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# Transgressive Theatricalities: Questioning the Existence of a Sincere Self in Sensation Fiction

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TRANSGRESSIVE THEATRICALITIES: QUESTIONING  
THE EXISTENCE OF A SINCERE SELF IN  
SENSATION FICTION

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Carley Amanda Robertson  
May 2018

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Accepted by:  
Dr. David Coombs, Committee Chair  
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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore connections between the sensation fiction genre of the 1860s and theatricality. The theatricality present in sensation fiction plays on the fears of acting and insincerity that Nina Auerbach outlines in her book *Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians*. Theatricality differs from performance or performativity, areas abundant with scholarship, in that it describes a person's ability to perform, not elements of an individual performance. In this thesis, I analyze characters within sensation fiction who utilize their theatricality in order to mask their sincere identities or interior self, or portions of their identities in some cases. Specifically, I look at Lady Audley, Robert Audley, and Clara Tabloys from Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, Magdalen Vanstone from Wilkie Collins's *No Name*, and Isabel Vane and Francis Levison from Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mom, Julie Robertson. You have always been my biggest fan, my rock, and my best friend. I could not have done it without your encouragement, support, and occasional proofreading. Thank you for allowing and encouraging me to follow my crazy grad school dreams. Two down, one to go!

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## INTRODUCTION

In the Victorian era, both sensation fiction and theatre were considered morally dubious genres. Although widely enjoyed by the masses, these genres were marginalized and dismissed as unworthy of the acclaim or admiration of the civilized upper classes. Both were highly criticized for their potential to corrupt otherwise pristine society.

In her introduction of Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*, Elizabeth Jay describes the development of the sensation fiction genre and asserts that critics deemed the genre sensational "because it played upon readers' nerves in two ways: first, by using to the full the opportunity for suspense and melodrama afforded by serial instalments; and second, by stimulating an 'unhealthy' interest in diseases and crimes... which the newspapers claimed threatened society daily" (Jay viii). Additionally, critics were concerned about the effect that the genre's reliance on "'piquant situation and startling incident'<sup>1</sup> to evoke awe" and "the notion of proximity" would have on readers of these novels (Jay ix).

Many works of sensation fiction transferred from the page to the stage. Although not often recognized by scholars, close connection between literature and the theatre was not uncommon in the Victorian era; as Auerbach notes, many beloved canonical writers "wrote for the theater, longed to write for it, or failing to achieve theatrical success, transplanted theatrical values into the works that made them famous" (Auerbach, *Private Theatricals* 13). In her introduction to *Lady Audley's Secret*, Lynn Pykett asserts that even Victorians who did not know Braddon's story and its characters, knew them

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<sup>1</sup> Here, Jay is quoting nineteenth-century novelist and critic Margaret Oliphant's article 'Sensation Novels', *Blackwood's Magazine*, 91 (1862), 564-584 (p. 568).

“through the numerous stage adaptations which appeared from 1862 and were frequently revived throughout the century” (Pykett vii). Lady Audley and her companions gained as much notoriety from the stage as they did from Braddon’s wildly popular serial novel<sup>2</sup>. Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* had a similarly advantageous relationship with the theatre. The first dramatized version of *East Lynne* was staged in New York in 1862; several other American versions were launched in the following years, and *East Lynne* made its first appearance on the English stage in 1864 (Jay xxxvi). Stagings of adaptations of Wood’s word were incredibly popular even as late as the 1920s and numerous adaptations of *East Lynne* were “immediately loved” by diverse Victorian audiences (Auerbach, “Before the Curtain” 11). Auerbach even asserts the importance of *East Lynne* to the Victorian theatre in her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Theatre*. She claims “we still shun its Victorianess,” because “its play with women’s being embodies Victorian theatricality” (11). Hence, in both forms, *East Lynne* plays on the Victorian fear of the theatrical nature of identities.

Nina Auerbach describes the fear Victorians held for the theatre and all things theatrical in her book *Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians*. Victorians worried that if acting was as easy as it appeared to be on the stage, perhaps acting was possible in day to day life: “As sources of truth, though, lives could be dangerously like masks. Living was so significant that sages strained to shelter it from contamination; the theater became the primary source and metaphor for meretricious, life-destroying activity” (4).

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<sup>2</sup> “*Lady Audley’s Secret* was one of the publishing sensations of the 1860s. An immediate best-seller when it appeared in three-volume form in 1862, it was also one of the best-selling novels of the nineteenth century” (vii).

Auerbach describes the Victorian definition of theatricality as the opposite of sincerity, which was held as sacred in Victorian culture (4). As a result, “The theater, that alluring pariah within Victorian culture, came to stand for all the dangerous potential of theatricality to invade the authenticity of the best self” (Auerbach 8-9). Similarly, the figure of the actor became “one image of the Victorian anti-self, capering and mocking sincere emotion,” and, as any figure who was opposed to sincerity was deemed conniving and evil, the actor and his profession were rejected by proper Victorian society (114). Thus, activity was shunned, as it was determined to be too close to acting, and as Auerbach puts it, “to be sincere, we must not act”<sup>3</sup> (8). As a result, the ideal Victorian heroes were “characters who do nothing” (5). Although sensation fiction is often subversive and plays into elements of theatricality, their heroes often do fit into this category. For example, *Lady Audley’s Secret*’s Robert Audley is described as a “lazy, care-for-nothing fellow” and *No Name*’s Norah Vanstone, unlike her theatrical sister, fades into the background; however, both characters save the day in their respective stories (Braddon 32). Despite the seemingly conventional casting of heroes, sensation fiction often explores the disconnect between the emphasis on the sincere or authentic self and the pressure to become a figure of the ideals of masculinity or femininity.

Thus, the similar dismissals of the sensation fiction genre and of the Victorian theatre stems from a fear of theatricality that accompanied both forms. Behind the fear of theatricality lies a fear of a lack of a true soul or self, a fear of a lack of authenticity of identity, and a fear that others could perform a role that was not their sincere self.

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<sup>3</sup> Although she also admits that “it is scarcely possible to be ourselves without acting ourselves” (8).

Theatricality differs from performance in one key way: it is not the act itself, but is instead the potential ability to carry out the acting.<sup>4</sup> I chose to emphasize theatricality over performance, as I believe this is truly where the Victorian fear of acting resides; it is not the fear of the performance itself, but the fear that someone might be able to perform. Sensation fiction writers like Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Wilkie Collins, and Ellen Wood played directly on the fear of theatricality in their novels. In fact, the plots of Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, Collins's *No Name*, and Wood's *East Lynne*, three of the most prolific sensation fiction novels, revolve around disguises, assumed identities, and acting out new roles. Sensation fiction characters regularly occupy normative roles in interesting ways, often ways that distort the role itself. These characters, much like actors on a stage, have theatricality, or the ability to move in between performed societal roles when needed. They are able to transform aspects of their identities, both small and large, in order to slip into a new role, often with some ease. Some change identities completely, while others change more minor aspects of their identities, often in order to positively affect their social standing.

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<sup>4</sup> The OED definitions of theatricality and performance indicate this: Theatricality is defined as “the quality or character of being theatrical” (definition 1a). In turn, theatrical is defined as “that simulates, or is simulated; artificial, affected, assumed” (definition 2). Performance, on the other hand, is defined as “the accomplishment or carrying out of something commanded or undertaken; the doing of an action or operation” (definition 1a).

## STEPPING AWAY FROM THE CRITICAL STAGE

In her book *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski seeks to “figure out what exactly we are doing when we engage in ‘critique’ and what else we might do instead” by examining why we read, “how we read and to what end” (1, 6). Contemporary critique, as Felski sees it, aims “to expose hidden truths and draw out unflattering and counterintuitive meanings that others fail to see” (1). In this definition, literary scholars read primarily to uncover some yet undiscovered analysis of a text so that they might write about it. Felski laments the continuous, compulsory development of critique, saying “the insufficiencies of critique demand that it be magnified and multiplied, cranked up a hundredfold, applied with renewed vigor and unflagging zeal” (8). Felski is well aware, as the title of her book indicates, of the limits of critique, and she asserts that if we reexamine our current techniques of analyzing literature, “we might admit that critique is not always the best tool for the job” (8). Although the diverse schools of critical thought show that we are already aware that “different methods are needed for the many aims of criticism, and there is no one-size-fits-all form of thinking that can fulfill all these aims simultaneously,” Felski accurately points out that “at a certain point, critique does not get us any further” (9). Thus, as we continuously fall into the same or similar patterns of analyzing literature, we might, in fact, be missing possibilities already present within the texts themselves.

Felski also offers an explanation for why contemporary critique might be ill-equipped for analyzing sensation fiction in her chapter “An Inspector Calls,” which explores “the connection between critique and crime” (85). Critics have many similarities

to detective figures in fiction. The two figures often have “overlapping methods of interpretation,” which Felski outlines:

Specifically, I pursue the analogies between detection and critique as styles of suspicious reading that blend interpretation with moral judgment. And here the similarities proliferate at a dizzying rate: a penchant for interrogating and indicting, a conviction that deceit and deception are ubiquitous and that everyone has something to hide, a commitment to hunting down criminal agents and a reliance on the language of guilt and complicity (86).

Critics, like detectives, look for literary clues in order to assign blame or guilt<sup>5</sup>. Critics’ innate suspicion that a text, which the critic ends up treating “as a quasi-person equipped with a desire to deceive,” has something hidden to be uncovered leads to the creation of “a never-ending stream of signs-to-be-read and conclusions-to-be-drawn” (95, 103). To the determined literary critic, any and all details of a work may be construed as clues, which can be used to piece together their theories of guilt. As a result, “present-day inspectors of literary studies arrive on the scene intent on transmuting apparent innocence into political guilt,” rather than letting the text reveal possible topics of scholarly conversation over the course of its narrative (90). The similarities between critics and detective characters leave critics at risk of coming to the same, or very similar, conclusions as the characters themselves come to in the course of their investigations.

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<sup>5</sup> However, Felski distinguishes the place of blame that critics look for from the detective fiction criminal: “One patent difference between detective fiction and academic critique: in the latter, the wrongdoer is not an anomalous individual – a deranged village vicar, a gardener with a grudge – but some larger entity targeted by the critic as an ultimate cause: Victorian society, imperialism, discourse/power, Western metaphysics” (89).

While some critics use their skills of detection to connect sensation fiction to the theatre or to elements of performativity, their investigation has not yielded a connection to the intersection of both, theatricality. The critic who comes closest to making this connection is David Kurnick in *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel*. While Kurnick does not specifically analyze sensation fiction, his theory of the impact that unsuccessful theatrical ambitions had on the work of writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such as Henry James, William Thackeray, George Eliot, and James Joyce. Kurnick notes that “these writers had serious ambition to write for the stage, and that all of them reworked their theatrical concerns into innovative and influential fiction,” which poses as indicative that “the novelistic turn to and away from the theater was not a punctual event but has been an ongoing aspect of novelistic development” (2). He ultimately credits many of the defining literary accomplishments of these authors to the influence of the theatre, and he particularly insists that “we recognize the role of the theater in the creation of the novel of interiority” (3). Most importantly, Kurnick notes the lack of emphasis that scholars place on the influence of the theatre:

The literalism is what most sharply differentiates this book from existing studies of the crucial figurative role theater plays in the novel. Although this scholarship sometimes notes the actual theatrical efforts of major novelists, the substance of those efforts has almost wholly escaped analysis. This focus has hypostatized the novel and the theater as independent traditions, and my emphasis on the erratic trajectory of individual careers is meant as a reminder that these forms are not produced in isolation from each other...A guiding hypothesis of much of this

criticism has been that when the novel engages theater, it does so homeopathically – to expel it, punish it, or marginalize it (6)

Although our subject matter differs slightly, I have found the same to be true of scholarship surrounding sensation fiction's connection to the theatre. The clearest connections made between the two concern the authors' endeavors in the theatre, but these texts only briefly, if they do at all, connect the author's relationship to the theatre to the individual novels themselves. Otherwise, critics might make connections between performance or identity and sensation fiction but not connect these elements to the theatre.<sup>6</sup>

So, if we do not wish to fall into the trap of becoming the critic-detective, if we have reached the limits of critique in relation to these literary texts, what should we look to instead? Felski claims that she “strive[s] to remain on the same plane as [her] object of study rather than casting around for a hidden puppeteer who is pulling the strings” (6). I wish to follow Felski's model and use sensation fiction itself, specifically what sensation fiction's theatricality can reveal, as a model for reading the genre. This type of analysis is what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus refer to as “*Attention to surface as a practice of critical description*” (11). They describe this method as such:

This focus assumes that texts can reveal their own truths because texts mediate themselves; what we think theory brings to texts (form, structure, meaning) is

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Ronald R. Thomas explores how detectives within detective fiction analyze the character of others. In “Sensation and the fantastic in Victorian novel,” Lyn Pykett analyzes the fear of women not adhering to the Angel in the House stereotype that is present in sensation fiction. In their book *Victorian Heroines: Representations of Femininity in Nineteenth-century Literature and Art*, Kimberly Reynolds and Nicole Humble spend a chapter outlining how the sensation fiction genre complicated the roles available to female characters within novels.

already present in them. Description sees no need to translate the text into a theoretical or historical metalanguage in order to make the text meaningful. The purpose of criticism is thus a relatively modest one: to indicate what the text says about itself (11).

Best and Marcus's proposed method lines up with Felski's suggestion that we search for meaning in the same plane as our source material. Taking this approach, sensation fiction, especially its knack for mystery, assumed identities, and disguises, most directly points us to theatricality.

Heather Love further describes methods of surface reading and explains how this method might interact with questions of identity in her article "Close Reading and Thin Description." Love asserts that these "forms of analysis that describe patterns of behavior and visible activity but that do not traffic in speculation about interiority, meaning, or depth" (404). In regards to questions of identity, which is inherently personal and interior, a lack of interiority or depth might be a pitfall of this particular method. For example, Love describes the way that Erving Goffman reads several literary texts by "analyz[ing] social reality by focusing on observable elements of behavior: gesture, spacing, timing, dress, posture, eye contact, and so on" (421). In this way, Goffman's method mimics sociological or anthropological studies, focusing on observable behavior instead of elements that make up one's identity. Thus, this method might be ill-equipped to analyze the dichotomy between theatricality and sincere identity. Therefore, while I will use some similar methods, such as analyzing how characters' surface appearances and behavior influences the way that others perceive them, I will depart from this aspect of surface

reading in order to delve into questions of whether or not identity is a permanent aspect of the self or it can be acted as if by an actor on a stage.

It is vital for me to point out that sensation fiction looks very close to the methods of criticism that Felski, Best and Marcus, and others wish to depart from. The way that some sensation fiction characters, like Robert Audley or Mrs. Lecount, attempt to read the theatrical performances of others mirrors the way that critics read these novels. They try to peer beneath the surface to find a deeper meaning, as the type of critics that Felski critiques do. Felski might assert that they are only intended, in the critics' case by the author and in the characters' case by the theatrical person, to see the surface presentation and thus should not seek to dig any deeper. In this method, the elements of theatricality within these sensation fiction novels reveal that they are intended to be read as one watches a play; we are to see (or read) the performance that is designed for us, the audience, and not peer behind the curtain to catch a glimpse at any hidden elements. Therefore, applying Felski's type of criticism to this genre works both with and against the grain.

In *No Name*, Wilkie Collins offers insight on one particular way to view the stories contained in sensation novels through a letter from a detective, Sergeant Bulmer, to the Vanstone family lawyer, Mr. Pendril. Sergeant Bulmer tells Mr. Pendril that “[t]his case seems a mighty simple one looked at from a distance. Looked at close, it alters very considerably for the worse, and becomes, to speak the plain truth – a Poser” (145). It is interesting that Collins chose a detective who has little to do with the rest of the narrative to comment on how to view a case such as Magdalen Vanstone's, especially given

Felski's connection between critics and detectives. Collins's choice of the word *poser* could have one of two meanings. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *poser* can mean "a person who poses," someone who acts out another role, or "a difficult or perplexing question; a puzzle" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The first definition points to elements of theatricality. The second definition relates the quote to Felski's argument about the critic-detective. In these two potential meanings, Collins highlights the importance of analyzing this genre from all angles, working both with and against the grain. Within these novels, there is a perceived congruity between a character's exterior or surface appearance and their interiority; however, a disconnect between the two is often revealed over the course of these narratives. From a distance, these texts are simple, and those who are advocates of surface reading might emphasize this simplicity, but when one looks closely at these texts, they, as Collins puts it, "alter considerably" and become puzzles for the critic-detective to solve. Thus, it is crucial to look at this genre from both perspectives in order to gain a full picture of the novels' relationships to theatricality and interiority.

## LADY AUDLEY'S PUNISHMENT: VICTORIAN SOCIETY'S REACTION TO THOSE WHO ACT

Mary Elizabeth Braddon had a deeply personal connection to Victorian theatre, a connection that exerted great influence over her literary work. Pykett declares that Braddon and her mother were “devotees of the theatre,” and that their fascination with all things theatrical led Braddon to turn to the stage to “supplement their precarious income in the early 1850s” under the pseudonym Mary Seyton (Pykett, Introduction viii-ix). Braddon’s move to the theatre was risky, as professional actresses were considered to be scandalous women who had taken on jobs that were improper for their gender. Braddon even wrote specifically for the stage during her time as a professional actress and later when she transitioned to her literary career. Pykett outlines a clear connection between Braddon’s theatrical career and her literary work:

Braddon’s theatrical interests and her personal experience of the professional theatre were important and shaping her development as a novelist. Her plots and character types were clearly influenced by the stage repertoire and some of the sensational scenes and dramatic tableaux in her novels, including *Lady Audley’s Secret*, clearly have a theatrical quality (ix).

Contemporary critics of Braddon’s work also made the connection between her literature and her early career in the theatre, and they “were wont to make rather snide jeers about her social background and familiarity with the repertoire of the popular theatre” in their critiques of her work (ix). Braddon clearly imparts her own much-noted theatricality onto her characters, most clearly on the scandalous, infamous Lady Audley.

In many ways, Braddon uses the complex characters in *Lady Audley's Secret* to draw attention to the flaws in the logic behind the Victorian fear of theatricality. Lady Audley's theatricality is deemed transgressive; in adopting a completely new role, she abandons her sincere self, a crime which cannot go unpunished in a society that is firmly anti-acting. Other characters, most notably George Talboys, Sir Michael Audley, and the novel's detective-hero Robert Audley, attempt to read Lady Audley's character through her outward appearance. These characters believe they can accurately judge Lady Audley's sincere self based on what she appears to be, but ultimately they are astonished to find that she is able to adapt to drastically different roles, some, or perhaps none, of which are indicative of her interiority.

The titular character of Braddon's novel is represented within the novel as acting three separate roles, that of Helen Talboys, née Maldon, of Lucy Graham, and of Lady Audley. As a result, it is difficult to outline which, if any, of these roles are representative of an interior self.<sup>7</sup> The closest that the reader can get to a picture of a sincere self is through George Talboys's descriptions of his wife as he remembers her during their first year of marriage and through Helen's recounting of her life's story at the end of the novel. George's descriptions of Helen depict her as an idyllic feminine figure. George repeatedly calls Helen his "pretty little wife," his "little darling," or even his "gentle, innocent, loving, little wife!" (21). He firmly declares that his Helen is "a girl whose heart is as true as the light of heaven," and he imagines her waiting patiently for him at home with their son. Unfortunately, George's recollections of his wife are so tainted with

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<sup>7</sup> For my purposes, I will refer to her interior self as Helen, as this is her "real" name; however, it could be debated that this too is a completely artificially constructed role.

long-lost love that he offers very few, if any, concrete descriptions of his wife's actual character. Helen's descriptions of her own character could be tainted as well but by her proclaimed madness instead of by love. When her true identity, that of Helen Talboys, is revealed, she proclaims to Robert that she is "a madwoman" (294). In order to explain her acting to Robert and Sir Michael, she relays "the story of her life" and emphasizes the effect that poverty and the madness that she has inherited from her mother had on her development (294). Additionally, learning that her beauty could afford her an advantageous marriage to elevate her wealth and social status instilled a great sense of pride in Helen. Therefore, pride, poverty, and the fear of becoming mad defined Helen's life and character. These characteristics combined with an intense desire to escape the condition of her low social standing leads Helen to easily leave her sincere self behind and take on a new role.

In order to take on the position of a governess after she believes her husband has abandoned her, Helen Talboys responds to an ad under a "feigned name," effectively stepping into a new character for the first time (Braddon 301). Before she is able to take on a new role, she must first get rid of the old one. In order to avoid someone connecting her old life as Helen Talboys to the new role that she has chosen, she chooses to kill Helen. She places her own obituary in the *Times* and even uses a dying woman with passing resemblance to her to take her place in her grave so that it appears that she is truly dead and therefore George may not continue to look for her. In killing her old role, or arguably even her interior self, she leaves her life of poverty and despair behind and becomes Lucy Graham, "the sweetest girl that ever lived" (Braddon 11). Similar to

George's descriptions of Helen, Lucy is described as the feminine ideal, "blessed with that magic power of fascination by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile" (10). Indeed, it is continuously asserted that "every one loved, admired, and praised her" (10-11). These descriptions and numerous other similar descriptions provide ample evidence that those around Lucy Graham, especially the men that she comes in contact with, read her as the ideal. She epitomizes all of the ideal feminine characteristics so well that Sir Michael Audley simply must marry her, despite knowing that she does not hold the same feelings for him as he does for her.

The change in her social status and name that results from her marriage to Sir Michael causes Lucy to take on an entirely new role as she becomes Lady Audley. She transforms from the sweet, docile, amiable girl to a frivolous, childlike, indulgent creature. Her "advantageous match" with Sir Michael Audley causes her to become prey to "the envy and hatred of her sex," and she is well aware of the acclaim that her new role affords her (10). As Lucy Graham, she seems independent and capable of taking on the challenges of her work, but as Lady Audley, she reverts to dependence and childishness. Although this change in her character is frustrating to some, like her new step-daughter Alicia, Lady Audley's new role seems to suit her well. Men seem infatuated with her; her husband cannot stop spoiling her, ignoring his own daughter in the process. Even Robert Audley, who seems otherwise ignorant of the charms of women, is enthralled by his aunt's beauty and grace. Even once Robert begins to suspect that Lady Audley has murdered George Talboys, he worries that her charm will continue to exert its influence over his uncle, claiming that Sir Michael "would rather think [Robert] mad than think her

guilty” (234). For a time, Lady Audley is able to perform her new role perfectly; however, her perfect performance does not last.

Little by little, other characters begin questioning the validity of Lady Audley’s character. Robert begins to have “a vague feeling of uneasiness” when staying at Audley Court, but it takes him much longer to uncover the source of his uneasiness (78). Alicia Audley and her Newfoundland dog, Caesar, seem to be able to see through Lady Audley’s performance most clearly. Caesar clearly feels the same uneasiness that Robert feels; the dog always seems to growl or cower in Lady Audley’s presence. The narrator relays that the Caesar’s behavior towards Audley Court’s mistress is “more indicative of terror than of fury” and expresses astonishment that “Caesar should be frightened of so fragile a creature as Lucy Audley” (93). Alicia even remarks that her step-mother “may bewitch every man in Essex, but she’d never make friends with my dog” (93). There is clearly no love lost between Alicia and Lady Audley; however, the narrator, Robert, and even Sir Michael blame the animosity between the two on Alicia’s jealousy of her youthful and beautiful step-mother. At first, Alicia seems, even to the reader, to simply be jealous, as others accuse her of being; however, she rightfully points out Lady Audley’s deception. Lady Audley responds by attacking Alicia’s character and pointing out her inferiority, hoping to divert Alicia away from the truth by playing on her jealousy.

Perhaps the moment that illuminates Lady Audley’s feigned role the most clearly is the description and the character’s reactions to Lady Audley’s portrait. Alicia Audley shows her cousin Robert and his friend, George Talboys, a portrait of her new step-mother, Lady Audley. Alicia shows Robert and George the portrait so that they can see

Lady Audley's much broadcasted beauty; however, the portrait has a sinister, almost monstrous quality to it. The narrator describes the portrait:

Yes; the painter must have been a pre-Raphaelite. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have painted, hair by hair, those feathery masses of ringlets with every glimmer of gold, and every shadow of pale brown. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid lightness to the blonde complexion, and a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes. No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait. It was so like and yet so unlike; it was as if you had burned strange coloured fires before my lady's face, and by their influence brought out new lines and new expressions never seen before. The perfection of feature, the brilliancy of colouring, were there; but I suppose the painter had copied quaint mediaeval monstrosities until his brain had grown bewildered, for my lady, in this portrait of her, had something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend (Braddon 65).

Many scholars have debated what function this portrait serves within the novel.<sup>8</sup> Most focus on the monstrous qualities of the portrait, arguing that these prove the portrait reveals Lady Audley's true monstrous nature. I, however, take a slightly different approach to the image of the portrait, which stems from the character's reactions to the

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Vicki A. Pallo asserts that the portrait's significance lies in Robert's critique of it, which is indicative of his transformation into the novel's detective. Ian Henderson, on the other hand, focuses the emotional response to the image, both the reader's reaction to the detailed description and Braddon's lack of description in regards to George's response to the portrait.

painting. George is stunned into white-faced silence.<sup>9</sup> Robert remarks that he does not like the portrait because “there is something odd about it” (66). Alicia readily agrees, but offers an explanation to why the portrait is so unsettling:

I think that sometimes a painter is in a manner inspired, and is able to see through the normal expression of the face, another expression that is equally part of it, though not to be perceived by common eyes. *We* have never seen my lady look as she does in that picture; but I think that she could look so (66).

Without knowing, Alicia has stumbled onto the truth. The pre-Raphaelite painter was able to see the cracks within Helen’s performance of the role of Lady Audley. The painter also was able to represent these cracks alongside the beauty and performed femininity that the other characters in the novel see. He was able to see both her interior self and the new role that she has stepped into, two separate selves, and represent them within the same image. For Alicia, Robert, and the narrator, seeing both the performance and the cracks in the performance that allude to a hidden sincere self within the same image is revolting.

Finally, Lady Audley is forced into a fourth role, that of Madame Taylor. Once the truth of Lady Audley’s deception is revealed, Sir Michael leaves her fate to Robert, who enlists a doctor to condemn her to a madhouse in order to avoid placing any scandal on his family’s name. Additionally, Robert and the doctor select a madhouse in France in order to completely separate the former Lady Audley from the rest of the family. Once there, Robert remembers “that he had been recommended to introduce his wretched

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<sup>9</sup> Although, the reader later learns that George’s reaction is not to the painting itself but to Lady Audley’s striking resemblance to this supposedly-dead wife.

charge under a feigned name” in order to avoid detection (330). So, although he has condemned all of Lady Audley’s previous acting, he creates a new role for her to perform as it benefits him and his uncle. He relays the specifications of her new role and emphasizes that she should not “wish to be known by [her] real name” (332). Interestingly, Robert does not specify what he means by her real name; he could mean any of her previous performed roles – Helen Talboys, Lucy Graham, or Lady Audley. He chooses the name Madame Taylor, and Helen quietly resigns to her fate. The creation of this final persona allows Robert to determine how Helen is perceived by others and to remove any and all discernable connection between Helen and his family.

Although Lady Audley’s theatricality is clearly able to deceive those around her for some time, the narrator of the novel asserts that honest men, like Michael Audley, cannot truly be fooled by acting:

But I do not believe that even in his misery he felt that entire and unmitigated surprise, that utter revulsion of feeling that is felt when a good woman wanders away from herself, and becomes a lost creature whom her husband is bound in honour to abjure. I do not believe that Sir Michael Audley had ever *really* believed in his wife. He loved her and admired her; he had been bewitched by her beauty and bewildered by her charms; but that sense of something wanted, that vague feeling of loss and disappointment which had come upon him on the summer’s night of his betrothal had been with him more or less distinctly ever since. I cannot believe that an honest man, however pure and single may be his mind, however simply trustful his nature, is ever really deceived by falsehood.

There is beneath the voluntary confidence and involuntary distrust; not to be conquered by any effort of the will (299-300).

Here, Braddon directly calls attention to a potential flaw in the logic of the Victorian society that ignores any and all acted out elements of identities in order to condemn theatricality. The narrator seems to be asserting that if any theatrical performance seems to be bought into by honest men, it is only because they are allowing themselves to temporarily not see the beyond surface appearances. Even if they appear to be fooled, they must always know that something is not quite right, despite any attempt to fully believe the acts performed for them. Indeed, Sir Michael has a difficult time accepting that he has been deceived, especially by one so close to him. As he listens to Lady Audley's account of her life, he sits "silent and immovable" in disbelief. He asserts that this story "could not be his wife's" because "he had heard her simple account of her youth, and had believed it as he had believed in the Gospel" (297). In order to cope with the shock of buying into Lady Audley's theatrical performance, Sir Michael disassociates the story from the woman he has known, calling her "this lady, whom I have thought my wife" (305). However, if this is the case, the good men who are aware that acting is a reality in their society do not truly buy into the idea of the sincere self.

## NO NAME: MAGDALEN VANSTONE'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY THROUGH THEATRICALITY

Wilkie Collins had a love for the theatre and all things theatrical that clearly influenced his literary works. *No Name* focuses primarily on Magdalen Vantsone, a natural born actress, and the book is even divided into eight sections, which Collins dubs scenes. The letters and chronicles that accompany the story fall into sections called "Between the Scenes." Mark Ford, who penned the introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *No Name*, even goes so far as to argue that Collins imparts his "understanding of the theatrical nature of all social roles" to Magdalen (Ford x). Although his fascination with the theatre and theatricality appears, perhaps, most clearly in his novels, Collins was also "a keen participator in amateur drama, and he wrote numerous plays, some of which were produced on the professional stage" (Ford xii). Collins's interest in theatricality intersects with his "interest in the dilemma of namelessness," which is a "part of his life-long preoccupation with the means by which social identity is constructed, and equally how it may be borrowed, invented, dismantled or buried" and "his fascination with the narrative possibilities of doubles and disguise" (ix). These social interests, along with Collins's "awareness of the problems society has in distinguishing between the genuine and the counterfeit" are keenly present throughout *No Name*.

Collins uses the Vanstone sisters' precarious legal identity to call into question the innate, sincere self and condemnation of theatricality. Once Magdalen and Norah are discovered to be illegitimate, they lose all legal claim to the identities that they have always believed to be their own. Norah quietly resigns to her fate, but Magdalen refuses,

choosing instead to use her theatricality to create new identities for herself in order to scheme her way back into the fortune she believes is rightfully her and her sister's. As Collins aligns the reader with Magdalen, who serves as the novel's heroine, he forces the reader to call into question a system which would both strip Magdalen of her identity as her father's daughter and heir and condemn her for creating a new identity for herself in order to prosper.

In addition to centering the plot and characters of *No Name* around theatricality, Collins also comments on the debate between innate nature and performed identity and reflects on the possibility of a sincere self. He considers whether one is born with an innate character or whether social circumstances influence and develop character over time:

Does there exist in every human being, beneath that outward and visible character which is shaped into form by the social influence surrounding us, and inward, invisible disposition, which is part of ourselves; which education may indirectly modify, but can never hope to change? Is the philosophy which denies this, and asserts that we are born with dispositions like blank sheets of paper, a philosophy which has failed to remark that we are not born with blank faces – a philosophy which has never compared together two infants of a few days old, and has never observed that those infants are not born with blank tempers for mothers and nurses to fill up at will? Are there, infinitely varying with each individual, inbred forces of Good and Evil in all of us, deep down below the reach of mortal

encouragement and mercy of the liberating opportunity and the sufficient temptation? (116).

Here, Collins asserts the existence of an interiority, even emphasizing the difference between this interior self and the surface character. Surface character may be altered to adhere to social customs; interiority, on the other hand, might be influenced but never directly changed, as it is innate. He even turns to the reading of the character of newborns to accentuate his point, highlighting that there are observable characteristics even in these youngest people. He does, however, establish a connection between surface appearance and interiority by describing both interior disposition and outward appearances as not blank. In *No Name*, Collins further explores these ideas through Magdalen's theatricality, exploring both her interiority and her alteration of her surface appearance.

Magdalen Vanstone is described as a "born actress, if there ever was one" (43), and she uses these skills to fool those around her when advantageous. She has the astonishing ability to convince others that she is another person. Early in the novel, Mrs. Vanstone notes that Magdalen's "habits of mimicry" concern her (11). Miss Garth worries that Magdalen's transition into acting might completely change her character: "Magdalen, in the capacity of a thoughtless girl, was comparatively easy to deal with. Magdalen, in the character of a natural born actress, threatened serious future difficulties" (44). At the beginning of the novel, Magdalen is unable to become a professional actress because it is deemed to be inappropriate for a lady of her station; however, after she becomes an orphan with no legal identity, Magdalen has a short but very successful career on the stage. In his journal, Captain Wragge records the characteristics that make

Magdalen so adept for the professional stage: “I have discovered that she possesses the extraordinary talent as a mimic. She has the flexible face, the manageable voice and the dramatic knack which fit a woman for character-parts and disguises on the stage” (190). He later notes that her performances draw massive crowds, even including patrons returning for multiple performances, who are all stunned by her convincing theatrical performances.

Magdalen is left with “No Name” when her father dies, leaving her to assume another role as she no longer legally has claim to the role she has played her entire life. Names remain a recurring issue throughout the novel. Captain Wragge notes that Magdalen “shows a morbid distrust of writing her name at the bottom of any document” (191). Even when the reader is first introduced to Magdalen, her name is instantly called into question:

Magdalen! It was a strange name to have given her? Strange, indeed; and yet, chosen under no extraordinary circumstances...Magdalen! Surely, the grand old Bible name – suggestive of sad and sombre dignity; recalling, in its first association, mournful ideas of penitence and seclusion – had been here, as events have turned out, inappropriately bestowed? Surely, this self-contradictory girl had perversely accomplished one contradiction more, by developing into a character which was all out of harmony with her own Christian name! (9)

Collins calling the innate nature of character into question by saying that Magdalen’s name and character do not match. She is also able to develop into a character, which is contrary to the Victorian ideal that character is sincere and cannot be acted out. On the

other hand, Magdalen's theatricality and her identity as someone with the name Magdalen could actually fit together quite perfectly. Although the narrator relays that Magdalen's name is inherited from an aunt, the name Magdalen is most closely associated with the biblical Magdalen, a morally dubious but ultimately redeemable woman. In this sense, her name is fitting; Magdalen Vanstone flaunts the lines of acceptable actions through her theatricality but is eventually redeemed through the course of the novel.

Miss Garth, the Vanstones' governess, realizes the implications of the sisters' inability to hold a claim to even their own name. She emphasizes the effect that the classification of "Nobody's Children" has on Magdalen in a letter to the family's lawyer, Mr. Pendril:

The last time you were so good as to come to this house, do you remember how Magdalen embarrassed and distressed us, by questioning you about her right to bear her father's name? Do you remember her persisting in her inquiries, until she forced you to acknowledge that, legally speaking, she and her sister had No Name? I venture to remind you of this, because you have the affairs of hundreds of clients to think of, and you might well have forgotten the circumstance. Whatever natural reluctance she might otherwise have had to deceiving us, and degrading herself, by the use of an assumed name, that conversation with you is certain to have removed. We must discover her, by personal description – we can trace her in no other way (143-144).

Miss Garth rightfully believes that stripping Magdalen of the legitimacy of her own name has taken away the legitimacy of all names for her. This belief gives Magdalen the backing to claim hold of any name. Magdalen's first assumed name is taken when she performs as a professional actress. When prompted to choose a name for the stage, she declares that her new name does not matter, as she has "as much right to one as another" (194). Magdalen's assertion of her own lack of a legal self supports Miss Garth's belief that the lack of legitimacy of her own name erases any belief she holds in the sincere self.

Magdalen's ability to completely disguise her character through theatrical performances is so incredible that she is even able to keep her interiority a secret from those closest to her. Shortly after her parents' death, Mr. Clare notices that Magdalen is hiding her true feelings; he asks her "[w]hat is this mask of yours hiding," implying that Magdalen is acting in a way that is insincere (125). Although Magdalen does not reply or indicate in any way that Mr. Clare's assumption that she is wearing a mask might be true, this small interaction is one of the earliest indications that Magdalen might already be concealing her interiority. Captain Wragge often remarks that he is unable to tell what Magdalen's true thoughts or feelings are. In a letter to her sister Norah, Magdalen apologizes profusely for not revealing herself to her sister, writing "Oh, my love, don't feel hurt at my not opening my heart to you as I ought! I dare not open it. I dare not show myself to you as I really am" (144). Both Norah and Miss Garth express concern for what Magdalen might do, as they are unable to predict the extent of her acting.

Magdalen's theatricality is contrasted by her sister Norah's quiet and sincere lack of action, qualities that make Norah the ideal Victorian heroine. The two sisters are often

directly compared to emphasize their differences. When Magdalen and her sister are discovered to be illegitimate, they are cast down to a lower role, even though they have never actually been in their assumed position. Norah Vanstone faces a similar situation to her sister, but she acclimates to the change in a very different way. While Magdalen uses her skills as an actress to easily slip into any role that she may require, Norah struggles to fit into her new role as a governess, which could be attributed to her lack of theatricality. Miss Garth often examines the sisters' personalities as two opposite ends of dichotomies:

It might be, that the upper surface of their characters was all that she had, thus far, plainly seen in Norah and Magdalen. It might be, that the unalluring secrecy and reserve of one sister, the all-attractive openness and high spirits of the other, were more or less referable, in each case, to those physical causes which work towards the production of moral results. It might be, that under the surface so formed – a surface which there had been nothing – hitherto, in the happy, prosperous, uneventful lives of the sisters to disturb – forces of inborn and inbred disposition had remained concealed, which the shock of the first serious calamity in their lives had not thrown up into view. Was this so? Was the promise of the future shining with prophetic light through the surface-shadow of Norah's reserve; and darkening with prophetic gloom, under the surface-glitter of Magdalen's bright spirits? If the life of the elder sister was destined henceforth to be the ripening ground of the undeveloped Good that was in her – was the life of the younger doomed to be the battle-field of mortal conflict with roused forces of Evil in herself? (116).

If Norah is light, Magdalen is darkness; if Norah is good, Magdalen is evil. In addition to emphasizing the differences between the Vanstone sisters, Collins also uses Miss Garth's questioning of character in this passage to call attention to the theatricality of character. Although Miss Garth has known the sisters for most of their lives, she worries that she is not able to properly read their true characters; she also worries that they might have somehow been able to conceal parts of themselves from her.

CONTRASTING MASCULINE AND FEMININE THEATRICALITIES IN *EAST  
LYNNE*

In Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*, two separate but connected plots take shape, both of which are primarily focused on the theatricality of their central figure. The first plot, that of Lady Isabel Vane, explores the ultimate and inevitable the downfall of a character who attempts to use her theatricality to improve her depreciated social status. The second, which is primarily concerned with locating the murderer of Mr. Hallijohn, emphasizes the worst potential outcome of the Victorian fear of theatricality: not only that one might be able to act in a role that is contrary to their sincere self, but that someone might be able to use that theatricality to escape punishment from a crime.

Like her counterparts Lady Audley and Magdalen Vanstone, *East Lynne's* Isabel Vane is revered for her youth and beauty. One of the earliest descriptions of Isabel, taken from the perspective of her future husband Mr. Carlyle upon their first meeting, highlights her beauty but also alludes to her future demise:

Mr. Carlyle had not deemed himself a particular admirer of woman's beauty, but the extraordinary loveliness of the young girl before him nearly took away his senses and his self-possession. It was not so much the perfect contour of the exquisite features that struck him, or the rich damask of the delicate cheek, or the luxuriant falling hair; no, it was the sweet expression of the soft dark eyes...he became conscious, as he grew more familiar with her face, that there was in its character a sad, sorrowful look; only at times was it noticed, when the features were in repose, and it lay chiefly in the very eyes he was admiring. Never does

this unconsciously mournful expression exist, but it is a sure index of sorrow and suffering: but Mr. Carlyle understood it not. And who could connect sorrow with the anticipated brilliant future of Isabel Vane? (11).

In addition to seeing her outward beauty, Mr. Carlyle is able to see a glimpse of Isabel's interiority through her eyes. Others only see the portions of Isabel's appearance that allude to her ability to obtain a successful future via marriage; however, through her eyes, often described as having a direct connection to the soul where the sincere self resides, Carlyle sees how Isabel's sincere character will lead her to "sorrow and suffering" (11).

Believing that her husband has betrayed her, Isabel abandons the role of Mrs. Carlyle in order to run away with Francis Levison. Levison's poor character causes Isabel to fall into ruin and sorrow. She is no longer able to claim her role as Carlyle's wife, but Levison has not given her a new role as his wife. Now, as the downcast divorcee Isabel Vane, Lord Mount Severn describes her distorted appearance:

She was looking like the ghost of her former self... misery marks the countenance worse than sickness. Her face was white and worn, her hands were thin, her eyes were sunken and surrounded by a black circle: care was digging caves for them. A stranger might have attributed these signs of her state of health: *she* knew better; knew that they were the effects of her wretched mind and heart (284).

Isabel's altered appearance is just not a result of her circumstances; it has resulted from her change of character. Her inability to remain as she was, as Lady Isabel Vane or as Mrs. Carlyle, or to find an available new role to slip into has caused Isabel to decay. She

becomes ghostlike, not her old self but not another person either, a figure who has no place to belong.

Isabel decides to use her proclaimed death to assume a new character, that of Madame Vine, finally able to capitalize on her theatricality. She transfigures her appearance and mannerisms in order to fit into her new role. Wood guides her reader through Isabel's transformations that allow her to become Madame Vine, allowing the reader to assess her surface presentation as the other characters do:

Look at the governess, reader, and see whether you now her. You will say No. But you do, for it is Lady Isabel Vane. But how strangely she is altered! Yes; the railway accident did that for her: and what the accident left undone, grief and remorse accomplished. She limps slightly as she walks, and stoops, which takes from her former height. A scar extends from her chin above her mouth, completely changing the character of the lower part of her face, some of her teeth are missing, so that she speaks with a lisp, and the sober bands of her grey hair – it is nearly silver – are confined under a large close cap. She herself tries to make the change greater, that the chance of being recognized may be at an end, for which reason she wears disfiguring green spectacles, or as they are called, preservers, going round the eyes, and a broad band of gray velvet coming down low upon her forehead. Her dress, too, is equally disfiguring. Never is she seen in one that fits her person, but in those frightful 'loose jackets,' which must surely have been invented by somebody envious of a pretty shape. As to her bonnet, it would put to shame those masquerade things tilted on to the back of the head, for

it actually shaded her face; and she was never seen out of doors without a thick veil... Who could know her? What resemblance was there between that grey, broken-down woman, with her disfiguring marks, and the once lovely Lady Isabel, with her bright colour, her dark flowing curls, and her agile figure? (389).

Many of her features, like the scars on her face and her grey hair, have been naturally, permanently transfigured as a result of time, stress, and/or injury; however, Isabel adds many feigned features, like the glasses and the bonnet, in order to completely rid herself of any traces of her previous roles as Mrs. Carlyle or Isabel Vane. When she places herself, in the character of Madame Vine, as a governess in her former husband's household, she carefully chooses her mannerisms and characteristics so that no one will suspect that Madame Vine is not her sincere self. Even when confronted with gossip about herself, she remains calm and collecting, knowing that "she had her *ro*le to play" (405).

As she grows closer to her former family and acquaintances, Isabel begins to worry that her performance as Madame Vine might be uncovered, that others might be able to see beneath her surface presentation. She avoids any proximity to Mr. Carlyle, fearing that he will instantly be able to discern that she is his former wife. She sneaks around the house that was once her home, listening to doors and peering around corners in order to avoid Carlyle's gaze. Unfortunately for Madame Vine, her disguise slips up in front of one of the few people who are likely to recognize her, Miss Carlyle:

She bent her face on the ground, looking at the damage. What should she do? The veil was over the hedge, the spectacles were broken: how could she dare to show

her unshaded face? That face was rosy just then, as in former days, the eyes were bright, and Miss Carlyle caught their expression, and stared in very amazement.

‘Good heavens above!’ she muttered, ‘what an extraordinary likeness!’ and Lady Isabel’s heart turned faint and sick within her (464).

Once Isabel’s face is revealed without the artificial elements of her disguise, the glasses and the veil, even the long, jagged scar is not enough to conceal her former distinguishing beauty. Similarly, Joyce, Lady Isabel’s maid, instantly recognizes her mistress once she sees Madame Vine without her veil and glasses. Later, Miss Carlyle asks Joyce “of whom does the governess put [her] in mind” (470). Joyce responds that she reminds her of Lady Isabel “both in her face and manner,” and Miss Carlyle remarks that when she saw her without her glasses she thought it was “an extraordinary likeness” and like seeing “the ghost of Lady Isabel Vane” (470-471). Even Barbara, the new Mrs. Carlyle, recognizes the “unaccountable resemblance that Madame Vine bore to Lady Isabel,” despite the fact that the two had very little contact before Isabel fled West Lynne (594).

Finally, as Isabel is nearing death, she sheds the disguise that placed her in the role of Madame Vine and reveals herself to Miss Carlyle and Mr. Carlyle. As is common in sensation fiction, the revelation of Isabel’s identity is highly dramatic; however, the most important detail of the reveal is the comparison of Isabel’s past and present appearances: “Ah! there could no longer be concealment now! There she was, her pale face lying against the pillow, free from its disguising trappings...It was the face of Lady Isabel: changed, certainly, very very much; but still hers” (611). Mr. Carlyle is understandably confused and has trouble addressing his former wife: “Isabel? Are you –

are you – were you Madame Vine?’ he cried, scarcely conscious of what he said” (613). Carlyle cannot even comprehend the specifics of Isabel’s altered identity. He does not know how to reconcile the two identities within the same woman, as indicated in his switch between are and were. He describes Isabel’s transformation as “a likeness, and not a likeness; for every part of her face and form was changed” (619). Similarly, Miss Carlyle condemns Isabel’s performance as Madame Vine, calling it “a mad act” (618). However, the reconciliation of Isabel to her sincere self ultimately allows her to die with relative peace.

Although Lady Isabel is the central figure of *East Lynne*, the search for the elusive Thorn, the man who is suspected of being Hallijohn’s killer and would be able to clear Richard Hare’s name, weaves throughout the narrative as well; the discovery that Thorn was actually a character performed by Sir Francis Levison is central to wrapping up the novel. Levison created the role of Thorn to seduce Afy Hallijohn, but his murder of her father made it pertinent that no one ever discover the circumstances of his acting. Although he only came across the man a few times, the other characters rely on Richard Hare’s identification of Thorn, as he asserts that he “should know him if it were fifty years to come” or “were he disguised” (266). Richard seems to believe that he has been able to see past Thorn’s exterior appearance and gain some critical knowledge of his interiority that will allow him to always identify the man, despite only knowing Thorn in passing.

Finally, an unlikely source, Ebenezer James, is able to identify Levison as the elusive Thorn. He swears twice, once to the lawyer Mr Ball and once during Levison’s

trial, that “he is the same man,” asserting that he is “as positive of his identity as [he is] of [his] own” (539). At a political rally, James snidely remarks to Mr. Dill that Levison “was not always the great man that he is now,” and after some prodding, he reveals that he recognized Levison as the Thorn that used to pursue Afy Hallijohn (479). Dill continues to pose questions to James regarding Levison’s disguise as Thorn, and the two consider why a gentleman might take on another identity:

‘Thorn – Levison, I mean – did not appear to like the recognition,’ said Mr. Dill.

‘Who would, in his position?’ laughed Ebenezer James. ‘I don’t like to be reminded of many a wild scrape of my past life, in my poor station; and what would it be for Levison, were it to come out that he once called himself Thorn, and came running after Miss Afy Hallijohn.’ ‘Why did he call himself Thorn? Why disguise his own name?’ ‘Not knowing, can’t say. *Is* his name Levison? or is it Thorn?’ (479-480).

In his final comment, James calls into question who, or which role, is Levison’s sincere self. This is an interesting question that is not fully addressed in the novel; it seems to be assumed that Levison is his interiority, as this is the name that is his given name.

However, even in the role of Levison, he proves to always be acting in one manner or another to get what he wants from others, so who can say what the man’s sincere self is, or if it exists at all?

Similarly, Wood places a lot of emphasis on Levison’s heart, or lack of heart. In the first description offered of Levison, Wood asserts that although Levison is charming, he lacks sincerity, a trait so important to Victorian heroes: “Few men were so fascinating

in manners (at times and seasons), in face, and in form, few men won so completely upon their hearers' ears, and few were so heartless in their heart of hearts" (15). Lord Mount Severn similarly warns Isabel that Levison is "not a good man" and encourages her to cut all ties with Levison (137). Once she begins to suspect his true nature, Lady Isabel tells Levison he has a "false heart," again emphasizing his lack of sincerity (216). Levison fulfills the accusations through his continuous willful deception of others. For example, Isabel once accuses Levison of wearing a disguise while walking through West Lynne; Levison immediately denies, to which the narrator comments, "False as ever. It *was* worn as a disguise, and he knew it" (270). Levison's inability to be honest in regards to his identity or concealment of his identity distinguishes his theatricality from Isabel's. Isabel acts upon her theatricality in order to survive; Levison does so to maliciously deceive others for his own benefit.

### **Conclusion: Reaffirming the Status Quo**

Although all three of these sensation novels draw attention to theatricality in their characters – whether that is to play on fear in order to draw in audiences or to call into question the validity of the logic behind the fear – they ultimately reaffirm the status quo through marriage and/or death of the guilty parties. These method of reconciliation allow the authors to explore questions of theatricality in relation to the sincere self and to ultimately leave their audiences content as the societal norms, that good people find happy and advantageous marriages and that those who transgress are punished, are validated.

In *Lady Audley's Secret*, the heavy focus on what Helen appears to be in each of her adapted roles reveals that the other characters have determined her character based on appearances and at least part of their anger at the revelation that she has been acting stems from the disconnect between her interiority and what they have judged her to be. In each of her roles, she appears to perfectly fit into the Victorian ideals of femininity. She is young, childlike, golden-haired, sweet, and amiable. The ideal hinges on the fact that these characteristics are innate and cannot be acted by one who does not truly possess them. This is why Lady Audley must be condemned as mad or dangerous; it is better to send her off to a madhouse, out of sight and mind, than to try to cope with the idea that one may be able to act out a role that is contrary to their sincere self. For the last three chapters of the novel, Lady Audley is even written out of her own story. The brief, final mention of Madam Taylor comes as a one sentence account of her death: “It is more than a year since a black-edged letter, written upon foreign paper, came to Robert Audley, to

announce the death of a certain Madame Taylor, who had expired peacefully at Villebrumeuse, dying after a long illness” (379). While she is punished for her inability to adhere to her sincere self, the ending of the novel, which also relays Robert and Clara’s marriage, “leaves the good people all happy and at peace,” the good people in this case being those who refuse to act (380).

*No Name* reaffirms the status quo through Norah’s success, and conversely Magdalen’s failure, in reclaiming the Vanstone fortune and also through Norah and Magdalen’s marriages. The end of the novel, in which Norah, who has only ever remained sincere in her interiority, unintentionally accomplishes the goal which Magdalen has been striving for, illustrates the differences between the two sisters. Perhaps, here, Collins is condemning Magdalen’s acting. She tries to fool and trick her way to her father’s fortune, but Norah is only ever herself and still manages to come into the money that should have been theirs in the first place. Norah’s sincerity and lack of acting leads her to accomplish the goal that Magdalen, even with all of her clever scheming and acting, was unable to achieve. The sisters’ respective marriages finally afford them a legal name, leaving them with identities of their own to claim. Additionally, all of Magdalen’s acting, which only brings her despair and depression throughout the novel, ceases once she meets Robert Kirke, and she returns to the idyllic, happy, carefree girl that she is introduced as at the beginning of the novel; thus, her marriage returns Magdalen to herself.

Wood combines the strategies of marriage and punishment as methods to reaffirm the status quo in *East Lynne*. The narrative partially redeems its own theatricality by

endorsing a normative familial unit through Carlyle and Barbara's marriage. Their marriage liberates Carlyle from the taint of his first marriage, prevents Barbara, a young, attractive, eligible woman, from becoming an old maid, and keeps the children in a nuclear family. Wood also utilizes the death of the transgressive woman, Isabel, to set right the indiscretions of the novel. Isabel's sudden and tragic death both forces her to shed the role of Madame Vine and reveal her interiority and punishes her for taking on a false role in the first place. Levison is also punished for his crimes, equally of his adaptation of his theatricality to deceive a young woman and of murder, but interestingly, he is not punished as severely as Isabel. Isabel is forced to indefinitely part with her beloved children without them ever knowing that she did not abandon them; although she gains some closure with her confession to Carlyle, her suffering does not seem to fully cease. Levison, on the other hand, is allowed to escape death and live out his days as a prisoner, despite the fact that he is initially condemned to death by hanging. Wood does note that this fate is "a far more disgraceful one in the estimation of Sir Francis," thus this fate might be a more fitting one, equivalent to the deaths of Isabel or Lady Audley.

Ultimately, despite the attention that sensation fiction draws to the ease of transforming one's identity through theatricality and despite any critique of the fear of theatricality present within sensation fiction, the failures of those who do act in sensation fiction reaffirms the validity of the interior self that cannot be erased or even concealed for long. Even when these characters do act, their true identity is inevitably discovered, confirming for disgruntled Victorian audiences that innate identity will always prevail.

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