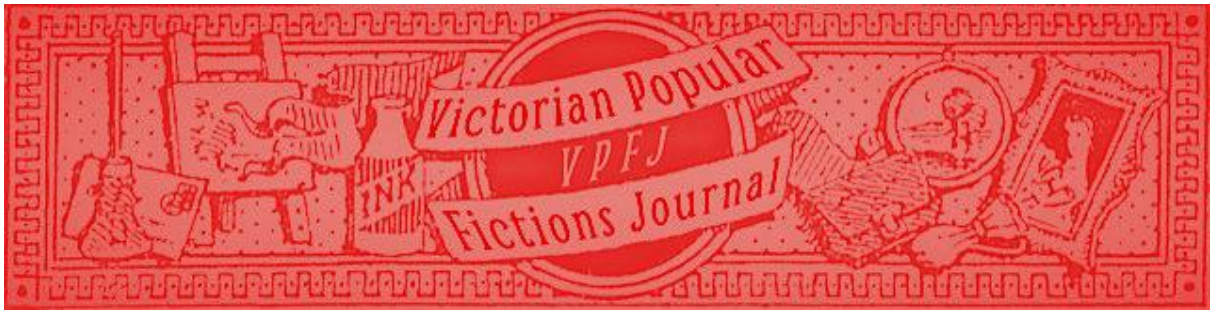

The Good, the Bad, and the Popular: The Question of a Popular Canon and Other Methodological Contemplations

Julia Kuehn and Diane Eveline van den Brink

Abstract

This article challenges the critical hierarchies that continue to shape the study of popular Victorian fiction by questioning not only the distinction between "high" and popular literature but also the emergence of a "popular canon" within Victorian studies. While writers such as Charles Dickens, Ellen ("Mrs Henry") Wood, Elizabeth Gaskell and Wilkie Collins have become established objects of scholarly attention, equally successful contemporaries including Ouida, Charles Reade, Hall Caine, Florence Marryat and Marie Corelli remain comparatively neglected. We argue that this disparity reflects value judgements inherited from nineteenth-century criticism that continue to shape academic research, teaching and adaptation.

Drawing on debates about aesthetic value and mass appeal, the article reconsiders the assumptions that underpin literary distinction and scholarly legitimacy. Through two case studies – Wilkie Collins and Marie Corelli – we demonstrate how textual, contextual and author-centred approaches can illuminate the cultural and affective work of popular fiction without reproducing hierarchies of literary merit. In particular, we examine Collins's and Corelli's own poetics and theories of the novel, genre and the reader as alternative frameworks for understanding their work.

Rather than asking which popular Victorian writers are more deserving of scholarly attention, the article interrogates the criteria by which such distinctions are made. It argues that popular fiction is inherently a complex site of readerly engagement, authorial practice and social reflection, and therefore merits critical study regardless of its "canonical" status. In doing so, it offers a methodological intervention into Victorian popular fiction studies by challenging the notion of a "popular canon" and proposing more reflexive ways of engaging with the category itself.

Keywords

Wilkie Collins; Marie Corelli; aesthetics; canon; distinction; taste; critical approaches to popular literature

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The Good, the Bad, and the Popular: The Question of a Popular Canon and Other Methodological Contemplations

Julia Kuehn and Diane Eveline van den Brink

From his early fiction onwards, reviewers called Charles Dickens's popular novels melodramatic masterpieces and works expressive of the quickly changing age in which they were written (e.g., [Forster] 1837: 421). In contrast, Anthony Trollope's *Autobiography* (1883) reveals how the aged writer still felt he had to claim that his oeuvre amounted to something "more," and "deeper," than quickly drafted sentimentalities (156). Flora Annie Steel may have been referred to as "the female Rudyard Kipling" in her time. Yet her Anglo-Indian romances – like those of Alice Perrin, Bithia Mary Croker and Maud Dive – are, today, rarely included in university syllabi as they make space for the, however problematic, Rudyard Kipling (see Roye 2017: 13).

In 1892, the eponymous persona of the satirical critic *The Silver Domino* – Marie Corelli, as it turned out – critiqued the literary and social world around him: he denigrated Ouida, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Rhoda Broughton as unoriginal and their plots and characters as predictable, as they allegedly always stayed in the same "groove."[1] And while the Silver Domino also did not think his literary colleague Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) of any moral or literary value and judged its author as extremely susceptible to the financial temptations of the profession, we cannot deny both the readerly and critical longevity of Tess's story.

We have become used to the scholarly narrative that the distinction between "high" and "low" literature emerges and subsequently becomes codified at the end of the nineteenth century with the arrival of widespread reading and popular, or even mass, culture. Scholars have referenced the 1871 Education Act, the death of the three-decker and the birth of the affordable one-volume novel after 1894, the expansion of publishing and periodical venues in the outgoing Victorian era and, arguably, even the changes to the "public sphere" which Jürgen Habermas (1989) dates to the 1870s when public debate becomes both more democratically accessible and also prone to manipulation. The terminology of "high" and "low," or "elite" and

[1] The Silver Domino calls Ouida "always the same old 'Ouida'" (Corelli 1892: 154); Braddon's characters a "set of puppets" (153); Broughton's writing style "regularly vulgar and unpardonable" (155).

"popular," literature indeed became most prominent between the 1880s and the 1920s. Scholars have named this period the age of literature-in-transition, with Fredric Jameson amongst them, declaring it the only truly dialectical age for the "highbrow" and the "popular." The division into "high" and "low" would, of course, be picked up and propagated by the modernists for whom this dichotomy and, specifically, the denigration of the popular would become helpful tools in establishing their own theory of literature – but also in justifying the low sales figures for their works which were, at least initially, anything but "popular."

Such narrative, however, has ignored the fact that matters of literary distinction and value judgements – by the public, the reviewers and the artists themselves – have, if not always, then at least since the eighteenth century, been part of, and have perhaps even defined, the literary landscape. As we will see with Kant, the contemplations and rulings concerning aesthetic value go back long before F.R. and Queenie Leavis and their academic compatriots developed a literary "canon," or *The Great Tradition* (1948), of books worthy of critical scrutiny in newly established, or developing, English literature programmes.

We should clarify that it is not our intention in this essay to write a theoretical – or, indeed, polemical – piece on the concept of the "(Western) canon" in the same way that Harold Bloom did in his provocative 1994 work of the same title. In fact, we argue against the codification of a popular canon rather than challenging inclusions and exclusions and thus being representatives of what Bloom dismisses as the "School of Resentment" (1994: 4): feminists, postcolonials, poststructuralists, Marxists and New Historicists who critique the canon as either masculinist, racist, undemocratic or "elite" and who seek expansions or substitutions. This essay is about how contemporary scholars might responsibly talk about a "popular canon" – or not at all. In fact, the premise that Bloom's list of 28 canonical Western works is built upon – namely, aesthetic greatness – is highly problematic, as we suggest. Furthermore, Bloom's assertion that working-class readers never mattered in determining the value and survival of texts is one we challenge throughout this piece.

Already with the Leavises, and in the process of identifying works of literary, national and cultural distinction, the question of "good" versus "bad" writing has had a very complex relationship with popular writing. We need only reference F.R. Leavis's famously fraught relationship with Dickens, whom he considered a "great entertainer" without profound ideas or aesthetic merit ([1948] 1950: 19), but we must also not forget Leavis's earlier, and convincing, research on how periodicals can shape a public's cultural aspirations for either better or worse (see Leavis 1924). Queenie Leavis's inaugural study of the popular, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), ultimately bemoans the alleged dumbing down of culture through unambitious but commercially successful middlebrow and bestselling fiction. And yet her premise that "good" literature distinguishes itself by helping the reader develop ways of dealing "adequately" with life is suggestive for the scholar of Victorian fiction, as it opens up a variety of methods to approach popular literature.[2] In the end, Leavis remains trapped in her and her husband's elitist views – based in the realms of cognition, anti–commercialism and ethics – that "good" literature challenges readers' prejudices rather than confirming them, and that it must not allow for escapism. The modern critic, however, could accept Leavis's premise and method of enquiry but flip its conclusion on its head: popular literature may, after all, help readers *especially* to develop affectively, psychologically, socially and communally; at times perhaps even cognitively, as a popular fiction reader is invited to recognise literary archetypes, patterns or intertextual references.

[2] Radway's original questionnaires in *Reading the Romance* (1984) pick up this very aspect about popular literature's "value."

What do we, after all, really know about what governs the habits and preferences of the reading public, Victorian or otherwise? Wilkie Collins excitedly announced his "discovery of an Unknown Public" in mid-Victorian Britain, which he estimated to consist of "a monster audience of at least three million" (1858: 217, 221). Collins here plays on the supposed threat this "enormous outlawed majority" presents to the established "literary tribes," as his findings show that the broader reading public's habits and tastes may differ substantially from what is appraised in more prestigious, meaning discerning, circles of readers (218). Many readers do not move in these illustrious places and circles of literary society – be these public reading rooms or the circulating libraries – but still read voraciously. Collins's sociological approach to mapping the reading habits of this unknown public proves challenging to the point that he concludes that, in the end, we know "absolutely nothing" about what governs, or defines, the readers' tastes (218). And yet, he argues that once these readers "learn to discriminate" one work of fiction from another, they will be the ones "who give the widest reputations" and establish the markers of what constitutes "good" or "bad" literature (222). Though his sociological method appears to fall short in characterising actual readers, his mixed fascination with, and frustration about, what actually governs the habits and tastes of the broader reading public remains a prominent feature of contemporary criticism of the popular. 170 years later, critic Stephen Edwards confirms Collins's view – merging fascination and frustration – in his case study of the reception of Marie Corelli's *Thelma* (1887). As Edwards analyses various readers' "Letters to the Editor" in contemporary newspapers about Corelli's sentimental Norwegian romance, he shows that fictional texts' implied readers, or directly addressed ones, indeed, did not necessarily, or at all times, match the actual Victorian ones (2025: 357). Edwards also reveals the many critical reader comments about what was, in the end, another bestselling novel by Corelli. Once more, we are left with more questions than answers about the reading public and their tastes and powers of distinction.

This article thus asks general questions about "taste," "distinction," and "value." Specifically, it asks these questions *within* the realm of the "popular" – rather than reading these as the boundary-creating paradigms *between* high and low, canonical and popular literature. Along the way, we will also ask methodological questions and introduce several approaches that popular Victorian literature has invited or been subjected to.

Critical and Methodological Premises

To give our deliberations both context and exemplification, we include two case studies.[3] Our first case study looks at Wilkie Collins: an "acceptable," or even "good," popular writer in the Victorian era and the literary-cultural imagination, if we trust his contemporary reviewers (see Page (ed.), *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, 1995), existing undergraduate reading lists and also the host of current Collins criticism in the, arguably, most highly esteemed Victorian academic journals, such as *Victorian Studies*, *Victorian Literature and Culture* and the *Journal of Victorian Culture*. On the other hand, in a second case study, we discuss Marie Corelli, who was considered a "bad" popular writer in her day and who is, arguably, still on the lesser examined side of academic inquiry today even if she was recently honoured with a new, in parts paradigm-shifting, monograph by Joanna Turner (2026) in the Key Popular Women

[3] We recognise that gender is an undeniable factor in canonical recognition and critical appraisal (see Palmer, 2011; Krueger, 2014; Hatter & Ifill, 2016; Sparks, 2022). Our pairing of one female and one male poetics case study is a deliberate attempt to acknowledge this imbalance rather than reproduce it. Issues of gender will be called upon where it is a relevant factor of influence in our argumentation, but it will not guide or determine the analysis of the poetics and narrative practice of these authors themselves.

Writers series as well as with a special issue in *Victoriographies* ("Marie Corelli Reconsidered", 2025), guest edited by Elinor Dobson and Joanna Turner.

In posing questions about methodology in this article and aiming to also probe more deeply into whether some approaches to popular Victorian fiction may be "more suitable," or even "better," than others, we are not without scholarly predecessors who asked similar questions.[4] Fredric Jameson (1979: 9) dates the split of culture into "high"/"elite" and "low"/"popular" to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (Queenie Leavis thought George Eliot was the last Victorian author read by a homogeneous readership [1939: 33].) Ever since then, popular fiction has been seen as the "other" to *literary* fiction in being governed by principles of commodity, profit and mass production, rather than aesthetic and intellectual appraisal and (social) prestige. And yet, throughout his entire career, Fredric Jameson would remain intrigued by a "double standard of high and mass culture" (1979: 134). This double standard was, we seek to show in this article, in existence at the time when Wilkie Collins and Marie Corelli published and circulated their works, and it continues to this day, as Jameson's varied scholarship has suggested. The very existence of the paradoxical notion of a *canon of popular Victorian fiction* would suggest that, at least in some part, aesthetic judgements come into play in distinguishing one work of popular fiction from the next.

We are not without critical precedents when it comes to thinking about "taste" and "value". Immanuel Kant's very early *Critique of Judgement* (1790) had already introduced different forms of aesthetic judgement, distinguishing between inferior superficial appreciation (taste of sense) and superior intellectual discernment (taste of reflection). Kantian aestheticism therefore establishes the "intrinsic merits or aesthetic value" as a work of art that invites and encourages reflection, valuing intellectual engagement over "mere" entertainment and enjoyment (Kant [1790] 2008: ix). This distinction appears to echo what has since separated "high," or "literary," fiction from popular fiction. But who is to say that these dynamics of appraisal cannot, or do not, exist at another level, furthering hierarchies of aesthetic appraisal *within* both genres? Our case studies will further address this question.

Pierre Bourdieu, as a more recent critic of social and aesthetic distinction, would frown upon "the barbarous integration" of Kantian high aesthetics into the realm of the popular (1984: 7). Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) places Kantian aesthetics into the social realm, considering dynamics of class and identifying the social stakes of upholding aesthetic standards. He argues that, in the so-called game of culture, only those with cultural capital (such as having a higher education level and an upbringing with upper-class entertainment) can participate. Those who are part of this in-crowd aesthetic appraisal are invested in this structure, as its very existence places them above the vulgar and popular taste. Bourdieu argues that, as soon as a work of art enters the realm of the popular, it loses some of its status of higher aesthetic appraisal and distinction. Though his sociological study of class-based taste unearths important power dynamics of aesthetic appraisal, Bourdieu is perhaps somewhat idealistic in supposing that the policing practices that govern high aesthetics do not exist within the domain of popular culture.

Let us, for a moment, accept Queenie Leavis's argument in *Fiction and the Reading Public* that the reading public only split after George Eliot, who was, apparently, read by

[4] We need not remind *VPFJ* readers that popular fiction scholarship arose prominently from the 1960s onwards, spurred in Britain by the formation of Cultural Studies in Birmingham and the prominence of historical materialist studies by self-declared Marxists like Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggart. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, scholars interested in popular culture built on the work of Frankfurt School diasporics, like Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse, the latter of whom would become formative for Fredric Jameson's work on (popular) cultural trends.

everyone from the literary connoisseur to the scullery maid. Let us also temporarily accept Andreas Huyssen's argument (1986) that a "Great Divide" occurs in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century when both authors like Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and James Joyce, and critics like Theodor Adorno and his Frankfurt School colleagues *create* the modernist aesthetic as a standard, fixed point of comparison against which popular culture can, or must, be measured. Finally, let us accept Fredric Jameson's (1979) Marxist call to approach matters of distinction and judgement not subjectively, aesthetically or through intrinsic qualities but by way of a dialectical historical approach. This dialectic, according to Jameson, works primarily along economic and social forces, and sees how the same historical era can give rise to artistic production that contains two separate but interconnected faces, or manifestations. Where does this leave us in terms of methodology?

Critics of popular English literature after Q.D. Leavis, Raymond Williams, and Jameson laid the groundwork for understanding how the genre reflects and shapes societal values, power structures, and cultural hierarchies through diverse theoretical and methodological approaches. Janice Radway's sociological feminist lens, as seen in *Reading the Romance* (1984) and *A Feeling for Books* (1997), explored middlebrow engagement with popular narratives through ethnographic methods – both qualitative and quantitative – which would mark a shift in the scholarship of popular fiction. Similarly, Tania Modleski's *Loving with A Vengeance* (1982) examined women's reading practices and the appeal of popular genres through a framework combining feminist theory, reader-response theory and psychoanalytical perspectives. Her engagement with the politics of popular fiction and the broader gendered perspectives on popular culture established Modleski as a key figure in the field. Another foundational figure in the study of popular (working-class) fiction, Louis James, approached the popular from the angle of (the decade's favoured) Marxist cultural theory, as his most influential work, *Fiction for the Working Man, 1830 – 1850* (1963), presented a rigorous analysis of popular Victorian fiction as a site of class struggle, cultural negotiation and (early-to-mid Victorian) historical change. These varied approaches all inherently raise questions about the arbiters of taste and the criteria for "quality" and "success" in popular (Victorian) fiction but, more often than not, question the "what" and "why" of popular fiction over the "how" of its construction. Some questions therefore remain, such as how do we evaluate craft and originality within a genre of mass-produced narratives, and how do we reconcile Jameson's ever-present tension between commercial ambition and success, and literary quality or aspiration?

In the end, three central (and established) methodological approaches remain for popular literature, with respective sets of questions and focal points: the contextual approach, the textual approach (or "the book itself" approach), and the author-led approach. As our case studies will now show, it is not only hard but, arguably, even undesirable to separate these approaches. We find a convergence of these approaches in a writer's poetics: their thoughts about why they write, how they write and for whom they write. A writer's poetics is, evidently, subjective and also no guarantor of the success of any writing produced. Yet an analysis of the poetic principles a writer outlines offers an additional and, we argue, valuable approach to a critical analysis of what constitutes "good" writing. But no theory of literature – especially if we want to use it as an approach to popular fiction to open questions about its qualities – is meaningful without exemplification. Hence, our case studies both end with an "application" of theory to the authors' own practice. Eventually, we want to invite readers to think about whether authors who possess a theory of writing and enact their poetics in their works should not automatically be considered "great" writers.

Contextualising Wilkie Collins

While Charles Dickens achieved both popular acclaim and critical respect, and George Eliot commanded intellectual authority alongside steady sales, Wilkie Collins occupied a more convoluted position in the mid-century Victorian literary marketplace. He was frequently dismissed by critics for his formulaic writing and his reputation as a key figure in defining the genre of sensation fiction. At the same time, his writing was rejected by proprietors of provincial periodicals who deemed it "too highbrow" for their readers (Peters 1991: 395). It is precisely this liminal position in broader literary hierarchies, combined with his recognised position as an established author in the canon of popular fiction, that makes Collins an intriguing first case study for Victorian notions of taste, distinction and "good" writing. We combine the textual, contextual and authorial approaches in this section, which analyses Collins's "theory" of poetics in *Man and Wife* (1870), his letters, journalism and other non-fiction writing, and the application of this thinking in *Armadale* (1866) and *The Woman in White* (1860), positioning his writings within his critical heritage and in comparison with his contemporaries.

In order to understand how Collins developed and articulated his distinctive position in the literary landscape, it is necessary to examine the biographical and artistic contexts that shaped the author. Much like his critical heritage and contested position in literary hierarchies, Collins's personal life and artistic circles are defined by the blending of two worlds, one of conventional "high" art and the other defined by democratising artistic forms. Collins was the son of William Collins, a Royal Academician, and enjoyed a transnational upbringing and early education that was fully immersed in art and a network of established painters across Europe. Collins's grounding in socially respected artistic circles was later weaponised against his popular writing, with the *Athenaeum* publishing a scathing review to condemn *Basil* (1852), asserting that Collins, as "the son of an eminent painter," should know that "the proper office of Art is to elevate and purify in pleasing" (quoted in Lycett 2013: 107). The author, however, would prove to have vastly different views on the purpose of art and regularly characterised the Royal Academy as a "miserably managed institution" whose appraisal of "pure" works was given far too much credence (Collins 1998: 19). These convictions, with which Collins rejects institutional monopoly on artistic judgement, reflects much of his own artistic philosophy and his commitment to democratising aesthetic authority.

In addition to connections with established painters, the Collins family also had ties to the rebellious Pre–Raphaelite Brotherhood through Wilkie's brother Charles and frequently saw its notorious leaders and members (Law and Maunder 2008: 21). Collins admired the persistence of this artistic movement, which aligned very well with his own efforts of democratising artistic taste and equally embodied "resistance to the canonised aesthetics of the Royal Academy" (Andres 2005: 72). In a letter to William Holman Hunt, Collins praised Hunt's widely discredited early work, *A Converted British Family Sheltering a Christian Missionary from the Persecution of the Druids (1849 – 1850)*, in a review that reflects his alignment with the other man's artistic ethos. He commends Hunt's efforts in "teaching the people to see for themselves the difference between true art and false" and breaking down all the constructions of "conventionality and claptrap" (Baker and Clarke 1999: 522). Collins was drawn to the combination of the real and the sensational in Pre–Raphaelite works, a combination that critics, such as Sophia Andres (2005, 2011), have traced in relation to the author's own narrative techniques of combining realism with sensationalism. Though he was not as transgressive, perhaps, as the Pre–Raphaelite painters, Collins was far more interested in developing and reforming "popular taste" than attaining canonical recognition by pandering to recognised literary authorities and their arbitrary standards of distinction.

In terms of his own readerly preferences, Collins self-identified as "an insatiable reader of books for which heavy people have invented the name of 'light literature'" (1873). At the time he entered the literary landscape, the novel still held the reputation of a morally reprehensible amusement rather than serious literature. Collins was a staunch defender of not only the excellence of the novel form, but also felt that reading was first and foremost for entertainment, not instruction. His own library is a testament to this conviction, as he had a collection with "a strong preponderance of contemporary popular works" (Law and Maunder 2008: 17). When asked by John Lubbock to provide a list of recommended books for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Collins confesses that he gives up on a book when "reading becomes an effort," having therefore "laid aside in despair" the plays of Ben Jonson, Burke's *The Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and Roscoe's *Life of Leo the Tenth* (1805) (Collins 1886: 12). Instead, Collins praises Byron's *Childe Harold* (1812-18) as "the grandest poem which the world has seen" since the publication of *Paradise Lost* (1674) and encourages his reader to "let Dumas keep you up all night" with *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1846) and let Balzac's *Père Goriot* (1835) move you to tears "that honour him and honour you." Final commendation goes to Walter Scott and Charles Dickens, who have his "most [implicit] trust." Eventually, Collins further elevates Scott and bestows on him the title of "the greatest genius that has ever written novels" (13). Collins's preferences reveal a clear underlying understanding of "good" literature, which lies not in difficulty, moral elevation or philosophical depth, but in a work's ability to grip the reader's attention and provoke a genuine emotional response.

Throughout his literary career, Collins spent much of his time in the company of "literary royalty," beginning as an apprentice to Dickens, who later grew into a collaborator and close friend. This friendship would later give him access to established writers, such as George Eliot, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Elizabeth Gaskell. Collins frequently collaborated with Dickens, and the "heavy–handed editing" of the latter often makes it difficult to disentangle the individual contributions of the authors in their shared publications (Bell 2023: 187). Though the authors undoubtedly influenced each other, with Dickens's unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) reflecting Collins's sensational style and Collins's *Hide and Seek* (1854) betraying significant Dickensian influences, it was never quite an equal partnership (Farmer 1991). As the senior, both in reputation and age, Dickens frequently complained to his friends about the "more radical elements of Collins's writing" and his willingness to "publicly flaunt convention" in his relationships with two mistresses (Nayder 2010: 4). The authors most significantly diverged in their opinions on prescriptive morality and didactic style. Collins's morally complex writings differed substantially from Dickens's more conventionally accepted style; a difference that set contemporaneous and later critics against Collins and has, arguably, contributed to his uncertain, or indeed secondary, position in the "popular Victorian literary canon."

Collins's early-career literary community consisted of the young literary journalists that Dickens had taken under his wing for *Household Words* (1850-9) and, later, *All the Year Round* (1859-70), and it is in his journalistic writings that Collins's aesthetic principles become most apparent. Despite Dickens's continued pleas for Collins to "compromise his political opinions" and tone down his biting critique, Collins's articles for Dickens's journals maintained their characteristic satirical tone (Nayder 2010: 201). Harsh critical reviews complaining about his immoral writings, however, were unlikely to weigh heavily on the author's mind but, rather, often fuelled his satirical pieces. One such response targeted precisely those "inflammable ladies and gentlemen of Modern Times," as Collins declared that he had "never written for these people and never will," stating that he finds their "condemnation infinitely more acceptable than their approval" (quoted in Lycett 2013: 108). This characteristically playful sentiment is exemplary of the cutting critique that Collins consistently and fervently levied

against critics who would look down on his fiction, and popular fiction in general, begs the question: if not those readers, then who was he envisioning as his audience?

Collins's Poetics

As mentioned earlier, Collins had his sights set on the "Unknown Public," the newly literate public that, much like the author himself, "reads for its amusement more than its information" (1858: 218). He referred to his own readers as "King public," emphasising the authority of many readers as an important marker of success and the only ones whose opinions on his writings he truly valued (Pykett 2005: 72, 74). Collins considered it his purpose "to teach that public how to read" in "a literary sense" and "be taught the difference between a good book and a bad," developing their own preferences independently from broader notions of distinction and a canon (1858: 222). Collins's grievances with those who proclaimed themselves as authorities of taste are a recurring theme throughout his journal articles. In "A Petition to the Novel-Writers," he complains of the "dull people in this country," whom he considered to be those "of all degrees of rank and education, who never want to be amused" and came up with "the cunning idea of calling themselves Respectable" (Collins 1856a: 481). Collins here unveils the social class-based mechanisms of distinction that are inherent to notions of artistic authorities of taste, as he frustratingly admits that these "dull people" govern the nation "privately, as well as publicly" by dictating which works should be awarded merit and which should be dismissed as "mere" entertainment (481). Their claim to respectability and status is their cultural capital, which is only strengthened by their ability to label popular fiction as "contraband goods" and shame its readers, authors and proprietors out of open acknowledgement and legitimate participation in literary culture (481). Collins's plea in this piece is clear: readers of popular fiction "deserve to be heard" and should "brave public opinion" by "publicly and proudly avowing" their taste for entertaining literature (482, 485).

The article that truly drives home Collins's grievances with regard to matters of distinction is the work aptly titled "To Think, or Be Thought For," which, though centred around the appreciation of paintings, equally translates to appreciation of literature. His main argument is encapsulated in the title as he considers two classes of artistic appreciation. First, there are those who think for themselves and simply praise and engage with art based on their own interests. Those in the second category want to be told what to read and adhere to what is publicly considered as "good" and respectable art. Collins goes on to state that it is time to "awaken the public" from its "hopeless dependence on arbitrary rules and critical opinions in matters of Art" (1856b: 193). This "cant of criticism" must be resisted, not just because it is given too much authority in matters of taste and distinction but also because it stands "drearily and persistently aloof from all popular sympathy" (1856b: 197). Collins's critique culminates in the paradox of Victorian literary culture and points to the gap between critical legitimacy and popular acclaim, emphasising that distinction has very little to do with what the public truly reads and enjoys reading, and much more with what the "dull people" have determined is respectable and acceptable to read.

In his journalism, Collins firmly establishes that much of what has been recognised as "good" literature is not what the general public reads. He frequently asserts that unnecessarily policing the literary landscape by identifying "respectable" literature stifles genuine public engagement with writing. His aversion to the arbitrary division of literature into "good" and "bad" often comes through in his fiction, most notably in his metatextual description of the Windygates library in *Man and Wife* (1870). Arranged entirely according to "the two grand divisions" of literature, Collins weaves into the very fabric of the personal library a critique of a literary landscape divided by notions of distinctions. The first class in the library

is that of "Solid Literature": books by established works of ancient philosophers alongside histories, biographies and essays of more contemporary authors which are "universally respected and occasionally read" and are proudly displayed on the shelves (Collins [1870] 2008: 188). The other class is that of "Light Literature," representing "the Novels of our day," which are distributed across tables throughout the room and bear the honour of being "universally read, and occasionally respected" (188). His critique here is, in the first instance, directed at the earlier vilification of the novel as a "morally suspect form of amusement" (Pykett 2005: 71), but it equally represents Collins's broader complaint against the unjust vilification of popular and entertaining fiction. The Windygates library, furthermore, physically takes on the workings of the literary scene, as the "luxurious armchairs" invite the reader of solid literature to "reveal himself in the act of cultivating a virtue," whilst the reader of light literature can make use of the "row of snug little curtained recesses" to "conceal himself in the act of indulging a vice" (Collins [1870] 2008: 188). The organisation of the library echoes Collins's earlier critique of the "dull people" who shame readers out of indulging in the literature of their choice and also points to the performance of distinction. The reader of "solid literature" cares more about keeping up the appearance of respectability and the reader of "light literature," equally unwilling to sacrifice respectability entirely, simply wants to be entertained by an enjoyable read whilst concealing their indulgence in this vice.

For Collins, the pursuit of popular writing was not a compromise or a lowering of standards but rather a deliberate aesthetic choice that aligned with his commitment to entertain and move his readers to think, rather than be thought for. His poetics is defined by his intentions to democratise the literary landscape, aligning him with general efforts of sensation novelists in blurring the "boundaries between lower-class and middle-class reading and readers by making the literature of the kitchen the favourite reading of the drawing room" (Pykett 2005: 88). In many respects, Collins's efforts are a threat to already deteriorating class-based distinctions. Growing reading publics resulted in a widening rift between respectable fiction and popular writings, which placed Collins's own writing, condemned by critics for being "out of touch with contemporary taste" and shunned by suppliers of certain periodicals for "being too literary," right in the middle (Peters 1991: 395). Though his ambitions to reach the "Unknown Public" were undoubtedly not entirely without personal interest in expanding his audience for financial purposes, his proclamation of mass readers as "King Public" would certainly translate into his "reader-oriented" style (Lonoff 1982: 20). His novels embody this commitment to attracting and developing "discriminating readers," shunning the more moralistic and prescriptive tone of his more established literary peers and instead confronting his readers with the complexity of ambiguity, encouraging them to think critically whilst being entertained by sensational stories of drama that combine the real with the sensational (Pykett 2005: 74). To examine the application of Collins's poetics in practice, we now turn to *The Woman in White* (1860), his most famous and commercially successful work, alongside *Armadale* (1866), which Collins himself considered his most accomplished novel.

Narrative Practice in *The Woman in White* (1860)

Collins's seminal novel, *The Woman in White* marked a significant change in his literary career, outstripping all his earlier successes. It is now considered "one of the best-known novels of the nineteenth century" (Peters 191: 211). During its serialisation in *All the Year Round*, sales of the journal amounted to over 100,000 copies, and "all 1,000 copies of the first edition were sold on the day of publication," with seven more editions produced within the next six months (Taylor 1988: 7). Enthused readers included Thackeray, who "read it from morning till sunset," Prince Albert and William Gladstone, the prime minister-to-be, who even missed "an evening

of parliament to finish it" (Pykett 2005: 107; Knight 2023: 81). The novel also earned Collins praise from his mentor and friend, as Dickens wrote to congratulate his junior on "triumphantly finishing your best book" (Lycett 2013: 191). The critics, such as the reviewer for the *Morning Advertiser* (20 Augustus 1863), lauded Collins's efforts and commended him for writing a story "full of striking situations, while the plot is wrought out with great ability" (Page 1995: 116). Margaret Oliphant, confessing to having re-read the book several times, expressed her "technical admiration" for the carefully constructed narrative method (1899: 186). Collins later earned a broadly recognised reputation as a master of plots, a skill that would prove a double-edged sword in assessments of his work. The critic of the *Saturday Review*, in turn, wrote that Collins's skills as a plotter were undeniable but added that "mechanical talent, however, is not enough to entitle a man to rank as a great artist" (Page 1995: 120). This complaint of Collins's only merit being his ability to plot a complex story, would later become a frequent grievance of his critics. Though Collins may have had little interest in this elevation to great artistry, it is clear that the author himself was proud of his most successful novel, as *The Woman in White* is also the singular title that Collins personally "asked to be put on his tombstone," marking the work as representative of his legacy (Knight 2023: 82).

The novel presents a complex narrative of identity, deception and Gothic intrigue, employing an innovative multi-narrator structure that the author himself introduces as a tribunal, brought before the discriminating eyes of his readers. In this case of injustice, the story will be told from the perspective of more than one witness, as Collins posits that "as the Judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now" ([1860] 2008: 5). Through this framework of faux-authentic witness testimonies, Collins here fully commits to his reader-oriented principles, negating any stable sense of narratorial authority and instead encouraging the reader to become the mediator of the story's facts and testimonies. *The Woman in White* (1860) demonstrates Collins's signature blend of realism and sensationalism, centring on a conspiracy to strip Laura Fairlie of her identity and inheritance, engineered by Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco. The plot exploits the uncanny physical resemblance between Laura and the asylum inmate (and fatally ill) Anne Catherick, confining the living Laura, now Lady Glyde by marriage, under Anne's name whilst presenting Anne's body as her own.

For the purpose of this multi-narrator framework, Collins's extensive experience as a journalist was put to good use, as it undoubtedly provided him with a "good training ground in the innovative mix of storytelling techniques – first-hand narration, private correspondence, the personal diary, public documents" and many more (Law and Maunder 2008: 59). In addition to refracting any stable sense of narratorial authority through the multiple perspectives presented in the novel, Collins provides his readers with different narrative forms that each evoke different levels of trustworthiness. His style effectively elicits scepticism and encourages readers to "distrust the story's various narratives" in order to "create [their] own more authentic story," reflecting his ambition to teach his audience to read "in a literary sense" (Knight 2023: 107; Collins 1858: 218). His characters constantly echo Collins's intentions as they emphasise that they "trust nothing" but their "own observation" (Collins [1860] 2008: 288). Furthermore, the multiplicity of perspectives allows Collins to do away with any distinctions of class or taste between his characters. Walter Hartright, a painter and drawing master; Frederick Farlie, a wealthy landowner; and the servants are all given equal claim to truth-telling. This essentially does away with, or at least questions, any sense of class-based authority and furthers Collins's agenda towards a democratising narrative authority that resists hierarchies of aesthetic distinction, where cultural refinement or educated taste might otherwise be privileged as markers of interpretive authority.

The reader, and subsequently, the practice of reading, is a recurring element in Collins's novels, and in *The Woman in White* its centrality takes on metatextual qualities. Just as the

readers of the novel must read closely to puzzle their way through the mystery, the characters are also constantly engaged in deciphering narratives. While one of the main culprits of the story, Count Fosco, dismisses the capacity society has for "the detection of crime," Marian Halcombe bests him by deciphering legal documents with minimal schooling or help from experts (236). Equally, we are given characters who cannot provide their own account, such as the cook in Count Fosco's service, who regrettably admits that they had "never learnt to read or write" but who still provides pivotal testimony that aids characters in solving the case (407). Collins's sustained commitment to rendering those who could not speak for themselves legible to his readers thus reflects his deep engagement with the expanding reading public of the 1860s. Characters and real-life readers alike become active participants in the narrative, an approach that further resonates with the author's belief in literature as a democratic space and perhaps even a democratic tool.

Throughout the novel, Collins further rejects a class-based authority on the level of the narrative, as he highlights the "fundamental fictiveness of class distinction" (Taylor 2023: 301). Sir Percival Glyde, Laura's fiancé and an upstanding aristocrat, is described by Mr Gilmore as someone who "stands very high," and whose social rank provides him with "an eminent position above suspicion" (Collins [1860] 2008: 119). Sir Percival, however, proves to not only be the main villain of the tale but to also have an illegitimate claim to his social standing, which exposes both "the fragility and performance of rank" (Knight 2023: 302). This exposure of illegitimacy is furthered by Collins's elevation of Hartright, a middle-class drawing master and hero who ultimately restores justice and marries Laura, a woman who far outranks him in terms of wealth and social status. Though often obscured in narratives filled with whims of chance and coincidence, Collins consistently draws attention to the growing instability of Victorian class structures by both exposing arbitrary assumptions of an upper-class superiority and by playing on contemporary fears of "social mobility and class transgression" (Talairach-Vielmas 2009: 60). The same dismantling efforts are applied to distinctions in form and content, as Collins consistently refuses to subscribe to neat delineations of what literary elements are constituted as "high" or "low" in contemporary literary hierarchies. In *The Woman in White,* as in most of his other longer works, Collins combines the motifs and conventions of Gothic literature in a melodramatic plot with sensational incidents of madness, conspiracy and stolen identities that equally use complex legal documentation and jargon (Talairach-Vielmas 2009: 14). As a founding figure of sensation fiction, Collins was well aware that the genre's "morbid phenomena of literature" that "preaches to the nerves" was received as disconcerting by critics, especially as its popularity showed signs of "a wide-spread corruption of which [sensation novels] were in part both effect and cause" (Mansel 1863: 502). Perhaps it is precisely this critical hostility that makes the genre's democratic reach that much stronger, as it has the capacity to cut across class boundaries and command a broad readership. Regardless, the novel's immense popularity, and especially its cutting across social boundaries, underscores Collins's efforts to reach beyond distinct classes of readership and aim to entertain as broad a reading public as possible.

"Light" and "Solid" Reading in *Armadale* (1866)

Armadale (1866), though not nearly equal in success to the earlier *The Woman in White* (1860), or the later *The Moonstone* (1868), was still generally well-received by Collins's contemporary readers. The demand for serialised editions also exceeded initial expectations, as Charles Mudie was forced, by public pressure, to stock "more copies of *Armadale* than he had originally planned" (Peters 1991: 272). Critics, however, were less keen than other readers. One *Atheneum* review describes the novel as a "diseased invention" that warrants very little merit and suffers from over-construction of the plot (Lonoff 1982: 58). As noted above, this

complaint over Collins's overreliance on plot, privileging construction over characterisation, was steadily becoming a distinct point of critique amongst his reviewers and critics. Even admirers like Anthony Trollope, who praised Collins for his ability to create a "construction most minute and wonderful," had to concede that he could never quite "lose the taste of the construction" in reading Collins's work (Trollope 1883: 160). T.S. Eliot's much later review of the novel was more generous, stating that the work "has no merit beyond melodrama, and it has every merit that melodrama can have" (1932: 486). This review shows, perhaps, some recognition of Collins's ability to obtain merit within a genre broadly considered to be void of merit and dismissed as vulgar entertainment. Collins himself certainly valued *Armadale* immensely, disclosing in an interview that the novel was "by far the best thing I have ever written [and] no other book of mine can compare with it" (1887: 355).

Since his earlier works Collins had developed the habit of directly addressing his readers in the prefaces of his novels. The preface to *Armadale* is particularly revealing in terms of the author's conceptualisation of the work and his poetics-in-practice, as it reveals his deliberate antagonism towards critical authority. Collins here addresses the two distinct classes of readers, beginning with "readers in general" who, he is certain, will "appreciate whatever merit there may be in this story," without him having to explain his intentions (Collins [1866] 2008: 4). In fact, he trusts that their opinion has not been "hastily mediated" but will judge the work accordingly. The second class, "readers in particular," are the critics and reviewers, who may find that the novel oversteps "the narrow limits" which have been set to restrict "the development of modern fiction" (4). Here, Collins alludes to the arbitrary policing of literary hierarchies and genres at the hands of critics. Collins waves off this critique pre-emptively, adding that this book should not be judged by the "clap-trap morality of the present" but rather be recognised as "a book that is daring enough to speak the truth" (4). There is no moral script that clearly prescribes proper conduct, as the meaning and, therefore, moral of the story must lie in the mind of the reader. Collins's claim to truth in this passage of the Preface particularly aggravated reviewers. A *Spectator* reviewer (16 June 1866) stated that "Wilkie Collins is fond of challenging his critics" and the reviewer accepts the challenge by arguing that Collins is throwing stones at "imaginary" critics whilst presenting an unmediated story of spectacle and fancy as a book that allegedly speaks "the truth" (Page 1995: 211). This discourse between author and reader, and the critical reaction that follows, illustrates Collins's grievance with the critical reception of his work, as one of his "readers in particular" attacks his fiction precisely for the merit it has in entertaining his "readers in general" with an exciting mystery that leaves ultimate meaning up to their own interpretation and is void of perspective morality.

To understand how *Armadale* embodies Collins's resistance to critical authority, we must first consider the structure of the novel whose plot is often unjustly dismissed as mere sensationalism but functions as a vehicle for his critique. The "notoriously convoluted plot" of *Armadale*, which opens with a dying man's confession to murder and stealing the dead man's identity, continues into the stories of four men by the name of Allan Armadale, with two sets of doubles manifesting in two fathers who pass on the likeness in name to their sons (MacDonald 2023, 114). The novel largely follows the younger generation, as Ozias Midwinter learns the truth about his father's crime after becoming close friends with the son of the now-murdered Allan Armadale senior. What follows is a dramatic chain of events in a novel that also introduces one of Collins's most famous villains, Lydia Gwilt. She is a scheming widow who has her sights set on the Armadale fortune and who pits the two Armadales against each other for her own gain. Characteristic of Collins's style, the novel plays on Gothic tropes, such as the existence of an evil double, haunting curses associated with inheritances, a poisonous plot (literally, revolving around poison) and other melodramatic events and settings. Just as in

The Woman in White, the practice of reading is a central narrative device in *Armadale,* which unlocks information and builds suspense by presenting flawed perspectives within the narrative through the readers' critical eyes. Characters are, effectively, "taught" to read and portray the very agentic reader Collins wants to cultivate among his audience.

Within the novel, the readers engage with "high" and "low" literature in very distinct ways. When Allan Armadale has the sudden ambition to elope with the underage Neelie Milroy, the couple seeks out legislative texts in support of their future union, which can be found in the prestigious library of the Armadale estate. Together, Allan and Neelie attempt to decipher the "hieroglyphics" of Sir William Blackstone's eighteenth-century treatise of *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765), a text neither of them, however, can properly understand (Collins [1866] 2008: 552). Neelie reflects that she "had certainly read somewhere" in "some book or other (possibly a novel) of an elopement" where the bridegroom was "sentenced to languish in prison" (548). This scene exemplifies Collins's critique of the division of "Solid" and "Light" literature, as the prestigious legal commentary proves inaccessible and useless to the characters, whilst the minor novel proves to have a more active role in shaping the characters' understanding of the world and the consequences of an elopement. The scene serves a dual purpose: it satirises the accusations made by critics about the corrupting influence novels would have on Collins's readers, whilst also illustrating that Neelie's novelistic education proves more applicable to her situation than Blackstone's canonical legal treatise. The novel, therefore, effectively dramatizes the false hierarchy between different kinds of reading.

This metatextual play continues through Collins letting the voice of his critics shine through his *Armadale* narrative in the dreary character of Dr. Downward, who complains about "the middle-class cant on fiction" (Pykett 2005: 75). With a name likely referring to the fear of the alleged downward spiral of a wider social respectability, the physician laments that English novelists must adhere to "purer modern taste" which represents "our higher modern morality" (Collins [1866] 2008: 770). Dr Downward's complaints represent the very "cant of criticism" that Collins also attacked in his journalism, namely the insistence on a prescriptive morality and arbitrary standards of taste that do not match readerly preferences. By placing these criticisms in the mouth of a novelistic character whose name signals moral decline, Collins satirises the critics who accused him of writing overly sensational fiction that allegedly corrupted public morals.

Both *The Woman in White* and *Armadale* thus embody Collins's poetics through their resistance to socially recognised authorities of taste. The novels democratise the literary landscape through multi-narrator structures that refuse stable class-based authorities, as they combine Gothic melodrama with complex socio-cultural and legal critiques that blur "high" and "low" genre boundaries and, instead, position reading itself as an act of democratic participation. Whilst Dickens reprimanded Collins for "repeatedly relying on his formulaic eyewitness narrative," this narrative device served as a pivotal practical element of Collins's poetics, as it allowed him to circumvent any stable sense of authority, or "truth," and encouraged active critical readerly engagement (Peters 1991: 214). In doing so, Collins not only reaches out to his "Unknown Public" but actively shapes and defines them as readers who form their own aesthetic judgements and are active participants in constructing meaning rather than passive recipients of prescribed moral truths and aesthetic judgements who ultimately, defer to hierarchies of taste. Collins's works therefore reflect his insistence on "King Public" as the ultimate arbiter of literary value, thus representing much of the author's fundamental challenge to critical mechanisms through which canonical hierarchies are constructed and maintained.

Contextualising Marie Corelli

As our introduction and the first case study have demonstrated, questions of a "qualitatively high" kind of writing are difficult to approach. Readers', reviewers' and scholars' responses are, certainly, important ways to approach these, and we must acknowledge that subjectivities and contemporary taste – sometimes, in contrast to posthumous critical appreciations – usually feature. Thomas Hardy turned to poetry due to the critics' negative assessments of his novels; Gerald Manley Hopkins's poetry was largely posthumously discovered and celebrated, and Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) was a bestseller in its day but is now largely known in expert Victorianist circles. The readership and the critics are unpredictable, after all, and work according to their own logic, and criticism – whether deserved or undeserved – can sting and lead to perhaps unintended consequences.

A writer's poetics is, evidently, equally subjective, as our first case study has shown. It is also no guarantor of the success of any creative piece produced. Yet the analysis of the poetic principles a writer outlines offers a constructive approach to the critical analysis of what constitutes "good," or "quality," writing. To better understand the forms of their fictions, scholars have turned to Charles Dickens's (however meagre) theoretical reflections on alternating melodramatic and comic modes on the stage, to Anthony Trollope's extensive elaborations on character in his *Autobiography*, George Eliot's review essays and diaries to examine how she explored a new, realist agenda – and, as we did, Collins's journalistic pieces and novelistic deliberations.[5] As we further analyse matters of distinction, taste and consideration of divisions and distinctions within the popular Victorian oeuvre, we must therefore give the same compliment to Marie Corelli, who, unlike most of the "serious" or, allegedly, "good" Victorian novelists, left behind a significant body of non-fictional writing in which she outlined her own poetic thinking and principles. This section thus outlines Corelli's poetics, as expressed in *The Silver Domino; or, Side Whispers, Social and Literary* (1892), *Free Opinions Freely Expressed on Certain Phases of Modern Social Life and Conduct* (1905), *My Little Bit* (1919) and various manuscripts/typescripts in her estate at The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon.

Corelli's Poetics

Much could be said about Corelli's post-Romantic, Percy Shelley-inspired calls for "the Imagination," "the Ideal," "Originality," "Truth" and "Beauty" in literature which, she argues, lift the readers into higher realms of thought, feeling and ethics. Yet our focus here is the method of distinction in her writing on poetics and her emphasis on the "Public" – generally marked with a capital letter by Corelli – as the ultimate arbiters of taste.[6] "A Little Talk on Literature" – a public lecture Corelli gave to the Heaton Mersey Philosophical Society on 19 January 1903 – provides an entry point into a list of authors whom Corelli considers "good" writers, and their works "the grandest Literature," because these authors and their works are,

[5] See Dickens [1838] 2008, chapter 17. See Trollope 1883. See Eliot's essays on Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, on Riehl's ethnographic overview of German people, her thoughts on "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" ([1992] 2000) and her metafictional thinking in chapter 5 of "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton" in *Scenes of Clerical Life* ([1858] 2015) and Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* ([1859] 2008).

[6] Kuehn (2004; 2005) has previously elaborated on Corelli's poetics. See also the Habermasian reading (Kuehn 2019) of the public sphere in Corelli's time, and Corelli's own comments on public opinion in her non-fictional writing. Deliberations in this article are differently focused and highlight issues of "distinction" and "taste," feeding into thoughts about a "good" versus a "bad" popular.

in her opinion, "the highest examples" of, and a "measure [for] our standard of Art" ([unpublished] (Corelli 1903: n.p.). Among these Corelli lists Homer, Plato, Aristotle, the writers of the Bible, Milton, Shakespeare, Addison, Steele, Macaulay, Ruskin, Shelley, Byron, Keats, Scott, Emerson, Tennyson, Carlyle, Dickens, Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot. This is mostly the same list Corelli had already given in *The Silver Domino*, which was, besides some minor, earlier journalistic pieces, her first detailed statement on poetics. In the earlier work, Corelli hides behind the pseudonym, mask and cloak of the "Silver Domino," and we must see her statements and opinions as purposely dramatic, hyperbolic and inflammatory, as Corelli wanted to achieve the greatest effect on her readership and hide her true identity. Yet many of the opinions uttered in this work are obviously Corelli's: her dislike of reviewers and serial publishing and her advocacy of the public's taste as a marker of literary distinction. The latter, she argues, becomes especially visible in book sales figures.

As a polemic, *The Silver Domino* regularly addresses what Corelli considers "good" and "bad" writing, writers and literary practices. This insistence on binaries, eventually, helps Corelli in what Gareth A. Reeves (forthcoming 2026) has called the "performance of canonicity" to establish her own literary value and respectability. It begins with the Preface (to the second 1892 edition), in which Corelli calls the recently departed Alfred Lord Tennyson "the Real singer," in comparison to Robert Browning, whom she considers "the Sham" (1892: x). In the Silver Domino's opinion, and bringing in another "bad" poet for comparison, Tennyson's "muse is pure, refined, and ever persuasive to good, while at times [Algernon] Swinburne seems possessed of a very devil of lewdness and atheism" (1892: 240). Corelli continues her binary value judgements in rapid succession: Browning had no Fame but only Notoriety (1892: 247); Edwin Arnold and Lewis Morris were mere verse-compilers rather than poets (252ff); William Watson is a "fifth-rate Wordsworth" (257); Robert Louis Stevenson's "past prose" was better than his "present prose" (258); Hall Caine "tries to be clever but does not succeed" – whereas Oscar Wilde "is a born wit" (260); Rudyard Kipling has "some literary skill," but his work, on the whole, is "shallow" and must be assessed as "rhymed doggerel" rather than "poetry" (271). As the Silver Domino claims, the press has not done Kipling any favours by "booming" him beyond his actual qualities (285). William Black, Marion Crawford, Hall Caine, Bret Harte, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Ouida and Rhoda Broughton sit, comfortably but unimaginatively, in a literary "groove" as their novels repeat themes, plots and genres. In distinction to these, argues the Silver Domino, operates Marie Corelli, who is a "distinctly exasperating writer" because she refuses to settle in a groove, and who constantly reinvents herself and offers something "original" in every new book (156, 159). The overall principle is clear: Corelli makes value judgements about "quality," and she uses a variety of parameters.

Her polemic continues as the Silver Domino gives further measures of quality and distinction. In terms of the literary ecosystem, the Press is "vulgar," biased, unfree and manipulated in their reviewing practices by economic reasons, while only the "voice of the people" is a reliable arbiter of taste, because their judgement is authentic, unmoderated and "free" (100). But not everyone is "the people," as the Silver Domino explains: in his assessment, the "'aristocratic' set … never read, … never learn, …never see anything beyond themselves" while it is the ordinary, common reader (Collins's "Unknown Public"), which the Silver Domino here calls the "'bas-peuple' [who] *are* reading … and [who] have helped to make national destinies" (Corelli 1892: 97). It appears therefore that Corelli explicitly values reviewer judgement lower than reader judgement, and the appreciation of the "common reader" is for her a hallmark of quality.[7]

[7] See, in this context, Stephen Edwards's reconstruction of readerly reactions to *Thelma* in "Letters to the Editor" submissions to various contemporary newspapers, which show both the readers' approval

These are the most significant assessments regarding literary distinction that Corelli makes as the Silver Domino. She thus describes "good" writing, or "poetry" or "Literature" (with a capital "L") as truthful and deep, striving towards the morally good, imaginative and thus always original rather than clichéd or predictable. Works achieve honest "fame" – rather than artificial "booming" through marketing or reviewing manipulations – when they are well received, and eventually purchased, by the common reader. The Silver Domino adds further detail – and polemics – concerning the final two points of distinction. This is where his denigration of the reviewing system and further defence of the common reader and book-buying public come in. Reviewers are sloppy and pressed for time, hence they "seldom can do more than scan the first page and the last" before uttering a verdict on a work's qualities, or lack thereof (1892: 190). Worse still is that reviewers are often forced by their publishers to "boom" certain writers and books; the Silver Domino thus decries corruption and favouritism in the reviewing world.[8] The chapter "The Responsibility of the Press" in the later *Free Opinions Freely Expressed* returns to the critique of reviewers, to the point where Corelli – now under her own name – suggests that many of the harsher reviewers are often failed authors themselves who bear a grudge against successful authors (Corelli 1905: 25).[9]

If the verdict of reviewers is, allegedly, unreliable and biased, Corelli returns time and again – not unlike Collins – to situating the powers of taste and distinction in the common reader. As she advocates in the "Little Talk about Literature," it must be, or is, "the voice of the People" which "pronounce[s] the verdict" and "bestow[s] the wreath of fame" on a writer or work ([unpublished] Corelli 1903: n.p.).[10] The British public (or "B.P."), she also says in *The Silver Domino*, can very well distinguish "trash" from quality: "they want the best of everything – and they have an infinite kindness and patience in waiting for that "best," and carefully looking out for it: and when it truly comes they welcome it with honest enthusiasm" (1892: 140). Here, Corelli differs significantly from Collins's statement on the working-class readers who read quantity over quality – but who must still have any (future) author's attention due to their sheer, newly emerging power within the literary market. The public she sees in the 1890s, continues Corelli in *Free Opinions*, is "capable, it thinks" and can "mak[e] its own choice" (Corelli 1905: 259). Hence, "in [her] humble opinion, nothing is too good for the Public. They deserve the very best they can get" (Corelli: 297). Here, Corelli's tone and opinion of the reading public is far more inclusive and less classist than Collins's thirty-five years earlier: the readership had changed and Collins's working-class, to him yet "unknown," readers have become part of Corelli's B.P. This integration was linked to the obvious changes in the publishing industry which had placed fiction within the purchasing possibilities of a much wider public than in 1858.

As Corelli celebrates the B.P's powers of judgement, she also cleverly muddies the (economic) waters when she establishes the *truly* distinguishing readers as those who buy rather than borrows books:

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and critiques; in short, a discerning public. See also Edwards (2025: 339-41) for further data on how Corelli described her readers' profile.

[8] Corelli portrays Andrew Lang as one such "incubator" who finds, promotes and hatches roosters only (1892, 320ff).

[9] A minor, though not negligible point is that Corelli also decries sexist practices in *The Silver Domino*: as the Silver Domino alleges, "booming" is usually done in favour of men rather than women (see Corelli 1892: 114).

[10] In her patriotic essay "'All we Like Sheep'" in the wartime publication, *My Little Bit*, she goes even further and says that "the People alone are the arbiters of national destiny." (Corelli 1919: 54).

> The true lover of books will never want to peruse volumes that are thumbed and soiled by hundreds of other hands – he or she will manage to buy them and keep them as friends in the private household. Any book, save the most expensive "édition de luxe," can be purchased for a few shillings… to borrow one's mental fare from Free Libraries is a dirty habit to begin with. It is rather like picking up eatables dropped by some one else in the road, and making one's dinner off another's leavings. One book, clean and fresh from the bookseller's counter, is worth half a dozen of the soiled and messy knock-about volumes, which many of our medical men assure us carry disease-germs in their too-frequently fingered pages.
>
> (Corelli 1905: 9)

We will say more about the end of the three-decker and library lending systems in the discussion of *The Sorrows of Satan,* but here we can see how the publishing landscape had changed from Corelli to Collins, and from the lending libraries and serial novel publishing to the novel that could be purchased. Summing up Corelli's poetic contemplations, it is impossible to say whether hers are idiosyncrasies and personal grievances, or more widespread opinions at the time. After all, Peter Keating calls Corelli "an invaluable chronicler of late Victorian discontent" (1989: 159). She certainly had her finger on the pulse of time as her novels explored urgent contemporary topics like (quasi-)religion, gender, education and even alcoholism and the Egyptian craze. Likewise, her comments on and novelistic experimentation with genre – romance, historical novel, proto-science/speculative fiction, melodrama, the Gothic, the bildungsroman, the artist's novel – also suggest that she was firmly embedded in contemporary debates about art. Her passionate defence of the romance and idealising mode, the novel's moral agenda and her rejection of materialism/naturalism and frustration with realism were, thus, not just her own but shared by other writers, like Mrs Henry Ward and Ouida, to name just two. Her denunciation of *all* reviewers as unfair and her consequent hailing of readers as the *only* judges of taste, however, seems specifically Corelli's stance though it does bear resemblance to Collins's earlier comments, even if it is more radicalised and more strongly worded. In the end, her comments on the contemporary literary field are probably personal *and* indicative of other authors' frustrations with reviewing practices, the "booming" of certain authors, and lucrative versus more exploitative, or simply lesser, financial ventures. Like Collins, Corelli wrote in a period of transition as a modern publishing and writing scene was replacing established structures, habits and practices, and her poetics tap into this spirit of change, which also altered thoughts on "judgement," resultant "distinction" and, most generally, on "good" versus "bad" writing.

Narrative Practice in *Ardath* (1889)

Having outlined Corelli's poetics, we move on to two representative novels to analyse whether she puts her theory of "good" literature into practice. As we claimed earlier, a theory of literature is only as useful – especially when applied to popular fiction as a way of raising questions about its qualities – as the examples that demonstrate its application. The first test case is *Ardath*: *The Story of a Dead Self,* which Corelli, throughout her life, considered her "best" work (Masters 1978: 82), in the same way that Collins thought of *Armadale* as his best work even if it was not his most successful. The circumstances surrounding the novel's reception may well have shaped Corelli's personal assessment vis-à-vis *Ardath*. The novel brought a letter from Tennyson in July 1890, to whom Corelli had sent a copy, including his comment, "[y]ou do well not to care for fame. Modern fame is too often a crown of thorns and brings all the vulgarity of the world upon you. I sometimes wish I had never written a line" ([unpublished] Tennyson: n.p.). Corelli, feigning modesty, must have assured the Poet Laureate that her popularity meant little to her. She would go on to repeat his remark, not least in her

Preface to the second edition of the *Silver Domino* (Corelli 1892: ix), using it to support her argument that her literary mission was higher than the pursuit of fleeting fame.

If she had the apparent support of the most admired poet, she also had the monarch's: *Ardath* brought a telegram from Buckingham Palace, commanding that *all* of Corelli's books be sent to Queen Victoria (Masters 1978: 104). On 9 November 1891, Corelli wrote to her publisher, George Bentley, that "[t]he Queen [was] intensely absorbed in 'Ardath' – it is her favourite one of all" ([unpublished], "To George Bentley"). If *Ardath* thus gave Corelli poetic and social clout from the "establishment," it also came with recognition in more progressive political and social circles. William Gladstone, after visiting Corelli, told her that "*Ardath* [was] a magnificent conception," and praised the "magnetism in [her] pen" and her "great power to move the masses and sway the thoughts of the people" (quoted in Bigland 1953: 109). Likewise, Oscar Wilde called on Corelli after reading *Ardath*. He had previously written to her after the publication of *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886), telling her that she "certainly t[old] of marvellous things in a marvellous way" (quoted in Masters 1978: 60). Now, regarding *Ardath*, he reportedly said – according to Corelli's letter of 17 June 1889 to Bentley – that he was "enchanted with the book" and was "going to review it somewhere" ([unpublished] Corelli, "To George Bentley"). Yet both Gladstone and Wilde never made their relations with Corelli public. Gladstone, despite four entreating letters from Corelli in June and July 1889, politely declined to review the novel ([unpublished] Corelli, "To William Gladstone": f.6; f.82, f.109; f.120). And Wilde's review also never materialised. Both men's comments, likely genuine, reveal an ambivalence as they acknowledged *Ardath's* compelling nature in private, but not in public reviews. Of course, we may need to allow for complex personal and gendered politics in these two instances, but it is certain that private compliments bestowed upon Corelli were not reflected in contemporary reviews. Once more, as had become almost customary for the critical reception of a Corelli novel, the reviewers mercilessly attacked the novel's alleged faults though they also, and reluctantly, admitted its compulsive appeal. The review in *The Spectator* exemplifies this unease, calling *Ardath* "very powerful, very fascinating, very faulty, and very irritating romance" and "a little clumsy," yet predicting its popularity: "We have seldom read a book which left us with such mingled feelings of admiration and repulsion as those which are left after the perusal of *Ardath*" (Rev. 1889: 49-51). *The Graphic* criticised Corelli's attempt to blend evangelical mission with imaginative fiction, arguing that "doubts are not to be met by dreams" (Rev. 1889: 714). *The Daily Telegraph* also takes up questions of narrative and genre – thereby also revealing how the terminology in the romance-realism debate was muddled – when it considers *Ardath*, "not, strictly speaking, a novel at all: it is a romance" (Rev. 1889: 2). It thus dismissed the novel as speculative fiction. These comments are revealing, as they repeatedly evoke questions of value and distinction: while the novel's powerful subject matter, characters and plot elements fascinate, they also irritate the discerning critic. *Ardath* is formally clumsy yet appeals to popular taste. It is admirable in some ways, but must ultimately be rejected for its anti-realist, dreamy style. In the critics' eyes, *Ardath* is both "good" and "bad": popular yet flawed, a compelling read but formally inferior. Perhaps as a result, even the two scholars who would later inaugurate scholarly interest in Corelli – Rita Felski (1995: 133) and Annette Federico (2000: 16) – dismiss or overlook the novel in their respective studies.[11] This said, *The National Union Catalogue* (1970) lists twenty-five editions of *Ardath* between its initial three-decker publication in 1889 and subsequent (one-volume) editions until 1920. While reviewers and prominent admirers like Gladstone and Wilde remained clearly

[11] Similarly, Sutherland disparages the novel, calling it "more chaotic in its fantasies than [is] usual with Corell" (1988: 27).

ambivalent about the novel's qualities or "value," readers ensured its enduring popularity through decades of steady sales.

Corelli's *Ardath* is both thought-provoking – particularly in the context of fin-de-siècle religious doubt – and compelling in its narrative. Inspired by a brief passage from the apocryphal *Book of Ezra* ("So I went my way into the Field which is called Ardath, and sat among the flowers"), the novel follows the poet Theos Alwyn, who seeks to recover his lost creative genius. Travelling to the monastery of Lars in the Caucasus to consult the monk Heliobas, Theos is transported through time to Al-Kyris, a magnificent city located on the future site of Babylon in 5,000 BCE. In the field of Ardath, Theos encounters Edris, an angelic figure embodying purity, divine love, and artistic inspiration. She becomes his muse, urging him to write a message of hope for humanity. Yet before attaining spiritual and artistic fulfilment, Theos must confront temptation. Al-Kyris is a city of splendour, hedonism and pagan worship, ruled by the seductive priestess Lysia and her lover, King Zephorânim. Theos befriends the celebrated poet Sah-Lûma, whose pursuit of fame and material success reveals a profound spiritual emptiness. Through encounters with the prophet Khosrûl and the mystic Zyriel, both of whom foretell Christ's coming, Theos embraces Christianity: his name, after all, means "God wins all." He learns that true art requires divine inspiration and must serve eternal rather than worldly ends. As he achieves spiritual salvation, Al–Kyris is destroyed in a catastrophic earthquake, echoing the biblical fall of Babylon. Awakening in Ardath, Theos learns that Sah–Lûma was his former incarnation. Restored in faith and poetic power, Theos returns to London, where he condemns modern materialism and advocates Christian values through his writings. Though met with ridicule and hostility, he remains steadfast. The novel concludes in Cologne Cathedral, where Theos reunites with Edris, now mortal. Together they withdraw from society, while Theos continues to produce works intended "fill the time with hope and passionate faith and courage" (Corelli 1925: 602).

Obviously, *Ardath* is a novelistic manifestation of Corelli's poetic principles in both content and form. Theos is a spokesperson for Corelli's poetic creed, and it seems almost impossible that her contemporaries did not identify Corelli as the author of *The Silver Domino* when Theos's principles are so clearly those of The Silver Domino.[12] In its dream-like quality – the dream also being a central plot element with Theos's transportation to the past and Al-Kyris – *Ardath* has a non-rational, compulsive quality to it as it propels the reader forward in an almost hypnotic readerly trance that neither requires nor offers either material or real-life markers. Even the descriptions of the Caucasus mountains, contemporary London and Cologne Cathedral feel otherworldly. The novel is certainly original and "creative" (not to say, "inspired") and awash with post-Romantic addresses to Love, the Imagination, the transcendental and Ideal. It was popular with readers and went through more reprints than most books of the period. It brought personal acclaim and financial rewards to its author. Corelli thus acted upon her poetic theory and earned popular success. Could these principles and results not be called "good" and evidence of an author's "quality" and "distinction"?

The Inspired Author in *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895)

We move to a second exemplification that both reiterates points raised whilst adding new ones. Six years after *Ardath*, in 1895, when Methuen published Corelli's *The Sorrows of Satan, or the Strange Experience of One Geoffrey Tempest, Millionaire*, the literary and publishing world

[12] *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886) had, of course, also already portrayed an artist – though a musician rather than novelist – who espouses Corelli's artistic faith in the transcendental, divine, inspired, idealising.

was undergoing major changes, as Guinevere Griest details in *Mudie's Circulating Library*.[13] The Victorian three-decker publishing system had dominated the British novel market for almost all of the nineteenth century. Under this model, new novels were issued in three separate volumes, typically sold as a set for the high price of one-and-a-half guineas. As a result, most (middle-class) readers accessed fiction through circulating libraries rather than purchasing books outright. The system depended particularly on the success of Mudie's Select Library, whose large-scale purchases guaranteed publishers a market for new fiction. This arrangement had profoundly shaped Victorian literature in content and form: authors were encouraged to write lengthy novels that could fill three volumes, often structuring their narratives around major turning points at the end of each volume; and they were encouraged to write fiction that would appeal to the middle-class's ethical sensibilities. On 27 June 1894, Britain's major circulating libraries – specifically, Mudie's and W. H. Smith's – put a stop to supporting the expensive three-decker format. They announced that, beginning in 1895, they would drastically reduce the prices paid to publishers for new books and would require publishers to wait a full year before issuing cheap editions of novels the libraries had purchased (Griest 1970: 171). While this might have seemed to the uninitiated like simple commercial manoeuvring, Peter Keating, in his Introduction to the World's Classics 1998 edition of *The Sorrows of Satan*, notes that those in the publishing business "took it as a serious warning that fundamental changes were on the way" (Corelli [1895] 1998: viii). At stake was whether Britain would continue to be a book-borrowing, or begin to be a book-buying, nation. Although readers could still borrow books from lending libraries under the new system, they were now actively encouraged to immediately purchase these in affordable editions – usually at six shillings – upon publication. The difference between a purchasing price of 31s. 6d. compared to 6s. for a new piece of fiction would revolutionise and modernise both publishing and reading, and bring in the book-buying practice that Collins, certainly, did not have on his radar. The shift exposed tensions and divisions in the literary world that the artificial stability of the publishing and lending library system had previously obscured. Authors with limited public appeal saw their sales collapse, as they were no longer artificially shielded by the three-decker system (under which Corelli published all her books until *The Sorrows*, including *Ardath*), while writers like Corelli – who could mobilise a large segment of the reading public to eventually buy their novels – reaped exceptional financial rewards. In short, the bestseller was born.

Although no accurate figures are available, it is widely acknowledged that *The Sorrows* was an instantaneous success, with sales numbers hitherto unprecedented (see Masters 1978, 3). The only available figure is an advertisement for Corelli's works in her 1920 short story collection *The Love of Long Ago*, where it is said that *The Sorrows* had sold 202,000 copies until then (Corelli 1920: Appendix). Given the fact that a first edition of any George Eliot novel usually meant between 1,000 and 2,000 print copies and that even Collins and Dickens spoke of a maximum of 100,000 readers for *All the Year Round*, the importance of such a figure cannot be overstated. Corelli's already established popularity gave her a unique advantage: she could appeal directly to readers to buy *The Sorrows of Satan*, while the press's customary, widely known, accepted and expected hostility toward her transformed the novel's sales into something of a moral crusade. From this point forward, Corelli insisted that no "cheap editions" of her novels be issued, underscoring her claim that her readers were willing to pay the full standard price, six shillings, for a one-volume novel. The cheap editions here referred to the discounted reprint editions, which were released once the initial sales had slowed down, and which were priced at 3s. 6d. or 2s. 6d. "Cheap editions" were also the two-shilling

[13] Corelli had at this point broken with her long-time publisher George Bentley. As her success grew, she became increasingly convinced that Bentley did not have her best (financial) interests in mind but kept her on a short leash, as it were.

"yellowbacks" sold at railway stalls and the paper-covered reprints (6d. or even 3d.), which were available for extremely popular titles. Corelli thus refused to have her novels reprinted for anything less than six shillings.

The Sorrows also marked a new front in Corelli's ongoing battle with reviewers. Corelli included a prefatory "Special Notice" which said that "No copies of this book are sent out for reviews. Members of the press will therefore obtain it (should they wish to do so) in the usual way with the rest of the public, i.e. through the Booksellers and Libraries."[14] In Corelli's now bestselling world, reviewers would hold no special status: they were no different from ordinary readers, possessed no unique influence, and were not needed to boost sales. If critics wanted to read her book, they had to buy it for six shillings; if they wished to attack it, they would have to pay for the privilege. This bold strategy guaranteed *The Sorrows* more publicity than any other novel of the time, though Corelli's primary aim was to demonstrate her direct, unmediated connection with her readers – as well as to teach a lesson to reviewers about the "new" and "modern" publishing and reading world.

The novel that would become the first modern bestseller in English literary history elicited – once again – mixed reactions from the reviewers who had bought their own copies. W. T. Stead, in *The Review of Reviews*, acknowledged positively that "[t]he conception is novel and even sublime" and the execution audacious and "vigorous" (1895: 464). In contrast, *The New York Times* criticised that Marie Corelli "takes many commonplace things, used-up topics and subjects, and shrieks over them" which make the novel into a "tedious" reading experience altogether (*Times* 1895: 31). Perhaps most revealing, however, is that both the positive and the negative reviews firmly place Corelli's style in the popular realm: the *New York Times* speaks of her as a "literary distortionist," and Stead writes that she paints in her latest novel "with a brush as huge as a bill-sticker's" (*Times* 1895: 31; Stead 1895: 464). Stead even goes as far as to conclude his review with the words: "[*The Sorrows*] is the supreme example of a popular style; the zenith attained by the Penny Dreadfulesque" (Stead 1895: 464). The reviewers thus recognised that Corelli had, at this point, fully mastered the art of capturing the (buying) readers' attention, through distorted dimensions, exaggerated modalities, a powerful, loud voice, glaring colours and audacious gestures, stances and writing strategies. Corelli's boldness began with an eye-catching book cover of the first edition: *The Sorrows* was bound in dark-green cloth and adorned with white angel wings encircling a brightly shining star. Beneath the image, the words *"O Lucifer, Son of the Morning, how art thou fallen!"* – a reference to Isaiah 14 – hinted at the novel's theme.

The novel presents Corelli's striking reimagining of the fall of Lucifer. Its protagonist and narrator, Geoffrey Tempest, is a struggling writer who unexpectedly inherits £5 million and befriends the mysterious Prince Lucio Rimânez, who is eventually revealed to be the Devil. What follows is a battle for Geoffrey's soul. Wealth brings him literary success through corrupt practices, as he pays reviewers to promote his books, and his money and new reputation also help him secure the hand of the aristocratic Lady Sibyl Elton. Sibyl, however, is morally corrupted and secretly idolises Lucio. When Geoffrey discovers her betrayal, she takes her own life after correctly guessing Lucio's true identity. Through conversations with the pure and successful novelist Mavis Clare, Geoffrey begins to understand Lucio's nature. Mavis Clare has managed to achieve genuine popularity through "honest public praise and enthusiasm" among her readers, rather than corrupt reviewers or commercially-oriented publishers (Corelli [1895] 1998: 387). Clare both pities and resists Lucio/ Lucifer, revealing that the fallen angel longs to be rejected by humanity in the hope of regaining God's favour. The novel culminates

[14] See the manuscript of *The Sorrows* (Corelli 1895, "The Sorrows," n.p.) and the first edition of *The Sorrows of Satan (*1895: 1), with minor typographical changes.

aboard Lucio's yacht, *The Flame*, on a voyage to "the World's End" (374), where Geoffrey ultimately renounces the Devil and chooses God. Lucio is granted a brief return to heaven, while Geoffrey loses his fortune and returns to poverty, spiritually redeemed. Although his future literary success remains uncertain, Geoffrey has learned to reject egotism, materialism, and the pursuit of artificial acclaim. The novel concludes with Geoffrey seeing Lucio arm in arm with a British cabinet minister, suggesting the Devil's continued influence in society. Corelli's central message is that true artistic value lies not in corruptly manufactured fame but in sincere recognition from the reading public.

Mavis Clare – an obvious portrait of Corelli herself, as early reviewers also noted and on which Simon James has further elaborated (Stead 1895: 453; James 2013) – is another incarnation of the "right" kind of author with the "best" kinds of works. Mavis writes wholesome spiritual literature full of "good" values. She is repeatedly described in angelic terms and even elevated to Jesus's level, as she is the only one to resist Lucio's temptations. As a writer, she is adored by her readers but vilified by the critics, and she represents – as a person and an author – the hope of western civilisation in a corrupt modern world. Mavis works hard for a living and has done well for herself. Not only does she manage to appeal to a wide audience, but she is also described as a "splendid businesswoman": a "match for the publishers all around" and "indifferent to opinions" (Corelli [1895] 1998: 115). Having transcendental, derivative post-Romantic poetic ideas of Truth, Beauty, the Ideal and making good money are not mutually exclusive, after all. Most importantly, Clare is "popular" with her readers, who are – in an interesting historical nod to what Queenie Leavis would later say about the homogenous readership of the time – noble and common readers alike (139). Before meeting her in person, Geoffrey, out of jealousy for Clare's talent, has "slated" her latest book, but Mavis is good-natured and mature enough to forgive him, as she says she generally ignores his and other reviews (183). When the Prince and Tempest visit her in her countryside abode, she shows them her doves, who all bear the names of contemporary periodicals and newspapers, and who represent critics who all reviewed her in negative terms. Mavis elaborates on each of the birds'/reviewer's characters: one is hard to please; one "fancies he's important, you know, but he isn't"; one is "not at all a well-bred bird"; another is forever cross, and another a fussy fighter (Corelli 1998: 187-8). Allegedly immune to reviewing practices, Mavis also puts herself on the side of the "great" poets Milton and Shelley who, she says, were also critiqued in their lifetime and who – as Shelley does in the Preface to "The Revolt of Islam" – expressed themselves immune to the "contempt and maledictions" of critics as they only hoped to directly "appeal to the Public" (Corelli [1895] 1998: 184–5). In short, Mavis Clare is the author that Corelli herself proclaimed to be and who incarnates all of Corelli's poetic principles.

The point of whether Corelli, in this novel, enacts her theorised principles for "good" writing is moot, therefore, given her inclusion of Mavis Clare, who *is* Corelli and who expresses the same poetics as Corelli did in *The Silver Domino* and would again in *Free Opinions*. On a meta level, *The Sorrows of Satan* also fulfils Corelli's poetic principles. It participates in the rules of the romance genre with stock characters, a black-and-white morality and battle between good and evil and, on occasion, unspecified settings like "the World's End" and unlikely events or supernatural, devilish abilities. It is an expression of the Imagination as it, in an original manner, rewrites Lucifer's fall with the twist that the Devil desires to be rejected by humanity to return to God's grace. The novel deals with transcendental issues and addresses the Ideal, specifically religion/God and transcendental Love, which is seen in contrast to carnal pleasures or strategic marriages for financial or status reasons.

Is this novel, then, not also a "good" novel? A novel that realises its author's poetic principles? What is the difference between Wilkie Collins, Marie Corelli and, indeed, George Eliot who all diligently and faithfully wrote their novels according to their poetic principles?

We saw Collins's poetic enacted in both *The Woman in White* and *Armadale*. And *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede* also act upon the poetic principles Marian Evans formulated in her long reviewing practice for the *Westminster Review* (see Dillane 2013; Kuehn 2023; Kuehn 2016). In contrast, Corelli's novels were successful with the readers, who bought them in the thousands and led to reprint after reprint. So were Collins's, which were widely circulated, especially in serial format, accompanied by sometimes good and sometimes more critical reviews. And Eliot's were both successful with the reviewers and the readers.

Corelli's case shows that there are two kinds of "judgement": the reviewers' (and, later critics') and the readers', and it is only the former that has traditionally led to "distinction." George Eliot is part of the English literature canon while Marie Corelli is not. But is this type of judgement and its resultant distinction, especially that of critics and reviewers outranking readers, the "only" approach, let alone the "right" approach? Should we therefore not also judge whether an author possesses a theory of writing, and whether they practise this successfully? Should we not establish a "canon of popular literature" – giving Corelli as well as Collins a prominent place in it – which either values the poetic principles a writer upholds and enacts and/or takes account of readerly success and appreciation? Our answer is an unequivocal "yes."

Conclusion

This article has argued that literary distinction did not suddenly emerge with the rise of mass culture at the end of the nineteenth century, the arrival of the modernist writers, and the scholarly manifesto of "the Great Tradition." Rather, practices of evaluating and hierarchising literature long predated the modernist "high"/"low" divide. From the eighteenth century, critics and reviewers routinely translated questions of taste into judgements of quality vis-à-vis literature, establishing distinctions between "superior" and "inferior," "worthwhile" and "worthless," "innovative" and "derivative" works, that reveal literary value as an ongoing process of critical differentiation rather than a uniquely modern development.

Any list of established and called-upon dichotomies could be long – but it would ignore the very fact that the Victorian age especially already went beyond such a simplistic binary or mode of contrasting: as Wilkie Collins's and Marie Corelli's non–fictional writings show, the reading public was, from the 1850s onwards, significantly more complex and varied than a simplistic division into more and less discerning readers might indicate. Collins realised in 1858 that a new, hitherto "unknown" (and ignored) "public" was emerging which presented an opportunity for authors, as these readers – currently tied to cheap penny-fiction – would become powerful actors in the literary marketplace, especially if they could be taught to read for higher quality and spend their money accordingly. While Collins's essay, in many aspects, reeks of classism as it denigrates the working classes, his awareness of a democratising readership was prophetic, and his future writing efforts would gradually build in, and rely on, the existence of readers across the classes and, in the end, express an honest appreciation of readers from the lower social strata. By the 1890s, the "Unknown Public" had become Marie Corelli's "Great British Public": allegedly fully educated in reading, in taste and distinction and – as Corelli argued and, probably, fully believed – always wanting and deserving "the best," including her own novels. The twentieth century would, post-World War 1, as Nicola Humble (2004) has analysed, invent the notion of the "middlebrow" to further diversify the readership. Interestingly, Collins is sometimes subsumed in this middlebrow, rather than popular Victorian, classification (Radford 2009: 23). Corelli clearly thought she spoke to a more elevated readership, too, beyond the appeals of penny dreadfuls and shilling shockers. Was there an emerging middlebrow in the second half of the nineteenth century already? Is, indeed, the middlebrow the canonical popular?

But what, in the end, did even Collins and Corelli know of their readerships? It is difficult – nay, virtually impossible – to paint exact portraits of Collins's and Corelli's readers and generalise into an image of the makeup of the reading publics of the 1860s and 1890s, respectively. The reviewers provide us with one facet of readerly distinction only. On the other hand, research into specific "common" readers, as in Edward's analysis of readers of Corelli's *Thelma* (2025), shows varied opinions, diverse reading experiences and contradictions when it comes to judgement about a work's merits, shortcomings and, ultimately, quality. And how is it possible that what these two authors themselves considered their best books – *Armadale* and *Ardath*, respectively – were not the ones that automatically had the best reviews or the highest sales numbers? Were they too "complicated" for readers in intricate plotting and doubling or (quasi-) religious and aesthetic depth? With every step we take in scholarly research about actual readers, we are left with more questions than answers and new complexities.

Our case studies and lingering questions are a testament to the paradoxical nature of distinction, particularly when its principles are applied within the realm of popular culture. Though some scholars – like Bourdieu in *Distinction* (1984), John Fiske in *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989), and Stuart Hall in "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'" (1981) – would suggest that theories of distinction are inherently unfit for the purpose of studying popular culture, it would be a mistake to arrive at the conclusion that, therefore, the hierarchies of merit and taste can, and did, only exist in circles of "high" art. Victorian literary culture widely dismissed popular writing for a lack of literary merit that would warrant distinction – but failed to recognise that literary hierarchies *did* persist within popular culture, as evident in the very existence of a contemporary popular standard, or even "canon," that appraises some, such as Collins, whilst ousting others, such as Corelli. The broad adherence to, and projection of, distinction has clearly seeped into considerations of what defines "good" popular literature, resulting in an ultimate mismatch between critical appraisal and canonical recognition and what readers value and respond to. If we were to stay true to the definition of popular fiction, its markers of success and subsequent recognition would be a widespread readership and commercial success. If the "canon of popular fiction" would truly value these markers, Corelli would have been a more centrally recognised figure than Collins, as she sold, in her time, certainly more copies than Collins did in his day. Corelli's exclusion from "the popular canon," however, shows that mass appeal and a broad readership hold little value in considerations of canonical belonging.

Perhaps the larger issue here is that popular fiction cannot have unified principles of distinction because its recognised authorities of taste are split and, therefore, difficult to distil into clear markers of "good" and "bad." Both Collins and Corelli consistently shun the respected authorities of taste in their fiction. In light of their rejection of notions of a standard or exemplar, it is particularly unjust to ascribe the status of "almost literary" to Collins, and the status of "almost popular canon" is equally undeserving for Corelli. These projections of canonical distinction result in judging these works by inappropriate and, frankly, irrelevant standards for the very purpose of their form. The widespread success of both Collins and Corelli poses, in this way, a problem for literary authorities: by refusing to play by the established rules of cultural prestige, they challenge existing hierarchies with the result of consequently becoming excluded from canonical consideration and critical elevation.

These two authors hold a peripheral position in, or find themselves outside, the constructions of the canon in its raison d'être, ideology and eventual literary politics. This is not to suggest that the intellectual work done by Corelli and Collins, as they outline their writing philosophy and strategies, should equally be dismissed. Their outsider position among the allegedly "more respectable," or "higher–quality," peers should, instead, prompt us to question to what extent canonical constructions can truly reflect literary "greatness," or "good" writing.

Through Collins's and Corelli's examples, we must also recognise the rich diversity of aesthetic principles at work within the genre of Victorian popular fiction and take theories of popular writing more seriously. Distinction and notions of the canon should therefore always be met with scepticism about whose opinion this is meant to represent and, perhaps more importantly, whose standards are being upheld and to what purpose. Perhaps we readers and scholars of Victorian popular fiction can, in the end, take a page out of Collins's book and simply ignore the opinions of "dull people" who seek to govern our literary preferences and scholarly appreciations, irrespective of critical acclaim and canonical distinction, and decide for ourselves what "good" literature is.

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