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Good Vibrations: The Sensationalization of Masculinity in The Woman in White

RACHEL ABLOW

At the center of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* is a problem that masquerades as a solution. Walter Hartright's almost unique ability to identify his wife is presented as the answer to the question of how she will be restored to her rightful position in society. According to him, she is Laura, Lady Glyde, born Fairlie, heir to the house and estate of Limmeridge. Yet for most of the second half of the novel she has no legal claim to that name or to the property attached to it, she does not look like Laura, and she is unable to say who she is or what has happened to her. Consequently, almost of all Laura's friends believe what their eyes tell them and what the legal and medical documents associated with her case appear to prove: that Laura has died and that the woman Walter marries is her illegitimate and propertyless half-sister Anne Catherick. Walter's ability to recognize this woman as Laura enables him to pursue the villains responsible for her plight, to amass evidence of their nefarious plot against her, and to convince others of their crime. But this conclusion still leaves the problem: how does Walter know who this woman is?

Recent critics of Collins's novel have rarely examined this question in detail. For the most part, they have understood *The Woman in White* to revolve around Walter's development from a youth, nervously susceptible to the sensations of his body, into a self-disciplined and reliable adult member of society. D. A. Miller, for example, has described the goal of the novel as the stabilization of Walter's self-mastery. "[I]mmature [and] ... nerve-ridden" at the beginning of his story, Miller argues, Walter needs to learn to control himself so as to realize the "normative requirements of the heterosexual ménage whose happy picture concludes" the novel (165). Jenny Bourne Taylor has characterized Collins's novel similarly, as revolving around the problem of how "Hartright's new subjective identity is constructed" so that he may become "his own and Laura's moral manager" (108). In the context of readings like these, Walter's ability to identify Laura has usually been taken as proof of the sympathetic bond between them.¹ Walter recognizes Laura, in other words, because he loves her and so has privileged access to the most basic grounds of her identity. Insofar as this sympathetic

¹ In "The Sensationalism of *The Woman in White*," for example, Walter Kendrick argues that the evidentiary narrative of the novel requires verification of a kind that can only be provided by a moment such as that in which Walter Hartright recognizes Laura. Walter's entire campaign to restore Laura's identity, Kendrick writes, "depends upon an immediate vision which transcends the lies of language—just the sort of direct felt sympathy which was the ultimate goal of mid-Victorian realism" (32). In this essay, I argue that although *The Woman in White* invites this interpretation, ultimately it destabilizes the notion of "direct felt sympathy" to the same extent that it undermines the reliability of documentary evidence.

epistemology indicates Walter's ability to understand his lover's interiority rather than simply to register the surfaces that excite him as a youth, it has been understood to indicate his newly achieved maturity. And insofar as it demonstrates the existence of a nearly unique bond between him and his wife, it has also been understood to legitimate their marriage: his profound understanding of the woman he loves proves that they are connected in a way that makes the class differences between them irrelevant.

In this essay, I argue that even though such a reading of *The Woman in White* is invited by the novel's many invocations of the idea of sympathy, it is also impaired by the text's ultimate reformulation of the psychological models on which the possibility of sympathy depends. By decoupling sensation from understanding, this novel produces an epistemology that is less committed to knowing persons than to making them function in certain ways, a notion of sympathy that seeks less to enter into the feelings of the other than to attribute feelings to her, and a model of male identity that relies less on memory or experience than on the ability to feel sensations, to name them, and to convince others of those names' validity. Walter's successful identification of his wife as Laura—and thus of himself as the husband of a wealthy heiress—is thus made to seem as if it rests not on his privileged access to her interiority, but instead on the fact that, like the novelist, he is able to persuade other people that they should feel, that they do feel, and that they should effectively pay him for feeling, as he wants them to.

This account of *The Woman in White* seeks to revise recent accounts of the model of male identity posited by the first sensation novel. In so doing, it also insists on the specificity of this novel within the history of the sensation novel. Recent critics have too often tended to equate Collins's novel with the sensation novel in general, and have tended to situate all such novels in the context of the negative critical backlash against them.² Thus, we have been told repeatedly that sensation novels were condemned for “preach[ing] to the nerves” (Mansel 251) and for “drugging thought and reason” (“Female” 210). What has often been obscured as a result is the fact that these condemnations only began to appear in 1863 and 1864, several years after the publication of *The Woman in White* in 1859–60. Initially, many critics liked sensation novels. Collins's novel, in particular, received many enthusiastic reviews from critics who praised it for its novelty, its compelling plot, and its sensational effects. Further, even critics who voiced reservations about the novel—largely for what they saw as its over-reliance on plot and its clumsy narrative form—did not condemn it on moral grounds. They discounted it as art, but they did not identify it as a source of danger. Such relative

² Some of the more important accounts of this backlash include Tillotson, Edwards, Hughes, Flint, and Brantlinger. Tromp is one of the very few critics to acknowledge that *The Woman in White* was sometimes exempted from the criticism lodged against the sensation novel (69–70). She accounts for this exceptionality by claiming that although, like other sensation novels, Collins's novel is subversive in challenging “the identification of the law as a coherent, seamless text that provided unity to social articulations of violence, gendered identity, and social control” (72), critics were placated by the fact it ends like a realist novel: with a woman's rescue, a marriage, and the birth of a child (70). In this essay, I argue instead that *The Woman in White* was exempted from the criticism lodged against the sensation novel because it was not really “subversive” at all.

critical respect continued even after the genre of the sensation novel began to be attacked; however much critics might condemn “sensationalism,” they almost never identified *The Woman in White* as an object of concern or hostility.

In this essay, I argue that at least part of the popularity of and relative critical respect accorded to Collins’s novel derives from the fantasy of male, middle-class identity that it offers—a fantasy that, unlike those offered in later sensation novels, revolves around the power of the middle-class man to define himself in highly profitable yet ideologically unproblematic ways. Walter’s power to improve his class position by convincing others of his sympathetic relationship with his wife resembles the models of identity described in later sensation novels; all are fascinated with the role of public opinion in the production of identity. What sets *The Woman in White* apart from such novels, however, is the way it neutralizes the threat implicit in such a notion of identity that public opinion might be as amenable to women’s manipulation as to men’s. As a result, what emerges from Collins’s novel is an enthusiastic endorsement of new possibilities for self-invention and self-improvement that are available to men alone.³

I

I had mechanically turned [toward London] ... and was strolling along the lonely high-road—idly wondering, I remember, what the Cumberland young ladies would look like—when, in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me.

I turned on the instant, with my fingers tightening round the handle of my stick.

³ Jonathan Loesberg (1986) was one of the first twentieth-century critics to claim that the sensation novel constituted a response to anxieties about the breakdown of class boundaries. Thomas makes a similar argument about the importance of class anxieties to the sensation novel. Cvetkovich links sensationalism instead to anxieties about urbanization and industrialization, arguing that “sensation” constitutes a defense against the depressing effects of capitalism. Critics who have seen the sensation novel as evidence of anxieties about gender identity include Pykett, Miller (though his argument is about *The Woman in White* rather than the sensation novel, per se), Trodd, and Williams. Critics who have linked it to anxieties about the increasing difficulty of determining the boundary between sanity and insanity include Kurata, Leavey, Taylor, and Shuttleworth. Heller sees it as evidence of anxiety about the feminization of writing and the questions it raised for the identity of the male writer. Schmitt links the sensation novel to anxieties about English national identity. John Kucich’s account of *The Woman in White* in *The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction* constitutes one of the few exceptions to the critical tendency to see the sensation novel as a product or index of anxiety. Although I ultimately come to different conclusions as to the nature of Walter’s identity, I find compelling Kucich’s claim that in this novel, Collins sought to affirm a positive model of exceptional middle-class identity premised on an “ambiguous antiprofessionalism” (82).

There, in the middle of the broad, bright high-road—there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heavens—stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments, her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her. (23)

“Few readers will be able to resist the mysterious thrill of this sudden touch,” Margaret Oliphant wrote of this passage in her 1862 review of *The Woman in White*. “The sensation is distinct and indisputable. The silent woman lays her hand upon our shoulder as well as upon that of Mr. Walter Hartright—yet nothing can be more simple and clear than the narrative, or more free from exaggeration” (“Sensation” 571). In this account, Oliphant identifies what came to be accepted as the basic hallmarks of the first sensation novel: its combination of realism and mystery; the absence of supernaturalism; and, most importantly, the apparently direct communication of a sensation from the novel to the reader. Oliphant does not explain how that communication takes place, but several aspects of this passage can be understood to encourage us to imagine ourselves experiencing Walter’s sensations.⁴ Our “thrill” is the result, first, of the unlikelihood of the events that occur. Walking home from his mother’s house along a deserted but familiar road, there is no reason for Walter to predict that anything out of the ordinary will take place. When something *does* happen, therefore, there is initially no way for either him or us to understand it; the event has no context, no precedent and so no obvious meaning. This uncertainty leads to the second condition of our experience: the fact that for one prolonged moment, sensation is divorced from understanding. As a result, rather than to the cause, our attention is directed to the thrill itself and to its manifestations: “I turned on the instant, with my fingers tightening round the handle of my stick” Only at the point when the hand that touched Walter is attached to the woman behind him does the moment of sensationalism end: when we see the material cause of Walter’s feeling we can relax, for we cannot be taken off guard in the same way again. This revelation fails to solve Walter’s problem, however. As he insists, he is still “far too seriously startled by the suddenness with which this extraordinary apparition stood before me ... to ask what she wanted” (24). This “apparition” may

⁴ With only a few exceptions, recent critics have focused on the significance of this sensation rather than on the means by which the novel produces it. D. A. Miller’s influential essay, for example, relies centrally on the fact that sensations are transmitted from Walter’s body to the reader’s. Instead of examining how that happens, however, he simply uses Oliphant’s review to claim that they are (153). In his essay “The Sensationalism of *The Woman in White*,” Walter Kendrick seems to promise that he will examine the characteristics of sensationalism. Yet, ultimately, he simply describes sensational moments as scenes that start off “chains of revelations” (21). Alison Winter is one of the few critics to discuss exactly how readers’ sensations can be accounted for. In *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*, she argues that sensationalism is the product of “the fact that one could not put [the novel] down. The will and judgment could not respond to signs of fatigue or hunger (or any other stimulus besides the book) until these reached an unusual intensity. When they did penetrate the reader’s concentration, they could produce a shock” (328). The principal problem with this account is that it fails to distinguish between *The Woman in White* and any other particularly absorbing text—or to explain why the touch Walter feels on the highway might alert the reader to her own physical needs.

explain the momentary stoppage of his blood, but since there is no obvious reason for this woman to be here, it is itself inexplicable. As a result, he has no idea of how to respond to her. Examining her closely as she pleads with him for help, Walter is able to describe her appearance (she has “a colourless, youthful face, meagre and sharp to look at, about the cheeks and chin,” etc.), her manner (“nothing wild, nothing immodest ... [her manner] was quiet and self-controlled”), and her probable class status (her manner is “not [that] of a lady, and, at the same time, not the manner of a woman in the humblest rank of life”) (24). But rather than helping to make sense of the situation, these observations enable him only to conclude what she is not: “The one thing of which I felt certain was, that the grossest of mankind could not have misconstrued her motive in speaking, even at that suspiciously late hour and in that suspiciously lonely place” (24). Several pages into his encounter with this woman, **all Walter knows for sure is that he has no idea of what is going on.**

Walter’s paralysis is broken only once the woman touches him again. This second touch does not clarify who she is or what she is doing there; Walter is still left wondering, “Was I Walter Hartright? Was this the well-known, uneventful road, where holiday people strolled on Sundays?” (27). But it does determine his course of action:

As she repeated the words [asking him to promise he will find her a cab and allow her to depart alone] for the third time, she came close to me and laid her hand, with a sudden gentle stealthiness, on my bosom—a thin hand; a cold hand (when I removed it with mine) even on that sultry night. Remember that I was young; remember that the hand which touched me was a woman’s.

“Will you promise?”

“Yes.”

One word! The little familiar word that is on everybody’s lips, every hour in the day. Oh me! and I tremble, now, when I write it. (26)

This second touch decides him, and he helps the woman in the way she requests. He finds her a cab and allows her to proceed unaccompanied to her unnamed destination. Only then does he discover that he has assisted an inmate of an insane asylum to escape. “What had I done?” he asks himself. “Assisted the victim of the most horrible of all false imprisonments to escape; or cast loose on the wide world of London an unfortunate creature, whose actions it was my duty, and every man’s duty, mercifully to control?” (31-32). Walter’s susceptibility to his sensations has prevented him from asking these questions until it is too late.

Such susceptibility is made to seem especially dangerous because of the consistency with which it leads Walter into error. In addition to causing him to help Anne Catherick (the woman in white) escape her pursuers, it is held responsible for his inappropriate attachment to his wealthy pupil, Laura Fairlie. As he admits, “I should have looked into my own heart, and found this new growth [his

attachment to Laura] springing up there, and plucked it out while it was young" (66). In this instance, however, "I and my trusty talisman were parted for the first time. Yes, my hardly-earned self-control was as completely lost to me as if I had never possessed it; lost to me, as it is lost every day to other men, in other critical situations, where women are concerned" (66). Even though this error is not framed by the same kind of dramatic narrative as is his first encounter with Anne, in this instance, too, Walter's sensations and his sense of himself as a man in relation to a woman make it impossible for him to act rationally. And once again, the consequence is (ambiguously) disastrous: in this case, his attachment to a woman who is far above him socially and economically. In order to take on a mature position in society, it seems, he will need to control the susceptibility that places him in situations like these.

Walter's subsequent exile to Honduras appears to provide exactly the training he needs. As he tells the reader:

From that self-imposed exile I came back, as I had hoped, prayed, believed I should come back—a changed man. In the waters of a new life I had tempered my nature afresh. In the stern school of extremity and danger my will had learnt to be strong, my heart to be resolute, my mind to rely on itself. I had gone out to fly from my own future. I came back to face it, as a man should. (406)

On the basis of this passage, it seems entirely appropriate to conclude, with Taylor, that while away Walter learns how to "use his 'reason' to 'curb the blind impulse of [his] disordered senses'" (114). Only upon returning does he seem capable of using reason rather than desire as the basis of understanding. Hence, only now does he appear worthy of a mature position in society, as well as the reward we have been encouraged to expect: his marriage to his wealthy and beautiful former pupil, Laura Fairlie, now Lady Glyde.⁵

Despite the rhetoric of strength and self-reliance used to describe Walter after he returns to England, however, it is not at all clear what changes while he is away. When he returns, he is just as susceptible to the sensational responses of his body as he was when he left and just as likely to leap to conclusions as to their meaning. Upon being told of Laura's supposed death, for example, he goes to visit her grave. Momentarily lost in reverie, he looks up to see two women watching him. "The springs of my life fell low," he recalls, "and the shuddering of an unutterable dread crept over me from head to foot" (410). One of the women removes her veil and reveals herself to be Marian Halcombe, Laura's half-sister; the other begins to approach him:

⁵ D. A. Miller has made the most sustained case for this understanding of the novel. Lyn Pykett makes a similar argument, arguing that, in the course of the novel, "Walter, the artistic drifter, is forced by love and trouble to 'act for myself' and to labour for love and money. In so doing he finds a vocation and a social role" (18). Also see Lauren Chattman's argument that Walter's mature "supposedly consolidated identity" is premised on the "repression and denial of the male subject's female irrationality and aristocratic self-absorption" (139).

The woman came on, slowly and silently came on. I looked at her—at her, and at none other, from that moment....

[T]he veiled woman had possession of me, body and soul. She stopped on one side of the grave. We stood face to face with the tombstone between us. She was close to the inscription on the side of the pedestal. Her gown touched the black letters....

The woman lifted her veil.

"Sacred to the Memory of Laura, Lady Glyde—"

Laura, Lady Glyde, was standing by the inscription, and was looking at me over the grave. (410-11)

In this passage, Walter experiences an incomprehensible physical sensation ("the shuddering of an unspeakable dread"); he loses his self-control and hence his ability to question the cause of that sensation ("the veiled woman had possession of me body and soul"). And at this point, he comes to a conclusion about the meaning of what he feels: "Laura, Lady Glyde was standing by the inscription." This seems to be exactly the same sensational, implicitly immature and unreliable epistemology that he had previously employed in relation to the woman in white on the highway. The implication would thus seem to be that nothing has changed while Walter was away and that he is just as impulsive, undisciplined, and vulnerable to sensations as he was before he left.

Yet even though this scene follows a narrative similar to that that governs Walter's encounter with the woman in white, the novel *does* strive to distinguish between them. In the earlier instance, his responses are explicitly attributed to immaturity: in explaining why he agrees to help Anne, for example, he asks the reader to remember that he "was young" and that she "was a woman" (26). After the scene in the graveyard, by contrast, Walter's sensational responses are re-described in a language of depths and interiorities suggestive of sympathetic understanding and romantic love.⁶ "If we [he and Marian] had loved [Laura] less dearly," he insists, "if the instinct implanted in us by that love had not been far more certain than any exercise of reasoning, far keener than any process of observation, even we might have hesitated, on first seeing her" (434). As it is, however, they know her better even than she can know herself. Despite the fact this woman looks like Anne Catherine, is commonly known as Anne Catherick, and is as feeble-minded as Anne Catherick ever was, Walter is utterly convinced that she is Laura. "Did no suspicion, excited by my own knowledge of Anne Catherick's resemblance to her, cross my mind, when her face was first revealed

⁶ It is worth noting that after the passage in the graveyard cited above there is a long digression during which we are given the story of Marian's reunion with Laura. Only once the story returns to Walter are we told that the sensations he feels in his beloved's presence are due to his deep love for her. As a result, for several pages we are left in doubt as to how we should understand his experience: whether they prove that his self-control has failed or that he has matured.

to me? Not the shadow of a suspicion, from the moment when she lifted her veil by the side of the inscription which recorded her death" (413). Such certainty, he claims, can only be the product of love.

Walter's ability to recognize this woman as Laura is most obviously significant insofar as it enables him to restore her true identity: once he realizes who she is, he sets to work to uncover the plot that forced her and her half-sister, Anne Catherick, to trade places. Walter's recognition of the woman he loves is at least as important for what it says about him, however, for it suggests that he is no longer subject to the dictates of his body. Sensationalism, it seems, has been replaced by sympathy, and an interest in surfaces has been displaced by an attentiveness to depths. And, finally, the fact he has been able to recognize Laura at a moment when almost no one else could makes the socio-economic differences between them seem irrelevant: these lovers belong together, we are led to believe, for he is the only one able to see her for who she really is. Their marriage appears to vindicate this claim entirely, for their life together is unmarked by conflict of any kind. By contrast with her violent and uncongenial relationship with her first husband, Sir Percival Glyde, Laura appears to share all her second husband's aims, interests, and concerns.

Yet, at the same time, it is hard to say what exactly there could be for Walter to disagree with, for by the time Walter is reunited with Laura after her supposed death, her experiences in the insane asylum have stripped her of her memory and sense of self. Walter and Marian's attempts to revive their friend's memories of the past are consistently thwarted: "Every little caution ... we tried, to strengthen and steady slowly the weakened, shaken faculties, was a fresh protest in itself against the risk of turning her mind back on the troubled and the terrible past" (434). Only once Walter and Marian attempt to *teach* her what she needs to know does Laura show any signs of remembering who she is: "Tenderly and gradually, the memory of the old walks and drives dawned upon her, and the poor weary pining eyes, looked at Marian and at me with a new interest, with a faltering thoughtfulness in them, which, from that moment, we cherished and kept alive" (434). In a passage like this one, it is impossible to say whether Walter and Marian revive memories that have been concealed to their possessor or whether they provide her with the information she needs to play her part. It is impossible to say, in other words, whether they are helping Laura recover or are helping her (or someone else?) become what they need her to be.

The questionable status of Walter's sympathetic access to Laura's interiority in the second half of the novel is only intensified by a close examination of his encounters with her in the first. At the beginning of the novel, Laura is described as having the kind of psychological complexity necessary for sympathy: before she is placed in the insane asylum, she clearly has thoughts, feelings, and desires of her own. Nevertheless, even at this point in the novel, each description of Walter's sympathetic bond with his future wife is indistinguishable from an account of projection. And each account of projection is, in turn, indistinguishable from sensationalism. The first time they meet, for example, Walter describes his future wife in the following terms:

The woman who first gives life, light, and form to our shadowy conceptions of beauty, fills a void in our spiritual nature that has remained unknown to us till she appeared. Sympathies that lie too deep for words, too deep almost for thoughts, are touched, at such times, by other charms than those which the senses feel and which the resources of expression can realise. The mystery which underlies the beauty of women is never raised above the reach of all expression until it has claimed kindred with the deeper mystery in our own souls. Then, and then only, has it passed beyond the narrow region on which light falls, in this world, from the pencil and the pen. (52)

The claims that Laura gives form to shadowy conceptions, that she makes Walter aware of a void in his nature, and that she raises the mystery of women to a new height utilize a language of deep interiorities associated with sympathy. But since Walter's is the only subjective life described, "sympathy" comes to look more like projection than understanding. Laura's ability to fill a void in his "spiritual nature" has nothing to do with her inner life, in other words; it is instead the result of the extent to which she embodies *his* shadowy conceptions of beauty. This implied autotelism is made still more problematic by its close association with sensationalism. As Walter tells the reader, the most accurate way to understand his feelings for Laura is to imagine one's own sensations in the presence of the first woman one loved: "Think of her as you thought of the first woman who quickened the pulses within you that the rest of her sex had no art to stir" (52). Walter's understanding of his lover thus comes to seem as if it revolves around his perception of her as an especially exciting set of surfaces.

One obvious question raised by the consistent sensationalism of Walter's epistemology is the extent to which we can trust his claims to know the woman he ultimately marries. The plot of *The Woman in White* hinges on Walter's ability to know that the woman he meets in the graveyard is Laura Fairlie Glyde rather than Anne Catherick, as almost everyone else believes. Yet as soon as one allows that Walter only ever uses a sensational epistemology in relation to these two women, the grounds on which he distinguishes between them collapses. After all, Laura is not the first woman to alter Walter's pulses. She may be the first to *stir* them, but by the time he meets her, his heartbeat has already been *arrested* by her half-sister on the moonlit highway. As a result, the very attribute that Walter claims is unique to Laura serves to associate her with the woman he claims to know she is not. The inextricability of the means by which he understands each of these women is underscored by the fact that Walter finds Laura most exciting at the moment when she reminds him most forcefully of her other. As he tells us, in his first meeting with Laura, he is struck by the fact that "[m]ingling with the vivid impression produced by the charm of her fair face and head, her sweet expression, and her winning simplicity of manner, was another impression, which, in a shadowy way, suggested to me the idea of something wanting. At one time it seemed like something wanting in *her*; at another, like something wanting in myself, which hindered me from understanding her as I ought" (53). This "something wanting" is supplied a few scenes later when he recognizes "the ominous likeness" between Anne and Laura (62). At this moment, a "thrill of the same

feeling which ran through me when the touch was laid upon my shoulder on the lonely high-road chilled me again" (62). As a result of the physical resemblance between the two women, Laura is able to make him feel the same thrill that Anne had—a circumstance that raises real questions as to his ability to distinguish between them.⁷

The questionable status of Walter's claim to "know" Laura at a moment when she barely knows herself is complicated by everything he stands to gain from that assertion. After all, his ability to recognize Laura legitimates their marriage on the grounds that, despite the class difference between them, he has a privileged attachment to and understanding of her. Further, it suggests his ability to speak for her and to intuit her needs. "In our present position I have no claim on [Laura] which society sanctions, which the law allows, to strengthen me in resisting the Count, and in protecting *her*," Walter tells Marian in defending his desire to marry her half-sister. "This places me at a serious disadvantage. If I am to fight our cause with the Count, strong in the consciousness of Laura's safety, I must fight it for my Wife" (559). The full implications of the equation Walter makes in this passage between his love for Laura and his ability to speak for her only become apparent when one considers that once they are husband and wife, Walter will not only be able to speak for his wife, he will be the *only* person with that ability. Even aside from the fact that, since she has little recollection of who she is or of what has happened to her, she has little power to identify her own needs, under the legal doctrine of coverture, upon marrying, Laura loses her ability to own property, to enter into contracts, to sue or be sued, or to leave her husband without his permission. Much therefore rests on Walter's ability to identify Laura's thoughts, needs, and interests.⁸

The difficulty of determining the exact grounds on which Walter claims to know and so to be able to speak for his wife begins to suggest the ambiguities inherent to the notion of sympathy, in general, and to the mid-nineteenth-century notion of the sympathetic bond between spouses, in particular.⁹

⁷ Sally Shuttleworth is one of the few critics to note the difficulty of determining the "real" identity of Walter's wife. According to her, that undecidability is the mark of the subversiveness of the sensation novel: the way it "deliberately flout[s] the formal constraints of realism" and calls attention to selves that are "neither biologically given, nor fixed and unified" (222). In my account, by contrast, this undecidability is instead the source of much of the profitability of Walter's—Collins's—narratives.

⁸ In the mid-nineteenth century, coverture applied to almost all married women. The laws of equity did, however, allow the woman's family to set aside some portion of her property in the form of a trust. The high costs of such arrangements meant they were available only to the wealthiest women. It is worth noting that in Laura's marriage to Glyde, the trust her lawyer has established is the principal object of contention between her and her husband. In her marriage to Walter, by contrast, no such trust exists. Hence, everything she owns is automatically his, and any legal identity she possessed as a property-owner disappears. For more on the laws relating to married women's property, see Holcombe, Shanley, and Stetson. Also see Laura Ledwon's discussion of coverture in *The Woman in White* as a "metonymic pattern with which to explore the issue of the loss of feminine identity" (1).

⁹ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, sympathy consists of a "(real or supposed) affinity between certain things, by virtue of which they are similarly or correspondingly affected by the same influence, affect or influence one another (especially in some occult way), or attract or

According to many nineteenth-century celebrations of domesticity, spousal sympathy constituted a necessary precondition for “female influence,” and hence, too, for the supposedly ameliorative effects of the home. For someone like Sarah Stickney Ellis, for example, while in the public sphere male identity is continually under attack, the private sphere constitutes a space where sympathy with one’s wife enables it to be healed and expressed. As Ellis wrote in her popular domestic manual, *The Women of England, Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (1839), the marketplace may require that a man be competitive, selfish, and materialistic, but with the help of his wife, “he may faithfully pursue the necessary avocations of the day, and keep as it were a separate soul for his family, his social duty, and his God” (57).

From the outset, descriptions of female influence and marital sympathy were politically charged. Both those who sought to reform the legal doctrine of coverture and those who sought to preserve it identified marital “sympathy” as one of their chief goals. But ambiguities in the term’s meaning enabled writers to come to very different conclusions as to how it could best be achieved. Conservative commentators, for example, usually understood female influence to depend on a form of marital sympathy that results from women’s natural propensity to mold themselves to others, from their sequestration from the temptations and trials of the public sphere, and from the identity of their interests with their husbands’. As Mrs. Sanford wrote in *Woman in Her Social and Domestic Character* (1833), for example, woman “must, in a certain degree, be plastic herself if she would mould others” (11). “She may be ... a corrective of what is wrong, a moderator of what is unruly, a restraint on what is indecorous” (12). Sarah Lewis agreed, although in *Woman’s Mission* (1839) she also emphasized the importance of women’s immunity to the logics of the marketplace. “Woman, at present, [is] ... the regulating power of the great social machine,” she argued (46). But that power depends on “the very exclusion complained of, [which gives them] the power to judge of questions by the abstract rules of right and wrong” (46). And finally, even as Margaret Oliphant admitted claims like those made by Sanford and Lewis, she also insisted on the role of coverture in producing marital sympathy. “The ‘marriage of true minds’ may be as rare as it is lofty and fortunate,” she admitted in “The Laws Concerning Women” (1856), but because of existing laws, “[t]he marriage of interests, hopes, and purposes is universal” (“Laws” 380). Coverture makes sympathy possible, in other words, for it guarantees that husbands and wives have no choice but to share goals and interests.

For reformers, by contrast, sympathy was less the product of women’s peculiar nature or of common interests as defined by the law, than of a kind of mutual understanding best achieved in a context of equality. As early as 1825, for example, William Thompson argued that because of coverture, there can be no identity of interests between husbands and wives. “[E]ven if these dissimilarities [of

tend towards each other.” This definition clarifies the difficulty of determining the nature of sympathy because it makes apparent the ambiguity around whether sympathy is a “real or supposed” affinity, whether sympathy means that certain things are similarly affected by the same influence, affect one another, or attract each other, and hence, too, whether sympathetic objects are simply similar to one another, or whether they share some kind of bond.

views and tastes] did not exist," he insisted, "the very act of placing the means of happiness or the command of the actions of the one in dependence on the pleasure of the other, would break the charm and destroy this identity of interest" (47). As a result, there can effectively be no sympathetic bond between husband and wife: "the less of resemblance, of equality, the less there will be of sympathy; the less power to resist and the less of controul [sic], the greater will be the temptation to, the more infallible will be the certainty of, abuse of power" (12). J. S. Mill expanded on this claim in his *Subjection of Women* (1869), arguing that "[e]ven with true affection, authority on the one side and subordination on the other prevent perfect confidence" (141). Whether because they are intimidated or ashamed, he insisted, wives have every incentive to conceal their true thoughts and feelings from their husbands. For writers like these, Oliphant's defense of the marriage law could best be understood as a sentimentalization of Blackstone's famous formulation, "[b]y marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs every thing" (1:430). As Eliza Lynn Linton argued in 1854, translating this account of a legal situation into claims about a psychological or emotional state of affairs serves only to obscure the very real disadvantages experienced by married women. Hence, while she claimed that conservatives mistakenly described marriage as involving a "beautiful ... ideal" in which husband and wife were "united by bonds none could break—their two lives welded together, one and indivisible for ever," for her, under existing laws, marriage should instead be understood to involve "the absorption of the woman's whole life in that of the man's ... the entire annihilation of all her rights, individuality, legal existence, and his sole recognition by the law" (257). The identity of interests produced by the law, she argued, is nothing more than a "legal fiction" having no necessary correlation to the emotional lives of the two parties.

In the context of these debates, Walter's claims to know, to sympathize with, and to be able to speak for his beloved seem like a nearly parodic exploitation of the slippage between conservative and reformist notions of sympathy. His example demonstrates, first, **the irrelevance of female interiority to marital sympathy: he does not need Laura to be anything other than the beautiful object of his desire in order to use her as the agent of his amelioration or his subjective self-production.** His identity is produced less in relation to her, in other words, than in relation to what he says about himself in relation to her. Second, Walter's example indicates the ambiguity that so often arose in discussions of marital sympathy regarding whether husbands and wives sympathize with one another because they have the same interests or whether "sympathy" is merely the name given to married women's inability under the law to articulate any interests other than their husbands'. **Walter's example thus calls attention to the impossibility of distinguishing sympathy from projection, in general, and its particular impossibility in a situation in which there seems to be so little available to sympathize with.** As one popular saying put it, under the law, "'Husband and wife are one person' and that one is the husband" (qtd. in Besant 8). The fact that in Laura's

case there is no there there only literalizes such an assertion. As a result, we are left with a strangely doubled vision of Walter's marriage to Laura that makes it seem simultaneously like an affirmation of his claim to love her and so to know her in a way that legitimates his marriage to her, and also like a demonstration of the extent to which sympathy can function autonomously from its purported object.

Such an account of *The Woman in White* contradicts a common understanding of the novel, which casts it as a defense of virtuous middle-class models of identity as opposed to those associated with the corrupt aristocracy.¹⁰ While aristocrats such as Glyde and Fosco define identity in terms of wealth and birth, and hence as something that can be stolen, mistaken, or lost, critics have often claimed, Walter appears to define both himself and his beloved in ways that are inalienable because of their connection with one another's profound inner selves. What Walter's sensational alchemy of identity begins to suggest, however, is that his superiority to Glyde lies not in his commitment to the inalienability of identity, but instead in the effectiveness of his strategies for altering it. In the course of the novel, both Sir Percival and Count Fosco go to extraordinary lengths to steal Laura's identity as well as to alter their own. But ultimately all their efforts fail, given away by the means they use to achieve the transformations. Sir Percival's forgery of a record of his parents' marriage can be observed, traced, and ultimately proven. Count Fosco's attempt to disguise himself by becoming enormously fat can be foiled by the red mark on his arm that proves his membership in, and betrayal of, an Italian secret society. Similarly, their effort to make Laura and Anne change places can be exposed simply by consulting the cab driver regarding the date on which he took Laura to the house where she is supposed to have died. Meanwhile, all Walter needs to do to effect the reverse transformation is to appeal to the proof of his pulses. He sees a woman, calls her Laura, and as the Count would say, "Hey! presto! pass!" the alteration is performed (235). And, in the process, he redefines himself as well, as one whose marriage to a wealthy heiress is legitimate despite the lowliness of the class position in which he began.

The most obvious objection to this claim is that it fails to consider the way the plot of the novel suggests a considerable investment in the continuity of physical identity. As contemporary critics noted repeatedly, Collins's novel has an extraordinarily elaborate narrative. "As the Judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now," we are told in the Preamble; with these lines, the novel is framed as a court case, and the reader is established as a surrogate judge who must weigh facts, determine plausibility, and come to a final conclusion (9). Evidence in the form of testimonials, legal documents, medical records, and so forth, is presented with little or no commentary from its compiler, Walter Hartright. As a result, it appears to give rise naturally to a story that makes sense of all the available facts and that has a satisfying conclusion: that Walter's wife is the rightful inheritor of the body, consciousness, and property attached to the name Laura Fairlie Glyde, and that her marriage to Walter is legitimated by the fact that he has identified her correctly. The novel thus appears to fulfill all the

¹⁰ See, in particular, Kendrick, Pykett, and Elam.

requirements of what Alexander Welsh has called a “strong representation”: one that, like a criminal trial, “holds the possibility of conviction—in both senses of the word” (2). Yet, despite all these indications of the novel’s commitment to an evidentiary narrative—and so, too, to the relation between identity and physical continuity—in the original version of the novel, the chain of circumstances by which Laura and Anne were made to trade places made no sense. In the edition published in serial installments and in the first two three-volume editions, a series of errors in the dates of Laura’s departure from Limmeridge House and the dismissal of Marian’s doctor and servants created an impossible chronology at the center of the novel.¹¹ As a result, there was no way an attentive reader could conclude that the woman Walter marries is Laura—or anyone else, for that matter—on the basis of the evidence provided. In the words of the critic for *The Times* who first called attention to the problem, any reader who attempted to piece together the facts would have to conclude that the novel’s last volume was “a mockery, a delusion, and a snare; and [that] all the incidents in it are not merely improbable—they are absolutely impossible” (6).

Such accidents happen, of course. And the confusion was clearly unintentional: Collins’s letter to his editor responding to the article indicates his annoyance at having made the error (Letter 587). What is interesting is less the fact he made the mistake, therefore, than the nature of readers’ responses to it. Simply the fact that it took three editions before it was exposed indicates that few readers cared enough about the evidence to piece it together. And for the critic for *The Times* who first noted the problem, it seems rather to have increased than to have diminished his admiration for the novel:

[I]f here [in the problem with the dates] we have evidence of Mr. Collins’s weakness, we have also convincing proof of his great ability. What must that novel be which can survive such a blunder? Remember that it is not now published for the first time. It was read from week to week by eager thousands in the pages of All the Year Round. In those pages a blunder which renders the whole of the last volume, the climax of the tale, nugatory, escaped the practiced eye of Mr. Dickens and his coadjutors, who were blinded, as well they might be, by the strong assertions and earnest style of the narrator. A plot that is worked out of impossibilities, like that of robbing the almanack of a fortnight, may be treated as a jest; but we vote three

¹¹ The full account of the problem in *The Times* is as follows:

If we dare trespass upon details after the author’s solemn injunction, we could easily show that Lady Glyde could not have left Blackwater-park before the 9th or 10th of August. Anybody who reads the story, and who counts the days from the conclusion of Miss Halcombe’s diary, can verify the calculation for himself. He will find that the London physician did not pay his visit till the 31st of July, that Dawson was not dismissed till the 3rd of August, and that the servants were not dismissed till the following day. (6)

This was not the first time mistakes had been pointed out in Collins’s plot. See, for example, the unsigned review in *The Guardian*: “it is almost a compliment to point out a slip in vol. iii, where an important entry in a register, assigned in p. 149 to September, is given in p. 203 to April, for such a blunder could only be worth noticing in a very highly finished and accurate work” (780-81). There is no record that Collins was aware of the earlier accusation. After *The Times* review, he corrected the error.

cheers for the author who is able to practice such a jest with impunity. He will not have a reader the less, and all who read will be deceived and delighted. (6)

What matters to this reader is not so much the absolute consistency of the novel's world as that world's persuasiveness—a persuasiveness that relies only on the “strong assertions and earnest style” of the narrator. Insofar as the error calls attention to this skill, therefore, it is the source of pleasure and admiration; it makes him admire Collins *more*, he suggests, and the deception itself will make readers “delighted.”

Despite Collins's annoyance with the fact of the error, the mode of persuasion this critic finds so effective is predicted by the text itself. Just as the novel's first readers were blinded to its impossibilities by the text's rhetorical force, so too are the members of Walter's audience taken in by *his* strong assertions. In the climactic scene in which he “proves” Laura's identity to her tenants, and so restores her to her rightful position, what appears to convince his spectators is less the circumstantial evidence he provides than the way that evidence provides a narrative frame for the sensation he communicates to their bodies—a sensation that bears all the force of conviction. After Walter provides the tenants with the history of how Laura and Anne were made to trade places (a history, we should remember, that in the first three editions would have been literally impossible), Mr. Kyrle, the lawyer for the family, rises and declares “that [Walter's] case was proved by the plainest evidence he had ever heard in his life” (618). And then, finally, Walter brings Laura forward. Only when confronted with the spectacle of her body do the tenants express their willingness to believe the story they have been told:

I put my arm round Laura, and raised her so that she was plainly visible to every one in the room. “Are you all of the same opinion?” I asked, advancing towards them a few steps, and pointing to my wife.

The effect was electrical. Far down at the lower end of the room, one of the oldest tenants on the estate, started to his feet, and led the rest with him in an instant. I see the man now, with his honest brown face, and his iron-grey hair, mounted on the window-seat, waving his heavy riding-whip over his head, and leading the cheers. “There she is, alive and hearty—God bless her! Gi't tongue, lads! Gi't tongue!” The shout that answered him, reiterated again and again, was the sweetest music I ever heard. (618-19)

These tenants respond neither to the evidentiary narrative nor to Mr. Kyrle's ratification, but instead to the ways in which those framing devices make possible the production of a sensation, the meaning of which has already been defined. “There she is,” they cry, “alive and hearty”: there is the woman whose body gives us a thrill that Walter has already successfully named “Laura.” Like the reviewer's enthusiasm for Collins's “strong assertions and earnest style,” what matters for the tenants is not so much the plausibility of the story they are told, but the way that story can be mobilized so as to explain a sensation they

have been made to feel. And, as in the case of the critic, this is a pleasure for which they are willing to pay—in this case, by accepting Walter as the future inheritor of the vast estate to which they are attached. In feeling what Walter feels, not only do they ratify his claim regarding the identity of his wife, but they also ratify his means of making that claim—means that effectively open up the possibility of nearly limitless male self-invention. What they endorse, in other words, is a fantasy of middle-class male mobility premised less on his deep sympathetic relationship with a woman than on the man's power to feel, to name those feelings, and to persuade others of the legitimacy of those names.¹²

II

At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned that even though *The Woman in White* bears all the hallmarks of the sensation novel—and was widely recognized as the first sensation novel as soon as others began to be published—it never elicited the scandalized critical response characteristic of its successors. The novel's first critics often complained that it emphasized plot at the expense of character, that some of its incidents were untrue to nature, and that its use of multiple narrators was occasionally awkward. But they rarely condemned the novel outright or voiced concern regarding its moral or physical effects on readers. So, for example, the 1860 review in the *Critic* praises *The Woman in White* for the way it "rouses your curiosity, it thrills your nerves, it fills you with admiration, contempt, indignation, hatred" (233). Only then does it go on to complain that although "you acknowledge [the novel's] artistic construction, you feel the want of nature" (233). Here, the fact that the novel "thrills your nerves" is an object of praise rather than censure—and although the critic criticizes certain aspects of the novel, she or he never voices any concern that it might be dangerous to readers. The review in *The Saturday Review* evaluates the novel similarly, claiming that although it is of "an inferior metal altogether," it "is a great compliment to [Collins's] skill" that "[n]obody ever leaves one of his tales unfinished" (250, 249). And the review in *The Spectator* altogether rejects the notion that "it is an interest of mere curiosity which holds the reader so fast and holds him so long" (864). "The vivid and manifold emotions with which we read [the woman in white's] story are still fresh in our memory," the reviewer insists, "and we retain a lively sense of the personality of every actor in it" (864).

Later critics largely agreed with these initial responses. Thus, even after later sensation novels began to be condemned, the critical enthusiasm for *The Woman in White* remained largely unaltered. The September 1861 essay in *The Sixpenny Magazine* that first used the term "sensation" to denominate a group of novels, for example, singles out *The Woman in White* for praise, describing *Great Expectations* as only "almost equal to Wilkie Collins's extremely clever romance,

¹² In this context, Walter's initial instruction to the reader to "[t]hink of [Laura] as you thought of the first woman who quickened the pulses within you that the rest of her sex had no art to stir" (52) takes on a different resonance than it might have in a first reading. This attempt to universalize Walter's experience comes to seem like a way to lay the foundation for this later attempt to capitalize on the reader's participation in his sensations.

which we regard as the greatest success in sensation writing, with the single exception of Mrs. Stowe's deservedly popular work, produced within our memory" (367, emphasis added). Similarly, the famous and frequently quoted condemnations of the sensation novel that came a year or two later—Henry Mansel's 1863 review, in which he condemns sensation novels for "'preaching to the nerves'" (251), and the Archbishop of York's much-publicized 1864 attack on the sensation novel for teaching us not to trust appearances, to be suspicious of our neighbors, and to embrace fatalism—do not name Collins's novel. Mansel's review is particularly noteworthy on this account, in that it refers to twenty-four other sensation novels, including Collins's own *No Name* (1862), and yet never mentions the novel that was commonly regarded as the initiator of the genre.

The most obvious and striking difference between *The Woman in White* and later sensation novels is that while Collins's novel revolves around a fantasy of male self-invention that posits women as the objects and vehicles of that invention, in later sensation novels, it is often the women who seize control of their identities, and of the identities of the men who love them.¹³ M. E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863), Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), and Collins's *No Name* (1862)—all these novels revolve around women who seize the power to redefine themselves.¹⁴ Hence, if the paradigmatic moment of *The Woman in White* consists of Walter's exclamation, "Laura, Lady Glyde was standing by the inscription and was looking at me over the grave" (411), the paradigmatic moment of these later novels might be the scene in *East Lynne* in which Carlyle is told that the woman he thought was his governess is in fact his first wife, who he had thought was dead: "The first clear thought that came thumping through his brain was that he must be a man of two wives" (626). While Walter represents a fantasy of a middle-class male power to reinvent the self, the later novels call attention to the extent to which that power is available to women as well. And it is the novels in the latter category that tended most consistently to be condemned by critics.

¹³ The anonymous author of "Female Sensation Novelists" was the first nineteenth-century critic to point out the connection between these later sensation novels and fantasies of female self-invention. "Husbands and fathers at any rate may begin to look about them and scrutinize the parcel that arrives from Mudie's," the reviewer warned her or his readers, "when young ladies are led to contrast the actual with the ideal we see worked out in popular romance; the mutual duties, the reciprocal forbearance, the inevitable trials of every relation in real life, with the triumph of mere feminine fascination, before which man falls prostrate and helpless" (234). Elaine Showalter (1976) was one of the first twentieth-century critics to make the same claim.

¹⁴ Of course, not all sensation novels follow this pattern. Charles Reade's *Hard Cash* (1863), for example, revolves around a man's attempt to steal another man's identity. And in Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), a woman gives a man back his identity, but is not responsible for taking it away from him in the first place. Nor were all the novels that revolved around women altering their identities condemned to the same extent: they had their champions as well as their opponents. But, after having read all the reviews of sensation novels that appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, *Cornhill Magazine*, *The Edinburgh Review*, *The Temple Bar*, *The Quarterly Review*, and *The Westminster Review*, and *The Times*, I would argue that it is clear that novels that depict women redefining their identities tended to be the subject of much more critical ire than novels that do not.

Interestingly, *The Woman in White* directly addresses the possibility that women might have the same power to define themselves as certain men—but only in order to close it down.¹⁵ Well before Walter and Laura are reunited, Marian Halcombe goes to the insane asylum to see the woman she has been told is Anne Catherick. She waits for a few moments in the garden and then sees two women coming towards her:

Miss Halcombe advanced on her side, and the women advanced on theirs. When they were within a dozen paces of each other, one of the women stopped for an instant, looked eagerly at the strange lady, shook off the nurse's grasp on her, and the next moment rushed into Miss Halcombe's arms. In that moment Miss Halcombe recognized her sister—recognized the dead-alive. (420-21)

This scene explicitly recapitulates that in which Walter is reunited with his lover in the graveyard: Marian sees her friend, recognizes her, and immediately sets to work to restore her to her rightful name, property and position in society. Nevertheless, this reunion scene is in no way sensational, for at no point are Marian's sensations divorced from understanding. Although her encounter with Laura takes place before Walter's, it is only recounted in the novel *after* the lovers are reunited. As a result, Marian's recognition of Laura is never called into question and so is made to seem authoritative in a way that Walter's can never be. It is therefore only appropriate that in the final tableau of the novel, it is Marian who informs Walter who he has become:

[Marian] rose; and held up the child, kicking and crowing in her arms. "Do you know who this is, Walter?" she asked, with bright tears of happiness gathered in her eyes.

"Even my bewilderment has its limits," I replied. "I think I can still answer for knowing my own child."

"Child!" she exclaimed, with all her easy gaiety of old times. "Do you talk in that familiar manner of one of the landed gentry of England? Are you aware, when I present this illustrious baby to your notice, in whose presence you stand? Evidently not! Let me make two eminent personages known to one another: Mr. Walter Hartright—the Heir of Limmeridge."

So she spoke. In writing those last words, I have written all. The pen falters in my hand. The long, happy labour of many months is over! Marian was the good angel of our lives—let Marian end our Story. (627)

Walter, the sensationalized subject, and Laura, the sensation-generating object, may together constitute the properly gendered marital unit. And sharing only one heart, consciousness, and set of interests, they may epitomize a particular

¹⁵ Several critics have seen Marian's relationship with Laura as subversive. See, for example, Balee, Barickman, Erickson, and Heller.

ideal of marital bliss. **But as Marian demonstrates, the ratification of that ideal requires an audience.** It is ultimately up to her—not Walter—to confirm that he is who he is, that Laura is who she is, and that their child is all that he should be. Thus, at the end of *The Woman in White*, we are confronted not so much with a vision of normative, naturalized heterosexual domesticity as with an oddly insistent reminder of the conventionality of that domesticity.¹⁶ At the same time, rather than serving *only* to destabilize the scene, Marian's presence *also* serves to validate it; by contrast with later sensation novels, the woman spectator here indicates how her subversive potential could be enlisted to support an ideologically acceptable paradigm of male identity formation.

In *The Woman in White*, then, the problem of male identity is answered in terms of strong assertions, the universality of sensation (even if those sensations do not have universal meanings), and a matrix of conventionality that determines the conditions of who can claim to know what at what moments and how. Anyone in this world can experience sensations, and some can even interpret them and so be able to claim to sympathize with their object. But only a few have the authority necessary to secure a profit from an audience willing to pay for the thrill of participating in those feelings and for the fantasy of almost limitless and—at least temporarily—exclusively male self-invention to which Collins attached them.

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¹⁶ Chase and Levenson have recently examined what they describe as the "fall into visibility" of the Victorian family (143). Marian's example suggests that rather than a "fall," the privacy of the private sphere is always already a performance staged for one's neighbors.

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