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READING AT THEIR PERIL: 
DANGEROUS ENTERTAINMENT FROM WILKIE COLLINS TO MAE WEST

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for 
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate 
School of the Ohio State University 

By 

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* * * * *

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation articulates the concept of "dangerous reading," situated within the context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Anglo-American culture. I postulate that certain forms of scandalous entertainment were perceived as threats to middle-class values because they preyed upon the "weak-minded" -- population segments discursively linked with children and the "lower races" -- who, theoretically, would be inclined to mimetic reproduction of the culture they consumed. I argue that the counterhegemonic strategy of Camp emerges as a way to circumvent charges of corruption, even while allowing duplicitous double meanings to accrue to certain cultural productions when interpreted by a knowing audience. Camp is a way of resisting "straight" reading while appearing to conform to it on a literal level.

Although my dissertation investigates different aesthetic objects from two cultures, I find that these are linked through their ability to be read as Camp objects. Furthermore, the British texts that I employ -- Wilkie Collins's sensation novels and the work of Oscar Wilde -- enjoyed popularity in America, while the productions of Mae West also made a successful transatlantic crossover. In addition to the primary texts, I examine contemporary reviews of sensation novels and scientific discussions of cultural "degeneration"; the trials of Oscar Wilde; and critical responses to and historical conditions surrounding Mae West's work. Using Oscar Wilde as the pivotal figure in this study, I argue that sensation novels are symptomatic of the cultural conditions that lead to
the coining of the term "Camp" in the first decade of this century, and that the brand of Camp employed by West depended upon a nostalgic retrieval of the Gay Nineties.

Replete with murder and sexual scandal, the Victorian sensation novel threatened the chastity of the women who read it, and it made the dangerous suggestion that gender and class could be imitated successfully. Chapters Two and Three investigate three sensation novels from the 1860s, and this study is original in its treatment of these texts as Camp artifacts. These novels problematize the gender identity of the protagonists, as well as of the reading subject. My reading focuses on femininity as role-playing and links the "act" of femininity to "deviant" sexuality. I argue that the "normality" that these texts seem to approve is only a successfully closeted deviance.

Chapter Four studies Oscar Wilde as the pivotal figure in the histories of both Camp sensibility and homosexuality. The Picture of Dorian Gray and Wilde's trials are the primary focus in this examination of how "dangerous texts" come to be seen as signs of the artist's degeneracy. Beginning with Wilde, the body of the artist is regarded as the potential repository for cultural "poison" that may be disseminated to vulnerable minds and bodies through the corrupting medium of the text or stage spectacle. Wilde's "camping" is interpreted as an attempt to combat the criminalization of his body by baffling a "straight" reading and by resituating "deviance" in the mind of the reader rather than the mind/body of the author.

Chapter Five examines literature's replacement by visual entertainment as the most potentially dangerous form of popular culture. Mae West provides the perfect meeting point for discussions of Camp reading, gender performance, transgression, and censorship. This chapter draws connections between West and the fin-de-siècle, arguing that West's one-liners and double entendres are Camp strategies derived from Wilde's epigrams and insistence on the indeterminate meaning of art.
My concluding chapter examines the theoretical implications of transgressive consumption and dangerous culture in the late twentieth century. Specifically, the discursive shift in focus from one aesthetic form to others (the relative neglect of literature in the face of more immediately accessible incarnations, such as television and music), as well as in the consuming subject who is supposedly at risk, reveals the facets of cultural identity currently perceived as being under siege by unsupervised consumption of popular entertainment. The viability of Camp's continuance as a counterhegemonic strategy is also examined.
Dedicated to Todd,

who always indulges my consumption of transgressive culture
I wish to thank my adviser, Linda Mizejewski, for her inspiration, enthusiasm, intellectual support, and advice, without which I could never have completed this project.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A class of literature has grown up around us, usurping in many respects, intentionally or unintentionally, a portion of the preacher's office, playing no inconsiderable part in moulding the minds and forming the habits and tastes of its generation; and doing so principally, we had almost said exclusively, by 'preaching to the nerves.' . . . Excitement, and excitement alone, seems to be the great end at which they aim—an end which must be accomplished at any cost by some means or other. . . . And as excitement, even when harmless in kind, cannot be continually produced without becoming morbid in degree, works of this class manifest themselves as belonging, some more, some less, but all to some extent, to the morbid phenomena of literature—indications of a wide-spread corruption, of which they are in part both the effect and the cause; called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply.

--H.L. Mansel, "Sensation Novels," Quarterly Review, April 1863, p. 482

The 1860s witnessed the emergence of a new genre of British popular fiction commonly known as the "sensation novel." A descendant of other nineteenth-century popular forms such as the Gothic novel and the Newgate novel, the sensation novel was thus denominated both in reference to its crime-related content—usually murder, bigamy, adultery, madness, and/or illegitimate offspring—as well as the the feelings it allegedly inspired in its audience. Although a rather short-lived phenomenon (the height of its popularity was during the sixties and seventies), the sensation novel bears cultural significance both in its contribution to later popular forms such as mystery novels and suspense films, as well as its role in a Victorian controversy in which ideas about gender,
class, and sexuality are at stake. The sensation novel was a contemporary of discourses that were concerned with the effects of literature upon "impressionable" minds; frequently, the image of a schoolgirl was invoked in such arguments. At the same time, anxieties over the potential effects of sensation novels also originated in class issues. By the period of the sensation novel's popularity, increased literacy rates and leisure time, more affordable books and periodicals, and the presence of circulating libraries such as Mudie's made reading for leisure a reality for a much larger portion of the population than ever before. However, not everyone viewed these developments positively. Opponents of the nascent mass culture felt that females and the working classes were being vitiated by the poisonous influence of the new literature, which could inspire illegitimate desires.

The purpose of the present work is to define connections among the sensation novels of Wilkie Collins, the work of Oscar Wilde, and the productions of Mae West (and, in the latter two cases, the artists themselves) as sites for the contestation of gender, class, and sexuality. In each case, I will also address the issue of how the consumption of certain aesthetic objects was perceived as dangerous by contemporaries, as well as what commonalities contribute to the notion of the perilous text. Particularly, I wish to emphasize the roles that acting, artifice, and exaggeration play in each case, as well as what possibilities these elements open for real and perceived subversion. This dissertation postulates the consumption of certain aesthetic objects as "dangerous reading." That is, the consumption of controversial examples of popular entertainment seems to pose a challenge to bourgeois ideals during periods of cultural transition or crisis. Works that appeal to marginalized groups without providing a sound moral lesson are regarded as corrupting those with indiscriminate tastes. The dreaded consequence is that those with "childlike" minds (initially, women and the working classes, although this

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will change during Wilde's trials) will reenact the scandalous or criminal behavior portrayed in the culture they consume. This project begins with the study of Wilkie Collins's work in a popular genre that arises at a period of increasing literacy among “weak-minded” groups. The popular success of the sensation novel is greeted by a tide of proclamations about the unsexing of women, the demoralization of the working classes, and the decline of the English race. Moving from here to Oscar Wilde, I discuss the conflation of the text or artistic product with the body as spectacle. In the figure of Wilde, the corrupting potential of the text comes to be seen as “evidence” of the creator’s own deviance, a means of spreading poison from the mind and body of the artist to an unsuspecting audience, whose composition has now changed into the educated bourgeois male.

In my final move to Mae West, I investigate the transformation of the cultural concerns presented in the previous chapters. First, I examine visual entertainment's replacement of literature as the most potentially poisonous form of popular culture. Anxieties over the literacy of women and the lower classes seem to disintegrate in the face of an immediately accessible cultural form that is available to all, regardless of training or education. Second, I compare West to Wilde as a figure whose body and “personality” are conflated with her cultural productions; who must evade the culture’s and industry’s sexual prohibitions through the manipulation of language and the use of Camp; and who is prosecuted for the "indecency" of her representations. Finally, I show how Mae West transforms some of the cultural and sexual anxieties exhibited in the sensation novel, turning the Victorian “monster” of the masquerading social climber into an American comic heroine and figure of feminist Camp, the gold-digger. Like the sensation novel, however, Mae West’s plays and films were still seen as somewhat dangerous for the audience, especially for young female spectators.
This dissertation also links all of these cultural products by investigating their manifestations of queer desire and identity. While Wilde and West have been routinely discussed as Camp icons and creators, as well as in their roles in gay history and entertainment, this has not been the case with Collins. In this project I argue that the problems of homosexual identity and desire permeate Collins's novels in the period immediately preceding the cultural moment in which these ideas can be articulated. The excess and the performative model of identity which characterize the sensation novel also render it an example of Camp prior to that concept's discursive formation. I consider the consumption of Collins, Wilde, and West as "dangerous" due to its potential to inspire inappropriate mimesis in the audience. This idea of dangerous consumption is paired with a Camp interpretation of these texts and persons to postulate an intersection of transgressive possibilities in which the imagined social body, as well as the material body, seems to be under assault from unauthorized or excessive reading and consumption.

Like many texts that investigate queer desire, perform queer readings, and/or construct a queer history, this dissertation is a theoretical hybrid. My interest in recovering and examining certain texts as queer (or campy, which is a related term) is intertwined with feminist and cultural studies approaches to these aesthetic objects. The work of Pamela Robertson provides the most pertinent model of linking the feminist with the queer in this respect, and especially in the articulation of a feminist Camp, a sensibility long linked almost exclusively with male homosexuality. Other scholars who combine feminist and queer theories are important to this project as well, including Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and Lynda Hart. Butler's discussion of gender's performativity is instrumental to my readings of staged and lived gender performances, as well as to my understanding of Camp. Meanwhile, Sedgwick's and Hart's queer and feminist readings of texts have provided useful models for my own.
D.A. Miller's queer reading of *The Woman in White* has influenced my readings of Collins. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* may not be about "queer reading" exclusively, but it is about the disciplinary function of the nineteenth-century novel. The application of these concerns to *The Woman in White* is decidedly queer, since Miller discusses the male sensation reader's imperative to control the "woman within" (153-56). Miller's assertion of reading's power to destabilize identity informs my own understanding of the relationships between consumers and aesthetic objects, as well as how the body and identity might be assaulted by certain kinds of consumption. I extend Miller's discussion of visceral responses to fiction by investigating more active forms of consumption that may lead to imitation that provokes further "gender trouble."

Queer theory further informs this project in terms of the history of sexuality and its identification/regulation, in discussing figures that are important to gay history as well as the history of entertainment and Camp, and in the discussion and formulation of Camp itself. Foucault's work is especially useful for thinking about the relationships among sexuality, discourse, language, and regulation, and also has applications for ways of "reading" sexuality. Ed Cohen investigates this history and these relationships specifically in the case of Oscar Wilde and his trials, in an attempt to trace the discursive history of male homosexuality. I have such queer histories in mind when performing readings of fiction, searching the literature that precedes Wilde (as a complement to the legal and medical research performed by others) for signs of the conditions that lead to the discursive creation of homosexuality and, subsequently, of Camp.

Writing about Camp is nearly always presumed to be queer, since Camp's origins and associations are decidedly homosexual. Even work on feminist Camp acknowledges the association of Camp with gay men, and feminist Camp to some degree depends on
this association.\(^2\) The essays in Moe Meyer's *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* and David Bergman's *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality* identify Camp as a gay discourse. Many of the recent writers on Camp problematize Sontag's 1964 essay, which aligns Camp with homosexuals and Oscar Wilde, but really fails to investigate the source of this relationship or to acknowledge Camp's political and subversive potential. Nevertheless, I think it is important to be familiar with Sontag's "Notes" as an early, if sometimes flawed, attempt to capture "Camp." I occasionally employ Sontag to support my Camp readings, but the passages that I find to be still relevant (such as those about Camp's theatricality, or the exaggeration of gender) are generally not those deemed controversial by more recent Camp theorists.\(^3\) I want to avoid the minimization of Camp's connection to homosexuality that Meyer criticizes in Sontag's work. While I agree with Meyer that the invisibility of the queer in pop Camp (which he opposes to queer Camp) makes it into "the unwitting vehicle of a subversive operation that introduces queer signifying codes into dominant discourse" (13), I differ with him over the exact genesis of the queer Camp/pop Camp split that results in this effect. Meyer argues that Camp and homosexual identity "both appeared simultaneously as the result of Wilde's juridico-legal inscription in his 1895 trials" (19). This may be true at a linguistic and legal level, but my reading of Collins's novels will show that the unwitting consumption of queer signifying codes, a kind of "drag" inherent in the reading, is available before Camp and homosexuality emerge into discourse.

\(^2\)For example, as Robertson remarks, Mae West's formulation of Camp involved a strategic alliance of women and gay men, both of whom West regarded as oppressed by straight men.

\(^3\)The biggest exception here is my occasional reference to Camp as a "sensibility," a term with which Meyer strongly disagrees. Meyer feels that this term has been used irresponsibly, making writing on Camp "invulnerable to critique" (8). His project involves the creation of a more concrete definition of Camp as praxis. While I think Meyer's definition of Camp is valuable for understanding the discursive emergence of Camp, for distinguishing queer Camp from pop Camp, and for framing Wilde as a founding figure of Camp, I still think the notion of Camp as a sensibility has important applications. As I will discuss shortly, my argument about Collins's fiction depends on the notion that Camp and homosexual significations are at work in the sensation novel before they are concretized in discourse.
A few scholars have designated late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century Europe as the birthplace of Camp, although the term itself does not seem to emerge until the beginning of the twentieth century. The dandy is regarded as a founding figure of Camp (see King and Robertson), and certainly Wilde is aware of this when he reprises the dandy for his own signifying practices in the late Victorian era. Between the dandy and Wilde's recovery thereof, however, Camp seems to be largely missing from history, or at least from theoretical discussions. In this dissertation I attempt to recover Camp in the decades immediately preceding Wilde's literary productions. Specifically, I argue that Camp can be found in the sensation novels of Wilkie Collins, particularly in their emphasis on gender identity, sexuality, artifice, and impersonation.

My identification of Collins's novels as Camp involves thinking of Camp itself as a reading strategy. This includes searching the text for signs of Camp, for items that stick out in their destabilization of identity. The precarious nature of social and gender identity in Collins's novels, as well as the frequently successful use of impersonation, regularly undermine the restoration of a "normal" social order at the narratives' conclusions. A number of Collins's characters seem to engage in a kind of drag.

I am not the first to think of Camp as a way of reading. For example, in "Narcissus in the Wilde: Textual Cathexis and the Historical Origins of Queer Camp," Gregory W. Bredbeck investigates the history of Wilde's association with Camp, pointing out that both Wilde and Camp have been used "as models of how to read moments of gay resistance hidden in history" (51). My own application of Camp reading to the sensation novel is something like this, although I would still hesitate to label Collins's work as "gay resistance." There is, however, something queer about the sensation novel. In The Novel and the Police, D.A. Miller identifies the threat to the gender identity of the male reader

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posed by *The Woman in White*. My chapters on Collins identify many other points of "gender trouble." In the decade preceding the coining of the term "homosexual," and two decades before the homosexual becomes a juridical subject, one finds simultaneously pleasurable and perilous forms of identity, desire, and consumption in the work of Collins. Although these issues become much more politicized with Wilde, Collins's novels offer sites where queer identities and desires repeatedly erupt into the text despite the conclusions' apparent affirmation of bourgeois, heterosexual, reproductive sexuality.

My Camp reading of Collins is a new one, but appropriate to a concept whose definition has always provoked debate. As Moe Meyer points out, Camp's first appearance in an English dictionary is in 1909, in J. Redding Ware's *Passing English of the Victorian Era*. This defines "camp" as "Actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis. Probably from the French. Used chiefly by persons of exceptional want of character" (61). Ware treats Camp as a strictly behavioral or gestural practice. This definition will become broadened later on, although the characteristic exaggeration will remain a constant. Ware further expresses a sort of moral disapproval of Camp, identifying it with individuals who possess an "exceptional want of character," although he does not mention gender or sexual orientation. The homosexual association may have been implicit, however, as the term's possible French origins (*camper* = to pose) could have rendered it sexually suspicious.

Later definitions of Camp tend to be more specific about the persons who employ or appreciate it, whether in terms of class association or sexual identification. A random sampling of more recent dictionaries produces interesting results:

1. a. An affectation or appreciation of manners and tastes commonly thought to be outlandish, vulgar, or banal. b. Behavior exhibiting such affectation or appreciation. 2. Banality or artificiality when appreciated for its humor.5

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7. [orig., homosexual jargon.] banality, mediocrity, artifice, ostenstation, etc. so extreme as to amuse or have a perversely sophisticated appeal. [Slang.]^6

1. exaggerated effeminacy. 2. something so outrageous, anachronistic, etc. as to be considered amusing.^7

The American Heritage Dictionary avoids any discussion of Camp's sexual associations, but its emphasis on Camp's vulgarity suggests that it has "low" sexual and class connections. Webster's gestures toward the complicated nature of Camp by describing it as "perversely sophisticated." Camp may rely on the trivial and mediocre, but the very excess of Camp works in a way that subverts the high/low distinctions of culture.

Webster's further identifies the paradoxical effect of Camp (something bad enough to be good) with "homosexual jargon." Funk & Wagnall's, however, is more specific (and not exactly progressive) in its understanding of the relationship between Camp and gender/sexuality, giving as its first definition "exaggerated effeminacy." This version of the dictionary, published in 1993, confirms what we probably suspected about Ware's 1909 definition all along: "exceptional want of character" means being "like a woman" (who has no character, according to Pope), which also means being "unmanly."

Camp plays an important role in my readings of "dangerous" culture because of the threats it poses to the imagined body of society. If Camp is "exaggerated effeminacy," then one who camps is being too much "like a woman"—a definition that renders feminist Camp problematic. There is something unmanly, or even unmanning, about Camp. This vague problem that hovers around official attempts to define Camp usually narrows down to the same thing: Camp threatens identity, particularly male identity, through its lack of respect for notions of gender propriety, status, and taste.

Camp perpetuates itself through its "perversely sophisticated appeal"; the cultivation of


the knowledge to identify and the desire to consume and perform Camp has the potential
to alter identity. It is unmanning and vulgarizing. In other words, the identity of the man
who camps is open to penetration by other, inappropriate identities, with the implication
that his body might be similarly vulnerable.

The brevity of dictionary definitions renders them inadequate for capturing
something as complex and controversial as Camp. While these few examples are
illuminating as a gauge of the evolution of our culture's understanding of Camp, the
concept still requires the fleshing out provided by critics and theorists. Susan Sontag
attempted to delineate the "fugitive sensibility" in 1964's "Notes on Camp," which has
been heavily criticized by later theorists. Some of this has to do with Sontag's
understanding of Camp as "apolitical," with which I must also disagree. Nevertheless,
some of Sontag's observations still seem to be generally accepted, such as her description
of Camp's theatricality, which she calls "Being-as-Playing-a-Role." Camp destabilizes
identity and, like theater, offers the opportunity to try on multiple identities. Drag offers
the most familiar incarnation of campy identity experimentation, one that usually,
although not always, involves a male impersonating a female.

This raises the question, as does the definition of Camp as "exaggerated
effeminacy," of whether women can produce conscious Camp (as opposed to simply
being retrieved as Camp objects, such as the various movie stars impersonated by drag
performers). The notion that Camp is the exclusive prerogative of men has been
challenged by recent scholarship, notably by Robertson and in work on lesbian Camp by
Cynthia Morrill and Kate Davy.¹ Part of the reason for the longstanding neglect of
women's Camp may have to do with the stereotype of women as naturally imitative (and

¹Cynthia Morrill, "Revamping the Gay Sensibility: Queer Camp and Dyke Noir," The Politics and Poetics
of Camp, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994) 110-29; Kate Davy, "Fe/male Impersonation: The
Discourse of Camp," The Politics and Poetics of Camp, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994) 130-
48.
humorless) creatures. If women have no character, as Pope said, and if they are naturally predisposed to imitation, as Darwin indicated in *The Descent of Man*, then women cannot be consciously campy; instead, those (men) who camp aspire to the condition of "femininity" in artificial and outrageous ways. An understanding of feminist Camp involves a critique of these assumptions, as figures such as West expose that "femininity" itself may simply be a form of drag.

The gender impersonation involved in drag, as well as the approximation of "femininity" that characterizes Camp, link Camp to certain forms of cultural consumption in their shared status as dangerous practices. Both can lead to improper imitation or impersonation. Camp practices emphasize that to imitate or impersonate is to be feminized, or at least to reject a certain notion of gender polarity. In the discourses that I examine, it is the assumption of femininity as an imitative condition that provokes anxiety. In the criticism of the sensation novel and other corrupting literature, one finds that it is the apparent feminine capacity to accompany consumption with imitation that worries fiction's antagonists. Throughout the criticism of the sensation novel, one finds images of women as unsophisticated readers, ones who mistake literature for reality and may passively imitate the actions of the unsavory women featured in the narratives they consume.

In the discourses surrounding Collins, Wilde, and West, one finds society endangered by consumption that has the potential to become mimesis. With the sensation novel, women and the working classes are framed as the endangered populations, the unskilled readers who are incapable of properly interpreting the novel's content. Yet beneath all this lurks the fear that it is perhaps *really* men—particularly men whose lineage is of consequence—who are actually imperilled by dangerous reading.

This idea is crystallized in Wilde's trials, when middle- and upper-class men are actually established as the endangered audience. In Wilde's case, the textual poison is not
mediated by women readers, but passed directly from the offender's body and his productions to the vulnerable male audience. Wilde is accused of writing "perverted" literature, and part of the concern about this literature is that its (male) consumers will be tricked into reenacting its perverse content. In other words, readers of Wilde's literature would in some senses become like women, suggestible and vulnerable to psychological and physical penetration from the influence of the text. Ironically, the means Wilde's antagonists employ to save these endangered men is to argue that they are already like women--prone to mimetic reproduction of the text. Though Wilde's campy courtroom performance failed with respect to the verdict, the legal methods employed against him emphasized the instability of identity, ironically suggesting that the male audience already resembled Wilde's "perverse" Dorian Gray both in their suggestibility and in the fluidity of their identity.

The male body and masculine identity were thus framed as being under assault both from literature that corrupted women and from literature and bodily practices that corrupted men. These cultural forms threatened to penetrate the body, and it is no accident that they are described in pathologized terms. Contemporary metaphors employed in criticizing sensation fiction were often those of disease, contagion, and sexual or psychological deviance. In my opening quotation, H.L. Mansel, remarking on twenty-four sensation novels from the period 1859-63 (including three classics of the genre, Braddon's Lady Audley's Secret and Aurora Floyd, and Collins's No Name), invokes a variety of pathological imagery: "preaching to the nerves," "excitement," "morbid phenomena of literature," "wide-spread corruption," "diseased appetite." This is a period in which the terms of psychology and sexology were being introduced into the cultural lexicon, as Foucault points out:

Through the various discourses, legal sanctions against minor perversions were multiplied; sexual irregularity was annexed to mental illness; from childhood to old age, a norm of sexual development was defined and all the possible deviations
were carefully described; pedagogical controls and medical treatments were organized; around the least fantasies, moralists, but especially doctors, brandished the whole emphatic vocabulary of abomination. (36)

Mansel's condemnation of sensation fiction is a typical example of the penetration of the "emphatic vocabulary of abomination" into general usage. Mansel portrays the reading public as creatures enslaved by their chosen entertainment, which has debased their tastes, sapped their moral instincts, and infected them with a disease whose characteristic symptom is a craving for more of the drug. While they usually avoid explicit discussion of the matter, Mansel's and other contemporary reviews betray anxieties about sexual transgression, as well as about the inevitability and inviolability of gender roles, social stratification, and the sanctity of the bourgeois family. Mansel himself, without directly stating that his fears really apply only to women and the lower classes, makes this obvious through his expressions of distaste for sensation fiction's vulgarity: "A commercial atmosphere floats around works of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop," and "Three principal [causes] may be named as having had a large share in producing sensation fiction]--periodicals, circulating libraries, and railway bookstalls" (483). Clearly, the availability of such literature to working-class people is responsible for the spread of this "disease," and what really seems to underlie Mansel's fears is that, through the instrument of corrupting literature, the Other possesses the means for infecting the bourgeois female: "We have ourselves seen an English translation of one of the worst of those French novels devoted to . . . the recommendation of adultery, lying for sale at a London railway-stall, and offered as a respectable book to unsuspecting ladies. . . ." (486). What is really at stake here is the integrity of the bourgeois female body, which through its fetishization is constructed as the foundation on which society rests.

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9In many respects, the contemporary proliferation of metaphors of addiction offers ample evidence of our culture's inheritance of the Victorian zeal for pathologizing "excessive" behaviors or behavior that deviates from the norm. Such modern curiosities as the "compulsive shopper" and the "sex addict" come to mind as the unique creations of our twelve-step consumer culture.
Throughout the next two chapters, I will clarify these connections by elaborating on the role of gender and sexuality in Wilkie Collins's novels, and its relation to contemporary discursive connections among the body, pathology, identity, and reading. I will also investigate the possibilities this may open for more radical forms of popular culture.

The "more radical forms" I have in mind are the productions of Oscar Wilde and Mae West. Although Wilde departs from the sensation novelists in his creation of more highbrow literature, and West usually works in a different medium, I am treating the consumption of these various aesthetic objects as examples of "dangerous reading." The cultural products, and sometimes the artists themselves, are regarded as a threat to the "impressionable" populations that participate in their consumption. The fear is that the weak-minded will mimetically reproduce the scandalous or even criminal behavior portrayed in popular culture. In this context, those who are considered impressionable or incapable of distinguishing art from reality are usually members of marginalized groups that are perceived as wanting or gaining unauthorized access to certain forms of power, such as education. The reactionary response is to discursively link these groups with children, thereby creating a need for their protection. As William Cohen points out in Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction, scandal destabilizes the categories of identity by altering our perceptions of how gender relates to the public domain: "Despite the usual construction of the public sphere as male, scandal's public is routinely portrayed as female, whether because of its penchant for gossip or its imagined need for paternalistic custody" (15). In the period that I examine, both women and the working classes are regarded as childlike, in need of paternalistic guidance. The population regulating cultural production (in this case, mostly middle-class men) recasts its anxieties about the inevitability of its own authority, portraying them instead as signs of benevolent concern for the socially restless, who require protection from themselves. One need look no further than Dickens's Hard Times to find the realities of class struggle.
sentimentalized as a family problem in which the rebellion of the "children" can be corrected through the benevolent paternalism of the manufacturing classes.

One cause for alarm in the public's choice of reading matter was its general preoccupation with murder and violent crime. In fact, the proponents of sensation fiction argued that such novels did not really "corrupt" their readers, since real-life horrors were available to them daily in the newspapers. The detractors of the sensation novel, on the other hand, argued that "there are other kinds of literature in which the darker problems of the time can be fitly discussed, and, with a tolerably unanimous consent, English writers have agreed to leave those subjects in their fit place" (Oliphant 257). Murder had long been a favored subject in popular fiction, but what so disturbed the Victorian mind about sensation fiction was the fact that its heinous crimes were removed from the distant past and exotic settings of the Gothic novel and relocated into the English home of the present. Unwholesome deeds in literature were more palatable when clearly foreign in setting or origin. But the introduction of violence or sexual transgression into a domestic setting threatened to taint the English national character, as Margaret Oliphant advises in an unsigned 1867 article for Blackwood's:

> English novels have for a long time--from the days of Sir Walter Scott at least--held a very high reputation in the world, not so much for what critics would call the highest development of art, as for a certain sanity, wholesomeness, and cleanness unknown to other literature of the same class. This peculiarity has had its effect, no doubt, upon those very qualities of the national mind which produced it... It has put writers on their honour, and saved readers from that wounding consciousness of restraint or of danger which destroys all delicate appreciation. (257)

The ideal type of English novel that Oliphant constructs is one in which considerations of art are secondary to sanitation of ideas. What is fascinating about Oliphant's argument is her portrayal of the relationship between fiction and its audience. Oliphant clearly believes that the mind is susceptible to the influence of literature ("This peculiarity has had its effect..."), yet, simultaneously, she maintains that the "cleanness" of this
literature is a result of the apparently natural superiority of the English psyche ("... upon those very qualities of the national mind which produced it."). The circularity of this reasoning asserts that wholesome minds cannot avoid producing wholesome literature, and that wholesome literature is undoubtedly the result of a wholesome mind. Despite Oliphant's assertions about the "natural" morality of the English, a few sentences later she refers to writers being "on their honour" to avoid the audience's "consciousness of restraint or danger." Here Oliphant contradicts her prior insistence on English innocence by acknowledging that the "wholesomeness" of the English novel—and the national psyche—is consciously manufactured by an artificial avoidance of the unpleasant.

Yet the popular literature of the period revealed that the vigilance of both authors and audience had failed Oliphant. One of the popular forms of fiction during mid-century was the "penny dreadful": "The stories contained in examples of this type of small, inexpensive, paper-bound book invariably tended to dwell lovingly on crime, horror, and the seamier side of relations between the sexes. So, naturally, they attracted a substantial following of people in search of pleasurable terror, revulsion, titillation, and general escapism" (Anderson 162). The penny dreadfuls featured fictional tales—often supernatural ones, dealing with ghosts, vampires, and the like—but some factual English stories proved equally horrific—and profitable. The Newgate Calendar, for instance, issued in 1773, 1809-10, and 1841 (Victorian Studies in Scarlet 44), was a popular anthology of criminal biographies. Accounts of trials and executions, in forms varying from broadsides to multi-volume sets, fed the public's appetite for tales of violent exploits. The English psyche was apparently not as "naturally" clean as Oliphant described it.

Scandal in a variety of forms—from political struggles to murder trials to "scandalous" entertainment—problematized both gender and class identity, most pointedly through the association of the lady with the public consumption of "low" entertainment.
Not only is the "natural" order of things reversed by the transformation of women into public creatures, but the women who are seduced by scandal even seem to be "unsexed" by it. A contemporary observes their unladylike sangfroid:

women of family and position, women who have been brought up in refined society, women who pride themselves upon the delicacy of their sensibilities, who would faint at the sight of a cut finger and go into hysterics if the drowning of a litter of kittens were mentioned in their hearing--such women can sit for hours listening to the details of a cold-blooded murder. They will put aside their costly lace veils to catch a glimpse of the man who has hurried his brother man to an untimely death. They will peer through their jewelled eyeglasses at the murderous weapon, the knife, or pistol, or blood-stained club, which is brought into court as mute witness of the deed of wrong. (quoted in Altick, Victorian Studies in Scarlet 42-43)

Scandalous material turned women into savvy consumers, but what they consumed threatened their sexual status. The anonymous source here reveals class and gender identity through the objects associated with the spectators ("costly lace veils," "jewelled eyeglasses"), suggesting that identity is at least partially based on consumption. The ladies' consumption of murder trials threatens to become a part of their identity as well. Scandal furthermore eroded the boundaries between art and life, as moral guardians worried about imitation of "trashy" novel content by women and the lower classes, even while sensation novels themselves, such as Collins's The Law and the Lady and Man and Wife, took inspiration for some material from real-life cases and the contents of the Newgate Calendar.

In the case of a famous trial, scandal was transformed into an entertaining spectacle. For example, the case of Madeleine Smith, on trial for poisoning her lover, was one that reached widespread popularity. Public support of the elegant and well-read woman may have been a factor in the jury’s verdict of "Not Proven" (meaning equivocal, but without sufficient evidence). Smith's appealing personality seems to have been of
greater concern to the general public than whether she actually committed murder, and even as erudite a figure as Henry James reflected the popular sentiment:

The case represents the type, perfect case, with nothing to be taken from it or added, and with the beauty that she precisely didn’t squalidly suffer, but lived on to admire with the rest of us, for so many years, the rare work of art with which she had been the means of enriching humanity. . . . I wonder all the same at the verdict in the face of the so vividly attested, and so fully and so horribly, suffering of her victim. It’s astonishing that the evidence of what he went through the last night didn’t do for her. And what a pity she was almost of the pre-photographic age—I would give so much for a veracious portrait of her then face. (Quoted in Altick, Victorian Studies in Scarlet 189)

The ability to maintain distinctions between art and life began to erode as scandalous entertainment was drawn from life rather than literature. Furthermore, the trials began to make celebrities of alleged criminals, and the wide admiration of Madeleine Smith despite—or even because of—the suspicion of her guilt certainly set a dangerous example for women. The popular appetite for crime literature even infected the realms of high art and criticism—to the latter's detriment, according to Oscar Wilde's "Pen, Pencil and Poison." Although Wilde objected to the influence of crime on highbrow writing, his own literature and literary celebrity were inverted to become “evidence” of his criminality. In Wilde’s trials, the scandalous text and the scandalous body are conflated. Despite public concern over the inability of “childlike” minds to distinguish life from art, Wilde’s detractors insist on the indivisibility of these entities in their attempt to “prove” Wilde’s deviance: “perversity” of the text reveals a concomitant perversity of the mind/body, and vice versa.

Furthermore, in Wilde’s case, accounts of the trial are only available to the modern reader through a number of interpretive lenses parading as objective representation. While conducting research for his 1993 Talk on the Wilde Side, Ed Cohen, desperate to locate the trial transcripts, frantically wrote to H. Montgomery Hyde, who published the trials in the mid-twentieth century. Hyde responded, “I did not use
any transcripts of the trials in my book and in fact relied on press reports in addition to
*Oscar Wilde: Three Times Tried* published anonymously by Stuart Mason (Christopher
Millard)—which it turned out was also based on press reports and personal
reminiscences” (quoted in Cohen 4). Thus the “facts” of Wilde’s trials come to us
already edited and interpreted, “real life” prepackaged for marketing purposes.

Hand in hand with Cohen’s discovery came his revelation, upon reading the actual
newspaper accounts, that the sexual issues at stake in the trial were largely omitted from
the reports:

... while the journalistic accounts endlessly circled around the very titillating
sexual accusations made against Wilde, first indirectly by the Marquis of
Queensberry’s barrister, and then very directly by the Crown’s prosecution, *at no
point did the newspapers describe or even explicitly refer to the sexual charges
made against Wilde*. Yet, since it was obviously this sexual dimension that made
what was unfolding in the Old Bailey’s crowded courtrooms both interesting and
marketable, I began to wonder how it was that everyone could seem to know what
it was that Wilde was accused of without it ever having to be positively stated. (4-5)

The logic of the open secret, the unspeakability of that which everyone already knows, is
the basis for much censorship, the attempt to make culture “safe” for the most innocent or
impressionable minds even while allowing other readers to feel sophisticated in their
more knowing interpretations. As Foucault points out, “As if in order to gain mastery
over [sex] in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language,
control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and
extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present” (17). He goes on to remark that
the strict surveillance of of certain areas of speech is paradoxically accompanied by a
"proliferation of discourses concerned with sex" (18). This illusion of controlling sex is
essential to the maintenance of dichotomies (male/female, sophisticated/naïve, etc.) that
allow for a prurient investigation into sexual deviance while preserving a superficial
innocence. The apparent sanitation of language (forcing sex into codification within
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certain contexts) further reinforces existing power relations by constructing the innocent, literal reading as the only acceptable (or available) one for "impressionable" populations.

Wilde himself insisted on the indeterminate meaning of his texts, arguing that anybody who demanded the finality of a single interpretation was simply an unimaginative reader. Transgressive meanings might be available, but other meanings were possible: the text mirrored the reader's, rather than the author's, interiority. If sex seemed to be codified within a text, it was because the reader had a perverse way of finding sex in "innocent" words. This strategy of ambiguity is one of the items that links Oscar Wilde and Mae West. Additionally, both built careers on consciously artificial public personae (and, in fact, both problematized the idea of any "real" personality behind the public figure); both were involved in sexual/artistic scandals; and the lives and careers of both were shaped by the regulation of sex at the level of language. In both cases, the reality of the artist's unauthorized sexuality became "unspeakable," even while while their marketability (or at least the marketability of their scandals) depended on everybody really knowing what it was that remained unspoken.

This study moves across temporal and national boundaries. As such, there must be some rationale for connecting these various artists and aesthetic products, as well as American and English culture. In the first place, I am reading these forms of entertainment as both "dangerous" culture and as Camp artifacts. While Camp is often described as a mode of reading or interpretation, my focus is how these texts were positioned as perilous products whose Camp effects are produced by the incongruities between their subversive content and the attempts to make them superficially moral (such as ending with a heterosexual marriage after the rest of the text had offered much different messages about sexuality). Certainly eighteenth- and nineteenth-century concerns about the pitfalls of mass literacy seem to disintegrate in the face of visual entertainment (especially something as widespread as cinematic spectacle), whose
accessibility is largely independent of the ability to read. The creation and strengthening of the Hollywood Production Code around the time of Mae West's popularity guaranteed the "safety" of Hollywood films for all audiences, arguably producing a need for West's campy strategies for circumventing censorship so that "sophisticated" audience members could read her meanings. However, as Ramona Curry argues, the very "censorability" that originally made Mae West such a marketable cinematic commodity eventually transformed her into a liability:

Counter to initial industry expectation, the comedic mode did not adequately cushion the offensive blow of West's depicted violations of middle-class sexual mores, largely because reports about the star's personal life and values lent her performance a verisimilitude that exceeded the degree of social transgression conventionally allowed film comedy. It was as much West's evident personal rejection of tenets of sexual morality as her film performances that were being censored. ("Goin' to Town and Beyond" 235)

West's own history as a Hollywood star thus seems to repeat the fate of scandalous celebrity in the late nineteenth century. While "respectable" authors distanced themselves from sexual scandal (despite their sometimes unorthodox lifestyles), creators of sensation fiction capitalized on their questionable personal lives as a marketing strategy. Yet Oscar Wilde, as scholars such as William Cohen and Peter Gay have shown, permanently disrupted the status of scandal in bourgeois Victorian life. As a writer of quality literature and a respected critic, Wilde violated bourgeois boundaries by failing (and eventually refusing) to keep his own scandalous behavior closeted. William Cohen refers to Wilde as a "disastrous convergence" (193) of the literary and the sexual, and the same might be said of West's meeting of the theatrical/cinematic and the sexual. Because of their violations, both Wilde and West are nearly silenced by censorship. Wilde's entanglement with the law ruins his career; West's legal troubles temporarily increase her popularity, but her repeated confrontations with film censors eventually result in her cinematic demise.
While the general concerns about "dangerous culture" and immoral artists persisted on both sides of the Atlantic, the productions of Collins, Wilde, and West made successful transatlantic crossovers as well. Popular English sensation novels were serialized in America. Furthermore, Bret Harte's burlesques of Braddon and Collins, and Louisa May Alcott's *Behind a Mask or A Woman's Power* establish American familiarity with the genre. Published under the pseudonym A.M. Barnard, Alcott's brief novel tells the story of a French actress posing as a governess to prey upon the male members of a respectable English family in her quest to possess a title. The plot exhibits all the key "sensation" ingredients more thoroughly discussed in the following chapters: the suspicious influence of foreigners, but especially the French; the unscrupulous woman, literally an actress, penetrating the bourgeois household by impersonating a governess; "acting" as a metaphor for femininity; the threat to class stratification. Alcott's novel takes place in England, as it seems a sensation novel must. The fetishization associated with lineage and titles is an English rather than an American one, and while social climbing is portrayed as a rather horrific prospect in many sensation novels, the mutability of social standing is in fact an essential element of the "American dream." An ostensibly classless society cannot be the setting of a sensation novel, since the idea of class impersonation would lose its impact. Although Americans apparently enjoyed consuming the genre, it appears unlikely that the element of "class-climbing" would seem as personally threatening. On the contrary, the woman who ruthlessly claws her way up the social ladder will be "camped up" in America: "the comic gold digger is to feminist camp what the dandy is to gay camp--its original personification, its defining voice" (Robertson 58).

The connection between the actress/fallen woman/social climber of many sensation novels and Mae West's gold-digging theatrical and cinematic heroines (often thinly-veiled prostitutes) should be fairly clear. The American disregard for the sanctity
of English class structure, and the inconsequence of class "passing" within a theoretically
classless society seem relevant to some of Wilde's productions as well. Oscar Wilde
toured the United States in 1882, lecturing on taste and aestheticism, and so Wilde and
America were familiar with one another. Some of Wilde's most successful fiction and
drama could only have taken place in an English setting, since his works often rely on
familiarity with English culture and social structure, and, especially in the comic plays,
with English manners, prejudices, and social customs. However, America—or at least the
possibilities that America represents--occasionally appears, always disrupting the English
way of life.

The particular forms of entertainment that are seen as dangerous and the audience
constructed as vulnerable change according to a period's particular social crises. During
the reign of the sensation novel, battles were fought over the "woman question" and the
social condition of the working classes. Various perversions were emerging into
discourse, and while, as I will argue, signs of the new deviant sexualities appear in the
sensation novel, they still remain "unspeakable," a category that is exploded by the fate of
Oscar Wilde. Wilde's initial inability and subsequent refusal to keep his indiscretions
hidden signals the end of Victorian "innocence" and the beginning of sexual orientation
as subjectivity. Wilde's scandal also redefines the "impressionable" audience. As I will
argue in Chapter Four, during Wilde's trials it is the middle-class male who is constructed
as vulnerable to the pernicious "sodomitical" influence of Wilde's texts.

Mae West's film persona also emerges at a time of cultural crisis, in this case that
of the Great Depression. Changing economic conditions, coupled with alterations in
women's roles and a decline in the marriage rate, resulted in concomitant changes in the
representation of gender relations in popular entertainment. Contrary to the Victorian
doctrine of separate spheres for the sexes, Hollywood created the screwball comedy in an
attempt to reconceptualize marriage as a fun partnership. Yet screwball remains conservative in that the ultimate goal of the female protagonist is to marry the right man. The more transgressive contemporary of the screwball heroine was Mae West’s gold-digging, sexually experienced tough girl. As Ramona Curry remarks in *Too Much of a Good Thing*, “Historical analysis of West’s early star vehicles reveals how the star’s image as a brashly sexual and persistently autonomous woman came, in the context of the Depression, to represent a challenge to the dominant but besieged values of the American middle class” (28). Mae West’s heroines are women in charge of their own sexuality, women who revel in their sexual enjoyment and use it to gain social and financial advancement.

Once again, imitation of the artist (or star) and of her heroines provides cause for public concern, especially since West’s characters were sexually aggressive. Impersonation or admiration of West on a variety of levels was regarded as transgressive. Her body, for example, was regarded by some as physically excessive:

West popularized plump female figures to such a large degree that the Central Association of Obstetricians and Gynecologists congratulated her and called her style a “boon to motherhood,” while Madame Sylvia, on a less congratulatory note, accused women of using West as an “elegant alibi” for letting themselves get too fat. (Robertson 50)

West’s “upholstered” physique was clearly an anomaly in the era of the lean, angular flapper. Yet while some obviously found West’s curves womanly, others worried about her bodily “excess,” whether because fleshiness was traditionally associated with prostitutes, or because signs of “excessive” appetites (with all the meanings that entails) have also been considered inappropriate or transgressive in women.

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West's frequently corseted figure also hearkens back to the nineteenth century, and the choice of an 1890s setting for some of her plays and films (such as *Diamond Lil*, *She Done Him Wrong* and *Belle of the Nineties*) reinforces this connection. West's representations clearly draw on the status of the Gay Nineties in the popular imagination, as a period of glamour and social and sexual freedom. Regardless of the accuracy of this perception, it is appropriate to consider West in terms of the fin-de-siècle and its cultural crises with respect to gender, sexual, and class identity. As a sexual aggressor, social climber, and "female impersonator," West undermines every guarantee of identity that the previous century was so anxious to establish. Through her cinematic and and dramatic performances and the treatment of her own life as a performance, West explodes cultural anxieties about the imitative capacity of the "weak-minded." Wilkie Collins's novels unveil the performative capacity of identity, even while they often seek to reestablish or stabilize identity by their conclusions. However, by revealing all of identity as nothing more than impersonation, Wilde and West ultimately elide the difference between the "knowing" and the "innocent" consumer: we are all, finally, reduced to impersonation.
CHAPTER 2

A SILK GOWN AND A SENSE OF HER OWN IMPORTANCE: IDENTITY AND IMPERSONATION IN NO NAME

. . . a woman has one duty of invaluable importance to her country and her race which cannot be over-estimated—and that is the duty of being pure. There is perhaps nothing of such vital consequence to a nation. Our female critics are fond of making demonstrations of indignation over the different punishment given by the world to the sin of man and that of woman in this respect. But all philosophy notwithstanding, and leaving the religious question untouched, there can be no possible doubt that the wickedness of man is less ruinous, less disastrous to the world in general, than the wickedness of woman. That is the climax of all misfortunes to the race.
--Margaret Oliphant, "Novels." [1867], 275.

Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman." To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.

Although Victorian sensation novels may not be understood as Camp, and may not have understood themselves as Camp, they certainly meet the qualification of "Being-as-Playing-a-Role." This is an essential condition of all sensation novels, yet in the first Wilkie Collins novel I will be examining, No Name, this concept is carried to its extreme. It is here that the performative nature of identity in the sensation novel—perhaps by implication, in Victorian life itself—is acknowledged and literalized. The novel itself is structured in terms of "Scenes," which are relieved by epistolary segments labeled "Between the Scenes," in
which the actors expose themselves by writing in the first person. My interest here is twofold: I will examine how *No Name* uses the metaphor of acting to discuss the problem of identity, and I will also explore Collins's employment of the disreputable figure of the actress to illustrate notions of gender propriety and transgression.

The specters that belie the Victorian construction of womanhood—the women who fail to fit into prescribed sex, gender, or class categories—are the focus of the three Wilkie Collins novels examined in this and the next chapter. Although none of Collins' characters here are literally prostitutes, the mercenary nature of sexual relations in each reinforces the idea, voiced by many nineteenth-century feminists, that marriage was no better than legalized prostitution. Furthermore, two of these novels feature "fallen women," treated with Collins' unusual and characteristic sympathy. Victorian culture had mixed reactions to "fallen women," but women who acknowledged awareness of prostitution, such as those who campaigned against the sanitary acts, were regarded with suspicion:

Sir James Elphinstone tells the House of Commons in 1872, "I look upon these women who have taken up this matter as worse than prostitutes." Even Charles Kingsley, a supporter of social work for middle-class women, writes privately to Mill that unmarried women will damage the cause of woman by speaking out on an issue about which they are supposed to be innocent. (Helsinger et al. 159)

Like Margaret Oliphant, the figures who oppose women's political intervention in the regulation of prostitution feel more sympathy with the prostitute herself—perhaps the victim of misfortune, poverty, ignorance, or seduction, but who still serves men's desires—than with the woman who is not "fallen" but is able to discuss the matter rationally. For a sane, well-bred bourgeois female to even contemplate such issues was unthinkable. Yet with the prevalence of prostitution in Victorian London (see, for example, Pearsall, or Helsinger et al.), even the most sheltered woman must have gone to great lengths to remain blind.
For the prostitute was, above all, visible, legible, accessible. Along with the actress, the prostitute is perhaps the prime example of woman as spectacle and as legible surface. The social discourses that determined the meaning of the female body used it as an instrument to keep sexual, economic, and racial differences intact: "In turning from legal discourse to the new and flourishing social sciences, we can see how the female body developed into a text enabling literate people to establish moral differences between themselves and other social and ethnic groups" (Armstrong 8). Woman became the barometer by which a particular group's morality and even evolutionary status was measured. Of course this provoked anxiety, for although woman was exalted in some quarters as being the moral superior of man (see, for example, Helsinger et al.), her alleged intellectual inferiority meant that she was perpetually in danger of relapsing into her "primitive state"—and her fall, in the discourse of the day, meant the fall of the race. Things or persons that threatened the sanctity of bourgeois womanhood had to be strictly monitored and controlled. Thus it was that those fringe elements—women who were the dark reminders of the fragility of the Victorian social fabric and of its manufactured innocence—had to be regulated, explored, confirmed as a different species than their more genteel counterparts.

Curiously enough, one of the figures responsible for safeguarding the purity of young womanhood could also be regarded as one of its greatest threats: the governess. Because governesses are prominent in all of the sensation novels examined here, as well as in of more canonical fiction (Jane Eyre, Vanity Fair), I want to emphasize the connection between the governess and "deviant" examples of womanhood such as the prostitute.

In a discussion of Jane Eyre, Mary Poovey points out that the attention devoted to the governess in Victorian fiction is disproportionate to the number of governesses in fact: "The 1851 Census of Great Britain lists 25,000 governesses, for example, at a time
when there were 750,000 female domestic servants, whose working conditions and wages were often more debilitating but markedly less lamented than the distress of the governess" ("Anathematized Race" 231). One must question why the governess is so prominent in Victorian fiction, especially either as a figure of misfortune or as an ambitious and unscrupulous woman scheming to penetrate the upper classes, when others who were less fortunate and/or more "perverse"—female servants and prostitutes—existed in greater numbers.

Perhaps the most obvious answer lies in the consideration of suitable subjects for fiction. Because she often came from a respectable background, the governess usually had the interiority and mannerisms of a lady, as well as an education; all of this would have made her palatable to a Victorian audience, even though her liminal social position would have rendered her resemblance to bourgeois women disconcerting. By the same token, the unique position of the governess allowed her to be an interesting villainess, since unsuspecting middle-class families could be duped by less-respectable women performing the role of the governess. As a figure between classes, the governess provided a space in which—at least in fiction—the barriers of class separation were pleasurably imperilled. This "socially mobile" possibility does not really exist for the prostitute or the servant. Moreover, neither of these figures would have been considered a fit subject for "polite" fiction of the 1860s, and one can hardly imagine a mid-Victorian novel treating prostitutes or servants as figures with any sort of interiority. The actress is also an unlikely choice: as I show in my discussion of No Name, the Victorian audience could not forgive a heroine who lost her virtue, nor could it believe that an actress would not do so. It supposedly was not possible or desirable for a

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11 What was possible in the eighteenth century seems less so for Victorians. John Cleland's Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure was taboo until the twentieth century; works like Defoe's Roxana and Moll Flanders seem unimaginable from the pens of Victorian authors.
Victorian audience to sympathize with "fallen" women, but the very status of the governess as a sympathetic character ironically opens the possibility for subversion.

Although the governess's semi-respectable status makes her a more viable fictional subject than her less reputable sisters, she is simultaneously intriguing and even threatening because of her link to these other women. The governess's tenuous social position meant that she was always in danger of sliding into economic desperation and the commodification of her sexuality. Nevertheless, as Poovey points out, the governess was responsible for

inculcating domestic virtues and, especially in the case of young girls, with teaching the "accomplishments" that would attract a good husband without allowing the sexual component of these accomplishments to get the upper hand. The governess was therefore expected to preside over a contradiction central to the domestic ideal—the contradiction between the moral (asexual) woman and woman the incarnation of (sexual) desire. (232)

The Victorian response was to neutralize the sexuality of the governess by positioning her as an impossible sexual object. Poovey continues:

... she was meant to police the emergence of undue assertiveness or sexuality in her maturing charges and ... she was expected not to display willfullness or desires herself. Theoretically, the governess's position neutralized whatever temptation she, as a young woman herself, might have presented to her male associates; to gentlemen she was a "tabooed woman," and to male servants she was as unapproachable as any other middle-class lady. (232)

Whatever sexual temptation the governess might have offered was thus supposedly defused by her incongruous social position. In some of the sensation novels, this idea holds true. Isabel Vane, once irresistible to her former suitor and husband, Richard Carlyle, is completely desexualized once she returns in the guise of a governess in East Lynne. Indeed, within the context of Wood's novel, one's reduction to governessing is presented as the social—and even physical—equivalent of castration for females: Isabel is physically disfigured, compounding the impediments to her sexual desirability. (Ironically, it is when she is least sexual that she is most maternal; the other hyper-
maternal character in the novel, Cornelia Carlyle, is also regarded as asexual.) In No Name, the governess is also assumed to be an asexual figure. Miss Garth, the governess of the Vanstone daughters, would appear to be sexually neutral because of her age, although her prim character makes the reader question whether she ever possessed youth or physical charms. When Magdalen, the novel's heroine, masquerades as her former governess, she dons a disguise that renders her frankly hideous. Yet Collins's use of the "ugly governess" in this novel is curious on two counts. First, not only does he sometimes enable his governesses to be attractive, but he also occasionally makes them irresistibly so. Second, Magdalen's asexuality as a "governess" is linked to another figure that is bizarrely desexualized in the novel: Magdalen as actress.

For much of the nineteenth century, acting remained a disreputable profession for women, at worst a sign of sexual availability or even a thinly-veiled means of prostitution. Thus it comes as no surprise that accusations of "acting" or literal associations with the stage are fraught with understandings of degeneracy in Behind a Mask, Lady Audley's Secret, No Name, and Armadale. Yet what is surprising is that, alone among these protagonists, Magdalen Vanstone emerges "unsullied" from her acting experiences. That is, even though she engages in various deceptions that she learns to look upon as "immoral" by the novel's end, Magdalen does retain her chastity. Unlike her shadier sisters— but like Man and Wife's Anne Silvester— Magdalen is a woman of genteel birth whose social position has been stripped from her. Because the other characters imitate a refinement to which they have never been entitled, it is perhaps easier to interpret them as sinister. Yet Magdalen, like many a governess, possesses the "appearance and manners" of a lady, as this has been her training. In order to establish

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12Lydia Gwilt's attractiveness can perhaps be explained by the fact that she is only "impersonating" a governess— although, since she displays the necessary accomplishments, what is it that separates the imitation from the genuine article? The "real" governess Anne Silvester (Man and Wife) is also nearly universally attractive to men, although not as audaciously so as Lydia Gwilt.
her "natural" gentility, Collins's heroine must remain pure despite the odds (which, according to the Victorian audience, were impossible ones).

Magdalen's precarious social and sexual position is easily linked to that of the governess. In the first place, after her fortunes have fallen, Miss Garth intends to set her former charge to work as a governess. Magdalen escapes to become an actress, who will later imitate Miss Garth herself in a "real-life" acting job. Finally, Magdalen's sister, Norah, does choose the governess route, and while Magdalen's adventures are infinitely more interesting, we are supposed to see the two sisters as parallels whose fates are intertwined. Furthermore, in addition to the novel's internal connections between Magdalen and the governess, her position as both actress and "displaced person" links her to the external cultural anxieties surrounding the governess. As Poovey points out, the condition of being a governess—and perhaps of being socially incongruous in general—was imagined as a threat to female sexual integrity:

> As [their] hardships were primarily imagined, they were not primarily physical or economic but emotional; the threat they posed was to the governess's self-control and, even more ominous, to her sexual neutrality. This danger surfaces most explicitly in fictional representations of the governess. . . . In articles about the governess, allusions to her sexual susceptibility are more indirect, but precisely because of this indirectness, they point to the governess's place in the complex system of associations in which the domestic ideal was also embedded. Two of the figures to which the governess was repeatedly linked begin to suggest why her sexlessness seemed so important—and so unreliable—to her contemporaries. These figures are the lunatic and the fallen woman. ("Anathematized Race" 234)

Although Poovey's article is specifically addressed to that most famous piece of governess fiction, Jane Eyre, her arguments about the discursive treatment of the governess certainly apply to sensation novels and their criticism. Especially in the case of Oliphant's criticism, one can readily distinguish the tensions surrounding class and gender propriety, the eagerness to accuse a character (or a female author) of not knowing what it means to be a "lady," even while the figure of the governess or of Magdalen
Vanstone persists as an uncomfortable reminder of the precarious status of ladyship. As Poovey proceeds to point out, the social mobility of the governess emphasized the common conditions shared by all Englishwomen at this period: dependence—on men, on the good will of others, and even on luck. The maintenance of social stratification, however, depended on denying common denominators among women and reinforcing their essential difference.

In "The Occidental Alice," Nancy Armstrong demonstrates the necessity of establishing the bourgeois Englishwoman's purity in order to justify various forms of domination by the English male. The association of English prostitutes (and madwomen) with "primitive" people pointed to a need for control by more civilized powers:

Extensive studies in comparative anthropology . . . reached the conclusion that the desires of primitive people were somehow like those desires that moral reformers, medical doctors, social scientists, and politicians had attributed to European prostitutes. From these assumptions, it was an easy step for them to see the people ruled by such desires as both childish and criminoid, primitive and degenerate versions of the European. The same logic that said a man's family was healthy because his business was good could also be used to insist that other cultures were poor because their women were bad. (Armstrong 4-5)

Because the prostitute was the disturbing link between the "evolved" Englishwoman and the primitive "Other," she had to be controlled, prevented from spreading her "poison" to the middle classes. Yet because bourgeois men were unwilling to relinquish the services of the prostitute (and even regarded her as a necessary fixture, on the grounds that using her to satisfy their passions kept their own women "pure"), abolition of prostitution was not a viable option. The English opted instead for regulation of these women's bodies through the Contagious Diseases Acts.

Passed in 1864 and amended twice during the next five years, the Contagious Diseases Acts nominally attempted to limit the spread of venereal disease by defining the prostitute's body as its source. Women suspected of being prostitutes (such suspicion was often dependent on class status) were required to register as such and were forced to
undergo regular pelvic examinations (see, for example, Armstrong, Helsinger et al., or
Pearsall). Obviously, the Contagious Diseases Acts could not really be effective in
controlling the spread of venereal disease, since the men who frequented prostitutes were
not subjected to any sort of physical examination. Furthermore, in the Victorian zeal to
exalt the "natural" purity of the bourgeois female, it became impossible to conceive of
infection in a chaste wife:

It was also a fallacy to believe that women who had venereal disease were
prostitutes or, indeed, in any way immoral—30 per cent of the women in London
who had VD were not prostitutes... In Devonport, one of the ports frequented
by navy men, a hospital had been built at a cost of £15,000 on a site given by the
War Office, and so intent were the authorities on the purpose of this hospital that
"honest women" were refused aid. (Pearsall 279)

It thus becomes apparent that the real purpose of the Contagious Diseases Acts was not to
control the spread of venereal disease, but to establish the female body as the site of
difference—not only in terms of male and female, but in terms of class and even racial
difference. By "proving" that prostitutes were a different species than respectable (read
"middle-class") women, Englishmen could justify their usage of the former women's
bodies, as well as the domination of all women's bodies.

A common nineteenth-century argument in favor of the existence of prostitutes
was that using these women's services kept bourgeois men healthy (and wealthy) and
bourgeois women "pure":

given prevalent assumptions that national prosperity depended on late marriages
and that male sexuality demanded gratification early and often, it is not even clear
that it was universally considered desirable to eliminate prostitution... it also
preserved assumptions about the asymmetry of sexual desire and the link between
male prosperity and the availability of female sexual resources. (Making a Social
Body 94)

The accessibility of prostitutes enabled the British construction of bourgeois women as
creatures without desire. Unable to reconcile the realities of sexual intercourse with the
idealized "angel in the house," the Victorians interpreted the respectable wife's sexual
activity as submission to her husband's will and as an indulgence of her desire for motherhood rather than as a means of her physical gratification.

Of the many problems with this arrangement, the one most troubling to Victorians (to the men, at least) was the specter of venereal disease. The fact that Victorian men transferred disease from the bodies of prostitutes to the bodies of innocent wives and unborn children nullified one of the differences that was supposed to clearly demarcate one class from another. Of course, as masters of denial, the Victorians refused to implicate genteel men in the guilt of spreading disease. As the earlier quote from Pearsall reveals, the idealization of "honest women" could be their death sentence, since Victorians refused to believe that virtuous women could bear the signs of sexual disease and degeneration. Instead, "fallen women" were treated as being directly responsible for the infection of the bourgeois family's children:

women of the lower classes had spread a poison throughout English society that directly assaulted motherhood. Not only were middle-class men removed as the pernicious mediators between the poison inside the bodies of the one class of women and the babies inside the bodies of the other, but those men who had specialized knowledge of the disease, again middle-class men, were also the only thing that stood between unborn children and a disease that seemed to threaten them directly. (Armstrong 7)

13Although "good" women were supposed to be unaware of prostitution, let alone venereal disease, political activists such as Josephine Butler are proof that at least some women were concerned about prostitution, even though to admit one's awareness meant exposing oneself to public censure. One does not find much direct discussion of the realities of prostitution or of the Contagious Diseases Acts in the polite literature of the period. One interesting exception is Sarah Grand's The Beth Book (1897). The protagonist of the story is hastily married off by her family to a doctor they barely know. After Beth has had time to discover her husband's general lack of scruples, she is informed of the real purpose of the "Lock Hospital" where Dr. Dan works. Choosing to confront him about it, Beth is devastated by the hypocrisy of Victorian "morality":

"But, then, in the name of justice," she exclaimed, "what means do you take to protect these poor unfortunate women from disease? What do you do to the men who spread it? What becomes of diseased men?"

"Oh, they marry, I suppose. Anyhow, that is not my business. Doctors cannot be expected to preach morals. Sanitation is our business."

"But aren't morals closely connected with sanitation?" Beth said. "And why, if sanitation is your business, do you take no radical measures with regard to this horrible disease? Why do
The exclusive location of disease in the bodies of "deviant" women made it possible not only for middle-class men to absolve themselves of any guilt in the spread of infection, but also to enable their own apotheosis as the saviors of innocent children. In reality, of course, these men were only further endangering the lives of the unborn—not to mention the living.

Providing themselves with license to indulge in pleasures forbidden to their female counterparts was not the sole aim of the men who created and supported the Contagious Diseases Acts. Rather, in the regulation of women's bodies and the linkage of "deviance" with the "lower races," one can see the "moral" and "scientific" bases for various forms of domination, from individual to global:

In turning from legal discourse to the new and flourishing social sciences, we can see how the female body developed into a text enabling literate people to establish moral differences between themselves and other social and ethnic groups. . . .

As Victorian intellectuals became increasingly absorbed in classifying, knowing, and controlling deviance, the female anatomy offered itself as a text whereon those deviant qualities of mind became especially legible. Social scientists discovered, for example, that a woman's moral condition could be read in certain details of her face and genitals. . . . science developed a set of analytical procedures by which one could determine the nature and behavior of one end of a woman by looking at the other. (Armstrong 8-9)

As Armstrong proceeds to point out, the physical signs supposedly common to insane or sexually deviant women in Europe were similar to those borne by the average African or Asian woman. Thus the legible signs of women's bodies revealed their connection to "primitive" races, and the characteristics of "fallen" or mad women provided "proof" that woman was perpetually in danger of lapsing back into her "primitive" state. Although

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you not have it reported, never mind who gets it, as scarlet fever, smallpox, and other diseases—all less disastrous to the general health of the community—are reported?"  

Dan shrugged his shoulders. "It's a deuced awkward thing for a man to be suspected of disease; it's a stigma, and might spoil his prospects. Women are so cursedly prying nowadays. They've got wind of its being incurable, and many a one won't marry a man if a suspicion of it attaches to him." (434)

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my project does not really focus on the larger issue of British Imperialism, the concomitant Victorian desire to establish the "natural" superiority of the British subject—and especially of the British male—does play a significant role in the discourses I am examining. Mrs. Oliphant's hyperbolic reaction to sensation novels reveals her fear that they will lead to "the decline of the race" through the devaluation of female chastity. It should be clear by now that female sexual purity was regarded as the one item that kept Englishwomen (and therefore the whole of England) from sinking into the ways of the "lower races." What is perhaps less clear is what all this hysteria over the female body had to do with the sensation novel.

The sensation novel seems to me to illustrate in many ways the Victorian conviction that the body is a legible text on which "the truth" will inevitably surface. As Armstrong mentions above, the female body becomes the primary text in this kind of thinking, wherein the threats posed by deviance are managed through the classification and regulation of sexuality. Foucault points out that the discursive creation of deviance is necessary to create a norm of sexuality: "The nineteenth century and our own have been . . . the age of multiplication: a dispersion of sexualities, a strengthening of their disparate forms, a multiple implantation of 'perversions.' Our epoch has initiated sexual heterogeneities" (37). It is Foucault's idea of the "perverse implantation" that appeals to me, the notion that in the frantic desire to establish oneself as "normal," one has to seek out every possible deviation to label as nonnormative. The identification of deviance "did not aim to suppress it, but rather to give it an analytical, visible, and permanent reality" (44). The truth of one's deviance had to be hunted down, chased out; sexual transgression tried to remain hidden, but, in the Victorian cultural imagination anyway, it always revealed itself.

I find that the sensation novel operates according to the same principle—not only because its protagonists are often sexually or otherwise transgressive in a way that is
always discovered by the end, but also because the form of the novel itself seems to adhere to Foucault's description of the "confession" used to uncover sexual truth:

it tended no longer to be concerned solely with what the subject wished to hide, but with what was hidden from himself, being incapable of coming to light except gradually and through the labor of a confession in which the questioner and the questioned each had a part to play. The principle of a latency essential to sexuality made it possible to link the forcing of a difficult confession to a scientific practice. It had to be exacted, by force, since it involved something that tried to stay hidden. (66)

Of course the author knew what it was that was being hidden—with the exception of those cases of serialization (the usual format of initial publication of a sensation novel) in which audience response had some effect on the story's turn of events. Yet the form of the sensation novel itself and the pleasure involved in its consumption remind me very much of Foucault's description of the confession. The secret—always containing at least some link to sexual issues—must be forced into hiding; the experienced reader of the sensation novel knows from the beginning the general type of secret to be uncovered, even if he or she does not know the particulars. The pleasure lies in hiding this secret in order to make possible its discovery; the reader (and the author) must pursue the secret through (usually) three volumes, experiencing a succession of mini-climaxes along the way before coming to the satisfactory ending. The sensation novel may thus be the logical expression of a culture dedicated to knowing, classifying, and managing "secret vice," a culture that has adopted the confessional mode as the means of extracting "truth," a culture that has sexualized and fetishized a seemingly endless array of objects so that vice can be perpetually uncovered. As Foucault observes, "What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they

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14This is not so much the case with Collins, who always had his plots worked out in advance. However, in situations where progression of the plot was in some way dependent on audience reaction, one can see a sort of communal drive to get at "the secret," perhaps an acceptable way of expressing unacceptable desires in the form of another author's text—a way of removing oneself from the responsibility of writing scandalous texts even while participating in the pleasure of their creation.
dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as the secret" (35). The sensation novel's popularity, combined with its condemnation in some circles, points to the tension within the Victorian world created by the denial of bourgeois impropriety even while the demand for sensation fiction testified to the public's insatiable, inappropriate desire for perilous, pleasurable texts.

Furthermore, the characters themselves must usually come to some kind of confession in the end. This is the case with this chapter's novels, from Magdalen Vanstone's confession to Captain Kirke, to Lydia Gwilt's compulsive diary-keeping and final written confession. In keeping with Foucault, what these characters want is often unknown to them until the end. The realization that these women must finally face is that they really wanted what everyone else did all along, only they didn't know it: normativity.

Magdalen Vanstone, the heroine of *No Name*, is at some times a professional actress, and at others she is a woman playing the role that is necessary to reclaim her inheritance and social identity. Although Magdalen does not literally prostitute herself or even lose her virtue, her offense is perhaps even greater, for becoming a "fallen woman" would at least, to the Victorian mind, be consistent with her other characteristics. What renders Magdalen so perverse is the inconsistency of her behavior, the fact that her acting, her association with "low people," and her struggle to survive do not result in the "essential" loss of virtue, punishment, or death. One anonymous review is worth quoting at length here, since it exhibits a variety of phobias raised by Magdalen and the sensation genre:

For our own part, we doubt very much whether the sensation school . . . will ever become genuinely popular in England. It is a plant of foreign growth. It comes to us from France, and it can only be imported in mutilated condition. Without entering on the relative morality or immorality of French and English novelists, one may say generally that, with us, novels turn upon the vicissitudes of legitimate love and decorous affection; while in France they are based upon the
working of those loves and passions which are not in accordance with our rules of respectability. Now, unlawful passions are inevitably replete with a variety of sensational situations, of which authorized love, however fervent, is devoid, and the consequence is that a sensation novel which cannot dwell upon seductions, intrigues, infidelities, and illegitimate connections, is like Hamlet, not only without the Prince, but without the Ghost and without Ophelia. If Magdalen Vanstone could have sacrificed her character without sacrificing the sympathy of an ordinary English reader, it is impossible to say what heights of sensational grandeur No Name might not have risen. Unfortunately it was essential that Magdalen should not commit the one unpardonable sin of our English code, and the necessity of preserving her respectability to the end has sadly trammelled Mr. Collins's powers of invention. (Reader 3 January 1863, 14-15, reprinted in Page 134-35)

The unnamed reviewer was certainly wrong about whether the English public would embrace the sensation novel, even if the zenith of its popularity was itself short-lived. As in the case of many other critics, this one illustrates his or her national chauvinism by placing the origin of the sensation novel's immorality within the tradition of French novels. As usual, this reviewer connects all that is "unauthorized" and "illegitimate" with French writing (and presumably with French sexual relationships), while English sexual relations both in and presumably out of novels are described as "legitimate" and

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Although a sometime admirer of Collins, Mrs. Oliphant echoes the opinions of the Reader reviewer in her own assessment of No Name:

Mr. Wilkie Collins, after the skilful and startling complications of the Woman in White . . . has chosen, by way of making his heroine piquant and interesting in his next attempt, to throw her into a career of vulgar and aimless trickery and wickedness, with which it is impossible to have a shadow of sympathy, but from the pollutions of which he intends us to believe that she emerges, at the cheap cost of a fever, as pure, as high-minded, and as spotless as the most dazzling white of heroines. The Magdalen of No Name does not go astray after the usual fashion of erring maidens in romance. Her pollution is decorous, and justified by law; and after all her endless deceptions and horrible marriage, it seems quite right to the author that she should be restored to society and have a good husband and happy home. (from Blackwood's Magazine August 1863, 170, reprinted in Page 143)

Again, Magdalen's great sin is not in the loss of her physical integrity, but in the fact that she does not lose it. Her seduction would signify the victory of passion over reason. Magdalen's actions are cold and calculated without being sexual; it is the ability to plot and manage her transgression that Oliphant finds so reprehensible. Interestingly, the racist hysteria of Oliphant's other reviews also surfaces here; Collins offends by making the perverse Magdalen ultimately indistinguishable from the "most dazzling white of heroines."
"decorous." The problem with *No Name*, in the opinion of this reviewer, is that Collins attempts to introduce the excitement and sensationalism of "corrupt" French literature into an English environment that is by definition completely incompatible. While Magdalen remains "English" in the preservation of her virginity, her deceitful impersonations and her ambition, combined with this physical integrity, render her an impossible figure for this reviewer and others. A woman's physical integrity was supposed to be a guarantee of a certain interiority; one synonym for a chaste woman has long been "honest." Magdalen's violation of this "inevitable" relationship renders her illegible and suggests that other women may not be as transparent as they seem. The most subversive implication of this is the possibility of Magdalen's inverted counterpart, the "fallen" woman who passes for being virtuous—Lady Audley, Lydia Gwilt, or even the most unusual example, *Man and Wife*'s Anne Silvester, a fallen woman who *is* virtuous.

As the title might suggest, *No Name* is a tale of the loss, search for, and recovery of identity. The protagonist, Magdalen Vanstone (the name belies the preservation of her physical virtue, although it does foreshadow her ultimate repentance and reform, and perhaps draws a fairly explicit connection between the prostitute and the actress), and her sister, Norah, become nameless when an untimely accident leaves them disinherited. Brought up in a solidly bourgeois household, Magdalen and Norah are unaware of any family secrets until their father perishes in a train wreck. This unfortunate incident brings the discovery that, because their father had entered into an ill-starred marriage years before, their parents had not been legally married until recently, upon receiving news of the first wife's death. Ironically, although their father's will originally provided for them as his illegitimate offspring, the recent legitimization of his marriage required that Mr. Vanstone alter his will—which he had intended to do the day that was to follow his accident. Mrs. Vanstone dies soon afterward, and the daughters are left without money,
home, or name. While the acquiescent (and exceedingly boring) Norah tries her hand at
governessing, attempting to meet her fate with dignity, Magdalen chooses to rebel against
the cold injustice of the heir-presumptive, her uncle (and later his son), who has turned
the young women out of their home and offered them one hundred pounds each.
Magdalen first of all earns her living as an actress, then proceeds to use her abilities to
impersonate various types of women in a series of situations in which she attempts to
recover her inheritance and name.

The novel itself is constructed around a series of concealments and revelations,
divided, according to theatrical form, into sections marked "scenes" and "between the
scenes," indicating the dramatic progression of the plot. In keeping with nineteenth-
century thought, the narrative informs us early on that truth, despite numerous obstacles,
can never remain permanently hidden:

Nothing in this world is hidden for ever. The gold which has lain for
centuries unsuspected in the ground, reveals itself, one day on the surface. Sand
turns traitor, and betrays the footstep that has passed over it; water gives back to
the tell-tale surface the body that has been drowned. Fire itself leaves the
confession, in ashes, of the substance consumed in it. Hate breaks its prison-
secrecy in the thoughts, through the doorway of the eyes; and Love finds the
Judas who betrays it by a kiss. Look where we will, the inevitable law of
revelation is one of the laws of Nature: the lasting preservation of a secret is a
miracle which the world has never yet seen. (25)

The "inevitable law of revelation" is repeatedly proven in the novel. Mr. Vanstone's
concealed past and common-law marriage is exposed, despite his best efforts; Magdalen's
various impersonations are discovered; and, finally, Magdalen and Norah are restored to
their rightful social position, since the wrongs that have been done to them must be
repaired. The Victorian maxim that crime always reveals itself is a commonplace of the
sensation novel, indeed its essential ingredient. The ways in which these mysteries are
unwound provide variety, but exposure must always be the end result. A particularly
compelling aspect of Collins's novels is the way in which the body, and sometimes the
trappings of gender themselves, cannot help betraying the soul's secrets. While a number of recent critics have attempted to claim Wilkie Collins as a feminist, pointing, out, for example, his sympathy for "fallen women" and his portrayal of the dark, ugly heroine Marian Halcombe, such theories are complicated by the fact that the female body or other component of "femininity" is often the undoing of an otherwise competent heroine or villainess. For example, in The Woman in White, Marian Halcombe's ugly, swarthy face serves as the outward expression of her "masculine" intelligence and resourcefulness. In stark contradiction to her face, however, Marian's body exhibits her voluptuous beauty, and the femininity of her form circumscribes Marian's capabilities. The demands of the feminine role--and her body--can be found in her insistence on observing propriety, as well as in her physical vulnerability. While the novel's hero, Walter Hartright, an initially insecure drawing-master, is able to prove his manhood by surviving a shipwreck, pestilence, and attacks by savages in South America (events that decimate the number of his companions) in order to return to save the day, Marian's noble attempt to save the life of her half-sister is foiled by the weakness of her own body. Having been soaked by the rain, the usually robust Marian succumbs to the delirium of a fever: only one who can combine masculine reasoning with a suitably masculine body will be able to bring the villains to justice.

In No Name, it is the female body and the signs of "femininity"--notably dress--that provoke discovery and forfeit success. The female body almost inevitably gives away its secrets here. In some cases, the legibility of the body or person/surface is the problem; this is the case both with Magdalen's telltale moles and with her wardrobe. Failing this, bodily weakness provides evidence of "true" femininity: most of the textual conflict is motivated by Mrs. Vanstone's physical frailty, and, later, Magdalen's own physical breakdown means that she must forfeit her project.
As I have mentioned, the plot of *No Name* turns on a legal question. The disinheritance of the daughters, created by the legalization of their parents' union in ignorance of the need to make a new will, places them in a most extraordinary position. The problem lies not only in the fact of their father's fatal accident before the creation of a new will, however. Because a portion of his fortune would have gone to his now-legal wife, her signature to a new will could have provided for her daughters. Significantly, however, Mrs. Vanstone is pregnant at the time of her husband's demise (all the more striking, when one considers that her younger surviving child is eighteen years old), and her "confinement" seems to coincide with the train accident. Mrs. Vanstone, doubly weakened by the tragedy of her husband's death and the physical exertions of childbearing, is rendered incapable of providing the crucial signature. Thus, it is the mother's physical vulnerability that shatters the last possibility of social identity and financial support for her daughters.

It happens that the heir to Andrew Vanstone's fortune is his estranged and heartless brother, Michael, who of course is bereft of pity for the orphaned daughters. Insulted by the sham generosity of his hundred-pound offer, Magdalen abandons her scruples in her determination to recover her inheritance. While her "feminine" capacities for imitation, flirtation, and deception appear to arm her with the necessary resources, her body and her wardrobe prove to be the liabilities which preclude her ultimate success. However, once Magdalen resigns herself to her inevitable feminine incapacity, she is rewarded with all that she had sought by less legitimate means.

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16 In typical Victorian fashion, the actual date or time of the child's birth is completely ambiguous. It is only after Mrs. Vanstone's death that we learn that the child survived her by a few hours. Until this point, the reader might have assumed that Mrs. Vanstone died before she could give birth. For the purposes of the plot, the child—whose sex is left undetermined—must follow its mother to the grave, since its status as legitimate heir might have provided some hope for the sisters.
The inspiration for the series of masquerades with which Magdalen tries to gain access to her usurped inheritance lies in the discovery of her acting ability during a neighbor's evening of domestic theatrical entertainment. When the Marrables decide to produce The Rivals for an audience of friends, Magdalen ends up, through chance, having to play two parts—Julia, and Lucy, the waiting-maid. Through intensely narcissistic self-absorption (39-40) and a sibyl-like receptiveness to character, Magdalen masters the performance of two distinct roles. Magdalen's theatrical triumph illustrates the supposedly feminine capacity for imitation, since, here and elsewhere in the text, the heroine's credibility rests on her impeccable mimicry of feminine "types":

The one member of the audience who looked at her and listened to her coldly, was her elder sister. Before the actress of the evening had been five minutes on the stage, Norah detected, to her own indescribable astonishment, that Magdalen had audaciously individualized the feeble amiability of Julia’s character, by seizing no less a person than herself as the model to act it by. She saw all her own little formal peculiarities of manner and movement, unblushingly reproduced—and even the very tone of her voice so accurately mimicked from time to time, that the accents startled her as if she was speaking herself, with an echo on the stage. . . . By a dexterous piece of mimicry, she had made a living reality of one of the most insipid characters in the English drama. . . . (48)

Magdalen's performances often seem to be not much more than studied and skillful imitation aided by makeup and costume. Here she borrows Norah's speech and mannerisms, foreshadowing her later impersonation of Miss Garth and a type of "method acting" by which she learns to pass as a servant. Magdalen's mimicry of other women transgresses on a number of levels. One complaint that might be leveled against Collins

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17 Norah and Miss Garth are wary of Magdalen's involvement in the home theatrical, both because performance is disreputable, and because Magdalen's practices and rehearsals place her in closer proximity to the object of her affection, Frank Clare. From the beginning of the novel, the theater is understood as an atmosphere permeated with dangerous sexual possibilities.

18 One should also pay attention to the fact that Magdalen is "violating" Norah by imitating her in her performance of Julia. Magdalen is thus in some way making Norah public, sulllying her identity by circulating it in the nasty atmosphere of the theater. This perhaps foreshadows the tainting of Norah's identity through the revelation of her illegitimacy.
(although it seems not to have been a prominent issue in critical discussions of this particular novel) is that his villains are frequently more interesting than his heroes. Magdalen, while remaining the heroine of this novel, stands in stark contrast to her meek and submissive sister, Norah, and their prim governess, Miss Garth. While the latter characters behave "honorably" after the Vanstones' daughters' disgrace, their passive resignation is hardly material for a sensation novel. Feeling the injustice of the situation, the reader is likely to overlook the frankly boring Norah to sympathize with her adventurous and avenging sister. *No Name*, through its creation of sympathy for Magdalen, violates morality at two different levels; it causes us to condone transgression and deceit in cases where "the end justifies the means," and it suggests that we regard Andrew and Mrs. Vanstone's common-law marriage as more "legitimate" than the hasty yet legal marriage that Andrew made in his youth.

Another level on which Magdalen's performances transgress is the fluidity with which she moves from one class to another. Having been raised in an upper-middle-class household, Magdalen has been cultivated to be a lady. Yet Magdalen's status as "illegitimate" prohibits her from being a "real" lady, a fact which perhaps betrays itself in Magdalen's failure to resemble her parents, and in the strange irreconcilability of her features:

... the youngest of Mr. Vanstone's children presented no recognizable resemblance to either of her parents. ... Her eyebrows and eyelashes were just a shade darker than her hair, and seemed made expressly for those violet-blue eyes, which assert their most irresistible charm when associated with a fair complexion. But it was here exactly that the promise of her face failed of performance in the most startling manner. The eyes, which should have been dark, were incomprehensibly and discordantly light. ... Thus quaintly self-contradictory in the upper part of her face, she was hardly less at variance with established ideas of harmony in the lower. Her lips had the true feminine delicacy of form, her cheeks the lovely roundness and the smoothness of youth—but the mouth was too large and firm, the chin too square and massive for her sex and age.... The whole countenance—so remarkable in its strongly-opposed characteristics—was rendered additionally striking by its extraordinary mobility. ... her figure was so perfectly
developed already that no one who saw her could have supposed that she was only eighteen. (8-9)

Like Walter Hartright's description of Marian Halcombe, No Name's narrator betrays insecurities when confronted with the manifestation of the contradictory demands of Victorian womanhood. Like Marian, Magdalen "doesn't fit"; though both women are voluptuous of form, each has a face that "isn't quite right," disappointing (and unmanning) the narrator by failing to comply with the expectations of the spectatorial gaze. Also like Marian, Magdalen's "mismatched" face and body are representative of her inability to fit within prescribed social roles. The orphaned and penniless Marian is dependent upon her wealthier half-sister for financial support. Her unattractiveness guarantees that she will never be married and will thus always be an "odd woman," a female whose class associations place her above laboring, but whose ugliness disqualifies her from her proper dependency as a wife. The revelation of Magdalen's illegitimacy robs her of her station in society, forcing her to also become a liminal figure.

Because Magdalen does not clearly belong to one class or another, is not decisively a "good" woman or a "bad" woman, but embodies characteristics of opposite categories or classes of humanity, she remains elusive and somewhat grotesque. In The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, their revision of Bakhtin, Stallybrass and White postulate a new way of thinking about the grotesque, one which might prove useful in analyzing Magdalen Vanstone:

Hybridization, a second and more complex form of the grotesque than the simply excluded 'outside' or 'low' to a given grid, produces new combinations and strange instabilities in a given semiotic system. It therefore generates the possibility of shifting the very terms of the system itself, by erasing and interrogating the relationships which constitute it. (58)

Stallybrass and White extend the definition of the "grotesque" by going beyond identifying it simply as what is "low" or "Other." Although this constitutes one version of the grotesque, the hybrid constitutes a second form of the grotesque between self and
Other. The hybrid is perhaps even more disturbing than the more obvious form of the grotesque, since the hybrid obfuscates the boundary between the proper, bourgeois self and the "low" animalistic Other:

We have had cause . . . to reflect on an unnoticed slide between two quite distinct kinds of 'grotesque', the grotesque as the 'Other' of the defining group or self, and the grotesque as a boundary phenomenon of hybridization, in which self and other become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone. What starts as a simple repulsion or rejection of symbolic matter foreign to the self inaugurates a process of introjection and negation which is always complex in its effects. In order to fathom this complexity, the inner dynamic of the boundary constructions necessary to collective identity, we have to avoid conflating the two different forms of the grotesque. If the two are confused, it becomes impossible to see that a fundamental mechanism of identity formation produces the second, hybrid grotesque at the level of the political unconscious by the very struggle to exclude the first grotesque. (193)

In a culture such as Victorian England where normativity is the ultimate goal, proving one's innate difference from the "Other" is an essential activity. One sees this difference invoked in a variety of attempts to establish superiority: male over female, "civilized" white over "primitive" nonwhite, bourgeois over working class. Figures such as the governess can be interpreted as hybrids that disrupt the safe distance established by the "self-other" model. Too well-bred and educated for her station, above a servant yet certainly subordinate to the family, the governess occupied a nebulous position in Victorian society. Rather than serving as an object of pity, the governess, whose very qualities of breeding and intellect seemed to suit her for the education of children, was usually regarded with a contemptuous eye, perhaps because she posed a living reminder to employers of the fact that their own fortunes might fall. Furthermore, novels such as Jane Eyre, Lady Audley's Secret, and Man and Wife remind us that bourgeois men and even noblemen sometimes married governesses, in real life as well as in fiction. While such a step is condoned in Jane Eyre and Man and Wife, the outcome of Braddon's novel reminds us that the precarious social position of the governess makes her an easy target.
for impersonation, a means by which the lower classes can penetrate the upper.\textsuperscript{19}

Interestingly, while \textit{East Lynne} can be interpreted as a warning against the practice of middle-class men taking aristocratic wives, the danger of a romance with one's governess does not seem to be a concern. While Richard Hare's courtship of the working-class Afy Hallijohn leads to disaster, the "hybrid" figure of the governess seems to be a non-threat due to de-eroticization. Isabel Vane's transformation into Madame Vine, the governess, apparently precludes her sexual desirability. \textit{East Lynne}, however, in certain ways comes closest (in terms of this group of novels) to literalizing the hybrid grotesque: Isabel's masquerade as Madame Vine is enabled only by her disfigurement.

It should come as no surprise, then, that after Magdalen has acquired some money through professional acting performances, her first real-life "role" is to impersonate her former governess, Miss Garth. Magdalen takes on the character of Miss Garth in order to implore Noel Vanstone, the possessor of what is rightly her fortune, to restore the half of the inheritance indicated by the original will to the two daughters. To portray a governess convincingly, Magdalen must render herself completely unattractive:

The first article of dress which she put on was an old gown of her own (made of the material called "alpaca"), of a dark-brown colour, with a neat pattern of little star-shaped spots in white. A double flounce running round the bottom of this dress was the only milliner's ornament which it presented—an ornament not at all out of character with the costume appropriate to an elderly lady. . . . She fitted and arranged the grey wig . . . and stained her face, with the customary stage materials, so as to change the transparent fairness of her complexion to the dull, faintly opaque colour of a woman in ill-health. . . . She deliberately disfigured herself by artificially reddening the insides of her eyelids, so as to produce an appearance of inflammation which no human creature but a doctor . . . could have detected as false. She sprang to her feet, and looked triumphantly at the hideous transformation of herself in the glass . . .

. . . Excepting the one case of seeing her face close, with a strong light on it, nobody who now looked at Magdalen could have suspected for an instant that

\textsuperscript{19}For an analysis of the portrayal of domestic employees as invaders or spies in the home, see Anthea Trodd's \textit{Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel}. 49
she was other than an ailing, ill-made, unattractive woman of fifty years old at least. (217-18)

Since neither Noel Vanstone nor his sly housekeeper, Mrs. Lecount, have ever encountered the real Miss Garth, it is unnecessary for Magdalen to cultivate an exact resemblance. Furthermore, given the fact that Collins's governesses are often attractive--Lydia Gwilt and Anne Silvester, for instance--and that even humdrum Norah's turn as a governess in this novel does not prohibit her from marrying the next heir to her father's fortune, George Bartram, it seems strange that Magdalen goes to such lengths here to make herself "hideous." Although her plan necessitates disguising her true appearance, Magdalen's zeal in transforming herself into a grotesque older woman seems to be rooted in fidelity to Victorian stereotype. Magdalen, herself a hybrid figure at this point, floating between legitimacy and illegitimacy, must avoid contributing her own grotesque status to the already grotesque position of the governess. Her metamorphosis into an asexual creature here renders her hybridity less threatening.

Magdalen's true nature, however, cannot avoid surfacing. Despite her skills as an actress, Magdalen cannot stop the eruption of her own emotions during her interview with Noel Vanstone. Magdalen's telltale ejaculations are produced in response to Noel's cold rejections of her plea, his refusal on the grounds that rewarding illegitimate children with an inheritance would encourage immorality and make him seem foolish. While the dull-witted Noel Vanstone remains oblivious to Magdalen's lapses into her own voice, the crafty Mrs. Lecount suspects Magdalen from the beginning. The housekeeper, a figure tellingly associated with reptiles, surreptitiously discovers Magdalen's plot, using, of all things, the latter's clothing as evidence:

... the housekeeper had noiselessly knelt down behind Magdalen's chair. ... The skirt of the false Miss Garth's gown—the brown alpaca dress with the white spots on it—touched the floor, within the housekeeper's reach. Mrs. Lecount lifted the outer of the two flounces which ran round the bottom of the dress, one over the other; softly cut away a little irregular fragment of stuff from the inner flounce; and neatly smoothed the outer one over it again, so as to hide the gap. (237)
In a novel that is entirely concerned with the recovery of identity, it is interesting to note here the bizarre means by which identity is established. Given the fact that Magdalen can no longer lay claim to any legitimate identity, Mrs. Lecount must rely on alternate means to verify who this person is. Significantly, the undeniable indicators of Magdalen's identity reside on her body and in her wardrobe. Despite Magdalen's chameleon-like abilities, her frequently-described "mobile" face, there is a constant tension in the novel that she will be exposed by a distinctive way in which her body is marked: two moles on the left side of her neck. Like a tattoo, this natural form of inscription is invoked repeatedly in attempts to discover Magdalen, a conspicuous sign appearing in one of the few places left uncovered by Victorian women's garments and thus accessible to nearly everyone's gaze when not carefully concealed by hair or makeup. Her only other distinguishing characteristic is dress.

It is appropriate that No Name is also a novel about acting, since it becomes apparent that Magdalen is performing on two levels. There is of course her theatrical performance, but her quotidian existence is also composed of a series of imitations of femininity. While Magdalen searches for an officially-sanctioned legal identity, she simultaneously reveals the fluidity of gender identity. As Judith Butler points out in Gender Trouble, the items we usually understand as indicative of some internal gender core are mostly arbitrary and artificial:

According to the understanding of identification as an enacted fantasy or incorporation . . . it is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, idealized, and that this idealization is the effect of a corporeal signification. In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. . . . In other words, acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the
illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality. (136)

Magdalen's aptitude for imitation is subversive in that it reveals that both gender and class are without any "natural" basis. Although Butler's analysis deals specifically with gender and sexuality, it is also appropriate to understandings of class, especially in a case such as the "lady" in which the ideals of gender and class are inextricable from one another. It is her loss of class status that propels Magdalen's series of gender imitations. Suddenly deprived of identity, Magdalen is forced to rely upon impersonation. The heroine cannot act "naturally," for how does one comport herself in order to signify an empty identity? The novel emphasizes that Magdalen is not even entitled to the name "Vanstone" (hence the title of the book), yet the position of anonymity fails to meet a prescribed social role. Magdalen is left with her first name, and in this case she will fulfill her destiny by eventually repenting of her sins. Magdalen's only other identity marker is "female," but the proper fulfillment of the female role is equally dependent on the individual's class status. Magdalen has been raised to be a lady, but, finding herself suddenly penniless and illegitimate, she discovers that her "natural" habits have become defamiliarized. Norah responds to the situation by living with Miss Garth to become a governess, yet this itself is only an imitation of what educated women without financial providers could do. Magdalen, on the other hand, realizes that the entire field of "femininities" is open to her, and that she may adopt whichever is most appropriate to her strategy at the time.

Although Magdalen's biological sex is clearly female, her lack of a definite social position renders her gender (and, as we will see, her sexuality) problematic. For the Victorians, as for many other societies, "female" is not an unmarked or independent term. Identifications of class position, occupation, marital status, sexual availability, etc., are usually attached: lady, governess, maid, prostitute. As Butler points out, the illusion of a
coherent gender core is instrumental in the maintenance of reproductive heterosexuality.
Yet in a class-conscious society such as Victorian England, social status plays an equally
important role in the regulation of desire. Magdalen's sex seems to be established, yet her
indeterminate class status threatens the regulation of sexuality, since she can appear to be
a proper object of desire for someone for whom discovery of "the truth" would render her
ineligible.

Because identity is understood as the product of a series of surface significations
that indicate a "true" and coherent interiority, it should come as no surprise that Magdalen
not only successfully constructs her various identities through superficial items
(costumes, makeup, mannerisms), but that these are also the means through which she is
exposed as a fraud. The signs by which Magdalen will be discovered are set forth early
in the novel, when Norah and Miss Garth find her missing and offer a reward for her safe
return: "Personal marks--two little moles, close together, on the left side of the neck.
Mark on the under clothing--'Magdalen Vanstone'" (151). Magdalen's body and her
clothing will repeatedly reveal her "true" identity throughout the novel. The fact that she
is identified through two moles on the neck is probably not unusual, although I should
hardly think such a mark rare enough to establish identity with any certainty. What does
strike me is the fact that the advertisement mentions the name on Magdalen's
underclothing. This is problematic for at least two reasons: 1) It seems unlikely that
many persons would have access to Magdalen's underclothing; the only persons who
might have reason to see Magdalen's undergarments would be servants (whom she
cannot afford at this point), police or medical examiners (in the event of her death), or
lovers (out of the question); 2) Resourceful as Magdalen is, she could certainly manage to
sell, exchange, or discard her undergarments or remove the name. This device is also
used in The Woman in White, where the asylum attendants "prove" to Laura Fairlie that
she is really the escaped Anne Catherick, since the latter's name is found on her

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underwear. To the attendants of the asylum, the name on the underclothing represents irrefutable proof of identity. Yet it seems unlikely that Norah and Miss Garth expect Magdalen to end up in an asylum, and therefore one must question who it is they expect to be examining her underwear.

The two figures in the novel who do pay close attention to Magdalen's garments are Mrs. Wragge, the docile, imbecilic wife of Captain Wragge, a distant relation who has "befriended" Magdalen on the condition that both profit by it, and the aforementioned Mrs. Lecount. While the former woman's interest in fashion is meant for comic relief (over six feet tall and impoverished, she possesses a less-than-flattering wardrobe; her interest is that of a half-wit), the latter's attention is much more sinister. In the previously quoted passage, we witness Mrs. Lecount slithering up to Magdalen and unobservedly removing a fragment of her dress's inner flounce. There is something peculiarly intimate and chilling in the housekeeper's cutting of Magdalen's clothing, a violation kept unnoticed by Mrs. Lecount's covering of "the gap." The gap, of course, can be seen as the hole in Magdalen's plot, the means by which Mrs. Lecount will "prove" the former's identity to Noel Vanstone. But the "gap," the missing piece, also represents feminine weakness. It is not difficult to interpret Mrs. Lecount's surreptitious excision as a symbolic castration, a way of making Magdalen vulnerable by leaving her with a "gap."

Magdalen's plan, following her discovery of Noel Vanstone's surfeit of greed and lack of mercy, is to pose as a young lady, Miss Susan Bygrave, in order to trick the new heir into marrying her. Mrs. Lecount immediately suspects Miss Bygrave, however, and confirms her doubts by manipulating Mrs. Wragge (now posing as Susan's aunt, Mrs. Bygrave) into letting her view "Susan's" wardrobe. The alpaca dress is not immediately visible; however, upon searching deeper into the wardrobe, Mrs. Lecount discovers it "on the innermost peg" (378). By violating the deepest recesses of her wardrobe, Mrs. Lecount has gotten to the "core" of Magdalen's "true" identity. This will be the material
with which Mrs. Lecount exposes Magdalen. Yet how devastating to an understanding of identity as a consistent interiority with a unique individuality to find that that interiority is nothing more than a surface signification, and one that can be exchanged among individuals—a dress!

Aware of Mrs. Lecount's suspicions (although unaware of her "evidence"), Captain Wragge and Magdalen construct a clever ruse to lure Mrs. Lecount out of the country for a short period in order to finalize the marriage with Noel Vanstone. Since the weak and sickly Vanstone is terrified of and managed by his Swiss housekeeper, he jumps at this chance to act on his own desires (or at least to escape her domination). Finding that she has been tricked, Mrs. Lecount returns to England, determined to expose Noel Vanstone's new wife. Her first point of evidence is, of course, the mark on Magdalen's neck, and the second is the alpaca dress. After commanding Vanstone to search his wife's wardrobe until the offending dress is discovered, Mrs. Lecount delivers her coup de grâce:

"When the woman calling herself Miss Garth came to see us in Vauxhall Walk, I knelt down behind the chair in which she was sitting, and I cut a morsel of stuff from the dress she wore, which might help me to know that dress, if I ever saw it again. I did this, while the woman's whole attention was absorbed in talking to you. The morsel of stuff has been kept in my pocket-book, from that time to this. See for yourself, Mr. Noel, if it fits that gap in the dress, which your own hands have just taken from your wife's wardrobe."

She rose, and handed him the fragment of stuff across the bed. He put it into the vacant space in the flounce, as well as his trembling fingers would let him.

"Does it fit, sir?" asked Mrs. Lecount.

The dress dropped from his hands; and the deadly bluish pallor—which every doctor who attended him had warned his housekeeper to dread—overspread his face slowly. . . . "Save me!" he gasped, in a hoarse, breathless whisper. "Oh, Lecount, save me!" (449)

Given Noel Vanstone's constitutional weakness and effeminacy, one easily assumes that his marriage with Magdalen remains unconsummated (indeed, this is more credible than
the notion that he would marry her to begin with). Thus it seems very deliberate that Collins strikes terror into Vanstone's heart through the revelation of his wife's "inscription" and her sexuality. Noel Vanstone is visibly shaken by discovering that his wife is already "marked" by the two moles on her neck, but it is the fitting of the dress fragment into the gap (by his own hand) that is his undoing. Just as interesting, however, is what comes next. As Mrs. Lecount searches for sal-volatile to revive her employer, she carelessly lays aside another bottle from the cabinet. As Noel Vanstone recovers, his vision is arrested by the label of the second bottle—Poison (450).

The reader knows by this point that Magdalen did not have such foul intentions toward her husband. The poison was actually purchased in a desperate moment in which Magdalen's self-loathing led her to contemplate suicide. However, presuming the worst of Magdalen, Mrs. Lecount persuades Noel Vanstone to pen a new will designed to prohibit Magdalen from ever accessing any of the fortune; he dies the following day, his demise facilitated by the previous day's terrors. Although he dies in fear of Magdalen, Mrs. Lecount is equally (or perhaps more) culpable for his death. We are repeatedly told that Mrs. Lecount has been warned about the delicacy of her master's health. Nevertheless, she does not refrain from exposing him to intolerable shock, and she

20During Magdalen's masquerade as Miss. Garth, the reader obtains a first glimpse of the heartless and cowardly Noel Vanstone:

she saw a frail, flaxen-haired, self-satisfied little man, clothed in a fair white dressing gown, many sizes too large for him, with a nosegay of violets drawn neatly through the button-hole over his breast. He looked from thirty to five-and-thirty years old. His complexion was as delicate as a young girl's, his eyes were of the lightest blue, his upper lip was adorned by a weak little white moustache, waxed and twisted at either end into a thin spiral curl. (228)

Magdalen is completely taken aback by the man's appearance: "Was this the man who mercilessly followed the path on which his merciless father had walked before him? She could hardly believe it" (229). Magdalen is obviously expecting a much more robust and "manly" man. However, when one considers the history of Collins's characterization, one finds that "effeminacy" and cruelty go hand in hand, whether in the case of true villains such as Count Fosco, or in cases where "weakness" leads to selfishness and a mean disregard for others, as in the cases of Frederick Fairlie and Noel Vanstone. Men who embody the ideals of "true" manhood, such as Walter Hartright, usually prove their valor.
conveniently insinuates herself into his new will shortly before he has been completely
done in. A keeper of pet reptiles who is sometimes described as "venomous," Mrs.
Lecount also threatens to poison Noel Vanstone. Although polar opposites in many
respects, Magdalen Vanstone and Virginie Lecount share a common bond in that they are
both regarded as "poison." For widely different reasons, each character is associated with
the idea of contamination, and this idea is ultimately connected to the sensation novel
itself. Mrs. Lecount's Swiss nationality and French surname are immediately suspicious;
her foreign influence, combined with the French-influenced sensation novel and the
dubious sexuality of Magdalen Vanstone, conspires to poison the bourgeois English
household.

Although, as I have mentioned before, Magdalen never technically loses her
virtue, her abilities to impersonate and dissemble throw her purity into question.
Actresses were long considered little better than prostitutes, something that Magdalen
evidently realizes when she must first use her body for professional purposes: "Oh, poor
papa! poor papa! Oh, my God, if he saw me now!" (194). Evidently, Andrew Vanstone
would be distressed at how his daughter has "fallen." This association between
professional acting and the demi-monde means that, for practical purposes, Magdalen
might as well be a prostitute. The public circulation of her body taints her integrity, even
if the body itself remains intact. And since the prostitute was understood as a vessel that
was spreading its "poison" through society, it should come as no surprise that Noel
Vanstone and Mrs. Lecount draw the connection between literal, bottled poison and the
"dishonest" Magdalen. However, as I will argue at the conclusion of this section, the
novel ultimately adheres to the "necessary evil" argument that is also used to justify
prostitution. In the end, we shall see that poisonous damsels like Magdalen are needed to
keep their sisters "pure" and "innocuous."
Upon being disinherited by her husband, Magdalen begins plotting alternative means of access to the fortune. Discovering that there is likely to be an instrumental letter in the possession of the next heir, Admiral Bartram, Magdalen determines to find it. Although Magdalen gains access to Admiral Bartram's residence in the role of parlourmaid, her plan once again fails. Caught in the act of prying into the Admiral's private papers, Magdalen moves into some poor lodgings, destitute and discouraged. Providentially, however, Magdalen is saved in her hour of desperation; fortune, family, and morality are restored to her, and she receives a new lover/father/protector. No Name seems to have a "moral" ending, in that Magdalen's deceptions come to naught, and Norah's virtuous marriage to George Bartram reinstates the daughters' fortune and identity. However, the morality of this ending is also undermined by the fact that Norah's marriage is only made possible by Magdalen's perversity, and that the man who rescues Magdalen from her poverty is connected to the family because of her father's own immorality. Furthermore, the marriages of both daughters not only restore their social identity, but also seem to fulfill a sexual desire for the father; the father is thus restored to them on two counts.

Norah's marriage to George Bartram, which will be the means of regaining Andrew Vanstone's legacy, can be traced to their initial meeting, the chance result of Norah's search for her wayward sister. When Magdalen married Noel Vanstone, the two embarked on a secret honeymoon with the intention of evading Mrs. Lecount on her return from Switzerland. In her (eventually successful) search for the missing couple, Mrs. Lecount contacts George Bartram and Norah Vanstone for possible leads. These characters also become involved in searching for the newlyweds, and in the process, they coincidentally wind up at the same hotel. The landlady remarks on this interesting fact to George Bartram, who is enchanted with his new-found cousin: "She has the dark eyes and hair, and the gentle retiring manners that I always admire in a woman" (424-25).
Although more reserved in her description, Norah betrays her affectionate response in a letter to Miss Garth: "He is quite young—not more than thirty, I should think. In face and figure, he reminded me a little of the portrait of my father at Combe-Raven—I mean the portrait in the dining-room, of my father when he was a young man" (426). It is interesting that uptight Norah—who was so distressed that Magdalen's play-acting would bring her into frequent proximity with her boyfriend (already their next-door neighbor)—should be inspired with sexual attraction for the first time in her life by someone who reminds her of her father. Also worthy of notice is the fact that George does not resemble her father as she remembers him, in his middle years, but as his portrait represented him, in his youth. It is as though Norah is redeeming not only Magdalen, but her father as well; by marrying the image of her youthful father, the sober Norah can repair the damage of history by correcting her father's impulsive first marriage.

Magdalen will also marry a father figure, but her loved one is more reminiscent of the mature Andrew Vanstone. At the crisis of her life, Magdalen is rescued by a man who was previously smitten by her appearance and fortuitously happens upon her just as she is in need: "he saw the woman whose beauty was the haunting remembrance of his life—whose image had been vivid in his mind, not five minutes since" (575). The savior, Captain Kirke, had once witnessed Magdalen in her incarnation as Miss Bygrave, and the memory of her beauty had accompanied him on his voyage to the other side of the world. Recognizing Magdalen's appearance but ignorant of her identity, Captain Kirke gallantly intervenes to save the woman who has haunted his dreams. The delirious Magdalen betrays no recognition of Kirke, mistaking him for her father:

21Coincidentally, Magdalen's former suitor, Frank Clare, a shiftless ne'er-do-well who had been sent to China to make his fortune, abandons his employers and stows away on Kirke's vessel. The kindly Kirke forgives him, and Frank, to whom Magdalen had for a long time been devoted, departs at South Africa to marry a wealthy elderly woman.
He stooped, and lifted Magdalen in his arms. Her head rested gently on the sailor's breast; her eyes looked up wonderingly into the sailor's face. She smiled and whispered to him vacantly. Her mind had wandered back to the old days at home; and her few broken words showed that she fancied herself a child again in her father's arms. "Poor papa!" she said softly. "Why do you look so sorry? Poor papa!" (576)

Magdalen's thoughts here drift not to her former love, Frank (who never exhibited any such "manliness"), but to her father. Indeed, Captain Kirke is old enough to be her father-he is forty-one, while she is twenty (594). Magdalen's affection for Kirke is consistent with the beginning of the novel, which revealed the playful nature of her relationship with Andrew Vanstone. Magdalen was her father's favorite, and she had been in the habit of treating him as a playmate and equal rather than as an authority figure. She is repeatedly shown in her father's lap, flirting with him, teasing, and cajoling him. Miss Garth and Mrs. Vanstone both disapprove of this arrangement, and the latter even goes so far as to blame Magdalen's perverse histrionic inclinations on the informality of this relationship: "Those habits of mimicry are growing on her; and she speaks to you with a levity which it is positively shocking to hear" (11). Magdalen's assimilation of various identities, according to this view, stems from her failure to properly understand her identity in the first place. Magdalen's improper relationship to the father foreshadows her legal fatherlessness; the reestablishment of her identity at the conclusion of the novel is accompanied by a "proper" father-daughter relationship, which is, tellingly, an erotic one.

Despite the fact that No Name repeatedly uncovers the artificiality of social identity and is actually critical of the cruel concept of "illegitimacy," the novel simultaneously follows an Oedipal trajectory whose purpose seems to be the establishment of a proper erotic object. That is, even though Collins deconstructs certain aspects of social identity that have to do with class or gender, the conclusion of his novel attempts to recover some primary sexual identity to accompany the daughters' reestablishment as "ladies."
The impropriety of Magdalen's sexual identity is clear from the beginning of the novel, and it is only "corrected" at the end, when her "father figure" and her sexual object are one. As I have already mentioned, Magdalen's relationship to Andrew Vanstone at the beginning of the novel was one of playful equality rather than respectful subordination. Though Mrs. Vanstone and Miss Garth are both shocked by Magdalen's behavior, fearing that the girl has a tendency toward theatricality (and therefore perhaps moral laxity?), without Mr. Vanstone's cooperation they are powerless to correct her. At the same time, Magdalen has formed a clearly inappropriate romantic attachment to her neighbor, Frank Clare. Frank exhibits a variety of faults, which perhaps would be apparent to any student of physiognomy:

The small regular features, which he was supposed to have inherited from his mother, were rounded and filled out, without having lost their remarkable delicacy of form. His beard was still in its infancy; and nascent lines of whisker traced their modest way sparcely down his cheeks. His gentle wandering brown eyes would have looked to better advantage in a woman's face—they wanted spirit and firmness to fit them for the face of a man. His hands had the same wandering habit as his eyes; they were constantly changing form one position to another, constantly twisting and turning any little stray thing they could pick up. He was undeniably handsome, graceful, well bred—but no close observer could look at him, without suspecting that the stout old family stock had begun to wear out in the later generations, and that Mr. Francis Clare had more in him of the shadow of his ancestors than of the substance. (30)

The reader at first feels a certain amount of sympathy for Frank Clare. Although it is clear from the outset that he lacks strength of character, one is likely to attribute Frank's failures and his lack of self-esteem to his father's incessant criticism. As the novel progresses, it happens that Mr. Clare's ill opinion of his son is correct. Although in the late twentieth century one might be likely to attribute Frank's selfishness and irresponsibility to his harsh and loveless upbringing, a fulfillment of his father's low expectations, the novel clearly intends us to interpret Frank's shortcomings as the inevitable product of nature, and his father's estimation as wise and prophetic despite its
insensitivity. Frank's "wandering" eyes and hands reflect his lack of conviction, as well as his inability to hold a job or remain faithful to a lover. Andrew Vanstone repeatedly intervenes to get Frank positions in which he can prove himself. Frank consistently fails; the final trial is a business venture in China, whose success would ostensibly prove Frank's worthiness of Magdalen's hand and fortune. Frank reveals his true colors through a cowardly flight from his post and a possible future with Magdalen; the siren song of an easy "kept" life is too much for him to resist.

Frank's final position as a "kept" man in South Africa is a logical outcome of his effeminacy. Frank's weaknesses of character are apparently due to his lack of manliness. As the passage above indicates, Frank lacks the physical signs of manliness as much as the less tangible characteristics of a "true" man: he possesses his mother's delicate features, little facial hair, and eyes which lack "spirit and firmness." The passage indicates a further example of sexual lack in declaring that the "worn out" stock of his ancestors has given Frank "shadow" rather than "substance." Before Magdalen loses her social identity through her disinheritance and "delegitimization," then, she already manifests an identity conflict. Magdalen identifies with her father while desiring a "feminine" object, Frank. Thus Magdalen's journey must not only recover her lost social status, but correct her sexual identification as well.

In the absence of both her father and her desired object, Magdalen's sexual identity becomes somewhat nebulous. On the one hand, between the departure of Frank early in the novel and the appearance of Captain Kirke in the end, sexual desire seems to become a non-issue. Even Magdalen's brief marriage to Noel Vanstone fails to raise the issue of sexuality, as her husband's sickliness "unmans" him and would appear to prohibit

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22The novel makes interesting use of topography here: on the "other side" of the world, Frank's laziness and cowardice are rewarded. Apparently, in the "backward" or "upside down" southern tip of Africa, women are the providers for men—a sign of the perverse ways of the "dark continent" and its potential to corrupt Englishmen?
any physical relationship. On the other hand, however, Magdalen's lack of a stable home and family and her acting "career" conspire to circulate her body publicly. As her mother's alarm had indicated, Magdalen's "habits of mimicry" are somehow connected to her failure to understand her proper sex/gender identity. Because Magdalen does not know "her place," she attempts to inhabit a variety of "places" or identities. This failure to understand her proper place also disturbs Mrs. Vanstone because it indicates violation of Magdalen's sexual role. Because Andrew Vanstone perishes not only before Magdalen's social position can be legally assured, but also before her Oedipal crisis can be resolved, Magdalen suffers a suspension of both her social and sexual identities. While the former is repaired through Norah's union with George Bartram, Magdalen's unguided sexual desire can only be brought under control through the recognition of a father figure as its proper object.

Of further significance here is the indirect relation of Captain Kirke to Mr. Vanstone. Unwilling to acknowledge the circumstances of his initial encounter with Magdalen in her incarnation as Miss Bygrave (for fear of awakening painful recollections), Captain Kirke explains his gallantry in terms of a prior claim on her--the past friendship of their respective fathers: "Did you never hear of [Kirke's] father, Major Kirke--commanding officer of the regiment in Canada? Did you never hear that the major helped your father through a great difficulty, like the best of fellows and good friends?" (588). Major Kirke, it turns out, had come to young Andrew Vanstone's aid during the latter's crisis of an ill-advised marriage. The Major's son, Captain Kirke, seems to have inherited the paternal predilection for saving desperate Vanstones who have made bad marriages. Kirke's authority to rescue Magdalen lies in the tradition

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23 Both Andrew and Magdalen Vanstone escaped death because of the Kirke family, and both transformed their lives following contact with their savior. Andrew Vanstone's lawyer, Mr. Pendrill, relates the details early in the novel: "One of Andrew's superior officers--a certain Major Kirke . . . found him in his quarters, writing to his father a confession of the disgraceful truth, with a loaded pistol by his side. That officer saved the lad's life from his own hand; and hushed up the scandalous affair, by a compromise" (99).
begun by his own father, while Magdalen's repentance and reformation are also given legitimacy by familial precedent.

The conclusion of No Name thus seems to turn in a strangely conservative direction, seeking to establish some "real" sexual identity despite its repeated exposure of other forms of identity as groundless. It also, of course, rewards the "good" sister Norah, and shows us a repentant Magdalen. However, in spite of the ending's "morality," I find three items that resist such a tidy conclusion and allow for subversive interpretation of the text.

The first and most obvious issue is that of the restoration of inheritance/identity at the conclusion of the novel. On one hand, Magdalen learns that patience and submission to one's lot lead to reward, as it is the passive Norah who winds up marrying the heir to the fortune. On the other hand, as Norah informs Magdalen, the marriage and its consequences are an indirect result of Magdalen's wayward actions:

You ought to be especially interested, my love, in this marriage; for you are the cause of it. If I had not gone to Aldborough to search for the lost trace of you—if George had not been brought there, at the same time, by circumstances in which you were concerned—my husband and I might never have met. When we look back to our first impressions of each other, we look back to you. (597)

Norah behaves with propriety and is rewarded, but only because her sister has been transgressive. According to this model, then, both "good" women and "bad" women benefit from role-playing. And, perhaps to be consistent with Victorian arguments about prostitution, the actions of "bad women" are necessary in order to keep women like Norah "good" and "pure." While this model is far from liberating in that it retains the oppressive virgin/whore dichotomy of female sexuality, there is something subversive in the fact that Magdalen simultaneously fulfills and is excluded from both these roles.

It is interesting to note that Andrew Vanstone's subsequent social success is dependent upon concealment—especially from his father—while Magdalen's redemption is ultimately achieved through confession to her substitute father.
Magdalen's impersonations throughout the novel are perceived as deceitful and dishonest, and certainly reviewers such as Mrs. Oliphant were horrified to witness the triumph of the "bad girl." Magdalen is "impossible" in the Victorian imagination because she is a "public" and deceptive woman who is a virgin, a "whore" who hasn't had sex. No Name reveals the inadequacy of essentialist limitations in defining "woman." Perhaps the most subversive element of No Name—as is the case with most sensation novels—is that it constructs impersonation as the founding condition of "femininity." Norah's role-playing is less obvious to the reader because she follows the path least offensive to Victorian sensibilities. Yet as Magdalen's masquerades reveal, the long-suffering governess is imitable, as are all other forms of "femininity." Magdalen's acting offends not so much because it is obviously deceptive, but because it exposes the capacity for all feminine roles to be deceptive, and it shows that such masquerades are encouraged and rewarded.

Because Magdalen repents by the end of the novel, she decides to reject her ill-gotten share of the inheritance. Nevertheless, her future is still secured by her relationship with Captain Kirke—a situation that is also the result of her machinations. As I have stated, Magdalen's romance with the Captain can be regarded as evidence of her having learned proper sexual identification. The fact that a father figure is her romantic object means that Magdalen's waywardness will be corrected by paternal discipline, just as her father's erroneous course was set straight by Major Kirke. However, the parallels between Magdalen's situation and that of her father problematize a straightforward interpretation of the ending. In the first place, Magdalen's errors recall not only those of her father, but also those of her father's first wife. Andrew Vanstone's first wedding had been performed in secret, due to his betrothed's persuasion. However, later discovery of the fact reveals the motive behind her desire for discretion: "Hardly three months had passed, when a chance disclosure exposed the life she had led, before her marriage. But one alternative was left to her husband—the alternative of instantly separating from her"
Because Andrew Vanstone's bride had not committed adultery after the marriage, he is unable to divorce her. Yet the discovery of her sexual experience prior to the ceremony makes their separation inevitable. Curiously, not much more is known about this woman; it is enough to know that she was sexually experienced to realize that she is an unsuitable marriage partner. (Ironically, the woman Andrew Vanstone lives with most of his life under the pretense of being "really" married only has sexual experience outside of marriage, yet this does not hinder him from marrying her when the chance arrives. In another violation of Victorian thought, the signs of her sexual deviance make no appearance on Mrs. Vanstone's body or in her gestures--everybody believes she is a lady and a legitimate wife.)

Although Magdalen does not commit the "one unpardonable sin" of losing her virtue, the life she has led is nevertheless scandalous. Having made her body "public" through her acting performances, Magdalen may just as well have become sexually experienced. (The novel's contemporary reviewers find it impossible to disconnect the two.) Moreover, until the final pages of the novel, Captain Kirke remains largely ignorant of Magdalen's history. During the illness that results from her destitution, while Kirke is nursing her back to health, Captain Wragge returns to the scene and strategically informs Captain Kirke of only a small number of details. Kirke is informed that "Miss Bygrave" is really Magdalen Vanstone, yet beyond this he remains in the dark (587). Unlike her father's first wife, however, Magdalen decides to make a clean breast of her sins. Magdalen tells Captain Kirke her history in writing. Unlike her own father, Magdalen's suitor is not repelled by her confession. On the contrary, "he knew the priceless value, the all-ennobling virtue, of a woman who speaks the truth" (609). On one level, we can read Magdalen's confession as the revelation of her "true interiority" to Kirke. However, if we are interpreting Magdalen's "bad girl" as a sort of parallel for the Victorian prostitute, we must also interpret Kirke as the doctor behind the truth-seeking
speculum. Kirke's benevolence gets to the core of Magdalen's perversity, and his paternal/sexual interest in her provides a remedy. As in the discourse surrounding the prostitute, the penetration of authority is required to render "poison" innocuous. The flaw in the Contagious Diseases Acts, however, was that they really did nothing to stop the spread of "poison." Perhaps some of Magdalen's perversity also remains. Kirke's undiminished ardor for his tainted love object appeared a dangerous example to contemporary reviewers. Kirke disregards Magdalen's unscrupulous past and therefore seems to endorse immorality. Perhaps more transgressive, however, is that Magdalen has become truthful, when the text has shown us that a certain kind of duplicity is essential to the maintenance of femininity and bourgeois life.

Finally, by embarking on a relationship with Captain Kirke, Magdalen has learned to successfully manage her desire, transferring it from a "feminine" object (Frank Clare) to a more suitably masculine one that she can associate with her father. Magdalen's romance with Captain Kirke also provides an interesting parallel to her sister's marriage to George Bartram. As I argued before, Norah's marriage to a man who resembles her father in his youth can be interpreted as an attempt to correct her father's early marital mistake, and as such is a way of identifying with the mother. Magdalen is also attracted to a living reminder of her father, except that her choice resembles the mature Andrew Vanstone. Magdalen's preference can be regarded as a way of identifying with her mother, since Magdalen's memories of her parents are of them in their middle years. However, because Magdalen is reforming her life under the paternal influence of Kirke and the maternal influence of Norah, just as Andrew Vanstone changed his ways with the help of Major Kirke and Mrs. Vanstone, one can easily argue that Magdalen still identifies with her father.

This to me seems the "blot" that remains at the end of the novel. On the surface, everything appears to be resolved. Magdalen has learned her lesson, and her repentance

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enables a happy ending, even if this is sometimes to the chagrin of contemporary reviewers. Yet, I am unconvinced of what Magdalen has learned, or that the ending is really as tidy and conservative as it seems; if this novel has taught us anything, it is that appearances are deceptive. Problems remain with the matter of Magdalen's sexual identification. Her early desire for the "feminine" Frank was clearly misguided. Although the issue of same-sex desire never clearly emerges in the novel, the fact that Magdalen betrays many more traditionally "masculine" virtues than her beloved (courage, determination, loyalty, industry, resourcefulness) implies that there is something awry in the sexuality of each. Furthermore, the fact that Magdalen resembles neither of her parents and has a face that does not "fit" her body should be cause for suspicion; she violates "normal" expectations at every turn. The incongruity of Magdalen's appearance likens her to The Woman in White's Marian Halcombe, as I indicated much earlier. In addition to resembling Marian in her "odd woman" position, Magdalen may also resemble her in suspicious sexuality.

Like Magdalen, Marian possesses a face that does not match her figure: a swarthy visage with a mustache atop a voluptuous body. Consistent with external appearances, Marian's "masculine" reasoning repeatedly conflicts with her "feminine" deference to propriety, and is ultimately subjugated by the physical limitations of the "feminine" body. Although on a less obvious scale, Magdalen undergoes a similar battle between her "masculine" determination and her "feminine" tenderness for her sister, as well as a body that foils her plans. Marian's internal and external struggles are on behalf of her half-sister; her "masculine" appearance, along with her passionate devotion to Laura, may cause her to be read as "lesbian." Yet as D.A. Miller points out, Marian's apparently defiant sexuality may only exist to be tamed or transformed by the males of the text:

In general, the "lesbianism" contextualized in The Woman in White amounts to mainly a male charge, in which the accusation is hard to dissociate from the excitation. In particular, the novel most effectively renders Marian "lesbian" in
the sense that it makes her suffer the regular fate of the lesbian in male representations: who defiantly bides her time with women until the inevitable and irrevocable heterosexual union that she, unlike everyone else, may not have known that she always wanted. (182)

Marian Halcombe is still single at the conclusion of The Woman in White, yet Miller argues that her dangerous sexuality is brought under the control of the heterosexual sphere through the textual violation of her diary by Count Fosco (Miller 182-84), a metaphorical rape. By the end of the novel, Marian serves the interests of reproductive heterosexuality by recognizing the superiority of its product, the son of Walter Hartright and Laura Fairlie. Like Marian, Magdalen must also be brought within the right mode of sexuality. Although Magdalen is never suspected of being "mannish" or lesbian, the terms of equality with which she speaks to her father and her "management" of Frank (it is through her intervention that Andrew Vanstone finds positions for Frank, and it is only by her command that he will leave to supposedly make his fortune in China) nevertheless represent qualities that are inconsistent with the demands of femininity in a patriarchal model of heterosexuality. Frank's eventual desertion of Magdalen for a wealthy older woman who will support him demonstrates his lack of fitness as a partner for Magdalen, since he exhibits the most "unmanly" combination of willingness to be dominated and unwillingness to work. From the beginning, the novel's other characters fail to understand Magdalen's passionate devotion to this ne'er-do-well. Consistent with Miller's argument about lesbianism and its construction in male representations, what Magdalen really wants is in front of her all the time that she has known Frank; inevitably, some crisis must reveal to her that her father was the desirable object all along.

Despite Magdalen's apparently "fixed" desire at the end, the problem still remains of the identification with her father. Magdalen's early attraction to Frank Clare seemed wrong because it appeared to be a kind of same-sex (or at least same-gender) desire: Magdalen was sexually attracted to someone "feminine." However, considering that Magdalen identifies with her father throughout the novel, one must question whether this
is really an issue of same-sex attraction. For if Magdalen both identifies with her father and desires her father's representative at the end, is not this a kind of bizarre same-sex desire, as well as narcissism? Furthermore, this strange form of "inversion" featuring "opposite" sexes is perhaps connected to Magdalen's experience as an actress. Mrs. Vanstone feared that Magdalen's "habits of mimicry" were the result of her improper relation to her father, and her initial "training" to be an actress is narcissistic—namely, it involves concentrating in front of a mirror at length while a servant brushes her hair. It is clear that the perversity of acting is linked to some deviant sexual identification. Like Marian Halcombe, Magdalen can be seen as an illustration of "the fantasy of 'the man-in-the-woman'" (Miller 184); it is thus intriguing that the Captain is so smitten with her, perhaps being attracted to Magdalen's "inner man." Magdalen becomes the means of cementing solidarity between Andrew Vanstone and his own saving father figure, Major Kirke. Magdalen's body thus becomes the sign of gratitude for Major Kirke's favor.

In Sedgwickian terms, Magdalen becomes the means of enabling a homosocial relationship between two men, at least one of whom is dead. Discussing psychoanalysis, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Gayle Rubin, Sedgwick describes this system in which women function as objects of exchange between men:

   patriarchal heterosexuality can best be discussed in terms of one or another form of the traffic in women: it is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men. . . . Lévi-Strauss's normative man uses a woman as a "conduit of a relationship" in which the partner is a man. (25-26)

On one hand, Magdalen can be viewed as the pawn in a relationship between two men. Yet if Magdalen herself is also a "man," what happens to the dynamics of this erotic triangle? If Magdalen is her father's surrogate as Captain Kirke is for Major Kirke, then the role of the female intermediary becomes problematic. Magdalen is not simply exchanged property; on some level, she offers literalization of male-male desire.
Of further significance is the difference in narration between this novel and *The Woman in White*. As D.A. Miller observes, Collins' use of a male narrator (Hartright) explicitly addressing a male reader in the latter novel creates an interesting situation, partly because the sensation novel usually presumes a female readership and because the reader is placed in a rather feminized position in reading the novel. Miller argues that the male-male address of the text is complicated by the inevitable identification of the reader with the title character, the Woman in White:

This reader willy-nilly falls victim to a hysteria in which what is acted out (desired, repressed) is an essentially female "sensation." His excitements come from—become—her nervous excitability... even his pallor... is mirrored back to him only as hers, the Woman in White's. This reader thus lends himself to elaborating a fantasy of *anima muliebris in corpore virili inclusa*—or as we might appropriately translate here, "a woman's breath caught in a man's body." The usual rendering, of course, is "a woman's soul trapped...", and it will be recognizable as nineteenth-century sexology's classic formulation (coined by Karl Ulrichs in the 1860s) for male homosexuality. (153-54)

The sensation novel was considered "dangerous reading" because of the threat it posed to "impressionable minds"—namely, women and the lower classes. Yet, in D.A. Miller's provocative reading, the text becomes dangerous because it activates "feminine" impulses within the male reader. By subjecting the male reader to the emotional and visceral results of reading the sensation novel—excitability, fright, anxiety—Collins forces him to identify with the female title character, who also experiences these emotions, as if he were getting in touch with some "feminine" interiority.

As Miller proceeds to point out, this provocation of "feminine" impulses in male readers is not necessarily radical or liberating. In fact, in a novel that is obsessed with the enclosure of females (*The Woman in White*), the "woman's breath caught in a man's body" may be just another incentive for enclosing and controlling real and imagined "women": "the sequestration of women takes for its object not just women, who need to be put away in safe places or asylums, but men as well, who must monitor and master...
what is fantasized as the 'woman inside' them" (156). Miller reads this formulation as homophobic, arguing that this is basically a way of self-imposing the restrictions of external society--the demand for men to "put away" or extinguish the "unlawful feminine" within the self (155-56). Given that The Woman in White is at least partly about Walter Hartright's quest for manhood, the success of which involves proving himself "manlier" than Marian, this reading seems perfectly plausible. But if the reader-text relationship in The Woman in White creates a "woman-inside-the-man" response that must be repressed, what is the effect of No Name on its reader's identity?

In both novels, the "masculine" woman is brought within the service of heterosexuality. Yet while Marian's "manly" appearance (and even intellect) demands that she fulfill her duties in a desexualized manner (through her devotion to Walter Hartright's heir), Magdalen's "man-within-the-woman" remains eroticized. In one sense, the ending could be read as her submission to her inevitable feminine role, the rejection of the "masculine" within. However, as I have been arguing, Magdalen exhibits "masculine" identification in that she relives her father's journey of recklessness and repentance, and that they even owe their reformations to men of the same family. In another sense, then, Magdalen's romance with Captain Kirke is a confirmation of the "masculine" within. The fact that this is Magdalen's only "legitimate" desire in the novel allows for subversive possibility.

How does one define the subversive possibility of this strange quasi-homosexual desire? Perhaps one can think of this text in terms of Camp:

The androgyne is certainly one of the great images of Camp sensibility. . . . the most refined form of sexual attractiveness (as well as the most refined form of sexual pleasure) consists in going against the grain of one's sex. What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine. (Sontag 279)
Although I do not wish to take Sontag's views on Camp for granted, I think her "Notes on Camp" are useful for evaluating the sensation novel in relation to Camp. (I am not sure that the sensation novel is considered Camp; perhaps this is because it is no longer a widely-read genre. Certainly, however, anyone who read Lady Audley's Secret would find it campy.) While I question Sontag's assumption of some essential sex that one can "go against," I think her observation on the role of the androgyne in Camp is an important one. It seems to me that the androgyne—in No Name at least—is strongly rooted in theater. Because the novel is constructed in terms of theatrical metaphor, it is very easy to make connections to androgyny or cross-dressing in theater—the pantomime and Shakespeare, particularly. Given the tradition of cross-dressing in English theater, one can perhaps interpret Magdalen as the woman who literally has a "man inside," the boy in woman's clothes who complicates the erotics of the text/production. The fact that it is a sailor who is smitten by her only seems to confirm this opinion, and perhaps constitutes a sly joke on the part of Collins. Identity in the text, it will be remembered, often comes down to one's clothes. As long as Magdalen "wears a silk gown and has a sense of her own importance" (503), she will be interpellated as a lady, regardless of the "man inside." Perhaps what is truly subversive about Magdalen is that she not only impersonates various types of femininity, but that she also reveals that femininity itself is an impersonation: she is a woman in drag.
CHAPTER 3

"HYSTERICAL" TEXTS: CAMP AND SEXUAL CRISIS IN ARMADALE AND MAN AND WIFE

Contemporary films are preoccupied with various kinds of male regression—physical, psychological, and historical—connecting nostalgia with the past and for childhood with a search for literalness in language. Nowhere are these fears and his quest more true than in the hit film Dead Poets Society, which is set in a boys' boarding school in 1959. Here the insistence on boyhood sexual innocence is so extreme that the film may be said to mark the return of the "hysterical" text, in which the weight of the not-said, that which is rapidly becoming "unspeakable," threatens to capsize the work's literal meaning. (Modleski 279)

I suppose it seems odd to commence a chapter on two sensation novels with observations on the film Dead Poets Society. However, because my project involves drawing connections between the discourses surrounding plays, film, and literature as popular entertainment, between American and British cultural productions, and the historical development of the discursive treatment of sexuality, I find that Modleski's remarks on a film from the 1980s (that is set in the 1950s) are a surprisingly appropriate introduction for two novels produced more than a century earlier. This dissertation argues that the notion of "dangerous entertainment" has persisted as a powerful anxiety in Anglo-American culture for at least two centuries, although the particular aesthetic objects that are thought to embody the threat have changed over time, as have some of the demographic groups thought to be most vulnerable to their effects.
Modleski's remarks on contemporary film and its concern with "male regression" is equally applicable to several nineteenth-century novels, and specifically to the two dealt with in this chapter. Both are about "connecting nostalgia for the past and for childhood with male fears of the body." In Armadale, the nostalgia is based on a desire to return to a past in which the identity of "Allan Armadale" was unified. "Male fears of the body" are evident in the "stain" that clings to the body of the female protagonist, causing her husband's repulsion. These anxieties are further evident in the paternal prohibition intended to divide the two male protagonists, and the novel's rendering of their love as "unspeakable" (and thereby equated with the body of the villainess) until the woman between them and the "unspeakability" for which she stands are destroyed. In Man and Wife, on the other hand, the nostalgia is on the female side, yet "male fears of the body" are still exhibited in the character of Geoffrey Delamayn, whose overcultivation of his body results in his stunted intellect and moral sense, and his eventual death. To be defined by the body is fatal.

Both novels also "search for literalness in language" in connection with the past. This is most apparent in the replication of names in each novel: there are four Allan Armadales in the first, two Anne Silvesters and two Blanche Lundies in the second. Each novel is about either embodying or overcoming a fate based on a particular name, as if one is determined to relive parental roles through the force of language.

Both novels (but especially Armadale) are obsessed with identity, sexuality, and fatality, and, like Dead Poets Society, both feature a sexual subtext that is "unspeakable" on the surface. Foucault speaks of the bourgeois attempt to "control" sex through the surface regulation of language, "As if in order to gain mastery over it in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present" (17). Collins's novels are "hysterical" in their attempt to "master"
transgressive desires by making them "unspeakable." In Armadale this is especially true, as articulations of love for his (male) friend send the character of Midwinter into convulsions; he literally becomes "hysterical." Modleski's choice of the word "capsize" as the threatened result is fitting here, as the image of the sinking boat and of men drowning one another (or drowning together) is employed throughout the text as a substitute for physical intimacy.

Also appropriate to the present argument is Modleski's acknowledgment, later in her essay, that Peter Weir's film avoids mention of Oscar Wilde, the "dead poet" whose presence would have nullified any attempt at homosexual/erotic coding, transforming it instead into less innocuous associations. Modleski remarks that Wilde's work "posed a threat to the transparency and innocence of language, seeming to contaminate it with duplicitous double meanings" (279). Dead Poets Society takes place in 1959, shortly before the social and political upheavals—including the gay rights movement—of the 1960s, and in what Modleski calls "lyricization" of "life in the closet" (282), it may actually be hearkening back to a pre-Wildean period, before the discursive production of the homosexual created a new and suspicious sexuality, and before "straight" language was "contaminated" by dangerous double meaning. When only "straight" readings of language were available, homoeroticism (in the nostalgic view, at least) lay in an undisturbed, Edenic state.

Armadale and Man and Wife are written prior to the period of Wilde's notoriety, but they are written at the very moment when the homosexual as a discursive subject is brought into history. (Man and Wife predates prohibitions of lesbian desire, however, and the difference in the portrayal of this homoeroticism is apparent.) Reading these texts post-Wilde, I find it nearly impossible to avoid encountering "duplicitous double meanings" at every turn, especially since the texts themselves are so preoccupied with doubling. Even before Wilde, these texts are already longing for a nostalgic past in
which homosocial desire could be innocently interpreted. The "unspeakability" of this desire renders the text "hysterical" in terms of the subtext undermining the literal interpretation. But the texts also become "hysterical" in the colloquial sense of the term; their very excess and their earnest avoidance of the "perverse" render them hilarious. The prohibitions surrounding "deviant" forms of desire and sexuality "hystericized" these texts through the creation of "unspeakability"; but Wilde further "hystericized" them, since, after him, "it has become impossible not to perceive the 'gay' meanings of the texts" (Modleski 279). Our engagement with Wilde forces us to reconsider "hysterical" texts in terms of Camp.

THE FATALITY THAT FOLLOWS MEN IN THE DARK: DESIRE AND DEADLY IDENTITY IN ARMADALE

He has been noble and good in his past life, and I have been wicked and disgraced. Who can tell what a gap that dreadful difference may make between us, unknown to him and unknown to me? It is folly, it is madness--but when I lie awake by him in the darkness, I ask myself whether any unconscious disclosure of the truth escapes me in the close intimacy that now unites us? Is there an unutterable Something left by the horror of my past life, which clings invisibly to me still? and is feeling the influence of it, sensibly, and yet incomprehensibly to himself? Oh me! is there no purifying power in such love as mine? Are there plague-spots of past wickedness on my heart which no after-repentance can wash out?
--Armadale 660-61

Like Lady Audley's Secret and No Name, Wilkie Collins's Armadale once again problematizes identity. Again the dark double proliferates; again the taint of the past threatens to erupt in the present; and the text converts heterosexual relationships and "the secret" into a possibility for homosocial/homosexual desire. More pronounced than in the previous texts is the instability of masculine sexual, class, and racial identity; also emphasized is the erotic nature of the relationship between the two male focal characters.
In Braddon's novel and in *No Name*, it is largely the identity of the female protagonist/antagonist that is at issue; the questionable "masculinity" of Robert Audley and Frank Clare is always a secondary issue, although nevertheless crucial to each novel's trajectory. In *Armadale*, however, the identity of two male characters—both named Allan Armadale—becomes paramount. The novel's very title emphasizes this problem, as it is initially unclear to which "Armadale" the title refers. It eventually becomes apparent that the real focus of the novel is the sign "Armadale" rather than any particular body to which the name adheres.

Miss Gwilt's motivation is to possess the income that accompanies the Armadale name. Thus the entire novel is not really about the *person* Allan Armadale (there are four of them in the novel, after all), but about this name that various characters are desperate to possess—or to escape. For while this novel is about the sign "Armadale," it is also about the inevitable "residue" of one's past, of one's name—that clings to an individual despite his or her attempts to change identity or fight fate. In *Armadale*, both Lydia Gwilt and Ozias Midwinter attempt to rid themselves of the tainted past that adheres to them, a past that connects the characters through the ancestral crime of the previous pair of Allan Armadales. The trajectory of the novel follows the lives of three primary characters in relation to the name "Allan Armadale," and their attempts to either overcome or capitalize upon the past in which one Allan Armadale *père* murdered the other Allan Armadale *père*. While Ozias Midwinter (née Allan Armadale) interprets the coincidence that leads him to the other Allan Armadale as part of a terrible fate that he must try to escape, Lydia Gwilt understands that names do not signify an inevitable destiny; rather, the villainess (or heroine, depending on one's perspective) regards names as surface significations that compel corresponding interpellations—and fortunes. As Ozias Midwinter attempts to avoid repeating the sins of his father by denying his original identity, Lydia Gwilt plots to wipe out her dubious past by establishing a new and
irreproachable identity as Mrs. Allan Armadale. The Allan Armadale who is heir to Thorpe-Ambrose, meanwhile, is entirely ignorant of the associations attached to his name, as well as the fact that this is also the real name of his dark double. Significantly, "good" can triumph in the novel only if Allan Armadale can be kept in ignorance (or, more consistent with the text's imagery, in the dark) of his family history, the identity of his best friend, and of the plot against him; ultimately, this happens through Miss Gwilt's conversion from the identity-as-performance model to that of identity-as-fate. Within the context of Armadale, the latter model demands the sacrifice of the criminal or "deviant" woman to ensure male homosocial bonds.

With so many Armadales circulating throughout the text, and with the interconnected problems of father, sons, identity and sexuality, one cannot escape the psychoanalytic implications of the novel. While Armadale problematizes identity, it also seeks to recover some stable, primal identity, and we find this in Midwinter's quest to invest his own life with meaning, a meaning contrary to the fate prophesied by his own father. Midwinter's traumatic history and lack of a father (to be discussed shortly) motivate him to return to a prelapsarian state, the brief period of his life prior to his father's demise, and the onset of his memories and troubles; that is, to the period in which he was still unproblematically "Allan Armadale."

The story is about Midwinter's attempt to return to his unproblematic identity, and the only possibility for this is to protect the other, "unstained" Allan Armadale from the terrible knowledge and to become one with this Allan Armadale. Although Midwinter will marry Lydia Gwilt, it is obvious throughout the text that his strongest desires are for Armadale himself, most notably in the places in which Midwinter effectively "becomes" or exchanges himself for Allan Armadale, or when he attempts to express his love for the latter--an event that usually leads to a violent outburst and a lapse into insensibility, the
failure of language signaling Midwinter's desire to return to the unified identity of his infancy.

The structure of the novel demands that we are faced with the issue of divided identity and the problems of the sign "Armadale" from the beginning. To invest the story with suspense, Collins must provide the reader with "fatal knowledge" up front. Here it might be useful to recall Slavoj Zizek's discussion of the Lacanian point de capiton (quilting point) in the work of Hitchcock, a description that also suits the atmosphere of Armadale:

a perfectly "natural" and "familiar" situation is denatured, becomes, "uncanny," loaded with horror and threatening possibilities, as soon as we add to it a small supplementary feature, a detail that "does not belong," that sticks out, is "out of place," does not make any sense within the frame of the idyllic scene. This "pure" signifier without signified stirs the germination of a supplementary, metaphorical meaning for all other elements: the same situations, the same events that, till then, have been perceived as perfectly ordinary acquire an air of strangeness. Suddenly we enter the realm of double meaning, everything seems to contain some hidden meaning that is to be interpreted by the . . . hero, "the man who knows too much." The horror is thus internalized, it reposes on the gaze of him who "knows too much." (Looking Awry 88)

There are two such "quilting points" in Armadale. The first, the prologue of the novel, places the reader in the position of one who "knows too much." All subsequent events in the novel are interpreted in their relation to the crime revealed to us in the beginning. The second quilting point comes in the last chapter of the First Book, "The Shadow of the Future," in which a dream of Allan Armadale's is recorded (170-72). This dream, which Lacan and Zizek would term a "phallic signifier" (an incongruous detail that transforms the surface into the uncanny), compels Midwinter's interpretation of everything that follows, his vigilance designed to protect Allan from a fate of which the "dark double" fears he will be the author.

As Zizek proceeds to point out, the "phallic signifier" drives one to uncover the "truth," the meaning which this strange element must signify. This demand for secret
meaning is part of the sensation novel's appeal, and the pleasures of reading are further enhanced by the reader's own implication in the mystery:

This is the way Lacan defines the phallic signifier, as a "signifier without signified" which, as such, renders possible the effects of the signified; the "phallic" element of a picture is a meaningless stain that "denatures" it, rendering all its constituents "suspicious," and thus opens up the abyss of the search for a meaning--nothing is what it seems to be, everything is to be interpreted, everything is supposed to possess some supplementary meaning. The ground of the established, familiar signification opens up; we find ourselves in a realm of total ambiguity, but this very lack propels us to produce ever new "hidden meanings": it is a driving force of endless compulsion. . . . this paradoxical point undermines our position as "neutral," "objective" observer, pinning us to the observed object itself. This is the point at which the observer is already included, inscribed in the observed scene. . . . (Looking Awry 91)

The novel's initial "quilting point," the prologue, is that which fixes the reader to the rest of the narrative. Armadale begins with the deathbed scene of one Allan Armadale; the man confesses to his murder of another Allan Armadale a few years earlier, hoping to save his infant son from a similar fate in the future. The written narrative that is Ozias Midwinter's legacy will eventually turn his world into the "uncanny," making him prone to recognizing the signs of fate in every setting and gesture. Yet the reader knows the truth of Ozias's history before he does and so we are immediately inscribed within the text, immediately taught to regard everything with suspicion. Of course one's training in sensation reading will have already provoked this interpretive vigilance, but Collins's nearly immediate revelation of the crime and its players complicates the situation. In a text such as Lady Audley's Secret or The Woman in White, much of the pleasure lies in trying to guess the crime. In Armadale, on the other hand, one already knows the crime. This time, the pleasure of reading lies in observing the struggle between destiny and ambition, and wondering whether fate will prove more triumphant than human willpower. The reader, along with Ozias Midwinter, is driven to hunt the truth out of its hiding place, to uncover the "real" meaning of the text's various signs.

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The reader's knowledge contributes to the “queerness” of the text, for we are invited to invest various elements of the text with “double meaning,” a process further encouraged by the novel’s emphasis on doubling, or “passing”—in terms of race, gender, class, and sexuality—when a dark truth lies underneath the surface. In his discussion of Camp, Jack Babuscio remarks that “the experience of passing is often productive of a gay sensibility. It can, and often does, lead to a heightened awareness and appreciation for disguise, impersonation, the projection of personality, and the distinction to be made between instinctive and theatrical behavior” (25). The plot of the novel relies on the phenomenon of “passing,” both in the case of Midwinter, and especially that of Lydia Gwilt. Because of this, both characters are in danger of gaining a “gay sensibility,” although Midwinter, in the habit of repressing his desires, remains naive to Lydia’s “performance” throughout the novel. Lydia, a master of passing, is completely attuned to the performances of others. And, because of the position of knowledge granted to the audience, the reader is further invested with this awareness that could be called a “gay sensibility” or Camp.

The prologue that begins this lengthy novel provides us with all the key ingredients of the story: the explanation of the duplication of the name "Allan Armadale"; a connection to the West Indies that "infects" the novel's characters with an "unwholesome" racial Otherness; the story of the murder; and the role played by Lydia Gwilt, the novel's fatal woman. Our introduction to the first of four Mr. Armadales in the text is less than promising; accompanied by his biracial wife, his infant son, and a "shrivelled old negress" (12), Armadale's "vicious life" is now revealing itself in his "approaching paralytic infection" (13), apparently due to syphilis. A reader of nineteenth-century novels might expect Armadale's "mixed" wife to serve as one sign of his degeneracy, yet Collins portrays her with sympathy and even admiration: "... a woman of the mixed blood of the European and the African race, with the northern
delicacy in the shape of her face, and the southern richness in its colour—a woman in the prime of her beauty, who moved with an inbred grace, who looked with an inbred fascination . . ." (23). Mrs. Armadale is not in fact the cause of her husband’s perversity. However, while she is portrayed as being beautiful and sensitive, the fact that Allan Armadale would marry a woman of Creole blood may in fact be a sign of his degeneration. His narrative reveals that he originally aspired to the hand of a "light" woman, but after his hopes were shattered by the machinations of the other Armadale, he turned criminal and settled for a "lower" woman more appropriate to his reduced situation. Mrs. Armadale is further exhibited as one who seems to attract reprehensible men. Mr. Neal, the Scotchman who transcribes the final lines of Armadale’s narrative (the tragic story of his life that he preserves for his son) both pities Mrs. Armadale and finds himself smitten by her beauty. Again, while one may be tempted to regard this as a progressive portrayal of race on the part of Collins, there are other items that indicate that this may not be the case. This is the first time that the abrasive Mr. Neal has ever been attracted to a woman. This exclusivity is perhaps supposed to be a sign of the "ill-breeding" and "brutality" that the other characters attribute to him. Indeed, when Mr. Neal marries Mrs. Armadale after the demise of her first husband, the two occupy themselves by abusing young Allan Armadale, who changes his name to Ozias Midwinter after escaping his dysfunctional home.

Midwinter’s hereditary "mongrelization" is instrumental in the novel, although the text’s attitude toward his racial background seems to be ambivalent. On the one hand, Midwinter is in effect the true hero of the novel, the savior without whom the feckless, oblivious, "dumb blond" Allan Armadale would be lost. On the other hand, the very items that enable Midwinter’s heroism are often consistent with racial stereotyping. First of all, Midwinter’s relationship to Allan Armadale is at least partially one of servitude: Allan employs him as his steward. Midwinter eventually moves to Italy to write for a
living, yet his position with respect to Allan remains basically unchanged; Midwinter remains Allan's guardian, the servant willing to sacrifice his own comfort and even his life. Second, Midwinter's racial heritage makes him more sensitive to the possibility of plots against Allan's life or fortune. While Allan remains consistently naive and oafish, Midwinter is constantly suspicious—and superstitious. Midwinter fully believes in the power of dreams and the workings of fate; while Allan's doctor attributes a strange dream to indigestion, Midwinter invests every element of the dream with potent prophetic value, revealing his "savage" superstition. Midwinter further allows his "hot Creole blood," as he calls it, to sometimes get the better of him, while Allan remains eternally placid. One must keep in mind, however, that Midwinter turns out to be at least partially correct. He is right to be suspicious, although the danger for Allan lies in the calculations of others, and not in the workings of the supernatural.

Finally, as Allan's literal "dark double," Midwinter serves as a constant reminder of the stain of the past. Ignorant of his family history, Allan Armadale exhibits his innocence in his own light coloring. Midwinter, the son of the murderer, embodies iconographic consistency by being literally dark. Midwinter consciously keeps Allan figuratively "in the dark" about their true relation to one another to avoid "staining" his friend as well. Part of Midwinter's function is to "save" Allan by keeping the signs of the past confined to his own body. Kept in perfect ignorance, Allan's body is free from the signifiers of familial degeneration, while Midwinter is plagued by this history not only in the form of his dark skin, but in other physical and psychological manifestations, the illnesses, fevers, and fits of melancholy that occasionally overtake him. It is thus appropriate that Lydia Gwilt ultimately does fall in love with Midwinter. For although, as we shall see, Lydia does not bear any tell-tale surface significations, she, like Midwinter, also embodies the sin of the past. Like the other villainous characters before her, Lydia Gwilt prefers the dark "half-caste" to the light, "pure-bred" Englishman.
Unlike her predecessors, however, Lydia's love for her biracial partner will result in her self-sacrificing redemption, and the preservation of the light-skinned Allan Armadale.

Lydia Gwilt's involvement in the story dates back to the period preceding the prologue, as we find out from the dying Allan Armadale. An accomplice to one of the criminal acts of the past, Miss Gwilt serves as the last living link between the first pair of Allan Armadales and the second. Although to a modern reader Miss Gwilt's original role in the past deceptions may not seem to merit a permanent "taint" of character, especially considering that she was only twelve years old at the time of their commission, they mark her eternal status as a fatal woman within the context of the novel. This is perhaps because her crime was forgery—a crime that depends upon impersonations of the "signs" that prove one's identity.

The story begins in Barbadoes, where the Mr. Armadale of the prologue was raised. To this atmosphere he attributes his original degeneracy, since he was surrounded by "slaves and half-castes" who were required to obey him, and thus his "passions were left . . . entirely without control of any kind" (31). Although his father's surname was Wrentmore, the child was named Allan after a wealthy English relative—Allan Armadale, of course—and is offered his estate and name to his nephew when the original heir proves to be a scoundrel.

The disinherition of one Allan Armadale, coupled with the re-christening of the "new" Allan Armadale, results in the novel's first instance of doubling, as well as its first social impersonation. In the character of Fergus Ingleby, the disinherited Armadale arrives in Barbadoes and gains the confidence of the new Armadale. Distrustful of Ingleby, Armadale's mother plans to separate him from her son by arranging the latter's

24 I am employing the English spelling used in the novel.
marriage with the daughter of her friend, Mr. Blanchard— the owner of Thorpe-Ambrose, then residing in Madeira. Somewhat predictably, Ingleby takes advantage of the opportunity to regain his social position by poisoning the new heir and departing for Madeira, ironically pretending to be someone else by using his real name. By the time the "new" Armadale recovers and sails for Madeira, he discovers that Miss Blanchard has already been married— to Allan Armadale. The success of Ingleby's deception depended on forgery, and this is where the fatal Miss Gwilt enters the picture.

Ingleby/Armadale had been able to "pass" as his rival because the sight-impaired Mr. Blanchard had never seen the "new" Armadale, nor had he seen the boy's mother in many years. The "imposter" using his own identity gained the affections of Miss Blanchard before revealing the truth to her, which became necessary when a letter was to go to Mrs. Wrentmore, asking for her formal consent. Knowing that a letter could not possibly be sent to Barbadoes while the intended Armadale was convalescing, and that the wedding would be impossible without Mr. Blanchard's receipt of his friend's consent, Miss Blanchard and Ingleby/Armadale undertake to forge Mrs. Wrentmore's handwriting. While Ingleby is unable to make a successful imitation, and Miss Blanchard is unwilling, the rogue locates an able assistant:

Ingleby found an instrument ready to his hand in an orphan girl of barely twelve years old, a marvel of precocious ability, whom Miss Blanchard had taken a romantic fancy to befriend, and whom she had brought away with her from England to be trained as her maid. That girl's wicked dexterity removed the one serious obstacle left to the success of the fraud... I saw the girl afterwards—and my blood curdled at the sight of her. If she is alive now, woe to the people who trust her! No creature more innately deceitful and more innately pitiless ever walked this earth. (39)

25The name suggests "whitening," and, considering the racial subtext of the rest of the novel, a "cleansing" of the island's "African" influence on young Armadale. The name also implies "blankness," appropriate for the heritage of the blond Allan Armadale, who is the whitest/blankest character in the novel (physically and symbolically), a person who lacks both physical and mental inscription.
Mr. Armadale's assessment of Lydia Gwilt seems suspiciously hyperbolic on several counts. First, as a twelve-year-old servant girl, Lydia Gwilt can hardly be attributed full agency in this matter. Furthermore, it is doubtful that this child would have understood the full scope and impact of her act; her imitation of someone else's handwriting to consent to a marriage hardly qualifies her as the most "pitiless" creature that ever existed. While it is true that the outcome of this deception leads to Ingleby/Armadale's death, one must keep in mind that it is the murderer himself who attributes this blame to Miss Gwilt. Armadale minimizes his own guilt in the affair by reinscribing his act as the inevitable consequence of a child's forgery. According to Armadale, it was Lydia Gwilt's "inherent wickedness"—exhibited in her capacity to imitate others, and apparent as a personal aura that "curdles" one's blood—that was directly responsible for the tragic events that followed.

When Armadale arrives at Madeira and exposes the deception, the guilty couple flees. As Armadale and Mr. Blanchard follow, they discover the sinking boat of the fugitives and rescue the unconscious bride. Unnoticed by others, Armadale locks his nemesis in a cabin of the sinking vessel, "La Grâce de Dieu." Mr. Blanchard and his daughter return to England, providing a continental education to ensure Miss Gwilt's silence, protecting the widow and her unborn son from the taint of public scandal. Armadale, meanwhile, unpunished for his unwitnessed crime, flees to Trinidad, where he will meet his wife. Unaware of her husband's past, the new Mrs. Armadale gives birth while her husband is coincidently ill, innocently naming the child after his father:

You, too, were Allan Armadale. Even in that early time--even while I was happily ignorant of what I have discovered since--my mind misgave me when I looked at you, and thought of that fatal name. . . . Mark how the fatalities gathered one on the other! Mark how your Christian name came to you, how your surname held to you, in spite of me! (53)
Because he shares his father's name, Allan Armadale/Ozias Midwinter is permanently marked by the sins of the past. Despite his attempts to escape his name, the alias taken long before he had any inkling of the "Armadale" history, Midwinter cannot cleanse himself of the name and its associations. Under his alias, he will encounter another Allan Armadale, unaware of their connection; he and Allan will find themselves aboard the wreck of the fatal boat; and he will later marry Miss Gwilt using his Christian name.

There is some intrinsic quality in Midwinter that establishes his "true" identity as Allan Armadale, an interiority that resists the manipulations of the external signs, insisting that he endure the fate that awaits "Allan Armadale."

Again, the novel's emphasis on identity, and especially identities that cannot be gotten rid of, makes a psychoanalytic reading useful. Midwinter especially, and later Lydia Gwilt, will try to change this fundamental identity, ending up with something of a split subjectivity. Midwinter's adherence to "fate" compels him to believe that there is something essential about his identity that he wishes to alter, but cannot. Ironically, we will discover by the end of the novel that this very component that seemed to be the "curse" of his inheritance is in fact the only thing that enables the salvation of his bosom friend. In a discussion of ideological interpellation, Zizek argues that the "traumatic kernel" that resists fitting into the rational order is actually the key to successful interpellation:

"..."internalization", by structural necessity, never fully succeeds ... there is always a residue, a leftover, a stain of traumatic irrationality and senselessness sticking to it, and that this leftover, far from hindering the full submission of the subject to the ideological command, is the very condition of it: it is precisely this non-integrated surplus of senseless traumatism which confers on the Law its unconditional authority: in other words, which--in so far as it escapes ideological sense--sustains what we might call the ideological jouissance, enjoyment-in-sense . . . proper to ideology. (Sublime Object 43-44)

In the case of Ozias Midwinter, the "traumatic kernel"--the given name of "Allan Armadale and the destiny that must accompany it--is the very item that seems to confirm
his father's authority. Midwinter's mother and stepfather had beaten him because they interpellated him as "Allan Armadale"—a fundamental component of his interiority that he could not comprehend, something that Midwinter originally misrecognized as an external signifier. Midwinter's coincidental encounter and friendship with the other Allan Armadale becomes retroactively transformed into the uncanny "proof of paternal authority when the son comes of age and reads his father's story and warning:

Never, to your dying day, let any living soul approach you who is associated, directly or indirectly, with the crime, which your father has committed. Avoid the widow of the man I killed— if the widow still lives. Avoid the maid whose wicked hand smoothed the way to the marriage— if the maid is still in her service. And more than all, avoid the man who bears the same name as your own. . . . Never let the two Allan Armadales meet in this world: never, never, never! (55-56)

Midwinter, of course, has inadvertently come into contact with two of these people, the mother and son, before ever receiving the warning. Midwinter, from the moment of his appearance, is regarded as a suspicious character by all but the unobservant Allan; he makes his debut while "suffering from fever of the brain" (67), carrying a bag of scholarly books and a written character as the only evidence of his identity. Mrs. Armadale, aware that there is another Allan Armadale near her son's age, but not making the connection, instinctively suspects Midwinter, as (at least initially) does the clergyman, Mr. Brock. It is as if Midwinter's "residue" warns others of his lineage, manifesting itself in his disorientation, nervousness, shadowy complexion, and lack of a home, family, or property. Despite his father's warning, however, Midwinter decides to remain with his friend because, as he says, of his "love for Allan Armadale." Although his feeling for Allan is ostensibly one of platonic friendship, Midwinter's passionate defense of his decision is fraught with desire:

"... ask your own heart if the miserable wretch whom Allan Armadale has treated as his equal and his friend, has said too much in saying that he loves him? I do love him! It will come out of me--I can't keep it back. I love the very ground he
treads on! I would give my life—yes, the life that is precious to me now, because
his kindness has made it a happy one—I tell you I would give my life—"
The next words died away on his lips; the hysterical passion rose, and
conquered him. He stretched out one of his hands with a wild gesture of entreaty
to Mr. Brock; his head sank on the window-sill, and he burst into tears. (121-22)

That Midwinter's love for Allan is a secret that forces itself out of him and subjects him to
an "hysterical passion" renders his claims to platonism suspect. Midwinter's passionate
devotion to Armadale here is much more pronounced than his feelings for Miss Gwilt,
even at their height, will ever be. Miss Gwilt, incidentally, will be the first and only
woman that Midwinter ever desires, however short-lived this infatuation may turn out to
be. As I will argue later on, Midwinter's temporary interest in Lydia Gwilt is really just
an effect of his desire for Allan Armadale, an unconscious way of both doing away with
his "rival" for Allan's affection and of saving Allan from the "fate" that he fears awaits
him.

Midwinter misrecognizes Miss Gwilt as the embodiment of this wicked and
inevitable "fate" in order to justify and maintain his intimacy with Allan. When
Midwinter discovers that there is a woman associated with Mrs. Armadale and the former
heir whose demise led to Allan's succession, he concludes that she indeed is the calamity
against which he must guard Allan: "Is there a fatality that follows men in the dark? And
is it following us in that woman's footsteps?"(125). With regard to his own problematic
interpellation, Midwinter chooses to overlook the prohibition demanded by the
coincidence of "fatal names" by reinterpreting his father's commands as a warning against
the fatal woman from whom only he can protect Allan. The "real" meaning of
Midwinter's life and his destiny is thus displaced onto the body of the Other. The desire
here is anything but linear, as Midwinter desires both Allan and, at least temporarily,
Miss Gwilt. But the desire for Miss Gwilt seems simply to be a means of approximating
the relationship that Midwinter desires but is forbidden to have with Allan. Midwinter
searches, whether consciously or not, for the "secret" which one or both of these
individuals must possess, the key that will help him understand the true meaning of his own destiny. Allan possesses this secret—although he cannot understand nor is he interested in interpreting it—in the form of a prophetic dream, while Miss Gwilt seems to hold the key to heterosexual fulfillment, even while she really ultimately serves as a way of having a relationship with Allan—in fact of "becoming one" with Allan Armadale.

It is with Allan's dream that we arrive at the second "quilting point" of the novel, the one that "denatures" everything for Midwinter, providing scenes and gestures with supernatural agency. We, too, may use the dream as an interpretive guide, until we discover the alternate model of Miss Gwilt's diary, a source which opposes human willpower and cunning to Midwinter's belief in fate. Allan's dream occurs while he and his friend are on a visit to Mr. Brock; borrowing a doctor's boat, the two young men end up exploring a shipwreck. The reader is probably not surprised to learn that these are the remains of "La Grâce de Dieu," but as Midwinter learns the name, the boat that brought the friends drifts off, leaving the second generation of Allan Armadales alone again on the same vessel. Midwinter's desire for Armadale, which should logically cause him to rejoice at being stranded with his beloved—is complicated by the father's prohibition, a situation that once again hysterizes Midwinter. As in the earlier scene with Mr. Brock, Midwinter's secret must compulsively drive itself out of him, revealing the true nature of his connection to Allan in Midwinter's claim of seeing two ghosts:

"I see two!" answered the other, driven headlong into speech and action by a maddening temptation to reveal the truth. "Two!" he repeated, his breath bursting from him in deep, heavy gasps, as he tried vainly to force back the horrible words. "The ghost of a man like you, drowning in the cabin! And the ghost of a man like me, turning the lock of the door on him!" (150)

Because Allan is a poor reader, he is unable to grasp the truth of Midwinter's statements, or even to treat them with any gravity. Perhaps because the audience already possesses the information necessary to understand Midwinter's hysterical outburst, and because the
pleasure of reading sensation fiction lies in one's aptitude for interpretation, it is very difficult to sympathize with Allan and his readerly ineptitude. Strangely enough, it is Allan's very lack of knowledge which places him in a position of power with respect to Midwinter. In the first place, it is apparent to the reader that Midwinter is in every respect superior to Allan Armadale—in intelligence, sensitivity, and his sense of social propriety, despite his lack of parental or social guidance. While he treats Midwinter as his dearest friend, Allan remains blind to his own inadequacies, as well as to the fact that it is only his chance inheritance that has provided him with a more comfortable social position than Midwinter, who has had to survive by his wits. Second, Allan's ignorance of his name's history, as well as of the "stain" on his mother's purity (due to her consent to the forgery), renders his social standing unproblematic in his own eyes. Allan's status as the one "in the dark" and Midwinter's as "the one who knows" (ironically, one who is "enlightened") produce a confessional situation in which the "one who knows too much" feels compelled to reveal the truth to the one who does not know.

According to Michel Foucault, the confessional model is an effect of a power structure. Midwinter feels guilt over having a relationship with Allan in spite of his father's prohibition and must repeatedly confess this guilt in search of some sort of exoneration. Midwinter's compulsion to confess is intimately bound up with his desire for Allan:

By virtue of the power structure immanent in it, the confessional discourse cannot come from above, as in the ars erotica, through the sovereign will of a master, but rather from below, as an obligatory act of speech which, under some imperious compulsion, breaks the bonds of discretion or forgetfulness. What secrecy it presupposes is not owing to the high price of what it has to say and the small number of those who are worthy of its benefits, but to its obscure familiarity and its general baseness. Its veracity is not guaranteed by the lofty authority of the magistery, nor by the tradition it transmits, but by the bond between the one who speaks and what he is speaking about. On the other hand, the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing, not in the one who knows and
answers, but in the one who questions and is not supposed to know. And this discourse of truth finally takes effect, not in the one who receives it, but in the one from whom it is wrested. (62)

Armadale's articulation of the confessional situation borders on the parodic, for not only is Midwinter "the man who knows too much," the one whose hysterical obsession with his secret and his fate drives the story forward, but Allan Armadale himself is an absurd exaggeration of the one who "is not supposed to know" By virtue of his social status, Allan is arbitrarily placed in a position of power/domination with respect to Midwinter, and this artificial "superiority" is at least part of the reason underlying Midwinter's compulsive truth-telling. Yet not only does Allan do nothing to exact the truth from his friend, he is in fact insensible to the significance of Midwinter's words. Even following Midwinter's confession, Allan remains the one who does not know; the secret is revealed to him, yet even at the novel's conclusion, he will remain in ignorance of it. The compulsion to speak always originates in Midwinter himself, and he will be the only one of the pair whose actions are determined by the "secret truth" throughout the novel.

Ironically, Allan unconsciously possesses a kernel of the truth within his psyche, but his lack of interest in interpretation leaves him in ignorance. Allan suffers a bad dream during his sleep on board "La Grâce de Dieu," later recorded (in its entirety of seventeen segments) by Midwinter. Allan and his doctor attribute the dream to "indigestion," but to Midwinter it is the key to interpreting the novel's subsequent events, as well as the mysterious and frightening "meaning" of his own identity. Because of its instrumental role in the novel, the dream narrative bears repeating at length here:

1. The first event of which I was conscious, was the appearance of my father. He took me silently by the hand; and we found ourselves in the cabin of a ship.

2. Water rose over us in the cabin; and I and my father sank through the water together.

3. An interval of oblivion followed; and then the sense came to me of being left alone in the darkness.
5. The darkness opened, and showed me the vision—as in a picture—of a broad, lonely pool, surrounded by open ground.

6. On the near margin of the pool, there stood the shadow of a Woman.

9. I found myself in a room, standing before a long window. The only object of furniture or of ornament that I saw... was a little statue placed near me.

10. I was not alone in the room. Standing opposite to me at the window was the Shadow of a Man.

11. I saw no more of it—I knew no more of it than I saw and knew of the shadow of the woman. But the shadow of the man moved. It stretched out its arm toward the statue; and the statue fell in fragments on the floor.

15. The Man-Shadow was the nearest; the Woman Shadow stood back. From where she stood, there came a sound as of the pouring of a liquid softly. I saw her touch the shadow of the man with one hand, and with the other give him a glass. He took the glass, and gave it to me. In the moment when I put it to my lips, a deadly faintness mastered me from head to foot.(171-72)

Midwinter fears that the "man-shadow" represents himself and that the "woman-shadow" represents the femme fatale who will turn him against his friend, an interpretation that will turn out to be at least partially true and whose development we are encouraged to watch with interest. However, even while our knowledge of the dream's content attunes us to the various signs that seem to indicate its fulfillment, we are simultaneously aware of the less-than-supernatural agency of Miss Gwilt's plot. Despite the fact that we are alerted to the importance of cunning over fate, the dream nevertheless provides keys to interpreting the novel, albeit an "alternative" reading to that of Midwinter.

It is intriguing that Allan dreams of his father, since the man died prior to his son's birth. This curious element is explained away by Doctor Hawbury as the effect of Allan's having recently viewed a miniature of his father. However, the presence of Allan's father in the dream appears to be most significant with regard to issues of the son's identity, sexuality, and even property. Allan Armadale, Senior, makes an appearance to guide his son, only to lead him into drowning and darkness. This can be interpreted on a variety of levels. First, it is a symbolic reenactment of what actually happened: the first Armadale's
death has left the son "in the dark" about his past. Second, the fact that father and son
drown together seems to warn of the son repeating the fate of his father, as Midwinter
fears. Finally, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the absence of a father figure has left
the matter of Allan's social and sexual identity unresolved. As is apparent throughout the
text, Allan is completely unaware of how to behave as a gentleman of property; his gaffes
and *gaucheries* repeatedly offend and flabbergast others. No father had ever taught him
to properly *perform* as a gentleman. As I have indicated before, discourses of gender are
often intimately bound with those of class, and the expectations of Allan Armadale as a
property owner lie in the particular intersection of the gender and class he is supposed to
embody. Judith Butler's theories of gender performance can in this instance be applied to
"class performance" as well:

> Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency
from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted
in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The
effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must
be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and
styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (140)

Allan's various displays of social ineptitude--rejecting the estate's lawyer's request to rent
his cottage because a later request comes from a family that has a teenaged daughter;
rejecting the gentry's invitation to a party welcoming him to the neighborhood; dropping
his first "girlfriend" when her governess shows up and asking the former's father for
personal information about the latter--reveal that behaving as a landed gentleman is
anything but "natural"; it is rather the result of years of careful training. Allan's lack of
"gentlemanly" interiority is repeatedly displayed in surface elements: his relentless good
cheer, mostly proceeding from ignorance of his own improprieties; his uncouth letter-
writing; and the social naiveté behind his impudently personal questions that winds up
making him easy prey for scheming women like Miss Gwilt and his ill-tempered invalid
tenant, Mrs. Milroy. Allan is shunned by most members of the Thorpe-Ambrose
community because he has failed to prove that he possesses a coherently classed interiority. (There are gender issues involved as well, since some of his gaffes—such as making inquiries into Miss Gwilt's past—are unbecoming to a gentleman, problematizing both his gender and his class performance.) While trouble with Lydia Gwilt and Midwinter lies in the inability to erase the residue of the past, for Allan Armadale the problem is that the past in the form of "breeding" does not remain with him. Allan's lack of a father to train him in the "laws" of culture renders him uncanny, a disturbing reminder, like the governess, of the social construction of difference.

Allan's absent father also contributes to his lack of skill in sexual relations. Although Allan does show interest in women, he is indiscriminate in his intimacies with both sexes. Allan's social position should theoretically prevent him from befriending a vagabond like Midwinter. However, as the text plainly reveals, the class stratification that would divide these individuals is both artificial and groundless. Despite his nervous shyness, Midwinter possesses more of the attributes suited to the role of the gentleman than does Allan. (Interestingly, Midwinter's bouts of illness and nervous hysteria seem rather appropriate for the role of "lady"—more appropriate, actually, than the forms of womanhood embodied by either Miss Gwilt or Miss Milroy.) Their relationship, furthermore, turns out to be the very thing that saves Allan's life rather than endangering it. Allan's relationships with women, however, are less prudent, and their results usually less sanguine. Allan begins his career at Thorpe-Ambrose by alienating the estate's lawyer, Mr. Darch, who had made the first request to rent Allan's cottage. Allan thoughtlessly rejects Darch's request in favor of a second one submitted by Major Milroy, simply because the latter has a teenaged daughter. Without meeting the daughter, Allan assumes that he will have a romance with her, a project which he commences upon their first conversation. Soon, however, Allan just as easily forgets Miss Milroy (portrayed as short, plump, forward, and whiny) in favor of her new governess, the more elegant,
attractive, and mysterious Miss Gwilt. Allan's ignorance of social propriety leads to Miss Gwilt's dismissal (he is easily tricked by the jealous Mrs. Milroy into making inquiries about Miss Gwilt's past, which, though unproductive, lead the Major to believe that she had given a false character), and the fiasco leads to the termination of his own relationship with the unemployed governess. Allan subsequently resumes his relationship with Miss Milroy—as if a woman, any woman, will do in his situation—while Midwinter finds himself strangely drawn to the forlorn Miss Gwilt.

This is where the remainder of Allan's dream becomes significant. After he is left in the darkness by his father, Allan dreams of two indistinct figures in rather specific settings. All that Allan can determine about the figures is that one is male and one is female (according to the shapes of the shadows, apparently). This may refer to Allan's general lack of distinction among persons; in waking life, he also seems unable to tell much more about a person than their status as male or female. What is interesting about the dream, and the reason it alarms Midwinter, is the role that the female figure plays in determining the relationship between the two male figures. In the dream there appears to be no prior relationship between Allan and the man-shadow; there is only the father/son relationship. The man-shadow takes shape only after the appearance of the woman-shadow, and he makes his first appearance as a threat to Allan's property; his first action is to break Allan's statue. When directly connected to the figure of the woman, the man-shadow becomes even more sinister; he becomes her instrument, producing in Allan a "deadly faintness." The upshot of the dream is that heterosexual romance can have fatal consequences for homosocial relations.

The fact that the key players in Allan's dream are his father, a woman (later identified as Miss Gwilt) and a man (Midwinter) is no accident. As Eve Sedgwick points out in Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire, this particular form of the erotic triangle repeatedly appears in heterosexist patriarchal culture,
emphasizing the complicated connections among desire, homosocial relationships, and patriarchal authority. According to Sedgwick, the definition of patriarchy in terms of "relationships between men"... in making the power relationships between men and women appear to be dependent on the power relationships between men and men, suggests that large-scale social structures are congruent with... male-male-female erotic triangles. We can go further than that, to say that in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an inherent and potentially active structural congruence. (25)

The roles of the (dead) fathers and of property in Armadale make explicit the connections among sexuality, homosocial relations, and the transmission of property. Midwinter's life begins with a paternal prohibition; under the Oedipal model, we would expect this prohibition to relate to the son's desire for the mother. In this case, however, what is verboten is contact with the other Allan Armadale's mother, the forging girl, and Allan himself. Of course, Midwinter violates his father's commands, however inadvertently, and the latter two characters become his forbidden objects of desire. Allan was the figure most to be avoided, as the father vehemently stressed, and it is this very person whom Midwinter finds most irresistible, to whom he is drawn as if by fate. That which is most "impossible" is that which is most desired.

Midwinter's compulsion to be with Allan despite the taboo is also representative of Camp, or at least of gay sensibility. For a reader with an awareness of this sensibility, Armadale can appear as a very campy book, but, like some other Camp objects, its humor is saturated with the sadness of those perceived as doomed to live their lives with 'unsuitable' emotions in a world where such feelings are tacitly recognized but officially condemned" (Babuscio 28). This intertwining of humor and sadness is represented in the split "Allan Armadale," with Allan clearly to be seen as a comic character, Midwinter a tragic one. The two characters together embody one of the incongruities typical of Camp. Midwinter's "unsuitable" feelings for Armadale are "doomed" to remain closeted until
the former can prove his conquest of sexual deviance as embodied in the "criminal woman."

The introduction of Lydia Gwilt complicates the situation. Miss Gwilt is introduced in the very setting indicated by Allan's dream, thus confirming Midwinter's belief in its prophetic veracity. Yet Miss Gwilt manages to outwit even the power of the dream, at least temporarily. She attracts Armadale, and, when her plan fails, tries for his friend Midwinter, who turns out to have the same "real" name. Although her efforts ultimately fail, leaving the two men together at last (what they really wanted, anyway), an examination of her character illuminates the novels homosocial/erotic undercurrents as well as the crucial role that the "criminal woman" plays in their maintenance.

Miss Gwilt's plan, not surprisingly, is to gain possession of an income by taking the Armadale name. The person "Allan Armadale" is immaterial, in fact. Miss Gwilt even declares in a letter to Mrs. Oldershaw, her mentor in "evil womanhood," that "I really never saw a man whom I could use so ill, if I had the opportunity" (343). In this case it is the signifier rather than the signified that is paramount, as the name will confer on its bearer a secure income, even more important to Miss Gwilt than the respectability that it will also provide. This is exemplified by the fact that the Allan Armadales are initially interchangeable in Miss Gwilt's opinion; when she discovers the truth of Midwinter's identity, Miss Gwilt determines to get the name and dispose of both Allan Armadales. Since no one else knows Midwinter's history (except the dying and distant Mr. Brock), the name of "Allan Armadale" on her marriage certificate would establish Miss Gwilt's social position, erasing the residue of her past and transforming her into a "lady."

The first obstacle to Miss Gwilt's success is, of course, Midwinter's vigilance, provoked by the dream. This is further strengthened by his communication with Mr. Brock, who warns Midwinter of a potential plot against Allan. Aware of the danger, Miss
Gwilt dresses her servant (with a figure "too good for her station") in her own clothes and causes her to be seen unveiled by the spying Mr. Brock. Because of the costume, Mr. Brock has no doubt that he is seeing the "real" Lydia Gwilt, and so sends a detailed description to Midwinter, which warns the recipient that the “fatal woman” is unattractive and middle-aged, with thin hair and a bad complexion.

Upon receiving Mr. Brock's warning, Midwinter prepares for the worst in his meeting with Miss Gwilt, only to find her the opposite of his friend's description:

This woman's hair, superbly luxuriant in its growth, was of the one unpardonably remarkable shade of colour which the prejudice of the Northern nations never forgives—it was red! . . . This woman's forehead was low, upright, and broad towards the temples; her eyebrows, at once strongly and delicately marked, were a shade darker than her hair; her eyes, large, bright, and well-opened, were of that purely blue colour, without a tinge in it of grey or green, so often presented to our admiration in pictures and books, so rarely met with in the living face. . . . The line of this woman's nose bent neither outward nor inward: it was the straight delicately-molded nose (with the short upper lip beneath) of the ancient statues and busts. . . . This woman's lips were full, rich, and sensual. Her complexion was the lovely complexion which accompanies such hair as hers—so delicately bright in its rosier tints, so warmly and softly white in its gentler gradations of colour on the forehead and the neck. Her chin, rounded and dimpled, was pure of the slightest blemish in every part of it, and perfectly in line with her forehead to the end. (334-35)

Although Midwinter is afterwards informed that the suspicious woman in London is also a "Miss Gwilt," his faith in the truth of appearances seems to establish the innocence of the Miss Gwilt with whom he becomes acquainted. Belief in the visual in fact determines Midwinter's outlook; not only do the tableaux of the dream provide his means of interpreting reality, but his past life has been decided in this way as well. Midwinter's "darkness" is the inevitable signifier of his past life, the justification for his dogged devotion and social subordination to the fair-skinned and -haired Allan. As Richard Dyer observes in White, a breakthrough attempt at theorizing “whiteness,” “Though the power of whiteness resides above all in its instabilities and apparent neutrality, the colour does
carry the more explicitly symbolic sense of moral and also aesthetic superiority” (70). Allan’s “whiteness” on a variety of levels is an inheritance from his mother, Miss Blanchard, whom Allan resembles more than his father. The “superiority” of whiteness “conceived and expressed, with its emphasis on purity, cleanliness, virginity, in short, absence, inflects whiteness once again towards non-particularity, only this time in the sense of non-existence” (Dyer 70). Allan Armadale, the blank, dumb blond, is certainly the whitest character in the text, in literal and figurative senses. Yet Allan’s extreme whiteness—the absence and the approach to non-existence inherent in his blankness—feminizes him: “In representation, white men are darker than white women. . . . any male lover is darker than his female beloved. . . . Working-class and peasant whites are darker than middle-class and aristocratic whites” (Dyer 57). Iconographically, Allan’s whiteness puts him both in the position of the female (and he is certainly the passive beloved of the dark Midwinter) and of the upper classes; in his ultimate whiteness, Allan approximates the lady: “gender differentiation is crossed with that of class . . . to be a lady is as white as it gets” (Dyer 57).

In so far as he is literally and symbolically white, Allan is the closest thing to a “lady” in the text. Lydia Gwilt understands the importance of “whiteness,” and her success depends upon passing for “white,” both in the sense of making her past blank, her body “unstained,” and perhaps also in the sense of racial passing; her unknown lineage and “unforgivable” red hair suggest Irish blood, and her early association with Madeira, her relationship with the Cuban Manuel, and her attraction to the biracial Midwinter further cast doubt on the “purity” of her racial heritage.

Midwinter’s dependence on visual signifiers leaves him doubly vulnerable to Lydia Gwilt’s plot. Not only does she look like the polar opposite of the “Miss Gwilt” described to him, but she also possesses an appearance which bears no trace of her past

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26 The Irish were considered “black” at the time: See Dyer 51-57.
degeneracy. Miss Gwilt's maintenance of her physical charms despite her questionable past and her evidently "advanced" age of thirty-five was rejected as unbelievable by reviewers. In an unsigned review in the June 1866 *Athenaeum*, H.F. Chorley objected to Miss Gwilt's lack of the appropriate signs of decrepitude:

She is described as a beautiful, accomplished, plausible lady, approaching middle age, who, after having passed her life in kennels and gambling-houses and casinos and jails, shows no trace in her demeanor of such associations, and by her graces entraps two young men and one old fool. The criminal dock, the prison, the companionship with a procuress, must tell even on an educated woman who had sunk to such infamy. Lydia Gwilt began her life in the midst of crime; and yet we find her writing to "Mother Jezebel" and talking to herself about "Beethoven's Sonatas"! (reprinted in Page 148)

Lydia Gwilt is the possessor of an expensive continental education, and her accomplishments are therefore plausible. However, because she is without family (her education having been provided by people who wanted to keep her quiet), she has no resource for survival other than her wits and her ancient acquaintance with the "procuress" Mrs. Oldershaw (the "Mother Jezebel" referred to above), who had employed Lydia during the latter's childhood. Thus, it is also not surprising that Miss Gwilt ends up a "fallen woman." The novel repeatedly emphasizes that Miss Gwilt's good looks are one of her primary tools for success. Even when found guilty of poisoning her first husband (under her previous name of Mrs. Waldron), the British public had risen in defense of this appealing person to have the sentence reduced from death to merely two years imprisonment (pp.640-47). The diegetic public cannot conceive that interiority could be incongruous with exterior appearances, and Miss Gwilt excels at passing. She has been raised, after all, on the importance of appearance over "truth." What is so disturbing to Chorley is that not only does Miss Gwilt not betray the physical signs of her low associations, but that she in fact demonstrates signs of being "cultured." Consistent with

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the Camp aesthetic, Lydia Gwilt believes that "life itself is role and theater, appearance, and impersonation" (Babuscio 240). Appreciation of Beethoven (and other forms of high culture) is evidently supposed to operate as a guarantee of chastity and/or a certain class status, and Miss Gwilt offends by usurping this "reserved" knowledge, thereby giving the appearance of purity and good breeding.

Like No Name, Armadale is at least partly about exposing the artificiality of such assumptions. Lydia Gwilt resembles Magdalen Vanstone in her lack of a socially defined place, and like the heroine of No Name, Lydia Gwilt consequently inhabits a variety of social roles with the ultimate goal of becoming a woman of property. Being the widow of Armadale would secure her twelve hundred pounds a year; the income is the important thing to Miss Gwilt, who realizes that identity means nothing apart from its relation to materiality. Her own identity has never signified anything, as her parents were unknown to her:

All she could remember, on being questioned, was, that she was beaten and half-starved, somewhere in the country, by a woman who took in children at nurse. The woman had a card with her, stating that her name was Lydia Gwilt, and got a yearly allowance for taking care of her (paid through a lawyer), till she was eight years old. At that time, the allowance stopped; the lawyer had no explanation to offer; nobody came to look after her: nobody wrote. . . . She may be the daughter of a Duke, or the daughter of a costermonger. (633)

Like Midwinter, Lydia Gwilt is raised by "surrogate" parents who treat her ill, and like him her identity is also problematized from the beginning. However, in contrast to Midwinter, who believes that his fate is determined by his lineage, Lydia Gwilt is free—in fact forced—to create her own destiny through her very lack of determining identity (Midwinter at least knows who his parents are/were). Her earliest lessons are in the value of appearances, when the Oldershaws "purchase" young Lydia from her caretaker in order to employ her as a living advertisement for their products:
Miss Gwilt's story begins . . . in the market-place at Thorpe-Ambrose. One day, something like a quarter of a century ago, a travelling quack-doctor, who dealt in perfumery as well as medicines, came to the town, with his cart, and exhibited, as a living example of the excellence of his washes and hair-oils and so on, a pretty little girl, with a beautiful complexion and wonderful hair . . . As for the pretty little girl, you know who she was as well as I do. While the quack was haranguing the mob, and showing them the child's hair, a young lady, driving through the market-place, stopped her carriage to hear what it was all about; saw the little girl; and took a violent fancy to her on the spot. The young lady was the daughter of Mr. Blanchard, of Thorpe-Ambrose. (632-33)

From the beginning, then, Lydia Gwilt's body has always been commodified. Miss Gwilt has never experienced a parental relationship based on affection; rather, her experience of the "parent-child" relationship has always been based on economic transaction. Consequently, Miss Gwilt carries the economic model into her future relationships, which are usually based on employment or some sort of ambition. In the two cases where Miss Gwilt feels affection for someone, with Captain Manuel (the Cuban lover who persuades her to poison her first husband) and later, though inadvertently, with Midwinter, her passion proves to be her undoing. In Miss Gwilt's "failed" relationships, the problem lies in her inability to remember her status as a commodity, while the men continue to regard her as an object of exchange. In the case of Captain Manuel, the man's true goal had been the fortune of Mr. Waldron, Miss Gwilt's first husband, while in the case of Midwinter, the desired object is Allan himself. Miss Gwilt's fatal error is in believing herself the beloved in these cases, when in fact—as in her "advertising" for hair oil or forging a signature—she is always utilized as the means to an end.

Upon Miss Gwilt's arrival in Thorpe-Ambrose, Allan becomes infatuated with her and redirects his attention from Miss Milroy to her governess. Midwinter, equally infatuated, must leave the scene when he discovers that his best friend and benefactor is also his rival. However, during Midwinter's absence, Mrs. Milroy manipulates the dimwitted Allan into conducting an inquiry into Miss Gwilt's past (a request he understands as completely innocent), thus making Allan into the most ungentlemanly
agent of exposing Miss Gwilt's use of a false character. In turn, Miss Gwilt loses her position, and Allan's lawyers (Pedgifts Senior and Junior), aware that something is awry, persuade Allan to have the lady watched. This is the scene of Midwinter's return. Having left when Allan intended to propose marriage, Midwinter now finds him employing spies against his former flame. Midwinter's first sin against Allan is to maintain the desire for the woman his friend has discarded and to defend her against Allan. Allan cannot fathom that Midwinter would believe Miss Gwilt's word over his own: "Is that the way you decide between us?" (481). As usual, Midwinter's passion manifests itself in violent physical symptoms. This time, however, instead of experiencing an hysterical outburst in the articulation of his love for Allan, Midwinter becomes destructive in his expression of love for Miss Gwilt: "In the madness of his passion, he saw nothing but Allan's face confronting him. In the madness of his passion, he stretched out his right hand as he answered and shook it threateningly in the air. It struck the forgotten projection of the bracket—and the next instant the Statuette lay in fragments on the floor" (481). In previous episodes, Midwinter's seizures of "madness" have resulted from the intensity of his affection for Allan; in the scene with Mr. Brock, Midwinter's uncontrollable outburst was the hysterical expression of love for his friend, while on the shipwreck, Midwinter's "madness" was a confession intended to warn Allan of the danger of his friendship. However, when Midwinter temporarily displaces his feelings for Allan by transferring them to Miss Gwilt, he becomes violent toward Allan, a threat to his property. Within patriarchal society, property is transferred from male to male; females serve as examples of this property in that they are transferred from the possession of one male (father, or perhaps brother) to another (husband). The female is desirable as property through her potential to produce male heirs to whom the property can again be legitimately passed. When Allan plans to propose to Miss Gwilt, the crestfallen Midwinter gracefully bows out, recognizing that his beloved is about to be claimed by a more "rightful" (that is,
propertied) owner. (Midwinter's desire for his friend's beloved is, however, in keeping with the homosocial/erotic dynamics of the love triangle in that Lydia Gwilt's body serves as the space in which the desires of the two male friends may meet). However, once Armadale's marriage to Miss Gwilt becomes an impossibility, Midwinter forgets where male loyalty belongs within patriarchy, remaining devoted to Miss Gwilt despite Allan. Miss Gwilt has disrupted the "natural" order of patriarchal society, both through plotting to possess her own property (with no intention of merely being its transmitter through the production of heirs), and through seducing men into the neglect of patriarchal obligation.

Because Miss Gwilt flouts the rules of patriarchy, she must ultimately be destroyed to stabilize the social order and gender identity. The demise of the criminal woman in this novel will coincide with victory over the woman "trapped inside" of the man's body. As I mentioned in my discussion of No Name, D.A. Miller argues that the sensation novel "feminizes" the reader by producing nervousness: "Nervousness seems the necessary 'condition' in the novel for perceiving its real plot and for participating in it as more than a pawn" (150). It is difficult for the reader to sympathize with Allan, who is never nervous, and who is an ignorant pawn. However, identification with the "hero" Midwinter is also problematic, for he is the nervous interpreter of the novel's events, and the association of nervousness with reading is complicated—not to say troubled—by its coincident, no less insistent or regular association with femininity" (Miller 151). The criminal woman is essential to the establishment of "stable" heterosexual identity, since her own sexual deviance detracts from that of the male characters, and since her elimination removes the "nervousness" that threatens the gender identity of Midwinter—and perhaps of the reader.

All four Allan Armadales intersect in the body of Lydia Gwilt, since she is the only living person who had had associations with each of these Allan Armadales.
Consequently, she is the only figure with the power to reunite all the Armadales, although, as the essential instrument of their original division through her skills of forgery/imitation, she must be destroyed to enable the "wholeness" of masculine identity. Lydia Gwilt's status as the meeting place for "Armadale" identity becomes apparent when Midwinter proposes to her. Although she is as yet unaware of his true name, his offer cannot help bringing the remembrances of the other Armadales to mind:

The horror of those old remembrances... came back, and made me tremble a little when he asked me to be his wife. I don't think I was actually faint; but something like faintness made me close my eyes. The moment I shut them, the darkness seemed to open as if lightning had split it: and the ghosts of those other men rose in the horrid gap, and looked at me. (507)

Miss Gwilt, who is stereotypically "unfeminine" in her unscrupulous ambition, her lack of squeamishness, and her knowledge in worldly matters, is here uncharacteristically overtaken by the "feminine" helplessness of her body. Despite Lydia Gwilt's mercenary practicality, the flattery of a marriage proposal brings the "woman" to the surface, approximating faintness. Miss Gwilt is overcome by darkness—as Allan had been on the boat—a sign that she is vulnerable to the text's "fatal visions." Throughout the novel, darkness—especially when in the context of a dream or vision—signifies not only mystery, but especially the mysteries of identity and feminine sexuality, and the inevitable, unforeseeable role of fate. Miss Gwilt's brief vision explicitly makes the connection between her own "deviant" sexuality and the fate of the Armadale men. Her helpless attraction to Midwinter is the "lightning" that penetrates the feminine darkness of her sexuality, exposing her to the gaze of male ghosts.

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28As Pedgift Senior says, in admiring one of her letters, "What a lawyer she would have made... if she had only been a man!" (436)

29The Freudian "dark continent" is especially appropriate here, since Miss Gwilt is linked through her unknown (and therefore possibly "contaminated") lineage to the "darkness" of Midwinter's Creole heritage.
Collins's emphasis in this passage is on the phrase "those other men," the antecedent of which remains purposely ambiguous. The obvious interpretation is to assume that Miss Gwilt refers to the dead Armadale fathers, due to the tragedy in which she was implicated and Midwinter's closeted status as an Allan Armadale. Yet the emergence of "other men" in a "horrid gap" also calls to mind Miss Gwilt's sexual experience. The term could refer to her first husband, Mr. Waldron, and her former lover, Captain Manuel, with whom we know she has been sexually involved. The implication is, of course, that Miss Gwilt's "gap" has not been limited to these men, and since "fallen women" in Victorian fiction are comparable to prostitutes, regardless of the quantity of their experiences or partners, Collins's imagery here evokes the speculum used to gaze into and regulate the body of the prostitute. The frightening occupation of Miss Gwilt's "horrid gap" also recalls the scene in No Name, in which, under the direction of Mrs. LeCount, Noel Vanstone discovers that the fragment of brown alpaca fits into the "gap" of Magdalen's dress. In both novels, the filling of a woman's "gap" foreshadows the undoing of her plot, and her eventual submission to male authority. Like the prostitute, Collins's women are made safe objects of exchange for males through the physical and optical penetration of their "horrid gaps."

Long before Midwinter proposes, Miss Gwilt suspects his alias, simply on the basis of its outlandishness, and because of her own experience as a "performer." Yet she does not know of the existence of the second Armadale until his confession on the eve of his proposal. Miss Gwilt determines to wed "Allan Armadale" by convincing Midwinter to marry her under his given name. As Lydia Gwilt recognizes, the appearance of being "Mrs. Allan Armadale" ("proved" through the signs of the name and the marriage certificate) can be of greater importance than which Armadale she is married to, since the fact of Midwinter's identity remains concealed from the community. What is further of interest here is that Midwinter is rather easily persuaded to use his real name for the
marriage ceremony, albeit in London, away from the Thorpe-Ambrose crowd. This is the scene of Lydia's apparent triumph; after managing to have herself publicly seen with the light Armadale on the train to London (she to meet Midwinter, he for unconnected business), Miss Gwilt convinces Allan that his friend wants to reconcile. While persuading the men that she wishes to promote their harmony, she simultaneously fools the town into believing that the propertied Armadale is eloping with her, and her plan is to return as the widow of Allan Armadale. What Lydia Gwilt fails to recognize, however, is that the pair truly united in the marriage is not herself with an "Allan Armadale," but the two Armadales with each other. After their London reunion and reconciliation, the two men are closer than ever. By becoming "Allan Armadale" in his wedding ceremony, Midwinter "becomes one flesh," not with his wife, but with his friend.

Miss Gwilt's downfall lies in her attempt to reconcile appearances with her interiority. Finding that she really has fallen in love with Midwinter, Lydia resolves to behave like a "real" wife, even to the point of having no thoughts independent of her husband's. The proof of Miss Gwilt's conversion to propriety lies, interestingly enough, in her resolution to cease recording her diary:

'Sunday, August 10th.—The eve of my wedding-day! I close and lock this book, never to write in it, never to open it again.

'I have won the great victory; I have trampled my own wickedness under foot. I am innocent; I am happy again. My love! my angel! when to-morrow gives me to you, I will not have a thought which is not your thought, as well as mine!' (624-25)

The intersection of Miss Gwilt's "reform" with the cessation of her writing points to a network of gendered assumptions and reversals. First, in Victorian popular thought, it was the wife's duty to play the "angel"—here the term addressed to Midwinter—who would act as a moral guide to the husband, protecting him from the corrupt influence of
Although she is doing her best to conform to the role of the Victorian lady, Miss Gwilt's dependence on her husband for moral guidance perhaps portends the unfortunate destiny of the marriage; try as she might, Miss Gwilt still cannot get the gender roles "right." She does have some cause for misgendering Midwinter, however, since his relationship to Armadale has in some ways placed him in a feminized position. Nevertheless, Midwinter's own "gender trouble" also bodes ill for the marriage.

Despite her misrecognition of Midwinter as the "angel" in her house, Miss Gwilt does attempt to correct her own gender identity. Lydia Gwilt recognizes that there is something transgressive in her act of writing, even if she is only keeping a diary. As a woman, she is not supposed to inscribe or create; within Armadale itself, the act of writing by women is repeatedly linked with wrongdoing, if not downright evil. Lydia Gwilt's early act of forging—a form of social "passing" enacted through writing—seals her status as the most "pitiless" creature on earth. Her diary-keeping, as well as her letters to others (especially Mrs. Oldershaw), serve as the space in which she can organize her thoughts into wicked plots. Mrs. Milroy's letters do the same; it is through them that she manipulates Allan. Even Neelie Milroy, whose billets-doux seem rather harmless, is forbidden to hold communication with Allan until the latter has proved the sincerity of his intentions. Writing by females is only permitted when it is under the surveillance of a suitable male authority figure. The problems with "feminine" writing apply to Allan as well. Despite his enviable social position, Allan's lack of a father, as I indicated earlier, has left him ignorant of social propriety. Allan's ridiculous attempts at letter-writing repeatedly offend the recipients, and the approval of one of the Pedgifts is often needed to correct Allan's blunders.

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There are numerous examples of this in fiction, poetry, and conduct books; see, for example, the work of Sarah Stickney Ellis or Coventry Patmore.
Lydia Gwilt realizes that unsupervised writing can no longer be part of her life if she is to have a "normal" Victorian marriage. Since her identity will now officially be absorbed into Midwinter's, she understands that her new absence of independent identity will mean the absence of independent thought. Thus we know something is awry when, two months later, we are given a glimpse into the heretofore veiled married life, in no other form than Miss Gwilt's diary:

'Naples, October 10th.—It is two months today, since I declared that I had closed my Diary, never to open it again.

'Why have I broken my resolution? Why have I gone back to the secret friend of my wretchedest and wickedest hours? Because I am more friendless than ever; because I am more lonely than ever. . . . My misery is a woman's misery, and it will speak--here, rather than nowhere; to my second self, in this book, if I have no one else to hear me. (659)

Lydia Gwilt senses that a vague "something" has crept into her marriage, yet she can point to no incident that would explain the cooling of Midwinter's feelings toward her. Finding no surface evidence for her husband's alteration, Lydia begins the contemplation of her horrible "residue" with which this chapter opened. Despite her efforts, Lydia Gwilt cannot erase the "stain" of the past that clings to her, a blemish that cannot be seen or proven but which Midwinter evidently senses. This passage marks a turning point in the novel for Miss Gwilt, who for most of the story has understood the superiority of appearances to "truth," knowing that the decisions about the "truth" of interiority are based on consistency of appearances. Now that appearances have failed her, however, Lydia Gwilt begins to worry that perhaps one's past is a determining factor after all, if an inescapable fate adheres to one. This "residue" that determines Miss Gwilt's fate is based in her body and her sexuality. Like Marian Halcombe and Magdalen Vanstone before her, Lydia Gwilt will ultimately find herself at the mercy of her "feminine" body.

The problematization of her new position as wife/respectable woman causes Lydia Gwilt to return to her rebellious, diary-keeping, and even homicidal self. In her
endurance of her husband's preference for the visiting Allan and "Dorothea," his yacht, Lydia can easily be interpreted as the bourgeois Victorian wife who is expected to overlook her mate's infidelities. It is the attempt to be a "normal" wife under these conditions that will finally drive her to criminality:

'What maddens me, is to see, as I do see plainly, that Midwinter finds in Armadale's company, and in Armadale's new yacht, a refuge from me. He is always in better spirits when Armadale is here. He forgets me in Armadale almost completely as he forgets me in his work. And I bear it! What a pattern wife, what an excellent Christian I am! (669)

Lydia Gwilt seems to have finally become a "normal" woman in her devotion to Midwinter. Yet it is this very "normality" that leads to her criminal madness. Bourgeois Victorian life demanded a manufactured innocence from its women, a willingness to overlook the unpleasantries in their lives, including the infidelities of their husbands. Much of the anxiety surrounding the criminal woman related to the effect she might have on "normal" women. As Lynda Hart observes in Fatal Women, the potential for deviance is latent in every "normal" woman: "It is not, then, the criminal woman as deviant that fascinates; rather, it is the inevitability of femininity collapsing into criminality. The fallen woman has not descended. She has ascended to the place already marked out for her by the patriarchal unconscious. This is the 'truth' of pure womanhood that ought to have remained hidden"(43). Thus it is no accident that Lydia Gwilt becomes most criminal (attempting the murder of Allan) when she has been most normalized. Madness or criminality is the inevitable condition of womanhood in patriarchal society, the latent "truth" that threatens to erupt. Lydia Gwilt is able to juxtapose comfortably her self-declared "madness" with a description of herself as a "pattern wife."

As Lydia Gwilt struggles to be a "pattern wife," the jealousy provoked by her rivals Allan and "Dorothea" results in the emergence of her criminal, "masculine" side. One may again recall Pedgift Senior's lament that Miss Gwilt would have made a great
lawyer "if only she were a man." Like Magdalen Vanstone, Lydia Gwilt also offers us an example of the "man trapped in a woman's body": her intellect, writing, and apparent lack of emotion mark her as "masculine," or at least "unwomanly," even while her appearance belies this identification. Midwinter's initial attraction to her, and his subsequent loss of interest once she becomes "wifely," could also be taken as evidence of her cross-gender identification. According to Lynda Hart, the nineteenth century interpreted criminal women (specifically murderesses) and sexual inverters as two sides of the same coin:

Women who were incapable of redemption simply were not women at all. The born offender, usually a murderess, was in the last analysis not even an aberration of femininity, but rather a man, albeit problematically in a woman's body, a close cousin to her newly constructed sister the invert. Thus the ultimate violation of the social instinct, murder, and the perversion of the sexual instinct, same-sex desire, were linked as limits that marked the boundaries of femininity. Crossing either one of those boundaries constituted a transgression from which there was no return. Women who killed, and women who loved other women, passed through the mirror of oppositional gender discourse and landed on the other side. (30)

The two limits of deviance meet in Lydia Gwilt, who is both a murderess and a "sexual invert. Again, like Magdalen Vanstone, she is "inverted" not because she desires other women, but because she both identifies with and desires men. The fact that Allan serves as a rival only emphasizes that desire in this novel is usually exchanged between males, and although she possesses "masculine" interiority (perhaps now diminished by her status as a wife), she lacks the body appropriate to her interiority. Such a body is in fact an impossibility, since Lydia's desire would always mark her as an invert; hence, the only appropriate action is to do away with the body. Allan's yacht is the only "feminine" rival that Lydia Gwilt ever faces for Midwinter's affection, and it strikes one that it is only following this recognition of "another woman" that Lydia Gwilt can finally be redeemed through her identification with the feminine. However, Miss Gwilt's final identification as a "true" woman will also signal the end of her existence.
As Armadale's boorishness wears down Miss Gwilt's nerves, she succumbs to the temptation to poison him. By chance, Allan is saved from this fate, since the brandy she puts into the poisoned lemonade turns him faint (Allan has a "horror" of the smell and taste of brandy). Unaware of the poison, Midwinter is nonetheless alarmed by this scene, since it fulfills the final tableau of Allan's dream, with the consequence that Midwinter must separate from his friend:

"For this, the miserable day dawned when you and I first met. For this, your influence drew me to you, when my better angel warned me to fly the sight of your face. There is a curse on our lives! there is a fatality in our footsteps! Allan's future depends on his separation from us at once and for ever. . . . Let his yacht sail, though he goes on his knees to ask us, without You and without Me—and let him know how I loved him in another world than this, where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest!"

'This grief conquered him—his voice broke into a sob when he spoke those last words. He took the narrative of the dream from the table, and left me as abruptly as he had come in. (683)

Midwinter blames Lydia, not for attempting to poison Allan (the fact of which he is ignorant), but for fulfilling the vision and forcing the separation of the two men. In his fervent adherence to fate, Midwinter attributes no agency to himself in his relationship with his wife; he was drawn by her influence, he was cursed. Once more in the novel, Midwinter is overcome by a violent demonstration of emotion—as always, expressing his love for Allan, and not for his wife. Love between men is elevated as sacred ("in another world than this"), while heterosexual romance is profane and cursed ("the miserable day . . . when you and I first met"), a shadow of the former whose false appearance as "real love" may prevent men from striving to achieve the higher, homosocial bond.

Miss Gwilt's recognition of Midwinter's opinion of her as a curse and a burden drives her to do in both her rivals, Allan and "Dorothea," in one blow. Through a coincidental reacquaintance to Captain Manuel, the scoundrel who had formerly used and abandoned her, Lydia arranges for a new crew to help Allan sail the "Dorothea"—with her
treacherous former lover as the sailing-master. Manuel agrees to what amounts to a reenactment of the scene of Allan's father's death; while Allan sleeps, he will lock him in his cabin and sink the boat. In the meantime, Miss Gwilt returns to England under the pretense of visiting her ailing mother, in order to proclaim herself the widow of Armadale and access the Thorpe-Ambrose income.

Miss Gwilt's plans are upset, however, when she finds that Allan escaped his death by being tipped off by the crew's English mate. In cooperation with Doctor Downward—a former accomplice of Mrs. Oldershaw and herself, and who now runs a Sanatorium—Lydia plots yet again to do away with Armadale. The two decide to lure him to the Sanatorium (under the pretext that Neelie has been sent here after receiving a false report of Allan's death), require him to stay overnight, and fill his room with poisonous fumes as he sleeps. Yet Lydia is once again foiled, as Midwinter's surprise arrival precedes Allan Armadale's, and Lydia is finally forced to choose between being a "pattern" but miserable wife, or a woman with a secure income. Miss Gwilt, who has returned to England as "Mrs. Armadale," denies that she is Midwinter's wife, an act that inspires her husband with a "black" and "savage" rage:

As the words passed her lips, he sprang forward from the wall, with a cry that rang through the house. The frenzy of a maddened man flashed at her from his glassy eyes, and clutched at her in his threatening hands. He came on till he was in arm's length of her—and suddenly stood still. The black flush died out of his face in the instant when he stopped. His eyelids fell, his outstretched hands wavered, and sank helpless. He dropped, as the dead drop. He lay as the dead lie, in the arms of the wife who had denied him. (758)

Midwinter's "savage" blood gets the best of him here, rendering him out of control and finally insensible. Miss Gwilt's violation of the sacred Armadale name fulfills the Victorian nightmare; the criminal woman has tainted one Armadale and returned the other to the condition of the "savage" races. Because of his involvement with a criminal woman, Allan Armadale's dark half becomes "black," "maddened," and "helpless."

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Midwinter has returned to the primitive, dark womb and is no longer able to govern himself or to command language. Ultimately, though, this episode helps Midwinter recognize the potential treachery of women. As a result, Midwinter overcomes his primitive, feminine, superstitious side to become more rational, masculine, and heroic in his efforts to save Allan: "Confronted by actual peril, the great nature of the man intuitively freed itself from the weaknesses that had beset it in happier and safer times. Not even the shadow of the old superstition rested on his mind now—no fatalist superstition of himself disturbed the steady resolution that was in him" (795). After his wife's denial, Midwinter promises himself, "She has denied her husband to-night... She shall know her master tomorrow" (762). Indeed, this is what happens, as the identification of the feminine as subordinate, even criminal, proves to be the foundation of masculine identity.

Midwinter persuades Allan to switch bedrooms by pleading his "nerves," again protecting Allan from the "taint" that characterizes his relationship with Miss Gwilt. Unaware of this development, Lydia begins to release poisonous gas through the vent of the room prepared for Armadale. Shortly afterward, however, she discovers the mistake, and saves the unconscious Midwinter by dragging him to the hallway. As her husband begins to show signs of life, Lydia Gwilt becomes beatific: "She silently bent over him and kissed his forehead. When she looked up again, the hard despair had melted from her face. There was something softly radiant in her eyes, which lit her whole countenance as with an inner light, and made her womanly and lovely once more" (805). What makes Miss Gwilt "womanly and lovely" is the decision to commit suicide for the happiness of her husband. She pens a final letter to Midwinter, confessing her criminal intentions and admitting that she has never been happy. Becoming a "true woman" at last, she finally has no desires but the desires of her husband, can only be happy if she commits the act that will free him of her horrid presence: "Live, my angel, live!... All your life is
before you—a happy life, and an honoured life, if you are freed from me!” (806). By sacrificing herself (the most "feminine" of acts) Lydia Gwilt expels the "unutterable Something" that has been clinging to her, freeing Midwinter's capacity for happiness. The intersection of "unnameables" in the text—Midwinter's inability to say his own name, the "residue" of the tragic past, Midwinter's inability to express love for Allan without collapsing into hysteric—is transformed by Miss Gwilt's final acknowledgment of the superiority of homosocial bonds.

Although Midwinter is never able to acknowledge his real identity to Allan Armadale, his reason for doing so is largely to preserve the integrity of the sign "Allan Armadale" and to maintain Allan's status as the "whitest" character, who is untainted by the knowledge of past sins. The death of Miss Gwilt not only preserves Allan's life and innocence, but also secures the status of women within this system. Midwinter has preserved the memory of Allan's mother; Miss Blanchard remains blank, white, un tarnished by the past; the instrument for merely transmitting the name "Allan Armadale," as Midwinter thinks she should be. Despite her own involvement in the tragedy of the past, the preservation of Allan's own "blankness" demanded that all the blame rest with Lydia Gwilt. Following the villainess's death, the men do what they can to erase her memory: "nothing has been inscribed on the tombstone, but the initial letter of her Christian name, and the date of her death" (809). Despite her determination to be Mrs. Allan Armadale, Lydia Gwilt is in the end stripped of all identity except "L." She cannot properly be buried under either the Armadale or Midwinter name, without the secret being revealed to Allan, or contradicting her marriage certificate, and her status as a married woman means that she will not be buried under her maiden name. Through complete removal of the patronymic, Lydia becomes detached from the patrilineal system, someone "outside" the patriarchy. This signifies her status as someone so criminal that she must be an outcast, without a name to signify her lineage; she has been
reduced to the literally unnameable, the "unutterable Something" that she feared. At the same time, however, the initial that remains, "L," is a homophone of "elle," the French pronoun meaning "she," a fact that emphasizes that Lydia's criminal potential is latent in all women, that this reduction to an anonymous interchangeability is the inevitable result of a system in which bonds between men are inviolable, and "blankness" is the ideal condition of womanhood.

Indeed, all of the primary female characters are "put in their place" by the end of the novel--their former identities transformed or erased if they were bad women, or simply "left blank" if they were good ones. Mrs. Oldershaw, for example, becomes a preacher. And to everyone's relief, the vicious Mrs. Milroy will not be around to cast a shadow on her daughter's wedding:

The medical men are of the opinion that she is sinking at last... She is greatly altered--quiet and gentle, and anxiously affectionate with her husband and child. But, in her case, this happy change is, it seems, a sign of approaching dissolution, from the medical point of view. There is a difficulty in making the poor old major understand this. He sees only that she has gone back to the likeness of her better self when he first married her... (810-11)

Like Lydia Gwilt, Mrs. Milroy finally becomes "womanly" as her death approaches. It is worth noting that the doctors equate her "wifely" and "motherly" behavior with "approaching dissolution": to be a perfect woman is to be nonexistent. The major is reminded of the way his wife behaved in the beginning of her marriage, a fact that offers some sinister suggestions about women in general, and Neelie in particular. Major Milroy married a "good" woman who later became vitiated. This suggests that women either "go bad" after marriage, or that they already are inherently bad, with "womanliness" just an act that is put on to ensnare men. Otherwise, with Mrs. Milroy, "womanliness" only emerges during the loss of her faculties. With the nuptials of Neelie and Allan on the horizon, Mrs. Milroy's transformation reminds us that heterosexual marriage is not necessarily a happy ending.
The one happy coupling that is ensured by the ending is that of Allan and Midwinter. Following defeat of the criminal woman and his "woman within," Midwinter has transformed the paternal prohibition with which his life began. Midwinter now reinterprets the past as a confirmation of his feelings for Allan, rather than as a warning against them:

I have learnt to view the purpose of the Dream with a new mind. I once believed that it was sent to rouse your distrust of the friendless man whom you had taken as a brother to your heart. I now know that it came to you as a timely warning to take him closer still. Does this help satisfy you that I, too, am standing on the brink of a new life, and that while we live, brother, your love and mine will never be divided again? (815)

Midwinter has expelled the "woman inside" of him, the susceptibility to nervousness that rendered him akin to the ostensible audience of the sensation novel. Once the plot has been revealed to him (the very plot that has always been apparent to the audience), he can overcome his lapses into nervous insensibility, becoming "manly" and controlling the text. Midwinter is no longer the pawn of fate whose destiny is determined by a Dream; rather, he is an active reader who determines the meanings of texts/dreams in accordance with his own desires. By finally "reading against the grain," bypassing a "straight" reading of his father's narrative and Allan's dream, Midwinter finally loses his nervousness and ensures his future with Allan by learning how to "play" a man.

FATAL IDENTITY REVISITED: MAN AND WIFE'S HOMME FATAL AND THE TRIUMPH OF THE FALLEN WOMAN

Never, until now, had Anne Silvester known that the man who had betrayed her, was the son of that other man, whose discovery of the flaw in the marriage had ended in the betrayal of her mother before her. She felt the shock of the revelation with a chill of superstitious dread. Was the chain of a fatality wound invisibly round her? Turn which way she might, was she still going darkly on, in the track of her dead mother, to an appointed and hereditary doom?
One of the less-discussed Wilkie Collins novels, *Man and Wife* is usually dismissed as one the author's disappointing post-*Moonstone* productions. When *Man and Wife* makes its appearance in critical volumes, it is usually discussed in terms of the vague Irish and Scotch marriage laws with which the text is concerned as a novel of social purpose. However, what scholars often fail to address is the very subversive quality of the novel, its engagement with and inversion of the themes of Collins's other work, notably *Armadale*. *Man and Wife* is reminiscent of *Armadale* in its repetition of names and issue of naming as destiny, its sense of fatality passed from parent to child, its color symbolism, its focus on the body as the site of fatality, and its concern with the fallen woman/governess. However, inverting the genders of the main characters in *Man and Wife* produces strikingly different implications than *Armadale*. The focus of this novel is on women's names and of the possibility of inherited fatality passing from mother to daughter, both with the same name. Like *Armadale*, *Man and Wife* realizes the emptiness of identity (emphasized through the novel's various indeterminate marriages), even while it seeks to establish a unified identity through homosocial bonding and the sharing of a name at the end. This time, however, it is friendship between women and the identity of women that is prioritized, and "good" men (and women) are the ones who facilitate feminine solidarity. *Man and Wife* is most unusual in two regards; its introduction of what I shall call the "criminal man," and its portrayal of the fallen woman as a heroic figure who is rewarded in the end.

While I realize that the term "criminal man" might seem unnecessarily marked, this is precisely the reason I am using it. "Criminal," used as a noun, is usually assumed to be male; hence the Victorian "criminal woman," a phrase that emphasized just how unnatural and misgendered such a creature was. The "criminal man" in *Man and Wife* is also strangely gendered. Part of the purpose of Collins's novel is to lecture against
English "muscular mania"; the author fears that emphasis on the physical development of the body will lead to a lack of intellectual, spiritual, and moral development. As he remarks in his preface, Collins sees "a connection between the recent unbridled development of physical cultivation in England, and the recent spread of grossness and brutality among certain classes of the English population" (6). Collins proceeds to remark that the "Rough" is no longer limited to the lower classes, but may even be found among the upper classes and university men. The problem is that "overdevelopment" of the body threatens class stratification by eliminating difference between the muscular middle- or upper-class man and the men of the working class. My argument about Geoffrey Delamayn, the villain or "criminal man" in this text, is that, because his entire identity proceeds from and is limited to his body, his appearance and status as a great athlete, he becomes oddly feminized. Just as regulation of the bourgeois woman's body was regarded as essential to the progress of the race, so is Geoffrey's; because Geoffrey becomes out of control in his obsession with his body, his stunted morality and intellect threaten to return England to the condition of the "aboriginal Britons," as the text so often warns. As far as the structure of the novel is concerned, the term "criminal man" is useful because Geoffrey parallels the "criminal woman"; misgendered, "unnatural," his introduction and eventual defeat serve mainly to facilitate homosocial bonding, this time that of women.

The more obviously unorthodox and transgressive element here is the heroicization and reward of the fallen woman. Anne Silvester, the heroine, loses her virtue to Geoffrey, seduced by his good looks and the glamour of his celebrity. Geoffrey had also promised to marry Anne, and, when she discovers herself pregnant, she insists that Geoffrey fulfill this promise. Geoffrey agrees in a letter, which he sends with a

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31 In the most vague Victorian fashion, we are uncertain Anne really is pregnant until the birth of a stillborn child. Nobody, until this point, suspects her condition.
messenger, Arnold Brinkworth, to the inn where Anne awaits. However, in order to remain at the inn, Anne, who has left her position as governess, must present herself in the character of a married woman, and Arnold, aware that Geoffrey must depart to visit his ailing father, masquerades as Anne's husband at the inn so as not to compromise her reputation. Unfavorable weather conditions force Arnold to spend the night at the inn, and when Blanche, his fiancée and Anne's dearest friend and charge, arrives to investigate Anne's sudden flight, Arnold must hide to avoid his fiancée's inevitable interpretation. Complications ensue when Geoffrey overhears some discussion of Scotch marriage laws and refuses to marry Anne on the grounds that her performance with Arnold as a married couple at the inn constitutes a legal marriage in Scotland. The betrayed Anne flies, consults a lawyer, and attempts to write Arnold to inform him of the predicament before he marries Blanche. True to Victorian fashion, however, Anne falls ill, giving birth to a stillborn child, remaining delirious for a few weeks before she can finish the letter. In the meantime Arnold and Blanche have married, unknowingly putting Blanche in danger of becoming a "ruined" woman.

Anne eventually recovers and writes to Arnold, who continues to keep Blanche in the dark about their situation, but consults Sir Patrick Lundie, Blanche's uncle, who is also a lawyer. Anne has by this time recovered the letter in which Geoffrey had promised marriage, which had been stolen by an employee of the inn. Although Sir Patrick realizes that Geoffrey's written promise also constitutes a legal marriage under Scotch law, therefore nullifying the "marriage" of Anne and Arnold, he hesitates to establish Anne's marriage to Geoffrey. By this time, of course, everyone realizes what a scoundrel Geoffrey is, since he has shown no reluctance to betray Anne and to leave responsibility for her with his former best friend. However, thanks to the machinations of her vindictive stepmother, Blanche is innocently manipulated into demanding proof of the validity of her own marriage to Arnold (so as to prevent any future problems with
illegitimacy, etc.), and Anne therefore resolves to sacrifice herself by exhibiting the letter establishing her own marriage to the violent and treacherous Geoffrey.

Anne's decision to live as Geoffrey's wife is practically suicidal, as her friends are well aware. Geoffrey blames her for losing his place in his father's will (really the result of his already estranged relationship with his father, compounded by the discovery of Geoffrey's betrayal of Anne, and his death before knowledge of the marital "reparation"); destroying his chances to marry Mrs. Glenarm, a wealthy widow; and for his loss of a foot-race on which his friends had bet heavily. The last of these items really had nothing to do with Anne, but with Geoffrey's failing health, which he refuses to acknowledge. Geoffrey imprisons Anne in an isolated house and plots to kill her, but is foiled when he dies from a stroke. Sir Patrick Lundie, impressed with Anne's bravery throughout, marries her, making her into Lady Lundie--the title of both Blanche's deceased mother who raised Anne following her own mother's demise, and of Blanche's stepmother and Anne's adversary.

In its final establishment of Anne as Lady Lundie, Man and Wife thus repeats Armadale's theme of becoming one/sharing an identity with one's beloved and overcoming the inherited fatality signified by one's name. These issues are introduced in the Prologue, which, like that of Armadale, features two characters (this time women), one of whom experiences a problematic, "illegal" marriage, the birth of children named after their parents, the death of one character with the concern that her child is fated to repeat the mother's heartbreak, and the intertwined destiny of the children. The main difference in Man and Wife, besides the gender of the characters, is that the women at the beginning of the story are intimate friends, and their anxiety is to protect the solidarity of their daughters rather than to separate them. As we have seen, bonds between women in

32 According to the doctors in the text, Geoffrey's approaching breakdown is the result of his excessive exercise and physical development.
Armadale usually represent evildoing; in Man and Wife, on the other hand, this is rarely
the case. The "bad" women in Man and Wife are those who hate other women and seek
to undermine women's friendships because of their own jealousy or pettiness (Lady
Lundie), or because of mental instability (Hester Dethridge). Perhaps because of their
gender, there is no sexual prohibition overshadowing their intimacy. Expressions of love
and physical affection between young Blanche and Anne throughout the novel are seen as
perfectly in keeping with their "passionate friendship," a stark contrast to Midwinter's
expressions of love for Allan, which always lapse into hysterical outbursts of the
"unutterable Something."

The relationship between Anne and Blanche has its origins in the parallel
relationship of their mothers. At eighteen, the mothers were intimate friends of long
acquaintance, whose division was introduced by Anne's mercenary parents:

Blanche was passably attractive, and passably intelligent—and no more. Anne was rarely beautiful, and rarely endowed. Blanche's parents were worthy
people, whose first consideration was to secure, at any sacrifice, the future well-
being of their child. Anne's parents were heartless and depraved. Their one idea,
in connection with their daughter, was to speculate on her beauty, and to turn her
abilities to profitable account. (15)

Like Lydia Gwilt, Anne Silvester begins her career as a commodity, her appearance used
to make money for her caretakers. Anne's parents send her to Milan "to be perfected in
the actress's and the singer's art—then to return to England, and make the fortune of her
family on the lyric stage" (15). The implication is, of course, that Anne's parents are
prostituting their daughter, and also exposing her to the dangerous or "queer" idea that
life is role-playing. Despite her experiences on the stage, however, Anne remains as
"white" as Blanche, "a woman of unblemished character" (20), a woman who leaves the
stage to become a middle-class wife and mother. Blanche, meanwhile, has married an
Indian officer and produced a daughter, and it is some time after this that the two friends
keep their vow of meeting again.
Blanche, now Lady Lundie, lives in India at this period, and sends her daughter before her own arrival in England. Little Anne and little Blanche seem to be reincarnations of their mothers, as Anne remarks to a family friend:

We two mothers, Mr. Kendrew, seem literally to live again in our children. I have an only child. My friend has an only child. My daughter is little Anne—as I was. Mr (sic) friend's daughter is little Blanche—as she was. And, to crown it all, these two girls have taken the same fancy to each other, which we took to each other, in the bygone days at school. One has often heard of hereditary hatred. Is there such a thing as hereditary love as well? (18)

On one hand, this passage would suggest that all women are simply imitations of one another, consistent with the idea that women are generic while men are individual. However, given that Collins deals with the problem of "hereditary hatred" and fate based on the name of the same-sex parent in Armadale, it is reasonable to assume here that the author is trying to resituate some of the issues of the earlier novel as they would occur between women. For a variety of reasons, Collins cannot simply displace the Armadale situation intact onto two women. Questions of originality aside, the limitations placed on both real women and their representation in the nineteenth century would have rendered it impossible to portray a mother-murderess, or a daughter who possessed the independence of Midwinter, for example. The problems of fate in this case must be worked out in a mother-daughter matrix in which intimate friendship is already established, threatened by outside forces, and reestablished in the end.

The absence of Armadale's paternal prohibition renders same-sex desire much less problematic in Man and Wife. Whereas the former novel forbade homosocial bonding between the offspring, the latter novel commands it, with the mothers enjoining the daughters to care for one another. Much of this has to do, of course, with the construction of gender in the nineteenth century, and with the understanding that women "naturally" displayed more physical affection toward one another than males, without necessarily signifying any sexual intention. In The Spinster and Her Enemies, Sheila Jeffreys 125
remarks that, "In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many middle-class women had relationships with each other which included passionate declarations of love, nights spent in bed together sharing kisses and intimacies, and lifelong devotion, without exciting the least adverse comment" (102). Man and Wife is replete with evidence of "passionate friendship," from verbal declarations--"Dearest Blanche! don't think me untrue to the affection we bear each other--don't think there is any change in my heart towards you . . . you, the sister of my love, the one person in the world who is dearest to me!" (164)--to physical demonstrations--"Blanche flew into [Anne's] arms and devoured her with kisses" (613). The desire that Midwinter has such difficulty articulating in Armadale is in fact overstated in Man and Wife. Anne and Blanche's love is the one indissoluble bond in the novel, and it is this loyal sisterhood that the story finally glorifies, overshadowing even the shame of Anne Silvester's indiscretion.

Anne's disgrace is forecast in the prologue, when a flaw discovered in her parents' Irish wedding ceremony provides her father, Mr. Vanborough, with the legal loophole he needs to justify the desertion of his wife and daughter that he has been contemplating. Tired of being married to a "normal" wife and mother, Mr. Vanborough now desires a wife "who can smooth [his] way through social and political obstacles, to the House of Lords" (22). Once Vanborough's lawyer, Mr. Delamayn, verifies that the thirteen-year-old marriage is not actually legitimate, Vanborough chooses not to officially marry his wife, but to use the loophole as a pretext to abandon her. It is at this moment that Blanche, Lady Lundie, reenters the story, to care for Anne, and her daughter after her. Anne soon grows ill, and asks Blanche to take charge of her daughter, insisting, "Don't bring her up like Me! She must be a governess—she must get her bread. Don't let her act! don't let her sing! don't let her go on the stage!" (42). On the surface this appears to be a reasonable request, since Miss Silvester's (she has returned to her unmarried name) former profession is so disreputable as to be associated with prostitution. However, Miss
Silvester's disgrace is not associated with this period of her life, when her reputation remained "unblemished," but with afterwards, when her occupation was "angel in the house," and her husband sought something more spectacular. Beneath it all is Anne's fear that the daughter's inheritance of her own maiden name will cause her to relive her mother's heartbreaking: "She is not called by her father's name—she is called by mine. She is Anne Silvester as I was? Will she end like me?" (42). Like Midwinter, young Anne Silvester's legacy is the dying wish of her parent not to repeat maternal errors, but her salvation this time will lie in repeating the mother's action of attaching herself to Blanche Lundie.

It is just as important to examine the role of homosocial desire in Man and Wife as in Armadale, although I find that, within the little scholarship available on this text, Anne and Blanche's friendship (in both generations) is usually taken for granted, and the question of the erotic is never introduced. Sheila Jeffreys criticizes this tendency to either overlook or reinterpret as asexual the role of desire in women's "friendships," and although her argument refers to the treatment of actual historical relationships, it can be applied to fiction as well:

[Historians] have tried to ignore [expressions of affection] or explain them away so that they could not be allowed to challenge their heterosexual account of history. The commonest approach has been to say that such romantic expressions were simply the normal form of friendship at that time. They say that it was fashionable to be effusive. Precisely the same explanation has been given for the romantic emotional expression between men of the sixteenth century. In this way historians have tidied away what they found incongruous and wiped the history of homoeroticism from the slate of heterosexual history. (103)

The assumption that the Blanche-Anne relationship is simply "normal" has the effect of "wiping" the homoeroticism in order to perform a "straight" reading of the text. Reading against the grain--performing a queer or Camp reading, for example--renders it impossible to interpret the excessive articulations and gestures of affection as simply the "fashionable" mode of female friendship. For one thing, women in Collins usually do not
relate to each other in this way; in No Name, for example, although Norah and Magdalen are very attached to one another, the novel lacks the excess of physical affection that is expressed here. One homosocial relationship in Collins that does resemble the Anne-Blanche relationship is that between Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe in The Woman in White. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Marian has often been read as a lesbian, or as a "man trapped in a woman's body." Perhaps because they lack Marian's butch appearance, or because both of them marry, neither Anne nor Blanche have been read in the same way. Yet their "passionate friendship" implies a level of homoeroticism, albeit at a time before the emergence of the term "lesbian" rendered such a relationship unspeakable.

Anne's relationship with Blanche (at least in the second generation) merits further examination in that the former's sexuality is already rendered deviant or potentially deviant on two counts: she is Blanche's governess and a fallen woman. Anne Senior's dying request is that her daughter not be permitted to become an actress; she must become a governess. What she fails to realize, however, is that in the Victorian imagination, the governess is either as vulnerable to sexual temptation or poses nearly as much of a sexual threat as the actress. As Poovey points out in "The Anathematized Race," the job of the governess was to "police" the behavior of her charges, especially females, to ensure the preservation of chastity and middle-class values: "economic and political turmoil . . . drove members of the middle class to demand some barrier against the erosion of middle-class assumptions and values. Because of the place they occupied in the middle-class ideology, women, and governesses in particular, were invoked as bulwarks against this erosion" (231). The governess was regarded as essential to the reproduction of middle-class ideals (and Man and Wife's replication of its women, the doubling of Anne and Blanche, may critique this idea through its literalization), yet the very existence of a class of governesses indicated that the middle class was not as stable
as it pretended to be. As Poovey goes on to point out, the position of the governess was supposed to maintain the rigid demarcation between "well-bred" women and those of the working class, and

The assumption implicit in these conjunctions, as in the middle-class preference for governesses from their own class, was that only "well-bred" women were morally reliable. In this reading of contemporary affairs, the unfortunate circumstances that bankrupted some middle-class fathers were critical to the reproduction of the domestic ideal, for only such disasters could yield suitable teachers for the next generation of middle-class wives. (232-33)

The irony here is that the "proof" of the middle class's stability and elevation above the lower classes in fact lay in its instability, the instances of "respectable" families collapsing into economic misfortune. Anne Silvester's situation is further ironic in that it was created by a father who rejected her mother's middle-class virtuosity. The very conditions of the governess's production demonstrate her commonality with other women (difference is based on socioeconomic circumstances rather than an internal identity core), yet it is her duty to validate the apparently "natural" difference of her charges.

At the commencement of the present story of Man and Wife, twenty-five-year-old Anne Silvester has already lost her virtue to Geoffrey Delamayn; the story opens on the day she demands reparation in the form of marriage. Anne's plight illustrates Victorian anxieties about the governess; her liminal status means that, although she is kind of like middle-class women, she is also like other, undesirable women, and the governess provides a means for "dangerous femininities" to enter the bourgeois home:

. . . the governess could not protect middle-class values because she could not be trusted to regulate her own sexuality. The lunatic's sexuality might have been rhetorically contained by medical categories such as hysteria, after all, but the prostitute's sexual aggression was undisguised; to introduce either such sexuality or such aggression into the middle-class home would have been tantamount to fomenting revolution, especially in a period in which both were imaginatively linked to the discontent expressed by disgruntled members of the working class and by the "strong-minded women" who were just beginning to demand reform. ("Anathematized Race" 236)
On one hand, as I asserted in the previous chapter, concerns about the sexuality of the governess link her explicitly to the prostitute, thus equating her with a "poison" that threatened the vulnerable bodies of the middle-class home. At the same time, however, Poovey's argument makes it clear that the aggressive sexuality associated with the prostitute invests her and her sister the governess with revolutionary potential. The transgressive capacity thus also links her with feminists and with discontented members of the working classes, disenfranchised groups that challenged the Victorian status quo. What is so ironic here is that the nexus of anxieties embodied in the governess both rely on constructions of the feminine as vulnerable and impressionable and on constructions of the feminine as "strong-minded" and aggressive. As I have argued throughout, contemporary arguments about the dangers of sensational reading matter depended on the construction of women, children, and the lower classes as impressionable and likely to mimetically reproduce the "low" culture that they consumed. Yet the simultaneous association of the governess (another potentially dangerous influence that must be selected and monitored judiciously) with figures of political and social rebellion reveals one of the fears about what might become of the "weak-minded" when exposed to dangerous influences: they will be transformed into the "strong-minded"! The concern, therefore, was not really about making women and the working classes into more judicious readers and consumers, but actually to preserve their state of "weak-mindedness."

As the ostensible promoter of middle-class values, then, the governess's job was to teach her charges--especially the females--various "accomplishments" without bringing them into the realm of the "strong-minded" or the sexually precocious. Man and Wife's curious position is that of asserting the sameness of ladies and governesses (who are also fallen women) without making the latter seem rebellious or even threatening to the bourgeois household. Man and Wife also articulates an innocent moment prior to the
discursive production of the lesbian, one in which the "passionate friendship" of the fallen woman and the lady is not represented as a corrupting influence but is actually heroicized.

Anne Silvester, though a "fallen woman," is presented as Everywoman early in the novel. What makes Anne heroic, as well as subversive, is, surprisingly, her status as "average":

She was of the average height. She was as well made as most women. In hair and complexion, she was neither light nor dark, but provocingly neutral, just between the two. Worse even than this, there were positive defects in her face, which it was impossible to deny. . . . And yet, with these indisputable drawbacks, here was one of those women—the formidable few—who have the hearts of men and the peace of families at their mercy. She moved—and there was some subtle charm, sir, in the movement, that made you look back, and suspend your conversation with your friend, and watch her silently while she walked. She sat by you, and talked to you—and behold, a sensitive something passed into that little twist at the corner of the mouth, and into that nervous uncertainty in the soft, grey eye, which turned defect into beauty—which enchained your senses—which made your nerves thrill if she touched you by accident, and set your heart beating if you looked at the same book with her, and felt her breath on your face. All this, let it be well understood, only happened, if you were a man. If you saw her with the eyes of a woman, the results were of quite another kind. In that case, you merely turned to your nearest female friend, and said, with unaffected pity for the other sex, 'What can the men see in her!' (59-60)

Anne is average, like "most women," yet at the point at which the narrator draws this portrait of her, Anne has already lost her virtue, although this is as yet unknown to the reader. As always in Collins's portraits of his heroines, the initial physical description is extensive and provides us with the external clues to read the character. Anne is neutral, "normal-looking," and this appearance will be important throughout the novel, revealing how "naturally" ladylike Anne is despite her mistakes; this governess and fallen woman only differs from the lady in her circumstances and, according to the narrator, in her unique superiority (Anne is one of the "formidable few" who can command both men and families). Collins conducts a masculine appraisal of Anne's looks, again typical of his
fiction, addressed to the specifically masculine reader ("sir"), inviting him to gaze at Anne, the woman who so easily captures men and "enchains their senses." The narrator remarks on Anne's facial defects, which are perhaps supposed to reveal the blemishes on her character, but he goes on to remark that a "sensitive something" in Anne turns "defect into beauty." Anne's "sensitive something" will turn out to be crucial in the novel as her "defect"—her sexual indiscretion—turns out to be the item that enables her heroism.

The narrator's address to the male reader assumes a complicity between them in the appraisal of female appearance that women cannot understand. Throughout the novel, men are shown to be sensitive to Anne's charms and ladylike manners, while several of the women are baffled by the men's interest in her. The notable exception to this is Blanche, to whom Anne is at least as beloved as Arnold Brinkworth, Blanche's fiancé. Because Blanche is the only woman who loves Anne and recognizes her value, one must question the former's gender and sexual identification, even though she appears otherwise quite "normally" gendered. Again, within the context of this pre-lesbian discursive moment, Blanche's attitude could be read as "normal" in the context of the "passionate friendship." It is intriguing to note that the timing of the story requires Blanche to become engaged contemporaneously with Anne's trouble. Unaware of Anne's predicament, Blanche informs her friend and governess of Arnold's intentions. When Blanche notices Anne's distance, she tries to guess her friend's troubles, first offering to lend money, and then wondering if jealousy is the issue:

Do you know that you have been looking out of spirits for some time past? Perhaps you don't like Mr Brinkworth? No? you do like him? Is it my marrying, then? I believe it is! You fancy we shall be parted, you goose? As if I could do without you! Of course, when I am married to Arnold, you will come and live with us. That's quite understood between us--isn't it? (74)

The relationship between Anne and Blanche is reminiscent of that between Marian and Laura in *The Woman in White*, yet in the latter case the sexual rivalry between Marian
and Walter Hartright (and later Sir Percival) is more pronounced both because of Marian's "masculine" face and intellect, and because she actually does live with Laura after her marriage(s). Jeffreys points out that such arrangements were often socially approved:

... a woman could cheerfully write to the male fiancé of the woman she loved, saying that she felt exactly like a husband towards her and was going to be very jealous. Women so involved with one another might, if they got married, refuse to be parted from their loved one, so that the husband would have to honeymoon with two women instead of one. Such friendships were seen by men as useful because they trained women in the ways of love in preparation for marriage.

(102)

While Jeffreys's description is not an exact fit of the case of Man and Wife, in that Anne neither acts jealously toward Arnold nor honeymoons with her friends, there are a number of pertinent connections. Blanche expects Anne to live with her after her marriage, and she is at least as affectionate with Anne as with Arnold, and more demonstratively so, since physical affection with another woman would be interpreted more innocently than with a man. Furthermore, although Anne does not literally honeymoon with Arnold and Blanche, her performance with Arnold at the inn is that of a honeymooning couple, and the rest of the novel is occupied with deciding whether this constituted a "real" honeymoon. In effect, then, Arnold honeymoons with two women, and the problem of the text is to decide whether he does so innocently.

Man and Wife's curious gendering is further reinforced by the fact that while Blanche, in spite of her womanhood, appreciates Anne, one of the people who is least sensible to her charms is Geoffrey. Although Geoffrey has had sexual relations with Anne, he never otherwise displays any interest in or attraction to her. Since Geoffrey's world is limited to the physical, one gets the idea that sexual activity is simply another form of exercise for him. Later, during his courtship with Mrs. Glenarm, it is plain that
Geoffrey only has eyes for her money, despite the fact that she is a "miracle of beauty" (360). Geoffrey's preference of his trainer to Mrs. Glenarm exhibits his perversity:

Mrs. Glenarm became as jealous of Perry, as if Perry had been a woman. She flew into passions; she burst into tears; she flirted with other men; she threatened to leave the house. All quite useless! Geoffrey never once missed an appointment with Perry; never once touched anything to eat or drink that she could offer him, if Perry had forbidden it. No other human pursuit is so hostile to the influence of the sex as the pursuit of athletic sports. No men are so entirely beyond the reach of women as the men whose lives are passed in the cultivation of their own physical strength. Geoffrey resisted Mrs. Glenarm without the slightest effort. He casually extorted her admiration, and undesignedly forced her respect. She clung to him as a hero; she recoiled from him as a brute; she struggled with him, submitted to him, despised him, adored him, in a breath. And the clue to it all, confused and contradictory as it seemed, lay in one simple fact--Mrs. Glenarm had found her master. (337-38)

In this curious passage, Collins basically equates athleticism with homosexuality, or at least with suspicious sexuality. Geoffrey's obsession with his own body, aided by his trainer, Perry, renders him invulnerable to the charms of women. In nineteenth-century discourse, women were usually associated with the material world, grounded in the body, while men were able to be more spiritual, intellectual creatures. "Good" women provided moral guidance and material comfort in the home, yet women also offered the opportunity to indulge in the baser joys of the material, and men had to be careful to avoid the temptation to overindulge in material pleasures, lest they become like women or the "lower races." Because Geoffrey is so absorbed in his own body, he is resistant to the allure of women--both to the temptation they offer (except in the most material forms, especially monetary) and to their "civilizing" influence. Mrs. Glenarm's wiles are completely lost on Geoffrey, whose devotion to the body renders him more attentive to his trainer than to the woman he is supposed to marry. Characteristic of Geoffrey's villainy is his resistance to feminine influence. Geoffrey's "muscular mania" is presented as a kind of narcissism, with his own body providing all the pleasure he can derive.

Indeed, Geoffrey's sexual encounter with Anne seems to be practically anomalous, since
nowhere else does he display any but a mercenary interest in women, and this, too, is connected to the male body, since most of his economic transactions involve betting on sporting events. Although necessary for the plot, Geoffrey's tryst with Anne seems to be rather inconsistent with his character.

Geoffrey's resistance to women, oddly enough, feminizes him. As the description of Anne informed us, men are irresistibly attracted to her, while women cannot see her appeal. Men are also universally attracted to Mrs. Glenarm, who signifies nothing but a secure fortune to Geoffrey. His indifference to feminine attractions, coupled with his egocentrism, places him within the novel's, and the nineteenth century's, construction of women. In his "On Narcissism," Freud describes women as self-absorbed, typically more interested in their own bodies and appearance than in their loved one. The description suits Geoffrey as well:

Complete object-love of the attachment type is, properly speaking, characteristic of the male. . . . A different course is followed in the type of female most frequently met with, which is probably the purest and truest one. With the onset of puberty, the maturing of the female sexual organs, which up till then have been in a state of latency, seems to bring about an intensification of the original narcissism, and this is unfavourable to the development of a true object-choice with its accompanying sexual overvaluation. Women, especially if they grow up with good looks, develop a certain self-contentment which compensates them for the social restrictions that are imposed upon them in their choice of object. Strictly speaking, it is only themselves that women love with an intensity comparable to that of the man's love for them. (554)

Freud does admit that there are "women who love according to the masculine type" (555), and this could probably be used to explain the love of Anne and Blanche, even more appropriately "masculine" because the object choice is female. Interestingly, Mrs. Glenarm and Geoffrey are well-matched in that they are probably the text's most "feminine" characters, at least according to Freud's model of the "purest and truest" female. Besides her great beauty and her stereotypically "feminine" language and gestures, Mrs. Glenarm is a "true" woman because she regards Geoffrey as her master: 135
"the natural condition of a woman is to find her master in a man. Look in the face of any woman who is in no direct way dependent on a man—and, as certainly as you see the sun in a cloudless sky, you see a woman who is not happy" (Man and Wife 336). Yet the evidence of the text flatly contradicts the narrator's misogynist philosophy; the most miserable women in the novel are those who are forced to acknowledge men as their masters. Hester Dethridge, the voluntarily mute cook of Lady Lundie who winds up inheriting a house of her own, exhibits signs of permanent mental trauma from experiences with the husband who beat her and stole her money. After repeated attempts to escape her husband, Hester eventually resorts to a murder that goes undetected, recorded in a manuscript carried in her bosom. Later, Geoffrey will rent rooms in Hester's house, where he will install his wife as his prisoner while he plots her murder. The men who are literally masters in the novel make their wives miserable and even endanger their lives. Even Mrs. Glenarm, who finds her "master" in Geoffrey, is brutally deceived by him and eventually enters a convent, to the horror of her former acquaintances.

Mrs. Glenarm was previously accustomed to unwavering devotion; it is only when she meets a man who displays no interest that she finds a "master." Despite the narrator's assertions (in which he tellingly contradicts "the epicene theorists of modern times" (336)), there is clearly something unsavory about the man as master, or at least as the kind of master that Geoffrey is. This perhaps lies in Geoffrey's misgendering, which Mrs. Glenarm misinterprets as a fascinating manhood. Mrs. Glenarm's narcissism is frustrated by Geoffrey's indifference, and her eventual obsession with him is not so much love as a determination to transform his self-absorption into devotion to her. Yet Geoffrey is also narcissistic; like Freud's "purest and truest" woman, his good looks and the development of his body lead to his intense self-interest. Freud argued that women relied on narcissism as compensation for their lack of choice in a mate. In one sense, this
does not really apply to Geoffrey, since his biological sex grants him more social
freedom. However, one might interpret Geoffrey's object choices as limited, since they
are restricted to females, in whom Geoffrey has no interest. Geoffrey is only concerned
with other men and "manly" activities, and his narcissism may be a way of compensating
for desires that would be prohibited.

One might expect Geoffrey's "perversity" to reveal itself in a suspicious
physiognomy. A strikingly unusual element of Man and Wife, however, is that the most
heroic man in the novel, Sir Patrick Lundie, exhibits the physical defect of a clubfoot,
while the character with the most deviant interiority displays a perfect exterior:

The parting of his curly Saxon locks, began in the centre of his forehead, travelled
over the top of his head, and ended, rigidly central, at the ruddy nape of his neck.
His features were as perfectly regular and as perfectly unintelligent as human
features can be. His expression preserved an immovable composure wonderful to
behold. The muscles of his brawny arms showed through the sleeves of his light
summer coat. He was deep in the chest, thin in the flanks, firm on the legs—in
two words, a magnificent human animal, wrought up to the highest pitch of
physical development, from head to foot. (60-61)

Contrary to the theory of mens sana in corpore sano, Geoffrey's most unhealthy
interiority inhabits an exterior which is an exemplar of physical fitness. Repeatedly in the
novel, references are made to Geoffrey's perfect physical appearance, yet we are made to
understand that such a body is incompatible with intelligence and morality. Geoffrey's
eyes are "perfectly unintelligent," and here as elsewhere he is referred to as a "human
animal," or simply an "animal," emphasizing his lack of mental or moral cultivation.

Geoffrey's athletic accomplishments win him widespread popularity, a fact that
alarms the club-footed Sir Patrick. The old gentleman worries that glorification of the
physical will lead to the decline of the race:

I don't see the sense of crowing over him because he's big and strong, and drinks
beer with impunity, and takes a cold shower bath all the year round. There is far
too much glorification in England, just now, of the mere physical qualities which
an Englishman shares with the savage and the brute. And the ill results are
beginning to show themselves already! We are readier than we ever were to practice all that is rough in our national customs, and to excuse all that is violent and brutish in our national acts. Read the popular books; attend the popular amusements—and you will find at the bottom of them all, a lessening regard for the gentler graces of civilized life, and a growing admiration for the virtues of the aboriginal Britons. (68-69)

The body, according to Sir Patrick, is the one thing that links the Englishman to the "lower races." Turning attention away from the body toward mental and moral edification is required for racial elevation; in other words, for evolution. What I find so stunning about *Man and Wife* is that, for once, the body of the male becomes fetishized in its necessity for maintaining bourgeois English values. Usually, female chastity is fetishized as the item whose maintenance raises the English (or, more specifically, the white, middle-class English) above others. In Oliphant's condemnation of sensation novels, for example, we saw the author pardon men for their sexual indiscretions, while woman's purity is the "one duty of invaluable importance to her country and her race which cannot be overestimated," and her violation thereof "the climax of all misfortunes to the race" (275). And in *Evil Sisters*, his study of "dangerous female sexuality" in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century discourses, Bram Dijkstra remarks that men were cautioned against being deceived by the appearance of female purity, since sexual insatiability might lie beneath the surface: "... under the skin of even the most perfectly acculturated female, the repressed impulses of nature still lurked. Inevitably woman's "badness," her natural compulsion to indulge in reproductive promiscuity, and her inherent tendencies toward socialistic primitivism and stasis remained a dangerous source of potential 'reversion' for society" (44). Female promiscuity endangered patriarchal society (and therefore "evolution" itself, defined in the nineteenth century as disparity between the sexes) through the threat of obfuscating paternity. While the anxieties surrounding female sexual transgression and the danger of a deceitful appearance of "purity" certainly apply to many sensation novels—including *Lady Audley's Secret* and
Armadale—Man and Wife is clearly not interested in this approach. Anne's indiscretion is never really regarded as a threat, except by the novel's least sympathetic characters--Lady Lundie and Mrs. Glenarm, catty women who would take pleasure in or profit from Anne's misfortunes. Because Anne gives birth to a stillborn child, the problem of illegitimacy ceases to be an issue. Yet the fact that the child is stillborn remains significant, not so much in any reflection it casts on Anne, but as an indication of Geoffrey's lack of "vital power."

As Sir Patrick remarks, Geoffrey and his admirers clearly threaten to return the English people to the condition of the "aboriginal Britons." In other words, Geoffrey represents racial regression rather than evolutionary progress. Paradoxically, Geoffrey's intensive strengthening of the body is bound to leave him weak:

Clearly those who spent much of their time on earth focused on the body had remained on a far lower level of evolutionary development that those who had cultivated their minds. Those who had failed to improve themselves on the "psychical" level had, therefore, in a very real sense, remained animals, and this had eliminated them from the competition for immortality. Such moral weaklings did not even deserve to be classified as human. (Dijkstra 14-15)

Those thought to be on the "lower" level of the evolutionary scale were usually nonwhites, women, and the lower classes. Yet Geoffrey should be a fine example of the highly evolved person: upper-middle-class, male, and blond--the ultimate sign of whiteness. Despite his advantages, Geoffrey spends his time "focused on the body." His time at the university is spent engaging in athletic competitions rather than studying. Collins repeatedly lampoons this, as when Sir Patrick quotes Dryden, and Geoffrey thinks the reference is to a man named Dryden with whom he rows. Geoffrey is a moral and intellectual weakling as well. Not only is he out of the race for immortality, but for mortal life as well; within the context of the novel, the stillborn child clearly signifies the weakness of Geoffrey's essence, a foreshadowing of his breakdown and eventual death that result from his corporeal fixation.
Man and Wife does not oppose all physical exercise per se, but rather the "muscular mania" condemned by Collins in the Preface. As Sir Patrick observes, physical exertion is acceptable, "provided the physical exercise be restrained within fit limits. But when public feeling enters into the question and directly exalts the bodily exercises above the books--then I say public feeling is in a dangerous extreme" (211). Sir Patrick, as mentioned before, objects to the mental and moral deficiencies produced by the focus on bodily exercise. In the middle of the novel, however, a surgeon, Mr. Speedwell, warns Geoffrey of his failing health, lecturing on the "debilitating" effects of exercise:

... a proportion, and not by any means a small one, of the young men who are now putting themselves to violent athletic tests of their strength and endurance, are taking that course to the serious and permanent injury of their own health. The public... see nothing but the successful results of muscular training. Fathers and mothers, at home, see the failures. There are households in England... in which there are young men who have to thank the strains laid on their constitutions by the popular physical displays of the present time, for being broken men, and invalided men, for the rest of their lives. (217-18)

The "violent athletic tests" to which Mr. Speedwell refers are not contact sports, such as football or rugby, in which the prospect of serious injury is ever-present, but rather sports such as rowing and foot-races, where there is comparatively little danger of sustaining major injuries such as broken bones or spinal damage. Speedwell's diagnosis seems rather bizarre to the modern reader, given what we now know about the connections between physical exercise and health. Yet Speedwell's concerns are in keeping with the tenets of nineteenth-century science, and especially with ideas about the connection between gender and evolution. It is obvious that Geoffrey has failed to cultivate an interiority in terms of a "soul" or mind (as he says, "A man in healthy training don't know that he has got a mind" (192)), but Speedwell's concern is that he has destroyed his physical interiority, which does not necessarily correspond to the exterior: "How many [training authorities] are aware of the important physiological truth, that the muscular
power of a man is no guarantee of his vital power? How many of them know that we all have . . . two lives in us—the surface-life of the muscles, and the inner life of the heart, lungs, and brain?" (218). Speedwell's analysis leaves his audience incredulous, since no one can believe that Geoffrey's manly, muscular exterior would belie a weak interiority. The health of Geoffrey's exterior is supposed to guarantee that of his interior, and Speedwell offends by remarking that appearances can be deceptive. (However, Speedwell himself has reached his controversial conclusion by "studying Geoffrey's face" (207).)

According to Speedwell, "muscular" and "vital" power are not the same, and it is the latter power—really an intersection of the physical, spiritual/emotional, and intellectual—that is the "true" indicator of manliness, rather than the body's exterior. The danger of excessive physical cultivation lies in its apparent detraction from the patient's "vital power," with the fearful consequence of making him "like a girl":

I have a patient at this moment who is a young man of twenty, and who possesses one of the finest muscular developments I ever saw in my life. . . . after going through a certain amount of muscular training, after performing a certain number of muscular feats, he suddenly fainted, one day, to the astonishment of his family and friends. . . . He will probably live, but he will never recover. I am obliged to take precautions with this young man of twenty, which I should take with an old man of eighty. He is big enough and muscular enough to sit to a painter as a model for Sampson—and only last week, I saw him swoon away like a young girl, in his mother's arms. (218-19)

Speedwell's analysis is clearly ludicrous, even hysterical, to modern readers, but it remains intriguing for its particular reading of gender and the body in mid-Victorian culture. This patient's development of himself into a "Sampson"—the exemplar of masculine strength—ironically causes him to regress into "feminine" behavior, inexplicably falling into fainting fits. The bizarre gendering emphasized in the surgeon's description points to an association between masculine bodily development and deviant
sexuality; more specifically, this intensification of men's interests in their own bodies can be linked to contemporary fears regarding masturbation.

Victorian anxieties about the effects of masturbation and about apparatuses for surveillance and prevention thereof (especially among children, another "weak-minded" population) are certainly well-known at this point and are not necessary to repeat here. The connection between masturbation (and other expressions of sexuality) and physical exercise lies both in the discipline of the human body and the conservation of "vital power" or essence. The fears surrounding each are the same— that the engagement with the body will become out of control, leading to a depletion of "vital essence" and eventually to class and racial regression, as Foucault indicates:

As for the adolescent wasting his future substance in secret pleasures, the onanistic child who was of such concern to doctors and educators from the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth, this was . . . the schoolboy, the child surrounded by domestic servants, tutors, and governesses, who was in danger of compromising not so much his physical strength as his intellectual capacity, his moral fiber, and the obligation to preserve a healthy line of descent for his family and his social class. (121)

It may seem odd to link exercise with masturbation, since the former is about discipline of the body, while the latter has been associated with lack thereof. However, Collins's use of the term "muscular mania" reveals his understanding of Geoffrey as a sort of "exercise addict," one who derives too much pleasure from the training of the body, turning this into a form of self-abuse. Sir Patrick expresses approval of exercise in moderation, but Geoffrey's "mania" becomes exercise misused, just as masturbation was considered a misdirection of sexuality as it should be properly expressed. True to the form of the onanistic child, Geoffrey has sexual relations with an improper object (the governess), and his "aerobic masturbation" has sapped his reproductive essence, as Anne's child is stillborn. If I may be permitted a pun, Geoffrey's surname is perhaps also
fatal in this regard: "Delamayn" looks and sounds suspiciously like the French "de la main," "of the hand," again easily linking Geoffrey to the problem of masturbation.

The anxieties surrounding masturbation in the nineteenth century were based in the belief that "vital essence" was most concentrated in semen, and doctors warned that "any" loss of semen was a significant loss of vital essence to a man, and therefore every incidence of carnal concourse should be orchestrated to take place under optimal conditions" (Dijkstra 55). In other words, ejaculation in the absence of procreative possibility was wasteful, depriving future generations of necessary "vital power": "Biologists, physicians, sexologists, and common folk were united in the conviction that a man's "vital essence" was the most precious commodity the world had ever seen, and that its conservation or expenditure was the absolute key to all processes of evolution or degeneration" (Dijkstra 54). Geoffrey's profligate expenditure of "vital essence" eventually turns on him. After spending the entire novel training for a North-against-South foot-race at Fulham, Geoffrey, who represents the South (perhaps symbolically associating him with being "below," descending into primitive conditions), loses his strength in the final laps. In a climactic moment, his "animal" nature rises to the surface: "He . . . lifted his arm to his mouth with a hoarse cry of rage--fastened his own teeth in his flesh like a wild beast--and fell senseless on the course" (495). In an ensuing examination, Mr. Speedwell ascertains that Geoffrey "has had a narrow escape from a paralytic stroke" (499). In his development of his brute self, Geoffrey has neglected and even damaged his brain, leaving it "weakened" and vulnerable to the stroke that will eventually kill him. In Speedwell's model, bodily excess leaves somebody "weak-minded," and not just in a figurative sense. In Geoffrey's case, overdeveloped muscles may even be said to "attack" the brain.

This physical danger to the brain is dangerously paired with a lack of mental capacity. It will be useful to recall here that in Sir Patrick's diatribe against the
glorification of the muscular body, he also indicted "popular books" and "popular amusements" in the tendency toward cultural regression. This seems rather ironic, since Wilkie Collins's own "popular books" were themselves implicated as examples of "dangerous reading." Despite Collins's own dependence on sensational material, and even on real-life murders and trials as sources for some of his own stories, in *Man and Wife* he uses Geoffrey's consumption of such reading matter as a sign of his degeneracy. After his collapse at the race, with his mind "weakened," Geoffrey is forced to acknowledge Anne as his wife, and he subsequently imprisons her in Hester Dethridge's house. When Geoffrey's brother, Julius, arrives to check on Anne, for whom he is concerned, he finds Geoffrey in possession of alarming reading matter. It is inscribed "'With Mr. Perry's respects.' . . . It was the ghastly popular record of Criminal trials in England, called The Newgate Calendar" (558). Julius later warns his brother, "You won't cultivate your mind . . . with such a book as that. Vile actions, recorded in vile English, make vile reading, Geoffrey, in every sense of the word" (564). Geoffrey's "feminization" through "muscular mania" has placed him in the group of people with "impressionable" minds, those unqualified to distinguish good literature from bad. Geoffrey's trainer, the architect of his degeneration, is also at fault; he has profited from the "weakening" of Geoffrey's mind and further contributes to the athlete's deviance through the morbid gift of the book.

As Geoffrey's dangerous physical activity and his perilous reading become more closely intertwined, his "deviance" grows more outrageously apparent. The exterior no longer conceals the unhealthy interiority, as exercise produces a delusional, hysterical bodily performance:

The clear starlight showed Geoffrey, stripped to his shirt and drawers, running round and round the garden. He apparently believed himself to be contending at the Fulham foot-race. At times, as the white figure circled round and round in the starlight, they heard him cheering for 'the South.' The slackening thump of his
feet on the ground, the heavier and heavier gasps in which he drew his breath . . .
gave warning that his strength was failing him. Exhaustion, if it led to no worse
consequences, would force him to return to the house. In the state of his brain,
who could say what the result might be, if medical help was not called in? (565)

Geoffrey's focus on his body has led to a complete absence of mind; he is so "animal" as
to become mechanical—as he said earlier, not even knowing that he has a mind.

Geoffrey's "masturbating" body has completely overtaken him, as he blindly follows the
impulses of his body. One cannot help seeing in this a grotesque caricature of the
woman, for whom biology was supposed to be destiny, and her blind, mindless desire to
reproduce. In fact, women who were such reproductive machines were considered,
during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, to be the most highly specialized
and therefore "evolved." Dijkstra remarks that, "Time and again, [social scientists] sang
the praises of "highly evolved" females whose childlike mental incapacities demonstrated
the advanced levels of their dimorphic evolutionary development, and they concluded
that "masculinism" in a woman could only be indicative of her reversion to primitivism,
to the "bisexual" origins of mankind" (131). In the opinion of these scientists, a society's
evolution could be determined by the level of equality in sexual relations. "Primitive"
societies featured relative equality, with the sexes resembling each other, while
"advanced" societies featured great social disparity in which the male sex dominated.
The most "advanced" females were those limited to their bodies, existing almost solely
for reproduction, while "evolved" men were able to develop a variety of capabilities.
Geoffrey becomes "feminized" through his specialization; his body only has one function,
which it mechanically repeats, Geoffrey's "specialization" represents not progress, but
the ultimate regression—mindless repetition without procreation.

Geoffrey's inability to produce healthy offspring signifies his status as *homme fatal*,
literally heralding extinction for the race. As such, he threatens not only Anne,
whose murder he attempts, but ultimately other men as well, since the popular promotion
of athletic competition would lead to a host of imitators, all depleting themselves of their
vital essence: an apocalyptic race of masturbators. While "dangerous readings" could lead the impressionable to mimetically reproduce various crimes, Geoffrey's "dangerous body" transgresses in its capacity to create a cult of the male body. Ultimately, the only solution to this problem is to have it destroy itself. In this sense, the text's treatment of Geoffrey is more consistent with the Victorian attitude toward lesbianism (here voiced by English politicians) than with its overt prohibitions of male homosexuality:

... leave them entirely alone, not notice them, not advertise them. That is the method that has been adopted in England for many hundred years, and I believe that it is the best method now, these cases are self-extirminating. They are examples of ultra-civilization, but they have the merit of exterminating themselves, and consequently they do not spread or do very much harm to society at large. ... To adopt a Clause [criminalizing lesbianism] would harm by introducing into the minds of perfectly innocent people the most revolting thoughts. (Moore-Brabazon, quoted in Jeffreys 114)

Jeffreys goes on to remark that "Lesbianism was an alarming thought to these MPs because they thought it would spread like wildfire if women ever heard of it"(114). Once again, women cannot help mimetically repeating that to which they are exposed. Geoffrey threatens to "feminize" other men by causing them to imitate him; the only solution is self-extirmination. Man and Wife is bizarre in that what seems to a modern reader to resemble a lesbian relationship—that between Anne and Blanche—is regarded as innocent and even healthy, while the deviant yet hard-to-define sexuality of Geoffrey is treated in a manner consistent with Victorian attitudes toward lesbianism and masturbation. That is, left to his own devices, Geoffrey ultimately exterminates himself. Meanwhile, the strongest homosocial bonds in Armadale and Man and Wife, though fraught with desire, result in heterosexual marriages. What can account for this?

In Armadale, first of all, women are regarded mainly as the producers of heirs and the transmitters of the paternal name; "Allan Armadale" must continue to be reproduced. Allan clearly sees Miss Milroy as a reproductive mechanism, and, following the destruction of Miss Gwilt, it becomes plain that heterosexual reproduction and
homosocial/erotic bonds are compatible, as long as a wife recognizes and accepts her place in the social order and erotic triangle. In *Man and Wife*, on the other hand, the "passionate friendship" of Anne and Blanche can be interpreted, as it often was in the nineteenth century, as "training" for heterosexual marriage. The "narcissism" associated with homosexuality is less threatening here, since it is considered the "natural" condition of women, and because women are already regarded as interchangeable. Arnold’s "double" honeymoon in fact demonstrates the interchangeability of the two women.

This attitude is reinforced at the end of the novel, when Anne is transformed into Lady Lundie—like Blanche’s mother and stepmother—through her marriage to Sir Patrick. After the announcement of the new Lady Lundie, Blanche’s stepmother "looks at the woman who has taken her place at the head of the family; and sees—ANNE SILVESTER!" (642). This is the final line of the novel, but it is clear that Lady Lundie is flabbergasted by the usurpation of her title by the (impure) governess. The ultimate insult to Lady Lundie is the implication that she is no better than her stepdaughter’s scandalous governess, who has now "socially superannuated" her. Anne escapes the fatality of her mother’s name by taking the name—and the social position—of her mother’s best friend, in the process becoming literally the aunt and figuratively the mother to the younger Blanche. However, the final words of the novel are Anne’s name, capitalized, emphatically declaring her original identity. The camp aesthetic is perhaps most apparent in this final line, as Anne’s social transformation lays bare the role-playing that is foundation of society. Anne has played a variety of gender and class roles—daughter, sister, aunt, mother, governess, lady—while retaining the same "core" of Anne Silvester. The incongruity which inspires so much horror in Lady Lundie, whose own social identity has been adversely affected, is the threat that accompanied the governess all along—that identity is inherently unstable, and that titles and names could lose their meaning at any moment.
Gender also ceases to carry meaning in *Armadale* and *Man and Wife*, as the characters' sexual identities become increasingly androgynous, or at least impossible to clearly define. In the former novel, Midwinter and Allan are able to overcome the fatality that "follows them in the dark" by doing away with the criminal woman who operated as a substitute for their "unspeakable" desires. The fatality of the past, which Midwinter originally recognized as a component of his own name, was actually a residue that clung to Lydia Gwilt's criminal body. The sign "Armadale" is preserved through Lydia Gwilt's transformation into "true womanhood," her willingness to sacrifice her own life. However, when *Armadale* is paired with *Man and Wife*, one notices a trend in the villainy: deviant bodies *must* self-exterminate, either voluntarily (as with Miss Gwilt) or through corporeal/sexual excess that destroys the body's vital power. Paradoxically, in the end of each novel, "deviant sexuality" and "true womanhood" are revealed as *precisely the same thing*. Each is ultimately an irresistible impulse toward self-destruction that is necessary for the preservation of the heterosexual (and yet homosocial) economy.

Because the flip side of the "true woman" is always the sexual deviant, these novels seem to be anything but liberating. Yet Anne Silvester's marriage and social elevation at the conclusion of *Man and Wife* offer an alternative interpretation. As a fallen woman, Anne is guilty of sexual transgression, yet in the sacrifice of herself to preserve Blanche's marriage and happiness, along with the latter's "whiteness" and the legitimacy of future children, Anne is also a "true" woman. Like Magdalen's public circulation of her body in *No Name* that ultimately establishes her sister's heterosexual happiness, Anne's public admission of her sexual transgression (which has a very real possibility of being self-destructive, since Geoffrey intends to kill her) works in the interest of heterosexuality. And, also like Magdalen, Anne is rewarded with marriage to a father figure, restoring her to a "legitimacy" of which she had been deprived in
adolescence. But Anne's true reward is perhaps being able to maintain her relationship with Blanche by marrying into her family, thus securing the closest "legitimate" relationship possible with her loved one. Anne is a "true woman," but through her unauthorized sexuality and her desire for another woman, she can also be regarded as a sexual deviant. Yet we are clearly supposed to regard Anne as "normal," or even extraordinary, as Sir Patrick does. The presence of the criminal man encourages us to overlook the novel's contradictions, the "deviance" lurking beneath the surface of the normal characters. By making Geoffrey so obviously perverse, Collins permits the reader automatically to assume the normality of the remaining characters.

Armadale and Man and Wife both long for a past when identity was literally unified, when lover and beloved were one and the same. Both texts reverberate with homosocial desire, a nearly narcissistic yearning for oneness that is prohibited or disrupted, yet restored by novel's end. At the same time, both texts are troubled by a deviant sexuality, represented by the villain, whose body comes to contain all the text's criminality/fatality. In each case, the antagonist represents some kind of sexual inversion—Lydia Gwilt "should have been a man"; Geoffrey's muscular obsession weakens him "like a girl." Both must be done away with for the sake of heterosexuality and the English race. What makes these texts "hysterical" is that they are so marked by homosocial desire, even by cross-gender identification, at the same time that they seem to condemn sexual inversion. The overdetermined criminality of Lydia Gwilt and Geoffrey Delamayn is perhaps after all only a McGuffin, forcing us to look away from the homosexual subtext to the excessive parody of gender that compels our attention. The creation of the suspicious bodies in these novels, like the production of the sexual deviant in discourse, is meant to help us misrecognize the instability of gender and sexual identity, since everyone else seems "normal" by contrast. The real horror and hysteria in these texts lies in the terrible truth lurking beneath the surface: when the most
"masculine" woman (the criminal, intellectual woman) is also the most "feminine" (making the ultimate sacrifice), and the most "feminine" man (weakened by his status as "body") is also the most "masculine" (the most muscular), then gender ceases to have meaning. The body saturated with perversity must be created and destroyed to preserve us, like Allan Armadale, from knowledge of the troubling "stains" that cling to our identity.
CHAPTER 4

FORGERY AND TOXICITY:
OSCAR WILDE AND THE DEVIANT BODY IN/AS TEXT

When I think of all the harm that book has done, I despair of ever writing anything to equal it.

--Wilde, vis-à-vis the Bible, quoted in Pearson 165

Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities.

Such, at any rate, was Dorian Gray's opinion. He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead. (The Picture of Dorian Gray 106-7)

In 1895, Oscar Wilde underwent three trials, the culmination of which was his imprisonment until 1897 for homosexual behavior. Incredibly, Wilde himself was the litigant in the first of these trials. On February 18, 1895, the Marquess of Queensberry, father of Lord Alfred Douglas, then Wilde's lover, left a card at the Albemarle Club that was addressed "To Oscar Wilde posing Somdomite [sic]" (Ellmann 438). The accusation goaded Wilde into initiating a libel trial whose proceedings commenced on April 3 of the same year. During this trial, Queensberry claimed that he had written that Wilde was "posing as a Sodomite," a less serious charge than was actually written on the card:
Since the contested statement did not actually accuse Wilde of 'sodomy'—or of being a sodomite—for which a strict standard of legal proof (i.e., proof of penetration . . .) would have been required, the defense sought instead to show that Wilde was the kind of person—or at least that he had (re)presented himself as the kind of person—who would be inclined to commit sodomy. (E. Cohen 127)

It is in this trial that Wilde’s literary creations come into play as evidence of his perversity; the defense cross-examines Wilde about the morality of his (and other) literature in an attempt to establish his "pose." The Picture of Dorian Gray was the primary text in the "literary" case against Wilde. As I will argue in this chapter, the use of Dorian Gray in this context is ironic, since Dorian Gray's crimes and unhappy end are largely the result of his status as an unskilled reader. While Wilde advocated the indeterminacy of art, his character is obsessed with the "real" meanings of art, assuming reciprocity between art and life. In the trials, Wilde's antagonists must prove this reciprocity in order to establish the author's deviance. In other words, even though Wilde's detractors accuse his novel and protagonist of being "perverse," they simultaneously adopt the interpretive strategies that lead to Dorian Gray's corruption. Not coincidentally, this is the same type of reading formerly assumed to be reserved for "weakminded," naive readers.

The defense also had some damning evidence about more concrete manifestations of Wilde's "sodomitical character." Fearing that the rapidly emerging evidence might lead to Wilde's arrest by the Public Prosecutor for graver charges, Wilde's counsel, Edward Clarke, persuaded his client to withdraw from the case, allowing a verdict on the charge of "posing." It was too late, however, to avert disaster. Wilde was arrested later the same day, this time for offenses under Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act. The second trial, which sought to establish that Wilde had committed "acts of indecency with another male person," began the next day, the sixth of April. The jury could not agree, and Wilde was retried on May 21. Four days later, Wilde was found
guilty on all but one count of "gross indecency" and was sentenced to two years' imprisonment with hard labor.

While Wilde's trials have long been recognized as a turning point for the way we think about sexual identity, in this chapter I intend to show that they also transform the way we think about "dangerous" culture and entertainment. The most dramatic alterations brought about by Wilde's controversy include a major shift in imagining the endangered audience, as well as the idea that the author's body poses a corporeal threat to the consumers of his/her aesthetic products. Although some of Wilde's work shares commonalities with the sensation novel—whose creators were not considered corporeally toxic—the themes that emerge in his trials link him to cultural figures—such as Mae West—whose deviant sexuality was imagined as conspiring with their dangerous aesthetic projects to complete the "pollution" of the consumer.

In moving from Wilkie Collins to Oscar Wilde, we must reevaluate the connections among reading, the body, and the text. Two metaphors serve to link the works of these authors together: forgery and poison. Forgery and poison appear literally in the works of both authors, most prominently in Collins's Armadale and Wilde's "Pen, Pencil and Poison." Yet these terms are simultaneously loaded with other, more figurative meanings. Forgery in Armadale constitutes Lydia Gwilt's first instance of impersonating or passing as a lady. Her status as the novel's most pitiless creature reinforces the notion that performative identity, a continuously embodied "forgery," can be absolutely wicked. Lydia must repent to discover her "true" womanhood by the end of the novel, and this means her destruction and the reduction of her identity to an anonymous femininity (L./elle/she), the antithesis of her ambition to usurp the sacred male name of Armadale.

Yet not all impersonation in Collins's fiction is evil. Since his novels frequently problematize identity, Collins sometimes presents impersonation or acting as the only
option for people whose original identity is no longer available to them (such as Magdalen Vanstone and Midwinter). While there can be problems with this kind of "acting" (Magdalen must repent of her scheme in the end), it is permissible if done in the interests of restoring the original identity. Through Magdalen's machinations, the inheritance is restored to the two Vanstone sisters, and Magdalen's repetition of her father's youthful errors and "correction" by men of the Kirk family reinforce the pattern of the Vanstone identity (even while they raise questions about her gender identification). "Midwinter," meanwhile, is the false identity enacted by one of the Allan Armadales, but since the maintenance of this pose is integral to reestablishing the Armadale identity and racial purity, it is lauded as heroic. Thus forgery/impersonation is really only condemned in these texts when enacted by an originally nameless individual who seeks to taint and usurp a respectable name.33

"Forgery" for Wilde, meanwhile, means an opportunity for the multiplication of personality. The author's elaborations on the theme of forgery can be found in "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." and "Pen, Pencil and Poison," the latter of which I will discuss in more detail. "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." is one of those Wildean hybrids of fiction and critical essay meant to advance a particular aesthetic philosophy. Within the first paragraph, the narrator introduces the problem of forgery:

I insisted that... so-called forgeries were really the result of an artistic desire for perfect representation; that we had no right to quarrel with an artist for the conditions under which he chooses to present his work; and that all Art being to a certain degree a mode of acting, an attempt to realise one's own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammeling accidents and limitations of real life, to censure an artist for a forgery was to confuse an ethical with an aesthetical problem. (152)

33The same could be said of The Woman in White's Sir Percival Glyde; his name would even indicate the ease with which he slips into deceptive social roles.
If, as Wilde asserts in "The Decay of Lying," art is the telling of "beautiful untrue things," then forgery is an essential condition of aesthetic production, since creativity is not dependent on reality. Here Wilde makes explicit connections between art and acting, which provide a context for us to consider his representations of posing and identity in such works as The Picture of Dorian Gray and The Importance of Being Earnest. These works are organized around the notion of someone "posing" as something other than they really are, while the key to their "true" identity remains hidden. The irony of Wilde's work is that the surface or "pose" usually turns out to be as true or even more true than the "real" meaning lying beneath the facade. Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.." for example, is an extended discussion of the relationship between forgery and reality, one that ultimately concludes that forgery is acceptable (or even superior to the truth) if used in the service of an aesthetic ideal.

The above passage from "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." also warns against the conflation of ethical and aesthetical issues. "Pen, Pencil and Poison" both elaborates on and complicates this problem. The subject of the study, Thomas Griffiths Wainewright (a friend of Charles Lamb's) was a poet—in addition to being a forger and a poisoner. In this essay, as elsewhere, Wilde asserts art's independence from morality. His remark that a man's criminal status is irrelevant to his artistry seems to emphasize the separation of ethical from aesthetical issues. Yet a careful reading of "Pen, Pencil and Poison" reveals that Wilde's true target is the critical and literary romanticization of past criminals and historical monsters, individuals whose atrocities are forgiven as long as they provide interesting fodder for literature. Wilde's essay insists that, although Wainewright's crimes are too recent to be easily overlooked, in the future he is certain to be admired or glamorized by those who wish to capitalize on his infamy for their own literary profit. The problem with such authors is that they are not forging—i.e., presenting an aesthetic
ideal that may not be "real"—but rather presenting an ugly reality, safely located in the past to be more palatable for public consumption.

Wilde's history of Dorian Gray almost seems to acknowledge how "poisonous" the suggestions of art and interpretation can be, except that Basil and Lord Henry fail to degenerate through their association with art (in the case of the former) and decadent or immoral ideas (in the case of the latter). In fact, Basil even sees Henry's "immoral" cynicism as simply a pose (as Harry does Basil's "morality"). And, indeed, Dorian's body, which is transformed by art, remains uncorrupted. Clearly Wilde likes playing with the notion of "perilous" art and its attendant cultural anxieties while remaining ambiguous about what such art really means, whether art is really dangerous. This moment is crystallized in his essay "Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green," about the poisoner and poet Thomas Griffiths Wainewright:

... the subject of this brief memoir, though of an extremely artistic temperament, followed many masters other than art, being not merely a poet and painter, an art-critic, an antiquarian, and a writer of prose, an amateur of beautiful things, and a dilettante of things delightful, but also a forger of no mean or ordinary capabilities, and as a subtle and secret poisoner without rival in this or any age. (321)

Wilde's description of Wainewright sounds strangely like Collins's portrayal of Lydia Gwilt. Accomplished enough to pass as a governess and play Beethoven, she is adept at the same crimes as Wainewright—forgery and poisoning. These particular crimes are significant, since forgery, as I mentioned in the last chapter, is the way of usurping another's identity ("posing" as someone else), while "poison" is the metaphor commonly used to describe the threat offered by dangerous texts and by prostitutes. "Pen, Pencil and Poison" provides what are perhaps the most concrete links among literature, "posing," and the literal and symbolic implications of "poison." Wilde's viewpoint in this essay remains characteristically ambiguous and paradoxical, yet the difficulties inherent in the interpretation simultaneously confirm the essay's status as Wildean art.
While it is tempting to interpret Wilde's essay as proof of his views on art's independence from morality, Regenia Gagnier takes a different approach, reading "Pen, Pencil and Poison" as a parody of the vulgar fascination with criminals as the subjects of art, journalism, history, and popular culture: "He ironically parodies a topical genre, aesthetic appreciations of bizarre, perverse, often criminal, historical figures, in order to indicate the art world's incriminating engagement with culture. In doing so, he confirms the impossibility of separating creation from criticism, doing from talking, and, ultimately, life from art" (34). However, Gagnier adds that Wilde was not simply targeting the reading matter consumed by the poor or uneducated, such as sensation novels or penny dreadfuls. Rather, he was more troubled by "their offspring, the critical appreciations of criminals, which claimed more objective status and more psychological subtlety. That is, the essay is directed against academic, as well as popular, representatives of the art world" (34). Wilde once complained to the editor of the Scots Observer that the "illiterate and criminal classes" were much more likely to be reading newspapers than anything he had written. This was a jab not only at the quality of newspaper writing, but also at the sensational content of the newspapers themselves. What Gagnier claims is more disturbing to Wilde, however, is that authors of more highbrow material would borrow this same subject matter and transform it so that the vulgar passed for art. In this way certain academic writers were no better than popular writers or journalists; worse, in fact, because rather than posing a danger to the "illiterate classes," they tended to debase the tastes of the cultured and educated. Ironically, Wilde would ultimately be punished for the threat he posed to the men of this same class by seeming to eliminate the differences between them and their "less cultured" brethren. In some respects, it may appear that Wilde was in accord with his antagonists; they were also trying to protect educated men from being debased by literature. Yet one must keep in mind that Dorian Gray does precisely the opposite of what one would expect a criminal
history to do. Whereas the pleasure of reading "critical appreciations of criminals" (or
to attending murder trials) derives from the vicarious thrill of discovering the details of the
crimes, *Dorian Gray* rarely provides us with such descriptions. The novel actually
thwarts our desire to linger over gruesome scenes, making us conscious of our own
debased tastes. It is significant that its most detailed criminal description involves
Dorian's murder of Basil; the satisfaction of our desire for gore coincides with the death
of the artist.

Gagnier's provocative reading is correct in pointing out the irony of Wilde's essay,
yet we are then faced with the problem of reconciling his defense of art as not being
representative of the artist, and of being independent of morality, with his criticism of
irresponsible academic and journalistic treatment of crime, and with the fact that most of
his stories and plays were fairly moralistic. It seems to me Wilde *does* find journalism
guilty of pandering to the "low" tastes of the masses (and this is certainly true in the case
of his trials), but that he still finds humor in the notion that art alone could be solely
responsible for the corruption of the audience:

> [Wainewright's] crimes seem to have had an important effect upon his art. They gave a strong personality to his style, a quality that his early work certainly lacked. In a note to the *Life of Dickens*, Forster mentions that in 1847 Lady Blessington received from her brother, Major Power . . . an oil portrait of a young lady from his clever brush; and it is said that "he had contrived to put the expression of his own wickedness into the portrait of a nice, kind-hearted girl." M. Zola, in one of his novels, tells us of a young man who, having committed a murder, takes to art, and paints greenish impressionist portraits of perfectly respectable people, all of which bear a curious resemblance to his victim. The development of Mr. Wainewright's style seems to me far more subtle and suggestive. One can fancy an intense personality being created out of sin. (338)

The phenomena noted by Wilde here seem to literalize that confusion of art and artist that
he criticized in the reviewer of the *Scots Observer*. One cannot help noticing the tongue-in-cheek treatment here, as Wilde appears to chuckle at the anxieties linking crime to art
by offering examples that seem to make these entities interchangeable. The concern
about aesthetic productions inspiring crime has been replaced by the transformation of crime into art. Wilde pokes fun at "dangerous art" through exaggeration, however, this passage may also signal a problem with or a misuse of "posing" as a system of signification. If one can create a particular interiority through the exhibition of a certain exteriority and vice versa, than what does it mean for the artist's interiority to be transposed onto the art object itself?

One can read "Pen, Pencil and Poison" retroactively through the aesthetic philosophy constructed in Dorian Gray. Wilde's warning that it is the spectator revealed by art, along with his assertion that art conceals the artist, problematizes Basil's fear that the "secret of [his] own soul" is exposed by the portrait of Dorian. If this really were the case, we would have to regard the decay of the portrait as a reflection of Basil's sickening personality. Yet Basil is portrayed throughout as upright and earnest, and the reader is aware that the portrait is marred by Dorian's deeds rather than Basil's desires. The preservation of Dorian's body is Basil's "new manner in art," the literal embodiment of Basil's conception of Dorian's body as an ideal surface. The portrait of Dorian can be contrasted with the examples referred to in the above quote from Wilde. The author's preface to Dorian Gray states that, "To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim"(11). The painters mentioned in "Pen, Pencil and Poison" reveal themselves—and, in fact, the worst part of themselves—in their work rather than aspiring to the creation of ideal surfaces.

The most frequently quoted line from "Pen, Pencil and Poison" is the notorious "The fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose" (339). This has usually been interpreted as a defense of Wainewright, or at least as a defense of art's separation from morality. It thus seems a little odd that this particular essay did not emerge six

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34 This particular exaggeration of bourgeois anxieties sometimes appears in Camp productions. See, for example, John Waters's Female Trouble.
years later in the "literary" part of Wilde's cross-examination in the first trial. Perhaps this is because, as Gagnier emphasizes, Wilde is critical of the way in which scholars had tended to sugar-coat sometimes gruesome historical facts:

First, Wilde suggests that the aesthetic, impressionist, or Paterian school of criticism mystified the past, that is, that critics primarily concerned with art and artists obfuscated certain unconscionable facts of history in order to justify their own sense of the primacy of art. Second, he says explicitly that although such an obfuscation of history may have been attractive, it was dangerous for the present. (35)

Wilde apparently has his own idea of "dangerous reading," which consists of a denial of unpleasant facts and a glamorization of violence and criminality. Dorian Gray in fact provides a strange twist on this formula. The protagonist cannot escape his miserable deeds; their continual materialization on the surface of the portrait perpetually haunts him. Dorian tries to obfuscate his unconscionable history by closeting it, and then by destroying it, but the latter effort makes the truth available to everyone, even if they are incapable of deciphering it. Violence is not made palatable through its transformation into art; the aestheticization of crime is universally destructive.

Another reason that "Pen, Pencil and Poison" failed to appear in Wilde's trials may have to do with its suggestion that crime is more likely to result from certain social and/or historical conditions than from the influence of art. This is the argument put forth in Wilde's discussion of Wainewright's imprisonment and transportation. Wainewright felt that, as a "gentleman," he was above his fellow prisoners, regardless of how the gravity and brutality of his crimes compared to theirs:

... in a letter written to a friend he spoke bitterly about the ignominy of "the companion of poets and artists" being compelled to associate with "country bumpkins." The phrase that he applies to his companions need not surprise us. Crime in England is rarely the result of sin. It is nearly always the result of starvation. There was probably no one on board in whom he would have found a sympathetic listener, or even a psychologically interesting nature. (337-38)
Wilde's tone here is hardly sympathetic toward Wainewright. The irony of one who chooses to commit crime considering himself more "gentlemanly" than those who were driven to it out of necessity is more than apparent, especially when one compares it to Wilde's own ideas about the artificiality of class structure. Wainewright's assumption of his "natural" superiority provides an ironic contrast to his status as a forger. Wilde must have recognized that Wainewright's social status was at least partially dependent on his social and criminal posing. Wainewright's snobbery derives from his reinscription of his social position as "natural," his refusal to recognize that circumstances rather than nature distinguish him from his fellow prisoners.

The conclusion of "Pen, Pencil and Poison" remarks that Wainewright's prose is rather mediocre, but is more focused on the potential connection between "crime and culture" that a discussion of the poet occasions. Wilde certainly does not believe in censoring literary and historical figures because they set a bad example—"We cannot re-write the whole of history for the purpose of gratifying our moral sense of what should be" (339)—but by the same token he does not think that the atrocities of historical figures should be forgiven or forgotten simply because they are safely in the past. The intention of this essay seems to be to get away from the cultural hysteria surrounding the links between crime and art, while at the same time being careful not to absolve historical criminals simply because their lives or works were fascinating:

Of course, [Wainewright] is far too close to our own time for us to be able to form any purely artistic judgment about him... But had the man worn a costume and spoken a language different from our own, had he lived in imperial Rome... or in any land or any century but this century and this land, we would be quite able to arrive at a perfectly unprejudiced estimate of his position and value. I know that there are many historians, or at least writers on historical subjects, who still think it necessary to apply moral judgments to history... This, however, is a foolish habit, and merely shows that the moral instinct can be brought to such a pitch of perfection that it will make its appearance wherever it is not required. Nobody with the true historical sense ever dreams of blaming Nero, or scolding Tiberius or censuring Caesar Borgia. These personages... may fill us
with terror, or horror, or wonder, but they do not harm us. . . . They have passed into the sphere of art and science, and neither art nor science knows anything of moral approval or disapproval. And so it may be some day with Charles Lamb's friend. At present I feel that he is just a little too modern to be treated in that fine spirit of disinterested curiosity to which we owe so many charming studies of the great criminals of the Italian Renaissance. . . . To be suggestive for fiction is to be of more importance than a fact. (339-40)

Despite his opposition to confusing art with the artist and placing a moral value on art, Wilde at least saw something vulgar in capitalizing on journalistic sensation for one's fictional subject. This is not necessarily because Wilde views art as corrupting. In fact, in the preface to *Dorian Gray* and in his trials, Wilde insists that there is no such thing as "corrupt" or "perverted" literature; all that is relevant is the quality and creativity of the writing. On the other hand, art can be *corrupted* through too close an association with "facts," especially when these facts concern vulgar or banal subjects such as crime. The problem with the criminal histories criticized by Wilde in "Pen, Pencil and Poison" is that they attempt to be hybrids of both art and fact. Yet the authors' romanticization of their subjects prevents them from being factual, while the works' necessary grounding in a gruesome reality prohibits them from being truly creative. Ultimately, true art must free itself from dependence on facts.

The authors who capitalize on sensational criminal histories may, on the other hand, be guilty of the "poisoning" that is Wainewright's other crime. "Poison" is a common metaphor in the nineteenth century for literature which is regarded as corrupting its readership, such as the sensation novel or *Dorian Gray*. It is also used as a metaphor for venereal disease and prostitution. Its association with women and the dangers they pose is further strengthened by its status as a "woman's method" for murder.35 Collins's Lydia Gwilt is poisonous in both literal and figurative senses. She poisoned her first husband, and attempts to poison Allan Armadale. Her status as a "fallen woman" and her

35 Especially by poisoning their husbands through their food. Many of the murder trials for women were poison cases. For some famous examples, see the Madeleine Smith and Florence Maybrick cases in Altick's *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*. 162
use of sexuality threaten to "poison" English bourgeois domesticity. This toxic sexuality was usually associated only with women. Yet Dorian Gray proves equally baneful to his acquaintances, and the assumption that Dorian's sins are sexual may reinforce the notion of his "poisonous body." Likewise, for the first time with Wilde, we find that the author's body is considered as toxic as the text or its protagonist; the text becomes the means for the author to spread his poison to the reader.

Wilde's only novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, has much in common with the sensation novel. For example, Dorian Gray was first published in serial form—albeit in America—in Lippincott's Monthly. True, the sensation novel was a popular form often lacking in the merits of "high art," although the fact that authors such as Dickens and Hardy occasionally wrote sensation fiction reveals the genre's crossover potential. Wilde, as England's foremost representative of the aesthetic movement (along with Pater) and "l'art pour l'art," is, on one hand, a representative of "high art," yet his turns as playwright and lecturer simultaneously link him to popular culture. Indeed, his comedies of manners and society, such as The Importance of Being Earnest and Lady Windermere's Fan, demand fluency in popular culture, etiquette, habits, and tastes—both from author and audience. His famous paradoxes reveal his familiarity with bourgeois maxims.

In terms of form and content, Dorian Gray shares with the sensation novel a "love of secrecy," represented by a hidden secret (belied by the appearance of "normal," even beautiful, people) whose revelation is compulsively sought throughout the story. Yet Dorian Gray diverges from the sensation novel in that the audience knows the secret of the portrait from its debut, and subsequent attempts to discover the novel's other secrets are baffled at every turn. For the reader seeking Dorian Gray's "true" sins, there is no payoff.

Dorian Gray also continues the erosion of the connection between gender and the certainty of interpretation begun in the sensation novel. D.A. Miller's argument about
The Woman in White (discussed in Chapter Two) points out the "gender trouble" inherent in the reading of that novel. For while the audience of the sensation novel (and for popular literature in general) is routinely imagined as female, The Woman in White addresses a specifically male reader. The problem perhaps lies less with the female reader invited to gaze on and appraise Marian Halcombe's looks (for women in our culture are trained to assimilate and accept as natural this "scopophilic" aesthetic) than it does with the male reader who must necessarily indulge in "sensation" in order to appreciate the novel.

Although thanks to Miller and other contemporary theorists we can now see the dangers to masculine identity embodied by the sensation novel, it is interesting that during the period of the genre's popularity, the "unsexing" of men was apparently not a possibility to alarm critics. As my previous chapters have discussed, critics such as Oliphant and Mansel were largely concerned at what effects this fiction might have on "unsuspecting ladies" who were tempted into buying examples of literary poison at the ubiquitous "railway-stall." And, as I have also been arguing, much of the danger lay in the fact that the ostensibly imperilled population knew no better than to interpret the text mimetically (and part of the fear behind this was that women would gain the knowledge that would lead them to overcome such "innocent" readings). If the sensation novel's contemporaries recognized it as a threat to masculine identity, it was as an indirect one.

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36 Refer to both the implied and the direct addresses to male readers in the novel. Most (in)famously, there is the elaborate physical description of Marian Halcombe that appraises every detail of her voluptuous body, stopping only with the horrified declaration of her ugliness (58-59). More specific is the address to men in the description of Laura Fairlie, which asks the reader to "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" (76).

37 The issue of female spectatorship and gender identification will be developed more thoroughly in the next chapter. Because many novels and films present female bodies as the object of the erotic gaze, it has been difficult to pinpoint to what degree women, for whom this system of representation has been naturalized, experience scopophilia, identification, or other possible spectatorial reactions. Some excellent discussions of sex and spectatorship appear in The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality (London: Routledge, 1992).
since consumption of sensation fiction could cause women to become unchaste, endangering the sanctity of patrilineality.

Both Dorian Gray and the sensation novel problematize the gender identity of the reader, a situation that is further complicated by threats to the stability of identity in the "real" world of the Victorians. As literary scholar James Eli Adams points out, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the formerly immutable laws of social hierarchy "and the security they afforded had largely disintegrated as 'rank' gave way to structures of class, yet social hierarchy was a more urgent preoccupation than before--largely as a consequence of its new flexibility" (5). As the rise of industrialization and the middle class replaces a system of absolute social predestination, it becomes necessary to create new signifiers of social identity that are independent of rank. Among the new "styles" of masculinity (as Adams terms them) is the professional man, a category that includes the intellectual. This particular way of embodying manhood becomes a new way of signifying both class and gender status:

the professional professes to disdain narrowly economic interests. . . . Increasingly, middle-class professionals (including male writers) legitimated their masculinity by identifying it with that of the gentleman--a norm that was the subject of protracted contention throughout Victorian culture, because the concept served so effectively to regulate social mobility and its attendant privileges. . . . The gentleman was . . . rendered compatible with a masculinity understood as a strenuous psychic regimen, which could be affirmed outside the economic arena, but nonetheless would be embodied as a charismatic self-mastery akin to that of the daring yet disciplined entrepreneur. (Adams 6-7)

The professional man is ostensibly just as "masculine" a middle-class man as the "captain of industry," as long as devotion to the intellectual life is framed as a form of strenuous and self-denying labor. The intellectual thus escapes the commercial vulgarity of the "captain of industry" while retaining a legitimately masculine and necessary identity within his culture. But as Adams emphasizes from the beginning of his argument, intellectual labor was a suspicious style of "manliness" within Victorian culture. On one
hand, the intellectual was sometimes associated with the problematic figure of the dandy. On the other, "a wide array of Victorian intellectual vocations--Tennysonian poetry, Tractarian faith, Arnoldian culture, Paterian aestheticism, even Carlylean prophecy--came to resemble models of feminine activity and authority, particularly the 'influence' assigned to the domestic woman" (1). Ultimately, though, Wilde is the Victorian critic who will face the most extreme scrutiny of his gender identity.

This is the cultural atmosphere in which we must consider Oscar Wilde. For not only was Wilde a writer, an aesthete, and a dandy (or at least an heir thereof), but he was also an example of all these things that disproved the notion of intellectual labor as "strenuous and self-denying."

While biographies of Wilde indicate that he was, at least at times, a disciplined writer and student,\(^*\) they simultaneously indicate that Wilde never appeared to do any work and indeed cultivated the appearance of never laboring at anything. We should further add to this that, as a critic, Wilde even further approximated the domestic woman through his position of "influence." Unlike the domestic woman, however, Wilde's influence apparently did not inspire virtue. His perceived temptation to sexual vice also links him discursively with the domestic woman's scarlet sisters.

According to Peter Gay, middle-class Victorians depended upon critics as "acknowledged legislators" of taste. As various types of artists doubled as critics, the Victorian era became "quite literally an age of criticism" (114). While Gay's discussion does not focus on the problematized "masculinity" of the critic\(^\text{39}\) and other professional men in general, it strikes me that the "influence" that threatened to feminize the intellectual, coupled with the importance of the critic (as the height of the "influential" professional) in Victorian culture, forms a particularly dangerous and destabilizing nexus. For while the Victorian public may have been reassured by relying on authorities to make

\(^*\) See, for example, Ellmann or Pearson.

\(^\text{39}\) Except in Wilde's case (132-33).
aesthetic decisions for them, they were also entrusting themselves and their tastes to potentially "unmanly" men.

Oscar Wilde offers the most potent example of such a case. Wilde's anti-philistine remarks aroused ire among his contemporaries, who "sensed pernicious social implications in them; they seemed to abandon the critic's mission to civilize the bourgeois and gave unwelcome space to immorality" (Gay 132). On one hand, the disapproval directed at Wilde seemed to confirm at least one of his own ideas about art. In "The Critic as Artist," Wilde's dialogue suggests that there is no appreciable difference between the creative and the critical faculty: "The antithesis between them is entirely arbitrary. Without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all worthy of the name" (69-70). By imagining the critic's job as "civiliz[ing] the bourgeois," Wilde's detractors attributed the same function both to literature and to criticism. Both forms should "instruct and delight," should edify the readers without leading them astray through sensations or ideas that could be productive of immorality. Like sensation fiction, Wilde's criticism threatened bourgeois domestic tranquility by unsettling soothing, received ideas. And while, as D.A. Miller argues, novels such as The Woman in White could expose male readers to the dangers of "feminine" sensations (although they simultaneously "unsexed" women), Oscar Wilde's statements, writing, and "posing" also marked a threat to the "manliness" of British men everywhere.

Wilde's artistic project, and specifically the element of "posing"/forgery merges disastrously with the medicolegal construction of the homosexual and the contemporary means of scrutinizing the body and its behaviors for signs of "perversion." As I will argue, Wilde's valorization of "posing" was concerned both with the creative importance of "acting" and with the formation of a homosexual identity that could be read through exterior significations. At the same time, Victorian psychologists and sexologists were also seeking to establish the corporeal legibility of homosexuality, and the Labouchere
Amendment of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 enabled the legal prosecution and punishment of persons identified as homosexual. While earlier sodomy laws had focused on punishing the perpetrator of a specific act, regardless of the gender (or even species) of the partner involved, the Labouchere Amendment was the first legal statute to criminalize a personality type based on sexual object choice.

Wilde also seems to offer the first case in which the criminal sexual character of the author could penetrate his/her aesthetic products. Sexual outlaws had long been linked with literature, yet this did not always mean that the author's sexuality pervaded the text. (Just to be safe, though, one might not want one's daughter to read Byron.) The danger of the text lay in the ideas expressed in it rather than in its status as an extension of the author's corporeality. Before Wilde, probably the closest examples of similar anxieties about authorship, sexuality, and the audience can be found in discussions of transgressive women authors. Virginia Woolf makes this point in *A Room of One's Own*:

> For now that Aphra Behn had done it, girls could go to their parents and say, You need not give me an allowance; I can make money by my pen. Of course the answer for years to come was, Yes, by living the life of Aphra Behn! Death would be better! and the door was slammed faster than ever. That profoundly interesting subject, the value that men set upon women's chastity and its effect upon their education, here suggests itself for discussion. . . . (1960)

The connection between intellectual labor and female chastity drawn by Woolf suggests that women were deprived of educational and creative opportunities with the understanding that such activities would imperil their bodily integrity. Woolf's version is interesting in that it positions *educated* women, rather than "weakminded" ones, as the population endangered by texts (or at least by their production). Wilde's vulnerable audience is also educated, although male. In the sense that it was usually only women in the public eye that were subject to sexual scrutiny, Wilde resembles women authors. And, like sexually transgressive women writers, Wilde's sexuality is represented as being
harmful mainly to educated readers of the same gender. The more that Wilde's work becomes representative of his aesthetic theories—that is, the more erudite his audience would apparently need to be to interpret it—the more insidious it becomes.

This chapter is not really interested in whether Wilde's literature is a site for encoding sexuality. Such terrain has been explored thoroughly elsewhere, and since it has been well established that Wilde was what we would now call a homosexual, there is no longer any controversy about the discovery of such meanings in his work. What I am more interested in are the problems associated with reading sexually encoded literature at the time, and with Wilde's resistance to the legal imperative to fix the meaning of Dorian Gray and other works as homosexual. William Cohen remarks that Wilde's "sexually unorthodox" male characters usually must conform or be punished by the end of the narrative:

Wilde's literary project of sexual suggestiveness is so self-conscious that the exuberance of its content may necessitate the primitive retractions of its closural moments: in knowing what he is doing, Wilde also recognizes that he ought not to be doing it, and he inscribes this recognition at the level of plot. . . . Wilde's aversion to an unequivocal affirmation of homoeroticism has less to do with an intentional negativism about sex than with his positive program for literature. (212-13)

Cohen understands Wilde's endings not only as the product of an enforced closeting, but also as analogous to the conclusions of many sensation novels or Production Code-era films in which transgressive content appears to be safely contained by a moral resolution. While Wilde may have attempted to create homosexual literary codes, he simultaneously believed that the best works of art always contained multiple interpretations: "the aesthetic critic rejects those obvious modes of art that have but one message to deliver, and having delivered it becomes dumb and sterile, and seeks rather for such modes as suggest reverie and mood, and by their imaginative beauty make all interpretations true and no interpretations final" ("The Critic as Artist" 89-90). Wilde's theories were
antithetical to the courtroom strategy of determining the finality of a single interpretation. Wilde's antagonists insisted on the referentiality of his literature, demanding that the unspoken crimes of Dorian Gray substituted for the author's "unspeakable" crimes of real life. Wilde would have considered this "poor reading," but his attempt to educate his persecutors in the art of interpretation failed. Ironically, *Dorian Gray*, the most controversial text of the trial, features a protagonist who is also a poor reader. Despite inhabiting multiple identities, Dorian attempts to reduce art to a single, monolithic interpretation (by destroying the alternative meanings embodied in the portrait), and in so doing commits suicide. Wilde's story is a parable of dangerous consumption, but the variables of gender, sexuality, and class altered the terms of the debate.

In the preface to the novel, Wilde offers a number of epigrams that advise against certain nineteenth-century interpretive tendencies. Some of these are in keeping with Wilde's usual anti-Philistine remarks:

The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.

The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass. (11)

Wilde's choice of Caliban as the representative of the nineteenth century is not exactly flattering, given that the character is primitive and bestial. It is perhaps appropriate, though, that Wilde's implied position is that of Prospero, the master of the art and literature that the Philistines rage against in their interpretive ineptitude. Wilde depicts Caliban (and those he represents) as incapable of appreciating imaginative beauty or of facing unpleasant truths. These criticisms of the Victorian reading public and their preferred reading material will emerge again in his critical essays, where Wilde will repeatedly insist that good writing invites a multitude of interpretations, while poor readers limit themselves to a single interpretation.
Wilde's preface proceeds to address reading strategies encouraged by such genres as the sensation novel. Namely, he emphasizes the consequences of prying too far beneath the surface, or for looking for some truth about "real life" in a work of art:

All art is at once surface and symbol.  
Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.  
Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.  
It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors. (11)

Of course I want to be careful here of reading too much "truth" into Wilde's axioms and paradoxes, of claiming this is what the author "really" believed. Wilde's style lies in the pleasures of paradox and contradiction, of going against the grain of received wisdom. Yet it is still worthwhile to take Wilde's preface seriously, no matter how frivolous it may sometimes appear. It is a hallmark of Camp to treat banality with gravity. In the passage quoted above, Wilde inverts conventional thinking about how to read, and about the gravity of reading's relationship to real life. Wilde warns that "sophisticated" readings are dangerous. On one hand, this reverses the nineteenth-century conviction that uninformed, superficial reading was dangerous. At the same time, however, the perils of interpretation might provide a transgressive thrill akin to the pleasurable nervousness produced by the consumption of the sensation novel. The motivation behind Wilde's statements can hardly be the same as it would have been for most Victorian critics. He is unconcerned with morality in art, as he states here and elsewhere that morality has to do neither with thought nor with intellect. The danger to the reader, at least in terms of

40 The height of Wilde's Camp productions is The Importance of Being Earnest, which, rather than concluding with a moral, ends with the protagonist's discovery that the "pose" he has been performing for years turns out to be his "true" identity.

LADY BRACKNELL: My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of triviality.
JACK: On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest. (507)

Earnest has a gleeful, ludicrous, campy ending because its characters valorize the pose, unlike Dorian Gray, whose solemnity can be found in the characters' obsession with the "facts" beneath the surface.  

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Wilde's preface, lies in his or her own interiority—or lack of interpretive skill—rather than in the text.

The Picture of Dorian Gray itself is all about the reading of appearances, and the dire consequences that result from overconfidence in a limited interpretive apparatus. Before we even meet Dorian Gray, we find the cynical Lord Henry Wotton making conjectures about the young man based on his portrait: "Your mysterious young friend, whose name you have never told me, but whose picture really fascinates me, never thinks. I feel quite sure of that. He is some brainless, beautiful creature, who should be always here in winter when we have no flowers to look at, and always here in summer when we want something to chill our intelligence" (13). Lord Henry's description of Dorian calls to mind Collins's portrait of Geoffrey Delamayn. Dorian Gray seems to be feminized by the obsessive focus on physical appearance that is usually reserved for fiction's female characters. Lord Henry's assumptions about Dorian's ignorance—and later about his innocence—are always based on the young man's appearance, and Henry's own misguided confidence in the reliability of surfaces. Dorian recognizes the crucial role that his appearance plays in his interpretation by others, and the resulting concerns with the cultivation of this surface further link him with Collins's Geoffrey. In both cases, the cultivation of physical appearance—whether in terms of beauty or muscularity—renders the men "brainless." Both Dorian and Geoffrey degenerate through their status as poor readers who literally reenact what they consume—Dorian with Lord Henry's suggestions and the portrait, and Geoffrey with the Newgate Calendar and Hester Dethridge's murder narrative. Finally, both Geoffrey's and Dorian's "feminization" leads to an unhealthy and ultimately fatal pursuit of "feminine" obsessions—Geoffrey's absorption with his body, and Dorian Gray's shopping.

Basil Hallward, the artist, has different concerns about art, interpretation, and spectatorship. He is apprehensive about showing his portrait of Dorian because he fears
it reveals too much about himself: "... every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. ... I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul" (15). Basil fears that the secret will become legible to anyone exposed to the portrait. This secret, of course, is easily read as the nature of the desire Basil feels for Dorian:

> When our eyes met, I felt that I was growing pale. A curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with some one whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself. I did not want any external influence in my life. ... I have always been my own master; had at least always been so, till I met Dorian Gray. (15)

In Moe Meyer's reading of Wilde's theory of "posing," Dorian becomes the surface that reflects Basil's desire. Dorian's body remains unchanged because this desire, instead of being located in the painting as Basil fears, has been purified through art and embodied by the living Dorian. It is the painting, instead, that is disfigured by the ugly reality of Dorian's crimes.  

Meyer's reading of *Dorian Gray* is provocative, and the text offers much evidence for this interpretation. Basil remarks of Dorian that "He is all my art to me now," and Dorian suggests to him "a new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style" (18). Basil's discoveries with Dorian would seem to correspond to Wilde's ideas about "posing" and art, the creation of new and alternative interiorities through the cultivation of a certain exteriority.

Dorian, meanwhile, is not really interested in composing new interiorities or exterior surfaces. He is afraid of signifying a new interiority and wants only for his exteriority to remain constant. In this respect, then, Dorian's criminality is the result of his opposition to the interests of art. Dorian can thus be interpreted as a critique of conservative writers, critics, and scientists who viewed artistic innovation as degeneracy:

Wilde represents an unwillingness to change one's signifying surface as an indication of

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41See Meyer 86-87.
deviance. Degeneration, by the then-popular German journalist, critic and physician Max Nordau, was a text that opposed artistic innovation and specifically targeted Wilde and other writers, artists, and philosophers as being responsible for the malaise and decay that, in his opinion, characterized the era bearing the "silly" (1) name of the fin-de-siècle:

Books and works of art exercise a powerful suggestion on the masses. It is from these productions that an age derives its ideals of morality and beauty. If they are absurd and anti-social, they exert a disturbing and corrupting influence on the views of a whole generation. Hence the latter, especially the impressionable youth, easily excited to enthusiasm for all that is strange and seemingly new, must be warned and enlightened as to the real nature of the creations so blindly admired. . . . Exclusively literary and aesthetic culture is, moreover, the worst preparation conceivable for a true knowledge of the pathological character of the works of degenerates (vfr)

Nordau's tome, written in 1892 and translated into English in 1895, purports to establish the causes and symptoms of "degeneration," which he sees as the defining characteristic of the fin-de-siècle mood. He takes issue with the term itself, rendered suspect by its French origins: "... it is a habit of the human mind to project externally its own subjective states. And it is in accordance with this naïvely egoistic tendency that the French ascribe their own senility to the century, and speak of fin-de-siècle when they ought correctly to say fin-de-race" (2). By this Nordau means not that the end of the human race approaches (as he explains in a footnote), but that the decadent rich are going into decline. The "simpler" ways of the peasant and the morality of the bourgeois will ensure their survival, while those who hold "contempt for traditional views of custom and morality" (5) (in Nordau's version, mainly artists and the aristocracy) will become extinct. Applying the principles of contemporary scientists such as Lombroso to art and literature, Nordau examines these works "scientifically" for signs of degeneration (as Lombroso had done with the human body in works such as The Female Offender). To Nordau, any sign of eccentricity or nonconformity in art or other forms of self-expression (such as dress) is cause for alarm. He prophesies mass cultural decay based on the unfortunate capacity of
dangerous art and literature to reach the masses. While Nordau champions "healthy" authors and painters (most of whom can be found in the distant past), he warns of the influence of decadent cultural forms with which one is constantly surrounded. While earlier Victorian critics mainly reserved their venom for discussions of perilous books, Nordau goes even farther. He is certainly worried about degenerate and insane writers (Wilde and the Decadents, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, for example), but even the illiterate are not safe from the influence of poisonous culture. Degenerate painting (such as Impressionism and Pre-Raphaelitism) endangers the eye, and, perhaps less easily avoided, degenerate music (Wagner is a prime offender) imperils the ear. In his introduction to the 1968 edition of Degeneration, historian George L. Mosse notes that Nordau "opposed the 'invention' of new artistic forms, for he believed that the ancient forms permitted enough flexibility for organic growth' (xvii). In short, any attempt to innovate, or, as Basil Hallward puts it, to create a "new manner in art" is interpreted as degeneracy by Nordau, and is of a piece with gestural and sartorial eccentricities such as Wilde's.

Nordau asserted that degenerate art was the greatest of the century's problems and elevated science as the solution to cultural decline. Given that nineteenth-century science devoted itself to the identification of myriad forms of cultural "poison," it is ironic that, in Wilde's story, it is not the artist who holds the greatest, and most dangerous influence over Dorian, but the figure with "objective" and "scientific" views that are mimicked by his pupil: "I don't think I am likely to marry, Henry. I am too much in love. That is one of your aphorisms. I am putting it into practice, as I do everything that you say" (42). Yet, as Basil points out, not even Henry follows his own philosophy: "You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose" (14). The fact of Dorian's corruption may lie in his limitations as a "reader": he is capable only of adopting Basil's and Henry's ideas wholesale, literally enacting them. His unskilled
reading makes the dangerous suggestion that well-educated bourgeois and upper-class males were no better readers than "weakminded" women and laborers. The critique implicit in Wilde's portrait of Dorian—as in his statement that art reveals much about the spectator—is that criminality lies not in art or the artist, but in the consumer who possesses a deficient or undeveloped critical faculty, and is only capable of understanding art as a representation of "real" life.

Some of Wilde's shorter fiction displays similar views on reading, performance, and identity, although these stories tend to be comic rather than controversial. In "The Canterville Ghost" and "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime," one can see the development of the Camp aesthetic that will become more pronounced in Wilde's later work. Although neither story is epigrammatic to the point that Wilde's plays are, they are in the habit of "treating serious things trivially and trivial things seriously," a practice that The Importance of Being Earnest will later take to its acme. Earnest is the least moral of Wilde's productions, the one that remorselessly lampoons nearly every aspect of bourgeois Victoriana without producing some grave "meaning" in the end. While "The Canterville Ghost" and "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" are much gentler (perhaps, after all, because they are written earlier), we can already trace this tendency of making fin-de-siècle culture laugh at its own most sacred institutions. Each of these stories is also concerned with the assignation of some identity or fate based on an external signifier. The plots of the above-mentioned stories, as well as Dorian Gray and Earnest, revolve around the protagonists' relationships with these determining signifiers. In "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime," for example, the main character is informed by a chiromantist that he is destined to commit murder. Worried that his crime might burden his family and future wife, Lord Arthur resolves to murder someone before he marries. Lord Arthur considers himself quite the martyr for postponing his nuptials until he performs his "duty" (which is
how he views the adherence to the fate indicated by his palm). He makes a few attempts at murder, none of which succeed. Finally, however, Lord Arthur encounters the chiromantist on a bridge, and is inspired to throw him into the Thames. Lord Arthur thus fulfills his destiny by killing the only person who ever could have made him aware of it. He can now be married, and "Never for a single moment did Lord Arthur regret all that he had suffered for Sybil's sake" (185).

The irreverence of "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" does much to obscure its more serious points. I refer not to the trivial treatment of murder, but to its criticism of the idea that identity or destiny is determined from birth and can be read on the surface of the body. Lord Arthur does not see anything wrong with the murder because he is bound to do it by his bodily inscription; it is, like his title, his birthright, and he must perform it properly no matter how much of a "sacrifice" he feels it to be. Both Lord Arthur and Dorian are naive readers whose actions are based on their obsessions with the interpreted surfaces. "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" ends with the murder of the character who enabled the protagonist's corporeal literacy; with the destruction of the interpreter, Lord Arthur can happily (and even guiltlessly) return to his domestic life. Dorian Gray's conclusion is much less sanguine, as Dorian's misreading of the painting, his

12 "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime," originally published in 1887, eerily foreshadows Wilde's real-life encounter with a chiromantist a few years later. At a social gathering in 1893, Wilde received a reading from a palmist named Cheiro. Wilde's anonymity was preserved during the reading by means of a curtain, yet his apparent "corporeal legibility" in this instance is absolutely uncanny. When Cheiro noticed significant differences in the lines of each palm, he explained how in palmistry the left hand denotes hereditary tendencies and the right hand individual developments. The left hand in front of him, he said, promised a brilliant success; the right, impending ruin. "The left hand is the hand of a king, but the right that of a king who will send himself into exile." Wilde, a superstitious man . . . asked "At what date?" "A few years from now, at about your fortieth year." (He was then thirty-eight.) Without another word Wilde left the party. (Ellmann 382)

Two years later, Wilde's trials took place. Ironically, Cheiro's "reading" of the body seemed to confirm that Wilde had succeeded in his project of changing his corporeal signification, but only to disastrous effect.
determination to destroy art for the sake of "real life," is catastrophic. There is no
restoration of happy ignorance in the end.

Dorian's unskilled reading is highlighted in his relationship with Sibyl Vane. When Dorian falls in love with Sibyl, it is because he mistakes her theatrical performances for a kind of "real" identity. Yet once he asks the actress to marry him, Sibyl loses her acting ability, the one trait that made Dorian desire her: "... the staginess of her acting was unbearable, and grew worse as she went on. Her gestures became absurdly artificial. She over-emphasized everything that she had to say" (56). Dorian could not bear to see this; "It was simply bad art" (57). Prior to her acquaintance with Dorian, Sibyl's skill as an actress derived, paradoxically, from inexperience—an appropriately sibyllic susceptibility to the personalities of the roles she played. The pre-Dorian Sibyl seems to be empty of her own personality, thus easily absorbing those of the characters she was required to play.

Through her romance with Dorian, however, Sibyl becomes possessed by a new role, the role of "woman" which her culture has already marked out for her. The problem is that this role is incompatible with the role of "actress." About to become a respectable wife, Sibyl can no longer act on the stage, a profession that would be inconsistent with her new character, which, like all the others, she performs perfectly. What Dorian cannot bear is that Sibyl's transformation makes her performance painfully apparent. She no longer "becomes" Juliet; the artifice is plainly revealed. In turn, the status of "woman" or "wife" as just another role to be played becomes apparent as well. Sibyl's acting becomes absurd, exaggerated "bad art." In other words, Sibyl's decision to perform gender properly becomes Camp, revealing the artificial basis of this identity. This is not to suggest that all bad acting or bad art is Camp, but rather that the mode of excess that distinguishes Sibyl's bad performance designates it as Camp. That is, Sibyl's bad acting proceeds from her particular understanding of "real" womanhood, as does her later
explanation to Dorian of her newfound understanding of "real" life. Sibyl's consciousness of her new role transforms her into a female impersonator, both on and offstage.

The tension between "actress" and "woman" can be found in a number of Victorian texts, such as No Name. Despite his great admiration for actresses such as Sarah Bernhardt, Lillie Langtry, and Ellen Terry, Wilde is also guilty of questioning the compatibility of acting and womanhood. His poem "The Artist's Dream" or "San Artysty" dubiously claims to be the translated work of a Polish actress, Madame Helena Modjeska. Yet because Wilde did not speak Polish (Powell 181), we must assume this is Wilde's own poem, and question his motives for writing in the character of an actress. The poem is the lament of an actress who regrets sacrificing an apparently carefree life in order to become internationally famous. Calling herself "Ambition's slave," the speaker recalls asking the figure of Glory for fame, and being chided for the request:

"Child, ignorant of the true happiness,
Nor knowing life's best wisdom, thou wert made
For light love and laughter, not to waste
Thy youth in shooting arrows at the sun,
Or nurturing that ambition in thy soul
Whose deadly poison will infect thy heart,
Marring all life's joy and gladness!" (823)

The actress awakens from her vision with a kind of stigmata, proving once again the "sweet" life she has forfeited in her misguided ambition. Modjeska's ostensible regret is consistent with Victorian conceptions of femininity, as Kerry Powell remarks in "A Verdict of Death: Oscar Wilde, Actresses and Victorian Women";

Actresses were commonly thought to pay a terrible price for the public lives they led, including even the fortunate minority like Modjeska, whose genius or hard work opened the way to riches and international fame. That price was figured in the rhetoric of suffering, illness and death, in lives wrecked by maladies both physical and mental. Victorian praise and even adulation of actresses was thus
mingled with representations of them as . . . victims of their own success in transcending the usual limits of a respectable Victorian woman's life. (181)

This is indeed the case of Dorian Gray and Sibyl Vane. Dorian worships the actress until the moment that he realizes that she is a woman beneath it all, playing a part. And when the role or identity of woman replaces her previous status of art object, an empty vessel filled at various times by the appropriate personality, then she must pay the price of a Victorian woman who has transgressed boundaries.

Sibyl must die when she finds herself a "normal" woman. Having been an actress, she is somehow tainted, barred from what were reputed to be the simple pleasures of the domestic woman. "San Artysty" paints the existence of the bourgeois Victorian woman as a sort of Garden of Eden from which the actress has been cast out, or has chosen to exile herself. And as Powell goes on to observe, these ideas about the actress and the domestic pleasures from which she is excluded are intimately bound with questions of identity itself:

Their lives were believed to be incompatible with the domestic satisfactions of other women whose identity seemed single rather than complex, their lives contained by marriage and motherhood. What could actresses, exiled from the domestic "garden", have in common with them? Indeed, could actresses be said to possess an authentic self of their own amid the whirl of identities that they assumed on stage? Could they be thought of as women at all? (181-82)

Dorian apparently accepts the notion that the actress has no real abiding self, that she is simply an object to "ensoul" and delight others through the myriad personalities she exhibits. When she takes on the role of domestic woman--incompatible with stage acting--she becomes distasteful to Dorian both because she has exposed "femininity" itself as role-playing, and the collapse of "real" self into the performed self has produced "bad art." This is a Camp moment, the literalization of Being-as-Playing-a-Role.

Dorian's developing relationship with the portrait also reveals his misunderstanding of the performative basis of identity. In this case, however, the "bad art" becomes much more material, as the painting turns progressively uglier. Dorian and
Harry dismisses Sibyl as someone who did not really count outside of her stage performances, yet one finds that Dorian's understanding of the relationships among art, reality, and the self is really quite parallel to that of this "simple" girl. Consider Sibyl's explanation of her sudden inability to perform:

... before I knew you, acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived.... You came ... and you freed my soul from its prison. You taught me what reality really is. To-night, for the first time in my life, I saw through the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant in which I had always played.... You had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection. You had made me understand what love really is. (68-69)

When Dorian proposes to Sibyl, she falls under the impression that there is some higher "truth" than the series of performances of which her life has been composed. Ironically, her belief that Dorian has disclosed a new reality to her is shattered when she realizes that Dorian was in love with an illusion, with her art, and had no interest in her "true" and abiding self. Sibyl looks beneath the surface of art at her own peril, and the discovery that her "real" self is only some absurd female impersonation drives her to suicide.

Likewise, early in the novel, Dorian feels that he also has some truth or meaning of life revealed to him in Harry's suggestions and Basil's painting. Lord Henry's "poisonous" philosophy and the yellow book he gives to Dorian make the young man feel as if he has never lived before, as if life has suddenly been revealed to him:

For years, Dorian could not free himself from the influence of this book. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he never sought to free himself from it.... The hero, the wonderful young Parisian, in whom the romantic and the scientific temperaments were so strangely blended, became to him a kind of prefiguring type of himself. And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it. (96)

Basil's completed painting has a similar effect on Dorian: "When he saw it he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognised himself for the first time.... The sense of his own beauty came on
him like a revelation" (27-28). Like Sibyl, Dorian believes that he suddenly understands things about life that were never clear to him before. The main difference between them is that art becomes for Dorian a means of unveiling reality, whereas with Sibyl "reality" makes art seem hollow. In a sense, Dorian's exposure to Harry and Basil likens him to Sibyl before her discovery of "reality," when Shakespeare's characters seemed real to her, since he now believes art will make the truth legible to him: "For there would be a real pleasure in watching it. This portrait would be to him the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul" (82). The decay revealed in the portrait thus seems to be accompanied by Dorian's mental degeneration; he begins to mistake art for reality, hoping that the portrait will make him understand the "truth" of his life. In the beginning we are to blame this on his youth, but as he ages (even while appearing not to), he clings tenaciously to his "primitive" beliefs. Basil Hallward eventually overcomes his fear that Dorian's portrait reveals his own secret--"Even now I cannot help feeling that it is a mistake to think that the passion one feels in creation is ever really shown in the work one creates. Form and colour tell us of form and colour--that is all" (88). Basil has finally overcome his fetishization of the art object, his belief in its power to reveal the secrets of his own life. Yet Dorian has degenerated even further into the beliefs of the impressionable mind.

Dorian's interest in his portrait also makes him increasingly narcissistic, a character trait that Freud considered "natural" to women--and to homosexuals:

He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. He would examine with minute care, and

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43 Dorian's narcissism further links him to "primitive" peoples, women, and "perverts" in the Freudian universe (where images are not open to multiple interpretations, but have a single, fixed interpretation): We have discovered, especially clearly in people whose libidinal development has suffered some disturbance, such as perverts and homosexuals, that in their later choice of love-objects they have taken as a model not their mother but their own selves. They are plainly seeking themselves as a love-object, and exhibiting a type of object-choice which must be termed "narcissistic". (Freud 554)
sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead, or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth, wondering sometimes which were the more horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of age. He would place his white hands beside the coarse bloated hands of the picture, and smile. (97)

Dorian's relationship with the doppelganger of the portrait recalls the strange doubling of Armadale/Midwinter and its resulting homoeroticism. Yet Dorian's admiration of his own beauty, his defeat of time and other disfiguring elements, is also reminiscent of Lydia Gwilt, who took pride in her ability to pass as twenty-five when she had actually reached the "advanced" age of thirty-five, and had spent many of those years engaged in criminal behavior to boot. Wilde gets around the critical objections to Miss Gwilt's "passing" through the supernatural device of the portrait. It is intriguing that Wilde should choose to do this at all, since there often seemed to be less concern with the signifiers of the male body than with the female. Given the mechanics of sex and reproduction, one may be more likely to discover signifiers of sexual experience on the female body (though these are frequently unreliable). And it was, after all, female bodies that were subjected to the indignities of the Contagious Diseases Acts, to studies comparing their faces and genitals to those of more "primitive" women, to dissection and display of their sexual organs. There is no male equivalent of the Hottentot Venus, for example. Because Dorian Gray is obsessed with the signifiers of his own "fall," provided with a speculum through which he can gaze at the physical manifestations of his transgressions, he resembles the sexually deviant woman. We know what Lydia Gwilt's sins were, and reviewers found it inconceivable that these would not be legible on her body. We do not know what Dorian's sins are (or rather, we know only a few of them), yet they are all exposed to us on the surface of the painting. Reviewers differed on the originality of Wilde's device, and variously considered it silly or ingenious. In any case an insistence on corporeal legibility compelled critics to formulate an interpretation of the

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44See Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage.
painting's deformities in spite of Wilde's insistence on their indeterminacy. And because it was common practice to read criminality and sexual deviance onto the bodies of women—really the main model for thinking about the corporeal legibility of sexuality—Dorian's secrets are interpreted in the same vein.

Wilde objected to this way of interpreting his novel, as he indicates in a letter to the Scots Observer of July 9, 1890. In this missive, Wilde responds to a reviewer who evidently shares the anxieties of sensation novel critics such as Oliphant and Mansel:

Your reviewer . . . suggests, and apparently in all seriousness, that I have written [Dorian Gray] in order that it should be read by the most depraved members of the criminal and illiterate classes. Now, Sir, I do not suppose that the criminal and illiterate classes ever read anything except newspapers. They are certainly not likely to be able to understand anything of mine. (Quoted in Hyde 157)

Oscar Wilde's "pose" here is that he could not possibly be guilty of the sins of the sensation novelists, since he regards himself as "above" being a popular writer, and his work is both uninteresting and unintelligible to the "criminal and illiterate classes." Wilde inverts the criticism, suggesting that newspapers—the forum for his detractors—feature the very "corrupting" content that they pretend to find in his art, and that they therefore appeal to the lowest common denominator (a criticism made earlier by Oliphant). One sees here, five years before the trials, the inadequacy of framing Dorian Gray and its "depraved" content as a threat to the portion of the populace regarded as weakminded. By the time of the trials, Queensberry's defense and the Crown's prosecution must interpret Wilde's literature as a danger to "ordinary individuals," i.e., bourgeois men.

In the same letter to the Scots Observer, Wilde also scolds the reviewer for the assumptions he makes about the artist based on his aesthetic productions: "Your critic then, Sir, commits the absolutely unpardonable crime of trying to confuse the artist with his subject-matter. For this, Sir, there is no excuse at all" (Quoted in Hyde 157-58). To
Wilde's chagrin, however, this "unpardonable crime" of drawing inferences about an author from his/her creations would be used against him in his trials. Dorian Gray, the text in question here, would be used as "evidence" of Wilde's own degeneracy. Then, as here, Wilde would refuse to specify Dorian's offenses or to be concerned with the "morality" of the work: "Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray. What Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them" (Quoted in Hyde 158). The text is no longer an active force for corrupting a passive mind, nor is it simply the mirror of its creator's depravity. Instead, Wilde creates a third model of the interaction between reader and text, in which "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors." Wilde's assertion of what the reader brings to the text is subversive in that it refuses to treat the textual consumer as a passive innocent. No one could interpret Dorian Gray's evildoings as "acts of indecency between men" without some idea of what this phrase implied. (And it is interesting that women are always absent from the discussion of this novel--and, for the most part, from the courtroom. Yet it was impossible that women could be corrupted into performing "indecent acts between men."

Despite Wilde's attempts to warn against a reading that insists on referentiality, his body and texts are still interpreted in this manner. While on one level Wilde did try to create a legible homosexual identity, on another he believed that no manifestation of true creativity could be reduced to a single interpretation. Yet Dorian's acquaintances are blinded to his criminality through their allegiance to the singular meaning of his corporeal signification. The diegetic audience is never able to guess how criminal Dorian has been,

45 According to the accounts of the trials, the only women who were permitted in the courtroom were material witnesses, such as the landlady who testified to the "strange" decoration and incense-burning in Taylor's room, and the hotel maids who discovered the incriminating stains on the bedsheets of Wilde's room. Certainly no "ladies" were present, even as witnesses. Yet it is certainly curious that women were excluded from this trial (whose offenses they could not imitate), while they were permitted to attend various other trials (notably murder trials) where the crimes could be performed by women. Simultaneously, Wilde's persecutors construct his victims as men (particularly "ordinary individuals"), who were certainly well-represented in the courtroom.
since sin never manifests itself in his features. When Basil, for instance, hears rumors of Dorian's evildoings, he attempts to warn his friend:

Mind you, I don't believe these rumours at all. At least, I can't believe them when I see you. Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed. People talk sometimes of secret vices. There are no such things. If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the moulding of his hands even. Somebody--I won't mention his name, but you know him--came to me last year to have his portrait done. I had never seen him before, and had never heard about him at the time, though I have heard a good deal since. . . . There was something in the shape of his fingers that I hated. I know now that I was quite right in what I fancied about him. His life is dreadful. But you, Dorian, with your pure, bright, innocent face, and your marvellous untroubled youth--I can't believe anything against you. (111)

On one level Basil is correct, in that there is a surface somewhere that physically exhibits Dorian's sins, the manifest corruption of his "soul." But although we never know what Dorian's sins are, his greatest transgression is perhaps that he is able to "pass" as normal, stainless. Like Lydia Gwilt, Dorian's attractive appearance guarantees his entrée into social situations that should be denied him based on the "unutterable Something" that clings to him. Unlike Lydia, however, Dorian lacks the telltale "gap" that would give him away, the mark of sexual/criminal inscription. Instead, the signifiers of Dorian's corruption are displaced onto another surface, discrete from the body, that can easily be kept secret; not even Basil, who is so sensitive to deviance that he can detect it in the molding of fingers, can find a a trace to "prove" the rumors about Dorian.

The controversy surrounding The Picture of Dorian Gray, which insisted on reading Dorian's sins as homosexual ones, was no doubt based on this anxiety to be able to "read" and identify homosexuals. For one to protect the social margins, the "fringe elements" that endangered the social body had to be recognizable:

This new persecution of the peripheral sexualities entailed an incorporation of perversions and a new specification of individuals. As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-
century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. (Foucault 42-43)

In the previous chapters, I discussed the social anxieties about the identification of the fallen woman. Wilkie Collins raised the ire of critics by creating women whose exteriority did not properly display their sexual status. Collins's critics claimed that it was "impossible" for Magdalen Vanstone to maintain her physical integrity while she was role-playing and deceiving others; such an exteriority was a guarantee of "fallen" female sexuality and its accompanying degraded interiority. They also found Lydia Gwilt "impossible" because she was still capable of appreciating and playing Beethoven despite her sexual appetites and experiences in the demi-monde; reviewers could not believe that this "deviance" would not be made manifest in her face and person, nor could they believe any such person capable of appreciating "high art." Yet the problems with Miss Gwilt must be revealed to us somehow, and repeatedly we find her worrying about her "gap," "plague-spots," and "unutterable Something." Because the speculum is unavailable to us, Miss Gwilt's metaphorical language must make her sexual inscription clear. Moreover, the damage to the Armadale family that is blamed on Miss Gwilt's use of false identity (forgery; posing as a younger, inexperienced governess) is continuously manifested in Midwinter's darkness, hysteria, and the complications in his relationship with Allan. Miss Gwilt's deviance may not be legible on her face, but it cannot help erupting into the text continuously until she is destroyed.

The fallen woman has in common with the homosexual that her transgressions are supposed to be invariably legible on her face and person. However, while women's bodies (particularly those of prostitutes) were regularly subjected to physical examination, the "evidence" for homosexuality was often less concrete. Although
physical examination was a possibility (and it was not used in Wilde's case), it was not a reliable one. Complicating the matter was the fact that, although physical examination might be used in sodomy trials (and even then might be inconclusive), Wilde was not tried for the state of his body but for "posing as a sodomite," and subsequently for being a homosexual. " Fallen" women could be identified through bodily evidence, which would then reveal the woman's identity, psychology, and so on, and the physical act of sodomy should leave a similar identity-producing inscription: "medicine construes personal identity through examination and interpretation of the individual body... If they were sodomites their bodies should have said so" (W. Cohen 80). Yet when confronted with the problem of identifying a homosexual rather than a sodomite, there was no objective or even visible standard for "proving" inclinations, "character," or "core" gender identity.

Bodily signifiers become displaced onto art, clothing, gestures, language, social

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William A. Cohen provides the following example of the male body used as evidence of sodomy in the Boulton and Park sex scandal:

The anus was dilated, and more dilatable, and the muscles surrounding the anus could be easily opened and I could see right into the rectum. And the appearances I saw could be accounted for by the insertion of a foreign body, and one insertion could not account for the appearance I saw, but the insertion of a foreign body numerous times would account for those appearances... I considered the penis and scrotum were of an inordinate length. Boulton was then removed and the prisoner Park came behind the screen... I noticed that his private parts were elongated. I examined the anus: that was very much dilated, and dilatable to a very great extent. The insertion of a foreign body numerous times would cause such an appearance. The rectum was large and there was some discoloration round the edge of the anus, caused probably by sore. I have been in practice sixteen years... and I have on very many occasions examined the anus of persons. I do not in my practice ever remember to have seen such an appearance of the anus as those of the two prisoners presented. The insertion of a man's person would cause the appearances I have described. (Police court records (KB 6/3, part 1) of May 20, 1870, quoted in Cohen 78)

In the Boulton and Park case, the prisoners were originally remanded for wearing women's clothes. The physical examination ordered by the police was ostensibly to determine their "real" sex, but this probing of the anus (certainly not a necessary indicator of biological sex) led to the much graver charges of sodomy. It is interesting that the physician, James Paul, claims never to have seen an anus in this state (despite sixteen years of anal examination), yet he is certain that sodomy between these two men is the cause. It seems ironic that the doctor places such an emphasis on the size of the subjects' sex organs. What should be a guarantee of their "masculinity" (both in the senses of biological sex and of virility) becomes instead proof of their "unmanliness" and "effeminacy." (Paul's opinion on the prisoners' rectums, by the way, was later contradicted by other doctors (Cohen 80), indicating that the state of the anus was not beyond debate, but rather a matter of interpretation).
connections, even one's food and household decorations. What one reads and otherwise consumes becomes a major part of establishing identity, signifiers external to the body that are supposed to tell us about that body and its "soul."

Various external signifiers become a substitute for the physical examination, a way of establishing an individual's character without the necessity of physical probing, which was anyway unreliable. Continuing his discussion of the discursive emergence of the homosexual, Foucault remarks that, "The machinery of power that focused on this alien strain did not aim to suppress it, but rather to give it an analytical, visible, and permanent reality" (43-44). By establishing the legibility of the homosexual, it would seem easier to police the social boundaries that he threatened to penetrate. Yet the maintenance of the homosexual as a permanent identity certainly created a tension (perhaps one of Foucault's "spirals of power and pleasure") in which the naming of the homosexual required a constant surveillance of the boundaries of the "normal," a reliance on the homosexual's existence to confirm one's own normativity. Suppressing the homosexual would eliminate the "Other" necessary to the identification of the "normal" self; thus the Other is simultaneously both threatening and reassuring.

Various social changes in Britain in the late nineteenth century meant that the imagined stability of respected institutions such as class and gender were under attack. Wilde took advantage of the possibilities the new order seemed to offer, but this simultaneously marked him as a destroyer of the earnestness and stability that Victorians valued:

Because Wilde aestheticized his life, he is famous for "posing." Yet the problem of his lack of sincerity exemplifies problems shared by the late Victorians in general. The social conditions of the 1880's were ripe for posing: in this beginning of the age of modern advertising, the press was easily accessible for self-advertisement; the upper classes--which were now consolidating business, professional, and bureaucratic interests in addition to those of the older gentry and aristocracy--were enthusiastic for all kinds of fads and amusements; and the introduction of foreign-made fortunes and the decline of the landed aristocracy's
economic base as a result of agricultural depression relaxed the traditional restrictions on entry into fashionable society. (Gagnier 14)

The middle class had been made possible by shifting boundaries throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, yet they now felt compelled to stabilize those boundaries. The middle class imagined itself as threatened with penetration by the brutalized lower classes or the decadence of the aristocracy. We have already seen in the previous chapters how the governess, often linked with the actress and the prostitute, became the figure around whom crystallized a number of fears about the penetrability of the middle class. Regarded as a necessary fixture in the education of bourgeois children (especially in the teaching of feminine "accomplishments"), she simultaneously served as a reminder of the fragility of social status. Through real and fictionalized marriages with their employers, governesses are repeatedly imagined as a channel through which the lower classes may penetrate the upper or middle classes (even though they may have originally been members of the latter classes themselves). The governess's alleged social mobility is simultaneously linked with a fear of sexual predation, as well as with the idea of "posing" or being able to pass as a member of a better class.

While the discursive links among governess, prostitute, and actress are discussed in more detail in my previous chapters, it is worth noting that there seems to be no comparable male figure in the Victorian imagination. Women, and especially female chastity, were always fetishized as the barrier between civilized and savage races. Women are repeatedly imagined as the loci of disease, the ones who could be led astray by corrupt culture, and the the ones most likely to climb socially or gold-dig. As Foucault reminds us, "It is worth remembering that the first figure to be invested by the deployment of sexuality, one of the first to be 'sexualized,' was the 'idle' woman. She inhabited the outer edge of the 'world,' in which she always had to appear as a value, and of the family, where she was assigned a new destiny charged with conjugal and parental obligations" (121). What I want to do here is to draw a connection between the
hystericization of women's bodies, as Foucault calls it, and the concomitant anxieties about their male counterpart, the "idle" decorative man that embodies the aesthetic ideal. In the aesthete of ambiguous sex, gender, class, and nationality, we strangely enough find the counterpart of the governess, actress, prostitute, and idle woman.

Dorian Gray is perhaps the most obvious example of this as far as Wilde's fiction is concerned. Dorian's deceptive golden beauty reminds one of Lady Audley, enabling him to conceal his past crimes even as he enjoys the pleasures of high society. Like a number of sensation heroines, and like Wilde himself, Dorian's "proper" social position is difficult to pinpoint. The "purity" of his breeding has been marred by cross-class parentage, this time with the father marrying above his station:

"He is the last Lord Kelso's grandson. His mother was a Devereux; Lady Margaret Devereux."

"She was an extraordinarily beautiful girl . . . and made all the men frantic by running away with a penniless young fellow; a mere nobody, sir, a subaltern in a foot regiment, or something of that kind. . . . (33)

While it is stressed that Dorian inherits his beauty from his mother, his parents' transgressions against class structure are largely dismissed outside of these few references. Lord Fermor, Henry's uncle, wonders, "What on earth induced her to marry as she did, I never could understand. She could have married anybody she chose. Carlington was mad after her. She was romantic, though" (33). While both men ponder the story of Dorian's "strange" parentage, neither seems willing to connect it (or the always-suspicious French blood) with other aspects of Dorian's character. Yet the disregard Lady Devereux displays for a "proper" love object foreshadows various items in Dorian's future. Although the mother is marrying outside her class, it is Dorian's father who is doing the class-climbing, reversing the "normal" gender roles in this situation. In Collins's fiction, for example, men who desire women of a better class position must find some way to prove their "manliness" (such as Walter Hartright) and/or wait until their
beloved's social station is reduced before asking for their hand. In this way, social inequalities are ironed out before the man becomes "feminized" by marrying above his station; the gender roles are corrected. In the case of Dorian's parents, no "gender balancing" takes place prior to the marriage. Dorian will inherit a predilection for class passing, both with lower-class figures (most notably his romance with Sybil Vane, and later his other, anonymous, "low" associations) and among artists and aristocrats.

Perhaps as troubling as Dorian's ability to penetrate social circles despite his transgressions or "hereditary" sin is the social ambiguity offered by Wilde himself. Dorian Gray is notable for its absence of a substantial middle class; only aristocrats, artists, and underworld types are represented. Many of Wilde's contemporaries objected to this lack of a middle class to anchor a moral universe:

Although his critics' ostensible concern was with the book's potentially "immoral" influence, its author's assertive familiarity with an aristocratic mode of life accounted for most of the journalistic hostility. . . . the author's image seemed to imply a mode of living which "in reality" he did not enjoy. . . . the gentlemen, with their self-image of sincerity and particular kinds of morals, battled with the dandy and his particular kind of manners. (Gagnier 57)

"Immorality" might lie in "posing," but as becomes clear in the discussions of Wilde, "posing" has multiple meanings. The criticism surrounding Wilde's novel did not always accuse him of "posing as a sodomite" (although words such as "effeminate" and "unnatural" cast their suspicions), but posing could also mean class passing, accusing the author of pretending to be something he is not because of the world he represents in his fiction.47 The reviews contain jabs at Wilde's class and sexual identification:

It is a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French Décadents—a poisonous book . . . a gloating study of the mental and physical corruption of a fresh, fair and golden youth, which might be horrible and fascinating but for its

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47This was not a criticism I found leveled at Collins, even though his characters often transfer class positions. Although some critics refused to believe that the characters would really be able to pass so easily from one class to another, none assumed that the author pretended to do so.
effeminate frivolity, its studied insincerity, its tawdry mysticism, its flippant philosophising, and the contaminating trail of garish vulgarity which is all over Mr. Wilde's elaborate Wardour Street aestheticism and obtrusively cheap scholarship. (Daily Chronicle 30 June 1890, reprinted in Beckson 72)

Regenia Gagnier refers to the language used in Dorian Gray's reviews as "an odd mixture of the rumors of Wilde's homosexuality and of the more overt criticism of Wilde as social poseur and self-advertiser. Although the suggestion was couched in terms applying to the text, the reviews seemed to say that Wilde did not know his place, or...that he did know his place and it was not that of a middle-class gentleman" (59). Indeed, the criticism of the novel and of the character of Dorian Gray seems oddly mixed up with criticism of Wilde himself. In addition to the charges of "effeminacy," the Daily Chronicle's critic everywhere accuses Wilde of an improper class performance—"garish vulgarity," "cheap scholarship," and "studied insincerity." Here, Wilde is oddly like the characters in Armadale--Allan, Lydia Gwilt, even Midwinter--in that he is clearly some "Other" seen as trespassing on bourgeois territory without properly embodying gender and class. The concern is that, like Miss Gwilt, he will be able to fool others into thinking that he is a "true" representative of a higher class than that to which he should belong, and simultaneously, that like Allan he is uninformed as to how to embody the "gentleman."

Dorian's capacity for boundary transgression is inherited from his parents, whose social violations are discursively linked with Americans in a conversation between Lord

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48 There are numerous examples of this loaded language in the novel's reviews (all quotes are taken from Beckson):
  
St. James's Gazette, 24 June 1890—"stupid and vulgar," "cheap research" (69)
Scots Observer, 5 July 1890, iv, 181—"Why go grubbing in muck-heaps?"; "...it is not made sufficiently clear that the writer does not prefer a course of unnatural iniquity to a life of cleanliness, health, and sanity."; "...he can write for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph boys."
John Addington Symonds, letter to Horatio Brown (22 July 1890)—"I resent the unhealthy, scented, mystic, congested touch which a man of this sort has on moral problems." (78)
Athenaeum, 27 June 1891, p. 824—"unmanly, sickening, vicious" (82)
Henry and Lord Fermor. Immediately after describing Margaret Devereux's romanticism, Lord Fermor makes a sudden shift, talking about the fad for marrying American women:

"And by the way, Harry, talking about silly marriages, what is this humbug your father tells me about Dartmoor wanting to marry an American? Ain't English girls good enough for him?"

"It is rather fashionable to marry Americans just now, Uncle George."

"I'll back English women against the world, Harry," said Lord Fermor, striking the table with his fist.

"The betting is on the Americans."

"They don't last, I am told," muttered his uncle. . . .

"Who are her people?" grumbled the old gentleman. "Has she got any?"

Lord Henry shook his head. "American girls are as clever at concealing their parents as English women are at concealing their past," he said, rising to go.

(34)

It is no accident that Wilde juxtaposes this discussion of fashionable marriage to Americans with the details of Dorian Gray's family history. As a theoretically classless society, Americans embodied all that was inimical to the English social structure.

According to Henry and his uncle, the American aristocracy consists of "pork-packers," thus emphasizing the vulgarity of the American version of social hierarchy. The American women, like Dorian's father, have no "people," and therefore threaten to break down the fabric of English society, producing offspring that, like Dorian, have no clearly defined social position. American wives are, at the same time, faddish, an obvious reference to the commodification of women under the conditions of the marriage market, but also a suggestion that the American woman is appealing because she offers a chance to "try on" a new identity.

Wilde's brief flirtation here with the possibilities for reinvention of identity through an association with Americans actually seems consistent with his own larger aesthetic project. Moe Meyer points out that Wilde's own 1882 lecture tour of America greatly altered the author's life; his former "aesthetic" costume was replaced by a revised dandyism, while his study of the "technical science of signifying gestures and postures" at
Steele Mackaye's Delsartean acting school provided him with new ways of theorizing the body as a text. The reinvention of the self, which for Wilde was at least partially inspired by his American experience, is a recurrent theme in his various fictional and dramatic works. Often, we find characters who turn from vice to virtue (An Ideal Husband, The Importance of Being Earnest); characters who change names, identities, and personalities (Earnest); the rewriting of the Salomé legend; and, perhaps most notoriously, Dorian Gray's transformation. What I want to suggest here is that this notion of the unstable self, the identity that can at any point be reinvented or "rewritten," is not accidentally connected to the "sexual perversion" attributed to Dorian Gray and to Wilde himself, to characters such as Lydia Gwilt and Magdalen Vanstone prior to this period, and to Mae West afterward. Furthermore, this indeterminacy of identity, the multiplicity of available interpretations, is inextricably linked to the ideas of "forging" or "posing" as the assumption of a "false" identity, as well as to the key term "poison," repeatedly associated with dangerous cultural products and sexually deviant bodies. Judith Butler remarks in Gender Trouble that "all social systems are vulnerable at their margins, and that all margins are accordingly considered dangerous. If the body is synecdochal for the social system per se or a site in which open systems converge, then any kind of unregulated permeability constitutes a site of pollution and endangerment" (132). Through their cultural marginality (or ambiguity of social status), figures such as the governess (especially apparent as she is rendered in fiction), Wilde (of indeterminate class, national, and sexual status), and the gold-digging woman who "impersonates" femininity (West), pose the constant threat of penetrating and violating the imagined body of society. While the deviance of an individual body is conceived as a threat to the social system, the body can simultaneously serve as a kind of metaphor for society. In this case, the social body is certainly imagined as male, since profound cultural anxiety is aroused.

49See Poovey, "The Anathematized Race."
at the thought of penetration, the need to maintain sacred physical boundaries. While women are regularly penetrated and probed in the service of society (the Contagious Diseases Acts, for instance), the penetration of the male body is repeatedly described, especially during Wilde's trials, as being, even when consensual, worse than murder. Of course, because it is the Crown prosecuting Wilde, his offense is framed as being against the body of the Queen. However, the discourses that surround Wilde's sexuality and other forms of "deviance" by marginalized persons make it quite clear that the real concern is that, unless deviance is contained, the (male) social body will be symbolically fucked, and that homosexual influence will lead to a more widespread, literal penetration of English men.

Deviance must be identifiable if one is going to protect against its invasion, and if one is going to confirm and maintain the "normality" of members of the social body. Working with Foucault, Butler writes about the cultural attempt to make deviance a legible corporeal style, one that perhaps shares odd affinities with Wilde's system of acting or "posing," which used a certain exterior signifier to connote a particular interiority:

In the context of prisoners, Foucault writes, the strategy has been not to enforce a repression of their desires, but to compel their bodies to signify the prohibitive law as their very essence, style, and necessity. That law is not literally internalized, but incorporated, with the consequence that bodies are produced which signify that law on and through the body; there the law is manifest as the essence of their selves, the meaning of their soul, their conscience, the law of their desire. In effect, the law is at once fully manifest and fully latent, for it never appears as external to the bodies it subjects and subjectivates. (134-35)

Wilde's attempt to create a homosexual signifying practice unfortunately coincides with the discursive construction of homosexuality that demands the legibility of such perversion on the surface of the body. "Scientific" texts, such as those by Nordau and Havelock Ellis, insist that deviance inevitably erupts into surface signification that cannot help giving itself away. This is not to say that Wilde would have agreed with this view: 196
Basil Hallward is clearly wrong when he tells Dorian that "sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face." Basil is a naive reader, since we see that Dorian can choose to maintain behavior that is "mismatched" to his exteriority. Wilde's corporeal means of identification is decidedly artificial and artistic rather than "natural" and inevitable.

Even though Wilde and the medicolegal community were both engaged in the process of producing or reading homosexual significations, Wilde would have objected to the medicolegal methods of and purposes for doing so. Wilde's interest in an identificatory signifying system was of a piece with his aesthetic project. As Moe Meyer observes, Wilde's "posing" dandyism offered a practice to embody his aesthetic theories (78). The medicolegal community, on the other hand, was only interested in converting corporeal signs into facts. In "The Decay of Lying," Wilde's Vivian identifies an obsession with facts as destructive to creativity:

Facts are not merely finding a footing-place in history, but they are usurping the domain of Fancy, and have invaded the kingdom of Romance. Their chilling touch is over everything. They are vulgarising mankind. The crude commercialism of America, its materialising spirit, its indifference to the poetical side of things, and its lack of imagination and of high unattainable ideals, are entirely due to that country having adopted for its national hero a man, who according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie, and it is not too much to say that the story of George Washington and the cherry-tree has done more harm, and in a shorter space of time, than any other moral tale in the whole of literature. (304)

An emphasis on facts has a tendency to stifle the imagination essential to art. Wilde's Vivian equates "lying" with being truly original, able to create something that bears no relation to reality. Hence it is ridiculous to dissect art for evidence of some truth about the artist. Yet, as Wilde points out, the funny thing is that the story of the cherry tree is a myth to begin with, and so the determination to find the truth of every matter is itself founded upon a cherished lie. Though it is apparent that Wilde does not seriously believe George Washington to be behind this compulsion to pry under the surface, it matters not,
since Vivian has no interest in "proving" his argument. To Wilde essays and criticism were another form of art, to be measured for their beauty, wit, and originality rather than their relationship to fact: "The moment Art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything" (319).

Wilde's concluding paragraph asserts that the more art is removed from facts, the better: "The final revelation is that Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art" (320). The dialogue previously asserted that life imitates art, and so it follows that the more beautiful one can make art, the more beautiful life will become. The aim of art is not to faithfully reproduce life, but, according to Wilde, to aestheticize it. And *Dorian Gray* is perhaps the best illustration of this. Dorian's poor reading, his inability to understand the relation of "truth" and "reality" to art is the cause of his destruction. Dorian imbibes Lord Henry's philosophies uncritically, believing whatever he is told (regardless of his mentor's sincerity) and reenacting it. When Henry gives Dorian a copy of the "poisonous" yellow book, the young man interprets it as the story of his own life. Dorian surrounds himself with objects with which he wishes to construct his identity, and indeed the catalogue of objects in Chapter Eleven appears when we are expecting to discover Dorian's sins. Dorian's identity has been replaced by his consumption, which in turn baffles our reading of his sinfulness. Dorian's desperation to construct an object-based identity also determines his relationship with the portrait.

When Dorian wishes to change places with the portrait, he desires for the painting to have its basis in fact, eternally. And although he initially resembles the portrait, he soon violates the principle of life imitating art. Dorian ceases to emulate the "pure" young man represented in the portrait, and, in a disastrous aesthetic turnabout, the work of art imitates life, revealing the "facts" of Dorian's unwholesome existence on its surface. It is Dorian's monstrous devotion to monitoring the relationship between art and fact that compels him to commit horrible deeds and track their progress on the portrait.
At the end of the novel, however, after his half-hearted attempt at reform fails to alter the painting for the better, Dorian determines to get rid of it, hoping to erase the evidence of the past. What he still fails to understand, however, is that works of art are dependent on creativity and aesthetic ideals and not on fact. The surface of Dorian's body had taken on the function of art, while the painting grew ugly through its reality. Thus the painting became the 'real' Dorian Gray, and Dorian thus commits suicide in stabbing it. In the end, the balance between art and life is restored. The painting is now a "beautiful untrue thing," representing a Dorian that was never real, an ideal created by Basil Hallward. In the end it is not the art or artist that is dangerous, but only the spectator who misguidedly demands to discover truths concealed by the art, and who is destroyed by his own devices.

Wilde's interests in the relationship between the corporeal surface and art, and especially in the corporeal surface as art or text, can be traced at least as early as his American lecture tour of 1882. Moe Meyer identifies this as a crucial period in the author's life and aesthetic development: "Upon his return to England he abandoned the knee breeches, lily, green tie, and velvet jacket that made him famous as 'The Great Aesthete' and 'The Professor of Aesthetics' and, instead, resurrected the cult of the dandy (which had been dead for several decades)" (77). Meyer emphasizes Wilde's interest in the "formal system of signifying practices" originated by François Delsarte, which Wilde studied under Steele Mackaye while in the United States (79). The Delsartean approach to acting and other forms of public performance is not interested in the psychology or interiority of the character or performer. Instead, "semiotic theories such as Delsarte's remind us that an audience does not intuit a character's emotion but recognizes it through a process of signification, and that as with any process of signification, there must be a consensus between actor and audience about the relationship between the emotion signified and the signifier the actor uses" (Maltby 264). Within such a system, then, the
audience could "read" each exterior signification as the indication of a certain emotional state, regardless of what the actor really felt. According to Meyer, Wilde's innovation lay in testing the reverse effects of his preferred aesthetic theories: "if a specific interiority produced a single exterior signification, then the reverse would also be true—a single exteriority would produce a corresponding interiority—permitting one to compose the self as one composed a painting" (79). This argument is intriguing in relation to the artistic composition of the self which is literally exhibited in Dorian Gray. (Meyer discusses this in detail.) However, this idea of mastering one's own interiority through the cultivation of a certain exteriority also fascinates because of its potential effects on the audience. Although Meyer discusses this implication specifically in reference to the loved one (and the artistic model), there are also interesting effects for the general public, including the theatrical audience.

In a situation of oral communication, it is not uncommon for the person or people who form the audience to mimic unconsciously the facial expressions of the speaker. This is the most basic, primitive form of empathy—understanding another's feelings through imitation of external signals to produce a corresponding interior reaction.\(^\text{50}\) This is one dimension in which Wilde becomes more "dangerous" than his predecessors in the production of corrupting texts. While some sensation authors, notably Collins and Dickens, produced (and sometimes performed in) stage versions of some of their works, their bodies were never identified as sites for the transmission of poison. In Wilde we have a performative style of the body and identity that compounds the transgression contained in his literary and dramatic productions, extending them from the page and the stage into "real life." While the sensation novel's danger lay in the potential for the weakminded to mimetically reproduce it, Wilde transformed and in fact magnified the

peril through his practice of performing as a middle-class intellectual who had fully
internalized and literalized the lessons of dangerous art.

Through his status as an expert on aesthetics, a man who taught America about
European art and home decoration (and later, England about America), author of plays
and a relentless self-marketer, Oscar Wilde was in a unique position to influence the
exterior appearances, and, consequently (according to his system), the interiorities of his
audiences. A small but famous example is the green carnation, which Wilde wore to the
openings of Lady Windermere's Fan and The Importance of Being Earnest (Ellmann 365,
430). Wilde arranged to have similarly-adorned friends scattered in the audience, so that
others would attribute some secret meaning to the flowers. When one of Wilde's friends
inquired about the meaning of the flowers, the writer responded, "Nothing whatever, but
that is just what nobody will guess" (Ellmann 165). The logic here follows that of Basil
Hallward in The Picture of Dorian Gray: "I have grown to love secrecy. It seems to be
the one thing that can make life mysterious or marvellous to us. The commonest thing is
delightful if only one hides it" (14). And again this is the logic of the sensation novel
(and indeed of sex in the nineteenth century, as Foucault reminds us): one must
manufacture a secret in order to have the pleasure of relentlessly hunting it out of its
hiding place. Both Wilde and sensation fiction invite the perilous pleasure of discovering
secrets, yet in Wilde's case the ensuing danger involves corruption not only by the text,
but also by the author's body.

Wilde's trials proceeded in a manner antithetical to his aesthetic theories,
demanding reciprocity between art and fact. In the first trial, Carson repeatedly read
passages to Wilde (from Dorian Gray and other works, some even by other authors) and
afterwards queried him on whether those passages were "natural," "true," "moral," and so
on. The closest Carson ever comes to naming the objectionable implications of Dorian
Gray is to suggest that the novel might be interpreted as "perverted." The circumlocutory
line of questioning made it difficult to establish Wilde's "character," or even the "facts" of the case:

The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885... was successful in establishing specific sexual acts within the juridico-legal discourse, but did not specify how one might identify the individual capable of such acts, and this also failed to produce a homosexual signification. These limitations are clearly seen in the difficulties Queensberry's defense face in trying to attach Wilde's signifying pose to the practice of sodomy. (Meyer 94)

The case against Wilde depends upon proving his "pose" which eludes Queensberry's defense even as Wilde flaunts it in his witty courtroom banter. The attempt to punish Wilde and censor his work is originally founded on the attempt to conclusively establish the vague notion of his literature being open to the interpretation of perversity. And for this to work at all, the court demanded reciprocity between art and real life; they employed the very method of reading condemned as "primitive" and "dangerous" by moral guardians.

Wilde is examined on the issue of writing "immoral" axioms for the use of young people. Because the acts that would establish Wilde's homosexual or sodomitical character are "unspeakable," the charges against him are addressed through elision with critical and moral reservations about popular literature. Carson goes on to describe Wilde's novel as further preying upon the "weakminded" through corrupting those who are not "literate" enough to know better:

. . . a well-written book putting forward perverted views may be a good book? -- No work of art ever puts forward views. Views belong to people who are not artists.

A perverted novel might be a good book? -- I don't know what you mean by a "perverted" novel.

Then I will suggest Dorian Gray as open to the interpretation of being such a novel. -- That could only be to brutes and illiterates. The views of Philistines on art are incalculably stupid.

An illiterate person reading Dorian Gray might consider it such a novel? -- The views of illiterates on art are unaccountable. I am concerned only with my own view of art. I don't care twopence what other people think of it. (Hyde 124)

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The definition of "literacy" operating in this exchange escapes easy definition. For if one employs a strict definition of "illiterate," the cross-examination makes no sense; what effect could reading Dorian Gray have upon people who could not read? The usage of "literacy" here seems to suggest that the "illiterates" to whom Wilde and Carson refer are technically capable of reading, but are not capable of interpreting the novel as they should. However, the "proper" way of reading Dorian Gray also seems to be a matter of debate. For Wilde, a proper reading of the novel would lead to an appreciation of the author's aesthetic philosophy and production of multiple interpretations, while Carson's definition of an appropriate reading remains ambiguous. In the controversies surrounding the sensation novel, it was clear that educated, "strong-minded" individual would not interpret the novels as faithful representations of reality, not would they suffer their harmful effects. Yet we can no longer make this assumption in the arguments about Wilde's work, as Carson does not seem to apply the "illiterate" label simply to women and the working classes. Instead, he uses this term interchangeably with "ordinary individuals" (Hyde 124). For the first time, it is the ordinary, "normal," middle-class male who is constructed as being the most "at risk" from improper reading. In order to prove that Wilde is guilty of "posing as a sodomite," and that this creates a public threat, Queensberry's defense must establish that the public at large (especially middle-class men) is "illiterate" and likely to interpret Wilde's writing as a representation of reality which they will unwittingly and compulsively reenact. Ironically, the men endangered by the pernicious "homosexual" influence of Wilde's aesthetic products can only be rescued through their legal construction as feminized and infantile.

51 The hypothetical examples given in the trial are gendered male.

52 In retrospect, it seems perversely humorous that the person who spurred this litigation was the author of the Queensberry rules of boxing. In his defense, Queensberry had to establish that his accusation of Wilde's "posing" was done for the public benefit. Therefore, Wilde's potential "victims"—men who did not already share his inclinations—were constructed as vulnerable and childlike in the service of the man who helped formalize what is arguably the most aggressive and stereotypically "masculine" of sports, pugilism.
Establishing Wilde's "character" was further complicated by the (at least tacit) prohibitions against plainly speaking of what Wilde's acts were alleged to have been, as well as how one could establish (and how one knows the way to establish) that a person is inclined to commit certain taboo acts. Ed Cohen explains the dependence of Queensberry's defense on Dorian Gray as a way of circumventing a discussion of the alleged acts themselves:

By proposing a hermeneutic that fixes the literary work as a form of (in this case, counterhegemonic) sexual didacticism, Queensberry's defense sought to hold the author morally and legally responsible for the implications of his writing. However, by linking the claim that Wilde was a particular kind of sexual "character" (and not that he had committed certain sexual acts) to a suggestion that this characterization had larger social implications because he was a writer, the plea introduces the possibility of reading Wilde's sexual proclivities into his writing in order to confirm him as a "certain person of sodomitical and unnatural habits, tastes, and practices." In other words, by foregrounding the literary text as an indication of the author's (and perhaps also its readers') sexual characteristics, the plea attempts to construct a way of discerning and subsequently signifying sexual "tendencies" without reference to sexual acts. (128)

The defense faces the problem of proving Wilde's "sodomitical" character without appearing to reveal knowledge of the forbidden acts in language that might suggest the defense's own familiarity with such acts. Yet this also raises the problem of one's relation to "coded" language: if one can read a text as evidence of the writer's "perverse" character, must not the reader also be privy to the code? As the first person tried under the Labouchere Amendment of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, Oscar Wilde raises a number of unforeseen issues.

Like the Scots Observer's critic to whom Wilde had earlier objected, Edward Carson (counsel for Queensberry and later for the Crown) confuses art with artist and attempts of use Wilde's work (as well as his opinions on other writers) to damn the writer himself. This approach is further confused by the Counsel's uncertainty over whom it is
they are trying to protect from Wilde's "poison." On one hand, educated gentlemen are the most likely to read Wilde's productions, yet most of the accusations against Wilde involve lower-class men who were considered unlikely to read his literature:

Let us contrast the position which Mr. Wilde took up in cross-examination as to his books, which are for the select and not for the ordinary individual, with the position he assumed as to the young men to whom he was introduced and those he picked up for himself. His books were written by an artist for artist; his words were not for Philistines or illiterates. Contrast that with the way in which Mr. Wilde chose his companions! (Hyde 166)

Wilde might have evaded the charges of the corrupting influence of his texts by claiming only those with superior intellect would be interested in them, but Carson turns this elitism on Wilde by framing the inferior class position of his companions as proof of wrongdoing. Repeatedly, Carson asserts that a man of Wilde's social position and education could not possibly have any reason to appreciate the company of men who were grooms, valets, and the like. Therefore, the only possible reason he could associate with them would be to obtain sexual favors.

The security of class identity seems to be just as much at stake in the trials as the status of Wilde's sexuality. Wilde was not tried for his relationship with Alfred Doublas, but for his "acts of indecency" with working-class men. For example, on multiple occasions, Carson suggests that it is bad for working-class men to be treated to better dinners than those to which they are accustomed:

A man of noble and generous instincts might be able to break down all social barriers; but there is one thing plain in this case, and that is that Mr. Wilde's conduct to the young men introduced to him was not instigated by any generous instincts. If Mr. Wilde wanted to assist Parker, if he were interested in him, if he wanted to find him employment, was it doing the lad a good turn to take him to a restaurant and prime him with champagne and a good dinner? Was that the work of charity and sympathy one would expect a man in Mr. Wilde's position to extend to another man like Parker? (Hyde 171)
Carson's theories on the propriety of cross-class interaction become clearer when he discusses Conway, a newspaper-boy:

Mr. Wilde procured the boy a suit of clothes to dress him up like a gentleman's son, put some public school colours upon his hat, and generally made him look like a lad fit and proper to associate with Mr. Wilde. The whole thing in its audacity is almost past belief. . . . If Mr. Wilde were really anxious to assist Conway, the very worst thing he could have done was to take the lad out of his proper sphere, to begin by giving him champagne luncheons, taking him to his hotel, and treating him in a matter in which the boy never in the future could expect to live. (173)

Carson's anxieties about the implications of Wilde's actions relate to arguments about the sensation novel on two intriguing points. First, like the fears about literacy, associations between members of different classes could open the eyes of the lower classes to the injustices of their situation, perhaps making them desire something that class stratification should, theoretically, prevent them from having. In other words, Wilde sets a dangerous precedent by engaging in activities that, at least temporarily, allow working-class men to escape "their proper sphere." Wilde's gifts and dinners are parallel to sensation fiction in that they are framed as bad for the working classes to consume. While the "corruption" caused by the sensation novel theoretically took place on an intellectual level that could then be carried out by the body, Wilde corrupts not only through his writing, but through the literal insertion of inappropriate items into the body (food and drink here, but with the understanding that this also implied inappropriate sexual penetration). Second, one of the most controversial aspects of the sensation novel was the frequent contrast between appearance and reality; a villain could appear to be both beautiful and respectable. By purchasing clothing for his companions, Wilde disrupted the dependability of appearance. It was unbelievably "audacious" for him to make a newspaper vendor appear to be a respectable person. The argument is framed in terms of concern for these young working-class men. Echoing paternalistic arguments opposing education for women and the working classes, Carson and those he represents
claim to prohibit certain activities or privileges for the benefit of those to whom they are denied. Working-class men should not associate with their social superiors, not because the latter have any anxieties about maintaining social distinction, but because doing so implants desires that the former can never hope to fulfill. Working-class individuals should only have "working-class" experiences to prevent the creation of illegitimate desires that could ruin them.

By positioning Wilde as the sole responsible party in the "corruption" of these young men (even though, as numerous scholars and the men's own testimony indicate, they were "corrupted" before meeting Wilde), the particular class and economic situation that encouraged male prostitution is made invisible, replaced instead by the powerful and pervasive influence of a solitary individual. Ed Cohen points out that in the London *Star* of 30 April 1895, a blurb about the problem of unemployment appeared near a sensational article on Wilde's trials and the perverse habits of its young men. However, the newspaper drew no connection between the two situations:

That this (albeit terse) reminder of the "want of employment" should be situated in such close typographical proximity to--and yet bear no apparent logical connection with--a story foregrounding the (sexual) behaviors of certain unemployed "youths" underscores the degree to which the newspaper's narrative of the legal proceedings adumbrated the larger social factors at play in the case only by rending them as individual anomalies. Indeed, by focusing so extensively on the ages of the men who were (allegedly) Wilde's sexual partners, both the legal and the journalistic interpretations undertook to represent Wilde as the sole responsible party. They therefore attempted to corroborate Wilde's "indecency" precisely to the extent that they sought to exclude both the possibility that these men had willingly chosen to enter into sexual relations with Wilde and the likelihood that contemporary social and historical conditions shaped their sexual practices. (199)

There is never any investigation as to why young men would resort to prostitution; to do so would be to diminish the case against Wilde. Furthermore, a number of scholars (Ellmann, for example) have pointed out that it was hardly unusual for middle- and upper-class men to have had homosexual experiences at school, or to pay for sexual
services from their working-class counterparts. Wilde's main transgression lay in his indiscretion, his willingness to be seen publicly with his "unfit" companions as if they were his peers. The visibility of Wilde's associations thus signalled both the "unnatural" relations that people assumed to be proceeding, and a violation of the social stratification cherished by the Victorian bourgeoisie.

In his trials, Wilde's violations of social stratification helped lead to his interpretation as "perverse," yet the breakdown of such stratification was an American ideal. Wilde certainly recognized this in his 1887 "The Canterville Ghost." as he did in his essays on America from 1883 and 1887. In "The Canterville Ghost," one senses that Wilde feels some kinship with the Americans and their destruction (or simulation) of fetishized English traditions, even if their means are vulgar rather than aesthetic. Virginia Otis is perhaps the one that we can most closely identify with Wilde: an ideal hybrid of nationalities, she is creative and appreciates the past without adhering to the silly English fetishization of "blood." Indeed, it is the American woman with whom Wilde seems to have the most sympathy, and his writings on America reveal his fantasies about alternative ways of embodying class and gender. Wilde reads American bodies differently than English ones, often concluding that the mode of identity performed by American women is superior to—and closer to his aesthetic ideals—than that of their male counterparts.

THE PARADISE OF WOMEN:
OSCAR WILDE, AMERICAN CONSUMERISM, AND MAE WEST

The seeds of the subversion of identity can be detected even in Wilde's earlier and less controversial works, such as the lighthearted "Canterville Ghost" (1887). The problematization of gender and class that is already present as comedy here will become damning by the time of Dorian Gray and Wilde's trials. Though it may seem an unlikely
pairing, "The Canterville Ghost" has in common with Armadale the weakening of English patrilineal identity when reproduced or usurped through its association with the New World. "The Canterville Ghost," meanwhile, is concerned with the effects of American disregard for sacred British institutions. In this story, the American family of minister Hiram Otis moves into Canterville Chase, a venerable English mansion. The Otises are admonished not to buy the house because it is haunted; not even the aristocratic Canterville family can endure the presence of their ancestral ghost. Mr. Otis, however, is unimpressed:

I come from a modern country, where we have everything that money can buy; and with all our spry young fellows painting the Old World red, and carrying off your best actresses and prima-donnas, I reckon that if there were such a thing as a ghost in Europe, we'd have it at home in a very short time in one of our public museums, or on the road as a show. (187)

Mr. Otis is a fictionalized example of the utterly practical, profit-turning character delineated by Wilde in "The American Man." While Wilde seems to appreciate the extreme "youthfulness" of the country (best embodied in this story by the twin boys), he simultaneously regrets the tendency, also pointed out in his essay, for Americans to treat everything as a commodity or spectacle, seeing only an opportunity for accumulation of objects or profit, without regard for beauty or history. Mr. Otis obviously sees Europe and its inhabitants as things to be collected by Americans, and he has no doubt this entrepreneurial spirit would overcome any terror afforded by the ghost.

While the portrait of Mr. Otis obviously pokes fun at the vulgar materialism of Americans, the story simultaneously seems to admire American recklessness, the refusal to be intimidated by rules, boundaries, and traditions that serve no apparent purpose. When Lord Canterville warns that the ghost always appears before the demise of a family member, Mr. Otis scolds him for presuming his title makes him special: "But there is no such thing sir, as a ghost, and I guess the laws of nature are not going to be suspended for
the British aristocracy" (187). Indeed, the Americans are revealed to be a threat to English "blood," in both figurative and literal forms. While the story mocks American consumerism, it also pokes fun at the English fetishization of blood, and shows that the emphasis on "good lineage," no matter what secrets it may hide, cannot withstand the most mundane exertions of American practicality.

For example, when the Otis family moves into Canterville Chase, Mrs. Otis is disgusted by a blood stain on the floor and insists upon its removal. The housekeeper, however, reveres the stain as a worthy treasure:

It is the blood of Lady Eleanore de Canterville, who was murdered on that very spot by her own husband, Sir Simon de Canterville, in 1575. Sir Simon survived her nine years, and disappeared suddenly under very mysterious circumstances. His body has never been discovered. The blood-stain has been much admired by tourists and others, and cannot be removed. (189)

The blood of which the housekeeper is so proud, as evidence of the family's aristocratic lineage, is simultaneously a signifier of its criminal history, as is the ghost. Yet so invested are the English in blood and descent, the housekeeper and others who take pride in the stain are willing to absolve the crimes committed by those of a "good" bloodline. The Americans, however, have no respect for this blood, and the oldest son (named Washington after the representative of independence) sets to work on the offending stain: 

"'Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent will clean it up in no time,' and before the terrified housekeeper could interfere he had fallen upon his knees, and was rapidly scouring the floor with a small stick of what looked like a black cosmetic. In a few moments no trace of the blood-stain could be seen" (189). The housekeeper faints at the sight of the stain's removal, since the Americans are destroying the proof of the Canterville family's heritage. One fetish is replaced by another, as the power of commodities is invoked to remove the evidence of ancestral crime (if only Midwinter and Lydia Gwilt had known!). Yet the stain reappears the next day, and for
the next several days, despite subsequent cleanings. The Otis family is at last convinced of the ghost's reality, as they cannot conceive that their trusted products would fail them. To maintain the integrity of their sacred cleansing products, the Americans must admit the possibility of supernatural adversity.

The Otises retain their undying faith in the power of commodities, and when the spirit of Sir Simon awakens the family by rattling his chains, Mr. Otis has the perfect solution:

I really must insist on your oiling those chains, and have brought you for that purpose a small bottle of the Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator. It is said to be completely efficacious upon one application, and there are several testimonials to that effect on the wrapper from some of our most eminent native divines. I shall leave it here for you by the bedroom candles, and will be happy to supply you with more should you require it. (191)

The ghost is indignant at this response to his fearsome chain-rattling. Wilde disapproved of the American fetishization of products, of the tendency to use brand names and "testimonials" in place of art and truth. At the same time, Wilde was a master of self-promotion, and one must question at what point "posing" ceases to be artistic and becomes vulgarized as advertisement. Wilde always advocated being a work of art--the artist as art--and perhaps he saw his tour more as an "art exhibition" than as the advertising which cluttered the natural beauty of the countryside.

During his lecture tour of America, Wilde found little that he could call art, but was bombarded by manifestations of consumerism, such as advertising. Oscar Wilde Discovers America offers the following bombastic example:

On boards and rocks against the majestic view of the Pacific Ocean were glaring such signs as . . .

"Vinegar Bitters Is All the Go for Love," "Condensed Eggs, Better than Fresh," "Chew Jackson's Best Plug," "Yosemite Bitters are Good for Belly Ache," "Pacific Stomach Bitters Beats Them All, Try Them" . . .

Wilde had noted these glaring examples of bad taste in other parts of the country, even at Niagara. "Sapolio," "Harvey's Horse Powder," "Smoke Vanity Fair," "Chew Wood Tag Navy," "Rising Sun Stove Polish," "Tarrant Seltzer Aperient Cures Diarrhea," had assaulted his eye from train windows in the East. Near Chicago, blank walls and rocks had screamed the news that "Bixby's is the Best Blacking," "Wizard Oil Is Good for Neuralgia," "Use Gail and Ax' Scotch Snuff," "Eat Gunther's Candy and Be Happy," "Use Dr. King's New Discovery for Consumption, Colds, and Coughs." (Lewis 257-58)
Silly and tasteless as these American ways might be, however, "The Canterville Ghost" portrays the British fetishization of the family line as even sillier, the blood-stain an ugly, distasteful form of advertising a history in which no one should take pride. The Americans may fail to properly recognize the ghost because they lack respect for lineage or even history, but their faith in commodities is shown to be no more ludicrous than the English faith in the value of blood, and in fact their mastery of advertising becomes a parody of sacred British tradition. The Otis children construct their own ghost out of household items. Although it lacks the authenticity of the Canterville ghost, it is equally effective, as the ghost himself is frightened at the sight of what he thinks is another spirit. The Americans are able to reproduce, with commodities, the effects of aristocratic English ancestors. The ghost is insulted to discover the ruse, which he understands when reading its accompanying placard: "Ye Otis Ghoste, Ye Onlie True and Originale Spook. Beware of Ye Imitationes. All others are Counterfeite" (195). The Americans are able to simulate the signs of English history, which to them consist of the quaint "Olde English" spelling, and the testament to a completely spurious authenticity. The "genuine" status of the Canterville ghost is emptied of meaning when he can be effectively and artificially replicated. British culture is, for the Otises, nothing but a shop window whose treasures they can synthesize, creating their own familial history through the manufacture of "ghosts."

"The Canterville Ghost" emphasizes the irreconcilability of English "ghosts" with American sensibility, and it also portrays the former as being quite easily conquered by the latter. The ghost's former insistence on maintaining evidence of the family's blood finally withers under the force of the Otises' faith in various products. He at last made up his mind to give up the point of the blood-stain on the library floor. If the Otis family did not want it, they clearly did not deserve it. They were evidently people on a low, material plane of existence, and quite incapable of appreciating the symbolic value of sensuous phenomena. . . . For the next three
Saturdays . . . he traversed the corridor . . . taking every possible precaution against being either heard or seen. He removed his boots, trod as lightly as possible on the old worm-eaten boards, wore a large black velvet cloak, and was careful to use the Rising Sun Lubricator for oiling his chains. . . . He felt a little humiliated at first, but afterwards was sensible enough to see that there was a great deal to be said for the invention, and, to a certain degree, it served his purpose. Still, in spite of everything, he was not left unmolested. (196-97)

Thanks to the influence of the Americans, the venerable Canterville ghost is doomed to suffer the same fate as Wilde's version of the American male. Confronted not only with their failure to appreciate history or the "symbolic value of sensuous phenomena," and their insistence on the infallibility of commodities, but also with their extreme practicality which treats everything in its path as a nuisance to be conquered or as a spectacle to be displayed, the ghost himself faces a crisis of identity. There is no space for a ghost in such a world; thanks to the social mobility perfected by the Americans, there can no longer be such a thing as an ancestral ghost. As the institutions of name and family become less absolute, a patriarchal spirit is not needed to validate their authenticity. Having already lost his corporeality, the ghost of Sir Simon, like the American male, now seems destined to fade away altogether.

The ghost eventually resigns himself to his fate and is laid to rest with the help of, appropriately, the Otises' teenaged daughter. Virginia Otis is representative of the type of young American woman described in Wilde's "The American Invasion":

Miss Virginia E. Otis was a little girl of fifteen, lithe and lovely as a fawn, and with a fine freedom in her large blue eyes. She was a wonderful amazon, and had once raced old Lord Bilton on her pony twice around the park, winning by a length and a half, just in front of the Achilles statue to the huge delight of the young Duke of Cheshire, who proposed to her on the spot, and was sent back to Eton that very night by his guardians, in floods of tears. (188)

Virginia is as charming, reckless, and exasperating to "duchesses who have daughters" as the young American women profiled by Wilde in his essays. As the Duke of Cheshire is

already smitten with her, she threatens the English values of "blood" and "people" in very concrete ways. It is on returning from an expedition with "her curly-haired cavalier" that Virginia one day encounters the forlorn ghost and attempts to comfort him. When the ghost responds stiffly, Virginia tells him that he has no reason to exist and scolds him for his past wickedness. The ghost counters by complaining of the vulgarity of Virginia's family, but she reveals that his precious "blood" and breeding is all a pretense:

... it is you who are rude, and horrid, and vulgar; and as for dishonesty, you know you stole the paints out of my box to try to furbish up that ridiculous blood-stain in the library. First you took all my reds, and I couldn't do any more sunsets, then you took the emerald-green and the chrome-yellow, and finally I had nothing left but indigo and Chinese white, and could only do moonlight scenes, which are always depressing to look at, and not at all easy to paint. I never told on you, though I was very much annoyed, and it was most ridiculous, the whole thing; for who ever heard of emerald-green blood? (200)

The ghost's "blood," then, winds up being no more authentic than that of the Americans, since he has to fabricate it from paint. And this is perhaps the real sin of the Americans; in their refusal to recognize class distinction, they expose its groundlessness. In his desperation to establish his status as the patriarchal ghost of Canterville, the ghost had recourse only to empty signifiers of identity; there was nothing "authentic" which he could offer as the basis of his authority. The ghost attempts to argue with Virginia that the content and the color of the blood-stain did not matter, since "the Cantervilles have blue blood, for instance, the very bluest in England; but I know you Americans don't care for things of this kind" (200). The ghost has committed the error of interpreting "blue blood" literally, of thinking he could signify an intangible essence (the identity deriving from an aristocratic bloodline) through material displays, first of a literal example of the blood, and then through substitutes—all of which prove to be powerless in the face of American products designed to erase the history embodied in stains.

Virginia finally helps lay the penitent ghost to rest. In return, he rewards her with jewels, although Virginia desires only to retain their enclosing box, for sentimental
reasons. This shocks her father, who is "a good deal surprised to find a child of mine expressing sympathy with mediævalism in any form, and can only account for it by the fact that Virginia was born in one of your London suburbs shortly after Mrs. Otis had returned from a trip to Athens" (206). American, but born in London under the influence of Greece, Virginia represents a sort of ideal cross-breed (except to her father, to whom European ideas mean cultural degeneration). Full of the lively animal spirits and lack of pretension that make American women attractive to Wilde, she at the same time appreciates art and the beauty of nature (as evidenced by her paintings), and she has some degree of respect for family and history (exhibited in her sympathy for the ghost and the desire to retain the box). Virginia neither fetishizes the jewels as a sign of aristocracy nor regards them as objects of material value; with simple sentimentality, she finds that only the worthless box has any meaning for her.

Of course, it is because of this artlessness that Virginia is rewarded with all that the most ambitious young woman could desire. Lord Canterville refuses to accept the returned jewels, arguing that since the Otis family now "owns" the ghost, whatever the ghost had owned is theirs as well. Ultimately, Virginia is rewarded with a title, as well as with jewels that signify her newly aristocratic status:

... when, in the spring of 1890, the young Duchess of Cheshire was presented at the Queen's first drawing-room on the occasion of her marriage, her jewels were the universal theme of admiration. For Virginia received the coronet, which is the reward of all good little American girls, and was married to her boy-lover as soon as he came of age. They were both so charming, and they loved each other so much, that every one was delighted at the match, except the old Marchioness of Dumbleton, who had tried to catch the Duke for one of her seven unmarried daughters, and had given no less than three expensive dinner-parties for that purpose... (207)

Virginia ends up an aristocrat, one who has "collected" a titled young man and historic gems in much the same way as her father had proclaimed that all of America's "spry young fellows" were carrying off Europe's women and treasures. In the process, Virginia
has also erased the stain of the past and laid to rest the patriarchal ghost of the Canterville family. The imagined American ability to erase "stains" that are markers of identity (whether aristocratic, as in this case, or sexual or racial, as in the cases of Lydia Gwilt and Midwinter) threatens to make it impossible to distinguish one type of person from another. Yet although Virginia has undermined English "blood" and identity, she is nevertheless portrayed as the heroine. Given the advantages of both American and English experience, combined with a touch of Hellenism (perhaps like Wilde himself), Virginia is practical without being unimaginative; she removes the "stain" upon the Canterville family while preserving the charming memory of its ghost.

While "The Canterville Ghost" is not one of Wilde's controversial texts, it features several elements that will reemerge in more subversive forms, whether in the author's life or literature. The story is mildly transgressive in its comic exposure of the emptiness of English identity. Wilde mocks American vulgarity at the same time that the story celebrates the dismantling of English "blood" that is the basis of the sensation novel's terrors. Like the Otis family, Wilde was able to fake the signs of an English upper-class (even aristocratic) identity through his education, his adoption of an English accent, his gestures, and the items he consumed. Oscar Wilde must have been most troubling to the Victorian imagination, as he escaped easy categorization: Irish, yet often identifying as English (and occasionally French); middle-class, yet the consort of the aristocracy (and sometimes the working class); and finally, a married father, yet homosexual. Jerusha McCormack remarks on the doubly problematic nature of Wilde's class position and nationality:

Although born of the "gentry" in Ireland, Wilde assumed the status of an English aristocrat, leisured, extravagant, charming and mannered. If these virtues were exaggerated, it was only to give a double edge to the performance, parodying as well the stereotype of the Irish: lazy, improvident, charming and witty. As Matthew Arnold trenchantly observed, the Irish had, by their very nature, more in
Although Wilde may have considered American materialism vulgar, his pose as a member of the English aristocracy reveals that he had more in common with Americans than he might have wished to acknowledge. Wilde's posing resembles the conspicuous consumption of the Americans in that it involves the construction of a surface intended to lead to a certain identificatory interpretation. Wilde's method of treating his body as a signifying text may be more artistic and intellectual than the American method of signifying status through the consumption of material goods (although one should keep in mind that Wilde derived his own method from an American acting instructor; see Meyer). Nevertheless, both methods provide a way of signifying class status that is not dependent on "blood"; or, as the story makes explicit, "blood" can be simulated, and in fact is simulated even by those who lay the greatest claims to its authenticity.

Wilde's essays on America emphasize that its way of life threatens stable gender identification at the same time that it erodes class stability. In his essay "The American Man," Wilde remarks that the eponymous species seems practically nonexistent:

One of our prettiest Duchesses enquired the other day of a distinguished traveller whether there was really such a thing as an American man, explaining, as the reason for her question, that, though she knew many fascinating American women, she had never come across any fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers, cousins, or, indeed male relatives of any kind whatsoever. (59)

The particular social organization of America (which Wilde in many places describes as "the Paradise for Women") seems to elevate the social visibility of the American female while reducing her male relatives to insignificance. In a society that is ostensibly without class barriers, patrilineality should become less important. As the male name loses its sanctity, the men themselves appear to be no longer necessary. In other words, class mobility leads to emasculation, perhaps even to the annihilation of men.
In the essays "The American Invasion" and "The American Man," Wilde provides some explanation for the curious state of the genders in America. Evolving in these two essays is a picture of the American woman as a sort of aesthetic ideal--beautiful, charming, eternally youthful, and utterly useless--while the American male is reduced to a useless utility, far removed from Wilde's ideas on art. "The American Invasion" paints young American women as childlike, charming, and vivacious "pretty whirlwinds in petticoats" (55). Apart from such spectacles as Buffalo Bill's wild west show, women seem to be the finest and most entertaining American export:

Warned by the example of her mother that American women do not grow old gracefully, she tries not to grow old at all, and often succeeds. She has exquisite feet and hands, is always bien chaussée et bien gantée, and can talk brilliantly upon any subject, provided that she knows nothing about it. Her sense of humour keeps her from the tragedy of a grande passion, and, as there is neither romance nor humility in her love, she makes an excellent wife. What her ultimate influence on English life will be, it is difficult to estimate at present; but there can be no doubt that all the factors that have contributed to the social revolution of London, there are few more important, and none more delightful, than the American invasion. (57-58)

Wilde's description of the American woman makes her seem to approach his definition of art--something both beautiful and useless. In her lovely, idle youthfulness, the American woman of which he speaks (the one with money and leisure enough to visit England) rather resembles Dorian Gray. And, like him, her lack of a defined class position enables her to move freely throughout English society. She may be a somewhat silly figure, but, as Wilde points out, her charming recklessness is what Englishmen find refreshing, and is "so agitating to duchesses with daughters" (55). Theoretically, these women had nothing to lose if they did not marry into the "correct" family (unlike their English counterparts), and Wilde seems to rejoice at the imminent peril facing the old order from these delightful aesthetic objects.
The American man, however, is a different story. In sharp contrast to the female of his species, the American man is the embodiment of utter utility. To Wilde, then, he is as far removed from the idea of "aestheticism" as one can get. In his "Impressions of America," Wilde observes that machinery is one of the most beautiful, perfected things in the nation, that American practicality and adherence to productivity "is a state of things which is not favourable to poetry or romance" (6). Utterly practical and incapable of understanding art or history, the American man in Europe is lost; to him, size is the main measure of value: "Bulk is his canon of beauty, and size his standard of excellence. To him the greatness of a country consists in the number of square miles it contains, and he is never tired of telling the waiters at his hotel that the State of Texas is larger than France and Germany put together" ("The American Man" 60). According to Wilde, the American man's understanding of beauty is wholly inadequate, informed as it is by industry and commercialism:

Abroad, he is terribly at sea. He knows no one and understands nothing, and wanders about in a melancholy manner, treating the Old World as if it were a Broadway store, and each city a counter for the sampling of shoddy goods. For him Art has no marvel, and Beauty no meaning, and the Past no message. He thinks that civilisation began with the introduction of steam, and looks with contempt upon all centuries that had no hot-water apparatuses in their houses. The ruin and decay of Time has no pathos in his eyes. . . . In a word, he is the Don Quixote of common sense, for he is so utilitarian that he is absolutely unpractical. (60-61)

Through his discussion of the American man, Wilde begins to deconstruct the idea of "manliness" itself. While middle-class women were often seen as decorative and men as utilitarian, Wilde parodies this notion by portraying American men and women as extreme examples of type. Through their extreme beauty and uselessness, the American women are actually described as "invading" London and causing a "revolution"—both very active, aggressive terms associated with masculinity. Paradoxically, the inutility of the American woman makes her the greatest force for social change.
The American man, on the other hand, is somehow rendered useless by his usefulness. Even though Wilde professes to admire the American man in his own environment, saying that foolishness is not tolerated in America, he also speculates that a life and culture that allows no room for beauty cannot endure. The practical and commercial demands of American life absolutely absorb its men, leaving no allowance for more pleasant pursuits: “Indeed, it is only the women in America who have any leisure at all; and, as a necessary result of this curious state of things, there is no doubt but that, within a century from now, the whole culture of the New World will be in petticoats” (“The American Man” 61). "Culture" in this passage could be interpreted as a synonym for the arts and humanities, since women are the only ones with the leisure for such pursuits. However, Wilde’s essay asserts that it is already the case that the men do not have culture, in the sense in which we use it, as the knowledge of the best that has been thought and said in the world” (61), and that American women are the only ones who have time for this culture. Therefore, "culture" in this sense is already "in petticoats" at the time Wilde is writing, and I am reading "culture" as a synonym for "nation" in his projection about the future. In other words, because American culture makes men so mechanistic, masculinity will cease to be desirable, or perhaps even necessary. Given the perfection of American machines, the mechanization of the American male could eventually render him obsolete. Or, failing this, "femininity" might simply be increasingly regarded as a more attractive option, an identity one could slip into to experience leisure pursuits. In any case, what Wilde is arguing is that, as in the case of Collins’s Geoffrey Delamayn, hypermasculinity paradoxically has the power to turn on itself and reduce men to inutility, if not obsolescence.

Wilde’s representation of the American man features a hypermasculinity that paradoxically results in an attenuation of gender characteristics. This situation, which Sontag recognizes as a hallmark of Camp, will be discussed further in the next chapter.
Mae West's films and plays feature such "gender trouble," and West's own performative identity is one that is "hyperfeminine" while destroying conventional understandings of femininity. The fantasy of social mobility is a recurrent theme in West's work, although its connection to "illegitimate" uses of sexuality illustrates that class can be as contentious an issue in American representations as in English ones. Finally, West's continuous maintenance of a performative persona, whether on or off stage or screen, can perhaps be seen as fulfilling Wilde's ideals of composing the body as a work of art. "The Canterville Ghost" and Wilde's American essays indicate his sympathy with American women: West's continuous performative identity offers a praxis for Wilde's fantasies.
CHAPTER 5

DON'T GO WEST, YOUNG WOMAN:
MAE WEST, IMPERSONATION, AND IDENTIFICATION

No woman was ever ruined by a book.

Such plays as "Sex" serve no good purpose. Whereas it probably would have no effect on the sophisticated and those experienced in worldly affairs, yet, in my judgment, it had a most inimical effect upon the youth of our city. . . . the most moral city in the universe.
—Judge Donnellan, New York Times 20 Apr. 1927

I can guarantee this. . . . Any show she writes in the future will not be one to cause public discussion.
—Nathan Burkan, defense attorney for Mae West, following acquittal for The Pleasure Man, New York Times 5 Apr. 1930

For a variety of reasons, it seems appropriate to me to use Wilde as a springboard for the discussion of "dangerous" stage and screen performers, and specifically in this case about the personality and products of Mae West. First, Wilde, throughout much of his career, was associated with acting on various levels: in his performative public persona, his playwriting, and his personal associations with actresses such as Lillie Langtry, Ellen Terry, and Sarah Bernhardt. The theme of acting pervades his work, whether in the sense of staged performances (such as Dorian Gray's Sibyl Vane), or the understanding of "being-as-playing-a-role." One confronts a similar pattern in the case of
West, who began her performing career at the age of five and who made performance the essential ingredient of her persona. West's feature films often establish her characters as diegetic entertainers (e.g., *She Done Him Wrong*, *I'm No Angel*, *Belle of the Nineties*), and the stories thus highlight her "performances" both on and off the stage.

As in the case of Wilde, the "immorality" of West's work is conflated with that of the artist. This is further complicated by the literal appearance of the creator's body in West's productions. By the period of West's popularity, visual entertainment has replaced literature as the most potentially perilous form of popular culture, as it is readily available to the masses, with no special interpretive apparatus required for enjoyment. Both Wilde and West are subject to censorship and to legal prosecution because of their "deviant" stylses of language, representation, and sexuality. Furthermore, both of these figures seem to provoke public censure and to combat it through the use of strategies that we now recognize as Camp. The employment of this counterhegemonic strategy is intimately related to each figure's valorization of performance and self-marketing, and is at least partially responsible for Wilde's and West's shared status as gay icons.

Finally, in addition to his subversive use of Camp, Wilde seems to share something with West in his particular framing of American culture as antithetical to Victorian bourgeois sensibilities. In such works as "The Canterville Ghost," for example, Wilde humorously portrays the American disregard for the sanctity of English "blood" as leading to the destruction of English traditions. While Wilde pokes fun at the vulgarity of the American family, he makes equal sport of the absurdity of English reverence and pride in "ownership" of a ghost. "The Canterville Ghost" finds humor in the very element that provides the sensation novel's fright: the threat to the lineage and traditions of the English aristocratic family. West's plays and films work in a similar vein. While social passing/class climbing was one of the most sinister elements of the sensation novel, allowing commoners (if not criminals) to penetrate the middle-class abode, it often bore a
very different meaning in American cultural representations. While class-climbing threatened to destroy the English way of life, on the other side of the Atlantic it represented the "American dream." Mae West capitalizes on this fantasy in several of her productions, where she plays either a gold-digger (The Constant Sinner, She Done Him Wrong) and/or a professional entertainer (I'm No Angel, Every Day's a Holiday, Belle of the Nineties) who becomes wealthy, often marrying a man from a higher class position than she. The gold-digger, rather than embodying horrifying possibilities as she did in the sensation novel, has been transformed into a Camp heroine.

Despite representing a campy version of the American ideal, West's roles were nevertheless troubling to censors and moral reformers. Although a bourgeois image of woman as a consumer was idealized and encouraged in Hollywood (not least to ensure the consumption of its own stars and products), the means for attaining this status as represented in West's films were seen as illegitimate. West's characters usually advance through the social strata through a self-controlled and pleasurable sexual promiscuity, a fact which alarmed some of her critics. One way of circumventing the scandal over her sexual representations was to place them in a nostalgic 1890s setting, which allowed West to present very modern ideas about sexuality to an audience convinced that it was witnessing the naive sexual styles of the Victorians. West heightened the nostalgic fondness for this romanticized past by cloaking it in humor whose pleasure lay in its audience's sophisticated interpretation of the double entendre. West's ambiguity of meaning and quick-witted, epigrammatic speech are techniques she shares with Wilde for expressing potentially subversive ideas while enabling a defense of a more literal reading. This chapter will show how West developed her particular brand of Camp through her work on the stage, which she subsequently parlayed into film. West's problems with film censors and the decline of her film career expose the contradictions inherent in Hollywood's simultaneous stimulation and prohibition of women's desires. As such,
West shares a common bond with the sensation novel and with Wilde, both of which were criticized for inspiring working-class individuals with illegitimate desires for a lifestyle beyond their means.

The Gay Nineties
When they did such things and they said such things on the Bowery. A lusty, brawling, florid decade when there were handlebars on lip and wheel—and legs were confidential! (Opening intertitle of She Done Him Wrong, 1933)

The best-known images of Mae West feature the corseted star in 1890s garb. In one respect, the explanation for this is very simple: finding her body unsuited to the streamlined flapper fashions of the 1920s and 30s, West fixed upon the styles popular in her childhood (and shown to best advantage by her mother, a former corset model) as those that would be most flattering to her figure. And while West also performed in pictures with contemporary settings, there are other reasons why her repeated cinematic returns to the 1890s seem perfectly logical. West's first film to take place in the fin-de-siècle, 1933's She Done Him Wrong (based on her Broadway hit Diamond Lil), describes the period as a "lusty, brawling, florid decade," thus safely locating these transgressions (no matter how appealing) in the past. The convention of transferring morally dubious content to a distant and/or "historical" context had many literary and cinematic precedents. Anyone familiar with the Gothic novel knows that its outlandish events took place not in a modern and moral England, but in a backward, corrupt, usually Catholic country in the past. Literary sexual awakenings also frequently took place on the European continent or other exotic locale, away from the repressive atmosphere of England or even America (Forster, Woolf, and James come to mind). In the early days of Hollywood, elaborate spectacles of sex and violence were permissible if cloaked in the context of an historical or Biblical tale (such as D.W. Griffith's Intolerance). Some of the

55See biographies by Hamilton and Leider.
silent cinema’s greatest sex symbols were those who seemed to possess the most
exotism, such as Rudolph Valentino and Theda Bara—even though the latter was really
from Ohio.56

West’s settings were hardly exotic—although she did frequently employ African-
American, Asian, and Russian actors—but her use of the 1890s backdrop created a certain
nostalgia that enabled her to portray characters and situations that were safely locked in
an ostensibly less law-abiding past. In "When I’m Bad, I’m Better": Mae West, Sex, and
American Entertainment, historian Marybeth Hamilton analyzes West’s motivations
behind employing the 1890s setting:

West’s aim here was not to resurrect the real 1890s—if indeed that were
possible—but to cast the decade in a particular light, as a time of naivété, still
constrained by Victorianism despite its self-styled daring. The period elements
that stood out in Diamond Lil, that reviewers praised and audiences seemed to
love, were those that provided an amusing contrast with the present by
demonstrating the innocence, the sexual timidity, of their predecessors’ stabs at
nightlife. (117)

Diamond Lil, which opened on Broadway in April of 1928, was West’s biggest stage
success. The setting worked not only to provide nostalgia for a particular New York
subculture that had passed, but it also assured the audience of its own modern
sophistication. Indeed, to an audience familiar with the excitements of jazz, speakeasies,
flappers, and Harlem nightlife, the "naughtiness" of the 1890s—at least as portrayed by
West—must have seemed rather naive. One amusing element was the decoration of the
stage with copies of the Police Gazette, the American counterpart of the scandal-
mongering journalism that had been so popular in Victorian England:

The Police Gazette had amassed a large readership in the late nineteenth century
with lurid exposés of underworld sex and crime.... But it was primarily the
memory of the magazine’s covers that Diamond Lil played off: portraits of
heavyset models encased in tight corsets and thick striped stockings. As racy

56See Dijkstra, Evil Sisters.
journalism, this could only have seemed laughable to a 1920s audience... (Hamilton 117)

As Hamilton goes on to observe, the "racy" photos seemed quite tame when contrasted with the rather revealing costumes of the flapper that could now be seen in person, print, and on film, exposing the legs that had previously been kept "confidential."

Diamond Lil was a success on Broadway, as it was on the screen when it appeared as She Done Him Wrong. In fact, West's first few starring vehicles—especially She Done Him Wrong and I'm No Angel—were enormously profitable and have occasionally been credited (especially by West herself) with saving Paramount from bankruptcy. Yet by 1938, when West filmed Every Day's a Holiday, the last of the star vehicles with whose production she was intimately involved, she had ceased to be profitable. Many of the problems with West's pictures after I'm No Angel (1933) can be attributed to the demands of the censors and the tightening of the Production Code in 1934, resulting in butchered scripts or inconsistencies of plot and character (in Belle of the Nineties and Klondike Annie, for example), that eventually made producing her films too troublesome, especially when returns were diminishing. It is worthwhile to consider West's plays and films within the terms of my discussion of transgressive reading, consumption, and interpretation. That is, I would like to consider how West and her work are situated in relation to Victorian and early twentieth-century arguments about entertainment, gender, and sexuality, and how West's persona and work—and their reception—are informed by these discourses. The West image is shaped both by the female impersonation that we see in the sensation novel, and by the Camp signifying practices originated by Wilde.

This chapter does not discuss My Little Chickadee (1940), Myra Breckinridge (1970), or Sextette (1978), since these are not films over which West had creative control, and are not really typical of the "Mae West" film I am examining. Moreover, the latter two lampoon the image of "Mae West," utilizing an altered form of Camp that only really begins to emerge in the 1960s.

See Curry, "Goin' to Town and Beyond: Mae West, Film Censorship, and the Comedy of Unmarriage," and Too Much of a Good Thing: Mae West as Cultural Icon.
Mae West began performing by age eight (although as early as five in some accounts); Marybeth Hamilton and Emily Wortis Leider both give excellent, detailed accounts of West's early career, as well as the particular performative atmosphere of the era in which she was born in 1893 (including such figures as Little Egypt, Eva Tanguay, and Bert Williams). West's various influences have been well-documented, from the "cooch dance" inspired by Little Egypt's "hootchy-kootchy," to the shimmy and the "dirty blues" she learned from African-American performers. Less frequently investigated, however, are nineteenth-century influences that were sometimes less explicitly connected with the song and dance of West's act, but which certainly had a bearing on her embodiment of gender, sexuality, and performance. Although West was not much of a reader, having dropped out of elementary school, she had others read to her, and she was certainly attuned to her culture from a tender age. Leider compares her to Oscar Wilde on a few occasions, and of course both figures frequently emerge in discussions of Camp. Yet a more explicit connection between the two remains unexplored, despite the fact that the brief overlap of their two lives undoubtedly left a lasting impression on West and her developing performative and linguistic style.

There has been some comparison between the comic verbal styles of the two, as Leider notes:

The popularity and pervasiveness of oft-repeated advertising slogans . . . may have bolstered the twenties' fashion for wisecracks. But there's also a nostalgic strain present that looks backward toward the 1890s. More than one Mae West admirer has crowned her the American Oscar Wilde, his equal in mannered, aphoristic humor. But unlike Wilde . . . Mae West was first a showman, a virtuoso entertainer who veered into writing in order to extend her sphere of influence, enlarge and enhance her limousine-scale celebrity profile, and expedite delivery of her letter to the world. (139-40)

59 Described as a "muscle dance in a sitting position." (See Hamilton 26). A standing version of West's cooch dance can be observed in "Sister Honky Tonk," the opening number of I'm No Angel.
Leider mentions the prevalence of advertising slogans in the same paragraph with Oscar Wilde without drawing a connection between the two. Despite Wilde's abhorrence of the vulgarity of advertising, he was himself guilty of using its tools to market his own image. West was also a master of self-promotion, one who seemed—if this is possible—even more of a persona and less "sincere" than Wilde himself. West even sometimes referred to herself in the third person. In a 1934 interview in Movie Classic, after West had broken from an uncharacteristically long-term romantic attachment on her mother's advice, she brandishes her name as some sort of external object: "From that time on, I have thought only of Mae West. Men have been important only as they could help me to help Mae West" (Biery 71). By the period of her Hollywood success, then, West was already thinking of "Mae West" as a sort of brand name, an independent entity that seemed to have a life of its own, and to whose cultivation she was devoted. West spent her career building the "Mae West" mythology, and, although a great deal of historical detail is available on the actress, still relatively little can be said about the "real" Mae West. In this sense West is an even more extreme case than Wilde, whose personal letters at least (especially those from prison) seem to offer some genuine sentiment.

Because West was not in the habit of doing much reading (nor writing, apart from scripts), it is impossible to know to what degree she was familiar with Wilde and nineteenth-century British literary culture. It is certain, however, that she did have some exposure. Nineteenth-century novels were frequently made into plays, and as a child West appeared both as Little Nell in The Old Curiosity Shop and as the dying Little Willie in East Lynne (Leider 44). In the novel version of Diamond Lil (1932), Lil and Gus Jordan travel to the Bowery Theatre to see East Lynne. In the same novel, West invokes the famous Aesthete while contemplating a group of Salvation Army workers:

Whenever Lil heard the holy howling, as she called it, she wondered why it was that saving one's soul was always made so dreary and unattractive, whereas the way to Hell was always so utterly delightful.
At that very moment, unknown to Lil, of course, Oscar Wilde in England was voicing similar thoughts, his pen etching brilliant insincere epigrams, while he amused himself with the more purple sins. (22)

West evinces a familiarity with Aestheticism elsewhere, as in her play The Pleasure Man (1928). As Pamela Robertson remarks in Guilty Pleasures, West's understanding of Camp is clearly linked to Wilde's sexual and linguistic practices: "In these play scripts, West aligns 'campin' ' with Wildean aestheticism, as well as verbal activity. In The Pleasure Man, references to dandies and aestheticism serve as a joking, coded language for the in-crowd of homosexuals" (31). The passage quoted above from Diamond Lil clearly draws similar connections among Wilde, "outlaw" sexuality, and verbal wit. Diamond Lil does not feature homosexual characters as The Drag and The Pleasure Man do, yet West appears to be paying tribute to Wilde's brilliance in making nonnormative, un(re)productive sexuality seem so attractive.60 And, as I will argue later on, the "brilliant insincere epigrams" which West so admires here will be transformed into her own one-liners, his "indeterminate meaning" into her useful double entendre.

Wilde and West shared a number of reasons for employing what, by West's time, had become known as Camp. West always liked sensational material, and, although she did not share Wilde's homosexual status, she was nevertheless sexually transgressive--uninterested in monogamous marriage or reproductive sexuality, and willing to cross the lines of race, class, and age in her sexual adventures.61 Both Wilde and West were interested in performance, signification, and sexuality. Wilde's project was rather more academic than West's--he was interested in cultivating a bodily practice that would

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60In my research of the New York Times from the period of West's Sex trial, I also found advertisements for performances of Patience, indicating that this parody of Wildean aestheticism still enjoyed cultural currency.

61During a 1911 vaudeville tour at age 17, West was married (under pressure from other performers, who threatened she would get pregnant or earn a "bad reputation") to fellow actor Frank Wallace in Milwaukee. West immediately regretted her action, and the two never lived as a married couple. West denied being married until a county worker in Milwaukee unearthed the marriage license in 1935, after which she and Wallace divorced. More details are given in Eells and Musgrove, Hamilton, and Leider.
correspond to a "Hellenistic" interiority, while West was more interested in profit and notoriety than in any social, political, or aesthetic project. However, his transgressions and West's often shared similar means and results. Both pushed the envelope of sexual representation, as well as of the performance/embodiment of subversive sexual identities. Both were criticized for the "realism" of some of their productions—that is, they were assumed to be representing transgressive sexuality that they had experienced or performed in real life. Both of them went to trial over their creations and the sexual identities they implied, although this left Wilde a broken man, while West's brief stint in jail was free publicity. And, finally, both used Camp to transform the meanings of their transgressive works, creating an indeterminacy meant to allow "innocent" meanings alongside a more knowing subtext.

Where both figures encountered trouble was in situations where their representations seemed to intersect with a dangerous reality. Both countered the attempts at "straight" reading by adopting an artificial, mannered linguistic style. Wilde's urbane epigram becomes West's streetwise one-liner; Wilde's insistence on the multiple interpretations available for his work becomes the double entendre which enables West, to some degree, to skirt the censors (so to speak). According to Wayne Koestenbaum, both figures employ what he calls "divaspeak." Although Koestenbaum's discussion applies specifically to the stars of opera, it has applications elsewhere in culture, as he indicates. Consider some of Koestenbaum's observations:

Divas aren't afraid to praise themselves. Divas talk like Oscar Wilde. Or Oscar Wilde talked like a diva. The diva turns a phrase and reverses it—substitutes praise for blame, pride for chagrin, authority for vacillation, salesmanship for silence... [Divaspeak has a] sublime lack of respect for the truth... Divaspeak is succinct, epigrammatic...

Divaspeak, a language of vindication and self-defense, works only because we know that the tale's moral. The diva is always right. And she assumes that we share her interpretation of the event...
Divaspeak helps the diva steal the show and then, with a rhetorical question, assert that the show was her property all along.

Divaspeak is the language of put-on (faked aristocracy, faked humility) but it utterly believes in the effectiveness of its gestures—or pretends to.

Divaspeak is not limited to opera culture. It is a gay dialect. A way of asserting power, preeminence, and invulnerability through language alone, of speaking strong though one is really weak. (131-32)

It seems odd to think of either Wilde or West as "weak," since both dominated everyone around them (with the exception of their mothers and Bosie), and the biographies of Wilde contain many reports of his remarkable stature and feats of "masculinity" (such as winning fist-fights and drinking bouts). Of course, much of West's appearance of physical domination was a put-on, as she was only five feet tall and wore enormous heels or platforms beneath her floor-length gowns to create the illusion of height. Yet both parties were in some sense "weak" through belonging to a marginalized group or groups: Wilde as homosexual, Irish, and of ambiguous class status, and West as female, uneducated, and working-class. Both certainly create seemingly invincible personae through the use of language--Wilde as the intellectual aesthete and high priest of culture; West as the sexually irresistible "tough girl" who calls all the shots and gets all the laughs without ever being the object of derision. Each used "succinct, epigrammatic" speech as a means of "vindication and self-defense." For example, Wilde's assertion in the Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray that "When critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself," is an incontrovertible, self-contained way of snubbing his detractors while insisting on the text's multiplicity of meanings. Moreover, both Wilde and West were famous for producing comedy by inverting common wisdom. Many of West's one-liners resemble Wilde's epigrams. For example, Wilde's "I can resist everything except temptation" is echoed in West's "What's the good of resisting temptations?--There'll

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62 As Diamond lil, West appeared to be five foot nine (Leider 195). West's heightening shoes were also responsible for her trademark slow-motion, undulating walk, born of necessity to keep from tripping.
always be more" and "When I'm caught between two evils, I generally like to pick the one I never tried."63

One of the major differences between Wilde and West is that the former is an exponent of an intellectual and cultural aristocracy that despises the dull Philistinism and "morality" of the bourgeoisie, while West is the uneducated daughter of a pugilist who enjoys scandalizing the bourgeois crowd to generate publicity.64 Wilde framed Philistines as being incapable of understanding his art because they were unimaginative and unsophisticated interpreters. West, on the other hand, relied on a bourgeois audience that would interpret her work as "shocking" in its vulgar uses of language and sexuality. The earnings of West's plays and films suggest that these audiences enjoyed being scandalized by her characters as they worked their way through the social ranks. No doubt Oscar Wilde was also dependent on the patronage of bourgeois audiences for his plays' successes, despite his insistence that he had no desire to be a popular author.

Wilde's most successful plays (The Importance of Being Earnest, Lady Windermere's Fan, An Ideal Husband) were all set in contemporary English bourgeois households. Salomé was not appreciated at the time it was written (there were laws against portraying Biblical characters on the British stage, and further problems were presented by Wilde's trials), and Wilde's other plays--such as Vera, or The Nihilists and The Duchess of Padua--are dour tragedies lacking the self-conscious absurdity that was Wilde's strength.

Wilde's greatest dramatic triumph, The Importance of Being Earnest, is also the campiest. West's early plays also lack the campiness that would later become her trademark. The best example of this is Sex, the 1926 play that brought West into the spotlight. Sex

63 Both figures are often accused of plagiarizing, which includes the recycling of their best lines. Some version of Wilde's "temptation" statement can be found in a few of his plays, while the West versions quoted above are from Klondike Annie.

64 One should keep in mind that Oscar Wilde also had working-class associations, although here I am primarily interested in discussing each figure's attitude toward the bourgeois audience.
is the story of Margy LaMont, a prostitute in a Montreal brothel. Margy cohabitates with Rocky Waldron, a blackmailer, thief, and pimp. Lieutenant Gregg of the English Navy attempts to convince Margy to "follow the fleet" to Trinidad, telling her she can make a fortune there. Margy hesitates until she and Gregg discover that Rocky has brought Clara, a society woman looking for cheap thrills, back to Margy's apartment and drugged her drink. Margy and Gregg help Clara recover, but when a policeman stops by on a tip, Clara claims that Margy drugged her and stole her jewels. When the policeman warns Margy that "Montreal is getting a little hot" (56) for her, she decides to head for Trinidad.

In Port au Prince, Margy receives the attentions of Jimmy Stanton, a young millionaire from the United states. Too naive to realize that Margy is a prostitute, Jimmy proposes to her after their first week together. Lieutenant Gregg also proposes, but Margy rejects him in favor of the "clean, wonderful love" (69) she feels for Stanton, with whom she travels to Connecticut. In a coincidence worthy of the sensation novel, Jimmy's mother turns out to be Clara Stanton, the society matron drugged in Margy's apartment while she was looking for a good time in Montreal's red light district. The two women confront one another, and after Clara behaves insultingly toward Margy, the latter seduces Jimmy. The next day, Margy confesses her profession to Jimmy and announces she is going to Australia (with Lieutenant Gregg).

The title of Sex is purposely provocative, courting danger, as is its content. It seems remarkable that the play would have been permitted to run at all in 1926, especially when one considers that after the introduction of the Production Code in 1930, one could not even speak of sex, much less represent it, in Hollywood films. Although West and her cast were eventually prosecuted for their performances of Sex (and subsequently for a later production, The Pleasure Man), the atmosphere in which these plays were produced seems more liberal than the era of Hollywood that was to come, and the popularity of West's plays proves that there was a market for such material despite (or
perhaps because of) the efforts of law enforcement. In order to make sense of West's Broadway experiences, it is useful to have some understanding of pertinent social and cultural changes that affected theater's relation to gender and class in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Robert C. Allen's *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* investigates the history and meaning of this form of entertainment, as well as what it meant for definitions of gender and social position. Allen traces the history of popular theater in America from its rowdy roots, revealing that audience passivity was not always the norm. He refers to a riot at the Astor Place Theater in 1849 as a turning point in marketing entertainment forms toward specific audiences: "after 1849, the heterogeneous fare that had characterized an evening at the theater in the 1830s and 1840s—variety acts, dancers, farce, and tragedy all sharing the same stage—was fragmented into distinct forms for separate, socially defined audiences" (61). After this period, certain forms of entertainment (such as legitimate drama, opera, and later, ballet and vaudeville) were regarded as acceptable for the middle and upper classes, women, and children, while less respectable forms were aimed at men and working-class patrons. Yet the theater's capacity as a fantasy space still enabled it to challenge the social order, and the occasional return of the "repressed" theatrical carnivalesque (recalling the disorderly, mixed-class audiences and "immoral" entertainment of previous decades) usually resulted in moral outrage. This was the case with the controversy over Lydia Thompson's burlesque troupe in 1868, as Allen points out. Burlesque's intersection of spectacle and female sexuality, as well as its inversion of social order (apparent in such elements as cross-dressing), scandalized "respectable" audiences accustomed to a sanitized theatrical space and content. Although Thompson's burlesque troupe was received enthusiastically by many, numerous others considered burlesque a "disease."
Allen attributes the negative responses to burlesque to the fragility of theater's respectability:

Ironically, it was the presence of respectable, middle-class women and men in the audience that made burlesque so problematic, and it was only in relation to what the bourgeois theater had become since the Astor Place riot that burlesque seemed so transgressive. . . . The theater would continue to be a liminoid space, where things were not what they seemed and where pleasure might be taken in the construction of unreal worlds. . . . But onstage and in the audience, the theater's inherent power to transgress and invert existing power relations was much more circumscribed than it had been a generation before. (77)

The problem with burlesque was that it recalled a more democratic and unruly theatrical audience, introducing a form of entertainment (sometimes called the "leg business") that was clearly unsuitable for a crowd that considered itself modest and refined. This is also the problem with West's Sex, which presented a "low" representational style in a respectable venue. By the time West emerges on Broadway, representation of sex--like theater itself several decades before--had been made "safe" for middle-class women, but only when presented within certain parameters.

In the 1910s and 1920s, the period in which Mae West was performing and developing what would become her star image, the sexuality of females and its shaping by aesthetic (and other) objects they consumed was still a hot topic for public discussion. The new, sexually sophisticated young woman was the flapper, delineated by H.L. Mencken in 1915:

This Flapper, to tell the truth, is far from a simpleton. . . . The age she lives in is one of knowledge. She herself is educated. She is privy to dark secrets. The world bears to her no aspect of mystery. She has been taught how to take care of herself.

For example, she has a clear and detailed understanding of all the tricks of white slave traders, and knows how to circumvent them. She is on the lookout for them in matinée lobbies and railroad stations--benevolent-looking old women who pretend to be ill, plausible young men who begin business with "Beg pardon," bogus country girls who cry because their mythical brothers have failed to meet them. She has a keen eye for hypodermic needles, chloroform masks,
closed carriages. She has seen all these sinister machines of the devil in operation on the screen. . . .

This Flapper has forgotten how to simper; she seldom blushes; it is impossible to shock her. She saw "Damaged Goods" without batting an eye, and went away wondering what the row over it was all about. The police of her city having prohibited "Mrs. Warren's Profession," she read it one rainy Sunday afternoon, and found it a mess of platitudes. She has heard "Salome" and prefers it to "Il Trovatore." She has read "Trilby," "Three Weeks," and "My Little Sister," and thinks them all pretty dull. . . . She plans to read Havelock Ellis during the coming year. (Young Mencken 451-52)

Mencken’s description of the Flapper echoes H.L. Mansel’s review of sensation novels from 1863. Both consider the effects of unregulated access to culture on young women, and how these women are transformed by their newly-gained knowledge. But while Mansel and his contemporaries tend to be apprehensive about whether and what women are reading, occasionally alarmed at the potential consequences, Mencken’s tone is far from hysterical. The description is occasionally tongue-in-cheek, as when Mencken comments on the flapper’s caution against potential white slavers, a practice she has learned from the movies. Absent is the anxiety, belonging to Oliphant and her ilk, that such scandalous cultural consumption will lead to the downfall of the race. Mencken recognizes that the flapper cannot be said to be "innocent," but neither does he frame her as a Jezebel. Familiar with the New Woman, Mencken and his contemporaries are less likely to be shocked by the flapper, and are sometimes even inclined to admire her sophisticated modernity. Nevertheless, Mencken’s interpretation of the flapper does not raise the possibility of her mimetic reenactment of the culture she consumes. Her informed reading of scandalous material is perhaps permissible because it is passive rather than active transgression.

As Mencken’s commentary on the flapper makes clear, this is an identity based largely on consumption. Rather than describing the class background of the flapper (although such a level of education and freedom to consume would tend to indicate at

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65 The flapper had both proponents and antagonists. See Bad Women. 237
least a middle-class background), Mencken draws her in relation to consumable objects: movies, books, plays, operas— even, as the essay continues, the kinds of things she may eat. Staiger, following the lead of other scholars, uses the term "culture of consumption" to describe this twentieth-century way of signifying identity (and perhaps an essentially American way, since one must find alternatives for signifying "status" in an ostensibly classless society). West's Sex (and other plays) debuted in this culture which expected young women to be more knowing and experienced consumers. Despite the general cultural atmosphere and the expectations of female exposure to formerly forbidden entertainment, however, Sex created an uproar.

Although the flapper and her society were supposed to be more sophisticated when it came to sex, they were not, as Marybeth Hamilton points out, accustomed to the sort of representation employed in Sex:

High fashion in the 1920s had brought sexual expressiveness into respectable women's wardrobes more directly than ever before, but in restrained or teasing ways—through bound breasts, a straight silhouette, and a slender, boyish look that suggested cosmopolitanism or sporty independence rather than overt eroticism. Broadway's mainstream entertainment reflected this unease. The Ziegfield girls took the stage in the Follies with their breasts bared, but they did so with a near-motionless elegance that gave them a detached, aristocratic allure.

... In the 1920s, when a boyish figure defined respectable sexuality, a thickset body like West's brought seamy associations to mind: prostitutes, who were marked, doctors claimed, by a "peculiar plumpness," and burlesque actresses, whose famously overblown figures signaled their supposedly aggressive embrace of sexual passion. (54-55)

The young middle-class woman of the 1920s was supposed to be more sexually sophisticated than her mother or grandmother had been, yet many critics and moral guardians were clearly disturbed by Sex's representation of sexuality. Apparently there was a mode of sexual knowledge that was appropriate for young women, and that was not Mae West's mode. The flapper body, even in its sexualization, exhibits a restraint of appetites. Although more of the body is revealed by the flapper's clothes, that body has
become more boyish and streamlined, less obviously sensual or sexually differentiated than West's. The flapper's svelte physique represents corporeal discipline, whether in the form of exercise or diet. American culture intimately associates a woman's control of one form of appetite with another, and in the 1920s, when the flapper body represented a respectable embodiment of female sexuality, West's fleshiness seemed to indicate an excess of appetitive satisfaction. Within a culture of consumption, a tasteful degree of self-restraint signified a certain amount of "class," ensuring that women would monitor the propriety of their own behavior even when granted comparative freedom. West violated the self-surveillance demanded by codes of gender propriety, appearing to indulge all her appetites.

One thing that the Sex controversy has in common with Wilde's trials is that both lay bare the social anxieties about the appearance of lower-class sexuality in middle-class space. Much of the "proof" of Wilde's homosexuality seemed to lie in his associations with working-class men. Carson and his team could only explain cross-class acquaintances as signs of an unsavory sexuality. At the same time, Carson seems not quite to know what to do with Wilde's various "rent boys." He needs their testimony to convict Wilde, but his argument must be framed in such a way as to suggest that respectable men, not male prostitutes, are the ones really endangered by Wilde. The portrayal of lower-class sexuality in Sex also endangers those with higher social status. Jazz Age audiences were accustomed to representations of sexuality and even prostitution, but such portrayals were often rather idealized. Sex was accused of being too "realistic."

To a turn-of-the-millennium reader, such a claim may seem rather ludicrous. Jimmy Stanton is so naive as to be clueless about Margy's profession, or about what she

66 This idea is also present in the Victorian era. See Armstrong's analysis of the "salon" body and the grotesque body in "The Occidental Alice."
is doing in Trinidad in the first place. Clara Stanton's role as Jimmy's mother who just
happened to be the woman drugged in Margy's Montreal apartment is utterly contrived.
Margy's final decision that she is unworthy of Jimmy and more suitable for Lieutenant
Gregg, the "black sheep" (67) of his family, is pure melodrama. The problem is not
"realism" per se but Sex's chosen mode of representation: "Sex shocked the critics
because it presented sexuality in a style that legitimate theater scorned. It created its
brothel by drawing on illegitimate sources that made it unusual and distinctly unnerving
in the context of Broadway" (Hamilton 51). One of the main "illegitimate sources" was,
of course, burlesque, which, like Sex, relied on "breakneck comic banter, transparently
sexual double entendre, and graphic physical movement" (Hamilton 52). Burlesque at
the time was considered the "lowest" form of theater, as opposed to more respectable
vaudeville and highbrow Broadway.

The introduction of lower-class and burlesque tastes and styles of representation
into the legitimate theater was certainly taboo. At the very least, it blurred into the
boundaries between respectable or "artistic" representations of sexuality and the crude
performances supposedly enjoyed by the lower classes.67 Because legitimate theater had
been considered highbrow, only of interest to an educated elite, until the 1920s
censorship had been considered unnecessary. Moral guardians "had long been concerned
with stage purification, of course, but until the 1920s they directed their campaigns
against immoral amusement at the cheap theaters--the small-time vaudeville, burlesque,
and movie houses that served the urban poor" (Hamilton 72). Hamilton remarks that the
development of boards of censorship for motion pictures was simply an extension of "the
Victorian tradition of policing the cultural activity of the poor," and that, as always, the

67See Robert C. Allen, Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture (Chapel Hill: U of North
imagined audience for whom the censorship guidelines were created was impressionable, childlike, and vulnerable.

_Sex_ reads as a Mae West product, although it is in some senses different from her films. Hamilton remarks that the play lacks the senses of irony and self-parody that are so present in her movies (54), and perhaps much of the humor that we recognize as distinctly Westian evolved from the necessity of evading film censors. 

There is never any doubt about Margy's profession, nor is it romanticized. Rocky is Margy's "easy rider" or pimp, and Margy is tired of working the streets:

ROCKY: Say, who meets the guys and steers them down here to you? Me.
    Who's the business head of this here dump? Me. And you want to know what I did? I started you didn't I? Yes, and I didn't only start you, I made you, get me, I made you ....
    MARGY: Oh, without question. But just the same, I'm getting tired of you and this dump.
    ROCKY: Not good enough for you, eh?
    MARGY: Oh, I'm going somewhere where I can play around with the heavy sugar daddies and see life and get something for it, instead of sitting around here night after night waiting for your cheap bunch. (37)

Prostitution is portrayed as something done out of desperation, and part of Margy's motivation for wanting to marry Jimmy Stanton comes from observing the wasting health, even the suicide, of some of her fellow prostitutes. Although she chooses not to marry the rich man in the end, Margy is not exactly punished or redeemed, as she would have had to be under the Production Code. Nor is Clara Stanton punished for her immoral escapade in Montreal: although Margy has initiated Clara's son into sexual knowledge, she still protects Clara from Rocky Waldron's blackmail and refrains from revealing the truth about Clara to Jimmy.

68 Ramona Curry remarks on this in "Goin' to Town and Beyond," pp. 213-14.

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Sex's portrayal of prostitution is not sentimental, nor does it present a moral universe in which sexual and social transgressions are inevitably punished. But what was perhaps most offensive about the play is that West's body, combined with the absence of her later gender parody, conspired to make the world of Sex seem alarmingly "real" to the critics: "Mae West as Margy Lamont manipulated her full figure to convey a voracious sexual appetite, freely indulged and unabashedly savored. So convincing was she that most critics could not see it as a performance. While none accused West of being a prostitute herself, a few implied that she took actual sexual pleasure in her performance—in their minds the most offensive 'realism' of all" (Hamilton 55). Representations of sex and prostitution were permissible in the legitimate theater as long as they were distanced and the actors did not appear "really" to be the figures they were portraying. West's palpably working-class (and burlesque) portrayal of sexuality violated this contract by making it appear that at least the star of the play enjoyed "low" forms of sexuality and was offering a literal portrait of such reality to a vulnerable middle-class audience. Furthermore, representations of prostitution or "white slavery" (also problematic in She Done Him Wrong) raised racial anxieties. Staiger cites a "white slavery scare from 1907" (Bad Women 51), and a statement by Charles Eliot, once president of Harvard University, frames the threat of prostitution and venereal disease as specifically detrimental to the white race: "We have got to remove this evil, or this country will not be ruled by the race that is now here. The family life of the white race is at stake in its purity, in its healthfulness and its fertility" (308-9). Although the criticism of Sex did not specifically articulate these racial tensions, West's "illegitimate" representations and embodiment of female sexuality would be continuously associated with nonwhites (particularly African-Americans), whether in her portrayals of interracial relationships (The Constant Sinner, Klondike Annie), her employment of African-American actors and musicians, her
performance of musical and dance styles derived from African-American entertainment forms, or her real-life affair with her African-American chauffeur Chalky Wright.

Sex brought West notoriety and profit, grossing $14,000 in its fourth week and $16,500 in its seventh (Eells and Musgrove 64). The play was obviously popular, despite the disgust of critics. Sex was allowed to run for over 370 performances before it was raided (New York Times 20 Apr. 1927). In fact, city officials refrained from taking action against West until she provoked them by beginning on her next controversial play, The Drag. The judgment against Sex was apparently meant to deter West from going forward with The Drag or other scandalous projects. A city official named McKee remarked of the Sex verdict that "Salaciousness, cloaked as art, is doomed as a box office proposition and pathological problems will not, in the future, be safe offerings with a stage for a dissecting room" (New York Times 7 Apr. 1927). McKee was obviously referring to The Drag and its "scientific" exploration of homosexuality. In the same article, McKee further derided the "sex play" as a European taint of American culture: "He attributed what he called the steady degradation of the American stage to a determination to acquire a European theatrical taste." McKee identifies West's degenerate theater as "other" and foreign, even though throughout West's life her Brooklyn origins would be one of her trademarks. The star's reaction to the guilty verdict is also uniquely American, capitalizing on the commercial potential of scandal: "'Considering what Sex got me,' she said, 'a few days in the pen 'n' a $500 fine ain't too bad a deal" (Schlissel 204).

It seems a poetic coincidence that Sex was running and work on The Drag was beginning at the time when screen idol Rudolph Valentino died. Valentino's remarkable status as a male sex symbol had initiated a public debate about what it meant to be "manly," and the influence of the cinema on American gender ideals. Marjorie Garber includes a discussion of Valentino in Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural
Anxiety, and Leider also points out the controversies provoked by Valentino's transgressive appearance and performative style:

Muscular, passionate, and often violent in his on-screen pursuit of women, Valentino was resented by many American men because of his ability to quicken the collective pulses of legions of women; and because of the androgynous sexuality he projected. Floppy harem pants, slave bracelets, a smooth, powdered complexion, slicked-back hair, mascaraed eyes, a swarthy exoticism, even his prowess at the tango all flew in the face of the rough-and-tough, tall-in-the-saddle, 100 percent American he-man ideal. Would a real American man recline languorously costumed as a bedizened Young Rajah, in a swan-boat barge? (153-54)

It is an interesting coincidence that Mae West also had a swan-themed bed (in Diamond Lil and She Done Him Wrong), as if such a thing were a prerequisite for gender impersonation, the sexual site of the transformation into the beautiful, a less sinister version of the symbolism of the death's-head moth in The Silence of the Lambs. The troubling aspects of Valentino's sex appeal also call to mind Wilde's observations in his essays on America and its men. In "The American Man," Wilde had declared that the species was so devoted to utility that it ceased to appreciate beauty and utterly lacked mystery. Wilde went on to remark that American men, especially when abroad, lacked the charm and vivacity that seemed to characterize American women. Wilde predicted that someday the nation would be entirely populated by "petticoats," since being "masculine" in America would cease to be enviable or even necessary, and the male of the species already seemed to be fading into a nonentity.

During his tour of America, Wilde endured many aspersions against his own "masculinity." Most of the assumptions about Wilde's gender propriety were based on his appearance—his long hair and velvet knee-breeches, for example—and his interest in "feminine" pursuits such as home decoration. Yet a number of contemporary articles and illustrations (and even W.S. Gilbert's Patience) indicate that at least some American women found Wilde attractive. Like Wilde, only to a much greater degree, Valentino,
whom Mencken described as "catnip to women" (Vintage Mencken 174) was challenging the mode of masculinity idealized by American men. Valentino's influence was pervasive, destabilizing gender identity by revealing that women were attracted to androgyny, the sexualized male body, and men whose cultivation of their appearance marked them as "feminized." Garber remarks that "Valentino is not being explicitly described as gay, but as contributing to effeminacy and foppery, sapping the virility of the American Male. Again display and masquerade are perceived as feminine, and feminizing" (363).

Valentino retaliated against charges of his effeminacy by asserting his masculinity and even challenging one detractor to a boxing or wrestling match.69 Ironically, just as, according to Wilde, hypermasculinity could lead to uselessness and obsolescence, Valentino's own version of "hypermasculinity"--his irresistibility to women, his supposed prowess as a lover--also paradoxically signified his feminization: "the more desperately Valentino himself emphasized attributes of physical prowess and virility, the more perfectly he played the part of the male impersonator, brilliant counterpart to the female 'female' impersonators of the American screen such as Mae West or the vamps of his own films" (Hansen 25). Hansen of course refers to the commonplace description of Mae West as "the greatest female impersonator of all time," a phrase that originated in the May 1934 issue of Vanity Fair, in George Davis's "The Decline of the West."70 Through her exaggeration of womanhood--her "excessive" body, exaggerated walk and gestures, over-the-top costumes, and so on--West becomes a "female impersonator," one who is

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70Davis's article laments both the embrace of "Mae West" by intellectuals, and the idea that West is seriously sexy rather than an "uproarious take-off on a beautiful dame" (82). Davis absolutely understands West as a parody of a sexy woman: "Though my love for you has never been the fleshly one proclaimed by so many of your admirers, it has withstood the true-blue test of time. I can pay you no greater tribute, dear lady, than to say that it has healed the wound in my heart caused by the death of the one and only Bert Savoy. I love you, Miss West, because YOU are the greatest female impersonator of all time" (82).
curiously both hyperfeminine and androgynous, just as Valentino (and even Collins's Geoffrey Delamayn) is both hypermasculine and androgynous. This seeming paradox, according to Sontag, is a hallmark of Camp: "Allied to the Camp taste for the androgynous is something that seems quite different but isn't: a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms" (279-80). Both ends of the spectrum, androgynous and hyper-(fe)male, throw sex/gender identity into chaos through its attenuation or exaggeration. Although Sex does not yet realize West's potential for the latter, her next play, The Drag, relies on the artifice of gender parody for its comedy. Although West did not star in The Drag (subtitled "A Homosexual Comedy in Three Acts"), she wrote and produced it, sensing the profitability in the then-popular "nance humor." In the past West had done male drag in a vaudeville act with her sister, and her awareness of the comic potential of gender impersonation would inspire not only The Drag's cross-dressing scenes, but her own camped-up female impersonation.

The Drag further expresses a medical interest in homosexuality, no matter how superficial this may be. West claimed to be familiar with the works of nineteenth-century sexologists (Hamilton 59), and the opening scene of The Drag finds Dr. Richmond reading a book by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, an early expert on "sexual inversion." The play is the story of one such "invert," Rolly Kingsbury, a wealthy young man who is married but who secretly desires his friend Allen. Allen, however, is heterosexual, and in fact falls in love with Rolly's wife, Clair, who is puzzled by her husband's neglect. In the meantime, Rolly's former lover, David, has been pining for Rolly since the latter's marriage. Following the confession of his inversion, Rolly throws a drag ball and is murdered. Rolly's father, a judge, at first accuses Allen, but must face the unpleasant

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71 This was in 1916. See Eells and Musgrove.
revelation of his son's sexual orientation when David confesses to the murder and its motive. The judge orders the murder to be publicly represented as a suicide.

West's attitude toward homosexuality seemed to vary according to when she was interviewed and by whom. The various accounts tend to understand West's attitude as one of tolerance toward what she considered an abnormality.\textsuperscript{72} West considered homosexuality a disease (one senses that this is at least partly because she could not comprehend any man failing to find her attractive), but she thought homosexuals should be treated with sympathy because they had no control over their sexual desires or identification. At the same time, "Queers fascinated her. She personally 'liked her sexes stable,' but found herself curiously drawn to the flaunting, preening, suggestive speech and campy put-ons of drag queens. She spoke that language, too" (Leider 157). Later in her life, West would recall that gay men were the first to imitate her in her presence. In interviews conducted during and after the beginnings of the Gay Rights movement, West would conveniently remember herself as a great advocate of homosexual rights.

Consistent with the formula of inversion, West understood homosexual men as women trapped in male bodies: "When she happened to see a bunch of cops roughing up some 'boys' after a matinee, she intervened. 'Remember,' she told the police, 'when you're hitting one of the gay boys you're hitting a lady'" (Leider 157). Yet one must temper West's "gay rights activism" with her certain recognition that a play about homosexuality would be both notorious and profitable.

Homosexual plays were becoming trendy at the time West wrote \textit{The Drag}. Sex plays in general had been gaining legitimacy by the time West's productions began

\footnote{This primarily applies to gay men. West did not seem to have much sympathy for lesbians. She did have a friendship with her Paramount costar Marlene Dietrich, but sometimes hinted that Dietrich's interest in her was not simply platonic: "[West] and Marlene Dietrich did become friends after they were assigned side-by-side dressing rooms in the 1930s. Mae was pleased to have Dietrich prepare good German food for her. 'But I had to pull back when she started wantin' to wash my hair,' Mae said. 'I was afraid it wasn't all on my head'" (Eells and Musgrove 14).}
appearing on Broadway, as the work of highbrow playwrights often dealt with the less wholesome aspects of life in an attempt to create greater psychological realism. Also, a few months before The Drag's debut, a play called The Captive had made an apparently legitimate splash on Broadway:

The play created an immediate sensation, packing the houses and drawing the unanimous acclaim of New York's theater critics, who praised its delicacy and "terrific dramatic effect." They chose their words carefully, eager to safeguard a lavish high-quality production that dealt with a highly controversial topic: The Captive was Broadway's first full-length overt treatment of lesbianism. (Hamilton 57)

Capitalizing on the earlier play's success, West even went so far as to proclaim her show "A Male Captive." Yet The Captive, starring Helen Menken and Basil Rathbone, was considered serious, dignified, and artistic—words that were unlikely to be applied to any Westian production. Leading lady Menken even "gave interviews suggesting that young college women see the play to learn how to avoid sexual perversion. At the final curtain, the woman who lured a young wife away from her husband was represented only by a small bouquet of violets left on a table. The word 'lesbian' was never uttered" (Schlissel 11). West would later argue that her own, less reputable plays had didactic and moral value, although her assertions were not given much credibility. In fact, the public furor over West's plays would result in a backlash against even acclaimed sex plays such as The Captive.

West understood that Broadway was fascinated with homosexuality, and was determined to give its audiences a treatment that was far from the tame Captive. With her background in working-class forms of comedy such as burlesque (although she would never admit to having been a burlesque performer), West knew that the interest in "nance humor" had origins in the "low" comedy that was considered beneath Broadway patrons. Yet the popularity of sex plays and homosexual-themed plays (including also the contemporary Rain and The Virgin Man) implied that these highbrow audiences—
including many "impressionable" women—craved more earthly delights. The popularity of West's and other sex plays seemed to validate West's assertion of the "genteel" audience's desire for "dirt." As in the case of sensation novel, nineteenth-century murder trials, and the works of Oscar Wilde, one of the most troubling aspects of this public appetite was the perceived incongruity between the "low" material and the audience that consumed it. Victorian ladies relished attending murder trials to witness their gruesome details; educated Victorian men were endangered by the sexual poison contained in Wilde's productions; and West's plays were popular not only with the typical burlesque crowd, but with young middle-class folks, including women. A Herald Tribune article by Elisabeth Marbury laments this state of affairs:

The more obnoxious the play, the more one sees the matinees full of young girls from 16 to 20 years of age. . . . They do not buy their tickets either inadvertently or ignorantly, yet there they are in the audience, listening to language that is foul, following a theme which is perverted and revolting, and watching gestures that have but one purpose and meaning. (19)

Marbury's portrait of the playgoing young woman contrasts sharply with the representation of the "innocent" young victims of railway-stall booksellers so often cited by Victorian critics, as well as with the hip, knowledgeable flapper delineated by Mencken. Victorian moral reformers understood young women as weak-minded readers, which is hardly the case with Marbury or Mencken. But while Mencken regards the flapper as a sexual sophisticate, he does not impugn her respectability; Marbury, on the

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73 The success of similarly sensational plays . . . had revealed an eager middle-class market for racy tales of prostitution; The Captive had proved that this fascination extended to homosexuality. Sex and The Drag were products of that cultural moment: shrewd pieces of exploitation by a would-be celebrity with an unsubtle sense of theatrical trends. As West allegedly told one of Sex's backers when he expressed hesitation about the play's rawness, Broadway audiences wanted "dirt"—and, she added emphatically, "I'll give it to them!" (Hamilton 66)
other hand, views the awareness of these young consumers as a sign of their certain perversity.

West's The Drag sensationalized the scientific treatises on sex that the in-the-know flapper was supposedly consuming. Early in the play, David, the cast-off lover of Rolly Kingsbury, laments his condition to a doctor. His description of his problem would have been familiar to anyone versed in Ellis, Ulrichs, or Krafft-Ebing:

DAVID: ... I'm one of those damned creatures who are called degenerates and moral lepers for a thing they cannot help—a thing that has made me suffer—Oh, God! --Doctor, I can't explain.
DOCTOR: Tell me everything—this perversion of yours—is it an acquired habit or has it always been so?
DAVID: Always, from the earliest childhood. I was born a male, but my mind has always been that of a female. Why, as a child I played with dolls—I even cried when they cut off my curls. As I grew older the natural desires of a youth were unknown to me. I could not understand why women never interested me. I was attracted by my own sex. How was I to know it was wrong, when it seemed so natural to me. (102)

Thus far the play seems to fall within the bounds of "respectability." David's explanation of his condition is one that has been familiar since the Victorian age, of a person whose corporeality is mismatched with a perceived internal gender core. The Drag assumes a rather conservative attitude toward "inversion." Although the assertion of David's lack of choice in the matter is supposed to be sympathetic, the play simultaneously interprets the gestures and significations of gender as natural. That is, David's early fondness for dolls and for his appearance should have indicated something was amiss.

Though on a structural level the play is about David, Rolly, and the problem of having to closet or disguise one's sexuality, its perhaps greater interest—and the one that aroused the most controversy—was its spectacle of cross-gender performance. Leider calls it "a strangely divided play, part a serious plea for openness and toleration, part campy, sensationalized free-for-all" (158). And Robertson notes that the gay characters in The Drag and The Pleasure Man (1928) are the ones whose dialogue really anticipates
The dialogue of the female impersonators at Rolly's drag ball is outrageously campy. Discussing an apparently recent arrest, The Drag's "Kate" uses Koestenbaum's "divaspeak" to transform the oppressive facts of homophobia and harassment into a sign of her personal triumph over "Winnie," a rival:

KATE: ... We had a grand time--The police were perfectly lovely to us—weren't they girls?
ENSEMBLE: Yes!
WINNIE: They were?
KATE: Perfectly lovely, why the minute I walked into jail, the Captain said--
   Well, Kate, what kind of a cell would you like to have? And I says—Oh, any
   kind will do, Captain, just so it has a couple of peepholes in it. I crave fresh air.
WINNIE: My, but you're getting thin.
KATE: I am not. I can at least cling to a man without wearing him out. You're terribly fat.
WINNIE: Fat! I should say not. I'm the type that men prefer. I can at least go through the navy yard without having the flags drop to half mast.
KATE: Listen, dearies--pull in your aerial, you're full of static. I'm just the type that men crave. The type that burns 'em up. Why, when I walk up Tenth Avenue, you can smell the meat sizzling in Hell's Kitchen. (132)

"Kate" takes an unpleasant facet of homosexual life--police harassment, a problem especially for "visible" homosexuals such as drag queens--and turns it instead into an indication of "her" desirability: the police find "her" irresistible. The banter of the female impersonators resembles Wildean speech in its insistence on "inverting" the conventional interpretation of a situation, rendering it both comic and favorable to the speaker. At the same time, a kind of logic always underlies this speech. Wilde's epigrams often ring of an element of truth, and "Kate's" interpretation of the policeman's behavior hints at the troubling desire that is often the basis for homophobia. The more ribald elements, however--peepholes, flags falling to half mast, sizzling meat--are pure West, the evocation of raunchy, bitchy, lower-class comedy.
It is no mystery that The Drag was the real target of the attack on Sex. In fact, charges against Sex would have been dropped if West had closed the play, but Sex continued, benefitting from the publicity, until shortly before the obscenity trial. Charges were filed against West and her co-producers (collectively denominated "The Moral Producing Company") and actors on March 2, 1927. The grand jury indictment recalls the language of the charges against Wilde; the offenses are not clearly articulated but are assumed to be understood:

The said defendants ... unlawfully did prepare, advertise, give, present and participate in an obscene, indecent, immoral, and impure drama, play, exhibition, show and entertainment then and there called "SEX," a more particular description of which said drama, play, exhibition, show and entertainment would be offensive to this Court and improper to be spread upon the records thereof, wherefore such description is not here given. ... (Schlissel 206)

The rhetoric of the indictment implies that any "normal" or "decent" person would be offended by West's play, and that it is therefore unnecessary to find language for Sex's violations. Indeed, to do so would only taint the innocent members of the jury. In this way, the audience can grasp Sex's perversions without seeing the play or hearing about its particular transgressions. The indictment is more specific in dealing with the intended effects of the production: "The said defendants ... contriving and wickedly intending, so far as in them lay, to debauch and corrupt the morals of youth and of other persons and to raise and create in their minds inordinate and lustful desires. ..." (Schlissel 206). As in the case of the controversies over the sensation novel and Dorian Gray, the opponents of Sex frame themselves as the protectors of impressionable youth and "other persons" against this cultural poison. James Bolan, Deputy Inspector of the police who made the raid, expresses anxiety over the sexual and generational composition of the audience:

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74 The April 21, 1927 New York Times states that the play ran until March 19.
"The audience was not only of both sexes but was chiefly made up of young persons whose ages appeared to me to be between 17 and 20 years" (Schlissel 219). That the mixed gender and age of the audience merited remark illustrates that it is really the young woman about whom one should be most concerned. The case against Sex frames it as being dangerous to all persons, yet as one finds in the arguments against the sensation novel, the young woman or schoolgirl is used as the epitome of the impressionable, endangered subject.

The result of all this was that West was sentenced to ten days in jail and fined $500. Yet the Sex trials also ensured West's notoriety, as well as ticket sales for her future productions. Although The Drag never opened in New York, and another play, The Wicked Age, only lasted a week (Leider 178), West's Diamond Lil was a phenomenal success.

By drawing on New York's nostalgia for its own past, West finally managed to deal with sexuality by making it seem safe and naive, not threatening like the "real" sex in contemporary costumes employed in Sex. Similarly, by portraying a period whose costumes were flattering to her body type, West could be simultaneously "sexy" and a parody of a beautiful woman:

Grandly gowned as a woman of the 1890s, Mae West could finally thumb her nose at the flapper. She lashed out in the press at young women who were deceived into believing that they "looked well by appearing mannish, in sports styles. Naturally, this leads to rough manners and a generally careless attitude. Good lord, if there's anything more awkward than a woman draped over a bar. The speakeasy influence. Sit at a table, dearie, I always say." (Quoted in Leider 187)

Unsuccessful as a "plump flapper," West's glamorization of the 1890s silhouette granted her a position of exalted femininity that enabled her to "reject" a mode of womanhood that she had failed to embody convincingly. West had found her niche and would be remembered in her Gay Nineties costumes for the rest of her life, especially after She
Done Him Wrong immortalized her Diamond Lil as Lady Lou. In the 1940s, after her film career had waned, West renewed her glory days by performing Diamond Lil in London and touring the United States (Leider 202).

While Diamond Lil was still running, West worked on and premiered The Pleasure Man. Like The Drag, The Pleasure Man did not star West, and both plays rely on homosexuality and the gender performance of drag for their sensational appeal. As Leider remarks, West believed that "gay characters belonged in a backstage setting; they had long been an integral part of show business" (204). The backstage choice is significant, not only because it acknowledges the role that homosexuals played in the entertainment industry, but also because the "backstage" setting naturally lends itself to revealing what normally remains hidden. It is a convention of "backstage musicals," for example, to demystify certain aspects of film production (such as the use of sets and dubbing in Singin' in the Rain), even though they usually remythify other aspects to retain the aura of effortless entertainment, while teasing the audience with "insider's knowledge" of the workings of film (See Feuer). As crude as it is, The Pleasure Man on some level attempts to demystify the closet of theatrical life, exposing this world's connection to queer culture.

References to Valentino provided shorthand for identifying gay actors; Variety labeled the stars of West's play "men wearing slave bracelets" (August 29, 1928). Although The Pleasure Man is a backstage play whose plot involves a womanizer who is murdered (by castration!) by the brother of one of the women he has betrayed, the homosexual characters are once again the true highlight. That this was West's intention is apparent. For example, in a conversation including Noel Coward and a British producer, West ignored the latter's suggestions about performing Diamond Lil in London, instead trying to sell her audience on The Pleasure Man: "But you don't understand! In this show, I got seventeen real live fairies on stage!" (Quoted in Eells and Musgrove 80).
The main "fairies" in this piece are Paradise Dupont (also called Bird of Paradise) and her four "boys"; Peaches; Bunny; The Cobra; and a dancer named Joe. The homosexuals and female impersonators provide the comic relief in this "comedy drama," but they are also presented as morally superior to the "Pleasure Man" (Rodney Terrill) and his brand of masculinity.

According to Pamela Robertson, The Pleasure Man exposes West's understanding of the true relationship between women and gay men:

West modeled herself on a camp gay style because she believed that gay men were like women. On the one hand, she adhered to inversion models that claimed that gay men were women in men's bodies. On the other hand, she believed both gay men and women were oppressed by straight men. She impersonates gay men and female impersonators not to expose the gay style but to exaggerate, burlesque, and expose stereotypical female styles as impersonation. (33)

The Pleasure Man capitalizes on the spectacle of cross-dressing, thus appearing to "expose the gay style." However, Robertson's analysis makes a great deal of sense when one considers the story that runs parallel to the drag spectacle, that of the desolate Mary Ann who has been impregnated and forsaken by Rodney Terrill. Terrill is simultaneously carrying on with Dolores, a married woman whose husband is also in the show. Both women, but especially Mary Ann, are the obvious victims of Terrill's "masculine" philandering. But The Pleasure Man, by juxtaposing outrageous drag queens with the plot, reveals the performative nature of gender in the play, whose "naturalness" is symbolically destroyed through the castration of the villain.

The impersonator Paradise expresses the most direct identification with women and their oppression by heterosexual patriarchy. Near the end of Act One, when the impersonator finds Mary Ann after she has been thrown down some stairs by Terrill, Paradise assesses the situation with utmost sympathy: "She had an awful fall.--Like happens to all us poor girls" (184). Paradise's reference to Mary Ann's "fall" tells literally what has happened to her, but Paradise simultaneously recognizes her as a "fallen"
woman. Paradise identifies with Mary Ann in this respect, since she sees them both as sexual outcasts who are used roughly by men.\(^75\)

The figure of the drag performer, with its exposure of the fact that there is nothing "natural" about this gender arrangement, also holds possibilities for subversion. Robertson reads West's trademark 1890s costume as a campy feminine masquerade that is a response to drag, one that offers opportunities for power and gender reversal:

West's masquerade does respond to drag, and this means it can be read as camp. . . . I believe that response can only be described as feminist because it parodies drag by replacing and displacing it with the hyperbolization of the feminine through the masquerade. . . . I suggest that West displaces the masculine characteristics of the drag performer to articulate a specifically feminine form of aggressivity. Female impersonators absorb and displace a female aesthetic; they mimic the dress and behavior codes of femininity. West recuperates this aesthetic as a female aesthetic. She parodically reappropriates—and hyperbolizes—the image of the woman from male female impersonators so that the object of her joke is not the woman but the idea that an essentialized feminine identity exists prior to the image: she reveals that feminine identity is always a masquerade or impersonation. (33-34)

West had done some male impersonation in vaudeville, but the female impersonation that Robertson discusses really begins to show up in *Diamond Lil*. West's Lil (later Lady Lou on film) and her other, later characters that wear fetishizing costumes (the corseted 1890s costumes, but also the glamorous, over-the-top costumes such as the Travis Banton-designed spider dress for *I'm No Angel* or the Delilah gown for *Goin' to Town*) certainly present an exaggerated version of "femininity" that is aggressive and even predatory. Because *The Pleasure Man* was designed to run simultaneously with *Diamond Lil*, however, West did not star in it, and her heroic female female impersonator is lacking. Gender parody and sexual retribution must be achieved by other means.

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\(^75\)The Drag's references to "rough trade"—straight-identified men who sometimes sleep with gay men—corroborate Paradise's identification and suggest that both women and gay men are victimized by straight men, who are depicted as sexual predators.
Camp itself is designated by West in the play, understood as both a linguistic and performative practice. Act One offers a most unusual stage direction: "BOYS camp--cross center down front" (161). This apparently refers to the exaggerated gestures that Paradise's "boys" make during rehearsal to annoy the stage manager, Steve. A pair of married actors dismiss Paradise's "boys" as "queer," to which the other drag queens respond bitchily:

MRS. HETHERINGTON (To her husband): Ugh! Such people. I can't understand them. They're so queer.
HETHERINGTON: Yes, my dear--extraordinarily queer. I think queer is the word. They lack perception, my dear, of the finer qualities which go to make up the true artist of the legitimate drama.
PEACHES: Aren't there peculiar looking people on this bill? (Looking at MR. and MRS. HETHERINGTON)
PARADISE: Yes, and some of them are so moth-eaten, they look as though they've been buried and dug up. (161-62)

Mrs. Hetherington remarks that her "normality" makes her incapable of understanding the female impersonators, and her husband finds that their exaggeration makes the female impersonators incapable of understanding "real" acting. Of course, the drag queens are attuned to the degree that "normality" (and the Hetheringtons' nervous assertion thereof) is an act, and they retaliate by describing the "normal" couple as the truly unsavory freaks.

"Camping" in The Pleasure Man is a linguistic as well as a gestural practice. In the scene where Mary Ann is thrust down the stairs, two dancers investigate the cause of the clatter. When Flo remarks that she thought she heard a woman's scream, Jewel responds, "No, you heard them queens next door, campin'" (184). The dancers have missed Mary Ann's fall because the sounds of "femininity" are so successfully imitated by the "queens" in the next dressing room. The dancers, at any rate, seem to understand "campin'" as an audible impression of femininity, one which is assertive and exaggerated enough to be mistaken for screaming, or vice versa.
The play's performers all interpret "camping" as part of the homosexual sensibility they associate with the female impersonators. They further link this notion of homosexuality with Wildean aestheticism. For example, a dancer named Chuck becomes gravely concerned that his partner, Joe, is "actin' funny": "The first week he was wit' me every thing was ok, but the second week in his spare time, I found out he makes lampshades. Now that ain't right. I wouldn't mind if he got drunk or shot crap in his spare time—but makin' lampshades—phooey—that's all wet" (172). Chuck would prefer his partner to develop "masculine" vices rather than cultivate the suspiciously "dangerous" hobby of lampshade-making. After meeting Joe, another character, Stanley, assures Chuck that his partner is harmless:

STANLEY . . . : He's all right—nearly. There's no harm in lampshades. He's just an aesthetic type.

CHUCK: Oh, yeah?—well maybe I was wrong about him. If he's as you say, just an elastic type, why I guess I'll have to overlook his funny actions.—But even so, I'm gonna keep my eye on him. (173)

Stanley persuades Chuck that there is nothing inherently dangerous about "aesthetic types." Yet Chuck's malapropism—that Joe is an "elastic type"—reveals the anxieties that accompany his fear of "aestheticism"—that Joe's gender is "elastic," changeable, stretched, exaggerated. Chuck is still quite concerned about Joe's emasculating potential—although he cannot name it other than by pointing out that the man prefers lampshade-making to gambling and drinking.

There is a character who is literally emasculated in The Pleasure Man, but once again this loss of gender identity is the result of the character's own "hypermasculinity." Rodney Terrill (who prefers for women to call him "Rod") is the eponymous character. Although Rodney's gestures and language may not be stereotypically masculine, he is excessively so when it comes to sexual predation. Rodney takes advantage of the more naive young women in the cast while he carries on affairs with the ones old enough to
know better. When Paradise discovers Rodney's treachery toward Mary Ann, she dismisses the value of "masculinity": "... if you're a man, thank God, I'm a female impersonator" (187). As a sexual outsider, Paradise feels superior to this "normal" man who ruins women's lives, posing much more of a danger to society than "inverts."

In poetic retribution for Rodney's victimization of Mary Ann, the latter's brother castrates the brute, inadvertently murdering him in the process. The cause of death is referred to obliquely: "Rodney Terrill, actor, was the victim of some person as yet unestablished. Death was due to an operation performed by someone who had a knowledge of surgery and who used instruments which were found, with some degree of surgical skill" (199). The explanation for the type of surgery comes from Ted Arnold, Mary Ann's brother, when he surrenders himself. Ted explains that he did not intend to kill Rodney, but simply to prevent him from using women and ruining their lives. When another character describes the act as obscene, Ted defends himself:

Obscene—obscene . . . when I was in college—in the laboratory—we experimented with rats—with vermin—with poisonous things—we worked on them—so that they could never propagate their own kind—the life I took from that man Terrill—was no higher or better than that of a poisonous beast. Men can fight dirt with dirt . . . and still fight for what's clean. . . . (200)

Although there is a "fallen woman" in the play, she is not regarded as its source of poison, nor are the female impersonators. Indeed, West reverses the attribution of cultural poison to the "fallen woman" or prostitute's body, laying the blame instead on the man who deceived and seduced her. Instead of subjecting the woman to the medical gaze of the speculum, or surgeries such as the clitoridectomy or oopherectomy, it is the man and his "overactive" genitals that are pathologized and must be removed from circulation in society. Turning men's own devices on them proves to be fatal. Finally, Ted's insistence that men "can fight dirt with dirt" in the interests of purity may be a reference to West's own defense of her "dirty" plays as didactic vehicles. When taken to task for
the questionable content of her plays, West usually countered that one had to reveal the most unsavory aspects of life to persuade the audience to avoid them.

The police certainly did not buy West's "educational" argument when it came to The Pleasure Man. The play was performed in the Bronx and Queens in late September, 1928, but was raided when it opened in Manhattan on October 1, and West and all her cast were arrested at the next performance (Schlissel 221). West was once again charged with obscenity, and one of the controversial elements was the pleasure man's death by castration. In West's reply affidavit, she attests to the morality of the piece. West claims that, as a former vaudeville performer, she was writing from her own experience of backstage life. In her synopsis of the play, West only states that Rodney Terrill is killed by an operation. After commenting on the play's success in the Bronx, West asserts that The Pleasure Man's intent is didactic: "The play, indeed, tells a moral story, and teaches a lesson not to be forgotten. The play teaches succinctly that punishment will follow a wrongdoer. The lines of this play are wholesome and not objectionable" (Schlissel 228). Of course, one must keep in mind that West and her casts usually kept one version of the script to be given to police and censors, and another version that was the actual text for performance. At the level of language, however, The Pleasure Man is not truly objectionable, at least for the Broadway of its time. West's assertion of its wholesomeness is comparable to Wilde's insistence on his texts' multiplicity of interpretation. One could read Dorian Gray or The Pleasure Man as sexually deviant works, but that would mean that the reader had brought his or her own perversity to the text.

In fact, West's courtroom defense and the ensuing hijinks bear a number of resemblances to Wilde's trials. West's affidavit remarks that she was arrested at the close of her own performance of Diamond Lil, while The Pleasure Man was still running—evidence that "the defendants herein had premeditated the arrest regardless of the nature
of the play" (Schlissel 229). Indeed, many people knew that the police raid was coming, and some paid $70 and $100 per ticket for the anticipated raided performance (Schlissel 221). The play was raided because of the "immorality" associated with Mae West productions, but the likelihood of the raid and subsequent closure increased The Pleasure Man's value as a commodity.

The raid of The Pleasure Man created more of a sensation than the play might have if allowed to run, as most of the actors were arrested in makeup and costume, and New York newspapers published photos of the cross-dressed actors. Some of them "camping" as they were loaded into police vehicles. While some members of the cast were outraged by the arrests, others "treated the raid as a joke, shouting to friends, 'Beat it, Mary, before Lizzie Law grabs you, too!'" (Eells and Musgrove 85). The publicity generated in the case caused Bertini, the presiding judge, to declare the trial more harmful than the play: "By the trial itself millions of people find out all about the play. The trial spreads filth and obscenity throughout the country when the play itself was intended only for spectators at the theatre. You've increased its audience so materially that more harm is done to society in an effort to enforce the law than if no effort were made at all" (New York Times 5 Apr. 1930). Bertini's criticism suggests that mere acknowledgment of "filth" is itself corrupting, at the same time that it seems to recognize the public appetite for such scandal. His apprehensions about the capacity of the trial news to reach a wide audience foreshadow the concerns about West's ability to influence a larger audience through motion pictures.

The Pleasure Man trial itself, which did not commence until a year and a half after the arrests, seems to have been as outrageously comic as one of West's plays or films, and in fact no less unbelievable than West's/Tira's courtroom antics in I'm No Angel. Leider and Eells and Musgrove remark on West's performance in the courtroom, from preening herself for her latest spectacle, to feigning modesty when hearing The Pleasure Man
compared to such works as Hamlet. Apparently, however, the greatest entertainment came from one of the prosecution's witnesses, police officer James J. Coy. According to Eells and Musgrove, Coy gave a comic performance, however unwittingly, in response to the district attorney's questions:

When asked to describe what he had seen, he leaped up, pulled his manly body to its full six feet, daintily placed his hands on his hips, turned on his heel, looked over his shoulder, and said, "They behaved in a very effeminate manner." He gave minute details and flamboyant imitations of all the disgusting behavior by both men and women he had witnessed a year and a half before. (92)

Coy's courtroom shenanigans made him an object of derision, but he was only trying to help the prosecution prove the play was indecent. James Wallace, the assistant district attorney, had to establish that the cross-dressers in Mae West's play "acted effeminate," which he then had to distinguish from "female impersonation." In 1927 New York had passed a law that forbade the representation of homosexuality on stage (Schlissel 236). Yet the depiction of female impersonators was not illegal, as even Wallace himself was forced to admit. As far as the law was concerned, then, "female impersonation" did not necessarily signify any perversion on the part of the impersonator. In order to find West and her cast guilty, Wallace had to prove that they were either portraying homosexuality, and/or that the impersonators were real-life "degenerates."

As in the case of Wilde's trials, although it was clear that "homosexuality" was the forbidden matter, there was no established way of proving what constituted homosexual behavior, complicated here by the fact that, theoretically, female impersonation was permissible. The prosecution's notes in this case offer a glimpse of how the state hoped to establish the play's "degeneracy," as well as the problems involved. In the first place, the prosecution had been unable to obtain a script of the play, whose dialogue or stage directions might have helped their case. The notes also illustrate that the law deals with the "degenerate type" rather than the act of sodomy:
This 2nd section doesn't mean sodomy. The People of this state, thru their legislature, have said in so many words to theatrical producers, authors, managers and actors, "You must not depict or deal with sex degeneracy or sex perversion on the stage. If you do you commit a crime. . . .

Law not intended to apply to acts of sodomy. You can hardly expect these to be enacted on stage in public. (Schlissel 237)

Even judge Bertini criticized the law (called the Wales law) that forbade the representation of degeneracy onstage: "The main fallacy of the law . . . is the inherent impossibility of producing in court a show as it was seen on the stage, getting in the actions and gestures of the actresses and the precise intonations they used in their lines" (New York Times 5 Apr. 1930). Coy's courtroom histrionics further highlighted this problem. The police Captain claimed to have written notes during a production of Pleasure Man that he had attended, but he later admitted altering the notes when he supplemented them with those of a Sergeant with whom he created a "synopsis." Coy explained that he did not have the synopsis with him because "I don't like to bulge myself out" (New York Times 22 Mar. 1930).

Coy's "performance" of the actors behaving in an "effeminate" manner was meant to illustrate the play's suggestion or presentation of sexual perversion. The prosecution referred to bits of dialogue, but the stage gestures were necessary to punctuate the meaning of the language. In reference to the scene from Act One in which the Bird of Paradise describes her act ("Oh, I get down on my knees--and sing a couple of Mammy songs. . . ." (152)), the prosecution recorded the following observations:

You can see the effect if a male in men's attire, acting like a fairy, in view of Harvey's definition of what "goes down on knees" means.

Depict by manner, walk, and speech with double meaning on sex degeneracy and sex perversion. . . .

The object of these lines, in addition to whatever comedy effect they had, was to call attention to these persons who were depicting male degenerates. They were not doing any female impersonation. If, as People's witnesses say, they were acting in an effeminate manner, walking and talking like women, they were depicting fairies or degenerates. (Schlissel 238)
An interesting definition of "female impersonation" emerges here, as it is apparently limited only to women's attire and does not include "feminine" language or gestures. "Female impersonation" was permissible on the New York stage, but only if the cross-dressed actors walked and talked "like men." If a gesture or use of language could be proven "womanly," then the actor employing such verbal or gestural practices would be decidedly degenerate.

The prosecution also attempted to establish that the cross-dressed actors wore women's clothes and engaged in women's activities offstage, as a way of reinforcing that "effeminacy" and therefore sexual degeneracy was being represented or even "really" shown onstage. Yet Wallace's attempts to illustrate the actors' effeminacy failed miserably. Wallace's strategy was made ridiculous by the antics of Coy, who was supposed to be aiding him. The New York Daily News made light of the situation:

Coy in a sense established the fact that Pleasure Man was a high-class show, for he could think of nothing but three or four syllable words to describe it. Nothing ever happened; everything transpired. The ladies and gentlemen of the cast were never dressed; they were attired. When they got to the acrobatic scene to which the police objected, Burkan wanted to know all about it. "Now about the female impersonator sewing on stage?"

"Yes?"

Burkan: "How could you see the needle and thread?"

"Oh," vouchsafed Coy, "it was illuminous on the stage."

Burkan wanted Coy to sing the ballad "The Queen of the Beaches" so the jury could determine for itself whether beaches rhymed with peaches, as the defense claimed, or ditches, as Coy testified. Coy flatly refused. (Irene Kuhn, New York Daily News, March 21, 1930; Quoted in Eells and Musgrove 93)

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76 Nathan Burkan, West's attorney. The "acrobatic scene" in question is referred to only vaguely in the play's script. The acrobats who performed the scene did attempt to recreate it in court, where the exhibition consisted of "handsprings, backflips and balancing stunts," although there was some debate over whether this was the same act performed in the show. Throughout the trial, the Times featured a number of sensational titles and subheadings in reference to the testimony. A subheading in the April 1 article (though amazingly not an April Fool's joke) goes the farthest in emphasizing the farce the trial had become: "One Leaps to Rail of Jury Box to Exhibit Costume Before Showing Act Alleged to be Indecent."
Coy's attempt of highfliwn language could mark him as "effeminate," but what is more
incriminating are his numerous malapropisms that directly recall Sheridan's eponymous
character. Mrs. Malaprop in The Rivals derives her comic effect from her supposedly
"feminine" mishandling of language, and Sir Anthony Absolute thinks that women
should be forbidden the dangerous power of literacy. Through this fortunate coincidence,
Lieutenant Coy's testimony, which seems too good to be true, connects West both with
the problems of defining "degeneracy" raised in Oscar Wilde's trials, as well as with the
issues of impersonation and language as illustrated in the sensation novel. It is The
Rivals that Magdalen Vanstone performs in her misguided introduction into her own
career of feminine impersonation. Yet Coy's courtroom spectacle showed that while he
had a penchant for impersonation, he was utterly inept in the use of language. In other
words, while working for the cause of gender stability, Coy unwittingly reveals how
unfounded are the assumptions about the linguistic and gestural practices that constitute
gender identity.

The problems created by Coy's testimony were further exacerbated by the defense.
In addition to the acrobats who exhibited the "decency" of their act by performing it in
the courtroom, West's cast offered other outrageous or uncooperative witnesses. Alan
Brooks, who played the pleasure man, and an actress who played a cleaning woman, both
claimed ignorance of the "double meaning" attributed to the dialogue by the prosecution.
Moreover, Brooks "declared he had no knowledge of how he was 'murdered' in the play
in a scene specified as 'indecent' in the indictment" (New York Times 2 Apr. 1930). The
jury could not come to an agreement, although the majority voted for conviction.
Assistant District Attorney Wallace decided not to pursue a retrial.

A few years later, West's notoriety landed her in Hollywood, where her
"pollution" had the potential to reach a much wider audience. Although there is not space
for a full analysis of her films here, I do think it appropriate to discuss a recurring element
of West's persona that evolves and transforms controversial issues from the sensation novel and Wilde: the kept woman or gold-digger, and the accompanying inspiration of "illegitimate" desires in women and working-class consumers.

Like Wilde's sexual transgressions and her own plays, West's films offend through their use of cross-class sexuality. West goes even further than Wilde in her suggestion that lower-class women can use their bodies as a means to gain social respectability and power. Her repeated use of this narrative alarmed censors:

The concern in industry self-regulation of these ["kept woman"] films focused on showing that characters who aspired to a higher station through sex with rich men were punished in the course of the narrative--at best by being returned to their working-class origins, often also by suffering through the loss of a child or other family connections. The aim of such narrative recuperation of erring women, especially as enforced by PCA head Breen, was to illustrate that illicit sexuality does not pay. . . . the pleasurable spectacle of upper-class glamour, luxury, and power present a rise in social standing as a highly desirable goal, but the narrative condemns as illegitimate and ultimately unsuccessful the only means of attaining higher class status available to lower-class protagonists. . . . This 1930s film cycle communicated the pleasures of higher class status and conspicuous consumption while warning at least female viewers against aspiring to those. (Too Much 49-50)

The concerns about West's representations again boil down to the same anxieties about the gender and class of the consumer that we have seen with Collins and Wilde. The sensation novel was inevitably about an upper-middle-class family, sometimes with aristocratic connections, that was often in danger of penetration by lower-class women posing as governesses or ladies. The sensation novel offered the (female) reader the pleasurable knowledge of upper-class life and showed that clever lower-class women could gain access to this life of luxury and privilege, even though the punishment of such characters ultimately warned against doing so. At the same time, upright but impecunious young men such as The Woman in White's Walter Hartright could climb the social ladder through a successful exhibition of "manly" behavior. Although sensation novels usually mark women's means of social climbing as illegitimate (even while
inspiring such desires in the reader), Collins's *Man and Wife* is exceptional in its endorsement of a "fallen" governess becoming Lady Lundie. Anne Silvester/Lady Lundie, however, has not engaged in the masquerade that would mark her as the sensation novel's typical gold-digger.

In Wilde's trials one also witnesses similar concerns about the exploitation of sexuality and the mixing of classes. Wilde was chastised for buying clothes, cigarette cases, and champagne lunches for his working-class acquaintances. The author's associations with lower-class men were regarded as evidence of his perversion, and the exposure of these men to the privileges of economic well-being was depicted as harmful to the recipients, since it would inspire unattainable desires. The "crime" of Wilde's sexual character is inextricably linked with his creation of illegitimate desires in working-class men.

West's "kept woman" films also arouse anxiety through their potential creation of illegitimate intersections of economics and female sexuality in the minds of the audience. Yet as West's Statue of Liberty pose in *Belle of the Nineties* indicates, surely her characters are feminine embodiments of the "American Dream." In *Guilty Pleasures*, Pamela Robertson follows her discussion of West with one of *Gold Diggers of 1933*, "to suggest that feminist camp is a sensibility that is particularly attuned to historically determined attitudes toward women and work and that the comic gold digger is to feminist camp what the dandy is to gay camp--its original personification, its defining voice" (58). Feminist Camp is allied to gay Camp through its emphasis on the performative nature of gender and its creation or resurrection of outrageous burlesques of gender itself. Through her studies of West and *Gold Diggers*, Robertson specifically articulates feminist Camp as a sensibility of working-class women, since the bourgeois ideal of femininity so often represented in popular culture is frequently as inaccessible to such women as the norms of masculinity are to gay men. The feminine masquerade and
the control and exploitation of one's own sexuality seem like convenient ways to obtain the fantasized social ascent that one is expected to desire but simultaneously forbidden to attempt by "illegitimate" means (i.e., those available to women):

by aligning the figure of the showgirl with the stereotype of the gold digger--and linking both to prostitution--[Gold Diggers of 1933] provides a historical context for viewing feminist camp as a working women's strategy. This film suggests that the conjunction between West's "awarish" female masquerade and her role as performer and prostitute are not accidental but fundamental to feminist camp. (58)

That Robertson should identify feminist Camp as a "working women's strategy" is perfectly sensible. For although Camp itself is usually identified as a gay sensibility, the working woman (or indeed nearly any woman who deviates from the ideal of the contented homemaker and mother) has in common with the homosexual male desires that are considered "illegitimate" within patriarchal, heterosexual, bourgeois culture. In the sensation novel, we see a number of women attempting to improve their social position through unauthorized means; Lady Audley, Magdalen Vanstone, and Lydia Gwilt are all early examples of gold-diggers. And, although America is ostensibly a classless society, in practice and on film it is apparent that this is not so. Traditionally, women's only access to the "American Dream" was to marry a wealthy man, making such an ideal virtually unattainable to women who rejected marriage or heterosexuality, as well as to women whose occupations or social circles rendered them unlikely to meet such men. A recurring Hollywood fantasy involves a small-town girl or working woman, such as Janet Gaynor or Joan Crawford, becoming famous or wealthy through talent and ambition. West's means are more aggressive and subversive (although one might make similar arguments about some of Crawford's roles), involving the use and enjoyment of her sexuality and violation of the codes of femininity through her persistent autonomy and rejection of heterosexual bourgeois ideals.
Mae West's (and her characters') hyperbolic appetites—for money, glamour, food, clothing, and men—are a logical response to a culture in which women are continually commanded to consume. Yet like the women who read and appeared in sensation novels, and like Dorian Gray and even Wilde himself, West manifests her desires by consuming in excessive and taboo ways. Moreover, West alters the terms of sexual exchange, representing female sexuality as a commodity that can be controlled and enjoyed by women. By doing so, "West's movie image exposed contradictions in the well-established American capitalist practice of simultaneously exploiting and repressing female sexuality as a commodity under men's control" (Too Much 28). After 1938, West's film career declined; Every Day's a Holiday was the final production over which she had creative control, and the first of her films to lose money. Recurrent trouble with censors had made West increasingly undesirable to work with, and her cinematic demise ensured that West could no longer "poison" women in the audience by encouraging them to decode and master the most threatening text of all: the female body.
CONCLUSION

CHAPTER 6

THE NEW FIN-DE-SIÈCLE: SEX, VIOLENCE, AND ENTERTAINMENT IN A CARCERAL CULTURE OF CONSUMPTION

Under our very eyes the novel is being increasingly degraded, seriously and highly cultivated men scarcely deeming it worthy of attention, and it appeals more and more exclusively to the young and to women. . . . it is fair to conclude that after some centuries art and poetry will no longer be cultivated except by the most emotional portion of humanity—by women, by the young, perhaps even by children. (Nordau 543)

In the fifth and final book of Degeneration, Max Nordau makes a number of predictions about the twentieth century if society continues unchecked in its diseased habits. Nordau frets that sexual perverts are not only being imitated by the general populace, but are gaining legal legitimacy as well. Nordau's imagined future in some respects resembles Wilde's ideas about the future of American culture "in petticoats," with the difference that Nordau is very alarmed by this trend. Finding literature increasingly in the hands of women and the young signals its certain decline; Nordau portrays men as becoming more feminized (through passivity and costume), while

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77"Sexual psychopathy of every nature has become so general and so imperious that manners and law have adapted themselves accordingly. They appear already in the fashions. Masochists or passivists, who form the majority of men, clothe themselves in a costume which recalls, by colour and cut, feminine apparel. Women who wish to please men of this kind wear men's dress, an eyeglass, boots with spurs and riding-whip, and only show themselves in the street with a large cigar in their mouths. The demand of persons with the 'contrary' sexual sentiment that persons of the same sex can conclude a legal marriage has obtained satisfaction, seeing they have been numerous enough to elect a majority of deputies having the same tendency." (538-39)
women are transforming into phallic dominatrices. That Nordau connects these gender metamorphoses with the state of literature is telling. Men's loss of interest in—or control of—the literature that rightly belongs to them is accompanied by women's external, phallic references to their new power—spurs, whips, and cigars. If "seriously and highly cultivated men" fail to control and consume the instruments of culture, Nordau warns, they will find themselves at the mercy of overthrown gender norms, becoming petticoat-wearing weaklings at the mercy of castrating women.

Nordau's picture of society would seem to stem from a too-literal reading of Venus in Furs. The acquisition of literacy and the creation of literature by women and young people has not yet resulted in his predicted apocalypse. In retrospect, some of Nordau's fears seem quite laughable, while other predictions—such as those pertaining to a wider cultural acceptance of homosexuality, or more liberal definitions of gender propriety—would be regarded as positive developments by some people. Nevertheless, a century after Degeneration, one still finds our culture grappling with some of the same issues, as well as cultural critics, moral reformers, and politicians who echo Nordau's fears. One important difference from Nordau is that the role of literature has largely disappeared from contemporary debates about censorship and the corruption of impressionable populations. Literature occasionally arouses controversy, as for example when a school library debates whether to keep The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn on its shelves. Yet the recurrent troubles with popular culture and entertainment focus either on those items that are widely and immediately accessible—such as music, television, and film—or on the Internet, which is theoretically a democratic medium, although in reality it requires a certain form of literacy and is most likely to be available to those with at least a middle-class income. Because it involves both reading and composing, cyberculture is the medium that most closely resembles literature (and is perhaps replacing it), even

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though its status as a new and unregulated technology creates some similarities to the problems posed by cinema in its infancy.

Another item that has changed since the nineteenth century is the composition of the audience that imagined as vulnerable to the influence of popular culture. While the idea of an unskilled interpretive group that might mimetically reenact dangerous culture seems to be fairly constant, the identity of this group varies over time and with the particular medium in question. The referentiality of fiction and poetry no longer seems to be a major cultural concern, perhaps because there are now many other cultural forms from which anyone can choose, most of which are quickly and easily consumed. In general, women are no longer portrayed and the most impressionable audience, and perhaps this is because women are expected to be more educated, and their extramarital sexual experience no longer heralds the downfall of society or universally brands them as outcasts. Female chastity is still somewhat fetishized, however, and women are still judged by the quantity (and sometimes the quality) of their sexual partners. There are exceptional cases in which a film is interpreted as a dangerous example for women; I will discuss this concept shortly, using Thelma & Louise as the most potent recent example.

In the United States, nonwhites, but particularly African-Americans, are regarded as childlike in their consumption of entertainment, especially if this entertainment is associated with black culture. This is true regardless of whom the audience for "black culture" really is, as I will discuss in the case of rap music.

Many of the current efforts involving regulation and censorship of entertainment are targeted at protecting actual children, not just those with "childlike" minds. Sometimes this means shielding children from the influence of "degenerate" groups, as in the controversy over whether the Teletubbies' fictional Tinky Winky is "really" gay (a

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78This is a television program for toddlers in which the costumed characters have television sets in their stomachs.
conclusion based on Tinky Winky's purple fur and possession of a purse). At other times, regulation and censorship (such as the PMRC's notoriously ineffective parental advisory labels for music) are intended to protect children from content or language that is deemed inappropriate for their age group.

The protection of children is also at issue in our nation's initial, embryonic attempts to regulate cyberculture, most notably in the (overturned) Communications Decency Act of 1996. This act attempted to censor the availability of obscene or pornographic materials on the Internet on the basis of the facility with which children might access such material. Yet the broadness of the legislation, coupled with the legislators' general unfamiliarity with the new technology, resulted in a determination by the Supreme Court that the Act was a danger to First Amendment rights. Yet it is likely that further legislation will address Internet regulation, especially in the wake of the recent Littleton, Colorado high school shootings, which have been linked with use of the Net. As I will discuss presently, the population construed as the most "at risk" from this form of entertainment and information technology is also the most privileged: bourgeois adolescent white males.

By proceeding from the oldest of these forms of popular culture (music) to the most recent (Internet technology) I will show that as entertainment becomes more accessible and more global, the more groups are framed as in need of protection from the forces of popular culture. The culture of consumption that evolved at the turn of this century has grown into a nearly omnipresent pressure to consume, yet this culture that demands consumers (and in fact uses consumption as a primary form of identification) also demands a constant self-surveillance. Commodities are fetishized to such a degree that even artificial "communities" are based on product ownership, yet we remain haunted by the dangers of consumption.

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79 See Quittner, "Free Speech for the Net."
It is not necessary for me to repeat here the controversial history of American popular music in the twentieth century, which has always been associated with sexual transgression and nearly always with bringing the culture of marginalized groups to the masses (this is true of jazz, rock, punk, disco, and rap). In his (in)famous The Closing of the American Mind, Allan Bloom lambastes rock music while sounding suspiciously like Nordau and even Mansel, the critic of the sensation novels. Bloom's main departure from Nordau is that he considers Wagner a great artist rather than a degenerate; like Nordau, however, Bloom believes that the new forms of music signal a return to barbarism. Bloom longs for a nostalgic past in which fluency in classical music was a certain marker of education and class position. Echoing Mansel's description of sensation novels, Bloom laments rock music's democratic accessibility, characterizing the music as both druglike and conducive to sexual excess: "A pubescent child whose body throbs with orgasmic rhythms; whose feelings are made articulate in hymns to the joys of onanism or the killing of parents; whose ambition is to win fame and wealth in imitating the drag-queen who makes the music. In short, life is made into a nonstop, commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy" (259). One is surprised to find that Bloom does not go on to recommend the revival of the antimasturbatory devices that Victorians purchased for their children. For although Bloom does not offer the adage that masturbation (now induced by rock 'n' roll) will make children lose their sight and sanity, he might as well.

Bloom evidently adheres to the Victorian belief that loss of semen equals loss of one's "vital essence." He equates the influence of rock with drug addiction, for which he blames his students' loss of heart:

Their energy has been sapped, and they do not expect their life's activity to produce anything but a living. . . . I suspect that rock addiction, particularly in the absence of strong counterattractions, has an effect similar to that of drugs. . . . as long as they have the Walkman on, they cannot hear what the great tradition has to say. And, after its prolonged use, when they take it off, they find that they are deaf. (264)
Again, Bloom's assessment of the effects of rock music is remarkably close to Victorian hysteria about masturbation. And while Bloom may be pointing to a real problem with students' lack of enthusiasm for the liberal arts, his scapegoating of rock music (and even drug addiction) overlooks a number of other contributing factors. Like the newspapers that covered the Oscar Wilde trials, Bloom fails to make any connection between socioeconomic conditions and his students' apathy. The "serious life of leisure" (261) that Bloom recommends seems to hold little meaning for most of the current American population. Bloom laments the transformation of leisure into entertainment, but he fails to recognize the devaluation of liberal arts degrees by corporate America (which unfortunately is reflected in universities), as well as the fact that a college degree no longer guarantees a secure or fulfilling career to even the most dedicated or "cultured" student. Bloom's ideal of a "serious life of leisure" is both outdated and class-based, a term rendered meaningless to nearly anyone with origins outside of the "leisured" classes.

Bloom's meditation on popular music does not overtly target a single race or gender. The Closing of the American Mind was written in 1987, shortly before rap music evolved into the major musical genre that it is now. Rap is arguably the most controversial musical form of the 1990s, and much of this has to do with its association with African-American culture. As a number of critics have pointed out, rap is much more likely to be held responsible for its representations of violence than "white" music or movies with similar themes. One of the most memorable examples of this was the 1992 single "Cop Killer" by rapper Ice-T. While songs by white artists that imagined confrontations with law enforcement--such as The Clash's "Guns of Brixton" or Eric Clapton's "I Shot the Sheriff"--were not interpreted as encouraging real violence against police, Ice-T was threatened with personal responsibility for any potential "aftermath" of his song by President George Bush. Oliver North "started a petition drive aimed at bringing Time Warner executives to trial for 'sedition and anarchy'" (Ehrenreich 419).
One can hardly imagine someone such as Arnold Schwarzenegger—the pal of George Bush who played the cop-killing Terminator—being brought to trial for causing copycat crimes. Like Mae West's representation of prostitution in *Sex*, however, rap's imagined verisimilitude makes it seem alarmingly "real" to its critics. On the other side, Barbara Ehrenreich concludes that Ice-T's lyrics are much less threatening than the attitude toward black youth that concludes that they are incapable of distinguishing entertainment from reality: "The 'danger' implicit in all the uproar is of empty-headed, suggestible black kids, crouching by their boom boxes, waiting for the word" (419). Ehrenreich points out that "white" musical fans have a long history of similar themes, and that overtly violent or racist language used by white performers is usually defended as "free speech." Moreover, she emphasizes that "young African-Americans are not so naive and suggestible that they have to depend on a compact disc for their sociology lessons" (420); black youth are much more likely to suffer violence at the hands of police than vice versa.

All this is not to romanticize violence in rap music, or in any of the other cultural forms I discuss. Rather, my point is to show that certain representations of violence, depending on the creators and the imagined targets of the violence, are disproportionately singled out for scrutiny. Some have pointed to this issue in their discussions of the sexism inherent in focusing on songs such as "Cop Killer" and N.W.A.'s "Fuck tha Police" for criticism of rap's violence. In a 1992 opinion piece in the *Los Angeles Times*, Elaine Lafferty and Tammy Bruce pointed out that rap's frequently misogynist lyrics were often dismissed, while rarer lyrics about anti-police violence created a national uproar: "Yes, there have been voices raised against the growing violence against women in movies, books, and lyrics, but there have been more voices dismissing the complainers as humorles prigs, censoring crusaders or, worse, just unhip" (422). Explicitly violent

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80 Schwarzenegger has remarked publicly that violent movies are not responsible for America's violent youth, but rather that "working mothers" are the problem—despite the fact that his own wife has a career.
lyrics are permissible as long as they are directed toward women, or perhaps even toward other minorities, but it is only when presumably white, male establishment figures are the target of verbal assault that outrage is provoked.

The national panic that arose from such songs as "Cop Killer" and "Fuck tha Police" is of course dependent on the image of an impressionable African-American audience that will inevitably reenact the commands of song lyrics to perform acts of violence against white people. What figures like George Bush and Oliver North overlooked, whether purposely or not, was a recent and surprising discovery about rap's audience composition. In 1991, Billboard magazine changed its way of calculating record sales by tracking bar codes at stores across the country instead of limiting reported sales to major metropolitan areas. Consequently, record sales were more likely to be determined by the purchases of suburban white consumers than urban consumers of color:

America awoke on June 22, 1991, to find that its favorite record was not Out of Time, by aging college-boy rockers R.E.M., but Niggaz4life, a musical celebration of gang rape and other violence by N.W.A., or Niggers With Attitude, a rap group from the Los Angeles ghetto of Compton whose records had never before risen above No. 27 on the Billboard Charts. (Samuels 279)

Writing for The New Republic at the time, David Samuels pointed out that this was a development no one had predicted: while a higher proportion of blacks than whites listened to rap, the audience was actually composed of more whites than blacks. This discovery did not guarantee liberality or multiculturalism on the part of the white audience, however. On the contrary, "the more rappers were packaged as violent black criminals, the bigger their white audiences became" (279).

While George Bush and company were vilifying rap, they failed to understand that the most violent rap was simultaneously serving very conservative, even reactionary, ideas about race: "Rap's appeal to whites rested in its invocation of an age-old image of
blackness: as a foreign, sexually charged, and criminal underworld against which the
norms of white society are defined, and, by extension, through which they may be defied" (Samuels 280). Listening to violent rap reaffirms the "normality" of the white audience, who are safely provided with secondhand thrills of drugs and violence that are thought to provide insight into "authentic" black culture.

Those who defend rap argue that it is simply posturing, a form of "heavy-handed parody, turning the stereotypes of black and white American culture on their heads" (Gates 290). Henry Louis Gates, Jr., senses revolutionary potential in rap and hip-hop, defining them as "sexual carnivalesque" (290). Musically, this links rap with such recent-and controversial—musical styles as punk, goth (think Marilyn Manson), and so-called hate rock—the latter two of which have been identified as scapegoats for violent behavior in youth in the wake of the Littleton shootings.81 On one hand, I do find some explicitly violent lyrics disturbing, especially when these express racist or misogynist sentiments that are all too present in real life. However, "posing" and the possibilities it presents for alternative identities in these musical subcultures also links them to the cultural forms examined in the previous chapters. In a sense, rap (with its hyper-blackness), goth culture (with its hyper-alienation), and hate rock (with its hypermasculinity) may be ways of presenting rebellious youth of all colors in a new type of drag.

As I write this, much of the current media frenzy about violent representation is a direct result of this year's massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Congress is scrambling for legislation to "do something" about the recurring problem with violent youth in this country. Yet bills regulating the sales of weapons repeatedly fail, as the NRA and its lobbyists fret about violations of Second Amendment rights. Attention is diverted away from the weapons of destruction to popular entertainment—as if mass murder could be so easily accomplished from the influence of entertainment


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alone, in the absence of firearms. A number of bills are being introduced in Congress to curb violent entertainment, "including legislation to make it illegal to film violent images on public property, as well as the idea to make it a federal crime to sell a ticket for an R-rated movie to a minor" (Svetkey 45). One of the prime targets in the call for more regulation or censorship of movies is 1994's Natural Born Killers, variously blamed for the mutilation of a 13-year-old girl by a 14-year-old boy in Texas; a police chase of a fugitive couple in Paris that resulted in 5 deaths; and the shooting of a convenience store clerk by a teenager in Louisiana. In the last case, "A lawsuit . . . seeks to make Oliver Stone and Time Warner financially responsible" (Svetkey 48) for the alleged influence of their aesthetic product. Extreme measures suggested in Congress threaten to introduce what even the strict Hollywood Production Code was created to avoid: government regulation of movies. According to Senator Barbara Boxer of California, "There was one that would have set up a commission to look into whether the government should actually regulate the content of movies. It was really terrifying" (Svetkey 48).

The particular measure that Boxer objected to was an amendment to the Juvenile Crime Bill. The current obsession with suggestibly violent youth has resulted in the recent practice of requiring proof of age for purchase of R-rated movie tickets. One sees less anxiety about the dangers of grown women mimicking female stars or characters, although the occasional example reveals that fears about subversive cinematic gender representations still linger in the cultural psyche.

Violence is a commonplace of American film and television, and even representations of violence perpetrated by women rarely raise an eyebrow. Of course, violence in women is represented as acceptable only within certain parameters: when the woman is fighting on the side of the greater good (such as Sarah Michelle Gellar in "Buffy, the Vampire Slayer" or Michelle Yeoh in Tomorrow Never Dies), or when the violence identifies women as sex-crazed psychopaths (i.e., Fatal Attraction). In other
words, women can become violently aggressive only when they are protecting society, or when they are simply crazy. Women must never be shown using violence in a rational way that threatens to limit men's privileged sexual access to their bodies.

This is precisely the trouble with Thelma & Louise (1991), which created hysteria about the potential for women to reenact the screen's representation of femininity. The film is the story of two friends who on a road trip, but soon end up on the lam after one woman (Louise) kills the man she finds raping her friend. The justification for the women's flight is Louise's argument that the law has no sympathy for female rape victims, especially if they retaliate. The two women bond together, having a grand time as fugitives, although the tale ends with their choice to commit suicide rather than face the law. Many male critics responded to the film as if it posed some personal threat to them. There was great alarm that women would begin revolting against their rapists in similar ways, as if their desire to do so would be inconceivable without the prompting of such a film.

Thelma & Louise is not about random violence. A woman kills her friend's unrepentant rapist, knowing that the law is unlikely to punish him. Defenders of the film pointed out that there are countless movies that portray men killing other people, with or without motives. There is little concern that men will reenact films like The Terminator. The danger of Thelma & Louise lay in its suggestion women had a right to defend their bodies, and that the desire for sexual autonomy could lead to sisterly solidarity. The fact that this particular anxiety results from assumptions of male sexual privilege can be seen plainly in one parallel example: Pulp Fiction (1994). Late in the film, Marcellus (Ving Rhames) is raped by men who are holding him captive. When he is set free, it is clear that he murders these men, although the action is not represented onscreen. This never aroused any controversy, and in fact seemed to be the "logical" and just response to my male acquaintances and students who have seen the movie. Men apparently have the
right to defend their bodies from unwanted penetration and to punish violators, while women do not. Moreover, some people who disagreed with Thelma & Louise suggested that the women's problems could have been solved by going to the police—which would have resulted in public scrutiny of the victim's sexual history, regardless of the outcome of a trial. Such a process is apparently inconceivable for men, whose violations cannot be exacerbated through public spectacle. In the cinema at least, it is acceptable and even necessary for men to have swift recourse to their own forms of justice.

Again, such outrage against the portrayal of women in American movies is now rare, but this is partly due to the fact that Hollywood's representations nearly always reinforce the inevitability of heterosexual coupling. Ending on a kiss between the heterosexual couple usually helps contain any transgressions in the preceding narrative. Concerns about women and television are also infrequent, although again there are exceptions. Murphy Brown's single motherhood inspired Dan Quayle's censure, but Quayle's unsophisticated interpretation of the character inspired more laughter than moral opprobrium. Clearly, American viewers sensed a distinction between fictional portrayals and reality that was not so apparent to Quayle. The strategy utilized in Wilde's trials—assuming reciprocity between representation and real life—did not work in this case. Quayle was seen as naive and hopelessly out of touch.

Despite widespread mockery of Quayle's concerns, most critics, reformers, and politicians continue to worry about the reproduction of television content by children. Recently, a TV ratings system was instituted that, like movie ratings, assigns a letter to the program indicating the appropriate audience ("G" for "general," "MA" for "mature audiences," etc.), as well as letters that identify the potentially objectionable content (such as nudity and adult language). It remains to be seen whether this is any more effective than parental advisory labels on music. The principle of television rating—which can work only if parents monitor their children's viewing—is taken to a heightened level of
surveillance with the V-chip, a technological device capable of blocking whole channels and individual programs. This is surely one of the paradoxes unique to our consumer culture: one elects to pay for the technology to receive certain channels, then pays an extra amount to have those channels blocked, rather than deciding not to receive the offending channels at all.

Similar technologies are being implemented for the Internet, in the form of search engines that parents can subscribe to in order to prevent their children from accidentally logging on to pornographic sites. Yet the Internet presents many other problems that stem from its status as a new technology that is largely immune to existing laws that apply to other media. One of its most controversial aspects is the ease with which children can access the websites of racist groups, as well as instructions for the building or purchase of weapons. Although recent attempts at legislation (such as the Child Online Protection Act) aim to restrict children's access to potentially damaging material, the more specific target of these concerns is young, white, economically privileged males. People from at least a middle-class background are more likely to have access to computer technology in their homes and schools, and therefore to have the particular literacy that is needed to both access and operate websites. All of the instances of multiple shootings at schools in the last few years have been committed by white adolescent boys, and in the Littleton case, the perpetrators even maintained a web page that revealed some of their intentions. Yet although the local authorities were notified of this worrisome online activity before the massacre, little legislation existed (or exists) for taking legal action based on online materials or statements.

As in the case of Oscar Wilde, the audience constructed as most vulnerable is also the most privileged--the group usually assumed to be most knowledgeable and rational. Yet unlike Wilde's case, there is no aesthetic philosophy to defend, and no possibility of Camp. In the place of the dangerous personality that is solely responsible for the
corruption of young men, we have a technology whose authors are difficult to isolate, since they are as diffuse as possible. The prosecution of Oscar Wilde depended on establishing his degenerate identity, yet the Internet is characterized by its anonymity, and simultaneously by an infinite possibility of identities.

The liberatory possibilities of cyberculture—a space where one could be genderless or raceless or inhabit various identities at will—are clouded by the less savory applications of this detachment from bodies. The anonymity that should free people to multiply their identities—something that would probably be applauded by Wilde—simultaneously enables users to voice racist and sexist sentiments that they would never dream of expressing to "real" people. And although many people create harmless online identities through the use of nicknames, to cross gender boundaries, for example, others use false identity for more sinister purposes, such as fraud or sexual predation. The most exciting aspects of cyberculture with respect to pure identity performance also enable some of its most disturbing possibilities.

Although the Internet offers the potential for multiple identities, real bodies have largely fallen out of the picture. There are always exceptions, as when Internet encounters lead to romance, or when the Net is linked to violent behavior in real life. Cyberculture is by definition bodiless, yet so many people who are absorbed in the Net engage in activities that are obsessed with real bodies. Cybersex substitutes for real sex; chat room members often express romantic interests; users even pay to access websites where they can observe other, real people in their homes at any time of day. A lack of interaction with real bodies and communities is paradoxically accompanied by a predilection for virtual bodies and communities.

While the "posing" enabled by cyberculture would probably appeal to figures such as Wilde and West, the absence of the body would be antithetical to their aims. Wilde's homosexual signifying practice seems impossible without the body, as does
West's very physical form of Camp. In cyberspace interiority and exteriority are collapsed, transformed into pure language. Yet Wilde's interest in the multiplication of personality went hand in hand with his aesthetic project. The quality of writing on the Internet is often as far from Aestheticism as one can get, as Gary Chapman observes:

the general quality of the rhetoric on the Internet is discouraging in itself. Even without all the cranks, poseurs, charlatans, fetishists, single-issue monomaniacs, sex-starved lonely hearts, mischievous teenagers, sexists, racists and right-wing haranguers many participants in unstructured Internet conversations have little of interest to say but a lot of room in which to say it. . . . The new electronic Acropolis seems to foster rhetoric stylistically closer to Beavis and Butthead than to Pericles. (Chapman 350)

Wilde sought the telling of "beautiful untrue things"; cyberculture often fulfills the second adjective but not the first. The Internet exponentially expands the power and pervasiveness of the advertising Wilde found so vulgar, encouraging consumption at every turn. While Wilde described his own soul as "democratic" to explain his associations with working-class men, he surely would have protested the parade of subliteracy, bigotry, and vapidity that is the flip side of the Internet's potential to enlighten through urbane and informed dialogue.

At the same time, our culture is seeing a revival of interest in Wilde. The 1999 film adaptation of An Ideal Husband showcases Wilde's polished and surprisingly modern wit, a refreshing contrast to the usually dialogue-deprived summer releases. But even beyond adaptations of Wilde's own work, we seem to need representation of Wilde himself. Part of this is due to the presence of gay rights activists in our own fin-de-siècle, many of whom revere Wilde as a founding figure in the history of gay identity. The 1998 biopic Wilde serves as reminder of the price the author paid for his artistic and social transgressions, as does Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde, a play by Moisés Kaufman. But Wilde's trials are not simply historical curiosities, representing a past from which we are now secure. On the contrary, Wilde can also remind us of the
continued public scrutiny of sexual identity, as well as the advanced mechanisms for carrying out such investigations.

The recent Congressional inquiry into Bill Clinton’s sexual practices was unsettlingly Victorian in its investigation of the President’s sexual “character.” Yet one drastic change from Wilde’s trials lay in the abolition of the “unspeakable.” The President was required to describe his intimate encounters, in great detail, on national television. Although the public devoured the spectacle, it rapidly grew jaded by the ubiquitous coverage. In the end, the public—and Congress—decided that there was not necessarily any reciprocity between Clinton’s sexual character and his role as President.

This is not to say that Clinton looked good under questioning. In contrast to Wilde’s sharp wit and campy defense, Clinton quibbled over the technical meaning of every word. Meanwhile, some people evidently regard Monica Lewinsky as a potential Camp figure, although not a conscious one. John Waters has remarked in talk show interviews that people have suggested that he cast Lewinsky in a movie, to which he has responded that that would be "bad bad taste" (not Camp) rather than "good bad taste" (Camp). Waters’s lack of interest derives, as he says, from Lewinsky’s apparent absence of wit. In Lewinsky we find an "excessive" and "threatening" body, similar to Mae West’s, but with a complete absence of West’s savvy and sense of self-parody. One imagines that West would have capitalized on the scandal of nearly toppling the Presidency by emphasizing her power and irresistibility. Lewinsky, on the other hand, simpers that she wants a "normal" life with a husband and children, distant from the scandal, even while she eagerly accepts the opportunities for celebrity that scandal has provided her.

Clinton’s impeachment hearings highlighted our culture’s own problems with the limits of sex, language, and representation at the end of the millennium. As if following a script from Foucault, Kenneth Starr and his team vigilantly chased sex out of every
hiding place, making the minutiae of the Clinton-Lewinsky encounters available in all possible media. The prurient details of the Starr Report, available in book form, seemed like some unsuccessful hybrid of titillating fiction and dry fact rather than a government document: some newspapers and magazines mockingly reviewed it as a second-rate romance novel. Yet the way this scandal bombarded the public ultimately emphasized its banality. The very loss of mystery or unspeakability detracted from the excitement associated with scandal, and the courtroom actors proved equally uninteresting.

In retrospect, certain limits on language and representation may be more likely to produce Camp. Both Wilde and West were compelled to cloak their transgressions in indeterminate language. This ambiguity allowed multiple readings, both innocent and knowing, and the resulting incongruity was campy. The linguistic and representational strategies utilized by Wilde and West needed an audience of sophisticated and imaginative interpreters to make the humor apparent. West herself even advocated such limits on language, since she claimed that her brand of comedy depended on clever ways of circumventing these restrictions. Paradoxically, the removal of "unspeakability" seems to result in fewer possibilities for transgressive linguistic strategies.

This is perhaps because what appears to be linguistic freedom does not always produce liberating effects. Just as the labeling of myriad perversions in the Victorian era gave them a "visible and permanent reality," so the new "speakability" of the body and its acts may be just one more item that contributes to the monitoring thereof. The technology that makes possible the exposure and dissemination of the minutiae of one's life makes society seem increasingly panoptic:

the activity of judging has increased precisely to the extent that the normalizing power has spread. Borne along by the omnipresence of the mechanisms of discipline, basing itself on all the carceral apparatuses, it has become one of the major functions of our society. The judges of normality are present everywhere. .. The carceral network, in its compact or disseminated forms, with its systems of
insertion, distribution, surveillance, observation, has been the greatest support, in modern society, of the normalizing power. (Foucault 304)

This is not to advocate censorship as means of restoring linguistic virtuosity—if such a thing were even possible. What those who support censorship overlook is that the very instruments that they seek to vilify are those that offer the greatest potential as means of surveillance and normalization. This is especially true of the Internet, whose scope and interactive possibilities could create a nearly universal panopticon, with every user monitoring—or else believing that they are monitoring—everyone else. And as in the panopticon, it is the sheer possibility of being watched that disciplines our bodies. Ironically, in the absence of "real" and dangerous bodies that one may imitate, our corporeal significations may finally be determined by the very absence of bodies. We already have examples of how linguistic behavior is shaped by this phenomenon; the effects on gestural practice remain to be determined.


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