



Knighthoods and Empty Benches: Wilkie Collins's *Armada* (1866) and the Late-Victorian Culture Industry

Robert Laurella

Abstract

In locating Wilkie Collins's novel *Armada* (1866) in the context of its two subsequent dramatic versions, this article considers how the Victorian culture industry contended with an aggressively expanding market economy. It positions Collins's work amid an ongoing Victorian debate that was especially prevalent in literary and dramatic periodicals concerning the bifurcated development of English drama and novels. Highlighting how Collins flexibly adapted his writing for the stage in the face of legal, commercial, and artistic pressures strengthens emerging links between the ostensibly discrete fields of novelistic and theatrical writing. The adaptation of novels for the stage is one of the primary areas where developing intellectual property law collided with cultural production, opening up, for writers such as Collins, new avenues to write, produce, and entertain. This article aims to expand on recent studies of the evolving nature of copyright law in the nineteenth century by considering the forms of cultural production that context facilitated. Considering the legal context of these adaptations in concert with, however, and not as ancillary to or separate from, their social and political valences highlights the modes of production that arose despite – or perhaps as a result of – the opaque nature of Victorian intellectual property laws. Wilkie Collins the successful dramatist, as opposed to Wilkie Collins the novelist writing for the stage, emerged in his own right partly due to the copyright contests that initially encouraged him to adapt his novels in the first place.

Keywords

nineteenth-century theatre; Wilkie Collins; adaptation; copyright; intellectual property; *Armada*

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Knighthoods and Empty Benches: Wilkie Collins's *Armada* (1866) and the Late-Victorian Culture Industry

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Introduction

In the final decade of the nineteenth century, when George Moore was advocating for the creation of an independent English theatre free from the overdetermining economic concerns of the commercial London stage, he modelled his ideal theatre on the French Théâtre Libre. He claimed that such a theatre in England, financed not by ticket sales but by subscribers, would be free to stage plays “which a manager of a regular theatre will not produce, not because they are bad, but because he thinks there is no money in them” (Moore 1891: 239). The issue, for Moore, was the provenance of such plays. Inundated with farces and melodramas, presided over by despotic actor-managers, and navigating an increasingly commercialised business model, the English stage had, in Moore’s view, demonstrated an inability to produce or attract native playwriting talent. Such talent did exist, however; it simply did not write for the stage. “Were I the founder of the Théâtre Libre,” wrote Moore, “I would apply to all the novelists: gold is found in the most unexpected places” (246).

In locating Wilkie Collins’s novel *Armada* (1866) in the context of its two subsequent dramatic versions, this article considers how the Victorian culture industry contended with an aggressively expanding market economy. It positions Collins’s work amid an ongoing Victorian debate that was especially prevalent in literary and dramatic periodicals concerning, as Moore’s comments suggest, the bifurcated development of English drama and novels. Highlighting how Collins flexibly adapted his writing for the stage in the face of legal, commercial, and artistic pressures draws new links between the ostensibly discrete fields of novelistic and theatrical writing.

Frustrated with copyright laws that did not protect his financial interest in dramatising his novels, Collins was equally aggravated by how those laws sanctioned pirated adaptations of his novels which threatened not only his wallet but also his reputation as a writer and that of his works. When a pirated adaptation of his 1871 novel *Poor Miss Finch* was produced without his consent, for instance, Collins was characteristically vocal in a letter on 25 February 1873 to John Hollingshead:

My 'Poor Miss Finch' has been dramatised (without asking my permission) by some obscure idiot in the country. I have been asked to dramatised it, and I have refused, because my experience in the matter tells me that the book is eminently unfit for stage performances. What I dare not do with my own work, another man (unknown in Literature) is perfectly free to do, against my will, and (if he can get his rubbish played) to the prejudice of my novel and my reputation.

(Baker 1999: 362-3)

Though, by 1871, Collins was preparing dramatic versions and copyright performances of the novels he intended to eventually dramatised as well as printing them privately in order to protect his right to represent them onstage, he did not do so with novels such as *Poor Miss Finch* in which he saw nothing to be dramatised. This allowed theatrical pirates to prepare their own dramatic versions and bypass Collins's pecuniary and artistic interests.

In order to achieve some measure of artistic and financial control over the dramatic adaptations of his popular novels, opaque intellectual property laws (discussed below) forced Collins to hone his skills as a playwright. The difference between the 1866 play *Armadale*, and its updated 1875 version *Miss Gwilt*, is the difference between a novelist's wholesale translation of novelistic characters to the stage and a playwright's sophisticated understanding of dramaturgy. In the evolution of Collins's writing, as embodied in the tonal, formal, and thematic shifts from the 1866 play *Armadale* to *Miss Gwilt* in 1875, we also begin to see an embryonic suggestion of the psychological realism critics of the nineteenth-century stage claimed was entirely absent. In an 1862 letter to an unknown recipient, Collins stated that "if I know anything of my own faculty, is a dramatic one" (Baker 1999: 208). Collins held a lifelong admiration for the theatre; it was, perhaps ironically, the failure of the legal system to protect his interests with regards to dramatic adaptations of his novels that pushed him to act on it.

As the sensation novel was reclaimed by literary critics and cultural historians as a legitimate site of academic inquiry in the mid-twentieth century, Collins's novels became the topic of much scholarly interest. His works have consistently been identified as the locus of a plethora of narrative and formal innovations that have irrevocably shaped how we understand both the Victorian novel and its successors. These important critical interventions spawned dozens of articles, monographs, and the foundation of both the Wilkie Collins Society and Journal, all of which positioned Collins as a purveyor of sensation fiction and an integral force in shaping the literary conventions of mid-Victorian England.¹ I use the term "mid-Victorian" deliberately; while this article considers Collins's participation in the late-Victorian culture industry, critical attention paid to his work has typically focused on his early writing and rehearsed the familiar criticism that characterises the arc of his career as one of decline. Considering *Armadale* in the context of its subsequent dramatic adaptations remedies this narrative by highlighting the increasing importance of theatrical writing in Collins's career. I hope to build on the work of scholars who continue to redefine the

¹ Studies include Lonoff (1982), Thoms (1992), Gasson (1998), Bachman and Cox (2003), Taylor (1988, 2006), Mangham (2007), and Bisla (2013).

connections between the novel, drama, and the beginnings of a mass culture, and begin redressing the narrative that characterises English drama as languishing behind its more rigorous and intellectual counterpart, the novel, until the advent of innovators such as Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw.²

Expanding on Franco Moretti's definition of canon formation centred around novels, which he sees as "crucial to any social account of literature" (2000: 209), I highlight the shared set of assumptions, gestures, and conventions that worked across genre and form in Collins's career. This article also elaborates on Margaret Cohen's notion of the "great unread," a body of literature either unavailable to or ignored by scholars, by emphasising the centrality of the theatre in the daily lives of Victorian readers and writers: indeed, the "great unread" is a phrase equally adept at describing the vast majority of nineteenth-century plays, even the most successful of which remain forgotten and are rarely – if ever – revived (Cohen 1999: 23).³ In employing Tracy Davis's characterisation of nineteenth-century dramatic repertoire as "the cultural lingua franca" of Victorian audiences and theatre practitioners, this article emphasises how the Victorian stage also informed avenues of cultural production outside of the theatre, in ways that remain obscured by a persistent critical attention paid to the nineteenth-century novel (Davis 2009: 24). I aim to broaden the scope of research that has typically leveraged theatre as a prism through which we can understand the novel without also acknowledging its complex and central position in the Victorian cultural sphere.⁴ In complementing David Kurnick's discussion of "the novelistic turn to and away from the living theater [as] not a punctual event but [as] an ongoing aspect of novelistic development" (2012: 2), this research aims to widen that discussion beyond the limitations of "novelistic development." In building on the work of these scholars, therefore, I am deliberately avoiding replicating a teleological framework that prioritises understanding and analysing the novel at the expense of the theatre. That the theatre was so closely enmeshed with the writing and reading of novels in the nineteenth century is significant not solely because of what it tells us about the novel, but rather what it illuminates about the wider Victorian culture industry.

Writing for the Stage: Copyright, Markets, and Popular Culture

The narrative of decline that attended the theatre in the final quarter of the nineteenth century was at odds with both its enduring popularity and its upward social mobility. The incompatibility of the precarious economic situation that underwrote the English stage with the lofty aspirations of its many commentators was a familiar refrain in literary periodicals. William Archer, writing in the *Fortnightly Review* in the final decade of the nineteenth century, couched his criticism of English playwrights in sarcastic religiosity: "Never was Messiah more eagerly awaited. We are all on tiptoe, with our trumpets at our lips, ready to hail his advent. And yet he comes not" (1891: 663).

In the Victorian theatre, one of the conflicts between a nascent, market-driven popular culture and the intellectual sphere of a bourgeois intelligentsia reached its apex. Though the work of writers such as George Eliot and Henry James demonstrated the novel to be capable of a rigorous, highbrow sophistication, the legal and financial systems underwriting the nineteenth-century theatre were seen by critics such as Moore and Archer as obstacles hindering

² Recent and important studies concerning late-Victorian theatrical culture and the novel include Shepherd-Barr (1997), Moi (2006), John (2010), Eltis and Shepherd-Barr (2016), and Abdalla (2021).

³ See also Cohen (2009).

⁴ See, for example, Litvak (1992).

its ability to demonstrate that same intellectual and aesthetic depth. The absence of both clear intellectual property laws and pecuniary incentive contributed to the perceived widening gap between the fields of fiction and drama. After the 1843 Theatres Act removed the exclusive patents of Covent Garden and Drury Lane to perform spoken drama, dramatic writers and critics contended with a heightened commercialism now that the number of theatres legally allowed to perform spoken drama expanded. Public approval drove investor choices in two ways: on the one hand, aggressive risk management and loss prevention strategies meant that plays often lasted as little as a week (Davis 2000); on the other hand, speculative compensation schemes, in which a theatre relied on long runs and healthy ticket sales to recoup losses and, ideally, generate profits, was seen by critics to discourage intellectual depth by rewarding low-risk dramatic endeavours that pandered carefully to the widest possible audience. The 1843 Theatres Act was not a watershed moment that created a demand for plays on its own. Instead, it responded to a concerted effort made by theatre practitioners seeking the legal authority to capitalise on what they saw as an extant and growing demand for theatrical performance. What it enabled was an expansion of the number of theatres able to perform spoken drama, and thus also an increasing demand for written plays that would provide a safe return on investment.

A writer for the *Quarterly Review* projected a nostalgia for the imagined excellence of an erstwhile English theatre onto Henry Irving's hugely popular management of the Lyceum:

It is to the existence of a yearning for something more worthy of the traditional glories of the English stage, something more abreast of the true culture of the time, that Mr. Irving largely owes the immense success which has attended his management at the Lyceum.

(Art. 1883: 381).

In a pair of essays entitled "The Stage in Relation to Literature," Lord Lytton responded to the commentator in the *Quarterly Review* by identifying the issue that the theatre faced as one of authorship: "between playwrights who are not poets or thinkers, and thinkers and poets who cannot writeactable plays, the British stage derives from our contemporary literature no intellectual nutriment, and our literary genius receives from the stage no dramatic inspiration" (1883a: 15).

The divide between writers who wrote for publication in novels and those who wrote for the stage formed the ideological terrain on which these arguments played out in literary periodicals and newspapers. In 1892, the *Pall Mall Gazette* ran a series of essays titled "Why I Don't Write Plays" and solicited the contributions of several major novelists. Among them were Thomas Hardy, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Moore himself. The questions posed by the *Pall Mall Gazette* to those novelists are themselves indicative of the perceived divide between the stage and other forms of literature. They inquired:

- (1) Whether you regard the present divorce of fiction from the drama as beneficial or inimical to the best interests of literature and of the stage;
- (2) Whether you, yourself, have at any time had, or now have, any desire to exercise your gifts in the production of plays as well as of novels; and, if not,
- (3) Why you consider the novel the better or more convenient means for bringing your ideas before the public whom you address

("Why I Don't Write Plays" 1892a: 1-2).

The responses to these prompts fall within two broad categories, the first of which is artistic concern. Hardy, for example, rehearsed familiar arguments expounding the formal limitations of the stage as opposed to the novel:

the novel affords scope for getting nearer to the heart and meaning of things than does the play, [... in which] the presentation of human passions is subordinated to the presentation of mountains, cities, clothes, furniture, plate, jewels, and other real and sham-real appurtenances, to the neglect of [...] action and emotions”

(“Why I Don’t Write Plays” 1892a: 1-2).

Braddon’s response echoes Hardy’s:

Many of my early literary attempts were made in dramatic form, but the far wider scope afforded by the novel, with its fascinating elements of mystery and suspense – elements almost impossible in a stage play – make novel-writing a much more agreeable form of literary work.

(“Why I Don’t Write Plays” 1892d: 3).

In his own response, Moore argued “that the narrative form permits the novelist to put his best thoughts and his most accomplished art into his work,” whereas the dramatic form demonstrates a “disregard for every kind of moral sequence and the violent dislocation of the inevitable course of human action” (“Why I Don’t Write Plays” 1892e: 3).

William Edward Norris – a largely forgotten writer responsible for over five dozen novels over the course of his lifetime – voiced his distrust in the ability of novelists to write for the stage: “I do not believe that the average novelist – the novelist whose works are supposed to be read by ‘the lesser public’ – could hope to escape being rendered publicly ridiculous were he to essay the suggested feat” (“Why I Don’t Write Plays” 1892e: 3). Arthur Quiller-Couch, a literary critic who wrote several novels along with publishing multiple editions of Shakespeare’s works for Cambridge University Press, argued that

when I desire – as we all desire at times – to cast a situation into dramatic form I find myself a beginner again, tied up in a new set of conventions. [...] To be original at four-and-twenty is within most men’s competence; but in my humble opinion your only title to triumph over conventions in any art is that you have mastered them.

(“Why I Don’t Write Plays” 1892c: 2)

For Quiller-Couch, the problem was one of expertise; novelists could not write for the stage, as Archer and Moore urged them to do, because they were trained in the publishing fields of the periodical press, not the stage.

Margaret L. Woods, who also responded to the *Pall Mall Gazette*’s prompts, agreed insofar as her own career was concerned: “There is nothing I should like better than to write a play, did I feel myself possessed of the necessary knowledge and powers” (“Why I Don’t Write Plays” 1892c: 2). MP and novelist Justin McCarthy echoed Woods’s sentiment:

I am convinced that I have not in myself the slightest dramatic capacity, and that if under present conditions I am to appeal to the story-loving public at all it must be through the medium of the novel and not of the play.

(“Why I Don’t Write Plays” 1892d: 3).

The Australian émigré and novelist Mrs. Campbell Praed wrote strikingly about her own inability to write for the stage:

I feel as though I were only pulling the strings of marionette performers, and am forced to realize that a scene which presented itself to my mind as dramatic in a novel has ceased to seem so when I try to adapt it for the stage, and that I must get courage and strength for a bolder spring before I can free myself from paralyzing conventionalism.

(“Why I Don’t Write Plays” 1892f: 3)

The other dominant concern in the responses to the *Pall Mall Gazette* is commercial, and these replies are characterised by a strong defence of writers' pecuniary interests. The responses that fall under this category address Archer's claim in the *Fortnightly Review* that "what would tend more than anything else to promote the development of serious dramatic art in England would be a theatre, a single theatre, which should be exempt from the necessity of paying interest on capital invested" (Archer 1892: 167). One correspondent, who opted to remain anonymous and identified themselves only as "A Novelist," couched their response in strictly financial terms:

A novelist writes to earn daily bread. He deals in an article for which he can get a fairly regular price. On that he can often manage to live in a tolerable condition of lower-middle-class comfort. Why, then, should he waste his time in writing plays as a speculation?
(“Why I Don’t Write Plays” 1892d: 3)

Considering the profession of writing in terms of both the language and dynamics of a market economy was not uncommon: Lord Lytton had argued ten years earlier that

Eminent actors and successful managers cannot be expected to waste time and trouble, for the pure love of literature, in unprofitable speculations, nor can eminent and successful authors be expected to write for the stage if the result is not conducive to their literary reputation and pecuniary advantage.
(1883b: 225).

The combination of a perceived lack of native English playwriting talent along with an undiscerning audience was thrown into sharp relief for dramatic critics with the advent of Ibsen's Scandinavian influence: even Moore could not help but observe that "the great Ibsen plays to empty benches after three or perhaps six performances" ("Why I Don't Write Plays" 1892e: 3). Yet Henry Irving would become the first actor to receive a knighthood in 1895, a testament to the widely recognised importance of his career as actor and manager. As literary and dramatic critics alike lamented the state of their contemporary theatre, the nineteenth-century stage demonstrated itself to be a nexus for pioneering forms of entertainment that would reverberate across the cultural spectrum. Despite the enduring success of popular theatre, encouraged by the work of innovative managers such as Madame Vestris and the Bancrofts throughout the nineteenth century, dramatic critics continued to see the theatre's financial structure as an impediment to its intellectual and aesthetic development.

In addition to this financial context, one of the primary factors that shaped dramatic writing in the nineteenth century was the failure of the legal system – both in England and beyond – to adequately address the burgeoning practice of adaptation. While the 1710 Statute of Anne, or the Copyright Act of 1710, was the first intervention in the complex and muddled history of British copyright that continued into the twentieth century, the specific situation of dramatic copyright was not addressed until over a century later, when suggestions made by the 1832 Select Committee into the Drama would be taken up in the 1833 Dramatic Authors Act, allowing playwrights to claim copyright of their dramatic works. The 1842 Copyright Act would officially extend copyright to dramatic writing, a fact that would become increasingly important the following year when the 1843 Theatres Act removed the exclusive patents of Covent Garden and Drury Lane to perform spoken drama. As London's West End expanded its capability to serve a larger number of patrons at an increasing number of theatres, the demand for plays accordingly swelled.

It was not until two decades later, however, that legislation would begin to address “an area of copyright obscurity which was the cause of much ill-feeling between novelists and playwrights, namely, dramatised versions of novels, which were in effect immune from the law on copyright” (Stephens 1991: 97). Because this “obscure” area of copyright law was governed as much by legislation as it was by legal precedent, it was only in the 1863 case *Tinsley v. Lacy* that the law was clarified: in order for a novelist to protect their exclusive right to represent a novel dramatically, they had to first write a dramatic version and produce a brief “copyright performance.”⁵ The copyright performance was, from then on, a single performance of a given play, nominally open to the public but usually given only to invited guests and with minimal accoutrements, produced in order to secure an author’s exclusive right to dramatic performance.⁶ The adaptation of novels for the stage is one of the primary areas where developing intellectual property law collided with cultural production, opening up, for writers such as Collins, new avenues to write, produce, and entertain. This article aims to expand on recent studies of the evolving nature of copyright law in the nineteenth century by considering a specific form of cultural production that fell through the cracks of emergent intellectual property law: dramatisations of novels.⁷ Because it was published alongside the novel, the play *Armadale* (1866) protected Collins’s exclusive right to produce his adaptation dramatically before *Miss Gwilt*, the final version of the dramatisation, would be staged in 1875. Considering the legal context of these adaptations in concert with, however, and not as ancillary to or separate from, their social and political valences highlights the modes of production that arose despite – or perhaps as a result of – the opaque nature of Victorian intellectual property laws.

The assumption that, suffering under the strain of legal and commercial pressures, English drama stagnated until the advent of Ibsen in London and J. T. Grein’s Independent Theatre Society, rests on the privileging of psychological realism. This article suggests, however, that the conditions for developing that psychological realism onstage were present in some form throughout Victorian theatrical practice even if they are not immediately evident to us today. Though an unpromising legal and financial landscape precluded many Victorian novelists from writing for the stage, it also enabled a cross-fertilisation between the development of the Victorian novel and its counterpart on the stage which remains understudied. Critics of the nineteenth-century stage that privileged novels over drama on aesthetic grounds often grounded their criticism in the speculative compensation structure that dramaturgs faced, as the quote by Moore with which this article began suggests. Comparing Collins’s two adaptations of his novel *Armadale*, separated by nearly a decade of theatrical experience, demonstrates, however, that for Collins, psychological complexity and the stage were not mutually exclusive.

Though novelists often saw their work adapted to the stage throughout the nineteenth century (Dickens, scandalised by a pirated adaptation of *Oliver Twist*, famously laid down in his box at the Surrey Theatre to avoid witnessing the ending), novelists adapting their own work or writing original plays for the theatre, as Moore suggests, was a less common practice.

⁵ In this case, publisher William Tinsley claimed infringement of his copyright on Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s novels *Aurora Floyd* and *Lady Audley’s Secret* by Thomas Hailes Lacy, who had published William Suter’s dramatised versions of those novels. The court ruled that Lacy had indeed infringed on Tinsley’s copyright not because Suter had adapted Braddon’s novels for the stage, but because Lacy had published the dramatisations in print. In this sense, legal thinking about unauthorised copying was still stuck on literal print.

⁶ On the history of the copyright performance, see Miller (2012).

⁷ Recent studies include Pettitt (2004), Seville (2006), Moody (2007), Newey (2014), Cohen (2018), and Abraham (2019).

There are, however, notable exceptions: Wilkie Collins wrote sixteen plays during his lifetime, twelve of which were adaptations of previous novels and short stories.⁸ One particularly instructive example of the closely aligned development between the novel and the theatre is Collins's *Armadale*, published serially in 1864-6 and in volume form in 1866, and adapted by Collins twice for the stage, first in 1866 and then revised in 1875. Decades before Horkheimer and Adorno would first identify the functions of a culture industry, writers such as Collins were working within a prudent commercialism that actively discouraged risk in favour of stable returns on investment. For a writer who is so often enshrined in both the canon and popular culture as a literary innovator, Collins's dramatic works mimicked the successful techniques of contemporary dramatists. The adaptations he wrote of his own novels increasingly appear to resemble the understated realism in dialogue and set design that characterised, for example, the work of dramatists such as T. W. Robertson rather than the sensational writing for which Collins is more readily remembered today.

An Adaptation in Development: Wilkie Collins's *Armadale* (1866) and *Miss Gwilt* (1875)

By 1875, Collins had solidified his reputation as a writer of both excellent novels and dramas: four of his plays had enjoyed runs of over one hundred nights, an indication that audiences and critics were responding positively to his dramatic works. Some were also being performed both in the provinces and in America. While the 1860s saw his development and growth as a novelist, not just of lowbrow sensationalism but of complex, thoughtful works, it is also the period when his career as a playwright began to crystallise. This is evident in the production of *Armadale*, Collins's longest novel, and the first of his works to be published simultaneously as both a novel and a play. Collins had not done so with his previous works, including *The Woman in White* (1859) and *No Name* (1862), and had therefore surrendered his exclusive legal right to produce those works dramatically. Though *Armadale: A Drama in Three Acts* was published in 1866, the play itself would not be performed until 1875, with a radically altered script and an entirely new title: *Miss Gwilt: A Drama in Five Acts*.

Miss Gwilt opened at the Alexandra Theatre, Liverpool, in December 1875, and later transferred to London's Globe Theatre in April 1876. The play ran for twelve weeks in London, before Ada Cavendish revived the role in 1879 at Wallack's Theatre in New York. In a letter to Frederick Enoch on 24 February 1880, Collins referred to the 1866 dramatisation of *Armadale* as "little better than the record of a failure...it has never been, and never can be, performed on the stage" (Baker, Gasson and Law [2005] 2016: 269). In *Miss Gwilt*, Collins fundamentally changed the premise of the original dramatic work and the novel, resulting in what are essentially two theatrical works of diametrically opposed natures. Comparison of the two adaptations – written nearly a decade apart – illustrates Collins's growth as a playwright during this period and the influence of his theatrical experience on his dramatic writing. The 1866 play *Armadale* is a work steeped in the sensational nature of Collins's earlier writing: the plot is complex and reliant on dates, the characters spend more time plotting murder than interacting with each other, and the stage direction is often unwieldy and overdetermined. Despite its weakness, however, Collins's first dramatic iteration of *Armadale* suggests the struggle of a writer working to carve out a space for himself between the identities of novelist and playwright. *Miss Gwilt*, on the other hand, is a play that bears the distinct influence of Collins's theatrical productions which occurred between 1866 and 1875: a stripping down of sensational plot devices and a dramatic focus shifted onto questions of marriage and romantic

⁸ On Collins and adaptation, see Laird (2015) and Pearson (2015).

tension. “This time, the novel is not like the ‘Magdalen’ a novel ready made to the dramatist’s hands,” Collins wrote on 27 December 1875 in a letter to Carlotta Leclercq, who had previously acted in two of his plays, adding “My *Armada* play is all but a new work – with scenes upon scenes which are not in the book.” (Baker, Gasson and Law [2005] 2016: 109-10). Collins’s success with his adaptations of *Man and Wife* (Prince of Wales’s 1873) and *The New Magdalen* (Olympic 1873) began to foster a dramatic vision, employed in the production of *Miss Gwilt*, that was increasingly mindful of what theatrical audiences (as opposed to readers of novels) did and did not enjoy.

One of the fundamental changes Collins made in revising the original dramatisation of *Armada* into *Miss Gwilt* is in the eponymous character. While both plays treat Miss Gwilt as the central character, in the former she is a woman intent on marrying and murdering Allan Armadale, exacting revenge on Armadale’s mother, and avoiding debtor’s prison. Her criminal behaviour thus suggests the lack of any moral impulses within her. In the 1875 adaptation, however, she plots to murder Allan Armadale to preserve her reputation. The motivating factor behind Lydia Gwilt’s actions is primarily the protection of her social standing, and with it, her marriage. Though she nevertheless plans to commit murder, the 1875 adaptation is at pains to disentangle the crime from its morally nuanced perpetrator, emphasising instead the love she feels for her husband. Unlike in the original version of the play, where Lydia Gwilt seeks revenge and the income of Armadale’s widow, in *Miss Gwilt* she believes Allan Armadale to be in possession of her secret – that she had previously been romantically involved with the navy captain, Manuel – and fears that he will reveal this secret to her husband, Ozias Midwinter. What emerges is a character whose complexities motivate her actions, not a linear mind bent on revenge. Upon reading the initial playscript of the 1866 version, Dickens wrote to Collins on 10 July 1866, cautioning him against the character of Lydia Gwilt:

Almost every situation in it is dangerous. I do not think any English audience would accept the scene in which Miss Gwilt in that widow’s dress, renounces Midwinter. And if you got so far, you would never get through the last act in the Sanatorium. You could only carry those situations, on a real hard wooden stage and wrought out (very indifferently) by real live people face to face with other real live people judging them, – you could only carry those situations *by the help of interest in some innocent person whom they placed in peril, and that person a young woman.*

(Storey 1999: 220-1; emphasis in original)

It is impossible to determine whether Collins’s revisions to Lydia’s character in the 1875 production were the direct result of Dickens’s influence or Collins’s own canny knowledge of what would be successful onstage. In either case, Miss Gwilt in the ultimately staged dramatization of the novel is a fully matured version of the character from the 1866 play *Armada*, an earlier iteration which only hints at the moral complexity of the character in the novel.

Early in the first act of the 1866 play *Armada*, Collins introduces the audience to what motivates Miss Gwilt, in an exchange with the dubious Doctor Downward:

Miss G. (thoughtfully.) I should like to be Mr. Armadale’s widow.

The Dr. Oh, fie! fie! Think of his eight thousand a year while he’s alive – and say his wife.

Miss G. No. I say, his widow.

The Dr. My dear lady! You talk as if you had some old grudge against this unlucky young man. You look as if you actually hated him!

Miss G. My looks tell the truth then. I do hate him.

(Collins 1866: I.7)

In the following six pages of the script, Miss Gwilt recounts her past to Doctor Downward, and explains how Armadale's father bribed her to forge a letter from his mother which consented to his marriage to the woman who would become the young Armadale's mother. After Armadale's father drowned in a shipwreck, the only people in possession of the secret were Armadale's mother and Miss Gwilt herself. She was sent to a French boarding school at her mistress's expense, until she turned eighteen and was abandoned by Armadale's mother. "I was left at eighteen, in a foreign country, to my own resources", she tells the doctor. "You know the horrors I have gone through, the miseries I have suffered, the wickedness (if you like) that I have committed since. It all sprang from that time – it all lies at Mr. Armadale's door" (I.11-12). She is speaking, in this passage, of Armadale senior. After finally tracking down Armadale's mother, Miss Gwilt learns that she arrived moments too late, and finds herself instead at the woman's funeral. "Death had come between us, and had snatched her out of my reach!" she continues. "Now do you understand why I hate the son, for the mother's sake? Now do you know why I should like to be Armadale's widow instead of Armadale's wife?" (I.12)

This scene sets up the character Miss Gwilt becomes over the next three acts. She is calculating, passionate, and determined. Her relationship with and marriage to Ozias Midwinter occur in spite of her feelings towards the Armadale family, and, despite being offered a comfortable life married to a man whom she genuinely loves, she takes the first opportunity presented to her to leave him, falsify her identity as Armadale's widow, and claim her widow's income. When it is revealed that he survived the shipwreck that she believed claimed his life, she attempts to murder him, only backing out at the last minute when she learns she was about to murder Midwinter, her real husband, with whom she was still in love. She ends the play by taking her own life instead in an act of remorse which the critical press found insufficient to counterbalance her immorality when it was finally staged in 1875.

Miss Gwilt in the 1866 adaptation of *Armadale* closely resembles the murderess that reviewers of the novel thought her to be: cunning, cruel, and criminal. Historian and theologian Connop Thirlwall referred to her as "a tragic Becky Sharp, but immensely below her prototype," while H. F. Chorley, reviewing the novel for *The Athenaeum*, claimed she is "one of the most hardened female villains whose devices and desires have ever blackened fiction." (qtd. in Page 1974: 145-7). More inflammatory still, the *Spectator* claimed the novel "gives us for its heroine a woman fouler than the refuse of the streets" (150). This perception of her character is echoed by the declamatory, melodramatic phrases Miss Gwilt speaks in the 1866 dramatisation: "If I could kill Armadale at this moment by holding up my finger – I'd do it! No, I wouldn't! I'd wait to marry him, and have the widow's income!" (Collins 1866: I.21). Faced with the prospect of Armadale's future in her hands, she baldly states to the doctor: "I should kill him!" (II.39). When she finally decides to leave Midwinter and claim the income of Armadale's widow, she is alone onstage:

Miss G. [...] there is no necessity that wants twice considering but the one terrible necessity of Armadale's death! (A pause. A ray of moonlight penetrates through the trees, and falls on her, as she stands thinking.) Armadale's death! The death of a man whom I hate doubly, for his mother's sake, and for his own! (Another pause. She lifts her hands with a sudden gesture of supplication.) Oh you Devil tempting me, is there no Angel near, to raise some timely obstacle which might help me to give it up?

(I.27-8)

Soliloquising alone, Miss Gwilt does not so much struggle against her evil impulses as she looks for ways to justify them. At this moment, instead of being joined onstage by an “Angel” who might appeal to her better nature, the morally ambiguous Doctor Downward enters and ends up assisting her in the plot to murder Armadale all while plausibly exculpating himself. Even Miss Gwilt herself doubts that there exists in her any of the good to which a different character might have appealed. When the doctor mentions the quarrel that prompted Miss Gwilt to leave her husband in Naples and return to England, she responds with a barrage of rhetorical questions:

Who could help quarrelling with such a woman as I am? How was our marriage to end, with a great nature like his, and a vile nature like mine? What do *you* know of the heartache that man suffered when he found he had built his hopes on me, and built them in vain? What do *you* know of the despair that drove me away from him, and the madness of wickedness that has ended in *this*?

(II.37)

Even when faced with the reality of lying to her husband’s face about being Armadale’s widow, the Miss Gwilt of the 1866 adaptation chooses the path of revenge rather than abandoning her murderous plans:

Miss G. “My wife is the vilest of living women”. Those were his words. I *have* been the vilest of women to him; but, oh! the bitterness of hearing it from his lips! (*Flings her arms on the table, and drops her head on them. A pause. She suddenly raises her head, and looks up.*) What! Sensitive to his opinion of me, after denying him to his face? Am I here – with the resolution in me at last to brush Armadale’s life out of my way, as I might brush a stain off my dress; and I can’t hear my husband say I’m the vilest of living women, and laugh at it? (*Starts to her feet, and bursts out laughing hysterically.*) Ha! ha! ha! ha!

(Collins 1866: III.65)

Whatever ostensible interior struggle Collins may have been suggesting here is immediately negated by an outburst that verges on the absurd. Miss Gwilt in *Armadale* the play prioritises revenge above all else, even the man for whom she experiences genuine feeling. It is only at the end of the play, when she nearly murders Midwinter instead of Armadale, that she abandons the murder and attempts to atone for her actions in her last lines:

All that woman can risk, I have risked. All that woman can lose, I have lost. The end has come – not for Armadale but for *me*. The one atonement I can make to my husband is the atonement of my death.

(III.73)

By this point, however, her speech does not express the tragic, interior struggle of a more complex character, but gestures instead at the retributive justice characteristic of melodrama’s binary understanding of morality. The original stage version of Miss Gwilt falls prey to the logic of melodrama, unable to occupy a space between the polarities of good and evil. In other words, the Manichean imagined world of melodrama renders her a stage villain to the end.

It would not be until the more compassionate 1875 version that Collins was to depict a sense of Miss Gwilt’s divided self. The original dramatic version of Miss Gwilt more straightforwardly slots into the easily legible moral binary of melodrama, something that Collins avoided in the version finally staged at the Globe Theatre in 1875. Although the 1866 play, like the novel, consistently represents Miss Gwilt’s wickedness, the 1875 play departs from these melodramatic conventions: in the updated version, she is no longer a criminal attempting in vain to live a life of normalcy, but rather a character trying desperately to manage the competing impulses of vice and virtue.

The Miss Gwilt of the 1875 version, moreover, is altogether more sympathetic than her counterpart in both the novel and its 1866 adaptation. Collins achieved this by fleshing out the relationship between Miss Gwilt and those around her, at the expense of the various villains with whom she consorts in the 1866 version. Rather than an expository conversation between Miss Gwilt, Doctor Downward, and Mrs. Oldershaw, which introduces Miss Gwilt's desire for revenge – as we get in the 1866 adaptation – in *Miss Gwilt* Collins introduces audiences to his new title character in her capacity as a talented and sympathetic governess. Major Milroy's assessment of Miss Gwilt illustrates the difference between the two versions of her character:

“Miss Gwilt, you are the most universally-gifted person I have ever met with. If my reckoning is right, you have been a resident in our family for something like three weeks. I declare hardly a day has passed without our finding some fresh accomplishment of yours to admire!

(Collins 1875: II.23).

In Collins's first dramatic adaptation, *Armadale*, no mention is made of Miss Gwilt's accomplishments, nor do we see her interacting sympathetically with her employer. In *Miss Gwilt*, one of her early lines demonstrates that by 1875 she had evolved into an almost entirely different character. Prompted by her employer, Major Milroy, to discuss her past, she offers the following summary:

I have had the training of a lady – for the life of a servant! My mind has been cultivated, my tastes have been refined – and all for what? To see people without mind and without taste prosperous and happy – to find my poverty degrading all that is highest and best in me to the level of something to sell, something which the insolence of wealth can purchase on its own terms. Don't think me ungrateful! I am speaking of the time before you knew me. Will the day ever come when I shall deserve your kindness? Shall I stay with you long enough to win a sister's place in my pupil's heart?

(II.24)

Here, as opposed to the melodramatic soliloquy quoted earlier, we are allowed a glimpse into Miss Gwilt's bitter psychology. She clearly resents the work into which financial circumstances have thrust her, but she demonstrates a genuine feeling for the family of her employer. Rather than her earlier invocation of the Devil's temptations or an Angel's salvation, the tone of this monologue has shifted in the direction of the quiet, subdued drama more at home at the Prince of Wales's in the works of T.W. Robertson than the melodramatic stage.

In addition to deepening the relationship between Miss Gwilt and her employer's family, in the 1875 version Collins also revised her relationship with Midwinter. One of the “scenes upon scenes” which he added to the 1875 play adds an additional layer to the history of Miss Gwilt and Midwinter: the two had previously met when Midwinter saw Miss Gwilt at the police-station having been charged with an attempt on her own life. When they meet at Thorpe-Ambrose, the Armadale family home, he pretends not to have seen her, and thus their romantic entanglement begins: “Have I a heart still left? and has that man touched it?” Miss Gwilt asks herself. “What is it that speaks to me in his voice? – what is it that looks at me in his eyes?” (II.26)

Shifting the drama's early narrative focus away from Miss Gwilt's crimes, as in the novel, and onto her interactions with her employer's family enables the play to begin developing her character in a realm that exists outside of the considerations of criminal behaviour. Miss Gwilt's relationship with her student, Miss Milroy, for instance, draws attention to the former's stoic demeanour in the face of the latter's haughty arrogance. When prompted by her father to admire one of Miss Gwilt's drawings, Miss Milroy responds:

Miss M. I am looking at the works of Raphael, papa. Perhaps I may be excused if I have no admiration to spare, even for Miss Gwilt.

Miss G. I am charmed to find, my dear, that you are making some progress in your knowledge of art. It is something to have discovered that Raphael was a better painter than I am!

(I.21)

In trying to elicit sympathy for Miss Gwilt in a way that neither the novel nor the 1866 adaptation did, however, *Miss Gwilt* sometimes overcompensates by emphasising her character's pathos, as in the frantic monologue she delivers alone onstage in a fit of anxiety at having deceived Midwinter:

Miss G. (alone). What has Armadale been saying about me behind my back? Nothing, or I should have seen it in my husband's face. And yet! and yet! (*She seats herself, and pauses, thinking.*) Oh, me! is the blessed peace of mind that some women know, never to be mine again? I have tried so hard to be worthy of my husband! I have loved, honoured, and obeyed him! I have done all but confess to him the miserable story of the past! (*She rises, and paces backwards and forwards impatiently.*) Why does the kiss he has left on my lips burn me with the guilty sense of my own deceit?

(III.5)

In moments such as these, where she is less a calculating criminal than she is a desperate woman in search of forgiveness, Miss Gwilt's character echoes the profoundly repentant fallen women that proliferated on the nineteenth-century stage.⁹ For all the play's potentially radical moments, particularly in its exploration of a person's latent capacity for crime, moments such as these underscore Collins's lasting sexual conservatism. Despite centring his plays around psychologically nuanced female characters, Collins's dramatic writing still seems at times caught between the perpetually popular melodrama of the nineteenth-century stage and the emergent psychological drama that other moments in his work herald. The embryonic suggestions of a nascent feminism in *Miss Gwilt* – that women might, in fact, exist outside of the moral binary between domestic angel and cruel seductress – are never allowed to evolve into a thoughtful exploration, and are instead undermined by the play's ultimate return to the tropes of the melodramatic stage.

The role of Miss Gwilt was played by Ada Cavendish in 1875, both in Liverpool and then in London. Cavendish had also premiered the role of Mercy Merrick in Collins's *The New Magdalen* at the Olympic in 1873, a role similar to Miss Gwilt in both characters' desperate determination to preserve their reputation. Of Cavendish, Collins wrote in a letter to William Winter on 5 August 1878: "She has, I think, more of the sacred fire in her than any other living English actress of 'Drama' – and she has the two excellent qualities of being always eager to improve and always ready to take advice in her Art. I am really interested in her well-doing" (Baker, Gasson and Law [2005] 2016: 487). Critics were emphatic in praising Cavendish's portrayal of Miss Gwilt, even as they struggled to wrap their heads around her dubious morality. One reviewer noted that her performance was "the gem of the whole, the apex of the pyramid, the sun of the firmament [...] unswervingly and triumphantly successful in her realisation of the author's unfortunate though not blameless woman" ("Miss Ada Cavendish as Miss Gwilt" 1875: 7).

⁹ On the fallen woman, see Auerbach (1980), Diamond (1997, ch.1), Eltis (2013), Braun (2015), and Hill (2018).

Collins's distinct attention paid to the lead actresses of his plays gestures towards the increasingly important role of the international celebrity actress that would come to embody an emergent feminist movement during the *fin de siècle*.¹⁰ Collins relied not only on his heroines to produce much of the interest of his novels and plays, but also on the actresses who brought them to life onstage. Lydia Foote, Ada Cavendish, Ada Dyas, Fanny Davenport, and Isabella Pateman all became central figures in Collins's theatrical career for the roles they played in embodying his complex characters. Indeed, his adaptations tended to focalise their dramatic interest in the journey of their female protagonists, creating roles for lead actresses which were morally complex and emotionally charged. What emerges in the 1870s in Collins's dramatic career is an understanding not just of how the stage might be leveraged to demonstrate the very same psychological complexity that critics thought was absent from the stage, but equally how much a successful play relies on a celebrity performer, a theatrical dynamic familiar to dramatists and producers but potentially less recognisable to a novelist.

Caroline Radcliffe has noted that when adapting *Armadale* for the stage in 1875, Collins "does not simply reiterate the techniques used in his writing but has a clear sense of what will produce the greater effect dramatically – a theatrical 're-telling'" (Radcliffe 2015: 82). The stage during the sanatorium scene in which Miss Gwilt attempts to murder Armadale and ends up taking her own life, for instance, is physically divided in half, allowing audience members to see both parties onstage in separate rooms. This is a consequence of his understanding and deployment of a theatrical system of storytelling values: the panoptical split-stage design allowed audience members to view both rooms at once, but, importantly, those two rooms are occupied by the play's central romantic relationship. Staged in this way, the play's final scene worked to refigure Miss Gwilt into the kind of psychologically nuanced character that the theatre's detractors claimed were absent from the stage. By ensuring that she is in full view of the audience while her husband dies in the adjacent room, the audience is forced to confront the reality that she is simultaneously a murderer and someone capable of genuinely loving another person.¹¹

This reading of the final play's staging – that its panoptical design intentionally redirects dramatic interest onto the play's marriage plot – is once again supported by the context of Collins's adaptive process. In the novel, as in the 1866 dramatisation, Miss Gwilt poisoning Midwinter, and then herself, is visible only from the vantage point of the drawing room outside the bedroom in which the poisoning occurs. In the novel, after she rescues Midwinter from the poisoned air, the reader watches her leave the imaginary narrative space: "The door of the room opened – and closed on her. There was an interval of silence. Then, a sound came dull and sudden, like the sound of a fall. Then, there was silence again" (Collins [1866] 2008: 807). In the 1866 dramatisation, Miss Gwilt's final moments look almost identical:

Rises and puts her hand on the lock of the door of Number Four. Waits and looks again at Midwinter, touches her lips with her hand, waves it to him as a last farewell, and enters the room, closing the door behind her. A pause of a moment, then the sound of a fall is heard faintly in the dark room.

(III.74).

¹⁰ On the international celebrity actress, see Garelick (1998), Glen (2000), and Roberts (2002).

¹¹ In practice, audiences found this staging to be absurd rather than thought-provoking, but the shift in tone from the 1866 adaptation regardless attempts to highlight Miss Gwilt's interior life: see Radcliffe (2015: 88-90).

In *Miss Gwilt*, however, Collins no longer relegates her death to an offstage imaginary space, and instead she dies in full view of the audience, separated by a wall from the barely-conscious Midwinter who says her name one final time before she is overpowered by the poisoned air. Though the critic for the *Pall Mall Gazette* found this staging unconvincing and ludicrous, calling it “a device utterly fatal to all scenic illusion” (“Miss Gwilt” 1876: 11), it nevertheless indicates Collins’s desire to emphasise Miss Gwilt’s psychological complexity, in this case via its stage design.

The final scene of *Miss Gwilt* demonstrates that Collins’s attention to theatrical success – his deployment of what worked in the theatre, and what did not – was not limited to questions of plot. When reviewers in the critical press wrote of Collins’s sometimes-futile attempts to compress the lengthy and complex novels for which he was best known into a short play, they were often caught up in questions of plot, as the reviewers for *Miss Gwilt* tended to be. Closer inspection of these dramatic adaptations, especially against the backdrop of their original versions, reveals Collins’s adaptive process to be gradually more concerned and familiar with the tastes of Victorian audiences, tastes which sometimes overlapped with those of novel-readers, but which could also subvert literary taste entirely. The 1866 novel *Armadale*, like much of Collins’s early corpus of work, relies on a complex framework that blends epistolary passages, personal memoir, and a narrative economy that withholds crucial information from the reader. By 1875, Collins had done away with the intricate apparatus of his earlier fiction, and his dramas – including *Miss Gwilt* – demonstrate a much tighter focus on the romantic relationships of his characters. In exploring those relationships and their pitfalls, Collins’s later plays attempt to reconcile his earlier, sensational writing with an emergent psychological realism that would find its first fully-fledged iteration on the British stage in the works of Ibsen.

Miss Gwilt illustrates how Collins’s approach to writing for the stage evolved over the length of his career. By the time Collins was ready to stage *Miss Gwilt* in 1875, the three major theatrical successes he had experienced gradually distanced the tone and form of his dramatic writing from his novels. The production of *Man and Wife* (Prince of Wales’s 1873), *The New Magdalen* (Olympic 1873), and, to a lesser extent, *The Woman in White* (Olympic 1871), all progressively shifted away from sensational plot devices and mechanisms and embraced simplified plots which allowed room for more natural dialogue and character development. The same is true of *Miss Gwilt*: placing Collins’s final 1875 dramatisation against the original version produced in 1866 – before he had found his theatrical footing – illustrates his development as a playwright in the direction of the emergent realism and psychological complexity of late-Victorian theatre.

The evolution of *Armadale*’s dramatic adaptations also demonstrates Collins’s attempt to imbue the characters in his dramatic writing with the psychological and moral complexity critics thought to be absent from his novels, all while satisfying the tastes of Victorian audiences as well as those of risk-averse theatre managers. In responding to commercial pressures and revising his adaptations accordingly, Collins’s career offers an early example of how writers contended with the increasing power wielded by financial structures in the realm of cultural production. Collins’s dramatic writing did not exist in a vacuum, and if a sustained engagement with just one of his adaptations reveals how the theatre shaped the trajectory of his wider career, then future considerations of other, similar works equally have the potential to leverage their position as central to our understanding of Victorian cultural production. When George Moore was envisioning an English stage populated with the work of novelists, the task ahead was not to invent a fundamentally new practice, but to scale up the work that writers such as Collins were already doing.

Comparing both dramatic adaptations Collins wrote of *Armada* and locating them in the context of the nineteenth-century stage gestures towards the mutually constitutive relationship between the novel and the stage in the lives of Victorian readers, writers, audiences, and critics. In contrast to the millenarian discussions occurring in the critical press regarding the status of English drama, especially when compared to the intellectual development of the novel, an awareness of the amorphous formal boundaries that characterised Victorian cultural production highlights the ways in which writing and reading novels was coextensive with (and not separate from) writing and attending plays. Despite the many obstacles produced by the lack of stringent intellectual property laws, particularly concerning authors who sought to write for both the novel and the stage, there exist moments in the Victorian theatre that demonstrate an important cross-fertilisation that this context also enabled.

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