the status quo, judging all women against the ideal feminine standard of his time, to actually encouraging his friend to marry a fallen woman, the novel offers readers a guide to reevaluating conventional conceptions of fallenness.

Talbot Bulstrode

Aurora's 19th birthday ball introduces several characters into the action including, perhaps most importantly in terms of the plot, Bulstrode. As Bulstrode struggles with what to make of Aurora, readers learn a considerable amount about him through his thoughts and actions. Braddon's narrator is less forthcoming with details of the heroine, thereby creating and maintaining suspense: our second glimpse of Aurora is entirely from Bulstrode's perspective. Proud of family name, lineage, and purity of race, Bulstrode is not a man for the divorce courts, and since he seeks to wed only the perfect woman, he of course remains unmarried. He has no vices, which is perhaps his greatest vice, as he is consequently very cold and judgmental. Bulstrode, however, is completely typecast in this role; he is the ideal Englishman of noble birth, upright and principled, yet altogether a cold fish. This information

about Bulstrode clearly establishes his self-control as quite the foil for Aurora's vibrant personality.

Bulstrode himself is positioned for a fall. Content in his own security and full of pride, Talbot Bulstrode discontentedly stands aside at the ball watching the female dancers as they pass and categorizing them according to type: "dark beauties in pink, fair beauties in blue; tall dashing beauties in silks, and laces, and jewels, and splendor; modestly downcast beauties in white crape and rose-buds. They had been spread for him, those familiar nets of gauze and areophane, and he had escaped them all. . . ." Like the riders of Rotten Row, these women put themselves on display, if slightly more decorously done at private ball than a public park. Tempting and purposefully enticing in order to secure husbands and position, they use luxury as a marketing device, and Braddon accordingly describes the scene in language that supplies material texture to the manner of this display. Of course Bulstrode has never met these particular women—"the faces, though unfamiliar to him, were not new"—and this language points to these types of women as a recurring feature of such balls, a persistent snare. Bulstrode's purposeful distancing of himself from his fellow partygoers through typecasting renders him ripe to meet the one woman here whom Braddon has created as impossible for him to pigeon-hole, a woman unlike all the others:

While he lounged against the pillar of a doorway, leaning on his cane, and resting his lame leg, and wondering lazily whether there was anything upon earth that repaid a man for the trouble of living, Cornet Maldon approached him with a woman's gloved hand lying lightly on his arm, and a divinity walking by his side. A divinity! imperiously beautiful in white and scarlet, painfully dazzling to look upon, intoxicatingly brilliant to behold. Captain Bulstrode had served in India, and had once tasted a horrible spirit called *bang*, which made the men who drank it half mad; and he could not help fancying that the beauty of this woman was like the strength of that alcoholic preparation; barbarous, intoxicating, dangerous, and maddening.

His brother-officer presented him to this wonderful creature, and he found that her earthly name was Aurora Floyd, and that she was the heiress of Felden Woods. (77-78)⁵⁸

This passage tells readers a great deal about Bulstrode, though it describes Aurora. The immediate introduction of Aurora after Bulstrode's musings about the value of living seems to implicitly answer his question: Yes! A divinity, a woman like *this* makes life worth living! He is dazzled by Aurora's beauty, intoxicated and maddened as with a narcotic. He finds Aurora "imperiously beautiful," a phrase suggesting the duality of power and beauty, and that she is clad in contrasting white and red hints at purity as well as the loss of it, at virtue and temptation intertwined. Part and parcel of her foreignness to him, her sexuality is implicitly exotic and "dangerous" while the snares of the other dancers only bore him.

Maldon's introduction of Aurora pulls Bulstrode down from the heights of his appreciation: Aurora the divinity transforms from a "wonderful creature" to an "earthly" heiress, though of a manor house with a name more fit for a fairy woodland. The transformation duplicates in Bulstrode—"Talbot Bulstrode recovered himself in a moment" (78)—as he instantaneously switches from worship to fault-finding. He now analyzes Aurora's every physical defect, cataloguing her features as he continues efforts to place her into a type. Talbot recognizes Aurora's "low forehead, a nose that deviated from the line of beauty, and a wide mouth," noting these imperfections from Victorian standards of beauty as

⁵⁸ Bang is actually a hemp product. According to Watt's *Dictionary of the Economic Products of India*, the plant "is cultivated more or less throughout India, either on account of the NARCOTIC derived from (a) the resin, *charas*; (b) the young tops and unfertilised female flowers—*gángjá* (or *gánja*); (c) the older leaves and fruit-vessels—*bháng*; or on account of the fibre, HEMP; or the ripe seed from which an OIL is prepared" (104). The sea captain and three-time circumnavigator William Dampier wrote of the product in his 1699 travelogue *Voyages and Descriptions*: "It is reported of this Plant, that if it is infused in an Liquor, it will stupefy the brains of any person that drinks thereof; but it operates diversely, according to the constitution of the person. Some it makes sleep, some merry, putting them into a Laughing fit, and others it makes mad: but after 2 or 3 hours they come to themselves again" (126). In 1834, selling "any intoxicating drugs or materials, any intoxicating drink or preparation manufactured from Bang, Gunjah, Grain, Opium" without a license became illegal in India (Fagan 220).

though to establish how very earthly this false divinity is, in order to finally categorize her according to class. Though Bulstrode imagines Aurora as a marriage-minded young woman looking for a husband with pedigree—“She was to have fifty thousand pounds for her portion, so of course she didn’t want a rich husband; she was a nobody, so of course she wanted position, and had no doubt read up the Raleigh Bulstrodes in the sublime pages of Burke” (78)—Aurora defies expectations yet again. Not only does she seem indifferent to the excellent potential husband standing beside her and makes no attempt to snare him, but she also proves to be thinking of horse-racing rather than becoming mistress of Bulstrode Castle. Talbot’s failure to understand her not once but twice renders him “confounded.” He can hardly believe her a woman, as her behavior seems sinfully ignorant of her true feminine role: “ ‘If I had a sister,’ he thought, ‘I would get her to talk to this miserable girl, and bring her to a sense of her iniquity.’ ”(79). Of course he has the same expectations of a sister as he does for a wife—a woman worthy of the name Bulstrode would of course not go in for horse-racing but would instead show dutiful piety in maintaining her gender. He later “declared that if he had such a woman for his sister, he would shoot her, unless she reformed and burned her betting book,” again underscoring his dislike of Aurora at the same time that he uses her as the model for what a Bulstrode woman should not be.

Yet this conversation with his fellow officer also reveals Bulstrode’s feelings toward Aurora, for the narrator tells us that he “talked of her as if she had done him an unpardonable injury by entertaining a taste for the Turf” (80), implicitly revealing the injury of her indifference, the iniquity of stepping outside her predetermined female role. He has, after all, already been imagining her as the mother of the Bulstrode heirs, teaching them a racing alphabet. Cornet Maldon counters Bulstrode’s “savage humor” with the argument that

Aurora “was a very jolly girl, and a good girl, and a perfect lady,” three descriptions of women with radically different implications and meanings. His metonymic slide from “very jolly girl” to “perfect lady” is the great undertaking of the novel: that is, the argument that the very jolly follower of the horse-track may be good girl and even a perfect lady to boot. Ultimately, Bulstrode himself must come to see and appreciate Aurora on these terms in order to restore peace and matrimonial bliss to Mellish Park. But first, he falls in love with the jolly girl, discovers she might not be so very good as she ought to have been, and assumes that her status as a perfect lady is in jeopardy. That is to say, he misreads her again and again before he pigeon-holes her at last as the mistress of Mellish Park and his friend’s loyal wife, a role he makes possible by stopping her fall with a stopover in his family home.

Talbot Bulstrode’s understanding of womanhood depends largely on his idea of personal and familial honor, and his inability to understand Aurora’s character springs from the same origins. In his quarters, he hangs images of “grim saints and angular angels in the pre-Raphaelite prints” (83-84) that model his ideal woman, “some shrinking being, as pale and prim as the mediaeval saints in his pre-Raphaelite engravings, spotless as her own white robes, excelling in all womanly graces and accomplishments, but only exhibiting them in the narrow circle of a home” (86). His wife must possess all these virtues so as not to besmear the golden value of a good family name. In his assessments of Aurora against the starkly pure saint ideal, he calls her after a number of historical and fictional women, including Cleopatra, Semiramide, Nell Gwynn, and even Guinevere, who suggest sinner rather than saint. His defamatory remark, “A Cleopatra with a snub nose two sizes too small for her face, and a taste for horseflesh!”, joins together criticisms of her exotic temptations, faults of beauty (as defined by his class), and crimes against femininity. Juxtaposed with Aurora, her cousin

Lucy fits Bulstrode's saintly ideal at every point. While she does not figure significantly in the ball scene, her after-party "babble about the ball" shows that she noticed and admired Captain Bulstrode at the party, while Aurora conversely does not remember him at all. Lucy's chatter even reveals that she, unlike Aurora, has indeed read up on the Raleigh Bulstrodes, just as Talbot believes a marriageable girl would. Upon Talbot's second visit to Felden, he meets Lucy and finds he can typecast her easily. To him, Lucy "was exactly the sort of woman to make a good wife," "just the good and timid creature who was destined to make him happy" (94)—yet he is not interested in this virginal saint in the slightest. Talbot wants to sip the *bang*.

A symbolic scene in the great drawing room at Felden Woods depicts Talbot wavering between Lucy and Aurora. The blocking of the scene and the transitions in and out of the light foreshadow the events that follow the scene. As Lucy sits "bathed in a flood of autumn sunlight," Bulstrode recognizes that Lucy has all the traits of a model wife, that she "was his ideal." Braddon's narrator describes Lucy's beauty as looking best by sunlight, which brings out her delicacy, and Talbot admires how the sun "light[s] up the golden halo about her face." However, the entrance of Aurora changes the lighting:

While Captain Bulstrode was watching Lucy with that grave contemplative gaze, trying to find out whether she was in any way different from other girls he had known, and whether the purity of the delicate beauty was more than skin deep, the window opposite to him was darkened, and Aurora Floyd stood between him and the sunshine. (86)

The blocking of Aurora's entrance graphically features her standing so that she physically blocks the light from falling on Bulstrode and Lucy; thus, she inadvertently calls Bulstrode's attention to herself, silhouetted as she must be against the light, from Lucy. She literally overshadows her fairer cousin. This scene suggests the ensuing period spent worshipping

Aurora before Bulstrode again appreciates Lucy, remembers her beauty as it had shone in the light, and again finds her sitting alone in the sunshine, waiting for him; he proposes then and there. For Bulstrode alone does Miss Floyd's beauty eclipse her cousin's "as the rising sun extinguishes the stars" (87).⁵⁹ His increasing interest in Aurora is led on by his inability to read her behavior and her beauty, as Aurora continues to perplex and entice him like "an empress who reigned by right divine of her eyes and hair." As a result, "Talbot Bulstrode turned away from his ideal to look at this dark-haired goddess." This physical and emotional transfer of his attentions from Lucy to Aurora yet again features language that suggests Aurora's otherness, her foreignness, and her unwitting power to entice.

Though Bulstrode expects women to behave as his mother, his grim saints, and even Lucy do, he also notices that Aurora, imperfect on this scale, is not devoid of her own merits; her relationship to her father, her sympathy with horses and dogs, her interest in the poor all complicate his reading of her character. He can pity her—she is, after all, nothing like his ideal—but he cannot classify her. He muses,

"I wonder whether these creatures are wiser than we? . . . "do they recognize some higher attributes in this girl than we can perceive, and worship their sublime presence? If this terrible woman, with her unfeminine tastes and mysterious propensities, were mean, or cowardly, or false, or impure, I do not think that mastiff would love her as he does; I do not think my thorough-breds would let her hands meddle with their bridles: the dog would snarl, and the horses would bite, as such animals used to do in those remote old days when they recognized witchcraft and evil spirits, and were convulsed by the presence of the uncanny. I dare say this Miss Floyd is a good, generous-hearted girl,—the sort of person fast men would call a glorious girl." (95)

This passage largely disparages her character in making several backhanded compliments to her affinities for "these creatures." Alongside the possibility for possessing "higher attributes" is the impossibility that "we"—he and all Society—"can perceive" them. Though

⁵⁹ Thus, the narrative of this scene at Felden is decidedly skewed toward Bulstrode's perspective, even as the narrator remains outside the story.

Bulstrode decries Aurora as “terrible,” “unfeminine,” and “mysterious,” he does not in turn compliment her directly; he instead establishes what she is not, “mean, or cowardly, or false, or impure.” However, her tastes and propensities fit her to keep company with animals and fast men rather than people such as himself. He will not call her a glorious girl, only daring to call her “a good, generous-hearted girl” for whom he is sorry. Yet this pity covers his interest in her, for “he was nevertheless allowing himself to be bewitched by this black-eyed siren; freely drinking of that cup of *bang* which she presented to him, and rapidly becoming intoxicated” (93). He follows her, not perfect dutiful Lucy, to Brighton and hangs on her every word for the next fifty pages, still intoxicated and unable to fight “the folly of loving her” (102).

The intoxicating bang drives Bulstrode to two proposals and one engagement with the woman he has almost always considered unsuitable as a wife. As a rival, Mellish forces Bulstrode’s hand by his blatant admiration of Aurora. Though Talbot had been appalled by Aurora’s interest in the races, Mellish, down to Brighton for the hunting season with his stud, cannot imagine why he admires Aurora, pondering, “she knows no more of horses than half the women in Yorkshire; so it isn’t that” (109). The competition for Aurora becomes an equestrian one, and thus more suited for Mellish, who shares her tastes and propensities for horse flesh. Talbot, beaten by this fitter horseman, takes out his ire on Lucy, whom he now compares unfavorably to Aurora: “The captain never admired Lucy so little as on horseback. His pale saint with the halo of golden hair seemed to him sadly out of place in a side-saddle” (111). In competition with Aurora on her turf, so to speak, just as Mellish outcompetes Bulstrode, Lucy shows unfavorably. Bulstrode unfavorably and uncharacteristically blames Lucy for her timidity both on horseback and in life, claiming that he intended to marry her

and followed *her* rather than Aurora to Brighton, and “he was half inclined to be angry with poor Lucy for not extricating him from the snares of Aurora” (112). But caught in a double bind, she cannot speak of her love to win Bulstrode or win him by keeping quiet. Bulstrode’s ideal loses out to her rival, as Bulstrode proposes to Aurora to defeat his competition.

Though he and Mellish both propose to Aurora, Bulstrode is the first to repropose to her after the arrival of the sporting newspaper with the entry that frees Aurora from her secret past: the death of her secret first husband. Though he does not understand or care why Aurora so impulsively changes her mind, Bulstrode “accepted the cup of bang which the siren had offered, and had drained the very dregs thereof, and was drunken” (122). The suitable, ideal woman is entirely overlooked now, for “Guinevere was lady of his heart, and poor Elaine sadly in the way” (147)—another reference to the women as a disparate pair, as disparate as these ladies of Arthurian legend. Braddon seems to solve one problem, Aurora’s choice of mate, while uncovering another, the mystery of the article about the dead jockey, and thus continues the novel’s narrative suspense.

One part of the secret resting in the newspaper comes arrives via a letter from his rigidly upright mother, and Bulstrode’s faith proves weaker than the trust Aurora puts on it. He stays true to his grim saints and shuns the Abyssinian queen; he is not Lancelot to her Guinevere after all. Talbot responds to the discovery of her secret—Aurora left the Parisian finishing school and vanished for a year—with doubt: “Why was he so ready to doubt her? What a pitiful coward he was to suspect her – to suspect this girl, whose transparent soul had been so freely unveiled to him; whose every accent was truth!” (154) Braddon’s narrator asks through Bulstrode the question that haunts the remainder of the novel: “What was there from first to last in the whole affair that was not perfectly natural and probable, the exceptional

circumstances of the case duly considered?" (154). This question about circumstance gestures to the wider debate over fallenness in Victorian culture; Bulstrode is ready enough to excuse Aurora's behavior if she can supply the "perfectly natural and probable" circumstance of her behavior. The novel's readers have known from the second chapter that something was not quite right about Aurora's education abroad, without knowing the particulars, and it is easy to envision the whole of the Victorian reading public waiting expectantly for the answer Aurora will provide. When she refuses to answer, Talbot cannot forgive her. Aurora's plea, "If you can trust me, Talbot; if you can believe that this secret is not utterly shameful— —" (156), points to exactly what Talbot and many readers would be thinking: a missing year in the life of a young woman is most likely quite shameful. Aurora's missing past implies that she has done something that ought to remain secret or otherwise mark her as fallen.

Talbot cannot trust the virtue of a woman with a secret. Denied the secret, he pronounces, "Then, Aurora Floyd, you can never be my wife" (156). This declarative sentence recasts Aurora all over again, as she moves from wife-to-be back to a foolish choice, an unfit wife for a man of stainless reputation. Bulstrode further explains his decision as a just one: "God forgive you, Aurora Floyd; but by your own confession you are no fit wife for an honourable man. I shut my mind against all foul suspicions; but the past life of my wife must be a white unblemished page, which all the world may be free to read." (157). To evaluate whether Aurora's life has been unblemished, Talbot would need her secret, and merely her denial to put him in possession of her secret is enough of a blemish on her virtue; her unfitness becomes implied fallenness through disobedience to her would-be spouse. She is unfit because she has a secret that she will not share with him who commanded its revelation; however, he equates revelation and transparency with proving her virtue,

expecting her to hold out the white unblemished page of her virginity for him to see. Breaking off their engagement emphasizes that a missing year in the life of a woman is indicative of her fallenness—a white page hidden must not be white after all—and so he invokes the forgiveness of God, withholding his own forgiveness, for her seemingly sinful secret. Significantly, the lost year adds yet another layer of mystery to the story, though Braddon and Aurora both withhold the gritty details we readers and Talbot both want to know: Is she fallen?

The winter weather outside Felden mimics both Talbot's self-repression and the death of his love, and Talbot himself recognizes the wintery parallel between the recent past and the future: "All this was typical of the crisis of his life. He was leaving warm love and hope, for cold resignation or icy despair" (159). Rid of his intoxication, no longer addicted to the *bang* supplied by Aurora's beauty, Talbot's present seems once again devoid of love and companionship, lonely and cold. As he continues further from the warmth and lights of the house into the chilly darkness, a final look back at the "dimly lighted," "feeble glimmer" of the house lights suggests the warmth there is no longer for him, that his distrust banishes him from the festivities therein, even as he wishes he could have "believed in her truth" (160). Though he has no faith in her now, he eventually learns to trust Aurora so that the exceptional circumstances of her life, including bigamy and possibly murder, are not reasons to doubt her again, but only after he discovers the truth of her past, long denied to him. In mastering her secrets, Bulstrode will at last find the truth of the missing year to be, if not a white page, not utterly shameful either. To borrow Bulstrode's own metaphor, he learns to accept that a vast spectrum lies between a spotless page and an irredeemably marred one.

John Mellish

The introduction of John Mellish, Aurora's eventual husband and Talbot's old friend, does several things for the novel. First, he serves as a rival and a foil for Bulstrode, a man who appreciates Aurora for what she is. He also becomes the moral compass of the novel, emotive and compassionate when Talbot Bulstrode proves stoically cold in his attachment to honor. In loving Aurora, he becomes Braddon's figure of the ideal man, though Talbot Bulstrode first appeared intended for that role and though Mellish seems an overgrown man-child. Mellish all but bursts upon the scene, high-spirited and completely unlike his friend: "a big man, with huge masses of Scotch plaid twisted about his waist and shoulders, sprang out of the vehicle, splashing the mud upon his legs, and rushed up to Talbot" (103). This Yorkshire-bred bear of a man seems an unlikely figure for the lover of our heroine, "having withal such a boyish exuberance in his manner, such a youthful and innocent joyousness in his face, that he might have been a youngster of eighteen just let loose from some public academy of the muscular Christianity school." Yet the narrator describes Mellish as a "familiar brute" immediately more "at his ease with Aurora" than Talbot, spreading joy and so generous that his servants love him. He is also an example of manly virtue, yet in a vein quite unlike his friend:

[I]t was something at thirty years of age to be able to look back upon a stainless boyhood and youth, which might have been befouled with the slime of the gutters, and infected with the odour of villainous haunts. Had he not reason to be proud of this?

Is there anything, after all, so grand as a pure and unsullied life—a fair picture, with no ugly shadows lurking in the background – a smooth poem, with no crooked, halting line to mar the verse – a noble book, with no unholy page – a simple story, such as our children may read? Can any greatness be greater? can any nobility be more truly noble? (106-7)

These virtues are different from Bulstrode's restraint and control, though both men have grown up similarly without a blemish on his past of which to be ashamed; the difference is that Talbot rigidly holds himself responsible for his and his family's moral purity, while Mellish's virtues seem to exist largely passively, unsullied because they have not been befouled or infected. Yet the narrator seems called upon to expound further on the two gentlemen, explaining, "Talbot Bulstrode may offend you with his sulky pride; John Mellish may simply impress you as a blundering countrified ignoramus; but neither of them shall ever shock you by an ugly word or an unholy thought" (108). We readers might not know Aurora's secret yet, but we can hazard a guess that these gentlemen will be shocked by it. Unlike Mellish's fair picture, "stainless boyhood," and "pure and unsullied life" with "no unholy page," all language suggestive of sexual innocence as much as innocence and virtue in general, ugly shadows of sexual knowledge lurk in Aurora's background. Ironically, the revelation of Aurora's dirty secret to these stainless men will be the truest test of their virtue.

Braddon uses the proposal scenes—there are three proposals at Brighton, but only Bulstrode's attempts are available to the reader—tells readers a great deal about the two men, for the scenes focus on the male perspective rather than Aurora's. At this point in the plot, why she refuses two men and then accepts one of them is inexplicable both to the men and to the reader. We—and the potential husbands—only know who is accepted and who is not. But when Talbot Bulstrode proposes to Aurora and fails, he stoops so low as to use his family as a tool to manipulate her into capitulating, and is then stung that ". . .he, Talbot Raleigh Bulstrode, of Bulstrode Castle, and of Saxon extraction, had been rejected by the daughter of a Lombard-Street banker" (116-7). The family-proud son of an old family cannot cajole a rich but nameless girl—a nobody, he had said—into being his wife. He offers that which he

believes is the best he has, a name and an estate, and both fail without him understanding why. Bulstrode's dreams, which feature Aurora as unreadable and consequently dangerous, betray his ignorance of his beloved: "he was at Grand Cairo (or at a place which would have been that city had it not been now and then Bulstrode Castle . . . and that Aurora Floyd was with him, clad in imperial purple, with hieroglyphics on the hem of her robe, and wearing a clown's jacket of white satin and scarlet spots, such as he and once seen forms in a great race" (120). This image of Aurora combines all that he fears about her: falling in thrall of her "imperial" beauty and her interest in the race-course as well as her exoticism and the mystery of understanding her and her secrets, which are suggested by the foreign scene, her "imperial purple" clothing, and the impossibility reading the glyphs on her hem.⁶⁰ He does not understand her at all, to have offered up his family position, which, the dream tells us, he is in fact less than comfortable with offering. That Grand Cairo alternately becomes Bulstrode Castle points to his repressed fear of installing this dangerous woman—garishly costumed as a clown rather than a lady—as the new mistress of his family seat. Subconsciously, he finds the indecipherable, sexualized woman, even as a wife, to be a threat to the domestic space she would inhabit.

John Mellish's first proposal to Aurora also fails, though he promises her something very different. Recounting the proposal to Bulstrode, Mellish reveals his understanding of Aurora's interests, particularly in contrast to Bulstrode, who nonetheless becomes her accepted lover; Mellish also thinks of her as a normal woman, a woman worth doting on in his own way, but no goddess:

" . . . it's doosed hard, when I promised her she should keep a racing-stud if she liked, and enter as many colts as she pleased for the Derby, and give her own orders to the

⁶⁰ The Rosetta Stone had been translated earlier in the century, but the first complete English translation had only been published in 1858 (Parkinson 41).

trainer, and I'd never interfere; and--and--Mellish Park is one of the finest places in the county; and I'd have won her a bit of blue ribbon to tie up her bonny black hair." (119-120)

His proposal offers her an active role, too: she would be mistress of her own stables, involved in the breeding, training, and racing of horses. Indeed, she would have decision-making ability in these arrangements, doing what "she liked" and "she pleased" and giving "her own orders." Mellish Park, like Bulstrode Castle, is also offered up to his beloved, but sandwiched between talk of the racing stud and a blue ribbon won in a horse race, the reference to Mellish Park might well point out the fine horse country or the stables as much as the manor house. Mellish's ideal vision of life with Aurora is then radically different from Bulstrode's: blue prize ribbons in her hair versus imperial purple robes, the active head of a racing-stud in horse country versus the passive, mysterious mistress of a cold castle on the coast of Cornwall.

When John Mellish finally speaks to Aurora a second time, again telling her of his love and hope, his reaction to her secret is completely opposite Talbot's. From outrage that Talbot could have broken the engagement with Aurora, to his happiness at Aurora's acceptance, his behavior throughout the scene seems designed to strengthen the contrast:

"He did, John Mellish, and he was justified in doing so," answered Aurora, gravely. "You would have done the same."

"Oh, Aurora, Aurora!"

"You would. You are as good a man as he, and why should your sense of honor be less strong than his? A barrier arose between Talbot Bulstrode and me, and separated us for ever. That barrier was a secret." (179)

Here, Aurora refers to Talbot's sense of honor, and implicitly to his pride in the Bulstrode name, a name that Talbot protected by insisting that between himself and his wife no secrets could exist, for his wife must represent and uphold his honor. Aurora expects, after

Bulstrode's desertion for the sake of his honor, that Mellish, as his friend, will behave in kind, like a man who believes her fallen because she refuses to argue otherwise:

She told him of the missing year in her young life; how Talbot had called upon her for an explanation, and how she had refused to give it. John listened to her with a thoughtful face, which broke out into sunshine as she turned to him and said,

"How would you have acted in such a case, Mr. Mellish?"

"How should I have acted, Aurora? I should have trusted you. But I can give you a better answer to your question, Aurora. I can answer it by a renewal of the prayer I made you five minutes ago. Be my wife."

"In spite of this secret?"

"In spite of a hundred secrets. I could not love you as I do, Aurora, if I did not believe you to be all that is best and purest in woman. I can not believe this one moment, and doubt you the next. I give my life and honor into your hands. I would not confide them to the woman whom I could insult by a doubt."

His handsome Saxon face was radiant with love and trustfulness when he spoke. All his patient devotion, so long unheeded, or accepted as a thing of course, recurred to Aurora's mind. Did he not deserve some reward, some requital, for all this? (179)

In this passage, Aurora tries her suitor to prove his fidelity, employing language that hints at the divorce courts—"in such a case"—when asking how he would have acted. She matches his acquittal, in which he finds her to be "best and purest in woman," with requital.

The passage not only underscores Mellish's trust of Aurora but also serves as a companion scene to the earlier discussion of the secret at Felden. Where Talbot Bulstrode doubted, Mellish trusts; where Talbot renounced his offer, he renews his; where Talbot proved cold, he is "sunshine" and "radiant with love and trustfulness." The statement that he would not give his life and honor to a woman he doubted seems on par with Bulstrode's model of honor, yet his trust in Aurora, unsullied by doubt, directly contradicts Bulstrode's revocation of Aurora as his bride-elect. Because Mellish does not renounce her, because he renews his offer of marriage, because he has proven himself so devoted, because he does not demand her secret to believe in her purity, Aurora obliges him and accepts his offer: "She held out both her hands to him with a tearful smile. He took those little hands in his own

broad palms, and, bending down, kissed them reverently” (179-180). In the scene at Felden, when Talbot likewise touches Aurora’s hand before he leaves her, “[t]heir hands met with as icy a touch as the hands of two corpses” (157). The touch of the doubter is cold as the death of love, Braddon tells us, but this man who trusts also reveres. Aurora closes the scene with a vow to be worthy of this trust—“You are worthy of the love of a better woman than me, John Mellish; but, with the help of Heaven, I will never give you cause to regret having trusted me” (180)—a line that echoes her earlier plea to Bulstrode, “you must believe that I know too well the value of your love to imperil it by word or deed” (138). Yet the focus of her promise is now changed. Both men have loved her, but only one has trusted her. Thus, Aurora’s second promise is based on trust rather than love.

Early in the novel, Aurora is described as a tree allowed to grow without guidance or proper pruning, so that she is hard to control and must be sent away for instruction. Yet the novel declares her to be the sort of woman whose early recklessness helps her grow into a tree of strength to shelter her family. Later, when Talbot renounces her, Braddon returns to the tree metaphor to discuss Aurora’s first love and the eventual love “a great deal better worth having” that develops between her and her husband: “She loved [Talbot] as women only love in their first youth, as they rarely love the men they ultimately marry. The tree is perhaps all the stronger when these first frail branches are lopped away to give place to strong and spreading arms, beneath which a husband and children may shelter.” (185) The narrator’s discourse on how this very domestic second love is the result of the pruning of the excessively romantic first love and how Bulstrode effectively has functioned as the gardener who chopped back this excessive growth into proper boundaries is intentionally misleading. The narrator’s assessment that Mellish benefits from Aurora’s tempered, less romantic love

screens her first marriage from readers; at this point in the plot, the bigamy is not yet out of the bag. Aurora demands that her marriage with Mellish be built upon this great secret.⁶¹ His ability to trust her makes him the ideal husband and a symbol of an ideal Society, and Aurora “accepted his devotion with a Sultana-like grace, which became her amazingly” (184). At their wedding, we have only one slight hint to mar their perfect felicity. Braddon tells her readers, “Miss Floyd looked wondrously handsome in her virginal crown of orange buds and flowers, and her voluminous Mechlin veil; she had pleaded hard to be married in a bonnet, but had been overruled by a posse of female cousins” (184). This second love and second marriage is not that of a maiden and a gentleman, for Aurora has been a wife already, but her unwillingness to wear the virginal crown is pushed aside. She marries wearing this crown, signifying her chastity, so that her appearance belies her secret and again screens her past; she seems to be signaling her desire to start fresh, to be chaste if not virginal in beginning this second marriage.

Once married, Aurora is both the perfect wife and a domestic failure. Mellish is radiantly happy with his bride, yet Aurora is not an ideal wife, as Lucy Floyd will be. She is still a follower of the horse track, and she even strikes a groom with her whip, meets in secret with another groom—the one who is actually her first husband, and she gives him money that she will not tell even her father about, keeps his existence secret from father and husband, and puts herself in a position to be blackmailed by her housekeeper. According to Natalie and Ronald Schroeder, “If Bulstrode and Lucy’s marriage reflects the ideologically acceptable

⁶¹That Aurora keeps her secret at this point was a failure in the eyes of reviewers: “Aurora and old Floyd can never be forgiven for losing this opportunity of telling Mellish the whole truth. It is so evident he was ready to marry her, in spite of every impediment, that it is highly improbable and absurd that they should continue to keep him in ignorance of her former marriage” (“Popular” 261). The *Athenaeum* shared the sentiment: “*Nothing* can excuse Aurora for keeping honest, confiding John Mellish in ignorance of the mad folly of her youth . . . more especially when Aurora is represented as good-hearted and truthful, and John Mellish as the most generous and forgiving of mortals” (“Aurora Floyd” 145).

model of spousal relations, then Aurora's freedom constitutes a measure of wifely liberty that is alien to—and subversive of—the domestic ideal” (*From Sensation* 92). The whipping of the Softy groom—a scene much discussed by critics—resulted in a furious contemporary debate about whether a properly bred woman would behave in such a way.⁶² Fraser Rae scathingly wrote,

An authoress who could make one of her sex play the chief part in such a scene, is evidently acquainted with a very low type of female character, or else incapable of depicting that which she knows to be true. We are certain that, except in this novel, no lady possessing the education and occupying the position of Aurora Floyd could have acted as she is represented to have done. (190)

And yet other contemporaries of Braddon argued favorably for Aurora's behavior: “Poor dear Aurora! Though she did horsewhip her groom, we all know she was more sinned against than sinning.” (Sala 55) Mellish takes up his own whip to replace Aurora's toy whip, but his “horror at beholding the beautiful fury” (194) has no lasting impact on their marriage, for when Lucy comes to visit, she discovers “her dark-eyed cousin a despotic and capricious sovereign, reigning with undisputed sway over every creature” (196), including Mellish. Though Aurora is in many ways not the ideal, dominating her husband so absolutely, she is nonetheless “true as a wife should be; true in every thought; true in the merest shadow of a thought” (197). Accordingly, “[t]he prevailing ideology of marriage simply cannot accommodate the grounds for marriage on which Aurora and Mellish thrive, because the lovers implicitly reject the hierarchy of marital power” (Schoeder, *From Sensation* 99). Their

⁶² Quite a number of scholars have written about the whipping scene. Bronwyn Rivers discusses the scene as an instance of lax household management in which Aurora is not properly controlling her emotions in front of servants (63). Andrew Mangham relates Aurora to Constance Kent, noting that like Kent's murder of her brother, Aurora's taking up the whip destabilizes gender attributes because she beats a man who is shorter than she is, so that her husband has to whip the groom to reset “traditional power relations” (68): “Aurora's emasculating violence is linked, for both the Softy and John Mellish, to her biological position as a woman.” (69) Gina Dorré's argument links the scene to gender roles in sensation fiction: “This image of a beautiful and powerful woman acting out in violent passion against lower-class cruelty exemplifies much of what was scandalous about sensation fiction” (63). This passion also suggests the eroticism of the horsey heroine (64).

marriage is indeed unconventional for the ideology if not the practice of marriage in the period, with Aurora wielding so much power and Mellish congenially allowing his wife to rule him, but they find happiness in their unconventional marriage.

Insidiously undermining this happiness, a series of people—all lower class—intrude in their affairs and attempt to penetrate and puncture the unusual domestic happiness at Mellish Park. The estate becomes a series of screens for hiding and spying. Within the manor house at Mellish Park, doors open quietly, letting in people from outside, people who take things and sift through letters before the doors let them out again quite soundlessly. Aurora comes and goes in the night, with only the malevolent Mrs. Powell, the chief of all those who watch and sneak in the house and its park, to notice, so that she can spitefully report on her mistress to her master. Aurora's actions are whispered about, becoming public knowledge and subject to public discussion. For example, Aurora's taking a whip to the Softy becomes widely known by the local population, so that a driver from a nearby town can tell Captain Prodder about the event: “ ‘they do say as she gave t'fondy a good whopping; and damme if I don't admire her for it' ” (354). That John goes to Aurora's private dressing-room to watch and pray over her troubled sleep establishes a modicum of privacy within the Mellish home. Within this chamber, the spies lurking throughout the surrounding house and estate cannot penetrate, try as they might to disturb the domestic peace of this space. Here, with her husband's trust and belief reaffirmed anew, Aurora presides over her tea table, which as Braddon tells us in *Lady Audley's Secret* is “the most feminine and domestic of all occupations,” in which the mistress of the tea-table “reigns omnipotent, unapproachable” (222), finding safety in appearing so appropriately situated to the task. After all, even Lady Audley, already having attempted to murder her first husband, still looks and acts like a lady,

and Aurora seems the mistress of Mellish Park and yet is the wife of a Mellish Park groom. As it is, Mrs. Powell can but fume over the sounds of marital domesticity; the “chinking” and “rattling” of the tea service continue unaffected by her vigilant ill will. Thus, the widow “was mutely furious as she thought that love and harmony reigned within that chamber where the husband and wife sat at tea” (339).

Mrs. Powell, the Softy, and eventually Conyers all represent the penetration of the domestic sphere by dependent outsiders; they, rather than Aurora, threaten the stability of the Mellish marriage. The murder of James Conyers on the estate eventually reveals Aurora’s secrets.⁶³ Mrs. Powell finally knows all: “Ever since Aurora's brief illness the poor woman had been groping for this key—groping in mazy darkneses which baffled her utmost powers of penetration” (260). However, the revelation of the secrets in turn reveals the role of the spies in undermining the domestic harmony of the Mellish, thus vanquishing the power of the

⁶³ The possibility that Aurora may indeed have killed Conyers would occur to readers rather strongly, especially given the widespread publication of newsprint detailing the acts of criminally violent women, such as Constance Kent, Maria Manning, and Madeline Smith. Comparisons between these women and sensation novel characters were made by critics, too. Several months after Conyer’s murder appeared in the August 1862 issue of *Temple Bar*, the *London Review* complained of Lady Audley, “We have nothing here but the lowest type of criminal—mean, cunning, cruel, and sensual. The newspapers which gave in detail the murder of O’Connor, and the detection of Mrs. Manning, furnished exactly the same style of reading as ‘Lady Audley’s Secret.’ ” (482). In 1867, the same periodical showed ongoing dislike for Aurora, vilifying her unwomanliness and criminality: “It is all very well by way of a literary exercise to stuff a groom’s accomplishments into a felon’s skin, to supplement them with petticoats and call the whole a woman, just as one can fancy an artist in a tipsy freak heaping all his properties on a lay figure and calling the product a creation. The result is still more startling when it is flavoured with bigamy, and intensified by impulses to manslaughter, but it is none the less a monster.” (“On Heroines” 562)

Madeline Smith’s case in particular bears striking similarity to Aurora’s situation. Smith was from a good upper-middle class family, but she fell in love with a lower-class man, L’Angelier. As detailed in her letters to him, their relationship became increasingly sexual: “Beloved, if we did wrong last night, it was in the excitement of our love. Yes, beloved, I did love you truly with my soul. Oh, if we could have remained, never more to be parted, But we must hope the time shall come” (qtd. in Gordon 54). When her father refused L’Angelier as a suitor for his daughter, Madeline bid her lover goodbye and asked him to burn her letters (61), which he clearly failed to do; though they clandestinely communicated for a time, he planned show the letters to her father if she ended their romance. Madeline bought arsenic on Feb. 21, March 6, and March 18, 1857 (118), and L’Angelier died painfully on March 23. After his death, Madeline was tried for murder, and her sexually frank letters appeared in court and shocked the Victorian public, who was fed every juicy morsel of the trial via the press. The trial ended with Madeline’s acquittal (140), and like Constance Kent, Madeline lived out the rest of her long life in relative comfort. She married in 1863, became associated with the Pre-Raphaelite set through her husband’s employer, William Morris (177), emigrated to America in the early 1890s, and died in the Bronx in 1928 (188).

conspirators over Aurora. John recognizes Mrs. Powell's menace and sends her packing, so that her threat can only come anonymously and from a distance beyond the family sphere, in the form of invidious letters to the papers. Unfortunately for the Mellishes, the Softy and the ghost of Conyers are not vanquished so easily from the estate or the plot; men, it seems, are harder to dismiss than widowed housekeepers, for men alone have both the knowledge of secrets and the capacity to threaten and manipulate Aurora's sexual history for their own ends. Mrs. Powell must anonymously attack Aurora's happiness, or she would risk her own reputation and future employment, for no one hires a known sneak as a housekeeper. Moreover, though she writes her letters without any purpose beyond damaging Aurora's reputation, Conyers and Softy seek to use their knowledge to gain more tangible, distinctly material results. Conyers desires money, £2000 to be exact, to stay his secret; the Softy kills both for the money and for revenge on Aurora. Softy almost achieves his aims, for Conyers's death at Mellish Park necessitates that Mellish must exculpate Aurora from not only bigamy but also murder before they can again live happily there.

Vanquishing the Threat

Given Aurora's history with Talbot Bulstrode, his assistance in Aurora's exoneration is ironic. Bulstrode protects the Mellishes' social position and ultimately their home from the threat posed by the lower-class villains of the novel. The ties of friendship and kinship prompt him to assist the couple when they come to him. He helps them because Aurora is his wife's cousin and his friend's unlawful wife. If his relationship with and opinion of Aurora is not quite settled before the death of Conyers, it certainly is by the novel's end, for Bulstrode's influence is highly instrumental in Braddon's happy ending. Bulstrode becomes

the pragmatist of the family and the voice of his Society, maintaining the status quo, paradoxically achieving this objective by undermining the strict standards against which he initially judged Aurora and establishing in their stead a new, less white-and-black understanding of the relationship between goodness and fallenness. He protects Aurora's reputation, especially during the period when she leaves the shielding cover of her husband's roof, and uncovers the truth about Conyer's murder. Most importantly, rather than ushering Aurora toward disgrace on learning of her bigamy, he safeguards her from the effects of fallenness, and in doing so buttresses the Mellish marriage against the threats assailing it.

As witness to his friend's domestic happiness, Bulstrode had frequently reminded himself of his narrow escape from a similar fate: "Thank Heaven, this was not *his* wife who knew all the slang of the course, and, with *lorgnette* in hand, was craning her swan-like throat to catch sight of a bend in the Knavesmire and the horse that had a lead of half a mile" (206), " 'Thank God I married the other one.' " (285). The narrator snarkily comments, "It is to be observed that Captain Bulstrode was always peculiarly demonstrative in his gratitude to Providence for his escape from the bonds which were to have united him to Aurora." (287) Even seeing her a happy wife, Bulstrode's traditional prejudices against women like Aurora come into play as he convinces himself of the soundness of his judgment. In selecting Lucy Floyd as his bride, he relies on this judgment, judgment that had been blinded by Aurora's brilliance, so he chooses Lucy "calmly and dispassionately" because she fits his image of proper, saintly femininity: "he was going to marry Lucy because he had seen much of her, had observed her closely, and believed her to be all that a woman should be" (221).⁶⁴ Lucy likewise establishes the cousins as points of comparison, juxtaposed in a futile and imaginary

⁶⁴ To her mother, Lucy has behaved appropriately and as she ought: "She was glad, therefore, to find that her daughter did justice to her excellent education, and had too much good sense to refuse so advantageous an offer as that of Captain Bulstrode" (222).

competition: “ ‘I know, of course, that he loved you first, and that he doesn’t love me quite - in the same way, you know – perhaps, in fact – not as much.’ Lucy Bulstrode was never tired of harping on this unfortunate minor string.” (287) Like Lucy, Archibald Floyd cannot understand Bulstrode’s seeming preference for Lucy to Aurora, noting,

She was very pretty, certainly, with pink cheeks, a white nose, and rose-coloured nostrils, and a species of beauty which consists in very careful finishing off and picking out of the features; but, oh, how tame, how cold, how weak, beside that Egyptian goddess, that Assyrian queen with the flashing eyes and the serpentine coils of purple-black hair! (280)⁶⁵

His own preference for his daughter, so much in the image of her beloved mother, follows the evaluation of the two women that Bulstrode himself makes initially. His assessment of their beauty also matches Bulstrode’s assessment of their characters: one has been very carefully finished and the other is an exotic deity, all flashing eyes and coiling hair (how interesting that for both men no paradigm for Aurora exists in England’s recent past). But for all the tangled relationships connecting these characters, Talbot Bulstrode is the person Aurora and John Mellish turn to in their troubles.

When the Softy confronts Aurora with news that her relationship to the deceased is meanwhile being revealed to Mellish, Aurora, fearing that Mellish will no longer trust her, evacuates the domestic space that she considers herself unworthy to fill: “Good-bye, dear home, in which I was an impostor and a cheat” (409). After all, her husband will have realized they were never actually married, so she has been only a mistress in fact though a wife in act. He may even realize that for the past ten days Aurora had known that the new

⁶⁵ This possibly draws upon Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”: “It was an Abyssinian maid,/And on her dulcimer she played,/Singing of Mount Abora./Could I revive within me/Her symphony and song,/To such a deep delight 'twould win me/That with music loud and long/I would build that dome in air./That sunny dome! those caves of ice!/And all who heard should see them there./And all should cry, Beware! Beware!/His flashing eyes, his floating hair!/Weave a circle round him thrice./And close your eyes with holy dread,/For he on honey-dew hath fed/And drunk the milk of Paradise.” (57-8)

groom was her legal spouse, and that she had not told him. Aurora futilely attempts to spare Mellish the pain of discovering her secret marriage by paying off Conyers, but for contemporary readers, as discussed earlier, continuing to live as though married to Mellish simply compounds her crime, for “she brazenly maintains her position instead of shamefully confessing all, as a properly feeling heroine would have done” (Rivers 62).⁶⁶ Only the revelation of her first marriage prompts her decision to flee Yorkshire.

And where does Aurora go when she flees the house of her second husband? She does not drown accidentally, suffer a disfiguring train accident, or even intentionally put a hole in the river, in the style of Maggie Tulliver, Isabel Vane, or countless women without hope. She decides to consult Talbot Bulstrode: “I will go to him; I will have no shame now in telling him all.” In her appeal to him, Bulstrode recognizes the parallelism with the scene at Felden, when she had first fallen on her knees before him. All that he feared at Felden he feels to be proved in the repetition of that act: “She was a guilty woman, then; a guilty creature, whom it would be his painful duty to cast out of that pure household. She was a poor, lost, polluted wretch, who must not be admitted into the holy atmosphere of a Christian gentleman’s home” (430). Bulstrode’s initial understanding of her pose and his frightened reaction to it speak volumes; at first his thoughts justify Aurora’s assumption of her unfit

⁶⁶ A *Fun* spoof of the novel, “Furora Lloyd,” features a heroine who longs to be like Aurora and her sisters in bigamy. She does not tell her second husband about her first, and follows in Lady Audley’s footsteps rather than Aurora’s: “Her fondest dreams were realized. From her earliest youth her bosom had burned to imitate those matchless heroines of romance whose histories she had perused. Now she was halfway on the ladder of fame! She had indeed committed bigamy! Of course she knew that the rest was easy. Murder alone remained wanting to place her on a pinnacle beside the objects of her ambition.” The method of murder is humorous indeed, as well as ultimately unsuccessful: “As he slept . . . she doubled him up carefully, and inserted him in the pages of a large edition of “TUPPER’S Philosphy.” She closed it cautiously—opened it again. The volume opened at a different page. He was so thin she could not find the place by him. He was, therefore, effectually concealed. But she was not yet content. She did the book up in a large sheet of foolscap and directed it to ‘WILLIAM SMITH, Esq., Post-office, Charing-cross, to be left till called for.’ Ere long her victim was hurried off by the mail train. Diabolical scheme! *He was never to be called for.*” (151) Furora’s forgiveness comes about when a Mr. Smith retrieves his surprise package and comes for revenge, “having been compelled to read so much TUPPER.”

to remain in her home, but they also emphasize her unfitness to remain in *his* home in the company of his wife. Bulstrode's reaction recalls the precedent of casting the fallen outside of Society, particularly female society, here symbolized by the private home. He feels that Lucy Bulstrode must be prevented from seeing this cousin whom she loves because of the possibility of contamination, as the atmosphere of the Bulstrode home may be subject to this implicitly unchristian pollution. Bulstrode tells his wife, "if Mrs. Mellish leaves her husband in Yorkshire, and comes to London without his permission, — for he would never permit her to come alone, — she must explain to me why she does so before I can suffer my wife to receive her" (428). Through her description of Bulstrode's reaction to Aurora, Braddon underscores the irony that the Christian thing to do for the fallen was to exclude them from Christian life and sympathetic friendship.

Yet Braddon's straightlaced paragon of male virtue does not throw her out. Instead, he listens to her secret. Bulstrode's movement from Aurora's ex-lover to her cousin-in-law and confessor coincides with his slow understanding of Aurora as a good woman and a good wife to his good friend. This understanding comes only when he possesses the secret that earlier divided them, and he pities her; full knowledge of the secret reveals not the white page of her virginity, but the white page of her wifely chastity blotted by unintentional bigamy. At the revelation of bigamy, "Talbot's face suddenly grew pale. He began to understand something of the nature of that trouble which had brought Aurora to him." (434). Her secret marriage is nothing to the realization that she and Mellish are not legally married. Yet he nevertheless grants her access to Lucy, commanding his wife, "Go in to her, and comfort her, my dear" (435), an act that reveals his faith in Aurora and his awareness that she needs comfort rather than harsh judgment. He clearly believes his household will suffer no

pollution from her, for he tells Lucy, “She will stay with us as long as she remains in town.”
(436)

“Dear, dear Talbot,” murmured the young Cornishman’s grateful worshipper,
“how kind you are!”
“Kind!” cried Mr. Bulstrode; “she has need of friends, Lucy; and, God knows,
I will act a brother’s part towards her, faithfully and bravely. Yes, bravely!” (436).

Bulstrode’s decision to not only shelter Aurora but also to stand up for her, to be her friend and brother rather than her judge, speaks to the ability of men to protect the fallen from their fall. Here, Bulstrode literally keeps Aurora safe in his own home, in the domestic space of the Victorian family, outside which she would lose position.

Through his compassion, Bulstrode becomes not judge and jury for Aurora’s sins, but her confessor. Aurora observes that “had she been a Roman Catholic, she would have gone to her confessor . . . but being of another faith, she went to the man whom she most respected” (440-1). In Aurora’s turning to Bulstrode rather than the Church of England, Braddon hints here at the failings of the Church to mercifully judge the fallen, and so Bulstrode serves as an idealized Anglican priest. He hears out Aurora’s confession, allows her communion with his wife, absolves her of her bigamy and fallenness, and advises a course of reclamation, albeit to Mellish rather than Aurora, beginning with their remarriage: “I told her nothing, my dear fellow; but I tell you to take your lawyer down to Doctor’s Commons with you to-morrow morning, get a new licence (sic) and marry your wife for the second time, in some quiet, little, out-of-the-way church in the City” (439). Bulstrode’s voice is that of Church and Society as Braddon would have them speak, the voice of hierarchy, of the most rigidly decorous elements of Victorian social order, dismissing Aurora’s fallenness in order to approve her second marriage to John Mellish because of the good faith of her first vows to him.

Of course, this ideal voice of hierarchy is still hierarchical. Aurora's fallenness can only be covered by the complicity of her second husband, who can shield her with his name, so Bulstrode's advice—"The future is not yours to dispose of; it belongs to your husband, John Mellish" (443)—both makes clear how she can remain within Society as well as noting that her future remains in the hands of her husband. Aurora's social and even moral salvation comes through John Mellish's willingness to remarry his beloved once more. His willingness to do so shocked readers and reviewers again: "What can the highest attainment of Christian charity produce beyond this? Yet John Mellish is a creature of the imagination. Probably no man alive, in his place, would have acted as he did" ("Popular" 262). If Bulstrode is representative of an ideal Society, John Mellish is his romantic counterpart: an ideal husband. "It is difficult to conceive anything more touching, beautiful, even sublime, than the fidelity of John Mellish at this time of trial" ("Popular" 261), wrote a reviewer for *Fraser's*. Because of her husband, Aurora does not fall out of society, instead becoming a dutiful wife to the man to whom she is legally married and the mother of his children. In marriage, a wife's legal rights were subsumed by her husband in legal coverture, and here, so is Aurora's past. So long as Mellish covers her past with his countenance, what can touch her? Until that point—until the man she loves can trust her with his reputation and she can trust him to love her despite her history—her future is endangered by others who know her past but who are by no means trustworthy. Once remarried, her future position is certain. Mellish grimly relishes that their second marriage certificate, the proof that his wife is his, cannot be proved false.

Talbot Bulstrode not only encourages this remarriage but also proves Aurora guiltless of the murderer of Conyers, so that he essentially frees the Mellishes from the threat of both

bigamy and murder. After the Softy is captured along with evidence that he, not Aurora, has murdered Conyers, “heedless of grooms, gardeners, stable-boys, hangers-on, and rabble, John Mellish fell on his friend’s breast and wept aloud” (547), an act that underscores the role Bulstrode played in saving his marriage. Bulstrode’s advice and assistance stabilizes the couple as a domestic and social unit, allowing the Mellishes to become part of a larger extended family, including the Bulstrodes, Captain Prodder, and of course Aurora’s father, that upholds and protects Aurora’s social position and creates social stability for the entire family, whose prominence would have been damaged by her fall. The stability gained through their remarriage in turn perpetuates the domestic life found at Mellish Park in the final lines of the novel.

For many Victorian readers, that Aurora can be concurrently married to multiple men and emerge at the end of the novel the respectable wife of a respectable man would have been as shocking as, if not more than, Helen Talboys’s criminal violence to protect a life like Aurora’s. Lady Audley is punished for her lower-class presumption to aspire and for the violence she hides behind her childish beauty, while Aurora gets to sin and be saved:

In Aurora Floyd, detecting reveals that the dark heroine is in fact truly innocent, so that the terror of power is a male perception, not a reality. In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, detecting reveals the more horrifying insight that the Angel in the House ideal is capable of murder. The terror results from the knowledge that the Angel herself is dangerous. (Tatum 110).

Aurora is excused from Lady Audley’s fate by virtue of the men who rescue her, whereas Lady Audley is condemned by the man she has just tried to burn in his bed. Bulstrode and Lady Audley’s nephew, Robert Audley, both finish their respective novels as new parents, perpetuating the social order that they have protected by either assisting or condemning a fallen woman. These disparate judgments focus more on the woman’s marriage to a social

unequal than the charges of bigamy—both women are guilty, yet innocent—and murder—both are innocent, yet guilty. Bulstrode and Mellish feel Aurora’s marriage to a groom makes her an object of pity. However, the lower-class villains of each novel, Conyers and Lady Audley, have sinned most of all in ruthlessly marrying up, both even inventing new pasts for themselves in order to do so. They are given no quarter; Conyers is heartless and self-aggrandizing at Aurora’s expense, and Lady Audley’s institutionalization serves to cover and protect the social order from her. Both Conyers and Lady Audley must die so that the social order continues. Alternatively, Aurora conforms to the Victorian ideal of wife and mother by the novel’s end.

To some extent, the novel presents Aurora as a precocious child grown into a headstrong woman who must be tamed and domesticated by the taints of bigamy and murder in order to become an ideal wife. Are domesticity and maternity the categories into which formerly untamed women fall after having fallen? Unlike her literary predecessor, Aurora does not get summarily dispatched to an asylum in Belgium to fade away. Rather than penning the death of this bigamous character, Braddon writes Aurora’s social triumph and maternity at the heart of her extended family. The final image of the titular character is as a mother “unspeakably beautiful and tender, bending over the cradle of her first-born” (549). Braddon all but shoves Aurora at her critics: here, a bigamist *and* a mother! Aurora’s final role in the novel, though a life of domesticity in marriage, escapes more traditional fates for fallen women: death or incarceration in madhouses and nunneries. Conforming to the feminine ideal through her new maternal role, “[s]he replaces the rocking-horse with the doll” (“Feminine Sensations” 99). Significantly, “Aurora has no child by either husband till after the clearing up of the mystery which surrounds her. On the last page but one of the third

volume, is the announcement of the birth of a ‘black-eyed’ boy” (Rae 188). Fahnstock wrote that legal marriages—though perhaps in doubt—are often revealed or pointed to by any healthy offspring of the marriage (63). That this certifiably Mellish child is a boy signifies and reaffirms Aurora’s role in perpetuating the Mellish name; Lucy Floyd Bulstrode notably gives birth to a girl rather than the heir to Bulstrode Castle.

Conclusion

Braddon manipulated the formula she began with *Lady Audley’s Secret*, extending suspense throughout *Aurora Floyd* by continually leaving readers in doubt of Aurora’s culpability as each mystery is revealed, for each revelation provides yet another mystery. Only at the novel’s close are all mysteries at an end, all troubles smoothed away for the titular heroine. Despite the success of this novel and *Lady Audley’s Secret* before it, Braddon moved away from bigamy in *Eleanor’s Victory*, *Henry Dunbar*, and *The Doctor’s Wife* even as she continued to employ the formula she established these two novels. The similar formula minus the infamous plot point was evident enough in these subsequent novels that Henry James criticized the repetitive nature of works by “Miss Braddon” in an article by the same title, published in November 1865, some years after *Aurora Floyd*’s publication:

Since ‘Aurora Floyd,’ Miss Braddon has published half-a-dozen more novels; each, as we have intimated, better than the previous one, and running through more editions; but each fundamentally a repetition of ‘Aurora Floyd.’ These works are censured and ridiculed, but they are extensively read. The author has a hold upon the public. It is, assuredly, worth our while to enquire more particularly how she has obtained it. (594)

With the debate about the validity of sensation fiction as a literary form ongoing, James’s only positive remarks concern the size of Braddon’s audience and how she captured such a readership. His words recall Wilkie Collins’s discussion of “The Unknown Public,” printed

in *Household Words* in 1858: “When that public shall have discovered its need of a new writer, the great writer will have such an audience as yet as never been known.” (222).

Braddon, like Collins, found her fame and fortune amid the unknown masses, critics of sensation fiction be demmed.

A great piece of irony resulted from her widespread popularity: in July 1863, *Aurora Floyd* became the subject of a serious medical journal article on the effect of reading sensation fiction. The *Medical Critic and Psychological Journal* article, “Sensation Fiction,” ends by arguing that the disparity between events in the novel and real life might excite readers but might more importantly prove useful to the moral formation of its female readers!

Based upon his foundation, the whole novel may be regarded as an admonition to young ladies not to let their early fancies run away with them on pain of suffering great misery and annoyance. And although a sensation novelist must step a little over the bounds of probability, although clandestine marriages with grooms are unfrequent (sic) and although, when contracted, they usually involve a totally different chain of consequences from those imagined by Miss Braddon—still, young ladies who read newspapers will not, on the whole, learn much previously unknown evil from the romance; and they will be furnished with an additional incentive to the exercise of caution and prudence with regard to the degree in which their fancies are to be indulged. The world, it is trite to say, moves fast, evil of all sort is rampant and unconcealed around us; and it is possible that ‘Sensation Literature’ may become a substitute, not altogether to be despised, for the didactic teaching that was in vogue with an earlier generation. (“Sensation Novels” 518-19)

If only Aurora could have read *Aurora Floyd* as her cousin read didactic High Church novels, perhaps her clandestine marriage might have been avoided.

The Virtuous Prostitute: Wilkie Collins's *The New Magdalen* and the Case for Reform

“Reformatories, Magdalen Institutions, and the like, are admirable in their way; but there are numberless cases in which individual judgment and help alone are possible.”
—Dinah Mullock Craik⁶⁷

The heroine of Wilkie Collins's 1873 novel *The New Magdalen* is the pitifully desperate Mercy Merrick (the name “Magdalen” having been given to the heroine of *No Name* a decade earlier). Mercy is a fallen woman and former prostitute, who was an inmate of a magdalen house when she heard a sermon that speaks to her desire to change her lot in life, beginning with her profession. In her efforts to be a “good” woman, the same society that placed her on the streets refuses to lift her up again, and her past thwarts her ability to hold a respectable domestic position. Collins, however, seems intent to make something of Mercy, and so he marries her to the very minister whose sermon caused her to long for repentance. Mercy proves herself above her past life and takes the penalty (disgrace) and reward (marriage) for her sin and salvation; for Collins, rescue may be temporary, but redemption is infinite. Along the way, the novel gives readers one illustration after another of the nobility of Mercy's character, pitting her against a virginal, gently-bred, but malicious young girl, Grace. The reader, all but forced to this conclusion by the sympathetic portrayal given to Mercy, comes to understand Grace is not Mercy's moral equal for all her sexual purity.

⁶⁷ 199.

The impossibility of escaping this heavy-handed moral of the novel—the narrative is much too direct for any ambiguity of meaning to linger—underscores the novelist’s determination to give his audience a prostitute-protagonist who deserves both moral and social redemption. She only receives the former, as the novel claims English society is too morally bankrupt to accept her, even after her marriage to a prominent Anglican clergyman. The novel certainly scathingly depicts Society’s hypocrisy over moral values, yet the most shocking feature of the novel’s characterizations has a deeply social aspect as well as a moral one: the former street-walker is more the lady than the gentlewoman, Grace. Through a discussion of this prostitute-heroine and the period’s prevailing ideology of redemption for such women, this chapter ties *The New Magdalen* to the dissertation’s larger argument on the fallen woman and her redemption; the novel’s emphasis on the need for social change, particularly in the treatment of women who have turned from prostitution and seek to reestablish themselves in respectability, unquestionably participates in the broader campaigns of sensation fiction to promote redemption for the fallen.

Though the zenith of sensation fiction’s fame had passed by the beginning of the 1870s, Collins and his fellow sensation authors wrote on with great popular success, as their readers continued reading, despite the continued criticism attacking the books and the values they promoted. As with earlier novels, these works, in holding the attention of a rapt audience, had a popular venue for voicing their social theories. Like much of sensation fiction, *The New Magdalen* was published serially. The novel ran in *Temple Bar* from October 1872 to July 1873, with Bentley—who owned *Temple Bar*, the successor to *Bentley’s Miscellanies*—publishing the book on May 17, 1873, just before the serials finished their run (Gasson 113). On November 16, 1872, early in the publication process,

Collins wrote to John Forster, “I know you will be glad to hear that my story is, so far, a great success.” (*Letters* 356). The story grew in size when the serials proved popular. As Collins wrote *The New Magdalen* in serial parts, the length of the project grew from an intended number of six parts to eight parts, stretching well into the summer. He wrote apologetically to his American publishers, Harper & Brothers, in November 1872, “I cannot spoil it, and I cannot finish it (without spoiling it) in two more monthly parts. There is the case, frankly stated. I heartily wish I could have been more accurate in my estimate. But (alas!) a work of fiction is not a work of machinery.” Collins added, “Here, the first chapters of the story have produced such a strongly favorable impression that the proprietor of ‘Temple Bar’ is not only willing, but glad, to widen my limits” (Letter 355). Harper & Brothers had little reason to complain, however, given the sales of the novel, for “[t]his novel had sold much better in the United States than it had in England when it first appeared” (Pykett 197). To have a greater profit abroad than at home illustrates the international success of *The New Magdalen*. Though critics today tend to ignore this novel, it was extremely popular at the time in serial form as well as on the stage.⁶⁸ Our current devaluing of it may

⁶⁸ *The New Magdalen* has been written about from a variety of vantage points. Typical scholarly critiques from the 20th century classify the novel as melodrama better suited for the stage: “The crude melodrama and sentimentality of the book were perhaps more acceptable on the stage, but *The New Magdalen* must be numbered among his least satisfactory novels. This was not however the view of Matthew Arnold, who said it was his favourite sensation-novel” (Robinson 261). Jenny Bourne Taylor also read *The New Magdalen* as a standard sensation novel with tropes like the Magdalen and identity fraud, in which the fraud perpetuates Mercy’s guilt and remorse.

One critic deemed the novel “essentially a purpose novel” but contested that “it has not courageously enough faced up to the realities of the chosen theme: the rehabilitation of fallen women” (Andrews 241). The reasoning for this assertion is that Mercy “is not at all a tragic figure: she seems to have come out of it all strangely unscathed and has really been rather a lucky girl” (240). Conversely, another 20th-century scholar wrote, “*The New Magdalen* is a moving and dignified treatment of a very difficult theme” (Sadleir, “Excursions” 113). Similarly, George Watt’s stance on *The New Magdalen* is that it and Collins’s other fallen-women novels “tell us a great deal about the women who are their subjects” and the society that represses them (117).

Two scholars stand out for not engaging with the debate over whether the novel is good or bad literature. Lillian Nayder wrote about reverse colonization in *The New Magdalen*, so that Mercy’s participation in the Franco-Prussian War echoes fears of European powers. In the end, Mercy and Julian emigrate; here, “Julian enters a paradoxically old New World in which women understand their proper place” (132). Barbara Fass

have everything to do with our inability up to this time to see the fundamental importance of the theme of redemption, as my study argues, to the sensation novel's success.

Despite successful runs of the novel in serial parts, the bound novel, which Bentley sold in England in two volumes (Gasson 113), did not do as well as Collins thought it should have. He placed blame for this on Mudie's Circulating Library. Mudie, who kept tight control over the books offered by his library, at first refused to pick up the bound edition for circulation. A self-appointed censor, Mudie wanted *The New Magdalen* to be published with a different name when bound as a book to distinguish it from the serials that were being printed in *Temple Bar*. Collins wrote angrily to Bentley on Mudie's resistance: "This ignorant fanatic holds my circulation in his pious hands. What remedy have we? What remedy have his subscribers?" (qtd. in J.B. Taylor 210). Collins did not allow the change, and ultimately Mudie's fears over the novel's topic and pointed title may have hurt sales by several hundred pounds (Peters 340). In contrast, the stage version, not having Mudie impeding its success, was a smash hit. "Despite some disapproving comments on its morality, the stage version of *The New Magdalen* had been one of the most frequently performed of Collins's plays in England" (Pykett 197). Just as internationally popular as its literary predecessor, the melodrama appeared in theatres across Europe in the 1870s.⁶⁹ The different responses in Britain to the popular serial and stage versions of the *The New*

Leavy studied the novel through the lens of folklore to discuss the mythologies (kind and unkind girls, princes, etc.) surrounding the main characters.

⁶⁹ The relationship between the play and novel is a close one, and critics then and since have debated the significance of this close relationship. The *Illustrated Review*'s "Wilkie Collins" called *The New Magdalen* "[a]nother play and novel in one, that is to say at least under the same title" (37). The article also noted the play's great success: "this new play of his, now running its radiant course at the Olympic . . . has made the tour of Europe as the revolutionary tricolor did. . . . Comprehensive arrangements have been readily negotiated by the novelist-dramatist for its performance in Paris as *La Nouvelle Madeleine*, in Berlin as *Die Neue Magdalena*, in Milan as *La Nuouva Maddalena*, at the Hague as *De Newe Magdalen*, and at Moscow as *Novaia Magdalena*." According to *Bow Bells*, the play also toured England before reappearing in London: "In May, 1873, 'The New Magdalen' was performed at the Olympic with Miss Ada Cavendish as the heroine, *Mercy Merrick*, and ran through the summer. It was then taken to the provinces, and on January 11th, 1874, was restored to the boards of the new Charing Cross Theatre." ("William Wilkie Collins" 132)

Magdalen versus the unpopular bound edition suggest that the British public greatly enjoyed Collins's story on the whole, as did the international audiences who had uniform freedom of access to the various versions of the story.

The topic of prostitution made the novel and particularly melodrama both extremely popular, but it also made them easy targets for criticism. Even some fellow authors were quick to condemn the novel. In November 1872, one of Collins's fellow sensation novelists, Ouida, penned a letter exclaiming, "What frightful trash English novel-literature has become! That Simpleton and New Magdalen are a disgrace to any men who know aught of the world" (qtd. in Lee 73).⁷⁰ A chorus of voices arose to censure the morality of the reclaimed heroine. The *Examiner* critic wrote,

Mr. Wilkie Collins has ingeniously managed to enlist the sympathies of the audience not with the victim of fraud, but with the impostor; and the moral of 'The New Magdalene' appears to be that a young woman may stray from virtue's path, and lie, and steal, and cheat, but that if she repents in the end, she is sure not only to be forgiven, but to be glorified as a saint and married to a clergyman of the Church of England. (E. 550)

The issue here seems to be that Mercy both receives sympathy and redemption; she is fallen and quite conversant in criminal behavior, but she can be saved from this life by repentance. Her subsequent marriage to a clergyman is not seen by the reviewer as a just reward, but an improbable, unmerited reward instead of her just desserts. The reviewer obviously does not subscribe to the idea of complete social reintegration for women who have thus strayed and repented, or at the very least does not believe forgiveness implies a return to the degree of purity necessary in the wife of a clergyman. Yet why should it frustrate the critic that Mercy marries a clergyman, unless he or she truly believes the Church of England ought not to offer absolute forgiveness to penitent prostitutes?

⁷⁰ Ouida's distancing of herself from Collins suggests she does not consider herself at all in the same category—or at least resents it.

Critics particularly struggled to accept that Mercy takes moral precedence over Grace in both the novel and stage versions of the story. The *Athenaeum* review of the novel noted, “it is a more serious thing to hold before the young the idea that absolute purity and highest grace are the result rather of a fall into the gutter and a subsequent ablution than a course of consistent rectitude” (“The Week,” 24 May 1873, 674), as though the novel might actually lead impressionable—*very* impressionable— young women to believe abandoning their virtue would render them more pure. Even years after the publication of the novel, critics for the *Examiner* and *Athenaeum* used *The New Magdalen*—and the same language as the earlier *Athenaeum* review—to vilify other novels by their similarity to it:

The Duke de Pomar supports Mr. Wilkie Collins in those doctrines which that eccentric author so strongly supported in ‘The New Magdalen.’ He holds that the reformed member of the *demi-monde* is superior to the average woman of conventional respectability. (“Secret” 1493)

While stopping short of Mr. Wilkie Collins’s conclusion, in his ‘New Magdalen,’ that the only, or, at any rate, the best road to absolute purity and ineffable virtue is through what the world has been accustomed to consider defilement, Mr. Aidé shows that a blot upon the fair fame of a woman is a matter which a definite number of tears may efface. (“Woman’s Ambition” 851)

While the *Examiner* critic finds fault with Collins’s lenience to a “reformed member of the *demi-monde*,” the *Athenaeum* reviewer clearly takes issue with both Collins’s story of purity born of corruption and the idea that the stigma of fallenness can be overcome or even erased entirely. Both critics hold up “conventional respectability” and “fair fame” as the feminine ideal, an ideal that ought to be inaccessible to the inferior fallen woman.

Though A.C. Swinburne wrote in 1889 that *The New Magdalen* was “silly false and feeble in its sentimental cleverness” (589), a number of critics disagreed with the negative reviews. In fact, these critics responded very positively to the novel’s moral of redemption, if principally in reviews of the play. The *Illustrated Review* notes that though “Mercy Merrick

develops into a female Claimant, and give (sic) great trouble,” “in the last act we find her repentant, having made all the expiation in her power” (“The Olympic” 584). Here, the idea that she has expiated her sins seems to allow for a more clement response to her repentance. The *Saturday Review* reviewed the play, too, and counters the opinions of the *Examiner*’s ‘E.’; to the *Saturday Review* critic, Mercy’s marriage to the clergyman, Julian Gray, is entirely appropriate, given his influence on her repentance:

His influence over Mercy leads to her confession of the fraud she has practiced, even when she appears triumphant over Grace. Honesty in this instance is certainly the best policy, for she loses a bad husband in Horace Holmcroft, and finds a good husband in Julian Gray. (“The New Magdalen” 684)

Some reviewers whole-heartedly enjoyed the play. One columnist called it “one of the most exciting, novel, and ingeniously constructed dramas of the day,” not merely “a rough sketch with traces of cleverness, but a genuine work of art” (“The Olympic” 584). The *Dublin University Magazine* concurred: “we consider the ‘New Magdalen’ Mr. Collins’ best creation; not outraging the bounds of probability; and, that point once secured, there can be no doubt of Mr. Collins’ intrinsic merits” (“Dramatic Note” 371). The focus on the probability of the heroine’s repentance—despite each review’s stance on the issue—certainly had become a common thread in criticism of *The New Magdalen*, a thread that linked reviewers to broader discussions of sensation fiction and realism as well as to the rather sensitive topic of the novel: whether or not a former prostitute *should* receive ablution, much less be allowed back within the fold. That the issue could be debated at all in the period demonstrates that our fixed notions of Victorian prudery, in which fallen women necessarily live beyond the pale, are too simple.

Reclaiming Magdalens: Victorian Charity and Reform Campaigns

Given the Victorian preoccupation with prostitution—what to do about it, what to do with prostitutes, and a general fear of prostitutes as a social evil—it is no wonder that *The New Magdalen* could be both popular and reviled. Estimates of how many prostitutes worked in London and other large towns were very high. As Thomas Beames, Preacher and Assistant of St. James, Westminster (Blount 341) wrote in *The Rookeries of London*, an 1850 study of the London slums:

Prostitution prevailed [in London] to a fearful extent. In one large house it is said that £.10, in a smaller that £.5 per week, are cleared by this traffic; the most open and shameless immorality is carried on; the middle classes contribute to the evil. Six or seven houses in one street are applied to this nefarious trade, and there are from 200 to 300 fallen females here, for mothers to send out their own daughters on these errands, and live on the proceeds. (Beames 142)⁷¹

The army of whores that seemed to be sweeping down upon the purity of domestic life created a great deal of fear—fear of disease, of contamination, of illegitimacy, of sin. In order to quiet the fear of prostitution as a social evil, “[p]rostitution was re-defined through a moral language of temptation, fall and guilt” so that “the prostitute could be accommodated within hegemonic notions of femininity and morality” (Nead 139). To render the prostitute a victim rather than a threat, much as Collins does in *The New Magdalen*, necessitated a new argumentative tack. These women, rather than discussed as uncontrollable sinners actively introducing disease and immorality into good society, were instead redrawn by social reformers and compassionate authors as innocents seduced into a life of vice; for example, Mercy Merrick had been an impoverished seamstress who fainted in the street and woke up

⁷¹ The writer of “The Literature of the Social Evil” dismissed the statistics presented by the press: “we certainly are not going to trust the very loose and extemporaneous statistics we meet with in these publications, which assure us—of course upon data which do not exist—that there are ’360,000 women who live by sin as a trade,’ of whom 65,000 are to be found in London, and which furnish calculations of the exact amount spent every week in ‘houses of reception.’ (418).

an inmate in a brothel. Once pitiable, the prostitute was a controllable image (139), because a seduced innocent plying her trade for the necessities of life presented a considerably more sympathetic and less fearsome figure to the public than a sexualized vamp. But the prostitute as social victim can only find salvation in death, instead of taking her taint with her as she quietly disappears into family life. Thus, the rewriting of prostitution into a tale of debauched virtue “informed its bourgeois consumers that its moral codes were universal and that deviation from these codes inevitably resulted in decline and death” (140).

Once offered, however, the image of the prostitute as social victim readily took hold. In 1850, W.R. Greg published “Prostitution” in the *Westminster Review*, in which he echoes the myth. His article claims that society represses the fallen woman’s attempts at self-rehabilitation:

Instead of helping her up, we thrust her down when endeavoring to rise; we choose to regard her, not as frail, but as depraved. Every door is shut upon her, every avenue of escape is closed. A sort of fate environs her. The more shame she feels (i.e. the less her virtue has suffered in reality), the more impossible is her recovery, because the more does she shrink from those who might have been able to redeem her. (Anderson 56)

According to Greg, in a society that shuns assisting the fallen, the door that always remains open to the fallen woman who is one frustrated by herself and scorned by others, is the downward spiral through prostitution to death. Taking up the ideas that prostitutes can be redeemed but that their futile attempts at self-rehabilitation could only end in a return to the profession or suicide, reformers’ organizations and female penitentiaries endeavored to persuade prostitutes that death was not their only means of leaving prostitution, if they would only accept help (Anderson 58).

Nina Auerbach notes that some Victorian supporters of the fallen woman, such as Thomas Hood and Henry Mayhew, describe the fallen woman somewhat sympathetically as

a “beaten-down prostitute” who is “defined economically rather than morally, emitting no special aura of destruction and doom but joining the poor seamstress and the shabby-genteel governess among the ranks of capitalist victims” (81). This notion of an economic justification for prostitution merged well with the women’s work movement.⁷² Middle-class women who hoped to improve their lower-class sisters’ chances of procuring work by increasing the opportunities for women beyond serving as governesses and seamstresses noted that money, not low moral character, drove women to prostitute themselves.⁷³ Theoretically, the same women, when provided with respectable means of self-support, would no longer need to prostitute themselves and could again become useful members of society. The remedy to prostitution would therefore be found in providing work. Other women, including Harriet Martineau, blamed men for barring women workers from jobs on the basis of gender, when the ultimate end was that women had few options to earn money respectably (Rivers 35).

Women who could marry often did so to secure financial comfort, effectively prostituting themselves into “an institution which supposedly exists as a bulwark against prostitution” (36). For a Victorian voice on this subject, Henry Spencer Ashbee’s sexually frank, pornographic, 4000 page biography, *My Secret Life*, of which only six copies were

⁷² The author of “The Literature of the Social Evil” disagrees with such justifications: “Women, it is said—and there is some truth in it, though the remedy is impossible to discover—are driven to prostitution by low wages and scarcity of female employment. Such cases, however, we believe to be but few” (418). The article continues, “We are told . . . that love is the only treatment appropriate to the case of the fallen. These sentiments we consider to be in themselves a social evil as bad as that which we are called upon to deal with.”

⁷³ Dinah Mullock Craik argues in *A Woman’s Thoughts on Women* that fallen women often have well-developed moral characters, despite their profession: “Another fact, stranger still to account for, is, that the women who thus fall are by no means the worst of their station. I have heard it affirmed by more than one lady—by one in particular, whose experience is as large as her benevolence—that many of them are of the very best; refined, intelligent, truthful, and affectionate.” (191)

printed in 1888, argues both for greater sexual freedom for women and scathingly charges upper-class girls with prostitution on a more expensive scale on the marriage market:

A girl is not among nine-tenths of the population morally damaged by a little illicit f***ing, as she is among those who look upon a hymen as a prize and guarantee in the woman they seek as a wife. All said, the female who keeps her c*** hymenized and under seal among the well-to-do classes, only does so that she may get a higher price for it, either in money or position. (qtd. in Marcus 158)

W.R. Greg's *Prostitution* similarly argued, "For one woman who thus, of deliberate choice, sells herself to a lover, ten sell themselves to a husband." (458)⁷⁴ But if not working a respectable trade meant prostitution, literally or in marriage, at least women who married for money were allowed to keep social countenance as they sold themselves.

One additional aim of feminists was what Judith Walkowitz calls "the state regulation of prostitution" (124), namely the Contagious Diseases Act and its endorsement of mandatory examinations of any woman thought to be a prostitute—but of course not of the clients of prostitutes—for venereal diseases.⁷⁵ The Act's "emphasis on examining the body of the diseased woman, made female sexuality into a spectacle" (Michie 127). Given the male control of government and the male clientele of prostitutes, the conception of the redemption prostitutes as "woman's mission" arose in the 1860s through the initial idea that "a woman's hand in its gentle tenderness can alone reach those whom men have taught to distrust them" (Mitchell 101). As a result of these ideas, "[t]here were many attempts, both organized and private, to save the Sisterhood of Sorrows, or soiled doves, from their evil ways. Well-meaning ladies showered them with tracts. One sat on the steps of a brothel and

⁷⁴ Chapter Four further discusses the concept of prostitution in marriage.

⁷⁵ Even advocates of the act acknowledged the larger problem: "No Contagious Diseases Act can be of very much avail while prostitution abounds, and prostitution can never be much abated until a great reformation is effected in the position of women" ("The Contagious Diseases Acts" 727).

with bowed head and clasped hands endeavoured to pray the inmates to come out” (Compton 173). Such ventures were met with indeterminate success. Certainly, one attempt to aid the fallen resulted quite contrarily to its intentions when the prostitute in question, realizing that a man was zealously following her, did not stop to discover that he wanted to save her soul before voluntarily jumping off a bridge into the river beneath, presumably to her death (173).

Perhaps more successful than these attempts, Urania Cottage, a house for fallen women dating from 1846, was an early example of charity to fallen women. Funded by a wealthy patroness and advertised by a famous author, Charles Dickens, the cottage was nevertheless not really a complete success, due to its inability to be interesting enough for the women to want to stay there, according to *The Charity of Charles Dickens*. Still, Dickens’s pamphlet to be given to imprisoned prostitutes, advertising Urania Cottage and its benefactress, give a good example of the sort of ideology of redemption fallen women could expect:

And because it is not the lady’s wish that these young women should be shut out from the world after they have repented and learned to do their duty there, and because it is her wish and object that they may be restored to society—a comfort to themselves and it—they will be supplied with every means, when some time shall have elapsed and their conduct shall have fully proved their earnestness and reformation, to go abroad, where in a distant country they may become the faithful wives of honest men, and live and die in peace.

I have been told that those who see you daily in this place, believe that there are virtuous inclinations lingering within you, and that you may be reclaimed. I offer you the Home I have described in these few words, to you. (Dickens 235-6)

Obviously, though capable of possessing morals and even the will to reform, these women are not to be allowed to remain in England. Marriage of course is the one social solution to women having sex before marriage, and while Dickens offered up an idyllic image of

marriage and fidelity, marriage to a stranger in a foreign land was not perhaps the most appetizing prospect.⁷⁶

Larger penitentiaries for the fallen had great numbers of women come in and out their doors in the 19th century. The numbers of penitentiaries and penitents continued to increase throughout the century. The Magdalen Hospital admitted 14,235 women from its foundation in 1758 until World War I necessitated removing the women from the hospital premises in 1916 (Pearce 51). The women admitted were expected to stay for two years, during which time they learned a variety of skills to make them employable, before being helped into a situation; indeed, “the large portion of them went to domestic service” (48).⁷⁷ Over the span of 158 years, 9,261 women completed their stay. 135 inmates of the penitentiary died at the hospital, 126 were deemed lunatics, and 108 were counted as still residing there in 1916. An additional 3,132 women asked to leave before their time was passed, while 1,473 were discharged for misconduct (51). Considering the small number of women who completed a full stay at this penitentiary and others like it, “Female Penitentiaries,” an 1848 *Quarterly Review* article, noted a striking dissonance between public support for such institutions and the societal expectation that fallen women should be rehabilitated institutionally; the article postulated that without “these institutions, disproportioned as they are to the need, the greater part [of penitent prostitutes] would have long since pined away, if they had to trust to public generosity and external support” (361). The article additionally cited annual earnings of £1184 in 1847 versus donations of £724 for the same period, at one of London’s most

⁷⁶ On April 12, 1850, Dickens wrote in a letter to Miss Burdett Coutts, “I have spoken to several women and girls, who are very thankful, but make a fatal and decisive confusion between emigration and transportation.” (Michie 81). *The New Magdalen’s* Mercy Merrick chooses to emigrate to Canada, but has such bad luck there that she returns to Europe; Collins seems to deliberately point at the holes in his friend’s scheme from the vantage point of twenty-four years later.

⁷⁷ “Removing prostitutes from their degraded environments, providing them with alternative lifestyles and occupations, and keeping mothers with their children were the priorities in such homes” (Logan 70).

populated penitentiaries, the London Female Penitentiary; roughly a hundred women lived there at the time (361). More recently, Elsie Michie has argued that the desire to contain prostitutes in such homes “literally enforced the split between the public and the private woman; through them, the prostitute was defined as either criminally out in the streets or safely locked up in rescue homes” (80). Though fallen women clearly found temporary shelter in such places and supported their institutions through learning and practicing trades, the lack of charitable funding for penitential homes suggests that the overarching public sentiment wanted prostitutes off the street and out of mind, but at no cost to themselves.

The first Anglican home for fallen women, the House of Mercy at Clewer, was founded in 1849 (Hutchings 83). The rector of Clewer advocated Christian responsibility to fallen women and preached that exclusion of these women and not the men who visit them was a failing of the church that needed remedying (78). Historian Susan Mumm argues in her article on convent-based penitentiaries for fallen women that the houses run by Anglican nuns “were quick to make use of the gospel imperative to shake off the taboos forbidding the interaction of virtuous women and prostitutes” (529). What was this gospel imperative? From such a slight reference a number of possibilities arise, ranging from not throwing stones to the idea that Christ’s salvation was available to all people—“whoever believeth in him” (John 3:16)—but of course the most obvious link between the Biblical gospel and the penitentiaries was Mary Magdalene. According to Khalid Kishtainy, “Christ’s acceptance of Mary Magdalene was the greatest conciliatory gesture ever made to prostitutes until the rise of socialism The redemption of the whore and her conversion to saintliness was the theme treated . . . by the Christian idealists of the nineteenth century . . .” (25-6). As a result, the penitentiary in Glasgow only accepted women who had recently fallen, theorizing these

women most likely to be penitent, based “on the popular perception of Mary Magdalene” (Mahood 160).⁷⁸

That the sisters of Anglican orders willingly came in contact with fallenness, without fear of their own contamination, is also significant, especially given the prevalent ideology of sexual contamination spreading like disease.⁷⁹ Their actions show that at least in some parts of British society, extramarital sexual knowledge was not considered tantamount to loss of goodness—that virtue broadly and virtue as narrowly reduced to sexual purity were not the same at all, and that these disparate senses of the term should not be used interchangeably, as though sharing the same meaning.⁸⁰ The sisterhoods often thought of their work as providing the home life these women never had, discipline alongside warmth, “ ‘what nature had failed to give, and what the world cannot’ ” (Mumm 538). The nuns, like the social reformers, also knew that many of their penitents did not enter prostitution due to sexual desire but necessity,

⁷⁸ According to Deborah Logan, practices such as limiting admission may have been common: “Some reformatories admitted [first-time offenders] over [‘hardened’ prostitutes] in the belief that they were less fallen and more redeemable; others emphasized women’s degrees of fallenness by forcing them to wear uniforms and cut their hair” (70).

⁷⁹ Acton’s *Prostitution* explores this idea of sexual contamination: “What is the prostitute? She is a woman who gives for money that which she ought to give only for love; who ministers to passion and lust alone. . . . She is a woman with half the woman gone, and that half containing all that elevates her nature, leaving her a mere instrument of impurity; degraded and fallen she extracts from the sin of others the means of living, corrupt and dependent on corruption, and therefore interested directly in the increase of immorality – a social pest, carrying contamination and foulness to every quarter to which she has access, who, ‘like a . . . disease . . . / Creeps, no precaution used, among the crowd. . . .’ ” (119)

⁸⁰ Victorian understanding of virtue derived greatly from Aristotelian ethics. For example, in R.W. Browne’s 1850 translation of Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*, Browne’s introduction to Book VII describes virtue as the result of habit, so that to achieve happiness man must “labour to form imperfect habits of virtue in his onward course towards the acquisition of perfect virtue. He must earnestly strive to improve them day by day, and thus gradually approach nearer and nearer to the standard of absolute perfection, which is coincident with the idea of perfect virtue” (1, Book VII). William Leslie Davidson’s *The Logic of Definition: Explained and Applied* (1885) also defined virtue as a gradual and ongoing process: “So far we have regarded virtue simply as *an act*. But virtue is also a *habit*, or better still, a *formed character*; and it is as a formed character or habit that is commonly most highly extolled by moralists, Aristotle leading the way. ‘A habit,’ says Aristotle (Nic. Eth., Bk. I.), ‘that is praiseworthy is what we call an excellence or virtue,’ and we learn virtue by actually doing it; in other words, the capacity is created by the practice” Davidson continues, “It has to be acquired and strengthened by repetition; it needs to be fanned and cherished under the most favourable and judicious treatment—in the midst of struggle and temptation, to be sure, but by the thoughtful selection of circumstances, care being taken that the temptation be not at any point greater than we can bear. . . .” (193-4). Sexual virtue would only be one aspect of the whole practice of virtue.

saying: “ ‘[t]hey are starving, and they sell themselves for food.’ ” (533). The sisters of these penitentiaries significantly extended to prostitutes the possibility not merely of a shelter from the streets but also that they possessed a soul.

Most women from the penitentiaries (which are called refuges in *The New Magdalen*) went back out into the world. Mahood argues that reforming prostitutes cost the women their independence and that a chance at giving up prostitution by entering a penitentiary also meant “an opportunity to serve their superiors, whether commercial, industrial, or domestic employers, or relatives and husbands” (163). As penitents generally married, became domestic servants, or began work at a trade, Mahood’s argument seems justifiable, for socializing the prostitute did mean that she no longer worked for herself when she left the refuge. Upon leaving,

[about] three-quarters of penitents re-established themselves in respectable working-class life. Most married within a year or two of leaving the penitentiary. This indicates that the transitional period in the institution may have assisted (or at least not hindered) their reinstatement as respectable females. Of the remaining one-quarter, some returned to their old lives. (Mumm 541)

Penitentiaries hoped that these women, with the penitentiary experience speaking for them, had proved to their families and potential employers their resolve to give up prostitution. Despite the stigma of having been in a magdalene house, that many women thus reentered society is certain. Moreover, Auerbach points to Acton’s 1857 book *Prostitution* as proof of “the mobility of actual social life” (“Rise” 32). Therein, Acton wrote that mobility was available even to women who did not enter the penitentiaries and that prostitution was not inevitably a life-time calling:

The old idea, once a harlot always a harlot, possesses the public mind. Proceeding from this premise, people argue that every woman taken from the streets through the agency of penitentiaries, is a woman snatched from an otherwise interminable life of

sin, whereas I have shown that the prostitute class is constantly changing and shifting . . . the women composing it become reabsorbed into the great mass. (Acton 196)

That many prostitutes were not prostitutes for life was a startling idea to Acton's Victorian readers, for the significance was that women could pass in and out of prostitution as needed. Most scandalously, it also meant that former prostitutes often went undetected in their midst. The reality, then, was more forgiving than the social fiction, subversively so, if former prostitutes could go undetected—if the fallen were not apparently different from the virtuous. Of course, for those women who were able to do so, slipping quietly back toward respectability would certainly have been preferable to the stigma of prostitution or of having been an inmate in a magdalene house.

Some prostitutes found a permanent end to their profession in marrying men in every rung of society, some even of high society. The magdalenes of the penitentiaries serve as factual evidence of a practice that must not have been, according to Acton, so very unusual among their sisters outside the refuges. As stated in "Female Penitentiaries," of the 289 women who left the Magdalene Hospital between 1840 and 1843, 43 were married by 1843. The exact same number of women was logged under the category "Behaving ill;" presumably these women returned to former occupations. However, the London Female Penitentiary recorded that only one penitent left to marry in 1847. The disparity in number between similarly large penitentiaries can be understood as a difference in time since release; the records of the Magdalene Hospital followed the fortunes of its former inmates for some time after their reentry of the real world, while the other penitentiary's records only accounted for the reasons women left the institution. The Liverpool Benevolent Society records show that 22 women were married in 1847. Whether the other penitentiaries cited in the article, which do not record any number of penitents being married, did not see any of

their women getting married in the year before “Female Penitentiaries” published these facts or simply included marriages in the larger category “Restored to friends” is unknown (368-9). Even so, 43 marriages out of 289 single women is a small number, and while many of these women entered service, records as to the number who were able to keep positions are scanty at best. The uncertainty of this data suggests more unevenness in social attitudes than history has preserved. To stabilize the social reentry of these women into domestic service, despite the stigma that could have created employment and marital difficulties, a form of social discourse was needed to supplicate for those women found out to have come from a penitentiary: the novel filled this need.

Novel Voices

Written in the midst of this debate over women’s work and prostitution, women’s novels of the 1860s more obviously blame men for prostitution rather than either economics or female vulnerability.⁸¹ By sharing this idea of male culpability with their readers, the novels spread a message of a single standard of sexual behavior and accountability: “Women could not change the law but they could, through their social power, alter accepted mores” (Mitchell 102). If male seducers and clients of prostitutes could not fall, why should fallen women not be virtuous? For example, in the 1868 novel *Meg* by Elizabeth Eiloart, the title character is abandoned by the man who has seduced and kept her, and she commits suicide to allow her younger, virginal sister to inherit money intended for Meg and to live free of the taint of Meg’s life. A contemporary review argued that Meg’s sacrifice of her life was

⁸¹ The *Christian Reformer* voiced this complaint clearly: “There are men among us, of education and rank; candidates, too, sometimes for the post of legislators, who can only be truly described as ‘lewd fellows of the baser sort,’ even though ‘the best blood of the aristocracy’ flows in their veins. But of the vices of the rich and great it is scarcely permitted to speak” (“Christian Reformers” 7).

portrayed too sentimentally, that the novel made a fallen woman and a “suicide” into a “saint” (111). Similarly, Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel *Ruth* rebuts attempts to contain prostitution and keep it separate from the domestic space of the home by purposefully including her fallen woman inside the home; Ruth also demonstrates great virtue and pays off her sin with a death brought about through her charity toward the very man who ruined her.⁸² Yet these fallen women, though they are also good women, only find absolution in death.

Surprisingly, a study of Thackeray, Dickens, Trollope, and Collins, *Corrupt Relations*, suggests that this quartet of male writers, more so than female writers of the period, allowed female characters who were not good more power: “Whereas Dorothea Brooke, Margaret Hale, and Jane Eyre become powerful through their goodness, the virtuous heroines of the male novelists are less powerful than the unconventional women they are paired with” (Barickman 19). Of course, the heroines referenced here are all heroines of realism, not sensation novels, and these men wrote both. But while several of these male novelists allow bad women to have power, they do not all allow bad women to be good, suggesting some discomfort with the idea of moral reclamation. Nancy and Lady Dedlock perhaps come close to goodness, but having fallen women die miserably or live as an unrepentant adventuress like Becky Sharp is a far cry from the morality the penitentiaries and even Eiloart allotted to their magdalenes. Though a male writer, Wilkie Collins, ever radical in his novels (for example, his rebellious Magdalen Vanstone flouts illegitimacy with

⁸² Elsie Michie has written of *Ruth*: “By depicting an impure or sexual woman taken into the home, Gaskell refused the logic implicit in the arguments in favor of the policing of prostitutes, arguments that led to the passage of the Contagious Diseases Act. That logic associated the deviant or wayward woman with disease and therefore defined her as needing to be kept absolutely separate from the rest of Victorian society. A place such as Urania Cottage effectively kept the domestic sphere, defined as both home and nation, free from contamination by quarantining “fallen” women until they could be sent abroad.” (98) Ruth and Mercy share similar qualities, particularly their long-suffering and quiet nursing of others. Both tend the bedside of the dying, but Mercy’s service as a wartime nurse has the benefit of her patients’ injuries not being catching. Collins allows his fallen woman to not only live but to be redeemed.

chicanery, and Lydia Gwilt's final moments anticipate Mercy's redemption), differs from his counterparts and stands in solidarity with reform advocates through his portrayals of fallen magdalenes, presenting them as complex and dynamic characters who blur the black and white lines of female purity.

All told, Collins wrote a number of novels, including *The Dead Secret* (1857), *No Name* (1862), *Armadale* (1866), *Man and Wife* (1870), *The New Magdalen* (1873), and *The Fallen Leaves* (1879), that present as the heroine a fallen woman, and not only that but a fallen woman who proves to be still a good woman. *The New Magdalen* and *The Fallen Leaves* focus specifically on prostitution, yet in both novels, "it is the prostitute's predicament rather than her trade that is presented as the social evil" (Pykett 145). *The New Magdalen* in particular offers Collins's most forceful appeal against Society, because the former prostitute heroine can only find employment as a wartime nurse in a foreign country—France, of course—because she bears the double stigmas of prostitution and penitentiary. Like several other Collins heroines, Mercy Merrick remains a silent sufferer, bearing her lot as quietly as she can. Yet unlike Laura Fairlie, Norah Vanstone, or even Rachel Verinder, all born and raised gentlewomen and consequently carrying sympathy on their side, Mercy ought to be, according to conventional wisdom, a bad woman. After all, the facts of her life weigh heavily against her: she is illegitimate, she prostituted herself, she has been incarcerated for stealing, and she has been an inmate in a refuge. Yet, as the novel tells readers repeatedly, this character is a good woman.

Portrait of a Penitent Prostitute

Unlike *No Name*'s Magdalene Vanstone, who rebels against the law and even family

members who conspire to divest her of her identity and patrimony, Mercy Merrick is not an unconventional woman. Magdalene's imitation of a coy young woman in order to woo and win her tight-fisted cousin's hand in marriage is a revenge plot. Mercy lives for years as a penitent former prostitute before her impersonation within *The New Magdalen*, and she decides to imitate Grace Roseberry after carefully, tediously weighing the possibility of injuring other people. No one who knew Grace was alive, there was no family to shame, and Grace herself was apparently deceased. For Mercy to take an opportunity to improve her life at the risk of nobody is very different than Magdalene intentionally impinging on her cousin, however dastardly he may have behaved to her real self. She marries for money, exclusively. It is a much closer relationship to prostitution than we readers see in Mercy in her actions during the chronology of *The New Magdalen*. In fact, Mercy, when tempted to marry Horace Holmcroft precisely to spite his family, still feels that she cannot.

Mercy's conventionality is further expressed through her perfect modeling of the Victorian ideal of womanhood. She is the self-sacrificing nurse, the angel in the house, and the dutiful daughter. Ironically, it is while she lives a lie that Mercy-as-Grace is an angel in the house. She does find all her joy and happiness at home. Grateful for her place there, she gladly assists her "family," including everyone down to the servants who staff Mablethorp Hall, cheering one and all with kindnesses and gentle words. By leaving Mercy's sins and even their expiation offstage, Collins manages to desexualize her altogether. Her immediate effect on men does not drive passion, but admiration; Horace proclaims, "Kind as well as beautiful. What a charming creature!" (Collins 32), and Julian Grey acknowledges that her sorrow does "perplex as well as to interest him" (67). By showing Mercy years after leaving the refuge where she was redeemed, thus pointing to her inward moral redemption as

outwardly manifest in an on-going repudiation of her past livelihood, the novel focuses on what happens to the redeemed rather than the damned. By showing Mercy to be charming, the novel focuses on her as a woman rather than a fallen one.

An outgrowth of the novel's desensualization of its heroine is that Mercy is not described in terms of latent sexual danger. Revelations that she has willed herself not to fall prey to despair and suicide are readily forthcoming, but the novel never openly suggests that Mercy could fall into her old life. Victorian novelist Dinah Craik postulates in her nonfiction treatise *A Woman's Thoughts about Women*, "Given a chance, the smallest chance, and a woman's redemption lies in her own hands. . . . No human power could have degraded her against her will; no human power can keep her in degradation unless by her will" (198). This much Mercy has done by willingly entering the refuge. But then what is a penitent to do? Once redeemed, what are her options? As noted above, penitents often married, found jobs, or returned to walking the streets. Yet at the completion of her time at the refuge and her reentry into the working world, Mercy's life has stalled. In showing her struggle after leaving the refuge, Collins here attacks the "the fact that these so-called charities worked against their professed aims. Membership of a refuge was a social stigma which was almost impossible to efface" (Watt 103). *The New Magdalen* begins at this point in Mercy's history, because it is here that her will has failed, for "without a 'character' even the poorly paid positions were closed to her, and banishment to a distant land was offered as the one hope of respectability" (Payne 46). After a series of rejections from employers, Mercy's position as a Red Cross nurse in a military field hospital is a last resort for respectable employment. As Victorian readers would be well aware, prostitution remains a persistent possibility, a silent backdrop to the novel: it is the lone profession in which a fallen woman may always find

work. But Mercy desperately seeks support through legitimate and respectable labor, even outside her homeland and even amid a war zone, so determined is she not to return to her past way of life. The novel sets up Mercy's predicament so that the lack of reputable options for women in her position rebounds negatively on the Society that has limited them.

The novel's ability to render Mercy sympathetically also belies her social standing. Mercy's introduction to Collins's readers allows her seemingly to belong to a class above her true social standing. Though she is the daughter of a nobleman, thus endowing her with those innate qualities Collins so praises, she is an illegitimate daughter never recognized by or benefiting from such a parent. Her mother's class becomes her own, but she is able because of her father to fit perfectly into "good" Society so long as her other heritage and its impact on her virtue remain veiled. From Mercy's first scene, the triumph of her beauty and deportment are evident: "there was an innate nobility in the carriage of this woman's head, and innate grandeur in the gaze of her large grey eyes" that coupled with "her finely-proportioned face" to make her beautiful, if not glamorous. Later, sitting at luncheon with Lady Janet, Mercy could fool "believers in blood and breeding . . . that this is another noble lady" (Collins 44). While Mercy's stature lends itself to an easy gracefulness, her foil throughout the novel, Grace, introduced in the same paragraph as Mercy, is smaller and darker but still graceful and beautiful—at this point. Indeed, at this point in the novel, these two women mirror each other in their dress and position, as both are shabbily dressed in the midst of the Franco-Prussian War. For all the reader knows, they are equals. The novel certainly sets them up to seem so. The reader cannot distinguish social class, sexual purity, or any other marker that would create biases, and so must read the women true to character rather than typecast.

Indications that Mercy is not comfortable with Grace's presence begin the process of divulging the women's true positions and dispositions. As Mercy rebuffs Grace's politely presented gratitude, she seems aloof, indifferent to the plight of the lost traveler, though Grace is friendly and interested in her lone female companion in the masculine world of warfare. Grace is open, jovial, confiding; Mercy is curt and withdrawing. Mercy even seats herself at a distance from Grace, and she hesitates to give her name. When Grace offers her hand, she withdraws yet further. Mercy intentionally distances herself from the other woman. "The physical placing of Mercy in the room captures the essence of her habitual alienation from fellow creatures" (Watt 110). Grace does not understand the significance of Mercy's actions. Instead of comprehending that Mercy ought not touch her, she thinks Mercy will not, signifying her rank to be higher than Grace's rather than lower; Grace misreads the signs, presuming that Mercy is "some great lady in disguise" (Collins 9). The failure of the woman of true social position to correctly read the other underscores the novel's endeavor to create in Mercy a fallen woman who cannot be recognized as such. In positing that Mercy looks more the aristocrat than the streetwalker, the novel's message is surely a subversive one, intending to disrupt class distinctions and social values.

Shortly thereafter, each woman's character fully unmask itself. Once Grace pries into Mercy's history, the novel presents the readers with a new conception of each woman. Mercy, foreseeing the ultimate failure of her story to create pity in her listener, insists that Grace comes no nearer to her. Having warned Grace that they cannot be friends and that she will regret hearing the story, Mercy reveals that she has been a prostitute, able to be forgiven by God but unable to find a place in society. Mercy's kindness to Grace in keeping her at a distance is now understood. In contrast, Grace physically recoils from Mercy; she "sprang to

her feet with a faint cry” and “stood petrified” (11). Eventually, she “composed herself” enough to speak “coldly” to Mercy (12). Mercy’s continuation of the story does not, however, prevent her from desiring Grace’s pity: “Would a word of sympathy come to comfort her from the other woman’s lips? No! Miss Roseberry was shocked” (12). Hitherto reserved, Mercy has, in telling the story Grace so desired to hear, allowed the truth of her status as a fallen woman, a former prostitute, and a woman out of a refuge to make her vulnerable. Grace, upon hearing it, shrinks back from Mercy to bodily signal her withdrawal from intimacy with such a woman. Grace is plainly painted as possessing no pity and no kindness to be offered to this woman. She fears closeness with this woman as she would a contagion, hence the hasty backing away from her. Grace’s earlier idea that Mercy was aristocratic has been quite reversed and revulsion takes the place of flattery. Just as Mercy was released from service in England and Canada when fellow servants learned of her prior life and its stigma, she has completely fallen in Grace’s estimation. The novel’s focus on dialogue and blocking rather than the interior space of the characters offers readers the chance to read the scene without guidance; even so, the figuring of these women leaves little doubt that Grace will have fallen in our estimation. Their positions reversed, Mercy becomes the more sympathetic character and remains so throughout the novel; the novel thus forces reader sympathy for the fallen, surely part of the novel’s overarching social agenda.

Yet for all Grace’s utter lack of sympathy for Mercy, Mercy continues to make herself still more vulnerable to Grace’s rejection, dually seeking both sympathetic friendship and a good flogging for her unworthy love. Grace, raptly listening and questioning Mercy, “interested in spite of herself” (13) and full of “anxiety . . . to hear more” (14), wants to know all Mercy’s dark secrets. Grace’s response to Mercy’s final admission, that of her infatuation

with the clergyman who inspired her to not commit suicide when she was desperate and unable to find decent work, seals Grace's character as well as Mercy's:

A woman who could have sympathized with her would perhaps have guessed what those words meant. Grace was simply embarrassed by her; and Grace failed to guess.

'I don't understand you,' she said.

There was no alternative for Mercy but to own the truth in plain words. She sighed, and said the words. 'I was afraid I might interest him in my sorrows, and might set my heart on him in return.'

The utter absence of any fellow-feeling with her on Grace's side expressed itself unconsciously in the plainest terms.

'You!' she exclaimed, in a tone of blank astonishment. (14-15)

Grace cannot immediately understand Mercy's confession because she cannot allow that former prostitute has a woman's heart. That Mercy can love or can even dare to love, much less dare to love a clergyman of the Church of England and of good standing in the social world, is more than Grace's social grace can manage.

Grace's responses to Mercy's narrative to this point have been stock sentiment, all politeness with no feeling; her earlier platitudes "I don't wish to offend you" and "I am very sorry for you" (12) here make way for the clearly derogatory "You!" Here, at last the feelings she expresses are "unconsciously" genuine, stated in "plainest terms" so that Mercy cannot misread her contempt. Mercy intuits that the "confession had gone far enough" (15)—that is to say, she knows that Grace heard enough to sate curiosity and could no longer hide her disgust. Though Grace ceases to be polite in her exclamation of surprise, she quickly regains her self-possession, an "uneasy politeness" pushing her to "take refuge in the most trivial of all the commonplace phrases which one human being can address to another" (15). Her meaningless chatter is as intentionally closed as Mercy was open. Grace has gotten Mercy's secrets, and Mercy has proven that she was, after all, kinder to Grace—and ultimately to herself—in initially distancing herself from Grace.

The novel offers Grace redemptive opportunities for sympathetic overtures, but she decides not to comfort Mercy, halting as though unsure of whether “common humanity” makes physical contact necessary and then, deciding against it, retreating. As a result, Mercy is “stung by the cold courtesy of her companion into a momentary outbreak of contempt” (16). The characters revert to their first depicted personality traits; Grace becomes talkative on the subjects of weather and war, quite safe subjects no matter to whom they are addressed, and Mercy responds but offers no further confidences. Grace throughout has behaved as a woman of the upper class in this period and only echoes sentiments society has taught her, but suddenly, in light of Mercy’s honesty, these sentiments ring hollow; it would be foolish for Mercy to take Grace seriously when she says, “If there is anything I can do for you— —” (16). Her response, “Miss Roseberry might have taken my hand!”, stresses how very different Mercy’s needs are from what Grace insincerely offers. Ironically, only shortly thereafter, in her terror amid the wartime shelling, Grace suddenly clings to Mercy—and here the novelist clearly connects the parallel scenes—“to the woman whose hand she had shrunk from touching, not five minutes since” (19). Collins certainly seems to resent the insipid vanity of Grace’s purity; indeed, Grace soon receives a head injury from a stray shell as punishment for her unsisterly crime of indifference.

The distancing of Grace from Mercy and of Mercy from Grace will repeat itself in the later social failure of Mercy Merrick, as she neither wants to attend Lady Janet’s ball in her honor or to face the guests who arrive without any of their unwed daughters, distancing herself from and distanced from other women. Through these two scenes, which open and close the novel, Collins first reveals Society’s “cold, open contempt for the fallen which threw them back on the streets because they deserved it” and argues that this open contempt

“has been replaced by a cold, charitable smile, which has, none the less, the same stony heart behind the apparent kindness” (Watt 103). In the last scene, Lady Janet’s goodness and social might fails to compel Society to receive Mercy as a good woman; Lady Janet and her status and power might lure them to the banquet feast, but she cannot make them forget to fear the contamination of fallenness. Representative of her class and its fears of contamination, Grace’s “low and broad” forehead signals that her mind is likewise low and unrefined (Collins 22), and her instinctual sense of preservation both from war and fallen women allows the contrast between Grace and Mercy to solidify. In this initial scene and throughout the novel, “[t]he fallen woman is capable of sublimity; the virtuous woman is weak and selfish” (Watt 110). Yet the sublime woman must remain wary of intimacy with her social “betters.”

Even given the opportunity to join her social betters and live without the constant contempt of others, Mercy debates the justness of such a course. Standing over Grace’s presumably dead body, she realizes she could become Grace: “In one breathless moment, the conviction struck her like an electric shock. *She might be Grace Roseberry if she dared!*” (Collins 27). This mantle of purity and position is what Grace can do for her. Her decision, very daring indeed to a society that worked so hard at keeping women like her out, is followed by her slow consideration of the plan of impersonation. Even after her consideration, “she was not at ease; she was not quite sure of having fairly questioned her conscience yet” (28). That she considers so carefully, that she is endowed with a conscience, and that her life on the streets has not left her devoid of all sense of right and wrong, serve to emphasize her redemptive potential. She has turned away from sin only to find hopelessness, and even at the opportunity of a new life, she pauses. The portrayal of Mercy’s meticulous

examination and doubt, which recur time and again in the novel, presents a view of prostitutes to Collins's readers more in line with reformist aims than prevailing negative attitudes. This is no hardened hussy.

In contrast, when next Grace appears in the novel, her characterization verges on sympathy only momentarily before continuing unsympathetically. Grace, at her apparition, again suffers the narrator's snide comment that "her forehead was low and broad" (Collins 87). Her voice is "hard, clear, and quiet" as she stands "looking interrogatively" at her presumed benefactress and Mercy-as-Grace's fiancé, Horace Holmcroft. She displays "confidence in the reception that awaited her" (89) and is "mortified and surprised" to be rebuffed by Lady Janet, who in the intervening months since the scene at the cabin has not only installed Mercy in her home but also come to love her. Her failure to attract the attention of the great lady produces "proud composure" (91) and leads her to inadvertently insult Mercy: "A woman out of a Refuge would be quite capable of presenting herself here in my place." While her listeners find the remark particularly offensive, she of course is quite correct. Mercy has quite capably presented herself in Grace's place.⁸³ The irony of her insulting someone about whom she is speaking truthfully is not lost on Grace: "The truth turns liar, and takes *her* side," she says (100). But her behavior in presenting herself as she does—she intrudes herself into Lady Janet's presence without introduction, and she calls upon Lady Janet with force of language and body to tell her if a woman has taken her place—demonstrates that though she is a lady by birth, she does not act like one. The narrator points out the awkward and violent breaches of common social etiquette to highlight the deficiencies in her character, deficiencies that the descriptions of Mercy entirely lack. Grace

⁸³ The *Contemporary Review* notes that impersonation is a plot point Collins had made use of earlier in *Armada* ("Mr. Wilkie Collins's Novels"22).

is in the right, but she is unpitiable.

This scene culminates in a complete reversal of the typical typecasting of good and bad female characters. At Mercy's entrance into the melee created by Grace, Grace "start[s] violently" and "with a shriek of vindictive delight" points out true impersonator.

Mercy turned as the sound of the scream rang through the room, and met—resting on her in savage triumph—the living gaze of the woman whose identity she had stolen, whose body she had left laid out for dead. On the instant of that terrible discovery—with her eyes fixed helplessly on the fierce eyes that had found her—she dropped senseless on the floor. (Collins 96)

Though the true maiden, Grace defies social constructs of femininity and her own name to become an aggressive banshee, shrieking and savage, fierce and terrible to Mercy's eyes. Mercy, the harlot of old, enters the library quietly, dressed as a "young lady" (96). She is helpless and unable to bear up before the onslaught of Grace's vengeance and so faints in shock and horror. Like Pamela falling senseless before each approach of licentious Mr. B—., Mercy's faint delays succumbing to her predator. Grace responds "with a merciless smile" (97), not exactly imitating maidenly virtues of the period. Their actions seem quite the contrary of what they ought to be if they both behaved according to social dictates or presupposed moral feelings, with which the maiden should be blessed and the prostitute bereft. Interestingly, Collins plays with this white and black dichotomy even as he attempts to paint the prostitute with more shades than strict black allows. In establishing shades of grey within the moral code, Collins must show the prostitute as capable of putting on the lady to great effect, and likewise the lady behaving badly.

Continuing Collins's portrayal of Grace as a virulent threat to Mercy and to polite behavior—quite the switch from the prostitute as a threat to the chaste—her character for the remainder of the novel insists on her right to a place in Lady Janet's home. After frightening

Mercy, she tells Julian, Lady Janet's nephew and the clergyman who had so inspired Mercy years earlier, "I refuse to go. My place is in the house. Neither Lady Janet nor you can get over the plain facts" (Collins 99). Again she asserts, "I won't submit to have my name and place taken from me by a vile adventuress! Say what you like, I insist on exposing her; I won't leave the house!" (100). Forgetting that the house itself she has no right to even if her name should be reestablished, she continues to evoke only ill will from Lady Janet and Julian. Once again, technically she is right; her name has been taken and her place filled by someone respectable society would in all likelihood condemn as a vile adventuress for daring what Mercy has dared. Yet in the drawing of the characters, the remorse seen in Mercy after the revelation that Grace is alive—"she hid her face in the bedclothes, and murmured to herself piteously, 'Oh! what shall I do? What shall I do?' " (102)—leads her to reveal her identity and past sin to Julian Gray. This unprompted revelation shows that Mercy knows herself wrong, while Grace cannot imagine but that she is entitled to all that Mercy has acquired in her name.

Thus affairs stand when Mercy turns to see "established in triumph on the chair that she just left—sat Grace Roseberry, in sinister silence, waiting for her." The blocking of this scene, in which Mercy only briefly leaves her seat to attend to Lady Janet, means that Grace swiftly took her place. Victoriously, she sits "in triumph" as though enthroned in her rightful place of honor. She sits waiting, not simply to claim her place but to have it out with Mercy. Sinister indeed she proves, no longer shrinking from Mercy but demanding Mercy's obedience to her will: "I forbid you to be seated in my presence. You have no right to be in this house at all. Remember, if you please, who you are, and who I am" (Collins 155). Repeating her earlier assurance of rightful belonging, she assumes authority in this house

which she has no right to assume. Who is Mercy? The beloved companion and adopted daughter of the owner. Who is Grace? Even as a woman mistreated, however accidentally or intentionally, she has revoked all her privilege during her earlier argument with Lady Janet by assuming that she had privilege at all. Grace's vengeful vulgarity, positioned as she is to judge from Mercy's chair, and her vengeful self-satisfaction are evident: "Mercy Merrick, I have got you at last. Thank God, my turn has come! You can't escape me now!" (156). The "modest dignity of manner" with which Mercy answers Grace's repulsion underscores the narrator's note that in this scene, the distinction between the women in appearance and bearing is such that onlookers would "have picked out Grace as the counterfeit, and Mercy as the true woman" (156). Verily, the narrator is right, for from Grace an overabundance of insults fly: "How dare you speak to me as if you were my equal?," "You audacious woman!," "you, madam, with the air of the Refuge and the dirt of the streets on you!," "You have no right to anything!," "That dress is mine. Take off your bracelets and your brooch. They were meant for me," "You are one shameful brazen lie from head to foot!" (157). Mercy's meekness yet again sets her up as a foil for Grace; Grace is a fury. The demands coupled with insults show her inability to understand the merit and services with which Mercy deserved all that Lady Janet bestowed upon her. Grace's expectations, even after so roughly endeavoring to oust Mercy, are to fill a position that Collins has told us she cannot fill, due to her "littleness of heart and mind" (156) as signified by her "broad and low" forehead.

Driven thus by Grace, who in this scene functions as the voice of Society, driving the penitent back into sin, Mercy's responses show her struggle to be a good woman. She must choose between having her sins flouted by Grace in front of the entire household or quelling Grace's attempt by maintaining that she is Grace. Pressed, "[t]he better nature which Julian

Gray had brought to life sank, poisoned by the vile venom of a woman's spiteful tongue" (Collins 160). The resultant decision to best Grace by being Grace finally makes the true Grace realize that Mercy in all reality fitted the position with Lady Janet. Mercy says to her, "Leave the house while you *can* leave it. Stay here, and I will send for Lady Janet Roy" (160). In maintaining the false identity, Mercy is able to summon power. The rightful place in the house is one that is supported by Lady Janet. Mercy clearly states her position of power for Grace:

"You have not a shadow of proof against me. I have got the papers; I am in possession of the place; I have established myself in Lady Janet's confidence. I mean to deserve your opinion of me—I will keep my dresses and my jewels, and my position in the house. I deny that I have done wrong. Society has used me cruelly; I owe nothing to Society. I have a right to take any advantage I can. I deny that I have injured you. How was I to know that you would come to life again? . . . I tell you to your face, I have filled the false position more creditably than you could have filled the true one, and I mean to keep it." (160-1)

In these words, Collins comes very close to those penned by the anonymous author of "The Great Social Evil." This letter to the editor, published in February 1858 in the *Times*, told autobiographically the life of a destitute child of the streets who became a prostitute. The writer asks, "What has society ever done for me, that I should do anything for it, and what have I ever done against society that it should drive me into a corner and crush me to the earth?" The letter calls for greater social responsibility for the poor and for understanding that the morality of the middle and upper classes cannot be expected from a group of people who are not trained to behave according to it. Similarly, Mercy's response is not merely in answer to Grace, but to the troubles she has suffered her whole life. Mercy claims that she will live up to Grace's and society's low expectations for women such as herself: Grace thinks her an adventuress, so an adventuress she will be. Shortly thereafter, she submits to wear Horace Holmcroft's family jewels, which she does in front of the real Grace, parading

her status as a pretender swaddled happily in her disguise. Interestingly, scholars have argued that “[Collins] approaches his central preoccupation with women’s identities through characters who consciously impersonate others and unconsciously mimic them” (Barickman 112). Accordingly, Mercy’s outburst in the role of Grace mimics the entitled behavior of the real Grace.

Yet the novel does not entirely structure itself in a power struggle between Grace and Mercy-as-Grace. Julian Gray’s intervention forces Mercy’s confession. He sees good in her and expects her to act accordingly, “holding up an idealized image of her for her to emulate” (J.B. Taylor 219). On the point of seeing Grace arrested and forcibly removed, Mercy folds. Her wounded pride could not support that as well as the impersonation. Julian ever guides her and encourages her, all the while knowing that the woman to whom she must give up her false identity, though pure, possesses “a hopelessly narrow, mean, and low nature” (Collins 195). Just as Dinah Craik advised the fallen to be honest about the past—“No virtue was ever founded on *a lie*. The Truth, then, at all risks and costs – the truth from the beginning. Make a clean breast to whomever you need to make it, and then – face the world” (198)—so Julian advises Mercy. As Mercy vows to give up all her imposture has given her, he praises her determination to speak the truth: “Thank God for this day! . . . I have been of some service to one of the noblest of God’s creatures!” (218) His reassurance helps her to explain all to Horace. When she does so, the narrator exclaims, “Of her own free will, she had made the expiation complete! Of her own free will, she was going back to the martyrdom of her old life!” (227), clearly connecting the confession to her redemption. Julian Gray understands Mercy’s merit and moral superiority to both Grace and Horace, and promptly on the tail of Holmcraft’s exit from Mablethorp, he asks Mercy to marry him. She has proven herself

through sacrifice, and her past is past to Julian and to Lady Janet. Mercy's opponent, on the other hand, deludedly believes that she has a claim on Lady Janet's charity; when Lady Janet frees her from this delusion, Grace reacts in character with her "low" nature by bargaining with Lady Janet for as much money as she can get.

While critics have argued that "Collins manipulates the reader's reaction to the whole moral question of responding to the supposed existence of only two types of women" (Watt 107), Collins gives us a third type to whom the real power in the novel belongs. Lady Janet, a driving force in the plot, is an entirely different sort of woman than Mercy or Grace. She is the only woman who remains entirely on moral high ground by Collins's standards—she has not fallen, and she extends not only pity but also a place in her home and heart for a fallen woman. At the end of the novel, Holmcroft thinks she is losing her mental powers, but while she may not be correct by society's standards, readers are to understand that she should be lauded rather than condemned, deemed proper in her actions if not a proper lady of the ton, and thought wise rather than foolish. Her actions are to be understood as the right course for Victorian women to take to truly help the fallen. Like Collins, other Victorian voices similarly invoked women to help fallen women rise, to not be prevented by fear of contamination or social displacement from extending sympathy and help to these women in need. One such voice, "Female Penitentiaries," stresses that "[t]he very sameness of sex should lead [women] above all others to pity the fallen and the frail" (376). Similarly, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem "Jenny" acknowledges that women could help women, if guarding their purity did not preclude them from such activity: "Like a rose shut in a book / In which pure women may not look, / For its base pages claim control / To crush the flower within the soul" (lines 253-256). Dinah Craik strongly advocated for women to help other women; in A

Woman's Thoughts about Women, she argued, "It would be a blessed thing if our honourable women, mothers and matrons, would consider a little more what could be done with such persons" (199). Lady Janet, old enough to be impervious, is the perfect woman to intervene in the lives of prostitutes.

Just as Lady Janet is the ideal for behavior, Horace Holmcroft begins the novel as an ideal man. He has money, good sense, and has been charmed by a charming woman and asked her to marry him. Yet by the novel's end, he has evolved into an example of what men should not be: insufferably principled with the wrong principles. Holmcroft's position in the great social game of the upper class contributes to a self-opinion and self-importance, fostered by his mother's conception of their family's ancient nobility, which renders his condescension to take a former prostitute as his wife utterly inconceivable. Mercy does not even merit his notice as he leaves her. All his former feelings for her cannot overcome his class prejudice. Horace believes what many well-to-do Victorians, men and women alike, would have believed of a woman who hid her prostitute's past in order to make a very, very good marriage match:

The most common type of sinful, sexual, evil woman in sensation novels is the adventuress. The whole race are Becky Sharp's children: women who pursue money, position, power and security by the socially acceptable rout of marriage. The adventuress marries without love and therefore submits to sex without love. Even though the submission takes place within marriage, the adventuress is often shown to be evil because of her sexual willingness. (Mitchell 76)

Holmcroft's final estimation of Mercy is that she is false as hell, that she refuses to marry Julian at Lady Janet's request only to win more money from the great lady by waiting, that she insinuates herself into Julian's affections, and that she is a trickster.

Yet Mercy is the anti-adventuress. She does not pursue Horace and only desires a means of getting back into society to have a place and usefulness again. She willingly tries to

enter domestic service with only short-term success because of her past history, so she opts for the one route to secure, decent employment that remains to her. She accepts Horace's proposal and intended to marry him not for money or position, but because she loves him. Even then, she still asks herself if she can marry him, stalling their marriage: "Could she let the man who loved her—the man whom *she* loved—drift blindfold into a marriage with such as she had been? No! It was her duty to warn him" (Collins 56). While in *No Name*, Magdalene's willing admission of her transgressions to her lover, Captain Kirke, ends in marriage, Holmcroft rejects Mercy. Even when Kirke knows the truth of Magdalene's past, he feels unworthy of her youth, just as she feels unworthy of his love. But he also values her truthfulness and loves her all the more for it. Conversely, Horace Holmcroft cannot or will not see Mercy's goodness despite her past, and so he cannot forgive her. She has been honest and faithful to him, but he rejects her. When Julian shortly thereafter proposes, her reply points out the failings in his choice: "Remember how Mr. Holmcroft has used me!" (Collins 265). With such a rejection from him after her explanation of her life, she knows society will never accept her. Yet for loving Mercy when Horace failed to, Julian is rewarded with praise from the narrator: "True to her from the first, *he* was true to her still" (267). Mercy, unable to shame Julian, readily returns to the refuge. She might as well put back on the red cross she wore at the start of the novel, her scarlet symbol of fallenness and a bleeding reminder of her patient suffering toward salvation.

Conclusion

Even in this novel which does so much to argue for a prostitute's place in the world, readers never see the refuge that makes Mercy's story possible. The refuge remains offstage.

Readers know that Mercy came from a refuge before the staging of the novel and that she goes back to it after revealing her true identity to Horace, Julian, and Lady Janet. Indeed, it is a very serious business for Mercy to return, and her letter to the matron holds more significance than present-day readers might ascribe to it. She has to write to ask if the refuge would take her back, and she is lucky to receive an affirmative reply. Due to the number of women clamoring for berths, many could not find room in any penitentiary (“Female” 364). Lady Janet herself goes to this refuge to visit Mercy not once but twice, which Horace thinks most shocking and quite a condescension for someone of her rank. Are we to assume that readers would agree with Horace that this is no place for a good woman—or respectable man, at that—to experience? Warfare readers can safely visit, but not a home for prostitutes? Why would Collins so deliberately distance his readers from the refuges if not for general prejudice against their occupants? The conclusion of “Female Penitentiaries” suggests this is so, reminding virtuous women to give of themselves by giving “bountifully of their worldly means to penitential hospitals; in this way the pure, without being soiled by any contact with impurity, may help to rescue the unhappy” (376). Men too are exhorted to remember those with whom they sinned of old, before family life led them “to regret the stains which discoloured their opening years.” Remembering by alms is satisfactory, however, as “[r]estitution is a part of penitence.” The article, while encouraging better provision for penitentiaries, clearly fails to ask readers to do anything but open their pockets and purses, and certainly does not attempt to change their way of thinking about reformed prostitutes.

Conversely, *The New Magdalen* does ask readers to change their opinions of prostitutes’ capacity for moral redemption. The answer to the above questions regarding the novel’s reticence to follow Mercy into the refuge is more complex than that readers could not

be taken even in literature into the refuges, for indeed they went into the very brothels in *Hidden Depths*, an 1866 novel by Felicia Skene (Sutherland 295). The answer is two part. First, Mercy's fallenness and her course in redemptive morality must come offstage and much earlier for her to be sympathetic. The point of the novel is that Mercy has developed a habit of virtue and maintained a safe distance from her former profession, that she has been working faithfully for some time to overcome the stigma of her past without success, and that despite this progress, Grace and most other people with knowledge of her past shun her. Second, Mercy's evacuation of Mablethorpe House and return to the refuge ends the omniscient narrative voice in *The New Magdalen*. At this point, the narration changes to an epistolary mode, featuring letters written by Horace and Grace, in which Horace tells Grace that Lady Janet has twice gone to the refuge to plead Julian's case to Mercy. Horace, of course, would never darken the door of a penitentiary. His letters illustrate the "the self-preservation of his class which he feels is being deserted by Lady Janet, and even more by Julian who wishes to marry a prostitute" (Watt 116). Readers are left with the impression that Grace, who has proved herself to be quite the conniving, house-breaking adventuress herself, will suitably impress Holmcroft's mother, that bastion of female decorum and self-righteous chastity that nearly prompted Mercy to marry Horace for spite.

At the close of Chapter 29, just before the Horace-Grace exchange, the narrator provides the last clear insight into Mercy's reasons for not marrying Julian; she will not have him for the shame she brings. When they do marry, the narration of the novel again changes voices so that the novel's final words on the matter are given in Julian's diary, which details Lady Janet's final attempt to lead Society to recognize Julian's new wife. Instead, the ball scene intended to introduce Mercy into Society mirrors Grace's rejection of Mercy, and with

this scene Collins closes the novel. All the wives can come and visit Lady Janet, but their unmarried daughters remain at home, safe from this trollope who has wheedled into the upper class. Accordingly, Julian and Mercy leave behind them the society that rejects Mercy on the basis of errant principal, sailing away to “the unknown future,” a distant date that may see such social reconciliation. As the newlyweds embark on this journey toward new possibilities, Julian pronounces himself and his wife, along with “five hundred adventurers like ourselves,” to be “social failures produced by England” (Collins 290). And so readers are to see them, as good people rejected by an unbending nation and its unbending, hypocritical people.

The Sinless Divorcée: The Fairy Tale of Divorce in Ouida's *Moths*

“How many girls are compelled to marry rich brutes—more brutish than the Beast, who’s only one in form and not in his feelings or actions?”

—Gabrielle de Villeneuve⁸⁴

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“To live under the perpetual authority of a man you hate, is of itself a state of slavery: but to be compelled to submit to his embraces, is a misfortune too great even for slavery itself.”

—Jeremy Bentham⁸⁵

Once upon a time, a beautiful Victorian maiden with ropes of golden hair left her grandmother’s staid British castle and went to live with her mother. Her mother, a vain woman jealous of her daughter’s beauty, used magical potions to look young. But in comparison to her youthful daughter, she looked old and worn, so in her jealousy she sold the maiden to a prince who had become a beast. But the new princess found that despite all prince’s palaces and treasures, he was not well-mannered or kind. A kind and beautiful man sent her a talisman to protect her from the corruption of her mother and the beast. When the beast locked up the princess in a castle, she escaped to find the beautiful, kind man. The beast is left to the mercy of an evil sorceress, but the beautiful woman and the kind angel live happily ever after.

This summary of Ouida’s 1880 novel *Moths* is perhaps not the most common description of the novel, but nonetheless it helps to highlight the novel’s relationship to fairy

⁸⁴ 159.

⁸⁵ 265.

tales.⁸⁶ A number of studies discuss the relationship between fairy tales and other Victorian novels. After all, many Victorians knew the tales of Charles Perrault, the brothers Grimm, and Hans Christian Andersen, whose collections were first published in English in 1729, 1819, and 1846 respectively (Silver 329).⁸⁷ Scholars have pointed to the use of fairy tale motifs by authors as diverse as Sheridan Le Fanu, William Sharp, and Robert Louis Stevenson (Harris 16). Fairy tales also lent themselves to female writers. Nina Auerbach asserted that for female writers in particular the fairy tale was “a dormant literature of their own” (*Forbidden Journeys* 12), quietly disrupting expectations that they ought to write

⁸⁶ In fact, until quite recently, little had been written about this novel beyond contemporary reviews of her work; until the late 20th century, scholarship on Ouida in general has been largely limited to three biographies and Edgar Harden’s “The American Girl in British Fiction,” which draws on Fuschia Leach in its discussion of the rich American titleseeker. More recently, Sally Mitchell discussed *Moths* and Ouida’s other novels in light of their determination to portray fallen heroines as chaste by virtue of their innate virtue: the heroine’s fall is not her fault (142); this makes *Moths* “the most shocking book” (140). Talia Schaffer has argued that Ouida’s use of the Gothic style first appears in *Moths* and that the plot she developed—largely centering on “the passive girl placed in a dangerous situation”—reoccurred in her other novels of the 1880s (128). Natalie Schroeder’s “Introduction” to *Moths* provides background on the novelist, the historical context of the novel, and contemporary responses to the novel as well as later scholarship. Schroeder and Holt’s *Ouida the Phenomenon* asserts, “*Friendship* and *Moths* provided fantasies of female empowerment within the male-dominated culture” (197).

⁸⁷ Fairy tales prove difficult to define, a recurrent problem for folklore scholars. Fairy tales might borrow from folktales, but they differ in being generally new creations, with the most familiar, most widely distributed fairy tales appearing in multiple and distinct versions. To complicate the issue, many tales dubbed fairy tales do not feature fairies at all, such as *Hansel and Gretel*, but do include magic. For example, the Grimms’ collected stories are indeed magic tales, but many of them are not properly tales about fairies. In attempt to solve the problem of classification, fairy tales are categorized in the Aarne-Thompson folktale index as magic tales, and the heavily-edited folktales of the brothers Grimm, called fairy tales since an 1868 English translation invented the almost completely incorrect title *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, are also found in this category (Ashliman). Yet Jack Zipes rejects this system of classification as too broadly based on folktales, and his book *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition* recategorizes fairy tales by theme. Many folklore scholars have adopted a German term, *Marchen*, to use synonymously with fairy tale; as *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* states, “*Marchen* means what fairy tale *should* mean” (322). Additionally, the terms *Volksmarchen* and *Kunstmarchen*, or the folktale and the literary fairy tale, help to distinguish between folktales as oral and the fairy tale as a written form. In these terms, it becomes sensible to view the literary tales of the brothers Grimm and Perrault as the so-called fairy tales learned by generations of children, from Victorian times into the present (Ashliman). Indeed, in England, Perrault’s stories “became so popular that they completely obliterated such indigenous stories as *Catskin*, *Childe Roland* and *Mr. Fox*. In 1812 the brothers Grimm did us the same disservice and *Tom Tit Tot* surrendered to *Rumpelstiltsken* and *The Sillies* to *Hansel and Gretel*. From this date onward all English fairy stories were a combination of Perrault and Grimm” (James 337). The term ‘fairy tale’ as used in this chapter then refers to the various written tales that we frequently call by that name, and the stories that most readily come to mind, courtesy of continuous retelling, reprinting, and remaking: *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, and company.

domestic realism by pervading their work with stories from the fairy tale tradition, a tradition largely carried on by women. For example, several scholars, including Auerbach, have argued that by 1848 Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* heavily drew upon fairy tales. Micael Clark wrote about the influence of the Grimms' version of "Cinderella" on *Jane Eyre*, not only generically but also in its imagery, particularly the hearth (700). Karen Rowe's work on *Jane Eyre* drew connections to this tale but also to "Beauty and the Beast," "Sleeping Beauty" and "Bluebeard." The use of fairy tales in novels was so pervasive, according to Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, that "[f]rom William Makepeace Thackeray to Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope, from the Brontë sisters to George Eliot, nearly all Victorian novelists alluded to fairy worlds" (1)

Traces of fairy tales have been discovered in sensation fiction as well. In *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels*, Talairach-Vielmas argued Wilkie Collins's "use of fairy tales generally figures as a means to probe contemporary ideologies of femininity" (161). For example, she discussed *Lady Audley's Secret* as a Cinderella story in which "fairy beauty" starkly contrasts madness and criminal behaviors (3). She considered Collins's *Armadale* a rewriting of "Snow White" and *The Law and the Lady* as reinterpreting "Bluebeard," and argued that grounding his novels on these fairy tales allows Collins to use the tales as a "literary shortcut," a means by which his characters can be seen to act predictably according to their fairytale predecessors. When the protagonist of *The Law and the Lady* seeks the truth of her husband's past, this search through forbidden territory, reminiscent of Bluebeard, leads her to see reflections of herself in other women, including her husband's deceased first wife (163), whose secret she deliberately unlocks (166).

Within Ouida's oeuvre, discussing *Moths* in terms of its structural borrowings from and references to fairy tales makes a great deal of sense. Natalie Schroeder and Shari Holt have argued that her novels *Idalia* and *Pascarel* have fairytale elements, with *Idalia* ending when "the lovers are united and sail away to Idalia's kingdom on the sea" (69). Ironically, Sally Mitchell suggested that Ouida headed in a new direction with *Moths*, turning from "the never-never land of her fantasy novels" (140) to engage in realism. However, just as Micael Clark postulated that "Cinderella" helps Charlotte Brontë to "fuse the domestic to the mythical" (695) in *Jane Eyre*, this novel fuses a biting critique of the upper class lifestyle to a fairy tale about a too-virtuous-to-be-true princess, the real to the fantastic. *Moths* participates in the tradition of literary fairy tales, a genre including Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and *The Magic Fish Bone* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, that imitates and borrows from older fairy tales (Ashliman 195). These tales "were acceptable to Victorian sensibilities and yet recognizable as part of the fairy tale tradition" (Harris 46). Victorian writers of literary tales—and indeed of novels more broadly—often used them to inquire or remark on social and political issues of the period (Silver 331), such as "industrialism, utilitarianism, the Woman Question, moral didacticism, and socialism" (Harris 37). Ouida, never much in danger of ascribing to the hegemony of domestic realism, approached social issues in characteristic style. Ouida herself noted, "I have, I believe, sometimes been accused of writing 'fairy-stories'; but is life itself very often a fairy-story, if too often, alas! one in which the evil genius preponderates" (qtd. by Schroeder and Holt 205). The fairy-story she wrote in *Moths* functions as tool to question the preponderance of evil genius in real life, particularly in marriage. By borrowing from fairy tales, Ouida manipulated her readers' familiarity with plots and characters so that as the novel continues,

it becomes increasingly obvious that *Moths*' virtuous, fairy-tale heroine can be saved from moral corruption only through the social disgrace of fallenness and divorce.

The basic premise of the traditional fairy tale is thus reversed in *Moths*: instead of ending with the maiden's marriage to a prince or king, the tale continues until the princess flees the beast/prince to remarry her love. The heroine navigates through the typical fairy-tale structure in reverse, from being a part of society to confinement in a tower to a permanent separation from society (Ashliman 41). To allow the heroine of her novel to be both a good, pure woman and a scandalous divorcee, Ouida employs a series of symbols to create a literary fairy tale that attempts to augment Victorian Christian ideology on divorce. Through an emphasis on language and color in the novel, I will argue that Ouida dismantles the traditional fairy tale by first catering to it and then refashioning it with other paradigms, namely the allegory of the moth and the star, to create a new, modern fairy tale. The use of stereotyped characters and plots allows Ouida to approach the contemporary fiction of divorce, as created by divorce laws in the second half of the 19th century, and to show it false. She creates instead a modern fairy tale of redemption in which the princess does live happily ever after, but not with her prince. Freed by means of a little legal magic, Ouida's divorced princess may well be the first "utterly happy" divorcée in English fiction (Mitchell 140). *Moths* keeps Victorian readers grounded in their material present with details that would suffice as evidence for a divorce in a court of law, as most Victorian readers would have been all too aware after more than two decades of sensational divorce cases. In rewriting the traditional fairy tale and fitting it with her unconventional morality, Ouida's focus on her social context manifests the influence of the cultural moment on fairy tales, however much they may seem timeless and unchanging narratives. For example, *Moths* draws changing

divorce law; conceptions of fallenness, particularly as concerned the divorced woman; and the European political climate, including Russian Nihilism, to set the scene for the redemption of the fallen divorcée.

Once Upon a Time: Setting the Fairy Tale Scene

The novel centers on Vere Herbert, later Princess Zouroff, as a fairytale heroine in the then-modern world. What happens to her innocence when vice—in itself a common feature of the fairy tale as the contrary to virtue—not only comes to capture the fair maiden but also marries her? Early in the novel, Vere seems “an enchanted princess who had missed her road” (97) when she loses her shoes and stockings to the incoming tide; the sabots she is given to wear “fitted as if they had been the glass slipper of Cinderella” (81) further hinting at her lineage from fairytale princesses.⁸⁸ Her clothing suggests she is a princess in character, regardless of dress. She does not need glass slippers, but her prince will make her wear all the trappings of conspicuous princess-hood, for this enchanted princess metaphorically “misses her road” in marrying the beast/prince and becoming an actual princess. Vere’s purity and faith serve to further associate her with the heroines of fairy tales, such as the Grimms’s Snow White and Rose Red, creating for her a form of protection from corruption that the narrator describes as a fortress akin to those in which fairytale princesses and maidens are kept safe:

⁸⁸ The Broadview Press edition is used here due to its wide availability.

Vere still dwelt in the citadel of her own innocence, as within the ivory walls of an enchanted fortress. Little by little the corruption of life flowed in to her and surrounded her like a foetid moat, but though it approached her it did not touch her, and often she did not even know that it was near. What she did perceive filled her with a great disgust, and her husband laughed at her. (263)

However, the necessity to protect herself from the evil around her, surrounding her as a moat as she moved through aristocratic society, puts Vere the princess in the atypical position of having to protect her innocence from the very man who would be, in the typical fairy tale, rescuing her or fighting for her honor: the prince, her husband. The unusual result is that vice is rewarded and virtue punished; Vere suffers the loss of innocence, but her princely debaucher prospers.

Hardly a knight in shining armor, never charming, and utterly lacking the sense of duty and honor befitting a valiant prince, Prince Zouroff threatens the fair maiden's innocence. Vere has no knowledge of her sexuality or Zouroff's lust, no conception of the duties that will be hers as a wife. Her mother recognizes the intentions of the prince—he is after all, one of her former lover—and finds allowing and encouraging these attentions to be unpleasant in her new role as potential mother-of-the-bride. Lady Dolly always wants life to be pleasant, so that it is quite bothersome to have an old lover trying to marry her daughter. She thinks of this as,

The girl lay sound asleep in the sweet dreamless sleep of her lingering childhood, her hair scattered like gold on the pillows, her limbs in the lovely grace of a serene and unconscious repose.

Lady Dolly looked at her as she slept, and an uneasy pang shot through her.

'If he do mean that,' she thought, 'I suppose it would be horrible. And how much too pretty and too innocent she would be for him—the beast!' (124)

Yet Lady Dolly sells her daughter to Zouroff knowing what he is, though she "felt a sort of sickness steal over her as she saw the look in his eyes which Vere did not see" (143).

Knowing his lust firsthand, Vere's mother nonetheless sacrifices an innocent child to the man

she herself calls a beast. Once married, Prince Zouroff takes pleasure tormenting his wife and marring her innocence: “It amused him to lower her, morally and physically, and he cast all the naked truths of human vices before her shrinking mind, as he made her body tremble at his touch. It was a diversion, whilst the effect was novel” (225). As if Prince Zouroff’s actions are insufficient clues to his character, the reader is frequently reminded. Although the narrator never oversimplifies characterization by forthrightly describing Zouroff as a beast, the novel’s characters often reference fairy tales in their interpretations of each other, thus allowing the participants in the plot to tell the fairy tale rather than the narrator. They do this by calling each other after the stereotyped figures of fairy tales. Corrèze, Vere’s love and eventual husband, calls Zouroff “The beast!” and a brute. Even Zouroff knows himself to be a barbarian and beast: “ ‘I am a beast to hold her to her word!’ he thought; but the beast in him was stronger than aught else and conquered him, and made him ruthless to her”(140, 194). The frequency of name-calling suggests that even the most oblivious readers would recognize the repetition and associate Zouroff with animal instincts.

The characterization of the principle characters Corrèze, Lady Dolly, and Jeanne de Sonnaz also benefits from associations with stereotyped fairy tale figures. Though Corrèze might be a “frivolous, dreamy, fantastic singer” (199) to frivolous, fantastic Lady Dolly, he more significantly features as the true knight of the fair Vere and the hero of the novel. His kindness to the poor and his humility further denote his role as a traditional fairy-tale hero (Tatar 98-101). That he tracks down the site of his ladylove’s imprisonment plays on the theme of rescuing a damsel in distress, seen in stories such as “Rapunzel” and even “Sleeping Beauty.” In contrast to Corrèze’s generosity, kindness and fidelity, Lady Dolly’s weaknesses arise from self-absorption, so that she features as the vain, wicked step-mother instead of the

oft-silent fairytale mother. Of course, the stereotyped wicked stepmother of “Snow White” also figures as the true mother “in some versions” (McGlathery 121), such as the original 1812 version by the brothers Grimm (Rohrich 238). Though Vere is actually her daughter, Vere has been brought up so differently from her mother’s way of life that Lady Dolly has no sympathy for her. Moreover, while Lady Dolly uses cosmetic potions to miraculous effect, she remains jealous, simpering and coy, envious of her daughter who is truly the fairest one of all. So, like Hansel and Gretel’s stepmother, she simply sells—under duress, indeed, but caring more for her reputation than her daughter—the child she does not want.

But the real villain of the novel is not Lady Dolly or even Zouroff but Duchesse Jeanne de Sonnaz, Zouroff’s longtime mistress and eventual wife. Jeanne knows her power, both social and sexual, and uses it to thwart Vere, largely to punish Zouroff for marrying another even though she herself is married and a mother. Thus, she functions as the sorceress/witch/enchantress figure, her identity most evident when she dresses for a costume ball as a sorceress. She bids Zouroff obey her will, which he does despite calling her a “demoniac,” and her malevolent undermining of the Zouroffs’ marriage prompts the prince’s sister to similarly dub her a “diabliesse” (Ouida 253, 302). Fuschia Mull, Vere’s cousin by marriage, describes Jeanne as a snake, a creature long associated with the demonic: “That Sonnaz woman is a bad lot; poisonous as snakes in a swamp *she* is and of course she bruits it abroad. I cannot make out what your husband drives at; ‘guess he wants you to divorce him; but aren’t it aren’t him so much as it’s that snake” (510). Under Jeanne’s bewitchment, the prince renounces Vere and sends her to his castle in frosty Poland, where she awaits her reawakening at the novel’s climax.

Vere’s submission to Zouroff and her icy immurement in Poland recalls the frozen

sleep of the classic fairytale heroines Sleeping Beauty and Snow White, who unknowingly wait to be awakened by their princes. Similarly, Vere enters a sort of conscious slumber through her self-repression, but only because her prince chills her to be awoken later by her true love. For, after Vere unwillingly accepts Zouroff's proposal and is faced with the unwanted desire of a hot-blooded sensualist, she exhibits extreme emotional repression as she struggles with the need to submit her physical person to her future husband. Even in her own room, she "lay quite still, as she had fallen, upon her bed, her face upturned, her hands clenched, her shut lips blue as with great cold" (173), a scene suggestive of her approaching wedding night. From this scene, Vere's continuous association with coldness becomes emblematic of her character: "her youth was frozen in her, the ice seemed in her veins, in her brain, in her heart" (275). Her coldness is of course evident to her husband-to-be, who remarks to his future mother-in-law, openly comparing the sexuality of the two women: "Who could tell *your* daughter would be a piece of ice, a *femme de marbre*? It is too droll" (209). In her first scene with Zouroff after their engagement, repetitions of her coldness abound, particularly in tandem with Zouroff's attentions.⁸⁹ When her betrothed speaks to her, she shudders "as if some cold wind had smitten her." Her kissed cheek is cold, her look at the beastly, predatory Zouroff a "fleeting hunted glance." She "might have been made of marble, she was so calm and irresponsive" to him (178). She is, as Gilbert and Gubar describe the sleeping Snow White, "an object, to be displayed and desired, patriarchy's marble 'opus'" (41).

Moreover, she knows it. She admits, "I am cold." Like Hans Christian Andersen's Snow Queen in appearance and demeanor—the Snow Queen is "tall and proud and

⁸⁹ For example, Vere is "white, and cold, and still" (Ouida 178). Her face is "passionless, and chill as a mask of marble" (179), and she looks "chilly and pale" (176). Vere's words, with their "cold and bitter accent," "chilled" (178-9).

dazzlingly white” (Andersen 236)—Vere is similarly statured and clad in white and silver.

Society, looking on, judges the newly affianced couple according to their key character traits:

“Such a beast as he is!” said the men who smoked his cigars and rode his horses.
“And she who looked all ice and innocence!” said the women, already in arms against her. (176)

This dialogue underscores Zouroff’s high status in *Moths*’ materialist society despite his debauched appetites, as well as the resentment Vere’s unintended social triumph stirs. To women of the *ton*, her success in the marriage market is at odds with her seeming innocence—she only “looked all ice and innocence,” but surely must not be genuinely innocent to snare the beast. Her cold chastity is consequently misread as affectation, and the male attraction she generates, however unwittingly, threatens these women more than the hypersexuality of Fuschia Leach, who they can copy just as Anonyma had been copied in earlier years. As Vere is the only woman moving in Society with a general dislike for socially acceptable misbehavior, Ouida’s deliberate distinction between Vere’s cold distance from such behaviors and the women who participate in them becomes more apparent as the novel continues. Unable to recognize Vere’s genuine difference from them—and thus representing a Society that ostracizes moral conscience rather than supports sisterhood—these women hate Vere.

In the scene of Vere’s introduction as Prince Zouroff’s affianced, Ouida also draws attention to Vere’s passivity in entering into a marriage tantamount to bondage. Having agreed to marry this man and to wear his gifts, Vere understands his actions to be marking her as his possession. His strings of pearls, his first gift after their engagement, are “chains locked on slave-girls bought for the harem” (180), a sardonic reference given the Victorian use of ‘pearl’ as both a symbol of maidenly image and a euphemism for ‘clitoris’ (Anderson

8). These are indeed chains of a sexual nature, binding virginal Vere into wifely service, just as Russian traders in the Caucasus bound their sex slaves.⁹⁰ With the revelation that neither his gifts nor the rapt attention of his guests appeases her, Zouroff feels “a momentary instinct to tear his pearls off her, and bid her to be free,” highlighting that he too considers the gifted jewelry to signify his ownership of her and her body. Yet the steadfast poise that allows Vere to accept the marriage proposals of a man she despises also attracts him.⁹¹ Her very coldness, that she is the “serene, cold, mistress of herself,” excites him. Instead of releasing her, “his hands clenched close on hers.” Ruthless ownership and passivity, carnal heat and frigidity—these opposing traits manifest in Zouroff and Vere’s approaches to their marriage.

Not only do these characteristics resemble the bestial villains and maidenly heroines of fairy tales, but the overall plot, including Vere’s unwillingness to marry Zouroff, borrows from several well-known fairy tales. In borrowing from familiar tales, Ouida not only grounds her version of the tale in the expected outcome of the tale, but employs familiarity as a tool to confuse conventional morality. By employing a fairy tale and remodeling it, Ouida’s novel thus features a moral different from the traditional story—and yet the same, as this chapter will later demonstrate. The “Pride Punished” tale of a too-proud princess unwilling to marry an inferior man (Zipes 668). This traditional folktale plot—seen most famously in Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*—is also called “Taming of a Shrewish Wife”

⁹⁰ This is one instance of a continuing theme of entrapment and liberation in the novel; the harem-slave of the Russian trader appears later in the novel, not actually clear in this scene. Her mother has already laughed off Vere’s assertion that she is being sold like a slave. Later, Vere purchases a painting, “Slave for the Harem,” which featured “a slave-girl standing with rope-bound wrists and fettered ankles amidst the lustrous stuffs and gems of the harem, surrounded by open coffers and the glittering stones and chains of gold in which her captors were about to array her nude and trembling limbs” (260). Vere sees her future as akin to the harem slave’s, thinking, “Marriage could never bring her aught better than it brought her already—a luxurious and ornamented slavery” (273).

⁹¹ Dancing the Quadrille d’Honneur with her affianced, she renames the dance “the Iron Cross” (Ouida 181), suggesting a relationship between her position in this dance and the Iron Cross awarded for military service.

(Ashliman 156). However, Ouida tells us time and again that Vere is not too aristocratic but too good for Zouroff. He may stand socially superior, but his wealth and title do not figure in Vere's assessment of his potential as a husband. The "Beauty and the Beast" tale is instead a more obvious source of inspiration. Vere sacrifices herself, she thinks, for the reputation of her mother, much like the heroine of the fairy tale replaces her father as the beast's captive. Yet *Moth's* plot reverses that of "Beauty and Beast," for that fairy tale and others like it generally extend hope of the beast's transformation "into a radiant young man, a perfect lover" (Warner 276). In one variant, "Snow White and Rose Red," the titular heroines are saved by a bear whom they have befriended; when he transforms into a prince, he marries Snow White and his brother marries Rose Red (Zipes 774-8). Paradoxically, almost all the world already sees Zouroff as an ideal husband, as his wealth and title count for more than radiance and perfection. Accordingly, the beast does not transform. Onlookers expect Vere to alter under Zouroff's lecherous influence rather than for him to fall in love with his wife. Indeed, once married, the beast refuses to change and attempts to corrupt his beauty. Vere's old-fashioned values reassert themselves in an environment that expects particular hypocritical behaviors and actions, so that following her duty—though just what that duty is becomes suspect and ultimately reevaluated—leads to her happily ever after. *Moths* emerges as a revisionist or crossover fairy tale that answers the need for a new paradigm.

Toward this end, the novel reintroduces Corrèze's advice to Vere to remain unspotted by the world reformatted in the form of a necklace sent anonymously to Zouroff's bride prior to the wedding. The necklace comes to be a defining symbol for Vere's determination not to allow Zouroff to break her will. Vere secretly sees in the necklace the advice that Corrèze gave her earlier. He warned her, seeing her the likely subject of her mother's marriage

marketeting, “ ‘It is a world of moths. Half the moths are burning themselves in feverish frailty, the other half are corroding and consuming all that they touch. Do not become of either kind’ ” (Ouida 97).⁹² Corrèze worries that this “poor little moth, dreaming of flying up to heaven’s light” is but “born to sink into earth’s commonest fires” (105). Recognizing Vere’s uniqueness, he unhappily lists the traits he admires in Vere in the order that they will be destroyed by the world:

‘The moths will eat all that fine delicate feeling away, little by little; the moths of the world will eat the unselfishness first, and then the innocence, and then the honesty, and then the decency; no one will see them eating, no one will see the havoc being wrought; but little by little the fine fabric will go, and in its place will be dust. Ah, the pity of it!’ (105)

But while Society offers Vere opportunity after opportunity to spurn Corrèze’s warning and to become popular in falling from the star, the necklace protects her from the destiny thus foreboded. Her innocence, honesty, and decency all come to be challenged, but the necklace works its charms. That it becomes a talisman has an undeniable element of the fantastic, but the necklace’s effect is didactic—rather like fairy tales themselves—and not overtly magical.

Curiously, this talisman features a “moth of sapphire and pearls” hanging between a “single rose diamond cut as a star” and “a flame of rubies” (190). In a reversal of Ouida’s metaphor, or perhaps an implied criticism that Vere has become one of the moths through her betrothal, the moth here refers to Vere. Though her Zouroff diamonds gain fame for their quantity, sparkle, and size, Corrèze instead associates her constancy with the luster of the pearl. Accordingly, this pearly moth hangs indecisively between the star and the flame, and

⁹² The description of Society as moths was not unique to Ouida. The 1880 article “Queens of Trumps” describes the home of eighteenth-century courtesan Sophia Bradley in similar terms: “The house in Grafton Street became as a brilliant candle, around which fluttered the most splendidly-bedizened moths” (Wingfield 141). In the short story “How She Paid Him,” published in the *London Reader* in 1881, a gentleman’s new mistress generates a coterie of admirers: “It pleased him at first to think that she was so sought after, but as the moths grew thicker and the flame that attracted them brighter, it made him feel a little uncomfortable” (183).

the “moth now touched the star, now sank to the flame” according to the movement of the necklace on the breast of its wearer. Vere knows that in marrying Zouroff, she “must sink to the flame” (190) of his desire. Explaining the necklace to her husband, Vere tells him it signifies that “one may rise to great ends, or sink to base ones.” Pressured for further elucidation of why it was sent to her, Vere continues, “I have sunk” (201), showing her belief that her marriage has demeaned her, that she has prostituted herself through the formalities of church ritual. To intimate to Corrèze that she has not forgotten the lesson, Vere wears his necklace to hear him sing at the Paris opera; as Zouroff inspects her before this appearance, “about her beautiful throat the moth trembled between the flame and the star” (218), just as Vere herself is suspended throughout the novel between Zouroff and Corrèze. Her husband reveals the flame to which she has sunk in appraising her as “handsomer than any of the others,” a remark Vere knows to allude to his other kept women, with whom she classes herself.⁹³ Vere ultimately thanks Corrèze and tells him she “sank” against her will, as she had not “forgotten the star and dropped to the mere earthly fire” of her own accord (323).

The novel employs color to further divide Vere of the star from the moths of the flame, particularly Zouroff and his mistresses. The colors of white and red become associated with Vere and her husband and play a major role in differentiating their characters. In physical terms, the novel often describes Vere as white, pale, or pallid, and her husband and mother repeatedly and significantly request that she begin to paint with rouge to have more color. Vere further stands out against her husband and his painted women by consistently wearing white costumes. Her association with the color white, as well as with snow and ice, references fairy tales again, for in them white and clear are classically symbolic of purity, as

⁹³ At one point, as Vere chooses personal honor over avenging herself by taking a lover, “the moth rose and touched the star” (392).

seen in Snow White's fair skin and Cinderella's glass slippers. Similarly, the color red often symbolizes sexual maturity (Ashliman 8-9); Perrault's "Little Red Riding Hood" and the Grimms's "Little Red Cap" tell of a maiden just reaching puberty, and D.L. Ashliman points to pricked, bleeding fingers as forecasting pregnancy in the Grimm tales "The Juniper Tree" and "Little Snow-White." In *Moths*, red can more narrowly be considered a sign of sexuality and sexual desire, hardly unrecognizable symbolism for the Victorian reader. In many other novels, red and white are also associated with unchaste and virginal women (Morris 217-8). To associate the color red with a man is an interesting choice. The novel introduces Zouroff as a "tall large man" with "bold and cold eyes" that are reddened with drink (Ouida 123). The Hotel Zouroff in Paris, with its "scarlet-clad" servants and a grand staircase carpeted in "hues of scarlet," appears to Vere "like fire to her tired eyes" (221, 216), and this reference to fire links the scarlet color to the ruby flame of Zouroff's lust.

In contrast to Vere and in unity with the prince, Zouroff's mistresses are also demarked by red hues in their physical and material descriptions. Zouroff's mistress Noisette, an actress, seems a painting rather than a statue like Vere, for she is "very handsome too, in a red and white way, like Reuben's women," complicating the separation of the colors and hinting at the complexity of real women. She also drinks Burgundy, of course a red wine, and "plenty of it." The courtesan Casse-une-Croute's description focuses on her "mouth like a poppy" and "ruby-lipped" sensuality, and the equipage in which she famously rides features a "little mulatto boy behind her dressed in scarlet" (277, 381, 226).⁹⁴ Pretty Lady Dolly uses a red parasol to hide, shamefaced, from Zouroff, and she wears false "curls of a richer

⁹⁴ Interestingly, the color red was not thought fashionable for carriage accoutrements in the late Victorian period (Haug). This description shows that Casse-une-Croute is too uncouth and gaudy to follow the fashion.

ruddier hue” and paint that makes her mouth “like a little pomegranate bud” (378).⁹⁵ Unlike the other mistresses, Jeanne de Sonnaz’s physical features are summed up as ugly in lieu of description, but her clothing makes up for the lack of colorful details about her physical person. Zouroff’s most powerful mistress significantly appears repeatedly appareled in red, her signature color. In the course of the novel, Jeanne de Sonnaz dons a Dutch peasant’s outfit complete with “bright red stockings,” a dressing gown “with a knot here and there of her favorite cardinal red,” a bathing costume of “red and black stripes and a red cap—*vrai bonnet rouge*,” “silver high heels and tall ebony cane, and skirts of cardinal red” to go driving, a hooded skating costume in “her favorite crimson colours,” and a ball gown “of red and gold, and some of her grand rubies” (305, 295, 311, 360, 273, 469). She also sets rubies in the eyes of a stuffed eagle to decorate her dining room.⁹⁶

The contrasting colors have their most straightforward exhibition at a costume ball, to which Vere and Jeanne de Sonnaz each come dressed in her symbolic color. In their fancy-dress costumes, the characters are also attired very representatively. Dressed as the Ice-Spirit with jewels that “shone all over her,” her enormous Roc’s Egg diamond “and all the lesser stones seeming to flash sunrays from snow,” Vere’s apparel creates a “cold luster” of “light all over her” (266-7, 270). Even the Roc’s Egg denotes its wearer’s purity. If a gift to primarily symbolize Zouroff’s wealth and secondarily his generosity to his wife, it

⁹⁵ Like Vere’s pearls, “pomegranate bud” may also reference female anatomy.

⁹⁶ Ouida develops the relationship between characters and color considerably at Jeanne de Sonnaz’s charity Kermess, where each booth bears its occupants’ colors and symbols. For Vere’s booth, Jeanne de Sonnaz chooses an icy, pale blue; for her own, she hangs “a scarlet flag that bore her arms and coronet” (298). Unbeknownst to Vere, her false friend has also arranged for Noisette to be present. Like her description, her booth, in a “rose-colour” and decorated with “great garlands of pink roses,” hints at her relationship to Zouroff. Its position “[i]mmmediately facing” Vere’s booth draws them into direct opposition. Each woman has her battle colors, with Jeanne’s the most akin to Zouroff’s and Vere’s paradoxically the least. Here, too, a gradient of color emerges, with Jeanne and Vere ranked at the ends of the Zouroff-wives-and-lovers spectrum with the minor mistress waffling in the pink range. Without seeming overtly contentious herself, Jeanne’s orchestrates the heraldic colors as well as the placement and occupants of the booths to deliberately create tension between Zouroff and his wife.

nonetheless underscores this woman's ability to wear such a large and flawless stone. The princess's competitor was "a Sorceress, and was all in red, a brilliant, poppy-like, flame-like, Mephistophelian red, with her famous rubies, and many another jewel, winking like wicked little eyes all over her, while a narrow Venetian mask of black hid her ugliest features, and let her blazing eyes destroy their worlds" (267). Not only are the women appropriately attired as stereotypes of themselves in these costumes, they also reflect the dichotomy of the star and the flame. The gemstones in the necklace are diamonds and rubies. While Vere shines like the star, Jeanne is even described as "flame-like" and "blazing." She is the epitome of the flame to which the moth can fall. It is significant, then, that she wants to do to Vere "what the moths do to ermine" (311). It does not matter, Ouida suggests, whether she rends or burns Vere; the outcome is the same for the poor moth.

To underscore Vere's transformations from innocent girl to frosty princess to shunned divorcée, Ouida offers readers a secondary motif of flower imagery to work in conjunction with the parable of the moth and star. Princess Vere becomes known widely as "the Edelweiss."⁹⁷ The name of this flower derives from the German words meaning "noble"

⁹⁷ To Corrèze, however, the remote edelweiss does not seem appropriate as Vere's symbol. He first associates her with the simplicity and purity of sweetbriar and later with the rarity and beauty of the wolfina, though the edelweiss is an important part of Vere's symbology, being the only white flower among these three. The smell of sweetbriar not only leads Corrèze to think of the moths of the world but also becomes a reference point for considering Vere's squandered youth. Once she is married, "He thought that he would have given all his triumphs, all his joys—nay, his very voice itself—to undo the thing that had been done, and make the wife of Sergius Zouroff once more the child by the sweetbriar hedge" (443). She too remembers the cliff and the sweetbriar he gave her there, and though they pass through the world as strangers, a rose bouquet with a "little branch of sweet-briar said to her that it was the welcome of Corrèze, who had not forgotten. It touched and soothed her. It seemed very sweet and thoughtful beside the welcome of her husband, who bade her rouge and go to an embassy ball" (276). In contrast to her husband, who would rather her not be pallid but rosily painted like his mistresses, Corrèze honors her youth and her nature. So, to obey both her husband and her heart, she wore the sweetbriar to the ball "beneath the diamonds on her breast" (276), hiding the thoughtful gift of Corrèze under the showy gifts of her lord. Ouida connects the sentence describing this secret by a semi-colon to another about her loveliness that night, linking her beauty to the sweetbriar and the memories it conjured. Of course, that the flower is *Rosa rubiginosa*, or the sweet briar rose (Prince 79), hints at Vere's relationship to Briar Rose, the name of the princess in an eponymous version of the Sleeping Beauty tale published by the Grimms (Grimm 43).

and “white” (Walton), and these root words certainly apply to Vere, both as adjectives and as an allusion to her new titled status. However, this appellation derives from less from her purity than her remoteness from Society, which correlates her with the white flower’s frosty habitat. Vere seems frustratingly unattainable and distant, like the alpine flower itself would seem to Parisians. Lady Dolly, who is one of society’s more attainable flowers, opines on the application of the title Edelweiss to her daughter: “ ‘Of course it means that she is quite inaccessible. If she were inaccessible in the right way, it might all be very well. . . .’ ” (248).

Vere’s inaccessibility is the link between the three threads of symbolism—the star, the color white, and the edelweiss—for each implies purity and holding the corrupting world at a distance. Corrèze ultimately voices these connections, and in doing so realizes the transforming power of his own advice to Vere. Determined to ruin Vere, Jeanne de Sonnaz schemes to get Vere to an alpine spa town when she learns Corrèze will be there, where she baits him with edelweiss: “a knot of edelweiss was flung upward, and fell at his feet” (320), easily within reach, echoing Jeanne de Sonnaz’s hope that Vere will fall. Ouida does not tell whether the singer picks up the edelweiss; his relationship to Vere is as yet undecided. However, though Vere herself is ignorant of the soubriquet (348), Corrèze does intentionally and significantly link her emblematic white flower to the parable he created. In a seemingly casual letter to both Jeanne and Vere, he carefully writes an evocative sentence for Vere about the edelweiss brought with the note: “ ‘It has no other value than that of representing her by living at an altitude where nothing but the snow and the star-rays presume to share its solitude.’ ” (350). Jeanne puzzles over this sentence, but Vere and *Moths*’ readers of course know the parable of the moth rising to the star. Thus, the sentence clearly references that part of the parable, letting Vere know that he thinks she has not sunk but still lives amid the “star-

rays.” He later vows, “ ‘I will dedicate myself to you, iceflower, and of the roses I will have no more. . . . Edelweiss, you shall live with me and be my amulet.’ “ (352). This vow is scandalous—a vow of chastity and fidelity to a woman who is the wife of another man!⁹⁸ Yet the novel makes a point of highlighting that this highly unorthodox vow is kept, but the vow made not just once but twice, celebrated as holy matrimony in an Anglican chapel and as sacrament in a Russian Orthodox church, is broken. Indeed, Corèzze’s loyalty challenges stereotypes of male and female relationships: he waits, he pines, he keeps himself for a woman. In becoming such a man, he takes on the very unworldly virtues he sought to instill in Vere, the same virtues Ouida encourages men of her world to take on, virtues that defy gender roles. He is the hero of this novel precisely because he does not follow the dictates of male behavior.⁹⁹

Because Vere remains true to her unfaithful husband, Corèzze decides that edelweiss is, though rare in Paris, too common to be Vere’s emblem. As an alternative, he presents her with a rare purple Wolfina: “I thought it was a fitter emblem for you than the edelweiss, which is bought and sold in every Alpine village” (359). That he references the commercial aspect of obtaining edelweiss harkens back to Vere’s fears that she has been bought like a prostitute as well as Zouroff’s understanding of himself as her purchaser. Corèzze also gives the wolfina to her because, while her husband buys her icy diamonds to parade his wealth, the singer can offer her this gift that her husband would not trouble himself to hunt on the high mountainside. An English ambassador who sees the flower in Vere’s hands similarly

⁹⁸ Corèzze “loved her more than he had ever loved anything on earth—and she was the wife of Sergius Zouroff. She was no more Vere, but the Princess Vera, and her world thought her so cold that it had called her the edelweiss.” (343)

⁹⁹ It is interesting to note that the only other man in the novel who struggles with the moral implications of Vere’s marriage to Zouroff, another of Lady Dolly’s paramours who wishes he had been available to marry and save Vere, commits suicide.

understands its application to her; his only role in the novel at all is to echo Corrèze's earlier statement about the Wolfina: " 'It is the only flower you ought to wear, for it is the only one really emblematic of you; the edelweiss, that they call you after in Paris, is too easily found—and too chilly' " (363). As though Ouida fears her readers may miss this shifting of symbolic gears, the ambassador opines that, unlike the waxen, white flower attributed to her, " 'She is not as cold as they say' " (366). If this scene hints that the growth of Vere's character will eventually better suit the more remote but brilliant purple flower rather than the more widely-available ice flower, then Vere's relationship with these two emblematic flowers—a relationship that would have been rather apparent to Victorian readers, particularly middle- and upper- class women, who more than likely were conversant in the language of flowers, just as Ouida clearly was—follows her from frosty self-repression to the ultimate happiness she achieves. But so long as Vere is Zouroff's faithful princess, having sent Corrèze away when he brought her the Wolfina, Corrèze continues to associate her with the edelweiss, possessively musing, " 'My beautiful edelweiss, do they think I should pluck you from your heights?' " (371). That the white flower consistently represents her married life also maintains the fairy-tale color symbolism of the pure princess, isolated in her ivory tower.

Divorce Law and Ouida's New Fairy Tale

What choice but self-imposed isolation does a fairytale princess have when she is married to a beastly prince? To escape the beastly spouse who has imprisoned her, Vere has an opportunity her fairytale predecessors lacked, a seemingly magical marital fix. With women's growing access to divorce in the late nineteenth century, Vere could petition the

courts for divorce on grounds of adultery, cruelty, and desertion (Horstman 78). Of the countries in which the Zouroffs live, Ouida must have had England in mind, for only English courts could have granted Vere a divorce. Abolished in 1816, divorce was not relegalized in France until 1884 (Phillips 434, 422), and according to the novel, Russia “permits no wife to plead against her husband” (Ouida 542).¹⁰⁰ In England, the 1857 Marriage and Divorce Act allowed women to petition for divorce on grounds of both adultery and another charge, such as cruelty, a progressive step even as the same law stated that men could be granted a divorce based on the single charge of adultery.¹⁰¹ As a result of the new law, husbands and wives realized that if they could but find the grounds, they could escape marriage, and so they learned to pay attention (Sutherland 30). Not only was a divorce easier to obtain for a man, but only men could sue the correspondent for damages (Kitchin 184); no doubt this provision aimed to protect property. Though the 1878 Matrimonial Clauses Act did allow women to separate from rather than divorce an abusive spouse, and gave her the right to own property, the law demonstrated that spousal abuse was less important than “a single instance of a wife’s infidelity” (Shanley 170).¹⁰² When wives discovered that a charge of cruelty added to adultery now stood as grounds for divorce, many of them petitioned for divorce rather than separation, with 97 female petitioners applying for divorces in the first year of the law’s

¹⁰⁰ Additionally, according to *Russian Women, 1698-1917*, “[d]efining marriage as a religious institution, imperial Russian law largely ceded control over the definition and administration of divorce law to the ecclesiastical authority of each officially recognized faith with respect to its own adherents. Most of the population consequently came under the control of the Russian Orthodox Church, which narrowly restricted the grounds for divorce (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to adultery, prolonged disappearance, and penal exile to Siberia, and sexual incapacity due to physical causes arising prior to marriage)” (Bisha 100). As a result of this ceding of control to the Church, “Divorce in this empire can be pronounced by an ecclesiastical tribunal in cases of adultery or ante-nuptial impotence” (Woolsey 184).

¹⁰¹ These grounds remained constant for the next eighty years: “Not until passage of the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1937 were new grounds for divorce added to the old ground of adultery—cruelty, desertion for three years, and incurable insanity” (Holcombe 105). Any single charge would then suffice.

¹⁰² Without a charge of cruelty, a woman merely separated from her adulterous husband could be subject to a writ mandating she submit to her husband’s conjugal rights under penalty of imprisonment (Shanley 158).

enactment (Horstman 86). Later, the Prince of Wales' presence as a party in the divorce courts—he had testified in 1870 that he had not committed adultery with Lady Mordaunt (Diamond 21)—did mitigate the stigma of divorce significantly; his appearance in this novel is interesting in light of this fact, and would have meant a great deal to contemporary readers. As well as being royalty, he was known for leading the “fast set” of English aristocracy, which in turn influenced behavior among other classes (Horstman 165).

The number of divorces continued to increase throughout the nineteenth century (146) to “about 500 a year by 1900” (Holcombe 105). The fairly slow increase in divorces owes much to a desire to avoid a sensation. If divorces were widely publicized and generated such a stigma, then initially “[divorce court] deterred adultery and encouraged forgiveness because the scandal of divorce was too much for any but the most infatuated . . . to seek willingly.” (Horstman 170). Divorce particularly stigmatized women. They were able to quit a husband only at the price of revealing the realm of the home to the prying eyes of the divorce court as well as the general public, which fed off the sensational divorce proceedings as printed up in periodicals of the day. The double standard of divorce law is thus echoed in social practices surrounding divorce, so that men not only have greater ease of access to divorce but in turn are less subject to its stigma than women. The inquisitive and revelatory nature of the divorce court, especially as concerned the wife's testimony, meant that regardless of whether the wife was the injured party or the adulterer, she became sullied by having her private life made public, while the public man did not suffer similarly. Yet the numbers of female petitioners demonstrates, as Allen Horstman argues, “Either wives feared the stigma of divorce court less than the cruelty of their husbands or there was more cruelty than expected” (86). The stigma proved a deterrent only to a point.

To Vere, even as she witnesses her husband's adultery and bears his cruelty, the public nature of divorce court coupled with the stigma of divorce means that by her own choice she remains Zouroff's wife, the frozen, icy, waxen edelweiss. She believes "fidelity is the only form of chastity left to a woman who is a wife; the man's vices cannot affect the question" (Ouida 423). Her mother's friend Lady Stoa opines that Vere's behavior is "So unlike people now-a-days, too, when they all seem to think it a positive pleasure to get into the law-courts and newspapers" (247). Her position on the issue of a husband's infidelity is highly in favor of keeping and maintaining a social position regardless of the trials in doing so; she sees Vere as a "very sensible" representative of the old ways of society, while her own daughter comparably ends up "rushing to the lawyers" (248). Both girls were similarly married to men they disliked under the influence of their mothers, and both became the unhappy wives of unfaithful husbands. Lady Stoa of course sees Vere's response as the more admirable one, as her own daughter elopes with another man. However, though Ouida seems intent on casting Vere's fortitude as admirable indeed, Lady Stoa clearly does not understand Vere or her fidelity to Zouroff, which has nothing to do with maintaining her position so much holding herself accountable for that fidelity. As Vere tells Nelaguine, "I abhor your brother, I could strike him as a brave man strikes a coward, but I have taken an oath to him and I will be true to it" (423). Nelaguine's more socially practical and less strictly moral viewpoint remains that, "Noisette, and a thousand Noisettes, if your husband forget himself for them, cannot hurt *you* in the eyes of the world; but one rash moment of indignation and rupture may be your ruin" (303). For Nelaguine realizes the double standard of virtue appears not only in matters of adultery but also in justly revenging it, for a woman divorced from her husband is a very different thing from a man divorced from his wife.

Fearing the affect of this double standard, it is Nelaguine who first employs the word “divorce,” however present in implication beforehand. Following a scene in which Corrèze publicly scolds Zouroff in a song about a golden cup that symbolizes Vere and her purity, Nelaguine pleads with Vere not to separate from her husband. Vere’s reaction is telling:

Vere, who had her eyes fixed on the distant snows of the mountains of Esterelle, turned and looked at her with a surprise and with something of a rebuke.
‘You mean?—I do not think I understand you.’
‘I mean,’ murmured her sister-in-law almost nervously, ‘do not seek for a divorce.’
‘A divorce!’
Vere echoed the words in a sort of scorn.
‘You do not know me much yet,’ she said calmly. ‘The woman who can wish for a divorce and drags her wrongs into public—such wrongs!—is already a wanton herself; at least I think so.’ (422)

Already “sitting by the statue of the wingless Love,” Vere’s preoccupation with the snowy heights of the nearby mountains connects her both to the coldness and austerity that represents her frozen desires as well as the flower that is emblematic of her chastity.¹⁰³ She goes on to tell her sister-in-law, who has reproached Vere’s stance as too stern, “Be grateful to my coldness” (422). Freezing herself instead of burning with rage over Zouroff’s mistresses, Vere again reveals the repression with which her pride covers her shame, a shame she could not make public without revealing her sexual knowledge of her husband and what he does with his mistresses and inevitably herself. It is the sexual knowledge, even in marriage, of a man she never loved that makes her believe divorce makes women wanton. She reiterates, “What could the law do for me? It cannot undo what is done. A woman is a prostitute legalised by form. . . .” (423). Divorce cannot take away the knowledge that makes

¹⁰³ Interestingly, the Esterel Massif mountains are known for their red color due to volcanic porphyry (Walker 149). The snow that frosts them over in this scene thus covers that color. Also, as Vere sits on the terrace of her husband’s home, located somewhere near Nice, looking west to the Esterel Massif, she also looks toward the town that may well have been Ouida’s inspiration for the novel’s hero: Saint-Raphael. This town sits on the coast and skirts the Esterel range. Given the topic of conversation in this scene and Ouida’s obvious familiarity with the geography of the Côte d’Azur, this scene may subtly indicate Vere’s devotion to the man who has helped her remember her marriage vows.

maidens into wives, and as Vere knows, “telling the whole world things that I blush even to know” will not reverse those roles. However, though Vere admits that she would never apply for a divorce, forcing a separation by leaving her husband remains a possible alternative; the Divorce Act did allow women who were subject to physical abuse to obtain a separation and to own and hold her own separate property, even if divorce itself was not possible (SurrIDGE 135).

Sensible of Zoureff’s infidelity to their marriage vows, Vere resists his treatment of her as a material possession subject to his will. After seeing her husband drive down the Promenade des Anglais in Nice in the carriage of his sable-clad mistress, Casse-une-Croûte, Vere’s first rebellion against the dictates of her husband—she steadfastly refuses to likewise don his sables and parade with him—leads to several scenes of spousal cruelty and physical violence. As Zoureff demands Vere’s obedience to his will, he speaks “curtly” and “[swears] a great oath” more than once before ultimately dragging her upright before him and threatening her with further violence: “I will teach you how a Russian can punish rebellion” (425). This language certainly hints at an undercurrent of repression and liberation in the novel, particularly apparent in references to Russian history.¹⁰⁴ Vere’s responses, despite her recent denial of any intention to divorce Zoureff, seem quite fit as evidence for the divorce court. She reminds him that her rebellion does not outweigh his wrongs against her: that is, she has the grounds of adultery as well as marital rape and cruelty.¹⁰⁵ Her husband’s response

¹⁰⁴ For example, the harem-slave bought by Russian traders in the Caucasus and the Russian serf are both images associated with Vere. Russian serfdom was abolished in 1861, so that in the novel, Zoureff “felt much the same emotion as his ancestors felt when some serf, whom they had been long used to beat and torture, rose up and struck them in return.” (272). Vere knows “she had no more power. . . than if she had been his serf” (464).

¹⁰⁵ Though marital rape was not a crime and thus not a possible charge in the divorce courts, women subject to the use of force that accompanied marital rape could claim cruelty as a ground for divorce in an English court (Hammerton 108). Vere certainly submits unwillingly to her role as Zoureff’s sexual partner, but in one scene at

promises violence, for Zouroff roars, “By God! I will beat you as my father did his serfs!”, which highlights her role as property without even the rights of a serf. Yet even as a wife, she vows not to subject herself to more of his insults, despite the outcome. In the ensuing stalemate, both husband and wife refuse to abandon their positions in this argument, though Zouroff knows himself in the wrong in his brutal treatment of Vere and “was ashamed of it.” Angrily, he compares her to his other mistresses as another woman he has purchased: “What better are you than that other woman who has my sables except that I bought you at a higher cost?”

This great conflict of their marriage has to be discussed; for the years they have been wedded, both of them have considered Vere’s acceptance of his hand a form of prostitution, what Ouida’s contemporaries might have called monogamic prostitution.¹⁰⁶ She has felt herself sold into the bonds of the harem-slave, while he has thought that he paid for her with his name and position.¹⁰⁷ Symbolically, Zouroff, on finding out Vere had been deceived, “Let go his hold of her wrists” (426). He ends his physical assault on her will and abandons his attempt to force her to drive out with him now that she has proven herself not to be so low as

Svir, his Russian estate, Zouroff not only invades his wife’s private sanctum, a private chapel, but in doing so also suggests his continuing invasion of her physical body as well. Vere never prayed in the chapel again, but how can she shed a contaminated physical self?

¹⁰⁶The narrator certainly underscores this implication: “There are many martyrdoms, as there are prostitutions that law legalises and the churches approve” (390). This idea was most certainly shared by others in the period. In 1885, the *Westminster Review* wrote of George Eliot’s relationship with George Henry Lewes, “No abundance of priestly blessings or of notarial seals can make a mere money match anything else but an act of prostitution; and, on the other hand, no lack of religious or legal formalities can prevent a marriage from being ethically sound, if only it be a union of a high order” (“Art. VIII.—George Eliot” 188).

¹⁰⁷ The novel tells us earlier, at the time of their betrothal, “He was ready to pay a high price for innocence, because it was a new toy that pleased him. But he never thought that it would last, any more than the bloom lasts on the peach. He had no illusions. Since it would be agreeable to brush it off himself, he was ready to purchase it” (176). The economic language underscores the availability of innocence to buyers in the marriage market. That Zouroff considers Vere in the same category as his mistresses thus makes sense, as inherently mistresses are paid for their sexual favors, and since he maintains his position as the wealthy purchaser of the goods on offer: “When they rallied him he turned on them savagely, and made them feel that, though he had chosen to toy with them and let them stuff themselves with his gold, he was their master and their purchaser—a tyrant that it was dangerous to beard, a lion with whom it was death to play” (436).

his bought women. As signs of his new valuation of Vere as a woman he cannot own or break, he even “look[s] at her wistfully” and “bow[s] with deep respect” (427). However, he has left her with bruised wrists, a sign of cruelty that can be seen by others and reported in court. Vere, recovering from their confrontation, seems as “one who has had a blow or fall.” Princess Nelaguine immediately questions whether her brother was “not violent.” The highly suggestive language points to the claims of an abused wife and the witnesses who could testify on her behalf, should Vere’s sense of wrong ever overcome her conception of the divorcée as wanton.

Ironically, though Vere suffers under the dual stresses of her husband’s harshness and his revelations of her mother’s duplicity, her physical and emotional exhaustion stems less from her conflict with Zouroff than from the latter. Even more ironic is the great period of peacetime in their marriage ushered in by this fight, for Zouroff seems a changed man. His opinion of Vere’s mother has also altered significantly. He tells his mother-in-law, now knowing how Vere came to be persuaded to marry him, “Pardon me if you do not return to my house, you and your daughter should not be sheltered by the same roof.” (431). Hitherto, he wished his wife were more like her mother, to wear paint and cajole other men into romances; now he believes Lady Dolly to be Vere’s inferior, derisively saying, “I never did you justice, I see.” The knowledge that he has made his wife a “victim of his tyrannies and martyr of his lusts” (436) engenders a desire to apologize to her for treating her as he valued her, as a rich prize too easily won and so cheapened by easy conquest.

He had always thought that he had bought her as he had bought the others, only *par le chemin de la chapelle*, and he had had a scorn for her that had spoiled and marred his thoughts of her. Now that he knew her to be the martyr of her mother’s schemes, a pity that was full of honour rose up in him. After all, she was so innocent herself, and he had hurt her so grossly. (437)

Despite his newfound “reverence that was almost fear” (437) and his recognition of unworthiness does not overcome the self-consciousness that bars him from begging forgiveness: “He thought if he lived more decently, that the whole of Europe would make a mock of it, and say that he had been reformed by the rebukes of Corrèze” (436). Pride-ridden to follow the lifestyle that society demanded, though he certainly had the resources to control it or dictate to its fashions, he avoids Vere instead. The interactions that must happen between a husband and wife going out together into the social world show him to be marked by a new “timidity” and “a gentleness and homage in his tone when he addressed her” (437). That the language is so often religious in nature hints at the type of worship the narrator deems appropriate for a woman like Vere, and it certainly foreshadows the language of the novel’s final scenes—only then the worshipper of this saint is no longer Zouroff.

How inopportune then, that Jeanne de Sonnaz should interfere, noticing Zouroff’s newfound kindness to his wife as signs to be read in “alarm” (437). Now, if not for the machinations of Jeanne de Sonnaz, Zouroff’s respect for his wife might, Ouida hints, have blossomed into love.

Without the influence of Jeanne de Sonnaz Zouroff would have loved his wife; not nobly, because he was not noble, nor faithfully, because he could not be otherwise than inconstant; but still, with more honesty of affection, more indulgence, and more purity, than he had ever had excited in him by any other creature. (502-03)

The possibility of falling in love with his wife does seem to gesture toward a traditional fairy tale ending. Readers are to see this possibility, which Ouida promptly undermines when the novel describes Zouroff’s courtesy to Vere as “only a lull in the storm” (434), thus foreshadowing the return of his disrespect for and possible mistreatment of Vere. Tense steps of the plot lead to the novel’s shocking happy ending, and the first of these steps occurs when he must endure Jeanne’s ridicule. Eager to bar his reformation into a good husband, she uses

her sharp wit to destroy “the half-formed resolution which he had made to be less unworthy of his wife” (435). His newfound virtuous impulses shred under a barrage of carefully-chosen, teasing barbs, thus recalling his base fears and jealousies.

Allowing her heroine to pass through the years of her abusive marriage unmarred by her beast is certainly fantastic, perhaps part of the modern fairy tale to replace the classic fairy tale of living happily ever after with a prince. Vere retains her virtue, if not her virginity, and her bearing, even as she bears bruises and stillborn babes.¹⁰⁸ The strong survivor is the heroine of Ouida’s new vision. To this end, Ouida employs a symbolically significant scene to move the plot from stagnation to a story arc that leads to the maturation of the new fairy tale. In her bedchamber, beneath the favorite painting of the harem slave—“ ‘Did you need to go to the East for *that*?’ ”, she had asked the painter (260)—Vere stands clad in her signature white, also wearing three pieces of jewelry brought to her through her marriage: Zouroff’s pearls, the Order of St. Catherine badge, and Corrèze’s necklace.¹⁰⁹ The painting and the pearls of course symbolize her bondage to Zouroff. The Order of St. Catherine insignia would presumably have been more familiar to Ouida’s contemporary

¹⁰⁸ Remaining childless also means that she can be divorced without losing custody of any offspring to her husband, as divorced women were usually prohibited from taking her offspring from their father (Steinbach 81). Vere had not, as women who know Zouroff predicted she would, find solace in having Zouroff’s children. When she becomes the mother of stillborn children, she is glad they die at childbirth. Comparing herself to Marian Earle, the innocent but fallen mother who lives for her child in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, Vere stresses the difference between—Vere has no love for the children of a man she despises, even if they are her children. Such a statement is strikingly unmaternal and contradicts one of the key arguments for marriages of convenience. Vere says, “I think my heart is a stone” (Ouida 203). Also, several times in the novel she expresses gratitude that the children did not live to grow up under the faulty example of her brute husband, who she fears would make them too much like himself: “Even if her offspring lived—she shuddered as she thought of it—they would be his, they would have his passions and his cruelties; they would be taken away from her, reared in creeds and in ways alien to her, they would be Zouroff Princes whose baby tyrannies would find a hundred sycophants, not her little simple children to lead in her hand up to God” (357).

¹⁰⁹ Because Vere is not the Russian empress, a princess of the blood, or a grand duchess, she would not be automatically inducted into the Order of St. Catherine on becoming Princess Zouroff. Instead, twelve Dames Large Cross were chosen from European ruling families while 94 Dames Small Cross were chosen from the nobility. While the imperial family and the Dames Large Cross wore a red sash, a diamond cross, and the badge and ribbon, the Dames Small Cross wore only the badge and ribbon. (Nicholson)

audience, particularly after the 1874 marriage of Prince Alfred to Grand Duchess Maria of Russia, an event which saw the Grand Cross of the Order conferred on Princess Beatrice (Dennison 83). The double-sided badge, in its portrayal of St. Catherine holding up her white cross of faith in front of the wheel to which she was bound and martyred, echoed Vere's self-sacrifice to marriage and her works amid the poor. However, the white cross contains the letters "DSFR," a Latin acronym that means "God Save the Tsar" (Nicholson). This show of support for imperial power makes Vere an unwilling member of the tsarist party, as she is interested in Nihilism and wants freedom for the Russian peasantry (indeed, she almost compromised Zoureff by talking to the tsarina about a Nihilist novel).¹¹⁰ Of course, it also reflects the tyrannical power of her husband over her person and will. Also, the badge worn by the Small Cross inductees hung from the left shoulder by a large red moiré ribbon (Nicholson), thus roughly over the heart that Vere deems frozen. Though the color red has so much to do with Zoureff and his mistresses, Ouida notably omits mentioning the ribbon, perhaps to maintain her distinction of red and white. Corrèze's "necklace of the moth and the star" (Ouida 452) thus is the only material object mentioned in the scene distinctly neither related to her bondage nor a reminder of it.

Upon his entrance into this scene, Zoureff "seized on the jewel as a scapegoat" (452) for his jealousy of Corrèze. To demonstrate his annoyance with his wife and her complicity in wearing the gift of another man, he "stamp[s] the delicate workmanship and the exquisite jewels out of all shape and into glittering dust" (453). After the destruction of the necklace,

¹¹⁰ This Nihilism shares little in common with Nihilist tenets as we understand them after the influence of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and postmodern philosophers. Instead, Vere is interested in the Nihilist political movement in Russia, which was very concerned with the rights of the populace and encouraged violent revolt against the imperial government. She may have been reading a novel by a number of Russian authors, including Ivan Turgenev, whose 1862 novel *Fathers and Sons* is lauded as popularizing the term (Nishitani 133). *Moths* was written in a period of escalating violence in Russia, culminating in the assassination of Alexander II in 1881 and widespread suppression of the revolutionary movement (Tyler 3134-7).

he tells Vere, “ ‘Before God, if you would let me, I could love you now!’ “ Though Ouida offers here a momentary possibility for the fairytale transformation of the beast into Prince Charming, she again undermines the possibility. Zouroff, trapped as he is under the spell of Jeanne de Sonnaz, watches his wife “longingly, sullenly, furtively” as “the shattered jewel lay at his feet.” Unconvinced that her refusal of his offer does not stem from love for Corrèze, he asks whether she is the singer’s lover. Vere accuses him of committing “ ‘the last insult that a man can pass upon his wife’ ” (454); he has, after all, suspected her of an infidelity that would give him grounds to divorce her. In contrast to his overt attack on her fidelity, Vere “shut the moth and all the shining brilliant dust in a secret drawer of her jewel-case” (455), saving the relic that has reminded her to seek the star, which she has understood to be duty to her husband. Without the necklace’s influence, Vere is more open to temptation, though she is yet unready to break Zouroff’s claims on her fidelity. But by breaking her necklace of the star and moth, Zouroff unwittingly begins to sever the chains that hold Vere. Notably, when Zouroff later exiles her to Poland, the pearls of her bondage are left behind, but the ruins of the necklace go with her.

As Vere struggles with honor, obedience and guilt, she discovers her husband has brought his mistress into the sanctity of the home. This violation of the home serves to rend their marriage asunder. Having seen what she deems “that last and worst of insults” and “his dishonor” Vere prepares to leave the roof under which he has so insulted her (471). Even during the Parliamentary discussion proceeding the passage of the 1857 Divorce Act, the members of the House of Lords heatedly debated the very situation in which Vere finds herself, with one lord arguing “ ‘adultery committed in the conjugal residence’ ” stood as sufficient basis for divorce (Shanley 43). Though the proposition was rejected and not

included in the law, with the additional charge of cruelty, Vere has a solid case. She also has precedent on her side, as seen in several English divorce cases. In one case, dating from 1865, the wife successfully brought evidence that her husband had committed adultery with the female members of their domestic staff, which she proved by dusting the floor outside his bedroom with flour. She told the court her husband “ ‘made his house a brothel, whose life was adultery.’ ” (Horstman 93). According to the *Law Times*, a record of court cases, a similar case appeared in 1889, when a wife petitioned for divorce:

The parties were married in 1866, and in 1872 the husband brought to the house an woman with whom he had immoral relations. The wife refused to admit her, but the husband insisted. The wife remained a short time in the house, and then told her husband that either she or the woman must leave the house. The husband told her she might do as she liked, but that the woman would remain. The wife thereupon left, and never afterwards cohabited with her husband.

Held, that the husband was guilty of deserting his wife. (“Dickinson” 330-1)

However, Vere’s husband seems utterly unconcerned with the possibility of Vere taking him to the divorce court; his note in answer to Vere’s vow that she or Jeanne de Sonnaz must leave the house reads, “Do what you please. You cannot suppose I shall insult my friend for you.—Zouroff” (Ouida 471). Like the husbands mentioned in these court cases, he flagrantly denies his wife’s request not to carry on such affairs in the home, which contemporary ideology ascribed as the woman’s realm. To conduct an affair here then is to all but turn her out, according to the precedent established in the courts.

But instead of divorce, Vere opts for a separation. In preparing to separate from her husband, she gathers her things to take with her. These notably consist of “the jewels her own family had given her” and the remnants of “the necklace of the moth and the star” (472), but none of Zouroff’s showy diamonds or coils of pearls. Her plan to escape does not include asking her husband for maintenance, as she means to leave behind all who know her in

asylum in “some man-forgotten place, and get her bread in some way” (472). She fully understands that leaving thus will cause a scandal which would damn her husband and his mistress: “Only all the world would know where she went, and why.” Zouroff too understands the potential for scandal and demands that Vere surrender and stay in the house with Jeanne de Sonnaz:

‘I will not have a breath on her name, What, you will make a scene that will ring through Europe—you will go out of my house when my friends are in it—you will make yourself and her and me the bye-words of society! Never, by heaven! You are my wife, and as my wife you stay.’ (473)

Here, Zouroff’s tyranny assumes that both Vere and the house are his to rule. Ouida later makes a keen reference to Vere’s property rights in noting that the Deauville mansion from which she intends to flee belongs by right to her, according to their marriage settlements, but Zouroff calls it “my house” several times. Just as he claims Vere’s property, he claims Vere—“my wife”—as well. He means for Vere to “stay” both in the house and in her rank so that she may function as the smiling screen for his relationship with Jeanne de Sonnaz and to protect his mistress at the price of her own honor. The imminent public ruin of his mistress hangs precariously on his wife’s submission to private shame, which is actually quite public but hypocritically unnoted by those in the know.

If Vere had wanted a divorce, she as yet has only adultery to charge him with, a charge that has been in her power to make for some time on account of the ambassadress who told her of Casse-une-Croute and Noisette. Her husband has been verbally violent, destroyed her necklace, and bruised her wrists, yet none of this would allow for the second charge needed for a woman to divorce her husband, because Vere has endeavored to protect their strife from prying eyes. Even Nelaguine, as much as she suspects violence, did not see Vere’s bruises. But when Vere calmly refuses to submit to the indignity of tolerating her

husband's lover in their home, Zoureff reacts with violence—"He raised his arm and struck her" (473)—and then says, " 'The law will be with you' " (474). Though he minutes ago demanded that she will live with him as his wife, this statement presumes that she will want to divorce him, now that she has the visible proof she needs. Jeanne de Sonnaz agrees, believing that Vere must be desirous of marrying Corrèze. Jeanne's problem in scheming against Vere is that, since she hides her adulteries to maintain a reputable public front, she misunderstands Vere as concerned with the technicalities of sin rather than with personal honor. Instead, Vere is the sort of model woman—Ouida's model wife, who is nothing like *Friendship's* villainess, Janet Ross, who seems intentionally referenced in Jeanne's duplicity and similar name—who feels guilty for merely realizing her husband's death would make her free. Her honor does not depend on whether sin could be covered over with the legalities of divorce, but with her self-respect. Petitioning for a divorce is thus utterly beyond her ability: "I shall not divorce you, I do not take my wrongs into the shame of public courts' " (474), she says. What ultimately unravels this colossal tangle of intrigue and ideals to give Vere freedom is her reevaluation of duty, so that she can dutifully serve a man other than the one she is married to without losing her sense of honor.

The stalemate caused by Vere's sense of personal morality of course cannot be broken by Zoureff, as he can neither make her stay at Deauville nor divorce her, as he has insufficient grounds for divorce. Zoureff knows that while " 'She may break, she will never bend' " (479), and so he sets about making her break. If anything, his actions continue to strengthen Vere's position, especially as, bearing "a broad black bruise" on her chest, she is shipped off to Poland. He writes to Vere, "The only woman whom I care for has been driven away by you' " (477), and this exile is her punishment. Her only way to leave, he says, is

through recognizing Jeanne de Sonnaz or asking for a divorce. Zouroff and Jeanne both understand the cruelty of Vere's captivity. Though initially he told Jeanne, "To protect your name I exiled her" (484), he has some feelings of conscious. Jeanne's reaction to Vere's exile again points to the undercurrent of Russian politics: "You are all imbeciles, you Russians. You have only one remedy for all diseases—Siberia! It does not cure all diseases: Nihilism shows that. Corrèze is your best friend, since you want to be free." (484). In likening Vere's exile that of Nihilist activists imprisoned in Siberia, Jeanne underscores this point for readers, and she also argues for Vere's liberation rather than her captivity—but by means of fallenness.¹¹¹ Jeanne, as she "impaled a blue butterfly" (482), encourages him to implicate Vere, the little moth, in adultery in order to have grounds for divorce. Yet Zouroff feels conflicted: "He sent her into captivity, and he kept her there without mercy, but to hem her in with falsehood, to dishonour her by affected belief in her dishonour, was a lower deep than he could stoop to, even at the bidding of his mistress" (490). The control Jeanne exerts over Zouroff maintains her false appearance of propriety, as she taunts him with the prospect of shutting him out of her life if he fails to force an end to Vere's seclusion: "I shall be obliged to close my doors to you; I cannot know a man who is cruel to an innocent wife" (502). In his desire for an easy way out of the stalemate and of Jeanne's demands, he wishes that Vere made the choice for him; if Vere did willingly go to Corrèze, then he would have grounds for divorce without her consent. But Jeanne quashes these better sentiments so that he can "put his wife away for ever" (490). Curiously, the context of this phrase allows it to mean both

¹¹¹ Banishment to Siberia was an ongoing punishment for Russian criminals, particularly political prisoners. For example, an attempt on Alexander II's life in 1879, one of many such attempts before he was killed in a bombing, resulted in exiling 1200 prisoners to Siberia (Tyler 3132). After a March 1880 attempt, the would-be assassins were hanged and "ten thousand out of twelve thousand Nihilist prisoners in the Moscow prison were banished to Siberia" (3134). Following Alexander II's death in March 1881, the government of his son Alexander III rigorously suppressed the Nihilist revolutionaries: "Over twelve thousand convicts were banished to Siberia in May, 1881" (3137).

“put aside,” as in having nothing further to do with, and “put away,” as in imprisonment. Both meanings are applicable to Zouroff’s treatment of his wife, and the duality of meanings allows Ouida to more deftly describe Zouroff and his callous cruelty in keeping Vere in Poland.

Yet in willingly leaving Zouroff to be locked up in his castle, Vere benefits twofold. Not only has Zouroff added imprisonment to the growing list of charges against him, but Vere seems to have that release that she had asked her husband for earlier—to go to some forgotten place and aide the peasantry on Zouroff lands. All things suggest that she has the will to stay there for eternity. She writes, “I am glad of this retreat” (479). Also, in remaining in frosty Poland, she defies Zouroff’s hopes that she will reconcile with Jeanne, lives away from him so as not to need a divorce, and all the while also obeys his pronouncement of exile. She will not even leave Poland at the request of her kin, the Duke and Duchess of Mull. Of course, “she would rather live and die on the Polish plains” than dishonor herself by meeting her husband’s titled mistress in society or calling on the aide of law.

Corrèze’s arguments, eloquent as the man himself, highlight the disparity of sentiment dividing him from his rival as he endeavors to shift Vere’s perspective on what he calls “captivity” (492), a “prison” (493), and “a second Siberia”—and here again Ouida employs language alluding to the Nihilism movement and the Russian government’s Siberian internment camps. As the joint charges of physical violence, adultery, and false imprisonment guarantee her a divorce, he rationalizes that she should take that option as her means to freedom. His plea seems fit to affect the heart of any juror: “he consigns you to it in your innocence, to spare the guilty!” (493) But Vere believes self-abnegation and muteness

demonstrates “a woman’s courage” (493), and her courage means loyalty to Zouroff, as she states in the following interchange with Corrèze:

He said abruptly, almost in a whisper: “The world says you should divorce him; you have the right—”
“I have the right.”
“Then you will use it?”
“No—no,” she answered after a pause. “I will not take any public action against my husband.”
“He wishes you to divorce him?”
“No doubt. I shall be here until I do so.”
“And that will be—”
“Never.” (493)

Vere’s responses contrast harshly to Corrèze’s concern considering his interest in her divorce. If she were free, they could of course marry. While she remains bound by principles to the beastly husband who intends to abandon her, either in divorce or in frosty captivity, she forgoes Corrèze’s love and they both forego a happy ending. Her emphasis that no man has a right to avenge her honor but her husband of course circularly emphasizes her husband’s lack of honor in disgracing his wife and then failing in his duty to avenge her honor, since it is against him that she needs an avenger. She repeats, credo-like, that avenging herself through divorce is impossible and that “courts are only for shameless women” (494). When Corrèze still prods her toward divorce, she angrily replies, “Do you know what you ask? You ask me to be no better a thing than Jeanne de Sonnaz!” Though she has long felt herself prostituted for her mother, procuring a divorce in order to offer herself to another man would seal her self-evaluation as a wanton woman. The fault lies with her conception of fallenness. Though she already considers herself fallen in her marriage, she still justifies her marital fidelity. As a divorcée, that justification must fail, as a divorced wife has failed her duty.

However, when her singer-as-prince duels with her prince-as-beast and is wounded, having himself nobly misfired, Vere awakens from the repression and duty in which she was frozen to at last understand the necklace's meaning and her marriage as oppositional choices. She acts without the help of any heroic princes to remove the symbolic, spellbinding splinter or bite of apple of traditional fairy tales—the ring which kept her bound in wakeful sleep. Moreover, she treads on her wedding ring just as her husband trod on her necklace. She leaves the castle, the position, and the prince behind, choosing instead the man who taught her the parable of the moth and the star in the first place, her impotent but faithful fairy godfather. Hitherto bound by an overwhelming sense of duty, she recognizes a higher duty to the wounded Corrèze than to her husband; she even means to avenge the singer if he has been killed, presumably by finally divorcing Zouroff as publicly as possible. That the princess solves her marital gridlock by tossing off social strictures to go to her lover before legally disposing of her husband speaks of Ouida's comprehension and reevaluation of the era in which she lived.

In an ironic turn of events, the chaste heroine's decision to go to Corrèze gives her husband the materiel he needs to be granted a divorce by his tsar.¹¹² Vere has intentionally left her husband's estates and defied him by going to the man all the world already presumes to be his lover, thanks to the lies of Jeanne de Sonnaz. Even if they never became lovers—the novel does not give us many details between Vere's arrival in Paris and the scene of Corrèze and Vere married and living in the Alps—Zouroff uses the appearance of infidelity to serve as the proof of it: "Russia, which permits no wife to plead against her husband, set him free

¹¹² John Sutherland has discussed *The Woman in White* along similar lines. Rather than the ending as it was written, "[t]he more realistic outcome in 1860 would have been for Sir Percival's private detectives to discover Laura and Walter cohabiting in the East End of London. This would constitute *prima facie* proof of adultery in the hands of any competent counsel. . . . They might afterwards be free to marry but Mr. and Mrs. Hartwright would be for ever outcasts from respectable society." (31)

and annulled his marriage on the testimony of servants, who, willing to please, and indifferent to a lie the more, or a lie the less, bore the false witness that they thought would be agreeable to their lord.” (542) He held all the power in their relationship: to send her away, to recall her, to testify against her where she cannot protest his falsities and proclaim his sins, to own and to rule. And power-mongering Jeanne de Sonnaz controls Zouroff, and wields her power against Vere’s reputation and Zouroff’s better instincts.

Conclusion

At the novel’s close, Vere is divorced and out of society, but she lives with the man she loves, possibly the first divorcée to be happily remarried in English fiction. She is also legally married to Corrèze, which also makes for a quite unusual happy ending. Even so, this ending has a basis in fact. After the Divorce Act, remarriages of divorced persons were relatively few in number, with only ten remarrying in 1861 and numbers remaining in double digits for nearly two decades after the act’s passage. But remarriage exploded, so that nearly four hundred remarriages occurred in 1900. In the year *Moths* was published, 117 remarriages took place (Horstman 156), suggesting that this portrait of a divorcée is not beyond the realm of possibility, if not exactly representative of women of the period, either. The old-fashioned heroine of *Moths* thus, paradoxically, becomes the most socially progressive woman in the novel by maintaining so-called traditional values and eschewing duplicitous respectability. Her emphasis on obedience to her marriage vows, her duty to her husband, and her inability to deceive him make her distinct in her generation, yet these characteristics are mocked, even by her husband. Through divorce, Vere leaves the bonds of her fractured marriage to enter into another marriage consistently described in sacred

language, but as a divorcée, she is fallen in the eyes of Society, though she could have taken lovers during her marriage with impunity, so long as she did it secretly. Ouida can portray the character as both progressive and traditional largely because Vere resists divorce and ultimately has no role in it—committing no sin—so that Zouroff alone bears the moral responsibility for the divorce, though the social stigma rests on Vere.

Society cannot understand that Vere attains the star in falling from the world of the moths, or that she is not really fallen at all. She and Corrèze live instead hidden away in a land “seldom traversed,” where their alpine retreat looks over a “nameless” lake and mountains that are “the glory nearest heaven that earth knows” (Ouida 540). These mountains, with the rising and setting of the sun, “glow like the fires of a high altar.” Here, “the air is pure as crystal.” Here, in this atmosphere of purity and wholesome naturalness, they have forgotten the world they left, remembering it only as “a confused and foolish dream, a fretting fever, a madness of disordered minds and carking discontent.” Here, we are to understand, they have only contentment, happiness, and knowledge of the authenticity of the world around them. Vere continues to wear her signature white, still pure even though a fallen woman. Corrèze worships her at this high alpine altar with “the religious homage of a man’s surpassing love” and with as “reverent and knightly a grace” (541) as he had offered when she was still a princess. Ouida means to show that his reverence is undiminished by the sacrifice of his voice. Indeed, they must be depicted as living blissfully out of society for this ending to be a happy one for a fallen, divorced woman. The reader of this novel is to know, through Ouida’s meaningful final sentences about Vere and Corrèze, that this life is better, much better, than the one they left behind. Though “the moths have gnawed the ermine” of Vere’s innocence, she and Corrèze now “watch the stars and dwell in the gracious silence of

the everlasting hills.” Here, high amid the mountaintops is the perfect home for the moth of the star.

Moth's fairy-tale happy ending is achieved by casting off social restraint. True to each other, Vere and Corrèze renounce rank and pageantry for naturalness, simplicity, and love. This devaluing of position and rejection of society notably takes place after both individuals have garnered all the worldly advantages of wealth and social prominence and found them dissatisfying. After their spectacular, very public escape, however, the novel clearly depicts Society marching on as dangerous to innocence as ever. Jeanne de Sonnaz does not, like Snow White's stepmother, dance to death in “red-hot” shoes (Gilbert 42), but is a leader of the world that ostracized her new husband's former wife. Lady Dolly, too, is quite well-thought of in society, having put on the appearance of virtue. Perhaps Ouida's most pointed moment of social commentary in the novel comes in this closing image of Lady Dolly. Ouida makes us understand throughout *Moths* that Lady Dolly's jealousies and insecurities force the drama of the plot in forcing Vere to marry Zouroff, and that she secretly hopes for Vere's moral downfall. That she both causes Vere's unhappiness and removes herself from it by refusing to know Vere socially, even though “great ladies” believe “ ‘it is very dreadful for her not to be able to know her daughter’ ” (Ouida 543), renders her a more reprehensible and certainly more recognizably realistic image than that of power-hungry Jeanne de Sonnaz, for Lady Dolly is a mockery of Ouida's Victorian readers themselves. Consequently, Ouida's message is enormous in its scope.

Of course such an ending did not find favor with reviewers, who lambasted the morality of the novel, even as the wonderfully popular novel flew off the shelves of libraries

(Ffrench 89) and became a popular stage melodrama.¹¹³ *Academy* writer George Saintsbury blamed the tone of the novel and particularly the happy ending for the novel's disappointing moral: "[*Moths*] is so appallingly dull that even the queer topsy-turvy pathos which Ouida generally manages to impart fails of its effect—perhaps because the ending is what may be called a happy one" (192-3). A *Westminster Review* critic wished the novel were less incendiary and instead catered to conventional values: "To be serious, we wish that Ouida could be persuaded to take a leaf out of some quiet, pure tale, like 'From Generation to Generation.' Such a book does good, 'Ouida's' nothing but harm" ("Belles Lettres" 606).¹¹⁴ Similarly, the *Athenaeum* condemned the novel's moral and portrayal of Society:

If we took seriously the moral purpose of Ouida, and held that any good could come from presenting two-thirds of society as blacker than human nature has ever been and one-third as whiter than it is ever likely to be rendered, the course adopted by Mr. Hamilton of depriving the work of whatever is significant in its teaching might incur condemnation. In sober truth, however, the pictures of life in 'Moths' are as fantastic as those in 'Candide.' We hope Ouida is sensible of the honour done her in such association. ("The Week," 1 Apr. 1882, 421)

The reviewer's stance that the story is "fantastic," which he tells us in "sober truth," reveals that he shares the opinion of his occupational predecessors that realism is the basis against which to judge all other literature. For the reviewer, taking seriously Ouida's pictures of

¹¹³ According to Allardyce Nicholl, "when Ouida brought out *Moths*, there was a general rush to bring its excitements to the stage. Three adaptations were written in 1882, three in 1883, while two burlesques were soon on the boards." (80). The novel was a target of Mudie's infamous censorship, to which Ouida responded angrily. "When she heard that Mr. Mudie had threatened to withdraw *Moths* from circulation among his subscribers, she wrote indignantly to Mr. Chatto saying that the subscribers would no more allow him to withdraw a book of hers than they would one of Lord Beaconsfield's" (Ffrench 91). Nevertheless, the novel gained immense popularity: "The sensation made by *Moths* upon the world of society was immense. The libraries were unable to keep up with the incessant demand for it; and yet after four months Mr. Chatto appears to have had the type broken up, and the book sold in a cheap edition. The original edition, whenever available, was at a premium, and people were willing to pay as much as three guineas for a copy. The suppression cost Ouida distress and much agitated correspondence. In a letter to her publisher she reproached him violently for the error, and added that, having electrified society, *Moths* had done all to sustain that success which even the demure Spectator had conceded was hers." (Ffrench 89)

¹¹⁴ Nevermind that the *Athenaeum* wrote that *From Generation to Generation* was "a disappointing book" with an "ill-told" story ("Novels of the Week" 16).

characters who are too white or too black would require fantasy, too, in imagining human life differently than it is in reality. Yet in focusing on how the novel strays from reality, he misses Ouida's didactic point, sweeping aside her social commentary because it suffers from, as he sees it, a lack of middle ground.¹¹⁵

Nevertheless, Ouida's revisionist fairy tale reveals her ideas on marriage, love, and purity in a broken and hypocritical world, a world in which the evil genius indeed preponderates. The representation of a gilded, specious aristocracy in *Moths* shows a reversal of Ouida's earlier fawning depictions of the lifestyle of the demimonde in early novels such as *Strathmore* and *Held in Bondage*, continuing a theme began in *Friendship* by now showing it to be shallow and dangerous.¹¹⁶ Ouida's melding of the fantastic and the real, the implausible and the plausible, the respectable and the fallen underscores the close relationship between fairy tales and realism, so that Ouida ironically succeeds in analyzing

¹¹⁵ A.K. Fiske, jingoist, racial purist, and author of the "Profligacy in Fiction" in the *North American Review*, also misses the message of *Moths*. Fiske not only asserts that Ouida has "no claim to the title of Englishwoman" (87) as a "much-traveled adventuress of no nationality" (86) and declaims knowledge of her history before completely ignoring her happy family life with her mother and grandmother—he invents a character of lady novelist to surmise how someone would write as Ouida does, and supplies her with an invented history—but he also hates *Moths* very much indeed. He complains that in the novel, "Society is false and corrupt, and knows it, but protects itself from collapse by a common consent to pretend that it is otherwise, until some fool rebels and makes a scandal. Then the fool must be suppressed, the victim of exposure ostracized, and the shallow comedy is resumed" (85). Such "vile rubbish," Fiske writes, is foreign to "Anglo-Saxon ideas of society and of human life," as the race "is not tolerant of infidelity or profligate practices cloaked by social pretensions" (86). He continues, "English literature from its beginning has truthfully reflected the social life, the character, and the manners of the people whose blood is English, and there is nothing of which we have more right to be proud than the steady purification of the stream."

¹¹⁶ Given her long-time romance—however real or imagined—with the Marquis della Stuffa, his desertion of her and Ouida's renewal of interest in her long-time object of desire, the opera singer Mario, *Moths* also reads somewhat biographically. While biographer Eileen Bigland states that Ouida replaced a prominent portrait of della Stuffa that had been hung above the table where she wrote *Moths* with one of Mario, who of course became Corrèze in the novel (149), Monica Stirling's biography of Ouida counters the notion that della Stuffa dropped Ouida after the publication of *Friendship*. Instead, he supposedly continued to see her frequently for several more years, which to Stirling suggested Ouida and della Stuffa sharing a plan for their future. During these years of reconciliation, Ouida wrote and published *Moths* (132). But Stirling reads Ouida's heartbreak as reason for her use of the opera singer-figure as her hero: "as she tried to fight her way out of the misery della Stuffa had caused her, her thoughts turned back to the childish emotion" (132-33). However, the happy ending that comes to Vere of course can only be an imagination for Ouida, who never had another chance at marriage after Stuffa finally breaks with her.

her very real world by describing it, warts and all, as it were, in a sensation novel that borrows heavily from fairy tales for structure and characterization. In the great tradition of fairy tales, *Moths* uses the didacticism of the fairy tale as a vehicle for commentary that both addresses Victorian readers and implicates their hypocrisy, so that for them, understanding *Moths* came at the price of understanding that its criticism rebounded upon its audience, upper- and middle-class readers alike, and not simply its villains. This twisted fairy tale shows Ouida's social truth.

Coda

In 1887, the *Edinburgh Review* published the sales figures of sensation novels for the year as two million serial parts per week and ten to sixty thousand bound books, showing that the taste for sensation had by no means ended (Altick 308). Over the years, many writers who had earlier been “vociferous critics of the sensation phenomenon” had given it a go, adopting “its devices and preoccupations themselves” (Reynolds 130). Widespread popularity continued both in England and abroad. For example, Clive Holland, discussing Braddon’s life and work in 1910, included a previously unpublished letter to Braddon from Robert Louis Stevenson that assured her of *Aurora Floyd*’s enduring popularity:

But there is one book, I am sorry to be obliged to inform you, which is a mere drug in the market in the Pacific. ‘Oh no, I have that already,’ is the cry—and the book is ‘Aurora Floyd.’ After all, it is something to be out and away greater and more popular than Scott, Shakespeare, Homer, in the South Seas, and to that you have attained. (152)¹¹⁷

Even in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which is set in 1904, Molly Bloom has read sensation novels, including Collins’s *The Woman in White*, Braddon’s *Henry Dunbar*, and Wood’s *East Lynne* (Joyce 551). The use of the term ‘sensation’ to describe new novels continued as well as the genre’s popularity, both trends carrying on long after the fad of the 1860s, as shown in a review of Williamson’s *Ordered South* in *The Speaker*, dated May 12, 1900, which compares the novel to *Aurora Floyd*:

It is an extremely well contrived, sensational novel. We read it with something of the same thrill of excitement that years ago carried us breathless through *Aurora Floyd*. It has not, perhaps, the same sustained and many-sided sensationalism as that popular

¹¹⁷ Holland did not give the letter’s date, but presumably Stevenson wrote it during the period he spent in Samoa, roughly 1890 until his death in 1894 (Speake 1052).

‘yellow-back,’ but it will have equal fascinations for many romantic young persons, and will be equally harmless in its results. (“Fiction” 177)

No doubt the critics of 1863, busily bashing Braddon’s novel for its amoral heroine, would never have dreamed that nearly four decades into the future, some fellow critic would deem the novel “harmless”!

Yet early twentieth-century critics did look back rather fondly on the sensation novel, arguing that this fiction from decades earlier compared favorably to the more scandalous literature of their own period. An *Athenaeum* article from 1908 discussed Ouida with the advantage of hindsight, stating that though “her views of the *demi-monde* were considered very wicked in a past age,” “it may be noted that she indulged in nothing like the licence (sic) of the novelist of to-day” (“Ouida” 128). The following year, Edith Searle Grossmann, a reviewer for the *Westminster Review*, expressed similar views about Ouida and the morality of her works, particularly *Moths*:

Our fleshy fiction has left the most sensational of the Victorians far behind. Ouida was considered one of the most risky novelists of her day, and yet in Ouida’s novels, *e.g.*, in ‘Moths,’ the most condemned of all, vice is vicious, and there is intense conviction of the thing then called purity. But to-day the absence of chastity is considered a sign of ‘warmth,’ and a loving disposition. (507)

The change in the characteristics of fictional heroines—from Ouida’s emphasis on the antagonism of vice and purity, to modern women who are fleshy, warm, unchaste, and loving, none of which bring chilly Vere to mind—shows a wide difference in behaviors. The “fleshy” fiction of 1909 evidently presented readers with sexualized women who no longer needed to be redeemed.

Later, scholars such as Amy Cruse, Pamela Gilbert, and Natalie Schroeder wrote about the influence of sensation fiction on the New Woman. Gilbert argues that Ouida’s novels anticipated and perhaps contributed to the rise of the New Woman, particularly as

“many New Women writers must have grown up reading Ouida” (173). The New Women of the 1880s and 1890s certainly did read sensation novels, including *Moths* (Cruse 350-1), and their interest in these novels derived from more than just a desire for rather saucy entertainment: they liked novels about fallen women who defied social expectations. For example, Ouida’s characters Cigarette from *Under Two Flags* and Folle-Farine from the eponymous novel enjoy both power and sexual freedom (Gilbert 181). Natalie Schroeder has asserted that Folle-Farine and *Strathmore*’s Marion Vavasour undermine conventional behavior and male authority by putting these powers, including their sexuality, to good use, and though defeated, these women “emerge as far more interesting than and superior to their male adversaries” (“Feminine” 101). Because of such characters, Kimberley Reynolds and Nicola Humble have argued, “. . . sensation fiction represents one of the major contestations of female roles operative in the nineteenth century—and is responsible for initiating significant changes in the representation of women in later fiction” (99).

The redemptive element of the sensation novel not only engaged readers but created new heroines for progressive writers to borrow and progressive readers to emulate. Due to the continuing popularity of these novels, eventually its characteristics and characters merged into the mainstream, so that their elements no longer seemed distinctly sensational, or at least did not cause a sensation in the same way. Prostitutes, sexually adventurous young women, wives with lovers, divorcées—these women became the familiar fixtures of late Victorian novels and dramas, including Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Bernard Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, and James’s *The Wings of a Dove*. Sensation influenced the decadence of Wilde’s plays *Salome* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as well. The fiction of George Gissing in particular explores the prostitute, and he “wrote

from personal experience; he had been expelled from Owens College, Manchester, in 1876 after he was caught stealing money to help the young prostitute he later married” (Mitchell 133). His first novels, *Workers in the Dawn* (1880) and *The Unclassed* (1884), both feature prostitutes as main characters, even heroines. Although *The New Magdalen* had featured a prostitute-heroine a decade earlier, Mercy Merrick had not actively practiced the trade during the novel, that part of her life having ended well before the novel’s opening scene. The following review—albeit from 1896, twelve years after the publication of the novel—of *The Unclassed* from the *Speaker* treats the novel much more sympathetically than the bulk of reviews for Collins’s earlier novel, even though this novel does feature an actively working prostitute:

Mr. George Gissing has strayed far beyond the limits of conventional propriety in ‘The Unclassed,’ and we do not doubt that he must have given offence to many of his readers in doing so. Yet, despite this fact, ‘The Unclassed’ is a notable and, in some respects, a noble piece of work. Though it goes down into the depths which are better left unsounded by the average man and woman, there is not a trace in it of the uncleanness of thought and suggestion which attaches to so much of contemporary fiction. The story, though it deals with a class which tradition associates with untrammelled passion and unlimited self-indulgence, is absolutely pure, and, indeed, almost stern in tone. There may be something exaggerated in the character of Ida Starr, the daughter of a fallen woman, who follows in her mother’s footsteps of shame. But, for all that, it is a noble character, and it is difficult to believe that it may not be a real one as well.

The article continues,

Strangely enough, the sunshine of the story, such as it is, is provided by Ida Starr, the outcast of the streets, who, purified by love and sorrow, works out her own redemption and that of others with it. We have seldom read a more touching story than this, nor have we ever read one which, dealing with unconventional themes, furnishes a better justification of its author’s choice of characters and topics. (“Fiction.” 23)

The prostitute-heroine of the novel not only supplies “the sunshine of the story” despite her profession, but she also shares an intimate but platonic relationship with an aesthete, inherits

a fortune, and retires to a life of benevolence—but only after she has secured “her own redemption and that of others with it.” Perhaps the novel outpaced its times, but this review certainly does not assume that the character of a fallen woman—even a prostitute, even a fallen woman capable not only of redemption but of redeeming people of a higher social status—is implausible or immoral.

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