

**"RANK AND POWER": AUTHORSHIP, THE DIARY, AND THE LAW
IN WILKIE COLLINS'S *THE WOMAN IN WHITE***

by

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This essay is dedicated to my late father, Eric Albright, who was a constant source of support, love, and strength throughout the course of my education, first as an undergraduate at Saint Mary's University, then as a Master of Arts candidate at Dalhousie University. He believed in me always, even when I did not believe in myself—for that (and for many reasons more), I am forever grateful.

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ABSTRACT

Addressing a gap in current criticism, this thesis explores the notion of authorship and its authority in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*. There are notable parallels between Collins's unique interest in, and vexation with, nineteenth-century British copyright law (and indeed, other aspects of British law) and his innovative use of the diary as narrative form. In this context, Count Fosco's penetration of Marian Halcombe's diary, which forms part of *The Woman in White*, can be read symbolically as an attempt to wrest control from its author. The diary, then, is posited as much more than a gendered, private, and introspective text: instead, it becomes a locus for the complexity and precariousness of Victorian authorship.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In an 1872 letter to his solicitor William Tindell, as a response to a publisher's request to know the duration of the copyright on his work, Wilkie Collins writes:

As to the copyright—how do I know how long I am going to live? I can only state the 42 years from publication as the duration of my copyrights—if I am called on (as I am) to state when my copyrights expire. You don't tell me whether I am right or wrong in doing this. And what else to do I don't know. Oh the English Law! (Baker and Clarke 350).

The sarcasm and vexation regarding British copyright law expressed in this correspondence would unfortunately plague Collins throughout his literary career. Although he became one of the most commercially successful authors of the Victorian era, Collins found himself struggling for control over his written work from the time he began writing—a circumstance which was not alleviated when he finally became a household name. The publishing industry and evolving literary market of the 1850s and onward, Collins discovered, was a ruthless system that often benefitted large, wealthy, and monopolizing libraries and publishing houses at the expense of authors who wished to retain control over their literary output. Andrew Maunder and Graham Law write that “When Collins began to establish himself as a novelist in the 1850s, the major metropolitan circulating libraries already exercised a virtually hegemonic control over new works of British fiction in volume,” which, ultimately, prevented him and other writers from making immediate financial returns on their works (35). Charles Edward Mudie changed the exclusive atmosphere of the lending of expensive and expansive multi-volume editions when he began to dominate the circulating libraries; he was the

only proprietor to lend books for as little as one to two guinea annual subscriptions. However, while Mudie's "monopolistic system guaranteed a small but stable return to conservative publishers at a time of rapid change," at the same time providing "a living to marginal literary talents," it also "severely limited the potential readership and rewards of writers seeking a popular audience" (Law and Maunder 36).

Collins wanted to sell his work, to reach just such a popular audience and to make a sustained living as an author, but he did not want outside forces to dictate every facet of his artistry. Although he found commercial success while working with Charles Dickens and contributing to Dickens's literary journals, the "English Law" about which he laments in his letter to Tindell did not help Collins to secure the kind of control over his written work that he felt he had the right to exercise, even while working with his mentor. Collins's experience with British law, then—especially as it relates to authorship and the Victorian literary marketplace—is extremely important to consider when one examines the content of his fiction. With this view in mind, this essay explores the degree to which the law has affected the compositions of Collins's novels—especially *The Woman in White*—and traces the law's connection to Collins's conception of authorship at mid-century. By doing so, this essay ultimately reveals that, just as in life, Collins is fighting a constant battle against outside forces in his fiction. More specifically, it reveals that the complex construction of character and narrative form in *The Woman in White* contained for Collins the symbolic potential to represent his precarious position in the literary marketplace, and to envision his work (and himself) operating outside its often-debilitating boundaries.

CHAPTER 2 COLLINS AND THE LAW

Before he began his illustrious (and, at times, controversial) literary career, Wilkie Collins had his sights on a profession altogether different: from 1835-42, Collins studied at Lincoln's Inn to become a lawyer (Maceachen 121). Although he abandoned his legal pursuits in favour of writing—which he first put into practice by authoring the biography of his late father, William Collins¹—the time he spent and the skills he acquired during his studies did not go to waste. His interest in and experience with the details of the law abound in his fiction, and this interest also undoubtedly helped him to reinvent and reinvigorate contemporary approaches to Victorian literature. For instance, unlike many authors of his time—such as Trollope, who famously declared that character, and not plot, was a main concern when writing his fiction, which allowed the story to unfold as he developed his characters—Collins painstakingly drafted his novel's plots in their entirety before he ever put pen to paper. Much in the way a lawyer must meticulously collect evidence and construct his legal argument before going to trial, Collins combined his legal acumen with a detail-oriented construction of events, approaching his writing in a way that paralleled his legal training. This proved an extremely useful authorial strategy as, ultimately, his careful planning of the details of his narratives is what helped make his popular fiction so sensational; always having his denouement in mind, Collins mastered the thrilling effects of suspense by invariably leaving his chapters, and his readers, on the verge of discovery (an effect otherwise known as the “curtain” or, as we know it today, the cliff-hanger). Much of his fiction is also well-known to have been inspired by actual criminal proceedings from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which is especially true for *The Woman in White*. Importantly, these trials reveal that the cases they pursued

were often based on the negligence and injustice of the law and the law's inability to protect the vulnerability of citizens—especially women. And when his inspiration does not deal directly with the inherent injustice of the law, it reveals the degree to which the law could be manipulated, which, in the wrong hands—as Collins's fiction suggests—had the potential to be both dangerous and volatile.

The first point of inspiration for *The Woman in White* is the famously documented conspiracy against Madame de Douhault who, in 1788, was robbed of her identity and was “confined in a Parisian lunatic asylum under a false name” at her brother's instruction, who wanted to steal the inheritance she received from their father upon his passing (*Wilkie Collins* 75). Presumed dead, Madame de Douhault lost her inheritance to her brother and nephew; and although she was eventually released from the asylum in 1789, she never succeeded in proving her identity in order to regain what she had lost. Impoverished, Madame de Douhault then died ignominiously in 1817.² Readers of *The Woman in White* will recognize the similarities between Douhault's case and one of the novel's major plot points. Laura Fairlie, the heiress to Limmeridge House and her drawing instructor Walter Hartright's love interest, is engaged to marry the acerbic, and much older, Sir Percival Glyde. For good reason, Laura does not want to marry Sir Percival (she in fact reciprocates Walter's feelings), but because the marriage settlement between them was arranged by her father before his passing, she feels obligated to go forward with the arrangement. This decision turns out very badly for Laura, as her uncanny resemblance to the novel's mysterious woman in white, Anne Catherick, enables Sir Percival and his indefatigably nefarious friend Count Fosco to confine Laura to a lunatic asylum in place of her doppelgänger Anne. This, in turn, results in Sir Percival's usurpation of Laura's inheritance to the sum of twenty thousand pounds; Fosco also

benefits from this grandiose deception, as his wife, Laura's Aunt, receives ten thousand pounds upon Laura's "death." By centering Laura's plight as the novel's main narrative, and by mirroring the true story of Madame de Douhault to Laura's own, Collins makes a powerful statement about not only the law's inability to protect, but also its inherent prejudice against and deliberate subjugation of women.

John Sutherland notes that another famous trial had a significant influence on Wilkie Collins as he was conceiving *The Woman in White*. In 1856, William Palmer, notoriously known as the "Rugely Poisoner," was accused of murder and then found guilty—not from physical evidence, but circumstantial evidence alone—creating a legal precedent in Victorian criminal proceedings (*Victorian Fiction* 39). What made the circumstantial evidence so compelling is the narrative that the prosecution was able to construct through the skilled use of witness testimony, which critically wove together ostensibly minute and seemingly disparate events, without any physical evidence to corroborate their stories—a strategy until that time unheard of, but one that proved critical for securing justice against the elusive felon.³ Although Collins never outwardly attributed his conception of *The Woman in White* to this trial, a recollection of his later in life, as Sutherland explains, leaves little doubt that it must have been so. Referring to a trial he had attended in 1856 (the year of the Palmer trial), Sutherland notes that Collins was "struck by the way each witness rose in turn to contribute a personal fragment to the chain of evidence" (*Victorian Fiction* 33). On this, Collins wrote:

It came to me then . . . that a series of events in a novel would lend themselves well to an exposition like this . . . one could impart to the reader that acceptance, that sense of belief, which was produced here by

the succession of testimonies . . . The more I thought of it, the more an effort of this kind struck me as bound to succeed. Consequently when the case was over I went home and determined to make the effort. (Davis 211)

Again, the parallels are striking. The mystery of Anne Catherick, and the mystery surrounding the crimes perpetrated by Sir Percival Glyde and the Count are presented to the reader, by Collins, as a series of written testimonies from different characters, outlining their part in, and recollection of, the novel's events. Just as Collins explains, this technique indeed creates a sense of believability of the novel's events, and imparts an immediacy to their occurrences that draws readers in and makes them feel as though they are part of what is taking place. While contemporaries such as Henry James sometimes pointed out that Collins's narrative technique was not so original as Collins himself thought (citing the use of the diary and letters, for instance, in novels such as *Wuthering Heights* and James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*), Sutherland claims that "they arguably missed the point." In the preface of the novel, "What Collins primarily stresses . . . is the analogy of *The Woman in White*'s narrative to the processes of law, as it is ritually played out in the English criminal court. The novel's technique is forensic, not historical" (*Victorian Fiction* 33). Collins's unique interest in, knowledge of, and relationship with the law, as Sutherland suggests, foregrounds the novel's construction, and should be the focus of its critical inquiries. British law was tremendously important to Collins—not simply as a vehicle to portray his stories, but more importantly as a way to evaluate its ability to mete out justice for the citizens it was meant to protect.

Collins's evaluation of the efficacy of British law is especially apparent in several of his novels' portrayals of the constraints of marriage law, and its sexist and patriarchal

treatment of women and wives. In addition to *The Woman in White*'s forensic approach and its deliberate evocation of the conspiracy against Madame de Douhault, the novel also strongly critiques the inefficacies of marriage law. Marriage law figures even more prominently in two of his later novels, *No Name* (1862) and *Man and Wife* (1870). After the passing of the 1857 Divorce and Matrimonial Causes act, "which established a civil divorce court in London, allowed husbands to divorce wives on the grounds of adultery, and granted wives the right to divorce adulterous husbands if their adultery was compounded by cruelty, bigamy, incest, or bestiality," Collins was outraged (*Wilkie Collins* 72). Although men and women could now pursue divorce with less difficulty, the act strongly favoured husbands over wives, as husbands were only required to provide proof of adultery, whereas wives had to both prove adultery as well as provide evidence that their spouses' actions were significantly more harmful than "mere" disloyalty. Because of this injustice, Collins openly lamented what he saw as the "senseless . . . prejudice" that prevented divorce from being "equal in its operation on husbands and wives of all ranks" (Law and Maunder 83). It became very important for Collins, then, to represent the myriad ways that marriage law could be used and manipulated by men in ways very damaging to women. As I have already discussed, *The Woman in White*'s Sir Percival Glyde takes advantage of his wife's vulnerable position, in that she bears a marked resemblance to an unfortunate asylum inmate. What's more, he also uses the common-law doctrine of coverture against his wife, which dictates that a woman's property rights become those of her husband's upon marriage, to ensure his own finances remain in good standing (it is revealed that Sir Percival's primary motivation for marrying Laura is that he has squandered all of his money, is thus in severe debt, and is unable to pay back what he owes). Although there is a clause in their marriage contract

that states Laura is to remain in possession of her inheritance either until her death, or until she signs a legal document agreeing to give her inheritance to her husband (which, despite Sir Percival's coercive attempts, she does not), Sir Percival's plot to fake her death nevertheless takes advantage of her frailty and the law's loophole to ensure his own financial security. Lillian Nayder explains that, "In theory, coverture provided wives the privileges and protection unmarried women did not enjoy. But in practice . . . it deprived wives of their freedom and autonomy and left them utterly dependent on their husbands, who might or might not choose to protect them in the manner described by common law" (*Wilkie Collins* 73). Detailing the degree to which Laura's vulnerability and loss of autonomy is apparent in the novel, she goes on to explain that "in staging Laura's death, Sir Percival and Count Fosco exhibit their own villainy; yet they also expose the criminality of the common law, which forces a woman to suffer a civic death upon her marriage, depriving her of her property rights and legal personality" (*Wilkie Collins* 82). By focussing in his fiction on the way marriage law eviscerates the autonomy and property rights women once possessed, Collins—as Nayder suggests—not only points to the injustice of the law, but also to its injurious and deliberate negligence in protecting the rights of half of its citizens.

By taking up the inefficacy of marriage law in three of his major novels—two of which are primarily concerned with this aim—and thereby aligning himself with Victorian women advocating for legal and social progress, Collins definitively established his passion for drawing attention to the law's inherent hypocrisy and injustice, especially where women were concerned. However, during his time writing for Dickens's popular monthly magazine *Household Words*, Collins was constantly put in check by his conservative mentor, being instructed to tame the progressive political sentiments that

were embedded in his work. Although their friendship and working relationship was exciting to Collins at the beginning of his career, and their relationship over twenty plus years was in many ways a positive one, Nayder and other scholars argue that their ostensible “partnership” was complex, and often led to Collins’s resentment of Dickens.⁴ During Collins’s tenure at *Household Words*, “Not only were Dickens’s contributors required to publish anonymously; they encountered strict stipulations about the structure, length, and content of their fiction and essays; were forced to submit to the editorial authority of Dickens; and occasionally became embroiled in disputes over copyright and permission to reprint their works” (*Unequal Partners* 21). George Augustus Sala, who was also a contributor to *Household Words*, reflects on Dickens’s strict policies in his *Life and Adventures* in no uncertain terms: referring to Dickens’s refusal to allow Sala to reprint a few of his smaller pieces, Sala writes that “As the law of copyright then stood . . . I had absolutely no remedy,” since “the proprietor of a periodical had the power of putting an embargo on the republication of contributions, unless a special agreement to the contrary had been made” (311). What’s more, because Dickens required his contributors to publish anonymously, he often received credit for the pieces he published. Under the constraints of this limited and competitive atmosphere, Collins not only sympathized with his fellow contributors, for who it appeared “that Dickens had created a class system in which contributors were the servants or hands and Dickens himself was the master,” but he also “increasingly felt the need to resist Dickens’s authority and claim his work as his own.” (*Unequal Partners* 9, 3).

Ironically, it is Dickens who first taught Collins “to look to his own interests [as an author], since the profits of his literary labors were not his alone” (*Unequal Partners* 1-2). This is a lesson that became useful both for his time writing for Dickens, as well as

dealing with international piracy and copyright laws. Having learned to be hyper vigilant in insuring that his name was attributed to his own work in *Household Words* and Dickens's subsequent journal *All the Year Round*, and having learned, indeed, that an author's very name held significant market value, Collins paid especial attention to the treatment of his compositions, both at home and abroad. As such, Collins was an outspoken advocate of international copyright law, and "believed that his originality should be legally recognized and protected" (Law and Maunder 7). As Graham Law and Andrew Maunder explain, "Collins's position is founded on a belief in the absolute, inalienable, and perpetual moral right of the author to control his own literary productions," which, in his view, should not be limited to Europe alone, but extended overseas as well. In fact, Collins felt so strongly about protecting his rights as an author, that when he learned that a small Dutch publishing house attempted to publish a translation of *Man and Wife* without his permission or any form of compensation, he furiously penned his journalistic essay "A National Wrong" (1870) on the subject. He also vehemently wrote about what he saw as American literary theft in his later piece, "Considerations on the Copyright Question" (1880). Indeed, Collins did not only express his frustrations in published journalistic pieces; he also frequently wrote of them in personal letters, as evidenced by the 1870 letter to his solicitor. In an 1871 letter to his publishing house Cassel's, he laments the lack of security of his authorial position in the marketplace even further, writing: "I am getting so weary of the vexatious and absurd regulations which these foreign laws impose on English literature, that I am strongly disposed to let myself be robbed, as the preferable alternative to letting myself be worried" (33).

Collins's belief in the perpetual right of the author to have control over his own

work was not the standard practice during his lifetime. Rather, “publication conferred on the author a proprietary right limited in duration, that could be freely assigned to another, and that was in practice typically leased or sold outright to a publishing house” (Law and Maunder 153). Collins’s embroilment in, and contention with, copyright law—and the law’s inability to protect his rights as an author—was something he would not overcome in his lifetime. However, he had a unique position in the literary marketplace as a writer who must (and did) excel under the tremendous pressures of monthly, then weekly, publications. Furthermore, the uniqueness of his position was enhanced by the fact that he was a partner and in many ways rival to the inimitable, colossal literary force Charles Dickens; that he was an author who came to be known for his steadfast stance on the inefficacy of British and international copyright laws; and that he was a writer whose intricate knowledge of British law inspired, propelled, and invigorated his fiction. There is thus a significant likelihood that, combined, these factors affected the compositions of his novels—particularly *The Woman in White*—and were, either consciously or subconsciously, embedded in the recesses of its pages.

CHAPTER 3 THE AUTHOR(S): COLLINS AND MARIAN HALCOMBE

In addition to Collins's tendency to occupy his fiction with aspects of the law and its often-ineffective operations, he also had a clear propensity to write about writing—both of which coalesce in *The Woman in White* as an illuminating, symbolic representation of the kind of precarity so particular to mid-century Victorian authorship. In her work on Collins and the female Gothic, Tamar Heller recognizes the way Collins's fiction is historically imbued with parallels unique to authorship: she explains that his novel *After Dark*, for instance—in which a wife suggests that her husband write for money, then transforms his stories into Gothic narratives—is “a plot that encodes Collins's anxiety about the female voice and the status of Gothic fiction [a genre with which his fiction was continually aligned] in the Victorian literary establishment” (82). Heller also notes that Collins's novel *Basil* links women writers with “the degradation of the marketplace in which male writers must now compete” (89). According to her, these novels symbolize Collins's dissatisfaction at being paralleled with popular women writers at mid-century; as a novelist with dreams of achieving a “high” literary status, associations of this kind reminded him of the impossibility of reaching such a goal (or at least, not on the terms he envisioned). The reality was that Collins was a novelist whose literary career began during a time in which it was necessary for him to compete in a marketplace that—due to a growing readership, and the establishment of successful female literary rivals, such as Braddon—was becoming more saturated and, therefore, more demanding. With a growing readership both at home, in Britain, and across the Atlantic, in America, another inevitability of achieving a popular literary status, if not a “high” one, was that the

demand for readable and compelling fiction would outweigh its supply. As his extreme and heated contention with copyright law reveals, Collins discovered that an increased demand for his written work did not always increase its value; rather, publishers found ways to give their readers what they wanted without remuneration for the author, or concern for the author's artistic property.

While *After Dark* and *Basil* deal, in part, with writing in what Collins believed to be a degraded marketplace, in addition to the importance of competition in such a marketplace, *The Woman in White* explores the implications of mid-century Victorian authorship even further by combining Collins's legal acumen and contentions with veiled representations of his own uncertain—and legally unprotected—literary and commercial positions. Sundeep Bisla agrees, and his work *Wilkie Collins and Copyright* on the subject is a highly important precursor for my own argument. In his essay “Copy-book Morals: *The Woman in White* and Publishing History,” Bisla reads *The Woman in White* as an allegory of Collins's concerns about copyright law. Referring to the infamous moment the reader realizes Count Fosco has intruded upon Marian Halcombe's diary, that the reader has just been consuming (a piece of writing that proves paramount for Hartright's investigation, and for the persecution of Sir Percival and Fosco—and which I will return to shortly), Bisla writes that

The Woman in White turns out to be a suppressed allegory, simultaneously published in both Britain and America, subliminally lobbying against the practice of pirating British works. The nineteenth-century American readers who had been obtaining their reading material if not for ‘free,’ as far as payments to the author went, then for lower-than English rates

(leaving the British author feeling like exploited labor) should have felt quite at home with the story's crossing over from Marian to Fosco, for allegorically this shift represents the book's crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. They should not have been shocked to be put into Fosco's position, but of course were, since the novel does not immediately represent itself as a copyright allegory. (121)

Bisla is indeed correct when he mentions that the novel's symbolic potential to be read as a copyright allegory is not readily apparent, especially as Fosco is an Italian—not an American; however, his position is a compelling one, and there is much evidence to support that *The Woman in White* exhibits many parallels between its characters, structure, and narrative events and the kind of precarity which constituted mid-Victorian authorship that Collins, particularly, experienced. In his essay, Bisla focusses his attention on Collins's own critical essay, "Considerations on the Copyright Question" (which I have already briefly mentioned), and theorizes that Fosco's foreign identity, coupled with his blatant disregard for Marian's diary, parallel the "foreign" American greed and ungentlemanly disregard for the unsanctioned dissemination of Collins's novels. "Marian's diary," he states, is "the stand-in for Collins's book" (125). In my reading of the novel, I see this correlation—but Bisla mentions it only peripherally, and focusses his attention, instead, on the implications of Fosco's intrusion into her written work (her diary) in light of Collin's notable position on Victorian international copyright law. His peripheral consideration, however, leaves some important questions unanswered. For instance, if Marian's diary is the stand-in for Collins's book, why would he represent his book, his written work—the integrity of which he was so passionate about retaining—as a

form of women's writing? Furthermore, why might Collins have chosen the diary—a text typically associated with domesticity and feminine flights of fancy—above any other written form? What could be so unique about the diary for Collins to have deliberately chosen it as his means to express his anxieties of Victorian authorship and vexation with copyright law; and what might this suggest about his conception of, and relation to, women's writing in the literary marketplace?

Contrary to what Heller suggests about Collins's relation to contemporary women writers, Collins chooses a dominant and unforgettable female writer, Marian Halcombe, as his primary heroine, who—as we shall see—is representative of an author much like himself. To begin, Marian is, by no stretch of the imagination, an anomaly according to the typical Victorian conception of women. A “dark and mannish woman,” she is a marked contrast to her fair-skinned, blonde-haired, delicate half-sister. Yet, as John Sutherland attests, this is also what makes her “irresistibly fascinating” (*The Woman in White* x). Walter's impression during his first meeting with Marian, after he has been hired on as art teacher at Limmeridge House, says it all. “Struck by the beauty of her form,” he recalls that,

The easy elegance of every movement of her limbs and body as soon as she began to advance . . . set me in a flutter of expectation to see her face. She left the window—and I said to myself, The lady is dark. She moved forward a few steps—and I said to myself, The lady is young. She approached nearer—and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), The lady is ugly! . . . [her] complexion was

almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. (31-2)

As Walter's astonishment suggests, Marian Halcombe defies categorization; she is both masculine and feminine, both abrupt and graceful. Ann Gaylin writes that "It is precisely this defiance of gender stereotypes that makes Marian so attractive, not only to Count Fosco [and Walter Hartright], but to us as readers. Marian embodies what Barthes calls an erotic space of 'intermittence' or betweenness, the space of textual pleasure, for she represents liminality" (315).⁵ Marian's liminality, her "betweenness," is important to consider in terms of Collins's decision to put Marian, in many ways, at the centre of the case against Sir Percival and Count Fosco. If we accept that Marian is representative of a writer with unique authorial parallels to Collins (as I believe, and as Sundeep Bisla believes we should), then his decision to have her defy boundaries and escape traditional dichotomies can be translated as a desire to position the writer outside of—or, more accurately, between—categories that would attempt to define them: "high" versus "low" literature, for instance, or masculine versus feminine writing. At the same time, Marian's clear superior force (she proves to be an incredible detective of the utmost reliability) undermines the patriarchal authority that attempts to demarcate her.

By constructing Marian in such a powerful way, thereby subverting the standard ideological authority of mid-century Victorian Britain, Collins establishes the potential that this character can equally undermine—or at the very least, call into question—the copyright laws that claim to protect the rights of authors. Sue Lonoff observes that "Marian is so markedly superior in force of personality and in construction that she justifies Fosco's subversive observations . . . 'that she has the foresight and resolution of a

man” (143). As she also explains, Marian’s “dissective quality”—which is especially apparent in her diary, and is a quality she has in common with many of Collins’s male protagonists—“suggests Collins’s failure to separate his own voice from the voices of his characters” (129). Collins’s “failure” as Lonoff describes, is, I would argue, no failure at all; rather, the possibility to recognize his voice in Marian’s construction is Collins’s conscious decision, allowing him to represent an author who is exempt from definition yet whose powerful force in the literary marketplace demands respect.

Marian’s narrative authority in *The Woman in White* certainly demands no less. To begin, her diary takes up tremendous textual space within the structure of the novel—occupying nearly one third of its pages. Other than the account written by the novel’s protagonist Walter Hartright, Marian’s diary easily dwarfs the other testimonies: in other words, she is a prolific writer. And as Grace Beekman proves in her innovative empirical measure of the novel’s affective emotionality, Marian is prominently responsible for *The Woman in White*’s cultivation of suspense—one of the main reasons the novel was such an outstanding success. In her study, Beekman isolates every moment of expressed emotion among the characters, in addition to every moment a character induces feeling in another. She then tallies the frequency of emotion within each character (as well as the moments they are responsible for effecting emotion)—together forming what she terms their “emotionality”—and distinguishes whether these emotions correlate to the novel’s serial installments. Unsurprisingly, her work proves that the correlation between the suspense of individual installments and character emotion or feeling is extremely strong. Surprisingly, however, Beekman explains that “The results of this empirical research reveal that *The Woman in White* is not, as some scholars have alleged, primarily concerned with Walter Hartright’s emotional development; rather, the serial novel

privileges the emotions associated with female characters. In fact, it relies on their expressions of feeling to maintain suspense and reader empathy” (10). Furthermore, her methodology, she explains, “highlights the connection between serialization as a publishing format and a serial narrative’s emotional rhythms: Collins . . . needed to encourage readers to feel emotionally connected to the narrator and emotionally invested in the outcome of installments’ suspenseful cliff-hanger in order to maintain interest in the narrative and the periodical itself” (13). A perfect example of the kind of suspense cultivated—what Beekman refers to as “A notable spike in [the novel’s] emotional density”—occurs in installment 10, “when readers are introduced to Marian Halcombe’s diary” (13). The second paragraph of the installment (and of Marian’s diary) reads:

I have been sadly distrustful of myself, in this difficult and lamentable matter, ever since I found out my own ignorance of the strength of Laura’s unhappy attachment. I ought to have known that the delicacy and forbearance and sense of honour which drew me to poor Hartright, and made me so sincerely admire and respect him, were just the qualities to appeal most irresistibly to Laura’s natural sensitiveness and natural generosity of nature. And yet, until she opened her heart to me of her own accord, I had no suspicion that this new feeling had taken root so deeply. I now fear that it will remain with her and alter her for life. The discovery that I have committed such an error in judgement as this, makes me hesitate about everything else. I hesitate about Sir Percival, in the face of the plainest proofs. I hesitate even speaking to Laura. On this very

morning, I doubted, with my hand on the door, whether I should ask her the questions I had come to put, or not. (164)

The sense of suspicion, doubt, fear, distrust, and hesitation in this passage is abundantly clear. The contrast of these emotions with the “forbearance and sense of honor” that Marian witnesses in Hartright, and to the “natural sensitiveness and natural generosity of nature” Marian knows to comprise Laura’s personality, enhances them even more, and increases the reader’s own sense of suspense and distrust—as though Marian’s hesitations are pouring from the page into our laps: readers can feel, and carry, this weight when we read her words. The ability to make a reader feel emotionally invested in this way helps the reader to sympathize with those that are unjustly treated—something Collins was personally invested in; and as Marian is unquestionably the writer who is most responsible for the reader’s emotional attachment and is therefore most responsible for the cultivation of suspense, the parallels between her and a writer like Collins become apparent. Moreover, Marian’s responsibility for the success of the novel’s periodical installments, as Beekman illustrates, places her in an authorial position that is entirely indicative of the mid-century Victorian literary market and of its publishing practices, which relied on constant production and monthly and weekly reader investment. As Collins was a writer who found himself at the centre of this literary revolution, it seems especially plausible that his writing of *The Woman in White* came to embody his personal experiences as an author.

What’s more, compared to the contributors of the other testimonies within the novel—but very much like Collins—Marian does not have the luxury of time when writing, which substantiates the very real possibility that she represents a kind of writer

unique to Collins's own authorial circumstances. Indeed, Marian understands, early on, that to secure a safe and comfortable future for herself and her sister, she must write with extreme constancy. As she notes to herself: "In the perilous uncertainty of our present situation, it is hard to say what future interests may not depend upon the regularity of the entries in my journal, and upon the reliability of my recollection at the time when I make them" (290). Throughout the novel, it is proven that Marian has, in fact, a remarkable memory. While other testimonial contributors fail to remember dates, names, places, times, or events, Marian recalls them exactly. Marian's ability to ceaselessly write at regular intervals, without ever compromising her faculty of recollection, is yet another trait she has in common with Collins. Graham Law explains that

almost throughout the Victorian period, the rigidity of the market for new books—geared to expensive multivolume editions in small print runs for the circulating libraries—encouraged a mode of prior part-publication characterized by variety and innovation. By the second half of the century, there were few novelists who did not issue their work initially in installments of some kind. (100)

As a writer, Collins was in a unique position in the development of the serial market because of his (at-first) enthusiastic response to the shift "from the more leisurely monthly number to the compact weekly instalment" ("The Professional Writer" 100). Whereas writers like Dickens preferred the flexibility and openness of the monthly number, Collins found the pressures of weeklies exhilarating and, initially, invigorating. Like his own character, Marian, Collins thrived under the pressure of constant production, and his success was aided by his careful planning of the narrative arc (which enabled him

to finish his instalments at the height of climax, leaving his readers wanting more), as well as his recollection of integral, yet minute details.

Writing under the pressure of constant production, however—even for a writer like Collins, who established his literary career generating his novels in this way—eventually takes its toll. In the novel, after she has spied on Sir Percival and Count Fosco in the rain and the dead of night, but before she falls ill with typhus fever, Marian feels compelled to record everything that took place; she does this because she knows that without her meticulous recording of events, her position—and Laura and Walter’s too—against Sir Percival and Count Fosco, would be perilously vulnerable. As she writes: “I recall . . . coming in here from the bedroom, with my pen and ink, and paper, before sunrise . . . the ceaseless writing, faster and faster, hotter and hotter, driving on more and more wakefully . . . how clearly I recall it, from the beginning by candlelight, to the end of the page before this, in the sunshine of the new day!” (342). Because of the precarity⁶ of her situation against the novel’s criminals, Marian has here been forced to write furiously, to do what she must to lend herself and her loved ones some measure of security. In her haste and delirium, she recognizes the physical toll her writing is taking, yet she knows she must persist despite her body’s warnings: “Why do I sit here still? Why do I weary my hot eyes and burning head by writing more?” (342). Later in his career, Collins is known to have suffered from “poor health,” which resulted in large part from “overproduction,” and which eventually placed “a severe strain on Collins’s creative energy” (Ashley 268-9). Although his creative energy was arguably at its best during his composition of *The Woman in White*, it is difficult not to think of the personal toll this task must have taken when we read of the immense effort needed, both physically and mentally, for Marian to write at the end of her narrative. Collins’s decision to emphasize

Marian's sheer might and strength of will, despite her circumstances being stacked against her, suggests his personal frustration with being forced to produce his own work in a new literary market that pushed him beyond reasonable limitations and that simultaneously took advantage of his literary productions (much in the way that Fosco will take advantage of Marian's diary). By paralleling Marian's authorial circumstances to his own, he is highlighting the plight of the mid-century Victorian author, and of such an author's vulnerability in the marketplace.

In the novel's 1860 preface, Collins approaches his authorial vulnerability more explicitly. Addressing literary critics, he writes:

In the event of this book being reviewed, I venture to ask whether it is possible to praise the writer, or to blame him, without opening the proceedings by telling his story at second-hand? As that story is written by me—with the inevitable suppressions which the periodical system of publication forces on the novelist—the telling it fills more than a thousand closely printed pages. No small portion of this space is occupied by hundreds of little 'connecting links,' of trifling value in themselves, but of the utmost importance in maintaining the smoothness, the reality, and the probability of the entire narrative. If the critic tells the story *with* these, can he do it in his allotted page, or column, as the case may be? If he tells it *without* these, is he doing a fellow-labourer in another form of Art, the justice which writers owe to one another? (646)

Collins is obviously appealing to critics and literary reviewers to do justice to his work; he is reminding them that a novel like *The Woman in White* cannot be accurately

summarized in a short column or under the spatial restraints of a newspaper article. In doing so, however, he is also drawing his reader's attention to the incredible effort it took him to write the novel, to the artistry and ingenuity necessary for his monumental work that "fills more than a thousand closely-printed pages." He also explicitly refers to the "suppressions" of the "periodical system" under which he wrote, which only serves to emphasize and highlight Collins's mastery. His stance is ultimately a defensive one; he wants proper acknowledgement for his capabilities and the results they produce. A stance such as this supports Sundeep Bisla's argument that Collins wanted his American readers to recognize their complicity in the pirating of his works—that Fosco's intrusion into Marian's diary is their intrusion into his novel. Collins's call for the "justice which writers owe to one another," is also his call for legal justice in the literary marketplace: publishers—who, like writers, are aware of the labour involved and the commercial dependency on written material—must treat his work fairly, and give credit and financial compensation where and when they are due.

Clearly, writers like Collins often found themselves in uncertain and precarious positions within the literary marketplace. Just as Marian is forced to depend on her writing to secure justice for her sister (as she cannot depend on the law to see that Laura remains safe from harm), so too is Collins dependent on his writing to maintain a living, and to establish himself among the literary greats of his time. Yet both Marian and Collins are susceptible to forces beyond their control: Marian, to the criminal who violates her diary for his own devious ends, and Collins, to the publishers who take advantage of his literary labours and print his work without permission or compensation. The scene in which Marian spies on Sir Percival and the Count and overhears their clandestine conversation, and that occurs just before she is forced to furiously pen her

recollections, symbolizes, in many ways, the mid-century Victorian author's vulnerability and precarity. Ann Gaylin, who writes that the operation of eavesdropping in *The Woman in White* "spatially represents the interaction of social, institutional, and narrative forces," contends that "Eavesdropping, the usurpation of other peoples' private information for one's own ends, suggests the unsanctioned transfer and use of narrative information from speaking subject to listener, and from writer to reader within a text." Ideologically, she says, "eavesdropping dramatizes the struggle for the control of a story and its dissemination" (306). While in terms of Marian's spying scene, Gaylin's understanding of eavesdropping suggests that Sir Percival and Fosco are the ones at risk of losing control of their story, her view nevertheless sheds light on Marian's own authorial circumstances. If the act of eavesdropping spatially represents the unique way that social, institutional, and narrative forces come together, we can interpret Marian's vulnerable position on the verandah, stripped to her undergarments and being pelted with rain, as a symbolic representation of the degree of vulnerability authors face when publishing their works. Marian, like Collins, and like so many actual Victorian writers, is forced into a position where she must face imminent physical danger in order to gain the upper hand—some measure of control in her circumstances. If Marian makes the wrong move, she is at risk of discovery (or worse, death); if an author makes the wrong career move—perhaps trusting a publisher whose motives are dubious—he or she is at risk of losing everything they have worked so hard to attain. For an author, the wrong move could lead to the death of a career, social "death" (like Laura's erasure from the landed gentry), or even physical death. For an author, like for Marian teetering on the edge of the verandah, the stakes are real, and they are very high.

With stakes as high as these for an author like Collins, Marian undoubtedly makes

for an ideal literary representative. She defies categorization, she is superior in verbal force and intellect, and she shines her brightest when forced into a corner (or on a verandah, as the case may be). Why, then, does Collins choose Marian's diary as (in Bisla's words) a "stand-in" for his book, when during Collins's lifetime diaries were socially and culturally seen as nothing more than "receptacles for women's silliness" (Summerscale 152)? It is possible that this decision could merely have been a practical one. In her book on the Victorian literary use of the diary as narrative form, Catherine Delafeld writes that diaries offer a "sense of originality and verisimilitude," which is "made abundantly clear with dates, derivation and the addition of 'private correspondence'" (20)—qualities that lend themselves nicely to sensation fiction, particularly. However, Kathryn Carter's work on diaries and their importance in mid-century Victorian Britain suggests more plausible reasons. She writes that

the diary assumed cultural importance as a private document; that is, it promised to represent a literary product exempt from the marketplace and to provide evidence of unexploited creative labor. The diary promised to imaginatively symbolize the unpaid, voluntary, self-motivated, self-fulfilling, non-competitive, private work of literature; it might also (illusively) demarcate authentic writing from that which was commercialized, publicized, or circulated and thereby denigrated. (255)

The cultural value of the diary lies in its conception and perception as a *private* document; its literary value, I believe, lies in this belief as well. Because the diary represents, as Carter explains, "a literary product exempt from the marketplace," and provides "evidence of unexploited creative labor," it seems a natural formal choice for an

author, like Collins, who wished his work could be equally exempt from the influences of the marketplace, and who ardently wished his own creative labour could not, and would not, be exploited. The law's inability to protect his rights as an author led Collins to construct a book structurally dependent on a form of writing that—because of its private nature—did not need the help of the law. The widely-accepted privacy of the diary lends the form a sense of inviolability; no one would dream of tampering with a diary, because to do so would be morally reprehensible. Laws and regulations are therefore not needed to keep the diary and its writing intact. Additionally, the diary's symbolic potential to be read as non-competitive created a space with which Collins could explore or visualize his own writing operating outside of the literary marketplace. The absence of competition equates to an absence of outside pressure and, subsequently, an absence of forces beyond an author's control.

The denigration of his writing was also a fear of Collins's. Graham Law explains that in his 1858 essay "The Unknown Public," Collins "perceptively inferred the emergence of a new mass reading public from the nationwide prevalence of 'penny-fiction weeklies.'" In the essay, Collins outlines his attraction "both economically and ideologically . . . [to] the idea of simultaneously reaching a mass audience measuring in tens of thousands rather than hundreds"; but, as Law explains, "he also clearly regarded appearing in such popular outlets as beneath his literary dignity, and mocked the stories as crude and ill-written and the readers as coarse or naïve" ("Wilkie in the Weeklies" 253-4). Collins's decision to place Marian and her diary at the centre of *The Woman in White*, then, is a symbolic act itself: Collins wished to be exempt from the literary marketplace that had the ability to control his written work beyond his personal sanction, and to place his writing outside of the commercial exchange that could devalue his

writing. At the same time, Collins's brilliance within the genre of sensation fiction cannot be denied, and could not be overlooked upon its publication. Surely Collins knew his abilities within serial publication were remarkable (Dickens, after all, told him so), so it is also possible that the diary equally presented a unique tool with which to elevate the genre of sensation fiction—a way for him to combat literary critics' perceived denigration of his writing. The trial of Mrs. Robinson, which took place in 1858, provides an excellent example, and is a sensational one, to say the least. Mr. Robinson, her husband, sued for divorce based on suspected infidelity, and the integral proof he presented to the court was her personal diary. Although the details of the case are too lengthy to describe for my purposes,⁷ what is important to know is that the trial's sensational reception solidified the diary's narrative use for sensation fiction. However, Collins's decision to give the diary such a prominent place in his own work does not work against him. Carter explains that “one of the most compelling or horrifying aspects” for women like Mrs. Robinson and “for the mid-century audience, is the diarist's lack of control over the text as a commodity, its slip out of symbolic privacy into public circulation, and the potential ramifications of this movement on authenticity and truthfulness” (260). Collins's decision to use the diary as representative of his own writing, more specifically, Marian's diary—with its remarkable verbal force and narrative authority—at once enables him to symbolize his literary output's vulnerability while also rendering it a powerful example of authentic artistry. Collins's relation to the diary as a textual form that could uniquely present and parallel his feelings of precarity in the literary marketplace lends it literary authority beyond mere sensationalism, and suggests that—contrary to what many critics think—Collins found value and merit in women's forms of writing.

If there is anything to know about Collins, his relation to and feelings about the

law, and his propensity to both veil and directly represent the law's inefficacy in his writing, it is that they are by no means simple. The diary provided a way for Collins to symbolize his belief in the moral, inviolability of writing, as well as a way to explore his desires to be exempt from exploitation and literary denigration—but, his decision to allow Count Fosco access to Marian's diary and, what's more, to *write* in it, inevitably complicates his desires and beliefs, and suggests Collins's awareness that opinions are far less operative than reality.

CHAPTER 4 COUNT FOSCO: CRIMINAL AND LITERARY RIVAL

When the reader of *The Woman in White* realizes that Marian's diary has been read by, tampered with, and written in by Count Fosco, it is arguably one of the best moments of the novel. The degree of shock is enormous, and it forces readers (albeit, only when they step back to take account of what has just happened) to recognize their privileged positions of having sanctioned access to such a private document: they, unlike Fosco, are given permission to review Marian's written work. Reflecting the reader's own impression of Marian's diary up to this point, Fosco is clearly taken by her writing, and acknowledges the literary power of her words. He writes:

There are many hundred pages here. I can lay my hand on my heart, and declare that every page has charmed, refreshed, delighted me . . .

Stupendous effort! I refer to the diary. Yes! These pages are amazing.

The tact which I find here, the discretion, the rare courage, the wonderful power of memory, the accurate observation of character, [and] the easy grace of style . . . have all inexpressibly increased my admiration of this sublime creature, of this magnificent Marian. (343)

Yet despite his admiration, Fosco's crime in this moment is blatant and disempowering—simultaneously intrusive and obtrusive. The authority of Marian's written work is undermined and overwritten by Fosco's effusive approbation of her diary; the text's *inviolability* is, in this moment, proven to be only a perception. And although Fosco's appreciation of Marian's writing suggests he has not tampered with it further, we simply cannot be certain. This is the moment, then, when the reader's foundation of faith in the

inviolability of the written word is disrupted—which, importantly, is also true for the writer Marian. Despite the power and mastery of her writing, and despite her best efforts to keep her text only in the hands of those she deems entitled, it is, nevertheless, intercepted by a criminal who uses its contents for his own unlawful ends.

Because this moment is undoubtedly the sensational apex of the novel, it has been widely analyzed by literary critics. Perhaps the most famous example is D.A. Miller's reading in "Cages Aux Folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*." In this essay, he explains that due to Marian's diary's private nature, it is an extension of her physical body. Fosco's intrusion of it, then, represents her symbolic rape—a forceful penetration of her private self. While Miller is certainly correct that there is potential to read this moment as a symbolic rape, an equally valid—and illuminating—approach is to examine the assault on Marian the author, rather than Marian the woman. In light of Collins's well-known contention with British and international copyright law, and in light of his deliberate construction of Marian as paralleling his own authorial position and capabilities, Fosco's interception can be directly interpreted as a copyright violation—an infringement of Marian's artistic and intellectual property. Bisla pointedly refutes Miller's position, and writes that *The Woman in White* "and its narrative are specifically concerned with the fundamental insecurities of dissemination in general and of the mid-nineteenth century publishing trade in particular" ("Copy-book Morals" 108). Although the perceived inviolability of Marian's diary allowed Collins to explore his fantasy of his own literary labours as immune from infringement and violation in the nineteenth-century publishing trade, his deliberate decision to allow Count Fosco to unlawfully read Marian's diary suggests Collins's awareness that this kind of transgression was inevitable under the ineffectiveness of contemporary international

copyright law.

Collins's construction of Count Fosco is equally illuminating in terms of his dissatisfaction with the inefficacy of British and international copyright law. He is purposefully painted as both a criminal and a man who knows what he's about. The seeds of suspicion regarding the Count are planted early in Marian's recollection—even before she has had the chance to meet him, she writes of Laura's sentiments toward him, stating that "she only says that he puzzles her, and that she will not tell me what her impression of him is, until I have seen him, and formed my own opinion" (204). Marian takes her sister's sentiments very seriously, yet despite their hesitations, he wins Marian over. Just a few short pages later, she writes: "I am almost afraid to confess it, even to these secret pages. The man has interested me, has attracted me, has forced me to like him" (219). Ultimately, Count Fosco earns Marian's good graces in spite of herself; and the reader is equally enraptured by Fosco, despite his apparent criminality. Therefore, during his later diatribe on the hypocrisy of English society (another of the novel's most captivating scenes), his words are tinged with believable elements of truth. During the scene, he emphatically expresses:

It is truly wonderful . . . how easily Society can console itself for the worst of its shortcomings with a little bit of clap-trap. The machinery it has set up for the detection of crime is miserably ineffective—and yet only invent a moral epigram, saying that it works well, and you blind everybody to its blunders, from that moment. (236)

If we consider Fosco's words in the context of Collins's sentiments about copyright law, they seem less like an abstract expression for the purpose of creating suspense, and more

like Collins's own feelings regarding the law's inadequacy. Although Victorian copyright law proposed to protect authors and to work in their best interests, its "machinery" was structurally inept. But, of course, nothing was done toward its improvement in Collins's lifetime, as we know; the law's "moral epigram"—that it was in place for rightful protection—was enough to keep many satisfied, at the same time blinding them to its ineffectual "blunders." As Graham Law explains, British copyright law was "confusing even to specialists. The 1842 Copyright Act had left many earlier provisions in force and was itself subject to many amendments, so that its interpretation in the courts became something of a lottery" ("The Professional Writer" 108). What's more, publishers often took advantage of the law's "blunders," its hidden loopholes, that benefitted themselves at the expense of authors ("The Professional Writer" 102). When Fosco goes on to state that "English society . . . is as often an accomplice, as it is the enemy of crime" (238) and that it is "a good friend to a man and those about him as often as it is an enemy" (239), Collins is making "Fosco critique Victorian hypocrisy and contradiction" (Gindele 74). Even more specifically, Collins is making the copyright infringer acknowledge the law's inefficacy at keeping him from pirating Marian's written work, which serves to displace the betrayal from the criminal perpetrator to the law itself.

Yet, the fact that Fosco actually writes in Marian's diary urges a more complex reading of his intrusion. In addition to the clear parallels of literary piracy, his action establishes something of a literary rivalry; his written approval is done with all the "accurate observation of character" and "easy grace of style" for which he applauds Marian's work. Furthermore, Count Fosco's later written testimony—secured by Walter Hartright after threatening to expose Fosco to the international secret society, "The Brotherhood," from which he has been in hiding since his time in England—is described

in terms that indeed characterize the Count as an author of considerable talent. Before he begins, Fosco exclaims: the “habits of literary composition are perfectly familiar to me. One of the rarest of all the intellectual accomplishments that a man can possess, is the grand faculty of arranging his ideas. Immense privilege! [And] I possess it” (607-8). Once he begins, Walter describes what he sees with astonishment and awe: “Slip after slip, by dozens, by fifties, by hundreds, flew over his shoulders on either side of him, till he had snowed himself up in paper all round his chair. Hour after hour passed—and there I sat watching; there he sat, writing. [Until his deadline,] he never stopped, except to sip his coffee” (608-9). The Count, much like Marian, possesses the rare faculty of “literary composition”; and, like Marian’s diary, the verbal strength of his testimony, and his accurate recollection of the details of events, provides some of the most compelling written work in the novel. In his discussion of Fosco’s intrusion into Marian’s diary as an act of literary piracy, Bisla conflates Fosco’s own literary capabilities with publishing practices, and describes them in terms that, in effect, downplay the Count’s literary talents:

When Count Fosco is not stealing women or their texts, he is writing a text of his own, an act which necessarily renders him vulnerable to the same crime he himself has perpetrated. This self-undermining act is only a replaying (from the anomalous situation however of the bad publisher now taking a turn as author) of the self-undermining act of writing, in the mid-nineteenth century, a potentially best-selling English novel and then publishing it. (“Copy-book Morals” 132)

The situation Bisla describes, that of a publisher who takes advantage of copyright law's inadequacies "now taking turn as an author," is anomalous indeed. While I agree with Bisla's reading that Fosco's writing "renders him vulnerable" to the same piracy he has perpetrated on Marian's diary, there is a more plausible way to interpret the Count's literary talents that will highlight the very personal feelings of precarity—and sometimes inferiority—Collins often experienced in the literary marketplace, that also equally accounts for the moment's parallels to literary piracy. If the author Marian is a stand-in for Collins, then the author Count Fosco is, in many ways, a stand-in for Charles Dickens.

Indeed, Collins's personal and, more importantly, working relationship with Dickens should not be overlooked when analyzing his representation of the Count as Marian's literary rival and counterpart. The friendship between the two prominent Victorian authors, and their collaborations, have been subjects of much critical inquiry⁸, and as Lillian Nayder's work on their unequal partnership attests, the two worked at odds as often as they worked together. As overjoyed as Collins was to have the attention of the inimitable Dickens in his early career, he eventually came to lament the degree of control which Dickens exerted over Collins and his other contributors, and resented his being termed nothing more than "a shadow of Dickens" among literary critics (Perkins and Donaghy 392). The rivalry—the literary rivalry, particularly—that is established between Marian and Fosco embodies Collins's feelings of resentment and vulnerability under the editorial control of his mentor. Nayder explains that Collins and other contributors to *Household Words* sometimes battled Dickens, heatedly, "over copyright and permission to reprint their works" (*Unequal Partners* 21)—so Fosco's decision to take advantage of Marian's written work not only parallels Collins's contentions with the inefficacies of British and international copyright laws, but also the loss of control he experienced as a

writer for Dickens's publication. Such a loss of control was only exacerbated by Dickens's insistence on the anonymity of his writers' contributions, something that outside writers also noticed about Dickens's governing. Nayder explains that the author Douglas Jerrold

declined to contribute to *Household Words* when Dickens asked him to A magazine proprietor himself, Jerrold understood that an author's name was a marketable commodity and that the anonymity on which Dickens insisted not only denied writers their artistic due but compromised their financial success in the long run. (*Unequal Partners* 21)

Fosco's overwriting of Marian's text parallels Dickens's obtrusive control, and Dickens's denial of artistic credit is equally embodied in Fosco's intrusion. For all his admiration and ostensible recognition of Marian's literary talents, Fosco's decision to write in her text is a clear assertion of his dominance over Marian's authorial circumstances, as well as the work she has thus far produced. "Clearly," as Nayder states, "Dickens was . . . running a business in which the literary profits and renown were primarily his" (*Unequal Partners* 20-1). At this point in the narrative, Count Fosco profits tremendously from tampering with Marian's diary; he discovers every plan and every device she and Walter have put in place in an effort to secure Laura's safety, which enables him to predict their future movements and evade their detection. By writing in Marian's diary, Fosco is also asserting his infamy and his "renown"; after all, her narrative abruptly ends at this point, and is overshadowed by the Count's written assertion of his power and ingenuity.

In fact, the Count's presence and mastery greatly influences those around him and plagues Marian throughout her narrative, suggesting yet another parallel to the complex

relationship that developed between Collins and Dickens. When reflecting on the power of the Count's influence, Marian writes that "He can manage me, as he manages his wife and Laura, as he managed the bloodhound in the stable, as he manages Sir Percival himself, every hour in the day" (225). Fosco's power of management directly reflects Dickens's editorial power at *Household Words*, where those around him were clearly subordinate under his authority. For Collins, "Dickens's influence was constraining as well as inspiring," yet he "chafed under Dickens's control," and believed that "Dickens sometimes got the credit that was due to subordinates" (*Unequal Partners*, 3). Even more concerning, Collins's subordination under Dickens led him to be "plagued by fears that the 'good things' about [his written work] . . . would be attributed to Dickens" (*Unequal Partners* 33). The contradictory feelings of inspiration and fear of losing artistic credit for his own writing while working with Dickens, then, informs Marian's preoccupation with the Count, especially at the beginning of her diary:

How much I seem to have written about Count Fosco! . . . I can only repeat that I do assuredly feel, even on this short acquaintance, a strange, half-willing, half-unwilling liking for the Count. He seems to have established over me the same sort of ascendancy which he has evidently gained over Sir Percival. Free, and even rude, as he may be occasionally in his manner towards his fat friend, Sir Percival is nevertheless afraid, as I can plainly see, of giving any serious offence to the Count. I wonder whether I am afraid, too? I certainly never saw a man, in all my experience, whom I should be so sorry to have for an enemy. Is this because I like him, or because I am afraid of him? (226)

Marian's indecision regarding her sentiments toward the Count at once acknowledges and respects his power while also suggesting her aversion to his influence. Marian's uncertainty regarding her relation to the Count thus directly reflects Collins's own conflicting feelings about Dickens. Initially, it was in Collins's best interest to make a friend of Dickens, as his powerful standing among the literary greats of his time inevitably bolstered Collins's own literary position. Yet, as Nayder's research proves, comparison between the two men often worked against Collins, as his work was frequently seen as inferior to that of his mentor. However, to make an enemy of Dickens would have been much worse for Collins, so he often conceded to Dickens's wishes even when they were contrary to his own, as established by the frequent taming of his more progressive stances under Dickens's direction. Marian's uncertain relation to the Count reflects Collins's often-uncertain position in the literary marketplace, especially under the influence of his mentor; just as she is vulnerable to Fosco's tampering and to his use of her text for his own ends, so too is Collins vulnerable to the dominant influence of Dickens who benefits from the profits of Collins's work and whose literary presence often outshines his own.

Despite Fosco's dominance in the novel, however, he spares no opportunity of praising his literary counterpart—even if that praise is, at times, a veiled disguise, masking his assertions of his own literary genius. Throughout the narrative of *The Woman in White*, Collins solidifies the reader's understanding that Fosco's admiration of Marian is, above all other possibilities, his greatest weakness. As he states in his coerced testimony, "Nothing but my fatal admiration for Marian restrained me from stepping in to my own rescue, when she effected her sister's escape," and goes on to explain (in the grandiloquent manner of referring to himself in the third person) that, "In brief, Fosco, at

this serious crisis, was untrue to himself. Deplorable and uncharacteristic fault! Behold the cause, in my Heart—behold, in the image of Marian Halcombe, the first and last weakness of Fosco’s life!” (627). Ultimately, the consequence of this revelation—that Fosco’s admiration for Marian is genuine and unerring—is that the power the Count has worked to establish (and that Collins has deliberately pointed our attention to), is, in the end, transferred back to Marian. In her study on the wonder Fosco and Marian mutually possess for one another, Karen Gindele writes: “The admiration that Count Fosco feels wholly for Marian, but that she feels as ‘a strange, half-willing, half-unwilling liking for him’ is unlike other nineteenth-century idealized and idealizing passions largely because it includes the appreciation of intelligence” (67). Just as Collins uses the diary as a symbolic tool with which to explore the fantasy of his literature operating outside the vulnerabilities associated with commercial exchange, so his decision to shift the dynamic of power from Fosco back to Marian suggests his desire to come out from under Dickens’s shadow. Fosco’s appreciation of Marian’s intelligence is a high recommendation indeed—but his capitulation to her in his plan to defraud Laura solidifies her mastery over him, rather than the other way around.

In addition to the control over the Count that Marian is ultimately proven to possess within the narrative, Collins also ensures her formal control of him as well. Gindele writes that “Fosco is constituted in and largely by Marian’s narrative; within the fiction, he owes his being to her” (70). This is decidedly true, as the reader gets to know the Count only through Marian’s diary; any other reference to him occurs only after he has been described by Marian. She paints his image in vivid detail, and it is arguably her unique (authorial) perspective that renders him so intriguing and compelling:

All the smallest characteristics of this strange man have something strikingly original and perplexingly contradictory in them. Fat as he is, and old as he is, his movements are astonishingly light and easy. He is as noiseless in a room as any of us women; and, more than that, with all his look of unmistakable mental firmness and power, he is as nervously sensitive as the weakest of us. He starts at chance noises as inveterately as Laura herself. He winced and shuddered yesterday, when Sir Percival beat one of the spaniels, so that I felt ashamed of my own want of tenderness and sensibility, by comparison with the Count. (222)

Whereas the Count's descriptions of Marian are often coloured with effusion and loquacity, Marian's description of the Count is pithy and judicious—she expresses his perplexing contradictions with elegance and pointed direction. While this approach alone does not establish her literary mastery over that of the Count, the fact that her descriptions are responsible for establishing the Count's formal nature places her in a position of superiority. Without Marian's narrative account of him, Count Fosco would be a cypher, a blank to be filled in. Considered in terms of the working and literary relationship between Collins and Dickens, Marian's depiction of the Count (or, more accurately, her formation of him) can be interpreted as Collins's assertion that he is responsible for the success of *Household Words* to a degree that he has not been given credit for. Once again, if Marian's diary is the stand-in for Collins's book, and if Fosco would not exist as he does to the reader without her written work, in this construction Collins is suggesting that his literary capabilities are deserving of the kind of attention and credit which is unquestionably afforded to Dickens. Fosco, then, not only points out

the “hypocrisies and contradictions” of Victorian England—in addition to its mechanically inept laws—but he also reveals, in his construction by Marian, the hypocrisy inherent in Dickens’s publishing practices. As Dickens usurps his contributors’ anonymous works under the masthead of *Household Words* which read “Conducted by Charles Dickens”—thereby constituting their writing as his own—Collins combats this reality by creating a fictional representation of his literary rival who is in turn constituted by his own fictional representative.

Nayder further explains that “Dickens himself worked as a literary hand for much of his career,” having been “exploited by Richard Bentley and others,” and was therefore “acutely aware that the profits of his literary labors were not his alone. Although he became increasingly skilled at negotiating contracts . . . he remained sensitive to the inequities between publishers with capital and writers without it” (*Unequal Partners* 17). However, the working relationship between Dickens and Collins, as well as other of his contributors—in addition to Collins’s symbolic representation of their literary dynamic in *The Woman in White*—for the most part suggests that Dickens’s sensitivities existed only insofar as they concerned his own literary capital and standing. When in the novel Walter laments the gruelling plight for justice for Laura in the “hopeless struggle against Rank and Power, [and] through the long fight with armed deceit and fortified Success” (422), examined in the context of the inequity of Collins’s relationship with and relation to Dickens, his words take on new meaning. Despite his commercial success with *The Woman in White*, Collins was all too aware of his precarious position in the mid-century Victorian literary marketplace, which required him to produce his work under demanding constraints and with near-debilitating regularity (an aspect of mid-century authorship which Dickens admittedly disliked); that forced him to defer his talents and authorial

desires to the “Rank and Power” of his mentor, creating opportunity for harsh criticism among literary reviewers that labelled him Dickens’s “shadow”; and that rendered his work susceptible to unsanctioned dissemination and piracy under deceptively ineffective copyright laws, both abroad and at home, while writing for *Household Words*.

The inequity that Collins often experienced while working for and with his mentor was especially acute for the women who also wrote for Dickens’s journal. Elizabeth Gaskell, for instance, found that she lost authorial autonomy and “control of her writing” while contributing to *Household Words* (Michie 88). Gaskell’s loss of control was especially apparent upon the journal’s publication of her short story “Lizzie Leigh,” which exhibited strong sympathies toward prostitution and the figure of the fallen woman. Uncomfortable with the story’s message, Dickens undermined Gaskell’s view by manipulating the context of the story’s meaning, following up her installments “with letters promoting emigration” (*Unequal Partners* 19). This manipulation, in turn, led to his being “mistakenly identified as . . . [the] author [of “Lizzie Leigh”] in America, by publishers who assumed that the leading story of *Household Words* must be his” (*Unequal Partners* 20). Moreover, Dickens’s “Rank and Power,” and indeed his own “fortified success” in the literary marketplace coloured his opinion of women writers: he did not believe they were capable of the kind of literary genius for which he was so famous. Ultimately, Dickens’s sexist stance meant that “women writers were placed at a particular disadvantage at *Household Words*, [as] their authorship [was] treated as illegitimate by virtue of their gender” (*Unequal Partners* 21). It is likely, then, that the injustice which Collins experienced and which he saw in Dickens’s treatment of his female contributors also had an influence on his decision to position Marian’s diary so prominently in his novel. Marian’s diary illustrates not only that feminine forms of

writing are integral to the genre of sensation fiction, but that they often can (and do) surpass written works by men. Collins's decision to make this point clear effectively legitimizes women's writing in the literary marketplace, and thus forces readers to re-evaluate their own opinions and prejudices regarding the cultural and social value of women writers. Justice, as Collins illustrates, is a necessary and equalizing moral force: its systems of checks-and-balances are integral for the fair treatment of all men, women, writers, artists, and laborers alike. Collins also reminds us, however, that the mechanics of justice—the law—can be easily manipulated, forgotten, and ignored, invariably to the detriment of those it is meant to protect.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Although it is impossible to know Collins's exact intentions regarding the construction of *The Woman in White*, a symbolic reading of the novel's unique and deliberate intersection of the law, authorship, and the diary as narrative form, as well as its construction of character, suggests that Collins used *The Woman in White* to combat many anxieties specific to his personal and authorial circumstances. Such a reading also suggests, importantly, that Collins's relation to women writers in the literary marketplace might be more sympathetic than what current scholarship would indicate. It is my hope that the research I have conducted for my study of *The Woman in White* will allow other scholars to pursue and expand upon Collins's sympathetic, rather than resentful, relation to women writers, and to examine *The Woman in White*'s notion of "Rank and Power" in this context as well. Rather than present his readers with a female writer who is markedly inferior, Collins created one of the most compelling and enduring representations of women, and of the power of female authorship (with which he also, notably, aligned himself).

There is debate over whether Marian or Walter possesses ultimate narrative authority by the novel's end. Its final words are written by Walter, but these words also explicitly confer authorial power onto Marian: "Marian was the good angel of our lives—let Marian end our Story" (643). If we are to accept the novel's terms of the relationship between law and authorship, however, I don't think it much matters who we conclude is most authoritative. The point is in the debate: rank and power are superior forces, but what sway do these notions possess artistically, intellectually—in law, the literary marketplace, or otherwise—if we are carrying on the conversation? Collins wanted the

readers of his novels, especially of *The Woman in White*, to understand that when systemic injustice cannot be altered or corrected, it can certainly be opposed, resisted, and even withstood—and surely there is power in that.

ENDNOTES

¹ Published in 1847, the book is titled *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., RA*, which Collins completed not two years after his father's death (*Victorian Novelists and Publishers* 3).

² Lillian Nayder notes that Collins discovered the story of Madame de Douhault in "a volume of records of French crime that he bought in a Paris bookstall in 1856." The volume was Maurice Mejan's *Recueil des Causes Celebres*, second edition (1808-1814). (*Wilkie Collins* 74).

³ William Palmer was on trial for a single murder, but he was suspected to have been directly responsible for upwards of sixteenth deaths. He had always been able to evade capture because of his use of tinctures and poisons that left no chemical traces in the bodies of the deceased (*Victorian Fiction* 39).

⁴ See, for example, Sue Lonoff's "Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins" (*Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35.2 (1980): 150-70); Philip Collins's *Charles Dickens the Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2003. Critical Heritage Ser.); and Graham Law and Andrew Maunder's *Wilkie Collins: A Literary Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁵ Laurel Erickson writes that "When *The Woman in White* first appeared in *All the Year Round* from 1859 to 1860, Wilkie Collins was immediately inundated with letters from English bachelors begging him to divulge Marian Halcombe's real name and address so they could seek her hand in marriage" (95). Marian's defiance of strict gender stereotypes was invigorating to Victorian men; the appeal, as Erickson goes on to explain, is that Marian's masculinity marks her as "'odd' or eccentric in relation to a centralized economy of heterosexual desire" (97). In other words, the overwhelming response to Marian reveals that the Victorian understanding of sexuality and gender construction is much more nuanced than we might think. Her liminality thus represents a conceptual space within which many limiting social dictations can be escaped or re-evaluated.

⁶ In the literary marketplace and workforce, Collins experienced the vulnerability and frequent uncertainty that characterizes the social and economic class we term today as "precariat" (a merging of the social term *proletariat* with *precarity*). Unlike the proletariat class of the twentieth century, who lacked their own means of production and thus sold their labour to live, members of the precariat are only partially involved in labour and must work both within and without the work force—often unremunerated—to sustain a living. The condition of the precariat class is to live without security, assurance, or predictability, which can deeply affect both physical and psychological welfare. Collins was a nineteenth-century precursor to the development of this social class, as he experienced much of the same kind of uncertainty that today characterizes the precariat's condition. When I go on in this essay to discuss Collins's precarity as an author in the nineteenth-century literary marketplace, it is the precariat's condition of existence to

which I am referring. For an informative overview on the development of this social class, see Guy Standing's *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011.)

⁷ See Kate Summerscale's book *Mrs. Robinson's Disgrace* for a riveting presentation of Mrs. Robinson's diary and the circumstances of the trial.

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