
Sensational Contagion: Sin, Disease and Religious Fervour in Wilkie Collins's *Armada* (1866) and Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely, but Too Well* (1867)

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Abstract

This article explores the intersections and conceptual links between sin, disease and religious fervour in the critical discourse surrounding sensation fiction in the 1860s and 1870s as well as two representatives of genre, Wilkie Collins's Armada (1866) and Rhoda Broughton's Not Wisely, but Too Well (1867). It aims to show that although the two novels under consideration replicate the discourse of disease and contagion that pervaded the mid-nineteenth-century sensation debate, they do so to a different end. This paper will argue that instead of moralising, their use of the rhetoric of disease and contagion allowed the authors of these works to challenge and negotiate notions of what constituted sinful behaviour and, at the same time, pass criticism on excessive religiosity. Moreover, it will demonstrate that the two novels' rhetorical construction of religious fervour as a disease is well-grounded in the medical literature of the time, which considered religious enthusiasm an important exciting cause of a range of mental diseases.

The threat of contagion was part of Victorian everyday life. Despite the era's progress in medicine, health and hygiene, Victorian Britain still faced epidemical waves of contagious diseases like cholera, smallpox, typhus and scarlet fever. The concept of contagion also figured prominently in the reception of nineteenth-century sensation fiction. Although Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859) was not the first sensation novel to be ever written, it was undoubtedly this novel that created the 'sensational mania' that characterised the sixties and seventies of the nineteenth century. After the book's publication, sensationalism swept through the country like a wildfire, leading contemporary reviewers to compare the demand for sensation fiction to a contagious disease:

Just as in the Middle Ages people were afflicted with the Dancing Mania and Lycanthropy, sometimes barking like dogs, and sometimes mewing like cats, so now we have a Sensational Mania. Just, too, as those diseases always occurred in seasons of dearth and poverty, and attacked only the poor, so does the Sensational Mania in Literature burst out only in times of

mental poverty and afflict only the most poverty-stricken minds. From an epidemic, however, it has lately changed into an endemic. Its virus is spreading in all directions, from the penny journal to the shilling magazine, and from the shilling magazine to the thirty shillings volume.¹

Besides being a damning indictment of contemporary culture and society, this excerpt from an 1866 article in the *Westminster Review* is representative of the nineteenth-century critical attitude towards sensationalism and reveals the critical anxieties pertaining to it by taking up various themes that proliferated within the critical discourse surrounding sensation fiction. On the one hand, the identification of the demand for sensation fiction as a form of ‘mania’ as well as the discursive construction of the genre itself as a ‘virus’ highlight the speed with which sensationalism spread and drove other genres out of the market, which was a common theme in contemporary reviews. On the other hand, the fact that the author of the article remarks that the ‘epidemic’ of sensation fictions ‘has lately changed into an endemic’ seems to imply that the initially erratic spread of the disease is over. However, as the review implies, this circumstance did not make sensation fiction less threatening; if anything it made one of the critics’ worst fears regarding the genre come true, i.e., that sensationalism was not just a passing fad but would become a constant presence in the Victorian literary landscape.

Another noteworthy aspect of the above-quoted passage are its repeated references to ‘poverty’, which represent unveiled criticism of sensation fiction’s ‘low’ origins and, at the same time, betray a fear of contamination from ‘below’. As the last sentence of the quotation indicates, it was a common belief among nineteenth-century reviewers that the sensation novel had originated from penny publications, which were tailored to the tastes of the working class. This view was echoed by Henry Mansel, who in an oft-quoted diatribe against sensation fiction identified penny publications as ‘the original germ, the primitive monad, to which all the varieties of sensation literature may be referred’.² Since sensation novels, unlike penny publications, were popular with readers from all social classes, sensation fiction posed a danger to established class boundaries, leading critics to discursively construct the genre as a disease. After all, as Pamela K.

¹ [J. R. Wise,] ‘Belles Lettres’, *The Westminster Review*, 86 (July 1866), 125-32 (p. 126).

² [Henry Mansel,] ‘Sensation Novels’, *The Quarterly Review*, 113 (April 1863), 482-514 (p. 505). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

Gilbert has noted, like sensation fiction, ‘germs [...] redefined class boundaries’³ by affecting people indiscriminately of their class status.

Besides their ‘seemingly contagious diffusion across the literary marketplace’⁴ and their blurring of class boundaries, sensation novels also possessed other properties that made them liable to being rhetorically constructed as a disease. As Bradley Deane has noted, reviewers also used the ‘rhetoric of disease’ to ‘describe the unhealthy consumption of these novels’ (p. 70) and their harmful effect on the reader’s body. Like pathogens, which after causing sufficient damage to their host’s body produce symptoms of disease, the detrimental effects of sensation fiction were believed to manifest themselves in certain physical responses in the reader. According to the author of an 1864 review of *Wondrous Strange* by C. J. Newby in the *Athenaeum*, sensation novels, like the novel under review, ‘curdle their [readers’] blood, cause their hair to stand on end, give them “pins and needles” in the region of the heart, and fix their eyes with a rigid stare for at least twenty-four hours’⁵, thus echoing an 1863 satirical article in *Punch*, which claimed that sensation novels were dedicated to ‘Harrowing the Mind, Making the Flesh Creep, Causing the Hair to Stand on End, [and] Giving Shocks to the Nervous System’.⁶

Most reviewers agreed that the ‘excitement’ and the resultant bodily responses in the reader’s body that sensation novels caused were ‘unwholesome’ or ‘unhealthy’. In fact, a number of reviewers believed that the human body’s response to sensation fiction was similar to a fever. The reading of sensation novels was thought to create a ‘feverish sensation’⁷ in the reader. However, not only the physical effect of sensation fiction was equated with fever, but also the same metaphor was used by critics and reviewers when referring to the production and consumption of sensation fiction. For example, in an 1867 article in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, Margaret Oliphant referred to sensation novels as ‘feverish productions’,⁸ thus implying that sensation fiction not only

³ Pamela K. Gilbert, *Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women’s Popular Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 39. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

⁴ Bradley Deane, *Making of the Victorian Novelist: Anxieties of Authorship in the Mass Market* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), p. 70. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

⁵ ‘New Novels’, *The Athenaeum* (6 August 1864), 177-8 (p. 178).

⁶ ‘The Sensation Times’, *Punch*, 44 (9 May 1863), 193 (p. 193).

⁷ ‘Philosophy of “Sensation”’, *St James’s Magazine*, 5 (October 1862), 340-6 (p. 346).

⁸ [Margaret Oliphant,] ‘Novels’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 102 (September 1867), 275-80 (p. 275). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

produced symptoms of disease, it was also the product of a febrile delirium in the author. This view was shared by Henry Fothergill Chorley, who in an 1866 review of Wilkie Collins's *Armadale* in the *Athenaeum* argued that such novels were the product of 'diseased invention'.⁹

Other critics, however, believed that the main portion of the blame rested with the Victorian reading public, whose 'morbid failings and cravings'¹⁰ had given rise to the genre of sensation fiction in the first place:

Precisely as certain diseased conditions of the body give rise to a craving after unnatural food, so do certain morbid conditions of the mind produce an appetite for literary food which a sound mental organization would reject. Individual instances of such morbid affections are fit subjects of study for the physician only [...] [b]ut that such books have a very large and increasing circulation should be a matter of painful interest to every decent man and woman in England.¹¹

As suggested by the above quotation, some critics including Vincent E. H. Murray, believed that the origin of the 'disease' of sensation fiction could be traced back to the reading public's 'morbid' appetite. Interestingly, some reviewers claimed that sensation fiction was not only the symptom but also the underlying cause of this morbidity of literary taste. According to Henry Mansel, both demand for and supply of sensation fiction had created a vicious cycle:

works of this class manifest themselves as belonging, some more, some less, but all to some extent, to the morbid phenomena of literature – indications of a wide-spread corruption, of which they are in part both the effect and the cause; called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply. (pp. 482-3)

Many scholars have drawn attention to this rhetoric on the part of the reviewers that equated sensation novels with disease and have put forth various theories regarding the reasons behind this rhetorical strategy. According to Deane, 'the trope of disease was only one element of a broader rhetorical strategy to discredit

⁹ [Henry Fothergill Chorley,] 'New Novels', *The Athenaeum* (2 June 1866), 732-3 (p. 732).

¹⁰ 'Not a New "Sensation"', *All the Year Round*, 9 (25 July 1863), 517-20 (p. 517).

¹¹ Vincent E. H. Murray, 'Ouida's Novels', *The Contemporary Review*, 22 (1873), 921-35 (p. 935).

sensation fiction' (p. 70). Others, like Gilbert, believe that this rhetoric bespeaks a variety of anxieties relating to 'the disintegration of the physical and social body' (p. 18). According to Gilbert, by using the rhetoric of disease '[t]he critic aligns him/herself with the sanitary inspectors whose purpose it is to police consumption and make the commodity safe for the middle classes' (p. 77). This view is echoed by Barbara Leckie, who has argued that the critics' disease metaphors 'highlighted the reviewers' anxiety with the reading body'.¹² By rhetorically aligning sensation fiction with disease, i.e. something that causes harm to the body, nineteenth-century reviewers were able to express concerns for the safety of readers of sensation novels and at the same time, as Henry Mansel put it, give a diagnosis regarding 'the state of health of the body in which they appear', reading sensation novels as 'by no means favourable symptoms of the conditions of the body of society' (p. 512).

Moreover, the rhetoric of disease and contagion in connection with sensation fiction enabled nineteenth-century reviewers to pass moral criticism on both the genre and the Victorian reading public. Due to their vivid depiction of transgressive behaviour, sensation novels were believed to pose a threat to public morals. Since a large part of the Victorian readership were supposedly highly impressionable women, many nineteenth-century reviewers feared that readers of sensation fiction might conflate the characters' thoughts and opinions with their own, leading them to adopt undesirable attitudes towards morality or engage in immoral behaviour themselves. According to Henry Mansel, sensation fiction played 'no inconsiderable part in moulding the minds and forming the habits and tastes of its generation', so much so that sensation fiction had usurped 'a portion of the preacher's office' (p. 482). However, in direct contravention to the duties of a preacher, instead of instilling moral values in their readers, sensation novelists tended to 'excuse criminality, or to render vice interesting',¹³ as the author of an unsigned 1862 review in *St James's Magazine* complained. Sensation fiction not only attracted criticism from lay critics but also caused a significant outcry among members of the clergy and certain Christian denominations. For example, the *Record*, an Evangelical newspaper, complained that sensation fiction was 'one of the crying evils of the day'.¹⁴

¹² Barbara Leckie, *Culture and Adultery: The Novel, the Newspaper, and the Law, 1857-1914* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 119.

¹³ 'Philosophy of "Sensation"', *St James's Magazine*, 5 (October 1862), 340-6 (p. 343).

¹⁴ Qtd. in Mark J. Knight, 'Rethinking Bibliolatry: Wilkie Collins, William Booth and the Culture of Evangelicalism', *Wilkie Collins Society Journal*, New Series, 3 (2000), 47-58 (p. 50).

In the nineteenth century, disease was not only associated with physical but also with moral harm. The spreading of venereal disease through prostitution had become a considerable problem in Victorian England, leading to the passing of the Contagious Diseases Act in 1864. This act made it possible for the police to detain prostitutes for compulsory health checks. Like prostitutes, books were considered to be agents of contagion and contamination, both in a moral and physical sense. As Gilbert has shown, books were believed to be capable of spreading disease, resulting in the disinfection of books during epidemics and the withdrawal from circulation of books loaned to reportedly diseased people (see p. 55). In the nineteenth-century imagination, the contagious potential of literature and prostitutes was strikingly similar, as ‘both involve the invasion of the desiring subject by an apparently passive, but secretly aggressive and dangerous object’ (p. 56). It was this dangerous potential of books that justified their subjection to close moral inspection by the reviewer, since ‘[t]he fear of the physical contamination of books by germs is an expression and crystallization on a physical level of anxiety related to a less specifically identifiable agency of moral contamination in the text’ (p. 56).

The Sins of the Father: Hereditary Contagion and Religious Mania in Wilkie Collins’s *Armadale* (1866)

As in the nineteenth-century sensation debate, sin and disease are curiously aligned in Wilkie Collins’s 1866 novel *Armadale*, whose main conflict is rooted in the Bible verse ‘The sins of the father shall be visited on the child’. In *Armadale*, the sequence of events that threatens to disrupt the lives of the two main protagonists, Allan Armadale and Ozias Midwinter (né Allan Armadale), is set in motion already well before the two of them are born, namely during the lifetime of their fathers, who vied for the affections of the same woman. The novel opens in the German spa town of Wildbad, where the mortally ill Allan Armadale writes a confessional letter to his son, who bears the same name (to avoid confusion, hereafter called by his birth name, ‘Wrentmore’). The letter, which is to be delivered to his son Allan Armadale (hereafter called Midwinter, an alias he assumed during adolescence) when he has come of age, tells of the father’s debauched youth, which culminated in the murder of his cousin, who was also called Allan Armadale (hereafter ‘Ingleby’, the name assumed to trick Wrentmore), because he had alienated Ms Blanchard’s affection from him and married her himself. Wrentmore believes that his son, Midwinter, will have to

pay for his sins, which is why he closes his letter with an explicit warning to his son to steer clear of Ingleby's offspring and all the other people who were involved in the plot, most notably Ms Blanchard's maid, because he is convinced that his son and the son of his adversary are bound to re-enact the actions of their fathers and will cause each other's downfall:

I look into the Book which all Christendom venerates; and the Book tells me that the sin of the father shall be visited on the child. I look into the world; and I see the living witnesses round me to that terrible truth. I see the vices which have contaminated the father, descending, and contaminating the child; I see the shame which has disgraced the father's name, descending, and disgracing the child's. I look in on myself – and I see My Crime, ripening again for the future in the self-same circumstance which first sowed the seeds of it in the past; and descending, in inherited contamination of Evil, from me to my son.¹⁵

According to Wrentmore, sin is not something that is contained within the individual sinner but something that, like a disease, can be transmitted to other people. However, unlike an infectious disease, which can be communicated to everyone who comes into direct or indirect contact with it, sin rather seems to have the qualities of a hereditary disease, which is solely passed on from parent to child. As the above quotation indicates, the idea of the heritability of sin can be traced back to the Bible. More precisely, it is presented in a passage in the *Book of Exodus* in which God admonishes the Israelites not to worship idols after their flight from Egyptian slavery, threatening them to visit their transgression of this law on their descendants: 'Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God *am* a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth *generation* of them that hate me'.¹⁶ Although other Bible passages indicate that '[t]he fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin' (Deut. 24.16) and that '[t]he son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son' (Ezek. 18.20), thereby suggesting that children cannot be punished for

¹⁵ Wilkie Collins, *Armadale*, ed. by John Sutherland (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 47. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁶ *The Bible*, Authorised King James Version with Apocrypha (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), Exod. 20.5. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

their parents' sins, Wrentmore remains staunch in his belief that his sin will be passed on to this progeny to 'work its deadly mischief' (p. 47) with the second Armadale generation.

Years later, due to a series of accidents, Midwinter and Allan Armadale, Ingleby's son, cross paths and form a firm friendship, which becomes endangered when Midwinter receives his father's deathbed letter. After the receipt of his father's letter, Midwinter repeatedly tries to break off his friendship with Allan because, like his father, he is convinced that he will be the instrument of his best friend's destruction. Despite Midwinter's repeated attempts to escape the allegedly fatal sequence set in motion during their parents' lives, it seems that the two Allan Armadales of the second generation are bound to repeat their fathers' actions. At a first glance, the idea of the transmissibility of sin built up in *Armadale's* first chapters is corroborated by a prophetic dream that gradually seems to come true as well as a number of startling coincidences, including the reappearance of Lydia Gwilt, Ms Blanchard's former maid, who, struck by the resemblance of the two friends' names, devises a plot to defraud Allan of his money by marrying Midwinter under his real name. Even though the novel eventually disproves the notion of the transmissibility of sin by inheritance, hereditary contagion plays an important part in the unfolding of events. Wrentmore's superstitious belief in cross-generational retribution, which borders on religious fanaticism, is passed down to his son through his confessionary letter, which serves as a metaphor for hereditary transmission. Although the novel only contains few direct references to mental illness, Midwinter's conviction of the heritability of sin undoubtedly has morbid characteristics, leading other characters to dub it a 'mad superstition' (p. 564).

This is in line with nineteenth-century medical discourse, which connected religious fanaticism and insanity in various ways. In the nineteenth century, it was a common belief that excessive religiosity could provoke insanity. For example, Philippe Pinel, a famous French psychiatrist whose works were also translated into English, listed religious fanaticism as one of the main exciting causes of mental illness.¹⁷ Moreover, the diagnosis 'religious insanity', with its clinical manifestations 'religious mania' and 'religious melancholia', established a direct link between religion and mental disease. Alexander Morison and many other nineteenth-century alienists considered religious insanity to be a form of

¹⁷ Philippe Pinel, *A Treatise on Insanity*, trans. by D. D. Davis (Sheffield: Cadell and Davies, 1806), p. 113. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

monomania.¹⁸ According to Morison, religious insanity could take a variety of shapes, ranging from ‘Theomania’ to ‘Demonomania’ (see p. 115). One of the most common forms, however, was religious melancholia, which was usually accompanied by a sense of impending doom, with ‘the patient conceiving that he is under the wrath of heaven and, that all hope of salvation is lost’ (p. 115). James Cowles Prichard gave a similar definition of religious melancholia: ‘Many religious persons, labouring under a predisposition to grief and despondency, have conceived the opinion that they are doomed to future perdition, their own cases forming particular exceptions to the otherwise merciful dispensations of Providence’.¹⁹

The case of Midwinter, who believes that he is ‘doomed, beyond all human capacity of resistance, to bring misery and destruction blindfold’ (p. 513) on his best friend and cannot be persuaded to believe that providence would intervene on his behalf, is strikingly similar to the cases described by Morison and Prichard. Right from the beginning, the novel establishes an indirect, yet firm, connection between Midwinter’s superstitious belief in the transmissibility of sin and disease by linking the ‘symptoms’ of his religious fanaticism to the symptoms experienced by his father, who is suffering from syphilis, or ‘general paralysis’, as nineteenth-century medical practitioners usually termed it. It is interesting to note that general paralysis was frequently associated with mental illness in the nineteenth century. For instance, Prichard noted that general paralysis ‘frequent[ly] occurre[d] in conjunction with mental derangement’ (p. 99), which is why it ‘must be looked upon as nearly related to that disease [...]’ (p. 100). By aligning Midwinter’s passive submission to what he considers his fate with his father’s affliction, the novel establishes a link between Midwinter’s superstition and mental disease. Like his father, Midwinter appears to be paralysed by the oppressive sense of doom that haunts him. His paralytic condition is also noted by some of the other characters, who entreat him to ‘free [himself] from the paralysing fatalism’ (p. 512) that has taken hold of him.

Apart from Midwinter’s almost paralytic resignation and passivity, his ‘psychopathic obsession’²⁰ with inherited doom also elicits a number of other

¹⁸ Alexander Morison, *The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases* (London: Longman, 1838), p. 115. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁹ James Cowles Prichard, *A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind* (London: Sherwood, Gilbert, and Piper, 1835), p. 31. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

²⁰ Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, *Wilkie Collins, Medicine and the Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), p. 58.

symptoms of disease, like mood swings, loss of appetite, uncontrolled shaking, and even swooning. Jenny Bourne Taylor has noted that the descriptions of Midwinter's nervous condition resemble contemporary discourses of hysteria.²¹ Also Lyn Pykett has pointed out that 'Midwinter's hypersensitivity, his susceptibility to non-rational modes of interpretation, and his emotional self-policing combine to place him in a role in the sensation narrative which is more usually occupied by a female character – the hysteric'²². In fact, his sensitivity is so pronounced that Dr Hawbury, one of the novel's rational authorities, at one point states, 'I wouldn't change nervous systems with that man, for the largest fortune that could be offered me' (p. 137).

According to Marc Milton Ducusin, 'Ozias's hysteria resembles the gender transgressions that Ellis and other English sexologists would later label as inverted'.²³ Indeed, the transgression of gender norms seems to be curiously aligned with a tendency towards mental illness in nineteenth-century medical and cultural discourses. Many heroines of sensation novels who are labelled 'mad' are apt to transgress established gender boundaries. This is hardly surprising given the fact that, as Elaine Showalter has pointed out, 'expressions of sexual desire, anger, and aggression were taken as morbid deviations from the normal female personality'²⁴ and therefore frequently deemed pathological. With this in mind, it may be argued that Midwinter's 'sensitive feminine organization' (p. 220), which represents a departure from Victorian ideals of masculinity, makes him particularly liable to mental diseases of a religious kind. In *Observations on the Religious Delusions of Insane Persons*, Nathaniel Bingham, a nineteenth-century physician, observed that religious insanity was frequently produced 'in persons of a delicate and very susceptible constitution'²⁵ when occupying themselves excessively with religious matters. Midwinter himself acknowledges the detrimental effects his superstitious belief in the transmission of his father's

²¹ See Jenny Bourne Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 165.

²² Lyn Pykett, *The Nineteenth-Century Sensation Novel* (Horndon: Northcote House, 2011), p. 49.

²³ Marc Milton Ducusin, 'Male Hysteria, Sexual Inversion and the Sensational Hero in Wilkie Collins's *Armadale*', in *Victorian Medicine and Popular Culture*, ed. by Louise Penner and Tabitha Sparks (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 95-107 (p. 100).

²⁴ Elaine Showalter, 'Victorian Women and Insanity', in *Madhouses, Mad-Doctors, and Madmen: The Social History of Psychiatry in the Victorian Era*, ed. by Andrew Scull (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 313-36 (p. 322).

²⁵ Nathaniel Bingham, *Observations on the Religious Delusions of Insane Persons* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1841), p. 118.

sin has wrought on his mental condition: ‘I am ill and unnerved; trifles startle me’ (p. 264). Although he believes that his nervous suffering is the after-effect of an attack of brain fever he suffered earlier in the novel, it soon becomes obvious that his nervous symptoms are brought on by his pathological belief in cross-generational retribution.

The affinity between Midwinter’s superstition and disease not only manifests itself in the range of physical and mental symptoms listed above but becomes apparent from its infectious nature. Like a contagious disease, Midwinter’s superstition seems to have the property of spreading to other characters. While some of the novel’s characters, like Allan or the Reverend Brock, seem to be immune to his fatalistic beliefs, Lydia Gwilt, despite being the novel’s most sensible character, is compelled to admit that she has been infected with Midwinter’s superstition: ‘I believe I have caught the infection of Midwinter’s superstition. I begin to think that events are forcing me nearer and nearer to some end which I don’t see yet, but which I am firmly persuaded is now not far off’ (p. 442). Although mental illness was not generally regarded as a contagious disease, religious insanity was commonly believed to be infectious in nature. Nineteenth-century medical practitioners frequently used terms like ‘outbreaks’, ‘contagion’ or ‘epidemic’²⁶ when describing alleged cases of religious hysteria. As Robert E. Bartholomew and Julian D. O’Dea have pointed out, ‘Collective reactions among revivalist movement members were typically viewed as contagious hysteria’.²⁷ For example, the author of an 1862 article entitled ‘The State of Lunacy in Ireland’ quoted a report stating that ‘during the two months that *religious revivalism* was prevalent, a year or two ago, in the northern district of the island, more cases of insanity resulted therefrom than had taken place in the whole preceding year’.²⁸

Nineteenth-century alienists believed that religious insanity was of ‘a most obstinate character’.²⁹ According to Pinel, ‘melancholia or mania, originating in religious enthusiasm, will not admit of a cure, so long as the original impressions are to be continued, or renewed by their appropriate causes’ (p. 81). However, the

²⁶ J. G. Havelock, ‘An Epidemic of Religious Mania Originating from a Case of Spurious Pregnancy’, *Transactions of the Edinburgh Obstetrical Society*, 19 (1894), 183-5 (p. 184).

²⁷ Robert E. Bartholomew and Julian D. O’Dea, ‘Religious Devoutness Construed as Pathology: The Myth of “Religious Mania”’, *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 8.1 (1998), 1-16 (p. 4).

²⁸ ‘The State of Lunacy in Ireland’, *The Medical Critic and Psychological Journal*, 2 (January 1862), 102-13 (p. 110).

²⁹ Forbes Winslow, ‘Religious Insanity Metaphysically Considered’, *The Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology*, 1 (1875), 67-79 (p. 70).

novel's conclusion suggests that religious insanity is curable given the right treatment. Midwinter's path towards mental recovery begins with the moral management of his friends, who encourage him to exercise self-control. As Rebecca Stern has pointed out, 'As a genre, the sensation novel both contributed to and reflected public discourse about moral treatment'.³⁰ While Stern does not elaborate on this claim, Bourne Taylor has addressed the relevance of moral management for the plot of *Armada* in more detail. According to Bourne Taylor, it is Midwinter's continued self-analysis and attempts at self-control that promote his recovery: 'in attempting to control his associations Midwinter enacts the prescriptions set up by Abercrombie and Conolly in their outline of "the qualities and acquirements which constitute a well-regulated mind"' (p. 166).

Quite tellingly, Midwinter's recovery is completed at a mental asylum. To gain possession of Allan's inheritance, Lydia Gwilt, the novel's arch-villainess, lures the two Armadales into the sanatorium of her criminal associate Dr Downward, where an elaborate mechanism is supposed to flow a deadly, undetectable toxin into the room where Allan is staying for the night. However, Midwinter, sensing that something is not right, switches rooms with his best friend, thus saving his life. While some scholars have read Midwinter's selfless act as a way to atone for his father's sin, thus being able to put a stop to the fatalistic sequence set in motion by the murder of Allan's father, I agree with Peter Thoms, who has interpreted it as a means to recover from his religious delusions:

By substituting himself for Allan Armadale in the sanatorium and thus saving him, Midwinter avoids the repetition of the past which his father's deathbed confession [...] foresee[s]. His sacrificial substitution relates to the original criminal act of substitution (in which the attempt to usurp another's position leads to murder) as a form of rewriting or reinterpretation. Thus he halts the almost fatalistic sequence which has carried him along paralyzed by guilt. He repudiates the curse of the past and in his new independence reclaims a lost innocence.³¹

³⁰ Rebecca Stern, "'Personation' and 'Good Marking-Ink': Sanity, Performativity, and Biology in Victorian Sensation Fiction', *Nineteenth Century Studies*, 14 (2000), 35-62 (p. 43).

³¹ Peter Thoms, *The Windings of the Labyrinth: Quest and Structure in the Major Novels of Wilkie Collins* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1992), pp. 114-5.

The realisation that he has turned out to be Allan's saviour rather than the tool of his destruction erases the last traces of the superstition he has contracted from his father and makes a happy ending possible. While *Armada* provides an optimistic outlook by showing that the contagious effects of religious fanaticism can be overcome by the right treatment, Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely, but Too Well* paints a grimmer picture of this subject, by detailing the potentially disastrous effects that religious enthusiasm can have on individual lives.

Carnal Sin, Religious Fervour and Fever Epidemics in Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely, but Too Well* (1867)

Like in Wilkie Collins's *Armada*, the concept of sin also features prominently in Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely, but Too Well*. Being a representative of a sub-genre of sensation fiction that Andrew Maunder has dubbed 'erotic sensationalism', the book's sensationalism 'lies in thrilling emotion' rather than 'crime and detection'.³² As Shirley Jones has noted, 'Adultery, or the possibility of it, is the most common "crime" featured in [Rhoda Broughton's] novels'.³³ However, although adultery is only contemplated and never actually committed, Rhoda Broughton's 'controversial representation of female desire'³⁴ was considered to be highly problematic by conservative reviewers, like Margaret Oliphant, who declared her writings to be downright 'sinful' (p. 267).

The first part of the novel is set in a Welsh seaside resort, where the book's heroine, Kate Chester, and her two siblings, Maggie and Blount, are staying with their aunt and uncle for the summer. During her stay, Kate falls passionately in love with the local squire's second son, Dare Stamer, a debauched womaniser. After a number of ardent encounters, Dare confesses that he is already married to another woman and tries to convince Kate to run away with him and become his mistress. Despite Kate's unconventionality, she is shocked by her lover's proposal and vehemently refuses his offer. Soon afterwards, she leaves for town together with her siblings, where they establish a household together. After an interval of a year and a half, Kate is still lovesick for Dare but is gradually

³² Helen Debenham, 'The Victorian Sensation Novel', in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by William Baker and Kenneth Womack (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002), 209-21 (p. 214).

³³ Shirley Jones, "'Love': Rhoda Broughton, Writing and Re-Writing Romance", in *Popular Victorian Women Writers*, ed. by Kay Boardman and Shirley Jones (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 208-36 (p. 212).

³⁴ Tamar Heller, 'Rhoda Broughton', in *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, ed. by Pamela K. Gilbert (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 281-92 (p. 282).

becoming her old self again. She starts a harmless flirtation with her cousin George Chester and rather unwillingly does charity work under the supervision of her old friend, the curate of her parish, James Stanley. One day, however, she runs into Dare again, and he renews his indecent proposal. Although Kate has qualms at first, she eventually relents and promises to elope with him and become his mistress. However, on her way to meet him the day afterwards, she runs into her moral guardian, James Stanley, who guesses her purpose of running away with Dare. By means of a lengthy sermon, he eventually manages to convince Kate not to meet with Dare after all. Kate's decision to forsake her lover proves to be so stressful that she comes down with brain fever. After she has convalesced, Kate completely immerses herself in charity work and eventually decides to join an Anglican sisterhood, where she dies a few years later, after having gone through many hardships and privations.

Kate's love for Dare is represented as sinful and destructive. Right from the beginning of the novel, the narrator establishes a dichotomy within love, one high, ethereal and ennobling, the other low, earthly and degrading. According to the narrator, Kate's feelings for Dare belong to the second class:

That muddy, polluted flood of earthly love [...] had, with its bitter waters, swallowed up and choked the spring of higher, better love, which might have refreshed and watered her soul for the garden of God. O, idiot! – to make so losing a bargain with this dull, passing world.³⁵

Throughout the novel, this contrast between love originating in the 'dull swampy flats' of Earth and 'that better, boundless love which is the essence of Deity' (p. 41) is framed as a vertical hierarchy, with God's 'higher, purer, more satisfying love' at the top and the 'wretched, wicked love, that is desolating [Kate's] life' (p. 299) at the very bottom. This dichotomy is embodied by two of the book's characters. While James Stanley, Kate's friend and moral guardian, is the representative of 'pure, deep, utterly unselfish love', Dare is a personification of the 'mad, wild-beast passion' (p. 296) that only breeds 'disgrace and shame and pollution' (p. 297).

The destructive nature of Kate's passion is highlighted by the book's use of the rhetoric of disease and contagion. Right at the beginning of the book, Kate muses that life would be much more peaceful 'without any of those dreadful hot

³⁵ Rhoda Broughton, *Not Wisely, but Too Well* (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2013), p. 66. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

and cold fits that one is subject to in typhus fever and love' (p. 51). The analogy between love and fever is further developed through the attack of brain fever Kate suffers after she has forsaken her lover for the second time:

People cannot indulge in such frantic emotions as I have tried weakly to portray in the last chapter without paying for them – paying a good price too. Nature will avenge herself on those who maltreat her so uncalculatingly. For the second time in her life, Kate was struck down by a violent brain-fever. Again for weeks and weeks she lay, hovering on the ill-defined borders of life and death, in a sort of debatable land that hardly belonged to either. Again, in delirious frenzies, she raved about her forever-lost Dare [...].

According to the narrator, the brain fever is a reprisal for the intense emotions Kate gave way to on the day she intended to elope with Dare. Following a lengthy sermon by her moral guardian, James Stanley, in which he makes plain the sinful nature of her passion for Dare, Kate's attack of brain fevers seems to be the product of sin. Similar to Wilkie Collins's *Armadale*, sin appears to be closely aligned with disease. Moreover, just like in *Armadale*, the disease bred by sin does not remain contained within the individual sinner but spreads like a wildfire. As Gilbert has noted, Kate's fever of passion 'is [...] transformed from an individual to a community concern, escaping its containment within the individual to prey on society at large' (p. 117). According to Gilbert, Kate becomes 'a vector for disease' (p. 114), 'spread[ing] contagion wherever she goes' (p. 116). Kate's apparent recovery and search for a cure from her diseased passion is set against the backdrop of a fever epidemic, which rages in the slums of the town where she lives. Although the outbreak of the disease in the slums predates her attack of brain fever, it is only after she has abandoned Dare that the fever begins to spread uncontrollably.

The infectious nature of Kate's sinful passion is well-grounded in nineteenth-century religious discourse. Indeed, the idea that sin was contagious and could be communicated to everyone who came into direct or indirect contact with it had gained some traction among authors of nineteenth-century religious text on both sides of the Atlantic, as this passage from the writings of Daniel Smith, an American Methodist, demonstrates:

Sin is contagious. [...] It is a spreading leprosy. Can we welcome it to our embrace, and yet hope to avoid the contagion? In vain does the blood dance joyously along in its appointed courses; in vain does the eye flash and the cheek bloom; in vain is the step elastic and the strength firm; the infection is inhaled by the breath, absorbed through the pores – soon is it coursing its way through every artery and vein, and corrupting the whole mass – the light fades from the eye, the limbs falter, ‘the whole head becomes sick, and the whole heart faint!’³⁶

Also James Spence, a Scottish clergyman, shared the opinion that sin was not self-contained but could infect and corrupt other people:

We are all familiar with the sad fact that sin is infectious, that it possesses a power of self-propagation, of passing by contact from man to man, and from heart to heart. One soul that is tainted communicates the taint to another, and that one to a third, and thus the foul thing is transmitted and its existence perpetuated in the earth.³⁷

According to Gilbert, Kate’s sinful sexual passion for Dare ‘is figured forth as disease’ (p. 116). However, the fact that the outbreak of the fever epidemic in the city slums follows directly on a sermon delivered by Kate’s friend James and coincides with Kate’s new-found religious fervour makes another interpretation possible. In the book’s second volume, before she decides to leave Dare for good, Kate becomes a district visitor, distributing evangelical tracts to the poor and the sick. Although she initially goes about her duties rather reluctantly, calling the tracts she is supposed to hand out ‘[l]ittle torments’ (p. 168), she starts to embrace her district-visiting duties after her recovery from brain fever: ‘Heart and soul, with all the energies of her body, and all the faculties of her mind, she went into that work, with which she had formerly trifled and played’ (p. 304). In accordance with the saying ‘The devil finds work for idle hands’, she plunges herself into charity work to atone for her past sins.

As this instance of internal focalisation reveals, Kate’s attempts to suppress her ‘sinful’ urges through self-sacrifice assume exaggerated proportions:

³⁶ Daniel Smith, *Lectures to Young Men on Their Dangers, Safeguards, and Responsibilities* (New York, NY: Carlton and Philipps, 1853), p. 26.

³⁷ James Spence, ‘The Greatest of These Is Love’, *The Original Secession Magazine*, 17 (1886), 369-79 (pp. 377-8).

No reins [...] could be too strait and tight to curb and check so untamed a soul, no manacles too heavy and close to fetter it. [...] She had done for ever with the flowers and jewels of life; the thorns must be her portion now, and she would wear them crownwise, round her brows, and not clamour or complain about the blood they drew. On her past harmless coquetries she looked back as on so many deadly sins [...]. (p. 303)

Both the narrator and Kate's immediate family members agree that Kate's religious fervour has taken on pathological features. According to the narrator, Kate's 'exaggerated strictness' with herself is the result of a 'morbid remorse' (p. 303). This sentiment is echoed by Kate's sister, Maggie, who states, 'She is morbid; it is unnatural to hear a young girl preach like that [...]' (p. 331). Moreover, Kate's fervent adoption of Methodism is connected with mental illness. When Kate does not show any inclination of giving up her visiting of districts where the fever is raging, Maggie declares her 'mad' (p. 308). The association between Kate's religious enthusiasm and madness is reminiscent of nineteenth-century medical discourse, which considered religious fervour, especially in the context of religious revivalist movements, to be an important cause of insanity.

By reading the rhetoric of disease and contagion in the context of religious fervour rather than transgressive sexuality, the book's message appears in a completely new light. While many scholars have highlighted the moralistic overtones of the book's second half, which largely seem to erase the novel's radical stance on female desire and sexuality of the book's first half, such a reading allows an entirely different interpretation. Rather than condemning passion as 'a contagion that invades the body and corrupts the mind' (Gilbert p. 117), the novel seems to foreground the oppressive nature of religion, which by preaching continence prevents people from attaining happiness. This interpretation is underscored by the fact that Kate's religious transformation is not conducive to her happiness. Although the narrator appears to be awed by her self-sacrificial devotion, Kate's final years with the Sisters of Mercy, which are summarised in a few words, have no semblance of a happy ending: 'Early and late she toiled, giving her days and her nights, her feeble strength, and all her tender woman's heart, to the abating by but a few drops the great ocean of human anguish; and, for meed of her labours, won much weariness of body, oftentimes discouragement of soul, and small cold praise' (p. 375).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be said that the rhetoric of disease and contagion not only pervaded the mid-nineteenth-century sensation debate but also features prominently in the two representatives of the genre chosen for the subject of this article. Both Wilkie Collins's *Armadale* and Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely, but Too Well* weave together discourses of disease and contagion with discourses of sin, thus replicating the rhetoric that was used by conservative reviewers to discredit the genre of sensation fiction and demonstrate its allegedly harmful properties.

However, as I have argued, instead of taking on a moralistic, preaching tone, their use of the rhetoric of disease and contagion in conjunction with the rhetoric of sin allowed the authors of the two works under consideration to challenge and negotiate notions of what constitutes sinful behaviour. By applying the rhetoric of disease and contagion to both sin and religious enthusiasm, the two novels put the two concepts on the same level, suggesting that excessive religious fervour can be as destructive as sin. This is exemplified by the stories of the two novels' main protagonists, Ozias Midwinter and Kate Chester. While Midwinter's religious mania threatens to drive a wedge between him and his best friend, thus almost making his worst fear come true, namely that he will bring about his best friend's destruction, Kate's adoption of Methodism, rather than bringing her happiness, condemns her to a life of toil and misery.

It may be argued that both novels display an anti-Evangelical strain, as they both demonstrate the dangerous potential of the Evangelical 'insistence on human depravity'³⁸ and belief in the doomed nature of humanity in their own way. By depicting both Midwinter's conviction that he is doomed to be the tool of his best friend's destruction and Kate's conviction that her depravity has put her outside the pale of God's mercy (see p. 293) and her subsequent religious fervour as pathological, the novels under consideration level thinly veiled criticism at two of the core teachings of Evangelicalism. Thus, in an ironic reversal of nineteenth-century moral criticism of sensation fiction, which declared sensation novels to be 'one of the crying evils of the day', Wilkie Collins's *Armadale* and Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely, but Too Well* can be said to expose moral self-

³⁸ Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton, *Literature and Religion in Mid-Victorian England: From Dickens to Eliot* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 94.

righteousness and excessive religiosity, especially that of an Evangelical turn, as the real agents of contagion.

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