

Wilkie Collins and the Victorian Murderess

by

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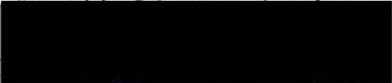
MASTER OF ARTS


in the Department of English

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ABSTRACT

In Victorian Britain, people were fascinated with both fictional and non-fictional narratives of murder, particularly when the alleged offender was a middle-class woman. For a “respectable” murderess’ violent transgression threatened nineteenth-century society’s belief in the innate goodness of women and the inviolability of the domestic sphere. In Wilkie Collins’ lifetime (1824-1889), relatively few middle-class women were charged with murder, but their cases were sensational. Contemporary accounts of the trials of Maria Manning (1849), Madeleine Smith (1857) and Adelaide Bartlett (1886) reveal that belief in a woman’s guilt or innocence was often predicated on the extent to which she fulfilled Victorian expectations of feminine behaviour. Wilkie Collins was intrigued by the idea of a murderous woman, an interest reflected in a number of his novels, all of which feature women who kill or attempt to kill: Lydia Gwilt in *Armada* (1864-66); Hester Dethridge in *Man and Wife* (1870); Madame Fontaine in *Jezebel’s Daughter* (1879); and the Prisoner, Eunice Gracedieu and Helena Gracedieu in *The Legacy of Cain* (1888). This thesis examines the cases of the aforementioned real-life murderesses in order to establish general Victorian beliefs about women who kill and, using these attitudes as a reference point, explores Collins’ manipulation of these stereotypes in his fiction, discussing the extent to which he challenged, or conformed to, nineteenth-century preconceptions about such women. Unlike many Victorians, Collins depicted murderesses with compassion, intimating that they deserve understanding, if not sympathy. Though he never suggested that a murderess should escape punishment, he did not blame a female character’s homicidal inclinations solely on inherent sexual or moral deviance or lack of feminine sensibility. In fact, Collins not only suggested that murderous women were indistinguishable from “normal” women, but he repeatedly stressed that they *were* “normal” women, seeking the same domestic happiness as their non-criminal counterparts.

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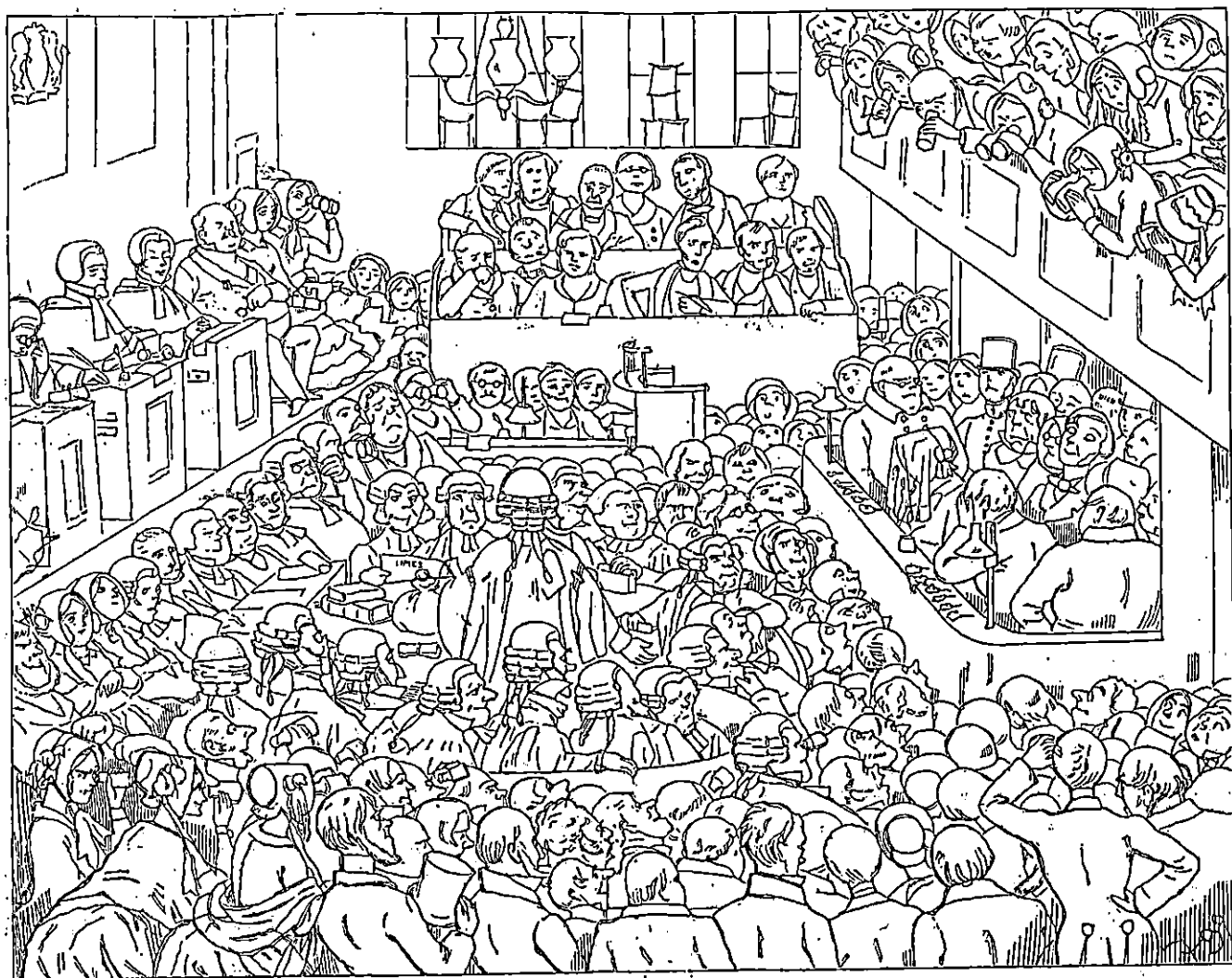
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## ILLUSTRATION 1:



APPEARANCE OF YE CRYMNYAL COVRTE DURYNG AN "INTERESTYNG" TRYAL FOR MVRDER.

Anonymous. "Appearance of ye Crymnyal Courte Duryng an "Interestyng" Trial for Murder." *Punch; or, the London Charivari* 39 (November 1849): 86.

## Introduction: Wilkie Collins and the Victorian Murderess

At times, the eagerness with which Victorians followed murder cases, in both the press and in fiction, lapsed into morbid preoccupation. Handbills and broadsheets announced the most recent crimes; weekly magazines and daily newspapers published meticulous accounts of homicides; Newgate novels and “penny dreadfuls” detailed notorious cases (which were also occasionally dramatized on stage or set to music); Madame Tussaud’s waxworks featured models of infamous criminals; and crowds filled courtrooms to see and hear the accused (Altick, *Scarlet* 41-66). “Homicide was an impromptu entertainment industry,” remarks Richard Altick. “Fascination with murder . . . knew no bounds . . .” (*Presence* 515).

Wilkie Collins (1824-1889) perfectly embodied the Victorian “fascination with murder.” There is evidence that his lifelong interest in reading and writing about crime started as early as 1849, the year of Maria Manning’s execution; he and Charles Dickens, who had witnessed the hanging, surely discussed the case and a reference to Manning appears in *The Woman in White* (1859-60) (Altick, *Presence* 522). During the 1850s, Collins translated cases from Maurice Méjan’s *Recueil des Causes Célèbres* (1808) and contributed them to Dickens’ *Household Words* (Lonoff 83; 250). For the Christmas 1855 issue of *Household Words*, Collins submitted a murder story, “The Ostler,” in which the title character’s wife tries to stab him to death. In the following summer, Collins attended the trial of the poisoner Dr. William Palmer, which apparently inspired his unique narrative style (Sutherland, *Victorian* 33).<sup>1</sup> In addition, only months after the trial of the accused murderess Madeleine Smith--allusions to which may be found in both

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<sup>1</sup> John Sutherland notes that Collins “was struck by the way each witness rose in turn to contribute a personal fragment to the chain of evidence. ‘It came to me then [Collins wrote] that a series of events in a novel would lend themselves well to an exposition like this . . . one could impart to the reader that acceptance, that sense of belief, which was produced here by the succession of testimonies . . .’” (*Victorian* 33).

*Armada* (1864-66) (Sutherland, "Introduction" xvi) and *The Law and the Lady* (1875) (Taylor xix)--Collins wrote *The Red Vial* (1857-58), a play about a murderess who was perhaps based upon the real-life serial poisoner, Anna Maria Zwanziger.<sup>2</sup>

Still more criminal cases found their way into Collins' fiction. When public protest overturns a murder conviction in *Armada*, Collins is mirroring the similar pardon of Dr. Thomas Smethurst, found guilty of poisoning his wife, but released in 1858 (Altick, *Presence* 525). The case with which Collins is most frequently associated is the Road Murder of 1860, in which a young woman, Constance Kent, was suspected of murdering her four-year-old half-brother. The detective in charge, Inspector Whicher, noted that Constance's nightgown--presumed bloody--was missing. It has been fully established that elements of *The Moonstone* (1868) were inspired by the case; Inspector Cuff bears a striking resemblance to Whicher, and a missing nightgown is central to the plot (Peters 304; Boyle 146; Altick, *Presence* 526).<sup>3</sup> It has also recently been shown that the murderess in Collins' *Man and Wife* (1870) has much in common with Susannah Palmer, who stabbed her abusive husband in the throat the year before the novel's publication (Surrige 104).

It is thus evident that Collins, like most of his contemporaries, paid close attention to the sensational crimes and trials of his age. Moreover, he wrote in a genre--that of

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<sup>2</sup> It is possible that Collins first learned of Zwanziger in a *Household Words* article, "The Ursinus," written anonymously by William Howitt in 1855. Collins directly refers to Zwanziger in *Jezebel's Daughter* (1880), a novel based on *The Red Vial*. In the novel, he acknowledges his debt to Justice Anselm von Feuerbach's *Narratives of Remarkable Criminal Trials* (1828-29) in which Zwanziger is, because of her sex, a predominant figure.

<sup>3</sup> In his introduction to *The Moonstone*, Steve Farmer cites a letter from Collins to Dickens (24 October 1860) in which Collins theorizes that Constance's father and the young boy's nursemaid had killed the child when he caught them in a "compromising embrace" (26 n.1). This theory had been advanced by Kent's local newspaper at the time of the murder (Hartman 118).

sensation fiction--which attracted readers precisely by appealing to the Victorian interest in crime. Sensation fiction featured issues of secrecy, detection, and sexual and criminal misdemeanours, usually in a domestic setting. What Collins and fellow sensation novelists surely intuited was that public interest in crime was greatest when the offense breached the sanctity of the middle-class domestic realm. In October 1865, *Blackwood's Magazine* noted the Victorian fascination with murder in the middle classes:

In Britain, for instance, the *cause célèbres* . . . which arrest attention are those perpetrated in the very heart of the pressure of modern life. A London man of business is disposed of, in a crowded train, returning to his home in the suburbs; a medical practitioner poisons his relations under the eyes of the Glasgow doctors; a child is found mysteriously dead in the bosom of a respectable family; a young lady buys arsenic, and her lover dies--these are the crimes which throw the great British public into a state of intense excitement, curiosity, and alarm.<sup>4</sup> (493)

The victims and murderers who aroused the most interest were usually not of the lower classes, whose members were often regarded as inherently dissolute. The Victorian public was most intrigued by crimes by and against people in the "respectable" middle class--whose homes ought to have been havens and whose "young ladies" supposedly neither entertained lovers, nor killed them with arsenic.

If the Victorian public viewed middle-class crime as especially intriguing (as intruding on domestic space and endangering those who dwelled there) imagine the interest it felt when a crime such as murder was attributed to a woman. For at the centre of the middle-class domestic paradise was the "angel in the house," whose purpose was to

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<sup>4</sup> The "London man of business" was Thomas Briggs, 70, a banker who in 1864 was bludgeoned to death in a train compartment by a German immigrant, Franz Müller. The "medical practitioner" was Dr. William Palmer who, in 1856, was convicted of the murder of his mother-in-law, wife, and brother. The "child found mysteriously dead" was the "Road Murder" of 1860, in which Francis Saville Kent, 4, was found, his throat cut, in his family's outdoor privy. The "young lady" was Madeleine Smith, acquitted for the murder of her lover, Emile L'Angelier, with the uniquely Scottish verdict of "Not Proven".

nurture and maintain the home, not attack it from within. The middle-class murderess' deviance from spiritual and domestic responsibilities was frightening, for it threatened the Victorian faith in womanhood and the inviolability of the home.

In Collins' lifetime relatively few middle-class women were tried for murder. Therefore, when such an event happened it produced an immense sensation--the "product of the very infrequency with which a respectable woman went on trial for her life" (Hartman 7).<sup>5</sup> In such cases, Victorian society sought the source of the middle-class woman's deviant behaviour, often looking, not to social, cultural or environmental causes, but to moral, physical or emotional flaws in the woman herself. The accused woman's private world was subject to intense public scrutiny: her appearance, past actions, performance of womanly duties, and sexual morality were examined by the court and the press. The degree to which she satisfied gender expectations was crucial to the middle-class woman accused of murder. If she had been negligent in any of these areas--especially if she had been involved in sexual impropriety--her guilt might be presupposed. Conversely, if she had fulfilled expectations of feminine behaviour, people were often willing to believe her innocent.

The trial of an accused murderess was a sensational occurrence, and the press inundated Victorian readers with details of her life and alleged crimes. Inspired by these narratives--and conscious that "topical references" created "a sense of community between themselves and the readers" (Altick, *Presence* 4)--authors incorporated into their fiction characters and incidents associated with these sensational events. By "borrowing the topical matter of journalism," writers not only stimulated readers' interests, but also

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<sup>5</sup> Hartman notes that "the number of middle-class women tried for murder was surprisingly small. A survey of the cases in the London Central Criminal Court for three selected years for each decade from the 1840s through the 1890s revealed just 6 out of 117 cases of women tried for murder in which the perpetrator appears to have [been] of the middle class" (6-7).

gave credibility to their fictional accounts of murder (Altick, *Presence* 6). The trials of Maria Manning, executed with her husband for killing her lover in 1849; Madeleine Smith, charged with poisoning her French lover in 1857; and Adelaide Bartlett, tried for poisoning her husband in 1886--not to mention the numerous cases of less sensational murders by poison which dominated the press--all "legitimized" their fictitious counterparts. "[S]uch real-life murders made it easy to believe that fictional [ladies] . . . were capable of killing" (Altick, *Scarlet* 79).

Though he never explicitly professed an interest in female criminality *per se*, Collins' fascination with murderous women is clearly evidenced in his fiction. He alluded, both directly and indirectly, to real-life women accused of murder or attempted murder (Maria Manning, Madeleine Smith, Anna Maria Zwanziger, Constance Kent, and Susannah Palmer) and in his four "murderess" novels, he both responded to, reflected, and challenged what their cases revealed about Victorian society's preconceptions about homicidal women. In keeping with both his personal curiosity and the widespread public interest in "respectable" murderesses, four of Collins' novels feature women who either kill or plot to kill: Lydia Gwilt, the intelligent and beautiful antagonist of *Armadale* (1864-66); *Man and Wife's* (1870) Hester Dethridge, the violently abused woman who has killed her husband; Madame Fontaine, the homicidal mother in *Jezebel's Daughter* (1879); and Helena Gracedieu, Eunice Gracedieu, and the Prisoner in *The Legacy of Cain* (1888). In the following thesis I will examine the cases of three accused murderesses in order to establish Victorian beliefs about women who kill. Using these attitudes as a reference point, I will then analyse Collins' manipulation of such stereotypes in his fiction, discussing the extent to which he challenged, or conformed to, nineteenth-century preconceptions about murderesses, and exploring his unorthodox intimations that a woman who kills deserves understanding, if not sympathy.

In most of these novels, Collins depicted murderesses with a compassion rarely afforded to women who killed. Though he never suggested that a murderess should escape punishment, Collins (unlike many Victorians) did not blame a female character's homicidal inclinations solely on inherent sexual or moral deviance or lack of feminine sensibility. Instead, he "repeatedly stress[ed] the social causes of criminality--alienation, abuse, economic deprivation--and show[ed] profound sympathy for women faced with the unpalatable choice between suffering and violence" (Morris 106).

Collins created some murderesses who, like many of the accused women in actual murder trials, were intelligent, charismatic, sexually appealing and "respectable." His depiction of women who kill as somehow "normal," however, provoked incredulity among critics. In October 1866, the *London Quarterly Review* proved especially unwilling to accept Collins' suggestions that a murderous woman might linger, unnoticed, in good British company:

Are we to believe that there are women, holding respectable positions, received into honest and even Christian circles, who are carrying on a system of intrigue and wickedness which we have been accustomed to associate with the name of Italy, but which we fondly believed had no existence in this country? Apparently our novelists would have us receive this notion, so determined is the pertinacity with which they go on producing . . . heroines of this style. (107-9; qtd. in Page 156)

Victorian society normally expected that a murderess must exhibit signs, in either her appearance, nationality or manners, that would announce her as criminally and morally deviant. Collins assailed these expectations--and added suspense to his fiction--by intimating that women who kill were indistinguishable from other middle-class Englishwomen.

## Chapter 1: The Victorian Murderess; or, "Specter of an Unwomanly Woman"<sup>1</sup>

It is possible to conclude that it was wise to be female and respectable if one intended to dispose of somebody in the nineteenth century. Middle-class women were literally getting away with murder.

--Mary Hartman, *The Victorian Murderess* (1)

According to the prevailing belief in the gentle nature of the female sex, the middle-class Victorian woman was regarded as innately moral, sexually pure, and domestically inclined. This attitude led to a common corollary: "being naturally good and sociable, women were thought not to be drawn to the evil and anti-social activities of criminality" (Zedner 23). Therefore, when a woman killed, Victorians were shocked, disturbed and perversely fascinated. Shocked, because they could hardly comprehend the circumstances that would prompt a woman--whose nature was thought to be intrinsically nurturing--to commit as "unfeminine" an act as murder. Disturbed, because it was believed that a woman exerted a tremendous moral influence over others; her criminal behaviour would thus have a negative effect upon the morality of her family, community and nation.<sup>2</sup> Fascinated, because relatively few middle-class women were tried for murder. Viewed as mysterious and immoral, her femininity at issue, a "respectable" murderess was an instant sensation.

When a middle-class woman killed, she did not merely break the law. If a man murdered, he was seen as having misdirected his natural "energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest" (Ruskin 146), but a middle-class woman who murdered directly violated assumptions about normal female behaviour. Contemporary commentary thus often suggested that a woman who killed was morally diseased, contagious, bestial,

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<sup>1</sup> Morris 65

<sup>2</sup> "It is bad enough if you corrupt the man," Lord Shaftesbury wrote in 1844, "but if you corrupt the woman, you poison the waters of life at the very fountain" (qtd. in Weeks 58).

demonic, barbaric, un-British, promiscuous,<sup>3</sup> deceptive, cunning, and/or adept at disguise. A murderess was scarcely considered to be a woman at all.

In the following pages of this chapter, I will examine attitudes towards three middle-class women charged with murder whose cases were among the most sensational: Maria Manning, Madeleine Smith and Adelaide Bartlett. I have selected these cases because, in each instance, the innocence or guilt of the woman was not as important as the degree to which she had violated or conformed to Victorian standards of female behaviour. As Mary Hartman notes, judicial and public responses to these cases “involved judgments on alleged facts about the women’s lives which often had little or nothing to do with the charges, but everything to do with . . . attitudes toward women” (8). These accused murderesses were on trial for their moral as well as their criminal behaviour. I would suggest that Collins attended to these (and other) cases involving women accused of murder, the details of which alerted him to both society’s and the English law’s partiality for “feminine” women; and that he used this insight to challenge many Victorian suppositions about women who killed.

**Maria Manning: “Lady Macbeth on the Bermondsey Stage”<sup>4</sup>**

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<sup>3</sup> It was an assumption in Victorian Britain that a woman who was sexually immoral was capable of (and perhaps even disposed towards) criminal acts. Connections were “commonly made between female crime and sexual morality, not least of all because all female sexual activity outside the bounds of marriage was seen as an undesirable and particularly damaging form of deviance.” This attitude “tended to characterize all criminal women as sexually deviant, so that assessments of sexual conduct were used to measure the depth of their criminality” (Zedner 32).

<sup>4</sup> Following her execution, the *Times* noted, “Had MARIA MANNING been possessed with the insane thought of following Lady MACBETH in her insatiable cupidity and ambition, in her atrocious conceptions, her undaunted soul and her unflinching nerve; in her dominion over a sottish and a cowardly husband, in her treachery to her guest, in the complacency with which she could behold her victim, in the vigour with which she could smite him . . . and perhaps also in the steadiness with which she could encounter her doom, she could not have played her part with truer feeling of its character” (14 Nov. 1849, 4a).

The Bermondsey Murder was perhaps the first sensational Victorian homicide in which the accused was a “respectable” woman. On 9 August 1849, Maria Manning (a Swiss *émigrée* and former attendant to a duchess) and Frederick, her husband of two years (a railway guard and known criminal), invited her lover, Patrick O’Connor, to their home for dinner. The couple shot Patrick and buried him under the kitchen floor; Maria robbed his lodgings of valuables; and she and her husband parted ways. When investigators discovered the body, and finally located the Mannings, Frederick blamed Maria and claimed that he “was a mere tool in the hands of his wife, whose uncontrolled temper and impetuous will, working upon his weak and corrupted, but not cruel disposition, dragged him after her into the abyss of crime” (*Times* 14 Nov. 1849, 5a). Despite her defense’s efforts to repudiate Maria’s image as marital ruler and criminal mastermind, the jury found both guilty and sentenced them to death.

To the Victorian way of thinking, Maria Manning was eminently capable of murder: she was foreign; she was an adulteress; she displayed incredible fortitude in court; and she was preoccupied with dress. Viewed as unwomanly and un-English, Maria’s licentiousness, self-control and artfulness supported the assumption that she had killed. Frederick Manning’s defense lawyer relied upon this logic, reminding the jury that as Maria had already proved herself sexually immoral, she was therefore receptive to murderous impulses:

We are all in the habit of associating the female character with the idea of mildness and obedience, and that of the male with power and strength. It is not necessary, however, to come to the conclusion that the rule is a universal one. History teaches us that the female is capable of reaching higher in point of virtue than the male: but that *when she once gives way to vice* she sinks far lower than our sex. My hypothesis, then, is, that the female prisoner premeditated, planned, and concocted the murder, and that she made her husband her dupe and instrument for that purpose.

(*Annual Register* [1849] 441; emphasis added)

Frederick's defense lawyer pointedly alluded to the occasions on which Maria "gave way to vice" [i.e., had an extramarital affair], accused her of usurping her husband's marital authority, and thus argued that she was capable of murder.

Maria Manning's reaction to her husband's finger-pointing, to the public knowledge of her infidelity, and to the possibility of hanging was a display of composure that prejudiced observers against her. "The coolness and general levity of her conduct . . . excites considerable observation, if not surprise," the *Times* remarked (4 Sept. 1849, 7a). Maria's self-possession was frequently juxtaposed with Frederick's lack of poise, the latter increasing the tendency to view her as an emasculating woman who ruled her husband. On 14 November 1849, the *Times* noted that Maria exhibited "an amount of courage and nerve which contrasted strangely with the terror-stricken aspect of her husband" (5a).

Maria's adulterous relationship, composure and marital control did not fit the accepted image of femininity. The perception that her unorthodox behaviour was "unwomanly" seems to have been linked to the perception that her appearance was masculine, though she was by all accounts an attractive woman. "Her figure," the *Times* noted, "which is large and rather handsome, though masculine, could be seen to advantage. She has all the appearance of unusual strength for a woman" (17 Sept. 1849, 8a).<sup>5</sup> In the press, Maria's "masculinization" was enhanced through comparison to her husband. The *Annual Register* (1849) described Frederick as "altogether repulsive . . . with a half-effeminate expression" and "not a tithe of [Maria's] sagacity, resolution, and

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<sup>5</sup> Collins alludes to Maria's "large" figure in *The Woman in White* (1859-60), when Marion Halcombe compares the obese Count Fosco with what she knows of other evil personages: "Mr. Murderer and Mrs. Murderess Manning were . . . both unusually stout people" (qtd. in Altick, *Presence* 523).

adroitness" (435; 433). Maria's natural femininity, it appears, had been replaced by a perverse masculinity which for Victorians served as indication of her ability to kill.

Though Maria's contemporaries viewed her as unwomanly, they nonetheless attributed her crime to "her talents in the sinister female 'arts'" (Nayder 311). Attention to costume might have been considered a feminine trait in any other Victorian woman, but in Maria it was seen as both an attempt to deceive others by presenting herself as "respectable," and as proof of the shallowness of her nature.<sup>6</sup> "Scarcely a word escapes her lips in reference to the part she is supposed to have taken in the dreadful crime," noted the *Times*. "All her thoughts apparently are devoted to dress" (4 Sept. 1849, 7a). Maria seemed worried neither about her husband, nor her moral salvation, nor her legal defense; she busied herself almost exclusively with clothing. She "paid considerable attention to her personal appearance"; her "wristbands were conspicuous from their size and showy make"; and she "showed considerable anxiety lest her satin dress should have been creased while she was seated" (*Times* 17 Sept. 1849, 8a). What woman was this, the papers asked, who was so callous as to turn her murder trial into a fashion show? Maria was regarded as duplicitous and shallow, artfully enhancing her physical attractions in order to mask her corruption from public view.

Witnesses at Maria Manning's execution noted her vanity up to the moment of her death. It was remarked that she never once expressed remorse, yet she did take great care to dress well for the event. The *Annual Register* (1849) reported that Maria "showed 'the ruling passion strong in death'; she was attired in a manner that evinced the greatest

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<sup>6</sup> "It may be mentioned, as a fact strikingly illustrative of the character of this wretched woman, that her thoughts in prison appeared to be wholly devoted to dress" (*Annual Register* [1849] 435).

attention to her personal appearance" (447).<sup>7</sup> In "Lying Awake" (1852), Charles Dickens recollected his own experience at the public execution:

I recal [sic] . . . those two forms dangling on the top of the entrance gateway--the man's, a limp loose suit of clothes, as if the man had gone out of them; the woman's, a fine shape, so elaborately corseted and artfully dressed, that it was quite unchanged in its trim appearance as it slowly swung from side to side. (146)

Dickens clearly had a "sense of [Maria's] artfulness" (Nayder, "To Murder" 311). His description reinforces the image of a couple who were viewed in death much as they were in life: the husband, flaccid and weak, drained of all manliness, and beside him, the deceptively lifelike figure of a woman, who (as master of the feminine skills of costume and deceit) remained enticing and seductive--with a pleasing figure and a hypnotic swing--to the very end.<sup>8</sup>

Maria Manning killed Patrick O'Connor but, more important to this study, she embodied the contradictions of a Victorian murderess. Maria's illicit sexuality was viewed as a sign of her "unwomanliness" and immorality; her domination in marriage and emotional fortitude fuelled the perception that she was "unfeminine"; and her nearly obsessive attention to dress was seen as a sign of disguise and deceit. Sexually and

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<sup>7</sup> Editors for the *Times* called Maria "JEZEBEL the daring foreigner . . . painted and attired even unto death" (14 Nov. 1849, 4b).

<sup>8</sup> Maria Manning furnishes perhaps the best example of a real-life murderess making her mark upon Victorian fiction. Dickens used her as his model for *Bleak House's* (1852-53) foreign murderess Mademoiselle Hortense (Morris 65). In Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), Robert Audley compares the murderous Lady Audley to Maria Manning, emphasizing his aunt's wickedness by "invok[ing] the contemporary personification of feminine deceit" (Morris 95). And Molly, Mr. Jagger's housekeeper in Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1860-61), bears a resemblance to Mrs. Manning (Altick, *Scarlet* 128), sharing the same strong build, tenaciously controlled temper and the scars of a suicide attempt. In addition, Richard Altick notes at least two more lesser-known novels upon which Maria Manning had an influence (*Presence* 522-23).

socially experienced, un-English, domineering, and artful, Maria Manning was in every way objectionable to Victorians, who welcomed the death of this most unwomanly of “respectable” murderesses.

### **Madeleine Smith: The Abnormal Spirit**<sup>9</sup>

In 1855, Madeleine Smith (19; daughter of a Glasgow architect) was introduced to Emile L’Angelier (26; a French clerk). They began to meet and correspond secretly, and the affair quickly became sexual. In her letters, Madeleine often addressed Emile as “husband” and enthusiastically referred to their numerous intimacies. Emile became distressed when he learned that Madeleine had engaged herself to a family friend (a wealthy merchant named William Minnoch) and he threatened to expose Madeleine’s imprudent correspondence to her father. Shortly thereafter, on 22 March 1857, he was found dead of arsenic poisoning. The letters and the liaison were soon discovered; it was found that Madeleine had recently purchased arsenic; and investigators suspected that, shortly before Emile’s death, she had served him cocoa one night from her ground-level bedroom window. Madeleine was charged with murder and, despite the strong circumstantial evidence against her, public sympathy was undeniably in her favour. She was acquitted with the unique Scottish verdict of “not proven”.<sup>10</sup> Maria Manning--mature, foreign and adulterous--bore all the marks the Victorian public expected to find in a murderess, but few believed that the beautiful, young, British, middle-class Madeleine Smith could have committed such a crime. Her virtuous feminine appearance and “respectable” status secured the general opinion that--if not

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<sup>9</sup> On 11 July 1857, the *Glasgow Sentinel* named Smith “one of those abnormal spirits that now and then rise up in society to startle and appall us” (qtd. in Hartman 84).

<sup>10</sup> In her introduction to Collins’ *The Law and the Lady* (1875), in which Eustace Macallan receives just such a verdict, Jenny Bourne Taylor notes that Collins was “tacitly referring” to the Madeleine Smith case (xix-xx; see also Altick, *Presence* 526).

absolutely innocent--Madeleine had been the helpless victim of a depraved foreigner's attempt at seduction and social climbing.

As no one had seen Madeleine serving Emile cocoa on the night of his death, her love letters were the prosecution's most damning evidence. "The unspoken assumption," notes Randa Helfield, "seems to have been that Madeleine's confession of sexual sin . . . was tantamount to a confession of murder" (164-65). In an address to the jury, the Lord Justice Clerk agreed that the letters were extremely incriminating:

[The] correspondence comes to be of much importance in ascertaining what sort of feelings this girl cherished, what state of mind and disposition she was in, and whether there is any trace of moral sense of propriety to be found in her letters, or whether they do or do not exhibit such a degree of ill-regulated, disorderly, distempered, licentious feelings as show that she is not a person quite incapable of cherishing any object to avoid disgrace and exposure, and of cherishing any feeling of revenge . . . . (*Times* 11 July 1857, 10e)

The correspondence proved that Madeleine was experienced in both deceit and immorality and that she had happily consorted with a Frenchman who was socially beneath her. Madeleine's actions opposed Victorian expectations of womanly behaviour; her active sexuality and amorous letters suggested that she was unfeminine, deceptive, worldly--and, consequently, capable of murder.

Madeleine's defense refuted this assertion by suggesting that their client was the blameless victim of a powerful seducer. If her letters were licentious, if her morals were corrupted, was it not more likely that a sexually experienced, low-born foreigner like Emile L'Angelier had led Madeleine astray than that she had wilfully done wrong? The defense depicted the clerk as a predator who had debauched an innocent girl:

How corrupting that influence must have been, and how vile the arts were to which he resorted for his nefarious purpose, could never be known so well as by looking to the altered tone of this poor girl's letters. She had not lost her virtue merely, but . . . her sense of decency. Whose fault was that? Whose doing was it? Think you that, without temptation, without vile teaching, a poor girl falls into those depths of degradation?

No. Influence from without, most corrupting influence could alone account for such a fall. (*Times* 10 July 1857, 12a)

Madeleine's letters, noted the *Glasgow Courier* (11 July 1857), could not have been "natural" to a British girl and "must have resulted from the contamination of a thoroughly corrupted associate. That associate could only be the obscure foreign adventurer" (qtd. in Helfield 169).<sup>11</sup> Madeleine was no longer on trial for poisoning Emile; *he* was on trial for poisoning *her* (Helfield 167).

By depicting Madeleine as a victim, and by absolving her of responsibility for her sexual impropriety, the defense convinced the jury to view her as a fragile girl corrupted by a foreign invader. This willingness to believe in womanly inculpability was condescending but, as Hartman reminds us, "Gentlemen were taught, after all, that nothing was a young lady's fault and, although the notion may have stripped women of human identity, they could find it useful in times of trouble" (56). On 21 Sept. 1865, for example, when Sarah Geals was tried for attempted murder, the *Times* acknowledged, "Had she been a man, doubtless the verdict would have been that her intention was to kill, but, as it was [i.e., as she was a woman], they [the jury] appeared to have thought that she was not aware of the effect she was likely to produce" (qtd. in Townsend 301). Anthea Trodd calls this tendency to view women as not responsible for their own actions the "doctrine of female unaccountability" (132). Victorians were reluctant to believe that Madeleine Smith could have poisoned Emile L'Angelier, let alone that she could have been responsible for the "effect she was likely to produce".

Equally useful to Madeleine's defense was her ability to appear innocent, to display the appropriate emotions at the proper times, and to take "full advantage of the courtroom stage to present the part of respectable young womanhood wronged" (Hartman

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<sup>11</sup> Some Victorians saw through the defense's smear campaign. In a letter to his publisher (1857) George Henry Lewes wrote, "I would say that it is very lucky for that miserable girl that her victim was a Frenchman and she a Scotchwoman" (qtd. in Trodd 38).

82). Madeleine's clothing--fashionable, yet always modest--emphasized her "respectability" without suggesting artfulness or disguise. Her appearance prompted the *Times* to admit that "her very aspect and demeanour seemed to advocate her cause" (2 July 1857, 5a). Though the prosecution had earlier insinuated that Madeleine Smith's composure (like Maria Manning's) was proof that she had the strength of will to murder, the defense argued that her self-control was instead "the courage of a heroine" who was "proudly conscious of her innocence" (*Times* 10 July 1857, 12b). In turn, Madeleine, faced with evidence of her sexual experience, behaved as though conscious of, and regretful about, her error. When her letters were read in court, Madeleine hung her head in shame; when consulting with her lawyers, she courteously "smiled with all the air and grace of a young lady in the drawing-room" (*Times* 2 July 1857, 5a)--though the cynical *Ayrshire Express* interpreted it as a "smirk . . . lack[ing] all the elements of a genuine smile" (qtd. in *Annual Register* [1857] 591); when her fiancé took the stand, Madeleine was, like any woman in love, "restless and excited" (*Times* 4 July 1857, 5a); and during the summing-up, she exhibited "a slight shade of sadness" (*Times* 10 July 1857, 12c). Some suspected that Madeleine's reactions were contrived, but the press was generally sympathetic, taking her actions as evidence that she was, despite her sexual misconduct, both blameless victim and "respectable" girl.

Unlike Maria Manning, reviled for her artfulness and unfemininity, Madeleine Smith did not fit the Victorian image of a murderess, for she had been raised in a "respectable" British home and looked the image of virtuous womanhood. Only when the prosecution read Madeleine's secret correspondence to Emile did her claim to innocence falter. The letters revealed a clandestine sexual relationship that suggested an unfeminine worldliness and, therefore, the capability of murder. Fortunately for Madeleine, her lover had been both socially inferior and foreign. The defense successfully proposed that Emile had seduced and corrupted Madeleine who (because of her fragile feminine nature) had

been unable to resist or understand his advances. This reinstatement of her femininity--coupled with her charming manners in court, her elegant (yet apparently artless) fashion sense, and, it must be admitted, the merely circumstantial evidence--resulted in Madeleine Smith's acquittal. The jury simply could not hang the "respectable" Scottish maiden.

### **Adelaide Bartlett and Her Marvelous Story** <sup>12</sup>

In 1875, Adelaide de la Tremoille (21; the illegitimate, well-educated and attractive daughter of a rich Englishman and a high-ranking Frenchwoman) was married by arrangement to Edwin Bartlett (31; a prosperous grocer). The marriage appeared affectionate and uneventful--until the morning of 1 January 1886. Adelaide claimed that she had been sleeping in a chair beside her husband's sick-bed, woke to find him cold, and promptly summoned a doctor. Edwin had been ill throughout December and the attending physician, Dr. Leach, had detected signs of mercury poisoning, but the patient had quickly recovered and subsequently appeared to be suffering from nothing worse than poor dental health. Dr. Leach was therefore shocked to find Edwin dead. Subsequently, the autopsy revealed the presence of liquid chloroform in the deceased's stomach. When an intimate family friend, Reverend George Dyson, heard the news, he disclosed that Adelaide had asked him to purchase the chemical only days before the death. Charged with murder, the young widow asserted that, owing to his unorthodox opinions about sex and marriage, Edwin had swallowed the chloroform in order to facilitate a union between herself and George Dyson. Adelaide's diversionary story--coupled with inadequate efforts by the prosecution and the gender bias of the presiding judge--worked in her favour. The jury declared Adelaide innocent.

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<sup>12</sup> "Whether on the theory of guilt or innocence, the whole story is marvelous" (*Times* 19 April 1886, 4; qtd. in Hartman 197).

Edwin's alleged notions about sexual and marital relations were easily the most sensational elements of the case. According to Adelaide, her husband felt that men should have two wives: one to bear children and run the home and the other to serve as platonic companion. Except for one instance of intercourse by which she became pregnant (resulting in stillbirth), she alleged that the ten-year marriage had been entirely non-sexual. Furthermore, she claimed, Edwin had actively promoted a relationship between herself and George Dyson, in effect giving his wife to the minister in anticipation of his own death. Adelaide stated that because her marriage had been almost wholly platonic and because she felt herself to be affianced to George, she became distressed when Edwin inexplicably started making sexual advances to her, adding that she acquired the chloroform in order to sedate her libidinous husband. Adelaide's story was supported by the discovery in the Bartlett's lodgings of Dr. Nichols' *Esoteric Anthropology* (1853), a book which addressed subjects such as platonic marriage and extramarital sex, and which was assumed to have been Edwin's. With no other evidence of his sexual peculiarities but the distasteful book and Adelaide's word, Edwin was vilified for exposing his wife to "smut" (Glendening 322) and for endangering her morals with his perverse opinions.

As a result, Adelaide Bartlett quickly came to be regarded as the blameless sufferer of her husband's depraved sensibilities. If one trusted her account of the marriage, Adelaide had been an obedient and dutiful wife: she had catered to Edwin's unusual whims; she had selflessly forsaken her natural desire for motherhood; and she had even submitted to be pledged to George Dyson. "The grocer's wife," notes Hartman, "commanded sympathy as the helpless victim of a husband who had corrupted her mind by forcing her to read filthy literature and then compromised her respectability by throwing her into the arms of another man" (188). Dyson was viewed as another of Adelaide's unchivalrous victimizers. It was suggested that he had capitalized on her

innocence and Edwin's eccentricity when he indulged himself in her companionship. Moreover, he was derided for his lack of gallantry when (after the murder) he disparaged his close friendship with the Bartletts and became an outspoken proponent of Adelaide's guilt. Public sympathy was in her favour. To Victorians the demure and attractive defendant--"mistreated by males lacking the paternalistic chivalry of true gentlemen" (Glendening 309)--was seen as too feminine, submissive and unworldly to have killed her husband.

John Glendening points out that prosecutors should have been better able to destroy Adelaide's untarnished image; instead, they "missed or minimized much that might have counted against the accused" (325). They pointed out that Edwin had rewritten his will in Adelaide's favour (allegedly at her instigation) only months before he died; they reminded the jury that she had repeatedly lied about the acquisition and disposal of the chloroform; and--most importantly--they discredited her story about non-sexual marriage when a witness revealed that Adelaide had mentioned that she and Edwin regularly used prophylactics (Hartman 197). If the Bartletts were sexually intimate, Adelaide's explanation that she needed the chloroform in order to maintain her chastity was a lie. But the prosecution failed to emphasize both this and numerous other incriminating details, such as the strong likelihood that Adelaide had had an affair with Frederick Bartlett, her brother-in-law, and was motivated to kill her husband in order to be with him when he arrived from a stay in America (Hartman 205). Glendening notes many other questionable circumstances, among them Adelaide's "close attendance" on her husband and her "restriction of visitors"; the presence of a book on pharmaceuticals that "fell open to a page explaining that brandy can be used as a solvent for chloroform" and Adelaide's "recent purchase of brandy"; and Dr. Leach's early suspicions that Edwin was suffering from poisoning (325-26). The prosecution established motive and discredited Adelaide's incredible story, but still her plea of innocence was accepted.

Though Justice Wills did not believe Adelaide's account of a non-sexual marriage, he exhibited a gender bias which nevertheless worked in her favour. In his lengthy charge to the jury Wills did not dwell (as he might have) on Adelaide's lies or the alleged adultery that may have been a motive for her crime, but instead seemed to express sympathy for her. Wills was a firm believer in the delicacy of "respectable" women and the need to protect such women from "the vulgarities of life, especially sexuality" (Glendening 321). He blamed Edwin for allowing indecent books into his home: "It should excite a feeling of pity for the unhappy woman, made in early life the companion of a man who could throw such literature in her way," Wills stated (qtd. in Glendening 321). Wills felt that George Dyson had erred in becoming close with a married woman and that he had sinned more greatly still in turning against her, thereby implying that the minister's testimony was worthless (Glendening 323). Wills was also deeply offended by the presence, in the court, of female onlookers who would "listen willingly to details which even to men of mature life . . . were distasteful and disgusting" (*Times* 19 April 1886, 4b). In comparison to these "unwomanly" women who left their middle-class homes in search of sensational thrills, Adelaide ironically came to embody respectable femininity (Glendening 309). By stressing her victimization at the hands of her husband and Dyson, and by suggesting the contrast between the good (if misguided) wife and the repulsive women who flocked to watch her trial, Justice Wills endorsed Adelaide's femininity, thereby facilitating the jury's belief in her innocence.

Despite the strong circumstantial evidence against her--and the inescapable realization that the tale of Edwin's bizarre views had been a lie intended to hide her guilt--Adelaide Bartlett got away with murder. As with Emile L'Angelier, sympathy for Edwin Bartlett's horrible death was eclipsed by disgust for his alleged perversion of a pure young woman. Adelaide was viewed as the victim--an obedient wife who had suffered morally at the hands of her husband and who had been treated callously by

George Dyson. The arguments of the prosecution did little to alter public opinion, and Justice Wills' comments only reinforced the tendency to see Adelaide as a woman wronged. Blameless and feminine, so unlike the Victorian notion of a murderess, Adelaide Bartlett was free to go.

The trials of Maria Manning, Madeleine Smith and Adelaide Bartlett are only three of the relatively few instances in which "respectable" women stood accused of murder in the public glare of the court. The responses of the Victorian press and legal system to these women and their alleged crimes provide a glimpse into the manner in which both murderesses *and* middle-class women were expected to behave. The nineteenth-century legal system gave a woman accused of murder every opportunity to prove her femininity [i.e., her lack of culpability] or to establish herself as a weak and innocent victim who (if she had indeed killed) was driven to it by corrupting external influences and/or aggressive male sexuality. It may be inferred that Victorian society preferred to accept the flawed "doctrine of female unaccountability" to the ideologically threatening realization that "respectable" women were not only possessed of active sexual appetites, but that they might also commit premeditated murder. As noted above, Victorians generally adhered to the notion that genteel British women were naturally selfless, mild and virtuous. When a woman maintained this image, society found it seemingly impossible to convict her of homicide. But when a woman failed to preserve her sexual purity, or proved to be otherwise unwomanly in her behaviour, Victorian society considered her quite capable of murder.<sup>13</sup> In the end, a woman's femininity was her best defense.

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<sup>13</sup> In France in 1843, Euphémie Lacoste (a young widow who celebrated her recently inherited wealth with shopping sprees and a new apartment) was charged with the murder of her husband after townsfolk complained to the public prosecutor. According to the mayor, they felt that "a person who could behave as she did must have taken a life"(Hartman 49). Euphémie, however, was acquitted.

Collins clearly understood the correlation between femininity and inculpability, and he exploited it to great effect in his novels about murderous women. The following chapters will show the extent to which Collins played with Victorian expectations of the appearance of a murderess, giving beauty and respectability to his most reprehensible characters, and presenting his least despicable murderess as sinister. They will also demonstrate Collins' efforts to depict the murderess as a sympathetic figure. Just as Madeleine Smith's and Adelaide Bartlett's lawyers represented their clients as victims and emphasized their femininity in order to secure their acquittals, so does Collins invite empathy for most of his characters. He assigned to his murderesses mitigating circumstances, "feminine" traits, and histories of disappointment or neglect in an attempt to elicit compassionate responses from readers. Moreover, Collins asserts, particularly in his later novels, that a woman's murderous impulse and her domestic affections are not mutually exclusive, but that these seemingly disparate characteristics may in fact coexist.

**Chapter 2:**  
**Lydia Gwilt; or, "The Shadow and the Poison"**

Howe'er thou art a fiend,  
A woman's shape doth shield thee.

--William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (4:2 66-67)

On 14 January 1864, Wilkie Collins wrote to Charles Ward, "If I know anything about it, I have got a fine subject this time--something *entirely* new at any rate. And so the Times is beginning to pat me on the back--is it? Well, we shall see what they say to my next book . . ." (Lonoff 34). The forthcoming novel was *Armadale* (which appeared in *The Cornhill* from November 1864 to June 1866), and the letter voices Collins' expectation that the work would not receive the critical acclaim of his earlier books. His assumption was correct. Victorian reviewers--many of whom had admired *The Woman in White* (1859-60)--almost unanimously disapproved of *Armadale*. Yet despite critical censure, the novel was successful with Victorian readers. Its sales never reached those of *The Woman in White*, but public demand drove Charles Mudie to order more copies for his library than he had originally intended (Peters 272), and the American serialization single-handedly revived the flagging circulation of *Harper's Monthly Magazine* (Robinson 188). How did Collins know that *Armadale* would provoke critics? How did he know that the story would nevertheless be popular with his reading public? Because, I would argue, the novel's central and most vital figure is a murderess, Lydia Gwilt.

Collins certainly realized that few subjects were more likely to enrage reviewers and seize readers' attention than the intrigues of a murderous woman. As I have already argued, Victorians deplored a murderess' unfeminine and immoral act, yet they nevertheless crowded courtrooms for a glimpse of the offender's face and devoured newspaper articles that detailed her crime and legal trial. *Armadale* was not the first nineteenth-century novel to feature a murderess,<sup>1</sup> but Collins' work is unusual in that

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<sup>1</sup> See Mademoiselle Hortense in *Bleak House* (1852-3); Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede*

Lydia Gwilt expresses her thoughts, feelings, and conflicts in her “own” words. In addition to eight letters and a suicide note, five of the novel’s forty-two chapters consist of lengthy, first-person narratives in which Lydia--ostensibly writing in her journal--describes events as she sees them. For an audience that wished to know all it could about a murderess’ deviant nature, there must have been a voyeuristic thrill in reading the letters and diaries (however fictitious) of a woman who was plotting to kill. But reviewers--who considered themselves to be the moral guardians of the reading public--viewed such familiarity with a murderess as undesirable and dangerous. As Collins expected, this intimacy with the criminal Lydia Gwilt excited his readers, and generated concern in his critics.

Further provoking reviewers, Collins suggested in the preface to the May 1866 edition of *Armada* that his book might disturb “the Clap-Trap morality” of some readers. He then justified its possible offensiveness by claiming that the novel was merely “daring enough to speak the truth” (5). But reviewers took issue with Collins’ assertion, vociferously denying that the work--with its dark view of Victorian society in general, and women’s natures in particular--was an accurate representation of the world in which they lived. On 9 June 1866 the *Spectator* demanded indignantly, “Is it true that all women are idiots till they are twenty, [and] intriguers and murderesses till they are forty . . . ?” (qtd. in Page 149).

Lydia Gwilt stood out as the most difficult element of the novel for reviewers to accept. In an unsigned review in the *Athenaeum* on 2 June 1866, H. F. Chorley (a friend of Collins) expressed his disbelief that such a character as Lydia could exist:

She is described as a beautiful, accomplished, plausible lady, approaching middle age, who, after having passed her life in kennels and gambling-houses and casinos and jails, *shows no*

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(1859); Molly in *Great Expectations* (1860); and Lady Audley in *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862).

*trace in her demeanour of such associations*, and by her graces entraps two young men and one old fool. The criminal dock, the prison, the companionship with a procuress, must even tell on an educated woman who had sunk to such infamy. Lydia Gwilt began her life in the midst of crime; and yet we find her . . . talking to herself about 'Beethoven's Sonatas'! (qtd. in Page 148; emphasis added)

The highlighted portion of this quote reveals the nineteenth-century expectation that an immoral woman would bear traces of her deviancy. Notably, Victorian juries found it hard to convict attractive and refined middle-class women like Madeleine Smith and Adelaide Bartlett, while they easily believed lower-class women--who were generally too impoverished to appear "respectable"--guilty of crime.<sup>2</sup> Chorley's sentiments were echoed by the *Spectator*: "It gives us for its heroine," the reviewer wrote, "a woman fouler than the refuse of the streets, who has lived to the ripe age of thirty-five, and through the horrors of forgery, murder, theft, bigamy, gaol, and attempted suicide, *without any trace being left on her beauty*" (qtd. in Page 150; emphasis added). This author, too, could not imagine that a criminal woman could be unmarked by her evil ways.

Only one month after the final instalment of *Armadale*, the *Cornhill Magazine* published an article entitled "Criminal Women" in August 1866. Possibly to alleviate anxieties produced by Lydia Gwilt, the article reassured readers that "our criminal women are all uneducated, untrained women" and "as a rule, educated women are not known in prison" (152). Furthermore, it added that criminal women--"wild, untamed, unwoman-like women" (159)-- were ignorant, promiscuous, slovenly and frequently drunk. In fact, they could hardly be viewed as women at all:

Women of this stamp are generally so bold and unblushing in crime, so indifferent to right and wrong, so lost to all sense of shame, so destitute of the instincts of womanhood, that they may be more justly compared to wild beasts than to women . . . . Criminal women, as a

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<sup>2</sup> "Data from a recent study of English women executed for murder indicates that of the forty-nine put to death between 1843 and 1890, the majority were miserably poor" (Hartman 5).

class, are found to be more uncivilized than the savage, more degraded than the slave, less true to all natural and womanly instincts than the untutored squaw of a North American Indian tribe. (153)

Through this assertion that criminal women were visibly impoverished, immoral, unfeminine, un-English and scarcely human, the article reassured its audience that middle-class women were not capable of crime and posed no threat to domestic stability. Also comforting to readers was the assurance that a woman who had been involved in indecent activities could never pass as respectable, for her womanliness would have been irrevocably “*destroyed*” (153).

But Collins recognized that for most of his middle-class readers the thrill of *Armadale* lay in the very fact that the villainess who threatened the novel’s domestic world was so outwardly respectable as to be beyond suspicion. Readers’ interest and suspense--and the novel’s popularity--could only be increased by the possibility that the novel’s unsuspecting male protagonists (Allan Armadale and Ozias Midwinter) would fail to identify Lydia Gwilt as a threat. But Collins was not thinking merely of the excitement that such a character might provide for his audience; he also intended that *Armadale* should challenge the Victorian expectation of what a criminal woman could be. The bias subscribed to and perpetuated by H. F. Chorley, the *Cornhill* article, and the *Spectator* review--that a murderess could not be respectable, and a respectable woman could not be a murderess--had recently been endorsed by the jury that acquitted Madeleine Smith (1857). It was also clearly shared by many other Victorians, whose indignation secured the release of Constance Kent (1860). By creating a villainess whose transgressions are cloaked by an appearance of womanly refinement, Collins contradicted the popular assumption that beauty, social status, or femininity precluded a woman from committing a violent crime.

In many of his novels, Collins enjoyed exposing stereotypes and challenging the preconceptions of his readers. For example, he asserted of Lady Macbeth, “You may

depend upon it that she was a rather small, fair-haired, blue-eyed woman, with a pink and white complexion, and very determined” (qtd. in Lonoff 91). Of the corpulent and malevolent Count Fosco in *The Woman in White*, Collins said, “I made him fat in opposition to the recognised type of villain” (qtd. in Lonoff 91). In *Armada*, two scenes in particular illustrate Collins’ manipulation and deconstruction of Victorian preconceptions concerning female criminality.

The first of these is the incident of the remarkable “woman with the red Paisley shawl” (208). In this episode, Ozias Midwinter and the Reverend Brock struggle to identify the mysterious woman whom they believe may endanger their friend Allan Armadale. Their fears are based on the posthumous warning of Ozias’ father, which identifies as a future threat a twelve-year-old girl forger (the young Lydia Gwilt). Knowing only that they are looking for a 35-year-old female, they suspect an enigmatic woman in a Paisley shawl. They are in fact correct in this surmise, but their preconceptions as to the appearance of criminal women lead them quickly astray. In a fine example of counter-espionage, the procuress/cosmetician, Mrs. Oldershaw, dresses her housemaid in Lydia’s clothes (Lydia has hitherto worn a heavy veil) and sends her as a decoy to deceive Reverend Brock. When the maid purposefully raises her veil, the Reverend notes her homely looks and sends the description to Ozias at Thorpe-Ambrose. Ozias, meanwhile, is troubled by the arrival of Neelie Milroy’s new governess (who is in fact Lydia Gwilt), who first appeared to him at Hurle Mere as the ominous figure in Allan’s portentous dream. The Reverend’s description, however, sets their minds at ease.

What is of interest here is why Mother Oldershaw’s stratagem works so well. Lydia’s decoy completely conforms to the Victorian image of a criminal woman; she has thin lips, lustreless hair, small eyes, a dull and sickly complexion, and a retreating chin, marked by a mole or scar (277). As Jeanne Fahnestock writes, Victorians believed in and were thoroughly familiar with the “code of *physiognomy*, the ‘science’ of reading

character in the face” (1). One look at the housemaid and Mr. Brock must have felt justified in his suspicions. For according to Fahnstock’s research, the housemaid’s lips indicate a lack of refinement; her chin, weakness; and--by extension--her ugliness might suggest a potentially criminal disposition (341-43).

In the second episode, Mr. Pedgift (a lawyer with “a large . . . experience of the shady side of the [female] sex” [358]) expresses his opinion (and quite probably Collins’ sentiments as well) about the duplicity of criminal women. Here, as in the episode of the housemaid/decoy, Collins makes clear the danger of assuming that criminality must necessarily appear ugly, coarse or unfeminine.<sup>3</sup> But, while experience has taught Mr. Pedgift that beauty and criminality are not mutually exclusive, Allan Armadale--who has evidence connecting Lydia to a number of disreputable people--excuses her as a “poor betrayed creature,” the victim of a “man who has cast her out helpless on the world” (366). The young man represents the many Victorians who (as in the Madeleine Smith case) felt that middle-class women were either incapable of crime or driven to it against their will by stronger, immoral characters. When the lawyer asserts that Lydia “is as far as I am from being the sentimental victim you are inclined to make her out” (366), Allan responds with indignation and disbelief. “‘Quite impossible!’ cried Allan warmly. ‘Miss Gwilt is a lady . . .’” (365).

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<sup>3</sup> In *The Legacy of Cain* (1888), Collins again asserts that criminality does not always advertise itself in the facial features. One woman, imprisoned for murder, resembles a Madonna as seen in Italian paintings (7). The prison governor (with experiences similar to Mr. Pedgift’s) states that “daily observation of all classes of criminals, extending over many years, has considerably diminished my faith in physiognomy as a safe guide to the discovery of character . . . . Only the other day, ladies and gentlemen coming to visit me passed a body of men at work on the road. Judges of physiognomy among them were horrified at the criminal atrocity betrayed in every face that they noticed. They condoled with me on the near neighbourhood of so many convicts to my official place of residence. I looked out of the window, and saw a group of honest labourers (whose only crime was poverty) employed by the parish!” (7-8).

Mr. Pedgift, who has had “years of professional experience among some of the wickedest women who ever walked this earth” (367), has no such illusions about Lydia. “You think her an object for pity,” he says to Allan, “--quite natural at your age. I think her an object for the inside of a prison--quite natural at mine” (365). Like Sir Patrick Lundie, the cynical gentleman in Collins’ *Man and Wife* (1870), Mr. Pedgift appears to represent the voice of Collins himself, asserting his belief that criminal women manipulate society’s stereotypes to their own advantage:

. . . I got, in time, to notice, among those who were particularly wicked and unquestionably guilty, one point in which they all resembled each other. Tall and short, old and young, handsome and ugly, they all had a secret self-possession that nothing could shake. . . . Some of them were in a state of indignation; some of them were drowned in tears; some of them were full of pious confidence; and some of them were resolved to commit suicide before the night was out. But only put your finger suddenly on the weak point in the story told by any one of them, and there was an end of her rage, or her tears, or her piety, or her despair--and out came the genuine woman, in full possession of all her resources, with a neat little lie that exactly suited the circumstances of the case. Miss Gwilt was in tears, sir--becoming tears that didn’t make her nose red,--and I put my finger suddenly on the weak point in *her* story. Down dropped her pathetic pocket-handkerchief from her beautiful blue eyes, and out came the genuine woman with the neat little lie that exactly suited the circumstances! (368)

The lawyer’s personal experiences have shown him that women capable of crime are equally capable of dissimulation. The women he describes resemble Maria Manning, who at trial appeared calm but who, when convicted, shook her fists and yelled, “Damnation seize you all!” (*Times*, 29 Oct. 1849, 5e). For Collins, Maria would have been a vivid instance of a woman who worked to maintain an air of innocence but ultimately revealed “the genuine woman” within, a deceitful and violent person who believed that her sex would save her from retribution.

While speaking with Allan about Lydia, Mr. Pedgift also expresses his frustrations with a justice system that repeatedly excuses middle-class women’s crimes. “A prison, in

the present tender state of public feeling, for a charming woman like Miss Gwilt!" he says to Allan. "My dear sir, if she had attempted to murder you or me, and if an inhuman judge and jury had decided on sending her to a prison, the first object of modern society would be to prevent her going into it; and, if that couldn't be done, the next object would be to let her out again as soon as possible" (368).<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing *Armadale*, the most recent instance of public disbelief in a middle-class woman's criminal culpability--apart from the Madeleine Smith case--would have been the Road Murder of 1860 (see page 2). In this case, Constance Kent's lawyer appealed to the public's sympathy for the accused: "Is it likely that the weak hand of this young girl . . . can have inflicted this dreadful blow? . . . it will never, never be forgotten that this young lady was dragged from her home like a common felon, a common vagrant . . ." (Hartman 99).

Long after Mr. Pedgift's conversation with Allan, Collins seizes another opportunity to suggest that the Victorian justice system too easily forgives women's crimes. In this instance James Bashwood--a private detective--discloses to his father the details of Lydia's trial for the murder of her husband, Mr. Waldron, an abusive and "savagely jealous" (526) man. After years of marriage, Bashwood reveals, Waldron discovered that his wife was secretly corresponding (à la Madeleine Smith) with a Cuban officer in the area; enraged, he struck her "across the face with his riding-whip" (527). Within a fortnight Waldron took ill and died. Authorities suspected that Lydia--who was then free from spousal abuse, able to be with her "lover," and expecting an inheritance--had poisoned her husband. They charged her with murder. A jury found Lydia guilty and sentenced her to death, but the public--moved by "heart-rending" (530)

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<sup>4</sup> In the notes of the Penguin Classics edition of *Armadale*, John Sutherland states that "Collins is reflecting bitterly here on the recent acquittal of the Scottish arsenical poisoner, Madeleine Smith" (698).

articles in London newspapers--clamoured for her release. Young Bashwood (probably mirroring Collins' own opinions) speaks of the pardon with sarcastic disbelief:

All the people who had no personal experience whatever on the subject, seized their pens, and rushed . . . into print. Doctors who had *not* attended the sick man, and who had *not* been present at the examination of the body, declared by dozens that he had died a natural death. Barristers without business, who had *not* heard the evidence, attacked the jury who *had* heard it, and judged the Judge . . . Here was the Law that they all paid to protect them, actually doing its duty in dreadful earnest! Shocking! Shocking! (530)<sup>5</sup>

Lydia's defense had represented her as the helpless female victim of a husband's abuse and of a foreigner's seduction (again, like Madeleine Smith), resulting in public sympathy and a subsequent legal pardon. In essence, Bashwood Jr. notes, "[T]he Law has said to her in the plainest possible English, 'My charming friend, I have no terrors for you!'" (530). Clearly, Collins took issue with a society that protested "against the working of its own machinery" (530); and he objected to a justice system which bowed to public opinion. Through the words of Pedgift and Bashwood, and through the incident involving the housemaid, Collins criticizes Victorians for adhering to flawed preconceptions about female criminality. Such ignorance, he suggests, cultivates a false sense of middle-class security and engenders unwarranted leniency for criminal women.

#### **"The Most Sympathetic of Villainesses"**<sup>6</sup>

Incongruous as it seems, while Collins criticized Victorians for their naïve assumption that middle-class women were incapable of crime, he also tried to create sympathy for the murderess *as murderess*. There is no equivocation about Lydia's

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<sup>5</sup> In his notes to the Penguin edition of *Armada*, John Sutherland points out that Collins was not only responding to Madeleine Smith's acquittal, but also to the case of Thomas Smethurst, who was charged with poisoning his wife. He was pardoned by the Home Secretary after pressure from both the press and medical and legal professionals (704).

<sup>6</sup> Marshall 72.

criminality--she *did* poison her first husband and she *did* try three times to kill Allan Armadale--but Collins nevertheless generates empathy for her character. In the rest of this chapter I will explore the numerous ways in which Collins fosters sympathy for Lydia; I will also examine the lack of compassion exhibited by Victorian reviewers faced with this unusual and sympathetic portrait of a respectable murderess.

Lydia's criminal behaviour is significantly mitigated by the unfortunate experiences of her youth, which are documented in notes that her criminal defense lawyer takes from her own statements. When James Bashwood details Lydia's past (518-536) he reasonably distrusts anything she has revealed about her history, and one must read the story of her life knowing that it has been in her interest to appear as innocent and pitiable as possible. Still, there remains the almost certain knowledge that Lydia was a neglected and manipulated child. Lydia was an illegitimate girl who lived, "beaten and half starved" (521), until her foster mother sold her to the Oldershaws, a quack-doctor and his wife, who used her to demonstrate their cosmetic products. Lydia then became the future Mrs. Armadale's maid and journeyed to the West Indies, where she forged the letter that provoked Ozias' father to murder. In his deathbed confession he calls Lydia "innately deceitful and . . . pitiless" (35), but the novel suggests that it is more probable that the young girl was pressured to commit the crime "under . . . instructions" (35) from her mistress' lover, and not because she was *inherently* wicked.<sup>7</sup> Uncomfortable with the girl and her knowledge, Mrs. Armadale sends Lydia to a boarding school in France and severs contact with her. By the age of twelve, Lydia has been abused, used, and abandoned numerous times.

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<sup>7</sup> John Sutherland suggests in his notes to the Penguin edition of *Armadale* that, as "forgery was a capital offence in 1832" (684), Ingleby/Armadale prudently assigned the commission of the crime to Lydia.

In following years, Lydia may not have been innocent in the adverse situations she encountered, but the novel consistently contextualizes her choices in terms of limited economic and social options. Hence when Lydia is friendless and unable to support herself by any “respectable” occupation, one can believe that she had little choice but to become involved in a gambling racket. When Waldron threatened to expose the scheme if Lydia did not become his mistress, one can understand that, for a woman with few choices, Lydia’s insistence on marriage was a shrewd, if disastrous, attempt at domestic security. When Collins details Lydia’s abusive marriage (Waldron “was an ill-tempered man . . . he made his wife feel it” [526]); when he writes that Captain Manuel courted Lydia and tempted her to murder so that he could marry her and her inheritance; and when he describes Lydia’s suicidal despair when she discovered that Manuel’s marriage to her was not only bigamous but mercenary, Collins asks the reader to consider that “Suffering . . . can, and does, develop the latent evil that there is in humanity . . .” (313). Once again, Collins does not suggest that Lydia has not done wrong, but uses evidence of her impoverished childhood and miserable life to elicit empathy and understanding.

In addition, Collins creates sympathy for Lydia by suggesting--as Maria Manning, Madeleine Smith and Adelaide Bartlett’s lawyers suggested--that she was a victim of male machinations. As noted above, her first criminal experience occurred at the behest of Ingleby/Armada. But Collins establishes Captain Manuel (like Count Fosco, an opportunistic foreigner) as the greatest negative influence on Lydia. Knowing she was married, Manuel “followed her” (526), wrote her love letters and convinced her to kill Waldron. Lydia calls Manuel “the man who has made me what I am” (444), and she provides a copy of the “letter he wrote to me to encourage me, when I hesitated as the terrible time came nearer and nearer” (444). Manuel did more than incite Lydia to kill; he probably provided her with the means to do so. “[U]nless she contrived, guarded and watched as she was, to get the poison for herself, the poison must have come to her in one

of the captain's letters," notes Detective Bashwood. Bashwood, Sr. regards Manuel as a "foreign scoundrel who tempted her" (534) into wickedness, a sentiment shared by many Victorians with regard to Madeleine Smith's lover, Emile L'Angelier. Lydia, moreover, feels that she is not wholly responsible for the plan to kill Allan. Speaking to Dr. Downward, she says, "Armadale himself drove me to it the first time . . . Manuel drove me to it the second time.--You cowardly scoundrel! shall I let *you* drive me to it for the third time and the last?" (619).

Collins further lessens Lydia's responsibility for her actions by suggesting that she is incapable of controlling her homicidal behaviour. In fact, for most of the last book of *Armadale* (set in a sanatorium), Lydia seems powerless to control her own impulses. Intent on killing Allan, and devastated by her final confrontation with Ozias, she is indifferent to everything around her. "She . . . glided out of the room like a ghost," Collins writes. "There was none of the usual animation on her lips, none of the usual temper in her eyes. [Dr. Downward] had never seen her so impenetrably and coldly composed . . ." (633). Notably, Lydia enters a trance-like stupor each time she attempts murder, as though she must deaden her emotive (i.e., "feminine") self before she is able to act in opposition to it. She recalls, for example, her "perfectly cool state" (429) when she determined to kill Waldron, an ominously disinterested and submissive frame of mind that preceded her act of violence.<sup>8</sup> Lydia enters a similar state when she decides to poison Allan: "My anger suddenly left me," she recounts. "Something came in its place, which steadied me in an instant, and took me silently out of the room" (558). And as Lydia prepares for her final criminal act, she writes, "[T]he dull, numbed sensation has got me

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<sup>8</sup> After Waldron whipped Lydia's face, Bashwood, Jr. notes, "the lady submitted as she had never submitted before. For a fortnight afterwards, he did what he liked; and she never thwarted him--he said what he liked; and she never uttered a word of protest. Some men might have suspected this sudden reformation of hiding something dangerous under the surface" (527).

again" (611). Though her eerily composed attempts to kill Allan are frightening, Lydia's trance-like state may nevertheless have been viewed by Victorian readers as reassuring. For by revealing that Lydia's violent acts are predicated by an instigational "presence" which motivates her to commit crimes in a semi-somnabulistic state, Collins represents her as a stereotypically passive female absolved of responsibility for her homicidal behaviour. It is a motif that Collins was to use again in *Man and Wife* and *The Legacy of Cain*, in which he depicts women who attempt murder in a trance or dreamlike condition, each urged to violence by a foreboding figure; they, too, are intended to be sympathetic, feminine women.

Collins further produces sympathy for Lydia by admitting the reader into an intimacy with her by way of her letters and diaries. As the reader pores over the details of Lydia's criminal plotting, and occupies the unique and suspenseful position of knowing the murderess' most intimate secrets, condemnation becomes difficult as familiarity and understanding increase. Initially, Lydia's writings only emphasize her sarcasm, irritability and violent thoughts. "I am in one of my tempers to-night," she writes to Mrs. Oldershaw. "I want a husband to vex, or a child to beat, or something of that sort. Do you ever like to see the summer insects kill themselves in the candle? I do, sometimes" (166).<sup>9</sup> The impression of her wickedness grows as she documents her excessive hatred of Neelie Milroy (429, 432-33), her opportunistic seduction of Ozias, and her attempts to manipulate--and then to kill--Allan. But as Lydia begins to feel true affection for Ozias, her confidence in her own reprehensible behaviour is shaken, and her diary begins to

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<sup>9</sup> See Illustration 2, "The Moth and the Candle," George Thomas's woodcut for the October 1865 edition of the *Cornhill Magazine*. Here, Ozias is clearly the hapless moth and Lydia, the enticing yet dangerous candle.

## ILLUSTRATION 2:



THE MOTH AND THE CANDLE.

[Thomas, George]. "The Moth and the Candle." *The Cornhill Magazine* (October 1865): 450.

reflect her hope for a purer sort of happiness than that which she might have had as the wealthy widow of Allan Armadale.

Lydia's tentative expressions of her belief in, and desperate craving for, the reformative power of love--especially after her unhappy experiences<sup>10</sup>--force the reader to regard her as a "normal" woman, and not as a cold-hearted murderess. In Victorian terms, she exhibits "normalcy"--and by extension, her potential redemption--by desiring the middle-class ideals of home and marriage. When she first speaks privately with Ozias, he is no more to her than the "summer insect" lured by the flame, but his continued devotion causes Lydia to question her decision to murder Allan:

The colour faded out of her cheeks; the beauty died out of her eyes; her face hardened horribly with a silent despair. "It's even harder work than I bargained for," she said, "to deceive *him*. . . . You strange creature!" she murmured . . . languidly addressing the reflection of herself in the glass. "Have you got any conscience left? And has that man roused it?" (388)

Despite her aversion to entering into a love relationship, Lydia allows herself to return Ozias' affection, begins to struggle with her conscience (427, 490), and convinces herself that love will free her from her criminal desires. On the eve of her wedding, Lydia writes that her evil deeds are over: "I have won the great victory; I have trampled my own wickedness under foot. I am innocent; I am happy again. My love! my angel! when to-morrow gives me to you, I will not have a thought in my heart which is not *your* thought, as well as mine!" (515). Lydia knows that being Ozias' wife will require her--as nineteenth-century society expected--to submit herself to her husband. Despite her

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<sup>10</sup> Lydia's terrible memories of her past relationships with men occur frequently and manifest physically. She writes that "the bare idea of marrying again (after what I have gone through) is an idea that makes my flesh creep" (162); that "[h]orrible recollections came back to me of other times, and made me shudder as I touched [Ozias]" (418); and that when Ozias proposed marriage "something like faintness made me close my eyes. The moment I shut them, the darkness seemed to open as if lightning had split it: and the ghosts of *those other men* rose in the horrid gap, and looked at me" (421).

strong-willed, independent nature, and her earlier marital failures, Lydia embraces the opportunity to marry Ozias and she hopes, thereby, to sublimate her murderous desires into domestic and wifely devotion.

Collins thus not only encourages his readers to feel an affinity for his homicidal heroine by revealing her to be a woman capable of love and possessed of a troubled conscience, but also by uniting them in the pursuit of middle-class values, such as marriage and home. There is, for example, a touching moment before her wedding in which Lydia dreams of carefree domestic happiness:

Bed? If it was ten years since, instead of to-day, and if I had married Midwinter for love, I might be going to bed now with nothing heavier on my mind than a visit on tiptoe to the nursery, and a last look at night to see if my children were sleeping quietly in their cribs. (426)

Lydia abandons the wisdom of experience and instead subscribes to the nineteenth-century notion that marriage, home and family will impart her with "femininity" (i.e., virtue, compassion and the inherent ability to provide and maintain domestic harmony). But Lydia's hurt and disappointment at Ozias' sudden disinterest in her after only two months of marriage, her boredom at being confined to the house, and especially her jealousy of the strong attachment between her husband and his friend, cause her to think again of becoming, in effect, Allan Armadale's "widow."

At this point, it seems clear that Lydia's transformation into a "good" woman will be entirely aborted, and--because of her renewed decision to commit murder for money--that readers' sympathies for her must necessarily be withdrawn. Readers can not reasonably be expected to feel compassion for a woman who attempts to kill her husband's best friend no fewer than three times. But, though her homicidal behaviour is entirely at variance with the Victorian idea of femininity, Collins still--astonishingly--tries to represent Lydia as a sympathetic example of wifely devotion and femininity--qualities, he suggests, that even a murderess may possess.

The contradiction between Lydia's murderous impulses and her "inherent" feminine nature is first apparent in a comparison between her attitude towards men in general and towards her husband in particular. For example, Lydia's hatred of Allan incites her to criminal conduct without *any* moral qualms: "There I was," she writes, "alone with him, talking in the most innocent, easy, familiar manner, and having it in my mind all the time, to brush his life out of my way . . . as I might brush a stain off my gown" (486). Yet Lydia is incapable of harming her husband without suffering intensely. When she forces herself to deny their marriage to Ozias' face, Collins makes it clear that Lydia's "unfeminine" behaviour causes her great anguish. As Lydia holds her unconscious husband after her denial causes him to faint, "the miserable woman lifted his lifeless face to hers, and rocked him on her bosom in an agony of tenderness beyond all relief in tears, in a passion of remorse beyond all expression in words . . . in silence she devoured his forehead, his cheeks, his lips, with kisses" (628). Lydia's defiance of her husband's marital authority is not merely emotionally painful to her. Her "unwomanly" resistance also manifests itself physically through the degeneration of her beauty; she becomes "[w]hite and still, and haggard and old" (626, 650) and entirely unlike her former self. By distinguishing between Lydia's easy, murderous disdain for others, and the agony with which she rejects her beloved husband, Collins establishes her as both villainess and loving wife.

By the end of the novel, there is no doubt either of Lydia's essential womanliness and wifely fidelity, or of the sympathy which readers are asked to feel. Upon discovering that Ozias, and not Allan, occupies the poisoned room at the sanatorium, Lydia breaks her trance-like state and struggles--with the "strength of which women are capable in emergencies" (664)--to drag him into the fresh air of the hallway. Reflecting upon her unsuccessful marriage and miserable life, Lydia resolves to kill herself. At the moment she decides on extreme womanly deference through suicide, Lydia ceases to look

“strangely pale and old” (633) and regains her feminine appearance. “As her eyes rested on him,” Collins writes, “a strange composure settled slowly on her face . . . . There was something softly radiant in her eyes, which lit her whole countenance as with an inner light, and *made her womanly and lovely once more*” (664-5, emphasis added). Lydia’s reparation is also stressed by her touching farewell note:

. . . . Still, I had some innocent moments--and then I loved you dearly. Forget me, my darling, in the love of a better woman than I am. I might, perhaps, have been that better woman myself, if I had not lived a miserable life before you met with me. . . . The one atonement I can make for all the wrong I have done you is the atonement of my death. . . . Even my wickedness has one merit--it has not prospered. I have never been a happy woman. (666)

Lydia’s decision to kill herself in order to free Ozias from his marriage to a criminal constitutes the redemption of her femininity (as evinced by her renewed loveliness), the proof of her wifely devotion, and an atonement for her crimes. Collins presents Lydia as a sympathetic martyr whose suicide is the only possible outcome of the battle between her “natural” womanliness and her “unnatural” murderous impulses.<sup>11</sup>

Though Collins had long been planning Lydia’s suicide (Lonoff 35), he nevertheless wrote to his mother in March 1866, “Miss Gwilt’s death quite upset me” (qtd. in Peters 277). Surprisingly, Lydia’s demise also moved the conservative literary critic--and *Armada*’s dedicatee--John Forster. In June 1866, Collins quoted Forster as having been greatly impressed with Lydia’s propitiatory death. “It is a masterpiece of Art which few indeed have equalled,” Forster wrote, “to bring even pity and pathos to the end of such a career as hers. You certainly have done this--and the single page in which it is

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<sup>11</sup> In *The Legacy of Cain*, Collins seems to reassert his suggestion that an deviant woman’s suicide may be proof of her basic goodness. When Miss Jillgall asks the prison Governor why the murderous Helena Gracedieu did not kill herself, he answers, “My dear lady, no thoroughly wicked creature ever yet committed suicide. Self-destruction . . . implies some acuteness of feeling--sensibility to remorse or to shame, or perhaps . . . making atonement” (312).

done is the finest thing in the book” (qtd. in Peters 272). Dickens acknowledged that the scene was “extremely powerful,” but unlike Forster, he correctly surmised that readers would not give credence to Lydia’s “tenderness or compunction” (qtd. in Lonoff 37).

Despite the numerous details Collins employed in order to render Lydia sympathetic, most reviewers felt that *Armadale*’s murderess was undeserving of either leniency or compassion. H.F. Chorley regarded Lydia as a “sorceress,” an “arch-fiend,” one of the “obscene birds of night” and--due to her sex--a worse culprit than Count Fosco (qtd. in Page 147-8). The *Saturday Review* stated that Lydia should not be in the pages of a book, but should instead occupy “her proper position in the world, which . . . we take to be the dock of the Old Bailey” (qtd. in Page 155). It was clearly felt that such a character could only aggrieve middle-class readers whom, Chorley noted, should not be exposed to a woman whose place was in “the police cells, but not to pages over which honest people should employ and enjoy their leisure” (qtd. in Page 147). The *Spectator* charged Collins with “overstepping the limits of decency, and revolting every human sentiment” (qtd. in Page 150) by introducing Lydia to the reading public. The *Westminster Review* accused Collins of creating Lydia merely as a spectacle designed to attract and shock readers:

When Richardson, the showman, went about with his menagerie he had a big black baboon, whose habits were so filthy, and whose behaviour was so disgusting, that respectable people constantly remonstrated with him for exhibiting such an animal. Richardson’s answer invariably was, “Bless you, if it wasn’t for that big black baboon I should be ruined; it attracts all the young girls in the country.” Now bigamy has been Miss Braddon’s big black baboon, with which she has attracted all the young girls in the country. And now Mr. Wilkie Collins has set up a big black baboon on his own account. His big black baboon is Miss Gwilt, a bigamist, thief, gaol-bird, forgeress, murderess, and suicide. This beats all Miss Braddon’s big black baboons put together. (qtd. in Page 158-9)

The *Westminster* saw Lydia as nothing more than a distasteful (and animal) exhibition of immorality. In short, stated the *Saturday Review*, “Miss Gwilt . . . [is not] capable of awakening our sympathy” (qtd. in Page 152).

Collins' recognition that he had failed to arouse compassion for Lydia is revealed in his dramatizations of the novel, *Armada: A Drama in Three Acts* (1866) and *Miss Gwilt* (1875), the second of which features a nearly unrecognizable--but unambiguously sympathetic-- Lydia. Collins wrote the first play immediately after the final instalment of the novel in order to preserve his copyright of the story and, as Barbara Brashear notes, the character of Lydia is essentially unchanged (105). But in the later dramatic adaptation of the novel, Collins depicts Lydia as neither assertive, nor manipulative, nor responsible for her actions; in fact, her only sin has been that she was once Captain Manuel's mistress. In this version of the story, Dr. Downward is the antagonist: he forces Lydia into the plot to marry Allan; he discovers Ozias' real identity and pushes her into marrying him instead; and he alone arranges Manuel's attempted murder of Allan (Brashear 114). In *Miss Gwilt*, Lydia's actions are not as ruthless or calculated; the doctor, for example, is able to convince Lydia to claim the Armadale estate only after she receives word that Ozias has drowned. Though she succumbs to pressure from Downward, Lydia continues to assert her basic decency: "I am not a bad woman" (68) and "I am not all bad" (102). Even the evil doctor acknowledges that Lydia is difficult to corrupt. "There is an undergrowth of goodness in that woman's nature," he says, "which is too firmly rooted to be easily pulled up" (73). This time, Collins clearly wished there to be no doubts about Lydia's very limited criminal culpability.

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The nineteenth-century fascination with middle-class women who kill--and the certainty that the inclusion of such a character in his novel would attract and shock a reading audience--inspired Collins to create Lydia Gwilt. But he plainly intended her to be more than just a "big black baboon." Collins chose Lydia as the central figure of *Armada* not merely to thrill his readers, but because he wished to highlight their misconceptions about "respectable" criminal women; to manipulate accepted stereotypes

of the murderess; to expose the gender bias of the British justice system; and to suggest that a woman who kills deserves understanding, and even sympathy.

In opposition to general preconceptions concerning homicidal women, Lydia is beautiful, cultured and intelligent--leaving the disquieting impression that it is impossible to differentiate between the "angel of the house" and the woman plotting to kill.<sup>12</sup> Reviewers were provoked by Collins' disturbing implication, and they were offended by Lydia Gwilt, who was the antithesis of all they expected to find in a murderess. Reverend Brock and Ozias Midwinter adhere to these assumptions and, as a result, they mistakenly identify a homely housemaid as a potential threat. This episode suggests to Collins' readers that--by assuming that female criminality must appear ugly, coarse or unwomanly--Victorian society unnecessarily exposes itself to unseen dangers.

Through his creation of a villainess whose transgressions are cloaked by an appearance of womanly refinement, Collins contradicts the popular assumption that beauty, social status, or femininity preclude a woman from committing a violent crime. This unconventional notion is supported by Pedgift's account of the numerous criminal women who, in order to escape punishment, relied upon the prevalent belief that "respectable" females were incapable of murder. Pedgift also laments that the justice system gives in to public opinion and repeatedly allows middle-class women to go unpunished because of their sex. Using Pedgift as a medium for his own observations about nineteenth-century society, Collins stresses the peril of adhering to flawed preconceptions about female criminality; such ignorance, he suggests, cultivates a false sense of middle-class security and generates undeserved leniency for criminal women.

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<sup>12</sup> Collins' intimation that any respectable woman could be a "Lydia Gwilt" is evident in the Reverend Brock's comment to Ozias Midwinter, as they are searching for the enigmatic woman in the red Paisley shawl. "Need an old man, like me," says the minister, "remind a young man, like you, that there are thousands of women in England, with beautiful figures--thousands of women who are quietly dressed in black silk gowns and red Paisley shawls?" (106).

Lydia Gwilt is undoubtedly wicked but--though Collins criticizes Victorians for their naive assumptions about, and leniency towards, criminal women--he nevertheless attempts to create reader sympathy for the murderess. Lydia has lived a life of neglect and poverty; she has encountered few opportunities to gain "respectability;" she was frequently victimized by men, forced by limited options to marry an abusive husband, preyed upon by a mercenary lover, and assisted in murder by Dr. Downward. Through the intimacy of her letters and journal entries, one also learns that Lydia is not an inhuman "other," but a woman who shares the desires--the domestic ideals of home and marriage--of most middle-class readers. Finally, the strongest evidence of Lydia's wifely devotion and fundamental femininity, and the moment of Collins' strongest evocation of pity for her character, occurs when she rescues Ozias from the poisoned room and sacrifices herself in his place. In an act of redemption, the murderess--unable to murder--becomes a martyr.

Still, even with the ultimate reassurance that Lydia was not a threat, reviewers generally failed to feel much sympathy for *Armadale's* villainess. In response, *Miss Gwilt* features a murderess who is less sinful, more remorseful and barely responsible for her final criminal act. Only in later years were reviewers capable of feeling empathy for Lydia as she was originally portrayed. In April 1888, twenty-two years after *Armadale* was completed and the year of Wilkie Collins' death, the *Contemporary Review* offered the first compassionate critical assessment of Lydia Gwilt:

This character, who stands to the female villains of fiction in the same relation that Count Fosco does to the male, lingers in the memory, *despite her crimes and her heartlessness*, with an almost terrible insistency; and in her final punishment, brought about, as it is, with a daring truth to reality, *by her fulfilment of the one good instinct of her nature, we feel almost as much for her as though all her acts had been equally blameless with her death for the man she loved*. I am here, no doubt, treading on delicate ground; we should have, the moralists tell us, no sympathy with a criminal who only suffers for her sins without abjuring them; but, human nature

being what it is, *I confess to a sympathy* with Mr. Wilkie Collins' disposition to find something which is admirable, or at least lovable, in even the black sheep of the community.

(qtd. in Page 245, emphasis added)

In January 1890, the *Contemporary Review* added that "Miss Gwilt herself saves the story, which becomes alive when she enters it, and, with all her crimes on her head, she is infinitely the most human and agreeable of the persons in this sordid affair. . . . There is nobody in the book to like or admire, unless Miss Gwilt be the person . . ." (qtd. in Page 270).

Collins was perhaps not aware of the contradictions which the character of Lydia Gwilt engenders. On the one hand, he is careful to point out the naiveté of the Victorian perception that "normal" women are not capable of homicide. Lydia appears to fit the description of the ideal middle-class woman in every respect, but the reader learns that she is merely better equipped to commit a crime, and to remain undetected and/or relatively unpunished. Yet, on the other hand, the novel's final, reassuring implication is that "normal" women *cannot* kill, the very notion that Collins initially refutes. For Lydia is finally represented as "normal:" her "feminine" desire for domesticity, her "womanly" softness when she feels true love, her "wifely" regard for Ozias, and her attendant suffering when she unwillingly defies him, all identify her as a "typical" Victorian woman. And Lydia--in her "normal" state--does *not* kill, a comforting conclusion to an otherwise provocative text.

### Chapter 3: Hester Dethridge; or, "Divorced by Death!"<sup>1</sup>

At her feet he sank, he fell; there he lay.  
At her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell--dead.  
Judges 5:27

Like her fictional predecessor Lydia Gwilt, Hester Dethridge also murdered the violent husband who ill-treated her, and found herself driven to kill again. But, in stark opposition to Lydia, Hester notably failed to incite disapprobation from reviewers, only one of whom even acknowledged the mute and sombre murderess of Collins' *Man and Wife* (1870). As it was, Margaret Oliphant referred to the "deathly-faced weird woman Hester" merely to assert that the character was outside both "the bounds of criticism" and the "rules of nature and probability," adding that this particular murderess belonged--not, with Lydia, on the gallows--but to the world of "sprites and demons" (qtd. in Page 190). Oliphant's dismissive reaction to a character who is, in murderous deed, the equal of the deeply reviled Lydia Gwilt poses the following questions: in what context did Collins present Hester, and what attributes did he assign to her, that prevented readers from feeling either alarmed or incensed by this murderess? Furthermore, how did Collins--who failed to evoke compassion for Lydia--succeed in creating sympathy (or at least apathy) for Hester?

The absence of negative reaction to Hester suggests that Collins succeeded in presenting this murderess in a way that made her acceptable to his middle-class readers. Like the stage production of *Miss Gwilt*, *Man and Wife* also contains a much more cautious representation of a murderess; indeed, in his depiction of Hester Dethridge, Collins seems to broadcast his unwillingness to upset preconceptions about women who kill.<sup>2</sup> Instead, he goes to extensive lengths to create a character who, unlike Lydia,

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<sup>1</sup> From Augustin Daly's 1870 dramatic adaptation of *Man and Wife* (qtd. in Brashear 78).

<sup>2</sup> In the play, *Miss Gwilt*, Lydia is no longer assertive and scheming. She is, instead, the

reassuringly conforms to Victorian notions of what a homicidal woman must be; whose obvious oddities announce her as suspect or outcast, but whose lower-class status, domestic skill, and pious asexuality declare her to be non-threatening; and whose experiences as a mistreated wife invoke the pity which was never afforded to Lydia.

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In *Armada*, the murderess occupies a central role and Lydia's letters and journal entries form a considerable portion of the narrative. *Man and Wife* also features a murderess, but Hester appears infrequently and peripherally, and is not even known to be homicidal until the third-to-last chapter, when the novel's villain, Geoffrey Delamayn, finds a letter in which Hester confesses to having murdered her abusive husband years before.<sup>3</sup> Prior to this discovery, readers know her only as the odd-mannered, mute cook at Lady Lundie's estate of Windygates. Little else is known about Hester, except that she had "suffered unutterably" (113) at the hands of a drunken husband; that one of his blows had caused her to lose her speech; that her doctors suspected that she had regained her ability to speak, but would not do so; and that she is an excellent servant despite her demands for impromptu holidays and a locked room of her own.

*Man and Wife*'s central plot focuses not on Hester Dethridge, but on the domestic affairs of the middle- and upper-class residents and guests of Windygates. There, Lady Lundie--with her late husband's brother, the lawyer Sir Patrick Lundie--cares for her step-daughter, Blanche (engaged to Arnold Brinkworth) and Blanche's companion, Anne Silvester (unmarried, but pregnant by Geoffrey Delamayn). The story begins when Anne disappears to an inn at nearby Craig Fernie to meet with, and marry, the father of her

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puppet of Dr. Downward, who manipulates her into an attempt on Allan Armadale's life. This alteration was presumably meant to appeal to a Victorian public that, rather than accept women's criminal culpability, preferred to believe that unconscionable men had morally corrupted Madeleine Smith and Adelaide Bartlett.

<sup>3</sup> The confession appears in the fifty-ninth of *Man and Wife*'s sixty-two chapters.

unborn child; she does not expect to be joined by Arnold, whom Geoffrey has sent to explain his unexpected summons to London. Anne and Arnold are forced by a storm to share a room at the inn and, for the sake of appearances, they address each other as husband and wife before the servants. Unbeknownst to the pair, Scottish marriage law decrees that those who have represented themselves as married are legally, if irregularly, wed. When Geoffrey learns this, he happily realizes that he cannot marry Anne and that he is free to marry a wealthy widow. Devastated, Anne runs to Glasgow, where her child is born dead and she becomes too ill to warn Blanche that her coming marriage to Arnold may be bigamous. At last, Anne gets word to Sir Patrick, who discovers a letter in which Geoffrey refers to Anne as his wife. On the evidence of this letter and the dictates of Scottish marriage law, it is determined that Geoffrey and Anne--as well as Blanche and Arnold--are legally married.

At this point in the story, Hester reappears. She had left Windygates shortly before Anne's flight to the inn because the imperious Lady Lundie could no longer accede to her cook's unusual requests. Since her absence, Hester has inherited property from her brother, and she rents the house and garden to Geoffrey (who needs the space to train for a foot-race) despite the fact that she had been uncomfortable whenever she had encountered him at Windygates. A weak heart causes Geoffrey to lose the race; in his bitterness he begins to drink heavily, his misery increasing when he finds that he is married to Anne. She must not only live--literally a prisoner of the house--in a wholly loveless marriage, but there have also been intimations throughout the novel that Geoffrey is, like Hester's husband, capable of great brutality. In fact, he has been reading the Newgate Calendar, trying to discover a foolproof method of killing Anne. When he stumbles upon Hester's confession--and its description of just such a method--Geoffrey blackmails her into helping him murder Anne. At the climactic moment when he reaches forward to smother his sleeping wife, Hester--possessed by a "homicidal frenzy [sic]"--flies "at his throat like

a wild beast" (636). As he raises his arm to brush her aside, Geoffrey suffers a stroke and collapses with Hester kneeling on his chest, "fasten[ing] her ten fingers on his throat" (637). The novel's epilogue reveals that Anne and Sir Patrick have married, and that Hester, twice a murderess, is now confined to an insane asylum.<sup>4</sup>

In his depiction of Hester, Collins shows his unwillingness to present his readers with another discomfiting Lydia Gwilt. Instead of creating a controversial murderess whose behaviour is indistinguishable from that of other respectable women and whose looks deceptively contrast with the Victorian image of a woman who kills, Collins placates his readers by giving them a woman whose unusual appearance and manners conform to popular notions of female criminality. Though Hester initially seems unremarkable--Collins describes her as "[e]lderly and quiet; scrupulously clean; eminently respectable . . . a steady, trustworthy woman" (113)--other details indicate that the cook is not ordinary at all. Hester has "the seal of some terrible past suffering set on her . . . . You felt it, rather than saw it, in the look of immovable endurance . . . in the deathlike tranquillity which never disappeared from her manner" (113). Though at this early point in the novel, readers could not yet know that Hester has killed anyone, Collins prepares them for the revelation that she is a murderess by giving her qualities that comply with the nineteenth-century notion of such a woman. Hester is disturbed and strange; she is mature, mysterious and lower-class; she is, in demeanour as much as in name (i.e., "Death"/ridge), repeatedly associated with death.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Collins notes, "she was as

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<sup>4</sup> It is strangulation (not the stroke) which kills Geoffrey, though the seizure leaves him susceptible to Hester's attack. For Anne heard "a hoarse gasping, as of some person labouring for breath. The sound ceased . . . . Then the head of Hester Dethridge rose slowly into sight through the gap in the wall--rose with the glittering light of madness in the eyes; and looked at her" (637). Geoffrey might well have lived through the stroke--as his father did--if Hester had not throttled him to death.

<sup>5</sup> Later in the novel, Collins goes so far as to describe Hester's eyes as "cold, dull, and changeless as the eyes of a corpse" (240), further hinting at her affiliation with death.

completely out of the world, as if she had been screwed down in her coffin, and laid in her grave" (117).

One of Hester's most disagreeable--and presumably criminal--qualities is her ability to discomfort nearly everyone she encounters (an effect which Lydia made efforts to avoid). Yet, though her bizarre behaviour is disturbing, it also paradoxically serves as a reassuring warning that criminality reveals itself. Lady Lundie, for example, is so disconcerted by her cook's eerie impassivity that she dismisses her (116), and Mr. Speedwell, the doctor, flees Hester's house, calling her "as complete a savage as the men [Geoffrey and his trainer]" (478). One would not expect Geoffrey--brutish, scornful, and physically forceful--to be troubled by a female servant, but Hester terrifies him:

Firm as his nerves were--dense as he was, on all ordinary occasions, to anything in the shape of an imaginative impression--the eyes of the dumb cook slowly penetrated him with a stealthy inner chill. Something crept at the marrow of his back, and shuddered under the roots of his hair. He felt a sudden impulse to get away from her. (241)

But, while Hester is alarming, she is not ideologically provoking. Unlike Lydia--whose beauty and cultivation were seen by many Victorian reviewers as incompatible with their image of a murderess--Hester's odd manners and appearance were (judging by the absence of critical comment) consistent with their views of women who killed, and her frightening effect upon others was conciliatingly suggestive to readers that criminal women were visible--and therefore safe.

Another example of the discomfiture caused by Hester occurs when she encounters Blanche trying to revive Anne (who has fainted after Geoffrey has revealed that she is probably married to Arnold). Blanche is the novel's most virtuous female character, and her response to Anne's predicament is conventionally feminine, tender and solicitous. In stark contrast to Blanche, Hester reacts "without a trace of human emotion in her stern and stony face" (253). She responds slowly to Blanche's pleas for assistance, callously writing on her slate that a man's cruelty has brought Anne to unconsciousness,

and adding that Anne would be better off dead. Thus, Hester is set further apart from the Victorian image of an ideal woman--as embodied by the feminine Blanche--not only because of her emotionless response to the situation, but also through her worldly (i.e., unwomanly) assumption that Anne has been abused, an idea which has clearly never occurred to the sheltered Blanche (Surrige 114-15). Hester's cold indifference, and her insistence that Anne is the victim of violence, frighten Blanche, who turns "from the sight of the woman, in horror" (254). Blanche's visceral response to Hester's oppressive presence re-enforces the suspicion that she is dangerous. The scene thus provides reassurance that the murderess would evoke a strong, self-preserving reaction in even the most unsuspecting of people and that the murderess' lack of femininity--a sure sign of deviancy--was easily discernable.

Hester's belief that a man has brought Anne to misery is based on her own abusive marriage (the details of which have not yet been revealed). One might imagine that she would sympathize with Anne because of this shared experience. Instead, Hester seems to take a perverse pleasure in thinking that another woman is enduring the same anguish. This is evidenced when Anne, seeking Geoffrey's acknowledgement of their marriage, visits him at the home he rents from Hester. She finds herself face to face with the mute landlady, who greets her with an uncomfortable written query: "I said . . . brought to it by a man. Did I say true?" (473). Riveted by Hester's "stony eyes" (473), Anne answers affirmatively and is again questioned by Hester on her slate: "We are loth to own it when they up with their fists and beat us--ain't we?" (474). Hester then grabs Anne by the arm, offers her tea "without the least appearance of kindness" (475), guides her to the garden where Geoffrey is training, and waits "with the expectation of seeing [Anne] treated, as *she* had been treated in former days" (476). Two men must restrain Geoffrey from assaulting Anne when he sees her in the yard; frightened, she returns to the house, only to encounter more nasty insinuations from Hester:

She looked at me [Anne] and then looked towards the garden, and made the motion of striking a blow with her clenched fist. For the first time in my experience of her--I hope it was my fancy--I thought I saw her smile . . . . She made the same motion again with her clenched hand, and looked back towards the garden--and then looked at me, and nodded her head, as much as to say, 'He will do it yet!' No words can describe how glad I was to see the last of her. I hope and trust I shall never set eyes on her again! (477-78)

Like Blanche, Lady Lundie, and Mr. Speedwell, Anne is relieved when she finally parts from the apparently merciless landlady whose peculiar and cold-hearted actions again conform to nineteenth-century beliefs about murderous women.

Hester is not like the other female characters in *Man and Wife*, and the contrast between the restrained cook and the emotionally sensitive middle-class women around her is another of Collins' attempts to cater to Victorian stereotypes about women who kill. In the novel, figures like Blanche and Anne are often--as was expected of domestic women--at the mercy of their emotions, but Hester's impassiveness contradicts the prevailing belief in delicate female sensibilities, and demonstrates once again that she is strange and not to be trusted. Hester's unwillingness--or perhaps inability--to respond emotionally to distressing situations may have reminded readers of Maria Manning's damning "masculine" coolness, a self-command that spurred the jury and the press to conclude that she was capable of murder.

For the greater part of *Man and Wife*, Collins depicts Hester as a sinister and unfeminine woman whose behaviour marks her as suspect, and whom others avoid. When the narrative reveals that she has killed, it could not have surprised readers, for they would have detected in Hester those traits which Victorians were told to expect in a murderess (i.e., ignorance, impassivity, ugliness). Yet, though Collins presents Hester as a stereotypical, cold-hearted, unwomanly murderess, he nevertheless contradicts this image by suggesting that her crime is mitigated by her femininity--oddly enough, the very thing she is seen to lack in the first three-quarters of the novel. Despite the repeated emphasis

The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that every entry should be supported by a valid receipt or invoice. This ensures transparency and allows for easy verification of the data. The second part covers the process of reconciling accounts, highlighting the need to compare the company's internal records with the bank statements. Any discrepancies should be investigated immediately to prevent errors from accumulating. The third section addresses the role of technology in accounting, noting that modern software solutions can significantly reduce the risk of human error and streamline the reporting process. Finally, the document concludes by stressing the importance of regular audits to ensure the integrity of the financial information and to identify any potential areas for improvement.

upon her “sinister tranquillity,” once Hester’s history of victimization comes to light, she begins to accrue sympathy. As I have shown, a woman who closely reflected the Victorian image of ideal womanhood was less likely to face prosecution or conviction; thus, Collins allays condemnation of his fictional murderess by stressing (albeit at the last minute) her femininity. Hester’s confession reveals, therefore, not only that she killed her husband out of desperation, but also that she is intensely pious, domestically skilled, and entirely unmotivated by lust--powerful signs of Victorian womanliness which work in her favour.

In addition, Hester’s crimes are somewhat mitigated by her lower-class status. Lydia Gwilt provoked critics because she successfully invaded the middle-class world and made its inhabitants her victims. Hester, on the other hand, only *begins* her life as the daughter of a middle-class merchant; Collins circumspectly repositions her among the working classes before she commits her first crime. Thus, while Collins is careful to give Hester a respectable upbringing that provides her with some of the empathy which was frequently bestowed upon middle-class women accused of murder, he simultaneously endorses the nineteenth-century belief that female criminals emerged from the poorer levels of society.

However, the most salient way in which Collins neutralizes the figure of Hester is to make her a sympathetic example of Victorian society’s inadequate protection of abused wives. In December 1869, an event occurred which inspired Collins to create Hester: Susannah Palmer, 40, a working-class woman, was arrested for stabbing her abusive husband, James (Surridge 104).<sup>6</sup> At Susannah’s trial for attempted murder, the extent of

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<sup>6</sup> Barbara Brashear writes: “Collins’ artist friend W. P. Frith told him about a model whose brutish, drunken husband would seek her out and take her money. She became the basis for Hester. Having already conceived and outlined the drama [ i.e. of *Man and Wife*, written in 1869; first performed in 1873], Collins did not include her, but added her to the novel which he was then writing” (84). Brashear gives no reference for this story, which may indeed be true, but the similarities between the experiences of Hester and Susannah Palmer suggest that Palmer’s case inspired Collins.

her husband's violence was revealed: in that twelve years of marriage, he was often drunk; he beat his wife frequently and brutally; he brought prostitutes home and made his wife and children sleep in the street; he displayed a sexual interest in Susannah's daughter; and when Susannah left him and found new lodgings, he moved in, sold her furniture and kept the money for himself--which, under contemporary law, he had the right to do. Instead of feeling outrage concerning Palmer's attempted murder of her husband, Victorians were touched with what the *Times* called a "strong feeling of commiseration" (15 Jan. 1869; 9a). Released after a few months of imprisonment--a punishment the judge considered "ten times better than the hell in which she had been compelled to live" (*Times* 15 Jan. 1869; 9a)--Susannah found that the sympathetic public had donated money and furniture for her benefit.

Collins must have been struck by this outpouring of support for Susannah Palmer, sympathy which was rarely afforded to women who killed. Collins had tried, for example, to make Lydia Gwilt's crime understandable by stressing her neglectful upbringing and by giving hints of her husband's cruelty (including the incident in which Waldron lashes her face with a horsewhip), but critics were unforgiving of *Armadale's* murderess, whose illicit sexuality, avaricious motives, and ability to deceive were so unsettling. Unwilling to create another unsympathetic murderess, Collins deliberately constructed for Hester Dethridge a history of abuse parallel to Palmer's. Readers could thus view Hester's crime, not as an adulterous and greedy attack upon a powerful middle-class man such as Waldron, but as an understandable response to years of domestic cruelty at the hands of a drunken labourer.

The details of Hester's abusive marriage and murder of her husband are not revealed until late in the novel, when Geoffrey discovers her written confession. Then, it is revealed that Hester, a dutiful daughter of an evangelical middle-class family, had married a working-class man, Joel Dethridge. She found that he was a violent drunk who

could not hold down a job (585). Hester's marriage--like Susannah Palmer's--was abusive: her husband beat her, once knocking out some of her teeth and impairing her speech (594); he repeatedly left her to fend for herself and returned only to raise money for drink by taking it from her purse, or by selling the furniture she had purchased with her wages (585, 588, 590, & 593); employers dismissed her when he harassed her at work (588, 589, & 591). Before Hester killed her husband, she considered every other possible option: she went to the police twice (586-8), she contemplated suicide (590), she offered Joel money to leave her alone (596); she spoke to a lawyer about committing her husband to an asylum (591); she consulted her pastor (592); and she looked to her middle-class employers and family for assistance (589 & 593). "Magistrates and lawyers; relations and friends; endurance of injuries, patience, hope, and honest work," she wrote, "--I had tried all these, and tried them vainly. Look round me where I might, the prospect was closed on all sides" (593).

Joel Dethridge's violence continued until Hester "suffered the last and worst of many indignities"--marital rape--and determined to "deliver [her]self from him for good and all" (599). Inspired in part by the biblical story of Jael and Sisera (591-92), Hester prepared herself to kill her husband. He had recently taught her to repair plaster walls, and she used his lessons to create a temporary secret entrance into his bedroom; while Joel slept in a room locked on the inside, Hester entered through the wall she had prepared, smothered him with a damp towel (a method she had read about in a newspaper article)<sup>7</sup> and, when he was dead, repaired the plaster. When authorities broke through the bolted door and found his body, no one suspected foul play, and Hester was at last free from her brutal spouse. Hester's marital suffering, the similarity between her situation

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<sup>7</sup> For Victorian critics who lamented that villains in sensation fiction inspired evil in hitherto innocent readers (Page 156-57), it must have been disconcerting to read that Hester was inspired to kill, not by novels, but by the Bible and the daily press.

and Susannah Palmer's--which clearly evoked public concern for women's mistreatment--and her countless attempts to seek assistance before she commits what is ultimately a crime of self-preservation, all act to deflect criticism of her decision to achieve divorce by death.

Collins further mitigates Hester's crime by suggesting that she is psychologically imbalanced. For an insane murderess did not contravene popular Victorian conceptions about women in the same way as a calculating murderess who killed for avaricious, sexual, or otherwise "unwomanly" goals; the former acted in accordance with nineteenth-century notions of female biology, while the latter contradicted those ideas. In fact, Victorian society presumed (and, certainly, preferred to believe) that homicidal women had no control over their actions:

[W]omen were seen to be closely bound to nature, the prisoners of their biology . . . [and] liable to fall prey to a variety of mental illnesses . . . Manifestations of mental disorder, or even of insanity, were not merely unsurprising but almost *to be expected* in a constitution innately predisposed to upheaval and crisis. (Zedner 87; emphasis added)

In 1874, H. Maudsley stated that "cases have occurred in which women, under the influence of derangement of their special bodily functions, have been seized with an impulse, which they have or have not been able to resist, to kill . . ." (Zedner 87). If Collins wished to create a murderess who (despite her crime) would not offend his critics, he could accomplish it in no better way than by making her not only abused, but also insane. Collins thereby relieves Hester of any responsibility for her homicidal behaviour, and readers could be satisfied that Hester's murderous compulsions were not the result of a premeditated cunning, but were the spontaneous impulses of an unbalanced female mind.

While insanity was generally viewed as the unfortunate result of a woman's biology, Collins notably refuses to attribute Hester's madness to "the derangement of [her] special bodily functions," suggesting instead that her husband's abusiveness is the

cause. For it is shortly after Joel had struck Hester unconscious for days that she found for the first time her mind “in the prophetic way” (595-96). Hester’s mental condition deteriorates even more after her husband forces himself sexually upon her, an act which motivates her to choose that same evening for his murder. “I wonder whether I was in my right senses?” (600) she asks herself.

As if to leave no doubt as to the extent of her insanity, Collins describes a sensational change in Hester’s mental condition after Joel’s death. Now Hester experiences repeated visits from a homicidal *doppelgänger* who tempts her to kill again:

The Thing stole out, dark and shadowy in the pleasant sunlight. At first, I saw only the dim figure of a woman. After a little, it began to get plainer, brightening from within outwards--brightening, brightening, brightening, till it set before me the vision of MY OWN SELF--repeated as if I was standing before a glass: the double of myself, looking at me with my own eyes. I saw it move over the grass. I saw it stop behind the beautiful little boy. I saw it stand and listen, as I had stood and listened at the dawn of morning, for the chiming of the bell before the clock struck the hour. When it heard the stroke, it pointed down to the boy, with my own hand. And it said to me, with my own voice:--“Kill him.” (605)

Herein lies Hester’s need for a private room with a locked door, and the reason why she fled from Geoffrey at their first meeting: when the apparition appears, she knows that she must hide herself away, or kill again. The presence of the demonic double--“[A]ppointed to haunt me for the rest of my life,” she notes (605)--tortures Hester deeply. “She called upon the mercy of God for deliverance from herself,” Collins writes, “for deliverance from the possession of the Devil; for blindness to fall on her, for death to strike her, so that she might never see that unnamed Horror more” (570)! At the same time that Collins uses insanity to alleviate Hester of responsibility for her actions, he also demonstrates by means of the *doppelgänger* that the murderess does not go unpunished.

Hester’s guilt and fear of murdering again are satisfactory reactions, and serve to increase sympathy in the eyes of the reader. Additionally estimable are her attempts to

protect others from her murderous impulses, and to atone for Joel's murder. After killing him, Hester vowed on the Bible "to set [her] guilty self apart among [her] innocent fellow creatures from that day forth: to live among them a separate and silent life" (603). Hester never speaks again except to pray alone. Her mutism becomes one of the reasons people regard her as "other," but when one realizes that she adopts muteness as a penance for her crime, it appears instead as a sign of social conformity. Suddenly, the trait which set her apart as suspect now identifies her as self-sacrificial and pious, despite her madness and crimes.

In *Man and Wife*, Collins creates a murderess who initially seems to conform to Victorian notions of female criminality, but he ultimately represents Hester (much as he depicted Lydia Gwilt) as a conventional woman with stereotypically feminine desires. It is remarkable for Margaret Oliphant to have written that Hester does not come "within the bounds of criticism"--especially when Lydia, another murderess, met with much censure--but this appears to have been the case. Not many nineteenth-century critics could have taken issue with a woman who, despite her crime, wanted nothing more than to be a dutiful and obedient wife; whose homicidal behaviour was not a moral digression as much as an act of lunacy and (as with Susannah Palmer) desperation; and who passed most her life in chaste repentance and the cultivation of domestic skills. Hester was outside the "bounds of criticism" because Collins kept her *within* the bounds of what Victorian society would accept. As a woman who flouted convention, Lydia generated little sympathy; her sexuality, cunning, and unorthodox appearance offended readers, even if her crime did not. But--though Hester's marked strangeness initially suggests that she, too, considers herself outside society's rules--her self-imposed isolation indicates that she is, in fact, contained and poses little threat. At the end of the novel, Collins pairs this self-containment with Hester's literal containment in an asylum (639), thereby securing

*Man and Wife's* middle-class world from further interaction with this already inoffensive murderess.

## Chapter 4: Madame Fontaine, the Prisoner and the Gracedieu Sisters

In earlier chapters, I showed that most Victorians found it difficult to view middle-class femininity co-existing with murder, a perspective which informed their social judgements as well as their legal convictions. In *Armada*, Collins disputed this notion by creating a murderess who was not only feminine but, because of her femininity, better equipped to murder. Despite this violation of contemporary stereotypes, the characterization of Lydia, like that of Hester in *Man and Wife*, was nevertheless consistent with the Victorian belief in the discrepancy between womanliness and murderousness in that she was unable to kill in her “feminine” moments (i.e. in moments of maternal or wifely feeling). In other words, Collins first rattled Victorian readers by establishing that a respectable woman could certainly kill, but then reassured them by suggesting that a womanly woman could not. This chapter will explore a shift in Collins’ treatment of the murderess in his fiction after 1870. *Jezebel’s Daughter* (1879-80) and *The Legacy of Cain* (1888) represent a development in Collins’ interest in murderesses where, for the first time, he suggests that a womanly woman can indeed commit murder--and, indeed, may do so out of purely feminine motives. Whereas in *Armada* and *Man and Wife* it is plain that murder is only possible when a woman’s femininity has been suppressed, these novels indicate that there is **no contradiction** between a woman’s nurturing nature and her capacity to kill.

This chapter will first examine Madame Fontaine, the murderess in *Jezebel’s Daughter*. She represents a transitional figure between the early and the late novels. While she satisfies many Victorian clichés about women who kill, she is nevertheless unique among Collins’ murderesses because she is a mother and, more importantly, because her maternal instincts are absolutely integral to her decision to murder. Collins was criticized for this suggestion that a murderess might also be a good mother (see the anonymous

*Spectator* review below), but in his next “murderess” novel, *The Legacy of Cain*, he reasserts his opinions about murder and motherhood through the figure of a condemned murderess and mother, known only as “The Prisoner” (2). Unlike Madame Fontaine, the Prisoner does not kill for the sake of her child, but Collins clearly shows that, despite her criminality, her maternal love is as pure and undiminished as that of the most respectable middle-class mother. His examination of how murderous urges may be congruent with femininity continues in the same novel through the sisters Eunice and Helena Gracedieu, both of whom attempt murder. Specifically, through the figure of Eunice, Collins makes the controversial point that a would-be murderess might still embody Victorian womanly ideals.

#### **Madame Fontaine: The “Modern Lucrezia Borgia”<sup>1</sup>**

“[Her maternal love was] an agreement of rapacity and animal instinct. In giving her a child, nature had developed the she-eagle in her breast. She was full of impotent, unrecognized impulses to prey on all things in her child’s behalf.”

-- Isabella Valency Crawford, “Extradited” (1870), 117.

From her first appearance in the novel--when the narrator, David Glenney, feels the ominous influence of her “snaky movements” and “sleepy eyes” (110)--Madame Fontaine satisfies many aspects of the nineteenth-century image of a murderous woman. But, as in *Armadale* and *Man and Wife*, Collins did not wish readers of *Jezebel’s Daughter* to view the murderess as unequivocally evil. Instead, he suggests that she may possess redeeming feminine virtue. In the preface to the novel, he wrote, “I have endeavoured to work out the interesting moral problem, which takes for its groundwork the strongest of all instincts in a woman, the instinct of maternal love, and traces to its solution the restraining and purifying influence of this one virtue over an otherwise cruel, false, and degraded nature” (xii). Specifically, Collins emphasizes Madame Fontaine’s

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous reviewer in the *Spectator* (15 May 1880)

maternal devotion and concern for her daughter, Minna, which prevails in her character and is a major factor in her use of poison-induced illness to manipulate the affections of her daughter's future father-in-law, Mr. Keller (who has opposed his son's marriage) and in her attempted murder of Mrs. Wagner (who has threatened to expose her as a thief).<sup>2</sup>

Though this chapter will come to focus on the "interesting moral problem" of a mother who kills for the sake of her child, I will first note the ways in which Madame Fontaine conforms to the stereotype of a murderess. Firstly, she is foreign: David Glenney negatively contrasts her "sleepy eyes and serpentine graces" (110) with "the lithe active figure and the bright well-opened grey eyes of [his] dear little English aunt" (107). Secondly, Madame Fontaine is artful, taking care (like Madeleine Smith) to dress strikingly yet respectably. Collins suggests that she is a consummate actress in her daily life: "There are certain remarkable women in all countries who, whatever sphere they may be seen in, fill that sphere as completely as a great actor fills the stage" (37). Thirdly, she has masculine traits; she possesses "commanding composure" (37), "powerful hands" (37), and a voice "as firm as the voice of a man" (54). Most damning of all, Madame Fontaine uses her sexuality to manipulate and bewitch the men around her. David Glenney describes her powerful effect:

The influence she exercised was, in part, attributable . . . to the commanding composure of her expression and the indescribable witchery of her manner . . . . Those dark, steady, heavy-lidded eyes of hers seemed to be looking straight into my heart, and surprising all my secrets . . . . How that influence was exerted--whether it was through her eyes, or, to speak the jargon of these latter days, through some "magnetic emanation" from her, which invisibly overpowered me--is more than I can possibly say. I can only report that she contrived by slow degrees to subject the action of my will more and more completely to the action of hers . . . . (37)

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed plot summary, see Appendix A.

Madame Fontaine's "unwomanly" temper and ambition for power similarly identify her to Victorian readers as a woman capable of murder. Just as Collins granted readers a peek into the minds of Lydia Gwilt (through her diary) and Hester Dethridge (through her confession), he uses Madame Fontaine's fictional letters to show her thoughts and motives. Here readers learn the depth and source of her anger, and her identification with the real-life murderess, Anna Maria Zwanziger.

Wilful and ambitious from a young age, Madame Fontaine is the daughter of a German nobleman who disowned her when she married a doctor against his wishes. She had hoped her husband would become wealthy by rising to the top of his profession, but he has thwarted her ambitions by choosing to study at a remote university. Though consoled by her daughter, Madame Fontaine grows to hate her husband and resents that, as a woman, she is unable to seek social advancement and wealth herself. "Power!--oh, if I had the power to make the fury that consumes me felt!" Madame Fontaine writes, at which point she begins to praise her favourite murderess:

Talking of power, have you read the account of the execution last year of that wonderful criminal, Anna Maria Zwanziger? Wherever she went, the path of this terrific woman is strewn with the dead whom she has poisoned. She appears to have lived to destroy her fellow-creatures, and to have met her doom with the most undaunted courage. What a career! and what an end! The foolish people at Würzburg are at a loss to find motives for some of the murders she committed, and try to get out of the difficulty by declaring that she must have been a homicidal maniac. That is not *my* explanation. I can understand the murderess becoming morally intoxicated with the sense of her own tremendous power. A mere human creature--only a woman, Julie!--armed with the means of secretly dealing death with her, wherever she goes--meeting with strangers who displease her, looking at them quietly, and saying to herself, "I doom you to die, before you are a day older" . . . . (66-67)

Madame Fontaine's identification with a serial poisoner could have done little to endear her to Collins' readers. It is evident that Madame Fontaine's willingness to kill is inspired

by a thwarted desire for power as well as by her love and marital ambitions for Minna.<sup>3</sup> Though she poisons primarily to advance the interests of her daughter, Madame Fontaine also fulfils her need for dominion over others:

“Power!” she thought, with a superb smile of triumph. “The power that I have dreamed of all my life is mine at last! Alone among mortal creatures, I have Life and Death for my servants . . . . What a position! I stand here, a dweller in a populous city --and every creature in it, from highest to lowest, is a creature in my power!” . . . At last her sleepy eyes opened wide; and infernal beauty irradiated her face. For one moment, she stood--a demon in human form. (129)

So far this ambitious, demonic and duplicitous woman conforms to the Victorian stereotype of a murderess, but it would have been difficult for nineteenth-century society to imagine how maternal affection could have any place in such a selfish and abhorrent nature.

Anna Maria Zwanziger would have had little problem in reconciling Madame Fontaine’s maternal devotion with her willingness to kill, having once said that “sentimentality is perfectly consistent with total hardness of heart, and even with cruelty” (Feuerbach 166). Zwanziger spoke from experience. In October 1809, she was arrested for murdering the wives--Mrs. Glaser and Mrs. Gebhard--of two men for whom she had worked as a housekeeper. In addition, she was suspected of having killed an employer--Mr. Grohmann--who had recently become engaged. She admitted having poisoned the women in order to facilitate her *own* marriage to their newly widowed husbands and was rumoured to have killed Grohmann in a fit of pique at his engagement. Like her fictional counterpart Madame Fontaine, Zwanziger not only poisoned to kill, but

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<sup>3</sup> Her sense of injustice and powerlessness is almost certainly exacerbated by the arrival in Germany of Mrs. Wagner, who is not only rich and respectable, but also has authority over the very man, Mr. Keller, who threatens the marriage of Minna and Fritz.

also to sicken those who had interfered with her; the former chose Mr. Keller as such a victim, and the latter, guests of the families for which she worked.

There are enough similarities between Madame Fontaine and Anna Maria Zwanziger to suggest that Collins relied heavily on Feuerbach's account as inspiration. Like Madame Fontaine, Zwanziger lived a life of luxury until, through extravagance and the death of a husband whom she did not love, she was forced to work as a servant (Feuerbach 168). Zwanziger became a prostitute and then a mistress in order to live as she had been accustomed (Feuerbach 167); Collins does not explicitly state that Madame Fontaine had done the same, but she *did* "charm" (61) a gentleman into paying her debts. Like Madame Fontaine, Zwanziger was driven from Würzburg by rumours of theft (Feuerbach 173) and never fully recovered from this loss of wealth and social status. And when Feuerbach writes that Zwanziger could keep "a smile upon her lips, while within there was burning hatred" (175), he could have been speaking of Madame Fontaine. Most importantly, Feuerbach's work seems to have provided Collins with a realistic portrait of a murderess' motives:

She discovered the secret of a hidden power, by the exercise of which she might not only emancipate herself from restraint, but also rule unseen and uncontrolled. This secret power was poison . . . . Her attachment to poison was based upon the proud consciousness of possessing a power which enabled her to break through every restraint, to attain every object, to gratify every inclination, and to determine the very existence of others. Poison was the magic wand with which she ruled those whom she outwardly obeyed, and opened the way to her fondest hopes. Poison enabled her to deal out death, sickness, and torture to all who offended her or stood in her way--it punished every slight--it prevented the return of unwelcome guests--it disturbed those social pleasures which it galled her not to share--it afforded her . . . an opportunity of ingratiating herself by affected sympathy with their sufferings . . . . (Feuerbach 176-77)

These are nearly identical to the sentiments expressed by Madame Fontaine. Possibly, Collins saw something plausible in Feuerbach's understanding of Zwanziger--that she was

a desperate woman craving power--and used this motive to add truthfulness and complexity to her fictional counterpart. However, Feuerbach's shocking account of Zwanziger poisoning babies' milk finds no parallel in Madame Fontaine, whose maternal instincts are untouched by her murderous desires.

Madame Fontaine's combination of maternal tenderness and homicidal tendencies was controversial. On 15 May 1880, the *Spectator* demanded:

[W]hy should Mr. Collins try to make us believe that Jezebel, the modern Lucrezia Borgia, who will poison you as soon as look at you, is at bottom . . . a 'moral [figure],'-is redeemed, in other words, by the supremacy of her maternal affection? This redemption is so palpably lugged in by the head and ears, and is in itself so *grotesquely preposterous*, that we should have supposed even Mr. Collins might have hesitated to suggest it. (qtd. in Page 209; emphasis added)

But this anonymous reviewer was wrong in assuming that Collins introduced a criminal, yet maternal, character solely for the purpose of redeeming her. I believe that he was genuinely interested in the co-existence of womanliness and criminality, not so much for the sake of mitigation or sympathy (as in his earlier "murderess" novels), but in order to explore the way in which feminine attributes, such as maternity, contribute to the impulse to commit crimes. In this instance, Madame Fontaine's only redemptive womanly trait--motherhood--is very much interconnected with her willingness to kill.

Collins gives numerous instances of how Madame Fontaine's abundant maternity drives her criminality. Though, on a practical level, she poisons in order to secure Minna's financial security via her marriage to Fritz Keller, Madame Fontaine also feels that Minna will "die of a broken heart" (40; 179) if her wedding is stopped. To Mr. Keller she writes, "I implore you not to drive me to despair. A mother who is pleading for her child's life--it is nothing less, in this case--is a woman who surely asserts a sacred claim" (57). Minna is conscious of the destructive potential of her mother's protective love: "I think you are almost too fond of me, mamma. I shouldn't like to be the person

who stood between me and my marriage--if *you* knew of it.' Madame Fontaine smiled, 'You foolish child, do you take me for a tigress?'" (126). She has already told Minna, "If fifty Mr. Kellers threatened your happiness, my child, I would brush the fifty out of your way" (54). Indeed (as will be discussed below) Collins *did* seem to be asking his Victorian readers to view Madame Fontaine in the light of a tigress, insofar as she is biologically programmed to fight for the life of her child and cannot be faulted for following her instincts.

Still, Collins complicates this depiction of Madame Fontaine by describing exceptions in which the maternal drive, instead of causing a violent reaction, overrides her criminal intentions (a much more conventional treatment of a woman). During her marriage, for example, Madame Fontaine was sometimes "inclined to set fire to the hateful University" where her husband worked, until she felt Minna's "innocent kisses, and [became], for awhile, quite a good woman again" (66). Later in life, Madame Fontaine has few scruples about poisoning, stealing and lying in order to promote Minna's marriage. Yet some vestigial connection between maternity and morality survives, as she resolutely refuses to implicate her daughter in these crimes. At one point, Madame Fontaine debates asking Minna to lie but she "shrank from deliberately degrading the nature of her own child" (157). When David Glenney discovers Madame Fontaine's diary after her death, he senses a "softer side" to her "wicked nature" (224) and looks kindly upon her ability to be moved by her daughter's goodness: "It was always in Minna's power to lift her above her own wickedness" (54). Glenney's conventional interpretation emphasizes the contradiction between violence and the maternal; however, the novel does not fully support this.

Part of the way in which Collins introduced the notion that femininity and violent tendencies might co-exist--and indeed be linked--was by alluding to emerging neo-Darwinian theories about the connections between human and animal maternity and

violence. This is especially evident in Fritz's letter from Frau Meyer who writes anonymously about Madame Fontaine's wrongdoings. Just as Allan Armadale failed to believe that a beautiful woman posed a threat, Fritz refuses to accept that Madame Fontaine is capable of wrong. He believes her to be a paragon of maternity and femininity--a "brilliant star among a set of dowdy domestic drudges" (26)--but Frau Meyer anticipates his opposition:

I don't deny that she is a fond mother; but is the maternal instinct enough of itself to answer for a woman? Why, Fritz, a cat is a fond mother; but a cat scratches and swears for all that! (22)

Frau Meyer is echoing the increasingly held neo-Darwinian view that women, low on the evolutionary ladder, were only steps away from animals (Dijkstra 163-73). Maternal instinct was inherent, not because women were so blessed by God, but because it was thus with all female creatures. As Dijkstra observes, the "days . . . of woman's natural sainthood were passing" (163). Scientists such as Herbert Spencer, for example, had reasoned that "woman, incapable of the higher forms of evolution, was doomed to remain a simple tool of nature, a *domestic animal*, one might say, whose sole responsibility was the reproduction of the race" (Dijkstra 171; emphasis added).

Hence Madame Fontaine may be the "fondest of mothers" but, as Frau Meyer asks, "What does *that* amount to? It's as much a part of a woman's nature to take to her child when she has got one, as it is to take to her dinner when she is hungry. A fond mother? What stuff!" (60). Collins might have used Madame Fontaine's motherliness to incite sympathy, as he did with Lydia's and Hester's femininity, but instead the novel highlights the way in which violence and biological maternal drives might be connected. Thus, this novel stands as a key transition between Collins' earlier works (*Armadale* and *Man and Wife*), which exploit the contradictions between femininity and murder, and his next "murderess" novel (*The Legacy of Cain*), which suggests that these might be

integrally linked. In the following section, I will examine this novel about three murderesses (or would-be murderesses) and I will argue that this text represents Collin's controversial position that "feminine" traits, such as motherliness or domesticity, were absolutely compatible with female violence.

**Helena, Eunice and The Prisoner: "Domestic Treason of the Basest Kind" <sup>4</sup>**

"[W]here her love was--there her safety was."

--Collins, *The Legacy of Cain* (1888), 325

At first, *The Legacy of Cain* appears to be a novel about the issue of nature versus nurture.<sup>5</sup> A murderess' daughter and a minister's daughter are brought up as sisters, and neither the reader nor the sisters know which is the child of the Prisoner (who has killed her husband). This mystery poses three obvious questions: Which young woman is the daughter of the murderess? Will she inherit her mother's wicked nature? And will her upbringing by a kindly minister mitigate this inheritance? By the middle of the novel, one learns that Eunice is the murderess' child and that she does indeed share her mother's capacity for murder, despite her separation from that mother in infancy. But Collins also reveals that Eunice's sister Helena--like numerous others who lash out violently in the novel--has homicidal inclinations, even though she is *not* the daughter of a murderess. Therefore, it quickly becomes apparent that the "nature vs. nurture" debate is a red herring. The novel's thesis is instead to show that all people, including women, are capable of violence regardless of inheritance or upbringing. In this way, the text emphasizes that femininity, or a lack of femininity, has little to do with whether a woman murders; and reiterates, as in *Jezebel's Daughter*, that a woman's love and her willingness to kill are not mutually exclusive.

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<sup>4</sup> Collins, *The Legacy of Cain*, 175.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed plot summary, see Appendix B.

Through the character of the Prisoner--married to a gentleman who "was profligate in his habits and violent in his temper" (2)--Collins fulfilled Victorian expectations of murderous women in most respects (she is lower-class, uneducated, jealous and cunning). His narrator stresses the Prisoner's vanity, and condemns the "deliberate and merciless [i.e., unfeminine] premeditation" (2) with which she murdered her husband. The Governor of the prison also makes it clear that she could have avoided hanging if she had only possessed the feminine virtue of forgiveness, and had attempted "wisely-applied [sic]" (2) remonstrances with her husband, instead of "unwomanly" anger. Collins never suggests that the Prisoner's behaviour is anything less than reprehensible, but he once again contradicts the stereotype of the murderess by creating a figure who, despite her murderousness, is both beautiful and motherly. Indeed, the Prisoner resembles Italian representations of the Madonna (7). She is fiercely protective of her infant daughter and, though proud, this condemned prisoner begs the minister to care for her soon-to-be orphaned child:

[S]he broke into an outburst of rage. 'Think of *my* daughter being brought up by charity! She may suffer poverty; she may be treated with contempt; she may be employed by brutal people in menial work. I can't endure it; it maddens me . . . . The one way to my better nature--if I have a better nature--is through that poor babe. Save her from the workhouse! Don't let them make a pauper of her!' She sank prostrate at his feet, and beat her hands in a frenzy on the floor. (10, 12)

Collins mingles maternal love and animal rage so that it is difficult to determine where one impulse ends and another begins. The Prisoner's womanly instincts drive her equally to kill and to protect her child at any cost (though, unlike Madame Fontaine, her crime is motivated by spousal jealousy, not parental concern). As in *Jezebel's Daughter*, Collins shows through the character of the Prisoner that murder and maternal love not only co-exist, but perhaps originate from the same primal source, and that a woman's nature,

volatile and animalistic as contemporary science declared it to be, might result in both negative and positive ramifications.

At this point, the novel shifts its focus to the daily lives of the Gracedieu sisters. Seventeen years have passed since the Prisoner died, and the reader does not yet know whether Helena or Eunice is her biological child. Collins requires his audience to guess in whom the seeds of this genetic evil are located but, as the girls' ages are obscured, he forces the reader to make assumptions based on evidence of personality, such as that provided by their journals.

Initially, it would seem that Helena is the Prisoner's daughter. If vanity, jealousy, artifice, cunning and other "unwomanly" traits are markers of a born murderess, then Helena would be the logical choice. From the outset, the novel depicts her as unsatisfied with her lot in life--"[I'm sorry] not to have been born a man!" (44)--and resentful of its monotony, "unwomanly" reactions which identify her as potentially suspect. In her journal, Helena reveals a distaste for her domestic duties--"Oh, how I hate inventing dinners!" (44)--and she questions her Evangelical father's injunctions against secular pleasures, which he represents as "temptation[s] of the Evil One" (46). Despite her aversion to menial and repetitive responsibilities, Helena has managed to serve as housekeeper for many years; yet as she grows older, she cannot help but turn her thoughts to the world outside the domestic sphere.<sup>6</sup> Helena admits that, on a recent visit to friends in London, she almost succumbed to the "wickedness" of seeing the "wonderful singers and . . . entrancing music" (46) of an Italian Opera. The journal also reveals that she frequently (and successfully) masks her true feelings beneath a veneer of feminine respectability: "I may long to box the ears of the whole [Sunday school] class, but it is my

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<sup>6</sup> "To many Victorians," Lillian Nayder notes, "such 'longings' in women . . .--whether satisfied or not--seemed to pose as great a threat to the empire as native insurrections or imperial rivalries" (*Wilkie Collins*, 131).

duty to keep a smiling face and to be a model of patience" (45). And, though the Minister forbids poetry and fiction, Helena reads French novels in secret.<sup>7</sup> This insubordinate behaviour hints to Victorian readers that she may be the Prisoner's daughter.

Incongruously, at the same time that Collins suggests that Helena, through her resistance to patriarchal authority and her traditional female role, could be the murderess' child, he represents her contumacy as apt, sympathetic and fully justified, thus undermining one's ability to draw conclusions. At the time in which the story is set (1875), forbidding one's daughters from reading novels was outdated, and her complaint must necessarily have elicited empathy from the real-life nineteenth-century novel reader. Most notably, perhaps, Helena is identified with things that Collins loved (Italian opera and French novels), and she rebels against one of the things he detested (Evangelicalism).

But finally, Collins defeats all our suppositions by revealing that Eunice, the stereotypical angel of the house, is in fact the Prisoner's daughter. Sweet, naive and unassuming, Eunice is in every way the counterpoint with her sister, who only pretends to be so. And if Helena is to *The Legacy of Cain* what Lydia Gwilt was to *Armadale*, then Eunice is a gentler version of Neelie Milroy (also unsophisticated, girlish and not overly bright or fashionable), though *this* naif tries to kill her romantic competitor. In any case, the reader's speculation as to which sister is genetically related to the Prisoner is shown to be completely irrelevant when both Helena and Eunice attempt murder.

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<sup>7</sup> "French novels," Daniel Pool explains, "with their telltale yellow covers, had long been regarded in England as dangerously 'adult,' inasmuch as they dealt frankly with sexuality and adultery . . . . 'Novels in England are written to be read by boys and girls,' said the *Fortnightly Review* . . . in 1871, 'novels in France are not.'" (232). In *Armadale*, the door of Mrs. Oldershaw's shop is opened by a "lean and yellow young woman, with a tattered French novel in her hand" (340). The book, and the mirroring of its yellow cover in the complexion of the servant, strengthens Allan Armadale's impression that the place is disreputable.

To achieve this, Collins places his heroines in a situation where their sexual jealousy is extreme. On a rare trip to London, Eunice meets a wealthy and attractive young gentleman, Philip Dunboyne, who appreciates her artless and loving nature, and proposes to her. Believing herself to be more worthy of his affection, Helena uses her powerful sexuality to steal Philip from her sister.<sup>8</sup> In despair, Eunice tries twice to kill Helena, but is prevented each time by an awareness of Philip, before whose image she cannot behave violently. When Philip recognises Helena's evil, he chooses to be with Eunice instead, but Helena resents his rejection of her and tries to poison him.

Thus, the shock of the novel is that **both women attempt murder**. The question of a wicked inheritance, which was initially so vital to the suspense of the novel, becomes no question at all when Eunice and Helena each lash out violently for similar reasons. If a nineteenth-century reader of *The Legacy of Cain* expected the story to hinge upon a typically sensational domestic crisis in which one potential, unrelated, and (to the reader) easily identifiable murderess threatens an unsuspecting middle-class family from within, then those expectations would have been upset by this narrative. Firstly, there are *two* homicidal women in the Gracedieu home. Secondly, Collins depicts Helena, the daughter of a "respectable" wife, as crueller and more violent than the child of a lower-class prisoner. Finally, and most importantly, Helena's and Eunice's murderousness is not predicated upon traditionally envisaged factors like biological inheritance or upbringing.

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<sup>8</sup> Collins does not stress Helena's sexuality to the same extent as he did with Lydia and Madame Fontaine, but he provides some evidence of a sexual appetite which signals, in the minds of Victorian readers, that Helena is capable of much worse. Though she refers to *The New Magdalen* (1872-73), Lillian Nayder notes that Collins "disparages women who act for themselves, associating their desire for self-government with sexual aggression . . ." (*Wilkie Collins*, 131). This statement applies to Helena, who decides that she wants Philip for herself; who seduces him in a matter of days; and who has no compunctions about passionately kissing him in a public (albeit obscure) place. In addition, readers must note the Governor's repulsion at Helena's large breasts--"unduly developed for her time of life" (179)--which warn him of an adult sexuality, though she is no more than sixteen.

As though to stress this point, the novel includes an incident in which the Minister himself (half-mad in the belief that the Governor had seduced his wife in the past) attacks his old friend with a straight razor (228-29). Clearly, Collins' depiction of the Gracedieu sisters defies convention, not only because he continues (as in *Armadale*) to play with stereotypes of the homicidal woman and the circumstances which engender her, but also because he suggests that strong motives (such as sexual jealousy) can transcend gender, education, and lifelong personality traits to inspire murderous rage in anyone.

As noted above, Collins leads his readers to assume that Helena is the daughter of the murderess by stressing her rebelliousness and self-interest, but confuses his depiction by representing her temerity as sympathetic. When Eunice unexpectedly reveals, through her second attack on Helena, that *she* is the murderess' child, and after her sister shows that she is both a seductress and a poisoner (despite having come from "good stock"), all previous expectations as to "nature vs. nurture" are moot. The fact that both women have attempted to kill is paramount. Collins' suggestion that any woman--any *person*--could be driven to murder was in defiance of the belief, existing even in the late part of the nineteenth century, that women were unlikely to kill. Nevertheless, though Collins has once again contravened Victorian stereotypes about murderesses, he finally conforms to convention by showing that the criminal's child is redeemed by traditionally feminine traits such as nurturance.

Eunice is both the Prisoner's daughter and an attempted murderess in her own right, but her culpability is substantially less than her sister's. While under the influence of laudanum, Eunice dreams that her mother's spirit convinces her to kill Helena for seducing Philip. Stirred to anger at "the sister who had committed the worst of murders--the wretch who had killed in [her] all that made life worth having [i.e., a husband]" (148), Eunice (still under the influence of laudanum) attempts to smother Helena but, at the sight of Philip's miniature around the sleeper's neck, ceases her attack.

That the thought of Philip is enough to defuse her anger testifies to Eunice's essential womanliness, which is thus proved to be in the ascendant. Moreover, the influence of laudanum decreases her culpability (as it does Franklin Blake's in *The Moonstone*). Unlike Collins' depiction of Helena--who kills solely out of a passionate and jealous vindictiveness--Eunice's violence is represented so as to alleviate her responsibility and to bring her the sympathy that can, ultimately, never be afforded to Helena. Eunice not only acts under the influence of a drug, she is also encouraged to kill by an "Evil Spirit" (146) and she does so in a trance which prevents self-awareness (like Lydia and Hester before her).<sup>9</sup> In addition, her education and upbringing has had a purifying effect upon her and, in essence, eliminates the taint of her ancestry.

In contrast, Helena (despite her sympathetic rebelliousness) is wholly culpable and unredeemable in her attempt at murder. In fact, as despicable as Collins depicts the Prisoner to be--guilty of "one of the most merciless murders committed in our time" (21)--Helena comes across as more depraved, even though she does not succeed in killing Philip. Helena's faculty for murder is first emphasized by the traits she shares with the Prisoner (pride, vanity and jealousy, an inability to submit to perceived effronteries in a docile, "womanly" fashion, and cold, "masculine" premeditation), but their differences highlight the extent to which Helena is more debased than her predecessor. The Prisoner's crime is not only mitigated by her maternal devotion and by such powerful motives as infidelity and domestic violence (the latter sufficient to excuse Susannah Palmer/Hester Dethridge), but it is also understood to have resulted from the Prisoner's being of an "inferior rank of life" (2) and therefore predisposed to criminal behaviour.

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<sup>9</sup> Notably, Eunice's decision to smother is the least reprehensible of her choices. Stabbing is rejected as messy (she has a very "feminine" aversion to blood) and she cannot poison because of the necessity for subterfuge (a noble objection); by comparison, suffocation--clean, quiet, non-invasive and reminiscent of sleep--is an almost gentle and "ladylike" form of murder.

Thus, the shock of Helena's murderousness comes out of the feeling that, unlike Eunice's, her education and religious upbringing have come to nothing. Eunice, her femininity preserved despite her murderous intent, cannot be held accountable for her actions; thus, Helena's poisoning of Philip, due to its "masculine" deliberation and mercilessness, and her completely selfish motive, appears all the more abhorrent.

Ironically, Helena's attack on Philip provides the opportunity for Eunice to embrace her feminine role as she nurses him back to health. Eunice, unlike her sister, is rewarded with her heart's desire--marriage and family--and in domestic security she finds a prophylactic against her murderous potential: "[W]here her love was--there her safety was" (325).

Collins, in *The Legacy of Cain*, gives the unconventional opinion that any woman, regardless of genetic heritage, upbringing, or personality, is capable of murder, and that everyone (man or woman) has a point at which homicidal impulses will take over. This is the unorthodox position suggested by the novel's title--we are all Cains. Still, Collins finally adheres to convention in that he proposes that a womanly woman (a yielding woman with traditional, domestic priorities) has the greatest chance of avoiding iniquitous behaviour and will be justly rewarded for her feminine virtue, which exists, Collins tells his readers, regardless of her murderous capacity.

## Conclusion

Victorians were fascinated with murder in general and middle-class murderesses in particular. For a respectable woman who killed contravened nineteenth-century beliefs about the nurturance, docility, and selflessness of women, a sentiment expressed in 1855 by William Howitt in *Household Words*:

There are few subjects which present to the psychologist more curious traits, and more subtle enigmas than lady poisoners. The character is *so opposed to all our ideas of feminine feeling and affection* that . . . its existence would seem hardly possible. (176; emphasis added)

Throughout the nineteenth century, society's inability to reconcile its ideas about women with the violence of homicide is clearly discernable in sensational murder trials. The law was seemingly less concerned with a woman's criminal culpability than the degree to which she maintained her "femininity." Thus, though Madeleine Smith and Adelaide Bartlett were likely guilty, only Maria Manning hanged. Mature, foreign, and adulterous, Maria was deemed "unwomanly" and her guilt was assumed; Madeleine and Adelaide, on the other hand, despite evidence of sexual impropriety, established themselves as helpless "feminine" victims, and escaped punishment.

Victorians were unwilling to accept that an otherwise respectable woman could kill, for to do so implied that any middle-class home might harbour a murderess unawares. As Howitt again expresses, this sort of deception was an affront, an attack from within upon the sanctity of the domestic sphere:

. . . . It is amazing the variety and amiability of character that is worn for years, to cover the foul fiend within. For long periods these female vampyres live in the heart of a family circle, wearing the most life-like marks of goodness and kindness, of personal attraction and spiritual gifts; caressed, fêted, honoured as the very pride of their sex, while they are all the time calculating on the lives . . . of those nearest, and who should be dearest, to them. (176)

Sensation novelists picked up on this anxiety and added suspense to their works by placing unsuspecting protagonists within the power of a homicidal woman.

The prevalence of murderesses in Wilkie Collins' fiction testifies to his interest in women who kill, and it appears to have been a lifelong fascination. Collins alluded, both directly and indirectly, to real-life women accused of murder or attempted murder (Maria Manning, Madeleine Smith, Anna Maria Zwanziger, Constance Kent, and Susannah Palmer); and in his four "murderess" novels, he both challenged, reflected, and responded to what their cases revealed about Victorian society's preconceptions of homicidal women. Collins was perhaps attracted to the idea of incorporating a murderess into his fiction not only because such a character would attract readers, but also because it afforded him the opportunity to manipulate stereotypes of the homicidal woman and to inspire his nineteenth-century audience to feel either compassion for, or understanding of, a type of woman they abhorred. It is impossible to know *why* Collins evoked sympathy for murderous women--perhaps to unsettle a complacent public, perhaps as a reflection of his own beliefs, or observations--but his efforts were consistent with his other works (*No Name* [1862], *The New Magdalen* [1873] and *The Fallen Leaves* [1879] ) which also featured sympathetic portrayals of "fallen" women.

Collins' use of diaries, letters and confessions not only provided readers with a voyeuristic thrill, but also assisted him in guiding readers' responses to his fictional murderesses. In some cases, reading her private thoughts created a sense of intimacy which fostered understanding for the woman who killed, especially if she revealed an element of womanliness which was not immediately apparent. In her letters to Mrs. Oldershaw, Lydia comes across as heartless, but she acquires sympathy when her diaries reveal self-doubt and "womanly" yearnings for a conventional married life. Similarly, Hester's confession documents a marriage so abusive that one feels for her rather than the victim. On the other hand, a murderess' writings occasionally disclosed information

which acted to her detriment. Madame Fontaine's letters divulge a reprehensible admiration for Zwanziger and an "unwomanly" desire for power, while Helena's journal exposes her prideful motives for poisoning her fiancé. In both cases, the woman's secret feelings signaled the extent to which she was depraved.

In many cases, a peek into the murderess' writings was the only way to determine her criminality, for Collins manipulated stereotypes of appearance and manner, and his characterizations occasionally ran counter to popular preconceptions of what a murderess might be. Many Victorians believed that her villainy would reveal itself in her physiognomy, but only Hester and Madame Fontaine physically communicate their criminality (though Hester's muteness ironically transforms from a signal of otherness to redemptive self-abnegation). Lydia, Helena, and the Prisoner, on the other hand, use their beauty to mask their deceit. Collins was confirming what William Howitt and his contemporaries feared: there were no external proofs of a woman's criminality; therefore, a murderess might inhabit the middle-class world undetected.

Incongruous as it seems, while Collins assaulted the naive assumption that middle-class women were incapable of crime, he also created sympathy for the murderess *as murderess* by emphasizing her misfortunes and/or her femininity. Collins attempted to elicit compassion for Lydia by suggesting that her criminality was the inevitable result of years of exploitation, and her self-sacrificial death is evidence of an intrinsic, if hidden, womanliness. Hester leaves her family for love of her husband, a sign of "feminine" devotion, and kills him only as a last resort after years of abuse. Even Madame Fontaine, who in most respects fulfilled the Victorian stereotype of a murderess, has the merit of loving her child. Only Helena, because she is wilfully "unfeminine" in every respect but outward appearance, fails to accrue much sympathy; while her sister, Eunice, who has also attempted murder, escapes criticism because she has always behaved with obedience and docility, and strikes out solely to preserve her right to a husband and family.

Helena is the only Collinsian murderess whose crime is unmitigated and, strangely, the only one to escape the ramifications of her aggression relatively unscathed. Collins was unorthodox in suggesting that a murderess may be bad *and* possess “womanly” sensibilities, but he nevertheless reassured his readers that the threat posed by a homicidal woman would come to nought. In all of the novels, the woman’s attempt at murder is either aborted, or distanced from the narrative by time; and, in the end, the murderess is safely contained. Lydia’s only murder occurs long before she meets Allan Armadale; her next attempt is half-hearted and unsuccessful, and she dies a martyr. Hester’s first crime occurs “offstage” and her attack on Geoffrey Delamayne is rendered less disturbing because he simultaneously suffers a stroke which would have killed him anyway; regardless, she spends the rest of her life in an asylum. Madame Fontaine, despite her best efforts, fails to kill anyone and, as she lies on her death-bed, acknowledges that she deserves to die; her last words are motherly concern for Minna. Helena’s comparative freedom is a puzzling anomaly, perhaps indicating Collins’ fear that the “New Woman” of the late nineteenth-century (like Helena, a woman who wanted to move out of the domestic and into the public sphere) was, despite her inherent threat to the *status quo*, beyond the control of patriarchal society. But Eunice, lashing out in a trance and craving domestic security (as Lydia Gwilt did), is the final depiction of a Collinsian murderess, her murderousness held in check by her adherence to stereotypical Victorian feminine ideals.

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**Appendix A:  
Plot Summary of *Jezebel's Daughter* (1879-80)**

Madame Fontaine and *Jezebel's Daughter* are based on Collins' first work for the professional stage, *The Red Vial*, which was first performed at London's Olympic Theatre on 11 October 1858.<sup>1</sup> The play was never published, but Barbara Brashear's summary suggests that it "concerns the efforts of the scheming villainess; Mrs. Bergmann, to gain a businessman's fortune. She is finally led to murder in order to reach her goal, but her efforts do not succeed . . . and poetic justice requires her own life" (37). Though the acting was praised, *The Red Vial* was a failure; the audience "roared with laughter at the most serious moments" and theatre critics "generally agreed that nothing could have saved the play" (Robinson 120). After a month, *The Red Vial* completed its unsuccessful run. In the margins of his manuscript of the play, Collins noted: "On its first night it was damned . . . . The rest is silence" (Robinson 121); disappointed, he gave up writing for the theatre for over a decade and focused his attentions upon fiction instead.<sup>2</sup>

In 1879, twenty-two years after the failure of his first play, Collins serialized *Jezebel's Daughter* in a number of northern newspapers owned by the publisher Tillotson (Brashear 38); in 1880, Chatto and Windus published the story in three volumes. The plot of *Jezebel's Daughter* is as follows. The narrator, David Glenney, writing in 1878, tells of events which occurred fifty years earlier while he was a young man working for his recently widowed aunt, Mrs. Wagner. Her politically radical and philanthropic husband had left her in control of his business, requesting that she continue to employ women and

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<sup>1</sup> I attempted, unsuccessfully, to locate a copy of *The Red Vial* (available in manuscript only at the British Library and at the Harry Ransom Humanities Library at the University of Texas) and, therefore, must rely on plot summaries from secondary sources.

<sup>2</sup> His next play, *Black and White* (co-written by Collins and Charles Fechter) was produced at the Adelphi Theatre in March, 1869, eleven years after *The Red Vial*.

to revolutionize the care of the mentally challenged by proving, through example, that kindness is a more effective treatment than confinement and abuse. Mrs. Wagner rescues a “half-wit” known as Jack Straw from the Bedlam asylum; though unpredictable and suspicious of others, he becomes her devoted attendant. Also new to Mrs. Wagner’s household is Fritz Keller, the son of one of her partners who, with Mr. Engelman, operates the German branch of the business in Frankfurt. Mr. Keller has sent Fritz to England as an attempt to sever his son’s romantic attachment to Minna Fontaine, the daughter of a woman with a reputation for debt and under suspicion of thievery.

Madame Fontaine, Minna’s mother and the widow of a German chemistry professor who studied poisons, had found it necessary to move to Frankfurt from Würzburg to escape social ostracism. For after Dr. Fontaine’s death, authorities inquired into the whereabouts of poisons earmarked for disposal in his will; though she claimed not to have known of them, people correctly believed that Madame Fontaine was responsible for their disappearance. Due to lack of evidence, she “was not pronounced to be guilty [of the theft]--but she was also not declared to be innocent” (30).

Poor, outcast, and unemployed, Madame Fontaine’s only joy rests in Minna’s marital prospects with Fritz. But the young man’s father refuses to acknowledge Minna or her mother. Tellingly, Madame Fontaine vows, “If fifty Mr. Kellers threatened your happiness, my child, I would brush the fifty out of your way” (54). Madame Fontaine later poisons Mr. Keller’s bedside water carafe. When he grows violently and inexplicably ill, she produces an antidote, nurses the sick man to health, earns his gratitude and convinces him that she has no debts, thereby removing his objection to the marriage. It is later revealed that she had used the same method to charm a wealthy, older man from Würzburg into paying her creditors.

When Mrs. Wagner visits Germany shortly thereafter, she finds that Madame Fontaine is installed as Keller’s housekeeper, and that Mr. Engelman, the other partner,

has suddenly died of a stroke. He had proposed to Madame Fontaine, and was in despair after she rejected him; David Glenney suspects that she had romantically snared Mr. Engelman only to secure a position of welcome in the household should her attempts to revive Mr. Keller have failed. When Madame meets Jack Straw, there is immediate animosity; she had known him as a worker in her husband's laboratory years before, was aware that his mental deterioration was caused by some of Dr. Fontaine's poisons, and now fears that he might reveal what he knew of them. But larger problems arise for Madame Fontaine. Believing that her debts in Würzburg are cleared, she is shocked to discover that her wealthy admirer has died and that his heir intends to collect on the promissory note she had given. Fritz and Minna must be married before the debt becomes known to Mr. Keller but, at the last moment, the wedding is postponed.

Driven to desperation, wretched with the thought that her daughter might lose the man she loves, Madame Fontaine steals money from the business safe. Mrs. Wagner discovers the theft, and confronts her, giving the housekeeper a week to return the money or be revealed as a thief. The next day, after dinner, Mrs. Wagner becomes horribly ill and, though Jack Straw tries to restore her with the contents of a blue-glass bottle from Madame Fontaine's medicine chest--the same substance that cured Mr. Keller--she dies and is removed to the morgue. Madame Fontaine knows that the poison administered to Mrs. Wagner was different from that which she gave to Mr. Keller, and that, unlike the first poison, it had no antidote; still, she is sufficiently worried about the potential outcome of Jack's attempted cure that she hides in the morgue to see for herself that Mrs. Wagner is dead. Jack, meanwhile, ensures that the watchman has attached bell-pulls to each of Mrs. Wagner's fingers and he waits for the ringing of the bell.<sup>3</sup> As he is about to

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Robinson explains how Collins came to include this scene in the novel: "As a young man he had visited Frankfurt and had been shown round the mortuary, or Deadhouse . . . . In the course of his inspection he learned that at one time a superstitious fear of being buried alive had been common throughout Germany, and that it still

drink wine into which he has poured "medicine" (again, poison stolen from Madame Fontaine), he discovers her, terrified and cold, and offers her his glass. She drinks the tainted wine; the bell rings as Mrs. Wagner rises from her bier; and Madame Fontaine, seeing her victim before her, faints in horror.

The novel ends with Mrs. Wagner's full recovery and Madame Fontaine's stoic, unrepentant death by poison.

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prevailed to some extent in Frankfurt. As a precaution . . . the Deadhouse authorities had long since established . . . a particularly grisly practice. To the fingers of each corpse a series of strings was attached, leading to a bell. Any movement on the part of the 'corpse' would thereby automatically ring the bell and rouse the attendants. It hardly needed the macabre imagination of a Wilkie Collins to reflect upon the situation of a cadaver thus dramatically announcing its own resurrection" (297-98).

**Appendix B:**  
**Plot Summary of *The Legacy of Cain* (1888)**

*The Legacy of Cain* begins in 1858, and is initially narrated by the governor of a prison in which resides the "Prisoner," a convicted murderess who awaits her execution by hanging on the following day. As suits his position, the Governor has little sympathy for the woman--who has murdered her profligate husband--though he does pity her soon-to-be-orphaned infant daughter. But the Prisoner has already considered her child's future; she asks to see a popular clergyman, Abel Gracedieu, and when he arrives, tells him that unless he adopts her daughter, she will die cursing the name of God. "You want to save my guilty soul," she tells the minister, "There's but one way of doing it. Save my child!" (12). As a believer in the hereditary transmission of evil, the prison's doctor advises against it; he asserts that the child "comes of bad stock" (18) and will inherit the mother's wickedness. The clergyman--whose wife is childless, and whom he mistakenly believes will love the girl--takes the child. The Prisoner hangs the next day.

A year later, the prison governor receives an unexpected visit from the minister's wife. Mrs. Gracedieu, now mother to a biological daughter (Helena), wants him to find a charitable asylum for the murderess' daughter (Eunice), whom she has never loved. The Governor is shocked that Mrs. Gracedieu would ask him to assist in undermining her husband's will. Disgusted by her callous disregard for the feelings of both the minister and Eunice, he refuses to participate.

The story continues in 1875, seventeen years after the death of the Prisoner and is told through entries in Helena and Eunice's journals. Mrs. Gracedieu had died soon after her visit to the Governor, and her threat to expel Eunice from her home has come to nothing. Instead, Mr. Gracedieu has raised the girls as sisters. They have never questioned his decision to conceal which is the eldest child (a measure for preventing inquiries into the identity of the Prisoner's daughter) and live in relative harmony despite

personality differences. Eunice is kind, unassuming and easily amused, though by no means clever. Helena, on the other hand, is intelligent; but, though she appears dutiful and patient, she is dissatisfied with her narrow way of life. Her growing aggravation with domestic demands increases when her father's middle-aged cousin, Miss Selina Jillgall, comes to live with them; Helena immediately despises the eccentric, though otherwise inoffensive, woman.

Everything changes between the sisters when Eunice meets a young gentleman named Philip Dunboyne, who appreciates her artless and loving nature, and proposes to her. But when Philip asks her father's permission to marry Eunice, he is refused. Mr. Gracedieu cannot, in good conscience, allow a man to unknowingly marry a murderer's daughter. Selina Jillgall, with whom Eunice has formed an instant friendship, suggests that her sister may be able to change his mind, but Helena does not wish to do so; she has seen admiration in Philip's eyes and, believing herself to be more deserving than Eunice of the love of a handsome and wealthy gentleman, she has seduced him. One day, at a hint from Selina, Eunice searches for Philip and Helena, only to find them kissing in a park bower. In a sudden fury, she seizes her sister by the throat, but, with a look at Philip, cannot continue; she returns to the house and tries to deal with the betrayal of the two people she loved most. Helena taunts Eunice and gloats over her own engagement.

Mr. Gracedieu is only partly aware of the tension between his daughters. His mental health is deteriorating--exacerbated by renewed anxieties about Eunice's history and the chance that it may be discovered--and he asks the retired prison governor to visit and give him advice. Before he arrives, an event occurs which drives the minister to the brink of insanity. Suffering from insomnia, Eunice takes laudanum and (like Franklin Blake in *The Moonstone*) acts strangely in her sleep. She is visited by the ghost of her mother (a woman she does not remember), is convinced by her to smother Helena in her bed, and wakes from her trance upon seeing Philip's miniature. Helena's scream rouses

Mr. Gracedieu, who is more distressed by his biological daughter's hard-hearted betrayal than by Eunice's violent response (172), and he sends Eunice to live at a nearby farm.

At this point, the narrative is resumed by the Governor, who accepts the minister's invitation to visit. Mr. Gracedieu is obviously on the verge of a nervous breakdown, but the Governor convinces him to write a letter to Philip's father, informing him of his son's ignoble behaviour and asking him not to endorse his marriage with Helena--to which the angry father complies. Helena is furious; she has made efforts to charm the Governor into being her ally, but he has seen through her mask of docility (as he saw through her mother's) and does not trust her. His sympathies reside with Eunice, who avoids Helena and takes solace in her life at the farm. Unbeknownst to anyone, the Governor speaks privately with Philip--who now regrets having fallen victim to Helena's seduction--and convinces him that he still has a chance of being with Eunice. Philip, by now aware that Helena "has the principles of Jezebel, and the temper of Lady Macbeth" (176), decides that he will ask Eunice to take him back. As he is now a guest in the Gracedieu household, under Helena's watchful eye, it is difficult for him to visit to the farm; when he does, he is unaware that she has followed him, and that she has overheard him tell Selina, "Helena disgusts me" (281).

Though she does not love Philip, Helena's pride is wounded; if she cannot have him, she will not allow Eunice the chance. Filled with rage, and inspired by the story of a woman who killed with poison, Helena secretly gains access to the local doctor's medical texts and researches different kinds of toxins. Shortly thereafter, Philip falls seriously ill. The doctor, certain that someone is poisoning his patient, speaks to the apothecary and learns that Helena had recently purchased digitalis. Still, he is unwilling to speak to authorities, and tells Selina to warn Helena of their suspicions, thereby giving her the opportunity to flee.

Eunice comes to Philip's sickbed and (in the novel's most powerful scene) accuses Helena of being a poisoner. Though Selina, Eunice and the enamoured chemist's assistant have all warned Helena that she is suspected of the crime, she audaciously claims that Eunice has been poisoning Philip, and threatens to tell her story to the magistrates. At this announcement, the doctor abandons his chivalrous compunctions, and arranges for Helena's arrest. At her trial, the judge sentences her to two years in prison, during which time Eunice and Philip marry and move to the ancestral estate in Ireland, and Mr. Gracedieu dies. When Helena is released, she settles in the United States where she becomes known as the Reverend Miss Gracedieu, spiritual leader and author.

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