“KITCHEN LITERATURE”: THE FEMALE SERVANT IN SENSATION FICTION

by

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(Under the Direction of Tricia Lootens)

ABSTRACT

This project considers how the sensation fiction genre popular in the 1860s fits into the canon of nineteenth-century literature and considers how its depiction of gender and class reflects its context of social change. Contemporary critics derided the genre as “Kitchen Literature” because of its popularity among the newly literate servant classes, but this term also reflects the prominence of the genre’s influential servant characters. I demonstrate how the female servant in particular is a key figure who embodies the most “sensational” aspects contemporary critics identified in sensation fiction in her subversion of the Victorian boundaries of class and gender. Through the lens of the female servant, I trace the origins of the sensation fiction genre to the more canonical novels *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* and argue to broaden the genre’s definition to include the sensation short story. I consider how, among the more well-known sensation titles, distinct character patterns emerge: the criminal servant, the actress-qua-servant, and the servant as spouse. Ultimately, my research suggests that, far from a fad of a single decade, sensation fiction has remained influential and its tropes are still found today in Neo-Victorian literature and popular culture.

INDEX WORDS: Sensation fiction, Nineteenth-century English literature, Domestic employees, Servants, Governesses, Maids, Class, Gender.

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DEDICATION

For Alexander, my motivation both intra- and extra-utero. And for Ben, who makes it all worthwhile.

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INTRODUCTION: "KITCHEN LITERATURE"

Among the paintings displayed at the 1865 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition was one fairly unassuming portrait by William Powell Frith. It depicts a woman posing next to a writing desk with a small stack of books and a manuscript on it. She wears a modest black dress and gazes directly at the viewer with a frank expression. The *Examiner*'s review of the Exhibition concluded with an assessment of this particular painting, condemning the figure as "look[ing] like a lady's maid whom one might think twice before engaging" ("Pictures" 364). The subject was the author Mary Elizabeth Braddon, who was known at the time as the "Queen of the circulating libraries," but whom the *Examiner* instead contemptuously dubbed "The Queen of Kitchen Literature" ("Pictures" 364).

"Kitchen Literature" was the derisive term that the *Examiner* coined to describe the genre of "sensation fiction" that became popular in the 1860s.[1] The term "kitchen literature" derived from sensation fiction's purported readership; as a *North British Review* article claimed in 1865, sensation novels "temporarily succeeded in making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing-room" (Rae 204). In other words, the sensation novels that the cook or the maid would read were now being read by the mistress of the house as well. (In 1864, the *Herts Guardian* somewhat cynically read the situation as "quasi-fashionable novelists… profiting by the discovery that there are a Lady Betty and a Lord Tomnoddy of the drawing-room

[1] Other publications, such as *Herts Guardian,* the *Morning Post,* and *Western Times* also subsequently employed the term.

with brains torpid as those of Betsey[sic] and Jeames[sic] in the kitchen" ["Kitchen Literature" 7]).

The *Examiner* critics did not consider "Kitchen Literature" to be particularly artful or literary, as an 1863 article entitled "Miss Braddon's Kitchen Stuff" suggests:

> To the compounding of "sensation novels" out of such stuff as we find in *Lady Audley's Secret* or *Aurora Floyd* there goes no genius of any sort. For the production of this sort of kitchen literature little more is wanted than the *cacoethes scribendi*, a coarse mind, avoidance of all contact with good literature, and a full dietary of unwholesome reading. (8)

The *Examiner* further bemoans the "devolution" of taste that was evident as both ladies and their domestic servants read the same titles only in different formats. Its 1867 review of a sensation novel remarks that

> Kitchen Literature… delights the imagination of a scullery maid, while it gratifies the frivolity of any Lady Aramina who, sharing the tastes of Betty the scullery maid, reads Betty's books when they are republished in three volumes octavo, and differs from her humble sister only in having had the opportunity of rising to a higher level of intelligence and not having used it. ("Review: *Leslie Tyrrell*" 500-501)

In fact, the popularity of the genre extended well beyond Lady Aramina and Betty the scullery maid; it transcended the boundaries of class, education, and gender. For instance, future prime minister William Gladstone was so engrossed in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860) that he cancelled a theatre engagement to finish it in a day, and the future King Edward VII was such a fan of Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) that he convinced the Dean of Westminster,

Arthur Stanley, to read it as well (Pykett, Collins 107; E. Jay viii). Thus, these books were hardly "designed only for the delight of empty men, fast ladies, and slow scullerymaids," as yet another *Examiner* review claimed ("Review: *Won By Beauty*" 428).

Despite the popularity and cultural impact of these novels in the nineteenth century, modern critics have been slow to embrace the serious study of sensation fiction. Only in recent decades have scholars begun to pay the genre the attention it merits and worked to dispel its still-lingering stigma of "Kitchen Literature." My project builds upon the critical work in this burgeoning field and suggests that the established body of sensation fiction can and should be expanded to include titles that are today considered "canonical" but which bear many of the hallmarks of what might have once been dismissed as "Kitchen Literature." I consider why this term, while originally intended to be derogatory, is actually an apt descriptor for a genre that had a prominent female servant readership and which featured key female servant characters. Until now, critics have failed to consider these works in light of their reputation as "Kitchen Literature." My project investigates why this term was applied to sensation fiction and how it reflects contemporary perceptions of what constitutes "literature" as well as social fears about who should be reading it.

As the body of critical work on sensation fiction continues to grow, the genre's subversive treatments of gender and class have emerged as sites of particular academic interest. My specific focus on the female servant, a key figure at the nexus of gender and class studies, will yield previously unexplored trends in the genre. Since its popularity among the female servant readership earned sensation fiction its reputation as "Kitchen Literature," it is surprising that this pivotal figure has escaped critical attention until now. True, as Patrick Brantlinger argued in his seminal article on sensation fiction, "the overriding feature of… the sensation novel

is the subordination of character to plot," but this does not necessarily come at the expense of attention to character development ("'Sensational'" 12). Even Brantlinger notes that in Wilkie Collins' preface to the first edition of *The Moonstone* (1868), the author states that:

> [i]n some of my former novels, the object proposed has been to trace the influence of circumstances upon character. In the present story I have reversed the process. The attempt made, here, is to trace the influence of character on circumstances. (Collins xxiii; Brantlinger, "Sensational" 12)

In fact, some of the most unforgettable characters of nineteenth-century literature are found in sensation fiction: characters such as Lady Audley, Count Fosco, or Isabel Vane.

While male servants are key characters within the genre, it is the female servants who have the most agency, and who are best able to cross social, familial, and class boundaries. (In *The Moonstone*, for example, Gabriel Betteredge may be a memorable and opinionated narrator, but it is Rosanna Spearman who propels the plot with her cross-class infatuation.) These understudied female servant characters represent one of the most "sensational" aspects of sensation fiction: its largely unprecedented depiction of power for women and for the servant classes. The sensation novels of the 1860s are subversive and revolutionary in a context of major culture change in England regarding class relations, the status of domestic workers, and increasing literacy among the working classes. The books show the influence of these social changes, and as popular media, they also play a role in shaping popular perception of class relations. My project investigates how the contemporary social context is treated in sensation texts as well as how the genre itself was received and critiqued, particularly for its polarizing depictions of class and gender.

Just as their readership extended across class lines, sensation novels often contain plots that rely on blurring the boundaries of class and the division between servants and masters. My study of these texts begins prior to the "sensational sixties" with a look at these themes as they initially appear in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), then examines the highly subjective nature of the divisions between mistress and maid in the "canonical" sensation novels *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) by Mary Elizabeth Braddon and *East Lynne* by Ellen Wood. Next, I consider Elizabeth Gaskell's understudied short story "The Grey Woman" (1861) as a sensational text that broaches the taboos of cross-class intimacy and equality. Finally, I will consider how the tropes that appear in these key texts and in other sensation fiction of the 1860s—the criminal servant, the servant poseur, and mistress/servant intimacy—drive the action of Sarah Waters' neo-Victorian novel *Fingersmith* (2002) and other twenty-first century analogues.

The plots of all these texts rely on the suggestion that the dichotomies of master and servant or upper-/middle- and working-class are not self-evident, but rather quite malleable and situation-specific. The extent to which sensation fiction relies on class identities being confused or upended, combined with the genre's much-remarked "kitchen" readership, suggests that "sensation fiction" could just as appropriately be deemed "servant fiction." Studying the key role female servants play in sensation fiction in light of contemporary concerns about gender and class reveals an alternative genealogy for the genre.

While servants were often a source of public attention during the Victorian era, some scholarship has suggested that their fictional counterparts became less prominent. In *The Servant's Hand* (1986), widely regarded as the seminal study of servants in the British novel,

Bruce Robbins claims that much of nineteenth-century fiction demonstrates a return to elements found in "Roman, Elizabethan, and Restoration comedy, to the much-repeated master-servant tropes and devices that earlier novelists had already borrowed from Shakespeare and Moliere" (xi). Robbins argues that the nineteenth-century novel reduces "the loquacious master-servant pair" found in eighteenth-century fiction to "an increasingly isolated servant chorus" and believes that "[a]s far as linguistic equipment is concerned" the Victorian novel has no counterpart to a master and servant fighting "on equal terms" like Pamela and Mr. B of Samuel Richardson's 1740 novel *Pamela* (79, 82). Despite his acknowledgment of Collins' frequent use of a servant narrator, Robbins sees a nineteenth-century trend toward partially or fully "silencing" the fictional servant. He describes a move from the eighteenth-century "picaresque narrator toward the marginality and muteness of servants" until "by the nineteenth century the servant observer tended to separate off from the bourgeois actor, and to have less and less right to speak about an action in which he or she was less and less involved" (Robbins 113). He claims:

> In the Victorian novel, servants tend to be less central, less distinct, more engulfed in their masters' characters and interests, in the plot machinery, in "symbolic background." Titular servant protagonists like Pamela disappear or are gentrified into governesses. Verbal confrontation diminishes in length, frequency, animation, and centrality. If servants are addressed, it is often only in such mute or monosyllabic commands as Eliot requests [in her *Pall Mall* article]. (Robbins 79)

To support his position, Robbins points to novels in the realistic mode by Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, and Gaskell. With the sole exception of Collins' *The Moonstone*, Robbins ignores

sensation novels. My study of the roles of servants in these texts will correct this oversight and provide a more complete picture of the changing servant figure in Victorian fiction, and correct the gender imbalance in Robbins' largely androcentric study.

Elizabeth Langland's book *Nobody's Angels: Middle-class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (1995) has already filled in some of the gaps in Robbins' book by studying both literary and historical female servants, though she, like Robbins, primarily considers novels of realism. She briefly touches on two sensation novels, *The Moonstone* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, and explores how they offer subversive reinterpretations of the mistress of the house as a Victorian "Angel in the House." Surprisingly, Langland does not address the role of the female servant characters in the same context. Langland sees a distinct lack of intermarriage among the classes in nineteenth-century realistic fiction, specifically claiming that "the story of the working-class heroine who secures her master's hand in marriage… disappears from the novel" after Richardson's *Pamela* (1). Jane Eyre and Becky Sharp are excluded, since "they are educated and impoverished gentlewomen forced to the expedient of working" and are not working-class by birth (1). A brief look at sensation titles offers a rebuttal to her claims and highlights the need to expand the literary limits of her focus: in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Octoroon* (1862), Cora is a slave by birth who marries her master; in Wilkie Collins' *The New Magdalen* (1873) Mercy, a low-born reformed prostitute, marries Lady Janet's heir; and, in Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Grey Woman," although it is an untraditional marriage, the maid Amante becomes "husband" to her mistress. In fact, cross-class romance proves to be one of the more "sensational" topics that recurs in the genre.

Even now, critics continue to ignore the importance of the servant figure in Victorian fiction. In her 2008 monograph, Rebecca Stern maintains that in nineteenth-century fiction,

"there are exceptions, of course, but generally domestic servants appear only on the margins of canonical texts, as part of the scenery against which the central characters act" (52). Many critics, like Stern, consider servant characters only as an afterthought in part of a broader study and thus maintain a point of view that has not yet been adequately challenged. My project redresses the lack of consideration that sensation texts have previously received in the extant studies of the literary servant, which is itself a field that merits increased attention. Most modern studies of the nineteenth-century servant do not focus specifically on the female servant, despite the crucial role that gender played in determining a servant's status in the domestic household and the literary text. One exception to this trend is studies of the governess, who has remained a figure of particular interest to academics.[2] However, the lady's maid and the maid-of-all-work, who prove to be equally crucial figures in sensation fiction, have not yet received adequate scholarly attention.

Sensation fiction as a genre only began receiving renewed critical attention in the past three decades. Two of the major texts that sparked the critical reevaluation were Winifred Hughes' *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (1980) and Patrick Brantlinger's article "What's so 'Sensational' about the Sensation Novel?" (1982). Hughes' book establishes Wilkie Collins, Charles Reade, Ellen Wood, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon as the genre's major authors, and suggests that what Brantlinger called "a minor subgenre" was actually quite innovative and radically changed the "reigning domestic novel" ("'Sensational'" 1; W. Hughes 37). Later, D. A. Miller's book *The Novel and the Police* (1988) considers the role of detection and policing in Collins' *The Moonstone* and *The Woman and White*, and although it notes how gender and class factor into middle-class surveillance, it does not specifically address

[2] For one recent example, see Cecilia Wadsö Lecaros' *Victorian Governess Novel* (2001), which explores the "governess novel" as a genre unto itself.

how the female servant serves this function within the middle-class home. Anthea Trodd's *Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel* (1989) discusses how sensation plots rely on the secrets of the domestic home and how the household both resists and relies on their exposure. Trodd explores the role of servants as both "household spies" and storytellers. Trodd's book offers one of the most comprehensive studies of the female servant in sensation fiction to date, and my study builds upon it by studying the female servant not only in her criminal capacity, but as a complex figure who plays multiple roles in the genre.

Following these influential works of the 1980s, critical studies of the sensation novel have flourished, with attention being paid to books once popular but previously ignored within the academy. Lyn Pykett's book *The "Improper" Feminine* (1992) studies how the sensation novel connects with New Woman novels in their depiction of unconventional women and, as the title suggests, the idea of "the improper feminine," although it limits its consideration of femininity largely to the middle class and does not fully recognize the different gender expectations for women of the servant class. Ann Cvetkovitch's *Mixed Feelings* from the same year explores the politics and construction of "affect" as depicted in sensation novels. While Cvetkovitch examines how the mistresses of the house in sensation texts subvert gender norms, my reading will bring the maids of the house into consideration and thus further develop and build upon the themes Cvetkovitch explores of gender and power dynamics within the middle-class home. "The Kitchen Police," a 2000 article by Brian W. McCuskey, elaborates on D. A. Miller's work but offers specific consideration of how household servants "police" the Victorian household perhaps more fully than the police force itself. However, as in most studies of the servant in the genre, McCuskey's article treats male and female servants as a single group and does not distinguish the role that gender plays. Andrew Mangham specifically considers gender

in *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction* (2007), which compares Victorian medical and scientific theory to the depictions of the criminal woman in both sensation fiction and actual criminal trials. While much recent critical work on sensation fiction has focused on women, and the servant has emerged separately as a key figure within the genre, there has not yet been a work that links the genre, gender, and class aspects together in a specific study of the female servant.

Part of the reason sensation fiction was denied serious critical consideration until recent decades is that the genre was relatively short-lived and remains notoriously hard to define. The term "sensation fiction" was only coined in the early 1860s, and by the end of the decade, the genre's popularity had already faded.[3] Contemporary critics had difficulty pinpointing exactly how to characterize the genre. Some seized on the physical "sensations" the texts produced on reading, as when *Punch* parodied the genre's reputation for "making the Flesh Creep, causing the Hair to stand on End, [and] giving Shocks to the Nervous System" ("Sensation Times" 193). Other critics focused on the genre's recurrent use of certain plot types: H. L. Mansel, for example, grouped sensation fiction under the umbrella terms "bigamy novels" and "newspaper novels" (490; 501). Sensation texts were "newspaper novels" because, as Richard D. Altick explores in *Victorian Studies in Scarlet* (1970), they often offered a fictional extension of the coverage of murder stories in English newspapers (8). The literary critics of the *Examiner*

[3] There is much debate about when the term "sensation novel" originated. The OED cites 1863 as the first use of the term "sensation novel," with the term "sensation-drama" said to predate it by three years. However, in *Deadly Encounters*, Richard D. Altick cites a *Morning Herald* article from 25 August, 1861 that refers to "sensation novels," and also notes that a Margaret Oliphant review titled "Sensation Novels" appeared in *Blakwood's Magazine* in May 1862 (147). In *Victorian Sensation Fiction*, Andrew Radford elaborates on the debate surrounding the use of the term in an Oliphant review of Collins' early novels from 1855, and in an 1856 review of Caroline Clive's *Paul Ferroll* (1855) (173-74).

coined the term "Kitchen Literature" as a way to ridicule sensation fiction's readership, but I suggest that this term also offers a useful lens through which to consider the genre. While sensation fiction does deliver "shocks" through bigamy, theft, murder, and blackmail, as Jonathan Loesburg notes, "sensation novels evoke their most typical moments of sensation response from images of a loss of class identity" (117). When such images are studied across a number of sensational texts, patterns emerge in which "kitchen characters"—female servants—are central.

Like their nineteenth-century counterparts, modern critics have struggled to define sensation fiction, particularly since its texts are usually seen as hybrids: part mystery, part romance, part melodrama, part political parable. Brantlinger suggests that sensation fiction has antecedents in genres as varied as the Gothic novel, "silver fork" fiction, the Newgate novel and "sensational" journalism ("'Sensational'" 1). Other modern critics, like D. A. Miller and Ann Cvetkovitch, have considered sensation fiction in light of its most notable descendants, detective and mystery fiction. But while detective fiction has the famous motif of "the butler did it," this is only possible because in its antecedent, sensation fiction, the maid did it first.

My focus on how female servant characters embody the most recognizable tropes of the genre prompts a reconsideration of how sensation fiction is characterized. The centrality of the female servant to sensation fiction, given the genre's focus on class, its boundaries and its construction, suggest a key element heretofore missing from modern critics' answers to Brantlinger's question "What's so sensational about the sensation novel?" My consideration of the servant as crucial to the sensational plot also allows for a closer look at other texts from the 1860s that have not previously been recognized as exemplars of the genre, such as Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Grey Woman," and earlier, more typically canonical texts, such as *Jane Eyre.* At

the same time, by narrowing my scope to the key figure of the female servant, I am also able to explore how the texts under consideration were perceived as addressing a new kind of reading public—including the lady's maid, the housekeeper, and other members of the servant classes.

My second chapter considers how social reform and cultural change in the 1860s led to increased servant literacy and subsequent anxiety over the taste levels and artistic merits of English literature. Some contemporary critics attacked sensation fiction using highly charged, class-specific terminology and expressed a fear that the leveling of literary taste across class lines might lead to the devolution of the novel form. Others feared that the sinful acts depicted in sensation novels might inspire impressionable servant readers to take part in criminal activities. As the population of women working as domestic employees in England reached an all-time high, debates arose about the humane treatment, education, and rights of female servants. Periodicals and tracts specifically targeted at a female domestic audience cautioned their readers to be content with their lot in life, not to read novels, and to be willingly subservient to their mistresses. However, the divisions between maid and mistress became increasingly blurry as both women would often be reading the same novel in their respective parts of the house.

In order to fully explore the multifaceted relationship between the female servant and her employer in the literature of the period, my project next considers two of the most prominent domestic employees in English literature: Jane Eyre and Nelly Dean. Although *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* were published well before the boom of sensation fiction in the 1860s, Wilkie Collins' first sensation novel, *Basil*, was published in 1852, only five years after the Brontës' novels. The "Victorian Gothic" mode in which the Brontës wrote their novels is one of the primary antecedents of sensation fiction, and many of the tropes remain the same. *Jane Eyre*, for example, is a "bigamy novel" featuring a madwoman, and *Wuthering Heights* contains the threat

of adultery in its story of a class-climbing criminal servant. Contemporary critics reacted to the Brontës' work in a similar fashion to the later critics of sensation fiction. *The North American Review* described *Jane Eyre* as "a great favorite… in the worshipful society of governesses," suggesting a wide domestic employee readership, and *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper* declared *Wuthering Heights* a "novelty" in terms of genre, while *Graham's Lady's Magazine* saw it as "a compound of vulgar depravity and unnatural horrors" ("Novels" 356; *Douglas Jerrold's* 77; *Lady Graham's* 60). Paramount among the "unnatural horrors" that both novels expose are the ambiguity of class and social status within the middle-class home. Both texts also feature servant narrators, which, as previously noted, would become a mainstay of sensational fiction. By telling the story of their employers in their own words and from their own point of view, Nelly Dean and Jane Eyre exercise a kind of control over their employers' lives.

My fourth chapter explores the trope of the servant as psychological "master" over her own employer as it is manifest in a canonical sensation text, *Lady Audley's Secret*. The lady's maid Phoebe threatens to expose Lady Audley's past while using her mistress in her attempt to climb the social ladder herself. Much like her mistress, Phoebe refuses to be contained by class boundaries, but she does not use madness as an alibi; she sees herself as simply a deserving opportunist. Critics have largely ignored the key role Phoebe plays as a kind of Lady Audley manquée who, unlike her mistress, is not punished for her crimes. My study of Phoebe also considers similar female servant figures—like Hortense of *Bleak House* and Madame de la Rougierre from Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas* (1865)—who undermine their mistresses as a way to gain money, status, or, most surprisingly, as a form of sexual jealousy. Although Lady Audley has two husbands, the novel suggests that her most intimate relationship is with Phoebe, who is most often alone with her lady and is privy to her secrets. Lady Audley shows jealous concern when

Phoebe expresses her wish to marry Luke, although Lady Audley becomes part of the marriage ceremony by proxy by insisting that Phoebe wear one of her dresses. The jealous mistress-maid relationship is reversed in Dickens' *Bleak House*: by replacing her lady's maid Hortense with another woman, Lady Dedlock drives her former maid to commit murder and frame her mistress for it. Perhaps because *Bleak House* is not a "true" sensation novel, Hortense, unlike most other criminal servants found in the genre, is ultimately punished for her crimes by the law. My look at the depiction of the servant with aspirations to "master" considers the diversity of the character type and its function within the text, and analyzes how it fits into broader patterns of the genre as well as contemporary cultural trends.

The following chapter explores the counterpart to the servant "master": the master who becomes a "servant." Many novels rely on non-servant characters who "perform" the role of servant as actors would, since they find the role of servant so paradoxically powerful. My focal point here is Isabel Vane's role in *East Lynne* as the estate's former mistress who returns disfigured and disguised as a governesses for her own children. Her self-chosen dive down the social ladder is often seen as prolonged penance for the sins she committed while still a "lady," but she also finds a surprising amount of power from her new position as an employee in her former home. She may be denied access to some of the rooms and ornaments she once found precious, but in her role as governess she learns more about her household, her husband, and her children than she previously could. I consider *East Lynne* in the context of subsequent sensation novels that also feature "actresses" who "perform" servitude or service as a means to an end. For example, the character Magdalen from Wilkie Collins' *No Name* (1862) is born to a wealthy middle-class family, but she finds that playing the part of a governess, and later, a maid, allows her access to people and places she was denied as a middle-class woman. Similarly, Lydia Gwilt

of Collins' *Armadale* (1866) is former con artist who finds that assuming the guise of a servant affords her the tools by which she can exact revenge and marry for money. Surprisingly, like both Magdalen and Isabel, she is depicted as a sympathetic character, and she is the character with whom the reader is allowed to best identify. The "penance" that these characters must perform as faux domestics is mitigated by the powers they gain as servants.

The sixth chapter discusses the depiction of intimacy and marriage between a servant and master and how this relates to the suggestion of class equality, using Elizabeth Gaskell's novella "The Grey Woman" as my central text. Female servants have appeared as objects of sexual pursuit in the novel since Richardson's *Pamela*, but romantic intimacy between masters and their female employees remained taboo even as late as 1898, as evidenced by Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). As I have demonstrated, sensational plot twists often rely on the explicit revelation that class boundaries are not innate but simply cultural constructs. My study of "The Grey Woman" considers it as a work in the sensation mode as evidenced by the unusual relationship between Amante, a lady's maid, and Anna, her mistress. They not only work together as an equal partnership but also pass as man and wife, a largely unprecedented fictional relationship that suggests the possibility of an alternative model of marriage that startlingly subverts gender and class norms. There are brief scenes of mistress-maid intimacy in other novels, such as *Desperate Remedies* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, that I use for comparison. I also turn to historical cross-class marriages like that of Arthur Munby and Hannah Cullwick, in addition to other contemporary lesbian "marriages" like that of sculptor Lady Louisa Ashburton and her "hubbie" Harriet Hosmer (200).

My final chapter considers how Sarah Waters' twenty-first-century "neo-sensation" novel *Fingersmith* both faithfully maintains and reimagines the tropes of 1860s sensation fiction as

explored in the previous chapters. Waters' novels describe an "alternate reality" where maids and mistresses share intimacy on more equal terms—a scenario which, I argue, Gaskell's "The Grey Woman" prefigures. Waters' text depicts a more explicit sexual relationship between the women and allows for the former mistress and maid to remain happy in their "marriage" relationship at the end. The tropes of the mistress disguised as a maid, the maid using and controlling her mistress, the servant spy, and the question of how far identity is determined by biology all are key to the novel's plot. The story is told in the alternating voices of Sue, the "servant," and Maud, the "mistress," although their identities eventually become so tangled and intertwined that the boundaries of class and profession are ultimately lost. This chapter concludes with a brief look at modern-day analogues to sensation fiction and how we reinterpret and respond to the same tropes today.

Each of these chapters investigates how the fictional servant responds to and even anticipates the key cultural, economic, and political changes the 1860s. My project further explores how the representative tropes of sensation fiction evolved from earlier "Kitchen Literature" and how they are manifest in later novels, even as servants themselves become less common. My consideration of a still under-studied genre from a class- and gender-based perspective sheds new light on why these works remained controversial but popular both above and below stairs.

CHAPTER 2

"LET NOTHING EVER INDUCE YOU TO READ NOVELS": SERVANTS AND SENSATIONALISM IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

By the mid-1870s, after the initial popularity of sensation novels had waned, the *Examiner* had largely retired the term "Kitchen Literature" as a byword for sensation fiction. By 1874, the term had found a new meaning, as evidenced by a *Morning Post* review of a reference book titled *Things a Lady Would Like to Know Concerning Domestic Management and Expenditure.* The review describes the book as "kitchen literature," noting that "[t]he 'angels of our household' are taught in it not only how to cook, but how to pray; how to go to market, and how to marry; how to travel, and how to dress; how to attend to a garden, and how to set a good example" ("Things" 3). Still, in other contexts, contemporary critics continued to accuse the sensational "Kitchen Literature" of the previous decade of poisoning its own readership of "angels of [the] household" by teaching sinful behavior and instilling bad morals.

Many critics feared that rather than teaching women how to cook, pray, and marry, sensation novels were a source of information on crimes such as bigamy, adultery, and murder. In 1864, the *Christian Remembrancer* denounced the ways that the sensation novel "stimulates a vulgar curiosity, weakens the established rules of right and wrong, touches, to say the least, upon things illicit, raises false and vain expectations, and draws a wholly false picture of life" ("Our Female" 210). One review of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*, for example, expressed the fear that readers might begin to imitate the shocking behaviors depicted in such novels:

> we foresee that the effect of familiarizing the public mind with highly wrought scenes of misdirected passion, will in all probability lead to the extension of sensation plots into a region of social experiences at present almost entirely appropriated by French authors. ("Review: *Aurora Floyd*" 176)

This danger is said to be particularly great due to the vulnerability of sensation fiction's readership, since "the influence of a pernicious literature, however well disguised, cannot fail to have an insidious effect upon the class of minds chiefly devoted to sensation reading" ("Review: *Aurora Floyd*" 176). The "class" of sensation novel readers is often invoked, and it is somewhat surprising how often the class of the author is cited as well as evidence of the genre's degeneracy.

As evidenced by the review of her portrait at the 1865 Exhibition, Mary Elizabeth Braddon in particular was often attacked on the basis of class. Contemporary critics variously characterized her as a servant, a spy, and a criminal. In an 1865 article on Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Henry James conflates what he perceives as the "lower class" characteristics of the author's work with the character of the author herself. He claims that Braddon's novels

> betray an intimate acquaintance with that disorderly half of society which becomes every day a greater object of interest to the orderly half. They intimate that, to use an irresistible vulgarism, Miss Braddon "has been there." The novelist who interprets the illegitimate world to the legitimate world, commands from the nature of his position a certain popularity. Miss Braddon deals familiarly with gamblers, and betting-men, and flashy reprobates of every description. She knows much that ladies are not accustomed to know, but that they are apparently very glad to learn. The names of drinks, the technicalities of the faro-table, the

> lingo of the turf, the talk natural to a crowd of fast men at supper, when there are no ladies present but Miss Braddon, the way one gentleman knocks another down—all these things… our sisters and daughters may learn from these works. (115-16)

James sees the books as the instigators of dangerous blurring between opposing cultural boundaries. He suggests that the books offer middle-class readers a fairly unprecedented (and vulgar) "intimacy" with the lower classes, with the suggestion of criminality and vice inherent to the latter group. The lower classes, like the books that depict them, are "illegitimate" and uncivilized. Equally shocking, the books will provide female readers with forbidden knowledge of male behavior. James suggests that Braddon reveals her own immorality through her books' content, which may poison other, more respectable women as well.

An *Examiner* review of Braddon's *Henry Dunbar* (1864) had already voiced a similar sentiment, declaring the novel to be "a highly-seasoned dish of tainted meat that has been already contrived and served up for a kitchen dinner by the great chef of the kitchen maids, and is now brought upstairs for the delectation of coarse appetites in the politer world" ("Kitchen Literature" 404). The gendered and classist language in the description of Braddon as "the great chef of the kitchen maids" is particularly telling. In a review of a novel about a servant who steals the identity of his former master, Braddon is explicitly figured as a servant herself, cooking "tainted meat" for her fellow servants as well as the gentry. The class-bending content of the novel's plot is used as evidence of the author's class-climbing and the genre's class-corrupting potential. Even decades after the heyday of sensation fiction, Braddon herself was conflated with the class-crossing genre with which she was most identified. The 1887 *Blackburn Standard* article "Miss Braddon At Home" describes how "Miss Braddon is not only a novelist, she is a house-keeper;

her controlling hand is seen and felt in the kitchen as well as in the drawing-room of Lichfield-house" (2). The phrasing here seems to deliberately echo W. Fraser Rae's famous claim from 1865 that sensation fiction "[made] the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing-room," suggesting that Braddon herself similarly straddles both worlds in her roles as both "novelist" and "house-keeper." As late as the twentieth century, critics still used similarly classed terminology when describing the sensation phenomenon; one 1920 literature survey described sensation novels as a "species of absurd fiction" featuring "simple-minded plots" and a "governess mentality" (Elton 220; qtd. in Radford 25). Part of the "governess mentality" identified here may stem from the genre's inspiration from earlier servant-narrated novels such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*.

In James' review, Braddon is described as a kind of spy reporting back what she sees and learns from a "forbidden" culture, revealing the secrets of one class group to another. This is in keeping with prevalent concerns regarding servants at the time; Trodd even suggests that it was ultimately the desire to maintain privacy that caused the demand for live-in servants to decline after the initial boom from the 1850s to the 1870s (50).

Part of the increased visibility of servants in sensation fiction can be attributed to contemporary social changes in England. Domestic service was a common profession for women at the time, and the greatest leap in the nineteenth-century British servant population occurred during the height of sensation fiction's popularity. From 1851 to 1861, the domestic servant population in England increased by nearly a quarter, and by the end of that period, the estimated 1,123,428 domestic servants accounted for 14.3% of the labor force (McBride 142). Between 1861 and 1871, the servant population increased nearly as much again, and by the end of this decade, an estimated 1,387,872 servants made up 15.3% of the work force (McBride 142).

By 1871, one out of every eight women in England and Wales was a domestic servant (Jordan 80).

During these decades of growth of the servant population, more attention was being paid to servant welfare, and laws were passed to ensure good treatment of domestic employees. In 1851, the Poor Law Board passed an amendment requiring that masters treat servants or apprentices humanely and provide "necessary Food, Clothing, or Lodging" or face imprisonment (Horn 120; Poor Law Board 19). Harriet Martineau's 1859 essay "Female Industry" called attention to the bleak working conditions of employed women, paying particular attention to female servants. She describes how difficult it is for a female domestic to marry and leave her station and even suggests that the hard labor and low wages of their work drives them mad, claiming:

> The physician says that, on the female side of the lunatic asylums, the largest class, but one, of the insane are maids of all work (the other being governesses). The causes are obvious enough: want of sufficient sleep from late and early hours, unremitting fatigue and hurry, and, even more than these, anxiety about the future from the smallness of the wages. (Martineau, "Female" 307)

Several new laws and social changes of the 1860s attempted to redress the grievances of domestic employees and other members of the working class. The first attempted "servant union," the London and Provincial Domestic Servants' Union, was formed in 1861 (Huggett 160).[4]

This was also a time of political unrest: one key issue was suffrage for women and members of the working class. In 1866, the National Society for Women's Suffrage was

[4] The union did not prove popular, however, and only claimed about a thousand members by 1894 (Huggett 160).

established, indicating the growing dissatisfaction with the status quo among those disenfranchised not only through the demarcations of class but gender. The female servant was doubly disenfranchised. The Reform Act of 1867 extended the voting rights of the upper and middle classes to the working class, a crucial recognition of equal legal rights across class boundaries, although voting remained a male-only privilege.

Gender and class issues remained at the forefront of debates about employment and education reform. In her 1868 tract "The Education and Employment of Women," for example, Josephine Butler insists on the need for more job opportunities for women outside of domestic service in order to decrease competition and improve the working conditions for current domestic workers. Butler describes the "surprise" and "despair" she feels on learning that "*three hundred women*" answered an advertisement for an "*unpaid*" nursery governess position (3, italics original). Women were often perceived as qualified to do little else, and there were few other positions they could take and still be considered respectable. After the 1870 Education Act, however, improvements in educational opportunities superseded the former appeal of the "education" that employment as a domestic servant offered, and within a decade, the numbers of domestic employees began to fall (Horn 25). In the 1870s, one proposed (but rarely implemented) solution to servant scarcity was the recruitment of "lady helps," women from the upper class who were willing to work as high-ranking servants (Horn 29). Part of the unpopularity of this concept may be due to the ambiguous nature of a "lady help"—despite the terminology, in a world of strict class boundaries, one cannot simultaneously be both "the lady" and "the help" within a household.

Throughout the nineteenth century, governesses present a similar quandary, being genteel ladies yet household employees, a key plot point in both *Jane Eyre* and *East Lynne*. The

problem is addressed in Elizabeth Rigby's review of *Jane Eyre* for the *Quarterly Review*; she claims that "the real definition of a governess, in the English sense, is a being who is our equal in birth, manners, and education, but our inferior in worldly wealth" (507). Even if the governess is recognized as the master's "equal in birth," her servant status undermines her former claims to gentility. Thus, in John Brougham's 1849 play adaptation of *Jane Eyre*, when Rochester announces his plan to marry "the governess," members of the aristocratic Ingram family declare the very idea "'revolting!'" (101).

The anxieties about women's class mobility also had political origins. While romance and marriage between master and servant is one of the more sensational tropes of sensation fiction, it should be noted that at the time, wifehood itself was often likened to servitude. Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill used the servant as a metaphor for the limited and subservient role expected of the Victorian wife. In an 1851 *Westminster Review* article, Harriet Taylor describes the "affection" a man claims to have for his wife as akin to the "feelings [that] often exist… between a master and his servants" (307). Similarly, in *On the Subjection of Women* (1869), John Stuart Mill sees "the wife [as] the actual bond servant of her husband: no less so, as far as legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so called" (57). Mill also wryly notes the apparent redundancy of a woman's reading and writing, if she is destined to mere servitude. If women are to be left no other choice but the subservient position of wife, then "[w]omen who read, much more women who write, are, in the existing constitution of things, a contradiction and a disturbing element: and it was wrong to bring women up with any acquirements but those of an odalisque, or of a domestic servant" (Mill 54). The issue Mill raises here is echoed by other critics of the time who address the problem of the literate female servant.

Literacy among domestic employees and other members of the working class was a particular source of anxiety among critics in the mid-nineteenth century. Patrick Brantlinger's book *The Reading Lesson* traces the origin of the perceived "threat of mass literacy" in part to the mass popularity of William Harrison Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* serial (1839-40), one of sensation fiction's direct predecessors (*Reading* 71). In 1840, a valet killed his master, Lord William Russell, by cutting his throat, and later claimed *Jack Sheppard* had given him the idea (72). This was seen as proof by some contemporary critics of the evil such novels could inspire in impressionable servants, and The Lord Chamberlain's Office banned any further play productions of *Jack Sheppard* (72). Even during the "sensational sixties," critics continued to insist upon this alleged correlation from twenty years prior. One reviewer opined:

> We have always understood that "Jack Sheppard" and the "Newgate Calendar," which professed to be the record and illustration of crime and not the inculcation of it, were, nevertheless, the favourite reading of those who warred upon society; and that, so far from the pictures which these books exhibited of the sad results of a misspent life warning others by the examples they contained, they possessed a strange fascination for criminals of all classes, and in many instances actually tempted their readers into the vicious life they portrayed. ("Review: *Aurora Floyd*" 175-76)

In an effort to keep potentially incendiary texts out of servant hands, nineteenth-century pamphlets and periodicals published for a servant audience often included warnings and parables about the insidious dangers of novel-reading. An 1849 issue of *Servants' Magazine* (founded 1838; relaunched January 1867) includes a brief vignette titled "Things Proper to be Known" in which Mrs. Trueberry commends her maid Martha for "'refusing to read novels'" as "'they are in

general mere trash, and many a young person has been deeply injured by attending to them'" (133).[5] Another instructive tale titled "Novels" in an 1852 edition of the *Servants' Magazine* has sisters Charlotte and Maria arguing over whether the latter should read a novel. Charlotte earnestly reminds her of their father's words:

> "[L]et nothing ever induce you to read novels. They are the bane of servants, and have ruined many an industrious youth and maiden. What use is it to fill the head with high flying stories and things which are never likely to happen, or if they do, generally turn out unhappily; and what good will it be to read about the manners and ways of people, with whom we have nothing to do, and about out-of-the-way doings, which tend to make us dissatisfied with the homes which God has given us…. Shun novels as you would the plague or ardent spirits, or play-houses." (85)

Chief among the "high flying stories and things which are never likely to happen" is the suggestion that servants could rise above their station and become the equals, or even the betters, of their employers. However, this is a scenario that sensation novels will revisit time and again. The fictional tales printed in *Servants' Magazine* were far less inspiring. For example, in the story "Spare Moments" (1861), Mary the maid is rewarded for using her "spare moments" to learn good penmanship when her mistress's daughter agrees to tutor her in writing and ciphering, and in "The Irish Servant" (1862) because good Kitty is such a perfect servant (save for her Irish accent), a master carpenter falls in love with her. The most that a servant can hope for in a *Servants' Magazine* story is the approval of her mistress or a reasonably advantageous marriage

[5] Also tellingly known as *The Female Domestics' Instructor*, the *Servants' Magazine* included recipes, cooking and cleaning tips, and home remedies for female domestic servants.

within or near her own class stratum, but the servant characters of sensation novels often achieved far loftier goals.

During the 1860s, *Servants' Magazine* struggled to appeal to its intended audience. In January of 1863, the magazine introduced illustrations, which the editors hoped would help fulfill their wish "that upon the book-shelf of every female servant the 'Servants' Magazine' would be found" ("Preface" 5). The magazine also took particular pains to dissuade its readers from reading sensational novels. In the previous decade, many of the reviews in *Servants' Magazine* concerned tracts, hymnbooks, and collections of religious parables, but in the 1860s, the magazine made an effort to review more works of fiction, although they were generally didactic morality tales. One representative book reviewed is "Ellen's Trials," which tells the tale of the nursemaid Ellen, who "subdues" the child in her charge through love, and resists vanity as other servants encourage her to spend money on dresses. With stories such as this offered as the alternative, it is little wonder that sensation novels proved so popular with the female servant audience.

In one *Servants' Magazine* story from 1862, a wise female character voices the magazine's stance on appropriate literature when she laments, "Now, as I fear many young people do not value the precious gift of reading, but rather spend their time over idle and pernicious books, than in improving their minds by useful knowledge, and especially in reading the words of Holy Writ, which can make them both wise and happy" ("My Old Chest" 261). A similar story details how a mistress who read novels aloud to her servants "instill[ed] poison into the minds of those young people; for as surely as poison destroys human life, so does immoral reading the purity of the soul" ("Daughters" 6). The tale itself is fairly standard for its topic: the narrator learns a lesson about the corrupting power of reading when her sister is lured into evil

by bad novels and winds up as a sickly prostitute. What is perhaps most surprising about this story is the familiarity with such "poison" that it demonstrates. The narrator advises her readers:

> At all risks give up those poisonous [serial stories], for I tell you with sorrow and with shame, that the very first time I had a thought which I would have blushed to own to my sister or my departed mother, I had been reading a low bad novel. Both the hero and the heroine held loose and dangerous principles; an elopement and duel took place, but no matter, I identified myself with the beautiful Flora, the heroine, and was soon on the look-out for Theodore, picturing to myself the rival killed, the father who opposed the match dead, and all obstacles being surmounted, by entering on a lie of unbroken happiness, and dazzling pleasure. Rapid and most specious was the progress of the evil, all my ideas of virtue were distorted, nothing under the colouring of love seemed unlawful, and I speedily became discontented, and impatient of control. ("Daughters" 7)

The level of detail offered here suggests a sensational plot more engaging than the framing narrative itself. Despite—or perhaps because of—warnings against novel-reading, servant readership would continue to grow.

Prior to the repeal of the stamp duty in 1855 and the paper duty in 1860, novel-reading would have proved too expensive for the majority of servants. However, in the 1860s, sensation novels were often first serialized in penny weeklies that specifically catered to a working-class audience. Wilkie Collins dubbed this readership "the unknown public" and made an admittedly conservative estimate that five of the top "penny-novel-Journals" might boast a readership of about three million people ("Unknown Public" 218). Collins notes that while no one of his

acquaintance will admit to being a penny journal subscriber, he has "heard theories started as to the probable existence of penny-journals in kitchen dressers" ("Unknown Public" 218).

The parables and sermonizing of *The Servants' Magazine* proved unpopular with its intended audience, and instead, female servants in particular were drawn to magazines like *Bow Bells* (1862), which would include needlework and dress patterns along with serial fiction (L. James 358).[6] Contributors to serials included authors such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon, although she did not often publish under her own name in such a context. Braddon confided in a letter to Edward Bulwer-Lytton that she produced "an immense deal of work which nobody ever hears of, for Half penny & penny journals. This work is most piratical stuff, & would make your hair stand on end, if you were to see it" (rpt. in Wolff 11). Braddon's book *The Octoroon*, for example, was first anonymously serialized in The *Halfpenny Journal*, which bore the appropriate subtitle *A Magazine for All Who Can Read* (Harrison 212). Braddon's letter suggests that the working-class readership desires certain recurring themes in their serial fiction; she claims, "The amount of crime, treachery, murder, slow poisoning, & general infamy required by the Half penny reader is something terrible" (rpt. in Wolff 11). Yet Braddon's novels that were published under her own name, which were ostensibly geared more toward a middle-class readership, contain plots that rely largely on the same "piratical stuff." Thus, as previously noted, although her readers may not have realized it, the same author was being read simultaneously both in "the Kitchen" and "the Drawing-room."

At a time when increased literacy among the lower classes threatened the upper and middle classes' perception of exclusivity, the popularity of the sensation novel concurrently made certain kinds of "lower class" reading palatable to the wealthy. As Graham Law explains,

[6] Louis James suggests that despite its claimed readership of 6,000, *Servants' Magazine* had "a probable circulation of about 4,000, mostly in London" (355).

the genre brought "what had hitherto been seen as the proletarian themes of violence, infidelity, and insanity into bourgeois settings, but also… encourag[ed] the middle classes to participate in the proletarian mode of weekly serialization" (24). One 1863 *Living Age* article on Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ellen Wood satirically suggests that since "[Braddon's] novels are of the school of Mr. G. W. M. Reynolds, literature of the kitchen as it used to be," then "to give currency to them among educated readers without placing the name of Reynolds on a level with that of Sir Walter Scott, Miss Austen, or Mr. Dickens, is a gross injustice" ("Mrs. Wood" 99). In this reviewer's opinion, what "used to be" kitchen literature has now infected the upstairs rooms of the house. The article warns that penny-weekly writers would soon be considered on par with Shakespeare if the trend of "coarse fare [being] sought by the dainty" were to continue ("Mrs. Wood" 99). Many contemporary critics saw the literary blending of "high" and "low" cultures as an experiment likely to end in failure. Or, as Margaret Oliphant believed, the effective combination of these two elements is a task only a "genius" could accomplish. In an 1862 review, Oliphant states:

> To combine the higher requirements of art with the lower ones of a popular weekly periodical and produce something that will be equally perfect in snatches and as a book, is an operation too difficult and delicate for even genius to accomplish, without a bold adaptation of the cunning of the mechanist and closest elaboration of workmanship. How far the result might be worth the labour, we will not attempt to decide. ("Sensation" 584)

Interestingly, in this review, Oliphant critiques *East Lynne, The Woman in White*, and *Great Expectations* as a trio of sensation novels, and concludes that "Dickens is the careless, clever boy who could do it twice as well, but won't take pains. Mr. Wilkie Collins is the steady fellow, who

pegs at his lesson like a hero, and wins the prize over the other's head" ("Sensation" 580). In short, *Woman in White* is judged to be the "better" book.

There was a real fear among contemporary critics about what a leveling of literary taste across class might mean. In an 1863 review, H. L. Mansel decried these new "morbid phenomena of literature" as "indications of a widespread corruption… called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply" (495). A review of Collins' *Armadale* similarly describes "sensational mania" as a "virus … spreading in all directions, from the penny journal to the shilling magazine, and from the shilling magazine to the thirty shillings volume" (Wise 270). The recurring description of reading as a "disease" echoes Carlyle's poor Irish widow who "proves her sisterhood" with others across class boundaries by infecting them with typhus (151). Mansel suggests that part of the "corruptive" nature of the sensation novel is its popularity and accessibility. Mansel further describes how "[a] commercial atmosphere floats around works of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop. The public wants novels, and novels must be made—so many yards of printed stuff, sensation pattern, to be ready at the beginning of the season" (495-96). He suggests that the lack of artfulness in "works of this class" is evidence of the lack of good taste in the working class. His main objection seems to be to members of the middle classes, who should know better, who become part of the genre's mass readership.

As Winifred Hughes points out, it is the sensation novel's threat of "upward mobility" that is so distasteful to such critics; few would have objected to literary trends trickling from the upper classes to the lower ones (42). Hughes notes that instead, "neither the original impetus toward sensationalism nor the particular conventions of the sensation novel had been developed under middle class control. The content and implications of the genre…tended to diverge from

or even attack the most cherished of middle-class values" (42). Thus, close on the heels of the evolution debates of the 1850s, the sensation fiction of 1860s fueled fears of "social devolution" among contemporary critics. As Beth Kalikoff describes, the content of the novels themselves reflects a "social paranoia about [the] infiltration" of class (97). In 1866, J. R. Wise imagined that the current "Sensational Mania" heralded a return to medieval ignorance:

> Just as in the Middle Ages people were afflicted with the Dancing Mania and Lycanthropy, sometimes barking like dogs, and sometimes mewing like cats, so now we have a Sensational Mania. Just, too, as those diseases always occurred in seasons of dearth and poverty, and attacked only the poor, so does the Sensational Mania in Literature burst out only in times of mental poverty, and afflict only the most poverty-stricken minds. (270)

A *Temple Bar* critic in 1874 envisioned not only "social devolution," but moral and physical devolution as well, claiming, "Reading, so long a virtue…has become a downright vice…a softening, demoralizing, relaxing practice, which, if persisted in, will end by enfeebling the minds of men and women, making flabby the fibre of their bodies, and undermining the vigour of nations" ("Vice of Reading" 42). The literature of the lower classes is thus accused of corrupting the inherent superiority of the higher classes, serving as a proxy for interclass sexual relationships. Even the term "sensation novel" was meant to indicate a physical, not intellectual, response to the literature. If, as Robbins notes, a servant is a "hand," and the master of the house is its "head," this literature could be considered evidence of the base body trumping the rational mind.

Contemporary critics not only derided sensation fiction on the basis of class for its "kitchen" audience, but also disparaged the genre as being gendered feminine. The genre

boasted many prominent women writers, featured memorable female protagonists and antagonists, and the novels themselves often directly address an assumed female reader. Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*, for example, frequently offers appeal to an explicitly female reader, although it did contain a single direct address to the male reader in its initial serial version. In its revised novel form, however, the commentary directed at the male reader was excised (Wynne 61). As Lyn Pykett notes, the "woman-to-woman" address of these novels "was a particular source of anxiety to reviewers of the sensation novel because of the 'fast' nature of its main characters and situations, and because of the particular type of female experience which it represented" (*"Improper"* 32-33). Thus, while the presumed readership of the sensation novel clearly suggests that the female servant can serve as a figure of identification, at the same time she may be depicted as an undesirable role model.

The horror of female servants imitating the scandalous acts featured in sensation fiction contributed to the growing anxiety regarding the potential repercussions of servant readership. Jean Fernandez describes how the dramatic increase in servant literacy in the latter half of the century "signaled [servants' ascent] to the rising cultural hegemony of England's middle classes" (4). This trend was cause for concern, as a literate servant could introduce to the middle-class house substandard, subversive, or sensational literature. The servants' "insidious [power] of cultural contamination" through reading could be considered "a cultural obscenity" or "specter of revolution" (Fernandez 4). Just as Fernandez argues that increased servant literacy blurred the bounds of the master/servant "binary," the content of the literature itself that many servants were reading was further undermining such boundaries.

It was widely feared that literacy among the servant classes might be a stepping-stone to subverting the class system itself. As Theresa McBride points out, becoming a servant actually

provides the tools for advancement up the social hierarchy by "offer[ing] both wages and an education in the social habits of the wealthy" (85). Although in much of sensation fiction, it is the female servants who disguise themselves, Pamela Horn describes that in reality, male servants were more likely to be reported impersonating their employers (147). As an example, Horn cites a case from 1865, when a middle-aged servant was imprisoned after being found guilty of "embezzling £1 2s. and…receiving 'in the name and account of his master' a further sum of £3 7s. 6d" (147). One of the most dramatic depictions of a servant's social-climbing can be found in a scandalous 1871 pamphlet called "Brown on the Throne," which offers a fictional narration by Queen Victoria's servant John Brown about "his" life ruling over Britain's monarch (Fernandez 141). Cartoons of Brown on the throne had also appeared as early as 1867 (Munich 162).[7] In this instance, the woman in power is superseded by her male servant; however, in contemporary fiction it was more often the female servant who is seen attempting to seize the power of her superiors.

The mobility of female servants and their potential for upending the established class hierarchy held a particular threat for the mistress of the house. *Punch* even coined the term "Servantgalism" to describe the tendency of female servants who show pretensions above their station or attempt to emulate their mistresses. The attire of female servants seems to have been a particular source of dismay; as Theresa McBride explains, servants would often spend their wages on clothing since food and board were generally provided for them, and this led to the dangerous prospect of servants dressing as well as (or better than) their employers (95). An 1867 article in *Servants' Magazine* offering "Friendly Hints on Dress" advises that "a gown should never be made in that Fashion which is suitable only for mistresses; a profusion of ribbons on the

[7] "A Brown Study." *Tomahawk* 10 August 1867.

cap and flowers in the bonnet are out of character; long drop earrings are also unseemly" (195).[8] Numerous cartoons in *Punch* were dedicated to such comical scenarios as the prospective servant who declares she was "brought up genteel" and insists she cannot stay in a home without a footman[9] or the maid who wears a dress with a long train in order to be a "lady."[10] One "Servantgalism" cartoon features an ostentatiously dressed maidservant who claims she left her last position because "'the missus thought I were too good-looking!'"[11] A *Punch* cartoon from 1883 hints at an opposite—but equally distressing—scenario in which the only difference between mistress and maid *is* their attire. Titled "The Force of Habit," the drawing is of a mistress seated at a desk, "acting as Amanuensis to Mary" while her maid stands and regards her employer's writing.[12] The text reads: [Mistress]: "'Is there anything more you wish me to say, Mary?' Mary: 'No Marm, except just to say, Please excuse Bad Writin' and Spellin'" (rpt. in Fernandez 15). The comedy derives from the reversal of roles: the maid is dictating to her mistress, even obliquely criticizing her work. Further, as Fernandez points out, "*Punch* appears to hint that the serving classes could one day surpass their employers in literary talent" (16). The concerns expressed in *Punch* about the ambiguous distinctions between the middle-class woman and her working-class employee are echoed in several key tropes of sensation fiction.

In a number of sensation texts, the identities of the maid and her mistress become interchangeable, indistinguishable, or irrevocably intertwined. One of the more common motifs is the mistress and maid who wear the same clothing, as seen in *Bleak House* (1853) with Hortense and Lady Dedlock, and in *Lady Audley's Secret* with Phoebe and Lady Audley.

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[8] Collins parodies articles of this type in *The Moonstone* when Miss Clack offers the servant Penelope a tract titled "A Word with You on Your Cap-Ribbons" (201).
[9] "Servantgalism: Or, What's to Become of the Missuses? No. 2." *Punch* 12 Mar. 1853. 104.
[10] "Fashions for the Kitchen." *Punch* 17 Mar. 1877. 120.
[11] *Punch* "Servantgalism." 29 Sept. 29 1860. 124.
[12] *Punch* "The Force of Habit." Sept. 29 1883. 146.

Sensation fiction often depicts employer and servant as doubles of one another, whether through their clothing, as mentioned above, or in the figure of the doppelgänger. Winifred Hughes sees sensation fiction demonstrating a "recurrent preoccupation with the loss or duplication of identity…. Everywhere in the lesser sensation novels the unwitting protagonists experience their strange encounters with the empty form of the *doppelgänger*" (21). Mistresses with working-class ghostly doubles include Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick in *The Woman in White* and Eunice Manston and Ann in Thomas Hardy's *Desperate Remedies* (1871). Another version of sensational "doubling" can be found in the spectre of the mistress who lives a second life as a "servant," as seen in *East Lynne* and *No Name*. The maid, in turn, can become the "mistress," a scenario seen in *Lady Audley's Secret* and, later, *Fingersmith*, which explores the idea of an "alternative reality" in which employer and employee swap places.

Considering sensation fiction in light of employer/employee relationships and paying particular attention to the role played by the female servant can shed new light on one of the genre's canonical texts, *The Moonstone*. *The Moonstone* is one of the best known and most studied sensation novels, but even so, no studies have been made specifically on the importance of the female servant in the text. Today, critics often read Collins' novel as an early detective story or for its depiction of colonialism, and it is less often explored in the context of the more prototypically sensational "bigamy" novels. However, the term "Kitchen Literature" is as equally applicable to *The Moonstone* as it is to other sensation texts. *The Moonstone* was inspired by a sensational murder case in which the killer was initially assumed to be a female servant, although she was later exonerated. In the "Road Murder" of 1860, Elizabeth Gough, a twenty-three-year-old nursemaid, was suspected of killing her charge, four-year-old Francis Kent. Although the newspaper coverage focused on the presumed-guilty servant, in 1865,

Constance Kent, the daughter of the house, confessed to the crime (Trodd 24). Similarly, in Collins' novel, while suspicion is initially cast on the servant Rosanna Spearman (and Rachel Verinder,the daughter of the house), the perpetrator of the crime is actually Godfrey Ablewhite, a relative of the wronged family.

In *The Moonstone*, as in other sensation texts, class divisions are revealed as merely external constructs. The maid Rosanna sees herself as the equal of Miss Rachel, explicitly suggesting that the only difference between them is their clothing. In her letter, Rosanna wonders, "Suppose you put Miss Rachel into a servant's dress, and took her ornaments off? … it does stir one up to hear Miss Rachel called pretty, when one knows all the time that it's her dress does it, and her confidence in herself" (322). The reversal of class roles Rosanna imagines here is possible in part because servants possess certain privileges over their employers. They have the ability to study the world above stairs while remaining unseen, and, from a Foucauldian point of view, are able to thus "police" their employers.

The sensational servant is often equipped with the kind of "*super-vision*" that D. A. Miller identifies in the figure of the Victorian detective, often accompanied by a guiding force of "supervision" (35).[13] While Miller claims that Betteredge, one of the more prominent servant "supervisors" of *The Moonstone*, considers the detective presence of Sergeant Cuff as the primary reason why "'nothing is like what it used to be'" in terms of the Verinder estate hierarchy, this reading does not offer a complete picture (Collins 143; D. A. Miller 38). The quote concerning the new democratization within the household is spoken by Betteredge's daughter Penelope, who has better insight into the key role her fellow servant, Rosanna, has

[13] In *Bleak House*, Inspector Bucket claims to have both a brother and brother-in-law working as domestic servants, and says his "father was first a page, then a footman, then a butler, then a steward, then an inn-keeper" (751). The "public servant," then, is not much of a leap from a domestic servant.

played in the mystery. In his preface to the first edition of *The Moonstone*, Collins describes how "[t]he conduct pursued, under a sudden emergency, by a young girl, supplies the foundation on which I have built this book" (xxiii). Patrick Brantlinger claims that the "young girl" mentioned "undoubtedly" refers to Rachel Verinder here, although he notes that the description could also apply to Rosanna Spearman ("'Sensational'" 12). However, Collins explains that his goal in *The Moonstone* was "to trace the influence of character on circumstances," and the character Rosanna arguably plays a more active role in the plot than Rachel (xxiii). Although few members of the Verinder family notice or acknowledge the maid while she lives, they keenly feel her influence after her death. Maria Stoddard Holmes notes that since Rosanna's "passion is expressed, preserved in her writing and thus in the 'documents' that comprise *The Moonstone*, her effect on the novel and her place in the memories of its readers resonates much more strongly than Rachel's" (71). And while Betteredge may be self-satisfied with his belief that his words begin and end the novel, it is Rosanna's letter that is key to solving the puzzle.

In many ways, it is servant literacy that is the great equalizer in the household of *The Moonstone*: at the narrative level, contributors from both above and below stairs must collaborate to create the text. Betteredge's preoccupation with the century-old novel *Robinson Crusoe* suggests his steadfast devotion to the old class order and his place within it, but Rosanna is also distinguished from other servants by her love of reading, which indicates "just a dash of something that wasn't like a housemaid, and that *was* like a lady, about her" (Collins 26). The suggestion that Rosanna seems like "a lady" because of her reading habit may have fueled her hope for a taboo relationship with the gentleman Franklin Blake. After Rosanna dies, her friend Limping Lucy prophetically claims that "'the day is not far off when the poor will rise against the rich'" (192). This reversal of the natural order suggested here—"the poor ris[ing]"—does

occur in the novel, although not through the revolutionary means Lucy foresees. Rosanna's reading has made her the intellectual equal of the upper-class Verinders, and the servant Gabriel Betteredge's ability to write has made him, in a way, the "master" of the story.

Much of the existing criticism on the subject of servants in sensation fiction centers on Gabriel Betteredge as one of the most visible narrators of the genre. While Betteredge is depicted as a rigidly loyal domestic employee and devout imperialist, he also "controls" the lives of his employers by beginning and ending their story in his own words. As Tim Dolin explains,

> Betteredge…as the substitute custodian of the property, stands in for the absent patriarch. Betteredge is at once the guardian of his mistresses, and, ironically, the one token of aristocratic continuity. Absent too is the figure of the favoured son; instead, it is Betteredge who is passed down from one generation to the next, and holds the fragile social order together. (75)

The novel depicts an English family undermined and invaded by forces outside its class. Dolin points out how "[t]he usual rigid stratification of masters and servants, represented by the squirearchy and their staff, is broken down in an atmosphere of universal suspicion …. Suddenly, the impermanency of the ruling class becomes blindingly obvious," which leads to "disastrous" results (75). The tenuous power of the upper and middle classes cannot compete with the covert power of the servant classes.

One way the servant class is able to keep the middle classes in check is by threatening to expose the secrets of the middle-class home to the public. An 1853 *North British Review* article warns:

> Everything that you do and very much that you say at home is related in your servants' families, and by them retailed to other gossips in the neighborhood, with

> appropriate exaggerations, until you almost feel that you might as well live in a glass house or whispering gallery. (Kaye 97)

In *East Lynne*, for example, it is overheard servant gossip that so distresses the lady of the house that she abandons her husband and children. Servants were also able to blackmail their employers by threatening to expose incriminating secrets. In an 1870 article, Alfred Austin outlines a typical scenario of a sensation novel thus:

> It is on our domestic hearths that we are taught to look for the incredible. A mystery sleeps in our cradles; fearful errors lurk in our nuptial couches; fiends sit down with us at table; our innocent-looking garden walks hold the secret of treacherous murders; and our servants take £20 a year from us for the sake of having us at their mercy. (422)

While it might be expected that, as the precursor of detective fiction, sensation fiction might rely heavily on the motif of the murderous servant, this is not generally the case. Servants rarely commit violent crimes themselves, although they often function as spies or exercise sinister influence over their employers. In her 1989 study of *Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel*, Anthea Trodd describes how in Victorian "crime plots" servants are similarly associated with "spying and surveillance"; they are "the weak link in the maintenance of the privacy of the home, both as intruders and as publicists to the outside world… this idea of endangered privacy is formulated as the household's dark secret which the servant may control or reveal" (8). For example, one of Braddon's own books, *Lady Audley's Secret*, describes how a lady's maid "has a hundred methods for the finding out of her mistress's secrets," which, in that particular case, she will use to blackmail her employer (336).

Thus, in sensation fiction, the domestic employee, most often valued for manual labor, or even reduced to a mere "hand," is seen as capable of being a "mind," even "mastermind," with the intelligence and ability to outwit members of the higher classes. Modern scholarship has too long ignored the crucial role that servants play in mid-nineteenth-century fiction. By overlooking servant agency, critics have unwittingly reenacted a scenario that Wilkie Collins used to comedic effect in *The Woman in White* when the cantankerous Frederick Fairlie suggests that his servant is not a man, but a mere prop. Fairlie explains, "'He might have been a man half an hour ago, before I wanted my etchings, and he may be a man half an hour hence, when I don't want them any longer. At present he is simply a portfolio stand'" (178). Fairlie is of course wrong, and the valet must be sent away lest he overhear and reveal family secrets. My study of the servants of sensation fiction reveals that these characters are far from mere "props" but are actually quite key to fully understanding the genre.

CHAPTER 3

"MERELY TELLING THE TRUTH":

SERVANTS' STORIES IN *JANE EYRE* AND *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

Since contemporary critics accused sensation fiction of undermining morality, glamorizing vice, and pandering to lower or even criminal classes, sensation authors often defended their work by asserting that they were simply "telling the truth." For example, Wilkie Collins' first sensation novel, *Basil* (1852), contains a dedication in which the author claims:

> I have founded the main event out of which this story springs, on a fact within my own knowledge. In afterwards shaping the course of the narrative thus suggested, I have guided it, as often as I could, where I knew by my own experience, or by experience related to me by others, that it would touch on something real and true in its progress. (3)

Collins further suggests that any critics who accuse the book of immorality are simply making a pretense of "shrink[ing from]… subjects which they think of in private and talk of in public everywhere" (5). Thus, Collins proposes that his text, while fictional, is actually a means of telling harsh truths, which is why it inspires his critics' contempt.

In the preface to her sensation novel *Véronique* (1869), Florence Marryat includes a similar disclaimer:

> To affirm that the story I submit to your approval is not sensational, *i.e.,* that its incidents are not intended to appeal to your feelings, would be erroneous, since it

> boasts no higher claim; but on the other hand, should I be accused of distorting nature in order to give birth to a "monstrosity of fiction," my answer is, that the most unlikely scenes depicted here… have happened, and are drawn from life; and it is a remarkable fact, that those incidents in my novels which have incurred most abuse or ridicule at the hands of the public press, have invariably been those gained from the same source. (vi)

Marryat then quotes from "an abler authority than [her]self" to lend credence to her stance, citing a line from Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*. Marryat's decision to quote *Shirley* to bolster her own credibility suggests that she felt that she and Brontë were doing similar work and facing similar criticisms, and perhaps covertly acknowledges Brontë as one of the first "sensation novelists."

Years before Collins and Marryat, Charlotte Brontë herself had included a defense of the "truth" of her novel *Jane Eyre*. Like the sensation novelists of the following decade, she felt she had to respond to critics who accuse her novel of immorality. In the preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre*, Brontë explains that "[t]he world…may hate him who dares to scrutinise and expose—to rase the gilding, and show base metal under it—to penetrate the sepulchre, and reveal charnel relics: but hate as it will, it is indebted to him" (1-2). She then cites "the satirist of 'Vanity Fair'" [William Makepeace Thackeray] as "a man in our own days whose words are not framed to tickle delicate ears: who, to my thinking, comes before the great ones of society…and who speaks truth as deep, with a power as prophet-like and as vital—a mien as dauntless and as daring" (2). Brontë's choice of citing *Vanity Fair* is particularly noteworthy because critics such as Elizabeth Rigby often compared it with *Jane Eyre*, since both novels recounted the stories of unconventional governess characters. The nature of Brontë's defense of her work suggests that

she is like a servant storyteller herself, because she is broadcasting the truth, albeit in fictionalized form.

Servants are often the only ones allowed both to see and speak plain truths, so they make ideal narrators for stories with "sensational" content. As Anthea Trodd notes of sensation fiction, scenes of criminal behavior "are often perceived or narrated by servants, whose modes of perception and manner of speech are seen as more appropriate to such material than those of a middle-class character would be" (9). A servant often understands the secrets of the house better than the master or mistress, and is willing to reveal them, even—or perhaps especially—if it would incite scandal. *Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights,* and *Agnes Grey* (1847) are all stories told by and about female domestic employees. *Jane Eyre* was subtitled "An Autobiography," Nelly tells her tale in "true gossip's fashion" (49), and Agnes Grey says she is making "confessions" (138). In each novel, the domestic speaks to the reader or listener as a trusted confidant(e), one to whom she can reveal not only her own life story but the secret lives of her employers. As the footman John in Brougham's theatrical adaptation of *Jane Eyre* wryly observes, "a fellow servant as won't confide in a fellow servant, don't deserve to belong to our honorable profession" (82). Arguably, then, some of the servants who confide to us in these books may be positioning readers as fellow servants as we become privy to the private secrets of the household made public.

A servant's rank within the domestic hierarchy also reflects *how* things can be said. In *Wuthering Heights*, the "poor man's daughter" Nelly Dean spares no shocking or gruesome detail in her narrative, which may account in part for contemporary critics' revulsion at the novel's content and "passion." The governesses Agnes and Jane employ a more reserved tone befitting their gentlewoman status. For example, Jane herself would never utter a phrase like

"'dead as the stones on which her brains and blood were scattered,'" so the old butler at Thornfield must provide the reader that particularly grisly image (365). Like Collins after her, Jane combats any potential accusations of indecency in her tale by insisting to the reader that she is "merely telling the truth" (92). Like him, too, she inspires contemporary critics' shock at what they perceive as her narrative's sensationalism.

A decade after *Jane Eyre*'s publication, the novel would prove influential to the writers of the sensation school, who maintained the key focus on servants that the plays featured, but also revisited the criminal elements the plays had lost. Although few modern critics have studied Charlotte Brontë's novel as the progenitor of sensation fiction, contemporary critic and novelist Margaret Oliphant and sensation author Mary Elizabeth Braddon both explicitly describe Jane as the mother of the sensation heroine ("Novels" 258-9; "My First" 23). In Braddon's novel *The Doctor's Wife*, a woman who is obsessed with sensation fiction sees no distinction between Jane Eyre and other sensation heroines, thinking, "Oh, to have been Jane Eyre, and to roam away on the cold moorland and starve,—wouldn't *that* have been delicious!" (144). (She includes Becky Sharp from Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* in this category as well.) Sensation novelists would use *Jane Eyre*'s most scandalous plot elements in their own works, sometimes borrowing and embellishing large chunks of the novel's plot. The sensation school would "rewrite" *Jane Eyre* in a number of ways, adding more of the crimes of passion and "vulgar" behavior that critics had condemned when the novel was first published.

The contemporary reception of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* shares surprising similarities with the criticism that sensation novels would receive a little more than a decade later. Many contemporary critics conflated the fictional narrators of *Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights* with the authors themselves, just as future critics would do with authors such as Mary

Elizabeth Braddon. Although Charlotte and Emily Brontë famously wrote under ambiguously-gendered noms de plume "Currer" and "Ellis," reviewers seized upon the class and gender of the servant storytellers as evidence of the authors' own backgrounds. One reviewer from 1847 determines "much" of *Jane Eyre* to be "veritable biography," "since we all know that the first works of writers of fiction embrace not only much of their experiences, but also much of their adventures" (*Douglas Jerrold's* 474). In 1848, *Living Age* all but confirms the thesis, suggesting that "the intensity of feeling which [the author] shows in speaking of the wrongs of [the 'despised and slighted governess'] class seems to prove that [the feelings] have been her own" (481). This review further describes the author in terms appropriate to a truth-teller like the servant narrator; it sees "an intimate acquaintance with the worst parts of human nature, a practised sagacity in discovering the latent ulcer, and a ruthless rigor in exposing it" evident in the novel (*Living Age* 481). In her infamous review, Elizabeth Rigby affirms that whoever authored the novel represents the worst aspects of the servant class: "it is a person who, with great mental powers, combines a total ignorance of the habits of society, a great coarseness of taste, and a heathenish doctrine of religion" (506). Rigby also promotes the pervading theory that Thackeray's governess, who was also assumed to be his model for *Vanity Fair*'s Becky Sharp, wrote the novel (506). Decades later, *The Eclectic Magazine* recalled how so many readers of *Jane Eyre* would search in vain for "this wonderful governess" who wrote the autobiography ("Monograph" 702). The same 1876 review characterizes such misguided readers as "people ever seeking to know some new thing and to taste some new sensation" ("Monograph" 702).

The use of the term "sensation" here is particularly telling. Contemporary critics accused both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* of relying on shocks to the nervous system, vulgarity, and

pandering to the baser desires of a rude audience, just as sensation fiction was said to do. While the more overt violence and sadomasochism of *Wuthering Heights* may still have the power to shock modern readers, today the familiarity of the *Jane Eyre* story may initially make it seem a less likely source of horror. However, contemporary reviewers saw the book as a threat to corrupt morals and popularize vulgarity in polite society. One American reviewer, E. P. Whipple, describes the "Jane Eyre fever" that seized the nation on the book's publication, the symptoms of which were said to "var[y] with different constitutions, in some producing a soft ethical sentimentality, which relaxed all the fibres of conscience, and in others exciting a general fever of moral and religious indignation" (355). (This description bears a distinct resemblance to the "Sensational Mania" that an 1866 review of *Armadale* identified as gripping the public [Wise 270].) Whipple's review further claims that *Jane Eyre's* success lay in its reputation for illicit content and profanity, and suggests that it has inspired young men to imitate Rochester's ill manners (355). Elizabeth Rigby laments how, "in these days of extravagant adoration of all that bears the stamp of novelty and originality, sheer rudeness and vulgarity have come in for a most mistaken worship" (501). Even Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë's biographer, was so concerned about the novel's moral tone that she forbade her eldest daughter from reading *Jane Eyre* until she turned twenty (L. Miller 33-34).

Reviews of *Wuthering Heights* depicted the novel as lower-class in its tastelessness, and suggested that the book's perceived "coarseness" would be alien to readers of refined taste. In an 1847 review of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, H. F. Chorley writes that "[the Brontë sisters] do not turn away from dwelling upon those physical acts of cruelty which we know to have their warrant in the real annals of crime and suffering, but the contemplation of which true taste rejects" (rpt. in *Wuthering* 281). Another review speculates that the authors of *Agnes Grey*

and *Wuthering Heights* may be some type of uneducated savant: "[the novels] are so new, so wildly grotesque, so entirely without art, that they strike us as proceeding from a mind of limited experience, but of original energy, and of a singular and distinctive cast" (*Britannia*, rpt. in *Wuthering* 289). Although most contemporary critics assume a sophisticated audience for the Brontës' work, one that would, as one review puts it, "instinctively shrink" from the fictional horrors, others suggest that the books could only be written for a criminal or lower-class audience (Dobell, rpt. in *Wuthering* 293). One American reviewer of *Wuthering Heights* offers a particularly interesting theory:

> There is an old saying that those who eat toasted cheese at night will dream of Lucifer. The author of *Wurthuring Heights* [sic] has evidently eat[en] toasted cheese. How a human being could have attempted such a book as the present without committing suicide before he had finished a dozen chapters, is a mystery. It is a compound of vulgar depravity and unnatural horrors, such as we might suppose, a person, inspired by a mixture of brandy and gunpowder, might write for the edification of fifth-rate blackguards. ("Wurthuring" 60)

Emily Brontë's story of "vulgar depravity and unnatural horrors" establishes a servant narrator who initially appears to be tangential to the main action. However, closer consideration reveals Nelly Dean as a key player and "author" of *Wuthering Heights*. While Jane Eyre serves as a model for sensation heroines like Isabel Vane, Nelly Dean can be viewed as the predecessor of servant characters, such as Phoebe Marks in *Aurora Floyd* or Rosanna Spearman in *The Moonstone*, who manipulate the plot and their employers in subtler ways while their own stories are not foregrounded.

Wuthering Heights*: the servant gossip as manipulator*

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics tend to view Nelly as an unreliable narrator with murky motives; James Halfley even famously declared her to be "the villain of the piece" (199). John Mathison suggests that Nelly's narrative actually directs the reader "toward feeling the inadequacy of the wholesome, and toward sympathy with genuine passions, no matter how destructive or violent" (Mathison 129). Indeed, *passion* is a word often applied to both Nelly and the nature of her tale; Sternlieb notes:

> We do not understand a story apart from the one the narrator has told; we remember this as one of the great passions in literature because of, not in spite of, Nelly's presentation. Nelly is not an obstacle to our understanding; she creates the obstacles around which the novel is structured. She does not rein in anarchy; she creates desire. Her narration does not control passion; it fosters it. (49)

The passion inherent in Nelly's words appears to be infectious. In telling her tale to Lockwood, she stokes his passion for the younger Catherine, whom he knows primarily through Nelly's tale. She not only reveals the families' secrets, she allows the stranger Lockwood to feel on intimate terms with the families without their knowledge or consent. Although Lockwood has only met Catherine once, Nelly's stories have made him infatuated with her; as the housekeeper notes, he "look[s] so lively and interested when [she] talk[s] about her," and has "asked [Nelly] to hang her picture over [his] fireplace" (196). When Lockwood again meets Catherine, it is clear that the power of Nelly's words has led him to believe that he has a part to play in the story himself. He tells Catherine, "'you are not aware that I am an acquaintance of yours? so intimate that I think it strange you won't come and speak to me'" (229). Unlike Jane Eyre's "gentle reader," Nelly's confidant is a man who is able to interact directly with the story's characters. His

presence reveals the danger that can be invited into the domestic sphere via a story-telling servant.

Wuthering Heights is a servant's story in more ways than one: Nelly Dean narrates, but she also drives much of the drama, as in the early scene where she neglects to tell Cathy that Heathcliff has overhead her harsh words about him. Nor is she the only servant who propels the plot; Zillah prompts the reason the story is told by leading Lockwood to Cathy's haunted room against her master's orders. The tale itself begins as a potential servant-Cinderella story, much like *Jane Eyre*: the poor orphan Heathcliff is taken in by a wealthy family but is abused and made to act as a servant until one day he is able to become master of the estate himself. Thus begins Heathcliff's revenge, and the story comes full circle when he makes Hareton act as a servant in his own family home. Unlike Heathcliff, Nelly was never formally considered to be a member of the family; she is generally treated as a trusted (if not trustworthy) "human fixture" (26). Gilbert and Gubar see Nelly's position as servant as crucial to her ability to "avoid[] the incestuous/egalitarian relationship with Hindley that Catherine has with Heathcliff, and at the same time—because she is ineligible for marriage into either family—[to] escape[] the bridal hook of matrimony that destroys both Isabella and Catherine" (*Madwoman* 290). She is the only one capable of telling the Linton and Earnshaw families' stories because she is privy to their private lives, but she does not "herself becom[e] ensnared in it, or perhaps, more accurately, she is able (like Brontë herself) to use the act of telling the story as a strategy for protecting herself from such entrapment" (Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* 290).

Like Jane Eyre, Nelly justifies her more provocative stories and sentiments by insisting on claiming "the truth" as she sees it. Unlike Jane, Nelly uses her truth-telling as a means to bully and offend her employers. She tells Hindley plainly that his family "hates" him and she

reveals to Edgar his wife's transgressions: "'You'd rather hear nothing about it, I suppose, then, Mr. Linton?'… Heathcliff has your permission to come a-courting to Miss, and to drop in at every opportunity your absence offers, on purpose to poison the mistress against you?'" (59, 100-01). Nelly is always keen to collect more secrets she can use, but only, as she tells Cathy, if they are "'worth keeping'" (60). Although Nelly often serves as a liaison between Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights and she is able to swap stories some with Zillah, she is grateful for the opportunity to tell an outsider the families' history. Lockwood underestimates his servant storyteller; he thinks he has tricked her into revealing family secrets by asking questions "under pretence of gaining information concerning the necessities of [the] establishment" (26). Nelly, however, has her own agenda, and although she admits, "'I could have told Heathcliff's history, all that you need hear, in half a dozen words,'" she stretches the tale over several days (48).

Lockwood is under the false impression that he has some control over the story and its teller. Early on, he is adamant that he does not want the subject of the story to be the servant herself, since "her own affairs" "could hardly interest [him]" (26). He flatters Nelly with compliments on how well-read she must be, and in the same breath he calls her his "good friend," but these words ring hollow; he merely wants to hear more of what he dismisses as servants' "gossip" (49). Because of Nelly's servant status, Lockwood thinks of her tale as a child's bedtime story, perhaps like one of the "Captain Murderer" tales Dickens' nurse used to tell him ("Nurse's Stories" 94). Lockwood wishes Nelly to "'rouse [him] to animation or lull [him] to sleep by her talk'" (26). In these ways, as Manette Berlinger points out, "Lockwood tries to mitigate the story's impact by casting it as a literary fiction" (190). However, his later actions toward Cathy show that he believes he has become part of the story himself.

Lockwood feigns a lack of interest belied by his insistence on putting Cathy's portrait over the mantle and his repeated requests that Nelly tell him more of the story. When he is alone, he muses, "'What a realisation of something more romantic than a fairy tale it would have been for Mrs. Linton Heathcliff, had she and I struck up an attachment, as her good nurse desired, and migrated together into the stirring atmosphere of the town!'" (232). When Nelly is present, however, Lockwood must undermine her authority as a key player and the narrator of the story. He claims to recollect only the "chief incidents" of the story, refers to his landlord as a "hero" of fiction, and even offers deliberately outlandish suggestions of how Heathcliff may have earned his fortune, from escaping to America to becoming a highwayman (71; 72). In these respects, Lockwood plays a similar role to the contemporary literary critics of the Brontës: making false assumptions about the "author" of the tale, insisting he can divine the "true story" behind it, and criticizing the way the narrative is delivered. He fails to notice the art in the storyteller's craft. As Gideon Shumani notes:

> Nelly's story is based on her own human reactions, her diligent probes, and her crafty exegeses of occurrences, and not on a direct and profound attempt at analysis of the pattern of relationships among the protagonists and the events which thereby result. Lockwood's simplicity is thus patently apparent in his total faith in all of Nelly Dean's words. (463)

Although Shumani sees Lockwood's "gullibility result[ing] from his absurd confidence in Nelly's depth of intelligence and wisdom," I see Nelly as a very intelligent woman who has chosen her words carefully and made, as Shumani acknowledges, "crafty exegeses" (463). At one point, for example, Nelly admits that she withheld information from her master so she could wait and better assess how her private knowledge could best benefit her: "I also threw little light

on his inquiries, for I hardly knew what to hide and what to reveal" (202). Nelly, like the "Bell" siblings, is wary of what she can safely reveal to her audience.

Since Nelly Dean is now often viewed as a potentially treacherous character, it is somewhat surprising that Charlotte Brontë claimed, in her 1850 preface to her sister's novel, that "[f]or a specimen of true benevolence and homely fidelity, [a reader should] look at the character of Nelly Dean" (315). Modern critics have considered this statement to be a "stunning misreading" of *Wuthering Heights*, one that seems especially perplexing coming from the creator of Jane Eyre, a similarly enigmatic servant storyteller (Sternlieb 39).

I see Nelly as a self-serving and acerbic character, but many nineteenth-century critics ascribed those same characteristics to Jane rather than Nelly (Sternlieb 39). A *Living Age* review describes Jane's character (and, by extension, the author of the novel) as possessing

> a temper naturally harsh, made harsher by ill usage, and visiting both its defect and its wrongs upon the world—an understanding disturbed and perverted by cynicism, but still strong and penetrating—fierce love and fiercer hate—all this viewed from within and colored by self-love. (481)

Elizabeth Rigby declared, "We hear nothing but self-eulogiums on the perfect tact and wondrous penetration with which [Jane] is gifted, and yet almost every word she utters offends us, not only with the absence of these qualities, but with the positive contrasts of them, in either her pedantry, stupidity, or gross vulgarity" (503). The disgust expressed by these critics may be due in part to Charlotte Brontë's complex positioning of Jane as both an independent-minded narrator and the heroine of the tale who is at once a domestic employee and the wife of her "master."

Jane Eyre*: The servant storyteller as hero*

Jane Eyre is perhaps one of the most popular characters of nineteenth-century academic study, and while many have explored her vexed class position, and many more have studied her narrative voice, few have studied Jane in the context of the servant storyteller tradition.[14] Throughout her adult life, Jane is positioned as both servant and not-servant, which is in part a function of her identity as a writer, since in her narrative she straddles the line between "educated autobiographer" and "superstitious servant." Her introspection and thoughtfulness place her in the former category, while her insistence on Thornfield hosting a "ghost" places her in the latter.

From the beginning, Jane largely defines herself through her relationships with servants, and she is greatly concerned with what they think of her. She imagines the maid Abbot giving her "credit for being a sort of infantine Guy Fawkes," and she craves the maid Bessie's sympathy and kind words (21). As a young child Jane rebels against the stigma of servitude, asking rhetorically how John Reed could be considered her "'master'" if she is not "'his servant,'" to which Abbot retorts that Jane is "'less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep'" (9). Eventually, Jane willingly accepts the duties of a domestic in her relatives' home as she acts as "under-nurserymaid" to Bessie (24). But even once she becomes a domestic employee in earnest at Thornfield, Jane's position is difficult to categorize due to her employment as a governess, a paradoxical occupation that both recognizes her as a gentlewoman and renders her a dependent domestic employee.

[14] Jane is a servant storyteller in the sense that she was a domestic employee during much of the course of much of her narrative, but she is writing it retrospectively from her present position as Rochester's wife.

There is a scene in John Brougham's theatrical adaptation of *Jane Eyre* (1849) that drives home the liminal status of the governess. When the Dowager Lady Ingram hears a carriage and wants to know who has arrived, she asks the footman John if it was a "gentleman" or a "lady" (Brougham 79). When he replies that it is neither, she is confused since there seems to be no other possibility left, until she is told that it is "[o]nly the new governess" (Brougham 79).

As previously noted, Elizabeth Rigby asserted the "real definition of a governess" to be "a being who is our equal in birth, manners, and education, but our inferior in worldly wealth" (507). She elaborates: "Take a lady, in every meaning of the word, born and bred, and let her father pass through the gazette, and she wants nothing more to suit our highest beau idéal of a guide and instructress to our children" (507). Rigby notes that the governess is not accepted by either the gentry or the servant classes; she is a "bore" to ladies and gentlemen, and "[t]he servants invariably detest her, for she is a dependant like themselves, and yet, for all that, as much their superior in other respects as the family they both serve" (508).

The plight of these gentlewomen reduced to domestic employment attracted much attention in the mid-nineteenth century. The amount of public debate on the governess issue was disproportionate to the numbers of the governess population itself; in 1851, there were over 750,000 female domestic servants in England, only 25,000 of whom were governesses (Peterson 8). For her part, Elizabeth Rigby supported the Governess' Benevolent Institution, an organization established in 1843 that sought to allow governesses to maintain a lifestyle more in keeping with their original class status. In 1848, the GBI also founded a college for governesses, and the following year, an Asylum for Aged Governesses opened in Kentish Town (Renton 92-3). Other organizations were founded to encourage prospective governesses to emigrate to the colonies, where there was greater need for their services (Peterson 20).

Because gentlewomen had few options of employment open to them in England except working as governesses, employers often took advantage of their limited position. An 1850 *Punch* article titled "The Governess Grinders" notes that employers will advertise for a "governess" even if they "really want a very humble description of maid-of-all-work," and suggests that "henceforth, let the words, '*WANTED A DOMESTIC DRUDGE*!' be placed at the top of all similar advertisements" (151, capitalization and italics original). In 1857, the *Times* ran a letter from a self-described "poor governess" who deemed contemporary treatment of governesses "white slavery," describing how about fifty "accomplished gentlewomen" vied for a demanding position as governess to seven children for which they would only be paid £10 per annum, while the other servants in the house received equal or better pay ("White Slavery" rpt. in frontispiece, Renton). However, with such limited options available to them, women who wished to become governesses often had to claim, as one *Times* advertiser did in 1841, that salary was only "a second consideration" to them (qtd. in K. Hughes 45).

The governess is also disproportionately represented in literature of the time; in her extensive study of *The Victorian Governess Novel*, Cecilia Wadsö Lecaros notes how "many novels from the 1830s and 1840s take the form of promotion texts for the cause of the governesses, [showing a] clearly voiced desire to draw attention to the difficulties of governesses" (199). Charlotte and Anne Brontë both worked as governesses, experiences that informed their fictional governess autobiographies *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey*. When Agnes Grey first decides to become a governess, she imagines it will be a "delightful" and "charming" occupation (9). Even after her first miserable experience, she retains hope that her next employer would be "one of those genuine thoroughbred gentry my mother spoke of, who would treat his governess with due consideration as a respectable well-educated lady, the instructor and

guide of his children, and not a mere upper servant" (54). However, such an ideal position was hard to come by.

In *Jane Eyre*, the upper-class Ingrams demonize governesses within Jane's hearing: Blanche recalls that "half of [her governesses were] detestable and the rest ridiculous, and all incubi" (150). Her mother agrees, claiming to have "suffered a martyrdom from their incompetency and caprice" (150-51). When Lady Ingram is reminded that "one of the anathematised race was present" in the form of Jane, she says, "loud enough for [Jane] to hear, 'I noticed her; I am a judge of physiognomy, and in hers I see all the faults of her class'" (151). Their references to governesses as a "tribe," a "race" or a "class" underscore the Ingrams' need to emphasize the gap between their own class position and Jane's. Although Jane must be acknowledged as a gentlewoman by birth in order to work as a governess, it is this very position that brands her as a social inferior. Ruth Brandon notes how the upper and middle classes might perceive the governess as the embodiment of the "nagging dread" of the constant possibility of financial ruin (13).

Jane prides herself on her financial independence through employment, but finds that even those closest to her have difficulty resolving the conundrum of gentlewoman-cum-domestic that the governess position presents. When Rochester first meets her, he assumes she is "'not a servant at the hall, of course,'" but even as their relationship becomes less like master and servant, she reminds him that she is his "'paid subordinate'" (97, 115). When she agrees to be his wife, Jane still insists on maintaining her "paid subordinate status" for a time: "'I shall earn my board and lodging, and thirty pounds a year besides. I'll furnish my own wardrobe out of that money'" (230). The complex role Jane proposes playing as both mistress and servant of the house will later be played out in a more sensational version in *East Lynne.* However, in that

novel, the heroine dies and is buried under a pseudonym so that her true story will never be known. Jane, on the other hand, tells her story directly to her "gentle reader," thus ensuring that she controls her own history and how it is told.

Vicky Simpson claims that Jane is disappointed that "most of the others in her life lack the storytelling skill that she has" with the exception of Rochester (24). This reading ignores the servants' crucial contributions and impact on Jane as a storyteller. As Carla Kaplan notes, even before Jane comes to Thornfield, she "measures human relationships by a yardstick of narrative exchange" (75). Jane's reliance on storytelling to determine her intimacy with others is a pattern that begins with Bessie, and continues with Helen, Mrs. Fairfax, and, most significantly, Rochester, who claims that "[a]ll the melody on earth is concentrated in my Jane's tongue to my ear (I am glad it is not naturally a silent one)" (374).

Although Jane has a higher rank at Thornfield than the other servants do, she can still be considered a servant storyteller. Servants like Nelly and Zillah, Leah and Grace, and Jane and Mrs. Fairfax discuss the lives and history of their employers among each other, which makes them natural choices as narrators. Storytelling, whether based in fiction or reality, is treated as a kind of currency and a means of distinguishing rank among the servants in both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. For example, Mrs. Fairfax explains that Leah and John "are only servants, and one can't converse with them on terms of equality: one must keep them at due distance, for fear of losing one's authority" (82). Jane, however, is disappointed that Adele's nurse Sophie "was not of a descriptive or narrative turn, and generally gave such vapid and confused answers as were calculated rather to check than encourage inquiry" (94). The servants' unwillingness to answer Jane's questions is a recognition of her elevated position among the domestics but also a

function of Jane's adopted role as a detective figure.[15] Sensation novels like *The Moonstone* depict servants as wary of detectives because the "public servants" can subvert the role of domestic servants. A police detective is able to learn the secrets of the household but also may assume the socially-sanctioned authority to speak with the master or mistress on terms closer to equality.

Because Jane feels unable to confide completely in the other servants who are beneath her in rank, her closest relationship is with her reader, from whom she holds little back. As Lisa Sternlieb notes, "Jane is most likely to share intimacies with her reader… when she is most loath to tell her story to anyone else in her narrative" (21). Jane leads the reader to easily identify with her because she presumes a close, confidential relationship. In an 1848 review, Edwin Percy Whipple assumes that the novel's intended readership consists of women with the same status as Jane, describing the book's popularity "in the worshipful society of governesses" (322). Jane's willingness to share her private thoughts and actions on the page could arguably be seen as positioning her ideal "gentle reader" as a fellow governess. In reality, however, *Jane Eyre*'s readership extended well beyond "the worshipful society of governesses"; Mary Elizabeth Braddon believed that "every small plain novel-reading girl in England thought herself a Jane Eyre, and waited for that sudden sunlit opening in the dull wood of her life which would bring her face to face with her Rochester" (Braddon, "Shrine" 174). By treating the reader as a privileged confidant(e), the novel encourages a relationship between reader and narrator that Elaine Showalter sees in sensation fiction as "a kind of covert solidarity" ("Desperate" 159). Carla Kaplan describes "the pleasures of conversation" between reader and narrator in *Jane Eyre* as a kind of "'girl talk': an erotically charged, intimate conversation that imbricated romance,

[15] For a thorough examination of Jane as detective, see Sandro Jung's article "Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, the Female Detective and the 'Crime' of Female Selfhood."

sexuality, and sisterhood, that oscillated between gossip and self-reflection, that provided so many occasions for affirmation, recognition, and social critique" (92).

Kathryn Hughes suggests that Jane held broad appeal for female readers even in the middle and upper classes, because a governess appears to have better freedom and mobility: "the governess became a daring alter-ego who could wander the world in a manner quite unthinkable for a young woman in more comfortable circumstances" (4). Middle- and upper-class children would also have grown up hearing servants' stories, which offered them a glimpse of the world beyond their own home and limited experiences. As Davidoff et al. note, "Maids were a fascinating source of forbidden topics: birth, sex, adventure, whispering stories about their courting escapades, enlivened by the characteristic smell of hair oil, patchouli and body odour" (169).

In addition to being known for broaching taboo subjects, servants' stories have a reputation for embellishment and vulgarization. Jane remembers how her nursemaid Bessie had "a remarkable knack of narrative; so, at least, I judge from the impression made on me by her nursery tales" (24). When Jane is eighteen and Bessie visits her, she smiles when Bessie comments that she is "quite a lady" and reveals she has even named her daughter after Jane (77-78). Jane values Bessie's opinion in particular because Bessie remains the "master storyteller" who most influenced Jane's writing. Bessie's stories of ghosts, imps, fairies, and kidnappers make a profound impact on the young Jane, and their tropes reappear in her autobiographical writing as an adult. Eventually, Jane realizes that the "passages of love and adventure" that the servant Bessie used to read aloud to her were "taken from old fairy tales and older ballads; or (as at a later period I discovered) from the pages of *Pamela*, and *Henry, Earl of Moreland*" (7). (The inclusion of *Pamela* is particularly pertinent, since, like *Jane Eyre* itself, it tells the story of

a domestic employee who is pursued by and ultimately marries her employer.) Bessie's literacy is not treated as unusual and little fanfare is made of her preference for novels. By the 1860s, however, the novel-reading servant would become a source of much public anxiety. Given the influence that Bessie's fairy tales, ballads, and—particularly—*Pamela* evidently had on the young Jane, perhaps Bessie's reading does present a cause for concern to the middle and upper classes.

Jane's interactions with Bessie may have an autobiographical basis in Charlotte Brontë's relationship with Tabby, the Brontë sisters' beloved household servant. According to Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë,* Tabby played an important role in the Brontë household, and her words in particular held great power: "To a visitor at the parsonage, it was a great thing to have Tabby's good word. She had a Yorkshire keenness of perception into character, and it was not everybody she liked" (94). Tabby was also privy to all of the family's affairs, and even when she grew deaf she "expected to be informed of all the family concerns" (Gaskell 59). While this might have been a boon to employers who value family privacy, Gaskell says that Charlotte "used to take [Tabby] out for a walk on the solitary moors; where, when both were seated on a tuft of heather, in some high lonely place, she could acquaint the old woman, at leisure, with all that she wanted to hear" without other members of the household hearing any secrets (59). Tabby seems an odd choice of confidante, however, since she was known to tell tales:

> No doubt she had many a tale to tell of by-gone days of the country-side; old ways of living, former inhabitants, decayed gentry, who had melted away, and whose places knew them no more; family tragedies, and dark superstitious dooms; and in telling these things without the least consciousness that there might ever be

> anything requiring to be softened down, would give at full length the bare and simple details. (Gaskell 60)

Tabby's aversion to "soften[ing] down" her tales is one of the hallmarks of servants' stories. Like Shakespeare's fools, the Brontës' servants are the tellers of difficult truths.

Jane even becomes privy to the servants' uncensored version of her own family history when she overhears Bessie and Abbot discussing it. She will spend the rest of the novel trying to take control of her own life story so she too can tell the truth as she sees it. As Carla Kaplan has pointed out, Jane first does this by contradicting the false version of her life that Mrs. Reed tells. Jane insists she "will tell anybody who asks me questions this exact tale" of how her aunt treated her "with miserable cruelty" (Carla Kaplan 71; *Jane Eyre* 69-68). Mrs. Reed has developed excuses for Jane's dislike of her that are appropriate and unembarrassing to explain to visitors, but Jane acts as a servant storyteller here, threatening to broadcast the secrets of the middle-class family home after she leaves for a new "position," so to speak. As a young girl, Jane feels she is not heard, and when she speaks, she is accused of lying. As Vicky Simpson suggests, Jane overcomes this disadvantage as an adult by "us[ing] storytelling to implicitly challenge social institutions by gaining the authoritative position of storyteller, a position that gives her significant influence over St. John Rivers, Edward Rochester, and, of course, her reader" (Simpson 2).

Storytelling gives Jane agency and control over how she is perceived; although it appears that even though she is writing the text of the novel after her marriage to Rochester, he is not afforded the opportunity to exercise any editorial control over how he is depicted. Sternlieb sees Jane's admission that she "kept these things, then, and pondered them in [her] heart" as her "most explicit confession that Rochester never has and never will read the novel to which the

reader is afforded such intimate access" (381; Sternlieb 35). Rochester tells Jane his sordid history, which she in turn reveals to her reader. Sternlieb believes that "Jane masquerades as a confidante in order to obtain stories that she will later write about; and the gentle reader is made to overlook Rochester's miscalculation of Jane's unobtrusively innate sympathy while recognizing his misreading of her talents" (Sternlieb 19). Sternlieb's point of view is unusual but compelling, and makes Jane appear to have much in common with Nelly Dean. I do not perceive Jane as being quite so duplicitous, although her position as a narrator is complicated by her conflicting roles as a gentlewoman, a domestic, and the master's wife. Who can her ideal "gentle reader" be, since she can no longer speak with other governesses on equal terms?

Some contemporary playwrights adapting *Jane Eyre*, particularly those writing for theaters that catered to a more working-class audience, solved this problem by having other domestics narrate Jane's story. The plays depict Jane as a heroic figure primarily because of her demonstrated empathy for her fellow domestics. In adapting *Jane Eyre* for the stage, these playwrights seized upon Brontë's sympathetic depiction of the servant classes in order to reframe the story to emphasize the rights and experiences of domestic employees.

Theatrical adaptations of Jane Eyre

The first playwrights who adapted the novel for the stage eschewed the more typically "sensational" (and theatrical) aspects of bigamy, murder, and madness, and instead showcased its use of the servant's voice and its representation of the ambiguity of class relations. Because they minimize or exclude some of the more controversial material in the novel—like Jane's childhood abuse or Rochester's marriage to Bertha—the plays may at first appear to be greatly abridged or even bowdlerized versions of the novel. However, they do call attention to the class politics in

the novel—arguably, an equally "sensational" topic that the sensation school of the 1860s will incorporate as well.

The two earliest productions that Patsy Stoneman has discovered and reprinted in *Jane Eyre on Stage* primarily focus on the heroic servants of the story and depict their struggles for recognition and respect among the abusive higher classes. Both plays were written for theatres that catered to a working-class audience, so the plays sought to cultivate sympathy and identification between the servants on stage and those who might be in the audience. Upper-class characters like the Ingrams are designed as particular objects of scorn and ridicule, but petty tyrants like Brocklehurst and even Rochester are put in their places by the savvy servants. In John Courtney's play *Jane Eyre, or The Secrets of Thornfield Manor* (1848), as the servants revolt against Mr. Brocklehurst's authoritarian rule at Lowood, Miss Scatcherd yells that "[t]he house is being turned upside down, and if I stay here much longer I shall be served the same" (37). By privileging the servant voice, these plays, like the sensation novels that will follow, turn the conventions of the nineteenth-century class system "upside down."

Less than three months after the publication of Charlotte Brontë's novel, Courtney's play was showing at the Royal Victoria Theatre on the south bank of the Thames (Stoneman, *Jane* 20). The play employs a number of servant narrators who explain the action and offer commentary to the audience. Jane, however, is not among them—perhaps because a retrospective commentary by a genteel-born who is now the master's wife may seem a less likely source of empathy to a largely working-class audience than "one of their own" might. The most talkative and sympathetic characters are inventions of the play; these include Joe Joker, Betty Bunce, Sally Suds, Sam, and John Dean—all domestic employees. The servants, particularly Joe and Betty, are depicted as the true heroes of the play; they are witty, wise, and loyal, and they

rescue and comfort their employers on a number of occasions. Joe defends Jane when Mr. Brocklehurst forces her to stand on the stool, carries Rochester on his shoulders out of the fire, and saves Rochester again when Mason tries to kill him.

The audience recognizes Jane and Rochester as good people largely because of how they treat these servants. Jane, for example, allows Joe to take a meal with her while he is dressed in ragged clothing, and Rochester generously asks Betty to be Jane's bridesmaid. Although their charitable actions make Jane and Rochester seem admirable, the servants are intended to be more sympathetic and more honest characters than their superiors in class. Joe proposes to Betty by depicting himself as a more morally upstanding man than their master: "I should never have two wives from one of the soundest principles in nature…. I never seed a woman yet, as was not a match for the best man alive and as couldn't give him a little un into the bargain" (Courtney 58). Courtney's play also offers an ending that would be particularly satisfying to its working-class audience; because of their devotion, Betty and Joe are publicly commended, rewarded with higher-ranking positions in the house, and allowed to accompany Rochester and Jane on their honeymoon. The final words of the play—aside from the cheers of the farm servants—belong to Jane praising Joe: "Joseph, the preserver of my husband and myself, be happy; for I will make you so!" (63).

John Brougham's theatrical adaptation of the novel was first performed at the Bowery Theatre in New York in 1849 (Stoneman, *Jane* 70). Brougham's play is noteworthy for its emphasis on the Ingrams' class snobbery and their class-based victimization of Jane. Lord Ingram, for example, sees sport in throwing the governess "lamb" to "those old Dowager Lionesses" (Brougham 80). The Ingrams and Colonel Dent are depicted as snobbish, freeloading aristocrats; when the party laughs at Rochester's eccentric behavior in his absence, Dent

declares, "so long as he leaves such glorious wine to be drunk, noble horses to be ridden, and splendid game to pop at, what the deuce is it to us" (78). In fact, class warfare is the central focus of the play, eclipsing even the mystery of the madwoman, as Bertha barely appears.

John Downey, a witty footman, serves as the audience's guide. John ultimately marries Grace Pool[e], and together they mock the pretensions of Rochester's upper-class guests. In one memorable scene, Grace ignores class protocol and remains casually sitting in the drawing room eating cake after the Ingrams enter, and even offers them a bite.[16] As in Courtney's play, Jane's role is to bridge the divide between the classes by making an ally of Rochester and marrying him. Jane is taunted by the Ingrams, but retains pride in her class identity, saying:

> Better, a thousand times better, my solitary cell once more, than be gibed and mocked at by the vulgar-wealthy; to have the badge of servitude engraved upon my very heart, and know that tyrant circumstance has placed me in a world all prison, where every human being is a watchful jailor, and where you must endure the unceasing lash of insolence, the certain punishment of that statuteless but unforgiven crime, poverty. (84)

Rochester is depicted as admirable because his love for Jane leads him to champion the servant and laboring classes. He finds Jane's "unworthiness" of rank to be one of the most appealing things about her, and promises grandly to "fling aside the gauds of title and of name" for her "beloved sake" (101). He defends Jane from her tormentors the Ingrams by saying, "The instructress of my child, my lord, ranks among the foremost of my friends; my acquaintances surely need not blush to be in such society" (89). And, when the Ingrams declare the idea of

[16] Lord Ingram initially guesses that Grace is actually "Rochester dressed up," which is surprising since Rochester will later disguise himself as a *male* gypsy (Brougham 88).

marrying "the *governess*" to be "[r]evolting!" Rochester rejoins that "one pure instant of [her] companionship were worth a whole eternity with such as ye" (101).

The play's ending also proves particularly happy for the yeomanry. John tells the blinded Rochester, "Your tenants who love and respect you, sir, have brought their poor but honest gifts; it would make them and all of us so happy sir, if you would accept them" (107). Rochester graciously assents, and Jane reassures the tenants that it is Rochester's ambition "to be the kind landlord, and the good adviser" to them (108). Then, the "peasants"—as the stage directions deem them—rejoice by presenting him with garlands and a banner declaring Rochester to be "The Farmer's Friend" (108).

The marriage between Jane and Rochester is perhaps the most sensational aspect of the original novel that these early theatrical adaptations retain from the novel. While the plays depict the marriage as a harmonious union across class lines that signifies a bright future, many contemporary critics of the novel saw it as setting a dangerous precedent for undeserved class-climbing. Elizabeth Rigby dismisses Jane Eyre as "merely another Pamela" who "is stamped with a coarseness of language and a laxity of tone which have certainly no excuses in our[time]" and sees a similarity to Becky Sharp as well, since "[b]oth the ladies are governesses, and both make the same move in society" (497). Rigby perpetuates the myth of the adventuress-governess, women who, as Harriet Martineau describes, "hope to catch a husband as an establishment of one or other degree of value; fawning liars, who try to obtain a maintenance and more or less luxury by flattery and subservience" ("Governess" 271, qtd. in Brandon 195).

Indeed, Rigby sees Jane primarily as a conniving servant bent on making a mercenary marriage: "Coarse as Mr. Rochester is, one winces for him under the infliction of this housemaid beau idéal of the arts of coquetry" (504). In fact, Rigby believes that when Jane faces Rochester

during the gypsy scene, her response to her master reveals her true motives: "governesses are said to be sly on such occasions, but Jane out-governesses them all—little Becky would have blushed for her" (504). Rigby, who would soon become Lady Eastlake, appears to be most upset by the governess's success in marrying her above her station and thus advancing in society. She strenuously objects to the novel's "anti-Christian" view of class relations, and its "murmuring against the comforts of the rich and against the privations of the poor, which, as far as each individual is concerned, is a murmuring against God's appointment" (506). The "Cinderella" trajectory of Jane Eyre and Pamela would soon become a standard plotline for sensation heroines, although their actions and motivations have more in common with those of Becky Sharp.

Jane Eyre*'s influence on sensation fiction*

In 1867, during the reign of the sensational school, Margaret Oliphant traces the origin of English girls' new "eagerness for physical sensation" to "a singular change [that] passed upon our right literature" that "perhaps began" with the unconventionalities of *Jane Eyre* ("Novels" 259, 258). According to Oliphant, Charlotte Brontë's novel signaled the beginning of "all those stories of bigamy and seduction" featuring "[w]omen driven wild with love for the man who leads them on to desperation before he accords that word of encouragement which carries them into the seventh heaven [or] women who marry their grooms in fits of sensual passion" ("Novels" 258). The novel that Oliphant likely refers to in describing the woman who marries her horse groom is Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd,* which offers a gender reversal of *Jane Eyre*'s cross-class marriage. Braddon admitted that she was greatly influenced by *Jane Eyre* in her own writing. She described an early "sentimental period" in her writing "in which

my unfinished novels assumed a more ambitious form, and were modeled chiefly upon *Jane Eyre*, with occasional tentative imitations of Thackeray" ("My First" 23). Braddon recalls that the first time she read Brontë's novel, "The story gripped me from the first page …. I had enough of a girl's romantic fancy to fall prostrate before the stern and rugged grandeur of 'Mr. Rochester,'" although within two years, "Rochester had become a type. The circulating library bristled with Rochesters" ("Shrine" 174). Even more overt imitations of *Jane Eyre* would appear with the advent of the sensation novel.

Many of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's plots contain elements introduced in *Jane Eyre*, and some, like Braddon's novella *Ralph the Bailiff* (1867), borrow liberally from its plot, although the story is altered to suit the conventions of sensation fiction. In *Ralph the Bailiff*, for example, Dudley Carleon, the master of the house, has a guilty secret that only his servant, Ralph the bailiff, knows. Although Jane merely speculates that Grace might be blackmailing Rochester, in this instance Ralph does blackmail his employer, and he uses knowledge of a murder in Dudley's past to force his master to marry his sister, Martha. Dudley, like Rochester, keeps his marriage a secret, and he sends his wife away because he is ashamed of her low class status. Dudley then bigamously marries the good Jenny Trevor. One night Jenny wakes after a vivid dream of a child and she realizes that she heard a real child's cry; she speculates it might be a ghost. Instead, she discovers Dudley's first wife Martha and their baby hidden in a room near the servants' rooms. Jenny flees the house during a fire, and although she escapes, Dudley dies, perhaps having committed suicide. Like *Jane Eyre*, this novella is what Pyrhönen dubs "Bluebeard Gothic," a story type that is popular in sensation fiction (8).

Jane Eyre contains many tropes that would later become standard in sensation fiction: suicides, madness, mutilation, blackmail, transvestism, illegitimate children, and child abuse,

among others. Like sensation heroines after her, Jane even adopts an alias to live under a false identity and she engages in a cross-class marriage. However, even the most "shocking" aspects of *Jane Eyre* might seem quaint when compared to the sensation fiction of the 1860s. While Brontë's novel boasts attempted murder and attempted bigamy, later sensation novels featured true murderers and bigamists. Winifred Hughes remarks that the "Jane" of these texts "no longer runs away from the would-be bigamist; she is much more likely to dabble in a little bigamy of her own" (9). Elaine Showalter notes the difference as illustrated in the words of a sensation heroine from 1861: "If I had been Jane Eyre, I would have killed [Mr. Rochester]" (Jenkin 249, qtd. in Showalter "Desperate" 1).

Sensation novels such Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White* use servants to narrate some of the most crucial moments. Only five years after the Brontës' most famous novels were published, Collins wrote *Basil*, one of the earliest sensation novels. Unlike *The Moonstone*'s Betteredge, *Basil's* eponymous gentleman hero proves himself unable to correctly read any situation outside from outside his own class experience. Basil regards the drawing room of a linen draper's "oppressively new" middle class home somewhat like an anthropologist encountering some unknown and incomprehensible culture (Collins 53). Since Basil has known only privilege, he cannot adequately understand it; he says "the eye ached looking at it" and suggests "[t]he room would have given a more nervous man the headache" (Collins 54).[17] The plot of Collins' first attempt at what would become the sensation novel relies on its narrator's inability to cross class boundaries effectively or to read them correctly, which limits the narrative possibilities of the novel itself. In the "true" sensation novels that would follow, the narrative voice is chameleonic and able to transcend the borders of class. A range of

[17] Basil's inability to interpret a situation due to his own limitations of class may echo the plight of Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights*.

voices from across the social spectrum is heard in novels like *The Woman in White*; the first-person perspective of a gentleman of privilege, as found in *Basil,* will rarely again be employed as the primary narrator.

The voice of the servant narrator is one key manifestation of servants' power and resistance within the genre. Servants are "privileged spies" (as Braddon describes them) who tell tales of what they see and thus are among the most frequent narrators within the genre (*Lady Audley's* 336). Bruce Robbins explains how the "insidious immediacy" of first-person narration "can disarm criticism and establish a subversive right to fellowship" (93). In the case of a servant narrator, this means the middle-class reader will share intimacy with a member of the working class, albeit a fictional one. Servant/employer intimacy is seen in both of the Brontë novels studied here, as well as 1860s sensation titles and later novels in the sensation vein, such as Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Winifred Hughes has described sensation plots as "verg[ing] on surrealism," but I suggest they are actually closer to what Bakhtin described as the carnivalesque. (22). The servant-narrator is master of the story; and the novel-reading classes are his subjects. Neo-Victorian novels of recent years have prominently featured servant voices; modern "sensation fiction" texts such as *Mary Reilly* (1990), *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Fingersmith*, and *Kept* (2006) all feature servant maid protagonists who take part in the narration.

CHAPTER 4

"PRIVILEGED SPIES":

THE CRIMINAL SERVANT IN *LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET*

Just as critics of *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* had done in the 1840s, the reviewers of the sensation fiction of the 1860s often accused these novels of glorifying immoral conduct. For example, in 1864, a critic for the *Christian Remembrancer* claimed the novels undermined morality "by drugging thought and reason … and especially by tampering with things evil, and infringing more or less on the confines of wrong" and encouraging "sympathy with crime" ("Our Female" 107). In 1863, another critic, from the evangelical publication *Good Words*, saw the sensation novel as heralding the end of Victorian domesticity, and humbly prayed for writers of sensation fiction "to exorcise this evil possession of our literature, that we may not have the sorrow and shame of knowing that the reign of good Queen Victoria, our true woman and wife, will be identified in after generations with the reign of female criminals in English literature" (Keddie 86). It is the prevalence of these *female* criminal characters that appears to have most deeply offended such critics. Since contemporary critics often assumed that women were the primary readers of sensation novels, there was a fear that the deviant acts of fictional female criminals might seem appealing and lead otherwise moral, Christian women astray.

Sensation novels themselves appear to substantiate the fear that reading the wrong material can be dangerous. In *Lady Audley's Secret,* the primary villainess, Lucy Audley, and her devious lady's maid, Phoebe Marks, delight in discussing "the questionable subjects of" the

"yellow-paper-covered" French romances that they read together (104).[18] Braddon's inclusion of this detail suggests that novel-readers may attempt to emulate what they read. Lady Audley sees herself in one heroine in particular, a beautiful Frenchwoman who is burned at the stake for some long-forgotten crime that suddenly came to light in her old age (106). By the novel's conclusion, Lady Audley has suffered a similar fate: when her long-hidden crime comes to light, she is left to die in a Belgian asylum.

Here, as elsewhere, Braddon actually suggests that that sensational literature can be used as an instructional tool. Robert Audley is able to use his knowledge of sensation novels as a how-to guide to propel his amateur detective work: "'I haven't read Alexandre Dumas and Wilkie Collins for nothing,'" he boasts (402). In contrast, George Talboys fails to recognize his wife's deception because he has neglected to keep up with "fashionable literature" and rarely reads (14). In *Aurora Floyd*, Braddon uses a character's reading choice to convey a sly wink to her own sensation-seeking readership. The eponymous heroine is seen "poring over *Bell's Life,* much to the horror of [her governess] Mrs. Walter Powell, who had a vague idea of the iniquitous proceedings recited in that terrible journal, but who was afraid to stretch her authority so far as to forbid its perusal" (53-54).

Some sensation novels, like *The Woman in White*, adhere to the conventions established in Gothic novels and feature a male villain who plots against a virtuous woman in peril.[19] Quite often, however, sensation fiction "toy[s] with the Gothic mode" by making the primary villain, sinner, or criminal of the text a woman (Rance 110). Probably the most well-known female

[18] French romances in particular were highly suspect; in one 1859 *Servant's Magazine* story, "Daughters from Home," a young girl becomes morally corrupted when her employer reads French novels aloud to her.

[19] A notable exception to this convention among Gothic novels is Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* (1806), which features a female villain, although it could be argued she only acts as the puppet of Satan, who appears in male human form.

criminal in a sensation novel is Lucy Audley, whom the *North British Review* described as a "beautiful demoness," a descriptor that seems to suit the murderess she is initially believed to be ("Novels" 188). However, from a legal standpoint, the only crimes she successfully commits are bigamy and arson.[20] From a social standpoint, however, Lucy Audley commits an unforgivable crime: although she is only the daughter of "a tipsy old half-pay lieutenant" daughter, she poses as a gentlewoman governess, then rises to become the mistress of Audley Court (18). As Winifred Hughes notes, "Lady Audley embodies an internal threat to the respectable classes because she identifies with them; she wants what they value and brilliantly parodies their ideal" (127). Her successes at climbing the rungs of the social ladder and impersonating a lady suggest that a woman's class rank is merely a matter of perception; with the right costuming, makeup and acting talent, a lady's maid can become a lady.[21]

As Katherine Montwieler notes, Lady Audley has carefully crafted her new identity through clothing and demeanor (50-51). Lady Audley advises her own poor lady's maid how she might similarly tip the social scales in her favor. She tells Phoebe, "'you *are* like me, and your features are very nice; it is only color that you want…. Why, with a bottle of hair-dye, such as we see advertised in the papers, and a pot of rouge, you'd be as good-looking as I, any day, Phoebe'" (58, italics original). While Lynn Voskuil suggests that this points to the "authenticity" of Lady Audley's beauty, I see this as an instance of Lady Audley passing down the knowledge and tools that facilitated her rise in rank so that others may follow her example (625). As Patrick O'Malley points out, several characters in the novel champion the ethos of self-help; when Lucy is a governess, even her "employers encourage rather than condemn her appeals to Sir Michael's

[20] It could be argued that she does successfully commit murder, since Luke Marks eventually dies, presumably as a result of the fire.
[21] The next chapter will explore the reverse of this scenario—a lady who transforms into a servant.

romantic interest" (121). Lucy uses the economic language of making a "bargain" in accepting Sir Michael Audley's proposal of marriage, because "marrying up" is one of the only options available to domestic employees who wish for future financial stability (O'Malley 120). By the novel's conclusion, when Lady Audley defends her crimes as acts of insanity, Dr. Mosgrave reasons, "'She committed the crime of bigamy, because by that crime she obtained fortune and position. There is no madness there'" (377). As Elaine Showalter points out, "Lady Audley's real secret is that she is *sane*, and moreover, representative" ("Desperate" 4).[22] She has simply used the only tools available to a woman in her position her to gain power and wealth. Lady Audley may meet a kinder end than many transgressors in sensation fiction do, because readers who had similarly felt the injustices of the British class system likely identified with her (Showalter, "Desperate" 4).

Lady Audley's Secret shares several elements in common with the "sensation plot" involving Lady Dedlock in Dickens' *Bleak House*. Braddon often modeled her plots on the work of other authors, so it is possible she used *Bleak House* as a source text. In *Bleak House*, Lady Dedlock is guilty of adultery but innocent of murder, although her former maid attempts to frame her for it. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Lady Audley is similarly guilty of bigamy but innocent of murder, and her maid attempts to blackmail her for her secrets. *Bleak House*'s Hortense provides a prototype of the criminal servant that would be imitated so often that it would become a cliché by the end of the century. Other representations of the sinister female servant include the aforementioned Phoebe Marks of *Lady Audley's Secret*, Mrs. Lecount of *No Name*, Mrs. Powell of *Aurora Floyd* (1863), and Madame de la Rougierre of *Uncle Silas*. While many of these characters have previously been treated as relatively one-dimensional villains, here I

[22] D. A. Miller says that the question of whether or not is mad is immaterial since she presents a danger to society (170).

consider how they are part of a broader set of patterns that reveal the criminal servant's role as part of class struggle.

Bleak House

Hortense is an example of a servant who takes drastic criminal action only after she has exhausted her other options and finds she has power to do little else. Steig and Wilson suggest that Hortense "is put forward as a substitute character to enact the murder that Lady Dedlock has 'often, often, often wished' [and] may thus in some sense be seen as an embodiment of Lady Dedlock's anger" (790; Steig and Wilson 290). Although Hortense comes to detest her former mistress, she unwittingly acts as a more perfect lady's maid than Rosa, since she will go to prison for carrying out her lady's wishes. Hortense has few redeeming qualities, is consistently vilified by other characters (including the omniscient narrative voice), and is characterized as something abhuman: she has a "feline mouth," is "like a very neat she-wolf imperfectly tamed," and is often called a "vixen" or a "tigress" (171, 615, 773).

However, the motive for her actions is quite human: when she loses her position as a lady's maid, she is desperate to find a new position to support herself. She offers to work for Esther Summerson "'for nothing'" but is turned down (339). She assists Tulkinghorn's investigation in hopes of securing a recommendation from such a "'powerful'" man, and later even pays him back his two sovereigns in hopes that he would offer her regular employment instead (336, 615). Hortense feels her character was unfairly ruined "'by remaining with a lady[] so infam[ous],'" so she attempts to ruin Lady Dedlock's reputation as revenge (769).[23]

[23] Mrs. Powell of *Aurora Floyd* similarly sends anonymous messages to the police claiming her former mistress is a murderess. The only difference is that Mrs. Powell actually believes her accusations to be true (413).

Hortense's actions highlight both the power and powerlessness inherent to her position as a lady's maid: she is close enough to the rich to witness their lifestyle and be privy to their secrets, but her class status limits the future possibilities and opportunities available to her. Without a character reference from Lady Dedlock (or Mr. Tulkinghorn), she has few employment options to choose from, so she exacts her revenge. Living in prison might seem preferable to unemployment, or even taking a lower-ranking servant position, which she would find degrading. By the end of the novel, Hortense is almost an object of pity as Bucket browbeats her into a confession.

Hortense also highlights how fine a line exists between a lady and her maid. Lady Dedlock was not born into a title but has married into one, so she is a "lady" only by a chance of fortune. In Hortense's opinion, both women act equally matched in rank: "'My Lady was too high for me; I was too high for her'" (339). Because Hortense is a Frenchwoman, the struggle for power between Hortense and Lady Dedlock seems strongly suggestive of the broader class conflicts of the French Revolution. This comparison that seems to be deliberately evoked in the scene when Hortense is fired and she takes off her shoes and wanders through the wet grass, prompting the keeper's wife to wonder aloud if "'she fancies it's blood'" (277).

Lady Dedlock eventually finds she is more comfortable having a different, English maid—she selects the poor, prettier, and more inexperienced Rosa to replace Hortense. Lady Dedlock admits she is "'different to [Rosa] from what [she is] to any one,'" and Rosa replies that Lady Dedlock acts much kinder to her, and remarks, "'I think I know you as you really are'" (679).[24] It is likely that Lady Dedlock feels more comfortable and intimate with Rosa because she feels a close class kinship with her; she may be Sir Leicester's wife, but she is also a "fallen

[24] Lady Audley clings to Phoebe for similar reasons, believing her to be "neither better nor worse than herself" (299).

woman" who was the fiancée of an army captain.[25] Her struggle to define the class boundary between herself and Hortense remains a constant reminder of her own tenuous position. At one point, she even capitalizes on the lack of difference between lady and maid by dressing in Hortense's clothes to pass as a servant on the street. In Hortense's final scene, we witness a reversal of this scenario: Hortense looks like a lady, and Bucket takes on a parodic role of lady's maid. He says, "'Let me put your shawl tidy. I've been lady's maid to a good many before now. Anything wanting to the bonnet?'" (773). Meanwhile, "Mademoiselle Hortense, casting an indignant eye at the glass, shakes herself perfectly neat in one shake and looks, to do her justice, uncommonly genteel" (773). Hortense offers a model of the criminal servant that other sensation novels imitate. Among these melodramatic and memorable criminal servant villains, one that has remained understudied and widely unnoticed is Phoebe Marks of *Lady Audley's Secret.*

Lady Audley's Secret *and other sensation novels*

While Phoebe is often overlooked in critical considerations of *Lady Audley's Secret*, I believe her character deserves reconsideration in the context of other well-known criminal female servants of contemporaneous fiction. The criminal maid, housekeeper, or governess has become a familiar stock character, and I see Phoebe as an overlooked representative of this character type as represented in sensation fiction. From Hortense in *Bleak House* to twentieth-century representations like Mrs. Danvers of *Rebecca* (1938), the depiction of the criminal

[25] Lady Dedlock also feels an affinity for Rosa because of the maid's beauty and obvious affection for her. Rosa becomes at once a stand-in for Lady Dedlock's lost child and for her own lost innocence. However, Rosa's reluctance to leave Lady Dedlock "even for a lover" could be suggestive of an intimacy that I explore more fully in Chapter Five, which considers "The Grey Woman" (421).

servant falls into a familiar pattern: the servant is a manipulator and spy who is herself manipulated and spied upon; she is consistently depicted as the "other" (inhuman, abnormal, or unearthly); and at some point she serves as a substitute or double for her mistress. Such characters are rarely the primary antagonist but are more often acting as agents of an even more threatening villain.[26] They nearly always experience a downfall by the end, often one that even inspires pity. While other erring sensation heroines, such as Isabel Vane or Aurora Floyd, are driven to sin by lust or naïveté, the criminal servant is often motivated by ambition to rise in status or wealth; she is keenly aware of the unfairness of her class position and feels envious of women of higher rank. Lady's maids and governesses in particular must work closely with more privileged women every day, and the novels show the social complexities of such a relationship.

The female criminal servant is more likely to use her wits and cunning rather than violence to achieve her goals. As Anthea Trodd notes, "When servants do resort to violence it is much more likely to be for the purpose of framing their employers, as with Hortense in *Bleak House*…. In such cases the violent action is more important for its function in the servant's spying activities than as violence" (Trodd 67). Phoebe Marks initially appears to be a less overtly malicious character than the other representative criminal servants because she feels sympathy for her mistress and shares a certain intimacy with her. In several chapters, Phoebe appears to have more in common with Rosa, Lady Dedlock's beloved young maid, than with Hortense, the traitor. However, I suggest that Phoebe is quite similar to the more overtly

[26] Bracebridge Hemyng's *Held in Thrall* (1869) could be considered one exception, although it more often considered a "penny blood" than a true sensation novel. The sinister governess Mona Seafield shares a motive with other sensation villains, however: "To raise herself above the necessity of working—for work with her was a necessity, her parents being very poor, though of genteel extraction—and to compel others to render her the homage due to rank and wealth, Mona would have sold herself to the powers of darkness" (Hemyng, *Held* 2).

malicious servant characters but appears less threatening only because, unlike the others, she readily gets what she wants.

Phoebe and her husband, Luke, blackmail Lady Audley in order to fund their own public house. Critics have largely overlooked the fact that although this provided a livelihood for Luke, the initial scheme was masterminded by Phoebe. For example, Andrew Mangham claims that "Luke's progress echoes that to the Victorian self-made man. Beginning in a position of obscurity, he manages to climb a step on the social ladder" (92). Mangham's reading ignores Luke's repeated protests against his wife's desire to rise in rank and his own lack of motivation. It is not Luke but Phoebe who is determined to better herself and her social position (92). She points out her perceived qualifications to her husband:

> "But they say traveling makes people genteel, Luke. I've been on the Continent with my lady, through all manner of curious places; and you know, when I was a child, Squire Horton's daughters taught me to speak a little French, and I found it so nice to be able to talk to the people abroad." (27)

Phoebe also attempts to emulate the members of the upper class, adopting the "carriage of a gentlewoman" "in spite of her humble dress" (25). She has seen the erstwhile Lucy Graham transform from governess to lady, and believes with some cunning she might pull off the same trick. She reflects,

> "What was she but a servant like me? Taking wages and working for them as hard, or harder, than I did. You should have seen her shabby clothes…. Why, I've seen her come out of the parlor with a few sovereigns and a little silver in her hand, that master had just given her for her quarter's salary; and now look at her!" (27)

Luke, however, scoffs at his wife's ambition: "'who wants you to be genteel, I wonder? Not me, for one; when you're my wife you won't have overmuch time for gentility, my girl'" (26). When Phoebe wears a glamorous silk gown at their wedding, Luke again derides her for her social pretensions: "'You're cold in all this here finery…. Why can't women dress according to their station? You won't have no silk gowns out of my pocket, I can tell you'" (112). Unlike Phoebe, Luke has no initial desire to upset the social status quo.

It is likely no coincidence that Samuel Smiles' groundbreaking book *Self-Help* was published in 1859, just prior to the boom in sensation fiction. *Self-Help* contains biographies of men who accomplish impressive feats through integrity and perseverance.[27] Its profiles of great men are remarkably similar in tone and content to the instructive and inspirational tales included in *The Servants' Magazine* from the same time period (although the magazine notably included stories about both men and women). *Servants' Magazine* offers accounts of servants who are recognized by their employers and even promoted within the domestic ranks due to their honesty and spirit of industriousness. *Self-Help* advocates the idea that men from all classes can become great men:

> Riches and ease, it is perfectly clear, are not necessary for man's highest culture, else had not the world been so largely indebted in all times to those who have sprung from the humbler ranks. An easy and luxurious existence does not train men to effort or encounter with difficulty; nor does it awaken that consciousness of power which is so necessary for energetic and effective action in life. Indeed, so far from poverty being a misfortune, it may, by vigorous self-help, be converted even into a blessing; rousing a man to that struggle with the world in

[27] Although wives and mothers are mentioned as influences, no women are profiled.

> which, though some may purchase ease by degradation, the right-minded and true-hearted find strength, confidence, and triumph. (Smiles 16)

Although there is a section on "Industry and the Peerage," the bulk of the biographical stories are about "common" men of unremarkable class or rank who are depicted as admirable role models.

Phoebe and other class-climbing servants of sensation fiction subscribe to the "individual industry" Smiles championed and his belief that a "healthy spirit of self-help created amongst working people would more than any other measure serve to raise them as a class" (253). However, they ignore Smiles' stipulation that this should be achieved "not by pulling down others, but by leveling them up to a higher and still advancing standard of religion, intelligence, and virtue" (253). Indeed, some sensation texts go so far as to depict individual industriousness, even at the expense of the upper classes, as a social good rather than a social evil. Wilkie Collins' *The New Magdalen* (1873), for instance, features a poor woman taking the identity of a rich woman.[28] Published during Collins' purported "Wilkie, have a mission!" phase, it offers less nuance and more overt moralizing.[29]

As women who rely on regular wages for their livelihood, servants understand the true value of money, perhaps better than their charges or mistresses, who may never have had to work. For example, Lady Audley's former life as a governess prompts her to cherish her expensive baubles and ornaments, and she even covertly packs the best of them to take with her to the asylum (383). A servant faces a moral dilemma while working in the home of a wealthy family while subsisting on small wages. As Ellen Darwin put it in *The Nineteenth Century*, "No

[28] *The New Magdalen* is the Cinderella story of Mercy, a reformed prostitute made good; it is a Horatio Alger-like tale in which moral fortitude, innovation, and a firm grip on her bootstraps leads to her social elevation and success. Her good fortune, however, comes at the expense and embarrassment of an aristocratic family.
[29] *Swinburne,* "Collins" 598.

people contemplate so frequently and so strikingly the unequal distribution of wealth: they fold up dresses whose price contains double the amount of their year's wages; they pour out at dinner wine whose cost would have kept a poor family for weeks" (290). The criminal servant of sensation fiction is often spurred to crime by greed or jealousy of the higher classes.

Phoebe knows the value of each item in her lady's boudoir—"'I've heard that those [paintings] alone are worth a fortune,'" she tells Luke, and she rhapsodizes about Lady Audley's chest "'full as it can be of diamonds, rubies, pearls and emeralds'" (29). When she finds the small packet that reveals Lady Audley's secret past, Phoebe realizes that the value of blackmail is far greater than the diamond bracelet Luke initially wanted to steal (31). As more than one novel suggests, blackmail also has the added bonus of ensuring that a servant cannot be dismissed, lest she reveal her employer's damning secret. As the blackmailing Mrs. Powell observes in *Aurora Floyd*: "'they're both in my power; and I'm no longer a poor dependent, to be sent away, at a quarter's notice, when it pleases them to be tired of me'" (337). In *No Name*, the housekeeper Mrs. Lecount uses a different but similar tactic, extracting money with her employer's knowledge and consent rather than stealing furtively, which could lead to her imprisonment. (Like Phoebe, Mrs. Lecount earns her employer's trust and convinces him of her value to him. She bullies Noel Vanstone into leaving her £5,000, convincing him that it was not merely "a favor," but her "right" [560].) However, as *Lady Audley's Secret* underscores, even wealthy employers have limited funds. Phoebe learns this when Lady Audley demands:

> "I suppose when my purse is empty and my credit ruined, you and your husband will turn upon me and sell me to the highest bidder. Do you know, Phoebe Marks, that my jewel-case has been half emptied to meet your claims? Do you know that my pin-money…has been overdrawn half a year to satisfy your

demands? What can I do to appease you? Shall I sell my Marie Antoinette cabinet, or my pompadour china, Leroy's and Benson's ormolu locks, or my Gobelin tapestried chairs and ottomans? How shall I satisfy you next?" (302)

Phoebe's blackmail begins, significantly, with a theft. Servant theft and extortion seem to have been a prevalent concern in the mid-nineteenth century.[30] In *London Labour and the Poor* (1861), Henry Mayhew claims that even "respectable looking young women" employed as maids are often actually criminals who will facilitate a "heavy burglary" in their employers' homes (289). Tracts were published to discourage servant theft, such as the 1863 *Address to Young Servants*, which admonished that "the beginnings of dishonesty is very often just the taking a little tea or sugar, or some other trifling thing which would not be missed; but remember, God's eye sees through the darkest night, and it man cannot see you it is impossible to hide from Him" (qtd. in Horn 140). That same year, *Servants' Magazine* reviewed a morality tale titled *The Governess; or, the Missing Pencil Case*, which concludes with "the wicked servant" who has stolen the pencil case in question "laid upon a bed of sickness from which she never rose… sensible of her evil doings, and… filled with remorse. She longed to confess her guilt to the mistress whom she had so basely imposed upon" (138). Even a servant's act of touching her mistress' personal objects was cause for concern. The 1857 tract *Kind Words to Domestic Servants* offers a parable about a servant, Mary, who tries on her mistress' clothing and touches her possessions. The mistress suggests that even such minor infractions are far from "perfectly honest, truthful, upright" and would not "stand the search of God's all-seeing eye" (qtd. in Stern 70-71).

[30] Modern scholar Theresa McBride, however, notes that while servants were indicted for a disproportionately high percentage of crimes, they also had high rates of acquittal, and were most often accused of petty larceny, not vicious crimes (107).

Part of the horror of servant theft stems from the fear that by stealing her employer's possessions, a servant might also steal part of her employer's identity. As Rebecca Stern suggests, "Even in giving away one's 'torn-up damask,' one seemed to give away something of oneself along with thread and fabric" (78). As a cautionary example, Stern points to the ludicrous housekeeper Miss Horrocks in *Vanity Fair*, who is known as "the Ribbons" since she takes and alters the clothing of two former mistresses of the estate as part of her plan to become mistress herself (79). The idea that a servant in her mistress' clothes might successfully pass as the mistress herself is far more subversive to the social order than Lady Dedlock's attempt to disguise herself as a servant. Phoebe, whom "you might have easily mistaken her for my lady" in "certain dim and shadowy lights," could present a real threat to Lady Audley's already-tenuous class identity (104-05).

It seems somewhat strange, then, that even though Lady Audley objects to her maid's marriage, she ultimately provides Phoebe one of her own silk dresses for a bridal gown. It is then noted that Phoebe, wearing a garment "that had been worn about half a dozen times by her mistress, looked… quite the lady" (110). The connection between the two women is heightened when it is suggested that "a superstitious stranger might have mistaken the bride for the ghost of some other bride, dead and buried in the vault below the church," just as Lady Audley's alter ego is ostensibly "dead and buried" in another church (Braddon 110). This blurring between the new bride and the unrepentant bigamist suggests that the maid functions as her lady's double or doppelgänger. Helena Michie suggests that:

> One could … dismiss the Phoebe incident as the trace of a previous idea for the plot. It seems equally possible, however, given the novel's insistent thematization of doubling, that the double without a function is precisely a sign of duplicitous

> excess: a self-reproduction with no explicit purpose in the economy of the novel, a reproduction, as it were, with no real reproductive function. (Michie 65)

However, the recurring pattern of mistress/maid or master/servant doubling in sensation fiction suggests that Phoebe is not simply evidence of "excess" in the novel. She is a complement to Lady Audley as a less successful, less sympathetic, but less overtly criminal servant character.

Early on, Lady Audley perceives that her maid was, "like herself, selfish, and cold, and cruel, eager for her own advancement, and greedy of opulence and elegance; angry with the lot that had been cast her, and weary of dull dependence" (299). Again, Braddon's move here resonates with aspects of other sensation novels: another similar pair is *No Name*'s Mrs. Lecount and her future mistress Magdalen Vanstone, whom Mangham describes as "mirror image[s]" of each other (187). Somewhat paradoxically, this novel too has the more overtly sinful and subversive sensation "heroine" represented as the one most deserving of reader sympathy. This pattern suggests that mistresses and maids may be two sides of the same coin, one used to define the other. If, as Seebohm Rowntree declared in his 1899 survey of York, social class could be determined by "'the keeping or not keeping of domestic servants,'" then the mistress and maid determine each other's roles and ranks, and the blurring of those divisions could lead to a loss of identity (qtd. in Horn 17).

Phoebe's likeness to Lady Audley prompts her to attempt to imitate her mistress' life. When Lucy Audley's fortune changes and she goes to live at Audley Court, Phoebe goes with her, and her new position and higher wages make her "therefore quite as much the object of envy among her particular friends as my lady herself to higher circles" (25). The maid attempts to match Lady Audley's successes with her own. She similarly marries "well," but only once she is sure Luke will be able to run the public-house. Then, once it becomes theirs, Phoebe attempts as

best she can to emulate the fine décor of Lady Audley's house that she so admires. When Lady Audley visits Phoebe's bedchamber there, she notices how

> Ms. Marks had done her best to atone for the lack of substantial furniture in her apartment by a superabundance of drapery…even the looking-glass…stood upon a draperied altar of starched muslin and pink glazed calico, and was adorned with frills of lace and knitted work. (323)

As Katherine Montwieler notes, "The former maid's emulation of her mistress's bedroom is a macabre failure. But Phoebe's attempt indicates that she has learned from Lady Audley—and that she is a quick learner, if not initially as successful as her mistress is" (57). The name of Luke and Phoebe's pub, "The Castle," implies a substitute for Lady Audley's own manor, but the maid can act as the mistress of this "Castle."

To facilitate her rise up the social ladder and complete her transformation into "mistress" of "The Castle," Phoebe must act the part. Lady Audley is a skilled actress who, if her own claims are to be believed, was able to conceal her madness from others for years. As Jennifer Hedgecock notes, "Lady Audley uses assumed names to role-play each type of woman depending on the desires of her suitor: innocent girl, devoted mother, abandoned wife, naïve governess, and child-wife. Her disguises persuade male conquests that she is an authentic version of each role" (135). According to Robert Audley, all women are practiced performers:

> Who ever heard of a woman taking life as it ought to be taken? Instead of supporting it as an unavoidable nuisance, only redeemable by its brevity, she goes through it as if it were a pageant or a procession. She dresses for it, and simpers and grins, and gesticulates for it. She pushes her neighbors, and struggles for a

> good place in the dismal march; she elbows, and writhes, and tramples, and prances to the one end of making the most of the misery. (206)

Phoebe's role-playing is more limited in scope; she must only convince Lady Audley of her sincerity. She claims that she "'would never, never have told'" Lady Audley's secret had Luke not "'forced'" it from her instead of admitting that she told him as part of their blackmail scheme (109). Phoebe claims to be afraid of Luke, describing him as "violent and revengeful," and uses him as an enemy to forge solidarity with her mistress. She emphasizes her helplessness and the lack of options available to her as a servant to gain her mistress' sympathy.

While not all criminal servants are able to deceive their employers as easily, they must maintain the pretense that they are mere dependents to hide the reality that they exercise psychological "mastery" over their masters or mistresses. In *No Name*, for instance, Mrs. Lecount, who literally dictates her master's own will, nonetheless demurs that others "'are mistaken… in supposing that I am of any importance, or that I exercise any influence …. I am the mouth-piece of Mr. Noel Vanstone; the pen he holds, if you will excuse the expression—nothing more'" (278). At another point, she affirms, with irony Vanstone fails to detect, that he must be master because *she says* that he is (404). As will be explored in the chapter on *East Lynne,* some sensation heroines even pose as servants because they are able to pass unnoticed and unsuspected. The servant who acts enjoys similar advantages but may also hope to graduate to a new role one day as a member of the middle, or even upper, class. Montwieler notes that "through Helen Maldon and Phoebe Marks, Braddon shows us that women who plan can get ahead. A lady may actually be a lady's maid in disguise. For a lady's maid (like an avid magazine reader) knows a lady's secrets" (56). The criminal servant is able to use her ability to see but remain unseen to operate as a spy in her employer's home.

A servant in the position of a lady's maid or companion is especially likely to be privy to all of her mistress' secrets. An aside in the text of *Lady Audley's Secret* remarks that

> when the lovely fairy of the ball-room re-enters the dressing-room after the night's long revelry… and drops her mask, and like another Cinderella loses the glass-slipper, by whose glitter she has been distinguished, and falls back into her rags and dirt, the lady's maid is by to see the transformation. (336-37)

Phoebe is, as Eve Lynch recognizes, the person in the house "most acutely positioned to recognize the fall taking place," despite the watchful eyes of Lady Audley's husband, stepdaughter, and nephew being trained on her as well (90). Phoebe is often defined by her gaze; she scrutinizes her mistress's face with "pale, anxious eyes, that only relaxed their watchfulness when Lady Audley's glance met that of her companion" (300). A similar Braddon character is Mrs. Powell, who, Aurora Floyd is convinced, must always have her eye on her mistress: "'She is watching me… though her pink eyelids are drooping over her eyes, and she seems to be looking at the border of her pocket-handkerchief. She sees me with her chin or her nose, perhaps. How do I know? She is all eyes!'" (276).[31]

Robert Audley's first thought on meeting Phoebe is that she "is a woman who could keep a secret," and he explicitly comments on the "power" that the maid holds over her mistress, and Lady Audley herself characterizes Phoebe as a possessor of some unknown secret (131, 135, 108). Phoebe's watchfulness and secretiveness pays off when she catches her lady in the act of a crime. As Luke recalls:

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[31] Servant literacy further compounds the danger of the servant spy. As the narrator of *Vanity Fair* opines, "Some people ought to have mutes for servants in Vanity Fair—mutes who could not write" (562). As an example, in Wilkie Collins' *Blind Love*, the servant Fanny conceals her understanding and literacy of French so that she can eavesdrop on her employers. Later, she is able to write a manuscript that exposes of their crimes.

> "Phoebe told me all about what she see, and she told me as she'd met her lady almost directly afterwards, and somethin' had passed between 'em, not much, but enough to let her missus know that the servant what she looked down upon had found out that as would put her in that servant's power to the last day of her life. 'And she is in my power, Luke,' says Phoebe; 'and she'll do anythin' in the world for us if we keep her secret.'" (430)

Brian McCuskey suggests that in such a case, the criminal servant is actually serving a purpose for the common social good, functioning as a "kitchen police" force:

> Lady Audley actually poses a much greater threat to the social order than the spying of her maid, who would then be doing bourgeois society a service by spying and tattling on her mistress. From this point of view, the effect of servant surveillance is normative rather than subversive, facilitating the restoration of law and order in the community. (362)

The novel itself would not appear to agree with McCuskey's claims, since Lady Audley is arguably a more sympathetically rendered character and a more viable target of reader identification than her maid. She has committed crimes that must be punished, and the patriarchy will punish her for them. However, Lady Audley may not be wholly to blame for her crimes, since she employs an insanity defense, and the narrative voice of the novel appears to exonerate the mad for their crimes: "Madhouses are large and only too numerous; yet surely it is strange they are not larger… when we remember how many minds must tremble upon the narrow boundary between reason and unreason, mad to-day and sane to-morrow, mad yesterday and sane to-day" (205).

Another direct address to the reader further paints Lady Audley as a target of the reader's sympathy; it depicts the maid as a "spy" and her mistress as the helpless "victim" who cannot keep even the most personal problems secret from the maid's all-seeing eye.

> Among all privileged spies, a lady's-maid has the highest privileges…. She has a hundred methods for the finding out of her mistress' secrets. She knows by the manner in which her victim jerks her head from under the hair-brush, or chafes at the gentlest administration of the comb, what hidden tortures are racking her breast—what secret perplexities are bewildering her brain. That well-bred attendant knows how to interpret the most obscure diagnosis of all mental diseases that can afflict her mistress; she knows when the ivory complexion is bought and paid for—when the pearly teeth are foreign substances fashioned by the dentist—when the glossy plaits are the relics of the dead, rather than the property of the living; and she knows other and more sacred secrets than these. (336)

This description figures Phoebe as a woman with a kind of mesmeric power, one who is able to read signs in order to understand her mistress's mind and thereby control it. The passing of Phoebe's hands over her Lady Audley's head as she brushes her mistress's hair and her victim's responsive "jerks" reinforce the maid's image as a mesmerist (336).[32] Mesmerism supplies an "excuse" for women to upend social strictures that they would otherwise obey. As Amy Lehman observes:

> Performance… in the context of enacting a role in a trance state, could be a

[32] Sarah Waters will later use a similar description to illustrate the mesmeric power of a maid in her Neo-Victorian novel *Affinity*: "Then [the maid Ruth] put the brush aside & she took me to the glass. She held her hand above my head, & my hair gave a crackle & flew to her palm" (175).

> powerful means of escaping from normal restrictions on behavior and feelings. In a mesmeric trance, or as a medium in a séance, a woman could express negative, violent, or otherwise unacceptable thoughts and feelings with relative impunity. (26)

The relationship between Lady Audley and Phoebe recalls that of Harriet Martineau and her maid; Martineau encouraged her maid, and later, a poor lady's companion, to mesmerize her, since she "was happy to surrender her will only to a subservient member of her household, who did not threaten to undermine, as a male mesmerist might, her recent success in establishing her independence and authority" (Winter 222-23). Such an attitude is perhaps admirable but, in the case of a sensation plot, naïve; the criminal servant of the sensation novel is more likely to use any power, occult or otherwise, to take advantage of her employer.[33] Phoebe's desire to rise in the Victorian class hierarchy is in keeping with a common theme of the time; as Bruce Robbins demonstrates, the servants of Victorian novels often invoke the occult or the supernatural to enforce a kind of justice that the rigorously enforced system denies them (182).

In particular, the governess's "exclusion from categories" as "neither lady nor maid" may also tie in to her frequent representation in fiction as not human or not natural (Mangum 224). In some cases, her "otherness" is further compounded because she is a foreigner, and in others, she is depicted as otherworldly or specter-like.[34] *Uncle Silas*' Madame de la Rougierre offers an extreme example of this characterization, even telling Maud, "'I am Madame la Morgue—Mrs. Deadhouse! I will present you my friends, Monsieur Cadavre and Monsieur Squelette'" (34).

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[33] In a similar but less sinister vein, when Elizabeth Barrett Browning had her maid Wilson attempt automatic writing, "one of the 'messages' she transmitted from the spirit world was 'Send Wilson to bed—she is ill'" (Stuart 202).

[34] While not employed as a governess, *Bleak House*'s Hortense meets both of these criteria as well.

The supernatural often plays a key role in servant stories; Eve Lynch observes how "[s]upernatural stories turning on apparitions, mesmerism, fantastical occurrences and inexplicable omens—the stock in trade of tales of domestic 'possession'—were readily paired with the dilemmas of those dispossessed members of the household lacking property, education, social standing and independence" (74).

As Lynch argues, the Victorian servant is often equated with a specter, since "[l]ike the ghost, the servant was in the house but not of it, occupying a position tied to the workings of the house itself" under the pretense of being unseen, which also allows for unchecked voyeurism (67). With her otherworldly appearance and predilection for exposing secrets, Phoebe presents a new twist on the idea of the demon that tampers with the domestic, a literary tradition that stems from Alain-Réné Le Sage's 1707 novel *Le Diable Boiteux*, in which the demon Asmodeus lifts the roofs from houses to reveal the corruption within (Lynch 69). The first time the reader of *Lady Audley's Secret* is introduced to Phoebe, it is with her cousin Luke's exclamation, "'you came upon me so still and sudden, that I thought you was an evil spirit'" (Braddon 25). Thereafter, she is described as "gliding" like a ghost, is often found under "shadowy lights" and in "dark…passages," and she is frequently associated with fog, smoke, and the color grey (104-05). She is inscrutable, depicted as "a very dim and shadowy lady; vague of outline, and faint of coloring" (Braddon 110).[35] The most concrete description provided of Phoebe is quite unusual and unsettling:

> She was not, perhaps, positively a pretty girl; but her appearance was of that order which is commonly called interesting. Interesting, it may be, because in the pale face and the light gray eyes, the small features and compressed lips, there was

[35] Mrs. Powell of *Aurora Floyd* is described in similar terms; she is said to be "like some pale and quiet shadow, [who] lurked amid the bed−curtains, soft of foot and watchful of eye" (114).

> something which hinted at a power of repression and self-control not common in a woman of nineteen or twenty. She might have been pretty, I think, but for the one fault in her small oval face. This fault was an absence of color. Not one tinge of crimson flushed the waxen whiteness of her cheeks; not one shadow of brown redeemed the pale insipidity of her eyebrows and eyelashes; not one glimmer of gold or auburn relieved the dull flaxen of her hair. Even her dress was spoiled by this same deficiency. The pale lavender muslin faded into a sickly gray, and the ribbon knotted round her throat melted into the same neutral hue. (Braddon 24-25)

The extreme paleness of Phoebe's face, hair, and body is so emphasized that she is said to possess "white eyelashes"; the only color in her face is seen in the "red rims" around her "pale eyes" (66, 112). Thus described, the maid appears otherworldly, even death-like, except for her lips, which significantly suggest a kind of malevolent strength. She is not quite feminine and may not even be entirely corporeal.[36]

As Bruce Robbins demonstrates in his study of the Victorian servant, supernatural evil is often conflated with unmerited social climbing. Perhaps the most famous example is found in Henry James' *Turn of the Screw*: "by usurping the position of a gentleman, the servant Peter Quint becomes 'a horror,' without further need of supernatural props or special effects" (Robbins 200). An 1864 review of sensation novels anticipates such horror by explicitly connecting criminal or socially illicit behavior with the thrill of the supernatural:

> The one indispensable point in the sensation novel is, that it should contain something abnormal and unnatural; something that induces, in the simple idea, a

[36] An alternate reading might suggest she is in fact *too* corporeal—that is, corpse-like.

> sort of thrill…. All ghost-stories, of course, have the same feature. In one and all there is appeal to the imagination, through the active agency of the nerves, excited by the unnatural or supernatural. But the abnormal quality need not outrage physical laws; exceptional outrages of morality and custom may startle much in the same way. ("Our Female" 107)

In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Phoebe is a criminal servant, but her lady too is a former servant who has simply had more success in breaking the law as a means to ascend the social ladder. Indeed, in an earlier version of the text, she too is seen as unearthly. In the 1863 *Sixpenny Magazine* serial, there is a scene deleted from later editions in which Robert has a dream that contains a disturbing vision:

> Once he was walking in the black shadows of this long avenue, with Lady Audley hanging on his arm, when suddenly they heard a great knocking in the distance, and his uncle's wife wound her slender arms around him, crying out that it was the day of judgment, and that all wicked secrets must now be told. Looking at her as she shrieked this in his ear, he saw that her face had grown ghastly white, and that her beautiful golden ringlets were changing into serpents, and slowly creeping down her fair neck. (65)

Nina Auerbach points to Lady Audley as an example of the prototypical demon-woman whose countenance can transform from angelic to demonic based on the viewer's perspective (Auerbach, *Woman* 107). However, it is significant that in this vision it is Lady Audley's skin and hair that are transformed—the only two physical characteristics that separate the lady from her maid.

The criminal servant is often depicted as somehow aberrant or inhuman. Mrs. Powell, for instance, ultimately "degenerate[s] into something reptilian with a 'viperish nature'" (Mangham 123; Braddon 343). Madame de la Rougierre is, like Hortense, instantly vilified by her description as an "apparition," a "wolf," "a devil," "a witch or a ghost" (18, 21, 30). She is intended to be a horrific perversion of femininity and domesticity, the antithesis of the ideal female domestic: she is bald, "masculine," and brags of a ravenous sexual appetite that disgusts her young charge (19, 75). On the other hand, *No Name*'s Mrs. Lecount, a "Venus of the autumn period of female life," is far less grotesque in appearance, but, as Mangham points out, she "embodies the masculine world of science" (189). She also is a parodic version of the Angel in the House, with her apron that is "a little domestic poem in itself" and her effect of seeming to outsiders like "'A very domestic person! a truly superior woman!'" (275-76, 357). In reality, of course, she manipulates and controls her master and acts more like a "husband" while he plays the unwitting role of the passive invalid "wife."

What is most surprising about these unfeminine or abnormal women is that they are not the primary antagonists in any of these novels, but are agents, or even victims, of a greater villain. In many cases, the more prominent criminal is the sensation heroine, who though erring, is beautiful and feminine. For instance, Phoebe Marks works under the instructions of Lady Audley to forge a trail of false evidence suggesting that George Talboys left for Australia. And although Phoebe successfully blackmails her mistress, Lady Audley trumps her maid by burning down Phoebe's home, The Castle, which kills her husband Luke. In *No Name*, Mrs. Lecount convinces Noel Vanstone to leave her a large sum of money, but only after she has tried to save him from falling prey to the machinations of Magdalen Vanstone, who wants to rob him of his entire estate out of revenge. Mrs. Lecount then uses her money to establish a scholarship for

poor students and a fund to train orphan girls for domestic service (637). (Readers might shudder at what curriculum she would include in her education of future female servants.)

It is surprising how often the criminal servant becomes a source of pity or pathos, even if she has no evident redeeming qualities. The class difference that affords servants the privilege of invisibility for surveillance also denies them a certain sort of agency. Even if her mistress is not what she appears to be, the social structures in place limit the legal rights and recourses a servant has when employed by a criminal mistress. The female servant in particular is also subject to the limitations of her gender, since women are also denied the rights allowed to men. Much as Hortense turned to the more powerful villain Tulkinghorn in hopes that his influence could win her a job, Madame de la Rougierre works as an agent for the evil Uncle Silas with the understanding that she will be paid well. She is not in a position to inherit Maud's estate herself, so it is only by allying herself with a man that she stands a chance to profit. Like Hortense, Madame resents that she is left "ruin[ed]" after Maud's family dismisses her with no character. Unfortunately for her, once she concludes her work with Uncle Silas, she is murdered (418, 426).

The vengeful Mrs. Powell of *Aurora Floyd* may be one of the most surprising potential objects of reader sympathy. She believes she is working with a male servant, Steeve Hargraves, toward the shared goal of exposing their mistress as a bigamist and a murderess, but she remains unaware that Steeve, not Aurora, is the actual murderer. The only servant who is able to profit from blackmailing Aurora about her bigamous marriage is the horse groom, James Conyers, who was Aurora's first husband. Mrs. Powell is actually a pitiable figure: she is described as "the widow of an ensign who had died within six months of his marriage, and about an hour and a half before he would have succeeded to some enormous property" and "a woman whose whole existence had been spent in teaching and being taught," and she disappears from the novel's

narrative after she is unceremoniously fired for telling Aurora's husband the truth about his wife's past (51, 343).

Mrs. Powell is said to "hate" Aurora "for the very benefits she received, or rather because she, Aurora, had power to bestow such benefits" and because she knows "she was retained by reason of Aurora's pity for her friendlessness; and, having neither gratitude nor kindly feelings to give in return for her comfortable shelter, she resented her own poverty of nature, and hated her entertainers for their generosity" (133, 337). She resents her position in the class hierarchy, but detests Aurora for pretending that a paid employee like Mrs. Powell is her equal: "Mrs. Powell had been far more at ease in households in which she had been treated as a lady-like drudge than she had ever been at Mellish Park, where she was received as an equal and a guest" (338). Mrs. Powell must submit to being called an equal in name while acting as a servant in actual practice in order to maintain her position as a servant. The façade she must maintain develops into a hidden "criminal" side she must conceal, since "it is not for a dependent to hate, except in a decorous and gentlewomanly manner—secretly, in the dim recesses of her soul; while she dresses her face with an unvarying smile—a smile which she puts on every morning with her clean collar, and takes off at night when she goes to bed" (133). She has entered domestic servitude only by necessity and is equally resentful of her thankless position and the circumstances that drove her to it.

Wilkie Collins was sympathetic to the hardships experienced by domestic servants; in *My Miscellanies* (1875), he describes the hopeless life of a maid, whom he surprises by encouraging her to speak to him "on something like equal terms" (226). He describes how, for the maid,

> Life means dirty work, small wages, hard words, no holidays, no social station, no future, according to her experience of it. No human being ever was created for

> this. No state of society which composedly accepts this, in the cases of thousands, as one of the necessary conditions of its selfish comforts, can pass itself off as civilized, except under the most audacious of all false pretenses. (226)

In Collins' *No Name*, the kind governess Miss Garth reflects on how demoralizing life experiences can lead a person into crime or sin. She wonders if there is "hidden Good and hidden Evil" in every individual, "both alike at the mercy of the liberating opportunity and the sufficient temptation" (146). The key to unlocking one and not the other, Garth believes, is "earthly Circumstance"—of birth, class, gender, and so forth (146).

Other critics of the time similarly suggested that the criminal servant was made by necessity of circumstance, not born. In 1859, the anonymous author of *Our Plague Spot*, for example, quotes a report by Mr. Surgeon Tait of Glasgow that makes "enquiry into the extent, causes, and consequences of female immorality" (41). The causes listed include: "[p]ride, and love of dress," "[w]ant of surveillance on the part of masters and mistresses," and the reading of "[i]mproper works and obscene prints" (qtd. in *Our Plague Spot* 41). In response to this list, the author of *Our Plague Spot* remarks:

> If this worthy missionary had pursued his enquiry further, he would have discovered another prolific *cause,* namely, the cruel treatment experienced from some masters and mistresses. *Their* unkind behaviour has driven thousands to seek the wages of sin rather than remain where they were treated worse than the generality of slaves. (42, italics original)

A similar type of finger-pointing is also found in a passage from Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* that claims that servants' bad behavior is only the result of the inhumane treatment and unreasonable expectations of their employers:

> You don't allow them followers; you look blacker than thunder if you see Mary's sister or John's poor old mother sitting meekly in your hall; you are surprised if the postman brings them letters, and attribute the fact to the pernicious system of over-educating the masses; you shut them from their homes and their kindred, their lovers and their friends; you deny them books, you grudge them a peep at your newspaper, and then you lift up your eyes and wonder at them because they are inquisitive, and because the staple of their talk is scandal and gossip. (178)

This suggests that any culpability for undesirable or criminal behavior can and should be traced back to its middle-class source; the servants themselves should be pitied, not punished. What is perhaps most surprising about this passage is its use of "you"—it directs the blame squarely at the (presumably servant-keeping) readers of the novel.

Aurora Floyd further offers a shocking account of the attitudes of household servants:

> Remember this, husbands and wives, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, brothers and sisters when you quarrel. *Your servants enjoy the fun*…. Nothing that is done in the parlor is lost upon these quiet, well-behaved watchers from the kitchen. They laugh at you; nay, worse, they pity you. They discuss your affairs, and make out your income, and settle what you can afford to do and what you can't afford to do; they prearrange the disposal of your wife's fortune, and look prophetically forward to the day when you will avail yourself of the advantages of the new Bankruptcy Act. (177-78, italics original)

A scene in *Vanity Fair* had earlier made a similar point its description of the "servants' inquisition" in which the household staff passes judgment on members of the gentry (562). Regarding the servants' covert social power, the narrator advises, "If you are guilty, tremble….

If you are not guilty, have a care of appearances: which are as ruinous as guilt" (562). The servants, while initially seeming socially powerless, are actually in a position to influence and even control their employers' lives. Spying, theft, and blackmail become some of the few perks of a servant's otherwise unrewarding job. The depictions of the criminal female servant in sensation fiction characterize the criminal female servant in a way that reveals her covert power within the limited options available to her as a woman and member of the servant class.

CHAPTER 5

"SHE HAD HER RÔLE TO PLAY":

EAST LYNNE AND THE SERVANT ACTRESS

As exemplified by many of the criminal servants previously discussed, one of the stock characters of Victorian sensation fiction is the "upwardly-mobile 'imposter'" (Wynne 50). Contemporary publications expressed ridicule for the practice that *Punch* dubbed "Servantgalism"—servants who attempt to dress or act like their masters. Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) offers a prime example of this character type in Aphrodite "Afy" Hallijohn. Afy's proclivity to "'dress outrageously fine'" and her "'disreputable'" social pretensions are evidence, in one character's opinion, of "'[t]he world's being turned upside down'" (382). Although Afy is hired as "three parts maid and one part companion," and is not permitted "to sit or dine" with her employer, she "was never backward at setting off her own consequence, [and] gave out that she was 'companion'" (390). Lyn Pykett identifies Afy as a representative of a common trope: "the saucy servant who apes her superiors and attempts to achieve her social ambitions by sexual means" (*"Improper"* 123). When Afy learns she will not be able to rise in class rank through marriage as she had planned and instead must accept a marriage proposal from a shop-keeper, she consoles herself with the promise of certain outward signs of her change in financial status: "'He's having his house done up in style, and I shall keep two good servants, and do nothing myself but dress and subscribe to the library. He makes plenty of money'" (565). Elizabeth Langland describes how numerous manuals and tracts reveal the contemporary obsession with

the importance of outward appearance, particularly dress, to define a person's class (35). *Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen* (1876) warns the nouveaux riches never to "dress *above* your station; it is a grievous mistake and leads to great evils, besides being the proof of an utter want of taste" (15, italics original; qtd. in Langland 35). While Afy attempts to "marry up" by dressing above her station and fails, *East Lynne* also contains an example of a character who takes the opposite tack—Lady Isabel Vane chooses to perform a servant's role by dressing *below* her station.

While the middle and upper classes may be quick to condemn the behavior of the class-climbing servant, the opposite phenomenon—adopting a costume to "lower" oneself into servanthood—does not at first appear to pose the same threat. A pretentious servant like Afy is an object of scorn and distrust, but by mimicking the climb down, rather than up, the social ladder, Isabel Vane, the lady-qua-servant, deflects suspicion and attention. Both Afy and Isabel are defined by their transgressions, Pykett says, but their difference in class means that "Afy is not required to undergo the punitive moral, emotional and physical suffering which is constructed for Isabel" (*"Improper"* 123).[37] The text suggests that Isabel feels immediate remorse because, as one of the "women in the higher positions of life[,] Lady Isabel was endowed with sensitively refined delicacy, with an innate, lively consciousness of right and wrong" (283-84). Pykett thus claims that:

> Afy is required to suffer less than Isabel because of the presumption (heavily underlined by the narrator) that she is less emotionally and morally refined than her social superior. Afy's fall is presented by the narrator as a mixture of folly

[37] Barbara too could be considered "sexually transgressive," since she is in love with another woman's husband. It is open to debate how much she is "punished" for this—or how much she in turn punishes her rival's children.

> and willfulness; if the character reflects upon her situation at all is to see it as a career move. However, Isabel's is a fall from grace, which is accompanied by exquisite agonies of moral scrupulousness and emotional self-torture, both of which are presented in class terms. (*"Improper"* 123-24)

I would further suggest that the difference in the severity of their crimes is mitigated both by the class they are born into and the class they attempt to enter. Isabel's performance as a domestic servant threatens stability within her home, but Afy's pretensions to a higher class offer a more wide-reaching and dangerous threat to the social hierarchy.

The lady-qua-servant can be categorized as an "adventuress": a woman who attempts to "marry up" in order to achieve higher status, wealth, and power. Other examples of this character type—dubbed "Becky Sharp's children" by Sally Mitchell— might include Lucy Graham of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, Magdalen Vanstone of Wilkie Collins' *No Name*, and Lydia Gwilt of Collins' *Armadale* (*Fallen* 76). These adventuresses share the same initial strategy to set their plans for marriage in motion: like Thackeray's Becky Sharp, they act as domestic employees. Unlike Becky Sharp, however, they enter servanthood as performers taking on a role, forging their references, altering their identities, and adopting appropriate costumes to create a convincing performance. Although sensation fiction is replete with servant characters, the aforementioned "actresses" remain distinct from true domestic employees; for example, Magdalen Vanstone, who plays the role of a maid and a governess, pities her sister Norah, who must become a "real" governess.

Although an adventuress who is attempting to advance her social status might be expected to play a role above, rather than below, her rank, a servant is allowed a freedom of mobility that a woman of higher class may be denied. In *East Lynne*, Isabel Vane takes

advantage of the privileges a servant has within the household. She performs the role of a governess in order to achieve a kind of personal freedom denied her as a lady and wife. After Lady Isabel leaves her husband and children to have an affair with the wicked Sir Frances Levison, she is disfigured and nearly killed in a train accident. Her husband, Archibald Carlyle, believing Isabel to be dead, remarries the middle-class Barbara Hare. In order to live in her family estate and to be close to Carlyle and her children once more, Isabel transforms herself by acting as the governess "Madame Vine." Despite the class difference between Isabel Vane and the other aforementioned adventuresses of sensation fiction, all of the women are "actresses" who perform the part of a domestic servant as an unexpected means to achieve independence, whether financial or emotional.

When Isabel Vane is seen as "Lady Vane," she is monitored by a house full of gossiping servants who appear to understand her household and her relationships better than she herself does. Later, when she plays the role of "Madame Vine" the governess, Isabel is paradoxically allowed more mobility within her home and is less subject to surveillance than she was as a lady.[38] Most importantly, her ability to act—to perform a servant role convincingly—grants her the ability to interact more freely with her family. It is only through her performance as a "governess" that Lady Isabel is able to become Carlyle's "wife" and her children's "mother" in defiance of the societal expectations for how she should perform those roles.

The servant and the actress occupied similarly indeterminate positions in the social and class hierarchy of mid-Victorian England. In his article on the Victorian maidservant, Louis

[38] Although she is recognized as a gentlewoman in her capacity as governess and is of a higher rank than other, more menial domestic employees, I refer to Isabel's role as that of a "servant" because it is how she perceives herself. She bemoans that she must live in her own former home "as a subordinate, a servant—it may be said—where she had once reigned, the idolized lady" (399).

James describes how the social position of servant women was itself quite malleable: "One could enter service from a number of different backgrounds; if one left, one was relatively mobile socially to go into a variety of occupations. The servant was subject to her employer, yet she was also identified with the household in which she worked" (353). Tracy Davis' book *Actresses as Working Women* offers a strikingly similar description of a different profession for women:

> Victorian performers were… recruited from all classes of society. While performers repeatedly demonstrated that class origins could be defied by hard work, talent, or strategic marital alliances to secure some a place in the most select company, others lived with and like the most impoverished classes. Unlike other occupational groups, performers' incomes spanned the highest upper middle-class salary and the lowest working class wage, and were earned in work places that ranged in status from patent theatres to penny saloons. (3)

The Victorian maidservant and actress thus have much in common: they are recruited from across the class spectrum, they exist on the fringes of "good" society, and they fall within a diverse hierarchy of rank and earning power. Servants were also characterized as deceptive, resourceful, and fond of dress, all traits that suggest performance. *Our Plague Spot* (1859), an anonymous collection of essays on the condition of England, contains a vignette that offers a very unflattering depiction of the servant as an actress:

> This lady fancied she had a respectable, *and always nicely dressed* servant, as attendant upon her Baby…. [O]ne day on going through some distant part of the Town, she beheld in a beggarwoman's arms, *her own child dressed in filthy rags,*

> and in its pretended mother—equally revoltingly attired—her *tidy respectable nursery maid!* (378, italics original)

This scenario raises the question: if the servant is an actress, can employers ever really know who is watching their children? A nursemaid may double as a beggar, as seen above, or, as is the case in *East Lynne*, she may be a rival for her master's affection. While this anecdote is intended to strike fear in the hearts of middle-class mothers, it also reveals the freedom that servant women were perceived to possess. Both the servant and the actress are mobile and can explore alternative lives and selves, while the middle-class mother's role is more limited.

Unmarried middle-class women had so few jobs available to them that many viewed their choice of employment as limited to becoming either an actress or domestic employee. In her essay "The Woman I Remember," Mary Elizabeth Braddon recalls how her younger self struggled with this decision:

> Of all those gates which are now open to feminine suitors there were but two open to her. She could go out into the world as a governess, like Jane Eyre, in an age when to be a governess in a vulgar family was worse than the treadmill; or she could go upon the stage, a proceeding which convulsed her family, to the most distant cousin, a thing to be spoken of with bated breath, as the lapse of a lost soul, the fall from Porchester Terrace to the bottomless pit. (5)

The perceived "fall" from virtue that Braddon describes here could be equally applicable to women in either profession, since both the actress and the female servant could potentially face the social stigma of being "fallen women." As Mary Poovey suggests, any type of paid work for women could invite comparisons to prostitution, but the servant and the actress seem particularly prone to such accusations (145-6). In fact, one of the most popular names assigned to servants,

"Mary Anne," was also a slang term for a prostitute (Davidoff et al. 172). In his note in *London Labour and the Poor* (1861), Bracebridge Hemyng declares that "there can be no doubt that the tone of morality among servant-maids in the metropolis is low" and suggests that a large percentage may be working prostitutes (257). *Our Plague Spot* offers a purportedly true sensational story of a nursemaid in Edinburgh who would leave her charge in the care of a friend while she worked her second job in a brothel (379).

Sensation fiction and the Victorian theatre were closely connected from the genre's beginnings. Both Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, a former actress, were playwrights as well as novelists, and the novels they wrote were often adapted by others for the theatre. *The London Review* describes the novels themselves as mere vehicles for their inevitable stage adaptations: "We can hardly take up a *Times* without perceiving the skeleton of a sensation novel only waiting to be appropriated by Mrs. Wood or Miss Braddon, and put on the stage tricked out with the necessary amount of tawdry morality and high-flown sentiment" ("Aurora Floyd" 175). A review in *The Christian Remembrancer* similarly derides Braddon's novels as overly theatrical:

> the world is essentially a *stage* to Miss Braddon, and all the men and women, the wives, the lovers, the villains, the sea-captains, the victims, the tragically jealous, the haters, the avengers, merely players. We could extract pages, fit, as they stand, for the different actors in a melodrama, vehemently and outrageously unnatural. ("Our Female" 236, italics original).

The novel *East Lynne* often intentionally uses the language of theatre; for instance, when Carlyle is first introduced in the serial version, the text advises the reader to "[l]ook at the visitor well […] for he will play his part in this history" (29). Many of the *East Lynne*'s characters are

"actors": not only does Lady Isabel Vane play her part, costumed as a French governess, but the accused killer Richard Hare dons false whiskers to elude capture, Frances Levison masquerades as Captain Thorn, and the servant Afy Hallijohn dresses like a gentlewoman. Although Wood's novel was popular with readers, the story of *East Lynne* achieved even greater public recognition through its numerous theatrical adaptations by T. A. Palmer, John Oxenford, Lilla Wilde, Clifton Tayleure, and Hamilton Hume, among others. The popularity of the play made the phrase "Next week—East Lynne!" become a clichéd promise among theatre companies vying to please their audience.[39]

Many of the theatrical adaptations of *East Lynne* stayed fairly true to Wood's original story and borrowed some of the novel's most memorable and melodramatic lines for their scripts. Most of the plays' pathos derives from Lady Isabel's agonizing over the alienation of her husband's affection and the psychological torture she endures once she returns to East Lynne but cannot reveal her true identity. However, Hamilton Hume took a very different approach for his theatrical adaptation, *The Tangled Path, A Tale of East Lynne*. Only fifty copies of Hume's play were printed, which Hume states are "solely intended for the amusement of private friends" (v). His version essentially de-sensationalizes Wood's sensation novel by omitting the bigamy, child illegitimacy, and divorce. (This odd decision may also account for why Hume's version had such a modest printing.) Hume explains in an introduction that he "found it perfectly impossible, in the limited space to which I was restricted, to carry out the idea of the authoress and let [Isabel] return to East Lynne in the capacity of governess" so he omits that part altogether and relegates Isabel's character to a fairly minor role (vi). Hume de-emphasizes two character

[39] This phrase remained recognizable even in the twentieth century. Gilbert B. Cross' 1977 book on nineteenth-century domestic drama in performance used "Next week—*East Lynne*" as its title.

types that are often prominently featured in the sensation genre: strong women and influential servants. In fact, the *Saturday Review* saw Wood's depiction of female servants in the novel as one of the strongest aspects of her writing:

> [Mrs. Wood] has one knack which is a great help to a novelist of family life—she can draw servants. There are two half-sisters, both in service, who make a great figure in the book. One of the old respectable family servants, and the other the flighty, fashionable lady's-maid of the present day. The latter is drawn with a relish and a liveliness that show the authoress to have studied lady's-maids almost as much as she has studied attorneys. ("Reviews" 187)

Hume's choice to eliminate or downplay the servant roles differs radically from the approaches of the more successful playwright T. A. Palmer, who cast his own wife in the crucial role of the servant Joyce, and Clifton Tayleure, whose version highlights Lady Isabel's tragic performance as a servant in her own home and thus made the career of the stage actress Lucille Western. Since taking on a role of a lady-turned-governess was Western's ticket to lifelong fame, it seems that the audience of Tayleure's play craved this particular brand of sensationalism.

The varied theatrical versions of *East Lynne* demonstrate the aspects of the novel that resonated with audiences that made the novel so popular. Andrew Maunder's article "'I will not live in poverty and neglect': East Lynne on the East End Stage" describes W. Archer's 1864 adaptation for the Effingham Theatre titled *Marriage Bells; or, the Cottage on the Cliff*, which differed from most West End versions of the story in its increased focus on the working class (178). Maunder points to the play's focus on working-class issues as a reflection of the class demographics of East End audiences, and further suggests that the altered focus of the Effingham production "builds upon elements latent in the novel [and] the bourgeois ethos of self-help that

the text espouses" ("Poverty" 181). The East End version of the play taps into a theme of undervalued working-class power, which recurs in *East Lynne* and other sensation novels. In Wood's novel, members of the working classes are primarily represented by servants: Joyce, the faithful lady's maid, Wilson, the outspoken nurse, and Afy, the class-climbing "companion." Lady Isabel eventually joins their ranks, posing as a servant herself, in an act that has often been described as penance, but that I see more as part of the "bourgeois ethos of self-help" that Maunder identifies.

As explored in the previous chapter, Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* was published just as the sensation trend began, and its contents reflect contemporary attitudes and ideals that are reflected in the novels of the time as well. Smiles' description of "illustrious Commoners raised from humble to elevated positions by the power of application and industry" seems most applicable in *East Lynne* to the character Archibald Carlyle, a middle-class lawyer who marries an earl's daughter, buys her family estate, and eventually is elected to Parliament (132). The earl's daughter in question is Isabel Vane, who follows an opposite trajectory: she marries a man of lower rank, loses her reputation and identity, and must ultimately live in her former family home as a paid domestic. However, the goals of rank, legislative power, and national renown that Smiles sees as markers of success for men do not apply in the same way for women. Isabel's reclamation of her life in the guise of a governess suggests that she uses her ingenuity and industriousness to achieve recognition on her own terms as a woman and mother rather than a statesman or business leader. Isabel uses a corrupt version of the principles of "self-help" to fuel her new life as an actress, "perform[ing] respectability" as Rebecca Stern describes it, and "counterfeiting the self" (65). She actively takes control of her own life and becomes an autonomous woman, breaking out of the successive roles of obedient daughter, passive wife, and

submissive lover that she has heretofore been expected to play. By playing the role of a servant, Isabel literalizes her previous performances of female subservience and uses her acting ability as an unexpected source to attain power over herself, her relationships, and her choice of role within her own home, which is now inhabited by the middle-class lawyer Carlyle and his second wife Barbara.

Deborah Wynne describes a "covert power" that the middle class wields over the upper class in the novel (73). The balance of economic power is shifting in favor of members of the rising middle classes, like Barbara Hare and Archibald Carlyle, while Isabel and her father the earl are represented as outdated relics. As Lady Vane, Isabel was a symbol of conquest; as Wynne points out, she is appropriated by the middle-class Carlyle almost as part of a package with the house and grounds of East Lynne (68). In fact, Wynne sees Carlyle's "bowing habit" as part of a middle-class strategy to achieve power through unexpected means:

> For Wood's quiet revolution to take place it is necessary that her middle-class heroes and heroines remain outwardly deferential towards the class they mean to usurp. We learn that Carlyle "received the training of a gentleman" at both Rugby and Oxford, and is well-equipped to meet the upper classes on their own territory. (68)

The middle classes, then, originated the strategy of the performance of subservience that Lady Isabel herself will adopt to regain power within the home that has exiled her.

Lady Isabel's experience of feeling suppressed or oppressed by middle-class women like her oppressive sister-in-law Miss Corny or Carlyle's second wife Barbara Hare provides one of her first experiences as an "actress." According to Amy Lehman, the most common roles that a Victorian woman could expect to play on the stage were a madwoman, a demon, or an angel

(27). To a certain extent, Isabel Vane plays all three roles, but she primarily plays the part of the "angel" in her roles as both servant and wife. Ann Cvetkovitch sees "the strategy of submission" that Isabel must play as Carlyle's wife as the same one "that will later be played out in more exaggerated terms when she returns to East Lynne" (101). Before her downfall, Isabel meets social expectations by performing submission and subservience and keeping her emotions under control in order to convincingly play the part of "The Angel in the House." When Isabel's loyal maid, Joyce, learns that her mistress has left her husband for another man, she affirms Isabel's longstanding status as both "angel" and "servant" that she held in her capacity as wife and mistress of the house. Joyce tells Miss Corny,

> "I say she has been driven to it. She has not been allowed to indulge a will of her own, poor thing, since she came to East Lynne; in her own house she has been less free than any one of her servants. You have curbed her, ma'am, and snapped at her, and made her feel that she was but a slave to your caprices and temper. All these years she has been crossed and put upon; everything, in short, but beaten—ma'am, you know she has!—and she has borne it all in silence, like a patient angel, never, as I believe, complaining to master." (279)

Tricia Lootens suggests that since a nineteenth century woman cannot become a literal angel, she becomes an "Acting Angel" instead (57). The "Acting Angel" is described as a woman who "commit[s] herself to a life of strenuous spiritual asceticism, [so] she could seek both to impersonate and to act as a stand-in for the Victorian female ideal" (Lootens 57). Isabel resigns herself "*to take up her cross* daily, and bear it" as she willingly adopts a life of self-denial, but her aspiration is to servanthood rather than sainthood (398, italics original). Thus, as Jeanne Elliott suggests, *East Lynne* can be viewed as "an extended parable of the problems of the

gentlewoman in Victorian England" (331). Paradoxically, an ideal gentlewoman, wife, and mother, must also be an actress. As suggested in *Vanity Fair*, "your domestic models, and paragons of female virtue" are "hypocrites" who are praised for their "pretty treachery" of performance (Thackeray 208). Succinctly put, "[a] good housewife is of necessity a humbug" (Thackeray 208).

The "actresses" of sensation novels such as *East Lynne* reveal the Victorian ideals of class and femininity as constructs through their "performances" whether they are featured on the literal or domestic stage.[40] Even an upwardly-mobile, middle-class wife such as Isabel's successor Barbara Hare feels pressure to play a role, although it may be less overt. Barbara is so concerned with maintaining an appearance of wealth and status and appearing to be a model of middle-class womanhood that she is overly concerned with expensive dress, remains wary of her servants, and believes she must keep her children at a distance. Both Barbara and Isabel feel that they must maintain composure and control their display of feeling in order to play their parts convincingly.

As might be expected of a domestic melodrama, *East Lynne*'s heroine does indulge in emotional outbursts, but they are more often expressed internally than externally; part of Isabel's acting skill is seen in her ability to repress emotion. The moment that Isabel chooses to return to East Lynne as a governess, she decides that "her own feelings, let them be wrung as they would, should not prove the obstacle" (398). Dan Bivona suggests that "[e]motional control" like Isabel's "can only be achieved in the moment in which the actor directs herself on stage, the

[40] Laurence Talairach-Vielmas further describes how "sensation novels, by featuring actresses or female characters playing parts, heighten the paradoxical construction of womanhood, so perfectly illustrated by the actress herself, simultaneously embodying feminine beauty and female fashion while transgressing woman's sphere by stepping out onto the working/public stage" (135).

moment in which she acts out her emotions while critically regarding them from a spectator's distance" (116). Isabel does this when her son William is dying, as she contemplates "the dreadful misery of the retrospect" and the novel describes how "[t]he very nails of her hands had, before now, entered the palms, with the sharp pain it brought…. there, as she knelt, her head lying on the counterpane, came the recollection of that first illness of hers" (587). But, as Cvetkovitch asserts, "playing the pathetic woman is not the same as being the pathetic woman" (98). *Armadale*'s Lydia Gwilt, for example, plays the pathetic woman in order to deflect suspicion from herself; she asks for Mr. Bashwood to support her, claiming, "'My little stock of courage is quite exhausted'" as "[t]he woman who had tyrannized over Mr. Bashwood" disappears and "[a] timid, shrinking, interesting creature filled the fair skin and trembled on the symmetrical limbs of Miss Gwilt" (371). While Isabel may have less guile than Gwilt, who is a practiced con artist, she still is able to maintain her performance. Isabel frequently feels anguished about her role as governess, but she never drops her disguise, and her true identity is only discovered by her former maid, Joyce, when Isabel believes there is a fire and leaves her room without her tinted glasses.

Taking on the appearance of a servant can obfuscate a heroine's identity, and the "invisibility" expected of servants within a household offers further anonymity for criminal or illicit acts. As Eve Lynch explains, the "surface dirt" of the servant "provides a costume or method for suppressing true recognition" (88). Sensation fiction has several examples of the usefulness of this disguise: in *No Name*, Magdalen Vanstone chooses to pose as a maidservant when she wishes to search a house for secret documents, Margaret Wentworth of Braddon's *Henry Dunbar* (1864) impersonates a maid when she wishes to mislead a police officer on the trail of her criminal father, and in Collins' *Blind Love* (1889), a mistress swaps shawls with her

maid and then deliberately sullies her own bonnet so she will not stand out in a crowd. Lynch describes how adopting "the masquerade of servitude" can prevent "exposure for females escaping the domestic site," but in the case of *East Lynne*, the performance of servanthood allows an upper-class woman access to the domestic sphere that she was previously denied (88). For a lady whose dress and actions may fall under particularly intense scrutiny, the possibility of inconspicuousness may be particularly enticing.

Many of the freedoms allowed a servant "performer" are made possible through the disguising nature of the servant costume. While both her sister-in-law Miss Corny and her former lady's maid Joyce see Madame Vine's uncanny resemblance to Isabel, it is the clothing and accessories that Isabel wears that conceal her true identity. A servant is defined by her dress—a point is driven home in Dickens' *Bleak House*, when Lady Dedlock meets with Jo disguised in her servant Hortense's clothes. When Bucket asks Jo why he previously misidentified Hortense as the lady in question, he insists, "'cos that there's the wale, the bonnet, and the gownd. It is her and it an't her. It an't her hand, nor yet her rings, nor yet her woice. But that there's the wale, the bonnet, and the gownd, and they're wore the same way wot she wore 'em'" (336). The rings, however, set Lady Dedlock apart and reveal her inexperience as an actress. The sensational heroine with performing experience knows to pay minute attention to detail in costuming. In *No Name*, the former stage actress Magdalen asks her maid Louisa to teach her how to perform a servant's duties so she can convincingly play the part of a parlor-maid at St. Crux. While Louisa worries that the other servants "would find [Magdalen] out," Magdalen knows the most important trick of performance: "I can still *look* the parlor-maid whom Admiral Bartram wants" (613, italics original). When Magdalen adopts the clothing of her maid, she "becomes" the maid. Magdalen succinctly defines the only difference between a lady and

her maid thus: "'A lady is a woman who wears a silk gown, and has a sense of her own importance'" (613). She is able to provide Louisa both necessary elements and successfully pass her off as a lady, effectively demonstrating the ambiguity of the boundary between "lady" and "maid" (613).

Sensation novels also repeatedly show how the true age of a servant—which determines both the employment prospects of servant girls, and the possibility of their sexual appeal—is difficult to ascertain because it is so easy to disguise. When Isabel returns as a governess she has become disfigured, and, "'though she can't be more than thirty, her hair is gray,'" which is a source of curiosity for other women, who wonder at her true age (398). In *No Name*, it is suggested that the housekeeper Mrs. Lecount could "ha[ve] struck some fifteen or sixteen years off her real age, and… asserted herself to be eight and thirty, [and] there would not have been one man in a thousand, or one woman in a hundred, who would have hesitated to believe her" (275). Similarly, Mother Oldershaw of *Armadale* tells Lydia Gwilt,

> "The question is—not whether you were five-and-thirty last birthday; we will own the dreadful truth, and say you were—but whether you do look, or don't look, your real age…. If you will follow my advice about dressing, and use one or two of my applications privately, I guarantee to put you back three years more…. you [will] look no more than seven-and-twenty in any man's eyes living—except, of course, when you wake anxious in the small hours of the morning; and then, my dear, you will be old and ugly in the retirement of your own room, and it won't matter." (152)

Gwilt is thus able to play the part of a young, attractive governess in order to seduce Allan Armadale, her wealthy target. As texts as diverse as *Jane Eyre*, *My Secret Life* (1888), or the

diaries of Hannah Cullwick might suggest, female servants held a distinct sexual attraction for middle- and upper-class men.

As Cullwick's diaries reveal, Arthur Munby so fetishized Hannah's position as a servant that he asked her to costume herself and "perform" as different kinds of domestics or laborers, even "blackening" her body to achieve the necessary look her roles would require. As Elizabeth Langland describes it, "[t]he dirtiness that was initially only the consequence of her labor quickly became a staged performance" (216). After she married Munby, Hannah additionally "performed" as a lady, complete with the appropriate costume—"a felt hat & plume of cock's feathers to wear, & a veil, & a new brooch to pin my shawl with & a new waterproof cloak," but she is relieved to return to her own clothing—"my dirty cotton frock & apron & my cap"—afterward (Cullwick 266). The simple dress of the servant retains the same sexual appeal for gentlemen in sensation novels. In *No Name*, Magdalen dresses as a servant in "a lavender-colored stuff-gown… a white muslin apron, and a neat white cap and collar, with ribbons to match the gown" (621). Her employer the admiral keeps an all-female servant staff and "insists on youth and good looks" in his maids, leaving any more practical qualifications for the job to the discretion of his house-keeper (609). The text explicitly states how enticing Magdalen is to her master in her "servant's costume":

> in this simple dress, to the eyes of all men, not linen-drapers, at once the most modest and the most alluring that a woman can wear, the sad changes which mental suffering had wrought in her beauty almost disappeared from view. In the evening costume of a lady, with her bosom uncovered, with her figure armed, rather than dressed, in unpliable silk, the admiral might have passed her by without notice in his own drawing-room. In the evening costume of a servant, no

> admirer of beauty could have looked at her once and not have turned again to look at her for the second time. (621)

Similarly, in *Armadale*, the text suggests that Lydia Gwilt's appeal lies in her "subtle mixture of the voluptuous and the modest which, of the many attractive extremes that meet in women, is in a man's eyes the most irresistible of all" (367).

While the actress recognizes the paradoxical allure of plain dress, members of the rising merchant class, like Barbara Hare, try to mimic what they imagine the wealthy should wear. Barbara is greatly concerned with fashion, as evidenced by the initial synechdocal description of her as she appears on the street: "A pink parasol came first, a pink bonnet and feather came behind it, a grey brocaded dress and white gloves" (64). While all of "'West Lynne seems bent on outdressing the Lady Isabel,'" Isabel knows the allure of modest attire (65). Barbara observes that even as Lady Vane, Isabel "'has no silks, and no feathers, and no anything!'"—in short, "'She's plainer that anybody in the church!'" (65).

Isabel's acting ability identifies her as the heroine in the sensation mode. As Elizabeth Gruner notes, "proper" Victorian heroines often "prove their virtue by failing as actresses" (303). A typical Victorian courtship plot concludes when the heroine "must cast off one role—usually that of daughter or eligible young thing—for another—usually that of wife, although sometimes (in the case of the transgressive heroine) mother or mistress," since she must "be one thing only; [she] must not act roles, but embody them" (Gruner 303). As Helena Michie describes, the sensation novel heroine embraces acting:

> Sensation novels abound with women who disguise, transform, and replicate themselves, who diffuse their identities… In the cases of Lady Audley and Isabel Vane this duplicity, this multiplicity of identity, is explicitly marked by the text as

> criminal; it is the job of the reader and/or the detective figure of each novel to sort through the multiple identities offered by each heroine, to work against her self-reproduction, and to close the novel with a woman confined to a single identity, a single name, and a single place—in both cases, the grave. (59)

Even Jane Eyre, the proto-sensation heroine, was described by a contemporary reviewer as a "flippant, fifth-rate, plebeian actress" (Rigby 505). The criminal nature of acting does require "punishment" for the transgressive heroine of the sensation novel, but for the majority of the text, acting also offers her power. While the heroine of *Lady Audley's Secret* is punished by society for her social pretensions, Lady Isabel dies of natural causes and is able to achieve closure with her family before her death. Other sensation heroines who play roles, like Lydia Gwilt, Magdalen Vanstone, and Margaret Wilmot, are allowed to repent and attempt to redeem themselves.

Despite their social transgressions and criminal acts, these heroines, particularly Isabel, appear to be designed as unexpected sources of reader empathy by their novels' end. Although Isabel is initially presented as a fallen wife and mother, she redeems herself through renewed devotion to her children and even rekindled passion for her husband. Isabel, with her pathetic inability to fully reclaim her roles as wife and mother, elicits more sympathy from contemporary critics than her rival does. As Margaret Oliphant put it in her 1863 review, "When [Isabel] returns to her former home under the guise of the poor governess, there is not a reader who does not feel disposed to turn her virtuous successor to the door, and reinstate the suffering heroine, to the glorious confusion of all morality" ("Novels" 170). A critic for the *Saturday Review* similarly opines, "Although, at the close of the story, the whole of the attorney's affections are most properly concentrated on his living wife, the reader is not sorry to be permitted to have a

slight preference for the dead one" ("Reviews" 187). The *London Quarterly Review* even worried that Lady Isabel's likability might undermine readers' sense of morality:

> *East Lynne* is one of the most powerful, but one, also, of the most mischievous, books of the day. Throughout an exciting, though very improbable story, our sympathies are excited on behalf of one who has betrayed the most sacred trust man can repose in woman. All that the union of beauty, rank, talent, and misfortune can do to create a prejudice in favour of the criminal is done, while the sense of the enormity of her crime is greatly enfeebled by the unamiable light in which her husband is presented. ("Thackeray" 406)

It is surprising then that some modern critics have suggested that in *East Lynne*, Barbara Hare is intended as the primary source of reader identification. Both Barbara and Isabel fit the description the text offers of its expected reader as a "Lady—wife—mother"; the primary difference between them is that of class (283). Deborah Wynne suggests that the hoodwinking of the aristocratic Lord Vane by the middle-class Carlyle, or the triumph of Barbara Hare over Lady Isabel, "may have had an appeal for the 'solid' middle-class readership of the *New Monthly Magazine*" (73). Jeanne Elliott describes Wood's audience as likely consisting of "the wives and daughters of the newly prosperous and upwardly mobile mercantile classes"—much like Barbara (330). In addition, Lyn Pykett notes that some critics may see the author herself as more like Barbara, citing the novel's "straining for gentility" as evidence of Wood's own social insecurities as the daughter of a glove manufacturer" (*"Improper"* 119). However, Barbara shows herself to be a petty woman and a jealous wife throughout the novel, and she fails to demonstrate maternal affection for her stepchildren. While Isabel may be an actress, the poverty, humiliation, deformity, and physical and emotional suffering she endures are quite real, while Barbara's life

remains "relatively carefree" (Albright 201). Unlike the downfall of the murderer and fellow adulterer Sir Frances Levison—whose sentence of hard labor prompts the narrator to jeer, "Where would his diamonds and his perfumed handkerchiefs and his white hands be then?"—Isabel's fall from grace invites reader sympathy and understanding. Her first fall may be divine retribution for her sins, but her second fall is a self-designed martyrdom.

Barbara, of course, suffers as well—she remains uncertain of her husband's love for her and she worries that she will never be able to fill Isabel's place in his heart or their home. Her anxieties represent those of the middle-class wife and mother, which Isabel also experienced before her transformation to a governess. Ellen Bayuk Rosenman's article describes how, by becoming a servant, Isabel suffers in order to achieve intimacy with her children and suggests that "Isabel's new role reveals the class-specific constraints on maternal emotion implicit in the Angel in the House" (29). As a parvenu, Barbara feels she must subscribe wholly to social expectations of her, so she strives to embody what she imagines a wealthy mother should be, showing a reserved love at a distance. When she first hires Isabel as governess, Barbara explains her beliefs about motherhood. She claims that

> "too many mothers pursue a mistaken system in the management of their family…. They are never happy but when they are with their children: they must be in the nursery; or, the children in the drawing-room. They wash them, dress them, feed them; rendering themselves slaves, and the nurse's office a sinecure." (406)

Isabel is a willing "slave," then, by being close to her children and tending to their needs. Rosenman sees this as means of "fling[ing] off the constraints" of this unfulfilling model for middle-class (or even aristocratic) motherhood (29).

Early in the novel, Isabel pleads to take her children to the seaside with her, insisting, "'I will get well all the sooner for having them with me,'" but her sister-in-law Miss Corny will not allow it (201). At this point Isabel is still recognized as their mother and as an upper-class woman, so it is somewhat surprising that Miss Corny's reasons for refusal are the stressors associated with mothering children and the expense of transporting them, which Miss Corny even implies could "ruin" Carlyle financially (200). As Rosenman points out, Isabel "soon learns to control herself and accede to the commands of Cornelia and her doctor"—one of her first steps toward becoming an actress through the performance of submission (28).

Andrew Maunder suggests that "[i]t is only by controlling (as far as she is ever able to) the 'impulsive' and 'lower' instincts and taking on the middle-class virtues of 'labour and self-sacrifice' that Isabel herself can be reunited with her children" since "Wood seems to suggest that successful and rewarding mothering is only for the more deserving members of humanity" ("'Stepchildren'" 67-68). However, I believe the text more clearly suggests that motherhood is not bound by class, but that good mothers are united across class lines by maternal feeling: "Let the mother, be she a duchess, or be she an apple-woman at a stand, be separated for awhile from her little children; let *her* answer how she yearns for them" (390, italics original). Certainly Isabel adopts the positive "middle-class virtues" that Maunder identifies, but Barbara Hare, the text's example of a middle-class mother, hardly demonstrates these qualities herself. Early in the novel, Wilson, the most prescient of the servants, hopes that "nothing happen[s]" to lady Isabel, since "'[Barbara] would not make a very kind stepmother, for it is certain that where the first wife had been hated, her children won't be loved'" (179). When Isabel is presumed dead and separated from her children, she anguishes about her children: "Would they be trained to goodness, to morality, to religion?" (390). The report she receives from Afy confirms her fears.

Afy thinks Barbara does not "ha[ve] much to do with them," and Isabel realizes "she had abandoned them to be trained by strangers" (395, 390). Anxieties about a "stranger" raising a child in lieu of its natural mother were common at the time. *The English Schoolroom* (1865) harshly condemns mothers who allow their children to be educated by a governess: "The mistake once made will be repented for ever, and a conviction will haunt her, when too late, that she had far better have done her duty to the full, and subject to any inconvenience… rather than have given over her offspring to the stranger" (Thompson 24). To right this wrong, Isabel returns in the guise of a stranger to ensure her children are properly cared for.

As Ann Cvetkovitch contends, "Whenever a social problem is dramatized through the sensational figure of a mother separated from her child, melodrama is producing not just tears but social policy," which is undoubtedly the case in *East Lynne* (127). The case of "Madame Vine" demonstrates just how little parents might know about the person hired to take care of their children. In her introduction to the Oxford edition of *East Lynne*, Elisabeth Jay sees the novel as suggesting that

> [t]he greatest threat posed by the governess to middle-class families was not, as Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, might lead us to suppose, an illicit romance with the master… but the danger of hiring a woman whose class pedigree and moral qualifications for superintending children were not what they seemed. (xxx-xxxi)

There was a demonstrated concern at the time for the dangers that outsiders such as nannies and nursemaids might present to the household. Theresa McBride makes a case for the decreased demand for servants toward the end of the nineteenth century being a result of "a growing intimacy within the middle-class family, and to a wish to be closer to, and provide better care for,

one's children" (67). Smiles' *Self-Help* even gives a nod to the importance of good parenting in shaping a child's future success: "The characters of parents are thus constantly repeated in their children; and the acts of affection, discipline, industry, and self-control, which they daily exemplify, live and act when all else which may have been learned through the ear has long been forgotten" (294). Barbara, however, leaves this crucial duty to a woman whom she believes to be a mere governess; in Tayleure's play, she tells the disguised Isabel, "I trust you may be able to instill such principles into the mind of the little girl, as shall keep her from a like fate [to her mother]" (IV.1). The irony that Barbara would trust a stranger living under an alias to teach the children morality is not lost on the audience. The play's sympathetic depiction of Isabel upholds the idea that regardless of her sins, the children's mother will have their best interest at heart. Thus, the character of the governess "Madame Vine" simultaneously reverses and exacerbates the contemporary anxieties surrounding domestics who watch the children in the home.

As exemplified by both the pretending governess Isabel Vane and the former governess Lucy Audley, governesses in particular are sources of suspicion in many sensation novels. As noted in the Brontë chapter, a governess, like a maid, is especially well-positioned to influence certain members of the household. While she may not have the unlimited access to the mistress of the house that the lady's maid enjoys, she is expected, to an extent, to control and exert her will on her young charges. As Lady Knollys advises the young Maud in *Uncle Silas*, "'A governess may be a very useful or a very useless person; but she may also be about the most pernicious inmate imaginable. She may teach you a bad accent, and worse manners, and heaven knows what beside'" (45). Governesses like Madame de la Rougierre of *Uncle Silas* and Mrs. Powell of *Aurora Floyd* also occupy an unstable social position as gentlewoman servants, which makes them difficult to categorize and thus somewhat suspect. Lillian Nayder notes that Mrs.

Powell "positions herself on various thresholds at Mellish Park; poised on boundary lines, she reveals herself as a socially hybrid figure" as "both genteel and working class" (96).

The supposed cruelty of governesses was a familiar topic among contemporary writers; the scene in *Jane Eyre* where Blanche Ingram describes them as "incubi" is one noteworthy example (C. Brontë 150). Although the Brontës offered sympathetic depictions of governesses, the stereotype of the bad governess lingered. Harriet Martineau claimed:

> From the overcrowding of the vocation, bad governesses are very numerous;—adventuresses who hope to catch a husband and an establishment of one or another degree of value; fawning liars, who try to obtain a maintenance and more or less luxury by flattery and subservience; ignorant pretenders, who, wanting bread, promise things which they cannot do;—these, and the merely infirm in health or temper, might furnish as much true material for domestic tragedy as any number of oppressed governesses. ("Governess" 269)

The "governess-adventuress" Martineau describes was readily represented in fiction, from *Vanity Fair*'s Becky Sharp to Lady Audley to *Held in Thrall*'s Mona Seafield. By the mid-nineteenth century, the term "governess" had also become synonymous with a kind of dominatrix figure who would whip or "violate[] her female charges for the pleasure of her male employer" (Mangum 229). Edward Ashbee's 1877 index contains references to numerous volumes of fetishized "governess" flagellation pornography, and somewhat sanitized versions of this appear in sensation fiction as well (Mangum 229). *Uncle Silas'* Madame de la Rougierre, for example, is a grotesque, brutal, and sexualized character who may have roots in the pornographic "governess"; she prefigures the nanny that would become a staple of later horror stories and films. Lady Knollys even likens her to a vampire, a dangerous interloper that must be invited in:

"'People need not nail up horseshoes and mark their door-stones with charms to keep the evil spirit out… but you open your door in the dark and invoke unknown danger'" (71). In the case of *East Lynne*, Barbara unwittingly invites a "spy" into her home.

When passing as a governess, Isabel is able to largely avoid the gaze of others and gain access to her former home to watch her husband and children surreptitiously. Jeanne Fahnstock suggests that *East Lynne* is unique among "bigamy novels" for the intensity of its voyeurism, particularly among its servant characters (54). Servants cannot be policed in the same way that they police their own employers, a fact that many enterprising characters are able to turn to their advantage. Afy admits to "listen[ing] at keyholes," and Wilson "carr[ies] on a prying system in Mrs. Hare's house" (333, 180). As Magdalen affirms in *No Name*, "'[s]ervants' tongues and servants' letters… are oftener occupied with their masters and mistresses than their masters and mistresses suppose'" (609). McCuskey's article points to this proliferation of servant surveillance in the novel as a means of keeping the members of the household in check: "At the end of the long arm of the law, we find the servant's hand" (McCuskey 370). Because of their own devotion to voyeurism, the servants are convinced that the meddling Miss Corny must reciprocate and "listen" in the same way, but the text assures us, "in that, they did her injustice" (347).

The governess's privileges also come at a price; there are limitations and rules that Isabel must follow as a subordinate member of the household. Although as a governess at East Lynne, she is still "regarded as [a] gentlewom[a]n," Isabel faces a lack of free access to objects in her former home (401). In the novel, Isabel glances "with a yearning look" inside her old dressing-room at "the little ornaments on the large dressing-table, as they used to be in *her* time; and the cut glass of crystal essence-bottles" (401). She has lost the right to hold or even safely look at

these objects—but she has traded it for the right to see and touch her children and see her husband.

When Isabel acts as a governess, she becomes privy to everything that transpires in the home; as E. Ann Kaplan notes, "she becomes the voyeur; she is able to look and grieve, but unable to have the gaze of recognition blaze back on her" (83). She and Barbara have effectively switched places, since Barbara once gazed longingly at Carlyle during his marriage to Isabel, and now Isabel must witness his married life with her former rival. T. A. Palmer's theatrical adaptation of the novel emphasizes the particular pain Isabel's gaze causes her. She laments:

> My sin was great, but my punishment has been still greater. Think what torture it has been—what it has been for me to bear, living in the same house with—with—your wife; seeing your love for her—love that once was *mine*. Oh, think what agony to watch dear Willie, and see him fading day by day, and not be able to say "he is my child as well as yours!" (Palmer 4.2, italics original)

Isabel's role as governess rekindles and even deepens her love for her "master" Carlyle. Although she does not have a physical relationship with Carlyle as Madame Vine, even while living in the house under his new wife, the text states that "[Isabel], poor thing, almost regarded Mr Carlyle as *her* husband" (591, italics original). At the end of *East Lynne*, Isabel tells Carlyle, "'I never loved you so passionately as I have done since I lost you'" (615). After Isabel admits that she returned in disguise to be with him as much as her children, Carlyle tenderly touches her hair and nearly kisses her, a scene that is described with tantalizing suspense in the *New Monthly Magazine* serial version of *East Lynne*: "What was he about to do? Lower and lower bent he his head, until his breath nearly mingled with hers. To kiss her? He best knew. But, suddenly, his face grew red with a scarlet flush, and he lifted it again" (45). The sentence containing the word

"kiss" was deleted from this scene in some editions of the novel, although the intentions behind Carlyle's aborted gesture remain clear. Moments later, as Isabel "clung to his arm" and "lifted her face, in its sad yearning[,] Mr. Carlyle laid her tenderly down again, and suffered his lips to rest upon hers" (617). In response to her final words, "'farewell, until eternity…. Farewell, my once dear husband!'" he replies, "'Until eternity'" (617). His words suggest that Isabel may realize her "'one great hope'" that "'[they] shall meet again… and live together for ever and ever'" (617).

When Carlyle reveals to Barbara that his former wife has been living with them in disguise and his new wife plaintively asks if Isabel's presence "'has… taken [his] love from [her],'" he reassures her with a far less intimate gesture: "He took her hands in one of his, he put the other round her waist and held her there, before him, never speaking, only looking gravely into her face" (623). He also does not directly answer her question, and the novel's narrative commentary—"Who could look at its sincere truthfulness, at the sweet expression of his lips, and doubt him? Not Barbara"—is less than definitive. Surely the reader who has just "witnessed" the heart-wrenching scene between the two former spouses is not so easily assured. Barbara might maintain her status as Carlyle's wife, but Isabel makes certain that Barbara will never usurp the role of mother to Isabel's children.

When Isabel was still recognized as an aristocrat and her father was dying, the doctors who attended him concealed the worst of his condition from her, and even Carlyle would "soften[] down the actual facts," which infuriated her (87). As a governess, Isabel ensures that she is with the doctor more frequently than either Barbara or Carlyle are and is thus best able to hear his straightforward medical opinions (442). When the doctor speaks to Carlyle, he neglects to reveal the worst; as Wilson says, "'if he saw the child's breath going out before his face, and

knew that the next moment would be his last, he'd vow to us all that he was good for twelve hours to come'" (579-80). Although the doctor tells William's "new mother" Barbara that William "'will outgrow'" his cough, causing her to dismiss it by suggesting, "'perhaps a crumb went the wrong way,'" Isabel is immediately able to identify William's condition instead as consumption (408, 419). In her capacity as servant, Isabel is able to "make [her child's] health [her] care by night and day" (422). She is able to treat her son with cream, since she says she "'[has] known cream to do a vast deal of good in a case like William's,'" and believes "'no better medicine can be given,'" even though at that point Carlyle is still relying on the doctor's mistaken opinions (442).

Isabel is also the only person present with William when he finally dies. Although this is a scene of protracted anguish for Isabel, it also provides closure. When her father was dying, Isabel was denied the right to see him, despite her repeated entreaties, precisely because she was a female and a family member. As her father dies in the next room, she accuses Carlyle, "'It is so cruel, so to treat me… When your father was dying, were you kept away from him?'" (87). He responds, "'My dear young lady—a hardy, callous man may go where you may not,'" and when she exposes the flaw in his rationale, pointing out that Carlyle is neither hardy nor callous, he avers that he "'spoke of man's general nature'" (87). Eventually, Carlyle explains that "the truth" is that "'[her father's] symptoms are too painful,'" and if she "'were… to go in, in defiance of advice, [she] would regret it all [her] after life'" (87).

As the governess Madame Vine, however, she is able to be part of William's death in a way she could not have been as Isabel Carlyle. Although she famously mourns that "not even at that last hour… dared she say [to William], I am your mother," it is precisely because she is *not* perceived as his mother that she can be the one alone with him at his dying hour (586). T. A.

Palmer's play milks further pathos from this scene with the famous line, "Oh, Willie, my child! dead, dead, dead! and he never knew me, never called me mother!" (3.3). However, in John Oxenford's adaptation, William rewards Isabel's efforts by seeing through her disguise at the last minute and calling her "Mamma" once before he dies (3.3). Still, after she has revealed her true identity, Isabel dies from grief; her seemingly contradictory roles of mother, wife, lady, actress, and governess cannot survive publicly reconciled in one body for long.

Ellen Wood's biography *Memorials of Mrs Wood* (1894), written by her son Charles, describes a similar scenario occurring when Ellen Wood's own daughter died. Charles Wood describes the beloved French nurse who cared for him and Wood's other children as "[a] faithful, self-sacrificing, duty-fulfilling woman, [for whom] neither time nor infirmities would have separated her from her beloved masters and charges" (C. Wood 56). In what is ostensibly a biography of his mother, Wood devotes an entire chapter to this nurse. Most tellingly, he says, "Her charges had always been *her children*, and those yet living are so still" (56, italics original).[41]

The way Charles Wood characterizes the nurse's actions during the illness of Ellen Wood's first daughter, Ellen, points to the possibility that she may have been a model for Isabel or other servant characters in *East Lynne*. The younger Ellen fell ill with scarlet fever, and, as Charles Wood describes it:

> The doctors treated her according to the fashion of the day. They first starved her almost to death, and, then she was sinking from exhaustion, ordered leeches to be applied to the throat…. [The nurse] cried to her master in agonies of grief, "do

[41] This description perhaps gives credence to the contemporary fear that servants could be dangerous intermediaries who appropriate children's affections from their own parents (McBride 67).

> not allow it. If leeches are used, the child will die. I know it from experience." But she was powerless. The leeches were applied, the little throat closed up, and the child died. (51-52)

East Lynne contains very similar scenarios of servants "knowing best" even though their advice remains unheeded. The servant Wilson proves that, through her previous experience tending those with consumption, she can predict the trajectory of William's illness more accurately than the doctor (580).[42] When William dies in the novel, "Madame Vine" is so overcome with grief that she neglects to maintain her governess persona. Her child's death signals the end of Isabel's performance, and she removes her disguise (588). Nina Auerbach sees "Isabel's eulogy [as] less a eulogy for her son than for her own lost roles"—or more specifically, as I would suggest, the only role she chose for herself ("Curtain" 12). [43]

In *Memorials of Mrs Wood*, Wood's nurse too is consumed with grief at the death of the child Ellen, even though she is not her mother. As recounted by Charles Wood, the reality was an emotional scene to rival any theatrical production to *East Lynne*:

> The faithful nurse was almost equally stricken [as the child's father]. She was one of those strong and determined characters who must have their own way in everything: the under nurses had to obey her every look and word—even the mother's authority in the nursery was quite a secondary consideration. But she was as tenacious in her affections as she was strong in character. None but herself was allowed to perform the last sad office for the pure and beautiful little creature who had gone to a better world. With her own bare hands she placed her in her

[42] Later, only the maid Joyce recognizes that Isabel is dying; in response, Barbara declares the servant to be "a simpleton" (611).
[43] Here Auerbach refers to the same death scene in T. A. Palmer's 1874 stage version.

> little coffin, watched over it night and day until the little body was consigned to the earth and hidden away from mortal eyes for ever. (Charles Wood 52)

As *Memorials of Mrs Wood* indicates, Wood herself had firsthand experience as an unconventional "actress." The text describes how, shortly after Wood was married, her husband suggested that they visit the monastery Grande Chartreuse together. The surprised Wood responds, "'But I thought women were not admitted over the threshold? What Open Sesame would unbar the doors to me?'" (C. Wood 124). The "Open Sesame" solution her husband devises is to disguise Wood as a monk so that she might tour the monastery and not arouse suspicion. Isabel Vane and other sensation heroines create their own means to "Open Sesame" access to the middle-class home by adopting the similarly unobtrusive disguise of a servant. While characters like Lydia Gwilt or Magdalen Vanstone use the role of servant in attempts to illicitly gain wealth and revenge, Isabel more subtly subverts the class system. By choosing to perform a climb down the social ladder she is able to express love for her children as a "mother" and feel passion as a "wife" to Carlyle in ways previously denied her as Lady Vane.

CHAPTER 6

"WE WILL STILL BE HUSBAND AND WIFE":

THE SERVANT AS SPOUSE IN GASKELL'S "THE GREY WOMAN"

Among the stories included in the 2000 collection of *Gothic Tales* by Elizabeth Gaskell is "The Grey Woman," a fascinating but understudied novella. While other stories in the collection remain in the "Gothic" tradition suggested by the title, "The Grey Woman" is not easily classified as such. Diana Wallace's 2004 article on "The Grey Woman" describes it as a revised Bluebeard tale, a story in the "female Gothic" tradition, and an "uncanny story" in which the "ghost" is the symbolically "murdered" Anna (60-61). Although the story has many Gothic elements—among them, a framing narrative featuring a mysterious portrait and a hidden letter, and a plot concerning a heroine trapped in a castle with a villain—it does not strictly conform to the conventions of either "male" or "female" Gothic modes.[44] In fact, though the hybrid nature of Gaskell's story makes it so difficult to categorize, as Shirley Foster has suggested, "The Grey Woman" may be best considered as an example of the sensational school (119).[45] The case for broadening the canon of sensation fiction to include "The Grey Woman" is bolstered by the novella's similarities to the previously examined works of sensation fiction, especially its depiction of a female servant.

[44] As outlined in Anne Williams' *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic.*
[45] Foster further notes that borrowing records from the Portico Library in Manchester suggest that William Gaskell may have checked out some sensational titles for his wife (129).

Although the sensation fiction canon is often considered to comprise primarily novels, Gaskell's novella utilizes many of the key conventions of the sensational school. The story lacks unexplained or supernatural phenomena but relies on suspense and "shocks" to the nervous system; it offers the "secret history" of women with agency; and it concerns detection, spying, and the exposure of family secrets. Ann Cvetkovitch distinguishes between the Gothic and the sensational by noting how, "[w]hereas gothic novels depict the trials of courtship and threats to the purity of virgin heroines, sensation novels are more likely to represent marriage…. Plots revolve around the legal status of marriage, and the conflicts created by property and inheritance laws" (46). This distinction clearly suggests that "The Grey Woman" is part of the sensation tradition, since its heroine's three "marriages" and their dubious legal status drive much of the story's plot. H. L. Mansel characterized the sensation genre as "bigamy novels," and "The Grey Woman" depicts a surprising version of "bigamy": an extension of what a *Temple Bar* critic called sensation fiction's "domestic relations of an exceedingly peculiar character" (Mansel 490; "Sensational School" 414). As Laura Kranzler observes in her introduction to Gaskell's *Gothic Tales*, stories such as "The Grey Woman" "[suggest] that this domestic arena which Gaskell is so keen to preserve and prioritize is also precisely the place where women are at their [most] vulnerable and in most danger," another characteristic of the sensational (xiv).

Here, as featured in other sensation (and, later, detective) fiction, there is a servant who watches at the keyhole—but, as with Rosanna Spearman of *The Moonstone*, it is to protect, rather than to expose, her beloved employer. In fact, the most "sensational" element of the story is the relationship between the servant Amante and her mistress Anna. As Rose Lovell-Smith points out, in Bluebeard tales the "female helper" is a constant presence who serves as "companion, informant, confidante, or saviour of the heroine" while also doubling as "servant,

ally, relation, or even lover of the husband" (199). Amante, the helper figure in Gaskell's story, embraces all of these roles, but with a startling twist: she becomes the servant, ally, "relation" and even "lover" of her mistress, Anna. Despite its inclusion of this remarkable servant character, "The Grey Woman" receives little more than two pages of attention in Julie Nash's book *Servants and Paternalism in the Works of Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell* (67-9). In fact, "The Grey Woman" has received very little focused critical attention at all. The story merits a closer look, particularly since it offers one of the most unusual servant characters outside the more canonical sensation novels. In one of the few recent studies of the novella, Julia Sun-Joo Lee considers the novella in light of its fictional setting of class warfare during the French Revolution and its contemporary backdrop of American slavery. However, what Lee's study fails to explore is how nineteenth-century British class and gender politics influenced the story. This chapter will explore the relationship between the mistress Anna and her maid, Amante, and how it blurs the boundaries of gender, class, and the nature of marriage, as well as how this "sensation novella" challenges the generic constraints of sensation fiction.

"The Grey Woman" begins with a framing narrative set in 1840s Germany, when a traveler takes refuge from a storm at a miller's house and admires an old portrait of the miller's great-aunt, Anna Scherer. The miller then produces a letter that Anna wrote to her daughter Ursula on the occasion of the latter's engagement, and this text, in three "portions," constitutes the rest of the tale. In the letter, Anna warns her daughter not to get married and offers her own life history by way of explanation. She describes her adolescence in late eighteenth-century Germany and how she was courted by the aristocratic Monsieur de la Tourelle. After Anna reluctantly agrees to marry him and he takes her to his château in France, she learns that he is secretly the head of the murderous gang Les Chauffeurs. The pregnant Anna, fearing for her life,

flees with her only confidante, her maid Amante. They disguise themselves and Amante poses as Anna's "husband" to escape to Frankfurt, where Anna gives birth to a daughter. Amante continues to live and provide for her "family" as a man until she is killed by M. de la Tourelle, the shock of which causes Anna to turn unrecognizably gray. Anna then marries the doctor who attended Amante at her death, and she lives to see M. de la Tourelle executed. She reveals that she is telling her daughter this story because she has just learned that her daughter's fiancé is the son of one of Les Chauffeurs' murder victims.

Reading this story as an example of sensation fiction rather than Gothic fiction allows for a more complete understanding of what I see as one of its most "sensational" aspects, its unconventional depiction of gender roles. Wallace sees "The Grey Woman" as "one of [Gaskell's] most radical statements about the ways in which male power erases or represses women, about the redemptive possibilities of female relationships, and about the ambiguous nature of gender itself" (61). As noted, Wallace considers the story as part of the Gothic tradition, and it is true that Anna initially acts much as a Gothic heroine might—she screams, she "nearly faint[s]," and she cannot take action (315-16). On the other hand, her servant Amante is clever and quick to act—and, much like the eponymous character in *Lady Audley's Secret*, Isabel Vane of *East Lynne*, or Magdalene Vanstone of *No Name*, she is not afraid to use deception and disguise to achieve her desired goal. Lyn Pykett suggests that "the key opposition in the sensation novel is not between the 'masculine' women and the 'feminine' woman, but between conflicting versions of femininity, in particular the proper and improper feminine," but in "The Grey Woman" there is no conflict between either woman—the "improper" woman acts as protector to her more "proper" counterpart (*"Improper"* 82). The novella further suggests that the "masculine" woman is not actually "improper," but is actually more admirable, resourceful,

and able than the "feminine" woman. This was an unusual stance for the time, as evidenced by an 1863 review of Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* that claims that while "a masculine woman without a heart borders on the repulsive," "[a] masculine woman with a heart is not a lovable being" either ("Review: Aurora Floyd" 176). Amante also shares "gender-bending" traits and behaviors with M. de la Tourelle, although while she is primarily portrayed as heroic, the feminine man is depicted as perverse and monstrous.

Although M. de la Tourelle proves to be a terrible husband—he is controlling, relentless, and violent—initially, his most remarkable defining feature is his effeminacy. In her first meeting with M. de la Tourelle, Anna describes how:

> His features were as delicate as a girl's, and set off by two little "mouches," as we called patches in those days, one at the left corner of his mouth, the other prolonging, as it were, the right eye. His dress was blue and silver. I was so lost in admiration of this beautiful young man, that I was as much surprised as if the angel Gabriel had spoken to me, when the lady of the house brought him forward to present him to me. (295)

M. de la Tourelle thus enters the tale passive and "beautiful," and seems a fitting counterpart to Anna. By the end of the evening, however, she "became a little tired of the affected softness and effeminacy of his manners," and later she "[finds] an amount of determination, under that effeminate appearance and manner, for which [she] was not prepared" (295, 299). After their marriage, Anna sees how his delicate exterior masks a hard interior:

> For, while M. de la Tourelle behaved towards me as if I were some precious toy or idol, to be cherished, and fostered, and petted, and indulged, I soon found out how little I, or, apparently, any one else, could bend the terrible will of the man

> who had on first acquaintance appeared to me too effeminate and languid to exert his will in the slightest particular. I had learnt to know his face better now; and to see that some vehement depth of feeling, the cause of which I could not fathom, made his grey eye glitter with pale light, and his lips contract, and his delicate cheek whiten on certain occasions. (301)

Maureen T. Reddy suggests that the revulsion Anna feels for her husband "can be read, on one level, as a highly symbolic rendering of the psychological shock an inexperienced young woman was likely to feel when confronted by her husband's desire for sex" since M. de la Tourelle has a "delicate" public persona but a hidden, "violent… private self" (188). This is a plausible reading, but Anna is suspicious of M. de la Tourelle well before their marriage, and shows reluctance to marry anyone at all even before she meets him, which suggests that it is not merely the physical act of sex that prompts her horror.

Amante's initial description is nearly as masculine as M. de la Tourelle's is feminine: "She was tall and handsome, though upwards of forty, and somewhat gaunt" (302). Even Amante's voice sounds like that of a man (319). Anna likes her immediately for her "look of straightforwardness" and the fact that, while Anna "was afraid of everybody, Amante feared no one" (303). Amante holds her own with the men of the château, and seems to earn their respect on a kind of equitable, masculine footing:

> She would quietly beard Lefebvre, and he respected her all the more for it; she had a knack of putting questions to M. de la Tourelle, which respectfully informed him that she had detected the weak point, but forbore to press him too closely upon it out of deference to his position as her master. (303)[46]

[46] The use of the word "beard" here is particularly suggestive given its connotations of maleness.

Such masculine qualities render "Good, brave Amante" heroic as she protects Anna's life repeatedly throughout the story (312).

Amante's masculine characteristics are not limited to her personality; she also uses her physical strength to remove Anna from danger. After the maid leads her mistress to safety with her voice, Anna describes how "I fell upon her neck, grasping her tight, till my hands ached with the tension of their hold. Yet she never uttered a word. Only she took me up in her vigorous arms, and bore me to my room, and laid me on my bed" (316). Reddy sees this scene as "crucial, and it marks the point in the story at which Amante takes de la Tourelle's place as Anna's husband. Amante's carrying Anna to her bed and Anna's subsequent faint are a parodic enactment of a conventional wedding night" (189-90). But in contrast to her disillusioning wedding night with M. de la Tourelle, this marks the beginning of the successful "marriage" between Anna and Amante.

Indeed, Anna and Amante's relationship goes beyond "female friendship" and becomes a kind of "marriage," which progresses from the "parodic" initial scene identified above to costumed roleplaying and ultimately to an unconventionally conventional family arrangement. While the two women are hiding from Les Chauffeurs, Amante physically disguises herself as a man:

> finding in one box an old suit of man's clothes… she put them on [and]… cut her own hair to the shortness of a man's, made me clip her black eyebrows as close as though they had been shaved, and by cutting up old corks into pieces such as would go into her cheeks, she altered both the shape of her face and her voice to a degree which I should not have believed possible. (323)

They become the "characters of a travelling pedlar and his wife" after "she stuffed a hump on her back, [and] she thickened [Anna's] figure" (324). On the road, Amante introduces herself as a tailor, adopting her father's profession for herself, since "as a girl she had often helped him with his work, and knew the tailors' slang and habits, down to the particular whistle and cry which in France tells so much to those of a trade" (288). Eventually, Anna gives birth to her daughter Ursula, and the three live together as a "married couple" with a child until Amante is killed. As Nash observes:

> neither character expresses any wish to revert to previous positions with regard to gender or class. The "man" of the house is a female servant, and neither Gaskell nor her narrator seem to find that detail all that remarkable. Although the novella ends with Amante's murder and Anna's (bigamist) marriage to a male doctor, that relatively conventional ending does not change the story's premise that social (and gender) roles are better determined by aptitude and inclination than by birth. (69)

Through Amante's performance as a man, she reveals the degree of performativity that is socially expected of a marriage: she must "scold" Anna "from time to time" to continue acting the part (325). At a certain point, as Nestor observes, "it is clear that the threat of discovery is much less relevant than the fact that the relationship has developed into one of mutual dependence and attachment, as valid in the love that nourishes it as any heterosexual relationship" (77).

Amante's redefined gender role seems to suit her, and she lives out the rest of her life posing as Anna's husband. It is only on her deathbed at a hospital that "the fact of her sex was

made known" (338). However, initially, Anna did not plan to maintain their charade indefinitely and had hoped to bring Amante to her father's home in Germany. She tells the maid

> of the safety and comfort of the home that awaited her in my father's house; of the gratitude which the old man would feel towards her; and how there, in that peaceful dwelling, far away from the terrible land of France, she should find ease and security for all the rest of her life. (333)

It is unclear what role Anna expects Amante to play in such a scenario. Would she continue her role as Anna's maid or "retire" and live there as an equal and friend? Is it possible that Amante would become an adoptive sibling to Anna, a surrogate mother, or perhaps even a new wife for Anna's father? As "husband" and "wife" their requisite household roles are more clearly delineated.

The differences in gender performance between the two women make their relationship ideal, according to the parameters laid out by Dinah Mulock Craik in *A Woman's Thoughts About Women* (1858), which Nina Auerbach characterizes as "a sort of handbook for spinsters" (*Communities* 19). Craik writes that women's friendships require "a difference—of strong or weak, gay or grave, brilliant or sordid—answering in some measure to the difference of sex" (163, qtd. in Auerbach *Communities* 20). An 1870 *Saturday Review* article on "Friendship" similarly describes how, for two women to enjoy a successful relationship, one must have "a stronger character than the other" (qtd. in Nestor 12). As Pauline Nestor observes, this means that female friendship could only work "when the relationship conformed to conventional heterosexual roles" (12).

"The Grey Woman" is not the only text where Gaskell depicts such a masculine-feminine pairing of women; Françoise Basch cites others such as Miss Matty and Deborah in *Cranford*,

Phoebe Browning and Dorothy in *Wives and Daughters* (1865), and the younger and older Misses Tomkinson in *Mr. Harrison's Confessions* (1851)—although these are all pairs of unmarried sisters (178). In its unexpected reversal of masculine and feminine, "The Grey Woman" bears some resemblance to the world of Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860). Lyn Pykett describes it as "one in which the relation between masculinity and femininity has somehow gone wrong. It has both masculinized women and feminized men, but mostly there is just too much femininity around, and where there is masculinity it occurs in inappropriate places" (*Sensation* 21). And while Marian Halcombe disgusts Walter Hartright with "the dark down on her upper lip [that] was almost a moustache" in *The Woman in White*, she is the perfect complement and defender of her more feminine half-sister Laura, just as Amante is to Anna (34). Later, Collins will depict a pair of women even more similar to Gaskell's in his final novel, *Blind Love* (1889), in which a masculine maid repeatedly saves her passive mistress from her criminal husband.

Reddy sees the insistence on a male/female division of labor in Anna and Amante's relationship as "a failure of imagination on Gaskell's part; that is, she can imagine a non-traditional relationship—a family made up of two women—but she cannot fully imagine an entirely new order, in which people create new ways of assigning responsibilities" (190). However, Thomas P. Fair suggests that when the author

> balances … a rebellious individual with a conventional figure …. Gaskell *appears* to be reinforcing the hegemonic paradigm when, in fact, she is subverting it to allow her rebellious heroines agency and the opportunity to fashion their own success from within the system that would attempt to contain them within its traditional boundaries. (218)

Nash claims that "the two women create their own family, based on the paternalist ideal, but with a twist: "Amante becomes the strong husband that Anna clearly wants, one who uses 'his' strength to nurture and lead, not to frighten and brutalize" (Nash 69).

However, Anna's early rejection and fear of the apprentice Karl would suggest that it is not merely a "strong husband" that Anna wants. Anna is drawn to her maid's strength, but much of Amante's appeal seems to be her maternal nature. Laurie Buchanan sees male and female protagonists in many of Gaskell's novels as "striving toward an androgynous ideal" to "allow a marriage of partnership rather than one of dominance and passivity" (98). She describes how Gaskell's heroes learn to embrace "feminine" traits to become more caring and sensitive, and her heroines become more assertive and strong, but neither sex must give up their gender identity. While M. de la Tourelle is said to act "feminine" (or, more correctly, effeminate) from the beginning, he is also cold and cruel and lacks the kindness and gentleness that Amante demonstrates. Buchanan believes that many of Gaskell's novels show an "ideal Victorian marriage" as "a balancing of typical [sex] roles within each individual in the marriage," which seems closest to the arrangement depicted in "The Grey Woman" (107).

A woman's desire for stereotypically "feminine" traits in a romantic partner is not unusual, even in the context of a heterosexual relationship; in her study of twentieth-century romance novels, Janice Radway found that for most female readers, neither a male hero's "strength nor protectiveness is considered as important as intelligence, gentleness, and an ability to laugh at life" (81). Radway notes that "[w]hile the women want to feel that the heroine will be protected by the hero, they also seem to want to see her dependency balanced by its opposite, that is, by the hero's dependence on her" (81). The ideal male partner, her study suggests, is a

"maternal man," and Amante's character indicates that, for Anna, the ideal partner is a masculine but maternal woman.

Anna is mistress of the house and Amante's employer, but even before her maid becomes her "husband," Anna allows her to play the role of her "mother" and exercise power in that way. (Anna's own mother is presumably dead.) Early in the story, Anna repeatedly describes how Amante treats her like "a child," a trait that initially "annoyed" her—hinting at Amante's attitude being seen as "insubordinate"—but later the maid's maternal (or paternal?) treatment of her mistress seems to become part of her appeal (305, 317). This is a distinct reversal of roles, since servants themselves were often looked at and treated as children by their employers (Horn 109-113). In a crisis, Anna unquestioningly obeys Amante as she gives "directions… without reasons—just as you do to a child; and like a child [Anna] obeyed her" (317). Anna seems to dislike adult responsibility; when her sister-in-law Babette usurpes her role as mistress of her childhood home early in the story, Anna says she did not mind, since she "always feared that [she] did not manage well for so large a family" (292). Thus, she seems more than willing to allow Amante to acknowledge her power over Anna and treat her like a child as she outlines the rules under which they will "play house":

> "If madame will still be guided by me—and, my child, I beg of you still to trust me," said Amante, breaking out of her respectful formality into the way of talking more natural to those who had shared and escaped from common dangers—more natural, too, where the speaker was conscious of a power of protection which the other did not possess—"we will go on to Frankfurt…. We will still be husband and wife; we will take a small lodging, and you shall housekeep and live indoors.

> I, as the rougher and the more alert, will continue my father's trade, and seek work at the tailors' shops." (334)

Basch discusses how the "old maids" of Gaskell's fiction often must find new life through surrogate family or a job, as Miss Galindo in *My Lady Ludlow* (1859), Miss Matty in *Cranford*, and Lizzie Marsh in "Libbie Marsh's Three Eras" (1847) do (179). As Frances Power Cobbe's 1862 essay "What Shall We Do With our Old Maids?" indicates, at the time thirty percent of women in England never married (594). Amante could be seen as one of the selfless unmarried women who are, in contemporary writer George W. Burnap's words, part of a providential "corps de reserve," who are "stationed up and down in life to aid the weak, to take the place of those who are cloven down in battle, or of those who refuse to do their duty" (124-25; qtd. in Auerbach *Communities* 25). Basch observes how "Mrs Gaskell's spinsters… never criticize the injustice and absurdity of the fate which is the lot of old maids. Once the most difficult sacrifice is accepted—renunciation of the condition of a wife-mother—a life of abnegation and altruism follows naturally" (176). Amante does demonstrate selflessness and compassion, but she also does not have to deny herself the experiences of being a spouse and parent.

Amante continues her role as "parent" even after she becomes Anna's "husband" when Anna gives birth to her daughter Ursula. Although, as M. de la Tourelle's biological daughter, Ursula is described as a "poor worse than fatherless child," Anna explains how Amante shared in her parental joy:

> It was a girl, as I had prayed for. I had feared lest a boy might have something of the tiger nature of its father, but a girl seemed all my own. And yet not all my

own, for the faithful Amante's delight and glory in the babe almost exceeded mine; in outward show it certainly did. (335)

Their partnership recalls a similar scenario in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), when Aurora proposes that she raise Marian Erle's child with her:

"I am lonely in the world,
And thou art lonely, and the child is half
An orphan. Come, and, henceforth, thou and I
Being still together, will not miss a friend,
Nor he a father, since two mothers shall
Make that up to him." (VII. 120-25)

In "The Grey Woman" it seems that the two mothers do succeed in making an ideal home for the child together. The last time Anna sees Amante, she is kissing "their" baby farewell "as if she never could leave off" (337).

Even on her deathbed, Amante ensures Anna's future: "she told enough to enable [Dr. Voss] to understand the position in which [Anna] was left; before the priest had heard half her tale Amante was dead" (338). Here, it could be argued that Amante is either continuing to "parent" Anna by arranging her marriage as a father might, or that she has selected her own replacement as Anna's spouse.[47] In fact, Anna's marriage with Dr. Voss feels less authentic and even more sexless than her "marriage" to Amante. Anna describes how while Dr. Voss called her "his wife," she never divorced M. de la Tourelle although their religious difference would have made a divorce "easily procurable by German law both ecclesiastical and legal" (339).

[47] As Sharon Marcus notes, in *Aurora Leigh*, Marian is the one empowered to facilitate the marriage of Aurora and Romney, so "the novel's final marriage is the result of an exchange between women that asserts the generative energies of friendship… and secures the bond between them" (*Between* 94).

They have a religious ceremony but are never legally married, even after her first husband is executed (339).

Patsy Stoneman points out that Gaskell features "less conventional families" in several of her other works as well, including *Cranford, Ruth* (1853) and *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), and short stories such as "Martha Preston" and "Half a Lifetime Ago"—which "demonstrate that Gaskell's concern with the raising of children does not depend on a conventional concept of the heterosexual family, but rather on functioning cooperation" ("Gaskell" 143). In *Cranford*, for instance, Auerbach sees a similar scenario take shape by the novel's end:

> Like her sister, Matty replaces the openhearted dead with a proxy mate: Martha, her servant, is allowed a follower, the honest Jem Hearn, who, on the failure of Matty's investments, will obligingly marry his sweetheart to provide her mistress with a home and will father a daughter perpetuating Matty's name. (*Communities* 84)

Both Miss Matty's and Amante's legacies are ensured by the next generation, but while it may be flattering for a maid to honor her mistress through her child (as Bessie does in *Jane Eyre*), it is more unusual for those roles to be reversed as they are in "The Grey Woman."[48]

Because of its strong female protagonists and vindication of female relationships, Maureen Reddy proposes reading "The Grey Woman" as "a feminist palimpsest." She sees an oft-overlooked "feminist rage evident in [Gaskell's] short fiction" (183). From this standpoint, Reddy describes the novella's male characters thus:

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[48] After leaving M. de la Tourelle, Anna becomes part of a series of unconventional families: first her pretended husband Amante, then her so-called husband Dr. Voss, and finally, her own brother Fritz promises to be "father to…Ursula" when Anna dies (292). Ursula never knows her biological father, although as Herr Scherer says in the framing story, "The sins of the fathers are visited on their children" (290).

> The miller and Anna's husband are simple variations of a single type, as are their homes; the suggestion is that Anna's husband is in fact representative of all husbands/jailers, and his home is not an extraordinary example of a house that is intended to imprison women. Anna was imprisoned first in that same mill by her father, then in her husband's manor, and finally in the mill by the miller, who controls her story; Ursula died in the mill; and, finally, the miller's wife is imprisoned there as an invalid. (186)

The female characters' isolation and lack of control identified here are evident throughout the text, but this particular reading overlooks other key aspects of the story. While "The Grey Woman" does display the benefits of a female-only household and depicts a successful woman-to-woman marriage partnership between Anna and Amante, it demonizes its other female characters to an astonishing degree.

The character whom Anna most condemns is not M. de la Tourelle, but her sister-in-law, Babette. Early in the tale, she states simply, "Babette Müller was, as I may say, the cause of all my life's suffering" (292). It is difficult to see the story wholly as a "feminist palimpsest" when Anna pinpoints Babette, not her own murderous husband, as the source of "all [her] life's suffering." Anna explains that Babette "looked upon [her] as a rival," criticizing Anna's clothes as unfashionable and spending Anna's father's money to buy new garments (292). Next, Anna is manipulated by Madame Ruprecht, whose "one great object [in]…life was to retain her position in society," as both she and Babette attempt to push a reluctant Anna into marriage (294). Even years later after Anna's miraculous return, Babette will only "[scan her] with a cold, distrustful eye" and will not allow Anna to stay in her home with Fritz (292). The self-serving, perhaps even misogynistic actions of these women demonstrate that the story does not, as Reddy

suggests, carry the message that "[o]nly in a community composed entirely of women can any one woman hope to escape the destructive influences of patriarchal power" (191). It is implied that these women are partly motivated by jealousy of Anna's beauty.

On the other hand, most of the male characters are depicted in a positive light. Anna loves her brother Fritz and wants to return to live with him after Dr. Voss dies (292). Among the "several people [who] love [her]" at her family home, one is "the old servant Kätchen," but the rest are all men—her father, her brother "Fritz,… and Karl, the head apprentice at the mill" (292). Her father is further described as "always gentle and indulgent towards us women" (292). Dr. Voss too acts kindly toward Anna and she calls him a "dear husband and father" (340). Even the miller in the framing narrative, whom Reddy sees as a "jailer," shows only generosity, concern, and courtesy toward women. Thus, the novella is not simply an indictment of male abuse of power or men themselves. Still, it does offer a scathing critique of what Anna calls the marriage "net" (298)

Anna expresses distrust of marriage early in the story, when she is pursued by Karl, her father's apprentice. Although her father encourages the union, Anna confesses, "The more Karl advanced, the more I disliked him. He was good in the main, but I had no notion of being married, and could not bear any one who talked to me about it" (293). As this suggests, Anna seems more afraid of marriage itself than of any other kind of imprisonment. Later, after she has been coerced into marriage with M. de la Tourelle, Anna says she first "[wakes] up to a full sense of what marriage was," and she sees it as the loss of her father, her brother, and her rights (299). She cynically observes, "I understood that I had made what Madame Rupprecht and her set would have called a great marriage, because I lived in a château with many servants, bound ostensibly to obey me as a mistress" (301-02). Anna's concerns about marriage prove to be

well-founded after she discovers that her husband likely murdered his previous wife. Reddy sees Anna's letter to her daughter as "a cautionary tale, a warning from an experienced woman to an inexperienced one, which describes what marriage really is for women; that is, Ursula ought not marry because the institution of marriage itself is a terrible trap for women, regardless of the individual man involved" (186). Anna is only able to escape this "trap" by embarking on a new kind of marriage that flouts every marital convention of the time: it is with another woman, it breaches the boundaries of class and between master and servant, and it is based on terms of equality.

Such points suggest that, as is the case with other sensation titles, we should read "The Grey Woman" in the context of mid-century debates about the nature of marriage and the rights of wives. In an 1851 *Westminster Review* article, Harriet Taylor stated that "[t]he real question is, whether it is right and expedient that one-half of the human race should pass through life in a state of forced subordination to the other half" (300). Taylor argues that a wife's role has been relegated to that of a "humble companion[to a man]…attached [to him] for the purpose of bringing up his children, and making his home pleasant to him"; in short, as Taylor's husband John Stuart Mill argued in *The Subjection of Women*, she is expected to act like a servant.

Modern historian Leonore Davidoff too draws a clear connection between the master/servant and husband/wife relationship, noting how the abolishment of the Law of Master and Servant and its replacement by the Employer and Workman Act of 1875 coincided with the movement to repeal coverture ("Mastered" 406). Natalie and Ronald Schroeder note that in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novels, wifehood is sometimes linked to slavery or domestic servitude; in *John Marchmont's Legacy* (1863), for example, one character says that a proposal of marriage "'is very much the same thing as engaging a governess; only the engagement is to be

more binding'" (Schroeder 41; Braddon 84). At the same time, comparisons were also drawn in the opposite direction, likening the role that the domestic servant plays to that of a middle-class wife. As the number of servants employed in the middle-class home increased in the mid-nineteenth century, they took on the duties and economic role that the middle-class wife once held (Mitchell, *Fallen* 100). Since the ostensible primary goals of both the servant and the wife are to serve, women in either position would learn similar skills and perform similar labor (Davidoff et al. 159).

As Elizabeth Langland points out, domestic service was often seen as ideal "training" for wifehood, since it taught women how to care for a household while keeping her "under surveillance" (15). However, once a female servant got married, she presumably would have to cease her employment as a servant (Straub 35). Still, few maids, cooks, or even governesses could anticipate much advance in social status upon leaving their position. The class mobility depicted in novels like *Jane Eyre* was less common in real life. Langland explains that "[a] lower-class wife, a working girl, would not be sufficiently conversant with the semiotics of middle-class life and could not, therefore, guarantee her husband's place in society" (9).

Although Langland claims that thus "the story of the working-class wife for the middle-class man" became "non-narratable" in literature of the mid-Victorian period, the question of whether a cross-class romance could be successful was often addressed in the sensation fiction of the 1860s (9). In Florence Marryat's *Love's Conflict* (1865), for example, a woman who marries beneath her is punished for their social sin by having to become a prostitute and ultimately dying of a venereal disease. Similarly, Ouida's *Held in Bondage; or, Granville de Vigne* (1861) ends with a lengthy exhortation to young men not to marry too rashly or too far below their station and thus avoid "those marriages that are a bondage more cruel, more eternal, more unpitied than

the captivity of Israel in Egypt!" (447). Other works by sensation authors, such as Collins' novel *The New Magdalen* (1873) or Braddon's play *Married Beneath Him* (1882), suggest the very opposite—that a working-class wife could bring a refreshing new perspective to a middle-class marriage. A cross-class romance, then, may only be "non-narratable" outside the sensation genre.

"The Grey Woman" is not unique in its depiction of a master/servant "marriage," either—at least among sensation novels. The genre features a few other instances of servants posing as spouses—in Thomas Hardy's sensation novel *Desperate Remedies,* Manston's housekeeper is forced to pass as his murdered wife, and Grace Poole is blamed for Rochester's wife's actions in *Jane Eyre*—but there is no love present among such "couples." Conversely, there are also spouses who pose as servants, but their motivations tend toward personal gain, not mutual love: the eponymous heroine of Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* is blackmailed by her horsegroom to keep their marriage secret from her most recent husband, and *East Lynne*'s Isabel Vane returns to her husband's home as a governess to see her children.

Servants also held sexual appeal among a certain subset of the middle and upper class as a kind of fetish. While there is no way of knowing how widespread sexual intimacy between master or mistress and maid may have been, maids in particular were often seen as sexually provocative, as evidenced by the author of *My Secret Life*'s boasts of his "conquests" of servant girls, and Arthur Munby's famous fetishization of Hannah Cullwick. Female servants who were too old to continue as lady's maids but who did not become housekeepers sometimes turned to prostitution; in one contemporary survey, about 35% of prostitutes had previously worked as domestic servants (McBride 105). Thus, even women who were currently working as domestics often found themselves subjected to employers who assumed their sexual availability. Gaskell's

story is therefore particularly intriguing in its depiction of an employer/maid relationship that does not appear to be built on sex or self-interest, but rather a mutual love and respect.

The story also offers background on Anna's past interactions with servants, showing that her relationship with Amante is unique. At her childhood home, Anna was close to the servant Kätchen, who would "help [her] in the housework," and who is one of the only people who tries to dissuade her from going to Carlsruhe (292, 293). Once at her husband's home, however, Anna no longer feels comfortable among his servants; she says,

> I had no pride to keep me from associating with the domestics; it would have been natural to me in many ways to have sought them out for a word of sympathy in those dreary days when I was left so entirely to myself, had they been like our kindly German servants. But I disliked them, one and all. I could not tell why. Some were civil, but there was a familiarity in their civility which repelled me; others were rude, and treated me more as if I were an intruder than their master's chosen wife; and yet of the two sets I liked these last the best. (301)

It is especially interesting that Anna claims to most dislike the servants who show "familiarity," since later Amante will address her mistress as "my child" and treat her accordingly (334). The other servants are complicit in keeping Anna confined to one part of the house, and Anna explains that she "had … the feeling that all the domestics, except Amante, were spies upon me, and that I was trammelled in a web of observation and unspoken limitation extending over all my actions" (308, 309). Anna further admits that she "never dared to give orders" to the servants (306). Anna feels safe and cared for with Amante alone, a fact that prompts M. de la Tourelle's jealousy toward the woman who will replace him as a surrogate husband.

Anna's close relationship with Amante has an unexpected parallel in her husband's relationship with his "principal male servant" Lefebvre, whom M. de la Tourelle describes as "most valuable and faithful," although Anna is "very much afraid of him" (301).[49] Anna even says, "it sometimes struck me that Lefebvre ruled his master in some things" (301). Just as M. de la Tourelle is jealous of Anna's relationship with Amante, Lefebvre acts like a jealous lover toward Anna. As Anna describes it:

> One thing I remember noticing, that the more M. de la Tourelle was displeased with me, the more Lefebvre seemed to chuckle; and when I was restored to favour, sometimes on as sudden an impulse as that which occasioned my disgrace, Lefebvre would look askance at me with his cold, malicious eyes, and once or twice at such times he spoke most disrespectfully to M. de la Tourelle. (302)

Thus, like Amante who "scolds" Anna, Lefebvre assumes a certain familiarity with his master and does not perform the subservient role expected of him.

When M. de la Tourelle seeks a maid for his wife, he specifically requests a woman "of middle age," which may indicate his possessiveness, as well as the potential of sexual jealousy (302). Before long, Anna observes that "he was jealous of my free regard for her—angry because I could sometimes laugh at her original tunes and amusing proverbs, while when with him I was too much frightened to smile" (303). (The fact that Anna's regard may be given "freely" while marriage was a socially-mandated contract for most women of her station may be a large part of the appeal of her relationship with Amante.) Anna even admits, "I daresay it was

[49] It is worth noting that almost all of the homosocial master/servant relationships explored in Kristina Struab's book *Domestic Affairs: Intimacy, Eroticism, and Violence between Servants and Masters in Eighteenth-Century Britain* are between men, from John Macdonald's *The Memoirs of an Eighteenth-Century Footman* (1779) to William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794).

true what M. de la Tourelle said—before many weeks had elapsed—that, for a great lady, a lady of a castle, I became sadly too familiar with my Norman waiting-maid" (303). Anna rationalizes the differences in their status, claiming "that by birth we were not very far apart in rank: Amante was the daughter of a Norman farmer, I of a German miller" (303). Like Braddon's Lady Audley and other sensation heroines, Anna has "married up" to achieve wealth and status. As is the case in much of sensation fiction, while the plot itself reveals rank and class as arbitrary constructs, the blurring of boundaries in a cross-class romance proves nearly as sensational as blackmail, bigamy, or adultery.

M. de la Tourelle's hunt for and eventual murder of Amante suggests, as Reddy has noted, that in his mind Anna and Amante may have even committed the latter two crimes (191). As he spins a tale of woe during his search for them, he claims:

> "Once a happy husband, now a deserted and betrayed man, I pursue a wife on whom I lavished all my love, but who has abused my confidence, and fled from my house, doubtless to some paramour; carrying off with her all the jewels and money on which she could lay her hands…. she was accompanied in her flight by a base, profligate woman from Paris, whom I, unhappy man, had myself engaged for my wife's waiting-maid, little dreaming what corruption I was bringing into my house!" (327)

As Auerbach explains, there was some fear evident at the time that when women remain together in close quarters for an extended period of time, their effect on each other could be a kind of "subtle sexual contagion" (*Communities* 14). Anna Jameson's 1846 memoir warns specifically against allowing a girl to share sleeping quarters with her governess for fear of "mischief" (qtd. in Marcus, *Between* 18). In *Psycopathia Sexualis* (1886), Richard Krafft-Ebbing claims that

lesbian sex "is, of late, quite the fashion,—partly owing to novels on the subject, and partly the result of… the sleeping of female servants in the same bed, seduction in schools by depraved pupils, or seduction of daughters by depraved servants" (430). As a servant who shares a bed with her mistress, then, Amante could be perceived as a sexual temptation or threat.

Amante's sexuality is further complicated since she remains dressed in male drag for most of the story. Lillian Faderman claims that, inspired by George Sand, the figure of the transvestite woman who seduces another became "almost a stock image" in French literature from the 1830s (263-64).[50] Krafft-Ebbing claims to know of at least three incidences in which women dressed as men in order to have relationships with women, one of whom, like Amante, lived as another woman's "husband" for thirty years, and "[o]n her death-bed the 'husband' confessed her secret to those about her" (430).

In *Between Women*, Sharon Marcus cites several nineteenth-century women who defined their relationship with another woman as a "marriage," including Anne Lister, Charlotte Cushman, Rosa Bonheur, Harriet Hosmer, Emily Faithfull, Minnie Benson, Ethel Smyth, and Frances Power Cobbe (20). These women would describe each other using spousal terms such as "'sposa,' 'hubby,' 'wedded wife,' [and] 'my other and better half'" (Marcus *Between* 20). Since these women were involved in longterm lesbian relationships, their use of (heterosexual) marital language seems quite apt. In the case of Anna and Amante, however, defining their relationship is less straightforward. The women initially adopt the terms "wife" and "husband" to establish aliases, although eventually they come to embody their respective roles and might have continued to do so indefinitely had Amante not been murdered.

[50] An English comic ballad from 1831 called "The He She Lady's Maid" offers a reversed version of this stock figure, telling the tale of a man who dresses as a lady's maid to seduce his mistress (Stern 68).

As other critics have noted, Amante's name suggests the Latin word for "lover," and as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg describes one relationship in her "Female World of Love and Ritual" essay, it is clear that the women are emotional, if not physical, lovers (7). No critic appears to claim that Gaskell is suggesting that the women necessarily have a sexual relationship. Nestor, for example, explicitly denies a homosexual component to the story:

> It would be a distortion of "The Grey Woman" to see its significance in terms of its daring as a depiction of a homosexual relationship. Gaskell depicts a comprehensive love between two women which goes beyond the simple logic of sexual attraction. Far from daring, there is if anything a quality of innocence about the tale, which comes in part from Gaskell's sense of the non-libidinous nature of women. (78)

Although I agree that the foundation of Anna and Amante's relationship is the "comprehensive love" that they share, the story itself does not appear to emphasize, as Nestor does, that their love must be strictly platonic by nature. The women become so in tune with one another that they are able to easily communicate without words—they feel that "[t]ouch was safer and as expressive" (317).

In literature from the eighteenth century, when Anna's story is set, male servants were frequently depicted as sexually predatory, whereas maids were often portrayed as alluring but sexually passive (Straub 37). In "The Grey Woman," however, Amante is an active force, while Anna appears to be more sexually passive. Anna describes how, after their initial flight from M. de la Tourelle's home:

> I lay like one stunned; my body resting, and renewing its strength, but I myself in an almost idiotic state—else surely I could not have taken the stupid interest

> which I remember I did in all Amante's energetic preparations for disguise. I absolutely recollect once the feeling of a smile coming over my stiff face as some new exercise of her cleverness proved a success. (323)

Anna's gaze here is somewhat voyeuristic and reminiscent of a master eyeing a new parlor maid. Amante, as an unmarried woman, may be less sexually experienced than Anna.[51] When Anna describes how Amante knew of Anna's pregnancy although her own husband did not, the language she uses is provocative:

> And with all her shrewdness to others, she had quite tender ways with me; all the more so at this time because she knew … that by-and-by I might become a mother—that wonderful object of mysterious interest to single women, who no longer hope to enjoy such blessedness themselves. (303-04)

The "object" itself here is ambiguous—but it could encompass motherhood, pregnancy, and even sexual knowledge.

At one point, Anna reflects on the nature of her feelings for Amante, using language that indicates she bore a stronger love for Amante than for either her first or third "husbands":

> I cannot tell you how much in these doubtings and wanderings I became attached to Amante. I have sometimes feared since, lest I cared for her only because she was so necessary to my own safety; but, no! it was not so; or not so only, or principally. (325)

With this passage, Anna admits that her affection for Amante transcends the socially acceptable level of affection that a lady might feel for her maid. There are numerous examples of close

[51] The text never addresses Amante's sexual past, and as Gaskell wrote a sympathetic, reformed "fallen woman" in *Ruth*, such a claim could be contested. However, there is a much larger cast of "old maid" characters in Gaskell's fiction who find a niche in life without sex, as noted previously.

maid/mistress relationships in nineteenth-century literature, but as Robert Dingley points out in his discussion of the "lesbian menace" in Victorian popular fiction, the nature of this relationship must not render the women equals—or worse, allow the maid the upper hand—lest it be labeled "abnormal" (107). Dingley observes, "[a] passionate bonding between 'woman and woman only' may be thinkable between equals, where it can be comfortably construed as companionship," but when there is a marked difference of rank or class between the two women, "friendship" is no longer an acceptable term for it.

Although a maid is meant to be devoted to her mistress, too much affection on her part can be construed as unhealthy obsession. Dingley points to a passage in Collins' *Blind Love* in which the villain Mr. Vimpany decries the maid Fanny Mere's devotion to her mistress Iris as unhealthy:

> "Such a woman as this would like to absorb the whole affection of her mistress in herself. You laugh. She is a servant, and a common person. How can such a person conceive an affection so strong as to become a passion for one so superior? But it is true. It is perfectly well known, and there have been many recorded instances of such a woman, say a servant, greatly inferior in station, conceiving a desperate affection for her mistress, accompanied by the fiercest jealousy." (Collins and Besant 306; Dingley 107)[52]

Earlier in the novel, Fanny acknowledges that the fierce love she bears her mistress is unusual for a maid. She tellingly describes her mistress, Iris, as "'the one *friend* who held out a hand to

[52] Dingley neglects to note that this passage is included in the portion of the novel that Walter Besant wrote after Collins' death. Although Collins left a detailed outline for Besant to follow in completing the novel, Besant does deviate from this outline somewhat and introduces a different tone to the latter half of *Blind Love*. All further references to the novel will refer to the part of the text that Collins authored unless otherwise indicated.

me'" (222, italics added). She continues, "'I hate the men; I don't care for the women. Except one. Being a servant I mustn't say I love that one. If I was a lady, I don't know that I should say it. Love is cant; love is rubbish'" (222). So, while "friend" is not a term to be used for an employer and social superior, it remains inadequate to express Fanny's affection, and "love," she believes, is a fraudulent word used to justify a marriage contract. Fanny's "one animating motive" in her life is ensuring her mistress's welfare, and she "honestly believe[s] that it would be better and safer for [her mistress Iris] if she and her husband finally decided on living separate lives" (262, 271). Ultimately, Fanny is proven right; after Iris's husband is murdered, the two women set up a home together (described as a "refuge") along with Mrs. Vimpany, the villain's widow.[53]

Sharon Marcus claims that "before 1880, Victorian literature offers few examples of same-sex couples setting up house together" ("Home" 122). "The Grey Woman" is one notable exception Marcus fails to recognize, but the idea of "setting up house together" could also feasibly be applied to women who employ maids and manage a home together, an arrangement that may at first appear too conventional to merit mention. As *The Servants' Magazine* advised in an 1862 article on "Employers and Servants," mistresses and maids must observe strict codes that reinforce their respective status in the home while at the same time acknowledging that they do in fact share the same home: "Although they may not sit at the same table, nor occupy the same room, they dwell under the same roof, and partake of the self-same provision. The home of the one is, or might be, if rightly understood, the home of the other" (Old Jonathan 230).[54] The close proximity that a mistress shares with her maid can complicate the question of how to define their relationship.

[53] This occurs in Besant's portion of the text.
[54] The article was republished featuring advice to "Mistresses and Maids" only in June 1864.

One noteworthy example of an erotically-charged relationship between a lady's maid and her mistress is found in Thomas Hardy's sensation novel *Desperate Remedies*. Miss Aldclyffe was once in love with Cytherea's father, and when she hires Cytherea as her lady's maid the novel suggests that she seeks her maid's affection as a kind of proxy. The novel describes in detail the maid's physical responses to her mistress coming to her bed at night—Cytherea's "lips being parted with the intentness of her listening," she "made a movement which caused a faint rustling of the bed-clothes," and feels a sudden rush of "modesty" (78-79). Then, "[t]he instant they were in bed Miss Aldclyffe freed herself from the last remnant of restraint. She flung her arms round the young girl, and pressed her gently to her heart. 'Now kiss me,' she said" (79). Although the text describes Miss Aldclyffe's kisses as "motherly," she expresses grave disappointment that Cytherea's mouth has previously been "'sullied by a man's lips,'" hardly a strictly maternal sentiment (82). She urges Cytherea to "'try to love me more than you love him—do. I love you more sincerely than any man can. Do, Cythie: don't let any man stand between us" (82).[55] Although the intensity of the passion expressed for one woman to another is part of what makes the scene so "sensational," as Dingley points out, the gulf in class between the two women makes it even more extraordinary (104). Once the women are in bed together, the hierarchical nature of their relationship is forgotten, as "[i]t was now mistress and maid no longer; woman and woman only," and Miss Aldclyffe remarkably claims, "'But remember that you are mistress in this room, and that I have no business here, and that you may send me away if you choose'" (79).

[55] Miss Aldclyffe's frustration is later echoed in *Blind Love* when Iris kisses Fanny, prompting the maid's "faint blue eyes [to fill] with tears. She dashed them away, and held her mistress for an instant in her arms. 'I know whom you are thinking of,' she whispered," referring to Iris's absent husband (293).

One of the potential inspirations for Hardy's scene may be a similar incident from *Lady Audley's Secret.* Lady Audley and Phoebe seem unusually close, particularly since they have such different stations within the house. As Anthea Trodd suggests, "a good relationship between wives and servants, as in *Lady Audley's Secret* ... is suggestive of criminal intrigue, of an alliance of subordinates dangerous to the well-being of the head of the household" (108). Such a pairing might often covertly imply a lesbian relationship. In a telling moment, Lady Audley's stepdaughter Alicia enters the room and discovers "the maid and mistress laughing aloud over one of the day's adventures [and] Alicia, who was never familiar with her servants, withdrew in disgust at [her] lady's frivolity" (Braddon 58). The maid and mistress's interaction is rendered "illicit" by Alicia's reaction, although the two women simply appear to be gossiping. Their relationship extends well beyond a working relationship into the personal; once Phoebe leaves her service, Lady Audley's new maid does not take on her predecessor's role of confidante (Braddon 337).

The women's desire is made explicit when the mistress buries herself "in soft wrappings of satin and fur" and suddenly demands of her maid, "'Kiss me, Phoebe'" (Braddon 59). Natalie Schroeder observes that "Lady Audley's self-indulgent manner of attaining warmth—by wrapping herself in luxurious covers and by demanding a caress from Phoebe—suggests both masturbation and lesbianism" (92). Neither woman seems capable of romantic love for men, as Lady Audley later admits, "'The mad folly that the world calls love had never had any part in my madness…and the vice of heartlessness became the virtue of constancy'" (354). Similarly, when Phoebe declares her intention to marry Luke, Lady Audley, taken aback, asks, "'You surely are not in love with the awkward, ugly creature are you, Phoebe?'" to which her maid replies, "'I don't think I can love him'" (107). These women seem incapable and unwilling to embrace love

as a concept except in the context of female relationships. Schroeder explains that "in a novel where the heroine is not interested in men, Braddon is unable to titillate the reader with veiled suggestions of heterosexual love," so the women instead are allowed the most sensual scenes with one another (92).

Lady Audley, *Desperate Remedies*' Miss Aldclyffe, and *Blind Love*'s Fanny Mere are all women who have suffered past abuse at the hands of men, which ostensibly prompts their lack of sympathy or interest in romantic male relationships. As Fanny says, "'[I have no heart] for the men… I keep my pity for the women'" (184). Anna too has been treated cruelly by her husband, while Amante's past experiences remain unknown. However, what seems more clearly to unite these characters is their shared sense that relationships with other women are more emotionally satisfying, and offer more personal freedom, than those with men. Fanny's mistress Iris is willing to treat her maid as a "friend" and "sister" because she needs "'[an]other woman to speak to who knows what women feel'" (232). Iris is also only able to realize her criminal husband's lack of worth when she looks back on her most treasured memories—"her first governess [and] her school friendships" and reads her maid's account of what transpired in her home (363, 369).[56] In effect, it is only her past and present relationships with other women that have sustained her and enabled her to survive her husband's corrupt actions. Iris becomes content for the first time once she is able to live with women alone. In such a female-only community, it seems, class is no longer a concern, as evidenced by the happy home that Anna, Amante, and Ursula share.

As Marcus points out, "female marriage" had numerous advantages over legally recognized heterosexual marriage in the nineteenth century. Women retained their individual

[56] These incidents are Besant's inventions.

rights to property and to dissolve their union at will, and "[t]hey also created unions that did not depend on sexual difference, gender hierarchy, or biological reproduction for their underpinnings, as most Victorian marriages between men and women did in legal theory if not in social fact" (*Between* 205). In her study of "women's recreational reading of the 1860s"—which she frames as a kind of sister genre to sensation fiction—Sally Mitchell notes a pattern in which fictional "ideal" heterosexual marriages are depicted similarly to a "female marriage." She describes how in many of these novels,

> Marriage is a partnership, not a dependent relationship…. There is some explicit physical or financial or moral basis of equality between the partners…a partnership-marriage is impossible unless men are forced to give up some of the power which law and social conditioning have embedded in their characters. The achievement of that weakening through suffering embodies a world view which takes feminine qualities, as understood by the authors and readers of the time, as the desirable norm for the human character. ("Sentiment" 43-44)

Anna and Amante embody this type of "ideal marriage," although since they are both women, neither must be "weakened" in order to achieve harmony and balance. Other literary works have depicted similarly idealized communities and partnerships of women; Nina Auerbach points to Mary Wollstonecraft's novel *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* as an example of a "postulate[d]" community of women, noting how "once Maria and Jemima have awakened to resist the degradation men and their laws impose, the novel can suggest that they will combine to raise and educate Maria's malleable little daughter" (*Communities* 15).

Although this scenario is only sketched out as one of many possible endings for Wollstonecraft's unfinished work, in "The Grey Woman" Gaskell makes it a reality. Even the

framing narrative relies on a cooperative female community to help Anna's story be told. Reddy points out that the "rescue [of Anna's memory] is actually a joint enterprise: the narrator needs her friend to help with the translation. The sense of a solidarity among women is underscored by the situation: the narrator and her friend in a woman's private room, her 'inner chamber'" (185). Nestor's book on the subject offers several scenarios that describe the type of complex new relationship hinted at in "The Grey Woman":

> This union of women can, as we have seen, take many forms. It can provide compensation for the absence of men, offer support in adversity and foster sisterly solidarity. As a further final possibility, that love between women can become not simply a substitute for heterosexual relationships, but a positive alternative, in which it is not so much a case of women without men as women repudiating men. (76)

"Alternative" female communities have been featured in Neo-Victorian novels such as Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Fingersmith* (2002), but "The Grey Woman" may offer one of the closest analogues in mid-century fiction by a canonical author. When read as sensation fiction, the novella is revealed to fit into a broader pattern of similar stories that depict intimate maid-mistress relationships that defy the conventions of the time. As Gaskell is best known for her realistic novels, her story in the sensational mode merits critical reconsideration, particularly for its subversive takes on gender and class.

CHAPTER 7

"THE STUFF OF LURID FICTION":

SENSATION FICTION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

As we have seen, disdain for the sensation genre is not a modern phenomenon; only a decade or two past its heyday, nineteenth-century critics were already downplaying the genre's former prevalence and cultural significance. When Wilkie Collins died in 1889, many obituaries noted that he was most famous for writing in a now-passé literary genre; some even expressed chagrin at the extent of the author's former popularity. The *Contemporary Review* remarked that Collins' work could not be considered equal to "the excellence of Dickens, of Thackeray, of George Eliot, of Charles Reade, or even of Anthony Trollope [because t]he *genre* of novel to which Mr. Collins devoted himself was lower than theirs" (Lang 275, italics original). This criticism of Collins' preferred genre rings hollow when one considers that Dickens and Trollope both attempted to emulate the mystery plot of *The Moonstone* with *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) and *The Eustace Diamonds* (1871) respectively; Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* could be considered a proto-sensation novel; Charles Reade was best known for his sensation novels such as *Very Hard Cash* (1863); and Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) were both considered in an 1864 review of "sensational novels," sandwiched between a discussion of Collins and Ellen Wood ("Thackeray" 406). A blanket dismissal of sensation fiction as "low art" ignores how it actually shaped the Victorian novel in the decades between *Vanity Fair* and *The Eustace Diamonds*.

Other Victorian critics anticipated the recent critical return to the sensation novel. In his obituary for Collins, Algernon Charles Swinburne defended the writer's legacy and even speculated that future generations would better recognize the merits of his work. Swinburne opines that in Shakespeare's time, the culture

> was pleased to ignore the drama with a scorn as academic … as it now can pretend to feel for the novel. And yet the name of Shakespeare is now more widely known than the name of Puttenham. And though Dickens was not a Shakespeare, and though Collins was not a Dickens, it is permissible to anticipate that their names and their works will be familiar to generations unacquainted with the existence and unaware of the eclipse of their most shining, most scornful, and most superior critics. (254)

As Swinburne may have foreseen, in the past few decades, modern academic critics have begun to pay Collins' genre of choice the scholarly attention that it merits. The study of sensation fiction has shown to be key to understanding the evolution of genre fiction as well as more canonical literature. And while nineteenth-century sensation fiction is no longer widely read (or even well-known) outside academic circles, it continues to have an impact on popular culture. Stories with plots that are rooted in contemporary scandals, and characters who expose the fluid boundaries of class and gender still provides sources of shock and entertainment for popular audiences. Indeed, the legacy that sensation writers left is still readily found, both as "high" and "low art."

Although sensation fiction as a genre became less prominent after the 1860s, certain of its elements became key components in other genres that emerged in the late nineteenth century. For example, the detective story, the mystery novel, and fin de siècle Gothic fiction all focus on

secret criminal activity and its detection in the middle-class home. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, sensational plots and tropes are readily found in genre fiction, television, and film; authors of Neo-Victorian novels are also deliberately rewriting the sensation novel for a modern audience. By identifying the tropes of sensation fiction and considering how we reuse and transform them for the twenty-first century, we can see what social issues, fears, and crimes we deem "sensational" today.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Neo-Victorian novels gained popularity. The inaugural issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* asserts that this relatively new genre comprises "works which are consciously set in the Victorian period…or which desire to re-write the historical narrative of that period by representing marginalised voices, new histories of sexuality, post-colonial viewpoints and other generally 'different' versions of the Victorian" (Llewellyn 165). Given this definition, it does not seem surprising that many neo-Victorian novels share a close affinity with sensation fiction, a genre that frequently represents the voices of "marginalized" servants, and which contains content quite "different" from what most modern readers might expect of a Victorian novel.[57]

The Neo-Victorian novels I consider here are not merely set in the period but are directly inspired by nineteenth-century novels and history. A number of these texts draw from the sensation tradition that began with the Brontës. For example, Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly*

[57] The above definition also could encompass the modern subgenre that Margaret Atwood dubs "costume Gothics"—melodramatic paperback romances that are set in the nineteenth century. In *Lady Oracle*, an author of costume Gothics characterizes her books by describing their covers, which "featur[e] gloomy, foreboding castles and apprehensive maidens in modified nightgowns, hair streaming in the wind, eyes bulging like those of a goiter victim, [and] toes poised for flight" (Atwood 34). Costume Gothics resemble sensation novels in their popularity, affordability, and the sense of escapism they offer the reader. However, they generally do not strive for literary merit or period authenticity, key factors that distinguish them from the novels most often called "Neo-Victorian."

(1990), Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), and Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002) all employ a female servant to narrate their tales of crime, passion, and social subversion. While *Mary Reilly* is a retelling of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Alias Grace* is a fictionalized account of the Grace Marks murder case, Sarah Waters' novels offer original sensational plots.

This chapter will primarily focus on Waters' *Fingersmith* as a twenty-first-century Neo-Victorian sensation novel that exemplifies the importance of the female servant to the genre. The novel contains sensational tropes that have been explored in previous chapters—the servant narrator, the criminal servant, the servant-actress, and the servant as spouse. Waters expertly combines these elements to create the quintessential sensation novel. By virtue of being written and published in the twenty-first century, *Fingersmith* is able to be more explicitly subversive in its treatment of class politics and challenges to gender norms, and yet still contain content that might be considered "sensational" to a modern audience. The novel's reception among popular literary critics demonstrates how misunderstood the idea of "the Victorian novel" is among non-academics, and how the exclusion of the sensation novel from the Victorian canon contributes to this false stereotyping. However, *Fingersmith*'s popularity in both its print and film versions attests to the continued impact of sensational tropes. Here I explore how these previously identified tropes are emphasized, downplayed, or altered in order to "sensationalize" a contemporary audience.

Fingersmith, like *The Moonstone*, is narrated by alternating voices—in this case, those of Sue, a poor girl who poses as a maid to swindle an heiress, and Maud, the heiress in question. Sue has been raised by Mrs. Sucksby, a "baby farmer," and her band of petty criminals, and one day she is convinced by a man called "Gentleman" to pose as Maud's maid in order to allow

Gentleman access to woo and marry Maud. Afterward, Gentleman says he will commit Maud to an asylum and give Sue and Mrs. Sucksby a share of Maud's fortune. Like Phoebe of *Lady Audley's Secret*, Sue takes on the role of the criminal servant conspirator but also finds herself becoming her mistress's trusted confidante. The relationship between mistress and maid becomes further complicated when they become lovers. However, Sue continues to act according to Gentleman's plan until it is she, not Maud, who is committed to the asylum under the name "Maud Lilly"—a twist of identity reminiscent of *The Woman in White*. It is revealed that Maud and Gentleman have double-crossed Sue as part of a plan orchestrated by Mrs. Sucksby, who is actually Maud's biological mother. The two girls were switched as infants because Sue's real mother did not want her child to be raised by her cruel brother, Christopher Lilly. Although Maud and Sue have betrayed each another, they find that their love remains strong and ultimately, echoing the trajectory of "The Grey Woman," they live together as lovers.

Waters has stated that *Fingersmith* in particular "was very deliberately written in the tradition of the Victorian novel of sensation" (Armitt 117). It is somewhat surprising, then, how most of its non-academic literary critics failed to recognize the direct influence of prominent sensation novels on the text, despite the abundance of evidence. Although critics of *Fingersmith* could recognize that certain elements of the novel were directly derived from nineteenth-century sources, they have difficulty correctly pinpointing their sources. One adjective that newspaper critics frequently use to describe any Neo-Victorian fiction is "Dickensian," perhaps because Dickens is the Victorian author with the broadest name recognition among laypeople today.[58] Tom Gilling's review in *The New York Times* is representative of many similar reviews in

[58] However, as Waters herself notes, she is not writing in the same mode as Dickens at all. She suggests instead that "'Zadie Smith is a Dickensian writer because she's writing about society now, just as Dickens was writing about his society. To write these faux Victorian novels is quite different'" (Moss).

American newspapers; he describes the world of *Fingersmith* as "an alternative Dickensian fiction" and compares the novel's heroine, Sue, to Oliver Twist. Gilling also identifies the work as "Gothic," despite the lack of any supernatural elements in the novel.

It seems that even among (non-academic) professional literary reviewers, sensation fiction as a genre is still largely unknown. The reviewers express familiarity with the tropes reproduced in *Fingersmith*, but they fail to identify correctly the genre to which the tropes belong. Unlike Dickens, the most prominent sensation authors are hardly household names today—a 2010 *Huffington Post* article even ludicrously claims that "most Americans are aware of Wilkie Collins simply because Sarah Jessica Parker and Matthew Broderick named their son 'James Wilkie'" (C. Ellis). A few of *Fingersmith*'s reviewers do identify Wilkie Collins as a clear influence, although British reviewers are far more likely to do this than their American counterparts. (And even though *The Guardian* name-checks Collins, it too mischaracterizes Collins' work as "Gothic" [Myerson].) Although Waters has cited *Lady Audley's Secret* as one of her primary inspirations, I found no initial newspaper reviews of *Fingersmith* that mentioned Braddon's name, nor those of any other prominent Victorian sensation writers ("Sensational Stories").

The popular critics' lack of knowledge about sensation fiction leads them to make sweeping claims about "Victorian novels" that do not hold true for sensation fiction. A *New Statesman* review of the film version of *Fingersmith* trumpets that "[t]he Victorian heroine is given backbone" in the story (Billen 49). Billen is one of the few reviewers who explicitly notes that Waters is writing in the sensation mode, but he reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of what those novels actually are about. He writes, "I should at this point offer some commentary on the twists performed by a contemporary woman writer on a (primarily) male Victorian literary

genre. The most interesting is the rejection of the Victorian convention that fair young women are 'innocent'" (Billen 49). A true sensation novel, of course, is more likely to showcase the mad or criminal young woman, and the genre itself could hardly be described as "primarily male." Billen's comments reveal more about common contemporary beliefs about what a prototypical Victorian novel "should" be like—featuring a passive heroine who has little personality or agency—than what they actually *were* like. A serious consideration of sensation fiction would quickly challenge popular twenty-first-century conceptions of "the Victorian novel."

Like *Fingersmith,* Waters' other Neo-Victorian novels focus on female characters, and her first novel, *Tipping the Velvet*, even creates an alternate Victorian England where lesbian women have their own underground clubs. Critics have cited Waters' characterization of women as representative of one of the main differences between the Victorian and Neo-Victorian novel. A review of *Fingersmith* in *The Gay and Lesbian Review* opines that Charles Dickens

> was, to be blunt, quite inept at creating a range of female characters. Of course, he couldn't have created a female bildungsroman equivalent of *David Copperfield* or *Great Expectations*, since women were rarely given the opportunity to develop their lives back then. Dickens's women are all either Angels of the House or devouring monsters. (K. Jay 39)

Although this is a gross generalization of Dickens' work (one might question to which category Lady Dedlock might belong, for example) it does point to a common theme among critics who see Waters as Dickens' heir apparent whose writing is distinguished primarily by its female characters' agency and empowerment. Cora Kaplan notes that "[i]n Dickens… female sexual transgression however underpinned by an unjust society is punished by exile or death," while

Fingersmith's Maud and Susan are allowed to "survive" ("Coda" 53). Waters herself sees her women somewhat differently; she once noted in an interview that she wanted to write a new book set in the twentieth century because the female characters of her Victorian novels—except for the cross-dressing Nan of *Tipping the Velvet*—"were all… ladies in peril" (Dennis 49). Although Waters' statement oversimplifies the diversity of her characters, it does suggest that she is consciously keeping to the trope of the "woman in peril" that is common in Victorian sensation and Neo-Gothic novels.

Waters' use of the female narrator and her modern take on the female *Bildungsroman* have invited comparisons to two other Victorian authors that are well-known to the general public: Charlotte and Emily Brontë. Michael Upchurch of the *Seattle Times* sees similarities to the Brontës' "feverishly gloomy haunts" in *Fingersmith*, and Karla Jay of *The Gay and Lesbian Review* draws comparisons to the Brontës' "dark houses, ominous male figures, and interior setting[s that] speak to the lives and imaginings of women" (Upchurch; K. Jay 39). The parallels that Jay notes in particular are also tropes common to sensation fiction, but without the necessary knowledge of that genre, the Brontës' works do appear to provide the closest analogues.

In effect, then, non-academic critics' ignorance of the sensation genre has led them to draw their own conclusions that *Fingersmith* is a homage to the works of Charles Dickens and Charlotte and Emily Brontë—canonical authors who I believe pioneered many of the tropes and devices that became common to sensation fiction. While Dickens and the Brontës are rarely described as sensation authors, it is noteworthy that they were found to be indisputable influences when the critics worked backwards from a modern text that incorporates plot and character elements from the most famous sensation novels. Thus, although the critics lack the knowledge of the context and tropes associated with the sensation genre, they have inadvertently

arrived at my own line of argument—that the line between the more archetypal Victorian novels of Dickens or the Brontës and the popular but "lesser" sensation novels by Braddon or Collins is not as well-defined as it may at first appear to be. Elements of the Victorian Gothic of the Brontës led directly to sensationalism and in turn, sensation tropes permeated canonical novels like those of Dickens.

Like *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, *Fingersmith* employs servant narration. As Esther Saxey notes, Neo-Victorian literature is often narrated by the disenfranchised members of Victorian society (74). What makes *Fingersmith*'s servant narrator unique is that the maid Sue is actually illiterate. Servant literacy is a key component in *Mary Reilly* and *Alias Grace* since those eponymous characters author parts of the text themselves, but in *Fingersmith*, it is suggested that Sue's illiteracy protects her. Maud, Sue's mistress, is forced to perform transcription work for her uncle, who is compiling a bibliography of pornography. She envies Sue's ignorance of the "poisons" found in her uncle's books (73). While in the nineteenth century servants were commonly seen as more prone to sexual desires and more knowledgeable of sex in general, in *Fingersmith* it is the mistress who is more worldly and the maid who is more naïve about sexuality. At age thirteen, Maud fantasizes about her lady's maid Barbara, "imagin[ing her]self fingered and pierced," but because her only knowledge of sex comes from pornographic books, she asks her maid why her "'cunt … is … so black'" when the pictures she has seen suggest it should be "smooth" (210).

Maud struggles to reconcile her own sexual experiences and feelings with the version found in her uncle's pornographic books, which were written for a male audience.[59] Maud recreates some scenarios found in the books for herself, such as when she feigns innocence in

[59] The pornographic texts mentioned in the novel are all real and found in the annotated bibliographies by Henry Spencer Ashbee, using the pseudonym Pisanus Fraxi.

asking Sue "'what it is a wife must do, on her wedding-night'" (297). She deliberately distances herself from her true feelings for Sue by imagining their actions as words on a page:

> After all, this is how it is done, in my uncle's books: two girls, one wise and one unknowing … 'He will want,' she says, 'to kiss you. He will want to embrace you.' It is easy. I say my part, and she—with a little prompting—says hers. The words sink back upon their pages. (297)

Although here Maud is attempting to exploit Sue's sexual naïveté, she also finds that she is falling in love with her maid. Maud resists her feelings because she wants to be the author of her own life story, not merely a player in male-created erotica. When Maud recalls the taste of Sue's fingers in her mouth, she wonders "What I have tasted, or imagine I have tasted, is the taste of her; only that. May a lady taste the fingers of her maid? She may, in my uncles' books.—The thought makes me color" (270). Maud refutes the influence of her uncle's books by creating a new kind of erotica that is personal and written for and by a woman. In the novel's final lines, Maud reveals her work to Sue, now that they are able to acknowledge their mutual love at last: "[Maud] said, 'It is filled with all the words for how I want you … Look.'… She put the lamp upon the floor, spread the paper flat; and began to show me the words she had written, one by one" (582). Maud's new genre is revolutionary because it not only assumes a female interest in sex and cross-class romance, but it is written explicitly for a female servant audience.

Although sensation fiction is not erotica, authors such as Ellen Wood and Mary Elizabeth Braddon often faced attacks by contemporary critics who believed that sensation novels' frank depiction of adultery, bigamy, and other sexual sins were tantamount to pornography. *Fingersmith*, deliberately written in the sensation tradition, also addresses the Victorian concerns about the dangers of novel-reading, particularly for women. A doctor at a mental asylum where

the maid Sue is committed explains his own theory that novel-reading introduces sexual urges in women which ultimately lead to madness:

> "the over-exposure of girls to literature—The founding of women's colleges… We are raising a nation of brain-cultured women. Your wife's distress, I'm afraid to say, is part of a wider *malaise*. I fear for the future of our race, Mr Rivers, I may tell you now. And her wedding-night, you say, the start of this most recent bout of insanity? Could that… be plainer?" (318)

When Sue attempts to explain how she came to be committed, the doctor dismisses her story as mere "fancies": "'Terrible plots? Laughing villains? Stolen fortunes and girls made out to be mad? The stuff of lurid fiction! We have a name for your disease. We call it a hyper-aesthetic one. You have been encouraged to over-indulge yourself in literature; and have inflamed your organs of fancy'" (447). The doctor's diagnosis is made even more ludicrous by the fact that Sue is unable to read at all. Although literacy often delineated class in the early nineteenth century, by the 1860s, when the novel is set, servants and other members of the working classes were often able to read. Later, when it is revealed that Sue is the heir to the Lily estate and Maud is the biological daughter of a poor "baby farmer," it becomes clear that literacy, intelligence and ability are not intrinsic to members of a certain class stratum.

Fingersmith, like *East Lynne*, suggests that servants enjoy certain freedoms denied to their middle and upper class employers. Sue grows up able to speak and roam freely in London, while Maud is confined to two rooms of her uncle's home and made to work as his secretary. Although one of her uncle's friends insists that "'[s]ervants and young ladies… are very different sorts of creatures," Maud sees her menial transcription work as equivalent to domestics' labor, explaining, "'I was bred to the task… as servants are'" (221). Class is treated as a discriminatory

social construct that can be manipulated through a resourceful character's ability to act. Richard Rivers, a man so identified with the gentry that he is simply referred to as "Gentleman" in much of the text, compares himself to Robin Hood and explains that the rich deserve to be brought low because they have made their money "'from the backs of the poor'" (32). Somewhat unsurprisingly, "Gentleman" is discovered to be no gentleman at all but merely a smooth-talking draper's son (549). As Waters herself explains, "where *Tipping the Velvet* had featured cross-dressing, *Fingersmith* was interested in transvestism of a different sort, as its characters swapped the trappings of class, passed themselves off as things they weren't—or, more disturbingly, were passed off as them by other people without being aware of it" ("Sensational Stories"). Although scholars have suggested that "class transvestism" is one element that distinguishes the Neo-Victorian novel from the Victorian novel, as I have demonstrated, it is a common trope in sensation novels such as *No Name, Armadale,* and *Lady Audley's Secret.* In an article for *Critical Survey*, Mariaconcetta Costantini claims:

> The ambiguous identity and the transgressive behaviour of [Waters'] female protagonists dismantle the binary structures of the Victorian world, which melodrama tended to reinforce. A first element of deviance can be found in their class and gender mobility. If most of her heroines are low-class figures who ascend the social ladder, they are all, first and foremost, rebellious women who violate the norms of female conduct and the requirements of the marriage market. (33)

However, *East Lynne* is one clear example of a melodrama that similarly "dismantle[s] the binary structures of the Victorian world," just as Constantini claims Waters does. The plots of

sensation novels rely on mistaken identities, disguises, and doubling—there are no clear dichotomies in their world.

Neo-Victorian fiction is, however, more explicit than mid-Victorian fiction in its condemnation of upper- and middle-class privilege and its championing of the rights of the servant class. As my previous chapters have demonstrated, the sensation texts of the 1860s often depicted servants in a sympathetic light and featured aristocratic villains; however, authors had to be careful not to alienate any faction of their readership, which would have included both servants and their employers. While the twenty-first-century reader is unlikely to fall into either of these categories, the female servant has emerged as the preferred source of reader identification in Neo-Victorian novels instead of the mistress of the house. Neo-Victorian fiction often overtly condemns the privileges that the middle and upper classes enjoy at the expense of the working and servant classes. In *Fingersmith*, for example, Maud is seen torturing her maid Agnes by pricking her with needles. Later, Sue observes that "servants grow sentimental over the swells they work for, like dogs grow fond of bullies" (70). In Atwood's *Alias Grace*, when the wealthy Dr. Jordan asks the former maid Grace about her duties, she observes that "[m]en such as him do not have to clean up the messes they make, but we have to clean up our own messes, and theirs into the bargain. In that way they are like children, they do not have to think ahead, or worry about the consequences of what they do" (214). This modern sentiment contrasts sharply with the common nineteenth-century conception of servants as children; as Langland observes, Victorian class stratification was often justified "by positing servants in the role of tutelary children to benevolent parents" (55). In Neo-Victorian writing, however, this model has been turned on its head, and the servants are revealed as the savvier counterparts to their naïve employers. In *Alias Grace,* the maid believes that the privilege enjoyed by members

of the higher classes keeps them in a state of childlike ignorance, "but," she reasons, "it is not their fault, how they are brought up" (Atwood 214).

Neo-Victorian novels are also able to clearly expose the absurdity of the Victorian insistence in the inherent differences in ability and intellect among the classes. In *Fingersmith*, of course, this is illustrated by the low-born Maud who is educated as a gentlewoman while the high-born Sue remains illiterate. In Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*, the idea of inborn physical traits among members of different classes is taken to its illogical extreme: one high-class woman claims that lower-class British women have unusually large clitorises since "They are brought up twenty to a bed. The continual frotting makes their clitorises grow. I know that for a fact" (314). To prove her point, the woman attempts to lift the skirt of Zena, a servant girl, to reveal the presumed innate biological difference between them. As Langland's book suggests, the Victorian ideal of the middle-class woman was largely based on how she could be distinguished from "her Other, the Victorian domestic servant" (11). The Victorian "angel," Langland argues, "was imbricated in class distinctions. It was never, simply, a womanly ideal; it was always middle class, existing only under the condition and assumption of a supporting cast of domestic servants" (79). In *Fingersmith*, the rogue "Gentleman" wryly observes this symbiotic nature of the lady/maid dichotomy, noting that if a lady wore stays that fastened in the front, "she shouldn't need a maid. And if she didn't need a maid, she shouldn't know she was a lady" (38). Waters' Neo-Victorian novels often return to this presumed binary of lady and maid, blurring the boundaries between them for pathetic or sensational effect. In *Affinity*, the upper-class Margaret reflects on how "queer" the social enforcement of subjective class distinctions seems to be (256). Although she and a lower-class woman have attempted the same crime—suicide—she observes

"[t]hat a common coarse-featured woman might drink morphia and be sent to gaol for it, while I am saved and sent to visit her—and all because I am a *lady*" (256, italics original).

Many nineteenth-century sensational texts, such as *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Bleak House*, "The Grey Woman," and *No Name*, similarly expose the arbitrary nature of class hierarchy through plotlines that showed how a mistress might be mistaken for a maid, or vice versa. In these novels, it is only a woman's clothing that distinguishes her rank and thus her identity. Neo-Victorian novels employ the same trope; the plot twists of *Fingersmith* rely on the power of "costume" to define who is perceived as mistress or maid: when Maud, the mistress of the house, playfully dresses her lady's maid, Sue, in her own fine gowns, she declares, "'Now I am your maid, and you are the mistress!'" (Waters 108). Maud is later able to successfully pass Sue off as a lady in order to steal her identity and have her committed to an insane asylum. Waters' earlier novel *Affinity* also features a maid with a hidden identity: Ruth Vigers works as Mrs. Brink's lady's maid and later, a housemaid, but she also disguises herself as the medium Selina's "familiar spirit," Peter Quick.[60] When Ruth is playing the part of Peter, she is able to control (and seduce) her mistress, Mrs. Brink, and her aristocratic friends. They never suspect the true identity of the "spirit" because as a maid, Ruth is meant to remain largely invisible. When Ruth later works as a housemaid for Margaret Prior, she manipulates Margaret into believing that Selina has occult powers and uses Margaret to facilitate Selina's escape from prison. In the final line of the novel, the erstwhile maid makes her position of power clear, reminding Selina to "'Remember whose girl you are'" (352). Just as Amante and Anna embark on their journey as "husband" and "wife" in Gaskell's "The Grey Woman," in the closing scene of *Affinity*, Ruth and Selina leave their home to pursue a new life together.

[60] Her chosen male alias is a deliberate reference to *The Turn of the Screw*'s Peter Quint.

While nineteenth-century sensation texts such as Gaskell's novella do explore both cross-class romances and intimate relationships between women, Neo-Victorian novels are able to be more explicit in their depictions of "taboo" sexual feelings and behavior. In *Fingersmith*, Waters appropriately gives a nod to the cross-class romance of *Jane Eyre* in her description of Sue's longing for Maud. Maud feels a "thread that had come between us, tugging, tugging at my heart—so hard, it had hurt me" (153). This description is a reappropriation of the metaphor Rochester uses to explain his connection to Jane: "it is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame… I am afraid that cord of communion will be snapt; and then I've a nervous notion I should take to bleeding inwardly" (215). In Waters' *Affinity*, Margaret fantasizes about being touched by her maid Ruth—"I imagine her placing her finger upon me and the finger growing warm, and softening, staining my flesh"—while in "The Grey Woman," the relationship between mistress and her maid "husband" is coded as strong friendship rather than sexual love (349). Writing nearly a century and a half after the heyday of Victorian sensation fiction, Waters is able to more directly address lesbian relationships, and even anticipate a wide lesbian readership. Still, many of the tropes and conventions established in early sensation fiction remain integral to her novels.

Waters' books give deliberate nods to their Victorian inspirations, as in *Affinity* when Margaret reads Dickens' *Little Dorrit* (1857), which features a subplot that some modern critics have interpreted as a possible depiction of a lesbian relationship between Miss Wade, a former governess, and Tattycoram, a foundling who is treated as a domestic servant. *Affinity* also features repeated references to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), and while Margaret's mother wants to hear the part about Romney's blinding read aloud, Margaret instead

chooses to "read her Book Seven, that has Aurora's speeches to Marian Erle" (287). The "speeches" to which she refers include Aurora's "proposal" that she and Marian should share a home together and make up their own family (VII.124-125). Margaret attempts to reenact this scenario with her beloved Selina, planning an escape to Italy together and even booking Selina's ticket under the alias "Marian Erle" (303).

Much of the "sensational" material in Sarah Waters' own novels derives directly from nineteenth-century source material. She studied sensation novels as part of her doctoral research, which makes her uniquely qualified to create a Neo-Victorian sensation novel that stays true to its original inspiration. Thus, it seems disingenuous of the *New York Times* literature critic to broadly characterize a book like *Fingersmith* as "a Victorian novel the Victorians never dreamed of writing" (Gilling). The critic's unfamiliarity with nineteenth-century sensation texts can partly account for this sentiment, but it is the happy ending for the two lesbian heroines of *Fingersmith* that prompts the *New York Times* critic to declare that "Dickens… would surely have blushed to read it" (Gilling).

Waters once characterized her first three novels as "lesbo Victorian romps," a term she later regretted coining ("Desire"). Waters has since stated that she would "far rather critics and readers paid proper attention to the diversity of writing by lesbians rather than trying to lump us all together under one umbrella" ("Desire"). And while *Fingersmith* reached a wide readership in the UK—it was shortlisted for the Man Booker and Orange prizes—its American reviews tend to characterize it as "lesbian fiction," a label seen as being at odds with its "historical fiction" genre. In 2005, a film adaptation of *Fingersmith* first aired on BBC1 in the UK, but the first channel to buy rights to the film in the US was Logo, a cable channel described as being "specifically targeted to gay and lesbian audiences" ("Over the Waters" 47). Because so much

attention has been focused on the lesbian identity of Waters' heroines in *Tipping the Velvet, Affinity,* and *Fingersmith*, few critics, academic or otherwise, have given full consideration to the class politics that they represent.[61] The primary plot of each of these books explores a romance between a middle- or upper-class woman and a working-class woman, and each novel also features a sexual relationship between a mistress and her maid. In the mid-nineteenth century, the cross-class romance was one of the most common sensational tropes, but today the taboo against cross-class relationships in England is less commonly a source of public sensation.[62] Waters' books raise the stakes by using a Victorian context to explore the social politics most relevant in the twenty-first-century; to a modern audience, a "lesbo Victorian romp" is more likely to elicit a reaction of "sensation" than a "cross-class Victorian romp," although the descriptors would apply equally to her first three novels.

In this way, Waters stays true to the original function of sensation fiction. As Costantini suggests, Waters' Neo-Victorian novels are continuing the work of nineteenth-century writers

> who adapted the novel form to render the dynamic of the socio-economic forces at work in their society…. The stylistic and generic complexity of her works (are

[61] Another reason the class difference remains largely unremarked is that cross-class romance has become something of a convention in Neo-Victorian literature and film. If an original contemporary work is set in the nineteenth century, there is an expectation for upstairs/downstairs intrigue, as seen in television programs and films such as *Upstairs, Downstairs* (1971-75), *Berkeley Square* (1998), *Gosford Park* (2001), and *Downton Abbey* (2010-11).

[62] Of course, class politics remain relevant even if they are less publicly acknowledged. In his analysis of contemporary British literature and cinema, Lawrence Driscoll suggests that "rather than a classless society… what we have seen since Thatcher has been the continued growth of an underclass that has split off from the working class alongside the rise of what Adonis and Pollard term a 'Super Class.' The underclass is… a whole 'Servant Class' that has sprung into being to serve the needs of the now (more) rich and (more) powerful super class" (13). Driscoll does not cite any specific instances of literature featuring a modern romance between a member of the "super class" and the new "servant class," but it would be an intriguing avenue to explore as a new modern genre of sensation fiction.

> they historical, picaresque, melodramatic, mystery, sensation, erotic, sentimental or lesbian novels?) is functional to her equally complex treatment of identity and social problems, which started to be faced by her ancestors but still demand attention in the protean, multi-voiced age of postmodernism. (36)

The "stylistic and generic complexity" alluded to here can also be seen in nineteenth-century sensation novels, which defy easy categorization. The labels Constantini suggests of Waters' work, from "historical" to "sentimental or lesbian novels" all represent aspects of sensation fiction. Moreover, the function of the writing remains the same—both Waters' novels and sensation novels speak to contemporary social concerns. Waters herself has said that Neo-Victorian fiction is

> a way of addressing issues that are still very, very current in British culture, like class and gender, and submerged sexuality or sexual underworlds. Things that we think we're pretty cool with, and actually we're not at all, and we keep on wanting to go back to the nineteenth century to play these out on a bigger scale, precisely because they're still very current for us. (Dennis 45)

Thus, it seems irrelevant for critics to argue whether Waters' novels contain anachronisms or if they show the influence of twenty-first-century theories and mores; she intends her novels to speak to her contemporary society just as nineteenth-century sensation texts did.

Sensation novels were often called "newspaper novels" because they fictionalized and commented on current court cases; they remain a useful tool for determining the Zeitgeist. In fact, Sally Mitchell once claimed that

> [f]ew [popular] sensation novels have any claim to literary survival except as a reflection of the decade's interests. Changes in the publishing business and the

> reading audience that were not wholly understood at the time explain why sensationalism received more serious critical attention than we now give to similar kinds of entertainment. (*Fallen* 90)

Mitchell's claims about the genre's literary merit aside, her assertion raises the question of what the best modern analogue to sensation fiction might be. I believe that the answer lies in the "[c]hanges in… the reading audience" that Mitchell alludes to here—the increased literacy and popularity of novel-reading across class and gender lines that has been previously discussed. A modern analogue to sensation fiction must have a broad audience base that includes women and which is not bound by socioeconomic or educational status.

Neo-Victorian novels like those of Sarah Waters tend to be read by only a small fraction of the English-speaking public. They are often marketed as niche or genre titles and have little chance of reaching the equivalent of what Wilkie Collins dubbed "the Unknown Public": the readers of serialized sensation stories in what he called "penny-novel Journals" ("Unknown" 218). Perhaps the best analogue for this "Unknown Public" today is the television audience, since television is a medium that operates in a serial mode, is relatively affordable, and is able to stay more up-to-date on current events than any bound book. Television also reaches a far bigger and more diverse audience, since literacy is not even a prerequisite to understand its stories. While Waters is considered a popular author, her readership increased exponentially when her novels were televised; *Tipping the Velvet,* for example, had an initial print run of 5,000 copies, but after the BBC aired its miniseries version of *Tipping*, over 60,000 copies of the novel sold in two weeks (Keenan 12).

In addition to reaching a substantial audience across class boundaries, sensation fiction is known for its appeal to female readership and its prominently featured female characters. In the

United States, the cable channel Lifetime was the first channel marketed specifically as "television for women" (Hundley 175). Launched in the early 1980s, Lifetime airs off-network syndicated television shows as well as original series, although its most archetypal programming is the "Lifetime Original Movie." These films adhere to a familiar formula that always features strong female protagonists who are often in peril, crimes such murder, kidnapping, or adultery, and a contemporary setting that allows for current events to "inspire" the plot of the film (as the "newspaper novels" did). The plots of *East Lynne*, *No Name*, or *Lady Audley's Secret* would easily lend themselves to be the basis of one of these films. Elaine Showalter suggests that "[s]ensation novels expressed female anger, frustration, and sexual energy more directly than had been done previously. Readers were introduced to a new kind of heroine, one who could put her hostility toward men into violent action" (160). Similarly, Lifetime Original Movies often feature a heroine who must fight against a male threat—an ex-husband, a stalker, her daughter's boyfriend—and in the process discover her own strength and resourcefulness. Like a sensation heroine, she serves as a source of viewer identification and empathy; even though she may commit criminal acts, she has moral, if not legal, justification.

These films are widely regarded as "guilty pleasures" since they are commonly derided for their excessive melodrama, bathos, and sentimentality—the same criticisms that were leveled at sensation novels in the nineteenth century (cf. Laidlaw 658-59). Just as Collins claimed that he "ha[d] never yet met with any man, woman, or child" who would admit to subscribing to a penny-novel Journal (despite its weekly circulation of about one million), few people today are likely to confess to watching Lifetime Original Movies, although the films themselves have achieved such popularity that there is now a channel devoted entirely to them, the Lifetime Movie Network.

If sensation novels constitute "kitchen literature," then Lifetime is "kitchen television"; it is primarily marketed to women who will watch it in their homes. Much Lifetime programming also features modern domestic employees, such as babysitters, housekeepers, or nannies. Many of the films demonstrate great anxiety about the threat that female domestic employees represent to the stability of the heroine or her home. Some representative titles include: "Baby Monitor: Sound of Fear" (1998), "The Perfect Nanny" (2000), and "My Nanny's Secret" (2009). Other Lifetime movies, such as "The Haunting of Helen Walker" (1995), a remake of *The Turn of the Screw*, or "Invisible Child" (1999) offer a more sympathetic depiction of female domestics. Lifetime also has run syndicated episodes of two series that recycle elements of the *Jane Eyre* story: "The Nanny" (1993-99), a series about a lower-class nanny who eventually marries her wealthy employer, and "Frasier" (1993-2004), which features a prominent subplot involving a well-heeled psychiatrist who falls in love with his father's working-class domestic employee.

Although it is an imperfect analogue, Lifetime thus shares much in common with the "penny-novel Journals" that serialized the sensation stories beloved by Collins' "Unknown Public." And, as Sally Mitchell predicted of "similar kinds of entertainment" to sensation fiction, Lifetime and its programming has received little, if any scholarly attention. Although few would argue that Lifetime Original Movies exhibit great merit as art, their recurring themes and tropes would be well worth studying from a socio-cultural standpoint. They are a readily recognizable part of American pop culture much in the same way that sensationalism was in England in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Lifetime movies tackle subjects that are currently considered socially relevant and "shocking" to their target audience: fodder for recent plots includes high-profile kidnappings, teenage pregnancy pacts, the trial of an accused female murderer, and cyberbullying-inspired

suicide. Looking at the focus of these films tells us what twenty-first century viewers find effective for—as *Punch* magazine put it in 1863—"Harrowing the Mind, Making the Flesh Creep, Causing the Hair to Stand on End, Giving Shocks to the Nervous System, Destroying Conventional Moralities, and generally Unfitting the Public for the Prosaic Avocations of Life" ("Sensation Times" 193). They represent our society's current fears, fascinations, and values, just as their nineteenth-century antecedents did.

By studying these popular forms of fiction, we are better able to see not only what constitutes entertainment in a particular time and place but also how audiences across the class and gender spectrums engaged with relevant cultural controversies. For example, the flurry of sensation novels featuring bigamy plotlines is concurrent with the divorce debates following the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act. As Chase and Levenson point out, "the bigamy plot…[represents] the improbably discreet alternative to the noise of a public divorce" (208). So, while the level of discourse in a sensation novel may not be particularly subtle or nuanced, it represents a point of view that proved attractive to readers across the class spectrum and thus merits consideration (208).

Although studies of the sensation genre have gained popularity ever since Winifred Hughes' groundbreaking 1980 study *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s*, the scholarly consideration of these texts is still in its infancy. Braddon and Collins alone were so prolific that there have been few in-depth studies of their lesser-known works, and the sensation short story is an entire subgenre that remains relatively unexplored. My project seeks to remedy some of these gaps in the extant criticism, and most of all, attempts to contextualize sensation fiction. It is not simply the one-off invention of a single decade, as Hughes' title implies, but a descendent of the Brontës' Gothic fiction and the progenitor of genres as varied as

the mystery novel, the Neo-Victorian novel, and quite possibly, even the Lifetime Original Movie. By considering these texts in their critical, literary, and historical context, my project explores why "making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing-room" should cause such a sensation.

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