

## **'SHE HAD HER ROLE TO PLAY': THE PERFORMANCE OF SERVANTHOOD IN *EAST LYNNE* AND OTHER SENSATION NOVELS**

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### *Abstract*

In its original novel form and subsequent theatrical versions, Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) tells the story of Lady Isabel, who infiltrates her former home disguised as a servant. This essay explores Isabel in the context of other acting heroines of sensation novels by Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Wilkie Collins. These actresses give performances as servants as an unexpected means to gain access to the domestic space and to achieve personal independence. While the servant who acts and dresses above her station has been recognized as a stock character of sensation fiction, the lady-qua-servant merits equal attention. The servant and the actress share an ambiguity of class and the stigma of sexuality that make them a natural fit for sensation fiction's tropes of illicit behaviour, secret identities, and forbidden romance. The actress-servant is able to use her attention to costume, her emotional control, and her performance of helplessness to deflect suspicion from her true motives. While the other actresses largely use their servant roles for mercenary purposes, Isabel poses as a governess to reclaim her titles of 'mother' and 'wife', literalising the subservience she previously performed as a 'lady.'

A stock character of Victorian sensation fiction is the "adventuress", a woman who attempts to "marry up" in order to achieve higher status, wealth, and power. Examples of what Sally Mitchell dubs 'Becky Sharp's children' might include Lucy Graham of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), Magdalen Vanstone of Wilkie Collins' *No Name* (1862), and Lydia Gwilt of Collins' *Armada* (1866).<sup>1</sup> These adventuresses share the same initial strategy to set their plans for marriage in motion: like Becky Sharp, they act as domestic employees. Unlike Becky Sharp, however, they enter servanthood as performers taking on a role, forging their references, altering their identities, and adopting appropriate costumes to create a convincing performance. Although sensation fiction is stuffed with servant characters, the aforementioned 'actresses' remain distinct from true domestic employees; for example, Magdalen Vanstone, who plays the role of a maid and a governess, pities her sister Norah, who must become a "real" governess. Although an adventuress who is attempting to advance her social status might be expected to play a role above, rather than below, her station, servants are allowed a freedom of mobility that women of higher classes are denied.

In Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), Lady Isabel Vane performs the role of a governess in order to achieve a kind of personal freedom denied her as a lady and

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<sup>1</sup> Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women's Reading 1835-1880* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Press, 1981), p. 76.

wife. After Lady Isabel leaves her husband and children to have an affair with the wicked Sir Frances Levison, she is disfigured and nearly killed in a train accident. Her husband, Archibald Carlyle, has divorced Isabel, and when he believes her to be dead he remarries the middle-class Barbara Hare. In order to live in her family estate and to be close to Carlyle and her children once more, Isabel transforms herself by acting as the governess 'Madame Vine'. Despite the class difference between Isabel Vane and the other aforementioned adventuresses of sensation fiction, all of the women are 'actresses' who perform the part of a domestic servant as an unexpected means to achieve independence, whether financial or emotional.

The 'lady-qua-servant' character type I explore here offers a foil to the 'upwardly-mobile "imposters"' that Deborah Wynne identifies as stock characters in Victorian sensation fiction.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary publications expressed ridicule for the practice that *Punch* dubbed 'Servantgalism': servants who attempt to dress or act like their masters. While the middle and upper classes may be quick to condemn the behavior of the class-climbing servant, the opposite phenomenon, adopting a costume to 'lower' oneself into servanthood, does not at first appear to pose the same threat. The pretentious servant, represented in *East Lynne* by the hired 'companion' Afy, is an object of scorn and distrust, but by mimicking the climb down, rather than up, the social ladder, Isabel Vane, the lady-qua-servant, deflects suspicion and attention. As Eve Lynch explains, the 'surface dirt' of the servant 'provides a costume or method for suppressing true recognition'.<sup>3</sup> Taking on the appearance of a servant can efface a heroine's identity, and the invisibility expected of servants within a household offers further anonymity for criminal or illicit acts. Thus, *No Name's* Magdalen Vanstone chooses to pose as a maidservant when she wishes to search a house for secret documents, and Margaret Wentworth of Braddon's *Henry Dunbar* (1864) impersonates a maid when she wishes to mislead a police officer on the trail of her criminal father. Eve Lynch explores how adopting 'the masquerade of servitude' can prevent 'exposure for females escaping the domestic site', but in the case of *East Lynne*, the performance of servanthood allows an upper-class woman access to the domestic sphere that she was previously denied.<sup>4</sup>

For a lady whose dress and actions may fall under particularly intense scrutiny, the possibility of inconspicuousness may be particularly enticing. When Isabel Vane is seen as Lady Vane, she is monitored by a house full of gossiping servants who appear to understand her household and her relationships better than she does. Later, when she plays the role of 'Madame Vine' the governess, Isabel is paradoxically allowed more mobility within her home and is less subject to surveillance than she

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2 Deborah Wynne, *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 50.

3 Eve M. Lynch, 'The Masquerade of Servitude in Victorian Literature', *Pacific Coast Philology* 31.1 (1996), 88-106 (p. 88).

4 Lynch, p. 88.

was as a lady.<sup>5</sup> Most importantly, her ability to act, to perform a servant role convincingly, enables her to interact more freely with her family. It is only through her performance as a governess that Lady Isabel is able to become Carlyle's 'wife' and her children's 'mother' in defiance of the social expectations for how she should perform those roles.

The servant and the actress occupied similarly indeterminate positions in the social and class hierarchy of mid-Victorian England. In his article on the Victorian maidservant, Louis James describes how the social position of servant women was itself quite malleable: 'One could enter service from a number of different backgrounds; if one left, one was relatively mobile socially to go into a variety of occupations. The servant was subject to her employer, yet she was also identified with the household in which she worked.'<sup>6</sup> Tracy Davis' book *Actresses as Working Women* offers a strikingly similar description of a different profession for women:

Victorian performers were [...] recruited from all classes of society. While performers repeatedly demonstrated that class origins could be defied by hard work, talent, or strategic marital alliances to secure some a place in the most select company, others lived with and like the most impoverished classes. Unlike other occupational groups, performers' incomes spanned the highest upper middle-class salary and the lowest working class wage, and were earned in work places that ranged in status from patent theatres to penny saloons.<sup>7</sup>

The Victorian maidservant and actress thus had much in common: they were recruited from across the class spectrum, they existed on the fringes of 'good' society, and they fell within a diverse hierarchy of rank and earning power. Servants were also characterised as deceptive, resourceful, and fond of dress, all traits that suggest performance. *Our Plague Spot* (1859), an anonymous collection of essays on the condition of England, contains a vignette that offers a very unflattering depiction of the servant as an actress:

This lady fancied she had a respectable, *and always nicely dressed* servant, as attendant upon her Baby [...] [O]ne day on going through some distant part of the Town, she beheld in a beggarwoman's arms, *her own child dressed in filthy*

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5 Although she is recognized as a gentlewoman in her capacity as governess and is of a higher rank than other, more menial domestic employees, I refer to Isabel's role as that of a 'servant' because it is how she perceives herself. She bemoans that she must live in her own former home 'as a subordinate, a servant—it may be said—where she had once reigned, the idolized lady' (399).

6 Louis James, 'The Trouble with Betsy: Periodicals and the Common Reader in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England', *The Victorian Periodical Press: Samplings and Soundings*, ed. by Joanne Shattock and Michael Wolff (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982), 349-66 (p. 353).

7 Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 3.

*rags, and in its pretended mother—equally revoltingly attired—her tidy respectable nursery maid!*<sup>8</sup>

While this scenario is intended to strike fear in the hearts of middle-class mothers, it also reveals the freedom servant women were perceived to possess. Both the servant and the actress are mobile and can explore alternative lives and selves, while the middle-class mother's role is more limited.

Unmarried middle-class women had so few jobs available to them that many viewed their choice of employment as limited to becoming either an actress or domestic employee. In her essay 'The Woman I Remember', Mary Elizabeth Braddon recalls how her younger self struggled with this decision:

Of all those gates which are now open to feminine suitors there were but two open to her. She could go out into the world as a governess, like Jane Eyre, in an age when to be a governess in a vulgar family was worse than the treadmill; or she could go upon the stage, a proceeding which convulsed her family, to the most distant cousin, a thing to be spoken of with bated breath, as the lapse of a lost soul, the fall from Porchester Terrace to the bottomless pit.<sup>9</sup>

The perceived "fall" from virtue that Braddon describes here could be equally applicable to women in either profession, since both the actress and the female servant shared a certain social stigma of being "fallen women". As Mary Poovey suggests, any type of paid work for women could invite comparisons to prostitution, but the servant and the actress seem particularly prone to such accusations.<sup>10</sup> In fact, one of the most popular names assigned to servants, 'Mary Anne', was a slang term for a prostitute.<sup>11</sup> In his note in *London Labour and the Poor* (1861), Bracebridge Hemyng declares that 'there can be no doubt that the tone of morality among servant-maids in the metropolis is low' and suggests that a large percentage may be working prostitutes.<sup>12</sup> *Our Plague Spot* offers a purportedly true sensational story of a nursemaid in Edinburgh who would leave her charge in the care of a friend while she

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8 Anon., *Our Plague Spot: In Connection With Our Polity and Usages as Regards Our Women, Our Soldiery, and the Indian Empire* (London: Thomas Cautley Newby, 1859), p. 378. Emphasis in original text.

9 Mary Elizabeth Braddon, 'The Woman I Remember', *The Press Album* (London: John Murray, 1909) pp. 3-6 (p. 5).

10 Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 145-6.

11 Davidoff, Leonore and others, *The Family Story: Blood, Contract and Intimacy 1830-1960* (London and New York: Longman, 1999), p. 172.

12 Bracebridge Hemyng, 'Prostitution in London', in *London Labour and the London Poor*, IV, ed. by Henry Mayhew (New York: Dover, 1968) 210-72 (p. 257).

went to her second job in a brothel.<sup>13</sup>

Sensation fiction and the Victorian theatre were closely connected from the genre's beginnings. Both Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, a former actress, were playwrights as well as novelists, and the novels they wrote were often adapted by others for the theatre. *The London Review* describes the novels themselves as mere vehicles for their inevitable stage adaptations: 'We can hardly take up a *Times* without perceiving the skeleton of a sensation novel only waiting to be appropriated by Mrs. Wood or Miss Braddon, and put on the stage tricked out with the necessary amount of tawdry morality and high-flown sentiment.'<sup>14</sup> A review in *The Christian Remembrancer* similarly derides Braddon's novels as overly theatrical:

The world is essentially a *stage* to Miss Braddon, and all the men and women, the wives, the lovers, the villains, the sea-captains, the victims, the tragically jealous, the haters, the avengers, merely players. We could extract pages, fit, as they stand, for the different actors in a melodrama, vehemently and outrageously unnatural.<sup>15</sup>

The novel *East Lynne* often intentionally uses the language of theatre; for instance, when Carlyle is first introduced in the serial version, the text advises the reader to '[l]ook at the visitor well [...] for he will play his part in this history.'<sup>16</sup> Many of the *East Lynne*'s characters are 'actors': not only does Lady Isabel Vane play her part, costumed as a French governess, but the accused killer Richard Hare dons false whiskers to elude capture, Frances Levison masquerades as Captain Thorn, and the servant Afy Hallijohn dresses like a gentlewoman. Although Wood's novel was popular with readers, the story of *East Lynne* achieved even greater public recognition through its numerous theatrical productions by T. A. Palmer, John Oxenford, Lilla Wilde, Clifton Tayleure, and Hamilton Hume, among others. The popularity of the play made the phrase 'Next week—*East Lynne!*' become a clichéd promise among theatre companies vying to please their audience.

Many of the plays stayed fairly true to Wood's original story and borrowed some of the novel's most memorable and melodramatic lines for their scripts. Most of their pathos derives from Lady Isabel agonizing over the alienation of her husband's affection and the psychological torture she endures once she returns to East Lynne but cannot reveal her true identity. However, Hamilton Hume took a very different approach for his theatrical adaptation, *The Tangled Path, A Tale of East Lynne*. Only fifty copies of Hume's play were printed, which Hume states are 'solely intended for

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13 *Our Plague Spot*, p. 379.

14 'Aurora Floyd', *The London Review*, 14 February 1863, p. 175.

15 'Our Female Sensation Novelists', *Christian Remembrancer*, July 1864, p. 236.

16 Ellen Wood, 'East Lynne', *The New Monthly Magazine*, January 1860, p. 29.

the amusement of private friends.<sup>17</sup> His version essentially de-sensationalizes Wood's sensation novel by omitting the bigamy, illegitimacy, and divorce. Hume explains in an introduction that he 'found it perfectly impossible, in the limited space to which I was restricted, to carry out the idea of the authoress and let [Isabel] return to East Lynne in the capacity of governess' so he omits that part altogether and relegates Isabel's character to a fairly minor role.<sup>18</sup> Hume de-emphasizes two character types that are often prominently featured in the sensation genre: strong women and influential servants. In fact, the *Saturday Review* saw Wood's depiction of female servants as one of the strongest aspects of her writing:

[Mrs. Wood] has one knack which is a great help to a novelist of family life—she can draw servants. There are two half-sisters, both in service, who make a great figure in the book. One of the old respectable family servants, and the other the flighty, fashionable lady's-maid of the present day. The latter is drawn with a relish and a liveliness that show the authoress to have studied lady's-maids almost as much as she has studied attorneys.<sup>19</sup>

Hume's choice to eliminate or downplay the servant roles differs radically from the approaches of the more successful playwright T. A. Palmer, who cast his own wife in the crucial role of the servant Joyce, and Clifton Tayleure, whose version highlights Lady Isabel's tragic act as a servant in her own home and thus made the career of the stage actress Lucille Western.

Andrew Maunder's article "'I will not live in poverty and neglect': East Lynne on the East End Stage" describes W. Archer's 1864 adaptation for the Effingham Theatre titled *Marriage Bells; or, the Cottage on the Cliff*, which differed from most West End versions of the story in its increased focus on the working class.<sup>20</sup> Maunder's article points to the play's focus on working-class issues as a reflection of the class demographics of East End audiences, and further suggests that the altered focus of the Effingham production 'builds upon elements latent in the novel [and] the bourgeois ethos of self-help that the text espouses.'<sup>21</sup> The East End version of the play taps into a theme of undervalued working-class power, which recurs in *East Lynne* and other sensation novels. In Wood's novel, members of the working classes are primarily represented by servants: Joyce, the faithful lady's maid, Wilson, the outspoken nurse, and Afy, the class-climbing 'companion.' Lady Isabel eventually

17 Hamilton Hume, *The Tangled Path', A Tale of East Lynne, a dramatized version of Mrs. Henry Wood's celebrated novel* (Calcutta: Savielle and Cranenburgh, 1863), p. v.

18 Ibid., p. vi.

19 'Reviews: *East Lynne*', *Saturday Review*, 15 Feb 1862, p. 187.

20 Andrew Maunder, "'I will not live in poverty and neglect': East Lynne on the East End Stage', *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*, ed. by Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2006) 173-187 (p. 178).

21 Ibid., p. 181.

joins their ranks, posing as a servant herself, in an act that has often been described as penance, but that I see more as part of the 'bourgeois ethos of self-help' that Maunder identifies.<sup>22</sup>

Samuel Smiles' groundbreaking book *Self-Help* (1859) contains biographies of men who accomplish impressive feats through integrity and perseverance. Its profiles of great men are remarkably similar in tone and content to the instructive and inspirational tales included in *The Servants' Magazine or, Female Domestic's Instructor* from the same time period. This periodical, which was intended to reach a literate servant audience, offers accounts of servants who are recognized by their employers and even promoted within the domestic ranks due to their honesty and spirit of industriousness. *Self-Help* promotes the idea that men from all classes can become great men:

Riches and ease, it is perfectly clear, are not necessary for man's highest culture, else had not the world been so largely indebted in all times to those who have sprung from the humbler ranks. An easy and luxurious existence does not train men to effort or encounter with difficulty; nor does it awaken that consciousness of power which is so necessary for energetic and effective action in life. Indeed, so far from poverty being a misfortune, it may, by vigorous self-help, be converted even into a blessing; rousing a man to that struggle with the world in which, though some may purchase ease by degradation, the right-minded and true-hearted find strength, confidence, and triumph.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, although there is a section on 'Industry and the Peerage', the bulk of the biographical stories are about 'common' men of unremarkable class or rank who are depicted as admirable role models.

Smiles' description of 'illustrious Commoners raised from humble to elevated positions by the power of application and industry' seems most applicable in *East Lynne* to the character Archibald Carlyle, a middle-class lawyer who marries an earl's daughter, buys her family estate, and eventually is elected to Parliament.<sup>24</sup> The earl's daughter in question is Isabel Vane, who follows an opposite trajectory: she marries a man of lower rank, loses her reputation and identity, and must ultimately live in her former family home as a paid domestic. However, the goals of rank, legislative power, and national renown that Smiles sees as markers of success for men do not apply in the same way for women. Isabel's reclamation of her life in the guise of a governess suggests that she uses her ingenuity and industriousness to achieve recognition on her own terms as a woman and mother rather than a statesman or

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22 Ibid., p. 181.

23 Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help, with Illustrations of Character and Conduct* (London: John Murray, 1859), p. 16.

24 Ibid., p. 132.

business leader. Isabel uses a corrupt version of the principles of 'self-help' to fuel her new life as an actress, 'perform[ing] respectability' as Rebecca Stern describes it, and 'counterfeiting the self'.<sup>25</sup> She actively takes control of her own life and becomes an autonomous woman, breaking out of the successive roles of obedient daughter, passive wife, and submissive lover that she has heretofore been expected to play. By playing the role of a servant, Isabel literalizes her previous performances of female subservience and uses it as an unexpected source to attain power over herself, her relationships, and her choice of role within her own home, which is now inhabited by the middle-class lawyer Carlyle and his second wife Barbara.

Deborah Wynne describes a 'covert power' that the middle class wields over the upper class in the novel.<sup>26</sup> The balance of economic power is shifting in favour of members of the rising middle classes, like Barbara Hare and Archibald Carlyle, while Isabel and her father the earl are represented as outdated relics. As Lady Vane, Isabel was a symbol of conquest; as Wynne points out, she is appropriated by the middle-class Carlyle almost as part of a package with the house and grounds of East Lynne.<sup>27</sup> In fact, Wynne sees Carlyle's 'bowing habit' as part of a middle-class strategy to achieve power through unexpected means:

For Wood's quiet revolution to take place it is necessary that her middle-class heroes and heroines remain outwardly deferential towards the class they mean to usurp. We learn that Carlyle 'received the training of a gentleman' at both Rugby and Oxford, and is well-equipped to meet the upper classes on their own territory.<sup>28</sup>

The middle classes, then, originated the strategy of the performance of subservience that Lady Isabel herself will adopt to regain power within the home that has exiled her.

Lady Isabel's experience of feeling suppressed or oppressed by middle-class women like her oppressive sister-in-law Miss Corny or Carlyle's second wife Barbara Hare provides one of her first experiences as an 'actress.' Ann Cvetkovitch sees 'the strategy of submission' that Isabel must play as Carlyle's wife as the same one 'that will later be played out in more exaggerated terms when she returns to East Lynne.'<sup>29</sup> Before her downfall, Isabel meets social expectations by performing submission and subservience, and keeping her emotions under control in order to convincingly play

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25 Rebecca Stern, *Home Economics: Domestic Fraud in Victorian England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), p. 65.

26 Wynne p. 73.

27 Ibid., p. 68.

28 Ibid., p. 68.

29 Ann Cvetkovitch, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992) p. 101.

the part of 'The Angel in the House.' When Isabel's loyal maid, Joyce, learns that her mistress has left her husband for another man, she affirms Isabel's longstanding status as both 'angel' and 'servant' that she held in her capacity as wife and mistress of the house. Joyce tells Miss Corny,

"I say she has been driven to it. She has not been allowed to indulge a will of her own, poor thing, since she came to East Lynne; in her own house she has been less free than any one of her servants. You have curbed her, ma'am, and snapped at her, and made her feel that she was but a slave to your caprices and temper. All these years she has been crossed and put upon; everything, in short, but beaten—ma'am, you know she has!—and she has borne it all in silence, like a patient angel, never, as I believe, complaining to master." (p. 279)

Tricia Lootens suggests that since a nineteenth century woman cannot become a literal angel, she becomes an 'Acting Angel' instead.<sup>30</sup> The 'Acting Angel' is described as a woman who 'commit[s] herself to a life of strenuous spiritual asceticism, [so] she could seek booth to impersonate and to act as a stand-in for the Victorian female ideal'.<sup>31</sup> Isabel resigns herself 'to take up her cross daily, and bear it' as she willingly adopts a life of self-denial, but her aspiration is to servanthood rather than sainthood (p. 398, italics original). Thus, *East Lynne* can be viewed as 'an extended parable of the problems of the gentlewoman in Victorian England'.<sup>32</sup> Paradoxically, an ideal gentlewoman, wife, and mother, must also be an actress. As suggested in *Vanity Fair*, 'your domestic models, and paragons of female virtue' are 'hypocrites' who are praised for their 'pretty treachery' of performance.<sup>33</sup> Succinctly put, '[a] good housewife is of necessity a humbug'.<sup>34</sup>

The 'actresses' of sensation novels such as *East Lynne* reveal the Victorian ideals of class and femininity as constructs through their 'performances' whether they are featured on the literal or domestic stage. Laurence Talairach-Vielmas further describes how 'sensation novels, by featuring actresses or female characters playing parts, heighten the paradoxical construction of womanhood, so perfectly illustrated by the actress herself, simultaneously embodying feminine beauty and female fashion while transgressing woman's sphere by stepping out onto the working/public stage'.<sup>35</sup>

30 Tricia Lootens, *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender, and Victorian Literary Canonization* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), p. 57.

31 Ibid., p. 57.

32 Jeanne B. Elliott, 'A Lady to the End: The Case of Isabel Vane', *Victorian Studies* 19.3 (March 1976): 329-344 (p. 331).

33 William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero* (New York: Harper, 1848), p. 83.

34 Ibid., p. 84.

35 Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007) p. 135.

Even an upwardly-mobile middle-class wife such as Barbara Hare feels pressure to play a role, although it may be less overt. Barbara is so concerned with maintaining an appearance of wealth and status and appearing to be a model of middle-class womanhood that she is overly concerned with expensive dress, remains wary of her servants, and believes she must keep her children at a distance. Both Barbara and Isabel feel that they must maintain composure and control their display of feeling in order to play their parts convincingly.

As might be expected of a domestic melodrama, *East Lynne's* heroine does indulge in emotional outbursts, but they are more often expressed internally than externally; part of Isabel's acting skill is seen in her ability to repress emotion. The moment that Isabel chooses to return to East Lynne as a governess, she decides that 'her own feelings, let them be wrung as they would, should not prove the obstacle'.<sup>36</sup> Dan Bivona suggests that '[e]motional control' like Isabel's 'can only be achieved in the moment in which the actor directs herself on stage, the moment in which she acts out her emotions while critically regarding them from a spectator's distance'.<sup>37</sup> Isabel does this when her son William is dying, as she contemplates 'the dreadful misery of the retrospect' and the novel describes how '[t]he very nails of her hands had, before now, entered the palms, with the sharp pain it brought [...] there, as she knelt, her head lying on the counterpane, came the recollection of that first illness of hers' (p. 587). But, as Cvetkovitch asserts, 'playing the pathetic woman is not the same as being the pathetic woman'.<sup>38</sup> *Armadale's* Lydia Gwilt, for example, plays the pathetic woman in order to deflect suspicion from herself; she asks for Mr. Bashwood to support her, claiming, 'My little stock of courage is quite exhausted' as '[t]he woman who had tyrannized over Mr. Bashwood' disappears and '[a] timid, shrinking, interesting creature filled the fair skin and trembled on the symmetrical limbs of Miss Gwilt'.<sup>39</sup> While Isabel may have less guile than Gwilt, who is a practiced con artist, she still is able to maintain her performance. Isabel frequently feels anguished about her role as governess, but she never drops her disguise, and her true identity is only discovered by her former maid, Joyce, when Isabel believes there is a fire and leaves her room without her tinted glasses.

Isabel's ability to act identifies her as the heroine in the sensation mode. As Elizabeth Gruner notes, 'proper' Victorian heroines often 'prove their virtue by failing

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36 Ellen Wood, *East Lynne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p. 398. Further page references will be given parenthetically in the text. References to the earlier serial version or other adaptations will be indicated.

37 Dan Bivona 'The House in the Child and the Dead Mother in the House: Sensational Problems of Victorian "Household" Management', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 30.2 (June 2008), 109–125 (p. 116)

38 Cvetkovitch, p. 98.

39 Wilkie Collins, *Armadale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 371. Further page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

as actresses'.<sup>40</sup> A typical Victorian courtship plot concludes when the heroine 'must cast off one role—usually that of daughter or eligible young thing—for another—usually that of wife, although sometimes (in the case of the transgressive heroine) mother or mistress', since she must 'be one thing only; [she] must not act roles, but embody them.'<sup>41</sup> As Helena Michie describes, the sensation novel heroine embraces acting:

Sensation novels abound with women who disguise, transform, and replicate themselves, who diffuse their identities [...] In the cases of *Lady Audley* and *Isabel Vane* this duplicity, this multiplicity of identity, is explicitly marked by the text as criminal; it is the job of the reader and/or the detective figure of each novel to sort through the multiple identities offered by each heroine, to work against her self-reproduction, and to close the novel with a woman confined to a single identity, a single name, and a single place—in both cases, the grave.<sup>42</sup>

The criminal nature of acting does require 'punishment' for the transgressive heroine of the sensation novel, but for the majority of the text, acting also offers her power. While the heroine of *Lady Audley's Secret* is punished by society for her social pretensions, Lady Isabel dies of natural causes and is able to achieve closure with her family before her death. Other sensation heroines who play roles, like Lydia Gwilt, Magdalen Vanstone, and Margaret Wilmot, are allowed to repent and attempt to redeem themselves.

Despite their social transgressions and criminal acts, these heroines, particularly Isabel, appear to be designed as unexpected sources of reader empathy by their novels' end. Although Isabel is initially presented as a fallen wife and mother, she redeems herself through renewed devotion to her children and even rekindled passion for her husband. Isabel and her pathetic inability to fully reclaim her roles as wife and mother evoked more sympathy from contemporary critics than her rival does. As Margaret Oliphant put it in her 1863 review, 'When [Isabel] returns to her former home under the guise of the poor governess, there is not a reader who does not feel disposed to turn her virtuous successor to the door, and reinstate the suffering heroine, to the glorious confusion of all morality.'<sup>43</sup> A critic for the *Saturday Review* similarly opined, 'Although, at the close of the story, the whole of the attorney's affections are most properly concentrated on his living wife, the reader is not sorry to

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40 Elizabeth Rose Gruner, 'Plotting the Mother: Caroline Norton, Helen Huntingdon, and Isabel Vane', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 16.2 (Autumn 1997): 303-325 (p. 303).

41 Ibid., p. 303.

42 Helena Michie, *Sororophobia: Differences Among Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) p. 59.

43 Margaret Oliphant, 'Novels', *Blackwood's Magazine*, August 1863, p. 170.

be permitted to have a slight preference for the dead one.<sup>44</sup> The *London Quarterly Review* even worried that Lady Isabel's likability might undermine readers' sense of morality:

*East Lynne* is one of the most powerful, but one, also, of the most mischievous, books of the day. Throughout an exciting, though very improbable story, our sympathies are excited on behalf of one who has betrayed the most sacred trust man can repose in woman. All that the union of beauty, rank, talent, and misfortune can do to create a prejudice in favour of the criminal is done, while the sense of the enormity of her crime is greatly enfeebled by the unamiable light in which her husband is presented.<sup>45</sup>

Surprisingly, some modern critics have suggested that in *East Lynne*, Barbara Hare is intended as the primary source of reader identification. Both Barbara and Isabel fit the description the text offers of its expected reader as a 'Lady—wife—mother'; the primary difference between them is that of class (p. 283). Deborah Wynne suggests that the hoodwinking of the aristocratic Lord Vane by the middle class Carlyle, or the triumph of Barbara Hare over Lady Isabel, 'may have had an appeal for the 'solid' middle-class readership of the *New Monthly Magazine*.<sup>46</sup> Jeanne Elliott describes Wood's audience as likely consisting of 'the wives and daughters of the newly prosperous and upwardly mobile mercantile classes', much like Barbara.<sup>47</sup> In addition, Lyn Pykett notes that some critics may see the author herself as more like Barbara, citing the novel's 'straining for gentility' as evidence of Wood's own social insecurities as the daughter of a glove manufacturer.<sup>48</sup> However, Barbara shows herself to be a petty woman and a jealous wife throughout the novel, and she fails to show maternal affection for her stepchildren. While Isabel may be an actress, the poverty, humiliation, deformity, and physical and emotional suffering she endures are quite real, while Barbara's life remains 'relatively carefree.'<sup>49</sup> Unlike the downfall of the murderer and fellow adulterer Sir Frances Levison, whose sentence of hard labour prompts the narrator to jeer: 'Where would his diamonds and his perfumed handkerchiefs and his white hands be then?' Isabel's fall from grace invites reader sympathy and understanding. Her first fall may be divine retribution for her sins, but her second fall is a self-designed martyrdom. The better analogue to Levison would be Afy, the maid who has lofty aspirations of social climbing.

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44 'Reviews', p. 187.

45 'Thackeray and Modern Fiction', *London Quarterly Review*, April and July 1864, p. 406.

46 Wynne, p. 73.

47 Elliott, p. 330.

48 Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 119.

49 Richard S. Albright, *Writing the Past, Writing the Future: Time and Narrative in Sensation Fiction* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2009), p. 201.

Both Afy and Isabel are defined by their sexual transgressions, Pykett says, but their difference in class means that 'Afy is not required to undergo the punitive moral, emotional and physical suffering which is constructed for Isabel.'<sup>50</sup> The text suggests that Isabel feels immediate remorse because, as one of the 'women in the higher positions of life Lady Isabel was endowed with sensitively refined delicacy, with an innate, lively consciousness of right and wrong' (pp. 283-84). Pykett suggests that:

Afy is required to suffer less than Isabel because of the presumption (heavily underlined by the narrator) that she is less emotionally and morally refined than her social superior. Afy's fall is presented by the narrator as a mixture of folly and willfulness; if the character reflects upon her situation at all is to see it as a career move. However, Isabel's is a fall from grace, which is accompanied by exquisite agonies of moral scrupulousness and emotional self-torture, both of which are presented in class terms.<sup>51</sup>

I would further suggest that the difference in the severity of their crimes is mitigated both by the class they are born into and the class they attempt to enter. Isabel's performance as a domestic servant threatens stability within her home, but Afy's pretensions to a higher class offers a more wide-reaching and dangerous threat to the social hierarchy.

Afy's proclivity to "dress outrageously fine" and her "disreputable" social pretensions are evidence, in Miss Corny's opinion, of '[t]he world's being turned upside down' (p. 382). Although Afy is hired as 'three parts maid and one part companion', and is not permitted 'to sit or dine' with her employer, she 'was never backward at setting off her own consequence, [and] gave out that she was "companion"' (p. 390). Lyn Pykett describes Afy as 'a stock character of Victorian fiction [...] the saucy servant who apes her superiors and attempts to achieve her social ambitions by sexual means'.<sup>52</sup> When Afy learns she will not be able to rise in class rank through marriage as she had planned, and instead must accept a marriage proposal from a shop-keeper, she consoles herself with the promise of certain outward signs of her change in financial status: 'He's having his house done up in style, and I shall keep two good servants, and do nothing myself but dress and subscribe to the library. He makes plenty of money' (p. 565). Langland outlines how numerous manuals and tracts reveal the contemporary obsession with the importance of outward appearance, particularly dress, in defining a person's class.<sup>53</sup> *Etiquette for*

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50 Pykett, p. 123. Barbara too could be considered "sexually transgressive", since she is in love with another woman's husband. It is open to debate how much she is "punished" for this—or how much she in turn punishes her rival's children.

51 Ibid., p. 123.

52 Ibid., p. 123.

53 Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian*

*Ladies and Gentlemen* (1876) warns the *nouveaux riches* never to 'dress above your station; it is a grievous mistake and leads to great evils, besides being the proof of an utter want of taste'.<sup>54</sup> While Afy attempts to 'marry up' by dressing above her station and fails, the woman who chooses to perform a servant's role defies expectations by dressing below her station, which allows her to succeed her goals without appearing to present a threat.

Many of the freedoms allowed a servant 'performer' are made possible due to the disguising nature of the servant costume. While both her sister-in-law Miss Corny and her former lady's maid Joyce see Madame Vine's uncanny resemblance to Isabel, it is the clothing and accessories that Isabel wears that conceal her true identity. A servant is defined by her dress. This point is driven home in Dickens' *Bleak House* (1853), when Lady Dedlock meets with Jo disguised in her servant Hortense's clothes. When Bucket asks Jo why he previously misidentified Hortense as the lady in question, he insists,

"'cos that there's the wale, the bonnet, and the gownd. It is her and it an't her. It an't her hand, nor yet her rings, nor yet her woice. But that there's the wale, the bonnet, and the gownd, and they're wore the same way wot she wore □em."<sup>55</sup>

The rings, however, set Lady Dedlock apart and reveal her inexperience as an actress. The sensational heroine with performing experience knows to pay minute attention to detail in costuming. In *No Name*, the former stage actress Magdalen asks her maid Louisa to teach her how to perform a servant's duties so she can convincingly play the part of a parlourmaid at St. Crux. While Louisa worries that the other servants 'would find [Magdalen] out', Magdalen knows the most important trick of performance: 'I can still *look* the parlour-maid whom Admiral Bartram wants.'<sup>56</sup> When Magdalen adopts the clothing of her maid, she 'becomes' the maid. Magdalen succinctly defines the only difference between a lady and her maid thus: 'A lady is a woman who wears a silk gown, and has a sense of her own importance' (p. 613). She is able to provide Louisa both necessary elements and successfully pass her off as a lady, effectively demonstrating the ambiguity of the boundary between 'lady' and 'maid' (p. 613).

Sensation novels also repeatedly show how the true age of a servant, which determines both the employment prospects of servant girls and the possibility of their sexual appeal, is difficult to ascertain because it is so easy to disguise. When Isabel returns as a governess she has become disfigured, and, "hough she can't be more than

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*Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 35.

54 Ibid., p. 35.

55 Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 336.

56 Wilkie Collins, *No Name* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 613. Emphasis in original text. Further page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

thirty, her hair is grey', which is a source of curiosity for other women, who wonder at her true age (p. 398). In *No Name*, it is suggested that the housekeeper Mrs. Lecount could 'ha[ve] struck some fifteen or sixteen years off her real age, and [...] asserted herself to be eight and thirty, [and] there would not have been one man in a thousand, or one woman in a hundred, who would have hesitated to believe her' (p. 275). Similarly, Mother Oldershaw of *Armada* tells Lydia Gwilt,

"The question is—not whether you were five-and-thirty last birthday; we will own the dreadful truth, and say you were—but whether you do look, or don't look, your real age [...] If you will follow my advice about dressing, and use one or two of my applications privately, I guarantee to put you back three years more [...] you [will] look no more than seven-and-twenty in any man's eyes living—except, of course, when you wake anxious in the small hours of the morning; and then, my dear, you will be old and ugly in the retirement of your own room, and it won't matter." (p. 152)

Gwilt is thus able to play the part of a young, attractive governess in order to seduce Allan Armadale, her wealthy target. As texts as diverse as *Jane Eyre* (1847), *My Secret Life* (1888) or the diaries of Hannah Cullwick might suggest, female servants held a distinct sexual attraction for middle- and upper-class men.

As Cullwick's diaries reveal, Arthur Munby so fetishized Hannah's position as a servant that he asked her to costume herself and perform as different kinds of domestics or labourers, even blackening her body to achieve the necessary look her roles would require. As Elizabeth Langland describes it, '[T]he dirtiness that was initially only the consequence of her labour quickly became a staged performance.'<sup>57</sup> After she married Munby, Hannah additionally 'performed' as a lady, complete with the appropriate costume: 'a felt hat & plume of cock's feathers to wear, & a veil, & a new brooch to pin my shawl with & a news waterproof cloak', but she is relieved to return to her own clothing, 'my dirty cotton frock & apron & my cap', afterwards.<sup>58</sup> The simple dress of the servant retains the same sexual appeal for gentlemen in sensation novels. In *No Name*, Magdalen dresses as a servant in 'a lavender-colored stuff-gown [...] a white muslin apron, and a neat white cap and collar, with ribbons to match the gown' (p. 621). Her employer the Admiral keeps an all-female servant staff and 'insists on youth and good looks' in his maids, leaving any more practical qualifications for the job to the discretion of his house-keeper (p. 609). The text explicitly states how enticing Magdalen is to her master in her 'servant's costume':

<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 216.

<sup>58</sup> Hannah Cullwick, *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick, Victorian Maidservant*, ed. by Liz Stanley (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1984), p. 266.

in this simple dress, to the eyes of all men, not linen-drapers, at once the most modest and the most alluring that a woman can wear, the sad changes which mental suffering had wrought in her beauty almost disappeared from view. In the evening costume of a lady, with her bosom uncovered, with her figure armed, rather than dressed, in unpliant silk, the Admiral might have passed her by without notice in his own drawing-room. In the evening costume of a servant, no admirer of beauty could have looked at her once and not have turned again to look at her for the second time (p. 621).

Similarly, in *Armadale*, the text suggests that Lydia Gwilt's appeal lies in her 'subtle mixture of the voluptuous and the modest which, of the many attractive extremes that meet in women, is in a man's eyes the most irresistible of all' (p. 367).

While the actress recognizes the paradoxical allure of plain dress, members of the rising merchant class, like Barbara Hare, try to mimic what they imagine the wealthy should wear. Barbara is greatly concerned with fashion, as evidenced by the initial synecdochal description of her as she appears on the street: 'A pink parasol came first, a pink bonnet and feather came behind it, a grey brocaded dress and white gloves' (p. 64). While all of 'West Lynne seems bent on outdressing the Lady Isabel', Isabel knows the allure of modest garb (p. 65). Barbara observes that even as Lady Vane, Isabel "'has no silks, and no feathers, and no anything!'"—in short, "'She's plainer than anybody in the church!'" (p. 65). When Isabel trades her modest dress for the even plainer costume of a servant, she is able to largely avoid the gaze of others and gain access to her former home to watch her husband and children surreptitiously.

Jeanne Fahnestock suggests that *East Lynne* is unique among 'bigamy novels' for the intensity of its voyeurism, particularly among its servant characters.<sup>59</sup> Servants cannot be policed in the same way that they police their own employers, a fact that many enterprising characters are able to turn to their advantage. Afy admits to 'listen[ing] at keyholes', and Wilson 'carr[ies] on a prying system in Mrs. Hare's house' (pp. 333, 180). As Magdalen affirms in *No Name*, '[s]ervants' tongues and servants' letters [...] are oftener occupied with their masters and mistresses than their masters and mistresses suppose' (p. 609). Brian McCuskey's article points to this proliferation of servant surveillance in the novel as a means of keeping the members of the household in check: 'At the end of the long arm of the law, we find the servant's hand'.<sup>60</sup> Because of their own devotion to voyeurism, the servants are convinced that the meddling Miss Corny must reciprocate and 'listen' in the same way, but the text assures us, 'in that, they did her injustice' (p. 347).

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59 Jeanne Fahnestock, 'Bigamy: The Rise and Fall of a Convention', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 36.1 (1981), 47-71 (p. 54).

60 Brian W. McCuskey, 'The Kitchen Police: Servant Surveillance and Middle-Class Transgression', *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2000), 359-375.

When Isabel acts as a governess, she becomes privy to everything in the home; as E. Ann Kaplan notes, 'she becomes the voyeur; she is able to look and grieve, but unable to have the gaze of recognition blaze back on her'.<sup>61</sup> She and Barbara have effectively switched places, since Barbara once gazed longingly Carlyle during his marriage to Isabel, and now Isabel must witness his married life with her former rival. T. A. Palmer's theatrical adaptation of the novel emphasizes the particular pain Isabel's gaze causes her. She laments:

My sin was great, but my punishment has been still greater. Think what torture it has been—what it has been for me to bear, living in the same house with—with—your wife; seeing your love for her—love that once was *mine*. Oh, think what agony to watch dear Willie, and see him fading day by day, and not be able to say "he is my child as well as yours!"<sup>62</sup>

There are also limitations and rules that Isabel must follow as a subordinate member of the household. Although as a governess at East Lynne, she is still 'regarded as [a] gentlewom[a]n', Isabel faces a lack of free access to objects in her former home (p. 401). In the novel, Isabel glances 'with a yearning look' inside her old dressing-room at 'the little ornaments on the large dressing-table, as they used to be in *her* time; and the cut glass of crystal essence-bottles' (p. 401). She has lost the right to hold or even safely look at these objects, but she has traded it for the right to see and touch her husband and children.

In her introduction to the Oxford edition of *East Lynne*, Elisabeth Jay describes the novel as suggesting that:

[t]he greatest threat posed by the governess to middle-class families was not, as Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, might lead us to suppose, an illicit romance with the master [...] but the danger of hiring a woman whose class pedigree and moral qualifications for superintending children were not what they seemed.<sup>63</sup>

Although Isabel's role as governess does allow her access to her children on false pretences (which will be discussed later), it can be argued that it also rekindles and even deepens her love for her 'master' Carlyle. Although she does not have a physical relationship with Carlyle as Madame Vine, even while living in the house under his

61 E. Ann. Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 83.

62 T. A. Palmer, *East Lynne: A Domestic Drama in a Prologue and Four Acts* (London: Samuel French, 1875), IV.2.

63 Elisabeth Jay, 'Introduction', *East Lynne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) vii-xxxix (pp. xxx-xxxii).

new wife the text states that '[Isabel], poor thing, always regarded Mr Carlyle as *her* husband' (p. 591). At the end of *East Lynne*, Isabel tells Carlyle, 'I never loved you so passionately as I have done since I lost you' (p. 615). After Isabel admits that she returned in disguise to be with him as much as her children, Carlyle tenderly touches her hair and nearly kisses her, a scene that is described with tantalizing suspense in the *New Monthly Magazine's* serial version of *East Lynne*: 'What was he about to do? Lower and lower bent he his head, until his breath nearly mingled with hers. To kiss her? He best knew. But, suddenly, his face grew red with a scarlet flush, and he lifted it again.'<sup>64</sup> The sentence containing the word 'kiss' was deleted from this scene in the first edition, although the intentions behind Carlyle's aborted gesture remain clear. Moments later, as Isabel 'clung to his arm' and 'lifted her face, in its sad yearning Mr. Carlyle laid her tenderly down again, and suffered his lips to rest upon hers' (p. 617). In response to her final words, 'farewell, until eternity [...] Farewell, my once dear husband!' he replies, 'Until eternity' (p. 617). His words suggest that Isabel may realise her 'one great hope [that they] shall meet again [...] and live together for ever and ever' (p. 617).

When Carlyle reveals to Barbara that his former wife has been living with them in disguise and his new wife plaintively asks if Isabel's presence 'has [...] taken [his] love from [her]', he reassures her with a far less intimate gesture: 'He took her hands in one of his, he put the other round her waist and held her there, before him, never speaking, only looking gravely into her face' (p. 623). He also does not directly answer her question, and the novel's narrative commentary, 'Who could look at its sincere truthfulness, at the sweet expression of his lips, and doubt him? Not Barbara', is less than definitive. Surely the reader who has just 'witnessed' the heart-wrenching scene between the two former spouses is not so easily assured. Barbara might maintain her status as Carlyle's wife, but Isabel ensures that Barbara will never usurp the role of mother to Isabel's children.

Ellen Bayuk Rosenman's article describes how, by becoming a servant, Isabel suffers in order to achieve intimacy with her children and suggests that 'Isabel's new role reveals the class-specific constraints on maternal emotion implicit in the Angel in the House.'<sup>65</sup> As a parvenu, Barbara feels she must subscribe wholly to social expectations of her, so she strives to embody what she imagines a wealthy mother should be, showing a reserved love at a distance. When she first hires Isabel as governess, Barbara explains her beliefs about motherhood. She claims that

"too many mothers pursue a mistaken system in the management of their family [...] They are never happy but when they are with their children: they

64 Ellen Wood, 'East Lynne: Part the Twenty-First', *The New Monthly Magazine*, September 1861, p. 45.

65 Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, "'Mimic Sorrows': Masochism and the Gendering of Pain in Victorian Melodrama', *Studies in the Novel* 35.1 (Spring 2003), 22-43 (p. 29).

must be in the nursery; or, the children in the drawing-room. They wash them, dress them, feed them; rendering themselves slaves, and the nurse's office a sinecure" (p. 406).

Isabel is a willing 'slave', then, by being close to her children and tending to their needs. Rosenman sees this as means of 'fling[ing] off the constraints' of this unfulfilling model for middle-class motherhood.<sup>66</sup>

Early in the novel, Isabel pleads to take her children to the seaside with her, insisting, 'I will get well all the sooner for having them with me', but her sister-in-law Miss Corny will not allow it (p. 201). At this point Isabel is still recognized as their mother and as an upper-class woman, so it is somewhat surprising that Miss Corny's reasons for refusal are the stresses associated with mothering children and the expense of transporting them, which Miss Corny even implies could 'ruin' Carlyle financially (p. 200). As Rosenman points out, Isabel 'soon learns to control herself and accede to the commands of Cornelia and her doctor', one of her first steps toward becoming an actress through the performance of submission.<sup>67</sup>

Andrew Maunder suggests that '[i]t is only by controlling (as far as she is ever able to) the 'impulsive' and 'lower' instincts and taking on the middle-class virtues of 'labour and self-sacrifice' that Isabel herself can be reunited with her children' since 'Wood seems to suggest that successful and rewarding mothering is only for the more deserving members of humanity'.<sup>68</sup> However, I believe the text more clearly suggests that motherhood is not bound by class, but that good mothers are united across class lines by maternal feeling: 'Let the mother, be she a duchess, or be she an apple-woman at a stand, be separated for awhile from her little children; let *her* answer how she yearns for them' (p. 390, italics original). Certainly Isabel adopts the positive middle-class virtues Maunder identifies, but Barbara Hare, the text's example of a middle-class mother, hardly demonstrates these qualities herself. Early in the novel, Wilson, the most prescient of the servants, hopes that 'nothing happen[s]' to Lady Isabel, since '[Barbara] would not make a very kind stepmother, for it is certain that where the first wife had been hated, her children won't be loved' (p. 179). When Isabel is presumed dead and separated from her children, she anguishes about her children: 'Would they be trained to goodness, to morality, to religion?' (p. 390). The report she receives from Afy confirms her fears. Afy thinks Barbara does not 'ha[ve] much to do with them', and Isabel realizes 'she had abandoned them to be trained by strangers' (pp. 395, 390). Anxieties about a 'stranger' raising a child in lieu of its natural mother were common at the time. *The English Schoolroom* (1865) harshly

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66 Ibid., p. 29.

67 Ibid., p. 28.

68 Andrew Maunder, "'Stepchildren of Nature': *East Lynne* and the Spectre of Female Degeneracy, 1860-1861', *Victorian Crime, Madness, and Sensation*, ed. by Andrew Maunder (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 59-72 (pp. 67-68).

condemns mothers who allow their children to be educated by a governess: 'The mistake once made will be repented for ever, and a conviction will haunt her, when too late, that she had far better have done her duty to the full, and subject to any inconvenience [...] rather than have given over her offspring to the stranger'.<sup>69</sup> To right this wrong, Isabel returns in the guise of a stranger to ensure her children are properly cared for.

As Ann Cvetkovitch suggests, 'Whenever a social problem is dramatized through the sensational figure of a mother separated from her child, melodrama is producing not just tears but social policy', which is undoubtedly the case in *East Lynne*.<sup>70</sup> In *The Domestic Revolution*, Theresa McBride makes a case for the decreased demand for servants toward the end of the nineteenth century being a result of 'a growing intimacy within the middle-class family, and to a wish to be closer to, and provide better care for, one's children'.<sup>71</sup> Smiles' *Self-Help* even gives a nod to the importance of good parenting in shaping a child's future success: 'The characters of parents are thus constantly repeated in their children; and the acts of affection, discipline, industry, and self-control, which they daily exemplify, live and act when all else which may have been learned through the ear has long been forgotten'.<sup>72</sup> Barbara, however, leaves this duty to a woman whom she believes to be a mere governess: in Tayleure's play, she tells the disguised Isabel, 'I trust you may be able to instill such principles into the mind of the little girl, as shall keep her from a like fate [to her mother]'.<sup>73</sup> The irony that Barbara would trust a stranger living under an alias to teach the children morality would not have been lost on the audience. The play's sympathetic depiction of Isabel upholds the idea that regardless of her sins, the children's mother will have their best interest at heart.

Servants could also be perceived as dangerous intermediaries who appropriate children's affections that should be reserved solely for their own parents.<sup>74</sup> Ellen Wood's biography *Memorials of Mrs Wood* (1894), written by her son Charles, seems to show the validity of this fear. Charles Wood describes a beloved French nurse who cared for him and Wood's other children as '[a] faithful, self-sacrificing, duty-fulfilling woman, [for whom] neither time nor infirmities would have separated her from her beloved masters and charges'.<sup>75</sup> In what is ostensibly a biography of his

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69 Anthony F. Thompson, *The English Schoolroom; or, Thoughts on Private Tuition, Practical and Suggestive* (London: Sampson Low, 1865), p. 24.

70 Cvetkovitch, p. 127.

71 Theresa McBride, *The Domestic Revolution* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), p. 67.

72 Smiles, p. 294.

73 Clifton Tayleure, *East Lynne, A drama in five acts, adapted from the novel East Lynne, written by Mrs. Henry Wood*, in *British Plays of the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology to Illustrate the Evolution of the Drama*, ed. by J. O. Bailey (New York: Odyssey Press, 1966), pp. 306-27 (IV.1).

74 McBride, p. 67.

75 Charles W. Wood, *Memorials of Mrs. Henry Wood*, (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1894), p. 56. Further page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

mother, Wood devotes an entire chapter to this nurse. Most tellingly, he opines 'Her charges had always been *her children*, and those yet living are so still' (p. 56; italics original).

One incident in particular suggests that this nurse may have been a model for Isabel or the servant characters in *East Lynne*. Ellen Wood's first daughter, Ellen, fell ill with scarlet fever, and, as Charles Wood describes it:

The doctors treated her according to the fashion of the day. They first starved her almost to death, and, then she was sinking from exhaustion, ordered leeches to be applied to the throat. The nurse cried to her master in agonies of grief, "do not allow it. If leeches are used, the child will die. I know it from experience." But she was powerless. The leeches were applied, the little throat closed up, and the child died (pp. 51-2).

*East Lynne* contains very similar scenarios of servants 'knowing best' even though their advice remains unheeded. The servant Wilson proves that, through her previous experience tending those with consumption, she can predict the trajectory of William's illness more accurately than the doctor (p. 580).<sup>76</sup>

When Isabel was still recognized as an aristocrat and her father was dying, the doctors who attended him concealed the worst of his condition from her, and even Carlyle would 'soften down the actual facts', which infuriated her (p. 87). As a governess, Isabel ensures that she is with the doctor more frequently than either Barbara or Carlyle are and is thus best able to hear his straightforward medical opinions (p. 442). When the doctor speaks to Carlyle, he neglects to reveal the worst. As Wilson says, 'if he saw the child's breath going out before his face, and knew that the next moment would be his last, he'd vow to us all that he was good for twelve hours to come' (pp. 579-80). Although the doctor tells William's 'new mother' Barbara that William 'will outgrow' his cough, causing her to dismiss it by suggesting, 'perhaps a crumb went the wrong way', Isabel is immediately able to identify William's condition as consumption (pp. 408, 419). In her capacity as servant, Isabel is able to 'make [her child's] health [her] care by night and day' (p. 422). She is able to treat her son with cream, since she says she '[has] known cream to do a vast deal of good in a case like William's', and believes 'no better medicine can be given', even though at that point Carlyle is still relying on the doctor's mistaken opinions (p. 442).

Isabel is also the only person present with William when he finally dies. Although this is a scene of protracted anguish for Isabel, it also provides closure. When her father was dying, Isabel was denied the right to see him, despite her repeated entreaties, precisely because she is a female and a family member. As her father dies in the next room, she accuses Carlyle, 'It is cruel, so to treat me [...] When

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76 Later, only the maid Joyce recognizes that Isabel is dying; in response, Barbara declares the servant to be "a simpleton" (611).

your father was dying, were you kept away from him?' (p. 87). He responds, 'My dear young lady—a hardy, callous man may go where you may not' and when she exposes the flaw in his rationale, pointing out that Carlyle is neither hardy nor callous, he avers that he 'spoke of man's general nature' (p. 87). Eventually, Carlyle explains that the truth is that '[her father's] symptoms are too painful', and if she 'were [...] to go in, in defiance of advice, [she] would regret it all [her] after life' (p. 87).

As the governess Madame Vine, however, she is able to be part of William's death in a way she could not have been as Isabel Carlyle. Although she famously mourns that 'not even at that last hour [...] dared she say [to William], I am your mother', it is precisely because she is *not* perceived as his mother that she can be the one alone with him at his deathbed (p. 586). T. A. Palmer's play milks further pathos from this scene with the famous line, 'Oh, Willie, my child! dead, dead, dead! and he never knew me, never called me mother!'<sup>77</sup> However, in John Oxenford's adaptation, William rewards Isabel's efforts by seeing through her disguise at the last minute and calling her 'Mamma' once before he dies.<sup>78</sup> However, after she has revealed her true identity, Isabel dies from grief; her seemingly contradictory roles of mother, wife, lady, actress, and governess cannot survive publicly reconciled in one body for long.

Charles Wood describes a similar scenario occurring when Ellen Wood's own daughter died and was attended by the French nurse:

The faithful nurse was almost equally stricken [as the child's father]. She was one of those strong and determined characters who must have their own way in everything: the under nurses had to obey her every look and word—even the mother's authority in the nursery was quite a secondary consideration. But she was as tenacious in her affections as she was strong in character. None but herself was allowed to perform the last sad office for the pure and beautiful little creature who had gone to a better world. With her own bare hands she placed her in her little coffin, watched over it night and day until the little body was consigned to the earth and hidden away from mortal eyes for ever (p. 52).

In *East Lynne*, William's death signals the end of Isabel's performance as Madame Vine, and she removes her disguise (p. 588). Nina Auerbach sees 'Isabel's eulogy [as] less a eulogy for her son than for her own lost roles', or more specifically, as I would suggest, the only role she chose for herself.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Palmer, III.3

<sup>78</sup> John Oxenford, 'East Lynne', in *The Golden Age of Melodrama: Twelve Nineteenth-Century Melodramas*, ed. by Michael Kilgarriff (London: Wolfe Publishing Limited, 1974), pp. 278-306 (III.3).

<sup>79</sup> Nina Auerbach, 'Before the Curtain', *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. by Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004) 3-14 (p. 12). Here Auerbach refers to the same death scene in T. A. Palmer's 1874 stage version.

*Memorials of Mrs Wood* describes how, shortly after Wood was married, her husband suggested that they visit the monastery Grande Chartreuse together. The surprised Wood responds, 'But I thought women were not admitted over the threshold? What Open Sesame would unbar the doors to me?' (p. 124). The 'Open Sesame' solution her husband devises is to disguise Wood as a monk so that she might tour the monastery and not arouse suspicion. Isabel Vane and other sensation heroines stage their own means of 'Open Sesame' access to the middle-class home by adopting the similarly unobtrusive disguise of a servant. While characters like Lydia Gwilt or Magdalen Vanstone use the role of servant in attempts to illicitly gain wealth and revenge, Isabel more subtly subverts the class system. By choosing to perform a climb down the social ladder she is able to express love for her children as a mother and feel passion as a wife to Carlyle in ways previously denied her as Lady Vane.

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