

The Secret Theatre of Suburbia: Identity and Roleplay in Wilkie Collins's *Basil*

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Abstract

Victorian popular novelist Wilkie Collins was, like many other writers of the period, fascinated with the stage. Amongst the literal dramatic activities that he engaged in, Collins was, for example, a keen amateur actor, and he regularly wrote theatrical reviews. This essay seeks to contextualise Collins's knowledge of acting alongside his depiction of the London suburbs in *Basil*, his 1852 novel of modern life. In this text, Collins's presentation of the city as a kind of theatre is prominently established in a key scene where he describes domestic unrest within the imaginary suburban location of Hollyoake Square as 'the secret theatre of home'. While Collins's evocation of the theatrical metaphor to superimpose urban with theatrical space is effective in augmenting the novel's central theme of identity, I demonstrate with close attention to conventions of the popular mid-nineteenth-century stage how Collins takes this further. Developing recent criticism that has considered Collins as an urban writer, I argue London and its surrounding suburbs are, for Collins, a site of roleplay, which serves to underscore the theme of identity that is central to his work and address anxieties relating to identity and selfhood therein.

Ideas relating to the symbiosis between city and stage were ingrained within texts about the London metropolis during the mid-nineteenth century. In *Curiosities of London Life*, which was a collection of journalistic pieces written during the late 1840s and early 50s, Charles Manby Smith sketches his observations of the London metropolis, equating urban and theatrical space from the very beginning of the text. With theatrical zeal, Manby Smith declares:

[w]e are going to lift the curtain, and present to the gaze of the Public many a varied scene in the strange drama of London life and experience. [...] it is plain we cannot do better than to call upon the members of our company to perform their own overture, preparatory to the entrance upon the stage of the several actors, who are summoned to play their parts for the general amusement and edification.¹

The idea of lifting the curtain serves to accentuate the sense of curiosity and even wonder that can be associated with the metropolis. Throughout his account of London life, Manby Smith emphasises the visual display that the city presents, extending his theatrical metaphor to introduce the 'actors' who each play their

¹ Charles Manby Smith, *Curiosities of London Life; Or, Phases, Physiological and Social, of the Great Metropolis* (London: W. & F. G. Cash, 1854), p. 1.

parts in the drama of metropolitan life. While figurative language associated with acting establishes the idea that the metropolis is a site of performance and of roleplay, the way in which Manby Smith crams his opening gambit with other allusions to dramatic experience further amalgamates theatre and urban space. Suggestive of the spectacularity that was associated with the nineteenth-century stage, the mention of the 'gaze' of the public reinforces the idea that the city accommodates a relationship between performers and spectators. Likewise, the reference to 'overture' is evocative of the music of the theatre, encouraging us to consider the diverse soundscape of the nineteenth-century city. For Manby Smith, the theatrical metaphor goes some way to encapsulating multiple aspects of the experience of theatre during the mid-nineteenth century. The presentation of the city as theatre recurs with striking consistency in popular fiction of the mid-Victorian period. One has only got to think of the spectacle of the city and the stage-like characters that populate the London of any of Charles Dickens's novels to gain an insight into what Murray Baumgarten understands as the 'theatrical code' which permeates Dickens's depictions of urban life.²

Although Dickens is often considered as '*the* London novelist',³ scholars have started to focus more closely on the extent to which Wilkie Collins, Dickens's friend and close contemporary, was, too, a city writer who used his portrayal of the cityscape to imbue his narratives with meaning.⁴ While Collins is perhaps best known for writing *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868) – works that take in an expansive array of shifting settings, his initial foray into the realm of fiction had a distinctly urban quality. The plots of novels such as *Basil* (1852) and *Hide and Seek* (1854), for example, are anchored by their metropolitan settings, and the city serves as a site that allows Collins to explore the interaction between character and place. Noting the frequency with which London settings dominate Collins's early work, Graham Law and Andrew Maunder have suggested that Collins's novels give us a 'double-edged view of the capital', arguing: 'Collins's London may not have the idiosyncratic detail and atmosphere of Dickens's, but the city is nonetheless present as a distinct environment full of meaning'.⁵ In contrast to the bustling city scenes of his more

² Murray Baumgarten, 'London, Dickens, the Theatre of Homelessness', in *Victorian Urban Settings: Essays on the Nineteenth-Century City and Its Contexts*, ed. by Debra N. Mancoff and D.J. Trela (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996), pp. 74-88 (p. 74).

³ Efraim Sicher, *Rereading the City/Rereading Dickens: Representation, the Novel, and Urban Realism* (Brooklyn: AMS Press, 2003), p. 1.

⁴ See Tamara S. Wagner, 'Sensationalizing Victorian Suburbia: Wilkie Collins's *Basil*', in *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*, ed. by Kimberley Harrison and Richard Fantina (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006), 200-211; Anne Witchard, 'A Fatal Freshness: Mid-Victorian Suburbophobia', in *London Gothic: Place, Space and the Gothic Imagination*, ed. by Lawrence Phillips and Anne Witchard (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), pp. 23-40.

⁵ Graham Law and Andrew Maunder, *Wilkie Collins: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), p. 61.

famous contemporary, however, the cityscapes of Collins's early novels focus on suburban areas of London. As Tim Dolin notes during reflection on the reading public of the mid-nineteenth century, 'it was Collins, not Dickens, who gave voice to the urban and (increasingly) suburban lives of this public'.⁶ Critics have, generally speaking, considered how Collins Gothicises suburbia throughout his early novels. I want to explore how Collins's profound interest in drama influences the theatricalisation of urban space in his early work.

Collins was an avid enthusiast of the drama of his day. In addition to the dramatic criticism he contributed to various publications, including *The Leader*, Collins was engaged in a wide range of literal theatrical activities. Collins regularly attended the theatre throughout his life. He was well versed in the literal exploit of acting, and he staged and acted in amateur theatricals with his friends and family from a young age.⁷ Adapting *A Court Duel* from the French in 1850, before pursuing dramatic ventures throughout the entirety of his career, Collins also wrote for the stage. *The Lighthouse* (1855) and *The Frozen Deep* (1857) were first performed at Tavistock House as part of Dickens's series of private theatricals, though other performances soon followed.⁸ It was after receiving an invitation to join Dickens's theatrical troupe that Collins first met Dickens in 1851,⁹ and he went on to perform frequently in Dickens's amateur theatricals and was clearly an enthusiastic young actor who was knowledgeable about acting and the machinery of the stage. After a performance of *Not So Bad As We Seem* in Manchester under Dickens's management, for instance, Collins wrote about the performance to his mother:

My part, you will be glad to hear, was played without a single mistake – and played so as to produce some very warm congratulations from my manager, and indeed from the whole company. The dress and the wig made me (everybody said) look about sixteen. The first sight of the audience, when I peeped at them through the curtain before we began was something sublime – nothing but faces from the floor to the ceiling. I did not feel the slightest degree nervous, and was not “thrown off my balance” by a round of applause which greeted my first appearance on the stage.¹⁰

⁶ Tim Dolin, 'Collins's career and the visual arts', in *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, ed. by Jenny Bourne Taylor (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), 7-22 (p. 16).

⁷ Catherine Peters, *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins* (1991; repr. London: Minerva, 1992), pp. 81-3.

⁸ Andrew Gasson, *Wilkie Collins: An Illustrated Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 50.

⁹ Catherine Peters, *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins* (1991; repr. London: Minerva, 1992), p. 93.

¹⁰ Letter to Harriet Collins, 13 February 1852; repr. in *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: Collected Letters*, in 4 volumes, ed. by William Baker et al. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), I, pp. 60-1, p. 60.

The thrill Collins got from appearing on stage is unequivocally expressed here: Collins seems to relish the dynamics that arise between performer and audience, as well as the fact that he was able to appear as someone, or something, he was not. As well as participating regularly in amateur theatricals before beginning to write novels, Collins demonstrated an inclination towards drama throughout his life. Indeed, when discussing Collins's dramatic adaptation of *The Woman in White*, a contemporary reviewer noted of the author that '[a]s a novelist, he is the most dramatic author we possess, and it may be affirmed that no living playwright equals him in writing for the stage'.¹¹ Reinforcing such an evaluation of Collins's talents is the fact that, of his later dramatic successes, he consistently achieved acclaim by adapting and dramatising his own novels.¹²

Critics have readily pointed out Collins's acknowledgement of the interrelation between drama and the novel. He notes in his letter of dedication to Charles James Ward at the beginning of *Basil* that 'the Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the family of Fiction; that the one is a drama narrated, as the other is a drama acted'.¹³ In this essay, I will argue that Collins's profound fascination with the stage influenced his conception of setting and character in this early text, enabling him to address anxieties relating to identity and selfhood. Several of the characters of the novel adopt multiple identities, accentuating the idea that the cityscape of the London metropolis exists as a site of roleplay. But such a notion of Collins's characters as actors can be taken further in order to theorise how this urban narrative is engrained with notions of theatricality and performance – namely, by attention to conventions of the popular mid-nineteenth-century stage. With close reference to Rede's *The Road to the Stage*, a popular contemporary acting manual, I will contextualise Collins's characterisation alongside the gestural action that was associated with the nineteenth-century stage and explore how he models his characters on the stock character types associated with the stage only to subvert these comparisons. Furthermore, I suggest clothing and costumery can be considered to be synonymous in *Basil*, serving as another means by which Collins frames his characters as actors on the stage of the London metropolis and augments the novel's central theme of identity by portraying the city as a place of self-making that accommodates complex interplay between a plurality of selves.

Basil: A story of modern life

Published in 1852 by Richard Bentley before being heavily revised and republished ten years later, *Basil* is arguably one of Collins's most significant

¹¹ *Wrexham Advertiser*, 21 October 1871, p. 4.

¹² Jim Davis, 'Collins and the Theatre', *Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, ed. by Jenny Bourne Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 168-180 (p. 173).

¹³ Wilkie Collins, *Basil* (1862; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 4. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

works, marking a departure from his earlier effort at novel writing – his debut, *Antonina; Or, the Fall of Rome* was an attempt at historical fiction – and cementing the course of his future writing career. The novel is based around the eponymous narrator's account of shameful events of his recent past that have resulted in his exile from his family home in London and expulsion from his aristocratic caste. Basil, an aspiring writer, decides to take a ride in an omnibus, hoping to gain inspiration for his historical romance. Onboard the vehicle, he becomes beguiled by the appearance of a young woman, whom he follows to her home in suburban London. Upon finding out that Margaret is the daughter of a linen draper, Basil realises that his father would never give him permission to marry a partner of such lowly social status. In his desire for Margaret, Basil naively becomes ensnared in a scheme conceived by Stephen Sherwin, Margaret's father, and the pair marry but must keep their union secret for one year before Basil is permitted to publicly claim Margaret as his wife and consummate their marriage. On the eve of this much-anticipated anniversary, however, Basil overhears Margaret being seduced by Sherwin's clerk, Mannion, and he listens with horror to their licentiousness through the thinly papered walls of a hotel room. While the novel's explicit portrayal of adultery was shocking to contemporary readers, the text is unique in the sense that it is the only text by Collins which utilises a single first-person narrative voice and, in anticipating the style of his future novels, the narrative is interspersed with letters, other documents, and dream sequences. *Basil* is, as Anthea Trodd puts it, an 'innovative mingling of several genres – Gothic thriller, confessional narrative and domestic realism'.¹⁴

At the centre of *Basil* is scrutiny of the nature of social class, and Collins exposes the sense of performativity, which is associated with rank and other arbitrary signifiers of identity. Being set largely amidst a suburban landscape of unfinished streets and houses, *Basil*'s original subtitle of 'a story of modern life' was a wholly apt assessment of the text and critics have frequently acknowledged the author's fixation with these concerns. In her seminal reading of *Basil*, for example, Tamar Heller suggests that the 'class allegory' of the novel's plot is 'written as an allegory of gender, with the erotic bond between Margaret and Mannion figuring revolution as the inversion of both class and gender hierarchies that Basil's rebellion produces'.¹⁵ For Heller, the figure of Basil serves as an embodiment of Collins's own anxiety about the role of the male author and the ambiguity of class division. Acknowledging how the rapid expansion of Victorian suburbia impacted what she calls 'petit-bourgeois self-definition', Tamara S. Wagner's discussion of social class in *Basil* revolves around the novel's suburban

¹⁴ Anthea Trodd, 'The early writing', in *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, ed. by Jenny Bourne Taylor (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), pp. 23-36 (p. 26).

¹⁵ Tamar Heller, *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 61.

topography and the construct of the middle class.¹⁶ *Basil*, then, is a text that anticipates the central ideas of Collins's mature writing; as Law and Maunder suggest, it is notable for 'the challenges to identity, sanity, and selfhood posed by unscrupulous relatives and scheming acquaintances' and 'the disjunction between appearance and reality, particularly in middle-class homes' that Collins presents throughout.¹⁷ It is my contention, as we shall see, that Collins's interest in theatre and performance is a context that serves to underscore the theme of identity in *Basil*. London and its surrounding suburbs are, for Collins, a site of roleplay, and his theatricalisation of the (sub)urban topography of London throughout this early text is a crucial element of his success in exploring these key themes.

Basil places emphasis on what it means to know character and, indeed, the self throughout his narrative. As a budding novelist, he boasts of his 'aptitude for discovering points of characters in others: and its natural result, an unfailing delight in studying characters of all kinds'. For Basil, the interior of a London omnibus offers an insight into 'the infinitesimal varieties of human character' (*Basil*, p. 27). Gauging a sense of someone's character is important for Basil and he insists on offering insight into the characters of those around him throughout his narrative: 'I knew my father's character well', comments Basil at one point in the text, whereas he has trouble when initiating contact with his future father-in-law due to the fact that he 'knew nothing of Mr Sherwin's character' (*Basil*, pp. 39, 52). Moreover, when Basil first meets Mannion, he expresses his fascination with the enigmatic character of the clerk, noting at one point that '[a]t times a suspicion crossed my mind that he might really be studying my character, as I was vainly trying to study his' (*Basil*, p. 93). Similarly, when he is invited into Mannion's home to take shelter from the storm, Basil writes: '[t]o study the appearance of a man's dwelling-room, is very often nearly equivalent to studying his own character' (*Basil*, p. 98). While Basil also notes 'certain peculiarities in Margaret's character' after Mannion returns to London, he describes the eve of the day when a year has elapsed and he can finally claim Margaret as his bride as an occasion when he 'went to see Margaret for the last time in my old character' (*Basil*, pp. 107, 122). Although Basil maintains a fixation with knowing the characters of others, he makes clear at the beginning of the narrative, in retrospect, that it is somewhat impossible to truly know the self. Collins writes:

I might attempt, in this place, to sketch my own character as it was at that time. But what man can say—I will sound the depth of my own vices, and measure the heights of my own virtues; and be as good as his word? We can neither know nor judge ourselves [...] Let my character appear—as far as any human character can appear in its integrity, in this world—in my

¹⁶ Wagner, p. 202.

¹⁷ Law and Maunder, p. 65.

actions, when I describe the one eventful passage in my life which forms the basis of this narrative. (*Basil*, p. 10)

The way in which references to ‘character’ and, particularly, the ‘knowing’ of character appear throughout the text is striking; the fact that Collins made over one thousand deletions in preparation for the 1862 revised edition of the text and that these passages survived suggests that identity and conceptions of character are themes which Collins very much intended to foreground in his text.¹⁸

Although the importance of identity and the act of understanding the self are prominently established throughout *Basil*, the inherent theatricality of the novel soon serves to contradict such notions. The Sherwin family live in a fictional suburban neighbourhood named Hollyoake Square and, contrasting with the polite ‘drama of country society’, Collins prominently establishes the image of the theatre when in recounting an interview between the eponymous narrator and the characters of Mr and Mrs Sherwin, superimposing urban with theatrical space:

I could see one of those ghastly heart-tragedies laid open before me, which are acted and re-acted, scene by scene, and year by year, in the secret theatre of home; tragedies which are ever shadowed by the slow falling of the black curtain that drops lower and lower every day—that drops, to hide all at last, from the hand of death. (*Basil*, p. 23, 64)

Life, and particularly life in the metropolis, is portrayed by Collins as a kind of show, though the notion of the secrecy of the suburban settlement suggests a more macabre kind of performance. While this is the sole instance in the novel where Collins explicitly utilises the theatrical metaphor, Collins’s characters are framed as actors in the drama of the city, and he frequently alludes to the idea that the self is put on display against the urban backdrop of London throughout the novel. For example, the idea of London being a site of performance is also suggested through Sherwin’s boastfulness about the quality of Margaret’s education. We are told that she attends ‘the most genteel school, perhaps, in all London’, where there is

[a] drawing-room-department day once every week—the girls taught how to enter a room and leave a room with dignity and ease—a model of a carriage door and steps, in the back drawing-room, to practise the girls (with the footman of the establishment in attendance) in getting into a carriage and getting out again, in a lady-like manner! (*Basil*, pp. 60-61).

¹⁸ As Dorothy Goldman notes in the Oxford World’s Classics edition of *Basil*. See ‘A Note on the Text’, pp. xxi-xxii.

In order to fit into the high London society that Sherwin aspires Margaret to be part of, the girls train almost as actors when performing the functions associated with and expected of ladyhood and, indeed, class. Sherwin seeks to improve the social status of his family through his daughter, and the Sherwins' middle-classness unavoidably propels them into a perpetual cycle of self-invention where they essentially engage in a form of roleplay. Essentially anticipating Dickens's portrayal of the Veneerings in a text such as *Our Mutual Friend*, North Villa, Collins describes the suburban home of the Sherwin family as both 'oppressively new' and 'bran-new' (*Basil*, p. 54, 62). The gaudiness of North Villa reflects the inauthenticity of the linen draper Stephen Sherwin himself. At one point in the novel, Basil ponders over Sherwin's character, finally able to see through the fact that, upon first meeting Sherwin, the situation had distorted his impression of Sherwin's true character: '[h]ad I seen him under ordinary circumstances', writes Basil, 'I should have set him down as [...] a pompous parasite to those above him—a great stickler for the conventional respectabilities of life, and a great believer in his own infallibility' (*Basil*, p. 54). Sherwin's mannerisms are ultimately offensive to Basil's aristocratic sensibilities. We are told that Sherwin made 'a low and cringing bow' to Basil during their first meeting, whereas he perpetually offers Basil wine throughout their subsequent meeting (*Basil*, p. 54).

Another aspect of the novel that is inherently linked to its exploration of the theme of identity is Collins's notion that the massive urban backdrop of London fundamentally facilitates duplicitousness. Mannion performs a role under the guise of Sherwin's clerk. There is something fundamentally inauthentic about Mannion's physical features; as Aoife Leahy perceptively notes, 'Basil cannot read Mannion's emotions from his mask-like face'.¹⁹ The scene in Mannion's home, in which the lightning strike reveals the 'hideously livid hue' and 'such a spectral look of ghastliness and distortion to his features', illustrates this juxtaposition between his respectable self and the fiendish self which lies beneath his social mask (*Basil*, p. 106). Just as Mannion's act of self-invention results in the fact that there is doubleness to his persona, the character of Margaret is similarly framed as a duplicitous figure. Writing of Margaret's 'inherently disingenuous' character in his letter to Basil in part three of the novel, Mannion declares:

All, however, that I discovered of bad in her character, never made me pause in the prosecution of my design; I had carried it too far for that, before I thoroughly knew her. Besides, what mattered her duplicity to me?—I could see through it. (*Basil*, p. 191)

¹⁹ Aoife Leahy, 'The Face of Adversary in the Novels of Wilkie Collins', in *Wilkie Collins: Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. by Andrew Mangham (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), pp. 74-89 (p. 81).

Margaret is, on the one hand, literally portrayed as a duplicitous character through the fact that she commits adultery whilst displaying a surface of propriety. On the other, the characters of Margaret and Clara, as Wagner has also pointed out, exist in the novel as a set of doubles.²⁰ Both women represent very different sides of womanhood for Basil, and this is an idea that Collins establishes very early in the novel through the inclusion of the dream sequence in chapter eight. In his dream, Basil finds himself standing on a ‘wide plain’, envisioning a dark woman coming out of the woods and, from the other side of the landscape, a woman in white looking from the hills above (*Basil*, pp. 40-41). Moreover, while Heller helpfully suggests that Basil is doubled by the figure of Mannion,²¹ Anne Longmuir is also right to argue that a ‘strange and symbiotic relationship’ exists between Mannion and Basil.²² There are undoubtedly parallels that exist between the two men. In addition to the fact that both characters perceive themselves as literary gentlemen, both have become the personalities that they are through the influence of Basil’s father – Mannion reveals that Basil’s father was the Member of Parliament that gave evidence against his own father’s forgery, resulting in him being sentenced to death. ‘[T]he villain Mannion is not only Basil’s pursuer but his double’, writes Catherine Peters, before arguing that ‘[t]he revenge plot is supported at a psychological and mythic level as Basil and Mannion repeatedly change places during the course of the story, alternating the roles of avenger and victim, substance and shadow’.²³

Basil is also essentially a text in which revolves around the act of naming and how naming supports the act of self-creation. ‘Names’, as Julian Wolfreys puts it, ‘fix the limits of an identity’ and the significance of naming is established throughout Basil’s narrative.²⁴ Though revealing nothing of the actual words that Basil spoke to Margaret upon first approaching her, Basil notes that ‘I made use of my name and my rank in life—even now, my cheeks burn while I think of it—to dazzle her girl’s pride, to make her listen to me for the sake of station’ (*Basil*, p. 48). We are told that Mannion ‘assumed the name of a schoolfellow who had died’ early in his life and he continued to reinvent himself in events prior to the story (*Basil*, p. 184). Moreover, Basil expresses disapproval towards the servants of the Sherwin household while they insist on referring to Margaret as ‘Miss Sherwin’, despite the fact that she is now lawfully wedded to him (*Basil*, p. 169). Naming, or lack of a name, is established as a fundamental theme of the novel

²⁰ Wagner, p. 210.

²¹ Heller, p. 74.

²² Anne Longmuir, ‘The Scotch Verdict and Irregular Marriages: How Scottish Law Disrupts The Normative in *The Law And The Lady and Man and Wife*’, in *Wilkie Collins: Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. by Andrew Mangham (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), pp. 166-178 (p. 167).

²³ Peters, p. 120.

²⁴ Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. xi.

through the character of eponymous narrator himself: the lack of a surname in the novel's title, for instance, is symptomatic of the fact that '[c]ircumstances', as Basil tells us at the start of his narrative, 'have forced me to abandon my father's name', self-reflexively noting that 'at the head of these pages, I have only placed my Christian name—not considering it of any importance to add the surname which I have assumed' (*Basil*, p. 8). Names have a profound significance in *Basil*, and the ease with which names are assumed in Collins's novel gestures towards the very theatricality of the London metropolis and underscore the performativity that can be associated with identity.

While names are straightforwardly adopted in *Basil*, they are also effortlessly taken away. Basil's lack of a sense of identity is symbolically realised in the scene where, after he confesses the truth about his marriage and dealings with the Sherwins, his father rips his name from the book of family history: '[t]he shrill, lively peal, mingled awfully with the sharp, tearing sound', writes Basil, 'as my father rent out from the whole book before him the whole of the leaf which contained my name; tore it into fragments, and cast them on the floor' (*Basil*, p. 163). There is, also, a sense of irony associated with Basil's father's pride regarding his aristocratic connections because Collins hints at the fact that these were actually on Basil's deceased mother's side of the family. When having his first interview with Sherwin, the pair discuss Basil's father's pride about his ancestry, Sherwin states: 'Sir. Such estates, such houses, such a family as his—connected, I believe, with the nobility, especially on your late lamented mother's side. My dear Sir, I emphatically repeat it, your father's convictions do him honour' (*Basil*, p. 58). While names are important signifiers of identity for the characters in the novel, Collins exposes the artificiality that exists behind names and naming, showing the characters to be essentially assuming or performing a role against the backdrop of suburbia.

Performing Selves: Stock Characters, Gestural Action, and Costumery

Given the performativity which can be associated with each of *Basil's* central characters, the 'secret theatre of home', an expression which Collins uses so pithily to describe the interior of the Sherwins' home in Hollyoake Square, goes some way to encapsulating the very nature of the surrounding metropolitan topography of the novel and the figures which occupy it. Throughout the novel, Collins presents his readership with a vision of London as being a secret theatre of suburbia, where identity is fluid and its signifiers, including social class and gender, are but constructs. Writing about the nature of theatre in relation to nineteenth-century conceptions of the integrity of selfhood in her classic study, Nina Auerbach argues: '[r]everent Victorians shunned theatricality as the ultimate, deceitful mobility. It connotes not only lies, but a fluidity of character

that decomposes the uniform integrity of the self'.²⁵ Though a celebrated form of entertainment during this period, Auerbach suggests that the notions of performance, masquerade, and theatricality also inspired a sense of anxiety within the Victorian psyche regarding selfhood, identity, and authenticity. The notion of playing a part, as we have seen, is implied by Collins through his interest in the theme of identity, but this is also very literally established through his deliberate evocation of conventions associated with the mid-nineteenth-century theatre throughout the text.

A convention, for want of a better expression, of the Victorian popular theatre was its reliance on recognisable stock characters. Throughout the nineteenth century, players became known for the roles that they performed, and the period witnessed the rise of the 'star system', which endorsed the idea that star actors were the 'main attraction' of any given dramatic piece.²⁶ While audience members began going to the theatre because they were interested in select personalities rather than just the stories of the plays themselves, the system did remarkably serve to strengthen the tradition of the stock company – the members of a theatrical group that were able to fulfil the 'stock' character types required for any given performance, such as the Leading Lady, The Heavy, The Old Woman and the Comedian.²⁷ Such characters were crucial parts of the Victorian stage. The success of pantomime, for instance depended on conveying a sense of familiarity. As Millie Taylor has suggested, pantomime is 'a simple re-telling of a well-known story performed by stock characters'.²⁸ While these figures have roots in the Italian *commedia dell'arte* and Harlequin, Columbine, Pantaloon, Pierrot and Scaramouche, the central characters of the harlequinade section of the mid-nineteenth-century pantomime consisted of Pantaloon, Harlequin, Columbine and the Clown.²⁹ Farce, too, revolved around recognisable stock character types: 'the father or guardian, the young lady or pair of young ladies, the lover and his friend (who may also be a lover), the foolish rival, the clever manservant and scheming chambermaid'.³⁰ Moreover, the theatrical stock characters that perhaps translate most recognisably into literary fiction are the characters of melodrama, such as the hero, heroine, villain and comic man, due to the firm moral values that they each embody.³¹ Melodramatic characters are by their very nature uncomplicated; the hero is, for example, as Michael Booth

²⁵ Nina Auerbach, *Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 4.

²⁶ Michael Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* (1978; repr. Oxon: Routledge, 2016), p. 26.

²⁷ J.L. Styan, *The English Stage: A History of Drama and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 314-15 (pp. 311-12).

²⁸ Millie Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007), p. 15.

²⁹ Jeffrey Richards, *The Golden Age of Pantomime: Slapstick, Spectacle and Subversion in Victorian England* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2015), p. 35.

³⁰ Michael Booth, *Prefaces to English Nineteenth-Century Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), p. 112.

³¹ Booth, *Prefaces*, p. 25.

explains, ‘a handsome young man of action and courage, eternally devoted to a sweetheart or wife, with a physical prowess frequently demonstrated in a series of desperate encounters with the villain and his allies’.³² Throughout the various styles of popular nineteenth-century drama, straightforward character types and their moral stances and the role in the story that they perform would have been unequivocal to the audience through their stereotypical actions and behaviour. The dominant acting style throughout the mid-nineteenth century was, generally speaking, one of excess and grandiosity that conveyed strong passions and emotions as opposed to a sense of verisimilitude. While the need for loud voices and exaggerated actions was in part necessary due to the increasing size of auditoriums, it is somewhat paradoxical that the acting style of the day was imbued with such a sense of inauthenticity when every effort was made to present a sense of realistic stage spectacle through complex stage machinery and elaborate special effects. With its range of predictable stock character roles and grand acting style, nineteenth-century acting perpetually acknowledged its own artifice.

The way in which the characters of *Basil* conform to theatrical models of characterisation or, more accurately, fail to fulfil the expectations of the stock characters they resemble, is a fascinating aspect of the text. While heroes, heroines, and villains were by no means exclusive to drama and undoubtedly were portrayed in different ways by authors adopting the form of the novel, the main characters of *Basil*, at least on the surface, appear to imitate the character types that would be associated with nineteenth-century melodrama. The eponymous narrator takes the role of the hero figure and Margaret Sherwin appears to be the heroine. Mannion as the villain of the story, and Stephen Sherwin, who appears to be Mannion’s wicked sidekick, threaten the pair. Contemporary reviewers showed no hesitation in considering the ‘actors’ of the story in line with these stock types. The *Athenæum* stated that the third volume of the novel is entirely occupied with ‘the theatrical vengeance of Mannion’, whereas the *Examiner* described Mannion as a ‘mere villain of the melodramas’.³³ Others, however, were puzzled by the fact that Collins had made ‘a woman given up to evil the heroine of the piece’.³⁴

In reality, the mid-nineteenth-century was a period that saw the rise of duplicitous villains – as well as villainesses – on the stage. As Juliet John has illustrated, villainesses, or female villains, were often ‘passionate, repressed, and

³² Booth, *English Melodrama*, (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965), p. 16.

³³ ‘Basil: A Story of Modern Life’, *Athenæum*, 4 December 1852, 1322-3 (p. 1323). ‘The Literary Examiner. *Basil: A Story of Modern Life*’, *Examiner*, 27 November 1852, 756-7 (p. 757).

³⁴ ‘Art. II. – The Progress of Fiction as an Art’, *Westminster Review* (October 1853), 342-374 (p. 373).

[...] obliged to play certain roles'.³⁵ On the one hand, Collins's characterisation accurately reflects the theatrical reality of the mid-nineteenth-century stage: Mannion is not immediately revealed as the villain of the story, and Margaret is, despite her deviance, a passionate young woman who is repressed by the expectations of *bourgeoise* society. On the other hand, however, Collins plays with his reader's expectations of stock character types. Through the fact that Basil does not have the physical prowess that one might expect of the hero figure, Collins challenges Basil's identity as the hero of his story. While Basil's descriptions of himself are non-existent due to the first-person form of the narrative, he mentions that his brother Ralph was 'stronger, taller, handsomer than I was; far beyond me in popularity among the little community we live with' and 'just that sort of gay, boisterous, fine-looking, dare-devil boy, whom old people would instinctively turn round and smile after' (*Basil*, p. 15).

Melodrama was an externalised form of artistic expression, relying on gestural actions as well as the manipulation of facial expressions to convey meaning. There were many acting manuals produced throughout the period, which served to instruct actors about gestural acting, and popular titles included Henry Siddons's *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture* and Lemman Thomas Rede's *The Road to the Stage*. Using exaggerated movements as a means by which to convey meaning, the melodramatic actor's movements were each loaded with connotations, and these gestural codes were ingrained into a performer's repertoire. Writing about conveying the emotion of despair, for instance, Siddons's guide suggests that '[t]he last attitude of an actress charged with such a part should accompany this expression with a degree of faintness almost approaching to annihilation, with her face averted', specifying that 'she should now and then cast a timid and furtive glance', and that her hands, 'feeble and trembling', should 'afterwards drop lifeless by her sides'.³⁶ Similarly, Rede's book offered guidance on how to express passions and emotions via physical movements of the body on stage in addition to practical advice regarding obtaining contact with the managers of provincial companies and how to improve and strengthen the voice. While delight or pleasure is, for Rede, 'expressed by placid looks and moderate smiles', he suggests that grief is:

sudden and violent, expresses itself by beating the head or forehead, tearing the hair, and catching the breath, as if choking; also by screaming, weeping, stamping, lifting the eyes from time to time to heaven, and hurrying backwards and forwards. This is a passion which admits, like many others,

³⁵ Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (2001; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 202, 11.

³⁶ Henry Siddons, *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action; Adapted to the English Drama by a Work on the Subject by M. Engel* (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1922), p. 347.

a great deal of stage-trick; but which, if not well contrived, and equally as well as executed, frequently fails of the desired effect.³⁷

Such descriptions of acting style provide a vivid visual code that outlines how action on the early-to-mid-nineteenth century stage might have looked. Simon Cooke has perceptively suggested that the manipulation of dramatic gesture was a principal means by which Collins wrote character. For Cooke, ‘Collins’s knowledge of gestural taxonomy was substantial’, and examples that he identifies of this method of characterisation include reference to the ‘aristocratic pride of Basil’s father’, which is conveyed through the character’s ‘unchanging manner’ and ‘commanding gaze’, and the emotionally detached nature of Mannion which is conveyed through his ‘inert stance’.³⁸ In his essay, Cooke examines a broad range of texts from Collins’s oeuvre. In the context of *Basil*, however, these observations can be taken further to suggest that Collins encodes his descriptions of character with references to gestural acting to portray the city as a site of performance.

The way that Mrs Sherwin is portrayed throughout *Basil*, for instance, corresponds with several of Rede’s models. ‘[A] total inattention to everything that passes’ is, for Rede, a means by which to act ‘melancholic’.³⁹ In addition to the fact that we are told that Mrs Sherwin is a ‘melancholy woman’ she is consistently portrayed as being emotionally distant and inattentive (*Basil*, p. 64). Describing her composure when she watches over Basil the first time he is granted an interview with her daughter, Collins writes: ‘Mrs Sherwin still kept her place; but she said nothing, and hardly turned to look round at us more than once or twice. Perhaps she was occupied by her own thoughts’ (*Basil*, p. 72). Furthermore, Basil reports that Mrs Sherwin has ‘pale, sickly, moist-looking skin’, and Mr Sherwin also accentuates the fact that his wife has ‘[a] bad stomach – a very bad stomach’ (*Basil*, pp. 64-5). Although it is clear that this physical sickness is also of the mental sort in Mrs Sherwin’s cases, it is useful to note that a means by which to express sickness on the stage was to display ‘extreme languor in every motion and utterance’ with ‘the hands shaking’.⁴⁰ When Mrs Sherwin cuts cake for Basil, we are told that ‘[t]he poor woman’s weak white fingers trembled as they moved the knife under conjugal inspection’, while Basil reports that, at Mrs Sherwin’s deathbed, ‘[h]er hand moved halfway towards mine; then stopped and trembled for a moment’ (*Basil*, p. 64, 175). Throughout

³⁷ Leman Thomas Rede, *The Road to the Stage, Contains Clear and Ample Instructions for Obtaining Theatrical Engagements* (1827; repr. London: J. Onwhyn, 1836), pp. 77-8.

³⁸ Simon Cooke, ‘Action and Attitude: Wilkie Collins and the Language of Melodramatic Gesture’, *Wilkie Collins Journal*, 1 (1998), <<http://wilkiecollinssociety.org/action-and-attitude-wilkie-collins-and-the-language-of-melodramatic-gesture/>> [last accessed 10 July 2017].

³⁹ Rede, p. 78.

⁴⁰ Rede, p. 90.

his depiction of Mrs Sherwin, then, Collins repeatedly invokes codes associated with gestural action, further establishing his theatricalisation of suburban London.

Moreover, the act of fainting, which, according to Rede, is ‘common in ladies’ characters’, and is ‘represented by a seeming sudden deprivation of all senses’, is clearly evoked in the scene when the eponymous hero of the story assaults Mannion and finds himself blacking out.⁴¹ In describing the moments before he fainted, Basil states: ‘I hid my face in my hands, and tried to assure myself that I was still in possession of my senses’ (*Basil*, p. 134). When Basil regains consciousness, he restarts his narrative with an anecdote about ‘[w]hen the blind are operated on for the restoration of sight’ (*Basil*, p. 136). Furthermore, as Basil attempts to throw himself at his father’s knees in order to make his confession, we are told that, essentially, Basil’s father misreads Basil’s gesture: ‘[h]e mistook the action’, reports Basil, ‘and caught me by the arm, believing that I was fainting’ (*Basil*, p. 153). Basil’s father disapproves of popular theatrical entertainments, and the willingness with which even he sees the world around him in terms that are associated with melodramatic gestural acting, emphasises the extent to which the characters of the novel are part of a theatrical landscape.⁴² The fact that Basil is a male character that is prone to the act of fainting also undermines Basil’s position as the hero figure of the novel, signalling towards anxieties regarding gender roles in the city. There are countless other examples throughout the novel where Collins’s descriptions of action resonate with melodramatic gesture. While Cooke has already suggested the extent to which Collins’s characterisation is inspired and encoded with melodramatic gesture, this insight further supports the idea that Collins theatricalises the cityscape in *Basil*, framing it as a site of performance.

Considering the urban topography of *Basil* as a site of self-creation is also particularly plausible when considering the text alongside and an awareness of the implications associated with stage costumery during the nineteenth century. While costumery, or dressing up, may have obvious connotations of roleplay, J.L. Styan has explained the symbolic value that clothes had during the staging of nineteenth-century popular melodrama:

The characters were identified by their *costumes* and associated *colours*. The heroine always wore white, the traditional symbol of innocence and purity. [...] The aristocratic “toff” [“swell” or “nob”] was identified by his fashionable topper and frock coat, but if a gentleman’s clothes were at his knees and elbows, misfortune had befallen him [...] The villain wore black and sported a black cloak, an opera hat, a cane and a black moustache, while his opposite number, the villainess (if there was one), might reveal

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Basil tells us that his father’s sense of family pride was ‘outraged’ by his brother’s membership to an amateur theatrical club (*Basil*, p. 16).

black hair and a swarthy complexion, her dress and ribbons often of the colour appropriate to a scarlet woman.⁴³

It is surprising that nobody has mentioned the role of clothing in relation to the theatricality of *Basil*, particularly given the fact that Margaret's father is, by profession, a linen-draper – Basil tells us that 'Mr Sherwin kept a large linen-draper's shop in one of the great London thoroughfares' (*Basil*, p. 33). A linen-draper is primarily a wholesaler of cloth rather than a dressmaker, but Collins informs us that Sherwin's shop does indeed stock dresses, and the associations with roleplay here are profound. In chapter four of the second part of the novel, Basil overhears an argument between Margaret and her mother, which revolves around the fact that Margaret wants a new dress. 'But I will have the dress', asserts Margaret, 'I'm determined. He says his sister wears light blue crape of an evening; and I'll have a light blue crape, too—see if I don't! I'll get it from the shop, myself. Papa never takes any notice' (*Basil*, p. 108). Margaret is desperate for the kinds of clothing Basil's sister wears because it will enable her to assume the identity of an upper class lady. There is, however, a sense of irony surrounding Sherwood's profession as a linen-draper: he cannot make women or men into ladies or gentlemen through their clothing alone, just as he cannot transform Margaret's social class – nor his own – through his ambition and new money. Moreover, colour symbolism is associated with costume and appearance, and is evoked throughout *Basil* as a means by which to frame Margaret and Mannion as the villainess and villain respectively. As we have already seen, Margaret is symbolised as the dark woman of Basil's dream, but the fact that '[h]er hair, eyes, and complexion were darker than usual in English women', is another means by which Collins evokes stage dynamics in his characterisation. Margaret is also associated with the colour scarlet, and she shouts out on her deathbed: '[p]ut roses in my coffin—scarlet roses, if you can find any, because that stands for Scarlet Woman' (*Basil*, p. 234). Mannion is, too, described as being dressed 'entirely in black' (*Basil*, p. 91). While clothing is literally portrayed as a means to reinvent the self in *Basil*, the colour symbolism associated with Margaret and Mannion resonates with that associated with conventions of stage costumery, signalling the pair as villainess and villain.

'[T]he condition of selfhood', writes Sally Shuttleworth, 'is dependent on having something to conceal: it is the very disjunction between inner and outer form which creates the self'. For Shuttleworth, '[a]wareness of an audience, and of one's ability to baffle their penetration, constitutes the essential basis of selfhood.⁴⁴ While Shuttleworth is examining the notion of selfhood in the context of nineteenth-century psychology, her choice of the word 'audience' is evocative

⁴³ J.L. Styan, *The English Stage: A History of Drama and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 314-15.

⁴⁴ Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (1996; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 38.

of the context of the stage. The theatre is fundamentally at odds with notions of authenticity, and this is how it has most frequently been explored in recent studies of nineteenth-century theatricality. Many reviewers deemed Collins's delineation of character in *Basil* to be one of the strongest points of the novel, but some evidently found the villain of the story problematic: the *New Quarterly Review*, for instance, praised Collins's construction of Clara, but simply stated that 'we cannot bring ourselves to believe in such a character as Mannion'.⁴⁵ However, to insist on reading Collins's characters as realistic personas drawn from real life is perhaps to miss the point. Identity is a recurring theme throughout many of Collins's stories, normally manifesting itself in plots that revolve around the loss of, the reinvention of, or doubling of a sense of self. Throughout his depiction of the London metropolis in *Basil*, Collins depicts the city as a site of roleplay, where identity is fluid, and is easily adopted and constructed by his characters. Such superimposition of urban with theatrical space, then, enables the author to channel his anxieties regarding class, gender and self in the city.

⁴⁵ 'Basil: A Story of Modern Life', *New Quarterly Review and Digest of Current Literature, British, American, French, and German*, January 1853, 94-6 (p. 96).

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