



# *Victorian Network*

Volume 8

Winter 2018

Forgery and Imitation



© Victorian Network  
Volume 8  
Winter 2018

[www.victoriannetwork.org](http://www.victoriannetwork.org)

**Guest Editor**

Aviva Briefel

**General Editor**

Heidi Weig

**Founding Editor**

Katharina Boehm

**Editorial Board**

Megan Anderluh

Sophie Bullen

Sebastian Graef

Tammy Ho Lai-Ming

Sarah Hook

Heidi Weig

Louise Willis

Mariam Zarif

*Victorian Network* is funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council and supported by the University of Regensburg.



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council



Universität Regensburg

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION: FORGERY AND IMITATION <i>Aviva Briefel</i>	1
ARTICLES	
Coining Counterfeit Culture: Christina Rossetti's <i>Goblin Market</i> <i>Nicole Lobdell</i>	5
The Bank Nun's Tale: Financial Forgery, Gothic Imagery, and Economic Power <i>Rebecca Nesvet</i>	28
'I am born': Writing Corporate Personhood in Victorian It-Narratives <i>Jakob Gaardbo Nielsen</i>	50
The Doctor-Coquette Nexus in <i>Middlemarch</i> , <i>Villette</i> , and <i>The Woodlanders</i> <i>Emma Rayner</i>	71
The Secret Theatre of Suburbia: Identity and Roleplay in Wilkie Collins's <i>Basil</i> <i>Derek F. Stewart</i>	93
BOOK REVIEWS	
<i>Oscar Wilde's Chatterton: Literary History, Romanticism, and the Art of Forgery</i> by Joseph Bristow and Rebecca N. Mitchell (Yale UP, 2015) <i>Anhiti Patnaik</i>	113
<i>Drawing on the Victorians: The Palimpsest of Victorian and Neo-Victorian Graphic Texts</i> ed. by Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell (Ohio UP, 2017) <i>Shannon Scott</i>	118

*The Jane and Bertha in Me* 122  
by Rita Maria Martinez (Aldrich Press, 2016)  
*Louise Willis*

*Modern Painters, Old Masters: The Art of Imitation from  
the Pre-Raphaelites to the First World War* 126  
by Elizabeth Prettejohn (Yale UP, 2017)  
*Tessa Kilgarriff*

## Forgery and Imitation

Aviva Briefel, Professor of English and Cinema Studies  
(Bowdoin College, Maine, USA)

Debates on forgery in the Victorian period were inseparable from questions of personhood. In part, this was due to the fact that until the 1832 and 1837 Forgery Acts, individuals charged with this crime would lose their personhood through the death penalty. But the act of forgery also had the power to redefine the identities of the living in significant ways. In her pivotal book on the topic, *Forgery in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture*, Sara Malton writes, 'As it exposes the fragility of a financial system that grants increasing agency to its individual participants, forgery thus becomes centrally implicated in changing ideas of selfhood.'<sup>1</sup> She goes on to argue that 'forgery poses acute challenges to deeply held cultural beliefs about the primacy of individuality, identity, and origins'; Pip's formation into adulthood in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1862), for instance, is fueled by counterfeiting and modes of deceptive self-fashioning.<sup>2</sup> In my book about faking, *The Deceivers*, I explored multiple ways in which art forgery act generated complex vocabularies 'for defining persons as well as things.' The artistic practices of copying, forging, restoring, and fraudulent dealing constructed new categories for thinking about identity along gendered, social, racial, and national lines, which reached far beyond the aesthetic sphere.<sup>3</sup>

The essays in this issue of *Victorian Network* challenge us to think about the interconnectedness of forgery and human identity from a number of novel perspectives and frameworks. As Victorian scholars, our tendency is often to ascribe the fascination with fakery to the fin-de-siècle, as expressed through the aesthetic celebration of deception, artifice, masks, and other modes of inauthentic self-fashioning.<sup>4</sup> In their study on Oscar Wilde's profound interest in the eighteenth-century forger Thomas Chatterton, Joseph Bristow and Rebecca Mitchell describe the 'range of ideas Wilde cultivated about artful criminality:

---

<sup>1</sup> Sara Malton, *Forgery in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture: Fictions of Finance from Dickens to Wilde* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Aviva Briefel, *The Deceivers: Art Forgery and Identity in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>4</sup> In *The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), John Kucich already warned us about the false assumption that a belief in the effectiveness of lying was exclusively a fin-de-siècle phenomenon. He argues that 'middle-class culture, too often reduced to an ahistorical flatness and homogeneity, depended precisely on internal instability, incoherence, and stratification, instantiated by a symbolic logic of transgression, to produce and maintain its claims to cultural authority' (3).

from the rollicking endorsement of unabashed deviance in ‘Pen, Pencil, and Poison’, to the dialogic reasoning of the positive value of lying in ‘The Decay of Lying’, to the depiction in his stories of the ways that artifice can encourage affection and even altruism.’<sup>5</sup> The essays in this issue of *Victorian Network* direct their attention to earlier moments in the Victorian period, focusing on texts that, while rarely espousing a Wildean celebration of fakery, demonstrate a shared belief and investment in the intimate relationship between forgery and identity formation. What follows are five distinct takes on the ways in which Victorian literary and financial culture developed new models for representing the tenuous distinctions between the real and the fake, the authentic and the insincere, the person and the thing.

The issue begins with Rebecca Nesvet’s ‘The Bank Nun’s Tale: Financial Forgery, Gothic Imagery, and Economic Power’, an essay that discusses the personification of anxieties around financial forgery and its punishment. Nesvet traces the literary history of ‘Miss Whitehead, the Bank Nun’, a legend that emerged in the Victorian period—and persists today—about a woman who haunts the Bank of England after her brother’s execution for financial forgery in 1812. While the brother in this story is based on a historical person, Paul Whitehead, the subsequent gothic narrative was inspired by two fictional texts: the serial *Streetology of London, or the Metropolitan Papers of the Itinerant Club* (1837) and James Malcom Rymer’s penny serial *The Lady in Black, or, the Widow and the Wife* (1847-48). Whereas in using the image of a vindictive nun the earlier text revives a gothic trope based on vengeance and villainy, the later one reverses this trope to represent a version of the nun as victim to a gothic plot. Nesvet argues that these two intersecting yet differing representations ‘enlist Gothic imagery to debate the impact of financial forgery, its prosecution and punishment, and the economic empowerment of women and working-class people.’ The nun in these narratives thus emerges as a physical embodiment of the nefarious practice of forgery *and* of the excessive punishment with which this crime was met through the first decades of the nineteenth century.

Jakob Gaardbo Nielsen explores the ethics of personifying abstract concepts in the ensuing essay, titled, “‘I am born’”: Writing Corporate Personhood in Victorian It-Narratives’. The essay focuses on the idea of corporate personhood, which was instantiated by a series of Company Acts in the 1840s-1860s and whose relevance to our own moment was revived by the 2010 Supreme Court ruling *Citizens United V. FEC*, Nielsen identifies Victorian object narratives that problematise what it means to consider corporations as people. Both Edward P. Rowsell’s novella *The Autobiography of a Joint-Stock Company* (1861) and Laurence Oliphant’s anonymously published *Blackwood’s* essay ‘Autobiography of a Joint Stock Company (Limited)’ (1876) offer their reading

---

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Bristow and Rebecca N. Mitchell, *Oscar Wilde’s Chatterton: Literary History, Romanticism, and the Art of Forgery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 215.

publics a ‘way of thinking about incorporation that allowed them to see the ethical ambiguity underlying the principle of personhood.’ The fact that these are both Victorian ‘it-narratives’, derived from an eighteenth-century literary genre that gave voice and agency to objects, allows for a more direct challenge to notions of corporate personhood than do financial realist novels of the period, such as Charles Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1848), Anthony Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* (1875), and Margaret Oliphant’s *Hester* (1883). As Nielsen argues, object narratives ‘present a more radically disjointed vision of a fragmented, rather than cohesive society’ as their genre allows them to ‘*perform* rather than *describe* corporate personhood.’

In the issue’s third essay, ‘Coining Counterfeit Culture: Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*,’ Nicole Lobdell focuses on the threat that forgery poses to the domestic sphere as a sacred site of middle-class female personhood. She expands critical discussions that treat Rossetti’s 1862 poem as being about sexual corruption or various modes of deception (i.e., food adulteration, false advertising) by suggesting that through the deployment of contemporary slang, it provides a coded narrative about the ‘fraudulent subculture’ of coining and forgery. The poem’s language and imagery evoke the production and proliferation of false coins in the culture at large, representing the goblins as forgers who labour to deceive Lizzie and Laura, sisters who emblemise Victorian womanhood. Lobdell makes the persuasive claim that ‘counterfeit slang’ takes on a dual meaning in the poem: ‘to describe both slang about counterfeiting *and* slang that does not look or sound like slang’ (emphasis in original). Like the ‘it-narratives’ discussed by Nielsen, *Goblin Market* thus enacts what it describes, giving readers a direct experience of the ‘perils of deceit’ that define a culture of forgery. Within this context, Lizzie and Laura signify the human consequences of succumbing to this culture and the possibilities of resisting its seductions.

The next two essays shift to considering literary characters and narratives that do not resist forgery’s deceptions and inauthenticities but find strategic ways of inhabiting them. In ‘The Doctor-Coquette Nexus in *Middlemarch*, *Villette*, and *The Woodlanders*,’ Emma Rayner discusses the coquette as a model of performative personhood that ‘cultivates a self-presentation that resists penetrative reading.’ Embodied by Rosamond Vincy in George Eliot’s novel, Ginevra Fanshaw in Charlotte Brontë’s, and Felice Charmond in Thomas Hardy’s, the coquette is an ‘adept director of her own performance on the social stage’ as she challenges notions of stable or natural identity through her role-playing and excess. The ideal audience for the coquette, Rayner argues, is the male doctor with whom she becomes paired narratively and often romantically. This middle-class professional deploys a way of seeing that insists on locating a natural essence within female identity, and he thus becomes both frustrated and mesmerised in his interactions with the coquette (we can think of Lydgate

imagining Rosamond as a basil plant, which ‘flourished wonderfully on a murdered man’s brains’). In trying to demystify the coquette through his scientific surveillance, the doctor ultimately helps to produce her; as Rayner argues, ‘It is the doctor’s specular defect which equips the coquette with the understanding of artifice she requires in order to realise that biological sex and true character might be things apart.’

The final essay, Derek F. Stewart’s ‘The Secret Theatre of Suburbia: Identity and Roleplay in Wilkie Collins’s *Basil*,’ expands on the theme of inauthentic selfhood, this time as depicted in sensation fiction. Stewart illuminates the nexus between the artifice of the city, of theatre, and of identity in the Victorian period, which lies at the heart of Collins’s novel about deceptive selves. The essay’s author argues that like his friend Dickens, Collins was fascinated by the fakeries of urban life and theatrical melodrama, a combination he explores in *Basil* to ‘address anxieties related to identity and selfhood’ in modern life. Stewart takes us on a tour of Victorian theatrical conventions, focusing specifically on the stock characters and extreme gestures and emotions of melodrama, and traces their reconfiguration in *Basil*; this work of sensation fiction, he proposes, represents that ‘city as a site of roleplay, where identity is fluid, and is easily adopted and constructed by his characters.’ As in Rayner’s discussion of the coquette, audience reception and collaboration are crucial to these artificial figures, both in terms of the reading public of sensation fiction and the diegetic characters who engage with each other’s fakeries.

Given our current concern with ‘fake news’ and its potentially devastating effects on real persons, it is enriching to read a series of essays that demonstrate the nuance with which Victorians approached fakery. Indeed, whether they viewed forgery and imitation as a cultural threat or as an opportunity for relinquishing fixed notions of identity, the nineteenth-century texts discussed here share an investment in taking fakes seriously. They demonstrate that forgery and imitation are never homogenous acts or discourses, but instead that they encompass a multiplicity of strategies for thinking about identity within financial, aesthetic, and social systems. Studying fakes reminds us that our own identities are always being forged—both in the sense of being produced and fictionalised—through a confluence of self-fashioning and external influences. The more we take these complex productions (both ours and the Victorians) into account, the more we may develop a strategic presentism for living, and resisting, in this, our post-truth moment.

## Coining Counterfeit Culture: Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*

Nicole Lobdell  
DePauw University, IN, USA

### **Abstract**

*Victorian slang is endlessly fascinating, but no readings of *Goblin Market* have considered its use of slang. This article examines *Goblin Market* through nineteenth-century slang, specifically slang connected to money and counterfeiting. For example, the phrase 'Jimmy O'Goblin' is nineteenth-century rhyming slang for 'sovereign', or a sovereign coin, and 'fig' is slang for a mediocre counterfeit coin. Tracing elements of slang such as these situates *Goblin Market* in conversation with other counterfeiting narratives of the period. Published in the popular periodical *Household Words*, Dickens's 'Two Chapters on Bank Note Forgeries' (1850) about the difficulties in identifying forged banknotes, and Sidney Laman Blanchard's 'A Biography of a Bad Shilling' (1851), a short story told from the perspective of counterfeit coin, conveyed mid-Victorian middle-class fascination with forgery. *Goblin Market* is different in that it focuses on middle-class anxiety. The poem relies on nineteenth-century slang, which has the ability to go undetected, in order to create a sublimated narrative about the perils of deceit. Looking at *Goblin Market* through its slang doubling reveals the hidden Victorian fears of counterfeiting and fraud, in the home and the marketplace.*

The mid-Victorians were fascinated by slang. John Camden Hotten's popular *The Slang Dictionary; or, The Vulgar Words, Street Phrases, and 'Fast' Expressions of High and Low Society* (1864) even included this advertisement: 'Copies of this work interleaved with finely-ruled paper, for the use of those who desire to collect such Slang and colloquial words as may start into existence from time to time, can be obtained from the publisher, price 9s. 6d'. Middle-class readers could purchase editions of Hotten's slang dictionaries equipped with lined paper, encouraging readers to collect and record slang they encountered, especially new slang as it came into existence.<sup>1</sup> Dictionaries such as these encouraged readers to participate in the use and documentation of slang. Peter Wright claims that rhyming slang was 'strongly established by 1851 [...] Costermongers [...] were amongst the earliest users of rhyming slang'.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The advertisement for alternate editions appeared in Hotten's dictionary. In the preface to the 1864 edition, Hotten notes that *The Slang Dictionary* 'incorporated *The Dictionary of Modern Slang, Cant, and Vulgar Words*' (p. v). First published by Hotten in 1859, this early edition included approximately 3000 words; a second edition was released in 1860 with approximately 5000 words. When *The Slang Dictionary* was published in 1864, it included nearly 10,000 words, demonstrating the increased recognition and recording of such language. John Camden Hotten, *The Slang Dictionary; or, The Vulgar Words, Street Phrases, and 'Fast' Expressions of High and Low Society* (London: John Camden Hotten, 1864).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Wright, *Cockney Dialect and Slang* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981), pp. 94-5.

One wonders how many writers participated in recording slang and using slang dictionaries as source material. We know for certain that some authors, such as Dickens, not only recorded slang but actively employed it in their writing. Did Christina Rossetti read slang dictionaries? As a poet, was she influenced by the costermonger's rhyming slang heard in Covent Market, as Clayton Tarr has suggested?<sup>3</sup> Did she read in a dictionary, of which there were many, that 'Jimmy O'Goblin', later reduced to 'goblin', was nineteenth-century rhyming slang for 'sovereign', a sovereign coin? If 'goblin' were the only instance of such slang in Rossetti's poem, it might remain an unremarkable footnote – but there are many more. While we cannot determine unequivocally what Rossetti knew, or read, or heard in the London markets, we can consider what the suggestion of such language in her poem means. In what ways does *Goblin Market* change if we read it alongside dictionaries of nineteenth-century slang?

The goblins of Rossetti's poem pose an invasive threat, but I argue the choice of goblins over other fantastical creatures, such as sprites or pixies, connects issues of language with those of economy. In traditional lore, goblins represent deviousness, mischief, and deception. Goblins are a 'force that invades the rural home and drains a family's resources through its boundless voracity. It is not always evil, but a thing of pure hunger, pure desire: close to home, but not a [...] reciprocating part of the home'.<sup>4</sup> Counterfeiting represents a similar insidious desire, a greed which does not reciprocate but subverts the rules of commerce. I use the term 'counterfeit slang' to describe both slang about counterfeiting *and* slang that does not look or sound like slang. Counterfeit slang includes such words as 'goblin', 'queer', 'sly', 'brown', 'fig', and 'utter'.<sup>5</sup> All these terms, along with others explored in this paper, have slang doubles associated with counterfeiting or 'bad' money. In her recent article on *Goblin Market*, Emily Bernhard-Jackson examines the concept of twinship in sources that may have influenced Rossetti.<sup>6</sup> What is a counterfeit, if not an object attempting to pass as the twin, or double, of a legitimate one? I argue that if we read *Goblin Market* through its slang doubles, we discover a sublimated narrative

---

<sup>3</sup> See Clayton Tarr 'Covent Goblin Market', *Victorian Poetry*, 50 (2012), pp. 297-316. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Molly Clark Hillard, 'Dangerous Exchange: Fairy Footsteps, Goblin Economies, and *The Old Curiosity Shop*', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 35 (2005), pp. 63-86 (p. 74).

<sup>5</sup> To this end, Jonathon Green's *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang* (2005) and *Dictionary of Slang* (2010), and the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* prove the best modern sources of for this type of linguistic research. Jonathon Green's *Dictionary of Slang* (2010) provides extensive citations including definition, date of origin, country of origin, and period of active usage, and, for this study, Green's dictionary served to cross-check information provided in the *OED* and nineteenth-century slang dictionaries, including Ducange Angilcus's *The Vulgar Tongue* (1859) and John Hotten's *Slang Dictionary*.

<sup>6</sup> See Emily A. Bernhard-Jackson, "'Like Two Pigeons in One Nest, Like to Seedlings in One Capsule': Reading *Goblin Market* in Conjunction with Victorian Twin Discourse", *Victorian Poetry*, 55.4 (2017), pp. 451-470.

about the perils of deceit that places the poem in larger discourse with other narratives about Victorian counterfeiting and fraud.

Fraud has been the subject of several critical studies of Rossetti's poem, including Rebecca Stern's rich research on food adulterations and Herbert Tucker's compelling analysis of the rise of seductive false advertising, connecting the dangers in Rossetti's poem with real threats in the Victorian marketplace.<sup>7</sup> While there are collections of nineteenth-century slang that document the colourful diversity and subversive power of this marginal language, there is not a focused study of counterfeit slang.<sup>8</sup> This gap in linguistic history perhaps accounts for the oversight of such slang in Rossetti research and Victorian studies in general. In the first section, I examine the counterfeit slang present within the poem and put the poem in conversation with other works of the period that use counterfeiting or respond to counterfeiting practices, a topic that seemed to capture the imaginations of mid-Victorian audiences. In the second portion, I interpret the visual representations of counterfeit culture in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's frontispiece and title page designs before analysing the goblins' attack on Lizzie as indicative of the dangers counterfeit economies present to legitimate ones.

### Victorian Counterfeiting

Near the mid-nineteenth century, urban idiolects adopted 'goblin' as slang for 'coin' – more specifically a gold sovereign, a 'golden goblin', a coin imbued with a high monetary value and emblematic of a sovereign's authority ('goblin').<sup>9</sup> In her seminal work on cant and slang dictionaries, historian Julie Coleman addresses both the origins and forms of cant and slang dictionaries, noting that '*slang* is usually short-lived' and 'cant is the secret language of thieves and beggars, and is used for deception and concealment'.<sup>10</sup> Coleman brings together and conducts a comparative study on such dictionaries, highlighting dictionaries in circulation in the first half of the nineteenth century. A small sampling of

---

<sup>7</sup> See Rebecca Stern's '„Adulteration Detected”: Food and Fraud in Christina Rossetti's „Goblin Market"', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 57.4 (2003) and Herbert F. Tucker's 'Rossetti's Goblin Marketing: Sweet to Tongue and Sound to Eye', *Representations* 82 (2003).

<sup>8</sup> Jonathon Green's *Crooked Talk: Five Hundred Years of the Language of Crime* (2011) does include a section on the slang of forgery and counterfeiting, which surveys the most common slang terms including queer, snide, and sour. Green's collection, however, does not include several of the other slang terms that I examine here.

<sup>9</sup> See OED entry 'goblin, n.<sup>2</sup>' and Green's *Dictionary of Slang* (2010). The OED identifies 'goblin' as British slang for a sovereign, identifying its use now as obscure and historical. Dating slang can be tricky because slang is sometimes in use long before it is recorded and codified by slang dictionaries. Although 'goblin' is recorded by Green as common by the 1880s, it is probable that it was in use long before then.

<sup>10</sup> Julie Coleman, *A History of Cant and Slang Dictionaries: Volume II 1785-1858* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 1-2.

popular ones available in the first part of the nineteenth century includes Francis Grose's *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (first published in 1785 and reissued in expanded editions in 1811 and 1823); *The Lexicon Balatronicum: A Dictionary of the Buckish Slang, University Wit, and Pickpocket Eloquence* (1811) compiled by Francis Grose and Members of the Whip Club; *Ducombe's New and Improved Flash Dictionary of Cant Words* (c. 1850); and, Ducange Angilcus's *The Vulgar Tongue: A Glossary of Slang, Cant, and Flash Words and Phrases Used in London from 1839 to 1859* (1859); George Mastall's *Vocabular* (1859); and, previously mentioned, Hotten's *The Slang Dictionary; or, The Vulgar Words, Street Phrases, and 'Fast' Expressions of High and Low Society* (1864), published just two years after Rossetti's *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862). Coleman also considers other popular literary works including *The Memoirs of James Hardy Vaux* (1819) and Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), which became popular sources of cant and slang for Victorian readers. Finally, Coleman suggests that *The Lexicon Balatronicum* (1811) and the *Vocabular* (1859) were based off Francis Grose's dictionaries published as far back as 1785, which points not only to the recycling of slang dictionaries but also the longevity of some slang terms. Dating slang, however, is notoriously tricky. Historian A.L. Beier claims that 'despite the efforts of lexicographers, it is difficult to fix precise dates on word usages, since they inevitably list the first written examples, which are probably delayed records of the spoken word'.<sup>11</sup> So, although Hotten's dictionary appeared after Rossetti's publication of *Goblin Market*, it remains a valuable resource for recording slang usage in the years preceding its publication.

Slang dictionaries were popular reading among members of the Victorian middle class. Ellen Bayuk Rosenman argues that such dictionaries acted as 'conduit[s] between the streets and the parlor' and allowed their middle-class readers to access the 'privileged knowledge' of the lower classes, knowledge which allowed tradesmen 'to manipulate customers' and 'communicate privately to fend off middle-class investigators'.<sup>12</sup> Along with slang dictionaries, readers had access to new reports on urban life, such as Mayhew's *London Labour* (1851), an early piece of investigative journalism.<sup>13</sup> Mayhew was particularly

---

<sup>11</sup> A.L. Beier, 'Identity, Language and Resistance in the Making of the Victorian „Criminal Class”: Mayhew's Convict Revisited', *Journal of British Studies* 44 (July 2015), pp. 499-515 (p. 511).

<sup>12</sup> Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, 'Rudeness, Slang, and Obscurity: Working-Class Politics in *London Labour and the London Poor*'. *Victorian Vulgarities: Taste in Verbal and Visual Culture*, ed. by Susan David Bernstein and Elsie B. Michie. (New York: Ashgate, 2009) pp. 55-70 (pp. 59-60).

<sup>13</sup> Slang dictionaries and Mayhew's work were highly commodified, and while I do not have the space to address this issue in detail in this text, I acknowledge their heuristic status with middle class readers. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see A.L. Beier 'Identity, Language, and Resistance in the Making of the Victorian 'Criminal Class': Mayhew's Convict Revisited'.

interested in traditional street cries of London costermongers, recording that a cry contained two parts: the product and the price. For example, the herb seller cries, ‘a double ‘andful of fine parsley for a penny’, while the turnip seller shouts, ‘A penny a bunch’.<sup>14</sup> The goblins’ cry, ‘Come buy our orchard fruits, / Come buy, come buy’, does not disclose the two most important pieces of information, product – ‘orchard fruits’ is rather ambiguous – and price (Rossetti 3-4).<sup>15</sup> By adopting the sounds of the costermonger cries without adopting their formula, the goblin market offers mere mimicry, an aural deception, of a true London market.<sup>16</sup>

In *London Labour*, Mayhew also describes testing a young ‘newly-trained coster lad’, whom he quizzes, asking the boy to translate formal English words, such as ‘equestrian’, into a dialect of coster slang.<sup>17</sup> When Mayhew asks the boy to translate ‘good-natured’, Mayhew finds he ‘[can] not, on any of the three renderings, distinguish any precise sound beyond an indistinct gabbling’ (p. 88). Rosenman suggests that the boy’s ‘gabbling’ is ‘a version of coster slang into which Mayhew has not yet been initiated’ (p. 60). Mayhew’s use of ‘gabbling’, remarkably close to the word ‘goblin’, to describe the inarticulate sounds of the coster, interests me. Mayhew argues that ‘this slang is utterly devoid of any applicability to humour. It gives no new fact, or approach to a fact, for philologists. One superior genius among the costers, who has invented words for them, told me that he had no system for coining his term’ (p. 88). Whether the ‘genius among the costers’ has no system, or if he simply refuses to share such knowledge with an outsider, is unclear. Mayhew’s use of ‘coining’, however, is also complex, merging concepts of language with economy. To coin something means to create it, to give it form. To coin money is an act of transformation, converting metal into coins. In the marketplace, the language costermongers ‘coin’ can give them advantages over their middle-class consumers, leading to financial rewards. For costers, coining a catchphrase can transform language into money.

The opening lines of *Goblin Market* suggest just such a scene. The poem entices readers with a menu that ‘construct[s] a vision of a bounteous and abundant nature that is seductive in its infinite variety’.<sup>18</sup> With twenty-nine

<sup>14</sup> Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*. 1861-62. 4 vols. (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1967) p. 37. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>15</sup> All citations from Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* are taken from *The Complete Poems*, ed. by R.W. Crump (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1979-90, reprinted by Penguin, 2001) pp. 5-20. Line references are indicated in the text.

<sup>16</sup> Neither the fruit nor the goblin coins present a price or value. The goblin is a species of gold coin used as official bullion and, therefore, minted without a nominal value stamped on either face. The absence of numerical indicators in the *Goblin Market* raises questions about value.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Rosenman, p. 60.

<sup>18</sup> Sean C. Grass, ‘Nature’s Perilous Variety in Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 51.3 (1996), pp. 356-76 (p. 358).

different fruits, the goblin market explodes with an abundance of berries, plums, apples, figs, and citrons.<sup>19</sup> Watching from ‘among the brookside rushes’ (Rossetti 33), sisters Laura and Lizzie listen to the tempting goblins’ cry: ‘Come buy our orchard fruits, / Come buy, come buy’ (3-4). Laura warns Lizzie: ‘We must not buy their fruits; / Who knows upon what soil they fed / Their hungry thirsty roots?’ (43-45). Identifying the produce simply as ‘orchard fruits’, the ambiguity of language veils the fruit’s true origins. When Laura first meets the goblins, their actions belie deception:

When they reached where Laura was  
 They stood stock still upon the moss,  
 Leering at each other,  
 Brother with queer brother;  
 Signalling each other,  
 Brother with sly brother.  
 One set his basket down,  
 One reared his plate;  
 One began to weave a crown  
 Of tendrils, leaves and rough nuts brown. (91-100)

Through ‘leering’ and ‘signalling’, the goblins communicate their duplicitous intentions, but their descriptions as ‘queer’ and ‘sly’ illustrate the depth of their deceit (93, 95, 94, 96). In formal lexicons, ‘queer’ traditionally signifies difference or strangeness, and ‘sly’ means deceptiveness or quick wits. In nineteenth-century slang, however, a ‘queer’ is a counterfeit or forgery, especially indicative of counterfeit money (‘queer’), and ‘sly’ means illegal, illicit, or ‘suggestive of artifice’ (‘sly’). Translating the slang phrase ‘queer and sly goblin brothers’ reveals the goblins to be ‘counterfeit and illegal coins’.<sup>20</sup> The rural setting of the goblin market reinforces its position on the fringes of a legitimate economy.<sup>21</sup> The setting of the goblin market on what Jan Marsh describes as ‘the

<sup>19</sup> In ‘The Political Economy of Fruit’, Richard Menke examines the materiality of the Victorian fruit, noting that in Rossetti’s poem there are ‘twenty-nine kinds of fruits in twenty-nine lines’ (p. 110). Out of those twenty-nine, three types of plums are listed: greengages, bullaces, and damsons. As early-eighteenth century slang, *plum* indicated a fortune, or more specifically, 100,000 pounds (‘Plum’). In the nineteenth century, *plum* came to signify ‘any desirable thing, a coveted prize; the pick of a collection of things; or one of the best things’ (‘Plum’).

<sup>20</sup> Slang cant for general legitimate money includes, ‘bit’, ‘bunce’, ‘bustle’, ‘dimmock’, ‘duff’, ‘rag’, and ‘steven’ (Vaux p. 227, p. 230, p. 230, p. 235; Green p. 458; Vaux p. 261, p. 274). Slang for generalised counterfeit money includes, ‘queer’, ‘queer-bit’, and ‘shan’ (Vaux p. 260, p. 264). A coiner is a ‘bit cull’ or ‘bit-faker’, (Green p. 114; p. Vaux 227).

<sup>21</sup> Although out of date by the time Rossetti came to compose *Goblin Market*, Patrick Colquhoun’s 1806 accounts of counterfeiters’ practices identified ‘the Country’ surrounding London as ‘where all the dealers and coiners of [a particular silver] species of base money

frontier with fairyland' emphasises its position between lawful society and the lawless wilderness, associated here with a subversive counterfeit economy.<sup>22</sup>

The earliest recorded citation of 'queer' as slang for counterfeiting dates to the popular nineteenth-century sourcebook, *A New and Comprehensive Vocabulary of the Flash Language* (1812). Compiled by the self-confessed thief and twice-transported swindler James Hardy Vaux, the *Comprehensive Vocabulary* became an eminent nineteenth-century guide to the slang lexicon used by thieves and con men. In *Goblin Market*, if we look past the goblins to the items they carry, to 'plate', 'crown', and 'brown', we find other indicators of a fraudulent subculture. In the context of the poem, plate may very well be the platter the goblins use to carry fruit, but it was also the silver coating used to cover counterfeit coins of the period. 'One began to weave a crown / Of tendrils, leaves, and rough nuts brown' (Rossetti 99-100) can have two translations depending on which language system we use. The organic imagery of the scene suggests the goblins use the tendrils, leaves, and nuts to create a crown, the symbol of royal authority and a bit ironic, since the goblins are themselves imitation sovereigns. A crown, however, is more than just a symbol of power, it is also a coin – a crown coin.<sup>23</sup> 'Weave' means to create, but it also means to fabricate; the goblins fabricate a crown out of materials – tendrils, leaves, and rough nuts – that have no value. Add brown to this reading, which Vaux's dictionary identifies as slang for a counterfeit, or 'bad', halfpenny, and it reveals the goblins are not carrying fruit into the marketplace but counterfeit coins.<sup>24</sup>

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century definitions of counterfeiting break the crime into two subcategories: the manufacturing of counterfeit coins, known as coining, and forgery, the reproduction of bank notes.<sup>25</sup> Until the Forgery Acts of 1832 and 1837, both crimes carried death sentences, but these punishments were reduced in later years with coining commuted to a few months hard labour or time served and bank note forgery to a life term. For sentencing purposes after the 1830s, the distinction between counterfeiting and forgery depended upon proof of criminal intent. Nineteenth-century legal systems interpreted coining as the intent to produce 'unendorsed and potentially fraudulent copy, something whose

---

resort'; in Patrick Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis*. 7th ed. London, 1806. *Google Book Search*. [accessed 20 July 2017], p. 175. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>22</sup> Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Writer's Life* (New York: Viking, 1995), p. 229.

<sup>23</sup> A crown is the equivalent to five shillings, whereas a sovereign is twenty shillings.

<sup>24</sup> Vaux p. 230; Green p. 188. Neither Grose's 1785 or 1811 editions of the *Classical Dictionary*, nor his *Lexicon Balatronicum* (1811) note the usage of *brown* or *browns* as counterfeit coins. The entry does not appear until the 1823 edition. Although Rossetti is using 'brown' as an adjective to describe the colour of the 'rough nuts' and the slang dictionaries use 'brown' or 'browns' as nouns, I am advocating for an imaginative consideration of other ways this line might be interpreted.

<sup>25</sup> A counterfeit bank note is known as a 'queer screen' (Vaux 240).

true nature is disguised'.<sup>26</sup> Forgery, however, indicated a skill, artistry, or 'craftedness'; 'forgery' was applied 'particularly for [the] crafting [of] authority' as in the cases of forged signatures or papers' (p. 73). In her work on nineteenth-century forgery and fraud, Sara Malton asserts, 'forgery enacts a violation on several fronts: it signifies a transgression against property, identity, the authority of law, the nation-state, and the economic system. It is therefore deserving of the harshest of punishments'.<sup>27</sup> Bank note and signature forgeries were considered sustained threats to legitimate systems of authority; therefore, forgers received more scrutiny and harsher punishments than coiners. Malton also draws attention to the hermeneutics of forgery. In her discussion of Dickens's 'Two Chapters on Bank Note Forgeries', about the difficulties in identifying forged banknotes, which appeared in *Household Words* in 1850, Malton asserts that Dickens 'identifies forgery as disrupting not only financial economies, but also economies of knowledge. The forged note becomes the economic emblem of a world in which appearances are dangerously unreliable; its circulation shows that we cannot trust what we see' (p. 46).<sup>28</sup> Although interchanged synonymously with fraud, both counterfeit and forgery intimate a materiality that nineteenth-century definitions of fraud do not. Identifying a deception as a 'fraud' labels the exchange, but not the goods, as fraudulent. On the other hand, 'counterfeit' is a material fact; a product either is or is not genuine.

For nineteenth-century banking systems, counterfeiters and their goods proved difficult to identify, track, and eliminate. Robert Peel's 1844 Bank Charter Act established the primacy of Bank of England bank notes over notes issued by country banks and identified the Bank of England as the sole issuer of new notes. In 1855, new printing technologies enabled the creation of bank plates capable of printing identical bank notes.<sup>29</sup> Older plates deteriorated quickly resulting in non-identical notes of the same denomination, exacerbating the proliferation of forgeries. As bank notes gained financial security and popularity among Victorian consumers, periodicals of the period helped to garner the public's trust in them, which, Mary Poovey asserts, 'bank notes could not generate on their own' (p. 50). Poovey cites an 1850 article, 'Review of a Popular Publication', by *Household Words* editor William Henry Wills. Wills's 'popular publication' was a 'Bank of

---

<sup>26</sup> Nick Groom, *The Forger's Shadow: How Forgery Changed the Course of Literature* (London: Picador, 2002), p. 73. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>27</sup> Sara Malton, *Forgery in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture: Fictions of Finance from Dickens to Wilde* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), p. 1. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>28</sup> Forgery is a frequent theme in Dickens. For an excellent discussion of forgery in *Great Expectations* (1861), published one year before *Goblin Market*, see Simon James, 'Pip's Counterfeit Money: Forgery and *Great Expectations*' in *Fakes and Forgeries*, ed. by Peter Knight and Jonathan Long (Amersham: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2004), pp. 41-9.

<sup>29</sup> See Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Meditating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 49.

England note'; he 'insisted that the note's stylistic features – its 'pithy terseness' and its graphic 'flourishes' – instantaneously and automatically inspired confidence in its user'.<sup>30</sup> Unlike coins, whose internal composition of precious metals assured their value, notes offered no material guarantee of their worth.

Alongside shorter articles, such as those published in *Household Words*, book-length studies dedicated to identifying and policing the activities of criminals, including counterfeiters, also appeared. Magistrate Patrick Colquhoun, a founder of the Thames River Police in 1798, authored *A Treatise of the Police of the Metropolis* (1806) in which he summarises the various methods of coining, breaking the crime down into several divisions according to the coin's material (gold, silver, copper) and further subdivisions by the counterfeit's fabricated value (crown, half-crown, shilling, etc.).<sup>31</sup> Outlining the production of five species of silver coins, Flats, Plated Goods, Plain Goods, Castings of Cast Goods, and Figs, or Fig Things, Colquhoun reveals that the naming of the first four species reflect the methods of their origin (i.e. Plated Goods are essentially low-valued copper coins plated with thin layers of silver and stamped to resemble higher-valued silver coins) (pp. 174-9). Here, I am most interested in Colquhoun's recording of counterfeit slang, especially the facetiously named Figs or Fig Things. The Fig, he claims, is 'a very inferior sort of counterfeit money, of which composition, however, a great part of the sixpences now in circulation are made. The proportion of silver is not, generally speaking, of the value of one farthing in half a crown' (p. 179). In the years leading up to Rossetti's poem, however, there were an increasing number of fictions with plots dependent on fraud, 'reflect[ing] a public increasingly aware of frauds practiced more locally by tradesmen'.<sup>32</sup> In 1851, for instance, Dickens published in *Household Words* Sidney Laman Blanchard's 'A Biography of a Bad Shilling', a short story narrated from the perspective of a counterfeit coin. As the counterfeit shilling circulates with genuine ones, it reveals mid-Victorian anxieties connected with fraud, especially the increasing public awareness of a thriving counterfeit culture.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Poovey, p. 50.

<sup>31</sup> Although Colquhoun's work precedes Rossetti's composition of *Goblin Market* by more than 50 years, it remained an important source for slang used by counterfeiters, and much of the slang Colquhoun identified made its way into the slang dictionaries of the period. I refer to it here solely for its recording of counterfeit slang.

<sup>32</sup> Rebecca Stern, "'Adulteration Detected': Food and Fraud in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*", *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 57.4 (2003), pp. 477-511 (p. 484).

<sup>33</sup> As early as 1817, banks, such as Backhouse's Bank, released circulars warning customers of counterfeiters attempting to pass counterfeit notes. These announcements could include information on location as well as specific details to identify a counterfeit note. See 'From the Archives: Countering the Counterfeiters' *Barclay* (29 March 2017) <<https://www.home.barclays/news/2017/03/Countering-the-counterfeiters.html>> [accessed 3 June 2017] for more information.

In Blanchard's story, the counterfeit coin leads to the devastation of the coiner's entire family, including the imprisonment of his daughter, the transportation of his son, and ultimately the coiner's own death. Despite being labelled 'bad', the shilling asserts that it is the product of 'good' materials and expresses its moral outrage at discovering its own identity:

I believe I may state with confidence that my parents were respectable, notwithstanding that one belonged to the law—being the zinc door-plate of a solicitor. The other, was a pewter flagon residing at a very excellent hotel [...] How shall I describe my first impression of existence? how portray my agony when I became aware *what I was*—when I understood my mission upon earth? The reader [...] can have no notion of my sufferings!<sup>34</sup>

The shilling's discovery and final destruction comes when a child picks it up off the pavement and runs (ironically) 'into a shop for the purpose of making an investment in *figs*'; but, upon recognition by the shopkeeper as a counterfeit, 'the child went *figless* away' (p. 70; emphasis added). As punishment for its illegitimacy, the shilling '[is] nailed to the counter as an example to others' (p. 70). Reliant on the layering of cultural and linguistic contexts, the pun on 'fig' and 'figless' adds comedic irony to Blanchard's tale.<sup>35</sup> Nailing the coin to the countertop, the shopkeeper strikes violently at its interior, or the space which is the source of its value. 'A Biography of a Bad Shilling' warns of the consequences for counterfeiting (imprisonment, transportation, and death) and alerts readers to the dangers that counterfeit money poses to unwary consumers. Blanchard's personification of the counterfeit coin and his counterfeit slang ('fig') lends credence for mid-nineteenth-century authors incorporating slang vocabulary into their works and for reading Rossetti's poem through nineteenth-century slang.

### The Counterfeit Market

As symbols of counterfeit economies, the goblins are antagonists to the poem's two tokens of legitimate value – Laura's golden curl and Lizzie's silver penny. The enticement of fresh and ripened fruit lures Laura first:

Good folk, I have no coin;  
To take were to purloin;  
I have no copper in my purse,

<sup>34</sup> Sidney Laman Blanchard, 'Biography of a Bad Shilling', 1851. *The Financial System in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. By Mary Poovey (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), pp. 60-70 (pp. 60-1). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>35</sup> Blanchard misses an opportunity here for some wordplay with counterfeit and 'counter-fruit'.

I have no silver either,  
And all my gold is on the furze. (Rossetti 116-20)

With an expectation of formal marketplace conduct, Laura is surprised by the goblins' response: "“You have much gold upon your head”, / They answered all together: / “Buy from us with a golden curl”" (123-5). She succumbs and agrees to barter for goblin fruit with a 'golden lock' (126) and a 'tear more rare than pearl' (127). One way to interpret the cutting of Laura's golden lock is as a scene of prostitution, the exchange of part of Laura's body for fruit. I want to propose, however, another interpretation of this scene in line with counterfeit culture. Another trick that counterfeiters used to create counterfeit coins, especially gold coins, was known as 'coin-clipping'.<sup>36</sup> In the nineteenth century, as coins were circulated, handled, and used they would wear down and become misshapen. Counterfeiters could take the irregularly shaped gold coins and, using 'coin shears', clip away some of the gold, which could go unnoticed if a coin was already deformed. The clippings would then be melted down into bars and sold to counterfeiters to be recast as counterfeit coins. The now deformed and devalued coin could reenter the market with its face value intact. Laura's clipping of a golden lock may enact a similar scene. The loss of one lock is like the clipping of a gold coin – so small as to be unnoticeable. By clipping her hair, however, Laura unknowingly reenters circulation as a devalued object within the goblin's counterfeit economy.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> See "From the Archives: Countering the Counterfeiters" *Barclay* (29 March 2017) <<https://www.home.barclays/news/2017/03/Countering-the-counterfeiters.html>> [accessed 3 June 2017]

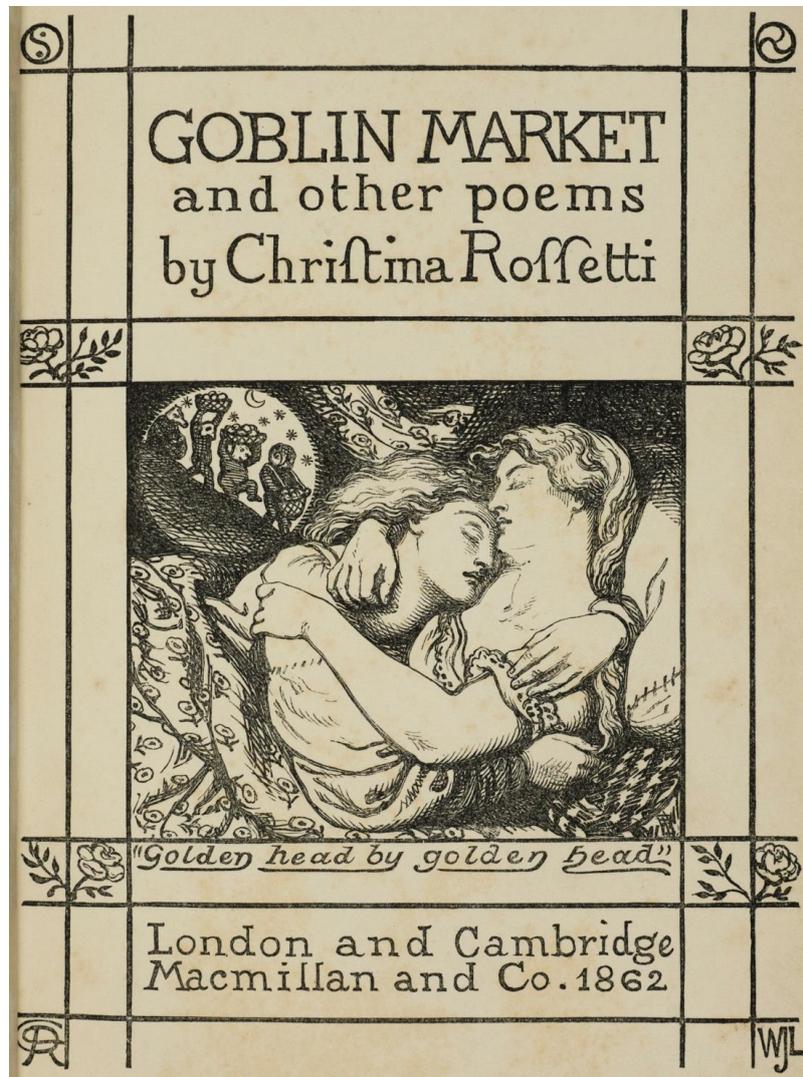
<sup>37</sup> Clayton Tarr notes that selling hair was a 'perfectly normal marketplace transaction – an exchange that is not charged with sexual transgression, which many have argued, but with symbiosis: Laura's hair is flaxen, valuable enough to the goblins for her to feast, and more valuable than Lizzie's "silver penny"' (305). See 'Covent Goblin Market', *Victorian Poetry*, 50 (2012), pp. 297-316.



**Figure 1** *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862). Frontispiece designed by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's title page and frontispiece, designed for the 1862 publication of *Goblin Market*, visualises the sisters' relationship with counterfeit culture, depicting the moments directly before and after Laura's consumption of the goblins' fruit. Captioned 'Buy from us with a golden curl', the frontispiece shows Laura clipping her hair as the goblins threaten to overwhelm her. The cat-faced goblin threads her long strands of hair through its human-like hands. The owl-faced goblin holds aloft a plate filled with pomegranate, which sits sliced open, its seeds visible. Associated with the myth of Persephone, the pomegranate suggests Laura is in danger of meeting a similar fate. The owl-faced goblin, whose presence in this illustration has gone unremarked, is also associated with the Persephone myth. According to Ovid, it is Ascalaphus, the orchardist of Hades, who reveals that Persephone has eaten the pomegranate seeds. Demeter, her mother, then punishes Ascalaphus by burying him under a large rock in the

Underworld. Persephone, however, rescues Ascalaphus and transforms him into an owl. In Dante Gabriel's illustration, the pomegranate and owl-faced goblin serve as visual signals warning against deception.<sup>38</sup>



**Figure 2** *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862). Title page designed by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

In the upper-left corner of the frontispiece, Lizzie trudges away from the scene, but looks back over her shoulder to observe the exchange. The posture of Lizzie's body and her look back towards Laura are suggestive also of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth. In his grief after Eurydice's death, Orpheus travels to the Underworld, where he plays and sings so beautifully that he moves Hades and Persephone. Hades grants Eurydice's release with one condition – Orpheus must

<sup>38</sup> See Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting *Proserpine* (1874), Tate Gallery London. Comparing the disembodied hands and pomegranate fruit of this later painting provides an interesting study for the frontispiece and title page illustration.

lead Eurydice out of the Underworld without looking back at her. At the threshold between worlds, believing Hades has deceived him, Orpheus turns back – only to witness Eurydice disappear back into the Underworld. In Dante Gabriel’s illustration, Lizzie’s glance back does not condemn, it confirms – Laura is not following. The Orpheus and Eurydice myth is one of anticipated deception; like Orpheus, Lizzie anticipates the goblins are deceptive, and she is right. When she attempts to lead Laura out of the market, she cannot help but glance back.

The layouts of the frontispiece and the title page mirror one another. As Lizzie walks uphill in the frontispiece, the goblin men march downhill in the title page. Captioned ‘Golden head by golden head’, the title-page design depicts the sleeping sisters wrapped in a protective embrace:

Golden head by golden head,  
Like two pigeons in one nest,  
Folded in each other’s wings,  
They lay down in their curtained bed:  
Like two blossoms on one stem,  
Like two flakes of new-fall’n snow,  
Like two wands in ivory  
Tipped with gold for awful kings. (Rossetti 184-91)

Intertwined, the sisters appear outwardly indistinguishable. The positioning of the sisters’ hands, however, may give clues as to their identity. One hand grasps lightly, between thumb and forefinger, the end of a lock of hair. While another hand, disembodied and hovering directly above the first, appears wedged between pillow and hair. These two hands appear intent on touching the hair, the smaller hand actively grasping the end of a lock, while the larger hand appears to trap the strands tightly against the sleeper’s back, pulling them taut in the process. Might this be Laura who, in her sleep, is gathering, testing, or weighing Lizzie’s golden hair? Is she dreaming of fruit-laden goblin men, assessing how much fruit those strands could purchase? Or, could this be Lizzie, clutching at the ragged, clipped ends of Laura’s strands and anticipating the goblin men’s return for more? The answer remains unclear.<sup>39</sup>

Marching invasively towards the domestic space of the bedroom, the goblins are present but remain confined in a circular image. What is this circular image? In his analysis of *Goblin Market*, Victor Roman Mendoza weighs the ambiguity of the goblins’ image in the title page, questioning what purpose their appearance serves: ‘So is this inset image in fact a dream? Or is it some other window through which the goblin merchants might also ‘gaze in at them’? Or might it be a *coin*, whose face, in juxtaposition with the sisters’ own circular-shaped repose, adds even more significance to the reversible, antimetabolic

<sup>39</sup> See Bernhard-Jackson for a recent discussion of twinning in Rossetti’s poem.

caption'.<sup>40</sup> With a knowledge of economic slang and counterfeit culture, Mendoza's reading of the goblin image as a coin makes sense. If 'goblin' is a gold sovereign, the caption 'Golden head by golden head' focuses attention on the symbolic images – coin and hair – of the two economies.<sup>41</sup> The presence of the goblin coin within the sisters' bedroom denotes the extent to which the counterfeit economy has penetrated the domestic one.

In Blanchard's story, the bad shilling passes successfully *only* when it blends in with authentic coins of real value. Similarly, in the title page, the two sisters are indistinguishable, their embrace signifying the protection that legitimate economies provide counterfeit ones. When Laura returns to the market, she can no longer hear or see the goblin men because she cannot differentiate them from real men. Laura and Lizzie, indistinguishable before, are now distinct. Unable to return to the market the next day, Laura begins to fade:

Her hair grew thin and grey;  
She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn  
To swift decay and burn  
Her fire away. (277-80)

The fading of Laura's golden hair symbolises a devaluation, transforming her from a gold coin to a silver one. Depleted, Laura no longer participates in the domestic economies of the home. Finding herself now solely responsible for the health of Laura and their domestic economy, Lizzie wavers over how to help her sister:

Tender Lizzie could not bear  
To watch her sister's cankerous care  
Yet not to share  
[...]  
Longed to buy fruit to comfort her,  
But feared to pay too dear  
[...]  
Till Laura dwindling  
Seemed knocking at Death's door;  
Then Lizzie *weighed* no more  
Better and worse;

---

<sup>40</sup> Victor Roman Mendoza, "'Come Buy': The Crossing of Sexual and Consumer Desire in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*", *ELH*, 73.4 (2006), pp. 913-47 (p. 941; emphasis added). Mendoza identifies Lizzie's silver penny as a possible Maundy coin and a lost religious token, connecting Lizzie's economy with Rossetti's asceticism.

<sup>41</sup> D.G. Rossetti's 'Jenny' also connects gold coins and hair with prostitution and sexuality.

But put a silver penny in her purse. (299-302, 310-11, 321-24; emphasis added)<sup>42</sup>

The sudden appearance of the silver penny, I argue, symbolises a material calculation by Lizzie. Like a clipped coin, Laura's face value differs from her actual value, and Lizzie must *weigh* her to know her new value. In this calculation, Lizzie transforms herself into a merchant and goes to face the goblins as an equal. Just as the decline in formal language gradually exposes the falsity of the marketplace, the goblins' acceptance of gold hair and refusal of silver money reveals their dangerous deceit.<sup>43</sup>

Without any recognised source of income, the silver penny may constitute the whole of the sisters' financial resources. If true, Lizzie *must* calculate the risk of gambling their only penny without the guarantee of a return. Approaching the goblins, she calls out 'Give me much and many' (365), then 'Held out her apron, / Tossed them her penny' (366-7). Reinforcing the risk Lizzie wagers, her gesture of tossing the coin embodies a popular nineteenth-century marketplace game played by costermongers and their customers. Described by Mayhew as a simple coin toss, the customer tosses the coin while the pieman calls heads or tails; 'If the pieman [wins] the toss, he receives [the coin] without giving a pie; if he lose[s], he hands [the pie] over for nothing' (p. 196). Lizzie's coin toss possesses all the implications of marketplace gambling; the tossing of her silver penny, however, brings Lizzie legitimate economy into conflict with the goblins' illegitimate one. The attack that follows literalises the violent coexistence of two economy cultures in the nineteenth-century marketplace.

Initially unresponsive to her tossing of the silver penny, the goblins instruct Lizzie to 'Sit down and feast with us, / Be welcome guest with us, / Cheer you and rest with us' (Rossetti 380-82). Lizzie resists their offer, maintaining,

If you will not sell me any  
Of your fruits though much and many,

---

<sup>42</sup> The use of 'Tender' suggests both compassion and money. Lizzie is tender (compassionate) and tender (legal money). Rossetti employs 'tender' again near the poem's conclusion, when Lizzie and Laura are mothers with children newly minted: 'Their lives bound up in tender lives' (547).

<sup>43</sup> In "'Men sell not such in any town": Exchange in *Goblin Market*', *Victorian Poetry*, 28.1 (1990), pp. 51-67, Terence Holt notes the poem's abundance of 'economic language and metaphors, terms of finance and commerce ("buy", "offer", "merchant", "stock", "money", "golden", "precious", "sell", "fee", "hawking", "coin", "rich", etc.)' (p. 51). From the formal terms of 'offer', 'merchant', 'stock', and 'golden', Rossetti's syntax shifts to the more informal references of 'sell', 'fee', 'hawking', and 'coin'. The progressive decline of verbal formality outlines a cessation of legitimate marketplace practices and a turn to informal and potentially fraudulent ones.

Give me back my silver penny  
I tossed you for a fee. (386-89)

Ignoring the penny, the goblins become quickly agitated. Lizzie remains unmoved, ‘white and golden’, (408) as their attack escalates from verbal coaxing, to scratching, pinching, and ends in mockery and mauling:

Though the goblins cuffed and caught her,  
Coaxed and fought her,  
Bullied and besought her,  
Scratched her, pinched her black as ink,  
Kicked and knocked her,  
Mauled and mocked her,  
Lizzie uttered not a word;  
Would not open lip from lip  
Lest they should cram a mouthful in. (424-32)

The bruising left on Lizzie’s body reflects their attempts to transfigure her, the scratches and pinches that cover her skin signifying their violent attempts to mould her. The verb ‘pinched’ (427) is significant for its slang doubling. Although more modern idiolects recognise ‘pinch’ as slang for stealing, mid-Victorian slang translated ‘pinch’ as ‘to pass counterfeit money in exchange for goods’.<sup>44</sup> Their physical abuse of her body mirrors the production and passing of counterfeit money. Terence Holt suggests that ‘the lines associate goblin sexual violence with writing, and although it attempts to render that writing deficient, claiming that the goblins fail in their assault on her virginity, the imagery of the ink contradicts the claim: Lizzie leaves the market marked by the goblin pens’.<sup>45</sup> Holt proposes the inky lines prove the success of the goblins’ attack, and, although she certainly leaves the market marked, the lines are superficial and, I would argue, represent the artificiality of the counterfeit culture – Lizzie’s interior, the source of her value, remains intact.

No matter how much they scratch and pinch, ‘Lizzie uttered not a word; / Would not open lip from lip’ (Rossetti 431-32). Beyond its common usage, ‘to utter’ also means ‘to issue, offer, or expose for sale or barter’ (‘utter’). Refusing to utter, Lizzie rejects the threat to her interior. In nineteenth-century slang, ‘to utter’ denoted the movement, or passing, of counterfeit money.<sup>46</sup> By refusing to utter, Lizzie denies any productive inclusion in the goblin’s fraudulent market.

<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Green, *Cassell’s Dictionary of Slang*, 2nd ed, (London: Weidenfield & Nicholson, 2005), p. 1094.

<sup>45</sup> Holt, p. 57.

<sup>46</sup> This usage is recorded in several slang dictionaries popular at the time, including *The Vulgar Tongue* (1859) and *The Slang Dictionary* (1859, 1860, 1864).

Tired of her resilience, the goblins fling the penny back and disappear. Leaving the market with ‘juice that syruded all her face / And lodged in dimples in her chin’ (Rossetti 434-35), Lizzie hears ‘her penny jingle / Bouncing in her purse,— / Its bounce was music to her ear’ (452-54). In his slang dictionary, Hotten identifies the slang *wyn* as penny, but Hotten appends the note that *wyn* may stem from the Welsh *gwyn*, meaning ‘white: – *i.e.* the white silver penny’ (20). Lizzie leaves the goblin market with her penny safely in her purse – Lizzie gambles her *wyn* and wins.<sup>47</sup>

Returning home, she calls Laura to ‘Come and kiss me. / Never mind my bruises, / Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices’ (466-68). Laura must ingest the fruit juices to purge herself, undergoing an internal restoration: ‘Her lips began to scorch, / That juice was wormwood to her tongue, / She loathed the feast’ (493-95). Beginning at her lips and moving inward towards her tongue and throat, the once poisonous fruit moves swiftly, burning like an internal fire: ‘Swift fire spread through her veins, knocked at her heart, / Met the fire smoldering there / And overbore its lesser flame’ (506-9). Melted down by the heat, Laura undergoes a kind of recasting. Then, overcome with fever, she drops, as if fresh from the mould:

She fell at last;  
Pleasure past and anguish past,  
Is it death or is it life?  
Life out of death. (521-24)

The chiasmus interlocking Death and Life, Life and Death, reverses the effects of the goblins’ depletion, reinvigorating Laura with genuine value. Described in resplendent images of newness and gold, she awakes to begin her renewed life:

And early reapers plodded to the place  
Of golden sheaves,

---

<sup>47</sup> Another potential slang term for penny is Polly, although it is less clear if the slang term would have been in regular use in Rossetti’s time. Early in *Goblin Market*, the parrot-goblin is described as ‘One parrot-voiced and jolly / Cried, “Pretty Goblin” for “Pretty Polly”’ (112-13). Compare the following quote from Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853) in which a tavern bill is being calculated: ‘Four veals and hams is three [...] and four pints of half-and-half is six and three, and four small rums is eight and three, and three Pollys is eight and six’ (253). The waitress in the scene is called Polly, but here in the tallying of the bill a ‘Polly’ stands for a penny, the tip each of the three diners pays her. Green records the use of ‘Polly’ and ‘Pretty Polly’ as slang for penny in the 1970s but not earlier, and it does not appear in any of the other slang dictionaries, but, as Beier notes and as Coleman demonstrates, slang falls in and out of fashion, sometimes surviving for centuries through dictionaries and handbooks. So, the possibility exists that ‘Polly’ was still slang for penny at the time that Rossetti composed *Goblin Market*.

And dew-wet grass  
 Bowed in the morning winds so brisk to pass,  
 And new buds with new day  
 Opened of cup-like lilies on the stream,  
 Laura awoke as from a dream,  
 Laughed in the innocent old way,  
 Hugged Lizzie but not twice or thrice,  
 Her gleaming locks showed not one thread of grey. (531-40)

Signified by the new buds and the morning reapers cutting the golden sheaves, Laura's recasting allows her to reenter the domestic economy. The poem closes with the harmonious image of the sisters as wives and coiners of another kind of currency:

Days, weeks, months, years,  
 Afterwards, when both were wives  
 With children of their own;  
 Their mother-hearts beset with fears  
 Their lives bound up in *tender* lives;  
 Laura would call the little ones  
 And tell them of her early prime  
 [...]
 Would tell them how her sister stood  
 In deadly peril to do her good,  
 And *win* the fiery antidote (543-49, 557-59; emphasis added).

Responsible for the children's newly minted and tender lives, Lizzie and Laura perform the reproductive roles of wives and mothers. Laura's use of *win* recalls her game-like dealings with the goblin merchant men. Both sisters appear to escape the goblin market with no long-term damage; yet, after Lizzie's resuscitation of Laura with the words, 'eat me, drink me, love me; / Laura, make much of me', Lizzie never *utters* another word (471-72). Why is Lizzie silent? Does her silence enable Laura to speak and tell the children of her experiences? Within the new domestic economy of the family, Laura's duties are to warn the future generation away from the temptations that come in the form of goods, merchants, money, and desires. Her acts of storytelling allow an outering of her consciousness, while relieving the burden of her knowledge gained in the goblin market.<sup>48</sup> Throughout the poem, Laura is the sister associated with interiority by

---

<sup>48</sup> In his discussion of psychodynamics and orality, Walter Ong asserts that 'interiority and harmony are characteristics of human consciousness. The consciousness of each human person is totally interiorized', accessible only through the acts of sound production (p. 71). Uttering becomes an act of outering one's interiority. For more on the constructions of orality and

way of threats to it, damages done it, and renewals of it; the continued outing of her interiority in the conclusion follows form. Lizzie's actions from the beginning have been to preserve and prevent an outing of her interiority. She admonishes Laura for 'peeping' at goblin men; *to peep* implies sight and sound, the opening of lids and lips. Lizzie refuses to peep, to utter or open herself up to the goblins' attacks. In a poem, where words and language can be deceitful, silence is self-preservation.

*Goblin Market* uses counterfeit slang to enact what it theorises – that language, like money, can deceive us. Reading *Goblin Market* through slang dictionaries and putting it in discourse with other works about counterfeiting reveals the depths of Victorian anxieties about fraud, especially the frauds that hide in plain sight. But the poem ends with an image of hope: 'Their lives bound up in tender lives / Laura would call the little ones / And tell them of her early prime' (547-9). At the conclusion, Lizzie has won and the cries of newly minted children replace those of the fraudulent goblins. The poem ends with Laura's proclamation that 'there is no friend like a sister / [...] / To fetch one if one goes astray'; even if one falls prey to a fraud or deception and 'goes astray', they can be redeemed.

---

primary oral culture, see Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002).

## Bibliography

- Beier, A.L., 'Identity, Language and Resistance in the Making of the Victorian "Criminal Class": Mayhew's Convict Revisited', *Journal of British Studies* 44 (July 2015), 499-515
- Bernhard-Jackson, Emily A., "'Like Two Pigeons in One Nest, Like to Seedlings in One Capsule': Reading *Goblin Market* in Conjunction with Victorian Twin Discourse', *Victorian Poetry*, 55.4 (2017), 451-70
- Blanchard, Sidney Laman, 'Biography of a Bad Shilling' (1851), *The Financial System in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by Mary Poovey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 60-70
- Coleman, Julie, *A History of Cant and Slang Dictionaries: Volume II 1785-1858* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)
- Colquhoun, Patrick. *A Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis*. 7th ed. London, 1806. *Google Book Search*. [accessed 20 July 2017].
- 'goblin, n.<sup>2</sup>' *OED Online*. <[www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)> [accessed 25 July 2017]
- Grass, Sean C. 'Nature's Perilous Variety in Rossetti's *Goblin Market*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 51.3 (1996), 356-76
- Green, Jonathon. *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang*. 2nd ed. (London: Weidenfield & Nicholson, 2005)
- Groom, Nick. *The Forger's Shadow: How Forgery Changed the Course of Literature* (London: Picador, 2002)
- Hillard, Molly Clark. 'Dangerous Exchange: Fairy Footsteps, Goblin Economies, and *The Old Curiosity Shop*', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 35 (2005), 63-86
- Holt, Terrence. "'Men Sell Not Such in Any Town": Exchange in *Goblin Market*', *Victorian Poetry*, 28.1 (1990), 51-67
- Hotten, John Camden. *The Slang Dictionary; or, The Vulgar Words, Street Phrases, and 'Fast' Expressions of High and Low Society*. 1864. *Google Book Search*. [accessed 8 August 2017]

- Malton, Sara. *Forgery in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture: Fictions of Finance from Dickens to Wilde* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009)
- Marsh, Jan. *Christina Rossetti: A Writer's Life*, (New York: Viking, 1995)
- Mayhew, Henry. *London Labour and the London Poor*, 1861-62. 4 vols. Augustus M. Kelley, 1967
- Mendoza, Victor Roman. "'Come Buy": The Crossing of Sexual and Consumer Desire in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*', *ELH*, 73.4 (2006), 913-47
- Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* [1982] (New York: Routledge, 2002)
- 'plum, n'. *OED Online*. <[www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)> [accessed 26 August 2017]
- Poovey, Mary. *Genres of the Credit Economy: Meditating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain*. University of Chicago Press, 2008
- 'queer, a.<sup>2</sup> and n.<sup>1</sup>' *OED Online*. <[www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)> [accessed 30 August 2017]
- Rosenman, Ellen Bayuk. 'Rudeness, Slang, and Obscurity: Working-Class Politics in *London Labour and the London Poor*'. *Victorian Vulgarity: Taste in Verbal and Visual Culture*, ed. by Susan David Bernstein and Elsie B. Michie (New York: Ashgate, 2009), 55-70
- Rossetti, Christina. *Goblin Market* [1862] *The Complete Poems*, ed. by R.W. Crump (Baton Rouge, Louisiana University Press, 1979-90. Reprinted New York: Penguin, 2001), 5-20
- 'sly, a.<sup>5b</sup>' *OED Online*. <[www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)> [accessed 8 July 2017]
- Stern, Rebecca. "'Adulteration Detected": Food and Fraud in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 57.4 (2003), 477-511
- Tucker, Herbert F. 'Rossetti's *Goblin Marketing*: Sweet to Tongue and Sound to Eye', *Representations*, 82 (2003), 117-33
- 'utter, v.<sup>1a, 2b</sup>' *OED Online*. <[www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)> [accessed 8 July 2017]

Vaux, James Hardy. *The Memoirs of James Hardy Vaux, including his Vocabulary of the Flash Language*. [1827], ed. by Noel McLachlan (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1967)

Wills, W.H. [published anonymously]. 'Review of a Popular Publication, in the Searching Style', *Household Words* 1.18 (27 July 1850), 426-31

Wright, Peter. *Cockney Dialect and Slang* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981)

## **The Bank Nun's Tale: Financial Forgery, Gothic Imagery, and Economic Power**

Rebecca Nesvet  
(University of Wisconsin, Green Bay, USA)

### **Abstract**

*A Victorian urban legend maintains that 'Miss Whitehead, the Bank Nun', a black-clothed woman in a nun-like headdress, frequently visited the Bank of England to protest her brother's 1812 execution for financial forgery. Well-known by 1880, the story is largely neglected by modern scholarship on the depiction of forgery. I reveal that the Bank Nun is a Victorian literary invention, the product of a series of texts that enlist Gothic imagery to debate financial forgery's impact, prosecution, and punishment and the economic empowerment of women and working-class people. The character's development begins with the sketch collection *Streetology of London*, or the Metropolitan Papers of the Itinerant Club (1837), which vilifies financial forgery by transforming the historical Miss Whitehead into 'the Bank Nun', an update of the venal nun of Gothic literature. Contesting this narrative, 'Sweeney Todd' creator James Malcolm Rymer's penny novel *The Lady in Black*, or, the Widow and the Wife (1847–8) reinvents the Bank Nun as a Gothic heroine whose ordeal demonstrates that forgery prosecution oppresses the productive classes. These angelic and demonic instantiations of the Bank Nun proliferated throughout the Victorian era, generating an enduring myth.*

In *Behind a Brass Knocker: Some Grim Realities in Picture and Prose* (1883), the cartoonist Charles Henry Ross recalls that as a child in 1840s London, he 'had pointed out to [him] a wild-looking elderly woman, dressed in shabby mourning'.<sup>1</sup> She 'rambled through the City streets, or hung round the Bank' of England, 'mutter[ed] to herself in impotent rage', and 'shrilly accuse[d] the Bank authorities, on whose charity she mostly lived, of robbing her' (p. 84). The sister of a financial forger whose execution she blames on the Bank, this woman is named Sarah Whitehead but colloquially known as 'the Bank Nun' (p. 84). Several modern histories of the Bank agree that she importuned its employees, inducing them to finance her subsistence.<sup>2</sup> An indicative example is a 2017 history of the Bank authorised by that institution.<sup>3</sup> However, scholarship on nineteenth-century depictions of financial forgery largely neglects her, possibly

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Henry Ross, *Behind a Brass Knocker: Some Grim Realities in Picture and Prose* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1883), p. 84. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Hennessy, *A Domestic History of the Bank of England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 36; Kate Rosenberg and Robert Thurston Hopkins, *The Romance of the Bank of England* (London: Butterworth, 1933), p. 171.

<sup>3</sup> David Kynaston, *Till Time's Last Sand: A History of the Bank of England 1694–2013* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 103. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

on account of her gender.<sup>4</sup> The most infamous nineteenth-century financial forgers, such as Henry Fauntleroy, Joseph Hunton, and Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, were men. Furthermore, as Lana L. Dalley and Jill Rappoport note in the introduction to their edited volume on Victorian women's economic participation, while economically resourceful male characters like Robinson Crusoe have long commanded critical attention, their female counterparts remain 'liminal'.<sup>5</sup>

Like the historical and fictional women whom Dalley and Rappoport's volume illuminates, the Bank Nun provokes important questions. What is the history of her inspiration, Miss Whitehead? When and how did she earn her unusual nickname? To what ends did the literary imagination deploy her image, and what might her representation reveal about financial forgery and other nineteenth-century topical concerns? In response to these questions, I propose that although Paul Whitehead, executed in 1812, was indeed survived by a sister, the Bank Nun is a Victorian literary invention, produced via a series of texts that enlist Gothic imagery to debate the impact of financial forgery, its prosecution and punishment, and the economic empowerment of women and working-class people. This process begins with the serial *Streetology of London, or the Metropolitan Papers of the Itinerant Club* (1837), which vilifies financial forgery by dredging up the memory of the Whitehead siblings and likening the sister to a Gothic stock type, the venal nun. In response, 'Sweeney Todd' creator James Malcolm Rymer's penny serial *The Lady in Black, or, the Widow and the Wife* (1847–8) recasts *Streetology's* 'Bank Nun' as a Gothic persecuted heroine. Her ordeal shows that forgery harms only the financial elite, which prosecutes it to oppress the productive classes. These angelic and demonic versions of the Bank Nun proliferated throughout the Victorian era in adaptation, plagiarism, and anecdote, often accompanied by claims to historical authenticity. This echo chamber produced the urban myth that Ross knew.

This myth emerged in a nation long conditioned to fear forgery and unused to paper money. As Paul Baines argues, eighteenth-century Britain passed thirty-six mostly capital forgery statutes and considered forgery a 'pervasive cultural problem' and a form of violence against an 'internal notion of [the] private self'.<sup>6</sup> Mary Poovey historicises this fear, showing that Britain assimilated 'bewildering varieties of credit paper' that, easy to forge and difficult to authenticate,

---

<sup>4</sup> An exception is Gordon Bigelow, who, in *Fiction, Famine, and the Rise of Economics in Victorian Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 106, identifies allusions to the Bank Nun in *Bleak House*. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Lana L. Dalley and Jill Rappoport, 'Introduction', in *Economic Women: Essays on Desire and Dispossession in Nineteenth-Century British Culture*, ed. by Lana L. Dalley and Jill Rappoport (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013), pp. 1–24 (p. 1).

<sup>6</sup> Paul Baines, *The House of Forgery in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 8, pp. 11–14.

‘considerably complicated efforts to distinguish between valid and invalid monetary forms’.<sup>7</sup> Paper money was gradually ‘naturalized’, or made a part of everyday life, a process to which the rise of the novel involuntarily contributed ‘by teaching readers to practice trust, tolerate deferral’ and recognise ‘immaterial’ entities (p. 59, 89). However, at the century’s end, a forgery epidemic undermined this naturalisation. To finance war with France, the Bank Restriction Act (1797) clawed back bullion and printed copious small denomination banknotes, forcing the public to use them. As Ian Haywood argues, this situation ‘spectacularis[ed] the contradictions of the credit economy’, such as official distrust of a public required to trust paper money.<sup>8</sup> The Bank zealously pursued forgery prosecutions, resulting in the execution of an unknown number of innocents who had uttered (circulated) notes that they did not know were counterfeit.<sup>9</sup>

According to Catherine Gallagher, this new and hazardous economic culture inspired public contemplation of the nature of paper money, which modernised economic thought and shaped British Romanticism.<sup>10</sup> Extending Gallagher’s thesis, Robert Miles finds forgery–mania an ‘enabling condition’ of the Romantic movement, informing ‘the dream of achieving permanent or transcendent value against a background of value rendered radically unstable or contested’ (para. 10). One Romantic character who pursues this dream, the eponymous heroine of Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1815), treats her friend Harriet like a banknote of questionable validity (para. 1). Meanwhile, Regency radicals formulated Romantic interpretations of forgery and its prosecution. Thomas Wooler’s journal *The Black Dwarf* (1818) blames the forgery executions on the Bank, rhetoric echoed in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s 1819 poem ‘The Masque of Anarchy’, which calls all paper currency forgery and contends it oppresses the working class.<sup>11</sup> Most intriguingly, William Cobbett’s editorial ‘Paper Against Gold’ (1817) proposes that a talented engraver should flood London with forged banknotes, compelling the discontinuation of real ones. As Alex Benchimol explains, Cobbett envisioned this act equipping working–class people with the

---

<sup>7</sup> Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth– and Nineteenth–Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 5. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>8</sup> Ian Haywood, ‘Paper Promise: Restriction, Caricature, and the Ghost of Gold’, in *Romantic Circles and the Credit Crunch: A Romantic Circles Praxis Volume*, ed. by Ian Haywood (2012), <<https://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/forgery/index.html>> [accessed 23 May 2018], para. 5 of 32.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Miles, ‘*Emma* and Bank Bills: Romanticism and Forgery’, in *Romantic Circles and the Credit Crunch: A Romantic Circles Praxis Volume*, ed. by Ian Haywood (2012), <<https://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/forgery/index.html>> accessed 23 May 2018], para. 9 of 32. Further references given after quotations in the text.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Gallagher, *Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 7–8, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Alex Dick, “‘The Ghost of Gold’”: Forgery Trials and the Standard of Value in Shelley’s “The Masque of Anarchy”, *European Romantic Review*, 18.3 (2007), 381–400 (p. 390).

economic power that the credit economy denies them and protesting press censorship by curtailing banks' money-printing.<sup>12</sup> Cobbett's imagined redistribution of economic and printing power makes forgery Promethean.

This was the cultural backdrop of Paul Whitehead's crime. On 30 October 1811, he was charged with forging a signature on a bill of exchange. Banker Abraham Wildey Robarts initially declined the bill, then was persuaded by his 'principal clerk', Mr. Lee, who 'said he knew [Whitehead] very well as a clerk in the cashier's office in the bank [sic] of England, and considered him a 'respectable man'.<sup>13</sup> The forgery's subsequent detection challenges the validity of Robarts' classist, nepotistic verification method. Elaborating on this point, the *Criminal Recorder, or Biographical Sketches of Notorious Public Characters* (1815) calls Whitehead 'a man of genteel appearance' whose 'mention' of 'the name of a respectable gentleman in Mr. Robarts's office' reassures him.<sup>14</sup> In the *Criminal Recorder*, Whitehead also leverages his Bank employment, telling Robarts 'that he should render himself liable to lose his situation in the Bank in the event of not getting the bill cashed' (p. 244). Revealing the unwritten, fallible rules of Regency currency verification, Whitehead's crime constitutes what Andrew Smith has identified as Gothic subversion: a 'counter-cultural' revolt, the 'rebellious tendency' of which 'transcends any overt political message' and is 'not necessarily in control of its own image-making'.<sup>15</sup> Lacking an intentional political message, Whitehead's fraud undermines London's financial culture, and, as we shortly will see, transcends his control by resurfacing in writings that sideline him, instead foregrounding his sister.

Neither the trial transcript nor *Criminal Recorder* mention a sister, but she existed. Gordon Bigelow surmises the public may have known of her as early as 1818, when, according to a 1926 number of the Bank of England's journal, the management bribed her with 'a pension' to 'stop loitering around the building'.<sup>16</sup> The earliest contemporary report is a 22 February 1828 *Times* account of a Southwark magistrate's examination of a 'Miss Whitehead [,] well-known in the

<sup>12</sup> Alex Benchimol, 'Knowledge Against Paper: Forgery, State Violence, and Radical Cultural Resistance in the Romantic Period', in *Romantic Circles and the Credit Crunch: A Romantic Circles Praxis Volume*, ed. by Ian Haywood (2012), <<https://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/forgery/index.html>> [accessed 23 May 2018], para. 17 of 32.

<sup>13</sup> 'Trial of Paul Whitehead (t18111030-44), October 1811', in *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* <<http://www.oldbaileyonline.org>> [accessed 23 May 2018].

<sup>14</sup> Anon., *The Criminal Recorder: or, Biographical Sketches of Notorious Public Characters*, 2 vols (Nottingham: R. Dowson, 1815), II, p. 244. Further references given after quotations in the text.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Smith, *Gothic Radicalism: Literature, Philosophy and Psychoanalysis in the Nineteenth Century* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), p. 77.

<sup>16</sup> Anon., 'The Bank Nun', *The Old Lady of Threadneedle Street: The Staff Journal of the Bank of England*, 3.22 (1926), 231-4, cited in William Marston Acres, *The Bank of England from Within, 1694-1900*, 2 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), II, p. 368, cited in Bigelow, p. 106. Further references to Acres are given after quotations in the text.

city, at the Bank and Stock Exchange particularly, which she daily perambulates [...] dressed in deep mourning', including a 'black gauze' headdress; her 'red cheeks and lips plastered over with carmine', emphasising 'the contrast' between 'the poor woman's artificial ruddy complexion and the sombre hue of [her] curious dress'.<sup>17</sup> She complains that female relatives are trying to rob and poison her, but the *Times* implicates Paul Whitehead instead. According to 'an individual who was present [...] about 14 years ago, [circa 1814] her brother, who was a clerk in the Bank, had been executed for forgery'. She is 'in the constant habit of going to the Bank, where many of the gentlemen who attend there [...] very liberally contribute to her aid in providing for her wants' (*Ibid*). Notably, this article appeared four years after the debonair financial forger Henry Fauntleroy's controversial execution and months before the unsuccessful public campaign to relieve another financial forger, well-connected Quaker Joseph Hunton. The bankers' generosity and the *Times's* sympathy ('poor woman') suggest mixed feelings about the social impact of forgery executions.

In 1828, this ambivalence was topical. In 1821, Restriction ended and, in 1832, the death penalty for most forgery offences was abolished, with the total abolition of execution for forgery following in 1837. Phil Handler demonstrates that this reform resulted from a campaign against the death penalty that represented execution for forgery as the indicative judicial travesty, a position that Sara Malton identifies in Charles Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge* (1841).<sup>18</sup> Still, in 1837, financial forgery remained feared. Some Victorian literature judges it an 'intensely dangerous social and economic disruption' and a 'transgression against property, the authority of the law, the nation-state' and the sometimes destabilised 'economic system' (p. 3). For instance, in 1836–7, an international financial crisis forced the Bank of England to spend down its reserves, a major Irish bank nearly closed, and an embezzlement scandal rocked Manchester's Northern and Central Bank; a worse panic erupted in the 1840s.<sup>19</sup> According to Tamara S. Wagner, the novel genre responded to events like these, often enlisting

<sup>17</sup> Anon., 'Union-Hall', *The Times*, 1828, p. 4, also discussed in Steve Roud, *London Lore: The Legends and Traditions of the World's Most Vibrant City* (London: Arrow, 2010), pp. 53–4. Further references to the original are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>18</sup> Phil Handler, 'Forgery and the End of the "Bloody Code" in Early Nineteenth-Century England', *The Historical Journal*, 48.3 (2005), 683–702 (p. 684); Sara Malton, *Forgery in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture: Fictions of Finance from Dickens to Wilde* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 22. Further references to Malton are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>19</sup> Jessica M. Lepler, *The Many Panics of 1837: People, Politics, and the Creation of a Transatlantic Financial Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), especially pp. 57–60; Philip Ollerenshaw, *Banking in Nineteenth-Century Ireland: The Belfast Banks, 1825–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 39; Kynaston, pp. 132–3; Acres, pp. 463–6.

individual, familial, or national financial instability to signify ‘emotional, moral, or social insecurity’.<sup>20</sup>

Did Miss Whitehead live to see these cultural developments? William D. Reider’s *New Tablet of Memory; or, Recorder of Remarkable Events* (1841) claims ‘Miss Whitehead, the Bank Nun’ died on 9 November 1837.<sup>21</sup> Six years later, Rymer’s novel *The Lady in Black* states she died on 9 November 1830.<sup>22</sup> An Eliza Whitehead died on 9 November, 1837 and was buried at Spa Fields, Islington, but she cannot be our heroine, as she was an infant.<sup>23</sup> A more promising possibility is Phoebe Whitehead, a ‘single’ destitute ‘laundress’ born in Holborn in 1788. She entered Southwark’s Christ Church Workhouse in 1828, the year of the *Times* report, and returned there in 1837, 1838, and 1839, the period of Miss Whitehead’s literary transformation into the Bank Nun.<sup>24</sup> The 1851 Census locates single ‘pauper’ Phoebe Whitehead at a different Southwark workhouse, St. George the Martyr.<sup>25</sup> If these records describe Paul Whitehead’s sister, the Bank did not save her from destitution, nor, as we will see, from literary appropriation and reinvention.

### ‘The Bank Nun’

These transformative processes begin with ‘The Bank Nun, A Black Note, with Red Signature’, the third sketch of *Streetology of London* (1837). The earliest published depiction of the Bank Nun that I have found, this sketch judges Restriction–era financial forgery a genuine public danger. Informed by the Pickwick phenomenon, *Streetology* purports to be ‘edited’ by one ‘Jack Rag, Knight of the Street Cross Sweepers’ Society’ from the memoirs of a Regency sweeper and former Bermondsey apprentice, Richard ‘Dickey’ Tynt.<sup>26</sup> The ‘Bank

<sup>20</sup> Tamara S. Wagner, *Financial Speculation in Victorian Fiction: Plotting Money and the Novel Genre, 1815–1901* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), p. 173.

<sup>21</sup> William D. Reider, *The New Tablet of Memory; or, Recorder of Remarkable Events, Alphabetically Arranged from the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (London: John Clements, 1841), p. 348. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>22</sup> James Malcolm Rymer, *The Lady in Black, or, the Widow and the Wife, a Romance* (London: Edward Lloyd, 1847–8), p. 9. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>23</sup> London, The National Archives, General Register Office, ‘Registers of Births, Marriages and Deaths surrendered to the Non–Parochial Registers Commissions of 1837 and 1857’, in *Ancestry.com* <<http://www.ancestry.com>> [accessed 23 May 2018].

<sup>24</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, ‘Workhouse Admission and Discharge Records, 1764–1930’, reproduced at *Ancestry.com*, <<http://www.ancestry.com>> [accessed 23 May 2018].

<sup>25</sup> London, The National Archives, ‘England Census Database for 1851’, available at *Ancestry.com*, <<http://www.ancestry.com>> [accessed 23 May 2018].

<sup>26</sup> Anon., *Streetology of London, or, the Metropolitan Papers of the Itinerant Club, being a Graphic Description of Extraordinary Individuals who Exercise Professions or Callings in the Streets of the Great Metropolis* (London: James S. Hodson, 1837), p. 1. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

Nun' sketch, set in 1812, begins with Tynt setting off for the Bank of England's Rotunda to invest his life savings in stock. He meets the 'trickster' Captain Naylor, who practises 'the art and mystery of dishonesty by which' he 'turn[s] all [his] victims into gold' (p. 33). Naylor steals a Yorkshireman's cheque, accuses the victim of having forged it, and schemes to fob it off on another victim.

This anti-forgery agenda is further developed by *Streetology's* characterisation of the Bank Nun. In the sketch's final episode, Naylor and Tynt visit a City chop-house. There, they encounter 'Miss Sarah Whitehead [...] of Bank Notoriety', or 'The Bank Nun' (p. 41), who, as Naylor explains, lives off the proceeds of her bullying of Bank of England employees and City financiers including Baron Rothschild (p. 45). Her introduction as a human 'Black Note', or false banknote with 'Red Signature' (her make-up) renders her, like the anti-heroines of some nineteenth-century depictions of art forgery examined by Aviva Briefel, a 'female fake', or promiscuous living forgery that employs 'cosmetics to deceive'.<sup>27</sup> The caption of George L. Lee's portrait illustration reiterates this personification:

The Check you behold by a Whitehead was drawn,  
On the Bank of Old England, 'tis true;  
Some say't was dishonoured and noted with red,  
And at Walworth now lies over due (p. 32)

In other words, in Walworth, Southwark, the Bank Nun, a human bad cheque, is sexually 'dishonoured' and pregnant ('lies over due').<sup>28</sup> This accusation reinforces the forgery narrative because, as Sara Malton observes, in Victorian fiction, the 'shadowy double [of] forgery' is often hidden illegitimate reproduction (pp. 6–7). The Bank Nun's disreputability also reflects poorly on her brother's cheque because nineteenth-century Britons used the word 'character' to denote both 'institutions or [financial] instruments referring to their degree of reliability' and, as we have seen in the banker Robarts' reported encounter with Paul Whitehead, treated '[s]kill in character interpretation' and

<sup>27</sup> Aviva Briefel, *The Deceivers: Art Forgery and Identity in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 71.

<sup>28</sup> John Plotz, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 28–31, argues that inanimate object-protagonists proliferated in nineteenth-century fiction. Several examples involve monetary instrument protagonists. See John Wilson Croker, *The Life, Adventures, and Remonstrances of a Scotch Guinea Note* (Edinburgh: Waugh and Innes, 1826); Sydney Laman Blanchard, 'A Biography of a Bad Shilling', *Household Words*, 1851, pp. 420–6; Clara Lucas Balfour, *Passages in the History of a Shilling* (London: S.W. Partridge, 1862).

‘the encouragement of good character’ as ‘the economic safeguard[s] of choice’.<sup>29</sup> The sexually dishonourable woman verifies her late brother’s guilt.

More powerfully, *Streetology* vilifies financial forgery by likening its anti-heroine to a nun. She is no nun, nor does she masquerade as one. Rather, her nickname ‘the Bank Nun’ is the invention of the employees at the Bank of England, from whom she demands money as restitution for her brother’s death. As Naylor tells Tynt, these men find her nun-like ‘for the peculiarity of her [black] dress, which is really emblematic of her mind’ (*Ibid*). By likening her to a nun, they associate her with a well-known Gothic villain. As Diane Long Hoeveler explains, perennially popular Gothic literature features countless ‘bad nuns’, who, shaped by that tradition’s consistently anti-Catholic ideology, present ‘the more outlandish face of the “Catholic as other”’.<sup>30</sup> The typical Gothic nun is either ‘sexually voracious, perverse, [...] manic’, and often ‘glutton[ous]’, or a naïve maiden held captive in the convent until she is corrupted by the bad nuns (p. 52). An indicative bad nun is the villainess of William Henry Ireland’s *The Abbess* (1798; reprinted 1834). The title character rules her convent in a draconian style, but lives promiscuously, hides another, pregnant nun from official scrutiny, sexually assaults the suitor of a younger nun, and is complicit in various criminal conspiracies. The Gothic nun pervades cheap Gothic chapbooks that, as Hoeveler documents, ‘caution the lower classes’ against Catholicism (p. 69), a theme continued in Victorian penny bloods and dreadfuls such as *Love and Crime, or, the Mystery of the Convent* (1841), G.W.M. Reynolds’s *Mysteries of the Inquisition*, translated from the novel by ‘V. de Féréal’ (the *alias* of Victorine Subervic), and Robert Huish’s *The Nun of Gnadenzell* (1846, from Carl Spindler’s 1833 novel).<sup>31</sup> Hoeveler identifies other relevant titles published as late as 1908. She concludes that the venal nun ‘has never really left the Gothic imaginary’ (p. 96).

Acclimated to this imaginary and opposed to Catholic Emancipation (1829), many Victorian Protestants found nuns dangerous to what Rene Kollar calls ‘Victorian family values’.<sup>32</sup> Consider an inheritance dispute discussed in the

<sup>29</sup> Aeron Hunt, *Personal Business: Character and Commerce in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014), p. 86.

<sup>30</sup> Diane Long Hoeveler, *The Gothic Ideology: Religious Hysteria and Anti-Catholicism in British Popular Fiction, 1780–1880* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press 2014), pp. 53–7. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>31</sup> Anon., *Love and Crime, or, the Mystery of the Convent* (London: T. Paine, 1841); G.W.M. Reynolds, *The Mysteries of the Inquisition*, ed. by Marie Léger–St–Jean, *Price One Penny*, <<http://www.priceonepenny.info/editions/index.php>> [accessed 23 May 2018]; Robert Huish, *The Nun of Gnadenzell* (London: Edward Lloyd, 1846).

<sup>32</sup> Rene Kollar, *A Foreign and Wicked Institution? The Campaign Against Convents in Victorian England* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2011), p. 19; Michael Diamond, *Victorian Sensation: Or the Spectacular, the Shocking, and the Scandalous in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Wimbledon: Anthem Press, 2003), pp. 83–98.

*British Magazine and Monthly Register of Religious and Ecclesiastical Information* (1848). Two Irish Ursulines sued their brother after he denied them a share of their late father's fortune. After extended litigation, the brother won. Condemning the 'cupidity of the convent', the *British Magazine* opines that 'simply [...] as nuns', the sisters cannot participate in the economy. 'Any deed executed by them' is 'utterly null and void' because:

the member of one of these religious orders ceases to be a free agent in the distribution of any property that may devolve upon her, and becomes enslaved by the rules and regulations of the community, without any possibility of relieving herself from the dominion of the vows thus taken upon her.<sup>33</sup>

Notably, the 'vows' that negate women's agency do not include marital ones. Rather, Anglicans feared nuns' Catholicism and challenge to domestic patriarchy. They also feared the Anglican sisterhoods that, emerging at midcentury, similarly 'circumvented property law and constructed new family ties'.<sup>34</sup> In this cultural milieu, the nickname 'the Bank Nun' associates Miss Whitehead with a form of Gothic transgression that appeared to be making a real-life resurgence.

Gothic imagery also demonises *Streetology's* Whitehead siblings as a unit. Robert Mighall argues that Gothic plots 'dwell in the historical past, or identify "pastness" in the present', and often involves a 'respectable family' destroyed by a curse. The 'tyrants and monsters of this mode represent and attempt to exorcise the ghosts of the past, and often can't complete the desired exorcism' because of a 'curse' that destroys their 'respectable' family.<sup>35</sup> Some such families consist of sibling pairs, as in Matthew G. Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1848), and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889). The Bank Nun sketch conforms to this pattern. Like the financial forger Hunton and the fictional Tynt, the Bank Nun's brother Mr. Whitehead, initially a Bank of England clerk, climbs 'the unsubstantial ladder of speculation,' which financially ruins him, inspiring him, like Hunton, to try to pay his debts with the proceeds of financial forgery (p. 43). A bad guardian, he allows his sister to be jilted by a

<sup>33</sup> Anon., 'Modern Monasticism', *The British Magazine and Monthly Register of Religious and Ecclesiastical Information*, 34.8 (1848), 197–214 (p. 201).

<sup>34</sup> Jill Rappoport, *Giving Women: Alliance and Exchange in Victorian Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 93–6. See also a broader study of Victorian criticism of women's distribution of money beyond their families: Marlene Tromp, 'The Afterlife of Wills and the Politics of Foreign Investment, 1850–85', in *Culture and Money in the Nineteenth Century: Abstracting Economics*, ed. by Daniel Bivona and Marlene Tromp (Athens, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2016), pp. 199–222.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. xiv, pp. xix–xvii, p. 78.

lover, whose identity Naylor refuses to reveal. '[D]elicate points connected with her life' might 'rankl[e] the feelings of her friends, if she has any', Naylor claims, but 'unrequited love [...] assisted the melancholy that [...] took possession of her' (p. 41). There is additionally a more damning suggestion of sibling incest, as in *The Monk*, *Wuthering Heights*, and other Gothic texts. According to Naylor, upon Whitehead's arrest, relatives relocated his sister, telling her nothing and causing her to assume he has absconded to marry a woman she does not know (p. 44). This is the suspicion of an abandoned mistress, not a dependent sibling, which suggests that incest contributes to the fall of the house of Whitehead.

This fall culminates with Miss Whitehead's decay, like the Gothic nun, from a naïf into a woman of demonic agency. This stereotypical Gothic trajectory is luridly described by Peter Grudin, who argues that in *The Monk*, a text repeatedly reprinted, adapted, and plagiarised throughout the nineteenth century, the monasticised sorceress Matilda, a variation on the bad nun, 'progress[es] from effeminate novice to voluptuous woman' and 'ends with the virago'.<sup>36</sup> The Bank Nun undergoes the same metamorphosis. When Naylor and Tynt encounter her at a City chop-house, 'a reticule [...] h[a]ng[s] on her arm', containing the money with which the Bank keeps her away, and she 'devour[s]' her meal (p. 41). In Lee's portrait, she stares brazenly out at the viewer, brandishing her reticule, sign of the economic agency not possessed by actual 1830s charity-seekers such as Phoebe Whitehead of Southwark. In fact, having found a way to fill her purse without much conventional labour, *Streetology's* Bank Nun recalls John Stuart Mill's conception of economic man. In 'On the Definition of Political Economy' (1836), Mill posits that economics views man 'as a being who desires to possess wealth', only 'capable of judging of the comparative efficacy of means for obtaining that end'; as Mary S. Morgan observes, a getting and consuming caricature.<sup>37</sup> The Bank Nun succeeds in fulfilling this desire, which is significant because women's getting and spending vexed Victorian observers. Elsie Michie theorises that wealthy women in nineteenth-century fiction appear 'vulgar' when they 'possess [...] the wealth and status' that the male hero wants, especially if they seem not to deserve it.<sup>38</sup> In keeping with this model, the Bank Nun infuriates Tynt by dining out on her 'Bank notoriety' amidst the City's masculine space, reinforcing her characterisation as a corrupt and corrupting virago.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Grudin, 'The Monk: Matilda and the Rhetoric of Deceit', *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 5.2 (1975), 136–46 (p. 140).

<sup>37</sup> John Stuart Mill, 'On the Definition of Political Economy', in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill: Essays on Economics and Society*, ed. by J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), p. 321, quoted in Mary S. Morgan, 'Economic Man as Model Man: Ideal Types, Idealization, and Caricatures', *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 28.1 (2006), 1–27, p. 5. See also Morgan's analysis, p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> Elsie B. Michie, *The Vulgar Question of Money: Heiresses, Materialism, and the Novel of Manners from Jane Austen to Henry James* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), p. 5.

*Streetology's* representation of Miss Whitehead as a Gothic venal nun whose pursuit of substance without labour is irritatingly effective suggests that financial forgery, far from being a victimless crime, places economic power in the wrong hands. As Deanna Kreisel observes, Victorian writing often made connections between 'perverse economic management', especially wealth-hoarding, and 'femininity', finding 'degraded' female 'sexuality' akin to 'moribund consumption', and often qualities of the same woman.<sup>39</sup> In Regenia Gagnier's paraphrase, Mill maintains that women 'liberated to participate freely in market relations' and mass education would produce worker-controlled markets and the end of the reign of the 'nuclear family'.<sup>40</sup> Fearing such expansion of economic power, 1870s critics found the woman shopper, a figure historicised by Krista Lysack, transgressive because she 'go[es] to market on her own, not as an object of exchange but as a subject'.<sup>41</sup> *Streetology's* tale of a lazy street sweeper who fancies himself a stock investor, then encounters misappropriated economic power in the Bank Nun's Gothic shape suggests an author uncomfortable with the possibility of female and working-class challenges to traditional economic paradigms.

These fears reverberate in *Streetology's* Bank Nun's afterlife. Alone of the serial's instalments, 'The Bank Nun' struck a chord. Lee's caricature, which one 1837 reviewer called 'an exact likeness of the lady', was widely reproduced, while part of *Streetology's* text was plagiarised verbatim as the *Memoirs, Extraordinary Life, and Singular Adventures of that Eccentric Character, Miss Whitehead, the Bank Nun, with Numerous Anecdotes and Interesting Particulars of the Awful Death of her Brother* (1837).<sup>42</sup> One copy of the illustration printed circa 1837 cements the Bank Nun's association with forgery by making her the mistress of a forger more notorious than Paul Whitehead. Its caption identifies 'Miss Whitehead' as 'a relation or some connexed with Fontleroi [sic] the last man hung for a forgery on the Bank of England'.<sup>43</sup> Elaborating upon her subversiveness, Reider's aforementioned 1841 *New Tablet of Memory* claims that in November 1837, the Bank Nun planned to disrupt a 'Civic Banquet,' a

<sup>39</sup> Deanna K. Kreisel, *Economic Woman: Demand, Gender, and Narrative Closure in Eliot and Hardy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), pp. 5–6.

<sup>40</sup> Regenia Gagnier, 'On the Insatiability of Human Wants: Economic and Aesthetic Man', *Victorian Studies*, 36 (1993), 125–53 (p. 133).

<sup>41</sup> Krista Lysack, *Come Buy Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Victorian Women's Writing* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2008), pp. 3–5, p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> Anon., 'Literature, Reviews, &c.', *Blackwood's Lady's Magazine and Gazette of the Fashionable World, or, St. James's Court Register*, 3, (1837), p. 149; Anon., *Memoirs, Extraordinary Life, and Singular Adventures of that Eccentric Character, Miss Whitehead, the Bank Nun* (London: J. Thompson, 1837).

<sup>43</sup> London, The Wellcome Collection, George L. Lee, untitled lithograph ['The Bank Nun'], c.1837, <<https://wellcomecollection.org>> [accessed 23 May 2018]. The lithograph may be viewed at this open-access site.

politically disruptive act prevented only by her sudden death (p. 350). Finally, *Streetology*'s sketch and illustration are plagiarised in an 1869 revision of the Regency *Book of Wonderful Characters*, which maintains that its portraits accurately represent historical people.<sup>44</sup> By this point, the Bank Nun had crossed the border from literature to myth, bringing *Streetology*'s Gothic imagery and demonisation of forgery with her.

### *The Lady in Black*

Despite the sketch's sudden and enduring popularity, it did not appeal to every reader. The penny novelist Rymer proved unimpressed, seemingly on personal grounds. 'Every person', he wrote in his novel *Family Secrets, or, A Page from Life's Volume* (1846), has 'some corroding care, which may not inaptly be likened to a skeleton, in the house'. One must not 'envy' any man, 'for Heaven and himself only knows what skeleton he may have in his house'.<sup>45</sup> Rymer's domestic skeletons include an association with financial forgery. In 1838, his younger brother Thomas, an engraver like most of the Rymer men, was convicted of 'feloniously engraving, without authority, part of a Bank-note' and 'feloniously and knowingly uttering a forged £5 Bank-note', and transported.<sup>46</sup> In Van Diemen's Land and on the Australian mainland, Thomas Rymer was repeatedly convicted of using his engraving knowledge to forge banknotes, with his final conviction recorded in 1865.<sup>47</sup> His fate evidently preoccupied his brother, given forgery's prominence in James Malcolm Rymer's penny fiction, including *Jane Shore* (1842–6), *Ada, the Betrayed, or the Murder at the Old Smithy* (1843),

---

<sup>44</sup> Henry Wilson and James Caulfield, *The Book of Wonderful Characters: Memoirs and Anecdotes of Remarkable and Eccentric Persons, in All Ages and Countries* (London: Hotten, 1869), pp. 36–9. Earlier editions contain no Bank Nun story: see Henry Wilson, *Wonderful Characters: Memoirs and Anecdotes of Remarkable Persons*, 3 vols (London: J. Robins, 1821); J.H. Wilson, *Wonderful Characters, Comprising Memoirs and Anecdotes of Remarkable and Eccentric Persons, of Every Age and Nation* (London: J. Barr, 1842).

<sup>45</sup> James Malcolm Rymer, *Family Secrets, or, A Page from Life's Volume* (London: Edward Lloyd, 1846), unpaginated preface. For the attribution of this and other penny serials to Rymer, see Helen R. Smith, *New Light on Sweeney Todd, Thomas Peckett Prest, James Malcolm Rymer, and Elizabeth Caroline Grey* (London: Jarndyce, 2002), and Marie Léger St.-Jean's database: *Price One Penny: Cheap Literature 1837–1860* <<http://www.priceonepenny.info>> [accessed 23 May 2018].

<sup>46</sup> The critic Dick Collins discovered that James Malcolm and Thomas Rymer were brothers. See Dick Collins, 'Thomas Rymer', in *Convict Records* <<https://convictrecords.com.au/convicts/rymer/thomas/64334>> [accessed 23 May 2018]; 'Trial of Thomas Rymer (t18380514–1173), May 1838', *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* <<http://www.oldbaileyonline.org>> [accessed 23 May 2018].

<sup>47</sup> See Rebecca Nesvet, 'Introduction to *Science and Art: A Farce in Two Acts*', *Scholarly Editing*, 38 (2017), <<http://scholarlyediting.org/2017/editions/scienceart/intro.html>> [accessed 23 May 2018].

*Family Secrets, or A Page from Life's Volume* (1846), *Varney, the Vampire, or the Feast of Blood* (1847), *The Lady in Black* (1847–8), *Kate Chudleigh, Duchess of Kingston* (1864), and *A Marriage of Mystery, or, the Lost Bride* (1868). Some of Rymer's forgers demonstrate audacity akin to his brother's. For instance, the eponymous hero of *George Barrington* (1862) forges a copy of an evil courtier's jewelled snuff-box, purloins the original, and, upon acquittal for the theft, receives a public ovation.

Rymer's serial *The Lady in Black, or, the Widow and the Wife* (1847–8) employs Gothic imagery to contest *Streetology's* narrative and its anti-forgery rhetoric in terms recalling the economic radicalism of Cobbett, Wooler, and Shelley. *The Lady in Black* includes a plagiarism of the Lee illustration of the Bank Nun, and the heroine, Marian Whitehead, wears a 'black veil' and 'odd-looking head-dress', but Rymer does not liken her to a nun, instead denominating her 'the Lady in Black' (p. 13), a name reminiscent of Shakespeare's Dark Lady. She conforms to a Gothic type very different from the bad nun: the angelic and persecuted heroine, martyr of hypocritical autocrats.<sup>48</sup> Her troubles begin with her love for an industrious young City clerk, Charles Ormond. His employer, merchant trader Simon Godfrey, is a textbook Gothic villain. He fires Ormond for trying to prevent his theft of the money that Marian's late father made working in India. Her mother shelters Ormond, giving him 'an apartment to himself', where he lives 'as a brother to Miss Marian', absolving her of *Streetology's* accusations of sexual immorality (p. 184). She never marries, but her faithful mourning makes her Ormond's widow and wife, while her first name recalls the lady love of the economic rebel Robin Hood.

More radically, *The Lady in Black* informs Rymer's working-class target audience that the financial community prosecutes forgery to suppress workers. Godfrey induces Ormond to accept his final wage as a cheque, which Godfrey makes out to look forged. Because the cheque is worth exactly what Godfrey owes Ormond, had Ormond forged it as accused, economic justice would have been served. Instead, when Ormond presents it at the Bank, assuming it is genuine, he is arrested for forgery. No one cares that Godfrey has stolen Ormond's labour's value, for the law does not exist to protect working men. Reinforcing this point, Rymer declares 'forgery makes no call upon general and public indignation', but victimises 'only those who have directly suffered [...] in pocket by the attempt of the criminal', not 'aggravat[ing]' the 'multitude [...] however really great an [sic] one it [the victim] is in a social point of view' (pp. 127–33). At Ormond's trial, the prosecutor affirms that forgery harms mainly 'the

---

<sup>48</sup> See Angela Wright, *Britain, France, and the Gothic, 1764–1820: The Import of Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 132–3, p. 146. Alison Milbank, 'Victorian Gothic in English Novels and Stories, 1830–1880', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 145–66, documents the rebirth of this character after Victoria's succession.

mercantile community’ and argues that Ormond must be convicted to set an example to other employees who might defraud their employers. Forgers have ‘enormous power [...] even of irretrievably ruining their employers [...] utterly destroy[ing] the thousands of families who depend upon the prosperity of that merchant or trader for employment – for bread’, he argues (p. 159). ‘[T]he great necessity of there existing between the employer and the employed a bond of union’ makes Ormond’s supposed ‘offence [...] public one’, which must be ‘punished accordingly by the public’ (p. 159). However, in the world of *The Lady in Black*, employer and employed share no bond.

Not seeing this point, the jury convicts Ormond. After his execution, Marian haunts the City, not as a perverse nun, but as a Gothic madwoman and the working nation’s secular martyr–saint. This latter identity predominates in her final days, which are marked by lucidity and purpose, particularly with respect to issues of human rights, including her violated economic rights. From her deathbed in the home of the charitable Cockney cheesemonger Miles Atherton, Marian sends Godfrey not the ‘curses’ he expects, but her ‘forgiveness’ gives Atherton a portfolio of documents that reveal her history (pp. 553–4). She carefully explains to him her economic dispossession and Ormond’s judicial murder, and authorises Atherton to publish the documents in fifteen years time (p. 9; see also p. 18, p. 30). This last plot point implies that all depictions of her predating 1845 are dubious, including, of course, *Streetology* and its earliest plagiarisms. Furthermore, her selection of Atherton as her the executor and publisher of her archive renders her story working–class intellectual property and a tool of socio–political critique.

Like the *Streetology* sketch, Rymer’s reinvention of The Bank Nun proved popular. In 1880, the working–class novelist and activist Thomas Frost remembered *The Lady in Black* as a ‘thrilling romance’ and one of ‘the most successful of the Salisbury Square fictions’, a category that includes Rymer’s influential *Varney, the Vampire* and Sweeney Todd romance *The String of Pearls*.<sup>49</sup> Noting that *The Lady in Black* is based on ‘the well–known story of a young lady who lost her reason through the execution for forgery of her brother, a clerk in the Bank of England’, Frost finds Rymer’s heroine sympathetic, calling her ‘a pale, thin figure, waiting for the brother she would never see again’ (*Ibid*). In 1848, the playwright Charles Alfred Somerset, dramatised *The Lady in Black* as *The Lady in Black; or the Nun of the Bank*, which superimposes Rymer’s narrative on *Streetology*’s Gothic icon.<sup>50</sup> A radical writer, Somerset later

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Frost, *Forty Years’ Recollections: Literary and Political* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1880), p. 94.

<sup>50</sup> London, British Library, ‘Lord Chamberlain’s Plays Vol. CXLV111. May–June 1848, Part 2: May 1848 – Jun. 1848’, Add. MS 430.12: P2, in *Nineteenth Century Collections Online* <<https://www.gale.com/primary-sources/nineteenth-century-collections-online>> [accessed 23 May 2018]; see also Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of Early Nineteenth Century Drama, 1800–1850*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), II, p. 395.

composed *The Life and Struggles of the Working Man* (1853), adapted from a novel by Émile Souvestre.<sup>51</sup> Canonical Victorian literature also borrows from Rymer's novel, echoing its politics to some extent. Ross identifies *The Lady in Black* as an antecedent of Wilkie Collins's 1859 novel *The Woman in White* (p. 87), which, as Malton observes, 'implicat[es] forgery in the fallibilities of the law' as did Rymer and the Romantic radicals (p. 31).

Rymer's martyred Lady in Black and *Streetology's* Bank Nun both survive in British literature and urban folklore, often inhabiting the same text. Edith Sitwell's Modernist rumination *The English Eccentrics* (1930), informed by *The Book of Wonderful Characters*, operates in the spirit of Rymer and Somerset by representing 'the Bank Nun' as an 'angel' and exemplar of pure love.<sup>52</sup> While several twenty-first century popular accounts of 'paranormal' activity informed by Victorian and twentieth-century sources depict the Bank Nun with varying degrees of sympathy, a London ghost tour operating in 2018 reaches back decisively to *Streetology's* Gothic ideology. Its Bank Nun is a contract-breaching public nuisance burdened by a family curse, who drags the past into the present, refusing to allow its exorcism. The tour's publicity claims that the Bank curtailed her 'daily disturbances' by bribing her 'never to return', but 'her wraith [spirit] has broken' that agreement 'many times'.<sup>53</sup> In these modern Bank Nun tales linger the residue of Victorian controversy about financial forgery, its prosecution and punishment, and the gender and class politics of economic power, electrified with Gothic imagery.

---

<sup>51</sup> London, British Library, 'Lord Chamberlain's Plays, 1852–1858', Add MS 52943 Q, in *Nineteenth Century Collections Online* < <https://www.gale.com/primary-sources/nineteenth-century-collections-online> > [accessed 23 May 2018].

<sup>52</sup> Edith Sitwell, *The English Eccentrics: A Gallery of Weird and Wonderful Men and Women*, intro. by Richard Inghams (London: Pallas Athene, 2006), p. 30.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Jones, *Walking Haunted London* (Cape Town: New Holland Publishers, 2007), p. 24; Morgan Webb, 'Meeting the Ghosts of London Past', *Financial Times*, 1 November 2002, in *ProQuest Business Premium Collection* <[www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com)> [accessed 23 May 2018]; Anon., 'The Bloody Code and the Black Nun of Threadneedle Street' <<https://hauntedpalaceblog.wordpress.com/2015/12/08/the-bloody-code-and-the-black-nun-of-threadneedle-street>> [accessed 17 May 2018]; Richard Jones, *London Ghost Walks* <[http://www.london-ghost-tour.com/bank\\_of\\_england.htm](http://www.london-ghost-tour.com/bank_of_england.htm)> [accessed 23 May 2018].

## Bibliography

- Acres, William Marston, *The Bank of England from Within, 1694–1900*, 2 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1931)
- Anon., ‘The Bloody Code and the Black Nun of Threadneedle Street’, <<https://hauntedpalaceblog.wordpress.com/2015/12/08/the-bloody-code-and-the-black-nun-of-threadneedle-street/>> [accessed 23 May 2018]
- Anon., *The Criminal Recorder: or, Biographical Sketches of Notorious Public Characters*, 2 vols (Nottingham: R. Dowson, 1815)
- Anon., ‘Literature, Reviews, &c.’, *Blackwood’s Lady’s Magazine and Gazette of the Fashionable World, or, St. James’s Court Register*, 3 (1837)
- Anon., *Love and Crime, or, the Mystery of the Convent* (London: T. Paine, 1841)
- Anon., *Memoirs, Extraordinary Life, and Singular Adventures of that Eccentric Character, Miss Whitehead, the Bank Nun* (London: J. Thompson, 1837)
- Anon., ‘Modern Monasticism’, *The British Magazine and Monthly Register of Religious and Ecclesiastical Information*, 34.8 (1 August 1848), 197–214
- Anon., *Streetology of London, or, the Metropolitan Papers of the Itinerant Club, Being a Graphic Description of Extraordinary Individuals who Exercise Professions or Callings in the Streets of the Great Metropolis* (London: James S. Hodson, 1837)
- Anon., ‘Union–Hall’, *The Times* (22 February 1828), 4
- Baines, Paul, *The House of Forgery in Eighteenth–Century Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999)
- Balfour, Clara, *Passages in the History of a Shilling* (London: S.W. Partridge, 1862)
- Benchimol, Alex, ‘Knowledge Against Paper: Forgery, State Violence, and Radical Cultural Resistance in the Romantic Period’, in *Romantic Circles and the Credit Crunch: A Romantic Circles Praxis Volume*, ed. by Ian Haywood, (2012), <<https://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/forgery/index.html>> [accessed 23 May 2018]

- Bigelow, Gordon, *Fiction, Famine, and the Rise of Economics in Victorian Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)
- Blanchard, Sydney Laman, 'A Biography of a Bad Shilling', *Household Words*, 2 (1851)
- Blumberg, Ilana M., 'Sacrificial Value: Beyond the Cash Nexus in George Eliot's *Romola*', in *Economic Women: Essays on Desire and Dispossession in Nineteenth-Century British Culture*, ed. by Lana L. Dalley and Jill Rappoport (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013), 60–74
- Briefel, Aviva, *The Deceivers: Art Forgery and Identity in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006)
- Collins, Dick, 'Thomas Rymer' [comment], in *Convict Records* <<https://convictrecords.com.au/convicts/rymer/thomas/64334/>> [accessed 23 May 2018]
- Croker, John Wilson, *The Life, Adventures, and Remonstrances of a Scotch Guinea Note* (Edinburgh: Waugh and Innes, 1826)
- Dalley, Lana L. and Jill Rappoport, 'Introduction', in *Economic Women: Essays on Desire and Dispossession in Nineteenth-Century British Culture*, ed. by Lana L. Dalley and Jill Rappoport (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013), 1–24
- Diamond, Michael, *Victorian Sensation: Or the Spectacular, the Shocking, and the Scandalous in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Wimbledon: Anthem Press, 2003)
- Dick, Alex, "'The Ghost of Gold": Forgery Trials and the Standard of Value in Shelley's "The Masque of Anarchy"', *European Romantic Review*, 18:3 (2007), 381–400
- Frost, Thomas, *Forty Years' Recollections: Literary and Political* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1880)
- Gagnier, Regenia, 'On the Insatiability of Human Wants: Economic and Aesthetic Man', *Victorian Studies* 36 (1993), 125–53.
- Gallagher, Catherine, *Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006)

- Grudin, Peter, 'The Monk: Matilda and the Rhetoric of Deceit', *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 5.2 (1975), 136–46
- Handler, Phil, 'Forgery and the End of the "Bloody Code" in Early Nineteenth-Century England', *The Historical Journal*, 48.3 (2005), 683–702
- Haywood, Ian, 'Paper Promise: Restriction, Caricature, and the Ghost of Gold', in *Romantic Circles and the Credit Crunch: A Romantic Circles Praxis Volume*, ed. by Ian Haywood, (2012) <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/forgery/HTML/about.html>> [accessed 23 May 2018]
- Hennessy, Elizabeth, *A Domestic History of the Bank of England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)
- Hoeveler, Diane Long, *The Gothic Ideology: Religious Hysteria and Anti-Catholicism in British Popular Fiction, 1780–1880* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014)
- Huish, Robert, *The Nun of Gnadenzell* (London: Edward Lloyd, 1846)
- Hunt, Aeron, *Personal Business: Character and Commerce in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014)
- Jones, Richard, *London Ghost Walks* <[http://www.london-ghost-tour.com/bank\\_of\\_england.htm/](http://www.london-ghost-tour.com/bank_of_england.htm/)> [accessed 23 May 2018]
- , *Walking Haunted London* (Cape Town, South Africa: New Holland Publishers, 2007)
- Kollar, Rene, *A Foreign and Wicked Institution? The Campaign Against Convents in Victorian England* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2011)
- Kreisel, Deanna K., *Economic Woman: Demand, Gender, and Narrative Closure in Eliot and Hardy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012)
- Kynaston, David, *Till Time's Last Sand: A History of the Bank of England 1694–2013* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017)
- Lee, George L., 'The Bank Nun' [lithograph], (c.1837), in *The Wellcome Collection*, <<https://wellcomecollection.org>> [accessed 23 May 2018]

- Léger St.–Jean, Marie, *Price One Penny: Cheap Literature 1837–1860*, <<http://www.priceonepenny.info/>> [accessed 23 May 2018]
- Lepler, Jessica M., *The Many Panics of 1837: People, Politics, and the Creation of a Transatlantic Financial Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)
- London, British Library, ‘Lord Chamberlain’s Plays, May–June 1848, Part 2: May 1848 – Jun. 1848’, Add MS 43012 P2’, in *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*, <<https://www.gale.com/primary-sources/nineteenth-century-collections-online>> [accessed 23 May 2018]
- , ‘Lord Chamberlain’s Plays, 1852–1858’, Add MS 52953 Q, in *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*, <<https://www.gale.com/primary-sources/nineteenth-century-collections-online>> [accessed 23 May 2018]
- London, London Metropolitan Archives, ‘Workhouse Admission and Discharge Records’, in *Ancestry.com* <<http://www.ancestry.com>> [accessed 23 May 2018]
- London, National Archives, ‘England Census Database for 1851’, in *Ancestry.com* <<http://www.ancestry.com>> [accessed 23 May 2018]
- London, National Archives, ‘General Register Office: Registers of Births, Marriages and Deaths surrendered to the Non–Parochial Registers Commissions of 1837 and 1857’ in *Ancestry.com* <<http://www.ancestry.com>> [accessed 23 May 2018]
- Lysack, Krista, *Come Buy Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Victorian Women’s Writing* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2008)
- Malton, Sara, *Forgery in Nineteenth–Century Literature and Culture: Fictions of Finance from Dickens to Wilde* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)
- Michie, Elsie B., *The Vulgar Question of Money: Heiresses, Materialism, and the Novel of Manners from Jane Austen to Henry James* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011)
- Mighall, Robert, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History’s Nightmares* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)

- Milbank, Alison, 'Victorian Gothic in English Novels and Stories, 1830–1880', *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 145–66
- Miles, Robert, 'Emma and Bank Bills: Romanticism and Forgery', in *Romantic Circles and the Credit Crunch: A Romantic Circles Praxis Volume*, ed. by Ian Haywood (2012) <<https://www.rc.umd.edu>> [accessed 10 May 2018]
- Morgan, Mary S., 'Economic Man as Model Man: Ideal Types, Idealization, and Caricatures', *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 28.1 (2006), 1–27
- Nesvet, Rebecca, 'Introduction to *Science and Art: A Farce in Two Acts*', *Scholarly Editing* 38 (2017), <<http://scholarlyediting.org/2017/editions/scienceart/intro.html>> [accessed 23 May 2018]
- Nicoll, Allardyce, *A History of Early Nineteenth Century Drama, 1800–1850*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930)
- Ollerenshaw, Phillip, *Banking in Nineteenth-century Ireland: The Belfast Banks, 1825–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987)
- Pelham, Camden, ed., *The Chronicles of Crime, or, The New Newgate Calendar* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1841)
- Plotz, John, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009)
- Poovey, Mary, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008)
- Rappoport, Jill, *Giving Women: Alliance and Exchange in Victorian Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)
- Reider, William D., *The New Tablet of Memory; or, Recorder of Remarkable Events, Alphabetically Arranged from the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (London: John Clements, 1841)

- Reynolds, G.W.M., *The Mysteries of the Inquisition*, ed. by Marie Léger–St–Jean, *Price One Penny*, <<http://www.priceonepenny.info/editions/index.php>> [accessed 23 May 2018]
- Roud, Steve, *London Lore: The Legends and Traditions of the World's Most Vibrant City* (London: Arrow, 2010)
- Rosenberg, Kate and Robert Thurston Hopkins, *The Romance of the Bank of England* (London: Butterworth, 1933)
- Ross, Charles Henry, *Behind a Brass Knocker: Some Grim Realities in Picture and Prose* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1883)
- Rymer, James Malcolm, *Family Secrets, or, A Page from Life's Volume* (London: Edward Lloyd, 1846)
- , *The Lady in Black, or, the Widow and the Wife* (London: Edward Lloyd, 1847–8)
- Smith, Andrew, *Gothic Radicalism: Literature, Philosophy, and Psychoanalysis in the Nineteenth Century* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000)
- Smith, Helen R., *New Light on Sweeney Todd, Thomas Peckett Prest, James Malcolm Rymer, and Elizabeth Caroline Grey* (London: Jarndyce, 2002)
- ‘Trial of Paul Whitehead (t18111030–44), October 1811’, *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* 6.0 (2011) [OBP], <<http://www.oldbaileyonline.org>> [accessed 23 May 2018]
- ‘Trial of Thomas Rymer (t18380514–1173), May 1838’, *OBP* [accessed 23 May 2018]
- Tromp, Marlene, ‘The Afterlife of Wills and the Politics of Foreign Investment, 1850–85’, in *Culture and Money in the Nineteenth Century: Abstracting Economics*, ed. by Daniel Bivona and Marlene Tromp (Athens, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2016), 199–222
- Wagner, Tamara S., *Financial Speculation in Victorian Fiction: Plotting Money and the Novel Genre, 1815–1901* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010)

- Webb, Morgan, 'Meeting the Ghosts of London Past', *Financial Times*, 1 November 2002, in *ProQuest Business Premium Collection* <[www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com)> [accessed 23 May 2018]
- Wilson, Henry, *Wonderful Characters: Memoirs and Anecdotes of Remarkable Persons*, 3 vols (London: J. Robins, 1821–2)
- , and James Caulfield, *The Book of Wonderful Characters: Memoirs and Anecdotes of Remarkable and Eccentric Persons, in All Ages and Countries* (London: Hotten, 1869)
- Wilson, John Henry, *Wonderful Characters, Comprising Memoirs and Anecdotes of Remarkable and Eccentric Persons, of Every Age and Nation* (London: J. Barr, 1842)
- Wright, Angela, *Britain, France, and the Gothic, 1764–1820: The Import of Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

**‘I am born’:  
Writing Corporate Personhood in Victorian It-narratives**

Jakob Gaardbo Nielsen  
*Aarhus University, Denmark*

***Abstract***

*The following article analyses two literary texts that emerged from the public discussion of joint stock companies and corporate personhood in Victorian Britain. The Company Acts of 1844, 1855-56 and 1862 gradually made the privileges of incorporation available to the public, thereby ending a period characterised by a strict attitude towards corporate finance. A heated discussion ensued which pitted notions of character and credit associated with traditional partnership businesses against the more aggressive business strategies associated with joint stock companies. Literary texts were anything but silent in this discussion. Victorian novels, for example, drew heavily on plots and characters hewn from the emerging financial sector, but other, more experimental fictions of the corporation also emerged in the turbulent decades following the Limited Liability Acts of mid-century. Edward P. Rowsell’s 1861 corporate novella, *The Autobiography of a Joint-Stock Company*, and Laurence Oliphant’s similarly titled periodical essay, ‘*Autobiography of a Joint-Stock Company (Limited)*’ from 1876, are thus more than just fictional autobiographies; they are literary experiments with the form and function of joint stock companies. Drawing heavily on precedents set in the genre of it-narratives, these texts offer dramatisations of what was uniquely fascinating and problematic about the joint stock company and the concept of corporate personhood.*

In 2010, the US Supreme Court controversially granted first amendment free speech rights to corporations. This put the question of ‘corporate personhood’ – the concept that joint stock companies, as legal or ‘artificial’ persons, can assume liability and have rights and legal agency similar to ‘natural’ persons – high on the public agenda, and raised fundamental questions about the nature of financial capital, companies, and, more generally, the financial sector itself. However, aside from debated cases such as *Citizens United v. FEC*, incorporation and limited liability are common and normalised modes of business organisation in the current economy. In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, when these corporate privileges first became publicly available, they were much more controversial, and sparked heated debates throughout political, financial, journalistic, and literary discourses. The idea that a joint stock company is, in effect, a legally ‘sentient’ entity, and that it can insulate shareholders and directors from financial losses, is unremarkable today, but for many Victorians it was an exceptionally controversial notion.

Part of the Victorian anxiety concerning corporate personhood, and the kinds of corporate misconduct some believed it to encourage, has been attributed to the string of financial crises that periodically revealed the fragility of the

nineteenth-century financial system. In the popular press, personhood, and the corporate privileges it entailed, became entangled with the public reception of fraud cases, such as the Overend, Gurney & Company prosecutions of the 1860s and 1870s – cases that underscored the ethical opacity of a corporate form whose defining feature was, in George Robb's words, 'the divorce of ownership and control'.<sup>1</sup> This separation jarred with the business sensibilities associated with the traditional partnership company, in which partners were fully liable for their companies' actions and liabilities, and prompted the widespread idea that the joint stock company, as an economic 'surrogate', inherently encouraged fraudulent trading practices, and that it owed its existence to an unnatural or 'uncanny' artificiality.<sup>2</sup>

The Victorian anxiety about corporate personhood was voiced through many discourses, but was particularly widespread in fictional genres. As we will see, the ownership structure afforded by joint stock companies became, in itself, an object of particular interest for Victorian writers. Indeed, as Taylor argues, 'Novels and plays [...] helped shape how commerce and particularly the new phenomenon of joint-stock incorporation was understood'.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the form and function of joint stock companies even gave rise to new genres and literary forms that specialised in representing non-human entities such as corporate 'persons' in innovatively ambiguous ways. Writers of realist fiction may have been among the most prolific commentators on Victorian finance, but other, more specialised genres existed, which reflected on and interpreted the principles behind incorporation in a more direct way.

Several important studies have recently emphasised the multileveled entanglement of fictional realist discourse and the context of finance and financial institutions in the Victorian period. A string of recent works such as Catherine Gallagher's *The Body Economic* (2006), Mary Poovey's *Genres of the Credit Economy* (2008), Sara Malton's *Forgery in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* (2009), Tamara S. Wagner's *Financial Speculation in Victorian Fiction*

---

<sup>1</sup> George Robb, *White-Collar Crime in Modern England: Financial fraud and business morality, 1845–1929* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 23f. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Smith already voiced this concern in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776): 'This total exemption from trouble and risk, beyond a limited sum, encourages many people to become adventurers in joint stock companies who would, upon no account, hazard their fortunes in any private copartnery' (quoted in Johnson, Paul, *Making the Market: Victorian Origins of Corporate Capitalism* [Cambridge University Press, 2010], p. 112). Smith's concern resonated with nineteenth-century political economists such as J. R. McCulloch (1789–1864), who accused limited liability of violating the natural order of business, in which 'every man [is] personally answerable to the utmost extent for all his actions' (McCulloch, J. R. *Considerations on Partnerships with Limited Liability* [London, Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1856], p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, James, *Creating Capitalism: Joint-Stock Enterprise in British Politics and Culture, 1800–1870* (Cornwall, Boydell Press, 2014), p. 14.

(2010) and Anna Kornbluh's *Realizing Capital* (2014) all variously emphasise the *bilateral* exchanges between the realist novel as a certain set of aesthetic codes and historically situated contexts such as financial institutions, capital, or money, arguing in turn that realism, in this period, became uniquely suited to the kinds of interpretative aesthetic reflections the public exercised in order to understand and question the new financial economy.<sup>4</sup> Despite its sustained focus on the Victorian works of novelistic realism, and its various branches and generic orbitals, however, certain genres have remained relatively under-researched. The it-narrative is one such genre. Using anthropomorphism and *prosopopeia* to narrate stories from the perspective of objects and entities, this genre, I argue, held a unique potential, substantially different from realism, to reflect upon the ontology of financial institutions, especially the joint stock company, because it could, so to speak, let such institutions speak for themselves.

The richness and diversity of the literary engagement with finance in this period has been attributed to the scarcity of reliable information about how financial institutions actually worked. Mary Poovey has argued that the public debate about finance was consistently troubled by a 'lack of readily available information'.<sup>5</sup> The institutions that the Victorians 'sought to understand' were 'only partially willing to disclose their secrets'.<sup>6</sup> This led to the financial sector becoming a domain of the public 'that was only partially visible and constantly in a state of change', at least rhetorically.<sup>7</sup> Representing financial institutions in Victorian Britain was as much an interpretative act as a descriptive gesture, and it often meant applying literary and imaginative devices to fill in the blanks. To varying extents, novels, newspapers and treatises on political economy all used narrative devices and imaginative leaps to generate the impression of wholeness and containment in what they felt to be elusive and obscure.

This was especially true of the joint stock company. In this article, I draw attention to two overlooked texts outside the realist novel that directly reflected upon the ontology of corporate personhood. These texts devoted themselves specifically to the challenge of representing the economic and social paradoxes

---

<sup>4</sup> Other works include (among others): John Vernon, *Money and Fiction: Literary Realism in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1984); Barbara Weiss, *The Hell of the English: Bankruptcy and the Victorian Novel* (Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 1986); Norman Russell, *The Novelist and Mammon: Literary Responses to the World of Commerce in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, Clarendon Oxford Press, 1986); Francis O'Gorman (ed.), *Victorian Literature and Finance* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Mary Poovey, *The Financial System in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Poovey, 'Writing about Finance in Victorian England: Disclosure and Secrecy in the Culture of Investment', in *Victorian Investments: New Perspectives on Finance and Culture*, ed. by Nancy Henry & Cannon Schmitt (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2009), p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> Poovey, *Financial System*, p. 4.

that characterised joint stock companies and corporate personhood in the 1860s and 70s. These texts are Edward Rowsell's 1861 novella, *The Autobiography of a Joint-Stock Company*, and Laurence Oliphant's short periodical piece, 'Autobiography of a Joint-Stock Company (Limited)' from 1876. Read together, these fictitious autobiographical accounts of corporate entities form an interesting line of comparison from which to analyse Victorian attitudes toward corporate personhood. The former explores the concept of *unlimited* liability, whereas the latter explores *limited* liability. Both employ the formal affordances<sup>8</sup> and logical structure of corporate personhood in a generic mix of autobiography, testimony, and it-narrative, and fashion visions of corporate capitalism that differ, formally as well as thematically, from those prevalent in the realist novel. The result is a kind of corporate metaphysics.

They achieve this by entertaining the thought that a 'person' is born, so to speak, at the moment of incorporation. The form of this corporate person's narrative then builds on the tension between its moral subjectivity and its lack of agency. The most important element of this combination of literary and financial form, and what distinguishes these texts from their realist counterparts is, I argue, the way in which they employ generic traits associated with the it-narrative. During a period when it-narratives were less prevalent than before,<sup>9</sup> Rowsell and Oliphant found in this genre a particularly well-suited set of devices with which to narrate and think about what they imagined to be particularly problematic about the joint stock company and corporate personhood. Using the genre of the it-narrative and its attendant subgenres, they created a hybrid literary form that strived for formal equivalency rather than mimetic verisimilitude. By transposing economic principles directly into literary form, they *enact* the ontological tension inherent in the joint stock company.

Interestingly, Rowsell's text is almost completely unmentioned in the scholarly literature dealing with Victorian fiction and finance, and although Oliphant's text has received some commentary, it has been analysed mostly as a curiosity that informs a broader analysis of novels, rather than as a work of

---

<sup>8</sup> Throughout the article, I use 'affordance' in the sense put forth by Caroline Levine in *Forms* (2015): '[...] *Affordance* is a term used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs' (Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* [Princeton & Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2015], p. 6). Levine extends this definition somewhat and deploys it in the vocabulary of literary formalism 'to think about form': 'What is a walled enclosure or a rhyming couplet *capable* of doing? Each shape or pattern, social or literary, lays claim to a limited range of potentialities' (p. 6). These latent potentialities are referred to as affordances.

<sup>9</sup> It-narratives were a highly popular and profitable genre in the latter half of the eighteenth century, but fell out of fashion in the nineteenth century, when the genre became more specialised, and employed mostly in scientific books or children's literature. See Liz Bellamy, 'It-narrators and Circulation: Defining a Subgenre' in *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. by Mark Blackwell (Bucknell University Press, 2007), pp. 117-46 (p. 130-33).

literary fiction in its own right. My main argument in this article, then, is twofold. First, although the genre of the it-narrative may have been little-used in the latter half of the nineteenth century, these authors found them particularly useful and well-suited as a specifically *literary* way of thinking about corporate personhood and corporate finance in general. Using this hybridity, they produce in their texts an effect of estrangement, one that is logically inferred from the formal affordances of the joint stock company. Secondly, I aim to demonstrate that the generic context of the it-narrative has been overlooked in the scholarly reception of Victorian finance.

### **A Brief History of Corporate Personhood**

Prior to 1844, a Royal Charter or private Act of Parliament was required to obtain incorporation privileges, and these were only granted to companies involved in public concerns such as railways, overseas trading, canals, and mining. This legislative rigidity had its roots in the financial crisis following the 1719-20 South Sea Bubble. Therefore, in Victorian Britain, incorporation was nothing new, but its availability throughout society grew considerably in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the early nineteenth century, the strict attitude began to yield to free-trade and laissez-faire arguments that contended that regulation inhibited economic growth, and Parliament subsequently passed legislation that made incorporation a real possibility for the investing public.<sup>10</sup> By the 1840s, due in part to a growing demand for a legal infrastructure which could accommodate the growing number of capital-intensive ventures, state and public opinion of incorporation began to shift towards a more positive view – one that regarded limited companies as indispensable components in a free market economy.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, the Company Acts uprooted long-held assumptions about the structure of capital ownership, business integrity, and, indeed, destabilised the conceptual boundaries separating legal and illegal commerce. As George Robb noted previously, incorporation principally involves a divorce between ownership and control, and entails, as Paul Johnson puts it, the creation of a separate financial entity with an ‘autonomous legal personality’.<sup>12</sup> In a traditional partnership, the business is owned and jointly run by the partners, and these are liable in full for the company’s debts. However, in a company, ‘the owners of the business – the shareholders – are not held responsible for the actions of the company, for although their shareholding imparts ownership, they do not directly control the company’. Consequently, ‘if the company errs, the shareholders may

---

<sup>10</sup> The 1826 Joint Stock Banking Act, the 1844 Joint Stock Companies Act, and the limited liability Acts of 1855–56 and 1862 gradually made the advantages of incorporation available to most types of companies.

<sup>11</sup> See Taylor, *Creating Capitalism*, p. 9ff.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson, p. 111. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

lose their wealth but not their liberty’ (p. 111). In other words, a joint stock company is legally an ‘artificial person’ with rights and responsibilities independent from ‘those persons who have combined collectively to form the corporation’ (p. 110). Shareholders and board members are liable only to the extent of their original investment, because the company legally assumes ownership of the assets and liabilities contracted in its name. Whereas the traditional partnership was affected by the reputation and social standing of individual partners, shareholders and directors in an incorporated company could be relatively anonymous, and the company’s success was independent of its members’ private lives. As James Taylor has noted, the partnership and the company became associated with two competing sets of business values: ‘whereas the partnership system of commerce was predicated on notions of character, trust and credit’, joint stock companies ‘marginalised these qualities’ and even – such was the conservative contention – ‘encouraged their members to behave immorally’.<sup>13</sup>

The discussion of corporate personhood and limited liability thus hinged on different forms of organisation that expressed conflicting ideals, principles, and traditions. In the meantime, it also occasioned and informed other related discussions, such as those of business fraud and financial crime. The courts and legal institutions of Victorian Britain, at least after the 1840s, were not particularly efficient at preventing or prosecuting white-collar criminals.<sup>14</sup> Following the various deregulations of corporate law, financial crime increased – in creativity and number – with a speed that left the courts and criminal law behind. State and legal institutions struggled to criminalise the new forms of fraud in time, which resulted in a high degree of ambiguity being attributed to corporate finance in the press and popular culture. The result of this ambiguity was an extraordinary output of texts, articles, and treatises addressing the pros and cons of incorporation and its alleged proclivity for business fraud.

### **Object Narrators and Corporate Omniscience**

It-narratives are a particularly salient genre in this context. Also known as novels of circulation or object tales, it-narratives have been referred to as a ‘curious record of British Society’s relationship with its material framework.’<sup>15</sup> Intensely absorbed in printed matter and materiality, it-narratives are stories about

---

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, *Creating Capitalism*, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, see Robb, or Michael Levi, *Regulating Fraud: White-collar crime and the criminal process* (London, Tavistock, 1987), p. 1, or James Taylor, *Boardroom Scandal: The Criminalization of company fraud in nineteenth-century Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Mark Blackwell, ‘Introduction: The It-Narrative and Eighteenth-Century Thing Theory’, in *The Secret Life of Things*, p. 12.

objecthood told from the perspective of objects. This perspective on objecthood in turn mediates a critique of subjectivity, as objects self-consciously experience and reveal hidden social structures below the horizon of ‘human’ cultural visibility. Thus, coins, banknotes, pins, feathers, organs, and even atoms and abstract ideas narrate how they circulate as objects or commodities across the social, commercial, and political reality of the human subjects who make, sell, buy, drop, or forget them.

Most it-narratives offer horizontal cross-sections of a principally vertical society, and their selling point was the haphazard journey of objects through circuits of transferral that transcended socioeconomic hierarchies, and that afforded new perspectives on the economics of social interaction. Usually devoid of agency, the objects observe society with a testimonial authority predicated on their mundane instrumentality, the inconspicuousness that characterises them as everyday objects, which in turn allows them to pass unseen between human actors. ‘Objects bear witness’, Elaine Freedgood argues, and come to convey a moral code because they watch us ‘as we must watch ourselves’.<sup>16</sup> Through the metonymical relationship between the object and its world, the physical proximity, say, between a hat feather and the thoughts of its wearer, object narrators ‘have access to the social lives of people across lines of rank, class, age, ethnicity and occupation’ (p. 95). As a ‘horizontal’ application of the realist mode of discourse, the it-narrative facilitates a ‘fantasy of ultimate social penetration’ (p. 87), which ultimately relies on a recalibration of narrative omniscience. Freedgood argues that the object ‘could be an unobserved, yet very close eyewitness, and therefore a reliable, and highly knowledgeable narrator’, claiming ‘special powers as an observer of social life’ (p. 96).

It-narratives (whether short or novel length, stand-alone books or periodical pieces) tell stories of commercial reality that are different than realist novels. They present a more radically disjointed vision of a fragmented, rather than cohesive society, and employ a form of disclosure appropriate to this vision, one that bends to its content, rather than bending its content to suit its narrative structure. This is why I want to draw attention to Rowsell and Oliphant’s texts. In interestingly different ways, they calibrate literary form to the financial entities it is employed to dramatise. Through this particular combination of genres and devices, they *perform* rather than *describe* corporate personhood. The stories they tell of fraudulent directors are less important than the alien perspective from which they are told. Telling the story of a company as though that company itself had written it achieves a powerful effect of estrangement. As such, these texts reveal a genuine fascination with the idea of corporate personhood, and try to let it appear to the reader in all its epistemological uncertainty.

---

<sup>16</sup> Elaine Freedgood, ‘What Objects Know: Circulation, Omniscience and the Comedy of Dispossession in Victorian It-Narratives’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 15:1 (2010), 92. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

To be sure, influential critics such as Mary Poovey, Catherine Gallagher, Anna Kornbluh, and Tamara S. Wagner have argued that economic principles permeate literary genres, including the realist novel, on several planes, but, as I argue in the following sections, the perspective afforded by the it-narrative, when applied specifically to reflect on corporate personhood, should be seen as an innovation in literary form that is unique to this period and these authors, and that it is slightly but significantly different from novelistic realism.

**‘I began to die when I was four years old!’**

How, one might ask, is a writer supposed to dramatise the personhood of an immaterial financial entity such as an incorporated company? Edward P. Rowsell’s novella, *Autobiography of a Joint-Stock Company* (1861), is an example of how fictional discourses in the 1860s struggled to answer this question, and that writers were searching for the right combination of genre, plot, narrative structure, and style to accommodate it. The (fictional) paratext frames Rowsell’s text as a found narrative, with Rowsell listed as the ‘editor’ rather than the author, and the first and last chapters detail how the manuscript in question came into his possession, and how it changed his attitude to corporate finance.

The found narrative of *Autobiography of a Joint-Stock Company* is a strange case indeed. It recounts the brief life of a boy, dead at the age of eight, told retrospectively by that boy in tandem with the rise and fall of an incorporated insurance company with unlimited liability. The boy and the company are strangely commingled. The ‘father’ of both gets the idea to found the company at the exact moment that his son is born in a London garret. As it turns out, the ‘Saving Laundresses’ Mutual Benefit and General Elevation and Enlightenment Society’ and the child, ‘Laundry’, are to be understood as the same individual.<sup>17</sup> The editor learns that the boy and the company exist in a relationship of ‘representation’, but, as the story unfolds, their connection is revealed to be more intimate. When tasked with presenting the company prospectus to the board of directors, the father comments on the ‘marvellous coincidence’ that characterised the birth of the boy and company: ‘I looked with awe upon my child. I knew that I saw in him the soul of my idea – that my idea must be the life of my son.’ (p. 79). The boy himself, however, contends that the connection is, in fact, ontologically *real*:

The company throve and I throve. I sickened and the company sickened. I am dying and the company is winding up. [...] The company had a spirit. I was that spirit. I am that spirit. (p. 79)

---

<sup>17</sup> Edward P. Rowsell, *Autobiography of a Joint-Stock Company* (London, Ward & Lock, 1861), p. 6. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

The boy and the company, then, are a single individual, enclosed within the textual entity of the narrator, the biographer of a life co-lived by a flesh-and-blood human and a corporate entity. In other words, to create the perspective of the corporate person, the narrative employs a surrogate (human) interiority that legitimises the amalgamation of biological and financial ‘life’. The narrator eventually assumes control over its own constitution as a textual entity and collapses the distinction that has divided him into boy and company.

Henceforth I shall speak of myself, as flesh and blood, and of the society indiscriminately. In recording the course of the institution, I shall be penning my own history; in writing my own life, I shall be the historian of the society. (p. 128)

Here, the narrator makes explicit the formal principle that organises the text. As a transmutation of economic form into human flesh and vice versa, the narrator assumes complete omniscience across a previously insurmountable ontological divide. As a boy, he has a physical body, but as a company, he can transcend this form and listen in on the board meetings. This affords him intimate knowledge about the intricacies of the financial market, and, for the most part, what he learns is not comforting.

Almost everything uttered about the company’s affairs is framed as ‘falsehood’ or ‘deception’. Indeed, mirroring his father’s oratory, the boy describes himself and the company as a ‘scandalous impostor’, the result of perpetual embellishment on the part of his father:

He so long and so perpetually argued in favour of falsehood being truth, that even in his own mind the two changed places, and, by just retribution, he came at length himself to hug and fondle the cheat which he had successfully imposed upon great numbers of the community. (p. 130)

The company’s success, and much of the boy’s life, is the result of a succession of embellishments designed to inflate the company’s nominal value, furnishing an absence of value with the appearance of being ‘worth a great deal’ (p. 157). The rhetorical register associated with counterfeiting is the only vocabulary with which the boy can understand himself, split as he is between human substance and financial form. This becomes a kind of confession. On his death-bed in the Court of Chancery, the boy has a nightmare in which he witnesses a cannibal banquet where the ‘Friend Demon of Chancery’, poke and ladle in hand, cooks a soup out of indebted shareholders and wiggled directors. The Demon says to the writhing debtors: ‘I’ve fed you all your lives, and now you shall feed me’ (p. 157). Invoking imagery from scripture and caricature, the demon is a nightmarish vision of corporate personhood, of how companies, the products of ‘great

pretensions and little reality' (p. 173), can grow beyond their merit into monstrous and uncontrollable schemes that swallow and destroy all the wealth – monetary and societal – with which they come into contact.

After this feverish nightmare, the boy's parents assume he is dead, and abandon him. Unfortunately, the company, and thus also the sickly toddler, has four years of dying left to do, as the company's affairs are wound up. The winding-up of the company is a brutal affair. The 'Saving Laundresses' may be an incorporated company, but it remains an *unlimited* company, which means that its shareholders are liable to the full extent of the company's debts. The company can only satisfy the debts to the extent embodied in its capital (buildings, furnishings, machinery etc.), but the remainder must be paid by the collective body of owners, the shareholders. The winding up of unlimited companies often involved aggressive debt collection, and the narrator describes this process in the graphic vocabulary of hunting:

There is, really, so much good sterling gratification and wholesome blood-hound exercise to be obtained in the winding up an 'unlimited' company [...] that after having warmed themselves by a little freedom over in the murdering pursuit, the creditors and their dogs (Ah, reader! if you don't know what I mean by 'dogs', you have never been a shareholder in an insolvent 'unlimited' joint-stock company) sober down by degrees to a calm methodical cutting of throats, and find excellent amusement for a very long time. (p. 160)

The implicitly accused parties in this passage are the directors who ran the company into the ground with speculation, but also, somewhat surprisingly, the negligent and incompetent father, who at one point forgot to diversify a particularly large liability in the form of an old lady's policy, the payment of whose premium, upon her sudden death, claimed the majority of the company's capital. In other words, sympathy is clearly with the shareholders and with the boy/company itself, heartlessly abandoned on its deathbed, condemned to endure and witness the prosecution of its other family, the laundresses who have insured their lives with the company.

In this way, Rowsell's text applies the concept of corporate personhood as an organising principle for the narrative structure of the text by superimposing it on the biological life of a boy, and arranges the characters in the text according to a logic of ownership and liability, rather than social bonds such as familial affection. As such, it may be seen as a literary experiment with the specific form of the incorporated unlimited company, which, until limited liability was

extended to insurance companies in 1862,<sup>18</sup> was a common type of business association. In the coupling of the concept of corporate personhood with the generic framework of the it-narrative, corporate personhood emerges as a nightmarish vision of Frankensteinian artificiality. The boy and the company are one and yet separate, and the overlap of corporate and biological forms (temporal and spatial) produces an element of estrangement which highlights the ‘synthetic’ nature of joint stock companies – the legally ambiguous and conceptually knotty autonomy which incorporation confers upon an abstract entity. Rowsell’s narrative concretises this syntheticity by giving the reader a human subject, the unfortunate boy, whose life is made to simulate the logic of the corporation, upon which they may project their anxiety and sympathy.

### **‘an abstract being like myself’**

What would happen to this estrangement, however, if the company itself was allowed to speak? In his short periodical essay, which has a curiously similar title to Rowsell’s, ‘Autobiography of a Joint-Stock Company (Limited)’, Laurence Oliphant does exactly this. Published anonymously in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in July 1876, this short text appears in a very different context to Rowsell’s novel-length book.<sup>19</sup> Its claim to authorial legitimacy is stronger because of its proximity to factual discourses in which subjects such as economics and finance were regularly debated. Thus, Oliphant’s text paratextually enforces its claim to narrative omniscience by alluding to a corporate ‘we’ that draws on its materiality as an anonymous periodical piece.

Similarly to Rowsell’s text, ‘Autobiography of a Joint-Stock Company (Limited)’ presents itself as the confessions of a company on its deathbed in the

---

<sup>18</sup> The 1862 Consolidation Act granted limited liability and easier incorporation to banks and insurance companies. Other companies had received these same rights in the Limited liability Act of 1856 (see Robb, p. 26).

<sup>19</sup> The number of joint stock companies had increased significantly by the late 1870s compared to the early 1860s. Thus, the public had become more accustomed to the form and function of incorporated companies than before, even if the nationwide ‘triumph of the company’ (Jefferys, p. 142, quoted in Johnson, p. 123.) is more appropriately attributed to the period between 1885 and 1914. Sources are equivocal about this development, but an increase in the registration of joint stock companies certainly occurred in the years following the Limited Liability Act of 1856. Four thousand companies registered between 1862 and 1868, compared to only 996 between 1844 and 1856 (Robb, p. 26). Johnson maintains that the ‘scale of in-corporation rose to significant levels only in the 1880s.’ (Johnson, p. 123). However, this did not prevent the public from discussing the problematic aspects of incorporation, and the belated nationwide proliferation is more indicative of a period of normalisation, after which incorporation, much as paper money did previously, fell below the horizon of public visibility, and began dissolving into everyday instrumentality.

Court of Chancery, this time a joint stock company with *limited* liability.<sup>20</sup> Here, the company simply *is* the narrator, and no biological surrogate is attached to it. It speaks from a position of completely immaterial interiority, which affords a different kind of self-consciousness and the possibility of moral introspection. Horrified by the actions in which it has been forced to engage on behalf of its board of directors, to the ruin of most of its shareholders, the company frames its autobiography as a ‘timely and instructive warning’<sup>21</sup> addressed to the investing public. This public is ironically divided into an ideal readership of ‘widows and spinsters’, traditionally a common group of investors, and the more likely audience of ‘the squeezers themselves’ who, so the company fears, will read it ‘as thieves read the police reports, partly on account of the affectionate interest they take in the profession, and partly in the hope of picking up a wrinkle or two for future use and guidance’ (p. 329). The company readily assumes responsibility for having ‘ruined reputations, shattered fortunes, and carried want and misery into hundreds of humble homes’ (p. 327). ‘[C]onceived in sin and shapen in iniquity’ (p. 328), it acknowledges its culpability, and internalises the liability from which it shields its shareholders and directors. The text subsequently builds on the tension between legal agency and the lack of personal agency. The company, at the hands of its ruthless directors, can produce financial capital mostly out of nothing, but it cannot translate its own moral objections into legitimate action.

In a generic allusion to Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, the company is born into cognizant adulthood instantaneously. Beginning as a thought in the mind of its promotor, it then germinates first into ‘manuscript’ and subsequently into a proliferation of documents such as share certificates. This gestation period involves a string of strategic manipulations of information. All the steps in the process seem to involve swindling, deceit, and obfuscation – even fraud. The company’s promotor, a ‘predatory’ chap called the ‘Captain’, well versed in financial matters, explains to the first investor, a naïve baronet, that ‘confidence in matters of finance’ derives not from character or merit, but from accumulating ‘vast wealth by a long and successful career of fraud’ (p. 334). The principal virtue in finance, he suggests, is the ability to fashion convincing fictions, and the principal goal is not production or work, but to extend and inflate credit beyond the boundaries afforded by its plausible realisation. As in Rowsell’s text, the vocabulary of fraud and counterfeiting is applied to the entire ontology of finance,

<sup>20</sup> The actual nature of the business is purposefully obscure. In the front matter to its reprint in Poovey’s *Financial System in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Poovey connects it to the ‘actual case of Albert Grant [...] who created the notorious finance company, the Credit Foncier and Mobilier of England, in 1864’ (p. 302), but the narrator refers only vaguely to itself as the ‘X, Y, Z. Co. (Limited)’ (p. 339) and to its purpose as ‘my works’ or ‘my operations’ (p. 348).

<sup>21</sup> Laurence Oliphant, ‘The Autobiography of a Joint-Stock Company (Limited)’, reprinted in *The Financial System of Nineteenth-Century Britain* ed. by. Mary Poovey (Oxford University Press, 2003) pp. 327-56 (p. 328). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

because all the activities to which the company bears witness involve using ‘dazzling effect’ to produce the impression of real value and pecuniary substance. The ‘Captain’ continues:

Now if you or I were to offer them [the shares] for sale, their reputation for value would be ruined, because the public never look into the intrinsic value of the article to be purchased, but are influenced entirely by the manner in which it is presented to them, and the financial standing of the persons who offer it for sale: a poor, honest man will utterly fail to sell them a good thing in a straightforward way, while they will jump greedily at a bad thing, dangled skilfully before them by a rich rogue. (p. 333f)

The tension here is between the visible ‘body’ of the company as it is represented and circulated on shares and other documents, and its capital. The capital, merit and profitability of the company are largely irrelevant, because the financial market in which its shares are traded is disconnected from production. Futurity and proleptic speculation trump commercial activity. Therefore, the task of the board and promoters is not so much the running of the company, as it is to convince ‘the country investor to think that his or her future happiness and prosperity depend upon their obtaining possession’ (p. 333) of its shares. The narrative perspective of the company presents this wheeling and dealing in public credit by means of managing and manipulating the flow of information as the real business of finance.

All this the company learns from its ‘advantageous position’ in the ‘breast-pocket’ of its promotor (p. 335). The company is passive and afforded no diegetic agency, but its sensory apparatus appropriately functions outside the determination of socioeconomic or political categories, outside of biological time and geographical space, emerging simply from the pieces of paper on which it exists in writing. The company narrator experiences material reality through paper sensory nodes, the prospectus, share certificates, and other material manifestations of its ethereal ‘body’:

I must here remind my reader that having been printed in so many forms, I now filled the pockets of all the syndicate members, and that it was owing to this circumstance that I overheard the following conversation in Mr. Mire’s office [one of the directors]. (p. 343)

In this way, the corporate body of the narrator is characterised at once by centrality and ‘decentrality’, by psychological unity and material proliferation. Its aesthetic sensibility is drawn from the rhizomatic network of information circulating on paper that is the financial market. Like the artificially short life-expectancy of Rowsell’s boy narrator, the senses of this narrator are similarly

drawn from the ontology of corporate personhood. The result of this is, once again, that the narrator inhabits a different world than its human counterparts – a different ontology. This tension between conflicting ways of knowing arises from an overlap between, on the one hand, the kind of sequential linearity associated with human thinking as it is manifested in literary writing, and, on the other hand, the networked proliferation of ‘script’ and other forms of financial writing that constitutes the company’s material body. Sequence and network are overlapping within a singular individual. This creates a sense of ambiguity and discrepancy between the promises of its ‘written body’ and what this body is able to gradually learn about itself and its world. Thus, the text fashions a position of omniscience out of the spatial and temporal affordances (the tension between sequence and network) of corporate personhood itself.

The overlapping of literary forms differentiates Oliphant’s text from other it-narratives. Typically, the singular object of an it-narrative comprises body, sensation, and mind of the narrator. Here, the narrator is not a randomly circulating coin or bank note, but a self-multiplying genre of economic writing whose material substance (share documents carried in the pockets of directors, for instance) gives it access to an otherwise obscure network of intelligence. In the financial circuit, it seems, the medium of the written word assumes a special degree of mendaciousness, promising high dividends and wealth where no capital exists, and passing off fraudulent fictions as staples of fact. In the market inhabited by this company, the appearance of facticity is indistinguishable from fact. Thus, Oliphant’s fable of textuality may be said to dramatise the logic of financial capital itself. The ‘work’ of finance lies in using fictional devices to construct persuasive narratives about future profits or returns on investment. Specifically, in Oliphant’s text, prospectus announcements, share certificates, or advertisements speak erratically and unreliably to its audiences, whatever their social class, and can never be asked to substantiate their claims to facticity.

In other words, corporate personhood saturates the text at all levels, and simultaneously becomes a formal principle for its composition as a work of narrative fiction, and a subject for public discussion, rendered newly intelligible by its application in literary forms that make it intelligible to common readers unversed in finance. This literary experiment in personhood is similar to Rowsell’s to the extent that it applies the formal logic of incorporation to the fabric of literary discourse. However, Oliphant’s strategy is more radical, as it does not apply any forms outside that of corporate personhood itself to the text. No human child or surrogate is needed. Also, whereas Rowsell’s is an *unlimited* company, the shareholders of Oliphant’s company are protected by *limited* liability. Therefore, there is no hunt for insolvent debtors. Most of the liabilities are held by the company itself. In other words, the event of incorporation results in the birth of a financial entity, which, it seems, if given a voice and conscience to go along with legal personhood, cannot become anything other than an object

of pity – an artificial scapegoat which, inconveniently for itself, can do nothing but accept the blame and sacrifice itself at its directors' convenience.

### Corporate Law and Narrative Fiction – A Synthesis

Rowell and Oliphant go about applying the formal logic of corporate personhood in highly different ways, but seem to agree on the usefulness of the it-narrative as a generic framework for negotiating its latent problems – the artificiality of the corporate entity itself, and the ethical ambiguity that ensues when ownership and control become separate. The perspective of the company itself, with or without human elements, is privileged. Despite the 15-year gap between them, both texts seem equally fascinated and alarmed by the idea of the corporate person and the kind of 'life' it has on the market. As I mentioned previously, incorporation and the limitation of liability had become more common, but no less controversial, by the time Oliphant's text appeared. The 1866 Panic following the collapse of the 'banker's bank', Overend, Gurney & Company (a wholesale discount bank) devastated the financial market and reemphasised the tension between legal and illegal business and the legally ambiguous definition of limited liability.<sup>22</sup> Paul Johnson writes that the tension especially arose from a conflict between 'individual and corporate liability that was inherent in the fictive personality of the corporation and the real personality of the sole proprietors and partners' (p, 152). According to Johnson, this legal ambiguity persisted from mid-century to the 1890s. In other words, the financial sector continued to supply writers and commentators with fraud and bankruptcy cases that demonstrated the problematic ontology of corporate entities. Throughout the nineteenth century, the ontology of corporate finance – the exact form and functionality of increasingly ephemeral forms of capital and financial institutions – was unclear, and even in the later Victorian period, many writers seized on this tension in their work. Works as diverse as Dickens' *Dombey and Son*, Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*, and Margaret Oliphant's *Hester* address corporate form in different ways, mimetically *and* formally, but the generic framework of the it-narrative, I now argue, allowed Rowell and Laurence Oliphant to stress-test the logical form of incorporation in a slightly yet significantly more radical way.

As I noted above, very little scholarly commentary exists on Rowell and his novella, but Oliphant's texts has elicited a few comments in recent years. In *Realizing Capital*, Anna Kornbluh offers the argument, similar to mine, that at least in its literary manifestations, capital is 'always already fictitious'. Capital, she argues, 'goes about realizing because capital's business is the incorporation

---

<sup>22</sup> Legislation did not specify the limits of liability. The courts addressed this on a case-by-case basis, and their operation was slow and often inconclusive. See Johnson, p. 152f. Further references follow in-text quotations.

of the virtual into the real'.<sup>23</sup> Kornbluh makes this claim based on literary sources drawn mostly from the high realist tradition, arguing that 'the truly financial element in realism is the form' (p. 13). While she does comment briefly on Oliphant's text, this is only as an aside to an analysis of Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*. Similarly briefly, in *Financial Speculation in Victorian Fiction* (2010), Tamara S. Wagner argues that Oliphant's text should be regarded as one of a number of 'thinly fictionalized cautionary tales'<sup>24</sup> that 'policed public attitudes towards speculative operations'. I agree with Wagner that Oliphant's writing 'straddled different [...] fictional and economic discourses' (p. 19), but in her analysis the context of it-narratives is again omitted. In *Genres of the Credit Economy*, Mary Poovey similarly compares the 'Autobiography' to the work of David Morier Evans and categorises it as a work of journalism whose function was 'to help naturalize the workings of financial institutions by providing a norm against which aberrant behaviors could be judged'.<sup>25</sup> From this perspective, the text familiarised its readers with the workings of high finance by ironically defamiliarising the principles behind it with literary devices.

All the above-mentioned critics touch on the generic and institutional heterogeneity of Oliphant's text, but none has devoted attention Oliphant's use of the it-narrative to develop a statement about corporate finance that the realist novel was less inclined to emphasise. I contend that in Oliphant's work, the equivalency between paratextual and narrative framework, on the one hand, and on the other, the subject matter of corporate personhood, results in a genuinely original thought experiment that engages directly with the logic of capital and corporate enterprise. Compared to the realist novel, what is unique about Rowsell's and Oliphant's texts is the narrative authority they assign to the company itself. The corporate perspective, and the decidedly non-human life-world to which it grants access, poses the fundamental question of how a disembodied corporate entity can assume liability on behalf of human actors, and how the way it does this has very concrete and tangible consequences in the social world.

Rowsell and Oliphant's texts are interesting because they strive for metaphysical rather than mimetic accuracy. They may have had particular cases in mind<sup>26</sup>, but their texts engage mostly in reflection on how corporate personhood works, formally, structurally, and narratively. Principally, they both experiment with the *form* of corporate personhood. They tune a specific set of

---

<sup>23</sup> Anna Kornbluh, *Realizing Capital: Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form* (Proquest Ebook Central, Fordham University Press, 2014), p. 8. Further references follow in-text quotations.

<sup>24</sup> Wagner, (p. 18). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 275.

<sup>26</sup> See note 20.

literary genres into a generic matrix that aims to be formally equivalent to the object at hand. The coupling of the it-narrative and the testimonial autobiography with the object of the corporate person is what allows them to do this particularly rigorously, and in a way that emphasises the generality and usefulness of such formal reflections. The corporate it-narrative is the ultimate inside story of finance. To be sure, in *The Way We Live Now* Trollope brings his readers into the boardroom of Melmotte's railway company, but the information thus disclosed is limited by the fact that at no time does any character in the novel (or, indeed, the narrator) have a full overview of the company's state of affairs. Rowsell's and Oliphant's companies do know their affairs exactly, and are mostly horrified by them, and their tragedy is that they cannot act on this knowledge. They are the unwilling and subservient instruments of Economic Man. The tragedy of this position is the warrant of these texts' statement about corporate personhood, and it is difficult to see how this particular argument could be made without the generic framework of the it-narrative. Oliphant makes this point explicit by having the company narrator argue for the validity of his confession by invoking exactly this element of its omniscience.

My melancholy history is now closed. If I have wearied you, my patient readers, and still more patient investors, my apology must be that it would have been quite impossible for you ever to have obtained the valuable information which has been disclosed in this veracious history, excepting through the medium of *an abstract being like myself*. (p. 355, my emphasis)

The unknowable is forced into the domain of the sayable, and this disclosure necessitates the testimony, not of board members, directors, or shareholders, but of the corporate entity itself. The position of 'corporate omniscience', and the narrative authority thus conferred on the corporate person, ostensibly becomes the only way of knowing anything about corporate finance. Oliphant's use of this device indicates and echoes the idea that corporate finance somehow takes place outside legal and state (i.e. human) jurisdictions.

Rowsell's text similarly legitimises its narrative structure, when, in the final chapter, the editor finishes reading the autobiography, becomes infuriated with corporate finance, and violently refuses to enter into a similar scheme proposed by a friend. The lesson thus conveyed did not come from a treatise on political economy, or from a parliamentary report or a newspaper article. It came – and could only have come – from a fictional corporate autobiography masquerading as testimony.

What Oliphant's and Rowsell's texts gave their readers was not merely a detailed account of how companies were sometimes floated to simply generate financial capital. They gave their readers a way of thinking about incorporation that allowed them to see the ethical ambiguity underlying the principle of

personhood. Even if they were involved in the cultural naturalisation of the joint stock company, as Wagner and Poovey have argued, they certainly also worked hard to defamiliarise it. Their motivation seems principally to come from a genuine fascination with the *form* of the incorporated company, how it connects and estranges people of different classes, how it grows out of control and spreads into the obscure networks of the financial market, but also how the resultant entity, the company and the corporate ‘person’, is characterised by ‘Frankensteinian’ artificiality. The corporate persons are presented as deeply unhappy creatures, who, while lamenting their very nature, disclose a systemic ethical problem in modern corporate finance in a way that is both edifying and cautionary. The incorporated company may be an incredibly profitable mode of business organisation, but it is also, these texts ponder, at least potentially, a tortured and unhappy individual who suffers the incongruity between its purpose (to generate monetary value and safeguard investors from liability) and its nature.

As Poovey noted, writing about finance during the Victorian era often meant using imaginative devices to fill in the blanks of an obscure system. My argument here is that Rowsell and Oliphant were among the most imaginative commentators on the concept of corporate personhood in the Victorian literary culture. Their hybrid texts radically approximate the logic of their content to the form of their disclosure. The result is a form of imaginative writing that may be as akin to metaphysics as it is to literary fiction. Employing the generic framework of the it-narrative, and the narrative device of corporate omniscience, they *enact* the form of corporate personhood *narratively*. They ‘think’ about corporate form in the way in which they imagine companies themselves would. Even if their combined vision is one of fragmentation and incoherence – in both cases, the companies die tragically while their dear shareholders are ruined – Rowsell and Oliphant are not uniformly condemning the Company Acts for their allegedly demoralising effects on corporate conduct, nor are they lamenting an imaginary loss of business integrity in the growing financial sector. Instead, their two corporate ‘persons’ ask their readers to see through the textual artifice that allows them to speak, and to use their testimony to engage in a productive thought experiment: What if corporate persons were, actually, *persons*? What stories would they tell about the humans who associate to form and trade with them? This question evidently troubled the Victorian imagination. In the modern age of global corporate capitalism, in the age of Google, Amazon, Facebook and the rest, such thought experiments have only become more pertinent.

## Bibliography

- Blackwell, Mark, 'Introduction: The It-Narrative and Eighteenth-Century Thing Theory', in *The Secret life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. by Mark Blackwell (Bucknell University Press, 2007), 9-14
- Bellamy, Liz, 'It-narrators and Circulation: Defining a Subgenre' in *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. by Mark Blackwell (Bucknell University Press, 2007), 117-46
- Freedgood, Elaine, 'What Objects Know: Circulation, Omniscience and the Comedy of Dispossession in Victorian It-Narratives', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 15:1 (2010), 83-100
- Gallagher, Catherine, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton University Press, 2006)
- O'Gorman, Francis (ed.), *Victorian Literature and Finance*, (Oxford University Press, 2007)
- Jefferys, J. B., 'Trends in Business Organisation in Great Britain since 1856' (PhD thesis, University of London, 1938)
- Johnson, Paul, *Making the Market: Victorian Origins of Corporate Capitalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2010)
- Kornbluh, Anna, *Realizing Capital: Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form* (Proquest Ebook Central, Fordham University Press, 2014)
- Levi, Michael, *Regulating Fraud: White-collar crime and the criminal process* (London, Tavistock, 1987)
- Levine, Caroline, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton & Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2015)
- Malton, Sara, *Forgery in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture: Fictions of Finance from Dickens to Wilde* (London, Palgrave, 2009)
- McCulloch, J. R., *Considerations on Partnerships with Limited Liability* (London, Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1856). Also partly quoted in Johnson, P., 137

- Oliphant, Laurence, 'The Autobiography of a Joint-Stock Company (Limited)', in *The Financial System of Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by Mary Poovey (Oxford University Press, 2003), 327-56
- Poovey, Mary, *The Financial System in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2003)
- , 'Writing about Finance in Victorian England: Disclosure and Secrecy in the Culture of Investment' in *Victorian Investments: New Perspectives on Finance and Culture*, ed. by Nancy Henry & Cannon Schmitt (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2009), 39-57
- Robb, George, *White-Collar Crime in Modern England: Financial fraud and business morality, 1845-1929* (Cambridge University Press, 1992)
- Rowell, Edward P., *Autobiography of a Joint-Stock Company*, (London, Ward & Lock, 1861) Google Ebook
- Russell, Norman, *The Novelist and Mammon: Literary Responses to the World of Commerce in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, Clarendon Oxford Press, 1986)
- Taylor, James, *Creating Capitalism: Joint-Stock Enterprise in British Politics and Culture, 1800-1870* (Cornwall, Boydell Press, 2014)
- , *Boardroom Scandal: The Criminalization of company fraud in nineteenth-century Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2013)
- Trollope, Anthony, *The Way We Live Now*, (Oxford University Press, 2016[1875])
- Vernon, John, *Money and Fiction: Literary Realism in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1984)
- Vogl, Joseph, *The Specter of Capital*, trans. by Joachim Redner and Robert Savage (Stanford University Press, 2015), 52-6
- Wagner, Tamara S., *Financial Speculation in Victorian Fiction: Plotting Money and the Novel Genre, 1815-1901* (Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2010)

Weiss, Barbara, *The Hell of the English: Bankruptcy and the Victorian Novel*  
(Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 1986)

## The Doctor-Coquette Nexus in *Middlemarch*, *Villette*, and *The Woodlanders*

Emma Rayner

Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

### **Abstract**

*Although there remains a critical tendency to denounce literary coquettes like Rosamond Vincy as inauthentic, recent developments in gender and cultural theory have led critics to recuperate such anti-heroines. Still yet to be fully realized, however, is the complementary importance of a character type that recurs just as often as the coquette in the nineteenth-century novel: the provincially exiled young doctor. Numerous novels of the mid-Victorian period romantically pair an ambitious coquette – who stage-manages, but does not inhabit her own femininity – with a doctor figure whose ‘scientific’ outlook jars notably with the determinedly superficial self-presentation of the female object in his view.*

*Surveying the coquette-doctor relationships forged within George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871–2), Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), and Thomas Hardy’s *The Woodlanders* (1886–7), this essay promotes an understanding of the coquette as a kind of Frankenstein’s monster of Victorian culture. Despite (or perhaps because of) the stereotype’s origin in the conservative English psyche, the coquette proves a character highly attuned to the performative strategies she must maintain in order to navigate the strict gender standards of the era. The Victorian doctor stands on the other side of the coupling as a representative of the period’s pseudo-scientific attitudes toward the female body in particular, his diagnostic tool-box of positivist inquiry and empiricist objectivism proving a dubious match for the coquette’s careful curation of her own sexual and social signs.*

In their assessments of *Middlemarch*, literary commentators have tended either to neglect Rosamond Vincy altogether, or else to reduce her character with the loaded accusation of narcissism.<sup>1</sup> F.R. Leavis, for example, describes Rosamond in *The Great Tradition* as ‘simple ego unembarrassed by any inner complexity’, going so far to admit that ‘the reader certainly catches himself, from time to time, wanting to break that graceful neck’.<sup>2</sup> Few could forget, furthermore, T.S. Eliot’s claim that Rosamond terrifies more than Goneril or Regan, *Middlemarch*’s female antagonist apparently representing – unlike the villainesses of *Lear* – precisely the ‘admixture’ of weakness and satanic villainy which makes character

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the leading voice in this camp is Barbara Hardy, who in *The Novels of George Eliot* labels Rosamond a ‘grim egoist’ (London: A&C Black, 1985), p. 226. So too does Bernard Semmel – in his only comment on Rosamond – describe her as a ‘narcissistic and beautiful blonde’ in *George Eliot and the Politics of National Inheritance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 94. See also Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, ‘Negotiating *Middlemarch*’, in *Middlemarch in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Karen Chase (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 107-31 (p. 118).

<sup>2</sup> F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 84.

plausible.<sup>3</sup> Rosamond, then, enrages our first male critic because of her Vice-like simplicity; the second, because of her terrifying realism. What are we to make of such contradictory assessments? This essay argues that the reason Rosamond presents such a threat to the conservative reader is because she cultivates a self-presentation which resists penetrative reading – especially when enacted by the male gaze.

Contemporary commentators have done much to redeem Rosamond from over a century of belittling reviews like those recorded above.<sup>4</sup> Revisionists have not, however, always situated Eliot's anti-heroine in her proper character typology. Rosamond's stage-managing of her appearance and behaviour – a practice motivated by the desire to make 'conquests' of men<sup>5</sup> – firmly establishes her as a female coquette, affiliating her with a much wider network of novelistic flirts including Emma Bovary, Becky Sharpe, and Rosamond Oliver. The coquette, as an adept director of her own performance on the social stage, rises to narrative and romantic dominance by virtue of her determined adherence to a femininity which is essentially theatrical. Because of this, the coquette troubles notions of gender essentialism, and poses a problem for readers expecting straightforward expressions of subjectivity in novelistic character. Denying both inherent femininity and selfhood in this manner, the coquette emerges as a figure capable of provoking anxieties about social authenticity and gender fakery in the Victorian age (and, if we are to judge by Leavis' compulsion to violence, on into modernity).

The coquette's subversive potential has rendered her an object of interest for literary and cultural commentators in recent decades. The publication of Richard A. Kaye's *The Flirt's Tragedy* (2002) and King and Schlick's edited collection *Refiguring the Coquette* (2008) speaks to the increased attention paid the figure of the coquette in literature, from her *naissance* in cultural commentary of the eighteenth century, to the nineteenth-century redactions I discuss here. But though both studies mount a fine argument for the coquette's demonstrative gender performativity', neither draws sufficient attention to the spectators who call her performance into being. For the coquette's trick only works when her male onlooker invests mutually in the myth of typical femininity that she projects. 'In order for coquetry to grow on the soil of sociability', George Simmel has

---

<sup>3</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'The Three Voices of Poetry' (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 514-517; Rebecca Mitchell, 'The Rosamond Plots: Alterity and the Unknown in *Jane Eyre* and *Middlemarch*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 66.3 (2011), 307-327; Anne E. Patrick, 'Rosamond Rescued: George Eliot's Critique of Sexism in *Middlemarch*', *The Journal of Religion*, 67.2 (1987), 220-238; and Doreen Thierauf, 'The Hidden Abortion Plot in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*', *Victorian Studies*, 56.3 (2014), 479-89.

<sup>5</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 426. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

written, ‘it must meet with a specific behavior on the part of the male’.<sup>6</sup> Like meaning in Wittgenstein’s language games, the coquette’s false subjectivity is constructed (or, in faith to the theme of this journal issue, *forged*) dialogically, somewhere in-between the intentions and desires of the female flirt, and those of her naïve and stereotyping male victim. Without the latter’s collusion, the coquette would be barred from using a typically-feminine guise to her advantage.

Once the narrative trajectory of the coquette is read in this way (that is, as a series of scenes inhabited by players and audience members who together fashion a particular kind of femininity), then one character type in particular emerges as a common presence opposite her. This is none other than the young, provincially exiled Victorian doctor. It is widely acknowledged that the doctor character, following earlier manifestations in novels such as *Bleak House*, was afforded a more substantial role by later nineteenth-century novelists from Trollope to Wilkie Collins.<sup>7</sup> Less obvious is the frequency with which the doctor is romantically paired with a coquettish love interest in mid-Victorian realist fiction. Indeed, the novels which hold my critical gaze in this essay, Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871–2), Thomas Hardy’s *The Woodlanders* (1886–7), and Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), are only a few of the most representative examples of the doctor-coquette nexus in the literature of this period.<sup>8</sup>

Tabitha Sparks has previously parsed the complex relationship between the Victorian doctor and the marriage plot.<sup>9</sup> Sparks’s sensitivity to the liminal status of the doctor in nineteenth-century social and literary space – his straddling of the public/realist and domestic/romantic spheres – is a key theme in my own argument. Again, however, Sparks’s study does not consider the medical man’s *epistemological* significance contra the coquette. If, as King and Schlick allege, the coquette surfaces in the eighteenth century as a product inextricable from the material and marriage markets, then it is my contention that the professional doctor emerges in mid-Victorian fiction as a pseudo-scientific extension of the bourgeois morality of the era, his positivist science sparring with the coquette’s social sign-bending to fascinating effect.<sup>10</sup> Thus when Lydgate transports himself

<sup>6</sup> George Simmel, *The Sociology of George Simmel*, ed. by Kurt H. Wolff (London: Macmillan Publishing, 1950), p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. xii.

<sup>8</sup> The titular Emma marries a medical man in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*; Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *The Doctor’s Wife* and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters* depict the same romantic pairing of coquette and doctor; Harriet Martineau pursues a similar dynamic in *Deerbrook*. Even within *Villette*, Ginevra has a precedent in the dead Mrs. Bassompierre, a coquette who neglects her child and disappoints her doctor husband.

<sup>9</sup> Tabitha Sparks, *The Doctor in the Victorian Novel: Family Practices* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> King and Schlick write that the coquette’s rise in popular culture coincided with the ‘emergence of a specular economy, [...] the anxiety of selfhood generated by accommodation to newly commercialised social relations, and [...] the rise of the middle classes and of middle-

to a false paradise at the mere thought of Rosamond's sweet laughs and blue eyes in *Middlemarch*, when Dr. John is rendered stupid by Ginevra's supposedly 'artless' charms in *Villette*,<sup>11</sup> and when Fitzpiers is lost to the sheer spectacle of the seductively-draped Mrs. Charmond in *The Woodlanders*, the owner of the medical gaze discloses himself not merely as the primary target for the coquette's wiles, but as the active co-creator of her myth. As it politicises the coquette's performance, therefore, this essay will demonstrate that the doctor represents in concentrated form the surveillance of women's bodies and behaviours in the Victorian milieu, displaying in his relations with the coquette the inconsistencies at the heart of the enforcement of gendered subjectivity.

### The Victorian Coquette

The Victorian coquette is an inheritance of the prior century, her popularization in English art and literature owing to the civilising efforts of such cultural patriarchs as Steele and Addison. The essays of *The Tatler* (1709–11) and *The Spectator* (1711–12) are dense sites of social stratification, and in them, the coquette is deplored along with other derogatory female types such as the pict, the jilt, and the idol. The coquette's particular flaw was her engagement of womanly wiles which, because deemed to spring from a selfish aspiration toward sexual freedom and pleasure, constituted a vaguely-defined threat to normative femininity'.<sup>12</sup> It did not help that the Gallic etymology of the term 'coquette' – which we see reflected later in the French sensibilities of *Middlemarch*'s Rosamond Vincy, *The Woodlanders*' Felice Charmond, and *Villette*'s Ginevra Fanshawe – worked immediately to signal the coquette's penchant for overt or false display. These supposedly 'French' characteristics made the coquette a didactically-useful figure of contrast when set against the ideally restrained and, as Richard Kaye puts it, 'tasteful' English woman.<sup>13</sup> The realist novelist imports these nuances into the nineteenth century, adopting Steele and Addison's practice of tracing the coquettish character's allure back to false foundations, to a beauty that is significantly augmented – if not wholly generated – by material adornment, and to a charm that is learned rather than intrinsic.

Given the coquette's association with costume and with pretence, it follows that this character type is strongly allied with theatricality. This association is, in

---

class culture' ('Introduction', in *Refiguring the Coquette*, ed. by Shelley King and Yaël Schlick (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2008), p.13.

<sup>11</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. by Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), p. 149. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the eighteenth-century coquette, see Erin Mackie, 'Fashion Plates: Subjectivity, Style and Gender', in *Market À la Mode: Fashion, Commodity, and Gender in The Tatler and The Spectator* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 144-202 (p. 172).

<sup>13</sup> Richard Kaye, *The Flirt's Tragedy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), p. 121.

fact, built into the coquette's very definition: in Samuel Johnson's dictionary of 1755, 'to coquet' is recorded to mean 'To *act* the lover', and the O.E.D. continues to define the coquette as 'A woman (more or less young), who uses *arts* to gain the admiration and affection of men'.<sup>14</sup> In the mid-Victorian novel, the literary coquette's penchant for the theatrical is often invoked at the level of plot and character (Hardy's Mrs. Charmond is a former play-actress; Brontë's Ginevra Fanshawe literally performs the role of a coquette in her school play) and also dialogically, through the coquette's interaction with her social audience (this is primarily the case with Eliot's Rosamond). Since the realist novelist invariably portrays the coquette's flirtation as an act of deception, the reader quickly learns to oppose this female type with the writer's working conception of the 'real'.

Indeed, generically speaking, the coquette is a character better suited to the conventions of drama than to those of the realist novel. T.S. Eliot anticipates this claim when he likens Rosamond to Iago.<sup>15</sup> Theatre, after all, cannot show the referent, only the material signifier; in this respect, it is the same as the body observed only by the naked eye. Dramatic performance offers to its audience only external symptoms, encouraging spectators to guess at buried meanings without the assuring guidance of an omniscient narrator. The coquette's self-presentation is hence not psychological realism in the sense we have come to know it from Victorian fiction, and it is distinct even from Barthes' realist materialism, under which objects and things perform a straightforward function in announcing themselves as real. 'Good' femininity, as opposed to the coquette's theatrical version, is classic realism: symbols of outward beauty and virtue described by the narrator perfectly correspond with the 'good' female protagonist's inward state, without the merest suggestion of authorial falseness to disrupt the correspondence. Female protagonists like Dorothea Brooke and Polly Bassompierre, for example, support their external loveliness with demonstrable moral purity, the visible signs of gender that they project clearly supported by ethical, inward referents.<sup>16</sup> The coquette, by contrast, exists as an animate compound of fine dresses, memorised sentiments, and trained movements, her announced artifice aligning her with the early-modern masque sooner than with the novel of domestic realism.

Literary depictions of the coquette commonly involve mirrors and doubling, supporting the notion of a female self-presentation determined to thwart the reader's perception. More than serving simply as a material indicator of the coquette's narcissism, the prop of the mirror serves to disconcertingly rive the coquette in two, questioning the basic realism or coherence of the reflected female subject. Rosamond's mirror-scene in *Middlemarch* is particularly captivating, her image replicated so that

---

<sup>14</sup> Both definitions taken from 'Coquette, n', *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2017, <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed May 2018].

<sup>15</sup> Eliot, 'The Three Voices of Poetry', p.11.

<sup>16</sup> See Mackie, 'Fashion Plates', p. 147.

two nymphs – the one in the glass, and the one out of it, [...] looked at each other with eyes of heavenly blue, deep enough to hold the most exquisite meanings an ingenious beholder could put into them, and deep enough to hide the meanings of the owner if these should happen to be less exquisite. (p. 112)

Neither ‘nymph’ in Eliot’s visual is easily read. As the eyes of both join in a promise to contain other observers’ meanings whilst safely guarding Rosamond’s own, the reflection in the glass is posited to be just as phenomenologically real (or perhaps more accurately, just as artificial) as the embodied original. Subjectivity is faintly gestured at (‘the meanings of the owner’), but it is obfuscated by layers of theatrical externality. Such stubbornly superficial imagery naturally frustrates the reader who values the existence of a more authentic self. Just as *Daniel Deronda*’s Gwendolen Harleth draws a kind of vital energy to sustain her state of emotional indifference from kissing her own image in the cold glass, Eliot’s antecedent coquette makes use of mirrors to redouble her social mask.<sup>17</sup>

Given Rosamond’s talent in arranging her very body to receive others’ meanings, it is no wonder that *Middlemarch*’s narrator describes the coquette as ‘by nature an actress of parts that entered into her physique’ (p. 117). Consider Eliot’s extended description of Rosamond:

Rosamond never showed any unbecoming knowledge, and was always that combination of correct sentiments, music, dancing, drawing, elegant note-writing, private album for extracted verse, and perfect blonde loveliness [...]. She was not in the habit of devising falsehoods, and if her statements were no direct clew to fact, why, they were not intended in that light – they were among her elegant accomplishments, intended to please. (p.268)

If Lionel Trilling defines sincerity as congruence between avowal and actual feeling, then Rosamond is clearly as compulsive a liar as Iago.<sup>18</sup> Furnished by Mrs. Lemon’s finishing school with an ornamental set of ‘accomplishments’ – all of which anticipate the approval of a social audience – Rosamond’s capacity for social sincerity has been compromised at a formative stage. ‘Subjectivity is further buried beneath coquettish display as a result of Rosamond’s post-debut immersion in a patriarchal society which clearly recommends and rewards the kind of female type-filling that she has been taught in girlhood. Rosamond is, after all, ‘by general consent [...] a rare compound of beauty, cleverness, and amiability’ (p. 268, my emphasis).

<sup>17</sup> See George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1996), p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), p.2.

*Villette*'s Ginevra Fanshawe is still, in fact, a schoolgirl. Like Rosamond, she too enjoys a culturally-approved education more thespian than intellectual in flavour, designed to funnel her into a life of 'music, singing, and dancing, also embroidering [...] fine cambric handkerchiefs' (p. 123). Openly referred to as a 'vain coquette' by Brontë's narrator Lucy Snowe, Ginevra assents to her own stereotyping with gusto, finding it more 'convenient' (p. 103) to perform this cosmetic brand of femininity than to actually espouse traditional female virtues like those possessed by Polly Bassompierre, *Villette*'s quintessential 'Angel in the House'. Ginevra admits to preferring Lucy's honest company to Dr. John's: 'I am far more at my ease with you, [...] who take me at my lowest, and know me to be coquettish, and ignorant, and flirting, and fickle, and silly, and selfish, and all the other sweet things you and I have agreed to be a part of my character' (p. 106). Even in female company, Ginevra performs a socially-negotiated role. By inhabiting that social self wholly, deliberately, and always, Ginevra suggests that the inner personhood expected of the Victorian middle-class woman – disinterestedness, servitude, and other 'sterling qualities and solid virtues' (p. 106) – is in no way preferable to the exhibition of coquetry that can exact the same end: namely, courtship ending in marriage.

When risking classification as a coquette becomes a simpler means of satisfying cultural demand than does aiming for actual sincerity and authenticity, a unique kind of self-division comes into play. This is a self-division unto which the Victorian doctor's distinction between public and private life directly maps. Where a public-facing male like Victorian poet Matthew Arnold can exalt the notion of a 'buried life' because he is allowed respite when in private to cultivate that hidden subjectivity, a coquette like Rosamond or Ginevra is taught to perform even in the most sequestered of settings, her inner self well-obscured beneath the markers of type that she constantly projects.<sup>19</sup> Whilst Arnold is fortunate to sporadically escape the platitudes and disguises of the social world, the coquette has been so moulded into her public mask that she cannot recognise her true self outside of it.<sup>20</sup> As Eliot writes, '[Rosamond] even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own' (p.117).

Perhaps this is why the doctor emerges as so appropriate a target for the coquette's wiles. The Victorian doctor, we must not forget, has an act of his own to sustain, and this act – like the coquette's – must be upheld in the most intimate of settings. In the nineteenth century, the general practitioner's work was largely comprised of house calls, whereby he would be summoned to preside over intensely private, deathbed moments. But the doctor, we know from novels of this period, presents in these moments as an impersonal, impenetrable actor, unable to take off his professional mask until within the door of his own home.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Arnold, 'The Buried Life', in *Arnold: The Complete Poems*, ed. by Kenneth Allott (New York: Longman, 1979), pp. 286-291.

<sup>20</sup> Gilbert and Gubar expound a similar argument with relation to *Villette*'s narrator – see 'The Buried Life of Lucy Snowe', in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, pp. 399-440.

In consequence, the doctor conflates his own household (and the wife stood over its hearth) with the coveted opportunity to free his deeper self. Whilst at home, in other words, the doctor expects his wife to play nurse to his subjectivity, so that he may recharge in preparation for the next day's performance on the most private of public stages. Thus not only is the Victorian doctor's ideal spouse expected to express in the home 'true' femininity (a truth the medical man has theorized), but she is to privilege and nurture her husband's buried self, too.

Take *Middlemarch's* Lydgate, who subscribes wholly to the binary that Arnold invokes in his celebrated poem 'The Buried Life' (1852), desperate to retreat from the public realm of activity and trade each night to be emotionally serviced by a wife sensitive to his most private concerns and ambitions.<sup>21</sup> Rosamond projects this truth to begin with, and so Lydgate makes of her his wife. As soon as they begin to inhabit the same space, however, Rosamond effaces the true-self, false-self myth that her husband has invested in, and shows the intimate reality of her character to be as empty as that of her socially-performed identity. When Lydgate comes home to his wife, therefore, he is met not with therapeutic disinterest but a total *lack of* interest, for Rosamond harbours no trace of the wifely compassion her doctor-husband has come to expect from women in the domestic setting.

In *Villette*, Ginevra's initial object of male interest – a doctor, naturally – rescinds his affections before his domestic ideals can be irrevocably disappointed in the same way as Lydgate's. From the beginning of the novel, Dr. John is painted as a paradigm of middle-classness, as a bastion of domesticity.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, his flight from beguilement with coquettish Ginevra to moral repulsion with her is triggered by the revelation of her innate performativity. Watching Ginevra act the role of 'coquette' in the literally theatrical context of a school play, Dr. John sits as an audience member enraptured (p. 142). When both players are removed to the more overtly public setting of the local theatre, however, the young doctor realises that Ginevra *never* suspends her act. In this climactic scene, Dr. John reacts furiously to the girl's flirting sensibility and 'triumphant [...] beauty', concluding that she is 'neither a pure angel, nor a pure-minded woman' (pp. 197–8).

Notably, Dr. John borrows from his medical vocabulary when figuring his expired obsession with Ginevra, claiming that the moment of crisis at the theatre

---

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Stickney Ellis' behavioural manual *The Women of England*, originally published 1838, describes the working man's problem with dramatic flourish: 'with a jaded look and feeble step, then, he enters his home. He wipes the gathering dew from his wrinkled forehead, sits down with a sigh almost amounting to a groan of despondency, and then looks round upon the well-furnished parlour, where the ladies of his family spend their idle hours' (London: Fisher, Son & Co, 1839), p. 256.

<sup>22</sup> It is soon revealed that Dr. John is a matured form of 'Graham', the boy Lucy grows up with at home in England, simply transplanted to live in a near-identical abode with his mother in France.

effected ‘a mere puncture’ to his heart, that ‘no pain or malady of sentiment has yet gone through my whole system’ (pp. 199–200). Still later, he declares ‘I am better now [...] I have entered another condition, and am now much disposed to exact love for love’ (p. 222). In this way, the doctor functions as a moral yardstick for just how far the coquette can take her emasculating performance before the bourgeois physician returns to full gender fitness – that is, before he retreats to the safe haven of domestic femininity epitomised by *Villette*’s Polly Bassompierre, a superior creature to Ginevra because her beauty is rooted in the ‘firm soil of reality’ (p. 267). The nineteenth-century doctor, in *Villette* and beyond, exemplifies the spilling-over of science into the realm of social ethics.<sup>23</sup> The professional doctor heals the bodies of people in their own homes; the biopower gained from this intimate transaction authorizes, in turn, his commentary on domestic matters of ideological and political import (matters like, evidently, marriage and gender roles). There is perhaps no more insidious instrument of the nineteenth-century’s institutional morality than the Victorian doctor, no more apparently benign extension of surveillance society than the general practitioner going about his house calls.<sup>24</sup>

### The Myopic Scientific Gaze

In an 1836 book titled *Beauty: Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman*, Alexander Walker promotes a set of physiognomic principles by which the contemporary male reader could supposedly diagnose, through visual interpretation only, a woman’s inherent virtue or vice.<sup>25</sup> To be sure, Walker’s is a dubious mode of empiricism, and his brand of speculative science was quickly eclipsed by more ‘rationalistic’ forms of inquiry as the nineteenth century progressed. However, the rise of positivist science and the related professionalization of the medical practitioner in England

<sup>23</sup> Lawrence Rothfield comments further that ‘the faith that sustains Lydgate as a physician-scientist is precisely that the obscure and the minute can be made manifest, and that this operation will yield therapeutically valuable insights, confirming the “direct alliance between intellectual conquest and social good”’ (“A New Organ of Knowledge”: Medical Organicism and the Limits of Realism in *Middlemarch*’, in *Vital Signs: Medical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 84–119 (p. 97)).

<sup>24</sup> For more on the Victorian doctor’s social function, see Asa Briggs, ‘*Middlemarch* and the Doctors’, in *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs Vol. 2* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), pp. 49–67. For a Foucauldian reading of Dr. John’s gaze (as applied to Lucy Snowe), see Sally Shuttleworth, ‘*Villette*: “the surveillance of a sleepless eye”’, in *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 219–242.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Walker, *Beauty: Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1836). For an excellent correlating of physiognomy to the coquette, see also Ellen Rosenman, ‘Fear of Fashion; or, How the Coquette Got Her Bad Name’, *ANQ*, 15.3 (2002), 12–21 (p. 13).

did not entail as wholesale a revision of Walker's diagnostic method as one might expect, at least when it came to the perception and conception of gender difference. As Lilian R. Furst has chronicled, the advent of the Victorian age saw major developments in medical theory and praxis, including the popularization of the house call and the idealization of the hospital as a space for scientific progress. But these developments brought also a renewed emphasis on visible, tangible markers of disease, of the kind amenable to detection by the newfangled stethoscope.<sup>26</sup>

Because the 'principles of science were in this period 'seen to be *universally* operable', fictional doctors can be observed to extend their material hermeneutics beyond their patients to encompass social players also.<sup>27</sup> Within this milieu, an anatomy-inclined general practitioner like Lydgate – though keenly interested, as Peter M. Logan records, 'in what is unseen, in hidden mechanisms and physical laws' – creates a firm internal analysis of woman based on the epistemologically-compromised science of seeing.<sup>28</sup> Foucault writes in *The Birth of the Clinic* that the symptom 'is the form in which the disease is presented: of all that is visible, it is closest to the essential; it is the first transcription of the inaccessible nature of the disease'.<sup>29</sup> In the literary context at hand, the disease in question is biological sex, and the symptoms are the visible signs of sex that mark the female body. The doctor's habit of conflating sign and imagined signifier – or, as Sally Shuttleworth puts it with reference to *Villette*'s Dr. John, the doctor's practice of "distinguish[ing] inner experience from outer signs" – is only intensified when the object of this faulty gaze is the coquette, a woman who demonstrates that the biological facticity of sex can be entirely unlinked from the fiction of gender.<sup>30</sup> The coquette, as has been established, offers herself up as a body to be read, but arranges the signs of her femininity in a very specific manner indeed, so that they become amenable to their receiver's classification or preferred insertion of reference rather than to any deeper citation of the self.

The coquette-related chink in Lydgate's outlook can be traced to his contact with Laure, the actress who enraptures him as a young medical student in France. Swapping vivisection experiments in medical school for observation in

---

<sup>26</sup> See Lilian R. Furst, 'Seeing – and Hearing – is Believing', in *Between Doctors and Patients: The Changing Balance of Power* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press (1998)), pp. 55-85.

<sup>27</sup> Patrick J. McCarthy, 'The "New, Young Surgeon" of *Middlemarch*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 10.4 (1970), 805-816 (p. 808). See also Rothfield: the Victorian world is one 'split between the microscopic and the human' ("A New Organ of Knowledge", p. 101).

<sup>28</sup> Peter M. Logan, 'Conceiving the Body: Realism and Medicine in *Middlemarch*', *History of the Human Sciences*, 4.2 (1991), 197-222 (p. 199).

<sup>29</sup> Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, transl. by A.M. Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 90.

<sup>30</sup> Sally, Shuttleworth, '*Villette*: "the surveillance of a sleepless eye"', p. 220.

the dramatic theatre, Lydgate is in the audience one night when Laure, in a play depicting spousal crime, actually kills her husband. Laure's collision of representation and reality, act and action, teaches Lydgate to readily conflate the visible with the true from that point forward. But the 'scientific view of woman' (p. 153) that he vows to adopt following this shock is a contradiction in terms, a commitment not to an objective hermeneutics of character but to a system of judging which operates according to a theatrical precedent that cannot, in fact, be mapped onto the entire female sex. Once Lydgate enters Rosamond's social orbit in *Middlemarch*, we quickly discover that his 'scientific view' operates in alignment with his desire. By allowing *himself* creative liberties when scientifically theorising the origin of Rosamond's femininity, he fails to look beyond the observable in her. It is this, the blind spot in Lydgate's doctoring lens, which ultimately leads to the ruin of his romantic and vocational narrative.

'Lydgate's science', Peter M. Logan explains, 'is a case-study in the limitations and dangers of naïve realism, that is, of representation that denies its own status as representation'.<sup>31</sup> In this, Logan hits upon the irony at the heart of Lydgate's supposed rationalism: namely, the prominence of the young doctor's imagination in what is supposed to be his 'scientific view of woman'. Foucault, too, emphasises the creativity belying the epistemology of modern medicine:

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, doctors described what for centuries had remained below the threshold of the visible and the expressible, but this did not mean that, after over-indulging in speculation, they had begun to perceive once again, or that they listened to reason rather than to imagination; it meant that the relation between the visible and invisible – which is necessary to all concrete knowledge – changed its structure, revealing through gaze and language what had previously been below and beyond their domain.<sup>32</sup>

It is a paradox of medical practice, in the Victorian period as now, that all diagnostic investigation begins (at least before the turn to inward-seeing technology like the MRI scan and X-Ray) with a conceptual understanding of the body and the inferences drawn from sensory, superficial penetration.<sup>33</sup> Working from a few such inferences of sweet femininity, Lydgate over-determines Rosamond's character, enhancing the fiction she projects with the one imagined in his own mind. He retains, in this, the old medicine's fault of diagnoses 'float[ing], free of any material referent, in the fancy'.<sup>34</sup> Lydgate's scientific

---

<sup>31</sup> Peter M. Logan, 'Conceiving the Body', p. 209.

<sup>32</sup> *The Birth of the Clinic*, p. xii.

<sup>33</sup> Logan distinguishes between Lydgate's *sensory* penetration (that which would require, for example, a stethoscope) and his *imaginative* penetration – the conceptual understanding of the body upon which Lydgate draws to infer its interior condition ('Conceiving the Body' (p. 202)).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

training, it seems, has trained him not for deep etiological exploration, but for the creative augmentation of the literal with the assumed.

When formulating his scientific view of woman, Lydgate's fancy falls on botany. One would surmise that the study of plants is at quite a remove 'from Lydgate's specialization in pathological anatomy; nonetheless, it is the imagery of flowers which he invariably returns when constructing his version of Rosamond. During their courtship, Lydgate poorly naturalises Rosamond's clearly artificial aspects until she becomes something quite different even from what she elects to show of herself. In an exemplary instance, Lydgate becomes distracted

thinking how lovely this creature was, her garment seeming to be made out of the faintest blue sky, herself so immaculately blond, as if the petals of some gigantic flower had just opened and disclosed her; and yet with this infantine blondness showing so much ready, self-possessed grace. (p.159)

Having never had the time nor the interest to 'give him[self] up to natural history' (p. 172), Lydgate appears to have entirely forgotten that socio-historical environment operates as an essential variable in the development of any organism, most of all the human individual. He prefers instead to imagine Rosamond – who is again contrarily 'self-possessed' and 'ready' even in his airbrushed conception – as a direct product of nature. Even her dress, her most material covering, is sublimated into something else by the doctor's delusive thinking. Persisting with his naturalizing mission, Lydgate tries to re-inscribe Rosamond as a flower that has popped up in spite of hostile circumstances: 'After all, he thought, one need not be surprised to find the rare conjunctions of nature under circumstances apparently unfavourable: come where they may, they always depend on conditions that are not obvious' (p. 161). Lydgate is right about the invisibility of certain conditions, of course, but he does not accurately judge the thoroughly *social* character of these external stimuli. It is thus an intellectual shock first and foremost when Lydgate discovers that Rosamond, notwithstanding her periwinkle eyes and nymph-like naturalness, does not embody recognisable organic structures – like the ultra-tangible tissual system studied by his medical idol Bichat, for example – but the immaterial ones of normative society.<sup>35</sup> After the bathos of conjugal life supplants courtship, all Lydgate can do is revise his initial conception of Rosamond until she becomes in *Middlemarch's* finale a murderous, masculinized basil plant: 'He once called her

---

<sup>35</sup> Foucault uses Bichat as a metonym for the late eighteenth-century age of medicine, implicating the French anatomist when discussing corpse-opening, and the process by which 'the complex, inexhaustible *individuality* of the organs is dispelled and suddenly simplified' (my emphasis); also relevant is Foucault's claim that 'Bichat's eye is a clinician's eye, because he gives an absolute epistemological privilege to the *surface gaze*' (*The Birth of the Clinic* (p. 128–9)).

his basil plant; and when she asked for an explanation, said that basil was a plant which had flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains' (p. 835). In Lydgate's devastating distortion of the botanic metaphors attributed to Rosamond since their meeting, the coquette ends her performance piece blooming on the very brains that fatally overlooked her decidedly anti-floral nature until the entrapping bonds of marriage were already rooted in place.

As well as invoking his fancy rather than his empirical knowledge when he attempts to deduce Rosamond to a scientific certainty, Lydgate also regularly returns to his belief in the species-level difference between the two sexes.<sup>36</sup> This way of thinking is a direct manifestation of the 'spots of commonness' which *Middlemarch's* narrator highlights as Lydgate's fatal flaw. Eliot draws attention to the flimsy grounds of the doctor's reason when she writes that Lydgate 'seem[ed] always to have present in his *imagination* the weakness of [women's] frames and the delicate poise of their health both in body and mind' (p. 835, my emphasis). Acerbically critiquing the Victorian era's rudimentary business of differentiating between the sexes by surrogating the terms of folly for those of evolutionary science, Eliot offers a prescient insight into the hypocrisy of constructing a dialectic of gender nature and gender artifice with the unproven ideological tools of popular culture.<sup>37</sup>

### **A Failure to Act: the High Stakes of Staying in Character**

Courting Rosamond, Lydgate lives within an ideality half of his own construction. His mode of perception is specular, mirroring his preexisting beliefs about orthodox femininity back to him – and since Rosamond intends her signs to refract, Lydgate is quickly entangled in her web. What ensures his inevitable catchment in Rosamond's web is the coquette's refusal to disrupt, for the duration of their courtship at least, her own projection of the signs of typical femininity with any compromising referents. In contrast to Rosamond, Felice Charmond of Hardy's *The Woodlanders* exemplifies the dire fate reserved for the coquette when her act is disrupted. At the beginning of *The Woodlanders*, Mrs. Charmond appears as archetypal as her novelistic counterparts, though with a touch more of the eighteenth-century *femme fatale* than Rosamond or Ginevra in terms of age and appearance. 'She in the House' is afforded a coquettish history by multiple members of Little Hintock even before she is presented to the reader directly.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Lydgate thinks of Rosamond 'as if she were an animal of another and feebler species' (p. 667); he relies 'especially on the innate submissiveness of the goose as beautifully corresponding to the strength of the gander' (p. 36).

<sup>37</sup> See Elizabeth Langland, 'Inventing Reality: The Ideological Commitments of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*', *Narrative*, 2.2 (1994), 87-111 (p. 92).

<sup>38</sup> The scandalous nature of Mrs. Charmond's history is seemingly confirmed when a former lover stumbles – rather theatrically – into the plot. See Tim Dolin, 'Who belongs where in *The Woodlanders*?', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 73. 4 (2012), 545-568 (p. 551).

Marty, for example, gossips that ‘if stories are true she’s broke the heart of many a gentleman already’, and the favourite subject of the copse-workers is their proprietress’ personal character and history.<sup>39</sup> But it is precisely Mrs. Charmond’s failure to follow Rosamond’s (and Ginevra’s) example in observing the defensive symbiosis between *empty* melodrama and coquetry that eventually identifies her more strongly – and tragically – with a self-sacrificing heroine like Dorothea than with the more successful coquettes.

This factor of difference is best illustrated by parsing the distinct versions of ennui suffered by both Mrs. Charmond and Rosamond. Women of leisure have, of course, long been associated with languor, and charged in that idleness with a likening for sexual fantasies and games. Just so, Mrs. Charmond is introduced yawning in a carriage, whilst Rosamond Vincy suffers from the same complaint of world-weariness after winning Lydgate, her internment in the marital home leading her to fantasize about both Captain Lydgate and Will Ladislaw as if a character in an Arthurian romance. Initially, both Mrs. Charmond’s and Rosamond’s scenes of ennui are theatrically styled. When Lydgate stops his visits during their courtship, for example, ‘Poor Rosamond lost her appetite and felt as forlorn as a stage Ariadne – as a charming stage Ariadne left behind with all her boxes full of costumes and in no hope of a coach’ (p. 299). Eliot’s condescending pity in this, her picturing of Rosamond not as Ariadne but as a mere actress playing her, puts a crucial distance between the coquette and her emotions which implies that Rosamond is only affected in the histrionic sense of the term. So, too, does Mrs. Charmond’s ‘mien of listlessness’ (p. 53) present as notably performative in the early chapters of *The Woodlanders*, echoed or perhaps inspired by the ominously ‘relaxing atmosphere’ (p. 54) of Hintock House. ‘I am the most inactive woman when I am here’, says Mrs. Charmond after summoning Grace to the House; ‘I think sometimes I was born to live and do nothing, nothing, but float about, as we fancy we do sometimes in dreams’ (p. 55). Sounding strikingly out-of-place amidst the awkward niceties of the women’s first meeting, Mrs. Charmond’s existential musing has the same melodramatic cast as Rosamond’s casually nihilistic comment that ‘There really is nothing to care for much’ (p. 601), fuelling the critical tendency to regard Felice, too, as a mere dramatic player.<sup>40</sup>

However, what presents as insincerity in Mrs. Charmond’s piece of dialogue is complicated by Hardy, whose narrator vindicates an equally melodramatic speech of Dr. Fitzpiers’s by arguing that sometimes, ‘real feeling glides into a mode of manifestation not easily distinguishable from rodomontade’

---

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, ed. by Dale Kramer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 13. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>40</sup> Take this comment from Tim Dolin as paradigmatic: ‘[Mrs. Charmond’s] melodramatic excess [...] frequently descend[s] into farce’ (‘Who Belongs Where in *The Woodlanders*?’ (p. 551)).

(p. 181).<sup>41</sup> Sure enough, Mrs. Charmond's ennui is revealed to be genuine as her investment in Fitzpiers grows. Hardy's narrator later comments without irony that, when left alone, 'Her whole being seemed to dissolve in a sad powerlessness to do anything, and the sense of it made her lips tremulous and her closed eyes wet' (p. 179). Whereas Rosamond engages her feminised ennui in the private space of the home as an affective means to gain dominance over the 'warmhearted and rash' (p. 301) Lydgate, who feels 'a strange timidity' (p. 770) when confronted with his wife's melancholy, it would seem that within Hardy's murkier conception of the boundary between the genuine and the *apparently* disingenuous, feeling hovers dangerously close to the surface. The romantic-melancholic disposition that Mrs. Charmond initially only simulates comes to directly commune with the volatile emotions that she vainly tries to suppress.<sup>42</sup>

Mrs. Charmond's telling Fitzpiers that she cannot 'coquet' (p. 174) with him consequently marks the moment that, for her, performance becomes inextricable from truth. It is Grace Melbury, Fitzpiers's lawful wife, who unexpectedly helps to abolish Mrs. Charmond's coquetry from that point on:

'I thought till now that you had only been cruelly flirting with my husband, to amuse your idle moments – a rich lady with a poor professional gentleman whom in her heart she despised not much less than her who belongs to him. But I guess from your manner that you love him desperately, and I don't hate you as I did before [...] since it is not sport in your case at all, but *real*.' (p. 214)

Humiliated that she exposed her true feeling to the extent that her character can be so softened and tenderised by her lover's spouse, Mrs. Charmond tries unconvincingly to assert her own inauthenticity: 'I *have* been insincere – if you will have the word – I mean I *have* coquetted, and do *not* love him!' (p. 215). But the sheer fact that Mrs. Charmond's 'manner' is expressive enough to allow Grace a clear window into her heart makes a sea-change from the 'blank unreflecting surface' (p. 587) that Lydgate comes up against when he tries to access Rosamond's mind, or the unreadable '*nonchalan[ce]*' (p. 102) that characterises Ginevra's dispassionate sensibility in *Villette*. Where Mrs. Charmond's femininity was formerly amenable to interpretation as the effect of performance and costume, Hardy's psychologizing of his coquette throughout *The Woodlanders* suggests that womanliness is in fact the essential foundation of her character, that the impassioned dimensions of her coquetry are genuinely felt.

---

<sup>41</sup> Alison Byerly comments on this quirk in *Realism, Representation, and the Arts in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); see p. 160.

<sup>42</sup> As Hardy's novel progresses, it becomes evident that Mrs. Charmond's horror at the prospect of losing her grip on deceptive female performance is more than justified, as by the finish of *The Woodlanders* she is 'a passion incarnate', finally meeting her end in an unrelated 'scene of passion and crime' (p. 211, p. 233).

Assenting to her own weakness as a woman in love, however, has the effect of stripping Mrs. Charmond of the unusual autonomy of identity she formerly enjoyed as a widow. Instead of defending her own mystery with her habitual aristocratic haughtiness, she descends to the level of the lovesick peasant Suke Damson, another of Fitzpiers's 'Wives all' (p. 233).

Why does Mrs. Charmond's act fail so? The most obvious explanation would be the progression of her coquetry beyond mere flirtation to sexual involvement with Fitzpiers. As King and Schlick remind us, an essential criterion of coquetry is the maintenance of sexual virtue: the coquette is 'neither wholly fallen (because she carefully preserves her chastity by conceding her body to none of her many suitors), nor wholly virtuous (because she consciously and overtly seeks to arouse desire in men)'.<sup>43</sup> Once Mrs. Charmond surrenders her body to Fitzpiers, she transitions from the theatrical Mrs. Charmond to whom we are first introduced – complete with false *coiffure* – to a Felice who is dangerously real. Her body is henceforth transformed into one for use and abuse, not unlike the surgeon's practice cadaver. Once its first wall is broken and the initial hypothesis confirmed, the body's text is considered exhausted, its disposal the next and final stage in the experiment.

The metaphysically-inclined Fitzpiers does not initially seem the type to embody such cruel scientific detachment, but Hardy soon makes it clear that the young doctor's romantic notions extend only so far. Fitzpiers's bodily-scientific perception of the world – and the women in it – resurfaces once his affinity for idealistic theory is exhausted. At one juncture, he reverts to a doctorly pragmatism which leads him to dismiss Mrs. Charmond's chronic, culturally-induced depression as the result of 'staying indoors so much' (p. 178). After his self-described sexual 'conquest' of Mrs. Charmond is achieved, moreover, Fitzpiers assumes a power over the former coquette's emotions that forces her into a position of conventional womanhood: he seeks Felice's self-effacing sympathy and aid – as a *nurse*, ironically – when he is injured, but extends none in return when she protests against the 'terrible insistencies (*sic*) of society' (p. 192) that keep her true character stifled. But this doctor's influence is not limited to the abstract realm of diagnosis. When Mrs. Charmond's pregnancy is as good as announced in an ashamed whisper to Grace, Fitzpiers's proves a bodily control as well, an insidious form of biopower which makes it impossible for Mrs. Charmond to forget the fact of her sex. Confined to her body, Mrs. Charmond is hereby permanently bound to Fitzpiers and his vacillating desire, a self-declared 'slave' (p. 220) kept in his 'passionate bondage' (p. 237). There is no longer any shielding dependence, any sustaining interface, between Mrs. Charmond's coquetry and Fitzpiers's medical gaze. The promise of the coquette's material symptoms of femininity have, in Fitzpiers's eyes, been fulfilled to their full

---

<sup>43</sup> King and Schlick, 'Introduction', *Refiguring the Coquette*, p. 22.

extent, and so he dictates that her mystery – and their tryst – is come to its natural end.

### Radical Duplicity

The cautionary tale of Mrs. Charmond proves that the coquette can only win dominance if she continually confiscates her ‘true’ self from male society’s reach. To understand a successful literary coquette with a view to the political implications undergirding her performance of femininity is, therefore, to revise her egoism as a survival tactic in an empirico–rational society which, though demanding the appropriate appearance of gender, has no way of ensuring its internal continuity. In *Middlemarch*, Rosamond’s performance of coquettish femininity is soon exposed as little more than a calculated entrance-card into respectable society and marriage. Once a wife, she proves incapable of intimately, sympathetically relating to her husband: ‘her want of sensibility [...] showed itself in disregard both to [Lydgate’s] specific wishes and [...] his general aims’ (p. 652). Decrying marriage’s ‘demand for self-suppression and tolerance’ (p. 753), acting boldly in the pursuit of her own interests, and strongly denying maternity, Rosamond is alert to the benefits of exploiting her feminine frailties or wiles at crucial moments in her narrative, abandoning her gender (and the weaknesses associated with it) like a stage-costume once those battles are won.<sup>44</sup> Unlike Dorothea, who undergoes a steady moral development throughout the novel, Rosamond does not experience a narrative progression (an ethical *bildung*) so much as a narrative undressing of the most peculiar sort. Each passing chapter reveals only more of the fully-formed deceptive artist beneath Rosamond’s feminine mask – so that even after marriage, she is in ‘her secret soul’ still ‘utterly aloof from [Lydgate]’ (p. 649-54). Rosamond is duplicitous, to be sure: vitally, however, her synthetic display proves not to point to her feminine vapidness but rather to her enigmatic alterity or opacity.

In *Villette*, it is not the demure Polly who emerges as the outstanding model of female autonomy for Brontë’s narrator, but instead Ginevra, who is cast as ‘a sort of heroine’ (p. 155) in Lucy’s personal struggle to determine for herself a female identity that is not wholly self-imprisoning. In particular, Ginevra’s experience with Dr. John is invaluable for its alerting Lucy to the relative two-dimensionality of the doctor’s emotional character when compared to the passionate nature of Monsieur Paul, who notwithstanding his sporadic misogyny sets Lucy on a path to professional independence. Ginevra makes a similar

---

<sup>44</sup> On Rosamond’s denial of maternity, see Lauren McKean, ‘The ethical treatment of Rosamond and Dorothea in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*’, *The Explicator*, 74. 2 (2016), 104–106 (p. 105). Doreen Thierauf also mounts an intriguing argument regarding Rosamond’s failed pregnancy in ‘The Hidden Abortion Plot in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*’, *Victorian Studies*, 56.3 (2014), 479-489. For gender as costume, see Louisa Schein, ‘Performing Modernity’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 14. 3 (1999), 361-395 (p. 370).

exchange herself, swapping Dr. John for the very *atypical* Alfred de Hamal, a man with ‘too much spirit’ to conform to the ‘humdrum way[s] of other people’ (p. 382), and interestingly effeminate in his own right, dancing as well as he can climb, full of quixotic notions, and quick to dress as a woman for the sake of romance. Ginevra, it would appear, has successfully lured a spouse who does not expect her extrinsic beauty to pervade into moral regions.

This is not to say that the trajectory of the successful coquette’s career is any model for female liberation. Rosamond’s great achievement in life is her relocation to another domestic ‘cage’ with superior ‘flowers and gilding’ (p. 835) to the one in *Middlemarch*, whilst Ginevra spends her *vivre* on motherhood. But it is surely significant that *Middlemarch*’s finale takes leave of Rosamond as she makes a ‘pretty show’ (p. 835) of herself, parading the streets of London and signalling her power in the only way that she can: materially. Equally notable, Ginevra’s storyline is concluded with an envious statement from Lucy regarding the coquette’s talent for survival: ‘she was pretty sure to obtain her will, and so she got on – fighting the battle of life by proxy, and, on the whole, suffering as little as any human being I have ever known’ (p. 385).<sup>45</sup>

The coquette’s act is detached from her interiority, which develops almost independently of her various narrators’ pejorative statements about the ‘shallow[ness]’ of her nature and the absence of her intelligence. This detachment gives the flirt leverage over the people in her life, makes quiet rebellion possible because she does not commit herself to womanly sympathy with the same fervour as the domestic angel.<sup>46</sup> In this respect, coquettish characters like *Middlemarch*’s Rosamond and *Villette*’s Ginevra unexpectedly herald the possibility of the world that Butler identifies in her foundational essay ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution’ (1988) – a world in which ‘acts, gestures, the visual body, the clothed body, the various physical attributes usually associated with gender, *express nothing*’.<sup>47</sup> The coquette’s stratagems show that even in the nineteenth century it was a radical exercise to contemplate what opportunities might follow from the realization that ‘there is no essence, origin, or reality prior to or outside of’ the cultural enactment of femininity.<sup>48</sup>

The ideological currency that these conceits of essence and authenticity afford to ethical denunciations of the Victorian flirt explains why the doctor type plays so integral a part in the coquette’s story. Emblematic of nineteenth-century society’s sexist and simplistic understanding of the female sex, the medical man

---

<sup>45</sup> This is not in itself insignificant: Bourdieu points to the comingling of material and cultural capital in *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 170. As cited in Langland, ‘Inventing Reality’, p. 88.

<sup>46</sup> See Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 701 and p. 707, and for similar remarks regarding Ginevra, Brontë, *Villette*, p. 102.

<sup>47</sup> Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution’, *Theatre*, 40. 4 (1988), 519-531 (p. 530).

<sup>48</sup> Schein, ‘Performing Modernity’, p. 369.

is perfectly placed to demonstrate conservative society's desperation to establish an internal continuity between woman's outward presentation and her abstract nature. Though Eliot and Brontë intend to make a moral statement *against* female deception by correlating the male demand for a pretty show with the frequent appearance of women like Rosamond and Ginevra, it is the doctor's specular defect which in fact equips the coquette with the understanding of artifice she requires in order to realise that biological sex and true character might be things apart.<sup>49</sup> Alert to the reality that gender might be a thing fashioned rather than a thing inherent, the coquette can direct her performance to a man whose very vocation recommends the diagnosis of the invisible from what is visible. In the fictional doctor's inability to distinguish between the coquette's actual identity and her calculated constitution of a feminine self, the reader becomes aware that the abstract phenomenon of 'gender' cannot be held within the enlightenment regime of knowledge that underpins the authority of the medical gaze. The coquette is the doctor's foremost indication that a 'real' woman is in fact one who betrays – or, to move away from the vocabulary of deceit, *exceeds* – the seen, expected, and typical.<sup>50</sup> Thus when a critic of the former century calls for Rosamond to 'somehow be awakened to fulfil the promise of her beauty and talents',<sup>51</sup> one might feel compelled to reply that it is the coquette's very refusal to fulfil such a loaded 'promise' which constitutes her greatest achievement.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 370.

<sup>50</sup> See Claudia Moscovici, 'Allusive Mischaracterization in *Middlemarch*', *Nineteenth Century Literature*, 49. 4 (1995), 513-531 (p. 526).

<sup>51</sup> Suzanne Ferguson, 'Mme. Laure and Operative Irony in *Middlemarch*: A Structural Analogy', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 3. 4 (1963), 509-516 (p. 516).

<sup>52</sup> Rosamond, Peter M. Logan observes, is an unlikely heroine, but 'by defeating Lydgate's simplistic determination to 'take a strictly scientific view of woman', she becomes a heroine none the less' ('Conceiving the Body'), p. 211.

## Bibliography

- Arnold, Matthew, 'The Buried Life', in *Arnold: The Complete Poems*, ed. By Kenneth Allott (New York: Longman, 1979), 286-291
- Brontë, Charlotte, *Villette*, ed. by Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008)
- Butler, Judith, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', *Theatre*, 40. 4 (1988), 519-531
- Dolin, Tim, 'Who belongs where in *The Woodlanders?*', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 73. 4 (2012), 545-568
- Eliot, George, *Middlemarch*, ed. by Rosemary Ashton (London: Penguin, 2003)
- , *Daniel Deronda* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1996)
- Eliot, Thomas Stearns, 'The Three Voices of Poetry' (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954)
- Ellis, Sarah Stickney, *The Women of England, Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (London: Fisher, Son & Co, 1839)
- Ermarth, Elizabeth Deeds, 'Negotiating Middlemarch', in *Middlemarch in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Karen Chase (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 107-31
- Ferguson, Suzanne, 'Mme. Laure and Operative Irony in *Middlemarch*: A Structural Analogy', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 3. 4 (1963), 509-516
- Foucault, Michel, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, transl. by A.M. Sheridan (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013)
- Furst, Lilian R., 'Seeing – and Hearing – is Believing', in *Between Doctors and Patients: The Changing Balance of Power* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 55-85
- Gilbert, Sandra and Susan, Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980)
- Hardy, Barbara, *The Novels of George Eliot* (London: A&C Black, 1985)

- Hardy, Thomas, *The Woodlanders*, ed. by Dale Kramer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)
- Kaye, Richard A, *The Flirt's Tragedy: Desire Without End in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002)
- King, Shelley and Schlick, Yaël (eds.), *Refiguring the Coquette: Essays on Culture and Coquetry* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2008)
- Langland, Elizabeth, 'Inventing Reality: The Ideological Commitments of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*', *Narrative*, 2. 2 (1994), 87-111
- Leavis, F.R, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (Abingdon: Penguin, 1986)
- Litvak, Joseph, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992)
- Logan, Peter M, 'Conceiving the Body: Realism and Medicine in *Middlemarch*', *History of the Human Sciences*, 4.2 (1991), 197-222
- Mackie, Erin, 'Fashion Plates: Subjectivity, Style and Gender', in *Market À la Mode: Fashion, Commodity, and Gender in The Tatler and The Spectator* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 144-202
- McCarthy, Patrick J., 'The 'New, Young Surgeon' of *Middlemarch*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 10.4 (1970), 805-816
- McKean, Lauren, 'The ethical treatment of Rosamond and Dorothea in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*', *The Explicator*, 74. 2, (2016), 104-106
- Miller, Andrew H, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)
- Mitchell, Rebecca N, 'The Rosamond Plots: Alterity and the Unknown in *Jane Eyre* and *Middlemarch*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 66.3 (2011), 307-327
- Moscovici, Claudia, 'Allusive Mischaracterization in *Middlemarch*', *Nineteenth Century Literature*, 49. 4 (1995), 513-531

- Rosenman, Ellen Bayuk, 'Fear of Fashion; or, How the Coquette Got Her Bad Name', *ANQ*, 15.3 (2002), 12-21
- Rothfield, Lawrence, "'A New Organ of Knowledge": Medical Organicism and the Limits of Realism in *Middlemarch*', in *Vital Signs: Medical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 84-119
- Schein, Louisa, 'Performing Modernity', *Cultural Anthropology*, 14.3 (1999), 361-395
- Semmel, Bernard, *George Eliot and the Politics of National Inheritance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994)
- Simmel, George, *The Sociology of George Simmel*, ed. by Kurt H. Wolff (London: Macmillan Publishing, 1950)
- Shuttleworth, Sally, '*Villette*: "the surveillance of a sleepless eye"', in *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 219-242
- Sparks, Tabitha, *The Doctor in the Victorian Novel: Family Practices* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2009)
- Trilling, Lionel, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972)
- Walker, Alexander, *Beauty: Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1836)

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

Derek F. Stewart  
*University of Aberdeen, Scotland*

### **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.<sup>1</sup>

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

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

Although Dickens is often considered as '*the* London novelist',<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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'.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to the bustling city scenes of his more

---

<sup>2</sup> 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).

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

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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'.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> It was after receiving an invitation to join Dickens's theatrical troupe that Collins first met Dickens in 1851,<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> 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).

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

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

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

<sup>10</sup> 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'.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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'.<sup>13</sup> 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

<sup>11</sup> *Wrexham Advertiser*, 21 October 1871, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> 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).

<sup>13</sup> 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'.<sup>14</sup>

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'.<sup>15</sup> 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

---

<sup>14</sup> 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).

<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> *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.<sup>17</sup> 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

---

<sup>16</sup> Wagner, p. 202.

<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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).

---

<sup>18</sup> 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'.<sup>19</sup> 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)

---

<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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,<sup>21</sup> Anne Longmuir is also right to argue that a ‘strange and symbiotic relationship’ exists between Mannion and Basil.<sup>22</sup> 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’.<sup>23</sup>

*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.<sup>24</sup> 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

---

<sup>20</sup> Wagner, p. 210.

<sup>21</sup> Heller, p. 74.

<sup>22</sup> 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).

<sup>23</sup> Peters, p. 120.

<sup>24</sup> 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'.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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'.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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'.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> Melodramatic characters are by their very nature uncomplicated; the hero is, for example, as Michael Booth

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>31</sup> 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’.<sup>32</sup> 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’.<sup>33</sup> Others, however, were puzzled by the fact that Collins had made ‘a woman given up to evil the heroine of the piece’.<sup>34</sup>

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

---

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

<sup>33</sup> ‘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).

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

[...] obliged to play certain roles'.<sup>35</sup> 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 Leman 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'.<sup>36</sup> 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,

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

<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup>

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’.<sup>38</sup> 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’.<sup>39</sup> 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’.<sup>40</sup> 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

<sup>37</sup> 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.

<sup>38</sup> 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].

<sup>39</sup> Rede, p. 78.

<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup> 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

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup>

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.<sup>44</sup> While Shuttleworth is examining the notion of selfhood in the context of nineteenth-century psychology, her choice of the word 'audience' is evocative

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

<sup>44</sup> 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'.<sup>45</sup> 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.

---

<sup>45</sup> '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).

## Bibliography

- ‘Art. II. – The Progress of Fiction as an Art’, *Westminster Review*, October 1853, 342-374
- Auerbach, Nina, *Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990)
- Baker, Michael, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* (1978; repr. Oxon: Routledge, 2016)
- Baker, William et al. (eds.), *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: Collected Letters*, 4 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005)
- ‘Basil: A Story of Modern Life’, *Athenæum*, 4 December 1852, 1322-3
- ‘Basil: A Story of Modern Life’, *John Bull*, 4 December 1852, 780
- ‘Basil: A Story of Modern Life’, *New Quarterly Review and Digest of Current Literature, British, American, French, and German*, January 1853, 94-6
- Baumgarten, Murray, ‘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), 74-88
- Beetz, Kirk H., ‘Wilkie Collins and “The Leader”’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, vol. 15, no. 1 (Spring 1981), 20-9
- Booth, Michael R., *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965)
- , *Prefaces to English Nineteenth-Century Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980)
- Collins, Wilkie, *Basil: A Story of Modern Life*, 3 vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1852)
- , *Basil* (1862; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)
- , ‘Dramatic Grub Street: Explored in Two Letters’, *Household Words*, 6 March 1858, 265-270
- , ‘The Courier of Lyons’, *Leader*, 1 July 1854, 619

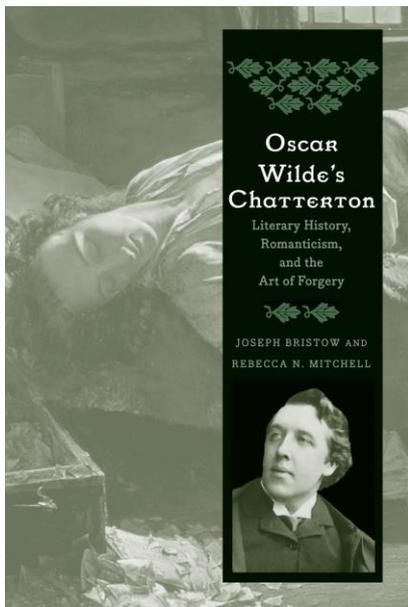
- , *The Lighthouse: A Drama in Two Acts*, ed. by Andrew Gasson and Caroline Radcliffe (London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2013)
- Cooke, Simon, 'Action and Attitude: Wilkie Collins and the Language of Melodramatic Gesture', *Wilkie Collins Journal*, vol. 1 (1998), <<http://wilkiecollinssociety.org/action-and-attitude-wilkie-collins-and-the-language-of-melodramatic-gesture/>> [last accessed 10 July 2017]
- Gasson, Andrew, *Wilkie Collins: An Illustrated Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)
- Heller, Tamar, *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992)
- Jackson, Russell, *Victorian Theatre* (London: A&C Black, 1989)
- John, Juliet, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (2001; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)
- Law, Graham and Andrew Maunder, *Wilkie Collins: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008)
- Mangham, Andrew (ed.), *Wilkie Collins: Interdisciplinary Essays* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007)
- Peters, Catherine, *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins* (1991; repr. London: Minerva, 1992)
- Rede, Lemman Thomas, *The Road to the Stage, Contains Clear and Ample Instructions for Obtaining Theatrical Engagements* (1827; repr. London: J. Onwhyn, 1836)
- Richards, Jeffrey, *The Golden Age of Pantomime: Slapstick, Spectacle and Subversion in Victorian England* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2015)
- Shuttleworth, Sally, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (1996; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)
- Sicher, Efraim, *Rereading the City / Rereading Dickens: Representation, the Novel, and Urban Realism* (Brooklyn: AMS Press, 2003)

- Siddons, Henry, *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)
- Smith, Charles Manby, *Curiosities of London Life; Or, Phases, Physiological and Social, of the Great Metropolis* (London: W. & F. G. Cash, 1854)
- Styan, J.L., *The English Stage: A History of Drama and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)
- Taylor, Jenny Bourne (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)
- Taylor, Millie, *British Pantomime Performance* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007)
- Wagner, Tamara S., '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
- Witchard, Anne, '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), 23-40
- Wolfreys, Julian, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002)
- Wrexham Advertiser*, 21 October 1871, 4

## BOOK REVIEW

*Oscar Wilde's Chatterton: Literary History, Romanticism, and the Art of Forgery*, by Joseph Bristow and Rebecca N. Mitchell (London: Yale University Press, 2015). 488 pp. Hardcover, \$50.

*Reviewed by Anhiti Patnaik*  
(Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Pilani)



‘[T]he forged object is one example of a true inventiveness that is both artful and aesthetic’ (p. 298) – this, among many other complex and compelling deductions, frames Joseph Bristow and Rebecca N. Mitchell’s investigation of the impact of Romantic-poet Thomas Chatterton on Oscar Wilde and late-Victorian aestheticism. This pivotal study – emerging out of research conducted at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library in the summer of 2012 – draws attention to an otherwise underrated link between Chatterton and Wilde. Chatterton composed his best works under the assumed identity of an imaginary fifteenth-century priest, Thomas Rowley. Going a step further, Wilde ventriloquised the poetic identities of literary

predecessors like Keats, Shelley, De Quincey, Rossetti, and Macpherson. Wilde deemed Chatterton the ‘father of the Romantics’ and lectured on his work at Birkbeck College in 1886. In their introduction, Bristow and Mitchell propose that ‘Chatterton catalyzed Wilde’s interest in the thematic and psychological links between creative agency and criminality, originality and artifice’ (p. 28). This statement culminates in one of the most erudite and widely-researched literary biographies of Wilde and Chatterton. It becomes clear that both writers’ acts of literary plagiarism were premised upon a sustained and self-reflexive subversion of what we now identify in postmodern theory as the ‘author-function’.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The term was developed by Michel Foucault in his 1969 essay ‘What is an Author’, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), pp. 197–211.

The link between art and crime in the nineteenth century was most prominently highlighted in Simon Joyce's essay, 'Sexual Politics and the Aesthetics of Crime: Oscar Wilde in the Nineties' (2002). Joyce traced Wilde's amoral (and, some would say, 'criminal' or 'degenerate') approach to art to Thomas De Quincey's 1827 essay, 'On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts'. Wilde wrote a rather De Quinceyan biography in 1891 of the eighteenth-century poet, painter, and poisoner, Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, which he titled 'Pen, Pencil, and Poison: A Study in Green'. Here, Wilde argued that there was no essential incongruity between criminal and aesthetic impulses and that art could, in fact, benefit from rebellious criminal energy. Unlike Joyce, Bristow and Mitchell focus on Wilde's uncannily similar appreciation for Chatterton's 'art of forgery':

In what ways then were the suicidal Chatterton and the murderous Wainewright entwined in Wilde's imagination? Both subjects were forgers, executing varieties of such deceit for similar ends. Chatterton's fakes were exclusively literary acts of deception that he carried out in part to reap financial rewards with very mixed success. The extravagant Wainewright's forgeries counterfeited signatures so that he could gain access to moneys tied up in a family trust. (p. 217)

The most brilliant aspect of *Oscar Wilde's Chatterton* is how Bristow and Mitchell construct a sub-genre within Wilde's canon called 'artful criminality' (p. 215). They show how, in works such as 'The Decay of Lying' (1891), 'The Portrait of Mr W. H.' (1889) and 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime' (1891), Wilde 'puts into fictional practice' his philosophy of Art for Art's Sake (p. 246). For Wilde, plagiarism, forgery, piracy, reproduction, reduplication, and misattribution were not crimes if the consequent work of art complied with the highest standards of beauty and aesthetic merit.

It is worth clarifying that at no point do Bristow and Mitchell condone plagiarism or forgery. They strive, instead, to define and delimit what constituted the 'art of forgery' in the late-Victorian period. Scholars of Victorian forgery will find extremely useful the extensive bibliography that Bristow and Mitchell have compiled on the topic. From Walter Arthur Copinger's 1870 text on copyright law and Thomas Mallon's 1989 work *Stolen Words: Forays into the Origins and Ravages of Plagiarism*, to more contemporary books like Aviva Briefel's *The Deceivers: Art Forgery and Identity in the Nineteenth Century* (2006) or Robert Macfarlane's *Original Copy: Plagiarism in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (2007), the scope of their bibliography extends far beyond the lives of either Wilde or Chatterton. It would, however, have been interesting to see some overarching theoretical engagement with postmodern theories of authorship. Only Laura Savu's fascinating observations on the persistence of Victorian bourgeois morality in copyright law in her 2009 book, *Postmortem*

*Postmodernists: The Afterlife of the Author in Recent Narrative*, makes an appearance. Elana Gomel's essay, 'Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the (Un)death of the Author' (2004), would have made a valuable addition to this bibliography as she also addresses the violent and aporetic relationship between the author and his work as represented in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).

Several important keywords elaborating nineteenth-century attitudes to crime and art develop from Bristow and Mitchell's research on forgery. They can be grouped into three categories: *nature*, *creativity*, and *crime*. In *nature*, we see vestiges of the Platonic indictment against art that Wilde and Chatterton challenge through their 'art of forgery'. Keywords like 'true source', 'copy', 'authentick', 'original', 'echo', 'artifice', 'identity', and 'genuine' appear and reappear throughout the book. Chapter five, titled 'Wilde, Forgery, and Crime', makes a significant leap from *nature* to *crime* by focusing not only on Wainewright as a forger and murderer, but also on how these two modes of deviance were fused in criminological tracts by Havelock Ellis and Max Nordau. From this chapter onwards, we see an increased occurrence of legal words such as 'inquiry', 'confession', 'inquest', and 'examination', especially when related to 'attribution', 'copyright', 'intellectual property', 'plagiarism', and 'self-plagiarism'. Bristow and Mitchell's literary history of forgery (over mere literary criticism) skilfully delves into the nineteenth century without resurrecting its moral biases. They are able to link otherwise morally contradictory keywords like 'genuine' and 'genius' or 'artifice' and 'artificer'. Their underlying claim is that Wilde's 'inquiries into Chatterton's career mark the moment his attention was for the first time fixed on the paradoxical links between the creation of unsurpassed beauty and unrepentant acts of fabrication: not just creating forgeries but also fabricating lies, performing roles, and donning masks' (p. 214).

The actual instances of plagiarism discussed in this book do, however, need to be nuanced from the outset. There is an important distinction between how Chatterton commits poetic forgery in the guise of Thomas Rowley and Wilde's alleged 'plagiarism' in the 'Chatterton Notebook'. Although Bristow and Mitchell acquit Wilde on the grounds that this notebook is nothing but a notebook and 'not a completed work of art' (p. 160), they do not sufficiently theorise the difference between 'copy' as counterfeit and citation. The former is indubitably a criminal act, whereas the latter is the foundation for scrupulous literary and academic writing in general. It is the difference between representation as 'proxy' (*vetreten*) versus 'portrait' (*darstellen*), which Marx elucidates in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852).<sup>2</sup> Wilde maintains this difference between proxy and portrait in his use of the word 'portrait' in 'The Portrait of Mr W. H.' and the word 'picture'

<sup>2</sup> Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak draws attention to the distinction between representation as proxy versus portrait by referring to *The Eighteenth Brumaire* in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 275-76.

in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Consequently, in Bristow and Mitchell's analysis, forgery is treated more as a metaphor than as a specific unlawful act. Samuel Johnson's definition of plagiarism in his dictionary, along with actual historical cases of copyright infringement such as 'Dickens v. Lee (1884)', are invoked far too late to be of any use in a definitional way. Had Bristow and Mitchell structured their argument to include these period-specific definitions of forgery and plagiarism in the very first chapter, alongside a facsimile of Wilde's 'Chatterton Notebook' (which is relegated to the Appendix), the distinction between proxy and portrait (and thereby crime and art) would have been more transparent.

Carlo Ginzburg's seminal essay, 'Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method' (1980), comes to mind here. His first case study of the nineteenth-century art historian Giovanni Morelli is particularly fascinating. Morelli recommended that instead of examining the most obvious characteristics of a famous painting in order to detect forgery, one must 'concentrate on minor details, especially those least significant in the style typical of the painter's own school: earlobes, fingernails, shapes of fingers and toes' (p. 7). By comparing these trace details, the original could be distinguished from the counterfeit. Needless to say, the expert knowledge of the art historian is separated here from the criminal and unlawful intentions of the forger. Ginzburg connects 'Morellianism' to the criminological method of Sherlock Holmes and the psychoanalytic method of Sigmund Freud to show how the 'truth' of art, sex, and crime was discursively constructed in the nineteenth century. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that homosexuality – at least the brand of dandyism and effeminacy popularised by Wilde and his circle – was also considered to be a counterfeit, inferior copy, forgery, or inversion of the so-called 'truth' of sex. Bristow and Mitchell bring Victorian attitudes towards male homosexuality into the fold in their analysis of 'The Portrait of Mr W.H'. They argue that 'the falseness of the beautiful forged object is not necessarily a disavowal of an otherwise unrepresented homoeroticism'. In fact, they maintain that 'the faking of Cyril Graham's portrait of W. H. remains central to its status as a supreme work of art' (p. 298). This is precisely what allows Bristow and Mitchell to offer the convincing conclusion that, in the nineteenth century, the 'art of forgery' exemplified 'a true inventiveness that is both artful and aesthetic'.

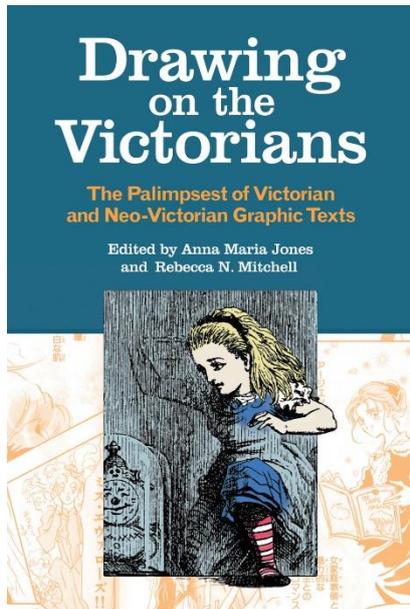
## Bibliography

- Briefel, Aviva, *The Deceivers: Art Forgery and Identity in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).
- Foucault, Michel, 'What is an Author', *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), 197–211.
- Ginzburg, Carlo, 'Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method', *History Workshop*, 9 (Spring 1980), 5-36.
- Gomel, Elana, 'Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the (Un)death of the Author', *Narrative*, 12.1 (Winter 2004), 74-92.
- Joyce, Simon, 'Sexual Politics and the Aesthetics of Crime: Oscar Wilde in the Nineties', *ELH*, 69.2 (Summer 2002), 501-523.
- Macfarlane, Robert, *Original Copy: Plagiarism in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- Mallon, Thomas, *Stolen Words: Forays into the Origins and Ravages of Plagiarism* (San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt. Inc., 1989).
- Savu, Laura E., *Postmortem Postmodernists: The Afterlife of the Author in Recent Narrative*, (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009).
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravarty, 'Can the Subaltern Speak', *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 275-76.
- Wilde, Oscar, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde Volume III: The Picture of Dorian Gray: The 1890 and 1891 Texts*, ed. Joseph Bristow (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- Wilde, Oscar, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde Volume IV: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine Guy (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- Wilde, Oscar, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde Volume VIII: Short Fiction*, ed. Ian Small (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

## BOOK REVIEW

*Drawing on the Victorians: The Palimpsest of Victorian and Neo-Victorian Graphic Texts*, eds. Anna Maria Jones & Rebecca N. Mitchell (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2017). 386 pp. Hardback, \$64.

*Reviewed by Shannon Scott*  
(University of St. Thomas)



A palimpsest is a document on which the present writes over the past, which is almost all, but not completely, erased. The past remains somewhat visible beneath the present, thus creating detectible layers of time. *Drawing on the Victorians* examines the palimpsest of neo-Victorian texts writing over Victorian texts, but it also exposes layers already present in Victorian texts themselves since they are frequently self-reflexive. The collection focuses on Victorian and neo-Victorian texts that contain visual elements, such as illustrated works, graphic texts, manga, and web comics. The visual elements are materially present on the page and are meant to be interpreted in relation to the text. For editors Jones and Mitchell, '[t]he palimpsest offers a compelling image of the presence of a ghostly,

partially legible past bleeding through contemporary textual productions' (p. 7). If this definition sounds haunted, gothic, gory (or Gorey), that is by design. The past remains a shadow throughout this diverse collection as it moves from science to the sacred, from British imperialism to valentines. In their introduction, Jones and Mitchell ground the collection by drawing on Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), with illustrations by John Tenniel, to help readers recognise a palimpsest and to prepare them for their own fall through the rabbit hole as they pass through layer after layer of adaptation in each of the ten essays.

*Drawing on the Victorians* is divided into five sections: Adaptations, Graphic Epistemologies, Refigured Ideologies, Temporal Images, and Picturing Readers. Each essay is consistently well-written, well-researched, and careful to carve out its distinct application of the palimpsest metaphor to, together, appeal to a range of academic fields. The importance of the visual element is emphasised in the first essay by Brian Maidment, which explores serialised illustrated fiction in the Victorian era. Maidment highlights the difference between illustrations that

are ‘essentially derived from, and thus subordinate to, the text’ and illustrations that speak for themselves (p. 40). Using William Hogarth’s drawings as an example, he argues that visual texts are too often ruined when writers with an agenda meddle with illustrations by adding long, didactic explications, unnecessarily and inaccurately, as if readers have no clue how to decipher a visual text. Looking at Robert Seymour’s illustrations of social commentary, Maidment demonstrates how clearly a visual language can speak for itself.

For readers interested in gender studies, there are several essays that will stand out for their freshness and enthusiasm. Linda K. Hughes looks at poetic-graphic texts in Victorian periodicals, namely mid-century texts that capitalise on the popular resurgence of neo-medievalism inspired by Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poetry. The visual element in these poems is startling, not only because it challenges previous depictions of masculinity, especially in terms of chivalry, but also because of its featured female leads. Hughes convincingly contends that these heroic ‘Pre-Raphaelite stunners’ prefigure ‘the lethal but sexy comic book villainesses whose martial and physical powers threaten men even as their nubile bodies lure them on’ (p. 217). Perhaps the best example is Paul Gray’s illustration for ‘The Huntress of Armorica’ (*Once a Week*, 29 December 1866) by Eleanora L. Hervey, in which a striking and athletic heroine scales a mountain to save her endangered lover. Rebecca N. Mitchell’s essay on how the Victorians contemplated their own history in the Diamond Jubilee issue of *Punch* (1897) similarly brings feminist themes to the fore. Mitchell contrasts cartoons of families in 1837 with that of a family in 1897, where the New Woman rides a bicycle and has no children. Whether the New Woman’s circumstances are related is not addressed, but Mitchell’s neo-Victorian illustration from the steampunk comic series *Sebastian O* (1993), by Grant Morrison and Steve Yeowell, distinctly highlights how the roles of husband and wife are completely re-envisioned through the neo-Victorian lens.

Perhaps my favourite essay concerning gender studies in the collection is Jennifer Phegley’s exploration of working-class women reading valentines in the periodical, *Bow Bells* (1862-1897). Phegley does not skimp on historical background, which is completely necessary and never dull, detailing how the Penny Post fundamentally changed Valentine’s Day by making courtship via the postal service affordable for all classes. The avidity with which women were portrayed in illustrations, awaiting their coveted valentines, plainly reveals that marriage was the ultimate goal for working women hoping to find ‘a good man who could provide both emotional and financial fulfilment’ (p. 286). In other words, there was a lot riding on cupid’s arrow, and the ability to read the visual subtext of a valentine became essential for working women. The plight of the working woman continues in Anna Maria Jones’s analysis of the Victorian governess in the contemporary manga series *Lady Victorian* (1999-2007) by Moto Naoko. Jones shows how Naoko draws on what is already known about the figure of the governess in Victorian literature by way of the Brontë sisters and

Henry James, only to reflect on the role by creating layers of literary appropriation. In Naoko's text, the main character and governess, Bell, reads an issue of *Lady's Magazine* that contains the story 'Governess Laura', a narrative about another governess who falls in love with her employer. The result is a governess narrative within a governess narrative. Naoko's text complicates gender expectations in terms of romantic outcomes, but Jones reveals further complexity relating to 'transnational neo-Victorianism' (p. 306), where Japanese and British cultural traditions are carefully considered.

For those who did not get enough of Lewis Carroll, Monika Pietrzak-Franger adds another layer of depth to Jones and Mitchell's introductory analysis of Carroll and Tenniel by examining the 'global expansion of the Alice industry' (p. 67). In particular, she shows how new graphic wonderlands have challenged or criticised imperialist elements present in the original text. Pietrzak-Franger looks at Jerzy Szlak's Polish text *Alicja* (2006) and Nicolas Mahler's German text *Alice in Sussex* (2013) to demonstrate how Alice's story can be appropriated to meet different cultural agendas. Szlak's text uses sexual and political violence (presented in a disturbing illustration of rape) to mythologise Poland's traumatic national past. In Pietrzak-Franger's words, Mahler uses Alice (with illustrations that are not sexually explicit) to encourage 'an imaginary journey through the intellectual landscape of world philosophy and literature as a counterpoint to the boredom of the everyday' (p. 81).

Of course, any Victorian collection worth its gruel, plum pudding, or starveling street urchin must feature Charles Dickens. Heidi Kaufman examines Will Eisner's *Fagin the Jew* (2003), which brings Dickens back to life in graphic novel form so that he can learn the full story of his character, Fagin, and confront Victorian anti-Semitism. Kaufman contemplates the idea of a temporal palimpsest when she claims that 'Eisner's interest in considering the Holocaust in this novel about Fagin reminds us that neo-Victorian novels have the power to imagine the past as an accumulation of histories rather than as a historical relationship linking contemporary readers and Victorians' (p. 153). In that way, Eisner's visual text, contrasted with George Cruikshank's illustrations for *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839), alters the way readers study Victorian depictions of Jews by looking at history not as two points (Victorian and neo/now), but rather as a palimpsest that accumulates everything in between. Jessica Straley then focuses on representations of dying girls in Victorian texts, specifically Little Nell in Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), in conjunction with Henry Peach Robinson's photograph *Fading Away* (1858), determining them to be 'cloying and false', 'beautiful, sentimental, and contrived' (p. 182). Countering these maudlin displays of decay are neo-Victorian interpretations by Edward Gorey and Roman Dirge, whose macabre and darkly humorous illustrated texts have 'revived the dead and dying Victorian girl for their audience's amusement' (p. 176).

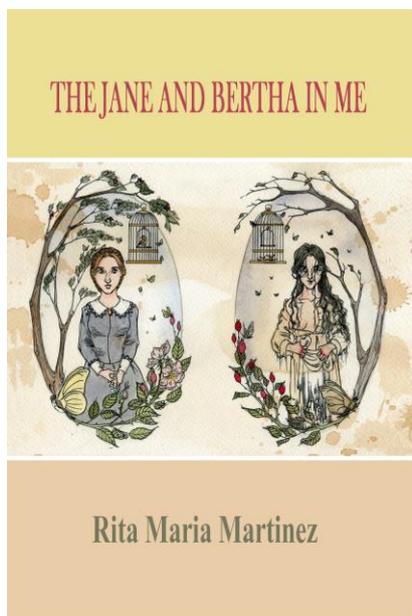
The pseudo-scientific and sacred are explored in essays by Peter W. Sinnema and Christine Ferguson. Sinnema reveals how cartoons can explain complex geophysical theories, such as those put forth by Edmond Halley and Cyrus Reed Teed, who believed that the earth was hollow. Moving from the Enlightenment to the nineteenth-century, Sinnema shows how illustration was utilised not simply to explain hollow-earth theories, but to render them more popular and believable. Similarly, Ferguson examines pseudo-spirituality in the illustrated spiritualist text *A Stellar Key to Summer Land* (1867) by Andrew Jackson Davis and Olivia Plender's 2007 comic adaptation of the same title. Ferguson successfully establishes how spiritualist art can help explain complex, if bogus, spiritual theories. In this case, the theory being explained is not a hollow earth, but the 'resmelting' of humanity post-mortem, leading 'to ultimate Union with the Divine' (p. 125). Perhaps the most surprising and offensive illustrated concept in Davis's text is the idea that while Indian Removal Acts in America were unfortunate, they ultimately led to a positive influx in the spiritual realm. Unnervingly, Davis identifies genocide as having a silver lining, namely dead Native Americans coming to reside in Summer Land to share their 'ancient wisdom' (p. 130).

The afterword by Kate Flint offers a satisfying culmination to this image-and-text investigation of the palimpsest. Flint uses examples of photography, such as Yinka Shonibare's *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998), to reveal layers of time and subtext. *Drawing on the Victorians* is inarguably a scholarly text; however, the large number of illustrations provide a more accessible and enjoyable reading experience than many a denser, artless tome. To apply yet another palimpsestuous metaphor, Jones and Mitchell's text is like a puff pastry, maybe a croissant or a Danish, with layers of flaky crust that are as enticing and intricate as they are tasty.

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Jane and Bertha in Me*, by Rita Maria Martinez (Aldrich Press, 2016).  
89 pp. Paperback, \$17.

*Reviewed by Louise Willis*  
(King's College London)



Rita Martinez's first full-length poetry book is inspired by Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, capturing and developing the distinct characters of Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason Rochester, in various forms. Published in Charlotte's bicentennial year, the poetry collection is timely; it is an innovative and clever homage to the novel and to its author's now-legendary imagination. Kate O'Keefe's finely drawn cover image aptly represents Jane and Bertha as 'Two Sides of the Same Coin'.

Martinez opens by quoting a memorable extract from Charlotte's novel that sets the tone for her book of poetry. The extract exemplifies Jane's restless character as she paces the third storey of Thornfield Hall with a racing mind, with intense emotions, and with surges of imagination and vigour. This image of Jane echoes that of the incarcerated Bertha. The spirit and energy of both women permeate Martinez's work, together with a large measure of poetic licence. The reader is presented with every part of the spectrum of womanhood: traditional archetypes, femme fatales, wayward women, cultural icons, and countless permutations of Jane and Bertha from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. We are given trans-cultural, trans-national, trans-historic, and trans-temporal perspectives; crossing borders, spanning divides, and traversing literary, cultural, and gender/sexual boundaries. Martinez injects *Jane Eyre's* women with a twenty-first century dose of realism that will appeal to the next generation as well as to longstanding readers of the Brontës.

Elsewhere, Martinez defines herself as a 'hardcore Brontëite', who was deeply moved by the experience of viewing a *Jane Eyre* manuscript twenty years earlier (depicted in the final poem) and who still delights in studying the minutiae

of Brontë's extant letters.<sup>1</sup> Though Martinez's work is creative, it is carefully grounded in factual, textual, and academic detail. Several of Charlotte's letters, including those to best friend Ellen Nussey, Mary Taylor, literary advisor W.S. Williams, and beloved former teacher, Constantin Héger, are not only referenced in the poems, but moreover used to shape their meaning. The book's key influence is Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal critical text, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), which introduced us to the psychoanalytic concept of Bertha as the dark, sexually exotic alter-ego of Jane, the virtuous English rose. Similarly, no discussion of Bertha can ignore Jean Rhys's prequel to Charlotte's novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which gives Bertha an identity and a voice as Antoinette. A number of Martinez's creations owe much to this ingenious work.

The poetry collection is organised into three parts: 'Femme Covert', 'The Gothic Grotesque', and 'Promiscuous Reading', each theme offering a selection of poems with thirty-eight in total. 'Femme Covert' presents a modern adolescent girl, covertly binge reading *Jane Eyre* and learning about sexuality. Taking inspiration from Gilbert and Gubar's text, the title poem presents Jane with Bertha as her alter ego. It alternates between verses on plain and reticent Jane, with her bun and 'bottle-thick' glasses, and on her brazen gypsy twin, wearing a turban and 'chandelier earrings'. In another poem, we see Jane transported to be a guest on American late-night confessional television shows, being interrogated by guidance counselors. It is not surprising that Martinez, a confessed Elvis Presley fanatic, compares Jane to the 1960s icon Priscilla Beaulieu and places her in Presley's Graceland home, where Jane resists becoming Rochester's mannequin.<sup>2</sup>

The most extreme revision of Charlotte's novel comes in the form of Charlotte as a cross-dressing Currer Bell seen standing in a crowd, wearing a 'stick on mustache', a bathrobe, and a pink satin girdle. Although extreme, the poem is so witty and clever that I forgave Martinez for this unedifying image of Charlotte/Currer. Again, the poem's source of inspiration is Gilbert and Gubar's text, which explores the notion of the pen as a phallic symbol and male sexuality as the essence of literary power. It asks: what organ may women use to generate texts?<sup>3</sup> Martinez's poem smartly draws on the episode of Rochester cross-dressing as the gypsy fortune-teller and suggests that Currer Bell might envy men for their efficiency in dressing, rather than for their appendage, given the many layers of clothing Victorian women were obliged to negotiate. Martinez employs

---

<sup>1</sup> Rita Martinez, 'Celebrating Charlotte Brontë's 200th Birthday', *Cultured Vultures* (4 April 2016): <https://culturedvultures.com/charlotte-bronte-birthday/> [accessed 3/11/18].

See *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, Vols. I-III, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> See aforementioned Martinez article.

<sup>3</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Second Edition (Yale: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 3-4.

the perfect blend of talent, imagination, and Brontëite knowledge to win over any reader.

In part three, Martinez exploits Sheri Erwin's zombie tale *Jane Slayre* (2010) to present Jane's rival as a bloodsucking Blanche Ingram in a literary mischievous act that many readers will find pleasing. Another double appropriation recasts Jane as the Cuban version, Juana, before overthrowing it and reflecting on all the iconic Janes, only to return to the 'quintessential Plain Jane: Jane Eyre'. Here, Jean Rhys's novel influences two poems on Bertha. The first draws on colonial stereotypes from popular culture (are you old enough to remember Johnny Weissmuller?) and the second, 'Letter to Bertha', ironically brings the character to life with its poignant wish to save her from inevitable death. Martinez has the reader squirming at the flies beneath the bed, backing the transformed, empowered, kickboxing Creole, then moved by the image of her caressed face, unburdened from its painful memories with tender kisses.

Martinez also gives us Jane's close friend, Helen Burns, rescued from death, marrying St John, and disappearing to India as a missionary. This is a revision of Charlotte's novel that I thoroughly endorse. There are several nods to the famed *Bewick's*. Indeed, virtually all the novel's characters, from John Reed to Miss Temple to Mason, take on a role; even Rochester's ex-lover, Giacinta, features. Still, I would have liked to have seen more development of these characters, perhaps also the inclusion of Jane's childhood friend, Mary Ann, who is rarely noticed by readers or critics of Charlotte's novel. During the typhus epidemic at Lowood, Jane ventures with Mary Ann far beyond its confines. The two frequently spend hours roaming free like gypsies. They are seemingly 'partners in crime', a notion that could lend itself well to invention and embellishment. My favourite performances, however, are the three ingenious triptychs on Rochester, Mortification, and Vintage Bertha, which are neat, beautifully-crafted tributes that offer new perspectives on key characters.

Charlotte Brontë's bicentenary in 2016 inspired countless *Jane Eyre* (and *Villette*) afterlives that are shaping stage productions and modern fiction (including neo-Victorian), and being debated in current academic texts. As Deborah Wynne explains in 'The "Charlotte" Cult', since the publication of Elizabeth Gaskell's 1857 biography of the author, Charlotte's mythical and literary legacy has been increasingly pursued, appropriated, and commodified, a trend that shows no sign of abating.<sup>4</sup> Louisa Yates has delineated it as *Jane Eyre's* 'sexual and financial afterlives' due to the novel's misappropriation by some authors and publishers of erotic novels.<sup>5</sup> Though widely acclaimed, Jean Rhys's novel was surrounded by an 'ethics of appropriation' when first published,

---

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Wynne, 'The "Charlotte" Cult: Writing the Literary Pilgrimage, from Gaskell to Woolf', in *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and Afterlives*, eds. Amber K. Regis and Deborah Wynne (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 43-57.

<sup>5</sup> Louisa Yates, "'Reader, I [shagged/beat/whipped/f\*\*\*\*d/rewrote] him": The Sexual and Financial Afterlives of *Jane Eyre*', in Regis and Wynne, pp. 258-60.

something that will always be raised when the work of a venerated author is reinvented, especially one who is entrenched so deeply in academic scholarship.<sup>6</sup> Unusually, Martinez uses the medium of poetry to offer a broad, fresh, and diverse range of guises that embrace many of the novel's fundamental and timeless concerns, including the fight for feminism, permissible sexual expression, the desire for liberation, and feelings of displacement. I believe her contribution will stand strongly within the genre. Despite being a traditionalist at heart, I commend Martinez for skillfully giving us such a multitude of contemporary Jane and Bertha personas; it is difficult to conceive a more creative tribute to *Jane Eyre*. In my opinion, *The Jane and Bertha in Me* is an artistic endeavour that Charlotte Brontë – who first published as the poet Currer Bell – would have more than approved.

### Bibliography

Brontë, Charlotte. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, Vols. I-III, ed. Margaret Smith, intro. Janet Gezari (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

Martinez, Rita. 'Celebrating Charlotte Brontë's 200th Birthday', in *Cultured Vultures* (4 April 2016): <https://culturedvultures.com/charlotte-bronte-birthday/> [accessed 3/11/18].

Wynne, Deborah. 'The "Charlotte" Cult: Writing the Literary Pilgrimage, from Gaskell to Woolf', in *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and Afterlives*, eds. Amber K. Regis and Deborah Wynne (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 43-57.

Yates, Louisa. "'Reader, I [shagged/beat/whipped/f\*\*\*\*d/rewrote] him": The Sexual and Financial Afterlives of *Jane Eyre*', in *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and Afterlives*, eds. Amber K. Regis and Deborah Wynne (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 258-60.

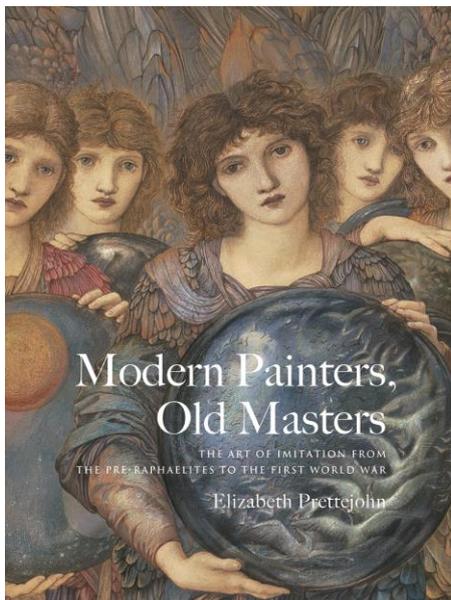
---

<sup>6</sup> Regis and Wynne, p. 32.

## BOOK REVIEW

*Modern Painters, Old Masters: The Art of Imitation from the Pre-Raphaelites to the First World War*, by Elizabeth Pettejohn (London: Yale University Press, 2017). 288 pp. Hardback, £45.

*Reviewed by Tessa Kilgarriff*  
(University of Bristol)



Visual allusion and the transhistorical relationship between works of art and their viewers form the subject of Elizabeth Pettejohn's illuminating study, *Modern Painters, Old Masters*. The author proposes that the much-maligned term 'imitation' most accurately describes the practice by which artists and viewers form relationships with their counterparts in other historical eras. The book argues that 'imitation' came in two distinguishing categories during the period from the 1848 founding of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood to the First World War: 'competitive imitation' (in which the artist attempts to transcend their predecessor) and 'generous imitation' (in which the artist

faithfully copies the earlier model) (p. 15). In chapters on originality and imitation, on the influence of Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of (?) Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife* (1434), on the Pre-Raphaelites' discovery of early Renaissance painters, on Frederic Leighton's debts to Spanish painting, and on the tension between making art and looking at it, Pettejohn asks fourteen key questions. The formulation and clarity of these questions is explained by the origins of the book, namely Pettejohn's Paul Mellon Lectures given at the National Gallery in London and at the Yale Center for British Art in 2011.

Pettejohn's incisive questions stringently rebuff the notion that the significance of visual allusions, or references, is limited to identification. Instead, she probes issues of artistic intention, conscious and unconscious resemblance, and the import of context to allusion, and asks whether allusion might go beyond parody or derivation. The introduction also makes clear that documented historical proof is not necessary for Pettejohn's conception of visual allusion; for her, correspondence showing that Simeon Solomon had encountered and admired

Sandro Botticelli's *Madonna of the Magnificat* (circa 1483) prior to painting his visually similar *Toilette of a Roman Lady* (1869) is ancillary. What matters to Prettejohn is the aesthetic relationship, not the logical and provable ones. Her focus is on 'the discussion about whether there may be a relationship, and not in the assertion that there is one' (p. 14).

The sophistication of Prettejohn's arguments offers art historians an apparatus for approaching visual allusion comparable to that which literary scholars have developed for the study of intertextuality. By framing imitation as a form of visual argument, the author also convincingly argues that nineteenth-century painters like Dante Gabriel Rossetti dramatically expanded standards of taste and, thereby, the canon. Writing in fluid and accessible prose, Prettejohn continually upturns clichés and orthodoxies about her period's most familiar movement, Pre-Raphaelitism. For instance, in chapter three, the depth and quality of Rossetti, Millais, and Holman Hunt's knowledge of early Italian art is skillfully elaborated through an examination of their deployment of arched tops and predellas to harness and revivify the power of religious art for the artists' predominantly secular paintings. It is in this section that Walter Pater's conception of the 'House Beautiful' – in which 'the creative minds of all generations are always building together' (p. 177) – is introduced as the keystone for the collaborative historicist model put forward.<sup>1</sup>

In chapter four, Prettejohn takes Frederic Leighton's 1889 Royal Academy lecture on the art of Spain as a starting point for a discussion of nineteenth and twentieth-century imitations of Velazquez's *Las Meninas* (1656).<sup>2</sup> Weaving together paintings by John Singer Sargent, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, William Orpen, John Lavery, James McNeill Whistler, and Gustave Courbet, this chapter continually points to the artists' repetition of shadowy studio spaces populated by suggestive mirrors and identifiable artworks. Steering clear of the temptation to present a holistic theory that knits these varied works together, Prettejohn instead emphasises the richness of new meanings generated with the same pictorial means. This chapter makes strong claims about the implications of reconsidering Velazquez's 'influence'. Juxtaposing two portraits, one a fulsome and fleshly depiction of the young Miss Ruth Stewart Hodgson by Frederic Leighton, the other a feather-light sketch of Minnie Cunningham by Walter Sickert, the author shows how the study of Velazquez's reception might jolt 'us out of conventional narratives about the history of modern art' (p. 208).

Prettejohn hopes that *Modern Painters, Old Masters* may resonate far beyond scholars of Victorian art. She notes that her arguments will interest readers who believe that 'works of art (broadly defined) [...] may communicate to eras and peoples not their own' (p. 4). As art historical interest in reception

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter H. Pater, 'Romanticism', in *Macmillan's Magazine*, 35 (November 1876), 64.

<sup>2</sup> Frederic Leighton, *Addresses Delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy: By the Late Lord Leighton* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1896), p. 219.

history and revivalism grows, this generously illustrated book will find a ready audience, eager to test its appealing arguments on the complexity and depth of visual imitation.

### **Bibliography**

Leighton, Frederic, *Addresses Delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy: By the Late Lord Leighton* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1896).

Pater, Walter H., 'Romanticism', in *Macmillan's Magazine*, 35 (November 1876), 64.