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HISTORICIZING PERFORMATIVITY: CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

by

REBECCA STERN

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE

Helena Michie, Director Professor of English

Robert Patten Lynette S. Autrey Professor in Humanities

Martin Wiener Mary Gibbs Jones Professor of History
ABSTRACT

Historicizing Performativity: Constructing Identities in Victorian England

by

Rebecca F. Stern

This dissertation draws upon performance theory and new historicism to read Victorian literature and culture. By fusing the gender consciousness and social constructionist agenda of the former with the rigorous dedication to historical specificity of the latter, I am able both to ground potentially amorphous theoretical assertions and, through readings of novels, nonfiction prose, and other historical documents, to comment upon the constructedness of what the Victorians fought to maintain as “natural” aspects of character. The focus on gender that defines so much work in performance theory is a prominent concern here, but it is not the organizing principle of the dissertation; rather, following the lead of recent feminist criticism, I explore masculinity and femininity within the contexts of other social categories such as class, work, sanity, and race.

The first chapter locates Victorian antitheatricality within the context of industrial culture. Reading political tracts alongside conduct books, I attribute Victorian antipathies to visibly repetitive or rehearsed behavior to the monotonous actions of the machines that increasingly replaced human labor. The second chapter reads the Victorian fantasy of class transcendence against the fear of fraud, focusing on the conflicting pressures in narratives of upward mobility to reshape oneself to conform to a new class standing and yet to maintain a “genuine” self. The third chapter explores the performances that constituted professional identity and the tremendous latitude the Victorians allowed theatricality so long as “acting” was troped as “activity.” The fourth chapter focuses on the demise of moral treatment (a form of therapy that sought to cure the mad by teaching them to behave sane), to examine sanity and shifting strategies for treating and explaining madness. My final chapter unsettles the stability of skin as a reliable determinant of racial identity,
exploring the performative aspects that enabled white Victorians to seem racially invisible and the acts and attributes that risked that invisibility. The dissertation examines texts by many authors, including Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Thomas Carlyle, Wilkie Collins, Dinah Mulock Craik, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, John Stuart Mill, John Ruskin, and Mrs. Henry Wood.
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Introduction
The Politics and Perils of Performance in Everyday Life

Shortly after I began my research for this dissertation, I met a man named Chuck with whom I was not destined to fall in love. Chuck was in Houston for the annual Film Festival. He was a co-producer of a black comedy entitled *Eddie Presley*, which, given my penchant for Elvis shlock, intrigued me. He was different from the men I had been meeting in academic circles and, although he was not very smart, he was an interesting character. He was lively and confident and funny and different from other men I'd been dating. We had a week-long whirlwind romance in Houston and then he drove back to Los Angeles, calling me nightly after his departure.

When I accepted his invitation to visit him in Los Angeles, I had enough reserve within two weeks of purchasing a plane ticket to call various Los Angeles friends to arrange emergency backup housing; I was later grateful for my foresight. I did not yet know that he had had visions of Jesus on a white horse reaching down to save him. I did not yet know that his mother lived on the couch of his one-bedroom apartment, not for financial reasons, he told me, but because they were so close. The visions I heard about my first night; his mother I did not discover until the second (she had been farmed out to a hotel the previous evening), but it was she who surprised me by making unexpected sense of my visit, who recuperated it from being a completely useless nightmare.

The morning after I arrived, we drove off to Disneyland, where we spent the next fourteen hours. It was at Disneyland that I realized the full extent of my mistake, the depth of my error in reading this man. I would have felt utterly miserable even had the final altercation, which I will describe in a moment, not happened: to spend fourteen hours at Disneyland with someone whose sense of cultural critique is so impaired that he used the crowd inside that American megalopolis to argue that the country was certainly not in a recession ("Look at that guy over there! His shorts must cost $300! And that woman
there! Those are Persol sunglasses!”), who insisted upon being the center of attention on long line after long line, who insisted upon calling me “baby,” was enough to test my limits. But then, after the events of the long day had worn my patience threadbare, there was the problem of crossing the Frontierland plaza just as the Frontierland fireworks were slated to go off; we had no time to lose if we were to make our 9:30 p.m. dinner reservation at the Blue Bayou, a fancy Disneyland eating establishment. The crowd control people, readily identifiable in their red shirts with Mickeys on the pockets, refused to let us cross seemingly arbitrary lines, making it impossible to get from here to there. It was at that point that Chuck started yelling about how we had to get to our four children who were waiting for us on the other side of the plaza.

People turned to stare at the loud man who had let his children, (yes, four of them), go off by themselves at Disneyland, at the woman (me) who looked too young, too little worried, and too horrified at the prospect of reproducing with this man to be the mother of said children. The crowd control man took one look at Chuck and one look at me and refused to let Chuck cross the plaza.

“Whatcha gonna do about it?” Chuck snarled at him.

“Well sir,” said the man, “I’d be happy to escort you from the park if you cross that line.” Which Chuck promptly crossed. More people stared. I begged the bright bricks beneath my feet to swallow me. When the supervisor came over to see what the ruckus was all about, he looked at Chuck disgustedly.

“Just go,” he said.

“Come on, baby,” Chuck said, grabbed my hand, and began pulling me towards the restaurant.

I thought it was remarkably reserved of me to tell him calmly and evenly that I’d prefer it if he never did anything like that in my presence again. He begged to differ, however, and stormed off, yelling “no woman tells me what to do.” I watched him go with relief, grateful to have him gone, ready to call my friend Geoff to come retrieve me
from my Mouseridden fiasco. Chuck returned, though, contrite and confused, and wanted to know what exactly he had done wrong. In my efforts to explain to him the finer points of courtesy, I mentioned the fact that I don’t, above and beyond various other problems, like lying. It was initially rather a minor point, but it seemed one of the few around which he could wrap his small mind.

When we returned to his apartment, it was this last comment upon which he focused as he recounted the day’s events to his mother. I was none too thrilled to see her, having wanted the couch for myself that night (I was forced to postponed my escape until the following morning, as Geoff was not in and it was nearly midnight). Chuck’s mother was a horrifying specter in more ways than one, however, as she prompted a full review of our day and our differences. I did request that he fill her in some other time, but to no avail. As Chuck reached the point I’d made about lying, she turned to me.

“Aw shucks, honey,” she said, shaking her head. “That’s not lying. It’s acting.”

It was then that I realized that I’d traveled to Los Angeles, not to investigate a potential romantic relationship, but in order to do some real life research on my dissertation.

I offer this horrific story from my personal life as a way of beginning to discuss what happens when the intersections between “real life” and the theater become visible, and the ways in which that visibility can be disturbing. I was surprised by my response to Chuck’s mother’s invocation of acting: academically, I had always seen performativity as a positive quality, had celebrated the ways it foregrounds the constructedness of identity. But Chuck, I protested to myself, had been lying, not acting, and I struggled to maintain the distinction between those two quantities.

In this instance, it was easier to maintain. We had no four children, we had no one to meet, the story was a mere fabrication. In other instances, however, preserving “true identity” from performativity would be more difficult, largely because acting and lying are
often conflated in opposing them to truth. The stability of my distinction between Chuck’s lie and the truth depended upon his having a self from which his narratively produced identity (the father of four children) differed in fairly radical ways. More complex is the attempt to distinguish between acting and truth; this would require Chuck to have a genuine, “true” self that was either constituted or representable without recourse to acting. Therein lies the rub. As Nina Auerbach notes, theatricality is defined “in relation to the pure things it is not” (PT 4). In general, we human subjects like to think of our identities as real and true — “pure,” if you will — and of our daily actions and expressions stemming seamlessly from them. Chuck was an idiot and presented me with an easy case, for acting can be distinguished from lying, but that does little to establish the truth value of the genuine self, of the self free from the “taint” of acting. The extent of our discomfort in discovering performativity in everyday life reveals how anxious we are to maintain the difference between pure and theatrical identity, to disavow convincingly the trouble of performativity.

That disavowal is central to the stability of identity. As Jonas Barish writes in The Antitheatrical Prejudice, the pervasiveness of antitheatrical sentiment “comes to appear a kind of ontological malaise, a condition inseparable from our beings, which we can no more discard than we can shed our skins. It would seem to reflect something permanent about the way we think of ourselves and our lives” (2). There is something dishonest, it seems, about seeming, for seeming threatens to reveal the seams of identity, to reveal the daily masks, the costume-like quality of daily attire, the repetitive or rehearsed nature of everyday behavior. Antitheatricality, then, is the manifestation of anxieties about the veracity, stability, and integrity of the self, about the self’s status as “real.”

The definition of performance I will be employing throughout this dissertation derives from recent work in performance theory, wherein I both borrow and depart from Judith Butler’s work in Gender Trouble. The academic furore that greeted Gender Trouble was comparable to that popular reception usually reserved for the particularly scandalous
— say, for the revelation of Michael Jackson’s sexual escapades with young boys, or his subsequent performances of normative sexuality through marriage and paternity. Butler became the name on everyone’s lips; papers and symposiums on “Unnatural Acts” and gender performativity proliferated. The most scandalous, popular, and enduring of Butler’s ideas in Gender Trouble have proved to be those which regard the instability of gender identity, the un-naturalness of the “natural” category of sex; the most oft-cited chapter of the book is thus the third in which Butler argues that gender is not a natural quantity that simply inhabits biologically sexed bodies, but rather “is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (140; Butler’s italics). This chapter further contends that “internal” identity is a fiction altogether, that “the internal’ is a surface signification, and gender norms are finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody” (141). The scandal of Gender Trouble, then, might be said to be double, as Butler argues that gender identity, and by extension identity in its entirety, are not only performatve, but ultimately fictive as well.\(^1\)

The majority of objections to Gender Trouble cluster around Butler’s idea of “subversive repetition,” of the potential to effect political change by parodying gender norms and hence calling attention to the constructedness of gender categories. Such a “reconceptualization of identity as an effect,” Butler argues, “that is, as produced or

\(^1\)In a sense, Butler’s ideas represent a logical outcome of postmodernist theories which deconstruct the oppositions between signifier and signified, between inside and out. Butler’s contention, however, that there is nothing but outside, that interiority is the false and ghostly effect of a belated and always partial inference based on outward signs, is something more troubling. “Language,” she writes, “is not an exterior medium or instrument into which I pour a self and from which I glean a reflection of that self... Indeed, to understand identity as a practice, and as a signifying practice, is to understand culturally intelligible subjects as the resulting effects of a rule-bound discourse that inserts itself into the pervasive and mundane signifying acts of linguistic life” (143-145, Butler’s italics). Hitting the wall of postmodernity, Butler here goes too far for many critics. Even as Richard Dyer, for example, cites Butler’s theories, he cites as well the limits of her credo, limits which I, too, believe should be drawn.

\[The\ \textit{categorical}\ \textit{sex}\ \textit{distinction}\ \textit{male}:\ \textit{female} (and not just the gender distinction masculine: feminine) may not be the bottom line of how we must represent humans, as Judith Butler (1990) among others argues. In saying this, however, I give no ground to those who say that there is no reality except representation itself. There are variations in skin colour, there are genetal differences, there are differet sexual practices — representation is the organization of the perception of these into comprehensibility, a comprehensibility that is always frail, coded, in other words, human. (4)\]
generated, opens up possibilities of 'agency' that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational or fixed" (GT 147; Butler's italics). Regardless of her careful bracketing of “agency,” feminist and other critics have been quick to point out the naïve optimism of Butler’s claim.\(^2\) Not only is parody too easily mistaken for “the real thing,” but it is also easily appropriable in other ways, either as comedy or, as various critics have suggested, as simply another occasion for desire.\(^3\) Further, those individuals who do effect parody in some unmistakable, unrecoverable way are all too frequently punished for their successes. Acts of violence against gays, lesbians, and cross-dressers of both sexes suggest that those “subversive repetitions” of gender identity that are not recoverable into straight, patriarchal systems of signification are rewarded for their efforts with bodily and/or economic suffering.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler attempts to defend against these two most popular attacks on *Gender Trouble*.\(^4\) The first regards that question of agency, which Butler insists she intended to be a far more complicated, far less blithe matrix of symbolic imbrication than her *Gender Trouble* detractors had found it.\(^5\) The second, far more the focus of *Bodies*, is directly linked to the potential efficacy of parody and to the issue of performativity itself. *Bodies That Matter* attempts to take on the issue of materiality, specifically of material bodies and their conditions, and to bring to bear upon it the

\(^2\)See, for example, E. Ann Kaplan's review essay in *Signs*. Summer 1992 (17:4), pp. 843-8. “[Butler] sees agency as meaningful only within given gender sign-systems, and the 'subject' as produced through such systems. The subject has no ‘depth,’ only a surface constituted through signs. This surface-subject has agency enough to play with the established gender repetitions. Yet exactly where this ‘agency’ comes from remains unclear” (848).


\(^4\)And I do mean defend. The preface, in which Butler frames (and so attempts to belittle) these critical objections within a whining “‘What about the materiality of the body, Judy?’” (ix), is a critical performance that deserves more audience response than I can allot space to here. Butler’s defensiveness throughout *Bodies That Matter*, however, is fairly remarkable, and I find frankly boring in its insistence.

\(^5\)“[I]f I were to argue that genders are performative, that could mean that I thought that one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night...Certainly such a theory would restore a figure of a choosing subject—humanist—at the center of a project whose emphasis on construction seems to be quite opposed to such a notion” (*Bodies* x)
ontological challenge of performativity. How effective is performativity as a tool for intervention if one is restricted to the confines of a particular body of a particular gender in a particular culture which assigns to that body a set of particular meanings? The political capacities of performance seem to disappear in the face of this body, a weighty body, one might argue, freighted with all those signifiers that earlier caused Butler to read as “a sign of exhaustion” the “embarrassed ‘etc.’ at the end of the list” generated by “theories of feminist identity that elaborate predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and ablebodiedness” (GT 143).

But “color, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and ablebodiedness” are concerns not easily dispensed with. Materialist analyses of gendered, classed, and raced bodies have grown increasingly popular, numerous, and politically salient over the past few years, largely due, it seems, to the incursion of new historicism into the academic marketplace as the critical lens of preference and to the efficacy of identity politics as a means of reestablishing, if only provisionally, certain areas of stability within the category of subjectivity. Specificity, that is to say, is of the essence, especially if one’s project is to explore and to demystify essentialism. As Diana Fuss argues, “the concept of ‘identity’ has long been a problem for feminist poststructuralists seeking to base a politics on something other than ‘essence.’ Is it possible to generate a theory of feminine specificity that is not essentialist? How do we reconcile the poststructuralist project to displace identity with the feminist project to reclaim it?” (69-70). Certainly, Butler’s work seeks to forge a solution to this problem. Her approach, however, because of its largely philosophical basis, produces enormously abstract, if provocative, answers. Perhaps because performance-based reading strategies have not yet made great headway in historically-based readings, many critics of a Butlerian approach attack the amorphousness of using theater as an abstract term and the resulting dangers of making broad cultural claims without solid historical evidence. Thus far, few critics have combined the promise of reading performance outside the theater with an historical approach; few have used the Butlerian definition of performance to read social
trends, to analyze particular ideological movements at specific historical moments. The work of such critics as Mary Poovey, Nancy Armstrong, and Catherine Gallagher suggests just how very much can be done by bringing to historical inquiry a Foucauldian-based awareness of the constructedness of histories and the conventions that govern them. By insisting upon the historicization of "natural" categories, that is, one can learn a great deal about a culture's evolving investments, anxieties, and desires—about, in short, its ideology and the performative repetitions that construct it.

Hence, this dissertation extends most previous work in this field in two major ways. First of all, I will be reading beyond the exclusive focus on gender and sexuality most previous work in this field has maintained and, secondly, I will be situating my readings within a specific historical context. Perhaps because issues of gender identity have structured most of the debates about natural versus assembled behavior, many cultural theorists who have drawn upon performance theory have continued to confine their energies to deconstructing productions of gender and sexual preference. In contrast, recent work in feminist theory emphasizes how gender identity is complicated by class, race, and other social characteristics. Following the lead of the latter, while retaining the approach of the former group, I analyze gender construction as it intersects with the categories of industrialization, class, professionalism, sanity, and race. Gender is integral to the conceptual framework of the dissertation, but I organize my discussions of it around these other powerful components of social identity.

My second departure concerns history. In the interests of providing temporal context and historical specificity for this body of provocative theory, I incorporate historical materials both to test and to develop further the claims of a performative model of culture. By taking those insights offered by performance theorists and applying them to a specific historical situation, namely nineteenth-century Britain, I am able to use events and documents, ideological movements and cultural mythologies, to explore the Victorians'
conceptions about who they were, who they could become, and how they might go about that becoming.

The Victorian period encompasses radical economic and industrial shifts that produced redefinitions of class-related, geographical, religious, and domestic boundaries, as well as corresponding shifts in acceptable or desirable identities (for example, the male professional, the middle-class wife and mother, the member of Parliament, the inventor, the at-home imperialist). The flood of written and visual materials that accompanied these changes provides a rich resource for examining the new “scripts” the Victorians practiced and performed and for establishing foundational intersections between domestic and theatrical spheres. In an age of exceedingly fluid identities, Victorian writers expressed seemingly paradoxical anxieties about performativity. While they fought to maintain the naturalness of the human character, condemning “acts” that made artificiality or self-conscious construction visible, they nonetheless insisted upon the possibilities of transcending class and birth through distinctly performative “self-help” strategies. In short, I find them not so neatly “antitheatrical” as some critics have suggested.

A number of recent articles have begun to integrate historicism and performativity from a critical stance similar to that I employ in this dissertation. Before turning to that work, I want to discuss an earlier exploration of performance within historical contexts that exemplifies some of the strengths and pitfalls of such studies. Although Terry Castle’s *Masquerade and Civilization* overtly concerns the literal masquerades that furnished entertainment in eighteenth-century culture, she looks beyond the purely “factual” for psychological and cultural implications of this period’s fascination with costume. In her project to produce a “phenomenology of the English masquerade” (vii),

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6 In this arena, I am furthering the contentions of such scholars as Nancy Armstrong and D.A. Miller who argue against the impenetrability of public and private spheres. That the domestic realm grew increasingly theatrical while the Victorian theater grew increasingly domestic (the cup-and-saucer dramas of Tom Robertson and the salon-like decor of the Prince of Wales theater attest to the influence of domesticity upon both the content and the atmosphere of the Victorian theater) suggests that public and private, domestic and theatrical spheres were not so separate as previous generations of scholars have argued. I discuss this at length in my first chapter.
Castle insists upon the interplay of psychoanalytic and anthropological bases in establishing its significance. "To go masquerading in the eighteenth century," she writes, "was at once to enact a private vision of otherness, by plunging into an intensely self-absorptive state of fantasy and sensual gratification, and to participate in a cultural institution, by becoming part of a crowd, the anonymous collectivity of masks" (72-3). Hence, Castle argues, the individual and cultural implications of this activity are not divorcible, and the "ecstatic impersonation" that, she holds, called into question the stability of class hierarchies, does not fully signify without recourse to its impact on the individual. "The notion of the self," she maintains, "must be invoked in any discussion of the masquerade" (4).

Not only am I skeptical about Castle's vision of literal masquerade as unequivocally subversive of culture and of identity, but she generally allot too much power to the effects of masquerade costumes — at one point she argues that, in its ability to appropriate "the shape, the very body, of the other," masquerade costume effected a situation in which "biological separateness itself was ritually revoked" (76). Further, her understanding as "a symbolic scandal" costume's power to generate a "conceptual gap separating true and false selves" (75-6) seems to me to forget the reifying powers of costume worn as costume. If one can strip off one's party disguise to reveal a "real" self underneath it, that "real" self would seem to be validated, preserved, and consolidated by the "false" self beneath which it has hidden. More useful is Castle's reading of clothing in general, as her argument about costume contains some practical, if not unfamiliar insights. "Like language," she writes, "clothing is . . . a system of signs, a means of symbolic communication."

The scandal which I find both most interesting and most productive for cultural studies resides not in the spectacular arena of masquerade balls but in the domestic realm, in a context in which one does not expect to find costume, in a locus that is supposedly the site of symbolic stability. The mutability of costume in the home can offer a much greater scandal than the deceptiveness of costume at a masquerade ball. The remarkable energy
that went into regulating sartorial signification in the Victorian household, for example, testifies to tremendous anxieties about the stability (or lack thereof) of various power relationships and the failure of clothing to maintain them. Dinah Mulock Craik’s concerned meditation about Mrs. Smith’s dress being the only thing that distinguishes Mrs. Smith from her cook is emblematic of conduct writings on this subject. Craik’s contention that “the more intelligent of her servants soon find out that [Mrs. Smith] is ‘not a lady;’ that, in fact, if one were to strip off her satin gowns, and sell her carriage and make her inhabit the basement-story instead of the drawing-room of her handsome house, Mrs. Smith would be not one whit superior to her own cook,” indicates that Mrs. Smith’s character unravels all too easily into its superficial component parts (Thoughts 127). And Craik is far from being the sole conduct writer to address the problem of servants’ clothing failing to maintain the stability of station. Sarah Stickney Ellis presents an interesting alternative to sartorial superiority when she asks, “shall we continue to compete with our servants in dress...or shall we . . . compete with them in self-denial?” (130). The widespread familiarity with this problem suggests that the dynamics of the masquerade costumes about which Castle writes were very much present in the “normal” attire of the Victorian home, so that the ease with which clothing can be put on and taken off led to a search for more stable, more immutable signifiers of, in this case, classed identity. The vast social mobility of the nineteenth century, and hence the possibility of the man who was Mr. Smith the working-class blacksmith yesterday becoming Mr. Smith the respectable middle-class owner of Smith’s metalworks tomorrow, called forth, especially amongst that same middle class, an almost hysterical nostalgia for fixed, immobile signifiers by which to identify themselves and others.

It seems not nearly enough, then, to say that performance is subversive or that it is not, which is one reason I find myself increasingly wary of the subversion/hegemony debates that have dominated so much recent literary criticism. This is not to say that such debates are unimportant, but that they too often limit the scope of an investigation and leave
too much ground unexplored. Looking at the scandals surrounding, say, costume in the Victorian home, can allow us to speculate about the reasons behind the Victorians' investments in naturalness, the reasons behind their biases against the theater, and the provisions through which theatricality was not reviled, but endorsed. If we are to read performance from a cultural studies perspective, we ought to commit fully to going not just behind but beyond the stage, to using the intersections between performance and daily life to further our understandings of the foundations of that life and of the investments behind them.

There are other works like Castle's which situate performance within a cultural context; the majority of these focus primarily on the theater proper. One of the best known of these studies is Barish's *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, which offers a history of discrimination against the theater. Because Barish defines theater only in its most literal sense, however, he rarely remarks upon any more abstract notion of performance and rarely moves beyond solid material stages. Michael Booth offers interesting work in the history of the Victorian theater, but his definition of theatricality is similarly prosaic. More successful in their differing ways are Tracy Davis's *Actresses as Working Women*, Regenia Gagnier's *Subjectivities*, and Mary Jean Corbett's *Representing Femininity*, which explore issues of performativity and subjectivity. Davis's book is one of the first gender-conscious historical studies of the Victorian theater and, while she does place her thoroughgoing work in the history of the theater on quite literal footing, she offers broader social observations about performativity. On the other hand, Corbett's and Gagnier's readings of autobiographies reveal Victorian selves extremely conscious of their audiences. Corbett in particular, in her chapters on Victorian actresses's autobiographies, moves deftly between historical contextualization, issues of subjectivity, and "real" and metaphorical theatricality to establish a densely intertextual fabric of identity that is the product of a particular genre of Victorian self-making.
Within Victorian studies, Joseph Litvak's *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* initially seems to begin — in fact, to be — the work of this dissertation. Litvak succeeds in extending performance studies' constructionist thesis beyond the bounds of gender by reading the "real world" as a stage upon which acting is both necessary and necessary to mask. Although Litvak accomplishes the important work of deconstructing the opposition between theatricality and narrative that has shaped performance and literary studies for many years, *Caught in the Act* proves to be more a theoretical exposition than an historical study. While Litvak's first chapter is strongly historically grounded — he incorporates conduct books, diaries, newspaper articles — the subsequent chapters find him more interested in performativity as a concept than in its specific role in a specific culture. Further, although Litvak's definition of "theatricality," as a trope that "enables us both to unpack subjectivity as performance and to denaturalize—to read as a scene—the whole encompassing space in which that subjectivity gets constructed" (xii), is a useful one, the subjectivities Litvak examines seem to be reduced to the two (or perhaps four) that defined most earlier work in performance studies. In other words, while smart and theoretically complex, *Caught in the Act* examines masculinity and femininity almost exclusively; Litvak does examine homosexual renderings of these categories, but he leaves aside nearly all other components of identity. This dissertation, as I have stated above, seeks to move beyond such limitations.

Since I first began work this project, a number of articles integrating performativity and historicism have contributed to the shape of the dissertation and have altered the field in which it is situated. Three collections of essays published in the last three years epitomize new work in this field. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Andrew Parker's edition, *Performativity and Performance*, contains essays primarily engaged with the speech act theory of J. L. Austin, whose 1962 text, *How to Do Things with Words*, formulates the idea of the performative utterance. Parker and Sedgwick open the questions, "When is saying something doing something? And how is saying something doing something?"
explore the intersections between linguistic enactments and performativity in culture (1). The essays are uniformly highly theoretical, yet some of them seek to integrate that theory with cultural specificity: Joseph Roach situates his work on the roles of citation and repression in African-American history in the vivid ground of New Orleans jazz funerals; Sandra Richards interrogates canon-making and the “problem” of African-American literature by exploring the ephemerality of performative components of both oral history and black drama; and Cindy Patton explores the narrative problems of self-making with reference to contemporary AIDS research. The majority of the work in this collection, however, retains a theoretical abstraction that, while savvy and provocative, does little to test itself within cultural contexts. Further, the collection nearly unilaterally ignores literature as a cultural artifact; only Patton’s essay seeks to bring performativity, history, and literature together.

_Cruising the Performative_, edited by Sue-Ellen Case, Philip Brett, and Susan Leigh Foster, is a collection culled from the first “Unnatural Acts” conference at UC Riverside. Unlike those in _Performance and Performativity_, the essays in this collection are overtly concerned with cultural situation, focusing for the most part on popular culture. Essays on class transvestism, racial and national performativity, and literal performances of “nature” (in the shapes of animals) expand the usual categories of performance theory into territories that allow for far more complicated interrogations of identity. This is a far cry from Butler’s exclusive focus on gender in _Gender Trouble_, published only five years earlier. For example, in her essay “Michael Jackson’s Penis,” Cynthia Fuchs explores how Jackson uses his whiteness, femininity, and childishness manipulatively to evade _and_ capitalize upon the myth of black male sexuality. Parama Roy’s essay on cultural exchanges between late-nineteenth-century India and Britain offers one of the collection’s more interesting literary historical pieces, while Michael Davidson’s and Richard Rambuss’s essays examining performativity within historopoetic contexts round out _Cruising’s_ contribution to more specifically “literary” criticism. The remainder of the
essays examine issues of performativity in film, dance, music, technology, and other aspects of popular culture.

Last, and I think most salient, is *Performance and Cultural Politics*, edited by Elin Diamond. This collection represents some of the smartest work in performance theory to date, both in its interrogations of the limits of this theory and in its rigor in testing it within cultural situations. The first two essays are particularly compelling: Emily Apter explores orientalism and lesbianism in the salons of *fin de siècle* Paris and Ed Cohen teases out the intersections between theater, life, and law in his essay on the Oscar Wilde trials. The Wilde trials provide rich material for a literary/historical/performative nexus, as the Marquis of Queensberry’s defense in Wilde’s libel suit required only that the Marquis prove Wilde guilty of “posing as a sodomite.” As Cohen writes, “since the contested statement did not actually accuse Wilde of ‘sodomy’ — or of being a sodomite . . . , the defense sought instead to show that Wilde was the kind of person — or at least that he had represented himself as the kind of person — who would be inclined to commit sodomy” (36; Cohen’s italics). The dramas of the dramatist, the courtroom, and of self-representation coalesce here in a matrix that makes painfully visible the interpenetrations of theater, institutional structures, and individual subjectivities. Cohen’s work represents some of the best in the past decade.

The literary studies in these collections, in addition to a limited but growing number of such essays in scholarly journals, bring together literary, theoretical, and historical concerns in ways that seem to me crucial for the application of performance theory to literature. I situate my work in this dissertation alongside these essays as part of a trend in performance studies that politicizes the literary and the cultural and uses the promise of performance theory in context to open up new perspectives in those fields. In the following chapters, I will be invested not only in finding cases of performativity, but in interrogating their reception, in looking at the institutional and social structures that governed the interpretation of both discernible and invisible acts. Performance theory offers tremendous
potential for reading both culture and literature; this dissertation seeks to bring the three terms together.

The first chapter sets up the terms and concerns of the dissertation, linking the Victorian suspicion of conspicuously constructed identity to those anxieties produced by industrialization. If one's "act" was too visibly rehearsed, I argue, the repetitions that made up proper, coherent identity were too reminiscent of the machines that threatened nature in a more literal sense. By exploring the connections between literal anti-mechanical discourse, such as that of and surrounding the Luddites, and more metaphorical strains of anti-mechanical sentiment that related specifically to human behavior and identity, I locate Victorian investments in naturalness as a reaction to concerns about mechanized behavior. Much of the rhetoric of Victorian labor reform, for example, argued that men were becoming too much like the machines that were replacing them, and so were losing access to unique, "natural," human behavior. Political and domestic writers, too, testified to prejudices against rehearsed, or manufactured, identity, but situated both their audiences and their criticism within a more popular forum. In contrast to studies of Victorian culture that assume the integrity of separate spheres, I argue that the political writings of the time operated in tandem with the conduct books Mill, in particular, ostensibly hated. Both male and female, public and private, political and domestic writers, in addition to other disparate parties and social institutions (including the theater itself), were united in an attempt to script certain types of behavior while vehemently renouncing anything reminiscent of construction. I put these Victorian thinkers into dialogue with one another to reveal their shared suspicions of self-conscious performativity and the ensuing paradoxes of their insistence upon the possibilities of self-transformation through repetition.

The second and third chapters extend the paradoxes the first chapter lays out in general terms to specific contexts, namely class transcendence and professionalism. An introductory section reviews current critical debates in the arena of class and argues that class performativity is both too complex and too specific to be easily dismissed as self-
evident. While not readily essentialized, class has its own peculiar allegiances to the precepts of “nature” that deserve careful and thorough exploration. The second chapter reads Charles Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* within the context of the inspirational discourse of Samuel Smiles’s 1859 edition, *Self-Help*, and cautionary journalism on the seemingly rampant problem of swindling. Victorian press accounts of swindlers and their exploits almost unilaterally drew upon the language of the theater to treat their subjects. Classed identity in the Victorian period was alarmingly fluid; men and women who moved “up” economically, therefore, had to guard their subsequent social transformations against detectable artifice lest they conjure up the performative components of the successful con. Smiles becomes interestingly entangled here between the rhetoric of transcendent self-transformation and suspicions about the too-protean self; the former is essential to the premise of the self-made man, while the latter retains a critique of that “making” and the motivations behind it. Dickens’s novel traverses this spectrum and suggests, almost in spite of itself, a premise that rings startlingly true: swindling is an integral component of capitalist identity. In the words of the playwright Douglas Jerrold, “swindling is . . . the cement that keeps society together.”

My third chapter explores professionalism and the complex systems of legitimacy and culpability that govern its constituent performances. In the interests of generating a theory of professional performativity, I read Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* with reference to the figures of the dandy, the dissipated peer, the idle “mamma’s boy,” and the fallen woman, all of which I find central to the construction of professional identity. These figures participate in *East Lynne*’s many instances of literal masquerade, all of which are cross-class impostures. Through these impersonations, I explore the ways in which work serves to redeem both male and female sexual transgression, and indolence invokes both irresponsibility and promiscuity. By endorsing “acting” provided that it is troped as “activity,” Wood’s novel offers unique insights into middle-class morality, exploring the latitude the Victorians allowed theatricality so long as a capitalist moral code was ultimately
embraced and protected. For all its scandalousness, *East Lynne* works relentlessly to recuperate its potentially subversive acts into a safe, stable, affirmation of middle-class solidarity.

The penultimate chapter considers the performative and biological aspects of sanity. I begin by exploring “moral treatment,” a method for tending the mentally ill that came into favor at the close of the eighteenth century. Moral treatment is provocative because of its focus on the external manifestations of madness and its claims to cure the mad by teaching them to *act* sane — by rehearsing them, in effect, in the impersonation of sanity. Its eventual extinction may be traced to the fact that it reduced a healthy psyche to an outward mastery of those traits supposedly indicative of a sound interior. Popular arguments against moral treatment surfaced early; by the 1850s, there was a veritable biological backlash. Early opponents grappled with the moral asylum’s troubling resemblance to “normal” Victorian society; both the highly domestic settings and the carefully rehearsed, at times nearly parodic, posturings of the asylum “guests” provoked alarm in many observers. More corporeal, less performance-based, theories of sanity were far more appealing in that they lent an air of surety to both diagnosis and health. The impact of Darwinian theory in the 1860s fueled a definitive return to the body as medical practitioners argued against reforming the mad on the grounds that “teaching” sanity threatened the mental health of future generations and the general health of the nation. This chapter includes extended readings of two sensation novels, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* and Mrs. Henry Wood’s *St. Martin’s Eve*. Both novels feature genetically “mad” heroines whose performances of sanity ironically mark them as duplicitous; both novels explore the anxious desire to return sanity to an interior locale so as to separate and protect it from something that may be purely theatrical and hence dissimulable; and finally both examine the cultural, economic, and gendered consequences of corporealizing mental health. An epilogue discusses the demise of both the sensational novel and hereditary theories of madness.
My final chapter explores the performativity of race, more specifically of the seemingly redundant phrase, Victorian whiteness. Taking as its basis and its challenge the dynamic that leads Richard Dyer to observe that “white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular,” this chapter examines the performative aspects that constitute racial invisibility, that make an interrogation of the dominant race of Victorian England seem futile or superfluous. I focus on dirt, both literal and social, in order to explore the ways that some racially white bodies (here, primarily the working classes and fallen women, although a longer study would include the Irish and the Jews) take on color through social transgressions or affiliations, through “acts” and alliances. I begin by reading recent critical accounts of 1880s soap advertisements in which blacks were “washed” white, before turning to 1860s “anthropological” texts and to George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss. In the latter text, Maggie Tulliver’s “unmanageable” sexuality appears first in her mother’s inability “to keep her in a clean pinafore two hours together,” and then in Maggie’s “brown skin [that] makes her look like a mulatter.” The dirt on Maggie’s pinafore, which synecdochally presents Maggie’s body as soiled from the very start of the novel, recurs in this ambiguous sense of “dirtiness” represented by the darkness of Maggie’s skin. The segregation that follows Maggie’s sexual fall, then, has racial as well as sexual implications. I turn next to The Octoroon by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and “Black and White” and Poor Miss Finch, a melodrama and a novel by Wilkie Collins, which similarly dismantle racial identity by locating “whiteness” in social behavior rather than the body. This trio of “passing” texts, however, inverts the structure of The Mill on the Floss, presenting “colored” bodies (blue in Poor Miss Finch!) whose good social behavior awards them white racial identity. The liberalism these texts espouse contrasts radically with the openly racist advertising of 1880s to which I return to discuss the social ramifications of making whiteness visible.

To the best of my knowledge, this dissertation is the first full-length study of performativity in Victorian literature and culture. My hope is that it will not only further
scholarly considerations about the Victorian period, but that it will also stress the portability of this productive matrix (if one can read Michael Jackson, house music, Madonna, and Shamu through a lens that also accommodates Victorian culture, one might usefully apply it to myriad other subjects). Furthermore, I hope that this study will offer readers a way of making sense of Disneyland nightmares and school uniforms — in short, of considering differently the performative possibilities and limitations that touch their own lives.
Chapter One
Moving Parts and Speaking Parts:
Situating Victorian Antitheatricality

In her influential conduct manual, *The Daughters of England*, Sarah Stickney Ellis presents a portrait of a woman who has succumbed to "a selfish desire to stand apart from the many; to be something of, and by herself." Invoking the images and discourse of industrial labor debates, Ellis compares the spectacle of this woman's failed attempt to manufacture a "cheerful . . . witty . . . animated, brilliant, and amusing" self to the spectacle of men forced to perform repetitive, unnatural actions that are neither original to themselves, nor conducive to the development of human character. Because, Ellis argues, such a woman's achievements demand from her

> ingenuity in the way of evading, stooping, conciliating, and sometimes deceiving; as well as . . . a continued series of efforts to be cheerful when depressed, witty when absolutely dull, and animated, brilliant, and amusing, when disappointed, weary, or distressed. . . . [w]e are led to exclaim, that the miner, the convict, and the slave have an easier and a happier lot than hers. (132-3; emphasis added)

In this chapter, I will be arguing that, in her project of shaming the would-be exceptional woman's attempt to construct herself, Ellis's turn to the lexicon of industrialism is in no way random.¹ Rather, this smooth transition from dissimulation to mechanization is typical of the rhetoric of proper nineteenth-century subjectivity. Ellis's horror at this woman's behavior lies largely in the transparency of its artifice, so that the sacrifice of "nature" to class interests is condemnable not so much because it is unusual, but because it is detectable. Her repetitions of the gestures and signs of cheerfulness, wit,

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¹See Catherine Gallagher, 113-146, for a differently valenced discussion of the shared goals and rhetoric of social and domestic reformers. Gallagher's argument focuses on the overlaps between "social paternalism and domestic ideology," more specifically on the uses of familial metaphor in industrial debates.
and so on, become scandalous because they strip those qualities of their essentialist claims and reduce them to manufactured products.

In the interests of clarity, let me offer an anachronistic example. In producing this chapter, I found myself consistently haunted by a scene from Brian Forbes’s 1975 film, *The Stepford Wives*. In it, the heroine, Joanna, enters the home of her friend, Bobbi, only to find that, like the other women of Stepford, Bobbi has fallen victim to a sinister genius. The genius, retired from a career of making robots for Disney, now plies his trade in Stepford, producing different figurines for a different small world. His domestic models are suburban angels in the house who slowly but surely kill and replace the human housewives of this sleepy California town. Horrified to find the previously feminist Bobbi dressed in something not far short of a French maid’s outfit, Joanna stabs Bobbi in the stomach. Instead of gushing blood, however, Bobbi simply gushes. “Why would you do a thing like that?” she asks Joanna. “Just as I was about to get you coffee . . . just as I was about to get you coffee . . . just as I was about to get you coffee . . .” In lieu of bodily fluids, Bobbi produces a series of repetitions, turning to the kitchen cabinet again and again, withdrawing teacups and dropping them to the floor as she continues to deplore Joanna’s rejection of her hospitality.

Given the mechanical quality of Bobbi’s repetitious politeness, I imagine I am not alone in finding it comforting that Bobbi ultimately proves to be an automaton. More disconcerting is the proximity of Bobbi’s behavior to what one might deem a “natural” display of social grace, so that the repetitions she makes visible as repetitions carry an ontological threat. Just as the scandal of her incessant lament for the coffee she will never serve lies in its repetitive, mechanical attitude, the scandal of the potential for the repetitions that constitute “natural” behavior to become visible lies in the precarious status of naturalness itself. The disdain with which Joanna receives Bobbi’s nearly parodic display of sociability does not, in fact, differ greatly from Ellis’s representation of the “evading, stooping, conciliating, and sometimes deceiving” woman; in fact, that Ellis refers to this
woman's "efforts to be cheerful when depressed, witty when absolutely dull, and animated, brilliant, and amusing, when disappointed, weary, or distressed" as a "continued series" suggests the ways in which the motions of cheer, wit, and so on have become perceivable as part of a usually invisible string of postures.

Butler's definition of performance is clearly apropos to this context. According to her work in *Gender Trouble*, visible repetition has the potential to denaturalize nature for, in order for gender or any other quality to appear "natural," the repetitions that consolidate it must remain invisible. Normalcy depends upon this invisibility, upon the transparency of its constitutive repetitions, in order to maintain its status as truth. Thus, as Butler writes in *Bodies That Matter*, performativity as she defines it cannot be either identified with or reduced to "a singular 'act,' for it is always a repetition of a norm or a set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition" (12). In other words, the acts that make up normalcy cannot be singular; they must disappear into a landscape that masks repetition and preserves ideology. If rehearsal is visible behind an act, then the act, detectable as an act, loses its status as real or natural. As Joseph Litvak writes, although such theatrical effects are not capable of "discovering a layer of signification that somehow lies 'beyond' ideology," detectable acts and reactions to them "can locate fault lines or pressure points within ideology" (137; Litvak's italics).

The Stepfordian automatons at the threshold thus prove to be not so far out of place as they might initially have seemed. In the figure of the automaton, antitheatrical and antimechanical sentiments converge; I will be arguing that the one cannot be fully understood without the other. As the advent of industrialization worked its effects upon the ideological investments of English culture, the inhabitants of that culture grew increasingly sensitive to visible repetition; by the time Victoria took the throne, British citizens had come to deem "unnatural" anything human that partook of mimicry or seemed in any way mechanical or constructed. If one's "act" was too visibly rehearsed, the repetitions that
made up proper, coherent identity were too reminiscent of the machines that had come to threaten nature in a more literal sense. The Victorians’ investments in characterological naturalness, then, can be understood as a direct reaction to concerns about mechanized behavior.

That many Victorians worried about the effects of industrialization will be a familiar claim to many literary critics and historians. More than twenty years ago, for example, Richard Altick noted that “In Victorian times, the quality of life among the masses of people first became a pressing social concern. The revolutionary conditions brought about by industrialization and related developments posed the question, How can society re-fashion and equip itself so as to provide its members with the greatest inner satisfaction and fulfillment?” (Victorian 238). Altick’s study, however, like most previous work in this arena, locates both crisis and change at the level of “society”; few critics have focused on the particular set of issues and paradoxes that accompanied the concept of “re-fashioning” at the individual level. The latter subject seems to me a crucial site of investigation. Amongst the most important of Michel Foucault’s contributions to cultural studies are his arguments that power has not a hegemonic but a “capillary form of existence”; rather than envisioning large social structures exerting influence over passive individuals, Foucault’s work offers a model of “a synaptic regime of power, a regime of its exercise within the social body, rather than from above it” (“Prison Talk” 39). If we think of “society” and “politics” as structures that derive their power from individuals, the re-fashioning of which Altick writes must be reconsidered from the perspective of individual and “private” subjects. Re-fashioning provoked different and more acute anxieties when applied to individuals for, while Victorian pundits may have accepted societal fluidity as at worst a necessary evil, the notion of individual fluidity (i.e., fashionability) was cause for some alarm. My work in this chapter explores both why this paradox existed and how it shaped the ways Victorian subjects envisioned themselves, their fellow subjects, and their culture.
The performance studies approach to history I call upon here seeks not only to demonstrate that particular subjectivities were actively constituted but also to explore how they were. Which debates and cultural investments produced the narrative of the antitheatrical subject? What interests were at stake? How did Victorian writers contend with this fantasy? How did they support or challenge it? I will be upholding, then, the long-standing concept of Victorian industrial angst, but will be exploring its ramifications for a subtler and more subjective landscape. When Litvak suggests, above, that regarding history with an eye to theatricality “can locate fault lines or pressure points within ideology,” he stresses the importance of re-examining well-known material. Rather than dismissing Victorian industrial anxiety as familiar turf, we would do well to return to it from a perspective that takes very little for granted.

I begin this chapter by exploring the aversions to human repetition expressed in labor reform rhetoric with a particular focus on the Luddites and their impact upon later movements. Whereas the Luddites fought against a machinery that replicated human labor, many later labor reformers argued that men were becoming too much like the machines that were replacing them, and so were losing access to unique, “natural,” human behavior. Because machine-breaking entered into wider social debates and so sustained currency as a metaphor even in arenas that had little to do with labor, I turn then to the works of political and domestic writers to explore prejudices against rehearsed, or manufactured, identity within a more popular forum. I put these thinkers into dialogue with each other to reveal their shared suspicions of self-conscious performativity and the ensuing paradoxes of their insistence upon the possibilities of self-transformation through repetition. In both “public” and “private” literature, I find a remarkably consistent hostility towards what John Stuart Mill terms the “‘made’ or manufactured man” (Autobiography 93). It is in this form, as manufactured being, that the figure of the automaton appears, and reappears, in the Victorian consciousness. This too perfectly regulated, too visibly constructed being haunts a wide spectrum of Victorian literature.
As Mark Seltzer argues in his study of nineteenth-century American machine culture, the industrial era is one which struggles with the "‗discovery‘ that bodies and persons are things that can be made, and its implications" (3). The crisis that seems to arise over and again for public and domestic writers, for novelists and essayists, involves maintaining the tenuous naturalness of human subjectivity, condemning artifice, and preserving the untaintedness of sincere identity. Mill seems to grasp the essence of this impulse as he writes, "unnatural generally means only uncustormary, and . . . everything which is usual appears natural" (Subjection 22-3). Ultimately, however, performance theorist Herbert Blau's statement seems most relevant to the dynamics of Victorian self-representation: "credibility occurs as a politics of form" (49).

**Men and/as Machines: The Rhetoric of Labor Reform**

In the nineteenth century, the aversion to mechanized subjectivity initially and most literally manifested itself in anxieties about machinery in general, more specifically in anxieties about machinery that replaced or displaced human labor. The Luddites, otherwise known as "machine-breakers," were responsible for the factory attacks of 1811-16 in Nottinghamshire, the Midlands, and Yorkshire. These groups of laborers took as their targets both their employers and their employers' means of displacing them, namely the cotton jenny, the stocking-frame, the steam loom, and the power loom. The Luddites' endeavors to fight the tidal wave of industry through machine-breaking was ultimately, of course, unsuccessful; Luddism in its formal trappings was displaced eventually by Chartism which more practically, though no more successfully, represented the workers' concerns.

Although the Luddites did have their sympathizers, machine-breaking, per se, was not well received by the general public. As George Beaumont wrote in 1812, "[T]he remedy for [the workers'] grievances lies not in the destruction of Machinery. They are oppressed exceedingly, but not by Machinery. Those who accuse Machinery of causing
any part of the distresses of the poor, have very contracted views and narrow minds, and see but a little way” (101-2). Historians such as Malcom Thomis have agreed with Beaumont’s dismissal of the specificity of the Luddites’ targets, claiming that “These attacks on machines did not imply any necessary hostility to machinery as such; machinery was just a conveniently exposed target against which an attack could be made” (14). Such readings, however, miss the symptomatic anxieties expressed in these attacks. Thomis fails to appreciate that, while men may have been making or implementing the mechanical fruits of industrialization, the workers were being displaced by the machines themselves and, at least in part, recognized the machines as adversaries. Rather like the young women of Stepford who found themselves confronted with and supplanted by deadly mechanical doubles, the workers of Manchester, Yorkshire, and Nottingham, were made redundant by a new technology.

Although literal Luddism was history by the early nineteenth century (the movement dying out with the capture, and in some cases the execution, of the main leaders in the second half of 1816), actual machine-breaking continued.2 Hostility towards machinery developed more powerful and pervasive currency, however, in the rhetoric of political debates surrounding, first, labor reform, and second, the social impact of industrial capitalism. The outrage regarding what certain men had done to certain machines, that is to say, waned in the face of social concerns about what machinery was doing to men.

Authors in these debates relied heavily upon two discursive methods: the anthropomorphism of machines and the dehumanization of workers. The former approach enabled Henry Morley to capture and convey the anxieties of industrial society both chillingly and surprisingly accurately. Morley’s portraits of sinister machines and workers

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2The term, Luddite, continued to refer to the machine-breaking that remained a threat and a powerful statement of protest. See, for example, Peter Gaskell, The Manufacturing Population of England, its Moral, Social, and Physical Conditions, and the Changes which have arisen from the Use of Steam Machinery, with an Examination of Infant Labour, in which Gaskell reports that “incendiarism, machine breaking, assassination, vitriol throwing, [and] acts of diabolical outrage, all have been perpetrated for intimidation or revenge” by frustrated workmen (299). The term, Luddism, has reentered our lexicon in recent years with reference to opponents of the cyber movement. See, for example, “Return of the Luddites,” Wired 3:6 (1995): 162-5, 210.
made victim to a nonspecific, impersonal force are characteristic of this genre of labor reform discourse. The following excerpt from his "Ground in the Mill" is one of the most famous examples of this technique:

Perhaps it is not good when a factory girl, who has not the whole spirit of play spun out of her for want of meadows, gambols upon bags of wool, a little too near the exposed machinery that is to work it up, and is immediately seized and punished by the merciless machine that digs its shaft into her pinafore and hoists her up, tears out her left arm at the shoulder joint, breaks her right arm, and beats her on the head. . . . Possibly it was better for the boy whom his stern master, the machine, caught as he stood on a stool wickedly looking out of window at the sunlight and the flying clouds. These were no business of his, and he was fully punished when the machine he served caught him by one arm and whirléd him round and round till he was thrown down dead. . . . 'Watch me do a trick!' cried such a youth to his fellow, and put his arm familiarly within the arm of the great iron-hearted chief. 'I'll show you a trick', gnashed the pitiless monster. A coil of strap fastened his arm to the shaft, and round he went. His leg was cut off, and fell into the room, his arm was broken in three or four places, his ankle was broken, his head was battered; he was not released alive.

(224)

This rhetorical approach, to which Household Words editor Charles Dickens was also partial, was sufficiently popular to provoke angry responses from mill owners and such laissez-faire advocates as Harriet Martineau. Martineau's attacks on Dickens focus specifically on this hyperbolic style which removes responsibility and agency from individual workers and sacrifices accuracy to dramatic effect. Morley, Dickens, and others like them, Martineau argued, falsely victimized workers injured in factory accidents. Such was the case of "the overlooker at Bury, George Hoyle, aged 50, of whom his comrades

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3See also Peter Gaskell, who in 1833 warned working-class men that they would do well to get out of unions and to bond with their masters (in this case the mill owners), else "they will miss the opportunity, and will condemn themselves to a life of servitude to an iron master, who is already more than threatening them" (41).
said at the inquest, 'It was entirely his own fault; the shaft was quite out of the way of everybody, and unless a person wilfully did something he ought not to do, he could not be injured by that shaft'" (301). While the mill owners had their defenders, however, the machines did not. Very few laissez-faire accounts argued on behalf of the machines' good intentions, or on the inappropriateness of personifying them.4

The concern that machinery was becoming human was not, of course, so much literal as strategic. More troubling was the worry epitomized by the famous description of Coketown in Dickens's *Hard Times* that closes with a portrait of the

several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next. (22)

As Stephen Spector notes, "Only at the end of the passage are human beings mentioned, and properly so, since they are subsumed by the savage, unnatural city as interchangeable parts in a machine they have created but which seems to run without them. Each person has been reduced to a small repetitive "behavior"" (371).

Dickens worried in good company, as political writers increasingly portrayed English workers as mechanized beings. Sally Shuttleworth notes that "Both Tory and radical opponents of contemporary developments in industrialism appropriated the notion of man as machine to voice their criticisms" ("Female" 54). As James Kay-Shuttleworth wrote of the Manchester working classes, "They are drudges who watch the movements, and assist the operations, of a mighty material force, which toils with an energy ever unconscious of fatigue. The persevering labour of the operative must rival the mathematical precision, the incessant motion, and the exhaustless power of the machine"

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(43). The bleakness of such portraits as Kay-Shuttleworth’s and Dickens’s convey a sense of contagious monotony. As in Morley’s representation, workers are in danger of suffering, but here the threat has less to do with factory accidents than with the mechanical quality of repetitive labor. The requirements of factory work produced an existence of such dullness that the workers began to resemble the machinery they served. As Karl Marx saw it, the mechanical system of production was, in effect, “an automaton consisting of numerous mechanical and intellectual organs, so that the workers themselves are cast merely as its conscious linkages.” The factories of England, in addition to producing other, more exchangeable commodities, effected “the transformation of the means of labour into machinery” (279).

Anti-reform writers also used the comparison of workers to machines to bolster their pro-machinery arguments, so that the patent on this metaphor did not belong solely to those who opposed industrial development. Andrew Ure, for example, contended that “hand-working is more or less discontinuous from the caprice of the operative, and never gives an average weekly or annual product at all comparable to that of a like machine equally driven by power” (311). Similarly, Peter Gaskell reminded his readers that “each steam-loom is nearly four times as effective as the hand-loom, and that improvements are hourly taking place in its applicability — giving it endowments — approximating it with the most delicate operations of the human hand.” Should men wish to better themselves and their situations with respect to the new machinery, Gaskell advises that they “compete with it on more equal ground . . . by working steadily, orderly, and systematically” — that is, by becoming more like machines themselves (41). Both pro-machinery and pro-reform writers, both Ure and Gaskell, found fault with the workers for failing to be as efficient as the machines that increasingly replaced them.

The decay of personal agency and the resulting multitude of depersonalized workers proved to be increasingly significant themes to social debates of the nineteenth century. Marx’s argument, above, suggested that a worker’s personal agency was not only
compromised but potentially eradicated by mechanical activity. Robert Owen's idea of human character as the end-product of a social machine worked from the other end of the assembly line, enabling him simultaneously to critique the industrial system and to consider how men might be better made. His determinist concept of "made men," however, brought on a barrage of criticism. While many political writers came to agree with Owen's ideas about the perils of capitalism — that it encouraged the production of "strong powers of deception... destructive of that open, honest sincerity, without which man cannot make others happy, nor enjoy happiness himself" — his concept of human nature as so thoroughly determined, or "made," proved repellent to most of his contemporaries (114). The prefabricated human being, the vision of men and women whose actions were always already scripted, was unacceptable to most citizens of industrial culture. It was impossible to maintain clearly the distinction between human beings and the machines that were replacing them, if human beings were simply reduced to less efficient, more vulnerable machines. And this distinction was crucial, not only rhetorically but ideologically. As Catherine Gallagher notes, "the religious and emotional sources of reform were at variance with the language of social and economic determinism (27)."

Human beings simply could not be machines if human culture and philanthropy were to continue to prosper. Consequently, the rhetoric of this period is complexly paradoxical and self-contradictory. As Sally Shuttleworth notes, "man was figured both as a rational, self-interested actor, in full control of his own destiny, and also as a mere cog within the larger machinery of industrial labor, without free agency or self-determination" ("Female" 54).

**Mechanical Identities: The Problem of Repetition**

The problem of mechanized persons one encounters in labor-reform rhetoric plagues many other Victorian reformist discourses as well. With the continuing proliferation of industry, as the socioeconomic strata of Victorian England shifted and changed, concern about the effects of industrialization on human character became a
popular topic for both public and domestic writers. It found voice in the writings of Carlyle, Ruskin, and Mill who expressed their concerns about mechanized behavior, imitation, self-consciousness, and duplicitousness. It also found voice in the works of such writers as Ellis, Dinah Maria Mulock Craik, Mrs. John Sandford and others of that group of moralists who, with the rise of industrial capitalism, came forward to shepherd and tend carefully the subjects changed by its advent. Not unlike more public political writers, this latter group of authors sought to shape the parameters of post-industrial identity by producing meticulous scripts for acceptable social behavior while, at the same time, urging their disciples to be, above all else, "genuine."\(^5\)

Both public and private social critics did their best to defend against a generation of mechanized subjects, against a population made dull and predictable by either their comfort or their want. As political writers worried about the nature of industrial identity, writers such as Craik, Ellis, and Sandford placed a similarly marked (although for them more conspicuously paradoxical) emphasis on "naturalness" in their manuals of self-assembly known as conduct books. Like their more overtly political counterparts, they warned their readers against the taint of perceptible imitation, of repetition, of any qualities that belied the natural. For example, at the same time as Mrs. Sandford concedes that "Taste is imitative; it follows the lead of others. . . . There is but little original taste" (237), she argues that, "[t]he first great fundamental rule of good taste is, to be natural; and it is from an

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\(^5\)Until recently, most critics of Victorian nonfiction prose have either refused or neglected to examine the intersections between public and domestic writings. Many scholars did not seriously consider the political importance of conduct materials, perhaps because of an investment in preserving the order and convenience of the doctrine of separate spheres. More recent critics, however — most notably Nancy Armstrong, Mary Poovey, and D.A. Miller — have undone that tidy division. As Armstrong writes in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, "political events cannot be understood apart from women's history, from the history of women's literature, or from changing representations of the household" (10). Historian Stefan Collini reinforces, although indirectly, the importance to the study of identity construction of considering conduct writers strategies and foci. "The ideal of character" he writes, "enjoyed a prominence in the political thought of the Victorian period that it had apparently not known before" (94). Collini's work, however, is indicative of a practice that still does not read these authors together. Collini is definitely more interested in male political writers' investments in character than in conduct, *per se*; he cites not a single conduct book by or for women. As a result, he leaves domesticity out of the political picture nearly altogether and so preserves what I will be arguing is a spurious distinction between male and female, between domestic and political ideals of character.
infringement of this that many of our worst mistakes proceed” (222; Sandford’s italics). What these writers, from Carlyle to Sandford, ultimately demanded in their definitions of “natural,” non-mechanical, human character was a concealment of the rehearsals, the practice, and the training that constituted that character. What they demanded, in short, was a renunciation of performance.

The opening of Thomas Carlyle’s essay, “Signs of the Times” (1829), seems to be a simple continuation of a labor-reform rhetoric that condemned the displacement of men by machines:

Were we required to characterise this age of ours by any single epithet, we should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but above all others, the Mechanical Age. . . . Nothing is now done directly, or by hand; all is by rule and calculated contrivance. For the simplest operation, some helps and accompaniments, some cunning abbreviating process is in readiness. . . . On every hand, the living artisan is driven from his workshop, to make room for a speedier, inanimate one. The shuttle drops from the fingers of the weaver, and falls into iron fingers that ply it faster. (141)\(^6\)

Later in the essay, however, when Carlyle worries that “men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand,” it becomes clear that his concern is not so simple. The automatism of actions proves to work its effects elsewhere. “[People] have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind. Not for internal perfection, but for external combinations and arrangements, for institutions, constitutions,—for Mechanism of one sort or other, do they hope and struggle. Their whole efforts, attachments, opinions, turn on mechanism, and are of a mechanical character” (142) What seems to trouble Carlyle the most is the fact this “mechanical character” does not restrict itself to external actions. The automatism he discovers in his contemporaries’ focus on

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\(^6\)Carlyle continues this metaphor of a world turned machine throughout his career, although perhaps most notably in *Sartor Resartus*, in which Teufelsdröckh writes that, for him, “the Universe was all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb” (127).
exterior faultlessness does not denote human beings emptied of interiority, but rather an interiority that, too, has become mechanized or staged. "Not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and spiritual also. Here too nothing follows its spontaneous course, nothing is left to be accomplished by old natural methods. Everything has its cunningly devised implements, its pre-established apparatus; it is not done by hand, but by machinery" ("Signs" 143-4).

Two aspects of this last passage seem particularly significant to both antimechanical and antitheatrical sentiment. First, the pun on "cunning" conveys a decided prejudice against visibly artificial behavior. The cunning of these "cunningly devised implements" lies not only in the smartness of their devise, but in their seeming innocence. While the implements appear to offer an improved option over the "old natural methods," they serve instead to separate men and women from their own "Natures." The link Carlyle forges here between mechanization and trickery is one that comes to apply to character, as increasing numbers of industrial moralists regard as "duplicitous" people who seek to detour around "the old natural methods."

My second point regards that "natural." Later in the same essay, when Carlyle presents an idea that seems uncannily Butlerian, it becomes clear that the stability of naturalness itself is at stake. Carlyle writes of:

an inward persuasion [that] has long been diffusing itself and now and then even comes to utterance, That, except the external, there are no true sciences; that to the inward world (if there be any) our only conceivable road is through the outward; that, in short, what cannot be investigated and understood mechanically, cannot be investigated and understood at all. ("Signs" 146-7).

This is, at least in part, Judith Butler's argument: we can know the internal only belatedly, only retrospectively, and then only through outward signs. But for Carlyle, this is not enabling but horrific. His argument against this trend returns him immediately to the question and unquestionability of nature. "Consider the great elements of human
enjoyment,” he writes, “the attainments and possessions that exalt man’s life to its present height, and see what part of these he owes to institutions, to Mechanism of any kind; and what to the instinctive, unbounded force, which Nature herself lent him, and still continues to him” (“Signs” 149). The return to Nature, and with it to an incontrovertible interiority, counters a potential renunciation of the a priori existence, of the “givenness,” of human identity.7 As will prove to be the case for a wide range of Victorian literature, the impetus behind Carlyle’s essay is the eradication of the villainous “mechanical character” and the reinstatement of human Nature.

The desire for stable, a priori interiority had far reaching effects. With respect to the theater proper, various critics have suggested that, although this era was one in which acting became an increasingly acceptable middle-class vocation, the Victorians continued to regard acting itself as distinctly suspect, as precariously close to lying.8 This aversion seems especially relevant to the prevalence of conduct books and “self-help” manuals in which various authors described and dissected acceptable social identities for middle-class men and women. Investments in sincerity and simplicity made denizens of the middle class extremely suspicious of mimicry, acting, and theatricality in general. Being so new a class themselves, having so indistinct and recently defined parameters of character, they worried about the naturalness of their own behaviors, belying their security in the truth value of their social positions. As the historian Marjorie Morgan notes, “At a time when traditional political, social and economic authorities and theories were being questioned and undermined, ambiguity in any form was particularly alarming because it greatly exacerbated the sense of insecurity. Late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century attitudes

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7One might also see this as a potential renunciation of the human spirit, and to renounce spirit is impossible in a Carlylian system. Although it is not Christian, Carlyle’s definition of spirituality motivates the great bulk of his work; furthermore it is what saves him and his theories from the threat of constructionism. Carlyle finds holiness in what he terms “vitalism” and it is this which he finds endangered by early nineteenth-century industrialism.

8See, for example, Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women* and the fourth and fifth chapters of Mary Jean Corbett, *Representing Femininity*.
to theatrical performances and language, for example, clearly revealed an increasing unwillingness to tolerate ambiguity” (152).

Dinah Mulock Craik’s letter to her friend, Miss Dickens, about an unnamed actor demonstrates this characteristic ambivalence about performance as Craik shrinks from theatricality, even though she is at the theater:

We were at Hamlet last night -- in the dress circle -- and found it better than ever.

He gives the tenderness of Hamlet’s nature in a way quite over-coming. Only I wish he would die subtly and not drop at length on the stage. . . . I am sure, in nature.

Horatio would support him and not let him fall flat till long after he was dead.

Craik’s resistance to the actor’s “fall[ing] flat,” to dying without subtlety, should not, perhaps, be surprising. Visibly mimicking the motions of death in such a way as to make the mimicry visible, the actor calls attention to the fact that he is indeed acting. Defying the “nature” that would have him cradled by Horatio, the actor generates a performance that proves more jarring than tragic. Within the contexts of Ruskinian aesthetics, to which I will turn in a moment, one might say that the actor makes it too clear that he is using his body as a machine.

As George Henry Lewes notes in the epistle that serves to introduce Actors and the Art of Acting, most Victorians did not like to think even of literal acting as something which required rehearsal or craft. “It is noticeable,” he writes, “that people generally overrate a fine actor’s genius, and underrate his trained skill. They are apt to credit him with a power of intellectual conception and poetic creation to which he has really a very slight claim, and fail to recognize all the difficulties which his artistic training have enabled him to master” (6). It seems in no way insignificant, then, that the most popular actors of the age were those who were thought not to be acting at all. Ellen Terry was famous for always seeming herself, for never allowing the audience to forget that, behind every role and beneath every costume, she was always consistently Ellen Terry.9 Henry Irving, too,

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9See Auerbach, Ellen Terry: Player in Her Time and Corbett, Representing Femininity.
played "only one part"; George Bernard Shaw's obituary of the actor is a testimony to Irving's remarkable fixity of character over a long and successful career:

this artist, who could produce every illusion about himself off the stage by the mere force and singularity of his personality, was prevented by just this force and singularity from producing any great range of illusion on it. He had really only one part; and that part was the part of Irving. . . . His huge and enduring success as Shylock was due to his absolutely refusing to allow Shylock to be the discomfited villain of the piece. The 'Merchant of Venice' became the Martyrdom of Irving . . . .

He had no power of adapting himself to an author's conception; his creations were all his own; and they were all Irvings.

As Nina Auerbach has argued, the Victorian aversion to performativity presented a rather thorny problem with respect to identity: "it is scarcely possible to be ourselves without acting ourselves," she writes, "but to be sincere, we must not act" (PT 8). In keeping with this prejudice against theatricality, Victorian conduct book and political writers alike requested that their readers, in assembling the aspects of better, more polite, more moral selves, forget that they were performing. In his later Heroes and Hero Worship, for example, Carlyle exhorts man to develop himself—"to speak-out, to act-out, what Nature has laid in him" (Heroes 449).10 Carlyle's neat conflation of the natural with the performative enables the process of becoming what Auerbach terms a "best self" to be posited as a natural process of discovery rather than one of manufacturing a new and potentially artificial self. By making his definition of "acting out" one which relies upon discovering that which is already inside, Carlyle protects his new, improved self from the taint of repetition.

Similarly, John Ruskin's rhetoric in assailing what he finds to be a demoralizing, perfectionist, imitative trend in Classical style is, like Carlyle's appeal in "Signs of the

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10See the second chapter of Auerbach's Private Theatricals for more on antitheatricality and self-transformation.
Times,” nearly identical to the rhetoric of labor reform. In “The Nature of Gothic,” perhaps the most famous essay from *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin exalts the democratic, humanistic aspects of Gothic over the repressive, fascistic qualities of Classical architecture. He argues against Classical architecture on the basis that it takes away the humanity of the workers who construct it. For Ruskin, value inheres in that which celebrates the human rather than the mechanical. He takes issue with Classicism, then, because it forgets that “the vital ingredient of all products is invention . . . Classicism,” he argues, “only imitates and repeats” (166).

In a now familiar rhetoric, although here located in an aesthetic field, Ruskin finds that the symmetry, perfection, and regularity of Classical forms make literally inhuman demands upon men, and so automatize them.

> You must either make a tool of a creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both. Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions. If you will have that precision out of them, and make their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanise them. (222-3)

The requirements of Classical (and traditional English) buildings are “unhumanising” because they render workers tools or machines, imposing themselves directly upon the workers’ bodies so that their fingers must be “cog-wheels,” their arms “compasses,” and their actions testimonies to the principles of regularity and sameness. “If you will make a man of the working creature,” Ruskin writes, “you cannot make a tool. Let him but begin to imagine, to think, to try to do anything worth doing; and the engine-turned precision is lost at once. Out come all his roughness, all his dulness, all his incapability . . . but out comes the whole majesty of him also” (223).

Where Ruskin finds Classical architecture’s imitative requirements dehumanizing, he finds beauty in the tremendous variety of the Gothic, the diversity of its ornaments and forms. “[E]very building of the Gothic period differs in some important respect from
every other;,” and the uniqueness of each Gothic building testifies to “certain mental
tendencies of the builders, legibly expressed in it; as fancifulness, love of variety, love of
richness, and such others” (213-5). Later in the essay, Ruskin clarifies his antipathy
towards repetition, arguing that “great art . . . does not say the same thing over and over
again”; rather, he claims, it “consists in its saying new and different things” (234-5).

As many critics have noted, Ruskin’s aesthetic criticism may often more aptly be
called social commentary; his remarks about architectural characteristics are often thinly, if
at all, veiled expositions on national and/or personal character. As C. M. Finn writes,
“Gothic [architecture] has a significance far beyond questions of structure or even
aesthetics. The vigour of Gothic accompanies the moral and spiritual health of a society,
and its decline is a sure sign of the loss of strength of a culture” (161-2). Ruskin’s
ostensible purpose in this essay is to restore creativity, and hence dignity, to the industrial
working classes who have been “counted off into a heap of mechanism, numbered with its
wheels, and weighed with its hammer strokes” (225-6). However, while the class
commentaries in “The Nature of Gothic” are remarkable in and of themselves, Ruskin’s
object seems to exceed the liberty and dignity of the working classes. His comments on
the middle-class “Love of Order which makes us desire that our house windows should
pair like our carriage horses, and allows us to yield our faith unhesitatingly to architectural
theories which fix a form for everything, and forbid variation from it” (233) liken the
figure of the worker enslaved to an imitative craft which strips him of judgment, to the
English middle class and their readily yielded “faith” to fixed forms of conduct that
demand imitation.

When Ruskin argues, “what we have to do with our laborers [is] to look for the
thoughtful part of them, and get that out of them, whatever we lose for it,” he, like many
other moralists, suggests that the problem with imitation is that it is not enough bound up
with thought (223; Ruskin’s italics). Ultimately, however, Ruskin’s objections to imitation
have more to do with the fact that mimicry produces what he considers an “unnatural”
condition than with the nature of copying work itself. Above and beyond the problem of intellectual involvement, the repetitive, imitative aspects of identity are disturbing in that they suggest the ways in which even human "nature" is ultimately assembled. Ruskin's imperative "never [to] encourage imitation or copying of any kind, except for the sake of preserving record of great works" relegates imitation and "copying" per se to some place beyond the sacred "Nature" of the essay's title (227).

By objecting to copying as an activity that threatens the nature of human Nature, Ruskin reveals a common fear that human identity owes a great deal more to repetition than most nineteenth-century writers would have liked to admit. As Morgan writes, by the late eighteenth century, "that people were the creatures of imitation . . . became a source of alarm" (62). Mrs. John Sandford's position neatly represents the contradictory and precarious stance of many of these authors: she wants no part of imitation in her concept of adult identity, but, in her chapter on taste, she marries her injunctions to "cultivate the moral feelings" with others to "[r]ead the best authors — study the best models" (236). The tensions between these two agenda become even more striking in discussions of human development. Imitation, after all, is fundamental to establishing right thought in the first place and nearly all social reformers stressed the importance of role models. The "nature" of childhood makes many essentialist arguments untenable, however, and conduct writers in particular struggled to reconcile equivocal contentions about authenticity and repetition, about natural identity and the importance of example.

"Childhood is like a mirror": An Army of Tiny Repeaters

Cautions regarding children's propensities for mimicry appeared ironically and repeatedly in conduct books. The tone and the prevalence alone of these warnings establishes that many Victorians were quite anxious about the fact that children seemed to be "natural imitators." The ideological contradictions contained herein were sufficiently troubling to demand nearly acrobatic rhetorical contortions in order to accommodate them.
In the following excerpt, for example, Sandford grapples with her son’s ready acknowledgment that his religious beliefs are reducible to imitation.

On [his] being asked why he believed in such a doctrine? “Because mamma told me,” was his reply. The answer, it must be confessed, was not satisfactory; but it was natural; and it stated probably the true ground upon which early faith rests. Veneration is a prominent feature in the young mind; and until it is counteracted by the growth of other faculties, and the operation of external causes, it has the greatest share in determining the early character. (32: emphasis added)

The “growth of other faculties” is crucial to the stability of individual, legitimate character, and the strong emphasis on the development of reasoning faculties is typical of Victorian conduct and political literature alike. Sandford calls in these “other faculties” to establish and protect a singular, humanist subject from the horrors of metonymy, from the shame of the artificial self; likewise, the label, “natural,” and the term, “veneration,” function to defend against the specter of the child-born-automaton. The consistency with which these writers invoke the protective power of individual reason, however, belies their confidence in it as an adequate rejoinder to the questions posed by primary repetition. The stakes of mounting a strong defense appear quite vividly in Sandford’s concern that, without those faculties that bring the child beyond the realm of mimicry, “knowledge attained of even primary truths is scanty and superficial” (36). Here as elsewhere, the category of “primary truth” depends heavily upon a subject’s ability to distinguish it from “superficiality”; here as elsewhere, this distinction seems troublingly precarious.

Although many conduct books “urged parents to take meticulous care in setting morally sound behavioral examples for their children, and encouraged youngsters to imitate and be unquestioningly obedient to their parents” (Morgan 114), this blithe impetus to imitation had certain undesirable consequences. Morgan notes that “[i]t became imperative to resolve the question of how children steeped in the virtues of emulation were to limit their propensity for imitating once they were no longer protected by the safeguards
of parental supervision” (115). As Morgan suggests, this army of young imitators grew markedly less appealing as they outgrew their youth, for the skills that constituted model children presented, in maturity, quite a problem for political and other reformers. The process of maturation, then, was to involve a sloughing off of the mechanics of imitation, so that the graceful dance into Victorian adulthood involved a repression of plagiarism. Ideally, these young mimics, in part through mastering that which they had previously imitated and in part through erasing any memory of the original, would be able to claim their actions as uniquely their own. Samuel Smiles’s highly deterministic, un-Self Help-y, *Happy Homes and the Hearts That Make Them* suggests, however, that childhood repetition is unerringly enduring: “Childhood,” Smiles writes, “is like a mirror which reflects in after life the images first presented to it” (91). According to Smiles, then, juvenile imitation does *not* end with puberty, but rather infects life after childhood.

Smiles’s axiom was particularly threatening because most Victorians regarded childhood as the most “natural” period of life; children’s propensities for mimicry thus posed a substantial threat to the originality and primacy of Nature itself. If people were indeed imitators, if their innermost feelings and all of those things which felt most natural to them could be reduced to things they had learned and replicated, the distinctions between them and the feared automatons of industrial rhetoric were not comfortably secure. One can see these greater underlying anxieties in Sandford’s imperative that children “not be able to detect any thing but *truth* in the actions, and words and manners, of those around them” lest they be led to imitate them, for “affectation . . . will soon appear in them, if they observe it in their teachers” (238; Sandford’s italics). That “*truth*,” unfortunately for Sandford, is rather flimsy stuff. As Craik writes, “to very few people — as may be noticed of most small children — does *truth*, this rigid, literal veracity, come by *nature* . . . it comes only after the self-control, watchfulness, and bitter experience of years” (*Woman’s* 215; emphasis added). Craik’s point, that “*Nature*” and “*Truth*” are incompatible terms, that truth is something one must *work towards*, rather than something
one is born with, redefines the parameters of “true identity,” so that it is more of a goal than a given.

In the interests of maintaining phenomenological integrity, many social reformers redefined their parameters of consciousness, so that both alongside and contrary to Ruskin’s exaltation of the “thoughtful part” of men, Victorian writers coached their readers to be somewhat less thoughtful, less conscious — in short, they advised them to protect against self-consciousness. If one did not watch oneself too carefully, did not examine oneself and the machinations behind one’s gestures and words, imitation might yet remain unconscious and unknown. If one was able to “forget” one’s good models and yet still produce acceptable behavior, who was to say that one’s identity was not authentic?

“Genius is ever a Secret to Itself”: The Problem of Self-consciousness

Carlyle’s “Characteristics,” written in 1831, opens the question of self-consciousness that poses so great a problem for nearly all of these writers, although perhaps especially for Mill. In “Characteristics,” Carlyle equates vitality with “unconsciousness” (his own term), so that “the truly strong mind, view it as Intellect, as Morality, or under any other aspect, is nowise the mind acquainted with its own strength” (314-5). Self-consciousness, Carlyle feels, makes actions “mechanical,” not “vital,” for consciousness leads to doubt: “Self-contemplation is infallibly the symptom of disease” (316). Locating the germ of this problem in industrialization, Carlyle waxes nostalgic for pre-industrial (read “simpler”) times: “action, in those old days was easy,” he writes, “was voluntary, for the divine worth of human things lay acknowledged; Speculation was wholesome, for it ranged itself as the handmaid of Action; what could not so range itself died out by its natural death.” The “speculation,” or introspection, that plagues nineteenth-century society, however, produces only doubt about the value of “human things,” about what things humans are supposed to make, or do, or be, and about whether or not they are any longer capable of dying a “natural death,” let alone of living a “natural” life. For
Carlyle and others like him, self-consciousness is so disabling as to produce a situation in which people must "struggle to be persons, not machines" ("Characteristics" 335-6; emphasis added).

The specifically theatrical valence of "speculation" or "self-contemplation" is most evident in the "spectator" hidden in the former term. Not only does the watching or audience function seated within Carlyle's self-conscious self enact and implement a "supervisory authority bent on demystifying everything but itself" (Litvak 96-7), it also produces a divided self that acts and does and thinks in a fashion neither unitary nor simple. It institutes a specular function that checks for imperfections and improprieties and hence, through its careful watching, puts its own actions on stage.\(^{11}\) By making visible the performative components of identity, self-consciousness threatens to produce the "mechanical character" against which these writers expostulate. As Mill writes in On Liberty, his contemporaries, instead of simply acting — or acting simply — subject each of their actions to careful analysis, hence robbing themselves of sincerity: "They ask themselves, what is suitable to my position? what is usually done by persons of my station and pecuniary circumstances? . . . Thus the mind itself is bowed to the yoke: even in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of . . . until by dint of not following their own nature they have no nature to follow" (74-5).

In the fifth chapter of his Autobiography, Mill writes about the breakdown he suffered in his early twenties. Describing his younger self as "a 'made' or manufactured man, having had a certain impress of opinion stamped on me which I could only reproduce," Mill demonstrates the dangers of allowing childhood repetition to remain discernible in adult life (93). "I had always heard it maintained by my father, and was

\(^{11}\) As many of these writers discovered, this aversion to self-scrutiny makes for interesting problems in the practice of autobiography. Ruskin's Praeterita, for example, takes such a very narrow viewpoint as "privileged seer" that, as Regenia Gagnier notes, he "denies his own subjectivity, leaves himself unseen" (240). As Ruskin writes in Praeterita, "all my faculty was merely in showing that such and such things were so; I was no orator, no actor, no painter but in a minute and generally invisible manner" (cit. Gagnier 243). See also Corbett, Representing Femininity, particularly the section on Fanny Kemble.
myself convinced," he writes, "that the object of education should be to form the strongest possible associations . . . with all things beneficial to the great whole, and of pain with all things hurtful to it" (82). Although Mill claims to have had no doubt of the efficiency of behaviorist methods to form associations through repeated rewards and punishments, his breakdown leads him to reconsider. He comes to believe that, ultimately, "there must always be something artificial and casual in associations thus produced. The pains and pleasures thus forcibly associated with things, are not connected with them by any natural tie" (83). In other words, education must be reinforced by nature, not simply by repetition. Rote learning is too vulnerable to analysis, as Mill painfully learns, as it enables that which should be "natural" to dissolve all too readily. Mill finds, too, that the "feelings" that are supposed to form the basis of his world view disintegrate under the rigorous and relentless analyses that form the basis of his education. "[T]he habit of analysis," he writes, "has a tendency to wear away the feelings . . . and the analysing spirit remains without its natural complements and correctives. . . . My education, I thought, had failed to create these feelings in sufficient strength to resist the dissolving influence of analysis" (83-4; emphasis added). Endowed with a intellect capable of deconstructing all that comes before it, Mill is unable to find either sufficient reason or adequate fiction to make life endurable; he suffers a breakdown in 1826.

Mill attributes his "healthier," retrospective outlook to a refusal to examine the foundations of his identity. Ascribing his breakdown to an excess of self-consciousness, Mill finds that the only way to be happy in life is not to question overmuch its foundations. This latter outlook depends upon "a theory of life, very unlike that on which I had before acted, and having much in common with what at that time I certainly had never heard of, the anti-self-consciousness theory of Carlyle. . . . The enjoyments of life (such was now my theory) are sufficient to make it a pleasant thing, when they are taken en passant, without being made a principal object. Once make them so, and they are immediately felt to be insufficient. They will not bear a scrutinizing influence" (85-6).
The defense against this scrutiny lies in what Ann Cvetkovich and other critics have observed about the Victorians’ emphasis on affect as guarantor of genuine personhood. “Capitalism’s perceived ability to dehumanize,” Cvetkovich argues, “necessitates the reassuring production of affect that guarantees individual subjectivity” (94). Given this context, it is not surprising to find that Mill attributes the turning point of his depression to the moment at which he realized he was capable of crying. Because this appeal to emotion functions as an appeal to interiority, it seeks to ensure that “the only conceivable road” to the inward is not “through the outward,” as Carlyle had worried, above. Another of the central problems with self-consciousness, then, is that it makes it nearly impossible to keep one’s emotions “inside”; if one is always watching one’s own responses, it is rather difficult to keep them “off stage” and beyond the realm of manufacture.

**Whereforth Nature?**

There were limits, of course, to the acceptable scope of personal affect; the enforcement of those limits returns me to Ellis. Seemingly antithetical to her earlier tirade against the self-consciously self-constructing woman, the following excerpt finds Ellis urging her readers to imitate precisely — indeed robotically — the models of deportment with which she presents them.

> [L]et no one in her blindness or temerity, venture upon the slightest transgression of these rules, because in her young wisdom she sees no cause for their existence. Society has good reasons for planting this friendly hedge, beside the path of woman, and the day will come when she will be thankful — truly thankful that her own conduct even in minute and apparently trifling matters, was not left in early life to the decision of her own judgment, or the guidance of her will. *(Daughters* 125)

Within the context of Victorian anxieties about self-consciousness, it becomes clear that Ellis’s investments in shaping genuine identity are not antithetical to — are, in fact, \textit{compatible with} — her abnegation of individual will. Ellis’s invocations to personal
surrender have a religious valence, certainly, but evangelicalism fails to account for her
pirouettes around the troublingly mechanical and troublingly theatrical problems of self-
conscious imitation. The following, from her introduction to *The Daughters of England*,
demonstrates how thoroughly anti-constructionism imbricates her more overt religious
agenda.

> My desire is to assist them to overcome the three great enemies to their temporal
and eternal good — their selfishness, indolence, and vanity, and to establish in their
stead feelings of benevolence and habits of industry, so blended with Christian
meekness, that while affording pleasure to all who live within the sphere of their
influence, *they shall be unconscious of the charm by which they please.*” (10; emphasis
added)

By promising her readers that their submission to her dictates will grant them a character
both more pious and less aware of itself, Ellis links “Christian meekness” to amnesiac
self-construction. The inattention she demands (“they shall be unconscious of the charm
by which they please”) asks young women to learn what is pleasing, but to forget to look
for its effects, while her condemnation of selfishness and vanity addresses directly the
dangers of conscious intent in repetition and so defends against conscious self-
manufacture. Unfortunately, Ellis leaves no agent in place to instigate action. According
to this schema, these ideal young ladies, like Ruskinian Angels, or Stepfordian wifelets, are to
perform automatically and unconsciously acts that are gratifying to others.

Ellis’s suggestions are of precisely that sort that provoked Mill’s most scathing
attacks on conduct materials; ironically, many of his ideals prove to be surprisingly close to
hers. As Collini notes, although “Mill was uneasy with the element of ‘self-abnegation’ . .
. fostered by the popular ideal of character, . . . he profoundly shared many of the beliefs
upon which that ideal rested” (102). Even as Mill asks why people who “do the old things
should forget why they are done, and do them like cattle, not like human beings,” he is
unable to forgo completely the principle of imitation (*Liberty* 78). *On Liberty*, that text in
Mill's oeuvre perhaps most committed to human individuality, makes this conflict particularly evident. In it, Mill argues that subservience to social norms and proprieties threatens social stability; unexamined artificiality, he claims, makes a society vulnerable to anything "real." The notion of "realness" he offers, however, is just as much bound by the principles and tensions of repetition as Ellis's.

There is only too great a tendency in the best beliefs and practices to degenerate into the mechanical; and unless there were a succession of persons whose ever-recurring originality prevents the grounds of those beliefs and practices from becoming merely traditional, such dead matter would not resist the smallest shock from anything really alive, and there should be no reason why civilization should not die out, as in the Byzantine Empire. (78)

Although here Mill attacks the repetitive, performative, not "really alive" aspects of a culture enslaved to imitation, his remarks on China in the same essay *endorse* an imitative approach. Condemning Western Europe for "decidedly advancing toward the Chinese ideal of making all people alike," Mill nonetheless continues to rely upon the rhetoric of the good model for his solution to the situation in China. "[I]f they [the Chinese] are ever to be farther improved," he writes, "it must be by foreigners" (87-8). In order to be "saved," that is, the Chinese need to make themselves after new and supposedly better models. In effect, the "tendency . . . to degenerate into the mechanical" and the principles of self-improvement rely equally upon a repetition that both constitutes and threatens Nature.

The relationship between antitheatricality and the project of establishing authentic subjectivity is already well-established in both cultural and performance studies; the intersections between that nexus and antimechanical sensibilities expand the parameters of this conflict, bringing the potential for new insights to previously obscure tensions and alliances. This correspondence makes it no coincidence that such industrial novels as *Middlemarch*, *Mary Barton*, and *Shirley* exhibit so much concern about genuine
subjectivity. Beyond the entangled marriage and industrial conflict plots of these novels, the entangled antitheatrical and antimechanical biases I have been exploring here relate as well to the economics in novels such as *Little Dorrit*, which I discuss at length in the following chapter, where fraudulent identity relates directly to capitalist fraud. This concordance may also be tied to the sensation novel’s often nightmarish depictions of an impersonal culture in which multiplications of identity seem not only possible but almost commonplace. Overall, this reading strategy enables Victorian authors’ simultaneous renunciations and venerations of Nature, their demands for sincerity alongside their pleas for possible transcendence, to take on significances that may else have gone unrecognized. The following reading of *Middlemarch* demonstrates a reading of specifically antimechanically valenced antitheatricality in a specifically literary text.

**An Echo Not At All Innocent: Repetition in *Middlemarch***

George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871-2), set in 1829-1832, a period of political and industrial unrest, suggests that the conflicts of the early nineteenth-century retained their power to disturb and fascinate the later Victorians. Repetition offers a key to reading Rosamond Vincy’s refusal to see the connections between “Parliament going to be dissolved, and machine-breaking everywhere, and an election coming on” (388) and her marriage to Lydgate. As I have been arguing throughout this chapter, the mechanization against which the Luddites rallied echoed into the homes of many Vincys, Lydges, Garths, and Brookes, not simply in the forms of clothing, upholstery, and stockings, but also as something that shaped and influenced human identities and relationships.

In his run for Parliament, poor Mr. Brooke of *Middlemarch* takes on an endeavor that “does absolutely demand some speechifying” (546). As he prepares Brooke for his performance, Will Ladislaw finds that “the only way in which Mr Brooke could be coerced into thinking of the right arguments at the right time was to be well plied with them until they took up all the room in his brain. But here there was the difficulty of finding room, so
many things having been taken in beforehand" (545). Not unlike John Stuart Mill’s childhood education, Brooke’s overtly automatic learning fails him. Brooke’s “breakdown,” however, takes quite a different — in fact a tangible and public — form. His foray into public speaking summons forth an image of himself that proves quite disturbing for, as his speech at the White Hart quickly turns to mechanical issues, it produces a rather undesirable “issue” of its own.

“[M]achinery now,” Brooke begins, “and machine-breaking — you’re many of you concerned with machinery, and I’ve been going into that lately. It won’t do, you know, breaking machines: everything must go on — trade, manufactures, commerce, interchange of staples — that kind of thing — since Adam Smith, that must go on.” Almost immediately after Brooke begins speaking, “there [rises] above the shoulders of the crowd, nearly opposite Mr Brooke and within ten yards of him, the effigy of himself; buff-coloured waistcoat, eyeglass, and neutral physiognomy, painted on rag” (547). As if the eerily mirroring visage of the puppet weren’t quite enough to point out Brooke’s tenuous hold on his “material,” “there had arisen apparently in the air, like the note of the cuckoo, a parrot-like, Punch-voiced echo of his words” (547).

As Eliot tells us, “The most innocent echo has an impish mockery in it when it follows a gravely persistent speaker, and this echo was not at all innocent” (547-8); rather, it produces in Mr. Brooke “a general slipping away of ideas within himself” (548). The hail of eggs that follows soon after furthers the confusion between Brooke and his more visibly tattered double. “Chiefly aimed at the image,” the eggs “occasionally [hit] the original, as if by chance” (549). That Eliot chooses to shower both the original of her character and his “image” with eggs offers a sly comment upon the issues of origin and artifice at play in this novel.

Characters such as Madame Laure, Middlemarch’s melodramatic actress offer a key to the novelistic use of theatricality to comment upon and undercut conventions of character, reading, and realism. Laure’s acting, though “no better than it should be” (180),
proves capable of being fatally convincing. While Laure, as "an example of the fitful swerving of passion to which he was prone" (180), certainly warns of Lydgate's later susceptibility to Rosamond's carefully arranged charms, she also signals the interpretive problems that stem from the false opposition between drama and reality. When Laure tells the amorous Lydgate, "I meant to do it," admitting that, although her foot "really slipped," she intentionally murdered her husband, Lydgate remains stubbornly fixed within the arena of melodrama: "There was a secret then," he insists. "He was brutal to you: you hated him" (182). As if melodrama could contain Laure's act and rescue the rest of her for domesticity, Lydgate desperately attempts to separate the theatrical from the mundane, the sensational from the realm of "everyday life." The real horror of the story lies in the lack of affect in Laure's reply: "No! he wearied me; he was too fond: he would live in Paris, and not in my country; that was not agreeable to me." A pale Lydgate rushes back to his galvanism, resolving thenceforth to "take a strictly scientific view of woman," feeling sure that "he had more reason than ever for trusting his judgment, now that it was so experienced" (183).

Whether Laure is or is not a sociopath poses an interesting question, but of greater interest at present are the ways in which Eliot juxtaposes jeopardy with theatricality. As Litvak notes, Lydgate's encounter with Laure suggests that "Laure's foot is not the only thing capable of slipping. . . . We could characterize this slippage as that between art and reality, between the 'act' and the fact of murder" (148). Lydgate's response comments most immediately on his relationship with Rosamond; it is also central to at least one aspect of the tenuous opposition between Rosamond and Dorothea, which opposition falls apart upon closer inspection.

Even before we meet Laure, Eliot tells us (in parenthesis), "(Every nerve and muscle in Rosamond was adjusted to the consciousness that she was being looked at. She was by nature an actress of parts that entered into her physique: she even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own)" (144). Lydgate
unknowingly wins the male lead in "Rosamond's social romance, which had always turned on a lover and bridegroom who was not a Middlemarcher, and who had no connections at all like her own" (145). Determined to fall in love with no more "cow-like beauties" — and he quickly dismisses Dorothea — Lydgate is convinced by Rosamond's "infantile blondness" that both she and her behavior are beyond affectation.

But Rosamond cannot help but be infected by artifice. Like another Eliot heroine, Hetty Sorrell, whose theatrical faults lead her to commit acts that far exceed her solo boudoir performances, Rosamond is scrupulously aware of her audience and the effect she has on them. The irony that Eliot underlines is that the schooling of a proper young lady, the rhetoric of conduct books, and the choreography of courtship all partake of the language of theatricality. What Rosamond's brother Fred terms "Rosy's lies," then, Eliot chalks up to proper female schooling:

She was not in the habit of devising falsehoods, and if her statements were no direct clue to fact, why, they were not intended in that light—they were among her elegant accomplishments, intended to please. Nature had inspired many arts in finishing Mrs. Lemon's favorite pupil, who by general consent (Fred's excepted) was a rare compound of beauty, cleverness, and amiability. (301)

The stock of seductive talents that make up "the irresistible woman for the doomed man of that date" (301), in fact, hardly escape the realm of the actress whose performative talents are notable for their mediocrity. Each item of "that combination of correct sentiments, music, dancing, drawing, [and] elegant note-writing" that makes Rosamond so attractive requires rehearsal; without it, all Mrs. Lemon's teaching would go for naught.

Rosamond is hardly the sole character in *Middlemarch* to manifest a consciousness of the theater's intersections with "real life." Against the backdrop of encroaching railroads, Reform Bills, and machine-breaking, Fred carefully manages his behavior with his uncle, Peter Featherstone; Mr. Casaubon worries about "acquitting himself and acting with propriety" in his marriage (314); and Mr. Farebrother quietly enacts his self-
deprecatory courtship of Mary Garth. However, because she most visibly represents the dangers of detectable identity construction, many readers find it difficult to look beyond Rosamond for guilt in this arena. And Eliot doesn’t seem to want anything beyond that. Even as she asks, “who can represent himself just as he is, even in his own reflections?” (763), she arranges for Rosamond to fail in her attempts at reformation so that her insufficiently subtle manner(s) leave Rosamond carrying the burden of guilt in *Middlemarch*.

As Mr. Vincy tells his daughter, the problems of industrialism have “a pretty deal to do with” the problems in pretty Rosamond’s marriage, and with the problems with pretty Rosamond in general. The “strictly scientific view of woman” Lydgate affects after his experience with Laure, leaves him vulnerable to those acts that undo the neat opposition between science and art, between reality and imitation. The problems in Lydgate’s judgment lie, first, in his desperate refusal to allow performative and genuine behavior to overlap and, second, in his strategic blindnesses to even the smallest ways in which character is constructed. When he recognizes in Dorothea a “deep-souled womanhood” (638), Lydgate continues his mistake; we, as readers, do too if we accept his assessment of Dorothea as a “pure” character. In order to establish Dorothea’s purity, we must follow Lydgate in forgetting that Celia was “used to think of her sister as the dangerous part of the family machinery” (873). We must forget, too, her “love of extremes” that causes her to “[kneel] suddenly on a brick floor and [pray] fervidly as if she thought herself living in the time of the Apostles” (31). Such forgetting seems only natural, however. After all, the ideology of *Middlemarch* depends upon such lapses.
Introductory Comments on Class Chapters

During the early stages of this project, I discussed the premises of the following two chapters with a friend whose work also draws upon performance studies. The idea of discussing class within the context of performance seemed to her superfluous. "I’d always considered class purely materialist," she remarked. "I mean, there seems to be no essentialist basis for classed identity."

It is understandable that she would assume, first, that class is incomprehensible without reference to performance and, second, that to say that class is a non-essential quality is merely to state the obvious. Class is not readily biologizable, after all, or at least not so readily as such other categories as race and gender. The critical debates around sexual preference, however, are useful in developing new ways of understanding class. Just as gender theorists have contested the hegemonic status of normative (read heterosexual) narratives of sexuality, an analysis that explores competing constructionist and essentialist strategies might open up narratives of socioeconomic position. The contradictory rhetoric of identity politics offers particularly pertinent insights here: as many identity politics adherents endorse the political praxis of what Lisa Walker calls "looking like what you are" (866), the dual performative and essentialist agenda in this statement — the costuming requirements of "looking like" and the confidence in a solid interiority suggested by "what you are" — play back and forth between innate and performed notions of identity.

Dorothy Allison’s essay, "A Question of Class," provides an example of this rhetoric within the context of class. Allison utilizes the discourse of essentialism to locate the economic basis of her identity:

[What may be the central fact of my life is that I was born in 1949 in Greenville, South Carolina, the bastard daughter of a white woman from a desperately poor family, a girl who had left the seventh grade the year before, worked as a waitress,]
and was just a month past fifteen when she had me. That fact, the inescapable impact of being born in a condition of poverty that this society finds shameful, contemptible, and somehow deserved, has had dominion over me to such an extent that I have spent my life trying to overcome or deny it. I have learned with difficulty that the vast majority of people believe that poverty is a voluntary condition. (15)

What seems most pertinent to my present inquiry is the work that Allison does in the second sentence of this passage. While she initially presents her reader with a richly textured portrait that draws upon geography, gender, race, legitimacy, and education, as well as economics, to achieve its full complexity, Allison then dismisses all but the latter in her discussion of the "condition" that has so profoundly influenced her sense of identity: "the condition of poverty" transcends all other "conditions" limiting and delimiting Allison's character. While I find the disappearance of these other factors quite troublesome — even spurious — the strategy is provocative. By locating social standing, regional identity, and educational background alongside race, gender, and legitimacy, Allison gestures towards a matrix in which the former — in Allison's lexicon "voluntary" — categories are as instrumental in forming identity as the latter, "involuntary" categories, so that class functions as fundamentally, indeed as innately, as those qualities our culture readily grants as congenital.

Allison's simultaneous recognition and interrogation of the distinctions between "voluntary" and "involuntary" aspects of character are useful in understanding the tensions within both present day identity politics and, more pertinent to my purposes here, Victorian ideas about character. A number of recent studies also contribute to this work, most notably Cvetkovich's Mixed Feelings, Ellen Brinks's essay, "Who's Been in My Closet?", which deals with class transvestitism in Single White Female, and Rethinking Class, an anthology of essays edited by Wai Chee Dimock and Michael Gilmore. These studies examine the simultaneous essentialist and constructionist paradigms that work to frame class identity and the situations in which they operate respectively. With respect to the
Victorians, middle-class investments in the doctrine of self-help (the voluntary) stood uneasily alongside their simultaneous investments in essential (involuntary) personhood. At the same time as the ideology of the middle classes depended upon the possibility of self-construction, most writers of this period reflect a propensity to cling to the notion of an essential, static self. As I discuss in the previous chapter, for the most part the Victorians were distinctly uncomfortable with overt self-making, so that while they worked to preserve the prospect of class transcendence, they demanded a stability of character across economic contexts. Hence, they refused to endorse the limit cases of self-help, choosing instead to dismiss too visibly manufactured or "self-made" characters as charlatans or frauds.

In the following chapter, I will explore the dangers inherent in self-help strategies with specific reference to charlatans and frauds. I examine the dynamics of class transcendence by reading Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* as a novel equally about manipulating social rank and about the art of the con. I will be arguing, in short, that the theatrical posturings that enable successful class transcendence were too readily appropriable, too accessible to men and women who strove to make themselves appear respectable only to derive financial and social wealth from their "audiences." As may already be clear, only the aforementioned "limit cases" of the latter group were readily classifiable as criminals. Swindling of a more amorphous style, however, was popularized and endorsed by self-help culture.

My third chapter looks at an anomaly: a situation in which acting and theatricality receive hearty social endorsement. Through a reading of Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne*, this chapter discusses the parameters of professional activity and the ways in which work, gender, and performativity productively intersected in Victorian middle-class life. I look particularly at the characteristics of the professional gentleman: straightforwardness, honesty, sexual prudence, selflessness, and industriousness. Given a case in which the essential self was slothful, self-indulgent, and erotically rapacious, the Victorians
encouraged performance to discipline and reform the "natural" self, for if one could act a better person than one was and "truly" perform honest, economically-based work, one might, in a strangely inverted ontology, recuperate the sins of the "bad" essential self. In the interests of constructing and propagating good capitalist subjects, Victorian culture allowed theatricality tremendous latitude so long as "acting" was troped as "activity."

In short, the following pair of chapters look at the economic grounds behind attitudes towards theatricality. That which served and protected a capitalist agenda received sanction and encouragement; that which exceeded or threatened such an agenda met with juridical or other correctional measures. Throughout, however, the subjects and institutions governing these performances set out to essentialize classed behavior, to ground the fluid perimeters of economic identity in individual bodies.
Chapter Two

Class Acts: Class Transcendence and The Art of the Con

It seems almost redundant to say that the Victorian period offered tremendous potential for class mobility. The industrial revolution, the growth of the British empire, and the rise of the professions made it possible for men of no great fortune to "make themselves." For women, new opportunities for self-making were less ostensibly economic, but the role of the (re)productive guardian of the home offered women possibilities of economic advancement in which self-transformation, or self-making, paid off in the dividends of marriage. In Family Fortunes, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall remark upon the mythic weight of upward mobility, observing, "One had only to breathe the air of Birmingham to turn from an idle character to a diligent and productive one" (36). The potential for class advancement was so great that, by 1865, Lord Palmerston was able to present it as a given to the audience at a prize giving ceremony of the South London Industrial Exhibition. The Prime Minister confidently assured his audience:

you have all seen in your own experience men starting from the smallest beginnings who have in this very city realised princely fortunes. In the manufacturing districts examples of this kind are abundant, for no man can go, even for a few days, into those districts without hearing of great wealth, acquired by men who started with little, but by their talents and genius, raised themselves and their families to opulence.

The "rise" of which Palmerston spoke was both material and social. As Walter Arnstein notes, "English society, hierarchical as it was, proved sufficiently adaptable to permit the wealthy merchant to buy a country seat and to have his children intermarry with the squirarchy; a fledgling industrialist might hope to do the same" (192). At the same time, then, as one might purchase an estate, one might also purchase access to aristocratic title.
Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne*, which I discuss further in the following chapter, represents precisely such a case, as Archibald Carlyle, an ambitious and industrious lawyer, purchases the estate, and in effect the daughter, of the financially stripped and gout-ridden Earl of Mount Severn. By the mid-Victorian period, in other words, class had become a buyable commodity; this had always been true to some extent — as Marjorie Morgan notes. “Rich merchant families had traditionally mingled comfortably and intermarried with aristocrats and landed gentry” (49) — but moving up became so much a part of cultural mythology, if not always daily reality, that the bloodlines that had previously governed access to titles and power seemed to have lost their influence. Social standing was no longer a biologically determined quality.

Financial fall was also a present narrative, but it functioned more as a shadowy warning than as an active story in the ideology of the epoch; the absence of such stories in the first edition of *Self-Help* prodded Samuel Smiles to comment in the preface to the 1865 edition, “As for Failure *per se*, although it may be well to find consolations for it at the close of life, there is reason to doubt whether it is an object that ought to be set before youth at the beginning of it” (34). Many tales of financial failure involved or at least implicated the upper classes, the aristocracy of the past whose leisurely (read immoral) modes of living no longer sufficed in what had become a fiercely competitive society. Although the realities of failed banks and railways brought the duplicity of the middle-class man into the popular unconscious, the mobility in “class mobility” generally signified moving *up*.¹

The potential for upward mobility was not cause for unequivocal celebration, however, for class fluidity encompassed both peril and promise. The radical multiplication of economic and social possibilities within industrial Britain meant not only that one might make of oneself a success story, but also that the self was a far more fragmented and tenuous quantity than it had appeared in “simpler” times. As the Rev. J. Baldwin Brown

remarked in 1871, "There is no sort of fixity in any of the institutions of society, no sort of continence in any of its orders. . . . All things are in constant flux; and above all things the habits, pursuits, callings and social status of men. We do not know where to find men, and large classes do not know where to find themselves" (cit. Bailey 345). This problem of "finding" men and women in their proper places, and of what those places might be, created a crisis in social topography. As social historian Peter Bailey notes, "mid-Victorian England appears remarkable not only for its volatile social order but for the plasticity of its human geography. . . . there were as yet no adequate physical cordons sanitaires to protect the assumptions and apparatus of class superiority" (345).

Cordons sanitaires were lacking not only to delimit neatly the difference between one class and the next, but also to bound the limits of individual selves. That morality for which the Victorians are so famous was more than some simple expression of low-church mentality; it bespoke a desire to govern and regulate character within a broader spectrum. The popularity of Evangelicalism among the middle classes, in fact, had much to do with its pliancy as a faith. As Richard Altick notes, Evangelicalism brought together the secular and the religious in ways particularly suited to middle-class aspirations and values: "Work, in a secular context, was the counterpart of faith in a religious one, and its efficacy too was regarded as infallible doctrine. 'Industry' and 'work' were holy words in the contemporary lexicon, and the moral imperative they embodied was identified with that of faith" (Victorian 168). As a faith that governed daily conduct in the ledger of business as well as in the great ledger in the sky, Evangelicalism provided a system of secular mores to govern both earthly and religious transcendence. The conflated transcendences of class and of spirit suggested that ascension rewarded hard work, honesty, and moral goodness; the mid-Victorian emphases on morality and character (to say nothing of the ways in which the two terms became almost interchangeable), functioned to implement a compass of sorts to locate and orient readings of identity within what had become a miasmic social order. The increasingly secularized religious ideals of the middle-classes promised both
heavenly and more immediate material rewards for respecting, rather than exploiting, the flux of the social system.

**Self-Help and the Problem of Selfishness**

As Stefan Collini remarks, "the ideal of character . . . enjoyed a prominence in the political [and, I would add, the private] thought of the Victorian period that it had apparently not known before and that it has arguably not experienced since" (94). Collini’s reference to the "ideal of character" points out the paradox within the term: "character" did not simply describe a subjectivity, but rather demanded the manifestation of certain attributes; as Bailey notes, character was “a matter of independent individual achievement though an ongoing process of self-discipline and self-improvement” (338). Furthermore, despite the energy that went into such discipline and improvement, character was to appear inherent. One was to work towards achieving the necessary features of character — “energy, cheerfulness, prudence and industry” (Briggs 25) — but one was also to maintain a basic integrity behind all of one’s actions and motivations. Character was hence figured as both essential and constructed. Because it conferred the respectability that, Bailey argues, was “considered a principal prerequisite for true citizenship,” character was necessary to the lady and the gentleman both; it was, perhaps, especially necessary to the man or woman who sought to move upwards in the social ranks.

Morgan’s arguments about the rise of the etiquette book in the 1830s emphasize the ways in which the newly wealthy manufacturing classes strove to assimilate themselves socially. “These new manufacturers,” she writes, “were a bewildering breed most often of humble origins, and their precipitous rise to wealth and fortune afforded them the economic but not necessarily the behavioral requisites for mixing in polite social and political circles” (49-50). As Bailey suggests, above, money alone did not class transcendence make. “Upward social mobility . . . depended as much on [the nouveau riche] adopting polite, fashionable, manners, dress and speech as on their accumulating
wealth and property” (Morgan 50). Smiles reinforces this, noting that “The making of a fortune may no doubt enable some people to ‘enter society,’ as it is called; but to be esteemed there they must possess qualities of mind, manners, or heart, else they are merely rich people, nothing more” (Self 301). In short, social training was a required component of moving into any class “above” that which one had left behind.

Self-help literature answered to the desire for transcendence that characterized both the spiritual and the more material interests of the age. Victorian self-improvement emphasized the development of “character” through education, dutifulness, industriousness, and perseverance. Self-help texts endorsed the pursuit of character for people of all classes, so that, although amongst the working classes “poverty was a major source of people’s understandings of who they were” (Joyce 26), the doctrines of self-help were nonetheless rigorously upheld. “The healthy spirit of self-help created amongst working people,” Smiles writes, “would more than any other measure serve to raise them as a class, and this, not by pulling down others, but by leveling them up to a higher and still advancing standard of religion, intelligence, and virtue” (284). Within the rhetoric of self-help, there was no range of identities to accord with the spectrum of an audience’s financial positions; money, in fact, seemed to have little impact upon the catalogue of desirable characteristics. Amongst the many ways he shaped the ideology of his epoch, Smiles succeeded in “draw[ing] out the ideal of the gentleman from its upper-class context, claim[ing] that it had not connexion with riches and rank, and relat[ing] it to moral worth” (Briggs 30), so that the attributes of gentlemanliness became accessible to men of every class.2 In some passages, Smiles even endorses poverty, arguing that “trials, wisely improved, train the character, and teach self-help; thus hardship itself may often prove the wholesomest discipline for us, though we recognize it not” (325).

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2As Robert Patten has pointed out to me, however, “the impoverished apeing the gentleman was dismissively labeled ‘shabby-genteel’ by Boz,” which is to say that there were limitations as to how readily the poor could adopt the role of the gentleman. Although the poor could be “respectable.” Altick, too, notes that middle-class Evangelicals’ “message to the poor was summed up in three words: Know Thy Place” (Victorian 174).
The notion of independence was at the very heart of Smilesian ideology, so that, although benevolence was an important aspect of gentlemanly character, it was commonly thought that "the poor's first duty was to help themselves" (Joyce 111) rather than it being the duty of the more fortunate to help the less. This latter formulation was not, at least not simply, the ideology of a laissez-faire society; rather, self-sufficiency was considered a fundamental component of a healthy identity, so that outside aid was therefore not really aid at all. A writer from the Religious Society of Friends phrases these sentiments with surprising coldness: "we would remind our poor Friends, that it is their duty, by frugality and industry, to use their strenuous endeavours to maintain themselves and their families . . . and not to be dependent on others" (cit. Joyce 111).3

If one was not to help others overmuch, neither was one to work too exclusively or ostentatiously for one's own benefit. The culture of self-help was suspect for its focus on the self to such a degree that, ironically and perhaps defensively, the lexicon of self-help increasingly coincided with the lexicon of anti-selfishness. Smiles's introduction to the 1865 edition of Self-Help laments that "the title of the book, which it is now too late to alter, has proved unfortunate, as it has led some, who have judged it merely by the title, to suppose that it consists of a eulogy of selfishness: the very opposite of what it really is, — or at least of what the author intended it to be" (33). Duty became the answer to self-interested improvement; duty provided a rationale for and a distraction from focus on the self. Smiles termed duty "the very crown of character" (cit. Collini 97), so that people's actions, although they might benefit themselves, were never ostensibly to serve their own interests.

3One was to work towards improving oneself through an unquestionable and uncontested sense of agency. The very grammar of self-improvement, however, relied upon a schema in which, although "the object of culture was the self, . . . the agent of culture was [also] the self" (Joyce 173, 174). The seeming paradox of determinist and constructionist agendas, rather than producing a divided politics, coexisted with surprising plasticity. Many Victorian authors wrote both with the assumption that one is responsible for the development of one's own character and that "character determines circumstances rather than vice versa" (Collini 91), so that the very character that one was to work towards acquiring was in much contemporary rhetoric an already-established — even deterministic — quantity. Many a Victorian text on political economy was nothing more than a "long sermon on the importance of character in making one family rich and another poor" (Collini 91).
The doctrine of anti-selfishness worked towards resolving the troublesome question of motivation in self-transformation and towards masking any economic motives behind self-improvement. When Smiles writes of the exhaustive catalogue of examples that comprise the bulk of *Self-Help*, he argues that they depict

the power of self-help, of patient purpose, resolute working, and steadfast integrity issuing in the formation of truly noble and manly character; exhibit, in language not to be misunderstood, what is in the power of each to accomplish for himself; and eloquently illustrate the efficacy of self-respect and self-reliance in enabling men of even the humblest rank to work out for themselves an honourable competency and a solid reputation. (40)

As this passage reveals, Smiles desires that his readers be ambitious to transform — or rewrite “in language not to be misunderstood” — themselves into success stories. However, the foundations of such an ambition are perilously close to contradicting the “steadfast integrity” Smiles designates as central to “truly noble and manly character.” How is integrity to be understood in this schema? To what is one to be true? How steadfast is one to be, and to what is one to hold steadfast? Self-help was not about presenting what “was already there”; rather, it required self-alteration according to a prescribed and endorsed inventory of characteristics. At least a certain order of dishonesty was an unavoidable prerequisite to self-improvement. As Morgan remarks,

whether people were suppressing emotions in the interest of order and congeniality; fashioning their appearance, behavior and opinions in order to please or impress an audience; or presenting only fragments of their whole identities, they were necessarily distorting, by means of concealment and embellishment, their natural selves. Such deception was not only tolerated but even enthusiastically embraced by . . . the new consumer-oriented industrial society. (204)\(^4\)

\(^4\)I am far less ready than Morgan to take as a given the concept of the “natural self” that lays beneath the scripted exterior. Morgan he, self seems ambivalent about this elsewhere (see the previous chapter for instances of such skepticism in her work).
The concept of self-improvement relied upon the notion of changing oneself, of quite literally making oneself different (Smiles would say better) than one was at present; this required being untrue to at least some aspects of the self one attempted to leave behind.

As Patrick Joyce notes, “The self that self-culture confronted was not at ease with itself, divided as it was between Mammon, and the base, and the spirit that expressed what was divine within it. . . . To achieve self-culture the good had to be actively exercised” (174). Like Evangelical rhetoric about transcendence, the pre- and proscriptive directives Smiles and other writers offer speak to the danger of a more self-serving, less dutiful, interpretation of self-making. For example, when Smiles writes of self-culture, a central component of self-improvement, he argues that, “The object of knowledge should be to mature wisdom and improve character, to render us better, happier, and more useful; more benevolent, more energetic, and more efficient in the pursuit of every high purpose in life” (313). The proximity of Smiles’s exhaustive invocation to goodness suggests, if only by repudiation, that there are motives for pursuing knowledge and self-improvement that have nothing whatever to do with benevolence or usefulness. As Smiles himself writes, “One way in which self-culture may be degraded is by regarding it too exclusively as a means of ‘getting on’” (315).

The potential for self-making in a model more selfish than selfless produced a specter that haunted both the Victorian imagination and the Victorian landscape in fact. When Smiles writes that “The spirit of self-help is the root of all genuine growth in the individual” (35), it is less clear than he might have hoped whether this “growth” signified progress or something more malignant. The emphasis on anti-selfishness at the very core of the doctrine of self-help invokes through negation the possibility of manipulating one’s surface simply in order to benefit oneself. This was a very real threat, as the growing number of banking failures made clear; as Timothy Alborn notes, “in a wave of company failures that culminated in the commercial crisis of 1857 . . . , episodes of wrongdoing began to crowd out examples of smoothly-operating commercial principles in the bankers’
own publications" (210-11). Thus selfishness, within the vocabulary of the period, became a term nearly interchangeable with fraud. The potential ramifications of the doctrine of self-help, then, went beyond the promise of upward mobility, beyond the field of financial gain; they also included the menace of counterfeiting — a counterfeiting, specifically, of oneself.

**"Be What You Seem": The Problem of Counterfeit Men**

"Counterfeit? I lie, I am no counterfeit; to die is to be a counterfeit, for he is but the counterfeit of a man who hath not the life of a man; but to counterfeit dying when a man thereby liveth is to be no counterfeit, but the true and perfect image of life indeed."

—*1 Henry IV* (5.4.114-8)

The double entendre on the term “counterfeit” is one that dates back at least as far as Shakespeare. The pun is at the heart of *Henry IV, Part 1*, in which it works out the play’s dual investments in financial and personal value and ensures the impossibility of ever clearly establishing the authenticity of either.⁵ Chronicling the reformation of Prince Hal, the play never clarifies whether, in proving himself a false thief, the true prince has done anything more than what he promises in yet another pun, namely to “imitate the sun.” “[W]hen this loose behaviour I throw off,” Hal muses, “And pay the debt I never promised, By how much better than my word I am, By so much shall I falsify men’s hopes” (I.ii.203-6). The text carefully refuses to establish the truth value of the true prince, so that behavior, be it loose or otherwise, and the identity it implies are maintained as masks that may be “put on,” that may be “thrown off.”

Most Victorian moralists were far from sanguine about such a capricious understanding of self-improvement. Edward Benson, the renowned headmaster,

⁵It seems significant within this context to note that any performance of *Henry IV, Part 1* is necessarily a meta-performance, for this is a play that is all about acting.
considered "untruthfulness and indecency"... the two most serious threats to the welfare of Wellington College" (Tosh 48). On the other hand, in his essay, "On Cant and Hypocrisy," William Hazlitt takes performativity as a matter of course: "Though few people have the face to set up for the very thing they in their hearts despise," he writes, "we almost all want to be thought better than we are, and affect a greater admiration or abhorrence of certain things than we really feel. Indeed, some degree of affectation is as necessary to the mind is dress is to the body; we must all overact our part in some measure, in order to produce any effect at all" (43). Hazlitt's easy exculpation of affectation was anomalous, however. Benson's conservative view was far more prevalent, so that the conscious manufacture of a surface self that was purposefully divergent from one's "interior" self was generally regarded at least as untruthful, if not indecent. Because the era of self-help was one in which the concept of character as a "part," the understanding of emoting as acting, had the potential to culminate in dire social and/or financial consequences. moralists and politicians encouraged the English public to reinvent themselves, but simultaneously cautioned them not to create surface effects that jarred too radically with more presumably interior motivations and opinions.

This double-edged approach mimicked the paradoxical rhetoric of many self-improvement manuals. Far before Smiles first published Self-Help in 1859, etiquette and conduct manuals had presented examples for their readers to imitate.\(^6\) Self-Help itself, as I note above, is a veritable catalogue of examples. Chapter after chapter reports exhaustive chronicles of successful self-improvers. The anecdotes, Smiles argues, are there to provide models and inspiration, but the performative aspects of the imitation he endorses threaten to undermine, at least fail to guarantee, the authenticity of the self-help aspirant. When the author of The English Gentleman (1849) implores, then, "You should be consistent with yourself... do not... ever wish to seem other than you really are," we might recognize in his plea for consistency a reproach against those who intentionally produce appearances

\(^6\)See my first chapter for a more thorough discussion of the dynamics of imitation.
that diverge radically from their intentions (cit. Morgan 132; original emphasis). 7

Unfortunately, the demand to “be consistent with yourself” sentences readers to a peculiar stasis. Such an imperative severely limits the possible range of self-improvement. More flexible, and more popular, was the strangely backward rhetoric of Smiles’s comment, “Be what you seem.” This definition of self-help, as the manipulation of one’s surface and the subsequent attempt to match one’s interior to that newly forged exterior, also offers a plea for consistency between the self that exists in the realm of being and that which exists in the realm of seeming, but allows for some motion. More dangerously, however, it preserves nothing essential, placing “seeming” prior to “being” in a structure that leaves little room to regulate the shape or boundaries of the created self.

The economic impetus for internal and external continuity was strikingly visible during the Victorian period. Morgan suggests that industrial society “encouraged all of its members to become expert deceivers . . . [f]or it required them to employ dissimulation for the self-interested purpose of promoting themselves, their ideas and their products” (243); this may be a bit strong (“all” seems all too general and self-interest was certainly not overtly encouraged), but the prevalence of cautions against charlatanism and fraud in the literature of the period suggests that the Victorians were quite conscious of the possibilities of self-misrepresentation. As Bailey notes, “Contemporaries were far from unaware that men might take advantage of the discontinuities of big city life to default upon their respectability” (346). The encouragement to make oneself a better man included, certainly, an economic component; “better” might be visibly ascertained by the location of one’s home, by the cut of one’s clothes, by the state of one’s accounts with one’s creditors. The potential, however, to parlay the appearance of respectability into profit, to exploit the

7See Judith Butler, Gender Trouble on subversive repetition. See also Peter Bailey’s suggestion that respectability, as Bailey notes, might be more a “calculative function,” an assumed posture used to achieve specific ends, than any sincere entity. In Bailey’s analysis of working-class culture, respectability “cloaked a form of deviancy or new style of counter-theatre. Where its practice served to extract material and social benefits from class superiors it functioned as a kind of exploitation in reverse” (348).
foibles of a newly impersonal marketplace, produced a nearly hysterical aspiration to accord appearances with intentions. Hence Smiles's comment that

'‘Respectability', in its best sense, is good. The respectable man is one worthy of regard, literally worth turning to look at. But the respectability that consists in merely keeping up appearances is not worth looking at in any sense. Far better and more respectable is the good poor man than the bad rich one—better the humble silent man than the agreeable well appointed rogue who keeps up his gig. (300)

Within Smiles's comment is the suggestion that the well appointed rogue might eclipse the humble silent man, that the good poor man might receive less credit — both socially and financially — than the seemingly wealthy one. Smiles's concomitant utilization of the lexicons of finance and morality points to the dangers of self-help mentality, of the potential for "keeping up appearances" to mask a less presentable interior. One might, through careful study of Smiles's and other moralists' exemplars, learn to polish a corrupt surface into something bright and seemingly valuable, but might retain a certain moral roughness; the threat of the actor who could perform respectability well enough to pass him or herself off as one might a false coin brought home, quite literally, the ramifications of trading on one's burnished exterior in order to obtain things, positions, or circumstances of value.

Impersonation is, of course, a central aspect of the successful con. The triumphant swindle relies upon a convincing mirage of respectability; in order to extort money from unsuspecting victims, the Victorian swindler needed to be able to play his or her part convincingly, so that the relationship between acting and swindling was quite cozy indeed. Amongst thousands of cases reported by the London Times, one finds those of John M'Dermid and Mrs. Cooper, unremarkable but for their similarity to hundreds of others. The Times relates the arrest in 1860 of one Mrs. Cooper who informed a Mr. Taylor that "she was a widow, . . . and that she had lately received a communication from the Court of Chancery, informing her that she was heiress to an immense property in Scotland, and that
a few preliminaries were necessary which would cost a few hundred pounds, before she could take possession of her property. The trap was so well laid that the victim fell into it at once, offered her his hand and heart” ("Extraordinary"). After Mrs. Cooper had succeeded in stripping Mr. Taylor of his property, she promptly disappeared. The figure of the scheming widow became increasingly popular in both fact and fiction: Trollope's Lizzie Eustace offers one of the more famous literary examples. The con artist who adopted the shape of a widow played upon the general trustworthiness awarded married women in general and upon Victorian sympathies for the widow in particular.

M'Dermid's case plays rather on the opposite side of the coin; masquerading as a military man, M'Dermid donned the façade of the generic dupe of the con. Apprehended in 1867, M'Dermid "ha[d] been in the habit of ingratiating himself into the favour of military gentlemen by representing that his name was the Hon. E. T. Lawson, son of the late Lord Provost of Edinburgh, and that his worldly prospects were good, and by these and similar statements he succeeded in extorting money and jewelry from officers in various parts of the kingdom" ("Career"). By representing themselves as respectable, well-to-do people, Cooper and M'Dermid turned false prospects into financial gain. Their convincing performances of middle-class respectability enabled them not simply to pass in Victorian society but also to take advantage of less-savvy aspirants to comfort and prestige.

As Marie-Christine Leps notes, "Whenever possible, swindlers were described [by the press] as handsome, impeccably dressed, and well mannered" (107). The descriptions from Le Temps of two mid-Victorian swindlers, the famous Allmayer and the lesser-known Adler, depict more polished, more ambitious, and more notorious versions of M'Dermid and Cooper:

Allmayer is setting a fashion: like him, every swindler wishes to own a carriage and operate with the manners of a lord and master. The police are presently looking for a swindler of this kind who, under the name of Adler, has made many dupes among the tradesmen of the elegant quarters of Paris. Adler . . . is a gentleman of attractive
appearance . . . most elegantly dressed, with a perfectly cut black morning-coat, pale trousers, dazzling patent ankle-boots, grey top hat, having in his entire person a very British air of dignity which lets him be taken for some Lord passing in Paris. (cit. Leps 107).

The fluidity between the lexicons of swindling and of class transcendence are nothing if not remarkable. If “every swindler wishes to own a carriage and operate with the manners of a lord and master,” there were certainly plenty of men who might not readily be called swindlers who wished for the same things — and sought to achieve them by recourse to the maxims of self-help. The carefully managed surfaces that are Allmayer and Adler — and the respect the press accorded to Allmayer is particularly remarkable here — function both as façades and as effective signs of upper-class gentility. Although he knows that this is the costume that allows Adler to commit his crimes, the reporter’s admiration of Adler’s “perfectly cut black morning-coat, pale trousers, dazzling patent ankle-boots, [and] grey top hat,” his attention to detail and terminology (“perfectly cut,” “dazzling”), suggest that the façade functioned successfully even when the viewer was aware that it was a façade.

Charles Dickens’s Little Dorrit is a novel strangely tailored to these dynamics. Set in and around the Marshalsea prison for debtors, Little Dorrit is all about class mobility, finances, self-help, and the fluidity of identity. In an ironic if unintentional commentary on imitation, the novel contains a plethora of repeaters: Maggy echoes Little Dorrit’s words, Mr. Plornish repeats after his wife, while Christopher Casby, fittingly, seems doomed to speak in linguistic doubles; echoing himself, taking the places of both original and copy, he remembers the past as times “past and gone, past and gone” and Clennam’s mother as a woman who “bears her trials, bears her trials” (123).

As Janice Carlisle notes, Dickens’s figures his explorations of the vexed dynamics between finance and identity through “what has been called the major polarity of the novel,
the problem of appearance and reality” (197). According to Carlisle, most critics have read this conflict within a moral context:

By using such conspicuous examples as the broad expanse of flesh that constitutes the Bosom of Society or Mrs. General’s “surface and varnish, and show without substance”, they are able to claim that appearances are false and therefore bad and that the destruction of appearances, the emergence of reality, is the highest moral good. To be morally effective, therefore, the action of the novel must invalidate the sham of seeming and reveal the essence of being to the reader. . . . But *Little Dorrit* is a novel that can be more justly characterized by ambiguity than by such simple resolutions. (197)

I agree with Carlisle’s skepticism regarding the simplicity of Dickens’s project in this novel; certainly, *Little Dorrit* does nothing if not complicate the “essence of being” and the question of its representability. However, I would add to, if not correct, her interpretation of the author’s project in this novel. If Dickens’s interest in the dynamics of seeming may be understood as an investigation of the dynamics of fiction itself, *Little Dorrit* is also an investigation of the economic ramifications of self-fictionalization in a culture in which seeming has come to displace being. In other words, what has been read as a moral project may have specific financial motivations and, as if to make this clear, Dickens overtly presents the novel as a parable. “If I might make so bold as to defend that extravagant conception, Mr. Merdle,” he writes in the preface to the 1857 edition, “I would hint that it originated after the Railroad-share epoch, in the times of a certain Irish bank, and of one or two other equally laudable enterprises” (xxi). The tragic financial consequences of Mr. Merdle’s fraud, framed within specific instances in British history not far gone, demonstrate that the potential for charlatanism contained within the doctrine of self-help poses a threat not only to social but to national security. As Charlotte Rotkin notes, “In *Little Dorrit* Dickens creates a realistic portrait of mankind in which the hierarchy of conventions allows for varying forms and degrees of deceit, some of which are individual
and harmless whereas others threaten the public welfare" (53). Dickens uses this novel to foreground the literal, economic ramifications of fluctuations in human value, to offer a plea for fixing the estimation of human worth in a perilously mutable marketplace, and — it is this, perhaps, that makes the novel so interesting — to concede the futility of ever achieving such a goal.

**A General Malaise**

*Little Dorrit* is, amongst other things, the story of an ailing society. The novel is rife with metaphors of contagion, beginning quite literally with the introduction of the Meagleses, Tattycoram, Clennam, and Miss Wade held in quarantine upon their return to England from the East. Mr. Meagles's paranoia about the plague initially seems to locate the disease as the stuff of comedy — "[T]o suspect me of the plague," he argues, "is to give me the plague. . . . I have been waking up, night after night, and saying, now I have got it, now it has developed itself, now I am in for it, now these fellows are making out their case for their precautions" (13; original italics) — but the opening of a much later chapter makes it quite clear that a metaphorical if not the literal plague is allotted a fatal and serious function in this novel. The opening to the chapter entitled, "The Progress of an Epidemic" runs as follows:

> That it is at least as difficult to stay a moral infection as a physical one; that such a disease will spread with the malignity and rapidity of the Plague; that the contagion, when it has once made head, will spare no pursuit or condition, but will lay hold on people in the soundest health, and become developed in the most unlikely constitutions; is a fact as firmly established by experience as that we human creatures breathe an atmosphere. (476)

The ailment in question here — and one might ask whether it is the same as that which the authorities sought to detain at Dover — is not the Plague proper, but rather that which proves to be Mr. Merdle's ailment: not illness, but fraud, which "spread[s] with the
malignity and rapidity of the Plague” and infects nearly all spheres of this novel. In small doses, it accents the pretty coquetties of Fanny Dorrit, inflects the dulcet tones of Mrs. General, and provides entertainment for Mrs. Merdle’s parrot. The infectious air of the Marshalsea prison, however, suggests that more concentrated doses smother instead of season. If it “is a fact . . . firmly established by experience . . . that we human creatures breathe an atmosphere,” the atmosphere of the Marshalsea prison for debtors proves so contaminated as to have “such an effect on Mr. Meagles that he began to gasp for air . . . ‘My dear,’ said Mr. Meagles, ‘I can’t live without breathing. This place has taken my breath away’” (677-8). In the Merdles’ parlor, fraud exerts its presence as an interesting if ignoble incense; in the Marshalsea prison, its aroma has become not simply cloying but contaminating. The Merdle’s parlor may be the place where Fraud puts up its feet; the Marshalsea is both home to its victims and school for its future progenitors. Mr. Dorrit insists upon referring to the prison as a College, and its inmates as Collegians. Dorrit, “Father of the Marshalsea,” demonstrates the bent of its education when he emerges into society a well-schooled sycophant.

The chapter that introduces this fabulous parlor is rather a good place to begin a discussion of what one might call the General malaise that infects this novel, first because of that parlor’s preponderance of things from those Eastern regions initially associated with the Plague and secondly because of another site described in that chapter. If the scene of quarantine at the novel’s threshold cautions us that things Eastern are potentially pestilent, the Merdles’ parlor is a regular breeding ground for infection. In a room “far more splendid than anything [she] had ever imagined,” Little Dorrit is introduced to Mrs. Merdle, who promptly “compose[s] herself voluptuously, in a nest of crimson and gold cushions, on an ottoman near the parrot” (200). The unhealthy influence of the East only reinforces the narrator’s description of the unhealthy inhabitant of this parlor: “The lady was not young and fresh from the hand of Nature, but was young and fresh from the hand of her maid. . . . Either because she had a cold, or because it suited her face, she wore a rich
white fillet tied over her head and under her chin” (200). The question of whether Mrs. Merdle is ill or simply affected is, of course, moot. Within the lexicon of Little Dorrit, Mrs. Merdle is ill because she is affected, because she has departed from the “hand of Nature.” “[W]e are not in a natural state,” says that great lady. “Much to be lamented, no doubt, particularly by myself who am a child of nature if I could but show it; but so it is. Society suppresses us and dominates us — Bird, be quiet!” (201).

If Mrs. Merdle embodies the falseness and superficiality of a society that has forsaken nature, it seems important to retrace Little Dorrit’s steps to the beginning of the chapter, in which she goes in search of her sister, Fanny. Upon inquiring for the theatre at which Fanny performs,

she was directed to a furtive sort of door, with a curious up-all-night air about it, that appeared to be ashamed of itself and to be hiding in an alley, she hesitated to approach it; being further deterred by the sight of some half dozen close-shaved gentlemen, with their hats very strangely on, who were lounging about the door, looking not at all like Collegians. (196)

Dickens reinforces his parallel between the state of the theater’s health and that of the Marshalsea when Little Dorrit enters the door and encounters a “man so much in want of airing that he had a blue mould upon him” (196). This is, one imagines, an advanced state of “illness,” but it seems significant, first, that it proleptically announces Mr. Meagles’s later gasping for air, and second, that the sisters depart the unnatural, smothering atmosphere of the theater, with its “confusion of unaccountable shapes of beams, bulkheads, brick walls, ropes and rollers, and such a mixing of gaslight and daylight, that they seemed to have got on the wrong side of the pattern of the universe” (196) to enter the equally, albeit differently unnatural, atmosphere of Mrs. Merdle’s parlor. In the latter, there is money enough to keep up appearances and to ensure that nothing is blue, from mould or otherwise, that is not determined to be best suited in blue. Like the theater, however, it is a place in which interesting, attractive, but unnatural surfaces are manufactured and
maintained. Like the theater, Mrs. Merdle's parlor might be said to operate on the "wrong side of the pattern of the universe," propagating the illness of façade, the less carefully-maintained manifestations of which are visible in the diseased atmosphere of the theater, in the terminal air of the Marshalsea.

Samuel Smiles's invocation, below, presents an exaltation of what one might call positive contagion, of the possibility of one man's good behavior "pass[ing] unconsciously into the lives of others."

Even the humblest person, who sets before his fellow an example of industry, sobriety, and upright honesty of purpose in life, has a present as well as a future influence upon the well-being of his country; for his life and character pass unconsciously into the lives of others, and propagate good example for all time to come. (39)

*Little Dorrit* makes clear, however, that the viral aspect of Smiles's theory has the potential to take on a less optimistic cast. Many Victorian writers testify to a fear of contagious behavior; the journals of Edwin Waugh, the working class poet and journalist, are instructive here. As Patrick Joyce notes, Waugh regarded his wife, Mary Ann, as a source of contamination. "It is not," Joyce writes, "that she wants education so much, nor that she is a bad housekeeper, and least of all that he is not attracted to her, . . . but that living with her in continuous strife breeds behaviour which wounds him to the quick, 'soils' him, 'disgusts' him, 'turns his stomach'" (50). In this instance, the behavior in question does not include the affectation of upper-class airs; behavior that is equally fraudulent, however — sometimes even legally so — proves to be the among the foremost of Mary Ann's failings. Waugh cites her "'blackguardism,' by which he meant in part the giving of false witness" in court testimony, and in part, what he referred to as her "'repulsive coarseness' . . . particularly its public unashamed display" (Joyce 50). Waugh worries in the journal that Mary Ann's coarseness and duplicity will infect his own behavior in some way, will stymie his project of self-improvement. "The public display of coarseness,
‘blackguardism’, seems to mortify him before all else in his relations with his wife,” Joyce notes. “And this extended to his own behaviour as well, in his response to his wife” (50). Waugh did, in fact, “catch” Mary Ann’s social corruption, using “filthy and disgusting language” when he spoke to her in public. “The wind stood still,” he writes, “and looked on in astonishment” (cit. Joyce 50).

Ironically, Waugh’s desire that Mary Ann improve her public image requires of her another form of blackguardism in which she is to bear false witness against her former self. As Joyce notes, “the concern with moral conduct was a concern with propriety in the public sphere as well as the conduct of the soul. The pursuit of the moral life sat easily with the gender presuppositions of the time: a ‘clever, cleanly housewife’ who would sit quietly in the home was a helpful adjunct to self-improvement” (51). When he wished that Mary Ann would represent herself, at least publicly, as a “clever cleanly housewife,” Waugh asked that she act some part other than that of the woman he describes only shortly after his marriage as “the ignorant girl who has been ruined by a mother more ignorant than herself” (cit. Joyce 49). Mary Ann is to learn and perform a femininity that has little to do with her history or her own desires. Waugh asks that she subscribe to the axiom of self-improvement, not for her own salvation or transcendence, but to further his comfort.

Dickens, it seems, recognizes this paradox within self-help, for he bases his critique of it on its implicit endorsement of duplicity. In *Little Dorrit*, the work of Mrs. General, to “form the mind,’ and eke the manners, of . . . young lad[ies] of distinction” (374), relies upon auto-blackguardism, upon the forsaking of content and sincerity in place of form and self-promotion, perhaps best exemplified in that lady’s vapid repetitions of “prunes and prism” because those words give “a pretty form to the lips. Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes and prism. You will find it serviceable,” she tells Little Dorrit, “in the formation of a demeanour, if you sometimes say to yourself in company — on entering a room, for instance — Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes and prism, prunes and prism” (397). The surface Mrs. General seeks to propigate may be quite pretty indeed, and the young lady
entering a room would no doubt look quite thoughtful as her lips assumed a proper purse, for, as Dickens writes, "it was Mrs. General's province to varnish. In that formation process of hers, she dipped the smallest of brushes into the largest of pots, and varnished the surface of every object that came under consideration. . . . There was varnish in Mrs. General's voice, varnish in Mrs. General's touch, an atmosphere of varnish round Mrs. General's figure" (377). This preponderance of shellac is not intended to set off original qualities, nor to add lustre to the contours of an original mind, however, for "[t]he more cracked it was, the more Mrs. General varnished it" (377). The figure "behind" the catalogue of words that give "a pretty form to the lips" proves to be a paragon of vapidity: Mrs. General's work is to form a surface that not only masks but erases content. "Her way of forming a mind," Dickens writes, "was to prevent it from forming opinions" (377). Vapidity is, then, not a side effect but a goal of social varnish; teaching young women to mold attractive shells with which to fill with whatever stuff is most appropriate, Mrs. General sets out to kill off sincerity. In this respect, Mrs. General, although a seemingly minor character, may well be the novel's Typhoid Mary.

One of the goals of self-help is to improve oneself in the interests of fitting into a new social milieu. Mrs. General's training encourages achieving this through erasure and rehearsal rather than the more traditional avenues of education and development (although one might argue that Mrs. General's work exposes some truth about how education and development work). Erasure is precisely what Mr. Dorrit has in mind when he hires Mrs. General to "improve" his daughters. Dorrit insists that Amy learn to "sweep [her history at the Marshalsea] off the face of the earth and begin afresh" (399), for their social success depends upon this deletion. The price of such "development," however, has the potential to be rather dear. As Jeff Nunokawa has noted, "Her father's effort to remove the traces of acquisitive activity that mark Little Dorrit may be characterized as an attempt to situate her with the mirage of Christopher Casby," the slumlord with the appearance of a benevolent patriarch whom Mr. Pancks unMASKS as an impostor at the novel's close. Where "[t]he
translation of the wage laborer into the aristocrat’s daughter is her ‘formation’ as ‘a surface’ . . . which is so expressive of good breeding,” the acquisition of such a surface threatens the wholesomeness for which Amy Dorrit stands (Nunokawa 322).

Nunokawa is quite right to link Mrs. General’s work with that of Christopher Casby: both signify the refinement of surfaces that conceal what is at best a withering and vapid content. More seriously, both stand for the propagation of illusions that conceal an exploitative economics. The disconnection between surface and content has very specific consequences in this novel: rather than simply producing spiritless personalities, it is also the standard of imposture and fraud. Casby’s visage, for example, conveys the image of benevolence: “his physiognomical expression seemed to teem with benignity. Nobody could have said where the wisdom was, or where the virtue was, or where the benignity was; but they all seemed to be somewhere about him” (123). His acts, however, characterize him as “a heavy, selfish, drifting Booby, who, having stumbled, in the course of his unwieldly jostlings against other men, on the discovery that to get through life with ease and credit, he had but to hold his tongue, keep the bald part of his head well polished, and leave his hair alone, had had just cunning enough to seize the idea and stick to it” (124). To return to the notion of counterfeiting, when a valuable surface proves to have nothing behind it, any economic system founded upon it is likely to collapse; the perilous economic standing of the residents of Bleeding Heart Yard provides ready evidence of the economic ramifications of the disjunction of appearance and value that is Christopher Casby, as does Mr. Pancks’s unmasking of that Patriarch. “Speaking as a sufferer of both,” he cries, “I don’t know that I wouldn’t as soon have the Merdle lot as your lot. You’re a driver in disguise, a screwer by deputy, a wringer, and squeezer, and shaver by substitute. You’re a philanthropic sneak. You’re a shabby deceiver!” (667).

Mrs. General’s schooling, although explicitly domestic, promotes an equally exploitative application of imposture. Although Casby’s imposture may seem the more serious of the two, Mrs. General might in fact be the more dangerous: it is not simply that
she is but a surface, but that she is a producer of surfaces in others. As Dickens writes of the great disease that is the trope for Mr. Merdle’s fraud, “Bred at first, as many physical diseases are, in the wickedness of men, and then disseminated in their ignorance, these epidemics, after a period, get communicated to many sufferers who are neither ignorant nor wicked” (487-8). The “dissemination” of the disease that haunts *Little Dorrit* depends upon agents such as Mrs. General whose lives are dedicated to disseminating the art of counterfeiting. Furthermore, and more frightening to Dickens, it seems, there is no outside to this ailment; theatricality and the counterfeiting for which it stands are part of an ontological condition that permeates Victorian culture as a whole. As I discuss further, below, even Amy Dorrit, the novel’s paragon of genuine identity, cannot escape the taint associated with profiting from self-manufacture.

The nature of the “disease” itself resonates in the unhealthy air of Fanny’s theater, in the theatrical valences of Mrs. General’s work, in the carefully staged performances of Mrs. Merdle’s parlor, in the benignant illusion of the Patriarch, Casby, in the impersonations of Blandois, in the affectations of Mr. Dorrit, and in the paragon of Society who proves to be a sham, Mr. Merdle. Noxious performances saturate the landscape of this novel to such an extent that theatricality is an overt trope for illness. When Mrs. Merdle concedes to Fanny marrying her son “with all her heart — or with all her art, which was exactly the same thing” (502), for example, it becomes clear that the disease at issue in this novel is not masked by art but *is itself art*. As suggested by the heart readily supplanted by art, the “art” of self-manufacture suggests, alongside the potential for class transcendence, a personal superficiality and an unhealthy national body. As Smiles writes, “every act we do or word we utter, as well as every act we witness or word we hear, carries with it an influence which extends over, and gives a colour, not only to the whole of our future life, but makes itself felt upon the whole frame of society” (345). It would be incorrect to say, then, that Mrs. General’s school furthers the spread of illness by masking it; rather the illness is itself the art of masking.
“Whatever He Did, He Overdid”: Swindling and Theatricality

Whereas Mrs. General and Christopher Casby are two of Little Dorrit’s more subtle deceivers, the figure who alternately assumes the names of Rigaud, Lanier, and Blandois is a rather obvious example of what one might call a really sick case. Uniting the theatrical and financial valences of counterfeiting, Blandois literalizes the criminal aspects of what, in the cases of Mrs. General and her kin, is at least more metaphorical. That Dickens places on the threshold of Little Dorrit the criminal whose theatrical posturings will affect the fates of nearly all of the novel’s many characters, and that he introduces him in a prison, drives home the iniquity of class-transcending performances. “A gentleman I am!” Blandois declares. “It’s my intent to be a gentleman. It’s my game. Death of my soul, I play it out wherever I go!” (7). For Blandois, gentlemanliness is both a given quality (“A gentleman I am!”), and a “game” or role to be “played.” He is able to successfully play the gentleman because he understands the machinations of Victorian gentlemanliness: it is a role establishable by acting the part correctly. “Have I ever done anything here?” he asks his cellmate, Cavalletto. “Ever touched the broom, or spread the mats, or rolled them up, or found the draughts, or collected the dominoes, or put my hand to any kind of work?” (7). Explicitly familiar with the signs of upper-class gentility, Blandois is able to assert his citizenship in that class through carefully maintaining its outward signs — in this case idleness. As he later complements himself, “You have a quick perception, you have humour, you have ease, you have insinuating manners, you have a good appearance; in effect, you are a gentleman!” (295). Reducing gentlemanliness to the aggregate of its parts, Blandois is able to play his game with great success nearly throughout the novel; although we find him in a prison at the novel’s opening, he has made his way to the more fashionable inns of the Continent by the early chapters of Book Two, and is cozily ensconced in the firm of Clennam and Flintwinch before blackmailing them in the novel’s final chapters.
As a gentleman-swindler, Blandois is a type that would be familiar to most Victorian readers. As Dickens writes of Blandois, "He had a certain air of being a handsome man — which he was not; and a certain air of being a well-bred man — which he was not. It was mere swagger and challenge; but in this particular, as in many others, blustering assertion goes for proof, half over the world" (9). Like the aforementioned Adler, Blandois constructs himself after the fashion of "some Lord" by attentively crafting his surface and comporting himself with "swagger and challenge."

The links Dickens establishes between crime, class transcendence, and theatricality have profound implications in Little Dorrit. Quick to show that Blandois is false coin (see the repetitions of "which he was not," above), Dickens is equally quick to link this falseness with acting:

His theatrical air, as he stood with one arm on his hip, within the folds of his cloak, together with his manner of disregarding his companion and addressing the opposite wall instead, seemed to intimate that he was rehearsing for the President, whose examination he was shortly to undergo . . . (8)

Whereas, in this instance, Blandois's "rehearsals" enable him to escape being executed for murdering his wife, his later performances enable him to insert himself into the genteel world in which he will play out his schemes. Blandois's adeptness at playing the

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8Blandois's "airs" resonate with the airs, discussed above, of the Marshalsea and of Fanny's theater.  
9Timothy Alborn remarks upon the fact that many Victorians preferred married to single men as business managers on the grounds that such men brought to their work a consciousness of responsibility to a "family" of dependents (read investors). Commenting specifically on Little Dorrit, Alborn writes. "While bankers at mid-century did not exactly send their general managers off to church with Amy Dorrit, they did re-evaluate the role of domestic values in business administration. George Rae, author of the popular trade manual The Country Banker, claimed in the pages of the Bankers' Magazine that the model general manager should be a married man;—and the reason is this, that a married man has in his own experience a knowledge far beyond that of an individual who remains single all his days. . . . Will not the general manager, who is himself a married man, and has felt the joys, sorrows, and strivings implied in the rearing of a family, be better able to understand and sympathise with the various characters and wants of the mixed crowd of his inferior officers . . . than the lop-sided bachelor, whose experience of the most interesting and important relations of life is but a matter of hearsay or theory? (Alborn 211)

Blandois's uxoricide takes on yet another sinister cast within this context, tying together and enunciating, as it does, his radical threat to domestic and economic felicity both.
gentleman is part of the canonical repertoire of a Victorian swindler. Dickens suggests that the dangers of self-help culture are exemplified by this type of “passing,” that the Smilesean vision of a nation of “gentlemen” may be something less than advantageous.

Dickens’s use of theatrical language in his treatment of Blandois is not incidental; the language used to describe both swindlers and the trials of those who were apprehended relied upon theatrical tropes. As Leps notes, “Papers announced court sessions much like theater seasons” (110).¹⁰ The Daily Telegraph, for example, promised its readers “a number of attractions in the shape of sensational trials during the ensuing month” (cit. Leps 110). More explicitly, the account of Allmayer during his 1888 trial remarks upon how he “seems to have received from nature all the attributes which constitute the master swindler: invention, a prodigious range of mind, the gift for persuading simpletons, care for setting the stage and attention to details, the genius of disguise” (cit. Leps 109; emphasis added). By reference to his theatricality alone, one can recognize Blandois as the typical swindler. The one detail the Allmayer reporter neglects to include is the aspiration to gentlemanliness.

Within the cast of characters that inhabit Little Dorrit, Blandois is the most obvious con artist. However, although he does manage to wreak havoc upon the lives of various other characters in the novel, Blandois is not exactly a master. He lacks the subtlety that would make his performances undetectable as performances for he has, one might say, too much of swagger and challenge; at times, he puts his audience on the alert. “There was an inkling of suspicion in Mr. Flintwinch’s face,” Dickens writes, “that [Blandois] might be nothing, as he swaggered out of his chair (it was characteristic of this man, as it is of all men similarly marked, that whatever, he did, he overdid, though it were sometimes by

¹⁰ Leps argues that, by representing swindlers as gentlemen, the press showed them to be “the exception which proves the well-known rule that criminals are stupid and vicious. The act is presented as one of a kind, and its field of application limited to dupes — a non-threatening category, in that it usually excludes the immediate reader...[T]he exclamatory, excessive style used in these narratives,” she continues, “transformed the criminal into a larger than life hero, much closer to fiction than to fact” (108). This thesis is interesting, but wrong, or wrong at least within the context of Little Dorrit. Sensational journalism might very well have convinced many a Victorian reader that he or she would not be touched by fraud, but Little Dorrit provides an example of a novel in which swindling and false class representation proves extremely dangerous to nearly all characters. Blandois is nothing, after all, next to Mr. Merdle, and the latter’s downfall touches a great many lives.
only a hair's-breadth)” (300). Although Blandois’s “swagger and challenge” later enable him to “pass” in Mr. Flintwinch’s eyes, Dickens’s comment that he is “marked” suggests the ways in which the successes of Blandois’s performances will be limited. There are members of his “audience” who remain unconvinced throughout. Of Gowan’s perceptions of Blandois, for example, Dickens writes, “That exaggeration in the manner of the man . . . was acceptable to Gowan as a caricature, which he found it a humorous resource to have at hand for the ridiculing of numbers of people who necessarily did more or less of what Blandois over-did” (408). Little Dorrit, Pet Gowan, Cavaletto, and Arthur Clennam, too, all see through Blandois almost instantly, largely because of the largeness of his gestures, the too-obvious theatrics in his bearing.

“**He had sprung from nothing**”: Mr. Merdle’s Complaint

Although he is a swindler within this novel that takes as its impetus the art of the con, Blandois is not the novel’s consummate designer. *Le Temps’s* description of the qualities that comprise a master-swindler proves instructive once again: “invention, a prodigious range of mind, the gift for persuading simpletons, care for setting the stage and attention to details, the genius of disguise.” These qualities are necessary not only to the master-swindler, but also to the aspiring capitalist. We would do well, here, to consider the novel’s most successful capitalist, a character so subtle as to be nearly invisible. “He did not shine in company; he had not very much to say for himself; he was a reserved man, with a broad, overhanging, watchful head, that particular kind of dull red color in his cheeks which is rather stale than fresh, and a somewhat uneasy expression about his coat-cuffs as if they were in his confidence and had reasons for being anxious to hide his hands” (207). Unremarkable in appearance, inept in but dedicated to exalting Society, Mr. Merdle is so convincing a gentleman as to make him a veritable national champion. There are but two early clues to the revelation, which comes late in the novel, that Merdle is both a forger and a thief: the fact that “nobody knew with the least precision what Mr. Merdle’s
business was, except that it was to *coin money,* and his odd habit of "clasping his wrists as if he were taking himself into custody" (331; emphasis added).

Mr. Merdle represents both the Victorian dream of successful class transcendence and the Victorian nightmare of the man who works the outward signs of that dream only to prey upon a larger and more wealthy public, by parlaying his acceptance by Society into an enormous, indeed a national, scam. Mr. Merdle's "daily occupation [is that of] . . . causing the British name to be more and more respected in all parts of the civilised globe, capable of appreciation of world-wide commercial enterprise and gigantic combinations of skill and capital" (331). Mr. Merdle is such a success that his name "was deposited on every lip, and carried into every ear. There never was, there never had been, there never again should be, such a man as Mr. Merdle" (476). As a man who has "sprung from nothing, by no natural growth or process that any one could account for" (593), Merdle becomes quite something indeed and in that he embodies, however temporarily, the ideal of Palmerston's speech. Merdle stands briefly a material testimonial to everyman's potential to achieve the capitalist dream.

The concept of the man who has "sprung from nothing" is hardly a scandal in itself; initially, in fact, it amplifies Merdle's success. Subsequently, however, the fact that this ascendance has come through "no natural growth or process that anyone could account for" returns, as Dickens demonstrates that the "unnaturalness" of this process is not without its consequences. Although Mr. Merdle's unnaturalness bears little or no resemblance to the melodramatic unnaturalness of Blandois (he is neither arch nor overblown, he is not flamboyant, and he hardly seems to act at all, let alone to overact), it would be too quick to say that Mr. Merdle borrows nothing from the theater. Mr. Merdle's very subtlety, his difference from the flamboyance of Blandois, enables him to move smoothly and quietly into the very bosom of Society — indeed, to *marry* the Bosom of Society — and there to smoothly and quietly carry out his self-enriching designs.
That subtlety is key. As Smiles argues, "The cultivation of manner — though in excess it is foppish and foolish — is highly necessary in a person who has occasion to negotiate with others in matters of business" (368). Where the petty swindler, Blandois, comports himself with "swagger and challenge" and thus all too often comes across as "foppish and foolish," Mr. Merdle has, if anything, too little of the actor for Society's liking. As Mrs. Merdle complains to her husband, "You show that you carry your business cares and projects about, instead of leaving them in the City, or wherever else they belong to. Or seeming to. Seeming would be quite enough: I ask no more" (333).

If Mr. Merdle seems to be a failure at seeming, if he seems to have nothing theatrical about him, it should be noted that, like Allmayer, Merdle pays very careful attention to setting:

Society had everything it could want, and could not want for dinner. It had everything to look at, and everything to eat, and everything to drink. . . . Mrs. Merdle was magnificent. The chief butler was the next magnificent institution of the day.

He was the stateliest man in company. . . . He was Mr. Merdle's last gift to society.

Mr. Merdle didn't want him, and was put out of countenance when the great creature looked at him; but inappraisable Society would have him — and had got him. (208)

Mr. Merdle is mindful that "Society [has] everything it could want." His home, his wife, his staff, are all carefully selected to paint a portrait of capitalist success. His character is so closely fashioned after the maxims of self-help that Dickens practically quotes Smi|s1eann doctrines of anti-selfishness in describing him: "He was the most disinterested of men, — did everything for Society, and got as little for himself, out of all his gain and care, as a man might" (207). Even in seeming to "carry[y] the Shop about, on his back rather" as a reminder of the "nowhere" from which he has sprung, Mr. Merdle seems the very paragon of upward mobility (334). Indeed, as Mr. Merdle's reputation grows, "[i]t began to be widely understood that one who had done society the admirable service of making so much money out of it, could not be suffered to remain a commoner. A baronetc was
spoken of with confidence; a peerage was frequently mentioned. ... Lord Decimus ... wav[ed] Mr. Merdle about on his trunk as Gigantic Enterprise, The Wealth of England, Elasticity, Credit, Capital, Prosperity, and all manner of blessings" (Dickens 578).

The externality of the signs of Mr. Merdle's success, however, the ways in which they are producible and, in fact, produced, makes for a precarious social picture and, more seriously, for a precarious economics. As Mr. Merdle comes to function metonymically as "Gigantic Enterprise, The Wealth of England, Elasticity, Credit, Capital, [and] Prosperity," he represents a financial system based upon images of wealth that prove to have no real value behind them. When Mr. Merdle takes his own life, the economics of his empire proves to have no more life than the cold, pallid corpse he leaves to the world. Naked, stripped of the trappings that enabled him to stand for "The Wealth of England," Mr. Merdle is reduced to "the body of a heavily-made man, with an obtuse head, and coarse, mean, common features" (590).

Throughout the novel, we are told that this physical body that represents the fiscal health of the national body has what Dickens terms a "complaint." Although his physician "can find nothing the matter with Mr. Merdle," can only say that "He may have some deep-seated recondite complaint" (212), we have known that this is not a well body. So good is Mr. Merdle at keeping up appearances, however, so carefully staged and so publicly supported is his act, that it is not until his death that the nation learns the nature of his disease. It is fitting, perhaps, that the Chief Butler detects Mr. Merdle's "condition" long before the Physician. Ostensibly just one more symbol of Mr. Merdle's success (he is, after all, "Mr. Merdle's last gift to society"), the Chief Butler proves rather to be "the stateliest man in company." As simultaneous guarantor and guardian of class transcendence, the Chief Butler is a two-headed coin: he ensures that Mr. Merdle's scenery is complete, but being as, if not more, schooled in the art of propriety than his proprietor, he sees through the pretensions of Mr. Merdle and his guests. When Mr. Dorrit, for example, finds himself confronted by the Chief Butler's "cold and ghostly eye", it
misgave him that the Chief Butler must have known a Collegian, must have seen him in the College . . . let him think what he would, the Chief Butler had him in his supercilious eye, even when that eye was on the plate and other table-garniture; and he never let him out of it” (518). As the gaze that sees through pretensions to the title of gentleman, the Chief Butler operates as a divining rod for fraud. His lack of surprise, therefore, at his employer’s suicide stands to reason. “Mr. Merdle never was the gentleman,” he tells Physician, “and no ungentlemanly act on Mr. Merdle’s part would surprise me” (592).

Perceptive though he may be, the Chief Butler only shares his perceptions post mortem and Physician is often stymied by the odd complaint of his wealthy patient. He does not, however, consider Mr. Merdle’s “illness” serious, let alone contagious. When it turns out that “the late Mr. Merdle’s complaint had been, simply, Forgery and Robbery” (593), the lexicon of disease that permeates *Little Dorrit* reaches its zenith. As Dickens writes, the most dangerous thing about “the manner of communicating these diseases . . . is the subtle way in which they go about” (487).

Mr. Merdle’s “illness” contaminates the “health” of a great many families, and it is the great man’s subtlety that enables his malaise to have such far reaching effects. No longer representative of the dream of transcendence, Mr. Merdle now stands for the nightmare of successful and ruinous imposture. Samuel Smiles’s cautionary words in *Self-Help*, below, are uncannily adapted to Merd lis types and aspirations:

> There is a constant struggle and pressure for front seats in the social amphitheatre; in the midst of which all noble self-denying resolve is trodden down, and many fine natures are inevitably crushed to death. What waste, what misery, what bankruptcy, come from the ambition to dazzle others with the glare of the apparent worldly success we need not describe. The mischievous results show themselves in a thousand ways — in the rank frauds committed by men who dare to be dishonest, but do not dare to seem poor; and in the desperate dashes at fortune, in which the pity is
not so much for those who fail as for the hundreds of innocent families who are so
often involved in their ruin. (291)

One wonders why Smiles goes to such trouble to warn his readers against “men who dare
to be dishonest.” Might it be that he has some inklng of the necessary dishonesty
contained in the kernel of self-help? Might he recognize the duplicity he recommends,
despite his good intentions, to his readers? Too be fair, one must allow that Smiles writes
against base motivations at great length, that he is verbose in his endorsements of goodness
and selflessness. Nonetheless, the suggestions and coaching he offers his readers, the great
many models with which he presents them, make imposture an all-too-tempting —
perhaps an unavoidable — product of self-help culture.

**Addendum: A Nation of Swindlers**

The playwright Douglas Jerrold introduces his farcical essay, “The Handbook of
Swindling,” with these memorable words: “Other handbooks have their merits and their
uses: far be it from the editor to detract one iota from their claims upon a thoughtful people;
yet it must be conceded that their different subjects apply rather to the wants of sections of
the public than to the public in its integrity. . . . but for “The Handbook of Swindling” —
why it is a national work; a vade mecum for a whole people!” (6). Unlike Smiles, when
Jerrold suggests that swindling is of national interest and appeal, he does not frame it as a
warning. Rather, Jerrold argues, swindling has such popular appeal because the British
public is made up of swindlers. Swindling, according to Jerrold’s text, is “the cement that
keeps society together; the bond of union; the very salt of human government” (14).
Where Dickens offers a parable against swindling and Smiles shudders at the very thought
of it, Jerrold takes a conflation of literal and metaphoric definitions and embraces it as the
stuff of socialization. As “the cement that keeps society together,” self-counterfeiture
enables society to thrive; it is the meat of national solidarity.
Given such an all-encompassing definition of swindling, it might do to look at the figure who stands as the exception to the rule in *Little Dorrit*, namely the woman from whom the novel derives its title. As the critic Sarah Winter has noted,

In her mediation of other characters’ desires, Little Dorrit becomes the standard against which all emotional or domestic behavior is measured, so that any character who desires love, or deference, or even power, in some sense “borrows” from Little Dorrit’s emotional capital . . . Because she is the novel’s ideal and source of its emotional-economic legitimacy and solvency (she guarantees that Dickens’s novel, and his moral message will pay off in the end), Little Dorrit becomes the implied third term in every relationship. As Arthur finally realizes, she is the “vanishing point” of his own story: “Every thing in its perspective led to her innocent figure.”

(247)

Amy’s function as the novel’s “gold standard” consists largely in the purity of her “mettle.” If steadfastness, selflessness, and lack of artifice are the qualities that grant Amy this function, I would argue that the latter of these three is most central to the novel’s moral code; Amy is revered because, as Edmund Sparkler might put it, there is “no biggod nonsense about her.” There is nothing discernably false about Little Dorrit; this is emphasized through both her difference from such characters as her sister Fanny and her resistance to the social molding offered by Mrs. General. Refusing to refashion herself to suit the shift in her fortunes, Little Dorrit keeps herself free of the taint of theatricality. As F. R. Leavis writes, “Her genius is to be always beyond question genuine — real. She is indefectibly real, and the test of reality for the others” (226).

While Amy Dorrit seems to embody the Smilesean ideal of a strict synonymity between the verbs “to be” and “to seem,” one must not forget the various modes of “seeming” in this novel. She is, without doubt, the novel’s yardstick of sincerity, but this does not mean that she escapes the widespread counterfeiting that colors nearly all the action in *Little Dorrit*. As Janice Carlisle notes, “One need only realize the extent to which
Little Dorrit herself is intimately involved in . . . acts of fictionalization, of deception and lying, to recognize the complexity and subtlety with which Dickens formulates” issues of authenticity in *Little Dorrit* (199). Amy’s marriage to Clennam brings together the financial and romantic plots of the novel and does so in a way that seems to erase the seams of theatricality. Her own acting, however, as Carlisle notes, is extensive; keeping from Clennam the secrets of his birth and of his false mother’s scam to rob Amy of her rightful inheritance, Amy Dorrit practices her own self-enriching scheme. By silently forfeiting her claim to what are her rightful moneys, Amy is able to marry Clennam without obstacle. Because Dickens tropes the securities Amy offers as romantic rather than financial, he sets her apart from Casby, Blandois, and Merdle; the wealth in question is not economic but relational. Whereas the novel’s other counterfeeters seek, through their duplicitous performances, to extort money from or gain power over unsuspecting victims, Amy Dorrit’s prevarications restore and guarantee personal and financial security to those she loves. However, as Carlisle notes, “Their life together is begun with the inception of a new fiction, a new instance of secrecy” (203). In this case, because the well-played ruse brings personal, rather than fiscal, riches, it attains an aura of purity.

Within the Victorian moral landscape, Amy Dorrit’s brand of swindling would certainly be held above that of a Blandois or a Merdle. It would likely even be exalted. Little Dorrit is the paragon of virtue who is to represent the honest woman of England, the standard that might save the country from economic and moral ruin. However unselfish her actions may seem, though, her deceptions further Jerrold’s arguments. “[T]he faculty, the desire to swindle,” he writes, “is born with us, and . . . however nice, and moral, and exemplary, we may be in our individual capacity, swindle we must and do, when we congregate together, even with what are termed and considered the very best intentions” (66). Amy’s swindling ironically protects the value of the “genuine” self, a quality that Dickens seems, perhaps despite himself, intent upon preserving within this novel of counterfeiture. However, Amy Dorrit transcends even Merdle in the subtlety of her act.
Because her performative endeavors protect and insure the national project of economic advancement, however, she appears genuine, a real coin, the stuff of value.

Amy Dorrit straddles the line between falseness and realness. She is simultaneously a marker of the imbrication of the two terms and of the Victorian anxieties about that imbrication. That Amy symbolizes realness within *Little Dorrit*'s schema of fiscal, social, and moral values displays for the reader just how important a role economic implications played for theatricality. Amy becomes the novel's arbiter of value not because she is "real," but because her performances of realness fortify rather than etiolate the illusions necessary to consumer capitalism. The blurred boundaries between unselfishness and genuineness become even more complicated within the frame of positive instances of capitalist self-making. In the following chapter, I will discuss how the theatricality necessary to manufacture a "best self" receives sanction from the Victorian public, so long as that theatricality retains its allegiances to capitalism. I will also explore the complicated ways in which gender, performance, and class intersect in making up middle-class value.
Chapter Three

Working and Playing:
Theatricality, Sexuality, and Work in Mrs. Henry Wood’s East Lynne

It had been well for him had he lived and died plain William Vane. Up to his five-and-twentieth year he had been industrious and steady, had kept his terms in the Temple, and studied late and early. . . . [Y]oung Vane was ambitious, and he knew that on his own talents and exertions must depend his rising in the world. . . . [When] the young Temple student, William Vane, suddenly found himself Earl of Mount Severn, and the lawful possessor of sixty thousand pounds a year . . . the prudence which had sustained William Vane, the poor law student, in his solitary Temple chambers, entirely forsook William Vane, the young Earl of Mount Severn, and he commenced his career at a speed so great, that all staid people said he was going to ruin and the deuce headlong. (Wood 3-4)

Poor William Vane! Once heir to a promising future as a hardworking lawyer, Vane suffers the devastating misfortune of inheriting instead wealth and title. However absurd this “trauma” may seem, in the landscape of Mrs. Henry Wood’s East Lynne such a shift is indeed a tragedy, for in Wood’s novel, the “career” that departs from hard work signifies the decline not only of a particular man but also of a particular kind of manliness. Losing the impetus towards work, Vane loses his “industrious and steady habits” as well, habits which Wood suggests are worth far more than sixty thousand pounds a year. As he lapses into indolence and self-indulgence, Vane loses his manliness, that ephemeral quality comprised of the virtues of middle-class masculinity. Thus, leisure signifies not comfort but a dangerous decline of “prudence”; with the demise of a work ethic, all ethics go by the wayside. Given that ambition and industry are the standards of many a Victorian novel’s moral framework, it is not perhaps surprising that, throughout East Lynne, a
dramatic increase in economic wealth often coincides with a dramatic decline in personal value.

In his essay, "Domesticity and Manliness," John Tosh itemizes those qualities that made up sanctioned masculinity in the Victorian period and made for "success in business":

... an expanding urban capitalism and the growth of Evangelical religion caused the desired masculine traits of the middle class to be defined in a new way, which stressed a punishing work ethic, independence from patronage or favour, piety and high-mindedness, sobriety and chastity... These qualities served both to promote success in business and to define a new middle-class character which could assert moral ascendency over the landed aristocracy... To be 'manly' was to put away boyish pursuits, and to grow up straightforward, earnest, and pure. (Tosh 46; emphasis added)

In the following pages, I will be problematizing both what Tosh terms "straightforwardness" in capitalist identity and the functioning of the term "straight" in that straightforward. The value of the male body depended not only upon its participation in capitalist enrichment, but also upon convincing, yet conservative, heterosexual display. The figure of the gentleman thus demanded and regulated sexual, as well as economic and social practices.

The common definition of valuable male identity in this period derives, as Tosh’s does, from that school of thought that reads Victorian masculinity as a product of repression. Given the preponderance of essays like William Cobbett’s "Advice to a Young Man" which addressed themselves to "sober, abstinent, industrious, and well-informed young m[e]n" (58), this tendency is understandable, but it has led to a nearly unilateral understanding of Victorian manliness as a "reaction against the alleged vices and indulgences of the territorial aristocracy... [which is to say] against convention, artificiality, and mere outward polish" (Collini 106; emphasis added). To accept sobriety,
abstinence, and industriousness as testimonies to realness is to maintain that, in re-acting against the "artificiality" of the upper classes, sober, abstinent, industrious young men were in fact genuine; this reading forgets that genuineness — or straightforwardness, as Tosh would have it — is itself a construct which demands certain actions to produce a particular effect.

The element of performance is an important consideration here, perhaps especially with respect to the category of middle-class working identity, or professionalism. Being so very new a subject position, this category required as much construction as repression to maintain its boundaries. Herbert Sussman's definition of respectable manliness as a "technique of productive repression, a practice of energetic action . . . that avoids the female qualities of passivity, interiority, isolation" (27; emphasis added), suggests the ways in which what has been termed repression might be better understood as production. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's contention that "male selfhood increasingly depended on occupation, and public activity" frames masculinity as something that resided more and more in acts than in appearances; those acts, however, were not necessarily any more straightforward than the appearances they sought to transcend. The act of being manly, that is, was not idle but creative, did not silence but rather articulated.

To suggest that respectable middle-class masculinity has nothing to do with performance is to accept the common association of histrionics with femininity and to forget that performance can be resolutely conservative. As Joseph Litvak reminds his readers, "[t]heatricality has a less glittering side . . . and this variant turns out to be surprisingly consistent with . . . authoritarianism" (3). When troped as activity, performance proved not only acceptable but redemptive; rather than being antithetical to mainstream masculinity, acting was often an essential tool for attaining its subtlety of character. In the following pages, I will be investigating, first, that which was produced under the rubric of the professional man, and second, the identities that professionalism
both sought to reject and propagated, the actions that it condemned, and under what conditions performance was sanctioned or redeemed.

Professionalism may not be a topic one would ordinarily turn to a sensation novel to explore. However, it seems to me that much that has been said about melodrama might be extended to its cousin, sensation, with a remarkable facility, albeit not seemlessly. Citing Peter Brooks, Patrick Joyce notes that "melodrama sought to expose [moral] imperatives by making the moral accessible and legible to all" (177). The related lexicon of sensation was utilized and disseminated in the popular press, popular culture, and politics; like melodrama, the sensation novel collaborated in the machinery that circulated both moral and political sentiment.¹ As critics including Ann Cvetkovich, Jenny Bourne Taylor, and D. A. Miller have argued, sensation fiction provides valid and relevant insights into popular concepts of morality and culture, including such categories as work, sexuality, and acceptable subjectivities; in both its dubious respectability as a genre and its concern with these latter provinces, it provides rich fodder for examining that bastion of respectability, the Victorian middle-class gentleman.

Mrs. Henry Wood’s sensational East Lynne is a novel well-fitted to elucidate the dynamics of mid-Victorian professional identity. As the novel explores the redemptive properties of work, it (inadvertently?) problematizes the "straightforwardness" that many Victorian critics postulate as a central tenet of respectable identity. Many critics (including Tosh, above), have noted that work was an important locus of differentiation between the rising influence of middle-class morality and the declining influence of the gentry; Collini adds that "work was the chief sphere in which moral worth was developed and displayed" (105) and Joyce observes that, whereas "[r]iches distort the nature of happiness and betray the underlying truths of the heart and of human kinship" (78), "it is through work, fending for a living, that one may realise the dignity life’s hard struggles may bring" (65). My

¹See Nancy Armstrong, Desire and Domestic Fiction for a similar argument regarding the role of the domestic novel in shaping the modern concept of identity.
project in this chapter is to interrogate what falls under the rubric of work. In many novels, but perhaps especially in *East Lynne*, work proves to be an oddly acceptable medium for transforming identity — odd, first, in that work proves a means for recasting sexuality and second, in that activity is not always related to industry but is consistently linked to acting. The work that work does in this period, that is, can hardly be called unequivocally straightforward.

To date, most critics have read *East Lynne* within the context of those sensational issues canonically defined as feminine: Cvetkovich terms the novel “maternal melodrama” (112-23), Litvak employs it to explore the issue of “home-control” (or the impossibility thereof) (138-41), and Elaine Showalter reads it as an exposé on women’s frustrations in marriage (*Literature* 171-3). Certainly *East Lynne* lends itself to domestic topics; the story of Isabel Vane and her marriage to the successful lawyer, Archibald Carlyle, her sexual fall at the hands of the rakish Francis Levison, her disfigurement and assumed death, and her return to East Lynne to masquerade as her children’s governess, is a tale that captured Victorian audiences as thoroughly as it has succeeded in monopolizing the attentions of modern critics. *East Lynne* is a complicated novel, however, and its narrative extends beyond the tale of Lady Isabel. Lord Mount Severn, Archibald Carlyle, Francis Levison, and Richard Hare are integral to the fabric of the novel and to the fate of its heroine. Common to each of these story lines are the issues of masquerade (here performed by men) and work, the former being an overt component in four of the five cases (Carlyle’s being the sole exception). Lord Mount Severn acts as owner of East Lynne months after debt has forced him to sell the property to Archibald Carlyle; Richard Hare masquerades as a working-class laborer and as a sailor; and Sir Francis Levison assumes the name of Thorn in a self-imposed demotion from captain to lieutenant, in courting Afy Hallijohn. Those cross-class masquerades that entail “real” work (as in the cases of Isabel Vane and Richard Hare) transform the status of the acting subjects; that they are acting eventually signifies naught, for the transformation from dangerous idleness to productive activity
validates and redeems usually-excoriated impersonation and rescues the acting subjects from the stigma of their earlier illicit sexuality. Acting proves in these cases to figure as activity rather than fraud so that, counter to my differently contextualized argument in the previous chapter, here performing proves to be oddly and entirely acceptable.

Because the odd confluence between work and performance is cardinal in the moral framework of the novel and to understanding of professional identity it represents, I wish to use those figures who act overtly — the fallen women, the mamma's boy, and the dandy — to examine the exceptional case I cite above, namely that of Archibald Carlyle. While the primary bulk of this chapter will discuss Isabel Vane, Richard Hare, and Francis Levison — characters other than Archibald Carlyle and the figure of the professional he represents — Carlyle, the good professional man, remains central to each of these figures. I return to Carlyle at the close of the chapter to demonstrate how he, too, actively participates in theatricality and how his supposedly antithetical, "straightforward" identity depends upon such participation.

**Feminine Idleness**

Primary to any study of Victorian masculinity is the effeminacy against which it defines itself; one might say that this rings doubly true in the study of professionalism. *Self-Help*, that manifesto of self-making for the mid-Victorian man which I discussed in the previous chapter, may be said to epitomize the spirit of Victorian professionalism; in that light, its misogyny may not be remarkable, but is nonetheless significant. For example, in presenting narratives about inventors (the species of professional he holds in the highest regard), Smiles notes that "[w]omen do not readily sympathize with experiments whose only tangible effect is to dissipate the means of buying clothes and food for their children" (96). This seems initially a passing remark, but many of the "illustrations of conduct & perseverance" Smiles advertises illustrate, too, the withering influence and inconstancy of women so that, in his project of forging a credo for business-
like masculinity, Smiles defines that credo against female bodies and feminine characteristics. There is the case of Richard Arkwright, inventor of the spinning-machine, whose wife “was impatient at what she conceived to be a wanton waste of time and money, and in a moment of sudden wrath . . . seized upon and destroyed his models, hoping thus to remove the cause of the family privations” (64). There is also the case of William Lee, whose invention of the stocking-frame is adduced to his rejection by a young lady who

was accustomed to pay much more attention to the process of knitting stockings and instructing her pupils in the art, than to the addresses of her admirer. This slight is said to have created in his mind such an aversion to knitting by hand, that he formed the determination to invent a machine that should supersede it and render it a gainless employment. (72)

As the latter passage demonstrates, not only are women potential banes to the project of masculine self-advancement, but they provoke their own exclusion from the realm of financial enterprise. Within Self-Help, women generally function either as obstacles or as dubious sources of inspiration to the man who would increase his own worth.

The misogyny Smiles invokes locates a denigrated womanhood at the heart of Victorian professionalism. As Sally Shuttleworth observes, “one strong impetus behind Victorian ideologies of womanhood springs not from the need to control women, rather from the problems involved in assimilating men to the new conditions of the labor market” (“Female” 54; Shuttleworth’s italics). The same social strictures that defined femininity in one breath with “nature” worked against political and professional valuation of women and their work; as Joyce writes, “‘nature’ denoted the spontaneous and the sincere, but, in opposition to ‘culture’ and ‘society’, could in its unrestrained forms denote chaos and disorder” (118). This sense of feminine chaos and disorder seems to prevail as Smiles and
a vast many other Victorian authors attached to women their fears about male identity and about society in general.² As Herbert Sussman writes of Thomas Carlyle’s work,

women are charged with Carlyle’s own sexual and psychological anxiety about male identity. His fixation with diseased and disruptive women works within a coherent male fantasy that displaces onto the female Carlyle’s own dis-ease, his own anxieties about the inherently diseased male self, and his own fear of the eruption of the interior fluid energy with the consequent dissolution of psychic control. (21)

In constructing the “real” of masculinity at mid-century, Smiles and many other writers defended against such “dis-ease” and fluidity by using femininity as a flag for idleness and indulgence; literal women were thus kept at bay either because they were idle in themselves or because they functioned as erotic distractions that kept men from active production for, as Davidoff and Hall have noted, “sexual play became the ultimate antithesis of rational work” (27).

The coincidence of sex and play in the latter sentence points to the crux of gender-based debates about work which came to a head in the mid-Victorian period. As Helena Michie writes of the narratives regarding women working, “conservatives focussed on sexual fall, protectionists focussed on disease, and the protofeminists, paradoxically enough, on the healthy effects of work and the moral and physical corruption that attended idleness” (Flesh 33).³ Tosh, representing a conservative point of view, writes of the 1860s “as a critical decade in the transition from the Perfect Wife to the Perfect Lady, equipped with an array of specialist servants and free to become an attentive companion for her husband” (53). The liberation this stance suggests (“free to become”) clashes, however,

²See Joyce’s chapter, “The Constitution as an English Eden,” for a discussion of the gender dynamics surrounding the 1867 Reform Bill. “Those who were not independent were to be excluded — the mentally unfit, the poor and dependent workers, the morally unfit, and — according to majority opinion among the reformers, plebeian and higher class — women, . . . Women were . . . amongst the dependent classes, ‘virtually represented’ by a husband if married, and in general seen as unfit to exercise independence and the vote by virtue of their lack of education, and therefore of political awareness” (196).

³For more on women in the public sphere, see Michie, “Becoming Public Women: Women and Work” and “Calling and Falling: Vocation and Prostitution” in The Flesh Made Word.
with the works of protofeminist writers such as Dinah Mulock Craik and Florence Nightingale who argued that women already had too much time on their hands and were in spiritual and physical peril because of it (Michie *Flesh* 34). Protectionists and conservatives may have found contentious the argument that idleness fosters sexual and social decay in women; with respect to men, however, they united in deriding the ill effects of idleness. Many Victorians may have worried about the moral consequences of women entering the work force, but even protectionists and conservatives concurred with a *protofeminist* stance when it was applied to idle men: men who did not work risked promiscuity, duplicity, and social irresponsibility. In truth, of course, all men risked such downfalls, but public opinion readily associated such traits with indolent men; it seemed a given that they would suffer the male equivalent of the female fall. As if to protect against this fate, Cobbett wrote to his young male readers:

> Start, I beseech you, with a conviction firmly fixed on your mind, that you have no right to live in this world; that, being of hale body and sound mind, you have no right to any earthly existence, without doing work of some sort or other . . . To wish to live on the labour of others is, besides the folly of it, to contemplate a fraud at the least, and, under certain circumstances, to meditate oppression and robbery. (9)

Masculinity in the 1860s demanded active involvement and visibility in the public sphere as well as an activity and ambition that might defend against the laxity which signaled both social irresponsibility and sexual deviance. In *East Lynne*, this equation makes for narratives not unlike Smiles's anecdotes of distracting women, above; Wood, however, worked from a protofeminist position, extending arguments against idleness to women as well as men, so that idleness signifies a potent evil for both sexes. When Archibald Carlyle first meets the young Isabel Vane, for example, Isabel's beauty "nearly took away his . . . self-possession" and he finds himself distracted from the business that has brought him into contact with her; later, her singing distracts him from "the eager bustling world, of money getting and money spending, money owing and money paying"
(55). After their marriage, Isabel's idleness proves infectious. "[H]ow does she employ her time?" asks Barbara Hare of Miss Corny, Carlyle's meddling sister. "In doing nothing," is the reply. "Sings a bit, and plays a bit, and reads a bit, and receives her visitors, and idles away her days in that manner. She coaxes Archibald out here after breakfast, and he ought not to let himself be coaxed, making him late at his office... she is first with him now; business is second" (134).

The threat Isabel poses to Carlyle's business is both literal and metaphoric. Miss Corny consistently represents Isabel as a very real financial threat to Carlyle's economic stability due to her "high tastes" — "your husband shall be brought to poverty," she tells Isabel at one point (218). Wood extends this, however, demonstrating throughout East Lynne the dangers of idleness for both sexes; the sexual fascination Isabel holds for Carlyle proves to have other, less concrete perils than poverty. Isabel's excess of leisure produces a mental vacillation and exhaustion that leads to an indefinite and ill-defined personality, one too vulnerable to browbeating and seduction. This vulnerability is, within the novel's ethical scaffolding, a cardinal weakness. For example, in the following passage, as Miss Corny remarks on Isabel's indolence, she not only bullies her but moralizes about female indolence:

Miss Carlyle gave an unsatisfactory grunt. "You seem tired, Lady Isabel."

"I am very tired."

"I don't wonder at it. I should be tired to death if I sat doing nothing all day. Indeed, I think I should soon drop into my grave."

"There's nothing to do," returned Lady Isabel.

"There's always something to do when people like to look for it. You might help me with these new table napkins, rather than do nothing."

"I make table napkins!" exclaimed Lady Isabel.

"You might do a worse thing, ma'am," snapped Miss Corny.

"I don't understand that sort of work," said Isabel, gently.
"Neither does anybody else till they try. For my part, I'd rather sit on and
make and mend shoes, than I'd sit with my hands before me. It's a sinful waste of
time." (143)

In line with the opinions of such writers as Craik and Nightingale, Wood ties
Isabel's sexual fall to an overabundance of free time which leads her to frivolous habits.
This sense of sin returns, as Wood suggests that Isabel's failure to develop a stronger
sense of personal agency prevents her from suppressing her attraction to Francis Levison.
"She was aware that a sensation all too warm, a feeling of attraction toward Francis
Levison was working within her: not a voluntary one; she could no more repress it than
she could repress her own sense of being" (177; emphasis added). The passivity that
allows Levison to seduce Isabel may be tied into her "sense of being," but Wood stresses
that, had Isabel possessed the impetus to and the habit of industriousness, she might have
manufactured for herself a more voluntary, less innate "sense of being," through which
she might have resisted Levison's advances. Wood emphasizes this by stressing Isabel's
own responsibility for her situation: "She had lost Mr. Carlyle, and by her own act she had
thrown him from her; and now she must make the best of her work, spending her whole
future life probably in one long yearning for him and for her children" (249; emphasis
added). Representing Isabel's demise in the idiom of work, Wood brings home (literally)
the conjunction of social responsibility and activity.

**Acting, But Not Playing**

A further implication of this last passage lies in the double entendre on the word
"act." There are good acts and bad acts, Wood suggests, and Isabel's failure to perform
the part of the good wife in spite of her precarious "sense of being" leads to her demise.
However genuine, however involuntary, however innate Isabel's "being" may have been,
Wood implies that it was her duty — indeed, her "job" — to act beyond and despite it, to
perform feelings and actions that did not necessarily coincide with her sense of self.
Cvetkovich observes this dynamic from the perspective of affect, writing of the impetus to work, self-control, and respectability,

nineteenth-century culture charges women with the job of maintaining affective relations as mothers, daughters, wives, and lovers. The affective power of women, which underwrites the sexual divisions of labor that assigns women to the affective tasks of the home and men to the economic tasks of the public sphere, is at once crucial to the capitalist social structure and threatening to it. Affect must be simultaneously produced and regulated; hence, the valorization of the tender, sentimental, loving woman, and the denigration of the oversexualized, hysterical, irrational, or overly sentimental woman. The productive contradiction plays itself out in East Lynne in the class distinction between excessive, aristocratic affective display and correct, disciplined, bourgeois affective display (111; emphasis added).

To borrow some of Cvetkovich’s language, I would like to lay the stress somewhat differently: it is Isabel’s “job” to maintain affective relations within the home; she is responsible for the “simultaneous produc[tion] and regulat[ion]” of affect. This is work. Isabel’s vocation should be the production of unaffected affect and the careful monitoring and control of that production. Had Isabel’s upper-class upbringing deluded her into thinking that she had simply to feel and act according to the dictates of her own heart, she learns after her fall that her new class position required far more of acting than of feeling, far more of work than of leisure. As Wood writes of the fallen Isabel, “A conviction of her sin ever oppressed her; not only of the one act of it, patent to the scandalmongers, but of the long sinful life she had led from childhood; sinful, insomuch as that it had been carelessly indifferent” (250).

Later in the novel, after the train wreck that kills Isabel’s illegitimate child and leaves her disfigured, Isabel does learn the power of performance and its coincidence with both work and respectability. “Her first intimation that she was regarded as dead, was through a copy of that very day’s Times, seen by Mr. Carlyle, seen by Lord Mount Severn.
...[S]he began to ask herself now, why she should undeceive Lord Mount Severn and the world. She longed, none knew with what intense longing, to be unknown, obscure, totally unrecognized by all” (273; Wood’s italics). Taking advantage of the fact that “no one could have recognized in the pale, thin, shattered crippled invalid, her who had been known as Lady Isabel Vane” (270), Isabel disguises herself with blue spectacles and returns to East Lynne under the name of Madame Vine to work as a governess.

Cvetkovich argues that Isabel’s suffering enables the reader to “forget” the social causes behind her situation and hence to identify with, rather than condemn her:

If Isabel’s fate can be attributed to a series of unfortunate ‘circumstances,’ the reader can avoid confronting the extent to which her problems are caused by her social position as a woman. . . . Readers can thus displace feelings that might be the product of a more systemic and nameless oppression onto a situation in which pain can be expressed because the conditions that produce it are so clear. (104)

A canny analysis, certainly, but it does little to explain the astounding appeal of a novel whose heroine is a fallen woman who, rather than remove herself from the source of her fall, returns to it under dubious circumstances. That Isabel Vane could nonetheless be a heroine to so many Victorian readers is something of a miracle, a miracle that is not fully explained by the méconnaissance Cvetkovich suggests, above. The appeal of this novel (and subsequently of the melodrama) to so many middle-class readers and theatrogoers requires a larger moral justification. Herein, I would argue, lies the importance of Isabel’s new role as governess; it is not simply her suffering but also her activity that expunge the consequences of her sexual fall. By ceasing to succumb to the idleness that signifies selfishness and illegitimate sexuality in this novel, Isabel redeems herself as a mother and as a woman. It seems important to remark that it is not only through activity but also through overtly deceitful acting that she does so; thus, the sanctioned self is not the “genuine” self, but rather one made to suit a peculiarly capitalist moral code, one that mimics the self one “should” be.
One might consider in this light the "occupations" of other female figures in the novel: Cornelia Carlyle (better known as Miss Corny) is an overbearing spinster, wealthy but frugal and practical to a fault; after intimidating the young Isabel into giving over her household duties (or "work"), she then ridicules her for her quiescence. Miss Corny's femininity disintegrates under the force of her authority, however; given its tenor and tendency to attach to economic subjects, it locates her too much within the sphere of things masculine. When Isabel's maid, Marvel, terms Miss Corny a "female Guy" (124), she articulates the social perceptions of women are too sure of and vocal about their control, especially when that control exceeds the domestic realm. Miss Corny's concept of feminine work has no regard for the work of manufacturing femininity; like the Isabel of the first half of the novel, she makes no effort to act beyond the dictates of her immediate desires and wants.

Conversely, Afy Hallijohn's primary line of work seems to be manufacturing erotic femininity. "If not a lady," Wood writes of her, "she was attired as one: a flounced dress, and a stylish looking shawl, and a white veil. A very pretty woman, tall and slender was she, and she minced as she walked, and coquetted with her head, and, altogether, contrived to show that she had quite as much vanity as brains" (274). Dressing above her station as lady's maid is one of Afy's more colorful infractions. More serious are her role in the false murder accusation against Richard Hare and her alliance with Levison, with whom she, like Isabel, briefly lives as mistress. Afy represents that "type" of femininity that is neither productive in itself nor supportive of respectable masculinity. Indeed, Afy seems the epitome of that Smilesean paradigm of the woman who distracts men from productive endeavors.

Mrs. Hare, a sickly invalid, represents the woman who is idle to a fault. Dear to many in the community, Mrs. Hare's feminine deference leaves her impotent even in her own home. "I am so thirsty," Mrs. Hare frets in the reader's first encounter with her, "I am dying for my tea" (17). "It may occur to the reader," Wood remarks,
that a lady in her own house, ‘dying for her tea,’ might surely order it brought in, although the customary hour had not struck. Not so Mrs. Hare. Since her husband had first brought her home to that house, four-and-twenty years ago, she had never dared to express a will in it; scarcely, on her own responsibility, to give an order... [H]er life had been one long yielding of her will to his: in fact, she had no will; his was all in all. (17)

Mrs. Hare suggests the another potential future for Isabel. So deferent as to find it impossible “on her own responsibility, to give an order,” Mrs. Hare is the paradigm of the woman who, again like the young Isabel, does not act at all.

Her daughter, Barbara Hare, however, Isabel’s arch-rival and the woman who becomes Carlyle’s second wife, seems a paragon of feminine virtue. She has her failings, but Barbara acts and generally acts well. When Miss Corny tells her of Carlyle’s marriage to Isabel, for example, Barbara excuses herself and

swiftly passed up-stairs to her own room, and flung herself down on its floor in utter anguish... ‘Married to another! married to another!’ she moaned, as she went down the stairs, ‘and, that other, her! Oh fortitude! oh, dissimulation! at least come to my aid before his sister!’ There was actually a smile on her face as she entered the room.” (112; emphasis added)

Barbara’s masquerade of calm forbearance epitomizes the work of self-control and self-presentation that delineates the business of proper Victorian upper- and middle-class femininity. In the one brief moment in the novel when Barbara’s loses self-control and betrays her passionate attachment to Carlyle, Wood perhaps ironically, uses the lexicon of the theater to describe the breakdown of Barbara’s carefully maintained performances: “There are moments in a woman’s life when she is betrayed into forgetting the ordinary rules of conduct and propriety; when she is betrayed into making a scene. . . . A little self-control and Barbara would not have uttered words that must remain on her mind hereafter like an incubus, dyeing her cheeks red whenever she recalled them” (137; emphasis
added). The work of the Victorian woman is clearly to act without "making a scene"; she must have a will active enough to enable her to act, and yet she must not act in such a way as to call up the specter of the theater.

Because we can see through Barbara's acting to a scheming self below, Barbara remains throughout the novel a dangerous and suspect character. Even in her domestic role as Carlyle's (il)legitimate wife, Barbara seems selfish and artificial. The novel's divided structure, in which the second half repeats in reverse the female drama of jealousy of the first, underscores the differences between Barbara's acting and Isabel's. Whereas Barbara's performances as Carlyle's wife uphold the tenets of proper femininity and domesticity, Isabel's duplicitous acting seems selfless because it serves to endorse "real" maternal sentiment and facilitates the suffering and repentence appropriate to a duplicitous woman. Hence, at the novel's close, Isabel is rewarded with transcendence, while Barbara receives at best a muted happiness.

This repetition begins as the disfigured and fallen Isabel gains a second chance to perform the role of proper woman and mother — to work at femininity, one might say. Due to her role as governess, however, and the transformation in class-standing she experiences because of it, Isabel becomes acutely aware of the links between femininity and labor; in working to support the "woman of the house," Isabel makes visible the work of womanhood. As she battles with herself as to whether or not to accept the position at East Lynne, Isabel wonders, "how could she bear to see Mr. Carlyle the husband of another? — to live in the same house with them, to witness his attentions, possibly his caresses? It might be difficult; but she could force and school her heart to endurance: had she not resolved in her first bitter repentance, to take up her cross daily, and bear it?" (333; Wood’s italics). "Bearing it" proves to be as much a component of Isabel’s work as the teaching and care-taking for which she is engaged. Indeed, bearing it cheerfully proves to be integral to the work of a wife. In one of the novel's most famous passages, Wood adjures the reader:
Whatever trials may be the lot of your married life, though they may magnify
themselves to your crushed spirit as beyond the endurance of woman to bear, resolve
to bear them; fall down upon your knees and pray to be enabled to bear them: pray
for patience; pray for strength to resist the demon that would urge you to escape;
bear unto death, rather than forfeit your fair name and your good conscience. (237;
Wood’s italics)

Cvetkovich’s envisions “bearing it” a passive act. “By identifying with Isabel,”
she writes, “the reader can express the pain she might feel about the necessity of her own silent endurance. Just as Isabel is absolutely helpless to change her position, the reader can imagine that her own position allows for nothing other than passive submission to fate” (103). I do not mean to minimize the discomfort of many married women’s social positions in this period. However, as Wood suggests, “bearing it” requires active work rather than what Cvetkovich terms “passive submission to fate.” This is not, perhaps, desirable employ, but the activity of “bearing it” nevertheless requires acknowledgment; it is, after all, Isabel’s passivity — her failure to be active — that makes her vulnerable to Levison’s charms. Her route to redemption becomes evident as she writes to Barbara Hare: “She — she writing to Mr. Carlyle’s wife! and in the capacity of a subordinate! How would she like to live with her as a subordinate? — a servant, it may be said — where she had once reigned, the idolised lady? She must bear that; she must bear all else” (334; Wood’s italics).4

The work Isabel seeks in writing this letter calls up a second component of “bearing,” namely childbirth and child care. Wood initially invokes universal maternal instinct — “Let a mother, be she a duchess, or be she an apple-woman at a standing, be separated for a while from her little children: let her answer how she yearns for them”

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4One would do well to note how much forgetting Isabel’s accomplishes in remembering herself as an “idolized lady.” Her suffering at the hands of Miss Corny, her husband’s lack of intercession on her behalf, and her boredom hardly made for an idyllic life. However, preserving the myth of an Eden before the Fall requires such amnesia. For more on the role of forgetting in antitheatrical identity, see my first chapter.
(327; Wood’s italics) — but the pervasiveness of this argument quickly breaks down. Indeed, Wood’s novel is rather remarkable for its subtle interrogation of the work of mothering, both affective and concrete. The maternal instinct that supposedly springs unbidden from the hearts of women deteriorates when Isabel returns to East Lynne as Madame Vine. Her position as governess places her in a different relation to maternity than she had initially held. Not only is she to work with and for her children and to work quite literally, not only are her chores different, but motherhood now carries a salary of seventy guineas.

The following speech in the voice of Barbara Hare offers further contradiction to Wood’s initial claims for a universal maternity:

“I was never fond of being troubled with children. When my own grow up into childhood, I shall deem the nursery and the schoolroom the best places for them. I hold an opinion, Madame Vine, that too many mothers pursue a mistaken system in the management of their family. There are some, we know, who, lost in the pleasures of the world, in frivolity, wholly neglect them: of those I do not speak; nothing can be more thoughtless, more reprehensible; but there are others who err on the opposite side. They are never happy but when with their children; they must be in the nursery; or, the children in the drawing-room. They wash them, dress them, feed them, rendering themselves slaves, and the nurse’s office a sinecure. . . .

‘Now, what I trust I shall never give up to another, will be the training of my children,’ pursued Barbara. ‘Let the offices, properly pertaining to a nurse, be performed by the nurse — of course taking care that she is thoroughly to be depended on. Let her have the trouble of the children, their noise, their romping; in short, let the nursery be her place and the children’s place. But I hope I shall never fail to gather my children round me daily, at stated and convenient periods, for higher purposes: to instil into them Christian and moral duties; to strive to teach them how best to fulfil the obligations of life. This is a mother’s task — as I understand the
question; let her do this work well, and the nurse can attend to the rest. A child should never hear aught from its mother’s lips but persuasive gentleness; and this becomes impossible, if she is very much with her children.’

Lady Isabel silently assented. Mrs. Carlyle’s views were correct. (341; Wood’s italics)

By returning to East Lynne to partake of “the trouble of the children” she had borne and abandoned while simultaneously “bearing” the pain of her new position, Isabel makes room for herself under the rubric of respectable femininity. If Barbara’s position as lady of the house enables her to avoid “being troubled with children,” Isabel’s role as employee allows her to enter the children’s rooms and lives and to be respected for her role as one of those women who “are never happy but when with their children; [who] must be in the nursery; or, the children in the drawing-room,” who renders herself a “slave,” and “the nurse’s office a sinecure.” Because she is paid for her services and because of Barbara’s distinctions between the caring for and training of her step-children, Isabel may partake of the work of mothering. No longer fit to “instil into them Christian and moral duties,” Isabel must secede this task to Barbara, but she, playing the part of governess and, later, of nurse, “can attend to the rest.”

Barbara’s views on the divided labor of mothering, however “correct” Isabel may initially deem them, lead her first to overlook and then to dismiss the signs of her young stepson’s failing health. This may be due to her “step-” relationship to William, but Wood nonetheless thus calls into question the wisdom of a mother being simply a “trainer” and the acting behind Barbara’s role as mother. Isabel’s presence in the nursery, as well as in the drawing room, enables her to detect the seriousness of the boy’s cough.

“Pray give your orders, Madame Vine, for anything you think may be beneficial to him’” [said] Mrs. Carlyle. “You have had more experience with children than I. Joyce —”
"What does [Dr.] Wainwright say?" interrupted Mr. Carlyle, speaking to his wife, his tone low.

"I do not always see him when he comes, Archibald. Madame Vine does. I believe" (371).

Isabel's dual role as "bearer" and governess, as both mother and worker, enables her to redeem her femininity and her feminine value. Her attentiveness to young William and her heartfelt suffering at his death crystallizes the sacrifice Isabel makes to the altar of active maternity. In this dual capacity of work — her literal employment as teacher and companion combined with her metaphorical work of enduring trials that must supersede those of marriage — Isabel reenters the Carlyle home as a "true woman." Upon her deathbed, she first reminds Carlyle of what she has borne ("Think of what it was for me," she says. "To live in this house with your wife... to be alone with you in [William's] dying hour, and not be able to say, he is my child as well as yours!" [517]), and then asks for his blessing.

'Archibald, I am on the very threshold of the next world. Will you not bless me — will you not say a word of love to me before I pass it? Let what I am be blotted for the moment from your memory: think of me if you can, as the innocent, timid child, whom you made your wife. Only a word of love! my heart is breaking for it.'

He leaned over her, he pushed aside the hair from her brow with his gentle hand, his tears dropping on her face. 'You nearly broke mine when you left me, Isabel,' he whispered. 'May God bless you, and take you to His Rest in heaven! May he so deal with me, as I now fully and freely forgive you!' (518)

Calling to the fore both her acting and her forbearance, then overlaying that with the specter of her former self, Isabel receives Carlyle's, and by extension Victorian middle-class moral sanction (indeed, Miss Corny blesses her as well). Here, contrary to so many other
instances in which performance is punished, the activity of acting is heralded as a sign of progress and redemption.

**Queer Angels**

“[L.]ady angels go wrong sometimes, you see; they are not universally immaculate. She must have been a queer angel, rather, to leave her children,” Afy Hallijohn remarks to Isabel’s former maid, Joyce (279). Clearly referring to the convention of the angel in the house, Afy notes Isabel’s difference from the paradigmatic domestic seraph, a difference that has as much to do with Isabel’s erotic transgression as it does with her failure to “work” — or to work out — as a mother. If Isabel’s early acts taint her, mark her as “queer,” her later acts, acting, and activity enable her to return to the league of angels, however queer she may be.

A similar schema applies to Richard Hare. Hare, too, is something of a queer angel, although his queerness depends not upon infidelity but upon his too-domestic masculinity — upon his uncomfortable proximity to the domestic angel’s gender identity. Before the start of the novel, Hare flees West Lynne to escape prosecution for a murder he did not commit. The ostensible reason behind his self-imposed exile and supposed crime is sexual appetite: the victim is Afy Hallijohn’s father and, because the beautiful and coquettish Afy is below Richard in class, the town assumes his interest in her must be erotic, not romantic. It seems that fathers exist to object to such liaisons: as Richard says of his own father, “there was a row at home about my going so much to Hallijohn’s” (41) and it seems that Hallijohn, too, objected to Hare’s interest. Richard’s guilt, then, is based upon misplaced erotic interest and the performance of culpability; Carlyle later tells Barbara that “He acted as though he were guilty and that . . . often entails as much trouble as real guilt” (214).
“Going after” a young woman who is unavailable to him is actually the most active we see Richard’s heterosexuality, however, and the machismo associated with a murder of this sort seems quite oddly settled upon the man Wood initially describes as

a blue-eyed, fair, pleasant-looking young man, slight, and of middle height, and quite as yielding and gentle as his mother. In her, this mild yieldingness of disposition was rather a graceful quality; in Richard it was regarded as a contemptible misfortune. In his boyhood he had been nicknamed Leafy Dick, and when a stranger inquired why, the answer was, that as a leaf is swayed by the wind, so he was swayed by everybody around him, never possessing a will of his own. (41)

The community participates in an odd dynamic that labels “feminine” both excessive and inactive sexuality so that they not only emasculate Richard but also cast him into the realm of criminals and other outsiders. A man who suffers from the “contemptible misfortune” of “leafiness” proves even more threatening than a woman, here represented by Isabel: Richard is a literal outlaw as well as a social outcast. When Joyce inquires of Afy whether she had been living with Richard during her long absence from West Lynne, for example, Afy replies with disdain: “Living with Richard Hare! why I’d rather go and lived with a scalped red Indian who goes about with his body tattooed in place of clothes, and keeps sixteen wives” (276). Comparing Richard to a man who is foreign in both race and custom, whose body is both too accessible and too ornamental, whose plenitude of wives bespeaks sexual apathy as much as voracity, Afy locates the idle Richard Hare as a radical outsider to this upper-middle-class community. This racial slur is only furthered by her later comment, “Why I never cared for Dick Hare. He was only half baked” (277). Commenting upon capitalist definitions of both civilization and maturity, Afy calls up a specter of pale flaccidity that suggests not only that Richard may not be operating with a full cookie-jar, but that he has some work to do — literally — before he is “done.”
Indicative of crises surrounding the Victorian definition of masculinity, Richard struggles to achieve a balance between effeminacy and machismo. The young “Leafy Dick” is representative both of the mid-Victorian movement to have young boys remain at home longer and of the subsequent reaction against that movement. Smiles’s argument that “Home is the first and most important school of character,” emphasizes a certain comfort about men — or at least boys — residing within the domestic realm (“Character” 31). As Tosh notes, “For the middle classes, instilling the approved character in sons seemed all the more vital as entry into the professions came to depend on hard work rather than patronage” (60); this “approved character” came largely from the influence of mothers and sisters, from feminine company (60). However, Joyce comments upon how, if the new masculine sensitivity “sought to avoid the ‘macho’ characteristics of what was often taken to be a ‘gentry’ idea of manliness, it strove equally to avoid the dangers of ‘effeminacy’” (118). As boys’ characters began to reflect too much of female influence, a backlash ensued that argued for boys’ removal from the home as early as possible (Sussman 45-7). The more extreme reaction against domesticity led to a rash of “young middle-class men who possessed the means to marry but preferred to remain bachelors” (Tosh 67).5

Hare is a sterling example of the young man who has too much of the domestic about him, whose sensitivity overwhelms his masculinity. In striving to rectify the “contemptible” effects of his remarkably intense attachment to and identification with his mother, Hare concretizes the ways in which achieving manliness is “a hard-won achievement, a continuous process of maintaining a perilous psychic balance” (Sussman 25). In other words, masculinity is a process that requires deliberate and consistent acts.

As was the case for Isabel, Richard’s redemption relies upon both masquerade and work — in short, in making for himself a character more active and virile than was natural

5Cf. Tosh regarding the rise of the Boy Scout movement in answer to a too-domestic masculinity: as Robert Baden-Powell wrote, “manliness can only be taught by men, and not by those who are half men, half old women” (cit Tosh 68).
to him. Of this "natural" self, Richard says, "They had better have made a woman of me, and brought me up in petticoats" (43); he must, then, work against nature to make up a more masculine, less indolent — and less criminal — character. He has already begun this transformation when the reader first encounters him secretly visiting West Lynne. Richard’s disguise as a farm laborer proves to be substantiated by "real" work. "Where have you come from?" his sister, Barbara asks. "I have been working in London," Richard replies. "But it is hard work for me ..."

"How are you working? What at?"

"In a stable-yard," Richard replied.

"A stable yard!" she uttered, in a deeply-shocked tone. "Richard!"

"Did you expect it would be as a merchant or a banker; or perhaps as a secretary to one of her Majesty’s ministers — or that I was a gentleman at large, living on my fortune?" retorted Richard Hare, in a tone of chafed anguish, painful to hear. "I get twelve shillings a week, Barbara, and that has to find me in everything."

(26-7)

Working not only transforms Richard’s body — his face, we are told, becomes "white, thin, and full of care; and his hair ... was turning grey" (219) — it also brings to him a greater sense of masculine courage. Summoning the fortitude to return to West Lynne to confront Francis Levison, the true murderer, Richard claims his redemption not only through acting manfully but also, as in Isabel’s case, through performing activity. If the young Dick Hare is, as Miss Corny calls him, "the greatest natural that ever was let loose out of leading-strings" (294), the older, more respectable Dick is both less wayward and less "natural."

After identifying Francis Levison as the man who had called himself Thorn, who had vied with him for Afy’s affections, and had murdered her father, Richard finds himself at a loss. "What steps can be taken?" he asks.

"That’s the difficulty," said Mr. Carlyle.
"Who will set it a-going? Who will move in it?"

"You must, Richard."

"I?" uttered Richard Hare, in consternation. "I move in it?"

"You, yourself. Who else is there? I have been thinking it well over."

I will return to Carlyle’s refusal to act for Richard shortly. More central to Richard Hare’s project of self-improvement are, first, how his redemption relies upon motion — he must “move” in order to save himself and his name — and, second, how quickly this activity, this motion, enters the idiom of performance. “Your acting in this affair need not put [you] any the more in jeopardy,” Carlyle assures him (422; my emphasis). Richard, whose previous guilty behavior led the town to believe in his guilt, must now act the part of an innocent man, both theatrically and legally. Hence, when he is called to the stand to testify against Levison, the reader is not so surprised to find that “He had resumed his original position in life, so far as attire went, and in that, at least, was a gentleman again: in speech also. With his working dress, Richard had thrown off his working manners” (476). Now acting the active gentleman, changed and tempered through his working experiences, Richard “appeared, strange as it may seem, to have cast away all his old fearfulness” (477). The less “natural,” more scripted Richard earns the respect of the same townspeople who had deemed “contemptible” his earlier effeminate idleness. By acting against Levison, Hare learns a strategy for performing masculinity.

Richard’s arraignment follows Levison’s conviction; like the trial, the arraignment proves to be largely a matter of show. After Richard’s case is quickly dismissed,

[then ensued the scene of all scenes. Half, at least, of those present were residents of, or from near West Lynne. They had known Richard Hare from infancy; they had admired the boy in his pretty childhood; they had liked him in his unoffending boyhood; but they had been none the less ready to cast their harsh stones at him, and to thunder down their denunciations when the time came. In proportion to their fierceness then, was their contrition now . . . (484)}
As Richard’s newly masculine character redeems him legally, it likewise transforms the cast of his previous life: no longer are his “pretty childhood,” his “unoffending boyhood,” cause for capitalist or heterosexual alarm. Rescued by his convincing performances of action and restrained sexuality, Richard receives his reward in a “scene of all scenes” that recuperates him into a teleology that includes a gendered “maturity.” Richard’s life hence becomes an irreproachable — indeed a commonplace — narrative.

If his sexuality seems as much in question as it ever was, however, we must remember that “sexual purity was a major preoccupation for many proponents of manliness” (Roper and Tosh 3). Richard’s hasty return to his erotic attachment to his mother meets with approval, apparently because he has learned to reject heterosexual alliances that are purely erotic. When Afy Hallijohn discovers him returned, redeemed, and restored to his previous financial standing, she tries again to ensnare him. “I was an idiot once,” he tells her, “I don’t deny it: but you cured me of that; and cured me with a vengeance. You must pardon me for intimating that from henceforth we are strangers; in the street, as elsewhere. I have resumed my own standing again; which I periled when I ran after you. . . . It won’t do, Afy” (508; Wood’s italics). In truth, Richard has exceeded his “own standing,” an excess that suggests a certain remainder of the old Richard in the new. When Mrs. Hare worries that Richard will be “drawn in again,” he responds with a troubling but apparently utterly acceptable plan: “Mother mine, I am going to belong to you in future, and to nobody else. . . . My place will be with my darling mother — at least for several years to come” (510). Replacing idleness with action, Richard Hare carves out a niche for himself under the aegis of the new masculinity, a new subject position that is able to accommodate the penchant for domesticity which previously had dubbed him “leafy.”

**All Play and No Work**

“Good-looking, black hair, whiskers, and eyes, and given to deck himself out in diamond pins, studs, and rings. He has been called an aristocrat to me, but I think it
equally likely that he was a member of the swell mob, doing the fine gentleman — which they always overdo.” (Wood 48)

Archibald Carlyle’s description of Francis Levison, above, captures a typical Victorian reading of the dandy. He may be a gentleman, or he may be simply “playing” at one; regardless of his actual financial standing, the dandy “does” the fine gentleman rather overmuch. Unlike the downwardly mobile performances that recuperate Richard and Isabel, Levison’s performances of upper-class leisure threaten the moral framework of 1860s capitalism. As Ellen Moers notes, “dandyism was a product of the revolutionary upheavals of the late eighteenth century. When such solid values as wealth and birth are upset, ephemera such as style and pose are called upon to justify the stratification of society” (12). Parading “ephemera such as style and pose” was not exactly sanctioned activity, however — hence Carlyle’s condescending comment that the swell mob, rather than simply “doing the gentleman” overdoes him, acts him to a degree that is less convincing than contemptible. Deriving largely from Victorian antipathies to Georgian indulgence, attitudes towards dandyism tapped into politics, economics, and the discourse of social responsibility. As Thackeray wrote of George IV:

I try and take him to pieces, and find silk stockings, padding, stays, a coat with frogs and a fur collar, a star and blue ribbon, a pocket-handkerchief prodigiously scented, one of Truefitt’s best nutty-brown wigs reeking with oil, a set of teeth and a huge black stock, under-waistcoats, more underwaistcoats, and then nothing. (cit. Moers 213-4)

As Thackeray’s passage demonstrates, the dandy’s fascination with surface signifies both characterologically and politically. That he took too great an interest in his appearance, or was too fascinated with things feminine was only part of the problem; as Davidoff and Hall write, the dandies’ “all-male social clique . . . was opposed to business pursuits or habits, ostentatiously even refusing to wear a watch, and spurning all domestic burdens. The Dandies set their mark on London Society with their fashionable elegance
and concern with clothes, the antithesis of domesticated masculinity dedicated to business" (21). The concordance, that is, of a feminized idleness and a feminine aesthetic in a man makes for what Moers terms "the epitome of selfish irresponsibility" (13), for a man who adds up to Thackeray's "nothing." Moers notes that "the endless Victorian preoccupation with the proper nature of the gentleman may be said to have originated from [the editor of Fraser's magazine, William] Maginn's simple argument that the true gentleman is known first by his differences from the false, and that the virtues of the Regency dandy are merely the vices of the Victorian gentleman" (174; Moers's emphasis).

As John Angell James wrote in 1858, "cleanliness and neatness border upon virtue, as excessive foppery and expensiveness do upon vice. It is unworthy of a female to be inordinately fond of dress, but for a man to love finery is despicable indeed" (188; James's emphasis). Using the idioms of gender, economy, and sin, James's expositions against male sartorial indulgence locate sin less in the feminization of the male body than in the encumbrances fine clothes place upon it. "What is a man good for after his silk breeches and stockings are on, his hat under his arm, and his head bien poudre?" asked Arthur Young, a late-eighteenth-century writer. "He is in order for the conversation of ladies which to be sure . . . is an excellent employment; but it is an employment that never relishes better than after a day spent in active toil and animated pursuit" (216). Young condemns the notion of an "employment" that has nothing of work about it by contrasting the very term "employment" with "active toil and animated pursuit." The previous chapter discussed at length the negatively troped performances of the fraud who acts without working, or rather whose only work is performing the signs of a substance he does not have. Interestingly independent of whether his façade is backed by money or not, the dandy, by his employment of constructing image alone, forms a subset of the category of fraud. Sporting diamonds and behaviors that suggest a value based on "nothing," Levison is merely what Thomas Carlyle termed a "Clothes-wearing Man, a
Man whose trade, office, and existence consists in the wearing of clothes” (cit. Moers 31). This dubious occupation not only makes Levison the “the Opposite of a Man ... the non-man” (Moers 176) who contests and defiles the masculinity for which Archibald Carlyle stands, it also allows Barbara to match his description to that of the mysterious Thorn. As Barbara recalls, “Richard described a peculiar motion of [Thorn’s], the throwing off his hair from the brow; he said his white hand and his diamond ring glittered in the moonlight. The white hand, the ring, the motion — for he was always doing it — reminded me of Captian Levison” (306). Levison’s self-aggrandizing dress and gestures eventually lead to his arrest for Hallijohn’s murder.

Levison’s sexual prowess is rather an exception to the asexual aesthetic of the traditional dandy as modeled upon Beau Brummel. According to Hiltrud Gnüg, the early dandy “consider[ed] erotic passion, which always requires a momentary loss of self, as a threat. ... As an aesthete who regard[ed] the self as a well-formed composition, the dandy consider[ed] love to be a kind of decomposition, a dissolution of the mental contours of the self” (232). Going beyond Gnüg’s easy dismissal, Jessica Feldman offers a broader reading of the erotics of dandyism as a paradox of misogyny and appropriation in which “the dandy’s distance from woman repeatedly collapses into direct resemblance to her” (6). Like most pre-queer theory scholarship on dandies, however — and Ellen Moers’ work is a prime example of this — these studies fail to consider other possible directions for dandiacal desire. The paradigmatic Brummel may have had little interest in real women, but this hardly means he had no sexuality, no sex. Recalling the ease with which

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6Cf. Moer’s discussion of dandyism and authorship:

Thackeray even blamed the defects of Bulwer’s literary style on Bulwer’s dandy costume. Playfully of course, but in that distinctive half-cynical and half-apologetic tone Thackeray reserved for all moral pronouncements, he announced that a certain “popular writer is in the habit of composing his works in a large-flowered damask dressing-gown, and morocco slippers.” If he exchanged the elaborate dressing-gown for the simple jacket he would write in a different style: terse, uncomplicated, honest. Without the dressing-gown there would be “no great, long, strewing tails of periods, no staring peonies and hollyhocks of illustrations, no flaring cords and tassels of episodes ...”. The rough, manly, undadorned jacket was becomng a moral symbol to Thackeray; it was the costume of a gentleman. The gentleman [sic] in a dressing-gown could not possibly be a good writer. (203)
the community feminizes Richard Hare for both heterosexual excess and absence, it seems important to consider homosexual configurations of desire that open up relational positions to women that might be more directly competitive, and that might explain both community ostracism and deliberate blindness.

Levison's actions in the simultaneous roles of dandy and rake express both emulation of and violence towards women. With Levison, this has a specific economic valence. He not only undermines naturalized femininity by "putting it on," he also attacks women socially and financially by ruining them sexually. In a socioeconomic context in which feminine worth inheres in the purity, "nature," and reproductive functions of female bodies, Levison defiles the value of individual women by consuming them. Masculination, misogyny, and asexuality are not, then, parallel terms in the character of the mid-Victorian dandy. Rather, this period seems to be one that emphasizes the arguments of more modern critics of drag and adds an additional component: the self-styled, seemingly wealthy, performatively feminine man may have as much of hostility as identification in his attitudes towards "real" women and towards the economic system he simultaneously mocks and exploits.²

Both feminine and idle, vain and false, Francis Levison challenges the masculine capitalist morality at the heart of the Victorian work ethic. Alternately a "graceless spendthrift" (11), and a "butterfly" (101), Levison is "a bold, unscrupulous man [of whom] there was little doubt that the more refined feelings, both of the past and the present, he had thought fit to avow for Lady Isabel, were all put on, meant to serve a purpose" (183). He is the chancre in gentlemanly character, playing upon its paradoxes to his own benefit and to others' ruin. Smiles's conflicting pleas for sincerity and formality in Happy Homes and the Hearts That Make Them locate the gap in which Levison

²The film, Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, deliciously enjoyable as it is at times, contains scenes that are emblematic of this kind of misogyny (I am thinking in particular of the attack upon the innkeeper's wife). See Marjorie Garber, Vested Interests, for more on cross-dressing and misogyny, especially pp. 354-5. See also Elaine Showalter's "Critical Cross-dressing" in Men in Feminism (Jardine and Smith, eds) for more on the threat of masculinist appropriation within a constructionist feminist frame.
operates: "There is a truthfulness in action as well as in words, which is essential to
uprightness of character. A man must really be what he seems or proposes to be," he
initially suggests (604), only to contend some six pages later that "The cultivation of
manner — though in excess it is foppish and foolish — is highly necessary in a person
who has occasion to negotiate with others in matters of business" (610). Levison’s
performances of manliness, both too clumsy and too adept, make visible the "cultivation of
manner" behind "truthfulness in action." As Feldman argues, "by advertising the self as
nothing but the sum total of powerful, premeditated, costumed poses, dandies announce
the ascendance of fiction over fact" (12). Given to making scenes, Levison engages in
what are figured as specifically feminine excesses. Like Barbara Hare giving the lie to the
figure of the demure, composed woman, Levision gives the lie to the atheatrical realness of
the gentleman.

Clearly, given the redemptive performances of Lady Isabel and Richard Hare,
Levison’s main crime cannot be his false displays of feeling or character. Rather, the lack
of productive activity behind Levison’s acts makes his falseness a threat not only to an
asexual, gentlemanly ethos but also to financial stability. Levison’s masquerades as
Lieutenant Thorn whose only work is "galloping hither and thither," seducing young
ladies, and ruining unsuspecting, hard-working families only emphasize this; given his
"career" of ruining others through destructive, as opposed to productive, acts, it is no
surprise that he proves to be the true murderer of Hallijohn.

As if to drive home the difference between acting without playing and all play and
no work, Levison escapes a death sentence, receiving instead

penal servitude for life. A far more disgraceful [sentence] in the estimation of Sir
Francis . . . That man envied the dead Hallijohn, as he looked forth on the future. A
cheering prospect, truly! The gay Sir Francis Levison working in chains with his
gang! Where would his diamonds and his perfumed handkerchiefs and his white
hands be then? . . . Oh, why did they not hang him? he waited forth . . . (510-11)
As his sentence suggests, the basis of Levison's guilt has little to do with sexual transgressions, masquerading, or even murder. These seem rather the effects of a more serious problem. It is his failure to combine acting with working, to use performative potential to recuperate a rather lazy "essential" self, that places him within the category of the criminal. Failing to take advantage of his culture's unusual exception to theatrical constraint, Levison finds himself sentenced to a life of enforced labor, a sentence which makes clear the acts and actions sanctioned by Victorian society.

**Acting the Straight Man**

If Levison exposes the self as a manufactured item more clearly than do either Isabel or Richard (both Isabel and Richard return to their "true" identities, after all, whereas Levison works to denounce the category of true identity altogether), we would do well to turn now to that arbiter of "perfectly correct and honest" character named Archibald Carlyle (Wood 178). Held up throughout the novel as the standard of genuine gentlemanly masculinity, Carlyle proves to be every bit as much the actor as his nemesis, Levison. His studied matter-of-factness, his carefully cultivated professional reputation, and his many instances of what Eve Sedgwick has termed "strategic ignorance" undermine the consistent, naturalized character Carlyle is supposed to represent. Visiting him at his office quite early in the novel, Barbara Hare notes "how different his manners were in his office, from his evening manners when he was 'off duty.' Here he was the staid, calm man of business" (33). The novel consistently calls into question whether that "staid, calm" demeanor is some simple reflection of Carlyle's nature. When Carlyle refuses Barbara's request for a lock of his hair, for example, he reprimands her: "Don't be a goose, child, and exalt me into a Wellington, to bestow hair and autographs" (107). However true to Victorian manliness his awkward display of modesty may be, Barbara immediately questions its source: "Is it in his nature to be thus indifferent — matter of fact?" she asks (107; emphasis added). Given Carlyle's struggles both before and during his marriage to
Isabel to balance his desire for her against his professional responsibilities, it seems clear that at least some part of him equated with nature has little to do with indifference — and little to do with professionalism as well.

Wood’s representation of masculine “nature” depicts an “essence” far less stable than ephemeral. In another of the novel’s more famous passages, she addresses her (presumably female) reader directly:

Young lady, when he, who is soon to be your lord and master, protests to you that he shall always be as ardent a lover as he is now, believe him if you like, but don’t reproach him when the disappointment comes. He does not wilfully deceive you; he only forgets that it is in the constitution of man to change, the very essence of his nature. The time will arrive when his manner must settle down into a calmness, which to you, if you be of an exacting temperament, may look like indifference or coldness; but you will do well to put up with it, for it will never now be otherwise.

(166; emphasis added)

Wood’s play between will and constitution, between intent and nature, confirms Sussman’s reading of Victorian manhood as a “a hard-won achievement” rather than some essential property that belongs to male bodies by nature. The consistency and steadiness for which Carlyle stands requires his acting against “the very essence of his nature.” As I have already discussed in reference to Isabel and Richard, Carlyle’s “will” must supersede his “nature” if he is to seem the scion of respectability West Lynne so wants to believe he is; it seems, then, that it is not “in his nature to be thus indifferent.”

My discussion, above, of Isabel suggests that Carlyle’s business-like disinterest threatens to disintegrate in the face of his physical desire for her — as Miss Corny observes, “she is first with him now; business is second” (134). If Carlyle’s self-indulgence seems to suggest a less policed, more “natural” self behind the man of business, however, we must be careful to remember the plot Carlyle follows throughout the novel and how that plot plots the trajectory of his marriage to Isabel and her subsequent
fate. Carlyle’s own trajectory endorses, indeed represents, the potential for upright, steady middle-class men of character to supersede the financial and historical advantages of the gentry (“Egad!” Lord Mount Severn exclaims when Carlyle first approaches him regarding purchasing East Lynne, “lawyering can’t be such bad work, Carlyle.” “Nor is it,” Carlyle replies [5]). Although his new property places Carlyle on a footing with ladies and gentlemen of title — as the earl acknowledges, “A man who could purchase East Lynne was worthy of being received as an equal, though he was but a country lawyer” (54) — purchasing East Lynne accomplishes only part of Carlyle’s project. It is his marriage to Isabel, the earl’s daughter, that ultimately cements and essentializes professional transcendence by merging two differently classed persons into the “one flesh” of the nuptial body. The romantic valences of marriage, then, obscure the work that marriage does in solidifying Carlyle’s business identity.

The proposal itself is a carefully staged endeavor, as Carlyle lays the groundwork for his offer shortly after the earl’s death. As the financially embarrassed Isabel departs East Lynne for her uncle’s home, Carlyle reminds her that their “ordinary paths in life lie far and wide apart,” but then, paradoxically, leaves “a bit of crumpled paper lying on her lap... it was a bank-note for one hundred pounds” (90).

Her checks [sic] burnt, her fingers trembled, her angry spirit was up in arms. In that first moment of discovery, she was ready to resent it as an insult; but when she came to remember the sober facts of the last few days, her anger subsided into admiration of his wondrous kindness. Did he not know that she was without a home to call her own, without money — absolutely without money, save what would be given her in charity? (90)

While Carlyle’s words to Isabel mark their difference, his act of covertly endowing her with a hundred pound note marks a different inequality than do his words. His surreptitious gesture, albeit camouflaged as decorousness, belies the stability of his position. Indeed, Isabel initially “resent[s]... as an insult” what she quickly re-reads as
generosity; her financially embarrassed status functions both to enable Carlyle’s act and to facilitate her subsequent revision of it from “an insult” to an act of “wondrous kindness.” Acting so as to manipulate the parameters of his relationship to Isabel as well as her understanding of the context of his actions, Carlyle creates for himself access to the woman just “far and wide apart” from himself to consolidate his social role in the community.

Carlyle appears shortly thereafter at the new Lord and Lady Mount Severn’s estate, where he finds Isabel misused and unhappy. By this time, Isabel has failed in her resolution to keep the hundred pound note intact and to return it to Carlyle; when she stammers her thanks, Carlyle laughs off her embarrassment, declaring “I do not know what you are talking of” (97). Isabel’s debt is no laughing matter, however, for in breaking the note, she enters into the tangle of financial and emotional issues that will make up her relationship to her future husband, just as her sobriety and Carlyle’s willful ignorance of it will mark their subsequent relationship.

Wood depicts Carlyle’s proposal as having an odd and indeed an incredible spontaneity. “What emotion was it that agitated his countenance, impeded his breath, and dyed his face blood-red?” Wood asks. “His better genius was surely not watching over him, or those words had never been spoken” (98). The proposal ensues:

“If my words offend you, Lady Isabel, check them, as their presumption deserves, and pardon me. May I — dare I — offer you to return to East Lynne as its mistress?”

... her first emotion was one of entire opposition, her first movement to express it, as she essayed to withdraw herself and her hand away from him.

But Mr. Carlyle did not suffer it. He not only retained that hand, but took the other also, and spoke, now the ice was broken, eloquent words of love. Not unmeaning phrases of rhapsody, about hearts and darts and dying for her, like somebody else might have spoken, but earnest-hearted words of deep tenderness.
calculated to win upon the mind's good sense, as well as upon the ear and heart ... (99)

Carlyle makes his offer, he retains Isabel's hand, he speaks "earnest-hearted words ... calculated to win upon the mind's good sense." That Wood employs a professional lexicon to depict what is customarily a purely romantic and domestic event suggests the depth and variety of ends Carlyle seeks in marrying Isabel. His synecdochal recognition of Isabel's hands — and hence of Isabel — as property to be gained and retained makes evident the tangle of financial and personal interests that characterize Carlyle's romantic relationships.8 Carlyle's deliberate avoidance of excessively theatrical "phrases of rhapsody, about hearts and darts and dying for her" may be meant to confirm him as a gentleman of sincere and genuine character; should we buy into his "earnest-heartedness," however, we forget that it, too, is not only performative but "calculated to win." For Carlyle, marriage is an occasion for staging business as well as affection; it is a site of both effort and performance, of both work and play.

Many critics have remarked upon Carlyle's complicity in Isabel's sexual fall. The deliberate ignorance, both infantilizing and infuriating, that precedes his proposal to Isabel continues to characterize Carlyle's interactions with her. The narrator disparages Isabel's jealousy of Barbara Hare, representing Carlyle as "perfectly honorable and true giving her no shadow of cause or reason to be jealous of him" (216). Carlyle's refusal to acknowledge Isabel's concerns as serious, however, inspire an understandable uncertainty about Carlyle's intentions and the "nature" of his feelings for her. After all, Carlyle initially encourages Levison, inviting him to his home, promoting him as a companion to Isabel, all under the rubric of business. The resulting debacle allows Carlyle to engage in direct combat with the aristocracy, to display openly a hostility that would otherwise be out of keeping with staid professional identity. Furthermore, the surreptitious meetings with

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8The second proposal, this time to Barbara Hare, makes even more evident Carlyle's distance from the paradigmatic romantic hero: "'Will you marry me, Barbara?' The words were spoken in the quietest, most matter-of-fact tone, just as if he had said, Shall I give you a chair, Barbara" (307).
Barbara Hare that had led Isabel to suspect infidelity were *business* meetings. When her uncle seeks her out abroad, Isabel tries to explain her desertion:

"But he was always with Barbara Hare!" she murmured, by way of some faint excuse.

"She had to see him upon this affair: her mother could not, for it was obliged to be kept from the father. And so you construed business interviews into assignations!" continued Lord Mount Severn with cutting derision. (257)

Lord Mount Severn's derision suggests that Isabel is a fool to confuse romantic and professional interests, that her fall is due to her own misreading. As I have been arguing, however, the conflation of love and money, of romantic and economic, private and public interests, is the basis of the middle-class morality that governs this novel. Isabel's confusion, then, is anything but surprising.

Nor should we be surprised that the new Lord Mount Severn deems Levison a "cur" and Carlyle "one of nature's gentlemen" (257). What is surprising is the ease with which the Lord and the narrator concur upon the point of nature. Carlyle's "perfectly honorable and true" character is no less an act than Isabel's performances as Madame Vine, than Richard Hare's as a laborer, than Francis Levison's as Thorn, indeed than any of these characters' representations of their "true" selves. The one difference is that Carlyle works his image more efficiently, more quietly, and more seamlessly than these other characters; in its subtlety, his "act" makes up the truth of "natural" identity, a truth which neither the narrator nor many a reading subject is willing to disown.

"I Cannot Act": Running the Show

"Archibald, dear Archibald what can be done to clear him?" [Barbara] asked, the tears rising to her eyes.

"I cannot act against Levison."

"Not act? not act for Richard?"
“He bent his clear, truthful eyes upon her. “My dearest, how can I? . . . You have not considered, Barbara. It would look like my own revenge.” (408)

I am reminded often, in reading East Lynne, of Joseph Litvak’s argument regarding Mansfield Park. "Mansfield Park," he writes, "is about the incursion of public values upon private experience, about the theatricality of everyday life, in which to say, with Fanny, ‘No, indeed, I cannot act,’ is already to perform, whether one wants to or not" (5). Fanny Price’s refusal to participate in the Bertrams’ private theatricals seems more innocent than calculated; she cannot help but perform, certainly, but her desire to avoid the spotlight has more to do with a terror of being looked at than of what it would “look like” for her to perform. Carlyle’s “I cannot act,” on the other hand, is a studied performance in itself. “It would look like my own revenge,” he tells Barbara, so that his refusal to act does not excise him from the performance but rather enables him to play a different and more desirable role in the ensuing “scenes.” Carlyle’s motivations in refusing to act for Richard do not rely upon his moral rectitude, for his previous acts demonstrate that he has little aversion even to deceptive performances. As Wood writes when Carlyle brings (the wrong) Thorn to his office under false pretenses so that Richard may see him, “Mr. Carlyle held deceit and all underhanded doings in especial abhorrence; yet he deemed that he was acting right, under the circumstances” (220; emphasis added). To distinguish between acting and acting right is to identify the groundwork of respectable Victorian middle-class identity. Carlyle’s act of refusal protects and preserves the natural straightforwardness associated with the Victorian professional, and ensures that Lord Mount Severn may continue to speak of him as one of “nature’s gentlemen”; however, as Litvak’s comment above reminds us, “to say, ‘No, indeed, I cannot act,’ is already to perform.”

Punctuating the oddness of the distinction between acting and acting right is Carlyle’s profession, which demands acting, not in the theater, of course, but in the service of that historic (and histrionic) opponent of the theater, the law. To refuse to act for
Richard is to establish that Carlyle will and does act for others (indeed he has acted, quite literally, for Richard in the past, as his charade with Thorn demonstrates). The difference seems to be one between public and private welfare; as I have been discussing throughout, the sanctioned performances of work that permeate this novel serve national and hegemonic interests. Carlyle does not refuse to “stand” against Levison in the Parliamentary election that culminates in Levison’s arrest. “He has thrust himself offensively upon me in this measure,” Carlyle asserts; “I believe my better plan will be to take no more heed of him, than I should of the dirt under my feet” (385). Whereas “standing” and ignorance are defensive tactics, “acting against” is apparently offensive; one might distinguish here between “acting for” a client and “acting against” an accused man or women. In defending Richard, acting for and acting against coincide uncomfortably. The pleasure Carlyle might receive from prosecuting Levison is clearly too personal to be deflected onto the interests of his client, Richard. To act for purely personal interests is to become too much like Levison, is not to act right; however, we must remember that in refusing to act, Carlyle serves no one but himself.

Carlyle’s recommendation to Richard that the firm of Ball and Treadman represent him compounds and complicates the self-interest of his refusal. Lawyer Ball, we are told, “took up any practice that was brought to him, dirty odds and ends that Mr. Carlyle would not have touched with his toe” (425). The personal interest Carlyle has in acting against Levison, then, has the potential to sully the reputation of his own firm, so that it would be unprofessional for him to take up the case. “What business is it?” Ball asks Carlyle when he paves the way for Richard’s interview. “Some that offends the delicacy of the Carlyle office?” “It is a client for whom I cannot act,” Carlyle replies. “But not from the motives you assume” (426). When Ball presses the issue, asking “What debar[s] you?” Carlyle “disregard[s] the question.” (427). By refusing both to take up the case and to disclose his motives for acting around but not in it, Carlyle maintains a distinction between private and
public interests, a distinction that is at the root of what we still define as professional behavior.

Carlyle does not simply keep himself secret, however, but insists that the case be kept secret from him. "I tell you I know nothing. I will know nothing," Carlyle tells his head clerk regarding the case (431), and again, when Richard's father asks him what he knows, Carlyle repeats, "Nothing" (439). D. A. Miller's theory of the open secret informs both the above distinction between public and private interests and the deliberate ignorance Carlyle enforces regarding Levison's case. "Secrecy," Miller writes,

would thus be the subjective practice in which the oppositions of private/public, inside/outside, subject/object are established, and the sanctity of their first term kept inviolate. And the phenomenon of the "open secret" [the secret that is "always known"] does not, as one might think, bring about the collapse of these binarisms and their ideological effects, but rather attests to their fantasmatic recovery. In a mechanism reminiscent of Freudian disavowal, we know perfectly well that the secret is known, but nonetheless we must persist, however ineptly, in guarding it.

(207)

Carlyle's refusals both to act and to know assure the inviolate nature of his subjectivity. The invisibility he seeks protects his character from the scrutiny of a public hearing and the radical self-inquiry that hearing too much about Levison's prosecution might provoke. As Miller writes, secrecy is "a mode whose ultimate meaning lies in the subject's formal insistence that he is radically inaccessible to the culture that would otherwise entirely determine him" (195). Keeping his private interests in the case out of the public eye and the public information of the case from his private knowledge, Carlyle safeguards the public/private distinctions that not only uphold his status as a subject, but distinguish him as "one of nature's gentlemen."

Ball's comments after his meeting with Carlyle return me to the issue of the "straight" in straightforwardness and raise the question of what other secrets Carlyle may
be keeping from himself. "It's a queer business," Ball muses. "One would think Dick accuses some old flame of Carlyle's: some demoiselle or dame he daren't go against" (428). That Ball confuses "the gay Sir Francis" (511) with "some demoiselle or dame" emphasizes the threat Levison poses to Victorian masculinity. Levison is no "old flame" of Carlyle's, but the gender confusion he represents — the possibility that he might be, in more modern terms, an "old flame[r]" —threatens to collapse homosociality into homosexuality; it seems no accident that Levison is scapegoated to both Richard's struggle to achieve masculinity and to his alliance with Carlyle. Even the work of deflecting and defeating Levison proves dangerous to Carlyle for it is work that demands that he not work, that he remain idle. As I have already discussed, Richard must act in order to establish legitimate manliness; by refusing to act, Carlyle approaches the self-interested idleness that has previously been responsible for unmanning Richard. The central difference may be that Carlyle acts behind the scenes, working Levison's demise and his own security without seeming to be acting in the affair at all. Knowing the importance of acting but not playing, of working while not seeming to act, Archibald Carlyle refuses to steal the show and, hence, is able to run it.
Chapter Four

“Good Marking-Ink” and the Problem of “Personation”: Performing Sanity in Victorian Sensation Fiction

Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* offers one of the first literary records of feminine sanity being mistaken for feminine madness and, conversely, feminine madness passing for feminine sanity. Behind the novel’s scenes of sensational méconnaissance lies a dramatic case of misrepresentation in which the villains, Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco, exchange Laura Fairlie’s “sane” body for Anne Catherick’s “mad” one. Later, taking advantage of Anne’s failing health, the men stage Laura’s death with Anne’s body so that Glyde, Laura’s husband, may gain control of his wife’s substantial fortune. A great deal of careful scripting goes into this scheme, but Fosco’s letter to the asylum attendants may well be the most brilliant stroke. “The unfortunate woman’s last idea in connexion with Sir Percival,” he writes,

> was the idea of annoying and distressing him, and of elevating herself, as she supposed, in the estimation of the patients and nurses, by assuming the character of his deceased wife; the scheme of this personation having evidently occurred to her, after a stolen interview which she had succeeded in obtaining with Lady Glyde, and at which she had observed the extraordinary accidental likeness between the deceased lady and herself. (384)

Instructing his readers that Laura (“Anne”) will profess to be a woman she is not, Fosco ensures that her claims for sanity will be read as further proof of her madness. So well attuned is Fosco to the sentiments of his day, that this warning nearly allows his unlikely endeavor to succeed.

Finding herself in the asylum, recognized and addressed as Anne Catherick, Laura attempts to assert her own identity. Her claims, however, are quickly negated, as the asylum matron refers her with great certainty to the laundry markings on her clothing.
“Look at your own name on your own clothes, and don’t worry us all any more about being Lady Glyde,” the matron says. “She’s dead and buried; and you’re alive and hearty. Do look at your clothes now! There it is, in good marking-ink; and there you will find it on all your old things, which we have kept in the house—Anne Catherick, as plain as print!” (394). Sporting the costume of an asylum inmate, Laura’s body evokes the codes that defined madwomen in 1859. Within the framework of mid-Victorian medical discourse, “Anne’s” madness was inked into her very flesh, belying any possibility of recovery. Her claims for sanity thus become evidence of duplicity; her capacities for sane behavior are likewise dismissed. As the success of Fosco’s warnings about “personation” indicate, a great many members of the mid-Victorian public were quite willing to suspect the mad of theatrical propensities, of scheming to act beyond the “truths” of their bodies.

In the following pages, I will be contextualizing these suspicions with reference to the moment in Victorian culture at which the sensation novel emerged. I will be looking specifically at the demise of moral treatment, a method of curing the mentally ill by teaching them to act sane, and at the ramifications of that demise. Various scholars have offered profound insights on moral treatment’s mimesis of sanity and on the implications of that mimesis; Michel Foucault offers perhaps the most notable example. Foucault’s critiques of moral treatment in Madness and Civilization have been highly influential; in his exposition on the founding moral institution, the Retreat, Foucault identifies a dynamic much akin to the “self-policing” he later explores in Discipline and Punish. He contends that the disciplinary function of the violent eighteenth-century asylum does not so much disappear as shift in the nineteenth-century moral establishment; no longer residing in the brutal tools of the keeper, discipline sets up house within the psyche. The moral asylum urged its patients to control themselves, to replicate the signs of normalcy; thus, Foucault argues, moral treatment “substituted for the free terror of madness the stifling anguish of responsibility; fear no longer reigned on the other side of the prison gates, it now raged under the seals of conscience” (247).
Foucault’s focus on the influence of domesticity on the nineteenth-century mental institution has motivated a great deal of intelligent scholarship, including Andrew Scull’s *The Most Solitary of Afflictions* and Elaine Showalter’s *The Female Malady*. More recently, a number of critics have retained Foucault’s critical approach to the history of insanity while moving beyond his historical scope to explore the shift that began in the 1850s. This shift resulted in the medical profession’s control of the field and, especially after the advent of Darwin in 1859, in the ascendancy of corporeal theories of madness.\(^1\) Previous works on this transformation, including Scull’s, refer to the Victorian trend towards professionalism in general, the increasing predilection for things scientific, and moral treatment’s easy appropriability.\(^2\) As Scull writes, for example, “A somatic interpretation of insanity . . . place[d] it beyond dispute within medicine’s recognized sphere of competence” (217). More recent perspectives explore the cultural investments behind this biological backlash. Showalter, Janet Oppenheim, and Jenny Bourne Taylor bring gender to the fore, while others, including Sally Shuttleworth, explore class-based investments as well. This more recent work asserts that, while an increasing penchant for professionalism may have been *one* factor of the corporealization of madness, it was certainly *not the only one.*

Foucault’s thesis about nineteenth-century culture, that the domestic and the institutional realms were more compatible than contradictory, informs nearly all current work in this field. In the present chapter, I want to retain a sense of the *contradictions* between these terms in order to posit Victorian anxieties about their proximity as a central cause of biological ascendancy. I will be extending the critical perspectives of many of the

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\(^1\)Earlier in the century, proponents of phrenology and physiognomy had less successfully attempted to secure physical bases for psychological traits and illnesses. See Jenny Bourne Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, 48-52; Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, 57-70; L.S. Jacyna, “Somatic Therioets of Mind and the Interests of Medicine in Britain, 1850-1879”; Janet Browne, “Darwin and the face of madness,” and Roger Cooter, “Phrenology and British Alienists, ca. 1825-1845.”

\(^2\)For more on the medical profession’s eventual monopolization of the field of insanity, see Scull, Chapter Four, “From Madness to Mental Illness: Medical Men as Moral Entrepreneurs,” and Digby. *Madness*, Chapter Six, “The ascendancy of medicine.”
scholars named above to a reading that takes into account the social function of antitheatrical prejudice in Victorian culture in general, and its specific role in the demise of moral treatment. I argue that, due to its performative components, moral treatment constructed a potentially terrifying definition of sanity founded upon outward appearances, upon gestures and acts; its definition of the healthy psyche thus reduced sanity to something both unstable and dissimulable, something that had everything to do with acting and very little to do with "nature." As Taylor observes, "‘moral management’ itself . . . might promote the belief that a stable sane identity could be built up by proper training and self-regulation, yet at the same time it could also tacitly suggest the very fragility of the identity that it aimed to sustain" (31). The struggles of mid-Victorian biologist ideologues to define and substantiate a normative model of identity based in the body suggest that moral treatment provoked anxieties that extended far beyond the realm of sanity and into the "nature" of many bases of Victorian culture.

If we return to Collins's novel, we find that it offers us a semiotic system in which appearances rarely correspond with actualities, in which it is nearly impossible to construe "truth" or "nature" from exterior signs. This is a landscape rife with contradiction: Laura Fairlie's tombstone marks Anne Catherick's grave, Sir Percival Glyde proves to be neither a Sir nor a Glyde, and, in one of the novel's more famous passages, the "rare beauty" of Marion Halcomb's seductively feminine rear profile gives way to "dark down on her upper lip . . . [and] a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw" (25). The increasing alienation within urban centers of power, the rise of puffery (or deceptive advertising), the potential for class mobility, and the competing agendas of an increasingly vocal feminist population and the cult of maternity made such ambiguities very much a reality of mid-Victorian life. Collins here makes such vagaries sensational and local, but the anxieties he elicits regarding fraud, class, and gender would hardly be unfamiliar to the mid-Victorian reader. I will be arguing that a desire to have things be as they seemed, a search for ontological stability, informed the discourse of biology even more strongly than the medical profession's bid
for socioeconomic power. In a society increasingly troubled by duplicity, alienation, and permeable class and gender boundaries, the discourse of heredity seemed to offer the body as solid ground for various aspects of identity. The insistence with which Collins’s matron refers Laura to her laundry markings ("There it is, in good marking-ink; . . . Anne Catherick, as plain as print!") suggests the impetus many Victorians felt to fix identity in or on the body, so as to keep it unitary, stable, and within clearly intelligible social perimeters.

I begin this chapter with a description of moral treatment’s premises and practices. Turning, then, to the problems of wrongful confinement and parodic repetition, I discuss the decay of moral treatment that began in the 1850s. My subsequent treatment of biological theories of madness informs and is informed by my analysis of the sensation novel as a genre, and my extended readings of two 1860s sensation novels, Lady Audley’s Secret, by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and St. Martin’s Eve, by Mrs. Henry Wood. Emerging alongside evolutionary theory in the 1860s, sensation fiction seems peculiarly crafted to address concerns about dissimulation, segregation, and social stability, as well as to appeal to popular interests in re-corporealizing madness.3 I conclude with a brief discussion of the demise of the sensation novel and of hereditary theories of madness.

**Moral Treatment: Its Influence and Demise**

Moral treatment, initiated in 1792 by William Tuke at his famous Retreat at York, departed radically from the violent institutional practices that characterized insane asylums of the eighteenth century. Turning away from physical coercion, Tuke’s treatment was revolutionary, replacing straitjacketing and solitary confinement with open doors and unfenced boundaries so as to "encourage the self-control of its patients through what was

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3In both content and effect, the sensation novel was perceived to be a troublingly corporeal genre. As D.A. Miller writes in what is perhaps becoming a too oft-quoted citation, "the genre offers us one of the first instances of modern literature to address itself primarily to the sympathetic nervous system, where it grounds its characteristic adrenaline effects: accelerated heart rate and respiration, increased blood pressure, the pallor resulting from vasoconstriction, and so on" (146). Miller’s reading echoes that of Victorian critics who feared the effects of sensation on the bodies of a largely female readership.
effectively a system of rewards and punishments" (Digby "Moral" 54). By the 1830s, Tukean theory had revolutionized English attitudes towards insanity and its treatment; even those practitioners who maintained their interests in mechanical restraint gave over beating their patients as they found this to be "superfluous and unnecessary, and therefore to be condemned" (Scull 63). The asylum, too, underwent reform; no longer a prison-like edifice, it became "a comfortable environment which would facilitate [the] process of self-control by means of the patient’s daily experience of civilized living conditions" (Digby, "Moral" 53). If moral treatment was to achieve its desired end of reinstating the insane in "normal" society, it required a setting compatible with that goal; both public and private asylum keepers therefore went to great lengths to incorporate into their establishments the trappings of domesticity. As one writer for the Lancet observed, "It is by domestic control, by surroundings of the daily life, by such details as the colouring of walls, the patterns on floorcloth, the furniture and decoration of rooms, by the influence of pictures, birds, and draperies, . . . [that] the psychologist hopes to reach, capture, and re-educate the truant mind, and perhaps reseat the dethroned intelligent will of his patient" (Granville 79).

As asylums were modeled after ideal Victorian homes, patients too were to carry few visible signs of what they once had been. In accordance with this object, the carefully groomed settings served as backdrop for the most important aspect of moral treatment, namely the incultation of self-restraint through social training. As escalating numbers of asylums modeled themselves upon Tuke’s system, superintendents focused their attentions

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4 Cf. Scull 22. See also John Conolly on how asylum architects of the previous century “appear to have had regard solely to the safe-keeping of inmates, and the buildings resemble prisons rather than hospitals for the cure of insanity” (Remonstrance 7).
5 Many critics, including D.A. Miller and Paul Morrison, define Victorian culture as one based on domestic incarceration, in which the prison not only looks like a home, but the home itself becomes a prison. Lady Rosina Lytton, wrongfully committed to an asylum by her estranged husband, Edward Bulwer Lytton, in 1858, supports such Foucauldian readings, arguing, “take a person nolens volens, and by force, to Buckingham Palace, or to the Tuileries, which is rather more like a palace — and nail down the windows, lock the doors, and put keepers to attend to them, and presto! you convert the palace into a prison, and the most terrible of all prisons, a Madhouse” (49-50).
6 The present essay focuses primarily on middle-class asylums. For more on class divisions within and between asylums, see Browne, Asylums 228-30 and Walton.
on the behavior and the undesirable characterological traits insanity made manifest. Treatment was directed towards modifying behavior, towards encouraging and instructing patients to act properly. To effect this, keepers attempted to create within the asylum a microcosm of “normal” British society complete with class distinctions, a simulacrum that only began with the gaily-papered walls and carefully landscaped grounds. Much of moral treatment was comprised of what were in effect courses in acting for the mentally ill in which patients learned how to comport themselves properly, how to portray themselves as sane and reasonable individuals in both work and social situations. If patients were to learn how to act in the world beyond the pretty asylum gates, keepers reasoned, they needed to engage in what might be called rehearsal within them.

Samuel Tuke, whose *Description of the Retreat* (1813) brought the practices of the Retreat to public notice, describes asylum tea-parties at which the patients “dress in their best clothes, and vie with each other in politeness and propriety” (178). Of the Sunday Church services at the Hanwell asylum, W.C. Ellis remarks “as much anxiety amongst the patients to be permitted to attend, and to come in their best dresses, as there is amongst the sane, previous to an attendance on the most fashionable congregation in London; and it would be difficult to find in the metropolis one more orderly or devout” (298-9). John Conolly, who succeeded Ellis at Hanwell, recalls August 1839 when

the attempt was made on the female side of the asylum . . . to introduce some of the livelier scenes of social life among the patients; and one of those large assemblages, or evening parties, took place which have since become so general, and which form no unimportant article of therapeutic application. . . . When the evening of the day comes, they are delighted by meeting all the attendants, all the officers, and several visitors, in whose presence they dance, and manifest much gaiety; yet controlling themselves in a very remarkable manner. . . . The superintendents of asylums should, above all things, regard these entertainments as remedial; which they truly may be made. (*Treatment* 85-6)

Conolly goes on to note the therapeutic efficacy of “excursions in the neighbourhood, picnic parties, and visits to public exhibitions . . . [e]vening parties, concerts, and dances”
(Treatment 88). As these activities indicate, moral practitioners went to great lengths to bring domestic social functions, as well as domestic furnishings, into the asylum. Patients became familiar with the restraints of proper clothing, of social decorum; many did, in fact, adjust their behavior to satisfy the most rigorous dictates of social propriety. The rehearsals afforded by tea parties, outings, and dances proved remarkably successful.

The first problems concerning this proximity to normalcy stemmed from uneasiness about its definition of madness. According to medical historian Peter McCandless, the moral institution encouraged "an alarming tendency to equate sanity with behavioral acceptability" (341). A great many critics focus upon medical rather than public opinion, concluding, as McCandless does, that "[t]he person who seriously overstepped the bounds of acceptable conduct — through drunkenness, license, gluttony, or extravagance — courted an accusation of madness" (351). Shuttleworth, for example, argues that "The mad were no longer 'other,' to be locked away with criminals or the insane: anyone could become insane by the slight movement into imbalance of his or her physiological and mental system" ("Preaching" 198); Elaine Showalter, too, notes that "moral insanity redefined madness, not as a loss of reason, but as deviance from socially accepted behavior" (Female 29). When one considers public sentiment, however, one finds that medical men were not unquestioned in their mission to regulate the proprieties of human behavior through the threat of the asylum. The lunacy panics of 1858-9 and 1876-7

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7Behavior that deviated from the norm, that required segregation from and retraining for a burgeoning capitalist culture did become symptomatic of madness; my contentions regard the lack of public sanction for this interpretation. As Thomas Trotter wrote in 1807, "at the beginning of the nineteenth century, we do not hesitate to affirm that nervous disorders have now taken the place of fevers, and may be justly reckoned two-thirds of the whole with which civilized society is afflicted" (cit. Bynum 93; Trotter's italics). Interestingly enough, what Trotter described as "nervous disorders" were liable to develop from anything that deviated from "a simple energetic country life" (Bynum 93); as David Uwins wrote in his treatise on mental disorders, "Pianos, parasols, Edinburgh Reviews, and Paris-going desires, are now found among a class of persons who formerly thought these things belonged to a different race; these are the true source of nervousness and mental ailments" (cit. Scull 158). A penchant for luxury, a desire for commodities, came to be recognized as a form of madness, so that, as Scull notes, "The upwardly mobile were perhaps the most vulnerable of all" (158).

Between 1807 and 1844, the number of private madhouses tripled and the numbers of those people "officially recorded as insane" rose from 2.26 in 10,000 in 1807 to 12.66 in 10,000 in 1844. By 1890, the numbers had reached 29.63 in 10,000. Cf. Arieno, Ch. 1, and Scull, Ch. 2. For more on the gender divisions within the mad population, see Showalter, The Female Malady.
bespoke considerable public concern over the breadth of this definition of insanity and the ease with which a sane person might be confined.

*A Blighted Life* (1880), the memoir of Lady Rosina Lytton, records what was both one of the most famous and one of the most politically productive cases of wrongful confinement. Edward Bulwer-Lytton confined his estranged wife in an asylum for six weeks in 1858; the great publicity surrounding this incident was in large part responsible for the lunacy panic of 1858-9. In short, the story runs as follows: Edward and Rosina had been separated for many years due to both parties' flagrant dalliances. During the early period of their separation, Edward had provided his wife with a stipend of £400 per annum. When he came into his rather substantial inheritance, Lady Lytton requested that her annual allowance be commensurably increased. Lord Lytton refused. The already marked antipathy between them was thus heightened, culminating in, first, Rosina's attempt to defame Edward publicly and, then, Edward's more successful attempt to defame his wife by having her committed to an asylum.

The relative ease with which Edward was able to have Rosina deemed mad had, no doubt, a good deal to do with Rosina's open displays of anger.8 Her passionate language and behavior certainly differed from "proper" feminine values and manners; as Rosina readily admits, "I was not the plastic, swallow-anything Fool that men think women ought to be, and which for the propagation and comfortable impunity of their vice, too many women are" (20). It is to this refusal to be complicit that Rosina attributes Edward's attempts against her, and, one might argue, it is the basis upon which he achieved his temporary victory. The implicit message behind his triumph is that a sane woman would never display her temper as Rosina did.9 She was all too conscious of the standards of

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8If Rosina was angry before her incarceration, she has only grown more so by the time she recounts her experiences in *A Blighted Life*, so that the most notable element of the memoir may very well be its tone. It is particularly difficult to keep track of names, as *A Blighted Life* is fashioned as a (dubiously) easily deciphered *roman à clef* in which Edward appears sporadically as Sir E—— L——, Sir Edward, Sir JAR, and Sir JANUS ALLPUFF.

9Cf. Kurata: "One of [Rosina's] most effective ploys was to address letters, as many as twenty a day, to her husband and his circle. Because the envelopes were covered with violent, obscene inscriptions and were sent to Bulwer-Lytton's clubs, friends' homes, the House of Commons (to which he had been
which she fell short, asking bitterly at one point, "What could that charming injured man Sir E—— L—— do, but incarcerate such a wretch in a madhouse, which is the only safe place for wives not wanted, and who won't and can't be fooled?" (26; Lytton's emphasis). Clearly, a substantial number of medical authorities agreed with this estimation, for "at least six different physicians provided written opinions that Rosina was insane and should be committed to an asylum" (Kurata 46).

Edward was mistaken, however, about the public's sanction of his convenient interpretation of the lunacy laws. An 1858 excerpt from the Daily Telegraph remarks upon the implications of his actions: "the lunacy law of England," the journalist writes, "is dangerous to social liberty. Anyone, by obtaining the certificate of two medical men, may imprison wife, child, or other relative for years, perhaps for life, in a madhouse" (91). In the end, Edward's victory was short-lived. Within six weeks, popular outrage and the publicity campaign mounted by the Daily Telegraph had made Edward's position untenable and Rosina was released. Her behavior did receive censure — more than one journalist remarked upon her haughtiness and lack of womanly sentiment — but the press reports indicate a general reaction against confining people because their personalities are unpleasant. As a writer for the Somerset County Gazette noted,

Displays of ill-temper and malignity, of pride and arrogance, are never very reasonable; they are in truth very ridiculous; still there is much yet to be learnt if they are to be held as indications of madness. We make these remarks to show that, while under an impression . . . that in Lady LYTTON'S transfer to a Lunatic Asylum she has been made the victim of a shocking outrage and crime, we are not unacquainted with, or insensible to, her weaknesses and defects. (81)

Fears about wrongful confinement dovetailed with other anxieties about practices within the moral asylum. However restorative it may have been, the impersonation of normalcy moral treatment endorsed proved unsettling to many an observer. As Elaine Showalter notes, a "pervasive note of the uncanny, of a parodied ceremony, is struck in

elected), and his private residences, the letters were useful weapons in the connubial war. If he could withhold money and children, Rosina intended to inflict pain and embarrassment" (45).
many accounts of the lunatics' ball" (Female 49-50). Alongside questions regarding the moral definition of madness, that is to say, the public began to pose questions about the implications of moral treatment for *sanity*. Whereas sane people who behaved badly might easily be institutionalized, mad people coached in Tukeyan proprieties might easily pass as sane.

McCandless offers an extended reading of a drawing by Phiz which represents both the fear of wrongful confinement and this growing alarm about the mad performing sanity; McCandless focuses only on the former component. His text on the illustration entitled "Sir, I'm not the Lunatic, *that* is the Lunatic," reads as follows:

This drawing by Phiz illustrates a doubtless apocryphal story satirizing the ingenuousness and pretensions of asylum superintendents.

A lunatic, learning that his relatives planned to have a keeper convey him to a nearby asylum, slipped away unnoticed and presented himself at the asylum gates. He secured an interview with the superintendent, and, posing as the keeper, said he would return later with a client for the madhouse. He warned the superintendent that the lunatic was very clever and would try to convince him that he was committing the wrong man. After being assured by the superintendent that such a deception would not work, the lunatic returned home and then allowed himself to be decoyed back to the asylum.

Back in the superintendent's presence once more, it went as planned, and when the innocent keeper protested that there must be some mistake, he was seized and carted off to the ward for incurables. Phiz's picture captures his last despairing attempt to convince his captors that they had got hold of the wrong man. (338)

While McCandless offers a canny analysis of the anxieties the viewer may have felt for the keeper, he does not remark upon the anxiety provoked by the credible-but-duplicitous lunatic. By the 1850s, such capable "personation" began to call into question the theatrical components of moral treatment. Although tales of the eighteenth-century penny "shows" at Bethlem remained popular through the nineteenth century, they presented the specter of the mad performing madness; the contemporary specter of the mad performing *normalcy*, on the other hand, proved to be considerably disturbing. As a result, not so much counter
to as alongside the widespread acceptance of moral treatment, a prolific biological backlash maintained the moral base of Tukean theory but answered its frightening theatricality with a concrete foundation, restoring the definitive diagnosis of insanity and sanity, both, to physical manifestations and bases.

This shift was reflected in both linguistic and prognostic alterations. As Digby notes, “changes were taking place in the semantic description of treatment, in which there was a growing preference for the term ‘moral management’ rather than ‘moral treatment’. The former hints at a more systematic organization of patients and a more pervasive authority over them than does the latter” (Madness 61). A decrease in optimism accompanied this increase in institutional regulation. Whereas in 1805 Thomas Bakewell claimed that moral asylums could “implant” sane attributes in the very bodies of their patients, by 1857 W. A. F. Browne was not alone in worrying that “recovery may be little more than the exercise of great cunning, or self-control, in concealing the signs of error and extravagance” (cit. Scull 325-6).

By the 1860s, fears of racial, national, and biological degeneration spawned by Charles Darwin’s theories of evolution made the issue of “real,” as opposed to “performed,” sanity a strikingly literal concern. Although evolutionary theory provided soothing answers to the question of human nature, the threat of degeneration spawned new and different fears about the future of humankind, most especially about the future of the nuclear family. When, in 1843, Sarah Ellis wrote to the women of England, “You have deep responsibilities; you have urgent claims; a nation’s moral worth is in your keeping,” it is unlikely she ever suspected how literally those words would be interpreted by the next generation (6). As the medical profession’s interests in blood and heredity — and eventually in eugenics — increased from the 1860s onwards, physicians stressed more and more the interdependence between the definition of sane or natural behavior and the interests of the Victorian family. According to the influential Henry Maudsley, the
mentally ill person was "the necessary organic consequent of certain organic antecedents: and it is impossible he should escape the tyranny of his organization" (Pathology 88).

Moral treatment's emphasis on self-restraint and self-control proved, within this context, to have a dangerously subversive potential. If one knew how to control one's appearance, one might pass unnoticed into the innermost sanctum of domesticity and, once there, pass one's genetic "poisons" into the family's sacred heart. By the 1870s, it was common for medical professionals to argue within the idiom of heredity against restoring the insane to their communities, and hence against cure; the alienist Richard Greene, for example, maintained that it was "evident that the higher the percentage of recoveries in the present, the greater will be the proportion of insanity in the future" (503). This applied especially to women, as prominent physicians such as Andrew Wynter argued that "The tendency of the mother to transmit her mental disease is . . . in all cases stronger than the father's; some physicians have, indeed, insisted that it is twice as strong" (52).

As many a cultural critic has noted, the fears that entered the Victorian vocabulary with the term, "degeneration," often had more to do with social change than with any real physiological threat. As Janet Oppenheim observes,

At the very time when groups of middle-class women were organizing to claim the right to vote, to hold public office, to enjoy equal property rights with men, to gain access to economic independence through professional training and university education, and to stimulate a reevaluation of the laws governing marriage, evolutionary theory seemed to furnish undeniable reasons why the status quo should not be radically altered in response to these demands. (182)

Evolutionists also used degeneration to bolster conservative positions on Imperial politics, educational programs, morality, and familial configurations. Seeking to manage areas of social unrest by disciplining the reproduction of those bodies that "stirred things up," evolutionists were able to regulate "problem" areas of the Victorian population via the

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10Elsewhere, Maudsley argues that "when a person is lunatic, he is . . . lunatic to his fingers' ends" (Body 41).
11Cf. Scull's chapter "Degeneration and Decay." See also Peter Morton, The Vital Science: Biology and the Literary Imagination 1860-1900.
bodies organic theories ostensibly targeted. As Richard Soloway writes, “the debate over
deterioration always had much more to do with contemporary middle- and upper-class
anxieties about economic, social, political, and cultural change than it did with quantifiable
reality” (159). In short, degeneration answered to popular desires to assign a singular,
controlling prescription to complex and shifting social elements. Rather like Collins’s
matron, many Victorians sought to use the “good marking-ink” of Darwinian theory to
definitively and legibly demarcate social boundaries within their increasingly complex
society.

**The Sensational Body and the Crisis of Dissimulation**

Sensation novels not only reflected but contributed significantly to public discourse
surrounding moral treatment. To begin with, these novels almost unilaterally told tales of
dubious identity. Isabel Vane of *East Lynne* deserts her children only to return,
masquerading as the blue bespectacled Madame Vine, to be their governess; in her pursuit
of what she claims is her rightful inheritance, Magdalen Vanstone of *No Name*
shamelessly impersonates numerous people until she suffers a breakdown; and the mad
and murderous Lucy Audley of *Lady Audley’s Secret* and Charlotte St. John of *St.
Martin’s Eve* “personate” sane women, much as Count Fosco had warned the asylum
attendants that “Anne” would attempt to “personate” Laura. Furthermore, the sensation
novel unquestionably brought insanity — particularly female insanity — to the fore of
English literature, as innumerable sensational heroines were relegated to madhouses. In
framing these heroines, the authors of the 1860s located them within increasingly complex
social plots only to answer cultural problems with corporeal solutions: hereditary madness
is so popular a plot device as to be nearly canonical.

The majority of criticism from the past two decades reads these uncomplicated
diagnoses of intensely complicated women as wry cultural critique, as sensational authors’
subversive commentaries on industrial capitalism, marital roles, and compulsory
heterosexuality; Showalter, for example, comments of that amorphous secret belonging to Braddon's heroine, Lady Audley, "Here, I think, is the most subversive aspect of the book.

... As every woman reader must have sensed, Lady Audley's real secret is that she is sane and, moreover, representative" (Literature 166, 167; Showalter's italics).12 Ann Cvetkovich and Nicholas Rance are among the few critics who have looked at sensation's complicities with dominant culture, at what Rance identifies as "conservative sensationalism" (64). This seems an important critical move, especially with reference to theatricality and hereditary decay; within these contexts, sensation fiction was often resolutely reactionary.

Echoes of moral treatment pervade the genre. Accompanying the emergence of the private detective in novels of this period, many sensation novelists introduce medical detectives who widen the field of criminality, follow different clues, and discover corporeal "crimes." Many of the detection plots for which sensation novels are famous reference the emergence of the "medical police," marking a shift in the role of alienist from curer to keeper, from diagnostician to what one might call a detective of the body.13 The performances of sanity endorsed by moral treatment thus become criminal acts as they stymie the process of detection. Where the moral practitioner sought to teach the mad to behave sane, this new medical detective is equipped to arrest previously sanctioned performances by charging them with the attempt to elude Nature. True to this formula, both Lady Audley's Secret and St. Martin's Eve virtually erase the murders for which they convict their heroines, basing their guilt instead on their triumphs, however short-lived, of performance over biology. As Rance observes of Braddon's Lucy, "her adept performance as Lady Audley is the crime which brooks no forgiveness" (126).

12See, for example, Elaine Showalter, A Literature of their Own; D.A. Miller, The Novel and the Police; Winifred Hughes, The Maniac in the Cellar; and Joseph Litvak's chapter on Dickens in Caught in the Act.

13In Lady Audley's Secret, Mary Elizabeth Braddon has Robert Audley note the parallel openly: "physicians and lawyers," he says, "are the confessors of this prosaic nineteenth century" (374). For more thorough discussions of medicolegal debates about criminal responsibility, see Roger Smith, Trial by Medicine; David Oberhelman, "Knowing Right from Wrong: Insanity and Narrative Alienation in Trollope's He Knew He Was Right"; and Richard Moran, Knowing Right from Wrong.
Lucy Audley provides perhaps the most popular example of the desire to monitor the intersections between sanity, performance, biology, and the ambiguous boundaries of foundational social categories. As many critics have remarked, the conclusion of *Lady Audley's Secret* complicates, rather than solves, the mystery of Lady Audley. Is the secret that she is a bigamist? that she attempted to murder her first husband? that she abandoned her child? that she took on an assumed name? that her mother was mad? Although each of these potentially divulges the novel’s titular “secret,” it seems that which Lady Audley has been hiding all along remains invisible and undisclosed. If Lady Audley’s “real” secret is her insanity, it remains manifest only in terms of potential. Dr. Mosgrave, to whom Robert Audley appeals so that he may commit Lady Audley to a *maison de santé*, confesses that he expects to discover nothing the matter with her, for, he says

“I do not believe that she is mad. . . . There is no evidence of madness in anything that she has done. She ran away from her home, because her home was not a pleasant one, and she left it in the hope of finding a better. She committed the crime of bigamy, because by that crime she obtained fortune and position. There is no madness there. When she found herself in a desperate position, she did not grow desperate. She employed intelligent means, and she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that.”

(377)

Although Robert Aucley has told the good doctor about Lady Audley’s biological history, it is not until he relates her attempt to murder George Talboys that Dr. Mosgrave thinks again. “There is latent insanity!” he concludes upon returning from his brief conference with Lucy. “The lady is not mad; but she has the hereditary taint in her blood” (379).

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**14**Critical opinion diverges on this point. For example, Taylor asserts that “Lady Audley’s ostensible secret [is] that she is a bigamist” (7), while Rance avers with equal certainty that Lucy’s “secret is revealed to be that she is tainted with insanity” (120). See also Chiara Briganti, “Gothic Maidens and Sensational Women: Lady Audley’s Journey from the Ruined Mansion to the Madhouse” and Elaine Showalter’s chapter on sensationalism in *A Literature of Their Own*. 
It is odd, to say the least, that Mosgrave turns to what Lucy’s body contains rather than what it has done in order to exert his authority and conclude her mad. Because Lady Audley is so adept at playing the perfect lady, however, he requires her genetic history to reduce her ambiguities and to label her finally and unequivocally. It is only after he disregards her body’s exterior signs and regards its interior history that Mosgrave assures Robert, “you could do no better service to society than [to commit her], for physiology is a lie if the woman I saw ten minutes ago is a woman to be trusted at large” (381).

But this is beginning at the end. Dr. Mosgrave is not the hero of *Lady Audley’s Secret* and madness is only a convenient answer to many more complicated problems. Robert Audley’s quest to convict Lady Audley ultimately has less to do with her attempted murder of George Talboys than with her multiplications of identity and the performances that enable them. Braddon frequently suggests that Lady Audley’s real crime lies in her attempt at class transcendence through her enactment of middle-class femininity, a proposal that makes Robert’s project much more complex than one might initially discern. When he dedicates himself to “tear[ing] away the beautiful veil under which [Lucy] hides her wickedness . . . and banish[ing] her for ever from the house which her presence has polluted” (253), his early biases against Lucy’s working-class background and marital status inflect the language of biology he speaks. The “madness” with which Lucy’s performances threaten the Audley family, then, far exceed heredity insanity. We find as well the spectres of economic derangement, of denaturalized gender, and of the chaos of polygamy.

Robert’s oath that Lucy “shall play her pretty comedy no longer under my uncle’s roof” (256) summons the language of the theater to point to the superficiality of the signs that comprise not only sanity, but landed propriety and gender identity as well. Gender figures especially prominently, for Robert’s misogyny is amongst his defining characteristics. “Whoever heard of a woman taking life as it ought to be taken?” Robert grumbles to himself. “Instead of supporting it as an unavoidable nuisance, only
redeemable by its brevity, she goes through it as if it were a pageant or a procession. She dresses for it, and simpers, and grins, and gesticulates for it" (206). This cynicism seems strangely apropos to the troubling suggestions about femininity one finds in The Woman in White, where the differences between Anne Catherick's madness and Laura Fairlie's attractiveness depend almost entirely upon their difference in class. The "stuff" of femininity proves dreadfully unstable in this novel as well, as Hartright finds himself enchanted by Laura and yet troubled by "another impression, ... the idea of something wanting" (42). This "something wanting" echoes uncannily with the idioms that supposedly distinguishes Anne Catherick from her half-sister, suggesting that Anne's madness is Laura's femininity; only class sets the one apart from the other.15

Hartright manages the paradoxes within femininity by refusing to acknowledge them; Robert, however, immediately relegates all pretty displays of femininity to a false and at best frivolous theatricality. He readily cuts through the trappings of Lucy's womanly charms, denouncing "[h]er morning calls — her pretty visits of ceremony or friendliness. Good heavens! what an actress this woman is. What an rash trickster — what an all-accomplished deceiver" (256). Suddenly suspicious of the gestures and graces of respectable femininity, Robert is able to see them as performances and is accordingly enraged by the display.

Proving Lady Audley an actress, or a "rash trickster," proves no easy feat, however. The narrative's relentless dedication to effacing any complacent parallel between real and represented identity, between appearance and "truth," stymies Robert's project for a good many pages. "I have been shown," the narrator writes, "a meadow in which, on a quiet summer Sunday evening, a young farmer murdered the girl who had loved and trusted him; and yet even now, with the stain of that foul deed upon it, the aspect of the spot is — peace" (54). Nor is the general community enthusiastic about the idea that the "stain" of foul blood may belie beatific appearances; even Robert shows some reluctance

15I am grateful to Helena Michie, who brought this up in conversation.
early in the novel to subscribe to such an disturbing axiom. Commenting upon the
fiendish Pre-Raphaelite portrait of her step-mother, Alicia Audley muses, “I think that
sometimes a painter is in a manner inspired, and is able to see, through the normal
expression of the face, another expression that is equally a part of it, though not to be
perceived by common eyes” (71). Robert’s reply at this early juncture, before George
Talboys’s disappearance, before he has met the lady in question, neatly represents the
general ideology of Audley court: “Don’t be German, Alicia, if you love me,” Robert
pleads. “The picture is — the picture; and my lady is — my lady. That’s my way of
taking things, and I’m not metaphysical; don’t unsettle me” (72). Robert must confront
the discrepancies within representations, however, before he can “settle” the cipher that is
Lucy Audley. In order to clear a space for the category of “natural” femininity, he must
mimic the shift that occurred within Victorian culture in the 1850s by revising his
complacent confidence into an active suspicion that serves a conservative social agenda.

The novel itself promotes the latter revision, signaling readers from the start via the
“secret” in the novel’s title that suspicion ought to inform the activity of “reading.” The
briefly sunny opening of the novel heralds Lucy Graham, the young governess who has
not yet become Lady Audley and who we do not yet know has shed her identity as Helen
Talboys. “[E]verybody, high and low, united in declaring that Lucy Graham was the
sweetest girl that ever lived” (6), the narrator claims, adding “[i]here was nothing whatever
in her manner of the shallow artifice employed by a woman who wishes to captivate a rich
man” (7). When she “flushe[s] scarlet to the roots of her fair hair” upon her employer
suggesting “it only rests with [her]self to become Lady Audley” (8), we are not likely to
note the emergence of the blood that will be her undoing. The Audley community, far
more equipped to read feminine modesty than any more literal revelation of bodily content,
registers only the pretty pink flush Lucy’s blush brings to her cheeks. Hereditary insanity
is not what one expects to find in such a comely, well-mannered body, and the only early
mention of insanity is equally blithe: “the simple Dawsons would have thought it something more than madness in a penniless girl to reject [Sir Michael’s] offer” (9).

By the time the novel has run its course, however, it has revised our assumptions about how insanity operates. Lady Audley’s mad mother proves to be “no raving, straight-waistcoated maniac, guarded by zealous gaolers; but a golden-haired, blue-eyed, girlish creature, who seemed as frivolous as a butterfly, and who skipped towards us with her yellow curls decorated with natural flowers, and saluted us with radiant smiles, and gay, ceaseless chatter” (349-50). Differing from her daughter only in her lack of intellect (which “decayed” from the hour of Lucy’s birth), Lucy’s mother seems to represent the potential nightmare of the moral definition of insanity: a beautiful woman who so capably performs every attribute of femininity that her madness is nearly undetectable. As Lady Audley says herself, “People are insane for years and years before their insanity is found out. They know that they are mad, but they know how to keep their secret” (286; Braddon’s italics).

The dangers linked to this particular secret of Lady Audley’s are many. As I have been arguing, her success at transforming herself from the poor abandoned Helen Talboys into the governess, Lucy Graham, “the sweetest girl in the world,” into the wealthy wife of Sir Michael Audley opens up a set of terrifying suggestions about classed identity, sane identity, and identity in general. As Shuttleworth has noted, unlike the realist novel in which “the self . . . was a unified entity, . . . [s]ensation novels, by contrast explicitly violated realism’s formal rules of coherence and continuity and the psychological models of selfhood on which those works were founded” (“Preaching” 195). Helena Michie cites as the central anxiety of Lady Audley’s Secret Lady Audley’s abilities to reproduce herself; the novel thus works towards apprehending that skill so that her identity can be restored to some singular status: “one character, one name” (59).

Ironically enough, Robert voices his anxieties about Lucy’s self-reproductive potential within the idiom of heredity: his great fear seems to be that she will pass the
“hereditary taint that was in [her] blood” into the Audley gene pool (353). When he claims that Lady Audley has “polluted” Audley Court, Robert speaks about a vast number of social violations; however, by speaking within the lexicon of heredity, Robert’s anxieties take on the aegis of male rational conservatism. His desire to expel Lady Audley is thus able to appear as a “natural” desire to protect his family and his country.

Robert, however, strives to unseat Lady Audley long before he knows of her madness, which makes it clear that Lady Audley’s dazzling fluidity poses a threat to the nuclear family that is not so easily resolved by the genetic answer Robert proffers. It is within this context that the significance of her bigamy might be best understood. In her pained confession to her husband, Lucy recalls learning “that my ultimate fate in life depended upon my marriage, and I concluded that if I was indeed prettier than my schoolfellows. I ought to marry better than any of them” (350). She recounts how, after George Talboys had deserted her to seek his fortune in Australia, after he had been gone without word for three years, she thought to herself, “I have a right to think that he is dead, or that he wishes me to believe him dead, and his shadow shall not stand between me and prosperity” (354). The carelessness with which Lady Audley moves between “he is dead” and “he wishes me to believe him dead,” and her lack of concern for the difference between the two when she accepts Sir Michael, label her a threat to the very premise of monogamous family relations. Her cavalier polygamy resonates into the discourses of sociology and anthropology — degeneration was of concern not only to medical practitioners — and one finds a direct relation between monogamy, reproduction, and mental health in the works of Charles Darwin, John McLennan, John Lubbock, and other mid-Victorian anthropologists whose models of civilization were based directly on patriarchal family values. As Rosemary Jann notes,

central to defining human civilization was marriage and the construction of family relations it implied. Confronted with ethnographic evidence that modern patriarchy could not be considered timeless, innate, or divinely ordained, social anthropologists
plotted the evolution of sexual relations as the triumph of self-control (read 'civilization') over the natural (read 'bestial') Man. (290)

This narrative of triumphant patriarchal civilization was instrumental to the ideologies of both the nuclear family and the reigning definition of sanity. Failing to discover a solid history for the existing model of ideal relationships, McLennan and Lubbock, among others, suggested that polygamy bespoke a savage temperament, while monogamy was a “cultural achievement that only certain civilizations — and certain classes — had proved capable of attaining by learning to control their 'natural' impulses” (Jann 298). The implication here — that the lower classes may be an instance of one of those “civilizations” not yet capable of monogamy and hence not yet fully civilized — is startlingly apropos to Lady Audley. “You and your nephew, Sir Michael,” she says, “have been rich all your lives, and can very well afford to despise me; but I knew how far poverty can affect a life” (351). Her plea to Sir Michael and Robert to understand her mercenary attitude towards marriage really only confirms that she is not in fact — though she may be in appearance — of those “certain classes” that have triumphed over their “'natural' impulses.” Lady Audley's casual bigamy and financial motivations “threatened the most sacred of nineteenth-century institutions, the family” (McCandless 353). By removing Lady Audley to a maison de santé where she later dies, Robert seems to strike a blow for both the Audley blood and for civilization in general.

Whereas Braddon’s equivocations about Lucy’s madness leave room for critical or subversive readings of female insanity in Lady Audley’s Secret, Mrs. Henry Wood makes no such accommodations in St. Martin's Eve. Like her medicolegal contemporaries, Wood represents the problems of a madwoman impersonating a sane woman as resolvable only through the unitary space of the body, as the novel’s diagnosing physician turns to heredity to classify and arrest, as it were, the complex and rebellious heroine. Making male heredity as central a problem as female heredity in the novel, Wood does call into question the sexist politics that condemned women for acting beyond the “truths” of
their bodies; however, even as she interrogates the economic underpinnings of genetic debates, Wood maintains an aversion to performance and a decided interest in the evolutionary future of England.

*St. Martin’s Eve* makes unequivocal the ways in which 1860s medical discourse directly addressed the threat of genetic contamination that moral treatment inadvertently endorsed. Wood’s novel tells the story of Charlotte Norris, the daughter of a man who died “raving mad,” and her marriage to a widower, George Carleton St. John. St. John dies early in the tale, leaving Charlotte mother of one son and stepmother and guardian to the heir of Alnwick, St. John’s son from a previous marriage. So long as Benja, the young heir, lives, the laws of entail leave Charlotte dependent upon him and prevent her own son from partaking of any share of the Carleton estate. Charlotte’s bitter envy of the heir’s advantages over little Georgy, her own child, make her overtly hostile to the young boy in her charge: her “fits of jealousy” lead her to strike Benja on a number of occasions. Oddly, Wood does not represent this physical violence as a symptom of Charlotte’s madness; rather, she argues that such hostility is only natural given the structure of a second marriage, particularly one in which the estate is already entailed to a motherless heir. “Many a mother,” Wood writes, “far more gentle and self-forgetting than was Charlotte St. John, might have felt a pang in contemplating the contrast. Benja had a title in prospective; he would be rich amidst the rich. George . . . might count his future income by a few hundreds” (39). The tide turns one day when Charlotte finds that young Benja has set himself on fire while playing with a toy; rather than coming to his aid, she slides the bolt on his door. The result is macabre: “Where was the young heir of Alnwick? A dark mass smouldering on the floor at the far end of the room, the carpet smouldering, . . . no trace of him, save that shapeless heap from which the spirit had flown!” (151; Wood’s italics). Such is Charlotte’s ostensible crime: in one of the “fits of madness” that she has suffered since her youth, Charlotte arranges for her child’s and her own future. Muddling the issues of guilt in this novel, however, are the complications that arise when Charlotte
then goes through the motions of mourning, acting the part of the bereaved mother and summoning sufficient self-control to make her act convincing. The infanticide that provides the novel’s early crisis becomes, by the end, a mere metaphor for Charlotte’s genetic potential to destroy the young heirs of England. Ultimately, St. Martin’s Eve virtually erases the murder its heroine commits; Charlotte St. John’s guilt derives instead from her triumph, however short-lived, of performance over biology.

The reader’s first encounter with Charlotte suggests the effort she employs to mask her madness. Polished and elegant beside her plain half-sisters, Charlotte is reminiscent of a carefully wrapped package. “[W]ho would have believed that they were even half-sisters? — she with her stately beauty, her costly attire, and they with their homely faces, old-fashioned look, and plain green merino gowns” (7). The “tall, elegant girl” with her “pale, regular features” and the “rich silk attire” seems a very model of feminine attractiveness (7), but her “imperious” expression hints at the discipline Charlotte’s daily masquerade requires. She is conspicuous amongst the other guests at St. John’s fête, “[n]ot for her beauty, though that was great; not for her dress, though that was all that can be imagined of costly elegance; but for a certain haughty, imperious air, and a most peculiar expression that would now and again gleam from her eyes. An expression that many had observed and that none could fathom; a sort of wild expression of absolute will” (13; Wood’s italics). As Charlotte watches her future husband play with his son, Wood reveals the ends towards which Charlotte exercises this will. “His very actions, his movements, betrayed the depth of his affection, and a sharp feeling of jealousy shot through the heart of the beautiful Miss Norris as she watched him. . . . But her beautiful features were smooth as polished crystal as she drew near to Mr. St. John” (15). Calling upon a remarkably rigorous self-control, Charlotte effaces any sign of emotional disturbance, presenting to the man she wishes to marry a perfectly managed surface. The energy Charlotte channels into subduing her violent impulses, Wood later muses, is
impressive: "It is very probable," she writes, "that this enforced self-control ... cost her more than even [her family doctor, Mr. Pym] dreamt of" (323).

Unfortunately for Charlotte, her performances are inconsistent. Given to "fits of rage" when she does not get what she wants, Charlotte allows others to glimpse that which she struggles to hide. These fits last but a minute, but St. John remarks upon witnessing one of them, "think of what it is for the minute! She might — she might kill someone in one of them. I am sure she had no control whatever over herself the day I saw her" (49). Charlotte's control rarely wavers, however, and her remarkable talents of self-mastery produce admiring comments upon her composed impassivity; after Benja's death, for example, Isaac St. John remarks the "exceeding stillness that seemed to pervade Mrs. Carleton St. John. . . . The expression of her bent face was still, almost to apathy; her manner and voice were subdued. So young and pretty did she look in her grief that Mr. St. John's heart went out to her in compassion" (187; Wood's italics).

Had this novel been written some twenty years earlier, Charlotte might have been rewarded for her persistence in aspiring towards the Tukean virtue of self-restraint. In 1866, however, Charlotte's exercises in self-control register as a vicious duplicity. Frederick St. John, this sensation novel's requisite second son-cum-investigator, sets out to unmask Charlotte: "he was secretly busy as ever was a London detective, watching Mrs. Carleton. He had been watching her closely . . . and he persuaded himself that he did detect signs of incipient madness" (386-7). Charlotte's abilities to perform sanity impede Frederick's attempts at penetration for quite some time, however; as Dr. Pym, her diagnosing physician, notes, "In all ordinary matters she is as sane as I am; as capable of judging, of arguing, and of sensibly acting. It is only now and then that a sort of paroxysm comes over her. . . . She is then, as I believe, incapable of controlling her actions; and should she find an opportunity of doing an injury at these times she might do it" (435).

Despite the evident violence of her temper, Charlotte's adeptness at feigning propriety is good enough to maintain her within the wealthy and exacting community of
her in-laws at Castle Wafer; indeed, she almost wins a proposal from Sir Isaac St. John, the master of that family. Not until Frederick's suspicions lead him to interrogate more than her carefully managed façade is he able to supersede the impression conferred by Charlotte's impassivity. Probing into her biological history, Frederick discovers the secret of Charlotte's father which allows him to foreclose quickly and easily all future performances. Once they learn of her genetic history, the St. John family seeks to expel Charlotte before she is able to contaminate their society — or their blood — any further than she already has. Being established as a biological threat to the St. John family and to the greater English community at large, our heroine is neatly and unequivocally sentenced to an asylum.

The issue of inheritance that produces so much trouble in the Alnwick plot exceeds the question of both Charlotte's blood and the economic estate, however, for *St. Martin's Eve* is itself a schizophrenic novel in which Charlotte's story is but one of three or four. Characters roam between plots, bound together by one constant theme: degeneration. This is no typical sensational catalogue of brain fevers and love sicknesses; *St. Martin's Eve* contains so many incidents of physical decay that it is difficult to track them. Although she is the sole character to be imprisoned for her genetic potential, Charlotte is far from alone in carrying genetic threats. George St. John, for example, conceals from his young bride what he refers to as the "Alnwick superstition." When his health begins to fail and Charlotte confronts him, George's reply is nonchalant: "There's an old belief abroad, you must know, Charlotte, that the St. Johns of Alnwick never live to see their thirty-third birthday" (53). Although he dismisses the superstition, he admits, "My great-grandfather died early, leaving seven little sons. Three of them were taken in childhood; the other four lived to see thirty, but not one of them saw thirty-three" (54). Acting so as to trivialize the potential of his own "hereditary estate," George St. John pursues more immediate interests of physical and familial gratification and so adds his own corporeal frailties to the mix at Alnwick. Many pages later, when young Georgy succumbs to his father's illness and dies,
Charlotte asks of Dr. Pym, "What right had George St. John to marry? . . . If people know themselves liable to any disease that cuts off life, they should keep single; and so let the curse die out" (326). Pym's response, "Some have married who had a less right to do so than George St. John" (326), suggests that Charlotte's "legacy" is far more dangerous than that of her deceased husband. Even as Pym's inference sets up degrees of responsibility that seem suspiciously gendered, Charlotte's comment conveys those sentiments that form the moral basis of the novel — the health of the English family is in decline and marriages ought to be made in the interests of protecting it.

Shuttleworth, one of the very few critics to have written on St. Martin's Eve, notes how Wood subtly comments on the inequalities of inheritance: "women's negative economic placement is also inscribed on them physiologically," she writes, observing that, "We are told explicitly that Charlotte would have inherited her father's fortune if she had been a boy . . . [but] Charlotte's only form of inheritance is . . . a physiological one. She inherits from her father his fits of jealousy, which in her case start to manifest themselves when her economic interests are threatened" ("Preaching" 205-6). Although Wood does demonstrate a consciousness of economic inequality, St. Martin's Eve keeps within traditionalist boundaries. Far from condoning Charlotte's abilities to compensate her deficient inheritance by acting her way into money and position, Wood maintains throughout an abhorrence of theatricality and a strict allegiance to the dictates of corporeal responsibility.

The tale of Adeline de Castella, another plot rife with issues of performance and heredity, further illustrates this point. Although she has already consented to an arranged marriage with another man, Adeline falls in love with and agrees to marry the beautiful Frederick St. John, who will later torment Charlotte. Adeline's father refuses to accept the dictates of her heart, and Adeline's Catholicism prohibits her eloping with the Anglican St. John. "She knew it all now," Wood writes of Adeline's sudden reversal; "the secret of her father's obstinacy, and why she must give up Mr. St. John and marry de la Chasse. She
knew that if her father consented to her heretical marriage, or if she of herself persisted in contracting it, the Curse of the Church was to alight upon her, and upon her father's house” (289). When Frederick angrily deserts her, Adeline gives way to melodramatic histrionics that cause a blood vessel in her chest to break; she rapidly declines into death. In what is certainly one of the most bizarre scenes in English literature, Adeline's remains are "exhibited" in a spectacle that is both a mockery of marriage and a disquisition on the canker within reproduction. The "exhibition" features the corpse appraised in bridal garb and propped upright to "greet" the company that comes to view her: "Oh, the rich and flowing robes in which they had decked her! white satin, covered with costly lace; white ribbons, white flowers, everything about her white; the festive attire of a bride adorning the upright dead, and that dead worn and wasted. A narrow band of white satin was passed tightly under the chin, to keep the jaw from falling" (363). The costume and makeup, the "wiring" and sets, are convincing enough to fool the unsuspecting Frederick St. John, who wanders into the reception, having no idea that Adeline has died. When he comes face to face with the "bride" herself, however, finally close enough to see past the accouterments of nuptial normalcy, he notices "the set, rigid features, the unmistakable stare of the glassy eye; and with a rushing sensation of sickening awe and terror, the terrible truth burst upon his brain. That it was not Adeline de Castella, but her CORPSE which stood there” (364).

In this passage, the scene of marriage intersects with the scene of physical decay. Upon the stage of the family home, a costumed, rouged, but dead body receives her visitors in what Wood openly terms "a show" (361). Although Wood presents the exhibition as a repulsive pageant, she exculpates Adeline from the performativity that villainizes Charlotte. Before her death, Adeline begs "do not let it be done" (351); her "performance" is thus excusable as both involuntary and post mortem. Furthermore, Adeline has refused an "unnatural" marriage that might debase her family. "The Curse of the Church," though amorphous, must have seemed significant to the French de Castellas; the spectacle of the bride whose body proves to be dead, however, turns Frederick's
English mind to more concrete “curses.” After the exhibition, he deems her death fortuitous, not simply with reference to de la Chasse, but also within the context of genealogical decay. He seems abruptly sure that, even had he been allowed to marry Adeline, she did not have sufficient strength to live very long. “[A]ll things might still be for the best,” Frederick thinks to himself, pondering what might have happened “[h]ad she lived to bear him children — and to entitle upon them her fragility of constitution” (374).

After Adeline’s funeral, Frederick continues to focus on issues of patrimony, directing his energies towards protecting the future of Castle Wafer, the St. John estate. Charlotte has taken up residence there, very much enjoying the company of Sir Isaac, the bachelor heir. She has been welcomed, even appreciated. Frederick had “felt grateful to her, though rather wondering; he felt grateful to any one who appreciated his brother; but the truth seemed to have opened his eyes, and removed the scales that were before them. She was hoping to become Lady St. John” (382). Upon this discovery, Frederick suddenly remembers Charlotte’s sister’s suggestions that Charlotte might be mad. Spurred on by a what he represents as a nationalist cause motivated by fraternal love, Frederick’s raison d’être becomes preventing Charlotte’s marriage to his brother. “Every feeling of Frederick St. John rose up in arms against it. Not against his brother marrying. If it would be for his comfort and happiness, Frederick would have been glad to see him marry on the morrow. But to marry her — with that possibility of taint in her blood? Any one in the wide world, rather than Charlotte Carleton” (382; Wood’s italics).16

Up to this point, all Frederick can tell his brother is, “I don’t like Charlotte Carleton. I don’t think she’s sincere” (405-6). Already correlating artfulness, insanity, and immorality, the watchful Frederick solidifies his opinion when he witnesses a break in Charlotte’s behavior:

That strange evil look arose in her eyes as she gazed after the carriage, and a shiver passed through her frame. Frederick St. John was half frightened. If ever a woman

16For more on Frederick’s economic interests in preventing this match, see Shuttleworth, “Preaching to the Nerves.”
looked mad, she looked so in that moment. Her long fingers quivered, her lips were
drawn, her face was white as death. . . . In a moment [however] she had obtained
perfect mastery of herself: her pale face was calm again, nay, impassive; her eyes
had lost their frightful expression, and were ordinary eyes once more. (389)

It matters little that Charlotte regains “perfect mastery of herself”: Frederick St. John has
penetrated her act, has identified her impassive femininity as performance, enabling him to
bring his campaign against her into the open. The neighborhood gets involved next, as the
dean of Castle Wafer expediently proves to have been the Norrises’ curate. “Mr. Norris
died just as I was leaving,” the dean tells Frederick. “Report said he died of fever, but Mr.
Pym the surgeon who attended him told me it was not fever; though he did not say what it
was” (409). A hasty telegram to Pym produces the expected response. “Mr. Norris, of
Norrис Court, had died mad. The widow, subsequently Mrs. Darling, had hushed the
matter up for the sake of her child, and succeeded in keeping it secret” (415; Wood’s
italics). Thus armed, Frederick is able to ensure that Charlotte’s pretty displays of feminine
proprieties fail to signify. “You must take her away from Castle Wafer without delay,”
Frederick commands Charlotte’s mother (435). Mrs. Darling’s appeal to Pym
demonstrates how effectively physiology functions to preserve sanity as a viable category
and how efficiently it works to contain and expel biological, ontological, and ideological
threats. “Suppose, after watching Charlotte,” Mrs. Darling pleads, “you come to the
conclusion that there’s nothing really the matter with her——” “But I should not come to
that conclusion,” Pym interrupts. “Were I to remain in the house a month, and see no
proof whatever of insanity, I could not be sure that it did not exist. We know how cunning
these people are . . .” (Wood 437).

In refuting the validity of Charlotte’s performances, Dr. Pym refutes too the
implications of those performances. The biological definition of sanity on which he relies
not only protects a genetic future but also seeks to dismiss theatricality from the realm of
healthy subjectivity. Sane behavior is no longer proof enough to make the pudding of
sanity. Although Wood’s novel calls attention to the socioeconomics behind a biologist
agenda (Frederick St. John, after all, stands to inherit Castle Wafer should Isaac remain single), it nonetheless echoes Pym, maintaining a conservative stance towards the ontological and ideological threat of a theatricality that exceeds the individual body. One might want to agree with Shuttleworth that *St. Martin’s Eve* invites a subversive reading because, at the novel’s close, “Charlotte remains alive, a presence who must be forcibly forgotten and ignored if the facades of domestic and social order are to be maintained” (“Preaching” 208), but Charlotte’s living presence, however, also serves to fortify the fight for domestic and social order. That she haunts the novel’s conclusion reminds readers that she remains a problem, thus reinforcing the wisdom of her expulsion.

Lucy’s engagingly girlish, beautiful body houses murderous economic ambition; Charlotte shadows her violent interpretations of the cult of maternity with her docile, feminine performances of maternal grief. Madwomen wearing sane women’s clothes, performing sane women’s gestures, living sane women’s lives aroused levels of cognitive dissonance that were simply too disconcerting to allow popular sanction. As Collins, Braddon, and Wood suggest, the relationship between contradiction and criminality was a bit too cozy for comfort. I have been discussing throughout, however, how the crimes at issue were more social than literal, had more to do with enactment than with actual acts. The appeal of hereditary theories of insanity lay in their aspirations to resolve the conundrum of performativity, to remove the Lady Audleys and the Charlotte Norrices from the domestic scenes their histrionics threatened. Degeneration offered to authorities a good marking pen with which to label as madness the moral actress’s scandalous inversions of domestic ideology.

**Extinction**

Perhaps it was discomfort about the eugenic thrust of this conservative politics. Perhaps it was the increasing tolerance for contradiction that characterized the shift into modernity. Regardless, it is interesting and perhaps a little satisfying to observe that the
“good marking-ink” of late Victorian alienists was fast becoming disappearing ink by the 1890s. The 1880s saw a virtual onslaught of publications by Darwinian theorists. The thesis of Ray Lankester’s influential Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism is indicative of the tone of these works: “Nature is not mocked. If in our idleness and stupidity we do not obey her dictates of enterprise and aggressive Puritanism, then we shall soon be at one with the dinosaurs” (Morton 92). Ironically enough, such biologically-based hypotheses were themselves dying out. The advent of Charcot’s work on hysteria in the 1880s and Freud’s work at the turn of the century occasioned a reverse: at the famous leçons du mardi at the Salpêtrière, Charcot was able establish a respectable and controlled connection between the theater and the field of madness; likewise, Freud’s repetition compulsion comfortably accommodated human propensities for mimicry. Perhaps most importantly, Charcot’s and Freud’s work on hysteria proposed the body as a screen upon which the mind projected its symptoms, rather than the original site of mental illness that Victorian alienists had argued it was.17

The sensation novel underwent a similar decline in the 1870s. The urgency and radicalism that shaped both the genre’s backgrounds and narrative style waned with the close of 1860s; the social problems and realist novels of the ensuing decades continued to wrestle with difficult questions about identity, but did so in calmer, more conversational tones. For example, when Anthony Trollope depicts female madness in The Eustace Diamonds (1873), he does so very differently than Braddon or Wood. “When he touches me my whole body is in agony. To be kissed by him is madness,” Lucinda Roanoke avers of her fiancé, Sir Griffin Tewett (2:273). Trollope offers us a sympathetic portrait of Lucinda, whose hostilities towards Tewett have more to do with the lack of love in modern marriage than with any hostilities towards marriage in general. “As she told her aunt in her wickedness, she would almost have preferred a shoemaker,—if she could have become

17There is much to say about the continued themes of theatricality and reproduction within this context — the original “wandering womb” of hysteria seems a particularly remarkable image. Such a discussion would be beyond the scope of this chapter, however. For more on hysteria, see Bernheimer and Kahane, In Dora’s Case.
acquainted with a shoemaker in a manner that should be unforced and genuine" (2:4). The aunt, Mrs. Carbuncle, hastens on the marriage nonetheless. She fails to be daunted even when Lucinda ravages her trousseau:

the bride absolutely ran a muck among the finery, scattering the laces here and there, pitching the glove-boxes under the bed, chucking the golden-heeled boots into the fire-place, and exhibiting quite a tempest of fury against one of the finest shows of petticoats ever arranged with a view to the admiration and envy of female friends. But all this Mrs. Carbuncle bore, and still persevered. (2:267).

On the morning of the wedding, however, Lucinda revolts. Refusing to leave her room, “Lucinda sat square at the table, firm as a rock, saying nothing, making no excuses for herself, with her eyes fixed upon the Bible” (2:277). Although Lucinda is eventually “taken into the country for a little while” (2:284), it is clear that her madness emerges from her *inabilities to act* the part of a happy bride, from her *aversion to performing* the rituals of wifedom with Sir Griffin Tewett. “It is my belief . . . that you have driven her mad,” Lord George tells Mrs. Carbuncle, and indeed, in Trollope’s universe, this seems to be the case.

There are no scheming madwomen here. Lucinda’s body hides no particularly remarkable secrets, just as Lizzie Eustace’s artful performances refer back to no hereditary taints. Lizzie upholds the paradigm of the “rash trickster,” but Trollope delivers her story with both humor and an engaging realism. The legal complications surrounding the diamonds (did she steal them? are they rightfully hers?) provide occasion for interesting social commentaries, but the unsettling mood of the sensation novel has been displaced onto more commonplace, less gothic concerns. The body seems to have passed out of the equation, as both the sensation novel and vehement theories about hereditary madness lose their hold on the Victorian public.

No doubt, the shifts away from sensational motifs and corporeal theories of identity had a great deal to do with the upper- and middle-classes’ increasing confidence during the 1870s. As Rance notes, “In the 1860s, these classes had seemed threatened from below,”
whereas the 1870s provided a respite (137). The 1867 Reform Bill proved more palliative than revolutionary. Oxford and Cambridge opened their doors to women in the 1870s and the Married Women’s Property Acts were passed in 1870 and 1882; these events, similarly, proved less agitating than soothingly progressive. Royal Commissions, charity groups, and private individuals actively sought to alleviate the sufferings of poverty, rather than to castigate its victims as earlier reformers and laissez-faire advocates had done. Society at large was changing, but change had not done away with all that Victorian culture held dear. The fever of biological theory was perhaps too much for these calmer times, just as the drama of the sensation novel addressed cultural fears that no longer resonated so clearly. The threat of human contradiction seemed less powerful, more distant, more assimilable. By the century’s end, both sensation fiction and degenerative perspectives on madness were history.
Chapter Five

Dirty Boys and Soiled Pinafores:
Performance, Dirt, and Whiteness in Victorian England

I am, I suppose, pretty much your typical white girl: most of my friends are white, I generally listen to white radio stations, I wear white-person clothes, and I grew up in Great Neck, a wealthy white community on Long Island. At times, I am uncomfortable with this whiteness. It strikes me alternately as a genetic occurrence that aligns me with a history of domination and oppression that I do not support and experience sporadically, at times as a victim (perhaps because I am a woman, perhaps because I am a Jew, perhaps because my family lived in a Great Neck apartment instead of the palatial houses inhabited by my high school peers), at times as the beneficiary of cultural privilege and ease. Sometimes, I experience my whiteness as a blandness, a washed-out, toned-down quality that denotes boredom and cowardice more than anything else. I suppose there are times when, evaluating myself, I find that I want more color, more of that exotic vibrancy so many colonizers identified in the people whose lands they subsumed and claimed.

My mother has told me this story; I have no real memory of it, but the story has become my record of my first understanding of race. It happened, I am told, when I was about three years old, living in Chicago with my not-yet-divorced parents. Chicago was a volatile city at that time. I was tear gassed at the ’68 convention, the civil rights movement was gathering momentum, my father was a medic in the streets. I was, in the midst of all this, a three year-old girl. In the housing projects on Lake Shore Drive where we lived, eighty percent of the residents were black. My best friend Gregory was black. I have no memory of the racial composition of that apartment complex, nor do I remember Gregory’s skin being even a curiosity. I now think, however, that my best friend Gregory was black, a curious trick of cognition, perhaps, that has given color to my memory of the
boy I played with so many afternoons. Perhaps the following story explains that cognitive shift.

I was at the playground in the sandbox, which was my favorite place to play. My mother was on a park bench with other mothers, reading or crocheting or chatting. My mother tells me I came running to her with tears streaming down my face, crying so hard I was hiccuping. When she asked me what had happened, I told her a little girl had refused to play with me because, she had said, I was a “huckey.” I was desperate to know what a huckey was, what it was that was wrong with me. My mother then gently explained to me that I’d been rejected because I was a “honkey,” a white girl. She still describes the encounter as heartbreaking.

I tell this story because it is so different from many of my friends' stories of racial differentiation. Many of them describe nearly all white communities into which a young black boy or girl enters school to become the standard of racial difference — the oddity. What seems important to me in my own story is that that little girl made whiteness visible. By pointing to my skin as a symbol of my difference from her, rather than her skin being a symbol of her difference from me, I became the oddity. Twenty-nine years later, I return to that moment I've forgotten and recognize its political and critical importance. It is crucial to interrogate whiteness as whiteness, to make what may seem the relief for that "color" I wrote of above, a visible concrete category with its own strangenesses and exoticisms. That is what this chapter sets out to do.
Dirty Boys

In a tub carrying the Pears’ slogan, a black boy peers into seemingly opaque water suspiciously, almost fearfully, as a white boy sporting a crisp white apron hands him a bar of Pears’ soap. This plate, already symbolically loaded, tells only half a story, for the Pears’ ad is a diptych, and the bather reappears in a second image. Here, washed white from his neck down, he peeks at his reflection in a mirror held by his aproned attendant. No longer fearful but wide-eyed with wonder, the black boy regards his transformed body, his leg displacing the tub’s slogan now that his body stands as testimony to it: Pears’ soap, matchless for the complexion, has expanded the parameters of possibility, turning on its ear that old fabular maxim about the impossibility of washing an Ethiop white.¹

The ad’s ideology seems fairly straightforward, as it suggests in none too subtle terms not only that Pears’ is fabulous soap, but that racial color is equivalent to dirt, and that blacks, if only they would clean themselves up, might be as white as the next Briton.² Perhaps inadvertently, however, the ad undermines its own racism, as it extends the mutable qualities of race beyond the figure of the bathing boy. You see, the advertisement as it was printed in the 1890s is irreducible to a simplified racial spectrum of black and white. In the strikingly vivid original, the borders of the ad are a bright blue, the little footstool is a cherry red, both the soap and the “black” boy are brown, and the cheeks of the white boy’s face, as well as of those that peer in, out, and down from the corners of the ad, are a rosy pink. I raise this point to begin work towards a certain specificity. If one is to discuss race both in relation to and beyond its connections with physical bodies, it seems crucial to note carefully the attributes of those bodies. For example, the Crayola crayon with which I used to color white faces was once called “flesh”; it seems important that it is now called, not white, but “peach.” If one is to examine white racial identity, one must note that white may in fact be peach, that “blackness” may in fact be brown, that the pink

¹In her article, “‘And wash the Ethiop white’: femininity and the monstrous in Othello,” Karen Newman discusses this trope within and beyond its role in Renaissance literary representation.
²See Chapter 5 of Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather, and Chapter 3 of Carol Mavor’s Pleasures Taken for other extended discussions of the role of soap in constructing whiteness.
cheeks of the “white” faces in this ad suggest that they, too, only approximate the whiteness Victorian culture held in such high regard.

As Richard Dyer observes in his essay, “White,” “white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular” (141). Whiteness, that is, often performs a disappearing act, escapes from the vista of political surveillance — as Peggy Phelan has noted, whiteness is in part so desirable because it seems to be “unmarked” (95). My purpose in this chapter is not to “un-mark” the brown boy’s brownness — as Toni Morrison so rightly asserts, the answer is not in granting an equivalent invisibility to “other” races, even (or perhaps especially) under the guise of liberal generosity. “The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse,” she writes, “is itself a racial act” (46). Rather, I aim to explore the marks that threatened the boundaries of invisibility for white bodies in the Victorian period, to turn surveillance upon whiteness itself, to look at its particularities and peculiarities by exploring the acts that made whiteness visible. The huge market for soap, after all, was comprised primarily of a white population anxious about the taint of color.

The study of whiteness is becoming a remarkably popular field for scholarship, remarkable because it has for so many years been unmarked ground. Anne McClintock, for example, argues that “The invention of whiteness . . . is not the invisible norm but the problem to be investigated” (8); bell hooks reminds her readers that “black folks have, from slavery on, shared in conversations with one another ‘special’ knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people” (165); and Eve Sedgwick writes of whiteness as “a standard of our own and other people’s value, the zero-degree no-color of (not the skin of the Europeans themselves but) the abstractive ideology of European domination” (Tendencies 255). Nationality, class, gender, sexuality, regional differences, cultural practices, and religious beliefs are some of the many categories that inflect the rubric of whiteness. This paper can, of course, only take on a very small aspect of this very large topic. In the following, I will be exploring through readings of historical and
literary material, the racial ramifications of dirt, both literal and social, for the category of white Victorian femininity. What I find is that “adding color” to certain categories of white bodies worked to police and punish social trespasses, but did little to unsettle the stability of essential racial categories. In fact, such racialization did a great deal to reinforce traditional distinctions between whiteness and blackness.

Mary Douglas’s notion of dirt as “matter out of place” contributes to my understanding of the implications of dirt for racial identity, perhaps especially for whiteness. Douglas contends that “Dirt . . . is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements” (35). This concept dovetails neatly with the implications of the Pears’ ad, wherein the proposition that racial color is dirt exceeds the specificity of colored bodies, so that dirt proves to be a cultural condition that can, perhaps, be washed off, but that can conversely “soil” racially white bodies, and thus bring them into the realm of cultural visibility and censorship. In the following, I am interested in exploring the acts and affiliations that might bestow such color, that “must not be included” if the “system” of Victorian whiteness was to maintain its privileged invisibility.

In the 1850s and 60s, we do not find, for a variety of reasons, the openly racist tenor of later-Victorian advertising. The most cogent factor was England’s nearly unilateral abolitionist sentiments and their influence on the national discourse about the conditions in America, both prior to and during the Civil War. This is not to say that racism was absent during this period, but rather that racial bias more often appeared within the context of the Pears’ ad, differing from it, however, in the color of the body in the tub. Racial sameness and difference, that is, were articulated across a spectrum of white bodies within the lexicon of dirt. For example, a writer for The Anti-Slavery Advocate chastises Charles Dickens for mocking the emblem of the Anti-Slavery association. For many years, the writer notes,
the figure of a kneeling negro in chains, exclaiming ‘Am I not a man and a brother?’ excited pity and produced reflection. . . . [I]t is only of late years that small wits have found the sentiment a proper theme of ridicule, and it is only in his last number that Mr. Dickens has condescended to raise a laugh at the kneeling negro. ("A Hint" 8-9)

Although Dickens receives censure for his direct mockery of an abolitionist emblem, the Advocate writer takes little issue with the more subtle racist tropes Dickens employs to depict the Jellyby family. The literary reference, of course, comes from Bleak House, in which Caddy Jellyby bemoans the domestic conditions of her activist mother’s home: “I have no peace of my life. Talk of Africa! I couldn’t be worse off if I was a what’s-his-name — man and a brother!” (236). The familial model of the abolitionist slogan finds a disastrous echo within the Jellyby household, where Mrs. Jellyby’s concerns with the colonization of Borriboola-Gha monopolize energy that, Dickens suggests, would be better spent improving conditions closer to home. The racial color of the African natives finds its way to English shores in the form of filth, as Esther Summerson notes how, in the Jellyby home, “no domestic object which was capable of collecting dirt, from a dear child’s knee to the door-plate, was without as much dirt as could well accumulate upon it” (476). Esther’s initial remarks upon Caddy, her mother’s scribe, describe a similarly darkened appearance: “I suppose no one was ever in such a state of ink” (85).

Dickens suggests that Caddy’s connection with Africa via her mother’s correspondence touches her very body, transporting her to “a state of ink” that obscures her whiteness. This obfuscation, however, depends upon sexist and classist sentiments, so that Dickens “blackens up” the Jellybys less for Mrs. Jellyby’s connections with Africa than for Borriboola-Gha’s function of distracting her from the female province of the home. As Esther tells her guardian, “while [the obligations of the home] are overlooked and neglected, no other duties can possibly be substituted for them” (113). Mrs. Jellyby’s entry into the male domain of business and imperialism soils the image of domestic
femininity so important to mid-Victorian culture, driving the family into the social miasma of hygienic and economic ruin. Mr. Jellyby becomes a bankrupt and, as Caddy says, there’s "nobody but Ma to thank for it" (237). As Esther and Caddy demonstrate, however, this is social color that can be cleaned up with a little attention to social conventions. On the eve of Caddy’s wedding, an event that marks her passage out of Africa and into what Esther later deems “a natural, wholesome, loving course of industry and perseverance that was quite as good as a Mission” (594), the two young women transform the chaotic filth that is the Jellyby home into something approximating middle-class normalcy. “In the morning,” Esther reports, “it looked, by the aid of a few flowers and a quantity of soap and water, and a little arrangement, quite gay” (478).

This coincidence of literal, social, and racial dirt pervades non-fictional texts as well, particularly those about the poor. In Edwin Chadwick’s Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain (1842) and Henry Mayhew’s London Labour and the London Poor (1861-2), the authors journey to the “underworld” of Victorian England to report upon the living conditions of peoples foreign to the middle and upper classes. Because these foreign territories are quite literally at home, these reports voice concerns about national integrity and well-being; they do so, however, by sliding class and racial difference, so that the poor become almost literally another race. Mayhew, for example, opens his ethnology with an extended discussion dividing humanity into two distinct “tribes,” the wanderers and the settlers. This “tribal” difference, however, quickly becomes racial difference, as Mayhew begins his discussion of “the nomadic races of England” which include not only “the habitual vagrant — half-beggar, half-thief . . . peddlars, showmen, [and] harvest-men,” but also “the pick-pockets — the beggars — the prostitutes — the street-sellers — the street-performers — the cabmen — the coachmen — the watermen — the sailors and such like” (2). Of these “nomadic races,” Mayhew observes “a greater development of the animal than of the intellectual or moral nature of man” so that they manifest physical differences in the shape of “high cheek-bones and
protruding jaws” which intersect with radical cultural differences: “their use of a slang language . . . their lax ideas of property . . . their general improvidence — their repugnance to continuous labour — their disregard of female honour — their love of cruelty — their pugnacity — and their utter want of religion” (3). Literalizing signs of difference by converting the social into the racial, Mayhew constructs a convenient barrier by which to distinguish middle-class from working-class whiteness.

In his work on urban prostitution (1857), William Acton concerns himself with similar problems of social dirt permeating white bodies, although he removes his field of inquiry from the surface of the body to more interior climes; interpreting both moral decay and venereal disease as interior filth, Acton argues that “infected” bodies that carry no visible signs of their diseased condition are particularly dangerous to the health of society. Whereas the bodies of prostitutes disfigured by syphilis function as a visual flag of their polluted condition, those that are only socially soiled can “pass” back and forth between respectable and disreputable factions of society; it makes little difference to Acton, it seems, whether their overly sexualized, overly available bodies carry literal disease or simple corruption. As conduits of dirt that refuse to stay within their own social classes, prostitutes represent to Acton quite dangerous “matter out of place”; the Contagious Diseases Acts, which he pioneered, work strenuously to clean up both these young women and the cities their presence ostensibly polluted.

Oddly summing up the implication of these texts, the author of an 1866 pamphlet on cosmetic arts argues that “the Creator, in His wisdom, has . . . endowed man with an instinctive love of personal cleanliness” (Cooley 1-2). Construing the dirty as an Other, ungodly species, these texts place a cordon sanitaire around the category of whiteness so as to exclude racially white bodies that are soiled through consequence of “uncivilized” acts such as prostitution, intemperance, living in poverty, and failing to bathe. An ad for Hudson’s Dry Soap bears out the rigor with which many citizens policed this boundary: the figure of Big Ben provides the background for a bobby who reads by lantern-light a
slogan emblazoned across a wooden fence. "ARREST all DIRT and Cleanse Everything by Using HUDSON'S DRY SOAP," the ad reads. "REWARD!! Purity, Health, Perfect Satisfaction by its regular Daily Use" (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford: John Johnson Collection; Window Bills and Advertisements 5).

The tone of these works makes it clear that dirt was as much a moral as a material category, although the ideology of cleanliness depended for its efficacy upon the conflation of the two. The conflation of racial and social difference, however, not only put in place what I perceive to be a critically significant spectrum across which one white body was distinguished from another, but also enabled the Victorian public to discount the very real economic factors that lay behind many such differences. By making the poor into racial others, Victorian pundits were able to naturalize the problems of urban capitalism, so that consequences of laissez-faire economics became physicalized cultural differences that had their bases not in imbalanced social structures but in nature.

**Soiled Pinafores**

The term, "white slave," relies upon a similar dynamics of comparison and elision. Long before the term became familiar parlance for London prostitutes, novelists such as J. Rymer lent the term to seamstresses, while the biographer, G. E. Sargent, applied the term to a condition of indenture that looked rather suspiciously like marriage; the history of white slavery, that is, bespeaks a slippage between female work and color. The more familiar construction of the expression sought to transmit the color of African slaves' skin to white prostitutes' bodies as a consequence of the acts that were performed on and by them. To call such women "white slaves," however, was also to preserve and to naturalize the alliance between slavery and blackness. The term, that is, gained much of its rhetorical freight from surprise: black slavery, if a subject of political contention, still fell within the realm of the familiar, while white slavery was shocking because whites were not "supposed to be" slaves. Even as it maintained an implicit distinction between the perilous
spectrum of whiteness and literal racial difference, a vast quantity of literature dedicated to
defeminine bodily purity, to say nothing of the creams, lotions, powders, and salves that
worked to whiten white gentlewomen's skin, relied in large part for its currency upon the
dangers of white women "falling" into color. This color proved a powerful metaphor, and
a rather amazing proliferation of tracts and beauty products in the Victorian period suggest
specific anxieties about female filth and the precariousness of white women's racial status.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot demonstrates such a fall into color, although
she does so through a prolepsis that maintains a sense of cultural critique. After Stephen
Guest betrays his fiancée, Lucy Deane, a vision of pink and white, to elope with Maggie
Tulliver, the dark woman, the townspeople of St. Ogg's read backwards, retrospectively
identifying fallenness within Maggie's body: "to the world's wife," Eliot writes, "there
had always been something in Miss Tulliver's very physique that a refined instinct felt to
be prophetic of harm" (621). Racializing her "very physique," the community is able to
cast Maggie out without interrogating the status of the acts by which they accord social
sanctity and inclusion, for if Maggie returns without a ring, she also returns with her
virginity intact.

Whiteness in St. Ogg's, however, depends largely upon appearances, and Eliot
facilitates backwards reading practices by corporealizing Maggie's fallenness early in the
novel. Many critics have remarked upon Maggie's unruly hair, but few note the ways in
which this synecdoche for sexuality contributes to her racial status in the community. As
Maggie's Aunt Pullet says, "the gell has too much hair. . . . It's that as makes her skin so
brown, I shouldn't wonder" (118). As if too much hair could stimulate the skin to
produce an excess of pigment, the easy slide between the two posits a rebellious, "other"
sexuality that exceeds the standards of English civilization. Compounding this implication
of racial color, Mrs. Tulliver finds it impossible to keep the young Maggie out of dirt.
"How to keep her in a clean pinafore two hours together passes my cunning," she
complains. Mrs. Tulliver quickly works this propensity for dirtiness into Maggie's body,
disowning kinship with her daughter whose “brown skin makes her look like a mulatter” (60).

Mrs. Tulliver’s invocation of the “mulatter” woman resonates with Maggie’s dream of being “queen of the gypsies,” a dream Eliot makes a temporary reality through an intricate dance of sameness and difference regulated by the discourses of dirt and race. Maggie is confident that she will find likeness in the gypsies, as she “had been . . . often told she was like a gypsy and ‘half wild,’” but a sense of dis-ease stymies her identifications. Although she recognizes in the face of a gypsy woman “the bright dark eyes and the long hair . . . something like what she used to see in the glass,” she also “wishe[s] she had not been so dirty” (172). Throughout the encounter, Maggie operates within the compass of white imperialism, maintaining very specific ideas about civilization and cleanliness. Maggie feels sure that “the gypsies . . . would gladly receive her and pay her much respect on account of her superior knowledge” (168). “Everything would be quite charming,” Maggie thinks, “when she had taught the gypsies to use a washing-basin and to feel an interest in books.” She later treats them to a discourse on Columbus, “a very wonderful man, who found out half the world” (174).

Maggie’s encounter with the gypsies gives us a glimpse at the components of Victorian whiteness and at how they operate. Whiteness is about cleanliness and a particular understanding of global history; it is about wearing a bonnet, which Maggie readily relinquishes upon first meeting the gypsies but gladly reclaims “that recently despised but now welcomed article of costume” when she finds the gypsies more radically different than she had anticipated (178). Whiteness is about a privilege that the gypsies refuse to recognize, as soon “Maggie felt that it was impossible she should ever be queen of these people, or ever communicate to them amusing and useful knowledge” (175). Whiteness is about owning and respecting personal property (“they must certainly be thieves,” Maggie ruminates when a gypsy man fails to return her small silver thimble); it is about having bread and butter and tea, not “a lump of dry bread . . . and a piece of cold
bacon” (174). Over and above all, it seems that whiteness is about judging others according to their differences, and attempting to correct them where they “err.” When Maggie finds that the gypsies “dirt” cannot be so readily removed with the ablutions of a washing-basin, the threat of radical difference soon reveals the racism behind her earlier idealism. “From having considered them very respectful companions, amenable to instruction, she had begun to think that they meant perhaps to kill her as soon as it was dark, and cut up her body for gradual cooking” (177). Maggie’s search for the gypsies proves in the end to be a search not for sameness but for a difference more comfortable to herself, for a community that will recognize her whiteness and address her as “a little lady, and [be] prepared to treat her accordingly” (172).

Like the gypsies’ unwashable corruption, physical dirt becomes social dirt when the Tulliver family loses its financial security. This fall ironically seems to facilitate the sexual fall already inscribed on Maggie’s body. Lucy comments how well Maggie looks in her “shabby clothes,” and indeed, Maggie’s class-standing makes her all the more attractive to Stephen. Eliot subtly aligns economic and racial otherness, referring back to Maggie’s desire to be queen of the gypsies as she writes, “If Maggie had been the queen of coquettes, she could hardly have invented a means of giving greater piquancy to her beauty in Stephen’s eyes: I am not sure that the quiet admission of plain sewing and poverty would have done alone, but assisted by the beauty, they made Maggie more unlike other women even than she had seemed at first” (487). Like the overdetermined sign of a dirty pinafore, a dress with darned elbows speaks a great deal about the status and accessibility of the body it covers.

It seems fitting that Maggie’s fall depends upon her passing through Mudport.

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3Joe Childers’ work on the Ashkenazi Jews is particularly illustrative here. To bar the Jews from the category of Englishness (a category that functions nearly identically to the whiteness I am discussing here), the English identified various characteristics; chief among these were their domestic habits. As Childers writes, “a midwife in a Royal Commission report on immigration complained that the Jews would not offer her a nice fresh cup of tea or coffee, only brandy, and that she found the custom of Jewish husbands remaining near their wives during their confinements ‘utterly indecent’” (6).
Like the mud that marked her young body at the novel’s start, Mudport marks Maggie as a radical outsider, sullied by class, by color, by the taint of sexual excess. Refusing to stay with Stephen to “set out on a fresh life,” Maggie returns to St. Ogg’s to confront the social gaze that adds color to her body by inferring her acts. Her brother, Tom, the first person she sees, stands “trembling and white with disgust and indignation. . . . I wash my hands of you for ever,” he tells Maggie. “You don’t belong to me” (612). When the novel provides a “washing” that restores Maggie to Tom, it is enormous. The flood that takes the lives of brother and sister ironically brings Maggie back into the fold of St. Ogg’s in the only way she can be accommodated: as a corpse. Like its biblical counterpart, this flood washes the face of a disordered community, covering over with a torrent of white water the improprieties cast upon Maggie’s capable brown body. In the aftermath of the flood, the people of St. Ogg’s work towards restoring both social and physical order. Rebuilding “wharves and warehouses,” restoring mills and churchyards, the townspeople “clean up” the unsettling otherness of Maggie Tulliver as well, returning her ashes to ashes, her troubling dust to dust.

Richard Dyer argues that “only non-whiteness can give whiteness any substance” (144), but it seems important within this context to remember that Maggie’s color is a “non-whiteness” that falls beyond traditional racial boundaries. The darkness of her skin does not remove her from her parentage; her proximity to dirt, both social and literal, does. Like the Jellyby household, brought into visibility by the “contaminating” color of Borrioboola-Gha, Maggie enters the field of visibility through literal dirt, through poverty, and through a refusal to uphold the norms of middle-class femininity. Troping Maggie’s difference as racial difference, Eliot allows us to explore the acts that could transport a racially white body to the shores of racial exclusion and, conversely, that could import the color of distant countries into the body and bodies of England.
**Exhibiting Color, Salvaging Whiteness**

The search for simultaneous racial identification and differentiation of which Eliot writes in her description of Maggie's encounter with the gypsies refers outwards to a style of entertainment that gained popularity in England throughout the Victorian period, namely "exhibitions" of people from other countries. Saartjie Baartman, a South African black woman otherwise known as "the Hottentot Venus" ushered the practice into the nineteenth century, being exhibited in London, Paris, and on the Continent from 1810 until 1815, the year of her death. Baartman gained fame for steatopygia, or "abnormally enlarged buttocks" (Heglar 2); her exhibitions featured her dressed in fitted garments that blended with her flesh so that she appeared to be nearly naked. Baartman was measured, analyzed, and demeaned through quasiscientific means which quickly brought the erotic elements of both exhibition and blackness into popular discourse. The eroticized elements of this exhibition were literalized in that her genitalia also drew attention for "distortions and anomalies" (Matus 469) and "were put on display [after her death] in the French Musee d'homme" (Heglar 5). As Sander Gilman has observed, Baartman's steatopygia became a stereotype for primitive sexuality, a quality that all too easily read her distended physiology as an eroticism that was neither English nor white; not surprisingly, Gilman notes, many nineteenth-century representations of prostitutes endowed them with steatopygia (83-9). As Jill Matus writes, "the nineteenth-century association of the prostitute with the black was most readily compounded by the belief that prostitutes differed physiologically from ordinary women, that they were sexually primitive, even degenerate. Since the prostitute was associated with disease, the link between blackness, primitive sexuality, and corruption was further determined" (469). Popular discourse surrounding Baartman established a precedent that compounded display, femininity, blackness, prostitution, and dirt. a conglomeration that would endure into the twentieth century.

There were many such exhibitions, including the "small footed Chinese Lady," the Zulu Kafirs, and the Aztec Children, not all of which were so overtly culturally coded as
Baartman’s, of course, but the simultaneous dynamics of fascination and repulsion, of identification and distanciation, pervaded nearly all of them. As Richard Altick notes, “Not only did exhibitions figure prominently on the physical London scene and in the everyday comings and goings of the population: they also reflected some of the period’s most characteristic mental habits and attitudes” (Shows 227). The performances of racial and national difference these exhibitions entailed enabled a reification of the dynamics of Empire: by parading race and ethnicity as spectacle, exhibition venues sought both to tame and to contain racial difference within the parameters of whiteness. At the same time, the theatrical trappings of these exhibitions kept national and racial difference at a safe distance.

Julia Pastrana, otherwise known as “The Nondescript” or “the Bear Woman,” appeared at the Regent Gallery in 1857. Her publicity bill offers one of the most remarkable and bizarre examples of the rhetoric of exhibiton. Pastrana is described as both animal and young lady, as both masculine and feminine, as both foreign and utterly domestic. The ad includes the following:

*A description of Julia Pastrana, the NONDESCRIPT.*

This curious and very interesting little lady . . . has thick black hair upon the nose, forehead, and every part of her face and person, excepting the front of the neck, hands, and feet; . . . she has very pretty whiskers, beard, and moustache; her eyes are large and fine . . . ; her form and limbs are quite perfect, with wonderfully small hands and feet. Altogether Miss Julia is the most singular, curious, and pleasing specimen of humanity in the world, and will entertain her audiences by dancing

**THE HIGHLAND FLING,**

**AND SINGING**

**ENGLISH AND SPANISH ROMANCES.**

(Bodleian Library, University of Oxford: John Johnson Collection; Human Freaks 2)
REGENT GALLERY,
69, & 71, QUADRANT, REGENT STREET.

GRAND & NOVEL ATTRACTION.

Miss JULIA PASTRANA,
THE NONDESCRIPT
Known throughout the United States and Canada, as the
BEAR WOMAN,
Where she has held her Levees in all the Principal Cities, and created the
greatest possible excitement, being pronounced by most eminent Naturalists
and Physicians the WONDER OF THE WORLD.

WILL HOLD HER LEVEES
At the Regent Gallery, Every Day,
COMMENCING ON MONDAY, JULY 6th, 1857,
Morning 11 to 1, and 3 to 5, Evening 6 to 10. No Evening Entertainment on Saturday.

STALLS, 3s. AREA, 2s. GALLERY, 1s.
Stalls can be procured at the Box Office, Regent Gallery, every day between 10 & 5, without extra charge.
The John Johnson Collection of printed ephemera holds Pastrana’s advertisement in a box entitled “Human Freaks,” but the language of the showbill both exceeds and fails short of the usual lexicon of freakishness. Pastrana’s abnormal physical attributes are carefully catalogued, but the writer is also quick to point out that “she has very pretty whiskers, beard, and moustache,” that “her eyes are large and fine,” and that “her form and limbs are quite perfect.” The bill not only ostracizes but recuperates Pastrana, brings her beyond the realm of the human, deeming her “the most pleasing specimen of humanity in the world.” Pastrana even exceeds the safe space between audience and stage, for “after each performance, [she] comes among the audience to converse and answer questions” (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford: John Johnson Collection; Human Freaks 2).

Pastrana’s appearance close to the time of the Civil War in America may well have spurred the nearly hysterical and often comical tolerance this advertisement expresses. This seeming socioracial generosity, however, quickly becomes questionable when one remembers that such exhibitions were distinctly capitalist endeavours: seeking to reassure the public of the respectability of viewing this exhibition, the Regent Gallery employs a dual rhetoric of sameness and difference. Pastrana may be “the most pleasing specimen of humanity in the world,” but the bill also assures the public that she is “undoubtedly The Greatest Living Natural Curiosity.” The objectification of Pastrana becomes all the more evident when one regards a subsequent advertisement, one that appeared after her death. An etching depicts “Miss Julia Pastrana, The Embalmed Nondescript, Exhibiting at 191 Piccadilly” (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford: John Johnson Collection; Human Freaks 2).

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4Altick’s *The Shows of London* and *The Presence of the Present* both remark on Pastrana (although Altick refers to her as “the Baboon Lady”). *Shows* includes a selection that substantiates Pastrana as a “real” freak, rather than one of the many frauds that peopled Victorian showplaces: Francis Buckland, a naturalist, writes of Pastrana, “I believe that her true history was that she was simply a deformed Mexican Indian woman” (cit. *Shows* 266). In both texts, Altick seems more fascinated with Pastrana’s embalming than with her significance as a live exhibit. Further, he says little in either text about the implications of Pastrana’s return in an embalmed state for Victorian culture; in *Shows*, he begins to hint at this, writing, “Intently examined, the history of the Victorians’ involvement with human freaks is a fair index to certain aspects of their psyche. But the macabre return of Julia Pastrana, the bearded Mexican lady who sang in a sweet voice and spoke three languages, perhaps
suggests more than do most such tales" (267). Unfortunately, Altick does not expand upon what he finds these suggestions to be.
This latter depiction clarifies both the ways in which Pastrana was far more a commodified object than an Anglicized subject within the racial discourse of mid-Victorian Britain, and the ways in which that discourse worked to implicate white women as well as women of color. In the illustration, Pastrana’s tightly corseted, short-petticoated corpse stands upright in a glass cage, so that her black body takes on the features of a player. It is unclear whether the head that tops that body maintains her radical difference from the English showgirl or reveals an usually unseen “truth” about the showgirl’s body: she is unbonneted, her hair is in disarray, her features are set in an angry, rebellious stare, and her beard and moustache are prominent. The showgirl was a figure of dubious respectability because she sought public attention, because she brought her body into the public sphere for money, and because she all too self-consciously performed the attributes of femininity. The exhibition of “the embalmed nondescript” reduces Pastrana’s “humanity” to an ugly lesson about the “truth” of corrupted female nature — the showgirl becomes an unsexed, unwhite creature, a woman whose masculinity has pushed through her skin in the shape of “very pretty whiskers, moustache, and beard,” a woman who exceeds the boundaries of “nature,” whose dead/undead body stands upright as a lesson to the visiting public about the monstrous spectacle all women have the potential to become.

The etching advertising the “embalmed nondescript” reinforces this figuration of Pastrana as the shade within Victorian white womanhood: behind the glass case in which Pastrana stands is a white couple, a top-hatted man and a bonneted woman. While the man stands three-quarters to the outside of the case so that most of his body and nearly all of his head are clearly visible, the woman stands fully behind the double layer of glass that encloses the outlandishly outfitted, bearded corpse. The glass not only obscures her face and body, but, because she stands behind and only slightly off-center to Pastrana, casts her as Pastrana’s shadow. This strange inversion — white middle-class woman as shadow of the black hermaphroditic showgirl — maintains and complicates the relationship between the two women: this is not simply a viewing subject and a viewed object, for the shadow-
woman is not clearly white, although her dress and her white husband imply that she is so. Behind the protective glass that cages Pastrana, the woman appears a dusky gray. Shadowing Pastrana’s black skin, beside a man who is clearly white, the bonneted woman exhibits the racial potential that lies behind and within the whiteness of the Victorian middle-class white woman.

**Cleaning Up Race**

Taking the exhibition catalogues’ dual discourses of assimilation and segregation a step further, many fictional texts of the 1860s problematized the standards of whiteness. Written within the context of most of England’s vehement abolitionist sentiments about the Civil War in America, many British authors interrogated what exactly made up white racial identity in a manner that echoed but was far more overt than Eliot’s work in *The Mill on the Floss*. In this section, I will be pairing *The Octoroon*, a sensation novel by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, with *Black and White*, a melodrama by Wilkie Collins, before turning to Collins’s bizarre novel, *Poor Miss Finch*. The former two texts are remarkably similar in many ways: both involve a central figure with white skin but mixed blood who is raised to believe he or she is white; both are set outside of England; and both threaten the hero or heroine with black identity before recuperating him or her into the rubric of whiteness. In both of these texts, it is behavior, not racial heritage, that determines racial identity; in fact, in both texts, other characters with white skin and white blood “fall into color” through un-Christian acts. In both cases, it is the genuineness of the central characters’ actions that allows them to reenter the white company to which they had been accustomed and from which they had been threatened with expulsion. In making racial identity contingent upon acts rather than blood or skin, these texts offer a radical challenge to the stability of skin as a signifier of race, and to blood as a determinant of racial categorization.

*The Octoroon*, serialized in *The Half-penny Journal* between 1861-2, details the story of Cora Leslie, a beautiful young woman who, although born in Louisiana, has spent
nearly her entire life in England. The novel opens in England in 1860 with a farewell party for Cora’s dear friend, Adelaide Horton, whose father, like Cora’s, owns a plantation just outside of New Orleans. Adelaide, we are told, has led a charmed life.

Born upon the plantation of a wealthy father, the cries of beaten slaves had never disturbed her infant slumbers; for the costly mansion in which the baby heiress was reared was far from the huts of the helpless creatures who worked sometime sixteen hours a day to swell the planter’s wealth. No groans of agonized parents torn from their unconscious babes; no cries of outraged husbands, severed from their newly wedded wives, had ever broken Adelaide’s sleep. She knew nothing of the slave trade. (5).

Cora, at this moment, is similarly ignorant, but she learns a great deal very quickly when she hears that her father has been wounded in a slave uprising on his plantation and decides against his wishes to return to Louisiana with the Hortons. Upon her return, Cora learns from her father that his plantation is in deeply troubled financial circumstances. The planter is in debt to one Silas Craig, a usurer, to Augustus Horton, Adelaide’s ruthless and lusty brother, and to various other creditors. When Gerald Leslie is unable to pay his debts, his entire estate is auctioned. Cora learns that she is a part of that estate, for she is an octoroon and hence not only her father’s daughter, but quite literally his property as well.

The reader’s first view of Cora at the London fete belies the racial “truth” of her body, although Mortimer Percy, a friend of the Horton’s, is able to read beyond her skin, a talent which Southern women and Englishers seem to lack. Although Cora’s complexion is “fairer than the ungathered lily hiding deep in an untrodden forest” (7), Percy tells Gilbert Margrave, the novel’s hero, that “[his] angel, [his] nymph, [his] goddess, [his] siren is — a slave . . . . Had you been a planter, Gilbert,” Percy continues, “you would have been able to discover, as I did, when just now I stood close to that lovely girl, the fatal signs of her birth. At the extreme corner of the eye, and at the root of the finger-nails, the South American [here meaning an American from the South], can always discover the
trace of slavery, though but one drop of the blood of the despised race tainted the object upon whom he looked” (7).

The interplay between apparent and real whiteness, between a white outward appearance that suggests racial purity and a “tainted” interior truth that pollutes the “real” self, provides the structure for the moral framework of the novel. In forecasting Cora’s fate in New Orleans, for example, Percy rightly predicts that “Every door at which she dares to knock will be closed against her . . . . Genius, beauty, wealth, these can not wash out the stain; the fatal taint of African blood still remains” (17). This language of racial pollution pervades the novel. Braddon writes of Cora that “a few drops only of the African race were enough to taint her nature and change the whole current of her life” (44). Unlike George Eliot’s unwashable gypsies, however, Cora’s “inmost life” proves in the end to be as “white” as her skin, as Braddon removes racial identity from the realm of blood and brings it into the realm of behavior, or acts. In Cora’s case, if the “taint” of African blood has touched her “nature,” it has done so in a way entirely consistent with the codes of Victorian femininity, so that in preserving the signs of proper Victorian womanhood, Cora proves herself quite pure, quite white indeed. Braddon devises various tests of Cora’s womanhood. Her initial response to learning that her father had raped her mother is to take up the dual banners of abolition and women’s rights. Demonstrating compassion for her mother rather than pity for herself, Cora exalts herself into the echelon of British womanhood: “You sent me to England,” she reminds her father in her reproaches. “Do you know what they taught me in that free country? They taught me that the honor of every man, the love of every mother are alike sacred” (42-3). Cora’s sexual purity is tested as well, by Augustus Horton’s lascivious propositions. “Be mine,” Horton offers, “and none shall ever taunt you with that fatal secret; be mine, and you shall be the proudest beauty in Louisiana, the queen of New Orleans . . . Be mine, and the debt owed me by your father shall be cancelled” (38). Cora’s clear understanding of the difference between filial loyalty and familial honor rescues her from falling into mistresseship. “You have
done well to choose the hour of a father’s absence to insult his only daughter,” Cora replies. “Go!” Later in the novel, when Horton purchases Cora at the auction of Gerald Leslie’s property and her demise seems inevitable, she turns upon Horton with language of English abolition: “The free citizens of that land of liberty forgot to teach me that beneath God’s bounteous Heaven, there live a race of men who traffic in the bodies and souls of their fellow-creatures!” she exclaims (133). And when Horton tries to woo her, averring that “It is not the right of a master that I would exercise, but that of a lover,” Cora quickly negates the worth of his words. “‘You forget,’ replied Cora, with icy coldness, ‘that I love, and am beloved by a man who would make me his wife’” (133). Efficaciously sweeping away the social dirt Horton strives to cast upon her, Cora establishes the purity of the womanly soul contained within her “tainted” body.

Perhaps inadvertently, and in a vein I can’t discuss at great length here, Braddon reveals a troubling intersection between white slavery and Victorian marriage. As I have said, the novel chronicles Cora’s expulsion and recuperation into Southern society, but that recuperation depends upon Cora’s marriage to Gilbert Margrave, a ceremony and a transaction in which Cora is quite literally a gift. “I will give her to you as your lady’s-maid,” Augustus Horton tells his sister. “[L]et her feel what it is to be the slave of a woman who hates her” (143). Adelaide becomes an abolitionist, however, and redeems her own femininity by restoring Cora to her “rightful owner,” who significantly proves not to be her father: “I can not restore Cora to you even if I would,” Adelaide tells Gerald Leslie,

“For she is no longer mine. I, too, have given her away.”

Augustus started at these words.

“Yes, Adelaide!” he exclaimed.

“Yes. You gave her to me for a lady’s maid. I had been long seeking for an opportunity of repairing the injury which I did her [by rejecting her]. I have given her to her husband, Gilbert Margrave!” (158)
If Cora has anything of a "slave’s nature," that nature is itself naturalized by the ceremony that makes her her husband’s property, an equation that questions the status of women in England in general and that proves Cora just as fair, just as white, as her racially undifferentiated counterparts. The novel closes with Cora “a happy wife in our own dear native land” — that “land” being, of course, England (161).

Wilkie Collins’s melodrama, *Black and White* (1869), neatly parallels the dynamics of Braddon’s novel, but with a twist: the octoroon in this text is Count Maurice du Layrac, a man. Set in Trinidad in 1830, Collins’s play relates the tale of Miss Emily Millburn, an heiress engaged to a cruel planter, Stephen Westcraft. Like Braddon’s novel, the play opens with a party, this one for Emily’s birthday, but the birthday girl is not to be found when the final waltz of the evening is announced. “Where is Miss Millburn?” Westcraft demands. “She is engaged to me for this waltz — and I can’t find her anywhere” (2). Emily’s failure to dance with Westcraft signals a much larger problem, one that becomes evident when she appears minutes later, despondent and lethargic. “I must have been out of my senses to have gone to Europe!” she moans to her friend, Mrs. Penfold. “Why did I not stop here?” (4). When Mrs. Penfold reminds Emily that her doctors had ordered her abroad for her health, Emily reveals the source of her recently acquired ennui: “I should never have seen him, if I had not gone to Paris” (5). I will spare my reader the machinations of Emily’s coyness in this first scene. “Him” refers to the Count Maurice de Layrac, “the most charming man in the world” (5), with whom Emily had engaged in a healthy flirtation while abroad. In a moment of flirtatious play, she invites him to attend her birthday party and has been pining the night through over his absence, although he would have to travel half the world to fulfill his engagement.

Shortly after the final waltz ends, however, Maurice shows. Westcraft, of course, is none too pleased, and engages Maurice in jealous sparring. For his part, Maurice reverts back to the family of man paradigm to which I referred in *Bleak House*: although Westcraft is white, Maurice puzzles aloud whether he is Miss Millburn’s brother, uncle, or
cousin, before deciding upon the latter, declaring to Emily, "I have taken a fancy to your
cousin — I like his nice brown face" (9). Speaking with paradigmatic Continental
snobbery, Maurice highlights the orientalized "nature" of the island's products, as well as
its producers; he facetiously asks if Westcraft won't show him the "sugar-canels, liquorice,
cocoa, tobacco, pigs, parrots, musquitos, cockroaches, monkeys, rats" (9), and refers to
Westcraft himself as "Another production of this superb island. Bears!" (10).

Like Cora at the beginning of The Octoroon, Maurice does not yet know how
deeply his own production is entangled with that of the plantation. An ailing quadroon
slave, Ruth, recoils with horror when Maurice arrives at Emily's fete, and sends for him in
the night. Emily, overhearing that Maurice is off to meet a woman, determines to follow
him, and Westcraft determines to follow Emily. Two outsiders hence witness the "secret"
meeting between Ruth and Maurice, and both Emily and Westcraft learn that Maurice was
adopted by the Count and Countess de Layrac, his "father and mother," and that Ruth is
his true mother. Like Cora Leslie, Maurice de Layrac is an octoroon.

Collins establishes similar connections between acting and racial identity to
Braddon, although the gender dynamics in Black and White lead to a somewhat different
scenario. In The Octoroon, "true" whiteness seems to be all about an delicate balance
between of humility and dignity; this same balance exists in "Black and White," but, with
the gendered difference in racially colored bodies, feminine humility becomes masculine
humiliation. As one might expect, Maurice has little apprehension about the erotic
consequences of his recently revealed status on the island and the tests Collins devises of
Maurice's claims to whiteness assay masculine humility and middle-class dignity rather
than the feminized value of sexual purity.

At the opening of the play, Maurice has a few things to learn about British
masculinity; even as he contemplates the loss of Emily because "the slave blood runs in
my veins" (29), Maurice nonetheless reverts to the melodramatic snobbery of the
Continental gentleman in his encounters with Westcraft:
WEST. Keep your foreign gibberish to yourself.

MAUR. My foreign gibberish? Your education has been neglected, sir. One gentleman doesn't speak to another in that rough manner, and with that rude voice. Try again!

WEST. Keep a civil tongue in your head. You had better not try my patience too far, I can tell you!

MAUR. Oh, this is worse and worse! My poor island savage, it's quite a providence that I have come here to teach you. (29)

Summoning up the specter of the "poor island savage," Maurice compounds the implications of Westcraft's "nice brown face," challenging the implicit right to white status of those born into white families. However, Maurice's own behavior, haughty and out of place within both the island's and England's systems of social value, makes evident that he requires some schooling as well. Even prior to Ruth's revelation, Maurice has a bit too much of Continental color; he is not qualified to "teach" Westcraft the value or values of white behavior as they were defined within England. His own image "soiled" with the dirt of snobbery, Maurice seems to ask for the humiliation he receives from Westcraft shortly thereafter.

Westcraft challenges Maurice to meet him in the marketplace and provokes the unfortunate Count into striking him. Prepared for this, Westcraft orders his slave, Wolf, to seize Maurice and to flog him with his own cane. When the surrounding crowd object with cries of "Shame! shame! Let the gentleman go!", Westcraft quickly contradicts them: "Who calls him a gentleman? He's a slave!" (40). The crowd continue to express their discomfort about the potential spectacle of a black body flogging a white one, but they do not interfere. Only the appearance of Emily Millburn brings the scene to a halt:

(MISS MILLBURN rushes in through the crowd; and places herself between MAURICE and the cane. WOLF keeps the cane lifted, waiting his orders. MAURICE, humiliated, hides his face in his hands.)
The negro who has held him, draws back. MISS MILLBURN places one hand on MAURICE'S head, and stands steadily confronting WESTCRAFT.)

MISS M. (to WESTCRAFT). Strike! (41)

Introducing her white female body into the place of Maurice’s male racially mixed one, Emily both compounds and complicates Maurice’s embarrassment. Her role as witness to his public humiliation makes that humiliation all the more acute by enunciating his emasculation, even as she prevents actual violence against him. At the same time, however, she humiliates Westcraft, calling to account his claims to white masculinity. Her challenge to Westcraft requires that he strike a white woman, a prospect far beyond the realm of acceptable gentlemanly behavior; the analogy her interposition makes between her own body and that of the colonized, emasculated slave suggests, however problematically, the corrupted “nature” of the island gentleman and the tenuousness of his alliance with “true” manliness, here conceived as unerringly British, for this text, too, has its paean to the “great nation” of England (23). Emily’s act serves both to humble Maurice and to restore to the play the structure of good and evil familiar to both the viewers within the text and within the theater. The ease with which the on-stage crowd heralds Emily’s intervention bespeaks the extent of their unease about race unsettling the typical structure of the melodrama; the play’s title, Black and White, becomes here a pun for the exaggerated moral structure of melodrama itself, and the crowd’s unease is echoed by the reader’s; it is hard to resist searching for a way to restore the hero to the realm of whiteness (moral purity) and to relegate the villain to that of the black (moral turpitude).

I won’t detail the convolutions of plot that allow Maurice to go free, for more important than the discovered document that proclaims his emancipation is the fact that he learns a humbler, more British form of masculinity. The play ends by eradicating the source of Westcraft’s power, namely his money, so that he, with his “nice brown face,” may be dismissed. Financially emasculated, Westcraft loses his claim to the status of
white gentlemanliness on the island and Maurice and Emily are married. Oddly enough, this latter event offers another echo of *The Octoroon* with the gender dynamics appropriately reversed. Marriage is once again articulated within the language of ownership, but here ownership becomes feminine. When Emily sings happily that Maurice is “Free!”, he corrects her with the words, “No. Yours!” (56). As in Braddon’s text, the solution to racial mixture relies upon a transfer and a merging; from belonging to another man, both octoroos enter the spectrum of English whiteness via the conduit of white bodies schooled in the precepts of English abolition. The racial threat of miscegenation seems, then, to be erased by allowing moral structures of blackness and whiteness to take precedence.

For all of their abolitionist sentiments, however, Braddon’s and Collins’s texts institute structures of moral difference that maintain the stereotypes of racial difference, aligning purity with whiteness, and degeneracy with color. Both authors do question the essentialized claims of racially white bodies to social propriety and property, but stereotypes of blackness continue to haunt their prose. Alongside the plot that recuperates Cora into white society, for example, Braddon details a general falling away from whiteness in the American South. Citing “the laxity of Louisianan morals,” depicting New Orleans high society as an enclave undercut by greed, lust, and duplicity, Braddon has these moral taints permeate the bodies of Louisianian people, so that, by the end of the novel, the body of Silas Craig, the usurer, has begun to manifests signs of color: “His face was almost ghastly in its corpse-like hue;” Braddon writes, “purple circles surrounded his bloodshot eyes, and his lips were black and dry, like those of a sufferer in the worst stage of fever” (140). The “nice brown face” of Westcraft bespeaks a similar corruption, one which refuses to stay within the morally tainted body and seeps up to its surface. The role of African-Americans in both texts further undercuts Braddon’s and Collins’s seeming racial tolerance: Toby, who rescues Cora from Horton’s estate, is little more than a caricature of the happy slave, and Tristan, a character prominent in one of the novel’s
subplots, embodies the lack of civilization and inherent savagery associated with blackness in both stereotypical Western imagery and in Braddon’s own moral schema. “His was one of those natures,” Braddon writes, “burning as Afric’s skies, created, sometimes, like the venomous serpents of those tropical climes, only to terrify and to destroy” (60). In *Black and White*, the island’s slaves provide comic relief. The slaves of absentee landlord David Michaelmas’s plantation, for example, have taken the names of Mr. Plato, Mr. Socrates, Mr. Homer, Mr. Virgil, Mr. Shakespeare, and Mr. Milton because, as Plato puts it, “we don’t see why de dam white man should hab all de ’lustrious names to himself!” When the returned Michaelmas asks Plato if these men are “All black, sir?” Plato replies “All black, sar.” “Curious,” Michaelmas muses aloud. “They were all white when I last heard of them” (14). This Plato, unlike his wise white namesake, has little to command respect; when he tells Michaelmas his plan to win “de sacred right ob freedom,” he describes “two ways ob getting at it. De Liberal way is de easiest, I admit,” he says. “De Liberal way is to get up early one morning, and kill all de whites” (14-5). This plan may seem to have its merits, or at least to command its share of revolutionary regard, but Mr. Plato is a Conservative and his method is “to found a nigger club. Little by little, sar, dis club will unite all de blacks in one great conspiracy to learn no lessons, and to do no work. What is de necessary consequence? De dam white man (saving your presence) leaves de island” (16). This illustrious club which promotes the stereotype of the black as lazy and ignorant carries the ill-conceived moniker of “de Tick-Sculled Club” (16). Throughout the course of the play, Plato establishes his central values as those of greed, sloth, cowardice, and ignorance. If Maurice de Layrac demonstrates the potential for a racially-mixed body to “transcend” its physical components, Mr. Plato does little more than confirm the very worst stereotypes about the “natural” properties of blacks.

It seems important within this context to remember that both Cora and Maurice, who are granted white identity at the close of their respective texts, have bodies that appear white. They are, that is to say, far more easily assimilable into the norms of Victorian
whiteness than they would be had they had more visibly distinguishable signs of racial
difference. This brings to the fore questions about the differences between white bodies
performing whiteness and black bodies engaging in those same performances. Cora’s and
Maurice’s passing, while revolutionary in some ways, does little to undercut the deeply
embedded preconceptions about black bodies in England. While their “acts” are ultimately
unquestionably “white,” those same acts performed by a colored body would have been
less readily rewarded, that body less readily granted the status of middle-class whiteness.
It seems no mistake that many British abolitionist texts of the 1860s grapple with the
problems of octoroons and quadroons, with bodies that were dubious in their declarations
of difference from the whiteness that strove to recuperate them.

Wilkie Collins’s 1871 novel, Poor Miss Finch, both reinforces this point and
returns me to the striking spectrum of color in the Pear’s soap advertisement which began
this chapter. Where The Octoroon and Black and White concern themselves with a range
of brownness that denotes social dirt, Poor Miss Finch introduces and interrogates the
moral dynamics of color through an examination of blueness. The novel depicts the
predicament of Lucilla Finch, a young woman blinded in her first year, who entertains a
deep prejudice against dark colors. She falls in love with Oscar Dubourg, a white man
who suffers from epilepsy. Lucilla’s prejudices are in no way moderated by her blindness;
indeed, they are only exacerbated by the power of her imagination. “I have the oddest
ideas in this blind head of mine,” she tells her companion, Madame Pratolungo. “I
associate life and beauty with light colours, and death and crime with dark colours. If I
married a man with a dark complexion, and if I recovered my sight afterwards, I should
run away from him” (74).

Collins’s overt recognition of the characteristic properties of lightness and darkness,
explored elsewhere through his inversions of light and dark heroines, here takes the form
of an odd test of complexion and cognition.5 When his epilepsy grows steadily worse,
Oscar decides to take nitrate of silver to eliminate his seizures. This form of medication, while effective, has the unfortunate side effect of turning the patient’s complexion “a devilish—colouring of livid blackish blue!” (105; Collins’s italics). Oscar reconciles himself to this treatment with the comforting thought that he can keep the truth of his complexion from Lucilla. “[T]he one price to pay for it,” he tells Madame Pratolungo, “[is] a discoloured face for the rest of your life—which the one person who is dearest to you will never see” (112). Shortly after his conversion to blueness, however, Oscar finds himself confronted with the return to England of his twin brother, Nugent, and with Nugent’s proposals for restoring Lucilla’s sight. Nugent’s travels on the Continent have brought him into contact with a revolutionary German oculist, Herr Grosse, whose methods for removing cataracts have met with success. Nugent introduces Herr Grosse into the Finch household and the novel’s crisis begins: what will Lucilla do when she discovers that her true love is blue? Nugent seeks to circumvent this crisis and to serve his own desires by posing as Oscar; having fallen in love with Lucilla himself, Nugent begins a career of lying, scheming, and conniving.

Most of the limited criticism about Poor Miss Finch focuses on the novel’s realism; Catherine Peters, who introduces the Oxford edition, goes on for some time about Locke and Berkeley’s theories of perception and the true accounts within medical literature of recoveries from blindness and epilepsy upon which Collins apparently based his research (viii-ix). Nicholas Rance reads the novel as political allegory about the Continental predilection for meddling with what Lucilla’s father terms “Inscrutable Providence” (Rance 143-9). As Peters notes, the Victorian press, too, focused on the novel’s proximity to — or rather, distance from — reality, attacking “the absurdity of its plot; the unreality of its characters; the milk-and-water nature of its sensationalism” (xv-xvi). There is a startling silence about the racial implications of blueness and about Collins’s interrogations of the roots of prejudice. This is especially surprising given the fact that Lucilla is explicit

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heroines and fair villainesses, although Magdalen is a rather sympathetic villainess.
about the racial bias that imbues her discrimination against dark colors: describing her
meeting with a Hindu, a man who has been described to her as “very tall and lean, with a
dark brown complexion and glittering black eyes,” Lucilla recounts:

The instant I felt him approaching, my darkness was peopled with brown demons. He
took my hand. I tried hard to control myself—but I really could not help shuddering
and starting back when he touched me. To make matters worse, he sat next to me at
dinner. In five minutes I had long, lean, black-eyed beings all round me; perpetually
growing in numbers, and pressing closer and closer on me as they grew. It ended in
my being obliged to leave the table. (118)

This racism seems unexceptional within the novel’s community of people concerned with
sight; Herr Grosse exclaims over Lucilla at their first introduction, “Here is jost the
complexions I like—nice-fair! nice-fair!” (192-3).

The novel’s central question seems to be one that Nugent asks early in the novel,
before he has become a means of testing it: “Can there be such a thing as a purely
instinctive antipathy; remaining passive until external influences rouse it; and resting on no
sort of practical experience whatever?” (152). Testing the bases of racial prejudice, Oscar’s
dark skin and good behavior provide the contrast for Nugent’s white skin and
reprehensible behavior. This text provides no easy reconciliation of skin and action,
however; Nugent remains as white as he had been, while Oscar retains his fetching shade
of navy. The answer to Nugent’s question seems at first to be an unequivocal yes; Lucilla,
blind almost from birth, insists that she be surrounded by brightly colored things. “Pray
don’t wear dark colours,” she asks of Madame Pratolongo. “I have my own blind horror
of anything that is dark. Dear Madame Pratolongo, wear pretty bright colours, to please
me!” (14; Collins’s italics). However, Lucilla discerns no change in Oscar as his skin
gradually becomes more and more blue and the novel, in the end, offers the troubling
suggestion that tolerance may be found through the only slightly-masked metaphor of
blindness.
Lucilla has no trouble distinguishing between the identical brothers in her sightlessness; giving her hand first to one brother and then the other, Lucilla identifies Oscar unfailingly, for she says, "When Oscar takes it, a delicious tingle runs from his hand into mine, and steals all over me" (148). Lucilla has no notion of Oscar's blueness, and responds to the man she loves over and again without the bar of prejudice. When Nugent takes the blind girl's hand, she triumphantly declares she feels "Nothing!" (148). After Herr Grosse's operation, however, Lucilla sees Oscar's face for the first time; deceived into thinking he is Nugent and Nugent is Oscar, she recoils with horror.

[Her eyes] encountered Oscar's face. She saw the blue-black of it in full light.

A cry of terror escaped her: she started back, shuddering, and caught hold of Nugent's arm. Grosse motioned sternly to him to turn her face from the window; and lifted the bandage. She clutched at it with feverish eagerness as he held it up. "Put it on again!" she said, holding Nugent with one hand, and lifting the other to point towards Oscar with a gesture of disgust. "Put it on again. I have seen too much already." (256)

This gesture of voluntary masking, of willful blindness, becomes the gesture that symbolizes racial tolerance in the novel. Much later, after Oscar has fled the county, Nugent, posing as Oscar, persuades Lucilla to elope with him to London. Before the wedding can take place, however, Lucilla's persistent journal-keeping and mental agitation cause her to lose her sight again. When Madame Pratolungo's deft detective work enables her to find both Oscar and the confused, unhappy girl, she finds Lucilla no longer in love with "Oscar" (in fact, Nugent). Having lost her sight again, she tells Madame Pratolungo, "I have so little feeling for him, that I sometimes find it hard to persuade myself that he really is Oscar. You know how I used to adore him. You know how enchanted I should once have been to marry him" (415-6). Lucilla's return to blindness returns her as well to a level of insight that supersedes vision. Able once again to "see" past the surface of the skin to the color of the being "within," Lucilla reads Nugent's true colors in all their
darkness — and Oscar's in all their imagined light. When Madame Pratolungo places the real Oscar's hand in hers, Lucilla responds with "a long low cry—a cry of breathless rapture . . . In soft tones of ecstasy, with her lips on his cheek, she murmured the delicious words: 'Oh Oscar! I know you once more!'" (416-7).

Restored to the real Oscar, restored to blindness, Lucilla begins the work of cultivating ignorance. His blueness cannot enter into her mental picture of him, else she responds with repulsion. "Thank God, I am blind," she says over and again. "My blindness is my blessing. It has given me back my old delightful sensation when I touch him; it keeps my own beloved image of him—the one image I care for—unchanged and unchangeable. . . . Oh, what a shock it would be to me, if I saw him as you see him! Try to understand me, and you won't talk of my loss—you will talk of my gain. . . . My life lives in my love. And my love lives in my blindness" (417-8). Lucilla's strategy of repressing her revulsion of dark skin enables her to love Oscar. If this seems a dubious strategy of accepting difference, it is nonetheless one which characterized late Victorian attitudes towards racial assimilation.

After Reconstruction in the United States, anxieties about racial assimilation emerge in full force. This shift is clearly delineated by the soap advertisements of the 1890s, which appeared at a crucial time in the imperial timeline, parading the spectacle of racial difference and both promising and negating the possibility of cleaning up that difference. As Anne McClintock notes,

Soap did not flourish when imperial ebullience was at its peak. It emerged commercially during an era of impending crisis and colonial calamity, serving to preserve, through fetish ritual, the uncertain boundaries of class, gender and race identity in a social order felt to be threatened by the fetid effluvia of the slums, the belching smoke of industry, social agitation, economic upheaval, imperial competition and anticolonial resistance. Soap offered the promise of spiritual salvation and regeneration through commodity consumption, a regime of domestic
hygiene that could restore the threatened potency of the imperial body politic and the race. (211)

Beyond whatever fetish value the act of washing may have carried, the national “housework” accomplished by the soap advertisements themselves was significant. Seeking to fix boundaries that were threatening to erode, these ads shored up the image of Britain as the world’s standard of stable, powerful civilization, and of whiteness as the banner of that power. Many ad plates featured the arrival of soap heralding the arrival of civilization on foreign shores; others featured foreign peoples as filth, such as one for Izal Disinfectant which depicts a masked native who sits among an assortment of human bones as he smokes a hookah. On his left, white bodies hang from distant gallows; on his right a Britisher in an IZAL costume approaches cautiously with a rifle. “The Dervish,” the text runs, “like the Microbe, is a nasty beast that tries to spread disease and death. Use Kitchener and IZAL!” (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford: John Johnson Collection; Soap 1). This ad, like many others, does little to diminish racial bias, relying upon it, in fact, to sell both its product and a comfortingly confrontational ideology.

As I discuss above, brown bodies washed white were among the most popular figures in these ads. One which ran with the heading, “An UnPacific Yarn,” further emphasizes the correlation between filth and color in these ads and the link between this correlation and social value. This plate tells the story of “The Bishop Q., of Wangaloo,” who loses his congregation to the fair, silver-haired Bishop Brown. Of Bishop Q., the ad relates, “Though white within, and free from sin, it was a fact that he/Unto the eye, externally, was black as black could be.” Bishop Brown condescends to help poor Q. with the following words: “Although a grievous case, I’ll guarantee, if you’ll agree, to change your nigger face./That you’ll obtain their love again, so buoy yourself with hope, And I’ll give you a cake or two of PEARs’ Transparent Soap” (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford: John Johnson Collection; Soap 5). Bishop Q promptly washes himself white,
IZAL Disinfectant was ordered by Her Majesty's Government for the use of the Soudan Expedition.

The Dervish, like the Microbe, is a nasty beast that tries to spread disease and death.

Use Kitchener and IZAL!
AN UNPACIFIC YARN.

THE Bishop Q., of Wangaloo, in Unpacific Seas,
A Service fair, conducted there, in dignity and ease;
Though white within, and free from sin, it was a fact that he
Unto the eye, externally, was black as black could be.

The Bishop Q., of Wangaloo, beloved was of all,
The Unpacific residents, his people great and small,
They often said, "A Bishop bred,
Is fitter than another man to guide a native flock."

BUT Oh! Alas! a dreadful pass he came to on the day
That Bishop Brown, of Monkeytown, a visit came to pay;
Whose features fair and silver hair, their fancy quickly gain'd,
Whose tuneful voice, and learning choice, affection soon obtained.

The natives all, both great and small, admitted with a groan,
That Bishop Brown, of Monkeytown, was better than their own;
That though they knew that Bishop Q. was pure and free from guile,
He must arrange to make a change, and leave his native isle.

THEN Bishop Q., of Wangaloo, his visage wet with tears,
Repaired to Brown, of Monkeytown, to intimate his fears
That base and rude ingratitude, and unbecoming slight,
Would bleach with care, his aged hair, because he wasn't white.

Said Bishop Brown, of Monkeytown, "Although a grievous case,
I'll guarantee, if you'll agree, to change your nigger face,
That you'll obtain their love again, to buoy yourself with hope,
And I'll give you a cake or two of Pears' Transparent Soap."
regains his congregation, and lives thankful to Bishop Brown for proving to him that "cleanliness is next to godliness."

There are many other such advertisements. They share with the texts of the 1860s and 70s a notion of racial identity that suggests fluidity even as it scrupulously reifies the stereotypes of racial difference. The gradations of whiteness that allow for the racial exclusion of women, of the poor, and of other significant groups I've been unable to discuss here, including the Irish and the Jews, operate to police social performance, to erase or de-race the constructions of white racial identity, and to naturalize conveniently cultural differences. Many of the 1860s attempts to "clean up" the dirt of other races so that they might be assimilated into the larger "family of man" ("Am I not a man and a brother?") prove, too, to be more about cleaning up an already-white family whose "dirt" had far more to do with socially transgressive acts than with literal, physical color. In many subtle and not-so-subtle ways, the Victorian discourse of dirt employed a subtractive method of establishing and protecting the boundaries of whiteness: whiteness, it seemed, relied for its continuance upon a certain rigor in taking out the trash.
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