GENDER NON-CONFORMITY BEYOND NARRATIVE PROSTHESIS IN WILKIE COLLINS'S *THE LAW AND THE LADY* AND *POOR MISS FINCH*

by

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Dalhousie University is located in Mi'kma'ki, the

ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.

We are all Treaty people.

for those who find themselves mis-fitting

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

TLTL	*The Law and the Lady* Edited by Jenny Bourne Taylor, Oxford UP, 2008.
PMF	*Poor Miss Finch* Edited by Catherine Peters, Oxford UP, 2008.

ABSTRACT

Of the writers who influenced sensation fiction in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, there are few who parallel Wilkie Collins in their commitment to quasi-realist presentations of disability in their narratives. In two of his novels—*The Law and the Lady* and *Poor Miss Finch*—disability is treated as a nexus point for gender nonconformity, containing subversive depictions of people with disabilities thriving in their respective social circles despite their marginalization and their subsequent deviation from idealized gender roles. Drawing mainly on the theoretical frameworks established by Tobin Siebers and Martha Stoddard Holmes, this thesis explores the narrative significance of superimposing queerness onto an already discomfiting body—the disabled body—in the context of mid-nineteenth century sensation fiction. Fundamentally, this thesis encourages a re-examination of Collins's work, as the marginalized identities he centers may have influenced fiction and made space for later, bolder literary acknowledgements of figures who operate outside the physical norm.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Of the writers who influenced sensation fiction in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, there are few who parallel Wilkie Collins in their commitment to quasi-realist presentations of disability in their narratives. Sensation fiction—a genre that began in Britain in the 1860s with Collins's novel *The Woman in White* (Hingston 78)—was named for the fear that the genre could produce physical sensations in readers' bodies, "appealing to the nerves" of respectable middle-class audiences and subsequently increasing social disease and dysfunction (Arias 14). The genre's Gothic roots, mixed with its realist overtones, created a space for scandalous plots that critics deemed unsuitable for respectable middle-class audiences because they involved bigamy, murder, suicide, forgery, and adultery (Hingston 77). Sensation fiction's visceral imagery and unsavoury plotlines made the genre particularly well-suited to characters who fall outside the bounds of "propriety," particularly characters with disabilities, queer-coded individuals, and women characters (Hingston 78). Stressing suspense and mystery, sensation fiction was removed from the sober realism that "higher literature" of the 1860s centered, and instead set the stage for an exploration of identity that attempts to reconcile the particularities of the mind with the realities of the body in what Hingston terms a concern with "identity and its loss" (79).[1] The rise of psychology and its medicalization of social realities deeply impacted the mid-Victorian social fabric, "producing an anxiety about bodily identity to which sensation fiction responded" (Hingston 80). Thus, it is

[1] For more about the history and conventions of sensation fiction as a genre, please refer to Brantlinger, "What Is 'Sensational' about the 'Sensation Novel'?" (1982); Gilbert, *A Companion to Sensation Fiction* (2011); Logan, *Sensational Deviance: Disability in Nineteenth-Century Sensation Fiction* (2020); Mangham (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction* (2013); and Wynne, *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (2001).

through the medium of sensation fiction that Collins repeatedly features characters of acute bodily difference and extreme social subversion—figures who fit into these melodramatic literary landscapes of "identity and its loss."

Writing on the prevalence of disability in this genre, Kylee-Anne Hingston argues that "sensation fiction's multitudinous depictions of disability make the genre a critical focus of disability scholarship in Victorian studies" (Hingston 79)—as is demonstrated through recent scholarly attention to the Collins canon. Of particular importance to this discussion are two of Collins's novels: *The Law and the Lady* (*TLTL*) and *Poor Miss Finch (PMF*). Both novels treat disabled and gender nonconforming characters as fully developed figures who, despite their marginalization, exercise significant social agency. *The Law and the Lady* features Miserrimus Dexter—an eccentric (and heavily queer-coded) man "born without legs" (*TLTL* 214)—who moves as one with his wheelchair and has a flair for colourful dress; whereas *Poor Miss Finch* tells the story of Lucilla Finch—a young woman whose "natural femininity" is meticulously dismantled and reconstructed through her search for a cure for early onset blindness (*PMF* 125; 257).With the particularities of disabled existence running through the core of these narratives, Dexter and Lucilla are not only notable in their operation within frameworks of bodily difference but also in that their bodies allow them to express social and mental difference with less scrutiny than their able-bodied counterparts. In other words, in taking advantage of asexual frameworks that disabled people often have prescribed to them in an effort to sanitize their bodies and sexualities (Siebers 145), both Dexter and Lucilla are able to express gender nonconformity through their disabilities, rendering queerness inextricable from disability in these narratives.

This reading of Collins's work adds to the growing but still modest body of scholarship exploring connections between bodily difference and gender nonconformity in Victorian sensation fiction. The gender queerness of both Dexter and Lucilla is integral to the portrayal of these characters as figures of acute bodily difference, as it is their very existence in liminal bodies that opens for these narratives what Zigarovich terms "trans possibilities" (99) —suggestions of gender queerness that allude to trans-coded identities. While staying within the conventions of sensation fiction, Dexter and Lucilla enact a subversive agency that helps to "fracture a number of binaries" (Hingston 79) through the presentation of their bodies: namely the fragile delineations between straight and queer, man and woman, public and private, and abled and disabled (Siebers 136, 145; Zigarovich 99). Depicting both gender and disability as states of being that are fluid (in contrast to assumptions that they are static bodily realities) Collins foregrounds an entwining of sexuality, ability, and gender that challenges the prescribed asexuality that the dominant Victorian social structure typically uses to sanitize disabled bodies, removing any taint of "deviance" from their bodies and their interactions (Mossman and Stoddard Holmes 494; Siebers 144). Queerness in these texts is superimposed onto an already disquieting and destabilizing body—the disabled body—to render queerness excusable under a social structure that typically makes little room for expressions of bodily difference.[2]

Examining disabled identities in tandem with queerness (as opposed to framing them as two distinct aspects of bodily difference that happen to coexist by happenstance)

[2] The nineteenth century was by no means homogenous in terms of its attitudes towards queer and disabled subcultures; however, a deep historical overview of every possible subculture and alternative framework of understanding is not possible in the scope of this project. Collins's work attempted to address the dominant conservative discourses of his time, and so this thesis is broached with an understanding that it is these conservative hegemonies that Collins is responding to with his focus on marginalized bodies (Rance 75).

extends and demonstrates Jolene Zigarovich's claim that "the sensation genre allows for and celebrates these subversions [of gender binaries] and creates spaces for sympathizing with non-normative [disabled, and trans-coded] characters" (Zigarovich 100). Collins uses strategies of Othering found in sensation fiction in tandem with the well-rounded characterization found in realism to portray complex characters in a nuanced light. Additionally, he uses strategies of caricature in his writing carefully, delivering realistic and humanizing perspectives of people contained in texts that are fundamentally used to shock and entertain. This, in turn, allows for more nuanced discussions of marginalization and bodily difference in a fictional tradition that foregrounds the domestic sphere (Stoddard Holmes, "Disability in Victorian Sensation Fiction" 493). This supports the assertions of Marlene Tromp, who argues that "the narrative of life offered in sensation fiction and realist fiction are not two poles—reality and unreality—but [are] instead intimately related in ways with which we have often failed to grapple meaningfully" (858-61). Collins's sensational realism challenges the relationship between bodies and narrative, and in doing so "[exposes] the fragile separation between public and private spheres" (Siebers 136) that disability challenges in its rearticulation of mobility. By destabilizing beliefs that "the distinction between men and women [is what] 'naturally' characterize[s] each gender" (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction* 94), Collins uses disability beyond narrative prosthesis (Mitchell and Snyder 10) to show that boundaries used to separate bodies are less fixed than they appear.

CONTEXTUALIZING VICTORIAN DISABILITY

Both *The Law and the Lady* and *Poor Miss Finch* concern themselves with domesticity, (prescriptive) heteronormativity, and congenital or early-onset disabilities—disabilities not generally considered treatable. Sensation fiction's concern with the domestic centres social anxieties of the changing attitudes towards gender roles present in the mainstream British culture of the 1860s and these narratives interrogate how disability functions in these rapidly evolving understandings of gendered spaces. Rooted in the "separate spheres ideology" —that, among other things, viewed paid labour as the domain of men and domestic labour as the domain of women—fundamentally affected the ideals of labour distribution and freedom of movement. Although the distinction between separate spheres was never absolute, there were real and explicit ways in which the boundary was policed, such as the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864[3], which sought to prevent the movement of women at certain times of day or in certain places through the legal restriction of sex work. This anxiety over "working women" and subsequent effects on their bodies and households has resonance for this discussion of Collins's works for two reasons: firstly, men with congenital disabilities like Dexter's were not permitted the same freedom of movement between public and private spheres as able-bodied people—a fact that affects these idealized gender roles (Hingston 14); secondly, the systemic enforcement of gendered space and place had very real implications for bodies that were deemed "mis-fits" in the environments they operated in (Garland Thomson 593).

[3] Given that lower-class women often had to engage in labour due to economic necessity, the public/private split became an issue overwhelmingly affecting those at the intersection of class and gender. Women engaging with labour and education were generally seen to be moving past their rightful station, a sentiment most explicitly demonstrated by the passing of the Contagious Diseases Act. This act decreed that women suspected of sex work register with police and agree to an invasive medical examination to check for sexually transmitted infections, forming a legal basis for the stigmatization of women labouring outside the home. For a literary analysis of the impact of the Contagious Diseases act see Sparks, "Medical Gothic and the Return of the Contagious Diseases Acts in Stoker and Machen."

Similarly, Collins's exploration of the domestic and its boundaries (McEvoy 7-9) allows for an examination of these social boundaries and the anxieties that stemmed from transgressing them, employing the Gothic's foregrounding of society's prejudice, anxiety, and fear to create tension and invoke sensation. Both Dexter and Lucilla appear to be figures grappling with the performance and subversion of gender (Butler 175) through their experiences of bodily difference in domestic spaces that were constantly observed and interrogated. Using Tobin Siebers's "ability as ideology" as a framework for analyzing these subversive depictions of congenitally disabled figures, it is clear that contextualizing these figures in the medium of sensation fiction—with its focus on embodiment and its connection to Gothic transgression—offers a nuanced literary space through which to reconcile the issue of disabled gender, sexuality, and performance in the mid-nineteenth century.

Key to interpreting these novels is the framework through which the dominant discourse understood bodily difference. The Victorian vocabulary used to refer to disability differs from modern medical models of disability classification; thus, in using frameworks from contemporary disability theory it is essential not to superimpose current political debates onto these nineteenth-century contexts. These modern frameworks illuminate the subversiveness of Dexter and Lucilla's characterizations, but these frameworks do not imply their characterization is indicative of progressive politics or social ideologies. The binaries separating "abled" and "disabled" bodies were not as clear-cut for Victorians as they are for thinkers of the twenty-first century, as Victorian medical thinkers acknowledged the potential for disabled bodies to become abled and to

regress depending on the specifics of their ailments.[4] This fluid boundary between "abled" and "disabled" resides in the widespread nineteenth-century use of the word "invalid" and all the social implications the term carries with it (Hingston 14-17). The term "invalid" refers to a state of being un-able to act independently, rather than being "dis-abled" or permanently "afflicted." As Hingston writes, states of invalidation in the nineteenth century are contingent upon illness and injury—both events that are out of an individual's control that imply possibilities of both permanent disablement and potential recovery. This reinforces Siebers's theorization that disability is a partially socially constructed state of being that is informed by social environments that are incongruent or "mis-fit" with the individual's physically embodied needs (Siebers 57; Garland-Thompson 593). Similarly, the term "affliction"—a term used at the time to refer mostly to physical disablements—brings with it the connotation of marring or ruining a "perfect" body (Hingston 17-18). In an era when medicine was rapidly evolving and medical procedures were often disabling in their own right (Sparks, "Surgical Injury" 1), overall, the Victorians understood disability as something that happened *to* a body, and not a fully integrated feature *of* a body. Although the widely held view of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries considers disability an issue solely of medicine (and not society), Collins's

[4] The modern "medical model" of disability defines disability as a defect that is intrinsic to the individual's physical body and believes that curing disability through clinical interventions is the goal of disability management. The medical model is, at its core, individualistic, and tends to see people through the conditions of their limitations. The modern social model seeks to distance disability from impairment (affliction, invalidity) by focusing on the systemic difficulties people with disabilities face through negative attitudes and exclusion by society as a whole. Unlike the medical model, the social model attempts to reconcile acknowledgements of bodily difference with an understanding that ability as ideology (Siebers 10) prefers to stereotype individuals with disabilities rather than looking at the social factors that influence disabled realities. Although the Victorians would not have used the modern "social model" of disability, there was an understanding of treatable vs untreatable disabilities (i.e., congenital defects vs. chronic illnesses) and how these affected social movement. Collins tends to focus on the systemic treatment of people with congenital disabilities and their subsequent places in society (See Dodd et al., "Disability Reframed: Challenging Visitor Perceptions in the Museum"; Hingston, "Negotiating Victorian Disability"); and Oliver, "The Social Model in Context.")

narratives see disability as a concern of both medicine *and* society. Fundamentally, "invalidation" and "affliction" are key to understanding how disability and deformity function in the context of these nineteenth-century narratives.

Collins uses several techniques to center Dexter and Lucilla—all of which are made possible by the conventions of sensation fiction and its penchant for foregrounding the taboo. Although there are infinite ways to read Collins's literary choices, there are three that I will focus on that appear in both *The Law and the Lady* and *Poor Miss Finch* that make his stories of bodily difference subversive rather than dehumanizing. Firstly, Collins routinely uses images of conventional beauty to subvert notions that people with disabilities have no "sexual culture" (Siebers 130), and in doing so makes space for trans possibilities (Zigarovich 99) that would find less suitable grounding in able-bodiedness in the context of the nineteenth century. Secondly, Dexter and Lucilla are not the only disabled figures in their respective narratives—there are side characters and secondary characters that are explicitly disabled, challenging expectations that able-bodiedness is the default norm. And finally, Collins uses the characteristics of sensationalism (including shock, transgression, and counter-culture behaviour) to deliver more nuanced depictions of marginalized figures, as the nature of sensation fiction as "popular fiction" allowed for more controversial plotlines (Hingston 77-80).[5] In intwining queerness with disability, too, this pattern of recognition foregrounds the existence of intersectional bodies in Victorian social landscapes in a way that allows for the "trans possibilities" outlined by Zigarovich, and speaks to the fluidity of binaries assumed to be universal prior to the establishment of medical models translating and interpreting bodies clinically.

[5] See Tromp, Marlene (ed). *Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Britain* for a more in-depth examination of how disability functioned in the context of Victorian circuses and "freak shows."

Collins uses archetypes of biblically inspired art as a descriptive tool for his marginalized protagonists, as connecting them to biblical aesthetics of the body allow Dexter and Lucilla subversive access to physicality and attractiveness they would otherwise be barred from. Dexter and Lucilla's attractiveness disturbs assumptions that disability (should be) intrinsically linked with a lack of sexual agency, desire, or attractiveness. Speaking to a sexual culture for disabled people, Tobin Siebers writes,

> The ideology of ability represents the able body as the baseline of humanness . . . The preference for ability permeates nearly every value in human culture, including the ability to have sex. Sex is the action by which most people believe that ability is reproduced, by which humanity supposedly asserts its future, and ability remains the category by which sexual reproduction is evaluated. As a result, sex and human ability are both ideologically and inextricably linked. (139-140)

Referring to Dexter "as a model for St John" (*TLTL* 213-214) and describing Lucilla as "the lovely creature of the Dresden picture, [the Madonna de San Sisto]" (*PMF* 13), Collins humanizes these characters through the discourse of martyrdom—figures that, in Christian discourse, exhibit moral goodness and model aesthetics. The aesthetic resonance of these figures, rather than their theological meaning, is Collins's key interest: these allusions signify attractiveness while acknowledging the cultural anxiety that surrounded disabled figures engaging in reproduction. These figures—as beautiful and enrapturing as they are—do not engage in the messiness of sexuality that the average population does (as they are instead associated with sexual self-discipline), and so using these religious archetypes further queers Dexter and Lucilla by instilling physical beauty

in figures typically invoked in the discourse of freakery and the grotesque (Garland-Thompson 593). This supports Siebers's claim that "people with disabilities share with gay men and lesbians the suspicion by majority populations that they cannot, will not, or should not [reproduce]" (Siebers 140). Although this technique sterilizes these marginalized bodies somewhat, this does not fully render them asexual, as sensation fiction enjoys the transgressing of boundaries and upending of social norms—thereby rejoicing in the sensational discomfort of suggesting sexualization through chaste Christian archetypes by contrasting sexual discipline with blatant transgressions of sexual boundaries (as is the case with Dexter's "eccentric" tendency to touch and Lucilla's physical need *to* touch). Significantly, Collins reserves this technique for his major figures, and the disabled side-characters in these narratives are presented in their own unique and subversive ways.

Both *The Law and the Lady* and *Poor Miss Finch* deviate from narrative prosthesis by including multiple queer-coded and disabled figures, providing a nuanced and relatively intersectional social structure through which to interrogate mid-century British Victorian social assumptions about ability and queerness. Dexter's cousin Ariel in *The Law and the Lady* and Lucilla's suitor Oscar in *Poor Miss Finch* contribute to these narratives through their roles as embodiments (and critiques) of binary frameworks. Through their ambiguous or subversive gender expressions and their destabilization of ability as ideology, Ariel and Oscar provide disabled counterpoints to the arbiters of ability in both narratives. Jolene Zigarovich argues that the trans possibilities of Dexter (and Ariel) "[signify] the same disruption and destabilization of gendered physicality by both shocking and arousing these binaries in the incongruity of their maleness and

femaleness" (104). Ariel is endowed with trans possibilities from her introduction through to the end of the novel:

> I could now see the girl's round, fleshy, inexpressive face, her rayless and colourless eyes, her coarse nose and heavy chin. A creature half alive; an imperfectly developed animal in shapeless form, clad in a man's pilot jacket, and treading in a man's heavy laced boots: with nothing but an old red flannel petticoat, and a broken comb in her frowsy flaxen hair, to tell us that she was a woman… (*TLTL* 210)

Foregrounding conflations of physical sex with ethereal gender, Ariel's "female masculinity" (Reay 120) personifies the mild (or, rather, proto-) "genderfucking" of disordered bodies of the mid-nineteenth century. Ariel's discomfiting presence—her embodiment of maleness and femaleness that renders her the masculine nonbinary compatriot to Dexter's feminine nonbinary flamboyance—demonstrates Reay's claim that "gender hybridity was achieved through combinations and tricked anticipations of clothing and bodies in ways that, while not as blatant as genderfuck, were certainly challenging in the context of their time" (101). Of course, there are problems in associating queerness with disability (or queerness *as* disability); however, in the context of upper-class politics of mid nineteenth-century England, this was a way to discuss gender queerness without invoking the scrutiny or disgust that queerness may have invoked when depicted in an able (or "unafflicted") middle-class body.

Oscar is not explicitly genderqueer; however, his "affliction" (epilepsy) motivates his choice to pursue a treatment that he knows to be permanently disfiguring, thus becoming a "man of feeling"—a disabled man whose emotional state aligns him more

with the feminine ideal rather than the masculine ideal (Bourrier 4). This choice to embrace disfigurement, in addition to foregrounding disability as a fluid state of being, further connects affliction to states of gender nonconformity. In a discussion with Mme Pratolungo, Oscar reveals his intention to pursue a course of Nitrate of Silver (infamous for causing the skin to turn a permanent and disconcerting shade of blue), and Collins uses this to write Oscar as a natural match for Lucilla. Lucilla's disability allows Oscar to erase his deformity without consequences:

> He smiled bitterly. 'Weak as I am,' he answered, 'for once, my mind is made up.'…
>
> 'Are you in your right senses?' I burst out. 'Do you mean to tell me that you are deliberately bent on making yourself an object of horror to everybody who sees you?' 'The one person whose opinion I care for,' he replied, 'will never see me.' (*PMF* 110)

Oscar's naturalized "fit" as a partner for Lucilla is embedded in his disability and his atypical masculinity. Oscar—described as "weak" and markedly less virile than his brother Nugent—straddles the same liminal space as Lucilla as his affliction blurs the boundaries between invalid, afflicted, and able-bodied. By fracturing these binary ideals that align normative gender expression and bodily wellness, Collins creates intricate partnerships between marginalized bodies that challenge notions of dependence and worth in a fundamentally ableist and homophobic landscape. Creating characters with liminal tensions—both in gender expression and in relation to "affliction"—Collins's narratives interrogate these binaries by supporting marginalized figures to strengthen the sensational lives of his nonconforming protagonists:

> Characters who might be described as androgynous are never fully at home with the warring . . . between them, so that androgyny is less an ideal than it is a stage in the struggle toward some as yet unidentified ideal. That such an ideal is not articulated or moved forward in any steady way indicates that Collins is not yet able to offer answers about the gender conflicts; he only asks questions from as many perspectives as he can create. (Zigarovich 230)

These interrogations—together with the literary frameworks of sensation fiction—allow Collins to subvert ability as ideology through these interrogations of bodily normalcy and marginalization. As these bodies exhibit both queerness and disability Collins's use of sensation fiction to give voices to these androgynous bodies (and "afflicted" bodies), demonstrates a strong commitment to questioning the literary ideals of the upper-class English Victorian public Collins was critiquing.

Collins subverts the assumption that "ability is the supreme indicator of moral conditions" of a person (Siebers 10) by creating characters with profound moral complexities that cannot be determined by looking at their bodies (see Dexter's complex involvement with courts in *TLTL,* and Lucilla's gentility despite constant deception in *PMF*). In *Poor Miss Finch*, both Lucilla and Oscar challenge the assumption that overcoming disability is an event to be celebrated through their transformational movement from able-bodied to disable-bodied as the narrative progresses. Collins characterizes both Dexter and Lucilla as extremely charming, rebelling against assumptions that disability removes a body from active social participation with able bodies (Siebers 10-13). All of these subversions—across both narratives—are grounded in the notion that these figures are inextricably embodied, and in this embodiment, they

cannot help but be profoundly sensate in their narratives. Stoddard Holmes comments on these literary occurrences of sensation and disability, suggesting that

> Feeling was central to Victorian discourses of disability as well. As Mary Klages explains in her study of disability in Victorian American culture, while Descartes and Locke had defined personhood in terms of the capacity for rational thought, eighteenth-century moral philosophers . . . relocated humanness in the capacity to feel, and especially to feel compassion for the suffering of others. Within this context, people with disabilities could be theorized not only as suffering objects with a key role to play in the moral development of others, but also, given their capacity for feeling and compassion, as "empathic agents" in their own right. (*Fictions of Affliction* 37)

The emphasis on "sensation" in sensation fiction provides an ideal literary grounding for these deeply embodied figures. Functioning as "empathetic agents" in the context of their narratives, both of these marginalized figures find homes in sensation fiction not only because of sensation fiction's insistence on shocking readers with controversial plots that foreground the "unsavoury" aspects of Victorian life, but also because these figures (by nature of their embodied existence) are more inclined to sensation.

Siebers's conceptualization of ability as ideology critiques a set of assumptions about disability that are positioned by social hegemonies as undeniable truths — "truths" which were established in the nineteenth century and have carried through to today. Throughout both *The Law and the Lady* and *Poor Miss Finch,* Collins uses these assumptions to create tension in his novels before subverting them to create sensation: firstly, that ability is the supreme indicator of value when judging human actions,

conditions, thoughts, goals, intentions, and desires; secondly, that overcoming a disability is an event to be celebrated—or that it is an ability in itself to be able to overcome disability; and finally, that a loss of ability translates to a loss of sociability, and therefore the ability to engage in social norms (Siebers 10). These three assumptions lay the foundation for expectations of how disability functions, and as Collins consistently rebels against legal and medical expectations through Dexter and Lucilla, his writing challenges Mitchell and Snyder's claim that disabled figures are used "as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight" (39). Collins is still a product of his era, and there are times when he fetishizes or exploits these figures for narrative gain (Zigarovich 102); however, it is in this tension between progressiveness and regressiveness which highlights and "[exposes] the fragile separation between public and private spheres" (Siebers 136) that Dexter and Lucilla occupy in their liminal social states.

Both *The Law and the Lady* and *Poor Miss Finch* foreground disability and gender through expectations of performance (Butler 111-13; Siebers 56-60). Dexter and Lucilla are both expected to perform certain narratives of disability—particularly the expectation that they will sterilize themselves and mask their sexualities for the comfort of others around them. This is indicative of the tendency to want to prescribe people with disabilities an obligatory asexuality that keeps them separate from spheres of reproduction (Siebers 130). Consequently, their disabilities function to upset notions that "the [physical] distinction between men and women [is what] 'naturally' characterize[s] each gender" (Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction* 94), aligning the able-bodied ideal with heteronormativity positions Dexter and Lucilla as social "misfits" (Garland-

Thomson). This emphasis on misfitting bodies, minds, and figures is no surprise to those aware of Collins's reputation as a social anarchist (Robinson), but the foregrounding of the messy relationships between bodies and society speaks to a focus on normalcy and comfort that the conventions of sensation fiction sought to destabilize. Either they are too disabled to be considered a whole person, or, when they achieve some sort of alignment with able-bodied society, they are considered too queer to truly belong there.

CHAPTER 2

"HYBRIDITY, EXCESS, AND ABSENCE": SUBVERSIVE EXISTENCE IN *THE LAW AND THE LADY*

As a man marked by hybridity, Miserrimus Dexter's existence as a literal "half-man" grounds gender anxiety in the physical body in a way that sparks sensation and discomfort. With his adaptive movements and his penchant for feminine activities, Dexter represents sensation fiction's ability to evoke visceral responses to social circumstances in its focus on embodied metaphors for cultural anxieties. The novel repeatedly draws attention to the fact that Dexter was born without legs (and, it implies, without genitalia), aligning him with a destabilized masculinity which not only calls into question the nature and thus the validity of his gender, but also interrogates the way he might "fit" in with respectable Victorian society as a result. As de Giovanni argues, Dexter is constructed through a series of seemingly incongruent binaries "[embodying] a number of mutually exclusive features [including] human/animal, organism/machine, male/female, [and] child/adult" (159) —echoing the narrative's binarized description of him as "funny" yet "frightening", "mad" yet "brilliant" (*TLTL* 191) — that render him a liminal figure that straddles acceptability and unacceptability by very nature of his existence in a body marked by difference (Brusberg-Kiermier 42). As such, the foregrounding of Dexter's half-masculinity serves to nestle the "trans possibilities" (Zigarovich) of his existence behind a veil of physical difference that both explains and excuses his explicit rejection of gender conformity. If he is not quite a man, after all, why would it be unacceptable for him to be somewhat womanly? Dexter's lack of shame in both his disability and his gender expression subverts the commandments of ability as ideology (Siebers 10)—

rendering Dexter a figure that should be read as a mis-fit (Garland-Thomson 594), but who instead destabilizes social conventions through embodied hybridities to center himself as the unexpected and somewhat discomforting norm. Until Valeria—the narrative's protagonist—meets him in person and is able to deliver her own account of his behaviour she must rely on other figures in the narrative to describe Dexter's character. These figures are normative and draw on the language of the grotesquerie to represent Dexter as subversive, laying the groundwork for a presumptive interpretation of a disabled man:

> My dear lady, the man's mind is as deformed as his body… He is a mixture of the tiger and the monkey. At one moment, he would frighten you; and at the next, he would set you screaming with laughter. I don't deny that he is clever in some respects—brilliantly clever, I admit… [and he has never willingly] injured anybody. But, for all that, he is mad, if ever a man was mad yet. (*TLTL* 191)

Other figures in the narrative describe Dexter using rhetorics of beastliness (in terms of his disability) and madness (in terms of his "character," which I interpret as his queerness). As "masculinity and femininity in Victorian fiction are often depicted with the help of parallels that are drawn between human and animal" (Brusberg-Kiermeier 37), Dexter's comparison to animals (particularly circus animals, as will be addressed) serves the dual function of aligning him both with the physically inhuman and the naturally masculine. Discourses of "natural" gender were abundant in mid-nineteenth century Britain, with the Separate Spheres ideology purporting to provide naturalized arguments for a gendered split between public and private spheres (Bell 80-82)—with men given exclusive rights to move between private and public spheres, and women relegated to the

private sphere exclusively. Dexter is not able to operate in the public sphere as a disabled man, and so he blurs the boundaries of these normalized expectations. When a physical body does not easily conform with a "natural" gender (as is the case with Dexter), these discourses of naturalized gender roles have little purchase and begin to fall apart. Significantly, this gender ambiguity is caused by his physical deformity, linking ability with masculinity and disability with a less desirable and uncomfortably feminine gender expression.

Dexter first defies expectations of disabled existence by subverting the notion of disability as it was understood in the context of the Separate Spheres. As men were expected to move between public and private spheres, Dexter's mobility affects his masculinity by compromising that free movement. Based on the idea of the "invalid"—an individual who is extremely weak or incapable of moving or living independently—Collins's narrative encourages the expectation that Dexter will be dependent on a wheelchair or other aids to function or move "normally."[6] Valeria's first encounter with Dexter foregrounds not only an initial tendency to dehumanize him by using animal-like terminology to describe the encounter—but also the reality that Dexter is, in fact, uncomfortably mobile (or able) despite his regular use of a wheelchair. This ease of movement, far from just subverting generalized expectations of how wheelchair users can move, also renders Dexter threatening in this landscape of propriety and normalcy:

> For one moment we saw a head and body in the air, absolutely deprived of the lower limbs. The moment after, the terrible creature touched the floor as lightly as a monkey, on his hands. The grotesque horror of the scene culminated in his

[6] Here I mean "normally" as in "the way one would expect a wheelchair-bound person to move," in line with Siebers's claim that ability as ideology centers the abled body as default (10).

> hopping away, on his hands, at a prodigious speed, until he reached the fireplace in the long room. (*TLTL* 207)

Miserrimus Dexter (true to his name, which translates roughly to "Miserable Dexterity") demonstrates an agility that seems incongruent with the expected mobility of a wheelchair user, highlighting the socially constructed aspect of disability in the assumption that Dexter—by nature of his body—must be dependent, immobile, or "invalid." Dexter first shocks Valeria by not performing his disability for her, moving deftly on his hands instead of depending on his wheelchair to move him around the room. Additionally, Collins's use of dehumanizing rhetoric to refer to Dexter blurs the line between human and animal for the sensitive Valeria. Of particular interest here is the use of the terms "grotesque" and "creature"—which have a fraught connection to the history of "Freak Shows" in the Victorian era (Reay 96-104). This rhetoric is not used without cause: Collins makes a spectacle of Dexter. Collins invokes the image of the monkey (another regular attraction at Freak Shows and other such oddity markets), aligning Dexter with the Darwinian specter of the monkey that haunted the mid-Victorian psyche.[7] In spite of his primitive movements, Dexter demonstrates an ability to move that complicates the discourse of the invalid. Although Dexter is always disabled, Collins demonstrates what Siebers details in his examination of disabled identity—that although disability is a state of being grounded deeply in undeniable physical realities, there are certain aspects of disability that are fundamentally socially constructed. This peering behind the veil reveals an unspoken anxiety about disability that Collins foregrounds

[7] The use of the monkey to portray an inhumanness in mid-to-late Victorian literature is grounded in an anti-Black racism that construed People of Colour as less-evolved than the white British population. Darwin himself, who published *The Origin of the Species* in 1859, used racist rhetoric in his writings (Marks 99), which in turn led to the problematic notion of "Social Darwinism" among certain members of the intellectual classes (Tambling 178).

using sensation and suspense: that disability does not necessarily equate to invalidity, and assumptions aligning disability with immobility—instead of being a natural state of existence—are instead a performance.

Because Dexter does not need his chair to move well, his return to it is solely for Valeria's comfort. Remarking that upon return to his mobility aid, "the creature in the chair checked his furious wheels . . . with an impish curiosity" (*TLTL* 207) it is clear that Dexter's use of the chair is for the sake of his audience, and he is curious to see if his performance has succeeded in calming his spectator. His command of his space and the assuredness of his movement is threatening to the typical body, and so to converse with typical bodies he "performs" disability to sanitize that threat. After having calmed down and called her back into the room, he apologizes for his outburst, and Valeria remarks that "the whole man appeared to have undergone a complete transformation. He spoke in the gentlest of voices—and he sighed hysterically when he had done, like a woman recovering from a burst of tears" (*TLTL* 208). In doing so, Dexter performs a feminine display of emotion to better "fit" with Valeria's expectations, using gender as a distraction from his divergent mobility. In doing so, Dexter "institutes and relinquishes" disability (just as he institutes and relinquishes his gender expression), supporting Butler's claim that

> Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what is at any given juncture in time. An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure. (16)

In establishing a "feminine masculinity," Dexter's engagement with identity performance demonstrates a mastery of this "instituting and relinquishing" of expected and unexpected behaviours. He interrogates the presumed embodiedness of both ability and gender to reveal the socially constructed aspects of physicality, and in doing so threatens to expose the fragile delineations of acceptability that sensation fiction relishes in overthrowing. This pantomime of fragility becomes a performance of disability that is acted *through* gender expression, particularly as Dexter's mannerisms are markedly feminine to soften (and arguably obscure) the destabilizing fact that he is strong, fit, powerful, and potentially dangerous if he so wished to be. Collins chooses to demonstrate an abjectly uncomfortable subversion of disability discourse and normalize it through gender nonconformity. This supports Hingston's argument that Collins uses sensational depictions of disability in a way that "cause[s] narrators to recognize the instability of their own identities and bodies, and thus of normalcy" (Hingston 82). Valeria's initial perception of Dexter and her subsequent meeting of him demonstrate two drastically different realities of disability: the social constructed performance of dependency, and the lived reality of adaptive agility.

Dexter's performance of disability is connected to his performance of gender, which amplifies his impact as a subversive agent in the novel. Ability as ideology views the ableist gaze as one that assumes the disabled body must invoke an asexual response, and so Dexter's comfort in his gender expression translates to an excess of attractiveness that further puzzles Valeria. Framed to highlight that Dexter is attractive *despite* his lack of lower limbs, the narrative's focus on ascribing sexual appeal to a figure that would otherwise be treated relatively asexually by the social norm not only grounds taboo

attraction in the disabled body but also calls into question how sex and gender function in bodies that—according to discourses of propriety—should be denied both (Siebers 135-157). Commenting that "the deformity which degraded and destroyed the manly beauty of his head and breast, was hidden from view by an Oriental robe" (*TLTL* 213), Valeria highlights the undeniable virility of his features while foregrounding the fact that his deformity is hidden behind a decorative robe:

> As to his other features, the mouth, so far as his beard and moustache permitted me to see it, was small and delicately formed. The nose—perfectly shaped on the straight Grecian model—was perhaps a little too thin, judged by comparison with the full cheeks and the high massive forehead. Looking at him as a whole (and speaking of him [from a woman's point of view]), I can only describe him as being an unusually handsome man. A painter would have revelled in him as a model for St John. And a young girl, ignorant of what the Oriental robe hid from view, would have said to herself the instant she looked at him, 'here is the hero of my dreams!' (213-14)

It is significant that it is Dexter's "affliction" that is cloaked in the robe, as this visual imagery draws attention to the "trans possibilities" (Zigarovich) of his body. Emphasizing the lack of a lower body just as it attempts to conceal it, the robe marks Dexter's bodily difference by both foregrounding his birth "defects" and by visually representing a blurred sexual binary in its eccentrically floral contrast to Dexter's manly upper half. Additionally, the "Oriental Robe" begins the narrative pattern of Dexter choosing flamboyant, feminine-coded garments to "beautify himself" for Valeria's visits (*TLTL* 232). Given Dexter's liminally gendered body, "his [acute] hypervirility becomes

grotesque" (Denisoff 48), further suggesting that performance is a conscious part of Dexter's social participation. Furthermore, the comparison to St John paints Dexter as an undeniably handsome man, again speaking to his hybridity and suggesting an uncomfortable tension between his bodily difference and his physical attractiveness.

One of the most striking features of Dexter's character in this context is his lack of shame when breaking strict gender binaries. *The Law and the Lady* underscores the notion that, in the nineteenth century, "the construction of identity within these social and scientific narratives about bodily difference was influenced by a hierarchy that ascribed power, status, and privilege to the 'normal' body" (Cothran 194). Dexter's abnormal body gives him unexpected and disrupted narrative power in the face of this privilege, and so his disability allows him to express a gender antithetical to the mid-Victorian standard by nature of his Othered body. Dexter's lack of a "lower half" already calls his masculinity into question, so his effeminacy makes more sense in the context of widespread assumptions about bodily difference and masculinity in this context (Bourrier 8):

> His long silky hair, of a bright and beautiful chestnut colour, fell over shoulders that were the perfection of strength and grace. His face was bright with vivacity and intelligence. His large clear blue eyes, and his long delicate white hands, were like the eyes and hands of a beautiful woman. He would have looked effeminate, but for the manly proportions of his throat and chest; aided in their effect by his flowing beard and long moustache, of a lighter chestnut shade than the colour of his hair. Never had a magnificent head and body been more hopelessly ill-

> bestowed than in this instance! Never had Nature committed a more careless or more cruel mistake than in the making of this man! (*TLTL* 163)

Dexter's bodily difference is proffered as the biomedical reason for Dexter's gender nonconformity as Valeria "seeks to place Dexter within the heteronormative gender codes of the period" (Zigarovich 104). He embodies both masculine and feminine beauty standards in his perfectly imperfect body, with his ambiguous genitalia serving as an acceptable nexus point for gender regardless of his (disrupted) biological sex. Possessing physical features ideal for both Victorian women and Victorian men, Dexter's ability to operate within the ideal heterosexual matrix excuses in many ways both his disability and his rejection of standards of masculinity. In fact, Dexter's supreme comfort in his body is indicative of Collins's tendency to allow disabled characters the same agency as nondisabled characters. Subsequently, "by refusing to 'fix' the different characters in his novels, Collins works to complicate how others read and respond to both ability and disability" (Cothran 212), subverting expected frameworks of difference and conformity by grounding transness in physical absence (i.e., the "lack" of sight, legs, etc.) instead of mental deviance.

Subversive as his characterization is, Dexter still generates discomfort in the novel—particularly from Valeria, its narrator—making him a good illustration of Hingston's point that "mid-Victorian sensation fiction uses the disabled body to explore cultural anxiety surrounding the body's connection to identity—to the soul, the mind, and the self" (Hingston 81). By portraying Valeria's discomfort with Dexter's eccentricity (*TLTL* 232-236), Collins situates a barometer of propriety in the text, further sensationalizing Dexter's nonconformity. Dexter's lack of shame in his explicitly

feminine mannerisms, dress, and decoration are rendered acceptable *through* his existence in a disabled body:

> I have dressed, expressly to receive you, in the prettiest clothes I have. Don't be surprised. Except in this ignoble and material nineteenth century, men have always worn
>
> precious stuffs and beautiful colours as well as women. A hundred years ago, a gentleman in pink silk was a gentleman properly dressed. Fifteen hundred years ago, the
>
> patricians of classic times wore bracelets exactly like mine . . . I like to be bright and
>
> beautiful . . . (*TLTL* 232)

Here, Collins "uses [elements of] plot to reveal misinterpretations of disabled bodies" (Hingston 82) in Dexter's articulation of gender. As a "half man," Dexter's masculinity is softened and feminized to offer a reasonable counterpoint to more stereotypically "manly" literary figures, as—in the 1860s—"the crippled male embodied traditionally feminine virtues, softening the taciturn strong man and eliciting emotional depths from his seemingly coarse, muscular frame" (Bourrier 2). Considering this passage occurs after his cousin Ariel has "combed, brushed, [oiled and] perfumed the flowing locks and the long silky beard of Misserimus Dexter" (210) for a considerable length of time, it is significant that Dexter chooses to be beautified in front of Valeria and not in private, engaging in a performance of gender that exposes the fragility of perception in these domestic contexts. Striking a fine balance between effeminacy and femininity as a man unable to move freely between public and private spheres, Dexter's choice to embrace his

feminine qualities are indicative of his unique position in the domestic sphere and how he chooses to be perceived in it. By choosing to present himself in manners that continually subvert Valeria's expectations, Dexter is able to comment on the fragility of these binaries of being without incurring the social ire he might otherwise be met with if he were to engage with these frameworks in a typical body. The other characters in the novel align Dexter's disability with an inherent mental fragility, thereby excusing his gender nonconformity as "eccentricity" and not labelling it outright as a deviant behaviour that requires punishment. This is demonstrated later in the novel during a conversation between Valeria and Mr Playmore, in which he reveals that "[those involved in the trial] had not the slightest suspicion of him . . . but we were all afraid of his eccentricity; and some among us even feared that the excitement of appearing at the Trial might drive him completely out of his mind" (281). This performance of acceptable disability (i.e., a disability that comes with weakness or "invalidity" and does not threaten through competency) is complicated by the performance of an unacceptable gender identity. Throughout the narrative, Dexter "crosses several lines of propriety [such as] devouring Valeria's hands with kisses, placing his hands on [her] shoulders, and, most shockingly for Victorians, putting his hands around her waist" (Zigarovich 104). Thus, he constantly engages with the tension that occurs between propriety and impropriety and is shielded by his willingness to engage with the complexity of performance among non-disabled and gender conforming figures.

CHAPTER 3

"BOLDER IN THE DARK": QUEER RETURNS IN *POOR MISS FINCH*

Joining the vast canon of Victorian marriage novels, *Poor Miss Finch* features a unique twist on the traditional tenets of the marriage plot through its commitment to ensuring that "Lucilla's sexuality is one of her most striking features" (Newman n.p.). "With an entanglement of concealed identities and correspondences worthy of a Mozart opera, Collins's narrative places a blind woman—Lucilla Finch—in the centre of a love triangle involving two twin brothers (one disabled, one not) coordinated by the novel's fiery narrator, Mme Pratolungo. Blindness as an "affliction" is treated as an exception in Victorian literature, as it is often romanticized in the context of other physical disabilities (Newman n.p.; O'Farrell 513).[8] In her disabled state, Lucilla is given a remarkable amount of agency as she is excused from gendered expectations that she would otherwise be held to in order to "fit" the social landscape. In other words, Lucilla's blindness is invoked to excuse her when she presents as either hyper-feminine or hyper-masculine in ways that subvert ability as ideology—namely that "overcoming a disability is an event to be celebrated" and that "disability translates to a loss of sociability" (Siebers 10). In blindness, Lucilla is free to engage in relationships without being held to the expectation that she will fulfill the typical marital duties expected of a Victorian woman. In fact, the prospect of her marriage and procreation as a disabled woman is a point of contention for her family (33-35) with her blindness recurrently foregrounded as a major impediment to her womanhood. This is mainly demonstrated through the rhetoric of the surgeon, Herr

[8] O'Farrell writes, "Victorian blindness envy speaks of the dissatisfactions of the sighted with sight insofar as the beguilements of the visual hinder access to the risks and pleasures of self-definition and self-loss, of knowing and not knowing, amid the pressures of materiality… blindness envy reveals in the sighted a desire for an intimacy with the material world that deranges ordered and conventional ways of experiencing and knowing it" (514).

Grosse, during the consultation process of Lucilla's procedure. Grosse aligns beauty with ability as he exclaims, "I shall let the light in here—but in my own way, at my own time. Pretty [love]! Ah, how infinitely much prettier she will be, when she can see!" (*PMF* 205). In blindness, Lucilla is free to engage in romance and sensuality on her own terms while embracing her own gender nonconformity—in her relationship with the novel's narrator and her tendency to engage in masculine-coded outbursts, independence, and displays of sensuality. In transitioning to sightedness, rigid frameworks of gendered behaviours are imposed on Lucilla, and the freedom of expression she previously enjoyed as a blind woman is revoked. Subverting expectations that blindness is equal to sterility and dependence in questions of marriage, Lucilla's return to blindness to facilitate her marriage serves to defy expected plot resolutions—rebelling against a social landscape that maintains "the cure" as the ultimate goal for treating both disability and gender queerness.

Lucilla's gender nonbinary nature exists not in the absence of gendered characteristics, but in an excess of characteristics associated with both Victorian sexes. Beginning with her physical body, Lucilla embodies visions of ideal European femininity as Mme Pratolungo describes her in relation to artistic representations of virginal womanhood, save for the exception of her clearly "afflicted" eyes:

> I happen to have visited the picture gallery at Dresden in former years. As she approached me, nearer and nearer, I was irresistibly reminded of the gem of that superb collection—the matchless Virgin of Raphael, called 'the Madonna di San Sisto.' The fair broad forehead; the peculiar fulness of the flesh between the eyebrow and the eyelid; the delicate outline of the lower face; the tender, sensitive

> lips; the colour of the complection and the hair—all reflected . . . the lovely creature of the Dresden picture. The one fatal point at which the resemblance ceased, was in the eyes. (*PMF* 13)

This positions Lucilla as a liminal subject: both beautiful and scarred, she embodies the hybrid reality ("afflicted," transgressive, imperfect) to the binary ideal (picturesque, static, nonthreatening). Taking for a moment Reay's claim that "disordered bodies [are] gender bent bodies" (116-117) in the context of nineteenth-century gender roles, Lucilla's blindness is the first aspect of her identity that renders her nonbinary. Her blindness is an "affliction," but that affliction does not render her "deformed." Lucilla's beauty functions to render her blindness palatable, and her blindness, in turn, functions to give her freedom to present as she sees fit without self-policing to meet others' expectations. Even so, she still in many ways "passes" as the norm through her beauty, echoing the arguments of disability scholars who argue that—much like gender—there is an element of "passing" that disabled bodies engage in to avoid scrutiny.[9] Mitchell and Snyder write, "Even in disability communities a parallel phenomenon can be seen at work. To dissociate one's disability from stigmatizing associations, disabled people are encouraged to 'pass' by disguising their disabilities. Prosthetic devices and behaviours… provide means for people with disabilities to 'fit in' or to 'de-emphasize' their differences" (3). Lucilla's physical attractiveness allows her to function in Victorian society despite the realities of

[9] Although "passing" as a term is used in queer theory to describe conscious behaviours that individual engage in to pass undetected in heteronormative societies, it applies here in the socially constructed (or environmental) elements of disability and "fitting" (Garland Thomson 591). "In a society of wheelchair users, stairs would be nonexistent" (Siebers 57), and so the engagement with the physical world involves a certain amount of adaptive participation for individuals with disabilities to fit in these frameworks. Lucilla engages in activities that help her fit (or pass) in these environments, namely knitting (*PMF* 268) and playing the piano (Ch. 1, 5, 27, 33, etc.). Because of the nature of her sight, there is a certain amount of adaptation needed to participate in these activities, but these adaptations—like the effort that goes into "passing"—are not foregrounded nor acknowledged by the narrative.

her blindness—further upsetting discourses of acceptable bodies and, by extension, acceptable women.

In choosing to make Lucilla a conventional beauty, Collins challenges the notion that disabled figures are removed from sexual spaces and romantic situations. Supported by Stoddard Holmes's work on disabled sexuality, the destabilizing effect Lucilla has on expectations of agency and femininity is demonstrated in the fact that both nineteenth-century and "contemporary critics and readers alike overwhelmingly seemed to prefer a blind girl who suffered and was rescued, rather than a blind girl who might marry and reproduce" (Stoddard Holmes, "Collins and Disabled Women's Sexuality" 60), an effect that Collins seems to lean into as he foregrounds Lucilla's independence and unabashed sexual identity throughout the narrative. As outlined by Siebers, the ability as ideology that permeates Western discourse discourages (or silences) the possibility of disabled reproduction, and as such, the concept of Lucilla having a sexual identity that could lead to reproduction while she is blind is discomfiting to others in her family (*PMF* 32; 35-36). For Lucilla, her tentative claim to womanhood and that institution's tenets of domesticity and maternity is strained by her precarious placement in the domestic sphere and convoluted by her queer coding. With Reverend Finch fretting that "there was one terrible possibility threatening his future—the possibility of Lucilla's marriage" (32), Lucilla's debut on the marriage market is a discomfiting prospect in the inherent acknowledgement of a sexual culture involving Lucilla and her suitors—which affects not just the terms of inheritance but also the reproduction of the lineage and Lucilla's tenuous place in the marriage market as a potential mother. This anxiety around Lucilla's marriage—echoing Siebers's claim that disabled adults are prescriptively removed from

sexually charged spaces by hegemonic ableism[10]—excuses her and her nonconformity by rendering her agender (and in some ways asexual) in Victorian society. As a disabled woman she is not expected to engage with discourses of romance, marriage, or childrearing, and she is fully in control of her own inheritance (*PMF* 31) to compensate for this. Given responsibilities more typically reserved for male heirs in Victorian society, Lucilla is given an incredible amount of financial agency for an upper-class woman at the time—particularly a blind woman—as she is moved into a liminally gendered cultural space that interrogates how disability affects her womanhood and her right to self-actualization.[11]

As Lucilla's sense of self is at the core of the novel's plot, she fluidly navigates multiple binaries to center "mechanisms of the closet" (Gladden 467)—interrogating the realities of her presentation that threaten heteronormativity and ability as ideology. Taking advantage of sensation fiction's history of manipulating unmentionable social anxieties to achieve the shock it seeks, Lucilla's position at the nexus point of "heterosexual" and "homosexual" ("femininity" and "masculinity," to use the language of the established binary) contributes to the sensate discomfort of issues of "the closet":

> Closet issues frequently get displaced into other arenas of discourse, such as anxieties about good and evil, light and darkness, and health and illness . . . *Poor Miss Finch* is saturated with the kinds of binary oppositions Sedgwick finds historically specific to the moment of the binarization of the divisions "hetero-"

[10] See "A Sexual Culture for Disabled People" in Siebers, *Disability Theory*.

[11] With the increasing tension caused by Nugent and Oscar's deception, Collins decides which brother will marry Lucilla based on whether she remains blind. While sighted, Lucilla is poorly paired with Nugent (who she is reluctant to marry), whereas, while blind, she is paired with Oscar who she is keen to marry. This is especially clarified in the chapters that present Lucilla's private journal, which details Lucilla's regret over her surgery, her grief at the change in "Oscar" (Nugent pretending to be Oscar), and her longing for the world she experienced while blind.

> and "homo-sexual" near the end of the nineteenth century. That Collins's novel anticipates this phenomenon by a quarter of a century suggests that the epistemology Sedgwick describes may be shifted to an earlier historical moment, since it may be shown to "fit" *Poor Miss Finch* quite convincingly. (Gladden 467)

These "closet issues" speak to the fraught reality of queerness that existed at the time Collins was writing—a time when clinical understandings of queerness were beginning to take shape. While Collins's writing career was in its last days before the importation of the term "homosexual" from Germany,[12] the implications of Lucilla's relationship with Mme Pratolungo allude to an inherent queerness—both in how she presents gender (which will be addressed below) and in how her sexuality is constructed in the narrative. Although queer partnerships existed relatively under-the-radar in mid-nineteenth century Britain, scholars have shown that lesbianism was more acceptable than same-sex activity between men and that this was partially due to certain beliefs about what constituted "sex" and prevailing attitudes towards women's roles in sex at the time in novels (Wahl 79). These intimate relationships between women were assumed to be homosocial by default—not homosexual—so Collins's treatment of Lucilla's relationship with Mme Pratolungo blurs the line between homosocial and homosexual, despite "homosexuality" not being a framework that would have been used at the time to describe intimacy between women. This is indicated repeatedly in the novel, as Mme Pratolungo regularly expresses sentiments of physical affection towards Lucilla: "I eagerly approached Lucilla.

[12] The Oxford English Dictionary's entry on the term "homosexual" indicates the term was taken from German in the late 1860s. The entry reads, "the German adjective *homosexual*, was apparently first printed in *Das Gemeinschädliche des § 143 des preussischen Strafgesetzbuches* (1869)… which challenges a law against homosexuality; the term is contrasted in this text with "normalsexual" [heterosexual] lit. 'normally sexual.'"

There was still a little dimness left in her eyes. I noticed also that they moved to and fro restlessly, and (at times), wildly. But, oh, the bright change in her! . . . Her smile, always charming now caught light from her lips, and spread its gentle fascination all over her face. It was impossible not to long to kiss her" (*PMF* 297). In choosing to make Lucilla an ideal Western beauty, Collins challenges the notion that disabled figures are removed from sexual spaces and romantic situations. From the moment Mme Pratolungo meets Lucilla (as evidenced by the emphasis on her beauty and her insistence that Lucilla's features are consistent with conventional ideals), there is an affection in their connection that reads as something more intimate than friendship. This closeness is partially built through Lucilla's blindness—there is an inherent sensuality in Victorian depictions of blindness—as she relies on both sound and touch to "visualize" the bodies of those around her. Although she has similar instances of intimate touch with both Oscar and Nugent—evidenced by her flustered reactions to Nugent kissing her hand (146) and her need to touch the faces and chests to "learn" the faces of those around her (142-150)—her intimacy with a variety of genders and abilities further queers Lucilla as her sexuality is completely centered in her blindness. As Collins states, "the most modest girl in existence is bolder with her lover in the dark than in the light" (*PMF* 59), and Lucilla's blindness keeps her in a constant state of darkness that obscures both her physical reality and the social reality she is removed from. Lucilla's disability renders her able to engage in sexual expression and gender fluidity without rendering herself vulnerable to the prescriptive delineation of sexual propriety that governed social exchanges in the marriage politics of mid-nineteenth century England.

Using the vocabulary of "femininity" and "masculinity" to describe Lucilla is the most straightforward way of broaching this analysis of her gender nonconformity—although I fully acknowledge that this terminology is limited in its ability to address the full spectrum of queerness in contemporary understandings of gender expression. Turning first to Lucilla's expressions of femininity, it is significant that Lucilla's feminine qualities are exaggerated by the relative dependency on others that results from her disability. With Mme Pratolungo, Lucilla's family, and her suitors all conspiring to protect her delicacy while working towards "curing" her blindness, those around Lucilla consider her a "mis-fit" for the ways in which she is unable to engage with typical womanhood. [13] Lucilla is vulnerable, and in that vulnerability lies a kind of feminization that functions at odds with the rest of her personality: "Vulnerability is a way to describe the potential for misfitting to which all human beings are subject. The flux inherent in the fitting relation underscores that vulnerability lies not simply in our neediness and fragility but in how and whether that vulnerable flesh is sustained" (Garland-Thompson 598-599). Lucilla's feminine "vulnerability" coexists with her recurrent outbursts and aggressive independence, positioning her at the crossroads of gender in the juxtaposition of her delicacy and her fierceness. She is defined by her hybridity—exhibiting traits associated with both masculine and feminine identities in the nineteenth century—and so exists in a sort of "female masculinity" (Reay 120) that upsets the very notion of a gender binary through blindness.

Lucilla's "female masculinity," although present in her blind state, renders her a "misfit" (Garland-Thomson) as a sighted woman as her nonconformity is scrutinized in a

[13] As *Poor Miss Finch* was published serially, Collins tends to approach plot details like this circuitously. He begins laying the groundwork for this grand deception in Chapter Twenty-Five.

body that is sanitized and "cured" of defect. As her independence provides a "[counterpoint] to the feminine ideal, [she furthers her] gender hybridity" (Reay 96) by refusing to align with heteronormativity to complete her transformation into an abled woman. Lucilla finds her freedom restricted post surgery; she becomes increasingly aware that there are social rules she must now abide by that she did not previously have to contend with. Declarations such as, "I am a woman—I won't be treated like a child" (*PMF* 250), indicate how she feels infantilized by the way dominant society treats adult women, and she retaliates by aligning with masculinity instead: "My heart stood still. I couldn't speak. I couldn't move. The half-closed door of the sitting-room was burst wide open—roughly, violently, as if a man, not a woman, had been on the other side" (*PMF* 254). Her rejection of docility in light of being "cured" reconfigures her previous moments of assertiveness and independence through a more strictly focused binary lens. These moments—previously excused by nature of her disability are now rendered unacceptable in light of the restoration of her sight. As a "cured" woman (and, as Siebers writes, one of the main tenets of ability as ideology is that the ultimate goal of disability is to be cured), Lucilla is expected to now engage in a set of gendered expectations that, as a blind woman, she was excused from. The narrowing of freedoms for Lucilla's expressive and previously ambiguously sexed behaviours renders her aggressive and unsociable—another subversion of ability as ideology—as Lucilla's newfound ability actually causes her to become a mis-fit more so than she was when she was blind: "'My eyes are of no use to me! Do you hear?' she cried furiously, taking him by his broad shoulders and shaking him with all her might—'my eyes are of no use to me!'" (*PMF* 300). Echoing the same rhetoric used to describe Dexter (namely the use of the term

"creature"),[14] Lucilla's panic when confronted with sight is also a confrontation of gender. Lucilla laments, "the restoration of my sight has made a new creature of me. I have gained a sense—I am no longer the same woman . . . Can the loss of my sense of feeling be the price I have paid for the recovery of my sense of sight?" (*PMF* 329). Lucilla is in a way disembodied by the foregrounding of her embodiment, and her recent transition having made a "new woman of her" renders the body a site of unfamiliarity that denies the necessity of touch she has used to navigate the world. This sanitization of her hybrid (nonbinary) identity spurs her into depression, and her eventual return to blindness is implicated as a return to a non-gender space in which she can express hybridity without consternation.

The stylization of Lucilla as doubly defective—both afflicted *and* nonbinary—is superimposed onto her blindness to better critique the prescription of strict gender binaries in Collins's literary landscape. Lucilla, "looking back with horror at what she suffered when she had her sight" (*PMF* 418), boldly defies expectations of a happy ending for a blind heroine. Whereas other nineteenth-century narratives resolve the stories of their "afflicted" characters through a permanent cure or a profound sympathy, Lucilla's return to blindness as a conscious choice to return to a state of being in which she truly "fits"—even though the narrative never clarifies whether her return to blindness

[14] The Oxford English Dictionary's entry on the etymology of "creature" evaluates the complexity of the term's semantics, detailing its context-based usage. Given the recurrent use of animal imagery and dehumanizing rhetoric, the most applicable definition of "creature" in this case is 3. A) "A living or animate being; an animal, often as distinct from a person," seen in Dexter's comparison to a monkey used throughout his introduction. Definition 2. C) "a reprehensible or despicable human" may apply to people with disabilities in some nineteenth-century texts, however, Collins's self-professed attempt to "depict blindness as it really is" (*PMF* xxxix-xl; O'Fallon 515) discounts this definition in this particular context. Definition 3. A) points to a more softened if still dehumanizing rhetoric and invokes the "pitiable" aspects of the word's cultural semantics (e.g., "a creature deserving of pity). There is documentation to support the use of both 3. A) and 2. C) in literature circulating at the time of Collins's writing.

was spontaneous or caused by any sort of medical neglect.[15] This is further indicated by Lucilla's consolation of the novel's narrator. Recently re-blinded, Lucilla states,

> 'Don't cry about my blindness,' said the soft, sweet voice that I knew so well. 'The days when I had my sight have been the unhappiest days of my life. If I look as if I have been fretting, don't think it is about my eyes.' She paused, and sighed bitterly. 'I may tell *you,*' she went on in a whisper. 'It's a relief, it's a consolation, to tell *you.*' (*PMF* 412)

Ability as ideology would position this relief coming on the heels of the restoration of her sight; however, in this "queer return" to blindness, Lucilla subverts all expectations of the socially "correct" resolution of her character as a blind woman by finding empowerment in disability.

Interpreting Lucilla's return to blindness as a psychosomatic choice, she returns to a state of embodiedness that allows her to fully embrace her sensuality, sexuality, and expressive freedom. Collins's novel ends with Lucilla's sightedness in favour of her own independent, hybrid social freedom.

> 'Thank God, Thank God I am blind'. 'My blindness is my blessing. It has given me back my old delightful sensation when I touch him; it keeps my own beloved image of him—the one image I care for—unchanged and unchangeable…. My life lives in my love. And my love lives in my blindness.' (*PMF* 417-18)

Stating that "[Lucilla's] life was a happy one, [and] your conditions of happiness need not necessarily be her conditions also" (*PMF* 424), the narrator's refusal to see the novel's

[15] Herr Grosse, the surgeon who performs her operations, responds to her renewed blindness with frustration and offense. "'If my operations had failed,' he said, 'I should not have plagued you no more. But my operations has not failed; it is you have failed to take care of your nice new eyes when I gave them to you'" (424).

resolution as a failure paints Lucilla's revelation of joy in blindness as an emphatic rejection of ability as ideology and the idea that the only acceptable outcome of disability is for that disability to be cured, erased, or cleaved from the body.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

CREATURES, WRETCHES, LIVING THINGS: MIS-FITTING VICTORIANS

Dexter and Lucilla, despite their charms, are fundamentally mis-fitting bodies in their respective narrative environments. Building on the assumed truths that contribute to ability as ideology (Siebers 10), mis-fitting denotes the circumstances in which bodies and people are unable to move freely through their social environments by encountering resistance, judgement, and hardship (Garland-Thomson 593). Although mis-fitting is deeply tied to physicality and how bodies move through spaces, it is also necessarily extendable to performance in its similarity to expressions of gender and heteronormativity. Neither Dexter nor Lucilla "fit" with society or with their families as their bodies, identities, and behaviour are incongruent with the realities and expectations that are placed on them by straight, able-bodied social conventions. The realities of functioning while mis-fitting allow Collins to destabilize the social landscapes of the narratives he has crafted, as it is the incongruency between the environment and the individual that allows Dexter and Lucilla to transcend these binary frameworks of behaviour. In operating in these incongruencies, both figures are able to defy expectations and substitute startling realities that foreground the rigidity of these binary frameworks and the prevalence of these stereotypes. This intra-active dynamism between marginalized bodies and the societies Collins constructs in these narratives create trans(formational) possibilities for both figures, allowing both Dexter and Lucilla to express gender nonconformity *through* their disabled bodies, and not in spite of them.

Both *The Law and the Lady* and *Poor Miss Finch* feature multiple instances of misfitting —multiple love interests and side-characters grapple with physical disabilities, many of them are explicitly queer coded, and the ones that seem "normal" grapple with more mundane difficulties—difficulties that the Victorian social fabric deems more acceptable. Through this, Collins demonstrates the variable nature of the misfit as "[he] asserts the basic similarities of bodies on one plane (drawing together the seemingly disparate states of youth and old age, male and female) [and takes] issue with the way in which bodies were classified and separated as a means of making assertions (and producing knowledge) out of perceived differences" (Wagner, "Redefining Bodies and Boundaries" n.p.). This foregrounding of the fraught relationships between bodies and society speaks not only to his own research on disabled Victorians, but also to the effect sensation fiction had on the late-Victorian literary landscape.

In essence, Collins's writing time and time again shows a commitment to social agency beyond narrative prothesis in his marginalized literary heroes and heroines. Bestowing on these figures an exceptional breadth of agencies and powers, his contribution to sensation fiction stretches beyond establishing conventions of the novels themselves: Collins's work demonstrates a consistent need to interrogate all aspects of "naturalized" social ideologies. A mis-fit himself (Rance 75), Collins expertly manipulates the language of hegemony to suit the purpose of the narrative, rebelling against "propriety" in all its forms for the sake of showcasing the figures that are too often sanitized from our literary foundations. Dexter and Lucilla—both wonderfully flamboyant, proudly disabled, and undeniably queer—offer sensational possibilities that translate well into the twenty-first century, evidencing proto-narratives of transness and

disability presentations in sensation fiction that are worth further study. Despite Collins's well-known "long decline" towards the end of his prolific writing career (Rance 17; 155), his later works offer narratives with the potential to offer new perspectives to scholarship's treatment of trans and disabled identities prior to the twentieth century, examining how these identities may have influenced fiction and made space for later, bolder literary acknowledgements of figures who operate outside the physical norm.

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