RENEGOTIATING AUTHORITATIVE CONVENTIONS: WILKIE COLLINS'S BLURRING OF HIGH AND LOW IN *THE LAW AND THE LADY*, *THE MOONSTONE* AND *ARMADALE*

by

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This is for my mum: who never ceases to inspire me with her intelligent and resilient spirit, and who is largely responsible for my love of books.

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Abstract

This thesis is interested in Wilkie Collins's blurring of high and low, authoritative and non-authoritative discourses, in *The Law and the Lady*, *The Moonstone* and *Armadale*. It looks at how these novels undermine the legal system, realism, and medicine respectively—three discourses that presumed high levels of authority during the nineteenth century. Collins supplements this undermining of authority by privileging less official approaches to human understanding and behavior. I argue that it is this self-reflexive subversion of Victorian normative values that renders his novels deserving of critical attention and reconsideration within the canon

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Advancing statements about the Victorian Novel is an unavoidably reductive task: one that involves, and in fact requires, arriving at conclusions about a site of contradiction. By the mid nineteenth century the main features of the Victorian novel—its audience, function, and aesthetic—were all in flux. Richard Nemesvari describes this destabilizing of novelistic conventions in extreme terms: "by 1860 the Victorian novel was on the verge of an epistemological crisis" (Nemesvari 15). This drastic renegotiation of literary conventions reflects the cultural climate of mid nineteenth-century Britain. At the forefront of the country's massive cultural transformation was its large-scale democratization (Daly 6). Nicholas Daly describes the import of this democratization: "the 1867 Act for the first time gives the vote to substantial sections of the working class. From the point of view of the ruling classes, it looked as if the masses were taking over" (Daly 6). The passing of this second Reform Act, here referred to, blurred distinctions between high and low in the political realm. In effect, it granted members of the working class a similar political agency to their "ruling class" counterparts (Daly 6). Artists and authors responded to this undermining of social hierarchies in various ways, through their various artistic mediums. Daly prefaces his substantive work on sensation and its relationship to modernity by gesturing at two salient ways in which literature responded to this collapsing of high and low. He thus writes,

> While some fantasized about ways of capturing and holding the attention of the masses, others preferred to make art and literature more exclusive, to shut out the crowd. One path led to 'Sensation,' the other to aestheticism, though there were also efforts to evade the opposition (Daly n.p.).

Daly's prefatory statement aptly suggests the position held by Wilkie Collins which accords with the third response: that of disrupting or "evading the opposition" between high-brow and low-brow forms of literature (Daly n.p.).

My thesis locates Wilkie Collins at the center of the nineteenth century debate over the attribution of cultural and artistic value in the novel, and the essentializing problems that attended it. The divide between high and low, between discourses that were considered authoritative and those that were not, is a binary that Collins takes up and actively resists in a number of his novels. Significantly, this binary—which implies totalizing ideas about what is serious and non-serious, valuable and non-valuable, authoritative and non-authoritative—is persuasively undermined in *The Law and the Lady*, *The Moonstone* and *Armadale* respectively. Indeed a different authoritative discourse, or kind of authority, is proposed by each of these novels.

While Collins's novels disrupted literary conventions so too did he, himself, challenge the social conventions of Victorian propriety. Critical scholarship on Collins widely acknowledges and connects the transgressive details of his life to those depicted topically in his novels. R.C. Terry does just that, first by illuminating the author's atypical domestic situation: "Collins' role of old fashioned bachelor uncle and man-about-town was congenial to the Victorian mind, and provided the ideal and ironical cover for a man enjoying the domestic comforts of two 'wives' and three children" (Terry 7). Terry astutely notes the parallel between Collins's renegotiation of social practices in his life as in his novel-writing. He reinforces this claim by gesturing at the author's debilitating addiction to laudanum: an unshakeable dependence that he battled with right up until his untimely death. Terry writes,

> Paul Theroux, among others, has suggested that all writers occupy strange territory behind their skulls, and one feels that Collins' was stranger than most. Without bringing modern assumptions about drug addiction to bear on his case, one cannot help reflecting on this central part of Collins' later life. […] Much of Collins' real pain was masked by the bravura of his story-telling, only to be more vividly rendered in his fiction—himself in the background, the story in front (Terry 9).

Terry's reading borders precariously on suggesting that we read Collins's fraught depictions of domestic life autobio*Graphic* ally: "himself in the background, the story in front" (Terry 9). While this seems to advance a reductive approach to Collins's novels, it nonetheless conveys how the author was concerned to subvert more than just literary conventions. In fact Collins was determined to renegotiate the stringent conventions that dictated both the literary and cultural environment in which he worked.

In this way Collins's corpus aligns with the aims and attributes of the sensation novel genre. Approaching Collins's novels as sensation novels—a characterstic approach in the literary critical sphere—helps to elucidate the ways in which they blur authoritative and non-authoritative discourses. The term 'sensation' has several different though related theoretical connotations. One permutation of the term grew out of the highly physicalized reading practices that sensation fiction was thought to invite, eliciting "bodily responses, often at the expense of higher, more intellectual stimulation" (Garrison 1). Moreover, this physicalized reading practice was closely linked to the sensational topics around which these novels revolved, primarily relating "tales of crime, violence, and punishment" (Barton and Phegley 2). In consequence, nineteenth-century

sensation fiction was largely characterized and evaluated as a lesser and "dangerously amoral" type of literature than realist literature, given its preoccupation with and eliciting of bodily processes as opposed to intellectual or moral ones (Garrison 13).

Despite its aesthetic connotations the term 'sensation' also referred to "the status of many of these novels as runaway bestsellers" (Garrison 2). For these reasons, 'sensationalism' in nineteenth-century fiction came to denote a highly popular genre of literature, yet one which was critically debased or denigrated for its privileging of bodily sensation—and related eliciting of emotion—over a more rigorous and detached form of intellection. Worth noting is that implicit in these critiques is the distinction between high-brow and low-brow literature. Critics of sensation fiction suggested that high-brow and thus authoritative literature appealed to readers' rational faculties rather than their bodily ones. By giving value to bodily responses—a faculty shared by people across class barriers—sensation fiction disrupted the idea that literature could only be appreciated by members of Victorian society's upper crust. Rather, "sensation was […] intimately linked to an era of mass production, mass readership, and mass culture" (Barton and Phegley 2). Barton and Phegley speak to the sense of "mass appeal" held by the sensation novel, and how it was met with polarized critical attitudes:

> Sensationalism was judged in vastly conflicting ways as either the sign of cultural decline or the harbinger of a new and more energetic age. Either way, it was certainly something to debate—sometimes seemingly endlessly—and to condemn or celebrate, depending on one's perspective (Barton and Phegley 2).

Collins's novels enact sensation fiction's blurring of the divide between high and low, appealing to audiences and topics that cross cultural and class divisions. Indeed his novels self-reflexively engage in this subversive project: thematizing a blurring between authoritative and non-authoritative discourses. While Collins's reflexive subversion of novelistic conventions has contributed to his diminished position in the canon, it is also—paradoxically—what renders his novels all the more pioneering and deserving of critical analysis among those more critically acclaimed Victorian novelists.

With this in view Collins's failure to match the level of canonicity of several of his contemporaries—most notably, Charles Dickens—does not bespeak a misunderstanding of the literary climate in which he wrote. In fact, he had a clear vision of how his novels would be critically received, and anticipated the critical malaise that his novels endured. For example with *The Law and the Lady*, a novel published serially between 1874 and 1875, Collins made efforts to legally protect it from censorship. What was more important to the author, beyond critical approbation or popularity, was maintaining a sense of control and ownership over his novels. Indeed, his valuing of authorial agency fuelled his anticipatory decision to legally protect the scandalous content of *The Law and the Lady*. In so doing he drafted a contract with the *Graphic*, the newspaper that was to publish his novel. In this contract, the author specified, "[that] his proofs [were] to be published verbatim from his MS" (Taylor xxv). Collins further bolstered his need to author his novels strictly on his own terms in anticipation of how *The Law and the Lady* disrupted conventional nineteenth-century portraits of the domestic sphere: "I thought it wise to insert a clause in my agreement forbidding the alteration of any portion of my story by anybody employed in the interests of the

Domestic Inquisition at the *Graphic* office, without first obtaining my consent and approbation" (Collins 416). The satirical tone of this remark, which undercuts the newspaper's conservative ethos, effectively softens what the novel does. Namely, its blurs and expands the kinds of texts that were thought to constitute serious and authoritative literature.

Each of the three novels that I consider in this thesis carries out a similar challenge to the binary between authoritative and non-authoritative discourses. To begin, *The Law and the Lady* undermines the legitimacy of the legal system, as an institutional and thus authoritative structure. To put it more simply, the novel disrupts the idea that laws couched in legalese correspond to a monolithic and provable set of truths. This is achieved, in part, through Collins's depiction of crimes and the normative or moral statements to which they are attached. He suggests that, just as the standards are murky through which crimes are defined and punished, so too are the moral statements that undergird these legal prescriptions. In this way, Collins clearly establishes *The Law and the Lady* as a work of sensation fiction, insofar as his "deploy[ing] of intricate narrative structures to scrutinize how deviance is perceived and defined" is a distinguishing characteristic of the genre (Taylor viii). In fact the novel takes its criticism of legal standards and power even further, by focusing on the Law as institutional structure rather than on unlawful individuals. Collins does so by shedding light on the indeterminate, and in a certain sense arbitrary process through which crime is defined and punished. Focusing on and privileging the unique Scottish verdict of 'Not Proven' (Collins 101) crystallizes how the novel, more broadly, goes on to disrupt the epistemological and moral authority bound up with the legal system.

Collins disrupts rigid divisions of high and low in a parallel fashion in *The Moonstone*, here, in terms of how those divisions related to the Victorian debate over standards of authoritative authorship. The different voices through which the novel presents its story—a mode of narration which closely parallels that of *The Woman in White*—challenges the dominant literary mode of the nineteenth century, namely, realism. In fact literary interpretation, and the problems of subjectivity and limited perspective that attend it, are dramatized through the novel's shifting accounts of the moonstone's disappearance. Peter Thoms advances a critical remark to this effect, "In *The Moonstone* interpretation itself becomes a subject for inquiry as Collins explores how we might best read the world we inhabit" (Thoms 139). Indeed, *The Moonstone* dramatizes interpretation in a highly self-reflexive manner—particularly through the narrative accounts of Gabriel Betteredge, Drusilla Clack and Franklin Blake. All of these narrative accounts draw attention to themselves as written artifacts, in slightly different ways. In so doing, Collins self-consciously invites the reader to evaluate the level of authority attached to the different voices and narrative accounts of which his novel is comprised. Betteredge and Clack's narratives both represent the limitations of singular authorial accounts that presume authority. Conversely, Collins depicts the most truly authoritative accounts of the moonstone's disappearance as collaborative ones: ones that combine marginalized and dominant perspectives.

Finally, Collins's *Armadale* undermines divisions of high and low by privileging pseudo-science and prophecy, and conversely, devaluing medicine and empiricism. The main authoritative discourse being challenged in this novel is that of medicine, which was largely used as an authoritative lens and instrument through which to read and regulate

the body. Focusing on the inefficacy of medical analyses of character—derived from medical readings of the body—*Armadale* critiques the Victorian desire to control and regulate the body. As the critic Laurence Talairach-Vielmas notes, this owes, in part, to the affect that these sensationalized novels were thought to have on their readers. *Armadale*'s morally shocking revelations—and in particular, Lydia Gwilt's unabashed sexuality—were thought to produce subtle bodily reactions in its readers. In turn, the novel disrupted the traditional power dynamic between reader and text: "The reader becomes passive in the face of the violent mechanics of the novel" (Cvetkovich 21). Not only does *Armadale* disrupt aesthetic hierarchies, through the physicalized reading practice that it invites, but it also subverts the binary that presents science as authoritative and pseudo-science as non-authoritative. Instead, it frames scientific readings of the novel's plot and its characters as limited—and, often harmfully so. On this note, Collins undermines the authority of medical discourse, by having multiple people share the same identity, while the villainous Lydia Gwilt assumes multiple identities. Particularly through his fluid characterization of Miss Gwilt, who achieves this sense of fluidity in both physicalized and non-physicalized ways, Collins disrupts the idea that medical discourse can authoritatively read and regulate the body. Conversely, non-scientific and in fact non-rational discourses are privileged in *Armadale*, insofar as they are presented as being epistemologically sound. For example, the senior Armadale's opening prophecy, and the junior Armadal*e*'s dream, both guide and predict the novel's plot in indispensable ways.

In fact, Collins explicitly creates a space for science alongside pseudo-science by appending a note the end of *Armadale*:

> My readers will perceive that I have purposely left them, with reference to the Dream in this story, in the position which they would occupy in the case of a dream in real life—they are free to interpret it by the natural or the supernatural theory, as the bent of their own minds may incline them (Collins 817).

This final note gestures at a fruitful way to consider not only this work but all three of those here examined. Collins is stating his concern to open up a space in which authoritative and non-authoritative discourses can coexist. Moreover, he is encouraging his readers to critically consider the distinctions forged within this space, and the level of authority that such distinctions ought to hold.

Chapter 2 Collins's Challenging of Legal Discourse in *The Law and the Lady*

During the Victorian period, the legal profession was thought to produce the most authoritative prescriptive statements in the field of human conduct; the most legitimate account of how we 'ought' to behave morally (Longmuir 170). Anne Longmuir speaks to this idea, "the law is traditionally regarded as a civilizing force," (Longmuir 170) and is therefore responsible "to maintain a normative order" (qtd. Longmuir 170). Thus, the Law was conventionally understood as the system that defined and maintained "normative" standards (Longmuir 170). Undergirding Wilkie Collins's *The Law and the Lady* is the competing suggestion that the law is both fallible and inadequate, on its own, of performing this function. This idea is implied by the author's mingling of legal and extra-legal narratives within the novel, thereby merging official and unofficial accounts of the narrative's central conflict, namely: the unexplained death of Sara Macallan. In so doing, Collins implies that moral and legal statements are most accurately defined through a merging of their formulations, in official and unofficial narratives. By extension, the novel disrupts the idea that laws and legalese correspond to a monolithic and provable set of truths. Moreover, the narrative's central mystery is largely resolved in an unofficial space and from a marginalized perspective—by a female detective.

To contextualize this claim, it is necessary to sketch the novel's central conflict and resolution. The narrative is precipitated by the mysterious death of Sara Macallan: an event for which her husband Eustace has been tried and met with the Scottish "verdict of Not Proven" (Husemann 66). When Eustace remarries Valeria, at the novel's outset, she assumes the role of detective in an endeavor to clear her husband's name and legitimize their marriage, both socially and legally. During this venture, Valeria makes equal use of

legal and extra-legal texts and testimonies, disrupting the "traditional" view that official texts articulate more authoritative solutions to moral conflicts than unofficial ones (Longmuir 170).

In this way, *The Law and the Lady* aligns itself with sensation fiction's broader preoccupation with the ways in which standards of crime and deviance are constructed. In her introduction to the *Oxford World's Classics* edition of the novel, Jenny Bourne Taylor describes this trend as that of "deploy[ing] intricate narrative structures to scrutinize how deviance is perceived and defined" (Taylor viii). This thematic preoccupation is amplified in Collins's novels—a fact largely attributed to his legal training. Indeed, critics often approach his works as subversive not only in their disruption of generic and aesthetic conventions, but also in their desire to provoke legal reform (Maceachen 123). At the very least, his novels often illuminate how the legal system was fraught with ambiguity and uncertainty in ways that the middle-class Victorian reader might have otherwise left unchallenged. Maceachen writes: "Collins made his readers aware of existing legal injustices that might not have engaged their attention at all had he not incorporated these problems" within the scope of his novels (Maceachen 139). In fact, Collins's hybridized background, in law and literature, influenced his blurring the authority associated with legal and literary texts respectively. Instead, a number of his novels approach legal issues from a distinctly authorial perspective: "the author always implies that a more creative understanding of the law could lead to progress of the sort that mere reforms alone could not accomplish" (Leahy 152). And, while Leahy claims that unofficial narrative voices are endowed with the ability to improve laws and stimulate legal reforms, the converse is also true. Thus

Collins's far-reaching preoccupation with the Law, in his novels, suggests that legal narratives contribute and strengthen fictional ones as well.

A salient way that *The Law and the Lady* blurs official and unofficial narratives, as a means of understanding and presenting moral truths, is by undermining the authority "traditionally" bound up with the former (Longmuir 170). The novel undermines British legal discourse by highlighting its fixed and reductive aspects, and instead, depicting the fruitfulness of the Scottish "not proven verdict" (Husemann 79). During her detective work Valeria uncovers the official transcript of her husband's trial, and discovers that he was met with the liminal and indeterminate verdict of "Not Proven" (Collins 101). The official court transcript is uncovered in the home of Major Fitz-David, wherein the Major highlights the rich ambiguity of the verdict with which her husband has been charged:

> There is a verdict allowed by the Scotch law [such that] if there is not evidence enough, on the one hand, to justify them in finding a prisoner guilty, and not evidence enough, on the other hand, to thoroughly convince them that a prisoner is innocent, they extricate themselves from the difficulty by finding a verdict of Not Proven (Collins 101).

The critical scholarship on how Collins depicts and understands this verdict is markedly split. In Dougald B. Maceachen's view, the novel clearly adopts a critical attitude towards it: "Collins's objection to 'Not Proven' is that this verdict, in neither clearing an innocent man of a criminal charge nor finding him guilty of it, leaves his reputation under a cloud" (Maceachen 136). In this view, the ambiguity of the verdict forces those bound by it to oscillate between states of culpability and non-culpability. Maceachen extends this reading to argue that the verdict's ambivalence renders it largely

impotent and symbolically confusing, and in this way, at odds with what he understands as Collins's treatment of the law as authoritative: "The legal profession is a favored one in his novels. Rarely does he have a satirical word to say about a lawyer, and the 'crooked lawyer' is almost unknown in his imaginary world" (Maceachen 121). This reading is superficially accurate but also myopic. Though legal issues and upright lawyers pervade Collins's novels, in a converse manner to the Dickensian "crooked lawyer," the legal system proves highly problematic for Collins and many of his characters (Maceachen 121).

Other critics have argued that the novel represents the verdict as that which best indicates the gap separating legal principles and the moral statements that presume to undergird them. Mary Husemann analyzes Collins's representation of the verdict in this vein: "juries could use this verdict to indicate moral culpability where no legal culpability was proven. In cases of a divided jury, the verdict represented the truth of the situation: impressions of both innocence and guilt" (Husemann 79). While the verdict lacks clarity and determinateness, it better indicates the contradictions that often inhere in human behaviors. Anne Longmuir arrives at a similarly sympathetic reading of how the Scottish verdict is taken up in *The Law and the Lady*: "Not only did the very existence of another legal system inject relativism into the 'truths' of English law, but the peculiarities of Scots law, seized on by Collins, introduce epistemological uncertainty and irrationality into the British social sphere" (Longmuir 170). Indeed, a pioneering quality of this novel is its privileging of "epistemological uncertainty" and "irrationality" as a means of honestly representing moral situations (Longmuir 170).

Here, I will build on and extend the critical views articulated by Husemann and Longmuir. Collins's treatment of the Scottish verdict is not only sympathetic towards its ambiguity—as well-suited to the fluidity of moral and legal principles—but also supportive of its combination of official and unofficial narratives in arriving at this liminal position. To illustrate, as Valeria pieces together the unofficial evidence surrounding Sara Macallan's death, she discovers that her husband's former wife committed suicide—largely in response to the emotional abuse that she suffered at the hands of her husband. Her written confession gives voice to this emotional neglect, and abuse, by linking it to her physical appearance. For example, she refers to herself repeatedly in self-deprecating terms, most notably as Eustace's "poor ugly" (Collins 395), and "that next worst thing myself to a deformity—a plain woman" (Collins 388). Sara Macallan further suggests how this negative self-image is not simply self-generated, but also owes largely to the indifference she suffered at the hands of her husband. She confirms this emotional abuse, to both herself and the reader, by acknowledging her having read her husband's admission of the "sense of shrinking that comes over you when you are obliged to submit to my caresses" (Collins 391). Stemming directly out of this emotionally barren and abusive marriage is Sara's decision to take her own life. She writes,

> I determined to give myself a last chance at life. That is to say, I determined to offer you a last opportunity of treating me kindly. I asked you to get me a cup of tea. […] You politely hoped, before you went away, that the tea would do me good—and, oh God, you could not even

> look at me when you said that! […] The instant you were out of the room I took the poison—a double dose this time (Collins 393-4).

Significantly Sara frames this final action as being catalyzed by her husband: "I determined to offer you a last opportunity to treat me kindly" (Collins 393). When he fails in so doing, so too does her will to live. Collins thus depicts the Scotch verdict favorably insofar as it is accurate: Eustace is both guilty and not-guilty, morally though not legally accountable for his wife's death.

The Law and the Lady thus challenges the authority of the British legal system by depicting its rigidity as being disconnected from the fluidity of prescriptive moral statements. This criticism of British legalese is established, Husemann argues, through the interpretative openness of which the Scottish verdict permits: "The not proven verdict, made possible by the organic nature of Scots law, provides flexibility not built into the English system" (Husemann 79). Moreover, Collins depicts the British legal system's fixity and inflexibility as failing to account for the process through which all truth statements are constructed, in what Jenny Bourne Taylor describes as a continuous "reconstruction and representation of the past" (Taylor ix). I extend Taylor's reading, in part, by examining how the author himself reflects on the process by which truth statements are constructed. In fact, he foregrounds the main body of the novel by acknowledging the narrowness of any one perspective, in what he titles an Address to the Reader. Herein he writes, "that Characters which may not have appeared, and Events which may not have taken place, within the limits of our own individual experience, may nevertheless be perfectly natural Characters and perfectly probable Events, for all that" (Collins, n.p.). This paratext guides a reading of the subsequent text in a way that

recognizes the limited and limiting parameters of any one narrative. Instead, it encourages a merging of multiple perspectives in establishing moral and legal principles.

More specifically, Collins suggests that these different perspectives derive from both official and unofficial sources in a way that blurs their authoritative standings. Indeed, the idea that the legal system would benefit from a merging of unofficial and official testimonies is suggested in the novel's opening chapter, entitled "The Bride's Mistake." Herein, Collins represents legal discourse as a site of uncertainty and falsehood. The chapter opens with the marriage of Valeria Brinton to Eustace Macallan—an act rendered legally binding, and thus authoritative by their "signing of the marriage-register" (Collins 8). The author presents this official document as both an incomplete and skewed account of what it presumes to record. For instance, Eustace signs the document with the assumed last name of Woodville to steer Valeria away from discovering his troubled past. This suggests how legal writing can, quite simply, authorize and legitimize falsehoods: that an official discourse, which assumes authority, can be completely severed from the truth.

Nonetheless, Collins is interested not simply in undermining legal discourse but in renegotiating it, by broadening its parameters. Illustrating this point is Valeria's more subtle blunder in her signing of the marriage register. She recounts: "In the confusion of the moment (and in the absence of any information to guide me) I committed a mistake […] I signed my married instead of my maiden name" (Collins 8). Valeria then goes on to narrate her re-signing of the register. By representing this "mistake," Collins alludes to the Law's failure to fully and accurately capture Valeria's "individual subjectivity;" challenging what Longmuir terms as the "Victorian ideal of the whole and essential self"

(Longmuir 166). While legal standards do not permit both signatures Collins's narrative does, suggesting the fruitfulness of so doing (Collins 8). The reason that this 'mistake' proves fruitful is because each signature captures a certain profile of Valeria's identity. For example, Valeria's signing of her maiden name signals how her marriage is not fully legitimized by the legal document, and depends ultimately on her detective work to clear her husband's name. Moreover, the tenuousness of this legal identity is suggested by how quickly it can be re-written and re-established, as Valeria relates that, "with trembling fingers I struck the pen through my first effort" (Collins 8).

Nonetheless her married signature documents, in an opposing but equally valid way, the felt legitimacy of the union. Indeed, Valeria's wifely status is what drives her detective work, and what supersedes this work at the most critical stage of the investigation, as Jenny Bourne Taylor notes: "she ultimately relinquishes control at the penultimate stage of the investigation, leaving it to the lawyer Mr. Playmore and returning to her husband on the discovery of her pregnancy" (Taylor xvi). Catherine Peters echoes this analysis by highlighting the "contradictory impulses" (Peters 12) of her character: "Valeria Macallan, one of the earliest women detectives in English fiction, asserts herself magnificently, but only in order to rehabilitate her husband so that she can again become a wife" (Peters 12). These "contradictory" aspects of Valeria's personality suggest that including both her married and her maiden names, on the marriage register, is a more complete and accurate documentation of her identity (Peters 12). By opening the novel with this framing of the static and limited aspects of legal discourse, Collins suggests how the law would benefit from a broadening of the perspectives that is conveys.

With this in view, it is significant that the author actually imbeds both Valeria and Eustace's signatures within the narrative itself. This levels the importance of Valeria's unofficial narrativization of their marriage with its official and legal counterpart—forcing the reader to engage with them simultaneously. The protagonist's parenthetical remark about her blundered signature, "in the absence of any information to guide me," thus illuminates what Collins is doing here on a meta-textual level—suggesting that the complexity and richness of moral and legal facts is best guided by a balancing of official and unofficial texts. This is bolstered by the author's inclusion of the "Published Report of the Trial" (Leahy 151) within the novel itself. Taylor again speaks to the function of this narrative choice: "The 'Story of the Trial' is embedded in the main body of the narrative, and the reader, like Valeria herself, is positioned as part of a 'public gallery' of spectators" (Taylor xviii). By including official testimony amongst the unofficial testimony enacted by the rest of the novel, Collins assigns the reader the role of pseudo juror, illuminating how legal discourse is always ultimately validated or invalidated by interpretive acts. This is something he does in his other novels as well, most notably *The Woman in White* which is explicitly set up as a variation on a legal hearing as Collins writes: "As the Judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now [...] Thus, the story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of the offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness" (Collins 33). By framing legal discourse as something that depends for its legitimacy on interpretation, and as best constructed by an intertwining of narratives—both official and unofficial—Collins blurs discourses that presume authority with those that do not.

This blurring is taken even further in *The Law and the Lady* through Collins's challenging of the dichotomy between public and private. D.A. Miller writes in *The Novel and the Police*, that "a fully panoptic view of the world" and of legality depends on an engagement with, but ultimately a penetration of, public discourse. In support of this argument, he observes how what I term 'private discourse' is instrumental to the resolution of moral and legal conflicts: "[the] agents de police are privy to what goes on behind the 'scenes de la vie privée,' and they thus resemble the novelist whose activity is also conceived as a penetration of social surfaces" (Miller 23). Ruminating on how "detection" of empirical truths, moral or otherwise, depends on a penetration of the public, Miller goes on to discuss instances of this idea in Balzac's *Une Ténébreuse Affaire*: "from the worn creases of Peyrade's breeches, the text infers that he has a desk job; from his manner of taking snuff, that he must be an official. One thing inevitably 'indicates,' 'betrays,' 'conceals' a defining something else" (Miller 24). This analysis of Balzac translates well to how 'private' narratives, testimonies, and truths serve an instrumental role in *The Law and the Lady*. Another idea that Miller's criticism renders lucid is how a strict separation between public and private is both arbitrary and biased, as the two are inextricably linked. In fact, he suggests that publically rendered legal verdicts—which derive their authority from their having what Miller describes as their "institutional shape"—cannot be extricated from the private narratives that inform the legal case (Miller viii).

This yoking together of public and private envisions legal discourse not as a disjointed set of empirical truths, but as a narrative. This narrativized approach to legal texts, one that creatively combines public and private texts, is one that Collins adopts in

his own way in *The Law and the Lady*. Indeed, he represents public and private narratives as being inextricably linked within the legal framework. Aoife Leahy locates one instance of this in the figure of Miserrimus Dexter, who serves as witness to the events surrounding Sara Macallan's death. She astutely notes how Collins's chapters frame Valeria's interviews with Dexter in a diametrically opposed fashion:

> Dexter is interviewed by [Valeria] in chapters entitled 'First View' and 'Second View,' newspaper headlines normally reserved for important exhibitions of art. Typically, the first view was the private exhibition and the second the public, just as Valeria sees Dexter in his private and then publicly acceptable aspects (Leahy 152).

By formally designating his chapters in this way, Collins draws the reader's attention to how legal accounts and testimonies adopt a markedly different character in their "private and then publicly acceptable aspects" (Leahy 152). He does so in a way that refuses to privilege one account as more authoritative, in its veracity or completeness, than another. Instead, both Dexter's public and private testimonies are necessary to Valeria's piecing together the most complete and accurate account of the novel's events. As Leahy observes, "The court case fails to uncover the truth because only the public Dexter appeared as witness; Valeria succeeds because she is imaginative enough to find fresh perspectives on the facts" (Leahy 152). This reading supports the slightly different one here advanced, which argues that legal discourse embodies the quality of a narrative.

Furthermore, Valeria adopts the role of author insofar as she combines and relates public and private testimonies in a coherent, narrative form. In fact, she literally pieces together the fragments of Sara Macallan's diary which are dispersed and buried in a dust

heap on her old property (Collins 364). In addition there is a trope in the novel by which Valeria reflects on the act of writing—ruminating on the fact that she is the individual composing the story or account of her husband's innocence. Approaching the end of the novel she relates: "I write from memory, unassisted by notes or diaries;" (Collins 399) and at numerous other junctures in the novel draws our attention to her role as author-figure. Again, she considers, "If I had been travelling homeward in my own carriage, the remaining chapters of this narrative would never have been written" (Collins 317). These meta-fictional moments, among others, present legal discourse as narrative; and moreover, as a narrative that depends equally on public and private types of testimony.

Beyond conveying how legal discourse would benefit from merging public and private testimonies, Collins does much to highlight the real value and instrumentality of private texts in legal discourse. In so doing, he illuminates the parallel between Eustace's trial and that of Madeline Smith. Like the historical analog that this novel is widely thought to be taking up—the case of Madeline Smith, who was charged with murdering her lover in 1857—Eustace Macallan's trial also ultimately hinges on private testimony. As Maceachen notes, what proved most detrimental in Madeline Smith's public hearing were "certain damaging letters which she had written to L'Angelier": letters that substantiated their romantic affair and sullied her persona as a model of female propriety through their becoming objects of public scrutiny (Maceachen 136). Private texts adopt a similarly elevated position in Collins's novel, as Eustace's diary is the piece of evidentiary proof taken up most seriously in court. His diary is intended as a private text, and narrates the deep resentment he held for his wife in light of the weighty demands placed on him by her chronic illness. Indeed, Eustace's mother frames this private

discourse as the main contributor to his being met with the Scottish verdict rather than one of not-guilty: "His pen has been his most deadly enemy, in this case—it has presented him at his very worst" (Collins 168).

Here, as elsewhere, the authority attributed to Eustace's diary is what is criticized; the idea that a private, emotive, and subjective text bears authority within a legal framework is implied as something absurd. This implicit criticism is one that Miserrimus Dexter—one of Eustace's closest friends—articulates explicitly in court:

> A Diary (when it extends beyond a bare record of facts and dates) is, in general, nothing but an expression of the weakest side in the character of the person who keeps it. It is, in nine cases out of ten, [a] more or less contemptible outpouring of vanity and conceit (Collins 174-5).

The conceptual depth here is significant, as the sole authority of this private textual medium resides in its capacity for objective documentation, providing "a bare record of facts and dates" (Collins 174). Indeed, what is presented as "weakest" about this private discourse is its subjective-mooring, as Dexter reminds the court that "the writer did not dare exhibit [this] to any mortal but himself" (Collins 175). Nonetheless, what the Madeline Smith trial established, and what Collins reinforces, is that public, legal, discourse is inextricable from private narrative.

In fact, Collins extends this idea to suggest that private discourses can bear more authority—in terms of producing resolution—where public discourse fails. This is first achieved insofar as a set of private epistles, between Sara and her nurses, are what direct Valeria toward the final resolution of her husband's case: that he is morally though not legally responsible for his wife's death. The private aspect of these letters is established

by their intimate content, in that they bespeak the less attractive side of marital life. They adopt the candid and liberated quality of gossip amongst women, who indulge in the common sufferings of the Victorian female experience. In this vein, Sara is instructed in one such letter to alter the expectations she holds of her husband so as to account for gender differences: “Men, my poor Sara, are not like us. Their love, even when it is quite sincere, is not like our love” (Collins 158). Another epistle evokes a similar sense of privacy, as the correspondent—whose anonymity furthers the privacy of the exchange—provides Sara Macallan with bold instructions: “Your husband’s conduct to you points to one conclusion. He is in love with some other woman […] Make it the business of your life to find out who the creature is” (Collins 159). The brazenness of these texts, composed and exchanged between several individuals, is protected only by the spirit of privacy and anonymity with which they are imbued. In this way, Collins opens up a space for private texts within legal discourse, as these letters are not only held up as evidence in the courtroom, but are also instrumental in providing Valeria with the insight and direction required to solve the case.

On this note, Sara Macallan’s personal diary is the text that legally, though not socially, clears Eustace’s name. The diary contains a suicide note and concludes with a statement that both implicates her husband in the act, and absolves him of any direct culpability: “I love you, Eustace—I forgive you” (Collins 395). It is appropriate that a private text accounts for the novel’s complicated resolution if we consider how the law, as public discourse, primarily focuses on fixing and asserting public standards of morality: “legal discourse is commonly held to restrict and limit meaning, employing its narrative ‘to maintain a normative order’” (qtd. Longmuir 170). The novel suggests that

private texts do not have the same imperative to fix meaning, and thus, can better communicate the complicated and conflicted ways in which events and relationships work themselves out. And while the narrative acknowledges the indispensability of upholding publically shared values, it problematizes the idea that these values are as singular and monolithic as legal discourse suggests. Accordingly, it is a private text that is imbued with the most legal authority, providing resolution and closure to the case. In this vein, Valeria responds to her discovery of Sara Macallan's diary: "Yes! To this end it had come. […] There, on the table before me, lay the triumphant vindication of my husband's innocence" (Collins 395). Thus, while the case's resolution depends on both official and unofficial, public and private narratives, it is an explicitly private text that completes and elucidates what had been, until then, the enigmatic and incomplete story of Sara Macallan's death.

Extending this claim, Collins not only blurs public and private discourses but also who it is that defines and shapes those discourses. In the process, he challenges Victorian gender categories and the level of agency with which they are associated. To illustrate, the resolution produced by Sara Macallan's diary renders it what Jenny Bourne Taylor terms, "an implicitly 'masculine' [literary] form"—having the capacity to "disclose origins, to discover and control the past" (Taylor xv). In a converse manner, Collins presents us with instances in which Eustace's writing—his signing of the marriage register under a false name—works against this idea of "masculine" writing: obfuscating his personal history rather than "disclosing" or elucidating it (Taylor xv). Furthermore, because it is Sara's diary and not Eustace's that publicly clears his name, Collins imbues female voices with newfound authority and allows them to transgress the domestic realm,

challenging what Anne Cvetkovich terms the "Victorian domestic ideology" (Cvetkovich 40). Cvetkovich goes on to describe what she intends by this ideological framework, particularly as it applies to women:

> [T]he household […] becomes the arena for a seemingly invisible enslavement or subjection. Moreover, the middle-class woman's suffering often takes the form of psychic or emotional rather than physical pain. It gives rise to a politics of affect according to which the expression of emotion can be liberatory (Cvetkovitch 40).

Without fully unpacking what Cvetkovich intends by the term "affect," her analysis is nonetheless helpful in illuminating a way in which Collins's novels challenge the type of invisible subjection that bound both real and fictional women of the Victorian era. Namely, both Sara and Valeria find voice and a sense of authority—through their private writing—in the public and "institutional shape" of the law (Miller viii). To put it simply, Collins's representation of female writing disrupts the conservative "Victorian ideology" of separate spheres, whereby men occupy positions of authority and consequence in the public realm while women are confined to the privacy of the domestic sphere (Cvetkovich 40).

Bolstering this claim is the novel's inversion of how the Victorian binary, between active and passive modes of subjectivity, was conventionally gendered. This inversion is carried out through Collins's characterization of Eustace as an absent, private—and thus passive—figure. For example, when his sordid past is brought to light, his first impulse is not to give voice to what he actually knows of the case, but to retreat from how it has been authored by others—in particular, by how it has been recorded in

the court transcript. When Valeria unearths this court transcript, and thus learns of the crime with which her husband has been charged, she loses consciousness. Significantly, upon regaining her senses Valeria finds that her husband has extricated himself from her both physically and emotionally. She thus reflects, "Why was Eustace not with me, like the rest of them!" (Collins 96). Eustace's emotional retreat from his wife is further cemented by his musing: "'There is an end of our married life,' he said to me, 'now she knows that I am the man who was tried at Edinburgh for poisoning my wife!'" (Collins 99). Rather than give voice, once again, to the circumstances surrounding his strained and unhappy marriage Eustace becomes palpably absent: a passive and private figure for the rest of the novel's duration.

Conversely, the women with whom he is most intimately connected accrue active subjectivities, by sketching his character for both themselves and the reader. For example, Eustace's mother emphatically sketches his passivity for Valeria: "My poor wretched son—he takes after his father; he isn't the least like me!—is weak in his way of judging; weak in his way of acting" (Collins 197). A stark contrast is formed between the masculine passivity of which Mrs. Macallan is speaking, and the forceful language she employs in doing so—emphatically repeating the word "weak" with an exclamatory tone (Collins 197). The binary between active and passive subjectivities is subverted more explicitly when she suggests that good women are the rightful authors of their husband's characters: "You are like a good woman—you make a hero of the man you love, whether he deserves it or not" (Collins 196). This statement aptly conveys how, although a male's heroism ostensibly grants him more agency than his female counterpart, her authoring of that role masks a powerful though a more privatized sense of agency.

Moreover, this disruption of gender categories is carried out, most broadly and extensively, through the figure of Collins's protagonist. Indeed Valeria mediates and evaluates all of the narratives of which the novel is comprised, for her male counterparts as well as for the reader. Assuming the role of author and editor, Valeria mediates the official testimony of the trial: "Writing, as I do, long after the events took place, I still cannot prevail upon myself to describe in detail what my unhappy husband said and did, at this distressing period of the Trial […] He now lost all control over his feelings" (Collins 156). It is significant that, unlike the rest of the official court transcript, which is inserted verbatim within the narrative, Valeria glosses and paraphrases this portion. In so doing, she adopts a rational voice and relates, with more collectedness than her male counterpart, Eustace's highly emotional and indeed hysterical courtroom behavior. At this juncture, Collins completely subverts masculine and feminine gender roles: Eustace becoming a locus of disorder—losing "all control over his feelings"—while Valeria acts to restore order by providing an account of her husband's behavior on more sympathetic terms (Collins 156).

And with this subversion of gender categories comes a subversion of the official and unofficial: Valeria's mediated version of the court transcript is the one that we are given access to, and thus, the one we have no choice but to receive as authoritative. Collins is disrupting the idea that official narratives assume masculine traits of rationality and restraint. During the Victorian period, the social construction of masculinity was worked out in contradistinction to that of femininity, and thus, women were largely understood as unregulated and irrational. In fact, these characteristics were ones that became naturalized to the female body, a topic that Andrew Mangham examines at great

length: "In the period's medical textbooks, such ideas on the demonic underside of femininity developed into a representation of female nature as deceptive and incendiary" (Mangham 116). Moreover, femininity was associated with states of disorder and emotionality that were thought to be owing to a certain type of "insanity" (Mangham 116). Indeed, in an assessment of this "insanity" John Millingen wrote in 1848: "In woman, the concentration of her feelings […] adds to their intensity; and like a smouldering fire that has at last got vent, her passions, when no longer trammeled by conventional propriety, burst forth in unquenchable violence" (Mangham 116). And thus, female voices and the narratives that they produce are rendered less legitimate as they are represented as lacking control, rationality, and direction. Moreover, the emotionality and directionless of feminized narratives were understood to do more to obfuscate than elucidate statements of fact.

Collins blurs how these gendered attributes inflect the masculine and feminine narratives interspersed throughout *The Law and the Lady*. He does not simply subvert Eustace and Valeria as rational agent and emotional object. Instead, he is interested in how the narrative authored by Valeria exhibits both traits of masculine restraint and rationality and feminine emotionality and impulsiveness. In so doing, he refuses a determinate valuation of one over the other. Jenny Bourne Taylor remarks on how Valeria's feminized approach to constructing a solution to the mystery lacks a sense of clear direction: "She does not, like her male amateur detective counterparts, depend on rational induction or scientific evidence, but is more likely to follow a different kind of logic, to act impulsively, to pursue random associations, to move in a dream-or trance-like state" (Taylor xvii). In fact it is Valeria's blind passion and love for her husband that

spurs her detective work forward, though she has no rational basis to think that she might be able to achieve what her male counterparts before her had not, namely: a resolution to the mystery.

Valeria reflects on the value of her feminized persistence: “A man in my place would have lost all patience, and would have given up the struggle in disgust. Being a woman, and having my end in view, my resolution was invincible” (Collins 65). Nonetheless, while her femininity bolsters her project in a positive way so too does it impede it, as “she ultimately relinquishes control at the penultimate stage of the investigation, leaving it to the lawyer Mr. Playmore and returning to her husband on the discovery of her pregnancy” (Taylor xvi). By interrupting the heroine’s project in this way, Collins illuminates how conventionally feminine and masculine abilities complement one another to produce the most complete and accurate narrativization of events and situations.

The complementarity of masculine and feminine narratives is more deliberately conveyed in the interactions between Valeria and Mr. Playmore—the lawyer assisting her in solving Eustace’s case. The two debate about how to proceed with the case as it and the novel approach their resolutions, and Mr. Playmore inquires,

> ‘Here is the client leading the lawyer. My dear Mrs. Eustace, which is it—do you want my advice? Or do I want yours?’
>
> ‘May I hear the new idea?’ I asked.
>
> ‘Not just yet, if you will excuse me,’ he answered. ‘Make allowances for my professional caution […]But the lawyer gets the better of the man, and

> refuses to be suppressed […] Let us go over a part of the ground again, and let me ask you some big questions as we proceed'(Collins 274).

The dialogue between Valeria and Mr. Playmore adopts a Socratic quality, whereby her emotional detective work is fruitful in "leading the lawyer" (Collins 274). And yet the passion and intuition that guide her research require Mr. Playmore's restraint and rationality, his insistence on reviewing "a part of the ground again," in order to produce the novel's resolution. Thus, while traditional gender roles are at least superficially restored in this resolution—it is the masculine lawyer who produces the final verdict on Eustace's case—Collins has fleshed out how it fundamentally depends on feminine abilities and voices drawn from both unofficial sources and private texts.

All in all, Collins does much to undercut an idea of the law as an official, public, and masculinized discourse in *The Law and the Lady*. Rather, he represents legal discourse as an amalgam of official and unofficial, public and private, masculine and feminine narratives. In so doing, the novel effectively challenges ideas of what stories are authoritative and who it is that decides. Challenging this binary is a subversive project that he returns to repeatedly in his novels, and illuminates a desire to speak back, critically, to the environment in which he wrote.

Chapter 3 "I am not permitted to improve—I am condemmed to narrate": *The Moonstone's* Refiguring of Authoritative Authorship

Just as he does in *The Law and the Lady*, Collins disrupts rigid divisions of high and low in *The Moonstone*: here, in terms of how such divisions relate to questions of authorship and writing. In the early Victorian period high-brow literature was almost exclusively realist literature (Kent 53). In other words, serious nineteenth-century literature accrued value according to its representational function: it endeavored to reflect, by giving voice, to social phenomena (Kent 53). Because sensation fiction and other literary modes diverged from this generic goal during the 1860s, we risk overlooking how realism had up until that juncture defined Victorian literary and critical standards. With this in view, Christopher Kent writes: "It is always salutary for the historian and the literary critic alike to be reminded that Victorian novelists and their critics assumed that the novels of their day would be read by posterity as social history" (Kent 53). As the critic here highlights, the unchallenged "assumption" (Kent 53) was that novelists documented and narrativized—with veracity—aspects of the social climate in which they wrote.

The Moonstone self-consciously sets this novelistic convention into crisis. As John Reed suggests Collins's novel defies evaluating literature on a realist basis, challenging the assumption on which it rests. In other words, it challenges the "assumption" (Kent 53) that it is possible for literature to represent reality directly and with veracity. Reed thus writes, "Collins's narrative method resists any definitive reading, as do the dynamics of the story" (Reed 98). The novel's use of shifting narrators, through which it relates the mystery surrounding the disappearance of the moonstone,

disrupts the assumption that it is possible for any one source to pen the "reality" of a single circumstance. In a letter to one of his subeditors at *All the Year Round* Charles Dickens betrays a palpable displeasure at this mode of narration: "*Of course* it is a series of 'Narratives,' and *of course* such and so many modes of action are open to such and such people" (Nayder 163, emphasis my own). Lillian Nayder understands this "implicit criticism" as one aimed at the predictability, or standardization, of these "standard elements of Collins's fiction" (Nayder 163). However, the critique clearly runs deeper than one about standardization and conventionality, if we consider that any author's corpus contains recurrent or "standard" (Nayder 163) formal and thematic elements. Instead Dickens's malaise with the shifting perspectives through which *The Moonstone* finds voice indicates a broader discomfort with the challenge it poses to realism: the dominant literary mode of the time. His is a discomfort with the "epistemological crisis" that the "Victorian novel" was then confronting (Nemesvari 15): a crisis valorized by *The Moonstone* through its depiction of competing narratives as vehicles for understanding complicated truths.

In order to establish how *The Moonstone* problematizes a monolithic vision of truth, and on what terms, it is necessary to outline the central theme that all eleven of its composite narratives take up. All of these accounts center, in some way, on the yellow diamond after which the novel is titled (Collins 1). While the material focal point of these narratives is singular—all of these accounts are fundamentally about the moonstone—they assume a wide range of tones and perspectives on the subject. To illustrate: the moonstone is to the Indians a religious symbol and a "sacred gem" (Collins 466); for Franklin Blake it is the only impediment to his relationship with Rachel Verinder; and for

Gabriel Betteredge, the moonstone represents the penultimate source of discord and fragmentation in the residence where he is employed (Collins 69). Moreover, Collins stresses the singularity of the source from which all these narrative accounts derive. For example, Franklin Blake understands the value of the diamond as inextricable from its completeness, associating “the integrity of the Diamond” with its being “a whole stone” (Collins 38). The singularity of the Diamond is also formally emphasized by its capitalization throughout the text, which imbues it with the individualism attached to proper names. Blake even notes how the Diamond could be multiplied, and would gain value in so doing, before dismissing the idea: “The flawed Diamond, cut up, would actually fetch more than the Diamond as it now is” (Collins 38). What this passage makes clear is that the Diamond’s worth is not monetary in nature, but is attached to its status as a singular and unique object. *The Moonstone* thus dramatizes how even a single phenomenon engenders a wide-range of authored interpretations.

What is most pioneering about this novel is its re-imagining of, and ruminating on, interpretive acts within the text itself. Peter Thoms speaks to this characteristic: “[*The Moonstone*] self-reflexively explores the process of interpretation itself, showing how humankind dilutes and delimits reality in the search for answers to its questions” (Thoms 157). Thoms persuasively argues that reductive qualities pervade all interpretive acts, and in particular, written accounts attempting to make sense of reality (Thoms 157). This simplification is entailed by the subjectivity of all written texts, and thus, by the singular perspectives from which those texts derive. *The Moonstone* accounts for this reality through its formal structure, which places a collection of narratives in dialogue with one another in order to narrate the mystery surrounding the moonstone. This formal structure

is one that Collins adopts elsewhere in his novels, and most notably in *The Woman in White*. Indeed the figure of Walter Hartright opens this earlier novel by ruminating on its narrative design:

> [T]he story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness—with the same object, in both cases, to present the truth always in its most direct and intelligible aspect (Collins 3).

This opening remark draws our attention to the interpretive act in which we as are engaging, as pseudo-jurors, evaluating the testimony of all the novel's "witnesses" (Collins 1859 3). The significance of how Collins authors this role for his readership is reinforced by Christopher Kent:"The very organization of *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White* […] implicitly invites the reader to take a judicial position. Gabriel Betteredge, thinking of the future readers of his narrative, is explicit: 'What a compliment he will feel it…to be treated in all respects like a judge on the bench'" (Kent 71).
Thus, both Collins and Kent identify how his novels blur categories of high and low: destabilizing the idea that authors uphold positions of epistemological authority over and above their readers.

The Moonstone enacts this blurring of high and low by emphasizing how the narratives it contains are not only objects to be interpreted, but are also interpretive acts themselves. Collins suggests that authorship is a fundamentally interpretive activity in the novel's Preface, wherein the "object" or purpose of the novel is advanced: "In some of my former novels, the object proposed has been to trace the influence of circumstances upon character. In the present story I have reversed the process. The attempt made here is

to trace the influence of character on circumstances" (Collins n.p.). Collins thus foregrounds the novel by highlighting the mimetic relationship that obtains between representation and reality, suggesting how his characters' authored accounts of certain "circumstances" come to bear on those "circumstances" in real ways (Collins n.p.). Thoms examines this guiding "object" of the novel from a slightly different vantage point by noting how it diverges from the realist mode, which largely presumed a monolithic vision of empirical truths: "Instead of pretending to affirm an order which answers all the questions, *The Moonstone* does essentially the opposite, as it recognizes the fictionalizing inherent in the interpretation of reality" (Thoms 157). By extension, drawing our attention to the fictive aspect of all written texts encourages us to renegotiate the grounds on which we determine their authority, beyond simply the veracity with which they represent "reality" (Thoms 157). One way that the novel renegotiates the authority of written texts is by having its characters employ textual artifacts, within the novel, as instruments through which to navigate the mystery of the moonstone. Two salient instances of this are Gregory Betteredge's dependence on Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and Drusilla Clack's fanatical reading and distribution of religious tracts. Both figures rely on textual artifacts in a way that evokes a sense of religious reverence: locating resolution to any and all conflicted or confused understandings in a single source. While Collins presents Betteredge's interpretive practice as overly-narrow and limiting to his own personal understanding, Clack's didactic desire to have others adopt her interpretive practice produces broader confusion and misunderstanding in the social unit in which she finds herself. In order to evaluate the efficacy of these subtexts, as interpretive tools, it is necessary to first examine how they are deployed.

Gabriel Betteredge's narratives frame the "multinarrative mosaic" of which *The Moonstone* is comprised (Nemesvari 18), as he himself acknowledges in closing: "I am the person (as you remember no doubt) who led the way in these pages, and opened the story. I am also the person who is left behind, as it were, to close the story up" (Collins 458). Here as before Betteredge presents himself as a highly self-conscious author, cognizant of his performing an authorial task that is to be received by a readership. Moreover, his name suggests the presumed authority of his interpretation of the narrative's events, his narrative presuming the "better edge" on the events attached to the moonstone's disappearance. The novel's structural mirroring—having the same voice both introduce and "close the story up" (Collins 458)—is reinforced by Betteredge's dense references to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in both of these framing narratives. It is in this vein that he narrativizes the events leading up to the loss of the moonstone:

> [S]uch a book as *Robinson Crusoe* never was written, and never will be written again. […] When my spirits are bad—*Robinson Crusoe*. When I want advice—*Robinson Crusoe*. In past times when my wife plagued me; in present times when I have had a drop too much—*Robinson Crusoe*. I have worn out six stout *Robinson Crusoe*s with hard work in my service. […] Still, this doesn't look much like starting the story of the Diamond—does it? (Collins 9).

This passage illuminates Betteredge's ardent reliance on Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*: upholding the work as one to be venerated for its applicability in all circumstances. Christopher Kent considers this reliance as one that parallels a kind of religious reverence: "The old servant makes it his secular bible to the extent of practicing sortilege

with it, opening it at random to find a text to guide him in moments of uncertainty" (Kent 62).

And yet Collins suggests that Betteredge's reliance on a single interpretive lens interrupts the task of arriving at newfound understanding about the moonstone's disappearance: "this doesn't look much like starting the story of the Diamond—does it?" (Collins 9). Indeed Collins suggests that the book's interpretive value has degenerated in being over-exhausted, as Betteredge has literally "worn out six stout *Robinson Crusoe*s" (Collins 9) by employing them to interpret any and all circumstances in his life. This obsessive reliance on a single text is bolstered by the cyclical manner in which Betteredge reiterates its title, and the fact that he returns to it again in his closing remarks: "when I write of *Robinson Crusoe*, by the Lord it's serious—and I request you to take it accordingly!" (Collins 459). In this way Collins dramatizes Betteredge's interpretive acts as being too narrowly defined, and impotent for that very reason, as his readings of what is going on in the Verinder residence are largely inaccurate[i].

Betteredge's reliance on *Robinson Crusoe* portends to be, but in fact disrupts, what Jauss terms a "horizon of expectations" (qtd. Nemesvari 18). Nemesvari elucidates this theoretical concept by describing how certain texts provide "horizons" of what to expect—and thus criteria by which to evaluate—literature of different genres. He explains: "the term itself emphasizes the way in which a work or works can only be known against a 'background' or perception which 'silhouettes' it / them. If such a background does not exist, distinctions are difficult to make" (Nemesvari 18). Extending this concept beyond the bounds of genre, we can see that *Robinson Crusoe* provides Betteredge with what he perceives to be an inexhaustible set of expectations and

prescriptions through which to understand his surroundings. However, he reverses the directionality of how these expectations are intended to function: rather than having his surroundings providing a 'silhouette' for the novel, the novel provides a "silhouette" or backdrop through which to interpret all of his surroundings (Nemesvari 18).

In this way, Collins suggests the limited and limiting effects of Betteredge's unique interpretive practice. By using a singular narrative through which to interpret all aspects of the mystery, he does not progress, or arrive at any new understanding of the world. Instead, the text serves as the perspective that singularly defines and affirms a pre-existent, static vision of the world. Certain critics have argued that Betteredge's "secular bible" (Kent 62) does in fact generate authoritative readings of the world, insofar as it "accurately foretells the birth of a child to Rachel and Blake" (Reed 99). However, it is more reasonable that Betteredge's accurate interpretation of events is coincidental: repeatedly applying passages of a text to one's external surroundings eventually, and predictively, produces an alignment between the two. Therefore it is not so much that *Robinson Crusoe* elucidates or extends Betteredge's readings of his surroundings, but that it imposes a comforting and familiar design on to them. Indeed this tranquilizing—and simplifying—purpose is one of which Betteredge is at least peripherally aware. He writes: "May you find in these leaves of my writing, what *Robinson Crusoe* found […] namely, 'something to comfort yourselves from, and to set in the Description of Good and Evil'" (Collins 190). Betteredge thus frames and employs literary texts as mechanisms not so much to interpret his surroundings, in novel ways, but to "comfort" himself in reinforcing his own set of cemented beliefs (Collins 190).

Drusilla Clack's interpretive practices are dramatized in a similar fashion; however, hers are so narrow so as to be not only impotent, but destructive to the sense of resolution that all of the novel'scomposite narratives seek to produce. Fanatically reading her surroundings through a set of Christian tracts fails to elucidate them and instead impedes her ability to do so. Thoms illuminates Collins's satirical representation of this highly subjective—insofar as it is extreme—interpretive method: "In her extreme subjectivity Clack symbolizes the limited vision which to varying degrees plagues all the characters in the novel" (Thoms 164). This hyper-subjectivity disallows her from genuinely understanding and interacting with the circumstances in which she finds herself, and instead stimulates her desire to control them.

Clack thus ruminates on the task of documenting her relationship to the moonstone, instead of her religious musings: "I could write pages of affectionate warning on this one theme, but (alas!) I am not permitted to improve—I am condemned to narrate" (Collins 198). An "objective" interpretation of her surroundings, having to strictly "narrate" rather than embellish and stylize facts, is a punitive imperative for Drusilla Clack: one that she ultimately fails to fulfill. In fact her interpretation of all situations as opportunities for religious learning only provokes further social fragmentation and dissemblance. She thus relates that when holding "up my precious book" (Collins 258) to the senior Mr. Ablewhite, his comportment and that of the entire social group degenerates: "It is impossible for me to write the awful word, which is here represented by a blank. I shrieked as it passed his lips…" (Collins 258). Collins here dramatizes, through Drusilla's insistent reliance on Christian tracts, how singularly narrow interpretations fragment and obscure understanding instead of producing

resolution. In fact Clack's attempt to produce a shared understanding of Rachel's rejection of Godfrey—by referring to a religious tract—literally leads to the dissipation of the group.

Worth noting is the parallel between the novel's reception history and the way in which it thematizes interpretive practices. Collins's critical representation of explicitly subjective, and narrowly-defined, interpretive practices aligns with how it was criticized for resisting realist techniques. Lillian Nayder explores the import of the novel's critical reception—and the reception of works with themes and techniques akin to it—through the lens of Collins's collaborative relationship with Charles Dickens. Reaching celebrity status as an author, Dickens responded critically to his colleague's insistence on multiplying and diversifying the perspectives from which *The Moonstone* is narrated. In an especially candid moment he comments on this formal aspect: "'The construction is wearisome beyond endurance, and there is a vein of obstinate conceit in it that makes enemies of readers'" (Nayder 163). To be sure, the novel's formal construction was foreign to that with which the mass or popular reader was accustomed, and perhaps for this reason it did alienate or "make[ ] enemies of readers" (Nayder 163). Though Dickens' novels largely attempt to subvert the social phenomena that they represent, through novel techniques, Collins's works are much more self-conscious in how they renegotiate the conventions of the Victorian novel. Collins continuously draws our attention to acts of writing, and to our role as readers, particularly in *The Moonstone* in a way that Dickens does not in his novels. In order to examine the import of this claim, and the way in which Collins pioneers novelistic conventions in *The Moonstone*, it is fruitful to examine the literary milieu out of which he was writing.

In fleshing out the basic parameters of this literary milieu it is helpful to look at the type, or model, of literary criticism that helped shape it. Particularly influential on Collins's writing were those critics who were either confused or offended by Collins's vision and novelistic techniques, or those akin to them. One of the most cited critical essays meeting this description is Henry Mansel's "Sensation Novels," originally published in the *Quarterly Review*. The essay is highly conservative in tone, complementing the "underlying editorial policy" of the *Quarterly Review*. Walter Houghton reflects, more specifically, on the criteria that this journal most stringently upheld and defended: "the *Quarterly Review* 'spoke throughout the period for an important concept of literature—the responsibility of the man of letters to shun the purely subjective or the unusual, and to uphold the great moral and religious ideas of English tradition" (qtd. Mansel 32). Here the critic makes clear that the overall ethos of this journal—and those like it—was incompatible with Collins's project, because it relied heavily on scandalous topics and immoral figures to dramatize how we both construct and interpret social phenomena.

This represents a dominant and authoritative idea of Collins's time, namely, that valuable literature is didactic: it instructs and reinforces "English" values (qtd. Mansel 32). *The Moonstone* disrupts this evaluative convention, and was criticized for so doing. To illustrate, Mansel's essay explicitly upholds the standard view that literature ought to be instructive, decrying Collins and his fellow sensation writers on the following terms: "No divine influence can be imagined as presiding over the birth of his work, beyond the market-law of demand and supply; no more immortality is dreamed of for it than for the fashions of the current season" (Mansel 33). Here Mansel compares sensation novels'

privileging of subjective and hyper-specific situations—as distinct from serious stories about shared moral or religious values—to the frequent installments in which they were published. This criticism is one that Margaret Oliphant echoes in a critical essay of her own, wherein she divorces Collins's sensational novels from "the republic of letters" (Oliphant 14). She does so from the same vantage point as Mansel, taking issue with how Collins's novels neglect their didactic task and instead, purportedly, "make the criminal its hero" (Oliphant 14). It is not, however, that Collins's novels resist engaging with broad moral or cultural values. Rather, they are intent on broadening and diversifying the literary approach through which these values come to be defined. Christopher Kent thus writes: "[Collins emphasizes] to an unusual degree among Victorian novelists the extent to which reality was a construct undergoing significant change in their own time" (Kent 53). Implicit in this analysis is the idea that English values, which critics like Mansel claim ought to be the subject of serious literature, are neither an objective nor a static set of truths. Rather, like interpretations of the moonstone itself they are fluid and are bound up with a continual process of being shaped and defined.

Collins was well aware of how entrenched this convention was, namely: that serious literature was expected to serve a didactic purpose. In fact, he embodies this convention in the figure of Drusilla Clack, who at several junctures meditates on the difficulty of narrativizing without moralizing: "I am not permitted to improve—I am condemmed to narrate" (Collins 198). Indeed, even her descriptions of Godfrey Ablewhite—who is the person responsible for the moonstone's disappearance—moralize about and thus improve his character: "I have exhibited the fluctuations in my opinion of

our Christian Hero, exactly as I find them recorded in my diary […] I write with the tears in my eyes, burning to say more. But no—I am cruelly limited to my actual experience of persons and things" (Collins 252). Clack's description of Ablewhite as a "Christian Hero" (Collins 252), whose piety produces in her an irrepressible admiration, obfuscates his self-interested disposition as the perpetrator of the novel's central crime. As readers we are encouraged to compare this narrow interpretation of people and events with our own interpretive practices, as Reed suggests, "It has become a critical commonplace that literary interpretation is analogous to criminal detection" (Reed 91). Collins conveys, through the figure of Drusilla Clack, that in order to develop genuine understanding we need to suspend personal judgment and consider different accounts of the object studied: particularly those without an agenda to reinforce pre-existing values.

Though the claim that authoritative literature passes the test of posterity was not unique to the Victorian era, it did become dominant in this cultural moment. Evaluating literature in virtue of its posterity is, of course, convenient when a critic aims to undermine an artistic mode or technique of any novelty. This idea functions—albeit illogically—to bolster Mansel's closing suggestion: "we should like to see a lending library established somewhat on the principle of the 'Retrospective Review,' which should circulate no books but those which have received the stamp of time in testimony of their merits" (Mansel 52). Of course if this same "retrospective review" were to be applied to critical texts it would become, for Mansel, an ineffective criteria by which to evaluate them (Mansel 52). Similarly underlying Oliphant's criticism of Collins's novels, and specifically *The Woman in White*, is the suggestion that they will not endure in a manner comparable to those works located in "the republic of letters" (Oliphant 14). In

fact, it is with the standard of posterity in view that Oliphant juxtaposes Collins's novels against the enduring works of "Shakespeare" and "Sir Walter" (Oliphant 10). And in a sense this criticism is fulfilled if we examine the reception of Wilkie Collins's novels against that of some of his contemporaries. Notably, Collins continues to be positioned as subordinate to Dickens in the canon: "while 'everything connected with [Dickens's] writing is part of the literary history of England,' his own is not" (Nayder 14). And yet Collins's works endure, and affirm their own value by doing so, particularly when we consider the way in which they renegotiated both literary and critical conventions.

Furthermore, there is an interesting way in which *The Moonstone* predicts, by narrativizing, its own posterity. The novel authors its own posterity, in part, by situating its main narrative within a broader paratext:

> But when [the main] story ends, there remains in The Epilogue another story that is not at all concerned with a pair of English lovers and the solving of a criminal case, but that involves the mystery of the moonstone itself and all that that mystery represents and never explains (Reed 99).

Collins frames his novel with a deliberate indeterminateness, creating the sense that his main narrative permits of many different interpretations. The speaker in the Prologue contributes to this indeterminateness by shedding light on the limitations of private experiences and the subjective narrative accounts thereof. He thus describes his uncertainty of Herncastle's committing murder, and theft, so as to acquire the moonstone:

> If I made the matter public, I have no evidence but moral evidence to bring forward. I have not only no proof that he killed the two men at the

> door; I cannot even declare that he killed the third man inside—for I cannot say that my own eyes saw the deed committed (Collins 6).

By foregrounding the novel's indeterminacy in this way Collins anticipates how the novel's composite narratives all suggest—in their own way—that the facts surrounding the moonstone and its disappearance are markedly murky and inconclusive.

Moreover, the novel's paratexts relate to how it scripts its own posterity and can be read as the author's exercising agency over the reception of this novel. For example the anonymous author of the Prologue contextualizes the Indian myths about the moonstone in a way that parallels conservative criticisms of the author's own novels: "So, as told in our camp, ran the *fanciful* story of the moonstone. It made no *serious* impression on any of us except my cousin" (Collins 3, emphasis my own). Framing the "story of the moonstone" as something "fanciful" parallels how the sensation fiction of Collins's day was not received as "serious," or authoritative. The author thus introduces *The Moonstone* by anticipating how its central theme is conventionally low-brow yet deserves expression nonetheless; by gesturing at the division between high and low and challenging it in his decision to give voice to the rest of his novel.

Extending this observation, we can see how Collins also scripts how his novel should be treated as a living organism: one that continues to develop over time, and for this reason, requires readerships to continually cycle back and interpret it. John R. Reed speaks to the text's generative quality, by noting how it resists providing conclusive answers to its central questions: "[it is] a narrative designed to resist the comfort of resolution and entrapment" (Reed 91). And of course Collins suggests the generative and thus fluid quality of the novel's central narrative through the symbol of the diamond

itself—attached to the cyclical movements of both the moon and of familial legacies. It is in this vein that the epilogue concludes, "So the years pass, and repeat each other; so the same events revolve in the cycles of time. What will be the next adventures of the moonstone? Who can tell?" (Collins 466). By referencing the cyclicality of the novel's main object, and inviting irresolution through the use of rhetorical questions, Collins successfully establishes grounds on which his novel ought to achieve posterity. And so it has.

The Moonstone moves beyond reconfiguring authorial practices, on its own, by thematizing this reconfiguration. The novel reconfigures, in a variety of ways, Victorian ideas about what constituted authoritative writing. A salient way in which it achieves this aim is by presenting its most epistemologically sound narratives as collaborative. Claiming that the author privileges and primarily presents collaborative authorship extends beyond a recognition of how the novel makes use of multiple narrators. In fact, many critics interpret this mode of narration as anti-collaborative, in that they understand its composite narratives as presenting "competing interpretations of events" (Reed 91). What these critics overlook, however, is how these "interpretations" build on and guide one another in self-reflexive and generative ways. A central illustration of this is Franklin Blake's assuming the role of editor: mediating all of the novel's composite narratives. For example, he expands on one of Drusilla Clack's written statements in a footnote:

> Note. Added by Franklin Blake.—Miss Clack may make her mind quite easy on this point. Nothing will be added, altered, or removed, in her manuscript, or in any of the other manuscripts which pass through my hands. Whatever opinions any of the writers may express, whatever

> peculiarities of treatment may mark, and perhaps, in a literary sense, disfigure, the narratives I am now collecting, not a line will be tampered with anywhere, from first to last (Collins 192).

This footnote indicates the referential and generative way in which the novel's narratives stand to one another.

Here, Blake is guiding how we ought to read this and all the rest of the novel's sub-narratives: as unmediated accounts of a complex series of events. However occurring simultaneously, and more subtly, is Clack's authoring an alternate mode of reading these narratives. Hers suggests a skepticism about the possibility for independent narrative accounts; accounts that have not been mediated or altered at all by external sources. Indeed, she is highly self-conscious of how her narrative comes at the bequest of Blake, and how he therefore holds a significant stake in its content. She thus writes: "My sacred regard for the truth is (thank God) far above my respect for persons. It will be easy for Mr. Blake to suppress what may not prove to be sufficiently flattering in these pages to the person chiefly concerned in them" (Collins 192). Clack here conveys a staunch skepticism about the possibility for singular narratives to exist independent of external influences, and thus modifications. Significantly, this skepticism is legitimized insofar as Blake's aside—an "addition" and therefore a mode of "tampering" with Clack's narrative—purports precisely not to make such textual alterations (Collins 192).

By having multiple narratives not only exist alongside one another, but permeate and guide one another, Collins legitimizes a collaborative form of authorship. We can read such elements as paying homage to the collaborative mode in which most of his own novels were produced. In particular, his works were highly motivated by the collaborative

relationship that developed between himself and Charles Dickens, “Collins was to learn—by working with, and for, the ‘Great man’ over the next seventeen years—that Dickens’s influence was constraining as well as inspiring” (Nayder 3)[ii]. Despite this ambivalent attitude, Collins not only wrote collaboratively but also frames writing as a collaborative activity in *The Moonstone*. In so doing, he undermines the authority attributed to certain authored accounts by blurring who it is that actually authored them.

This thesis is reinforced by the fruitfulness of Blake and Jennings’ collaborative project—that of recreating and documenting the state of affairs that were in place the night that the moonstone disappeared. This collaborative project is fruitful in that it produces a provisional and instrumental resolution to several of the plot’s central questions. Indeed, it confirms Rachel’s observation that Blake removed the diamond from her room, and cements the latter’s resolve to see the case through to its completion, “compel[ling] Blake to resume the investigation” (Reed 94). Collaborative relationships—both amicable and romantic—are therefore valorized in that they produce heightened states of resolution and understanding. And significantly, these unions are directly linked to acts of authorship and writing: as Jennings, Blake and Rachel all collaborate to document an experiment, aimed at extricating Blake from the crime. Conversely, Collins represents the impotence of individual written accounts: “I saw the Law (as represented by Mr. Bruff’s papers) lying unheeded on the floor” (Collins 419). This image represents Bruff’s strictly legalistic account of events as being dispensable in virtue of its narrowness[iii]. Ultimately Bruff abandons this independently authored account—leaving it “unheeded on the floor”—to helpfully and collaboratively author one

with Jennings (Collins 419). In fact, after having Bruff serve as a witness to the experiment Jennings has him document and authenticate his observations,

> I put the writing materials before Mr Bruff, and asked him if he had any objection—before we separated for the night—to draw out, and sign, a plain statement of what he had seen. He at once took the pen, and produced the statement with the fluent readiness of a practiced hand (Collins 424).

Here, Collins not only links collaboration to authorship, but presents this collaborative quality as stimulating the most epistemologically sound writing. Jennings recognizes that his unofficial account—that of a socially ostracized medical assistant—will not be taken seriously. Thus, Bruff's written account legitimizes that of Jennings within an official space. However in order to do so, Bruff must first develop a sympathy and openness toward Jennings' irrational explanations for the diamond's disappearance.

Collins also blurs divisions of high and low—divisions between authoritative and non-authoritative voices—on the level of gender. Monica Young-Zook observes how this blurring establishes itself as a sort of gendered "hybridity": a mixing that pervades Collins's other works as well (Young-Zook 236). This hybridization of gender undermines the idea that masculine narratives are more rational, and authoritative, than their feminine counterparts. *The Moonstone* challenges this convention subtly, by seeming to reinforce it, only to then transgress it. Sue Lonoff gestures at this idea in her feminist reading of the novel's central mystery. Indeed, she notes how, "The theft is perpetrated, traced, and resolved by men" (qtd. Lonoff 103). What is most insightful about this reading is its recognition of how male perspectives both provoke and resolve

misunderstanding—destabilizing the assumption that masculine perspectives are strictly rational.

Extending Lonoff's reading further still, it is worth noting that feminine narratives are largely excluded from the novel. In fact, of the eleven composite narratives of which the novel is comprised the only one authored directly by a female belongs to Drusilla Clack. The other two female characters of interest, Penelope and Rachel, have their narratives mediated and told by the men to whom they are attached. This often occurs to the detriment and obfuscation of what are their otherwise accurate and fruitful insights on the novel's central mystery. Moreover, as has been suggested Miss Clack's narrative is so exaggerated and extreme as to be dismissed. And yet it accrues the same level of legitimacy as that of Betteredge—both of which advance highly idiosyncratic, and narrow, accounts of their involvement in the mystery. By deliberately excluding female voices from the narrative a destabilizing of understanding is figured as attributable to its masculine narrators. Conversely, Collins suggests that were women to be attributed more narrative space, the mystery would be resolved much more quickly. And of course this is not possible if he is to serialize a novel of substantial length.

Collins establishes the idea that feminine voices have a keen and latent ability to produce narrative resolution, in particular, through the figure of Penelope Betteredge. Illustrating this claim is how, during the initial stages of the investigation, Penelope quickly and intuitively determines the cause of the paint left on Rosanna Spearman's nightgown as well as her odd treatment of Franklin Blake. She thus speaks to her father,

> 'Father!' says Penelope, quite seriously, 'there's only one explanation of it. Rosanna has fallen in love with Mr Franklin Blake at first sight!'

> You have heard of beautiful young ladies falling in love at first sight, and have thought it natural enough. But a housemaid out of a reformatory, with a plain face and a deformed shoulder, falling in love, at first sight, with a gentleman who comes on a visit to her mistress's house, match me that, in the way of absurdity (Collins 46).

And while Penelope accurately predicts this portion of the mystery—which Rosanna takes great pains to obscure, planting a confession of her feelings deep in a body of water—her analysis is nonetheless dubbed "absurd" (Collins 46). Significantly, this dismissal is carried out, literally, by her paternal figure. Gabriel Betteredge's rigid pragmatism, and regard for social hierarchies, disallow him from noting the validity of what his daughter's more intuitive and emotional reading produces. And thus Collins suggests that feminine voice can produce authoritative readings not despite but owing to their conventionally gendered attributes, namely: their heightened emotionality and intuitiveness.

Just as *The Law and the Lady* undermines an understanding of the Law as authoritative, so does *The Moonstone* undermine the authority of certain literary conventions. Collins does so by structuring the novel as a series of narratives that respond to one another reflexively: suggesting that the most complex and complete narratives are collaborative ones. This in fact thematizes the strained environment in which the author worked—his collaborative relationship with Dickens both benefitting and diminishing the critical valuation of his novels. Finally, *The Moonstone* figures the most fruitful collaborative authorship as texts that mix conventionally authoritative and marginalized perspectives. In this way, Collins builds on his overall project to blur the binary between

high and low, authoritative and non-authoritative discourses, and so call these categories into question.

Chapter 4 "Spoken Like an Oracle": *Armadale*'s Blurring of Rational and Non-Rational Discourses

In 1866 Collins penned his Preface to *Armadale*, closing it with a highly provocative statement: "Estimated by the Clap-trap morality of the present day, this may be a very daring book. Judged by the Christian morality which is of all time, it is only a book that is daring enough to speak the truth" (Collins 1866 Preface). The author therefore foregrounds his novel by anticipating its reception as a vehement response to Victorian culture—perhaps more overtly than any of his previous works. A number of critics respond to the novel along these lines, arguing that the sheer breadth of *Armadale*'s protestations weakens their effectiveness. Thomas Boyle thus writes: "It is a book so bursting at the seams with venom, social protest, and shocking behavior that its primary weakness seems to be that it tries to comprehend too much" (Boyle 159-60). Though Boyle articulates a common critical concern about the novel, he ignores how the novel succeeds in a particular subversive endeavor: namely, blurring divisions of high and low. In particular, the novel blurs the levels of authority assumed by rational and non-rational discourses: privileging prophetic analyses, while it undermines scientific and especially medical ones. This blurring is carried out, primarily, through a depiction of rational and non-rational narratives as inextricably linked. By undermining the authority of medical discourse in particular, *Armadale* disrupts gender categories. Medicine was the official body, after all, that established "traditional gender characteristics—both anatomical and behavioral" at this time (Ofek 102). Collins, in contrast, sketches his principle female character as evading such "traditional gender characteristics" through her fluid physicality and moral composition (Ofek 102).

Armadale's plot design is integral to its blurring divisions of high and low—divisions between rational and non-rational, masculine and feminine narratives. Peter Thoms highlights how the plottedness of this novel is almost unprecedented in its complexity, noting how, "The image often used to characterize *Armadale* is the labyrinth" (Thoms 115). Thoms attributes this characteristic to the broader trend, in the author's novels, of valuing plot over characterization. While this critical claim problematically simplifies Collins's project, it accurately indicates how his complex plots challenged the evaluative criteria by which Victorian novels had long been assessed. As Thoms explains, "In his time, [Collins] was justly recognized as one of fiction's most accomplished plotters, but this valuation was double-edged, granting Collins talent as a carpenter of plot as it simultaneously denied him a loftier position as a serious, well-rounded artist" (Thoms 1). Characterizing the author as a "carpenter of plot" communicates the unnatural quality of many of his novelistic designs: the way in which his plots read largely as artifice rather than a series of events that would actually occur (Thoms 1). *Armadale*'s plot is certainly marked by this heightened level of artifice, centering on the highly unlikely intertwining of five men—all of whom have claim to the surname Armadale.

Monica Young-Zook concisely relates the interrelation of these five characters,

> So there are five eponymous characters: Armadale the grand-père, two Armadale fathers, and their two sons. This entire history is revealed to the murderer's son via a letter his father dictates on his deathbed to the attorney Alexander Neal (Young-Zook 235).

As Young-Zook here suggests, these five men are intertwined in a fatalistic web. The murderous Armadale, here referred to, opens his confession by highlighting the fatalism bound up with his name: “The story […] begins with my inheriting the great Armadale property, and my taking the fatal Armadale name” (Collins 30). He inherits “the fatal Armadale name” when, through amicable connections to “Armadale the grand-père,” he inherits the wealthy man’s property over the man’s biological son. Alternately, the biological son of the eldest Armadale assumes the name of Fergus Ingleby: having sullied the surname that serves as a locus of conflict throughout the novel. Ingleby later seeks retribution from the man who “deprived him of his birthright” (Collins 37)—marrying the woman to whom his usurping “brother” is promised. In his own act of retaliation, Armadale murders Ingleby by locking him in the cabin of a sinking ship. The history of this crime is what the senior Armadale documents for his son, in the novel’s Prologue, and is what stimulates his son—out of shame—to change his name to Ozias Midwinter. Conversely, Ingleby’s son reclaims the family name by becoming Allan Armadale. The novel centers on working out the fate of these two sons, Ozias Midwinter and Allan Armadale, who implicitly share the same nominal identity. By constructing such an intricate web of narratives, Collins depicts how artifice—in the form of a name—is inextricable from fate.

From the outset Collins represents non-rational principles, as well as narratives, as fruitful mediums through which to understand and navigate the world. The novel’s main non-rational narrative is a prophetic message, related by the senior Armadale, in the novel’s prologue. Critics largely converge on the fact that this prophecy bears epistemological authority, by guiding and predicting the novel’s plot in an indispensable

way. For example, Laurence Tailarach-Vielmas describes the prophecy's narrative authority in legalistic terms, "the father's confession and Allan Armadale's prophetic dream (as recorded by Midwinter) function as laws dictating the characters' behavior and hence play a crucial part in the novel's supernatural atmosphere" (Tailarach-Vielmas 55). This analysis astutely conveys how prophecy, in *Armadale*, assumes a performative function: once uttered it is fulfilled.

Thomas Boyle echoes this assessment of the binding and authoritative quality of the novel's non-rational prophecies. Bolstering this assessment is the well-founded sense of foreboding with which the novel's opening prophecy is inflected, during which Armadale identifies the purpose thereof: " '…to warn my son of a danger that lies in wait for him—a danger that will rise from his father's grave, when the earth has closed over his father's ashes'" (Collins 30). Boyle notes how the prophecy's fatalistic tone derives from this particular warning, further arguing that, "The novel itself is devoted to the working out of the 'fatality' of this warning" (Boyle 161). And to a large degree this is true. To elucidate, Armadale renders his initial warning in more specific terms:

> Avoid the maid whose wicked hand smoothed the way to the marriage—if the maid is still in her service. And more than all, avoid the man who bears the same name as your own. […] There lies the way by which you may escape—if any way there be. Take it, if you prize your own innocence and your own happiness, through all your life to come! (Collins 55-6).

Worth noting is that Ozias's violation of this warning does, in fact, disrupt both his "innocence" and his "happiness" (Collins 36). In fact it is Ozias's marriage to Lydia

Gwilt—"the maid whose wicked hand smoothed the way to the marriage"—that places both him and Allan directly within a mercenary scheme, threatening both of their lives. The author here privileges a non-rational statement: foregrounding the novel with a prophecy, and largely affirming its content.

Collins goes beyond giving authority to non-rational statements, to blur rational and non-rational discourses. Tailarach-Vielmas comments on *Armadale*'s emphatic collapsing of the binary between rationalism and non-rationalism, stating how "science and the supernatural overlap constantly. Significantly, *Book the First*, which contains Armadale's confession, is supervised by doctors" (Tailarach-Vielmas 60). By having *Armadale*'s prophetic confession supervised and documented by medical professionals, rational and non-rational discourses are prevented, from the very beginning, from being placed in diametrical opposition to one another. In this opening scene Collins is gesturing at the cultural climate in which he was working. This is a climate that Richard Noakes refers to as "'the age of science'" (Noakes 23) which was concerned to order and regulate even non-rational phenomena: "the 'naturalization of the supernatural' as it was called by one early historian of Victorian psychical research" (Noakes 23).

The author is referring to this cultural practice in *Armadale*'s opening scene; in fact, he does so throughout by setting up scientific and non-rational discourses as competing forces, only to then combine and conflate them in various ways. Shedding light on this claim is how Collins sketches an atmosphere of unruliness in the Prologue. Set in the town of "Wildbad," the Prologue centers on the senior Armadale's morally transgressive past, relating how, "He has passed the greater part of his life in the West Indies—a wild life and a vicious life" (Collins 15). The savage connotations of the

town's name—which invokes ideas of unruliness and immorality, effectively yoking them together—along with the speaker's colonial past, together create an ethos of disorder. Extensive scholarship has been dedicated to the way in which colonized persons and practices were represented, at this time, as unruly and immoral. Moreover, as colonized persons were sensationalized as highly disordered, the Victorian novel largely acted "to assuage imperial anxiety by venerating English cultural superiority" (Willey 226). Collins works against this novelistic convention—beginning his novel by creating an unregulated atmosphere that, at this time, would have been associated with a non-rational ethos. Furthermore, he depicts an authoritative predication of the novel's events as stemming out of this unruly environment.

This atmosphere of disorder, and by extension non-rationalism, is bolstered by Collins's depiction of how the senior Armadale loses control over his own physicality. As his health rapidly deteriorates, he must rely on Mr. Neal to document his confession: "to write for [his] dying countryman what he cannot write for himself" (Collins 20). We learn that Armadale does not lack the requisite ability to write, but that his body no longer allows him to perform this function: "Mr. Armadale has been sent to Wildbad too late: he is virtually a dead man. The paralysis is fast spreading upwards" (Collins 15). The nature of this physical degeneration is such that it attacks Armadale's physical self—his limbs—while his cognitive functions remain in good health. Collins is disrupting the Victorian idea that physical disorder signified mental disorder. As Tailarach-Vielmas explains, criminals' bodies were read in terms of how they betrayed, and signified, their deviant minds: "In the last decades of the nineteenth century the rise of criminal anthropology foregrounded the necessity to read and write the criminal body as a set of

visible stigmatas. As a result, human behavior became more and more medicalized" (Tailarach-Vielmas 5). Collins disturbs this convention through his figuring of the senior Armadale. The doctor describes him in the following terms: "I heard him say to himself:-- I shall not live to tell it: I must write it before I die. I heard his pen scrape, scrape over the paper—I heard him groaning and sobbing as he wrote" (Collins 18). The doctor highlights Armadale's undiminished mental determination to convey his fraught personal history to his son. In this way Collins suggests that loss of bodily control, or regulation, does not necessarily indicate a state of diminished rationalism. Instead, he depicts Armadale's rational and non-rational faculties as being in stark—and in fact, frustrating—opposition to one another.

Thus, Collins ostensibly sets up a rigid binary between rational and non-rational forces. He reinforces this bifurcation by directly juxtaposing Mr. Neal—an archetype of rationalism—against the prophesying *Armadale*. Mr. Neal's rationalism is exaggerated to the point of caricature, and he is framed by the chapter title "The Solid Side of the Scotch Character" (Collins 13). Dual connotations stem from this title, as this "solidity" (Collins 13) signifies both a steadiness and regularity of conduct, and the "impenetrable" aspect of his character. This impenetrableness leads to a narrowness of understanding, brought on by Mr. Neal's stringently rational negotiation of the circumstances in which he finds himself. For example, this hyper-rationalism is manifest in Mr. Neal's propensity to order and regulate both himself and his surroundings. He chastises the doctor for his tardiness, without regard for its owing to the doctor attending the rapidly deteriorating *Armadale*. Collins depicts this hostile interaction,

> ‘I appointed ten o’clock for your visit,’ said Mr. Neal. ‘In my country, a medical man is a punctual man.’
>
> ‘In my country,’ returned the doctor, without the least ill-humour, ‘a medical man is exactly like other men—he is at the mercy of accidents.’
>
> […] Mr. Neal looked at his medical attendant with a sour surprise (Collins 14).

Of significance is Mr. Neal’s conjoining the medical profession, which aims to regulate the body, with a broader sense of regularity—namely, punctuality. The rationalism that undergirds medicine is thus bound up with ideas of orderliness and regularity. This rational regularity is echoed by Mr. Neal’s attempts to guide the conversations in which he partakes. For example, as the doctor diverges from what Mr. Neal conceives to be the purpose of his narrative, he attempts to set him back on course: “‘Excuse me,’ said the impenetrable Scotchman. ‘I beg to suggest that you are losing the thread of the narrative. […] ‘Will you oblige me, once for all, by confining yourself to the facts,’ persisted Mr. Neal, frowning impatiently” (Collins 17). Here a strictly rational posture is undermined in its being depicted in an unsympathetic light. Mr. Neal and his series of inquiries are received with reluctance, particularly by the professionals of Wildbad, “Both mayor and doctor looked after the Scotchman as he limped upstairs, and shook their heads together in mute disapproval of him” (Collins 11). This disapproval of Mr. Neal’s character, and unchecked rationalism, aligns with that of the reader—who cannot help coming to resent his constant impeding, and interrupting, of Armadale’s confession.

Collins further diminishes the authority of rational discourses by depicting them as inextricable from their non-rational counterparts. By extension, stringent or absolute

rationalism is portrayed as being untenable. Even the staunchly rational Mr. Neal is emotionally affected and moved to action by his attraction for Mrs. Armadale: "For the first time in his life, the Scotchman was taken by surprise. Every self-preservative word that he had been meditating but an instant since, dropped out of his memory" (Collins 23). And, though loss of control and non-rationalism—in the form of uncalculated attraction—are antithetical to Mr. Neal's character, they are what compell him to order and document Armadale's confession. Initially reluctant to participate in this project, his feelings for Mrs. Armadale convince him otherwise: "[she] brought him to his knees, a conquered man" (Collins 23).

The author extends his blurring of rational and irrational forces further still, by framing the narrative related in the Prologue as dependent on the collaboration of Armadale and Mr. Neal: models of supernaturalism and rationalism respectively. Mr. Neal's documentation of the confession imbues it with both a sense of authority and longevity. Moreover, the complementarity of these rational and non-rational characters—and the discourses that they stand in for—is more explicitly suggested when Mr. Neal supplements Armadale's voice when it falters. For example, the former instructs the latter as to what to do with the documented confession:

> 'When I have written what you wish me to write,' he asked, 'what is to be done with it?'
>
> This time the answer came:
>
> 'Seal it up in my presence, and post it to my Ex—[…]
>
> 'Do you mean your Executor?'
>
> 'Yes' (Collins 26).

The complementarity of rationalism and non-rationalism, embodied by Mr. Neals and Mr. Armadale respectively, is integral to what Thoms interprets as being the novel's intricate and complex design. In fact, Thoms describes Collins's literary designs as that which imbues his novels with "a final form, a wholeness as a meaningful story" (Thoms 114). While Thoms is here referring to the designs of *The Woman in White* and *No Name*, his analysis applies to *Armadale*'s design as well, the completeness of which hinges on an interaction between rational and non-rational perspectives.

On this note, *Armadale*'s yoking together of rational and non-rational discourses aligns closely with the cultural influences—and specifically, the scientific developments—that mark the climate in which it was written. Tailarach-Vielmas thus notes how the novel's temporal setting reflects the cultural milieu out of which it found voice: "Significantly, the novel is set in 1851, at the moment when the British Empire was proudly exhibiting its new technologies at the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. […]In fact, science enables Collins to conflate the natural and the supernatural" (Tailarach-Vielmas 59). While Tailarach-Vielmas understands science as facilitating a yoking together of "the natural and the supernatural," I suggest that *Armadale* presents science as a discourse that proliferates and muddies unified or singular meanings (Tailarach-Vielmas 59). In other words, Collins is not concerned with simply illustrating how science informs and elucidates non-scientific discourses to arrive at a monolithic truth. Rather, scientific discourse is framed as presenting an alternate and equally—though not superlatively—authoritative kind of understanding.

Bolstering this claim is the way in which the doctor's scientific theory multiplies the possibilities through which the younger Allan *Armadale*'s dream can be interpreted.

First, it is helpful to position this scene within the broader discussion on the emerging role of science in Britain, at this time. Laurie Garrison introduces the way in which scientific theories were being introduced, in the later nineteenth-century, as a means of managing the unprecedented wealth of information brought to light by new technologies. She writes, "Various scientific forms of study obsessively catalogued minute components of markets, human beings, the natural world and other areas" (Garrison 6). Garrison goes on to elucidate how the exponential expansion in all the aforementioned areas placed both science and literature in the role of producing and proliferating more exact explanations, rather than unified monolithic ones: "the work of the periodical publishers as well as the scientist would never be complete, merely more and more specialized" (Garrison 6). This description of science as a system through which to systematize and explain phenomenon captures how science is invoked and represented in *Armadale*. It does not lead to a singular definitive understanding, but instead fractures and multiplies the ways in which a singular phenomenon or event might be understood.

Allan Armadale's dream replicates the prophecy related by the senior Armadale (Fergus Ingleby) in the Prologue: it echoes the compressed history of the man who vengefully murdered his father. Significantly, Allan has not read the senior Armadale's confession, nor does he have any knowledge of its content. Nonetheless, his dream echoes several of its textual details with near exactitude. For example, Allan recalls how in his dream he was led by his father into the cabin of a ship, "Water rose slowly over us in the cabin; and I and my father sank through the water together" (Collins 171). This dream reproduces how his father actually died in a manner that ostensibly defies scientific explanation, imagining his being locked in the flooding cabin of a ship.

Similarly the dream accurately intuits, by anticipating, the climax towards which the novel progresses: namely, Lydia Gwilt's mercenary scheme to marry, and subsequently poison, Allan Armadale. Allan thus records how in his dream, "From where she stood, there came a sound as of the pouring of a liquid softly. I saw her touch the shadow of the man with one hand, and with the other give him the glass" (Collins 172). Indeed, Lydia attempts to murder Allan by way of poison—a scheme that is ultimately disrupted yet which is set into motion nonetheless. Worth noting is how Allan's dream also does not yield an impression of what occurs after this event, drawing a blank, instead, right before awaking.

On the surface, the validity of Allan's dream—or its epistemological soundness—seems to defy scientific explanation. However, the character of Dr. Hawbury employs a staunch empiricism in order to account for the particular series of images of which the dream is collectively comprised. In order to explain the impression of his father's death, the doctor gestures at the circumstances leading up to Allan's falling asleep: "You have the cabin in your mind; and you have the water in your mind; and the sound of the channel current (as I well know without asking) was the last sound in your ears before you went to sleep" (Collins 175). As Thomas Boyle explains, this theorizing of the dream is an implicit gesture at "the prevailing belief in Associationism. Everything in the dream is a duplication of an image lingering in Allan's memory from the preceding day" (Boyle 169). And while this scientific explanation is wholly viable, it does not account for the mimetic relationship between the dream and the enigmatic death of Allan's father. Significantly, Collins does not want to dismiss either scientific or supernatural theorization of this dream, and thus appends a note to the end of the novel:

> My readers will perceive that I have purposely left them, with reference to the Dream in this story, in the position which they would occupy in the case of a dream in real life—they are free to interpret it by the natural or the supernatural theory, as the bent of their own minds may incline them (Collins 817).

In so doing, Collins presents both science and pseudo-science as proliferating interpretations, rather than unifying or simplifying them. In effect these two discourses set up competing explanations or justifications for identical data: blurring their authoritativeness in the process.

Collins also undermines the idea of medicine as a scientific and thus authoritative discourse through his characterization of Lydia Gwilt. He represents her character—and specifically, her physicality and her writing—as being fluid and transgressive. In effect this fluidity is what enables Lydia to move beyond, and therefore disrupt, the confining gender characteristics advanced by Victorian medicine. Galia Ofek astutely conveys how nineteenth century medical discourse authored a strict binary between masculinity and femininity, and the different typologies associated with this binary: "[distinguishing] male from female, and fallen from 'virtuous' women" (Ofek 102). Bodies were read through a scientific lens, as medical discourse suggested that non-physical characteristics were manifest physically. Ofek highlights how this idea was taken-up in a very specific way by the Victorian novel, which focused on the female body, observing how, "These authors took part in the cultural discourse which perceived women's bodies in general, and their hair in particular, as texts or signs that could be readily interpreted or classified" (Ofek 102). This passage is speaking specifically of Dickens, Eliot, and Trollope: all of

whom closely linked the interiority of their female characters, and particularly their morality, to their hair. While Ofek's compelling reading is rather specific, it gestures more broadly at the way in which tropes of femininity were attached to women's bodies.

Daly notes how Collins first disrupts this scientific and essentialist interpretation of character in *The Woman in White*:

> It is tempting to assume that *The Woman in White* 's colour-coding is quasi-allegorical, the equivalent of a sort of moral chiaroscuro. We might, that is, assume that there is a contrast between the characters on the side of vulnerable but pure feminine goodness, Laura and Anne, half-sisters who both like to wear white, and the agents of darkness, notably Count Fosco […]But this melodramatic opposition collapses almost at once: it fails to account for the good but swarthy Marian Halcombe (Daly 32).

What is most compelling about Daly's reading is how it suggests that Collins sets up the convention, that persons can be interpreted and understood through their physical signifiers, only to then immediately disrupt it. Indeed, the author does reflexively invoke certain tropes as a means of highlighting their limitedness. Literary tropes of femininity did after all advance essentialist characterizations of women, and by extension, perpetuated their marginalized social position.

Collins similarly challenges this essentializing of femininity in *Armadale*, and specifically, its rootedness in medical discourse. Tailarach-Vielmas associates Victorian medical analyses of the body with the broader "urge towards classification, moreover, and the separation of pathological from normal types" (Tailarach-Vielmas 5). In literature this trend manifested primarily as men reading women's physical features as a set of

signifiers. Worth noting is how *Armadale*'s Lydia Gwilt reverses the directionality of this practice—reading her male counterparts in a way that echoes the Victorian medical trend of analyzing and thus regulating women by analyzing and regulating their bodies. An interesting way in which she does so, and which picks up on Daly's reading of *The Woman in White*, is by qualifying Ozias and Allan Armadale in terms of lightness and of darkness. She writes in her diary,

> And Allan the Fair doesn't know he has a namesake. And Allan the Dark has kept the secret from everybody but the Somersetshire clergyman (whose discretion he can depend on), and myself. And there are two Allan Armadales—two Allan Armadales—two Allan *Armadale*s (Collins 511).

Collins wittingly has Lydia employ a pseudo-medical method of interpreting her male counterparts, in a manner directly paralleling how women were more dominantly understood through their bodies. Allan's innocence and naivete is implied by his fairness, whereas Ozias's dark complexion signals his enigmatic temperament. Collins thus undermines how medical discourse was gendered, as it conventionally had male professionals produce authoritative readings or diagnoses about women. Instead, the author has Lydia produce an authoritative reading of her male counterparts: a reading that largely grasps how we, as readers, come to differentiate between two men sharing the same nominal identity.

In this vein, it is significant that Lydia's body largely avoids and evades stable qualification. Supporting this claim is how she challenges, by resisting, Brock's description of her. Decimus Brock writes a letter to Armadale cataloguing what he thinks

to be Miss Gwilt's physical features. In so doing, he attempts to protect Armadale from the young girl—now a woman—who was present during his father's murder. Of course, Brock's protection of Armadale from the "villainous" Gwilt hinges on his being able to correctly and accurately identify her: "Test her by her features, which no circumstance can change. If there is a stranger in the neighbourhood, and if her face answers my seven questions—you have found the woman!" (Collins 331). Collins disrupts the authoritativeness assumed by this scientific mode of reading or "testing" a person's character; a mode that assumes its authority through its lending itself to empirical testing: "Test her by her features, which no circumstance can change" (Collins 331).

Lydia effectively challenges the essentialist assumptions that undergird this "testing" or assessing of character, by reading bodies "as texts or signs" (Ofek 102). Indeed, Allan describes the most striking aspect of her physical person as its dissimilarity from the description provided by Decimus Brock:

> The one clear impression she had produced on him thus far, began and ended with his discovery of the astounding contradiction that her face offered, in one feature after another, to the description in Mr. Brock's letter. All beyond this was vague and misty—a dim consciousness of a tall, elegant woman… (Collins 336-7).

Later in the narrative we learn that, upon discovering that she is being followed, Lydia sends another woman out in her dress. Thus the woman, whose physical features Brock catalogues and documents, is not Lydia at all. Collins thus undermines a masculinized voice, which assumes its authority from what was perceived to be its scientific grounding, by having that voice perpetuate and amplify misunderstanding and confusion.

To elucidate, "the astounding contradiction that her face offered" stems from its being held up against the set of expectations cemented by "Mr. Brock's letter" (Collins 337). Moreover, Allan is so consumed with the comparative reading of Lydia that Brock's letter invites, that he is unable to glean anything about her for himself: "All beyond this was vague and misty—a dim consciousness" (Collins 337).

Just as Collins undermines this scientific and masculinized perspective, he privileges a feminine one: granting Lydia agency over how she constructs both her body and her personhood. And, while fluidity of identity is a theme with which Collins is more broadly preoccupied, he deals most explicitly and reflexively with the idea that femininity is a constructed category in *Armadale*. Tailarach-Vielmas attributes this to the novel's representation of certain processes of modernization: "the villainess Lydia Gwilt […] is a product of her time—a beautiful but illusory creature who plays many parts" (Tailarach-Vielmas 54). In a converse manner, other critics emphasize how Lydia's fluid identity—her assumption of a variety of roles—is a product of her marginalized status and circumstances: "Lydia Gwilt is a prisoner of circumstances, one who, instead of shaping events, is shaped by them" (Thoms 130). While Thoms's analysis captures how Lydia is marginalized—in virtue of both her gender and class—it ignores how she exercises a genuine kind of agency by constructing her own identity in a variety of ways.

Collins's representation of femininity as a construct was largely met with critical disparagement at the time of the novel's publication. Ofek notes how such conservative responses read broadly as a "lamenting [of] modern femininity," which specifically critiqued the shift "in focal point from the natural to the artificial, and advocating feminine self-construction through consumerist cosmetic artifacts and red hair dyes"

(Ofek 112). Miss Gwilt's character embraces this shift, by using it as a medium through which to accrue and exercise agency: a medium through which to define herself, through her body, rather than be defined and read by others. She does this in part by concealing her physicality, refusing to be read in these essentialist terms: "I seldom show myself in public, and never of course in such a populous place as London, without wearing a thin veil and keeping that veil down" (Collins 259). Furthermore, her ties to Mother Oldershaw—who acts in the capacity of a Victorian beautician—contribute to a characterization of her physicality as something constructed. Indeed, the constructedness of her physicality is suggested by her dyed red hair, a symbol of modern femininity that the conservative and jealous Miss Milroy disdains precisely on these terms. Indeed, she describes Lydia disdainfully, as having "red hair and a scrofulous complexion" (Collins 373). By presenting Lydia's physicality in fluid terms—as one that she either masks or constructs, on her own terms—Collins further disrupts the authority that pseudo-medical discourse assumed by reading people through their bodies.

The fluidity of Lydia's physicality is echoed by the fluidity instantiated by her non-physical person. Her diary entries vacillate between authored accounts of modern femininity, and its more traditional counterpart. This latter mode of femininity, in which women were defined both in relation and in subordination to their male counterparts, is captured particularly well in an entry penned on August seventh. Herein, Lydia writes,

> Is it my love for Midwinter that has altered me? Or is it his love for me that has taken possession, not only of all I wish to give him, but of all I wish to keep from him as well? I feel as if I had lost myself—lost myself, I mean, in him—all through the evening (Collins 615).

Here, Lydia frames her subjectivity as completely accidental to, in that it is absorbed by, that of Ozias: "I feel as if I had lost myself—lost myself, I mean, in him" (Collins 615). Her total absorption in Midwinter is further reinforced by her emphatic reiteration of the masculine pronoun, paired with a sense of uncertainty—provoked by her heightened emotion for him—suggested by a use of interrogative clauses. Monica Young-Zook describes this conventional femininity as, quite literally, "a subordination to traditional family structures through her love for (and marriage to) Ozias Midwinter" (Young-Zook 240). Worth noting is how this "subordination to traditional" gender roles and structures is something that reveals itself most in a private forum—in Lydia's diary—and is thus established as a genuine aspect of her personhood (Young-Zook 240).

And yet, an unwavering "subordination" to this "traditional" model of femininity is not something to which Gwilt is able to either blindly or consistently submit (Young-Zook 240). For example, when Midwinter leaves her she becomes much more directed, and clear, with both her sentiments and her language:

> He didn't suffer at taking leave of me as he suffered when he saw the last of his friend. I saw that, and set down the anxiety he expressed that I should write to him, at its proper value. I have quite got over my weakness for him at last. No man who really loved me would have put what he owed to a pack of newspaper people before what he owed to his wife (Collins 700).

Here Lydia suggests how her romanticizing of and subordination to her husband is only one aspect of her personhood; indeed, it is an aspect that she is able to provisionally surmount (Collins 700). A tone of rationalism—a quality conventionally associated with

masculinity—undergirds this self-reflexive and dispassionate statement. Collins bolsters Lydia's rationalism by doing away with the interrogative inflections of her writing, and having it instead adopt a very logical trajectory. For example: if Midwinter were to feel a certain way it follows that he would behave in a certain way.

By juxtaposing diary entries such as this against less restrained and passionate ones, Collins characterizes Lydia as straddling—and thus blurring—a rigid binary of masculinity and femininity. In fact, we can understand this blurring as what ultimately causes her death. She sets up an intricate medical experiment to poison Allan, from a mercernary motive. Both this financial motive and the medical means by which it is carried out were associated with masculine discourses and their professionalized aims. However, upon discovering that Ozias has switched places with Allan, in the poison-filled room, she removes his body and is killed in his stead. Both conventionally masculine and feminine traits are necessary to this final act, and outcome: Lydia's "masculine" rationality and propensity to plot, as well as her emotionalism and subordination to her husband. Thus it is out of a unique set of conditions, created by Lydia's straddling traditional gender categories, that causes her final and tragic outcome.

Albeit, as Catherine Peters states in her introduction to the *Oxford World's Classics* edition of *Armadale*, "though the active female principle may once again have been subjugated and destroyed, *Armadale* is Lydia Gwilt's book, and it is she who dominates the story to the end" (Peters xxiii). Peters's analysis holds water, especially when we consider the sheer amount of narrative space that Lydia assumes in the novel. By extension, Collins seems to be writing back, and against, how the medical profession analyzed bodies, and in particular female bodies, in essentializing and limiting ways. He

does so by: having a character who evades and transgresses medicalized categories carry the plot, and the interest, of this compelling and subversive novel. This of course supports the novel's broader preoccupation with blurring the authoritativeness of scientific and non-scientific, rational and non-rational principles.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

Collins's *The Law and the Lady*, *The Moonstone*, and *Armadale* all persuasively blur authoritative and non-authoritative discourses—structures that presume authority with those that do not. These three novels respectively undermine the authority bound up with the legal system, the realist genre, and medicine—renegotiating attitudes about these dominant sources of meaning and understanding. *The Law and the Lady* destabilizes the understanding that the legal system articulates a monolithic and objective set of prescriptive truths. Just as morally fraught situations permit ambiguous and fluid solutions, Collins suggests, so too should legal discourse. Accordingly, *The Law and the Lady* challenges conventional legal discourse by privileging a legal system that combines official and 'unofficial' testimony, from masculine and feminine voices. From a different vantage point, Collins challenges the binary between authoritative and non-authoritative authorship in *The Moonstone*. He does so primarily through the novel's mode of narration, which moves fluidly among different narratives authored from a series of different characters. Each of the novel's composite narratives is presented as limited, and biased, in its own way. By extension, Collins suggests that the most complete and accurate narratives are collaborative ones. In fact *The Moonstone* further suggests that the most fruitful collaborative writing involves a mixing of high and low—dominant and marginalized—perspectives. Lastly, Collins's *Armadale* blurs the levels of authority assumed by rational and non-rational discourses: privileging prophetic analyses, and undermining scientific and especially medical ones. The novel's reflexive linking of scientific theories with prophecies and dreams disrupts what had been scientific discourse's rigid and singular approach to 'analyzing' human character and behavior

through their bodies. In effect, *Armadale*'s blurring of rational and non-rational discourses results in the proliferation of the possible ways that we can come to understand the world, and one another.

On this note, Collins's blurring of high and low paradoxically highlighted the rigidity of the cultural values it brought into question. Indeed, his novels were met with the very propensity to control and regulate—both the generic conventions and social mores—that they sought to disrupt. Crystallizing the tension between Collins's project and its broader reception is the strained publication history of *The Law and the Lady* . Notably, the *Graphic* broke its contractual agreement with the author by altering one of the novel's scenes. The scene in question is one in which Valeria becomes the unwilling recipient of Miserrimus Dexter's sexual advances, within the privacy of his home. Responding publically to the violation of contract between author and publisher, Collins articulated feelings of shock and dismay: "To my undescribable amazement, I found this passage, on its publication in the *Graphic* , clumsily altered, abridged and mutilated (without a word of warning to me)" (Collins 416). The newspaper's justification for this "abridgment" claimed that the passage sullied conventionally pure representations of the domestic sphere, and by extension, gave "offence to the family circle" (Collins 416). Collins's vehement response to the newspaper's valuing of domestic values over the creative liberties of the author, suggests the gap that exists between what contemporary scholar Wendy Steiner terms the "real" and the "represented" (Steiner 76). Steiner highlights the urge to conflate these two categories, given the 'virtuality' of many pieces of art and literature: "Because art acts both as a sign of reality and as a self-contained entity, it

creates a confusion between meaning and being and has a necessarily ambiguous relation to the extra-artistic world" (Steiner 76).

It was precisely because this scene held an "ambiguous relation to the extra-artistic world" (Steiner 76)—not simply a reflection of a social reality, but a subversion of it—that it was met with such critical disparagement. Worth noting is the parallel between the novel's publication history and one of its main thematic concerns: namely, the parallel between *The Law and the Lady* 's thematic undermining of the legal system and how the Law was actually undermined in an attempt to control the conditions of the novel's publication. Ironically it is the publication history of a novel undermining this conventional understanding of the Law that exposes the Law as potentially fallible and limited. I argue that by critically challenging authoritative discourses—questioning what constitutes as authoritative literature and knowledge—Collins's novels remain relevant to contemporary debates over the binary between highbrow and lowbrow literature. As Laurie Garrison notes in her discussion of Victorian sensation fiction, one of the reasons the genre proved so divisive in its reception—insofar as it was highly popular amongst a "general" or "popular" audience, yet largely unpopular amongst critics or "experts—lies with its valorization of the sensual affects of artistic expression (Garrison 29). In other words sensation novels, like those of Collins, legitimate what is emotionally and sensually experiential to the reading-process; they value the "kinetic" qualities of literature (Dollimore 98). Garrison thus writes: "What is also at stake in these debates […] is an issue of subjectivity and its place within the experience of popular reading" (Garrison 29).

An apt contemporary example of a text that does something similar is E.L James's *Fifty Shades of Grey*: an erotic romance, published in 2011, that has been strikingly and significantly divisive in its reception. The novel centers on the passionate though tumultuous relationship of the young and naïve Anastasia Steele and her dominant lover, in what John Barber of the *Globe and Mail* describes as a, "celebrat[ion of] a young virgin's willing submission to a 'super-hot' sadist in his 'red room of pain'" (Barber 2012). The novel thus disrupts the still pervasive conflation of artistic influence with a strict kind of didacticism; that in order for literature to have value it needs to teach us, by communicating something serious. Instead, it re-locates art's value in the sensations it invites in its reader. To put it simply, it shifts the value of the work of art from those of aestheticism and intellection to those of sensation and "pleasure" (Steiner 76). For this reason, James's novel polarizes readerships: proving highly consumable amongst the general reading-public, yet in many ways critically irredeemable. This suggests that the liberalism towards which we gesture, insofar as we tout freedom of artistic expression, is not a value we ascribe to as definitively as we suggest. In fact a residual conservatism about what we allow people to say and how—through art—remains with us: perhaps rightly, though un-admittedly so .

However, it is not simply *Fifty Shades of Grey*'s sexually transgressive or shocking themes—but paradoxically, its reversion to conventional tropes—that contributes to its 'sensationalism'. To illustrate, the novel aligns itself quite transparently with the highly commodified and consumed trope of the "riches-and-rescue tale" (Stanley 2012)—a formula that is at the very least correlated with the vast commercial success of romantic comedies, fairy tales and harlequin romances (Stanley 2012). In fact, *New York*

Times reviewer Alessandra Stanley points to this antiquated formula as constituting what is most scandalous about this novel: "what is shameful about '*Fifty Shades of Grey*' isn't the submissive sex, it's the Cinderella story" (Stanley 2012). In this way Collins's Victorian heroines do what James's modern Anastasia Steele does not: they work against conventional gender categories.

Without comparing the aesthetic value of James's novel and those of Collins, several striking parallels nonetheless obtain between them. Specifically, they polarize readerships and critics. And while the divisive reception of James's novel provokes a debate on the high / low distinction, both the reception history of Collins's novels and their themes dramatize questions about authoritative discourses. Indeed, Collins's *The Law and the Lady*, *The Moonstone* and *Armadale* all undermine different authoritative structures: the Law, realism and medicine respectively. By undermining these types of authority and privileging other voices and instruments—through which we arrive at questions of morality, truth, and aesthetic value—Collins's novels assert their relevance within our contemporary culture. They do this particularly as they relate to current debates over the canon and the highbrow/lowbrow divide. For this reason his works deserve re-consideration within the canon, as he creatively confronted rather than blindly affirmed how it is that we determine social, epistemological and literary value.

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[i] *Robinson Crusoe* serves as the trope for a singular perspective, and Collins extends this trope to convey how a narrow point of view elsewhere causes Betteredge to misread his surroundings. For example, he is unable to consider the legitimacy of his daughter's suspicion that "Rosanna has fallen in love with Mr. Franklin Blake at first sight!" (Collins 46). Here, Betteredge's hyper-awareness of class stratification causes him to dismiss his daughter's interpretation immediately, as a humorous impossibility: "I laughed till the tears rolled down my cheeks" (Collins 46). Yet it is this narrowness of vision that prevents his recognizing the truth of what it is Penelope suggests. His general remarks about women, as the weaker sex, also conflict with how Collins characterizes the central female characters of the novel. Both Penelope and Rachel's steadfast beliefs are sound insofar as they are accurate-Penelope in Rosanna's love for Mr. Blake, and Rachel in her witnessing of Blake removing the Diamond from her room.

[ii] Lillian Nayder illuminates the collaborative relationship that obtained between Dickens and Collins, noting: "Between 1858 and 1861, Collins collaborated with Dickens on four Christmas Numbers […]: " 'A House to Let' (1858); 'The Haunted House' (1859); 'A Message from the Sea' (1860); and 'Tom Tiddler's Ground'" (Nayder 12). Not only did they collaborate directly, to author unified texts, but collaborated by contributing to the same periodicals and most notably *Household Words*.

[iii] Collins also depicts Bruff's relationship with written texts as one that is overly narrow by describing his state prior to the medical experiment, to be performed on Franklin Blake, in the following terms: "Mr Bruff opened [the door], with his papers in his hand—immersed in Law; impenetrable to Medicine" (Collins 415). Here, the author makes clear that Bruff's reading practices—and we can infer his writing practices—are markedly narrow.